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Reluctant Hero and the Question of Class (A Review Article)

ABDULLAH HUSSEIN *The Weary Generations.* Translated from the Urdu by the author. London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1999. U.S. Distributors: Dufour Editions, Chester Springs, PA 19425.

ALLOW me to start with a quibble about the title *The Weary Generations*, the elegantly produced English version of Abdullah Hussein's novel *Udās Naslēṅ* translated by the novelist himself for the esteemed UNESCO Collection of Representative Works. As a reader of similar novels written in various regional languages of the Indian subcontinent, many of them in the UNESCO series, I find it hard to associate "weariness" as an appropriate term for three generations' experience of the harrowing historical events that culminated in the partition of India. The authorial assertion of "weariness" somehow seems to misname the complex phenomenon of personal and public suffering endured by millions in the interest of cultural and political self-determination.

After reading *The Weary Generations*, I am not convinced that this Partition novel is ultimately about generational "weariness," although the novel's reluctant hero, Naim Beg, does behave as a flawed and tired protagonist. He manages to destroy his body and spirit with a certain sense of boyish abandon, yet one has to agree that he is an affable, sensitive, intelligent, good-hearted Indian who is constantly trying to do the right thing. All he wants is happiness. He is not greedy, arrogant, or selfish in any way. Right from the beginning, he exudes a sorrowful, unclear mourning. The adjectives associated with the word "*udās*" in the Urdu title of this novel—"sad," "sombre," "melancholy," "unconsoled," "suffering from Weltschmerz," "pessimistic," "depressed"—point at the various degrees of personal suffering that define the reluctant hero of this novel, although I doubt the same terms apply to the "generations" mentioned in the English title.

Naim Beg is an incorrigible idealist. One keeps wondering whether his sorrow has to do with some dark knowledge about the futility of his idealism, a deep dread of failure, especially given the magnitude of the problems at hand. No wonder he is tired and worn out even before the advent of his middle age. Placed in the context of the British Raj and its ideological pressures on a maturing Indian mind, Naim reminds me of Ashis Nandy's description of the Boy Scout training. "Scouting was a form of social hygiene established to counter the threat of English national decadence and lack of enthusiasm for the Empire."[1] Naim's transition from the crude peasant boy into the polished, eager scout takes place in Calcutta, tantalizingly off the stage.

Much of the novel shows a boy-scoutish Naim Beg being swept away by larger forces, which leave him helpless in a world suddenly overrun by people who are full of "passionate intensity" as W. B. Yeats puts it. *The Weary Generations* depicts the many personal and political dilemmas Naim faces, although he never confronts the crude mobs. Even when he is pushed into the middle of mob action, he retreats, for he is too decent a fellow, polished and much admired. Inevitably, the civilized hero's responses to the challenges are ambiguous, and fated to be so because of the way the novelist positions him as a bridge between the old feudal aristocracy and peasantry. The opening epigram of the novel quoted from The Book of Isaiah hints at the overwhelming sense of terror in his heart, or more aptly, in the narrator's heart: "And [the people] shall look into the earth; and behold trouble and darkness: dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness." In some ways, this epigram may be more indicative of the mood of the general public, not Naim's. He is the one character in the novel who has been imagined and shaped in opposition to the public, one who is capable of beholding "trouble and darkness" and yet morally prepared to face the firing squad, boldly, so that the people shall not be "driven to darkness." In other words, throughout the novel Naim Beg is constantly pulled away by some invisible hand, frustrating his personal sense of honor and duty, leaving him at the end of the novel as an unnerved, unfulfilled hero.

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[1] *The Savage Freud and Other Essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 168.

What unnerves Naim Beg? My reading is that it has something to do with the question of class identity.

