



## MUSINGS

# On Mint Chocolate and the Meaning of Life: Joyce's *Ulysses*

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"Chotto Kaka, I'm not afraid of the bogey-bug (coronavirus) when I have a tummy full of ice cream." When my seven-year old nephew made this demand, I thought, he could really have taken a leaf out of *Ulysses* – a masterpiece by the great Irish maverick, James Joyce. "What's your favorite flavor?" I asked my nephew. "Mint Chocolate," he replied. Personally, I never understood the logic of mint chocolate. "You know what'd go great with chocolates?" Certainly not, "TOOTHPASTE!"

Though it accumulates a tremendous amount of human experience including hateful resentment, rampant bigotry, chronic depression, emotional paralysis, and outrageous injustice, the

symphony of *Ulysses* floats on human voices, laughter and tears, memory and desire, and the immutable flair for everything that makes life worth living. But, why does Joyce take a hero who is almost three thousand years old – Ulysses, the Latinized Version of Homer's Odysseus – as the subject for his modern monograph?

The answer lies in the adjective Homer uses to describe Odysseus: *polutropos* – of many turns – jack of all trades, master of some. After laying siege to the impregnable walls of Troy for ten grueling years, Ulysses masterminds the trap shaped as a wooden horse, left at the gates of Troy to fake a Greek retreat. Taking it as a peace offering to the gods, the Trojans push the bait right inside their fortified city. When darkness lulls the Trojans to sleep, Ulysses with and comrades-in-arms come out from the wooden horse and raze the glorious city to the ground.

The calm after the storm of destruction mires Ulysses, the mariner and his crew, in another decade of misery; they get stranded at sea. During the voyage home, Ulysses survives devastating shipwrecks, siren songs of enchantresses, entertains demigoddesses, escapes Hades – the underworld, outsmarts man-eating monsters, wriggles out of traps, and finally, slays the suitors of his wife to retake possession of Ithaca, his Kingdom. *Odyssey*, the Homeric epic is one of the earliest to claim the primacy of intelligence over brute force.

In conversation with his friend, Frank Budgen, Joyce calls Ulysses the "complete man in literature" because, apart from being a son, a father, a husband, a lover, a King, and a warrior, "[Ulysses] was an inventor too. The tank is his creation. Wooden horse or iron box, it doesn't matter. They are both shells containing armed warriors." *Ulysses*, published in 1922, was written against the backdrop of World War I (1914–1918) when the corpse-lit battlefields of Europe were, for the very first time, patrolled by the machines of mass murder; i.e. tanks, fighter planes, and chemical weapons.

Joyce's counterpart for the Homeric hero is Leopold Bloom, a 38-year old man of Hungarian Jewish extraction residing in a predominantly Catholic Dublin. Though his father converted to Christianity, the Dubliners see Bloom's Jewishness as a dis-ease written into his DNA. No matter how hard he tries to blend it, Bloom is forever the outsider.

Throughout the novel, Bloom is snubbed by his boss, cheated on by his wife, and ridiculed by friends and foes alike for his lack of "manliness" and closeted Jewishness. His sea-voyaging exploits are limited to a single afternoon in the Dublin Bay, paddling a boat and nearly swamping his wife and daughter. Above all, he is haunted by the suicide of his father and the untimely death of an infant son. In the late American lingo, Bloom is a "total loser." Yet, he resembles, in Joyce's

imagination, the great warrior king of ancient Greece. How?

One word unlocks this puzzle: reincarnation. Reincarnation is revival, resuscitation, regeneration, not replica. Just as the genes of an individual is a patchwork of her/his ancestors going back thousands of years, just like the cross-pollination of two plants breeds hybrid seeds, so do ancient experiences in novel contexts strike us with uncanny déjà vu. Birth and death, happiness and misery bind the first human to the last. "What is the age of the soul of man?" Joyce asks. Ulysses' soul wanders for 3,000 years to be reanimated in Bloom in an entirely different historical period and geographical location.

While Ulysses devises a state-of-the-art killing machine, Bloom harbors within himself an indomitable living machine. Though he has been the butt of many jokes and anti-Semitic slurs, though he undergoes countless setbacks and personal defeats, though none of his fellow Dubliners makes it easier for him to go on, Bloom cherishes everything passing him by – music poured out by the cooing of songbirds, the fragrance melting through blooming primroses, the warmth of cuddling the loved ones on a chilly night. Therefore he resolves not to give into distress and despair but to drink in the mirth and miseries of life with equanimity.

