IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSONS...

After an interval of nearly three years, I am back at *Indian*

*Literature*, now as Guest Editor. I am immensely happy to

reconnect with my readers, who were so graciously indulgent

with my handling of the journal over a couple of years.

I was in Libya from October

2008 till February 2011, teaching

English in Garyounis University at

its Ajdabiya Branch, near Benghazi.

I am sure these place names

are now familiar with most of my

readers, on account of the recent

violent upheavals in that country.

Many cognoscenti in India, who rely

mostly on media reports and analyses

by ‘experts’ may not have a clear idea

of what is going on there. A dictator

who was ruling over Libya crushing

the people’s aspirations for free

expression over the last forty-two

years, has recently been ousted through a revolution which began

as a non-violent popular uprising as part of the now famous ‘Arab

Spring.’ It soon turned into an armed rebellion when unarmed

people were fired upon by the security forces with anti-aircraft

guns, breaking bodies up into several pieces.

A week went by like this, in Benghazi and other east Libyan

cities like Al Baida, Darna, tobruk and others, and also in Az Zawia

and Misurata in the west. What happened after that was stuff

that we see in films or read in novels. For example, ten thousand

unarmed people marching in a wave could overrun a security

post manned by two hundred personnel and grab their arms,

although a few hundreds of them would first fall to bullets. This

was the pattern that followed throughout the east and some parts

of the west of the country in the first few weeks of the

revolution. The so-called ‘Jasmine Revolution’ that swept away

dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, both flanking Libya, turned into

a ‘Red Hibiscus Revolution’ here.

At a juncture when hundreds of thousands were under

the threat of genocide in the city of Benghazi in mid-March,

the Libyans sought international help, and the concerned Arab

organisations and countries gave them support, followed by many

countries of the western world. Upon appeals by these, the UNO

stepped in and imposed a No Fly Zone to protect civilian lives,

which the NATO helped implement. The freedom fighters have

eventually overrun the old regime and almost all important world

powers have recognised the Libyan National Transition Council

as the legitimate body in charge of the affairs of the Libyans.

There can be allegations of imperialism, oil exploitation,

market prospecting and a host of other things…. But as a writer,

I am committed to the people… to the human saga that is

unfolding. The gentle, generous, peace-loving Libyan people

deserve freedom and the right to full-blown expression of their

personalities.

The western perception about Muslims at large and Arabs in

particular has been changing for the better much before Arab

Spring set in, in late 2010. The soft-power unleashed by the

younger generations of the Middle Eastern and Magreb countries

through unique cultural and aesthetic expressions, through

literature and the arts, have certainly broken stereotypes of ‘the

Muslim’ in western minds. Writers from these countries, over

the last two decades or so, have been raising their voices for

freedom, democracy and liberal values. The ordinary people of

all these countries, especially the young, gradually became aware

of their individual ‘selfhood’ as basic beliefs were pervaded by

the modernity that kept seeping in. The explosion of modern

communication systems, most significantly the internet, in the

last decade in these regions, bringing in Facebook, Twitter etc.,

made unprecedentedly swift dissemination of information

possible.

However, Arabic literature that was produced in these

countries over the last two-three decades, is of much greater

importance, as it reflected the changes in their worldview, the

gradually mutating social patterns, and political aspirations of

common people.

Here one may ask: can literature launch revolutions?

Obviously it can, at best like in the classic case of French

Revolution, ‘the mother of all revolutions.’ At any rate, literature

can catalyse a revolution, accelerating the process. Like literature,

revolution is also a creative process. Both break the established,

creating new value systems.

The regimes in the Arab world could be loosely described

as basically comprising tribal, neo-feudal, theocratic elements and

as dictatorships in compliance and complicity with the

requirements of the capitalist political structures of the western

world. The common people, who are used to nodding in assent

to the benign tribal elder, would accept the dictator in the same

manner! This structure, however, is originally alien to the

concept of Islam, in which all are equal in submission to the

Creator.

It is in this context that ideals of liberal democracy crept

in through the externals of modernity, in a long, gradual process.

