

Bulletin

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Contents

Intentions
Shakespeare as Contemporary: Indian Context
Of Joy and Grief: *Ripeness is All*
Why English Honours: *An Interview with the
Involved*
Nothing will Die: A Personal View
A Play-Reading Session
Books to Read
A Significant Publication
Messages

Contributors

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Intentions

It is perhaps precocious for a department not yet a year old to boast of a bulletin of its own, but the eagerness of the students and encouragement from colleagues have persuaded us to screw our courage to the sticking place.

This bulletin will publish articles on English literature and allied subjects, stories, poems, book reviews, letters and rejoinders, as well as news of literary and academic activity. Each issue will feature at least one invited article from a noted scholar. The aim would be to strike a balance between articles of scholarly excellence and attempts from fledgling writers. Though there will be no ironclad rule, we would prefer teachers and students of English literature to be the principal contributors. We welcome scholars of English from other academic institutions to submit articles and other matter. The decision of the editors concerning selection for publication would be final. All contributors are, of course, free to express individual opinions. We would welcome academic debate.

We are grateful to Prof. Dipendu Chakrabarty for allowing us to print his article in this first issue. We are also grateful for the support received from Principal Amitava Basu and the Teachers' Council.

This publication became a reality because of the enthusiasm of the teachers in our department. Professors Niharika Mukherjee, Swaty Mitra and Sumana Mitra did the bulk of the editing. Students also chipped in.

We begin humbly, but our hopes are high. We request the readers not to overlook our shortcomings and to enrich us with criticism and suggestions.

**Shakespeare as Contemporary:
Indian Context**
Dipendu Chakrabarty

Since the publication of Jan Kott's book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1961) there have been various attempts to confirm Shakespeare's contemporaneity challenging his familiar historicist and essentialist representations in academic studies and theatrical productions. In such a critical project Shakespeare ceases to be an Elizabethan and speaks like a modern dramatist who appears in BBC interviews to say something about everything that matters in contemporary Western politics and culture. No wonder, the majority of academics have shared Helen Gardner's contempt for Jan Kott's 'outrageous arrogance'. For them, Shakespeare's immortality or universality is an accomplished fact and can survive the subversive strategies of modernisation popularised by Kott and his followers like Peter Brook. Peggy Ashcroft said, 'We don't need to justify Shakespeare.'

Charles Marowitz in his turn has savagely attacked the academic critic's bardolatry as a kind of harlotry in his *Recycling Shakespeare*. Recent search for alternative Shakespeares in Post-structuralist, culturalist and feminist terms is in fact another way of contemporising Shakespeare. A public seminar, organised by the International Association of Theatre Critics, was held in 1989 at the Young Vic Theatre, London to discuss the question 'Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?' Though it was, according to John Esлом, 'a kind of birthday party' to celebrate the twenty fifth anniversary of the publication of Jan Kott's book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, it gave Prof. Kott 'a chance to recant before facing the wrath of the Shakespearean purists.' Prof. Kott did not of course recant; he only provided certain clarifications, and the traditionalists have not budged from their position, either. Thus the battle between the old guard and the *avante garde* continues unabated in the field of Shakespeare studies with memories of missed chances of temporary rapprochement.

Kott, of course, has never claimed that all of Shakespeare's plays are equally relevant today. He believes that at certain times, some works become more contemporary than others. The rationale behind this selective contemporaneity

of Shakespeare is Kott's own prioritization shaped by the political conditions of his country Poland. In an interview Marowitz asked Kott: 'You have Polish eyes. Does that make you see something different than if you had British or American eyes?' Kott's answer was in the affirmative and he himself quoted Peter Brook's comment in the introduction to his first book:

Kott is undoubtedly the only writer on Elizabethan matters who assumes without question that every one of his readers will at some point or other have been woken by the police in the middle of the night.

