

essay

Language, Eastern Soul and Solid Heart

by Razeshta Sethna

"A single shelf of a good European library," wrote Macaulay in 1835, "is worth the whole native literature." Macaulay probably never had a premonition that writers of this century would sling his pomposity straight where it had come from. The subcontinent is thrillingly entertaining a sudden surge of literary works in English from the radically exuberant Roy to the uniquely isolated romanticism of Seth. We have it all safely canoodled here; straight out of the language bequeathed to us by our colonial rulers; and straight from the heart of a culture that has moved the English-speaking world to include subcontinental narratives in their global literary ventures.

Publishers are aware that there had been an ignorance about Indian fiction in the West until writers like V S Naipaul, Bapsi Sidhwala, Rohinton Mistry and Vikram Chandra created notable waves. They went where no one had dared before; where the west had never been to chronicle with that first-hand emotion and they went back to where they had loved and lived - miles from the world that serves them impetus with which to write. They won prestigious literary accolades; collected huge advances and became sensational favourites in the western media. The last century has elevated prose writing - both fiction and non-fiction - from India and Pakistan to extraordinary heights. Seasoned writers are raking in millions of dollars from western publishing giants; clinching movie deals (see Candy Man by Bapsi Sidhwala gets a place in Deepa Mehta's trilogy, Earth, Water, Fire) and distinguished literary awards like the Booker, the Commonwealth Novel, the Betty Trask and the Whitbread Award. British publishers are certainly looking for Indian-style verve and ambition not to mention imagination and originality.

According to the best new books from this side of the globe, they have an abundance of powerful writings, typical characters with eastern soul and probably even a dash of suffering - executed in a third world context which is why many such English language authors get sufficient reviews in the right places. I'm not claiming that the literary world is new to Indian fiction writing in English but that a talented generation has emerged with stories to tell in a purely personal style. The Keralan writer Arundhati Roy arrived when publishers had been on the lookout for a refreshing novel. She didn't unleash a global market for Indian writers but merely established that an Indian love story if passionately told can certainly make you

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cry and certainly turn you into an applauded literary figure. Roy's story was one laden with passion making you teary because the striking prose, the enchanting Keralan spirit and the universality of her characters churned the mind. A tone of foreboding hangs over the novel like a dirty linen rag. When you read about Sophie Mol you know that all is not right; with Baby Kochamma, the ex-nun's loneliness and with Velutha, the outcast Paravam, with whom the twin's mother has a clandestine love-affair; you can feel the depth of pain, love and death. Roy writes: "They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much." The story is told through the innocent eyes of Esthappen and Rahul, the twins who learn painfully that things can change in a day. Roy gifts you a book where she dares to create language to suit her story of wit, magic, love and hope.

After Partition nearly every decade saw an Indian work in English being published to acclaim. Pakistani authors quickly followed suit, with Bapsi Sidhwala, Sara Sulteri and others. They altered the map of fiction from the subcontinent with their Indian counterparts. Heavyweights as Anita Desai were followed by novels such as Such a Long Journey and later A Fine Balance and Swimming Lessons by the Canadian Indian author Rohinton Mistry. In Swimming Lessons, Pesi tries to look up girls' skirts with his bright torchlight; the ayah trudges about her daily chores and Rustomji, the curmudgeon irritates most occupants of Ferozeshah Baag. The latter is the apartment block in Bombay where Mistry probably spent the best years of his adolescence. He knows about its ceilings that need plastering and that some of the toilets leak appallingly. He knows of the residents as a jolly lot though eccentric and stuck in their ways and unable to make that transition into the modern world. Later years were witness to Vikram Seth's

slow exit from oblivion to celebrity and Rupees 25 million advance for his charming prose in *A Suitable Boy*. Amit Chaudhuri wrote *Afternoon Raag* and has since published *Freedom Song*. Nadeem Chaudhuri shadowed with *Seasons of Rainbirds*. The mid-nineties welcomed two stunning debuts novels: Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy* about a classic Parsi family fussing with the modern Bombay lifestyle where names like Readymoney and Boatwala don't fail to amuse as much as the sharp, comic and speedy style of the writer. The other was Kiran Desai with her gift of storytelling in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* where the main protagonist is a monkey baba who lives, eats, sleeps and bathes on top of a guava tree. Sampath Chawla never ascends into the real world of corruption, decadence and lies. The novel is lushly imagined but lacks an intensity which many have said it may not require. Eccentric characters clog this work because they are convincing and real to life in the small rural town of Shahkot.

