

# Looking Back at 'World Literature' in 1994

## Some Issues and Concerns

by Azfar Hussain

It is virtually impossible to do justice to the whole range of literary events and experiences the world had presented in 1994. If one is to simply review them within a space as limited as I have here, the year 1994 came to an end, to look back now is to have glimpses into so many incidents and events which simply overwhelm one: Japanese poetry, for example, exhibited a strong desire to go back to its older forms in reaction against the spell of Eurocentric modernism; Arabic poetry had been full of protests and oppositions under the influence of Said's famous notion of 'oppositional writing'; Latin American fiction — particularly short stories — had sought such forms and images as would articulate the angst of the moment stemming from continuous conflicts between 'civilization' and its barbarism; poetry in the United States as well as poetry in Canada, Australia, Africa and India had been involved, in varying degrees, in what has come to be known as postmodernism, and then, there had been a huge surge of what is called cultural criticism from both the metropolitan centres and ex-colonial countries.

Thus, indeed, one can go on and on to survey at random literary phenomena and agenda of the year 1994; but, then, such an undertaking would result in a voluminous 1994-yearbook of literature. I must mention here that a yearbook is not what I am up to. What, in fact, I can possibly do is to identify a few trends and texts, agenda and addenda which I have found dominating and fairly easily discernible in 1994.

Again, such a task involves inordinate risks of generalization and omission; for, the narrative of the kind I wish to come up with would foreground and privilege one thing at the expense of the other. But then, this void of the narrative and possible 'absences' and 'margins' are unavoidable at the moment, and are also always vulnerable to rewriting.

The year 1994 was not an isolated temporal entity, not a detached chunk of time which can claim any position and possession absolutely its own. Thus viewed, the year 1994 was not a single year, but many years that had gone into the making and shaping of it. Many incidents taking place in 1994 had their obvious or complex roots either in the near past or in the distant one. In fact, I feel there are no such things as absolute breaks or absolute continuities in history. True, Foucault once spoke of discontinuities in history which, no doubt, demand and deserve our scrutiny and concentration. But, then, discontinuities may bear the marks and traces of something which is more or less continuing. This very dialectic is what one cannot so glibly dispense with, particularly when one is caught in the flow of time. For example, the 'modern age' is not really a break stripped of the presentness of its past. There is the 'medieval' in the 'modern', and

the 'modern' in the 'medieval'. Yes, when civilization seems to have progressed, when science and technology and philosophy have made rapid advances, when the humanity is supposed to achieve better standards of dignity, then the same world is also full of the medieval darkness exemplified in the rise of fundamentalism and communalism, class, race and gender discriminations; various forms of social and political disintegrations and diseases; murders, betrayals, threats, deaths, damages, whose history is not certainly confined to 1994, but spans a considerable stretch of time. In fact, to read 1994 is to read the year intertemporally, as to read a text is to read it intertextually.

Indeed, outright response to time had been, understandably, one of the immediate thematic concerns in the literature of 1994. It was in this year that a remarkable volume of writings had been directed against communalism and fundamentalism not only in India and Pakistan, but also in Africa, Latin America, Europe and the US. For example, writers like Garcia Marquez, Umberto Eco, Wole Soyinka, Ahmed Said, Adonis, Toni Morrison, Edward Said, and also Derrida, the deconstructionist, explicitly raised their voices against the inhuman politico-cultural and physical onslaughts of fundamentalism and communalism. Experiences of the conflict between the 'darkness' within civilisation and its glittering surface constituted dominant themes in fiction written in various parts of the world.

It is to be noted also that the year 1994 marked the height of fundamentalist and communalist onslaughts and assaults ranging from the physical to the psychological, mindlessly perpetrated and unleashed on progressive writers all over the world. For example, the simply atrocious October incidents in Algeria readily come to mind — writers, journalists, artists were humiliated and physically assaulted in the streets. And of course, Naguib Mahfouz, the noble prize winning Egyptian writer, was stabbed to near-death. There had been many such incidents in 1994; but, they were not dramatically new as they occurred in 1994, but, then, it was in this year that the fundamentalist assaults on progressive writers assumed a particular level of intensity contributing to a profound literary consciousness of the issue. Apart from the victims themselves as well as creative writers characteristically sensitively responding to experiences direct and immediate, those literary theorists and philosophers who had mostly been involved in inordinate abstractions and theorizing also tellingly exhibited their concerns with the issues of fundamentalism and communalism. Derrida, in the West, was one of the cases in point. Marxist theorists like Etienne Balibar of France,

Grossberg of the US, Stuart Hall of Jamaica/Britain, Franco Moretti of Italy, and also feminists like Catherine Mackinnon of the US, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak of India/US, among many others, raised voices and made protests against fundamentalism and communalism.

