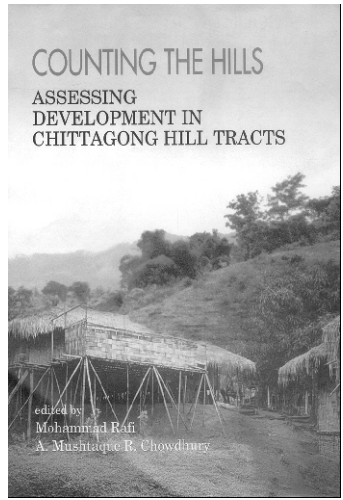


BOOK REVIEW

A compendium on CHT

Counting the Hills, Assessing Development in Chittagong Hill Tracts is a valuable addition to the growing corpus of knowledge on Chittagong Hill Tract, writes Monirul I. Khan



Counting the Hills, Assessing Development in Chittagong Hill Tracts Edited by Mohammad Rafi & A. Mushtaque R. Chowdhury University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2001

GENERALLY speaking the district gazetteer and district statistics documented by the government is the common source of vital information when we are specifically interested about a district of Bangladesh. Sometimes enthusiastic individuals prepare on their own the district account to which they or their forefathers belong and this is more to do with one's appeasing the feeling of attachment. When an organisation takes particular interest to prepare a document compiling the vital information of a region or district then immediately readers' mind start fetching the underlying objective. Undeniably the Chittagong Hill Tract abbreviating CHT now occupies a position demanding urgent attention from the plethora of people who may be policy makers, development workers, administrators, academic or the researcher. When a community suffers from backwardness,

deprivation or turmoil the need for attention from outside becomes urgent and the CHT's given context informs that sense of urgency.

A group of competent researchers from the BRAC and a few other organisations undertook a valuable effort of preparing a document reporting the most vital aspects of a place and its people. The book edited by Mohammad Rafi and A. Mushtaque R. Chowdhury and called *Counting the Hills, Assessing Development in Chittagong Hill Tracts* is the outcome of that effort. As many as eight authors, individually and jointly contributed articles in this book. It is based on an elaborate sample survey. Since different ethnic groups inhabit the CHT region thus this study reasonably chose a random stratified sampling procedure determining the sample size in the scientific manner. The sample size was about 14 thousand chosen out of 150 villages of the region. It covered the ethnic groups (Bangali, Chakma, Mro and Tripura) representing over 96% of the population. However, the evidence of unique cases falling outside the ethnic groups included here cannot be ruled out completely. Nevertheless the chosen sample is sufficiently representative to identify the major socio-economic trends of the region. Another important aspect of the book's style is its presentation of data and description in terms of different ethnic groups allowing the readers to gather comparative scenario.

The book is as usual divided into a few chapters (totally 17) covering different important aspects of the place and its residents. However, CHT bears a special feature unlike other places of Bangladesh. Such speciality stemming from its ethnic variation and the much talked about political imbroglio persisting several years.

In the introduction the physical, administrative, demographic,

ethnic, social and cultural aspects of the region marking salience is laid out in general terms.

The CHT region is also divided into three circles (the Chakma circle, the Bohmong circle and the Mong circle), each headed by a traditional chief. In the new arrangement commenced following the signing of the Peace Accord in 1997, the Regional Council is the ultimate authority representing the government. In addition there is a structure mirroring traditional organisation lead by the headman. According to the census of 1991 the population was over 974 thousand with a density of 492 (it was 1867 for the rest of the country). The increase of both population and density were several folds in the recent time. The most striking fact in this context is the change of proportion of the *pahari* vis a vis the others. For example, the study quoted that the *pahari* proportion was 93% in 1901 and declined to 51.4% in 1991. The first chapter has also supplied a list of ethnic composition, which shows as many as 12 ethnic groups including the Bangali. Above fact bears significance as far as the issue of ethnic heterogeneity is concerned. While commenting on the background of different ethnic groups the book noted all of them came from outside in the past at different points of time. It has quoted, "The *Paharis* themselves are as well said to be of the opinion that they had left their ancestral homelands and settled in CHT...Most of the *Paharis* moved into the region between the 15th to mid 19th century." Complexity did not arise only from the unique ethnic composition of the region, the continuous flux in its administrative status vis a vis the Mughal, British, Pakistani and the Bangladesh states lent ambivalence and the look of an 'enclave'. The second chapter eloquently and briefly chronicles the history of the political development of the region aside

