



# Between the Covers of Books

HISHAM M NAZER

"I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on  
In the world between the covers of books,  
Such sandstorms and ice blasts of words...  
Such staggering peace, such enormous laughter,  
Such and so many blinding bright lights...  
Splashing all over the pages  
In a million bits and pieces  
All of which were words, words, words,  
And each of which were alive forever  
In its own delight and glory and oddity and light."  
~ Dylan Thomas

I  
Some may say poetry does not bring peace; it does not do anything "substantial". Well, if some people think that peace is a piece of something that they can somehow discover somewhere as a lapis philosophorum and then insert it in the heart of the grand mechanism of life that showcases myriad nooks and nuances of incomprehensible kinds, then I am sorry to inform them that they might have serious delusional dreams that make them see visions of a fantastic world – one with incorruptible political and civil harmony – which, only to leave some room for doubt, may never actually come true. Peace in no way is like the saviourex machina; it does not originate somewhere in the "external" and then have a centripetal movement; rather, it blooms out of the centre, and the centre, no matter what post-structuralists say in their unique cerebral capacity, is, and has always been, human individuals. Peace therefore is unquestionably anthropocentric. It cannot be systematically disseminated, nor can it be systematized, nor supervised by one particular institution. Therefore, the reality is always peace ex nihilo, where the "nothing" denotes "indefinite possibility", which, definitely, one particular institutional projector cannot contain within its limited jurisdiction.

A debatable opinion this may be, but in reality, peace lies in small, often intimate, moments; it lies in everything that is poetic (not poetry necessarily) or which rhymes with what our existence covets in its multifarious whims. Reading in between lives, can we truly interpret the complex codes and chaos of constantly complicating realities that keep peace at bay? So, what I am trying to say is that, there is nothing called peace but only "peaceful moments" that may inflate its essence into larger realities when too many people are not necessarily "poets" but have considered the "poetic sensibility" necessary. Poetry intoxicates the mind with potions of "truth" and "beauty" and it is only when the mind is thus administered with these powerful potions, one can develop microscopic perspectives and see what is not readily visible to open eyes; it is only then can one see beyond the obvious, read between the shades, discern colours, and ultimately appreciate the little things that unwrap the gifts of

life. Allow me a moment to hypothesize: peace is invisible to eyes that are not poetic, since such eyes cannot appreciate the little things. In contrast, the mystical temperament believes that God lies in the details, in the grain of beings. It is not difficult to comprehend the truth that understanding the world may bring peace, and it is poetry, much intricately than anything else, that helps us to understand the world. This particular psycho-intellectual disposition is what fashions our characters, whose effects on our surroundings are indubitable. Although denounced by rationalists, this sensuousness of the world, discerned by the worldliness of our intellect, entices our senses and thus takes us closer to the bits where we may encounter, in a magnified state, the magnificent Leibnizian monads – the ensemble that renders "meaning" and "beauty" to the nature of reality as we perceive it in our limited understanding.



PHOTO: AUTHOR

II  
Beauty has two forms- the obvious and the oblique. The first kind can be found in beautiful things and therefore can be encountered by anyone who happens to pass them by; the oblique ones, on the other hand, are what we need to extract from the blandly mundane. It requires a little perceptiveness and a little power of observation to find oblique beauty (which, let me remind you, intoxicates the mind) that remains camouflaged around us. But once it starts to communicate, and its inapprehensible language starts to make sense to an individual, the spirit rejoices for this peculiar gift, which, the spirit fancies, has only been bestowed on it. This fancy, this priceless passion of attainment conceived in a moment, makes the mind alive with peaceful feelings. For example, on a winter evening, when you hold the hand of your beloved inside the pocket of your jacket and feel the warmth that elevates your heart to heights even birds cannot reach, there is peace. After a hot

summer day when the thunderbolts get busy displaying the art of kintsukuroi on a broken sky and the night plays music with invisible strings on the taro leaves, there is peace. One cannot deny that there is a particular peace in petrichor! There is an aching peace in nostalgia too, in reminiscing about the good old days, or in the moment when "painful pleasure" in childhood "turns to pleasing pain" in age. When you see a small child trying to catch a butterfly with his fingers smaller than the bug, or when a butterfly circles your leg for no reason, there is peace. There is peace even when your words put smiles on the faces of your students, and when their smiles make you smile inside without anyone noticing.

Now what is poetry other than the exhibition of oblique beauty (thus itself becoming beautiful)? And what is poetry other than a fine display of what perceptive individuals have discerned from the realities with the power of their unique observation? Poetry, to perhaps put it too simply, is the tool through which we can live these moments in our mind without living them actually. And poets are those humans who do their bits to make the mundane magnificent! So if we can truly achieve the poetic feelings within us, each of us will be instrumental to the achievement of a serene environment, which, let me tell you, will never be permanent. And that is the beauty of it, because imperfection is the spice to the desire of our becoming, and when there is no desire, there is no life!