Because the political situation in Britain or America has never been so nightmarish, Shakespeare's contemporaneity has been conceived there by and large in aesthetic terms. Thus, Shakespeare becomes our contemporary in different countries for different reasons. Race, culture and politics valorize Shakespeare's relevance in different ways. *The Merchant of Venice* was frequently performed in Hitler's Germany and it is now the most performed play in Israel. The reasons in both cases are political and racial. In Japan Ariane Mouchkine's Shakespearean productions were given an oriental flavour which was more cultural than political. Shakespeare can also be seen as our contemporary in Indian context which may be political or cultural. But we are still trapped in the discourse of British academic conservatism, a sustained colonial practice that prevents us from making Shakespeare relevant for us. Students learn from their teachers that Shakespeare is not for an age, but for all time. That this proclaimed 'universality' of Shakespeare is itself a product of academic investments growing day by day under the conditions of modern market economy has been acknowledged by many Shakespeare critics in the West. But in India one hardly sees a sign of dissent in the ritualistic celebration of the timelessness of Shakespeare. Here nobody dares to question the eternal appeal of Shakespeare as Gary Taylor has done in his irreverent *Reinventing Shakespeare* or Marowitz in *Recycling Shakespeare*. It is no longer possible to deny that Shakespeare is not only a cultural icon of England but a superbly marketable commodity.

For Kott Shakespeare is a 'supermarket', for Marowitz Shakespeare is 'one of the great multinational industries'. Any attempt to

damage the image of Shakespeare as embodiment of humanity that transcends temporal and spatial specificity in spite of his rootedness in history is likely to destabilize such a market or industry. This concern for stability provides the basis for a collaborative relation between academia and market. In India the study of English language and literature was initiated by the Raj for a colonial interest that always linked liberal humanist studies to economic prospects. Even after fifty years of independence English Literature studies here are controlled by what happens in the British academia and publishing houses. Because of our parasitic academic culture we lack the courage we need to make Shakespeare relevant in our context. Jan Kott, a professor at the University of Warsaw, Poland can make the British Shakespeareans sit up and take a fresh look at Shakespeare by showing the way in which Shakespeare can be relevant in contemporary Poland. Our Shakespeare studies in India, despite an overwhelming show of erudition, fail to cause a ripple in the British academia, because we give back what we receive from it. We have not yet developed a specific Indian response to Shakespeare. To see Shakespeare as our contemporary in India is certainly one of the ways in which we can make our reading of Shakespeare meaningful. I do not suggest that we follow Jan Kott in establishing Shakespeare's contemporaneity in the Indian context. Kott's approach was basically political, determined by the repressive political situation in his country. Ours is a comparatively liberal environment, so our approach will be more cultural than political. Of course the word 'politics' is now used in a broader sense, not as an arena of state power, but as a language of dominance inscribed in our cultural practice. In that sense we just cannot avoid politics, but it would be difficult to interpret *Hamlet* or *Richard III* as a symbolic representation of Indian political situation as Kott did in the context of Poland.

But the question of relevance is always determined by the changing socio-political context. It is a dynamic process in which the matrix of relevance never occupies a fixed space. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* became politically relevant in the Bengali theatre of the Seventies, as we saw it in an allegorical use of Hamlet's popular image in Asit Bose's *Kolkatar Hamlet*.

Maybe *Hamlet* will be relevant today if the rottenness in the state of India and the growing impotence of the radicals find a symbolic representation in an Indian production of *Hamlet*. The role of Fortinbras as an invader has a relevance in the context of Poland which lies beyond our experience.

Julius Caesar, I think, has much to say on the political developments in our country after the assassination of Rajib Gandhi. It is of course ridiculous to find a one-to-one correspondence between Shakespeare's play and the drama of power politics at Delhi, but the politicians' behaviour patterns betray certain common features in both the cases.

There are different ways in which a Shakespearean text can be made relevant — (1) to change the text in such a way as to underscore the sub-text of contemporary significance; (2) to change the setting and costumes to create a modern ambience in order to achieve temporal proximity of a past experience; (3) to adopt the Shakespearean text to the specific imperatives of a racial culture. In this category one must include the whole range of adaptations from English into other languages.

To present Shakespeare in Indian costumes may have unintended comical effect, but that way we can achieve a Brecht-like alienation effect to make a comparative analysis of Shakespeare's world and ours. One can also introduce a narrator in the Brechtian way in order to disrupt the continuity of dramatic illusion created by a Shakespearean text. Anyhow, whatever the theatrical technique, it is the content of the text that primarily indicates the limits of its relevance.

Measure for Measure has a fair chance of success in replicating for us the problematics of justice in a world of moral confusion. Shakespeare's text can be an appropriate form for the corruption and whimsicality of our bureaucrats and policy-makers.

