

## THE NEW SIX SEASONS REVIEW: keep up the good work!

FARUQ AWWAL

DON'T we all know that it isn't a good idea to judge a book by its cover? Nevertheless, the first impression the new *Six Seasons Review* makes is a favourable one; the moment one views it, one knows that it is going to be at least as visually impressive as the first two issues. Like the preceding ones, the cover is striking. Rajib Ahsan's photograph of two push-cart drivers resting on their vehicles, seen with the photographer's eye for symmetry and significance. In fact, Rajib is the featured photographer of this issue as Mahmud and Noazesh Ahmed were the artists showcased in the previous ones, and his black-and-white photographs of ordinary people are as extraordinarily evocative as theirs.

Like the previous issues of *Six Seasons Review*, the third one also highlights a leading Bangladeshi painter, Rokeya Sultana. Three works from her "Madonna" series and two from her "Air, Water, Land" sequence, one in water color, one in etching aquatint, and another in brush and ink, and the unusual "Composition" in tempera testify to the range of the artist and her command over a variety of techniques. Certainly, Rokeya's paintings, like Rajib's photographs, give credence to the claim made by the editors that this is truly a journal devoted to the arts as well as letters.

But what makes *Six Seasons Review* unique in my eyes is that it

is the only English-language publication of its kind to be coming out regularly from Bangladesh. As the editors point out, it follows the tradition set up by *New Values* in Dhaka in the 1960s and *Form* in the '80s, but the difference here is *Six Seasons* is more lavishly produced and more international in outlook. The poetry section of this issue, for example, contains verse from poets who live in England, Belgium, Bhutan, Macedonia, Israel, and Denmark, as well as poets residing in Bangladesh at the present time. There are translations from Urdu, Macedonian, Hebrew, as well as Bangla, including a version of "Sisuthirta," a long narrative poem Rabinranath Tagore had originally composed in English as "The Child" before rendering it in Bangla, and which Fakrul Alam has now chosen to translate from the Bangla version into English, with interesting results. There is a poem about a midnight stroll in Ibadan by the Indian poet Shanta Acharya while the Bangladeshi writer Afsan Choudhury meditates on death in Patan, Nepal. The fiction section features stories by two Indian writers as well as two Bangladeshi ones, plus a translation of Akhtaruzzaman Elias's unforgettable Bangla story, "Dojokher Om," here translated competently by Kaiser Haq as "The Warmth of Hell." The non-fiction section contains a memorable account of the major Bengali modernist poet Amiya Chakraborty's encounter with James Joyce in Paris (rendered here impeccably by Khademul

Islam from Bangla), an Indian diplomat's account of the ties that bind India and Vietnam culturally, and the Nepalese writer's evocation of hippies in Katmandu during what has come to be known as the Sixties. As a bonus, there is a profile (also by Kaiser Haq), of Belal Choudhury, poet and raconteur extraordinary, and his peregrinations in the two Bengals.

But *Six Seasons Review* the title is endearingly based on the fact that it is published from the land of six seasons, as established in the Bangla calendar also bears evidence of its origins in its poetry and fiction pages as well as its photographs and paintings of Bangladeshi people and scenes. Thus Sudeep Sen's sparse but lyrical short poems meditate on "thirst, water, rain" in our part of the world. Another expatriate, Sarah Sutro, evoke the complex feelings evoked by her stay in Dhaka in "An American on the Other Side of the World." Khademul Islam's short story, "Cyclone" deftly weaves autobiography and history in a Chittagong setting in what must be an extract from a work in progress. Syed Manzoorul Islam's "Keeping Watch" is a post-modernist take on the daily dose of violence that comes with the daily newspapers of Dhaka.

In short, the third issue of *Six Seasons Review* is another fascinating collection of photographs, paintings, poems, poetry, and prose, beautifully produced by Mohiuddin Ahmed and attractively designed by Ashrafal Hassan Arif

of UPL. Cosmopolitan and yet rooted in Bangladesh, the magazine can truly claim to be unique. However, the third issue comprises numbers 3 & 4, a sure sign that the editors have been falling behind. Is it too much to hope that they will be more regular in the future? Also, the verse contained in the third issue seem to me to be not quite of the standard set in the previous two numbers, while the review section this time is particularly thin. The magazine should also be attracting more and more writers. Surely, there are more Bangladeshi writers in English in and outside the country who could swell the magazine and make publication more regular? I have a feeling that UPL could do more to promote the journal, for it certainly deserves to be better known. And how about reducing the price? For sure, the printing is excellent and the packaging thoroughly professional, but isn't Tk. 250 a little beyond what most readers can afford to spend for periodicals?

