

THOUGHTS

Remembering our wordsmiths

As the month of Ekushey gets underway yet one more time, Syed Badrul Ahsan focuses on some writers whose contributions to Bangla literature have enriched the language ---



Akhtaruzzaman Elias (1943-1997) died rather early. That being the truth, there is another, which is that he did not write much. And yet for all that he is often regarded by critics and scholars of modern Bengali literature as one

belonging in the pantheon of Bengali literary giants. In his entire career, Elias wrote a mere two works of fiction. In Chillekothar Sepai, he traces the psychological journey of an man in the period immediately before Bangladesh is plunged into its war of national liberation. And in Khoabnama, the story revolves around the socio-political conditions prevailing in an era before political fratricide overtook politics.

Apart from his two novels, Elias has left behind twenty two short stories, within which his artistic creativity repeatedly shines through. That makes you wonder. How much more could he have achieved had he lived?

Abu Rushd Matinuddin

(1919-2010) was the quintessential scholar. His passion was English literature. He made it into a career. Moving over to East Pakistan following the partition of India, he taught English at a number of colleges in what was then Pakistan's eastern province. Subsequently, he travelled to Oxford for higher studies before returning home. His scholarly life lost none of its allure when, at particular moments, he was to serve in government. He was director of public instruction. In 1971, while engaged as educational counsellor at the Pakistan embassy in Washington, he switched his allegiance to Bangladesh. After Bangladesh's liberation, he found himself abroad once more, this time at the country's high commission in London, as educational counsellor... once more!

Abu Rushd's place in the annals of modern Bengali literature has been assured by the novels he produced over a pretty long stretch of time. Remember Elomelo, Shamne Notun Din, Onishchito Ragini and Shagita Dwip?



Alauddin al Azad (1932-2009) was never one to proclaim his presence in the world of letters. A quiet, self-effacing intellectual, he was to leave behind some of the most powerful works of fiction for Bengalis. Of course,

his Teish Nombor Toilochitro remains a point of reference, the work by which people easily identify him. But, again, there were others. Karnaphuli springs to mind, along with Onudito Ondhokar, Shopnoshila and Shagotom Bhalobasha. Ferari Diary, based on his experience of the War of Liberation, makes thoughtful reading.

Azad, who served a stint in government service as first secretary at the Bangladesh embassy in Moscow, was a popular teacher of Bengali literature.

Syed Waliullah

(1922-1971) has earned his place in Bengali literary history with his defining work Lalshalu. The story is at once an image of evil latent in man and the gullibility which the general masses are as a rule prone to. In the character of Majid, Waliullah creates an apt metaphor for the darkness which all so often assails the human soul. Decades after Waliullah's death in Paris (and that was barely a couple pf months before his beloved Bangladesh emerged as a free nation), it was for Tanvir Mokammel to set Lalshalu to film. The movie was a season of revival for Syed Waliullah.

Brilliance had always been a part of the Waliullah persona. At the age of twenty three, while working as a sub-editor for the Calcutta newspaper The Statesman, he saw his first set of short stories. That was the beginning. His novels were on the way. Besides Lalshalu, there would be Chander Amaboshya and Kando Nodi Kando.



Shaukat Osman (1917-1998) was born as Sheikh Azizur Rahman in Hugli of West Bengal and migrated to East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) after Partition in 1947. Assuming the name by which he carved

his niche in Bangladesh's literary world, Osman went into teaching in the initial stages of his career. Deeply secular and inclined towards literature, he soon veered into creativity with such works of fiction as Janani, which was to be translated in English. At a subsequent stage, his seminal work Kritodasher Hashi (Laughter of the Slave) was to be translated from Bengali to English by Kabir Chowdhury. In a career of prolific activity, Shaukat Osman would leave behind some poignant works noted not only for their intrinsic literary value but also for the subtle attention they drew to socio-political realities in Bangladesh.

Apart from novels, Shaukat Osman wrote verses and limericks which effectively lampooned the powers that be, especially religious bigots out to disrupt the secular social and political order he so deeply believed in. Fearless and principled, Osman died, as it were, waging battles for the ideas he believed in.

