

## POETRY

## A Requiem for Amazonia

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY



Amazon burns  
Each flame licks a life  
Each ember leads to strife

How will man survive?

From the meat roasted by the flames  
That rise as if from Earth's insides?

The birds that no longer fly  
Lie roasted, toasted, drained of colour.

The brilliant macaw with its plumes of blue and yellow,  
The golden monkey that leaps from tree to tree,  
The green frog that hops,  
The slithering snake that crawls  
Now all lie in a heap  
Under the dead burnt leaf.

70,000 fires that cindered  
The green to a dun, dull grey...  
Devoid of life  
Like Mordor, the ground cries.

Will only the Orcs abide  
The dead — can they rise?

During the last reckoning what will they say?

Childhood has ended and we hold the Earth in our sway?

The last child crumbles away...

*Mitali Chakravarty's poetry has appeared online and as part of two anthologies, In Reverie (2016) and An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English (1984). This particular piece was published in Countercurrents.org in August, 2019.*

## Knocks

BIPASHA HAQUE

Would a few doors remain closed?  
Though we wanted someone to open them  
or at least knock — knock once, twice...  
Haven't we let decades pass by for these  
knocks!

A few times we thought of giving up  
though,  
our arguments fume around whether to  
give up or not—  
At times sensing birds, insects or noctur-  
nals nearby,  
giving up the debate, not only ears,  
but our whole body gets alert!  
Sometimes we become nihilistic  
for the sake of argument, at other times,  
feeling exasperated, we simply mumble  
"we're nothing but wood, a few nails,  
hinges and a few coats of earthen oil ..  
no more than that."

Can't recall well, when was it that  
we last saw the palonko, mosquito net,  
scarlet red "Ma" in a framed nokshikatha...  
Often wafted in tobacco's crispy burnt smell,  
felt of tiny and big hands, and,

especially the pair of softy squishy hands.  
the dripping syrup from those fluffy hands  
got stuck here.. see..  
O how tingling that sensation is even now!

Don't remember when and how  
the andormohol light got off!  
The palonko, scarlet 'Ma', fluffy hands  
—how they all got faded!  
For the touch of those who dwelled inside,  
for the waft of burnt tobacco,  
while standing still on this threshold for  
ages—  
our desires are minimised to a few knocks  
now.

See, all we want is someone to knock.  
Should you have knocked,  
we would show what lies  
beyond words,  
beyond hope,  
beyond dreams...

*Bipasha Haque is a diaspora writer with partic-  
ular interest in life—the way it is. By profession  
she is a university teacher.*



## Is Writing a Gift?

MOHAMMAD SHAMSUZZAMAN

If it is, where is this gift coming from? God? Ahem! As off-putting as it might sound, biographies and autobiographies of writers reveal that most so-called gifted writers are scoundrels. Writers revel in nympholepsy, zipper syndrome, drugs, gambling, mood swings, revenge, fabrications, and jealousy. Writers are eccentrics, too. Think, for example, of Doris Lessing, who abandoned her children to pursue her literary career, or of Virginia Woolf, who committed suicide to save her husband from the consequences of her chronic bipolar disorder. Despite these vices and eccentricities, we tend to consider writers as those whose talents were bestowed on them by God. But why should God gift a group of people who are known for their transgressions? Writing is a secular engagement, and God has nothing to do with writing. Everybody is potentially capable of becoming a writer. Everybody, however, doesn't want to become a writer given that any serious writing is difficult. Very few people want to become writers; fewer write; and fewest are the writers that we read and admire. Because original and authentic writing is coming from only a handful of writers, we conclude that these people are exceptional and gifted. They are not, but the conjectural connection between writing and God is perhaps as old as writing itself. Let me exhume a bit of hoary history in this regard.

Ancient Greek mythology or religion used to consider writing an inspired undertaking. A writer is someone possessed when inspirational gods, Muses, speak through her. What these gods produced was *logos*, the divine word, and the Gospel claims, "the Word was God." The Greek linguistic and cultural connotation and context of writing was uncontested in Latin, too. In Latin, the word *vates* stands for both poet and prophet. Since antiquity and into the Romantic period, the act of writing was linked to a kind of sacred mission to reveal spiritual realities of artistic and aesthetic dispositions. Writers were not mere human beings. They were seers with clairvoyance. What they created had a divine origin and aura. Unlike other mundane activities, writing used to require prayers and meditations—invocations—to make a connection with a transcendental realm. Writing such as this sprang from a secret, sacred source. That's how a secular human endeavor like writing got implicated in God and gift. Challenging such a

romantic notion of writing amounted to a blasphemy, even when some disgruntled observers occasionally reminded us that writers were the first group of people to defy and defile God throughout the history of our civilization. So, God continues to gift his enemies, who are unlike lesser mortals. Writers are deified as geniuses. Are they so?

