

SHORT STORY

Goodnight, Mr. Kissinger - Part II

KAZI ANIS AHMED

V.

I hoped the second time Kissinger saw me, since it was already several weeks from our first meeting, that he would not remember me. Instead, as soon as I brought him the menu, he greeted me affably, "James, right? From Bangladesh?"

"You are very kind to remember, sir," I said trying to put on my best faux-English politeness. It worked well with the older crowd. "James is a bit of a student of world politics, even geography, if I remember correctly," said Kissinger to a blonde budding newswoman who was his dinner companion that night.

"Again, you are too kind, sir. May I bring you some water? Or, call the sommelier?"

"Sure, sure, there will be time enough for all that. Tell me first what you think of this terrible attack," said the old man easing into a winged leather chair. The old fox was not to be diverted easily. Once during the meal, and then again when I brought him the check, he tried to trap me into political talk. I would not have expected Kissinger to be the kind of big man who engages underlings, let alone service staff, in chats of any kind. But, clearly I piqued some perverse interest in him.

I persuaded the Head Waiter to assign me to the front part of the restaurant, adjoining the bar-lounge area. They preferred to have the good-looking actors work that area. People like me, people with personality, we were told, were needed in the main dining room, where the more demanding older customers were usually seated. Luckily the Head Waiter, a bushy-browed gay Englishman of great Old World charm, had taken a liking to me, and I managed to get my area changed.

The next time Kissinger walked in, I could watch him with relief from a distance. I was talking a young couple into ordering our hideously over-priced special of the night -- a "Kobe Wagyu" beef with cockle clams Agar Agar in a seaweed soy sauce. It was the latest invention of our famous Spanish Chef, a diva of insufferable proportions. In the middle of my sale, suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was the Head Waiter with a twinkle in his old eyes.

"Kissinger asked for you," he murmured in my ear, and turning to the young couple in his cheeriest tone, "May I continue taking your orders, please?"

This was more interest than I expected or required from Kissinger. No doubt the man had a streak of sadism in him. He would not stop pestering me with probing questions about the state of my country. One day he asked me if I thought it was a matter of time before a Bangladeshi would be caught in a terror attempt.

"Why just attempt, sir, why not an actual attack?" I blurted out, on the verge of losing control.

"I can't imagine they would have the competence, can you?" said Kissinger with a smile.

I could feel the vein in my scalp throb. I placed the wine bottle



artwork by mustafa zaman

back in its silver bucket before I was tempted to swing it down on Kissinger's face. After that second encounter, I could not stop thinking about harming Kissinger. Not since my teenage years, had anyone or anything sparked such sustained fantasies of violence in me. A steak knife would of course be the obvious choice of weapon

in this context. I was not sure I would be entirely beyond committing such a bizarre attack.

My entire past, I realized looking back from the calm perch of my new life, was strewn with acts of petty violence. I used physical force to impose my will, whenever my personality or reasoning was not enough. It came easily with people against whom a certain degree of violence was permissible in my culture - students, servants, urchins, neighborhood toughs. But, I pushed the boundaries of even other relationships. Once I took a rude parent by the arm to walk him out of my room. I banged on the table of my startled principal to make points. Another time I shook a policeman almost senseless for trying to shake down my scooter-driver. All those actions -- more than I could actually list -- pointed inevitably towards the excess of my last action.

So many people in the world -- from Chile to Cambodia -- had a cause, at least as justified as mine, against Kissinger, yet was I the first to have access both to his person and to dangerous weapons at the same time and place? How many times had he been exposed to the possibility of a stray, lunatic assault?

VI.

Kissinger came to The Solstice at least once a month; usually for dinner, and never failed to engage me in what he must consider friendly banter.

If I really wanted to hurt him, all I would have to do is wait for his next visit. I would watch him from the bridge to the serving station, eyes glazed and lower lip hanging, signs of a glutton, or just age, slowly passing morsels of rich food from his plate to his mouth on the tips of a silver fork. I could snatch that fork away and stab him in the eye faster than any security man could bat an eyelid. Besides, they were easily distracted with a plate of appetizers. Realizing that I had him in my hands seemed to have a calming effect on me. No matter what impertinent comments he made, I thought to myself, Old man, you have no idea how close you are to danger!

