

book review

The Victim and In Custody

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

HOW does one become beguiled by parasites? Firstly, because they convince one that they are victims of some sort, secondly one is led to believe that one owes it to them to be charitable towards them and thirdly, they have extraordinarily forceful personalities. The third onslaught is the most devastating one to overcome — it is not only the most devastating one to overcome — it is also hard to explain, because parasite behaviour and impressive personality are not readily bonded together in our minds. A reading of Anita Desai's *In Custody* and Saul Bellow's *The Victim* shows two disparate worlds both inhabited by same types of humanity — in both the unsuspecting, hopelessly unretracting quasi-willing victim will encounter the pseudo helpless charmer who is in straits, needs someone to sort out his life, one who keels over and accepts his victim's generosity with the assurance of one scraping dole of the public purse. The rancour that the victim-parasite relationship should con-

tain is complicated by the intervention of admiration and attraction.

Saul Bellow's *The Victim* examines the parasite plot and in his hands this means it is as charged as a thriller. Bellow studies classic parasitical behaviour with the parasite Allbee, a failed journalist, capitalizing on the way things have gone wrong for him. Asa Leventhal is 'accosted in a park near his house by a down-at-the-heels stranger who accuses him of ruining his life.' Allbee in a bizarre attack of accusations and pliant grovelling enmeshes Leventhal to such an extent that Leventhal begins to feel responsible for the downfall and tragedy that has struck Allbee. *The Victim* deals with the seedy appeals of the parasite, his strange arts, his out of the world demands turned perversely into 'reasonable' expectations. Allbee's presence is complex. Disagreeable he is, but also breathtaking. He harries Leventhal, pops up unexpectedly, eventually he moves into Leventhal's apartment, helping himself to Leventhal's daybed, his robe, his shower, his kitchen — grubbiest of the apartment, rummages through Leventhal's belongings, reads the post

cards Mary Leventhal has sent to her husband, even brings a woman to spend the night in the apartment when Leventhal is not there.

Resentful and willing to listen to Allbee is Leventhal's way, that is hardly likely to succeed in getting Leventhal to extricate himself from the enigmatic hold that Allbee has over him. The final straw comes when Allbee breaks in and tries to gas them both. *The Victim* could have ended with a huge relief produced out of the boot Allbee is given by Leventhal after the gassing episode — but Bellow lets the nightmare pass only temporarily, because there is a reincarnation of Allbee. Leventhal meets Allbee in the theatre a couple of years later. Allbee has resurfaced. No longer the bum on the pavement — he has found a petty advertising job and a wealthy beautiful woman to settle right under his thumb. "Shame faced and self-mocking," Allbee is back on track. As he talks of his recovery — the theatricality of this poseur is far from being on the wane. Bellow portrays the victim in hyper, anxiously trying to fore-guess and failing each time to predict what the parasite will do or say.

Bellow also depicts the parasite as an artist of some sorts who makes a living of self love, a sense of self preservation and a lack of esteem either for himself — or for those he leeches on to.

Anita Desai's *In Custody* is also about the bad days fallen on a gifted Urdu poet Nur who lives in squalor in Old Delhi amid bad housing, two wives, uncertain income, sycophants, biryani repasts, debts, old age phlegms, bad alcohol and ugly skirmishes. Deven, a college teacher of Hindi — of limited means, a monochrome family life and many suburban, lower middle class constraints — is infatuated by Nur's poetry. Once he is coerced into writing for his friend's newspaper an account interview on Nur's life and works — the fatal attraction begins to move mountains and collapse into ludicrous disappointments. Deven takes incredible chances being the 'little man' he is by sanctioning loans, neglecting his family, buying equipments he cannot use, pilfering himself into Nur's bizarre private life, paying for biryani, rum and the seedy houses he rents for Nur to clear his thoughts and deliver exquisite Urdu verses that either do not come or

when they do — the tape recorder misses. By the end of the novel, Deven is exhausted — physically, emotionally and financially — but Nur's hold over him is far from being over. Deven sees that something to do with his love and admiration for Nur's poetry has made him transcend normal boundaries of responsibility. Deven makes himself responsible for what happens to Nur's life and even beyond. Deven becomes the victim, now by choice, sanctimoniously holding on to what he respects, humbled by Nur's clutch on him — and by Deven's own capacity to care.

