

# A Tribute to Allen Ginsberg on his 24th Death Anniversary Ginsberg's Visit

JOHN DREW

Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, as much at home on the Kali Ghat as in Greenwich Village, is best remembered in Bangladesh on account of his poem, *September on the Jessore Road*. Year One.

I have a happier, earlier, memory of him standing outside his hotel in the Canadian city of Saint John on the day he was due to read to my students.

Saint John and other ports on the east-coast Maritime provinces had once been the gateway to Canada. Then ice-breakers opened up the Saint Lawrence River to year-round shipping. Saint John became a backwater.

We had asked Allen to come and read

long, bloody, bitter poem, was how Allen described it.

Alden Nowlan could have told him that, as an uneducated country boy who had been taken out of grade school to cut timber, he believed he had been sent by God to add books to that same Bible. Instead, he simply asked Allen if he'd like to compose a verse about the Loyalist Graveyard in which we were standing.

The hill-top centre-point of Saint John from which the rest of the city falls away is a graveyard. It is dedicated to those counter-revolutionaries who, preferring a mad king to a sane republic, fled north

he had finished high school. In fact, he had educated himself only by sneaking into a local library secretly and reading the biggest books he could find.

Arriving in Saint John, I inquired of Alden's whereabouts. As a student I had read and liked a slim volume of his poems about the rural poor. He is dying of cancer in hospital, they told me. When I went to see him, Alden had been advised that if he lived for two more days, he could expect to live for four, four more, eight and so on. Double or quits. Eighteen months later, here he was writing a full-page story on Ginsberg, using one of Allen's quips as a headline: LOVE IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD.

As a poet, Alden was not altogether happy with the fuss about Ginsberg's visit. His verse is flaccid, he objected, he's as sentimental as Longfellow. I reminded him I had repeatedly urged him to read his own poetry to our students. The trouble was, unschooled, he was shy of entering a university.

Alden did soon escape journalism to write poetry. A one-finger typist, he asked me, a two-finger typist, to type up his application for a Guggenheim grant. Three fingers must have been lucky: he got the grant. Among the many other poems he was to write was a very fine one about a journalist registering the death of Martin Luther King, "The Night Editor's Poem."

This poem catches perfectly the disjunct between the high-pressure professionalism required to set up a news story in print and the subject of the story itself. It is only at the end, the paper gone to press, that the exhausted night editor, grabbing a quick bite in an all-night diner, has time to understand "that Martin Luther King is dead and that I care."

Allen Ginsberg I had first encountered in another port city, Liverpool. As a journalist on the *Evening Standard's* "Londoner's Diary," I had been sent on an extramural trip to Liverpool to cover Ginsberg's visit to the home of the Beatles.

Allen's visit provided the occasion for a group of local poets to emerge from their dingy cavern on Canning Street, where they ran a smudgy little magazine called *Underdog*, and add a Liverpoolian dimension to the Beats. They included artist Adrian Henry, looking very surreal, Brian Patten, the clerical Roger McGough and Heather Holden.

Whatever happened to Heather? Women poets rarely got a look-in in those days, although Carol Ann Duffy, who would become Britain's first woman Poet Laureate, must have been somewhere in the Merseyside offing.

Having proclaimed Liverpool to be the centre of cosmic consciousness - and Liverpool having decided Ginsberg was really gear - Allen went on to Newcastle to say the same thing there, although it was left to a poet of quite a different ilk, Tony Harrison, to declare that Newcastle was Peru.

Ginsberg was in England after being declared King of May in Communist Prague. His happy knack was to create or validate a joyous counter-culture wherever he went. Just the person we needed in slumbering Saint John.

Presiding over the new Saint John branch of the university was a high school principal who, though game, was left rather gobsmacked by our wide-

walked Allen across the old sea-faring town. We went down the hill to the waterfront past the City Market with its Dickensian figure of a flower-seller at the gate. Lamb the butcher. Pipes the organist. A law firm called McKelvey, Macaulay, Makem and, yes, Fairweather. The names required no Dickens to make them up.

