

TEENS

TWENTIES

Coping With Identity Crisis

by Aiyaz Hussain

ANY of us who were either born in the states or those of us who immigrated there at an early age face the issue of identity confusion. I myself (having arrived there at the age of three) have felt the inability to belong to either American or Bangladeshi society. Melting pot offers little consolation, and at times I want to run off to Paris as Pierre Le Blance. Some Deshi's cope by donning blue jeans and preparing steak for dinner. Purists decry them and cling to Islamic orthodoxy and stands of cultural homogeneity. Still others seek a more diplomatic route, navigating a happy median course of partial integration.

One binding tie I always thought to be language. After all, Bangladesh came to being because a people found themselves in their preferred tongue. With all of the literature that becomes available, it truly can be a path to unity for confused masses. No wonder my 4th grade English classroom wall read "language is the only Homeland".

Religious beliefs constitute another critical mode of self-identification. The cross-cultural solidarity achieved under the banner Islam or Christianity is staggering. Nations, governments, and cultural traditions have been developed in accordance to religious guidelines. These frameworks have also led to separate branches of philosophy and mysticism. Thus, religious factors are indisputable pointers in directing one toward a realization of identity.

My cousins in the US, overzealous and liberated as they are, have taken to rewriting their own philosophies for themselves. Feigning piety and conservatism they pursue a promiscuous lifestyle, living a bizarre schizophrenic paradox.

For a few minutes, everyone's attention was fixed towards the Seiko clock, clung on the wall just above the bottle-green chalkboard. At last the clock-hands joined; it was midday, "you may start now." I uttered the words carefully, not to sound too pedantic, and swung round to face the examiners.

No sooner had they turned their question papers than a frantic noise filled the atmosphere of the classroom. Someone snapped open his pencil-case, another muttered expressions of despair, a third pulled his chair with a loud crack, and what not!

"Quiet, please!" I said a number of times, with a peremptory tone. The noise was gradually abating and it was almost after five minutes when the classroom returned to its usual quietness, with only the blades of the fans swishing.

I glanced at the boy nearest to me, the once fidgety body was now static, the only moving part being his right hand which pushed the pen with dexterity. The once pale face was now crimson which bore the fact that he was concentrating hard.

In fact all the students appeared serene and engrossed in their writing. Standing beside the teacher's table, I could do nothing but envy their resilience; with only ten minutes passed, they had subdued their initial state of frenzy, while I could not make myself comfortable in this so familiar classroom.

It was for the first time I was assigned to invigilate an examination. Before stepping into the classroom, I had contemplated the challenges I could face. Although I was an A-level student of another school, I was nonetheless a student, just like those examiners. This could encourage some to take up bold attempts to cheat and I had decided to remain as vigilant as possible. On the other hand, the fact that I was their students' counsellor and had earned quite a reputation consoled me greatly.

However, I kept my senses in full alert; a mere rustling sound and my head would

Who?

by Sabin Ahmed Khan

WHO is this predator of the night? Whose approach cannot be sensed? Who tears the flesh of its prey, And does not respond to the day. Who is this monster of the dark? Whose call makes violence. And if its eyes are locked on its prey, You can be sure, there is no escape — Who is this devil of the forest gloom, Whose evil call and fluttering, Remains a threat to all. Who is this monster? Who? who? Who?.....



They are aesthetically accessible to both cultures, though I fear their loss of any real consistency of cognition. Perhaps they have fooled themselves as well, living in a world of false

appearances as in Gatsby's Valley of Ashes.

I suppose this is an example of steering the middle course, but in truth it's just a single masked existence. The inability to identify with residents of a foreign land can be psychologically baffling, an intimidating obstacle to simple pleasures of life.

The perceptions of others can dominate personality, and one finds him/herself lacking confidence. For example, I am used to watching foreign nationals getting harassed and ridiculed by a foreign consulate from which I myself had to obtain visas. Whenever I return, I feel the need to establish a dialogue with the visa officers. It's a sort of constructive engagement which allows me to establish formality with western bureaucracy and attitudes. Similarly, such self-consciousness also plagues one in public places and social events, where I wonder about how Caucasians are classifying and labeling me.

In the same token, when I visit Dhaka, I strain not to look too overtly like a tourist, incapacitated by the pace change and functional discrepancies between life here and in America.

Holidays pose another dilemma. We never celebrated Christmas, but we didn't experience the traditional Eid holidays' full fanfare and splendor either.

Our lines were not inched with the festivities and celebrations which were a part of practically everyone else's world.

Sadly, the realities of cultural incongruity are true and difficult to overcome. Let us hope that time and social progress will affect new changes in polyglot nations like the US and foster tolerance and acceptance among "native" populations.

very boisterous and naughty. As soon as a teacher had left the classroom, we would turn the whole place as clamorous as a fish-market. We would play all sorts of bantering games while someone would peep at the corridor time to time. Once I threw a cricket ball to a friend, but it passed over him and smashed the window behind. As for my punishment, I had to write five hundred times, "I will not play in the classroom", on some loose sheets.

