

# NUGGETS FROM THE KOLKATA LITERARY MEET 2017

SAL IMAM

*The Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet was held from 25-29 January 2017 at the Victoria Memorial Hall. There were two spectacular venues, one under a shamiana erected on the east side and the other within the quadrangle on the western side. As always at literary festivals there were too many events scheduled for anyone to be able to attend them all and the write-up below represents a mere sampling of the delights on offer.*

PART 1

*Times They are a Changing—Dylan and Cohen. Joie Bose, Ananya Chatterjee, and Saira Shah Halim. With Arthur Cardozo. Music by Rahul Guha Roy.*

On the opening day, by the time I arrive at the Victoria Memorial Hall it is already 3 PM. No matter because this means that the first session I get to attend is a poeico-musical explosion—what could make for a better welcome? The songs of Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan, on stage and on screen, as fresh and evocative as ever, help me to understand once again that the genre of songwriting is indeed highly Nobel-worthy—as Rabindranath Tagore should have been the first to have proved. I hear for the first time what Leonard Cohen said about Dylan's Nobel, a typically enigmatic quote, "It was like pinning a medal on Mt. Everest." In this mood of somber well-being we are treated to original poetry by the members of the Kolkata group known as Poetry Paradigm whose mission it is to promote this art. Early in the session I hear a squeal of what sounds like surprised delight in my right ear followed by a flurry of smiling face and big embrace: it is Shazia Omar, here to attend as an invited author after success at the Jaipur Lit Fest a few days earlier, courtesy of her recent book *Dark Diamond*.

*The Sellout: Paul Beatty discusses his Booker Prize-winning novel with Sandip Roy.*

Sandip Roy can't help but start by asking about the intent behind the book's first line: "This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything." Right away we get the spirit of the book, it is going to be hitting you from unexpected angles. This author is not one for pinning down. The more you try to unravel his sentences the more they open out, incorporating two, and sometimes three, obliquely clashing ideas. The whole novel seems to be made up of a stream of zany riffs so that plot becomes all but superfluous. The book however never loses its focus on the African-American experience in modern America. Along with the irresistibly funny chaff we are from time to time thrown by a stinging insight. "I understand now that the only time black people don't feel guilty is when we've actually done something wrong, because that relieves us of the cognitive dissonance of being black and innocent, and in a way the prospect of going to jail becomes a relief. p.18"

We all marvel when Sandip informs us that *The Sellout* was rejected 18 successive times by publishers in the UK till the 19<sup>th</sup> one picked it up—but then such was the force of the springback that it went straight on to win the Booker Prize, its first American winner. Hence Paul Beatty's resounding advice to authors everywhere "Write something that can't be ignored." Or as he is too polite to spell out "Write something so damn incredibly good that it can't be ignored forever".

*Hidden Histories: Shashi Tharoor and Sanjeev Sanyal with Kunal Sarkar*

The session is held on a sunny mid-morning in the large garden of the Calcutta Club. Laid back as always, Shashi Tharoor sets out in mellifluous accents a tale of horror. The British reign in South Asia had been an unmitigated disaster for the people of the land. From a region which made up 23% of the whole world's GDP during the colonial era started India had been reduced to 3% by the time of independence in 1947. In pitiless detail, taken from his latest book *An Era of Darkness*, Tharoor explains how the British went about the systematic extraction of India's resources. In the eyes of the colonial authorities the consequences to India were of no account, from millions of dead in famines and diseases to the destruction

of flourishing textiles, steelmaking and shipbuilding industries and the distortion of the agricultural economy.

The genial moderator, Dr. Kunal Sarkar, asks about the argument that there have also been some positives to British rule. Tharoor, who has been waiting in ambush, pounces smoothly. He says that all the supposed benefits—from the introduction of institutions of governance to those of education, from the claims of political unity to cultural legacies such as the English language and even the sport of cricket—have had a sinister side. The costs have more than outweighed any benefits, he proclaims, which instantly makes his book, which has the full story, a must-have. Among many amusing asides Tharoor tells us that the study of 'English Literature' as an academic subject was invented in British India as a

shaped human history," a large and fascinating claim. He points out that we tend not to be aware of this interaction because historians have generally neglected it. Who knows for example of the exploits of Marthanda Varma, Raja of Travancore who won a major battle against the Dutch on such a scale that it eliminated their entire future presence in Indian history? I certainly didn't. Sanjay Sanyal says that the implications of Southern India's role as an important maritime power radiating trade, culture and religion all the way into the Pacific have not been sufficiently explored. He blames the generally North Indian bias of historians since 1947 which, he says, can in turn be traced back to the excessive influence of a Certain Ruling Family/Dynasty! At this Shashi Tharoor goes through the motions of putting up a defence but the applause in the

