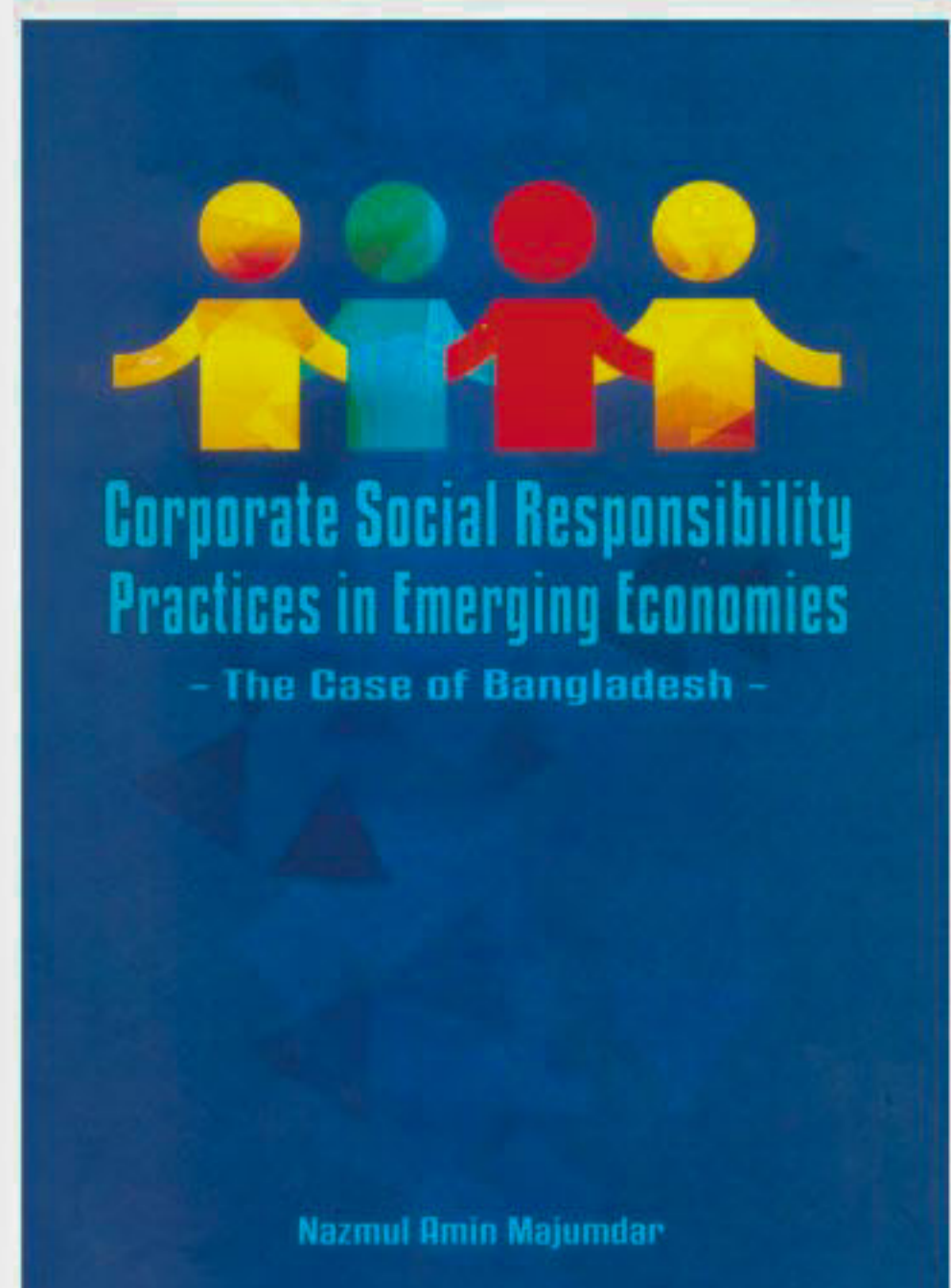


A STUDY ON CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

AUTHOR: NAZMUL AMIN MAJUMDAR

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

University Press Limited



TO use a hackneyed expression, times change. As has for the world of corporate business practice. Nazmul Amin Majumdar, the author of Corporate Social Responsibility Practices in Emerging Economies: The Case of Bangladesh, begins his book by expounding on this aspect of changing times: "In business and management literature, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a key business strategy tool for redefining the role of corporations in the marketplace in today's globalised economy." Majumdar is a career civil servant who, before joining the government service, worked in a large multinational company in Bangladesh. Majumdar acknowledges that the issue of whether the CSR involvement of corporations should be voluntary or set within a regulatory framework has yet to be resolved between academics and practitioners (given the relative novelty of the phenomenon, not very surprising). Nonetheless, there is little argument that, in "today's globalised corporate culture it is the obligation of corporate entities to ensure that the wellbeing of its stakeholders is ensured." In terms of defining the concept of CSR, after having discussed several offerings by different authors and organizations, he settles on the broad categorization suggested by Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, which states that CSR encompasses "not only what companies do with their profits, but also how they make them."

At the outset of the book, Majumdar clarifies that although the concept of CSR is applicable to corporations of all sizes, he has chosen to concentrate on the large corporations on the ground that "they are visible and have more power in the marketplace." In this context, he sets out the objectives of his study. Broadly, he attempts to develop an operational framework of CSR to assess the CSR practices of corporations. We find out later in the book the extent of his success in this endeavour. Specifically, his aim is to:

Understand CSR in Bangladesh. Identify the key CSR factors and highlight the problems and challenges confronting corporations and management. Undertake social responsibilities, including poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

Going back to the issue of divergence of opinion between the academic and institutional schools of thought, the author finds common ground linking the two. They seem to be in broad agreement that "human rights, labour standards, environmental impacts, corruption, workplace relations, the marketplace, gender discrimination in the workplace, freedom of association, fair trading options, and philanthropic activities like natural disaster management, could be