from the migratory process. The book noted that there prevails a feeling of deprivation and repression among the *Paharis* captured in the following lines, "As a result of discriminatory policies against the *Paharis* over a long period resentment combined with political consciousness gradually grew in them. They felt they that they were subject to economic, political, and religious subjugation which was increasingly endangering their identity." In course of time it was revealed that the migration of the people from other regions of the country at the behest of the government gave birth of severe displeasure in the mind of the *Paharis*. The book noted, "The settlement policy of the Government of Bangladesh made 100,000 tribal people homeless." At one point the *Paharis* stood up to resist the process of diluting their identity, took up arms resulting in armed clashes, death and other atrocities. Meanwhile the Bangladesh government responded with framing different laws to address the problem, which the book touched upon briefly but eloquently. Finally, a peace agreement was struck between the government and the feuding sides in 1997.

One of the earlier chapters of the book set out the sociological mapping of the region's villages, households and the members. Important aspects such as natural endowment of different villages, kinship, family types, occupation, type of housing among others came to be featured. It was found that the simple nuclear family was the predominant type followed by simple extended family with most ethnic groups. By natural and other endowments the village level difference is also significant although the information about villages where mixed ethnic groups live together could not be known.

Four chapters of the book six through nine charted the economic premise of the ethnic groups of the

CHT, scanning through land ownership, production, marketing, food security and some other important economic indicators. The average land ownership shows that the Mro owns largest average, 320 decimal, while the Bangali owns lowest average (139 decimal). Of the total land owned by different ethnic groups the Mro owns the largest percentage (27.1%) while the Bangali owns the lowest percentage (11.8%). The Tripuras also owned a low percentage (12.7%) of the total reported land. However, unequal distribution is very high among the Mro than other groups. Another important aspect of CHT's agriculture is the *jhum* or rotational cultivation. It is a particular cultivation technique on the hill slopes. The largest percentage, (96.5%), of the Mro are engaged in it. The Chakmas include the highest percentage, (68.4%), who are engaged in plain land cultivation. Interestingly, the lowest percentage, (25.7%), of the Bangalis are engaged in plain land cultivation. The dependence on cultivation is highest among the Mro and lowest among the Bangalis (Fig 6.4). Cropping pattern is quite wide ranging in the region. It consists of rice, corn, vegetables and the cash crops. The book examined different aspects of marketing of the products grown in the region. Among all ethnic groups the marketing of surplus produces is a long drawn practice. The study reported that there are only three non-agricultural produces produced by the people of the CHT. These include cloths, bamboo/cane products and alcoholic beverage. However, an interesting fact surfaced to the effect that the Bangali earned the highest from the sale of different commodities although they own the minimum land. It could result from the higher productivity in their land. The income generating activities pursued by different ethnic groups came under discussion in this part of

the book. Almost all households from different ethnic groups take part in income generating activities. However, they differ in terms of the types of activities they are involved with. For example, the Bangalis are not involved with *jhuming* at all whereas all other groups are so. On the other hand, Bangalis are engaged in service and business much more widely than other groups. The section on the economic life of the ethnic groups also discusses elaborately on the saving and credit among different groups. In the reporting of asset ownership the study divulged some important information. For example, the Marmas owned the asset with the highest value and the Bangalis the lowest. However, the Bangalis owned the highest when animals, birds, trees and non-productive assets are excluded from the estimation. Another vital chapter has focused on the food security of the ethnic groups. The Tripuras are the poorest in terms of the proportion of the households always running deficit (59.3%). The condition of the Mro is well ahead of others in this regard (8.6% always running deficit). Similarly Mro also include the highest percentage of surplus households (11.2%). The poverty situation is alarming among different ethnic groups in the light of extent of food insecurity. Except the Mro the proportion of the household suffering from regular or occasional food deficit is about three fourth of the total with the most groups. The above fact calls for external intervention urgently. The study stops short of examining the calorie intake, an important measure of poverty, which could otherwise shed valuable light on the issue.

