

The dilemma the middle classes fall prey to

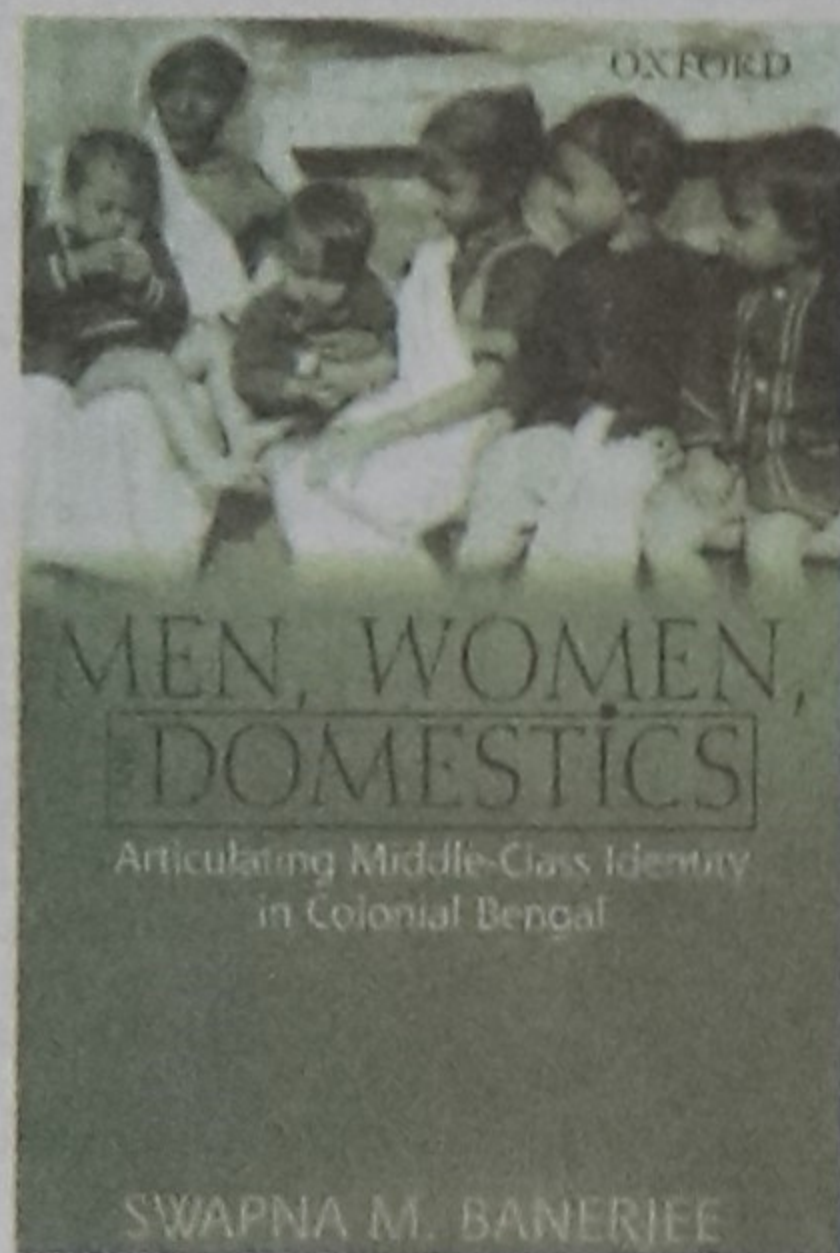
Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is impressed by a study on a unique subject

ONE can make an interesting observation on the title of the book itself where the first two common nouns make it most fascinating to general readers. The addition of the third certainly constricts its appeal to them, limiting it to the interest and need of a select group of readers comprising students, scholars and researchers of socio-cultural anthropology, South Asian history and gender studies. Viewing it from a broader perspective, one can as well discern elements of cross-cultural and comparative studies on the functioning of the family as the mainstay of a society taken collectively where it plays the role of a society in microcosm.

