

# A Voice in the Dark: Asia's Women Writers

ASIAN women are increasingly able to read about their lives and struggles in books written and published by other Asian women.

Until the 1980s, most writing about Asian women were either by non-Asian writers or by Asians settled in the West and published outside Asia.

All that has changed, as seen from works featured at the Fifth International Feminist Book Fair held recently in Amsterdam.

Ninotchka Rosca, whose best-selling book "State of War" revolves around the bonding between two women, traces the upsurge in Filipino writing for an about women, to the 1984 founding of Gabriela, a nationwide women's rights organisation in the Philippines.

"There was the impact of a very strong women's movement. But writing is not new to Asian women," he novel tradition is Asia was begun by women: there was Japan's Lady Murasaki who wrote 'Genji Monogatari' while the Chinese 'Dream of the Red Chamber' was written by a woman," she points out.

The problem in modern times has been to overcome the prejudices of colonial rulers, anti-democratic regimes and the male literary

establishment, says Ms Rosca. Living in a vastly diverse continent, modern Asian women writers have experienced varied problems in their struggle to establish their voices.

Powhiri Rika-Heke, a Maori writer, has had to confront colonialist and racist attitudes. Maori women were portrayed in either of two ways: denigrated as dissolute or presented as the 'noble savage'. Both were equally patronising. Our real voices were silenced.

Over the past 15 years, Maori women — who are the more prolific writers of their community — have been challenging this falsity.

Recently mainstream publishers, as well as Maori men and elders, have become "very supportive," she says. There is recognition that as *Tangata Whenua* (People of the Land), we have a story to tell. There is a strong anti-racist movement in New Zealand.

The only problem is when she is labelled feminist. "Then I am perceived by my people as letting go of my culture. We women are not equal. We don't want to be equal with men; we have complementary roles."

To Ms Rosca, who wrote "State of War" as an expatriate, gender is definitely an obstacle to women writers' success in the Philippines. "Official

Cassandra Balchin writes from Amsterdam

The full diversity of Asian women's experience remains unvoiced due to their lack of access to the writing and publishing industry

recognition of women's contribution to the arts lags some 20 years behind reality. They will give the National Artist Award to every dead and dying male author before they even consider giving it to a woman.

Whatever the obstacles they encounter, Asian women writers tend to focus on the same topics, revealing an inner world and a set of concerns that are entirely new to the European-dominated and male-oriented writing and publishing scenes.

Moreover, women from Asian countries with very varied levels of development have found they share many problems. "Japanese women seem to have been excluded from the benefits of development just as much as we have," noted Bangladesh's Fahmda Begum Shilpi after meeting Japanese women writers at the Book Fair.

The image of Asian women that emerges out of their writings is one of dynamism, creativity and innovation in the face of tremendous obstacles. Whether academic or fiction,

Asian women's writings are also highly political.

Ms Rika-Heke comments about the political nature of first works by young Maori women writers. "Writing is a legal way to hit back. There is a lot of anger towards an imposed system. Writing is better than hitting somebody on the nose."

But the full diversity of Asian women's experience remains unvoiced due to their lack of access to the writing and publishing industry.

To bring out such experience, some women writers have collated life histories and interviews with women otherwise absent from academic and fiction writings.

Examples include Delia Agular's "Filipino Housewives Speak" and Nighat Said Khan's "Voices within — dialogues with women on Islam" from Pakistan. In Bangladesh, efforts are being made to collect and publish rhymes traditionally sung by women which reveal a strong knowledge of the environment.

But few Asian women writers have emerged from rural backgrounds to tell their stories themselves.

The major problem is of language. While Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa feels the experience of writing in a language that is not her mother tongue is "enriching," she agrees that English is part of the colonial legacy and therefore elitist.

Established women writers are reluctant to assume the authority to speak on behalf of women with different experiences. "The problem is to find a system for her to speak out and be understood and yet keep her identity," comments Ms Rosca.