Distinct variation surfaces among the ethnic groups with regard to the educational background. The net enrolment rate of the children falling in the age group six to ten years is highest among the Bangali (65.6%).

It is lowest among the Mro (7.7%). The Bangali enjoys certain edge over others in education. The economic and educational condition of the Mro does not converge because asset and other economic indicators wise the Mro fare much better than many others of the region. The Tripuras are not economically well but their respective enrolment is higher - 56.8%. The chapter on education is well documented as it examines the relationship of education with many other socio-economic variables.

Five important chapters have been devoted to the scrutiny of health. Several important issues encompassing health occupy these chapters. Only 43.9% of the surveyed households throughout the region use tube-well, tap or boiled water for drinking. Compared to the national average it is significantly low. The study also examined the relationship between safe water drinking and different socio-economic variables reflecting on the causal connections. The issue of child immunisation has been extensively dealt with revealing a depressing scenario. Still a large number of children are deprived of it. Morbidity is prevalent among the surveyed population in moderate terms (19.0%). Gender discrimination is reported in this regard. Fever and gastro-intestinal diseases are more common than other diseases. In the context of health seeking behaviour the most dominant is the treatment meted out by the unqualified allopathic dispensers and more than a quarter either depend on home remedies or simply go without any treatment. This study also examined in detail the incidence of diarrhoea and night-blindness among the study population. Among the health care providers the traditional healers are the largest segment. There is an independent chapter on the environment of the region. It mainly deals with the

quality of drinking water. However, the issue of deforestation could have been addressed at a greater length.

The book came up with a concrete conclusion about the impact of the development initiatives implemented so far in the region. It may be quoted to bring in as a cautionary note while formulating the future development strategies, "The review of politico-development history of CHT indicates that the development efforts taken in the past did not benefit, rather harmed the people of the region. Two factors can probably be accounted for this situation. Those who were in charge of setting up and implementing development policies came from outside the region; in most cases they were not competent enough and/or sincere in carrying out their responsibilities. The policies implemented in fact were designed as such to serve the interest of the group who were involved in policy formulation."

With an attractive cover the book presents a quality publication barring a few typographical errors. For the anthropologically minded and inquisitive readers it offers a host of exclusive information in the way of appendix comprising kinship charts, description of rituals and festivals, detail description of the commodity markets and others. This book may be considered as a valuable addition to the growing corpus of knowledge on Chittagong Hill Tract.

Monirul I. Khan is Professor of Sociology at Dhaka University.

BOOK REVIEW

Silent partner

Clara Schumann was the finest pianist of her time - and a dutiful wife who rarely opened her mouth. Perfect material for a novel, says Janice Galloway

ROBERT, 11th week of marriage, 1840: A quiet week which went by with composing and much loving and kissing. My wife is love, kindness and unpretentiousness itself. My settings of the Kerner poems is ready; they gave dear Clara pleasure as well as pain, since she must purchase my love so often with silence and invisibility. Well, that's the way it goes in marriages of artists! If they love each other, that's good enough...

Why write a novel about a real person? Why indeed, especially when that person did not really say very much? Clara Wieck Schumann, quite certainly the finest virtuoso pianist of the 19th century, wasn't much of a talker. But then again, she was never meant to be.

Clara was born in Leipzig in 1819, two years after the death of Jane Austen and the completion of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and barely four years after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo.

Even before her birth, her father, Friedrich Wieck, a tenaciously self-made man and arguably the fastest, most furious piano teacher in Saxony, had decided on his daughter's path and could see her destiny with the "clarity" that the name settled upon her was intended to show.

His daughter, he decided, would become a prodigy, one whose talent and filial loyalty would make his name and fortune by becoming "the equal of Moscheles, the finest pianist yet living". After the death of his firstborn, after his own struggle towards music from a family that had little sympathy with such a calling, this child would be his brightness, his light.