Eventually, we reached the New Brunswick Museum. Ginsberg was delighted by a notice advertising an exhibition: *Secrets of the Deep - Upstairs*. He was even more delighted by the reception he received upstairs from the Archivist, Mrs Robinson. Oh, she said on being introduced to him, "Aren't you the son of Louis Ginsberg? He's my favourite poet."

Having walked across the decaying city, Ginsberg claimed that had he been born in it he would never have left. That was true of so many of its natives but when Ginsberg read his

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ranging plans. But, as former principal of the local academic high school, he had excellent contacts throughout the city.

The day before Ginsberg's scheduled arrival, the principal was tipped off that the Immigration authorities at the airport were going to refuse entry to the dissolute American poet. We should cancel hotel and hall bookings without delay.

King's County had a Progressive Conservative M.P. named Gordon Fairweather. A fair weather Tory, but a foul weather progressive.

Without delay I telephoned him. He came off the curling rink and promised to have a telegram in my hands within the hour from the Minister of Immigration. All I had to do was swear - so help me God - that while he was our guest Allen would not do drugs or corrupt the youth in any way.

After the meeting in the graveyard, I

hallmark *Howl* later that evening to a hall full of overflowing it flushed out of the woodwork an assortment of local eccentrics few of us had imagined existed. "I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed..."

One urbane colleague claimed that Ginsberg should have been a cantor in the Catskills. Possibly also in the Himalayas. Crowded into our cottage after the reading, our students listened wide-eyed as Allen and Chanchi discussed and sung - to the accompaniment of Allen's finger-cymbals - Indian and Tibetan chants.

In his turn, it was Allen who looked wide-eyed when our baby daughter, in her cot in the next room, was awakened by all the sound. Why, he asked, is the child crying?

John Drew's writing appears from time to time in *The Daily Star* and *Bengal Lights*.



his poetic clarion call *Howl* as one way of putting the new, very small, branch of the provincial university, long denied to the city, on the map. We would bring the world into it again.

I have a photograph of Allen standing together with Chanchi Mehta, my old teacher, trouper and Indian playwright, local poet Alden Nowlan, and I. Allen is telling us that the previous night he had picked up the Gideon Bible by his bedside and re-read *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit." One

after their defeat in the American War of Independence.

A residual covering of snow packed into ice among the tombstones led Ginsberg to hazard what he thought might be a haiku (or what passes for haiku in a language with a wholly different orthography): "Many drunks have slipped on this snow and bloodied their heads on these stones."

Nowlan, himself struggling to be a poet, was covering Ginsberg's visit as a journalist for the local newspaper, *The Telegraph-Journal*. He had broken into journalism only because it was assumed

## REVIEWS

# A Review of *Mistress of Melodies: Stories of Courtesans and Prostituted Women*

Nabendu Ghosh. ISBN-10 : 8194490863. Speaking Tigers, 2020

BY GRACY SAMJETSABAM

Nabendu Ghosh (1917-2007), an eminent author in Bengali literature pursued many passions. A dancer, an actor, a writer, a screenwriter and a film director, his opus of writing includes thirty novels and fifteen short story collections, that are being translated and continue relevant. In cinema, as a scriptwriter, he captured classics such as *Abhimaan*, *Bandini*, *Devdas*, *Majhli Didi*, *Parineeta*, and *Sujata*. He worked closely with big names in the Indian film industry like Bimal Roy and Hrishikesh Mukherjee. He received numerous literary and film awards, including the Bankim Puraskar, the Bibhuti Bhushan Sahitya Arghya, the Filmfare Best Screenplay Award and the National Film Award for Best First Film in direction for *Trishagni*.

