

## column Marginal Notes

by Firdous Azim

LIONISING, LITERARY OR otherwise, has its pitfalls. This is what I felt when I met the famous writer Mahasweta Devi last winter. Her rejection of a bouquet of flowers presented to her by a young admirer on the grounds of a disapproval of cut flowers was contradicted by Mahasweta herself as she went on to describe her visit to the *santals* in North Bengal, who had greeted her with garlands of flowers, which of course she had not refused. Sitting in the audience, and listening to Mahasweta recount the incidents of her life, and her struggles with and for the tribal people living in West Bengal and Bihar, I was wondering whether I was listening to yet another version of the 'noble savage' narrative. A middle-class Bengali woman, she had lived with tribals for most of her adult life, and while participating in their daily struggles, also wrote about them.

There was a strong anthropological motif behind what was being said. Yet



Mahasweta Devi, follows the dictates of her heart only

Star Photo: Zahid I. Khan

one could perceive a difference. As the writer herself went on to explain, she does not so much write *about* the tribals, as *for* them - giving a voice to the voiceless, making mainstream Bengalis hear and see what they are blind and deaf to. She does not make them the object of her gaze, objectively writing and reporting on 'remote peoples', but writes from her knowledge, from her experience of living and working in Palamo or Purulia. As she kept on insisting, she did not choose to live in tribal areas because she wanted to write about the people of those regions, but her writing springs out of her lived experiences. In fact, her own class and people do not interest or matter to her any longer, she has traversed into another set of peoples, customs and interests.

I was intrigued at meeting Mahasweta Devi. She was cantankerous, impatient with the women who sat around her, even dismissive of their concerns. Yet while she recounted her experiences, described her writing, the sincerity and the commitment to her writing, became obvious. This meeting intrigued me enough to set me reading her works. (I must admit that prior to this I had read her only in Gayatri Spivak's translations). What I found was a treasure trove, a kind of writing that is rare, and that indeed transports us to peoples and ways though alien, are part of our surroundings.

It is her 'tribal' stories that impress the most, ranging from the short stories in the *Shikar Parba* to the epic *Chatti Munda ebong Taar Teer*. The language is simple and factual. In fact, the listing of the various tribes, the names of their villages or their customs may again put us back into the anthropological mould, but is saved by the way that she makes this knowledge part of the reality or world view of the main character. The language, specially in *Chatti Munda*, veers easily between standard Bengali and the language of the mundas, as the 'gorman' and the 'dikus' are pitched against the mundas, the forests and the rivers. This fluctuation of language is so easily done that the reader is carried along with it even without being aware of the switch in the linguistic levels. Similarly, reality and legend, the present and the past and the future are made to blend into one another, in the manner of magical realism, but without using the kind of hyperbolic language that marks the writing of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Salman Rushdie. *Chatti Munda's* arrow, like Arjun's arrow, takes on a mythical quality, and while his extraordinary skill becomes a point of pride for his peoples, it sows seeds of fear in the 'dikus', the local Biharis, caste Hindus, who have exploited the Mundas through a system of bonded labour across the centuries.

Part of the beauty of *Chatti Munda's* story springs from the anthropological celebration of the noble savage, who is

strong and upright, brave, can never tell a lie or deceive anyone, and whose innocence is contrasted to the wily ways of civilisation, based on exploitation and deception. Except that the descriptions of poverty and hunger are too pointed, the strategies of survival are sometimes even demeaning, for us to read this merely as a romantic description of noble savages contrasted to the corruption of 'civilisation'.

It is to another story that I would like to turn to see how self-conscious Mahasweta herself is of the anthropological interest her stories may evince. This story is *Shikar Parba* and recounts the life of *Paro/Madhumanti*, a young *shabar* girl, the first graduate from her tribe. The names *Paro* and *Madhumanti* mark the passage between the two worlds that this girl traverses. *Paro* is the name given to her by her father and as *Paro* she lives her life in her home with her illiterate parents, with her mother who

she says died before she could know any happiness. The government has introduced free education for tribals, and despite the high drop out rate, *Paro* progresses from Class 5 to 8 to HSC and finally to become the first graduate in her tribe. It is during this educational progress that her teacher names her *Madhumanti*, which is her name in the world outside her tribe. Even as *Madhumanti*, it is her identity as a tribal that propels her on - tribals are given free education, she is on a tribal scholarship, she gets a job as a superintendent of a hostel for tribal and scheduled caste women. But at every step she is aware of the kind of manipulation and corruption that goes on, and her inability to be ever treated as a woman who has earned her way into her position. The final irony is when she enrolls in one of the new universities of Bihar to study for an MA in anthropology. It was the presence of small tribal groups which had given an impetus to new departments of anthropology in the state, funds for which come not only from the central government but from centres of learning in the west. However, the research projects cannot be condoned by this woman, as their aims seem to be that of categorising the tribals sometimes as 'criminal' at others as 'freed'.

