

## Karen Armstrong In Focus

*Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is impressed by a life of Islam's founder*

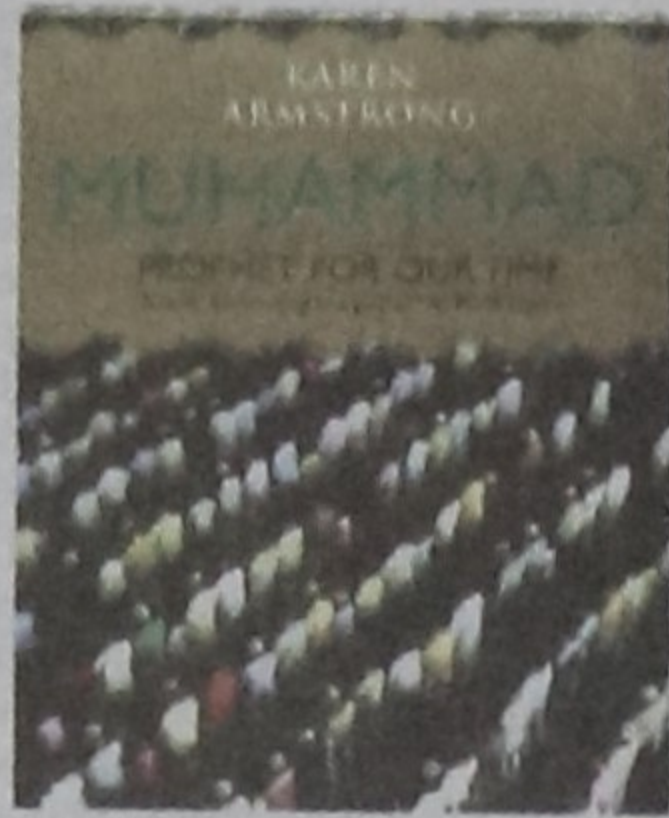
WHILE reading this book, I could hear the whispering of my intuition telling me that such a work most probably has not even been produced by someone subscribing to the faith of Islam. One is imbued with awe from the very beginning, that is, by reading the allusion that goes with the title of the book itself, till the end where the author upholds her conviction that the world in the 21st century is so full of turmoil and aggression that unless and until the Muslim and Western worlds strive to understand each other and act accordingly, the only planet we inhabit, which is one and the same for everybody, is very likely to crumble. She goes further and says, 'A good place to start is with the figure of Muhammad: a complex man, who resists facile, ideologically-driven categorization, who sometimes did things that were difficult or impossible for us to accept, but who had profound genius and founded a religion and cultural tradition that was not based on the sword but whose name - Islam - signified peace and reconciliation.'

There cannot be a better appraisal of a person and his work. It has all been put so succinctly in so few words. And this makes Muhammad (peace be upon him) the greatest of all mortals who have traversed this earth and will yet traverse. The connotation of the word Islam, meaning surrender to Allah rather than following a particular faith, has been pronounced in a most unambiguous manner that echoes through the whole book. It is a compendium that is stashed with facts and events in their historical, sociological, political and geographical details, drawing serious readers'

attention to the multitudinous internecine conflicts both inter- and intra-tribe, ever present suspicions that are virulent in nature and threat of a fierce battle about to erupt any time among the inhabitants of every hue. Against this backdrop of a very long and complex subject, Karen Armstrong, an extraordinarily diligent writer, recreates Arabia from the time before the birth of Muhammad (pbuh) to the felt need of an exemplar like him whose aim is 'peace and practical compassion', the crying need of the 21st century. No wonder the author sub-titles her book as *Prophet For Our Time*.

The point that Armstrong drives home is Muhammad (pbuh) has been thoroughly and willfully misunderstood and vilified by the Western world. She dwells at length on the implication of the word Jahiliyyah as she does with a number of other words in Arabic in order to convey their correct meanings, that is, etymologically. Thus, the exact meaning of jahiliyyah is not 'time of ignorance.' Recent research shows, Muhammad (pbuh) used the term jahiliyyah to refer not to an historical era but to a state of mind that caused violence and terror in seventh-century Arabia. Armstrong goes further and makes a rather bold assertion when she says, 'Jahiliyyah, I would argue, is also much in evidence in the West today as well as in the Muslim world.' Muhammad (pbuh) emerges as a great social reformer who struggled 'to change people's hearts and minds', for realizing which he waged a relentless struggle -- a jihad, as is the correct meaning of the word that has been entirely abused in the present day by extremists in the Muslim world.

