

MUSINGS

When I Met Pip

FAYEZA HASANAT

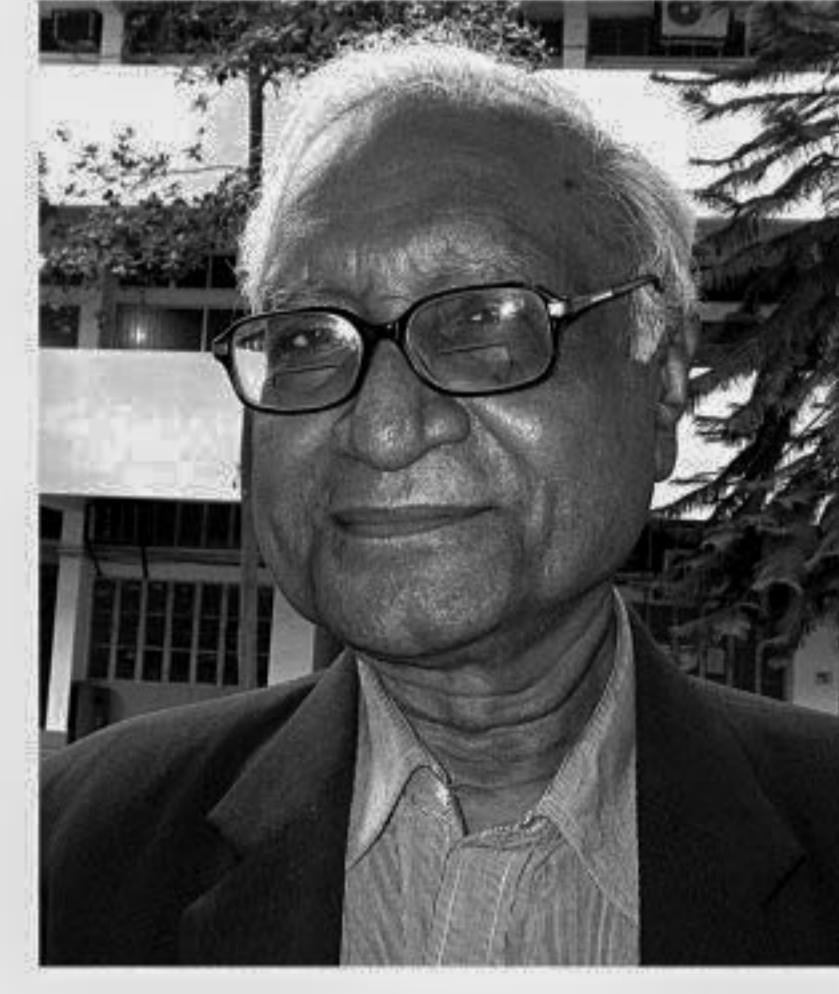
(For Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury: A Birthday wish, in advance)

When I met Pip, he was hanging upside down. It was not by choice though; someone held him by his feet against his will and made him face the world, upside down. His real name was Phillip Pirrip, the man who held him like a flittermouse was a convict named Abel Magwitch, the man who created them was Charles Dickens, and the person who introduced me to that upside down world was Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury.

He never took attendance, but no one ever missed his class. We would all sit quietly, waiting for our Dickens man (he was also our Jane Austen man, the Brontë man, and Tolstoy man, for he was the one who introduced us to the glorious world of the Novel). We watched him as he walked in, holding Dickens in his right hand and wearing a warm smile on his calm face. He always came on time and stood there—in front of us—for one short hour, reading from *Great Expectations* and talking about the socio-politico-historical issues of the Victorian Era. And those issues sounded quite simple—when Professor Choudhury talked about them nonchalantly—trying to bring the Queen's world down to our Pip-level.

"Write in simple words, you always say to me," Tagore once wrote, "but simple writing is not that easy. If I come up with some writeable thoughts, I might put them in words, with ease. Difficult writing is not hard at all; and useless writing is not as easy as it seems."

As we sat like a bunch of dumbfounded Pips in that classroom, mesmerized by Stella's beauty, Miss Havisham's cruelty, Joe's honesty, Biddy's modesty, and the convict's tantalizing tales of sufferings and



accomplishments, we found it easy to tackle all those grim textual terrors and fictional problems. It was not difficult at all—to understand why Joe was the perfect gentleman, or why most of the people in Pip's world preferred living like a bat, hanging upside down (including Miss Havisham—the clock-stopper, and Stella—the not so unreachable star).