In Custody is also about the problems of writing and maintaining control. It was interesting to read Anita Desai's own account in *The Guardian* (June 2, 1994) of her experiences as she set to brace herself and watch her book turn out into an ismail Merchant movie. In it she recounts things gone beyond her hand. "Is this how you pictured your characters?" the designer Desai writes, had asked her. Desai writes, "I was speechless, which was a good thing: I realised this was the role of the writer." Desai was about to discover that neither the director, nor the actors, nor

what the screen wanted — could be puppeteered by the writer. She writes, "The lesson for me was that one cannot hug the screenplay possessively to oneself as one can one's book; to do so would be effectively to prevent the film from coming to life. What one does is ruthlessly tear the pages out of one's book, fashion a kite out of them and launch it into the sky — then watch to see if it takes flight or falls." This read very similar to Deven's plight as he set about to write on Nur. Recreating Nur's greatness was impossible, what could be done was negotiate through difficulties and situations beyond manipulation and let them be. By the end, Deven the writer has changed completely. The timid despairing man has prepared himself to stop feeling denial and possessiveness (as victims feel about their parasites, or maybe even what writers feel about their works). Though he ruthlessly risks complicating his life, he becomes ready to launch his life straddled with Nur's problems. Somewhere along the line, his possessiveness has become less erratic, less consuming, less frightening. Because Deven has become the custodian of Nur's legacy.

Who Says Everything Is Fair in War?

by Ekram Kabir



SOMETIMES, wars become indispensable, for, at least the anthropologists say, they are the "turning points" for a nation, and for that matter, the entire civilisation. Battlefields are the frontiers to settling scores with and finding a new 'direction' for the progress of the civilisation. Many wars — in fact, every one of them, won or lost, prepared the "humanity" to pursue a new course of "life" — a future essentially meant for the better.

Truly, it has been so, down the history lane — be it for the better or the worse. This was how the world advanced and still doing the same. But the costs of armed conflicts are always "high" — both for the — vanquished and the unvanquished in terms of shifting one's position from one character another. And for a nation-in-war, it's a curse: recalcitrant bloodshed, brutality of the mischievous and a devastated valley of countless bemoaned to mourn the sickening barbarity.

Even those who fight wars, feel anguish — to put it in words of General Sherman (1820-1891), addressed at the Michigan Military Academy on June 19, 1879: "I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine... War is hell." Well, for now, Sherman's time is close to prehistoric as far as the twentieth-century wars are concerned. After that, the "age" was a legacy of wars: most of them were "genocides" one after another every decade.

During the later part of the millennium, in the heat of the Cold War, Bangladesh achieved freedom as an independent state after a nine-month-long blood bath. The penury of the country's people had to go through outdid the atrocities of many severest wars. History of Bangladesh's War of Independence speaks for itself. At home, side by side the Freedom Fighters and Allied Forces, the anti-Liberation components were active with their interest-bearing designs; and at the international level, in quagmire of diplomacy, leading countries with military might started playing a grand chess-

board, deciding the fate of wretched millions of Bangladesh.

But history unfortunately, as the experience suggests — at the hands of historians, of course — is prone to distortion. Possibly that is the reason why Mr. Fazlul Quader Quaderi did not try to play the role of a historian in the real sense while imparting some momentous information in his *Bangladesh Genocide and the World Press*. Instead, he depended mostly on the reports of foreign journalists who were working round-the-clock during the peppery seasons of 1971. He did so because the vocation of journalists is to portray the "truth and the whole truth". They are far more objective than the historians.

Mr. Quaderi's 612-page book is not a recent publication; it was first printed in February 1972. This third edition — every page of which is besmeared with blood of Bengalis — solemnising the Silver Jubilee of Independence, is a chronology of reports right from the night of the crack-down till the afternoon of victory, and arrival of Bangabandhu from imprisonment.

Fazlul Quader Quaderi did a marvelous work, to say it simply.

Although he overplayed with more than a hundred pictures (mostly depicting himself with dignitaries), yet collecting war-time reports of 137 newspapers, news magazines and journals from 39 countries was not an easy editing chore; and it simply can't be. Apart from reports, acquiring some classified information, which could jeopardise his earthly existence, is praiseworthy.

Says Mr. Quaderi: "The Pakistan Government had put an embargo on the import of these informative materials and their circulation in any manner was banned. The foreign missions also were debarred from distributing even parts of these news items among the public and were placed under strict censorship. In spite of these restrictions imposed on news media, a few of us including our journalists friends started collecting materials whatever could be smuggled into Bangladesh since April 1971... I could not, of course, collect all the papers and journals of the world

which focused our struggle for liberation."