I, for one, would like to see *Six Seasons Review* come out more regularly and with contributions from more and more new writers as well as the established ones who have been filling the pages of the first three issues. The editors promise a "Dhaka" issue for their fourth issue and that, certainly, is something to look forward to!

Faruq Awwal is a freelance writer.

## MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN: THE PLAY

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, adapted for the stage by Rushdie himself, Simon Reade and Tim Supple, is playing at London's Barbican Theatre. Saiful Islam, live from London, filed this review:

**Too little magic and too much realism!**

TO attend a play in London is to feel that the arts on this planet still pulsates, sharing cramped seats with other after-office theatre-goers braving the late winter's damp wind, in thrilling anticipation of a night out with the old Muse.

Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children* published in 1981, extended the genre of 'magic-realism' to a post-Marquez world, a fantasy vehicle invented for portraying the far-fetched, crowded and vibrant world of our sub-continent. The multi-layered story revolves around the fate of two children, personifying India and Pakistan, born on the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947 (the date of India's independence from Britain). Both children are swapped at birth, struggle to be free but remain inextricably linked by an elusive and cruel destiny. The book placed its characters against the backdrop of significant historical events on the Indian subcontinent, and at every turn depicts after independence, the next 30 years of political charade, social violence and military ambition that finally created Bangladesh along with a stunted generation, symbolised by 1001 children, also born at the stroke of midnight, each blessed with supernatural powers.

The book earned an enormous international reputation, was awarded the 'Booker of Bookers' (given every 10 years) vote in 1993, and till now has also successfully defied every attempt to stage or film it.

Enter the original writer as saviour, attempting the artistic metamorphosis of his own creation, along with Simon Reade and Tim Supple. Directed by Tim Supple with designs and choreography by Melly Still, lighting by Tina McHugh and sound and video by John Leonard, it received financial support from both the Royal Shakespeare Company and two American universities, where it travels after March this year.

On stage are revealed the fantastic travels through time, space and place by the central character Saleem Sinai, from the birth of the children, the family's anguish and subsequent attempts to define their Muslim minority world, as they move to a corrupt Pakistan, and back to a chaotic and increasingly dictatorial India under Indira Gandhi. Saleem's role is played with superlative effort by Zubin Varla, who continues almost without a break for the pain-

fully lengthy three and a quarter hours. Zubin is no stranger to the stage; previous roles for the RSC include Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* (1999), title role in *Roberto Zucco* (1999) and most recently Caliban in *The Tempest* (2000). He also played the lead role in the major revival of the Lloyd Webber musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Supporting Zubin is a cast of all-Indian actors and actresses, insisted upon by Rushdie. Slick film montages are used as a backdrop on a sliding screen that serves as a clever exit and entrance for many of the scenes. The pace is well maintained, as Brechtian changes of props and scenes are smoothly conducted by the use of the movie montage (makes you think, it would work as a movie), by songs and all the multi-faceted dimensions of the book, chapter for chapter unfolds in scene for scene, without ever detracting from the story.

A quick glance at the multiracial audience around me reveals Rushdie's singular contribution in leading his generation's charge on English cultural ramparts, softened by curry but still lusting for more spice in the soul. This they get, as sex and despots in tin hats are clearly taken on with cow-slaying relish. Indian words and expressions familiar to my ear are liberally sprinkled in the dialogue, and the 'tamasha' rises as 'ammi jaan' has some 'nashita' and yells 'khabardar' to 'chota bhai'.

It is Rushdie's loyalty to the book that comes through, a credible effort at maintaining the novel's language and the sub-continent's spirit of sarcasm, but this also appears to be a weakness. The plot is faithfully followed, perhaps too closely and the play is often the novel instead of being an inspired thespian interpretation. Also, with the exception of some parts such as the role of Saleem's mother, there is 'a little too much' (as the English are wont to say) pause and delivery of dialogues. On some occasions, actors and actresses, especially Saleem's wife, are left wandering in the shadows, while the spotlight focuses elsewhere. Lastly, there is much effort but no compulsive, indelible performances. The messengers deliver the message in a new medium, true to form but low in spirit, energy and that elusive quality well known to Rushdie's readers 'magic!'

We take the tube back with many others, hurrying through the dark and the drops of rain, having proved ourselves loyal subscribers to Rushdie - but speaking of other things, other plays, other books.