When the rest of the developed and developing world go

in for short term, elected governments to suit the process of

constant change and evolution in all aspects of life, only certain

societies remained in the grip of long-holding, almost ‘divine

origin’ leaders such as Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak, Ali Abdulla Saleh,

Ben Ali, Bouteflika and so on in the Arab world who tended

also to perpetuate dynastic rule — grim grandfather figures who

‘protected and guided’ their citizens, much the same way children

are treated in traditional societies. The logic behind this would

seem that citizens were too immature and vulnerable and were

not to be trusted with freedom or independence. This was

eventually discovered by the people for what it really was — a

ploy to perpetuate authority. In such a setup, the full potential

of the human individual was not recognised or even encouraged

to be formed.

When new ideas of individual freedom and selfhood began

to circulate and spread, their dissemination across the population

was made difficult and rather impossible in controlled societies.

With the advent of instant communication facilities like

the mobile phone, internet, social networking sites etc. over

the last two decades, a new kind of ‘brotherhood’ began to

emerge…a whole new generation of ‘fitness-freaks’ — educated

youngsters averse to life-destroying habits of their elders — who

wanted to look at life positively, to live a complete life with

the possibility of self-expression as essential as breathing and

eating.

Here is where various negative-ideology-driven

organisations, extremist outfits like Muslim Brotherhood, Al

Qaeda, Taliban etc., get dated. Islam as a religion of peace,

humanity, sharing and brotherhood, began to be projected in

practice. The adherence to the five prayers and cleanliness

practiced in public, seen regularly in Tahrir Square during the

Egyptian Revolution or countless venues in Tunisia, Bahrain,

Yemen, Libya and Syria, during ongoing revolutions, along with

the determined preference for peace, created the face of the new

Islam. The bogeyman of ‘political Islam’ as projected by the West

is demolished; the doctrine of ‘the clash of civilisations’ has been

effectively debunked.

Where regimes turned brutal and kept up mounting

atrocities, protesters within societies which had at least a figleaf

of civility—where discussion, intellectual and social resilience

were possible at least to some degree—pursued non-violent,

‘decent’ formats of protest, compelling President Obama to recall

Gandhi and Martin Luther King Junior in the context of the

protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo.

Members of societies which had been bottled up, and

lacking a civil body of culture of healthy exchanges and inclusivity,

found that their regimes met them with lethal force even when

they demonstrated peacefully for their democratic and human

rights. Eventually they had to resort to violence in response,

as that was the only language the regime would understand.

One is reminded of a Malayalam proverb, *Muttaalanu Muttavadi*,

(‘The cudgel for the brute bully’). For example, Libya’s is not

a civil war. It is an armed, internal conflict. ‘Civility’ is the aim

of the struggle. There is no question of two separate Libyan

nations. It’s just a question of how to conduct the affairs of the

country—whether an inclusive, democratic, civil society should

be there, in which everyone can participate, or an oligarchy or

family rule should be perpetuated. I remember a man in Benghazi

spilling it out on Al Jazeera TV: “As if we are all fools…as if

our sons and daughters are less intelligent, and his (Gaddafi’s)

sons are all endowed with the ultimate wisdom. How long can

they make us fools? How long can we suppress our own

aspirations?”

All this was made possible through a body of

writing, of which creative works constitute an

important component that formed the social and

political consciousness over the past several decades,

as already seen. Modern Arabic literature of the

region, fired on by passionate writers like Mahmoud

Darvish, Adonis and others, led the trail for further

explorations in modernity, reacting to the reality

at hand. Some writers gave expression to the

inexpressible, through their poetry, short stories,

novels etc. For example, Hisham Mater’s novel

*Anatomy of a Disappearance* (available in India), deals

with the shocking police state that Libya was, the

regime kidnapping and eliminating dissenters,

tracking them down anywhere in the world.

