

MADE IN AMERICA!

SOMDATTA MANDAL

Though times have changed, in the several visits I made to the US over the last twenty years, one headache has remained constant – what to bring back as gifts for my desi people back home. Earlier, picking up gifts was a simpler affair. People back home would be craving for anything 'foreign' – things like Heads and Shoulders shampoo, Dove soap, Estee Lauder cosmetics, cheap sweat shirts, etc and I would stuff my suitcase with as many of those items as my purse permitted. But gradually with time, with swanky shopping malls in our own cities and with multinational companies spreading their tentacles in the remotest corner of the globe, the idea of picking up those earlier items that everyone craved for is totally lost. Now it is becoming extremely difficult to buy something 'American' for people back home and I realized this most in my trip to the US last month.

With China making inroads into the marketing world over the last few years in such an aggressive way, walking into any convenient store or Walmart or Dollar Tree and picking up whatever you want is no longer exciting as everything in your shopping list from A to Z will be 'Made in China.' In this last trip, I had a long list of specific things to be brought back from Uncle Sam's land and then I realized how different things were now. After I had coaxed my son to drive me to the nearest departmental store, he took me there rather reluctantly at nine at night. The store was open till eleven and I had to buy whatever I wanted within the stipulated time of two hours. OK fine. I had to buy a jacket for someone so I rushed to the men's section. The first one I picked was made in Bangladesh. Surely spending my hard earned greenbacks to pick up something from our immediate neighbour was not very exciting. So I



tried another aisle. Here were jackets made in Sri Lanka. Again a 'no' from me. After doing away with several countries which did not seem exciting enough, not for the quality of the product but for the tag, I ultimately picked a jacket 'Made in Jordan.' Well at least this west Asian nation was not an immediate neighbour to India and was exotic

enough for the person for whom I was buying it.

The next item in the list was a tee shirt of XXXL size for a colleague of mine. Again, apart from design, price or colour, the name tag became the more important deciding factor. The first one I picked up was 'Made in India' so it went back to the shelf immediately. After a lot of scouring, the

one I ultimately chose was 'Made in Honduras' which I thought sounded exotic enough. Now for some bedsheets. One counter in that section had lovely cotton sheets on sale but the 'Made in Pakistan' tag made my patriotic self put it back in the stacks and I struggled hard to ultimately select one that was 'Made in Egypt.'

By this time only half an hour was left for the store to close. I still had many more purchase requests left on the list. Loitering around the different aisles listlessly discarding merchandise by looking at the country in which it was produced, I was scolded by my son who had already grown quite impatient.

"Why is it taking you so long? If you like the stuff, pick it up and let's go."

"But people back home won't like the idea that I brought them a gift from America that was made in our subcontinent. That too paying in dollars for it," I replied meekly.

"Oh, so you want only gift that has a label 'Made in America'? Ma, how stupid you can be at times; OK, here's a good suggestion. Go and pick up some American flags and take home for the rest of your folk."

"Flags, what will they do with American flags?" "Anything. They can decorate their lounge, use it as a tablecloth or dump it in their chest of drawers and forget about it. Your duty of bringing back an American gift will be over."

Not a bad idea, I mused as I walked towards the shelf selling flags of all sizes. Guess what? The first piece I picked up had a label "Made in Haiti." The rest of the tale is better left untold.

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Tales of Everlasting Endearment

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL



Women and children in masterly works of fiction tend to be endearing. From Bengal to Russia, the endearment lasts a lifetime; Sorbojaya and Durga, and Surobala of Bengali literature, Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, and Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native*, Natasha Rostov of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Zhenya of Chekhov's short story "The House with an Attic" are characters to remember forever.

Obviously, for us this love begins with Bengali. In Bengali literature Pather Pachali by Bibhutibhuson Bandopadhyaya is a moving tale of the pains and struggles of ordinary people. Apu is the pivotal point of the tale, but Sorbojaya the enduring mother and Durga the mirthful village girl melt the heart of the reader.

Sorbojaya can be identified as an iconic mother of rural Bengal; a woman persevering in privation. In such trying circumstances the woman of the house can become contemptuous and resentful. On no occasion is she found to be dismissive of the clerical aristocracy of Harihor whenever he speaks of an opportunity of a breakthrough. But Harihor, too, at one point surrenders to fate, admitting his hopeless situation when he tries to project a picture of better days to come. Pain writ in her eyes, Sorbojaya remains quiet, burrowing into such misery for days on!

Sorbojaya retains her dignity in her efforts to raise her children even in the direst of situations. Durga, on the other hand, is a chirpy village girl singing the song of life. When they are unwelcome in a village festive occasion, she does not allow Apu's spirits to wilt. She takes him to a place where nature offers its delicacies for poor children like them. Her sense of zestful discovery is how she keeps her mind unbound amidst the indignities of poverty. She takes Apu on an adventure involving getting a glimpse of a locomotive chugging on billowing black smoke. In the process, the poor little girl finds a place in the

heart of readers of all times.

