

POETRY

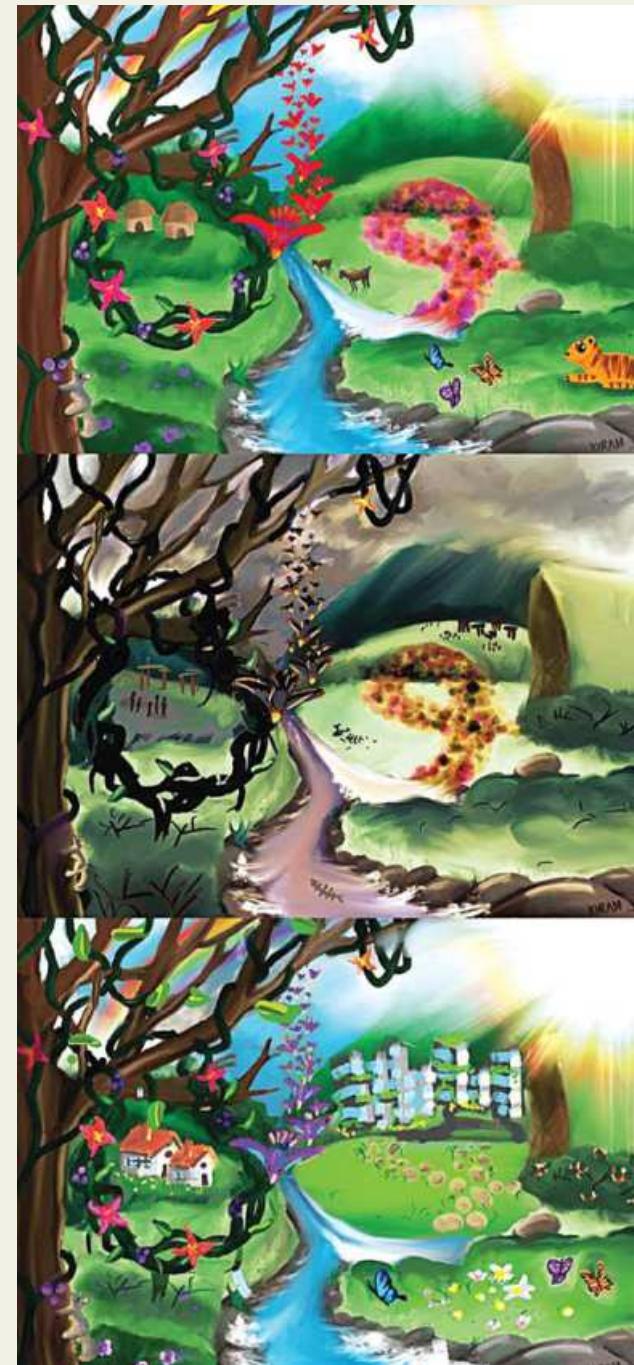


PHOTO COURTESY: KIRAN MAHBOOB

Symbols

AHMAR MAHBOOB

Symbols divide us; symbols unite us. If your symbols match mine, perhaps we can be allies; If your symbols, I don't recognise, you will be strange - at best. Through symbols we make sense of the world; Through symbols we live our lives. In language, sounds and scribbles are symbols; In religion, clothes and food become symbols; In culture, there is nothing that is not a symbol; In arts, in science, even in math, symbols rule our worlds. Symbols make our worlds, whether human or not: Where some use symbols in the here and now, We use symbols to escape place and time. A clever use of symbols, and, lo, We can go to the moon and come back. A wise use of symbols, and, lo, We can create a world just and fair. A neglect of the symbols, and, lo, We can fight and feed conflict. A malicious use of symbols, and, lo, We can destroy our worlds. Symbols are just symbols, they mean and they don't mean: A harmony in symbols is harmony in life; A disarray in symbols is hell with no end in sight.

Ahmar Mahboob is a Linguist. Currently, he is Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney.

You Don't Even Know Earth

KAMAL CHOWDHURY

TRANSLATED BY FAKRUL ALAM

Look! Look outside
Behold the state of the world
Poles once propped up the powerful and the proud
Now they have all gone now, destroyed by a virus!

Oh humans, don't you see the human side
Don't you understand what life is all about?
In honing your knife
You've lost your armor!

Now one can't recognize earth itself
The list of the dead keeps increasing
Neither the rich nor the poor
Know at this time who the real enemy is!

You can't be at war with the air
The whole world is now a battlefield
The sky has its limits and your terrain
Is not as boundless as you once thought it to be!

Don't venture out; everything is contaminated!
Stay home for sometime

Nature has turned hostile; the corona
reigns
And we must pay our debts!
Stay safe; stay in some house corner
Keep your country safe
Like your mother's face
Let earth live forever!

Only pray that our combined dreams
Will make these bad times disappear
Let the ones who have lost all recover
Let love live on forever!
Surely we won't lose; humanity must triumph
We'll see better days coming
The green leaf outside
Will smile again on a sparkling new day!