Kulfi stirs huge pots of food made from ingredients you'd never touch whilst cooking - dead frogs and sticks. Hullabaloo is the kind of story where sadness does not destroy entirely or poverty become too visible. It's more of a journey into the madness of the Chawla family with the mercenary Mr Chawla, the stupid Pinky and the coy Hip-Hop ice-cream boy. Sampath begins to prophesy from the tree and gets acclaim as a visionary where previously he worked in the post office, opening other people's mail; hence his powers to foretell the future. The atheist spy has vowed to expose these fraudulent means of extracting money from foisted worshippers making him comment in the writer's voice on society: "It is precisely those like Sampath who obstructed the progress of this nation, keeping honest educated people like him (the spy) in the backwaters along with them. They ate away at these striving intelligent souls, they ate away at progress and smoth-

ered anybody who tried to make a stand against the vast uneducated hordes, swelling and growing toward the bigger population of idiots."

No such fortune is available to the heroes in Kamila Shamsie's debut novel where the 11-year-old Hasan's imagination unfolds in an unnamed city. In the City by the Sea much revolves around the house arrest of the people's all-time favourite politician, Salman Haq. Shamsie's characters talk a great deal and do it really well because they are from the elite side of society that can rattle on about democracy and its demands. There is nothing about the outside real world of have-nots in this novel which concentrates on an untried authoritarian regime that fails to enforce itself through acts of violence.

Yet, what really appeals through the better part of Kamila's writing is the fairy-tale mind of Hasan who is shielded by adults from the cruelties of political injustice. The Bodyguard is a hilarious attempt at portraying individuals with names reading as Arif-Atif-Asif for the lack of not knowing which one is the right one. Kamila leaves us guessing if this is a remotely first-hand experience as she steers clear from writing about politics - though she uses characters as Shehryar, Hasan's father or the Widow or even Ammu to comment on Pakistani political mayhem in the early mid-eighties.

Difficult Daughters by debut novelist Manju Kapur is another piece of personal writing though the style is slightly deadpan. Kapur teaches English literature at Delhi University and spent five years researching this book. That it is not a tale from her life, that is obvious in her detached tone especially when she displays no emotions for her characters. The story is told by a daughter whose curiosity about the life and family of her mother leads to her tracing the unconventional romance, marriage and education of Virmati.

What strikes as interesting are the attitudes towards education versus

marriage for women at the time of Partition. The lack of liberal thinking is prevalent though the literate have enlightened views on women, children and the joint-family system. What is sad is a daughter's attitude towards a dead mother - here the reader probably senses a silent resentment. And I can gauge that the envy is because Virmati was far before her times. She went to university in Lahore to read philosophy after her marriage to a professor - an already married man. The writing is strait-jacket, almost an historical chronicling of events but the struggle to survive despite shattered taboos is important.

It was 1992 when I met Vikram Seth. It was a small discussion on his new novel that critics had torn apart for its length and repetition. Seth was highly inspirational in his chatter. He was also terribly short. And keen to know what my name meant. He wrote it in Urdu as he tipped the page over. Vikram Seth will always be known for his creation of *Harish in A Suitable Boy* where Lata chooses between impassioned love of another sort and an inherently practical match. Last month Seth's new literary sensation bagged rave reviews (and I wish I'd been there) but all this was rather strange for a narrative that moves away from the traditional shores of India travelling to Vienna, Venice and London. *An Equal Music* is a riveting read on the power of love, loss and music.

They say that a writer writes what he knows best; what he's experienced for the better part of his life. In the case of Seth's new novel this premise is not entirely true. The author says he's stirred by music, cannot play the violin but has researched this novel in fine detail - he was advised and educated by string players, composers and repairers of instruments. It is here that Seth's language complements the world of music he writes on. A sad world endorsing the cacophony of his music and where lost and gained (and lost again) love permeates through most of the

writing.

