

Unmasking lies and Deceptions

A Review by Syed Manzoorul Islam

Temptation by Vaclav Havel. Translated by George Theiner London: Faber and Faber, 1988.

Book Review

ČESKOSLOVENSKO



Havel on a postage stamp.



The cover

Vaclav Havel was first a humanist, political activist and dissident, and then, through a strange and ironic turn of events now so fondly known as the 'Velvet revolution' that also marked recent developments in many other communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe in the last couple of years, became the President of Czechoslovakia. This latest role has been thrust on him by history and he seems to be playing it with gusto and dedication; but the one role he really relishes is a slightly off-stage one, that of a humanist writer with a quiet voice of conscience.

Havel was recently asked by an interviewer how he reconciled the rather opposing demands of president and dissident (he would always remain a dissenting voice). Havel wrote in *Letters to Olga*, even to himself if the world outside changed and conformed to his ideals. The two identities are important for him, Havel replied, as the one keeps the other in balance. For one thing, he can always bring in an element of self-scrutiny to whatever he does, whatever decision he takes.

Havel's idea of protest—it is evident from the interview and from his plays and essays—is not a crying out in anger against the world, but is as much a quiet turning inwards, examining an individual's responsibilities and failures as it is a turning outward and taking on an establishment that feeds

us on false hopes and ideals. Quite frequently, Havel's protagonists would tear away the mask from an ideologue's face, would turn upside down the false models of development and statecraft, and expose the hollowess behind relationships that, in the name of this or that ideology, deny man his essential freedom. The Havelian protagonist demands, and often gets, his freedom to indulge in his dreams and fantasies; but he is not without his responsibility to society or to himself. Havel's plays are thus attempts to understand an individual, bring him into focus as an 'unhoused, untenanted man who has been exhausted by a long struggle with the establishment, but who is no less at war with his own inordinate ambitions, desires and dreams.

Temptation (first published by Faber and Faber in 1988) can be read in the light of Havel's continuous crusade against lies and deceptions that are perpetuated by the state and sanctified by larger-than-state dogmas. As early as *The Garden Party* (1963), and *The Memorandum* Havel attempted, in the words of Jeremy Adler in the TLS, to "unmask Communism as a power dependent on a public lie that utterly conflicts with private truth."

The plays are absurd, but absurdities, maintains Adler, "are those of the system." The microcosmic world of *Temptation* is a cruel and tragic exposition of that system in which man is trapped in a snare of lies and duplicity. But the play would be rather a doctrinaire piece and thereby

unsatisfactory if it remained within the ambit of what Milan Kundera once termed mere 'system-bashing'. *Temptation* does more than that, it is rather an exploration of the private truths that constitute our most enduring moments and account for, what Havel describes so wistfully in the

"Open letter to Dr. Gustav Husak" (1975) "the direction of life."

Temptation is a play that sets against a self-exhausting and self-deceiving system a cogent pattern of self-exhaustion and self-deception, this time so private that the protagonist can maintain, for a long time without being detected, the standard of double-speak. Once he is found out however, the system crumbles for him, he cannot be absolved for his crime by the establishment that valorizes conformity and stigmatizes deviation, and, unaccustomed to personal accountability, faces the inner void like a child, as does Dr. Faustus.

The play's intricate world of official zeal, duplicity, jealousy, and mutual mistrust reminds one of Orwell's 1984, only that *Temptation's* setting could easily be the mind of man. For, on one level, the play is a rich allegory of man's failure to seek for his own private salvation in a world where his individuality is constantly suppressed. The play's characters—The Director, his Deputy, the Scientists, (including the faceless Wilma, the other agent of temptation) are all, in varying degrees, aspects of that allegory, and represent what Havel describes in "The Power of the Powerless" (1978) as "Instruments of mutual total-

ity." Only Maggie, the Good-Angel representative of the society's anticode ("Anticodes" is the title given to a number of poems that Havel wrote and published in 1964), a dotting secretary who is prepared to share in Foustka's dreams and damnation, Maggie, to be sure, is doomed, she herself saw it coming when she vowed her allegiance to Foustka.

Faustus is not mentioned just in passing here: he is pertinent and central to the structure of Havel's play, for *Temptation* is built around the Faust legend. Dr. Henry Foustka, a disgruntled scientist, finds a way out from his frustration and his sneaky ambition through necromancy.

