

Nautical Fiction: An Exquisite Confluence of Literature and Maritime Lineaments

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World literature has been enriched and beautified with the contributions of different authors, novelists and poets who have penned unforgettable books on the affinity between human race and seas since time immemorial. There are scores of literary masterpieces both in forms of prose and poetry which come under the genre of nautical fiction or maritime literature. In this article, I am going to make a humble effort to narrate the stories of a few nautical fictional works which are widely read and applauded worldwide and have been translated in almost all major languages across the globe. In literary terms fictional works stand for novels and short stories which are sometimes based on true events as well.

Let me start off with famed 19th century American author Herman Melville's novel *Billy Budd*. This book was published in 1924 while Herman Melville died back in 1891. Billy Budd is the protagonist of the book. A British warship named HMS Bellipotent recruited Billy Budd as a sailor from a merchant ship who was a young man not exceeding 25 years of age. Billy Budd is characterized in the novel as a plain-dealing youth who keeps quiet most of the time except necessary conversations with his fellow sailors and superiors on the ship. Billy Budd gains admiration from most of the ship's company very soon by virtue of his skills at work and sincerity. The ship's commanding

officer Captain Vere was also impressed with Billy Budd's hard work and in particular with Billy Budd's feature of doing his duty without complaining about any of his colleagues onboard.

However, an experienced and elderly sailor named Dansker one day secretly informs Billy Budd that John Claggart, the master-at-arms of the ship, does not like Billy Budd. Dansker added that John Claggart is not happy with the way Billy Budd is becoming so popular with his fellow sailors and officers. Billy Budd did not take Dansker's message seriously and continued working in his own dedicated and professional way.

Soon Billy Budd identified some shady deals going on between a few members of the ship's company and some unknown people who don't belong to the ship. Billy Budd became concerned over the law and order on the ship and shared his trepidation with some sailors who were close to him. It took no time for John Claggart to figure out that Billy Budd has come to know about the suspicious things happening onboard. John Claggart started conspiring to put Billy Budd in trouble. Surveillance on the activities and movement of Billy Budd was conspicuously broadened. Billy Budd also sensed that he was put under strong monitoring.

One day all on a sudden rumours spread among the ship's

company that some sailors are hatching a plot to stage a mutiny. Captain Vere, the ship's commanding officer, calls John Claggart in his cabin and asks John Claggart whether the rumours are true or not. John Claggart answered that some sort of dissatisfaction among the sailors has emerged which did not exist before recruiting Billy Budd. John Claggart further said that it needs to be investigated rapidly what is actually going on and added that most probably Billy Budd is the ringleader of the stratagem.

Captain Vere calls Billy Budd to his cabin and tells him about the allegations he has heard from John Claggart. Billy Budd denies the allegations in presence of John Claggart. But John Claggart insisted that keeping Billy Budd onboard would be risky because Billy Budd is adding fuel to the fury of sailors. An argument broke out between Billy Budd and John Claggart in front of Captain Vere. At one point Billy Budd blew out of his temper and delivered a heavy punch on John Claggart's forehead. John Claggart fell down on the floor with blood gushing out of his head. The ship's surgeon declared him dead.

Billy Budd was immediately placed on a trial on charges of murdering John Claggart. The judges including Captain Vere at the trial did not take much time to conclude with the verdict that Billy Budd should be executed. Billy Budd remains absolutely calm and soundless while all these catastrophic things were happening. Finally Billy Budd was hanged but right before being executed Billy Budd yelled out "God bless Captain Vere" (Melville 2002).

After several weeks HMS Bellipotent faced a battle with a French frigate in which Captain Vere, the commanding officer of HMS Bellipotent, sustained serious wounds. He was soon admitted at a hospital in Gibraltar but he succumbed to his injuries. The last words that Captain Vere muttered before his death were "Billy Budd, Billy Budd" (Melville 2002). This novel bears themes of professional envy, humanity and penitence. The last words mumbled by Captain Vere reflect the fact that it was painful for him to order the execution of Billy Budd but Captain Vere at the back of his mind was suffering from the contrition of executing Billy Budd but he had no choice as he was a man in uniform commanding a ship and the murder took place in front of him.

