

On Rereading Jajabor's Drishtipaata and Alice Munro's Family Furnishings

Reviewed by Shibli Jabir

As you get older, you start to miss some of the books you have read in the past at different stages of your life. Sometimes what drives this yearning is nostalgia, a memorable moment in the past, or often a reference to a character from a narrative. At least among my friends, how often we refer to Amit Roy, Srikanto, or Constance during conversations, blogs, or on Facebook!

The two books that I reread in the last month are Jajabor's "Drishtipaata" and Nobel Prize-winning writer Alice Munro's latest collection of short stories, "Family Furnishings". What reignited my interest in *Drishtipaata* is a prolonged conversation with my Facebook friends on love and marriage. Since my boyhood, I was very sympathetic to the plight of the romantic Charudatta Adharkar who fell in love with Sunanda, a married woman living in Lahore during Second World War, but was subsequently jilted by her. The book was also a favorite of my mother, and her mother—my grandmother-- who first kindled my interest in the life of Adharkar when I was in high school. And, since Jajabor's observations and philosophical comments strewn all across the book were very well known while I was growing up, there was hardly a conversation during my prolonged stay at Dhaka University where we did not have a quotation from *Drishtipaata* to spice up our conversations. On love, marriage, technological change, religion, art, architecture, colonial rule, you name it; one could find a pithy statement in *Drishtipaata*. My mother, who was a very humble person herself, would quote until her dying days from him: "shohoj howar moddhey achhey culturer porichoy". But some of Jajabor's best-known views on love, betrayal, and sacrifice appear on the last page of *Drishtipaata*.

The last time I read *Drishtipaata* was more than a decade ago. I don't have a hard copy at home but as luck would have it, I came across an electronic version online, and started turning the pages gingerly. Why so? Well, first of all, I wasn't sure whether I would have the patience to finish it as I knew I have to plod through a poorly scanned PDF file. I also recall vaguely that *Drishtipaata* has pages and pages of Jajabor's arcane observations, comments, and references that never interested me. For example, descriptions of his trips to some of the markets and historic sites in New Delhi are lugubrious and superficial. And most importantly, some of his Bengali is tough for me to comprehend these days.

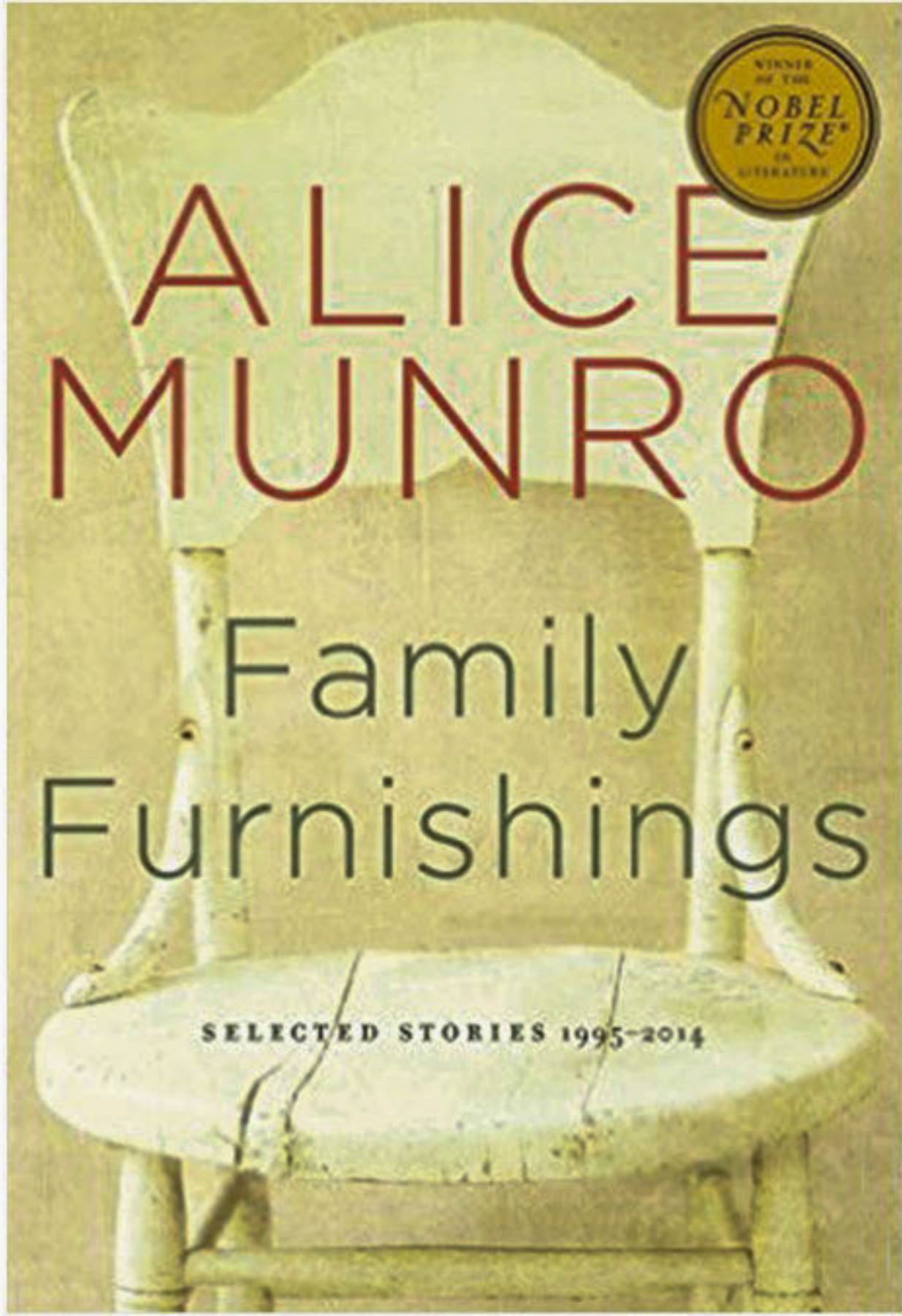
But the magic of the Adharkar name kept on prodding me. So, little by little I kept on turning the pages. In the meantime a Facebook friend of mine, Ashis, made a very interesting remark, "Charudutta Adharkars are a rarity now-a-days". Yes, I am sure in this day and age, very few men would vow to remain a bachelor and nurture the memories of a lover who speaks disparagingly of you. But, there is also a different moral embedded in this so-called love story. To paraphrase Jajabor, "men make major sacrifices for their love, but women do not". Was he right? I knew I had to research the matter by reading this mas-



