

EDITOR'S NOTE

"All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual." (Albert Einstein)

It's an auspicious month to think about what is valuable in human society. An introspective month to recognize opportunities for development. A month for individuals to take a step back and wonder how they can contribute for the greater good. Can a small girl save a big gnarly tree? Will the new generation of politicians live up to Joe Treasure's expectations? Can a poem scribbled too late last an eternity? Questions for today's SLR reader to meditate on. Enjoy the moment.

MUNIZE MANZUR

THE TREE

Zeena Choudhury

Farah saw the tree as soon as she entered the new apartment. Her parents had come to Dhaka after the Partition of India in 1947. Her father had been given a promotion and was Superintendent Engineer of Roads and Highways. The whole family was pleased for him. With the new job came a new flat in a block of apartments recently built for the senior government officials of East Pakistan. Her mother was a lecturer in Chemistry in Dhaka University. Farah and her brother however, studied in boarding schools in Darjeeling, which was in India. Every year in November both of them would come for their winter holidays to Dhaka – holidays which lasted three whole months with nothing to do but read, listen to records on their prized radiogram and roam around the surrounding areas.

Farah had a fondness for trees. In the Botanical gardens of Darjeeling, Farah loved to lie below the Magnolia tree with its creamy velvety flowers and gaze at the sky. In Dhaka, the trees had been brought over from South America and lined the streets in various places. The tree that Farah noticed was different. It was a common jackfruit tree, shortish with dark green leaves and gnarled branches. It stood out because it looked awkward standing aloof from all other trees at the very edge of a large field across the road.

Farah was determined to explore the tree. She soon found that there was one sturdy branch which could be used as a comfortable seat for reading or just gazing at the world passing below. In a day or two she had taken up her position on the tree and made it quite clear to friends and acquaintances that the tree with its comfortable seat belonged to her. Her friends agreed good-naturedly. Now that Farah had staked out her claim she would pass the mellow winter days reading and chatting to her friends whom she invited to join her. They all had a very good time. The branches were quite thick with leaves and provided a good hiding place from the apartments – especially when the *Moulvi Shaheb* would come for the daily Koranic lessons.

It was also a good place to daydream in. Farah imagined a lot of things about herself. She would pretend that she was in a forest hiding from her enemies. Even though she was a girl she would take on the roles of Robin Hood or

contrarily, she would be a lovely princess in a tower waiting for her Lancelot. She was as familiar with the tales of Robin Hood as she was with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. This was when she was still young. As she grew older, the imaginations stopped and her reading began in earnest. She would bring her homework and do it sitting on the tree. Over the years the tree had become a good friend. A good place to give vent to her anger when someone misbehaved, or when she felt sorrowful at some insult hurled at her. She would sometimes talk to the tree. She felt that it needed comforting when someone

"Well, some trees will be retained to edge the roads, others will be chopped."

"What about the jackfruit tree?" asked Farah again.

"What jackfruit tree are you talking about?" asked her father.

"Papa, my jackfruit tree, the one in which I sit and read, that one there. Come to the verandah and I will show you."

Farah dragged her father to the verandah and showed him. He looked at Farah's face ridden with anxiety and felt a certain tenderness.

"Look, Farah," he said, "I don't decide about the trees. The overseer

decided to sit on the tree while they worked, running home for a quick lunch and then continue her vigil till 5 p.m., when the work stopped.

Her mother was perturbed when she saw Farah doing this all week.

"You are obsessed with this tree, Farah. You should eat and read and play with your friends. This has got to stop."

"But, Mama," wailed Farah, "I have to be near the tree to guard it."

"Don't be silly, Farah. The overseer will not cut down the tree. Didn't you hear your father reassuring you that he would give special instructions to the foreman?"



called it ugly or tore its branches unnecessarily.

One winter, a few years later, she heard some disconcerting news. Her father who was now Chief Engineer was talking about the Government's plans of widening the roads near the fields where the jackfruit tree stood. Farah's heart stopped. What would this plan mean for the tree?

Farah asked her father timidly, "What does widening the road entail?"

"Oh, the fields have to be dug and leveled and then macadamized," he answered.

"What about the trees?" Farah asked hesitatingly.

who supervises the road decides about which trees are to remain and which need chopping down. Anyhow since you are so anxious, I will ask Mr Jalil the overseer especially to spare that tree – your jackfruit tree!" He laughed and patted her head reassuringly.

Farah felt comforted, but decided to keep a vigil nevertheless over the road that was to be widened. The very next morning she noticed a team of workmen led by two engineers and a middle-aged overseer, who must have been Mr Jalil, start their work. She wasn't too worried as they started leveling the fields a few hundred yards away from the jackfruit tree. She

However, Farah was not satisfied. Her father spoke to her quite sternly.

"Farah, what is this I am hearing from your mother? Do you trust me or not? You should have faith in me."

But Farah remained apprehensive. For one thing, she had talked to the overseer. He seemed to be a very important man and was annoyed when she came to remind him about the tree. He had hardly noticed the tree for he wanted her to point it out to him. She did that, drawing a circle around the tree trunk with white chalk for good measure. The next day when she went to the tree she tried to reassure it.

"You will see. I will not let them do

anything to you." She felt that the tree understood as it waved its dark green foliage.

A few days later she noticed that the workers were only ten yards away from the tree. She was extremely worried. She sat near the trunk of the tree and a few drops of water fell on her head. She looked up and felt that the tree was actually crying.

