



# Literary Giants at Each Other's Throats

by Fayza Haq

**I**N the world of literature there have been numerous squabbles and misunderstandings among colleagues and contemporaries with one novelist or poet running down the other bitterly and viciously.

Sometimes the quarrels were based on rivalry, and at times sheer misunderstanding and misconception.

The result has invariably been that a famous dramatist or short story writer has gone to all lengths to undermine and humiliate the other, who in on his part, left no stone unturned, to spite the injuries inflicted on him.

From the time of Aristophane and Euripedes, the Greek satirist and playwright, one calling the other "the maker of ragamuffin manikins," to Ben Jonson and Shakespeare, with one rival saying about the other "would that he had blotted a thousand words," when it was admitted that the Avon had penned page after page without pausing to blot out a single line, to D H Lawrence and J Middleton Murry, feuds in the literary world have abounded on innumerable occasions.

Dr Johnson and Lord Chesterfield, two great giants in the world of letters, were always at loggerheads. Chesterfield left to the world a description of a huge, slovenly, ill-mannered man, which undoubtedly was Johnson: "He throws anywhere but down his throat whatever he means to drink; and mangles what he means to carve. Inattentive to all regards of social life, he mistimes and misplaces everything."

When Johnson first sketched out a plan for his famous dictionary, dedicated it flatteringly to the Earl and asked a friend to present the outline to Chesterfield, His Lordship snubbed him and preferred to show favour to a less than second-rate writer Colley Cibber, who at that time, enjoyed the post of the poet laureate.

It was only after seven years of Dr Johnson's troubled labored endeavours, when the famous dictionary was nearly completed that Chesterfield came to shower credits.

He declared "I will not only obey him like an old Roman, I will implicitly believe in him as my Pope."

Dr Johnson, in return was unimpressed by Chesterfield's sudden interest and retorted, "I have sailed a long and painful voyage round the world of the English language and does he now send out two cockboats to tow me into harbour?"

Johnson's comment about Chesterfield's well-known elegant letters was that "They teach the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing master." While the Earl was renowned as a patron of writers, Johnson remarked, "Is not a patron, my Lord, one who looks on with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and when he has reached the ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent and cannot enjoy it..."

The great classical poet Alexander Pope had similar bitter quarrels with Colley Cibber, the chosen royal poet at the time when the German-born King of England could hardly appreciate much

English poetry. Cibber would have been obliterated from the minds of posterity if Pope had not immortalised him in the stinging lines of "The Dunciad." Pope was one of the great "haters" in English literature and the range of his hatreds were awesome.

It included God, the king, and ended with Cibber. The latter was ridiculed even in Pope's "Art of Sinking in Poetry." Cibber's poems were the most widely mocked and lampooned in the coffee Houses of London.

Pope summed up Cibber's merits in the following line:

"In merry old England, it was once the Rule. The King had his Poet and also his Fool.

But now we're so frugal, I'd have you know it

That Cibber can serve both for Fool and for Poet."

Cibber retorted by recounting an extremely embarrassing episode concerning Pope and his conquest in a tavern with a serving maid when he was found "like a terrible tomtit partly perching

upon the mount of love." Pope's face was covered with anguish when this and more of his "diversions" concerning wenches was read aloud to him.

Doestoevski and Turgenev admired each other, helped one another, and yet rowed endlessly with one another. Doestoevski, who gambled recklessly once requested the better off Turgenev for a loan of a hundred thalers, and he promised to repay the sum within a month.

Turgenev lent him half the sum but by mistake and lapse of memory demanded the repayment of the entire sum later, which led to anger and bitterness on the part of the insulted debtor.

At various parts in "The Possessed" Doestoevski lampooned Turgenev's mannerism and inglorious behaviour in his early youth when aboard a ship which was on fire and in danger of sinking.

Doestoevski even suggested to Turgenev that he buy a telescope and use it to study Russian life from the comforts of the German spas which he so clearly pre-

ferred. He went so far as to question and humiliate Turgenev for the manner in which he was bringing up his daughter, born out of wedlock, but tutored as member of the nobility.

If Turgenev was paranoid and Doestoevski was feverish of his attack of his contemporary and colleague, Thackeray and Dickens too were involved in a bitter feud which involved a contempt-admiration relationship.

