

Echoes from the Past

ONE starts a new piece of writing with a mild trepidation and ends it with a sense of relief, said a friend at a writers' workshop we attended years ago. Another countered, no, one starts it with a feeling of excitement, but ends it in a mood of shattering disappointment.

I do not know who is right as I work on a column, under a title that I find rather nice, almost fascinating, but without the slightest idea as to what it should be about. Of course, I would like it to be about people and places, about those fleeting moments of unspoken happiness or about suffering and pain, all linked together in disjointed memories and hazy recollections. I feel a little thrilled with the idea, then somewhat nervous about carrying it out.

I mention the idea of the column to a young colleague, in a matter-of-fact way. It is great, he says, when he probably means that it is not a bad idea. Another colleague shows the same excitement. I give up.

Well, I should have known that in our cultural environment, the excessive politeness shown towards a senior citizen by younger colleagues finds many different manifestations. This explains why my plan about this column evoked a tremendous response from a couple of my younger friends when their unspoken gut reaction was probably one of polite interest.

It would be different in another environment. Here's an example from the past.

While living in Bangkok, a little more than 20 years ago, I started writing a back page column for a local newspaper I worked for, under another fascinating title, "Along My Way." I had convinced myself that it was the most original name ever given to a column which would carry the most original thought, presented in the most original writing style.

It got off to a poor start. There was a hushed silence in the newsroom which I had a cross on my way to mine, on the day the column was first published. It appeared for two more weeks. Then, a young colleague -- a British feature writer -- told me quite casually that the column was not half as good as he had expected. He had just passed the death sentence on "Along My Way." It

never appeared again, a loss to the world of journalism!

For the next 20 years, I did all kinds of writing -- good, bad and indifferent -- but kept the thought about writing another column all to myself, nursing a secret dream which, surprisingly, refused to go away.

Now, what made me think of writing a new column after all these years? Why now when I have gotten different things to do every day, not counting so many unfinished jobs?

This may well have something to do with my being back to Dhaka and being active my profession, the only one I know something about.

I doubt if there was anything enduring about my column. "The City We Live In." It was probably more like a weekly essay by a university student aspiring to be a reporter than a professional journalistic exercise. What made the experience unforgettable was the moral support extended to me by my peers, the kind of support which, it is said, young newsmen seldom receive from their more experienced colleagues these days.

Starting with the late Abdus Salam, the then Editor of the Observer who gave a quiet nod of approval on seeing my first feature of the series -- after which he probably took little notice of the column -- there were several other good souls who regarded my weekly offering as "a pretty good thing to fill the space," to remember just one comment from a senior colleague. To me, there was

this paper. But mine was a weekly feature, written in slightly sentimental vein, mostly about people I ran into, about their hopes and joys. Looking back across these four decades, I like to think that the column captured something of the mood of what was then, by present-day standards, a slow-moving town that still retained a little bit of that romantic air that Buddadev Bose wrote about in some of his memorable pieces about Rama.

Once I picked up enough courage to ask Chakravarty if I could show him my raw copy before giving it to the Observer. He took a couple of minutes to respond to my request. "You should not," he finally said, "you should revise your copy as many times as you can, instead of relying on me to do your job." And then he laughed.

When I will revise this piece some 40 years after Prof Chakravarty had gone over and corrected my last published feature of "The City We Live In," just a week before I left Dhaka, I will offer a silent tribute to my teacher.

I owe another debt to Prof. Amla Chakravarty. It was this thoughtful teacher of mine who told me that I had passed my Master's of Arts examination, and was placed in second class. It was the only reliable information I had on my academic performance. It was still unofficial, and it remained so for 30 more years. A complex story which I related to Dr. Maniruzzaman Miah the other day, and the Vice Chancellor appeared to think that I had made it all up.

If, at that time, there was anything harder than writing the column every week, it was to retain my sense of humility, instead of feeling smug.

But there was no danger of my developing an inflated ego, not with my teacher in the university.

