

Second Thoughts

Syed Manzoorul Islam

LAST NOVEMBER, AS PART OF 'Utsav' — the Indian festival of the arts — there was this colloquium in Dhaka which brought together a number of writers and scholars from Bangladesh and India, ostensibly to share their views on the turn of the century perceptions in South Asia. What the colloquium turned out to be, however, was a series of monologues from most participants on their own writing. Held in Bangla Academy, the colloquium was participated by Mahasweta Devi, Mr Anand and three others from India, and Professor Kabir Chowdhury, Shamsur Rahman, Dr M Moniruzzaman, Dr Razia Khan Amin, Asad Chowdhury and Mohammad Nurul Huda from Bangladesh. I was given the task of moderating/facilitating the colloquium — but really had nothing to do except introduce the topic and the speakers, and, for the rest of the time, keep looking for an opportune moment to intervene without offending the speaker so that nobody monopolized the clock.

The colloquium was interesting and at times, entertaining, but a bit off the mark, as far as the topic went. Nothing much was lost on that count, however, for, the fact that writers and poets of the stature of Mahasweta Devi and Shamsur Rahman chose to speak about their own work was a good enough reason to sit through the whole colloquium. What was a bit discomfiting though, was some participants' impatience about any mention of future. 'I've not taken any sole agency on the future,' announced Mahasweta Devi, when I had introduced the topic and suggested that, in keeping with the title and the *fin de siècle* spirit, the participants might try to have a look into the future, standing on their end-of-the-century (and end-of-the-millennium) vantage points. I was surprised by the fact that Mahasweta Devi took my suggestion as an invitation to crystal gazing, which clearly was not my intention. Literature is not definitely an exercise in unraveling the future — that is something we have left to astrology and science fiction. But literature, even of the most realist kind, does sometimes give us a vision of a tomorrow, and in that sense it might even take us into the next century. Perhaps future was not the right word; perhaps I ought to have stuck to a more simple 'tomorrow'.

The other thing which stunned me was the degree of scorn displayed by some participants about literary theory in general and postmodernism in particular. Postmodernism got the biggest bashing. Poor thing! If it had a pair of legs it would run away to Shetland or Sahara, or jump off from the bridge over Buriganga. I myself do not profess any unreserved admiration for theory, or for that matter postmodernism, but I believe they have their virtues, whether one likes them or not. I realize there are people like Frank Lentricchia — once called 'the Dirty Harry of literary theory' — who have since recanted and renounced literary theory and joined the simple crowd of literature aficionados. But the Dirty Harry was once up to his neck in literary theory; it was his daily staple. By the same token therefore, it takes an insider like him to convincingly argue against theory. But for a lot of us, who have neither his 'authority', nor his reading, to rile against theory, and to reject it lock, stock and barrel — and that too, on hearsay — amounts at best to a deep-seated prejudice.

As one of the participants was consistently hammering on the point that postmodernism should be rejected for its nihilistic slogan 'there is no future', I kept thinking why something which is neither a movement, nor a crusade, should be so much resented. Postmodernism does not certainly have any slogan (it would be against its very grain if it had one); it rather demands a great deal of rethinking of concepts and ideas that, over the years, have become too authoritarian. I was reminded of a piece I once wrote in which I introduced a couple of painters as postmodern, and the sharp response it evoked from another painter. The painter in question wrote back, wondering how one can be 'post' modern, since we are at best modern. Implied in his criticism was this attitude: how can one live in tomorrow today? In his logic, since modern = today, therefore, post-modern = tomorrow. The fact that escaped both the participant in the colloquium and the artist is that postmodernism is not a replacement of modernism, nor a complete break with a modernist past, but a cultural phenomenon of the late 20th century that questions and resists modernist attitudes and proposes an entire series of new alternatives. Thus the paradox, irony, ambiguity, indeterminacy and contingency of post-modernism are seen to replace 'modern closure, unity, order, the absolute and the rational' as a critic informs us. Whether considered a period, a cultural condition, a cultural logic or a project, postmodernism does not lend itself to any rigid periodization — or categorization. It has been approached through a diverse range of artistic and cultural forms — including architecture, films, video, pedagogy, and so on. It is one thing therefore to shut one's eyes to this phenomenon and wish it away, and quite another to appreciate its forms and expressions and then take exception to some or even all.

essay

The Horse Rider's Ambition

by Alif Zabr

THE POLITICAL ETHICS in my country reminds me of the horse, the saddle, and the horseman. The rider must be trained to ride a horse, especially a wild horse. The horse must be trained, to be useful, even if he carries a wild rider. The saddle or the mount must be well used, for the comfort of the rider and the horse. Then, the reining has to be right, and the destination clear in vision or sight.