considered as issues of standard global CSR practices." However, he cautions that, in developing economies, corporations do not always practice them. That, given the disparity in the quality and efficiency of business practice in the developed and developing world, should come as no surprise. Still, there are CSR issues that cut across the major global models, like human rights, labour standards, and environmental issues. Majumdar is appreciative of the developing countries' situation when he notes that without first comprehensively examining their condition, the CSR operational models of developed countries cannot be expected to be completely functional in them.

The author has carried out an extensive survey on the leading pharmaceutical corporations of Bangladesh to substantiate his findings on CSR in at least one prominent sector of the country's economy (Ch. 3, "Industrial Development Policies and the Rise of the Pharmaceutical Industry of Bangladesh"). We recall that his stated intention was to concentrate on the large corporations. Fair enough, but that almost certainly limits the scope and authority of a holistic study. Majumdar has carried out an extensive survey on the industry,

which is reflected in the comprehensive chapter that he has written. Some of his findings reflect tangentially on the overall governance situation in the country. He finds rampant extortion and widespread corruption inhibiting CSR practices of corporations. One does not have to expend much energy to put two and two together to relate to the scenario bedeviling Bangladesh.

The author remarks on a sterling aspect of the average Bangladeshi's character: "In general, the people of Bangladesh individually or in groups assist the less fortunate, particularly during natural calamities like floods, cyclones and epidemics." He finds that corporations are also engaged in philanthropic activities, but many tend to view these involvements as insignificant in comparison to their profit growth. In terms of the richest people, he has a significant observation that hints at a corporation-

media nexus. Alluding to a study, he states that the very rich either own and run, or finance, important national newspapers "for their self-publicity and interests in order to create a political image and gain business through pressure, which often amounts to blackmail." Majumdar advocates for a more positive role for the media, whether print or electronic, which can act as a watchdog and guide businesses towards CSR practices in the establishment of a fair and free market. He, however, acknowledges that in Bangladesh, the media at times do make consumers aware of the consequences of a business policy or activity. He does not forget to add that the chapter has focused on the importance of the pharmaceutical corporations in this country and their contribution to its economic development.

