IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSIONS...

Libya is in the throes of the birth of modern democracy as

it awaits its first-ever elections in May-June this year. However,

lately the eastern half of the country has unilaterally declared

a ‘semiautonomous’ status for itself, in stiff opposition to the

policy of the central government headed by the National

Transitional Council. The advocates of Free Barqa (Cyrenaica),

swear that they just want federalism as a means to ward off

discrimination from the western half which is the seat of the

central government, a return to the system which was in force

during the time of the monarchy, with three semiautonomous

states—Barqa in the east, Tripolitania in the West and Fezzan

in the south—which was abolished in the last phase of the king’s

rule and even the idea totally erased from public memory when

Gaddafi came to power in 1969.

Now, Libya seems to be once again returning to

regionalisation, which in fact is defined naturally by its topography,

among other things. The eastern half of Barqa itself is

predominantly mountainous—the entire Jebel Akthar (Green

Mountain) area, with a cool climate, with towns such as Al Merj

and Al Baida, and those in the eastern direction along the

Mediterranean coastline such as, El-Agouria, Tolmeita, Appollonia

(Seaport of Cyrene which is 20 kilometres inland), Darna, Susah

(the ancient Cyrene of the Phoenicians, Greeks and the Romans—

remember ‘Simon of Cyrene’ in the New Testament, who

assisted Jesus in carrying his cross on his last journey?), and Tobruk

at the easternmost border with Egypt (very close to El Alamein

where Field Marshal Erwin Rommel of the elite German Army

was defeated by Field Marshal Montgomery of the Allied Forces).

At the westernmost point in the line of the above towns is

Benghazi, the second largest city of Libya and capital of ancient

Barqa situated on the coastline just at the beginning of the Gulf

of Sirte. In fact ancient Greek settlements at the sites of the

above cities had formed the ‘Pentapolis’ (meaning ‘five cities’

in Greek), with names such as ‘Berenice’ for Benghazi, ‘Balagrae

’for Al Bayda, Ptolemais for Tolmeita, ‘Barce’ of Barca for Al Merj

(from this the Arabic name Barqa originated, which came to mean

the entire eastern Libya as well), and Taucheira for El Agouria.

South of Benghazi is the ancient Roman settlement and the

present city, Ajdabiya; and then moving westward along the

coastline; the oil towns of Brega, Ras Lanuf and Bin Jawad on

the Gulf of Sirte—all well-populated. Areas south of the Green

Mountains, the coastline and these towns, are entirely desert

sands. The oasis towns of Awjjela and Jallou in the desert south

of Ajdabiya also come under Barqa; so does Kufra, in the farsouth-

eastern border area, deep in the Libyan Sahara. The region

of Tripolitania begins with Sirte, Gaddafi’s hometown, which

falls somewhere near the midway mark between the east and

the west, on the coast of the Gulf of Sirte and from that point

on, it stretches towards the west including the city of Misurata,

the towns of Zlitan, Al Khoms (where the world-famous Roman

city of Leptis Magna is located) and other smaller ones; almost

a hundred kilometres south from here is Bani Walid which is

even now predominantly pro-Gaddafi. Further along the coastline

is the capital Tripoli (‘Tarabulus’ in Arabic), and further west,

Az Zawia, Sabratha (another site of an ancient Roman city, and

before that, a flourishing Phoenician colonial city and trading

centre) and Zuara near to the Tunisian border. South-west from

here are the Western Mountains, with towns like Garyan, Yfran,

Zintan, etc., which are the most populated areas of this region.

Further south is the seat of the ancient indigenous cultural site

of Ghadames, and in the south-east from there, the towns of

Awban, Sebha, and Murzuq which form prominent population

centres of Fezzan.

I have dwelt so much in detail about the physical features

and topography of Libya because recently I came across a fascinating

collection of short stories from Libya, *Translating Libya: The*

*Modern Libyan Short Story*, from the Sahitya Akademi Library

(discovered two years ago and photocopied for me by my friend

Sri. Padmanabhan, Assistant Librarian, which I had carried with

me all this while, but had the opportunity to open only now).

