PEOPLE & PLACES

Fish out of 'another' water - I

A Rabindrapremi in the hills of Bundelkhand

LUBNA MARIUM

'Excuse me, Indians, but we Bangladeshis speak Bangla.'

-Geetanjali LXIII

I am uneasy at heart when I have to leave my accustomed shelter. I forget that there abides the old in the new, and that there also thou abidest.

- Rabindranath Tagore

In this picturesque campus of Harisingh Gour Visvavidyalaya set on a hill-top, overlooking a lake, I arouse a lot of curiosity. Almost the first question I'm asked is, 'Why Saugor?' I wanted to study the 'Natyasastra', but away from the fumes of a polluted city, however someplace near books, not too large, not too small. Saugor fitted all my requirements, notwithstanding the fact that I fell in love with the peace and quiet of the HSGVV campus with its well-stocked and well-maintained library. To go on, inevitably it is assumed by one and all that my mother tongue is Urdu. 'Bangla? Are you a Hindu?' 'No, but all Bangladeshis speak Bangla. No one even knows Urdu.' I inform them that Urdu is, in fact, one of the state languages of India. That also evokes a lot of surprise among the young students.

I was nearly stumped while still at 'Go'. How did I want to describe myself?

I was born a Pakistani, in the plateaus of the North West Frontier Province, to parents who had bid, during the partitions, a heart-rendering adieu to their childhood playgrounds in the cosmopolitan city of Calcutta to build life anew in the Deltaic plains of East Bengal. My childhood I spent in the young city of Dhaka, imbibing from my parents their immense passion for Truth and Beauty. Music and Rabindranath were always a part of our lives. Adolescence is stark memories ablaze with our fiery uprising to build a dream that was called 'Sonar Bangla'. Then came our encounters with harsh reality and the arduous task of building our lives and our nation. Today, I sit in this faraway land set in the hills of Bundelkhand, among people who speak in a slightly unfamiliar but lilting, musical tongue and who look askance at my preference for chawal, day in and day out, to their staple of roti. To their slightly bewildered questions, I answer, 'I'm here on a quest, looking for answers'. They look on fondly whenever I sing out aloud to myself, as and when my heart desires, 'Madamko rabindrasangeet bawhot hi sohani lagat hai, Rabindrapremi hai'. So, they listen to my Rabindrasangeets and I am thrilled with the deliciously rhythmic Bundeli geets that they themselves so love. That then is what I am to them and they to me. A Rabindrapremi among the music loving Bundelis.

In this picturesque campus of Harisingh Gour Visvavidyalaya set on a hill-top, overlooking a lake, I arouse a lot of curiosity. Almost the first question I'm asked is, 'Why Saugor?' I wanted to study the 'Natyasastra', but away from the fumes of a polluted city, however someplace near books, not too large, not too small. Saugor fitted all my requirements, notwithstanding the fact that I fell in love with the peace and quiet of the HSGVV campus with its well-stocked and well-maintained library. To go on, inevitably it is assumed by one and all that my mother tongue is Urdu. 'Bangla? Are you a Hindu?' 'No, but all Bangladeshis speak Bangla. No one even knows Urdu.' I inform them that Urdu is, in fact, one of the state languages of India. That also evokes a lot of surprise among the young students. Of course they have all heard of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Taslima Nasreen, but then onwards the picture is just a bit hazy. I show them pictures of my daughter's wedding. They see the lal bindi, the chandan decorations on her forehead, her mehendi dyed hands and the lal ghooghat and say, 'Arre, sajavat to ikdam hamare jaisehi hai'.

I enjoy telling my new friends, all about our land of rivers. In this gravely drought stricken land, they smile in sympathy whenever my eyes turn all wistful while I try to describe the wide, wide rivers that you encounter every few miles in Bangladesh. 'Yes, it's the truth, we have great big ferry-boats which carry a dozen trucks at a time, to and fro, across the rivers'. Here they know all about the Bengali's penchant for 'machli', however Munna Bhaiya refuses to even entertain such profane thoughts amidst his strictly vegetarian kitchen.

I too have a lot to write home about. Descriptions of the enchanting 'Ramlilas' which provided such colorful entertainment on the streets of Saugor during Deepavali, brightened my letters. Dhakaites love to eat 'pani-puri', which we call 'phuchka'; but this 'chat mixture' that's the favorite fast-food in the streets of Saugor, that they are not familiar with.

