

Poetry penned in captive land

SYED NAJMUDDIN HASHIM

T was in Rangoon in March 1981 that I had an unusual experience. My shy and retiring son of sixteen, who more than justified his nickname, which means 'one lost in reverie,' suddenly broke his silence to demand that I publish my scribblings to done over the previous three decades. It was exceedingly strange and not a little gratifying that what was always in the nature of a monologue was sought to be given the stamp of irrevocable finality. It was a rare pleasure to find that one so young had been delving into the meaning of things and, out of filial loyalty perhaps, ascribed some merit to ancient and yellowed manuscripts.

His younger brother, whose name stands for 'cool as dewdrops and peaceful as moonlight,' belies his name. With brutal originality he tells his indigent father, "Don't pick your



Poet Shamsur Rahman

kitchen legumes too soon, lest we have to pay your bills after you've gone." At twelve, he was already on the way to becoming a creative writer. As such he did not stand in need of the reassurance of a father's writings penned in the idle moments of a storm-tossed life.

I remember that I had dedicated these pieces to 'Moana of the Seven

Moons, who came but stayed not.' It was not any particular woman but a composite of many, perhaps of all women of all time. The scribblings were occasions for viewing the recurring personal crises against the backdrop of a crumbling world of broken columns, where the centre will not hold, where we are dismembered into myriad broken shadows. Wars, famines, pestilence, inequity, exploitation and civil strife, disintegrating values have all made of our world, to misquote Mallarme, 'the horror of the forest or the silent thunder diffused in the leaves.' It is the mounting but often futile anger, the sense of unbearable anguish and crippling fatigue stemming from our inadequacy, the death wish of the ineffectual intellectual suddenly made aware of the futility of history that informs all my work, perhaps lends to it some ephemeral significance.

Although each jotting, made in the agonising darkness of the long and unending nights, is strictly personal in origin, the dimensions of our anguish are never strictly or entirely personal. My life and the life of my entire generation is tinged and overshadowed by the tragedy of our time. A sense of participation in contemporary history is a prerequisite to comprehension of work shrouded in such seeming obscurity. You would have to know the murky inter-war years of international conspiracy and paralysis of will exemplified in appeasement, culminating in the Munich Pact, the cruelty and savagery of the dress rehearsal of the Spanish Civil War with Picasso's *Guernica* as the tragic and everlasting symbol and the impassioned cry, 'No passaran' (They Shall Not Pass) as the death-rattle of an embattled and betrayed Republic, the lynchings of the Deep South, the Biblical Diaspora culminating in the attempted 'Final Solution' of the Nazi death camps, to fully understand why personal love never stood a chance in the diabolical unfolding of the events of our time, when tinpot gods in the chancelleries of the world killed and crippled us for their profit, if not for their sport.

Twenty-five years later, *The*



Pomegranate Tree, penned in 1977 in Dhaka, the capital city of a new nation, has the same sense of futility of individual endeavour facing the daunting facts of history, the same sense of fellow feeling for those engaged in an unequal battle, for the innocent victims of organised genocide and incarceration in distant prison camps. A few years hence, who will remember the background of this piece? Who will recall a state nurtured by its international patrons into a veritable prison-house of nations, its paranoid and humourless succession of rulers? Who will take the trouble of finding out how a fledgling democracy was strangled in infancy, how untold atrocities were perpetrated against rebellious subject peoples, how the much vaunted sword-arm of a so-called martial race was blunted and broken by a ragtag band of freedom fighters? Will history have the integrity to record how such a regime was cynically supported and sustained by Grand Masters of the international power game and their servitor ideologues?