It is not difficult to see that many themes of Shakespeare have their parallels in Indian literature and popular cinema -- love and jealousy, friendship and rivalry, family feuds and revenge, and, of course, parent-children relation. *Romeo and Juliet* with a casteist background can be eminently suitable for Indian audiences, and *King Lear* is closer to the Indian family system than to the modern Western

concept of family. There is of course a serious omission in Shakespeare's works that cannot be taken lightly in a country where the cult of the mother is of the central importance even within a framework of patriarchy. In Shakespeare's world mothers are conspicuous by their absence. Even *The Tempest* which is now read as a tract against colonialism presents a world without mothers. It is as if patriarchy and colonialism were the two faces of the same social order.

Such an agenda for Indianization of Shakespeare, I am afraid, will be treated by our academics either as an unpardonable insolence or as a laughable exercise in intellectual anarchy. Indianization of Shakespeare is admittedly a distortion, but we should remind ourselves that every new interpretation of Shakespeare is distortion of a kind. Every age looks at Shakespeare in its own way, and thus distortion becomes unavoidable. The essential Shakespeare is only a myth. Every age builds its own image of this essential Shakespeare, neoclassicist, romantic, modernist, now postmodernist. To see Shakespeare as our contemporary is only another way of vindicating Shakespeare's universality, but that is an acknowledgement of a dynamic concept of universality, not a static one, as assumed by the essentialist view of Shakespeare. Differences of race, culture, gender, class, rupture the monolithic image of Shakespearean universality and make it accessible only in specific contexts. Shakespeare was an Elizabethan, yet he can be seen as Jan Kott's contemporary. Shakespeare was an English dramatist, yet he can speak to the Indians in their own idiom.

The dialogue between his age and ours, between his country and ours, is the only way to feel him as a living experience. An awareness of Indian context is what we need badly to know our Shakespeare from their Shakespeare.

Of Joy and Grief: *Ripeness is All* Niharika Mukherjee

Keats' poetry embodying the 'material sublime' in all its tremulous aspirations and tremendous vitality is a testimony to his celebration of life even in the depths of human anguish:

... life is but a day
A fragile dewdrop on its perilous way
From a tree's summit ...

There is no release from this ceaseless rhythmic pattern of change except through the acceptance and reconciliation of contraries within oneself.

While the classical poet accepts with quiet resignation the continual farewell of earthly joys, the Romantic is perpetually in a quest for some permanent refuge that can bear the onslaught of Time, Decay and Change. Wordsworth in *The Excursion* seeks 'stability without regret or fear', 'the central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation'. To Keats, however, this serenity of vision is born out of a contemplation of beauty implicit in the joy of the passing moment — 'a pigeon tumbling in the clear summer day', 'light uplifting of a maiden's veil'. This burst of lyrical joy in the poet's sense of oneness with a beauty that is fast-fading involves a going out of the constraints of the self to other existences wherein the poet waits, watches and grows along with the flower, with the sparrow picking at the gravel and with the soul blossoming between the contradictions of life and death, between fulfilment and extinction.

'The excellence of Art', Keats affirms, 'is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate in their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth'. The reality disclosed in *King Lear* may be tragic, but through a heightened awareness of the truth of existence reality becomes transformed utterly, giving birth to a 'terrible beauty' — a beauty not of soft colours and light, but that of a spectacle of human existence transfigured to universal truth. Loneliness, suffering, death seen in isolation in *Isabella*, *St. Mark*, *Lamia* is transmuted into a thread of continuity where flowering, fruition, death and immortality coalesce to form the girdle of Eternity. In the *Endymion* the search for an ideal glimpsed dimly in vision leads to a journey that ends in finding beauty through love and sympathy for a life rooted in the bounty of earth. While the Shelleyan Alastor is a lonely idealist, frustrated in his quest for the unattainable, Keats's Endymion moves towards the knowledge that the actual world of human life must be accepted and that only through participation in that life can the ideal be achieved.

In *Ode to a Nightingale* the poet remains unsure of his grasp of the Truth, whether the realm of the nightingale or that of Man is the living reality. The world of 'green darkness',

however enchanting, remains 'forlorn' and alien to mankind because it is not sanctioned by reality. The Keatsean instinct is to seek a particular sense-object experience and hence the search for beauty continues till it is realised in real, earthy life.

