

# Restoring Tajuddin in history

## Syed Badrul Ahsan agrees the Mujibnagar leader has been sidelined

THE idea of Bangladesh's parliamentary democracy being short-changed to a one-party system was anathema to Tajuddin Ahmad. He warned Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in the weeks before the Fourth Amendment to the constitution was adopted by the Jatiyo Sangsad, that the move would be a negation of all that the two men and their party, the Awami League, had long struggled for. Of course, Tajuddin's warning was not heeded.

And that warning came from Bangladesh's first prime minister at a time when he was fast being pushed into irrelevance in a party he had, together with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, built up patiently and assiduously as the foremost Bengali political organization over the decades. Tajuddin Ahmad, self-trained in the best of liberal-cum-socialist political traditions, remained acutely aware of the dangers the country was being pushed into through the encroachment of illiberalism in



*Pita* is a necessary reappraisal of Bangladesh's history in the formative years of the movement for regional autonomy that Mujib and Tajuddin together forged and waged till the collapse of the political negotiations involving the Awami League, the Pakistan People's Party and the Yahya Khan junta in March 1971. Then comes the question of the armed struggle that the Mujibnagar government --- and Mujibnagar was a term coined by Tajuddin --- initiated and waged over the nine months of Pakistan's military occupation of Bangladesh. On another and unquestionably crucial plane, Sharmin Ahmad examines the complex relationship between Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmad, the complexity of course coming into the picture soon after the liberation of the country and Mujib's return to Bangladesh from incarceration in Pakistan. At a third level, it may well be argued that the writer is keen that her father's place in history be set right, which is again quite natural. Sharmin Ahmad believes, and there are many others who share her view, that Tajuddin Ahmad has been turned into a footnote in Bangladesh's liberation story. Her key argument revolves around a huge gap she brings into focus before her readers, namely, that there is a straight leap from the March 1971 to January 1972 in the Bangladesh narrative, that indeed there is hardly any detailed account of the guerrilla war Tajuddin Ahmad conceived and carried to fruition in December 1971.

But nowhere does the writer attempt to place Tajuddin as a rival to Bangabandhu. The ties between the two men, it is obvious from Ahmad's telling of the tale, remained more or less intact, even after Tajuddin was compelled to leave government. From an absolutely historical perspective, the biggest damage done to the country in the early 1970s was the rift that led to Tajuddin's departure from the government. The absence of Tajuddin's steady hand on the state, combined with his intellectual brilliance and political acumen, was only to hasten the collapse of a government where sycophants, in the form of rightwingers like Khondokar Moshaque and inveterate anti-Tajuddin elements like Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni, found it easy to exercise influence on the machinery of the state. Politically, Tajuddin Ahmad was being pushed, even after his resignation from the government in October 1974, into being a historical non-entity. On the fourth anniversary of the Mujibnagar government in April 1975, when every other member of the 1971 administration travelled to Mujibnagar

to commemorate the event, Tajuddin Ahmad was studiously ignored. The man who clearly was the leading force behind the formation of the Mujibnagar government was not invited to Mujibnagar. He spent the day in depression at home in Dhanmondi.

And yet Tajuddin's loyalty to Bangabandhu never wavered. Towards the end of July 1975, armed with information that a plot was on to murder the Father of the Nation, he turned up at 32 Dhanmondi to warn his leader of the impending danger. Bangabandhu, as was his wont, was dismissive of the threat. Tragedy overtook the country barely a fortnight later. Sharmin Ahmad makes it a point, though, to re-emphasise the closeness Mujib and Tajuddin continued to enjoy. On a day in July 1975, days after Sheikh Kamal's marriage to the sports-woman Sultana had taken place, Bangabandhu telephoned Tajuddin to inform him that Sheikh Jamal's marriage too had been finalized, with Bangabandhu's niece. Throughout the narrative, the writer notes the long, cordial relations the two families maintained through the political movement Bangabandhu and Tajuddin waged against Pakistan in the 1960s and early 1970s. She speaks fondly of Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana, of the times when Begum Mujib would ask Zohra Tajuddin for some dry fish the latter cooked with finesse.