trading and cultural centre, one which attracted colourful adventurers from all over the world. Another curious parallel with modern times is that Bengal under Shayista Khan was also riven by religious conflicts within Islam, between orthodox fundamentalists on the one hand and more progressive Sufi thinkers on the other. She also says that she wanted to provide the young people of Bangladesh with a role model of their own, in Shayista Khan, rather than being always under the spell of alien heroes such as Captain America or Spiderman.

The audience, made up mainly of students, listens with rapt attention. Jayanta Sengupta explains that the young people in the Kolkata audience are interested because in their own school and college history courses Shayista Khan appears only as a footnote, as someone who lost three fingers in an epic sword fight with the Maratha warrior king Shivajee (an episode that Shazia has artfully weaved into her novel). Shazia's perspective broadens their knowledge about a character about whom they knew very little.

*Inheritance and Influence: Anita Desai and Kiran Desai with Sandip Roy*

The crowd is buzzing, jam-packed, for the duet of the mother and daughter. Anita, long blonde hair tied in a desi ponytail, is all kindly brutal. I love the way Kiran looks, cocked like a parakeet loaded with an about-to-erupt smile, waiting expectantly to be honorably born. Sandip, sitting between them, jostles their two currents with success, because they are in harmony to begin with.

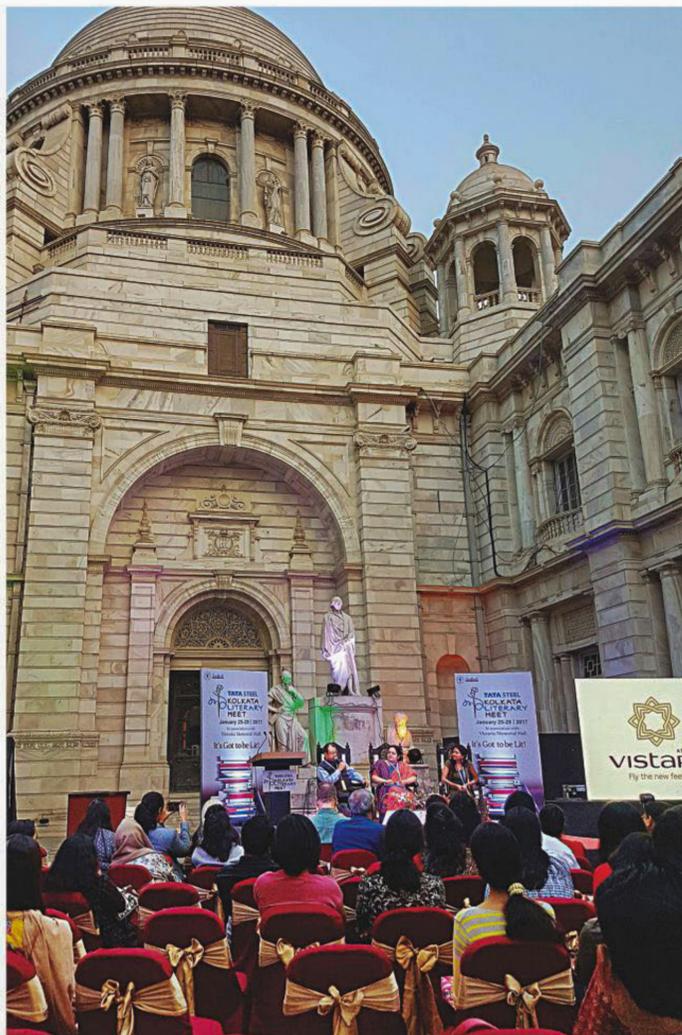
Anita Desai talks about her book *Baumgartner's Bombay*. "It is a day in the life of an elderly gentleman which is remarkable only for the fact that it is the last day in his life."

They are asked about whether they ever write together. Anita Desai says that there is a relationship but it is not as if they sit side by side drinking rum and exchanging sentences, as the *New York Times* would have it. Kiran Desai "When I am in the process of writing I never show the unfinished draft to anyone. Only when it is complete do I give it to my mother first. She makes a few remarks but these are so far-reaching that I then have to do a lot more work, reshaping and changing the text to dispose of them." Sandip reads out a comment by Kamila Shamsie about Anita Desai's work which includes the striking phrase that it "seethes with unspoken speech," and that a new genre has been created which could be known as 'South Asian Gothic'.

