

# Aijaz Ahmad's Talk on the Future of Marxism

"ONCE the question of radical equality is posed, nothing can actually stop. So far, one of the most radical and unresolved questions has been the question of equality. The future of Marxism depends much on how Marxism builds its struggle, theoretical and political, to resolve this question. So long as this question remains unresolved, the future of Marxism is open-ended." Marxist's tomorrows are thus viewed. If not really foreseen, by Professor Aijaz Ahmad in the concluding part of his two-hour talk he gave, animating that cold, crowded December evening at the Lekhok Shibir office.

Fiftyish, darkish, tall, bespectacled and punjabi-clad, Professor Aijaz Ahmad had words and phrases readily available at his disposal, points made with varying forces and stresses, and a voice remarkably loud, more than audible to the audience in the back. His talk began with a note of humility: "After such a glowing introduction, one can only fail".

Before we move on to the points and arguments of the talk, a brief introduction to Aijaz Ahmad and his oeuvre would not be out of place.

by Azfar Hussain

Professor Aijaz Ahmad, one of the finest cultural critics writing in the English language today and best known for his seminal book called *In Theory*, recently visited Bangladesh to attend a three-day international symposium on 'Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters' jointly organised by the English Department, Dhaka University and the Bangla Academy. During his stay in Bangladesh, he also gave a talk on the 'Future of Marxism' at the central office of the Bangladesh Lekhok Shibir on December 25, 1994, addressing both writers and political activists. Based on this talk, the following write-up seeks to review, briefly and critically, some of the major points of Professor Ahmad's arguments with regard to Marxism.

and trends one almost unavoidably encounters in the literary academy today.

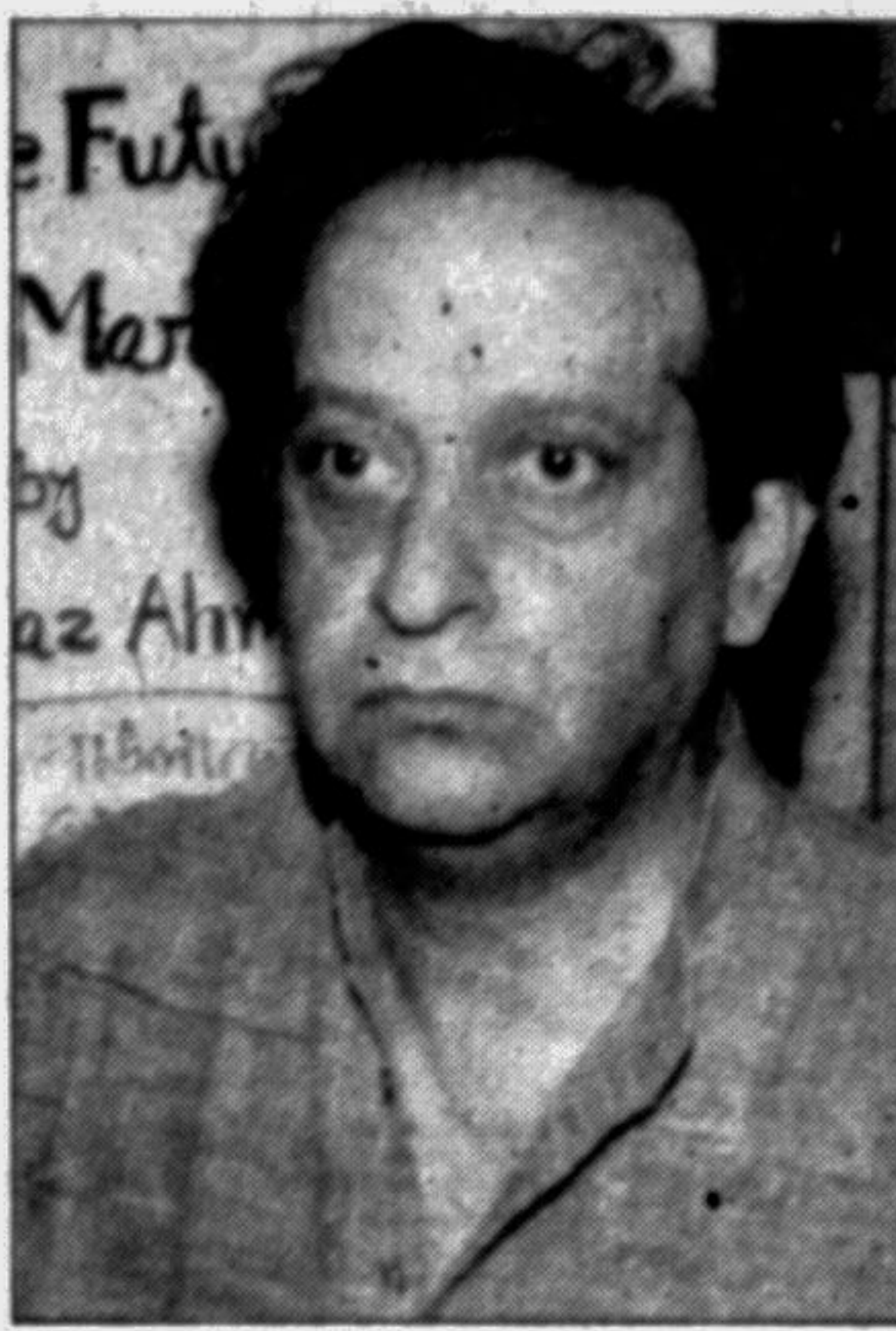
Professor Aijaz Ahmad was an ardent, open supporter of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. During this war, Ahmad had been in Pakistan from where he openly voiced his support to Bangladesh, almost endangering his life. Later, he returned to India, his birth-land, where he presently lives. Educated in Pakistan, India and the United States, he also taught English literature in the US. Based in Delhi, Aijaz Ahmad is now Senior Fellow, Nehru Memorial Library.

