

reflection

Lady Macbeth: When Men's Folly Finds a Woman's Name

by Syed Maqsood Jamil

THE next White House will not have the shadows of "Lady Macbeth", as Hillary was made out to be by her critics. It is unlikely that either Laura Bush or "Tipper" Gore has a Hillary Clinton in them.

History, recent and past, was never short of its Lady Macbeth. The literary character created by Shakespeare is associated with the villainy of women's ambition working on men. It is believed to have led to the undoing of many mighty men.

In spite of what was told of her, Hillary today stands more favourably placed than her scandalised husband. It is not her ambition or her suspect business dealings that harmed Clinton. His lewd conduct brought him to the brink. Hillary's ambition is set to climb higher. She is strongly believed to win the Senate seat from New York.

Most men, in fact, fall from their own follies. It often catches the name of a woman. Macbeth took to his heart what the third witch prophesied, "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter." Ambition has a natural hold on men's mind, because, the proceedings of the world is greatly a play field of men.

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the reason prisoner." He foresees in it the unthinking follies, Macbeth is to embark upon. Macbeth was already set on his reckless course, strongly believing, "If chance will have me/King, why, chance may crown me./Without my str." The drive was intense. Lady Macbeth's keen faith in the crowning of her husband kept it from declining. Macbeth was determined, "Come what come may/Time and the hour runs through the roughest day."

Imelda Marcos, as the world knows her, is readily picked out as Lady Macbeth. Public focus regarded the five hundred pairs of shoes and her countless numbers of dresses equal to her husband's remorseless tyranny in its disdainful extravagance. It lacks in fairness. The shoes and the dresses are, in reality, mere collection of dolls in comparison to the vicious deeds of Ferdinand Marcos. He savaged the state, scandalised the constitutional

process, and vandalised the treasury with abandon. Imelda was walking the stained course, Marcos was rampaging through. The world did not get Marcos. It got Imelda and fed on her. She stuck boldly to the rights of bringing home her husband's corpse. There was an admirable resoluteness in her campaign.

A similar kind of steely resolve, although, different in purpose worked inside Lady Macbeth. She was committed to the core on lending support to her husband's plan of murdering King Duncan, and pleaded with the heaven for strength, "And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full/Of direct cruelty. Make thick my blood./Stop up th' access and passage to remorse."

Marie Antoinette, the wife of Louis XVI was also seen as Lady Macbeth in her time. The fury of the French Revolution found her behind the mischief and treachery of Louis XVI. Her foreign

origin further fuelled the public anger and suspicion. She was the "German" behind the King. History was to prove later that it was the vacillation of Louis that was to be blamed. Marie, being a Princess to the core was what her royal upbringing made her to be. She was incapable of commoner's familiarity to become the "People's Queen". Her cultivated manner made her look aloof, cold and was thoroughly scorned by the French people. Marie carried her courtesy to the gallows where she is believed to have apologised to the hangman for stepping on his foot, saying "Beg your pardon, Monsieur." I wish she would have been as versed in the ways of the world and men as Lady Macbeth was. Shakespeare made her better focused, single-minded, down to earth and candid. One can have a glimpse of it by listening to the advice she offers to Macbeth, telling, "Your face, my thane, is as a

book where/men/May read strange matters. To beguile the time/Look like the time; bear welcome in your/eye/Your hand, your tongue; look like th'/innocent flower./But be the serpent undert." Marie Louis would have fared better in France with this worldly knowledge, had she been a Lady Macbeth.

The great helmsman Mao had a Lady Macbeth in her wife Jiang Qing of the 'gang of four'. Of all the infamous ladies, she comes close to being a Lady Macbeth. She was remorseless or incapable of any sense of guilt in wholly believing in the righteousness of driving on her husband in relentlessly hunting down his suspected adversaries. Her heart did not have any place for repentance or weakness of purpose. If I am to pick a real life Lady Macbeth for what she says to Macbeth, "My hands are of your colour;/but I shame/To wear a heart so white." I

would surely say, she is Mao's wife. In spite of her vicious nature, it would be preposterous to think Jiang Qing ruled Mao. The great helmsman had such prolific political instincts that gave him a clear perception of his purpose and his ways. A Maoesque plan was never in need of any support. Jiang Qing fervently believed in the purpose of her husband. She was the picture of solidity of resolve by the side of her husband ready to speak like Lady Macbeth, "Infirm of purpose/Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead/Are but as pictures."

Villainy in human beings, particularly in the great ones, is endemic. The survival instincts put them to diabolical acts. After all, only the strongest survive. This is the genesis of villainy. Even the good Macduff, the avenger of Duncan's murder admits "But I remember now/I am in this earthly world, where to do/harm/Is often laudable, to do good some-time/Accounted dangerous folly."

