

WIND'S FOAM

Al Mahmud

Nothing remains, see, leaves, flowers, village elders
the river's dancing waves, brass pitches and the hookah's coal,
groups of growing girls one by one dwindle like the *ilish* season,
yellow leaves in the wind on the rainless fields and meadows
drop rustling. The migrant geese go too,
their bodies like multitudinous bubbles
in the sky's blue cup.

Why does nothing remain? Corrugated iron, thatch or mud walls,
the ageless village *bat* tree are uprooted in the terrible
Chittagong typhoon.

Plaster cracks, as vast as faith,
With a great crash, finally
Crumbles and falls the local mosque.

Sparrow's nests, love, creepers' leaves, book covers
Fall torn and twisted. Bitten by the Meghna's waters
The harvest's green cry shivers to the horizon.
Houses, water-pitchers, cowsheds float,
And an old pillow, flower-embroidered, sink like childish affection.
After this, not a dwelling remains;
Wate-loving birds fly, wiping the wind's foam from their beaks.

(From *Sonali Kabin*)
Translated by: Marian Maddern

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

“POETRY IS A WORK OF A LIFETIME”

Having dedicated his whole life to poetry, Al Mahmud is now in the twilight of his life. On the occasion of his eightieth birth anniversary, Al Mahmud (AM) talks to Emran Mahfuj of The Daily Star (TDS).

TDS: Nowadays poets and writers are becoming increasingly involved in politics. What do you think are they gaining from this?

AM: The main problem with our poets and writers is that they get involved in politics. Any poet might want to get patronage from the state. But if a poet confines himself to party politics, it surely will harm his poetry. Such poets are consumed by regret all the time, and this habit takes the form of a disease, which is worse than tuberculosis and far more severe than cancer.

TDS: At a time when you were being criticised in Bangladesh, Shibnarayan Roy published your poems in different newspapers of Kolkata. In Kolkata your poems are more popular than Shamsur Rahman's. What do you think are the reasons behind this?

AM: I have portrayed my country in my poetry. Another thing which I think is important about my poetry is

years? 100 years is not enough to become modern. I don't think the term “modern poetry” is appropriate. Poetry is just poetry.

TDS: You have said in one of your essays that poetry is like a dream. Do you think poetry is unreal?

AM: Poetry is a blend of dream and reality. It is written about a reality. What I am saying is a person imagines things beyond his/her reality. Our reality is harsh, so we dream beyond reality. Lying on a torn quilt, we look at the stars. Don't we? A poet lives in his reality but dreams beyond that reality. When this happens, his dreams become poetry. Poetry is our imagination of a refined life.

As poetry is created through imagination, it is almost always surreal. In that sense, I don't consider poetry surreal. In surrealist paintings, we see broken pieces of our reality. An artist, whoever s/he is, lives in a surreal world, and can see a face

“eyes like a bird's nest” (*pakhir nirer moto chokh*). We all know that eyes can never be like a bird's nest. By saying so, Jibanananda meant the love and affection that exist in a bird's nest. So we happily accept this. It makes us imagine how peaceful a bird's nest is. Art is like this. So, there is nothing in poetry that we can particularly call surreal. It may be possible in case of paintings, but I don't have any idea how you can separate surreal from real in poetry.

TDS: Some say incomprehensibility is an important element of modern poetry...

AM: This is wrong. Poetry was never complex to people. A poem is only hard to understand when it has not become a poem. We have been studying all the complicated subjects of the world. We have been studying technology and architecture, which we can understand pretty well, can't we? Then why shouldn't we be able to understand the language of poetry? A poem must have a meaning. If a reader cannot comprehend a thing after reading a poem, then it has not become a poem.

TDS: You are considered one of the major poets of Bangla literature. How would you respond to this?

