

ROWING up in a country that is totally different, rather just the opposite in culture, heritage and language — from the land of your ancestors, may be the most difficult phase anyone can pass through.

Apparently they look quite settled and adjusted to the new world but how genuinely they belong to that country is a question to be evaluated. The second and the third generation Bengalee expatriates living in London face exactly such unpleasant turning points in life. There are many Sylhetis who cannot speak Bangla. Either they speak English in British accent or a pure Sylheti dialect.

They suffer from a cultural identity crisis. They are nowhere, completely unaware of their roots or origin and yet at the same time not actually being part of the new country and its culture.

Going through all the turmoil of identities and racial discrimination, these children can only understand their place in an alien society better by the help of teachers hired from Bangladesh and of course, by their parents.

Shamim Azad who was a teacher, a journalist and a Bengali writer here, is one such person whose contribution to these children's understanding of their identity is immense. Currently a teacher in London, she, with a professional playwright, Mary Cooper, has written a bilingual play 'Kola Pata Bhut' (The Hopscotch Ghost).

Bilingual threats can have a positive bearing in a multi-racial society. The bilingual work is specifically for children who do not have English as their first language. Shamim Azad, explaining her vision of the bilingual theatre in the Asian weekly, says that it is a shared art. It may be the only time that bilingual and monolingual classmates enjoy a learning experience on completely equal terms — where each has equal ease of access to the content and equal confidence in handling the linguistic

A BILINGUAL PLAY IN ENGLAND

Bridging the East-West Divide

by Raffat Binte Rashid

and cultural conventions.

The theatre-in-education team of Half Moon Young People's touring Theatre has produced a fabulous, entertaining play in Sylheti, Bengali and English. The bilingual play 'Kola Pata Bhut' or the Hopscotch Ghost served the same purpose for the Bangalee children in London.

The play, for children between 6 to 8 years is a highly relevant programme which combines music, songs and humour to create both a magical and an entertaining learning atmosphere for these children.



Director Christopher Baldwin and Shamim Azad

The subtle there of the play is actually the loneliness the trauma of living in solitude by these multi-racial children. A child's worst fear is being left alone without any companions and friends. Being rejected by a special friend she wants to be close to. This thoughtful play explores all the flaws in friendly relations and loyalty and mainly hints at this heart-rending situation that every child dreads, having no one to play with.

The Hopscotch Ghost is

times gives the child sweets too. *Kola Pata Bhut* is a desirable friend of every youngster, but whether his presence is real or imaginary is never really clear.

Maybe he symbolises the strong feeling or desire of the children that make things happen. When Mariam is all alone, she meets the *Kola Pata Bhut*, who plays with her and helps the girls to sort their problems out and become friends again.

Through games, songs and humour the characters have

about three girls, Shanaz, Mariam and Razia.

In the opening scene Shanaz and Mariam are best friends. Shanaz lies to her and goes with Razia leaving Mariam all alone. This is when the *Kola Pata Bhut* or the Hopscotch Ghost enters. Basically this ghost is created in a Bengali context. He is not at all frightening or sinister.

Whenver a young child remembers him and wants him badly, he comes spontaneously to the child's aid saying 'Asalamu Alaiyakum'. He helps the one who calls him and at

people of all races, speaking many different languages. We were seated on all sides, forming a square on the charming floor cloth which comprise the play's set, patterned with a striking hopscotch pattern.

'Kola Pata Bhut' is a play full of energy and life. The four actors easily created the atmosphere of school with children, opening the evening with a hectic series of children's games and chats in English and Bengali. I was impressed by the fluidity of Mary and Shamim's script, which enabled the actors to move swiftly between one part and another.

The language rang through as the speeches of young girls in the playground united with the two, tongues in an easy everyday manner. I do not speak Bengali, but was able to follow the storyline without difficulty. It was good to be able to enjoy many of the comic moments that were conveyed in Bengali, thanks to the actor's skills and the writer's craft! The use of music and song in both languages added a fine touch.

The most striking part is the stage of the play, there was a *Nakshi Katha* placed on the floor where the actors performed and the audience was seated all round the set, with the musician seated at a corner on top of a platform with all his instruments, said a Bangalee spectator who was visiting London at that time. With an excellent combination of guitar, tabla, flute and cymbals the entire music was rich and entertaining. The performance has left children as well as the adults spell-bound, from childhood to adulthood the performers depicted every stage of human life with an unusual ease and confidence," he said.

