

REVIEW ARTICLE

# Of remembering and misremembering

*Niaz Zaman observes, warts and all, a memoir-cum-novel*

When a group of my MA students at the University of Dhaka chose to work on the impact of 1971 on western literature, they concentrated on George Harrison and the Concert for Bangladesh and Allen Ginsberg's "On Jessore Road." Neither they nor I at the time had heard of a British writer by the name of Philip Hensher, who had written a novel on 1971.

Until Shreela Ghosh from the British Council lent me a copy of Hensher's *Scenes from Early Life*, I had never heard of him. Of course I haven't heard of many British writers or American or Australian for that matter unless they win the Nobel Prize, the Commonwealth Prize, or the Booker, or the Orange. Perhaps I should have heard of Hensher, whose *The Northern Clemency* had been short-listed for the Booker. But it is only a few prize-winning novels that find their way to the book stores in Dhaka. And the British Council which, at one time, had a fine library, has down-sized. I have no idea whether Hensher's books are on the fiction shelves at the British Council. Perhaps they are, along with other contemporary and classic writers.

But as things stood, it was only when Shreela mentioned Hensher that I heard of him. She was very excited at the prospect of his coming to the Hay Festival. His husband is Bangladeshi. Did I hear right? Yes, and I would have known it if I had read the Author's Note before reading the book: "The narrator speaks in the voice of Zaved Mahmood, the author's husband, who was born in late 1970. . . ." (309). As it was, I realized what Shreela was talking about when I read the book and about one-third of the way through came upon the description of the narrator's wedding, which was very different from his parents': "Among my wedding photographs, there are images of my new husband feeding me cake" (131).

Shreela very kindly lent me a copy of *Scenes from Early Life*. I assumed it was so that I could read the book preparatory to the festival. But, before that, the British Council was organizing a pre-Hay Festival discussion coinciding with a meeting of senior management of the Council from South Asia. There were several topics for discussion much too important and complex to be covered in the time allotted to us four: Kaiser Haq, Syed Badrul Ahsan, Kazi Anis Ahmed and me. We perhaps only discussed one-third of the topics. We had to cut short the discussion because Shreela did want to know what we four thought about Hensher's book.

Kaiser was on my extreme right, next to Shreela. So we expected that he would speak. However, he hummed and hawed. Before Anis could do the same, I said I would speak. After all, I was the only one of the four who had read the book, but for the last ten pages or so. Left to myself, I might not have picked up the

book. And though it was slow reading the descriptive nature of the narrative and the multiplicity of characters not making it easier I continued to read it. I have tried to complete the most unreadable of books, occasionally cheating by skipping paragraphs and pages and going to the end. Part of my plodding on was to find out what it was that had so excited Shreela.

It was a novel about 1971, I had been told. And yes, the concept was interesting: 1971 being told through the eyes of a child. The opening chapters, however, are not about 1971 but about a child growing up in an extended family, about his many uncles and aunts, about his grandfather and his two great grandmothers, about old Dacca and new Dacca, about mofussil towns, about villages. It was only when I finished the novel and read the Acknowledgements that I realized that the author's focus was not meant to be 1971. As he puts it, "This is not a history of the struggle for Bangladesh's independence, but the rendering of a family's passionately held memories. It does not pretend to be an account of the millions who died in the war and the famines that followed. These are the emphases of my husband's memories. . . ."

