

FROM
KATHARINE HART'S DIARY

SHASHI THAROOR

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I cannot believe I am sitting next to him, yet again, on a plane. How many times we have done this, how many flights, transfers, holidays, my passport and ticket always with him, even my boarding card; he was the man, the head of the family, he held the travel documents. And when it was all over, that was among the many rights I had regained, the right to be myself on an airline. Not an appendage, not a wife, not Mrs Rudyard Hart, no longer resigned to his determination to have the aisle seat, no longer waiting for him to pass me the newspaper when he'd finished it, no longer having to see the look of irritated long-suffering on his face when I disturbed him to go to the washroom, or asked him to catch the stewardess's attention to get something for the kids.

The kids. It's been years since we've all travelled together, as a family. He enjoyed travel, he often told me, but on his own. He was self-sufficient, he didn't need things all the time like we, the rest of us, did -- juice, or entertainment, or frequent trips to the bathroom. He made it obvious that being accompanied by us was not his preferred mode of travel. But we did it often enough, till the kids began to rate airlines and hotels and transit lounges the way other kids compared baseball teams. An because of Rudyard's posting, the kids had an unusually exotic basis for comparison. "Emirates is cool," Kim would say, because that airline had video monitors on the backs of the seats and a wide range of channels to choose from. "But they make

you fly through Dubai," Lance would retort, pronouncing it Do-buy "where it's just shops, shops, shops everywhere. Schiphol is cooler!" At Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, his own favourite, Lance would pray for our connecting flights to be delayed so that he could have even longer in the arcade, shooting down monsters and dragons with no regard for jet lag.

How wonderful it is to have you monsters and dragons on a screen in front of you, to be destroyed by the press of a button, and not inside your heart as mine are, hammering away at your soul. Monsters and dragons, not just at an airport arcade between weary flights, but on the plane, in your seat, in the seat next to you.

In the seat next to me sits my monstrous ex-husband and wife, merely father and mother. Father and mother with no kids in sight. Kim couldn't get away from work, where he tells me junior stockbrokers are lucky if they can take Thanksgiving weekend. And Lance -- Lance, who could never understand why I had to leave his father, Lance is in a world of his own and has no need of other worlds. But I'm not going to worry about Lance today I've got too much else to think about.

Priscilla. Priscilla with the baby blue eyes and the straight blond hair and that took of trusting innocence with which she greeted the world. Priscilla with her golden skin, her golden smile that lit up the eyes of anyone she was with. Priscilla with her idealism, her earnestness, her determination to do some good in the world. Priscilla who hated her

father because of what he had done to me.

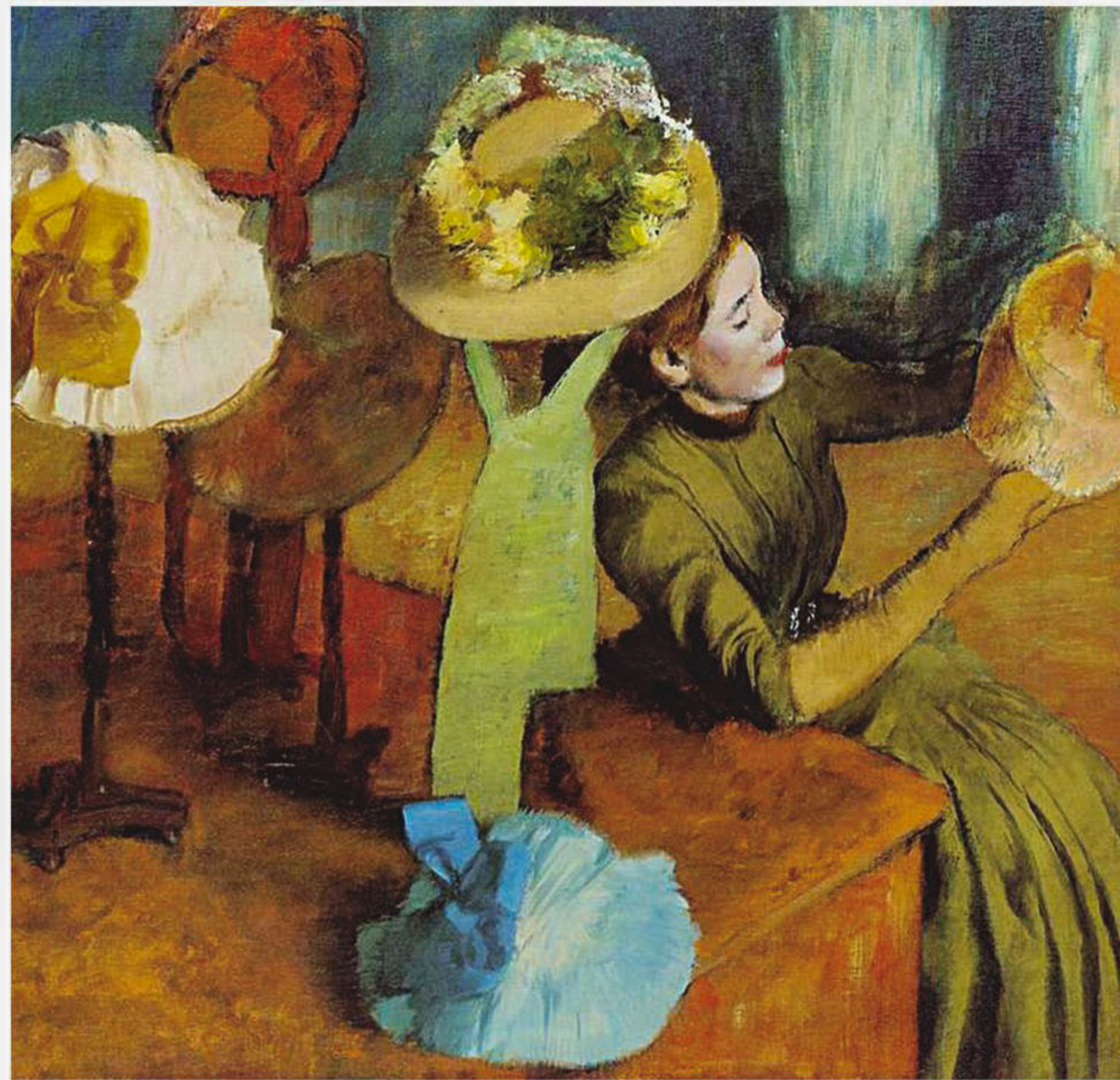
I look at him now, trying to read a magazine and not succeeding, his eyes blurring over the same page he has been staring at since I began writing these words. I look at him, and I see Priscilla: she had his eyes, his nose, his lips, his hair, except that the same features looked so different on her. Where his good looks are bloated by self-indulgence, hers were smoothed and softened by gentleness. And that sullen set of his jaw, that look of a man who has had his own way too easily for too long, set him completely apart from his daughter. There was nothing arrogant or petulant about Priscilla, not even when she was upset about some flagrant injustice. She was just a good human being, and no one would say that about Rudyard.