It must be said in Sharmin Ahmad's legitimate defence that while she does not fail to assess and acknowledge, in the broad historical sense, the place of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh's history, she points to the huge anomaly that has remained in the tale of Bengali liberation through a systematic sidelining of Tajuddin Ahmad's role in the movement for freedom. Her belief is that of all those others who have always felt that the first step toward a gathering tragedy in post-liberation Bangladesh was taken when Bangabandhu compelled Tajuddin, his comrade in good times and bad, to make his way out of government. When that happened, the wolves closed in on the Father of the Nation, eventually taking the life out of him. And those same denizens of the dark forest would not let Tajuddin and his three Mujibnagar associates live either. The murder of Bangabandhu and the jail killing of the four Mujibnagar leaders will forever be a tale in infamy.

In *Neta O Pita*, Sharmin Ahmad makes a simple yet necessary point: If Bangabandhu was the inspiration in the rise and expansion of Bengali nationalism, Tajuddin Ahmad was the leader who conceived, conceptualized and led the nation to freedom through a strategically planned armed struggle. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's goal was the liberation of Bengalis. Tajuddin Ahmad's objective was a concretising of that goal, adding substance to it, and transforming it into reality. In Bangladesh's history, therefore, Tajuddin Ahmad must be restored to the perch that belongs to him. Ignoring him would be tantamount to indulging in political immorality. That is Sharmin Ahmad's argument. One has little reason to disagree with her.

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# Baring the soul of society

## Ayesha Kabir reads of society's cogs and wheels

AS the flames of Hell lick her body, *Sweetey* is engulfed by a sense of calm. The pain of hellfire is nothing compared to the sufferings and torture she has faced in life. She walks steadily towards the flames, towards the peace and innocence of her childhood.

This is an extract from the short story *Baro Ghat* by Shesh Ghat, one of the nine stories in the book by the same name. The author Salek Uddin has managed succinctly to capture the sufferings of people, the intense psychological sufferings that perhaps far outdo the physical ones, in his short stories. The stories are not of the morbid genre, but real, painful and reveal the ugly side of life. There's a fine line between the girl in the slum and the girl living in the lap of luxury, perhaps not to the apparent eye. But Salek Uddin scratches the veneer of sophistication and civility to reveal that under the facade of respectability, the beast in humankind raises its ugly head.

In *Baro Ghat* Shesh Ghat, the writer follows the life of a young girl who moves from the poverty of the village to the depravity of city life. The life seems to be an interminable journey from the frying pan to the fire. She is used and abused and in the end it is only death that appears to be the release of sufferings. In an almost Dante-esque metaphor of hellfire, the last lines of the story see the girl *Sweetey* being devoured by flames. Are these the flames of hellfire, a penance for her life of 'sin'? Or are these flames to purge her sufferings and take her back to a realm of innocence and peace? The writer lashes out at the hypocrisy of a judgemental society.

In the next story, *Poonamer Jonmodin*, we find the central character to be the opposite of *Sweetey*, to all outward appearances. She is beautiful, pampered and the only child of the rich Shamsad H Rahman. She has innumerable young men at her feet, loving her, lusting for her, desperate to win her hand in marriage. But is this love? Her beauty certainly ignites their desire, but love? Do they love her for herself? Or the wealth she holds in the palms of her hand? Even all the luxury that her father lavishes on her cannot compensate for the personal attention she craves, the warmth. She wants a man, not a slave. But the one whom she desires remains elusive, a figment of her imagination? All she can do is wait...