On the other hand, a complete set of the newspapers and periodicals published in Bangladesh in the period between March and December 1971 would not be available today, for these have been destroyed in a planned way by the anti-Liberation forces. In doing so, the anti-Bangladesh elements were more advanced and farsighted than the pro-Bangladesh ones. And unfortunately anti-Bangladesh elements were not eliminated during the war or after the victory — they still are in action to revert what was achieved in 1971; and believe it, they will do exactly the same what they did during the war even a microscopic possibility down.

The sceptics — the younger generation and who are now frustrated elders — in this regard, should read *Bangladesh Genocide and the World Press* in right earnest. Because the genocides of '71 will instill the confidence to combat against future evils that may cross the limits of all fairness.

essay

Some Aspects of Nationalism of the Bengalis — VI

by Serajul Islam Choudhury

THE state has been an enemy, society has not been friendly either. Education was expected to bring people together, but it did not. For within the iniquitous social system and under the patronage of the state, education consolidated the class, rather than the nation. And class-consolidation runs, as it must, contrary to nation-building.

The first legislation with regard to universal primary education in Bengal was made in 1930; since then the Act has been amended and re-amended in East Bengal; but its objective still remains a distant dream. Since Curzon's time, there has been several attempts at educational reforms, none of these has been helpful for the promotion of democratic nationalism. The Kudrat-e-Khuda Commission has displayed its faith in the four state principles, but in it also there is a fear, not unlike that of the governments of the past, that educated unemployment might create problems for the state, and the Commission went disappointingly near the Sharif Commission under Pakistani Martial Law when it considered education not as an obligation of the state but as an investment like that in a commercial enterprise and also when it suggested that 50 per cent of the educational expenses should be borne by the guardians.

The Kudrat-e-Khuda Commission, however, had recommended the setting up of a uniform system of education. The state has done exactly the contrary. There are as many as three systems operating now. The English system and the Madrasah system are opposed to each other, but they join hands in their dissociation from the nationalist outlook. Both systems have grown phenomenally, to the detriment of the

main stream. During the last 25 years Madrasah enrolment has risen by 11.1 per cent against the 5 per cent rise in general education. This happened because of the state's persistent refusal to be secular.

Since the emergence of Bangladesh all governments have claimed to be nationalistic. But they have not been so in any progressive sense. The two leading political parties, who call themselves nationalists, have surrendered, voluntarily, to the wishes of the donors and the exigencies of market economy, and have compromised politically with the religious fundamentalists.

What is needed, as this discussion shows, is socialist content in the nationalist movement. Bengali language has held its own by its triumph over Sanskrit, a triumph that Mohammad Shahidullah appropriately calls the defeat of aristocracy by democracy. That struggle has continued. Democracy does not mean majority rule only, for it includes — and this is more important — equality of rights and opportunities. The struggle of and for democracy is, therefore, a socialist struggle. And this is yet to be successful.

THE spectre of communism had haunted not only the colonialists but the nationalists as well. Right from the founding of the Communist Party in India, the British government had been more hostile to it than to any other political organisation. Arrests of leaders and workers had continued. And after the independence of 1947, the party was banned in both India and Pakistan. The communists themselves have made grave mistakes; they have, for example, failed to keep in touch with the nationalist urge of the people. With them in the leadership, the nationalist movement would have been very different in content.

One of the basic problems with the nationalist leadership, on the other hand, had been that they did not have clear vision of the society they wanted to establish. Vivekananda's *Satyayug*, Gandhi's *Ram Rajya*, C. R. Das's *Swary*, Subhas Bose's *socialism*, Jinnah's *Pakistan* and Sheikh Mujib's *Sonar Bangla* — all had emotional appeal but were delightfully vague, to say the least. Sheikh Mujib achieved what no Bengali leader before him had done, namely, the establishment of an independent Bengali state; but after the achievement he was unsure of the way he should take. The speech he made in the Parliament on January 25, 1975 on the so-called Baksal amendment of the Constitution was the soliloquy of a bewildered hero and was in sharp contrast to the speech he had delivered on March 7, only four years ago. He thought the leftists were his enemies, and failed to see that his real enemies were the reactionaries around him, with their plans to exterminate him. Jawaharlal Nehru made the point well when he pointed out that the real enemy for India were not the communists, but the communalists.

