REVIEW ESSAY

# An evening with Marito Varguitas and Aunt Julia

NIAZ ZAMAN

THE book chosen for the July meeting of The Reading Circle was *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* by Mario Vargas Llosa and translated by Helen R. Lane. Though we had earlier read Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* – of which we had heard a lot before we actually read it – we really had no idea what this book was about. The reason we chose it was because copies of the book were available – thanks to Bookworm – and because Vargas had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010.

*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* is a pretty fat book, a little over 400 pages. It begins quite simply: "I was very young and lived with my grandparents in a villa with white walls in the Calle Ocharéna, in Miraflores." The narrator is studying law but really wants to be a writer. But the humour with which the book is replete appears within a couple of lines as he tells us that he has a job "with a pompous-sounding title, a modest salary, duties as a plagiarist, and flexible working hours: News Director of Radio Panamericana." (The plagiarism consists of his cutting out news items that appear in daily newspapers and editing them slightly to be read on air as newscasts.)

The rival radio station – owned by the Genaros who also own Radio Panamericana – is Radio Central. Radio Central broadcasts serials. These serials are "bought by weight and by telegram" from Cuba. Unfortunately, there is no time to go over the scripts and, because whole pages are sometimes missing, mixed up, illegible or eaten by rats, the Genaros face serious problems. On the day the narrative begins, Genaro Jr. tells the narrator about the imminent arrival of a Bolivian scriptwriter. It is the same day that the narrator first meets Aunt Julia, the sister-in-law of his maternal uncle.

The link between the scriptwriter and the Aunt Julia of the title is thus established early. When the narrator first meets Aunt Julia, she treats him like a child and calls him Marito – the diminutive of Mario. The narrator says that he "hated her instantly." Everyone believes Aunt Julia has come to find a husband, but, in the meanwhile, Marito is asked to entertain her by taking her to the movies. Aunt Julia explains why it is difficult to be a divorcee: people either think that she is fast or that she is in search of a husband. She is, however, romantic and thinks about falling in love. Marito pooh-poohs the idea of love. "Love doesn't exist," he tells her. It was "the invention of an Italian named Petrarch and the Provençal troubadours." Aunt Julia doesn't believe him. He tells her he's "against marriage." Of course, this will prove ironic as not only will the eighteen-year-old Marito fall in love with the thirty-two-year-old Aunt Julia, his desperate search for a mayor to marry them will take several pages.

Three days after Marito meets Aunt Julia he meets Pedro Camacho, the scriptwriter. Marito is reprimanding his assistant Pascual, who, with his fondness for catastrophes, has devoted the entire eleven o'clock news bulletin to an earthquake in Isfahan, full of graphic details. The problem is not so much that he ignored others news but that the earthquake was a week old. It is just at this time that they are interrupted by a short man, verging on a dwarf, dressed in a threadbare suit and wearing a shirt and bowtie with obvious stains. He bows to them politely and tells them that he has come "to steal a typewriter." Genaro Jr. enters and introduces the strange man as Pedro Camacho. Chapter one ends with Pedro Camacho "hopping and skipping along like an elf" to catch up with Genaro Jr., who effortlessly carries off one of the two heavy typewriters in the room.

Readers of traditional narratives expect there to be some relationship between the scriptwriter and Aunt Julia, but, beyond the fact that they are both Bolivian and that the narrator meets them about the same time, the novel is really about the narrator, Mario or Marito Varguitas – little Mario Vargas – and Aunt Julia and about Marito Varguitas and the scriptwriter. Readers of traditional narratives also expect that the second chapter will develop the story with the characters who have been introduced at the beginning. The second chapter is, however, about an entirely different set of characters: Dr. Alberto de Quinteros, a gynaecologist, and his nephew, Richard, and his niece, Elianita. It also, unlike chapter one, is a third-person narrative. The story takes place on the day of Elianita's marriage. The doctor is puzzled about why Richard should be so unhappy on his sister's wedding day and why Elianita should have chosen such an unlikely young man. When Elianita faints and he goes up to treat her, he realizes she is pregnant. A little later he also understands that she is not carrying her husband's child.