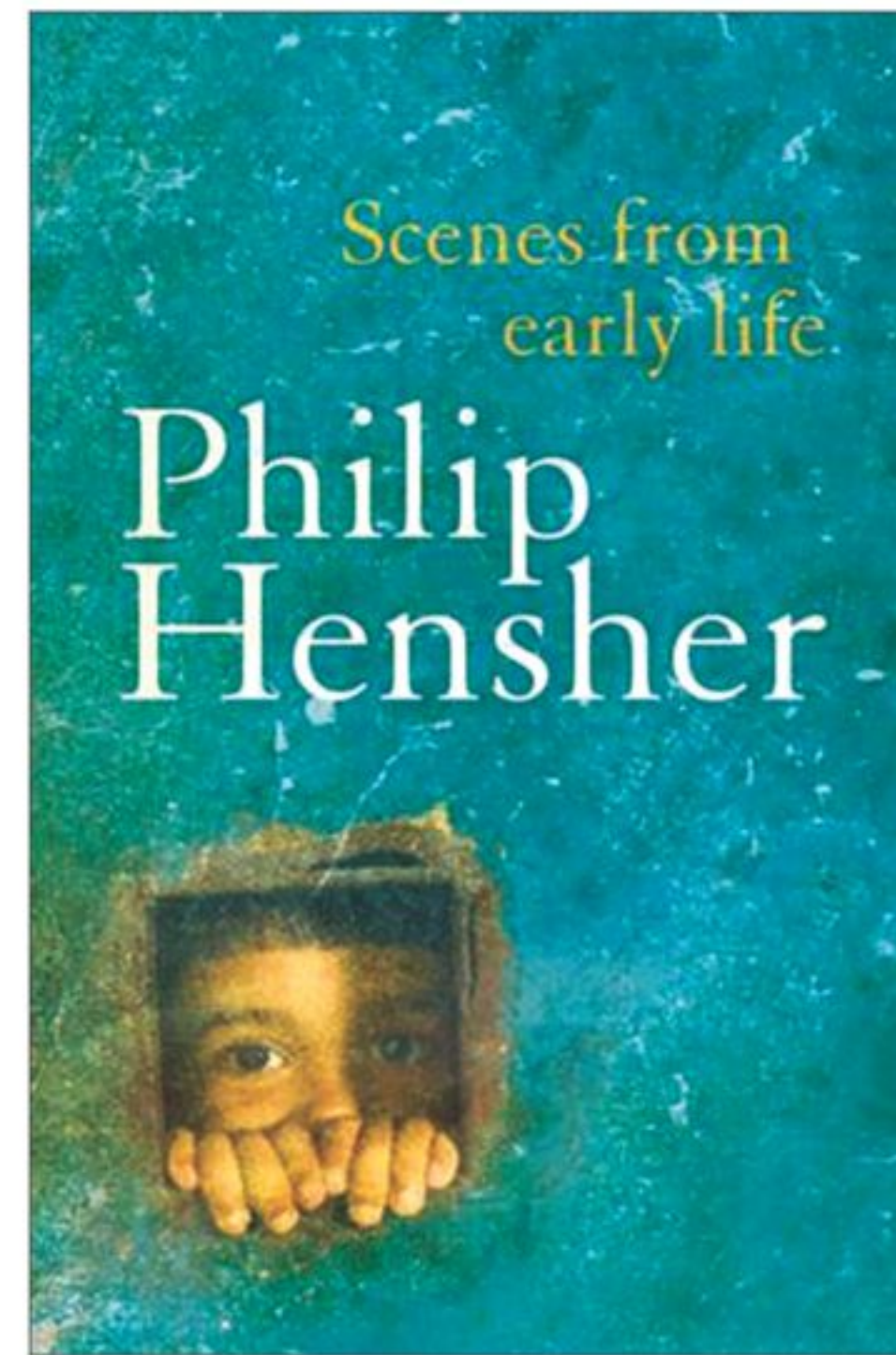
Much of the narrative would not be exciting to the Bangladeshi, for whom the dynamics of an extended family, or the life in a mofussil town with its Raj hangover or hand-me-downs, or the trip by bus, crossing several rivers, to finally land up in the rural country where there are ponds and streams to fish in, mango trees to climb, would be common experience and not worth writing about. And yet perhaps Hensher is showing how very ordinary experiences can be the stuff of fiction.

The large extended family with the addition of the grandfather's friend, family friends and acquaintances makes for a delightful confusion as was perhaps the norm in the past of large families and close family ties. However, the large number of characters makes it difficult reading. Any writer who wants so many characters should take a page from Vikram Seth, whose voluminous novel, *A Suitable Boy*, does exactly this. But then Seth's novel is perhaps three times as long as Hensher's. Hensher could also have remembered Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a long, slow novel, which like Seth's benefits by being read slowly.

Perhaps one of the most delightful and poignant episodes is of Saadi and the chicken. He is friends with Atish, the gardener, who enjoys watching the newly hatched chickens as much as Saadi does. Atish explains how Saadi can make a chicken come to him with pieces of chapati. "If you get a chick to come to you," he says, "it will be your friend." Saadi names the chicken "Piklu." He

assumes that a chicken with a name will not be eaten though he is told that it will make no difference. All chickens are destined for the pot. Hensher is perhaps at his best when he describes that fateful day when everyone is extra thoughtful to Saadi and he realizes too late that, in honour of his great grandmother, his chicken has been served up.

