BOOK REVIEW

The dress of thought: Letters of a man of letters

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Fifty-Seven Letters of Dr. Syed Sajjad Hussain,
By Abu Taher Majumder
Published by Desh Prakashan, December 2000

Although Majumder claimed in his prefatory note that Dr. Hussain never tried to indoctrinate his students, it appeared that many of his letters heavily breathed his ideological belief. He looked at the secularisation process in Bangladesh as a minority opinion thrust on a popular majority sentiment (Letter 52). But one cannot but appreciate his consistency in thought and clarity of vision. In his memoir The Wastes of Time, Dr. Hussain criticised attempts to establish Urdu as the state language of Pakistan in 1948. For him English was a better choice for a culturally diverse country.

THE career of Dr. Syed Sajjad Hussain was an illustrious one but not without some sunspots. He was one of the finest students of the English Department that Dhaka University ever produced. He joined his *alma mater* as a lecturer in 1948 and eventually became its vice chancellor during the tumultuous days of 1971. He was also the vice chancellor of Rajshahi University before taking over the topmost post in the University of Dhaka. He received his doctoral degree from Nottingham University for his thesis on Rudyard Kipling in 1952. Born and brought up in a conservative Muslim family, Dr. Hussain was a strong believer of nationalism based on Muslim ideology and a great supporter of integrity of Pakistan. His role during the 1971 was shrouded with controversy, and soon after the independence of Bangladesh Dr. Hussain was arrested as a collaborator. He was released under the general amnesty in 1973. Dr. Hussain then went to Cambridge as a Fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge University and later joined the Ummul-Qura University, Mecca Saudi Arabia in 1975 where he worked until 1985. He died in 1995 in Dhaka almost as a social pariah.

Recently, Professor Abu Taher Majumder published a collection 57 letters of Dr. Syed Sajjad Hussain. These letters are personal in nature and do not contain any direct reference to Dr. Hussain's political belief. In this collection of letters, we identify Dr. Hussain as an ardent student of literature. We find him as a teacher of English who was concerned over the overall decline in the state of English in Bangladesh, as an 'outcast' author who was fighting against odds to publish his books in local market, and as a mentor and a friend who was giving emotional support to a young colleague. Only in couple of occasions, Dr. Hussain did comment on the political scenario. Otherwise, he maintained a safe detachment, stating, "I know that I am an outcast 'in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes'. Why should I trouble deaf heaven with bootless cries?" (Letter 39).

Fifty-Seven Letters of Dr. Syed Sajjad Hussain, published by Desh Prakashan, is actually a tribute of a student paid to an esteemed teacher. Professor Majumder preserved these letters and published them as a gesture of reverence towards his one-time teacher. Surely, Dr. Hussain never intended these letters to be published as Professor Majumder made it clear in his prefatory note. However, in these letters, spanning a period of more than 25 years, one can trace gelling of a relationship between a teacher and a student. The first few letters are no more than official testimonials or teaching tips (like how to improve one's English or where to begin as a teacher). This, I think, is the first phase of the correspondence where the tone of Dr. Hussain is more formal and professional.

The second phase of the correspondence involves when Majumder himself was working for his master's degree at Wales. Dr. Hussain was taking deep interest in the progress of Majumder's dissertation on the orientalist Sir William Jones as well as encouraging him to learn more about the English culture. In particular he advised Majumder to visit the theatres as he himself "felt that direct experience of drama is an education by itself" (Letter 37). This is the same phase where Dr. Hussain found in Majumder a friend in need who could pursue different publishers that were dilly dallying with different manuscripts of Dr. Hussain. His self-exile made different publishers to withdraw their support from his works or even take advantage of his distress. Disenchanted with life, Dr. Hussain wrote: "The world is full of Iagos" (letter 23) or "We live in a world where doctor-like folly controls skill. I must seek my consolation in literature and philosophy" (Letter 37).