Thus Maggie says it all. She is let loose at the end of the play, a distracted Ophelia without the Prince, in a state that is perpetually rotten. Havel's grim comedy brings us face to face with a monolithic society with its severe demands of conformity. But the cracks show rather pitifully. We see Maggie through one of these cracks, as she sees the world through them.

But what about Foustka? Is he conceivable after the velvet revolution? Yes, says Havel, so long as man opts for entropy, in his own private world as in the world of his fellow men. Foustka and the Science Institute and the Director and the Scientist will all be there.

The reviewer is a Professor of the Department of English, Dhaka University.

The Fateful Days

Review by Waliur Rahman

OF BLOOD AND FIRE: The untold story of Bangladesh's War of Independence
Author: Jahanara Imam
Translated by: Mustafizur Rahman
Published by: Academic Publishers, Pages: 246

EVERY Bangladeshi has a special feeling about the year 1971. Those of us who have lived through the period will never forget it. For those of us who did not, this book is a must. Mrs. Jahanara Imam has captured the spirit of the moment, the heightened sense of patriotism, the willingness to actually give one's most precious possession, one's life, for the country, the despair at moments, the slow exhilaration of joy as the momentum of the war of Liberation builds up and the final victory inspite of its tragic cost is most authentically presented in her book. Her book, which is a day to day diary of the period, beginning from the magic month of March, till the final day of liberation, 16th December, 1971, takes us on a nostalgic path of our glorious history of the Bangladesh War of Independence. She has reinvoked the authentic environment of the society, the University Professors, the upper middle class professionals, the artists, singers, writers, the young and fiery students who were sentimentally and romantically enveloped in a sense of euphoria and despair. Against this backdrop was the heady call for independence. The students saw the ugly reality which was starting at them while the elders merely envisioned rosy dreams of their own flags flying atop their country while closing their eyes to the butchery and barbarity surely to be experienced from a senseless and mindless, greedy government who would not let go of this captive territory.

so that they may relive through the months and value the hard-won independence.

Brilliantly Mrs. Imam recounts the heroic exploits of the Freedom Fighters who performed daring acts in broad daylight, the blowing up of the bridges and army convoys, and ultimately the Power Station. She is a proud mother of one of the most daring freedom fighters. For she had to let Rumi go to meet his destiny.

The war of Liberation shows a nation, a people totally united. When the city people are fleeing to the interior we see peasants keeping jars of water for the thirsty fighters. In a typical gesture of hospitality the poor villagers would kill their chicken to feed the fleeing towns people in their moment of distress. In retaliation Pakistani army burnt the villages in and around the cities, looted their meagre belongings, shot the men after raping their womenfolk in front of them.

We are distressed when we witness the anguish of a mother whose brightest star, her son Rumi, is captured by the Pakistanis and tortured beyond imagination. In grief and sorrow, she and her husband run from pillar to post to free him. Her anxiety takes her to the Cantonment and the religious mendicant, the Pagla Pir, all to no avail. The entry of 6th September, when Azad's mother describes how the soldiers entered her house and beat up the inmates is blood curdling. Yet these are the actual happenings that took place, and we should never forget it.

The personal tragedy of Mrs. Imam goes side by side with that of the country. Since the fateful night when the army broke into the house and

Of Blood and Fire

The Untold Story of Bangladesh's War of Independence



Jahanara Imam Translated by Mustafizur Rahman

pick up her husband, her two sons, Rumi has never returned. Sharif, her husband and Jami were released after much torture. And on the 13th of December, partly due to the sorrow about Rumi and partly due to the torture he suffered in the Cantonment, Sharif undergoes a heart attack which ultimately claim his life.

When Liberation comes it is tinged with the further tragedy of the killing of the intellectuals. It was like a parting gift of the Army of occupation.

Mrs. Imam leaves her readers with a hope for the future, an optimism amidst her personal tragedy. Jami finds a new road, a road which spells a future with hopes of fulfilment.

