

Walnuts and Darts

Jamal Arsalan

WHEN the weather is made for sleeping, I am not an early riser. There comes a hammering of bare knuckles on my door. My youngest son is calling me. I have to wake up. He calls, "I want to crack my walnuts." Dimly his words penetrate into my mind. In the background can be perceived the murmurs of the other children whose representative for the moment is my three year old son. "Later," I croak mistily. They retreat. It is no use, however, for the effort of saying 'later' has increased my adrenalin flow. My body warms up, my mind cannot relax for sleep to come back.

Later on as I have my breakfast, my teenage daughter informs me my door has proved to be the best when it comes to cracking the shells of walnuts leaving the kernel smooth and unhurt. It seems to be a matter of hinges and the ones on this door are just made for cracking walnuts. My eldest son theorised it was because I always keep the hinges oiled.

In the evenings I am often busy with office work. Promotion means the display of initiative which in turn requires time and meditation. From experience I have found that conventional bolts do not work on a three-year old. Thieves have many a tool and technique to overcome the barrier of a door. But a three-year-old's voice simply has to threaten to dissolve —

one can imagine the lowering of the lip downwards! — and the occupant rushes hurriedly to unbolt the door. Or, if the occupant is obdurate like me, the three years old appeals tearfully to the mother.

"What on earth are you doing there?" My wife asks in amazement as if she has never heard of anyone working with the door bolted. She herself carries on her sewing, correction of her college students' khatas, slicing of fruits and vegetables, cooking as well as the innumerable household chores from sweeping cobwebs to answering the door — hawkers are a plague these days — with children all around but who would not dream of touching anything, except when allowed to assist, even if she left the room for some other work.

In my case, when children are around me as I work there are frequent cries not to touch this or leave that alone, it'll break and it's not available in the market anymore. Some commands go unheeded so a stronger dose of anger is needed: "This time I'll really get angry." My wife, in the meantime, is not happy about my lack of response in opening the door. She repeats her previous exclamatory query. Exasperated by a difficult passage in my work, I yell back, "I am strangling a woman. What else do you think I'd be doing?"

"Well, open the door." She tells me in a tone that implies why I cannot do that with the children inside the

room. Getting fed up, I make the excuse, "I have yet to get rid of the corpse."

"Well, do hurry up," she urges. "I have to fry the eggs and I can't stand here talking to you and the children all evening." She goes away confident I can get rid of the corpse — a situation that has baffled many a murderer, specially in today's forensic science age, when a morsel of bone or gristle or drop of blood is enough to prove one's guilt. Someone has given the children heaps of walnut which they now want to crack for the second time that day. Making sure there is nothing on the table that can be broken or hijacked. I open the door. The children pour in accompanied by some of their apartment friends.

The inside of the doors in our flat is decorated with posters. Thumb tacks are used, sometimes a hammer or its substitute is needed. I have to officiate at such functions: putting on a poster, taking off the earlier one, whose life span is over. The posters are secured at times from friends and relatives occasionally on an exchange basis. Generally I am the chief supplier like when we: the children and I go shopping or when I receive visitors from abroad I have yet to see my wife return from a shopping trip or a visit to a friend with at least one poster. On one occasion I came home laden with 7 posters to the utter delight of the youngsters.

My eldest son wants to know if I will be busy that evening. It was late afternoon and his home work was ap-

proaching completion. He had not gone out, nor any of the other children because it was raining intermittently. "Yes, why?" I look at him. "Then seeing his face," Oh, no, not again! Surely you will be watching TV!" But it turns out that once again it is one of those periods when there is really and truly nothing to view on TV. I have to go to the dining table with my work, while the children with others from the apartment settle down for an exciting game of darts. At first the children had been the only players. Then the news spread, even the landlord's grandchildren were involved. Despite complicated attempts to hide the door from the landlord, he found out in the end — from his grandchildren, of course. He asked them where they were going one dull rainy holiday and the whole story came out.

"Why don't they use the dart board you have made for them?" the landlord was puzzled. He himself liked my board immensely. I could only hand him a dart and position him towards the inside of my door. He realised why the children liked 'this' board. Darts became the indoor sports of the leaders of the building as well! My time in the room had to be scheduled accordingly! Cards and chess were played elsewhere, fortunately. When my door became too full of holes to hold a dart properly, the landlord had it replaced with exactitude. And continued throwing darts as enthusiastically as the children in the building!