Photo by Tristram Kenton of The Guardian

## Amiya Chakraborty on James Joyce

PARIS. A fog-wrapped evening; lights glow in the streets. It was time now to leave Europe. Having decided to leave via Syria, I had spent the better part of the day at various travel agents' offices. Suddenly I thought of James Joyce; then, wanting to properly round off my last night in France, I decided to call on him. I had met Joyce just the other day at a literary get-together, and he had invited me to his home.

I had never read James Joyce's writing completely, end to end. Till this day he continues to elude me. Whenever I came up for air after a dive into his wordocean, moss, seaweed, other strange, wonderful marine life silkily clung to my skin. It left me feeling restless, uncertain. The experience dazzled both the eye and the mind, an unforgettable thing. All those colours, such varying speeds, glimpses of shimmering ruins beneath the waves. If only the saltwater didn't sting one's eyes, it would have been possible to see so much more but to stay submerged for any length of time in this particular sea of language one needed the deep-sea diver's special gear. Though I did know that our language, our very mode of thinking, was now tied inextricably to this fer-

tile, bubbling genius. In other words, in no small measure have we been defined by this Paris-based, Irish writer's freewheeling prose. I was amazed that I, a Bengali from a thousand miles away, a stranger on the opposite shore, felt such happy kinship with him.

I climbed up the stairs. Joyce himself was standing at the top of his heavily-curtained flat. A lush carpet; a large, stylishly-decorated yet old-fashioned apartment. Every bulb was ablaze. Joyce's glasses had very thick lenses, the light occasionally glinting off his blurred vision. Again, it reminded me of the sea. The man was ethereal, not of solid earth.

Our talk turned to matters Indian; what were the writers there doing? Joyce mentioned Rabinranath Tagore's name with utmost respect. One should never read translations, he declared, translations were not literature. And yet, how astonishing that this Bengali genius could be found in them. He had seen Tagore in Paris. Had Bengali absorbed many other languages? Was Rabinranath's language as such? I saw that it was language itself, words, that he was most fascinated by.

He was reticent about himself.

But certain hints about the *Work In Progress* were forthcoming. One night Joyce had been reading a certain section of the new work to a friend (I forget whether it was Ogden or Richards). It was after dinner, the opposite shore, felt such happy kinship with him. Then Joyce, wanting to check some word or phrase had opened the door to go to the next room and in the dark had almost tripped over the maid. She, entranced by the reading, had been listening at the door. The maid had been French, and of course uneducated, and it would have been quite impossible for her to have understood even a word (it would have been beyond her even if she had been English and educated). Joyce said, see, those who want to, do understand! Why, nobody could tell. They, he continued, who listen and read exclusively to read and listen have no barriers to comprehension. For their end was to understand. Pun-dits had pronounced on his books, but the biggest compliment on his writing had been paid by that maidservant.

I listened. A faint American accent, a habit of pausing long in mid-sentence, then completing the thought. Airy paragraphs, ornamentally dotted. Heart-stealing nevertheless. Joyce was silent for a few minutes, then mentioned that the gramophone company had recorded him reciting from his novel. People fell asleep listening to it. There had to be many reasons for this. Could be the prose induced drowsiness. But then so did songs. The whole process seemed to be unrelated to the content of a work.

His wife appeared. It was time for tea. The one who stepped into the room bearing the antique silver china, then served us, was she the very same eavesdropping, enchanted domestic help? My question remained unasked. Joyce's mien while drinking tea was grave, his talk somber. As if deeply pondering the teacup, the act of sipping, the spoon, our eating. His glance remained fixed on the tea utensils. In the middle of the conversation he enquired about my impending departure, the precise time, the specific train. My own answers were received with the air reserved for the revelation of timeless mysteries.

I recall one more fact. He had said he would give me the portions of the manuscript that had already been published, part of the novel in the making. You must, he added, read them on board the ship. And to let him know from there what I really thought of it. About the work and its language, he said, listen, in any European port sailors from all over the world, on shore for a few hours or days, gathered in bars. They came together in the evenings for fellowship. What did they talk about, and in which language? Some were Norwegians, one perhaps a Levantine Jew, a few Dutch, or maybe Spaniards or Americans or British. There was no common language, yet the talk flowed freely. A bottle in hand, laughter in the eyes, a fountain of words, somebody unfolding a tragic story, others listening with sympathy, whatever they said and understood was enough for the occasion, for the boi-

terous camaraderie of the moment! Joyce explained that the words in his books were derived from other languages, or were influenced by them. Sometimes multiple words were combined to form one, at other times one word was split into varying rhythms. Entire passages were the result of several different languages, combined from the tongues of many different nationalities and cultures. Those who went to the heart of language listened to both the mind's and the body's speech, to the whole, to the universal among all men. The same was true of writing.