So, what else do I want to tell you about Bangladesh?

These last few decades my heart would actually shrink every time the papers reported on the growing aggression of Muslim jehadis. I could never correlate this brand of Islam with what I see being practiced in all our private and public spheres of life. The family in general will say their namaz; attend the Friday jamaat or congregation at the Masjid, organize milad-mahfils for religious occasions; I myself have always enjoyed keeping the one-month 'roza' or fast this little bit of austerity cannot but serve a worthy purpose. Yet, this is so very far removed from pictures of gun-wielding jehadis that, the word itself seemed alien. Then, a friend lent me Richard Eaton's 'Rise of Islam in the Frontiers of Bengal'. It seems, Islam in the Deltaic regions of Bengal was spread not through the cónquering armies but by the mystic Sufi saints who had dared to make homes for themselves in the jungles of the Sunderban. A gentler Islam. I understood myself a bit better. Ours is a land which gave birth to Lalon who sang-

'Shawb loke kawye Lalon ki jat shawngshare......'

'Everyone asks what birth-group (jat) has Lalan in this worldly life.

Fakir Lalon says, what form has jat? I have never seen it with my eyes....'

These mystic minstrels of Bengal will still begin there songs with a 'vandana' to 'Allah, Rasul and Saraswati' all in one breath.

In spite of recent concerns of extraneous threats of religious activism and militancy, I believe, Bangladesh's most remarkable achievement has been our successful, non-political, popular movement against religion in politics. This has been most effective in marginalizing religious fundamentalists in electoral politics. Of course, we have our share of 'fatwabaazes' but they are emphatically a minority. Taslima Nasreen is a much admired writer in Bangladesh and has evoked a great deal of spontaneous support for herself, against the insignificant group which has announced a 'fatwa' on her. However hers has been an individual's fight for Feminist Rights and she has never been a part of the grass-roots women's movement which has played a very significant role in Bangladesh. As a result of this movement, in our last public polls we had a large turnout of women voters, which played a major role in delineating the results of the polls. Micro-credit, immunization and contraception have gained popularity through the coordinated efforts of the NGO, the public and the private sector. This same cooperation helped us to competently manage our last 1998 floods. Of course, we've had more experience with calamities.

Yet, let me not flinch, though, in admitting that we have a long, long way to go yet. Illegal migrations, cross-border smuggling? The porous border with our neighbors, specially India, which by the way works both ways, is a reality. But then, we'll discuss regional cooperation another day. Time we have plenty - to get to know each other, to learn from each other, to build bridges.

Lubna Marium, ICCR Scholar from Bangladesh, Saugor, Madhya Pradesh-February 18, 2001

HISTORY

What happened to poets in January?

ANDALIB RASHDIE

IT was an ominous beginning. On the very first day of January 1782 the business prospect of a poet was just ruined. Poets seldom had success in love and business. Robert Burns was celebrating the New Years Day and there was a drinking spree all around. The poet was at the carousal when his shop caught fire and burnt almost into ashes. Fire engulfed his fortune and eclipsed his prospect of rising up through business. Thus Robert burnt.

William Wycherly, a poet and playwright, not so money-wise borrowed heavily and as it happened in case of many poets, artists and philosopher, he also failed to repay the money in time and started his term in prison. Locked in Fleet Prison he was lucky to have King James II come forward and pay his debts and fines bring him out of the lockers. After this royal magnanimity to a poet he was overwhelmed. But he did survive long. Death chose him on the New Years Day in 1716.

January born poet Susan Coolidge composed 'Everyday is a fresh beginning' and it was well taken by a hospice that arranged reading out of the poem to the patients in the death queue. The day one dies begins life in death afresh.

January 2: On the second day of January in 17 AD the great Roman poet Ovid died in banishment. After a long suffering for the progressive cancer Christina Rossetti died and was buried at Highgate Cemetery on 2 January 1895.

January 4: T S Eliot died on the 4th day of January 1965. He did not die in the cruelest month of April.