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* reconciles the contraries in the realm of Art. 'The great end of poetry', Keats writes, is 'that it should be a friend to "soothe the cares and lift the thoughts of man".'

The urn as a work of art draws upon the well of life for its inspiration and allows us a glimpse into that region where mortal sufferings, desolation, overwhelming happiness without 'life's satiety' are perceived in unison. The varied passions ranging from consummate joy to the torment of an aching heart are viewed in life in their fragmented, disjointed form. In the realm of art contraries melt into a unified pattern, easing the burden of mystery.

In *Ode to Autumn* it is the seasons, a symbol of life, which gives truth to the conviction that forces of destruction are as native to the world as the forces of creation. Autumn is both Life and Death, seemingly participating in activity, yet above the cycles of Time and Decay. She is confined by the boundaries of Time, yet is lifted above the temporal, as 'drows'd with the fume of poppies', she prolongs the pause of the season. The poem is a poignant expression of that idea from the New Testament — 'If it die, it brings forth much fruit.'

The *leitmotif* of 'death is life's high need' runs through the works of Keats and gives it a special richness. The moment of the birth of an organism is also the moment of death. The one way of looking does not preclude the other: *Ripeness is all*. The 'unusual intensity' of his life, which had an element of folklore in it, brought him happiness, sorrow, peace and insight into a world enclosed in the 'silent growth of flowers', the stillness of the urn and the full-throated song of summer. His is a voice that lives beyond the pales of Time, linking the voice of ancestors to their children.

Why English Honours *An Interview with the Involved*

It was going to be a simple session -- a bit of a breather away from the syllabus, both for us

and the students. Initially we had asked them to give us in writing their reasons for taking up English literature as their Honours subject. But after reading a couple of essays we knew our apprehensions were not unfounded: *they loved reading books; poetry appealed to them; literature gave them an insight into life ... etcetera, etcetera*. Nothing new, and, presumably, not wholly true. Hence our plan to have a talk with them. We intended to capture them in a whirl of words and ferret the truth out of them. So on a quiet afternoon, we gathered in the cool of Room No. 30, trying to probe ten freshers and find out why in the time of Computers, Management Studies, Chartered Accountants and courses in Public Relations, they have chosen English literature as their subject. We present here what we heard with little or no comment. The answers might not be wholly unfamiliar, but they reinforce the realisation that times they are a-changing and so are thoughts.

This is what they had to say when asked ...

Q: Which of the two words in 'English Literature' is more important to you -- 'English' or 'Literature'?

A. English. (They answer in unison)

Q: Why is English so very important?

A: Urmimala: I want to take up journalism and with a knowledge of English, I will have the advantage of knowing a second language.

Tania: I want to become an air hostess. It is necessary that I have full command over English.

Poulomi: When I wanted to do a course in I.C.M., they said they would prefer an English Honours graduate.

Mili had been told something similar when she had tried to join a course in Tourism.

Moon Moon's and *Devbrata's* fathers had advised them to take up English as knowing English is a prerequisite for landing good jobs.

Said *Shampa:* I really didn't think so much. I did not want to take up a subject which required a lot of mugging. English was always fine with me, so I took up English.

Suchandra almost took up Political Science, but when the college introduced English as an Honours subject, she opted for English.

All the students were unanimous in their opinion that English is a must for their future

career.

Q: Most of you seem to have assumed that taking up English Honours would improve your linguistic skills whereas the course is intended to groom you into appreciating literature, a command over the language is taken for granted. Did you understand this difference between studying literature and learning how to communicate in English?

A: We didn't think in terms of appreciating literature at all.

They all shake their heads ruefully.

Q: Leave aside the question of literature for the moment, let us talk of English -- how important is English as a matrimonial requirement for girls?

A: Said Mili (After a lot of giggling and vigorous nods from the entire group): Oh, very important Ma'am. Ask my grandmother -- she'll tell you all about it!

Q: We want to ask the girls particularly, do you discriminate between your male classmates and other male students studying other Arts subjects?

A: We ... well ... we must confess we feel them (those studying other Arts subjects) to be not so intelligent.

