

Psychology in ordinary lives

Sardar M. Anwaruddin dwells on the many facets of a man

In her book *Vygotsky at Work and Play*, Lois Holzman brings the theories and insights of Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, into the lives of ordinary people and their everyday activities. Vygotsky's influence is enormous in the fields of psychology and education, but he seems to be too difficult for ordinary readers. Holzman does an excellent job in bringing him from academia into the field. In this book, her main purpose is to tell her own "story of bringing Vygotsky from the scientific laboratory to ordinary people and their communities." *Vygotsky at Work and Play* can, therefore, be a great resource for teachers, psychologists, child development practitioners, and social workers.

Problem with scientific methodology: Holzman begins the book by referring to Vygotsky, who rejected dualistic divides in psychological conceptualization, and advocated a method of dialectics. Raising questions about contemporary scientific inquiry, he treated science as a cultural phenomenon open to scrutiny and radical transformation. He preferred to view science as a social-cultural-historical activity. Holzman informs us that "Vygotsky proposes a qualitatively different conception of method not a tool to be applied, but an activity (a 'search') that generates both tool and result at the same time and as continuous process." Holzman calls this *tool-and-result methodology* to capture the dialectics of Vygotsky's conception. This new conception is neither subjective nor objective, but definitely outside the dualistic box. This is a process of creating environments for development.

Vygotsky in therapy: Bothered by the cognitive-emotive divide, Holzman



Vygotsky at Work and Play
Lois Holzman
Routledge

aims at creating a zone of emotional development. Referring to several studies she and her colleagues conducted, she concludes that "cognition... is a social and cultural achievement that occurs through a process of people collectively constructing environments in which to act on the world. It is located not in an individual's head, but in the person-environment interface." She discusses her techniques of social therapy which take a *developmental* approach, rather than a *problem-solving* one. In the social therapy, she organizes groupings of people collectively working together and creating the 'emotional zone' that is their new emotionality (their learning-leading-development).

Bringing the psychological theories to everyday life, Holzman's social therapy treats *the group* not its individual members as the therapeutic unit.

In the classroom: Holzman's thesis is "that education could be advanced if we consider the teacher as therapist." Departing from the cognitive-emotive divide, she argues that most schools relate to emotion as a problem. Like Vygotsky, she criticizes the separation of intellect and effect, and argues that "schools function with an acquisitional learning model rather than a developmental one." If schools are not developmental, what should we do? Her answer is to bring development into schools. In order to do so, she emphasizes the roles of play, but laments that "the official position on play is that it is irrelevant to school learning." Holzman hopes for the unity of affect and cognition that is possible when children are learning to perform and performing to learn. In this regard, teachers should work as therapist and focus on "the entirety of a person's makeup and not just his or her cognitive faculties."

Outside of school: Holzman argues that schools hardly provide students with environments in which they can be creative on their own terms. Reporting on some outside-of-school programs, she emphasizes the importance of theatrical performance and play. Holzman elaborates "the Vygotskian claim that learning and development are fundamentally social activities." She relates this to life outside of school by giving children and adolescents opportunities to do what they rarely can do in school. Performance, in this regard, can give expression to the unity of intellect and effect.

At the workplace: Holzman uses a

quote: "Relationships are more important than things," and this seems to summarize her ideas. She explains how businesses prioritize collaborative learning strategies and the value of play more than schools do. Through her experience of working in professional development projects, she illustrates how participants engaged in *creative imitation* in what Vygotsky called the *imaginative sphere*. Holzman's main argument is that "to the extent that business and organizations are structurally and functionally designed to relate to social units... and not to individuals, they are potentially developmental environments."

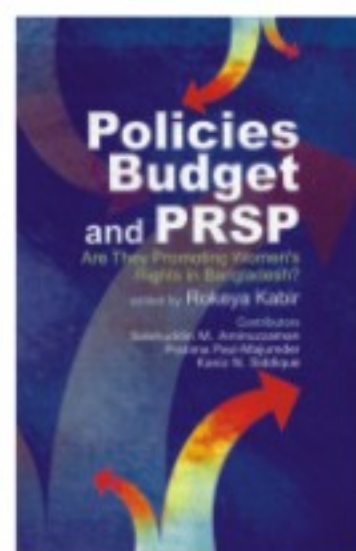
Changing relationships: With some background information about the institute where she works and the kind of work it does, Holzman raises some questions about the *inside academia* versus *outside academia* debate.

