

TRIBUTE

# Khondakar Ashraf Hossain

To your high requiem, I will be a sod

ZAYNUL ABEEDIN

WHILE reminiscing about a late professor, Professor Dr. Fakrul Alam would often quote this famous line from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "And gladly would he learn and gladly teach". Very impressive, this line, I think, also encapsulates the quintessential characteristics of Professor Dr. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain, who breathed his last on June 16, 2013.

Dr. Fakrul Alam no doubt personifies the truth of the quotation. But my first chance encounter with this line set me on an unending quest to explore its semblance in others as well. I know I am the most inattentive of students, and yet this silent quest kept me vigilant all through a class.

My encounter with Professor Dr. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain lived up to my expectations. The air of confidence with which he kept teaching us set me to ruminating inside the class and outside. I recall how often I laughed and talked to myself even after the class, erecting in the mind a secluded palace of my own to study, envisage and materialize my dreams.

I remember an occasion when I asked, "What is your grandfather?" to his grandson and granddaughter, Rubab and Miti, whom I was tutoring years back. They were twins, and like most other twins they believed in fierce competition. Vying to introduce him to me, Rubab said, "He writes poetry" while Miti retorted, "No. He teaches at a university". Neither was incorrect. I knew him very well, yet I posed the question only to see what the little ones do in such a situation. Now that I studied many years under his tutelage and that he is no more among us, I understand that a wondrous combination of both qualities made him such a personable teacher in the department.

While teaching us poetry, most of the time he would translate some esoteric lines from such difficult poets as Eliot. Might we have not needed a Bengali translation of an English poet, but his poetic ammunition was remarkable enough to electrify, entrance and embolden our fledgling, inchoate literary psyche in our academic trajectory. A savant in different languages like English, German, Bangla etc. including most of the dialects of Bangla, he even translated some of Eliot's poems into a Dhaka dialect.

A poet himself, he well understood the chasm between theory and practice and more often than not tried bridging the gaps. While it is usually expected of the teachers in an English department to know how a theme and a style coalesce in literary work to produce something of a novelty, for him it was more of an intuition than mere knowledge. Precisely for the intuitive quality, he could bring in the 'magic moment' in class, which is a perennial Holy Grail for teachers, but for some it is nothing more than an abortive endeavor and every once in a while ends in complete fiasco.

Apart from teaching, he launched several literary and cultural initiatives, *Krishnochura* being the quintessence of his efforts. After an incident in the department two or three years back, the Chair had to suspend many of the programs active in those days. With those programs seeing their better days, students had to go to the TSC to enroll in cultural programs. But it was he who wanted a change, and no doubt he made a splash!

While teaching us Eliot's *The Wasteland*, quite poetically, he would often say that the larger the crowd is, the lonelier a person feels—a European conviction underlying his PhD dissertation, *Modernism and Beyond: Western Influences on Bangladeshi Poetry*, which he defended under the tutelage of Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam, another doyen and celebrated writer in the department. No doubt, modernism and postmodernism, the two fields falling within his purview of literary and critical interest, must have made him construe life in that light. But inspirational, it left an indelible imprint on my mind. Later I myself vented my pent-up emotion about the feeling in a few lines. While I was still deliberating whether I should send them to *Krishnochura*, I heard he was no longer amongst us. If only I could have sent it to *Krishnochura* when he was alive!

Professor Ashraf was a source of inexhaustible humor, and it made him a personable figure. I can still recall one day in an exam hall when there was a commotion in the end. He along with several female teachers was invigilating the exam, and the female ones were groping for means to squash the uproar, saying, "Those who have

script B must submit it to us, the female teachers; on the other hand, those with script A should submit it to him, Ashraf sir".

He rose to his feet and noticed no change in the commotion. After a minute or two, he started, "A for Ashraf. A for Ashraf. Please give script A to me. Remember A for Ashraf". Who would forget the day?

It was such an obvious example of his ready wit. While students 'come and go talking about Michael Angelo', his was a completely different classroom, a veritable cornucopia of it if you will. Allusion is another kind of ready wit he seemed to have been eternally endowed with. We could remember he had taught us Yeats' "Second Coming" in the previous semester. In the next, he taught us a different course, but while going out of the class, he forgot his mobile set. When he returned a few minutes later, Dr. Fakrul Alam had already started his class. Now he had to interrupt us, so he quipped, "Sorry for my 'second coming' as he was going out, gathering his phone set.

