

Adieu, Perpetual Migrant!

A Tribute to Rizia Rahman

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The virtuoso with the pen Rizia Rahman has ended her terrestrial sojourn on 16th August, just a few months shy of entering her octogenarian phase. A prolific writer treading most of the domains of creative writing, she has left an indelible personal mark on our literary landscape.

Ms Rahman was born to be a litterateur, starting her creative journey at the age of eight to wind up at (nearly) eighty. She was at her duodecimal year when her first write-up was published. She was gifted and fortunate enough to get her maiden book published when she was still pursuing her ter-

tary level degree at the University of Dhaka.

The journey that was started at her pre-teen period, was well-continued with maestro-like dexterity and finesse to produce more than fifty titles cutting across many genres. Among the major works of this masterful artist are *Rokter Okshor* (Letters of Blood, 1978), *Bong Theke Bangla* (Bangla from Bong, 1987), *Uttar Purush* (The Successors, 1977), *Olikhito Upakhyan* (An Unwritten Story, 1980), *Shilay Shilay Aagun* (Stones in Fire, 1980), *Ghar Bhanga Ghar* (A House-Breaking House, 1984), *Ekal Chirokal* (Now and Eternity, 1984), *Prem Aamar Prem* (Love, My Love, 1985), and *Jhorer Mukhomukhi* (Facing the Storm, 1986).

Rizia Rahman was an iconoclastic novelist – she is among the pioneering writers in our language who treated the lives of the sex workers in minutest details. Her masterpiece *Rokter Okshor* centres around a trinity of major characters with a considerable retinue of other people connected with the oldest profession of the world. The protagonists Jahanara, a seasoned prostitute, Kusum, the pre-teen new kid on the block and last but not the least Yasmin, the rape survivor of 1971 (Officially declared as *Birangana*) were free members of this society before being forced to settle in Golapipatti, the Red Light District of Dhaka. It is very surprising to know that the writer herself could not manage to visit any brothel personally; she collected information about brothels, their inmates and other stakeholders from a journalist and yet how incredibly she has depicted the excruciating pangs and pains of these marginalized human beings! How full of the milk of human kindness she was in her almost videographic portrayal of the ostracized characters from the periphery

of the society. We internally bleed at the sight of Rohimon who all through her life provided carnal pleasures to many people and now she is inflicted with venereal disease which has rendered her noseless with a gaping hole at her mouth. What a blood-chilling toll prostitution has taken on her physique! She is, it seems, a graveyard Halloween character in flesh and blood let loose to haunt and lurk in the alleys of Golapipatti.

No less gripping are the stories of her fellow sex workers – all of them

killing of her family members. After the blood-bathed birth of Bangladesh, she was sheltered in a government house from where the poor soul was taken as a wife by a young man. Being miserably treated by the relatives and abused by her husband who married her only to grab her paternal property, she trod the filthy path of Golapipatti. Momota's odyssey also activates our lachrymal gland. The star-crossed Momota who hailed from an affluent background was lured into the dark profession by her boyfriend who promised

see Lalu, like the Birangana Yasmin, revolts against the powerful segment of the society. Rahman's treatment of the Baluchistan issue in this novel almost four decades back once again proves that powerful writers are endowed with some prophetic attributes. Her other major works like *Surjo Sobuj Rokto* (Sun-Green Blood) and *Ghar Bhanga Ghar* also powerfully chronicle the struggles of the downtrodden people from two different strata of the society – the workers of the tea gardens and the people rendered homeless by river erosion and other natural catastrophes. Precisely speaking, Rizia has squeezed the macrocosm around her spanning from Bangladesh to Baluchistan within the microcosmic realm of her creations.

Rizia through her works always tried to make the voice of the muted insiders audible, yet paradoxically in some mysterious ways, her own voice remained almost muted in our mainstream media. Though this artist of the wretched did not receive the kind of attention from the media that she well-deserved, she was fortunate enough to be lauded with many accolades including the prestigious Bangla Academy Literary Award (1978) and the Ekushey Padak (2019).

In her slim autobiographical piece, *Obhiasi Ami*, she declares herself as the "eternal migrant". Winding up her terrestrial chapter, this perpetual adventurer has started her new transcendental exploration at the cosmic level. Bon voyage, our literary Marco Polo!

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were coerced into this stigmatized profession. Some were trafficked, some were picked up by hooligans and after satisfying their needs were sold and some were duped. The backstories of two characters, however, are noticeably different from the whole lot – those of the Birangana Yasmin and the ambitious Momota. The tale of Yasmin here, is directly connected with our War of Liberation. In the war, her brother embraced martyrhood and the Pakistan Army raided her house to punish Kamal, a freedom fighter who took shelter in the house. The raid resulted in her rape and the brutal

to make her a heroine in the film industry of Dhaka. Sarazeen Saif has aptly commented on this book – This is a book for us. For every man, for every woman, for every single member of our society. Sex workers are, first and foremost, people. They have emotions, wants, needs. They are human and yet, they are the bitterest dregs of our cities, the darkest corners, the most feared secret. Rizia Rahman upturns the earth burying them, exposing the worms, the filth, the nightmare!

