"OVERCOMING JEALOUSY" : HOURS BEFORE DAWN

Though it was published in 1988, **Hours Before Dawn** bears similarities with his second novel, **Your Life to Live** (1972). In **Hours Before Dawn**, the author presents an Indian expatriate couple, Mrinal Chatterjee and Kabita Mukherjee, and shows how the differences in their outlook lead to their personal and cultural dilemmas. Mrinal’s jealousy leads to the abandonment of his family. Their separation is followed by a semblance of reunion as a result of self-education on the part of Mrinal. The self-education involves overcoming of jealousy by him. The philosophy of the two novels is that every wife and husband have to live their lives and strive to achieve harmony by realizing and transcending their individual limitations and learning to appreciate each other’s point of view.

The story opens with Kabita and Mrinal recollecting the celebration of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary at Blangy in France. In the second chapter the narration dates back to the first meeting of Mrinal and Kabita in London before their marriage. He is introduced to her at an annual dance event arranged for the new graduates who interned at the Middlesex hospital. Mrinal is a journalist working for **Daily Telegraph** and Kabita is a doctor. Mrinal is attracted by her but Kabita is not impressed by him. She lives with Dr. Kanu Mitra who is the
'older-brother figure to the young Bengali boys and girls who needed a home-away-from-home.' Mrinal learns from Dr. Kanu Mitra that Kabita's father is Sir Dhiren Mukherjee of I.C.S. Mrinal is interested in her and tries to get in touch with her. At last she responds to one of his messages and meets him. In course of conversation she comes to know that Mrinal was the President of the Student Union in Scottish Church College in Calcutta in which she also studied. Mrinal's heroism and oratory had left a profound impression on her. Mrinal tells her how, after his graduation, he was helped by J.C. Anderson to go to England for higher studies as he was impressed by Mrinal's talent in cricket. Kabita tells him of her background. She was brought up in western ways. She had studied medicine in Calcutta.

Mrinal and Kabita come closer. They are physically united. They are married in London in a traditional way. Only Kabita's parents attend the marriage. After a brief visit to India, Kabita and Mrinal are back in London. Mrinal gets a job in The New York Times and takes Kabita to New York. He finds no job satisfaction. Kabita becomes a doctor at Bellvue Medical Centre. After a year, Mrinal applies for and gets the position of assistant editor for Village Voice. Meanwhile, Kabita's erstwhile patient's son, Mr. Subhas Patel, gets close to Kabita. She helps him in his studies and in getting a position in hospital administration at the New Jersy General Hospital where she also works. Subhas has immense gratitude and adoration for her. Mrinal sees them taking dinner in a restaurant. Suspicion and jealousy set in his heart. In a party, Mrinal is introduced to
Suzie, a Vietnamese woman, who came to America in the early seventies. She kindles his interest in the war-torn Vietnam. Even without consulting Kabita, Mrinal decides to resign his job and go to Vietnam and write a book on the Vietnam war from the Vietnamese point of view. In Vietnam Mrinal meets several people who participated in war to get an authentic account of the war. After spending six months in Vietnam, Mrinal goes to Paris and writes the book, *In Course of Martyrdom*. He realizes the meaninglessness of his jealousy for Kabita and wishes to reconcile to her. Later she realizes that Mrinal has not completely freed himself from jealousy, yet she decides to reconcile herself to him.

Romen Basu constructs the plot from the end point, that is, the celebration of the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in the first chapter and comes back to the same event in the last chapter. In between he builds the events starting from the first meeting of Mrinal and Kabita to their reunion at Blangy in France. A reviewer is of the view that "the beginning is unimpressive and the end is no better after taking us through Calcutta, London, New York, Paris, Bangkok and Hanoi because the impersonal tension is not quite resolved in spite of their desire to keep the marriage going since what she is looking for in life has little in common with what he wants."¹

¹ Shakuntala Narasimhan, rev. of *Hours Before Dawn*, The Indian Express, 26 February 1989.
The novel has only a single plot consisting of Kabita, Mrinal and Subhas. The author devotes a sizable section of the novel from chapter 19 to 21 to Mrinal's stay in Vietnam but it is in no way connected to the main plot except that the episodes of the Vietnamese women, Suzie and Satang, help Mrinal look at his problem of jealousy from a different perspective. The author also tucks in other minor episodes of the participants in the Vietnam war. However, the account of the taxi-driver in Chapter 17 looks like sermonizing on divorce and is quite unnatural. It could have been dispensed with.