Thus the book *Men, Women, And Domesticity*, is elevated to the quality and rank of a highly scholastic treatise befitting the standard of an Oxford University Press publication. Placing the word 'Domesticity' on the cover of the book inside the box highlights the significance of the third actor in the matrix consisting of three, their interplay through the daily encounters in discharging business within a family and related matters. Swapna M. Banerjee, by stretching these particular modes of behaviour that are there on the domestic front, has very ably shown the family as political space culminating in the construction of a national identity. The characteristics forming traits of personality and their manifestations constitute the identity of the urban middle class Hindu families based in Calcutta during the colonial period. These English-educated Bengalis were much influenced by colonialism

associated with the western sense of a modern man and/or woman, all of which made inroads into the psyche of a Bengali, so much so that it shaped and transformed Bengali domestic culture that gave rise to the bhadralok/bhadramahila class on the one hand and the emergence of the 'other' or the lower social classes on the other. The distance between these two classes was a joint function of class, caste, and gender specific ideologies that came to the fore as Bengali middle class families articulated the identity of themselves definitely, consciously, oftentimes subconsciously as bourgeois ideology grew in their individual and national sphere of life.

Domestic workers at various jobs have always been there for the upkeep and maintenance of the household and serving its members and have remained an integral part thereof. But the subject has acquired very special significance through this research of the writer when seen against the background of the twin pressures of colonialism and nationalism seeping into the households of the educated middle class. The writer traces the origin and influx of people coming to Calcutta in search of a better scope for their traditional occupation only to find that the changed occupational scene vis-a-vis economic realities in the mid-nineteenth century dealt a hard blow to their fate, thereby reducing them to the ranks of the lowliest labourers. That included the job of a domestic helper among others. Thus gradually they were seen, their voices were heard, their jobs were carried out and their roles were



Men, Women, And Domesticity
Swapna M. Banerjee
Oxford University Press
New Delhi

played, although within the confines of the household injunctions but oftentimes with some form of transgressions that the writer notes. The servants having come from the hinterland thus turned into important actors in an establishment where governance existed with all kinds of rules and laws, hierarchy of persons wielding power and control, exercising

sanctions and rewards --- all enunciated and crystallised in unwritten terms.

With the inclusion and acceptance of the domestic workers, both male and female, the role of a 'new' woman, meaning thereby the independent image of a woman as herself emerged within the domain of one's household. Thus along with the menfolk, even if not exactly in the same way and in the same degree, women also asserted themselves in exercising their autonomy in their relationships with their subalterns. At this point we see the interplay of dominance, subordination and an ensuing hegemonic process surfacing through the complexities of a household. It is far-fetched to conceive of the intricacies brought out by the researcher, those that worked in those days of colonialism both in the domestic and national arena, as we look back at it from the 21st century. However, the author's model of viewing the domestic domain as a prototype of the then colonial administration within its realm can best be comprehended by superimposing the former on the latter in terms of their structural organisation and implementation of policies. Who else other than a social researcher of such distinguished calibre would conceive of a theoretical framework paving the way for observing its concretisation in a life lived? Historiographical studies projecting domestics may not be something new in the social history of this subcontinent but for the paradigm used by the author where the three autonomous yet interdependent actors enter into the household domain of complexities.

Many untold stories are revealed and there lies the uniqueness of her research. Banerjee has dredged up a wealth of data as if from the bottom of a sea that lay there unused for ages, which simply is fabulous. Interestingly, she has drawn heavily from the accounts of the Tagore family, among others. Also by citing relevant examples on the subalterns from the literary writings of well-known authors both male and female, she has made her book appealing. Otherwise it would have been rather dry reading, like any run-of-the-mill government report.

The most startling finding and the author's incisiveness in interpreting it is the fact that while the nationalist middle class tried hard to distinguish itself from its British rulers in order to construct its own identity, in the process encountering a sense of difference, domination and subordination and a constant unequal power struggle, nevertheless the same was resorted to by it over the less powerful segment of society employed in the domestic services. The colonised in their turn colonised others under their control. The same rules of conduct were applied and the same perceptions. And that was the irony.

As ex post facto research where a field study was undertaken, it is only natural that a researcher will meet with an overwhelming volume of related literature to fathom in order to turn it into a seminal work. Banerjee's treatise is both new of its kind and highly educational.