Universal Humanism and Literature

Continued from page 9

ture, beauty, awareness of something beyond the world of man will always be present in works of literature. But above everything else literature must speak of life, of life's unlimited possibilities, and of comradeship. And the writer has to perform this task artistically, without any touch of propaganda. He must speak artistically of friendship, love, human welfare and universal humanism against discord, disharmony, envy, hatred and evil. In defining art Tolstoy emphasised human welfare. The spirit of universal humanism inspired him to embrace such a philosophy of life. Tolstoy laid emphasis on another thing. Some referred to it as his

theory of interaction of art. He said, "Art must influence and interact. It must generate love for one's neighbour and strengthen human brotherhood. By bringing people together in a spirit of fraternity and by removing discord universal art will impart to the people the lesson of unity. Art will have to shoulder an extraordinary responsibility. True art will ensure the peaceful coexistence of men. The responsibility currently discharged by such institutions as law and order authorities, the police, charitable organisations, industrial administration etc. should be discharged by art, independently and in a pleasing way, through human activities. Art will surely banish from soci-

ety envy and discord." By encouraging the spirit of universal humanism literary works can undoubtedly perform this welfare-oriented task.

Tagore, too, had travelled along the road of universal humanism and found the good and welfare of man to be the essential truth. In his own words, "by nature I am a believer in all existence, that is, everything calls out to me in union. I accept all. A tree becomes successful by drawing light from the sky, water and strength from the depth of the soil, and inspiration from the changing seasons. I think, my religion is like that. Only by receiving everything smoothly from all and by obtaining the touch of

truth from everything can my soul attain success." This religion is really nothing but the religion of universal humanism.

I am aware that the presentation made by me on universal humanism and literature is incomplete, yet I have perhaps succeeded in drawing attention to two things. One, universal humanism has been an essential source of great literatures of all times of all countries. Two, all great literatures foster the growth of universal humanism in one way or another, whether the matter is directly articulated or not.

The writer is professor of English at Dhaka University.

A King's Ransom

ONE of the most fabulous jewellery collections in the world belongs to the Nizam of Hyderabad in India. Nizam is the hereditary title of the rulers of Hyderabad belonging to the dynasty founded by Asaf Jah. Subahdar of the Deccan from 1713-48.

For a while, after the Nizam's death, it was thought that this priceless collection, second only to Britain's Crown Jewels, would be sold at auction and the proceeds divided among the heirs as the successors quarrelled as to who will inherit the fortune.

The seventh Nizam, Usman Ali Khan, who had made the collection, had drawn up a will which specified that the collection should be sold three years after the death of his eldest son, Prince Azam Jah Bahadur. The Prince died in 1970.

An attempt was made in 1978 to organize an international auction of the pieces in the collection and Sotheby's was commissioned to sell the precious items to the highest bidder. Cultural experts were angry at the prospect of the jewellery collection being sold in the United Kingdom as these are historical relics,

they maintained.

Needless to say, the auction would have resulted in the dissipation of the jewellery, perhaps even its being brought out of the country.

Finally, the Indian government intervened and the auction was never held. The Indian Cabinet in New Delhi decided that the only way to deal with the matter was to sell it to the government which would then display it as a national treasure. The government claimed that the Nizam's pieces were of historical value and could not be allowed to leave the country.

The international price at that time was estimated to be 12,000 million rupees (US\$383 million). Its present value is said to be Rs 15,000 million (US\$478 million).

So a sum of Rs 2,110 million (US\$67 million) was paid to the Nizam's Jewellery Trust, which represents 49 major beneficiaries belonging to the former ruling family of Hyderabad.

But the money was paid only recently after 20 years of



legal tussle between the government and the heirs of the Nizam. In all that time, the jewellery was lying in the vaults of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank at Bombay.

After payment was made on Jan 8, the jewellery was moved from Bombay to Delhi by a special chartered aircraft although the government has yet to decide where to display the rare items of jewellery. Should it be at the National Museum as they are as valuable as England's Crown Jewels which are shown to

the public at the Tower of London? Some 80 security personnel were involved in the transfer.

