

REFLECTIONS

POETRY

Living with Kolkata little magazines

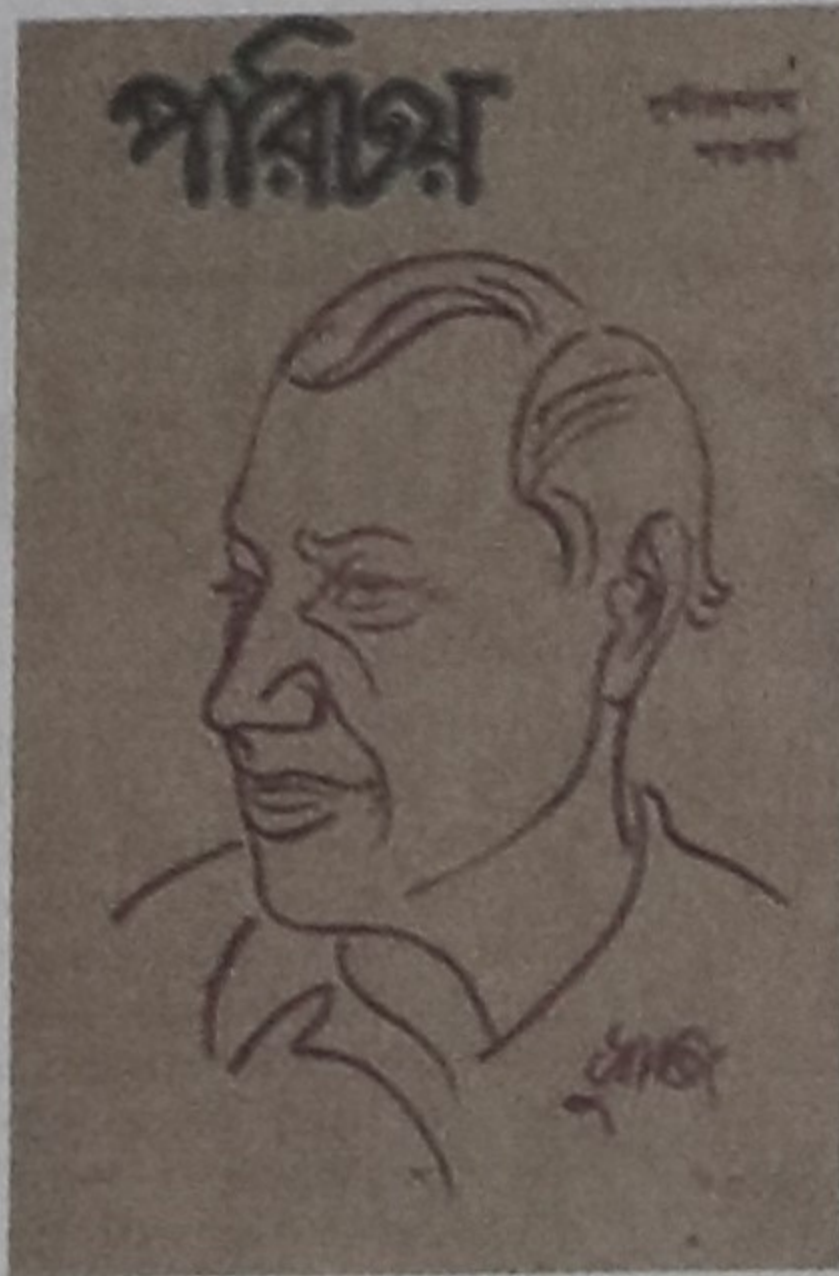
SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

THERE is little question that Bangladesh has been producing a good number of little magazines for the last few years. Many of them are up to the mark, but people inclined to reading journals from Kolkata cannot really detach themselves from those. The Dhaka literati who once had few bookshops, like Marieta at Dhaka stadium market and nothing like the present Aziz Market for foreign books and periodicals can surely recollect the many issues of *Bijnapan Parba* edited by Rabia Ghosh. Numerous novel thoughts on literature enriched the issues. Shibnarayan Roy, Sumantra Chattopadhyaya and Subimal Mishra were among the regular contributors to the magazine.