terpiece again.

As I embarked on this journey, one of the first things I learned is that I missed out on so much of this classic during my last read. May be I was rushing through it, or my memory nowadays is not as sharp as I believed it is. Also, we all mature with age, and that makes one appreciate the personalities, events, and a writer's perspectives in a different way. For example, Jajabor went to New Delhi from Calcutta by air, and he offers some interesting observations on how during his earlier travels by train he was able to enjoy the sights and adventures of passing through different parts of India. Having undertaken this journey from Calcutta to Delhi both by train and by air myself, I am able to see where Jajabor is coming from.

However, after going through the "Adharkar Affair" I now formed an opinion that is slightly different from the conventional wisdom. I am convinced that their emotional relationship was mostly one-sided. Sunanda did show some feelings for him but not enough to call it an affair. Today we might just call it crush or infatuation. She never said "I love you" or promised to divorce her husband. We also know that Adharkar went abroad for a year, and there is no indication in the novel that they stayed in



touch with each other during this period. So many things could have changed. They say, "Distance makes the heart grow fonder", but the relationship between these two could not be categorized as love, only friendship. Even when she came to Bombay after learning that he was sick, while she was rash but again to view that as a sign of passion might not be fair to her. No physical intimacy, no formal commitment, and no indication that was any reciprocal intensity.

I picked up Alice Munro's "Family Furnishings" which is the most recent collection of her short stories and includes 24 stories written between 1995 and 2014. This book is a companion volume to "Selected Stories (1968-1994)" which came out almost a decade ago. For dedicated readers of Alice Munro who had in July 2013, a few months before she won the Nobel, indicated that she might retire, any anthology of Munro selected by her is a cherished gift. While most of the stories in this collection were previously included in her earlier books, for first-time readers it is a great place to start since the arrangement is in chronological order, from the "Love of a Great Woman" (1996) to "Dear Life" (2011). While personally I have read many of them in the past in the New Yorker

magazine, it is always good to re-read Munro since her writing touches many areas of my core sentiments.

The trademark of a great writer like Munro is that her words never get old. While I have read many of the short stories of this collection, and immediately recognized many of the titles, and as I kept on reading these many of the characters, names, and plots seemed familiar, I can't say I felt bored or had the urge to skip a line or two as I had done earlier. Alice Munro's literary technique and narrative style is so captivating that for me, both as a writer as well as a longtime Alice Munro devotee, I clung to every word in the stories. I also realized how much of the love, creativity, and fascinating twists and turns in each story I missed in my first reading. One reason may be because I read these while I was commuting to work in a train. The surroundings were obviously very noisy and the stops and starts of the train must have been a distraction. This time, I was in my backyard and nothing else could take my eyes away from the pages as I swallowed each of her words. Once again I found the experience absolutely rewarding. I promise my readers that I will offer a review of this book shortly.

