

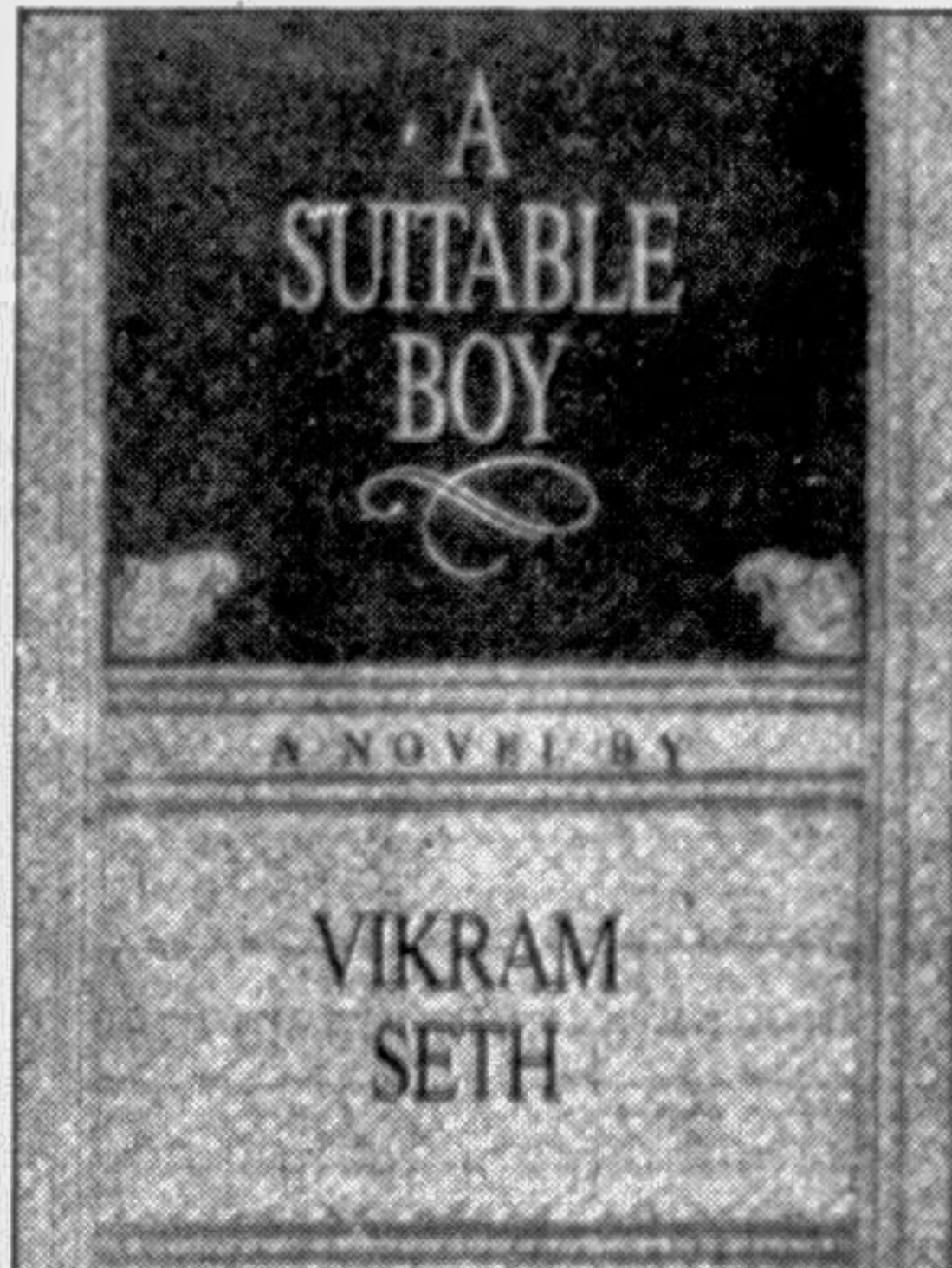
An Evocative Depiction of Indian Society