Although this accomplished historical narrative is interspersed with great lyrical outbursts and powerful descriptions of domestic and public experience, they all come filtered through a certain set of ideologies of history, politics, social and economic change that could be called "middle-class values." Middle-class values constrain the hero, rarely allowing him to grow freely as a character even within his own ideological parameters. He is often forced to live his life denying his true class affiliations, at times hiding behind a peasant masquerade, but always straitjacketed by family history and English education, not to mention an ubiquitous sense of feudal allegiance, old and new.

Naim the hero fits the mold that Georg Lukacs sees in the heroes of historical novels like Ivanhoe and Waverly: "He [the hero] generally possesses a certain, though never outstanding, degree of practical intelligence, a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to a capacity for self-sacrifice, but which never grows into a sweeping human passion."[2] In the context of Walter Scott's historical novels, Lukacs further describes the heroes of typical historical novels: "They are unsurpassed in their portrayal of the decent and attractive as well as narrow-minded features of the English 'middle classes.'"[3] Naim is such a hero, a victim of class, who is also an apologist for class; hardly a rebel, he is seldom willing to confront the institutions he is clearly capable of confronting. To get around the difficult structures of class, the novelist has invented a rather elastic plot that enables the hero to move between the peasantry and the aristocracy.

Truly, Naim is neither a peasant nor an aristocrat. He is part of a new breed in pre-Partition India—he is a member of the nascent "middle class," a status he gains through English education, urban upbringing, and military service, and of course, through his personal experiences of rejection by the feudal aristocracy he respects instinctively. If the hero had been permitted to behave more openly as a member of any one of the three classes, I doubt he would have cut such a sorry figure at the end. Certainly, he would not have been "weary" on account of his brave deeds in the name of harmony and freedom. As I rethink my reading of this novel, I even wonder whether the term "weariness" isn't a fig leaf for covering up the narrator's ambiguous, unresolved attitudes toward his class status, and to some of the difficult questions raised in this novel, questions of history, the politics of freedom, the violence that accompanied Partition, and the postcolonial nationalisms of the two decades that followed. (*Udās Naslēṅ* was published in 1963, and, not unlike many intellectuals of the period, the novelist himself moved to England in 1967.)

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[2] *The Historical Novel*; tr. from the German by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 33.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Early in the novel, we are given a clear picture of feudal allegiances that will control the protagonist's actions at every step. Right at the start, with only gentle doses of uncritical humor, the narrator offers the originary myths about the establishment of Roshan Mahal, the feudal headquarters located in Delhi that exerts much invisible power in the distant wheat fields of Roshan Pur. The original Roshan Agha was a "Middle Pass" and a clerk at the collector's office, clearly an individual who was already a beneficiary of the imperial establishment and its values. The clerk lived in an inner *moḥalla* of the old city with his mother, a wife and infant son when good fortune fell on them in the form of "the Mutiny." A British officer who was severely wounded by half a dozen Indian *sipāhīs* in pursuit shows up near the clerk's dwelling and he manages to save the Englishman's life, not knowing that the officer was actually a member of British aristocracy. This bold act in the service of his masters earns him quick induction into the Indian aristocracy. In return for his services to one aristocracy, the clerk is granted a seventy-two hour window of opportunity to round up as much land as he wants. In order to maximize his claim, the clerk borrows a horse and a jar of honey from a neighbor, and the lucky native traverses the wilderness holding aloft the honey jar, marking out his territory, the way a wolf marks out its territory with urine. The trickling jar of honey, drop by drop establishes the new *zamīn*, although the irony of the mythology is hard to miss, especially if one has read Tolstoy's story "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" What is missing here is a hint about the real story of claiming the land and the true nature of the seventy-two hour window of opportunity a native gets to amass so much wealth under imperialist watch, all ten thousand acres of it!

The protagonist's family story is inextricably linked to the originary myths about Roshan Mahal. There is also Roshan Agha's big house in Roshan Pur. The only other brick house in Roshan Pur belongs to Mirza Mohammed Beg, the last of a family of Mughals, from whom Roshan Ali borrowed the money and the horse, to whom Roshan Agha also transferred five hundred acres of the land he claimed. Some say it was because

Roshan Ali was an admirer of his neighbor's wife and that Mirza Mohammed Beg's son was a product of this attraction.