3

The topic chosen for the talk of Professor Aijaz Ahmad is one that is fairly common, given both its long prior history and present status. In fact the present status of Marxist discourses is more interesting, given the enormous scale and space of such discourses cutting across various disciplines and dimensions, circuits and circles. One can see that the entire field of cultural practices is today inhabited by Marxist discourses bringing together Marxist of various persuasions — Lukacs, Althusser, Gramsci, and also Benjamin, Bloch, Marcuse, Habermas along with those two early members of the famous Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno, and of course, Lefebvre, Franco, Negt, Hall, Jameson, Laclau, Anderson, Egleton, Balibar, Lesage, Petrovic, Spivak — to name a few. In fact, the list can be more impressively longer than one can imagine. But, the point, as is evident here, needs to be underlined: there are now an extraordinary number of Marxist discourses, methods, positions and politics. Grossberg and Nelson, in their introduction to *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, describes this scenario as "a renaissance in Marxist theory".

Indeed, even with the recent dissolution of the Soviet Union even in the face of repeated and jubilant declarations of "Marxism is dead" particularly by the bourgeois media, the extent and tempo of Marxist discourses all across the globe have not at all diminished; but they have rather increased, inviting fresh debates and disputes. On the other hand, with the explosion of radical theories in the West — with the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism including other such radical projects, Marxist discourses have not really fallen out of tune. Instead, Marxist discourses have since remained actively engaged either in conflicts or in conversations with competing or converging theories. And these conflicts and conversations are not always inconsequential, for now and then they have resulted in a newer recognition and acceptance of the very power and possibilities of Marxism itself.

Only recently, Jaques Derrida, in his piece called 'Spectres of Marx' published in the 1994 June-July issue of *New Left Review* which carried the title 'Deconstructing



Capital, unabashedly acknowledges a son's debt to the father — dead and alive — that Derrida has found in Marx. Yes, Marx is now Derrida's adopted father! Responses to such an affiliation may vary, and invite and evoke theoretical questions including feelings of amazement, laughter, scepticism, satisfaction, and so on. Aijaz Ahmad himself, in his most recent piece called 'Reconciling Marx and Deconstructive Politics', questions the recent Derridean and deconstructivist appropriation of Marx and Marxism. The fact, however, remains that Marx and Marxism have constituted an increasingly inviting and magnetizing territory which also keeps expanding with time.

4

First, in his talk, Aijaz Ahmad briefly deals with the problematics of the topic 'the Future of Marxism', maintaining that the topic entails a larger space than one may initially understand. He says that the topic includes at least three inter-related issues, namely: i) the future of Marxism as the philosophy of socialism; ii) the future of the alternatives to capitalism; and iii) the future of communism as it is found as a form of today's politics.

