

poetry

Hayat Saif — A Poet of Man and Earth

A Z M Haider

HAYAT Saif is indisputably one of the major poets of the sixties in Bangladesh, although readers, particularly the poetry lovers have little idea about the poet and his poetry. This is possibly because of the fact that soon after coming out of the university he joined the Finance Service of Pakistan. His association with the government service of Pakistan stood in the way of his writing poetry and publishing book of verses. He started writing poems from 1962, but kept them confined to exercise books except a few published in prestigious Journal "Purbamegh" edited by Zillur Rahman Siddique and "Shamakal", a Dhaka-based high-brow literary journal edited by Abu Zafar Sikandar. It was not until 1984 — over a decade after Bangladesh came into being — that his first book of verses entitled "Shantrasher Shathe Shahabash" (co-existence with terrorism) was published. This partly explains why his inactive works are far less than those of other bards of his generation.

His second collection of verses "Shab Phelay Diya" (leaving behind all) and the third one entitled "Mati O Manush (man and earth) were published in 1984 and 1989 respectively.

Hayat Saif, now in his late fifties, has retired from the government service. He has, therefore, plenty of time and is free from all encumbrances to devote himself to poetry.

As has been stated in previous paragraphs, Hayat Saif is the product of sixties — a decade of violent, unrest and tension. Nationally, the move-

ment against Ayub's military dictatorship as manifested through students agitation against Hamoodur Rahman Commission's Report on education, culminated in the struggle for restoration of democracy and finally in the War of Liberation in 1971. Internationally, the decade marked the beginning of cold war between Soviet socialism and Western democracy and its laissez-faire doctrine. One young poet of the sixties like their contemporaries of other countries, fired by youthful idealism, looked towards socialism of the Soviet Union as one holding key to their national emancipation.

A young blood in poetry at that time, Saif lacked iconoclastic spirit of some of his contemporaries. An ardent student of English literature, he knows how to chaste his emotion, although one may notice streaks of rage and spirit of revolt against forces, natural and unnatural trying to undermine human spirit.

In his first anthology of poems, Saif dwells on destiny which compels man to co-exist with violence and terrorism. While referring to terrorism, he did not mean only rowdyism and violence currently afflicting our society.

He has at the back of his mind also elemental fury of nature as manifested in the shape of tidal surges, floods and cyclonic storms etc. as well as devastating wars unleashed by man to turn human civilisation into ruins and rubble.

Although Saif has delineated a gloomy picture of life, as it exists today, in this anthology as well as in his other works, he is by no means a cynic who merely rests content with projection of dark and evil forces afflicting life with agony and excruciating pang. He is not a pessimist who remains bogged down to despair. On the contrary, he believes light of hope and love will help dispel dark shadows overtaking life for a temporary period and bring

spring breeze to fill in life with sweet fragrance.

the other

They for the time being do not find watershed there

They cannot look forward to a peaceful deep lagoon of calm sleep

There is no love left for them. And yet

the love of some men lives for ever

Therefore, now finally shedding every bondage

If not all at least a few of us shall march along

the lighted path of ultimate freedom

and disappear in the distance.

(translated by the poet himself)

The poet denounces relentless strides of man towards material advancement without making any attempt at spiritual edification. The material progress may give luxury and comfort. But it is unable to elevate his soul. The soulless material advancement cannot bring for man bliss and happiness.

In his other two anthologies, the poet gives vent to man's unsatisfied longing for love which he seeks from fellow human beings. But unfortunately the poet fails to achieve it from man because his fellow travellers in

the Sahara of life to not reciprocate love to him. Having failed to receive it from men, he turns to the animal world the earth and to water bodies for love. He receives it from them in abundance. The animal world is above all jealousies and narrowness. The animals receive man with open arms and give him plenty of love and loyalty.

Hayat Saif's concept for love is very different from those of his contemporaries. As a matter of fact, his concept of love is very different from those of the poets of his generation. While love of his precursors and contemporaries emanates from erotic passion, Saif's love stamping from the desire of flesh, finally assumes an abstract form. The following lines of his exquisite poem "in the love" explain what the poet means by love.

The one I love
She does not present herself
Through self-surrender.
In fact she never surrenders herself
and does not shed like falling leaves
As a tired leaf, all of a sudden,
falls in exhaustion
As rains falls down under
attraction of the earth.