Tagore is regarded as one of the three great short story writers of world literature. The other two are Maupassant and Anton Chekhov. Tagore's short stories are like returning home! His "Ek Ratri" is a tale of love lost to the blunders of fanciful thinking of youth, of love that was there for asking, of fancy succumbing to the realities of ordinary life and of a neglected love aiming to return to its home but overreaching its destination.

Surobala is a childhood playmate of the unnamed narrator, both their families look on them as a possible pair. She is famed for her beauty-- a charming face, a pair of lovely dark eyes and dark eye lashes. He looks upon her as his own, just as a boorish youth would tend to think! To that extent he lords over her, sometimes subjecting her to unkind treatment. His model is Nilroton, who has left for the city and become a clerk in the court. So, he too goes to the city! He becomes absorbed with fanciful thinking over his career.

News comes from home that the two families are thinking of his marriage with Surobala. He informs family members that he does not have the time for marriage. Garibaldi and Mazzini occupy his thinking! But he only becomes a sidekick political worker; setting chairs and tables for public meeting, pasting posters and even getting into scuffles. Surobala is married off to the pleader Ramlochon.

On learning that his father has suddenly died, our hero returns home. His dreams end there! He becomes a second school master in distant Noakhali. There he learns that Ramlochon the pleader lives nearby. What designs destiny has for him there! When he visits Ramlochon's house on one occasion, he can hear the soft clinking of bangles, the rustle of the creases of her sari and even the sound of her footsteps. Surobala is behind the curtain! One who could have been his

for asking but is now beyond his reach for ever.

The appointed meeting comes! The town is struck by a tidal wave. Ramlochon is away on business. Tidal waves start rising. He takes shelter on the embankment of a pond. In the darkness of the night he sees a woman taking shelter on the other side of the embankment. She turns out to be Surobala! There is no talk. Water rushes in, the cyclone becomes weaker and the night ends. The woman in the dark comes down and goes home! Destiny's ironical tryst is over.

The same scenes can be seen in other literature too! The infatuation of the artist with Zhenya, the petit young girl in Chekhov's "The House with an Attic" ends so abruptly as well! The story is set in a country retreat where the artist has gone on a sojourn and the two sisters from Moscow have come on a vacation.

The elder Lydia is abrasive and dogmatic, a scathing critic of the injustices of society. She is a school teacher, given to rhetoric. The younger Zhenya has just come of age. She is reticent and withdrawn and has little interest in Lydia's rhetoric. The artist plays tennis with Zhenya. She has the comeliness of a freshly blossomed flower. Love draws them closer.

The final scene of the tryst takes place on an evening of the full moon when Zhenya walks together to see off the artist. Love blossoms. The whole situation resembles that of Tagore's "Ek Ratri." Lydia, in the shape of fate, has different thoughts. She sends Zhenya to Moscow. The next day the artist returns to his place completely crestfallen.

Some characters of fiction, particularly women are not readily forgotten. They cast a spell that lasts a lifetime. Destiny may not have always been kind to them. But the pathos they are endowed with moves the readers, even if the end appears so unjust. They are unforgettable; as real as life!



Overseasoned

SAYEED MD M CHOWDHURY

Digging his grave in a mine,
The worker dreamt of the coastline.
His jaded body wanted to see the ocean,
Waves hitting rocks, he missed that motion.
Alcohol and cigarettes was his life,
Never had the time to woo his wife.
Abandoned and isolated, he felt low,
His mind told him "it was time to go".
The poison in his hand, he drank it all,
Smirked widely as he witnessed his fall.

The poet studies History, Politics and Economics at University College London.

Traversing Cohen

SABRINA BINTE MASUD

I want to write a letter to a woman from a time now past. Cohen style. To the woman with eye-brow-tongue-piercings, markings on her temple, dreadlocks and skin neither black, nor white, on a rattling New York subway, in a crowded New York subway, complete strangers on a subway, sharing a pole, one hand on top of the other, sudden push, a minute touch, two pairs of corneas locked, from two cultures, thousand miles apart, thousand legends and barbed wires away, amidst fallen towers, water boarding, covered hair, and cities in ashes, there was still recognition after all, because that was only fifty years old human history, or maybe thousands still, the tale of the beginning long forgotten in words, is present in our lungs and often escape, in a smile, and creeping blush and averted eyes, trespassing the warnings of the forefathers, breaking the taboo of the law makers and a kidnapping takes place, of the memorable kind, for memories are often lost or never lived but hardly ever forgotten at will.