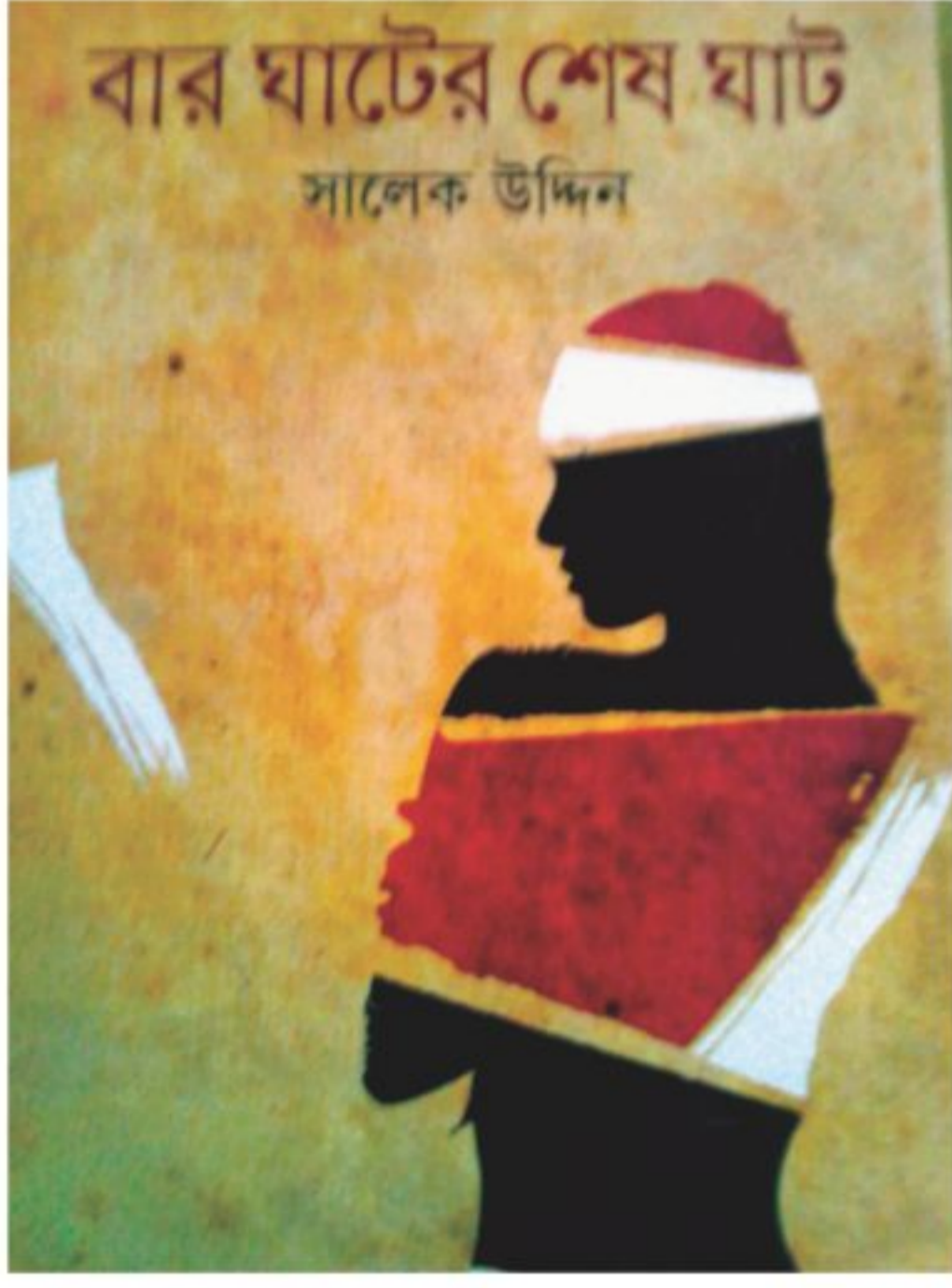
Is the writer a hardened cynic? A realist, yes, but not one who has lost his sense of romance. *Abar Kuri Bhochhor Por* is infused with the nostalgia of an unquenched love, of unfulfilled dreams. It's a story of what might have been. We get a picture of NGO life in rural Bangladesh, the interaction between a man and woman in a simple backdrop. The story is not a complex one, but the underlying human psychology is intricate. Not much is said, but the silence is louder than words. The man meets the woman after twenty long years, so much has changed... but so much remains the same.

The element of mystery and yearning is further brought forward in the story *Panchjaniyar Ekjon*. This story has a very cosmopolitan setting of an efficiently run office in the heart of the capital city. *Mahtab sahib* is showing signs of the middle-age syndrome when, like a breath of fresh air, the young and lissome *Tabassum* wafts into his office and life is never the same again. She is not the conventional "yes, sir" kind of girl and he is intrigued. One thing leads to another and we leave them at the end of the story, grasping each other's hands and gazing into each other's eyes in his room, way past office hours...

Then it's back to the uglier side of nature in *Ulthorath*, where crowds look on as a young woman is dragged down the street by her hair.

But Salek is not oblivious to the better side of human nature, the more humane and heroic streak that still exists in some hearts. Sharafi takes the initiative to save the girl from the hoodlum's hands, and the crowd follows suit. The silent passive crowd becomes active when given lead. Does the story symbolise the paucity of leadership and its implications for us as a nation? It gives us hope, that with proper initiative and leadership, wrongs can be righted. But is they ground reality? Rather than leaving us in an idyllic cloud, at the end of the story the writer leaves us questioning the future.