It is as if jihad means holy war. Rather it connotes an 'effort or struggle necessary to put the will of God into practice' on all fronts, that is, intellectual, social, economic, spiritual and domestic. The author quotes an utterance of Muhammad (pbuh), made when the prophet along with his men was coming back home from Badr: 'We are returning from Lesser Jihad (the battle) and going to the



Muhammad  
Prophet For Our Time  
Karen Armstrong  
Harper Perennial

Greater Jihad.' This carries serious implications. It is only the beginning of a far more difficult struggle waged with the aim of reforming their own society and their own hearts. At this stage one wonders if those who use the rhetoric and practice of jihad nowadays have ever gone through the teachings of the prophet in this regard. Moreover, the didactics inherent in this precept serve as a strong reminder to us in Bangladesh of the necessity of cleansing our

hearts in order to make any effort to reform our society, one that is coming apart at the seams.

Thoroughness and clarity of ideas, philosophies, a keen sense of historiography, comparative analyses of teachings and practices of different religions, particularly those of the Abrahamic family, bear ample evidence of erudition, expertise and incisiveness in the thought process of the author. A. N. Wilson, the British writer, pays her the ultimate tribute. 'Karen Armstrong is a genius', says he.

Of the five chapters, all of which are equally comprehensive in terms of content, the one on jahiliyyah is especially remarkable for being a thoroughly analytic discourse on the holy Qur'an, its language, expressions, mode of recitation, effect of the verses as one hears them and, on top of everything, how to hear when one hears someone recite. In other words, listeners are to be trained as well to absorb the teachings of the Qur'an, for they help them 'to slow down their mental processes and enter a different mode of consciousness.' The author corroborates it by quoting Michael Sells, an American scholar who describes the cool effect of Qur'anic recitations when played on cassette in a hot, crowded bus in Egypt. The recitations transform tired and restless people into relaxed souls. 'A meditative calm begins to set in.' In a masterly way, Armstrong explains the exercise of breathing and its control and draws a parallel to the breathing of the Yogis 'who have found that it brings a feeling of expansiveness, comparable to the music...' Here the therapeutic effect of breathing on the part of the audience is stressed alongside.

There is much more to marvel at

in this chapter when the author explains that in the invocation, 'In the name of Allah, the compassionate (al-Rahman) and the Merciful (al-Rahim) are not only grammatically feminine but related etymologically to the word for womb.' She qualifies it further, saying that in nearly all the earlier revelations, 'a partially personified female figure' was perceived to be central. And at this point the author infers that this fact 'may explain why women were among the first to respond to the message of the Qur'an.' Perhaps the high reverential status of a mother in Islam accrues from this perception as well.

Armstrong's very objective study of the Prophet, his work and achievements is a grand way of paying homage to him, revealing as it does the person in his totality in a multi-dimensional way. A hitherto less familiar Muhammad (pbuh) is presented to us who in spite of his daily struggles in a volatile environment remained a very natural person. He would take his wives even on military expeditions and refresh himself by challenging his beloved wife, Ayesha, to a foot race and similar other fun-filled exercises. All these draw us much closer to him than ever before. As a reader of this book, I feel extremely indebted to the author, who comes from a different faith and has been a nun in a Roman catholic order for seven long years, for her espousal of inter-faith understanding through an arduous task. The result is indeed a magnum opus. Khushwant Singh's recommendation to read this book is duly acknowledged.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque, whose interests include history and music, is Principal, Radiant International School.

## ...and Syed Badrul Ahsan reads of wars waged in God's name

GOD has always been elusive. Or the search for Him has been. Then too there are all the instances where looking for God, putatively finding Him and then claiming Him for a particular religious community has spawned issues over which vast global regions have become involved. Witness the aftermath of 11 September 2001 in the United States. Suddenly, because of the destruction in New York, Western interest in Islam as also its fears of it have become a considerable many degrees more pronounced. Karen Armstrong, happily for us, is not guided by these immediate considerations. For a basic reason, which is that she has for a very long time been writing on religion and has particularly remained busy expostulating the diverse aspects of the Islamic faith. Reasoned analyses have been part of her assessments of the place of faith in life.

