

REFLECTIONS

Reach of a destination...

AINON N.

THIS home is a story-teller. As I open each room I am greeted by musky air and the memories walk in with me. I head for the rooftop. There is a half-built room which was supposed to be my alcove for writing, a gift to me. This fragmented reality binds me to death that bestows incompleteness. With termination from life the question of why becomes irrelevant, so one has to resort to the question of how in order to compromise. And thus I had agreed that the dead be laid to rest in close proximity of this home in the firm belief that the departed souls would always bless this shelter and its dwellers. In spite of death's resolute severance from life, the contest between the two never ends! I can see the family graveyard from here and in silence I pay my respects to the loved ones. I still have the need to feel they acknowledge me as I return.

From here the view of guava, mango, jackfruit, lychee, grapefruit, coconut trees warm my heart, but to my disappointment I cannot locate the *Krishnochura*. I fancy its quiet splendour among the gigantic greens. I guess with it many other trees might have become vulnerable to the seasons or maybe they were purposely felled. In their absence now several mahogany trees stand tall and the aged *Rendi* has spread its branches as if to protect the old home. I encounter patches of moss creeping out of the crevices which speak of settled age. The cracks and streaks of green and gray runs on the walls carry the burden of many winters, summers and monsoons. As I meditate on the idea of attachment the silent thoughts and dreams tighten its embrace around me.

This home has undergone many changes. I climb out of the time barrier to see two spacious rooms surrounded by veranda on all sides. Corrugated tin walls and heavy curtains partitioned the space into sleeping rooms, prayer room, dressing rooms and so forth. As we were transient visitors then it served our purpose well. On the fringe of my memory lingers the favorite dreamland of a seven year old -- the large *kaar* (attic); its floor made of endurable and seasoned *shagun kaath* (wood). In order to get to the attic I had to pull down a ladder, climb in, and then shut the door from inside. It was actually one large room covering the entire space of the home. The ceiling was high enough for me to stand and walk around. I could hear the swish of winds pass through. Then there was the magic of sound on the tin roof during torrential rain.

I listened and listened hard, waiting for some echo of an ancient voice! There I also discovered a

trove of unusual nature that carried the weight of graces and durability of a home. On one side there were pots and pans of various sizes, mostly large ones neatly stacked, which would come in handy when families dropped by unannounced for lunch or dinner. Such was the custom. It was considered somewhat of a shame to ask neighbors for such trivial items; one always had to be well equipped. Then there were different size *dolas* (cylindrical barrels made of bamboo slices) that contained variety of rice; some husked to be cooked on special occasions, others unhusked to be used as seeds during the following season.

The rice itself was of various colours. I was told the ones with a bit of reddish coat were the tastiest. The grains were stocked for the entire year. I also discovered colored clay containers of different size. The big shiny ones were burnt to seal the clay pores which gave them their black luster. These were best to retain the crispiness of *moori* (puffed rice); others contained *cheera* (pounded rice). I was forbidden to open any of these as it would spoil the contents. A few were sealed with wax to reserve the contents for a long time. I have to confess I did dip my fingers in

tan-colored clay pots for I had discovered these contained *bheer* (liquid molasses), and it tasted good with *moori*. And then there were old steel trunks with flower patterns on them. These contained *kanthas* (hand-stitched quilts), pillows, bed-sheets, curtains; the extras to be used when we had visitors. With cultural tides the customs and the make of these items went out of vogue. I am still

gripped by these simple objects, preserving sights, dancing sounds, unique aroma; the signature of my roots. The perseverance of these images allows me to uncurl in time, to belong. They authorized me the simplicity of embracing life with candor, trimming down baggage that comes with living.

And then that home came down and a building was built so I could enjoy the modern amenities of life as an adult, that is, if and when I visited. Before arriving here I wondered how I would negotiate with memories so it does not disintegrate, only to realize that the two homes speak not so different a language. In hindsight, there was love then, and now as an adult having arrived here I feel composed, unconcerned with the passing of time and events. The tomorrows will conform to the legacy of belonging, and love of yesterdays. In the course of travel through life I will reach this very same destination time and again. This home is inside me, without a boundary.

As I recollect myself night descends and I can hear the dancing wind weave through the bamboo thickets...

AINON N --- ACADEMIC, RESEARCHER,

FICTION

Old man in death country

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

DEATH fascinates me. There is a beauty about it that draws me to old graveyards and ancient cemeteries. And on the plains and in the valleys and mountain passes of the world, I walk in search of the spirits of those who have died in battle or have perished, parched for want of water, in the cruelty of burning deserts. Millions, tens of millions, have lived and died on earth. Where are their bones buried? On the old expansive fields outside Athens, soldiers in frenzy murdered one another in wars that were to turn out pointless. Most wars are without point. Life is without point. A time comes when every war cry fades into silence, when kings out on missions to vanquish other kings recede into time. They live, only in the pages of textbooks. No one knows where their remains lie.