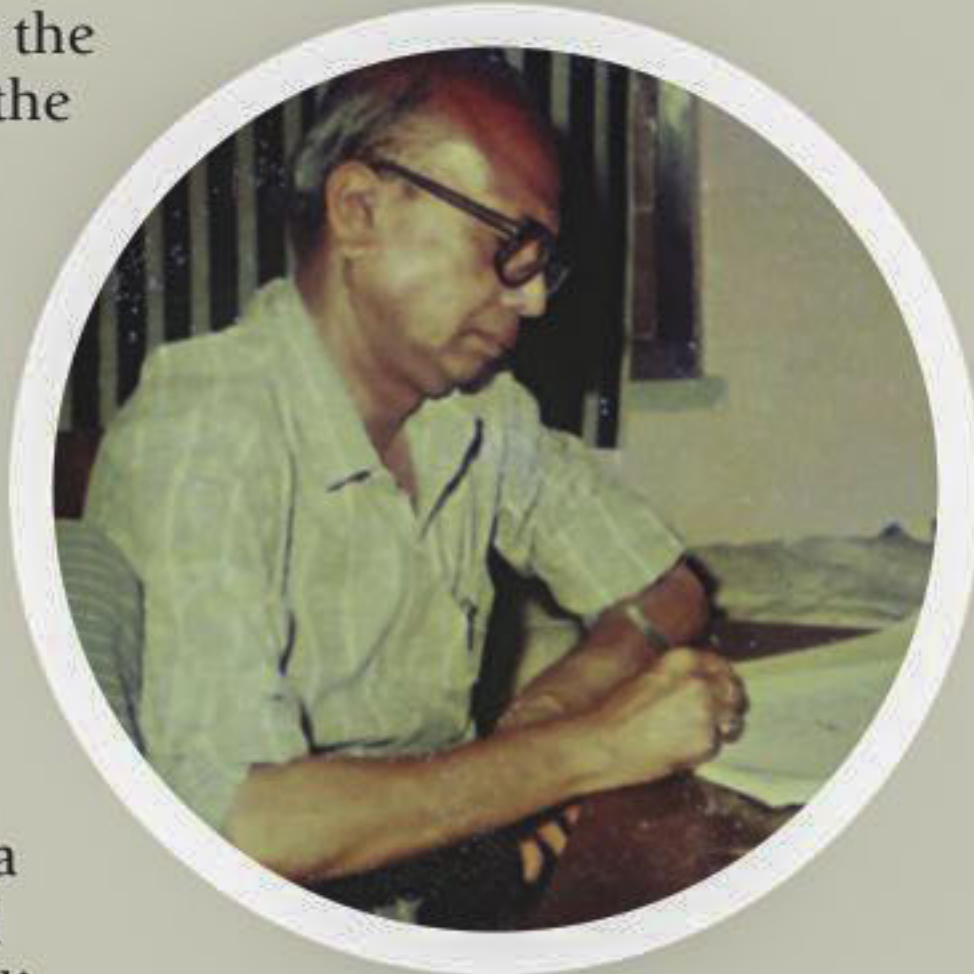
AM: I think Sonali Kabin has been more or less successful. These types of poems last for many years. But how can I claim that I am the greatest poet of my time? When people say I am the greatest poet of my time, I feel delighted. But I don't exactly have the ability to determine whether it is right. Time will judge who the greatest poet is. But in literature there is no such question. I would go as far as to say that I don't consider many of the poets of this country, who are considered great poets by many, all that great. Many of the so-called great poets don't seem so talented to me. But that doesn't mean that I am the greatest poet of this country. Such debates can never be solved.

TDS: What are your views on experimentation in literature?

AM: I don't think much about experimentation. I have been engaged

Al Mahmud, one of the greatest Bangali poets of the 20th century, was born on July 11, 1936 in Morail Village of Brahmanbaria. He is not only a great poet but also a celebrated short story and novel writer. He got widespread recognition after *Lok Lokantor* was published in 1963. His poetic works *Kaler Kalosh* (1966) and *Mayabi Porda Dule Otho* (1976) brought him in the limelight. He reached the peak of fame through his magnum opus *Sonali Kabin*, published in 1973. In 1971, Al Mahmud took part in the Liberation War. After the Liberation War, he joined *The Daily Ganakantha* as an assistant editor. He was jailed for a year during the then Awami League government. After being released from jail, he joined Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy in 1975 and retired in 1993 as its director.

Al Mahmud's first short story collection, *Pankourir Rakta*, was published in 1975 while *Kobi o Kolahol*, his first novel, was published in 1993. This legendary poet has received numerous literary awards including Bangla Academy Award in 1968, Jibanananda Das Memorial Award in 1974, Sufi Motaher Hossain Literary Gold Medal in 1976, Philips Literary Award in 1986 etc. In 1987, he received Ekushey Padak, the highest literary award of Bangladesh.



that I have used many words from local dialects which no other poet did so sincerely before.

TDS: Can poetry reach such heights only because of the poet's choice of words?

AM: One has to be a poet first, and then he has to perform his duty as a poet. How can you make a nation dream? A poet lives through his creation -- his thoughts on love, his writing skills, use of rhythm, selection of words, etc.

TDS: Nowadays there is much excitement about modern poetry....

AM: How old is this modernity? 100

divided into three pieces. But it is not anything beyond reality. It is like looking at a real situation from different angles with some imagination. I think it's all surreal: all the poets, writers, even the whole world of art and literature...

TDS: What do you think about those who are working with surrealism in poetry?

AM: I don't have anything to say about them. However, if a poem really becomes a poem, it doesn't matter whether it is real or surreal. Will it make any sense if I write a surrealist poem but no one reads it? Jibanananda Das said,

with literature for a long time. One has to be devoted to literature to get the taste of it. Poetry is a work of a lifetime.

TDS: You have devoted your whole life to poetry. How was it possible?

AM: This has happened for obvious reasons. Poetry is my passion. I always think about poetry. I always write poetry. Poetry has brought me fame and respect. It might not have given me wealth, but I am satisfied with what I have got from poetry.

TDS: Many allege that your recent writings are repetitive...

AM: I don't think so. I have always

tried to incorporate new ideas in my poetry. The metaphors and rhythm of my poetry stand as a testament of emotions and sincerity.

TDS: Today, on your eightieth birthday, would you tell us how do you still get the inspiration to write?

AM: I really become overwhelmed with emotion when people acknowledge me as a poet. I write lyrical poetry. There has always been lyricism in my poetry.

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