

INTERVIEW

Ten days with Naipaul: Encounters of a different kind

Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr recalls the time he spent with the literary genius in Hyderabad, and watched at close quarters the writer at work

SIR Vidiadhar Naipaul was as familiar as all writers are familiar to their readers. You seem to know them rather closely through their books. It is something which people experience all the time with all celebrities - writers, artists, film stars and yes, even, political leaders.

So when Naipaul came to the *tehelka* office last November for the first meeting of the Board of Directors of the company, along with Amitabh Bachchan and Khushwant Singh, I was just curious to talk to him. I asked Tarun Tejpal to arrange a meeting for him with the editorial staff. I did not expect it to happen. But it did. There was an informal meeting with the editors in Tarun's room, with lunch thrown in. All that Naipaul ate was the south Indian lemon rice and *idli*, watched over by his wife Nadira.

And he was listening to all that we had to say. And some of us readily got into an argument and a discussion with him. He was patient with our forwardness, and tried to explain his viewpoint. And like in all lunch-time discussions, it was about many things, including a critique of modernism and ancient values.

For those of us who had read his *India: A Million Mutinies*, we expected that somewhere he would take a soft line about ancient values because it was in that book that he, for the first time, adopted a sympathetic approach towards the myriad forms of Hinduism he saw all around him, and especially in his portrait of the Brahmin priest in metropolitan Mumbai.

But he showed a surprisingly critical attitude towards the ancient value system. He said, and of course there was a bit of stoicism in his tone, that the ancient world is dead, and that it cannot be revived. He recalled that long after the classical period of the Graeco-Roman world had passed its zenith, many of the people living in the twilight of that period began to write and live in the ancient manner. Naipaul pointed out that "imitation of ancient mode" is fake, not authentic. And some ancient names - which were literally Greek and Latin to many of us - came up. Among them were Aristotle, Plutarch, Tacitus.

At the end of an hour, he shook hands with all us, and said he enjoyed the conversation, which thrilled all of us.

We knew that he was going to Hyderabad. I told Tarun that I could give names and telephone numbers of some people there who could be of help to him. A day later, Geetan, wife of Tarun and one of the editors at *tehelka.com*, suggested that it would be better if I could accompany Naipaul to Hyderabad.

It seemed an interesting prospect, although I was told that all that I had to do was to help him when he wanted, and that for the rest of the time I could be on my own. It seemed a sensible arrangement because it seemed that he would be as friendly as he was at the lunch because it was known that he was going to Hyderabad to meet people for a book he was working on.

BOOK REVIEW

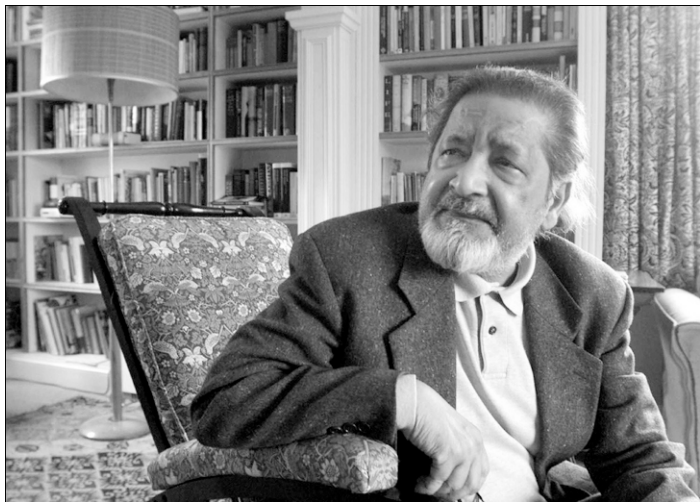
Giving American soap a deshi flavour

In a sense, The Vine of Desire epitomises much of what is habitually indigestible about Divakaruni. There is her *jeune* narrative style, for one, in which quite apart from the artillery of clenched jaws, jarring Americanisms and italicized agonies that one has to combat, there are these searching questions she is prone to ask: 'Have we underestimated Sudha?' 'Is Sunil really asleep?' 'Are these changes good or bad?' Writes Shoma Chaudhury

There is a gaping gully between deep emotion and sentimental slush in literature. Unfortunately, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni unfailingly swims for the latter shore - executing her valiant breaststrokes in trails of taffeta prose.

