

ESSAY

## Literature is the Defence of History

DZEVAD KARAHASAN

HERE'S a joke I was told was Bosnian, though it sounds Jewish, in which Ivek is in a local tavern and the moment he hears that the name of the man standing next to him is Moshe he kills him without thinking twice. He does not deny the deed to the police, he simply justified it by saying: "And what about what they did to our Jesus?" "But that was two thousand years ago!" the police inspector exclaims. "Yes, but I only heard about it yesterday," says Ivek.

What are the logical premises underpinning Ivek's action and line of thought? There are probably many, but three stand out. The most obvious is certainly the ahistorical: Ivek has no sense of the past. For him the past, wherever and whenever it may have occurred, has a potential presence and topicality; for him, the only form of existence is "the here and now" of his life. Everything he learns about, regardless of where and when it occurred, becomes immediate and current reality. Hamlet, here and now right next to Ivek, is hesitating over avenging his murdered father, thus risking the danger of inflaming Ivek's righteous anger. Brutus right now is brandishing the knife by which Caesar will die. Lisbon right now is being shaken by the great earthquake and Harun al-Rashid right now is presenting a watch to the barbarian ruler Carolus Magnus. All this and all else that really did happen in the past, that is described in literature or dreamt of in legend, is happening right here and now, the instant Ivek learns about it. The kind of ahistoricity typical of Ivek's sentiments could be called barbarian or pre-cultural, and in any case should be clearly distinguished from the ahistoricity of non-European cultures.

The second quite obvious logical premise of Ivek's action and thinking is a type of collectivism which I would like to call industrial collectivism. An industrial perception of the world is the necessary postulate for this type of collectivism and it would be truly wrong to attribute it to tribal, primitive or some other type of non-modern thought. It is an undeniable truism that it was indeed the industrial age and its attendant outlook on the world that brought the forms of collectivism that we encountered at the turn of the last century, that I encountered and felt on my own skin in the Balkans at the start of the twenty-first century, and that, unfortunately, we will obviously have a

FICTION

## Retelling Metamorphosis

CHANDRA P SHARMA

CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK

REGOR was changed into the shape of a giant beetle. God, what could he do in that shape!

It was already six thirty in the morning. As the sky outside was overcast with cloud, it looked dark. He had already missed his five o'clock train and he thought that he should not miss the seven o'clock train. So now, instead of trying to fall asleep or turn on his right, he started to try to get out of his bed. When he tried to scratch his belly with those unshapely insect legs of his, a cold shiver passed through him. He shuddered on his condition. If he could have explained his bargain to his family, it would have been better. But it seemed that he had become incommunicable. It seemed as if every body was awake and gathered outside his room. His father and mother were coaxing him to open the door; his sister had started to cry. By now, it was almost seven in the morning. The father had sent his sister to bring the doctor to examine Gregor and the locksmith to open the door of his room which he was unable to unlock even after so much of coaxing from outside.

"But Gregor was much calmer. The words he uttered were no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before, perhaps because his ear had grown accustomed to the sound of them. Yet at any rate people now believed that something was wrong with him, and were ready to help him. The positive certainty with which these first measures had been taken comforted him. He felt himself drawn once more into the human circle and hoped for great and remarkable results from both the doctor and the locksmith." Kafka

Everyone was knocking and shouting. Their concern made him feel happy. After seven, the head clerk from the office arrived to chastise him. He needed to explain to him the situation that he was facing and so he needed to talk with him. He had developed a bad habit of locking all his doors even when he was inside his own house. And that was the problem. However, he used all his skills to open one of the doors. Somehow, he became successful. He opened the door and calmly came out and tried to explain the situation. He had forgotten that he could not use human language now. He was provided with human understanding only. So the time the head clerk saw his grotesque shape, almost three feet in size, he left the room hurriedly.

"His mother fell on the floor among her outspread skirts, her face quite hidden on her breast. His

chance to see all around us for a long time yet to come. We have seen it, for instance, in the ideological and national totalitarianism of Bolshevism and Nazism, which saw membership in a particular nation or party as the true definition of a person's identity. At the heart of reducing identity to membership lies the clearly recognizable logic of the industrial series: each and every copy of any given model must be identical to all other copies of that model and must, without exception, be interchangeable with any other copy. In the pre-industrial age human identity could not be perceived in this manner for the simple reason that human life and existence in its broadest sense were perceived quite differently. It is unfair to ascribe our stupidities to times past, it is unfair to blame our madness on old forms of collectivism and earlier forms of human collectivity, especially if they had their own madness. As we can see from the joke I told at the beginning, for Ivek individual identity is embodied without exception in the collective identity and is completely identified with it: it is "us" and the Moshe he kills is "them"; Ivek is absolutely called upon to "avenge" and Moshe is the perfect object of revenge. "I" is the same as "us" and every member of the collective who is "us" is the same as and interchangeable with "I". By extension, "you" in the singular is equivalent to "you" in the plural, and every member of "your collective" is equivalent to, and without exception interchangeable with, "you."

