



book review

Bowled over By The Best in Books

by Muneeza Shamsie

THE topical book this summer is *Equal Music* by Vikram Seth, a truly unusual and dazzling work set in contemporary Europe, which is now available at OUP. There are no subcontinental characters in this book however; instead it revolves around a group of British and European musicians. At the heart of it is the powerful and poignant love story of a pianist Julia, struggling to overcome a physical handicap and of the narrator, Michael, a violinist trying to cope with an emotional crises that crippled him once, and threatens to consume him again. Michael, the second violinist in the Maggiore Quartet learns of the existence of a rare Beethoven quintet but it is a piece of music which he only knows of and has played as a trio; it brings back memories of Julia, the woman he loved in Vienna long ago and lost following a breakdown, for which he holds his demanding teacher Carl Kall responsible. Michael's research into the quintet and his subsequent discovery of the score coincides with a chance sighting of Julia on a London bus. The novel moves in an out of time to provide glimpses of Michael's life in Vienna and the circumstances which took him, a butcher's son, from the small town of Rochdale in Northern England, to a school of music. Central to the story and to Michael's many difficulties is the fact that the priceless violin he has always played on has been lent to him by the generous Mrs Fornby whose heirs now want the instrument back. Music lovers will be enthralled by Vikram Seth's descriptions of a musician's life, the small insights into Bach and Beethoven, Schubert and Mozart that he weaves into the narrative but the way that music is built into the story is such that it impels the plot forward; even readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of classical music will be caught up with the impetus and suspense of this tale. One of the musical pieces, pivotal to the plot is the

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The silence that surrounds Julia, the rapport between her playing and Michael's, and how she captures the grace and magic of music from gestures and vibrations rather than notes and sounds, provides some of the most remarkable and moving aspects of this enthralling book. History, or rather the forging of a national identity, is at the heart of the Australian-born Peter Carey's brilliant novel *Jack Maggs* which won the 1997 Commonwealth Writers Prize. This is a truly fascinating work, which reconstructs the story of Magwitch the convict in Great Expectations and through it, Carey challenges the narrative of imperial Britain — and of Charles Dickens. In Carey's story, the real Jack Maggs is an honourable, upright, larger-than-life character, a man

imbued with an innate sense of morality and decency, far greater than the English writer Tobias Oates who turns the true life of Jack Maggs into a fictionalized soap opera *The Death of Jack Maggs* for the benefit his English public. The story begins in 1837 when Jack Maggs returns to England with images of being re-united with Phipps, the boy he has educated to be an English gentleman. Jack has been pardoned in Australia long ago and become a rich, educated and respected member of the community but in England, having been deported for life, he remains a wanted man. Jack's search for the perfidious Phipps leads to a chain of unexpected events. Jack finds himself employed as a footman in the household of Phipp's neighbour, the curious Mr Buckle. There Jack makes the acquaintance of a famous but eccentric author, Tobias Oates, who is obsessed by "the criminal mind" and who dabbles in mesmerism. The book has many moments of high comedy but it is also imbued with a deep pain which embodies England's relationship with Australia and the many unfortunate people that the respectable men of England deported for the flimsiest crimes. Tobias is able to hypnotize Jack to ease the severe muscular spasm that plagues Jack but in the process, unknown to Jack,

Tobias Oates pries out Jack's innermost secrets — the terrors and horrors that Jack has survived, both as a founding and child-thief in England and as convict in Australia. But Tobias Oates also harbours a guilty secret which Jack Maggs discovers and the subsequent interplay between these two characters forms the pivot of this book and provides some of its finest passages. This is a truly wonderful and evocative novel which spins a good yarn against the backdrop of Dickensian London; it also provides an excellent portrait of the writer, his literary landscape and the link between autobiography and literature. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the novel which has kept the American public in its thrall is *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier. It's about the American Civil War but its main protagonists are neither northern Yankees nor Southern slave owners, nor slaves. They are an independent people living in a close kinship with the elements in a small mountain village, Cold Mountain, in the midst of soaring peaks and suffer the penalties of a war which is neither of their choosing nor their making.

