

REFLECTIONS

When Tagore came to Sylhet

SYED AHMED MORTADA

Sylhet can take pride in itself as being the recipient of many august visits, including those by Hazrat Shahjahan, Ibn Batuta, Sree Chaitanya, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and many more personalities from the Mogul and British eras.

Sylhet can also boast of being the only district in Bangladesh or in erstwhile Bengal having its own script with its own letters and dialect which is called "Nagri".

Although the script and the letters are now only a literary curiosity, by and large the dialect is still fighting fit, even colonising like a nouveau riche jargon in some local schools in London, known as the Sylheti diaspora. That could be one of the reasons that the most Sylhetians are not comfortable conversing in pure Bangla. Dr. Mujtaba Ali's grade in matriculation was not remarkable. But he cherished a desire to study at Shantiniketan which he didn't qualify for. When apprised of the matter, Rabindranath Tagore wanted to take Mujtaba Ali's interview himself. After the interview, when he was asked for his opinion, Tagore replied "It's all right. But the smell of orange still exudes from his mouth."

Rabindranath Tagore was holidaying in Shillong.

Initially he declined all invitations to visit Sylhet as communication with the region in those days was very primitive. But finally he had to yield when repeated calls from Sylhet Brahmo Samaj, Sylhet Mahila Samity and Anjumane-Islamia kept pouring in. The Nobel Laureate set foot in Sylhet on 5 November 1919. He was accorded a hearty welcome by the notables of Sylhet, among whom were Rai Bahadur Shukhomoi Choudhury, chairman of Sylhet Municipality, Syed Abdul Majid (Kaptan Mia), who later became the first Muslim minister of Assam, Abdul Karim, Rai Bahadur Promodchandra Dutta, Nalinibala Choudhury and other influential personalities.



The poet was accompanied by his son Rathindranath Tagore and his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi. On the same day he had to attend a reception hosted by Brahmo Samaj where he had to render a song, *beena bajao hey momo antorey*. After that he recited from the Upanishad. The next day, 6 November 1919, the poet was accorded a civic reception at Loknath Ratan Mani Town Hall (Sharada Hall). The chairman of the reception committee was the public leader Khan Bahadur Syed Abdul Majid CIE. More than 5000 people attended that congregation.

In addition to Bengali, Tagore knew Sanskrit, English, Marathi and Persian. Though acquainted with Urdu, Tagore was not really prepared for it. On the other hand, the chairman of the committee, Syed Abdul Majid, educated at Saint Xavier's and Presidency College in Calcutta and with excellent command of English, was not comfortable in spoken Bangla. Considering the fact that it would not be fitting to deliver his speech either in the Sylheti dialect or in

English, Majid delivered his welcome speech in Urdu. His baritone and the vocabulary employed in the speech were so impressive that the poet became not only overwhelmingly happy, but even rose from his chair and hugged Syed Abdul Majid. There was applause all around.

The Nobel Laureate then delivered his 'Bangla Shadhona'.

During his visit to Sylhet, the poet remained busy with many more programmes. On 7 November 1919 he delivered another significant speech at the M.C. College hostel "Akankha".

The soul of the poet was so awed by the breath-taking beauty of Sylhet that he instantly composed a poem on the region. He called it *SreeBhumi*.

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REMEMBRANCE

The man behind James Bond

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

He shamed Eton and Sandhurst, failed as a banker and botched up his job as a stockbroker. But working as a naval intelligence officer during WW2, the man lived a life which later provided the template for the most successful fictional spy of all times whom we today know as James Bond, agent 007. And today's related topics are: the making of a spy with ingredients shaken other than stirred erupting from the confines of a black tuxedo are strictly 'For your eyes only'.

May 28 was the 106th birth anniversary of Ian Lancaster Fleming, the man who gave the genre of spy-thriller a new dimension by introducing an agent, now turned into a cult plus a money-churning film franchise. But true to the aphorism, life is stranger than fiction, Fleming's own life was no less thrilling than his creation. Only last year declassified documents of MI6 revealed that a French double agent during the war was abducted and then terminated at the order of no other than Ian Fleming. However, the inside story: Ian Fleming, then a naval intelligence officer, issued an official report stating the officer was 'missing believed drowned'. But, in reality, the 'complete double-crosser' was killed as Secret Service operatives scrambled to smuggle him out of Spain.

This and many other so far protected details compelled this writer to look into Fleming's career. Without much surprise, it's his war time naval career that brought the best out of

him - before he came to be known for creating the cult-code "007." It was in May 1939, barely three months prior to the beginning of World War II, when Ian Fleming joined the Royal Navy as personal assistant to the director of naval intelligence, Rear Admiral John Godfrey.