Book Review of 'A Suitable Boy'

by Rehman Sobhan



Vikram Seth



I have just finished reading Vikram Seth's epic novel *A Suitable Boy* which covers some 1500 pages. It is perhaps the longest novel I have read since I went through *Gone with the Wind* at the age of 16. The fact that I could get through 1500 pages in the electronic era, where reading any book is something of an achievement, suggests that Vikram Seth commands the skills to capture the attention of at least some readers. Seth, I suspect, may be less than satisfied with such faint praise. He is currently being lionised by the literary media as having written a novel comparable in its size and scope to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. It is reported that Seth received an advance of a million dollars for *A Suitable Boy*. This is a remarkable fee for a relatively unknown novelist who has written 1500 pages about India set in 1952, a setting hardly familiar to the English language readers expected to buy enough copies of a book priced at £20 to make the publishing venture viable. The British Raj in the Indian sub-continent is back in fashion helped by such films as *Gandhi* and *A Passage to India* and the enormously watchable TV series *Raj Quartet* based on Paul Scott's brilliant epic novel but this is still hardly the making for a global bestseller.

There is a growing literature by the natives of the former British colonial raj writing in the adopted mother tongue of English. Such creative outpourings originated in the works of a generation of writers born under the raj such as Caribbean novelist VS Naipaul, the Barbadian poet Dennis Walcott who won the Nobel Prize for literature two years ago, Prawan Jhabwalla and R K Narayan from India and Zulfikar Ghose from Pakistan. Now a new generation of post-colonial writers dubbed by Salman Rushdie as *Midnight's Children* — those born in the post-colonial era — are coming of age. The award of the prestigious Booker Prize to such writers as Rushdie for *Midnight's Children*, has focused attention on the works of similarly gifted South Asians writing in English such as Anita Desai, Shashi Tharoor, (The Great Indian Novel), Pamaryun Chatterjee (English August), Sara Suleri (Meatless Days) and now Vikram Seth who had acquired literary acclaim with his epic novel set in verse, *The Golden Gate*, termed by Gore Vidal as the definitive novel on San Francisco. This new generation of writers is now acquiring enough of a critical mass to qualify as a literary typology around which graduate students of English literature can write Ph. D theses. This is something of an achievement and a recognition of the skills of those who were not English by race but have acquired a facility with the language which derives as much from their Anglo-Indian upbringing as from their own talents. Vikram Seth's current acclaim must thus be set in the context of this new found recognition of the South Asian writers in English who have, of course, benefitted not a little from the public controversy generated by one of the most precocious of this group, Salman Rushdie.

It is, therefore, important to distance oneself from the media hype surrounding Seth's novel and to discuss it on its own merits. Here one must immediately declare an interest. The setting of the novel in time and in a locale, covering Calcutta and a fictional provincial capital, Brahampore, resembling an Indian metropolitan centre probably in UP or Bihar, is entirely familiar to me. The historical, political, social and cultural nuances of the novel are thus for me enormously evocative. I, however, find it difficult to understand how the novel would strike an equivalent resonance in the United States or even someone of my son's generation for whom India of

the 1950's is just social history. This is not to say that Tolstoy writing in Russian about Russia at the time of the Napoleonic Wars or Pasternak about the Russian revolution or the outstanding Latin Americans writing in Spanish, such as the Argentinian Gabriel Marquez or the Peruvian politician-novelist, Llosa, the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes or more recently, the Chilean, Isabelle Allende, cannot move audiences outside Hispanic America with the incandescent brilliance of their writing, read even in translation. However, such writers have had to demonstrate outstanding skills as creative novelists who can tell a good story, capture the grandeur of historical events and weld these together with considerable linguistic skill into a literary work which leaves a lasting impact on readers unfamiliar with the context of such works.

My own impression is that, however readable *A Suitable Boy* is for me, it does not tell a sufficiently captivating story nor

novel. The story of *A Suitable Boy* is really built around four families, the Kapoors, the Mehras, the Chatterjees, all bound together by marriage and the family of the Muslim Nawab of Baitar, a close friend of the Kapoors. Running through the novel is the agonising search of the widow, Rupa Mehra for a suitable boy for her daughter Lata Mehra, a student at Brahampore University. The novel begins with the marriage of Savita Mehra, Lata's older sister to Pran Kapoor, a teacher of English literature at Brahampore University and ends with the marriage of Lata. To reveal the boy found suitable for Lata would be to take away the only element of suspense running through the novel.