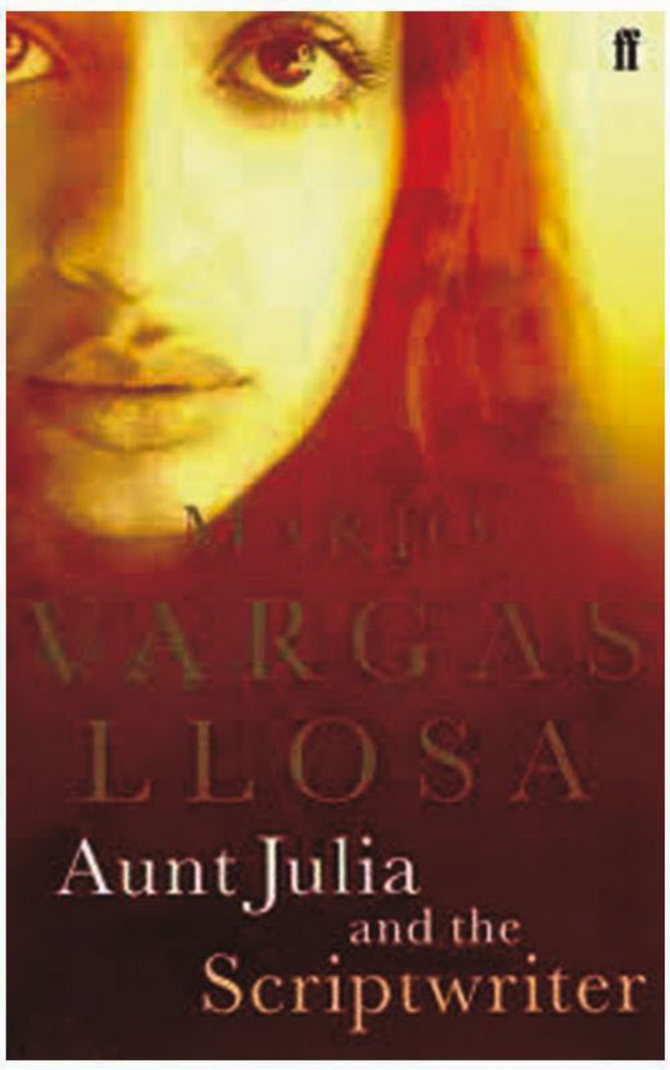
The relationship of the two narratives puzzled me – as it did the other readers of our reading group. The third chapter goes back to the first-person narrative, which develops the story of Marito and Aunt Julia. The fourth chapter, about Sergeant Lituma, is completely unrelated to the first three chapters. The novel continues to switch between first-person and third-person narratives, with the odd chapters about the growing romance between Aunt Julia and Marito Varguitas and the even chapters about unrelated stories, all of which end in questions. It is only very gradually that the reader becomes aware that these unrelated stories are the vivid imaginings of the Scriptwriter of the title.

Pedro Camacho churns out the different serials religiously and prides himself on being able to move effortlessly from one to another and not revising. But then, gradually, the serials start getting mixed up, characters from one serial end up in another, with different names. People

Mario Vargas Llosa

who die in one episode come alive again and appear in another. Elianata, renamed Sarita, becomes a football player in chapter sixteen. Because of an incestuous relationship with her brother, Sarita had entered into marriage but the husband had discovered the child was not his and forced her to have an abortion. Sarita has sworn never to give herself to any other man. She passes off as a man until Joaquin Hinostroza Bellmont, the football referee, discovers her secret and falls in love with her. During a football game – which soon turns into a bullfight – disaster strikes. Sarita leaps to save Joaquin but Captain Lituma, assuming that someone is attacking the torero, shoots her dead. Consumed by remorse at what he has done, Lituma turns his gun on himself. However, in chapter eighteen the child of incest is alive again, this time in a convent where she takes her vows as Sister Fatima. Pedro Camacho's episodes have become increasingly violent, and, at the catastrophic end of the chapter, Richard reappears and Fatima is no longer the child of his incestuous relationship with his sister but his sister herself.