Kamal Chowdhury is an award-winning poet and the Chief Coordinator of the National Implementation Committee for the Celebration of the Birth Centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Translated By Fakrul Alam, who is UGC Professor, University of Dhaka.



IN MEMORIAM the Harlem Renaissance

S M MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

Amid laughter, jokes and cheers, I hear Mr. Jefferson's intellectual sneer. In "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," you bet! I put my money in the safety of my pocket.

It is a truth self-evident in America that not all men, certainly not the men and women of "color," were created equal by the author of the Declaration of Independence who owned slaves. Against such a backdrop six scores and a year later W. E. B. Du Bois coined the "double consciousness" of the African Americans – the experience of looking at one's skin (and soul) through the lens of a segregated society hungover from the Civil War and slavery, held to the standards of a nation that looked back (or black) in contempt.

In the 1920s, when the ink of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had dried and disintegrated, when the hooligans of racial supremacy traded their Ku Klux Klan white bedsheets for police uniforms, when mongrels and hungry hounds were unleashed upon unarmed civilians, when, in the rural backwaters and some urban epicenters, mob lynchers were still pulling out people's fingers and toes, skinning them alive, and stringing them on trees and setting them alight for the crime of being born Black or being born at all, it was high time when the Afro-American consciousness turned the ink of disintegration into an ink of rage to blot across the pages of history. Listen to Claude McKay, an African American poet who, in 1921, wrote:

"Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view / The ghastly body swaying in the sun; / The women thronged to look, but never a one / Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue; / And little lads, lynchers that were to be, / Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee."

The ink sparked the conscience of the Black intellectuals who, severed off the umbilical cord of history, went on personal journeys to discover their racial past festering in the fetus of Yankee Imperialism. It was a time of revival and of rebirth; it was time for the Harlem Renaissance.

Post World War I. As the world was

shuffling off the Victorian pruderies for the free and easy ways of the Jazz Age, as the Euro-American (modernist) literati and culturati rode the Parisian "movable feast," scholars and artists from all corners of the United States turned Harlem, located in the upper Manhattan area of New York City, into the Black capital of America. Among them were actors, musicians, dancers, painters, sculptors, philosophers, historians, folklorists, essayists and novelists. The movement proper, however, was arguably synonymous with the wordsmiths, i.e. Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Bennett, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and many more. In capturing the essence of the African American experience, these bards laid their souls bare, as if to ask their tormentors, "Hath not the Afro-Americans eyes?"

"Because my mouth / Is wide with laughter, / You do not hear / My inner cry? / Because my feet/ Are gay with dancing / You do not know / I die?" sang Langston Hughes' "Minstrel Man."

What the masters have and the slaves lack is power. Power corrupts because it buys the monopoly on violence. Being immune to justice is the epitome of injustice. Fighting violence with violence has a way of reshaping major catastrophes into academic apostrophes, like footnotes in miniature fonts whispering: "Conditions apply." To rub off emotions – make someone else feel what one feels – one must turn the table on violence itself.

"Hating you shall be a game / Played with cool hands / And slim fingers," wrote Gwendolyn Bennett, "While rekindled fires / In my eyes / Shall wound you like swift arrows." Hatred here is not the petty thirst for revenge, but the personification of oppression itself; it "wounds" but does not kill, which the author uses not as an alibi to prevent destruction but to reconstruct the past she has lost. "Memory will lay its hands / Upon your breast / And you will understand / My hatred."

Hatred is a passion that unites like none other. During the First World War, the African American soldiers joined arms and shoulders with their white comrades in their shared hatred for

autocracy, hopes for democracy and a better future but came home to be appalled by signs such as 'For Whites only', 'Negroes keep out', and 'Blacks and dogs not allowed'. Pining for the loss of innocence and lost illusions, Countee Cullen and many others penned epitaphs to the promises of equality: 'Some are teethed on a silver spoon, / With stars strung for a rattle; / I cut my teeth as the black raccoon – / For implements of battle' ("Saturday's Child"). Expressing distinctly Afro-American experience in Western rhyme and meter schemes, constantly experimenting with style and content, poets from the Harlem Renaissance could be viewed as the forerunners to postcolonial and postmodern writers and artists.

Hatred, however, is never enough. The human spirit aches for love and reconciliation – to weave the intricate patterns of suffering and sorrow into tapestries of harmony and happiness through coexistence. Every Renaissance worthy of the name launches a cosmic osmosis that bleeds one heart into another, blends minds together and binds souls forever (or, at least, some day in the foreseeable future). The Harlem Renaissance, though unique, was no different.