Kabita and Mrinal are the chief characters in the novel and they can be studied as a contrast to each other. The fact that they are temperamentally different is indicated in their first meeting itself. Kanu Mitra compliments Kabita: "She was the most sensible person he knew. For her age, she was quite remarkable. Kabita is a sheer joy to anyone she meets." (p. 21). On being introduced to Mrinal, she sizes him up as an 'upstart' and 'a type who had to be overbearing to impress' and 'she was not thrilled to have met him.' Even the guests at the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary point out the difference in their nature. Bernard tells Kabita that Mrinal "was mysterious, full of self-proclaimed virtues behind a cloak of secrecy." (p. 11).

2. Romen Basu, *Hours Before Dawn* (New Delhi: Sterling publishers, 1988), pp. 145-146. All the further references are to this edition and the page numbers are given parenthetically.
Andre, another guest, tells her: "You look more intelligent than he. He manages to do so many things with the help of others, putting on a sad look of helplessness. But you show no sign of helplessness after being married to him for twenty-five years." (p. 12).

Like Ashoke in Your Life to Live, Mrinal hails from an Indian middle class family and shares a fascination for the Western way of life, that is, a carefree but competitive life. On the other hand, Kabita and her counterpart, Zarina, in Your Life to Live, are from a rich, upper class family and neither has a fascination for the Western way of life. They are drawn towards their motherland, India, and enjoy living in a joint family. Mrinal tells Kabita that during his stay for three years in England "my life has changed completely .... I like living here, somehow I feel more at home." (p. 29). Kabita feels that he is "no different from hundreds of others." (p. 29).

Despite such temperamental differences, Kabita is softened towards Mrinal when she discovers that Mrinal is the same student firebrand whose revolutionary fervour for independence she had admired from afar and finally yields to his intense love for her. But their temperamental differences continue to persist. Kabita wants her marriage to be a religious ceremony. But "Mrinal was convinced that Indian weddings were a bore. He could not see himself wearing a wedding cap on his head parading in a flowerbedecked car from Sham Bazaar to Hungerford Street." (p. 54). They still disagree violently about
where they want to live. Kabita realizes that Mrinal is brainwashed by the British like her father. She wonders at his 'infatuation for riding the tube, beer for lunch and Tommy Trinder's amusing words on the radio.' (p. 47). On the other hand, Mrinal is convinced that Kabita "romanticized the idea of her being a real Bangalibahu" (p. 46). He feels that "it would be impossible to return to a narrow provincial life." (pp. 47-48). Kabita realizes that he hates her attempts 'to draw him back to his roots.' Bernice, her friend, tells Kabita: "You play on his conscience too much. You are too much of an Indian, Kabita, let's face it." (p. 142). She suggests she should adopt Western style of living to please Mrinal. She says: "Go dancing sometimes, speak to him in English, cook steak once in a while; that's all." (p. 142). But Kabita thinks: "Maybe those little things could have satisfied him, but she could not be hypocritical, even to keep their marriage alive." (p. 142).

Kabita notices another side of Mrinal's personality when they go to India for a brief period after their marriage. Living with Mrinal's family, she realizes that "he was just the same as all the other members of his family -- unrealistically proud, passionate and emotional." (pp. 60-61). She also observes that his behaviour in his joint family is different from that when he visits her parents' house. She says:

Your behaviour was shocking this evening. I don't understand you. You are a two-faced man. In your own home you behave like a boy who
never left home and here you acted like a sahib. (p.72).

Mrinal explains to her:

My dear, it is quite simple. I am at home in spirit with my family and prefer the life-style of your family. Why is that so unacceptable to you? (p. 72).

Kabita replies:

Because it is unnatural and hypocritical. You cannot have an ideal of something and live a different kind of life. I don't believe you have any ideals at all. You don't consciously understand that you are running away from something. What it is, I would like to find out." (p. 72)

Another baffling thing Kabita finds in him is his dislike for Indians. He keeps himself aloof from Indians in England. In New York, he is assigned the work of writing articles mostly on Indians which he hates. Kabita wonders at this: "Every inch a proud Indian, what caused him to be so aloof from his compatriots? She is desperate to know how to understand him." (p. 92).