In an interview given to *Paris Review* – brought to my attention by Dr Neeru Chakravertty, who also participated in the discussion – Vargas describes the inspiration behind Pedro Camacho. Unlike Aunt Julia, who was a real person and whom in fact the author married – and to whom the novel is dedicated –




Pedro Camacho is a made-up character. However, according to Vargas, traits of a scriptwriter who worked for Radio Central – and who, I later discovered, thanks to the Internet, was named Raul Salmon – are to be found in him. This scriptwriter too started getting mixed up, but, Vargas notes, the real person didn't go mad as Pedro Camacho in the novel did.

*Pedro Camacho never existed. When I started to work for the radio in the early fifties, I knew a man who wrote radio serials for Radio Central in Lima. He was a real character who functioned as a kind of script machine: he wrote countless episodes with incredible ease, hardly taking the time to reread what he'd written. I was absolutely fascinated by him, maybe because he was the first professional writer I'd ever known. But what really amazed me was the vast world that seemed to escape from him like an exhalation; and I became absolutely captivated by him when he began to do what Pedro Camacho does in the book. One day, the stories he wrote started overlapping and getting mixed up and the radio station received letters from the audience alerting them to certain irregularities like characters traveling from one story to the next. That's what gave me the idea for Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter. But obviously, the character in the novel goes through many transformations; he has little to do with his model, who never went crazy. I think he left the station, took a vacation . . . The ending was much less dramatic than the novel's.*

The story of Marito's romance with Aunt Julia alternates with the rampant imaginations of Pedro Camacho. But even the realistic story has a lot of drama and even elements of the soap operas that Pedro's vivid imagination thinks up – William Kennedy titled his review of the translation, "Peruvian Soap Opera." As the interviewer from *Paris Review* comments, "Varguitas . . . lives a life as farcical as the lives of Camacho's serial characters." But the story of the eighteen-year-old who falls in love with a woman old enough to be his mother, as she says, is based on fact – except that, in fact, Vargas was nineteen years old when he married Aunt Julia and she was twenty-nine, not thirty-two as in the book.

What is even more the stuff of soap operas is that Aunt Julia was the sister-in-law of his maternal uncle and later, when he remarried after divorcing Aunt Julia – she is always called that in the novel, even when Varguitas is desperately trying to marry her – his second wife was the daughter of his maternal uncle and his wife, so that they "had gone from being my wife's sister and brother-in-law to being my parents-in-law."

Vargas notes in the interview that he had originally planned just to tell the Pedro Camacho story, but, thinking it too farfetched, added a "realistic story" as counterpoint. But, as he points out, the "realistic story" turned out to be as hysterical as his original inspiration.

*When I wrote Aunt Julia, I thought I was only going to tell Pedro Camacho's story. I was already well into the novel when I realized it was turning into a kind of mind game and wouldn't be very believable. . . . So, as a counterpoint to the absurdity of the Pedro Camacho story, I decided to create another more realistic plot that would anchor the novel in reality. And since I was living a kind of soap opera myself at the time – my first marriage – I included that more personal story and combined it with the other, hoping to establish an opposition between a world of fantasy and one that is almost documentary. In the process of trying to achieve this, I realized that it was impossible to do when you write a piece of fiction, a hint of unreality always seeps into it, against the author's will. The personal story became as delirious as the other. Language itself is capable of transforming reality. So Varguitas's story has autobiographical elements in it that were profoundly altered, as it were, by contagion.*

Vargas notes in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* as well how fiction alters reality. Varguitas is all the time looking for plots and ideas. Once Aunt Julia tells him a story about an actor who acted the part of Jesus in a play and what his reaction was when he found that he was about to crash on to the stage with the crucifix. Varguitas writes a short story based on what she has told him and reads it out to her. But Aunt Julia keeps interrupting. "But it wasn't like that at all, you've turned the whole thing topsy-turvy, that wasn't what I told you, that's not what happened at all. . . ." Varguitas gets upset. He breaks off his reading and tells her "that what she was listening to was not a faithful, word-for-word recounting of the incident she'd told me about, but *a story, a story*, and that all the things that [he'd] either added or left out were ways of achieving certain effects: '*Comic* effects'. . . ."