The author has also studied external and internal stakeholder conceptualization of CSR practices. His findings indicate that external stakeholders have acknowledged the importance of CSR in business. They believe that CSR has positively influenced gains in business reputation, brand name, and market power. Such positive impact on business performance eventually increases profit margins. The point is that, as stated earlier, almost no one disputes that modern business enterprises should take up CSR. It is just that the perception lingers, as the author has indicated, that the CSR that businesses undertake is not commensurate with the massive profits they make. The author could have expounded expansively on this perception, or reality, as the case may be.

In Bangladesh, the author finds, while some corporations have followed globally acknowledged CSR models, not all have been able to, because of country-specific constraints. A country's level of economic development, intensity of corruption, and organizational leadership need to be considered while practicing CSR in Bangladesh conditions. From this perspective, Bangladesh has some way to go before establishing widespread CSR practices in the busi-

ness sector. Indeed, the author observes, the perception of CSR often differs from one observer and/or practitioner to the other. "The empirical results suggest that CSR is recognized as a business strategy tool by both external and internal stakeholders in Bangladesh. However, the degree of importance of CSR varies between stakeholders."

Majumdar comes to several specific and general conclusions regarding his findings from the study. Stakeholders would like to pursue issues like workplace health and safety, women's rights, and creating jobs in order to facilitate CSR in Bangladesh. His analysis also suggests "that the country is struggling with contextual issues that have a negative influence on the CSR practices of corporations in Bangladesh: for example, the country's economic ills, the regulatory regime, corruption, and lack of a level-playing field between national and multi-national corporations." However, other determinants are positively related to CSR practices, like a democratic polity and the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of citizens.

The book seems to be, as it is organized, representative of a PhD dissertation. The substantial chapter on methodology, data collection, and research design, which could easily have been summarily presented, seems to be a dead giveaway. It reads like a dissertation effort. There is nothing wrong with turning ones PhD dissertation into a book, but necessary changes need to be incorporated for it to be metamorphosed into a book format. Corporate Social Responsibility Practices in Emerging Economies: The Case of Bangladesh explores a very important subject in the post-Cold War free market economy-dominated world. It will add to the knowledge of corporate social responsibility as a necessary and effective tool in business practice.

The reviewer is an Actor and Professor and Head, Media and Communication department, IUB.