I am sure many present-day Bangladeshi writers of serious note possess the *Bijnapan Parba* issues on Amiyabhushan Mazumder, Jean-Paul Sartre and Hasan Azizul Haque. Was there any such voluminous and worthy issue on Hasan earlier? The interviewers included Shahaduzzaman and Nurul Kabir from Bangladesh too. Sanatkumar Saha and Mohammad Kamal of these parts are also notable.



Can anyone pick up invaluable issues of *Ebang Mushayera* on Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Hamlet, Hans Christian Andersen at Aziz supermarket today? I found some copies at New Market bookshops also. When I found some issues on Lokenath Bhattacharya, I was amazed at the wealth of material on this less known, less popular, less read writer who certainly contributed hugely to the growth of Bangla fiction. Subal Samanta, editor of this little magazine, deserves a big salute from the whole Bangla language readership. I came across Lokenath's *Korecho Eki Sonyasi* in this



volume first.

The special issue on novels was a happy read. Thoughts on novels by contemporary West Bengal novelists such as Annada Shankar Roy, Amiyabhushan Mazumder, Bimal Kar, Mahashweta Devi and the above mentioned Lokenath, Mati Nandi, Shyamal Gangopadhyaya, Amalendu Charavarty, Debesh Roy, Subimal Mishra, Sadhan Chattopadhyay and Abhijit Sen are special features here.

Publishing special issues on individual authors has become a common trend for many of the little mags in Kolkata. *Uttaradhiakar* (ed by Amit Das) not of Kolkata but of north Dinajpur, highlighted themes that has helped it win the love of serious readers. I recall the issue on Amiyabhushan Mazumder. The two consecutive issues on this recently deceased writer who dominated serious Bangla literary scene for about four decades are a rich source of knowledgeable, especially for Bangladeshi readers as we have little way of knowing them.

Fans of Madhusudan, Saratchandra, Tarashankar, Rajshekhar Basu, Satinath, Jibanananda, Syed Mujtaba Ali, Bimal Kar and Saradindu will never forget the issues of *Korok* on these writers. A special issue of *Korok* is generally published on the eve of the Kolkata Book Fair every year. Almost all such issues include critiques on the works of the writers focused on, writings that illuminate their personal lives, reminiscences by acquaintances as well as literary figures and also comprehensive information about their biography and works. I can recall the *Korok* issue on Kazi Nazrul Islam which carried some unbelievably rich pieces on Nazrul by some West Bengali writers.

Few special issues have dared to focus on Ashim Roy, so unknown a writer but so worth remembering! *Jalark* published two issues on this almost forgotten writer, though it is worth mentioning that Ashim Roy could not draw many readers during his lifetime. The first issue on Ashim Roy

included 'Ashim Roy's Dairy (first phase)' along with some critiques by Ujjal Roy (his son), Nazrul Islam, Amitav Dasgupta and Pradumna Mitra. To Ashim readers, no doubt, the issue is a collector's item. And then, with great pleasure they found the second issue on Ashim which included writings on his individual novels --- *Abohomankal*, *Gopaldev*, *Ekoda Trene*, *Dwitiyo Janmo*, *Rokter Hawya*, *Deshdrohi*. The article on *Nababbari* was riveting. Is *Nababbari* the only Bangla novel that tells of slavery that existed in Bengal till even British colonial times?

Afif Fuad's *Diba Ratir Kabya* has also been satiating the thirst of many Bangla literature readers. The issue published in 1998 that was given over largely to Syed Waliullah created a deep impression on Waliullah enthusiasts. Essayists like Parthapratim Bandopadhyaya, Tapodhir Bhattacharya or Tushar Pandit have done well on this rather complex writer of the Bangla language. *Diba Ratir Kabya* published three special issues on the novel, comprising some thousand-plus pages with writings by serious authors and critics. The special issues on Dipendranath Bandopadhyay or Saroj Bandopadhyay or on thoughts like 'Criticism' or 'Tebhaga Movement' clearly targeted intellectual readers.