Undoubtedly, the desire of Vargas to marry a woman so much older than him must have been fraught with problems and obstacles. This situation is depicted through some of the funniest scenes in the book as the lovers, accompanied by Pascual, Varguitas' co-worker at Radio Panamericana, and his friend Javier, search for a mayor willing to ignore Marito's age and marry the two. The search leads them through a friendly mayor, an illiterate mayor, a drunk mayor, to a corrupt mayor. They finally find one individual who agrees to change the 6 on Varguitas' birth certificate to a 3 – of course, for a thousand *soles*.

The real Aunt Julia was not happy with the book. She wrote *Lo que Varguitas no dijo* (What Little Vargas Didn't Say) to provide her own version of the relationship. The book has been translated into English as *My Life with Mario Vargas Llosa* by C. R. Perricone. The book is not available in Bangladesh and it would be interesting to read the account. Does she tell us in her book that she helped type Vargas' first best-selling book? Of how she supported him when he was an impecunious writer in Spain and France? The book has been praised as a true "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man" through the eyes of his wife. Wives tend to be neglected, as Shari Benstock points out in her book *Women of the Left Bank*, about the talented intelligent women married to or associated with Hemingway and Fitzgerald in Paris. However, I can guess that while Aunt Julia – or to give her her correct name: Julia Urquidi Illanes – must have told the true story of her relationship with Vargas, her book could not have the humour that Vargas's book has.

How did the real-life model for Pedro Camacho feel about his portrayal in the novel? In "Aunt Julia and a Visit with a Bolivian Scriptwriter," Don Moore describes how he was intrigued by a brief mention that a man named Raul Salmon was the real-life model for Pedro Camacho. Moore made a trip to La Paz and met Salmon. However, when Moore mentioned Vargas's book, the man's "smiling face turned cold." He admitted that he had worked at Radio Central while Vargas had worked at Radio Panamericana, but he denied ever having met Vargas. He claimed that Vargas was prejudiced against Bolivia for various reasons.

Vargas doesn't only make fun of others – of Pascual, who loves catastrophes and broadcasts news of earthquakes and fires, even though they might be a week old, of what goes on behind the scenes at radio stations (and perhaps at television studios today), of the way fathers and mothers and uncles and aunts behave – he also makes fun of himself. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* is a delightful book worth reading. It has everything a reader looks for in a book: romance and humour, real-life and rampant imagination, elements of autobiography, the fantasy world of soap operas. And Bangladeshi readers will find Vargas's description of Lima in the 1950s and its environs strikingly like Dhaka and Bangladeshi small towns even today. But the reader should not – and I repeat should not – attempt to entangle Pedro Camacho's tangled plots. Ascribe the confusion to Vargas's playful post-modernism.