Responding to the critique that "only certain kinds of data produced under certain conditions count as legitimate," she returns to her argument about the methodological problems. Holzman follows Vygotsky who, following Marx, recognized that "the object of psychology's study was not the intra-psychic state of individuals as they are, but the social activity of producing their becoming." She concludes the book with an optimistic view that we can change the world by working and playing *together*. Holzman is very successful in making Vygotsky accessible to the ordinary readers. And the book, written in easy-to-understand language, can be a great resource for those concerned with human development.

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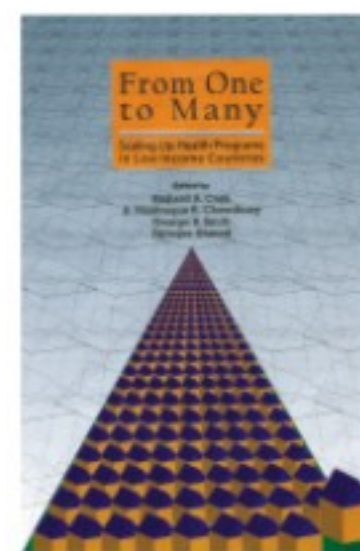
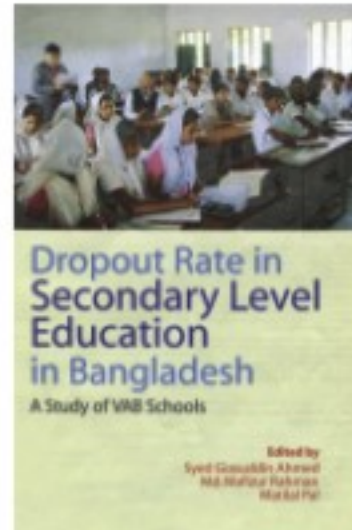
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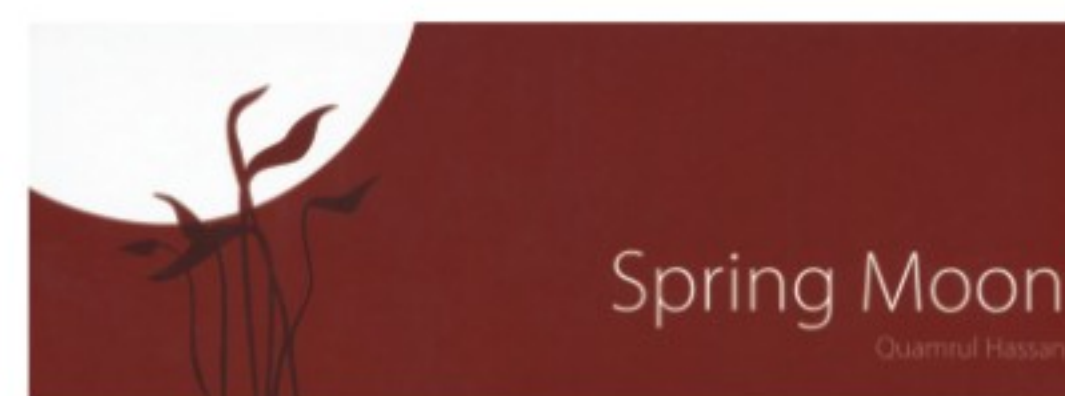
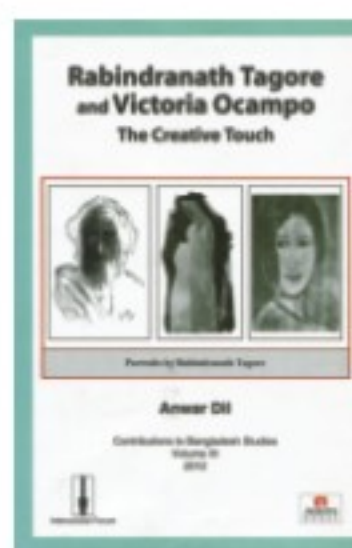
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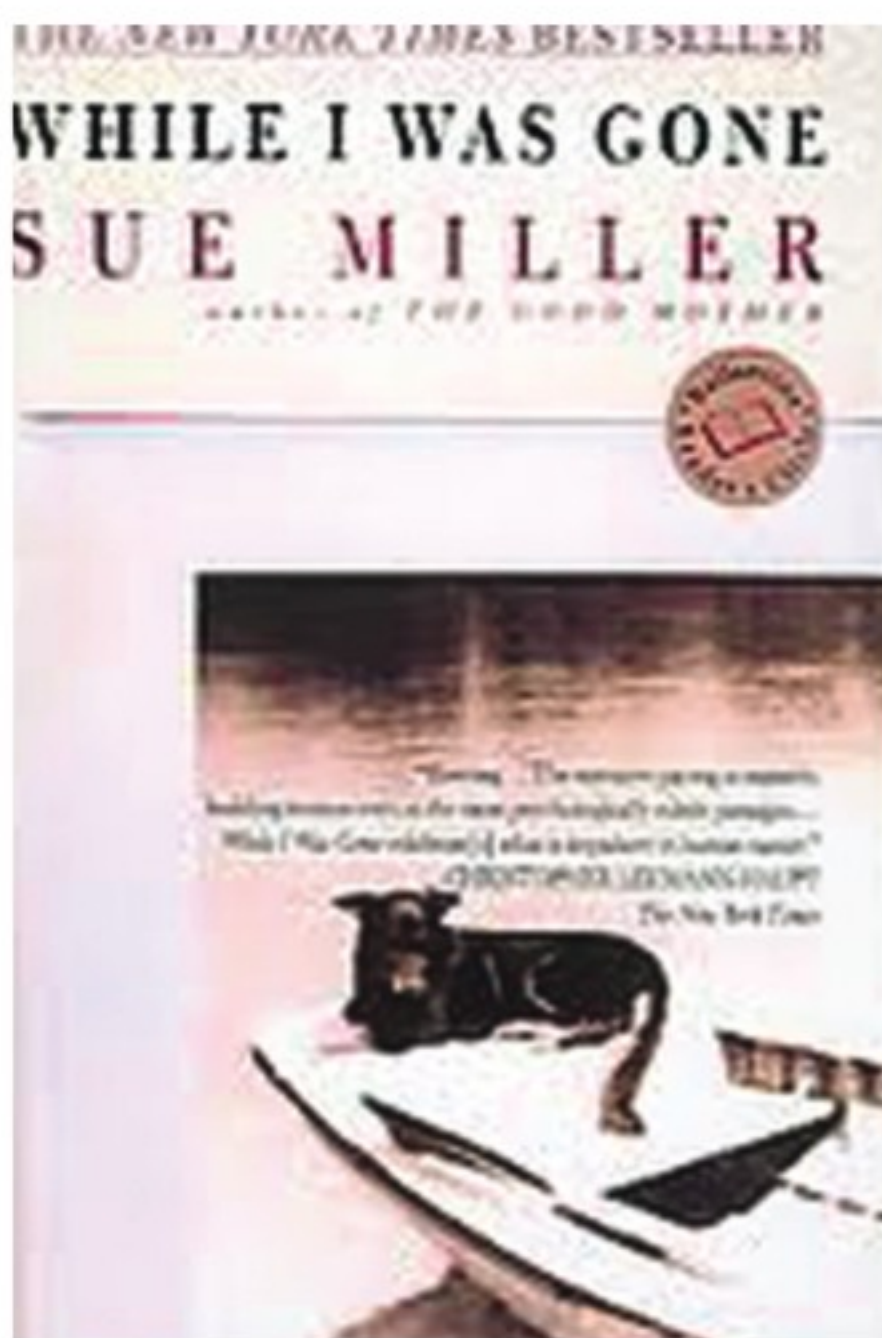
Tulip Chowdhury is touched by endless emotion