The beginnings of just such a system have emerged with the establishment of women's publishing houses and feminist bookstores in a number of Asian countries.

Fahmda Begum Shilpi of the Narigrantha Prabartana feminist bookstore in Dhaka comments: "We were amazed at how much had already been written by women. But not all of it is feminist; very little can be used by the movement."

It is ultimately the state of the women's movement and the struggle for democracy in each country which will determine the future prospects for Asian women writers.

There are indications that we are going back to a very strong role for women in society, in a positive sense restoring women's concerns to the centre of society, thereby solving many problems: the environment, the survival of the species," observes Ms Rosca.

But she is "very worried about the lack of young women writers."

"Before we really had to fight for our rights; the divisions were very black and white." Now "money from Western funding agencies is diluting the impact of women's writing. It is divisive in terms of our developing a cohesive feminist analysis," she says.

In stark contrast, Ms Rika-Heke is decidedly optimistic. "We are not so easily seduced. We are so used to having nothing that money is not the issue. We do offer support to the many emerging young writers and they are not doing (romance novels) but hard-hitting stuff."

Ms Rika-Heke highlights one of the main forces leading Asian women into breaking traditional monopolies over the writing and publishing industry. "We write so our children and our children's children can read something positive about themselves."

— Depthnews Asia

# Bertolt Brecht's 'Life of Galileo'

by Mamun Haq

AS already mentioned in an article on 'Drama in Bangladesh' — Part I by Sabah Moyeen (Daily Star, September 12, 1992), Brecht is considered as the most favourite foreign writer to us in Bangladesh. Keeping this in mind I have decided to deliver some information on 'Life of Galileo' of Bertolt Brecht.

The Galileo legend has been transferred from generation to generation in the last few hundred years. This legend has been a source of inspiration for poets, thinkers and revolutionary figures. Galileo is considered as the pioneer of scientific thinking. His struggle was against ignorance and oppression. Even Brecht had to take up this figure in order to give expression to his anxiety and fear of ruination of humanity.

Galileo was originally from Florence in Italy and lived between 1564 and 1642. He was a Professor of Mathematics and taught the theories of Copernicus. In addition to that, he went deeper into details on astronomical observations. But unfortunately, he became a victim of the Court of Inquisition. In those days, the behaviour of the Catholic Church was extremely cruel. Often terror created by the Catholic Church is compared to that of the Nazis within the concentration camps. Galileo was forced to withdraw what he said earlier. Later he was under house-arrest till his death.

With the advancement of science and technology, the social behaviour of a scientist became a vital issue for discussion. Brecht took up this theme in the 20th century masterpiece 'Life of Galileo'. Without social ethics, scientific advancement could not be welcome by the masses. Brecht had decided to take the role of an unusual dramatist. He used his theatre to voice his concern over the consequences of scientific progress. Humanity should be able to move towards peace and not destruction. That is why Brecht reminds us of an individual and his or her social responsibility. Before discussing the play 'Life of Galileo', I would like to discuss the events of his contemporary world. In those days, Germans were organising resistance against the dictatorship of Hitler. Brecht felt it necessary to contribute something in this direction. For him drama was the best weapon.

Many other writers like Thomas Mann and Anna Seghers also wrote against Hitler. After the writing of the first version of his play, the atom-bomb fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Later, he wrote second version of his play. Now the question comes up often why the hero of his play is Galileo and not Albert Einstein? Maybe Brecht thought that a historical figure could be more effective in order to mould public opinion.

especially in those days. But later in the 60s, there was another play with a similar theme named 'Die Physiker' of Durrenmatt. This play had the two characters Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. I wish to take up this comedy some time later.

I now wish to go into a short discussion on the two versions of this play. The first version was written while he was in exile. He wrote the first version in 1938, during his stay in Denmark. Brecht used his creative power in order to show similarity between history and his own contemporary society. The drama of Brecht provides patterns of behaviour for a new age. Actually Brecht encouraged his audience to organise sabotage against authority and power. Brecht could successfully maintain some distance by using the figure Galileo.