Salek Uddin has a penchant for mystery, or more specifically, mystery mingled with romance. In *Mohakobir Mohakabya*, we find a young couple in a hotel at Cox's Bazar. They are a couple but the wife is lonely in the sense that her husband prefers spending the evenings with his friends at a nearby hotel, gambling and drinking. Meanwhile, is completely intrigued and infatuated by the mystery man in the room next door. Who is he? Why does he spend lonely nights on the deserted beach? She cannot resist pursuing him. Is she pursuing her unful-



Baro Ghat Shesh Ghat Collection of Short Stories Salek Uddin Anannya

filled dream in a bid to fill the void in her existence? Can fulfillment ever be attained?

Then he delves into the underworld of crime and violence. In *Aye Nomita Aye*, the writer also touches on the problem of inter-religious love affairs, the conventions of society and communal condemnation. Unrequited love can reduce the toughest and most hardened criminal to a mumbling picture of pathos.

There are a couple of other equally compelling stories in this collection. Salek Uddin's tales ring true. These are people and stories which surround us in our every day lives. We are often blind to Machiavellian machinations of mankind and allow out silence to give the sordid side of life an upper hand. But the writer has stripped off the pretence and lain bare what lies beneath. He has also pointed to the complications in commonplace relationships where the fine line between right and wrong fades and accepted norms lose all meaning.

The short stories of *Baro Ghat* Ek Ghat do not aim at any profundity. It is simply a beautifully orchestrated prose picture of society as it exists.

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## REVIEW ESSAY

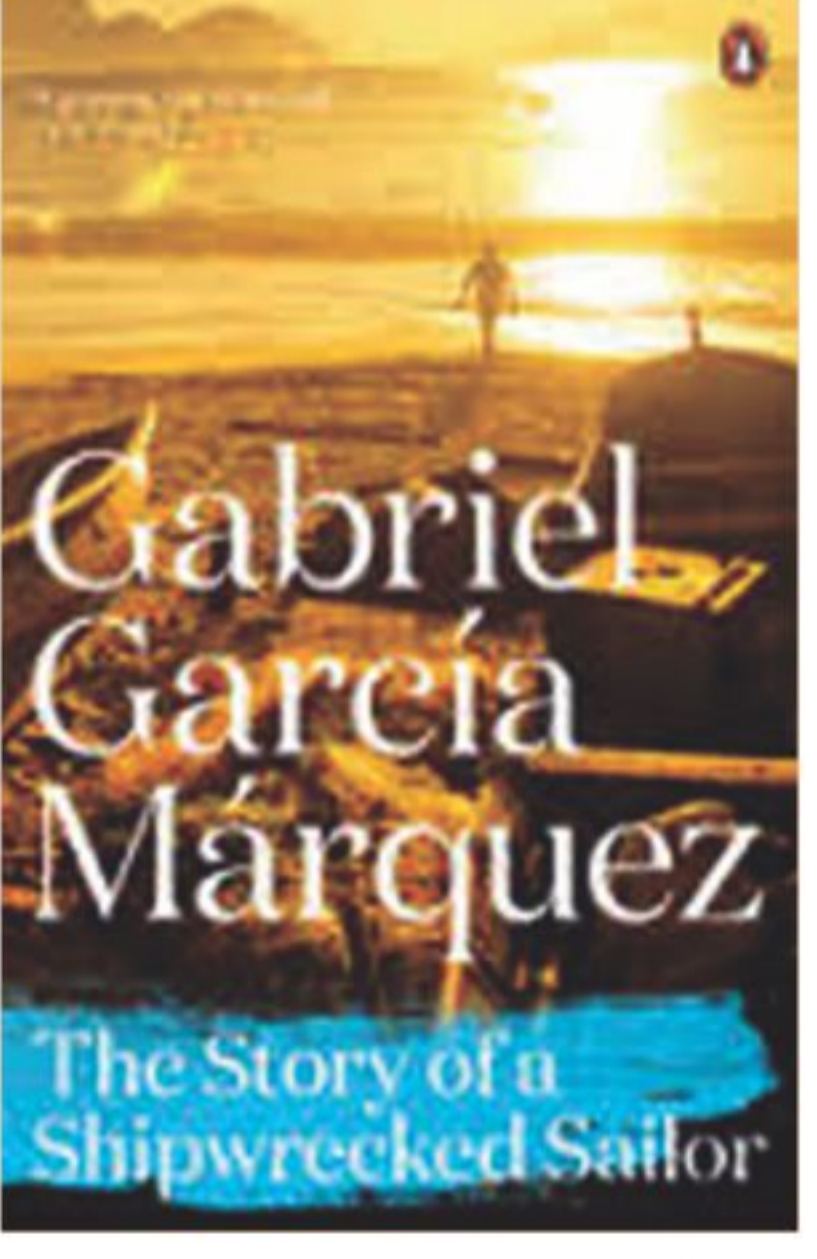
# Goodbye, Dream Seller!