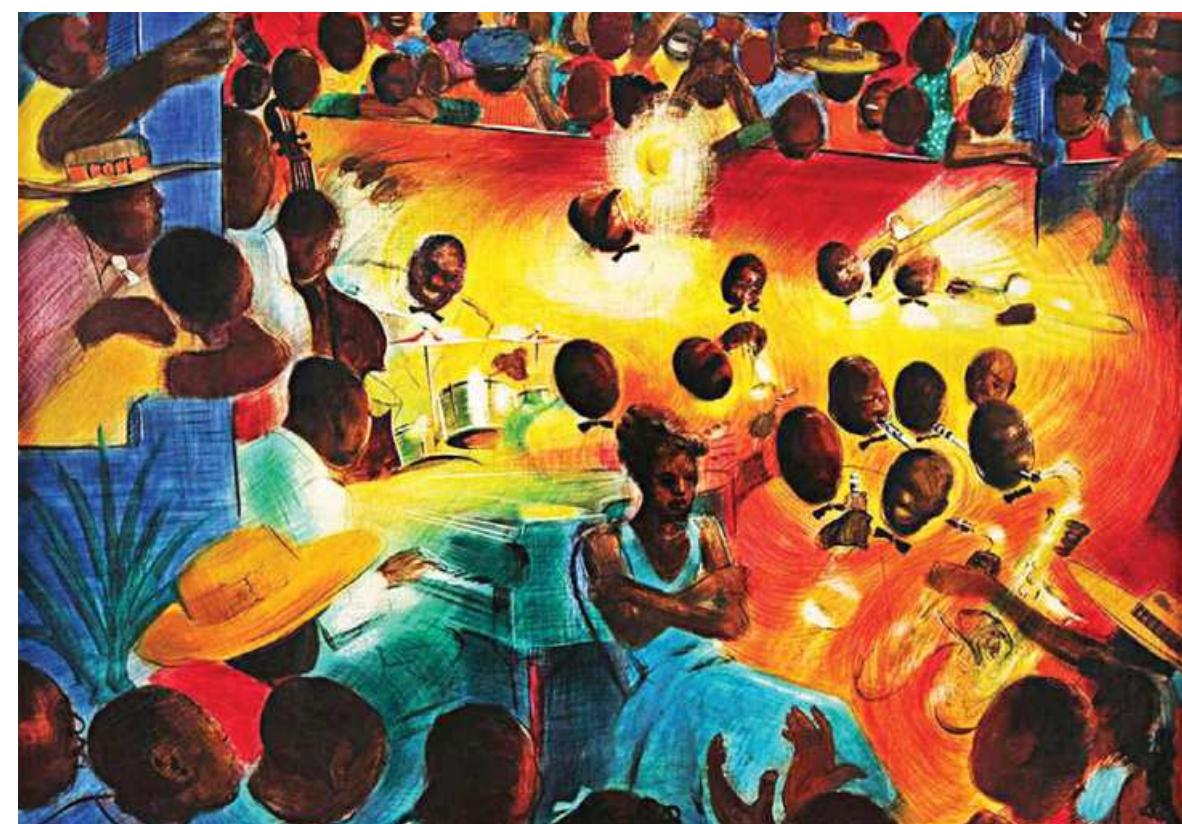
"I am the darker brother, / They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes, / But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong." It was a custom among the slave owners to send the slaves to the kitchen in the back of the house, if not the barn with domesticated animals, for their meals. As Langston Hughes' description suggests, the practice of demeaning people with dark skin was still prevalent in 1925, just like many of us even now do not allow our household help to sit on the sofa, sleep on the beds, drink off our glasses or eat off our plates, and use our restrooms, as if providing domestic service is a contagious disease; as if treating them with dignity would metamorphose (some of us) into Kafka's cockroach with an arched back, coarse voice, and numerous arms and legs wriggling uncontrollably.

What we pretend not to understand is that they do our menial chores so

we wouldn't have to, just as the racist Americans pretend not to know that the richest civilization the world has ever seen sucked the life out of countless slaves. There is no 'us versus them'; there is only blood and flesh.

"Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table / When company comes, / Nobody'll dare / Say to me, / 'Eat in the kitchen,' /

to come. Time moves at a glacial pace; standstill is its climax. Forcing time to its climax is to bend universal laws. It takes ages, but the force it unleashes echoes for eons. Almost from the beginning, the history of the American dream was the African American nightmare which the pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance were to grab by the horns.



Then." Hughes ends on a hopeful note, "Besides / They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed." "I, too, am America." Here is humanity reclaimed; the "I" is the eye of America – the song of self-reliance. America is not just cops and criminals, Congress and constituents, buyers and sellers, workers and bosses, men and women, Blacks and Whites – they are all parts and particles of the monument of freedom. Take out a kernel and the dominos tumble.

To forget the past is to disown the future, for what happened in the days bygone merely foreshadows what is yet

The "dream deferred" is a landmine. To feel it, one must step on it – be jolted awake. Though America is still steeped in bigotry after centuries of struggle and suffering, every little child, regardless of the color of her skin, can at least dream to rise to the very top, pursue life, liberty and happiness, and perhaps, spare a thought in memoriam the Harlem Renaissance.

S M Mahfuzur Rahman is a Lecturer in the Department of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).