Q: If you had a Utopian situation where not marks, but your interests would allow you to study a particular subject, would you still hold a similar opinion?

A: Not at all!

They are unanimous. What is this? Stereotyping of educational values?

At this point they started a discussion among themselves. After allowing their discussion to go on for a while, we resume.

Q: How much peer pressure has gone into your choice of subject?

A: Says both Tania and Shampa, severally: No such pressure Ma'am. Rather, all my friends are doing commerce.

Q: In that case, have you noticed any changes of attitudes, interests between you and your friends from other disciplines?

A: Urmimala: I find my best friend, a

commerce student, more practical, more worldly nowadays, whereas I, myself, have become more internalised.

Others, however, had not noticed any such changes. Is Urmi more perceptive then? And, is this change in Urmi and her best friend brought about by passage of time or by the inherent differences in the disciplines they have opted to study?

Most of the students had English as their second language at the Higher secondary level and had found it quite easy. So for them English was a soft option.

Q: There is always a gap between expectation and reality. So what did you expect when you opted for English Honours?

A: Shampa (Immediately): I thought I wouldn't have to work so hard!

Mala: I had commerce at the Plus 2 level. I found Accountancy difficult, so I opted for English.

Q: You still think English is going to be a cake walk?

A: Tania and Mala (with a groan): No, we don't.

Suchandra: We never imagined we would have to work so hard.

Shampa nods her head vehemently in agreement.

Then poured out the complaints. Philology is 'difficult' -- euphemism for 'boring' -- I am the 'Ma'am' who does philology, so they are circumspect. And surprise of surprises ... 'The Romantic Period' is boring and the most dreaded part of the syllabus! How far into the post-modern era are we!

The picture is not completely bleak though. Poulomi and Shampa are happy because literature gives them the freedom to use their imaginations and make their own interpretations, which is a great relief for them.

Mili bursts out suddenly: It is a khichri Ma'am, that's what literature is!

Mili does not know how close to the truth she is. These youngsters are still to find the magic of multiplicity, which literature offers. Nevertheless, they are trying to swim across the

ocean in which they have jumped in, mistaking it to be a pond. Hopefully, by the time they are through with the course, they would discover some pearls and would learn to distinguish between the true worth of literature and the practical necessity of knowing the language.

Interviewees: Suchandra, Poulomi, Mili, Mala, Tania, Moon Moon, Urmimala, Shampa, Devbrata

Interviewers: Sumana Mitra and Swaty Mitra
Compiled by Swaty Mitra

Nothing Will Die: A Personal View ***Suchandra Bhattacharya***

Reading a poem and understanding it is hardly easy. When my teacher asked me to comment on a poem, I felt very tense. I tried for long, but could write nothing.

Yet as the deadline approached, I became determined. 'Write or die' became my motto. I decided to read some of Tennyson's lyrical poems. The title of this poem -- *Nothing will Die* -- roused my curiosity. So, here goes.

Difficulty in understanding the language is usually the first reason of my tension when I read a poem. Fortunately that was not a problem here.

When will the stream be awearry of flowing
Under my eye?

When will the wind be awearry of blowing
Over the sky?

When will the clouds be awearry of fleeting?
When will the heart be awearry of beating?
And nature die?

Never, oh! never, nothing will die.

I found the words easily understandable. Beautiful lines, beautiful sentiments, no doubt.

Yet, as I went on reading the poem, I could not agree completely with the poet's views. He writes:

Nothing was born;
Nothing will die;
All things will change.

Throughout the poem, the words 'Nothing will die' run like a refrain.

But does nothing really die? Does not all change imply destruction of the old? Things must die, so that the new can be born. Creation occurs through destruction; mere change cannot bring in the new. Old seasons die away, giving

way to new seasons. The past dies so that the present can live. A new world can only be created when the old dies. Change can improve the state of things, but cannot build something new in a fresh and new form. The cycle of birth and death is necessary -- perhaps as part of the Divine Will.

By denying that death exists, was Tennyson trying to console himself? Perhaps he was trying to forget the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam and keep his memory alive -- 'through Eternity'.

A Play-Reading Session ***Sumana Mitra***

The USIS and the students of Calcutta University collaborated on a play-reading session held at the Lincoln Room on 14 December, 1998. The play, Richard Greenberg's *The Author's Voice*, was one of the hits of New York City's Ensemble Studio Theater's *Marathon '87*.