Araj Ali

Matubbor (1900-1985) can truly be regarded as Bangladesh's rustic or pastoral writer devoted to an exploration of the mysteries that assail life. He did not go to school owing to dire poverty. His father died when he was a child. And then, being a minor, he could not save his home from passing into the hands of others. That perhaps was a defining moment for him. Questions of life and death began to arouse his increasingly deepening interest, with the result that in time he developed a rationalist and humanist point of view. Matubbor endlessly came forth with questions. Not satisfied with conventional religious explanations of life and the hereafter, he proceeded to record his thoughts in such works as Shotter Shondhane. After that other books came along. Mention may be made of Srishtir Rohoshyo and Mukto Mon.

Being the sceptic that he was, Araj Ali Matubbor donated his body to medical science as his way of contributing to humanistic progress.



Syed Mujtaba Ali (1904-1974) spent much of his life outside Bangladesh for reasons of employment. It was not before 1972, a mere two years before his death, that he moved back to Bangladesh from India, where he had

worked for such organisations as All-India Radio.

But Ali's career in writing took off in his youth. In 1919 he began corresponding with Rabindranath Tagore. Ten years later saw him in employment in Kabul, which phase lasted a couple of years. Enthusiastic about India's freedom struggle, he devoutly believed in a united country once the British colonial power made its exit from the subcontinent. A peripatetic writer, Ali travelled to such global centres of civilisation as Berlin, London, Paris and Bonn, an opportunity he took advantage of to further his education. Once Pakistan was established, he moved to Dhaka. The very next year he demonstrated great courage when he published his article, 'The State Language of East Pakistan', wherein he argued that the language could not be other than Bengali. The article aroused the ire of the Pakistan government, which asked him for an explanation. Rather than compromise himself, Ali went over to India.

Syed Mujtaba Ali remains an iconic figure for the insight, with dashes of intellectual humour, he brought into his many works. His Deshe Bideshe, Chacha Kahini, Shabnam, Tuni Mem and Porosh Pathor, among so many others, have given him an unassailable reputation.

Quazi Motahar

Hossain (1897-1981) remains, three decades after his death, an iconic figure in Bangladesh's intellectual world. Every inch a modern man, with his remarkable grasp on such subjects as mathematics, physics, journalism and essay writing, Hossain was always miles ahead of many others of his time and later. Educated at Calcutta Presidency College, he joined the newly established Dhaka University when it was set up in 1921. Humility was his forte; and simplicity was what he felt comfortable with. He was a skilled chess player, so much so that he gave the game a new dimension among the young in Bangladesh.

Hossain's career was a multi-dimensional one. He was at once a writer, scientist, statistician and journalist. His written works, all based on profound scholarship, include Shancharan, Nazrul Kabyo Porichiti, Gonit Shaster Itihash, Alok Bigyan and Nirbachito Probandho.



M. SHAHINOOR RAHMAN

KAMAL Chowdhury is an iconic figure in post-Liberation Bangla poetry. He is a prolific writer and a bit of a critic, too. By now as many as 15 volumes of poetry bear his name. One volume, for instance, entitled *The Story of Bones and Other Poems*, published by Shamabesh, Dhaka (2012) attracted wide interest among readers in America and elsewhere. He has edited a collection of Bangla poetry of the 1970s under the title *Ajasra Aguner Phool* (Numberless Fiery Flowers). His research interest is the society and culture of Bangladesh. He did his Ph.D in anthropology – the ethnological identity and matriarchal settlement system of the Garos. His honours include Bangla Academy Sahitya Award (2011), Rudra Medal (2000), Jibananda Award (2008), City-Ananda Alo Award (2010) and Assam University Crest (2011). He is a Fellow of Bangla Academy, a Life Member of Bangladesh Asiatic Society and one of the founders of Bangladesh Writers Club.

Kamal grew into young adulthood in the wake of the Liberation War, the single greatest event in the history of the Gangetic delta. He seems to have completely identified himself with the inspiration and ideals of a war that brought about a new nation. But like his generation he was shocked and frustrated at the sight of that dream and those ideals being flouted by miscreants, oppor-

tunists and fortune-seekers.