To this mythical tidbit, the narrator adds,

> But the very nature of rumor is wild, stretching itself to say even that Roshan Agha's only child, … who had pale eyes and a fair complexion, had come to be as a result of a tryst between Roshan Agha's beautiful wife and the very same Captain Johnson, later Colonel, whose life was saved by Roshan Agha and who became friends with his benefactor, coming to visit and stay, so far from England. (p.18)

Perhaps, the true story of the clerk's new riches lies in the literal and figurative alliances with the representatives of British colonialism, but when it comes to such matters, the novelist resorts to summary and reportage.

About the mythology of the *zamīn*, the narrator says that

> [r]egardless of the implausibilities of the story, it was considered of no consequence to doubt the veracity of the story, for there was the solid evidence of a landmass of ten thousand acres, now irrigated by the cutting of a canal from the river and covered with living crops, sustaining some hundreds of human and animal lives for all to see. (p. 17)

As a reader, I find myself wondering about the true story of aggression behind the "cold evidence." Except for a few spotty anecdotes about the cruelty of the *zamīṅdārī* system, the bulk of the novel presents a rather benign picture of the big house, almost to the point of celebrating their indulgences at times. Soon after setting up the creation mythology of Roshan Pur, the narrator repositions the narrative thus:

> Roshan Pur has a central position in this story; for the first few days, however, our narrative takes us to Delhi, the capital city of the Indian Empire, where, the old Roshan Agha having died recently in his eighty-sixth year, the title was going to be transferred to his son, Nawab Ghulam Moheyyeddin Roshan Ali Khan. These were also the days when the struggle for the political independence of India had begun to take shape. (p. 20)

From a writerly perspective, I thought it would have been more convincing if there was yet another generation of aristocrats in between to solidify the myth, and more importantly, to consolidate the wealth and power gathered in the guise of imperial benevolence. By allowing the first Roshan Agha to live eighty-five years, the novelist misses out on a wonderful opportunity to create a far more textured narrative. Similarly, yet another generation of Begs maneuvering in the shadows of the new aristocracy would have helped this novel enormously, particularly in terms of how these factors come to play in the independence movement and the Partition.

Besides, the hero's father, Niaz Beg, as presented in the novel, is unconvincing as someone who has gone to prison for twelve years on account of such a potentially loaded hobby, gun-making. Equally unconvincing are Ayaz Beg's claims about his brother's "art" and that he never made bullets. Also, this important anecdote that accounts for Naim's departure from the village is rushed through as if the novelist is afraid of handling the topic. Had there been yet another generation of Aghas and Begs dramatizing the turn-of-the-century social and political transitions, it would have acted as a buffer zone separating the generation of myth and legend from the generation that will collide head-on with the forces unleashed by European imperialism.

Indeed, the beautifully crafted early sections of the novel lure the reader into the pre-Partition culture of the upper class. We see Gopalakrishna Gokhle and Annie Besant at a party to celebrate the "coronation" of the second Roshan Agha. It is at this party, the young Naim, unfazed by the intimidating atmosphere of the feudal and colonial élite, blunders into mentioning the name of Tilak, the extremist counterpart of the moderate Gokhle, who hobnobs with the glitterati while Tilak languishes in jail. The event becomes a trajectory for the novel's main political theme and it is also Naim's own rite of passage. Of particular interest is the great scene at the end of the "coronation" party, right after Naim's precocious and dangerous chatter about Tilak. Naim Beg informs his uncle that Roshan Agha's daughter Azra has invited him to a party. Still angry with his nephew and protégé, Ayaz Beg replies,

> "You weren't taken there to deliver a speech. You well know that even a mention of Tilak is tantamount to terrorism. Had we not been in Roshan Mahal the matter wouldn't end there. You could possibly be arrested." (p. 36)