This is where I wish to introduce the role of a particularly

interesting English language literary journal published from

London. *Banipal* (named after the legendary Assyrian king

Ashurbanipal, a great patron of the arts, who set up the first

systematic, organised library in Nineveh) a quarterly founded in

1998 in London by Margaret Obank, (who remained Publisher/

Editor up to Issue No. 37, when Deputy Editor Samuel Shimon,

a renowned Iraqi novelist, has been elevated as Editor) has been

bringing out special issues from literatures of the Arab Middle

East and North African countries. Interestingly, specials on Yemeni,

Tunisian and Libyan literatures came out a couple of months

before the revolutions broke out in these countries. Of course,

the Arabic originals from which the English translations appeared

in this journal, used to exist over the last several decades, but

their availability in English has thrown them open to the entire

world. This journal has, no doubt, played an important part during

the last thirteen crucial years, in getting more and more readers

and writers interested in the cultural ethos of the Arab world,

blasting away deep-rooted biases and suspicions.

Another interesting detail about this magazine is that it

is in the format of *Indian Literature*— the same size, 200 plus

pages in single column.

In this issue we introduce two new sections. One is “Literature

from the Margins.” From all over the country, writers who are

not seen in the mainstream for various reasons, those who belong

to and write about small/marginal communities, are intended

to be given a rare chance to be read on a national scale. We

begin with poetry from Gujarati, which forms only the first part

of the material collected by Kanji Patel, the noted Gujarati poet.

Another new section is “Younglife.” Literature for/by

young adults will be published in this section. This is in consonance

with the policy of Sahitya Akademi which has recently instituted

Bal Sahitya Puraskar and Yuva Puraskar. We begin with a short

travelogue by a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl.

In the coming issues, we plan to create another new

section, “Green” dedicated to environment-oriented creative

literature.

We welcome contributions in all the above genres.

Submissions can be sent to indlit@gmail.com. Hard copy

submissions can be mailed to the editor.

July-August, from mid-July to mid-August to be precise, comprise

the Malayalam month of Karkkidakam, corresponding roughly

with Ashaadhom of Shaka Era and the Aadi month of the Tamils.

Dakshinaayanam starts on the first day of this month, with the

sun moving to the Tropic of Capricorn. In Kerala this is a month

of spiritual and physical rejuvenation, with the believers engaged

in a month-long daily reading of Ramayana purging the spirit

of pent-up bad karmas and also undergoing corrective Ayurvedic

treatments accompanied by suitable diets in an atmosphere

cooled by the monsoon rains.

The season around Karkkidakam, when the monsoons

intensify, is also believed to be a period during which a large

number of deaths occur, especially around the new moon of

the month. This year, a number of people, some of whom were

literary and cultural figures whom I personally knew, fell its

victims.

First, just before the onset of the month, Sunil Poolani,

a writer, editor and publisher who lived life on the edge following

the good old tradition of the ‘rebellious writer,’ died in his sleep.

In his early youth, he had joined the fiery band of the last wave

of the romantic revolutionaries in Kerala. Those were indeed

the handful who offered at least a semblance of resistance to

rampant social and cultural ills. Soon, the movement got bogged

down in endless ideological debates; eventually, it all but petered

out. However, some of the zealous youths who could not brook

such tepid transformations, left Kerala seeking adventure in other

parts of the country or even outside. Sunil was one of them.

Though we had met only once, Sunil kept in constant touch

with me, mainly on gmail chat. He had taken the liberty of coopting

me, along with well-known figures, as one of the

‘Contributing Editors’ of *Urban Voice,* the literary and cultural

periodical he edited. Shortly before his death, he had got from

me with his usual skills of persuasion, a piece on Libya for its

latest issue, which I saw after his death. I salute this intrepid

warrior of the printed word.

K. Ravindran, a literary, ideological and cultural icon of

Kerala who passed away on 4th July, was closely known to me.

Ravindran, better known as ‘Chintha’ Ravi—so called because he

was one of the pioneering editorial board members of the Marxist

Party’s ideological journal, *Chintha* — was a writer and film maker

who was one of a kind. It was Ravi who gave the Malayalam

travelogue a modern creative character with a stamp all his own.