It also deserves mention that while right-wing writers attacked the issues of fundamentalism and communalism from immediate concerns, the left ones, apart from such concerns, went on to read and treat fundamentalism and communalism as complex historical issues invested with imperialist and neo-colonialist implications. The fact that fundamentalism is essentially a neo-colonial, urban phenomenon made possible in a world where capitalism has now filtered into microstructures and organisations of daily life was emphasized by writers like Marquez, and also by a host of Cuban writers. Most of the cultural critics, writing particularly in the ex-colonial countries, analysed such issues as fundamentalism and communalism as politico-cultural interchanges with imperial-

ism, neo-colonialism, and capitalism. The study of Aijaz Ahmad who is one of the finest cultural critics writing in the English language today was a strong example of fundamentalism-and-communalism studies undertaken in the 'postcolonial' world. It is to be noted also that a host of 'dissident' and 'controversial' writers — as they have been called — formed in 1994 an international union with Salman Rushdie as its Chairperson, and Derrida, Soyinka, etc. as its executive-committee members. Thus the year 1994 can be seen as the year of writers' resistance and opposition to communalism and fundamentalism.

Given the space, scale and scope of what has come to be known as cultural criticism today one can also look back at 1994 as the year of cultural criticisms whose intensity and influence far outstripped those of creative writing. True, novelists and playwrights and poets had been active throughout the year; but then, looking

back, one can hardly find in 1994 a great powerful novel, comparable, say, to Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Marquez himself was involved in writing stories, as had been the case with other Latin American writers. 'New' writers in Latin America and in the United States as well as in Africa and India had, in 1994, exhibited quite a discernible tendency to become 'postmodernists'. But, then, 'postmodernism' did not seem to have opened up potential spaces in creative writing as much as the 'postmodernism drives' were somewhat effective in philosophy, anthropology, historiography, art and architecture, film and cinema, and of course, in literary criticism. Experiments in poetry, of course, were undertaken now and then. One can readily mention African, Indian, Spanish, French and German poetry. Philippe Jacotte, the French poet, was somewhat active in breaking away with the older tradition of romantic spiritualism. Pere Gimferrer who writes both in Spanish and Catalan was also active in writing experimental poetry more than ever before. But experiments in the poetry of the US and Great Britain seem to have reached a creative dead-end of sorts.

Now, to come back to the area of cultural criticisms. Here, again, imperial centres like the US and Britain were somewhat eclipsed by the

performances one can see in the commonwealth, ex-colonial countries. Indeed, most of the cultural criticisms in 1994 came either from the 'migrant intellectuals' located in the metropolitan centres like the US or from the ex-colonial countries. Most of the issues of influential journals like *Social Text*, *Textual Practice*, *Diacritics*, *Social Scientist*, etc. remained replete throughout the year with cultural criticisms that focus on areas of human experiences affected by the global structures of politics and economy, the dynamics of media and propaganda, overt and covert changes in society and cultural practices, and so on. The postcolonial ethos of writing, through such cultural criticisms, also sharpened and intensified itself. Issues such as nation, nationalism, empire, colony, postcoloniality, were amply rethought with the consequence that a number of theoretical-critical reformulations, paradigms and positions visibly emerged, though a variety of disputes and debates over such issues are continuing and are also likely to continue in the future. Aijaz Ahmad, a cultural critic writing in India, substantially contributed to such debates in 1994, subsequent to his *In Theory* (1993), a seminal work in the area of cultural criticism for which he is best known. Edward Said, whose formulation of the concept of *orientalism* had already been critically impugned and dismantled by Aijaz Ahmad, also remained

quite active in the field of cultural criticism. His latest book called *The Politics of Dispossession* — a collection of essays gathered from 25 years of polemic on the Arab world — once again reinforced the power and influence of what is called 'cultural criticism'. However, Said's controversialist fire may have dimmed a little since he was diagnosed two years ago as having leukemia.

One of the most significant events occurring in the field of cultural and literary criticisms including literary theories in 1994 was their more intimate engagement with Marxism itself. The phase of that momentary disillusion which set in soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union seems to be over now. It is indeed interesting to observe that most of the emerging and established theories in the West, including various versions of post-structuralisms, post-modernisms and post-colonialisms, more or less tended to turn towards Marxism, recognising its power and potentials and possibilities. Even Derrida, in his most recent piece called *Spectres of Marx* published in the June-July (1994) issue of *New Left Review* which carried the title 'Deconstructing Capital', acknowledged his intellectual debt to Marx to the extent of adopting Marx as his own father. Yes, Marx is now an adopted father of Derrida who unequivocally pronounces thus: 'It will always be fault not to read, reread and discuss Marx... there will be no future without this.' Derrida's affiliation with Marx may be questioned on a number of theoretical grounds, as had already been done by Aijaz Ahmad in

his most recent piece called 'Reconciling Marx and Deconstructive Politics'; but, then, this does not rule out the phenomenon of an ever-increasing gravitation towards Marx and Marxism.

