

books

The Art of Remembering

by M. Mukundan

The Village Before Time by V.K. Madhavan Kutty; translated from Malayalam by Gita Krishnankutty; India Ink, New Delhi; 180 pages, Rs.250.

I HAVE just finished reading V.K. Madhavan Kutty's *The Village Before Time*. But I think it would be wrong to say that I have read this book. I was rather remembering the book. For, above all it is a book of remembrance. While flicking through *The Village Before Time* I learnt that remembering is a synonym for reading. In the fictional work of the modern time, we find that memory plays a great role, very often a role that is greater than that of the hero or heroine. Memory is the new fictional hero.

In the opening pages, the author says: "Not all the events in this book happened exactly as I have described here. Nor are they entirely creations of my imagination." What makes the book interesting is that it is neither a book of fiction nor a book of facts. Its place is somewhere between imagination and reality. The author recounts events he has witnessed, talks about people he has grown up with and, of course, about himself, and yet it is no autobiography. *The Village Before Time* is a biography of memory. Past a few pages, you are convinced that V. K. Madhavan Kutty, a veteran journalist, is a master in the art of remembering.

A book has a body like all of us. It has a physiology. In witness to its biological denouement, I have had the rare opportunity and privilege to go through *The Village Before Time* as early as at its formative stages. I had seen how the author conceived the book, let it grow organs, and in the final act how he delivered it. I had witnessed all these phases. If I walk along Amrita Shergill Marg from my office at Aurangzeb Road for about ten minutes, I can reach Madhavan Kutty's flat at Rabindra Nagar. There I had spent many lunch-break hours watching the book grow up. Before he brought himself to write the book, Madhavan Kutty had told me about the idea. And then one day in his study, stonewalled by countless tomes authored by Mahatma Gandhi to Mikhail Gorbachev and the poet Kumaran Asan to the novelist Uroob, he fished out a sheath of papers dotted with hurriedly written and disjointed texts in Malayalam. That was the foetus of *The Village Before Time*. In its original version, it had another title - A Feast of Memories.

When the book was complete. I went through it again. It is exciting to see how an author, working on his book, puts in order scattered thoughts, broken images, blurred dreams, splintered history. The most interesting phase in the creation of a book is this act of putting together shards and splinters. Writing is a kind of weaving, a dexterous work akin to that of a spider weaving its transparent and sticky web.

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Admittedly, for these reasons, I was always a little anxious to see how Madhavan Kutty has succeeded in this art of producing a text. He is a super journalist who has for over 40 years brought the news and news analyses to the masses through his reports and columns in newspapers and periodicals. That is fine. But has he ever written a book of fiction? Then how can he write about his village Paruthipully in Palakkad?

Paruthipully is no ordinary village. Well before the advent of feminism, woman had ruled the Tharavad there thanks to the now extinct matrilineal system prevalent only there. Women controlled the economy of the family and therefore controlled the economy of the village as well, while their men whiled away their time loitering in the temple premises or watching Kathakali. Above all, Palakkad is known for communist exuberance and poetic violence. The legendary E.M.S. Namboodiripad hails from this region. Great poets and novelists such as Idessery and Uroob lived and died on the banks of the Nila river that runs through Palakkad. Age-old customs and rites, fertile poetry and communism co-exist in Palakkad. Only a wordsmith with a profound imagination and sense of history is therefore expected to venture upon writing about Palakkad.

The unassuming Madhavan Kutty with his disarming modesty will not claim to be an author of this genre. But he is an imaginative wordsmith. He has a profound sense of history. When you finish reading *The Village Before Time*, you know it for sure.

My problem with the book is that, since I have already read its original Malayalam version, I cannot read it in a single language now. While reading the English translation, I was simultaneously reading its original Malayalam version as well. For each phrase in English, there was behind it its hidden original Malayalam phrase.

Reading a literary work in its original and reading its translation is an entirely different exercise. In the original text, each word has its extensions in its cultural references which in turn give the word connotations and resonances. In the translation, this is totally absent. There is nothing more

lonely than a translated word.

The ability to write a book in simple language and in a candid style is a feat in itself elsewhere, but not in Kerala. Whatever subject you are delving into, however simple it is, when you start writing you should intentionally make the narrative complex and intriguing. It should sound cerebral. If you fail in your effort to transform the simple into the complex, you are no good writer. You are not entitled to any literary award. Critics will look down upon you and your book with contempt.