While William Makepeace Thackeray had a comparatively difficult time selling his works, Charles Dickens was the darling of the readers both in England and America. The extremely successful Dickens realized that he had a potential rival in the author of "Vanity Fair."

Thackeray felt that the other could not tolerate his success and behaved "as if there was not room enough for both in this world."

Thus feuds based on disenchantment, or basically antagonistical personalities, or even jealousies and rivalry, reveal angry, baffled, troubled men, known to everyone else as the world's best writers.

## events

### Kabikantha's Poetry Reading Session on Paz April 28

Kabikantha, country's leading poetry magazine, is to hold a poetry reading evening on Octavio Paz on Monday April 28 at Kabikantha's office in Purana Paltan. Octavio Paz, Mexico's foremost poet, Nobel Prize laureate, died at 84 on Monday April 21. Bengali rendering

from Paz will be presented by eminent poets of Bangladesh, Alauddin Al Azad, Al Mahmud, Fazal Shahahuddin, Mohammad Moniruzzaman, Mahbub Talukder, Aminur Rahmah, among others. Kabikantha editor Fazal Shahabuddin will preside the recital.

### Octavio Paz: A Literary Profile

by Isaac A Levi

**S**OFT-SPOKEN, Sometimes aloof to the point of scorn, Paz' style was sometimes harsh. But it was so precise and clear that he changed the very way Mexicans express themselves.

Like most Mexican writers, Paz was preoccupied with his country's many paradoxes and contradictions, its contrasts between an ancient Indian past and a more recent Spanish heritage, which gave rise to a

culture that is often baffling even to Mexicans.

Even Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes — one of Paz' sharpest critics — conceded that Paz has "forever changed the face of Mexican literature."

In 1982, Paz won the Miguel Cervantes Prize, Spain's most prestigious award. In 1987, he won the T S Eliot Award in Chicago. In 1990, he won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Paz is best known for two of his earlier works: the book-length essay "The Labyrinth of Solitude" and the

poem "Sun Stone." "Labyrinth," published in 1950, described Mexican history as a search — "for our own selves, deformed or masked by strange institutions," he later explained to a friend. Many friends stopped speaking to him after the book's publication.

"Sun Stone" was a harsh critique of the proud apathy he said many Mexicans share. Again, many colleagues reacted with shock, but he picked up many fans as well.

Paz considered poetry the most noble form of literature. "Poetry comes from the very depths of one's being. It corresponds to experiences that are more profound" than prose, he told the Spanish literary magazine La Vanguardia in 1987.

"In poetry, there is always an interplay between the material, physical and mental parts of the meaning. In prose, good prose, this is not noticed; good prose is invisible. In poetry, it is not. In a poem, each word carries weight."

The clarity of his writing inspired many other authors to abandon the convoluted style long common in Mexico.

Paz was born on March 31, 1914, and grew up on the edge of Mexico City. His grandfather, a strongly anti-clerical army general, playwright, lawyer, journalist and sometimes revolutionary

was an ally of dictator Porfirio Diaz.

Paz's father and namesake was secretary to Emiliano Zapata, a peasant leader of Mexico's 1910-1920 revolution. He later became the diplomatic representative in Washington of Zapata's revolutionary forces.

When Zapata was murdered in 1919, the Paz family went into brief exile in Los Angeles.

Back in Mexico, the family fell on hard times. When Paz was a teenager, the family was selling pieces of furniture — and then the entire house — to make ends meet.

Paz published his first poem when he was 16 and his first essay a year later. He went to law school at Mexico City's National Autonomous University, where he joined a Marxist student group.

He married a young writer, Elena Garro, and continued to write poems.

In his early 20s, Paz sent a manuscript to the late Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who also would go on to win a Nobel prize. Neruda was so impressed with Paz that he wrote a favourable review and suggested the young Mexican go to a congress of anti-fascist writers in Spain.

In Madrid, Paz met other leftist writers including Andre Malraux, Andre Gide, Stephen Spender, Antonio Machado and the Soviet propagandist Ilya Ehrenburg.

Paz stayed in Spain after the congress and joined the leftist-dominated

Republican forces fighting rightist Gen Francisco Franco. He insisted on going to the front.

He was sent to a brigade commanded by a Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros but was never given a rifle and, apparently because some doubted his leftist credentials, was sent back to Mexico on a vague mission "to divulge the Spanish cause."

