

Fiction

Doubting impressions

Kazi Abu Bakar Siddique

IN life, everyone has to draw some impressionistic paintings, maybe not as impressive as the ones done by *Renoir* or *Monet* but they do and hope-fully and unknowingly pretend that they mean what they do. Days go by like the cherry blossoms, shimmer and glimmer to fade away suddenly. The shade of light and darkness mingles in the souls, in the most unconscious chambers, to make sure: dreams should and sometimes would turn into nightmares or night-mares would turn into something pleasant, if not dreams.

Clocks going round the opposite direction could be an illusion but Ahmad couldn't figure out what could explain the other anomalies, like people walking backwards, as in rewinding camera-works, conversations starting from the ends, incidents echoing those of another time, and so on. Dipping into philosophies didn't look very appealing and practical reasoning could lead him to some newer horizons of questionings.

The whiteness of wit and the gigantic jabbers of narrow-mindedness leave room for little lukewarm lunacy, which couldn't possibly be scraped out of a feverish mind. He imagined, rightly, he thought, wit could be as white as *Arcos de la Fonterra* and narrow-mindedness could be as hollow as a plumber's semi-sentimental pipe organ. At present, sleeplessness wasn't his slightest concern; it was rather a blessing, which might boom right across the face of a hypnotized lethargy.

Looking down from a fifty seven storied building, the first thing he could remember was a *Haystack* in the canvas of *Monet*, which kept on growing until the completion of the creator's satisfaction, before a fall. The happy faces of the *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette* merge into myriads of inexplicable inertia that could be traced in running subconscious errands for the unknown millions. The simplicity in the *Swing* or the enchanting music in the *Girls at the Piano* left little room for doubting the tranquility in impressions.

Questions live on in the basic expressions of culture and somersaulting hypochondria in the look-alikes of Lacan or the clashing derivatives of Derrida amuse and bemuse the veins of artistry in the ever silicon-minded motions. Unheard melodies still would haunt the spirits and many could dare being in the quest just for the pleasure of waiting. Devoid of almost unlikely solitude of literature, these ghosts in their unknown nightmares might look very much like Beckett's most famous characters.

Superficiality was rooted so much inside the Dalmatian Diaspora. Never quite meaning it but people scatter more than they stay, work and fight. Delphian oracle exists in every sky, momentarily combining the universal idea of a clash between luck and supernatural, in sound and echo frequencies. After winning all battles we can't say, man is sublime as we could never find out what we're up to.

There had been a time when exception used to define some existence, but that idea is at present absent. Exception has been so much in inception in the perception of every conception. The slant look of Sartre at Camus or symposiums at coffee corners sipping down ideals through a blocked ravine persistently ignore the grimaces of idiosyncrasy towering above the slain dragon of modernity, which might laugh off the imitations with Simpson's paratragic comedy. To think or not to think, that might be the question.

Suddenly there was a fast car racing out down the *Rodeo Drive*. He was looking out from inside, to the dizzy decorations of the sparkling lights. Imagination could always turn out to be a gift if curses could be fended off and Ahmad possibly knew how to do it, all along. Losing out to candidates better equipped with answers sometimes gave him the shivers. But he always wondered: knowing answers to only a number of questions wouldn't end his quest. A cutting edge infrastructure might not get him solutions to the meta-mathematical problems he was suffering from. He would be happy to land on a harbour but harbours nowadays merely bridge distances across, picking around corners.

A love story that begins with Shostakovich's *Second Waltz* would never be his. His story with the unknown girl, Yasmine, started rather strangely, when both were tired of their previous selfish selves. The hard days in the Latin Quarters still reigned with an uncommon range of butterfly effects, caging his spirit in a wasteland of checkerboard. Norah had been honest, perhaps too honest, and her graceful pursuit of a home for loving couldn't necessarily exist in his world of noir noise and Lilli lies.

He wished he had forgotten the sensitive Norah, a pure lover of his dreamer self. She's dead to him now, though those memories welcomed him off and on into a world, which could have been all his. Possibility permitted, he'd like to live out all the romantic stories in his head. If insensitivity is at the core of forgetfulness, why would new Abrahams wish to die for simple reasons? Poets' black cats don't run after prey any more.. Rather, there seem to be lots of life forms ready to die

POETRY
To be healed by You
--- Lamya Sadiq
Prudent as the guard
Who watches over your House of Love
A careful band-aid on a child's wound
Plastered with such care,
Not to expose broken flesh.
Prudence.
A man's biological magnet
To be so bold as to question 'what if'
Should the key to this House be Broken?
A half piece, consumed by its lock,
never to fully shut again.