This is a land of cows, not horses. But horse-trading is popular; for reasons unknown officially, but familiar in the drawing rooms, and in the parliament (the latter is known by the name of Jatiya Sangsad). Louis Khan's holes still exist — metaphorically; that man had a prophetic vision! The vision of

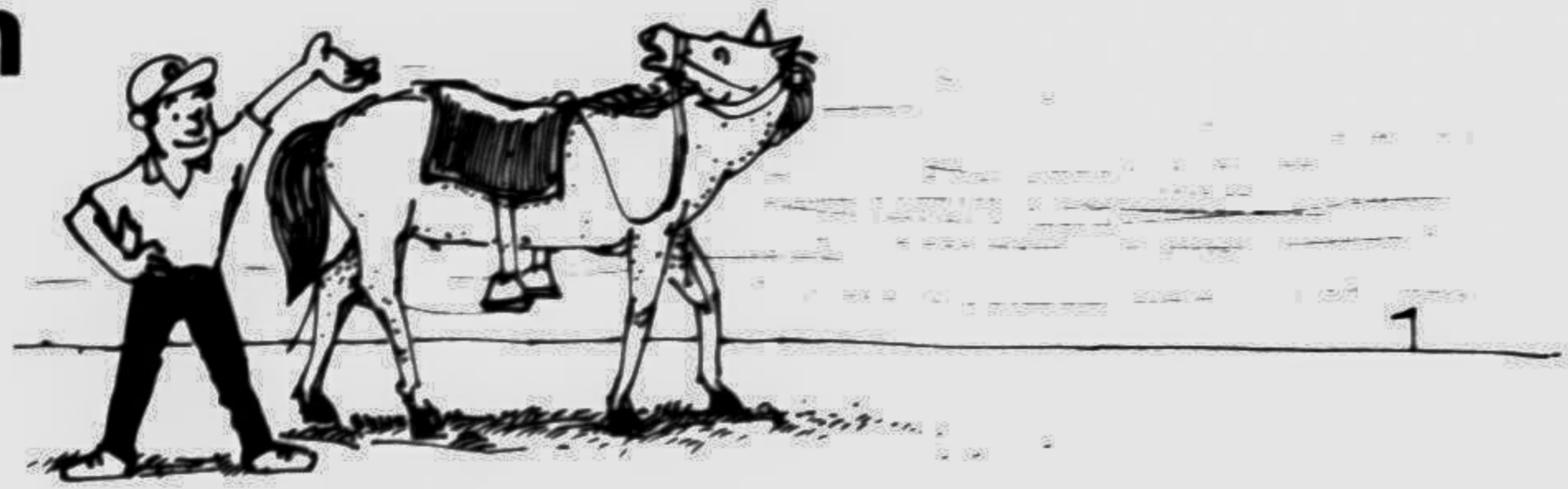
the triangles we see in the architectural design has yet to materialize, as bipartisan politics dominates the scene today.

Dhaka's race course disappeared long ago, hence we have logistics problems training up our horse riders, and practising horse riding, if not racing. There have been several changes of the mount, but the horse has yet to move, or trot, not to speak of galloping. It is suspected that is no stability in the stables of the lotus eaters. Hence the tool-kits of stability, in various forms, are displayed in the streets, to demonstrate that the relevant jockeys know their jobs and responsibilities. *Pankhraj* is a local term used by the inhabitants of old Dhaka. It appears to be a wise word, topically speaking.

The saddle is the *gaddi*, or the

seat of power. The power is suspect to load-shedding and system loss — lot of human touch there. The power factor is poor (PF is a technical term used by the electrical engineers to measure the power available for work, and the efficiency of a network). The distribution loss around the *gaddi* (saddle) is greater money-wise than copper-wise; as the *bakshish* (*cha-pani* or coffee money) has to be shared amongst the comrades in a socialist manner. The bills are prepared (or not prepared) also with a socialistic touch, reminding us of the special type of efficiency practised in the public-owned enterprises (SOEs).

The three factors (horse, saddle, rider) have to be integrated into a stable and workable combination. Stability must come



first, to make the system workable smoothly, silently, and efficiently. We, as a nation, are stability maniacs, and this single syndrome is taking the nation one step forward, and two steps backward. The past has become more important than the future, and the present is a transient point in time, flitting across the cross-hair of the national binoculars.

