

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Shards of beauty: POEMS OF A LIFETIME

Review of 'Yardstick of Life: And Other Poems' (Amazon, 2024) by M. Shahid Alam

I do not remember how the variations unfolded, nor do I know if the poem was among the 50 Alam supposedly destroyed—or among others mysteriously lost. But it's more than likely that a few of the poems in the sheaf I glanced at are here: the poet's Preface informs us that the collection includes work from his late teens to his seventies, i.e. from the late sixties till the book's publication last year.

KAISER HAQ

Shahid Alam and I go back a long way, though we had both half-forgotten it until recently. He was two years senior to me at St. Gregory's High School. I didn't know him personally, as I did several of his classmates. At Dhaka University he studied Economics, like many of my schoolmates, and I'd see him bustling about in connection with the departmental rag, titled *Optima*, that he edited. My friend Taqi Sudderuddin assisted him in the venture, rather lackadaisically, if I remember rightly, but he was full of admiration for Alam's dedication and discipline. The two became friends, and, I suspect, talked more about their shared interest in literature and philosophy than about economics. Indeed, both had taken it up somewhat reluctantly, Alam under parental pressure, for economics had a certain cachet among the Social Sciences. Once he had bowed to his parents' wishes, he didn't stint in his commitment to his academic discipline, and came out First in the First Class in the BA Honours examination of 1970.

He was active in the departmental student body as well, successfully contesting for General Secretary on a Leftist student party ticket. He was halfway through his MA when his life was sadly disrupted by the military crackdown. His family had moved from Calcutta to Dhaka in 1947, his birth year; now, he had to relocate in Karachi to finish his studies and take up a university position. He'd take a PhD from a Canadian university and, in the late eighties, move to the US, where he had a distinguished career at Northeastern University, and is now an emeritus professor.

His poetic pursuits continued throughout, on the side, but for that reason with no little seriousness; his Gregorian classmate (Professor) Shawkat Hussain, an English Literature student in the late 60s, recalls visiting his home in Mohammadpur and being shown samples of his translations of Ghalib; these efforts found eventual fruition in the publication of *Intimations of Ghalib* (Orison Books, 2018), reviewed by Ahrar Ahmed in *The Daily Star* of June 8, 2019.

Taqi showed me a sheaf of Alam's original poems that the poet had given him to read when they had met, ostensibly to talk about the departmental magazine. "Shahid Bhai quickly took care of magazine matters



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

and began Pounding away," Taqi reported in his characteristic humorous conversational manner, punning alluding to Alam's enthusiasm for the poetry of Ezra Pound. It made an impression on me, for Pound was part of my bedside reading. I had a quick look at Alam's poems too. There's little I can recall after 55 odd years except that the poems were short and carefully crafted, like Pound's early poems. One poem, perhaps the very first one, remains etched in my memory because of its peculiar blend of passion and playfulness. All in lowercase (if I remember rightly), it repeated a one-line statement a dozen or so times, each time with slight changes in the configuration of words and letters. The opening, signature line, went (I'm sure) thus:

go tell her i love her
I do not remember how the variations unfolded, nor do I know if the poem was among the 50 Alam supposedly destroyed—or among others mysteriously lost. But it's more than likely that a few of the poems in the sheaf I glanced at are here: the poet's Preface informs us that the collection includes work from his late teens to his seventies, i.e. from the late sixties till the book's publication last year.

Of more moment is the aesthetics expounded in the Preface. In Urdu and Persian, there exist in distinguished

profusion both long and short poetic forms. Allama Iqbal's *Asrar-i-Khudi* (1915) is a well-known example of a long philosophical poem in Persian; Hali's *Musaddas-e-Hali* of a long narrative poem in Urdu. But the most popular and impactful form is undoubtedly the relatively short Ghazal, which is typically between five and a maximum of 15 couplets in length. Alam models his poetry on the Ghazal, whose distinctive traits are highlighted in the Preface: the self-contained character of each couplet, and of each of the poems, which are arranged with no reference to the date of composition, but rather in the alphabetical order of the repeated phrase called the *radef*.

These are not mere dry technical details, though. Each *shehr* or couplet is an epigrammatic unity wittily blending observation, emotion, and ratiocination, and in consequence achieves the unified sensibility that Eliot identifies in Metaphysical poetry and upholds as a desideratum for the modern poet. The Ghazal also transcends another kind of dissociation of sensibility that F. R. Leavis diagnoses in modern culture as a consequence of the divergence of highbrow and popular taste; the Ghazal appeals to the sophisticate as well as the common man.

13 of the poems in this volume are labelled "Ghazals", though Alam

takes liberties with the form. Some have only four couplets, and not all are rounded off with the *Takhallus* or poet's name or *nom-de-plume*, which is a convention also seen in Bengali as the *Bhanita* in Vaishnava and *Bawool* lyrics. Poets naming themselves before concluding add a touch of personal drama, heightening overall impact. The final couplet of the first ghazal resonantly alludes to Sura Al-Alaq, and reveals a deeply felt religious vision:

Shahid, you were a clot.
Remember and recite.