It seems he never asked her what she felt about this. From what I can fathom from exhaustive research, no one did. Given the ability that soon evidenced itself in her fingers, it was taken for granted - and by Clara most of all - that Wieck's plan for his daughter was blessed.

And so it was. Whatever was amiss that made the little girl literally speechless until the age of four (and what novelist could resist wondering what that might be?), some things were solidly in place: a father with an iron sense of purpose, an example of maternal fortitude (that her mother, Marianne Tromlitz, had the nerve to leave such a husband, and that she played the piano professionally herself seems a powerful influence) and sound; endless, non-verbal, sound.

In a childhood she called "fortunate", when most girls her age were being taught how to make themselves desirable in the marriage market, Clara was afforded the best piano teacher her father could muster. In addition, he bartered lessons in theory, composition, harmony, orchestration and languages (solely those she would need for touring: no stuffy Latin or Greek, and certainly nothing to facilitate the consumption of litera-

ture). He also began a diary for her, written in Clara's voice, etching in his own hand the legend: "I will never be able to repay Father for everything he has done for me."

All her life, Clara Schumann, the rave-review prodigy of Prague, Vienna, Dresden, St Petersburg and Berlin, the mature performance equal of Thalberg, Rubenstein and Liszt, the wife and champion of Robert Schumann and mother of his eight children, the best friend Johannes Brahms ever had, never threw over this training in silence, stillness, duty.

While her father beat her brothers, or cruelly denigrated her choice of marriage partner, or deliberately tried to wreck her professional reputation rather than let go his control; while her husband deteriorated into alcoholic stupors, fits of suicidal depression or the torturing betrayals of full-blown mania; while her dearest friends died young and her body churned through relentless, morale-debilitating pregnancies, she largely kept her own counsel. As expected.

Who complains that a musician lacks the capacity for tete-a-tete if they manage the notes? If those notes, in turn, illuminate, entertain or educate without the assistance of language? Words, it is satisfactorily agreed, are not a musician's concern.

Certainly there were letters, diaries - miles of them. Despite her aversion to conversational exchange, Clara certainly wrote a great deal. Touring extensively as principal breadwinner for her family, she wrote to those who kept her company far from home and to those who opened the requisite doors to enable further touring. She wrote to her husband and children, to the housekeeper who kept her household together in her absence, to those she admired and her own fervent admirers, and screeds to friends and fellow-professionals Pauline Garcia-Viardot, Felix Mendelssohn and Jenny Lind.

She also recorded contracts and the content of her programmes and rehearsal schedules, itineraries for her frequent tours, packing lists and opinions as to the stupidity of Wagner's entire oeuvre. Famously, she also kept a diary of her relationship in tandem with her husband for the first four years of their marriage. Lots of ink, lots of detail - and not really very much at all.

Even reading her written words, the silences are unavoidable, the white, unspoken space between the lines seeming to grow wider with each passing year, each hellish domestic crisis. Discover Robert's "corrections" to her entries scribbled like teachers' comments in their shared diary, discover her ruthless cheerfulness in praising his work when he is at his least healthy, his least confident, discover her relief when a suspected fresh pregnancy proves false, and it's not hard to see why.

Certainly she had a career to deal with, fingers to keep in trim, ways to

secure a contract that Robert would not discover and fall sick in time to sabotage. But she also had that most old-fashioned of female priorities, love, to attend to: the demands of family she could not turn aside from, and would not, despite the odd flash of resentment, have wished to.

Certainly I had heard snippets of Clara's career told in the traditional way: the glittering career, the superbly histrionic story of her rabid father and haunted husband, the dramatic backdrop of the Dresden uprisings and the growth of pianist-as-cult in the 19th century with luminous show-stoppers such as Liszt and Chopin, warty little Wagner and golden-boy Brahms studying the field.

But the more I read about Clara, the more I listened to the music she herself, infrequently, composed, the more it was clear these supposedly "big stories" were the sideshow. A grand and highly coloured sideshow certainly, but not the pulse at the heart of this life - indeed anyone's life - at all.