When expectations are limitless

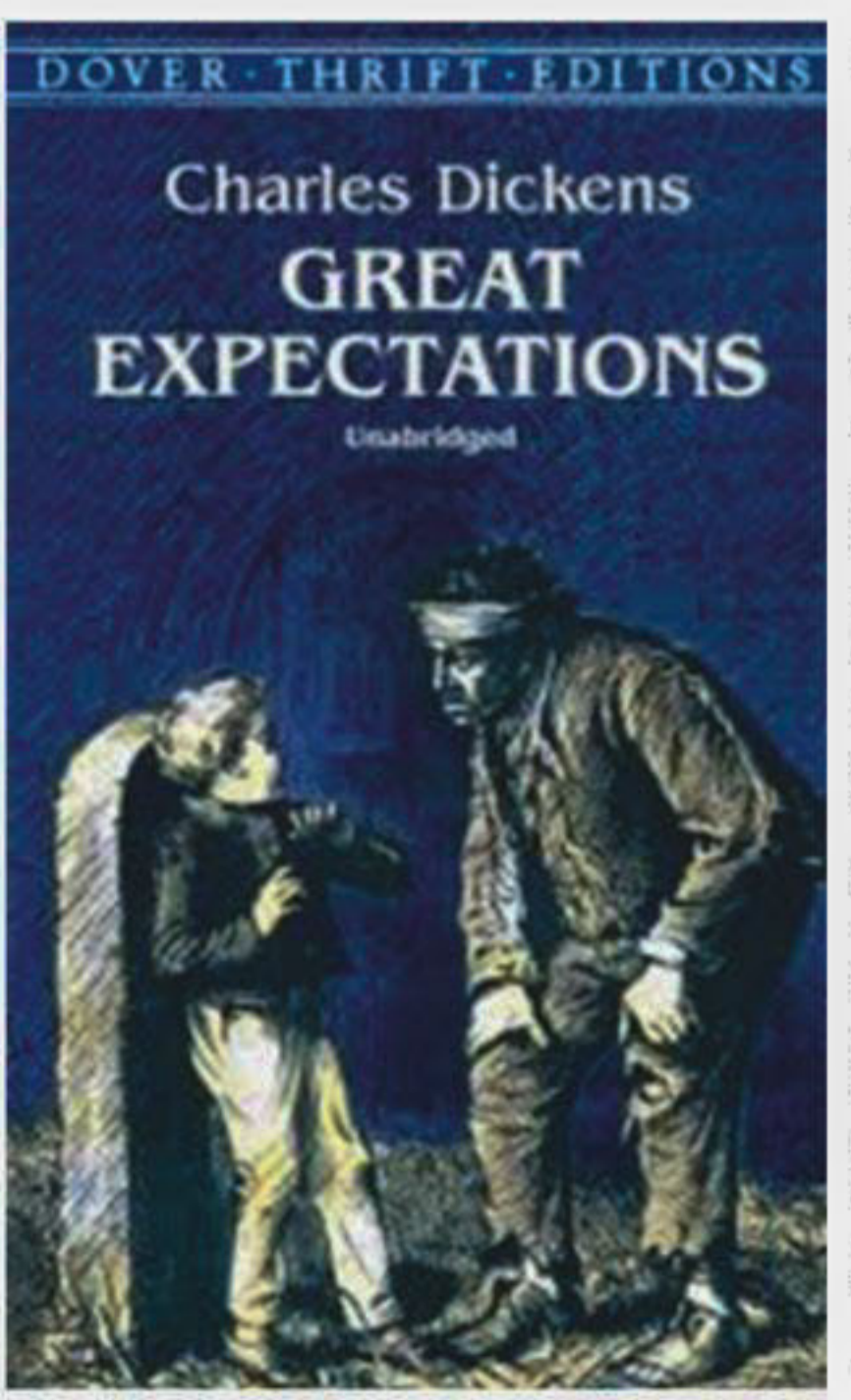
AUTHOR: CHARLES DICKENS

REVIEWED BY SARWAT SARAH

WHENEVER I lay buried in a fat volume written by a long 'extinct' writer, the great minds of today often ask me, "Why are you reading that? Who reads Tolstoy/Hardy/Sarat Chandra in this day and age?" Name-dropping aside, my only reply to them is that at some point in my life I hope to impress people by telling them that I had read *Anna Karenina* or *Srikanta*.

That was my thought as I opened the first chapter of 'Great Expectations' by Charles Dickens, considered a masterpiece by the world. I thought that someday it would be a great conversation-opener, telling people, "Oh yes I read a book or two by that Dickens bloke!" However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that I actually enjoyed the book. I was just as stunned as you (although, to be honest, there were times when I was bored numb. The endless descriptions of landscapes and the precise description of a character's attire did make my feeble brain protest at the cruel unjustness of it all. Yet I ploughed through and emerged a happy reader).

It is almost cruel to summarize a volume of such proportions. However, I shall do just that. 'Great Expectations' revolves around Pip, an orphan adopted by his stern sister and kindly brother-in-law (Mr. and Mrs Joe Gargery). They live in a small village near the marshes where everyone knows everything about each other (the aunts of Dhaka City would fit there quite well). One foggy morning, Pip encounters an escaped and starving convict hiding in the cemetery and provided him with food, a meeting which would subsequently change the former's life. As Pip grows up and begins to shed the veneers of simple rural life for a world of sophistication, a mysterious benefactor enables him to leave his village and chase after his 'great expectations'. Through Pip, the reader is immersed in 19th century England at the throes of the Industrial Revolution. Swept away from the pastoral simplicity of rural Britain, we enter the grimy city of London, full of seedy men



and woman.

