

THE SHELF

# 6 Essential Rabindranaths you should read

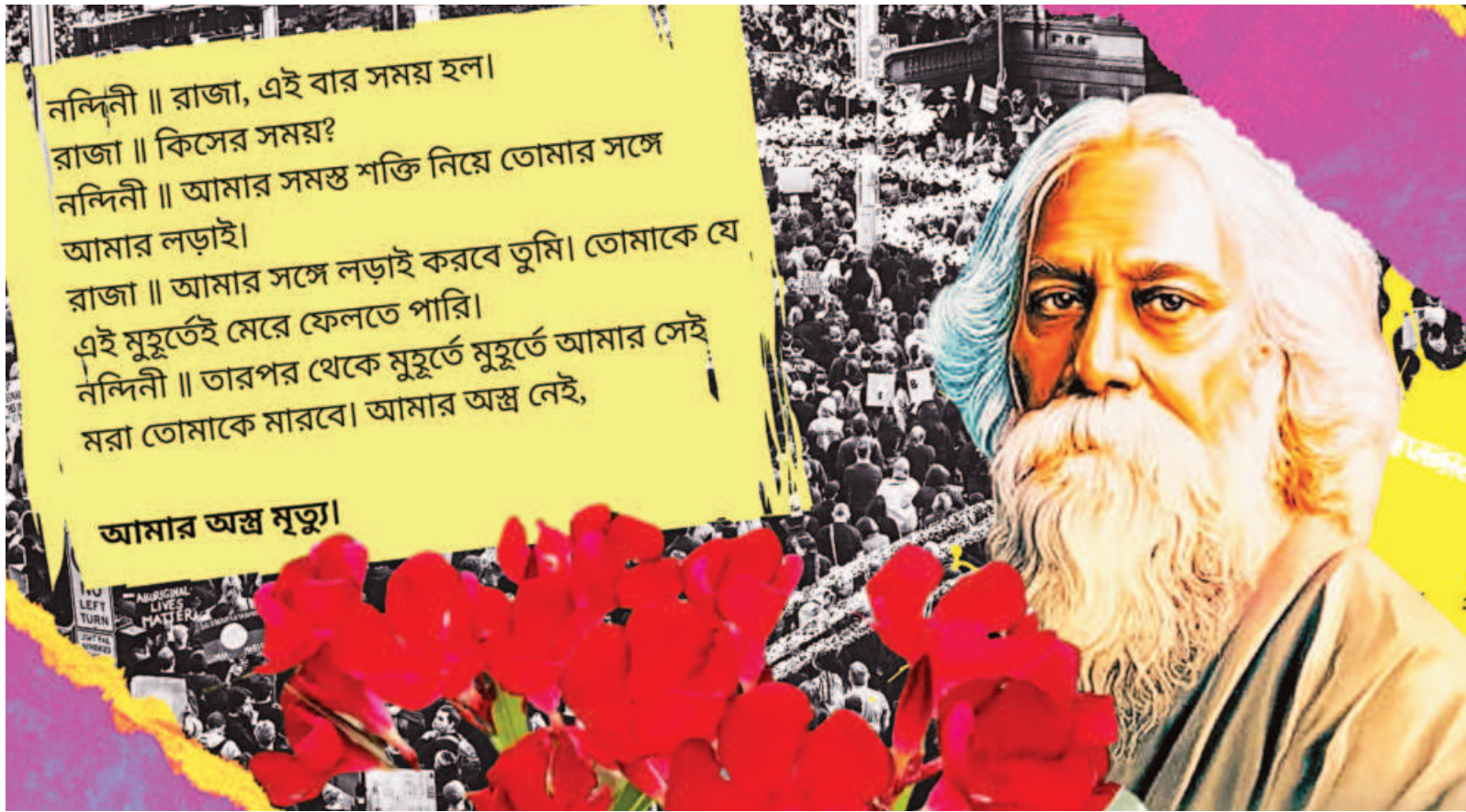


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

**In his long life, Rabindranath confronted protests and movements, revolutions and resistance efforts. His lectures, essays, letters, novels, and songs often tell the tales of those struggles.**

NAZIA MANZOOR

One does not need to remember Rabindranath on the occasion of the anniversary of his death—22 Srabon or August 7 to be precise. Rabindranath is evoked often, and with spontaneity in our everyday lives. But perhaps he is recalled with a particular kind of urgency when we experience turmoil of the kind we are experiencing at our present political juncture. In his long life, Rabindranath confronted protests and movements, revolutions and resistance efforts. His lectures, essays, letters, novels, and songs often tell the tales of those struggles. From the Swadeshi Movement to Bongo Bhongo to colonial violence against the unarmed, Rabindranath's pen addressed them all. On the occasion of this baishhe srabon, here are six essential revolutionary Rabindranath

pieces everyone should read.

