IMPRESSIONS

My Father's Autobiography

SAARA ZABEEN

In the month of February this year I came across an unforeseen episode of my life. The new episode began with a creation called Birombito Jiban. Birombito Jiban is the autobiography of my father.

My father's autobiography I wouldn't say is the best written autobiography ever. Unlike some other all time favourite autobiographies it is not a book full of all the rich attributes of literature. Jiboner birombona, life's contraries, in this book have not been philosophically interpreted but rather plainly rendered. It is also not a composition where my father has interwoven his thoughts with intricate language. Parallel to my father's belief "plain living and high thinking" the book's language is more simple and uncomplicated than ornamental and complex.

However, that very simple style, which impedes my father's book from entering the realm of the renowned autobiographies of great literary values, succeeds in making a place of its own in the hearts of all those who have read the book. My father may not have been introspective himself about the paradoxes of his life but his plain and lucid narration makes readers certainly pause and contemplate on it. They surely had a pleasant and satisfying time reading the book, at times smiling with joy and at times shedding tears of sorrow.

The book unfolds by telling of an unusual childhood lacking all the securities that a child usually gets or takes for granted in his family. The harshness of life had engulfed my father and his only elder brother at a very early age. After his father's business collapsed the two brothers had to cope up with all the misfortunes that resulted. Days were spent going back and forth into the experiences of sometimes extreme hopelessness and sometimes happiness. The uncertain times then with a greater blow culminated with the death of my grandmother when my father was

only seven or eight years old. One can hardly hold back one's tears at this stage and one's heart goes out to the little tender soul. One reader expressed her grief by saying that she couldn't read the book for sometime after she had read the particular part. While my uncle had already been sent to a missionary school away from home, after the death of his mother my father's life floated from one sphere to another, first taken over by his Chhoto Mama, then his Khalas, then by his father and finally by his Chhoto Mama again. The book closes with my father's end of adolescence in Goalondo (his Chhoto Mama's place) when he is about to start for Dhaka to study further after his SSC.

The turbulent journey of my father in the book has awakened me from my deep slumber of ignorance, the ignorance of my father's early childhood. The book made me realize that those were stories I had merely heard but never fathomed. Until I read the book I had never really apprehended the emotions of my father as a little boy. To start with, I was completely unaware of his afflictions after his mother's death. I had never felt the magnitude of his sorrow when he had to spend an entire night sitting beside the lifeless body of his departed mother. How sad and helpless he might have felt that night!

The particular part where he writes about his days with his father in Kolkata after his mother's demise makes me perceive his lonesome sufferings of the time. He writes that he used to stay alone at home all day long when his father was at work. Here we see a heartbreaking scene of a little motherless boy who has no one beside him. He spends his time playing with a rubber ball (it was the only toy he had at the time which was bought by his father), watching the white clouds high above in the sky and often taking heed of the whistles of the trains that passed nearby. Every time I read this extract my heart goes out to him and I wish to turn back the clock and go there to

embrace him with all the tender love, warmth and care that I as a mother shower on my son.

The book not only enables me to feel my father's pains but also the joys that he had experienced then. The hugeness of a little boy's joy can be measured in the section where he describes his first experience of having an ice cream of two paisa. The day had been more joyful as it coincided with his elder brother's visit. The extract is always pleasant to read.

In addition, little kids' coming back from the village fair and at night showing each other and everyone in the family the things they had bought or wearing punjabi and pajama and going to prayer congregations and enjoying sweets afterwards give us a delightful picture of rural children's pleasures. I am surprised to realize how the simple and tiniest things used to give the children of that time great excitement and happiness. One true example would be my father's description of a meal served by his Kutti Khala (youngest aunt) on an Eid day. The simple meal of bhuna kichuri and duck's egg curry was considered by my father and his cousins a feast. How excited they had been to see an enormous egg on their plate and how elated they were while having the meal! In the abundant treats and amusements of our times, it is unthinkable that children will now find anything grandiose in a meal like that.

