

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

In his second feature of the series on three outstanding editors of South Asia, the writer here pays his tribute to the former editor of DAWN, Altaf Hussain, whose death anniversary falls on May 25. The first one of the series, on Abdus Salam, appeared in February; the last one, on Faiz Ahmed Faiz, will be published soon.

Altaf Hussain—the Editor Who Could Make or Break a Government

All the three outstanding editors — Abdus Salam, Altaf Hussain and Faiz Ahmed Faiz — who are being featured in this column, had little in common, in terms of their professional attitudes, political beliefs and the working style. In this respect, they were different from one another, like chalk from cheese.

However, their lives shared certain similarities of a different kind. All three came into their respective newspapers from outside the profession and straightaway became chief editors. Salam was an accountant in Calcutta; Faiz was teaching English literature at a college in Lahore; and Altaf Hussain who had done a lot of journalistic writing in his student days was a college teacher and then the Director of Public Information, Government of Bengal.

In this sense, among the three, Hussain was the closest to journalism even before he assumed the editorship of Dawn in October 1945, then published from New Delhi, as a personal choice of the Muslim League leader, Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

The other similarity touches on a note of sadness. All three spent their last years, away from newspaper journalism, in circumstances which were unquestionably unhappy and probably, as their close friends would say, tragic.

After being forced out of the editorship of the Bangladesh Observer in 1972 by the then Awami League Government, Salam was virtually a non-person in the field of Dhaka journalism and he remained so until he died a few years later. Having quit the Pakistan Times in 1958 when the paper had been taken over by the Ayub administration, Faiz spent several years as the head of the Pakistan Arts Council. However, instead of staying on with this prestigious organisation, Faiz moved to the Middle East, first to Cairo and then to the strife-torn Beirut, editing "Lotus", a cultural magazine of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Organisation, which few of us had ever seen. If he was not in exile, he was certainly lost to us in the last years of his life.

The exit of Altaf Hussain from the editorship of Dawn — and from the profession — was different and, as in the case of the other two, somewhat forced. Having come to the conclusion that he ought to have a more pliable man as the editor of Dawn than the current independent-minded journalist, President Ayub had been trying to get Altaf Sahib over into his cabinet, and finally succeeded in bringing him in March, 1965 as the Central Minister in charge of Industries and Natural Resources. It was a job that the editor of Dawn did not at all care for, a job that robbed him of much of his authority and power. After three years, he resigned from the government owing to ill health and, just ten days later, on May 25, 1968 he died of a heart attack

at his residence in Karachi. My first impression of Altaf Sahib as we all addressed him, when I called on him at his office, was one of authority that the Editor of Dawn exuded in full measure. There was no ambiguity about it. He spoke in English, in short crisp sentences, in a clear decisive voice.

In a message sent through my uncle with whom I was staying in Karachi, Altaf Sahib had made it known that he could now offer me a job, for such and such salary, to carry out such and such functions and that, finally, I should start working from such and such date. It was all very clear-cut. If there was no ambiguity about the offer, there was also no scope for any bargaining.

The offer had, indeed, come at the right time, when I had just completed three difficult months with the Evening Times of Z.A. Suleri,

take many major decisions," he said. "But, in Dawn, you will be a small fish, in a very very small pond."

Suleri was only partly right. Being the youngest member of the editorial staff of Dawn in late 1952 when I joined it, I often felt — certainly looked — like a small fry. The fact that I was the only Bangalee, other than the editor and his son Ejaz then posted in Geneva as the paper's special correspondent, working for the so-called national daily, often gave me a feeling of isolation, sometimes alternating with a sense of distinction.

However, when it came to my functions and responsibilities, I was anything but a small fish. My main job was looking after the two-page Sunday Magazine which was part of the regular 12-page daily. I handled this job, from commissioning freelance contributions to laying out the pages, with near-total

publication. There was no variation in the routine.

At that time of the day, Altaf Sahib seldom seemed to be in a good mood. Maybe the mistakes in the paper, which he had already marked by his blue pencil, would put him in a sulky frame of mind. Or it could be something else.

My presence and the sight of the bunch of letters rarely helped in changing the mood

correspondence column, unless such views were detrimental to the interests of the nation. He would pay no attention to my feeble protests which I voiced over his refusal to publish certain kinds of letters, especially what he regarded as politically-motivated ones.

When, much against my better judgement, I became more selective in my choice of let-

I had not taken me long to realise that most senior members of the staff maintained a kind of love-hate relationship with their editor.