After a long silence, Ayaz Beg tells him, "Our family has been destroyed just because of such things. I took you away—educated you, put my life's ambition in you—" (p. 36)

Throughout the novel Naim keeps reminding himself of the many sorrows and humiliations of his family, the many wrongs that he wishes to right. Though he is helpless, we see him searching, struggling, failing repeatedly, yet again and again raising himself from his constricting environments, eager to live meaningfully, for himself and for others. But, his suffering hardly brings about much happiness for anyone, and one has to agree that Naim Beg doesn't really grow up during the course of this novel. This is a serious fault, given the expectations the novel raises early on when he boldly invokes Tilak at the party, in the presence of Annie Besant, Gokhle, and several members of the local élite, *pardēsī* and *dēsī*.

Another missed opportunity in the first section has to do with Naim's train journey to Roshan Pur which is presented with the aura of yet another originary legend. We expect nothing short of the protagonist's political coming of age. The event on the train, also clearly reminds of the formative experience Mohandas Gandhi had as a young lawyer in South Africa when he was kicked and thrashed and promptly ousted from the first class compartment he had paid for. In a similar vein, Naim witnesses a white man kicking a peasant, bent on evicting the poor old man from the compartment, even as the poor man begs for the sahib's mercy. When the train reaches the next station, the poor peasant falls to the floor, lifeless. Seeing the two constables arrive on the scene, a naïve Naim tells an onlooker that the white man would be charged for the act, which of course elicits a caustic remark from the onlooker. About this incident, the narrator tells us that it was significant for Naim, but we hardly get to know why and how, given the fact that he would soon go forward and join the white man's army to fight the white man's enemies.

The narrative power of several early sections promises a certain historical seriousness in the rest of the novel, but somehow the solemn energy created at the start dissipates as the novel meanders through Naim's tentative acts before and after the war. Here, instead of playing up the emotional trauma of confronting the horror of class, the novelist brings him to Roshan Pur and tries to transform him into a peasant like his father. Even at the warfront, what does he really learn? Perhaps his acknowledgement that he is a coward points at the futility of this adventure, undertaken voluntarily. Naim didn't have to go to war, whereas his companions, including the crudely portrayed Mahinder Singh had no choice.

Scenes of Naim's homecoming from Calcutta and the chapters dealing with his brief stay with the family, helping in the fields before going away to the war, also come off as problematic. Naim never quite behaves as Niaz's son, nor does Niaz Beg appear convincing as the hero's father, given the details we already know about his prohibitive hobby and the twelve year incarceration he earned for his pointless art. It is possible that the long prison life made him crude and uncultured, for until we pass the old man's death scene where he grabs his younger wife's crotch and departs from this world clutching her pubic hair, we are in the presence of a raw individual. On the other hand, everything we learn about him from others presents the picture of Niaz Beg as a veritable genius. An artist of the gun! My expectations were so high, I hardly recognized the man when I first encountered him in the novel. Our prior knowledge of Niaz and the whole family's tradition comes into conflict with the actual scenes about the mean, ill-tempered, foul-mouthed sharecropper with two feisty wives. Not that the characterization is unusual given the manners of his women, the Sikh farmers, the Hindu *Udās munshī*, and the *kammī* servant. Nearly everyone except the aristocrats are drawn with a harshness that doesn't ring true to my experience of human beings in rural India, but I suspect this is how the aristocracy is likely to view the lives of ordinary people! As I see it, the real problem here is the narrator's derogatory attitude toward the peasants in contrast to Naim who is romanticized as a sensitive, unblemished pastoral hero who has come into the paradise of Roshan Pur.