On yet another occasion when he was busy checking our scripts, he said, "You are getting so many 'marks'. You are all being 'marxist' (marks+ist)"—an unforgettable pun that we would all invariably miss henceforward.

Often he would make fun of himself as well. He had a slightly dark complexion and a slightly bald head, and these two often became more than his body features. Many of his jokes about himself elude my mind now, but ask any of his students, and you will still see a whiff of laughter, the vestiges of their class participation and learning under the effectual, inimitable tutelage of this doyen.

The last of his qualities that riveted our attention, motivated our minds and, above all, stupefied us was his honesty, dedication and passion.

When he entered the classroom, a reassuring ambience would prevail. I do not know if he subscribed to E. M. Forster's theory of teaching, "spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon", but all the years I studied under him I noticed him avoiding 'spoon feeding'. Before coming to the class, he always seemed to have well prepared himself so that every single query students might pose would receive a mind-kindling answer. Ever dedicated and honest with his profession, he would, every day before starting a new topic, recapitulate whatever we had done before. Therefore, the literary theory that he lately offered us still seems vivid in our memory.

Although a teacher cannot teach experience proper, he always taught us from his experience. While teaching us Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" in the

second year, he balked at the lines depicting the requiem: *Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— To thy high requiem become a sod.*

As was for Keats, it was a climactic moment for Khondakar Ashraf Hossain in the poem. Addressing the nightingale, Keats says if the bird still sings when he will die, he might not have a human ear but he would still be listening to it. He aspires to be a tuft of grass or soil thrown on the grave while the requiem is being played. For Professor Ashraf, it was the last wish too, and he wished when he would die, there should be some music all around.

It was just the beginning, the opening gambit of his obsession with death towards the sunset of his life. When his wife died towards the end of our undergraduate program, I remember he would almost always say that once his "sathi" (friend, comrade) and soul-mate, his wife, had left him, there was nothing left for him to press ahead with. While returning from the funeral prayers held at the premises of the Dhaka University Central Mosque, some of my friends, Halim, Maidul and Abir, commented that Hossain's health must have deteriorated after the demise of his wife, and maybe it was what hastened his death.

I do not know if their surmise would all be true, but I was not at all startled at his death. He had always wished it; he wished the faster it came, the better. I am not sure if there was music all around when he died either. But I am sure he must have heard something, something that left his face smiling even in his death.

Professor Dr. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain, even if you are no more amongst us, let me be a 'sod' at your grave when you listen to the celestial music, the eternal ambrosia in the blissful seclusion of your village, ever sequestered from the hustle and bustle of mundane life.

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THEATRE

# Witty, mischievous observations

PHOEBEE BEEDELL

*Karma Coffee*  
A play by Shazia Omar

AWESOME! Totally awesome! This is what we need, especially on Valentine's night—a good dose of superior theatre with a gender twist. Oh yes, 'Art is the medicine of society', as one of Shazia Omar's hilariously well-crafted characters might say, in *Karma Cafe*, her debut as a playwright, which was performed at Red Shift Café on February 14, 2014.

Previously, Shazia has had success with her intricate weaving of novel storylines depicting the gritty relationships of Dhaka's underbelly. In this new play she turns her talent for witty mischievous observation and no-holds-barred creative expression (this is not a play for the easily offended) to the stage.

*Karma Coffee* is a simple tale of seven bright young singletons, looking for love and marriage, and so very much more, in the do-nothing-be-anyone bubble of the Gulshan village. It's Dhaka, but it could indeed be any one of a number of urban centres in this region. The ambition of this play was staggering: to reflect on the state of our social and intimate relations; to inform and educate, but also to amuse and entertain. It could so easily have fallen into the trap of flippant slapstick or a series of disastrously boring diatribes, quite literally losing the plot. But this crew (for it is clearly a team effort) pulled off a marvelously chaotic balance of the serious, the sentimental and the satirical self-referential that left the audience laughing so hard there were moments when we had tears in our eyes.