Altaf Sahib's domineering personality and his somewhat intimidating working style put people off, creating a barrier between the editor and his colleagues. As I was never asked to attend the daily news conference or the smaller meeting which selected the topics for editorials, I had no first hand knowledge of the way the editor conducted discussions with members of his staff, who were undoubtedly all very competent people. A colleague once said that while on certain issues, Altaf Sahib encouraged a bit of a free discussion, he seldom went for decisions by consensus. He had little patience for long-winded academic discourses and he treated whatever he regarded

in Dawn, I have some difficulties in figuring out why I rate Altaf Sahib as an outstanding editor, a truly eminent personality, the type that has become rare in journalism in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In my view, the greatest contribution Altaf Sahib made to journalism was that he gave the editorship of Dawn a unique prestige, built on power and authority, which he used — most observers said, with scrupulous fairness — strictly according to his own judgement, not under the dictates of the Haroon family which owned the publication.

In dealing with successive Prime Ministers of Pakistan, between 1952 when Khwaja Nazimuddin was in office and 1958 when General Ayub pulled his coup, Altaf Sahib called the shots.

Once, while writing on a food crisis that had hit the

or in solving the problems between the Centre and what was then East Pakistan.

This was the failure not so much of Altaf Hussain as of Dawn and, indeed, of the press, as an institution, in Pakistan.

DESPITE an admonition from Altaf Sahib — "No one ever resigns from Dawn", he said — I left his paper at the end of 1953 to go to Britain for what I said optimistically to friends, "higher training in journalism." Altaf Sahib was right. My resignation from Dawn was an event and the staff gave me a farewell tea party where, much to my surprise, the editor made an appearance. It was more than an appearance. He made a touching speech.

While making some complimentary references to my work for Dawn, he predicted that although I had a long way to go, I would one day be the editor of a daily paper. And then came a typical Altaf Hussain observation, "a paper that may well be as good as Dawn, but not better than Dawn, because there can be no newspaper better than Dawn."

Then, without waiting for the applause to die down, Altaf Sahib shook my hand and walked out of the restaurant where the party was being held, in his firm brisk steps, exuding his usual authority and power.

This was, of course, not an end of my association with Dawn.

Some ten years later, in 1964, Altaf Sahib rehired me, this time as the Dawn's Special Correspondent for Southeast Asia, based in Hongkong. He provided me with enormous support in the coverage of some 12 countries during the 18-month period. At the end of it, Altaf Sahib offered me a three-year assignment as a staff correspondent in China.

This is where General Ayub intervened. He brought Altaf Sahib into his cabinet. The new editor of Dawn did not particularly care about putting me in Peking. Instead, my destiny took me to Thailand where I found a job as an editor, just what Altaf Sahib had predicted in 1953.

Our last meeting took place in Islamabad at the opening of the local Intercontinental Hotel which had invited some journalists from Southeast Asia, including myself, for the function. It was in early 1968, only a few months before Altaf Sahib was to resign from the government of Ayub due to ill health. We sat together on a sofa and talked a bit, for the first time, in Bangla, with a sprinkling of Sylheti dialect. He asked after my parents and other relatives, about my work in Bangkok and then he smiled.

It was the smile of a tired man who no longer exuded power and authority, a tired man who was just another casualty of the Ayub regime.

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doing some sub-editing and supervising the production of a 12-page weekly edition of Suleri's evening daily. A Karachi millionaire, Amir Ali Fancy had provided the funding for the publication, reportedly on the assumption that a Punjabi journalist-editor as young as Suleri — he could not have been more than 30 — with a bit of British education and an English wife was a sure winner in the growingly intense media race in Karachi. Unfortunately, there was nothing fanciful about Mr Fancy's funding support. It was rather modest. So, Suleri was obliged to run his whole operation from a couple of medium-sized rooms, the largest one being occupied by the Editor himself. And there, right under the eyes of Suleri, I had my desk and chair. So, I was either pretending to be extremely busy or listening to Suleri's sermons which ranged from the politics of Pakistan in which, as he put it, the real crisis was posed by growing Bangalee nationalism to the domination of Pakistan media by Dawn.

Suleri's reaction to my decision to switch from the Evening Times to Dawn was one of total disapproval. "Here, in this operation, you

freedom, involving little or no interference or, for that matter, supervision from Altaf Sahib or his deputies, News Editor Mohammad Ashir or Assistant Editor M.A. Zuberi. However, Altaf Sahib cast his long shadow over the whole operation of Dawn and most certainly over my freedom in editing the Sunday Magazine. Like my colleagues performing other duties, I knew instinctively that I would have no mercy from the editor had I committed a major error of judgement, either in the selection of any article or in editing the section.

My editing of the Sunday Magazine never seemed to bother Altaf Sahib very much. It was my other function, editing the "Letter to the Editor" column, my daily chore, which produced a lot of tension in what was then my fragile relationship with the Editor.

