

Forays into the Past

A review of **Fakrul Alam's** *Once More into the Past: Essays, Personal, Public, and Literary*. ISBN: 978-984-929-66-7-6. Daily Star Books, 2020.

Essays on the two parents reveal a lot about Professor's Alam in the book. He came from a family that, unlike many others of his childhood, fostered imagination, music, and education among all the children.

BY FARHAD B. IDRIS

In his five-decade long career as a teacher of the English department at Dhaka University and at other institutions and as a scholar, Professor Fakrul Alam has had countless grateful students and admiring readers of his scholarly works that are not merely scholarly in a literary sense but are also personal and public. The title, *Once More into the Past*, derives mostly from the personal section of the book. In it, Professor Alam recalls memories of his parents, grandparents, a street of Dhaka, a travel to Australia and others. A particular memory of his father is the man's passion for Tagore songs, which he heard on radio early mornings and wanted to share with his children. The young Fakrul at that time did not warm up to his father's enthusiasm. At a later time, he acknowledges, he did become a huge fan of our national father's songs. His father died many years later. Professor Alam does not include too many details of

a common trend among women of her time when resources were scarce among middle-class families and the male child usually got preferential treatment.

Essays on the two parents reveal a lot about Professor's Alam in the book. He came from a family that, unlike many others of his childhood, fostered imagination, music, and education among all the children. Senior Alam's gentle music-loving personality made Alam a lifelong connoisseur of Tagore song and other genres of music. All the

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articles in *Once More into the Past* show an imaginative approach and a striving intellect. The latter Alam most likely got from his mother.

The other essays are grouped into two sections: "public" and "literary." The public essays treat the founding history of Dhaka University, the language movement and its far-reaching consequences in Bangladesh, Karl Marx's changing views on India and Edward Said's somewhat limited reading of Marx as an orientalist, and the founder of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Alam's discussions on the last two topics are illuminating. Said's well-known critique of Marx is a contentious debate in postcolonial studies.

To his credit, Alam succeeds in balancing the twentieth-century literary scholar's unflattering appraisal of the nineteenth-century thinker. His conclusion is prescient: "Marx will be celebrated . . . for the essential truths he conveyed about history and society. And Said? . . . he will be remembered as the father of post-colonialism for a long, long time."

The last four essays of the public section are on the father of Bangladesh, who is simply known as "Bangabandhu" (friend of Bangladesh) to his people. The essays treat the great leader's untimely death in 1975, his murder by a gang of military officers; his rural roots that inspired him into politics; his university days; his countless imprisoned days; and his writings. An assessment of Bangabandhu's life and achievements is a challenging task. Though not an historian,

Alam attempts it in the few articles he has on the man and succinctly presents to his readers the Bangabandhu who "appear[s] only once in an epoch."

Alam deals with a wide variety of themes in his literary essays. These include the feminist scholar Elaine Showalter; Shakespeare, whom he distinguishes as "the world's *Biswa Kobi*"; the uneasy status of English education in post-Bangladesh; the expatriate Indian author Nirad Chaudhuri; and Alam's colleagues and friends and their works.

Highly pertinent in the education policy of Bangladesh is his "Bengali, English and the Anxiety of Influence." Alam discusses here the status of English in Bangladesh. He aptly recognizes that the language movement that led to the murder of unarmed Dhaka University students by the police on 21st February, in 1952 gave the prime political impetus to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. His observation that misplaced linguistic nationalism that cornered English in the seventies and eighties is also quite accurate. When he speaks about "communicative English" that DFID/British Council promoted in the nineties, the reader wonders what does the British Council have to do with the medium of instruction in the education of Bangladesh? Alam does not address this issue adequately in his article.

Alam notes in "Anxiety of Influence" that before 1970, there was no conflict between Bengali and English in education, but English was demonized after Bangladesh became independent in 1971, the origin of which was a mistaken jingoistic perception of the language movement. He mentions all the events that promote Bengali in the country's culture; he points out as well that none opposes the study of English. He is obviously right. It is hard to see the reasoning behind shelving English so Bengali can have a breathing space. Bengali is the language of Bangladesh, will continue to be so forever, and will be in no danger of extinction. As the most widely accepted world language, English, however, must not only be promoted but embraced wholeheartedly because, as Alam indicates, it has immensely benefitted Bengali literature and other aspects of its culture and education in the past and will do so in the future.

The articles in *Once More into the Past* are informative and insightful. The range of subjects that the book covers is impressive. Alam's lucid writing makes the book accessible to young readers, and his deft handling of complex issues of culture, politics, and literature rouses the experienced ones.

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POETRY BY MITALI CHAKRAVARTY



Sonata

Sometimes tears flow like rain for cakes that remain unbaked, birthdays that evoke whiffs of honeysuckle, amlaki*, birds, cats, roses,

blood bonds that override differences, even if they seem to create distances bridged by unconditional love.

Intertwined with harmonica notes, the scent of freshly brewed coffee mourns what could have been but was not. Like distant chords of a broken sonata, life plays along. With practice, you again learn to live in tune.

*Indian gooseberry



Immigrant

Chaotic cacophony creates walls, stones to cement rituals that annihilate, hurt, colour with hate.

Manic madness drenches, tears a home — incarnadined, the mob frenzies to a wave of fury, frightening with sounds that thump fear, incomprehension.