TUSAR TALUKDER

"A man should have two wives: one to love and one to sew on his buttons." --- Gabriel Garcia Marquez

THE boom-time litterateur Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014) left us selling his dreams. I never thought someday I would feel the urgency of writing something on him right after his demise. But when I heard the news I could not restrain myself from jotting down some words which were wandering through the realm of my mind. I along with one of my maternal uncles, Sumon mama, passed many nights discussing only Marquez and his writings. I can recall a night when I was just talking about Marquez and my mama was hearing me with a lot of zeal. The discussion began at 11 pm. When we felt that we needed to have a short-time break the chirping of birds informed us it was already 6 am. Then my mama asked me how we passed seven hours without an iota of pause! I replied it became possible because we were having a chat on the magic realism of Marquez. This is the way Marquez pervaded my consciousness during my early university days.

One of my friends once told me he had never read a book like Marquez's *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*. Before I forget I must admit I first heard about Marquez from my teacher, Syed Manzoorul Islam, who I believe, can analyze Marquez better than anyone else. Before reading Marquez I had heard many things on Marquez from him. I was so influ-



enced by Islam's speeches that I felt compelled to translate Marquez's selected short stories from English to Bengali. Before the publication of my book of translation, *Selected Short Stories Gabriel Garcia Marquez*, I was excited, wondering how a man could weave such brilliant stories around a lot of tiny issues. It is relevant to mention here that Marquez believed in the tradition of storytelling and so does Syed Islam. Furthermore, another author who loves reading Marquez much is Anisul Hoque. At the last Ekushey Book Fair, we had had a discussion on Marquez.

Marquez-lovers may have already guessed that I have grabbed the title for my essay from one of Marquez's short stories, 'I Sell My Dreams'. Obviously Marquez sold his dreams

through his stories and novels throughout his lifetime. But those dreams were derived from realism. The realism Marquez inserted into his writings invariably seemed like magic. Thereupon he became the most believable magic realist of the world. It is interesting to note that Marquez never considered himself a magic realist, though readers always find him a magic realist. Marquez says: 'There's not a single line in my novels which is not based on reality.'

At this point, I would like to share the main ideas of four must-read novels and a short-story collection of Marquez, which are pregnant with many thought-provoking lines. Pardon me, this must-read selection is completely mine and it may not be similar to your choices.

Allow me to begin with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the most famous one, which chronicles seven generations of the Buendia family in the fictional village of Macondo. For years, the town has no contact with the outside world, except for gypsies who occasionally visit, peddling technologies like ice and telescopes. The protagonist remains a leader who is also deeply solitary, alienating himself from other men in his obsessive investigations into mysterious matters. The novel unfolds the inevitable and inescapable repetition of history in Macondo, a substantial theme of the book. The book also disseminates the idea that 'there is always something left to love.'

In the second phase, the name which automatically comes to mind is *The Autumn of the Patriarch*,