Back in Mexico City, he worked at El Popular, a Socialist newspaper, but quit after political arguments with colleagues. From 1938 to 1940, he ran the magazine Taller (Workshop), but became increasingly distanced from the leftist movement.

Paz took a scholarship to study at the University of California, Berkeley, and worked in New York translating Hollywood scripts into Spanish.

A diplomat impressed with his writing in the Mexican magazine Manana offered him a job as cultural attache to the embassy in Paris in 1946. He went on to work in the diplomatic service in Japan and the United States.

In 1968, Paz resigned as ambassador to India when troops quashed student protests in Mexico City's Tlatelolco Square, killing hundreds of people.

It would be difficult to represent a government under these circumstances," he told reporters in New Delhi.

Paz had frequent disagreements with the leftist movement, equating Cuban President Fidel Castro with right-wing

Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and calling Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista revolution inconsequential.

But he also was a fierce critic of Mexico's government, denouncing the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party as corrupt and distanced from the Mexican people.

Paz denied he was anti-leftist, although he admitted he had little use for Marxism. He called himself a social democrat.

"I am an interlocutor who is hated and read by the left," he said on his 70th birthday. "Some call me retrograde. It is not the Mexican nation that criticises me but its intellectual class, which has not had a normal historical evolution."

Paz's marriage to Garro ended angrily after two decades, and in 1966 he married Marie-Jose Tramini.

In 1976, Paz founded Vuelta, which would become one of Latin America's most prestigious literary magazines. He remained the magazine's director.

Paz lived in a spacious and quiet apartment in a high-rise off one of Mexico City's busiest avenues, surrounded by thousands of books, mementos, pre-Columbian ceramics and art objects. Despite the pollution and noise, Paz refused to seek calmer surroundings in the suburbs.

"I'm Mexican," he said. "I have to live like the Mexicans. I adore my city. ... It was beautiful, and it's going to be beautiful again someday."

## impression

# Oh To Be In England : A Returnee Migrant's Re-Visit

by Fazlul Alam

(Continued from last week)

**N**EXT day, I was to go to London for a meeting near Euston railway station. I thought things must have changed greatly, and I would need more time to locate the place. To my relief, almost everything was the same. The morning session lasted two hours, and we were given option to buy our lunch at the hotel for only £15.00 a head, or have our 'free time' of two hours. Most of the participants opted out for the latter. I joined up with two participants who wanted to see the new British Library while munching a 'sandwich'. The sandwich cost me good £2.00 and a coke for 50 pence. On our way, I discovered the entrance of St Pancras Public Library, where I worked a close thirty years ago. The original premises on the main Euston Road were being pulled down to make way for the British Library. The library moved into a part of the Camden Council house. I asked my companions whether they would first pop into this building. They agreed. Alas! We faced a very disciplined lobby outside the library gate. They told us that they were the library workers taking industrial action and most Camden public libraries had been closed down. They handed over a leaflet and asked to sign their petition. According to the leaflet, the management of the Camden Council failed to safeguard the interest of people engaged in the library service, and the Council had wasted a vast amount of money in employing a firm of chartered accountant/business management to produce a blue print for improved library service which jeopard-

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dised the career prospects of all concerned. We signed and headed for the British Library avoiding beggars and buskers.

I heard that Prince Charles opened the premises a month ago, and did not criticise it as something short of an "incinerator" architecture. As an user of the old British Museum, I had completely different expectation. Frankly speaking, I was disappointed. The reception desk was not manned (or woman) by librarians. They could not answer any question, there was no introductory leaflet, except one which announced that all the floors would open in a month's time to those holding readers' ticket. There were a few computers in the entrance foyer. I opened and checked some well known titles, but they were not listed. I was grandly told by an attendant that the backlog was soon to be overcome. I was less optimistic, because the library program that were being used had a limitation of four hundred thousand titles only. I could not figure out why the British Library did not change over to the later version of the software. We did not have time to obtain a temporary readers' ticket to visit the only reading floor opened, but I was happy lest it revived my unhappy experience of using a modern architect built Birmingham Central Library in mid '70s after the demolition of a charming old building next door.

Prince Charles called this new building as monstrous and looking like an incinerator.

