

The many faces of Nazrul

Ayesha Kabir is cheered by a work without pedantry

It is perhaps because his father, the legendary folk-music artiste Abbasuddin Ahmed, was closely associated with Poet Nazrul Islam that made the task of writing about the poet's life so easy for Mustafa Zaman Abbasi. Or maybe the task wasn't easy at all. However, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Man and Poet* is an easy flowing book and the reader enjoys the fruits of Abbasi's labour. It is most fortunately free of all the pedantry so often associated with research work and has a very conversational style. It is as if the affable Abbasi is encircled by a group of listeners as he tells the story of the great poet.

Early on in this book, Mustafa Zaman Abbasi points to the pertinence of Nazrul in today's world, to his universality that transcends time and boundaries. He writes:

Nazrul's style and philosophy is a unique combination of two cultural patterns. Usually we think these forces will run parallel and would never meet. Inspired by his identity as a Bengali merged with Islamic and Indian moorings he was drenched deeply into the ocean of prophetic love and Hindu diversity. We find in literature a union of the two cultures. He is a Bengali poet of inspired genius wherein one can find a way of spiritual rejuvenation into this material world of meaningless pursuit.

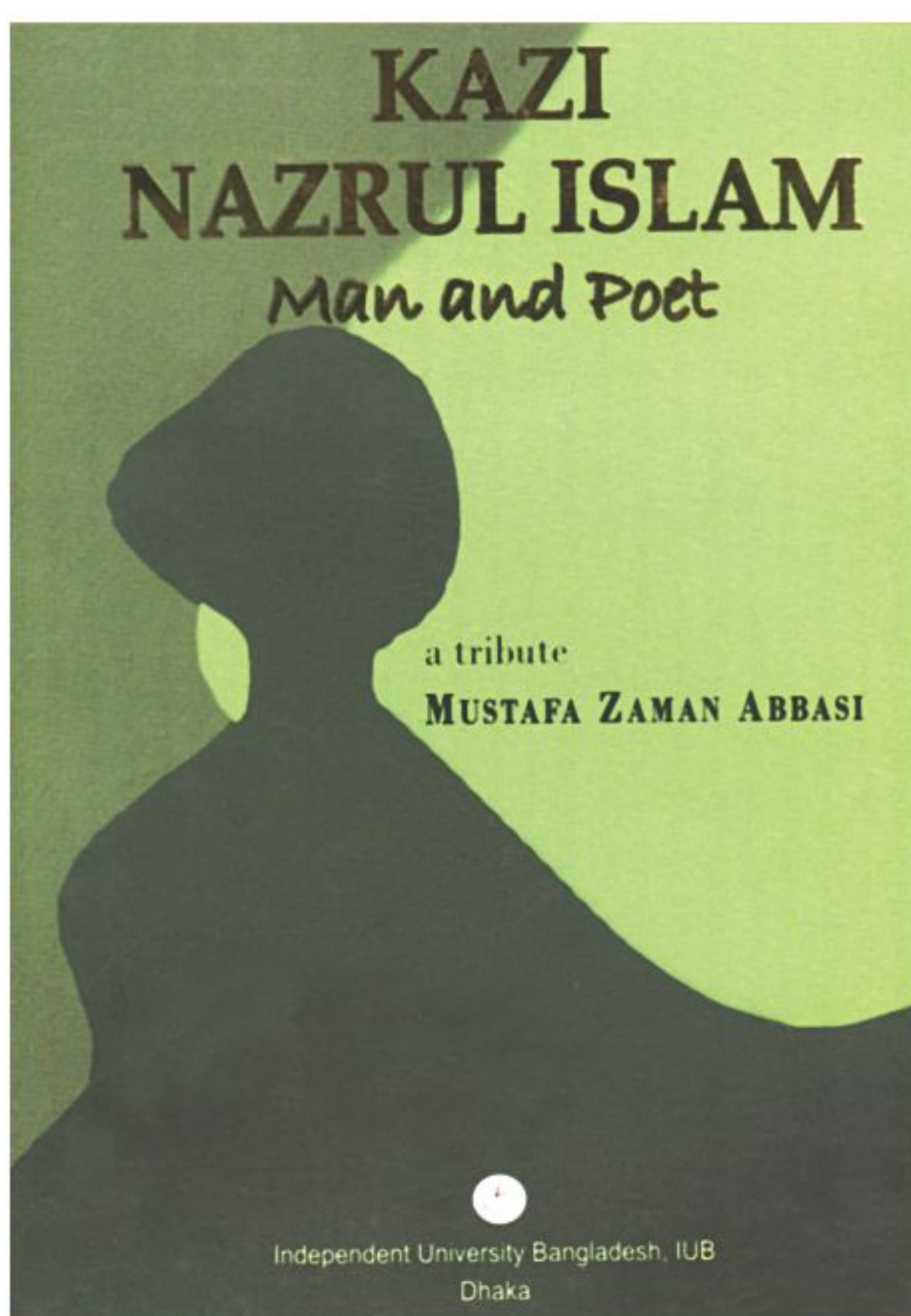
Having thus established Nazrul as a man and a poet way above the petty pursuits of the world, Abbasi depicts him both as the down-to-earth champion of the downtrodden, as well as an avante garde modernist of the "new epoch of Bengal". Thus, despite his poetic sensitivities that transcended the mundane, Nazrul was very much a part of the political predicament of the nation around him. That is why the writer sees a similarity between Nazrul and Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet-politician. He also sees an affinity between Nazrul and Rabindranath Tagore, both possessing great minds with a deep devotion for beauty and transcendental love.