I wondered if he was rude to people from every country whose independence he had opposed. Or, did he detect some streak of defiance beneath the veneer of my professional politeness that prompted him to make rude remarks about my country? I expected the animal instinct to be strong in a man like him. Instead of outright injury, I toyed with the idea of insults. Splashed wine, stinging slap. The more I thought about it, I also realized that no injury I could cause him would get either Kissinger himself or the world to see him as I wished. Still, part of me wanted to be provoked to the point of explosion, no matter what the outcome. Could you get deported for mouthing off a former Secretary of State? Could such rashness be construed as a threat to national security?

Of course, even the slightest of actions entertained in my fantasies would certainly cost me my job, if not throw me in jail. For all my pride, I found that that was deterrent enough. I don't understand why life's restraints work so well on people like me, but not on the likes of Kissinger or the killers of 1971, when it comes to

wreaking harm. Why can some people, literally, get away with murder, becoming ministers, or dining on Pemaquid oysters, while we can only stew in impotent rage?

I chose as a sign of protest the habit of leaving it to other waiters to see Kissinger off. I refused to pull his chair or fetch his coat. Dodging these tasks became an art, made easy by the fact that four other waiters were perfectly happy to step in for a big man. The Head Waiter himself loved attending to his biggest clients so much that he did not seem to notice that I was absconding from my proper role.

I started working fewer nights, having finally relented to offer private lessons to some Bangladeshi students. Some of them struggled to pass high school, while others strove to earn good scholarships. These tuitions paid very little, but I found that they formed a good balance with my restaurant job. Instead of cursing Kissinger all the way back from work on the 7 train I jotted down little points for the next day's lessons. I was sure I could get many more of my students qualified for college than they seemed to think possible.

I had saved up enough money to buy a place of my own, though I chose to send it back to my brother. I told them to buy an apartment in Dhaka. I started taking a Bangla paper now and then to my diner in the mornings; football scores of teams I once rooted for brought a strange glow of warmth to my heart. The novelty of meeting a figure like Kissinger began to fade. He stopped seeming like history embodied. I began to realize the impossibility of finding satisfaction in the event of a great wrong. I asked my students, during the Liberation War, "Can you forgive those who don't even know that they need to be forgiven?" I drew blank stares, and diverted the discussion to other topics.

I thought of writing a letter to the student whom I had hurt. Even though I was sure he could never forgive me.

Kissinger's provocations did not abate. I see you have once again topped the list for corruption. What is it with your people? Don't you really think it might do better as a province of India? The man's capacity for offense was endless. But his comments could not touch me anymore. Indeed, when he came to The Solstice soon after the Bangladeshi Independence Day, I reminded him of the fact, knowing full well he might use it as an opening. "Not much to show for thirty some years, except billions in aid and debt?"

"So it would seem from afar, Mr. Kissinger. But not up close," I contradicted, taking a chance. At any rate, the man's predictability amused me.

That night I finally saw him off. I fetched his coat and opened the door, towering over his short, stooped figure, moving slowly under heavy coats.

"Thank you, James," said Kissinger, as he stepped into the cold March night for the warm cocoon of a waiting limousine.

"Goodnight, Mr. Kissinger," said I, drawing the door of the Solstice behind him to a close.

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The Business of Creativity

ADIB KHAN

There are times when I feel as if I am a hypocrite. Occupying the middle ground between creative writing and academia, I am not entirely certain if I should be more actively engaged in the debate about whether creativity can be taught. There's nothing new in the argument. The Latin aphorism, poeta nascitur non fit ('a poet is born, not made'), is a definitive historical basis for much of the scepticism about the institutionalisation of creative writing. In his Art Of Poetry, Horace made the point that a poet must be innately gifted, even though his talent has to be nourished. Centuries later, Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of Judgement, pursued a parallel line of thinking. The same argument focussed on fiction in the late nineteenth century after the British novelist, Walter Besant lectured on 'The Art of Fiction' at the Royal Institution. In his 1884 address, Besant contended that like all art forms, 'no laws or rules whatever can teach' fiction writing 'to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts.' Besant's observations prompted Henry James to claim that fiction cannot be circumscribed by a set of laws.