He infused the locales he wrote about with a ‘personality’ of

their own. After the master writer S.K. Pottekkatt provided the

Malayalee with his travel accounts from around the world in

which the lands he visited were presented as ‘breathing’ characters

in the 1950s and 60s, it was Ravi’s travelogues *Swiss Sketchukal*

(Swiss Sketches), *Ente Yaatrakal* (My Travels),

*Akalangalilie Manushyar* (People in Far-off

Lands), *Mediterranean Venal* (A Mediterranean

Summer) *Buddhapatham* (The Path of the

Buddha) and others that advanced far ahead

from where Pottekkatt had left off. His megatravel

documentary serial Ente Keralam (My

Kerala) that ran into several hundred episodes

on the TV channel Asianet, explored the

nooks and corners of Kerala, weaving

together the scenic, cultural, literary,

aesthetic, economic, social, historical and

political threads that comprise Malayaliness.

Its script in book form won him the Kerala

Sahitya Akademi Award. One of his early

books *Kalaavimarsanam—Marxian*

*Maanadandam*, a collection of essays in neo-

Marxian aesthetics, played an influential role

in the field of modernist Malayalam literary criticism. His feature

films, *Iniyum Maricchittillatha Nammal*, (We, Not Yet Dead), the

State-award winning *Ore Thooval Pakshikal*, (Birds of the Same

Feather), and the biopic on legendary film-maker G. Aravindan

for which he received the National Award, set him apart. He

had indeed swayed the sensibility of a whole generation of

Malayalees.

Then it was the turn of S.P. Ramesh. A senior psychiatrist

by profession, he was well-known for his total dedication and

compassion. But his contributions as a fiction-writer, translator,

film-lyricist, music-director and screenwriter—he wrote the story

for G. Aravindan’s masterpiece *Pokkuveyil (*Twilight) and also for

the award-winning *Maargam* –*The Path* (along with poet Anvar

Ali and director Rajiv Vijayaraghavan) — besides several others,

had projected him as a major cultural figure. The memory of

his loving solicitousness about me personally leaves an aching

emptiness within me.

The last in the line was Srinivas Parsa, veteran journalist

who served mostly in Hyderabad and Delhi. He was a warm

friend I had met in the early days of my Delhi sojourn. Our

friendship remained unchanged all these fourteen years. Lighting

up many a gloomy mood with his innocent smile, he seems to

be just around even now. Once again, I am grimly reminded of

the fact that when a friend passes, one loses a part of one’s

own self.

Mallika Sesngupta, who passed away recently, was a poet

who enriched Bengali literature through her works in a new

idiom that effectively brought to the fore the life of the modern

woman. When H.S. Shiva Prakash was the editor and I, the

Assistant Editor, in 1999 I believe, I had the occasion to interact

with her when she came to Delhi to present her poems. In fond

remembrance of her, we carry an “In Memoriam,” with an

obituary by Sanjukta Dasgupta who has also translated Mallika’s

poems in this section.

Kamala Das, the celebrated poet and fiction writer in

English and Malayalam, passed away two years ago on May 31,

2009. She is remembered through her two stories in “Masters.”

The same section features Jayanta Mahapatra who is one

of the few living masters of Indian poetry in English. We present

some of his poems in English, and his Oriya poem “Ashoka,”

in his own translation.

S.V. Rama Rao is a senior artist whose works are on

permanent display in great galleries of the world like Victoria

and Albert’s in London, The Museum of Modern Art and The

Metropolitan Museum, New York, and several others. We celebrate

him in our “Graphic Essay.”

Sankar, the master-novelist, of Bengal, author of works like

*Seema Baddha* and *Jana Aranya*, both made into famous films by

Satyajit Ray, is briefly interviewed by Humra Qureshi in this issue.

*Hang Gandhi*! the English translation of Giriraj Kishore’s

famous Hindi play, deals with the life and struggles of Mahatma

Gandhi in South Africa at a crucial juncture in history.

Well, my dear readers, here we are. Hope to be around

with you for some more time.

A.J. Thomas