**Letter to Lord Chelmsford Rejecting Knighthood (29 May, 1919)**

Rabindranath was awarded the Knighthood in 1915, after winning the Nobel prize for *Gitanjali* (1910). However, he returned his Knighthood in 1919 in protest of Brigadier General Dyer's killings of 379 innocent, unarmed civilians at Amritsar in the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

Condemning the killing of unarmed civilians, Rabindranath wrote to the Viceroy of India, Lord Chelmsford: "Considering that such treatment has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organisation for destruction of human lives, we must strongly assert that it can claim no political expediency, far less moral justification." He adds,

"The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings."

A bold declaration of solidarity and a firm rejection of such brutal violence meted out against unarmed general people, the letter affirms Rabindranath's sense of what is just and what one must stand for.

**Manusher Dhormo (1931)**

A compilation of lectures delivered by Rabindranath and drawn from his Hibbert Lectures given at Oxford University in 1930, *Manusher Dhormo* is essential for everyone who wants to familiarise themselves with

Rabindranath's philosophy on life and being human. The lectures were delivered while tensions surrounding India's independence struggle were high. Rabindranath proposes that the future of humanity must be based upon equality among the races when he claims, "I ask them to claim the right of manhood to be friends of men, and not the right of a particular proud race or nation which may boast of the fatal quality of being the rulers of men." A critique of race egotism and the race-centric human order, the book attests to Rabindranath's belief in the notions of insubordination, creativity, and autonomy.

**Pother Sonchay (1939)**

Rabindranath's trip to England and America in 1912-13 was his third visit to the West, and the impressions were recorded in a collection of small pieces in a text which was given the name, *Pother Sonchay*. In one of the essays, he talks about the intellectual world in England which, as Rabindranath put it, bore no resemblance to the arrogance and pomposity demonstrated by the members of the British ruling class in India. Here, one might also recall the 1916 essay he wrote, condemning a Presidency College professor's ill words against Indians. He critiqued that men who are better suited for disciplinary roles—such as that of drill sergeant, or a jailer—have been put in charge of educating our young minds. Rabindranath's critique of English rule in India, particularly about how India was a source of profit for them and they kept India poor, is also worthy of engagement.

**Roktokorobi (1923/1924)**

Often regarded as one of Rabindranath's staunchest protests against totalitarianism, *Roktokorobi* features Nandini—the woman whose only ornament is the flower roktokorobi which she wears for the man she loves—as a character who stands tall against oppressive regimes everywhere. The tyrant king's greed is contrasted sharply by Nandini's ability to love and her fierce determination to fight him. A play critiquing the

onslaught of modernity and mindless industrialisation, *Roktokorobi* raises questions about what it means to be human when one is chained to a system that is intent on oppressing them.

**Song lyrics**

1905's Bongo Bhongo, or the first Bengal Partition by the British Raj was rejected by Rabindranath. Songs from this era, including "Ami porer ghore kinbo na ar", "Bidhir bidhon katbe tumi", and "Aji Bangladesher hridoy hote", are full of patriotic zeal and unparalleled love for Bengal. Other songs from this era include "Tor apone joney chharbey torey, ta boley bhabna kora cholbena", "Jodi tor daak shune keu na ashe", "Ebar tor mora Gangey baan esechhey", and of course, "Amar shonar Bangla", Bangladesh's national anthem. Lyrical, passionate, and poetic, the songs from this period continue to sway and move us—whether in music form or when appreciated for their poetic brilliance.

**Gora (1910), Ghore Baire (1916), and Char Odhdhay (1934)**

While out of the three novels, *Ghore Baire* most explicitly and expertly analyses the limits of the Swadeshi movement, together the novels reflect the thinker's dis-ease with nationalism and how sometimes, the endeavour can be selfish. Rabindranath was an early advocate for the Swadeshi Movement, and later a critic, but his anti-nationalism is perhaps less interesting than what the novels cleverly reveal—his dis-ease with revolution itself. This is not to claim that he was anti-revolutionary, but Rabindranath's constantly shifting, morphing ideas of both concepts—nationalism and revolution—are exhibited brilliantly in the novels, and particularly in *Ghore Baire*. All three novels also hypothesise the dangers of hyper masculinity and hyper sexualisation, and discuss the emergence of the new, modern woman.