Unfortunately, there are anachronisms which cannot be dismissed as a child's imagination or confusion. The idyllic scene in the village ends on a jarring note when the narrative describes Sunchita, Saadi's sister, sitting up on a mango tree, "where the red mangoes hung like Chinese lanterns" (95). A



Scenes from Early Life  
Philip Hensher  
Fourth Estate

very pretty picture indeed! The only problem is that Bangladeshi mangoes do not turn red. Churui vati, more correctly churui bhati, literally food for sparrows, is not a game invented in the garden by Saadi and his cousin Rubi, but the Bangla term for picnic when a picnic was a small, quiet affair.

There are other more serious problems. "Bihari" is not synonymous with "Punjabi" or "West Pakistani." But Sharmin, Boro-mama's wife, is described as "Urdu-speaking. . . from Bihar" (118). A few pages later, she is dismissed as "that woman from West Pakistan" (153). The correct spelling of Saadi's mother's name should be "Shirin" not "Shiri."

Towards the end of the book, Hensher narrates how the book one might call it a

docu-novel came about. Saadi, now all grown-up and married to a writer, describes how the writer went to Romania and met his publisher and his publisher's wife. The publisher's wife describes how she happened to be in Dacca as it was spelled those days. It was very quiet, the silence only broken by the sounds of a sewing machine. Looking for the source of that sound, she came upon a tailor sewing a green and red flag. The narrator allows the story to be told but notes that "the streets of Dacca were certainly not empty on the morning of independence, but crowded with celebrants, letting off firecrackers. Still, that was the story as she told it, and the story she liked to tell, so I have told it too, however untruthfully" (306). While family memories may be misremembered, historical facts do not allow for distortion.

Were people voting in 1970 for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to be made prime minister or president? Were East Pakistani officials writing official letters in Urdu in the late 1950's? Perhaps more serious than these is the account of Sheikh Mujib's assassination. As Hensher describes the event, "Sheikh Mujib's sons and their wives and children, his wife and other family members were roused immediately. We know that the wives took their children to Sheikh Mujib's wife's bedroom as fast as they could" (300). This description might not cause any problems with the majority of western readers, but any Bangladeshi reading the book would say "But there were no grandchildren." Is it a false memory, like that of the publisher's wife? Was that why the story of the publisher's wife was put in? To excuse misrepresentations? Hensher could have and should have checked up on his facts. For imagining how Sheikh Mujib's youngest son was killed on that fateful night, a Bangladeshi novelist's book was banned. Fortunately for Hensher, he is not a Bangladeshi.

Hensher's carelessness is upsetting to a reader like me because it suggests a complete indifference towards the people whose story he has taken it upon himself to tell. Being the husband of a Bangladeshi is not qualification enough. Of course there are other writers who also make these glaring mistakes. The highly popular Jhumpa Lahiri, writing a story about 1971, names a Bengali "Pirzada," narrates how in 1971 East Pakistani university teachers ate off banana leaves, describes how Mr Pirzada sends the American family a card for the Muslim New Year. True, in both instances, a child is supposed to be narrating the tale. But the child is a creation of the writer's and the writer must know the facts or imbed an explanation of the confusion in the story.

One of the narrative devices that Hensher uses and which works very well is that of repetition. That is how oral narratives are, or

family stories that are told again and again in different circumstances, to different audiences. Some of these repetitions are funny, some poignant. Thus the story of the steamed rui dish that Sharmin used to cook with ginger and lemon is repeated several times, as is the memory of Sheikh Hasina getting upset because the fifteen or thirteen sacks of red chilli were short. Another story that is repeated, to show how kind Sheikh Mujib was and his sense of humour, is that of his giving Sultana Kamal a lift to the university. (Sufia Kamal spelled Sufiya Kamal with her daughters, appears in the story on a number of occasions, with the writer focusing on why she is such an iconic figure, with her poetry, her cultural activism, her gracious hospitality, her courage, her thoughtfulness.)