As it seeks to unite with the earth
The one I love
Doles herself out like
an invincible conqueror
She submits herself through deliverance

(translated by A Z M Haider)

Hayat Saif is a distinctively modern poet. He is greatly influenced by post-Tagorian poets of the thirties like Shudhindranath Datta and Bisnu Dey, in particular. In choice of diction and style of presentation, he is clearly influenced by the poets stated above. Like Shudhindranath Datta, he is essentially a poet who is cerebral rather than emotional, although his poems are not entirely bereft of emotion. The few lines quoted below from his poem entitled "the Sleeping Lady" show how the poet restrains his emotion. But nonetheless the lines touch the cord of emotion of readers.

My mother now sleeps under
the cold soil of Hatem Khan
From Talaimari till Premtoli
Bosepara to Seroli
I hear now live a million
But I never see my mother anymore
Now she is in my mind, in my
memory
She lives as a unique image that I
have created
just like this enclave
created from Borendra
is an idea given birth from the long
memory
Of our history
(Translated by Abed Chawdhury)

essay

In The Jungle

by Iftekhar Sayeed

The Nation of Islam owed some of its black nationalist ideas to Marcus Garvey. Also known as the Black Muslim movement, it had been founded in Detroit in 1930 and later taken over by Elijah Poole, who moved the organization's base to Chicago and began calling himself the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Under his authoritarian leadership, the Black Muslims added notions of black supremacy to the traditional beliefs of Sunni Islam. Followers were instructed to refuse alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, and pork. They were forbidden to kill unless ordered to by Allah; as a result, during World War II, some Black Muslims were imprisoned for refusing to serve in the armed forces. (Elijah Muhammad himself spent three and a half years in federal prison for draft evasion.) Many observers would later trace the real growth of Islam to 1946 or 1947, after his release from confinement.

SLAVERY is the constant *leitmotif* of Western civilisation. In my previous essay 'Early Democracy and Slavery in Homer' (*The Daily Star*, 27 May) I had observed "Indeed, if, with Saul Kripke, we maintain that origin is essence, then the origins of western civilisation reveal its essence to be a simultaneous freedom, and absence, of choice, for Us and Them respectively."

Today, the descendants of the African slaves constitute 14% of the population of the United States — and over 70% of the prison population. In the land of the free, it appears that some are less free than most. During external crises, naturally, these black people were suspected of disloyalty. I have argued elsewhere that a slave can have no loyalty, and certainly not for the state which is an instrument for his oppression. In the Second World War, blacks were suspected of plotting against the nation.

One person who didn't want to join the United States war machine against the Japanese and Germans was an angry, light-skinned Negro teen-ager named Malcolm Little. When called for his Army induction physical, he convinced the psychiatrist he was a potential security risk and was classified 4-F.

Arrested for a string of burglaries in Boston, Little was sentenced, in February 1946, to a term of ten years in prison as a first-time felony offender. He was only twenty years old and had not started shaving.

Young Little was sent across the Charles River to the 140-year-old Charlestown State Prison, in a town that had been founded by black slaves named Bacchus, Cato, and Jupiter. Not much had changed there since. His ancient cell lacked running water. A covered pail served as his toilet. As No. 22843, he was just another Negro convict. His fellow prisoners called him "Satan" for his anti-religious attitude. He worked in the license plate shop. Whenever he could, he got high on nutmeg and reefer sold to him by corrupt guards.

Little might have turned into a ca-

reer convict, except that a few months into his sentence he came under the influence of a veteran inmate named "Bimbi", who told him stories about Thoreau and encouraged him to use the prison library.

Following his transfer to Concord prison, he received a letter from his brother Philbert, who described his recent conversion to a new religion known as the Nation of Islam, a new movement that was attracting growing attention in the black quarters of some American cities. Another brother, Reginald, urged him to quit cigarettes and pork, saying rather mysteriously that it would help him get out of prison.

The Nation of Islam owed some of its black nationalist ideas to Marcus Garvey. Also known as the Black Muslim movement, it had been founded in Detroit in 1930 and later taken over by Elijah Poole, who moved the organization's base to Chicago and began calling himself the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

In response to the first lawsuits brought by Black Muslim prisoners, some courts ruled that the convicts were not exercising religious rights that were protected by the First Amendment. Black Muslim prisoners were considered so threatening not only because they claimed to hate the "white devil" but also because they were self-disciplined and well-organized, had links to the outside, and knew how to use the courts to get their way. These inmates presented themselves as righteous and incorruptible, making them still more difficult to control, and they advocated rehabilitation and prison reform. In fact, the Black Muslims had taken men who were failures and outcasts, thieves and criminals, men who were in prison, and reformed them, made them proud and upright in their dealings with others. Elijah Muhammad had taught them to renounce narcotics and other vices and stop their criminal ways. He had made some of them into law-abiding, clean-cut, clear-thinking men.