The 1994 Nobel Prize in literature, as we all know, went to Kenzaburo Oe. The 59-year-old Japanese novelist who has been profoundly influenced by his nation's humiliation during World War II. Oe was cited for a 'poetic force' that 'creates an imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today'. Best known for his novels — *The Silent Cry* (1967) and *A Personal Matter* (1961). Oe himself describes his writing as a way of 'exorcising demons' — demons which come out of the poet's subliminal Africa full of darkneses and nightmares. And the humiliation, already referred to, has taken a firm grip on him and has coloured much of his writing. Although Oe stresses that he writes for Japanese writers, his work has been strongly influenced by Western readers, including Dante, Rabelais, Balzac, Eliot and Sartre.

The event of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1994 in fact shocked writers and readers all over the world. But, then, the politics of the Nobel Prize — rather the geo-politics of it — took its own course, finding at last an Asian writer who has visibly moved away from his earlier radical Marxist position. By international standards, in a world where writers like the Chek Novelist Milan Kundera, the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, the German poet-novelist Gunter Grass are still alive and active, the Japanese novelist Kenzaburo Oe with whatever oeuvre he has hitherto produced does not appear to be a major, powerful novelist with forms and themes that are likely to influence and inspire subsequent writers either in Asia or in the West. How long would the world bear with Sartrean and Eliotese-Audensque hangovers? Needless to mention, writers from various parts of the world are now increasingly questioning the hegemony of Anglo-American and Eurocentric modernism. To demolish and dismantle the old, majestic, hegemonic centres, and to dispense with the colonial spell with the West have constituted the most active verb and verve of the counter-hegemonic struggle carried forward by writers, critics and literary theorists in the post-colonial world.

Now, a word about the future which can only realistically be seen in the light of what is being, and has been, done now. Yes, given the enormous space already appropriated by prose and criticism — by cultural criticisms and by fiction in particular, poets and playwrights all over the world have now greater creative challenges to meet and face.



Edward Said, the author of *Politics of Dispossession* (1994) and *Orientalism* (1978).

Aijaz Ahmad, the author of *In Theory* (1993), who recently visited Bangladesh.

Kenzaburo Oe, the Nobel Prize-winning Japanese Novelist.

TWO surprises hit me pleasantly in the year now past. At the beginning of the year a colleague presented me with a Bengali translation of Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*. The book reached me late for it was published the previous February. I made a quick run of the thing and tried to collect my thoughts. Although first published in 1923 the book made an indelible imprint on our generation in the early fifties. Whole gangs of our intellectuals fell for Gibran. Decades that followed were turbulent politically as well as culturally for the Bengali intelligentsia. Gibran was set aside in our minds for a number of years. Then came the Rupa edition of Gibran's complete works, illustrated by the great poet himself. I, for one, suddenly woke up to how much indeed I had Gibran living inside me all of those forgetful years.

*The Prophet* was not written in Gibran's native Arabic, a language after which a whole race of peoples was named. Such was its power and richness. And it was poeies very own language for countless centuries. Gibran was a past-master in Arabic composition as he was also steeped in Arabic learning. Why did he then choose to write *The Prophet* in a foreign language at the creativity wise ripe age of 40? The answer comes so easily when one, having the feel of the English language, recites the lines of *The Prophet* to oneself in perfect solitude. A new expressive power — new in colour and sound and association of a thousand shades and kinds — has been brought to English, perhaps from Arabic. Both Thompson and a later-day Yeates forcefully maintained that Tagore's was not an Englishman's English. That notwithstanding, Rabindranath did something to the English language, and that something, landed him the Nobel. The spell, however, did not last long and without that incantation and the original Bengali's multi-layered meaning and music, *Gitanjali* today is rather an awkward read for

## Good Poetry, Fresh and Translated

readers of modern English poetry. A decade and a half after *Gitanjali*, Gibran declaimed in a prophet's elevated manner and yet touching the innermost chords of man. This was magic anew. And evidently this second great bending of the English language to couch oriental realisations, still holds.