Herman Melville's another novel, which is considered his masterpiece, is *Moby Dick* which was first published in 1851. This book portrays a bizarre seafarer named Captain Ahab who leads a whaling ship named "Pequod." Captain Ahab walked on a stick and had a false leg made with the jaw of a sperm whale. Captain Ahab lost his leg several years ago when a huge whale attacked his ship. Since then it became Captain Ahab's obsession to hunt down and kill the whale that caused him to lose a leg. He named the whale Moby Dick.

Gabriel, a man who worked on a merchant ship, had a prophetic power, according to the novel. He once advised Captain Ahab to move away from his pursuit to catch Moby Dick. Gabriel added that all the sailors and harpooners that attempted to kill Moby Dick faced mysterious disasters. So, the idea of trapping Moby Dick and to kill the gigantic whale would be a risky one, Gabriel cautions Captain Ahab.

Nevertheless, Captain Ahab did not pay heed to the advice from Gabriel and stuck with this lifetime target to hunt down Moby Dick. The aim of catching Moby Dick drove Captain Ahab crazy and persuaded him to behave absurdly with his ship's crew. The narrator of the novel is Ishmael, an ordinary sailor on Captain Ahab's ship. Ishmael was astonished to see the fearsome magnitude of Captain Ahab's lust for taking revenge on a whale. Ishmael had worked for some other ships in the past he did not come across anyone so crackpot like Captain Ahab.

Captain Ahab makes the lives of his sailors troublesome with frequent instructions to catch Moby Dick and often gets angry whenever chances are missed to catch whales that resembled Moby Dick. One day a typhoon hammered Captain Ahab's ship and a sailor gets killed. Starbuck, the ship's first mate, reminds Captain Ahab about the prophecy of Gabriel and says that some more dangers are looming ahead if Captain Ahab does not stop his mad quest for the whale Moby Dick but convincing Captain Ahab has already crossed all borders of human capability. Captain Ahab stopped all daily chores of his ship and engaged all sailors to find Moby Dick by any means. Captain Ahab even declared that he would not have the slightest regret even if he loses his own life in his combat with Moby Dick.

Finally one day Captain Ahab sighted Moby Dick and identified the mammoth whale. He sent out all his harpoon boats to kill Moby Dick. The monstrous whale devastated all the harpoon boats and then attacked Captain Ahab's ship. Ahab gets caught in a harpoon line and is thrown overboard by the massive blow from Moby Dick. Captain Ahab's ship was shattered by Moby Dick which led to Ahab's death. Captain Ahab was prepared for this kind of death because he knew too well that a confrontation between him and Moby Dick would imperil his own life. *Moby Dick* is taught in a lot of universities across the world. This novel has immortalized Herman Melville and ornamented him with the status of an icon in the field of nautical fiction, according to renowned literary connoisseur John Updike in his book *Hugging the Shore* (Updike, 2013).

Another landmark work of nautical fiction is *Mutiny on HMS Bounty*. This novel was first published in 1932. It was jointly authored by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall, both of whom are American novelists. Roger Byam, the novel's protagonist, is introduced to the reader, and we learn that he was invited by Captain William Bligh to embark on an expedition to Tahiti to gather breadfruit trees and take them to the Caribbean Islands, where they will be planted and their fruits will be fed to the slaves of English colonists. Byam is ordered to formulate a dictionary of the Tahitian language.

HMS Bounty sets sail in November 1787 and its crew is introduced to the reader. The ship stops for a while on several islands during its journey to Tahiti and meanwhile, conditions aboard the ship begin to deteriorate. Foodstuff started rotting while the crew suspects Captain William Bligh of hoarding food for himself while several men are accused of stealing food. Anger was mounting among the crew.

HMS Bounty reaches Tahiti and Byam began studying the Tahitian

language with the aid of some of the natives. Members of the crew begin the task of digging up young breadfruit trees and storing them on board the ship. Many of the men entered relationships with the Tahitian women and the realization that HMS Bounty would soon be sailing from this idyllic life caused displeasure among the crew. As a result three members of the ship's company deserted before the ship left.

HMS Bounty sets sail for the Caribbean Islands to deliver the trees, and early in the voyage, Captain William Bligh scolds his crew - in particular, he accuses some of them of stealing coconuts. His officers, remarkably Fletcher Christian, began grumbling over the poor treatment that they are receiving at the hands of Captain Bligh. Consequently, one morning, some of the crew, led by Fletcher Christian, seized the ship and forced Captain William Bligh, along with some of Bligh's followers, on to HMS Bounty's launch to fend for themselves on the high seas. A few sailors and officers wanted to accompany Captain William Bligh but could not because of the packed up conditions of the launch on which Captain William Bligh and his loyalists were accommodated forcibly by the mutineers.