As we follow Pip's journey through life; his growth, downfall and eventual acceptance of adulthood, we interact with a repertoire of unique characters. Whether it be the dilapidated Miss Havisham in her faded bridal dress, the coldly indifferent Miss Estella who had stolen Pip's heart, or the rogue Magwitch, we enter a world that is Dickensian to its very core. All these characters, with all their eccentricities, make the reader connect instantly to the story. Yet, the person who perhaps stole my heart the most was Pip himself. Dear Pip, whom I pitied, at one point disliked and finally forgave and accepted, perhaps because in him I saw myself so starkly at times, a life of fiction that seemed to be mirroring my own.

So, to go back to the original question regarding why I read the Classics; why these huge volumes of work, which were supposed to be long forgotten, shrouded in the cobwebs of time, yet are surprisingly not. It is quite simply because, these works have the strange power of invoking nostalgia for a time not ours, for places we've never lived in, by creating characters who lived our lives in a different time. We may be a modern and technologically unsurpassed generation, yet, much like a 20-something boy or an old jilted woman from the 19th century, we too crave for love and validation; and at times we too feel the seeds of resentment, indecision and hopelessness growing within us unchecked. These books don't tell us to bury our compulsions and forget them. Rather, they urge us to accept our imperfections; to cast away the great expectations we hold for ourselves and the world around us, to simply forgive and live life as it comes. So that, at the end of one such book, we close it slowly, take a deep breath and say, with a bit of relief, "So! I am not alone!"

And that, as simple as it may sound, is a wonderful revelation to a confused soul.

The reviewer is a young contributor.

A portrayal of different stages of life

AUTHOR: ALICE MUNRO

REVIEWED BY DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

SHORT stories by Alice Munro, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, are a veritable delight to read. Her command of the English language, description of human emotions, ability to economically capture the many twists and turns of human life, and her deep understanding of family and personal relations make her stories a source of rich and joyous experience. "Runaway", a collection of eight stories first published in 2004, was awarded that year's Giller Prize and Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize.

Every single story of this book has a one-word title which conveys some message and captures the essence of the lives it portrays. "Runaway", the title story, narrates a segment of the life of a young woman, whose relationship with her husband who is a much older man is full of problems and her attempt to run away from him. However, in the end, she cannot go very far and comes back to him; and probably remains trapped in a bad marriage.

The next three stories, "Chance", "Soon", and "Silence", have a common thread, the main protagonist named Juliet, and Munro portrays different stages of her life. Juliet is single and a modern woman—highly educated, intelligent and independent-minded—who is trying to carve out an existence for her in the Post-War Canadian landscape. She grew up in a small community in Ontario not far from Toronto, then moves back and forth between Vancouver and Whaling Bay in British Columbia, and finally takes a job as a TV host. Munro, in her own style, tracks the life, work, and lifestyle on Juliet from her childhood to her days as a single mom struggling with the estrangement from her only daughter.