Frailty, they name is politics.

at least in *Sonar Bangla*. Therefore, reinforcements are in order. We have been carrying out this exercise religiously, rigorously, and vigorously, for several decades now, but the *mahaprosthaneer pathey* concept has become elusive, getting obscurer and obscurer (there is no such term).

Nationalism is supposed to be a confirmed bachelor, without offspring; therefore any

question of illegitimacy may be irrelevant.

Anyway, since the rider is carrying the standard, we have to stand at attention and pay homage to what we pine for, idealisation, visualisation, conceptualisation, planning, project implementation, commissioning, operation, maintenance, integration, consensus... where are the frontiers of inner space? ■

ways of seeing

The Photographic Message

by James R Killingsworth



Photo - I

HOW DO WE REGARD A photograph? What do we regard as there? Whether the photograph-message and text-message are clear to us, we see something there — obviously, the thing photographed. As Wittgenstein again put the matter: 'We regard the photograph as the object itself (the man, landscape, and so on) depicted there.' It is easy to go over and pick up their photo to look at the children again — their photograph, that is. We look again to see what they are like [of course, early photographic portraits were called 'a likeness'.]

But again and obviously, it is not the children that we look at; we only regard the photograph as 'the object itself.' When we zip through a pile of photographs, aren't we choosing in a wink along Wittgenstein lines by looking for photos we regard as truly 'the object itself'? If we find some, are they the ones we want to come back to for another look? Are they our 'favourites'? Because we regard these photographs as 'the object itself' (even though they aren't that thing), do we hope to learn something about 'the object' just by looking at 'its photograph' — in the way we can find scientific information in photographs of a microbe?

But this kind of answer is only a start. Certainly, there are many 'kinds' of photographs — some of which we are readily inclined to regard straightforwardly as 'the object itself.' Often a photograph encourages us to regard not the object but the photography, our awareness that we are looking at a representa-

tion of the object itself. These photographs are sometimes called 'art photographs.' They sensitise us to seeing the image of 'the object itself.' In such cases we may provide a different answer to the question, 'What is there in a photograph?' replying that what is there is a special way of seeing 'the object itself.'

The photograph shown below of a make-shift steel oven at a rolling mill in Narayanganj draws our attention to the object then to the photograph itself — its nature as a composition and the shapes on the paper. Certainly, we 'go through' the object itself to get to the 'view' of the object represented in the photo, but it is eventually to the features of the image, not the object, that we are drawn.

Barthes divided-up the way we regard the molten steel in the photograph into matters that concern the mechanical, analogical face of the photograph — its iconographic message — and the photograph's historical-cultural connotation or linguistic context — its signification. It is not easy to explain these ideas simply. Barthes thought, ultimately, that the photo of the object itself yielded a completely analogical, continuous, and 'denoted' message. The scene itself — the pouring steel, the fiery fragments, the carrying bucket — is a reduction of the 'literal realities,' analogically perfect, but reduced in proportion, perspective, colour. As a mechanical analogue of reality, no room is left for a second-order message until a caption, headline, or other text is attached to illustrate or merely describe the object photographed.

The important point Barthes is making is that 'iconographic messages' matter very much to us because we add so much 'connotation' to them in the form of historical and cultural significance. They represent a fresh and un-coded opportunity to convert direct, mechanical analogy into cultural significance.

If we regard a photograph as 'the object itself,' then we do so because it gives us a freedom to 'overread' culture and history onto something taken to be right there in our hands. The lines from Tagore's *Gitanjali* are a very different starting point. By beginning from a linguistic code that we are all practiced at using, we experience discipline and constraint from the start. The photograph, begins from 'non-code' and provides only analogy until we 'overread' it with a linguistic code in the form of some spoken or written words.

'What are we trying to do with these little bits of paper?' For one, we are using them to put ourselves in an un-coded position with regard to 'the object itself.' For another we are using the analogies we hold in our hands to provide us with a very, very fresh and primary starting point. Strangely, however, the privilege we gain in so doing yields a starting point which is in a cultural sense initially and largely mute. The photograph, with all its analogy-dominated wordlessness, represents the very epitome of an invitation to use words. We are launched from its silence. There is a restricted and narrow kind of 'firstness' (Charles S Peirce) about the a photograph. It is not the 'firstness' of 'the object itself' [We are



Photo - II

not in the war when we see photograph of the war, though somebody was! 'Mute witness,' we might say.] Its 'firstness' includes its vulnerability to language, its status as something which is there on the paper ready to be 'worded,' 'logicised' and, in a linguistic sense, tamed. As Barthes contended, 'This same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is read, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs.'