The third obvious logical premise of Ivek's action and thinking is the attitude of opposition or, to be more precise, conflict that his "I" takes in relation to any other identity. By reducing human identity to belonging, Ivek reduces the relationship between individual identities to a single possibility: hostility, i.e. mutual exclusiveness. Anything that exists and that is not "I, i.e. us, is Other, i.e. Others, to which the "I" must somehow relate. As we saw in the joke, Ivek's "I" behavior toward the Other that was so irrefutably extant and present in his vicinity, i.e. toward poor Moshe, followed the principle of exclusion, i.e. it was within the scope of "either/or." Moshe is either one of "us" or he isn't; if he is, then he is equal to my "I", and if he isn't, then he is a "you" which necessarily rules out my "I" because "either/or" is based on the relationship between things in a mechanically perceived world. Moshe, I reckon, would not have

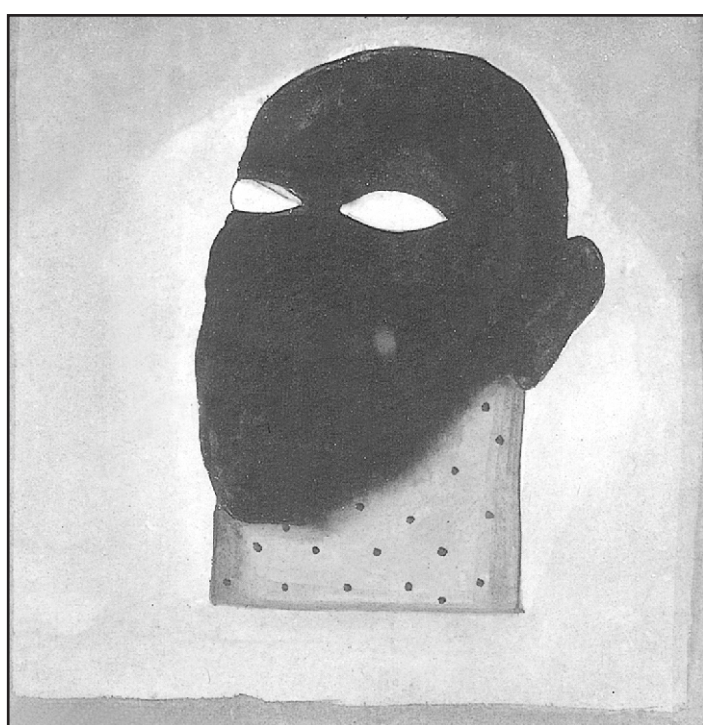


Illustration from Human Form and Art, Lalit Kala Academy, Delhi

mindful of Ivek had been less faithful to his mechanical concept of the world.

But why make such comments about a joke out of the blue like this? Unfortunately, we all know why: because the worst feature of Bosnian and Jewish jokes is that too often they are too reminiscent of reality. The world we live in reminds us of this joke every day. Did not the ideologues of Serbian aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina demonstrate the same kind of ahistoricity as Ivek's in the joke? Did not General Ratko Mladi explain the massacre in Srebrenica as the "avenging of Kosovo," applying the same logic and reasoning that Ivek used to justify his shooting of Moshe in the joke? The battle of Kosovo that General Mladi was "avenging" occurred in 1389 and did not involve anyone from Srebrenica. The general could not have cared less about such technical details; he had just learned about the battle of Kosovo and had to avenge it; in order for him to do so he had to find anyone who was not him, or his collective.

General Mladi resembles Ivek in his typically industrial perception of the individual. He considers himself utterly interchangeable with any other member of the collective to which he belongs, regardless of the time, place, or gender. He sees himself as utterly self-contained in

belonging to the collective just as an industrial product is utterly self-contained in belonging to a certain model. This self-violence would not be a problem if he did not carry out his concept of identity consequentially at the expense of others. This industrial type of collectivism is not limited to the Balkans alone. Exactly the same kind of logic and industrial type of collectivism is displayed by terrorists who invoke Islam: they believe that they have won over all members of the "Moslem model" to their cause by mere virtue of uttering that "model's" name. And it is precisely this logic and this type of collectivism that is then demonstrated by politicians, policemen and intellectuals in the West, who subject people to police questioning merely because they are Moslems, expecting and even demanding of them to declare themselves on and distance themselves from specific acts of terrorism, only because they are Moslems, like the terrorists who committed the crime.