Every morning, soon after he would arrive in the office, in his huge American car, and walk briskly to his light blue paneled air-conditioned office — the only room in the building to be served by what was then the ultra-modern cooling system — I would be asked to go over to his office with the bunch of letters which I had edited for

of the editor. If anything, it got worse.

Altaf Sahib believed in tight editing of the letters, keeping the substance of each communication and taking out the platitudes. Thanks to his superb command over English language, he really knew how 300-word letter could be edited down to a 100-word crisp communication. I am afraid, this is where I failed him from time to time.

From my point of view, the real problem lay somewhere else. The editor believed that for anyone it was a privilege to have his or her letter published in Dawn, but I regarded it almost as a right for a reader to have his or her views published in the

ters, leaving out the ones that I knew the editor would not approve of, and more proficient in tight editing, my morning sessions with Altaf Sahib abruptly came to an end.

It happened when, one day, giving me one of his rare benign smiles and looking anything but his usual intimidating self, the editor said, "I think, you already know how I want you to handle this Letter to the Editor column. From now on, you do it on your own. If you need my advice, come and see me."

What the editor did not know was, at that stage, I was already packing my bags for leaving Karachi — and Dawn.

as a leftist viewpoint with total distrust.

Among Dawn's Assistant Editors, Mohammad Abdus Shakoor, a South Indian settled in Karachi, was undoubtedly the best, especially as a leader-writer. He was also a leftist intellectual, a leading figure in the two friendship societies promoting better relations with China and the Soviet Union. In 1952, he made a trip to China, a rare honour for a Pakistani journalist in those days, and returned with materials for several articles on socialist reconstruction which was then gathering momentum under the leadership of Mao. But Dawn would publish only two of his features on China, and both were toned down.

Giving a somewhat light-hearted touch to his relationship with his assistant editor, Altaf Sahib nicknamed his South Indian colleague as "Shakoorov". Then, the Dawn editor himself went on a visit to Moscow and wrote a small book on the Soviet Union, which was, on balance, rather positive. Now it was Shakoor's turn to nickname his editor as "Altaf Hussainovich."

Looking back on that one year, from the middle of 1952 to the mid-1953, that I spent

country during this period. Dawn went after the then Central Food Minister, Pirzada Abdus Sattar and in an editorial written by Altaf Sahib himself, sharply criticised his handling of the situation. If I remember correctly, the editorial concluded with these words, "In these circumstances, we have no choice but to say, Pirzada must go." Within 24 hours, Pirzada Abdus Sattar resigned.

If a central government was in real crisis, an editorial in Dawn could make a crucial difference between its survival and downfall. Similarly, a new government could not do without a word of support from Dawn.

Not surprisingly, an obituary note, published by the New York Herald Tribune on the death of Altaf Sahib, described the editor of Dawn as "the maker and breaker of governments and powers."

Sadly enough, the power and authority that Altaf Sahib used, sometimes with a show of defiance and sometimes with a touch of arrogance, turned out to be superficial when it came to changing the situation in Pakistan, in saving democracy when Ayub put the country under his dictatorship

In her lust for power, she brought about the premature death of the Crown Prince, and appointed her nephew Kuang Hsu as her new nominal Emperor. When he showed signs of wanting to introduce reforms in a weakened and war-torn China, she had him imprisoned. For the remaining years of his life, the unfortunate man was kept locked up in an apartment in the Summer Palace where a wall was built over the windows so that he could not even see the light of day. Ci Xi ruled China with a iron hand for more than forty years. Before she died in 1908 she had Kuang Hsu poisoned, and appointed as her successor Pu Yi, the famous Last Emperor of China.

Three of the most famous women in twentieth-century China were the Soong sisters, who along with their brother T. V. Soong played crucial roles in Chinese affairs for many years from 1911 onwards. Educated in America, rich, intelligent and ambitious, all three women married famous and powerful men.

The eldest Ai-Ling married H.H.Kung, a millionaire who served for years in the government of Chiang Kai-shek. Shrewd, strong-willed, manipulative and ambitious, Ai-Ling was acknowledged to be a financial wizard in her own right, and accumulated a large fortune for herself. She

wielded enormous influence both over her husband and her own family, and was considered to be the mastermind behind the rise of the Soongs. Having herself married for money, she engineered the marriage of her sister to Chiang Kai-shek and became by extension, one of the guiding forces behind KMT government policy until the collapse of Nationalist power in China and the withdrawal of Chiang Kai-shek's forces to Taiwan.