Kamal's poetry is geared to this agony of disillusionment. He took to his pen as a rebel. His poetry is a sustained utterance of the hopes and aspirations of a newborn nation shattered by corruption at all levels. His very first collection *Michhiler Soman Boyosi* (As Old As The Procession), which appeared in 1981, immediately marked him out as an angry rebel pining at the sight of the vast panorama of rapacity and injustice and the resultant misery of the masses which he saw raging around him. His lacerated sensibilities cry out in every word he utters and over the years his spirit of rebellion and reformation has augmented into a mounting crescendo. But what is remarkable is that he has never allowed his optimism to decline. He has not yielded to dejection. Each piece of his poetry vibrates with the hope of a new world. To a student of English literature an analogy that may readily suggest itself is with Shelley blowing his 'trumpet of a prophecy' in *Ode to the West Wind*. As Hazlitt said, Shelley 'has a fire in his eye, a fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain...' But the similarity with Shelley ends there and dissimilarity begins. Shelley undoubtedly had 'a passion for reforming mankind' but he is predominantly a 'poet of sorrow' (Hughes); chronically lapses into melancholy; paralyzed by dejection, 'pallid and hysterical' (Carlyle); 'is drawn up by irresistible levity to the regions of mere speculation and fancy' (Hazlitt); 'a beautiful and ineffectual angel



beating in the void his luminous wings in vain', 'availing nothing, effecting nothing' (Arnold).

Kamal has a different profile to show. He is a visionary but not a recluse. He is not like Shelley withdrawn and fantasizing in a utopia:

'Of some world far from ours,

Where music and moonlight and feeling
Are one.'

Kamal's poetic idiom grows out of the stark realities of everyday life. He is not a wild philosopher, but like Charles Lamb "earth-bound and fettered to the scene of my activities, standing on earth, not rapt above the sky". He has seen life. There is a theory of literary criticism that advises us to consider the text, not the author. That means, the consideration should be confined to the work of the writer, in which case it is stigmatized as a 'flight from the masterpiece'. But Addison's theory is that the writer is also a function of his work in the math-

ematical sense, which means that the interpretation or appreciation of a product is greatly aided and enriched by a look at the producer. "A good book", says Milton, "is the precious life-blood of a master spirit embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life". To quote Addison: "I have observed that a Reader seldom pursues a book with pleasure, until he knows whether the writer of it be a black or a fair man, of a mild or choleric disposition, married or a bachelor, with other particulars of the like nature, that conduce very much to the right understanding of an author" (Spectator No.1).

Hence as a case in point, Kamal's personal life and personality have a claim to be known as preparatory to his poetic utterances. As a top-ranking civil servant, he daily exposes and is exposed to the myriad faces of depravity, moral turpitude, meanness, sham, chicanery, fraud and malversation with which society is honeycombed. Corruption lurks in places that cannot be foreseen or forethought of. Kamal's official position has schooled him in human nature. It must have pained him every now and then to notice high dignitaries betray their trust for venal considerations. He looks upon his poetry as the medium that will ventilate his aggrieved feelings and inspire the new generation to reform the country.

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REFLECTIONS

The story of a poet

NON-FICTION

Coming home

news that from then onward no money would be given to us, just rationed food, and oh, what coarse stuff it was! What about clothing and other necessities? All the saved up money was going into that and some were even getting worried at the dreaded thought of getting penniless! Despite all, the prisoners wished to keep their spirits switched on and tried to make life as normal as possible. They would get together, sing some patriotic songs, which eventually reached the ears of the authorities, and that too was reprimanded. However, the school that was run by the officers, out in the open land, to keep their children in touch with books and studies was not interfered with. Some college-going boys, including my brother, requested special permission to attend classes in Edward College Peshawar, and Allah's mercy was there, for they were granted that permission, escorted by strict security, and on roll call while leaving and coming back, just like real prisoners! The principal of the college, knowing the situation they were in, did not charge them any fees, a very noble gesture on his part, or education in such a prestigious college would have cost too much to be within their means. Allah surely is merciful. It is just that all in this world have to go through trials at different points in life! We had faced the trial, and were praying with all our hearts to be given enough courage,