It is in such a scenario that Madhavan Kutty wrote this book in Malayalam with utmost simplicity. Each word is crystal clear. He is not bent on intellectual pretensions.

In Madhavan Kutty's place, any other writer might have made an attempt to turn Paruthipully into a Marquessian terrain. For, Palakkad with its serpent shrines, its palm trees perpetually caught in wind, its sensuous women capable of seducing men and gods alike, is no less magical than Macao. But Madhavan Kutty is not a writer in this mould. Instead of turning the real into the magical, he turns the magical into the real. Here, the magical Paruthipully is laid bare to its naked bones.

There is no story line running through *The Village Before Time*. Just a host of characters and vignettes. But even a vignette speaks volumes. For instance, in the first chapter the author recounts the arrival of Abraham, the village postman. Abraham, a Christian, gently entered the village that had been rendered impregnable by Nairs and their caste customs and rituals, settled down there, bought a piece of land, planted tapioca, married, brought other family members. Very soon Christians and their rubber trees began to multiply. They formed the Kerala Congress and wielded power. For the author a few words suffice to paint a vivid picture of the great migrations of the Christians from southern Kerala to the virgin forests and villages of Malabar where they began an economic revolution with rubber and tapioca - above all with their hard work.

As the brief history of Abraham's life and death is a pointer to the untold greater stories of Christian im-

migrants in Malabar, an anecdote or an over-simplified narrative here and there could reveal a deep insight into the Malayalee's mind-frame. We, Malayalees are born rebels. We are bent on questioning everything. Fifty years ago, when plans were afoot to bring electricity to the author's village, all sections of the population irrespective of their caste and creed protested against it in unison. Recently Malayalees protested vehemently against the proposed construction of an expressway in Kerala. Even a child knows that a large expressway connecting the entire width and breadth of the State would accelerate its overall development. And yet Malayalees tried to sabotage the project. Although half a century has gone by, Malayalees remain the same.

Most of the events narrated in the novel took place nearly half a century ago. Even then, we very often feel that some of the characters live in the present, with us, in tune with our time. Subhadra is such a person. There are many other young ladies in the book, but she is the one I would like to fall in love with, if ever I have to, and this has nothing to do with her elemental beauty. She belongs to an extremely conservative family. One day she simply runs away with a low-caste young man. But this is not a romantic escapade. She is not in love with him. She takes him to a hotel room in the city, sleeps with him and quietly returns home when found out. Remember, this happened before Simone de Beauvoir wrote her *Second Sex* and Wilson Gordon his *Third Sex*.

There are all sorts of people living in the author's tiny village - casteist Hindus, Christian immigrants, Congressmen, musicians, courtesans, homeopaths, poets, Kathakali artists. There are low-caste Hindus who pollute, but who, in the time of elections, realise that their votes are not polluted. There are cart-drawing bullocks and snakes that strike in the pupils of your eyes. There is sex and romance. There is freedom struggle. All this is recounted in a very austere manner.

Madhavan Kutty has revived innumerable memories of rural India - never mind where - in his book. I was simply immersed in the memories. For anyone so completely lost in the book, I am not sure it is possible to

analyse it, to describe it or appraise it critically.

Several stories, repeated almost everywhere, haunted me. Ravana was actually slain by Rama coming from the temple in Tiruvilvamala.... The same thing happened in another village in my area where Narasimha's play was enacted in front of the Narasimha temple and lo and behold! the Lord came out and, having possessed the actor who played Narasimha's part, slit Hiranyakashya-pu's belly with his knife-like claws and killed him on the spot.

Ever since that day the play has never been enacted in front of the temple, so as not to provoke the Lord even in the name of a play. They say the actor who did the killing as a histrionic feat, cried and cried for his friend and colleague for days to get her. He just didn't know what he was doing when he did it. It is not known if the law of the time ever touched him. Obviously, those were pre-IPC times. Those were also times when you couldn't take any liberties with God even in thoughts if they were blasphemous - leave alone actions. How could you challenge Narasimha in front of his own holy abode?