January 7: American poet John Berryman, known to be a rebel and alcoholic jumped off the bridge over the river Mississippi and committed suicide in 1972. His father also an alcoholic but not a rebel with his genius chose a gunshot for committing suicide. John Berryman was cross with God who wrecked his generation.

January 8: Paul Valarine enjoyed an immoral and stormy relationship with Rimbaud. The immoral liaison brought him an award of two years imprisonment. The poet of the poets of his generation Valarine was squeezed into dire poverty and died on this day in 1895. It was however a good day to begin marketing of poems. Harold Monro opened the Poetry Bookshop that turned into a great meeting place of poets.

January 10: I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett, and this is no off-hand complementary letter that I shall write.' Robert Browning's courtship with Elezabeth Barrett began this day in 1845 with this letter beginning with love for her verses and that ended with 'and I love you too.' 39 years old Elezabeth, invalid and confined to wheelchair by illness and more by her possessive father did not instantly allow Robert to see her in the confinement at her family house in Wimpole Street. He had to wait another four months and ten days to get her permission to see the lady in chair. On September 12, 1846 they secretly made their way to Saint Marylebone Church to be declared man and wife. The news was received with mixed reaction with William Wordsworth commenting 'Well, I hope that understand each other nobody else would.'

January 11: The day carried good news for poets. William Blake charged earlier with the offences of sedition and assault got an acquittal from the court in 1804. Thomas Hardy, who was also a noted poet alongside his magical prose, bloomed far from the madding crowd died on this day in 1928. Hardy was a strong contender for the 1913 Nobel Prize for literature that finally came to Rabindranath Tagore. Hardy's readers, except those whose first language is Bangla, could forgive poet. T. Sturgemoor for proposing Tagore for the award to the Swedish committee. Hardy had a strained relationship with his first wife Emma Gifford. She died as an estranged wife of an icon in English literature. Hardy compensated her by allowing at his own death his heart buried in Emma's grave. His ashes were placed in Westminster Abbey next to the remains of Charles Dickens. Rudyard Kipling and A E Housman are his close neighbours in Westminster Abbey.

January 12: Lord Byron fathered an illegitimate daughter out of his relationship with Claire Clairmont in 1817. Claire used to live with poet Shelly and his wife Mary. Byron named his daughter Allegra.

January 15: The great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, born in 15 January 1891 composed words denouncing the autocratic regime of Stalin. Stalin's wrath made him paid heavily. Mandelstam was sent to prison and died later on the way to concentration camps.

January 17: Poet Sir Thomas Wyatt was accused on this day in 1541 for his alleged misconduct as the Ambassador to Charles V and was imprisoned in the Tower of London. On the same day in 1610 poet Thomas Lodge, who had fled from England under suspicion that he was a Roman Catholic could end his exile and thanked the British Ambassador in Paris.

January 18: Kipling, more of a novelist than a poet and more attacked than anybody else for his 'East is East/West is west/Never the twine shall meet' theory dies on this day in 1936. This was his 45th marriage day with Carrie Balestier.

January 21: Rare among the earls, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and a poet of some significance was executed in Tower Hill in 1547.

January 23: Walt Whitman got a stroke and became partially paralyzed on this day in 1873. West Indian poet playwright and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott was born in 1930.

January 25: Robert Burns was born in 1759 and Wordsworth's sister and lifelong companion Dorothy died in 1855.

January 27: Famous for his Alice books Lewis Carroll was born in 1832.

January 28: William Butler Yeats died of myocarditis in 1939 and Canadian poet John McCrae died of pneumonia while serving the British army in France in 1918.

January 29: Robert Frost crossed his miles before he finally slept on this day in 1963. The great rhymester Edward Lear who rose to eminence with his 'A Book of Nonsense' died on the same day in 1888.

January 30: Forget about Ezra's Nazi connections. But it is true that Ezra Pound met Mussolini on this day in 1935. William Butler Yeats fell in love with Maud Gonne the same day in 1889.

January 31: William Butler Yeats composed 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' on this day probably in 1893. The following is the middle of three stanzas:

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire aflame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by name
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

A small note of the poet who speaks of an old man who was cutting a quickest hedge reads that the old man says 'One time I was cutting timber over in Inchy, and about eight o'clock one morning, when I got there, I saw a girl picking nuts, with her hair hanging down over her shoulders: brown hair: and she had a good clean face, and she was tall, and nothing on her head, and her dress was no way gaudy, but simple. And when she felt me coming up, she gathered herself up, and was gone, as if the earth has swallowed her up. And I followed her, and looked for her, but I never could see her again from that day to this, never again.'

