



MUSINGS

This article was a special request from the Daily Star Literature team to the author to commemorate Shakespeare's birthday in late April.

My Life with Shakespeare

FAYEZA HASANAT



When you are asked to write a memoir or something about Shakespeare, you should know that you have reached your expiration date. For me, a memoir is a synonym for epiphany, the final effort to rewind and re-watch a life 'full of sound and fury,' which may have 'signified nothing' in the end. And for an English professor, Shakespeare is an epiphany of being and nothingness; there was nothing before Shakespeare, and without Shakespeare, there is nothing. As I sit on the other side of the seas (both literal and metaphorical), musing on Shakespeare, I realize it's happening sooner than I expected. By urging me to write a piece on Shakespeare, the clever editor has in fact asked me to write a memoir: my life with Shakespeare.

In a colonized world, Shakespeare always enters as an undersized English man—abridged, simplified, and at times rewritten in simple English, and harmless. The only harmful impact the abridged Shakespeare might have had in my teen mind was the overpowering sweet smell of the rose: we can call a rose by any other name, but that sweet smell? That fragrance itself is what a rose should smell like. I mean, if we were to name that sweet smell, we could call it a rose, or a not-rose. Bottom line, my first encounter with a fat, abridged Shakespeare was sweet. But my Shakespeare lost his charm when I met him in a classroom of Dhaka University's English Department. This Shakespeare was moodier than the mad-eye Moody, more deceptive than the pensive Snape, and way more complicated than the almost mighty Dumbledore. Sadly, *Harry Potter* was yet to be written and I had no magical wand. So I sat powerless and watched Prospero's tyranny. And no, I am not talking about the imaginary character named Prospero, who colonized an island and mishandled its occupants. I am talking about the Prospero who ruled that class like a tempestuous tormentor. He was known to his students as SMI, and we never had the courage to add an 'l' and an 'e' with those initials - not even for fun's sake. His was not a simple infectious smile. It was a sneer, a roar, a boisterous wind that destroyed my fragile passivity and opened a brave new world before me. And the hero in my brave new world was not Ferdinand. It was Caliban who haunted me with his sublime, charmed me with his poetic imagination, and provoked me to question boundaries. I was yet to read Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, or Edward Said, but my ignorance did not stop me from understanding this creature who dreamt of clouds. Syed Manzoorul Islam, my classroom Prospero, used his vicious wand to direct me toward the world of mistreated merchants and misguided kings. Tempests rose in my heart when I saw Shylock's diminished identity or when I heard the mad king Lear, screaming in desperation, "kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill." I heard a cry for annihilation of all senses and all feelings.

Miranda was a sweet girl, Cordelia was naïve, and Portia was a pawn in that patriarchal world. Shakespeare was a typical 'man-writer' and I was being 'man-taught.'

I am using the term 'man-taught' with utmost honesty here. The only female teacher who ever taught us something Shakespearean was Professor Benazir Doordana. She introduced me to the vivacious Rosalind and the tenacious Isabella. After I met Rosalind, I forgave Shakespeare for creating Miranda. And after meeting Isabella, I learned to admire this man who extended the horizon of my Caliban clouds and provoked me to dream. And in my dreams, I saw the clouds open and show riches that were ready to drop upon me, and such dreams were so intense and so powerful that "when I waked, I cried to dream again."

I cried, feeling the miseries of a blind Othello, and the perplexities of a hesitant Hamlet. And my empathy was possible because of Khandakar Ashraf Hossain's passion. He also dealt with Macbeth, and I say 'dealt' because he spent more time in explaining the three witches, a little time on Lady Macbeth, and zero time on the hero. Now that I am reminiscing, I can understand his witch-obsession. Being a poet, my professor had the ability to see the sublime in the fierce foresight of those three women. And knowing what I know now, I admire Shakespeare—not for creating all those strong and weak heroes, but because of his women characters: Miranda, Portia, Cordelia, Ophelia, Rosalind, Cleopatra, Isabella, Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, and the Dark Lady of the sonnet world.

But the three men who ousted all the good Shakespearean heroes for me were: Caliban, Shylock, and Iago. Khandakar Ashraf Hossain always recited the last soliloquy of Othello – "put out the light, and then put out the light..." in an attempt to put out the light of

our doubt regarding Othello's passion and Desdemona's devotion. And yet, I am not ashamed to say that it was Iago who intrigued me the most. My professors tried their best to persuade me into believing that Iago's was a 'motiveless malignity,' but I stayed unconvinced and suffered its consequences. Professor Shamsud Doha gave me an F in a tutorial essay for not agreeing with that motiveless malignity argument. He then asked me to rewrite the essay, if I wanted to keep my reputation (as a nerd) intact. Needless to say, I lacked Iago's manipulating confidence.