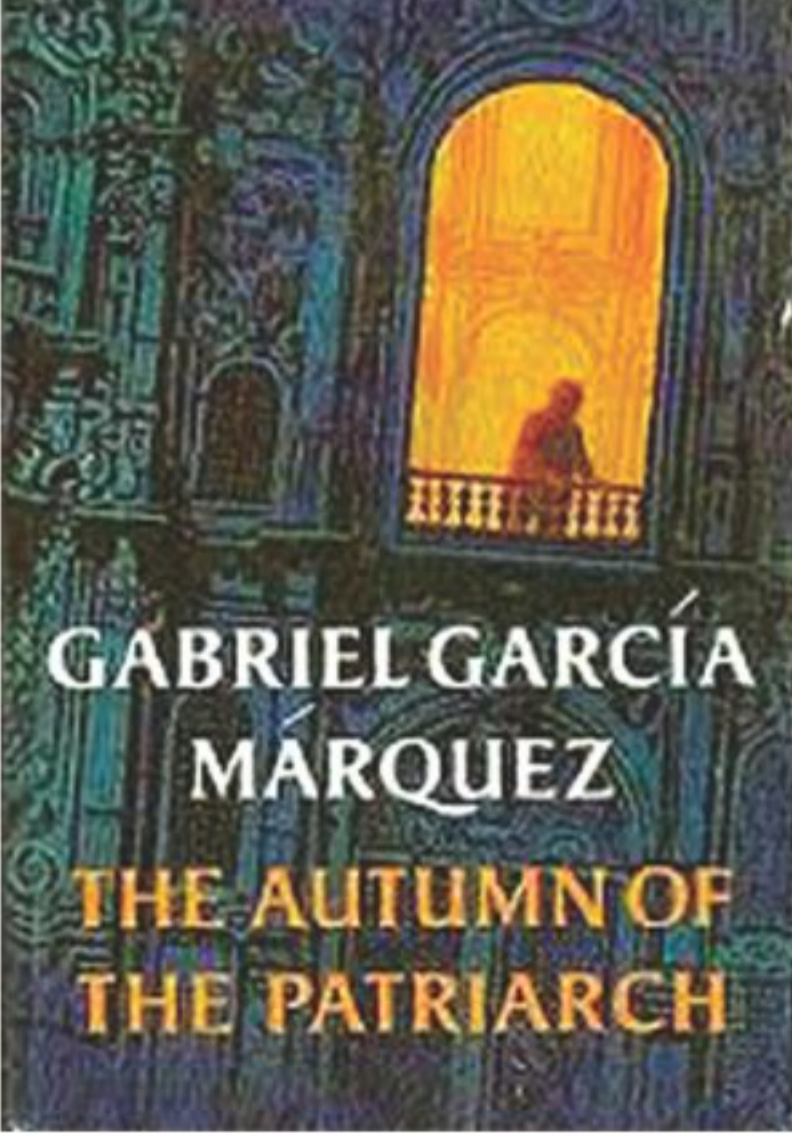
massively sold in Spain in 1975. Garcia Marquez spent ten years researching dictatorships from Pinilla to Trujillo and from Franco to Peron --- and then tried to forget everything he had heard and read to invent this story of a self-styled "General of the Universe". The novel opens with the discovery of the tyrant dead on the floor of the presidential palace, "older than all old men and all old animals on land or sea", before exploring moral decay and political paralysis in what the author called a "poem on the solitude of power". The book is divided into six sections and each retelling the same story of the infinite power held by the archetypal Caribbean tyrant. From charity to deceit, benevolence to violence, fear of God to extreme cruelty, the dictator of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* embodies the best and the worst of human nature. At this moment I can recall one of the most celebrated lines from the novel- "A lie is more comfortable than doubt, more useful than love, more lasting than truth."

My third choice is Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Before I give you a bit of detailed information regarding the novel, I feel the necessity of citing the following lines from the text: "But when a woman decides to sleep with a man, there is no wall she will not scale, no fortress she will not destroy, no moral consideration she will not ignore at its very root: there is no God worth worrying about." Indeed, the novel tells how the love between Florentino Arizo and Fermina Daza is thwarted by

Fermina's marriage to a doctor trying to eradicate cholera, only to be rekindled more than 60 years later. Some critics choose to consider *Love in the Time of Cholera* as a sentimental story about the enduring power of true love. Others criticize this opinion as being too simple. Garcia Marquez himself said in an interview, "You have to be careful not to fall into my trap."

At first I thought I would include *News of a Kidnapping* in my list of choices. But the work which haunts me is *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* --- the story of an old journalist, who has just celebrated his 90th birthday, seeking sex with a young prostitute, who is selling her virginity to help her family. Instead of sex, he discovers love for the first time in his life. The line I love most from the novel is, "No matter what, nobody can take away the dances you've already had."

You are now welcome to the world of Marquez's short stories. The collection I had gone through while doing my Masters is entitled *Strange Pilgrims*. All the stories in the collection take place in Europe. However, it is a slightly more rustic Europe than what some would imagine. With no real effort, Marquez plainly speaks of the places where these stories take place, making grand destinations seem normal, as only one who has lived in such places can. All the stories are based on his real life experiences. In a word, the twelve stories in the collection chronicle the surreal, haunting 'journeys' of Latin Americans in Europe. I feel I need to quote a line



GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ THE AUTUMN OF THE PATRIARCH

from a story titled 'Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane': 'I had always thought that there was nothing more fascinating in all of nature than a beautiful woman.'

Finally, let me refer to British novelist Ian McEwan's views on Marquez, made known after the demise of the writer. McEwan said Garcia Marquez's work had "almost a Shakespearean quality." For myself, I have understood Marquez's relevance through Einstein: 'Imagination is more important than knowledge.'

Note Marquez again: "The problem with marriage is that it ends every night after making love, and it must be rebuilt every morning before breakfast."

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