In the play, Todd is a wanna-be author with the looks and sex-appeal of a ramp model. It makes him an instant hit with lady editors. Yet as a man of letters, he is more often than not found fumbling for words. Portia is the glamorous editor who looks after more than just the author's words. However, under the veneer of a social belle, she is a hard-core professional. Gene (short for Eugene, perhaps) is an ugly deformed gnome. This misshapen, ostracized being exists in a peculiar relationship with Todd. Todd gives Gene a roof over his head, and Gene places his creative skills at Todd's disposal.

In an age of aggressive media-manipulation over book launches, book-readings and book-promos, when the cast of an author's jaw is more mesmerizing than the spell he casts with words, *The Author's Voice* presents, to quote New York Times, 'the headlong pursuit of 15 minute fame'.

Swaty Mitra was an excellent Gene, bringing out the subtle ambiguities of the relationship that exists between Gene and Todd. She was ably supported by Rituraj Chakrabarty as Todd and Gursheek Kaur as Portia.

Books to Read

For the dismayed beginner face to face with Aristotle, Late Prof. Subodh Chandra Sengupta's *An Introduction to Aristotle's 'Poetics'* can be a heartening guide.

After the introductory first chapter, the book focusses on the *theory of mimesis* in poetry as idealised portrayal of reality in language, the synonymy of *poesis* and *mimesis*, how poetry delves under appearances improving surface reality, how it tries to show what ought to happen rather than what actually happens, how it appeals to our love for the marvellous. Certain confusions in Aristotle concerning the 'general' and 'universal' nature of poetry and of the 'concrete unity' of a work of art is taken up next. Then the interplay of *necessary cause*, *probability* and *accident* in the complex unity of a dramatic work is discussed. After enumerating the modes of imitation in poetry, the book goes on to look at Aristotle's definition of tragedy followed by examinations of the concepts of plot and of character. Later chapters examine role of *Thought*, *Character* and *Chorus* in Greek drama. After a discussion of *Diction* in poetry, the book closes with an examination of *Comedy* and the *Epic*.

An Introduction to Aristotle's 'Poetics', 1971; 4th rpt. 1992; N. M. Publishers, Calcutta, pp. 143, Rs. 35.00

A Significant Publication

It is a matter of great pleasure for all students of English, particularly for those who had the good fortune of studying under Prof. Jyoti Bhattacharya, that *Baulmon* has published a collection containing nine of his articles. His students remember him especially for his teaching of *King Lear* and the book contains two articles on the play that bring back memories of his robust voice. The other articles, one each on *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's relevance to the masses, Eliot, and Brecht, speak eloquently of his erudition. The other three articles look at society and education in general. The book also contains some of his Bengali poems.

Jyoti Bhattacharya: *The Teacher*, 1999, *Baulmon Prakashan*, Calcutta, pp. 104, Rs. 45.00

Messages

The endeavour of the college and the department of English of Heramba Chandra College to meet the long-felt want of introducing instruction in honours course in English is highly appreciated. I congratulate all concerned for this laudable enterprise. Being the final beneficiaries of the project, the students, I hope, will feel happy and grateful. The publication of this bulletin from the Department of English, I am certain, will be very much an addition to its recent achievements.

Rabi Kundu

Chairman
Governing Body
Heramba Chandra College

I am very pleased to learn that the English Department of Heramba Chandra College is publishing a literary bulletin. The bulletin will provide a much-needed platform for teachers and students to unleash their creativity. It is to be hoped that other departments will follow this example. I wish the bulletin unqualified success.

Utarani Dasgupta

Rector
South Calcutta Group of
City Colleges

I am very happy that the English Department is bringing out a literary bulletin where teachers and students of the Department will be able to give free rein to their creativity and critical abilities. The college will try to provide all possible cooperation in this effort. I wish the bulletin every success.

Amitava Basu

Principal
Heramba Chandra College

We invite English scholars from other academic institutions to send us articles properly typed and not longer than 1500 words. Decision of the editors concerning publication will be final. Articles not selected for publication will be returned if accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelopes. Please retain a copy of whatever you send. Things are sometimes misplaced even when every care is taken.