No wonder, he continued to mention to Majumder every new book or author that he was experiencing. For instance, he praised the author of *The Jewel in the Crown*, Paul Scott, for his deep knowledge of India (Letter 30) while expressed his disgust at E.M.Forster whose private life was rather 'unsavoury.' He wrote: "I met him (Forster) in 1951. He seemed then very quiet and gentle. I could never have imagined that that this quiet don, no Fellow, could be perverted" (ibid.). He was particularly a fan of Proust whom he rated high as a poet whose vision of life was marked by a sensitiveness, a delicacy, a finesse which was unparalleled. "Compared to him most novelists seem juvenile." Comments like these were surely aimed at instilling interest in literature in a fellow student. Simultaneously, these were loud thoughts of a connoisseur of art and literature.

The third phase of the correspondence involves Dr. Hussain's candid remarks on the socio-political scenario of Bangladesh. He made some bold observations on the colonial design in the creation of what he thought as a fictitious Indian identity by English scholars. "The discovery by the West of the splendours of ancient Hindu civilisation and the belief that this alone constituted the authentic foundation of Indian culture led to the theory that Islam was an excrescence on the Indian scene. The English scholars had frankly political reasons for the propagation of this idea, but later a section of the Indians themselves accepted it, and there followed the attempts to preserve what they called the unity of the subcontinent" (Letter 35).

Although Majumder claimed in his prefatory note that Dr. Hussain never tried to indoctrinate his students, it appeared that many of his letters heavily breathed his ideological belief. He looked at the secularisation process in Bangladesh as a minority opinion thrust on a popular majority sentiment (Letter 52). But one cannot but appreciate his consistency in thought and clarity of vision. In his memoir *The Wastes of Time*, Dr. Hussain criticised attempts to establish Urdu as the state language of Pakistan in 1948. For him English was a better choice for a culturally diverse country. He held the same view regarding the deterioration in the standard of higher education and "the abysmal depths to which English studies have fallen" (Letter 30). Without English, he opined, "most of the younger generation of teachers are unable to read books on their own. It must be clearly understood that higher education is entirely different from secondary education. It should mean advance towards areas of knowledge which scholars can pursue on their own. It should never mean passing an examination on the basis of a limited number of textbooks. I am glad to notice that in West Bengal they are having second thoughts about English as the medium of higher education" (Letter 49).

This collection of 57 letters by Dr. Dyed Sajjad Hussain surely transcends the level of one-to-one correspondence and gives us an insight into the mind of a litterateur and a teacher. Especially in today's e-world, the correspondence between Dr. Hussain and Majumder is a refreshing testimony of human touch that ignored age and geographical barrier.

The reviewer is Assistant Professor of English, Jahangirnagar University.

"Indira became one of the Furie"

DOM MORAES

Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi
By Katherine Frank
Biography, HarperCollins Rs 595

Perhaps Frank's greatest advantage was that she was unable to meet her subject. Twenty years ago I wrote a biography of Mrs Gandhi. It took me about three years. During most of this time I met her at least twice a week. Before I started the book I had an image of what she was like as a person, a fairly clear one. It changed often in the three years that followed and by the end I had less idea of what she was really like, who she was, than I had had at the outset. Frank never seems confused, simply because she never knew her subject.

KATHERINE Frank is an American writer who now lives in England. She has been a university teacher in West Africa and the Middle East as well as Britain, and has also written four biographies of women. Her first three subjects were Lucie Duff Gordon, Emily Bronte, and Mary Kingsley: fascinating people, but by no means international figures. Her most recent book, "Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi" concerns a woman quite different from the others. This massive and handsome volume, published by HarperCollins, is priced at Rs 595.

We are told that Frank took six years to research and write her book. They were certainly not wasted. The research is forensically thorough. Even more impressive, idoes not impede the flow of the prose, which is utterly professional: engaging, fluid, and capable of nuance. Frank seems to have read and absorbed a colossal number of books and documents, and talked to many people who knew Indira Gandhi, in India and elsewhere. She has pieced together, in mosaic, an accurate, sympathetic picture of an unbelievably complex woman.

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Plenty of what Auden called "shilling lives" have been produced about Mrs Gandhi, and made her life and actions public property. Frank's biography, of course, is worth much more, in every sense. It tells you what lay behind the facts in the shilling lives. It attempts to explain Mrs Gandhi's actions, interpret them lucidly, and set them in a context of events. Frank looks at them through time, space, and history. This is almost certainly the best book we shall ever have on Indira Gandhi. That it leaves much unexplained or unanswered is not Frank's fault.