Next to her dignity, her quiet sense of duty and care (the word most often used of her playing was "noble"), the conquering artistic triumphs and crowd-drawing celebrity that Clara's father or indeed Liszt, desired, showed only as competitions, masculine obsessions of who's strongest, who's biggest, who wins. History works against the accomplishments of most of us that way, and against the truer accomplishments and priorities of women especially.

Women with families prioritise differently, although they know their achievement will be judged as harshly as a man's. And in this, writing about Clara was not merely writing about Clara at all. It was writing about the process of creativity from another perspective - the female creator's perspective.

The most interesting aspect of Clara to write about - indeed of Robert too - became the unsaid, the silences raddling the life. The place, in other words, where she joins the rest of us in dealing with the everyday moral, financial and emotional struggles we call "getting by". In this way she is the model of how a woman can live life serving her friends and families and also serve her own talents and ambitions.

Genius and what it might be is one thing, but it seems to me nothing much at all if it is separate from all that is human.

Clara, then, the good domestic woman, was what thrilled me. Her silences and her piano-playing were survival tools - she made her utterances between them. The device of fiction is what permits silence to speak, to find the edges of a psychology and bring it not only into being, but entirely close to home.

Clara by Janice Galloway is published by Cape, priced £10.99

The Guardian

ESSAY

Testament of the Word

Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer, whose novels and stories record and define apartheid, argues that a writer's highest calling is to bear witness to the evils of conflict and injustice

I grew up in the Union that came out of wars for possession between two colonisers, the British and the descendants of the Dutch, the Boers. I was the child of the white minority, blinkered in privilege as a conditioning education, basic as ABC. But because I was a writer - for it's an early state of being, before a word has been written, and not an attribute of being published - I became witness to the unspoken in my society.

Very young, I entered a dialogue with myself about what was around me, and this took the form of trying to find the meaning in what I saw by transforming it into stories based on everyday incidents of ordinary life: the sacking of the backyard room of a black servant by police while the white master and mistress of the house looked on unconcerned; or later, in my adolescence during the second world war, when I was an aide at a gold mine casualty station, being told by the white intern who was suturing a black miner's gaping head-wound without anaesthetic: "They don't feel like we do."

Time and published books confirmed that I was a writer, and witness literature, if it is a genre of circumstance of time and place, was mine. I had to find how to keep my integrity to the Word, the sacred charge of the writer. I realised, as I believe many writers do, that instead of restricting, inhibiting and coarsely despoiling aesthetic liberty, the existential condition of witness was enlarging, inspiring aesthetic liberty, breaching the previous limitations of my sense of form and use of language through necessity: to create form and use it anew.

Definitions of the word "witness" fill more than a small-print column in the Oxford English Dictionary: "Attestation of a fact, event, or statement, testimony, evidence; one who is or was present and is able to testify from personal observation." Television crews and photographers are pre-eminent witnesses in these senses of the word, when it comes to attesting to a modern catastrophe of staggering visual impact. No need for words to describe it: no possibility words could. First-hand news reporting or descriptive journalism become a pallid after-image. Analysis of disaster follows in political and sociological terms, by ideological, national or populist schemas, some claiming that elusive, reductive state of objectivity.

And to the contexts political and sociological, in the case of the events of September 11, there must be added analysis in religious terms. Number 8 in the OED definitions cites: "One who testifies for Christ or the Christian faith, especially by death, a martyr." The Oxford English Dictionary, conditioned by western, Christian culture, naturally makes the curious semantic decision to confine this definition of the term witness to one faith only. But the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in the US were witness, in

this sense, to another faith, which the dictionary does not recognise: each man was one who testified to the faith of Islam, by death and martyrdom.

Poetry and fiction are processes of what the OED defines as the "inward testimony" of witness. Witness literature finds its place in the depths of revealed meaning, in the tensions of sensibility, the intense awareness and the antennae of receptivity to the lives among which writers experience their own as a source of their art. Kafka wrote that the writer sees among ruins "different (and more things than the others)... it is a leap out murderers' row; it is a seeing of what is really taking place".

