

POETRY

KAISER HAQ

Inheritance

“... they shall inherit the earth.”

Across the street from the Pan Pacific Hotel Sonargaon, named after an ancient capital, now a pile of moldering bricks, the site of a Mogul caravanserai is the city's largest grocery market,

100% bio-degradable, though the smell doesn't quite reach the crossroads where we spend a sizeable fraction of our days trying to ignore beggars of all ages and juvenile hustlers,

pretending to watch a stainless steel fountain that looks like something from a chemical works and sprinkles water

only on national festivals,

as we wait for the traffic light to turn green, and when it does, for the traffic policeman's restraining arm to come down as he toots his whistle like a soccer referee signaling Goal! The jouissance of getting through is as good as an orgasm.

Past midnight – traffic cops all abed – lights shine and change pointlessly. Trucks laden with produce to three times their capacity grunt and grumble, turning gingerly toward the market.

In those seconds as the driver's eyes are seduced by light caught in the fountain's silently writhing steel pipes street brats materialize like apparitions; one lands on a truck like a basketball dunked by an invisible hand; to raised waiting hands he passes quickly dislodged cauliflowers, cabbages,

gourds, dried fish, bags of potatoes, rice, lentils, sugar, salt, and slithers down like a cat to vanish with his friends like exhaust from a beat-up old truck.

Santahar

(For Azfar Hussain)

No, I've never been to Santa Fe.

And I haven't been to Santahar either.

Two hallowed syllables in common, and a gently curved line twelve thousand miles long to link and set them apart.

Santa Fe conjures up Wild West reveries on muggy monsoon afternoons, ghost towns, rattlesnakes, rustlers, barroom brawls, gunfights at sundown, raiders on horseback ambushing a train,

the sheriff's glittering tin star, all in Cinemascope and Technicolor.

And Santahar? Not a name to conjure with. Perhaps my fascination is just a private vice.

All I know is that Santahar, a small-town around a railway junction, its braided steel forged in the furnace of the Raj, and stained with the blood of history, is just another place where everyday life goes on, people get off and get on and go off in another direction.

Santahar, I sigh, yielding to the magic of “ah”, the primal vowel, repeated three times between delicately poised consonants, why, it's only fifty miles, and I'll need no visa to visit. I must go there one of these days,

I say to myself, and lazily Google it on Youtube

and find an amateur video: trees, rough roads, jerry-built offices, schools, homes, hospital, ponds, railway station, bazaar, crowds in lungis, just what one would expect, with a sentimental tune playing and an abrupt end with the scrawled legend:

“We love it, miss it, & wanna die in it...”

Unawares, a catch in my throat.

Now I know what Santahar means: it's any place you want to go back to so you can die in peace.

Kaiser Haq has received the Sherwin W. Howard poetry award for 2017 from the journal `Weber - the Contemporary West` for the poems reprinted here. He is professor of English at the University of Dhaka.

MUSINGS

Debendranath Tagore – A Bicentennial Tribute (1817-2017)

