

“The City”

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In a popular Bengali classic, a rich young man named Navakumar finds himself on a shore after a miserable shipwreck. Surrounded by a dense forest, he tries to make his way through it in search of food. All of a sudden a very beautiful young girl appears with all the innocence of Miranda in *The Tempest*. She asks Navakumar, “Passer-by, are you lost in the forest?”

Let me come out from the spell and grandeur of the splendid classic novels and turn to the reality where I am in. The other day, I was standing on Gilbert Street trying to find my way to the Prairie Lights Bookstore. I was confused as to which way I should go. Then alone came one of my friends from the International Writing Program, no less wonderful than Miranda and with greater generosity. My friend drew my attention to the road map of Iowa City, and as she showed me how all the streets intersect with one another at right angles, I found my way. The map of the city looks like a geometric drawing with several rectangles. There must have been a lot of town planning, logic and wisdom behind the development of Iowa City. So there is no way one can get lost or be confused in this city as one may be in a forest.

So, this is the city, a creation of man. A city is like a piece of art. It is created like the Grecian Urn for which John Keats wrote an ode. People pour their passion, their love and, above all, their toil into the construction of a city. Every city has its special beauty as well as its glamour. In addition, every city has its unique character. It seems, in fact, that a city even possesses a soul. When a traveler visits a new city, its outward charm attracts the traveler. But it is important for a stranger to touch the soul of a city and to know its unique character. I read the book “The City of Joy” written by Dominique Lepierre. I discovered how deeply he penetrates into the life of the city of Kolkata and how intensely he feels the pulse and ambience of that Indian city.

In recent times, we find the city playing a vibrant role in literature as well as in all other spheres of art: painting, sculpture, music and so on. In the early twentieth century, we hear Charles Baudelaire, the French poet, speaking about the city, as if singing hymns in his own sarcastic way in his poems. I consider Baudelaire the pioneer to portray the city in poetry. In a rather ironical manner, he places the city in his poetry with his striking, shocking and peculiar metaphors. We know Frantz Kafka, who never visited America (am I right?), wrote a novel, namely *America*. There is a poem by Federico García Lorca, the Spanish poet, namely “Poet in New York”. We hear the city howling in Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”. Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish

poet and Nobel Laureate, is another urban writer who portrays the city very vividly in his poetry. And there is T. S. Eliot's poetry full of city images. He talks about the River Thames and the London Bridge. He tells us about one J. Alfred Prufrock who plans to measure his time with coffee spoons. We hear again from him about an urban character – Phlebas, the phoenician, a fortnight dead in his poem “Death by Water”. In Bangladesh, there are many poets who are noted as urban poets as they portray the city largely in their poetry. A major poet among them is Shamsur Rahman who passed away two years ago. Another of these urban poets is Shahid Kadri who has been living in New York for the last two decades.

I want to share with you some of my experiences which come to my mind. One day, about twenty years ago, I was walking through the streets of Prague with a map of the city in my hand. It was my second day in Prague, and I knew nothing about the city. Suddenly, I noticed a nameplate in front of a small house marked with an inscription, “Here lived Franz Kafka”. Kafka is one of my favorite writers. Imagine, what a thrill it was! The same thrill I went through when I saw quotations of the writers inscribed on the pavements of Iowa Avenue.

Now, as I am writing at my desk in my temporary home in Iowa, I can see a map of Iowa City hung on the wall. The Iowa River is flowing gracefully across the city. It is difficult for me to imagine how furious it was only two months ago. However, this river reminds me of the River Buriganga, which flows by my city Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Whenever I fly back to Dhaka from an overseas trip and look through the window of the aircraft to my city, I feel an indescribable peace. From up in the sky, it is a beautiful green city crisscrossed by rivers. But, to one on the ground, Dhaka is a vibrant, busy, overcrowded city, teeming with both sides of Reality—the bright as well as the dark. I have lived in Dhaka since my early childhood. I saw the city growing up through continuous evolution. Bangladesh is a poor and underdeveloped country. But Bangladesh has a very rich cultural and traditional heritage. In 1971, Bangladesh emerged as an independent country after a long courageous liberation war, at the cost of 30 million lives. Dhaka, as the capital city, bears the marks of all these struggles upon her face. To me, Dhaka is the source of all the strength that enables me to carry on the struggle of “To be or not to be”. In one of my poems, I wrote, “O Dhaka, where should I go, leaving you behind? O Dhaka, my childhood friend!”