"Good old days," I breathed



Anyway, the trembling of a body caught my attention. She wrinkled her brows and shook her legs continuously. "Can anyone with a panicky mind express his or her abilities?" The answer was obviously, "no". Then I remembered how nervous I had been in a number of examinations and how I ended up with miserable grade.

I went to her and peeked at her answer sheets, but I could hardly read her scrawls. I asked her to put her pen down and gave her a two-minute break. "Take a deep breath, count one to five and then exhale," I advised her and promised that she would be allowed to have an extra two minutes if she needed at the end of the examination. She did accordingly, and this little exercise seemed to have a tremendous impact on her.

She quickly mustered up courage, picked up her pen firmly and went back to her work with much determination.

An hour or so had already passed. And suddenly, I found there was little to do on my part — just keep the students under a vigilant eye. I leaned against a wall with my arms crossed and flicked through my childhood recollections. I was no stranger to this school. In fact, I had spent ten years of my schooling in this institution. Five years from now I had been a student of class seven and had worked diligently day and night to top my class. I was only twelve, then. Everyday, at around 8 o'clock, I would come to this room and take a seat somewhere in the second row. We were indeed

the examination supervisor bustled into the classroom, flicked through the answer sheets and left me alone beside the teacher's table. It was typically a muggy June day. I folded up the sleeves of my shirt and decided to leave the room at once. As I reached the door, I turned around to leave the last glance at the room.

The blue desks appealed so much to my senses that a quaint feeling urged me to walk down to the nearest desk. Oblivious of the surroundings, I sat down. Momentarily, the uneasiness that had crept over me throughout the examination faded away....

Behind The Mask

concealing of it

On a flight to Natal, South Africa, in April 1993, President Nelson Mandela was turning the pages of the Johannesburg Weekend Star with untroubled precision. On Robben Island, where the old apartheid regime had imprisoned him for 19 years, newspapers had been denied him, and he still savors them. I sat across from him in the twin-engine plane.

About 20 minutes from the airport, Mandela tapped me on the knee. I looked up, and he motioned toward the window. What I saw alarmed me. "Richard," he said matter-of-factly, as if asking me to pass the sports section, "would you please tell the pilot that the propeller appears to have stopped working?"

As I was making my way to the cockpit, I met the co-pilot, who informed us that the airport had been alerted. There would be emergency vehicles along the runway when we arrived. However, he didn't anticipate a problem, since the plane had landed with a single engine.

I returned to my seat. The sight of the crippled propeller only stoked my anxiety. So instead of looking out the window, I gazed at the reassuring face of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. He appeared as unconcerned as a commuter whose morning train to the office was a few minutes late. He returned to his newspaper, his expression and manner immediately calming me.

Fifteen minutes later we landed without incident amid a sea of fire engines and a cacophony of sirens. Throughout the descent Mandela's face had remained a mask of unconcern. In the airport, as he shook hands with local dignitaries, he whispered to me, "Man, I was scared up there."

I was in South Africa to work with Mandela on his autobiography. Over the course of a year, we met almost daily, either in his office at African National Congress (ANC) headquarters, or at his home in Johannesburg. Like everyone else, I knew the public Mandela: the smiling grandfather, the generous emancipator, the stern leader. The incident on the plane was one of the few times that I glimpsed something other than his public face. I discovered that the proud and graceful persona that Mandela has crafted for himself is virtually without cracks: the man and the mask are one.

He invented himself under the most trying of circumstances. Mandela told me there were times in prison when he was frightened, but he knew he couldn't afford to let the authorities see the slightest weakness. Eddie Daniels, a fellow inmate on Robben Island, says he used to take heart just from watching Mandela walk upright and proud across the prison courtyard. The lesson is that courage is not the absence of fear but the

him through proper channels. Someone once said that Mandela is a mixture of African aristocracy and British nobility. Educated by British missionaries, he was inculcated with the belief that the best ideas are English ideas. Despite his dislike of British colonialism, he emulates British style, from his suits to his accent to his manners. He once mentioned that he enjoyed meeting with British Prime Minister John Major, since the two of

interviewed a number of his colleagues with whom he spent decades in prison, and while they loved and respected him, many confessed they did not feel they really knew him. The occasional aloofness that characterized him before he went to prison hardened during those years. To create a barrier against prison authorities, he built a wall around himself that excluded almost everyone else.

South Africa's leader can appear naive on certain subjects, such as the media — areas that changed fundamentally while he was behind bars. When he came out of prison, for instance, he thought the fury sound booms carried by television crews were a newfangled South African police weapon. But when it comes to political strategy, his mind works with a subtlety and power that can be dazzling. To hear him discuss nonviolent protest as a tactic versus a moral principle is like listening to a great violinist improvising a cadenza.