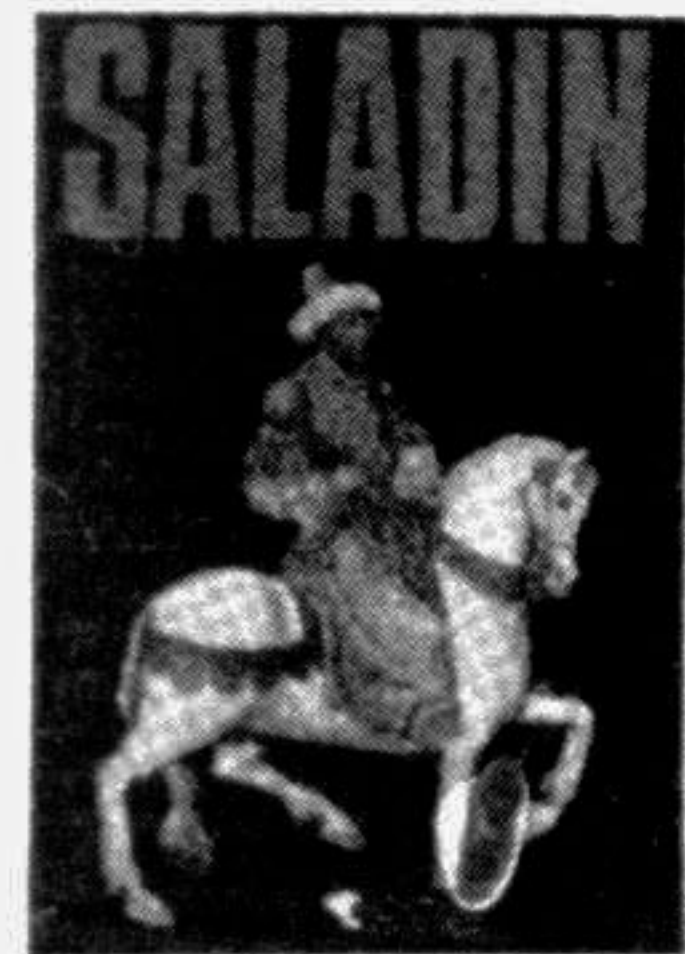
This excellent diary is the work of a gentle, sensitive artist, faithfully recording and recreating a moment of magic for all Bangladeshis. It is a glory unparalleled inspite of the hardship. It is also a power which is gone forever.

Whose emotions were still shattered by the search for justice and truth and who never could promise till their independence was wrested and at a terrible cost. The banks were empty, the roads, bridges, airports had been destroyed. Even the doctors, specialists, teachers and students were mercilessly killed. The horror perpetuated on the people remain unparalleled. But memories are short and people fail to learn from history. Thus we acknowledge this book with felicitation. It should be read by all the Bangladeshis.

The translation by Mustafizur Rahman is excellent. He translated the essence of the book faithfully, capturing emotion, each nuance that he experienced; the English itself has a style and lucidity of its own. It is a good example of translation from Bengali to English. We hope to see more translations from him in the future.

The cover picture of young freedom fighters reflects the content well. The printing is easy and readable.