The fibre of each restrained muscle threads neatly into a single touch.
Leaving a trail of crumbs to the source of Pulse.
A wash of an unnamed colour, behold its beauty!
Such beauty.
A feeling so near to a golden shade comes in to put Gold out of its misery
A finger dipped into buttered flour so edible, honey sweet
Man's natural sugar.
Man: so inherent in nature, yet nature is not Prudent.
The sinewy branches that cling together
The transient Time,

Prudence keeps the branches aged bare
devoid of blossoms, devoid of Nature.
Exposed skin in an eagerness to heal
We cease to dream of Love as fiction or prose
To overwhelm innately and unhinge the screws,
Pouring a saccharin Love deep, deep into you
Shall I seek Prudence once more?
Rather I anticipate each prick and each poison
To be healed by You
Like the fleeting realm of scent only the blind truly see
Dissolved,
Prudence contently leaves me.



Albert Camus

down into oblivion, willingly. But did he want her to go?

Surreptitious negativity lands noisily upon a silent plain, which might never have identified the enormous amount of treasure it had buried alive once. What is cherished in a world devoid of anything fresh? Now freshness dries up with a fleeting flip of the coin. Modern dictators never embark on Cape Sagres nor do they hide out under Schopenhauer's will or some dead god's psychoanalysis. Shakespeare's rest in silence gets arrested with an angry mob trying to convince a dead leader of their earnest condolences. Maybe, to do or not to do is the question.

When the spell of a hang-over hypnotizes nodding Homer or Hume or some egalitarian emotional Einstein, the time-bound tidy Toms try tracing some somnambulist syllogism, in some sugar-coated sauerkraut. Rational beings' reasons are pound-foolish sometimes and logarithms of ideal hemisphere may not possibly linger on a leaflet of common judgements. Could anyone ever associate the sociology of a penniless heart or richness of Cleopatra with the perpetual colours of our individual paradises? The ideas of realistic Rembrandts are sure to get short-circuited in the malevolent time-piece of Dali, or in the tardy egg-shells of some vigilant surrealists. Therefore, Feliz Navidad echoes empty encircling ethnocentric enigma where Felicianos dare to trade.

Suddenly a synthesized ringtone played softly with a rhythmic vibration. A call from Yasmine! She hardly calls him so late at night, but maybe today she had a good reason. Going through such a series of thoughts, almost feeling giddy, he found her voice to be the sweetest since the beginning of time.

"Well, I didn't expect you to be awake still. But had a sneaking feeling that you might be absorbed in the meaningless means of yours. The way you had been looking for something original, in the afternoon! You are so impossible sometimes!"

"Darling, you read me alright once again. I've had, what you might call, a monolithic odyssey through an island of streams. I am a blind man in the rain. Lost in time, yet trapped around *Ieri, oggi, domani!* Misspelled Cézanne! Scribbling a newer

mindscape, myriads of dotted lines merge outside the limit of the horizon, with a pallid sense of 'leaving out a lot details!'

"Wait! Wait! Wait! One at a time would be better! You've been through lots of thoughts, as you said, different expressions of impressions. Misspelled Cézanne? Why? Where have you been of late? Aix-en Provence?"

"I'm a solemn passer-by! Rejected by the Riviera sun! Daunted and haunted by fire-breathing gargoyles, I look away towards the *Grand Corniche!* A stolen plate of *La Cristallined'Agrumes au Coulis de Fruits rouges! When you're born in Aix, nothing else is good enough!* By the way, what might you be doing (looking at the clock) so late?"

"Oh, I had the same question, 'solemn passer-by'! What are you looking for in Aix? (Chuckling) Was trying a daydream before I realized we both are on the same side of the world. Have you ever listened to Nina Simone at this late hour? Sweet as the moonlight! Ah, darling, why don't we move to Aix someday? A little piece of paradise on earth! Someday! Anyway, there'll be time to reorganize everything. Let's get some sleep, shall we?"