The second time Sultana Kamal tells the story, at almost the end of the novel, bears repeating:

Once, when I was very young, and of no purpose or use to anyone, I was very late for my class at the university, and Sheikh Mujib's black sedan drew up as I was hurrying along. . . . He popped his head out of the window and said, "Can I give you a lift?" Just as the daughter of an old friend, you understand. Well, I demurred, and he insisted. (301) Sultana feels somewhat awkward. How would it look to be dropped off at the university by Sheikh Mujib even though he wasn't yet the president of the country? But he puts the girl at ease, chatting away about different topics. Before Sultana realizes it, they are at the courthouse. Sheikh Mujib gets out, telling the girl that the driver will drop her, but he had to get down at the court.

"You see," he said, "they want to send me to jail again. . . . And I really must be on time to be prosecuted. If I am late, they are only going to jail me for contempt of court, the scoundrels." (302)

Apart from being an orator and a political leader, Sheikh Mujib had a very human side to him. He truly was Bangabandhu. In this passage Philip Hensher has succeeded in projecting this side of the man.

I will just add one more comment, for writers like Philip Hensher as well as for writers of the Bengali/Bangladeshi diaspora but perhaps more for their publishers: Please get an editor who knows the history and culture of the region to read the manuscript before it is published.

Philip Hensher will be attending the Hay Festival Dhaka beginning on 15 November 2012 at the Bangla Academy

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# The life and times of a famous couple

*Pallab Bhattacharya appreciates a writer's candour*

Satyajit Ray has not written his memoirs. Ray, according to his wife Bijoya Ray, had often thought of writing his autobiography but "his many commitments kept him from doing so". Who then could be a better person to shed light on various aspects of the multifaceted life of the maestro director than his life-long partner Bijoya? And readers are amply rewarded by Bijoya's book, *Manik and I*, a Penguin India publication. Manik is the name by which Satyajit Ray was known to his close family members and friends.

The book is a translation of Bijoya Ray's meticulous diary notes of her association with Ray before and after their marriage till the director's death in April 1992, as serialized in Bengali weekly *Desh* in 2003 and 2004. Penguin India has done a yeoman's service by bringing out the English translation, beautifully done by Indrani Majumdar.

It is a must for a student of Ray because it sheds light on many aspects of the director's life. There are any number of interesting details and anecdotes about the life of Ray and his relationship with Bijoya, the flowering of the romance between the two, who are also close relatives, and their eventual marriagesomething not readily accepted in society.

Manik and I not only traces Ray's development as a director and his journey to national and international fame but also gives us a glimpse of the social, national and international political, economic, cultural and intellectual atmosphere in which the director lived and the people who filled his eventful life.

What comes out through the book is Bijoya's frank assessment of Satyajit Ray as her husband, an assessment that sees her commenting on his films and not deifying him just because he was one of the greatest directors of the world and such a genius in several areas of filmmaking, writing, music and painting. Above all, the book looks at Satyajit Ray as a human being and Bijoya makes no secret of the director's getting into a relationship with another woman in 1965 and 1966, that hurt her "immensely". Bijoya Ray does not name the woman but says

it was like a "nightmare" for her. She says, "My husband was no saint. He was a man of flesh and blood. And like many other men, he got into a relationship with another woman." It was something Bijoya likes to play down, saying it was a "short-lived episode, almost like an unfortunate accident. Now, it is absurd to either remember it or imbue it with any significance."