A scribbler of my captive generation in a captive land could not, therefore, sing of his lonely passion from an ivory tower. His individual alienation was overwhelmed by a quarter century of neo-colonialist humiliation of his people. The sense of outrage inevitably echoed in my words, as in the words of others. Witness my *Ramadan* and *Eid-ul-Fitr*. They were written on two successive days in 1970, against the backdrop of a tragedy of colossal and classical proportions, when a tidal wave left some half a million dead, a world

catastrophe reported faithfully by the international press and media but ignored and denied by our overlords. A bereaved people sustained and nurtured by charitable men and women of goodwill all around the world finally shed its illusions under Nature's merciless assaults and man's studied apathy. The ground had been prepared for the War of Independence that was to start in a matter of months. Significantly enough, these two pieces were published, under a pseudonym, of course, in a journal edited by the poet-author-film-maker-freedom fighter Zahir Raihan. He, along with the elder brother, author and journalist Shahidullah Kaiser, was butchered in cold blood along with scores of other intellectuals, under a plan to behead the emergent Bengali nation, which could no longer be held in thrall.

Ramadan and *Eid-ul-Fitr* are companion pieces of *The White Shirt* of Shamsur Rahman, the doyen of Bengali poets. All three poems clearly foretell the end of the myth, purveyed by patent violators of the Islamic code of a life of human dignity and justice to hold the Bengali nation in bondage for a quarter of a century. They anticipate Maulana Bhashani's ironic farewell greeting to the ruling class: 'Assalamu Alakum.' Together with Sikandar Abu Jafar's *Quit Bengal*, they are a paean to my enslaved people, battered but unbowed, who within a year waded through a sea of blood to proclaim to a largely apathetic and hostile world that they had finally decided to take control of their own destiny, which for long had been usurped by alien hands.

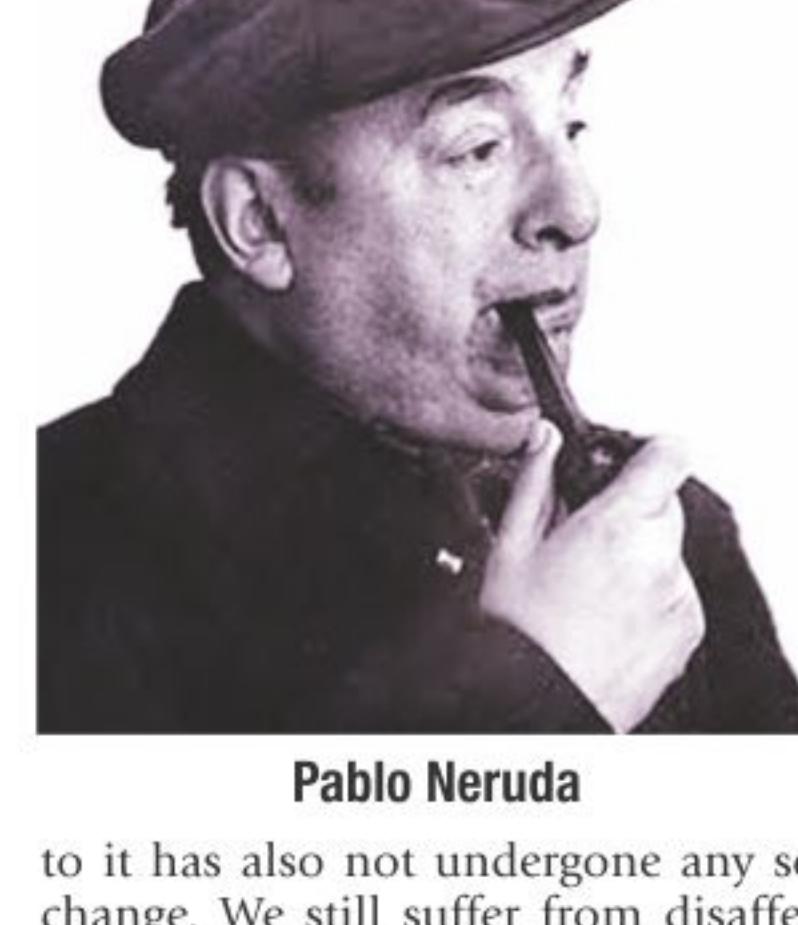
Sikander's ultimatum sums up the situation: 'Remove your black shadow from my skies and fields.'