"Sleeplessness is bliss! Passion is my sweet child leaning against the moon! Oh, let darkness linger a little more, for I'm a homeless brute, staring at a Botticelli angel, spreading her wings against the wind and against the light!"

"How am I supposed to react? You do take me to newly found lands, full of romantic nostalgia."

"Nostalgia?"

(Voices began to grow fainter, to only movements of the lips. Conversation went on, with fragments of stories, through smiles and tears, biting lips, twinkling eyes, etc., etc.)

Time went by, smooth or rough, he wouldn't question. As the trance broke, with an impulsive flash, ideas seemed to merge, faces seemed to fade, places seemed to fall into pieces and with a gusto of whirlwind memories disappeared, leaving him as still as the sleepy chill of Vivaldi's winter. It's 3.30 a.m. , in

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Tribute

The inspirational Dr. Murshid

Fakrul Alam

MY first meeting with Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid almost ended disastrously. I had applied for admission to the English department of the University of Dhaka in September 1969 and was appearing in the admission interview. He was on the other side of the table—Head of the department as well as Chair of the Admissions Committee—and by then quite formidable as far as his reputation was concerned. "Young man," he told me, "You are an 'O' level student. I am sure you won't mind being tested with a relatively difficult poem. Can you make sense of this one?" Though never the confident type, I had said rashly then, "Sir, I can try". But though I did I couldn't make any sense of the poem. The seconds ticked on—endlessly! "Ah", he said not unkindly, "perhaps you should go to your second choice department—Economics?" I was mortified, but something in his gentle manner told me he would give me a second chance. "Please sir", I pleaded, "can I get another poem?" "All right, young man," he said reassuringly, "try explaining this one". This time I succeeded, for as I later realized, Tennyson is far easier to interpret than Hardy! And so I got into the English department, ego dented, but thankful to Dr. Murshid for having thrown me a lifeline to what has become my permanent port of call in life.

Once inside the department, like all of its students, I was awe-struck by Dr. Murshid. Certainly, there was an aura about him. The stylish way he dressed, his confident gait, his unique inflected way of speaking English, and his soft-spoken but assured presence on departmental occasions made us all realize that our Head was someone special. And as the months went by in those heady pre-1971 days of protest and indignation at Pakistani machinations and admiration at Bengali spearheads of autonomy, we all began to be even more awe-struck by the stories circulating about his principled resistance to his equally famous and to us increasingly controversial predecessor Dr. Sajjad Hossein. As we came closer and closer to March 1971, we were full of admiration at Dr. Murshid's active participation in the six-point movement and his advocacy of all things Bengali and his opposition to attempts to thrust the oppressive and insidious ideology of Pakistan on us. To be sure, his lectures on Donne and metaphysical poetry often went above our head, but even though we didn't understand a lot of what he said in his classes, he sounded awfully impressive, and we listened in rapt silence.

There were other aspects of Dr. Murshid's personality that awed me. I was coming to know more and more about belles letters in our part of Pakistan and whenever the subject of English writing in the east of the country came up, so did New Values, the magazine he had edited. I had never seen a copy of the magazine— and still haven't!—but anyone who had would praise it to the skies. He was also present in Chayyanot events that I was beginning to attend regularly and other cultural occasions. Always a presence there and everywhere, he unfailingly dressed appropriately for each occasion, and forever seemed to be surrounded by his admirers.

Then—and subsequently—Dr. Murshid appeared exemplary to all of us interested in the life of the intellect. His proactive role in the Bangladeshi movement, his proximity to Bangobondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the part he played in the liberation war, the voice of dissent that he became in the dark days of 1980s, made him one of the key figures asserting the importance of being a Bengali and secular against atavistic forces attempting to suppress us even in independent Bangladesh with autocratic, militaristic or reactionary designs. He was exemplary, too, in the way he spoke on public occasions and the ready wit and sophistication with which he conducted seminars and chaired public events. In short, the more I saw of him over the years, the more awe-struck I became at this invariably soft-spoken but self-assured personality.

