

ESSAY

# War and peace and poetry and poets

This paper has been edited for brevity. It was first presented in the Poetry Conference’s panel for international participants on the theme of poetry and peace. All translations from Bengali poets in this piece are by Fakrul Alam unless specified otherwise.

FAKRUL ALAM

How can you talk about peace without taking into account war? Both are subjects not only of Tolstoy’s great novel but also of the two founding epic poems of Greek as well as Indian literature. About the *Iliad*, I recall now the great essay the French philosopher Simone Weil wrote titled, “*The Iliad*, or The Poem of Force.” To her, the epic reveals the overwhelming power of force unleashed by war/ rage/ lust that it unleashes or induces. But the poem to her also shows human love offsetting the deaths and horrors marring human relationships, implying the need for peace and making it an imperative in human relations. The subject of the poem then is also pity/ sympathy/compassion. These are qualities needed to counter wrath and reaffirm the place of love for each other. I think of WH Auden’s great poem induced by the onset of the Second World War, “September 1, 1939”. Its immortal and wise line tells

can’t resist talking about the late 19th century Bangla prose epic, *Bishad Sindhu*, a masterpiece that I translated into English and that Bangla Academy published in 2018 as *Ocean of Sorrow*. The narration is entirely in prose, but again and again its author Mir Mosharr al Hossain comes close to poetry in discussing the anguish and distress as well as the intense emotions of losing loved ones caught up in the turmoil of war. Indeed, as we come to the end of the mammoth epic—500 plus pages in my translation—we can read the narrator seeking God’s mercy and trying to figure out the divine scheme of things. As he puts it, “No poet has the ability to exercise his imagination to articulate that plan or explain its essence to everyone either.” Clearly, it is poetry that comes closest to articulating the empathy that war necessitates and God’s plan to have it in the scheme of things.

If we move to dramatic poetry on the subject of war and peace, it is Shakespeare’s name that comes foremost

the Crusades.

*Hamlet* begins in the ramparts of a castle and ends with numerous dead people, including the protagonist, but Fortinbras, now destined to be King of Denmark as well as Norway, indicates that there has been enough war; peace was what was needed now. War is destructive and exhausting; though the impulse to war is part of human nature, so is the urge to have peace prevail everywhere. That seems to be the message Shakespeare has for us all in this and other plays.

Truly, poets are best in articulating the desire for peace amongst peoples. They know it is difficult but they also know it is so desirable. I think of WB Yeats in “The Lake Isles of Innisfree” where he talks about an idyllic isle where the poet could “have some peace...for peace comes dropping slow”. Always, it is something to be craved for because the world knows too much turmoil; the mind and the body will always seek peace. It may be elusive but must be sought for.

his most famous poem, “Dover Beach” where war as well as the ferment of ideas calling into question faith were troubling all eminent Victorians. Love appears then the best antidote to such turmoil-inducing things. Arnold is troubled not merely by a receding “Sea of Faith”, but a world “swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, /where ignorant armies clash by night.”

More than any previous centuries, the 20th has been most devastated by wars. Imperialism, nationalism and modern weapons of mass destruction, including, most horrifically, nuclear bombs on the one hand, and unending missions and visions to thwart warmongers and bloody expansionists on the other, have resulted in war poetry and poetry of resistance.

Take the First World War English poet, Wilfred Owen’s moving poem “Anthem for Doomed Youth” as an instance. Its first stanza is worth quoting in full for the way he remembers the young lives lost and the endless corpses left behind by war machines fueled by ethnic hatred and nationalist egos—

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

But if war fomented by nationalism appeared to be overwhelming and all-engulfing, and if imperial egos seemed to be also involved, the 20th century saw poetry of resistance as well. Take the Bengali poet—our national poet—Nazrul Islam—as an instance.

He had joined the British Army at one point, but soon he would become the rebel poet who would use poetry as a weapon against unjust wars and make it a literary genre that would help take oppressed people to peace and brotherhood. The poet, he claims, is volcanic, tempestuous and fierce in the cause of rebellion in raising the “flag of man’s triumph” but he is also the harbinger of peace, “Orpheus’s lute, / Lulling the restless ocean to sleep,” bringing “calm to a fevered world” by enthralling people with “melodies” of peace.

