

NUGGETS FROM THE KOLKATA LITERARY MEET 2017

SAL IMAM

CONCLUDING PART

Acts of Faith: Javed Akhtar, Shazia Omar, Tabish Khair and Mudar Patherya with Mir Afsar Ali
I have always been fascinated by the person and work of the great poet Javed Akhtar and so I am delighted to have a chance to hear his views from up close (and little do I know how close it is going to be by the end of the day). The session, on "Islamophobia, Radicalism and Terror," is about a sensitive issue and sparks fly but only in the most civilized and informative way, under the guidance of Mir Afsar Ali, a well known Indian media personality.

Tabish Khair was forced many years ago to relocate from his home in Bihar to Denmark because of tensions with certain activists of his hometown. He is today the author of a number of groundbreaking novels, most recently *Jihadi Jane*. He has a way with titles as one of his earlier books is called *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*. He puts the problem in the broadest possible perspective. "The global political economy" Tabish Khair says "has progressed to the stage of Finance Capital. That's the one thing that is not being discussed by anyone even though it is the bedrock of many of today's problems."

Javed Akhtar is invited to speak and he proceeds to dominate the stage with his physical presence. He has the handsome head of a lion, complete with a shock of white hair atop serving as a mane. His lips are always curling in a witty saying or two. I didn't know he was so knowledgeable about social matters specially those of his own country. He says that 58% of Indian wealth is owned by the 1% of the rich. "So in order to prevent the 99% from coming after them, and to hide the reality of actual Horizontal Division, they create an artificial Vertical Division. The poor classes are induced to pick quarrels with each other, which is most easily done by exploiting religious differences."

After the sitting is over Javed Akhtar is treated like the celebrity he is. Surrounded by throngs of people who ask for his autograph and want to take selfies with him, he is led away by the organizers at the head of a procession of followers and there seems to be no way I will have any chance of getting to meet him again. Half an hour later however Shazia and I are heading towards the exit when we come across Javed Akhtar and his producer Sangeeta Datta getting into an SUV. He spots Shazia and asks us imperiously to join him for lunch. There is no refusing and Sangeeta graciously takes us along to *Arsalan*, one of the legendary eating houses of the city, for biryani. The food is delicious and for the next few hours we are treated to the wonderful face to face company of Javed Akhtar sb. He is a one-man show, full of arcane knowledge and meaningful anecdotes. At one point Sangeeta, who is a film producer, asks about the greatest death scenes in movie history, saying her own favorite is the one in *Aan*.

Javed Akhtar immediately rattles off instance after instance, from a wide range of cinema. He recalls Marlon Brando dying midsentence in *Mutiny in the Bounty* and acts it out for us with complete commitment, saying "We see Brando lying down and talking in a low voice and then suddenly no more words come out of his mouth. It is done so artfully that we don't realize for a long moment that he is supposed to have died." Without pausing for a second Javed Akhtar switches to an obscure war movie called *The Sand Pebbles* in which Steve McQueen in the last scene almost escapes being shot—except that he doesn't. We are all spellbound and left staggered by the encyclopedic breadth of Javed Akhtar's knowledge.

View from the Hills: Anuradha Roy with Sumit Ray

certain bus' or 'how to arrange for person A to meet person B in a natural manner'. The phases of pure lyrical channeling are relatively rare. "I like to develop my characters draft after draft and the narrative then seems to emerge by itself. My character Nomi became, after several iterations, 'unquashable', and her actions followed in an inevitable arc."

* thanks Wikipedia
Recitations: Javed Akhtar and Srijato
For my third encounter of the day with Javed Akhtar I settle myself eagerly to hear his own creative voice. He starts by saying that since poetry is all about communication he tries to make the language used in his work as simple as possible. He promises to translate critical lines into English in real time and invites us to interrupt him if anything seems obscure—which of course no

is fairly basic, I can understand many of the linguistic games of rhyme and illusion. One is intoxicated in any case by the sheer sound of the verses: "musalsal lagaatar gujar raha hain", words which, recited in the poet's intonations, manage somehow to convey the physical sensation of the passing of Time, a purely non-physical process. **Banglar Aaj o Agami: Srijato, Anindya Chatterjee, Smaranjit Chakraborty and Pracheta Gupta (Bengali session)**
I arrive late and catch only the Q&A. It is obvious that there has been much soul searching about the status and future of the Bengali language in India during the session. One audience member laments that his son reads the *Feluda* stories, but in English! The panelist replies "Please teach your son good Bengali and then he can read the Sherlock Holmes stories in Bangla."