For me the book falls into two distinct halves. The first tells of an acutely sensitive, imaginative young woman who happens to be the daughter of an Indian revolutionary. The revolutionary fights the British for freedom. He encourages his daughter to burn her British clothes and dolls. But he insists that she attend a British school. The adolescent Indira dreams that she is Joan of Arc, fighting the British. But she and her mother read Tennyson's poems aloud to each other; for pleasure; and he, even more than Kipling, is the poet of empire.

The adolescent grows up and marries a man different in every way, loud, vulgar, uninterested in the arts. When her father becomes Prime Minister she lives with him and looks after his household. She takes her two sons with her. Her husband lives alone. He dies; her father dies. She becomes Prime Minister. I think

Indira had always led a schizophrenic life, but up to that point the schizophrenia was under control. She liked who she was. In 1971, she waged war on Pakistan, won, and freed Bangladesh. She was then, perhaps, even happy.

Courtesy: tehelka.com

PHOTO: AFP

Indian writer and Booker Prize Winner Arundati Roy looks at the French award of "Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters" (Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres) which she received from the French Ambassador Bernard de Montferrand (L) at the French Embassy in New Delhi 26 April 2001. Roy was earlier awarded the Booker Prize for her book *God of Small Things*.

INTERVIEW

"I was very very involved in drugs and dissident sexuality"

It was Election Day--November 7--in the US. Hanif Kureishi was visiting. We were to do this interview that evening, but then the news of the close election started coming in. I didn't even switch on the tape recorder. We sat in my home, listening to the news on the radio, drinking Octoberfest lager and smoking cigarettes. We thought we'd wait till we found out who was going to be President before we did the interview. Every few minutes, one state would go to Bush, then one to Gore. Clearly, we were up for a long wait.

When we got together again the next morning at a cafe, I showed Hanif the headlines in the local papers that had prematurely declared "Bush Won." The election was still too close to call. We sat down to talk, not prepared to wait for as long as it now seemed it was going to take.

So, here's Hanif Kureishi talking about writing, childhood, sex, drugs, pop, fundamentalism, education, and his next book. Interviewed by Amitava Kumar

ELECTIONS are on, and you're here. I find in your writing a response to Thatcherism and the repressive eighties. So it seems appropriate to ask, where are we now at the present moment, whether in the UK or the US?

I suppose I would like to say something like I'm not really interested in politics. What I am interested in is society, if you can make that distinction. I am interested in character and therefore in society.

My work begins with a young Indian man leaving Bombay, coming to England in the end of the 40's and early 50's, marrying an English woman, and, obviously, all of this takes place in an historical, political social setting. So, you look at your father and then you begin to uncover the world in which he lives and develops and has children. And this man is very concerned about what kind of children they are going to turn out to be because to him at that time they are neither English kids nor Indian kids. So I look at the world politically where possible through the eyes of the individuals who are living in it.

In My Beautiful Laundrette, there is a young Asian kid, his father is an alcoholic, he meets his uncle, he starts to run a laundrette with an orphan who is a skinhead. So you have the political stuff, the social stuff, but mostly, from my point of view, you have the lives of individuals who are living within the system. So, as a writer, I try not to get too abstract.

What I am mostly interested in is individual men and women and how they try and get by with what they have, which is the world. These two boys running a laundrette, as my uncle wanted me to run a laundrette, it becomes a kind of Thatcherite gesture. Both of these kids are kind of outlaws, one is a skinhead and one is a "Paki." Yet they are doing a Thatcherite job, i.e. running a small business, and within this situation is the opportunity for tons of irony. So that is how I would approach politics, i.e., through the world as it is, but through individuals.

Tell me about your father. Reading your essay about his attempts at writing, I discovered another side of him which was not there in Buddha of Suburbia. Can you talk a bit about that history, of your father's struggle to be a writer, how formative an influence that was, as well as any rebellions it might have fostered?

My father wanted to be a novelist and he never was a novelist. He spent all his time thinking about trying to be a novelist and he wrote every day. In a sense, I kind of tried to live his dream, as good children do, but I also took to it. I liked doing it. I found I could do it and I liked it.