REFLECTIONS

Love defended

M A RAHMAN

Love is the light and sunshine of life. We cannot fully enjoy ourselves or anything else, unless some one we love enjoys it with us. Even if we are alone, we store up our enjoyment in hope of sharing it hereafter with those we love. But the philosophers are not impressed, as the factors of love have appeared too childish to need investigation. The subject better left to poets and fiction writers. It is not for philosophers to speculate on the game of love. The German philosopher Schopenhauer was puzzled by the indifference shown by the philosophers. He said, "We should be surprised that a matter that generally plays so important a part in the life of man has hitherto been almost entirely disregarded by philosophers, and lies before us as a raw and untreated materials."

The neglect seemed to be a vital denial of a side of life that violated man's rational self-image. Schopenhauer was offended on the miserable aspect of reality. Love "interrupts every hour the most serious occupations, and sometimes perplexes for a while even the greatest minds. It does not hesitate to interfere with the negotiations of statesmen and the investigations of the learned ---. It demands the sacrifice sometimes of health, position and happiness."

Schopenhauer was concerned with what made man the superior intelligent being of all species less than rational. And as such Schopenhauer worked out to find out a force within man, which had precedence over reason, a force powerful enough to distort all of reason's plans and judgements.

This force he named "the will to life" and he defined it as an inherent drive within human beings to stay alive and to have children. The will to life led even the depressed pessimists or morbid persons to fight for survival when they were threatened by serious accident or grave illness. It ensured that the most cerebral, career-minded individuals would be seduced by the sight of gurgling infants, or if they remained unmoved, that they were likely to conceive a child anyway. And it was the will to life that drove people to loose their reason over on coming travelers encountered across the aisles of long-distance trains.

Schopenhauer might have been annoyed by disruption of love; but he refused to conceive of it as either disproportionate or accidental. It was entirely commensurate with love's function.

"Why all the urgency, uproar, anguish and exertion? Why should such a trifle play so important a role? It is no trifle that is here in question; on the contrary, the importance of the matter is perfectly in keeping with the earnestness and ardor of the effort. The ultimate aim of all love affairs is actually more important than all other aims in man's life; and therefore, it is quite worthy of the profound seriousness with which everyone pursues it."

And what is the aim? Neither communion nor sexual release, understanding nor entertainment. The romantic dominates life because "what is decided by it is nothing less than the composition of the next generation the existence and special constitution of the human race in times to come."

It is because love directs us with such force towards the will to life's two great commands that Schopenhauer judged it the most inevitable and understandable of our obsessions. We do not think of the continuation of the species when we approach for love. We are divided into conscious and unconscious selves, the unconscious is dominated by the will to life and the conscious is unable to understand of its interplay.

The analysis surely violates a rational self-image, but at least it counters suggestions that romantic love is an avoidable escapade from more serious tasks that it is forgivable for youngsters with too much time on their hands to swoon by moonlight and sob under the covers, but that it is craziness for their seniors to neglect their work because they have glimpsed a face on a train. By conceiving of love as biologically inevitable, essential to the continuation of the species, Schopenhauer's theory of the will invites us to adopt a more forgiving stance towards the eccentric behaviour to which we are so often subject.

BOOK REVIEW

No lawyers allowed

John Grisham's novel centers on a young boy in a small Arkansas town

CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

JOHN Grisham is about as good a storyteller as we've got in the United States these days. Maybe a little too good for the books that have made him rich and famous -- those legal thrillers like "The Pelican Brief" and "The Brethren." Any formula, even the most successful, can feel like a trap after a while. So you've got to appreciate Grisham's desire to write a book where there's not a single lawyer, dead or alive, and no judges, trials, courtrooms, conspiracies or nagging social issues.