Notwithstanding this move, it appears, however, that the issue is far from completely resolved. Press reports say the heirs of the Nizam are not quite happy about the deal.

The present Nizam, Prince Mukarram Jah, who lives in Australia, has the major share. His younger brother, Mufakhan Jah, would get a 12.5 per cent

share.

A legal battle continues between the princes and their sister Princess Fauzia, who has been contesting the arrangement with the government as a major beneficiary of the Trust.

The late Nizam himself would have been dismayed by the 20-year-long battle to sell off the jewellery. He would have regarded it as a great humiliation.

Meanwhile, the government has collected its taxes amounting to over Rs 150 million (US\$5 million). An equal amount has been kept for future tax liabilities.

Officials have pointed out that the money will not go directly to people who are to benefit from the sale of the jewellery. The beneficiaries would only get the interest from the amount invested by the government.

What is of greater concern right now is whether or not the collection will bring misfortune to the rulers in New Delhi. The jewellery includes Jacob's Diamond, which allegedly carries a curse. Astrologers and pundits are not sure if government officials should take precaution.

— Dephneus Asia

Of Art Criticism and Brochure-writing

Continued from page 9

questions about things that were taken for granted even a generation ago. Last year, in a seminar in Dhaka, I spoke on post-colonial art and the blind spots in art criticism, especially in regard to Oriental Art. To my surprise, a few art history students of the Institute of Fine Arts came up, at the end of the lecture, with a number of queries and observations that clearly showed that they had thought long and hard on the subject. Then, in course of my year-long stint with the Institute of Fine Arts as a part-time lecturer in art history, I again found a new awareness of art among the students — I would like to call it a kind of new historicism — which attempts to read art history from their very own perspective, which is often a mix of diverse political, economic and cultural matrices.

Although I have been writing about art for the last twenty years, and doing a bit of art criticism on the side, I invariably flinch when some-

one puts the epithet 'art critic' after my name. For, I consider my knowledge of art — its history, techniques, styles; its overlapping definitional boundaries, its complexities — too inadequate to justify that pompous title and I frankly do not see how my rather eclectic exercise can aspire to the rigour and discipline which art criticism should employ. I was introduced to a Japanese journal last month during the 7th Asian Art Biennale as an art critic by a Shilpakala Academy official. The journal obviously had some questions to ask, may be about art in Bangladesh. But at the mention of the words, he retreated. May be in Japan art critics are a kind of cultural Shogun, to be kept at arm's length. During another Biennale, a French art critic came to Dhaka — and he was kept at arm's length, by practically everyone.

What do most 'art critics' do in Bangladesh? Well, in my case, I find I am increasingly getting involved in a type of writing I seldom relish: writing introductions to artists and their works in the brochures published on the occasion of art exhibitions — solo or group.

So why do I write? Firstly because of personal relationships. Artists are often friends, colleagues, students (some of whom I really like to promote), a friend's friend, relatives, and, at least once, a neighbour. They all need someone to write — and in English. Since I am an 'art critic' and a teacher of English to boot, I obviously become a first choice. I write also because I don't know how to say no. It is difficult to refuse a friend, or a student. Sometimes I do love to write about someone — especially an artist who has shown great promise and potential. I remember when I wrote about GS Kabir and Mohammad Iqbal first, they were not quite known beyond their immediate circles. But I was moved by their works, by the way each translated his vision in striking images. I was even

Eliot in Bengal

Serajul Islam Chowdhury



Continued from the December 8 issue

The nation wanted independence, poets demanded liberty. In their youthful rebelliousness, poets like Buddhadeva Bose had turned to D H Lawrence and desired that sex be treated frankly in literature. There was an element of adolescence in this revolt. Rabindranath was concerned when he saw faithful like Sudhindranath clamouring for liberty. Being a greater writer and humorist, he almost took the wind out of their sails by allowing one of his own fictional characters to speak against his so-called tyrannical poetic rule. In his novel *Sheshar Kavita* (Poetry at Parting) written in 1926 Amit Ray, the young barrister, says it loudly that Rabindranath had no business to stay so long; he must be forced to pack up and vacate, allowing for the creation of new poetry which should be like industrial factories, gothic churches and the pain of neuralgia. But Rabindranath was prepared to go even farther to meet the rebels. At 70 he changed his poetic style and began to write prose poems. In a volume called *Punaschya* (Postscript), published in 1932, Rabindranath appeared without his cloak, in the manner of Yeats in his later poetry. What is more, he translated into Bengali Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," which translation he included in this new volume.