One of the beauties of the play is the simplicity of the set-up: a pair of orphans, meeting in the café of their cake-obsessed Yasmin auntie (Neeta Manaf), who carries the comedy-of-errors storyline fantastically and is more than ably assisted by the brilliantly comedic Babu (Baizid Joardar), who plays the waiter and very nearly steals the show. The audience watches on as Ansari (Imtiaz Kibria) is conned and cajoled by his sister (Rumana Habib) into meeting four girls who might be suitable prospects for a much-needed marriage. And so, as sure as night follows day, we are presented with a procession of astutely observed caricatures. The four girls themselves are beautifully played — a greedy hard-faced businesswoman (Nissim Jan); a saintly social activist (Shehzeen Chowdhury); a yogi-hippy-chick (Afia Rashid), and a dark jazz musician (Neda Shakib). But Shazia Omar writes wickedly good lines for the men too (Mashur Chowdhury and David Browne), revealing in blunt form their charming ineptitudes, hypocrisies and base obsessions.

As the action progresses, we are treated to a succession of confessional conversations between the characters, and are uncomfortably shaken by a deeply serious commentary on women's everyday experiences of domestic violence, child marriage, date rape, abortion, eating disorders and gambling addictions.

The brilliant ensemble acting, clever and imaginative direction (direction by Amit Ashraf, who recently produced his debut movie, *Udhaa*) and technical finesse make this play a call to action. Shazia has produced a piece that asks us to look at who we are and who we want to be.

More of this kind of theatre please.

# City of Light

Paris in December

RAANA HAIDER

ONE may ask, why visit Paris in December? It was at times gray, gloomy and grim with an overcast sky and the intermittent rain. Given precious few days in a capital that offers scores of excitement; winter daylight hours do run short. Yes, there were moments of reflecting grayness in countless shades of gray, muted light, a fleeting winter melancholy with only the occasional splash of sunlight. Before you know it dusk has fallen. This is looking at the Parisian glass — half-empty. Once the sun has set over the Seine River immersed in time; standing on the Pont de la Cite, like a magician's wand; bridges, department stores, monuments, museums, palaces, parks — hosts of public edifices come radiantly alive. Lamp-posts glisten in the soft diffused light. The City of Light sparkles, twinkles like a massive Christmas tree, the seasonal symbol. Laid out is a grand illuminated urban spectacle that captivates and mesmerizes one. A high design city, it remains a global magnet out-doing all others. 'City of Light' was a term coined in the Age of Enlightenment and continues to keep its promise.

The French have finely tuned the Art of Light. In the words of the late eighteenth century Frenchman of letters Joseph Joubert: "What is true in the lamplight is not always true in the sunlight." A contemporary comment on 'light' appears in the following description by the Italian architect and designer Paola Navone on her home in the 11th district of the city. She writes: "The light was so special that I thought I shouldn't do anything else. You know, the light in Paris is very strange; sometimes you'll spot a cloud but they move really fast. Then all of a sudden — boom! — it's very dark. I could stay on that couch for a week observing it all." Paris in December remains impressionable; for here is a city that remains alluring in all seasons.

The short day and long night result in an opportunity to visually indulge further the iconic bejeweled 'Lady of Paris' — the Eiffel Tower. There she sparkles majestically in full grandeur contributing significantly to the city's unique ambience. Constructed in 1889 for the Exposition Universelle /Paris World Fair to commemorate the centennial of the French Revolution, it was an engineering marvel. In 2014, the Grande Dame celebrates 125 years of slender elegance. Yet in its day, it was coined as 'a useless and monstrous tower' by the city's residents. Fifty of Paris's leading artists and writers condemned this 'black and gigantic factory chimney' that was a blemish on the Parisian skyline. Today, it is the country's and the city's signature symbol. The Eiffel Tower is one of the world's most recognized landmarks and the most frequently visited paid attraction on earth.

The Avenue des Champs Elysees with its eye-popping vista any time of the year acquires a fabulous finale as the year comes to an end. Stretching from the illuminated awesome Arc de Triomphe built by Emperor Napoleon I to celebrate his victorious battles, through what is probably the widest avenue in the world and, without prejudice, certainly the most enchanting. This Christmas, hoops encircled leafless trees flanking the wide stretch. As evening fell, the illuminated hoops turned at varying times — into the three colours of the French flag — red, white and blue — a magical and mesmerizing visual vista. This is why one comes to Paris in December! One is fortunate enough to be in the front seat of a great spectacle staged just for you — or so it feels.