Built around this search by Rupa Mehra for a suitable boy is a quite evocative depiction of Indian political history and society seen from Calcutta and Bihar or UP in 1952. The story touches on the state of Indian politics arising out of the pas-

sioned by the UP leader, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, one of Nehru's closest associates in the movement for Indian independence, who had in 1952 actually resigned from the central cabinet headed by Nehru.

The other historical theme most effectively captured by Seth was the communal tension between the Muslims and Hindu's which lingered on even after the partition of India in 1947 in the Hindi speaking part of India and how this impacted on the family of the Kapoors and that of their Muslim friends both at the level of the fathers and the sons. The communal tension in Brahampore provides an element of suspense in the search for the suitable boy since Lata falls in love with a Muslim boy, Kabir Durrani, an attractive and out-going classmate of Lata's at the university who is the son of Prof. Durrani, a university mathematics teacher of some distinction. Another dimension of the communal scene is captured in the infatuation of Maan Kapoor, the

and its rural hinterland.

This use of individuals to represent social categories does not always lend itself to the formulation of well-developed characters in this novel. About the best developed of the characters is the mother in search of her suitable boy, Rupa Mehra, who appears to be both poignant and ridiculous as every mother in South Asia trying to do her duty as a widow by getting her daughters respectably married, must appear to these more fortunately situated. The other well-etched character is Maan Kapoor who captures the vacuity in the life of a younger son living in the shadow of a famous father and a promising brother. His relationship with Sayeeda is one of the better done sketches in the book. Surprisingly, Lata the heroine, emerges as a rather flat character, a pallid contrast to her lively feminist friend at the university. It is surely important to develop a central character who can rouse positive emotions either way. The rest of the characters are little more than two dimensional stereotypes of particular social types: the old Muslim nawab and his family, the 'modern' Calcutta Brahmo family of Justice Chatterjee into which Arun Mehra is married, the upwardly-mobile technocrat with not quite the right social graces working for a foreign company, rather unsubtly modelled on Bata's who is an aspirant for Lata's hand, the angry young Muslim private tutor with radical leanings who spans the world of the village and of lower middle class life in Brahampore, even the crooked but servile factotum of the nawab. None of these characters stay in the mind though they appear familiar to all who have knowledge of that world.

This weakness in characterisation is, however, amply compensated by the skills with which Seth captures the different social milieus which are woven together in the tapestry of this novel. The world of Firpos and the Saturday visit to the races, in Calcutta, the hierarchical world of the factory town of Prahapur/Batanagar, the old city of Brahampore with its intersect of Muslim and Hindu life, the socio-economics of small enterprise, the decaying world of Muslim feudalism and the nuances of village life provide ample evidence of Seth's skills, which contribute so much to the book's readability at least to my generation or even to a social historian.

The book itself does not really progress to a climax. The wedding of Lata is itself rather anti-climatic. If there was any climax as in the communal riot, the 1952 elections or a critical court case, these do not merge comfortably into the central theme of the novel, the search for a suitable boy, which I regard as one of the weaknesses of the book. This view, of course, may owe to my own rather stereotyped notions of what constitutes a successful 'blockbuster' novel, so other readers may well lay the book down with the same sense of repleteness felt when we put down *War and Peace* or *Gone with the Wind*. However, I certainly enjoyed myself over the week that I took to read the book and I imagine that those of my generation for whom the scenes of India in 1952 still generates powerful recollections, would share my pleasure. Prospective readers should at least reserve their copy at the British Council. To invest in the Tk 1000/- or more which this book will cost on the Dhaka market will demand a rather stronger level of literary enthusiasm from prospective readers. Whether at all it will be read by a more contemporary generation and with enthusiasm, in our part of the world or by a non-South Asian audience, will of course determine whether Vikram Seth will take his place as a suitable boy to sit in the company of his literary peers.

Extracts

"I suppose the guest-list consists entirely of those invited by Ma and Tapan and myself," said Amit, naming the three least suitable members of the family. "Verence, however," said he, rather sardonic, "Kakoli, whose name implied the sorghard that she was. You should go up to your room. That," said Meenakshi, "and settle down on the sofa with Jane Austen. We'll tell you when dinner is served. Or, better still, we'll send it up to you. That way you can avoid all your admirers. He's very peculiar," said Kakoli to Lata. "Jane Austen is the only woman in his life." "But half the bhadralok in Calcutta want him as a match for their daughters," added Meenakshi. They believe he has brains," Kakoli retorted. "Amit Chatterji, what a catch! Is a highly suitable match. Meenakshi added: "Why he has not married yet? Always playing hard to get." Kakoli continued: "Famous poet, so they say. Best! desert in every way."