Years later, while going crazy reading books and writing papers and defending a dissertation on everything Victorian, I learned the truth about simple knowledge in the hardest way possible: simplicity is the most complicated thing. Simplicity is not simple. In order to make the most complicated ideas accessible in simple language, one has to have the Herculean strength of clear knowledge and pure vision. Now, when I teach *Great Expectations*, I still see myself sitting in Professor Choudhury's classroom, frustrated by Pip's apparent naïveté. Back then, I could not understand why it took so long for the

upside-down Pip to see the world down-side up, the way he really should have seen in the first place, when the convict held him by the legs. I mean, by flipping him down, the convict actually was straightening him up, wasn't he? It was the convict who showed Pip what love and life and dreams were made of—in a Victorian London that flourished by sucking up the life force of its working class people and its colonial subjects. Pip stayed blinded by Stella's love, but I saw the spark of Joe's forge glowing in front me, in the eyes of my professor, the craftsman of knowledge.

In the beginning of the novel, Magwitch made Pip see the sky over his

Frostian yellow woods, where two roads diverged and he had to choose the one... less travelled by! I did not like such Frostian ending of that novel. Fortunately, because Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury was also my tutorial teacher that year, I had the opportunity to use those tutorial sessions to the best of my ability to torture him with my unrelenting flow of questions. Therefore, after Pip met his [unsatisfying] ending, I decided to declare my dissatisfaction:

"Why doesn't the novel have an unquestionably satisfying ending? Why does Dickens have to give two possible endings to one life story? Why was Pip



feet. At the end, Dickens flipped Pip over again, leaving him sandwiched between two possible endings—making him a Victorian Hamlet—stuck in a

so stupid to have missed his chance with Biddy? Why is it that man always falls for women like Stella—pretty, rich, but cruel? Why does it feel like that?

Dickens has intentionally left us hanging upside down to make us keep looking at the sky where we will never be able to tread?"

Professor Choudhury smiled in response. Then in his usual calm and soft voice, he said, in Bengali, "Oto gulo proshner uttar jante holey arekti uponyas ikhte hobe je!" One needs to write another fiction in order to find out the answers to all those questions. And then he asked, "Why don't you write?"

Me? Write? Fiction? I was only a female Pip back then, dreaming to build a *Satis House* of my own great expectations and gorging all the words coming out of every character from every novel of the western world, as if they were my only source of life! Didn't he know that I could have lost my track in that vicious Victorian woods had he not showed me the way to light?

He smiled the same way last February, when I met him after ages and instantly unwound the chain of my uncontrollably whimsical thoughts. He sat with me and listened to my words with utmost patience, occasionally asking me questions about my writing. I told him stories of my strength and dreams. But I could not tell him that I still carry inside me that image of an upside down Pip. With time, I have grown strong, like a weeping willow tree, hanging upside down, touching the ground with my stooping branches. The ground beneath my feet are solid and unyielding, because I was privileged to have people like Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury as my mentor—my very own 'knowledge-smith.'

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REVIEWS

Pestilential Scourge - The Plague

REVIEWED BY SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

Albert Camus, Hamish Hamilton, 1948.

Published in 1947, the background of Albert Camus' *The Plague* is that of Oran, a coastal town of colonial Algeria. The author certainly knew the place well and demonstrated his disgust against its ugly face of materialism. Craftily placed away from the actual happenings of liberation from German occupation, it still can be considered as an allegory of France's wartime trauma. Introspective and revealing in nature, the novel attempts to capture humanity's innermost thoughts.