The *Parikatha* has not reached many readers in Bangladesh. Debabrata Chattopadhyaya, the editor, has published two issues on Bangla novels one on the novels of West Bengal and the other on novels from Bangladesh. The first issue included 33 novelists and to my surprise I discovered there articles on Sanjoy Bhattacharya, Savitry Roy and Sulekha Sanyal, the unread novelists. The next issue on Bangladeshi novels included *Kando Nodi Kando*, *Janoni*, *Padma Meghna Jamuna*, *Karnafuly*, *Sangsaptak*, *Surya Dighal Bari*, *Warish*, *Barafgola Nodi*, *Rifle Roti Awrat*, *Ghor Mon Janala*, *Shesh Panpatro*, *Khoabnama*, *Hangor Nodi Grenade*, *Kanchangram*, *Jolorakshash*, *Chhapannohajar Bargomile*, *Urukku* and *Janma Janmantar*.

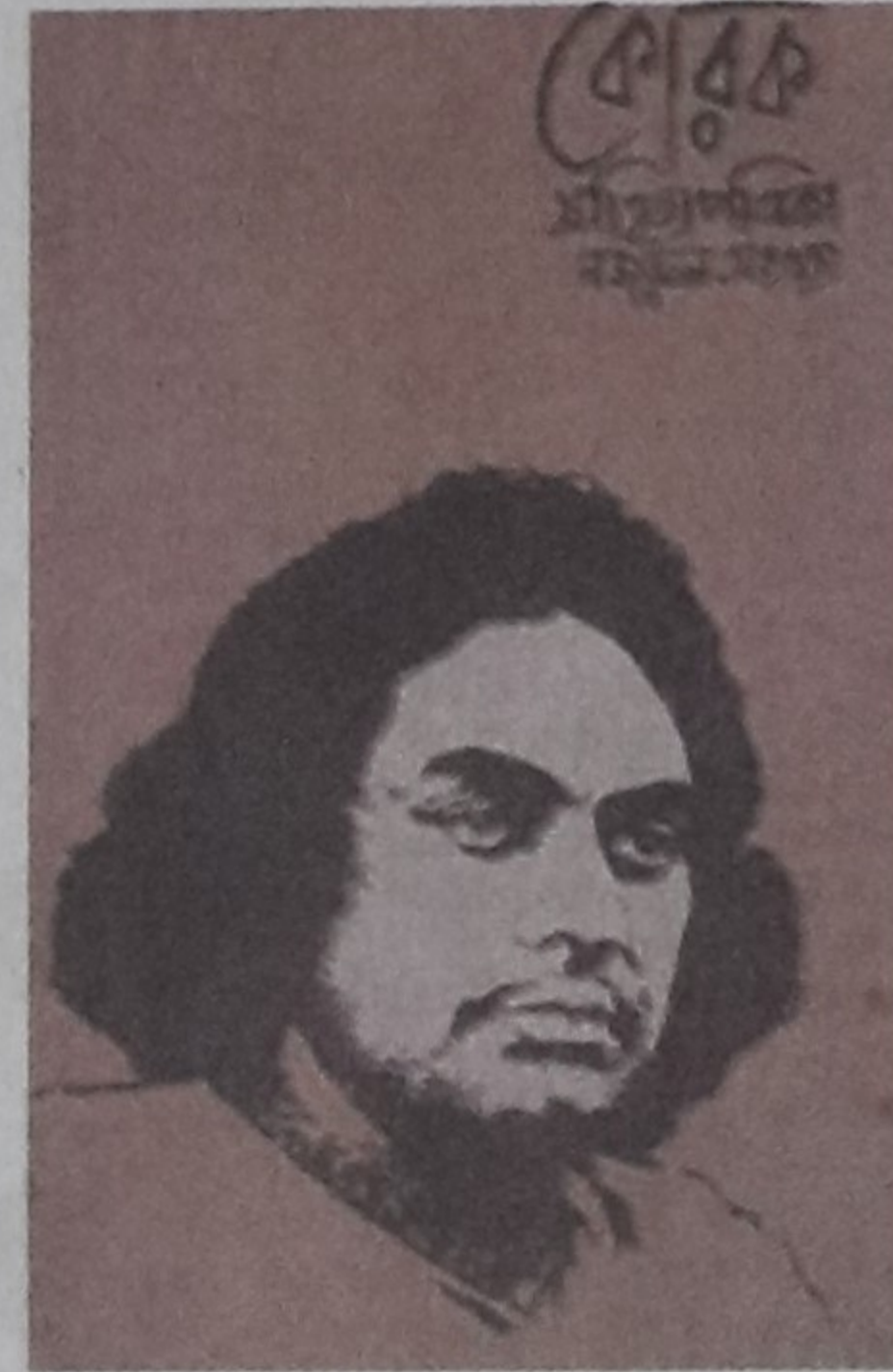
When Dostoyevsky was included on the list of focal ideas by *Samarua Byatikrom*, it first sounded like a somewhat impossible attempt by the journal. But gradually readers came round to the idea. At the Kolkata Book Fair of 2002 the magazine first zeroed in on this internationally acclaimed writer and over the next three years it brought out three more, all enriched with materials on and by Dostoyevsky.