With the codename "17F", he functioned out of Room 39 at the Admiralty. Though commissioned into the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in July, through two quick promotions, he was raised to the rank of commander by 1940. Fleming soon became instrumental for all crucial naval strategies, earning the honour of "invaluable for the admiralty" tag.

On behalf of the department, he maintained a fruitful liaison with the Secret Intelligence Service, the Political Warfare Executive, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), and the Joint Intelligence Committee and even with the Prime Minister's staff. In 1940, Fleming and Godfrey, along with Kenneth Mason, a geography professor at Oxford University, prepared a series of reports on

the geography of countries involved in military operations during the war. These reports became the precursors of the Naval Intelligence Division's Geographical Handbook Series, produced between 1941 and 1946.

Fleming acted as a strategist in 'Operation Ruthless', a plan aimed at obtaining details of the Enigma codes used by the German Navy. The idea was to "obtain" a German bomber, man it with a German-speaking crew dressed in Luftwaffe uniforms and crash it into the English Channel. The crew would then attack their German rescuers and bring their boat and Enigma machine back to England. Much to the annoyance of Alan Turing and Peter Twinn at Bletchley Park, the mission was never carried out. However, a turning point of the war came when Britain captured a German Enigma machine and deciphered its codes.

Fascinatingly, it was this Enigma machine that turned into the Lektor cryptographic device of the Soviets in Fleming's novel 'From Russia with Love' (no wonder it was one of the ten favourite novels of President John F. Kennedy).

Fleming also worked with Colonel "Wild Bill" Donovan, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's special representative on intelligence co-operation between London and Washington. In May 1941, Fleming accompanied Godfrey to the United States, where he assisted in writing a blueprint for the Office of the Coordinator of Information, the department which turned into the Office of Strategic Services that today we know as the CIA.

Between 1941 and 1942 Fleming took charge of 'Operation Golden Eye', a plan to maintain an intelligence framework in Spain in the event of a German takeover of the territory. 'Golden Eye' also involved maintaining communication networks with Gibraltar together with launching sabotage operations against the Germans. As a negotiator, Fleming in 1941 liaised with Donovan over American involvement in a measure intended to ensure that the Germans did not dominate the waterways.

A book usually reflects the thoughts of a writer, but through the awe-inspiring Bond novels we come to learn of a man who literally lived the life he wrote about. Literati across the globe have not considered Bond novels to be serious literature but the truth is the fictitious spy James Bond created a readership for a spy thriller genre that had never existed before. Through the movies the spy's popularity reached the peaks.

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POETRY

Words in Balance

AINON N.

Nestling close to his heart she said,
Will you read to me?
He said, I will do better
Thus he braided words of
Tennyson, Yeats, Neruda
To create for her a world where
Memories are unspoken,
Longings and desires form crystal droplets,
The fiery-sunflower-soul of life

Hesitate to close,
All at once harsh and gentle

The words connect,
And draw for her a shadow-tree
There she sits awhile in its shelter
Serving quietness,
Listening to roving life
Not needing to reason the purity
To love
Or be loved...

NON-FICTION

Celebrations under tropical sun

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

LONG weekend. Brilliant sun. Seemed like a perfect time to hop on a car and make the three-hour drive from Rangsit to Nong Nooch Tropical Garden near the Pattaya Beach in Bangkok.

At 400 Baht per head, I was still complaining about the entrance ticket. However, at the sight of the 500 acres of the tranquil landscape, such thoughts washed off in the blink of an eye! The open-air bus was ready to take us around the huge reservation, and needless to say, we didn't keep the driver waiting...

Nogn Nooch is one of the world's largest private palm collections. With about 1,000 species and a wide variety of globe to spiral shaped cactus there was plenty to see. We learned that there were also over 500 different orchids, bougainvilleas, gingers, cannas and anthuriums. The Japanese tourists were clicking away with their latest digital gadgets, while some craned their necks to breaking point to catch a glimpse of the dazzling greenery all around. But all heads seemed to turn in unison at the sight of the bonsai collection set in a fountain garden besides the lake. It was as if nature had been given a free rein to paint the landscape, and it had mustered all its creativity into creating this breathtaking landscape.

The Theme Park employs around 900 people and attracts approximately a million people a year, mainly from Asia. Other than the landscaped gardens, there was also a miniature zoo where children and adults watch agape the tigers, chimps, birds and butterflies.

If that wasn't enough, there were also a few inviting restaurants sprinkled around the park. We went for the Thai cuisine at a posh restaurant overlooking the lake (when in Thailand, do as Thai's do I guess...) and then set off to watch an hour-long show. According to the leaflet, the show would depict the centuries old Thai culture...but we were in for a tantalising surprise. We were treated to a medley of performances from traditional Thai music to

regional dances, but what excited my friends most was the exhibition of kick-boxing!

