

# Kahlil Gibran: Craftsman or bore?

## Short stories

**THE GREATEST WORKS OF KAHLIL GIBRAN:** Twelve Books in one omnibus edition. Jaico publishing House, 121 M. G. Road, Bombay-400023. Rs.125.

**HENRY JAMES: A LIFE:** By Leon Edel. Affiliated East-West Press Pvt. Ltd., 25, Dr. Muniappa Road, Kilpauk, Madras-600010. First Indian Edition, Rs. 110.

**THE DUSKY HORIZON AND OTHER STORIES:** By Manoj Das. B. R. Publishing Corporation, 29/9 Nangia Park, Shakti Nagar, Delhi-110007. Rs. 95.

Born in 1883 at Baharri, Lebanon, Kahlil Gibran emigrated with his parents to Boston in 1895. After higher studies in Beirut's Maronite Ma'had alhikmah (Institute of Wisdom) where he mastered the Arabic language, he came back to Boston in 1903. His first literary explorations were published in the Arab emigre journal, *al-Muhajir*. He continued to write in Arabic and English. Among his principal works in English are *The Prophet* (1923) and *Sand and Foam* (1926). He died in 1931.

Gibran is the Sufi poet of twentieth century consciousness. Naturally, the fulfilment for him is in the actual seeking, a concept indicated by Peria Achan Pillai who says *pohaye prayojanamaha* (the journey is the goal) when describing the Margasirsa vrata in *Tiruppavai*. Gibran's parables exhibit expert allusiveness, his prose poetry has an intoxicating sweetness, his short stories are a connoisseur's delight. Wearing the wizard's mantle from Lebanon he recreated the tears and smiles of the Near-East in his works and reflected the Bible, Nietzsche and William Blake in his concepts. His mystic romanticism has had a steady clientele and it is good to have this sumptuous volume that contains some of his most treasured writings along with scores of Gibran's original drawings where nude figures flow in and out of cloudy vagueness as if they were talismanic images that cannot be comprehended by our twin-forked mind.

We are, of course, impeded by the absence of any biographical note on Gibran in this volume. Nor is there any indication of who has translated books like *Ara is al-Muruj* and *Damah wa lbtisamah* into English. His major English works are here, though: *The Prophet*, *The Madman*, *The Forerunner* and *Sand and Foam*. We do miss *Jesus, the Son of Man*. All the same the present paperback is a priceless addition to one's personal library.

For, Gibran spreads a magnetic field of conceits that never get exhausted by our thought-processes. The Gibranesque pronouncements in *The Prophet* raise us above the mental plane of being: "When you pray you rise to meet in the air those who are praying at that very hour, and whom save in prayer you may not meet." Gibran's metaphorical energy is unimpeded, while his paradoxes are literary exotica. His scathing criticism of priestcraft belongs to a saner age when religious heads didn't cry havoc: "Off with his head!" Love and Death are undeniable

presences in his poetry where the Poet-Prophet assures the Poor Man that it is always better to be oppressed than be an oppressor like the Rich Man or the Bad Priest. Patriotism for his native land and love of the Child Jesus are other dimensions in Gibran.

Of immediate interest to us in this volume are his tales of Martha, Lyla (a real-life incident) and Khalil the Heretic. A blazingly beautiful story, 'The Broken Wings' which trembles upon the precipice of sentimentalism, winds up the volume. Translated from the original, *al Ajnihah al Matakassirah*, it is the tale of the rich Selma Karamy in whom Love and Beauty coalesce as a single flame of sincerity. But the young poet cannot have her. She is commanded by the Bishop to marry his nephew:

"The glory of a prince goes to his eldest son by inheritance, but the exaltation of a religious head is contagious among his brothers and nephews. Thus the Christian bishop and the Moslem imam and the Brahman priest become like sea reptiles who clutch their prey with many tentacles and suck their blood with numerous mouths."

A plague on all hour houses! Selma dies after five years of torment and is buried in a Beirut cemetery. "Here, all the hopes of Gibran, who is living as a prisoner of love beyond the seas, were buried. On this spot he lost his happiness, drained his tears and forgot his smile."