It was also the 60's, when young people were kind of breaking away from the straight world. So being a writer in the family wasn't such a weird thing anyway. But being an artist, also, in the 60's wasn't such a weird thing. The alternative was that you worked in a bank. I was a good son, in that sense. I was conventional in the sense that I followed his desire. On the other hand, my work--he died between Buddha and The Black Album; he saw several plays, and two films, three films--my work was rebellious in the sense that it shocked him. Because it was concerned with sexuality, certainly with gay sexuality, some amount of drug taking, the whole form of it to him--he grew up on Somerset Maugham. So my work was both a kind of defiance of him and a following of his dream.

He lived a life as a civil servant, which he found dull and painful and, in the end, unendurable. He gave me the impression that living a life as a writer was a pretty good life. And that was a good thing to give to a boy, I think.

We were different in the sense that I suppose he thought himself to be a failure. He never had the success in his life that he wanted. But I'd say success came to me quite easily, which was shocking for both of us. Because I thought the life of a writer was that you wrote for a very long time and you got terrible rejections and maybe after a bit you sold a book and you got a bit of money, etc. etc. But, actually, my first film was nominated for an Oscar and I was in Hollywood. That made relations between us quite difficult. It made him feel pleased for me and even worse for himself. There is a lot of complicated stuff there.

Where did he meet your mother?

I don't know. (Pause.) I think he met her in a dance hall in the East End. He used to hang out with his buddies, going out to meet girls in the way that young guys do. I think they met and he then went to live in the suburbs with my mother and her parents. So there was this very, very wealthy Indian man--from a wealthy Indian family, big house, servants, tennis courts--living in a small, suburban house. It was after the war, freezing cold, depressing, run-down England, but he really loved it. I think those big Indian families, as you probably know, are also very claustrophobic. You know, he had eleven brothers and loads of people around. But in his own house he was a king. He was Papa, he was God. And he preferred it that way, reall.

Courtesy: tehelka.com

Hanif Kureishi

ESSAY

Fortunate Fall and the search for centres in Shakespeare's sonnets

GOLAM GAUS AL-QUADERI

"THE external threat that resulted from the Fall was, of course, Time, and throughout the sonnets this occupies much of Shakespeare's attention". (*Themes and Patterns in Shakespeare's Sonnets*. - Shakespeare: The Sonnets , Casebook, Ed.by Peter Jones, p.238.)

THE question of thematic emphasis in a series of poems like Shakespeare's sonnets, needs to be treated with a great deal of circumspection. Despite the figural centers of the young friend and the Dark Lady, and the context that is unearthed or postulated, the sonnets remain bewilderingly alluring in their speculative incitement. But they seem to move, at least, at some levels between the themes of 'the fortunate fall' and 'individuation in poetry', albeit unconventionally considered. This gives them a unity along with their ascription to Shakespeare. Thus a consideration of these two overarching cognitive counters, not only satisfies our craving for a proper understanding of the sonnets, as a series, and more than that as individual works of art; but also gives us a satisfying peep into Shakespeare's mind.

When we look at the sonnets, as extracted in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol-1, we are baffled by the unevenness of excellence in them. We have instances of superb excellence like sonnet 129, beginning "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame', addressed to the dark Lady speaking of the ambiguity inherent in the concept of 'love'. We also confront such banalities as sonnet 3,beginning 'Look in the glass, and tell the face thou viewest' where the poet appeals to his young friend to get married and achieve immortality. But the thing that redeems the series as a whole is the inextricable mixture of text , context and a focus on intertextuality. This is based on the question of the inevitability of process and flux, and the need for formulating a proper morality, in a time of transition and instability as well as creative push.