As *Madhumanti* gets enmeshed in the coils of officialdom and academia, she longs to flee to her *Paro* self. But those ways are closed and she finally commits suicide. Again, is this a story of the 'noble savage' unable to find her way in the 'civilised' world? There is a reading that will lead us to the conclusion, as the text weaves in and out between the two selves of *Paro* and *Madhumanti*, making the lost world of *Paro* totally desirable to the lost *Madhumanti*. But at another level there is a strong critique of anthropology and policies for tribals which interfere in people's lives without sympathy, without knowledge, which are only concerned to make these people objects of research or of policies.

Mahasweta Devi's stories do add another chapter to the fascination with other peoples, add another dimension to the romantic celebration of the noble savage. But the celebration brings us closer to the realities of the tribal peoples living in the Indian states of West Bengal and Bihar - making us aware of systems of exploitation, of the continuation of bonded labour, of the inequalities in our societies.

An aside: the recent SAARC theatre festival staged a dramatised version of Mahasweta Devi's *Ruddali*, set in Bihar. Among the many beauties of the production - the sets, the language - what stood out was the feminism in the play - acting out as it did a story of poverty, of loneliness, and of women on their own, and the comfort and support that women derive from each other.

## reflections Literature in a Hurry

by Andaz

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE between a writer and a journalist? The former's target is literature, while the latter writes 'literature in a hurry.'

How to spot a piece of writing written by a journalist? Those who write for the mass media are well-trained and experienced to convert high-brow stuff for easy digestion by the low-brow readers. This current news and analyses are presented with easy clarity, for quick grasp by the readers at the lower end of the vertical scale.

Being a reader with a dot of healthy curiosity, I got hold of a book, 'When Words Collide - A Journalist's Guide to Grammar and Style' written by L. Kessler and D. McDonald of the School of Journalism, U of Oregon (Wadsworth, 1984, 224 pages). To understand the unusual title of the handbook, it was pointed out that 'words must collide to cause sparks and create energy'; because, 'language is the journalist's lifeline.'

The first part of the book dealt with more than the 'average' grammar we (readers) are familiar with; and included a chapter on 'clarity, conciseness, and coherence' which, in the reader's language might be called 'clarity, brevity, and simplicity.' Another chapter tried valiantly to explain two mystiques called 'style' and 'originality'; which, it was emphasised, both writers and journalists are entitled to possess and display. The second part of the book dealt with usage, as usually practised by the editors; who, mysteriously, are supposed to use blue pencils.

The grammar section could not be easily skipped, as a glaring sub-heading 'The Glamour of Grammar' arrests the attention of the reader. Consider this example: If you knew 1000 English nouns and 1000 verbs, you could combine these words into one billion (1000 million) 3-word subject-verb-



Painting by Monsur-Ul-Karim

object sentences. But how to construct sentences without knowledge of grammar? By the way, 'glamour' is a form of the word 'grammar'! For the scared reader, here is some good news: the humans are genetically programmed to identify grammatical patterns.

The 'craft' of writing is more than dishing out correct sentences. A 'good' sentence says precisely what you want

it to say. But that is not enough when you wish to create an impact. Consider these three sentences with the same meaning: (1) Men's souls are tried by these times. (2) These times are trying to men's souls (3) 'These are the times that try men's souls,' uttered by the famous American thinker Tom Paine. Note the power of the pen in the third sentence. The power of writing comes from the power of grammar, or

structuring the sentences the most effective way. A blacksmith and a word-smith use craftsmanship as one of the many tools available to the specialist, professional, or the hobbyist.

Avoid passive voice and change the weak verbs, he student of journalism is advised. Use active voice, present tense, more nouns and less adjectives; and change some of the adjectives into nouns.

According to a linguist, the average length of a sentence should be around seventeen words. Avoid multi-syllabic words, and cut out the fuzzy and abstract terms. Listen to the sound of the words in the string.

One of the tricks employed by the crafty editors to ensnare the readers is the 'Show, don't tell' technique, when it comes to descriptive detail - do not come between the reader and the subject. In other words, the write-up should pass this test: 'do not offer judgement; let the reader judge.'

Many tips are strewn throughout the pages. Only three pronouns can take either a singular or plural verb: all, some, none. There are rules to remember on endings such as -able, -ible; -ing and -ed; -ance and -ence; -le and -el-. Use of that/which, I/me, has/have, was/were, between/among are frequently confused. Some exercises and tests are included in the appendix.

This type of tutorial/reference handbook is better kept out of sight, for occasional consultation only, by the experienced professionals. For the less experienced, it is unpractical for daily use, as without the 'feel' in the use of the language (any language), there will be no flow. The medium should not distract the message.

