

Two Reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

Missives out of a war . . . . . Tales of the piercing kind

Despite all the old yarn about wars being adventures in courage and vanquishing the enemy being a proud tale of heroism, there is the sheer loneliness that comes through in the missives of those warriors who write back home. So it was in 1971, as the rich collection of poignant letters, called Ekattorer Chithi, makes obvious. But what does shine through all along is that sure grasp of hope that these letter writers demonstrate in their communication with their families and friends. That their belief in freedom is unalloyed, that Bangladesh will

real name is Kazi Nurunnabi, was fated not to witness the birth of his country. Abducted by the Pakistanis in October of that year, he was never seen again. ABM Mahbubur Rahman was luckier. He joined the war and survived. On 5 April, he writes to his mother: "Mother, I know you wouldn't have let me go and that is why I am going away without telling you." The sentiments are typical of many Bengali young men who went to the war. Parents, anxious that their children survived in the face of the Pakistani onslaught, nevertheless worried

father, "I am going away today. I don't know where I am going. I know only that I am going where a bold, freedom-loving child of Bangladesh should be going." A little further on, he puts the rhetorical question to the man who has sired him, "If today your eldest son Farooq has decided to wage war against injustice and in the course of that struggle loses his life, will you feel sad, Father?" He speaks of his dreams of going on to college after school and then to the university. And yet he knows that minus freedom all dreams are pointless. He recalls a quote in English, "Mother and motherland are superior to heaven."

There is then the letter Rumi writes to his uncle from Agartala on 16 June. It is briskly written, a sign of the hurry he is in to get on with the job of getting into battle mode again. He tells his Pasha Mama, "We are fighting a just war. We shall win. Pray for us all. I don't know what to write. . . there is so much to write about. But every tale of atrocity you hear, every picture of terrible destruction that you see is true. They have torn into us with a savagery unparalleled in human history." If Rumi spoke for the young, Akhlaul Hossain Ahmed symbolized in his own way the dilemma before the political class. Elected a Member of Parliament (the editors unfortunately do not say if he was elected to the national or provincial assembly), Ahmed writes to his wife Hena from Mahadeo on 16 June: "It is my prayer to Allah that all of you stay well. . . I am passing through many lands. . . There is pleasure in travelling, but when I think of you all, my heart breaks." On 16 July, Ataur Rahman Khan Kaiser, subsequently a senior Awami League politician and diplomat, writes to his baby daughter: "My child, I write this letter for the day when God-willing you learn to read, to understand. Surely there is much sadness in your tiny chest. . . Why doesn't daddy come to see you? My child, today on your birthday your father is unable to gather you to his bosom; it is a sadness that will not go away from your father's life."

Ekattorer Chithi, when you read through the letters, recreates the terrifying times that would eventually give way to freedom. But more searing is the pain which comes of the knowledge that life for an entire nation collapsed in a heap, had meshed with disaster of an unmitigated sort. Sons writing to their worried parents, fathers writing to their children, husbands writing to their wives, brothers writing to brothers, brothers-in-law writing to sisters-in-law --- all of these are a backdrop to the devastation that goes on in a land under brutal foreign occupation. Three days before the Pakistani forces surrender to the joint command of the Indian army and the Mukti Bahini, Anwar Hossain (subsequently to be an academic at Dhaka University) writes to Lutfa Taher, wife of the war-wounded Colonel Abu Taher, from Lucknow: "Bhaijan is quite all right. The journey from Gauhati to Shiliguri was enjoyable. . . Bhai only talked about you, wanted to know why we hadn't brought you along."

Those last lines make you wonder. It was free Bangladesh that claimed Taher's life. It was free Bangladesh that saw Anwar Hossain humiliated by men in an eerie time we might as well describe as caretaker emergency.

No one goes looking for a war. It comes suddenly, taking people unawares. And once it does, there is that sure, eerie feeling that huge havoc will be the consequence, that people will die and with them an entire set of values. That being the historical truth over the centuries, there is that other reality of war being a time when heroism and villainy make their appearance. Individuals die defending the nobility of a cause, thwarting the evil designs made by other individuals for whom the idea of a good life comes in a destruction of the lives around them. Some soldiers win wars. Others, rendered or proved qualitatively inferior to their adversaries, end up losing them, with results whose ramifications can last generations.