After the prologue which gives us Nazrul in a nutshell, Abbasi takes us to the beginnings, where Nazrul was born:

The sun rises in this remote village of Churulia in Asansol, a sub-division of district Burdwan in West Bengal, India. Arid, but the village is really beautiful, lush green during monsoon... a poet is born.

It is like a novel, wherein Abbasi tells the story of the protagonist Nazrul. But this is very real. It is interesting to see how Nazrul winds his way through schooling, singing and writing; poverty and sufferings could do nothing to stem his enthusiasm or his talent.

Nazrul appeared on the literary scene at a time when Tagore dominated all around. Who would be read or heard while the great man's genius remained all-pervading? Abbasi answers this question:



Kazi Nazrul Islam: Man and Poet
Mustafa Zaman Abbasi
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... a genius of another kind indeed startled the sky of literature showing that another sun had risen from nowhere.

Nazrul was indeed a sun, shining brilliantly on the world around him. His works illuminated the beauty of the world, just as it shed light on the injustices of society.

As mentioned earlier, this book on Nazrul is written in a very conversational style without the constraints of a conscious biographer. After all, Abbasi must have also heard so much about the poet from his own illustrious father, the singer Abbasuddin. Thus the writer has added interesting tidbits here and there, little gems of information not to be heard even in the most detailed biographies of the poet. For example:

One day one of Nazrul's spiritual mentors and friends, Abbasuddin was sitting by his side, both suffering from melancholia. The poet had lost his son Bulbul, and the singer, his second son, Nilu.

Nazrul said: "Unless I am alone, I won't be visited by the unknown. So, I decided to be alone each Thursday. I failed. Then I decided to go speechless on every Thursday. I failed. Where can I have a place to be friendless for some time?"

Abbasuddin said: "Kazida, I have a special way when I am in a meditative prayer, gradually reaching a stage where I cannot hear anything anymore, nothingness enters into me. I realise that I am with Him, a practice which can benefit you."

What profound spirituality! Today all around us we see people spending thousands of taka on new age meditation gurus, but Abbasuddin encapsulated it all in these few words of empathy to a kindred soul.

In the chapter 'Poet Wanderer in Battle Field', Mustafa Zaman Abbasi gives a picture of Nazrul's times and the poet's political convictions. He speaks of Nazrul as a "politically motivated poet" and says that Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed's memoirs indicate that Nazrul would have led the nation to great heights if the country was not suffering from wars, famine and communal riots. His fiery songs were an inspiration to the masses and he was often seen at public political meetings, addressing the people with words of rebellion and motivating them with his inspiring songs.

In this book, Abbasi alludes to several great writers of the world, like Omar Khayyam, Pablo Neruda, Shelley, Whitman and more, placing Nazrul on the same level as these universal greats. He sees an influence of Whitman on Nazrul. Nazrul's *Agropathik* is based on Whitman's *Pioneers*.