As I am a reader, no trick from this handbook has been consciously employed in writing this piece.

- Dharitri Feature.

## books The Adaptation of Camus' *La Peste* for a Theatre with a Message

Certain works have greater meaning in certain circumstances. The story of '*La Peste*' (the Plague), in the forties, which were dark years teeming with incendiary fascism, was a barely concealed criticism of a regime. Today, some fifty years later, although the scourges of our time have a different form, their destructive and inexorable power has no less weight on society and makes Camus' work a highly relevant piece of literature.

by Ines Somarriba

TO ADAPT CAMUS' WORK '*LA Peste*' (the Plague) is to take Camus' side as a committed writer, to denounce the situation through words and to make people react. More than any speech, playwrights have a major tool to put across a message. By not using a form of direct attack, their pamphlets are all the more virulent. By accepting an invitation from the Theatre Marigny, Francis Huster's company wanted to continue a play which had been put on earlier. It explains this by a new situation which could be echoed by Camus' work. 'At the last performance, we never thought that we would have to do this play again. But the "foul beast" was not dead. We felt it was our duty to serve Camus so that a new generation of young people above all could hear this cry at the end of the 20th century when we no longer have the right to remain silent.'

Yet it was no easy undertaking. The adaptation for theatre of a work which has become a myth could have ended in a fiasco. Indeed, it is no easy task to express the words and feelings of 33 characters, but Francis Huster is no novice and displays the skill of a virtuoso in his staging.

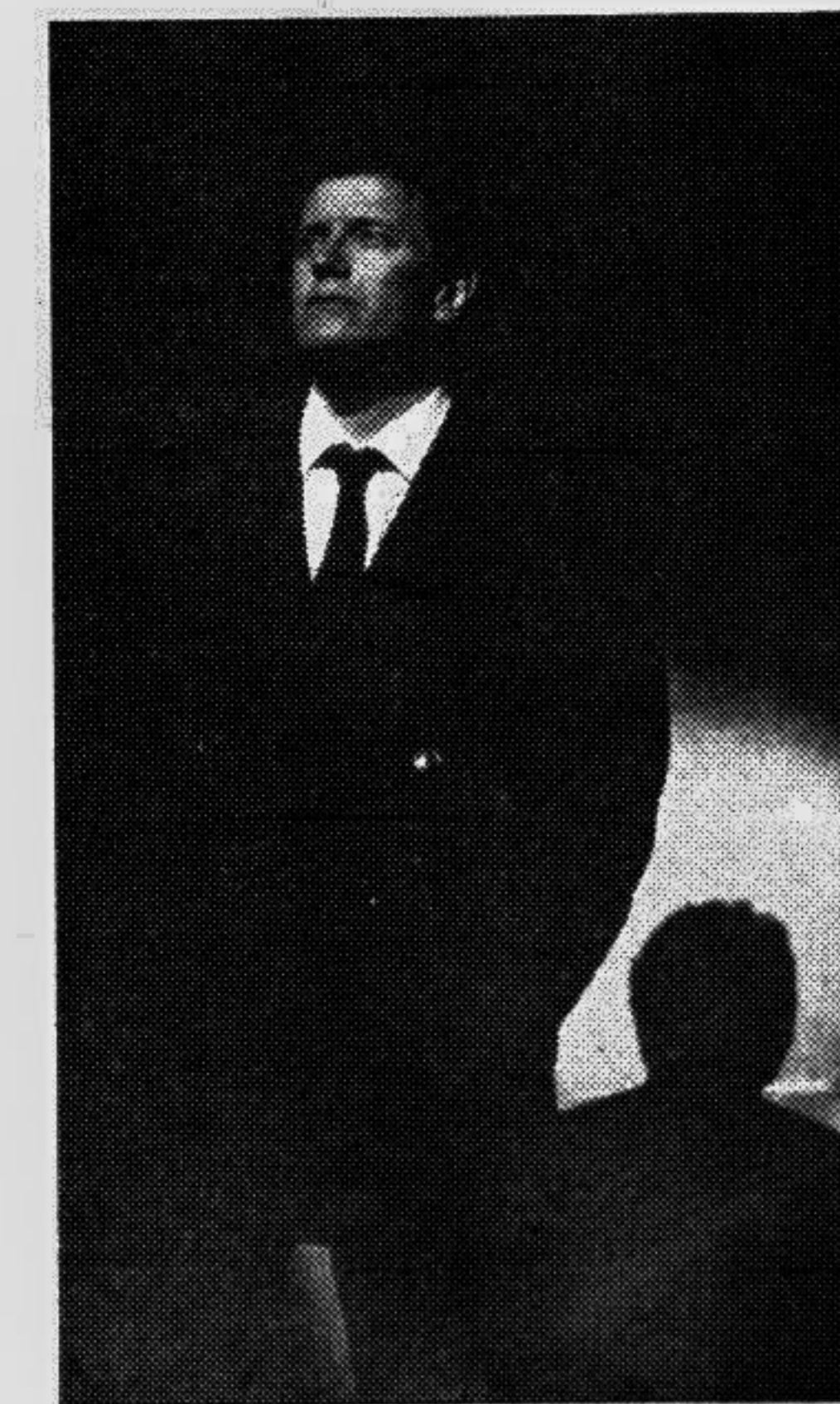
The presentation is very subtle and there are only two sets for this one-act drama - one behind the curtain: a square in Oran, naked and grey; and the other, in front, a 1940s interior where that mythical object, a wireless, thrones and pours out the macabre news on the latest victims of the scourge. A play of light and sound effects (the train and the glasses of water) blend into the text and emphasise it. Popular songs nostalgically present tunes from before the time of the plague. For a few fleeting moments, one forgets. It is the one occasion for all the characters played by Francis Huster to remember their love-affairs and their lives in an idealised past.