But that is not the image of war which Yasmin Saikia brings forth in her rather unusual work on Bangladesh's struggle for liberation in 1971. Her image is distinctly different. War, she seems to be arguing, is not so much a matter of heroism as it is of collateral damage. It is damaged lives that war claims as its legacy. In Bangladesh, it was its women --- two hundred thousand of them, in official estimates --- who were left forever scarred by the conflict which eventually was to claim the lives of as many as three million Bengalis. Saikia remains perfectly aware of the historical factors which went into the outbreak of the crisis between East and West Pakistan in March 1971, one that was to go on until Bangladesh emerged as a free country in December of the year. Over the years, much has been written and said about the war, in Bangladesh and in Pakistan and elsewhere as well. Only, it was the damaged lives that by and large went unreported.

In war, nothing can be more devastating than the impunity with which the participants go about, unconsciously, of destroying or severely affecting, the lives of non-combatants. In Bangladesh, the severity of the conflict was a great more pronounced than at any other time or place in modern history. Pakistan's soldiers, while telling themselves that they were engaged in the job of saving their country's unity and integrity, in fact went about killing men before hurling themselves on the women. In a very large number of instances, it was the local collaborators of the Pakistanis who proved instrumental in having the soldiers go after the women. For nine whole months, Bengali women throughout the occupied country lived in a state of insecurity. Many moved from a village to another and then another. And yet the soldiers had their ways of swooping on them, often in groups. The women were raped in gangs, for weeks and months on end.

And then came the war babies. The story of Beauty is a highlight in this riveting work. Shunned by society, unable to straighten her life out, Beauty persuades her mother, Nur Begum, into recalling the terror she went through at the hands of the soldiers. It makes for horrific reading and yet read we must, for the good reason that in all the decades which have elapsed since the end of the war, women like Nur Begum have suffered alone. To call them birangonas (women who paid a price through being molested by the Pakistanis) is all right, but only up to a point. The bigger question relates to what successive governments in Bangladesh have done for them, if they have done anything at all. Nur Begum speaks up loud and clear:

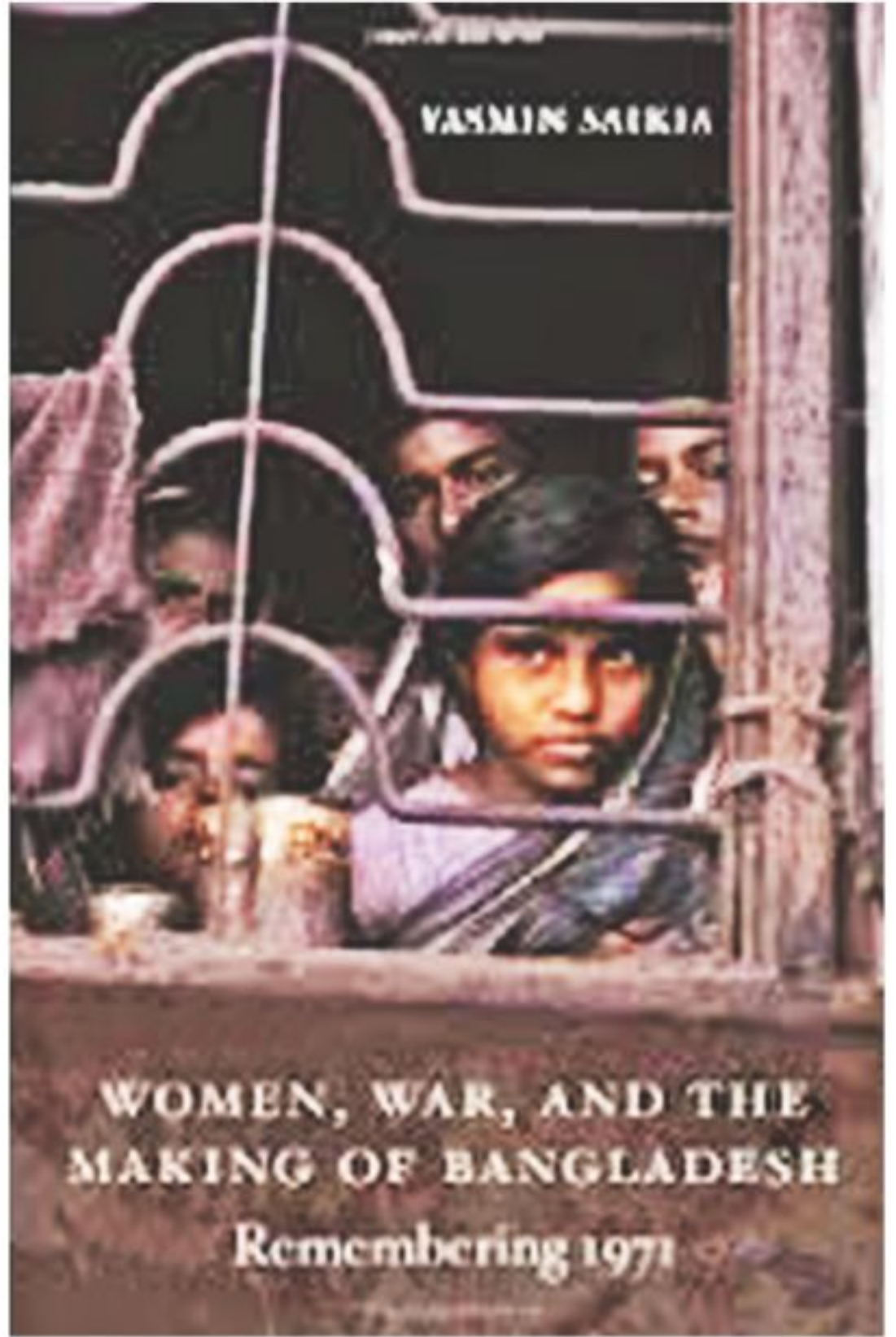
'I was marked with violence in 1971. Look at the bite marks on my breasts. When I was first captured, the Pakistani military kept me naked. . . The Pakistanis came in group after group. You seem surprised to hear it. They did it in front of everyone.'