The story revolves around a young woman Ada and Inman, the man she loved, before the war began and he became a soldier. She has no idea if he is still alive; he has no knowledge of the

fact that her wealthy father has died and left her penniless. Each chapter alternates between the story of Ada and Inman and their respective struggle for mental and physical survival; while Ada battles with the land and the weather to fight off starvation. The wounded Inman walks away from the dead and dying in the military hospital where he has been a patient for months. He makes his way back through the war-torn south, to Ada and to Cold Mountain, to regain all that he honours and holds dear. His journey is fraught with fearful dangers and is both a spiritual quest and search for salvation, from the de-humanizing brutalities of war. Cold Mountain looks at the wider issues of life and death, of war and of the nature of civilization; it also provides a magnificent panorama filled with tiny details of nineteenth century American life. Furthermore, the myriad of characters here, ranging from country farmers, a Cherokee Indian, a gypsy woman, and an independent black woman, all provide the alternative history of America and its heroes. Middle age and marriage is the subject of Hanif Kureishi's brief, clever and controversial novel *Intimacy* which begins with the lines: "It is the saddest night, for I am leaving and not coming back. Tomorrow morning when the

woman I have lived with for six years has gone to work on her bicycle and our children have been taken to the park with their ball, I will pack some things into a suitcase and slip out of the house...."

The narrator, Jay, is a successful writer married to Susan, an equally successful publisher and the father of two young children, but he longs to escape from a relationship which he finds claustrophobic. The book is essentially a contemplation of marriage with moments of doubts, of tenderness and joy, anger and confusion. The book provides cameo portraits of Jay's Pakistani

father and English mother, his divorced pal Victor and an elusive, free-spirited young woman, Nina, who has disappeared from his life. Pakistan is very much the subject of *In The City By The Sea* by Kamila Shamsie, but she has freed herself from the constraints of time and place, to encapsulate the Pakistani experience — and that of many other Third World countries — by giving her novel a fictitious setting, though her city is, recognizably, Karachi. A couple of weeks ago her novel became one of six titles, short-listed for the 1999 Mail On Sunday\John Llewellyn Rhys Award. This is given for the promising literary work, in any genre, in the English language to a Commonwealth writer under 35. Reviewers have particularly commented on Kamila's use of language, her vivid imagery, her subtle portrayal of tyranny and her understanding of how children rely on magic and make-believe to cope with harsh realities they cannot understand. The story revolves around Hassan, a carefree, privileged 11-year-old boy, whose life is suddenly disrupted when he watches his neighbour's son fall to his death from a nearby roof and his honourable, beloved, politician uncle is arrested and might well be tried for treason.

Courtesy of The DAWN

musings

The Greater Common Good

By Arundhati Roy

Continued from last week
SEVERAL kilometres upstream from the Sardar Sarovar dam, huge deposits of silt, hip-deep and over two hundred metres wide, has cut off access to the river. Women carrying water pots, now have to walk miles, literally miles, to find a negotiable entry point. Cows and goats get stranded in it and die. The little single-log boats that tribal people use have become unsafe on the irrational circular currents caused by the barricade downstream.

Further upstream, where the silt deposits have not yet become a problem, there's another problem. Landless people, (predominantly tribals and Dalits) have traditionally cultivated rice, fruit and vegetables on the rich, shallow silt banks the river leaves when it recedes in the dry months. Every now and then, the engineers manning the Bargi Dam (way upstream, near Jabalpur) release water from the reservoir without warning. Downstream, the water level in the river suddenly rises. Hundreds of families have had their crops washed away several times, leaving them with no livelihood.

Suddenly they can't trust their river anymore. It's like a loved one who has developed symptoms of psychosis. Anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing. But I'll be rapped on the knuckles if I continue in this vein. When we're discussing the Greater Common Good there's no place for sentiment. One must stick to facts. Forgive me for letting my heart wander.