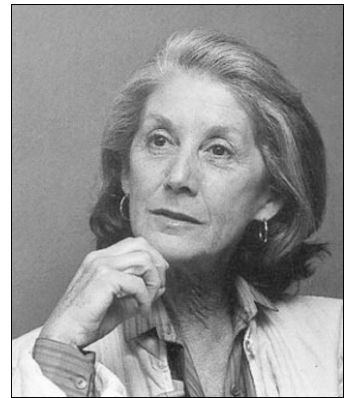
This is the nature of witness that writers can and surely must give, and have been giving since ancient times, in the awesome responsibility of their endowment with the seventh sense of the imagination. The "realisation" of what has happened comes from what would seem to deny reality - the transformation of events, motives, emotions and reactions, from the immediacy into the enduring significance that is meaning.

In the last century, as well as the one scarcely and starkly begun, there are many examples of this fourth dimension of experience that is the writer's space and place, attained. "Thou shalt not kill": the moral dilemma that patriotism and certain religions demand be suppressed in the soldier comes from the first world war pilot in WB Yeats's poem: "Those that I fight I do not hate./ Those that I guard I do not love." This is a leap from murderers' row that only the poet can make.

The Radetsky March and The Emperor's Tomb form the Austrian novelist Joseph Roth's dual epic of the break-up of the old world in the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and they are inward testimony of the increasing hosts of refugees from then into the new century, the Greek chorus of the dispossessed drowning the muzak of consumerism. They are also testimony to the chaos of ideological, ethnic, religious and political consequences - Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia - available to us through the vision of Roth.

The statistics of the Holocaust are a ledger of evil, its entry figures still visibly tattooed on people's arms. But only Primo Levi's If This is A Man bears continuing witness to the state of existence of those who suffered, so that it becomes part of our consciousness for all time.

The inhumanity that culminated in atom bombs on Japan was described in Kenzaburo Oe's novella, The Catch, about the second world war, in which a black American survives the crash of a fighter plane in a remote district of Japan and is discovered by villagers. None has ever seen a black man before. He is chained to a wild boar trap and kept in a cellar; boys are delegated to take him food and empty his sanitary pail. Totally



Nadine Gordimer

dehumanised, "The black soldier began to exist for the sole purpose of filling the children's daily lives." They are fascinated by, and terrified of, him, until one day they find him tinkering with the trap with a manual skill they recognise. "He's like a person," one boy says. They secretly bring him a tool box. He works to free his legs. "We sat next to him and he looked at us, then his large yellow teeth were bared and his cheeks slackened and we were jolted by the discovery that he could also smile. We understood then that we had been joined to him by a sudden deed, passionate bond that was almost 'human'."

Oe's genius of inward testimony is deep in not turning away from the aleatory circumstances - by that I mean the otherness, definitive in war - that end in the captive using the boy as a human shield when the adults come to kill him.

The level of imaginative tenacity at which the South African poet Mongane Wally Serote witnessed the apocalyptic events of apartheid is organic in its persistent perception. He writes: "I want to look at what happened, / That done, / As silent as the roots of plants pierce the soil / I look at what happened... / When knives creep in and out of people / As day and night into time."

Long before that, the greatness of Joseph Conrad's inward testimony found that the heart of darkness had not been in Mistah Kurtz's skull-bedecked river station, besieged by savage Congolese, but in offices in King Leopold's Belgium, where women sat and knitted while the savage trade in rubber was organised, its efficiency assured through punishing blacks by severing their hands if they did not meet delivery quotas.

These are examples of what Czeslaw Milosz calls the writer's "fusing of individual and historical elements", and Georg Lukacs defines as "a creative memory which transfixes the object and transforms it," and "the duality of inwardness and the outside world".

I have spoken of the existential condition of the writer of witness literature in the way in which I would define that literature. But how much must the writer be personally involved, at risk in the events, social upheavals and threats to life and dignity? In a terrorist attack, anyone

present is at risk, and becomes activist-as-victim. In wars or other upheavals, the writer may be a victim. But the writer, like anyone else, may also have chosen to be a protagonist - and if they did so choose, they would unquestionably experience the definitive witness literature.