I look at him, trying to focus on the page, mourning the daughter whose loss he cannot come to terms with. Cannot, because he had already lost her when he lost me, lost her while she was still living. Despite myself, I feel a tug of sorrow for him.

It hurt so much to use the past tense for Priscilla. My baby, my own personal contribution to the future of the world. I would give anything for it to have been me, and not her. Anything.

Shashi Tharoor has authored five books, including critically acclaimed "The Great Indian Novel".

("From Katharine Hart's Diary" is an excerpt from Tharoor's novel "Riot". Published by Daily Star Books, it is available at rokomari.com.)



The Millinery Shop by Edgar Degas, 1885, The Art Institute of Chicago.

My Father Abul Hussain

FARAH IMRANA HUSSAIN

Poets are expected to be "odd characters," eccentric and reclusive, a riddle and a mystery. They live in a world of their own. They are bohemian and stylish like Ezra Pound in a photograph I saw a long time ago or cut an arresting figure like Tagore in the long flowing robe of a seer. Their lives are open to speculation, legend, and myth. "Mad, bad, and dangerous to know" like Lord Byron or the wild-eyed and wild-haired Nazrul.

My father's contemporaries too advertised their romantic sensibilities through their demeanour, dress and behaviour. The near eccentric Shawkat Osman announced his arrival at our house by shouting profanities and affectionately calling my father names. The brothers Abu Rushd Matinudin and Rashid Karim were intense and brooding, and Shamsur Rahman, almost a dandy in dress, was strangely reticent.

My father was unlike any of them. He never indulged in eccentric behaviour. He didn't have a dramatic or secret life; not even a strange enigmatic one. He didn't have girlfriends or mistresses. Nor did he drink himself into a stupor or languish in poverty. He didn't have a dysfunctional family. He did nothing to make his life different from ordinary people.

Abba was a giant of modern Bengali literature. His poems comprise a remarkable literary heritage. You might expect him to be fiery, or over-sensitive, or at least slightly awkward and ill-at-ease? But no, not Abba. He was more like WH Auden, who believed a poet should be as ordinary as possible and be easily mistaken for a simple businessman.

As a youngster filled with romantic notions, I found it intriguing when people referred to my father as a "poet." Abba looked nothing like a poet. All his "working life" he looked like an English gentleman dressed immaculately in grey suits with bout cut pants and pointy shoes that are now the rage again. With his silver hair (black interspersed with grey) brushed back over his scalp without a parting, his tall lanky frame and his determined gait, I always thought he was the best looking man in the world. Even in his twilight years, frail and gaunt with age, his face retained traces of the extravagant handsomeness of his youth.

The German poet Goethe apparently welcomed difficult times because they brought out the best in his work. "My poetic ardour was always very faint as long as I was content," he wrote, "but as soon as I was in deep trouble, fleeing from some danger, then my poetic ardour was always ablaze. Sweet

poetry, like a rainbow, only shines forth against a background of darkness. That's why poets always cultivate melancholy."