This topical complexity he resolves here, partly through in terms of identifying inter-related issues, only to define the direction of his discourse. And part of his attempt at this definition lies in the statement he makes a little later: "In a formal sense, there is an actual separation between Marxism as a body of knowledge, and communism as a political practice; and therefore, the demise of the Soviet Union and East European countries and the marketization of the economy in China and Vietnam, have not bearing on the Marxist philosophy. But, then, Marxism itself has always insisted on the unity of knowledge and ethics, philosophy and politics, and more famously the unity of theory and practice". Thus, having kept the tension between unity and separation in view, Ahmad explicitly positions himself against a formal separatism between philosophical Marxism and political Marxism. He says: "I shall speak mostly of political Marxism, and will refer to philosophical Marxism only in relation to the practical struggles of political Marxism".

As he uses these two terms, he defines them very briefly thus: "by philosophical Marxism, I shall mean Marxist theory, and by political Marxism, I will mean those practical struggles by communists, socialists, labour movements, and more broadly, by broad working masses, and also those radical movements which have associated themselves explicitly with Marxism".

Now, Professor Ahmad moves on to the first part of his argument, and the initial point he

makes is this: "One cannot speak of the future of so complex a thing as Marxism without at least some shared understanding of an extremely complex history of its past. That is to say, we cannot discuss the future without first discussing that whole past which has been the prehistory of the present moment — the prehistory of the birth of Marxism."

Professor Ahmad, at this point, however, does not go straight into the theme of Marxism's prehistory as proposed, but raises yet another significant question to which he draws everyone's special attention: "Our topic cannot be entirely separated from that other question, namely, what is the future of Marxism after the collapse of the Soviet Union and of similar states elsewhere?" Exhibiting his rather emphatic concern with this question, he then goes on to say: "I think we need in the face of this question a special kind of courage — the courage to face up to this question. One cannot bypass it. One cannot suppress it. Also, we need the courage not to reduce the great complexity of the past and the future of Marxism to the single issue of the collapse of the Soviet Union." He adds: "It is a question that I will never refuse to address, no matter how badly I do it, no matter how unprepared I am."

Now, Professor Ahmad goes on to recall the moment, the historical moment, in which Marxism was born — "rather the prehistory of the moment of the birth of Marxism", as Ahmad puts it. This he does by reading, a lengthy passage from a recent article he wrote on the basis of a lecture he gave on occasion of the first anniversary of the demolition of the Babri mosque. The article is actually devoted to the issue of communalism in India which, as Ahmad argues in his article, is nothing but a form of fascism.

Instead of going into the details of the passage, let me very briefly indicate the drift of his main argument made therein: there was a continual process of struggle in the European history of the Enlightenment which began with the struggle for secularism which then gave rise to the struggle for democracy, and it was the radical understanding of democracy which first gave rise to the idea of socialism. And it was in this continuum that Marxism at a particular moment was born.

One may feel here that Ahmad tends to privilege a straightforward, linear, sequential narrative, and exhibits the possibility of a post-structuralist dismissal of such a narrative as 'ordinary', 'positivistic', and so on. But, Ahmad also points to the complexity, the void, the fissure of this narrative, rather of the Enlightenment itself, which gave rise to the ideas of equality, fraternity and liberty. Ahmad, in fact, here foregrounds Rousseau, maintaining that it was Rousseau who took a truly revolutionary step by asking "whether or not citizens who make laws or obey them can, in fact, be the equal subjects of law as makers of, and as made by, the laws, if the distribution of material goods among them is unequal." In other words, the question that Rousseau asked was: is property reconcilable with democracy? Or, for that matter, with secularism itself? Ahmad, here, once again quotes directly from Rousseau: "Citizens who are unequal in property relations cannot be equals as subjects of, and as subject to, the law." The 'citizen-subject', that is to say, the democratic individual cannot be even born without the abolition of private property. True, Rousseau did not quite resolve the problem even at the level of thought; but, then, according to Ahmad, in pointing to the incompatibility between property and equality, Rousseau introduced an 'irreparable' fissure within the body of the Enlightenment thought. Professor Ahmad adds that strands in the radical, Enlightenment were already pronouncing the impossibility of the birth of a democratic individual in a class-divided society and that it was these strands that Marxism picked up, giving to them politically and theoretically a vastly revolutionized meaning. In fact, Professor Ahmad goes on to the extent of maintaining that the political slogan of the Radical Enlightenment — liberty, fraternity, equality — can be translated for our time word-by-word as democracy, secularism and socialism.