*Mistress of Melodies: Stories of Courtesans and Prostituted Women* is edited by Ratnottama Sengupta, daughter of Nabendu Ghosh, herself a film journalist, an author, a translator and a film festival and art exhibition curator. The book is an anthology of six stories by Nabendu Ghosh, resurrecting the world of courtesans and prostituted women. Here, the first three pieces, "Market price," "Dregs" and "Song of Sarangi" are translated by Ratnottama Sengupta; the fourth "It Happened One Night" by Katha award winning writer, Padmaja Punde; the fifth "Anchor" by writer and editor, Mitali Chakravarty. The last story, "Mistress of Melodies," is the first draft of a screenplay written in English by the author himself.

Ghosh's portrayal of women across generations not only evokes a bygone era but also reflects the plight of women in general, and particularly those caught in the wrap of the flesh trade. In the foreword, filmmaker Muzaffar Ali accurately praises Ghosh as "the pride of cinema of Bengal, the cinema of realism and the romance of culture." Ali ponders on the institution of courtesans, where the rise and fall of human lives and human helplessness make a fine fabric for aesthetics, where amidst the heights of fame and the fading away of lives, 'love' provides the zone of purity, bliss and solace. These values

are strongly reflected in the stories that make up this anthology.

Ratnottama Sengupta notes how the world of literature and cinema have gained much from the narratives of the loves and lives of women who engage in prostitution. Also, there is no denying that the courtesans have long been custodians and conveyors of India's classical arts. Sengupta quotes the iconic film-maker Mrinal Sen's praise for Nabendu Ghosh as a creative individual who "never believed evil is man's natural state. Along with his characters he has confronted, fought and survived on hope." She agrees with Sen as Ghosh's works and the stories in this collection resonate the flaws and the pangs of the reveries of life of the characters, yet hope shines bright amidst the inescapable grimness of their lives and of their worlds.

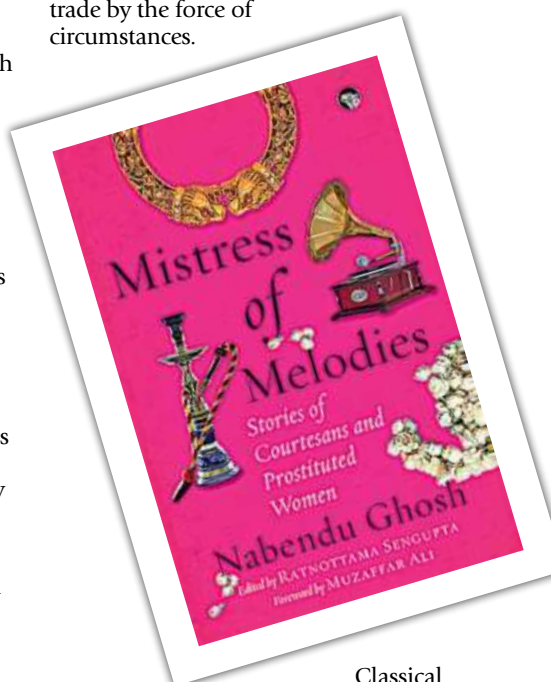
A sprinkle of Bengal's historical conditions of the time and the social impact of famine, riot and Partition add authenticity to the narratives. Additionally, Ghosh's remarkable choice of words in his storytelling leaves undelatable impressions of the characters he sketches, the drama he designs and the stories he tells. Born in Dhaka in pre-independent India and having made Calcutta and Bombay his home most of his life, Ghosh's works reflect the pulse and the spirit of these metropolitan cities.

In "Market Price," Calcutta is romantically sandwiched between the moving of the story back and forth from Gorajapur in Jessore district in pre-partition India and the narrow lanes of Kashi with the mention of the Jatra group, discussions on vegetables and Rohu fish or Santipuri saris. In "Dregs," the characters getting in the tram and alighting in places like Elgin Road, Theatre Road, Purna Cinema, Esplanade, Shyam Bazaar, Tollygunge, Curzon Park, Wellington-Gariahat route, Chowringhee, Kalighat to Dalhousie, and Bhowanipore, takes the reader through the city with a sense of nostalgia and magic, amidst the realism.