As I listened to him it occurred to me that writers who hotly deny that their books embody a particular idea or theory are the ones who were most attentive to them. The constellation of languages was Joyce's very own creation. Content was embedded in the style itself. This particular technique of mingling together the waves of enraptured minds everywhere surely meant habitual self-abnegation, a forgetting of the self. Though what this practice had inspired in him mankind had declared to be supreme.

I did read on board the ship the pages Joyce gave me. I have to confess it was no easy matter, since I found virtually the whole thing incomprehensible. All attempts to grasp the meaning of the work meant either splitting headaches, or else bobbing along in a tide of black print. Every once in a great while, whispers of once-familiar thoughts now lost in the desolate wind blew past my ear. I felt a distinct pulsation in my mind. Then an ugly thought

reared its head: the fear of uncleanness, of impure admixtures. Finally, driven to despair by this stupa of speech, this calculus of words, this laboratory of language, I threw it aside. And found renewed pleasure in the small talk of my fellow passengers, Englishmen stuffed into their government uniforms. The Mediterranean's wordless blue murmur seemed to make more sense, even as I dimly registered the inaccessible splendor of the text. I should have read it. Much later, I again read those sections of Finnegans Wake. It was an exact repeat of my previous experience.

I never did respond to Joyce. To say anything to the single-minded author of such a densely-constructed narrative would have been futile.

I remember Joyce's face. A small, ironic smile hovering at the corner of his mouth, an immensely abstracted expression partly no doubt because of his extremely poor eyesight but lit with human warmth. Infinitely courteous.

And therein hangs a tale. Just before I took my leave Joyce said, 'I'll give you an old book, but first tell me clearly the meaning of your name.' Then left the room.

The book he presented me with was inscribed "To Mr. Ambrose Wheelturner." Along with the comment that in Europe this indeed was a most befitting name for me. That it was not merely a translation, but a true and proper name.

\*Amiya's full name was Amiyachandra Chakraborty.

## Poet Laureates on both sides of the Atlantic oppose war against Iraq

THE sitting U.S. poet laureate, Billy Collins, has publicly declared his opposition to war and says he finds it increasingly difficult to keep politics out of his official job as literary advocate, reports the Associated Press. While at least three of Collins' predecessors also have stated their opposition to war, an incumbent laureate usually sticks to art for art's sake. Collins, whose books include "Questions About Angels" and "Nine Horses," is a mostly introspective poet who doesn't have a history of political activism. But he defended anti-war poets who last week caused the White House to postpone a symposium sponsored by First Lady Laura Bush.

"If political protest is urgent, I don't think it needs to wait for an appropriate scene and setting and should be as disruptive as it wants to be," Collins said. "I have tried to keep the West Wing (the location of the president's office) and the East Wing (where Laura Bush's office is) of the White House as separate as possible...but as this country is being pushed into a violent confrontation, I find it increasingly difficult to maintain that separation."

Collins, Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, former U.S. poet laureate Richard Wilbur and about 40 other writers and artists signed an anti-war petition last month.

In England, meanwhile, poet laureate Andrew Motion, appointed by the Queen in 1999, went one step further than his American counterpart when last month he wrote an anti-war poem that cited "elections, money, empire, oil" as the motivation for the planned Anglo-American aggression in Iraq. In a rare step for a poet laureate, Andrew Motion spoke out in his 30-word poem against the momentum towards a US-led invasion of Iraq using British forces who would be serving nominally under the Queen. Motion unequivocally sides with those who are "doubtful" about a war -- and against the political leaderships of Britain and America.

The poem is called *Causa Belli*, a Latin phrase meaning "causes, motives or pretexts of war". It is based on an antithesis between "They... the leaders," and "Our straighter talk...", the latter the doubters in conversations among the public. In the poem, the doubters' voices are "drowned" by the leaders. But the doubters' arguments are also described as "ironclad" because, Motion said in an interview published at the time, "they will endure."

### CAUSABELLI

By Andrew Motion

They read good books, and quote, but never learn a language other than the scream of rocket-burn. Our straighter talk is drowned but ironclad: elections, money, empire, oil and Dad.



And below is a poem from '100 Poets Against the War.3', the latest edition of the online anthology of poems started by Montreal poet Todd Swift against the invasion of Iraq.