The governments of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra continue to be completely cavalier in their dealings with displaced people. The government of Gujarat has a rehabilitation policy (on paper) that makes the other two states look medieval. It boasts of being the best rehabilitation package in the world. It offers land for land to displaced people from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and recognises the claims of 'encroachers' (usually tribal people with no papers). The deception, however, lies in its definition of who qualifies as 'Project Affected'.

In point of fact, the government of Gujarat hasn't even managed to rehabilitate people from its own 19 villages slated for submergence, let alone the rest of the 226 in the other two states. The inhabitants of these 19 villages have been scattered to 175 separate rehabilitation sites. Social links have been smashed, communities broken up.

In practice, the resettlement story (with a few 'ideal village' exceptions) continues to be one of callousness and broken promises. Some people have been given land, others haven't. Some have land that is stony and uncultivable. Some have land that is irredeemably water-logged. Some have been driven out by landowners who sold land to the government but haven't been paid yet.

Some who were resettled on the peripheries of other villages have been robbed, beaten and chased away by their host villagers. There have been occasions when displaced people from two different dam projects have been allotted contiguous lands. In one case, dis-

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placed people from three dams—the Ukai Dam, the Sardar Sarovar Dam and the Karjan Dam—were resettled in the same area. In addition to fighting amongst themselves for resources—water, grazing land, jobs—they had to fight a group of landless labourers who had been sharecropping the land for absentee landlords who had subsequently sold it to the government.

There's another category of displaced

people whose lands have been acquired by the government for Resettlement Sites. There's a pecking order even amongst the wretched-Sardar Sarovar 'oustees' are more glamorous than other 'oustees' because they're occasionally in the news and have an ongoing case in court. (In other development projects, where there's no press, no NBA, no court case, there are no records. The displaced leave no trail at all.)

In several resettlement sites, people have been dumped in rows of corrugated tin sheds which are furnaces in summer and fridges in winter. Some of them are located in dry river beds which, during the monsoon, turn into fast-flowing drifts. I've been to some of these 'sites'. I've seen film footage of others: shivering children, perched like birds on the edges of charpais, while swirling waters enter their tin homes. Frightened, fevered eyes watch pots and pans carried through the doorway by the current, floating out into the flooded fields, thin fathers swimming after them to retrieve what they can.

When the waters recede they leave ruin. Malaria, diarrhoea, sick cattle stranded in the slush. The ancient teak beams dismantled from their previous homes, carefully stacked away like postponed dreams, now spongy, rotten and unusable.

Forty households were moved from Manibeli to a resettlement site in Maharashtra. In the first year, 38 children died.

In today's papers (Indian Express, April 26, '99) there's a report about nine deaths in a single rehabilitation site in Gujarat. In the course of a week. That's 1,287.5 PAPs a day, if you're counting.

Many of those who have been resettled are people who have lived all their lives deep in the forest with virtually no contact with money and the modern world. Suddenly they find themselves left with the option of starving to death or walking several kilometres to the nearest town, sitting in the marketplace (both men and women), offering themselves as wage labour, like goods on sale.

From being self-sufficient and free, to being impoverished and yoked to the whims of a world you know nothing, nothing about what you suppose it must feel like? Would you like to trade your beach house in Goa for a hovel in Paharganj? No? Not even for the sake of the Nation?

Truly, it is just not possible for a

State Administration, any State Administration, to carry out the rehabilitation of a people as fragile as this, on such an immense scale. It's like using a pair of hedge-shears to trim an infant's fingernails. You can't do it without shearing its fingers off. Land for land sounds like a reasonable swap, but how do you implement it? How do you uproot 200,000 people (the official blinkered estimate) of which 117,000 are tribal people, and relocate them in a humane fashion? How do you keep their communities intact, in a country where every inch of land is fought over, where almost all litigation pending in courts has to do with land disputes?

Where is all this fine, unoccupied but arable land that is waiting to receive these intact communities?

The simple answer is that there isn't any. Not even for the 'officially' displaced of this one dam.

What about the rest of the 3,299 dams?