In our times, a great number of Creative Writing courses operate on the fallacy that those students who choose such courses are innately talented writers and who can be directed, shaped and nurtured towards publication of their works. Students are admitted into my novel writing course on the basis of a folio of previously written creative pieces. Some of the short stories and narratives are exciting, I am told by the selection panel. That is not the ideal criteria, I argue. It's like saying that a sprinter with a good track record can also succeed in running a marathon. I get nowhere, of course. I am invited to look at the waiting list for the course. I am supposed to feel triumphant and justified by the fact that I have a full class every year. The course is popular and it must go on. Economic rationalism prevails. The number of students in a class determines funding. Never mind the talent or the quality of writing.

My Sisyphean struggle has to continue. It is my embarrassing confession that in ten years of teaching Creative Writing, I have not had a single student who has produced a manuscript, worthy enough in content and structure, that I could pass it on to my agent or publisher for consideration. My only consolation is that I have encountered a number of writer-teachers with an equally abysmal record.

As a novelist, it is my firm conviction not to question the source or the nature of processing my ideas while I am writing. I do not spend time agonising how those ideas are transmuted into words or, indeed, how I achieve a structural wholeness in a novel. It all happens. I do not need to explain anything to myself. It would be so simple to let it rest there and get on with the business of writing. But, of course, I had to complicate my life by undertaking to teach Creative Writing. Teach Creative Writing? I am more of a facilitator than a teacher. But that is a

conclusion I have reached after a decade of classroom experience, mostly with idealistic undergraduate students with naïve notions and pronouncements of commercial publishing. I do sympathise with them. They make me reflect on my own ignorance about publishing after I had finished my first novel. My first class every year is a routine affair. I try to be honest by declaring that I do not have a definitive explanation of creativity and nor do I have the ability to teach anyone how to write creatively. I can discuss the tools of novel writing and the process of creativity. Perhaps I can even enhance students' awareness of the creative incubator in the imagination. But I am unable to formulate a method that can be applied to every piece of fiction. The expression of my limitation is usually met with polite silence. I can almost hear the students thinking. Confessions of an incompetent teacher. Fancy spending a whole year with him. Fortunately, most undergraduates eventually understand the need to focus and learn from themselves, operate within the frameworks of their imaginations, why I emphasise the necessity of finding an authentic 'voice', and my motives for existing on the periphery of their journeys of self-discovery and creation.

In Australia, there has been an astonishing proliferation of Creative Writing courses in tertiary institutions, sometimes at the expense of studying Literature. It is not a trend that I view with great enthusiasm. I hate to think that we are following the American way. Over two decades ago, in 1982, the American essayist and novelist, William H. Gass, observed: 'Creativity has become a healthy, even a holy word. Its popularity is recent, its followers alarmingly American. The command has gone out from gurus of every persuasion: be creative! An injunction which is followed by the assurance that it's actually better for you than bowling; and millions have eagerly, anxiously responded. The pursuit and practice of something labelled creativity is now an epidemic as tennis or jogging, and apparently as difficult to discourage, now it's here, as trailer parks, poverty or movie going.'

(Habitations of the Word: Essays, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985, p.118)

Our predicament is not quite as severe as the American experience, but hypergraphia (the exaggerated desire to write) is seemingly on the increase. Publishers are overwhelmed with unsolicited manuscripts, literary agents are hounded with self-proclaimed masterpieces and the reading public is exposed to a bewildering diversity of fiction. The problem has become so acute, that some of the major publishers now refuse to read manuscripts unless they have been recommended by literary agents. My own agent, Lyn Tranter, of the Australian Literary Management, has often told me that literary agents have to be quite ruthless for the sake of efficiency. In Lyn's case, if the manuscript of a first-time novelist does not engage her in its first few pages, then she will not read any further.

Creative writing has as much to do with style as content. Those who have ambitions

of becoming published writers must also read to develop an awareness of the trends in writing. And by 'reading' I am not necessarily referring to those standard and sometimes 'tired classics' prescribed by conservative and unimaginative English Departments around the world. During a conference in Kolkata on Globalisation and Post-Colonial Literature earlier this year, I had the privilege of meeting a couple of Bangladeshi students studying in India. One of them requested me to look at the first few pages of a novel which he was writing in English. He gave me a synopsis of the work before handing me the first chapter. The content sounded interesting. But after reading the first few pages, it was painfully obvious that this novel would not be publishable. The writing was clichéd, sentimental, melodramatic and suffered from an Edwardian correctness which plagued so many subcontinental writers until Salman Rushdie came along to break the shackles of Imperial formality. It was the kind of English that was induced by deference to a foreign language, and not something that had been adapted, absorbed and energised by the cultural imperatives of the subcontinent. I spoke to the aspiring novelist about style in contemporary fiction, and it became evident that he was not familiar with most of the writers I mentioned.