My "Shakespeare—moir" will be incomplete if I do not mention Professor Imtiaz Hasan Habib, or IHH as we called him. We were mortified of him. Walking to his class was a nightmare and surviving the whole class time was a Kurtzian horror—especially if for the nerd who sat on the first bench. The first day he walked in, he wrote "Richard of Bordeaux" on the board. Then he turned around and asked in a stern voice, "can someone read for me what I've just written?"

"Bordox," said a shaky voice from somewhere in the back of the classroom.

"Spell it," said the professor.

"B, o, r, d, e, a, u, x, bordox," stammered the petrified young man.

"Excellent. You ate up a bunch of vowels and decided to keep the x," said the tormentor. "Now leave my class."

Oh, dear reader, do you remember Tennyson? "There is not to reason why, there is but to do or die." That was the kind of terror we felt as we watched a fellow classmate run away in fear that day.

Then he looked at my nerdy face and said, "how about you?"

How about me? Oh my goodness! There was nothing important about me! I was just a book-loving weirdo who had read enough Sidney Sheldon and Jeffrey Archer to know when to swerve my vowels and when to swallow my 'x.' I, therefore, survived.

And then the most miraculous thing happened. The angry man opened his Bitten-old Shakespeare and started reading, like one hell of a king, ordering John of Gaunt to bring before him Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray. The King wanted to hear:

"the accuser and the accused freely speak.

High-stomach'd are they both, and full of ire, In rage deaf as the sea, hasty as fire.

As he kept reading and pausing occasionally—to explain relevant historical events—Professor Habib's rage went "deaf as the sea" and my desire to know grew "hasty as fire." That day, in a dingy classroom of Dhaka University's English department, I fell in love with William Shakespeare: the man who wrote such a powerful play about a passionate king who had the courage to admit, "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me."

I have not given up on Shakespeare since then.

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TRAVEL

Ghalib ki Dilli (Part I)

RAANA HAIDER



PHOTO : RAANA HAIDER

I should have been listening to one of the scores of imaginative events on the poetry, life and times of the pre-eminent poet of the Urdu language at the 'Ghalib Ki Galiyan' two day programme organised at the Indian International Centre (IIC) in New Delhi in February 2018. And there I was late for even the last two sessions - 'Ghalib Baithak' (Reminiscing Ghalib) and 'Ajab Waqt' (Poetry reading which included Sudeep Sen) on the last day due to flight delay. This truly called for *sabr* (patience). Resignedly, I took to *kismet*. A quick coffee in the room following checking-in led me early to the auditorium for the grand finale 'Mehfil-e-Ghalib.' I got an excellent seat and resolutely expressed *shukr* (thankfulness).

'Ghalib Ki Dilli' had opened with the movie screening of 'Mirza Ghalib' (1954) starring Bharat Bhushan, Suraiya and Nigar Sultana. Although not shown, Gulzar produced the television film 'Mirza Ghalib' (1988) with the casting of Naseerudin Shah and Neena Gupta. Who would not want to take in *Safar-e-Ghalib* (Bespoke walk revisiting Ghalib at Old Delhi) or *Aakhir iss dard kee dauva kya hai* (A conversation) or *Shahar-e-Aarzo* (The City of Desire) which included William Dalrymple in the panel or *Gham-e-Hasti* (pain of being)?

I thought of grabbing some food. Decided against missing out on what I anticipated would be ample food for thought. Post-recital, I had food for the soul. Radhika Chopra from Jammu and Kashmir and a masterful exponent of Mirza Ghalib's ghazals had the seats-full, stairway occupied and people standing at the back; an audience enthralled in pin-drop silence. My attention was partially focused on the man seated in front of me. His body language movement conveyed in totality his absorption and appreciation. Ustad

Ghulam Sahab on the sarang frequently accompanies the diva Farida Khanum. His strumming of the sarang strings drew out depths of emotions. For a somewhat un-initiated admirer, I felt privileged to be amongst such a *samajdhar* (knowledgeable) crowd. Radhika Chopra's elaborations enhanced her spontaneous interaction with the receptive audience. She mentioned that it was Jagjit Singh who made ghazals popular with the masses. She does come across requests for 'ghajals,' if not filmy songs. A wave of laughter followed this declaration. She spoke of the relevance of Mirza Ghalib's poetry even today. Dr. Radhika Chopra has left no stone unturned. She holds a doctorate in Fine Arts and Music from Delhi University. A standing ovation followed her finale - an exquisite rendition of '*Ab jaane ki zid na karo*' composed by Fayyaz Hashmi. Mesmerized, I floated out into the cool February evening air, filled with music for the soul. An experience soothing for the soul indeed!