Mrinal only tells her:

"I know my reason."
"Shouldn't you share it with me, so that I can understand you better."
"Do you think we have a gap in our relationships over this?"
"I think so. I am in a new country. If we do not make friends with the Indians, who will our friends be, your office colleagues?" (p. 93).

Like Ashoke in *Your Life to Live*, Mrinal is possessive in his view of wife and suffers from jealousy and the problem of jealousy is central to the theme of the novel. Envy is another form of jealousy. As Mrinal had envied Kanu Mitra and Kabita's other friends, she had to leave their company for ever:

She did not think it necessary to explain that jealousy did not surface only in romance, and judged it poor form to envy another person's ways. She had given up her friends without making it an issue, but his attempt to impose his will on her again, would make them both unhappy. Kabita was prepared to give up a great deal, but to surrender her freedom of choice was as bad as death. (p. 86)

Mrinal's jealousy is originated from the higher degree of success Kabita has achieved in her medical profession and Mrinal admits it to Satang:

Jealousy is my problem, not hers. She has a splendid mind and a generous heart, so success comes easily to her. I really did not think in the beginning that I had to be professionally more successful than she, but when she could afford more than I, it bothered me. Mind you, I never let her spend on anything (p. 188).

Marty, the barmaid, cautions him on this:

You must show your wife you trust her.
Jealousy can ruin a marriage. Your wife is a doctor, so she must be very bright. Don't make her unhappy. (p. 85).

Mrinal's jealousy takes an ugly turn when he makes 'outrageous allegations' on the 'unchaperoned friendship' between Kabita and Subhas Patel. Mrinal speaks out his suspicion:

She educated the boy, helped him to stand on his feet. They worked together in the same hospital and travelled together all over in America. Is my suspicion without any foundation? (p. 189)

But Kabita "said it was her tender heart that had responded to a young man's longing for guidance." (p. 189).

"Why can't you believe that there is nothing between us? You should know me by now that I cannot refuse to help."
"I married you not knowing that side of your character. How many others did you accommodate before this one became attractive to you?" (p. 128).

Kabita had not earlier told him about Subhas "in the expectation that given time he would overcome his hang-ups and accept their relationship for what it was." (p. 128).

Suzie, a Vietnamese woman, tells him that he is 'liberated' because he is not jealous of his wife travelling with a male colleague. But Mrinal admits to her that he is jealous and defends himself:
I am not liberated at all .... If jealousy is a sign of immaturity, I will go so far as to say that there is no male living who is not jealous of sharing his woman's attention with another man, however innocent it may be. But I don't belong to that breed of men who deny their jealousy. (p. 133).

Kabita takes Mrinal's jealousy in a general perspective. She also feels that jealousy is "part of a psychosis and .... very few are without it. One must try consciously to overcome the weakness. It is not only in a man-woman relationship, but the whole gamut of envy to have and to hold." (p. 129). On her part, she tries her best not to give scope for his jealousy but at the same time she does not want to hurt Subhas's feelings. She tells Subhas:

Aren't you concerned that my husband may not approve of your friendship with me?

Mrinal replies innocently:

Why should he, you are committed to him. Besides, he does not give me the impression of being the jealous type. Only men who are unsure of themselves question the motives of their partners (p. 129).

Mrinal, on the other hand, takes Kabita's supposed infidelity as an excuse to behave as he likes. He decides to go to a starnight with his friend, Herman, as a sort of revenge on Kabita:

If she can play, why can't I, he thought ..... He was determined to be indifferent to his wife's "callous behaviour." When a woman
conceals things from her husband she is obviously cheating. Imagine, three years she had been carrying on with this fellow. And after Mala was born, too. He could not console himself in any conceivable way. (p. 130).

Contrary to Mrinal and Ashoke, Kabita and Zarina are free from jealousy. For instance, in Your Life to Live, Zarina does not care about Ashoke's past. She asks his girl-friend Diane to take care of Ashoke in her absence. Similarly, Kabita does not feel envious when Mrinal tells her at the end of the novel that he has a French mistress. A reviewer points out that the author has made Kabita unduly virtuous:

Even when Kabita found her husband chatting merrily with a bejewelled prostitute in a Riviera bar (when on a holiday) she did not kick up a row. Neither did she console herself with the thought that men are like that. She was not touched by either suspicion or jealousy. Forgiveness, thy name is Indian woman. 3

Both Ashoke and Mrinal achieve reconciliation with their wives in separation. Ashoke is advised by his friend to learn to trust his wife and understand her needs and tastes with a spirit of accommodation. Mrinal is helped out of his jealousy by his separation from Kabita during his stay in Vietnam for six months and later in France. In his self-education he is also helped by the two Vietnamese women, Suzie and Satang.