Whitman says:
*Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready.
Have you your pistols? Have your
sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers O Pioneers!
And Nazrul writes:
O pioneers! O soldiers!
O my sun-burnt mud-stained brothers
listen to me
This is the day for your new vengeance
in the stale world...*

*Where is your hammer? Where is your shovel?
O pioneers! O soldiers!*

Though Abbasi finds a similarity between Nazrul and the other great poets, he also sees him as unique. He says that Bengali poetry was saturated with the tune of the flautist,

with Krishna featuring prominently in the pages of literature. But Nazrul burst upon the idyllic literary scene like "a volcano, a virtual Vesuvius." Following the war, Nazrul's book of poems *Agnibina* emanated with his fearless and uncontrollable spirit, like the relentless waves of the ocean.

Abbasi uses Nazrul's famous poem of rebellion, *Bidrohi*, as an example of the new dimensions the poet brought to the table of Bengali poesy. He refers to a modern critic's observations in this regard, saying that *Bidrohi* presented action orientation on the body of Bengali poetry; it introduced new imagery and new words; it combined mythology of the Indian *puranas*, of the Arab-Persian genre and also that of the Greeks; it discarded old age concepts of kings; it used folklore and folk images; used colloquial Bengali with ease; and, overall, widened the scope of the Bengali language.

It is interesting when the writer describes Nazrul's visits and interactions in Dhaka, Kolkata, Darjeeling and more. Those familiar with these places can go back in time and conjure up pictures as if travelling by the side of the poet.

Then there is a description of Nazrul's concept of beauty. His beauty is not the thin veneer of artifice, it is not all sugar and spice. His beauty has power. He sees beauty in so many different forms. He says, "In jail my beauty made me wear hard wreaths of chains around my hands and feet; soon after getting out of jail the whole of Bangladesh welcomed my innermost beauty with flower fetters, sandalwood of love..." He later writes, "Then my beauty came as my grief-beauty. My son came as my affection beauty." His grief of losing his son led him to the beauty of solace found in the Holy Quran and spiritual mediation.

A glance at some of the chapter titles in this book will reveal the diversity of Nazrul which Abbasi has brought forth. There is *Master Musician and Master Poet; Harbinger of Nationalism; Breeze of Tagore, Rumi, Lalun with Nazrul; Modernity, Post Modernity and Nazrul; Nazrul as a Man; and much more.*

In the epilogue of the book, Abbasi stresses the need to project Nazrul further to the people, to the world. Just as translations of Gibran, Rumi and Tagore have taken them to the four corners of the earth, the writer calls upon Nazrul lovers to take this great poet too beyond the borders, far and wide.

Kazi Nazrul Islam: Man and Poet will certainly be further enhanced with a collection of photographs of the poet. Perhaps we can hope for this in the second edition.

AYESHA KABIR IS A JOURNALIST, CRITIC AND TRANSLATOR

India's lure, frozen in time and imagination

Shahid Alam dissects a new work by a Bangladeshi writer

INDIA: *Beyond the Taj and the Raj* is a combination of travelogue and history of what constitutes India after it gained its independence from the British raj. Up to a point. We will touch upon this aspect as we go along. The author, Raana Haider, partly draws upon her experiences in India where both her father and husband had been posted as diplomats, her visits to her daughter who was educated at one of the exclusive schools in that country, partly on her obviously intense interest in history, and partly on her love of travel in general. *India: Beyond the Taj and the Raj* follows closely on the heels of the publication of Mustafa Zaman Abbasi's *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Man and Poet*, both books having been sponsored by Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

