

The Seminar

- N D Dani

(*The Seminar* is a work of fiction created in the mould of 'dystopia'. Any resemblance with any real-life character or situation or institution is purely coincidental.)

“Yes Sir, what would you like to have?” said the comely twenty-something in mauve top and black trousers.

“No, thank you, ma'am. I have had my breakfast at the station.”

“Sir, I want to know on which sub-theme of the Seminar you want a paper,” informed the comely twenty-something sitting behind a desk. Dr Bhaskar didn't get her. He said loudly to her. “Ma'am, frankly speaking, I don't get you. I have come to register myself for the Seminar on African literature in English. I couldn't register myself earlier. I did send my Abstract which may have been published. I was told that on-the-spot registration could be done.”

“So you want to read your own paper. No problem, Sir. We have both the options. Those scholars (she put stress on the word 'scholars') who want to have a 5-minute ready-made paper to read at the Seminar can pay the measly amount of ten thousand rupees and have a paper on any of the sub-themes from us. Actually, the University has outsourced this facility to us. We are a leading outsourcing agency for making research papers available to Seminar participants in India at a modest price of 10,000 rupees on any subject,” informed the twenty-something with a smile and in a honeyed voice. The truth was gradually beginning to register itself on Dr Bhaskar's senses by slow degrees. “Oh, is that it! But where can I pay for my registration, ma'am? She pointed towards the desk on the opposite side, with a smile, of course.

Dr Bhaskar took a bird's eye view of the room. The room was lined with chairs fixed close to the walls. There were three large desks in the room. You have already discovered the first one. The opposite desk was registration desk. Next to it was actually a large table around which sat four girls. The table was full with sling bags. Dr Bhaskar paid the registration amount, collected the Seminar kit but decided to wait in one of the chairs as he was there full forty minutes before the Inaugural would begin. Gradually, many young and not so young scholar-participants started entering the room and made a queue before Desk

No1. Dr Bhaskar found he was curious about the whole thing. The lady-with-a-honeyed-voice gave each one of them a form to fill in. They used those chairs to fill those forms and returned them to the lady. She requested them to wait. Within a few minutes, she started calling out the names. The scholars received some neatly typed pages, paid ten thousand rupees each and went back to their chairs to wait for the entry sign. Soon two attractive girls in red-bordered, cream-coloured silken saris and a boy appeared and stationed themselves near the entrance door. The boy had a thali on which was placed kumkum and akshat. The galz asked the scholar-participants to allow them to place kumkum and akshat on their foreheads and uttered 'Welcome Sir and Welcome Ma'am' in good English.

Dr Bhaskar was impressed with this blending of the orient and the occident. As there were still a good twenty minutes for the function to begin, he decided to check in the washroom and then have a quick coffee at the coffee counter in the adjacent building. It was a two-day *Inter-Galactic* Seminar on African literature in English, being organized by RJM University, one of the poshest private universities located on the Agra-Jaipur highway. RJM University was among the few private universities that had, besides the core faculties in Management and the various engineering branches, a robust Humanities and Social Sciences faculty, too. Its building could put the shiniest mall in Bangalore to shame. It had an auditorium much larger than the cinema halls in the multi-plexes in any metro city. The audio system in the auditorium could beat the best Dolby system. Don't be surprised by the expression 'Inter-Galactic'. Actually, in 2035 the term 'International' attached before every Seminar had grown stale due to overuse and the organizers of Seminars had to invent a new term. These days Seminars were fast catching up with the new revolutionary description tag and the term 'Inter-Galactic' was becoming popular. It was the Inaugural first day of this Inter-Galactic Seminar on African Literature in English.

After having kumkum dot and akshat on his forehead by the welcoming galz, Bhaskar entered the auditorium and looked for an empty seat as the auditorium was almost packed to capacity. He wondered at the academic zeal of the scholar-participants. These days few films ran to full houses. That this auditorium had, on a rough estimate, more than 1000 participants was a sure sign of the rising academic standards in the India of 2035. The credit for this spurt in research activity must be shared by a new directive from the UGC which made presentation of research papers at Seminars/ Conferences mandatory to score marks for API (Academic Performance Index) under PBAS (Performance Based Appraisal System). The College and University teachers suddenly found themselves fired by a new zeal for research. Soon India would be among the education-exporting countries of the world on a par with the countries having the best universities anywhere in the world.