Her first novel, The Mistress of Spices was a flaccid romantic conceit about a woman who ran a corneshop in San Francisco and healed fractured lives and migrant despair with Indian condiments. The book - with its array of susurrating sesame and compassionate cummin-reduced India to a culinary trope, melding nostalgia with the worst kind of exotica.

Since then, Divakaruni is several books older, and one would have hoped, several shades subtler. But though the early tinselly magic realism is absent, The Vine of Desire is still vintage Divakaruni. It continues the story of Sudha and Anju, the inseparable but star-crossed cousins of her last book, Sister of My Heart, and laves it with every conceivable stereotype. The 'achingly' beautiful Sudha is on the run from a divorce and a threatened abortion in India; and Anju is recovering from a miscarriage. Sudha journeys to America to find freedom and help her emotionally comatose



V.S. Naipaul: A memorable meeting

When we reached the Delhi airport to catch our flight to Hyderabad, there was still some time left. And there was no way but to talk. He talked about his visit to Hampi, the capital of the Vijayanagar Empire, and how the Muslim rulers of Deccan had destroyed it. Then the conversation drifted to Aurangzeb. I told him that one of the reasons that Aurangzeb attacked the Deccan sultans was that they were Shias, and Aurangzeb was a rigid Sunni. Naipaul admitted that he did not know that, and that no one had told him about that.

Naipaul then said that I did a good thing that I did not marry, and that I was able to spend time in reading and getting to know more things. It came a surprise statement, even an odd one. And it gave a certain impression of the man - that he was a devoted "wordman".

Once we reached Hyderabad, I presumed I would not have to interact with him much, and that he would meet the people he wanted to meet. Khushwant Singh had given him names of some police officials he could meet, and their telephone numbers.

Next morning, he had met one of the police officers and had a long chat with him. Later in the morning, when I met him he told me that he had a useful morning. And that the officer was arranging for us to go to Karimnagar, one of the districts near Hyderabad. And he said that I should travel with him the following day.

That evening he went to meet one of his contacts. I dropped him there and left. I met him in the evening. He sounded tired, and wanted a coffee. We had coffee, and he talked about his meeting, his impression of the person he had met. And I would tell him some of the social facts. This was to become the routine for the remaining days of our stay in Hyderabad.

Naipaul is a good listener. He asks questions, tries to understand the phenomenon that is puzzling him. This is a Western bent of mind - curiosity combined with rational questioning. But he is very patient, and very polite. It might be irritating at times, but once you get to know Naipaul, and he trusts you enough,

it becomes possible to interact with him. Even then, you realise he is not a gregarious kind of person. Though he enjoys a conversation, he needs to be alone to make up for the time he spent in conversation.

Whenever he is talking to people for the book project, he would take down notes. Then he let out one of the small secrets. He always used to wear a coat. He said that the coat is useful to hide his small writing pad in the inside pockets. He said that people became nervous if he started taking down notes. It was necessary to win their confidence after a few minutes of preliminary chat before he would start taking down notes with the consent of the person.

Though he appears a snob with his quaint British mannerisms - he would doff the hat every time someone greeted him in the hotel foyer - he turns into a journalist of sorts in his ability to talk to any person who can give him the information he wants. Without much ado, he would get into detailed questioning, and he would not have a condescending attitude. He was polite, concerned, and genuinely interested in the other person's narrative. This showed the humility of a man who was willing to interact with other people with whom he did not have much in common.

And after every meeting, he would discuss his opinions, his impressions and ask if he was right. There were times, when he would check facts about the previous day's meetings, and go over some of the details.

It turned out that he was fond of those who did not belong to the same social class as he did - especially people who did not share his British sense of propriety, or whose command of English was minimal. He became a warm friend of Srinivas Reddy, the reporter from *The Hindu* in Hyderabad, who took Naipaul to some of the villages in Karimnagar.

Naipaul showed some interest in physical details of the countryside, of the architecture of the little mansions of the village landlords. But it was a mere detail. It was apparent that it did not really interest him much. A well-built house, or a well-built person for him marked social

well-being, economic well-being. And he was always looking for those details.

He was quite unhappy one evening when Srinivas Reddy took him to a rich friend's house for an evening drink. The next day he told me that he would have liked to visit Srinivas Reddy's own small house rather than the palatial house of his friends. There was something very genuine in his admiration for people who were themselves.

On our journeys, we would discuss history. I told him about the principles of Islam, the life of Prophet Muhammad, and some of the basic principles of tolerance that emerge from the Prophet's life. He would listen to me with patience, and talk about the destruction wrought by the Muslim invaders.