When one comes to the end of *While I Was Gone*, one has a feeling of having completed a very peaceful journey through a great story. The plot of this story holds a superb build up that takes the reader in a smooth sailing with the characters and events and then climaxes into a great insight about the truths of human relationships, about how unpredictable life can be.

Jo Becker, a vet is married and has three vivacious daughters. Her husband Daniel is a loving, saintly man preaching at the local church. It all sounds like a happily settled family. And yet Jo's mind is invaded by a persistent restlessness. This restlessness originates through events that took place in her life when she was in her twenties. Living in a small town of Massachusetts, USA, Jo finds her mind repeatedly going back to Dana, a loving friend who had died an unnatural death. Nora, Sadie and Cass, the three daughters of Jo, are grown up and are well settled in their own vocations. With the chicks out of the nest Jo is going about her life with her husband, taking out quiet afternoons on their boat, taking evening strolls with their dogs and working with animals at the animal hospital. And yet in the midst of it all she has some eerie feelings as if everything is heading towards a bad ending. She tries to tell her husband that she is getting a premonition about brewing trouble but Daniel will have none of it; he is not influenced by distorted thoughts. And just then Eli, a man from Jo's haunted past, appears on the scene and she finds her life in jeopardy. Eli, part of an early life that Jo wanted to erase from her memories, now stands with her as a tormentor, shattering her feelings and can even ruin her marriage.

