

# Whose blame is it anyway?

AUTHOR: DILRUBA Z. ARA  
UPL: 2015

REVIEWED BY SHAMSAD MORTUZA



'BLAME' is a noun. 'Blame' is a verb. As a title of the novel, the word stands alone on the cover page, and as readers we do not know whether the story that we have in our hands is about an act of blame or about being blamed. Dilruba Z. Ara, who teaches Linguistics at a Swedish University, explained the parts of speech of the title of her second novel during its launch at the Dhaka Lit Fest in November. The personal narrative is actually more about the split humanity that accompanied our liberation war as an atrophy than a split grammatical item.

If war is a game, blame is a game too. Blame game can both be the cause and effect of a war. Blame game is particularly significant in the context of our liberation war in which a systematic programming and erasure of memory by successive governments was enacted. While history mostly concerns itself with the Who's Who in the war almanac, a fiction may focus on the imaginary other as the representative of the silent majority who sacrificed and suffered during the birth of a nation. Dilruba Z. Ara's novel is one such platform where the coming of age of a female protagonist coincides with the becoming of the nation.

The three-part novel begins in 1965 when Laila is still a teenager who is attracted to her poor Hindu neighbor Santo. The grownups as well as the growing communal tensions across the country constantly remind Santo and Laila that they are living in a changed world where it is impossible to have friendship across the religious divide. They cannot swim in the village pond as water too can be made impure by religion. Laila cannot invite Santo to the cock-fight organized by her family, the aristocratic Kazis. Her voice is subdued by the machismo of her brothers, father, uncles, and even a would-be suitor. Bullied by the narrow vision of patriarchy, represented by the closed eye shaped courtyard of the Kazi twin-houses, Laila can at most secretly receive a parrot with a broken wing from Santo and rear it in a two-chambered cage. The symbolism of Dilruba Z. Ara's novel comes naturally: the green parrot with its red ringed neck is the dream of a non-communal Bengal (foreshadowing the flag of a nascent state) that is kept in a two-chambered cage; rather, Pakistan a country with two wings. The grownups debate why being pure Muslim is important in Pakistan. The Hindu family finds it no longer safe in Chittagong; they changed their names and moved to Dhaka. Santo's father even started growing beards.

The second part of the novel covers just two years: 1968 and 1969 when the call for autonomy was

becoming stronger under Sheikh Mujib's 6-point demand. Laila finds herself in the thick of things when she comes to study in Dhaka. She could come as she was under the care of her uncle with whose son she was supposed to be married. Laila soon moved to the dorm where her inner passion for freedom was ignited by a group of like-minded men and women who could think beyond conservatism and think of humanism. Dhaka seems to be conducive to free thoughts where her cousins have also become revolutionaries.

Part 3 is the longest as it tells the tale of the war. The young girl by now has become a freedom fighter. So has her cousins, her childhood friend Santo and his sister Gita. But the plot moves to Chittagong after spending its incubation period in Dhaka. The war makes everything convoluted. War causes the various characters charter the limits of heroism and cowardice, love and hatred, passion and possession, sanity and insanity, loyalty and betrayal, innocence and experience, and above all, freedom and slavery. The agony that we go through, as readers of Dilruba Z. Ara's novel,

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is the pain of knowing and not knowing. The realistic account of the book helps us anchor the historical narrative. As informed audience we identify some of the events, motifs, or even anecdotes. Still the shock is too much to bear.

The afterword comes to validate the authenticity of the plot. The power of this chronological linear story lies in its story. A novel is primarily, as someone once said, story, story and story. Indeed, this is not a postcolonial novel trying to redress the past or a postmodern fiction that questions the validity of truth. I find the novel a straight forward historical fiction that claims the authority of being authentic. As a reviewer, I do not want to give away the story, but I welcome you all to read about a fringe narrative that is important in understanding the making of our national psyche as Bengali. It is a story that is brutally honest and honestly brutal. I can only ask you to read it and come to your own opinion about the book.