Now surely one cannot expect to have an ocean out of nowhere without the colossal assembly of tiny water drops. If poetic feelings are a must to achieve that state of mental peace that affects our life and in turn bigger realities, how can one deny the contributions of people who transform poetic feelings into actual poetry, into accessible mini-worlds where one can meet, in person, life in its crude form? Poetry allows us a vantage point, to see what we merely look at and never understand. Poetic sensibility, or even poetry, presents us with personal moments of peace, because "political peace" is an oxymoron, an utter impossibility. We cannot not know that the influence of civil and political life on each other is reciprocal. But what we must not forget is that the political persons have always their personal convictions at their side that, at the end of the day, make them who they are, and after all, lead them towards adopting policies that affect everyday lives and civil society. World peace therefore depends on the individuals who populate this world with sensitivity. It depends on those of us who can do their bit with poetry to ignite minds. And once the mind is ignited, there is no darkness that can colonize forever this celestial garden that came into being from the centre of the solar system – the source that gives "beauty" its visibility.

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# Poetry

AL MAHMUD

*Translated by Fakrul Alam as a tribute to the poet on his birthday (July 11)*



Poetry springs from childhood memories. It's mother's pale face Surfacing. It's a yellow bird perched on a neem branch; Siblings warming themselves around fires stoked by dry leaves All night long; father coming home, his bicycle bells ringing And mother's name, "Rabeya, Rabeya", being called till A rain-water soaked southern door opened. Poetry springs from knee-deep rivers splashed across When homeward bound; fog-filled paths; morning prayer calls; Pithas puffing up when fried, redolent of sesame seed scents; Fish scale smells; a net flung over the courtyard; Grandfather's grave covered in bamboo leaves and grass.

Poetry springs from memories—a sickly boy growing up in 1946; Meetings attended during school hours; processions; Flags flying everywhere; flames fanned by riots; a distraught older brother Narrating how he had to return home completely bankrupt. Poetry is a sandbank bird, gathered duck eggs, fragrant grass A wife looking glum-faced because her calf vanished when its rope tore; It's a carefully written letter in a blue envelope secretly delivered; Poetry is the school girl Ayesha Akhter, her hair all unfurled!

*Fakrul Alam has just retired from Dhaka University and is currently working as the Consulting Editor of The Daily Star.*

# Benimadhob

JOY GOSWAMI

TRANSLATED BY SYED MAQSUD JAMIL



Benimadhob! My darling Benimadhob!  
I long to go to your house.  
I ache to know if you still think of me.  
Benimadhob, under the tomal tree  
You would play so charmingly!  
I was a student at Maloti school  
Doing sums at my desk  
In a small classroom

While the school mistress sat with her husband outside.  
I was in a saree, a student of class nine,  
And had got so carried away  
When I talked to you at Sulekha's place.

Benimadhob! You were good at studies  
And from the city; dark-skinned that I was  
I panicked and ran home;  
Benimadhob! I was from a humble family  
And had a father working at a shop  
But bees would still buzz in gardens and flowers bloom!  
Unmindful me would err in math on evenings.  
I was in class nine and only sixteen.  
How fondly I remember the date  
You and I had by the side of the bridge!

Benimadhob! My Benimadhob! Those days are long gone  
But do you still recall the times we had together?  
Have you told your beloved about us?  
I only saw her once at your side  
Under the glowing light: such a special sight!  
I have to admit, the two of you made a perfect pair  
I was awestruck and left with burning eyes  
But on returning home, I said to myself  
May they be very happy!

Now as I go to sleep at night in a ground floor room  
Moonlight streams into the mattress on the floor,  
The sister who would sleep next to me is gone  
Lost in a circuitous trail of vice; who knows who she is with?  
I cope with life for now but what of tomorrow? Saturn's ascendant  
And I a sewing mistress of our neighborhood  
Yet a fire is raging; Benimadhob, where could it be raging?  
And what if I, too, become a fallen woman now?

*Syed Maqsud Jamil is an occasional contributor to this page.*

# Writing April

ANDREW EAGLE

We knew each other only through our articles. I liked Tulip Chowdhury's dreamy, messy, stream of consciousness essays. She didn't trouble herself much with writing convention. Whatever captivated, be it an autumn leaf or a belief in the beyond, thoughts tumbled as a waterfall, unrefined, to ripple across the page. To my mind there is little 'western' in her approach.

A few months before we embarked on writing April she sent a Facebook friend request, randomly, to a fellow author. We chatted online for the first time and I discovered that she grew up in Sylhet and lived in the United States.