We learned that the 1,000 seat theatre hosts shows three times a day and are staged by a cast of no less than 90 full-time artists. To be honest, I wasn't surprised at the large number. I could see from the drama, the amount of effort put in to the performance. Bright costumes, traditional Thai village and palatial settings, an effortless precision dance by girls in royal blue, magenta and gold sequined Thai silk with lighted candles, sword fights. The play takes you through how the simple village life is disrupted by the outlaws and the ultimate duel between good and evil. But no one could have prepared us for the moment when the elephants entered the arena and joined in the victory dance! All the while accompanied by the thumping drums and traditional music with bamboo instruments.

As the curtains fell on the fascinating cultural show we were herded out to an open air space to watch the spectacular elephant show. About 20 elephants marched in military precision and turned on their amazing show. We watched in awe as elephants as large as houses, nimbly played pin ball, painted t-shirts, and even gave a massage to some volunteering spectators. And did I mention they also high-fived and posed like super-stars after they scored goals in the football match? By then, I wouldn't have been surprised if one of them started knitting a scarf...

By the time the sun set, the audience was bone tired but didn't seem willing to leave. It was as if they wanted to relive the day as long as they could, busily replacing batteries and clicking away to capture the scenery on their lenses. I didn't carry any of those hi definition cameras or camcorder, but I knew the sights and sound of this stunning Tropical Garden would be locked solid in my mind for as long as I can imagine.

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Poetry penned in captive land

SYED NAJMUDDIN HASHIM

IT was in Rangoon in March 1981 that I had an unusual experience. My shy and retiring son of sixteen, who more than justified his nickname, which means 'one lost in reverie,' suddenly broke his silence to demand that I publish my scribbles done over the previous three decades. It was exceedingly strange and not a little gratifying that what was always in the nature of a monologue was sought to be given the stamp of irrevocable finality. It was a rare pleasure to find that one so young had been delving into the meaning of things and, out of filial loyalty perhaps, ascribed some merit to ancient and yellowed manuscripts.

His younger brother, whose name stands for 'cool as dewdrops and peaceful as moonlight,' belies his name. With brutal originality he tells his indigent father, "Don't pick your kitchen legumes too soon, lest we have to pay your bills after you've gone." At twelve, he was already on the way to becoming a creative writer. As such he did not stand in need of the reassurance of a father's writings penned in the idle moments of a storm-tossed life.

I remember that I had dedicated these pieces to 'Moana of the Seven Moons, who came but stayed not.' It was not any particular woman but a composite of many, perhaps of all women of all time. The scribbles were occasions for viewing the recurring personal crises against the backdrop of a crumbling world of broken columns, where the centre will not hold, where we are dismembered into myriad broken shadows. Wars, famines, pestilence, inequity, exploitation and civil strife, disintegrating values have all made of our world, to misquote Mallarme, 'the horror of the forest or the silent thunder diffused in the leaves.' It is the mounting but often futile anger, the sense of unbearable anguish and crippling fatigue stemming from our inadequacy, the death wish of the ineffectual intellectual suddenly made aware of the futility of history that informs all my work, perhaps lends to it some ephemeral significance.

Although each jotting, made in the agonising darkness of the long and unending nights, is strictly personal in origin, the dimensions of our anguish are never strictly or entirely personal. My life and the life of my entire generation is tinged and overshadowed by the tragedy of our time. A sense of participation in contemporary history is a prerequisite to comprehension of work shrouded in such seeming obscurity. You would have to know the murky inter-war years of international conspiracy and paralysis of will exemplified in appeasement, culminating in the Munich Pact, the cruelty and savagery of the dress rehearsal of the Spanish Civil War with Picasso's *Guernica* as the tragic and everlasting symbol and the impassioned cry, 'No pasaran' (They Shall Not Pass) as the death-rattle of an embattled and betrayed Republic, the lynchings of the Deep South, the Biblical Diaspora culminating in the attempted 'Final Solution' of the Nazi death camps, to fully understand why personal love never stood a chance in the diabolical unfolding of the events of our time, when tinpot gods in the chancelleries of the world killed and crippled us for their profit, if not for their sport.

Twenty-five years later, *The Pomegranate Tree*, penned in 1977 in Dhaka, the capital city of a new nation, has the same sense of futility of individual endeavour facing the daunting facts of history, the same sense of fellow feeling for those engaged in an unequal battle, for the innocent victims of organised genocide and incarceration in distant prison camps. A few years hence, who will remember the background of this piece? Who will recall a state nurtured by its international patrons into a veritable prison-house of nations, its paranoid and humourless succession of rulers? Who will take the trouble of finding out how a fledgling democracy was strangled in infancy, how untold atrocities were perpetrated against rebellious subject peoples, how the much vaunted sword-arm of a so-called martial race was blunted and broken by a ragtag band of freedom lovers? Will history have the integrity to record how such a regime was cynically supported and sustained by Grand Masters of the international power game and their servitor ideologues?