And so I, an old man approximating the prehistoric, walk, wondering where Alexander's bones, reduced to powdery dust, have lain all these centuries. He once beat Poros, then gave the dignified loser his kingdom back. Whatever happened to Poros after that? How did the man who looked the world's greatest monarch of the time in the eye meet his twilight? I walk, through the timeless deserts of Mongolia and into the old Middle Kingdom, and hear the deafening, frightening roar of the hordes Genghiz Khan once led into other lands, to sack and pillage and then destroy. As the shadows of a gathering late afternoon come over the mountain ranges, a wind passes by, the same wind that blew through the cavalry that Genghis Khan led. Where is the great Khan today? Where, O where, has the grandeur of Kublai Khan gone missing?

In the valley of death, I keep stumbling on the futility of life. Across the hamlets of Bangladesh, the old voices of protest penetrate the silence of winter, to remind me of the wrongs done by men to other men. I, senility of a man inhabiting an aging earth, have lived beyond my time, beyond the years allotted to me by nature. In my eighties, my near nineties, I long to speak to my dead comrades, my friends who passed on into the Great Beyond before their time? Did Chandan know leukaemia was creeping up on him? He laughed a lot, he taught children brilliantly in school. On his final night in the world of the living, his eyes lost their vision. He wanted to have a bowl of soup, took a few spoonfuls of it. The life seeped out of him at dawn.

Did my friend Akhtar, poet and raconteur and lover of sweets, know he was dying? In these months and years since he was placed in his grave, the same that held his father's bones, I have longed to hear his voice, for a miracle to bring him back to life, for us to take a stroll, to ponder on the burdens we carry in our pursuit of banalities. Sirajul Islam kept us all rolling in humour and rolling over in laughter. We have not laughed these thirty years; and he has stayed quiet in his pastoral grave in all this time.

On cold evenings battered by the loud autumn winds, I trek through ancient cemeteries in distant Wales. Voices rise out of the weeds and the grass in silent churchyards, resplendent in their fallen and broken and faded tombstones. My grandson, strapping young man of twenty plus years, steadies me as I bend to read the history of the man sleeping beneath the earth on the edge of which I stand. I read. And I read again, my bony fingers passing over the faded letters of the epitaph once, twice, and then over and over again. The truth eventually comes across: he whose tombstone stands, at an incline, before me bade farewell to life in 1485. Shakespeare had not yet been born, the French Revolution was centuries away; the innocent Japanese who would be smashed to black dust in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were far removed in historical time.

Everything palls. Everything pales. Everything falls. On monsoon nights, in the light of a cloud-screened moon, in the endless croaking of frogs in the silent waters, I call out to my



ancestors in their wet graves. They do not speak. They will not speak to one who carries their blood in his veins, who needs to link up with the elements that gave him shape and form and substance. The silence is eerie, the sound of silence bizarre. What if God made all those ancestors come alive on that rain-dappled night? What if they spoke of life beyond death, to me? A sudden breeze sends the bamboo grove swaying, the leaves on the mahogany trees dancing. Lantern in hand, a neighbour walks by, casting a nervous glance at me. Nervously he asks if I am all right. Reassured, he walks on. His pace, I note, has picked up speed. Was it me he has just seen in that cemetery? Or am I the ghost of who I was, for him, perhaps until a little while ago? The living do not always think of death. And they are petrified at the sight of the living strolling through a monsoon-laden graveyard.

It snows badly as my old, tired bones push me up the path towards the elegantly placed graves at Arlington. The wind howls. The heavens tell me it is a bad day about to be made worse. I make my way to the resting place of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. The eternal flame burns on, as it has burned since his widow lighted it on the day of his burial half a century ago. She now rests beside her husband. All glory, the restless wind whispers in my ears, is fleeting. The wind moves on. And I see beyond Arlington. I see the dead leaves making a heap on the unkempt grave of the Shahinshah in Cairo. I peer, through the snow, at the quiet tomb of Anwar Sadat in Mit Abu el-Kom. I turn, to go back. The cold is in a murderous mood. I turn; and flashes of the rough-hewn coffin that once carried the bullet-riddled remains of my country's father, our beloved friend of Bengal, our own Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to the eternity of his pastoral village rise in the vision, in the heart. I see a dead Dag Hammarskjöld clutching a blade of grass somewhere in a burning Congo.