Mrinal tells Suzie that he really wanted to go to Vietnam to see for himself the aftermath of the war 'but she knew instinctively that there was a marital problem.' She feels that 'his decision to go to Vietnam was an impulsive act.' "He wanted to run away from Kabita and hide where she would never find him." (p. 207). Kabita is sure that his deliberate separation would help him get over his jealousy and 'she is prepared for anything.'

......she felt sure that he was running away from her. Maybe the change would give him time to reflect on their marriage. Let him see that jealousy was an irrational emotion. To cast suspicion on someone you really cared for was not only unfair, it negated the real relationship between two people. It loses the respect of the other person on which marriage is based. (p. 142).

As Kabita feels helpless to stop him, he mistakes it for pride:

There was no protest or grief. She had not said one word to stop him from leaving. He thought of her as a hard and heartless woman who had not given anything to their marriage. (p. 145).

Mrinal acquires a sense of stoic detachment from Kabita during his stay in Vietnam. He admits to Satang:

He thought of her on this trip with the mind of a jealous lover, but once he had decided to surrender her to Subhas he felt a lot better.
The defeat gave him the satisfaction of loving her unselfishly. (p. 187).

He also complains about Kabita's habit of not sharing her personal feelings with anyone: "She was afraid to be hurt and so withdrew at the first sight of confrontation. Her inner shell was the only retreat she had for defence. 'I have never seen her cry, not even once ... I worry about people who cannot cry easily." (p.189). Satang points out to him his faulty thinking:

You are not able to accept the difference between yourself and her. You would like her to be as your fancy. You do not see her as a person, a separate human being, but only as your 'Asian wife'.... You hate to admit that you were less than inclined to give. (p. 190).

She wants him to learn from her husband who preferred to hear her teach him anything he did not know. She also wants him to learn 'to see beyond himself.'

Mrinal is chastised by the greatest healer, time, Remorse and realization well up in his heart. He wants to be forgiven for 'acting out of impulse' and 'he would not interpret her silence any more as indifference.' Kabita sees 'a new beginning' in his letter from Normandy which reads:

I don't know whether you will think I have changed but I feel like a new man. Hang-ups are like a noose around the neck. I feel much higher without the noose. What a terrible waste it has been to be jealous. Why cry over what one cannot have, why cry over imaginary fears?
I am glad you did not cry for the same wasteful emotions as I had. Even a minute of your presence is precious, and what a pity too much of it has been wasted in false pride, mine and not yours. Can we be together as we are for whatever time you wish? I have always loved you, though it could not reach a greater height, but now it has, hurrah! (p. 199).

Mrinal comes back home and tries to make up with Kabita. But kabita soon realizes that Mrinal is still not rid of his jealousy when he asks her whether Subhas has made love to her. Kabita’s hopes are shattered:

Kabita doubted Mrinal had changed much. She felt violated by his questioning. If he had not overcome his jealousy, then he was still the same person he had been before leaving New York. If she was not trusted what could be her reason to change? In the long separation, she had plenty of time to think about their relationship. Why was his sensitivity diverted in every other direction except towards her? (p. 203).

Thus, "it takes very little time for the couple to realize that they are temperamentally poles apart, and that neither is going to change completely. This interpersonal tension is not quite resolved in spite of their desire to keep the marriage going, since what she is looking for in life has little in common with what he wants." Both of them abstain from seeking divorce because they are not totally devoid of love for each other. While Mrinal is mellowed

by his observation of the lives of Suzie, Satang and Mark, Kabita is advised by Bernice and even the taxi-driver tells her:

In India, you don't have many divorces, am I right? .... My wife and I are going to split .... We are nuts in this country, you know that .... First thing we are looking for is the panic button when any little thing goes wrong. Remember, don't push the panic button in a hurry.(pp. 145-146).