One evening, as we were sitting in the coffee bar, he wanted to know whether it was possible to get some experts to write about people like Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Sri Lankan-born art historian, critic and philosopher.

He gave me a few tips about writing that evening. He said that I should write simple sentences, avoid using big words and adjectives, and that I should always prefer concrete images for descriptions, and avoid abstract nouns. He asked me to practise writing in simple English every day for six months, and that at the end of it I could become a writer. When I told Tarun about this on my return, he said "You have been instructed by a great writer of the language. You are fortunate."

He wanted to know what were the books to be read about Tantra. I mentioned that there was an English High Court judge in Calcutta called Sir John Woodroffe, who had written extensively and authoritatively on the subject, and that his books were published by Natesan and Company of Chennai (Madras). He remembered that there was much tantric ritual at home during his childhood.

The mention of the publisher's name struck a bell, and he recalled that his father used to order books from Natesan and Company, and that he saw he those books in his house when he was growing up. He said that his father was always reading books from India, which included those of the philosopher, S Radhakrishnan. And he wondered whether the publishing house still existed in Chennai.

On the last day of our stay in Hyderabad, I offered him a south Indian vegetarian meal. He liked the *oothappams*, and said that there was a lot of subtlety in the cuisine. And I told him what I felt I had to. I told him that his anti-Islamic stance was quite disturbing, and that he should look at the other aspects of Islamic history as well. He heard me and then said that while what I knew about Islam was from the books, he had travelled through Muslim countries, and that he wrote what he saw.

After we returned to Delhi, we did not interact again. He left for England the next day.

topple networks, the year when drive-by shootings will account for 129 deaths across America..." And again.

Given all this, for a long time, I have been stumped by the curious literary anomaly Divakaruni presents: her saccharine cliches are enough to cure a confection junkie of a sweet tooth, yet over the years she has annexed an enviable place in the American world of letters as a South Asian writer of great significance and immense popularity. How has this come to pass? What does she offer that I am missing? (I see I've been influenced by her penchant for searching questions.)

Today, I have the answer. The reason Divakaruni is so successful is that she has distilled the diasporic experience into a formula, she has unlocked the secret of the American TV soap and mixed it with recognisable desi flavours. Alternatively, you could say, she has pioneered something like an Asian American Mills&Boon with a respectable cover. Either way, the result is irresistible. It is wonderful to take off one's brains at the end of a hard day, put up one's feet, and sip a Chitra cocktail. At that level, I must say, I enjoyed her thoroughly.

BOOK REVIEW

"No Small Sherry": Kaiser Haq's The Logopathic Reviewer's Song

If part of Kaiser Haq's intent in the poems of The Logopathic Reviewer's Song is to mock critics and reviewers, another objective of his collection is to share his views about poetry with his readers and friends, writes Fakrul Alam

The Logopathic Reviewer's Song By Kaiser Haq Aark Arts, London & Dhaka: the University Press Limited, 2002 Pages:48, ISBN 1899179712(Aark Arts), 984051587X(UPL) Taka: 120

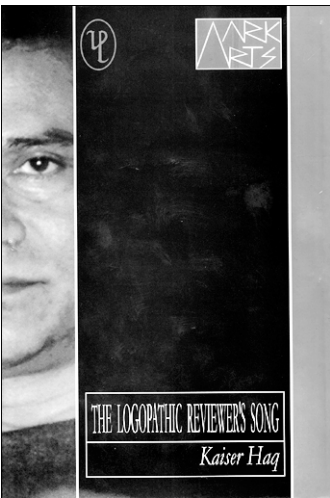
THE Logopathic Reviewer's Song displays Bangladesh's premier English language poet in fine form. In fact, the title poem of this, Haq's fifth collection of verse, has him revving up his poetry and grabbing our attention with the antics of his paranoid creation, the logopathic reviewer. Logopathic? As the last page of the collection explains it, this is a nonce word, one Haq has made up to mean either: 1. sensitivity to words (the poet's gift?); 2 or symptoms of disease or morbidity (the logopathic reviewer's state!). And just as the logopathic reviewer hits the road to scare " a lonely poet/meandering across" from the road, and to take on "the whole mob of word-wasters" with the zest of a "Demolition Derby champ/gone berserk", Kaiser Haq begins his volume by declaring war on "logopathic/hit and run critic(s)". Only, at the end of the day, the logopathic reviewer shows his vulnerable, defeatist side, while Haq ends his collection as confidently as he began it, by taking a parting swipe at would-be critics in these mocking lines of the concluding poem, "Dear Reviewer": "Yours is the superior art, /giving book news/fortified with smart viewsyou go down like a small sherry".