"I must stop imagining those tears," she said to herself, for as she looked beyond the tree she saw that it had started to drizzle. Reluctantly at lunch-time she left her spot, but not before going up to the overseer and reminding him not to touch the tree.

The overseer was amused. An ordinary jackfruit tree and this girl was so worried that she had got her father to prevent him from touching the tree. These people, he thought, must be superstitious. Why else would they allow this ugly tree to spoil the road? He forgot all about the tree and went to his parked jeep to have his lunch. He snoozed off for a bit and was abruptly awoken with the sound of a thud. He looked out and saw Farah running towards him.

"Stop them, Mr. Jalil, stop them! They've started cutting the tree!"

That girl again. He suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to tell his workman about that particular tree. He walked up to the tree and saw that the workmen were busy hacking at the trunk. He also saw the tiresome girl crying her eyes out. He called out to the workmen, but by this time they had practically sawed through the trunk. It was too late. He should have warned them earlier. Well, nothing could be done now.

Perhaps to appease the girl they could plant another jackfruit tree. Just as he was having this thought something heavy landed on the nape of his neck. Everything happened so quickly thereafter that he had no time to heed the warning cries of his workmen. The heavy branch broke his neck. He was crushed by the falling tree. A crowd gathered. Soon the workmen were busy extricating the overseer's body from beneath the branches and leaves of the tree.

Farah walked back sorrowfully towards the apartment. As she crossed the road a thought crept into her mind. Was this the tree's way of taking revenge?

Hard times revisited

Joe Treasure

For three impressive London women born in Bangladesh there were cheering results in the UK election. Labour's Rushanara Ali held her seat. Tulip Siddiq, taking over from retiring MP Glenda Jackson, increased Labour's majority in her constituency, and Rupa Huq overturned a Conservative majority in hers. London voters generally proved resistant to threats of economic chaos should the Conservatives lose. Elsewhere the results were so dismal I retreated into nineteenth century fiction. Picking up a Dickens novel, long neglected on my bookshelf, I was soon lost in the imaginary industrial city of Coketown.

Having read *Hard Times* as a teenager, all I remembered about it was Grandgrind's school, in which education is reduced to the memorising of facts, and any reference to imagination or feeling is forbidden. It's not surprising that, being a schoolboy myself, this was the part that stuck in my mind.

On this fresh reading, I discovered that the book is as much about disparities in wealth and the desperate conditions of working people as about education. Dickens nails the self-justifying cant of wealthy people who see poverty as a sign of moral weakness. This probably went over my head first time. But perhaps the satire strikes more sharply now that this way of thinking has come back into fashion.

It's easier to impose a policy of austerity, for example, if you think that welfare is morally corrupting and destroys the capacity for self-reliance. There's a young man in *Hard Times* called Bitzer, a model pupil in Grandgrind's school who grows up to be a model employee in Bounderby's Bank. Having sent his widowed mother to the workhouse (the last refuge of the destitute), Bitzer "allowed her half a pound of tea a year, which was weak in him," Dickens tells us, "because all gifts have an inevitable tendency to pauperise the recipient."

Dickens recognises the tendency in those who benefit from the free market to value the lives of others only in economic terms. Long before globalization, he shows corporate leaders threatening to close down if governments make any attempt to regulate their activities, whether to increase the safety of employees or to reduce environmental pollution. As for unions, Mrs Sparsit, who has been born into privilege, is shocked that the business owners don't organise more ruthlessly against them: "Being united themselves," she argues, "they ought one and all to set their faces against employing any man who is united with any other man."

I should have known better than to seek escape in Dickens. At the personal level his stories often involve fantasies of restorative justice, in which victims of oppression are finally rewarded for their virtue, but his sense of how society works is firmly rooted in reality and is as pertinent now as it ever was. Returning to the real world, I'm looking forward to seeing how Rushanara Ali, Tulip Siddiq and Rupa Huq perform as members of the opposition and hope they all get a chance to contribute to a Labour government in 2020.

THE MUSEUM OF FOUND MEMORIES

Ankita Ghosh



As her whole universe started shaking vigorously from a massive quake, she found in herself a strange place of calm. She took firm steps to reach the lonely stand on the verandah on which stood a lonelier, old telephone stark black, like her hair once used to be. She sat on the checkered floor beside the stand and wondered how she had never spoken to herself over phone. She can't know how her voice sounded like all these years to the people on the other side. As technology advanced in leaps and bounds and surrounded her universe with what seemed like enormous debris of gadgets she couldn't help but notice how more and more people changed sides and found refuge on the other end of the archaic, black telephone.

Sensing that she might not survive this humongous calamity she felt a strong urge to write a poem, her last one. Her fingers trembling more from age, less from the quake found a small notepad right beside the telephone. But there was no pen. By now her determination grew so strong

that she rose from the ground to look for it. After a bit of fumbling here and there, at last she found one inside her tattered, aged vanity bag, witness to at least a decade of frivolity and glee. She hurried back to the notepad as she couldn't wait to write the first line of her last poem. The ground was shaking ominously by now.

On the devastated site now stands a museum of lost lives and rescued memories. Among numerous, poignant exhibits, stands in a corner a small notepad with a poem written not with a pen but a woman's kohl pencil. The kohl gave the words a strange depth and vividness. The poem however is as lonely as anonymity itself.