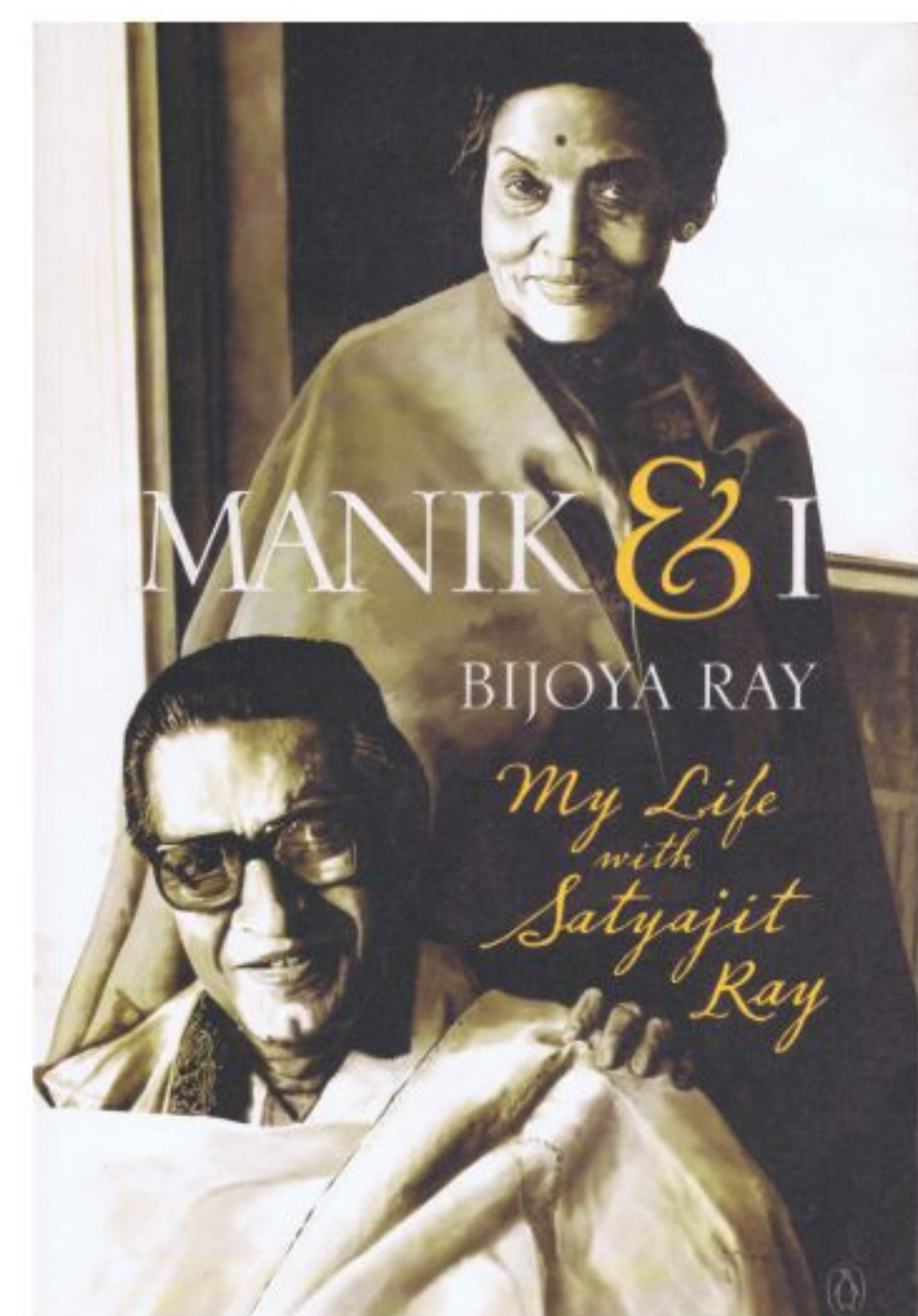
Of particular interest to the people of Bangladesh in the book will be her reminiscences about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's return to Bangladesh in January 1972, the Liberation War of Bangladesh, the selection of Babita as a lead actress in Ray's film "Asani Sanket" and the close association two Bangladeshi photographers Amanul Haq and Sayeda Khanum had with the Ray family.

Regarding Bangabandhu, Bijoya says, "I was so full of respect for the man." She recalls that on January 2, 1972, India had declared a public holiday to mark the visit of Mujib to India on his way back to a liberated Bangladesh. "None of us had expected him to return to Bangladesh peacefully", notes Bijoya Ray. Satyajit had gone to Bangladesh in February 1973 to attend "Bhasha Divas" function and on return "we had a long discussion on Mujibur Rahman", says Bijoya.

About the Liberation War in Bangladesh, she notes at one point that "meanwhile, a civil war was on in full swing in our neighbouring country. East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, was a tiny country and I didn't know how they were going to survive it. They were definitely being helped by our country; I wondered those days for how long even that would continue".

At another place in her diary, Bijoya Ray says Indira Gandhi had come to Calcutta on December 3, 1971 and the war with Pakistan had begun, though it had not been officially declared. "The most surprising thing is that in this moment of crisis, every Western power, with the exception of Russia, has decided to help Pakistan. Even China is supporting Pakistan. I've never understood much of politics. But I was pained to at the thought of my country in such trouble".