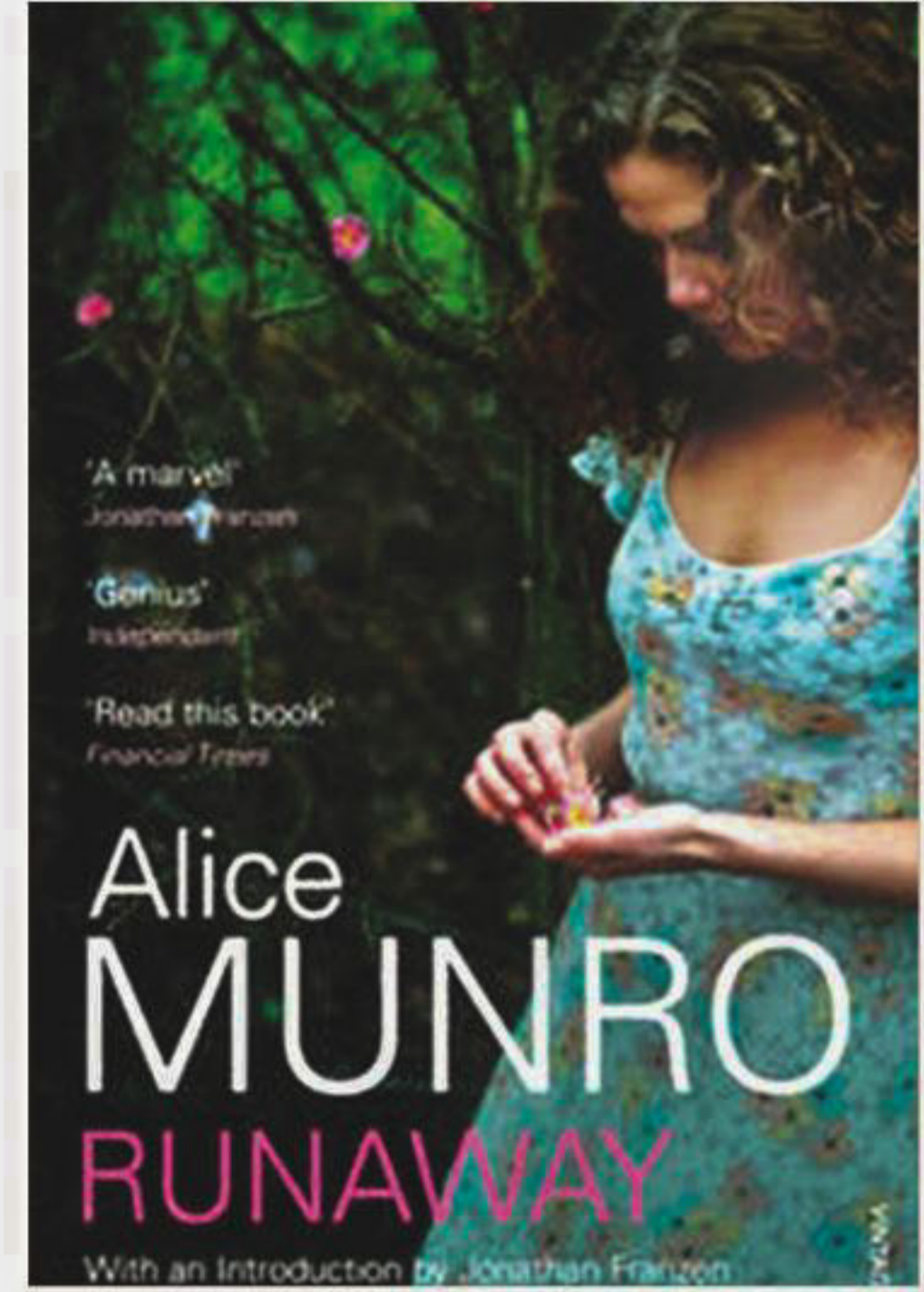
In "Chance" we learn about her trip to find the man whom she met on a train journey. She was studying Greek and was on her way to a short-term teaching position in Vancouver; he was heading for his home town, Whaling Bay. The opening pages of this story starts with Eric following up on their short encounter on the train where they develop a flirtatious relationship. During the ride, they strike up a conversation which continues into a discussion about stars and constellations, of which he knows well, and the Greek heroes she knows about. While working in Vancouver, she receives Eric's letter, she decides to go to Whaling Bay where he worked as a fisherman, and took care of his wife Ann who was left disabled by an automobile accident. When Juliet gets there, she learns of Ann's death, and she embraces the rugged lifestyle of living with Eric in the wilderness.