The tendency to relate the personal to the universal dilemma is, however, not always shared by my competitors, who favour a more direct and unambiguous utterance. In much of my work also it runs like a red thread. I can only explain it in terms of John Maynard Keynes' perceptive comment: 'Emotions of the moment had left behind a permanent furrow.' Looking back, I find that in '50, '51 and '52 some current national or international occurrences evoked direct and bald comment. (One such comment) was a rather long piece called *A Strange Tale*, of November 1951, commemorating the triumph of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, which traverses the tangled history of the subcontinent, drawing hope 'because a Chinese peddler knocked at my door,' a rather futile hope as it turned out during later years of infantile cultural disorder and our experience of an unrecognised liberation movement and the Chilean people's experience of eager recognition for a counter revolution. It is ironic that the poem carries visible traces of the Chilean Pablo Neruda's 'Let the rail-splitters awake.' Then there was *The Plot*, which was the immediate reaction to the dramatic disclosure of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case involving the cream of the officer corps of the Pakistan army and the doyen of Urdu poetry, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and which seemed to me to carry fateful echoes of the Reichstag fire which burnt down both the German parliament house and in effect sealed the fate of the Weimar Republic. The parallelism of the rise of Hitler and a succession of petty overweening dictators in our domestic scene did not, at the time, appear to me to be either forced or fortuitous. Then there was *Will McGee*, mourning the judicial murder of a young American black on patently trumped-up charges of rape. This was not one of my best efforts, although it was a favourite reading of my friend Ilbne Insha, now dead, whose Urdu poems on China, including *A Night in Shanghai*, were presented to Chairman Mao.

Between 1959 and 1964, I seem to

have been returning home, culturally speaking, because in (my) works of this period are discernible influences of Rabindranath Tagore, from whom no Bengali can ever escape since he has been our shield and our spear in every movement of asserting our identity, of the poets Sudhin Dutta and Jibanananda Das, of John Donne, TS Eliot and of the Old Testament. A distinct influence is exerted during this period by the tropical jungles of Bengal and the forests of the foothills of the Himalayas where I spent many happy days of my adolescence. And a recurring theme is the sea and the flowing rivers which have gone to the making of the Bengali psyche.

Between *Only a Few Years* and *The Pomegranate Tree*, a span of some twenty-five years, the human condition in our part of the world has hardly changed, except for the worse and except for our signal achievement of political freedom. Hence our response



Pablo Neruda

to it has also not undergone any sea change. We still suffer from disaffection with our inadequacy, anger at human perfidy, nostalgic yearning for our lost innocence and desperate urge to join the forces of social change, with no real confidence in their efficacy, strength or ultimate success. A very poor material for a versifier, I agree. Yet to attempt anything more would be less than honest.

(The article is a slightly edited version of the Author's Note the writer penned years before it came to be part

POETRY

My Salutations to You, Brave One!

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY

She looked at me with gentle twinkling eyes
And a humane smile on her softly etched pink lips
Her salt and pepper hair was neatly tucked in a bun
And I felt I could tell her everything in this jungle of a world
And she would embrace me and comfort me with infinite care
And I ponder: what did I do to deserve this unconditional love?

In that terrifying night of deepening silence her own world had come apart...
Her life partner and soul mate had left her and their precious son and daughter
For the unknown unseen world beyond this life which would never be his choice
The inhuman animals had mercilessly snatched his life and knowingly widowed her
When she was only in her early thirties and living on a bed of roses
Alas! if she had only known then the bitterness of life's prickly thorns!