Somehow this little fact took away all my worries, I felt confident, able to handle anything." This story, which particularly pleased me as a Bangladeshi, spoke volumes about how alienating it is for the Bengali citizens of India that their native language, Bengali, plays such a small role in the country's institutions.

Write the Change: Kiran Desai and Paul Beatty with Arunava Sinha
The session starts out slow as the moderator struggles to find an interesting line of attack but then finds an opening when he asks the authors "If you were a judge of a literary prize what would you be looking for?"

Paul Beatty speaks from experience: "There was a strange uniformity in the novels that had been submitted, no matter where the authors were from; whether Nigeria or the US or Korea, the story being told was essentially the same. The writers were not taking risks, there was nothing in their works that any right-thinking person would disagree with."

Kiran Desai: "There's a fatal error in writing to be liked which we all fall into. I see now that my first book had no darkness. I was hardly aware of it but at some deep level I wanted approval. However by the time of my second book this had been burned off. I approached it differently, fearlessly."

Paul Beatty: "I like to be challenged by the writer's linguistic style when I read. I want the writer to be really trying to do something with the language."

Kiran Desai: "That's the problem with writing workshops. All the eccentricities are ground out of your work."

In the general discussion Kiran talks of why Kafka is so important for her. "Even though he died well before the Nazi regime came to power in Germany, Kafka's writings had intuitively picked up on the trauma to come. The holocaust was prefigured in his work." She is full of foreboding today, getting similar intimations of future crimes in the air.

Paul Beatty's memorable line is: "There's something which I call the 'inauthenticity of the authentic'. Meaning that the way people expect you to be, the 'authentic', is actually false. You are much more than your real self." A nice note on which to end my visit to Kolkata and to begin my reveries...

And after it is all over and the tumult has died down and the feet are no longer stumbling on oversize stones and we are left with a kaleidoscope of opinions and personalities, interactions of joy and those of hurt, Kolkata traffic and the city's soft heartbeat, blazing intellectuality, convivial company, rich exhausting buffeting of events, tingling of knowledge gained, head and heart mightily engaged, we proffer a final toast "Hail fellow well-met—at the Kolkata Literary Meet."

Sal Imam is a writer who is working on his memoirs of the late 1960s in the US.



Lunch at Arsalan with Javed Akhtar.

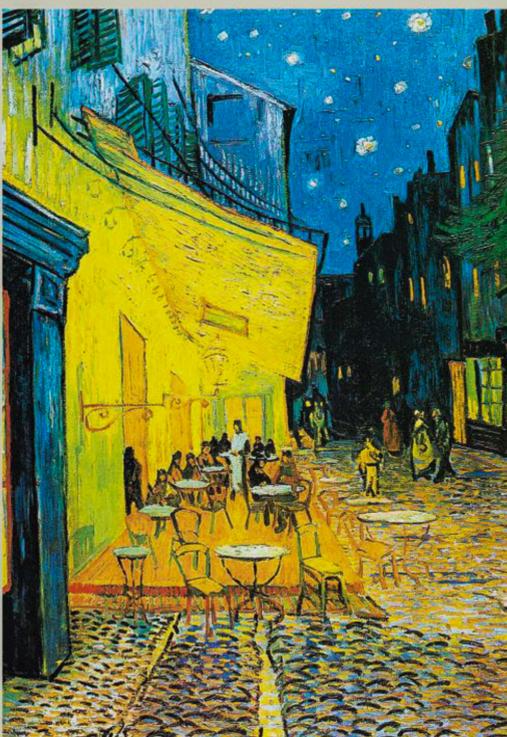
Anuradha is the Hindi name of one of the constellations—among 6 other categories, it is in the category of 'Sweet/Delicate and Friendly' constellations* — and nothing could more accurately capture the spirit of this author, or be more appropriate for someone who, from her youngest days, has been an outdoors person. This tends to explain why Anuradha Roy has based herself for some years far from the metros, in a remote hill station, and why her latest book *Sleeping on Jupiter* is set in a beachside location whose natural features become powerful factors in the novel's emotional landscape. Thus the vast 'open spaces' of the surroundings cast a hypnotic existentialist gloom over the characters while the 'force and energy of the sea' foreshadows the violence on shore. (I am reminded of a movie I saw recently called *Angry Indian Goddesses*).