Readings on the Gulf

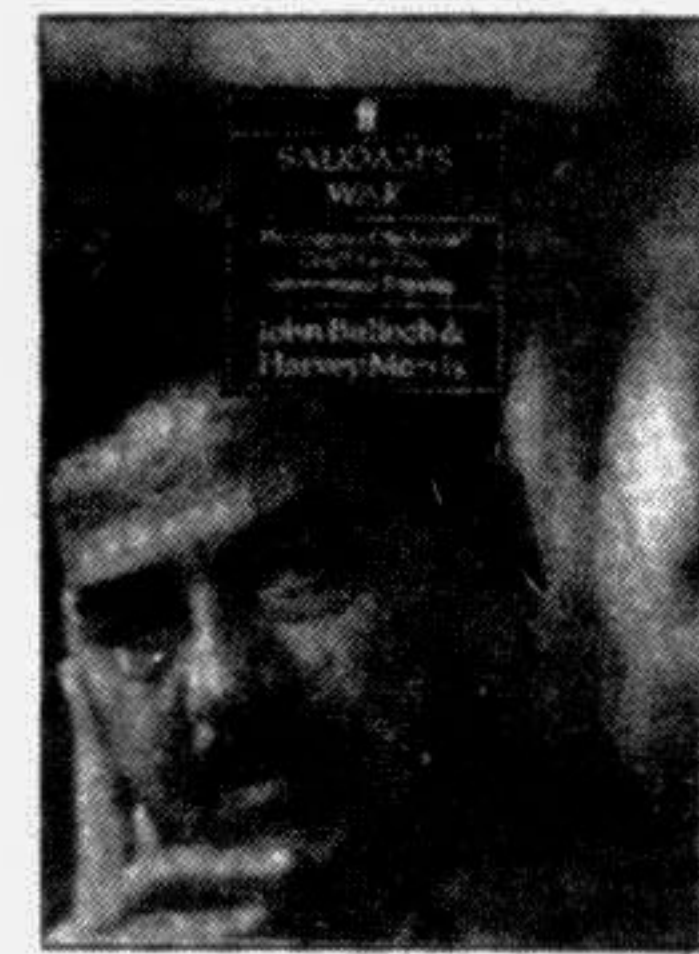


Saladin by Genevieve Chauvel Pygmalion; 365 pages; \$24

SADDAM Hussein is often compared to the great Sultan Saladin, who lived 800 years ago. No doubt Iraq's President would like to repeat Saladin's achievements, which included sweeping into Jerusalem to throw out the Crusaders and bringing all of the Holy Land under Muslim sway. Saddam likes to point out that he and Saladin share the same birthplace: The Iraqi village of Tikrit. But in Genevieve Chauvel's imaginative 'autobiography', Saladin emerges as a leader far more honorable, fair and clement than Saddam. Parallels with the current crisis, however, have made the book popular with readers interested in clues to what makes Saddam tick.

Written in the first person and signed 'I, Saladin, who consolidated Islam', the book details how the son of a great Kurdish family became Sultan of Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Yemen. Saladin waged war against the Frankish Crusaders in Palestine, holding off Richard the Lion-Hearted, with whom he signed an armistice in 1192. In Egypt, Saladin abolished a corrupt caliphate and built up its economy and military.

A consummate diplomat and pious Muslim, he treated his Christian subjects with tolerance and offered generous settlements to Christians remaining in Jerusalem after his victory over the Crusaders. To strengthen Egypt's position, he made peace with the Byzantine Empire. When Saladin died in 1193 at the age of 55, the poet Omar al-Kateb wrote that "generosity, justice, honor and the public's good fortune ended with him."



Saddam's War: The Origins of the Kuwait Conflict and the International Response by John Bulloch and Harvey Morris Faber and Faber

PREPARED in the months following Iraq's takeover of Kuwait in August, Saddam's War was rushed into print the week of the first bombing raid on Baghdad. John Bulloch, diplomatic correspondent of the Independent on Sunday, and Harvey Morris, deputy foreign editor of the Independent, paint a graphic portrait of Saddam Hussein's family background and his rise to power. The President, they conclude, is a "small-town political gangster who developed an obsession for history." They detail his alleged misdeeds, including dropping an opponent into acid and watching him dissolve and the execution of suspected conspirators by colleagues in the Baath Party with guns Saddam handed out in the middle of a meeting.

While the authors blame the West and other Arab leaders for failing to recognize Saddam's threat, they argue that the President is ultimately responsible for campaigns of terror and wars, "which he waged against his political opponents, against his own people, against Iran and in which, ultimately, he threatened to engulf the rest of the world". While praising the timing of its publication, the Sunday Times noted that the book was "by its nature... only a prelude to... eclipsing events." In its review the Guardian suggested that Saddam's War is "scissors-and-paste stuff, a hurried compilation," but still "worth not only reading but retaining as a reference material

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

I would like to use your column to bring to the attention of readers some of the most prevalent prejudices in our culture. The one I find most striking and disgusting is Colour Prejudice. Fair skin or light skin is always preferred to the dark, especially for girls. We very easily criticise the West for their colour bias, but we do exactly the same or even worse. Mothers, when looking for brides for their sons, want a fair complexion, parents prefer their children to be fair, etc. A fair girl is considered to be more beautiful and the dark girl is always made to feel inferior, no matter how beautiful her features are or how talented she may be. I have heard few people protest against this discrimination which women constantly face. Please print my letter and hope others will write on this issue.

Shakila, Shegun Bagicha

Dear Shakila,

Thank you for your letter. I find great pleasure in printing it. This is a sad and shameful aspect of our society and will only change through education, increased awareness of women's position and contribution to society. This will also change when women are no longer considered to be objects of decoration but rather citizens who contribute equally, and in many ways more, to society. Preference for fair skin in women is very deeply ingrained in our psyche through books, magazines, stories, and folklore and will be very hard to get rid of. But attitudes are gradually changing, and we hope we will be rid of this prejudice someday.

Dear Mita,

My son, 7, is so naughty and restless that I am really fed-up. He does not sit still for 5 minutes, is destructive and hits his cousins.

Believe me he is a source of embarrassment for me in public places or when I am visiting. I have often thought of taking him to the psychiatrist. Do you think he is abnormal? People say he will outgrow this behaviour but I do not have the patience to wait.