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# A pedagogue's authorial feat

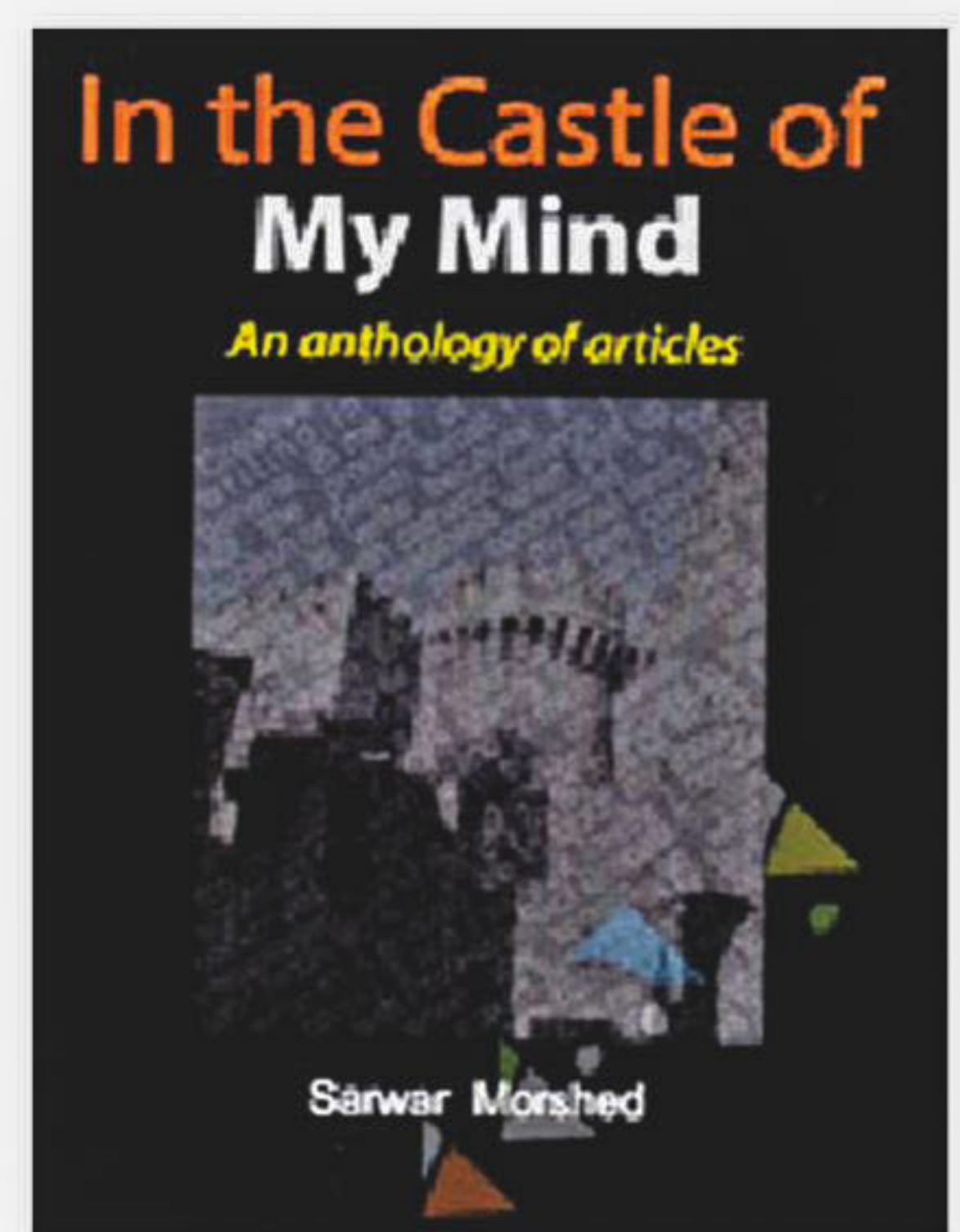
AUTHOR: SARWAR MORSHED

REVIEWED BY MAHFUZ UL HASIB CHOWDHURY

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THE most eye-catching feature of all textual feats by Associate Professor Sarwar Morshed is his amazing dexterity to exercise and brandish the terrific command he holds over English vocabulary and the diversity of subjects he deals with. These reflections flashed across my mind a few days ago while going through his book *In the Castle of My Mind*, published by Academic Press and Publishers Library, Dhaka in February 2015. His books contain precious things for sophomore readers as well as for those eager to have something to read for amusement on an unoccupied afternoon while sipping at a cup of tea. This versatility in the authorial physiognomy of Sarwar Morshed makes him an apt excavator of various terrains of knowledge and an ideal writer for dissemination of learning too.