Not until the coming of liberation were Nur Begum and others like her rescued. Listen to her again:

They (freedom fighters) turned the bunker

upside down and found us without bany clothes. The freedom fighters took off their shirts and hid our nudity. They were looking away from us.'

These are tales of the piercing kind here. Firdousi Priyabhashini's is of course a well-known narrative by now. Even so, her retelling of the horrors she was subjected to by the soldiers rekindles the old disgust you once felt, still feel, about the animal instincts which drove Pakistan's soldiers in 1971. Priyabhashini's problems were twin-fold and that too before the war. She was beautiful and she was poor. As she is not afraid to tell the writer, 'My continuous poverty was the root cause of why men took advantage of me. And then the war came. Priyabhashini's courage, a will to survive as it were, kept her going. 'I was struggling to stay alive being raped by five men,' she informs the writer. Post-liberation, she was 'not allowed to attend wedding ceremonies because (my family) considered me inauspicious. The only person who did not say anything rude or mean to me was my mother.'



Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh Remembering 1971  
Yasmin Saikia  
Women Unlimited  
An associate of Kali for Women

Memories underpin Saikia's work. And the memories go beyond the agonizing tales of rape. Heroism in women worked at other levels as well, a facet of the war the writer brings to light through recapturing such narratives as that coming from Dr. Syed Ahmed Nurjahan. Women, like Mumtaz Begum, who waged war on the battlefield are portrayed in the full measure of their patriotism. Being the conscientious historian she is, Yasmin Saikia listens to the other side as well. The other side is of course the Biharis, an ethnic group which remains notorious in Bangladesh because of the rabid support it provided to the Pakistan army in quelling the Bengalis. Once the war drew to an end, it was Bihari women as also men who faced Bengali wrath. Saikia does not flinch from noting their sufferings. The objectivity is admirable.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR

Just cooked corpses  
Efadul Huq is intrigued by a story

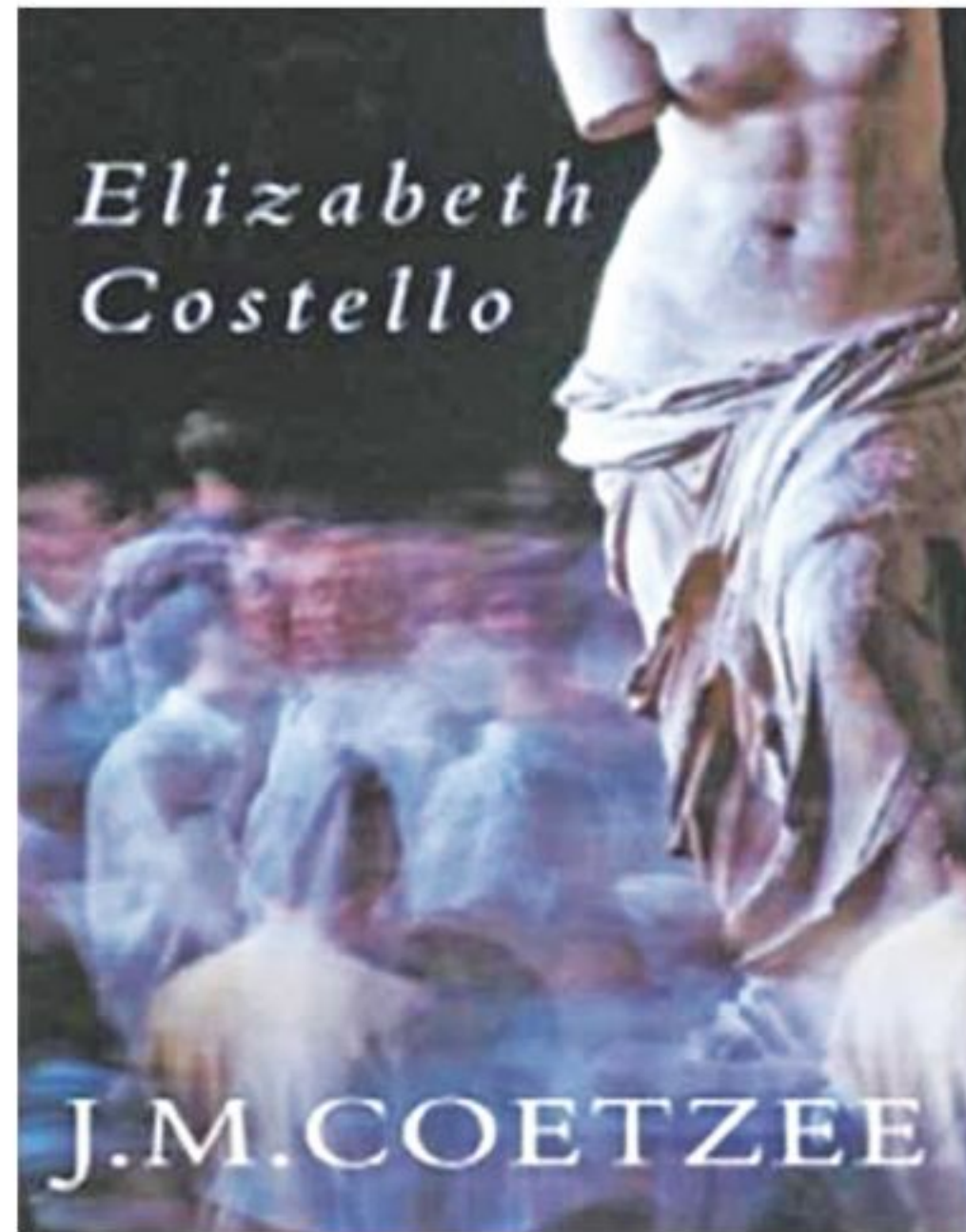
How does a writer affect his society by writing? What should an ideal writer write about? More importantly, where does a writer's words come from? These are the questions asked and discussed by J M Coetzee, from both ends of the spectrum, in Elizabeth Costello. The novel insightfully explores the many 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 proved 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



Elizabeth Costello  
J M Coetzee  
Secker & Warburg

questions she doesn't have any concrete answer. In fact, she wonders if this evil is essentially omnipresent as even she wears leather shoes.

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 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

Indian President launches Tagore book



President of India, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, released the book, Contemprising Tagore and the World, at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on May 8, 2013.

The book comprises a series of papers and articles that were written as part of the International Conference on Contemprising Tagore and the World that was organised by the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Jamia Millia University and Viswa Bharati University under the sponsorship of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) at the University of Dhaka from April 29-1 May, 2011. The International Seminar was organised in Dhaka as part of the joint celebrations of the 150th Birth Anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore between India and Bangladesh. The conference had wide participation from scholars and Tagore researchers from across the world including from far off countries such as Japan, Russia, and Netherlands. There were about 31 international Tagore scholars who participated in the conference.

The book, Contemprising Tagore and the World, has been published by UPL in Bangladesh. The first copy of the book was handed over to the President of India, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Dhaka, Prof. A.A.M.S. Arefin Siddique at the book launch ceremony specially organised by ICCR at Rashtrapati Bhavan on May 8, 2013. Present on the occasion were Dr. Karan Singh, President, ICCR, Mr. Suresh K. Goel, Director General, ICCR, members of the Steering Committee of the International Conference—Prof. Imtiaz Ahmed, Prof. Anisuzzaman, Prof. Syed Shamsul Haque, Mr. Asaduzzaman Noor, Prof. A.A.M.S. Arefin Siddique, Mr. Muchkund Dubey and Mrs. Veena Sikri, besides several former High Commissioners of India to Bangladesh.