



POETRY

A Poem

by Masud Mahmood

A ferocious heat induced meditation
And the world was blurred in a haze
The streets were torrid cauldrons
On which the pedestrians baked.
Silence was the staple of nightmare
People walked with downcast eyes
They were absorbed into meditation
On the proceedings of their daily lives.
Nobody has seen hell but heard of it
Heard so much that it's a veritable thing.
Mythologies, literature, folklore
We buy the fuel of imagination from.
But we burn the fuel on boiling streets
And we hallucinate hell to burn in it.

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MUSINGS

Rabindranath:
Weaving Miracles and Magic in Melody

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

My first encounter with Rabindranath Tagore was on a cold winter's day in early 1964. He was there as a sketch in pencil, on the mantel-piece of a Bengali home in Quetta. The flowing beard, the penetrating eyes, that sense of gravitas—all of this came alive in that sketch. I asked the host, a colleague of my father's, who the gentleman was in the sketch. A great man, said he. He is Rabindranath Tagore, a poet. Young as I was in my primary school days, I asked no more questions.

That was a long time ago. Between then and now, I have known Rabindranath or think I have known him, fundamentally through his songs. In the dark days of 1971, when monsoon showers added to the gloom of an enemy-occupied Dhaka, it was the poet's *Amar Shonar Bangla* that I heard day after day on Shwadhin Bangla Betar, making sure that no Pakistani soldiers were on the prowl, and that no one who looked suspiciously like a quisling was around. In the midst of that twilight struggle, I knew that Rabindranath was a contraband item in the genocide-driven East Pakistan. Some months later, with Bangladesh having taken birth, I came to know a little more of the poet, came to hear of the courage a few Bengali men and women had demonstrated in observing the centenary of his birth in 1961. The term *Chhayanaut* took on a note of familiarity.

My education in Rabindranath has gone on. There are some ideas that keep growing, keep taking newer shape, keep enriching human experience. When on a spring day in the mid-1970s my neighbor in Wari played *tomaaye*

gaan shonabo on his long-playing record, in Hemanta Mukherjee's voice, I knew I had to learn that song. I did, within weeks. And I have sung that song since then. And I have heard many others. But, then, I ask myself if my understanding of Rabindranath or indeed my ever closer encounters with him would be what they are today had Waheedul Haque not let me in on the wider world of Tagore philosophy. Every rickshaw ride with Waheed Bhai, all the way from the offices of the New Nation and to the university area, was a new lesson in Rabindranath. It was that dark period in life when military autocracy ran wild, in the early 1980s; and Waheed Bhai, one of those intrepid souls behind the 1961 celebrations, invariably sang *ekhono gelo na aandhar / ekhono roilo baadha*. The symbolism was all.