This staging gives value to the ac-

tor's talents of composition. Indeed, Francis Huster does not only play the narrator and Doctor Rieux, the main character in the work, but also all the other actors in the drama. He often uses mime to accompany his acting and this choice by the director and actor takes the spectators through a 1 hour and 40 minute stream of words and situations. The key to the adaptation of Camus' teeming work lies in the rhythm of the play and its absence of stale moments. He thus passes from one character to another without any moments of silence, without even the breath of a change in cue. And the speech becomes plural, from a monologue to a dialogue, sometimes introducing up to three characters in the same burst. Can this giddy speed be explained by a fear that the spectators will grow weary of this actor's solo?

The moments of respite are when the drama becomes lighter and the presence of a humour of derision is the surest way to maintain the constant attention of the public. The theatre and the literature of the absurd give way to fantasy and to the unbridled imagination. Thus, without breaking with the sombre tone of the play, with the slow propagation of the scourge, laughter and smiles, sometimes at the reactions of the heroes in spite of themselves, are moments of a release of tension for the spectators. Laughter then copes life when, even in the darkest periods of history, life maintained moments of gaiety. However, this apparent lack of care conceals a dull anguish gripping the protagonists of the drama.

Laughter also results from the different attitudes in the face of the tragic ill. For instance, that of Joseph Grant, a townhall clerk and an amateur writer who is obsessed with perfection. With great difficulty, he tirelessly writes the first sentence of a novel which will never go any further. 'On a fine May morning, a slender horse-woman, astride a superb chestnut



Scene from the Theatre Marigny's production of *La Peste*

mare, rode through the flowered paths of the Bois de Boulogne'. The jerky diction of this first sentence and its variations cause nervous laughter by the comic of repetition. He regularly speaks to Rieux of his findings and his doubts. 'I preferred on a fine May morning as the month of May would lengthen the trot somewhat. Although I have also been preoccupied by the adjective superb. I am looking for a term which would photograph the splendid mare that I imagine, in a single shot'. This escape into the imagination is also found in the journalist Rambert whose refusal to accept the obvious is like a certainty combined with fear. The plague belongs to another world, that of the others, and will not attain

him. The reactions of each character naturally, by extension, aim to be those of mankind facing the unacceptable. The abnegation and integrity of Doctor Rieux themselves encompass the whole of human courage. His merciless fight and hand-to-hand struggle to help one patient after another against the epidemic, is moving with sincerity and dedication. With Father Panelous' speech, we find the century-old position of the Church to the Plague which symbolises God's anger. Its invitation to pray contains tones of fatalism. It echoes the words and behaviour of many of the victims who are unable to react. On the contrary, some people benefit from the ill. Cottard, the rogue, who is sought by the police, thus finds freedom of movement and can pursue his misdeeds with full impunity.

The spirit of the work can be found in the precision of the carefully studied gestures. However, the acid portrayal, without any complacency, of this mankind, contains a message of hope when, at the end of the tale, Rieux admits that 'In the midst of scourges, one learns that in men, there are more things to be admired than things to be scorned.'

Far from being a dull recital, this theatrical form brings Camus' work astonishingly alive. Like a dialogue, the narrator calls upon the spectator, Camus himself, a man of the theatre, would have liked this adaptation. Did he not speak of the richness of recourse to theatre for the artist, which means real communication with the public as well as a demand for quality. 'There comes a time when the writer needs a human face and the warmth of a group of people. In the theatre, the artist is unable to reign. What he wants to do depends on others. Here, we are all linked to one another without each person ceasing to be free. Is that not good luck for future society?'

L'Actualite en France