

EDITOR'S NOTE

"Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete." – Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*

Today's SLR brings two pieces on literary concerns sans borders. Abeer Hoque takes it one step further and beautifully portrays how masterpieces in fact also transcend time restrictions. While Anisur Rahman shares his personal experience and insights across three borders. Enjoy the free-flying reads.

MUNIZE MANZUR

A MASTERPIECE REMASTERED

Abeer Hoque

If you're a Bengali or an art house film buff of any nationality, you've most likely heard of Satyajit Ray, one of India's finest filmmakers, whose debut in 1955 as a screenwriter and director was *Pather Panchali* (the first in a trilogy) set in early 1900s rural Bengal,

of the trilogy.

As writer and filmmaker Ruchir Joshi recounts in his ode to the forgotten master technicians and less celebrated but no less talented directors, he watched the trailer for the restoration of the Apu trilogy, and "the

luminaries in attendance, many of whom had seen the original premiere or later screenings in the 60s. The audience included Ken Burns, Wes Anderson, Joel Coen, Noah Baumbach, Jim Jarmusch, Laurie Anderson, Shampa Banerjee - the actress who played Apu's sister,

block outside the theatre, an eager whispering crowd.

Every other time I've gone back, either to see the other two films, or just passing by, there has been an excited queue. In fact, interest in the films has been so great that the initial two-week run of the films has been extended into mid June. The films will continue to show throughout the summer in over thirty cities nationwide.

Many of my friends who've gone to see the films in the last few weeks are new to Satyajit Ray's work, or any independent art house film from South Asia. Writer and oral historian Svetlana Kitto is deeply interested in origins and process. She had never heard of the films before now, and she found them a revelation: "shockingly beautiful, with an artistry of black and white that seemed almost richer than color. It was an accessible, modern, intimate coming of age story which beautifully, richly captured the interiority of childhood." Seeing the films reminded of watching her first Italian neorealist film and thinking, "This is how a movie can be. So much depth."

I cannot claim any more context than Svetlana, other than knowing Ray's name and

which the filmmaker has utter control of the pace. You will watch dragonflies on the water for five minutes if Ray and Mitra want you to, and it will stun you into silence. I had the sensation of having to put aside my headlong American narrative self. Svetlana put it more elegantly. She said she had the feeling she was being taken care of, that she could just sit back and let it all wash over her.

It was true that the audience sat in the theatre for over two hours that first night watching *Pather Panchali* in pin drop silence, a rapt quiet occasionally broken by a sigh or chuckle. Afterwards, the lobby of the theatre filled up, with audience members crowding the bulletin boards which were plastered with interviews and articles and praise for the Apu films.

Svetlana told me that the Apu movies made her think about the history of that part of the world: "It was an invitation to learn more." And as my more savvy cultured South Asian friends have been telling me for years, it is an invitation to me as well. Ritwik Ghatak, Aparna Sen, and Mrinal Sen are three of many critically acclaimed filmmakers to come out of the Subcontinent. There are many more.



following the life of a watchful little boy called Apu. This critically acclaimed period piece is especially astonishing considering that Ray's cinematographer, Subrata Mitra was only 21 years old, and neither he nor Ray had ever shot a film before they started this movie.

Sentiments about the trilogy range from labeling it dramatic poverty porn to the highest of art. There is no shortage of praise or prizes for the films world-wide, and the 1960 American release lasted eight rapturous months. No matter what you think of the trilogy, there's no denying their silver lambent beauty, and their assured spacious glacial pace.

Ravi Shankar lends his myriad marvelous talents to the scores of all three films, and for the first two he improvised the music over the course of a single viewing. Mitra the cinematographer, who was also a very talented sitar player, filled in when Shankar couldn't be there. It's no wonder then that even though the 1955 premiere at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) was without subtitles, people still left the theatre weeping.

None of this is new. What is new is the restoration story of the Apu trilogy negatives and the re-release of the trilogy this past spring in America. In 1992, just before he died, Ray received an honorary lifetime achievement Oscar at the Academy Awards. The producers who put together a reel of his work were shocked by the poor condition of the existing prints, and thus a project was born to restore them.