I always subscribed to the observation that most people of the European civil societies live on the media. One's own experience is only personal and insignificant. The anomie, alienation and detachment experienced by the common people are compensated by a good income (only if well employed), a good living pad (if one is lucky), and free time (yes, plenty of that - spend it away watching four channels - the fifth channel or cable television had not reached the majority of the homes as yet. The media in most cases control the mind of the civil society. The media make or unmake ideas. Once during the long conservative rule, the government think tank declared that people are themselves responsible for all their ills. They were unemployed because of a 'mismatch' - there were plenty of jobs for all. They were ill housed because they did not try hard enough. They fell ill more often because they were not careful. Their children were going ash-tray (drug use, excessive smoking, increase of illiteracy in real term, teenage pregnancies) because parents were not acting responsibly - and so on. Now, the media is telling them completely opposite ideas, and funny, people are accepting them. The Labour Party (I should call it the New Labour Party having

shed the clause 4 of their constitution) on coming to power had already started a new way of thinking. The British Medical Journal (the famous BMJ) covered full-scale the government Green Paper for action on a "Healthier Nation" announcing "Poverty is the major cause of illness in Britain". Of the illnesses, the priority areas were "heart disease and stroke; accidents; cancer; and mental health. Well, well, we in Bangladesh are not very much far behind.

My next two days were very hectic travelling to the Midlands and farther north. Like the morning showed the day, I was not becoming too unhappy about my decision to have returned to Bangladesh, however I become part of much less per capita income or GNP or GDP. In Ireland, racism against the black and Asians were unheard of. My doctor friend from Dublin phoned and almost wept while narrating his recent experience of racist attack on himself and his family. He also told me that these had already been reported in the BMJ and that these started happening only a few months earlier. I did not venture to seek sociological causes - since they must all be political.

The night before I was to leave, I invited my host over to a local Indian Restaurant, having thought that this would be a befitting end of my visit. As usual, the Indian Restaurant was

Bangladeshi run, and we were, after having been scrutinised that we would pay, made very welcome in an otherwise almost empty restaurant. The waiter, who spoke good English soon became very friendly and produced paper cuttings which told me of another chapter of the 'twisted tale' of living in Britain. One Mr Iqbal Wahab, a Bangladeshi in Britain on becoming editor-in-chief of an English catering magazine entitled "Tandoori" lashed out against the Bangladeshi run Indian restaurants that these would soon become extinct in Britain unless the restaurants change over a new image. His particular criticism was that the waiters are "miserable-looking" as if they had just come back from their best friend's funeral. This, upon being re-reported in a Bangla weekly of London raised hell in most Bangladeshi restaurants. Even the prestigious "The Times" ran an editorial "Proud to be Poppadam". It patronizingly assured that waiters in Bangladeshi restaurants had the right reason to look miserable and their gestures were well accepted by the British curry lovers. Eventually Mr Wahab was asked to step down from his editor-in-chiefship. He obliged and amidst fanfare opened his classy restaurant (Bangladeshi run Indian one again) in Kensington. Bangladesh High Commission in London also stepped into the dispute and advertised in several weeklies soothing

Bangladeshi business world that all were well and that Mr Wahab had been removed from the magazine. The ad was signed by the newly appointed Press Minister Syed Badrul Hasan.

I wondered what a colossal waste of money. Tandoori magazine was run by a group of Indian businessmen selling a particular brand of Indian beer through the restaurants outlet. What had Bangladesh High Commission to do with this? After all, Mr Wahab's article would have gone unnoticed had it not been picked by his arch-rival one Mr Amin Ali who once boasted to have opened an Indian Restaurant in Moscow (all flopped). Mr Ali was always in the good book of the establishment (Bangladeshi!) and for some business reason had a score to settle with Mr Wahab. So, the new Press Minister must have obliged him by advertising in the name of 'community welfare'!

I sat back relaxingly in the aircraft, and longed to return home, my real home in Bangladesh where amidst all the dean and bustle, amidst all the problems of living in a city like Dhaka, I always feel that I am person, not an immigrant ironically called 'ethnic minority' or 'culturally different person'. England have many problems, which are well reflected in the media scoops I narrated in England, I was not participant in those problems, because I was not a person, I was one of 'the problems'. I am content with my decision to return home, but I continue to admire the 'brave hearts' who continue living abroad for whatever reasons. As the plane takes off this time, it was no longer 'Oh to be in England', but a Tagore lyric 'Amar Sonar Bangla'.