

Literary Seminar in Stuttgart October 21, 2007
Discussion of 4 stories – from the Abitur’s ‘One Language – Many
Voices’

by Qaisra Shahrz

Introduction

I was invited by Prof. Wolfgang Schoeberle and Ms Angelika Hoff of Stuttgart Seminar to present a paper at their institution during my tour in October to teachers and students of English. Last year’s seminar was very successful – this time, however, as well as talking about my story “**A Pair of Jeans**” and about myself, I was requested by Prof. Schoeberle to discuss four other stories from the collection of the eleven required for Baden-Württemberg’s Abitur. Surprised by the request, I nevertheless rose to the challenge. I read all the stories again and chose Chinua Achebe’s, Hanif Kureishi’s, R.K. Narayan’s as well as Salman Rushdie’s short stories for discussion. Why did I choose these? Apart from liking them very much, I felt I could relate to these stories in some way or other. This is not an academic literary paper as such. What you have here are mere ideas and thoughts that I jotted down over three days as I reread the stories and mulled over as to what was happening in them. This was done whilst sandwiched between inspection work (reading of inspection reports) and writing-related chores. I hope my three days’ effort helps both students and teachers.

“Dead Men’s Path”
by Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe’s “**Dead Men’s Path**” reminded me of my own story entitled “**Perchavah**”, exploring the importance and role of superstitions and beliefs in shaping people’s lives – and how on a day-to-day basis people’s actions are driven by them. In Achebe’s story we have a conflict between the ‘modern’ colonial world of the white man and the ‘traditional’ world of the ‘natives’ with its own distinct beliefs and rituals. At its heart the story espouses the need for respect – here, of one’s own local culture, and hints at the negative impact of colonialism on the indigenous population.

We are shown how the lives of those ‘colonised’ and who are so eager to ape the way of their colonial masters are affected. The aspirations of some natives, such as the headmaster Mike Obi, to be like white people – their misguided beliefs that the world of the white man is superior to local traditions and customs – is the point of debate in this story. We are shown how the old ways and local beliefs and superstitions are arrogantly dismissed and mocked. The story parodies this and shows that people with strong beliefs will revolt if push becomes a shove. The stark message of the story appears to be: do not meddle with people’s beliefs or push them too far. On the contrary, learn to respect them and their way of life. The story mocks those who mock old ways and we assume that the people who mock are just as narrow-minded and shallow as the young headmaster Obi and his wife Nancy.

The appeal of the story hinges on the struggle between modernity and tradition, with people of different generations caught in the middle. The younger generation hold in contempt the old ways and native beliefs.

This conflict, this perception, still exists in parts of Asia and Africa. People's lives are still affected by this tug-of-war between modernity and tradition and the use of English versus the local language. In Karachi at a literary forum, in which I recently participated, everyone wished to communicate with me in English rather than the national language, Urdu. Why was this so? That was not appropriate. I was highly bemused. It appeared to be more of an issue of showing off, a demonstration of one's class and background. By all account the assumption being that if you spoke fluent English you were likely to be listened to or to succeed in a high-profile career or elicit respect from the listeners, etc.

The new headmaster and his wife, the 'queen of the school', are energetically trying to ape the lifestyle of their white masters, where 'the wives of the other teachers would envy her position. And she 'would set the fashion in everything'.

We are confronted with the headmaster's deliberate callousness in choosing teachers who are young and unmarried – for they will be able to give 'all their time and energy to the school.' In short he wants to exploit them. Though ironically his wife is disappointed, for there will be no wife 'to impress'.

The headmaster is described in unflattering terms: 'stoop-shouldered', 'frail,' though only twenty-six but looked older'. What are we to deduce from this? That life has been sapped out of him and his personality because his vision of life was so narrow and self-destructive.

By his reference to Nancy imitating the women's magazine she reads the author is hinting at the superficiality of her character. This woman is always trying to be someone else other than herself. Achebe with adeptness portrays the childlike behaviour of these adults, who become caricatures of themselves as they begin to lose their insight and perspective on life and the ability to decide between right and wrong.

The headmaster uses the term 'backward' in a cruel bid to dismiss old ways. I find this term loaded. It is often used in a derogatory context by many people in Asia and Africa. The term begs the question as to who exactly defines the concept of what constitutes 'backwardness'. What criteria does one have and whose criteria do we use anyway for that matter? Also, what right does the other person have to impose his or her criteria of the so-called 'modernity' on others?