With Eli's reappearance in Jo's life the story goes to a flashback in the past to reveal the dark chapter in her life. Jo was in her twenties when her restlessness got the better of her. This taciturn nature made her want to flee from her first marriage with Ted. She had taken a false name and gone away to another town to live with some students. There she had met Dana, the sweet, gentle young woman who had befriended her. Dana had a natural talent to be friends with people and everyone else in the house they shared with loved her. Jo had found herself telling lies after lies as she put that distance between Ted and herself. But Dana often looked at her quizzically

and asked searching questions as if she had doubts about all that Jo had to say. Nevertheless she continued to support Jo by being by her side. There were other students --- Larry, Duncan, Eli and Sara. Jo had a hard time keeping out of the way as some male inmates tried to make advances to her. And yet Jo was happy, happy just to be away from her marriage. Jo found life with these students very refreshing and it was like a new start to her life. The students took her in and shared their joys and sorrows with her and she was blended into their life like another friend. And then tragedy struck and Dana was brutally murdered in the



While I Was Gone
Sue Miller
Ballantine Books

house they all shared. The murderer went free as the police failed to find any links to the assailant. It was decided that it must have been a break-in case. Jo came back home after the tragic incident but her marriage was already on the rocks.

Now after all these years Eli shows up when he comes for the treatment of his dog. Jo, his vet, helps him with his emotional upheavals when his dog is put under euthanasia. But what is strange was that suddenly Jo finds herself drawn to this friend of her earlier years. It is as if she is being pulled to a dark void know-

ing well that she will regret the consequences. All of a sudden Daniel's goodness is not enough to hold Jo back from her peaceful married life. One day when she is ready to spend the night with Eli she finds the murder of Dana so close at hand that she feels as if she has been hit on her head by the murderer himself. Jo is ready to go to the police with her knowledge of the murder but she is stuck for there is no evidence pointing to the murderer. It is her version of the confession of a murderer against his telling the truth again at the police station. Daniel finds out about the nearly-committed adultery on Jo's part and once again Jo's marriage seems to be crumbling apart. Jo is now facing an indefinite future. Her restless nature derives her of a peaceful family life repeatedly and yet for this very reason she is near solving a crime that took place long ago. From this point the story seems to reach the poignant peaks and branches away in different directions, each branch holding a new light to the story line and the characters that come with it.

The story in *While I Was Gone* is a first person narrative by Jo the protagonist. That makes the reader feel as if the writer is buttonholing him and telling a story. The story portrays different remarkable characters. Daniel is gentle and kind. Jo is her fidgety soul most of the time and yet at times she concocts the truths of life. For instance she speaks of her children,

"Daniel and I lay side by side in the dark, unsure, unknowing, scared as children while the children moved dangerously around in the world, learning to be adults."

Her twin daughters Nora and Cass are two opposite characters. Cass, the boisterous one, is always on hunger for new life. Nora is the quiet and steady one. Then there is Dana, the loving person, and Eli the dark and quiet one. The other students, Larry and Duncan, too are shown with distinctive personalities of their own. All the characters seem to be sewn on to a real story and like a real life situation the characters are drawn with their flaws and goodness. Indeed the story builds up very gradually and when it reaches climax the reader has a realization that there is indeed a life story told with precision in every detail.

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and poetry.

Hitler's library, Rumi and Rwanda ...

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Something stirs in the heart when you come across new books. And then something cracks in it when you remember you simply cannot afford to buy all those books because of the prohibitive prices that come with them. With all this twenty two per cent tax imposed on the import of books, you cannot argue with the bookseller and ask him why he cannot give you the tomes you need at prices you can afford. He too has a life and a career to plod through. Now, the queer bit here is that he is in no position to give you the book the way you want it; and you are not quite ready to spend all that money you happen to have at a given moment on that book you have been eyeing for a while.

Which takes you to the matter of all the pirated editions of new books you often see at some traffic intersections in this hugely unwieldy and maddening city. Those books --- Obama's two works, Hillary Clinton's memoirs and now Jaswant Singh's work on Jinnah --- tempt you hugely. You know you can go into negotiations with the young man proffering them to you as your vehicle stops at the lights. He begins by asking for as much as five hundred taka for a copy. You know that you can pin him down, at some point, to a figure you and he can be quite comfortable with. There is, after all, all that experience you have accumulated at the fish market. The fishmonger began by demanding a thousand. You, the successful diplomat that you are in such domestic affairs, emerge triumphant when eventually you give him four hundred and march home gaily with that gleaming fish in your tremulous masculine hand. Who knows? You could try a similar approach with this young mobile bookseller. And so you talk. And as you do, you realise with something of delight that this young man has grown to be pretty knowledgeable about books in your time.