If part of Kaiser Haq's intent in the poems of The Logopathic Reviewer's Song is to mock critics and reviewers, another objective of his collection is to share his views about poetry with his readers and friends. As he notes in the meditative poem, "Pebbles on the Beach", poetry is all about "experiments with form" carried out in silence. It is the end product of contemplation, as the beautiful artifacts produced by nature must have been. In the half-serious, half-mocking poem, "Your Excellency" the poet does not deny that poetry is not "a nation-building/nor an income-generating activity" but is confident that "it is very much in the swim/of things." (compare W. H. Auden's unforgettable lines from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats, "Poetry makes nothing happen [but] survives/A way of happening, a mouth"). Ever alert to the nuances of words and never

averse to innuendoes, he notes that those who declare that "poetry is all balls" has got it right, since "balls" or "testes" in Latin means witness, and since a poet bears witness! In the same poem, very simply and very feelingly, he describes poetry as "the putting together of words/by which it comes into being".

Throughout The Logopathic Reviewer's Song one is constantly amazed at the self-reflexive, allusive, cosmopolitan tone of its poems. The exquisitely constructed poem "Sparrows" for example echoes an early poem by William Carlos Williams formally even while referring to Haq's own early work self-deprecatingly. "Writer's Retreat", the impressive poem that follows, alludes to Shakespeare's wonderful sonnet, "That time of year thou Mays in me behold" to recreate an ambience of "bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" in a creative writer's colony. "Ideas for Poems: A Letter", as erotic a prose poem as one can imagine, takes off from Mallarme's cryptic comment to Degas, "My dear fellow, poems are made of words, not ideas" but is essentially a sexually charged variation of F. T. Prince's famous poem, "The Naming of Parts". As one leafs through the twenty-plus poems of the collection, almost all of them dedicated to friends at home and abroad, and as one keeps in view the dedication of the collection, in memoriam, to Alan Ross, the legendary editor of London Magazine who had published Haq's work often, and Brother Hobart, the Catholic missionary-teacher who had inspired Haq's earliest efforts at verse, one realizes that Kaiser Haq is no introvert or isolato. On the contrary, he is very much an urbane poet, drawing inspiration from his favorite poets and wise mentors, and sharing his views about poetry and life with an intimate group of friends and acquaintances at home and abroad with humor and panache. But this is not to say that Haq is over-sophisticated or elitist. One notes for example the poem "Weekend" where he compares himself unfavorably to the gardener he sees across the street lovingly producing "a plump gourd'an object lesson in humility for the poet.

Learned, witty, wry, wacky, naughty, bawdy, exuberant, playful, erotic, tender how varied are the poems Haq has brought together in this slender volume of verse! Perhaps the zaniest and certainly one of the naughtiest poems of the



collection is "Bananas: A Live Interview", a *tour de force* premised on people eating bananas and going bananas but written in the form of a mock-interview between a hyperserious interviewer and the tongue-in- cheek poet. It is no surprise, then, that the endlessly inventive poet of " Bananas" should also present us with "A Bagatelle", a poem trifling with us, although the whimsy that is the source of the poem is worth our while because of the delicate lines and stanzas he has created for it. Nor is it surprising to see that the next poem parodies all do-gooders working on a global scale through its all-too-serious and long-winded title, "Zen Poems in Monosyllabic Free Verse Presented at an International Conference on Meliorism" and that the poem itself should amount to a few spare syllables ending in the admonishing "Sh!"

In Kaiser Haq's growth as a poet, Black Orchid (1996) represented quite a departure from the first three volumes (Starting Lines; A Little Ado; and A Happy Farewell) that consisted of mostly ironic and free but firmly controlled verse. The Black Orchid poems are much freer, and Haq's aesthetic in the collection shows him unraveling formally and reflecting values that mark him as a libertarian, especially in matters sexual. "Sparrows" and "Ideas for Poems: A Letter" are poems of The Logopathic Reviewer's Song in this vein, erotically charged and reveling in pleasures of the flesh.