Mandela is a preternaturally early riser and likes to start his day with a walk. I often met him at his home at 5:30 am for meandering three-hour constitutional in the countryside. He would walk from village to village, sometimes waking people up, many of whom — to Mandela's great amusement — did not know who he was.

After one such walk on April 10, 1993, Mandela and I sat down in his study to begin a taped interview. We had just started when his house-keeper informed him that 30 members of the Transkei Police rugby team were encamped in his driveway, waiting to say hello. In this track suit and socks (he had already removed his shoes), Nelson Mandela rose stiffly and walked outside.

With a smile and personal word for each man, Mandela shook 15 hands. Then he was told he had an emergency phone call. Returning to his study, he learned that Chris Hani, former leader of the ANC's military wing and the most popular man in the country after Mandela himself (and one of the old man's many surrogate sons in the organization), had been assassinated by a white extremist.

Mandela put the phone down and looked off into the distance, his face drawn and concerned. At that moment many South Africans feared Hani's death might trigger an apocalyptic civil war between whites and blacks.

Mandela then stood up, apologized to me for the interruption and returned to the driveway, where he put on his smiling mask and shook the remaining 15 hands of a grateful group of athletes.

Condensed from the spectator Richard Stengel

Selected articles from the Readers Digest April 1996 issue.



Nelson Mandela

dignity were evidence of that upbringing.

As a small boy in the Transkei, Nelson Mandela was treated as someone special. Later, as a young man in Johannesburg, he confronted a pervasively racist society. That earlier special treatment gave him enough pride not to let oppression make him feel inferior and submissive. Instead, it made him angry and combative.

Even today, what irks him more than anything else is an insult to his dignity. He once became testy with me when I handed him a gift — a new tie — in front of his staff. The gift should have been conveyed to

them spent most of their time discussing cricket.

Mandela's beauteous smile conveys a genuine warmth but also hides a man who knows the power of his image as the father of a new South Africa. At a banquet, Mandela makes a point of shaking hands with the kitchen staff, showing them the same courtesy as he would a diplomat. He is most easily kind with strangers and can often be cold with those closest to him.

Mandela has many friends, thousands of acquaintances and millions of admirers, but there are few people, if any, with whom he can relax. I in-

lucifer casting his spells.

Some have called it a shadowy version of life, others a criticism. But in truth there is no distinction for literature, but life itself. It does not profess to teach, it anticipates life and moulds it to its purpose. It shows us that one must never rush through life at a fast pace that one doesn't have the time to enjoy the blooming at the buds at the first call of spring, the call of cuckoo from the lush green leaves or a squirrel hiding against a harsh nature.

FRIENDSHIP, JEALOUSY AND POSSESSION

Twelve midnight and once again they're chatting on the phone

"Are they on the line again?" has been the general moan.

"Hey relax," they both exclaim, "it's cheaper than a shink."

"If we are mad," they argue, "then the world is getting madder."

"Or vice versa, perhaps still, whichever one is sadder."

Strange bedfellows, Uma and he, from an outsider's point of view.

Sworn enemies once, supposedly, though neither of them knew

In this game of life that's known as "The Accumulation of Wealth".

These nightly talks are all they had for preserving their mental health.

They talk not of politics, literary styles and "Art Dekhe-chos?"

Intelligentsia would be shocked but who gives an Umberto Eco.

None could take offence by what they rapped on about.

Girls and boys and boys and girls and those who did without.

Lovers they were not, these two were cynics, but late after one session

Saiful gets a call from Chompi, a woman driven by obsession.

She's bold and beautiful, a friend of both, she asked "Is Uma a contendor?"

She had the horn for Saiful, the likes of which he could not send her.

He had on his hands a hostile woman, without a sense of proportion.

"Oh dear" he thinks, "I haven't seen such drama since the last one on Door Darshan."

"You led me on!" she screams, hangs up. Saiful thinks she's delirious.

He calls back Uma, they discuss the matter and conclude it could be serious.

Guilty before proved otherwise, they prayed to the One above.

But love is blind and so is the lady who holds the scales of love.

"We've lost a friend," he says to Uma, "She must be really pissed."

"That's what happens," Uma says, "when you get your hormones in a twist."

"She's bonkers," they sadly admit and end up feeling guilty.

"Her reasoning's muddy, her intelligence cloudy and her brain has gone all silty."

They both agree to call her next day and set her all as- straight.

To try and stop her being devoured by that ugly emotion called hate.

Next day our lady Chompi is in no mood to see any rea- son.

To forgive our two chatter boxes. They have committed treason."

She builds a wall and blanks them out and proceeds to feed her fire.

On blood and guts and fear and hate and all the world's ire.

The time has come to talk of love at the cost of something grumpy.

On human nature, friendship, trust. We are addressing Chompi:

Don't act your shoesize, act your age. Can you please tell me how

You own a man you hardly knew, you're nearly thirty now.

Friends are friends and lovers are lovers and there's something to remember.

Both are doomed if jealousy and possession are high on your agenda.

by Gilgamesh