I must mention that two of the stories of which while I remember the general plot, I forgot the respective ending. "Passion" and "Dimensions." In "Passion", a middle-aged woman goes back to visit a house where she made a momentous decision of her life. Why? I forgot although I had read the story only a few years ago. And now, I was happy to discover. Alice Munro in this story projects about the importance of passion in life and love. Grace, a girl from a humble family gives up the prospect of marriage to Maury who comes of a well-to-do family but noticed that there was no passion in their relationship. They never kissed each other or had any physical intimacy. Then one day Neil, his elder brother, takes her out on a ride as they had gathered for Thanksgiving dinner. He is a doctor and touches her, in a friendly way, and her eyes opened. She finally realizes that a marriage without passion is not what she wants, and moves on with her life leaving Maury behind. The story appears to have a diametrically opposite outcome of *Drishtipaata*'s Adharkar.

In "Dimension", a woman whose husband killed her children goes to visit him in jail but then she finds liberated and makes a monumental turnaround in her life. While she was on a bus on her way to the prison, the bus stops because of an accident. A young man is on the ground and he is seriously wounded due to the accident. She gets off and nurses the victim and he starts to breathe again. But Munro leaves some mystery at the end. Did she turn her life around? Did she finally turn the corner and take the step that would let her be on the recovery trail? The reader can let his/her imagination draw the conclusion.

The reviewer lives and works in Boston, USA.

The Maidens' Club

Author: Niaz Zaman

Reviewed by Shabid Alam

DOWN MEMORY LANE AND THEN SOME

If you grew up as a teenager in the 1960s (and in the 1950s, or in the early 1970s), and had knowledge and experience of the life led by the upper crust society in then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), going through Niaz Zaman's *The Maidens' Club* might very well bring about a sense of déjà vu or nostalgia, or both, in you. A dozen short stories will take many of the familiar set down memory lane, and enlighten those growing up from the 1980s onwards on what life in Dhaka was like as lived by essentially the relatively small number who made up the upper class citizenry. They will also get more than an inkling of the state of Dhaka then, in contrast to what it has become down the years to this day. In a nutshell, Dhaka, for good reasons, has been categorized as perennially belonging among the top three most unlivable cities in the world for a number of years this century. And, although no such classification was done in the last century (at least not of any that I am aware of), it can safely be said that this city, then essentially a large town, would not have been demeaned in the manner it is now.

The opening story, "The Maidens' Club", brings out Dhaka of the 1960s through two of the protagonists, Zainab and Zeenat, senior citizens reminiscing about the old days:

"How different Dhaka was in those days! A sleepy little town with single- and double-storey houses set in the middle of a huge lawn --- new Dhaka, that is. Old Dhaka was always crowded, with houses built close together," Zainab said. "We used to go to Royal Stationery to get books, that's how I know what old Dhaka looked like."

"And the highest buildings were the flats in Azimpur and those on Bailey Road --- Kakhushan, Gulfishan, Ashiyan," Zeenat commented.

Now contrast in your mind's eye, if you will, that image with the one of present-day Dhaka, which has been turned into essentially a glitzy mega-slum, and you might begin to understand the feeling of nostalgia in those who had lived in Dhaka with wide-open spaces, plenty of greenery, and less hectic lifestyle, even if the electronics revolution has brought about a bounty of amenities and been a major factor behind the Dhaka of the new millennium. Notice, too, the perspective of the upper society woman towards old Dhaka (which, these days, retains the same congested appearance, albeit with the sense of crowdedness having been heightened with the construction of close-to-kissing high-rise buildings on small plots of land).

"The Maidens' Club" has three women in a small café chatting about a bygone era they had grown up in, and, in the process, highlight contrasting features of their heydays and the world of Dhaka in their advancing years. They are thankful for the internet that has all but erased time and space, and has allowed them to keep in touch over vast physical distances, even as they notice a group of

four, two young men and two young women, enter the café. One of the men is clad in a T-shirt, the other in an ochre-coloured khadi fatua with an embroidered stand-up collar, while one woman, short-haired, was in a flamboyant cotton orange and red sari, and the other in a Grameen red and green checked kurta with a matching gamchha wound like a turban around her head. Quite different from the attire of their young days! Now, in their twilight years, "Death had become a part of their lives."