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AT A GLANCE

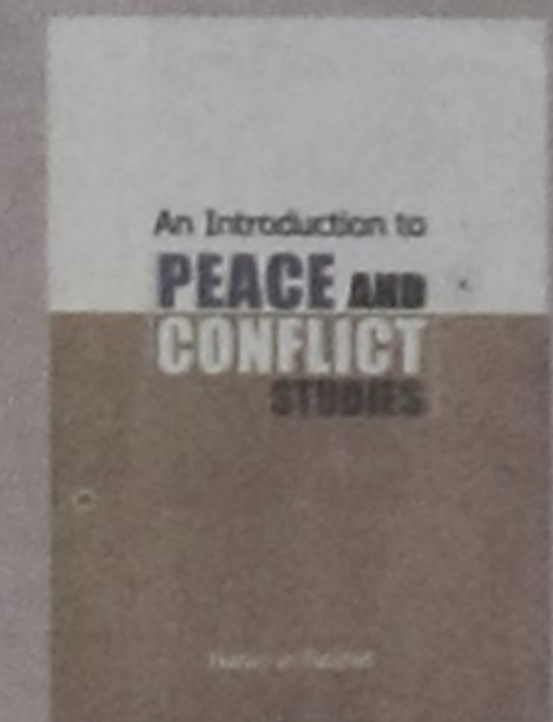


Pita Jatiyo Shok Dibosh 2008
Awami Shilpi Goshal

A small publication comprising poetry, essays and quite a number of photographs, the work is a tribute to the Father of the Nation on his 33rd anniversary of death. It is especially aimed at the younger generation, which will clearly grasp the ethos that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman shaped for the Bengali nation in his lifetime.

Military-Media Relations
in Bangladesh 1975-1990
Rezwan-ul-Alam
Palok Publishers

As the title makes it clear, the book explores the nature and degree of ties between the press and the military in Bangladesh, given especially the fact that the army has been in power for a good number of years in the country. Alam not only delves into the matter of the local media but also notes how the foreign press has handled Bangladesh's regimes.

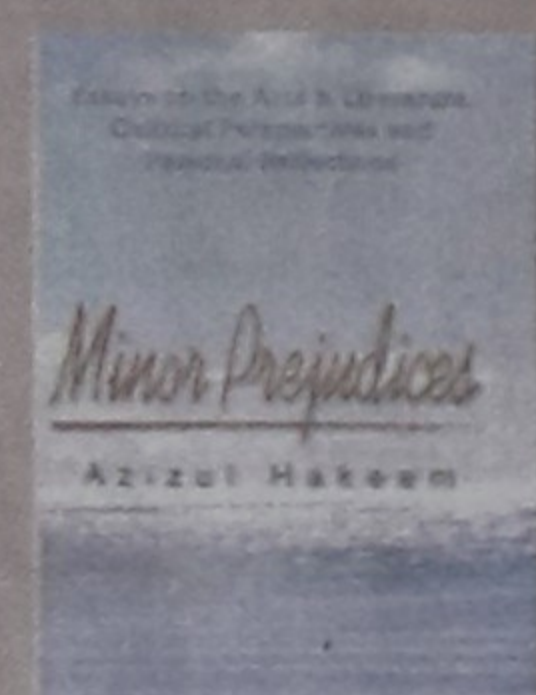


An Introduction to Peace and
Conflict Studies
Harun ur Rashid
The University Press Limited

A perceptive work from one who has been a noted diplomat for Bangladesh in some important capitals of the globe. It explores the history of human conflict. It is particularly the period after 1945 that the author presents in clear light, noting that since that time there have been 120 armed conflicts in 71 countries, of which 36 were civil wars.

Minor Prejudices
Essays on the Arts & Literature...
Azizul Haqueem
The University Press Limited

Here is surely a rich collection of articles on subjects that go into the making of liberal arts. With a background in English literature and having become part of cosmopolitan culture across continents, Haqueem is eminently placed to understand the nuances of language and the frontiers of the imagination. A good read, this.



The death of a leader and notes on a career

Syed Badrul Ahsan reads a couple of books, with interest



Shot O Adorshoban Rajnitiker Pothikrit
Shaheed Ahsanullah Master
Ed. Ataur Rahman
Bhawal Prakashoni, Gazipur

THE murder of Ahsanullah Master in May 2004 followed a pattern that had been set in the mid 1970s. It was the continuation of a trend through which popular, nationalist politicians were systematically done away with, with the result that Bangladesh was left serially deprived of the men and women who could have done it much good in terms of providing purposeful political leadership. And where the matter was specifically one of Ahsanullah Master, the man was a dedicated soul, with honesty being a hallmark of his entire political career.