*In the Castle of My Mind* is a compilation of a handsome number of articles by Sarwar Morshed published in different domestic and foreign newspapers like *The Daily Star*, *The Bangladesh Observer* and *The Oslo Times of Norway*. The author's extensive knowledge on literature glows from a number of allusions to Thomas Hood, William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, Alfred Newman and some more litterateurs. The author's remembrances ranging from his student life up to his current pedagogical job and many other events in between have been stitched together with thoughtful words and frequently allegoric expressions in this book. The saucy dash of humorous bits and pieces in several articles of the book are even more plausible and noteworthy. Education, domestic and international affairs, sports, festivals, travelogues, literature and linguistics cover the themes Sarwar Morshed has



worked on while writing this book. Despite the figurative and outside-the-box diction found in his books, Sarwar Morshed seems to be juggling with words while hammering his points home. However, this sportive approach does not curtail the depth of his statements; rather it makes his views and observations all the more whetted and penetrative. Moreover, some self-innovated maxims make the author resemble a reincarnation of Francis Bacon recalling some of the aphorisms that made Bacon famous during the 16th century and the centuries that followed. To quote a few aphoristic lines from *In the Castle of My Mind*, "You cannot step twice in the same river", "One life is too poor, too weak for people's revenge", "Writing for the authors is an architectural tool" etc.

The author has touched upon some social issues like moral degeneration, rise of crimes, overpopulation—all with a laughter-evoking but emphatic undertone simultaneously. Some cultural changes in the Bangladeshi society have been addressed in his article on Pahela Baishakh (Bengali New Year). Cross-border issues like BGB-BSF flag meetings, the murder of a Bangladeshi girl named Felani, frontier problems with Myanmar have also been emphasized in some of the articles of *In the Castle of My Mind*. In a couple of articles the author has looked back on his years in the United Kingdom where he went several years ago to embellish his profile with a higher academic qualification.

The traumatic plethora of road mishaps in Bangladesh has been highlighted in another piece of writing in this book. At the same time, in another article the author's dream to transform Bangladesh into a paradise of "inexhaustible love" and "amity" jingles with his patriotic enthusiasm and his glance ahead for a blissful motherland. A line from Friedrich Nietzsche quoted in the book is still revolving in my mind: "Where there are graves, there are resurrections". The author's leaning towards the concept of metempsychosis emanates from this citation and this reference to resurrection reminds us of poetry by the New England poets of colonial America while the Americans were passing through a rigorous episode under the theocratic truncheons of Puritanism.

A few words should be offered to evaluate the title of the book. The author's thoughts, reflections, memories, ideas and glimpses of various things happening around him have taken a crystallized and solidified form in his mind, like objects of archaeological value are preserved in museums. In my assessment Sarwar Morshed has applied the word "castle" as an allegoric replacement for the word "archive". The valuable patches of the author's remembrances and sagacity have added to the book the quality of a textual drive to reexamine a broad spectrum of academic, political, social, economic and international phenomena.

All the articles ornamenting the pages of *In the Castle of My Mind* deserve close perusal if readers search for solid amusement and seek to expand their ideas about multidisciplinary turfs. And as stated above, Sarwar Morshed's books all along serve as a powerful mechanism for fortifying the readers' clutch on English words and phrases and the way those lexical instruments should be applied in written and verbal discourses. So, the didactic angle of his books also needs to be envisioned while writing or speaking on his authorial dexterity.

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# TALE OF HUMOUR AND PATHOS ...

AUTHOR: MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

REVIEWED BY DR. SHIBLI JABIR

MARIO Vargas Llosa's latest novel, "The Discreet Hero", is really about two "heroes", both of whom are successful in their respective professions but face challenges in their lives because of their prosperity. As in his earlier book, "The Way to Paradise" (reviewed in these pages January 12, 2015), Mario Vargas Llosa tracks the life and struggles of these two businessmen in alternate chapters of his novel, and finally guides the reader to a resolution of the dual crises in a unique fashion that only a masterful storyteller of his caliber is able to pull off without making it appear too melodramatic.