Unfortunately for me, I had Dr. Murshid as my teacher only for a brief while after liberation. In 1972 he left Dhaka to become Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University and in 1975 he left the country to be Ambassador of Bangladesh to Poland. That year, while being briefed for his diplomatic posting in the foreign office, he used to come to the English department every day he

Non-fiction

Coming home

Dilara Mawla Monzur

NO sooner was I out of the aircraft, I hurriedly took off my coat. End of December, but so hot! Even the rays of the sun, that in winter seem to give a soothing feeling, were scorching me. I recalled the night before, at Karachi airport, where the whole night we were on our feet, either standing on the same spot for hours at a stretch or walking up and down, for that was the best arrangement awaiting us! What a night it was! Besides the chilling effect of the cold outside, some security people were being a nuisance by coming every now and then, fidgeting with people's belongings, even opening up the snack boxes, running a stick through the contents of the box, making it all unfit to be eaten! The day dawned and we were led to a place where snacks and tea were served. Three long hours of waiting and still no sign of the plane. It was delayed, so we were treated to another round of snacks and tea. It was soon after that that we were led to the plane. Some seemed to have gone to the washroom and were seen rushing back, panting and out of breath, as soon as they heard that announcement. It was an Afghan chartered plane. The cabin crew were far from friendly. Maybe they thought they were dealing with prisoners so they didn't need to be polite. Even the Pakistanis had been more cordial in their approach, the ones in position, so to speak! Seeing a crew member, a male, being rough with a young boy just because he was not able to fasten the seat belt quickly, I couldn't check myself, and intervened, "Excuse me! If the boy can't do it, aren't you supposed to help? That's part of your job, I know, and demeanour is important for you!"

He looked at me and, all of a sudden, he was a different person, all smiles, and looked humble too.

"Sorry, I'm a bit stressed today. Didn't realize," he smiled.

My folks didn't seem too happy with my intrusion, but that is the way I am, a bit bold at times and too straightforward, but I am trying to keep it in check now. All's well that ends well, and at last we landed at Dhaka airport! From the airport, we were whisked away to the B.A.F. Officers Mess in no time.

"So this is my beautiful Bangladesh!" I exclaimed. "Ah! What bliss! Freedom, you smell so sweet!" I could not contain my joy.

Was this real? I recalled how we had pined for this moment during our days of confinement that stretched into months and then years. Our hopes, gradually, had started dwindling, and uncertainty had settled in.

"Will we ever see our motherland?" That was the question we would ask time and again, and only uncertainty greeted us.

More than the physical hardships we were passing through, anxiety seemed to be killing us. We were almost spiritually dead at the fag-end of our tenure in concentration. How I longed to be on the other side of those barbed wires! Every time I took a stroll out for a change, I saw the security guards with their guns, which was surely not a very comfortable feeling. As if this was not bad enough to demoralize me, I was given a word of caution from my parents that considering the fact that the situation was far from normal, the less we were seen outside, the better. Blow after blow! All sorts of rumours were reaching our ears. The fathers were the

could. He took a few classes with us then on Shakespeare and Yeats. But though these were infrequent appearances, he said enough in those classes to leave me with the impression that he was the type of teacher who taught because of an innate love of the profession and an intense involvement with literature. Much later, in the 1990s, when I had become Chair of the English department, I rediscovered how fond he was of teaching. His health had begun to let him down by this time but seemingly nothing would deter him from guest lecturing in the department. I remember, for example, an occasion when I was called from my office because he had fainted while taking a class. He recovered and was taken home. Next week, however, he was back to teaching, as if frail health would never prevent him from being part of the profession that he so loved.

I have no doubt that if someone set himself to the task, we would have a rich collection of anecdotes about Dr. Murshid's devotion to his work and commitment to his principles, either as a teacher, an oppositional intellectual, or as an administrator. In Rajshahi University's Vice-Chancellor's residence a few years ago, where I was waiting for the incumbent to begin the proceedings of a selection board, I heard a story about Dr. Murshid that I have no doubt is typical. My informant—then chair of the university's English department—recounted the time when left-leaning students had gheraoed the V.C.'s office, refusing to let Dr. Murshid go anywhere until their demands were met. "All right," he had apparently said, "stay with me as long as you can but I will never budge from my position". Early next morning he was still in his office, but the student-demonstrators were fast asleep. He woke them up, I am told, and said that he was off for his morning walk and would be back with them. In the end, I infer, they had to give up!

Indeed, Dr. Murshid was the kind of person around whom legends amass. Here is one anecdote that has the potential of becoming the stuff of legend. I had gone to his house to meet his daughter Tazeen Murshid, a good friend, and we talked and talked for almost ninety minutes. All this time I saw him sitting in his study, fully focused on the book that he was reading. When I left Tazeen that day, he was still glued to the book and his desk, unfazed by the conversation Tazeen and I had for one and a half hour!