The story brings out the utter insensitivity and selfishness of the couple. For they have one single selfish aim: to show that they are 'better' than or superior to others and thus can do better.

For Mike's aim was to 'show these people how school should be run' – the key word is 'show'. He wants to do the dictating, the 'showing' and arrogantly thinks he has the right to do so. His action in sealing off the footpath that the villagers used on school property leads to disastrous consequences. The discussion between the headmaster and the village priest Ani directly re-enacts this conflict between modernity and

tradition. The headmaster wants to ‘eradicate just such beliefs’ and to ‘teach your children to laugh at such ideas’. It is such a brutal form of contempt – loss of faith – but also utter disregard for other people’s feelings.

The headmaster’s contemptuous words of ridicule: ‘I don’t suppose the ancestors will find the little detour too burdensome’ made me cringe. In a society where normally elders or religious priests are figures of respect and revered by everyone, here we have an alarming situation where this headmaster, a devotee of modernity, is piling insult upon insult – with little care to the priest’s feelings. I loved this interchange. It reminds me of Narayan in “**A Horse and Two Goats**” where an old man is speaking to an outsider. The village priest in “**Dead Men’s Path**” leaves with his dignity intact. The headmaster, on the contrary, has not only compromised his humanity but also shown an ugly side of man.

Next morning when Mike sees his precious flower garden destroyed, he bitterly learns a number of things. Above all that one should not toy with other people’s beliefs and that such beliefs should not be overlooked or people insulted for them.

Obi learns that the death of a young woman during labour has directly led to the destruction of his school garden. But the fact that he has taken the wrong approach with his school from the beginning is highlighted by the ‘nasty’ report that the ‘white’ inspector writes on the ‘tribal war situation developing between the school and village arising from the misguided zeal of the new headmaster’ – the key word here of course is ‘zeal’.

What the writer is trying to convey is that people get carried away with their own personal beliefs and arrogant thinking. Moreover the selfish need to succeed is often at the expense of others – they trample on people in their path and often do it with zeal.

The story ends on a really comic and ironic note: the headmaster had so wanted to impress the inspectors, but he in fact did the opposite. The message from this parable, this fable-like story, is that we must learn to respect other people’s beliefs and not be dismissive or mock them.

“My Son the Fanatic” by Hanif Kureishi

Like my story “**A Pair of Jeans**” Hanif Kureishi’s “**My Son the Fanatic**” explores cross-cultural themes, the generation gap and above all the issue of identity. The main difference is that it is written by a man exploring a father-son relationship whereas mine focuses on the mother and daughter relationship. The two stories are set in modern times, in Britain, and written by writers who belong to the second generation. Both stories attempt to explore issues relating to the writers’ own experience of growing up as a British citizens but with multiple identities, children of Pakistani parents or, in the case of Kureishi, a Pakistani father and an English mother.

Interestingly, the story turns the whole concept of identity, and expectations of different generations, on its head. For we soon learn that it is the son, British born,

who has lost his 'British' identity, whereas the father, the migrant worker, has embraced not only his 'British' identity but also wholeheartedly taken to the host country's values, customs, food etc – in fact to the extreme. The son has become very religious and in his zeal begins to lead an austere lifestyle. Not only does this alarm his father but it results in Ali becoming increasingly alienated by his father's lifestyle and habits.

The norm for Muslim households from what I remember of my own childhood and teenage days, is that parents were conscientiously expected (and saw it as their duty) to encourage their children to pray and lead a good moral life according to the teachings of the Holy Qur'an. My mother still, to this day, keeps echoing to me, her daughter - for I have a tendency to become lazy at times when it comes to prayers, that I must pray regularly. Last week ended the month of fasting, *Ramadan*, and during this time I too, like my mother felt duty-bound as a parent to remind my three sons to read the Holy Qur'an and to pray in the local mosques like millions of other Muslims do during this holy month. If I did not do this, I would be failing my sons and in my duty as a Muslim parent.

Parvez is not a normal Muslim parent. In the story it is the son, who is critical of his father's lifestyle. The father drinks, womanizes (has a prostitute as his girlfriend, cheats on his wife and eats pork – *haram*, forbidden food). The reaction to this latter bit of information about him eating pork is dependent on who the reader is. A non-Muslim would pass over this detail without a thought but when I read this, I was disconcerted. And it got worse; for not only does he eat bacon (forbidden for Muslims) but he makes his poor wife cook it for him.