The book has also been enlightening for me because it speaks about my grandparents, my roots. My grandfather Moulavi Tofajjol Hossein was not a person with whom one could easily communicate. I remember him leading a very isolated life even though he was living with us. Apart from taking walks in front of the house he never left his room to exchange words with the other family members. He showed affection for his grandchildren but not in the way grandfathers usually do. It seemed he was resentful of

everything and did not have much care for anyone in the world. We all accepted our Dadu's seclusion without ever questioning why he had such bitterness in life. I don't know whether any one of his other grandchildren ever thought about it or not but I certainly did not. The reason for this of course is that we rarely see our grandfathers' identities beyond the role that they play as grandfathers. However, the book has given me not only some impressions about Dadu's personality but also made me inquisitive to learn more about him. The book reveals his failure in business and so we understand why he could not be there for his wife and children. And just when he had a grip over life's harsh realities and started a new life with his wife and children, his wife died, shattering all his renewed hope and zest for life.

Accepting the inevitability and realizing his limitations he let his relatives take care of his children. These disclosures in the book certainly give some clues as to why he had such bitterness in life. It is true that Dadu was not an ideal husband or father, but it was not because of selfishness but rather inability on his part that caused it. We note that he never remarried. I greatly respect Dadu for this decision as I believe it highly honoured my grandmother's deceased soul.

While I had seen Dadu and remember him quite well, Dadi to us had always been a myth. As she had died very young few people had the opportunity to meet her and those who did were too old to say anything about her while we were growing up. But my father's early fleeting memories of his mother in the book were good enough resources for me from which I could paint a realistic image of our Dadi. My grandmother Jamila Khatun was a cheerful woman full of spontaneity. Everyone, including our Dadu, highly admired her and often compared her with a saint (in their words Fereshta). My father recalls that he had never seen her quarrel with anyone and

therefore had good relations with everyone. An incident which is quite proof of her lovable behaviour is when she as a young girl once accomplished something that every other person had failed to do. At a cousin's wedding the bride had suddenly become disappointed and refused to talk or eat at all. In this predicament eventually it was Dadi who succeeded in rescuing the family. Dadi not only pleased her enough to speak out but also eat from her hands. Because of Dadu's inconsistencies, life for Dadi was quite hazardous. She passed days in great uncertainty being the loan parent. But what is appreciable is that she never lost her calm or patience. Instead, for the well being of the family, she often tried to contribute on her own. From time to time she ventured out to do something that would bring some extra money at home. One such instance is that when her house was near the school, she quite innovatively thought of preparing some peanuts that the children could buy from her while going to school. Attempts like these were not looked upon kindly by my grandfather and I am sure it was also a gesture not well accepted at that time in the society they lived in. A woman from a middle class conservative society was expected to depend on the male members of the family. But I would say that it only shows that she was a woman who believed in progress. And her endeavours which were not recognized then would now be considered as admirable entrepreneurship skills. I salute my Dadi for her ventures. She had undertaken to do something which I don't think I could have ever dared to do myself.

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-To be continued next week

POETRY

Fiery Path

HARIVANSH RAI BACHCHAN

Fiery-path! Fiery-path! Fiery-path! The tree may be fine or erect, It may be dense or big, But not even the shade of a leaf Don't seek! Don't seek! Don't seek! Fiery-path! Fiery-path! Fiery-path!

You shall never tire! You shall never halt! You shall never stray! Take oath! Take oath! Take oath! Fiery-path! Fiery-path! Fiery-path!

This sight is really great, The people always trek, Tears get mixed with blood And flow along, flow along, flow along! Fiery-path! Fiery-path! Fiery-path!

Translation: Helal Uddin Ahmed

[Harivansh Rai Bachchan (1907 - 2003) was a distinguished Hindi poet of the twentieth century. He earned prominence during the 'Chhayavaad' (romantic upsurge) literary movement of Hindi literature and was a famous exponent of Hindi 'Kavi Sammelan'. The second Indian to obtain a PhD degree in English Literature from Cambridge University, he is best known for his early work of poetry 'Madhushala' (1935), which depicts a bar selling alcoholic drinks. Apart from Omar Khayyam's Rubayat, he is also remembered for his Hindi translations of Shakespeare's Macbeth and Othello, as well as the Bhagvad Gita.

His career spanned teaching jobs in universities, a producer of All India Radio as well as a stint with the Ministry of External Affairs. It was during his days at Cambridge in the 1950s that he replaced his family name 'Srivastava' with 'Bachchan' as a protest against caste-based Hinduism. He was nominated a member of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Indian Parliament) in 1966, received the 'Sahitya Academy Award' in 1969 and was honoured with the title 'Padma Bhushan' in 1976 for his contributions to Hindi literature. Bollywood megastar Amitabh Bachchan is the older among his two sons.