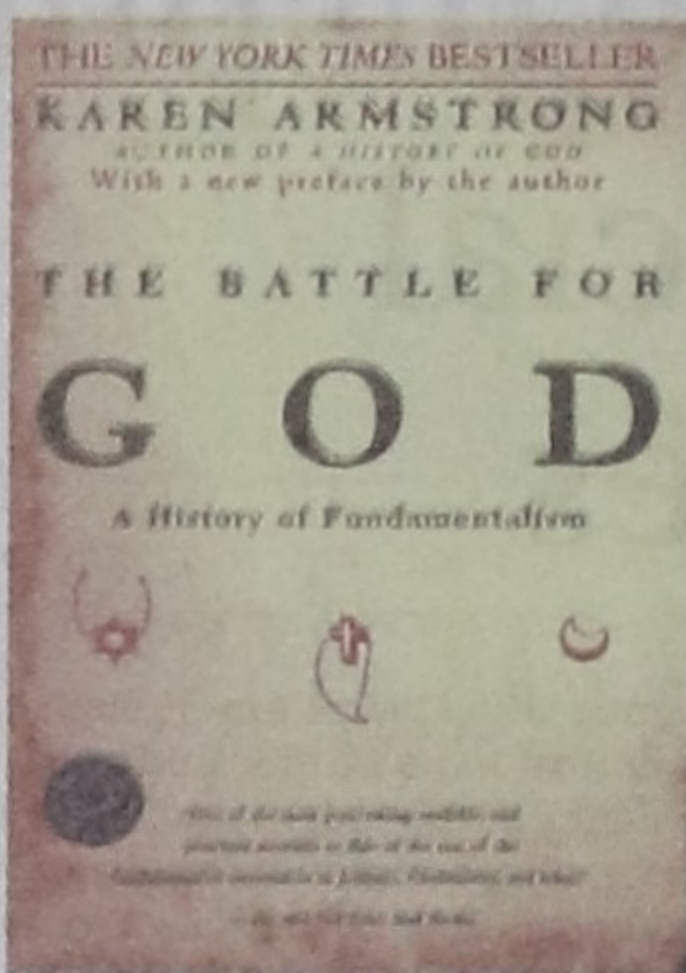
And it is just such an approach she brings into *The Battle For God*. As the subtitle makes clear, the work is a study of the history of fundamentalism not just within Islam but also among Christians and Jews. That is as it should be, for with the rise of the neo-conservatives in the United States, a fact earlier preceded by the arrival of the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, religion has come to acquire a harsher appearance than was earlier considered possible. Christianity, much to the chagrin of its tolerant sections, has in more instances than one been commandered by the neons in as much as Islam has been radicalized, and brutally so, by Osama bin Laden and his fellow fanatics. At

another end, consider the rise of Jewish extremism, especially when it comes to a question of settlements in occupied Palestinian territory. You find it rather incongruous that the very followers of Judaism who have suffered through centuries of repression and exile at the hands of other communities and governments should now be taking upon themselves the role of people not unwilling to make others suffer.

Karen Armstrong's peregrinations in the world of religion lead you to thoughts of all of the above, perhaps more. But note that she does not hesitate to inform her readers that the fundamentalism which is so dominant a factor in global politics today has had its origins in the thoughts of political leaders and religious thinkers. An instance of 'how religion can swiftly turn into a weapon for those looking for emancipation from an oppressive state comes through an observation of Iran as it was under the Shah. Between the early 1950s and late 1970s, Iran served as the perfect breeding ground for Islamic militancy. You can point the finger of blame at Ayatollah Khomeini, but do not forget that, backed by the Americans and directly assisted by the CIA, the Shah thwarted the nationalist politics Mohammad Mossadegh sought to enforce in Iran in 1953. The monarchy's insistence on Western-style development came alongside its obtuse belief that demands for democracy could be kept under the lid. SAVAK and all the instruments of repression were around to ensure that the Shah remained on top.

That was when popular discontent was taken full advantage of by Khomeini and channelled into a popular uprising.