These are stories from Libya’s different regions as described

above—Stories from the East, Stories from the South, and Stories

from the West, collected, translated and edited by Ethan Chorin,

a US diplomat, translator and scholar stationed in Libya from

2004 to 2006, as the country was emerging from its obscurity,

opening up to the world its oil riches. Chorin has been fascinated

by an interesting fact—the absence of ‘place’ in the Libyan short

story, symbolically suggesting as if most of the Libyan writers

are silently saying that they are devoid of any sense of a specific

‘space’ in the closed society of Libya under Gaddafi. So, he has

chosen only stories which suggest at least some kind of ‘place’

as their locales. During the dictatorship it was impossible to have

literary discussions in Libya. Chorin accomplished so much partly

because of his diplomatic immunity presumably, and got the book

published from SOAS, London, in 2008. Now, the legacy of

Gaddafi’s iron rule that crushed any kind of creative writing or

free artistic expression is showing its barren wake—the ordinary

people do not know what literature is! There has not been the

discipline of Literary Studies, as we know it, in the whole country

during the last four decades. No literary books or magazines;

no story or poetry published in the few magazines or newspapers

that came out with ‘official blessings.’ But the informed few—

sensitive souls who were rebels inside, while keeping up the

semblance of normal lives outwardly—have come out now,

especially in the cities, to salvage what is left of Libya’s literary

heritage. A woman short story writer and a scholar specialising

in narrative and the short story, Najwa Ben Shetwan, who was

born and brought up in Ajdabiya, and now a Professor in Benghazi

University (formerly Garyounis University), has been discovered

and represented by Chorin. So are many more Libyan writers—

from all regions, from different backgrounds.

In between sections, Chorin makes interesting background

notes on the travels he made in Libya, filled with the cultural

peculiarities of Libya and Libyans that he experienced firsthand.

The authors included in the book are: Sadiq Nayhoum

(1937-94, Benghazi),Wahbi Bouhri (Benghazi, b.1916), Ramadan

Abdalla Bukheit (Benghazi, 1935), Abel Raziq Al-Mansuri (b.1954,

Benghazi), Saleh Saad Younis (born in Al Beida), Najwa Ben

Shetwan (born in Ajdabiya in 1968), Abdullah Ali Al-Gazal (b.1965,

Misurata), Ahmed Ibrahim al-Fagih (1932 b.Village Mizda, 100

miles south of Tripoli), Maryam Salama (b.1965, Tripoli), Ahmed

Mohammed Lannaizy (b.1929, Benghazi), Mefta Genaw (b.1958,

Tripoli), Ziad Ali (Tripoli, b.1949), Kamel Hassan Maghur (1935-

2002, Tripoli), Lamia El-Makki (b.1972, Tripoli), and Ali Mustapha

Misrati (born in Misurata).

A few of the stories presented in this book date to pre-

Al Fatah revolution of Gaddafi on 1st September, 1969. Some

of them reflect the state of decay in the society during the time

of the monarchy under King Idris. Many of the stories written

during Gaddafi’s dictatorship are understandably allegorical, and

quite a few of them, especially “Locusts” by Ahmed Ibrahim

Fagih, are prophetic about the overthrow of the regime in future,

though written a couple of decades before it actually happened.

The reader will find that many stories are told as if in one breath,

in a hurry to finish before somebody spots the storyteller. Some

are too short, and end abruptly. It would seem that the writer

couldn’t wait and work on it, to develop the plot sufficiently.

Creative writing under a dictatorship is like stealing food and

eating it furtively, looking frantically around all the while for

anyone who could possibly cause trouble.

One of the most important short story writers Chorin has

presented above, Ahmed Ibrahim al-Fagih, novelist, short-story

writer, playwright, essayist, and senior diplomat, addressed the

Union of African Writers in Addis Ababa on 2nd May 2011,

condemning the regime at the height of Gaddafi’s war against

his own people. His doctoral thesis submitted to the University

of Edinburgh in 1983 on the Modern Libyan Short Story is a

mine of information on the genre in this country. He explains

why the short story is the dominant literary form in Libya.

According to him,

“The reasons for the short story attracting the attention

of the Libyan writer, rather than the novel, should be sought

in the peculiarities of Libyan society itself. The following ideas

may be suggested by way of speculation on the subject:

“Firstly, Libya as an underpopulated country, with its origins

in a nomadic social structure, does not offer the multitude of

characters and patterns of life, nor the diversified panoramic social

spectrum with its wide range of thoughts, ideas and concerns,

nor does it have the interplay of relations, actions, emotions,

which feed the long narrative. Of course the vastness of the

country, more than seven times the size of Britain with one

twentieth of its population, and the great distances which extend

between its peoples, contributes to creating a situation more

ideal for the short story than the novel. But, perhaps more

is so restrictive as regards relationships between people, and helps

to create a situation which leaves the novel with little to draw

upon, while providing ample opportunity for short fictional

work.

“Secondly, Libyan society abiding by traditional conventions

up to the present day, separates men and women, both sexes

leading separate social lives unable to mix outside the realms

of the family. This state of affairs must surely further restrict

the range of subject matters for the writer and determine the

shape and colour of his creative activity. The writer is left with

isolated fragments of human suffering which result from this

suppression of basic natural human inclinations, and he finds

it most convenient to express these in the short story.