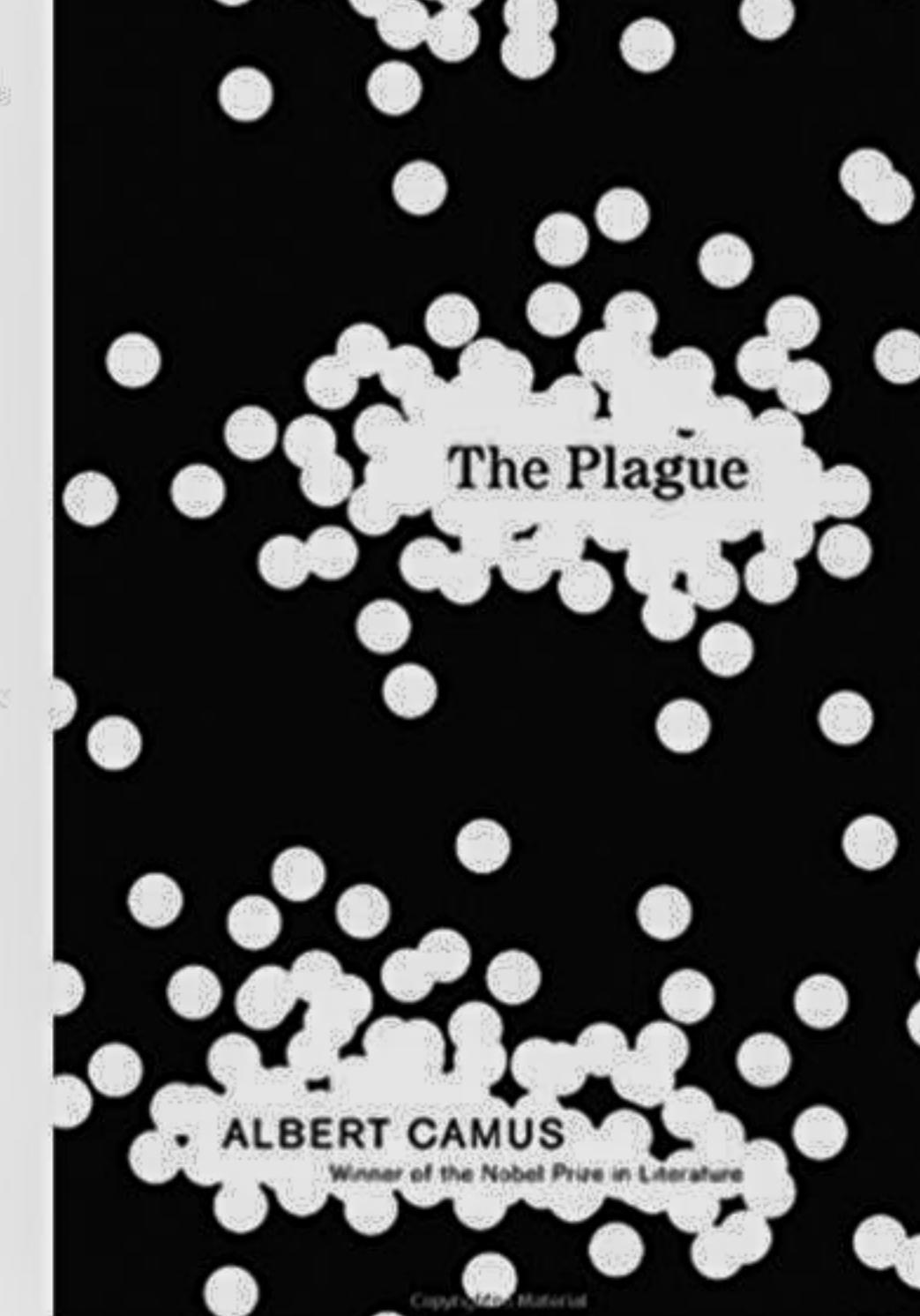
When Camus was in central France recuperating from tuberculosis, North Africa was liberated. During the time, the author was separated not just from his homeland, but also from his own mother and wife. Like his personal life there is pestilential illness in the outbreak of plague in Oran; isolation and loneliness in the quarantine. The description of the plague is so vivid and heartfelt that the reader finds an element of personal involvement – an allegory of life in the occupied France. In his words, "the first thing that the plague brought to our fellow-citizens was exile," separating families and friends for eternity.

In the novel, Camus did more than just inserting some vignettes and emotions; he portrayed three representative characters through those of the journalist Rambert, Dr. Rieux and the narrator in Tarrou. Rambert, the journalist gets stranded in Oran after the quarantine is imposed. He desperately wants to go back to Paris to his wife. Isolation and loneliness aggravate his suffering of being stranded in Oran. A stranger in town, the exile is stifling for him, and he desperately wants to get away. He is also cynical about the higher nature of his calling when Dr. Rieux tries to comfort him by saying that "there was no cloud without a silver lining," and that he could do well by writing an interesting report on the situation in Oran. He retorts, "I wasn't put on this earth to make reports; but perhaps I was put on earth to live with a woman." Reaching a dead end, Rambert explores possibilities of escape. But on the eve of it, realization dawns on him. He opens up, "I always thought that I was a stranger in this town and nothing to do with you. But now that I have seen what I have seen, I know I come from here, whether I like it or not."

Dr. Rieux, who can be called an alter ego of Camus, is an unassuming fellow who faces the common crisis, suffering not out of lofty ideals or heroic courage, or of careful reasoning for that matter, but of casual affairs and mundane

realities. For Dr. Rieux, it is simple necessity and he acts out of necessary optimism. On a personal level, Camus himself was exhausted and depressed by the demands of public expectations that were placed upon him as a public intellectual after the liberation of France. He was weary of being called an existentialist philosopher. Dr. Bernard Rieux becomes his stand in.