Fundamentalism, then, is often a consequence of bad politics. But there are, from the perspective of history, the original conflicts inherent in the struggle for dominance within a faith. Martin Luther, for all the reputation he was to gain as a reformer, is historically an individual whose goal was to steer Christianity back to its guiding principles. The concept of the Trinity, the belief that a set of clerics could claim to speak for God, was not what Jesus had struggled for. Move on to the world of Islam. The schism that has persisted for centuries between Sunni



The Battle For God  
A History of Fundamentalism  
Karen Armstrong  
Ballantine Books

and Shia owes its beginnings to the fact that Ali, cousin of Prophet Muhammad, was passed over as many as three times when it came time for the growing Muslim community to choose a caliph. And when he finally succeeded in making it to the top, he was assassinated. And then his clan, personified by his grandson Hussein, perished in Karbala. That was the point when the line between religiosity and politics in Islam began to blur. It would over the centuries take the form of an intense struggle that would test the ability of the faith to survive in a world where other faiths were already arrayed against it. Armstrong brings the tale of Abul A'la Maudoodi, the Pakistani preacher and founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami. Maudoodi, all too often a cause for sectarian tension in Pakistan and eventually an instrument come handy for a military regime engaged in a genocide in the country's eastern province, came forth with his own version of what Islam ought to be. Westernised governments, believed Maudoodi, constituted rebellion against God. The implications are clear: Muslims everywhere had the right to send such governments packing. Maudoodi's ideas were to be taken over by Syed Qutub in Egypt. An enlightened man well versed in literature and active in other liberal regions, Qutub gradually gravitated to a point where he not only embraced fundamentalist Islam but also tried hardening its core. It is then that you understand what the Muslim Brotherhood was all about. Gamal Abdel Nasser had

no time for the likes of Qutub, who eventually was executed by the regime in 1966. Fundamentalism thus got a shot in the arm and went on to acquire newer dimensions.

And new dimensions came to Judaism too, through the long centuries of persecution. A revealing case concerns the zeal with which Tomas de Torquemada (1420-98) served as the first Grand Inquisitor in Spain. Once a Jew himself, before repudiating it, he appeared to take particular delight in stamping out any sign of the faith both in himself and in the lives of those he persecuted. The flimsiest of excuses were applied to up the pressure on the Jews. Any Jew who lighted candles on Friday evening or refused to eat shellfish was promptly marked out for torture. The Promised Land was thus to prove illusory. The Jewish community has been driven from one country to another, almost always made the butt of prejudice and ridicule. Rare have been the times when Jews were made to feel welcome or provided with shelter. And yet Armstrong would have us know that it was only in the Islamic world that Jews were not placed in fetters. 'The Jews of Islam', she notes, 'were not persecuted, there was no tradition of anti-Semitism...'

The Battle for God goes beyond a search for the roots of radical faith. It is in essence a history of philosophy, of the distinctions between *logos* and *mythos*, that Armstrong has given shape to. An engrossing read. And a vastly enlightening one too.

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

## Stories that buoy the spirit

*Tulip Chowdhury feels her heart brim over with excitement*

SOON after her little brother was born little Sachi began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. The parents worried that Sachi might be jealous and try to hurt the baby. However, after days of cajoling, the parents finally left her baby brother with her. Elated, she went into the baby's room and shut the door, but it opened a crack-- enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen. They saw little Sachi walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say quietly,

"Baby, tell me what God feels like. I'm starting to forget."

This story is just a drop from the ocean of wonderful, soul-searching stories in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. This book is a collection of marvellous real-life stories that beg to be read slowly, savored and recalled time and again. The hundred and one stories are inspirational life experiences that do not fail to touch the heart as you read them. It is a gift to anyone on his or her own journey of growth and healing. It is all here, written with wit, compassion and integrity. Divided into subtitles such as "On Love", "Learning to Love Yourself", "On Parenting", "Live Your Dream", the book spans a wide array of life experiences. The pages unfold with inspiring stories and touch readers with wisdom for all ages.