Ah, death! She who loved me with an intensity no one has known died aeons ago. We met in the rain. We debated on life's monstrosities in the heat of summer. Our love, volcano-like, made of her a Dido, of me an Aeneas. Why revive Dido and Aeneas? She asked on a night of poetic grandeur, as I played with her salt-and-pepper hair. And then she whispered, "You have kept me alive, your love has kept me going." Our love child, born on a mist-filled dawn, does not know I am her father.

A thousand nights into our epic romance, Shonabou died quietly. In her lifeless hand was a sheet of faded, yellowing paper. On it was etched a poem, mine, recalling that first sight of her --- in white saree draped across honey-daubed skin, a woman in expectation of love's sublimity.

Tonight I sit at her grave, humming the songs we once sang together. Perhaps she will join me when the night begins to deepen in ardour?

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR

ESSAY

Who are our mainstream poets?

HAROONUZZAMAN

CONVENTIONAL Bangla poetry has remained enshrouded in 'superstition of modernity' propounded mainly by our purported 'educated' urbanized class. The ostensible educational system and its associated pride have paved the way for creating the mental barrier which led to the alleged divide of the history of our literature and culture which attach more value to a partial section assuming it to be the significant totality. In fact, we have accepted mainstream literature as the one created by the English-educated urban middle class. Although ninety per cent of the people of the country delightfully consume the literary pursuits of the professionals and the poets who emerged from an agro-based greater rural Bangladesh, the so-

quality of the larger section of the people of the country, has kept on flowing unabated, and to date it is marching ahead with full force. It will be sheer foolishness to consider the unlettered or near-unlettered rural majority as 'uneducated'. Rather, on many occasions, it has been found that the efforts to underestimate the intellectuality of this silent majority are false, fabricated and baseless. In no way are they the lesser intellectual ones compared to the modern and urban 'educated' class.

Not only did the rural creative geniuses absorb the traditional modernism but also inspired and influenced others to follow what they thought was classical modernism. Among the twenty-three poets, like Lui pa, Kanha pa, of *Charyapada* (generally the 18-20 line poem written in couplets) and Soroho pa of *doha* (longer poems), is encompassed fierce modernism. The more the 'establishment' became anti-people, the more the poets of the common people took their stand in favor of the rights of the people, and their works echoed the sentiments and emotions of ordinary people.

According to the views of the then 'educated' Bangalis, Bangla of the pre-colonial period was coarse, unsophisticated and rustic, and to tide over the inheritance of all forms of rusticity, they simply desired to become sharp, classy and intellectually informed. But, unfortunately, in the end, they turned out to be uprooted cosmopolitans. However, some sensitive and insightful metropolitans fell victim to the painful refusal, and to damp down the agonizing estrangement, they finally took a U-turn in search of the national heritage to revivify fading history, brushing aside the pride of urbanity, modernity and snobbery.

In the last twenty years of the 19th century, educated, urban Bangalis started having a close look at and taking interest in the works of the rural poets, better known as *Pallikobi*. Even a modern poet like Tagore was amazed by the incisive intellectuality, philosophy, classical modernism and artistic excellence found in the creations of the poets, popularly known as 'Bauls'. Nonetheless, they continued to remain sidelined as 'folk' poets having no 'seat at the dinner table' of the supposed enlightenment of the urban poets. Instead of marginalizing them, they should rather be termed as 'the poets of the real mainstream Bangla literature.'

From Lalon Shah to Voba Pagla, for example, from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, whatever number of urban poets came into being, the poets of the common people outnumbered the urban ones and remained far more active in the larger community of people. It is not that they were the majority only, their works were endowed with a diversity of ideas, and the variety was not only in the style and structure but also in their thoughts.

Their poems/songs not only embody different metaphors and images but also have narrative and lyrical qualities. Some of their works are enriched with dramatic qualities; some are theology-ridden; some wander like lovers in the land of imagination; some project cruel realities. Some of those poets have made forays into fairy tales and history; some are entrenched in the problems, crises, and possibilities of their own contemporary society. The contents and thoughts of these poets/singers appeal to ordinary people.

Ram Mohan and his disciples and followers did much to spread free thinking in the urban life of Bengal. Baul poets/singers, on the other hand, continued to oppose the fundamentalist religious consciousness and views, giving short shrift to the fiendish indignation of the *Mollahs* and Hindu priests. There is no denying that this



rebellious element of the culture of the common people of real Bengal triggered the current of free-thinking in the minds of the uninteresting and tedious life of the rural people.