We could not contain our joy. First Alhamdulillah and then 'Joy Bangla' was how everyone who heard the news reacted. Then all got into chorus and paraded the camp grounds shouting slogans of 'Joy Bangla'.

patience and resilience to make it to the end successfully. All prayed fervently day and night. At last came the bright day with the sweet tidings, music to our ears. Our prayers were answered. We were going to Bangladesh! We could not contain our joy. First Alhamdulillah and then 'Joy Bangla' was how everyone who heard the news reacted. Then all got into chorus and paraded the camp grounds shouting slogans of 'Joy Bangla'.

We were to go to Bangladesh in three batches. Our family was in the first batch. My brothers had about a hundred pigeons or so. It pained them to give them away, for they knew they would turn into food, and so they did, they were told later. My mother and father, together, had spent hours in the vegetable garden, and those vegetables were waiting to be plucked! They looked at their garden for some time, as if to say 'goodbye'. My mother had a chick hatched by pigeons. The rare thing about the chick was that it flew more and was on its claws less. It always flew over and sat on my mother's shoulders the moment she caught sight of her. My mother gave it to a woman who came to our house often to sell bangles and such stuff. The way she cried for that chick, anyone would have thought she was crying for a person!

Just when we were about to board the vehicle that was to take us to the railway station, I ran up to my father and gave him his box of

medals and awards, saying 'You forgot to pack these, Abba.'

'Just leave them where you found them,' he said.

'O.k. then I will keep it with my things,' I said. 'No!' Just that one word and the look in his eyes told me I had to put them back where I found them, though it made me sad. They were souvenirs. Why was he leaving them behind?

One last look at the house, the place, and we were all on board. The vehicle started to move.

'Joy Bangla!' the officers chanted in chorus, their faces beaming, and everyone joined in too.

I remember my mixed emotions as we were about to leave Warsak. Quite natural for one to feel that way! The land seemed to be calling out, 'Don't leave! We'll miss you!' It was just my imagination making me remember my life there, from infancy to teens! Then I was back to normal, excited at the idea of leaving for Bangladesh, my home, the place where I really belonged, the land of my roots! I was grateful to my parents for the love, warmth and affection showered on us even during those hard times. In their glee, nobody seemed to mind the discomfort of a very uncomfortable train journey to Karachi. We were perched on a 1947 bogie! I think they could not come up with an older one! Once in Karachi, we were kept in a transit camp for a week, and finally the blessed day arrived.

The B.A.F. Officers' Mess was thronging with people. While everyone was seen taking turns in going to the washroom, I took a stroll outside and looked around, admiring the greenery that surrounded the place.

"How beautiful my country is!" I thought.

Just then my eyes fell on the portion of the building that wore the traces of devastation, the effect of shelling, or bombing, giving some glimpses of the atrocities committed by the Pakistan army there. For a split second, I imagined myself caught in the gruesome happenings of that period...and came out with a shudder. By the time I returned from the stroll and went inside, I saw that most of the people who had come with us had left for their homes. I noticed some relatives who had come to greet us.

I said, "Assalamu Alaikum!"

My mother said in a low voice, 'Show your respect.'

I was confused, "I did!" I smiled and looked at the visitor. 'Perhaps you didn't notice.'

My mother pointed to the feet, for she wanted me to do it the Bengali way, by touching the feet. I just stood there, puzzled.

The visitors understood and quickly said, "That's o.k. No need!"

Then came the pinch, 'They are not Bengali-oriented. They will go through a hard period of learning!'

Since then I have been learning, and to this day. I am a grandma now and I am still learning, for after all, there is no end to learning! Despite my learning through trials and errors, and blunders, I feel fortunate to be in my motherland, and for breathing the air of an independent state.

"May our independence always be safeguarded," I heard myself saying under my breath. "May Allah keep our nation's integrity!"

(Concluded)

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