Patty Hansen writes about love between a father and daughter in

"Heart Song". Her father has brought her up with a little song of the heart, "I love you little girl." Then as she grew up the little-girl who was not-little- any- more would remind her father of her womanhood. But still the father would sing his song. Then one day her father had an accident and could speak no more. However, the little-girl-who-was-not-little any more felt as if she would suffocate and die unless she heard the song. She put her head on her father's chest and listened to the heart beat. She was sure the heart beats were singing, "I love you little girl..."

Jack Canfield and Mark V. Hansen write about a judge in "The Hugging Judge". The judge went about giving hugs to people in exchange for a little red heart. The hugging judge would go around finding people who were having a hard time and offer them a hug. People smiled and accepted his hugs with momentary relief. He even made a San Francisco bus driver, known as toughest, crabbier and meanest of people smile. Then he went into a hospital for the disabled and managed to make Leonardo, a severely disabled young man, smile. Every doctor, nurse and orderly was crying, for that was the first time Leonardo had smiled in 23 years.

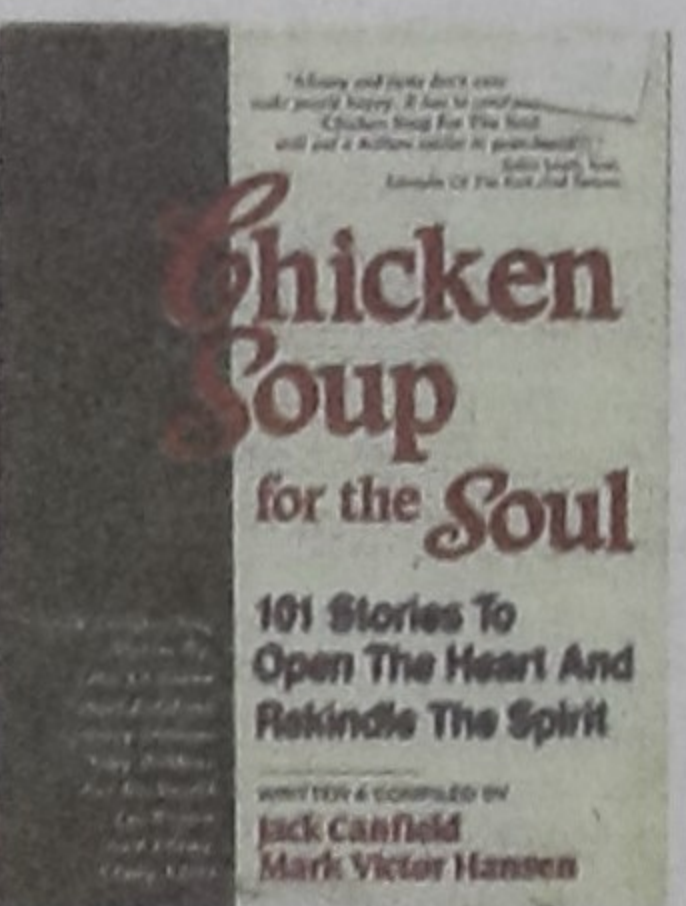
The stories under the subtitle "Overcoming Obstacles" begin with a quote from Henry Ford: "Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your

eyes off your goal." It continues with a message from the Wall Street Journal. The message says,

"You've failed many times, although you may not remember. You fell down the first time you tried to walk. You almost drowned the first time you tried to swim..."

Heavy hitters, the ones who hit the most home runs, also strike out a lot. Don't worry about failure. Worry about the chances you miss when you don't even try."

The humorist Art Buchwald writes about a friend who used to tell taxi drivers that they were doing a great job, that they were



Chicken Soup for the Soul  
Compiled by: Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen  
Health Communications, Inc.

really patient to be holding out against the heavy traffic. Buchwald asked him what the use of his lone ventures in boosting up the cab drivers was? His friend replied,

"I am trying to bring love back to New York. I have just made the taxi driver's day. Suppose he has 20 fares. He is going to be nice to all those people because he will remember me. The fares in turn will be kinder to their employees, or shopkeepers or waiters. Eventually the goodwill could spread to 1,000 people!"

The story "Simple Gesture" by John W. Schlatter revolves around Mark and Bill. One day Mark was going home. On the way he met Bill, who had dropped all his books, a baseball bat, a glove and a small tape. Mark helped to pick those up and helped him to carry them home. Five years on, Bill confided to Mark,

"I had stored Mother's sleeping pills and was going home to commit suicide that day. But after I met you I realized that the world still had hope with people like you. So you see, Mark, when you picked up my books that day, you did a lot more. You saved my life."