In thickening our environment with photographic messages, we have also chosen a peculiar place for ourselves. In effect, we have chosen a standpoint that can intensify the experience that we are out of reach and yet in the presence of 'the object itself' reproduced by the analogy-messages we hold in our hands. We are not only privileged to look, we are also privileged to be out of reach and to be in charge of cultural significance. If the children of the Baridhara photograph cannot speak for themselves, they also cannot explain their story. The flood of sparks at the steel mill were a threat to the photographer, but the flood of analogical sparks are no threat at all. Those who use photographs to sell — the advertisers — appreciate these points very well, since they manipulate images of trauma and surprise with over-reads that play upon the invincible and privileged position of the viewer.

Response to Question 3: What vast differences there are between images in the lines from Tagore and the photograph of the children. The photo image is iconic, mute, vulnerable, and, in

a special sense, undisciplined. The injunctions of Tagore use images whose signs are symbolic, vocal, expressive, and share in the economies and discipline of all great poetic imagery. Still, matters are not so simple. It is not quite clear, for example, what we mean by some of these words: 'icon,' 'symbol,' and especially 'image.' We all know that such matters cannot be brought to resolution here. At best, what can be done is to speculate a bit about these matters, leaving their resolution to the future.

To the philosopher Charles S Peirce, an 'icon' is a type of sign. It requires that the guiding relationship between the icon [photograph] and its object have the relation of 'similarity' between the object for which the icon stands and its ground or governing notion in the mind of the person who sees the iconic relationship. More simply, an 'iconic' sign — the analogy-message of the photograph — is experienced as a 'fragment' torn away from its object. Because the photograph 'makes' an image of its object, it is a sign in virtue of its quality — it makes an exact 'image' in the mind as if it were 'torn away' from the time, event, place of which it is a part. Quality-based resemblances or analogies depend upon the 'image' in the mind of the beholder — an image that recognizes the 'icon' as a fragment of its object. A photograph is, by this account, like a certain kind of diagram. The point-by-point correspondences make a 'physical connection' between the photo and 'the object itself.' If the photograph of the children is an 'icon' in this sense, then its

photographic message is the sum total of qualities to be found in the image or notion that ties up the lights, darks, colours, shapes, and distances of the photograph and the original object from which such a fragment can be seen to be 'torn.' It is likely that the photographic message resolves itself into the first-level feelings one can have as perception and memory proceed — the qualities that establish a point-by-point correspondence.

Recent research concerning the human brain (Damasio, Descartes' Error — Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain) suggests that feelings are the grounding of decisions and rational behaviour and that images are essential for feelings. The brain, through images, establishes links between a person or event and body states in order to tell how we feel about that person or event. Images seem to be based on neural representations and dispositions in the brain, ones that rely on acquired dispositional firing patterns of the neuron ensembles of the brain. It is likely that such 'images' tie together the points of the photograph with an image of 'the object itself' through first qualities or feelings sustained as the brain's neural patterns.

If feelings are bound through images into the very stuff of the photographic message, then we should not be surprised that other feeling-images pour into our sense of value in the photographic image. Photographs appear intimately linked with our feelings about the past and of time itself (Sontag, *On Photography*). Photographs not only bestow the privileged position of 'viewer' upon us, they also give us a calibrated emotional distance from feeling-images that might be too overwhelming or that might stir us to action if we were in the actual presence of 'the object itself.'

Finally, the holding of a 'fragment' of the very 'thing from which it was torn' [an iconic sign] makes the emotional value of a photograph into something 'democratic.' Our feeling-images may not be identical, but their value tend to be equalized. The cultural code of our times plays upon us through images that situate us functionally on a par with one another and before these mechanically exact visual signs. The photograph puts us into a very mute and straightforward contact with our transient grip on the culture that passes through us all as we pass through it. These images quicken our electronic mental years and inject still other distant and momentary images of 'the object itself' into the horizons of life. The photographic image, with its exact reproduction, delivers our vanishing culture at two levels. One is the glimpse of a bit of frozen time — maybe involving or maybe not involving us — held in the present. The second is the vanishing of culture altogether into homogeneous magic and the ingenious sense of silence given over by such exact fragments. ■