The poet, then, takes up poetry to protest against tyranny and unjust governments, but his penchant really is for peace. But Nazrul’s optimism about the poet’s role is not shared by all poets. I am thinking here of my favourite Bengali poet of the 20th century, Jibanananda Das, who wrote about darkness that had descended on the world with the Second World War, and on partition and global uncertainty caused by massive destruction. This surely is why his 1947 collection of poems is called *The Darkness of Seven Stars* and why he includes in it poems about shipping lanes “crowded by magnetic mines

and unending convoys” and “splinters” lighting up “skies into countless ghosts.” Where could peace be found and the rebel poet appear in such a situation?

Rabindranath Tagore’s conclusion to his speech, “Crisis in Civilization” comes to my mind at this point. It was written as the Second World War broke out, confirming his worst fears about nationalism, expansionist and imperial proclivities. This is what the poet-savant had to say then: “As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man. I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice.”

Let me conclude by talking about our own Liberation War and the anguish and pain felt by poets everywhere at what was happening to Bangladesh after the genocidal bid to thwart Bangladeshis from becoming independent. American beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s 1971 poem/ song, “September on Jessore Road” articulates his distress and grief at war refugee suffering as well as his rage at the American support of the Pakistani war machine:

Ring O ye tongues of the world for their woe

Ring out ye voices for Love we don’t know

Ring out ye bells of electrical pain

Ring in the conscience of America brain.

And here is the Bengali poet Shamsur Rahman celebrating freedom unforgettably and the peace that it could bring in:

Freedom, you’re the wife’s raven tresses, tempestuous in the untamed wind.

Freedom, you’re: The colorful kurta on a young boy.

The playful sunlight on a girl’s supple cheeks.

Freedom, you’re: The home amidst a flower garden; the warble of koel-bird.

The twittering leaves of antediluvian banyan trees.

My notebook of poetry, to pen poems as I please.

[Translated from ‘Shadinota Tumi’ (Bangla) by Syed Manzoorul Islam.]

Poets keep evolving in amazing ways. One of my favourite Bangladeshi poets of recent decades, Shaheed Quaderi, has a postmodern take on poetry, war and peace in “Greetings, Dearest” where the poet-lover assures his beloved that he will “fix it so that/night and day the army, navy and air force will circle round and salute/only you, dearest” (Kaiser Haq’s translation). Love is the best prescription for peace and antidote to war! Death is inevitable, but whether in war or peace, poets will keep producing beautiful poetry about life, hope, love, and peace despite war, death and the decay of values—forever and forever.

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COLLAGE:  
SALMAN SAKIB  
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us unequivocally the kind of essential truths poetry can highlight for us—“We must love one another or die.”

The Indian epic I have in mind which deals with war but also implies the need for peace is the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa’s enduring masterpiece. When Krishna is given the task of becoming the envoy of peace, he takes it with the conviction that war can only lead to endless death; it must thus be avoided and peace pursued assiduously. Here and elsewhere in the epic, it is implied that amity and harmony must be sought actively and war is not the only option available when human relationships are scanted.

On the subject of epic narratives, I

to my mind. Whether we turn to the history plays, or the Roman plays, or the tragedies, we find the centrality of the theme. Whether depicting civil war, or war among neighbouring kingdoms, or wars issuing from imperial expansionist designs, we find Shakespeare dwelling on the psychology of war mongers and the deeply felt need for peace of ordinary people. *Henry IV, Part I* begins, for instance, with the king expressing the exhaustion internecine wars have brought to Britain and the havoc done to nature—human or nonhuman—by it. He would like the island to experience peace, although ironically he would now like to aid the Christian military cause in

As the 17th century English mystical poet George Herbert puts it, “Sweet peace, where dost thou dwell? I humbly crave/ Let me once know.” Similarly, the 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson expresses intensely the need for something which is ever elusive and sometimes something of an illusion—“I many times thought peace had come/ When Peace was far away—/ As wrecked Men—deem they sight the Land—At Centre of the Sea”. It may seem near but is never that easily graspable. After all, life is a perpetual attempt to experience “fictitious shores/Before the harbors be.”