Mario Vargas Llosa is a Peruvian writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010 which was awarded to him, "for his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt, and defeat," to quote from the citation of the Nobel Committee. I have been an avid reader of Vargas Llosa since I read his "Bad Girl" in one breath. Subsequently, I have enjoyed reading his "Feast of the Goat", a political novel about the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, "The Dream of the Celt" a biography of the Irish revolutionary Sir Roger Casement (1864-1916) known for investigating human rights abuses of indigenous peoples in the Congo and the Putumayo District of Peru, and "The Way to Paradise" about the life and times of two artists, Paul Gauguin and Flora Tristan.

"The Discreet Hero" which was translated from the Spanish in 2015 follows two businessmen in

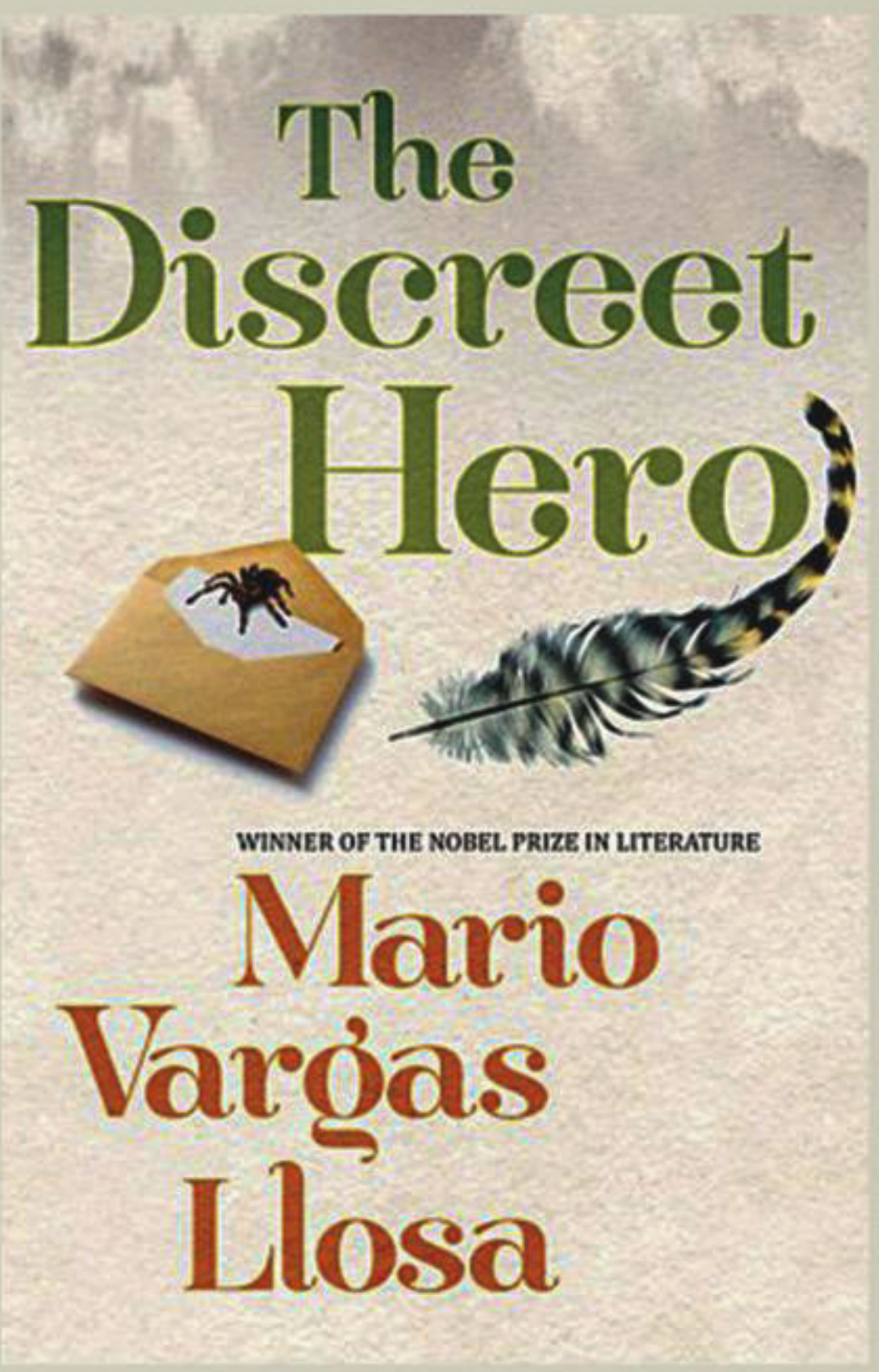
masterful translation of Edith Grossman.