His second version of 'Life of Galileo' was written in USA between 1945-47. While he was altering the manuscript of his play in 1945, the atom-bomb fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So naturally the opposition movement against Hitler's dictatorship was no longer of importance. Problems arose in other areas as well. Brecht connected the fate of Galileo with the act of betrayal of modern nuclear physics towards mankind. He held the Germans responsible for the use of uranium as atomic power and thus allowing human destruction to become more easy and effective. Brecht worked with Charles Laughton together on the second version of his drama 'Life of Galileo'. Later Charles Laughton became Galileo in his play. It was the intention of Brecht to deliver a true picture of the problems of that age. Another piece of drama appeared in 1964 named 'In der Sache J R Oppenheimer' written by Heiner Kipphardt. The theme is the same as that of Brecht. This play reminds us of the responsibility of researchers towards mankind. It was always the attempt to free humanity from the danger of total destruction by the deadly power of nuclear physics.

Bertolt Brecht struggled against the misuse of the fruits of science. His drama was his weapon in this struggle. He has warned us against the danger of a Third-World-War. His warning is an appeal to the reasoning and understanding capacity of mankind. Hope, my article will enable the audience in Bangladesh to understand Brecht's 'Life of Galileo' better. We are waiting to watch another stage-performance soon. It has always been difficult to procure a ticket for this particular play in Dhaka.

The writer is German teacher, Institute of Modern Languages, University of Dhaka

# The Media — yet to be Free

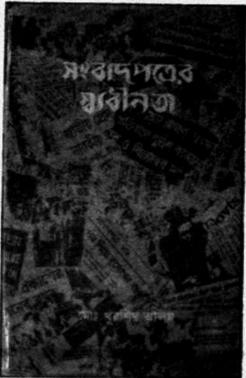
## BOOK REVIEW

Shangbadpater Shadhinata (Freedom of Press)

by Md Khurshid Alam

Publisher: Subarna, 150 Dhaka Stadium  
Cover design: Moin Ahmed  
Price: Tk. 80.00

Reviewed by Saiful Islam



THE book "Shangbadpater Shadhinata" is perhaps the first of its kind in the country in which the author, Md Khurshid Alam, has tried to show how the freedom of press and the security of the journalists are still being suppressed.

In fact people of this country have long been calling for a complete free press including the autonomy of state-run Radio and Television.

Freedom of expression and opinion including the right to seek, receive and impart information are the fundamental human rights. No body or government can ignore these rights in any circumstance. The shelved Bangladesh Press Commission Report also said, "Freedom of the press which is at the heart of all liberties and essential for the democratic process, should be guaranteed in practice while ensuring that the freedom is exercised with responsibility." But in practice, our experience is not so pleasant. In June last, over one hundred journalists were injured, thirty of them seriously in firing, teargas shelling, and baton charge by police in and around the National Press Club. After independence, this was the sever most attack on jour-

nalists. Police besieged the Press Club building for nearly one-and-half hour obstructing the shifting of seriously injured journalists to hospital.

During the past 19 months of the present administration, political forces showing up as pro-government made a series of attack on journalists and newspapers houses. The journalists were also reminded of the Penal Code provisions by the Information Minister himself. So one just cannot say that the press of this country has been enjoying a hundred percent freedom as the government often claims. The writer, in his book, categorically pointing out the mischiefs against the press, stresses that although the black law provisions in the Special Powers Act were repealed, the freedom of press is yet to be restored fully. There is still a lot more to be done to consolidate it, but the government has so far taken no step in this regard.

The government is also trying to introduce a new law by which the concerned authority can cancel the accreditation card of the journalists. Certainly this provision will create a great deal of obstruction in the free flow of infor-

mation. Moreover, as alleged, the present government uses advertisements as a tool for punishing the newspaper which is not loyal to it. As the author has set forth those allegations in his book, he also used some rare photographs to depict how vulnerable the journalists are in their profession.