You only have to go through an enu-

meration of his career. He was a teacher, a labour leader, a man inclined to increased devolution of power to local government and a successful parliamentarian. From such a perspective, Master was an individual in whom throbbed promise of the future. He was only fifty four when he was gunned down, an age in which other promising figures of independent Bangladesh were violently removed from the scene as well. And so there he shared a trait with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was a vigorous fifty five when he was assassinated, and with Tajuddin Ahmed and Syed Nazrul Islam, both in their early fifties when they were killed in prison. And with Ahsanullah Master's death, it was this pattern of the end of life that became rather discernible to the country.

By far some of the biggest ramifications of Master's murder came in the knowledge that it was a man of political accomplishment who had been done in. As this compilation of commemorative essays on his life and career demonstrate all too well, he was an individual for whom political correctness mattered little, or not at all. He belonged to the old school of politicians for whom straight talk and a deep sense of commitment were the foundations of political behaviour. This quality in him was conspicuously upheld when, at a time when his own party the Awami League held political power, he argued in defence of workers' rights to collective leadership of some jute mills. And he ended up winning the argument. It was a quality of leadership that Shah AMS Kibria admired in Ahsanullah Master. Ironically and yet in line with the tradition of Bengali political assassination, Kibria would himself be dead within months from a grenade attack.

This collection is a deserving tribute to a man who mattered and who could

yet have done more to transform Bangladesh's politics had he been allowed to live. In death, he was mourned nationwide, which was testimony to the all-encompassing appeal he had to the country. But did that matter? The government of the day --- and it was the BNP-Jamaat coalition --- and especially those who manned the home ministry made a farce of the intended investigation of the murder. On the one hand, the minister of state for home (and he is these days in jail himself) went around dishing out the astounding discovery of some Awami Leaguers themselves having been involved in the killing! The intention was clear, as ABM Musa, KG Mustafa and others point out here. The assassination was to be passed off as an instance of internecine warfare in the Awami League. And on the other hand, the prime minister (and that was Khaleda Zia) was busy telling the country and the outside world that a full and proper investigation would be carried out into the murder. It was not merely a government speaking in discordant voices. It was a sign that the government was already on its way toward diverting the course of the inquiry. The blasts of 21 August were to prove the point.

In a deeply saddening way, the work is a telling commentary on the nature of politics in the country. Nearly every write-up in the compilation is a lament on the absence of justice in a land made mute by growing insensitivities to collective national pain. Ahsanullah Master's assassination remains a gnawing pain because his was an effectual voice in the struggle for democratic rights. He did not mince words; he abjured linguistic nuances. He brought into his discourse with ordinary citizens a flair that matched their expectations of politicians. At a time (and this was in the early 1990s) when thoughts of the upazila system were anathema, because Hussein

Muhammad Ershad had initiated the scheme, Master realised the potential in it. Politics for him was what it was always meant to be, a vehicle for change. And he was willing to go to court to keep the banner flying.

Pothikrit is a requiem. It is also proof of all the good that has been and may not be again.

It is never tedious reading the memoirs of one who was once in public life. From that perspective, Justice ATM Masud's



Reminiscence of Few Decades and
Problems
Of Democracy in Bangladesh
Justice Chowdhury A.T.M. Masud
Academic Press and Publishers Library

ought to make interesting reading. But as you prepare to plunge into the work, you stumble over the title of the book. 'Reminiscence of Few Decades...' should have been 'Reminiscences of A Few Decades' in order for the work to keep pace with the English language. A bit disappointing, that. But move on.

Masud's work should be considered a good compendium of events as he has observed them shaping up in the course of his life. In a country where memoirs are absent or simply not written, the former judge has done a good job of having kept a record of his life. The Khilafat Movement, his life as a student in Calcutta, the movement against the Holwell Monument, et al, find a place here along with later events that were to take the writer to more elevated positions in life. He makes note of all the significant events that have since the 1940s shaped history in the subcontinent and specifically in Bangladesh. One would have expected him to reflect on the circumstances he cites in the work. He does not, which is quite a pity. The obvious is what Masud states in his memoirs. These are all facts of history, but few are the instances where he offers his own assessment of them. He does, though, linger a bit on the circumstances in which he accepted General Ershad's offer to be chief election commissioner in 1985. There are too quite a few appreciative passages on some legal luminaries, notably Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem, he has had opportunity to work with.