And then comes the glorious moment of



Manik and I  
Bijoya Ray  
Penguin India

Bangladesh's Liberation War and Bijoya Ray says, "My diary entry for 16 December 1971 states: 'Today is a historical day. East Bengal has achieved its independence and Bangladesh has been born. The Indian Army is being hailed as a saviour'. The next day, that is, 17 December, war came to an end. Our happiness knew no bounds."

About Amanul Haq, Bijoya Ray writes, "In 1959,...a young man called Amanul Haq came to meet us. He was a photographer who believed there could be no subject as interesting as Manik. He wanted permission to photograph him. He was well-spoken, warm and friendly. We liked him and Manik easily granted him permission...In no time at all, he had become part of the household. Manik grew very fond of him. He was a genuinely

good photographer and even now never fails to visit us every time he comes to Calcutta....Only he has photographed my mother-in-law, Manik, Babu (Ray's son Sandip) and I. Babu together. Babu was very young at the time and grew very close to Amanul".

Referring to Sayeeda Khanum, Bijoya Ray says, "A few years after Amanul's arrival, yet another photographer from Bangladesh, a woman this time, came to our Lake Temple Road house. She was called Sayeeda Khanum but we know her by her nickname Badaal....She still comes loaded with gifts to meet us on each visit. They are such lovely people and I'm grateful to them for not having forgotten us after Manik's death (in 1992)".

Not many in Bangladesh perhaps know that Satyajit Ray had wanted to make a film out of eminent Bangladeshi writer Selina Hossain's novel "Hangar Nodi Grenade" and written a number of letters to her requesting her to keep the book for his proposed project and not give it to anyone else. Ray had liked the novel very much, as seen in one of his letters to Selina Apa. But for some reasons, Ray could never make time to come over to Dhaka and make the film, according to his letters. It was by chance that I came to know of this when this writer met Selina Apa at the Bangla Academy, where she was an Assistant Director, in Dhaka a day after Ray died and we were discussing his films. It was my sheer good luck that Selina Apa mentioned it to me and the very next day I had a look at Ray's letters to her at her Shyamali residence. I was happy to make a story out of that which was published in Indian newspapers in a big way.

There are innumerable anecdotes in the book from the life of the Ray couple and one cannot possibly mention them all in this write-up. Still, one cannot help referring to Bijoya Ray's noting how she told her husband about her "great desire to work in one of his films and often asked him to cast me in some matronly role, like that of a mother or an aunt. But he (Satyajit Ray) never agreed. He would say 'I cannot work with someone so close to me'", writes Bijoya Ray, who had

already acted in some films.

We get a glimpse into Bijoya's role in the creative life of her husband when she tells her that it was she who had spotted the young boy who plays the role of Apu in Satyajit Ray's epoch-making film "Pather Panchali", a choice the director readily accepted.

About Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan never featuring in any film by Ray, Bijoya Ray says Jaya Bachchan had "told me in passing that Amitabh would be willing to work with Manik if he ever decided to cast him in any of his Bengali films....He smiled a little and said 'let me get better first--only then can I think of making another film. I've thought of Amitabh often but they are such expensive actors. Our Bengal film industry doesn't have that kind of money'. Jaya immediately said, 'Don't say that--it would be a great honour to work with you. I'm sure he won't demand that kind of money.'"

Manik and I wonderfully captures the progress of the life of the Ray couple on its huge canvas and poignantly brings out the health problems the director had faced over a long period of time, including his heart surgery in the United States, and the great anxieties and stress Bijoya had undergone in those times. Her notes in her diaries of that time are absolutely moving and are bound to make readers' eyes wet. During the last few weeks of a seriously ailing Satyajit Ray's life, the director's speech had slurred. He was finding it painful to breathe and virtually stopped responding to people. It was a tragic end to a man whom his wife describes as "forever the optimist" who "would tell me even in our darkest moments, 'Wait and see, all will be well'."

Manik and I is unputdownable and long after one has finished reading the 574-page book, one longs to return to it, again and again. Bijoya Ray deserves kudos for having gifted posterity such a book.

**PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, A JOURNALIST, WRITER FOR THE DAILY STAR FROM INDIA**