Sumit Ray draws out a number of writers' tips from Anuradha. Among them: "Often in a novel one has to put in the effort to work out practical matters like 'how to get a character to take a

one will dare to do. Leaning forward in his seat, whole body quivering with energy, Javed Akhtar lets loose. His sonorous voice soars over the assembly tickling every heart. He recites a recent poem which has as its theme that it is madness to try to cultivate a garden of flowers all of the same colour. Such an attempt risks making the garden itself bitter. This is clearly a veiled attack upon rigid interpretations of religion. Javed Akhtar recites another of his greatest poems, a long philosophical meditation called *Waqt (Time)* which starts with the lines:

*yeh waqt kya hain?
yeh kya hain aakhir ki joh
musalsal (lagaatar) gujar raha hain
yeh jab na gujara thaa,
tab kahan tha?
What is time?
What is this thing that goes on without pause?
If it did not pass,
Then where could it have been? (Posted by Anshul Gupta 13 December 2012)*
I am pleased that even though my Urdu

Another panelist takes this opportunity to recount a personal anecdote. "Last year I traveled to Bangladesh. It was my first foreign trip so I was already on edge. Things got worse when my plane was delayed because there was a SAARC meeting taking place in Dhaka and many VIP flights were landing. By the time I arrived it was in the middle of a Kal Boishakhi storm which had further disrupted the airport's operations. Because of the storm and the extra security the person who was supposed to receive me was not able to make it to the airport. So there I was, all on my own in a strange country with armed soldiers patrolling everywhere. I fearfully took a three-wheeled scooter to make my way into the city. I was nervous because I had heard that law and order was not perfect in Dhaka. At one point the scooter driver pulled into a petrol station saying he needed to fill up and I wondered if this was just an excuse to rob me. In this state of apprehension I looked at the counter of the petrol machine. All the words and numerals were in Bangla!



LONELY STAR

FARUK KADER

Like a lonely star in the heaven
You count the number of light years,
Before you flick out your last ray of light.
The planets orbiting you
So much assured of your benign light,
Go through the motion day and night.
Know they are safe and live,
As they are held in the caring bond
You have devised.

Café Terrace at Night
by Vincent van Gogh. 1888.
Location: Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo.

TO RABINDRANATH

SUKANTA BHATTACHARYA

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI:
MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

You're still fresh in my mind,
In each quiet moment, ecstasy prevails as usual,
I still get effusive listening to your songs,
And fearlessly evade the silent pangs of hunger.
Your gifted soil still brings golden crops
In each stratum of hearts.
Your words still hum, in deep emotion,
In mind's darkness.
Yet starvation days gradually build an empire,
We're persecuted at the hands of cruel collaborators,
Though the days are blood-stained, I foster
Your flaming words in my heart.

Yet abstinence from food is certain
Long sighs permeate my heart –
A poet of famine,
I see nightmares, clear images of deaths every day.
Waiting for food in the row, I pass my spring,
Watchful siren blows at my sleepless nights,
I feel distraught over needless brutal bloodshed,
I get flabbergasted at the cruel fetters.

I still believe today,
"Pleasant words of peace will finish mockery."
I can see, to fight monsters,
Everyone is ready with promises.



Self Portrait by Rabindranath Tagore.
Circa 1930 - 1940. Lithograph.