But what about creativity itself? The difficulty of explaining creativity or, indeed, the creative process, lies in the disconcerting awareness that we are dealing with the intangible, something that does not manifest itself clearly in a recognisably consistent form. There are no rigid rules, no fixed guidelines or principles. It is a murky world of variables without any constants. It is the weightlessness of drifting in space without coordinates and without the support of a mother ship.

The problem has bothered writers for centuries. For instance, in a conversation with Dr Johnson, Boswell once enquired, 'Then, Sir, what is poetry?' And Johnson's reply was, 'Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is.' And it is that distinction between the 'knowing' and the 'telling', that large gap between perception and articulation, where the dilemma exists.

We are all blessed with the ability to imagine, and this most elusive of human wonders can be viewed in two ways--first as a faculty capable of reproducing images of a pre-existing reality, and secondly, in a creative sense, with the capacity of producing original images in their own right. The question that immediately arises is how do these images originate? We are also compelled to ask, what is it that provokes their development in the human consciousness? The possible explanations can only be speculative and varied, since they are inextricably tied to individual experiences.

Creativity is a volatile and an unreliable force. In the 1970s, when physicists began to pay close attention to the observable irregularities in the natural world, there evolved the science of process that we now know as Chaos. But long before it leapt into prominence, the pivotal role of chaos in creativity was recognised by both artists and

writers. James Joyce is said to have written to an aspiring author: 'Young man, you do not have enough chaos in you to write a novel.' The notion of chaos was not as complex then as it is now, and it is a pity that Joyce did not further elaborate his views about the state of inner turbulence he regarded as being essential for a novelist. I think he was talking about a state of emotional upheaval and that peculiar condition of mental feverishness and their effects in stimulating the imagination to produce those images that are the raw material of novel writing.

During the process of writing, one tends to turn inwards and scan a labyrinthine landscape that can be barren or dense and teeming with life. You wait patiently for clear sounds and distinct movements. Even when you intuitively know that there is 'something' in the maze, it is often shrouded in a mist and appears to recede as you approach it. Frequently you settle for fractured sightings and fleeting images, sporadic eruptions and, occasionally, violent earthquakes.

But to assume that the imagination is all that matters in writing is to ignore the crucial element of an indigenous cultural environment which becomes a key determinant in shaping a work of art. To dismiss the pivotal role of a cultural incubator is tantamount to a failure to recognise the uniqueness of a writer's personality which is the life-centre of an individual's creativity. The imagination not only has to contend with the external world, but must come to terms with the inner self--the ways in which we think, feel, perceive and generally respond to people, events, situations and ideas. I can think of no better example to illustrate the necessity of the meeting between the imagination and the rational mind than the lines from Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass: "Well, now that we have seen each other," said the unicorn, "if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?"

A novelist has to strike an agreement with the imagination about the cultural margins of creativity. The shape of that boundary is mutable--it may be oval, round, square, elliptical or rectangular. The landscape is variable, but there is ultimately the recognition of the framework within which the imagination functions meaningfully. Wander too far beyond its limits, or try to extend them forcibly, and the result is often contrived and artificial.

The entire process is subtle and complicated. Its understanding takes time and reflection, and cannot be guided by the demands of a semester's work requirements at a university. With each draft of a novel, the process becomes more comprehensible and facilitates the shape and direction of the final outcome. But the ultimate realisation is a sobering one. The process is unique to the specific work. The next novel will inevitably require a different approach. The struggle with the imagination will be just as intense. As Roland Barthes wrote in Writing Degree Zero: 'A creative writer is one for whom writing is a problem.'

Adib Khan is a Bangladeshi born Australian writer.

Book Review

Coming-of-age novel

FARAH AMEEN

Swimming in the Monsoon Sea, by Shyam Selvadurai; New Delhi: Penguin India; 2006 (first print 2005); 211 pp.; Rs. 250.