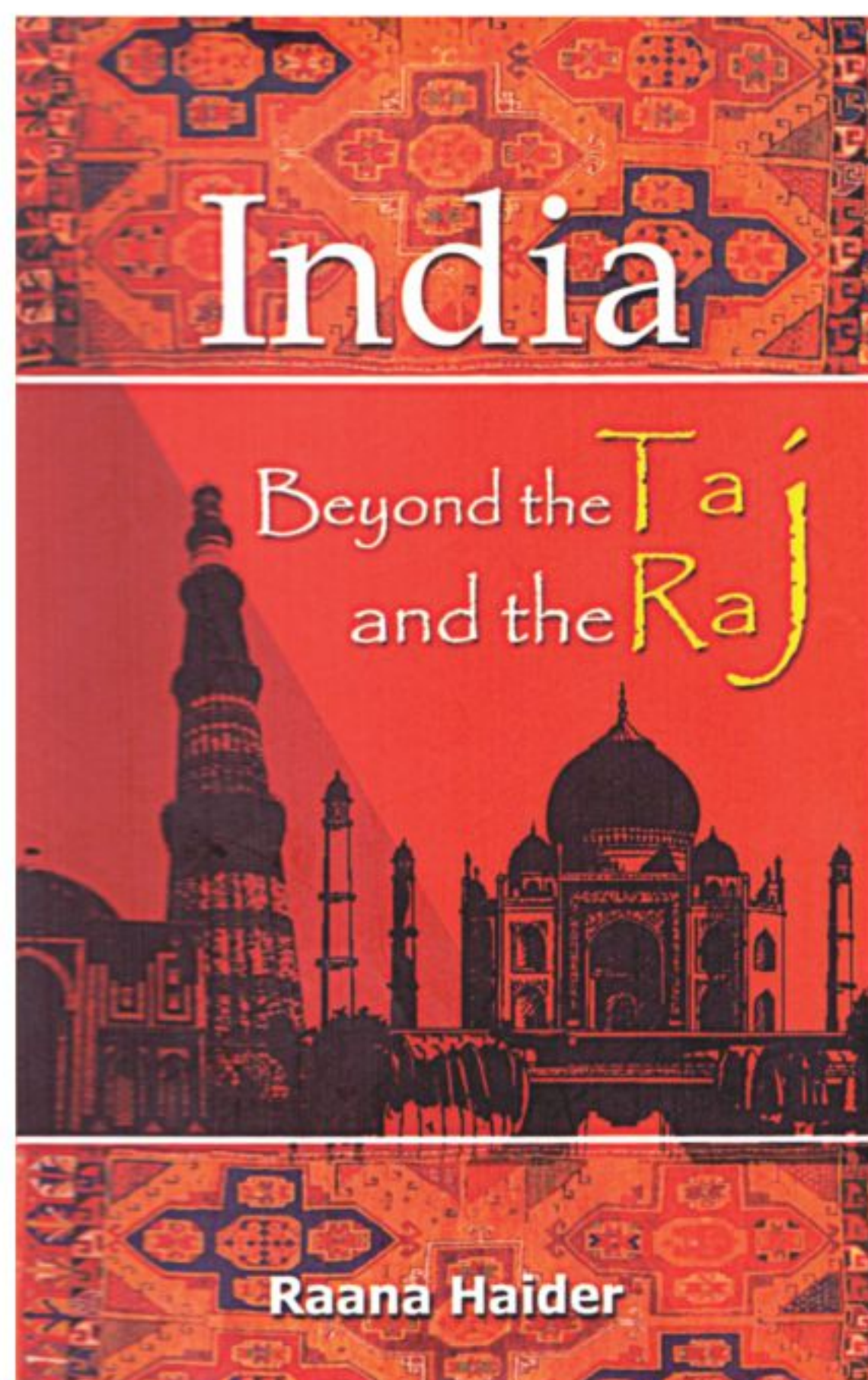
Beyond the Taj and the Raj is a somewhat misleading subtitle because much of the book's historical content deals with matters directly, or tangentially, related to the raj. But there are other snippets of history drawn from the Mughal period, Portuguese and French presence in India, ancient India, India of rajas, maharajas, maharanas, sultans, and nawabs, as well as India since 1947. *Beyond the Taj* approximates its stated intent, with the Taj Mahal receiving an exclusive chapter whose total number of pages account for less than 1 percent of the 450 pages or so that make up the bulk of the book. Various places in India, prominent in their own right, are explored through varied aspects that have made them more conspicuous than others in that country. For a number of understandable reasons, Kolkata (Haider prefers to spell it 'Calcutta'), and she offers her reasons for doing so to this city and to other places which underwent name changes or spelling alterations relatively recently --- 'old school' thinking, she explains) receives the most substantial treatment, but Aligarh, Lucknow, Chandigarh, Mussoorie, Kasauli, Jaipur, Udaipur, Srinagar, Shantiniketon, Meghalaya, Shillong, Bombay (as she spells it), Hyderabad, Goa, Bangalore, Somnathpur, Mysore, Madras, Mamallapuram, and Pondicherry are also dealt with in varying degrees of spatial significance. "The Living Mughals: From Royalty to Anonymity", "Season of Sufism: Jahan-e-Khusrau", and "Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville: Spiritual Retreats" provide instances of discussion on issues that take attention temporarily away from the little vignettes on cities and palaces of Haider's interest.