According to one survey, the Champs Elysees is ranked as number one of the '10 most amazing streets in the world.' Embodying all the celebrated beauty of Paris, the thoroughfare that never sleeps; is home to retailers that target tourists, high-end car showrooms, cinema complexes, the signature Sephora perfume outlet where fragrances trail off into the air and the ultra-classical Guerlain store that has scented women for generations. International chain stores merchandising clothes (Zara, H&M and Marks & Spencer) share pricey ground rent on the Avenue with the luxury giant Louis Vuitton.

This is the location to partake a café au lait and people-watch — the site par excellence to see and be seen. Here are cafes and restaurants — Fouquet's, Laduree, where you pay for the location and not the consumed commodities. It was Charles Dickens who stayed at No. 49 on the Avenue des Champs-Elysees in 1855. He noted: "Each room has but one window in it, but we have no fewer than six rooms (besides the back ones) looking on the Champs Elysees, with the wonderful life perpetually flowing up and down." On the other hand, it was the Parisian novelist Emile Zola in his short story 'Snow' who observed: "In Paris there are wide cityscapes like nowhere else. Habit has made us indifferent to them. But those who wander around the city — keenly sniffing the air, looking to be moved, to be amazed — are very familiar with these places. For my part, I dearly love the stretch of the Seine between Notre Dame and the Pont de Charenton; I have never seen a horizon as strange and vast as this". For there is always a season to match the Seine. From the banks of the river, you get a wide-eyed perspective of many of the city's visual imprints — Notre Dame cathedral, Eiffel Tower, Louvre, Musee d'Orsay; its innumerable limestone nineteenth century buildings and its broad tree-lined boulevards.

While not a white Christmas, a make-believe world of fantasy was created at the lower end of the Champs Elysees between Rond Point which during the other three seasons is the site for choreographed floral displays and the Egyptian obelisk that towers over the vast expanse that is the Place de la Concorde. In December 2013, I found a European Christmas village constructed along both sides of the Avenue. Wooden chalets recreate a winter wonderland — without the white magic. Edible shopping from structured street-eats is in the form of hot mulled wine, steaming cups of coffee, waffles with fruit-toppings, gingerbread cakes, glazed icing cakes and dark chocolate biscuits — all gastro-magic. Booths brimming with food, gifts, toys and the ubiquitous seasonal Santa Claus were thronged by domestic and foreign visitors.

A paramount city with a textured past, its buildings and monuments appeal to ones senses while setting a feast for the eye. Should you be strolling in the courtyard of the Louvre museum in the early evening, the spectacular grand entrance — that is the glass-constructed pyramid — shimmers in the encompassing dusk. A sudden shower has left rain-drops reflecting the surrounding illuminated edifices. Again an architectural blight for Parisians at the time; again what a transformation! What would be the Louvre's eighteenth century elegant panorama without the juxtaposition of the cool, chrome and glass architectural stamp of the twentieth century? This is where magic and modernity co-exist harmoniously; one embracing the other. Something must be working since solid statistics state that some 30,000 persons a day visit the capital's treasure house.

The finesse of the Art of Window-dressing is fabulously French. Parisian retailers outlets are in a league of their own. For in the memorable words phrased by the English newspaper editor James Grant in 'Paris and its People' (1843): "The journey of a Parisian shop... is a sight worth going a day's journey to witness; it is quite a study — a perfect picture. It affords an exhibition of artistic skill of which the people of no other country can have any conception." Bastions of Parisian chic, the grand Parisian department

stores; mini-cities in themselves compete and exceed one another in their flair and panache as they show-case their festive season products. With consumerism at its peak period during the festivities, the retail industry lures customers with its best and brightest; a combination of dash and dazzle. Le Bon Marche on the Left Bank of the Seine River and Galeries Lafayette and Printemps on the Right Bank are masters in the fine art of enticement. Imagination soars, from the sumptuously ornate — all gilt and glamour to the lean, clean and mean look of minimalism. It is de rigueur to stroll past and take-in the window wonderland. Galeries Lafayette has this year as its seasonal item theme — the Swatch watch. Under the stunning stained glass cupola that forms the centre-piece of the store stands the majestic Christmas tree festooned in all shapes and sizes of the Swatch watch. Not to be out-done, Printemps picked as its Christmas season brand — the Italian fashion house Prada; encompassing all its accessories, bags and clothing. Everywhere, crafted choreography is the name of the big-time game. Was it not Elsa Schiaparelli, the Parisian haute couture fashion designer of the early twentieth century who remarked: 'Fantasy alone can lift people above dreariness.'