Bishnu Dey recalls that it was he who was responsible for Rabindranath's translation of the poem. He writes: "Eliot's *Artel Poems* was available in Calcutta around 1930-31. Of the volume, I attempted a translation of 'Journey of the Magi.' Without disclosing the authorship, I sent the translation to Rabindranath requesting his comments on the verification in prose. Rabindranath suggested several improvements. When he came to know who the author was, he said, 'I seemed to have been unfair to Eliot.' He obtained a copy of the poem, made his own translation and sent it for publication in *Sudhindranath's* quarterly."¹ Rabindranath's translation of the poem catches the atmosphere and the sense of

alienation that characterise the original. Even then this poem which he calls "The Pilgrim" in Bengali is Rabindranath's rather than Eliot's, for it has a tenderness all its own. A year before this translation, Rabindranath had written in 1931 a remarkable poem called "The Child." This also has for its theme the nativity of a child, representing humanity, to a mother, who stands for the world. The idea of birth through death which had interested Eliot was of interest to Rabindranath as well; but it is not true, as some have suggested, that Rabindranath had taken the idea of the poem from Eliot, for he read "Journey of the Magi" only after he had written the poem, and not before. Rabindranath and Eliot did not have much in common, and his opposition to the kind of poetry Eliot wrote was fundamental.

In his new volume of poems Rabindranath was, as he put it, imitating his neighbourly river Kopai which was usually quiet and allowed men, carts and cattle to move freely across her. He was setting poetry free, which was what his young friends had demanded. In *Punaschya* the characters were new, some of whom were drawn from Calcutta. Even then there are no self-conscious Prufrocks in Rabindranath's world; most of his men and women belong to the lower middle class and struggle against neglect and poverty. Their problem is injustice rather than alienation. In their dreams, the girl who has been abandoned by her lover now reading in London is no less romantic than the poor clerk who is oppressed by poverty. Rabindranath never travelled in a Calcutta tram but his characters, even girls, did. However, the poet declined to choose his rhythm from the machines, he would rather go to the river in the village. "I am giving my words / the dress of yours," he said in a poem, entitled "The New Age."

Rabindranath altered his style, but he himself remained unchanged. Concurrently with these poems, he wrote an essay on modern poetry in

modernity as represented by Eliot was complete. Modern poetry, he said, was impersonal; and for him good poetry has to be personal. In his youth he had read the Romantic poets, each of whom was an individual, representing a correspondence between the world outside and their own selves. The Victorians too chose to speak of their personal reactions to the world. In the twentieth century modernism has arrived. There is a hurry in the modern world. The taste is fundamentally different. Rabindranath is prepared to accept that the frog has a beauty of its own; but he does not see why it should be allowed to claim equality with Apollo, as has been done in a modern poem.

In that essay, Rabindranath gives several other illustrations to drive home the point that modernism is unacceptable to him. He mentions a poem on aesthetics, by Ezra Pound wherein the poet suggests that to the impersonal eye, beautiful girls and fresh sardines are equally attractive. One must not discriminate. Rabindranath cites two poems from Eliot, "Preludes" and "Aunt Helen." In the first poem there is a sordidness which repels Rabindranath. He quotes from the poem with the comment that the smoky, mud-stained, stale smelling, garbage covered empty evenings and mornings must have pained the poet. The fuel-gathering old world that Eliot mentions in the concluding lines is unlikely to attract anyone. But the point is that poetry is no longer interested in clean beauty as it used to be in the past.