KUMKUM BHATTACHARYA

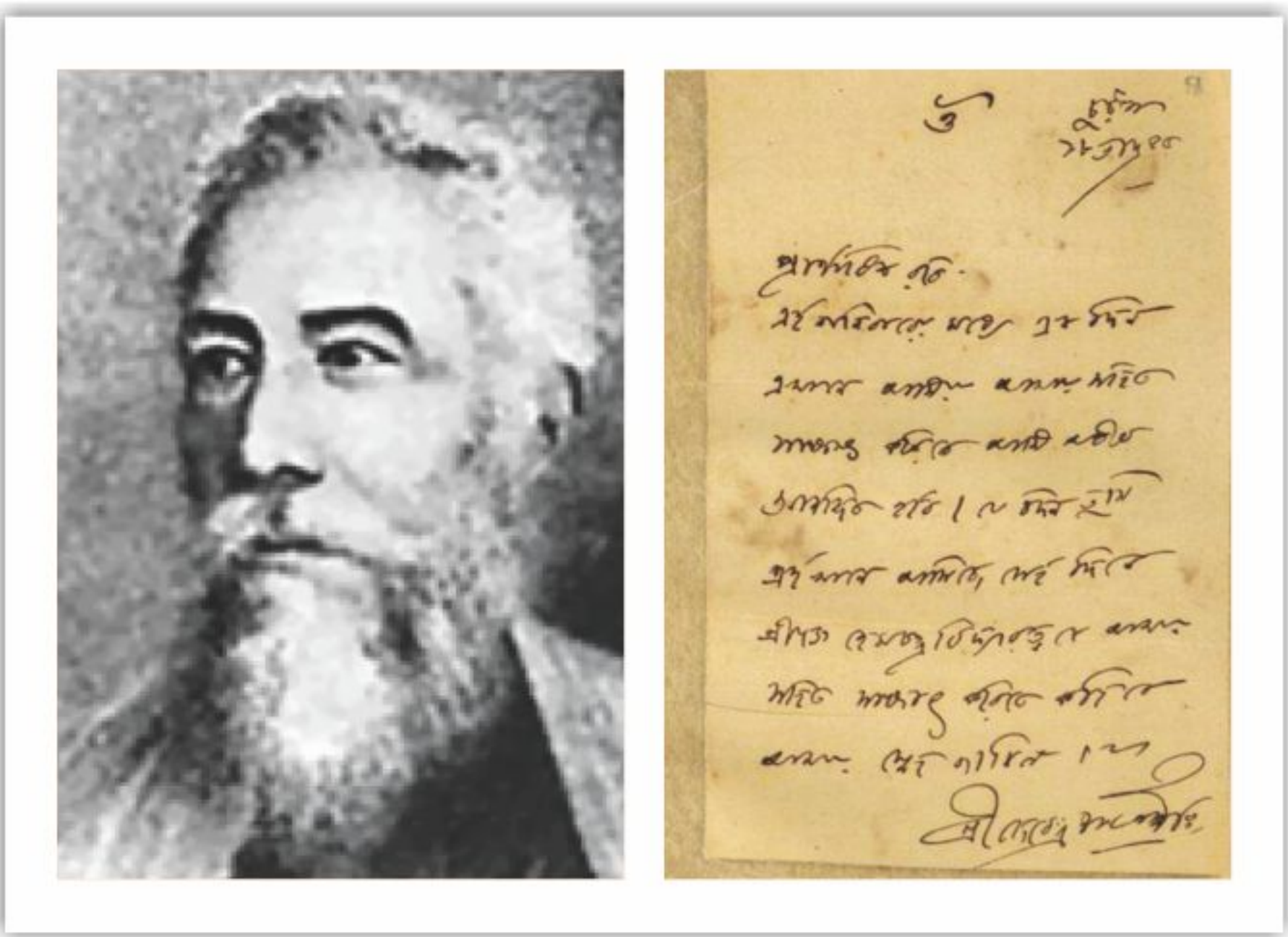
This year is the bicentennial of Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), the eldest son of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, who was also known as Maharshi, or the 'great sage'. It was during Dwarkanath's lifetime that the Tagore family's fortune grew to almost unbelievable proportions, albeit to be quite completely lost with his death. It took much privation, sacrifice and effort on the part of Debendranath to clear the debts left behind by the Prince. However, wealth and fortune were really incidental to the lives of the Tagores; their uses tell us much more about them, and fill us with reverence and awe. The members of the Tagore family seemed to have been endowed with the ability to not only engage in public good but also to strike out in new directions in their lives, thereby impacting on the sensibilities of prevalent social norms. Clues to this tendency can be discerned in Rabindranath Tagore's own words, 'We seemed to enjoy the freedom of the outcaste. We had to build our own world with our own thoughts and energy of mind...' (Cited in Krishna Kripalani's biography of Tagore, 2008). These words find their echo in Satyendranath Tagore's (Debendranth's third son) introduction to the autobiography of the Maharshi (1916, London) where he is trying to explain the distinctive path chosen by his father in his stewardship of the Brahmo Samaj, '...Reason and Conscience were to be the supreme authority and the teachings of the scriptures were to be accepted only in so far as they harmonized with the light within us.'

The Tagores dreamt dreams, their imaginations were heightened, and their sensibilities directed more at the higher realms of philosophical sublimation than at everyday existence. Many conjoined forces, religious, social, cultural, political and historical were sieved through their dreams, philosophical ideas and attitudes; the ultimate results were the creation of new paths for both the individual and for the Samaj. Theirs was not the spirit to balk at the effort needed and the strains endured in materializing their dreams.