My father never "cultivated melancholy" or anything else for the sake of poetry. He did not like drama in poetry or in life. He disliked the Romantic nineteenth century emotional style of writing. His works show strong political, social, and psychological orientations, drawing on language from commerce, industry. Like many young men growing up in a rapidly

holud. I remember the scene clearly. When it was his turn to apply holdi on my forehead, his hand shook. Amma turned to him and said, "Ki holo?" He could not speak. I got up from my bridal seat, took his fingers smeared with traces of turmeric and passed it over my forehead. I could feel the heavy thumping of his heart against his chest as he hugged me, but he said nothing. After my marriage, he wrote a letter to my husband that we cherish to this day. "All her life, I encouraged

a poem.

I often wonder how he crafted his poems. I imagine that he allowed several ideas to coalesce and form into some central idea and image that resulted in a poem. But I don't know for sure. I remember him telling me about a poem he wrote about Shamsur Rahman. Newspaper editors kept asking him for a poem commemorating the poet who had died the year before. He keenly felt the loss of his old friend (when I called the day after Uncle's death, he said to me in a very quiet voice, "Shamsur Rahman choley gelo...") but thought that he had said everything he had to say about him. And then, one night, he had a dream. He woke up and immediately began writing. Fragments of the dream coalesced in his mind and assimilated into the poem 'Mrityoo Bhoi.'

In his poetry he realized a lifelong search for a philosophical and religious position from which to analyze and comprehend the individual life in relation to society and to the human condition in general. He expressed his dislike for bad governments, his suspicion of progress without human feeling, and his belief in God. But he never pretended that he had universal truths to tell. He was not the type of person who moralized. His emphasis was on social issues.

Neither was he the kind of father who spoke to his children about morality. He simply led by example; displaying integrity in adverse circumstances. He never succumbed to the temptation to resort to unethical and dishonest means to get anything done either in his work or literary life, even when surrounded by people who exhibited those characteristics.

Like Ezra Pound he recognized the talent of a large number of extremely notable Bengali writers, helping them to get started on their careers and gain recognition by knocking into shape things that needed redrafting. Some of them didn't acknowledge publicly how his help had been crucial in their development as serious writers. I am not denying their talent, but on numerous occasions I saw my father working on their manuscripts, explaining to them the nuts-and-bolts of writing poetry. I never heard him question why those people did not acknowledge his help, or suffer the consequences of their actions. He was simply the kind of man who went about his own business and did what he thought was right regardless of everything else.

Once a journalist asked him what his biggest accomplishment was and I was surprised when he said that it was his children.

He qualified the statement saying that the credit went to his wife, which was true. He wasn't involved hands-on in our upbringing. South Asian fathers rarely are. He didn't spend a lot of time discussing our friends or progress at school. He knew our mother was doing a very good job of it. And he was not the kind of man who tried to mend what was not broken. We never doubted his unyielding love for us, which can also be seen in the many references to his family in his poems. He has written poems on his wife, sons and daughters, his parents, his mother-in-law. I don't know of any other poet inspired to write about his own family to the same extent. 'Dui Bon' and 'Meye Duto' are poems about my sister and me.

Abba was an undisputed master, having written more than 25 books of poetry, translation and prose over the course of seven decades. But he was not a poet of the masses, someone who cared about "popularity." His ego required no publicity. He did not relish being part of anything very public or talking too much. He spoke eloquently through his verse. He was never interested in cultivating a large audience of readers, although he had a dedicated fan following, consisting largely of knowledgeable and sophisticated poetry lovers, who wrote to him, visited him, spent hours in conversation about literature and politics, brought him flowers and delicacies. Their affection toward him, mixed with deep reverence, was like one might have for a favourite older relative. But he himself expected nothing from anyone.

He wrote every day in a beautiful bookshelf-lined study in the house that he built with my mother some forty odd years ago. His failing eyesight did not allow him to write the last two years of his life but he still sat at his desk occasionally, surrounded by family pictures and framed certificates of appreciation and awards that my sisters-in-law insisted on mounting on the walls. He had no interest in them himself. When we were young and looked with awe at the gold medals and crests, he would say, "This one is for you, and that one for your sister, and that one for..." If it were not for his poetry, he would easily have disappeared among the masses. I am sure that's how he would have liked it. At one time, he told my mother that he wanted to be buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. Amma was horrified, as was I.

June 29, 2015 marks the first year of poet Abul Hussain's passing. The writer is his eldest daughter who works for the World Bank based in the US. Chanida is her nick name.



Abul Hussain

urbanizing India, he was interested in machines, applying mechanical rhythms to traditional verse forms and metrical patterns while evoking the countryside of his boyhood (see the poem 'Dynamo'). I believe this is what distinguishes his work from the other poets of his generation.

If he eschewed sentimentality in poetry, he did the same in life. The one time that I saw him overcome with emotion was at my gaye

Chanida to rise above the mundane. I hope you will do the same."

The only time I saw Abba cry was when I was sitting on my mother's bed overcome by grief after her sudden death nine months after my wedding. He quietly came over, lay down beside me and cried. I realized that moment that his loss was greater than mine. My life lay ahead of me; he had lost his life companion. "Aar kisher opekha..." he later wrote in