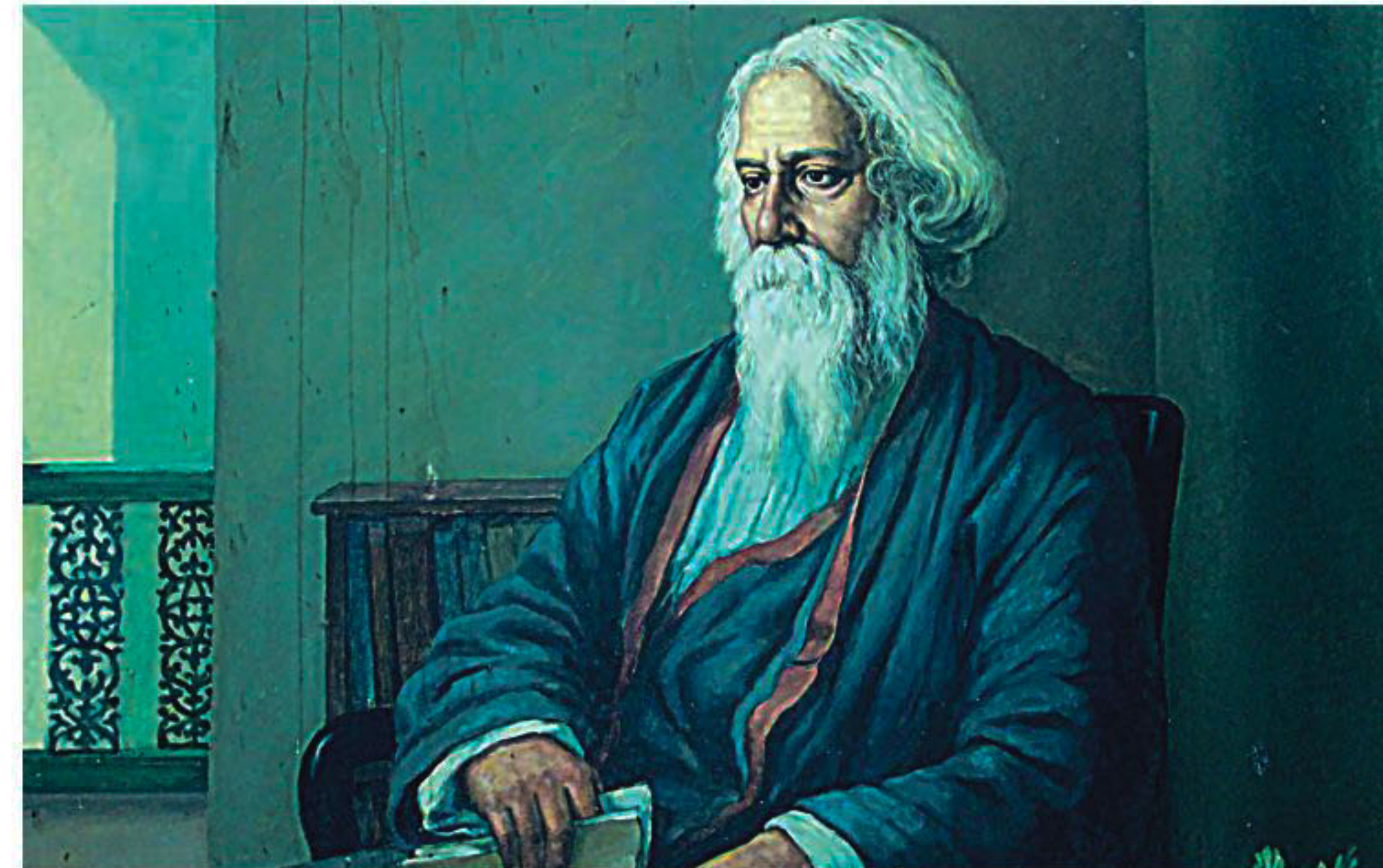
That Rabindranath Tagore remains, and will remain, our strongest hold on history comes through the many layers of thoughts regarding his personality. He was a poet. He composed songs which brought into their melody all the pains and pleasures we associate with living. His fiction was a portrayal of life in all its lucidity of meaning. His paintings were images of Bengal. There was the Renaissance man in him, the likes of whom we have not quite spotted in Bengali life of late. On his travels in China in the 1920s, he deftly deflected every insinuation of his poetry being weighed down by colonial dominance. Yet he knew that politics could not be separated from literature, that poetry could be a potent weapon against political chicanery. It was his pain, every Bengali's agony that rose as a loud cry unto the heavens

when the British colonial power drove a knife through the heart of the land and called it the Partition of Bengal. That was in 1905. Bengal was to be reunited and then segmented once more, in 1947. The cracked heart thus sings on... *o amar desher mati / tomar pore thekai matha*.

It is the deeply religious, a resurgence of faith that I have spotted in Rabindranath. Could any invocation to God, any admission of guilt consequent upon a commission of sin, be higher than the forever moving *amar hiya'r majhe lukiye chhile / dekhte aami paaini tomaaye?* Deep in the nocturnal hours, even as the rain falls in rhythm on the trembling leaves of the pastoral trees, something of the power of Creation wells up in the soul. In *tumi daak diyechho kon shokale / keu ta jaane na* comes an acknowledgement of your limitations, of your inability to identify with the divine.

Rabindranath's modernity, in these post-modern times, sends out spasms of romance into your being. His interaction with Victoria Ocampo in Argentina, his friendship with William Butler Yeats and his conversations with Albert Einstein give off a sure idea of how far he was ahead of most of his countrymen in his approach to life and the philosophies associated with it. His Shantiniketan conversations with Gandhi were that rare moment in history when nations are privy to a presence of the great and the glorious. History often comes in the form of miracles. Rabindranath lived in miraculous times, through weaving miracles and magic in his songs.

Love, that abiding call of the heart and



insistent yearning of the soul, becomes a sanctified song in Rabindranath. Love, besides being a many-splendored thing, is almost always a shattering of the emotions into a thousand and one pieces. That is the point you make as you hear *dekhate parine keno praan / khule go taare*. If that is agony at its most complex, there is the expectant in *gopone dekhechhi tomar / byakul noyone bhaaber khela... in aaji mormoro dhoni keno jagilo re*.

On lonely, silence-drenched treks through my ancient village, I spot the low hanging stars lighting up the heavens in cosmic charm.

A spontaneity of melody rushes forth... *akaash bhora shurjo taara bishwa bhora praan / taahaari majh khaane aami peyechhi mor sthaan*.

The lover's voice pierces the ageing night. She throbs in the sheer excitement of the consummation to be. I go back to Rabindranath, to convey to her the simplest of emotions that can arise in the one who waits:

Dibosh rojoni aami jeno kar / aashaye aashaye thaaki...

Syed Badrul Ahsan writes on literature, politics and foreign affairs.