Fletcher Christian immediately began sailing to the South Sea in search of an uninhabited island, but finding none and tired of the complaints of his fellow mutineers, Christian returned to Tahiti, where he dropped off those who wished to stay on the island, including Roger Byam. Then Christian resumed his search for an unexplored and uninhabited island.

Byam liked the easy-going lifestyle he experienced the first time on the island and soon he married a Tahitian princess. A child was born to the couple and life on Tahiti continued to be a paradise until an English ship drops anchor at the island. Byam rushed to meet the vessel and was immediately imprisoned as a mutineer, along with the other Englishmen on the island.

While taking the prisoners back to England to be prosecuted for mutiny, the ship ran aground on a reef and sinks, but not before the crew and prisoners have taken refuge in the ship's smaller boats. The small boats made an open-sea journey, and finally, after several months of sailing and woeful hardships, they reached land safely. The mutineers were jailed aboard another vessel, which took them back to England to await their court martial.

The court martial of Byam and his companions began. Testimony was given by the men of HMS Bounty who made it back to England. Byam and the other men were then allowed to present their defenses. The adjudicators examined all evidences and listened to the statements from eyewitnesses and found Byam, along with five of the other nine men, guilty of mutiny against HMS Bounty. Three of the six condemned men were taken to be hanged, and the other three, Byam included, were saved from execution only hours before their apparently unavoidable deaths. Byam was forgiven because Robert Tinkler, a friend of Byam onboard the HMS Bounty, strongly supported Byam's testimony with convincing descriptions at the court martial regarding Byam's innocence

and the other two men were also saved from capital punishment after being vindicated by the British judges.

Roger Byam went back to his family and started leading a rather carefree life free of worries and trepidations after undergoing so many vicissitudes. However, as seamanship ran in his blood, he joined another ship at the behest of the ship's captain. The ship battled the Dutch off the coast of Spain and came off victorious.

As the novel comes to a closure we find Roger Byam getting promoted to the rank of a Captain, given his own ship and he ordered his staff to sail to the South Sea. He paid a visit to Tahiti where he came to learn that his wife was no more, but that their daughter was alive. Captain Roger Byam met his daughter Helen, now a grown up girl, but did not reveal his identity to her. The magnificent novel ends with Captain Roger Byam recalling all the memories of the ups and downs he had to confront, looking back on his romance with the Tahitian princess whom he had married and stowing away a wish in the core of his heart to reunite with his wife in the world hereafter.

There are many more highly celebrated works of nautical fiction such as *Captains Courageous* by British author Rudyard Kipling, *Toilers of The Sea* by French novelist Victor Hugo, *Mr. Midshipman Easy* by British author Frederick Marryat, *Treasure Island* by another British litterateur Robert Louis Stevenson, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* by French science fictionist Jules Verne, *The Hunt for Red October* by Tom Clancy, and the list goes on and on.

Seas, oceans, maritime discourses, naval history of different countries etcetera have been very intimately bonded with literature for thousands of years if we glance back at ancient Greek bard Homer's imperishable epic *Iliad* with repeated allusions to seas which was written long before the birth of Jesus Christ. The authors and books described above are timeless gems in the realm of nautical fiction. These literary creations have splendidly stood the test of time and till today entice readers from all walks of life.

In postmodern Bengali literature Harishankar Jaladash's noteworthy novel *Jalaputra* is based on the lives, livelihoods, smiles and tears of fishermen living along the coastal areas of Bangladesh. This novel was published in 2011 while it was translated into English by Quazi Mustain Billah with the title *Sons of The Sea*. Quazi Mustain Billah is a retired Professor of Department of English Language and Literature in University of Chittagong. *Sons of The Sea* was published in 2014.

Around forty million people of Bangladesh live in the country's coastal region whose livelihood is for the most part dependent on fishing in the Bay of Bengal. Institutions like Bangla Academy, prominent academic scholars and the concerned ministries can motivate litterateurs to produce novels on equal terms with nautical fiction and effective steps need to be taken to have these literary works translated into English language so that these books can draw attention and applause from readers in foreign countries.

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