At that stage, "My World" may well be "The City We Return To," the sequel to "The City We Live In." The column I wrote for the Observer here just -- you won't believe it -- 40 years ago. There were probably altogether 50 features I published under that title, not particularly different from "Dhaka Day By Day" which you see in

of a serial to act in another paly or series simultaneously. "Ayomoy" will continue through this quarter.

The special programme "Abar Shei Falgoon" will be produced by Shahida Arbi, on the 21st February. Firoz Mahmud is going to produce "Sha-dhi-nata Tumi" on the 26th March. Another special programme "Barber Fire Aasha" produced by Md. Abu Taher is expected on the occasion.

Prof. Amla Chakravarty keeping a sharp eye on me. Those days, our teachers like A.G. Stock, S.N. Roy and, of course, two of our 1971 Shaheeds, Munir Chowdhury and Jyotirmoy Guhalakurda, saw individual students, inside the class and outside, a great deal more than ... no, I would rather not draw any comparison.

My favourite teacher, Amla Chakravarty found time to read my published piece every week, marked all the mistakes and inapt phrases and expressions with his blue pencil, put it in an envelope and gave it to me when we met the day after the piece had appeared. Since together with the corrected copy, he would write his detailed comments on a piece of paper, we never felt the need for a discussion. Maybe I felt a little awkward to bother Prof Chakravarty too much. His daily schedule was always full.

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— Mehdi Mahbub

TV Friday

MORNING TRANSMISSION

- 8:00 Opening and recitation from the Holy Quran.
- 8:10 News in Bengali.
- 8:15 Cartoon Film: Adventures of the Galaxy Rangers -- A high-tech action-adventure show.
- 8:40 Nolun Kuri: Children's programme.
- 9:10 Film: Mork and Mindy.
- 9:40 Probhata: Commentary on current affairs.
- 10:00 News.
- 10:05 Educational Film: The Ascent of Man.
- 11:15 Moner Mukurey: Telecast of select drama.
- 12:30 Programme summary of evening transmission.

EVENING TRANSMISSION

- 3:00 Opening announcement and recitation from the Holy Quran.
- 3:15 Alor Dishari: Children's programme on Islamic teaching.
- 3:40 Movie of the Week: True Grit (American). Based on the 1969 movie Rooster Cogburn, one of the West's legendary heroes battles injustice in his unorthodox way.
- 5:50 Sports Programme.
- 6:45 Janamat: Programme on population.
- 6:55 News in Bengali.
- 7:05 Modhu Chhanda: Modern songs.
- 8:00 News in Bengali.
- 8:30 Film: The Cosby Show. Comedy Serial.
- 9:30 Anirban: Patriotic feature.
- 10:00 News at ten: News in English.
- 10:30 Film: L. A. Law. Critically acclaimed TV series which has won several Emmy awards.

TV: What's New in the New Quarter

MAGH-Chaitra (Mid January-Mid April) quarter of B.T.V. has already started. This quarter is expected to be different in its character and content from the previous one. The Parliamentary election is knocking on the door and the 27th February is only a few days away from now. The T.V. authority has an ambitious plan on these national occasions.

Programmes in between the special bulletins and election results are planned to be rewarding enough for the audience. In addition to Bangali and English films, magazines, jokular programmes, cine songs, dance, music and children's programmes, B.T.V. is preparing to telecast seven



Popular drama serial 'Ayomoy' is to continue through the new quarter that has just begun.

A BOLD METAFICTION

The Judas Tree by Sanjib Datta. Published by the author, 80/10 Mahatma Gandhi Road, Calcutta-700 009, July 1984.

A Review by Syed Manzoorul Islam

Sanjib Datta was working in the Bangladeshi Observer in the early seventies when I first met him. To outsiders, Datta was a quite man with a absent look. Even while talking, he seemed to be lost in his own thought. During a casual, five minute conversation that followed, he did not reveal much about himself, beyond saying that he was writing, or contemplating writing, a book of poems. This, of course, was not a revelation, as it turned out that others had known about it.