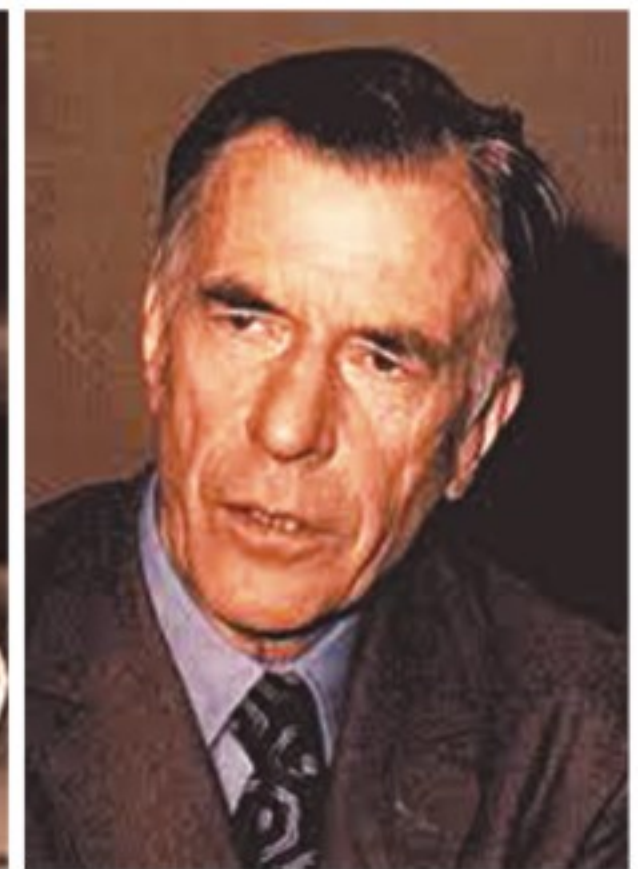
At the end of it all, as the red on the signal gives way to green, you have the newest of Shobhaa De's work in hand. You are happy, for there is that absence of subtlety in De that you have always admired. For that matter, you could even be thinking of Taslima Nasreen's loud professions of sexuality or Erica Jong's declarations of sensual love. Beyond and above that, though, is that certain thrill which tells you you are the owner of yet another book, one that will add to the beautiful chaos that is your bedroom. That is the place you love, for that is where you love the woman you would die for, where you love to read. Books do tempt, even those that you read ages ago as a child. Think of the fairy tales, think of a collection of these stories published in 1906 and now reprinted in 2009. The format, the cover, the sketches, the print all belong to that long lost year. You grab it from the magazine seller who visits you every week, give him the price he wants and go home. It has been quite a buy, and you are reminded of all the new-looking

books you sometimes stumble into at the charity shops in London. Or think of Gaithersburg in distant Maryland, of the second hand bookstores that yield up works as good as new. That is what you know as paradise. What more could you ask for?

There are then the books that saw the light of day years ago but you did not know where there. Does Galbraith's *Name Dropping* ring any bells? It came out a decade ago and you being a huge admirer of the late economist-diplomat-scholar somehow did not know about it. That is when you feel small, diminished in some way. But there is a way to make amends. You get in touch with your siblings in that faraway land, tell them about it and they do the rest. You wait for that copy of the book to come to you all the way from Washington. And then reflect on some books you have wanted to read since they first made it to the market. Romeo Dallaire's account of the Rwanda genocide of 1994 (he calls it *Shake Hands With The Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*) is a gripping work. You have read more than one review of the work in some journal or the other, but six years go by before you



Hitler



Galbraith

see, as if my a miracle, the actual book before you.

Ah, but why are we complaining? Inhabiting as we do a truly disadvantaged part of the third world, we do not expect to be privy to the good things that happen in Europe or America. That is reality for us. And yet there used to be that other reality, a long time ago, when books came our way, when we thought nothing of spending money on them. Imagine! Who wouldn't love to possess a work such as *Hitler's Private Library*? Timothy Ryback has done a splendid job, but how do you get hold of his work?

But let us not brood. There is that little work of Rumi's, a translation as it were, to go back to. It lies on your coffee table. You turn the pages. And you think of a woman with a pretty face and a profound mind. Rumi and she stir your sensibilities.

(The article is a reprint)

Syed Badrul Ahsan edits Star Books Review

REFLECTIONS