Debendranath, 'both saint and sage, was truly the heir and successor to Rammohun Roy' (Krishna Kripalani). Early in his life he realized the futility of material wealth unless it is used for public good. He also had an immensely powerful religious experience that turned him away from the practices of the Hindu religion; he felt strongly that it needed the robustness of the ancient texts and that the time-worn tenets of the Hindu faith had to be re-defined; he felt too that they had been brought to public notice thus in the works of Rammohun Roy in order to transform and revive a moribund society bereft of all pride, and wallowing in superstition. His personal experience of this realization was fraught with internal conflicts but in his actions he showed a mind and hand steady in the pursuit of the understanding of the Upanishads.

It is often asked if the future learns from the past or if history is smug in its 'I told you so', and rests its argument on the premise that human beings are prone

to repeat themselves. The accounts of Debendranth's battles in the firmament of his ideas (chronicled painstakingly by Ajit Kumar Chakraborty (1916 Allahabad), Sri Debendranath Thakur) were no different from the irrationality of blindness and conservatism that is seen and experienced today, even at the distance of two centuries. The truth that stands out is that every school of thought and philosophy spawns the conservative and fundamental idea that bypassing all reason seems to possess a telling power



that can hound anyone who is seen as the betrayer from even the same fold.

The history of the Brahmo Samaj and the Brahmo Dharma, torchbearers of the 'modern Indian ethos', is intimately linked to Debendranath's efforts. He believed that the idea of one Supreme Being encompassing nature and the cosmos could be a means for collective stimulation of creativity and ananda, two necessary ingredients of self-determination and self-assurance in confronting the stifling and waning situation created by blind superstitious faith that the Hindu religion had been reduced to. It was only natural that this modern day seeker of truth and the meaning of life would find a spot which embodied his deep realization of moner ananda, atmar shanti, praner aram in Santiniketan and transform in the process a desert into an oasis of spirituality, creativity and intellect. In the process he was able to create not just a space for like-minded Brahmo members but also a place where common people of the surrounding areas could also have access. The Pous Mela trust deed enjoins the display and performance of folk art, artisanship and culture beyond the bindings of creed and caste. Even to this day, a portion of the mela is a showcase for these aspirations.

Debendranath was a man of superior intellect; he was also a voracious reader to the end of his days; he had keen interest in assiduously pursuing the study of various languages. He knew English, Persian, Sanskrit, Gurmukhi and took up French when he was fairly old. His favourite poet-philosopher was Hafeez,

whose works gave him solace and inspiration. He had read Kant, Fichte, Francis Newman, Tennyson, Amiel, and the Bible, along with the leading Bengali thinkers. At the age of 18 he wrote a book on Sanskrit grammar and prolifically contributed to the issues of the Tattvabodhini Patrika. He transcreated the Upanishadic verses and devoted his time and energy to writing the philosophical arguments of Brahmoism. His attention to the education of the children of his household was unabated

to the last; he always had about him volumes on varied subjects by which he could transfer knowledge to the children – volumes on geography, geology, biology, anthropology, astronomy, history. He was deeply attracted to science. He would read and explain the complex ideas from these volumes to the children around him.

Reading the accounts of Maharshi's travels in the various parts of the country especially his travels and treks in the Himalayas, provides one with a glimpse of his strength, endurance, tenacity and skill. His ability to embrace the simplest and most basic living conditions and in making the local people his own was legendary. Debendranath was always attracted to nature's beauty in his travels – the mountains, the seas and the rivers were his preferred places which he used as retreats from the material world. However, he did not neglect the responsibilities of his large family of which he was the respected and revered paterfamilias.

Of all his 14 children, Debendranath was closest to Rabindranath; the poet possessed many of the ideals of his father. Rabindranath time and again acknowledged his father's influence in his life and work and a large part of his public engagement was taking his father's work forward, thereby shaping and strengthening his ideas of modernity. Debendranath was a product of the Bengal renaissance ushered by Rammohun Roy and in Rabindranath that renaissance was actualized fully.

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Homing into Darkness

FAYEZA HASANAT

As I see it, Zia Haider Rahman debut novel *In the Light of What We Know* (2014) turns on a high voltage light bulb of knowledge to eliminate the darkness of a diasporic heart, but ends up reaching a destination preordained by the inevitable darkness of religion. The unnamed narrator unfolds the story of his friend Zafar, a Bangladeshi-British banker-cum- mathematician- cum-lawyer- cum eclectic thinker, who trots around the globe chasing his 'homing desire.' A citizen of the world in all possible ways, Zafar has Bangladesh, London, Boston, New York, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in his roster of home. A child of rape during the liberation war, he has no familial attachments with the homeland (where his unmarried mother was raped and impregnated by a Pakistani soldier during the war, who then gave birth to him, and later handed him over to be raised by an uncle), or with the adopted home in London. If only he could call any of these places his home, his self-seeking journey might have come to a hopeful end. Exiled and homeless since birth, Zafar turns his life into a mission for truth or knowledge, home or hope.