Superb craftsman or soporific bore? Critics dealing with Henry James have vied with one another in depicting every possible shade in between the two extremes. However, no one has denied James's novels their rightful position in the shelves reserved for classics. *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Tragic Muse*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*. Leon Edel, devoted biographer of Henry James, received the 1963 Pulitzer Prize as well as the National Book Award for Volumes II and III of his biography. He has now tightened up his five-volume 'life' of "our one fully-achieved literary artist — a Shakespeare of the novel" for a new generation of readers.

It is a gripping tale, the story of one who consciously chose a writing career, avoided marriage, gathered a large circle of friends and admirers, preferred travelling in Europe and living in England and gave up his American citizenship in 1915.

Americans had almost idolized James, and now this betrayal. True, he had been too long in Europe, almost forty years. But must he now prove the scoffers to be right, the reviewers who had often taunted him of being anti-American? James died the following year and was cremated at Golders Green. As if it were a page from his psychologically credible but startlingly curious novels, his ashes were smuggled into America and buried in Cambridge (Mass.) cemetery. Leon Edel's total biography is marked by structural clarity and each chapter assures us of an enjoyable discovery. A well-produced volume with a portfolio of thirty-six illustrations, *Henry James: A life* is a magnificent bargain for the season.

Exactly twenty years ago Manoj Das brought out the first collection of his short stories in English. He was then already well known as a writer in Oriya. The young professor of English had earlier led a daring life as a revolutionary. The combination was auspicious. Here were tales authentic, interesting, thought-provoking, witty, sad. And written in beautifully clear English. Twenty years gone by, yet the style remains a graceful and simple as it was in *The Mystery of the Missing Cap* and *Sita's Marriage*. As always, the stories are sensitive explorations of the life around us.

The title story is a haunting piece and won for Manoj the prestigious Sarla Award for its Oriya original. The micraculous predictability of social taboos and the equally lightning unpredictability of the individual psyche are entwined in terms of distant childhood memories. "And birds caught up in a gale always saddened me. The sight of their pell-mell flight would remind me of a kind of modern poetry — of its crazy violence against rhythm." Such has been the narrator's childhood, literally and metaphorically. Three little boys and a little, chirpy girl. Lily's tragic end. The talismanic images of Lily's friendly gestures haunt the three even in their old age. She becomes a myth for one, a legend for another as Hatu builds a temple and Navin writes a fairy tale. And then, the Manoj touch:

"But what about me? I asked, and to my own great surprise, wept.

"Only if I could weep like you! It is not easy at seventy, you know!" said Navin."

Such tremulous recordings of one's past memories make the tales in *The Dusky Horizon* fascinating chips of one's racial autobiography. Factual fantasy is another Manoj special. Realism and dreamery clap hands to produce a banquet a tasty offerings like 'The Brothers', 'The Bull of Babulpur' and 'Night in the Life of the Mayor.' The tragic intensity represented by 'Lakshmi's Adventure' is deeply moving, while 'The General's grand daughter' is all inspired laughter, and 'Return of the Native' pure, practical wisdom. Manoj is surely a socio-political alarm clock for our society today. Shall we wake up and rectify our mistakes or shall we just throw a pillow on the warning ring and go back to our tamasic sleep of wilful indifference?

Prema Nandakumar

## For the young

**REMEMBERING OUR LEADERS:** Published by the Children's Book Trust, Nehru House, 4, Bahadurshah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 25.

The eight attractively got-up and slender books in this first instalment of profiles are on: Bankim Chandra, Annie Besant, Bhikhaji Cama, Sarojini Naidu, Abul Kalam Azad, C. V. Raman, Kamala Nehru, and Lal Bahadur Shastri.

Extremely lucid and highly absorbing as these accounts are, the juvenile readers (and even the old ones) will benefit intellectually by reading the books which describe the lives and times of the leaders vividly, and also the values they cherished. The Children's Book Trust plans to bring out similar profiles of great persons who shaped the history of their times. The effort deserves all encouragement.

T. Rajagopal