Should we not therefore relent on the Lady Macbeth created by Shakespeare, and those of flesh and blood, whenever there are any. For they suffer enough at the hands of self-inflicted wounds to exclaim, "Here's the smell of the blood/Still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not/sweeten this little hand." Lord, may They rest in peace.

event

From Bangladesh, with Courage

By Lyla Bavadam

"A PERSON is a human being first and last. I cannot understand or accept putting religion, especially religious fundamentalism, before this. People who do this are to be resisted. I believe that all writings are not meant to please. I will never be silent. I will fight these fundamentalist forces all my life," said a soft-spoken Taslima Nasreen, Bangladeshi writer, at a public meeting in central Mumbai on March 6. The Surendra Gavaskar Hall was packed beyond capacity. She elicited a warm and emotional response at the end of her speech that lasted just 10 minutes.

The function was organised by Akshar Prakashar in coordination with Communalism Combat and the Progressive Urdu Writers' Association, to release Marathi author Ashok Shahan's novel Phitam Phat which is a translation of Taslima Nasreen's book Shodh. The event was considered by the secular forces as an opportunity to come together to protest all manner of religious intolerance.

Welcoming Nasreen to Mumbai Nikhil Wagle, editor of the Marathi newspaper Mahanagar, said pointedly, "I hope your visit will strengthen

The Bangladeshi writer's visit was a triumph for the anti-fundamentalist groups in the city. Nasreen, who had been invited to come to the city a couple of weeks earlier, had to cancel her visit at the last minute owing to her mother's ill-health. This was interpreted by Muslim fundamentalist groups, who had threatened to burn her alive if she came to Mumbai, as their victory.

the secular spirit of the city." Wagle has been the victim of many attacks by the Shiv Sena and had been an outspoken critic of the earlier Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party government in Maharashtra.

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But for the anti-fundamentalist groups and for Nasreen herself it was merely a postponement. As Wagle said at the meeting: "The communalists said you did not come here because you were scared. This visit proves otherwise. No doubt we were anxious about this visit. Who would not be, consider-

ing the savage threats? Well-meaning people had even advised us to cancel your visit saying we should preserve peace and harmony and not aggravate feelings. I asked them what the purpose was in preserving a peace that was born out of fear. A peace should be born out of confidence. We welcome you again and again to our secular city."

Among the fundamentalist groups which objected to the visit were the Raza Academy, the All India Sunni Jamiatul Ulema, the Muslim Council and the Public Complaint Centre. In their letter to the Maharashtra Governor, signed by Raza Academy general secretary Mohammed Nori, the groups stated: "It seems Taslima Nasreen is being called as an experiment so that after her Salman Rushdie can also be called to India." They also asked the Governor to intervene and prevent Nasreen from entering Mumbai.

Chief Minister Vilasrao Desh-

mukh's reply as to why the Government had not taken action against those who had threatened Taslima Nasreen was this: "No one approached us for protection." Neither did he think the threats warranted suo motu action.

By the time Nasreen was in Mumbai, the Raza Academy and other fundamentalist groups had quietened down. The groups, however, sought to organise a protest march from their stronghold in the Bhandi Bazar area to the venue of the public meeting. About 40 to 70 people assembled at the Minara Masjid, but no procession was taken out. The police did not permit it, and took 45 people into preventive custody.

Additional Commissioner of Police (Security) Y.C. Pawar, who supervised Nasreen's security directly, refused to disclose the level of protection accorded her, but said:

"We took maximum precautions to

protect her." Informed sources told Frontline that the State government accorded Nasreen Category Z security. The lane leading to the venue of the meeting was cordoned off by the police hours before the programme. Traffic and pedestrians in the area were monitored and armed constables checked for any explosive devices. A large contingent of police personnel was on duty.

Nasreen's visit came in a context vitiated by fundamentalist positions on various issues. The controversy over the shooting of Deepa Mehta's film Water had found its echoes in Mumbai when local fundamentalist groups informally condemned Shabana Azmi tonsuring her head for the sake of her role in the film and called it an un-Islamic act. Referring to this in his welcome speech at Taslima Nasreen's public meeting, poet Javed Akhtar said:

"The fundamentalists try to tell us

what to write, which film is acceptable, what your daughter can wear to college. All fundamentalists have one goal, and that is to take away your civil liberties."

Another concern of the secular groups in recent times has been the attack on Asghar Ali Engineer, a reformist leader of the Bohra Muslim sect. Engineer has been excommunicated from his sect. After the latest attack on him on February 13, the State Government has provided him a police escort (Frontline, March 17).