Despite the shortcomings in his personality, Mrinal appeals to the reader as a man of idealism and zeal as evidenced by his eventful trip to Vietnam. As a students' leader his idealism was kindled by India's struggle for freedom and now as a journalist, he is attracted by the heroism of the Vietnamese people. Second, he is moved to pity by the experiences of Yen, the daughter of one of the Vietnamese fighters, Pok. During war, she was raped by an American soldier and her face was disfigured by acid. He promises to arrange plastic surgery for her. He feels that it is his 'only gift to Vietnam.' Third, he is a successful writer as evidenced by his book, _In the Cause of Martyrdom_, which gives him a fresh lease of life as a writer.

Though Mrinal comes across the three Vietnamese women and Kabita comes across Subhas, they do not have extra-marital relations. Hamdi Bey comments:

Throughout all these Mrinal had not an affair, neither with the three Vietnamese women, nor with the Riviera prostitute. Both he and Kabita
are kind, and their extra-marital weaknesses are buttered with sympathy and charity — not flaming with passion.

But it is far-fetching to ascribe 'extra-marital weakness' to Kabita because Kabita's transparent honesty can be seen in what she says to Mrinal:

Tell me where I'm at fault. You hardly speak to me these days. If it is about Subhas, it is absurdly childish. If I had been married at his mother's age, I could have had a son that old. I like people and I like to be pleasant to them and if you find that it is wrong you better get yourself examined by a psychiatrist. (p. 114).

Among other characters, Suzie and Satang are worthy of mention. The author weaves their personal life-stories into the theme of the novel and thus endows the two characters with the thematic purpose of reforming Mrinal. Suzie was married thrice but had to leave them when they showed signs of jealousy. She tells Mrinal that it is her nature to be outgoing and friendly and she did not see why her personality had to be changed to suit the likes of others. She is outspoken in her views:

I have paid the price for it. After three divorces, I said to my husband he better learn to accept me as I am, because I was not about to have a fourth divorce. (p. 135).

She points out Mrinal's possessive nature when she says:

Men want attention all to themselves, don't they? Why won't they accept that wives don't have to be pet birds to be in a cage for their amusement. I cannot be anyone's prisoner. My father taught me to be kind to people and from my mother came the spirit of friendship. (p. 136).

Mrinal must have been impressed by the nationalist in Suzie. When she feels that Mrinal is really serious about his proposed work, she takes pains 'to research things he should know.' Mrinal asks her:

"Why are you doing this?"
"One should do some good in life, don't you think? I hope it will buy a tiny bit of credit in His eyes." She sighed. (p. 150).

She tells him that in his proposed book he should "expose the indignities the Vietnamese suffered at the hands of the U.S. Army and the U.S. Mission." (p. 150). Yet she is objective in her attitude to the war and bears to ill-will for the American people. She says:

I do not fault the American people; they are as much responsible for the victory of North Vietnam. And they are entitled to know how in a civil war situation, the United States behaved. (p. 150).

Like Suzie, Satang had also suffered a lot during the Vietnam war but her will-power remained unshaken. Mrinal feels at
ease with her as 'Satang reminded him of Suzie, perhaps with a little more grace.' She has learnt from her husband that "jealousy was a terrible waste of human emotion." (p. 189). She tells Mrinal that since Kabita has denied any relationship with Subhas, his suspicions are totally baseless. She strongly defends Kabita:

> Your wife sounds like a very ethical person. She could not submit to your wishes without good reason and his (Subhas's) involvement in her work was not premeditated. (p. 189).

From Mrinal's replies to her queries, Satang understands that Kabita loves him very much and is convinced of her faithfulness to him. Thus, Satang and Suzie succeed in making Mrinal realize the shallowness of his jealousy and suspicions.

As in his previous novels, Romen Basu makes use of more than one point of view to present the characters, actions, setting and events. He also makes use of devices like flashback and 'memory digression' to narrate the past events. For instance, the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary is presented in a flashback in chapter one a few hours after it has taken place. Similarly, in chapter sixteen, when Kabita asks Subhas to recount any of his experiences where he felt jealous of anybody or anything, he tells how his father neglected his mother and how in his school days his schoolmate, Kathy, switched over her love from him to another boy. Another obvious use of flashback technique by the author can be seen in narrating how Mrinal's interest in cricket helped him to land in England.
The author also makes use of the device of 'memory digression' to throw light on the past events. For instance, when Kabita and Mrinal are engaged in conversation, she remembers that Mrinal is the same student who she had admired:

Kabita felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. Could it possibly the same man, revered among the students as a legend? Is this the man who got even the Presidency College students to march in the rally when Shah Nawaz Khan of INA came to town? Each time he addressed a meeting, students from all colleges came to listen to him. Impossible, that student leader had his dhoti draped about him like a peasant. (pp. 22-23).