For the non-Muslim reader this merely shows that this man is so well adjusted and integrated into his British environment that he has ended up compromising his faith. But as we learn from his experience of religious education back in Lahore, we find that religion meant nothing to him. On the contrary he mocks it and parodies his childhood experience of learning at the Madrassa, thereby conveying not only ridicule but his own personal lack of interest in and respect for his faith. Naturally, he thus becomes alarmed as he helplessly watches his son's hedonist lifestyle being transformed to an austere one. It is simply too much for poor Parvez.

The portrayal of Parvez is beautifully done by Kureishi. What we have in him, is a lovely, endearing man, with whom we, as readers, begin to identify from the very first paragraph – beginning to see everything from his point of view. As the story progresses, however, he almost becomes a caricature of an Asian migrant from the subcontinent of India – a 'fanatic' in his own way, a migrant who has gone to such extreme lengths 'to fit' into British life. 'We have to fit in!' he belligerently reminds his son – even to the extent of eating forbidden, *haram* food. So much so that he begins to elicit loathing from his son. The son, though born in the UK, has conclusively freed himself from his father's world of sin and instead turned to religious piety.

For a Muslim reader, like myself, at first there appears to be nothing unusual in Ali rediscovering his faith. I know of dozens of young men and women who have undergone this process. This younger generation genuinely aspires to a strong Muslim identity and leading lives as good Muslims, starting off with the first pillar of Islam,

offering their prayers regularly. Men often decide to keep beards and women begin to wear the scarf or the *hijab*. These are often very intelligent, confident individuals and with strong convictions and beliefs; they may well echo Ali's words that 'there is more to the world than the West, though the West always thought it was best'.

It is when Ali begins to spout utter nonsense about *jihad* and paradise, etc. that it becomes chillingly clear that not only has he 'flipped out' but also something of a far more serious and sinister nature has taken place. This is not a normal person speaking; Ali has obviously been indoctrinated – radicalised. So much so that he does not realise what he is saying or what it means.

This story was written a few years ago but its chilling ending has decided relevance to recent times. We see that some young men like Ali have become fanatics, radicalised and groomed to become suicide bombers – like the 7-7 bombers in London. Men who have not only have lost their British identity, but, horrifyingly, lost their rationality, too! Instead of leading good lives as British citizens, they have become pawns of evil, destructive men.

Through Kureishi's portrayal of Parvez and his son, we have a case study of a migrant – an exploration of the life of a migrant worker. Parvez is a man devoted to working hard and making a good living. Typically, he works as a taxi driver, the preferred profession of many male migrants across the UK – for it offers freedom and flexibility and there are no bosses to cope with. Parvez has materialistic aspirations for his son: the best clothes and education. Like other migrant parents he has made huge sacrifices in order to provide for his son, including luxuries like a guitar. So it is in a way a sense of betrayal by his son to turn his back on his father and what he has provided for him.

Kureishi has not done justice to the character of the mother. She hardly appears, has no name, is only mentioned twice and is no more than a stereotyped Asian wife doing her sewing. Perhaps, like the absence of a father in my story (students and teachers often ask me why he is not there – my answer: he was not required in the story) Hanif Kureishi had a similar purpose. That there was no need for her presence, but what he does present, however, is a very negative picture of a downtrodden wife. This is not true of most migrant wives. I know many who have become self-sufficient, confident and economically independent workers and are not at all passive. Nor, for that matter, would such wives tolerate a husband who drank or asked them to cook pork in the house! So this is not a normal Muslim household. This is what the readers need to understand. In fact Parvez has in his overzealous drive to fit in become a fanatic himself – doing all the things that his Pakistani Muslim peers would not normally consider doing. There are of course always exceptions.

Out of the three characters I find Bettina a very endearing character. A good soul, who has tried her best to help her lover Parvez to sort things out with his son, but, ironically, it is the nature of her own relationship with Parvez that becomes the tilting force where the son turns on his father and rejects both him and Bettina and what they represent.

The ending is poignant. The father has tried his best to please his son; even to the extent of growing a beard. The father's humiliation, fear and awe of his son is very

touching. Parvez is badly affected by his son's attitude and behaviour. In a culture where parents are normally looked up to and respected, Parvez feels belittled and feels he has lost not only his grip on his household but also on the social and cultural hierarchical ladder of human relationships where a father normally heads the family and children listen and respect. Here the son has lost all respect for his father due to his illicit relationship with Bettina and for allowing another woman – in fact, a woman of the streets, to touch him. For the son such an act is despicable. And this is where the relationship totally breaks down. The division between the son and the father and his feeling of total impotence leads to Parvez's total loss of control to the extent that he resorts to violence. It is then that his son calmly mocks him by asking 'who is the fanatic now?'