"Plenty to see and hear and feel yet. Feel live warm beings near you," Bloom muses while attending the fu-

neral of Paddy Dignam, a fellow Dubliner, "Let them sleep in their maggoty beds. They are not going to get me this innings. Warm beds: warm fullblooded life." Seeing a rat grown fat on the cold corpses squeeze out of the cemetery, Bloom reverses the clichéd phrase of funeral services; from "In the midst of life, we are in death," to "In the midst of death, we are in life!" Get up and fight, or lie down to die? Bloom has his work cut out, and so do we.

Ulysses and Bloom are woven together by their insatiable thirst for all life has to offer; if life is a work of art, death is its masterpiece. As darkness gives light its radiance and pain makes pleasure pleasant, the boredom of "stay at home" orders make us nostalgic for that which we took for granted – free movement. Only one thing could fashion the shackles of quarantine into a garland on the spirit of humanity: kindness – to neighbors, to strangers – kindness to oneself in relishing the simple delights. So, sit back, relax, enjoy a scoop of mint-chocolate ice cream (if you don't mind the tooth-pasty flavor), and occasionally, lend a helping hand to others, for shouldering the burdens of those in need makes humanity humane indeed. Perhaps, one day, we could share the joy of swimming in the sun again.

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## FICTION

# The Present and the Future of Rashid

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(1) Turbulent, murky, and eccentrically wide at this time of the rainy seasons, the river Padma flows incessantly. Lashing with fury at its banks on both sides the river flows swallowing fertile lands, homesteads, settlements. It is a different story at Mawabazar though, where humans endeavour to tame the river. The river here stands as a barrier to the extension of Dhaka-Mawa highway through Shibchar on the other side. As the structure of the Padma bridge rises from the abyss of flood waters, the vestige of the barrier gradually slips away. Forty-six piers stand like petrified giants above the flood water level. Some piers have been joined by decks supported on steel truss girders.

The construction site of the Padma bridge at Mawabazar is abuzz with the activities of workers, technicians and engineers. With the droning of heavy-duty trucks, forklift and excavation machines, the site has come alive. The construction work of the bridge has sent down ripples across Mawabazar and the surrounding villages like Bhagyakul, Mandra, Kabutarkhola, Jashaldia, Medinimondol. About fifty years ago, they used to be quiet rural hamlets, where farmers, boatmen, fishermen lived their lives unperturbed by what was happening in the rest of the world. Now they have woken up to embrace the changing ways of life and the prospects promised by the Padma bridge.

Local people of Mawabazar and the surrounding villages dream about their villages being turned into small towns with amenities of urban life: streets, shopping malls, fast food restaurants, cinema halls. Life would be completely changed for better; lands would be surely valued at the price of gold! When the Padma bridge would be a reality! Village people cannot wait to see that happen.

Rashid alias *Raishya*, a fifteen-year-old destitute lad, limps and plods on the edge of the brick soled road from Bhagyakul to Mawabazar. Alone in this world, he had polio as a kid. How could his poor parents afford proper treatment for their son? And the polio left him crippled. *Raishya* spends his whole day-time in the bazar begging food from hotels and restaurants. Some-

times he spends time on the river bank watching construction activities.

On the Mawabazar bank, *Raishya* sometimes muses how he grew up by the river side. The Padma is such a wide river during the monsoon that the other side looks like a thin line. After a heavy monsoon rain the flood waters from the upstream would rush down in vortexes. His father often warned him: "Don't dive into the *Gholna*, nobody can save you from there."

Sometimes in his sleep, *Raishya* would hear the sound of chunks of the bank giving way to the marauding flood water. Then he saw his father waking up and sauntering to the river bank to assess how devastating the river pillage was! He would spend days worrying about the river erosion and the threat it posed to their riverside small homestead; and pondered on where to move when that happened. But it happened one night anyway, which made *Raishya* both orphan and destitute.

As the bridge decks are closing on from both banks, *Raishya* desperately hopes to see this mighty Padma river tamed.

(2) Mawabazar has five hotels and restaurants to meet its customers' culinary demands; that includes fried Hilsa fish harvested from the Padma. *Rahmania Hotel* is one of those. *Rahmania Hotel* comes to life early in the morning. Cacophony of the customers, sounds of frying *paratha*, the mouth-watering flavor of omelet, heightened by the tinkling sound of tea cups, plates and spoons almost reach a crescendo.