Other stories also indicate the dress code of decades back, but "The Maidens' Club" offers other features down memory lane. Irrespective of their station in life, "all our mothers sewed in those days --- some more than others." Hardly any woman having crossed her teens remained unmarried. And, even after one got engaged, one could not mix freely. "Made for Each Other" is a story of a rather strange relationship between Rashid and Suraiya, two Dhaka University students of the early sixties (historians and other scholars have classified it as one of the defining decades in human history), who were considered by their fellow students as being made for each other. Their story is about jilted love brought primarily about by certain social norms of the day, but the denouement of their story is both poignant as well as indicative of the defiant character of Suraiya. This story, too, harks back to the old days, when the Dhaka British Council was a popular haunt for young lovers' surreptitious meetings. And the British Council of those days is unrecognizable in terms of ambience, facilities, and sylvan surroundings from the one of today.

The story of another jilted woman, "The Woman Who Rose", is one of the very few set in the computer-driven age. Jahanara, who struggles to support her family as a computer operator in a newspaper, was seduced by a colleague who then got married to someone else. She contemplated suicide and even murdering her lover, but transcended her vengeful self to reveal herself as a strong,

determined woman. "The Writer" is about an acclaimed author of Bangladesh who has a grievance that, although he has been conferred all the notable awards of his country, he has not been able to garner any international prize like a few of his younger countrymen writing in English. Commenting to his wife about all the prizes that Bangladesh has bestowed upon him, he laments, "...but are they the same as winning just one prestigious international prize?" He also manages to incisively bring out the differences between writers of his generation and the later ones: "They are not as concerned as we were about social and political issues. Their themes are very different from ours, also their sense of identity, of who they are in the world."

"Mrs. Jalil's Jelly" gives an account of another aspect of the elite society's lifestyle of the pre-Bangladesh Dhaka days, in this instance, of food, specifically guava jelly. For good measure, the recipe for making guava jelly is provided. "A Quilt for Mrs. Rahman's Grandson" is a poignant tale of an old grand dame carrying out a family tradition of making quilts for her anticipated grandchild, and the flouting of that tradition by her daughter-in-law, with support from her son. The last line of the story is moving and, in a way, suggests the parting of the ways of age-old tradition that was observed by almost all Bengalis, and not just those from the upper end of society, and the ideas and practices of the global world.

In a somewhat diluted form, this rupture is highlighted in "How Do I Love Thee?" The pre-glocal society (not that the phenomenon has disappeared from the Internet Age, far from it) is delightfully recounted in the story of Boro Nana who, according to the customs of the day, had only viewed the white little finger of a prospective bride and had (probably joyously) given his consent to marrying her. Upon marriage, however, having discovered that "the little finger belonged to a woman whose nose was, for all intents and purposes, non-existent," Boro Nana

hastily enlisted in the army and disappeared in the jungles of Burma! The story contains this wise observation: "Traditions change," one of the protagonists exclaim. "Human beings make tradition so why can't we change them as well?" One tradition of Bangladesh that the wedding of the two Internet Age glocal young man and woman breaks is that they had distributed a detailed programme of their wedding ceremony to the guests. However, in giving a long drawn-out description of the ceremony, the author resorts to providing some insipid details of Hindu rituals, Native American rites and Irish blessings being performed, as well as recitation of a Shakespeare poem and a couple from Khalil Gibran.

"The Embroidery Prize" is rather bland, and deals with an embroidery contest among students of a females-only premier educational institution of Dhaka (which offered both Matriculation and Senior Cambridge Examination). The prototype for the fictional school can probably be guessed at by those who were privy to those old Dhaka days, as could be of the fictional shaven-headed female sculptor in the very powerful story "The Statue". This last story is compelling and will surely cause the knowing and discerning readers to ruminate and wonder. Nostalgia also creeps in several places in "The Four-Anna Coin", a story of tender love in the old days: "...in those days one could get a rickshaw ride from the Dhaka Medical College to Shantinagar for four annas." Or twenty five paisas, but, of course, the average income level for a wage earner was much lower than that in the present, and the cost of living was also lower. "Only God Can Make an Ear" is very interesting, and contains a brief reference to a big businessman who, on hiring a call girl to spend the night with, discovers that it is his own superbly made-up and seductive daughter who studies at the university and resides in Women's Hall.

"The Special Member" has this wicked reference to the membership number 303, suddenly recalled by a special member of an elite club in Dhaka, of which her deceased high-ranking husband had been a member. 303 is the popular name of a World War I vintage rifle, but was a buzzword in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the number of high-ranking civil servants of Pakistan who were sacked from their jobs by President Ayub Khan! The reader can make his/her own inferences. For me, the most memorable observation in the book is attributed to the elderly woman in "The Four-Anna Coin": "She never liked the miniature replicas of the Taj Mahal. After seeing the Taj, she was even more convinced that one could not possess the Taj in miniature, only in one's memory." The Maidens' Club is a smorgasbord of primarily Dhaka and its upper-class society down memory lane, and the occasional profound perspective.

The reviewer is an actor and educationist.