Yet another example may be cited, Mrinal remembers his visits to the family estate in Jagulia with his kith and kin and the slaughter of goats at Kali temple in honour of visiting guests in chapter two. In the same chapter, as Kabita is reading a book, 'her mind wandered at different and familiar places.' She remembers Tarun Chowdhury and Goutam Banerjee and compares them with Mrinal. In chapter nine, Mrinal remembers the days of freedom struggle. He recollects how he tried to save Gour Haldar who had been ordered to be killed by the British government for his raid on the district armoury. Kabita reflects on this incident:

At least Mrinal had been involved in his country's struggle for independence, Kabita thought. What had she ever contributed? She knew in her heart where she was needed. It wasn't in the West End of London. Why didn't
Mrinal feel the same need she did to serve their country? (p. 84).

This takes us to another device of narration, namely, probing the thoughts of characters in order to gain access to their thinking and attitudes. However, the device is limited to the protagonists of the novel, namely, Mrinal and Kabita. For instance, the author lays bare Kabita's thoughts after Mrinal has seen her with Subhas in a restaurant:

She watched him turn restlessly and wanted to wake him to tell him that it had been an unexpected dinner at Subhas's insistence. He wanted to treat her to thank her for finding him a job. She felt horrible for not being straight with Mrinal for the first time. She rationalised that the time was not right and she would clear it up in the morning before he left for work. (p. 113).

Simultaneously, the author records Mrinal's reaction to this:

All day long he was miserable trying to fathom why she would lie to him. It was impossible for him to connect Subhas with his wife. His information was quite understandable, but for her to encourage him was another matter. How far had she gone to accommodate him? The more questions he asked himself the more complicated it became .... was it the beginning of a new phase in her life? He was not going to talk to her about it, no matter how much it pained him. (p. 113).
Kabita thinks that Mrinal is jealous because of his 'puritanical upbringing.'

Subhas's admiration flattered her, but for Mrinal to be jealous outraged her sensibility. Mrinal's puritanical upbringing suggested that a married woman, even a career woman like herself, should not have any unchaperoned friendship. If he had really wanted her to be like his aunts and sisters, they should have returned and settled in the family's Calcutta mansion. (p. 113).

She fears what his jealousy will lead to:

Kabita's face shrank with despair. He would be jealous and suspicious of every late hour she spent in the hospital as time shared with Subhas. His dissatisfaction with the newspaper would spark a new flame. She would not put it past him to hand in his resignation, pack his bags and go to Tahiti as he had talked about so often. (pp. 127-128).

Kabita is lost in her thoughts on ideal husband-wife relationship when Subhas tells her that she and Subhas 'are a team':

"We are a team." rang in her mind again and again. This is what a marriage should be. Mrinal did not appreciate her intelligence, had not given her any space to move around. He would not openly object to her doing anything she wanted to, but the silence with which he greeted new plans was worse. (p. 139).
Similarly, the author traces Mrinal's feelings as he realizes his folly of jealousy:

Suddenly his yearning for Kabita wrenched his heart. He longed to touch her, to kiss her, to make love to her. He wanted to tell her everything bottled up inside him for nearly a year. He would not interpret her silence any more as indifference. (p. 198).

Mrinal lowers his own image in Kabita's eyes when he asks her whether Subhas has made love to her. It only strengthens Kabita's commitment to her friendship with Subhas:

She thought it would be a lowering of Subhas's dignity if she were to tell him that he never even asked to hold her hand. She knew that if he came back, she would be his friend for as long as he was around. (p. 203).

In this connection, it may be pointed out that the author makes use of third-person point of view to narrate the events during Mrinal's six-month stay in Vietnam from chapter 19 to 21 as it suits the context.

