

EDITOR'S
NOTE

There is a delectable change in the air, a shortening of daylight, a mist waiting to cloak us in the evening, a cooling of the blood, an anticipation of new birds in the horizon. AamerHossain joins us in our quiet thoughts, inviting us to "move fluidly across invisible frontiers". Farah Ghuznavi helps us step back and release our creations to the powers that be. And, we are delightfully reminded by Tagore of our intimate equation with Mother Nature, as translated by DrFakrulAlam. Breathe in, read up, enjoy the romance of this moment.

MUNIZE MANZUR



THE WORLDS WE LOST

Aamer Hussein

Every few years, a book comes my way by a writer whose work has been forgotten, mislaid or undervalued. My own great-uncle, Rafi Ajmeri, was a short story writer of great promise whose early death and peripheral location erased his name from the literary map. I was having a conversation about literature, language and location with my poet-friend from Dhaka, SadafSaaz, when she mentioned that her grandmother, too, had been a writer of short fiction who died young. In Bengali, I assumed, but no: RahatAra Begum wrote in Urdu; what's more, she produced several volumes of stories before her very early date, in her late thirties, in Chittagong shortly after independence.

RahatAra Begum was in fact mentioned by Shaistakramullah, the pioneering scholar of modern Urdu fiction, in her PhD dissertation which was later published in book form. (Both were Calcutta-born writers of Urdu prose, and I was later to find they were related.) But unlike

Ikramullah's work, which has been republished, Rahat's seemed to have disappeared. Did she, I wondered, write about the lives of the Calcutta middle class, as Ikramullah occasionally did? Was the milieu she wrote about Hindu, Muslim or mixed?

Then Sadaf told me she had located an edition of her grandmother's stories, reprinted in India in the 90s. The poet Ahsan Akbar carried it to London for me, and for several days I read, riveted. Apart from a beautifully lucid prose style and a flowing narrative technique, the stories were also distinguished from the Urdu fiction of the time by their sense of location and by their refusal to conform to the prevalent Progressive fashions of the decade. They range from a near fairy-tale in which the milieu of a Prince's court could, at first glance, belong to the Arabian Nights, but on closer reading is set in a slightly romanticised version of a subcontinental Nawab's palace, to a story about a marriage of

convenience that takes place entirely in the North of England and is narrated by an Englishwoman called Queenie. While the first story is steeped in Sufi fable, the second seems to be inspired by Western models.

Inevitably, Rahat is concerned with the lives of women, particularly (but not exclusively) young married women looking for an identity within the restricted choices available to them. And in her exploration of women's lives, she turns to the society she probably knew best: that of Calcutta. Her gaze is detached but compassionate; Hindu and Muslim middle-class society is described with equal attention to detail. (By writing about Bengali Hindus in Urdu, she is performing an act of cultural translation, and bringing to the language a world with which it is not familiar; but there is no spurious exoticism or desire to explain in her stories, which bring alive middle-class Calcutta mores with the lightest of touches.)

But this selection is limited to only a few stories that the author wrote. There are many more to be found and reprinted. Was she lost to our generation because no country could ultimately claim her as its own? She spend much of her life in pre-partition West Bengal, chose to write in Urdu because she loved it, but also remained close to the Bengali language and its traditions (she translated Tagore). She is buried in what is now Bangladesh, but her books are most likely to be found in Pakistani libraries because several of them were published in Lahore. Ironically, the fact that her writings belongs in different ways – geographical, cultural and linguistic – to three countries, and bypasses the politics of nationalism, has alienated us all from her legacy. Where once we translated works between our languages – my mother and her sisters devoured Bengali novels in Urdu versions – we now depend entirely on English as the link language and losing the nuances and subtleties that are far

more effectively transferred from one South Asian language to another. It is, perhaps, time to return to the effortless vernacular



multilingualism of our ancestors and the rich traces of a shared heritage which allowed us to move fluidly across invisible frontiers.

POEMS FROM THE GITANJALI

Translated by FakrulAlam

80 AamiSharotShesherMegher Moto

Like clouds drifting at autumn's end
I drift towards the horizon,
Repeatedly, and without reason!
Dearest, you are my sun forever
It's you I treasure—
But till this day your beams
Haven't streamed on me
Touching me till
Making me one with your light.
And so, separated from you,
I count the months and years!