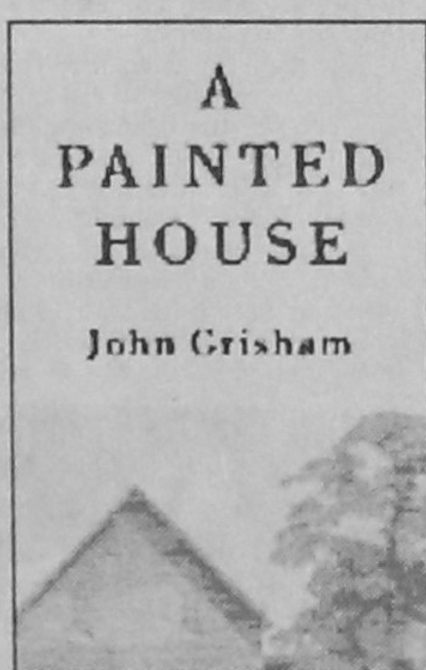
In "A Painted House," Grisham gives us a fictional reminiscence about regular folks in the little town of Black Oak, not far from Jonesboro, Ark., where the author was born. The world of the novel is sketched elegantly, and in its entirety, in the first paragraph:

"The hill people and the Mexicans arrived on the same day. It was a Wednesday, early in September 1952. The Cardinals were five games behind the Dodgers with three weeks to go, and the season looked hopeless. The cotton, however, was waist-high to my father, over my head, and he and my grandfather could be heard before supper whispering words that were seldom heard. It could be a 'good crop.'"

Luke Chandler is the name of the little boy who is coming of age. He is 7 years old. He's a real smart kid, but not a smart aleck. He can read, and he can write cursive script, and he can figure out just about everything you or I could figure out about what he sees going on around him. Luke watches his parents and grandparents barely clawing a living out of the land, and he knows that they and he will have to escape someday. He feels the first inchoate hints of desire for pretty girls. He roots for Stan Musial and longs for a St. Louis Cardinals warmup jacket out of the Sears catalog. He prays like a good Baptist and worries about sin, but he's not such a pious little boy that he doesn't spend a lot of time spying on anyone and everyone who interests him. That's how he witnesses two people getting murdered and a baby getting born amid storms, flood and scandals in that long late-summer cotton-picking season of 1952.

The plots and subplots twine. The pages turn. The characters take on their own lives. And at times, as the cotton bolls glisten in the sun, you can't help thinking of other coming-of-age novels from the South: "Huckleberry Finn" or "To Kill a Mockingbird" or William Faulkner's last book, "The Reivers." But if you're enjoying this sentimental reminiscence, it is best not to make the comparison. Grisham's prose is thin beside any of those three; so is the sensibility, and soon enough "A Painted House" starts to look like, well, a whitewash.

Not only are there no nagging social issues in Grisham's cotton country of 50 years ago, there are no black people. They were "a rare sight in our part of Arkansas," Luke tells us on the last page of the book. A little earlier, he had allowed as how his little hometown, Black Oak, "was too small to be divided" -- interesting choice of words -- there were no ethnic groups, no blacks or Jews or Asians, no permanent outsiders of any variety." Those are the only references. There is no one like Jim, who was Huck's friend and his moral dilemma on the Mississippi.



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There is no Tom Robinson for Atticus Finch to defend. There are no African-Americans to be seen or heard from at all. There is not the slightest hint of the real racial conflicts and accommodations that are at the complex emotional core of Southern life. Jim Crow is not an issue. Nor school integration. And miscegenation? What Southern boy coming of age in the 1950's did not hear about that heinous sin? But Luke, all he's heard is gossip about the husband of Mrs. Dockery, who's absconded to California and "taken up with a younger woman of another race -- possibly Chinese, though, like a lot of gossip around Black Oak, it couldn't be confirmed."

If Luke's voice were more clearly that of a 7-year-old, we could ascribe that line to his naïveté. But Luke is a pretty worldly little farm boy, and there actually is an interracial romance at the core of the book that he follows from beginning to end. It is between a hillbilly girl and a Mexican immigrant worker called Cowboy, who run off together in the middle of the night. Mexicans, in this book, serve as stand-ins on the race issue, sort of African-Americans lite. "Arkansas drivers were not likely to pick up such a swarthy character as Cowboy, especially with a young white girl at his side," this not-quite-child narrator informs us.