What about the remaining thousands of PAPs earmarked for annihilation? Shall we just put the Star of David on their doors and get it over with?

Jalud, in the Nimad plains of Madhya Pradesh, is the first of 60 villages that will be submerged by the reservoir of the Maheshwar dam. Jalud is not a tribal village, and is therefore riven with the shameful caste divisions that are the scourge of every ordinary Hindu village. A majority of the land-owning farmers (the ones who qualify as PAPs) are Rajputs. They farm some of the most fertile soil in India. Their houses are piled with sacks of wheat and daal and rice. They boast so much about the things they grow on their land that if it weren't so tragic, it could get on your nerves. Their houses have already begun to crack with the impact of the dynamiting on the dam site.

The 12 predominantly Dalit families who had small holdings in the vicinity of the dam site had their land acquired. They told me how when they objected, cement was poured into their water pipes, their standing crops were bulldozed and the police occupied the land by force. All 12 families are now landless and work as wage labour.

The area that the people of Jalud are going to be moved to is a few kilometres inland, away from the river, adjoining a predominantly Dalit and tribal village called Samraj. I saw the huge tract of land that had been marked off for

them. It was a hard, stony hillock with stubby grass and scrub; on which truckloads of silt was being unloaded and spread out in a thin layer to make it look like rich, black cotton soil. The story goes like this: on behalf of the S. Kumars (Textile Tycoons turned Nation Builders) the District Magistrate acquired the hillock, which was actually village common grazing land that belonged to the people of Samraj. In addition to this, the land of 10 Dalit villagers was acquired. No compensation was paid.

The villagers, whose main source of income was their livestock, had to sell their goats and buffalos because they no longer had anywhere to graze them.

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Their only remaining source of income lies (lay) on the banks of a small lake on the edge of the village. In summer, when the water level recedes, it leaves a shallow ring of rich silt on which the villagers grow (grew) rice, melons and cucumber.

The S. Kumars have excavated this silt, to cosmetically cover the stony grazing ground (that the Rajputs of Jalud don't want). The banks of the lake are now steep and uncultivable.

The already impoverished people of Samraj have been left to starve, while

this photo-opportunity is being readied for German funders and Indian courts and anybody else who cares to pass that way.

This is how India works. This is the genesis of the Maheshwar dam. The story of the first village. What will happen to the other 59? May bad luck pursue this dam. May bulldozers turn upon the Textile Tycoons.

Nothing can justify this kind of behaviour.

In circumstances like these, to even entertain a debate about Rehabilitation is to take the first step towards setting aside the Principles of Justice. Resettling 200,000 people in order to take (or pretend to take) drinking water to 40 million—there's something very wrong with the scale of operations here. This is Fascist Maths. It strangles stories. Bludgeons detail. And manages to blind perfectly reasonable people with its spurious, shining vision.

When I arrived on the banks of the Narmada in late March (1999), it was a month after the Supreme Court suddenly vacated the stay on construction work of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. I had read pretty much everything I could lay my hands on (all those 'secret' Government documents). I had a clear idea of the lay of the land—of what had happened where and when and to whom. The story played itself out before my eyes like a tragic film whose actors I'd already met. Had I not known its history, nothing would have made sense. Because in the valley there are stories within stories and it's easy to lose the clarity of rage in the sludge of other peoples' sorrow.

I ended my journey in Kevadia Colony, where it all began. Thirty-eight years ago, this is where the government of Gujarat decided to locate the infrastructure it would need for starting work on the dam: guest houses, office blocks, accommodation for engineers and their staff, roads leading to the dam site, warehouses for construction material.

It is located on the cusp of what is now the Sardar Sarovar reservoir and the Wonder Canal, Gujarat's 'life-line', which is going to quench the thirst of millions.

Nobody knows this, but Kevadia Colony is the key to the World. Go there, and secrets will be revealed to you.

In the winter of 1961, a government officer arrived in a village called Kothli and informed the villagers that some of their land would be needed to construct a helipad.

To be continued