Dearest, if this is how you want things to be,
If this is your game plan for me,
Play on with me endlessly!
Take the vacuous speck that I am
And my transient being,
Color me in many hues
Gild me with your gold
Float me in the wayward breeze
Sport with me ceaselessly
And make of my emptiness
An everyday marvel!

Dearest, when it pleases you to do so,
Wrap up your sport with me
In the dense darkness of midnight,
I'll disperse then into darkest night,
Crying endlessly!
In dawn all that will remain
In an unstained sky
Is a pervasive smile –
Chaste, transparent and bright;
And clouds that merge playfully
With the sea of stars above!

(Kheya: "Leela")

81 MajheMajheKotobarBhabhi

Every now and often I think how indolently
I spend my days, letting time pass uselessly.

But O Lord, those days aren't spent in vain
Since you always accept them as your own.
O Lord, lodged deep in my innermost being,
Secretly, unnoticed, and in your leisure,
You make seeds to sprout into fruit,
Buds to blossom in varied hues,
And fruits to overflow with sweet sap.
Nevertheless, overcome by deep sleep
Lazily, I would keep lying in my bed
Thinking my work had not yet ended!

But when, at dawn, I opened my eyes
I saw my garden was filled with flowers!
(Naibedya: 24)

82 He Rajendro

Supreme One, time is eternal for you!

No one counts when days or night pass
Or when ages flourish or subside
You never delay nor ever feel rushed
And know how to bide time. Leisurely,
You'll let a century pass to let a flower
Bloom. But time is never in our hands
And we jostle with each other over it.
None of us can ever bear to be late!

Lord, I devote my days to everyone
Serving them fully till my time is gone.
Alas, I thus let your altar stay barren.

Distraught, I then rush to you anxiously,
To find that you always had time for me!
(Naibedya: 39)

Q&A WITH FARAH GHUZNAVI:

The Writer's Wilderness
Survival Kit

QTN:

Every time I sit down to edit my stories, I keep changing it. Sometimes they change so much that I feel like I lost the main thrill of the story. How can I tell how much editing is enough and when it's time to stop?

ANS:

Let me say at the outset that I think it's really good that you are making revision such a priority – even if it sounds like you might not be going about it quite the right way! The truth is, far too many writers choose to send out their work without putting in the labour required to polish it until it shines. Not only is that disrespectful to readers, it is also unlikely to win them many fans. Most of the time, good writing involves so much revision that it might as well be called "re-writing". As Seth Godin says, "The first step is to say it poorly. And then say it again and again and again until you're able to edit your words into something that works."

Nevertheless, learning when to let go of the story is more of an art than a science, and it can take time to find the right balance. Partly, it depends on whether your writing style is that of a "plotter" or a "pantser" – namely, whether you plan out the story before you start writing, or whether you decide to do the whole thing spontaneously. Most of us are somewhere in between. But if you are a pantser, and prefer to make up the story as you go along, revision can be challenging in terms of retaining the flow of the story.

One thing that might help is to think through the plot structure of your story very carefully, determining how much time and space you want to

give to each segment. Develop a clear picture in your head of how the structure should look, and how the story is divided into sections. You can then revisit your story critically, looking at it from the perspective of the structure you have developed, and decide where you might need to flesh something out, or trim it down.

Another approach would be to sit down and read your story through from beginning to end, without being drawn into making changes while you are reading. Keep a piece of paper nearby, and jot down new ideas for changes. But don't give in to the temptation of beginning the revisions immediately. Once you have read through the story, you will have a clearer idea of how to tighten the plot structure and to make the story flow more smoothly. You can then start revising, referring to your list of possible alterations.

But the truth is, there comes a point when you just have to accept that a story is finished (even though, if you are like me, a reluctant perfectionist, you may never feel that it's ready!) Otherwise you can spend your entire life working on one story, which would be a terrible waste – even if you wrote the world's greatest story. So take a step back, and decide when you can bear to hand over this story to its reader. Remember, you can always revisit it in a year's time. So the question becomes whether it is good enough, not whether it is perfect. And if the answer is "yes", then – like every worried parent – you must let your child go and watch anxiously while she makes her own way in the world!

Queries on writing may be sent to Farah Ghuznavi at DSLitEditor@gmail.com