Howard Gardner debunks the myth of "genius" in his book, *Creating Minds*. He examines the lives of seven extraordinary individuals, who each reinvented an area of human endeavor. Some of the names include geniuses like Sigmund Freud, Pablo Picasso, Albert Einstein, and T.S. Eliot. With all the geniuses that he examined, he found one common attribute: "the capital of childhood." These geniuses were gripped by their passions since their childhood and devoted almost invariably ten years to make their initial creative breakthrough and another ten years for subsequent breakthroughs. When these geniuses stunned the world with their creative endeavors, they were well-prepared, not well-endowed by God. Excellent writers fall in the same framework of observation. The testimonies of the writers in the *Paris Review* reveal one common characteristic, which E.M. Forster in his interview in the same journal in 1953 calls a "literary childhood." George Orwell claims in his essay "Why I Write" that at the age of five or six, he knew that he would grow up to be a writer, and at the age of sixteen, he discovered the joy of words. Likewise, V.S. Naipaul claims in his essay "On Being a Writer" that quite early in his life, he had the "ambition" to become a writer. And his ambition spurred the commitment and diligence to win a scholarship at Oxford to learn the craft of writing. The testimonies of these writers evince that becoming a writer is neither an epiphany nor a revelation. It's a considered decision fueled by ambition and passion. A writer's development, then, follows an often predictable pattern.

Can this pattern pin down a writing genius like Rabindranath Tagore, the only Nobel Laureate in Bangla literature? Skeptics and scholars would scoff at any attempt to fit Tagore in a pigeon-hole of rituals that the development of a writer presupposes. An autodidact as he was, he hardly had any formal education. His literary creation, however, continues to guide the peoples of the Indian subcontinent—and beyond—for emotional, intel-

lectual, and spiritual survival as well as revival even 78 years after his death. His language is fresh and lucid; his thinking is sublime and unique; and he so gracefully shuttles between genres (e.g., lyrics, poetry, essays, short stories, and novels) that he seems to have drawn from a mysterious source. To argue that Tagore is not gifted is a tough sell. A disinterested critic would yet like to claim that Tagore was the beneficiary of the accident of a noble birth. Amartya Sen, another Nobel Laureate in Economics from India, was invited to deliver a lecture in 2011 at the University of British Columbia, Canada, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs that university offers. While he didn't lecture on Tagore's development as a writer, he presented Tagore as an ultimate embod-

iment of interdisciplinarity given his cultural and literary orientations. He implied that Tagore thrived in an environment conducive to his talents.

Professor Sen cited Tagore's own description of the cultural background of his family: "a confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan and British." He further claims that Tagore's grandfather, Dwarkanath, was well known for his command of Arabic and Persian, and Tagore grew up in a family atmosphere in which a deep knowledge of Sanskrit and ancient Hindu texts was combined with the learning of Islamic traditions as well as of Persian literature. While Tagore may have had the gift of genius, his cultural and literary backgrounds helped him own and hone that gift. Tagore doubtless had a "literary

childhood," which imbued him with an aptitude for literature. Writing was not a passing passion for Tagore. It was his only occupation. Add to Tagore's literary childhood Malcolm Gladwell's rule of 10,000 hours. Citing ample examples, Gladwell argues in *Outliers* that there are no instant experts in any cognitively demanding fields. The amount of practice needed for exceptional performance is extensive — at least 10,000 hours. Tagore seems to have spent Gladwell's requisite 10,000 hours or more in absorbing and practicing the craft of writing before he started his writing career. And the more he practiced, the more he excelled. Tagore, then, is a genius without any divine intervention. He became a writer by being a writer.

And that's what all writers do. The

erature is nothing but carpentry. Both are hard work, full of tricks and techniques, and very little magic. Citing Proust, he claims that writing takes ten percent inspiration and ninety percent perspiration. Turkish Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk echoed Márquez's view on writing in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in 2006: "The writer's secret is not inspiration—for it is never clear where it comes from—it is his stubbornness, his patience." And of course, the writer's conviction that writing is a human invention that he fully owns. If he creates magic and mystery with written words, the creator is still him.

A gifted writer is a euphemism for an accomplished writer. These days most accomplished writers seem to undergo adequate academic training before they



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venture into serious writing. Think, for example, of some of the Bangla-speaking accomplished writers who write in English: Kaiser Haq, Amitabh Ghosh, Tahmima Anam, and Zia Haider Rahaman. They all are university educated people and have had prolonged exposure to literature as well as to the learning and teaching of writing. Their development as writers reveals a predictable pattern of preparation. For all of them, writing is an intellectual achievement, not a natural endowment. Why should it be different for any other writer?

Writing is NOT a gift!

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