A former Indian diplomat and a cultural connoisseur, Pavan Varma delivered the closing remarks. He spoke of her superb diction and delivery of Urdu and her heartfelt interpretation of Ghalib's poetry. He acknowledged her as one of the most outstanding younger exponents of Ghalib's ghazals. Varma is the author of 'Ghalib: the man, the times' (1992). Next morning, I borrowed three books on Ghalib's poetry from the IIC Library. Khushwant Singh, the prolific author in his foreword to *Ghalib: Cullings from the Divan' rendered in English* by T.P. Issar writes: "...All I can say without hesitation is that of all the translations of Ghalib that I have read, I found his (Issar) to be the most readable and by far the best." Ghalib concedes:

"True, though, o heart, is my writing, redoutable

poets hear me again and again and request me to use simpler language. What I say is complicated, what I write is complicated." And to prove the point, how does one get over the following verse? "*My paper is all used up and yet much of Thy praise is left. Verily, to finish praise of Thee is to voyage a shoreless sea!*"

Dipping into the genius of Ghalib, I felt reassured by the translator T.P. Issar. "The English renderings and the footnotes have been done not only for the non-initiated - but eager reader, but also for the reader who knows his Ghalib but may wish, like the author, to 'burnish his rusted recollection.'" I fall into the first category.

A visit to Mirza Ghalib's restored haveli in old Delhi was next on my itinerary. A car drive through a packed road left us immobile. Gingerly boarding a rickshaw, we once again entered Chandni Chowk, the main commercial street designed by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century. He had been inspired by Esfahan in Persia renowned for its architectural and aesthetic attributes. After all, Esfahan was known as '*Nesf-e-Jahan*' (Esfahan is half the world). I looked back through the opening of the rickshaw and saw framed in perfect alignment the principal domes, turrets and balconies of the Lal Kila (Red Fort). Under a moonlit night, there would have been horse-drawn carriages, candle-lit stands and the buzz of commercial activities while people strolled the broad boulevard. It must have provided a pleasing panorama to its founder.

Well into the twenty-first century, the scenario is well - different. Mostly rickshaws negotiate Chandni Chowk. Off-side dark labyrinthine alleyways remain packed with vendors and buyers in a medieval market ambience; where even a

rickshaw passage is challenging. There is the *dhaba-wallah*, the *chai-wallah*, the *paratha-wallah*, the *churi-wallah*, the lace and ribbon seller... (street food seller/tea seller/ fried savoury seller/ the bangle seller...) We had gotten off to taste a famed culinary item, the *paratha* in the Paratha Gali. Traditionally, toasted on a hot skillet; what we consumed was fast-track deep-fried. A search for a cup of brewed tea proved arduous. A lone tea vendor's cart parked in front of a sealed dilapidated building with dark and dingy building blocks surrounding the narrow passage-way ended our search. Better not to know of its provenance.

The vast central expanse of the largest mosque in India was welcome. The Jame Masjid was also built in Shah Jahan's New Delhi capital, the earlier Mughal capital being Agra. It, along with the Red Fort on the opposite side, marks the two main magnificent edifices of today's old Delhi. Back onto the rickshaw for our ultimate destination: Ghalib's Haveli at Mir Qasim Jaan Gali, Ballimaran, Chandni Chowk. The poet spent his last years at this address. He died in 1869. The rickshaw swerved through serpentine-like Choori lane - the glint of sparkling glass bangles - and I so wanted to make a stop. Next came Chawri road, a wide street remarkably lined by shops solely specializing in wedding cards. Some simple, some colourful; mostly mega samples all glitz and gold. This is where the Big Bash Indian Wedding begins. Its provenance includes the first wholesale market of old Delhi, established in 1840. Earlier, it was also known for its brass and copper street level merchandise and upper floor 'Red Light' sexual services.

(To be continued)

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POETRY

RUBAIYAT KHAN

How We Used to Be

You, who are
In denial:
Do you remember how
We used to be?
Our skins were not a sallow gray.
There were no incusive cuts,
No visible scabs
for the naked eye, no
festering sores, no
permanent scars, no
cankers in my heart.

Our conscience,
It was not brittle,
And we did not beg
To turn to ash.

Malleable

I have been peeled
And pinned, spun
And rolled,
Round and round
Like jam rolls for
His evening tea.

Shredded and
Flattened,
Folded and hushed,
Tossed aside.

Neatly
Tucked away,
Ever so
Quietly, cells dividing
In perfect synchrony
Inside his sock drawer.

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