The second sister Ching-ling married Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Less ambitious and mercenary than her sisters, she remained loyal to the ideals of her husband after his death, in spite of persecution and pressure from her family to join the Chiang Kai-shek faction. When the People's Republic of China was established, she was made Vice-Chairman in recognition of her loyalty and service to China and was considered the most high-ranking woman in China till her death.

The third sister Mai-ling married Chiang Kai-shek. She was very influential in her capacity as his chief envoy on numerous fund-raising missions to the United States, and his spokesman on tours and publicity campaigns for garnering support for the government of Chiang Kai-shek in the United States. She was enormously popular in America see the following page

CONFUCIUS said in his Analects, "Only women and low-class men are hard to keep. If allowed to approach you they show no respect; if kept at a distance they complain."

There is no knowing what low-class men thought of Confucius' opinions, but certainly he has a lot to answer for to women. Confucius merely put into words what was probably already becoming a hardened attitude toward women in feudal China. They played no role in the scheme of things except as subservient beings who should work hard, be seen rarely and heard not at all.

An ancient manual on the training of women says:

"A chaste woman must not go out often, but must be ready to obey commands. If asked to come, she must come at once; if asked to go she must go quickly. If she fails to submit to any order, reproach her and beat her. She should be instructed twice daily, morning and evening. She must work very hard, her duties including sweeping, looking after the cooking, sewing, burning incense and weaving cloth. When others are present she must present a modest demeanour and, after bringing them tea or soup, walk slowly backwards and retire to her own room. When she is distressed she must not weep or scream, for this brings ill-fortune to the

family; and when she is happy she may not sing, for this encourages lewdness."

As a further curb on the movement of women, the custom of foot-binding was introduced in the tenth century. Small feet first became fashionable among the court dancers, whence it spread to upper class women, and later even to the peasants. In order to have the three inch stumps so admired by men, little girls of four had their toes turned under and wrapped tightly in bandages for several years to prevent the feet from growing normally. The pain and suffering were considered a small price to pay for these crippled appendages, known as 'golden lilies'. They were considered a sign of beauty, and it became impossible to find a husband for a girl if she had big feet. Apparently this custom was actually introduced to prevent women from moving around too much, since they could walk only with difficulty on their bound feet.

Regarded as second-class citizens, little better than slaves, women had no legal rights. They were discouraged from learning to read and write, and could not inherit property. If they came from poor families they were frequently sold into slavery or prostitution. However, if once married, they could bear a son, their precarious position im-

Women and Power in China

A Survey of Successful Women Through The Ages

proved somewhat, as they could not be discarded by their husbands; although they were still obliged to share their husbands with concubines. When widowed they were only considered virtuous if they killed themselves or remained single for the rest of their lives.

And yet, in spite of the centuries of oppression and suffering imposed by Confucian values on women in feudal China, or perhaps because of their tempering in this hard school, Chinese women through the ages have displayed unbelievable powers of endurance, great strength of character allied to a certain native shrewdness, a talent for getting their own way, and in many cases, an avid desire for power.

History is replete with stories of female suffering and sacrifice, but there are also instances of women exercising power, influencing the course of history and displaying the same qualities as men, with incidentally, the same mixed results.

Witness the case of the plump Yang Kuei-Fei, favourite

concubine of one of the Tang Emperors. She was considered to be one of the four most beautiful women in China. The Emperor was so enamoured of her that he hastened to fulfil her every whim. For her relays of horsemen brought fresh lychees every day from the south; for her the Emperor

promoted her relatives to high positions, and so far neglected affairs of state that he almost lost his kingdom. A Tartar general who was one of the favourites of Yang Kuei-Fei and was even suspected of being her lover, led an insurrection which lasted ten years. Finally, the people could bear no more, the brother and sister of Lady Yang were killed, and the army then demanded that Yang Kuei-Fei to be handed over for execution. She was finally made the scapegoat for the deficiencies of the Emperor's rule, and she was strangled.

But if Lady Yang was both the a symbol and a victim of

Tang dynasty decadence, Xue Tao was a famous and respected poetess of the Tang dynasty, of whom a statue still stands in a Beijing park. Xue Tao was also a courtesan, well-known for her fine voice and her dancing.

Although courtesans enjoyed a freedom that was un-

known to ordinary women, this freedom with its limited choices carried its own burdens. Youth and beauty were always at a premium. Yu Hsuan-chi, also a well-known poetess and courtesan, was one of the casualties. She was unlucky in her choice of lovers, and after a couple of unhappy experiences, retired to a convent where she continued to write. Unfortunately, she developed a fondness for drink. She lapsed into a life of dissipation, which culminated in her conviction and execution for the murder of a maidservant at the age of thirty.

If some women were the

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali



Altaf Hussain