On a pretty personal note, ATM Masud speaks of his younger brother Mahub Chowdhury, who was taken into custody by the occupation Pakistan army and never returned home. The sense of grief is palpable.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

A tale that touches sensibilities

Tulip Chowdhury loves a story of love

A more beautiful story of a boy growing up into a man could not have come up. The story of David Harper, a boy born with passion for love and learning, captivates the mind. This saga is capable of holding the reader spellbound and has one smiling and crying for the gripping plot-developments and the real life characters. The story, taking place in Buck County, Pennsylvania, also comes up with beautiful scenic descriptions with intriguing details. Once into the book, the reader seems to be with a wonderful friend who is whispering about divine wisdom and the secrets of life.

David was born in an orphanage and never knew his parents. As a little boy he found himself in a poorhouse in Doylestown in Pennsylvania. His friends were Old Daniel, Toothless Tom and Luther, also living in the poorhouse. They were men who have experienced life through different seasons. These men held out their hands to the boy as if to help him cross the pitfalls of life. David grabbed them with his little hands. And as times sailed by David started to grow from a little boy to a man. Old Daniel is one of the many friends to offer David insight into life. The boy listens to the old man giving his sermon as he says:

"Thinking is something different altogether! Think always as if the hot hand of hell were grabbing for you. Think to the limit of your mind. Imagine, dream, hope, want things, drive yourself to goodness. Whatever you do, David, do it to the absolute best of your ability. Never take the easy way where thinking is concerned."

Thus Old Daniel starts the boy toward reaching for the peaks with his thoughts. And the old man advises him to read to his full brim. The hunger for knowledge is born in the boy and he starts to spend hours in the library immersed in books. He attends school and his teachers become his mentors. There is Aunt Reba, his only surviving relative wanting him to quit school and work in the pant factory. He defies her orders, something he has never done before, and continues his school. He learns that the way to success is education. His mathematics teacher Miss Choler arouses in him the wonder of the subject and he is able to solve difficult equations mentally. In time he joins college in Deadham with full scholarship. Beside his interest in mathematics he finds history and art fascinating. He is soon reading away the life and works of Chaucer, Renoir, Cezanne and Rembrandt. The heart that often cries with his lingering poverty finds richness in knowledge and he looks at his life in the poorhouse as part of his varied experience of life. He is never ashamed of his poverty for he is filled with the greatest richness in this world; the richness of knowledge. Again in college he finds dedicated teachers who hold out torches showing him the way to a life filled of honour and glory. It is his music teacher Klementi who teaches him that the strong men of the world stood on the grounds of honour and not the weaklings. It was Klementi again who arranges a scholarship for David to go through college.

David is a passionate young man and his first love Nora is a fiery prostitute. She is older and knows her world. When Nora dies in a tragic accident David, tormented and turned in his poorhouse bed and he cannot even guess that men are



The Fires of Spring
James A. Michener
Transworld Publishers Ltd.

David's story of a man growing from rags to riches is a spellbinding tale. The character of the protagonist as drawn by the author is captivating. The human interest aspect is poignant! One cannot but feel empathy for the poorhouse boy. The inquisitive mind of the growing boy does not fail to draw admiration from the reader. When David falls in love the helpless emotion of the young man has the reader feel like leading him to his desired happiness. And then all along right from his life in the poor-house and all through his various stages of life we see David as a very generous and brave young man. First published in 1949, The Fires of Spring is an epochal novel that marks the eternity cycle. It is amazing how this book remains so vibrant 50 plus years after its release. The book Tales of South Pacific by James A. Michener won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948. The Fires of Spring is a discovery of a lifetime. There comes immense joy and contentedness in the heart after reading this novel.

Tulip Chowdhury is a writer and teacher.

REREADINGS

The facade begins to fall apart

Rehnuma Sazzad goes back to a writer's memories

IT is an unusual novel. Five apparently unconnected chapters without a conventional story make the subtitle, 'A novel in five sections.' And when you start going through the story, two things happen: first, the narrator and the writer seem to be one; second, some magical writing takes you through an extraordinary journey of living in a foreign land in order to develop the mind of a 'writer.' The novel has been called a 'thinly veiled autobiography.' The veil is obviously woven by braiding two parallel stories together. The fictional story is about an Edwardian Manor House involving the writer as its tenant, its employees and other people living in its valley. The autobiographical story, on the other hand, is a reflective narration of the writer's gaining an 'artistic' vision amidst the 'Enigma of Arrival.'

