







with numerous holes.  
 I have not inherited my mother's instinctive skill of mending;  
 Cotton derived from lamb's wool  
 That could have kept the shawl warm  
     is unknown these days in the market.  
 I can only faintly remember a flicker of fire  
 That I found glowing inside my mother.

Nowadays the houses are too much cloudy  
 Our days are ridden by bone-chilling cold.

How can I assure myself that  
 My daughter would be provided with adequate warmth  
     by that old worn out shawl?  
 Or should I ask my mother for that indomitable holy fire  
 That I found burning within her!

*February, 1997*

*Translated by the author*

### **The First Line**

God, you are supposed to send me  
     the First line of a verse  
 And, look, here I am sitting and waiting and getting dusty!  
 Time Flew from one planet to another  
     Giving out signals  
 The stars flared up and died out  
     embracing a timeless space  
 The Universe was immersed in moonlit ecstasy.  
 Yet a century is drowned in moonless darkness.  
 Monsoon- filtered night goes in vain,  
 O Yes, in vain,  
 And I shed no tears of pain  
 Though the sky goes on weeping.

Holding the green traffic light in my eyes  
 I swing a lifetime fixed in traffic Jam.  
 With outstretched hands I am that blind beggar  
 Amongst a crowd rough and rowdy  
 Standing in a stupor!  
 O God, I thought you kept promising



### Fantasy

In what profound blue you're sleeping  
 on the right side of this wakeful me,  
 sleep's peacock – blue artistry within your body;  
 opening my human eyes in the radiant dark I see  
 this integrated affair of sleep in shaggy midnight  
is Satyajit Roy.

My body too stays filled with sleep,  
 but on some nights dreams arise and called me  
 and calling, carry me along the roads  
of inexorable destiny; since  
 dreams also have various urgent  
and hear felt business with us  
 for which the time of sleep is most appropriate.  
Like a surreptitious thief it is  
 so I take its hand and go there  
 where in the end less river purple water goes on flowing.  
 A false bridge juts half finished out  
To the middle of the river;  
 I keep standing on that bridge.  
 Bending down, I go to gather flowers and sorrow  
out of the water  
 And at that moment my entire collection of sleep  
falls out of my pocket.  
 With a clatter, and scatters throughout the solar universe,  
 And from within my flesh something else flies off:  
 As if a yellow bird screeched and flew away  
 Into the tangle of moonlight  
toward nature's deliberations.  
 These two sounds alone roam around  
 and smash up the shadows  
of all the trees in the city,  
 Disrupting the prostrate dialogues of trees and stars.

I seat there awake on the breast of sleep,  
 Fire burning in my blazing third eye,  
following those tantric holly men –  
 This season sits there awake  
 Turning into frost, into a month of winter,  
 Into the bleached white of skulls  
in the display of a peahen's tail  
 The white ghost of moonlight beckons from the window pane,  
 Jibanananda's camel smiles sweetly  
and rattles the doorknocker.

I keep my mouth shut. I warm my consciousness,  
disguised as fire wood, over the ritual flame.

In this night, this cold,  
December's last few hours,

the past gradually blends into the future  
and pushes the future like a rejected , worn - out dress

back into the hands of the past;  
And in this process, crooked deceptive midnight  
enters into me and is fulfilled.

Like a self-absorbed bird, you sleep on,  
And together with your nice full head of hair  
You keep me covered—  
Just as all the minarets, in their spherical cores, embrace  
some emptiness, some air.

In this time of transiting  
I don't know who is my master, who my lord.  
With no other shelter I, Brihannala, see only you;  
Holding this begging bowl smeared with peahen's blood,  
Where, in what eternity, will I find that ambrosial fount?  
With a generous right hand, let a few grains  
of sweetness fall with a clatter  
In this dark time of worship.

Infect my body with your glorious sleep.

1974

*Translated by Syed Manzoorul Islam and Carolyn Wright,  
with the author.*

*Notes:*

Satyajit Ray is India's leading film director, best known for sensitive and subtle portrayals, of human life. Many of his films are in black and white, and set in his native Calcutta. Many are based on the novels of fellow Bengalis Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee, Sunil Gangopadhyay, and Rabindranath Tagore.

A famous poem by Bengali poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), entitled "at bachar ager ed din" ("A Day Eight Years Ago") contains a memorable simile, of "a certain silence, like the long neck of a camel," ("uter gribar mato nono ek nis-stabdhata ese"), which appears beside the sleepless speaker's window after the moon sets. This vision prompts him to commit suicide, as it makes him realize that he can no longer bear the burden of constant sorrow.

After thirteen years of exile, in the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharat*, the heroic Pandave brothers take refuge in disguise in the court of a king, in order to conceal themselves from their enemies, the kurus, before the decisive



given) is the bureau at which taxes and other bills are paid. It is the bane of many middle-class Bengalis' existence, in that records of paid bills-or even the cash itself--can be mysteriously lost by office staff and only found again upon payment of an additional--unrecorded--sum.

*Translated by Syed Monzoorul Islam and Carolyne Wright with author.*

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### **Coping with Others: The Writer's Dilemma**

After the Bengali poet Jibanannada Dash died in a tram accident in Calcutta on a gloomy October day in 1954, an onlooker wonderingly commented that not even a cow could be run over by the slow-moving Calcutta tram: how come then that the Babu (gentle man) became a victim of such an accident! Should we consider this accidental death as the usual way for the poet and writer to cope with others, with the World? Or should we admit that Jibanananda Das failed to cope with the 'others' of his world and submitted himself to his tragic destiny? We may, in the same way, approach and brood over the fatal end of Ernest Hemingway who took his own life. In these two cases, was it a failure to cope with 'others'? Could these 'others' be easily named?