Alam's declared aim is to capture "precious moments", which may be equated with the Joycean concept of the epiphany, a cornerstone of modernist aesthetics. Alam ends the poem, "Goldenrods", by charmingly conflating the natural and the aesthetic realms:

In the bee, beauty
makes honey: in man
it becomes epiphany.
But modern man's hunger for beauty
is fed by corruption—a somewhat
Baudelairean corruption, as in the
"Circe":

Men thrown here by rare
Mischance, delight in her
Incurably, interrogating her
Icy flesh & marble bones
For shards of beauty.

Precious moments do not preclude
pain; his departed son Junaid,

the book's dedicatee, is movingly memorialised in "Uncommon Care" and "Mary".

Alam is sensitive to the poetic potential of everyday domestic settings and events, like William Carlos Williams, whose poem "This is Just to Say" is called to mind by "Birthday", which deserves to be quoted in full:

Happy birthday!
I fixed the light switch
inside the fridge.
Sorry, I took
so long to fix this.
I would not do it
on any ordinary day.

The collection has a Foreword by Guy Rotella, emeritus professor of English literature at Northeastern University. Generally speaking, I regard introductory pieces in poetry collections by anyone other than the poet as excrescences, but not in this case. Professor Rotella not only gives a useful overview of Alam's work but highlights an aspect that readers might overlook; for Alam is a committed postcolonial intellectual and activist, and "in three overtly political poems," "Genghiz Khan", "America's Past", and "Holding the Center", he exposes "the tricks by which rulers or nations reify their hegemony as if it were inevitable and natural."

The thought has crossed my mind that Alam writes Urdu poems through the medium of English. Even if the reader agrees, I'd hasten to add that the poems are no less successful as English poems. Steeped in the traditions of Urdu and Sufi poetry, Alam successfully infuses the sensibility they embody into English verse. No wonder the poem "Translation" meditates on the importance of cross-cultural transactions:

All poetry translates
from buried scrolls, from
vanished hieroglyphs, from
the concerto of feelings
to the poetics of discovery.
Translation is not treachery.

Alam is a translingual and transnational poet whose life has been divided between Dhaka, Karachi, and North America. He can therefore be claimed by Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the South Asian diaspora in America.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Acknowledging the lesser-known

Review of 'Ateet Theke Adhuna: Women Writer of Bangladesh' (Panjeree Publications Limited, 2024)

edited by Niaz Zaman

MAEESHA WAJID

Aptly named *Ateet Theke Adhuna: Bangladesher Naari Lekhok*, this collection is unlike a conventional anthology. Starting with Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the list of writers includes an impressive 66 great authors. To imagine that such a large number of women who have written and have been writing in Bangladesh for 100 years has flown under the radar is indeed humbling and, frankly, disconcerting; I call acquiring knowledge of this unsettling matter because it sheds light on yet another glaring example of the age-long undermining of women's capabilities. It is also sad to note that before these eight women, no man had considered paying homage to those who "once wrote", and even those who "couldn't speak up or write". The dedication reads "To the women artists, both known and unknown, who once wrote, and to those who couldn't speak up or write..."

Traversing this veritable history of a 100 years of Bengali women's writing, the book offers readers a much-needed look into the numerous trials that women, to begin with, have had to overcome to learn to read and write, let alone write to publish. With the overt expressions of patriarchy being rampant during the 80s, and mid-to-late 90s, women of those times had to fight tooth and nail to step out of their houses to demand and act to receive their basic right to education. Braving chastisements, threats of and eventual ostracisation, these 66 women relentlessly and single-mindedly pursued their dreams. The tribulations they suffered and the indignity that was freely



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

doled out to them by the unfair norms and conventions designed by the patriarchy led them to make note of the injustices happening around them—to the weak, to the poor, and to the very country itself. This observation led them to include in their writing stories where the demeaned had voices that spoke not only for themselves but also for the nation they so dearly loved. And love the country they did (even

though it had not done much in the way of making these women's contributions widely known), as evidenced by their spontaneous and fearless participation both on the field and off it during the war for liberation. From writing fiery essays, invigorating poems and stories, to designing a plan to blow up the national power grid and hiding and ferrying arms to the freedom fighters, these women, even in the face of certain danger to their

persons and their families, shed the demure persona and, in dismissal of societal norms, came to their motherland's aid in whichever capacity they could.

Aside from the stories about biased traditions and characters whose lives mirrored their own, the fictional pieces created by these women also reflected the experiences of womanhood in all their variety. Narrated in an intimate tone, these

stories explored the vast emotional range of women and delved deeply into their innermost feelings about love, loss, grief, and death. Some of the texts and poems also broke convention and portrayed women characters who were morally ambiguous and open about their needs and desires.

If this compilation shows that women can and will break through barriers to realise their dreams, then it also makes apparent that, in the journey to reach their goals, women need their support systems just as much as men do. In all these women writers' backgrounds, the help and encouragement that these families have given them have stood out as common elements; if not for the staunch support that was unrestrainedly extended to them by a father, a mother, a brother, and/or a husband, their creative expressions would never have found their place on paper. In the current climate of gendered divisiveness, it was especially heartening to read about the gift of writing paraphernalia conspiratorially given by a brother to a sister; the morale-boosting declarations of approval made by a father to a daughter; and the loving espousal of and the eager prods to action initiated by a husband for his wife in their journey to bring their thoughts to life. The truth that none can exist as an island was further cemented by the inclusion of these facts about the writers having accepted the help that was offered to them by those closest to them.

This is an excerpt from the review. Find the full article on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites.

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