But The Logopathic Reviewer's Song is a much more virtuoso performance than Black Orchid and reveals Haq breaking out of the

scaffold he had constructed for his verse in his early work to break out in all kinds of directions. Thus we have "Writing Home", a simple love poem, "Writer's Retreat", a complexly woven composition about frenzied verse making, prose poems such as "Ideas for Poems: A Letter", "The Graffiti Artist", and "Trust", and three more marvelously paced renderings of Garo and Hajong folk-tales ("The Itchy Hand," "The Firefly", and "The Distant Sky"). In addition, Haq includes in his book of poems a series of apothegms under the rubric, "Short Shorts". Laconic, aphoristic, and in a few cases unexpectedly sententious, these are very much in the pensée tradition of original, pithy, and acute observations best exemplified in Pascal's creations.

Nevertheless, it is best to end this review of The Logopathic Reviewer's Song by asserting once more that Kaiser Haq is Bangladesh's most important English Language poet. No matter how international he is in affiliation and outlook, and notwithstanding the sophistication of his stance and verse experiments, he is very much a poet writing from Bangladesh. Occasionally, he even startles us with his representations about quotidian existence in Bangladesh. Poems such as "Nature" and "The Graffiti Artist" are about Dhaka street scenes. A single line in "Writing Home" where the poet remembers "the frenzy of rickshaw bells" bring the sounds of everyday city life in our country into English poetry. "Strange Pleasures" a wry evocation of a hartal happening concludes by disingenuously distancing itself from truth ("poets, as everybody knows,/are not to be entirely trusted"), but the scene it evokes of shops "half-shuttered" and buses running "half-way" and a street where an ear-cleaner and his client are accidentally injured does more than amuse us; it reveals the poet's sharp eye for the absurd in our lives. Of all the reasons to treasure The Logopathic Reviewer's Song then, is the ultimate one: among other things, he bears witness to the tragi-comedy of life in this country through his delicately wrought English verse. All one can wish for are more such volumes from him in the near, as opposed to the distant, future!

Fakrul Alam is Professor of English at Dhaka University

FROM THE LOGOPATHIC REVIEWER'S SONG

The Logopathic Reviewer's Song

for Priti & Sudeep

Late to bed
but early to rise --
so much to do,
so many books,
so many authors
to get through:
so many loafers
on my daily
stretch of road.

A quick breakfast,
quicker shit
and I'm in my seat,
ignition on,
revving up,
then zoom!

And I'm upon a lonely poet
meandering across:
who does he think
he is, does he think
he owns the road?
A blast from the horn
makes him skitter.
I step on it, swing,
catching his leg
with the fender's edge
and watch him hobble --
no sense of rhythm: poetaster!

Asententious bore -- progressive,
puritan -- waves
from the kerb. I wave

back, gesture to him
to step on to the road
as if offering a lift,

then slam him head on
below the belt
and leave him clutching his groin.

Now for a wholesale massacre
of the novelistic crew,
men, women, gender-benders,
the whole mob of word-wasters.
Head on! Swinging right and left!
In reverse!! drive

like a Demolition Derby champ
gone berserk. Does it feel good!
Yahoo!! Vrrrooom!!!

And though by evening I'm tired
as the sun, I can't wait
for the next day to start.

I'm the greatest, the one
and only logopathic
hit and run critic.
...
Got to admit though

there are bad nights
and worse mornings
when the will flags.
So many computers
puking crap
by the megabyte:
one against infinity,
a hopeless fight
and I just don't know
what to do, just feel sad
as the last dodo.

Pebbles On The Beach

for Shahed Bhai

Ah, the seal How do I see
the sea? A forever retching belly,
the earth's phlegm, bile, saliva,
primal chaos

spewing every now and then
these experiments with form --
pebbles, of myriad shapes
and sizes,

small enough to place beneath
the tongue -- like,
who was it, Olivier? --
and spout Shakespeare
above the roaring, rearing waves;
others just the right fit
for a missile-hurling fist.

But beyond such uses,
however diverse, noble or nasty,
these mineral miracles
of texture, geometry, colour,
born of cosmic tumult
and tempered by countless ages,
demand the artist's adoration;
knocked one against another
their modest clicks admonish
our garrulity,
Counsel silence,
contemplation.

Weekend

for Anne & Bernard Bergonzi

Across the street from my study
a man in lungi and sleeveless vest
tends a tiny kitchen garden

kneading the earth like a masseur,
watering it like his own
body in the shower
and before going in
bestows a lover's caress
on a plump gourd!
I haven't written a single poem
I'd care to treat like that.