Bhaskar looked to his right and left to locate some familiar face but there was none in his immediate neighbourhood. "Why not ask the young lady lecturer sitting next to me about her University?" thought Bhaskar. The lady told him that she was a student of BTech in Electronics. Bhaskar had a bout of incomprehension, not unlike the one he had on arriving at Desk no 1. "I suppose it is a Seminar on African literature in English. No?" he asked in incomprehension. He wondered if he really was in the Seminar hall or in some other hall where some other academic function was in progress. "You are spot-on, Sir. Actually, the first year students in Management, Electronics, Information technology and E & E have been told that there would be no classes for them today and we have been told to sit in the Seminar hall and attend the inaugural," informed his immediate neighbour out of pity for Dr Bhaskar's anxious looks.

"Oh, I get it now, thank you Miss er..." "Smriti," she extended her hand towards him. "Where are you from, Sir? I am from Lucknow," gushed the young lady.

"I am from Bhagalpur where I teach English at Shivrao Adani University."

"Welcome to RJM University, Sir." She had already acquired the best manners of the PROs in private sector software companies.

Soon the dais became lively. A young pretty girl extended a warm welcome to the participants in the sweetest of voices. She requested Professor Shwartz to preside over the inaugural function. Mr Ronald Gris was a special guest on the occasion. Ronald Gris – RanautGujjar before migrating to Hawaii – was an Indian who had migrated to Hawaii long back and wrote poetry in English there. He had rechristened himself and liked to fantasize being handed out the Nobel Prize in literature by the Swedish king at a glittering ceremony in Stockholm. These days many University Seminars and Conferences had a Creative section at which budding poets (actually professors in the English departments) showcased their poetry of the bleeding heart. The presence of Ronald Gris lent a truly inter-galactic air to the Seminar and the organizers had hoped that between themselves, Professor Shwartz from Tezon University, USA and Ronald Gris from Hawaii, they would be able to rope in a large number of participants who would feel the Seminar registration charges, a wee bit too high for India, justified.

All the guests having taken their respective chairs, the young lady requested all of them to grace the idol of Goddess Saraswati with flowers and to light the ceremonial lamps. It was followed by Saraswati Vandana. Goddess Saraswati is the Indian Muse of knowledge and even if Indians had sufficiently aped the Westerners in many things, it was only right that the organizers invoked the blessings of Goddess Saraswati to bless the propagators of knowledge assembled in the cavernous hall. Before Bhaskar could think that the welcome ceremony was over and he should

ready himself to listen to the speaker who would deliver the keynote address, he heard the pretty girl asking other pretty galz to present bouquets to the guests seated on the dais. After the bouquet distribution ceremony, it was the turn of shawls to be given to the guests on the dais. This was followed by the handing of Lord Ganesha plaques to the guests each, here called mementos by the pretty anchor. Then somebody reminded the pretty anchor about the garlands. She requested more galz to offer garlands to the guests.

Dr Bhaskar wondered if the keynote address had been taken off the inaugural. But then he heard that the Professor from the University of Qabilabaad was being requested to deliver the keynote address. It hardly needs saying that the keynote address is a very important academic address delivered by a well-known scholar who has worked in the field of the subject of the given academic Seminar. The professor from the University of Qabilabaad started his address by thanking the organizers for the invitation and told the gathering of academics that African literature in English was not his field but the organizer of the Seminar Dr Shweta insisted on his coming. Dr Shweta being his student, he could not say no to her. "So that pretty anchor is Dr Shweta," mused Dr Bhaskar. "The Seminar brochure only mentioned her name as organizing secretary." Professor Big-Mouth (that was the name of the Professor from the University of Qabilabaad.) was certainly not in his form and his big mouth seemed to have shrunk. To Bhaskar's unbelieving years, he quickly switched over to Hindi and after having delivered the key points of his keynote address, Prof Big-Mouth switched over to a dialect of Hindi which probably was his mother tongue. Bhaskar didn't know whether to feel shocked or have a laugh behind his sleeve. The young would-be managers and engineers, already undergoing the ordeal of listening to a Seminar on literature, seemed to think that enough was enough. Some of them laughed out loud, others booed the professor. Probably, like Bhaskar, they had rightly expected to hear good English at a Seminar in English literature. They came from English medium schools and were never exposed to such a farce in school. But Professor Big-Mouth (this was actually his nick name because he was in the habit of speaking very high of himself to his students at the University of Qabilabaad where he taught English literature to postgraduate students.) was made of never-say-die mettle. As for Professor Schwartz from Tezon University, the poor man couldn't make head or tail of what Prof Big-Mouth was saying. He requested Dr Shweta for the headphone so that he could listen to the English translation of the keynote address, only to be told by the lady that the University didn't have the automatic translation facility. Suddenly, there was pandemonium in the hall. The Seminar participants didn't know what to do. They didn't want Professor Big-Mouth to be shamed like this because he was a big gun and a demi-god in academics. They needed him at viva-voce exams and as PhD