There is one episode in the novel I must discuss in some detail. Here is the passage involving the Sikh's revenge upon some unidentified intruders present in their field following a dispute over water rights. Someone comes and whispers in their ears that their cousin was murdered. Next moment, a gang of Sikh men and their women set out, armed with axes and lances. They ask Naim. "Are you coming? Our friends come with us for revenge." Mahinder Singh adds, "Unless they are cowards" (p. 74). Hearing this, Naim joins them! (I suppose it is against the Boy Scout's code of conduct to rupture friendship!) Soon, they spot three people sleeping by the canal. The men approach them while the women stay back, behind a tree.

About the massacre that follows the narrator says, rather calmly:

> It was quick, the whole thing over within a few minutes. They flung the quilts off the sleeping men with their lances and sank the blades into their chests. Juginder Singh grabbed a sword and cut off their heads with a single lightning blow to each of them. They died without a sound. The women came up. Juginder Singh took an axe from a basket, chopped up the bodies into small pieces and threw them in the canal. The women scraped off the bloodied earth, filling the baskets with it and emptying them in the canal. (p. 75)

Don't forget that our hero, Naim Beg, is present on the scene, yet we hardly get a thinking man's response to the ruthless killings. This is how the hero who is preparing to embody the strivings of an entire subcontinent in the course of the novel reacts: "Naim had gone off in the middle of *all this* [italics mine] to stand by the bank of the canal. A cold shiver had spread over his body" (p. 75).

A cold shiver indeed. Also, I doubt there is any basis for such descriptions of peasant life, other than some aristocratic bias, some subtle feudal perspective of the narrator who is largely uncritical when it comes to depictions of Roshan Agha, Anees, and others associated with the big house and the big city. Of course, one can argue that Roshan Agha and company can afford to have better manners even when they are perpetrators of a massive system of injustice, but can the narrator of a modern novel afford to be so uncritical in its representations? If the narrator is evenhanded, we can overlook excessive harshness of description, but when it comes to the scenes involving Roshan Mahal, they are offered to the readers as celebrations, with limited sense of irony. Only in the final section of the novel when the Agha and his family pack up for Pakistan do we see some irony, some chastisement of the aristocractic hypocrisies.

As already pointed out, Naim's career of suffering begins too early in his life, and in some ways, he grows up prematurely. Toward the end of the novel, he tells Anees Rahman that he had never been young! True, when he returned from World War I, the only one out of dozens from his village the British had rounded up to fight their war, Naim Beg was still a youth. (Naim in fact volunteered, prompted by some mysterious compulsion, although we are made to think of him as politically conscious young man!) On his return, the war hero was honored with a medal for bravery and rewarded with 10 acres of land, which his father uses to re-establish the class status the Begs possessed before the family's downfall and the loss of their 500 acres. If we didn't pay close attention we might even miss an important detail, a unique mark of the war upon our hero—a hand not his own, a hand made by an enemy craftsman. A German prisoner of war he was guarding at the camp carved a fine wooden hand in return for Naim's kindness to him! Unfortunately, the novelist pretty much abandons such a key defining mark in an individual's life in the years to come.

Apart from a few jokes later on about the wooden hand, there is little effort to metaphorize the "lost hand" or "gained hand," none of which is brought into the realm of his psychology. However, the most serious disappointment of this novel is that upon his return to the village, Naim expends quite a bit of his life by meddling in the affairs of his family. Once, he did so with disastrous consequences, pitting apart his two little brothers, Ali and Rawal, whose brotherhood is destroyed forever in the process. Reminiscent of Bhishma's acts in the Mahabharata, Naim arbitrarily promises to let Ali marry Aisha, who was actually promised to Rawal! Of course, Rawal is furious, and he nearly kills his brother and forces him out of his home and the village, not relenting even when Ali comes back years later to bury his mother.

Another important point worth noting is that no one ever questions Naim. It is as if he possesses the sacred aura of the exemplary hero. One could detect it even before Naim was honored as a war hero, even before his marriage into aristocracy; in fact, the marriage was an inevitable result of this heroic aura, merely an external affirmation of his aristocracy. As a reader I became increasingly disappointed in the hero who did not dare to question the feudal system, especially since he was presented too insistently as a rebel born to change his surroundings. Instead of imagining Naim as a hero who possessed great moral courage necessary to confront the system, throughout the novel we see him being neutralized, rendered into "an aristocrat" in a peasant household. After the war, we see Naim aimlessly shuttling between the two classes, even when he is unable to belong to either the landed aristocracy or the peasant class.