Soon he left Dhaka to lead to a life of exile in India and to years of dissatisfied wandering, for Sanjib Datta nursed wounds that were too deep to heal. He had lost his father, former minister Dharendra Nath Datta, and a brother, in the war of Independence in 1971. The elder Mr. Datta was brutally killed by the Pakistani Army in Kumilla Cantonment. His eyes were gouged out, hence the title of the book of poems that eventually came out in 1975, "Eyesless in the Urn" (the urn being the cantonment, which was ringed by law hills on all sides), dedicated to the memory of his father. Years later, after Sanjib Datta had left his job of editor of the Naganland Times and returned to Calcutta, and had already published "Judas Tree", I re-established my connection with him through Shawkat Osman Datta. It now seems to me, is not a fenced off individual who likes to persist in his isolation, but an enthusiastic participant in the great events of life. His letters are warm and friendly, they tell a lot about him the man, the author, "Judas Tree" like his letters, demands a reply; it is not a novel that one can put aside after one reading. One has to maintain a dialogue with it, a correspondence of sorts, that is both revealing and rewarding at the end. It is not simply an "intellectual novel" it is a novel about intellect itself. The ratiocinative, analytical interior monologue which is largely the novel mode of discourse, is emblematic of the way intellect operates, often to the suppression or exclusion of imagination itself. Ovi, the protagonist, is in prison for an unexplained cause (he appears to be a killer, although like all other operative terms in the novel, this one may be strictly symbolic).

The novel is a monologic meditation on his life, past, present and future. Although in the process of his reminiscences, there are imaginative constructions and reconstructions of events, relationships, and history, the dominance of a discriminatory intellect is quite obvious. His remembrances are often shaped like a national discourse: he shifts through the details of his life, wanders through its mazes and labyrinths, but the selective process that tells the readers which is more important and which is less, is highly deliberate. It rests on our logical and axiological orientation. In a large sense, while Ovi recounts the flash points of his life, he is not describing them but trying to find out how they came into being and what significance and consequence are attached to them.

The whole novel is cast in the shape of these reminiscences; events and people are seen through Ovi's eyes. This is not of much help to the reader though, as Ovi is less of a character of flesh and blood than an abstraction. He represents a point of view, or several points of view: these tell us in a composite manner all about the floating world and impossibility of ever achieving certainty in life. As in a stream of consciousness novel (this novel is a tour de force in the manner of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, a stream of consciousness novel that arrived in the scene some thirty years after the technique was superseded by other metafictional modes) nothing endures but dissolves, everything is in a state of flux. There is no plot, no storyline, no central event, no cause-effect exposition of actions, no climax and characters are attacked to them.

We are not quite sure, even after reading the book twice, what is it that Ovi is spending close to two hundred thousand words about. The "plot" of the book could be Ovi's relationship with some women of improbable names: Myllee, Rhea, Autumn, Delon; the only exception is Nazma, a name we are comfortable with. That is all. And remember, he is reminiscing from within the walls of a prison, walls that "close up." Once again the prison is not the prison that encloses convicts, but the world itself, so are all women finally one woman, Myllee. Ovi's long, tortuous and often exasperating accounts of mental events exhaust the reader, but they do not add up to a coherent story: there is simply no story to tell. "Judas Tree" is an exceptional book in the sense that the whole thing stands on ex-

tremely flimsy, slippery ground with no bedrock of a plot to give it support. As Ovi admits at the end, "I don't know how it began though, no what sense the end is." So there it is, a novel without be-

... (among them the class called metafiction) did that, and more. They parodied the novelistic conventions, and ended up writing novels that offered an alternative mode of writing ... writing which consciously

strode not to look like novels.

Sanjib Datta's novel has a few elements in common with this class of fiction.

"Judas Tree" turns a neoreligious myth into an exploration of the unknown, an attempt to build a bridge over the chaos of mind. In the stream of consciousness novel first showed that the traditional novel with its well-constructed plot, theme and style could be rejected in favour of a discourse that was faithful to the moment, to the thought processes of the protagonist, and to the psychological realism of characters. Later fictions

tions, experiences. Datta's language, charged with the full burden of containing every bit of the novelist's intention, is used with a philosopher's abandon. He stretches a point of thought to the furthest limits of epistemological or ontological meaning, indeed forces out even the minutest nuances out of it, and his language therefore struggles to faithfully record every light and every shade.