Can Jibanananda readers forget the *Anustup* issue on the poet? When the established periodicals could not undertake such an initiative on the birth centenary of this great writer of Bengal, Anil Acharya could. So well organized the issue! So highly charged the write-ups! *Bivav* also brought out a 700-odd pages issue on Jibanananda. It seems to me that the Jibanananda issues of *Anustup*, *Vivav* and *Korok* added many new

dimensions along with much new information and many new explanations on this great poet-novelist-short story writer.

While talking about *Anustup* I cannot but recall its Puja issue of 1405 B.S. That included some 150 odd pages on Sanjoy Bhattacharya and his literary magazine *Purbasha*. Certainly this issue contributed hugely to research on Sanjoy Bhattacharya, the meritorious and experimental writer now left in oblivion.

The same issue of *Anustup* published *Ohinokul* by Shahzad Firdous. The novel inspired me to read more by him and I discovered a powerful writer in our language. Shahzad started with *Byasa*, which was published in Bangladesh, in English translation by Prof. Kabir Chowdhury, very



recently. *A-e-Ojoger*, a little mag, published a special issue on Shahzad in 1999.

Porichay, established by poet Sudhindranath Datta, brought out a special issue on its founder in 2001. *Baishakhi's* Gopal Halder issue, *Amritolok's* Italo Calvino issue, *Ebong Ei Somoy's* Bakhtin issue, *Kotharup's* Sulekha Sanyal issue, *Kari-O-Komal's* Banaful issue and issues of *Kabitirth* are many prestigious and precious examples that are worth mentioning.

Once there had been *Choturango*, established by Humayun Kabir and Ataur Rahman. Then *Jijnasa*, edited by Shibnarayan Roy, added much to this trend. In this row, in the eighties of the last century *Protikshan* began to publish out-of-trend novel ideas and writings. During the 1990s, we began to observe the appearance of some more and before the century turned over, the number of such magazines and their issues created a new horizon to exhibit past and present writers from home and abroad as well as new thoughts, literary trends and social movements.

Subrata Kumar Das has set up a website called www.bangladeshinovels.com

A dawn with a difference

(Remembering Bangabandhu)

SHAHNOOR WAHID

It was a dawn painted in black
When many a Brutus
Danced to the sound of gunfire
To perpetuate an unholy orgy
Amidst bloodied human corpse.

Lo! Humanity lay sprawling
Yonder, on the staircase
In its mellowed innocence
To tell the heartrending tale
Of a crime most foul.

Men soaked in blood rejoiced
At the command of their masters
But failed to fathom the heartbeats
of a nation, that was rock solid in resolve
To avenge the death of its liberator.