'Agneepath' was one of his inspirational poems, which was used as the theme and title of a 1991 blockbuster movie in Mumbai, featuring Amitabh Bachchan as a ruthless mafia don. The movie was a huge success and brought Amitabh a national award for outstanding performance.]

Motherland

MOBASHIR MONIM

For her will I fall, For her was I born. For her will I die, For her did I rise.

For her will I fight, For her is my pride. For her will I perish, For her are my merits.

For her was I at peace, For her am I at war. For her did I defend, For her now I offend.

For her I came to this world. The world to her I shall restore.

> MOBASHIR MONIM IS A STUDENT AT INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION CENTRE, DHAKA

ESSAY

'No Art to Know the Mind's Construction in the Face'

Which Is The Villain?

SHAFIQUL ISLAM

"O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain! My tables----meet it is I set it down/That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!" Hamlet, after his first visit with the ghost of his father, portrays how a villain may look like. As we move on to read Shakespeare, we are faced with evil characters as half of life is naturally in the hands of evil people because, in the Bard's own words," the web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together". The predicament of human life lies in his inability to delve deep into the human psyche, the Bard clarifies, "As there is no art to find the mind's construction in the face", we have to put up with all, men and women, good or bad because "Readiness is all" and "Some innocents escape not the thunderbolt". Shakespeare is well known for creat-

ing some wonderful villains and everyone loves a good villain as villainy is a very common human trait. Although the characters discussed here may not be the epitome of villainy, the quote selected certainly reflects villainous thoughts or intents. 'The vicious mole of nature' that Hamlet attributes to the villainous activities of human beings, is exquisitely delineated in the words uttered by the villains in different plays.

The 'pelican daughters' of King Lear, Goneril and Reagan are the most heartless and cruel children who betrayed their gullible father King Lear and innocent sister Cordelia. But both of them developed extra marital relationships with Gloucester's bastard son Edmund, who deceived his father and brother. Edmund is gradually developed into a more and more dangerous villain than Goneril and Regan who schemed to destroy all and grab everything. He ponders, "To both these sisters have I sworn love;/ Each jealous of the other, as the stung/ Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?/ Both? One? Or neither? Neither can be enjoyed/ If both remain alive."

There has always been great debate regarding Shakespeare's portrayal of the infamous King Richard III, and some critics disagree that he was as diabolical as Shakespeare presents him. Nevertheless, in the opening soliloquy of the play, " Now is the winter of our discontent", Richard explains his evil intentions quite clearly. Shakespeare is never partial to any character--- good or bad. He magnanimously allows the most diabolical villain to defend his cause and enough room to explain why he commits crime. He woos and cajoles Anne Neville into marrying him, even though he killed her husband hours before and father earlier. He basically kills anybody who objects to him, and then he had his two

nephews beheaded for good measure. Richard, aware of his deformity and ugliness, concludes that his only course to follow is to resort to ill deeds, " And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,/ To entertain these fair well-spoken days,/ I am determined to prove a villain/ And hate the idle pleasures of these days."

Macbeth, portrayed as very valiant, loyal and dutiful, before he meets the three weird sisters the witches, turns out to be ambitious and commits one sin after another to ascend to the throne and perpetuate his kingship. The character that goads him to perform all ill deeds is his wife- Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare endowed Lady Macbeth with more hard metal than most of his villains. Apparently free from all female 'frailties', she denies the inherent softness of a woman, especially of a mother to her children. After she obtains Macbeth's consent to murder King Duncan and the queen, she evinces her determination to become a devil, "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty!"

Macbeth, ambitious to usurp power and prompted by the witches and Lady Macbeth, adds to the darkness of his horrific crime, murdering Duncan and the queen as the worst violation of hospitality. From then on, he goes on to murder Banquo, the wife and children of Macduff and so on. He does not know how to bring an end to his reign of carnage. He utters, "For mine own good / All causes shall give way. I am in blood/Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go aver. Strange I have in head, that will to hand / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned."

Aaron in Titus Andronicus is very naïve in delivering his thoughts of villainy compared to other consummate villains. But the revenge that Aaron the Moor cooks up is so harsh that he ranks very high in the Shakespearian Villain list. He convinces Tamora's remaining sons to rape and mutilate Titus's daughter Lavinia. They cut out her tongue and cut off her hands so that she cannot identify them. Titus's other two sons were imprisoned, so Aaron told Tamora to tell Titus that if he would cut off his own hand she would set his sons free. So Titus chops off his own hand, and then promptly receives his sons back minus their bodies. Aaron is unrepentant even when he is ordered to be buried chestdeep and left to die of thirst and starvation, " If one good deed in all my life I did / I do repent it from my very soul." He defiantly proclaims his criminal proclivities, "I have done a thousand

dreadful things/ As willingly as one would kill a fly / And nothing grieves me heartily indeed / But that I cannot do ten thousand more."

Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, in Shakespeare's bloodiest play Titus Andronicus, turns out to be one of the cruelest villains and secretly plans a horrible revenge for Titus and all his remaining sons. She contemplates, "Ne'er let my heart know merry cheer indeed/ Till all the Andronici be made away / Now will I hence to seek my lovely Moor /And let my spleenful sons this trull deflower."

The most diabolical of Shakespearean villains, Iago, is not so articulate about his evil schemes. His evil design to annihilate Othello, Desdemona and Cassio contaminates the entire atmosphere of the play. He is apparently so naive and pretentious that he never outwardly poses any hint of mischief to any character and never blurts out his nihilistic views on mankind. He will eventually prove utterly different from what he pretended to be, "For when my outward action doth demonstrate/ The native act and figure of my heart/ In complement extern, 'tis not long after / But I will wear my heart on my sleeve/For daws to peck at: I am not what I am". At the end of the play, as they lead him off to what would seem to be his destruction, he dares to defy authority, "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: From this time forth I never will speak word."

Measure for Measure is a tragicomedy which unfolds a character, otherwise known as virtuous, turning out to be a nefarious one in circumstances in his control. Angelo rules in the Duke's absence and tries to uphold himself as a man of integrity. When Isabella, a beautiful novice nun approaches him with a request to save his brother now in jail waiting to be executed for newly enacted law of fornication, Angelo, a hypocrite, proposes to Isabella to sleep with her, "Redeem thy brother/By yielding thy body to my will,/Or he must not only die the death,/But thy unkindness shall his death draw out/To lingering sufferance.

Iachimo, in Cymbeline, proves himself to be villainous without having any cause for it. He bets with Posthumus that he can tempt his wife Imogen to commit adultery, "I will lay you ten thou sand ducats to your ring that, commend me to the court where your lady is, with no more advantage than the opportunity of a second conference, and I will bring from thence that honour of hers which you imagine so reserved." He sneaks into her bedroom, secretly watches a mole on her left breast while she is asleep and steals a bracelet as a proof of her infidel-

Claudius usurps the throne of Denmark by murdering his brother and suspects the behaviour of Hamlet who mourns his father and resents his mother Gertrude's hasty marriage to his uncle. His guilty conscience does not allow him to pray, "O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon it, Of direst cruelty!"

contrives in a contract to cut one pound of flesh from Antonio's body is also the finest attraction of the play . Shylock hates Antonio because he is a Christian and also because he insults and spits on him for being a Jew. He says, "I hate him for he is a Christian / If I can catch him once upon the hip / I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him./....Cursed be my pride/If I forgive him."

Thomas Delise, an American critic ponders, "The Merchant of Venice is an intriguing play because Shylock, originally regarded as a diabolical villain, is now regarded with a great deal of sympathy. In fact he is perceived to be a victim of cruel prejudice, while some view the Christians in the play as the real villains. Was Shakespeare himself sympathetic to Shylock's plight? We'll never truly know", but we can at least rest assured that Shakespeare 's villains are never deprived of human touches. When Shylock argues in favour of his action, we can not but suspend our hatred for the time being and agree with him. Shylock's self defense sounds quite reasonable, "if you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? if you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?----if we are like in the rest, we will resemble you in that."

Bassanio may dream of a world without villain in his passionate expression "I like not fair terms and a villain's mind" but people in fact have no choice. Shakespeare names the evil people as " the devil incarnate", " a stoney-hearted villain," and " bloody minded or a blinking idiot" and offers us the chance to see ourselves in them. As ordinary suffering humanity, we can not rise above our moderate or even high ambitions or we get concerned with money and become the victim of desireeventually all of us become enmeshed in the mystery of life either good or bad. To conclude, Shakespeare has given us wonderful tales filled with remarkable characters such as Othello, who force us to realize nance with a subtle dark angel.

MD SHAFIQUL ISLAM IS A SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL AND SHAKESPEARE BUFF

The Merchant of Venice is a comedy, but the villainous character Shylock who

that within each of us the better angel of our nature is always struggling for domi-