We were opposites: a Bangladeshi who admired the orderliness of the west and an Australian who, having grown up with that, favoured the unpredictability of a life juggled by chaotic Dhaka's hands. People know how to live, she might say of westerners. People are still people here, I would say.

It occurred to me that a short article with two perspectives from ends of the earth might be interesting. Tulip agreed. On further consideration we realized it might be difficult to do justice to two voices in a short piece. I was in Teknaf then, staying with Dada and Didi who I'd met at the Buddhist temple, as April 2015 approached. "How about we write a kind of shared diary for a month," I proposed, "writing on alternate days, just to see what might happen?"

It meant our project commenced on April Fools' Day, which could seem inauspicious. But so it was. For the next thirty days e-mail drafts travelled to and fro. It was busy.

I hoped that through April it might be possible to document something of the complexity of modern living, the layers of thoughts that we can be grappling with in a single moment: searching for socks while considering the day's plans while wondering if one's life is on track while questioning what life is

really about, anyway. Add a few memories, too. The modern mind is preoccupied.

Particularly with technology and enhanced communication capacity, the very speed at which life is lived has increased. If we embarked on a similar project a century earlier through letters, I might've thought vaguely about what Tulip was up to in Massachusetts but I wouldn't have known to think about how many crocus flowers had blossomed in her garden. Our distant collaboration coincidentally demonstrated a layered modern existence too.

But the process of writing a co-authored book via e-mail and Facebook was unique in other respects. Foremost was the availability of that prized cuisine authors feast upon: feedback. Writing is often solitary. April had daily response to the latest draft. Writing April was refreshingly social.

Then there were our general daily Facebook chats which ranged from book-thoughts to any topic at all. There were interesting passages appearing in the chat box that it seemed a shame for readers to miss out on. Thus the idea arrived to include Facebook chat sections between chapters. It fit nicely because it added yet another layer of modernity to the "April" experience. It was almost a way of bringing the reader into the book-writing experience.

There were other surprises. From the outset I wished to write a book that amid cross-cultural themes remained especially 'Bangladeshi,' but I hadn't thought what it might mean. The answer was staring at us, through the draft appearing on the laptop screen. Being co-authored, April was a kind of conversation. It was 'adda' of a sort, and what could be more Bangladeshi than that? This realization encouraged a more relaxed and informal tone, to hopefully allude to that adda spirit.

During the month there was little time to consider who might read

April. Would our lives and thoughts through a single month hold any interest to anybody? A much larger fear was that the goal of charting the complexities of daily life wouldn't be understood.

I guess I'm a strange author since I prefer narratives that aren't actually about anything unusual. I don't like reading of murders or daring rescues. I've even been accused of being able to write an article of some interest about a grain of rice. Not that I've tried. Perhaps it's an idea for later. But nonfiction April tied in nicely with my interest in finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. I just wasn't sure anybody else would like



it.

Needless to say April is not truly a stream of consciousness work. Several more months were devoted to fine-tuning, rearranging and some redrafting. During this phase Tulip was very patient with my perfectionist tendencies. At the same time I thought to approach a publisher since we'd already put a lot of time into our project, a work that for us had taken on a life of its own. It was Tulip who started to refer to April as the third member of our group.

So, about midway through the

self-editing I pitched the idea to Bengal Lights. I knew they sought avant-garde works from Bangladesh, in English, and that they liked the rarer nonfiction category. It was later I heard another feature had appealed: much of April is about outside-Dhaka, while perhaps the majority of contemporary writing in English in Bangladesh centers on the capital. That leaves the rest of the country particularly ripe for literature expedition.

Bengal Lights asked for a proposal. Despite their progressive tastes, I was worried our "April" might scare them. April isn't easy to classify. It's a memoir but memoirs aren't usually about a single month. It's a diary written by two people. It has Facebook in it. And being a work of nonfiction, it doesn't rise to a climax before tailing off into conclusion.

Indeed I specifically wanted it to end a little abruptly since April is an arbitrary timeframe that collides surely enough with the first of May. Our layers of thoughts and experiences competing for attention don't neatly end.

Fortunately, Bengal Lights appreciated April's unique qualities. By November we were published. In the interim Narottama Dobey had designed a fantastic cover featuring a combination of four tea and coffee cups. The image mirrors so well the strands of daily life and narrative flavours within; as well as, of course, Bangladeshi adda.

By November there was just one thing that hadn't happened. Tulip and I still hadn't met. She was due in Dhaka the following March and I used to imagine greeting her with, "Ah yes, you must be Tulip. I believe we might have published a book together?"

*Andrew Eagle, who writes for The Daily Star, and Tulip Chowdhury co-authored the nonfiction book April which was published by Bengal Lights Books in 2015. Here Andrew reflects on the book writing experience.*