Malcom X continued to identify with black convicts, and he frequently used prison metaphors in his political

rhetoric. "Don't be shocked when I say that I was in prison," he liked to tell his urban audiences. "You're still in prison. That's what America means: prison." In comments to reporters he characterized President Kennedy as a "warden," former Vice president Nixon as a "deputy warden," and called New York City's mayor, Robert Wagner, a "screw."

Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm eventually had a falling out that escalated into an open break. On February 21, prisoners throughout the United States learned that Malcolm X had been assassinated at a rally in Harlem. (The murder was apparently the act of a team of Muslims loyal to Elijah Muhammad.)

Elridge Cleaver, who was then serving time in Folsom, attributed Malcolm's death to his rift with Elijah Muhammad, which had become irreconcilable after Malcolm had travelled to Mecca and come back renouncing doctrines of hate and racial supremacy. Blaming the elder leader for Malcolm's murder, Cleaver took down Elijah Muhammad's framed picture from his cell wall, destroyed it, and replaced it with a photograph of Malcolm that he had clippings from the *Saturday Evening Post*. Cleaver later recalled:

Malcolm X had a special meaning for black convicts. A former prisoner himself, he had risen from the lowest depths to great heights. For this reason he was a symbol of hope, a model for thousands of black convicts who found themselves trapped in the vicious PPP cycle: prison-parole-prison.

... One thing that the judges, policemen, and administrators of prisons seem never to have understood, and for which they certainly do not make any allowances, is that Negro convicts, basically, rather than see themselves as criminals and perpetrators of misdeeds, look upon themselves as prisoners of war, the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social system that is so heinous as to cancel out their own malefactions: in the jungle there is no right or wrong."

poem

Parisian Poem of Shamsur Rahman

Translated by Andalib Rashdie

Shamsur Rahman spent the month of May 2000 in Paris. Michael Madhusudan had his heart for France. Paris ignited flames in James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, D H Lawrence, Anais Nin, Lawrence Durrell, Henry Miller, Samuel Becket, Hart Crane, E E Cummings, and countless others in the first half of twentieth century. Shamsur Rahman on his May visit navigated through the stream of Parisian masses and listened to the ripples of the Sean. He was looking for Charles Pierre Baudelaire, Jean Paul Sartre, Louis Aragon, Paul Alluard, and again countless other from the French galaxy, but there surfaced over all faces known and unknown busts of Chandidas, Madhusudan, Rabindranath, Nazrul and Jibana Das. Poems he wrote during his brief stay in Paris evidence that he was only longing for a tiny piece of Bangladesh — Andalib Rashdie



Alone in a sanitarium

My flight is often with floating clouds.
Of course I do not fly all the time, but very often I have to.
Sometimes I become absorbed in the fragrance of green leaves
all I look into the depth of rivers in search of the depth of something else
and I touch a desolate shoal.
What an addiction is there in catching feathers of dead cranes!
It is difficult to conceive well ahead when illness crawls up
and inherent flames tend to die out.
Something comes floating in the biting cold wind,
the structure of existence misses directions,
nobody is there, no real hands of care to nurse,
I am hanging on the vast expanses of emptiness and
the eternity whispers all around.
What an indistinct sound of footsteps is there.
I can hear some intimate and feeble voices of unseen men and women
in the overused bed of patients.
The ward is silent at three o'clock after the midnight.
I am lying cool like an unidentified corpse,
being deprived of sleep and deprived of hands,
soft and caring to rub on my forehead.
The curtain of blind darkness encircles me
I don't know what kind of dawn will greet me next
or shall I ever have the kisses of the sun.
Poisonous thorns sprout out of my body in darkness
I wish I screamed to the top of my voice
and pound the silence down like broken glasses, but
I lie down calm and quiet thinking of the existence of other patients.
What is my ailment? What is the virus acting in my blood?
Will any of you tell me now
What is there is the chill of such lonesome night, and in this blind silence.
Only pain is escalating
What kind of sanitarium is it?