Nowhere was that truer than in the visit to the unique exhibition 'Cartier: The Style and History' held at the Grand Palais just off the Champs-Elysees. It provided a rare glimpse at some of the finest jewellery and objects ever made by the house of Cartier founded in 1847 which since has dominated the realm of jewellery. In 1902, Cartier was consecrated the 'jeweller of kings and king of jewellers' by King Edward VII of England. It was Marilyn Monroe who famously sang: 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend' in the 1953-made film 'Gentlemen Prefer Blonds.' This exhibition offered 'all the objects of desire' — diamond tiaras by the dozen including the one worn by Duchess of Cambridge at her wedding and at least four that were on loan from the Qatar royal family. One could gasp at the



flamingo brooch in diamonds, rubies, emerald and sapphires that was sold to the Duchess of Windsor in 1940. Mysterious clocks in jade, marble, coral — some decked with diamonds are crafted as showpieces and steal the show. Cigarette cases designed from 1910 to 1940 remain entirely contemporary. The densest crowds hover around the showcases, photographs and write-ups that exhibit commissioned or items purchased by Elizabeth Taylor, Princess Grace of Monaco, Maharajah of Patiala, Maharajah of Alwar, Queen of England and the Duchess of Windsor. Entirely in awe and entirely content at having been at the right time in Paris for an experience of a lifetime; I somersaulted the next day by free-loading.

Long having wanted to visit the Musee Cernuschi, one of many free museums run by the 'Museums of the City of Paris,' I strolled past elegant edifices that frame Parc Monceau in the 16th arrondissement (district) of Paris en route to Enrico Cernuschi's town-house home that houses an eclectic collection of Chinese and Japanese decorative arts; some 3000 years old. Cernuschi was born in Milan in 1821 and moved to Paris in 1850. An economist and banker, as well as being active in politics, he became disillusioned with the turn of events following the Commune of Paris. Seeking a diversion, he embarked on a trip to the Far East in 1871. Succumbing to the European rage for all things Oriental and being a man of means with a discerning eye, Cernuschi amassed an immense collection of Chinese imperial chinaware and Japanese bronzes — manifestations of his Asian experience. Enchanted, I stood before a massive sublime Buddha Amitabha bronze statue from Tokyo. It dates to the Edo period in the eighteenth century. It ranks as the most iconic monument in the museum. In 1896, Cernuschi had the central hall built to house the colossal Lord Buddha black marble statue seated on a lotus flower atop a black marble base. Here I saw in the soft wintry afternoon light reflections of bare trees and silhouetted nineteenth century buildings from the large French windows that open out onto the Parc Monceau. Such was the perfectly sublime setting that at that very moment, I did not want to venture into the age-old debate; the acrimonious controversy concerning cultural heritage. This was a moment to simply savour.

Another wish was granted on this visit. Paris's fashion museum Palais Galliera reopened in 2013 following a massive renovation. The opening exhibition 'Alaia' was the talk of the town. A cutting-edge display and design exhibition housed in a nineteenth century palace is the setting. Azzedine Alaia, the Tunisian-born French designer is renowned for his state-of-the-art structured tailoring — clothes that fit with technical precision. One has to admire his extensive usage of leather; softening the material into folds. His declaration is that 'I make clothes, women make fashion.' Yet another learning experience in a city that never fails to innovate.

Above all, the 'City of Light' is made for walking. More appropriately, Paris is a city for strolling or in the words of Paul Theroux in 'The Tao of Travel'; "Some walks are those of the flaneur, an almost untranslatable French word meaning stroller, saunterer, drifter — the essence of a traveller — but in this case usually one in a city..." Someone once wrote on winter in Paris: 'with the greenery gone, the 'bones' of the city are exposed; and what grand bones they are.' Again and again, one feels the juxtaposition of grandeur with its inimitable pockets of intimacy; reliving the old while adding the new. The end result is a rich repository to be tucked away in the recesses of the mind. Surely, life is about moments. And in Paris, you create your very own moveable feast.

What is this life, if full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare...  
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance,  
(Leisure' by William Henry Davies)

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