The synchrony of song, dance and music particularly in "Song of a Sarangi," the music

circles in Calcutta in "Mistress of Melodies" enlivens one to the complicated world of courtesans that blends thumris, sufi music and devotional songs. More of Calcutta's ambience is brought to life in "It Happened One Night" with a glimpse of nightlife, Maa Kali, baul songs and incessant rains.

The stories portray the complicated lives of courtesans and women compelled into the trade by the force of circumstances.



Classical Hindustani music instruments - sitar, tanpura, sarangi, harmonium, and table - playing soulful music to blend baijis and nautch girls of heavenly beauty, singing and dancing to thumris of love and longing like that of Radha-Krishna evoke emotions ranging from profane to romantic and erotic in a world of seths, babus, alcohol, ornaments, sindoor and flower.

They are perceived as belonging to a community that entertains. The narratives

reveal how though "honour" is forced to a point of compromise, faith, fidelity and respect matter in the lives of these women. Also, it is interesting to note that the stories show the word "sin" is defined differently by the visitors entertained by nautch girls and the residents of the world of courtesans.

Dhaka is melancholically catered in "Anchor" by the mention of River Padma, the ghats, idyllic beauty, jute, ghazals, sweet shop and pice hotels, paan, bidi, and cigarettes, Goalundo, flickering lamp fed by redi oil, call of crickets and the port of Mirpur.

Touching upon gender and social issues, the predicaments of women, men and children, particularly women associated with the flesh trade are closely examined. Widowhood and vulnerability is reflected in the story of Chhaya, a young widow who falls in love, elopes and remarries but ends up being a victim of Balam's double entendre and heartlessness and also in the unrequited love of Rabiya.

Adolescence and prostitution is mirrored in the tragic rise to the zenith of beauty and wealth to a low fall of abandonment, disease and death of Basana. The humanness in the muses echoes in the stories of the attractive mother-daughter courtesans, Hasina Baiji and Gulab Banu, that revolves around the "nath-utara ceremony." By this tradition, the mother auctions her adolescent daughter's virginity to the highest bidder but tragedy befalls them as it does in the love, longing and acceptance of Gauhar Jaan.

The sad demise of Radha sends a message on health issues faced in flesh trade and on motherhood and prostitution through the fates of Fatima and Tagar. There is the solace of love that transcends social barriers and religion just as Binno Bai in "Song of a Sarangi" expresses, "In our world, there is no conflict between Hindus and Muslims." However, those born to prostitutes or courtesans, including male children, cannot escape being condemned as the dregs of society.

How in prostitution, women play the hunter and the hunted in the dealings of

match-making and love-making; youth and age; birth and death; loneliness and emptiness; heartbreak and healing; sadness and happiness; union and separation; love and betrayal are sensitively and intricately woven in the stories. Ghosh stunningly yarns time, beauty, memories and transience into a fabric that arouses emotions with the stories that are universal, and long-lasting, and alongside, ironically tells of the ever-changing times of people and places in the timelessness.

The beauty of Ghosh's use of language -- iconic short and crisp opening lines that subtly and perfectly set the tone for the story -- are well captured in the translations. The climaxes are at times happy and at times melancholic but the impact of the narratives is such that the characters and their stories linger on in the mind of the reader even after the story has ended.

What places Ghosh's writings at a higher pedestal and as a resource for further study is that at the centre of the stories are human elements that are delicately raw and real. This is fodder for exploration in a world that tends to regard women as a means of entertainment or commodities. Their tragedy lies in the humaneness and their raw feelings that scream out loud that they are like all of us - except birth and fate forced them to be caught in the world of flesh trade.

The translation of Nabendu Ghosh's stories in this new anthology, *Mistress of Melodies*, is a reminder of the enthralling potential of storytelling made accessible to all of us in lucid, simple English. Touching and haunting at the same time, the narratives are original and gripping. The book brought to us by Speaking Tiger has a beautiful cover illustration by Mistunee Chowdhury that fittingly reflects the stories told.

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