The next story, "Soon" takes us to Juliet's travels to see her parents. They still live near the town where she grew up. The conversations between the daughter and her mother, as well as with the father are constructed to leave many things to the imagination. For example, when her father left the job, and started farming, it is never said that he did so because he got into a fight with his fellow teachers over their dislike of Juliet's lifestyle as a single mother. Her mother Sara, who was bed-ridden,

showed her affection for Juliet, when she said, "When it gets really bad for me—when it gets so bad I—you know what I think then? I think, all right, I think—Soon. Soon I'll see Juliet". Sadly Juliet fails to acknowledge her mother's statement. Towards the end of this story, we notice Juliet has her regrets, or so it appears, in the following last paragraph.

"But she had not protected Sara. When Sara had said, soon I'll see Juliet, Juliet had found no reply. Could it not have been managed? Why should it have been so difficult? Just to say Yes. To Sara it would have meant so much—to herself, surely, so little. But she had turned away, she had carried the tray to the kitchen, and there she washed and dried the cups and also the glass that had held grape soda. She had put everything away."

In "Silence", Juliet is hoping to be reunited with her estranged daughter Penelope, who is using the weapon of silence against her mother. In a review written in French, Corinne



Bigot writes,

"While the story brings to the foreground a theme that runs through many stories by Alice Munro—the role of silence within the network of domestic relations—it offers one of Munro's most complex explorations of the reverberations of silence. As the young woman uses her silence as a weapon to sever the relationship with her mother, effectively wounding and punishing her, the short story first focuses on the power of silence. The reader then becomes aware that another loss, another dismissal and another silence lie at the heart of the story. Although "Silence" apparently reads like a tale of unresolved grief, a reversal of the values of silence is at work in the short story. As it weaves the fate of its heroine into a Greek tale and denies closure, the story leads us away from powerlessness to hope, from the politics of silence to a "rhetoric of silence."

"Powers" covers half a century of the life of

a woman and is mixed with first and third person accounts of the life of Nancy, Ollie and Tessa. The story begins with an entry on March 13, 1927 in Nancy's diary just before she gets married to a doctor. Then there is Nancy's friend, Tessa, who has physical disabilities but has the gift of clairvoyance. Tessa marries Ollie but Munro hints that he did so with the intention to exploit her talents for commercial purposes. The story then continues in 1969, when Nancy, widowed, goes to visit Tessa in a mental home. In the final episode, Nancy meets Ollie and the story then runs into an interesting fusion of dream and hallucination which I had a hard time comprehending.

In "Passion", a middle-aged woman goes back to visit a house where she made a momentous decision of her life. 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.

In "Tricks" I found similarities to a Bengali play I heard almost 40 years ago on *Akashbani* radio. In that play, a man and a woman strike up a conversation on the phone. This leads to long conversations from time to time and evolves into friendship. Finally they decide to meet at a bus station, but bad weather and missed bus trips upset their plans and create hurt feelings. Finally, after many years they find out what happened but by that time it is too late to try again. In "Tricks", the beauty is not in the plot but in Munro's description of different time periods and locales. Two time pictures, forty years apart. We also find a theme that is always there in her short stories: espousal of women's rights. Take the following paragraph:

"The prospects of marriage have opened up again, in a limited way, at her time of life. There are widowers looking around, men left on their own. Usually they want a woman experienced at marriage—though a good job doesn't come amiss either. But Robin has made it clear that she isn't interested. The people she has known since she was young say she never has been interested, that's just the way she is. Some of the people she knows now think she must be a lesbian, but that she has been brought up in an environment so primitive and crippling that she can't acknowledge it."

To end this review, allow me to mention that among modern short story writers, Alice Munro brings her unique gift of story-telling, time dimension, and an uncanny empathy for women's struggles to juggle careers, family ties, and a sometimes hostile environment in some mesmerizing tales in this collection.

The reviewer lives and works in Boston, USA.