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BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

## About romances ever-appealing

Review of *Abdus Selim's 'Shobdo O Bodher Kobita' (Aksar Bunan, 2024)*

ANSHUMAN BHOWMICK

Poetry and Bangali gentlemen are perennial bedfellows. Unlike some romances that die young, a regular Bangali male, once smitten by the muse of poetry, never quite relinquishes that moment of epiphany. He keeps coming back to it whenever an occasion shows up. Thus, Abdus Selim, one of the most prolific translators of Bangladesh, with a mind boggling collection of plays that he has transplanted from lands near and far into our soil, finds an opportunity to return to his first love—poetry. And boy oh boy, have we been presented with an exquisite collection of poems culled from the whole Anglophone ecosystem rendered in exquisite Bangla!

When we say 'Anglophone ecosystem', we, of course, imply all the English translations from major languages like Spanish, French, German, et al. As a translator, Selim takes full advantage of the Anglophone privilege. In *Shobdo O Bodher Kobita* (roughly translating to *Poetry of Sound and Sense*), Selim accommodates 33 poems by 21 poets representing seven nations and six languages. In addition to the languages one would expect in such a volume, the list includes Japanese and Russian, demonstrating Selim's genuine interest in poetry at large.

This book has been a clandestine romance all along; Selim makes no bones in admitting that this romance was initiated back in 1973 (I believe, the translator was studying literature in the US in those days) that continued till today. Thus, the poems in this volume reflect both the purity of young love and



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

the autumnal leaves.

Such diversity also reflects an educated Bangali's passion for literature of the world, a rarity these days. As I studied the poems—the translations and the originals, whenever I had an opportunity side by side—I was marvelled by Selim's complete command over the 'tatsama' elements in literary Bangla. This, facilitated by his penchant for matters linguistic, makes Selim a perfect representative of the last generation of Bangalis who inherited a multilingual ethos and chose to hone one's skills in several languages, including academic Bangla spiced with Sanskrit delicacies. This inheritance is rich, in every sense.

Selim does a marvellous job with Mathew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867), encapsulating the meditative mood of the original with smart deployment of transferred epithets. On reading Selim's rendering of

John Keats' "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816), I was reminded of Jibananda Das debts to the wealth of literary allusions employed by the second generation of English Romantic poets, and also how Das emulated the syntax of Keats' language in "Much have I travelled in the realms of gold" (1820) to pen the opening verse of Banalata Sen.

Irrespective of the ambivalence that marks Metaphysical poetry of the 17th century, Selim marvels us with his choice of words and precision of utterance. The rendering of John Donne's sermon starting "No Man is an Island" (1624) is a case in point. Sometimes, Selim's translations are so lucid and musical that you feel like reading out his adaptation of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" (1978).

Some poems spring a surprise. Yevgeny Yevtushenko's "My Universities", for instance, is a socialist gem composed during

the years of Communist atrocity. Jack Hirschman's "The Twin Towers Arcane" is a moving paean to the worst human massacre of recent years. That Selim introduces each poet in a few lines is helpful for the readers. As for publishing details, Selim gives the original titles at the end of each poem and names the English translators of non-English poems.

Translation is also about acknowledging the untranslatable. While digging into the culture specific registers of T S Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" (1930) for example, Selim leaves the title as it is.

Only one upsetting aspect lies in the production front. The proofing was below-par. And the cover design reflected nothing of the nuances that poetry carries.

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## WHAT WE'RE READING THIS WEEK

### "Kaho" by Haruki Murakami

Imagine being called ugly on a blind date as a sort of social experiment. Then, imagine going out with him again. Within the fabric of such an absurd short story, entitled "Kaho", that was featured in *The New Yorker* last month, Haruki Murakami weaves a critique of our world's hypocritical condemnation of lookism and its simultaneous obsession with women's appearance. The force of such a statement is all the more amplified as it stands bare in an unembellished, blunt writing style. What strikes me is how Murakami conveys complex issues such as the symbiotic bond between one's face and one's perception of the self, the malleability of identity, and the fluidity of beauty, all through a deceptively simple character, Kaho—the eponymous protagonist of the story and the "plainest woman" her "quirky" blind date has, purportedly, ever seen.

Syeda Fatema Rahman