“Thirdly, there must arise from the conflict between

traditional and modern conceptions of society an alienation

which must affect the psychology of the writer and leave its mark

on his subconscious mind. When he is asked to abide by traditional

social conventions, the writer will find it harder to suppress his

own personality and will use his writing as a vehicle for expressing

his sense of outrage and frustration. These expressions belong

more appropriately to poetry and the short story than to the

novel, which demands a prolonged labour and loses the immediacy

of his passion. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the

Libyan short story writer gives priority to the cause of the

oppressed woman, relating through this, his own crisis, and

identifying himself with her cause.

“Fourthly, the recent social developments in Libya (the

author is talking about the early 1980s here) have produced a

crisis in society for no sooner had the country emerged from

its battle to assert its identity than it was again plunged into

strife, this time as a result of the painful transition from a

nomadic, rural and partly-agricultural society to a modern industrial

urban society. Helped by the discovery of oil, the rapid change

has affected every aspect of social life and has made a profound

impression on personal attitudes and patterns of life. This has

left the whole of society in a state of turbulence and turmoil.

The certainties of a society that has for untold centuries followed

a familiar way of life, are shaken, the trodden paths are now

obscured, and an air of uncertainty, a sense of being lost, now

prevails. The question as to why of all the forms of literature,

importantly, is the tribal social code of Bedouin society which

the short story should be considered the most suitable medium

for expressing this moment of crisis has been the subject of many

studies. However, our present concern is to observe how a

situation like this has also helped to create a climate conducive

to the promotion of the short story.

“Fifthly, quite apart from social consideration there was

a very practical reason for the short story achieving pre-eminence.

Until the mid-Sixties no effort was made to establish a book

publishing business in Libya and it was therefore difficult for

Libyan writers to publish books. Journals and periodicals provided

the only outlet for literary expression, and journals are usually

reluctant to publish a literary work which is on the lengthy side.

“Finally, there is a factor which has been presented on some

occasions as the principal reason for the popularity of the short

story in Libya, namely the tradition of Libyan folklore which

favoured the short fictional work rather than the long narrative….

“These, therefore, are the main factors that must have

determined the nature of Libyan fiction, and has given the short

story preeminence over all other literary genres, be it the novel,

the play or indeed, even poetry, the traditional vehicle for literary

expression.”

However, Ethan Chorin does not agree with the argument

that “Libyan society is not sufficiently complex to produce

literature deeper than the short story....” He feels that “it is one

of the most complex and contradictory in the Middle East, a

region not widely known for penetrability. Furthermore,

analogous societies have produced extremely profound – and

lengthy – works of literature.”

As suggested earlier, in the Libya sans Gaddafi, there is a

near-total absence of literature – in life, in the print media, in

the curriculum – which seems like an organised neglect. A lack

of reflection of ‘place’ in one’s imagination could be a key to

the missing sense of collective national identity that characterises

post-revolution Libyan society. Here, Ethan Chorin’s parting shot

in his Foreword to *Translating Libya* (in 2008, two years *before*

the revolution) rings prophetic: “In a country where birth-place

and tribal affiliation are so critical, acknowledging relationships

in the printed word is key to sorting out issues of national

identity. One might go so far as to say that only through claiming

title to name, person and place, will Libyans be free to place

themselves solidly into a unified concept of ‘Libya,’ and to write

longer, self-reflective works.”

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We have in our ‘Masters’ section, first, poems by the

celebrated Oriya poet Kamalakanta Lenka (1935-99). He arrived

on the Oriya literary scene with powerful poems from the late

1950s. Since his first collection, *Suna Fasala* (The Golden Harvest)

appeared in 1958, twenty-four more came out in successive years.

According to the assessment of Lipipuspa Nayak, the translator

of the present bunch of his poems we carry, his poetic engagement

was mainly with metaphysical themes, the angst of existence,

and the medium of poetry itself. She notes, “Beginning with

an abstract, revolutionary style – unique, genuine and resonant

– dismantling sacred canons, his poetry later betrayed an affinity

for sentimentality and sensual imagery and yet transcended the

subjective world of the poet. His fierce individualism separated

him from the literary crowd. The poet kept off publicity and

power-centres of literary activities in Orissa, and remained

underrated and a lesser name with the Oriya critics. The poetry

of Kamalakanta was difficult to imitate, and obviously unmatched.

These poems are taken from his collection *Arthantar* (Another

Meaning).”