*Raishya* dreams about a full meal. He can't remember when last he had one. Because of his handicap, nobody in the bazar wants to hire him. The hunger consumes him, it burns in his eyes and gnarls his face, often drives him crazy. Sometimes he gets around the shops to sneak into the backside of the hotels. He would inhale the fiery smell of the spices and curries and would imagine a full plate of delicacies.

On a big table at the backside of hotels, the hoteliers dump the waste foods: stale rice and lentils, Hilsa fish heads and uneaten chicken legs; chicken wattles and necks, ribs -- not favoured by the diners. The hote-



liers often get rid of those foods by recycling them to destitute people like *Raishya*. He particularly loves the bony Hilsa fish heads and the chicken necks, because he can chew on them for a long time.

Mawabazar has only one bakery shop, *Sulemani Bread and Butter*. When the bakery shop opens in the morning, the bakery man organizes on the shelves' bread taken fresh out of the oven. The sweet smell of the freshly baked bread wafts out of the shop and pleases the sensory organs of the passers-by. *Raishya* takes a deep breath sniffing the air heavy with the sweet aromal. It titillates his nasal passage and then trickles down spreading warmth on his guts.

(3) This fishing season the river Padma has proved a boon for the fishermen community. The catch from the river has surpassed their expectations. Excited Hilsa fish lovers in Dhaka city crowd Mawabazar to taste the various Hilsa fish curry dishes put on display by the hoteliers. As the tour operators of Hilsa trip unload fish lover tourists at Mawabazar, *Raishya* reaches the operator's car. "Sir please come to *Rahamanyia Hotel*, if you want to savor Hilsa fish fresh from

the Padma river." *Raishya* greets the visitors. "They are big, tasty and fresh, Sir, cooked by expert hands. If you taste once, you would come back again and again to *Rahamanyia Hotel*. Don't ever be tempted by the vendors with unauthentic Hilsa fish curries."

The owner of *Rahamanyia Hotel* summons *Raishya* one day, and comes down heavily on him. "Mother \_\_\_\_\_, who told you to promote my Hilsa fish curry? My customers stand in que for tasting my Hilsa anyway! I don't need any publicity for my hotel. \_\_\_\_\_ off, you dirty piece of \_\_\_\_\_."

On a particular day, *Raishya* hardly has had anything to eat. He feels as if he could swallow all the waters of the river. Suddenly, the half-blind cook of *Rahamanyia Hotel* calls him over and hands him a half-eaten Hilsa *leja* (tail piece), some rice and masoor dal in a polythene bag.

*Raishya* goes to the homestead of a villager by the river bank side; tears a green leaf of a plantain, and then squats on the riverbank. He empties the contents of the packet on the banana leaf, taking care so that not a grain of rice, or a drop of dal and Hilsa curry spill off from the banana leaf. Then he mixes everything with dal and starts eating the mix slowly with relish. The

maroon coloured skin of the fish-tail tastes great to *Raishya*! He doesn't throw away the bones even; pounds each of them between his teeth and softens them with his saliva before gulping down. Then he licks up the banana leaf clean for the remaining broth.

Right at that moment, a steel girder between a pair of piers is in progress. A crane mounted on a barge carries the girder while the barge inches towards the span between the piers. On both the pier heads, engineers and technicians with yellow vests and helmets monitor the movement of the girder with level machines. They watch anxiously as the crane gradually positions the steel girder between the span of the two piers.

After savoring every morsel of his meal *Raishya* drinks water from the hand tube well at Mawabazar mosque premises to fill up his stomach. He lets out a burp filled with the smell of Hilsa fish but then presses his hands on his mouth so that it does not escape. Finally, he heads back to the riverbank, spreads out his *gamchha*, looks curiously at the bridge construction. Then he falls asleep.

"Oh Allah, when will this bridge be completed? When finished, would I be able to eat a full meal? This Padma has swallowed my home and my parents. Would this bridge help me to get my lost home back? Would I be lucky enough to build a thatched roof on my head in Padma's *char*!" All these questions churn in *Raishya*'s head even as he is asleep.

All of a sudden, there is a commotion of engineers and technicians. They are celebrating the successful installation of the steel girder between the two piers. A group of people on the river bank, not far away from where *Raishya* was resting, clap their hands and yell, "Joy Bangla." The commotion snaps up the blissful siesta of *Raishya*. It takes only a few moments for him to realise what it is all about. He too wants to shout, "Joy Bangla." But the creeping pain of hunger pulls him back. Still he tries to form the words. A gale blowing across the river, however, completely drowns *Raishya*'s voice. The river Padma, which flows unperturbed, too, does not bother to listen to him.

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