Albert Camus believed that, Camus expected that from among his comrades in the French Resistance, who had experienced so much that was physically and spiritually devastating and strengthening, there would emerge a writer who would bring it all to literature, and into the consciousness of the French as no other witness could. He waited in vain for that writer. Extremity of human experience does not make a writer. Oe, who survived atomic blast; Dostoevsky, who was relieved at the last moment before a firing squad; the predilection to write has to be there, as a singer is endowed with the right vocal cords, a boxer with aggression. Primo Levi could be speaking of other writers, when, as an inmate of Auschwitz, he realises that the inmates' stories are each of a time and a condition that cannot be understood "except in the manner in which... we understand the events of legends".

The duality of inwardness and the outside world: that is the essential existential condition of the writer as witness. Most people would consider Marcel Proust as the great writer least confronted by any kind of public events, but critics seem to ignore the truth that the cork-lined writing room to which they confine him did not exclude his telling and brilliant revelations of anti-semitism among the privileged and powerful. So I accept from Proust, without reservation, this signpost: "The march of thought in the solitary travail of artistic creation proceeds downwards, into the depths, in the only direction that is not closed to us, along which we are free to advance - towards the goal of truth."

Writers cannot indulge the hubris of believing they can plant the flag of truth on ineluctable territory. But we can exclude nothing in our solitary travail towards meaning. We have to seek meaning in those who commit acts of terrorism, just as we do in the lives and deaths of their victims. We have to acknowledge them. The priest in Graham Greene's The Comedians gives an edict from his interpretation of the Christian faith: "The Church condemns violence, but it condemns indifference more harshly." Another of his characters, Dr Magiot, avows: "I would rather have blood on my hands than water, like Pilate."

Is there a loss of artistic liberty in witness literature? Picasso gave a testy reply to the question of creative freedom on behalf of artists in every medium. "What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has nothing but eyes if he is a painter or ears if he is a musician, or a lyre at every level of his heart if he is a poet? Quite the contrary, he is at the same time a political being, constantly aware of what goes on in the

world, whether it be harrowing, bitter or sweet, and he cannot help being shaped by it." Neither can the art. And so there emerges Guernica. As Flaubert once wrote to Turgenyev: "I have always tried to live in an ivory tower, but a tide of shit is beating its walls, threatening to undermine it."

In the 1950s, I aimed for inward testimony with Six Feet of Earth, a story written almost anecdotally about the denial of possession of even that much African soil, a grave-sized share, to its rightful black owner. In the 1970s, when the dispossession of Africans reached its final entrenchment under apartheid, I found myself writing a novel, The Conservationist, in which some combined form of lyricism and its antithesis, irony, tried to reach for the meaning of land, buried with the corpse of an unknown black man on a white man's rural retreat; the body rises in the river's flood to claim the land. The obsessive return to the theme - the very ground of colonialism on which I lived - was both a subconscious expression of my lifetime love affair with the possibilities of the Word, and an acknowledgement of the imperative to be a witness.

When next I wrote a novel, Burger's Daughter, it was, as witness literature, an exploration of inward testimony to revolutionary political dedication as a faith like any religious faith, with edicts not to be questioned by believers, handed down from father to daughter, mother to son. Lyricism and irony would not serve there, where a daughter's inner survival of personality depended on recovering her father's life of willing martyrdom, his loving relationship with her, and the demands that his highest relationship, political faith, had made upon her. In this novel, documents were deciphered as inward testimony. I had to question this story in many inner voices, to tell it however I could reach its meaning, submerged beneath public ideology and action. Yet it was not a psychological but an aesthetic quest.

There is no ivory tower that can keep reality from beating at the walls, as Flaubert noted. In witness, the imagination is not irreal but rather, the deeper reality. Its exigence can never allow compromise with conventional cultural wisdom, and what Milosz calls "official lies". That intellectual of no compromise, Edward Said, asks who, if not the writer, is "to elucidate the contests, challenge and hope, to defeat the imposed silence and normalised quiet of power?" The final word on witness literature, though, comes from Camus: "The moment when I am no more than a writer I shall cease to be a writer."

This is an edited extract from the Inaugural André Deutsch Lecture to be given by Nadine Gordimer as part of International Writer's Day on Saturday, June 22

The Guardian