This is a dawn with a difference
And the nation has waited too long;
It is payback time, no matter what,
To lift the weight off our chest
And banish the hyenas to oblivion.

Shahnoor Wahid is Editor, Star Campus

In remembrance

AINON M.

I sat by you head bowed in silent prayer
Here and now is mine, not to share
Others can wait to set you at liberty
Before I let go, this moment belongs to me
I hold your hand for warmth
I touch your feet for blessings
I feel your face for assurance
I hold you long to my heart's content
...You will always be my luminary

Far away I see the morning sky's hue
I spread my wings to memories due
With unconditional love our fellowship began
To trust the first step you held my hand
The few words I said you marvelled at all
The breeze now trembles with prayer call

You led me to the path of courage
Taught me the spirits of truth
Said grieve when you must
But to live life, to healing do entrust
You led me to the road of wisdom
Offered me the understanding of creation
Taught me to read the words of quiet way
Bestowed me strength to make tomorrow a better day
As with time I came to being
I offered my child for you to hold
I saw your tears of joy unfold
And thus from you to me the journey began
I took the notes of life you sang
And braided a string of beautiful faith
Learned to smile when I heard young laughter
Listened to the silence of my child's pain

Caring, gently I wiped the tears with precious love
Your teachings I pass to my children for another day
To be bold to truth that will come their way
I look at your being with a smile
Between you and me this moment is mine
I seal our end with a kiss on your forehead
Embracing you I feel your heart
The beat of life is never again to start
Thus I engrave your face in my memory
In meditation I pray sleep in eternal peace
The path for you may have come to an end
But your life's scroll remains a living presence...

Ainon M. writes from Illinois, USA

NON-FICTION

Syed Badrudduja

A daughter remembers

SYEDA ZAKIA AHSAN

T HE leaves have started falling here in London and dawn has a different hue these days. I have always been attached to dawn since my childhood because it has had a special meaning for me. I am the youngest of ten children and as a child I always remember being an early riser in Kolkata. I can recall as early as when I was three, when I would awake at dawn and stand beside the red and green wrought iron railings of the long verandah overlooking the quiet road that ran by the house where I grew up. I would watch the Kolkata corporation people walk the roads. I would then skip inside to see my father, Syed Badrudduja, rosary in hand, sitting in his study and praying, a little tray in front of him. The tray contained his morning tea. Soon a maid would appear and pester me to drink a cup of milk sweetened with ovaltine. I would resist and then my father would intervene and get me halwa puree from the halwaais nearby.

My father was to me a figure of love and compassion, although I saw little of him as I grew up. Politics was his consuming passion. He was forever a public figure. And yet he was like a Druid to whom people came in droves for help and advice. He sat in a cavernous room downstairs and people gathered around him, listening mesmerised to him for hours without interruption.

Even when we had sat down for supper, my father talked of contemporary global events and personalities. It was from him we heard of men like Hitler and Mussolini and the Shah of Iran. He dwelt at great length on our Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). I wondered and thought that perhaps my father's role in life was that of a teacher. Or was he a holy man sent down from heaven to tell people to do the right things in life?

As I grew up I realised that he was my dear father and that his focus in

life was to give to others all that he had --- his knowledge, his compassion, his generosity and his love. He was the giving kind. Not for a moment did he think of the good things of life for himself or for his family. Politics claimed increasingly higher chunks of his attention; and though I did not see him much, I did get to know more of his intrinsic qualities.

My father spent long periods in jail for the political convictions he held fast to. I recall that when I was in year seven, I visited him in Presidency Jail with my mother. We carried food for him but we also carried very heavy books that he read there. Most of the books in my father's library have been stamped and passed by the jail authorities. They are a reminder to me of how he considered books to be his constant companions in seclusion.