Khusli, Dhanmondi

Dear Khusli,

No, your son is not abnormal and neither is there anything wrong with him. On the contrary he may be highly intelligent, and is trying to say something to you and is doing it in the only way he can. Often over-excited or restless children are also highly intelligent and this energy needs to be channelled in the right direction. A child of 7 is still very easy to mould the way you want to. Remember you are not dealing with an ordinary child. You must be very creative when trying to change his behaviour. Take it as a challenge and give him your time, energy and loving care. Please read books on such children; some of them offer sound and practical advice.

Dear Mita,

I have been married for 10 years out of which 8 years were spent abroad. Recently we have returned and due to financial constraints plus family obligations my husband insists we stay with my in-laws. They are very nice people but my mother-in-law is very interfering. I have to tell her everytime I go out and what time I shall be back. That is not all: she insists on looking after our son, who is 9, and is completely spoiling him. He has no bedtime and no eating time. He gets what he wants and I cannot say anything. My husband says I am exaggerating the problem and will not talk to his parents about it. What can I do, I am very unhappy because of the marriage. I have led a fairly independent life before and after my marriage.

Nasreen, Mohammadpur

about its contents.

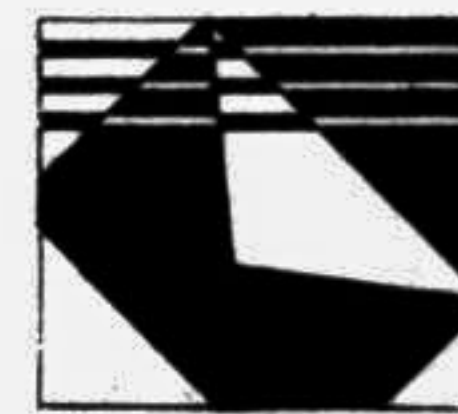
When Ronald Joffe proposed to make a film based on the book, his first script was referred to Satyajit Ray who was reported to have expressed in no uncertain terms his disapproval of it. Joffe then made some changes in the original script, and with a well-known Bengali writer, Sunil Gangopadhyaya as an advisor, started working on its production. But the revised script also has apparently failed to satisfy the Bengali critics. According to Utpal Dutt, the script is worse than the book. The state government's minister for culture and information, Buddhadev Bhattacharya (also a CPI-M leader) has openly come out

against the proposed film. Among those working in the film, at least one actor: Biplob Chatterjee - has walked out in protest against what he thought was an attempt to depict Calcutta in a bad light.

The furor over the shooting of 'City of Joy' in Calcutta has highlighted several contentious issues involving the age-old problems of Centre-State relations in India in particular as well as of freedom of the artiste in general. As mentioned earlier, the permission for location shootings by foreign film makers is granted by the Centre. In this case, the question arises whether the Centre sought the West Bengal government's approval before granting the permission.

WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toynbee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.



'City of Joy'

From Page 9

It cannot legally stop the shooting of the film, since the permission has been granted by the Centre. Expected to provide all the customary assistance to the film makers, the state government is grudgingly helping the team with police protection and other facilities during the shooting, much to the chagrin of the cadres of the Left Front who are opposed to the film.

But there is a curious side to the present controversy. Some of the Left Front leaders were apparently taken in initially by Dominique Lapierre's

demonstration of concern for Calcutta. In 1989, the then CPI (M) mayor of Calcutta, Kamal Bose gave a public reception to the author of 'City of Joy'. Calcutta Corporation was so impressed by the title of the book, that it chose to borrow the name to entitle a memorandum which it submitted to the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi seeking financial assistance for the city's development. It later transpired that neither the Mayor nor the other Left Front leaders had read the book before arranging the grand reception for its author. The book was dismissed as trash by leading Bengali critics soon after its publication. But the Left leaders apparently had no idea

of the proposed film. Joffe's film team has hired the Horticultural Society's gardens in Alipore for shooting some of the sequences. The garden is the property of the central government, and hence the state government can have no say in the matter. But under the rules, it is expected to provide police protection to the team. Caught in a fix, the Left Front now is trying its best to stop the shooting in some indirect way. It is giving its tacit support to the demonstrations of protest and is probably relying on a spontaneous - or whipped up - violent public protest against the shooting so that the filming of 'City of Joy' becomes almost impossible in Calcutta. Given this situation, it is urgent that

Sumanta Benerjee - a Delhi-based journalist - will be writing for the Daily Star regularly.