

# THE REST OF NOW

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## AMPHIBIAN MAN NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

Every time I translate Syed Mujtoba Ali, I start with a recitation of facts. Familiar to Bengalis, unknown to everyone else. This time as well...?

Mujtoba was one of the famous Indian writers, emerging from the Bengal renaissance and the end of the British colonies. Unusually for a Muslim, he penetrated deep inside Hindu *bhadralok* (genteel) circles, reaching the bastion of exclusivity by becoming a professor at Shantiniketan. He pulled off a delicate task—respect in India’s literary circles, and popularity among the plebs—and he was a roving artist in Europe in the 1930s, existing seamlessly in many cities and countries. He was not the familiar figure of today’s economic or political refugee, but an intellectual and cultural exile, his bohemian nature putting him at odds with the Indian middle class, but at home on European streets.

This many decades later, translating his text or his life is an uphill task. The genius of his chosen form—a cocktail of languages, puns, double entendres, insider references, and metanarratives—is lost in translation. I get wistful when I reread Mujtoba’s stories. Cafés, dinner parties, card games, Herrs and Frauleins and Mademoiselles. Now, when Bangladeshis are scattered all over the world, selling flowers in Italy and postcards in London, I wonder how Mujtoba passed with such ease in that society. Stories of old-world, melancholy afternoons in Parisian cafés sit uneasily with Schengen zone realities.

Consider his story of a showdown with Italian customs. His friend Jhandu-da is carrying a tin of vacuum-packed sweets—the mythic Bengali dessert *roshogolla* (literally, ‘orb full of juice’). When a customs officer insists on checking the tin, the following scene breaks out. Can we imagine a world where we can squash a sweet into a customs officer’s face and not immediately get arrested? How delicious then, this slice of Mujtoba’s Europe.

### IMMIGRATION (1960)<sup>2</sup>

*The devil immediately pulled out a tin-opener from under the counter. There was no lack of guillotines during the French revolution either. Jhandu-da studied the tin-opener and repeated, ‘Remember, you have to taste the sweets to make sure they are real’. The customs officer gave a thin little smile. The sort of smile we give if our lips are cracked from the winter chill.*

*Jhandu-da cut the tin open. Well, what else would come out? Roshogolla. Forgetting any formalities with fork and knife, he started picking sweets with two arched fingers and giving them out. First to the Bengalis, then all the Indians, then finally the French, Germans, Italians and Spaniards.*

*The French went, ‘Epaté!’ The Germans, ‘Fantastisch!’ Italians, of course, said ‘Bravo!’ Spaniards, ‘Delicioso, delicioso!’ Finally, the Arabs, ‘Ya Salam, Ya Salam!’*

*The entire customs office was swallowing roshogolla. The air was full of that sweet scent. Only with Cubist or Dadaist techniques could you draw a picture of that scene. Meanwhile, Jhandu-da was leaning heavily against the counter and saying to the officer, in Bengali, ‘Come*

1. In the eight-volume revised edition from Dhaka/Dacca or the eleven-volume original from Kolkata/Calcutta.  
2. ‘Roshogolla’, *Monthly Basumati*, Chaitra 1363 (Bengali year) (1960).

*on, just try one’. In his hand was a juicy roshogolla. The officer put on a serious face and shook his head.*

*Jhandu-da leaned forward even more and said, ‘Look, everyone is eating it. It’s not cocaine, not opium after all’. The officer shook his head again.*

*Suddenly, Jhandu-da slid his entire belly on the counter, grabbed the officer’s collar and squashed the roshogolla into his nose.*

*‘Damn you, you won’t eat it? Your whole family will eat it! You think this is a joke? I told you a million times, “Don’t make me open it, they will all spoil, the little one will be crushed!” But no you wouldn’t listen...’*

*By then the customs house was in chaos. In a strangled voice the officer started screaming for help. He cried not just for guards, but Il Duce Mussolini, Consuls, Ministers, Ambassadors, and even Plenipotentiaries. Mother Mary, Holy Jesus and the Pope thrown in for good measure. And why shouldn’t there be a fuss? This was a totally illegal act. If you try to stop a government official by crushing him with your one-hundred-and-twenty-kilo body and force-feeding him, whether you feed him sweets or arsenic is irrelevant—you can definitely go to jail for this. In Italy, you could hang for lesser crimes.*

*Five of us grabbed Jhandu’s waist and tried to drag him off the counter. Jhandu-da’s voice kept rising octave after octave, ‘Oh you won’t eat it, sweetheart? You won’t? I’ll make you eat it now!’ The customs officer kept calling for the police. But his cries were so weak, I felt like I was receiving a long distance call from my golden homeland India. But where on earth were the police? The French lawyer raised two hands in prayer and offered unsolicited commentary, ‘This is truly a holy land, this Venice, this Italy. Even the Indian sweet can create miracles by making all officials disappear. This tops even the “Miracle of Milan”! This is the “Miracle of Roshogolla”!’*