“A Horse and Two Goats”
by R.K. Narayan

Though living in a multicultural urban world of Manchester, I personally love rural life, whether in the UK or in Pakistan. I find the rural life of Pakistan, for instance, so fascinating, the simplicity, and warm hospitality of people both overwhelming and humbling. In my two novels **The Holy Woman** and **Typhoon** I have tried to capture some of that rural landscape.

Here in Narayan's story the setting is a village in India, possibly in the state of Kerala or Tamil Nadu. It immediately conjures up in my mind images of India, of Hindu gods and temples. The focal point of the story is an important piece of sculpture, a religious idol, a mud horse. The story in a nutshell explores the conflict between the modern world and the traditional world and their differing values, perceptions and expectations. What we have here is a true gem of a cross-cultural experience. And I totally loved it – how the old man carried on talking in his native tongue without understanding a word of what the foreign man was saying to him in English. However, he is having a proper conversation with the stranger based on his own assumptions of the situation. Both men talk at cross-purposes and do not understand each other but carry on as if it was a natural conversation between people.

When I first read this story, I recalled my grandmother's experience of interaction with an old English lady in a primary school when she visited England. I have documented this moment in a story called “**The Visiting Grandmother**”. My grandmother, just like the old man, began to speak in her own language – quite believing that the other woman could actually understand her. Similarly, the good old English lady smiled and continued the conversation in her language. I looked on bemused at this picture of two women from different worlds trying to communicate, to reach out to the other and bridge that gap between them. In the end it was the smiles, the twinkle in the eye and human warmth that did it!

I loved the poignant yet funny interaction between the two men representing different worlds and the semi-farcical ending – the result of classic cross-cultural communication. The stranger speaking in English and described as the 'red' man is assumed to be either from the USA or England. The old man from the village follows his own train of thoughts and makes his own assumptions as to what the stranger wants. He thinks he wants to buy the goats. He has no inkling that the foreign man is

interested in their object of religious worship – the mud horse. The old man is not at all attuned to the other man’s commercial and materialistic purpose in his dealing with him. Both continue to talk at cross-purposes – the old man about his village, the money lender, and his deity ‘god Vishnu’.

The horse is the most sacred statue in his village. And for that reason it never crosses the old man’s mind that the stranger would want to buy that. Instead he endearingly ends up selling him the two goats and takes away the coins in his hand and saunters off back to the village. And the ‘red’ man is left waiting, thinking that he has paid for the horse and somebody will come to clarify everything and so he is left waiting till night time.

The old man represents such endearing simplicity and innocence and through his dialogue we learn a lot about his life, his dealings with the money lender, his beliefs, etc. He remains immune from and untouched by the world of the stranger where the assumption is that if you have the money you can buy and barter for almost anything you want - even the ‘gods’ of other people’s faiths.

**“Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies”
by Salman Rushdie**

The story is set in Pakistan, in Islamabad near the British consulate. I have visited this area and can identify with a number of things. The bus that Rushdie describes, and from which Ms Rehana descends, is similar to those that I have seen, especially trucks with their ornate decorations. The manner in which the driver jumps down to open the door when she approaches the bus – is endearing. The focus is straightaway on Ms Rehana and her attractive looks that appear to elicit such a reaction from the driver.

She has the same effect on the advice expert Ali – for he too is immediately attracted to her and begins to feel ‘young’ again. And unlike his normal behaviour towards the ‘consulate’s Tuesday women’ he begins to treat her with ‘something like courtesy’. During my own visits to Pakistan I have found in some places that if you are a young woman or are fashionably dressed, you end up attracting the attention of men no matter of what age group. So the ogling and attention that Ms Rehana gets is reminiscent of many young women’s experiences.

I love the line describing the hopefuls – for the visa – the ‘women looked frightened’ and the men, often uncles, fathers and brothers ‘trying to look confident’. The British consulate is a foreign and an extremely formal and intimidating place – in fact the place of the old British sahibs who once ruled over India. So the consulate has potent powers to inspire both respect and fear in equal doses. The uncertainty and the worry as to whether they would get the visa or not plagues the mind of all the visitors. Inside they are confronted by Europeans, white people, that they will be coming across, for some for the first time. And of course the sahibs would be speaking another language, ‘*Engrezi*’ - the language of the Raj. So the women have every right to be afraid of what is in store for them. After all, those people inside the building will be deciding their fate, whether they will have the permission to enter the UK, or rather ‘London’, as is often locally called. The men, being macho, attempt to put on a brave front.