Emily Dickinson’s English contemporary, Matthew Arnold, wrote

## TALESPEOPLE SPIELS

# Take note

How note-taking can come in handy when you’re short of inspiration

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

As an “elder millennial”, I spent an analog childhood as a literature student where all the classroom notes, essay assignments, and diary entries had to be done by hand. While I’ve caught up with the times and learned to make my way around digital platforms and tools, I still derive pleasure from taking actual pen-to-paper notes when it comes to doing a brain dump, and have, over the years amassed a not inconsiderable number of notebooks that have been turned into sketchbooks and bullet journals, recording the mundane minutiae of my days, and from which I occasionally find inspiration when pressed for time and find myself in need of material or a reference for a feature or a creative piece.

My sister-from-another-mister Tarin, who is on the other end of the millennial spectrum, is an avid reader and a talented photographer. She records her life through beautifully composed shots, with poignant captions about the moment, her state of mind, and her literary/pop culture inspirations du jour for each image. While she insists she’s not a writer, each post, each clip, and each reel is a thoughtful witness account of the world as she sees it.

And then there’s my kid Usraat, a true-blue Gen-Z, who, like many of her generation, will “story” every waking moment on the fly, blurry



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

images and keyboard smashing interspersed with memes and reels to create a chaotic, organic narrative, which, in calmer moments, she can reference for more thoughtful meditations on her journey and growth.

While our approaches have changed with technology, the basic idea remains the same: to record the world around us as we see it, to capture a moment for posterity, and more often than not, these little records become the springboard for

longer pieces, raw material for other creative work.

Every so often, when I am trying to encourage someone to take up the Sehri Tales challenge, or helping a new feature writer learn how to pitch stories, or getting approached by beginner writers seeking tips on how to get going, or commiserating with professional writers about their latest bout of writer’s block, the question that arises is: What do I write about? And for me, the answer goes back to that one very simple piece of advice I received very early on in my career: look around you, and take notes, and revert back to these when you’re short of material. It is a practice that has paid back a thousandfold—providing me with inspiration, context, references and data. If that blank page and blinking cursor try to team up on you, there’s no better ammo to have in your corner.

Every Ramadan, the Sehri Tales challenge brings a month of creative writing prompts released daily at midnight, with participants getting between sehri time and 6 AM to submit their artwork and flash fiction. Read the best of each day’s Sehri Tales selections on The Daily Star website and on Daily Star Books’ Facebook and Instagram pages. Watch this print space for the Talespeople’s weekly reflections on creative writing.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is an author and journalist. She is the founder of the annual Sehri Tales challenge.

## POETRY

# a night poem

RIFAT ISLAM ESHA

my eyes can barely take the weight of sleep  
now  
now that you are wording sentences on wars  
and those who are left behind, those who are left on foot  
running,  
hiding,  
dying, dying for real –

i am trying to ration my poetry  
for you and i:  
because  
i dared to memorise the glow of the sun  
by staring straight at it in the morning –  
all by myself, alone,  
while capturing an image of the clear blue sky; clouds softly formed  
like your years-ago fingers on my face; as you slept a little –  
somewhere else you call home, maybe.

some days i make do with the memory  
to breathe, unaware  
because  
because my everyday  
contains the images of  
faraway wars too  
and the wars we both share:  
wars so close to our eyes, blinding, blindingly tucked in our skins;  
wars of desperate stomachs, fearful hands and legs clinging on to  
whatever helps to survive a day

because my everyday  
contains images of the skeleton of a city  
which gets fleshed by  
faceless people – sweating, grating their spines –  
just to be burned alive.

Rifat Islam Esha is a poet. For more updates on her work, you can follow her on Instagram: @rifatiesha.