### BUBBLE GIRL SONG

By Wednesday Kennedy

I shop with my white girl immunity and I am safe till I get on that plane  
I want to stuff myself and go back to sleep  
branded right down from my head to my feet  
yeah it's fat and obscene my American dream  
but you're only jealous cause you want the same  
tell me...  
Who's gonna die for my SUV  
come on  
who's gonna die for my SUV  
and i'm thinking i might get a facelift  
because that might make the world seem more fresh  
because it's not been the same since the day the world changed  
and the war cry keeps beating its tired old refrain  
I mean how can i shop in this negative frame,  
who knows what'll be the fashion next week?  
Tell me  
who's gonna die for my SUV  
come on  
who's gonna die for my SUV  
and it's just not the same it used to be  
the mcmuffins just aren't quite as sweet  
and the tips have dried up and the time's nearly up  
on the joker who's taking the heat  
and i want another mcsunrise and another mcsweet  
a mc\*\*\*\*, a mcstock, a car built like a truck  
a gas-guzzling tip-roaring empire's last wank  
Come on...  
who's gonna die for my SUV  
tell me  
who's gonna die for my SUV?

## TAXES ON BOOKS Part III: the madman in the attic

How does a government eradicate literacy?

How does it eat its own slogans?

How does it extinguish a necessary flame?

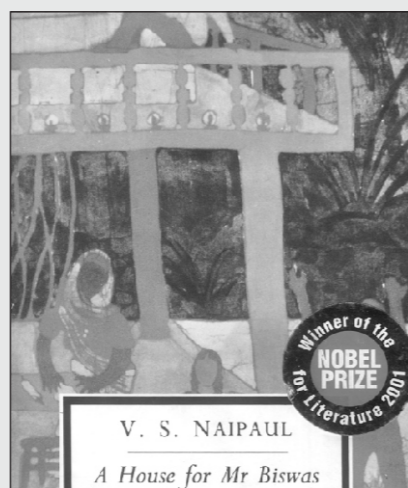
How does it obliterate taste and standards?

How does it bring about the extinction of an already endangered species, the well-read citizen?

How does it ensure that we remain backward, unable to speak to the world outside except in nativist and xenophobic terms, unable to frame our public discourses except in the narrowest of terms, that we think about substance and not about principles, be the madman in the attic banging

his head against the walls and ranting in an unknown tongue, with a diminishing ability to understand others or to make ourselves understood to others?

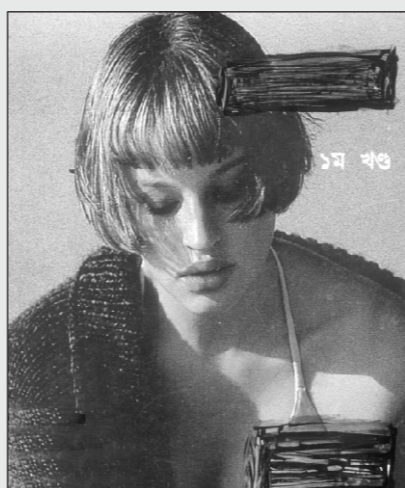
By actively aiding us to become readers of junk, by imposing a 21 1/2 percent tax on imported books, by choking them off at the source, by penalizing the good matter and leaving the trash to go scot free. By instituting an economic policy that chooses garbage over literature, by drowning us, as we have said on this page before, 'in the sensational, mind-numbing, low-rent, cheap nonsense that is floating by the ton in Bangladesh, about which the government and its nomenclature seem unconcerned. We are free, quite free, perfectly free, in fact, to buy as much (of it) as we want, and read as much as we possibly can stomach.'



A classic that critic James Woods called one of the best English language novels of the twentieth century. A sprawling, comic work of art.

Taxed to the hilt.

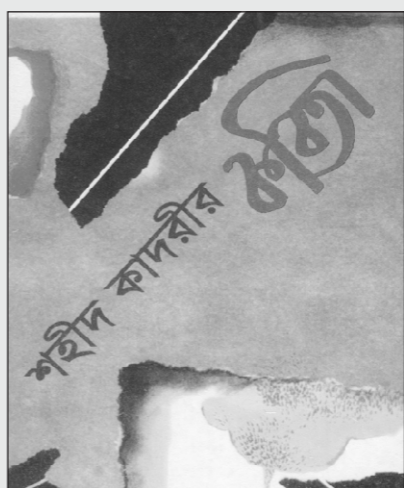
Price before last July's budget: Taka 220-240  
Price after last July budget: Taka 300-340



Soft core porn book, Bangla

No change in tax.

Price before last July's budget: Taka 20.00  
Price after last July's budget: Same



Poetry book, Bangla

The only books left to read are the locally produced ones. While many are excellent, clearly, they alone can be enough.

No change in tax.

Price before last July's budget: Taka 100.00  
Price after last July's budget: Same.