I had once the wonderful experience of getting help from him when I had to speak on a subject in school. The subject was, 'Poets and not politicians should rule the world.' He helped me with some points and when I delivered my speech at school the nuns said that it was like a piece of literature. At home we had a number of little girls who were orphans but were cared for by our family. To me, however, it did not seem that they were really orphans but were more like ornamental messengers in the huge household. Since I had no siblings close to me in age, I spent time playing with them. My father always told me to be kind to them; that we were all equal and that I must think of them as my siblings. Such advice has given me the values that I have with me now, that I have always cherished and nurtured and that have helped me to develop very deep and lasting relationships with people in life. He imbued in us ideas of simple living and high thinking. He taught us empathy and compassion and honesty in thought, action and feeling. And he instilled in us the idea that we had to have complete faith in the Almighty and in our religion. The rites of passage were what mattered to him. He

was a profound Muslim and yet he brought within himself elements of thought and behaviour that spoke of his innate secularism. He was an orator. He had mastery over Bengali, Urdu and English. He loved music and he was fond of poetry. In his youth, he once had the opportunity to meet Rabindranath Tagore and recite a poem before him. The Bard complimented him on his exquisite delivery.

In these past many years I have had occasion to come across some noted Indian personalities who knew my father well. Hashim Abdul Halim, speaker of the West Bengal assembly, remembers my father for the great orator he was. A few years ago I was in Kolkata, where I had gone to attend a conference. Suddenly I began to suffer from severe dehydration. When heard about it and when he came to know that I was Syed Badrudduja's daughter, he had his son, a doctor, visit me and prescribe medicine for me. Pranab Mukherjee, whom I met in Dhaka a few years ago, was happily surprised to know whose daughter I was. He talked long about my father on that evening.

The feeling today is special as I sit and recollect the past in London, thousands of miles away from my home in Kolkata. I can picture his burial, hundreds of oil lit lamps diffusing light in the cold November night in a long-ago 1974. Thousands of people pushed and shoved to get a last glimpse of the man who had dedicated his life to the struggle for the well-being of the have-nots in India. I can picture the waters of the pond before his grave and the mualims doing their ablutions for the morning prayers.

I have aged now and dusk has come quicker than I thought it would. And yet the fragrance of my father's teachings remains for me the light that makes of life an endless dawn for me.

Syeda Zakia Ahsan, the youngest daughter of Syed Badrudduja (1900-1974), former mayor of Calcutta and member of the Lok Sabha, pays tribute to him on his 35th death anniversary.

Why write?

NORA KHAN

T HE question *Why Write?* is one that writers hear often, sometimes asked in jest and at times with serious intent. How writers choose to answer it (again, sometimes in jest,



Virginia Woolf

and sometimes seriously) can vary, because the question is difficult, frustrating, and perhaps futile. Lurking within it is a number of flawed, thin assumptions about the nature of utility and importance. The question's main assumption is that, because "not many people read," therefore reading, and the work that produces reading (writing), are both, inherently, not "truly important" acts. Since few people have the time or luxury to read, writing cannot, then, be very important. Indeed, "no one will read this" is the deadliest phrase the struggling writer whispers to himself in self-defeat.

Let us examine these assumptions. If everything were defined this way if one only held what "most people" did to be most valuable, ignoring the reasons why people do these things one would live in a very empty and terrifying

world. Such a world would be defined by merely survival and self-interest, by the searches for food and shelter and reproduction, by major cruelties, by the accumulation of things. No person, then, would find art, or writing, or novels, valuable because their effects are not always, or necessarily, tangible or material.