This takes one to reflect on the realism in the novel, *Hours Before Dawn*. The author maintains psychological realism, as has already been shown, in giving an account of the thoughts of the protagonists. Besides this, the author endows the novel with documentary and historical realism in giving an account of the Vietnam War. It is not a political account of the war but one based on personal experiences of people of varied professions --
Col. Vu, Prof. Thi, farmers like Pok, Lu, Tu, Mr. Van Pha a Buddhist and so on. Major events of war at places like the Tet Offensive, battles of Dien Bien Phu, Phien Bau and Kai San are narrated to give authenticity to narration.

Conflict and irony appear prominently in the technique employed by the author. Internal conflict in Mrinal and Kabita outweighs the external conflict between them. Mrinal is troubled by his jealousy towards Kabita and Subhas. Initially he overcomes it. "From tomorrow, he resolved, I shall turn over a new leaf, be satisfied with my job, read more, share more with my wife." (p.115). He affirms to himself that 'women should be free from male dominance' and even writes a story on the theme. But, the suppressed jealousy gets out of control when he learns that Subhas has been working in Kabita's hospital for six months. In Paris, he again gets over his jealousy temporarily. It is this inability that mars the reunion of the couple.

A similar conflict rages within Kabita too. She can neither convince Mrinal nor can stop Subhas from meeting and talking to her for fear of hurting him. Besides, she has an inner desire to continue her friendship with Subhas. Thus Kabita finds herself in the dilemma of "wanting to keep a relationship going, and at the same time not wanting to, because it is offensive to her husband."

A close study of the novel reveals quite a few instances of irony. First of all, it is ironical that Kabita and Mrinal are

both Brahmins as also from different 'gotras' making it convenient for their marriage. 'Chance was so benign to them,' Hamdi Bey comments. Second, it is ironical that Mrinal abandons his wife and child but 'invests this decision with a moral purpose' of discovering for himself and write about barbarism in Vietnam. While he sympathizes with Yen who is deserted and disfigured by an American soldier, he does not think of his own desertion of his wife and child.

Hamdi Bey refers to an inconsistency that has crept into the novel:

Mrinal is interested in the arts, specially in painting but only in London and France. In the intervening New York years there is no mention of the arts. Kabita was fond of the ballet but it features only in the London years. They also seem to have gone to the theatre only in London.

Another such inconsistency may be pointed out. Kabita is deeply interested in getting back to India at least after one year of stay in America. She has no desire to earn more. She even wonders that Mrinal has forgotten his promise to go back to India after one year in New York. But when Mrinal applies for the post of assistant editor for the paper Village Voice which gets him two thousand dollars more than his present salary, she is lured. She tells him that the offer is quite attractive because 'the salary is

higher.' She no more refers to her old demand of returning to India. This marks a change in Kabita's attitude and strikes an inconsistent note in her personality.

On the author's use of language, a reviewer says: "There is neither the finesse nor the felicity of expression that marked the earlier novel." (i.e. Outcast). She feels that the language is at times 'odd,' as seen in this sentence:

She asked Kabita to look carefully at the grandmother, bedecked with jewels, hanging on the wall in her room. (p. 75).

At times he translates certain native expressions into English such as "bread-and-butter giver tone," "God is my witness" etc.

There are certain descriptions which carry a spark of beauty of expression. For example, he writes:

"She burst out like a water-lily suddenly opening to the kiss of the Sun." (p. 43).
"Kabita's eyes flashed like a happy peacock's" (p. 75)
"The lake in the centre of Hanoi was like a fine cut emerald." (p. 156).

One is reminded of a similar description in Romen Basu's fourth novel, The Tamarind Tree:

The emerald-green water in the pond was without a ripple. 9

While talking to Suzie, Mrinal's suppressed thoughts about Kabita and Subhas find a vent and the author describes it metaphorically:

The bandage broke off the wound he was trying to heal. (p. 133).

Referring to Romen Basu's use of language in the novel, Hamdi Bey comments:

...... the book's merit lies in it being a Bengali novel in English in spite of the location abroad. That is because of the verisimilitude achieved, and the Bengali manner of speaking being successfully reproduced.10

The title of the novel, Hours Before Dawn, has a symbolic value. "Dawn was Kabita's favourite time ... Most people favoured the skyline under shimmering lights. For her what mattered more was the freshness of the day, left-behind thoughts of the night before and hope for a new beginning each morning." (p. 13). It is symbolic of Kabita's affirmation of life and of her hope for harmony between her and Mrinal. Their reconciliation is expected to be a step in that direction.