FICTION

The Meal

TOHON

Nishat prepares *iftari*, a sumptuous light meal that includes lemon sorbet, dates, fruits, nuts, *begooni*, samosa, beans and curd. It is the best part of fasting. But now that she is visiting Bangladesh in preparation for the upcoming Eid ul-Fitr, I manage things on my own at our new home, Dhahran.

Life of a single man in Saudi Arabia is lonesome, particularly during this month of Ramadan. Typically, my day starts with *sehri* followed by the *Fajr* prayer at dawn. At about seven I head for work, walking before the sun becomes burning hot. The temperature is already on a steep rise, soaring to forty-five or fifty degrees Celsius by noon. The office hours are shorter due to Ramadan, but I do my full day's work. There is always plenty to do and it is a good time to get things done when nobody is around – no phone calls, no distractions, except that my stomach grumbles from time to time. When I leave the office around five, the forty-minute walk gives me a good sweat and grills my thirst – yet it is a comfortable journey compared to the day-long grueling work taking place on construction sites.

The *iftari* is at sunset and the main meal comes later in the evening. In Nishat's absence, I forgo *iftari* and break my fast with the main meal – *bhat*, *dal* and some veggies. I do not like to spend too much time cooking after a long, tiring day. Today I make things even simpler – *bhat* and *dal* with some slices of gourd in it. The smell tells me that the *dal* is cooked



well.

As it gets closer to sunset, I get my dinner table ready—a glass and a jug of cold mineral water and the meal. As usual, the last few minutes keep stretching. Finally, I hear the *Maghrib azan*.

I empty the glass in a few gulps and go for a second. I start mixing the *bhat* and *dal*, employing all five fingers—the more you mix, the better it tastes. I lick my fingers, add a bit of salt and keep mixing it, one more round. The first bite in my saliva-filled mouth calms my rumbling stomach and soothes my soul. But the taste stirs up buried emotion and incurs images from my childhood.

We live at Jamal Khan Lane, Ananda Bag, Chittagong, attending the Municipality High School near Biponi Bitan. Like any other day, we brothers return from the school, drop our books, get a bite and run off to the playground. We head back home, sweating, as we hear the *Maghrib azan*. We go for a wash and then get to our study tables. Ma has just finished her prayer and will soon be preparing the evening meal.

The busy lane has gone quiet. The hawkers have disappeared. But the rearest illsome rickshaws tinkling their bells and the last few fakirs knocking on the doors, 'Ma go, chydha bhat. Sharadin na khawa?'

I hear Ma calling, "Baba, Tohon, there is some leftover food in the kitchen." I run to the door without delay. I ask him to take a seat and then run to the kitchen. I first scoop the *bhat* onto a worn-out tin plate and then pour the watery *dal* on it. I pick a lump of ground salt from the *noondani* using my thumb and two fingers and then drop it in one corner of the plate. I get the tin glass and pour in water from the earthen jar.

When I get back, I see the fakir sitting on the floor cross-legged. He has put aside his belongings – a few thinly filled bags. Households generally offer uncooked rice, one of the many sorts: long-grain, short-grain, basmati, sunned rice, parboiled rice and so on. And then there is a variety within a variety, type within a type, and brand within a brand. Obviously, it is not practical to carry a collection bag for each sort.

I serve him the meal. In the dimness of the light, I see a ray of a smile on his worn-out face. He picks up the glass and gets to his feet. I notice he is hunchbacked, taller than me. He looks old, with his grey beard, thin hair and wrinkled face. He is wearing a *lungi* and a *kurta*, too loose for his thin, bony frame. His bare foot, skeleton feet show the marks of the miles he has trodden over the years.

He steps out from the veranda and, with a little water, washes his right palm and then gurgles to give his mouth a good rinse. He returns to his seat while gulping one short

drink. He picks up a bit of salt with the touch of his wet finger and then starts mixing it with the *bhat* and *dal*. He licks his fingers, makes one more touch on the salt and goes mixing it again. He raises his head, looks at me with his cataract eyes and says humbly, "Baba, one green chili, please."

I run to the kitchen again, pick up a few green chilies and get back to him in no time. He puts the chilies alongside the plate, licks his palm and then the thumb and fingers, one by one. He is now ready to eat.

With eyes focused on the plate, he gobbles one mouthful after another, with bites of the chilies making the well-blended *dal-bhat* hotter and heartier. He takes a break every now and then to lick the saliva from time to time. I stand motionless, leaning against the door, and devour with him the everlasting taste of the food of life.

Over the years I have travelled to many lands and enjoyed many meals but never again tasted anything close to that I shared with the fakir that evening. After the day's fast, the first bite not only resurrects that long-lost taste, but also reveals the fakir within me.

Tohon is an emerging short-story writer. He has published in the Star Weekend Magazine and Star Literature & Reviews pages.