If you know London, it makes the novel even more fascinating because you'll know just how freezing it is when the Water Serpents swim at dawn in the Serpentine or you'll know how rapidly the shining red buses whiz past each other at the point on Oxford Street where the "weeping angel of Selfridges" stands regally as a landmark. The story is narrated by Michael, the second violinist of the Maggiore Quartet that plays in London and tours Europe and the Americas. Michael's world is haunted by memories of his old lover whom he deserted more than a decade ago in Venice. The character is marred with a quest for that lost love - something which he does not actively seek out until it comes to him. It haunts him with images of the yester-years; of happiness and of ideal intimacy. The writer moves into realms of past and present where he discusses music and concerts almost as adeptly as he talks of friendship and unrequited love. Seth has moved into the person of Michael. He knows what drives Michael; music and love. A string quintet in C minor by Beethoven and Julia. Apart from the two meandering passions, the reader might take a quick peek into the world of concert pianists, string players and violists, agents and motley audiences. The volatile though compassionate relationship between the members of the quartet lends an inside-eye into the lives of contemporary musicians.

This is not a tale of classical music that takes you into the last century but a narrative where the classical masters are sought with an intense obsession. If you're not a classical music buff, don't let this scare you away from Seth's artistic creation. This will only render the journey into his world more humane and enduring. The novel is structured and the tone is strong though embedded in melancholy. Not contagious but doomed. You can almost hear the brilliance of *The Art of the Fugue* and sadly feel the pain of loss.

Perhaps this is an autobiographical piece in ways known to Seth and it was music that kept him sane through untamed turbulence. Nearing the epilogue he walks away from Julia's concert and into the rain. An early evening darkness trails his feet. Tears haze his eyes. A weary soul writes, "Music, such music, is a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness; why hope not to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music - not too much, or the soul could not sustain it - from time to time." Art and literature blot out grief but don't equal happiness.

Courtesy: *The Dawn*

book review

Fish, Water and People

by Shahadat Ali

M Youssouf Ali (1997)
The University Press Limited
154 pp.

This book will be consulted by fisheries students and workers for years to come. It is crammed with information which has been the privy of a handful. The book will be much quoted, much like the *Fishes of Dhaka*, by A L Bhuiyan. The book is authoritative and the author does not hesitate to say where we have gone wrong. His warning bell: Fish will disappear from Bangladesh.

The book is a "reflections". The author should be able to "reflect." He has been in fisheries policy making deci-

sions for long and has been consulted even after retirement. I am happy to see something in print for posterity. Dr Ali has an advantage: He's a zoologist-beaurocrat — a rare distinction and combination.

Published in 1997, the book has come up for review only 1999! The book is divided into nine chapters. Its title is reflected in the chapter contents. But one chapter is not necessarily related to the next or another. Also, the latest Department of Fisheries (DOF) statistics is given for 1993. Could we not have data for 1996? The chapters are short and read easily.

The Preface sets the tone for the book and the concern of the author. The Introduction shows the author's anguish

for the fishing community, and the ecological and sociological environment of Bangladesh.

Chapter One gives a geographical understanding of the features of Bangladesh's resources. It lists rivers, floodplains, beels and estuaries. In Chapter Two the living resources are given. There is a good write-up on small-sized fishes and prawns. Chapter Four on Water Resource Development projects is the largest chapter. It is a thorough account of the embankments that have been constructed throughout Bangladesh and is replete with maps and illustrations. It notes the strains on fisheries development resulting from innumerable dams. For example, page 67 gives the loss of fish catch due to the

closure of the northern Dhaleswar River for the Jamuna Multipurpose bridge. The general comments at the end of the chapter will be useful for any expert in the field. The chapter refers to FCD, FCDI, FAP copiously. It would be helpful if the origins of these were given for the untrained reader. In Chapter 6 on Water Pollution the author touches on the use of chemicals by modern day Bangladeshis.