At the end of the story, the readers are left with a great enigma to decide whether this is fiction or a true account of Naipaul's life. It is almost as if Naipaul's writing wants to mirror the surrealist painting from which its title is taken. Once he discovers the Giorgio de Chirico painting named 'The Enigma of the Arrival and the Afternoon' (see book-cover) in his rented house, it speaks volumes about his own journey to England:

A classical scene, Mediterranean, ancient-Roman or so I saw it. A wharf; in the background, beyond walls and gateways (like cut-outs), there is the top of the mast of an antique vessel, on an otherwise deserted street in the foreground there are two figures, both muffled, one perhaps the person who has arrived, the other perhaps a native of the port. The scene is of desolation and mystery; it speaks of the mystery of

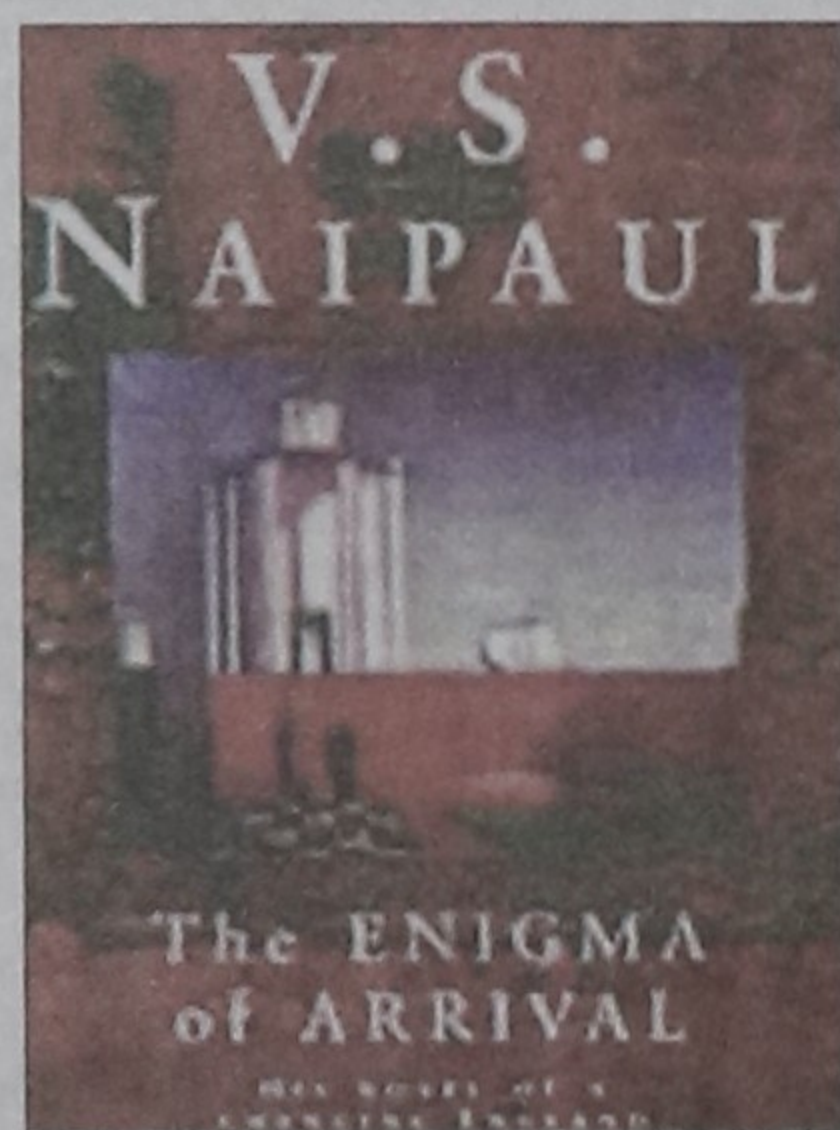
arrival. The autobiographical novel is, therefore, a saga of Naipaul's struggle in grounding him in a distant soil as a writer of a foreign language.