Even though Luke and the menfolk in the family listen religiously to baseball on the radio, no one talks about those black ballplayers who started coming onto the field in 1947. There is not the slightest hint that anyone anywhere in town has given the issue any thought. They talk about the Brooklyn Dodgers and the National League quite a bit, but it seems they never heard of Jackie Robinson.

As a matter of fact, the tiny town of Black Oak in Craighead County, Ark., is a real place, where Grisham has real roots, and it is true that people of color are rare there. In 1950 there were only 1,549 Negroes in all of Craighead County, out of a total population of 50,613. It is also a fact that in the summer of 1952 there had been no Brown v. Board of Education, and federal troops did not start escorting black students into Little Rock's Central High School until 1957. But John Grisham was born in 1955. If he had made his alter ego in this faux memoir exactly his age, Luke's apparently blissful ignorance about race could never have been sustained. When Grisham himself was 7, sit-ins and Freedom Riders, the Mississippi riots and Bull Connor in Birmingham were the talk of the South. Even in little Black Oak, Ark.

Grisham has not always dodged the issue of race. His first novel, "A Time to Kill," met the conflict head-on. And there is surely no reason that every book coming out of the South has to have the issue at its core. But it is always there in the background. What is this South without black people that Grisham has given us? It isn't in the South of Mark Twain or Harper Lee, certainly, or even of the early Grisham. It's not the South where he -- or anyone else -- grew up. It's much closer to Dorothy's Kansas, a fantasy land on the magic edge of Oz. In the homey, baseball-obsessed, Bible-thumping farm country of solid family values that is "A Painted House," African-Americans have no place on anyone's land or in anyone's mind. They have been painted out. As a result, the structure seems an empty facade.

Courtesy: The New York Times
Christopher Dickey is the Paris bureau chief for

No job for a woman

A cultural study of wifedom

LAURA SHAPIRO

YALOM (the author of several previous books, including "A History of the Breast") examines both the history of marriage and the history of women, chiefly in Western Europe and America. She gauges the progress of wives over the centuries by tracking two elusive ideals: love and equality. Neither was deemed necessary in most marital arrangements until the notion of marrying for love finally accumulated a critical mass of believers late in the 18th century.

Of course, any sizable stretch of history has its ups and downs. Low points on the long and winding road for wives would have to include ancient Athens, where a girl of 14 was likely to be handed over in marriage to a man twice her age, after which she spent the rest of her life confined indoors. (Her husband passed his days in the agora, the gymnasium and the brothel.) During the Middle Ages, wives were granted a place in the feudal hierarchy just slightly above the livestock; meanwhile, French and English law took to defining the crime of killing one's husband as treason.) As for the Enlightenment, it certainly wasn't meant to enlighten wives. Rousseau, the most widely read philosopher of the time, quickly fended off that possibility with his advice on how a woman should best fulfill her nature: "She should early learn to submit to injustice and suffer the wrongs inflicted on her by her husband without complaint."

Yalom scours the record for firsthand evidence of any wives who enjoyed affection and respect, even when tradition deemed them wholly owned by their husbands. Some wives, perhaps many, surely had the good fortune to win a kind master. But the record was written almost exclusively by men until female literacy became widespread among upper-class women in the 17th century. Hence Yalom has to extract what she can from art, poetry and such influential documents as the writings of Martin Luther. In the early 16th century, Luther insisted, as Yalom puts it, that "mutual love between husband and wife was a God-given mandate," although how wives -- or Luther, for that matter -- reconciled this teaching with his other great directive on women (that they were "created for no other purpose than to serve men and be their helpers") remains mysterious. When women's voices begin contributing in a major way to their own history, Yalom can at last turn to letters, diaries and memoirs. By the early 19th century, these demonstrate that love had gained pride of place in the concept of marital success.

The battle for women's rights, which took off a couple of decades later, didn't get much help from the new reign of love. The very prevalence of love marriages allowed both men and women to scoff at the notion that women had anything to complain about, even though wives, for starters, had no right to keep their own earnings and no custody rights in case of divorce. Yalom's chronicle of the last 200 years describes struggles over law, employment, sex, housework and feminism, culminating in the by-now allegorical tale of Hillary and Bill. Genuine equality in marriage, she concludes, doesn't exist just yet.

Laura Shapiro is at work on a book about women and cooking in the 1950's.