In "Aunt Helen," the other poem by Eliot that Rabindranath refers to, the theme is sexual repression. Sex, we know, had both fascinated and frightened Eliot, making him feel self-conscious, shy and diffident. But to Rabindranath sex was romantic. He was, therefore, unable to sympathise with what Eliot was doing in that Bostonian poem of his. Rabindranath gives a matter-of-

fact summary of the happenings in the poem. The old woman is dead. The shutters have been drawn; the undertakers are doing their work appropriately. Meanwhile the footman is sitting on the dining table holding the second housemaid on his knees. In his impatience, Rabindranath omitted to mention the last line which was about the amorous footman — "who had always been so careful while the mistress lived." Since the spinster's death, there has been a release, her parrot is dead, but her dogs are alive, and the footman is now free to do what he had always desired. Rabindranath's comment is typical. "The story is credible. But why should the poet write about it? Why should the readers bother to read?" He asks, and then

adds, "It is good to know that the girl smiles beautifully, but who would be interested in knowing what the dentist knows about the decay in her teeth?"

It is significant that what Rabindranath wrote about Eliot in 1932 is akin to what Yeats wrote about Eliot in his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, 1892-1935, which indicates a nearness between the two romantic poets, despite many differences. Yeats wrote, "Eliot has produced his great effect upon his generation because he has described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit; in describing this life that has lost heart his own heart seems grey, cold, dry. He is an Alexander Pope, working without apparent

the only principles of writing that it illustrates are such as are valid for Milton to observe." He had also noticed in Milton a "hyperbole of the auditory at the expense of the visual and tactile." The so-called dislodgement of Milton by Eliot gave the Bengali poets of the thirties a confidence, almost an impetus, to dismiss Modhusudan. There was a conspiracy of silence as well. Buddhadeva Bose wrote his *An Acre of Green Grass*, subtitled "A Review of Modern Bengali Literature," even so much as mentioning Modhusudan. In a well-known essay written in 1946, included in his volume *Shahitya Charcha* (The Cultivation of Literature), Buddhadeva Bose calls Modhusudan Michael, suggesting that the poet was not as much a Bengalee as he ought to be and made the point that Modhusudan was unnecessarily rhetorical and sadly incapable of growth.

Eliot changed his position of Milton in 1974 when he generously suggested that "the remoteness of Milton's verse from ordinary speech, his invention of his own poetic language, seems to me one of the marks of his greatness." But Buddhadeva remained unchanged. To tilt would have been to lose credibility.

Sudhindranath has not however ignored Modhusudan. In an essay called "Liberation of Verse and Rabindranath" he said that Modhusudan loved the Bengali language, but did not know its nature. Rabindranath, Sudhindranath thought, was fortunate, for he had the example of Modhusudan before him, and knew what he must avoid. It is interesting to see that Sudhindranath wrote his essay in 1932, four years before Eliot had written his on Milton, which suggests that in temper and attitude he was near Eliot, and, independently of the English critic, he had arrived at the same conclusion as Eliot's about an epic poet whose poetic ideals were not acceptable to the modernists.

The language Eliot used in his essays, his qualifications, cautious assertions, use of appropriate comparisons, and, above all, the controlled rhythm of his prose, have in-

fluenced many of our prose writers, often without their knowledge.

When Bengal was partitioned in 1947 most of the Muslim writers moved from Calcutta to Dhaka, and in order to support the two-nation theory floated by the Muslim leaders the question of tradition, among other things, was brought to the fore — politically as well as culturally. East Bengal, it was suggested, should have a distinct tradition of its own. Its literature should be independent of the literature of undivided Bengal in the past and of West Bengal in the present. Eliot was brought in to support the Pakistani view on tradition and religion. The tradition that the Pakistanis sought to have was religious in character, and they thought Eliot was on their side against those who recommended a secular tradition for acceptance. In their enthusiasm, the promoters of Pakistani culture ignored two facts about Eliot. First, that Eliot was speaking of a literary as different from a religious tradition, and secondly, that Eliot never thought that tradition was a lump to be swallowed or a substance to be inherited in a passive manner, and believed that it had to be acquired by great labour. They forgot that in Eliot's view a writer must have what he calls the traditional sense, which sense "compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." Eliot did not believe in rejection, unlike the Pakistani promoters of tradition.

However, the new generation of poets in East Bengal refused to reject, for they knew that they belonged to the broader and unified tradition of Bengali literature; and on them the influence of Eliot operated almost in the same manner as it had done on the poets of the thirties. For example, Hasan Hafizur Rahman called his first book of poems *Bimukh Prantar* (The barren Field), which title is reminiscent of *The Waste Land*. But Hasan's land

Continued on page 12