It takes a great writer to weave disparate phenomena into an entertaining story. Being one of them, Naipaul paints through the power of words one after another interconnected picture of his life in an English countryside. Consider the first chapter, 'Jack's Garden'. One simply carries on reading it because wonderful panoramas of countryside flora and fauna, seasons and landscapes are blended with a vibrant presence of history. Living on a farming valley close to Stonehenge (a pre-historic monument made-up of standing stones symbolising English heritage), Naipaul cannot not but project a timeless England which inspired him to be a writer in the first place.

His story of coming to Oxford at the age of seventeen, observing people and events from moment to moment, taking notes with a pen of 'indelible' ink, and relentlessly differentiating between worthy and not-so-worthy materials, is now re-examined in this novel. By the time Naipaul writes this novel, he has reached a stage where he is no more anxious and uncertain about his writing career as he was at seventeen or eighteen. This writer revives with insight, honesty and humour the writer that he used to be at the beginning. In spite of the age-old trouble of being a writer (his publisher did not like the novel he was recently writing and so he had to come back from visiting the United States to work on its improvement), experience has enabled him to talk about writing with ease and understanding. He can even say to his younger self, tongue in

cheek, 'If only you knew!' Having attained the desired success, he can concede that Man and writer were the same person. But that is a writer's greatest discovery. It took time and how much writing! to arrive at that synthesis.

But why was he at pains at the start of



The Enigma of Arrival, V.S. Naipaul
Viking

the journey to distance his Trinidadian identity from his entity as a writer? Searching for an answer, one cannot help noticing a troublesome aspect in the writer. It is understandable that 'colonial Trinidad' could not sustain a talented ambitious boy like Naipaul because of a lack of opportunities there, to put it simply. However, Naipaul is almost ruthless in nurturing (or being cultured,

as he would say) a Western self in him to wipe out any trace of Trinidadian-ness in himself. He goes so far as to claim that a 'colonial' plantation like Trinidad cannot have a history let alone a culture of its own, especially given its multi-ethnic inhabitants! Interestingly enough, Naipaul does discover a rich history of his land of birth in nowhere else but the land of his culture, i.e., England. Though this makes him understand Trinidad much better, he keeps treating its people with sheer contempt. The irony is, even after living in his cultural home for three or four decades, he writes with a sharp sense of being an 'outsider' here. He writes about England as a stranger who belongs to the country by imbibing its culture, history and language and not through birth.

What is even more ironic is that the 'timeless England' that Naipaul wants to cherish is found to be receding in this novel. As a post-colonial writer, Naipaul writes with a full awareness of England's loss of wealth and the effect of industrialisation on its landscape. For example, the writer's Edwardian Mansion-owning landlord is portrayed as a recluse; being shorn of his 'colonial' hey-day, he creates a facade around his lonely existence, having 'preferred to bewitch what he knew'. However, the facade starts to fall apart under the pressure of an industrial England bereft of its empires. The industrialisation seems to affect not only the landowner but also his employees. Naipaul might have known a quintessential England through his reading but the reality is ironic and tragic part of the mansion is being sold and people are losing jobs, facing uncertainties of various sorts, getting influenced by machine and so on. The small village of the writer lives in becomes a microcosm of

post-Empire England; though it rejuvenates the wanderer writer through its quiet beauty and order, it fills him with profound sadness as he observes a slow break down of the order and certainty.

Stylistically speaking though, it is far away from being a tragic novel. It is written in a muted tone all along to go with the quiet landscape with its changing colours and rhythm every chapter's title acts as a caption to the painting that is going to be created in it through words, of course. The characters are portrayed with so much insight that it feels like one knows them from a close perspective. They seem so real and the details involved in describing them are so memorable. The tone is that of an achievement as well, Naipaul being established as a kind of writer that he set out to be. In other words, there is a sense of a wheel coming full circle. In the last chapter, 'The Ceremony of Farewell', the writer takes us back to Trinidad from where his journey began. His younger sister's untimely death takes him back home to realise that...my journey, the writer's journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries...writer and man separating at the beginning of the journey and coming together again in a second life just before the end.

Despite Naipaul's shortcoming in accepting the so-called colonials in Trinidad (and elsewhere), he renders a powerful musing on home, life and living in this novel. I would completely agree with Irving Howe of the New York Times that the novel proves Naipaul to be 'the world's writer, a master of language and perception, our sardonic blessing.'

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