*By now, we had managed to get Jhandu-da off the counter. As the officer pulled out a handkerchief to wipe off the debris, Jhandu-da yelled, ‘Don’t you dare wipe that off. That will serve as your witness in court—exhibit number one!’*

*Within three minutes, the head officer made his way through the crowd. Walking up to the officer, with an open box, Jhandu-da said, ‘Signor, before you proceed with your cross-examination, please try one of these Indian sweets’.*

*The officer put one sweet inside his mouth and closed his eyes for two-and-a-half minutes. With eyes still closed, he held out his hand. Again. Another. Now Jhandu-da said, ‘A drop of Chianti?’ Like an agonized Kadambini came the cry, ‘No. More sweets’. Finally. The tin was empty. The customs officer made his complaint at last.*

*The head officer replied, ‘You did very well to open that tin, otherwise how would we get to taste it?’ Then looking at us, he yelped, ‘What are you all staring at? Go get some more roshogollas!’ As we quietly crept out, we heard him berating his junior officer, ‘You are an absolute ass! You open the tin and you don’t try this delicious object?’*

*The Italian poet Vincenzo de Filicaja wrote,*

*'Italy Italy, why did you hold such beauty in you  
There must be tragedies written in your fate.'  
And so I say  
'O Roshogolla, why did you hold such sweetness in you  
Italians forget their true Christian religion  
And fall at your feet today.'*

People find many reasons to resurrect historic figures. Mujtoba's breakthrough novel *Deshe Bideshe (Home and Abroad)* was an extended travel journal that brought him instant fame in Bengal. But as the travel genre became dated, literary historians focused on his Muslim identity. Such an identity is too narrow, because Mujtoba broke out of every proscribed confine (Sylheti, Muslim, Bengali, Bangladeshi, Indian, Asian). Like Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who insisted on translating his own works from Bengali into English, Mujtoba embraced English, French, German, and in fact Europe itself, just at the time when Muslim revivalists were insisting that English was the language of the colonizers, and that decolonization warriors must learn Arabic and Urdu.

MADemoISELLES (1952)<sup>3</sup>

*You can't spend all your time at the National Library or Guimet Museum. I had already enjoyed all the joie-de-vivre of Paris. I was walking among the crowds on Place de la Madeleine when suddenly I heard behind me, 'Bonsoir, Monsieur le docteur!'*

*I turned and saw a girl who looked like one of the millions of French beauties. With a ready pout on her face, she said, 'Oh, now you don't remember me! But you knew me even before you met your new love, Paris!'*

*As a schoolboy, a sudden slap from the teacher would remind me what the capital of Montenegro was. Just like that, it came to me—of course, I had met her on the train from Marseilles when I first arrived in France. My hat was already off, now I added a bow and pleaded, 'A thousand pardons and I beg your forgiveness, Mademoiselle Chatineau!' When it comes to high courtesy, there is much similarity between Paris and Lucknow. If you ever leave your book of Parisian etiquette at home, don't hesitate for a second—just start using that antique Lucknow style. It works like a charm.*

My memories of Mujtoba start with my mother. These things always do. Mother sits and embroiders complicated designs on saris. Mother talks about my eldest aunt dressing up to meet Mujtoba's German girlfriend.

Wait—he had a German girlfriend?

Not one, several... Well, no one used words like that.

Words like what?

Girlfriend.

Right, ok (I brush it aside)—but was there really?

Well I know they got dressed up to meet her. I never heard anything more.

You never heard if she was pretty or not? How could that be?

Well I did hear that she was older. But wait don't talk about this. This is not an interesting story.

It's interesting to me.

ITALIAN WOMEN (1956)<sup>4</sup>

*In English, you say 'carrying coals to Newcastle', in Gujarati 'full pitcher to the river', and in French, why, 'taking your wife to Paris'. The French phrase is tasty. But the question remains, are French beauties really that generous?*

*First, French women are truly beautiful. English women have boy faces, German women are blunt, Italian women look a bit like Indians (why go to Europe for that?). And Balkan girls, their lovers are always in a killing mood (saving oneself is the first rule). And one more thing—French girls really know how to dress, with very little money, very little material.*

*But beauty is not always the first thing that pulls us in. In countries where courtship is the norm (not ours), I have often seen beauties go wanting while plain girls tear up the town with fantastic husbands. So is it that people look for beauty for love, but something else for marriage. Are they two different instincts? It's possible, I suppose.*

*A German girl will treat a guest very well, maybe even fall in love deeper than the French. But you will always remain an Auslander to her, always the 'foreigner'. The French girl divides the world in a different way. For her there are two types of people—cultivated and uncultivated.*

The reason for this conversation. Mother worries (occasionally). Her son has vague work and a roving life. A bit too similar to stories she heard about her uncle, Mujtoba Ali. Of course it's preposterous, looking for Mujtoba traces in my life. But as the joke goes, every Bengali mother thinks her son is Jesus

In mother's memory, Mujtoba was too brilliant to be a family man. He was always in Paris, Berlin, London, Vienna. Hardly ever in his hometown Dacca.