Jack Canfield writes about following his dreams into owning a horse ranch. He was very poor, an itinerant horse trainer going from stable to stable. But once in a school project he wrote a seven-page paper describing his dream

of owning a ranch and even drew a diagram showing the location of all the buildings, the stable and the track. His teacher gave him an F, saying it was not a practical idea. The teacher suggested that he make some changes and he would also change the grade. After three days Jack handed the paper back, without any change and said,

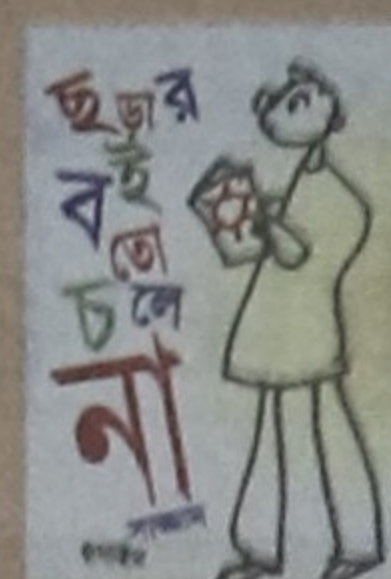
"You can keep your grade and I will keep my dream." And this was the beginning of the boy's determination to own a horse ranch. Today he owns a 200-acre ranch and his teacher brings his class every summer to show how dreams are realized.

In *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, two of America's best inspirational speakers, Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, share the very best of their collected stories. All the stories contain wit and wisdom, hope and empowerment to buoy you up through life's dark moments. They simply illuminate the path we walk on. If you wish to make a point, inspire a friend, or teach a child, you will find just the right story in this heart-warming treasury.

Money and fame do not automatically make people happy. Happiness comes from within. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* is bound to put a million smiles in your heart.

Tulip Chowdhury teaches, writes fiction and pens poetry.

## AT A GLANCE



Chhorhar Boi To Chole Na  
Sajjad Hussain  
Oinijho

These are verses or rhymes with a difference. The innocence you associate with poetry of this genre is missing here and what you stumble into is a series of harsh realities all around you. Sajjad Hussain is almost cynical in his portrayal of society, of the many ailments and pretensions it suffers from. These verses make you wonder.

The Collector's Wife  
Mitra Phukan  
Penguin Books

It is the tale of a civil servant's wife, one of those women whose sense of loneliness is somewhat made bearable through being part of the power circle. The protagonist here is paid due homage by her husband's underlings; she socializes quite a good deal. But underneath that seemingly cheerful exterior is a soul yearning for freedom.

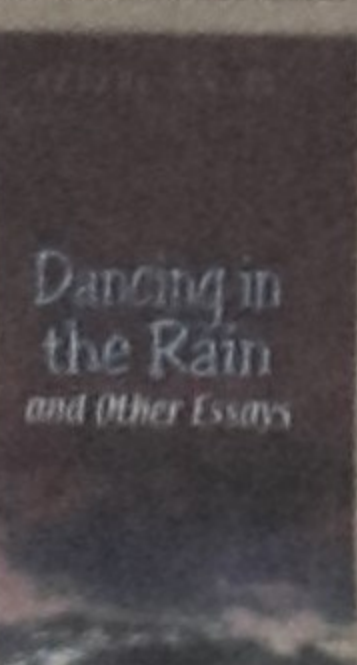


Wetland Management Valuation  
Anjan Kumar Dev Roy  
Academic Press and Publishers Ltd

With conservation getting to be an increasingly intense subject for Bangladesh, this work raises some of the serious issues that need tackling. Wetlands have over time been subjected to various sorts of predatory acts. Besides, a lack of awareness about them has often stultified progress in the sector. The work makes informative reading.

Dancing in the Rain  
And Other Essays  
Azizul Jalil  
The University Press Limited

Azizul Jalil has been writing prolifically over the past many years. Indeed, these essays are but a peek inside his thoughts, which have ranged across a wide number of subjects. There is the personal, as in his reflections on his mother. There are then the political and social pieces. And don't overlook the travel stories that come with that poetic flourish.