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# The heroes of Chittagong

*Asrar Chowdhury reflects on a discourse on colonization*

Manoshi Bhattacharya

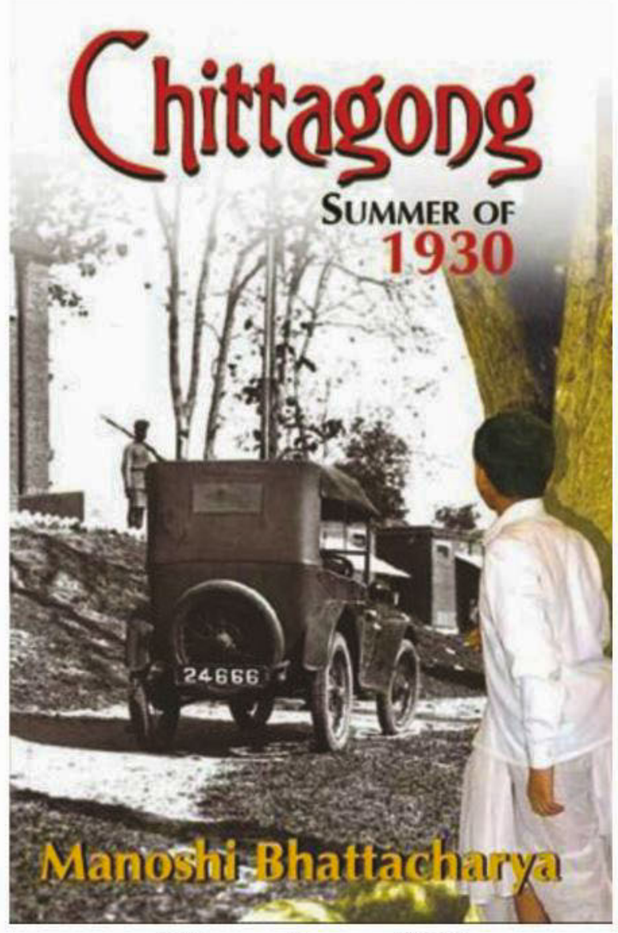
THE first page ends with the line *Chatga was in the news again. Chatga. The word ended with a nasal sound.* With this '*nasal sound*' Manoshi Bhattacharya takes you to Chittagong in the summer of 1930. The book revisits, and also dares to relive one of the most glorious chapters in the independence struggle of British India- Master Da' Surjya Sen's Chittagong Youth Rebellion and the four-year long insurgency shaking the foundations of British India and leading to its ultimate partition through 'freedom at midnight'.

Master Da's story is well known to the people of Chittagong and Bangladesh; and also throughout Paschimbanga and Tripura Rajya. Master Da and his band of merry men and women—Pritilata Waddedar, Binod Bihari Chowdhury, Kalpana Dutt, Ambika Chakraborty, Tarakeshwar Dastidar, Ramkrishna Biswas, Ananta Lal Singh, Ganesh Ghosh, Lokenath Bal, Ananda Prasad Gupta and Suresh De—have all become larger than life historical characters and folklore forming a part of common history that is shared and passionately loved throughout the Bangla speaking world.

Writing the history of an event still fresh in the minds of the descendants of its participants and the people of its region is a challenge. Stripping away myths to get to the facts is more difficult. In *Chittagong: Summer of 1930*, Manoshi Bhattacharya does all the above, and goes a few steps ahead. That '*nasal sound*' of Chatga makes the book special and a must read in Bangladesh and the Bangla speaking world.

The author gives voices to eight heroes from Chittagong and eight British officers who were in Chittagong at the time. Drawing from their writings, the author crafted dialogues putting the scenes together in a master jigsaw puzzle. This has created a series of skillful translations and transcriptions linked by a minimum of fiction. The author does not speak herself. Each storyteller speaks. Each picks up the thread where the previous storyteller left off. Endnotes to each chapter validate the sources and family interviews that were used to clarify what may seem as creative writing.

The story tellers present a discourse of colonization from the perspective of both the colonized and the colonizers. The former is characteristic of post colonial literature, but it is because of the latter that the book breaks new ground presenting also a view of the colonizers. Police Commissioner Sir Charles Tegart and his wife Lady Kathleen Tegart; Police Superintendent JR Johnson; Collector and District Magistrate of Chittagong during the Armoury Raid, HR Wilkinson; District and Sessions Judge, John Younie; and Sgt Morsehead; and police officers Hem Gupta and Ramani Majumdar present their accounts of Chittagong and the summer of 1930. This adds a new dimension that until now had been explored by only historians and the academia.




Chittagong: Summer of 1930
Manoshi Bhattacharya
HarperCollins India

The different Bengali and British worlds and their perspectives and styles have been presented such that the reader moves between them smoothly and identifies with them both. For example, revolutionaries talk of Chattogram or Chatga and Kolkata. The British speak of Chittagong and Calcutta. Master Da is presented as Surjya Sen (the spelling he himself used) and not as Surya Sen. A careful reading reveals: the British speak in Victorian English. English translations of revolutionaries' dialogues follow the style of Bangla sentence construction. Nuances, idiosyncrasies and expressions exclusive to Bangla have been captured in the translation. For instance, instead of 'go away' the revolutionaries say 'you may come' (*tumi ashte paro*).