Even after over three and a half decades that haunting scene often comes back
Intermittent flashes of darkness in her inward eye of that unforgettable 1971
The year of Bangladesh's unforgettable loss of blood and the War of Victory
And also the year of betrayal and terror when life had braked to an abrupt halt
It would always be isolated winters for her for the rest of her barren existence
The icicles in her heart were getting heavier with each passing year...

She had moved to foreign land to raise her two scarred children
She was single handed and life had its vicious cycles of light and shade

But she had strongly held the quivering mast with unfaltering love and care
Immense determination and endless patience never faltered on its track
And on stormy days and nights the light from above touched her soul.

And now her grandchildren gaze at her with endless affection and tenderness...
The wise one who listens carefully to everyone's stranger than fiction

Life's complexities, buries her own life's tale with the new soil of time and tide
Her personal sorrow and tears are effortlessly drowned in the murmuring river

As the days go by and the nights deepen she listens and solves others' tales
And awaits her divine union with him again but alas! how endless is the wait!

Even the homeward bound birds look at her with moist eyes...

It is only once in a while when the ebony darkness of a Baishakhi night

Envelopes her embittered soul and drooping spirits that she feels listless
And unpredictable tears drown her ravaged being and silent reflections

And then there seeps up an unknown yearning for a never forgotten dear person
In the innermost crevasses of her melancholy heart ever so lonely and fragile

She then searches for her beloved violets and lavenders which are still fresh as yesterday...

Passage on a Monsoon Day

MUINEERA PARBEEN

CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK

"I need to finish cooking before they discover the smoke coming out from this part of the village," she thought, as she hurried her way to the well some 50 yards away from the kitchen shed, walking carefully on the wet ground.

The well stood on the south-western corner of this homestead. It was skilfully blanketed from the lowlands in the front and roads beyond by a thick cluster of bamboo trees. Women could bathe and wash here without being seen.

An old woman, some hundred times removed aunt of hers whom she did not really remember seeing before this year was already at the well, pulling up water with a bucket suspended on a worn out rope. She turned towards Meena, staring with a dead pair of eyes set deep inside blackened eye sockets from a face so bare of flesh one would think she was nothing but a ghost... perhaps from the great Bengal famine of the 1940s!

The haggard woman nodded at Meena without her asking, signalling the young girl to extend the earthen bowl in her hand, as she tilted the bucket to pour some water into it.

'De ma, batita agaye de,' Kohinoor Begum said (hold out your bowl to me my child) with her toothless grin.

What is the use of being so dead and still struggle to stay alive?

'Rannar kisu oilo maa?' Kohinoor asked softly as she poured the water. Her voice was shaky and laced with fear lest she got told off in fury.

No one spared the old woman their fury.

The days had been hard on them all; they had lived on almost nothing for two days in a row. It was not this bad all the time but this past week had been hard. The incessant rains had meant a shortage of supplies and the seventeen families clustered between a few households had been struggling for food.

Meena's heart melted in pity. She knew why the old woman served her with all her might. She had no living relatives having lost her sons and brothers to cholera. Hanging around a pregnant woman meant there was something to eat for one or the other would be sure to find Meena a handful of something to eat. And Meena never forgot to share with this old many times removed aunt.

'Just a little bit more khala , I am cooking gourd and prawns and the rice is nearly done. We will all eat rice today,' she said gently.

The breeze under the bamboo trees felt cool on Meena's hot and grimy face as she looked around at the scene surrounding her.

The village homestead at Chandanpur was her forefathers' and only her octogenarian grandfather lived here now. Her great-great maternal grandfather had famously surrounded this homestead in a large circular line of mango trees, sealing the circle in a *bandh* with his prayers so that no unneatly beings could ever harm his daughter had married off into this household miles away from anywhere.

Her father, a policeman by profession, moved from one corner of the country to another according to the government's choice. Meena had loved that life of travel, always coming back here to home.

Then she was married off and rooted again in some remote part of Dhaka, building a home of her own.

Only that wasn't totally true.