Ms Rahman makes the subaltern speak not only in *Rokter Okshor*. In her *Shilay Shilay Aagun* (Stones in Fire), we

September 3, 2019 marks the 121st birthday of Abul Mansur Ahmed, a renowned writer, journalist and politician of Bangladesh. The following piece is edited and translated by the Star Literature Team

Abul Mansur Ahmed's *Ayna*: A World of Satire in the Light of Art

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Ayna, a collection of seven short stories by Abul Mansur Ahmed was published in 1935. Written through the span of 1922- 1929, these pieces were published in *Saagat* edited by Muhammad Nasiruddin. The stories were satiric in structure, reflective in observation, sharp-witted with varied subject-matters. Even though these writings started taking shape in the nineteen twenties, they are relevant to our times too. They remind one that literature is invariably connected to people and life.

Kazi Nazrul Islam, in the introduction of the collection, says, "In normal mirrors, one can only see the reflections of the outside world. But the mirror produced by my friend and artist Abul Mansur Ahmed reflects the inner aspects of a human being. The people that roam around the society wearing different masks have been caught in this mirror in their terrifying and wild characteristics. I have a strong sense of having seen these horrific creatures wearing human masks many times in the temples and mosques, standing at the public speaking dais, in political clubs, and literary arenas."

Following the threads of the stories, the poet Kazi Nazrul comments on the different aspects of the shape-shifting people and how they abound around us. Abul Mansur Ahmed crafted an amazing world depicting the familiar surroundings he observed.

The first story of the collection clearly depicts what an expert the author

Abul Mansur Ahmed has used satire as his element in bringing out these social aspects. And satire is indeed a weapon for a crafty and powerful writer. It is surely painful for a writer to look upon the moral offences done at a particular level and sometimes it is difficult to address the problem directly.

was in creating a dramatic atmosphere. The piece is titled "Hujure Kebla." This one story is enough to demonstrate Ahmed's assessment of people engaged in harming others, and in the process causing vital damage to the society. These people have little compassion, no sense of morality and hence they have no qualms in taking all kinds of steps in attaining their selfish ends.

Abul Mansur Ahmed used satire as his element in bringing out these social aspects. And satire is indeed a weapon for a crafty and powerful writer. It is surely painful for a writer to look upon the moral offences done at a particular level and sometimes it is difficult to address the problem directly.

Therefore, "Hujure Kebla" satirized fanaticism practiced in the prevalent society. He sees how religious fanaticism affects life, how politics becomes fraudulent and how women are oppressed in the process. Emdad in "Hujure Kebla" suffers from personal crisis. In his search to find truth, he left his

widowed aunt to work with a religious leader. After becoming the disciple of the *Pir Saheb* he discovers that the truth is very different from what he had expected. As he watches the *Pir Saheb* eat, he becomes convinced that the digestive system of the leader is far more stronger than his spiritual abilities. Emdad notices that it takes longer for the *Pir Saheb* to make his female audience understand aspects of his teaching. He further realizes that his ideas regarding Kolimon, the beautiful wife of Rajab, the landlord's son, is quite different from what he had thought earlier. Whenever he

holds sessions in the ladies' quarters, his eyes turn toward this particular woman in question. Emdad also notices that the *Pir Saheb* expects to be massaged in front of his lady audience more. Even though disturbed, Emdad refrains from asking questions. And yet, he cannot control himself when Hujur claims Kolimon as his own. Rojob has to divorce the wife he had wedded only a year before and leave the premises of his house in tears. The wedding is performed hurriedly while Kolimon keeps on fainting. Unable to contain himself, Emdad jumps on the *Pir Saheb* dressed as the groom. He

pulls the Hujur's henna-dyed beard in one hand and screams, "You wicked, wicked man! How could you do this to two young souls just so that you can indulge in your sinful pleasure?"

Of course, the other disciples of the *Pir Saheb* do not agree with Emdad's actions. And Hujur orders him to be turned out of the village. This is where the story ends.

What is so special about this story? I must say that because of the skillful story telling techniques used by the author the tale affects the reader. His use of Arabic and Persian words helps in bringing out some significant thematic aspects of the story. There are six more short stories in this collection which are no less artistic and throw light on dualistic aspects of human society through sarcasm and wit.

A writer looks on the problems of society and tries to explain and expand them according to his own understanding. And that is exactly what Abul Mansur Ahmed does and makes the reader aware of those issues through his use of satire. As Kazi Nazrul Islam observes in the Introduction of the book, "Satire is a rich contribution to literature around the world... Unfortunately, Bengali literature is not rich in satire because this particular genre requires extraordinary talent and wit.... I once saw a master lyre player play with a stick. I was amazed at his work and today I am amazed at the achievement of my friend Abul Mansur Ahmed. It is an amazing feat indeed."

Indeed, Ahmed's talent has transcended his time and reached the readers of the twenty-first century. Religion is an important part of human life. Those that try to use religion for their own selfish benefit are to be condemned. And he has certainly attacked them and proven his duty to the society. Just as he blames the perpetrators, he also shows how hapless women suffer most because of such hypocrisy.