It may very well be that those who were lucky enough to watch the original release in Indian theatres and then worldwide in the 50s and 60s were the first and the last to see what shining sharp beauty Ray and Mitra actually wrought. In the decades to come, reprints and videos have been marred by sludgy visuals and muffled sound. There has never been a high quality VHS or DVD release

stories of Subrata Mitra's volcanic frustration about duplicate prints and dim projection lamps all come into sharp focus. 'None of you have actually seen what we really made!' is one quote from Subrata Babu repeated by many who interacted with him in his last years.

In 1993, the original negatives of the trilogy and several of Ray's other films were sent to America to be restored as part of a project to keep his work alive through the ages. A stopover in London at Henderson's Film Laboratories proved disastrous. A fire at the lab spread to the film vaults, destroying more than two dozen original negatives of British classics, and burning several Ray films, including the originals of the trilogy.

The fragments, ashes, and film canisters that could be identified as belonging to Ray's films were sent to the Academy Film Archive, but they were unprintable - the damage was too great. Still, the AFA held on to the pieces in its vaults. Twenty years later, in 2013, the Criterion Collection along with L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna, a top restoration facility in Italy, began six months of painstaking manual restoration work using new technology and old school labour. It would take hundreds of highly skilled technicians 1000 hours, a task which even included rebuilding the sprocket holes on the sides of the film and removing melted tape and glue.

Frame by frame, the technicians were able to restore up to 40% of *Pather Panchali* and over 60% of *Aparajito*, the second in the trilogy, from the original negatives. The rest of the two films, and the entire third film, *Apu Sansar*, had to be restored from fine-grain masters and duplicate negatives. If before and afters fascinate you as much as they do me, take a look at the restoration trailer online - it's a magical thing.

On May 4, 2015, sixty years almost to the day, *Pather Panchali* re-released at the MoMA in New York City, with dozens of film



and Ray's son - Sandip Ray.

After that first night at the MoMA, the Film Forum, an independent theatre in the West Village took on the rest of the screenings. I went to the Film Forum days after the initial release, and despite the fact that it was a Monday night, the line stretched down the

fame. As a failed Bengali, the only other Ray film I've seen was a short on YouTube earlier this year. I've only seen the occasional Bollywood film, and of course cannot compare the Apu trilogy in any way to the schmaltz and gloss of those movies. It was more like watching a meditation, one in

If you're in the United States, go watch the Apu trilogy on the big screen this summer. Leave your watch behind. Take your wonder.

Abeer Hoque is a Nigerian born Bangladeshi American writer and photographer. See more at olivewitch.com

Rabindranath, Belgrade and My Emigration

Anisur Rahman

When the Swedish Writers' Union chose me for a guest writer scholarship to Belgrade, I became excited and started to count the days. I forgot who I was. What could be the consequence of getting a Bengali national to make his long journey from a South Asian country to a North European land and then to an East European country? I did not want to think about it.

I had decided that I would get my air ticket and travel to Belgrade like a free bird. But no. When I learned that I would need a visa for my trip to Serbia, I felt unprepared. As if I had gotten an unexpected question in an exam. I had thought that travelling from one country to the other in Europe would not require a visa. I was wrong.

I originally arrived from a newly liberated country that had achieved its independence less than a half century ago. Whenever I mention Bangladesh, many will say, "Rabindranath Tagore is a great poet and philosopher." I add on: I am a Bangladeshi citizen, Rabindranath is my second passport. He is our identity. He introduced our longstanding tradition, culture and literature to people around the world.

Interestingly, Serbian literature and Bengali literature began at the same time. The history of Serbian literature begins with theological works from the 10th and 11th centuries. The first collection of literary works

in the Bengali language, generally known as the *Charyapada*, appeared between the 10th and 12th centuries.