Mrs Rupa Mehra, a widowed mother of four, is currently on the lookout for a husband for her younger daughter Lata. But, unknown to her, Lata has met and become friends with a fellow student at her university, Kabir Durrani — a Muslim.

Clearly, the search for *A Suitable Boy* has to be conducted with even greater urgency.

does it demonstrate the linguistic felicity associated with the writings of the more skilled Indo-English writers or even that demonstrated by Seth himself in the *Golden Gate*. The style is entirely workman-like, almost in the manner of a more readable treatise in social history or a biography. There is little poetry in this book which brings a social setting, a landscape or a character to life with a few evocative sentences. The success of the novel must thus rest on its subject matter, structure and characterisation. Here the fact that the novel does not set out to tell a story, seamless in its structure, which captures the attention of the reader through the unfolding of events reaching their culmination in some powerful event, may itself deter a reader unfamiliar with the context of the

sage of a bill to abolish the zamindari system and its impact on the feudal families of UP/Bihar. It also centres on the degeneration of the Congress Party into a party of corruption and patronage, which drove Pandit Nehru to submit his resignation from the Congress Party Working Committee and even raised the possibility of his resignation from the party. This political episode is reflected in the story of the senior Kapoor, Revenue Minister in the Provincial Government of Brahampore. Kapoor is piloting the zamindari bill in the state legislature thus creating tensions in his relations with the Nawab of Baitar. But Kapoor has also become disillusioned with the Congress to the point where he resigns from the provincial cabinet and becomes a member of a rebel Congress Party in-

younger brother of Pran, with the Muslim singer/courtesan Sayeeda Begum and its impact on the relationship between the Kapoors and the family of the Nawab of Baitar. Built around these historical themes is a quite well done evocation of Calcutta of the 1950's. Seth's perspective on Calcutta is epitomised in the family of Arun Mehra, the older brother of Savita and Lata, a quintessential *Boxwallah* working for a British merchant company, drawn on the lines of Andrew Yule or Birds, bursting with the pretensions associated with his status as a brown sahib. Arun and his social circle appear to be metaphors for the varieties of social life in post-colonial India. Similar social settings are captured by Seth through his depiction of the lives of particular characters in Brahampore