The effects of effluents from mills and factories are discussed. Not enough data has been generated on the subject and the chapter is short. Only Epizootic Ulcerative Syndrome is discussed in 1.5 pages under Fish Diseases in Chapter 6. Certainly, not enough justice has been done here. The chapter on Fish Catch-

ment Assessment gives very useful data in two graphs and tables. The statistics for hilsa and carps, catfish, shrimps are given for ten years from 1983 to 1993 courtesy of the DOF. I was pleased to see the author refer to the unreliability of the data. Productivity figures for the Jamuna and Padma rivers and beels are given. Chapter Eight on Major Carp Spawning Fishery touches on the traditional methods of providing stocks for the many household ponds in Bangladesh. Except for the statistics, and to say how carp spawn is declining, the chapter has nothing more. The best chapter is left to the last. The reader waits to know what is in store for him. Dr Ali talks about the Jalmahal Leasing system, gives its history and develop-

ment. Happily, there is a criticism of the leasing system. The NFMP is discussed thoroughly. The exposure on Community Based Management, Fish Sanctuaries, Subsistence Fisheries, Openwater Fish Culture, Conservation Legislation is limited, understandably, as these are emerging issues. Not enough has been written on Decreasing Biodiversity.

In Chapter 1 'million acre feet' is used. SI units would be preferred. Page 3, F3 and F4 are one and same. It would be helpful if abbreviations were spelled out in one page.

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Environmental Economics: The New Emphasis

by D K Ghosh

THE enormous waste being produced by man's industrial activity and consumption habits will ultimately stretch nature's ability to sustain life to a breaking point, resulting in an ecological crisis, says a new book.

The crisis of environment has never assumed a worse global proportion than now calling for a fundamental revision of ecological understanding and values of the society, says S Karpagam in 'environmental economics'.

The new exigency now demands that humanity identify itself as an inseparable part of the nature, not as a superior and masterly force to suck her dry and, in the process, endanger its very physical existence on the planet, he says.

Almost every type of economic activity has a potential effect on the biosphere. It is imperative that such activity must evaluate itself in environmental terms to retain the 'ecological' balance.

Of the impending eco-disasters the most threatening and confounding is what has now come to be called as the greenhouse pollution or global warming.

Various efforts have been launched to stay off the disasters. The Kyoto protocol of 1997 committed the industrialised nations to specified legally binding targets of emission of the greenhouse gas by seven per cent below

1990. The relationship between man and nature formed the core of economic thinking for ages, as evident from Alfred Marshall's observation that "the Mecca of economists lies in economic biology rather than in economic dy-

namics, says the author.

Citing real life examples and their applications, Karpagam seeks to highlight this 'economic biology' saying that the basic postulate of environmental economics is that nature is as much an economic player as the producer and the consumer.

Environmental values, as Kahn noted, are economic values and therefore call for optimal utilisation of natural resources like air, water and the earth. It naturally follows that the environmental crises of the 20th century are the result of predatory exploitation of resources, non-optimal pricing and invasive technology that is set to conquer nature, as if, by violence.

The basic thrust of environmental economics is to take a fresh look at the

problem and work out an optimal production-consumption cycle.

The theoretical basis of environmental economics centres on the deviations from the optimum conditions and the solutions for these deviations involve policy changes in distribution.

But the author notes that awareness regarding indiscriminate use of natural resources has dawned and steps are being taken to address the problem.

The most important step in the new awareness is the Stockholm Conference of 1972 which set in motion a new movement of global environmentalism and ultimately led to the creation of the UN environmental programme.

Two decades later the Rio Summit laid down the basis of several agreements on biological diversity, climatic

change and forest principles, among others.

The issue of environment naturally brings in the question of sustainable development.

The economic component of sustainability requires that developing societies pursue growth models that generate income while maintaining that stock of capital, both man made and natural.

The social dimensions of the sustainable development is built on two principles of justice and equity so that wealth, resources and opportunity are equitably shared.

Environmental Economics — a Textbook by Karpagam published by Sterling Publishers. Pages 363. Price Rs 1251. —APB