It is not surprising that the main character in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* wrestles with his attraction to his male cousin. After all, homosexuality is officially outlawed in Sri Lanka. Openly gay, Shyam Selvadurai has explored the controversial topic in his writing before. In his latest novel (for young adults), the Sri Lankan Canadian author tells the poignant tale of orphaned Amrith, who struggles with the issues of mourning, loneliness, jealousy and his own sexuality. The 14-year-old has to come to terms with missing his mother, fitting in with his adoptive family and deciphering his burgeoning love for his cousin, Nireesh. Set in 1980 Colombo, the book is lush with descriptions of the monsoons, tumultuous sea, palm-fringed beaches, vibrant colors, delicious food, beautiful sights and traditional architecture of the South Asian country.

The monsoons and the rolling sea mirror the turbulence within Amrith, especially after Nireesh's unexpected visit. We first meet Amrith after a storm on the anniversary of his mother's death. Ever since his parents were killed in a motorcycle accident (the details are murky, though we know that his father was an alcoholic), Amrith has lived with his mother's bubbly best friend, Bundle, and her gentle husband, Lucky. However, Amrith seems to blame Auntie Bundle for his mother's death. He punishes her by pretending to have forgotten his own mother: "She asked him the same questions every year. 'Son, don't you remember your mother at all?' He shook his head . . . and avoided looking at her. Later . . . Amrith kept a few steps behind Auntie Bundle. He felt a curious bitter pleasure in denying her his memories."

Amrith leads a privileged life with the Manuel-Pillais--it involves country clubs, servants, tailor-made clothes, summer vacations and good food . . . most things that money can buy. But emotionally he's destitute, constantly yearning for his mother, whom he achingly recalls in vivid flash backs that he doesn't share. He is a shy, withdrawn, "invisible" teenager, one who does not have friends. Although he is close to his adoptive sisters, Selvi and Mala, he experiences a sense of alienation from the family. The situation peaks when Nireesh visits Sri Lanka with his father, Merlin, Amrith's maternal uncle. A mature

16-year-old who's grown up in Canada, Nireesh forges an immediate bond with his newfound cousin, lapping up everything that is Sri Lankan about him. For Nireesh, who isn't as self-assured as he appears, feels alienated in both his Western and Eastern worlds. Enthrilled by Nireesh, Amrith neglects rehearsing for the part and, ultimately, is cast as Cassio. He's mercifully teased about it (especially the scene where Cassio and lago kiss) because of his devotion to Nireesh. However, the drama teacher rebukes a student who picks on Amrith: "I have friends in the theater world who are that way inclined, and it's no laughing matter in this country," she says. "I don't like such things being ridiculed. Don't ever do that again."

Before Nireesh's arrival, Amrith's holidays show all the signs of dragging--his only plans were to learn typing at Uncle Lucky's office and audition for the role of Desdemona in his school's production of *Othello*. Amrith's life soon begins to parallel the play, with its theme of jealousy and revenge. Enthrilled by Nireesh, Amrith neglects rehearsing for the part and, ultimately, is cast as Cassio. He's mercifully teased about it (especially the scene where Cassio and lago kiss) because of his devotion to Nireesh. However, the drama teacher rebukes a student who picks on Amrith: "I have friends in the theater world who are that way inclined, and it's no laughing matter in this country," she says. "I don't like such things being ridiculed. Don't ever do that again."

As Amrith starts acknowledging the nature of his love for Nireesh--and it's lifetime implications--he realizes that he will always be different. In his country, this type of love is not "natural." He is a "ponnaya," a derogatory word "whose precise meaning Amrith did not understand, though he knew it disparaged the masculinity of another man, reducing him to the level of a woman."

In this gay coming-of-age novel, Selvadurai paints a vivid picture of his native country, the background to his portrayal of a teenager's loneliness and angst. However, Amrith's acceptance of his homosexuality is less convincing--it seems a little too quick for a boy who's spent more than six years dealing with other life-changing issues. But we do watch him mature, learn from his mistakes, forgive and realize that jealousy can drive a person to take extreme measures. When it creates a rift between him and Nireesh, Amrith knows how to "surmount the barrier" that's between them. And as the year's first monsoon season slowly ebbs, so does some of Amrith's inner turmoil.

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