A Welcome Tribute

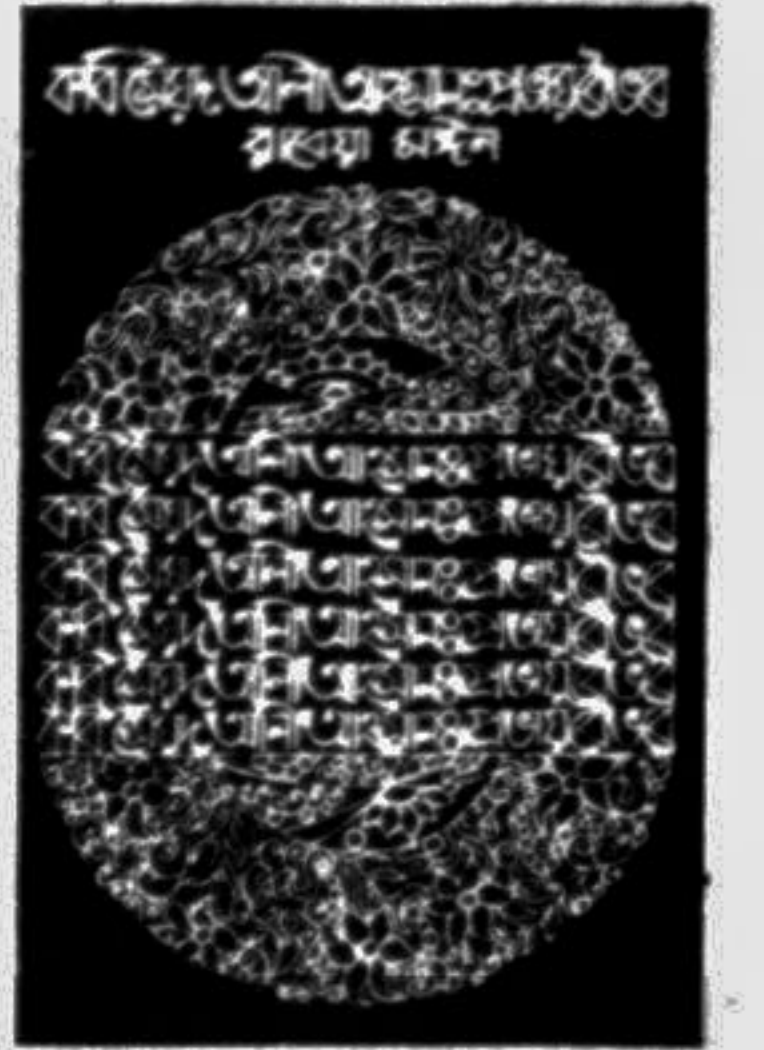
BOOK REVIEW

Kavi Syed Ali Ahsan: *Proqaya Baiwabey* (Poet Syed Ali Ahsan: in His Glory and Richness)

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RABEYA Moyeren in her recent book *Kavi Syed Ali Ahsan: Proqaya Baiwabey* has sought to critically evaluate Syed Ali Ahsan as a poet. Syed Ali Ahsan is one of our foremost literary personalities and scholars. He held many eminent positions in life. But his fame rests mainly on his outstanding contributions to literature, including poetical, prose and critical works. He is equally prominent in all these three areas. He also enjoys a reputation for being one of our few leading art-critics. He has published and is continuing to write autobiographical reminiscences which reflect wide dimensions of his experience, understanding of life, and knowledge about various things which will enrich the minds of readers. Rabeya Moyeren has, however, chosen to study one part of his literary contributions and present her findings systematically and stimulatingly.

I also find Rabeya Moyeren's book very inspiring in the sense that she has decided to write about Syed Ali Ahsan during his life time. Posthumous evaluations are possibly critically more viable because these enable critics to judge authors from a distance of time, with detachment. However, evaluations undertaken during life time, and if not deliberately and concertedly hostile or over-adoring in nature, are welcome tributes paid to authors for their contributions to the realm of literature. When they leave this world for good, they leave with this satisfaction that the time they have employed for the cultivation of literature has not been wasted.

Rabeya Moyeren's work is quite an ambitious one and consists of an enlightening introduction, three unequal chapters, facts about Syed Ali Ahsan's life, a bibliography of his works and a list of references.

In the introduction the author has sought to succinctly throw light on poetic movements in Bengali literature, with special attention to the thirties and forties of this century, mentioning the major poets and asserting that the poets of the forties have not received attention as such from either critics or literary historians and this has prompted her to undertake this study with a view to filling a gap in literary history. Her view is that most lovers of literature generally consider the thirties as a decade, pay attention to it without considering the forties as a distinct decade in itself which contributed to later developments in Bengali poetry. She has decided to analyse the characteristics of the forties as a decade, having a distinct identity, by way of evaluating the poetical productions of Syed Ali Ahsan. The poets of the forties, she has pointed out, deserve detailed critical consideration and evaluation, adding that only Farrukh Ahmed's genius and poetical productions have been evaluated by Sunil Kumar Mukhopadhyaya, and other eminent poets like Syed Ali Ahsan and Ahsan Habib have only received cursory glances in short studies although, as poets, they also have a strong claim to a high position in the pantheon of literatures. According to her, Syed Ali Ahsan

is the most prominent poet of the forties. The first chapter — *Ottijya, Jug O Jibon Prarochana* (Tradition, Age and Impetus for Life) — is the smallest of the three chapters. In this chapter, the author has enumerated the characteristics of the forties as a literary decade and has tried to ascertain Syed Ali Ahsan's position in it. She has marked him out as a poet of this decade and considered the earliest phase of his poetical career which she has described as the preparatory stage for a mature poetic style and sensibility without which the poet cannot be properly evaluated.