K.G. Sankara Pillai’s is a unique voice in contemporary

Malayalam poetry. His contribution in ushering in distinctly

modernistic modes such as working in striking images and

metaphors that defined the internal rhythm of a poem, freeing

it from the constrictions of metre and rhyme, driving a seeming

‘narration’ using irony and contrast, metonymy and synecdoche,

makes him stand apart, for nearly four decades now. He has

mentored upcoming poets through his publication *Samakaleena*

*Kavita* (Contemporary Poetry). He has also edited other important

journals like *Prasakthi (Relevance)* advocating humanity-based

politics. *Penvazhikal (Feminist Paths)* he compiled and edited, is

an acclaimed anthology of women’s poetry and feminist thought

in Malayalam. ‘Jananeethi (Peoples’ Justice),’ a forum for human

rights under his Chairmanship, has championed the cause of the

marginalised and the oppressed in Kerala. I remember the

impassioned plea he made on behalf of the evicted Adivasis from

Government land subjecting them to a brutal crackdown, during

his speech in a meeting in Kerala House, New Delhi, convened

to congratulate him for winning the Sahitya Akademi Award in

February 2002.

Fiction-writer, poet, dramatist and essayist, Ramesh Chandra

Shah seems to enjoy his vocation as a teacher, as he testifies

in an autobiographical piece he wrote in IL 264. A full and

accomplished life gives the author a sense of ‘arrival’ finally. His

great achievements in different genres of literature bespeak the

full fruition of his genius. We proudly carry his work in this

section.

In our “In Memoriam” section, Hindi fiction writer Shrilal

Shukla, author of the celebrated *Raag Darbari* and the winner

of last year’s Jnanpith Award who passed away on 28 October

2011, is remembered through Professor Vanashree’s poignant

obituary.

We are presenting in this issue, the first Kannada social

play to be written, the 19th century *Iggappa Hegade Vivaha*

*Prahasana* translated by Narayan Hegde.

In our ‘Literary Criticism’ section, is a speech made by C.S.

Lakshmi (Ambai), the acclaimed Tamil writer, who champions

women’s causes. Professor Avadhesh Kumar Singh, in his essay,

“Alternative Systems of Knowledge: A Study in Process and

Paradigms,” introduces a subject that is most relevant to our

‘aftermodern’ times.

Through an unfortunate mix-up, I had omitted to comment

on the Photo Essay “Engaging with the City: Collective Action

in Public Space” in our previous issue (IL 267). Malini Kochupillai

and Julia Gutge had presented, in their engaging conversation,

the various compelling issues connected with the use of public

space in Delhi by the “public” for which it is meant. The plight

of the pedestrians, and cyclists, who form the bulk of the public,

who are ruthlessly pushed out from the footpaths by the

burgeoning private car users, the menacing treatment by men

towards women who walk about in public places, the insensitivity

of the general public about their own rights in public places,

the necessity of engaging the public in any kind of public art

venture… the two artists have given us enough food for thought

and vibrant photos that catch the life of the public in their various

moments ‘out-doors,’ in Delhi’s public places, and also show the

kind of public art these artists engage in. I would request readers

to kindly pick up the previous issue and go through the pages

of the Photo Essay, if you haven’t already done so.

The photographs and “Dawn Poems” by Ankur Betageri

which appear in the Graphic Essay section in the present issue

bring out the importance of artistic expression making use of

public spaces. Art is no more considered the creation of lonely

individuals in cloistered private spaces; in fact, beginning probably

with rock paintings of Stone Age man, murals, frescos, bas reliefs,

public sculptures etc. in temples and palaces, churches and other

public structures throughout the world down so many centuries

have given us an idea of art in public space in indigenous cultures.

Mainly from the period of Renaissance art, the authorship of

such artistic pieces came to be established in the West, and by

imitation, here in the East as well in modern times, though in

our Asian traditions, such works had always remained anonymous,

surrendering the individual to the eternal. The relatively

new trend of art installations bespeak, if anything, the transience

of material creations, be it art or anything else; and yet, the

spontaneity involved in it helps let loose the creative passion

of the artist. Intervention of artists in the public space, with

works of art including photographs, serves to draw in the common

people into the creative effort, bringing them face to face with

reality reflected through art. For once, art is thus brought out

of the confines of galleries and other such ‘privileged’ spaces,

and shared with the public who has no pretence at being art

critics or connoisseurs and enable them to experience the novelty

or otherwise of ‘art’ as they see it. Ankur’s efforts in founding

an organisation like Hulchul and also sharing his photographs

and thoughts with readers is laudable.

To top it all off, we have a star-studded “What are you doing

in your attic?” section this time, with celebrated poets and authors

like R Raj Rao, Kanji Patel, Hoshang Merchant and Geetanjali

Shree contributing.

A.J.Thomas.