Looking for peace, a release, the migrant sings against the setting sky. Home stretches anywhere, everywhere shaded by hues of love and acceptance.



the event, but he mentions a well-known Tagore song that captures his feelings. He also has an essay, originally delivered as a speech at an International Women's Day event (date is missing, by the way), that discusses his mother who was feisty, fiery, and supremely dedicated to the education of her children, including her daughters—not

The Spider

HASAN MARUF

Nobody was around in the grey end of a Sunday. I strolled past the deserted park; the swings and slide failed to evoke the joy of old. The park looked cold, sequestered, and threatening in the dim light. It was strange and eerie to see not a soul there!

Usually, there were stoners on the bench at the back or somebody walking a dog in the field ahead. The road was dead quiet. It had rained all day and the grass was wet. The grass soaked into my shoes and my toes got cold. I had been walking for an hour but I hadn't moved more than a mile. The trees were beautiful, more beautiful than usual. The clouds were low and overbearing, they tightened around the town. I was high, whatever that meant, and getting high was my daily task. Usually, there were people around, but all the people I got high with had evaporated into the dark parts of the town. I walked home by myself. I was high enough to forget that I had school the next day.

The weed was losing its fun but if I stopped smoking it sped up everything. I walked towards the field. The glow of the street lamps was in the air. The field was slippery from the rain and I marched towards the light on the other side. Then the field gave away and I fell into a hole. I fell deep down onto rancid mud. Above me the orange light shone down from the field. I tried to climb out and found the wall vertical and wet. I felt my way around until the wall ceased and I found open space. In this moment of fear, I had two choices I could shout up to the field or I could follow the passage into the abyss.

I tried to shout but my mouth wouldn't open. I tried to talk and it opened but no sound came out. I looked into the dark and a bunch of eyes flashed and vanished. My

heart raced and my mouth remained shut. Blindly, I went into the tunnel which was high enough for me to stand upright.

As I walked, my shoes squelched in the mud. One by one, they got stuck and I lost them. Soon my socks were gone as well. I walked in the mud barefoot. I felt the wetness between my toes. I had never smelt death but a psychosomatic response made me think of death. I kept thinking about those eyes and I knew I had seen at least four pairs of red eyes. The creature must have been a spider with all those eyes. The logical side of my mind made it off as a hallucination.

Spiders were small and those eyes were the size of grapes. As I moved further, I heard a scuttling to my left. I didn't want to look but I did, and what I saw struck terror into my lungs. The red eyes stared bright and then vanished again. Ahead of me, I saw a flickering silver shape. The legs didn't move towards me but away. They were Phosphorescent silver legs scrambling away from me. I followed but I had no control over my limbs. The tunnel was lit up by the glow of the spider. It expanded as I walked, there were red eyes everywhere glaring out of holes in the walls. I wanted to run but I couldn't, and I couldn't scream.

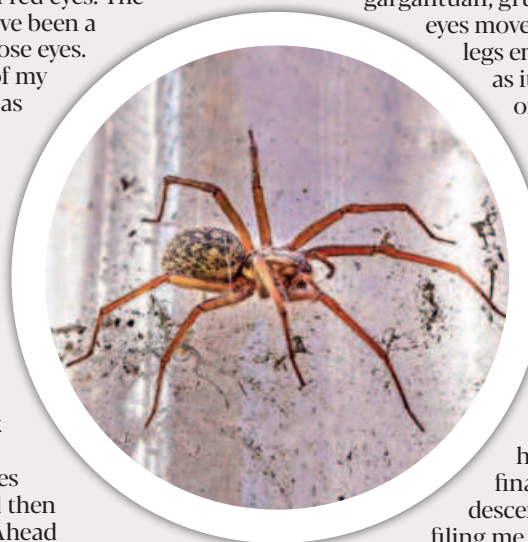
On the floor, little silver spiders scurried over my feet and sent tingles up my legs.

I felt trapped and it seemed as if my fate was to be devoured alive by these spiders. The mud was getting deeper and my pace slackened as I fought to keep moving. In the distance, I gazed into eight lamp-like eyes. They were big. This was the mother of them all. A spider descended onto my head and I felt its legs tapping against my ears. I knocked it off with force. The action brought the room into a tense halt. I stood inert as I was hypnotized by the great, gargantuan, gruesome eyes. The

eyes moved and then its giant legs emerged on either side as it brought itself out of its nest. It stood twenty metres off of the ground and its abdomen was like a hairy bulbous bus. In my whole life I never heard a spider making a sound. This mother began to chortle and scream through its pincers. I got hold of my vocals and finally screamed. Spiders descended around me filing me with their hairy legs. I passed out....

It was early in the morning when I woke up. Why was I lying in a ditch? I looked at my bag and found that it was spangled in fetid mud. I was really hungry and I opened the zip to look for something to eat. Inside the bag was a silver spider leg about the size of my arm!

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A Love Story

Waves ebb from the beach recede towards the setting sky to mingle with twilight.

The velvet spangled night watches as the sush of the sea shapes a frothy staircase.

The moon descends, fluttering shivering in response to unbidden caresses, clinging, reflecting.

The sky and the sea entwine in an embrace of love, weaving with intricate heaves the saga of the resplendent refulgent universe.

Mitali Chakravarty writes for love and harmony and in that spirit has founded the Borderless Journal.