I now want to remind my Serbian friends of Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Belgrade in November 1926. Your city was amazed by the Bengali poet, and he was amazed by your city. He delivered lectures at Belgrade University; had lunch with King Boris; gave an interview to Stanislav Vinaver, and talked to Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. During his visit he warned the Serbs not to lose touch with their traditional and spiritual lives. According to him, the cure for the soulless Western world could be found in Eastern treasures. That is the truth that Rabindranath expressed nearly a century ago. Is it not relevant, even today?

Back to my impending adventure, I thought that before visiting Belgrade I should have some idea about modern Serbian poetry. I went to the English Bookshop in Uppsala, the ancient university town in Sweden and obtained the following titles from their catalogue: *The horse has six legs—Contemporary Serb Poetry* plus *Anthology of Serbian Poetry: the Golden Age*. But the books were not in stock. Then I went to the Public Library - no such book was available there either. Let me now reverse the tale: imagine if I were a Serbian individual, prior to my visit to Dhaka to take part in a poetry

festival, and I was searching for books about Bengali poetry or translations of Bengali poems. I am sure the results of the search would prove no better. This is our common ground. I can identify with it.

I then became curious to know how the international media presented modern Serbia. I found features on the conflicts, chaos and separation of former provinces of Yugoslavia in recent decades. There was a distinct absence of the many cultural glories of Serbia. In the same way, one can find mainly saddening words like floods, cyclone, calamities and political chaos when it comes to texts about Bangladesh in the international media.

Prior to the end of the British colonial era on the Indian subcontinent, Rabindranath was disturbed by the growing communal discord between Hindus and Muslims in (his) Bengal (Bangladesh plus West Bengal). His secretary was a Muslim. Rabindranath feared for the safety of this secretary. Rabindranath told him, "If anyone asks you 'what is your religion?' tell them Rabindranath's religion is my religion." Rabindranath continued, "I have read religious books such the Quran, the Gita, the Bible and others. None of them are against peace."

I was once invited to the Swedish city of Malmö to talk about 'exile'. I was confronted

with the question: who is not in exile? A sensible person having a disagreement about many things taking place all around him discovers a feeling of exile in his mind despite living in his own country. This is how we can recognize the condition of being in exile. To be a writer it is necessary to be exiled in your mind. It may be one condition to be a writer. We the readers and writers belong to the same republic. Let us call it the Reading Republic.

The Zimbabwean writer Mia Couto made this astute observation: "A writer is an ambassador to this Republic from his own world of truth, beauty, feeling, pain and pleasure in life. Altogether it is a writer's lifelong journey. I am not sure about my being of writer. I have now learnt that to be a writer is to expose the truth. I am very attached to my father mentally; he is a farmer. Many things can be told about him. One thing he has taught me is: never hide the truth, it safeguards your simple life."

Sweden is a fine country, and I have lived there for more than a half decade. The Swedish Writers' Union offered me full membership long before I got residency status in that country. It is a breakthrough in the history of the union. The purpose was to extend their solidarity to a humble colleague like me. Swedish PEN offered me honorary membership in the same spirit. I am grateful

to them.

Yet the question continues to haunt me: who am I? My answer is: I am trying to find out the answer; the search never ends.

The International Library and the Botkyrka International Book Fair 2015 in Stockholm presented me in its catalogue by succinctly saying: Anisur Rahman has one leg in Sweden and the other in Bangladesh. I liked that.

My interest is a brief look at the contemporary Swedish literary scene in the post-August Strindberg era. Sweden has given birth to the bestselling writers of Swedish crime fiction on the international market and many fine authors. I would not like to miss the opportunity to mention the one whom I found to be a master of metaphor in the post-Elliot tradition of international poetry.

A friend from Bangladesh asked me, "Have you ever met the King of Sweden? Have you visited his palace?" I replied, "No, but I have met Tomas Tranströmer the Nobel Prize winner poet." Sadly, he passed away this year. It was my privilege to be one of his friends.

That's me, and how I felt before my visit to Belgrade.

Read more about Anisur Rahman at www.anisur.net