"Judas Tree" is significant for its bold experimentation with a genre. It is a powerful record of a mind trying to come to grips with time and history. It mocks standard novelistic pretensions as to what constitutes a story or a plot. Ovi, the protagonist is just an abstraction, but within this abstracted being Sanjib Datta has invested the history of a culture. Ovi does not belong to any place or time, his Bengali name and the place he called Dhaka are unimportant, as things happen only in his mind. In the interior labyrinth of his uncharted existence. Like Kafka's people, Ovi is our idea of ourselves, not a person with a name.

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BOOKS

ginning and an end; novel which not only questions the very act of writing the novel, but mocks it along the way.

This last observation needs some explanation though as Sanjib Datta may be (unjustly) accused of wasting readers' time. The stream of consciousness novel first showed that the traditional novel with its well-constructed plot, theme and style could be rejected in favour of a discourse that was faithful to the moment, to the thought processes of the protagonist, and to the psychological realism of characters. Later fictions

Freedom in Exile by The Dalai Lama (John Curtis/Hodder and Stoughton London 1990)

food forbidden to monks.

Then he crashes the 1920s Baby Austin (one of the three cars in the whole of Tibet) while joy-riding in the park of Lhasa's Summer Palace. In several episodes he spies out across Lhasa with his telescope from the roof of the huge Potala Palace, and also admits to tormenting his good-natured tutor with his unwillingness to be educated.

Later on there is the Dalai Lama's experiment with vegetarianism that ends with a severe bout of Hepatitis B. "My skin turned bright yellow. I looked like the Buddha himself."

He recounts how his eldest brother Takser Rinpoche, abbot of the important Kumbum monastery, decided to renounce his monastic vows and seek armed support from the United States despite the Dalai Lama's protests that he keep to Buddhist teaching.

Amid these turbulent events, the Dalai Lama managed to prevail with his rigorous monastic training and pass all the examinations necessary to become a geshe or Doctor of Buddhist Studies.

This ability to balance and integrate the spiritual and public life permeates the whole of *Freedom in Exile*.

Even in exile in the North Indian hilltown of Dharamsala he manages to continue his daily practice of five-and-a-half hours of meditation and prayers while working hard to help the 100,000 or so Tibetan refugees in India rebuild their lives.

While condemning Chinese contempt for Tibetan culture

and the suffering of the Tibetan people under Chinese rule which overshadows this whole account. The truth remains that, since the Chinese invasion, over a million Tibetans have died as a direct result of Peking's policies," he writes.

But for all the gentle-heartedness and breadth of mind of the author, it is the suffering of the Tibetan people under Chinese rule which overshadows this whole account. The truth remains that, since the Chinese invasion, over a million Tibetans have died as a direct result of Peking's policies," he writes.

Even now, horrific reports of torture of pro-nationalist activists still reach the West. Forty years after the People's Liberation Army first crossed Tibet's eastern border, Tibetan protests are still commonplace in Lhasa and the main towns -- as are their brutal suppression by the Chinese authorities.

Tibetan initiatives to find some kind of diplomatic solution have run up against Chinese intransigence. The Five-Point Peace Plan outlined to the US Congress by the Dalai Lama in 1987 has brought no response from Peking.

It proposes the demilitarisation of Tibet, crucially -- an end to the influx of Han Chinese settlers who now outnumber indigenous Tibetans in Lhasa and Shigatse, the two largest towns.

That is why the Dalai Lama asks the reader "not to forget Tibet at this critical time in our country's history" -- a time which sees the very future of the Tibetan people under threat. His aim is simple: a free Tibet "to help all those in need, to protect Nature and to promote peace."

GEMINI NEWS



DALAI LAMA
Caught eating eggs

the reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lama. Taken from his parents, he was brought up under monastic discipline until, aged 15, he was invested with full powers as head of the state of a country the size of Western Europe and a population of