So you see, it is not good to have too many girlfriends (Mother says).

He seems to have had a grand time.

Yes grand time, but in the end he came back to marry a Bengali girl. After all that.

Well why did he?

He knew the German girlfriend would not work. No one would accept it.

How do you know no one would?

I know these things.

LADIES OF THE NIGHT (1952)<sup>5</sup>

*In India, the Hindus go to Kashi, the Muslims go to Mecca, in Europe all the disciples head to Paris in search of the meaning of life.*

*As the disciples walked down the streets, at every step you would hear the sweet tones of 'Bonsoir monsieur, may your evening go well'. If you responded to the siren call—well, what happens next, I have no personal experience, nor do I crave that experience. I have no need to become Emile Zola's tragic hero. I still haven't been able to digest what Sarat Chatterji wrote, leave alone Zola.*

*I was a little lost in thought, otherwise I would have never replied to that last 'Bonsoir'. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized I had made a mistake. Handling two beauties in one night was beyond my meagre strength. My ancestors handled four beauties at the same time. My generation's fall from those heights was quite pronounced.*

*What was such a flawless vision doing on the streets? It is true, what Tulsi Das once said, 'The universe travels along such strange paths. The bartender sits in his tavern and sells wine, and there is no end to the crowds. Yet the poor milk-seller has to go from door to door to try to sell his milk'.*

*I said, 'Please don't be offended, but I can't quite place where I met you'.*

*What to do now, she had started to walk with me. If she wasn't one of the vendors of 'life', why was she walking with me? And why not say something—good or bad? No more of this, I would leave Paris tomorrow! I prefer my crosswords to be in the morning newspaper, not on the streets.*

Crosswords and puzzles. Teasing out memories of Mujtoba. Paradoxically, though there are many more possibilities for travel today, Mujtoba's easy and intimate relationship to Europe acquires a sharp edge in the light of contemporary discomforts with outsiders. In the era of Fortress Europe, he seems an improbable figure—almost as the title character of a Russian novel popular in 1970s Dhaka: *Ubhochor Manob*—fish in water, man on land. Swimming in and out of cultural spaces, across borders, with impossible ease.

## THE GHOST OF FORMOSA CÉDRIC VINCENT

*I pretend not to give you a perfect and complete History of my Island, because I was a meer Youth when I left it, but nineteen Years of Age, and therefore incapable of giving an exact Account of it. Besides, I have now six years from home, so many things of moment may perhaps slip my Memory.*

Preface to Psalmanazar's Description of Formosa, 1704

In 1764 a book appeared in London with the title *Memoirs of \*\*\*\*, Commonly Known by the Name of George Psalmanazar; a Reputed Native of Formosa*. In accordance with the author's instructions it was published after his death, and it would probably have attracted little interest today had it not contained surprising revelations about a celebrated book published sixty years earlier.

When it came out in April 1704, *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa* was applauded as the most thorough study yet written of Formosa (present-day Taiwan). The book described in minute detail the history of the island, as well as its political system, customs, economy, language, architecture and forms of dress. It also recounted the life of the author, a native of the island who was newly converted to Anglicanism after having escaped the Jesuit Inquisition. Part ethnographic study emphasizing the strangeness of the Formosan culture, part satire of the Jesuit order, and part confession of an authentic Formosan native, the book quickly gained an avid audience all across Europe. For a while the author's name was on every lip. He received the official protection of the Bishop of London. He taught the Formosan language at Oxford University. Certain passages of *A Modest Proposal* (1729) by Jonathan Swift were inspired by Psalmanazar's book. In his biography of Samuel Johnson, one of the most influential literary critics of his age, James Boswell reports: 'When I asked Dr Johnson, who was the best man he had known? "Psalmanazar", was the unexpected reply: he said; likewise'.<sup>1</sup> Despite all this, George Psalmanazar (1679?–1753) never went to Formosa. His Formosa was a pure invention, and only his posthumous confession revealed the deception.

We know little about Psalmanazar. Even his real name remains unknown.<sup>2</sup> Everything is as if he wanted to ensure that all the information we have about him today came from his own writing. At the end of his life, his autobiography provided a coherence that his deceptions and omissions had previously made impossible. It gave a unity to his life's journey, which he presented as a succession of games of identity, fluid and flexible.

Psalmanazar was born in the south of France, a region with strong heretic traditions, in about 1679. He was brought up by Franciscans at first, then Jesuits and then Dominicans. Then, assuming the identity of an Irishman persecuted in his own country, he travelled around the south of France and Germany, earning his money from begging. He was drafted as a soldier, and escaped being executed as a spy when he passed himself off as a Japanese man from Formosa, already using the name 'Psalmanazar'. In 1702, his regiment arrived in Sluis in the Netherlands, where he met a Scottish chaplain, William Innes. Innes invited the 'Japanese' man to his