It was a privilege and a pleasure to see such works, which both respect and celebrate differences and common ground. I look forward to the day when more audiences can share this experience."

At present Shamim Azad is

writing her second bilingual

play 'The raft' (Bhela) which is

scheduled to be staged by June 1994.

To minimise the racial tension

an create an atmosphere of cul-

ture harmony, such steps of

Shamim definitely go a long way

and her being a Bangalee adds

more to the glamour.



The Ghost — Douglas Sinclair



Douglas Sinclair and Sandra Vacciana

Scenes from the play :

1993 Books Focus on Individual Identity

A Report from Washington

If there is a unifying theme in the 1993 crop of novels, essays, scholarly works, and poems by American writers, it is a celebration of individual identity — the search to give voice to the experiences of Americans from different backgrounds. This search for diverse expressions is also clearly reflected in the year's literary prize awards.

Novelist Toni Morrison won the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature for her lifetime achievement as a novelist. Morrison is the first African American and second American woman to be so honored. (Pearl S Buck, the first American woman to do so, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938.)

From her earliest novel, 'The Bluest Eye' (1969) to her latest, 'Jazz' (1992) Morrison has explored the dilemmas of African Americans in white America. In her historical novel 'Beloved,' which won the Pulitzer prize for literature in 1988, a mother kills her baby rather than see her sold into slavery. The Swedish Academy, in conferring the Nobel, described Morrison's prose as having 'the luster of

light.'

Raban quoted a typically caustic Vidal, writing in 1986 on Japanese-US economic competition: 'Last summer (not suddenly, I fear) we found ourselves close to \$2 trillion in debt. Then, in the fall, the money power shifted from New York to Tokyo, and that was the end of our empire. Now the long-feared Asiatic colossus takes its turn as world leader, and we — the white race — have become the yellow man's burden. Let us hope that he will treat us more kindly than we have treated him.'

A R Ammons won the National Book Award for his poetry collection, 'Garbage.' This work, according to the New York Times Book Review, 'has a rufous grandeur and characteristically splendid oddity.'

Over the last 40 years Mr Ammons has consistently demonstrated the democratic percept that 'anything is poetry as an effant terrible: one of the best, most stinging pieces in the book is a passionate attack on Christianity — and, for good measure, Judaism and Islam — published last July.'

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The Pulitzer prize for biography went to 'Truman,' by David McCullough. Critic Alan Brinkley called the book an 'honest and revealing portrait of the ordinary man who became an extraordinary historical figure.'

The Pulitzer prize for history was awarded to the 'Radicalism of the American Revolution,' an exploration of the origins of American egalitarian culture by Gordon S Wood.

Tony Kushner won the 1993 Pulitzer in drama for 'Angels in America: Millennium Approaches.' Kushner's 'Angels' series of plays are long, emotional and derive with the dilemmas of

the human condition, however, remained at times clashed

ambivalent about their hosts.'

Poet Louise Gluck won the Pulitzer for her book of poems, 'The Wild Iris.' Elizabeth Lund of the Christian Science Monitor called the book a turning point for its author. Most of the poems use a flower as both metaphor and indirect subject.'

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The National Book Critics Circle Award went to Cormac McCarthy for 'All the Pretty Horses,' a novel about two American boys who head down to Mexico in 1950 to work on a horse ranch. Writing in the New York Times, Madison Smartt Bell said the work is 'powered by long, tumbling many-stranded sentences.'

The Washington, DC-based PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction went to Ms. Proulx for her earlier novel 'Postcards.'

The PEN/Faulkner-Bernard Malamud prize for the short story went to veteran writer Peter Taylor, known for his lucid, classically-written stories about ordinary Americans. The National Medal of the Arts, awarded by the United States government, went to poet Stanley Kunitz and Pulitzer-prize winning novelist William Styron.

As often happens, 1993's literary awards at times clashed

with the world of popular culture. In the popular book category, counter-culture radio disc jockey Howard Stern's autobiography, 'Private Parts' rocketed to number one on the best-seller charts shortly after publication. Stern's scatological, obscene and racially-tinged commentaries have become popular with some middle-class audiences alienated from the 'politically correct' bland intellectual and media establishment. Likewise, the 'Bridges of Madison County,' by Robert James Waller, which some critics found too sentimental, became an enduring best-seller.

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