It is important to emphasize here that I am talking about logic, not actions. I in no way wish to equate or even compare the actions of a general who orders the massacre of 7,000 people, a terrorist who kills 3,000 people and a politician who has ordered the police questioning of a Moslem who happens to want to study. It is actually out of an aversion

to the "terror of nominalism" that I wish to recall that human beings are real only and to the extent that they are individuals. Of course there is a "small difference" between the fate of the passenger on a downed plane and that of a citizen who is called in for questioning and then goes home; of course there is a "small difference" between 7,000 and 3,000 people killed and of course I cry out with all my heart: "Long live the small difference!"

From the nominalist standpoint these differences are indeed small. According to Islamic learning, the Prophet says that to kill one person unjustly is the same as killing all people, just as to save one person is the same as saving all people. This is indubitably true, murder is murder and whoever commits it is a murderer; arithmetical differences cannot bring into question the type, i.e. the name of the crime. And yet, perhaps it is after all worse to kill a person rather than humankind, because humankind would not leave behind a woman tearing her hair out in grief for its demise or a weeping child who perhaps does not yet know that he is now and ever after an orphan. Here one must not forget, of course, that "humankind" is not the same as "all people," humankind is a notion whereas all people are a mass, humankind is an abstraction whereas all people are a multitude. The arithmetical difference between one person murdered and two is to me crucial if the other one is me. Viewed from the nominalistic standpoint, even the difference between the questioned student and the passenger on a downed plane is not that important: death is an inalienable attribute of the living person.

Realistic point of view merely supplements the nominalistic view. It is only when we take into account the unbreakable connection between nominalism and realism, when we bear in mind the forest and each individual tree, as the old metaphor teaches us, only then will we be sure of not overlooking the life for the sake of the notion, and of not neglecting the notion either. Then, when we think of literature. Of all forms of human learning, only literature does not deny the presence of the notion or idea in the body it observes. Only literature can articulate the uniqueness of that body without bringing into question its connection in the idea or notion, only literature can achieve the full symbolic potential of a body, show all its "notional generality" without bringing into question its unique-

ness and specificity. Of all forms of learning, literature alone produces a form which functions like a living body, a form in which both structure and history neither supplement nor clash with each other; literature alone shows that at every moment of his life the individual is everything he has been, everything he is now and everything he will be.

I did not, therefore, compare utterly incompatible acts so as to say that they are similar; rather I wished to show that underlying such different acts is the same logical operation. The differences between some of these acts become even more evident when they are placed on a common footing, but these differences do not bring into question the said common footing, i.e. the "omnipresent" nominalistic logic which by virtue of its own nature reduces the individual to belonging and produces the "industrial image of man." This logic ever more crucially and ever more fatally moves our spirit and our language farther away from corporeal reality and toward arithmetic -- not toward the world of Platonic ideas, not toward the world of archetypes, but toward the pain series of natural numbers and collection of notions that are incapable of having a body. This logic has brought into our language countless worlds that have no denotation, it tries to reduce the word to serving as a mere bearer of information, it suppresses the body from the language and introduces oblivion of the absolute uniqueness of every living body. This logic and its attendant image of the individual is already clearly present in all spheres of our life. Has not the "industrial notion of man" held sway in the economy where man is no longer really the aim or the purpose but merely the means of labor, i.e. of profit? Has not the feeling that man is really a set of spare organs become so commonplace that the trade in organs is no longer covert and no longer upsets anyone? If this nominalistic epidemic continues to spread at the present rate, perhaps soon we will perceive even ourselves as a given, like those little men on the traffic lights who tell us when we can and cross the street and when we must stop, because we understand, sense and experience the world the way language depicts it.

TO BE CONTINUED

POETRY

## Melancholia

(In commemoration of nine eleven)  
Achintya Das Gupta

I write this note with thousands droplets of tears  
To commemorate the 'nine eleven' and to pay tribute to those  
Who were trapped in a live inferno and compelled to die.....  
I write this note to sympathize with those  
Who have assembled today at the Ground Zero  
To shed tears of red - red roses attuned with  
Melancholia of bugle.....  
I write this note on this day  
To reflect my dampened memory  
Left by man's gatastrophic deed on the innocent humanity  
Representing many countries around the globe  
And to say a hard 'no' to any terrorism at home and abroad.....  
I write this note to express my hatred to the atrocity committed  
And profound sorrow for those  
Who left back their most beloved ones to mourn their deaths in captivity  
For the rest of their days.....  
I write this note urging upon all  
To forgo unity  
In fighting away terrorism for good.