Then we have a person who became a guard in the Railways and whether he guarded the train or not, improvised rhymes and sang them to the rhythm of the chugging train. What layakari he must have mastered, indeed! Impeccable, no doubt. He used the train as a running drum, with all the six laya kalas in drummetry. For such a perfect accompaniment he made no payment to the Railways. It was all free, unlike these days.

The advent of the novel, perhaps of the first generation, is as common as it is interesting. Premaprahvam - even the title must have been considered scandalous! Fiction of this kind was frowned upon as vigorously as it was enjoyed - secretly of course. The novel was subconsciously taken as the author's own story. Madhavan Kutty doesn't quite tell us how Sankaran Nair's wife reacted to his Leela, but it could perhaps be gleaned from the fact that he gave up writing after marriage. When recently it came to political fiction, my own book *The Insider* evoked a detailed Who's Who in Andhra

Pradesh, without many readers caring to examine what I really wanted to convey. When we began reading novels where boys met girls just like that, while we had no such luck, we either imagined ourselves as the characters or envied them. It never occurred to us that fiction was not the same as fact.

Madhavan Kutty inevitably takes us to the changing times. The feudal set-up in which the Thampuran has the full right to get the loveliest girl in the locality and wed her - only to die in a year leaving her absolutely untouched. It is amazing how human beings could become collector's items in an acquisitive society.

The narrative has a familiar ring all through, but for names and some local colour. My fascination as I read on consisted mainly in the recollection of parallel experiences. Everything was familiar, no matter where it happened in India. In its own way, the book brings out unintended evidence of India's unity - in several cases, including unity in absurdity.

Madhavan Kutty is a simple and straight story-teller. That's why perhaps he is effective. But he also hits upon unexpected innuendoes. Look at the following paragraph, for instance:

"The petromax was lit whenever Kunhiraman Nair visited her. Its light spilled on to the road. All the children in the neighbourhood would come and gaze at it. Moths would fly up and give their lives up to it. Some of the villagers were comforted by the thought that the moths in the village would now crowd around the petromax and leave them alone."

The book abounds in such simple sallies.

And finally, the rules that someone else would tell a land-holder how much to sow, what crops to produce, how to report his stocks of grain - the worst nonsense a land-holder couldn't even imagine, ever. Then what you produce is given to you on ration cards. That was the worst affront to a farmer. The unforgettable experience of the Second World War time. These passages reminded me of my father who was irritated no end at these requirements of the Defence of Hyderabad Rules. He was fortunate to die before he suffered further from their tyranny.

In one word, Madhavan Kutty has written the story of a generation - in fact three generations. The bitter-sweet story of rural India. Many characters come in the book; they are flesh and blood and very much visible, albeit for varying durations. But there is one - just ONE entirely invisible but persistently palpable character throughout the story: GOD. They say He will vanish in the 21st century, but there seem no signs of that happening - at least so far.

On the whole, a simple and not-so-simple narrative by one who is himself at the tail-end of it.

— Courtesy of Frontline

lecture

Khushwant in Karachi

Khushwant Singh went from Delhi to Karachi in late March to address a seminar on "Peace, Goodwill and Fellowship", organised by Rotary International.

“**A**SSALAMULAIKUM ! This is a ritual greeting between Mussalmans, and I think it is a very important greeting between the people of India and Pakistan. You will agree that at no time in the 52 years that the two nations have been independent, have we been closer to war as today. We have fought three wars and are preparing for a fourth, which I have not the slightest doubt will be the final one because there will be nothing left of either you or us.

On that low note, let me start by saying that I represent no one. I am a half-writer of some books, but my roots are in this soil and I have great ambition to somehow prevent the spread of hatred between our two countries. I am also a manufacturer of jokes; in fact, the main factory of jokes against my own community, the Sardarji jokes.

Speaking about the impressions my countrymen have about Pakistan, there is one point that is always harped upon—our common past and heritage, that we speak the same language, we are the same race, our style of living is the same, we wear the same dresses, our mindsets are the

same, we eat the same kind of food. You are almost entirely Muslim, we are predominantly Hindu. But our Muslim minority of 14 percent, perhaps in numbers, equals the entire population of Pakistan itself. We have a lot in common.