Continued on page 11

## The Traveller

by Jenny Warren

The country shines in Bangladesh  
Beauty abounds — East through to West.  
Nature's colours rich and strong,  
Shadows interse through rivers long  
The gentle work provides no sound,  
Silent labour on fertile ground.  
Landscapes change — creativity remains  
Misty mornings hazy skies  
It is here where the answer lies  
In abundance of beauty in one great land  
It's time to leave, the traveller sighs.

NB: This poem has been composed by Jenny Warren, a member of the Australian GSE Team which visited Bangladesh recently, in praise of Mr Hussain, Ara Hussain and Mr PDG Aziz-Ul-Haq.

## Return of the Saintry Sage

In memory of S M Ali

by Hubert Francis Sarkar

The great galaxy of saintry-serenity  
where eternal peace bleeds  
the pacific-minded wizards,  
where the sage-pharaohs recite mantras  
for the ultimate holiness,  
Is the holy sepulchre, I believe, where you have taken your throne.

Rejected from the glitz all around,  
A terrific redoubt, though, a divine smile in the exterior,  
Your heritance is a sparkling metaphor:  
A Saint in his own right  
Reaching the magnanimous heights  
Recanting, ricocheting the moribund rites,  
The torn-up, trite memorials  
in hindsight.  
The glamorous socialite  
The mighty equestrian  
All look very liquidarian  
in light of the clear, clarion call.  
Yet, an unassuaged creativity, mingled with a devastating urge

For a marly splendoured voyage even in a make-shift barge  
blank out all mazes;  
Thus surge the holy beverage,  
The liturgy of the saintly sages,  
Then in a grandiose addiction,  
The tycoons rush in a ruckus to the cash-cow,  
Kowtowing to a dead-odd idol, even now,  
Yet that original sin,  
Yet that admonition of Holy Father,  
Yet that alienation,

They embrace a lasting row  
in the midst of this apparition, you hold fast to  
the divine rope  
The strings of Truth, Love and Hope  
Thus the saintly-sage shows us  
the coming of the ultimate age  
in light of the first age  
At the heart of the endowment of this Epiphany was the  
amazing propensity

To take to the amphitheater both the ordinary and the  
glitterati,  
As if a brightly-luminescent star is coming away from  
the dark alleys of obscurity,  
You have spirited out,  
With a perspective outstretching the horizon and a  
formidable clout  
Stemming not from the material world — not a glamo, not  
a weapon —

But, in all loveliness,  
from the captivating melody of Songs of Solomon,  
from the pleasant fragrance of the roses of Sharon,  
You had also seen the savage smiles  
Of the flashing teeth, the boondoggles, the gules,  
Weren't you tormented viscerally at all these ravages?  
Now, another angelic clan  
suffuses the joy of life over all valleys and ridges,  
Now, a claustrophobic girl returns home with a coveted  
trophy.

A father-figure smiles a broad smile  
at the remission of a sinister atrophy, a horrific catastro-  
phe.  
Abrogine girls sing and dance even amid all the cruelties  
And coquetishly wink and laugh at the frailties of all  
faculties.

It is so tempting for you to return in all biases,  
Yes, throughout the ages,  
We have throughout the ages,  
We have bowed to you, your fortitude and love — never to  
the mantle  
Of a saint, a sage.

CELEOPATRA herself is infinite variety incarnate. So is her creator. One aspect of this infinite variety finds its monumental expression in his last plays, in how he creates comedy out of all the signs and symptoms of tragedy. *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* are the plays belonging to the last period of Shakespeare's dramatic career. They bring to the fore forces, images and experiences of evil, ugliness and misery so much so that at times they tend to border on tragedy; yet they all end happily with Shakespeare's magic touch. In the plays preceding these, i.e., in the great tragedies, Shakespeare deals with the struggle against the forces of evil, guilt, sorrow, suffering and loss. He may have fatigued and as such sought relief in the peaceful zone of forgiveness and reconciliation. In each of these plays of the last period, "grievous errors of the heart are shown to us, but at the end there is a resolution of the dissonance, a 'reconciliation' — says Dowden.