The second chapter — *Kavi Manash O Kavya Sadhana* (The Mind of the Poet and His Poetical Career) — is by far the largest of the three chapters and is divided into eight sections which severally throw light on the poet's modernism, his love for loneliness, his borrowings and his art of assimilating them and diverse literary influences at work in him, his alertness to words, his response to feminine beauty, his penchant for physical love, for love itself, his approach to the ocean and his poetic translations. While commenting on and analysing Ali Ahsan's modernity, the author has carefully pointed out what qualities constitute modernity and to what extent the poet's verses reflect these and, in the context of his experiments, referred to European art-movements such as impressionism, cubism, etc. In the rest of the sections as well, the author has offered a detailed analysis of the various aspects of the poet's art and predilections, quoted from significant verses and from the poet's own pronouncements made at various times in different contexts in support of her assertions. For example, while discussing loneliness, she has pointed out that like other feeling hearts, Ali Ahsan has also created a chamber of loneliness in his own heart.

In the third section the author has thrown light on the influences of such native and foreign poets as Rabindranath, Farrukh Ahmed, Whitman, Eliot, etc. on Ali Ahsan, including those whom the poet has not mentioned in his autobiographical writings and interviews, such as Jibonananda Das, Sudhin Dutta, Mohitlal Majumder, etc. While commenting on Ali Ahsan's alertness to words, Rabeya Moyeren has drawn attention to his love for words and inclination to experiment with them in his verses. The poet's response to beauty, to physical love and to love itself has been discussed in the fifth, sixth and seventh sections. As usual, the author has referred to particular poems which highlight the poet's profound infatuation for feminine beauty, his burning desire for physical love and his personal realizations about love. The eighth section is concerned with Ali Ahsan's poems about the ocean and throws light on his preoccupation with the ocean which has a profound significance for him. The ninth and last section deals with the poet's translations from Iqbal, Ivan Goll, Whitman, Meredith, German poets, Sandesh-Rasak, Chaurapanchasika, Mirgabat, Madhu Malati, Padmabati, etc., and the very considerable contribution made in this field.

The third — the second largest chapter — *Kavitar Kalaprakashal* — deals with the technique and technicalities of poetry and is divided into two sections entitled 'The Creative Inspiration for Poetry' and 'The Construction of Poetry'. The second section is again divided into six sub-sections which severally deal with words, rhythm, sentence, simile, metaphor, imagery, style, etc. The author has very skilfully considered the technical aspects of verse which do not only throw light on Ali Ahsan's mastery over these, but also demonstrate the author's own understanding of these aspects.

The sections dealing with Syed Ali Ahsan's biographical details, his works and references will be very helpful to future students, critics, researchers and lovers of the poet.

Syed Ali Ahsan emerges from this book as indeed a very accomplished poet. From the point of view of tradition and individual talent, he truly fulfills T S Eliot's definition by his conscious adherence to tradition which 'involves, in the first

place, the historical sense', which again 'involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe... and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and compels a simultaneous order'. Syed Ali Ahsan is a modern poet, but in his poetry we notice a mixture of romanticism and classicism. We find in it escapism, love for village life, animals, and also love for order and restraint. From the beginning of his poetical career love and women, memory and wakefulness, sense of existence and self-awareness, experience and philosophy found their places in his poetry. His ultimate poetic aim is to reach a state of mind unassailed by doubt.

By critically evaluating Syed Ali Ahsan as a poet in this remarkable book, Rabeya Moyeren has established herself as a considerable critic of our time. She has been meticulously analytical, historical and comparative in her assessment of Ali Ahsan as a poet and her comments and conclusions are based on a profound understanding of the poet's work and his sensibility and also of the many authors of the past and the present. By identifying the forties as a distinct literary decade and forcefully asserting it for the first time, she has not only emerged as a pioneer in the realm of literary criticism but also earmarked a respectable place for herself in the history of literature. Her vocabulary is rich, and her language equal to her thoughts. The book unmistakably displays her utmost effort to understand the mind and art of Syed Ali Ahsan as a poet and, at the same time, displays her own wide-ranging scholarship. She has traversed quite a vast range of literature in order to determine properly the poet's position vis-a-vis other contemporary poets.