When Raymond Rambert the journalist, who was preparing a report on the health condition of the Arabs, seeks an unqualified indictment,



Dr. Rieux gently answers that it would be groundless and that he would not be giving anything to add to his report. The journalist then characterizes him as Saint Just; what he understood from his language.

The narrator Jean Tarrou represents Camus' stand on moral issues. In a way, Tarrou has similarities with Camus, both in their mid-thirties; he left home by his own account, in disgust at his father's advocacy of death penalty – a subject of intense concern to Camus. Tarrou eventually opens up to Rieux about his past life and commitment, summarizing the moral

message of the story, "that I had continued to be a plague victim for all those long years in which, with my heart and soul, [...] I was struggling against the plague. I learned that I had indirectly supported the deaths of thousands of men, that I had even caused their deaths by approving the actions and principles that inevitably led to them." Tarrou's conclusions are more than an avowal of political error: "...we are all in the plague I have decided to reject everything that, directly or indirectly, makes people die or justifies others in making them die."

Sketching an authentic voice on the ideological stand of Camus, this story speaks of collective responsibility. The calamity that had befallen the citizens of fictionalized Oran is a symbolic representation of what happened in France after German occupation in 1940s. The Republic is abandoned and Vichy's government is set up under German tutelage. "It was as though the very soil on which our houses were built was purging itself of an excess of bile ... letting boils and abscesses rise to the surface, which up to then had been devouring it inside." The widespread observation among the Frenchmen was like what Father Paneloux thundered out to his flocks, "My brethren, a calamity has befallen you; my brethren, you have deserved it."

The similarities between fictionalized Oran and France are all too many. Like what Camus says in *The Plague*, in appearance nothing had changed. "The town was inhabited by people asleep on their feet." He also notices how when the plague has passed, a kind of stupor somehow set in. And Camus moves on, speaking of the train of ills befalling Oran as what happened in France after liberation.

The awkward character of Cottard appears in the drift. But Camus is against polarized moral rhetoric. He presents Cottard in sympathetic vein drawing him close to Tarrou in spite of his many failings. His fate is similar to the punishment meted out to Tarrou to the presumed collaborators, often by men and women driven by revenge and equally culpable of past failings.

In conclusion, *The Plague* is a symbolic landmark in world literature chronicling a calamitous period in the life of a nation as happened in France. Reminiscent of Kafka, it also is a commentary on human life with all its absurdity, beautifully meaningful in its own way.

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POETRY

Daybreak

ARYAN SHAFAT

A perfect luminous ball with deep, wide craters and spots, like freckles—a round, floating rock island of infinite faces.

In the midst of a pitch black labyrinth, lies an aperture. Over the faint silhouettes of the silent trees, on top of a wavy field of vapours and gases, ominous arrows of light, shot from the invisible fortress, are reflected. Stained light, veiled in a golden hue, chases out the winding claws of gloom, like mice.

The bright, ominous missiles of light penetrate through the bubbly and bouncy dome-shaped pitch-black wall.

The wall, the faint silhouettes of the forgotten trees, the slumbering oceans, the sparrow in mid air, all awaken, in the span of an eye blink; the floating, vaporous waves come alight; the sky paints itself into a rainbow.

The gaseous waves dance with the illuminating arrows, even before a drop descends from the immortal waterfall, the oceans freeze, the sparrow dives into a see-saw of blindness and sight, flowers bloom, only to wither away, the insects halt the beating of wings.

Morning dew, on newly grown grass, turns into frost, revealing a smooth, polished emerald field of marble.

The heavenly lanterns come out to sing, at last.

Under the new stream of golden rays, heavy leaves turn transparent, the dim aquarium of mist is flooded with golden light, trees shed away their blankets of darkness, the blissful gardens and mole-hills fall into a trance.

Cool winds play with the brown crowns of the trees, shrubs fly away with the rock hard breeze, the leaves flutter away in flocks, travelling the translucent, magical carpet: the wind.

However, the lights stop, the dome turns ash, the falling leaves levitate in the air, boulders of gas and fire block the gliding stream of rays, Ignorance shrouds and devours the revolving dome; none of its inhabitants are spared.

Cobblestones of clouds filter the wild light of the swirling constellations.

Shades of orange litter the horizon of the dome. The giant has awoken.

Melodies of sweet chirps erupt from the forests, waves of biting wind, swarm over the wandering vessels, thick curtains of water enwrap the arching trees.

Small torrents of colour flow up the dome walls, an azure shade coats the dome, insects scurry out of their burrows, trees wake up out of their shadows, dew trickles down the silky petals, birds soar through the thick cottony waves, basking under the eyes of the giant.

Bathing their claws in puddles of seclusion.

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