To our admiration, Shakespeare, towards the end of his career, has animated his plays by a tragic passion consequent upon the conflict between good and evil. The evil is not, however, permitted to have its sway, but is controlled and conquered by the good, thus preparing the ground for a very tender and gracious tone prevailing throughout. This is done in striking contrast with the tragedies where the dramatist seems to be pre-occupied with the darker sides of human experience and makes his play out of those destructive elements and passions that shake the foundation of the whole moral order and bring ruin upon the innocent and the guilty alike.

In the last plays, the evil too has its place but it dwindles almost to a state of nullity; it is rendered ineffective and

# The Last Plays : The Final Victory

by M Arshad Ali

harmless. The result is that though there runs a strain of sadness throughout the whole story these plays end in an atmosphere of peace and happiness because of reconciliations between estranged relations, of the retrieval of loss, of wrongs righted through repentance not revenge and of pardon granted to the wrong-doer. These dramas have a "grave beauty and sweet serenity" and an attitude to life characterised by wisdom and contemplative tranquility.

The *Winter's Tale*, for example, has all the fibres that could have been woven into a sombre tragedy. Leontes is hot with fierce and destructive jealousy and suspicion like Othello. He suspects Hermione of adultery and treason. His jealousy leads to several grievous consequences: his accusation of his royal friend Polixenes of adultery with the noble queen, his trial of the queen in the open court and her imprisonment, his only son dying premature at the report of calamity inflicted upon his mother, and his act of banishing his infant daughter and finally the queen's reported death caused by the grief at her son's death. His mad jealousy leads him to ruthless cruelty and inhuman barbarity which burst into a frenzied fury at Antigonus for not instantly removing his new-born daughter from his sight:

"If thou refuse  
And wilt encounter with my  
wrath, say so:  
The bastard brains with  
these my proper hands  
Shall I dash out!"

What an extremity of bestiality that a man can stoop to in expressing his blind resolution to kill his own new-born

child himself finding the paucity of accomplices in this foul deed. This reminds one of Lady Macbeth's bold assertion of her cruelty to her husband when she urges him to commit the murder of the King Duncan. But the jealousy of Leontes does not result in the disastrous catastrophe that we witness ensuing from that of Othello. Leontes has 'performed a saint-like sorrow', and with his fault redeemed and heart purified by remorse and penitence, he is received back into the arms of his queen Hermione who generously forgives and forgives all his follies and guilt. Their long-estranged relation is repaired and they are reconciled.

They get back their former banished daughter. His friendship with Polixenes is revived through the marriage of Perdita and Forizel. Thus the drama ends happily with the restoration of the moral order which once seemed to give in to the tremendous pressure of chaotic jealousy. One is at the end left with the feeling of a potential tragedy ending in an enlightening comedy, as the process of creation rather than destruction has set in, as symbolised by the marriage of Perdita with Florizel.

Similar is the case with *Cymbeline*. Posthumus is infected with the same disease of jealousy, and is maddened into fits of murderous fury like Othello at the fabricated adultery of his constantly chaste wife Imogen. But he has long atoned for the wrongs he has done her:

"For Imogen's dear life take  
mine; and though  
'Tis not so dear 'tis a life;  
you coined it."

His repentance brings in his reconciliation with his



generous wife Imogen who silently forgives all his blemishes and gracefully receives him back. She is also restored to her father, *Cymbeline*. Guiderius and Aviragus, two supposedly dead sons of *Cymbeline*, rescue him from being taken away as a captive by the Romans, thus bringing in a retrieval. So, instead of the universal waste that these brutal jealousy and heinous conspiracy cause in the tragedies, they are subdued and frustrated by the powers of repentance and forgiveness so that vengeance made ineffective brings in reunion. The order

not only of the human relationship is restored, but also of the political life is attained with the treaty ratified between Britain and Rome. The tragic element of a malignant destiny hurling destruction to fallible humanity is counterbalanced by the ever benign presence of a deity keeping constant watch over man's affairs and ever ready to bring succour in times of his crises. The final impression is, therefore, not one of colossal destruction but of construction yielded by repatriation and reconciliation.