As one would expect, Dr. Murshid had read omnivorously and was knowledgeable and erudite about all sorts of things. He was also an avid collector of art and a connoisseur of music and all things requiring a delicate sensibility. Talking with him was invariably interesting and one was bound to be the wiser for the experience.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that Dr. Murshid left so little of his written work which was once in circulation; almost nothing by him can be found in print at this time. This is no doubt the one failing of this remarkably learned and intellectually vibrant man. For even till the very end of his life, the years had not diminished his interest in the arts and culture or his appetite for reading and his conversational skills. One kept hoping that before he would leave us he would write his memoirs or give us accounts and insights into whatever fascinated him or author works on his involvement in the major movements that dotted the road to the emergence of Bangladesh. One kept hoping, too, that we would see a selection from New Values, for I knew personally that this was a project he wanted to undertake near the end of his life.

Now that he has passed away I still keep hoping that we will one day discover a half-written manuscript on his life and times one of these days. Who would not be interested in the stories he had to tell and the views he was able to glean from a rich and full life? His presence had been inspirational for all of us in Dhaka for a long, long time and his death undoubtedly left a void in our intellectual world. Only his colleagues and fellow travelers who accompanied him in the second half of the twentieth century will know the full extent of his contribution to our intellectual and political life and we look forward to their accounts of the varied and unique role he played in Bangladesh's history. And as for us students, we can only grieve at the passing away of a mentor extraordinary and an exemplary academic who gave more than his scholarship to his nation.

ones to be used for the POW Exchange Program. For some reason, it was not working out as smoothly as was expected.

"We are not giving back the prisoners. No exchange whatsoever!"

How were we expected to feel then as rumours (they had to be rumours!) of this nature reached us to morally crush the spirit that was being held high against all odds? My father had opted for Bangladesh, like all the others who had been confined in Warsak until the POWs were returned. It seemed that a controversy had arisen among the leaders of the time on the issue of whether they wanted the Bengali officers in confinement to be exchanged with the POWs. How far those rumors were true, or whether they had any basis at all, is another matter. But at that moment it seemed to the confined officers and their families that verdict had been declared and they were outcasts in their own land! Far from pleasing, it did hurt! Demeanour, displayed so well, for almost two years, collapsed all of a sudden. The high spirits had taken a nosedive! Anyway, we were told after we came to Bangladesh that if Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had not spoken in our favour, perhaps we would not have lived to see ourselves in Bangladesh, perhaps would have met another fate.

I remember a day when all the officers were called for an emergency meeting. Probably, someone from Air Headquarters was visiting. After my father returned, he seemed very upset. His eyes told us something was wrong. Everyone in the house noticed the difference. My mother, alarmed, asked him what was wrong, and why he looked so pale.

"All the officers, we are hearing, not final yet, will be shifted to the Fort minus their families!" He blurted out and slumped down on a chair, as if drained of all energy.

As for me, ever since a very dear friend died in camp from diarrhoea, I could feel a pain in my chest, as if there was a hole inside there, and that pain never seemed to leave me, would get faint or severe, but stayed on, a constant companion. All of a sudden, in broad daylight, I felt scared, an uncanny fear, signs of mild nervous disorders were sprouting slowly! At night, the atmosphere grew sinister as the night got deeper. Attached bathroom, yet I had to make one of my sisters stand at the door while I was inside, wouldn't lock the door fearing it would not open, an uncertain fear worked within, hard to explain. At night, I would lie awake, thinking of the miserable conditions we were in, our dream to go to our motherland...would that dream go to the grave with us? Morbid thoughts had made home in my carefree, innocent mind. In the middle of the night, the sound of firing now alarmed me, whereas before, I would be interested in conjuring up a picture of the two warring tribes, not far from there, pitted against each other. In the Frontier Province, it was a usual happening, feuding tribes forever at each other. 'Blood for blood!' was the principle they upheld, and for generations, it continued, that never-ending rivalry!

"Oh, please stop killing each other!" My innocent heart would cry and utter in a faint whisper.

I would stare at the ceiling above and think of my friend who had died.

"O, why did she have to end like this? She deserved better!"