The secular groups emphasise the fact that their fight is against fundamentalism of any kind regardless of the religion or group involved. As Javed Anand, editor of Communalism Combat said, "Lajja was written soon after the Bombay riots of 1992-93. At the time Sajjid Rashid, features editor of the Urdu Times, had said that if 'Hindu' was substituted for 'Muslim' in the book, then the story would be equally relevant and applicable in India." Anand added: "Our fight is not against religion but for justice. We support Nasreen because she fights for minorities in Bangladesh and because she has become a minority within a minority in her own country."

Courtesy of Frontline

essay

Magic Realism in Nasrin Jahan's Novels

By Subrata Kumar Das

Continued from earlier week
AFTER the true depiction of the impatience and frivolity of conjugal life in *Sonali Mukhosh* Nasrin writes *Kruskath Kanya* which is also the narration of the middle-class city life where after everything torment and agony only remain. Through the story of Nilufar and her environs and association Nasir portrays the stories in which one may get the semblance of the stories of *Urukku* and *Sonali Mukhosh*.

Last year Nasrin published *Ure Jai Nishipakshi* which is also very significant in relation to her use of magic realism. But it could be mentioned here that her allegorical and dream-like fairy element do not take place in *Ure Jai Nishipakshi* as it did in *Chandralekhar Jaadubistar*, *Ure Jai Nishipakshi* begins in the following way:

In the dead night the unknown birds cry in the bamboo-jungle, who's there who's there? The old woman replies, I'm here, I'm here.

The old woman tries to remove the darkness around lighting her hand-

If we examine all the novels of Nasrin Jahan we will observe that most of her novels are full of dreams, fairy story and myth elements. 'Element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable and arcane erudition' are also very available in most of her novels. *Ure Jai Nishipakshi* and *Sonali Mukhosh* can be cited as the prominent instances in this regard. We also notice the 'mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre' in the above two novels along with *Chandrer Prothom Kalaa* and *Chandralekhar Jaadubistar*.

made lamp in response to an unheard call. The more the night stretches, the more the outer world calls her. That wind consists of rushing sound of waves as its breath. The old woman seems beaten by insects in her bed.

With the rush of the dust, the old woman loses her senses.

In her clay-made house high tide wants to rush breaking the doors. The high tide of the haor does not fear the earth or the sky. The mountainous Banyan tree also shrieks. With the speed of the air, the cold blood flowing under the wrinkled skin of the aged woman receives new heat. She attains the infatuation of an insect that wants to kills itself jumping into fire. Her head gets obsessed. The poor lice under her rough hair burn in that fire. The

old woman gets so mad, particularly in the moonlit nights, that she cannot hold herself stand straight. While she tries to come out under her ragged quilt, it seem that she has fallen in the unfathomable water. From that ice-cold water when she tries to come out she again hears that undying call, who's there, who's there?

The old woman cries out I'm here, I'm here in such a voice that her throat has been choked up with water. (Translation)

With this description *Ure Jai Nishipakshi* opens where we get three old women full of unreality. Approaching through this supernatural episode in the next chapter we get Osman, a product of true reality but not bereft of unreality totally. Gradually we realize

that thirty years back Osman left this village when his parents were killed by enemies. We can also realize his re-appearance in that village after thirty years is impossible to be real in a true sense. Osman gets shelter after the boat wreck in the home of the influential Mannaf Khan of Nayanpur who killed Osman's parents with his associates and grasped their all wealth. After his entrance in that village the people there appear to Osman in a two-fold way — one from his memory, second from his present reality. Moreover there are the legendary stories of the power of the three old women, the eldest of whom saved Osman at his birth with her miraculous power, the episode of Chandrani and the episode Fazlu-Raisuddin — the fellow mates of

Osman's boyhood also take vivid description. Along with them there is the story of the lake of bell-metal, the story of the shore of birds. But we can not but agree that both *Chandralekhar Jaadubistar* and *Ure Jai Nishipakshi* are journeys through unreal worlds but *Ure Jai Nishipakshi* cannot expose the inner truths as we meet in *Chandralekhar Jaadubistar*.

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prominent instances in this regard. We also notice the 'mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre' in the above two novels along with *Chandrer Prothom Kalaa* and *Chandralekhar Jaadubistar*. But we must agree that only in the last two novels of Nasrin we meet the quality that is called 'convoluted and even labyrinthine narration and plot' among which *Chandrer Prothom Kalaa* is an experiment and *Chandralekhar Jaadubistar* is a success.

Nasrin Jahan has published two more novels in the recently finished *Ekushe Boi Mela*. These two novels are *Megher Sonali Chul* (The Golden Hair of the Cloud) and *Sargaloker Ghora* (The Horse of the Heaven).

Previously she bagged *Philips Literary Award* and *Aaul Sahitya Purashkar*. This year she has been awarded with *Bangla Academy Sahitya Purashkar* (The Highest Award by the Bangla Academy for literature).

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