## Feeling and Fantasy

Rubab Abdullah

Let it rain a small degree  
Tears of passionate wailing  
May mix into aqua of nature  
May wipe off bitter memories of past  
Let it brighten the ray of hope  
May go in hiding behind mouth-mask  
All the pains and void of soul.

Who am I?  
Where do I come from?  
Where do we move towards then?  
Vitality ceases to exist  
Into these question marks.

NEWS

## "Americans have a sense of irony"

THE new edition of the Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations, published on September 12, one day after the first anniversary of the event that provides some of the book's most sober and up-to-the-minute thoughts. George Bush is included in the 5,000 entries for saying it is time "for us to win the first war of the 21st century", and Tony Blair is there with him, saying: "We ... stand shoulder to shoulder with our American friends."

The dictionary was last published in 1991 and its editor, Elizabeth Knowles, said she was looking for the recognition factor, something that was half-remembered and likely to be looked up.

"It's terribly tempting to think quotations were better in the good old days but I don't believe it," she said. "When you look back to the great quotations of the past, you are seeing those which have time to give a demonstration of their lasting qualities. The more ephemeral material has been sifted away."

The model Kate Moss ("It's a sin to be tired") and actor Ursula Andress (who said of the swimsuit she wore in the film Dr. No: "This bikini made me a success") could be among early dropouts.

The book is the work of a team,

which assembles and assesses quotations and keeps an ear open for what is being said.

Ms Knowles's current favourite quotation is in a crop which, contrary to expectations, proves that Americans have a sense of irony.

Journalist Tom Brokaw said of the broadcast networks' premature announcement of Bush's presidential win in Florida: "We don't just have egg on our face. We have omelette all over our suits." Which goes nicely with Bill Clinton's comment on the same election: "The American people have spoken - but it's going to take a little time to determine exactly what they said", and Al Gore's words as he introduced himself to a student audience last year: "I am Al Gore, and I used to be the next president of the United States."

Some of the mots are more bon than others, for example Ben Elton: "Uncool people never hurt anybody - all they do is collect stamps, read science fiction books and stand at the end of railway platforms staring at trains."

However, Ralph Waldo Emerson was writing too long ago to have a snappy line included from his journals of 1849: "I hate quotations."

Source: The Guardian

Source: The Guardian

BOOK REVIEW

## Char Kanya and Other Stories

Mirza Anisuzzaman

Pages: 96, Price: Tk 55.00 only

It is a nice collection of some ten short stories, written by Mr Anisuzzaman, which were earlier published in local newspapers and magazines. Mr Zaman is a retired Deputy Auditor-General and Comptroller of the Government of Bangladesh, thus being a person basically of statistics and accountancy. Such people seem to be dry and hard. But our writer is a remarkable exception. That the spirit of Bengali literature was almost lying dormant in him during his service life was quite evident when he produced his first book of short stories early this year, (his second one, "Hey Nabeen", is now under print). Perhaps the writer has tried to reflect his young mind with a psychological reflex late in the day!

I am sure the book will be thoroughly enjoyed both by the old and the young, particularly, the younger generation. There are all elements that go to make a good story love, hatred, rivalry, separation re-union, ending in either tragedy or comedy.

An interesting part of the stories is that they had been mostly built-up in the background of foreign lands, either in our neighbouring India or America, or some other place. In India, the writer has found the most fascinating places like Agra where stands the immortal symbol of eternal love, the Taj Mahal, and Benaras, which is one of the holiest places of the Hindu community. So

the main characters the heroes and heroines whether in *Madhuri*, *Sitara* or *Anjali*, they are all pitted against backgrounds of romance or holiness, that ultimately added colour and life to the development of his stories.

On the other hand, Mis Raza, in the story titled, *Raza*, is a wonderful character who is employed as an English interpreter in a non-English speaking foreign embassy. But there came a sudden charge in her life when she came into contact with a visiting foreigner on official business and she had to do the work as an English interpreter. But as ill luck would have it, she developed some weakness for him from the beginning, which ultimately ended in tragedy.

In another story, writer under title, *Troee* (Trio), written in the background of strongly-vitiated racial discrimination of USA, the author has given a very touching but tragic end when the heroine, a white girl was found in a drawing room later turned into a killing field, caressing her dying lover, a black man, shot dead by his rival, a white man, simply because he believed that a white girl can't be a fiancée of a black man.

As for the remaining stories, the readers should find out for themselves the magic touch of the writer behind each of them. The music is there for all those who can hear it.

Reviewed by AMM Shahabuddin