She was on the move again; more truthfully, on the run. Her husband had left for the war four months ago leaving her in the safety of his parent's village. She had been proud of him then.

But her bravery had not lasted long. The first few months of her pregnancy had been bad and she had been very miserable with her inlaws whom she barely knew. She was scared all the time. The war had spread and it wasn't always safe in the village either. Somehow, she convinced her father-in-law she would be safer with her grandfather.

'Let me go to dadu. I will be safe that side of the river.'

she pleaded.

In a way they were relieved she asked to leave. It was difficult enough with all their daughters home and most men in the village gone off to fight. Kohinoor Begum was travelling this way and was a relative one way or the other - as most people in neighbouring villages are - and that's how Meena got saddled with her.

It was a long journey but a large group of women were travelling together this way and some male relative or the other would accompany them from one point to another. People were generous at such a time of need.

But grandpas home had been no sanctuary and he too had sent her off somewhere safer.

Who was here to protect them now? Meena thought, certainly not the mango trees. Her great-great maternal grandfather had not forethought that danger would never come here in the shape of ghosts but the God-fearing Pakistan army.

War was everywhere. Danger walked in every nook and corner of existence even in daylight. Every other man who had not gone off to war to defend the country was a messenger for death.

Everyone knew who they were and what they did. They were the ones who informed the Pakistan army gentle which families had young boys. They were the ones who brought the vultures in. They were the ones who lifted women from villages and took them to the army camps, bartering the women's flesh to buy the protection of the Pakistani army.

There was no escape.

Meena and the female members of three families from her grandfather's village had taken shelter in a village called Ghagotia southwest to her grandfather's village. They had been given shelter by a family which was her uncle's in-laws. The village stood on an island strip in the middle of the river. There were no proper bridges - only a bamboo *shako* on one side.

Here seventeen families had been in hiding there for almost 3 months now, making it back to their own homesteads once or twice to check out on the few remaining at home, or to bring back supplies. Meena's eleven year old sister Kohinoor and her stepmother were with her.

They had decided to return two days ago to visit their aged grandfather and ten year old brother and pick up some supplies. Rabeya, the daughter of one of the families had given birth to her baby a few days back. Her parents decided to return home with the sickly newborn. Meena and a few others tagged along to visit home and pick up some supplies. Their village was not too far and they were all familiar with the locality. Her stepmother stayed back with the other *chachi* who was down with a fever.

Yesterday they had been south from the village. They could not find a boat to cross the river and had to take a detour further down to find someone to help them across the swelled up river. It had rained all the way and the new born had got sicker.

By the time they crossed the river it was already late afternoon. An old man approached them and asked them where they came from.

"Apnara ferot jan. The army has set up a camp on the other side of this village. It's best not to come here with womenfolk. You better go back the way you came," he advised.

But Rabeya's parents would not return. The newborn was dying and they wanted to return to their own home. Afzal Hashem was the only man in the group. He knew a detour to his homestead.

Meena and the other women got separated from them but they knew the way to Chandanpur, it was just a few hours walk.

On the way they learnt the local collaborators had set one nearby village on fire. The young men in that village had resisted being picked up and it had ended badly.

Meena and her companions had literally run on hearing this.

Meena had run with the baby in her belly. She had never been so scared for her life. They were off their initial track and at night took shelter in a hut owned by a boatman. It was a tiny little hut, not large enough to hold all of them. It was cold and miserable. No one slept. No one ate.

Early in the morning, they started walking in the drizzling rain.

Meena's feet ached. She could not remember the last time she had worn a pair of sandals. The muddy, slimy monsoon soil beneath her bare feet made her nauseous at times. Her throat was parched. She cupped her hands together to collect some rain water and drink it.

Her sister Nima wept half the way.

"I am so scared, I am so hungry" was all she would say.

Kohinoor Begum, the old hag, took the young girl by hand. Always resourceful, she had a betel leaf tied into the knot at the end of her sari. She shared it with Nima.

"Just