Despite all this, something does not allow us to become close to each other. Today we have in common many negative aspects, which are more important to talk about than the heritage we share. Our two countries are the most corrupt, poorest, the most violent, and the most ignorant. Some international organisations report that both of us share the distinction of being amongst the top 10 in corruption and violence, civic violence. I am mighty pleased to see that in corruption you were ahead of us by two cases. But somehow I do not believe this because for every case of corruption in Pakistan, I can match that with eight cases in India.

I read about your ministers and other people being put in jail, and having large estates in England and large accounts in Swiss banks. But that is chicken-feed compared to what our politicians have done to our country. We have had one prime

minister, described as Mr. Clean, and he made a neat 65 crore rupees on one deal. We had another prime minister who had to bribe only four members of Parliament out of the 540 to rule the country for five years. I can name at least two dozen chief ministers who have really done 'well' for themselves.

We have had a lady chief minister who blew up exactly 100 crore rupees at the wedding of her foster son, and she wore a belt on her sari, studded with diamonds and jewels, worth more than a crore. She still is holding her head high, she's still described as the amma of her state, and is a formidable force not only in her own state but also in the rest of the country.

We have the case of the Bihar chief minister who has been charged with an enormous sum of bribery. But not only did he win his way back into power, he also put his illiterate wife in the chair as chief minister. I do not think you can match this kind of thing.

We have in our Parliament and state assemblies, many who have been elected while they were still in jail, and who have come back to be sworn

in as ministers. All this is a marvel. We have had one of the ablest and honest of men, Dr. Manmohan Singh, losing in the last election. While a lady called Phoolan Devi, once convicted of the murder of 22 men at one go, won.

The question to really ask ourselves amidst this abysmal state of affairs is, what has happened to us? In both our countries, we have a leadership pool of high intelligence (the worthy minister who spoke before me gave a very lucid and, if I may say, brilliant defence of the indefensible), and yet how has it happened that we are the poorest and the most illiterate people in this world?

I think the answer is very simple—we brought it on our own heads. Our successive governments, instead of going in for building more roads, railways, schools, hospitals and whatever the countries needed, have been buying arms, manufacturing guns, fighter aircraft and submarines, all that we cannot afford. If you spend all the money in weapons of destruction, how can you expect to provide the people sustenance of any kind?

Kashmir as real estate

We are being told that the problem is Kashmir. I agree. But I think it has become an excuse for both of us. I have my own solution which would

not be acceptable to either India or Pakistan, but I have put it across with as much candour as I can. We have treated Kashmir as real estate, a property to be divided between India and Pakistan. Kashmir is not a problem of real estate, it is a problem of people, and they are neither Indian nor Pakistani. They are Kashmiri. And in our discussions, neither of us have talked to the Kashmiris about what they want.

You accuse us of not holding the plebiscite that we undertook to do before the UN. You are right, we did not follow the undertaking, what is more, we are not going to have a plebiscite for a simple reason. It is really clear that if the people of Kashmir are given the option of choosing either India or Pakistan, they will opt for Pakistan, for the Muslims are in majority there. If given a third choice without India or Pakistan, but as a state of their own, I have not the slightest doubt that they will opt for the third.

Now, the complication is that the Kashmiris are not one people. They are four different ethnic and linguistic groups of which one lot is with you, and they have no choice but to stay with you. Another lot is Buddhist, predominantly in Ladakh, and they will not come to you, Jammu again is slightly doubtful because

apart from the one district of Dodha, it is Hindu. There is no question of them ever wanting to come to Pakistan. The crux of the problem is the Valley of Kashmir, which is over 90 percent Muslim. And without doubt, on these people's decision about their future depend the future of India-Pakistan relations.

My suggestion has been repeated many times—that if our countries behave like civilised countries, you would accept this possibility: give the Muslims of Kashmir the right to decide their own future. Unfortunately, it is too small an area to be an independent state. It is only 70 miles long and 30 miles broad; it cannot be viable as a separate state. Its only possible existence as a fully autonomous state depends on the support by India and Pakistan. And do not think it is such a big problem, that we cannot get together and say we will give the Kashmiris total independence of you or us. They will allow anyone they want in the state, if they don't want an Indian to come in, they will not give him permission, and if they do not want a Pakistani, they will do the same. This is the quote I use to support this point of view:

"Jo bhi aye, meri ijazat hai aye, yeh koi jannat nahin hai, mera Continued on page 7