In *Pericles*, the protagonist is driven from shore to shore

by the debased Emperor of Greece in revenge for a discovery which the former has made of the shocking deed of adultery that the latter has done secretly with his own daughter. In the course of his sea-voyage while caught in a raging storm, he loses his wife who is thought dead at the time of the delivery of her daughter in the ship. *Pericles* leaves the daughter Marina with Cleone, the governor of the city of Tyre and his wife Dionysia who swears to bring up the infant as their own daughter as a gesture of gratefulness for the service he has rendered them at a former time of famine in their land. Marina grows into a lady of astonishing grace and refinement outshining Dionysia's own daughter of the same age. This generates jealousy in the mind of Dionysia who plots her murder so that her daughter might stand peerless. In this cruelty of hers, she is of Lady Macbeth's proportions. But before her agent Leonine is able to execute the foul design, Marina is kidnapped by a gang of pirates who sell her to a brothel. She is rescued by the Governor of Mitylene Lysimachus. *Pericles* is reunited with Marina first and then with his wife. In this play, the elemental forces of destruction the passions of revenge and jealousy have certainly tragic potentials, but they could not have wrought destruction; instead, they are subdued only to bring a happy end.

These peculiarities that characterise these plays culminate in *The Tempest* which has reasons to be the last play of Shakespeare and the maturest of his 'dramatic romances'. *Prospero*, the duke of Milana, was interested more in

the pursuit of knowledge than in the performance of his 'ducal responsibilities'. 'All dedicated to the closeness and bettering of my (Prospero's) mind' 'rapt in secret studies' in the library which is to him 'dukedom large enough'. He delegated his ducal power to his brother Antonio who taking advantage of Prospero's neglect of the state-affairs, grew ambitious enough to be the absolute ruler of Milan. He hatched out a conspiracy in league with the king of Naples, and finally succeeded in banishing him from his dukedom one midnight and set him along with his infant daughter Miranda adrift on a frail boat at the mercy of the perilous sea. Antonio's foul ambition, his perfidy and breach of trust run parallel to Macbeth's.

Prospero and Miranda are marooned in a desolate island. His safe arrival at the island provides him with the golden opportunity of putting into practical effect the power which long study has placed at his disposal. He raises a tempest in order to bring his enemies within his fold. But, the shrieks of the passengers for life and the desperate bid of the mariners to head the ship lack to the sea arouses in us a tragic suspense as to the fate of the people on board. The tempest and thunder rolling over head reminds one of the tempest of Macbeth on the night of the murder of King Duncan, or more so, of the storm in *King Lear* where the whole universe and its established conventions, social and moral, seem to collapse under the violent impact of the forces of egoism let loose. But the tempest in *The Tempest* instead of being an instrument of destruction acts as an aid to the ultimate regeneration of

the human soul and its rebirth. Alonso, under whose patronage the evil design of banishment is executed, is roused to the hideousness of his crime. The whole surroundings in which he discovered himself during the tempest did howl out to him his base crime: 'O! it is monstrous, monstrous!

Methought the billows spoke and told me of it;  
He is totally distracted; life becomes unbearable to him in the absence of his son and repentance, the only kind of water that washes the guilt away, comes upon him to the fullest extent. He finds peace of mind only when his lost son is retrieved and he is reconciled with his erstwhile victim turned enemy Prospero through the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda.

Even Caliban, the half-fish and half-monster full of earth and water with nothing of the higher elements in him, 'a thing most brutish', 'being capable of all ill', is lit, though faintly, by a flash of repentance. When he finds that Stephano and Trinculo, who he was buoyed up with the hope, would have restored his freedom snatched away by Prospero, quarrels over a petty trumpery.

"What a thrice double ass  
Was I to take the drunkard  
for a god

And worship this dull fool."  
In both *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*, one sees that both sleep creates inauspicious circumstances favourable to the execution of murderous designs — one executed and another frustrated. The imagination of Macbeth might not have been bedeviled to murder Duncan or Lady Macbeth might not have goaded her husband one to commit the bloody deed unless the king were asleep and defenceless. Likewise, in *The Tempest*, sleep breeds the idea of murder and Antonio poisons Sebastian to

Continued on page 11