The Writer, like every individual in society, is surrounded by a crowd of infinite others. A few individuals even bear the entities of others within themselves.

These various sorts of others constantly demand attention from them. To respond to this is not easy. When it happens to be uneasy, it becomes a matter of 'coping'. It seems that the writer has to face such situations of 'coping' more frequently than other individuals in society.

Am I right in considering the writer as someone different from other members of human society? Yes and no. The writer is, of course, a very normal human being with a rather special ability to explore his humanity and that of others. The writer is a highly sensitive person. Additionally, perhaps he has a conscious or unconscious sense of a mission, which could at times become a driving compulsion. And he is unusually endowed with the capacity of self-questioning and social interrogation. What is the overriding importance to

me, at the moment, is the writer's (or for that matter any individual's) willingness and ability to recognize and empathise.

There is a familiarity that hides and deadens perception, there is a proximity that obstructs vision, there is a force of stereotyping-- traditional, social and psychological--that robs human beings, including our dear ones, of their individuality and humanity. I suppose, I am expected to know my husband, son and daughter, but I wonder whether I know them well enough, and fully! How sincere are we when we recognize one another? How real are we to one another? The writer's problem --not his dilemma --is to break down the various impediments that obscure the reality of human beings. So the writer feels the urge to speak out the truth that seems to be lying beneath the surface of the apparently visible Reality. Like a fisherman beside a river, the writer concentrates all his efforts on searching out the truth he looks for. In his endeavor the writer may come down to the street from the ivory tower of Art. There is Rabindranath going out to the vast open fields of Bolepur to set up a new education system for young people. There is Pablo Neruda talking about people's rights. Bhisham Sahni reveals the conspiracy of British imperialism working behind the communal riots on the subcontinent in 1947. Shamsur Rahman protests the inhuman terrorist activities of the fundamentalist activists in Bangladesh.

The writer cherishes a secret desire to change the world he lives in. He has a strong faith in the printed word. But every practitioner of the craft of writing knows that his manipulation of words involves a kind of reordering, subversion and change. The writer does want to change things. But he shares neither the Neanderthal simplicity of a George Bush nor the organized cruelty and indifference of governments to ethnic and religious minority. He recognizes grey as well as dark areas. Arundhati Roy has said it all for us already--I cannot do it any better. Incidentally, a brave man in Bangladesh, Shahriar Kabir, attempted to tell his people, in his capacity as writer, of the dark happenings that took place in his country during the past few weeks, now finds himself in prison on the charge of treason.

The ethnic groups and religions minorities in Bangladesh could do with more attention and sympathy from the writer there than they have so far received. Among the SAARC countries, India has a secular constitution while Bangladesh has its strong secular heritage derived from its liberation war. And yet, ironically enough, in neither country do the government & the people seem to really care for secular values. For instance, we find little or no treatment of ethnic or Hindu life in Bangladeshi fiction -- a clear evidence that the minorities are largely absent from our minds. This points to a profound psychological and sociological problem, which is hardly ever discussed in public. We do not yet have a Mahashweta Devi who treats ethnic and minority characters with great understanding and tenderness in her recent novels. I do feel that we creative writers, with some exceptions, are indeed guilty of a serious failure of imagination. Our sense of human responsibility has not extended beyond our own group.

In all these situations, the writer faces a difficulty to cope with the others who are around him. He has to cope with his family members, his friends, and his colleagues. At times he has to cope with the State and the government and even with a stronger global power. For example, after the 11th September devastation in New York and Pentagon the writer may have to cope with a powerful international alliance. As in the case of Boris Pasternak, the

State did not accept the truth the writer upheld, and inflicted penalty upon him. Sometimes the writer thinks far ahead of the others, and cannot communicate properly with them. History shows that the writer frequently fails to cope with others in such situations. But instances of his success are not at all rare. He carries on this ceaseless effort of coping, and his success is inevitable in the long run.

People like to idealize the writer, to associate an aura of dream with his name. As if he were writing upon a table of sandalwood, his pen were studded with diamonds. May I now turn, with due apology, to another aspect of coping as a writer that is rather mundane and could even be embarrassing to the successful and affluent among you. In reality, like other human beings, the writer too feels hungry, and may have debts to repay. The writer also has to earn enough to keep his body and soul together. There are in fact, few writers who are fortunate enough to earn their livelihood by writing. To become a full-time writer is still a dream for most of the writers of the world, especially those of the SAARC countries where the people live below the poverty level. It is quite impossible in this region to earn a proper livelihood by writing. So the writer has to do some other job that enables him to earn money. Consequently, writing becomes his part-time or secondary occupation. With a reluctant heart the writer transforms himself into a teacher, a journalist, an insurance agent which marks his identity in society. The n has to spend much of his time and energy making a living. Thus the writer has to maintain an existence torn by the contradictory pulls of his real passion as a writer and the distractions of staying financially viable.

The situation becomes worse when the writer is a woman, and furthermore, a poet. Poetry hardly brings money or popularity to writer. In view of the glamour of technological advancement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wise people do not show much confidence in the utility of poetry in human life. So neither the family nor the society, nor even the publisher encourages the writer, specially the woman writer, to write poetry. On the other hand a woman writer's concern for her children and her household demand has no less priority than her concern for writing. In fact, the woman writer is called upon to fulfill multiple demands.

This is the other part of the dilemma of the writer, whether a man or a woman, a poet or a novelist. No-one seems to possess the magic power to change the situation to the writer's advantage in the near future. Yet the difficult circumstances seem, paradoxically, to give the writer the impetus to carry on his pursuit.

Read at the SAARC Writers' Conference, Delhi 2001

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