A Bangladeshi by birth, who becomes British, and then lives in the US and later spends time in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Zafar belongs to a category that Robin Cohen calls “a diaspora of a diaspora.” Cultural identity, Robin Cohen explains in *Global Diaspora*, is constructed through a blend of memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Zafar cannot go home because he does not have a home to return to, and because he does not have one, he invests a lot of himself into constructing an identity that is a blend of knowledge, memory, and fantasy. In his pursuit, Emily Hampton-Wyvern becomes an allurements, an interpolation of a home; and in order to actualize his homing fantasy, he inadvertently engages with her in a game of “Empire and the Ego” (222). Emily and Zafar are at a loss [or lost] and spend a lifetime in pursuit of meaning that always seems to be attainable only when they live at a transit point—in a nation-state that belongs to none of them. They are displaced but they have no homeward journey to complete. They are fixed in their state of displaced nothingness, and despite the fact that one of them may have functioned as a catalyst (Emily) while the other becomes an intermediary (Zafar), they both fail to resolve the issue of their isolation from society, from culture, or from each other.

Knowledge is a burden. The unnamed narrator and his friend Zafar display visible signs of exhaustion for carrying that over-loaded burden all their lives. The narrator's mundane marriage and his apparent betrayal of friendship stamp the label of failure on his overtly ambitious and elitist life. Zafar, on the other hand, fails to comply with the overwhelming burden of his cognitive load and ends up in a psychiatric facility. However, the whole extravagant pursuit of knowledge seems meaningless at one point when Zafar's knowledge of metaphysics, mathematics, science, literature, philosophy, and history are

all reduced to one simple question: “Do you know the Shahadah?” (311). Zafar is asked that question by one Dr. Reza Mehrani, at a private gathering in Colonel Sikandar's residence. After Zafar recited the correct English version of the Shahadah, Dr. Mehrani acknowledged him by saying, “You are one of us because you are a Muslim and you are from here” (322). Even though Zafar protested the statement by saying that he was a Bangladeshi, his protest was merged into a silence after another guest by the name of General Khan dubbed Bangladesh as 'a wound of betrayal of East Pakistan' (322).

With the proclamation of the Shahadah, Zafar's religious identity superseded his national one and he became a liaison for the Muslims who were working together for the greater good of the Muslim brotherhood of Afghanistan and its surrounding region. However, the irony lies in the fact that Zafar never believed that Islam could hold answers to all his questions. In an earlier conversation with the narrator, Zafar stated, “I believed that Islam's response to the pursuit of meaning was not to provide answers but to drill and drum men into forsaking meanings for ritual and habit” (167). But in the end, it is the ritual of knowing his Shahadah that rewarded him by making him a member of an imagined community of brotherhood, disregarding all his past identities. Because he was fortunate to be a part of the real “good” Muslim community, and because he earned the trust and protection of Colonel Sikandar, he

walked unharmed through the fragile door that separates the jihadists from the Muslim allies of the Western world.

In a conversation with Zafar about his visit to Bangladesh, Zafar's fiancé interprets his visit to Bangladesh as a “romantic journey home,” and makes a typical orientalist comment, “I'm curious to know what it's like to go back home” (375). Emily threatens Zafar's volatile identity and brings him face to face with his horror of living a homeless, rootless life - as a

British, Bangladeshi, Muslim man - serving successfully as a diasporic “Native Informant” because of his credibility as a Bangladeshi and a Muslim.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has provoked many a writer from across the globe to open a diverse channel of discourse on postcolonial politics. Take, for example, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), which explores the diasporic dilemma in the context of Conradian-Fanonian-Freudian-Saidian psycho-sexual discourse, and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), which plunges into the dark histories of exile and holocaust. And in Zia Haider Rahman's novel, Conrad works as a signifier of the irredeemable gap between the protagonist's oriental reality and his fiancé's occidental fantasy. But isn't Zafar Rahman's protagonist an oriental Kurtz of the post- 9/11 era, whose epiphany of ‘the horror’ is analogous to his pursuit of the knowledge of darkness?

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