In truth, the person who poses the question "Why write?" cannot be a thoughtful reader, or a lover of literature. If one has ever been lost in the world of a work, has felt oneself in the searches, passions and suffering of a fictional character, has felt a little more confirmed of one's worth and importance in the world, or has been able to see the people around one more clearly, then one understands why writing is one of the most important types of work a human being can undertake. In the play of characters and the constructions of fictional worlds, we watch the drama of our own lives unfold. We find people who are better and nobler than us, and we find people we would never spend an hour with in an enclosed

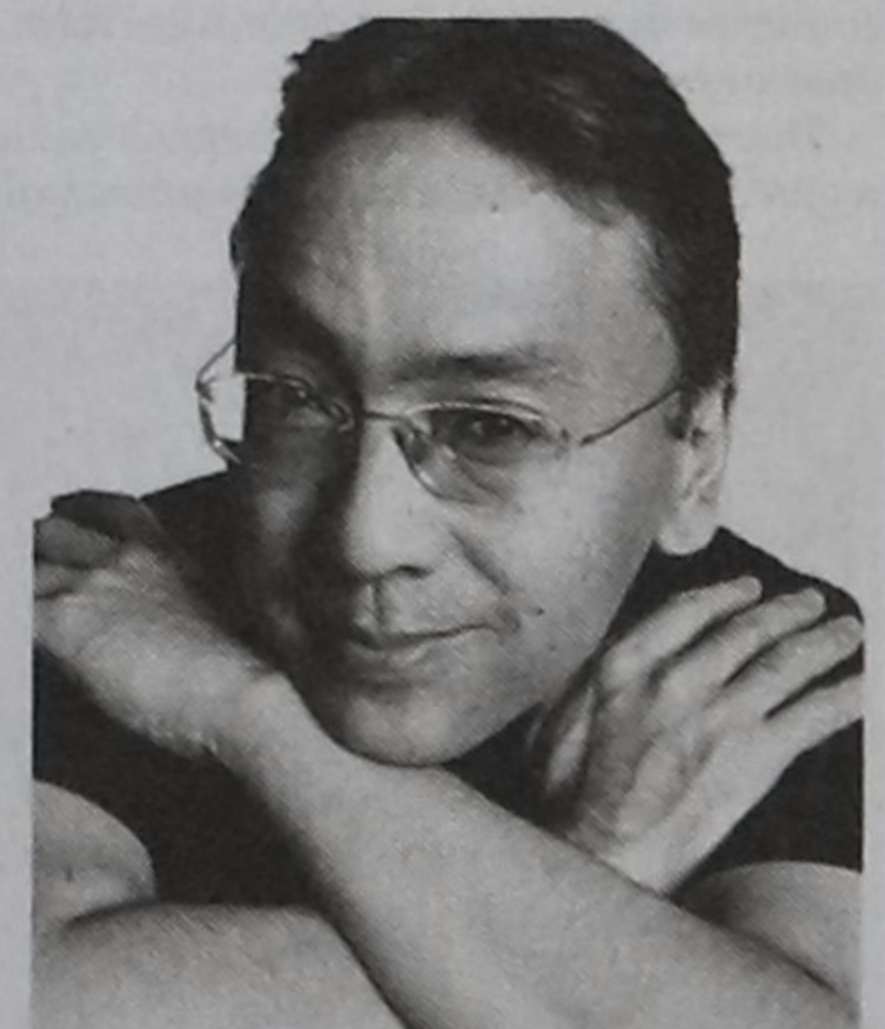


Vikram Seth

room. We are offered the exclusive privilege, and pleasure, of seeing the thoughts inside a human being's head, a privilege we are never offered in real

life.

One might go on to even respond to the query as follows: writing is rhetoric, and rhetoric is argument, which works to discern and lay bare the intent and



Kazuo Ishiguro

motives of groups of people, the importance of context and effect, and the gamut of human or animal experiences of time, emotion, and transcendence. In writing, an author can pose moral or ethical problems, explore and analyze different perspectives on any subject or idea, and work through the endless dilemmas of the heart. In reading writing, we learn from these rhetorical puzzles, offered up in different narratives, speakers, voices, religious and socio-historical contexts. We see our world's dilemmas reflected back to us. We learn to think more clearly and powerfully through writing, and we learn to be more developed, nuanced individuals.

Writing is how we transform our daily boredoms, our frustrations, and most importantly, our suffering, into beauty: the type of beauty we hopefully can experience in our own lives, even if once, or at least aspire to experience.

Nora Khan lives in New Haven, Connecticut, USA.