

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

Sankar Chatterjee
A Peace Park

After a long absence from his birthplace, Prof. Pedro Alvarez, a renowned academic historian from a European university returned to his birthplace Santiago Atitlan, next to namesake Lago de Atitlan (Lake Atitlan) situated in the highlands of Guatemala. Formed thousands of years ago in a collapsed volcanic crater, the natural lake's beauty is spell-binding. All around the lake, over the centuries various historic indigenous tribes created their own settlements that eventually grew into places bearing the names San Juan, San Pedro, and similar ones. Each settlement had a distinct identity with costumes, culture, way of life, and even the variation in spoken languages. The economy was agriculture-based, growing multiple kinds of corns and potatoes.

A commuter boat from Panajachel, a bigger commercial town on the other side of the lake dropped Prof. Alvarez on the dock-area. He started to the walk towards the centre of the settlement, but realized immediately that his birthplace had been transformed. Arts galleries and handicrafts emporiums were dazzling on both sides of the previously-narrow, but now-broadened walkway. Local youths in jeans, while sitting on their roadside motorbikes and talking on their cell-phones, were sipping brand-named western sugary drinks. He sensed globalization brought modernization, even to this far end of the world. As he walked forward, Prof. Alvarez also realized the permanent loss of major farmlands giving rise to boutique hotels for the international tourists. But, he was determined to find that small plot of farmland where the course of his life would suddenly change at the tender age of ten years. This was the time when Guatemala was changing rapidly, both economically and politically. It was rumored that only seven richest families owned all the business interests inside the country. Later Prof. Alvarez would learn the country was also a pawn in the chess match of cold war between two superpowers. That situation would allow a right wing militia to begin a civil war to suppress the demands of poor citizens for equality, better life, and basic rights. The militia was backed by the overseas secret service agents of one of the superpowers.

Prof. Alvarez remembered it was a December morning. He was helping his father and hired hands on family's farmland. Suddenly, six black-clad gunmen showed up and without any provocation mowed down thirteen unarmed farmers to send a chilling message for the rest of the local villagers to stay away from dissent. But, they spared him. Later, his mother was able to send him secretly to a European country to live with overseas relatives.

Prof. Alvarez arrived at the location where he thought their farmland stood, but no such luck. Instead there was a memorial park bearing the name "Parque de Paz" (Park of Peace), at the site of the massacre. It was erected at the end of civil war. On one side of the perimeter, a mural painting on a wall depicted the important events from the country's history, ending in that day's event. And the recorded date was December 02, 1990.