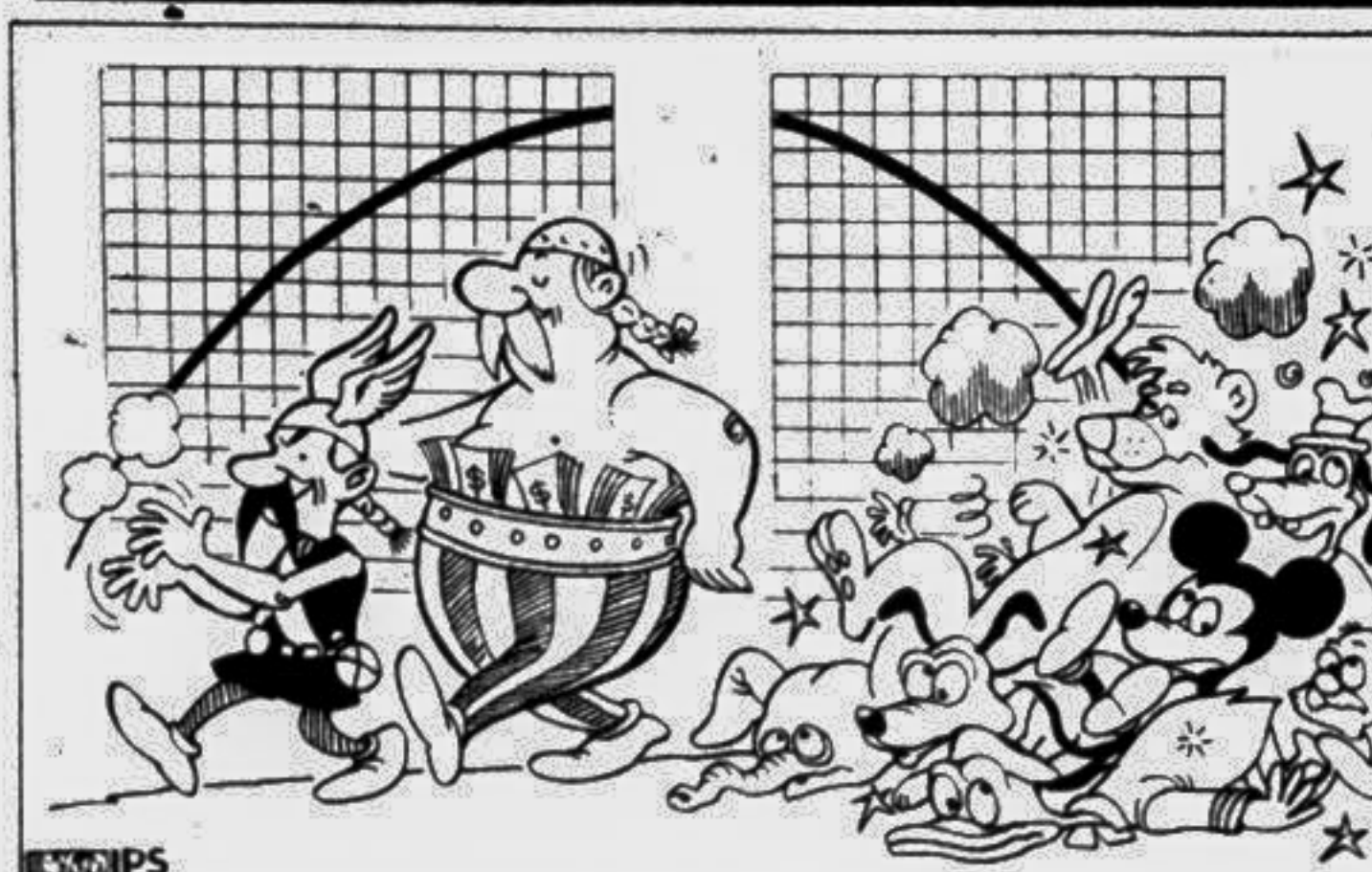
However, Rabeya Moyeren's critical terms are not wide-ranging. She does not display any awareness of the modern trends in criticism — awareness of the challenging developments in European criticism which could have added new dimensions to her approach. While writing the book she has been in close touch with the poet which has a positive side in that she received assistance in understanding his poetry, the working of his mind and in tracing and understanding the influences which were at work in shaping his poetic genius. But such an association has a negative side as well in that the critic runs the risk of being influenced by the poet in her judgement and become a 'charmed critic' rather than an objective one.