Again, the main structural problem of this novel arises out of the novelist's decision to place Naim in a limbo in between the two classes. I don't see why he can't be allowed to belong to either of the classes or in the "middle class" so that he can fully assert his independence from within a given class. By marrying Roshan Agha's daughter Azra he loses his ties to the peasantry, yet by practically abandoning her and the unattainable comforts of aristocracy, Naim also ends up forfeiting the potential strengths deriving from the certainties of his maturing self. One wonders why can't the novelist conceive the hero as a peasant who causes a groundswell among his peoples, or vice versa, as a new aristocrat who sacrifices his comforts in the interest of freedom and justice, or the "city-returned, English educated middle-class youth" who tries to make a difference.

It might be that in order to make Naim an intelligent man, the novelist has defined his hero in opposition to the crude peasants. By the same token, in order to politicize him and to render him into an idealized hero, the novelist keeps him safe from a totally feudal identity, even though feudal vanities matter much to him. Even his marriage seems to be weakened unnecessarily because of the novelist's decision to shape him in a certain way. Perhaps, the novelist feared that too much affection and loyalty for Azra might jeopardize the hero's identity! Also, we hear much about Mughal origins and the fact that the Begs were never servants. Even their misfortunes are brought about by extraordinary fates, namely for gun-making and the obsessive pursuit of a hobby. The father's misfortune makes the son an exile in Calcutta where he receives an English education and liberal views from his uncle, Ayaz Beg, who also gets precious little space in the novel.

There are some brilliant passages throughout the novel, quietly evocative, brutally accurate. One such moment is when Naim witnesses how Roshan Agha and the *munshī* torment Ahmed Din, whose son also died in the war, a war promoted by Roshan Agha himself with the promise of an additional share of grains. But at the end of the war, when Roshan Agha had purchased a Ford motorcar, the feudal lord levied a "*motorana*" (motor tax) on his sharecroppers. In the presence of Roshan Agha, his servants forcibly removed Ahmed Din's turban and pushed him down on the ground, where he was made to listen on all fours. A witness to this event, Naim, his clout considerably strengthened by his new status as an honored war veteran, says nothing.

Instead, on his way back from witnessing the scene, Naim throws a twig at the car. That's all. Soon after this event, Naim abandons the new comforts of land and home, and chooses to wage a new battle, urged on by the local schoolteacher, Hari Chand. About Roshan Agha's role in the system of oppression, Naim says,

> "The Agha is not a bad man. I saw his face turn pale when the wretched old man was crawling like an animal on a leash. But what difference does it make? He won't do anything because his raj runs on such things. The whole thing is rotten." (p. 139)

As expected, Naim makes an attempt to change the "whole thing" during two short, rushed chapters, trying to explode a passenger-train. The readers are not allowed to participate in the complex intellectual processes that force him into radicalism, and consequently out of it. This is also true of his nonviolent politics toward the end of the novel. Necessarily, Naim creates his precious inner knowledge in secret, far from the probing eyes of onlookers. He plays his cards close to his heart. The unexpected marriage between Naim and Azra points at this sort of narratorial secrecy. Early on at the "coronation" party, we could see the potential for their love, but such matters are rarely allowed to grow spontaneously as part of the general progression of the novel. When they in fact marry for love, it is possible to dismiss their union, for all we see is a "daughter of privilege" having her way. With the marriage, Azra tries to bring Naim into a more public life, earning him a seat on the committee to inquire about the Jalianwala Bagh massacre. Then suddenly, the ground shifts again, arbitrarily. At a political rally, when he finds himself on a raised platform during a *lāṭʰī* charge, he ends up making a public speech, and of course, the British throw him in jail. At times the novelist spells out these inner crises, in rather too pedantic statements. Here is an example:

> Throughout the years of his activism, Naim had been trying to instill in people a sense of their power to achieve things by a new kind of force-a force of resistance without violence. He hadn't been entirely successful in this within the national movement. At times he grew disheartened and returned to Roshan Pur to spend long periods of inactivity. But he always went back. Finally, in the middle of the monsoon season in the year 1924, he had the following experience, which drew him into a different world. (p. 207)

The experience was going to jail for unintentional political activism and leaving the comfort of marriage and his aristocratic residence. Upon his return from jail, his health weakened, dizzied by the magnitude of events happening all around him, he goes straight to his mother's house. His little brother Ali comes to see him, eager to abandon his new career as an industrial worker. Azra herself visits Naim's house for the first time, when Naim's mother appears, the narrator doesn't forget to tell us that the old woman's smile was a "peasant's smile."

Perhaps to justify the random drift of the hero's life, and to set up a phase of sustained self-reflection, the narrator adds:

> Until now, Naim's life seemed to have led him by its circumstances not from the front but from behind, like a man being pushed along in a storm by gusts of strong wind, limiting his own movements to the resistance of his limbs. (p. 281)

The self-reflection doesn't really come, although there is some half-hearted talk about religion with one Dr. Ansari, and then, Azra convinces him to move to Delhi, where she sets him up at the office of Anees Rahman at the Legislative Assembly. The two men attain an instinctive rapport with each other because Anees might very well be Naim's double. Both men are colossal failures, but they will never admit it. No matter how self-reflective they are after a lifetime of minor self-deceptions, they will blame "the weary generations," even as frenzied mobs burn, rob, and murder, fleeing east, fleeing west, not at all weary.

The chapters about the brief period prior to Partition are inexplicably sketchy and uncertain, given the major historical events taking place all around Naim in Delhi. Even when the novelist remembers to offer us some sense of historical orientation, the personal and historical remain alienated, and the style itself loses the vivacity we see in the early segments of the novel. Here is an example,

> The country was in turmoil. The Cripps Mission had failed and Stafford Cripps' offer of freedom 'after the war is over' had been rejected by the Congress Party. At the same time the 'Quit India' Movement was launched, which engaged in sabotage. Hearing reports of the blowing up of railway lines and suchlike, Naim was reminded of a part of his distant past but felt no movement in his blood. (p. 296)

Even if the novelist chooses to focus on the personal, the circumstances leading to Naim's flight and the inner drama deserve more than silences and gaps. The final section of *The Weary Generations*, "The Epilogue," is actually a tableau, meant to invoke the horror resulting from the terrible inefficiencies of the two young governments, and an arrogant old one.

In a way, the best thing that could be said about Naim is that he doesn't wait around to join Roshan Agha and Azra and their 50 suitcases prepared to be airlifted into Pakistan, but then, the question remains, why hasn't he joined his wife? Or was she just an instrument of characterization and hero-making? If Azra was Naim's true love, why doesn't he undertake such an important journey with her? We all know she still adores him. Is it too much to expect from an idealist hero? Of a brave man? In the end, the novelist makes Naim join the refugee populace. The trajectory of flight is not presented to the reader. One has to guess. Of course, he meets his little brother Ali in the crowd. Together, the two brothers bear witness to much horror. The older man falls on the way. It is Ali who makes it, so does Bano, a woman abandoned by her husband for whom she converted to Islam, a decision that has made her a refugee now, but she says, she isn't angry; she just made a mistake for love. If one looks closely, unlike the many novels about idealistic heroes of independence struggles, *The Weary Generations* is hardly about the struggle, about the desire for freedom, about moral courage, about growing up amidst the crises, about forging identities, about being destroyed in the process, about great sacrifices. It seems Naim's suffering is primarily about loss, about some unarticulated grief. ❐