examiner for theses. Paper kites were flying thick and fast and the Seminar hall converted itself into a theatre where a comic performance was in progress. The youngsters were laughing out loud. There was complete bedlam in the hall. A paper kite hit Professor Big-Mouth on the nose but he continued to drop names of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi. Professor Big-Mouth earned everybody's envy, if for nothing else, then for his sheer grit and capacity to stick to his guns.

The Inaugural function had to be declared closed as it was already 2 0' clock. The Plenary session which was to follow the Inaugural was cancelled. A lavish lunch was waiting in the dining hall. The participants ate their lunch in complete silence. The kind of welcome Professor Big-Mouth had faced left the organizers red-faced; even the participants wished they could become invisible lest Professor Big-Mouth might take them to task later for being witnesses to his shame.

The First Technical Session began at 3.30 pm simultaneously in ten rooms. Bhaskar had his paper fixed for the next day but he decided to check in the rooms. He was sure there must be some good presentations. After all, one comes to Seminars to learn, too. In one large room, forty participants were waiting for the Chairperson to arrive. "Each participant will have two minutes each to present their paper," announced the learned Chairperson. "After presentation, three minutes will be allowed for discussion and questions." Two minutes seemed an eon to read a paper. Bhaskar was amazed by the ingenuity of putting the presentation of a research paper on a par with the cooking of noodles. "Well, if you can make noodles in two minutes, why can't a research paper be presented in the same time," thought Bhaskar admiringly. However, most participants tended to exceed the time-limit (they had paid Rs10,000 for the 5-minute paper) and had to be reminded by the Chairperson to conclude their papers. Reading of every paper was punctuated by the Chairperson with remarks like "It was a nice paper" or "Mr so and so presented a nice paper on Chinua Achebe" or some similarly constructed expression in which the phrase "nice paper" was omnipresent. As there was no discussion, the Chairperson declared the presentation closed.

All the participants retired to the University Guest House satisfied with having taken part in a scholarly discussion on African writers.

For some technical reason, the second Technical Session, on the next day, had to be called off and the participants were taken on a sightseeing tour of this historical town. "But what about my paper? I had my paper in the second session," Bhaskar heard one young participant saying. "Don't worry, Sir, all the papers scheduled for presentation in the second Technical Session have been deemed to have been presented," Dr Shweta placed balm on the young participant-cum-assistant professor's frayed nerves in her, yes, honeyed voice. Later Bhaskar learnt that in

most rooms the First Technical session had been wound up earlier than scheduled.

The Valedictory was placed immediately after the Creative Writing session. The Valedictory being over, the participants marched towards a machine which was a larger version of ATM. Each one of them fed a particular number into this academic ATM and hey presto! a beautiful Certificate popped out, signed and laminated. Bhaskar was very unhappy with his foolishness in having wasted twenty days in preparing his paper. "How stupid of me to waste time and energy in preparing a paper! Next time I will be wiser and keep ten thousand bucks in my wallet," Bhaskar was in a self-accusatory mood. The range of sub-themes offered by the outsourcing agency was quite large; this much he had cleverly learnt from the smiling lady of Desk no1.

All went back praising the Seminar organizers for giving them, what one participant called, two 'finger-licking lunches' and a truck load of scholarship on African literature plus beautifully bordered and laminated Certificates of presentation which they needed for their promotion.

When the *hearse* came, Bhaskar heard the *sobs* of a young chap – he must have joined some university recently. The young chap was weeping for the *murdered academics*.