Though they, too, are equally intimidated and it shows on their faces and in their body language, especially when faced with the foreign officials.

So in this context Ms Rehana, the fact that she has come alone and appears very confident, is very unusual indeed and this is what attracts Ali to this woman. She is different. For she is not 'alarmed' and needs no male chaperone. She is not his normal gullible target for him to prey on but he finds himself unwillingly drawn to her and wants to genuinely help her. The role that Ali plays is that of a conman, who, like many of his kind all over the world, preys on people's desires to migrate to other lands and seek a better economic future.

We soon learn to our delight that Ms Rehana will not be conned. She is an unwilling participant, just as she is unwilling to share her *pakor*s with him and tartly tells him off: she has no money to part with for his so-called valuable advice and he should thus target others – those 'eating good wages'. His description of the consulate – that it is a worse place than even any police station – is interesting. By this the reader is meant to infer that the ordeal is going to be quite awful.

Ali manages to capture her interest at last and thus blissfully has an opportunity to 'ogle' her even more. In other words 'look at her for a few moments longer'. His base intentions towards her are thus made clear to the reader. The sort of questions Ali claims she will face are similar to what I have heard myself over a period of time; with so many people saying how they've made a mess of the interview because of some minor inconsistency of details. Some questions are so personal and culturally insensitive that it is highly embarrassing, especially, for the Muslim women who, out of modesty, would not openly wish to talk about such matters with total strangers, especially men. In their conscientious effort to weed out bogus applicants the questions that the British officials end up asking are often very distressing for women.

For Ali, the appearance of this young woman brings on a huge change in himself and he does things he has never done before – offering not only free advice but also a stolen British passport! As he has fallen in love with her, he genuinely wants her to reach her 'London' destination. For she was a 'rare persona, a jewel' and he generously offers her documents that can 'solve all her worries at one stroke' and as he does so, he cynically berates himself for being a fool and bewitched by a 'young' girl.

The next bit is sheer delight. Rehana turns on him and expresses her horror and disgust; that if she did what he suggested she would be committing a crime and thus belittling not only herself but also her fellow countrymen – she shows him and the readers that she is indeed a woman of high principles and would not compromise those at any cost.

Poor Ali has begun to care so much for her that he really does not want her to go inside the building where she would lose her 'dignity'. Undeterred, Ms Rehana goes inside the consulate, leaving poor Ali disconsolate and anxious.

When she comes out she tells him that she has, in a sense, taken his advice and then throws the thunderbolt at him – that she used his advice to her advantage by deliberately messing up the interview so that she is denied entry to the UK. This

shocks both the reader and Ali. The poor man is devastated at what she has done and regards it as a tragedy.

But with characteristic dignity she informs Ali and us that she has turned her back on 'London' and instead will return to a world that she loves and that values her rather than marry a stranger in a land she has no desire to reach. She above all 'would have been sad to leave 'the three good boys' to whom she is an ayah.

For the reader this is truly a delicious moment of irony and goes against all our expectations. Ms Rehana has shown personal integrity and in doing so has won the respect not only of Ali but also of the reader. It comes as a shock to all that, contrary to all expectations, in spite of coming from a humble background, she is not interested in the world of migration and its allure. On the contrary, she is happy with her present world and way of life. Bradford and the fiancé she hardly knew has no allure.

The story mocks those who go to extreme lengths to migrate to other lands, only to become deeply disillusioned once they reach it and are faced with the harsh realities of leaving one place and exchanging it for another. And it may well be a very unwelcoming and hostile environment.

At this point Qaisra Shahraz talks about her own father's experience of migration and the effect on his family.

**“A Pair of Jeans”
by Qaisra Shahraz**

Qaisra Shahraz discusses her own story and reads two extracts from it. She will discuss the context of the story, the themes, her own experience of growing up in the UK as a teenager and cross-cultural experiences/multiple identities/ the issue of clothes/generation gap, etc. She will also explain why there are two endings to the story and why she revised it nearly eighteen years later. Ms Shahraz will share her experiences as a Muslim woman living in Britain after the events of 9-11.