Like the past autocratic regime, the present elected government is also evidently using the state-run Radio and Television to more serve their own purpose than the public interest. From the beginning, the broadcasting media in this country have been regulated absolutely by the government.

The author has tried to show how the Radio and Television are playing in favour of the government in absence of autonomy. The trust owned newspapers are still in government hands. So, as one sees, the freedom of press as well as the freedom of broadcasting media are still vulnerable. And that is the main focus of the book "Shangbadpater Shadhinata," an appreciable laborious work by Md Khurshid Alam.

# General History of Africa

International Scientific Committee for the drafting of a General History of Africa  
Vol. V: Africa from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century Editor: BA Ogot

This volume covers a decisive period in the history of Africa, when two major themes emerge: first, the continuing internal evolution of the states and cultures of Africa; second, the increasing involvement of

Africa in external trade, with major but less unforeseen consequences for the whole world. In North Africa, we see the Ottomans conquer Egypt and establish regencies in Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers. South of the

Sahara, some of the larger and older states collapse (Songhay, Western Sudan, Christian Ethiopia), while new power bases emerge (Asante, Dahomey, Sakalava). Highly centralized political and administrative structures develop, with distinct social classes and, often, a strongly feudal character. Traditional religion continues to coexist with both Christianity (suffering setbacks) and Islam (in the ascendancy). Along the coast of West Africa, Europeans establish a trading network.



Woman: Nepal

Woman: Bhutan

Photo: ANWAR HOSSAIN

# A Culture-in-Exile Keeps Alive

A new exhibition celebrates 1,000 years of Tibetan identity, and highlights its latent nationhood. Lucy Johnson of IPS reports from London.



ON the door of the Sacred Art of Tibet exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts stands the squat, gold figure of Vajrapani, his face contorted into a ferocious snarl beneath his jewel-studded crown.

To Tibetans, the legendary figure of Vajrapani symbolises the indestructibility of their Mahayana form of Buddhism. To crowds of Londoners wandering through the museum, he is a reminder of the tenacity of the Tibetan people who despite 40 years of Chinese occupation, have retained their faith and culture.

Tibetans feel his triumph owes little to the British and other governments which, they say, have consistently turned a blind eye on the Chinese presence in their homeland.

The British government has always covered over what's happened in Tibet," says Tenzin Jampa, a 28-year-old exiled Tibetan monk from Namgyal Monastic University in the northern Indian hill town of Dharamasala, where most Tibetan exiles have settled.

"We want this exhibition to show people that Tibet is not the same as China, that it is a different country with its own special traditions."

It is this cultural distinction that China has tried to blur for the last 40 years to reinforce its claim to Tibet. The sacred art to Tibet, say Tibetologists, breaks new ground in that it celebrates Tibet's distinct national identity.

The exhibition, which spans a thousand years of Tibetan history, was originally devised by the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and will run in London until Dec 14. The Royal Academy has re-

presented its normally austere classical interior in the sumptuous reds and greens to Tibet's monasteries to house the 160 sacred brass, silver and bronze sculptures and Tibetan 'tangkas' — richly decorated religious designs, painted on cloths that can be rolled up an carried around.

Even to the uninitiated observer, the religious spirit of this infinitely complex art is clear. What is also clear is the extraordinary faith and sophistication of a culture, that as early as the 10th century, dedicated itself to the teaching of wisdom and compassion.

"It's really just a beautiful art exhibition but by having it at the Royal Academy I hope it will help to save a culture," says Annette Bradshaw, the academy's exhibition coordinator. She denies that the British Foreign Office — sensitive about Sino-British relations in the context of Hong Kong — had tried to prevent the exhibition.

Indeed, while the political references are kept politely muted, Tibetan observers say academy officials have flown in the face of government policy.