Master Da started the largest organized civilian armed uprising in the struggle for the independence of British India. It was second only to the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, which was led by professionally trained soldiers. That a simple schoolmaster from a remote Noapara village at Raozan, Chittagong, and a group of boys and girls, some of whom were only 14 years old, could achieve an uprising on this scale- sealing Chittagong off for three days- not only shook British India, it sent tremors to the British Parliament and beyond. Chittagong was put on the map. Master Da's Youth Rebellion (Chittagong Armoury Raid) and the subsequent insurgency featured in the newspapers of Britain, Australia, Canada and the USA. What baffled the British was not only its meticulous planning and execution, but also that the operation was conducted right under their noses! Master Da and his boys and girls never knew the impact their operation had on the British psyche. Letters of John Younie and testimonials of Sir Charles Tegart dug from the archives of Cambridge University and narrated in the book validate many of the claims made by the revolutionaries in their memoirs, but denied by historians and the official British 'Eurocentric' view.

Master Da's success was based on water-tight secrecy and a strict hierarchy. Master Da, Nirmal Sen, Ambika Chakraborty, Ganesh Ghosh and Ananta Lal Singh were the Top 5. They were the only ones who knew the entire plan. The next tier included Team Leaders and a chosen few like Ananda Prasad Gupta (one of the story tellers). Master Da's ingenuity was that Ananda knew only his team members and plans only of his team. He was not aware of what his brother Deboprasad Gupta or even his best friend Jibon Ghoshal (Makhon) would be doing, let alone the actual date of the Chittagong Armoury Raid. Also, not all first rankers were team leaders. Ananda and Jibon were not team leaders, but they were first rankers. Second rankers like Suresh De (storyteller) knew nothing at all except they would have to respond when the call came, to which they did blindly. Because of this segregation in information, Ananta Lal Singh's stories have more depth and are more enlightening. Suresh De's stories are simplistic and more romantic.

Why did Master Da' plan like this? If the police or their agents caught one of the boys from the first tier and he failed to hold up under torture, then he would give away names only of his group and details of the single task he and his team were to perform. The rest of the plan would not be jeopardized. Ingenious! The British were kept guessing.

By the time the revolutionaries started writing their memoirs, two features became evident. First, everybody knew Master Da's 'master' plan by then. Second, the revolutionaries were writing from memory unlike the personal home-letters and diaries of the British officers written at the time. Errors entered in the sequencing of the events. Researching her sources, the author had to address this to make each storyteller's saga become non-fiction within the time and space of the summer of 1930.

The book wonderfully captures the summer of 1930 in a holistic historical context. It also contains rare and unpublished photos (between pages 218-219). However, it has its shortcomings. Master Da does not feature as a storyteller. Despite help from Shri Gautam Mohan Chakravarty, Police Commissioner of Kolkata, the author could not unearth Master Da's notebooks from the archives of Lalbazar. This does not diminish the beauty of the book because through the eyes of his boys we learn about Master Da's many qualities, sense of humour and sagacity. The book is thus a good historical document that preserves and presents what is left of the writings of the heroes from Chittagong. The book ends with a hint that a sequel is in the offing. I have been told the forthcoming Part II deals with the four-year long insurgency that made greater history in the words of Master Da himself. It will cover the highly publicized Chittagong Armoury Raid trial with its very controversial outcome; the women's movement; and Master Da's hanging. In between, the two volumes capture the history of armed revolutions in the provinces of British India and stories of older Bengali revolutionaries, like Shri Aurobindo, Bagha Jatin, MN Roy and Khudiram, to name a few.

If reading a conventional history book is boring, then *Chittagong: Summer of 1930* is the book to get. The characters soon come to life, and before one knows it, they become a part of you. A Bangla translation of the book and its sequel will make it more relevant to Bangla speaking people. It has all the elements to rank alongside *Purbo Paschim* by Sunil Gangopadhyay from Faridpur, Bangladesh, as one of the finest non-fictions that address the agonizing experiences of Bengal leading to partition or was a consequence of the partition of British India.

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