Besides an apparently keen eye for details during her travels, Haider takes generous recourse to the writings of other travelers, chroniclers, historians, and writers, and brochures, and relevant literature in composing her book. While she demonstrates a special place in the heart for Calcutta, she is more entranced with Delhi. One learns that a British male physician, Dr. Barton, was allowed by Emperor Shah Jahan to treat his beloved daughter Jahanara for burn-related injuries. In return for his services, itself an unusual occurrence when perceived from different aspects of society and religion prevalent then, the good doctor pleaded that the emperor grant the East India Company to trade with the Mughal Empire. He got his wish and, as Haider says, "The die was cast and the rest is history." Still on Delhi, the author draws on Ahmed Ali, a former Pakistan Foreign Service officer, who had migrated from Delhi, and who in his *Twilight in Delhi*, laments: "The civilization I belong to --- the civilization of Delhi --- came into being through the mingling of two different cultures, Hindu and Muslim. That civilization flourished for one thousand years undisturbed until certain people came along and denied that great mingling had taken place."

In "Aligarh: Aura of Academia", Haider singles out the effort of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in goading the Muslims to move on with the changing times. Khan provides a part of his reason for doing so: "I still remember the days when in respectable families, the

study of English, with the object of obtaining a post in the government service or of securing any other lucrative employment, was considered highly detestable." That anomie of the Muslims began with the downfall of the Mughals that started almost as soon as Aurangzeb had passed away, and descended to a nadir with the British taking over India and banishing in exile the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. The descendants of the Mughals during the British raj went into effective anonymity, which Haider chronicles in "The Living Mughals: From Royalty to Anonymity". The last words in her chapter on Aligarh are instructive: "...culture vultures traversed vast distances all the while --- taking, giving and exchanging objects, arts and artisans."

The author comes across as a romantic, among other attributes. She is particularly drawn to hotels --- the grander and the more venerable the better it seems. Consider her thoughts: "I cover hotels in the course of my writings. These temporary abodes are



India: Beyond the Taj and the Raj
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permanent fixtures in a particular environment. Its walls echo of times past. Such hotels reflect and capture the past and present --- an aura of an age --- in terms of location, architecture, décor, furnishings.... If only hotel walls could speak, who knows what captivating tales they would whisper?" Regarding the grandest hotels, "One may not necessarily stay in them. However, one must visit them --- in a museum context." Hers is a paean to nostalgia expressed through experiencing reality over the years. Again, consider these lines: "Of all the hotels I have seen anywhere in the world, The Savoy in Mussoorie has to be the most eerie and ghostly.... Yet one cannot ignore the voices and events that recall a better bygone era. Here is truly a Grand Lady well past her prime whose perfume lingers on."

Haider clearly pines for the good old days of her early youth and early maturity. There is nothing wrong with that, although the generation(s) that

only experienced the waning of those days, or not at all, might find that longing a bit odd. But, then, human beings' civilization is not our civilization, but our civilization is human beings' civilization. There is no doubt, though, that something good of the old often gets lost in the new, and pining for the "good old days" would not be unnatural for those who lived them. Haider also quite transparently mourns the loss, or degradation, of certain aspects of high culture and values, as she indicates in "Lucknow: City of Nawabs": "We were primarily in search of...tehzeeb the fabled Lucknow tradition of cultural refinement and breeding. The Nawabi Awadh era has long been a source of fascination for many --- its mystical elegance, legendary hospitality, cuisine, culture, genteel art of living and gracious art of dressing.... Lucknow is a famed repository of past grandeur and bygone glory. The long-reaching shadow of time has left us with a city that is now in its twilight. Yet has it not been said --- culture remains when all else is lost?" She quotes the aged nabab of Hyderabad speaking about the post-1947 city, almost as an added weight to her own regret at the passing of an era of elegance and high culture: "I miss the old days, not so much for the grandeur that we once enjoyed, but for the etiquette we once possessed."