"This exhibition was a political decision," says Robert Barnett of the Tibet Information Network. "The labels in the exhibition do not say China, they say Tibet, and this is the kind of thing that really upsets the Chinese."

A short film about Tibet being shown at the exhibition also talks of the invasion of Tibet by Chinese forces in 1950. Since then, thousands of Tibetans (exiles say millions) were killed in summary executions, detention or famine.

The Tibetan government-in-exile says that of the 6,000 Buddhist monasteries in Tibet only 13 remained in 1979.

Today, the few that are left are little more than tourist attractions. Worship is controlled and Buddhism is not taught in schools.

For Tibetan exiles, more insidious is the shift in population patterns in Tibet. They say Beijing is deliberately moving Han Chinese to Tibet, attracting them with generous financial incentives and overwhelming the native Tibetan population.

But Beijing does not publish figures of migrations, and these allegations cannot be independently verified.

Since 1950, 120,000 people have fled Tibet. Most of the refugees have moved to India where Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, continues to be a focus of the country's religion and culture and appeals frequently for international support.

But governments around the world have done little. The international community that kept largely silent during the Chinese Army's march into Tibet is still muted.

The Chinese government announced this month it would encourage foreign investors and tourists to travel to Tibet, in the hope that an economic boom will dampen nationalist aspirations.

Recent Western criticism of human rights abuses in China have focused on the killings in Tiananmen Square in 1989. And although abuses in Tibet are mentioned, they have not pushed for Tibet's right to self-determination for fear of offending Beijing.

"China has a potential market of a billion people," says Barnett. "And foreign investment in China has gone up and up. This must be major motive for governments." Britain also has the fate of Hong Kong in mind.

# Aboriginals Ask

Continued from page 10

nocent Aboriginal, David Gundy, to death. That year, Lloyd Boney, a 28-year-Aboriginal, was also found hanged in a police cell in the northern NSW town of Brewarrina.

No sooner had the furore over Cop It Sweet died down than ABC news produced an amateur video filmed at a private party involving police in a south Queensland town at the time the Black deaths in custody Commission hearings were underway.

At least one officer involved in the Boney arrest was at the function. Two local police offi-

cers, drinking beer, had their faces blacked out and wore wigs with white nooses hanging round their necks.

When the camera turned to them, one lifted the rope, poked out his tongue out and said "I'm Lloyd Boney." The other did the same, adding he was "David Gundy."

A wave of revulsion ran through Australia for days and Prime Minister Paul Keating called a press conference to say the sickening police behaviour brought shame on themselves and their country.

Previous reports suggesting police actually systematically tortured young Aboriginals had been dismissed as exaggera-

tion. Now there was clear evidence that some police, as well as being openly racist, they were arrogant enough to put their prejudice on public display.

The embarrassed political and administrative bosses of police forces around the nation immediately cracked down, saying they would weed out all racists. Keating announced a \$150 million package of new reform.

He argued Australians could not be at ease with their own identity and place in the world if they could not, once and for all, resolve the Aboriginal question. He urged his countrymen to use the moment as the start of a new era of reconciliation between black and white.

— GEMINI NEWS

# Love

Tarikul Alam

In you I live,  
I believe  
In you I do exist  
You entered and death did exit  
From my life  
You made me suffer, struggle, smile, sing and strive.

Exiles we all  
You, me, everybody under unkind sky's fall.  
Why quarrel then?  
In futility, in vain.

Again and again  
We're in strain.  
Let us refrain  
From calling name  
My life, my flame,  
In you I live — in failure-in fame.

Love, lustre, longing  
Life, labour, belonging  
Enticing, erotic embrace,  
Oh my singing Empress —  
All in you.  
My morning sapphire dew —  
You, you only you.

My hope, happiness,  
During defiance  
All springs from thee  
Believe me, I'm you and you're me.

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# Smarty Brilliant

Gazi Sadeq

When you believe  
only half of  
what you hear,  
You are smart,

When you know  
which half  
is to believe —  
You are brilliant!