The heroes of the renaissance of Bengal observed 'the equality of all people' from the point of view of bourgeoisie humanism, imported from the West, while Lalon-Duddu-Pagla Kanai, the poets of the larger section of rural commoners, took the 'lesson of humanism' from all the secular ideas of traditional Bengal -- *nanan boron gavire vai, eki boron dudh/jogot vromia dekhlam eki mayer poot* (cows of different colours; yet milk is of the same color/going round the world I found the same mother-son bond everywhere). When Lalon acerbically ridicules the idea of one's becoming a Muslim through circumcision and a Brahmin by wearing a sacred thread as credentials, doesn't he sound more radical than western-educated modern urban Bangalis? Certainly, he does.

PROFESSOR HAROONUZZAMAN TEACHES ENGLISH AT INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY BANGLADESH (IUB) AND IS A TRANSLATOR, WRITER AND CRITIC

LITERARY TRADITIONS

English in Malaysia and Singapore

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

SINGAPORE'S pragmatic approach towards English has been best summed up by its current Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, in the following statement: "Our mother tongues carry with them values, ancient cultural heritages and a sense of identity. To lose some of this, because we need to speak English, an international language of business and science, is painful, but it is a rational trade-off to make."

Owing to this cosmopolitan outlook and business environment, English has emerged as the pivotal, bridge language in Singapore. In fact, English is so widely used in the country and has become such an integral part of the society, that the concern there, unlike in Malaysia, is, as Thumboo explains, "how to prevent other mother tongues from weakening." Notwithstanding this fear, which is a valid and legitimate one, especially since language is associated with identity, writers in English have taken full advantage of the situation and have made significant advance in all the genres -- poetry, fiction, nonfiction and drama. In the early years of independence, some scepticism was expressed towards literature (poetry in particular) as it was seen as a "luxury" (Lee Kuan Yew's phrase) that Singapore could ill afford. But that scenario has changed as Singapore is now trying to marry commerce with culture and turn itself into an Arts hub. In the manifesto of the Ministry of Information and the Arts, it is stated as a priority objective that, "To ensure sustained growth in the long run, Singapore must forge an environment that is conducive to innovations, new discoveries and the creation of new knowledge."

However, although commerce has opened up the environment for English and literary activities in English, excessive technological growth, which engenders a consumerist culture, also breeds an environment contrary to literary growth. This is an ambiguous situation that writers in Singapore have to tackle, each in his or her own way. I recently put this question to some of the Singaporean writers, as to whether or not they are intimidated by Singapore's all steel, glass and chrome culture. The answers ranged from yea, to nay, to yea and nay. But no matter how much the writer might be smothered by Singapore's "good" life, it has to be acknowledged that there has been a veritable explosion of literary activity in Singapore in recent years, with new writers emerging with new energy, enthusiasm and eagerness to experiment with new themes

and forms, while the more established writers have continued to produce yet more profound and resourceful works. A cursory look at *Literature in Singapore*, published by the National Arts Council in 2007, or a recent anthology edited by Angelia Poon, Shirley Lim and Philip Holden, *A Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (2009), would show how much has been achieved by writers in English in the island nation since Independence.

The Malaysian case

Malaysian literature in English will soon attain its seventieth anniversary since its modest inception in the late 1940s, initiated by a small group of college and university students in Singapore. Singapore was the academic hub of British Malaya and the only university of the colony was located there, therefore it was natural that a movement in English writing should have started from there. Nonetheless, given the current cultural and political rivalries between Singapore and Malaysia, it is rather ironic that a Malaysian tradition of writing started in a territory that now sees Malaysia as the "other." There is a second irony with regard to this tradition, however; that is, it started not during the heyday of colonial rule as in the case of India, but just before the retreat of the Raj to its native shores. If we consider, say 1947 or 1948 as the starting point of Malaysian Anglophone tradition, or 1950, the year that saw the publication of Wang Gungwu's *Pulse*, it is hard to miss the inherent irony in the timing of its inception because India and Pakistan were already independent in 1947 and Malaysia was to become independent in a few years, in 1957. Of course there were practical and political reasons for this late commencement of the tradition, and yet the fact that English writing should begin in the years immediately before the departure of the British cannot be ignored either.

Given the time that has lapsed and the new milestone that the tradition is about to reach, it would be appropriate to interrogate the glories and sorrows, possibilities and perils, of this tradition. The questions to be addressed are: What has Malaysian literature in English accomplished in the last sixty over years? Why has it failed to keep pace with the growth of literary activity in other postcolonial centres, say Singapore and India? What are the future possibilities of this tradition? To what extent have the writers of the tradition contributed to Malaysian nation-formation and to the cultivation of a dialogic sensibility that Malaysia so requires for coming to grips with its plural cultural environment? The article seeks to deliberate on these issues, with the purpose of providing a brief account of