*Kohinoor, an Indian Obsession: William Dalrymple and Anita Anand with Bee Rowlett*

William Dalrymple, the irrepressible living White Mughal who graces our times, has teamed up with Anita Anand to explode the myths surrounding the history of the Kohinoor diamond and to unearth the real, equally out of this world, story. In typical Dalrymple style this is done with theatrical flourish. He strides all over the stage acting out the grisly tale of how the diamond was passed from bloody hand to bloody hand, ending up seized by the British who sent it back to their homeland. Anita Anand then takes over to tell us how Queen Victoria and Prince Albert took charge of the Kohinoor and foisted it on the British public with varying degrees of success. Their jointly written illustrated book, *Kohinoor: The Story of the World's Most Infamous Diamond*, flies off the shelves and will surely convince its readers that this was indeed a most cursed stone too.

(Continued next week)  
Sal Imam is a writer who is working on his memoirs of the late 1960s in the US.



Panel with Shazia Omar.

way of inspiring awe among the natives. He zeroes in on the railways, widely touted as being of lasting value to India, and rattles off how they were built at highly inflated cost, by British contractors, paid for by the Indian treasury. Once they had been built Indian citizens were charged the highest ticket rates in the world for third class services, on the slatted wooden seats which are still in vogue today, while freight rates, used by British export houses, were the lowest in the world. Dr. Sarkar adds that malaria, which was then a European disease, only took hold in India because of the huge pools of stagnant water which were a byproduct of railway construction.

Then it was the turn of Sanjeev Sanyal to indulge in some gentlemanly exhortation. His field of study has been termed 'geo-history' and his most recent book called *The Ocean of Churn* is an account of "how the Indian Ocean

Calcutta Club audience in favour of Sanyal's view indicates which way the wind is blowing these days.

*Two Bengals, One History: Shazia Omar and Jayanta Sengupta with Priyadarshinee Guha*

It makes me proud to see Shazia Omar on stage with her fellow invited speaker Jayanta Sengupta a distinguished historian specializing in the British Indian period who is currently curator of the Victoria Memorial Hall and its museum. Priyadarshinee Guha the moderator is a school teacher. Shazia's novel *Dark Diamond* is set in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal and features Shayista Khan, the Mughal ruler of the province, in a swashbuckling tale of political intrigue and mystical salvation. She is asked why she chose this subject and replies that among other reasons it was to highlight that the Bengal of that period was truly 'Golden', in terms of its prosperity and its prominence as a

## The Inconvenience

SAYEED MD M CHOWDHURY

The life of a jovial six year old boy  
Tarnished by a devastating war,  
Sought refuge under a battered convoy  
With no-one to heal or stitch his scar.

The little quaint town he called home  
Pulverised and crushed by men, unknown,  
The mosque he prayed, its gigantic dome,  
Demolished, shattered, mutated to a gravestone.

As he felt the ephemeral of his being,  
We sat down to argue and discuss  
Stopped him on his way, from fleeing,  
Told him, we didn't want him to live with us.

The poet is a student of History, Politics and Economics at University College London.



"Refugees from Herzegovina" by Uroš Predić; made in the aftermath of the Herzegovina Uprising (1875–77).

## KAMAL CHOWDHURY'S POEMS

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI:

PROFESSOR FAKRUL ALAM



White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavender on Rose) by Mark Rothko. 1950. Location: The Royal family of Qatar.

### THE TWO OF US

One born in darkness  
The other in light  
Each the other's shadow  
Brothers extraordinary  
One living in the underworld  
The other in a palace  
Beneath a divided moon  
The two keep drifting away!

### WINGS

Waking up at befogged dawn I dart towards morning  
I beckon the sun with a cup of tea  
As I sip  
A shalik bird flies and lands in the dust.  
Thinking of that shalik I invent  
Some extraordinary wings.  
Time for me to take off!

### RIVERS DON'T DISAPPOINT

From the stream of time I asked for its flow  
I'm not daunted by debris; rivers don't disappoint.  
I drift while looking at fish eyes—  
A fishing boat; I'm a downstream man.  
Just because it's night time I'm not alone  
I've composed a new tune this day  
To make rivers, streams, canals and lakes overflow  
Only people with oil lamps for company can go  
with the flow,  
Please don't worry though—our rivers  
Overflow with poems.