## Just cooked corpses

*Efadul Huq is intrigued by a story*

HOW does a writer affect his society by writing? What should an ideal writer write about? More importantly, where does a writer's words come from? These are the questions asked and discussed by J M Coetzee, from both ends of the spectrum, in *Elizabeth Costello*. The novel insightfully explores the many aspects of writing and writers, about the capability of evil in goodness and about the neutrality of the one who writes.

Elizabeth Costello, the title character of the novel, is a famous writer who is invited to lecture at several universities and gatherings throughout the book. While doing so, she finds herself battling with her evolving thoughts as she discovers that there's more gray than black and white in the universe. Consequently, the novel becomes a collection of eight lectures given by this aged author who, in the twilight of her life, realizes her true identity but remains misunderstood by her son, daughter-in-law, journalists, critics, fellow authors and, of course, the audience.

Through the intriguing character of Costello, J M Coetzee attempts to come to terms with many controversial issues of this age. In the first lecture, when asked to speak on the subject of 'realism', a disillusioned Costello refers to one of Kafka's stories. The story is about an ape who speaks before a learned society, in civilized tongue. From there, and also going through a complex philosophical rigmarole, Costello concludes in the end: 'We don't know and will never know, with certainty, what is really going on.'

Having provided reality untrustworthy and gathering a lot of controversy, some of which are crudely offensive, Costello moves on. The next lecture, on a cruise ship heading for Antarctica, is about novels in Africa. While one of her contemporary Nigerian writers claims that African novels don't flourish in Africa because 'the African novel, the true African novel, is an oral novel', Costello provides a bolder perspective. She argues and points out the problem as: 'But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to me to be glancing over their shoulders all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them.'

The story proceeds and we find Costello lecturing on animal rights. A vegetarian by choice, Costello finds it appalling that animals are killed to be eaten. To her animal meat is nothing more than cooked corpses. She believes in her cause to such an extent that she compares the slaughter of cattle to the massacre of Jews in World War II. This, however, agitates her audience and they question her grounds with much vigour. To their questions she doesn't have any concrete answer. In fact, she wonders if this evil is essentially omnipresent as even she wears leathershoes.

A few pages later, Costello's thoughts on evil move beyond wonder when in a lecture in Amsterdam she raises unsettling inquiries about the very profession of writing. If a writer can instill

virtues in us, she asks, can he also not instill in us vices? If writing can bring us the realization of truth, she ponders, can it also not bring us the realization of falsity? If a writer delves into the darkest region in history or of human psyche to make his novel authentic, will he come out of the experience unscathed and without any evil? Led by these questions Costello decides perhaps some experiences are better left unwritten. Invited to speak against censorship in the lecture, she ends up endorsing censorship!

Near the end of the novel, our confused writer finds herself in an imaginary courtroom, quite Kafkaesque, waiting for her trial to commence. Before she is allowed to pass through the heavenly portals to the other side, she must make a confession of her belief. It is then that she comes face to face with the ever-present dilemma of her life: to believe or not to believe. She appeals that, as a writer, she cannot believe in any particular entity or idea, that she must wear belief like any garment. For her, she confesses, the invisible voice speaks and she, like a 'secretary', merely writes down what it says. It could be the



Elizabeth Costello  
J M Coetzee  
Secker & Warburg

voice of the murdered but it can also be the voice of the murderer. She is not the one who chooses. Allow this reviewer to leave the verdict of that court unwritten.

It hardly remains to be said that the Nobel-winning J M Coetzee masterfully tackles highly complex philosophical viewpoints under the guise of a story, weaving non-fictional arguments into the fictional lectures of his protagonist. The plot is loose and there is no central driving force per se, but Costello's outpourings, oftentimes poetic but charming nevertheless, on life and its several aspects keep the readers entranced. Despite the novel being a bunch of lectures, it never ends up being didactic. It is rather involving because Coetzee provides both sides of the issues at hand as angry audiences or fellow writers argue with Costello.

Indeed, J M Coetzee, by writing this novel with contradictory opinions, exemplifies that in the end a writer has no belief to call his own. He only writes what the invisible voice dictates, as did Elizabeth Costello.

Efadul Huq is a student at Georgia Southern University, USA.