The book has twenty chapters, ten chapters for each of the two protagonists' stories, and the narrative alternates between the two threads. The first chapter begins with Felicito Yanaque's regular early morning routine which is today spiced up with a letter he receives from an anonymous extortionist demanding payments for protection against "any accident, unpleasantness, or threat from criminal elements". The second chapter then introduces the other hero of this novel, Ismael Carrera, and his retiring second-in-command, Don Rigoberto. Ismael's two sons have burned through a lot of money from their father and now want to deny his new wife, Armida, any share of the fortune that he might leave behind after his death.

The two sons of Ismael hope to enlist Don Rigoberto in their scheme. In one gripping exchange that takes place in Rigoberto's living room when the two brothers confront him and elaborate their legal maneuvers to annul their father's marriage, one of them pronounces,

"A wedding, by the way, that's worthless because it's pure garbage," Escobito corrected his brother. "A travesty without the slightest legal standing. You know that too, uncle; you're not a lawyer for nothing. So let's talk turkey, if you don't mind, and call a spade a spade."

Vargas Llosa does not hesitate to use colorful words such as "chola", a half-breed to describe Armida, and liberally punctuates his dialogues with



Before Felicito came to this arrangement with her, Mabel was available to all clients for money, and he was hoping that she would be in a dedicated relationship with him. As he finds out, his own son also cherishes Mabel, forces her to regularly sleep with him, and finally persuades her to be part of the conspiracy to blackmail his unsuspecting father.

The novel has all the hallmarks of Vargas Llosa's unique skills. To connect with the reader with his easy-flowing style; his ability to detail the lives of ordinary people; the choice of words, phrases, and metaphors that enhance the reader's sense of the world where the characters of the novel live and negotiate; and his skills as a story-teller that make each page a must-read. Unlike his other books, almost all the drama takes place in Peru and the reader comes away with a fresh insight into its society as it transitions from a medieval backwater to a modern market-based global economy. The choice of the transport company, which Felicito owns, and the insurance company that Ismael built up, both of which are symbols of globalization, can also be seen as Vargas Llosa's attempt to go back to his roots as a native son. While he now spends most of his time in his adopted country Spain, the novel reminds us once again that he is a Peruvian first and still draws his intellectual sustenance from its rich culture and heritage.

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Peru whose lives have been thrown into turmoil by their own children who hatch elaborate plans to extract money from their fathers. The narratives detail the adversities they face and how they hatch counter-plans to foil the scheming off springs. Felicito Yanaque is the owner of trucking company in the coastal city of Piura in Peru who finds himself the victim of blackmail by his son who comes up with a plan with his young mistress. The other hero, Ismael Carrera successful owner of an insurance company in Lima, the capital of Peru, was recently widowed and remarried his maid, Armida. Ismael works with his long-time associate Don Rigoberto and lays out a counter-plan to avenge himself against the two lazy sons who want him dead. While this is not one of Vargas Llosa's best stories, it has humor and pathos, as well as lots of twists and turns, and these features are well preserved in the

four-letter words that I have not seen in "discreet" novels. But, given that the events are happening in the rough and tumble world of the Peruvian underworld, his choice of anecdotes, phrases, and flowery language gives a genuine flavor of real life in the market and non-market economies of Peru which is still a developing country. I was quite piqued by Vargas Llosa's allusion to "casa chica", a love nest that Felicito built for his mistress Mabel with a monthly allowance for her. "Casa chica" literally translates to "a small house", in which a man houses "a secondary family with wife and children which some married men kept apart from their primary family (the big house). The man bears the cost of this second family and visits with variable frequency, but its members have less than the 'legitimate' social rank, and no formal ties of marriage between him and the other woman."