The potency of nationalism has been displayed in our liberation war. It was a people's war, in which the socialist content was both clear and real. The Bengalis were fighting not merely for political independence, but really for establishing a democratic nationalist state. On the eve of the partition of Bengal in 1947 an attempt was made to keep it united, but the move fell through even before it got started, because there was hardly any identity of purpose among its sponsors. The Muslim side were sworn believers in Pakistan, and the Hindu side had no reason to be enamoured of the prospect of being taken over by the Pakistanis. Sarat Chandra Bose, however, had the vision of an independent socialist republic, which concept

could have served as a uniting force. But it did not have time to win supporters. It is worthwhile remembering that the Communist Party of India, right before the partition, had recommended the formation of a federation comprising 17 independent states constituted on the basis of language. Maybe that was the time path, but that idea was not even heard in the clamour created by the two major political parties, both of them professedly nationalists and impatient to have two separate states with a view to establishing their ownership.

It is not without significance that the vision of a socialist independent Bengal arose, once again, in and through the liberation war. But the socialists were not in leadership; and the war ended quickly; one of the reasons behind the quick ending being the fear of its sliding into another Vietnam.

Democratic nationalism requires a social revolution, and that precisely is what the middle class as a class-in-itself is afraid of. Surely Bankimchandra was speaking for the middle class itself when he said, "We are not supporters of social revolution." The struggle for that revolution would be the work of the children of the mother, aware of the mother's isolationist weaknesses. What it signifies is the need of a unity between the intellectuals and the people.

THIS discussion, as it comes to a close, remains incomplete for the important reason that it does not include an assessment of the role of the peasantry in the formation and growth of national consciousness. Despite their social and political marginalization the peasants constituted at one time more than 90 per cent of the population. Consecutive famines decimated them, but still they remained demographically the overriding majority and economically the sustaining force. That Syed Ameer Ali, a non-Bengali settler

in Calcutta and in many respects an alien to the culture of Bengal, found it necessary to admit, because of his knowledge as a magistrate and legislator, that the peasant question was "the life-problem of Bengal" testifies to the fact that no discussion of Bengali nationalism can be comprehensive without taking into account the politics relating to the peasantry. Unfortunately, we have neither the space nor the time here to do that.

The nationalism we have been talking in this essay is middle-class both in creation and aspiration. The middle class has tried to draw the peasantry into its nationalist movement, not as a partner but as a supporter. As in society so in politics, it has, in relation to the peasantry, behaved like the father and exploiter rolled into one rather than like a friend and comrade. Nationalism is basically about power and honour, and the Bengali middle class wanted to drive away the foreign usurper with a view to taking over its place of power and honour. Finding itself incapable of achieving the purpose on its own, the middle class sought the help of the peasantry.

This nationalism retained its class character and failed to be of the entire people. It was enriched and vivified by contributions from the passionate earnestness and sacrifices made by individuals, but, ironically, it remained, at least to an important extent, anti-national in as much as it fostered, even as the middle class moved ahead, divisions on communal and class lines. For although it fought for liberation, it did not find it possible to be fully secular and de-classed, and was not without a desire to thrive on the labour of the peasants. Nor did it discard gender-discrimination, despite its professed respect for the mother. Thus the promoter of nationalism was also its betrayer.

Even on a very palpable level the fact was that those who laid down their lives were as much drawn from the middle class as were those immediately responsible for their arrest, and consequent execution. Also, there were in the movement those who believed in writing applications for rights and privileges along with those who were sworn believers in violence, representing two opposing trends within the same class.

The nationalism that the people needed and desired was the one that would lead to a much-delayed social revolution. And it was precisely this revolution that the middle class feared and tried to hinder. Indeed for the middle class radical social change was a more frightening prospect than the continuation of foreign rule itself. Bankimchandra, a pioneer nationalist, was being entirely truthful in his outspokenness and faithful to his class when, in discussing the plight of peasants, he said that although he was fully aware of the misery that the Permanent Settlement had caused to the tillers of the soil, he would not recommend its abolition for the simple reason that he was not a supporter of 'social revolution'. On another occasion, he had opined that the English occupation of the country would continue for long. The latter-day nationalists were less pessimistic; they could visualize the English leaving the country, but they were uninterested in changing the nature of the state; what they looked forward to was really transfer of power, with the production and social relations remaining unchanged. The fatherly hero in Saratchandra's political novel, *Pather Dabi*, could conceive of the working class as an ally in his nationalist movement, but found it inconceivable that the peasantry would join the armed insurrection he was working for.