Although the poet does not ensconce himself in a metaphysical corner, he nevertheless engages with his time and attempts to formulate a personalist ethics reflecting on the relationships between the poet, his young friend and the Dark Lady. The poet's relationship with his young friend, before being complicated by the intrusion of the Dark Lady, hinges on the two counters of patron-poet and vates (poet-prophet)-subject matter. While the poet apparently privileges the friend, this privileging is equivocal . In sonnet 18 he speaks of the merits of his verse/poetry, following a tradition of Renaissance poetry, but problematizes the question of hierarchization and the privileging of 'word' over 'flesh':

"So long as men can breathe ,or eyes can see,
So long lives this ,and this gives life to thee."(L.13-14)

Here Time is considered both as instantiation and as continuity, and the prioritization of writing and the aristocratic friend, is made something subject to Time. Because of the complexity of the relationship , but perhaps more because of an incisive understanding of spatiality and temporality , the question of right becomes an open question. But the texture of the poems do not claim any vertiginous freedom, as much as a willed entrapment in the interstices of life and art.

The relationship of the poet with the young friend and the Dark Lady is inscribed in the structure of the series .The two sections in the sonnet sequence are interesting in their complementarity. The notional and tonal movement in those addressed to the Dark Lady matches the ambiguity of the sonnets addressed to the young friend. In situating himself between male and female love and ostensibly privileging the one over the other, the poet is subverting the sonnet tradition. While at specific instances like in the last two lines of sonnet 147

("For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright Who art as black as hell, as dark as night")

the poet does descend to the level of misogyny and even a vicarious sadomasochistic pleasure; the artistic exuberance as evidenced in other places makes it clear that the poet eludes categorization, which makes him too much a man or a person of his time. The paradoxical formulation of sonnet 138 redeems the poet from any facile moralization

and makes it clear that the poet lays claim to a vision , which is neither beyond time nor bound in time , but in a space of constant movement or oscillation and interrogation :

"While my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think some untutored youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties "
(L.1-4)

The sonnets as a series do not inscribe any formulaic conjunction and distancing in the manner of vassal and the feudal lord, or the poet and the beloved, put on a pedestal. While this cannot be taken as an anarchic repudiation of all hierarchy, it puts into question the facile equation between the poet and the persona and the dichotomization between the speaker and the audience. The sonnets do not incarnate a process of spiritual alchemy, but we can say that their awareness of time do not fall in the same category of 'carpe diem' motif, as exemplified in Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', or the metaphysical love lyrics of John Donne.

In the sonnets, we have the instance of a poetic manipulation of time and an immanence and individuation in time, which can' be equated with creating or recreating a terrestrial Eden or an Olympus. While the morality of all this is not inclined towards hypostatization, it is also not anarchic and fizzling. What we have, is, rather a movement between individual consciousness and an enactment of what Keats termed as 'negative capability'. This despite the serial form of the sonnets! It ultimately points out, if we entertain any notion of ultimate in this context, the inadequacy of the binary duality of right and wrong and the inclusion of questions of beauty, symmetry, truth and perhaps an acceptance of human finitude. While this was heretically relevant to Shakespeare's time, it is important to us as an example of sincerity:

"For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds,
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."(Sonnet 94, L.13-14)

In the sonnets the natural and the human, the artistic and the cognitive are intertwined in an intricate way. The concepts of 'time', 'space ', 'morality' and 'individuation' inscribe themselves in the play between banter and seriousness, disengagement and intimacy; between the poet and his creations, both concrete and ideational. The drama that the sonnets write is one where natural process and artistic or creative intervention incarnate regressive questioning as well as authorial reigning in. Sonnet 107, in which the poet talks of contemporary events and prophecies common in Elizabethan almanacs, is an instance of this interest in individuated time:

NOT MINE own fears , nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come
Can yet the lease of my true love control,
Suppos'd as forfeit to a confin'd doom.

Thus while the poet does not accept finality in Time, he does accept the impossibility of individuation in questions of morality. This is acceptance of a type of closure for Shakespeare, 'the poet' if not the poet, 'Shakespeare'.

The first and perhaps also the last reason we value the sonnets is because of their ascription to Shakespeare; but Shakespeare, the dramatist is perhaps also given a further dimension by them. The question of the fortunate fall, both in the world of God and the world of the poetic psyche is thus at the center or epicenter of these sonnets. For a hypothetically decanonized Shakespeare, the sonnets are thus a monument of excellence, but not of identity.

Golam Gaus Al-Quader is Part-time Lecturer in English at Dhaka University