A scribbler of my captive generation in a captive land could not, therefore, sing of his lonely passion from an ivory tower. His individual alienation was overwhelmed by a quarter century of neo-colonialist humiliation of his people. The sense of outrage inevitably echoed in my words, as in the work of others. Witness my *Ramadan* and *Eid-ul-Fitr*. They were written on two successive days in 1970, against the backdrop of a tragedy of colossal and classical proportions, when a tidal wave left some half a million dead, a world catastrophe reported faithfully by the international press and media but ignored and denied by our overlords. A bereaved people sustained and nurtured by charitable men and women of goodwill all

around the world finally shed its illusions under Nature's merciless assaults and man's studied apathy. The ground had been prepared for the War of Independence that was to start in a matter of months. Significantly enough, these two pieces were published, under a pseudonym, of course, in a journal edited by the poet-author-film-maker-freedom fighter Zahir Raihan. He, along with the elder brother, author and journalist Shahidullah Kaiser, was butchered in cold blood along with scores of other intellectuals, under a plan to behead the emergent Bengali nation, which could no longer be held in thrall.

Ramadan and *Eid-ul-Fitr* are companion pieces of *The White Shirt* of Shamsur Rahman, the doyen of Bengali poets. All three poems clearly foretell the end of the myth, purveyed by patent violators of the Islamic code of a life of human dignity and justice to hold the Bengali nation in bondage for a quarter of a century. They anticipate Maulana Bhashani's ironic farewell greeting to the ruling class: 'Assalamu Alakum.' Together with Sikandar Abu Jafar's *Quit Bengal*, they are a paean to my enslaved people, battered but unbowed, who within a year waded through a sea of blood to proclaim to a largely apathetic and hostile world that they had finally decided to take control of their own destiny, which for long had been usurped by alien hands. Sikander's ultimatum sums up the situation: 'Remove your black shadow from my skies and fields.'

The tendency to relate the personal to the universal dilemma is, however, not always shared by my compeers, who favour a more direct and unambiguous utterance. In much of my work also it runs like a red thread. I can only explain it in terms of John Maynard Keynes' perceptive comment: 'Emotions of the moment had left behind a permanent furrow.' Looking back, I find that in '50, '51 and '52 some current national or international occurrences evoked direct and bald comment. (One such comment) was a rather long piece called *A Strange Tale*, of November 1951, commemorating the triumph of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, which traverses the tangled history of the subcontinent, drawing hope 'because a Chinese peddler knocked at my door,' a rather futile hope as it turned out during later years of infantile cultural disorder and our experience of an unrecognised liberation movement and the Chilean people's experience of eager recognition for a counter revolution. It is ironic that the poem carries visible traces of the Chilean Pablo Neruda's 'Let the rail-splitters awake.' Then there was *The Plot*, which was the immediate reaction to the dramatic disclosure of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case involving the cream of the officer corps of the Pakistan army and the doyen of Urdu poetry, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and which seemed to me to carry fateful echoes of the Reichstag fire which burnt down both the German parliament house and in effect sealed the fate of the Weimar Republic. The parallelism of the rise of Hitler and a succession of petty overweening dictators in our domestic scene did not, at the time, appear to me to be either forced or fortuitous. Then there was *Will McGee*, mourning the judicial murder of a young American black on patently trumped-up charges of rape. This was not one of my best efforts, although it was a favourite reading of my friend Ibne Insha, now dead, whose Urdu poems on China, including *A Night in Shanghai*, were presented to Chairman Mao.

Between 1959 and 1964, I seem to have been returning home, culturally speaking, because in (my) works of this period are discernible influences of Rabindranath Tagore, from whom no Bengali can ever escape since he has been our shield and our spear in every movement of asserting our identity, of the poets Sudhin Dutta and Jibananda Das, of John Donne, TS Eliot and of the Old Testament. A distinct influence is exerted during this period by the tropical jungles of Bengal and the forests of the foothills of the Himalayas where I spent many happy days of my adolescence. And a recurring theme is the sea and the flowing rivers which have gone to the making of the Bengali psyche.

Between *Only a Few Years* and *The Pomegranate Tree*, a span of some twenty-five years, the human condition in our part of the world has hardly changed, except for the worse and except for our signal achievement of political freedom. Hence our response to it has also not undergone any sea change. We still suffer from disaffection with our inadequacy, anger at human perfidy, nostalgic yearning for our lost innocence and desperate urge to join the forces of social change, with no real confidence in their efficacy, strength or ultimate success. A very poor material for a versifier, I agree. Yet to attempt anything more would be less than honest.

(The article, a reprint, is a slightly edited version of the Author's Note the writer penned years before it came to be part of his collection of poetry, *Hopefully the Pomegranate*, published by writers.ink)