Haider manages to also convey a particularly nasty bit of colonial attitude towards the Indians: "Till World War I, a notice at the (Mussoorie) Library entrance read: 'Dogs and Indians not allowed.'" And, in Calcutta, the "White Only" policy of the Saturday Club "prevailed long after independence. The first Indian president, K. Puri was appointed only in 1968." While it shows up one of the seedier aspects of the raj, it certainly does not show at least some of the Indians in their independent country in good light! However, such instances of the citation of colonial misrule and discrimination against the Indians are few and far between. The book is replete with details about high living, noblesse oblige, and all the trappings of the grand life. And, so, the Samode palace of Jaipur "embodies the regal lifestyle of a past era.... It parallels in aesthetic and decorative ornamentation that is found in the Jaipur City Palace: complete with glittering chandeliers, carved walls and painted ceilings." Among all the razzle-dazzle, accounts of sumptuous repasts, and nostalgia for bygone days, Haider manages to slip in this profound food for thought: "Where are the writers of today? Where is the reading public today?" But there are a couple of slip-ups: she mentions "Humayun's grandson Shah Jahan", when the correct relationship should be great grandson; and this oddity: "a woman who was a 4' 10" tall giant in the global beauty business".

India: Beyond the Taj and the Raj takes one to a never-never land that one presumably would love to inhabit without sparing a thought for doing so anywhere else. But India is not a Shangri-la, not for the vast multitude of its people, many of whom have to eke out a day-to-day existence, not infrequently in the shadows of many of those very same fairy-tale buildings and their inhabitants. That is the India that Haider barely scratches the surface of, or even think of scratching. As one progresses through the book, one is kept waiting to find out about the hoi polloi, of those who make up much of the reality that is India. After the last word of the book has been read, that waiting becomes eternal. Raana Haider's book would be pleasant reading particularly for those who find comfort in the lifestyle of a rarefied circle, of a bygone era, of a magical land, of grace and graciousness, and of exquisite manners and mannerisms, but would be a disappointment for those seeking to learn about India, warts and all, before, during and after the raj.

SHAHID ALAM IS AN ACADEMIC, ACTOR AND FORMER DIPLOMAT

When the heart burns . . .

Nashid Kamal needs more summer wine

NAJMA Chaudhury writes in her introduction that she had never thought of writing poems or becoming a poet, or even publishing them. However, some random thoughts compelled her to pick up pen and paper, sometimes even scraps of waste paper, because the thoughts wanted to form words and appear in the shape of poems. I appreciated this impulse. It sounded like the lines we had read in the Promoth Chowdhury text for our SSC exams 'Birds sing out with the pleasure of singing, they are not bothered as to who is listening to them'. To me Najma Chaudhury's collection of seventy six poems is a documentation of such explosive thoughts in exclusive moments. They need not conform to the formulas of poetry writing, yet they bring out some inner thoughts even when they are one liners (Shunno Purnota), which, when translated, reads this way: *Heart is empty, Hands are empty, relationship is distressed!*

The poems have been written and arranged at random. No particular theme can tie the knot. However, in most of the poems, there is a disappointment, both of a personal sort as well as a collective manner. For example, in the poem titled 'Slogan' she writes that the government wants to curb population growth, although she feels the death of good human beings (four lines), very significant and meaningful.

In another poem of my liking, titled 'Bonniman', she writes about people being bothered by a burning smell and looking all over for something that is burning. Finally, they find that her heart is burning, her innocent and immature heart! Quite unique. Other poems catching my fancy are 'Phire ele', 'Phaki', 'Kothokota', 'Chhut din', 'Shopno, shoopno' and some more. I would have liked to see more poems with meaningful time sequence embedded in the poem, something like 'dui bighe jomi' of Tagore, because the poet has traversed many roads and had varied experiences, many of which could be summarized with deeper inner content.

The poem bearing the title of the book, *Neelkonthi*, says the following

*I am wet with love
Yet I am not a peacock, I am a crow
I left the red attire of love and took to blue
Knowing full well, I drank the blue hemlock
Hence I am the one with the blue hue*

I liked another poem, which is titled 'Ferrari ferra', where she uses interesting analogies and political words like 'emergency' declared on the heart, 'curfew' limits its activities, and then banished to the Andaman Islands. Thinking along those lines, I think we all are. This thought is universal (at some points of our lives) that our lives are some kind of punishment and have been touched upon by famous poets, especially Jibanananda Das, Hason Raja, to name a few.

I can relate to the bhawaiya song 'Phande poriya boga kande re', where the strings of the fish net weigh like heavy iron slaps on human feet, when the poet says 'Ore ahare kunkurur shuta holu lohar ghuna re'. I think that in these seventy six poems, all readers will find themselves somewhere. Even though there are myriad disappointments in life, just reading some good poetry enlivens you and makes you wish for more 'summer wine' and I think *Neelkonthi* will trigger the thirst.

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