Excepting the weaknesses of his earlier works, Rabeya Moyeren does not refer to any weakness in the poet's later works and it points to her weakness as a critic since she ignores the ups and downs in the achievements of a literary artist. At times Ali Ahsan appears to be a little too self-conscious as an artist. In order to be a more properly detached critic in the western sense, Rabeya Moyeren will have to control her sense of admiration in her future critical works and has to rigorously avoid being poetical. Unlike a critic's her appeal, at times, tends to be more to the heart rather than to the head. She has been understandably ambivalent in assigning prominence to Syed Ali Ahsan and Farrukh Ahmed as poets of the forties.

Apart from these Rabeya Moyeren's language is fittingly powerful and racy and carries the readers along with it rather forcefully. And taking everything together, I have no hesitation in asserting that *Kavi Syed Ali Ahsan: Proqaya Baiwabey* is one of the very few remarkable critical works of our time and an admittedly pioneering work which has very admirably prepared the ground for a proper appreciation and evaluation of Syed Ali Ahsan as a poet. A very prominent poet in his own right, Syed Ali Ahsan is also prominent as a prose writer and a critic. Before concluding I would like to request Rabeya Moyeren to undertake the evaluation of Ali Ahsan also as a critic and prose-writer.

Asterix Trounces Mickey Mouse

The French homegrown Asterix Park holds its own against giant Euro Disney. Gigo Oyog of Inter Press Service reports from Paris.



"It is [also] the side that does not accept American culture in particular," he adds.

Since Asterix first appeared in the early 1960s, the blemished little warrior has been delighting children and adults alike in France and in other parts of the world.

The first comic book in a series called *The Adventures of Asterix* appeared in 1961 and sold 6,000 copies. By 1991, 29 titles had been created and over 250 million copies sold. Today, Asterix comic books are translated into more than 40 languages including Korean,

Greek, Hindi, Hebrew, Chinese and Basque.

Created by illustrator Rene Goscinny and writer Albert Uderzo, Asterix's storyline is set in the year 50 B.C. when Gaul was occupied by Roman invaders except for one tiny village inhabited by Asterix and other Gauls, ancestors of the French.

Thanks to a magic potion giving them super-human powers, Asterix and his friend Obelix lead the villagers in resisting the Roman occupiers.

These days, people the world over are unable to resist the charms of Asterix and find modern-day analogies to their struggle for self-determination in the face of an over-whelming occupying army.

"Every time I come to France, I come to Asterix Park," says Nabila Abdal-Aziz from Saudi Arabia. "I have gone to Euro Disney and it's all right. But everyone likes it better here. It's cheaper."

Entrance fee at Asterix Park is 150 francs for adults (some US\$17) compared to 250 francs

PERENNIAL cartoon favourite Mickey Mouse, who has made billions for the US-based Walt Disney organisation, is faring second best in his duel with a lesser-known but feisty villager from ancient Gaul.

Despite the odds, the French comic book character Asterix is managing to hold his own against Mickey Mouse and his Disney friends who have invaded French turf.

When Euro Disney, the fantasy land of Disney characters began in the United States as Disneyland and Disney World, opened at its sprawling site outside Paris in April 1992, the future appeared bleak for the 650-hectare Asterix Park.

Located near the town of Oise, 35 kilometres northeast of the French capital, the French theme park suffered an initial setback shortly after Euro Disney was inaugurated.

From 1.3 million visitors in 1991, attendance dropped to just one million, forcing management to streamline operations, retrench personnel and prepare Asterix for his biggest fight.

Now Asterix Park has sprung back — to the chagrin of the

Disney group — and the crowds are once more heading for the French cartoon character's lair.

Says Park director Nicholas Perrard: "If the trend continues, we will have 1.3 million visitors for 1993."

That's still small compared with Euro Disney's more than 10 million visitors during its first year. But the 2,000 hectare theme park also has huge debts, and it now appears in need of restructuring itself if it wants to take on its tinier French competitor.

Perrard attributes the Park's success to its strong French characteristics — and the popularity of Asterix. According to a 1992 independent survey of 1,000 people in this country, 55 per cent knew the comic book hero, while 47 per cent knew Mickey Mouse. "Asterix is popular also because it touches a familiar chord in the hearts of the French people: the side that loves the family and friends, and also the chauvinist side, the one that complains a lot and picks up an argument very easily," says Perrard.