How does one react to William Radice's good to fair to excellent translations of Tagore? A Bengalee reader would of course miss his Rabindranath in almost all of them — and yet discover many odd and interesting bits that he or she had overlooked in the original, patently for familiarity's sake. What would an English-speaking reader get from Radice? How much? Forget it is translation and take it as original and test for yourself if it stands to any height of English literature. The result is, at the very best, uncertain. It is said that the great poet Juan Ramon Jimenez wrote some very great Spanish poems — indeed in a great number, it was relevant only for the interested and the inquisitive that many of these were translations of Tagore via Gide's French translation and the loving collaboration of English knowing poet-cum-wife Cenobia. It is sheer bad luck for both Rabindranath and us Bengalees that in no other language, a master artist of that language recreated Rabindranath. The great Czech composer Janacek did much to immortalise Tagore among his people, but musically. In Latvia very competent translations by the greatest living writers of that land have given Rabindranath a currency not enjoyed by him anywhere else. Gibran by one stroke of creative daring did away with this very uncertain way reaching non-native audience. And with what result? Is *The Prophet* wisdom couched in poetry or is it poetry posing for depth — and maybe effect — as wisdom? It may be a high form of philological poetry, maybe better than that, is that why it is in

this form of *Thus Spake Al Mustajaf of Orphalis*?

Humayun Abdul Hye's lucid translation has many plus points, a number of them indeed high ones. He keeps very close to the original — a great thing — but doesn't become pompous which was quite a real risk with such elevated and poetic prose. His simplicity of diction however doesn't prevent him from liberally using a rather sombre and heavy vocabulary.

What separates present day translators from the haloed ones of old: from Tarashankar Tarkaratna to Jyotirindranath Tagore to Rajshekhhar Basu? There may be many points of difference but one decidedly

congenial devices. Mr Hye's credit lies in his taking care to retain them in Bengali. How I wish this translation to get a wide readership.

Now for my other surprise of the year.

On my table lies a sleek book of poems. The cover by Samar Majumdar is extraordinarily interesting and attractive even by Majumdar's standards. He is after all one of the best that carry on the good work of Qayyum Choudhury. The title couched between two projections of sweep of perhaps cloud-formation but resembling more veins of precious stones adds to the anticipation: *Abhimani Megh* (The

### A Review by Waheedul Haque

major distinction relates to whether Bengali of the translation stands up to the test of accepted norms of grammar and diction. Modern translations tend to be callous on the point of linguistic excellence. I have been very favourably impressed by, to start with, the *murdhanya naw* at the end of *awpekshaman*, "and such charged sentences as *kebol matra ektibar et nibir nitor bayute aam shivas neo, kebolmatra ektibar bhalobashar distri meste pichhon phrey takabo strewn all over the text*. And didn't I notice how the translation split *kebol* and *matro* at the start of that sentence only to join them together into *kebolmatro* in the same breath only later. How this reminds me of Rabindranath playing with *Janala* and *Janla* in the same page of his poetical tales of *Lipika*.

The book comes in rather expensive offset paper and the text type is advisedly in bigger point than average body-type. The epigrammatic nature of the text has been heightened by leaving ample space between every sentence and at times even midway through one. The original English, of course, features this and other

cloud in a pique? Underneath is a name no one knows as having written a single piece of poetry — or prose Anjana Saha. The inside is as remarkable. Forty poems on as many pages. But the best part of the pages are left white. A couplet or a quartet or less frequently a sestet or heptet hangs suspended on the upper left — presumably leaving the whole space — a whole world of space indeed — for the resonance of the inscribed words to fill in. One wonders if lines like *Bhuleichhham smritir kanta/nashito dwer maufo/ack mimeshet probol taney/ushke dilo khauto* wouldn't impel the reader to muse for more than a white page — the words keep on ringing endlessly and after some times start coming back from all of the bruises of part injuries in the reader's soul. But then this white page is not material page of double-duty parameters — it is as infinite as the universe expands into.

While Gibran's wisdom comes cascading from up above, Anjana is also beautifully epigrammatic but hers is all broodings of a sufferer — one who has fallen upon the thorns of life and is bleeding. There is a lot of *haiku*-esque economy

and precision of words, but the Japanese form paints pictures while Anjana conjures up sentiments. *Rubats* are another form that exhausts one big world-sized feeling into the space of four lines. But Anjana's quartets, are not quite rubaiques either. If only she would read classical Sanskrit one could suggest borrowings from the *subhashitas* and *shloka-couplets*. But that is unlikely. The closest she rings are the pieces of *Lekhon* by Rabindranath.

And the longer poems — only three exceeding the sonnet-length and getting on to no more than 20 lines, some of the lines having maybe two words only — naturally tend to wax losing somewhat the tautness of the small ones. But the tentatively begun lines do somehow collect themselves together and end up on a note of significant poetry as so tellingly illustrated in *Samantaralorti* which could be for better named as *Tantalus*.

The loose, easy and flowing rhyme, falters here and there but never at the cost of poetry. The overall colour is sombre pierced sometimes by sharp pang — and loose go, rather go well with the words that keep sighing all through.

Modern Bengali poetry often enough sets great store on well-crafted and interesting and nevertheless superficial turns of speech. Many successful poets credited with having built their own idioms and distinctive diction, have very frequently had recourse to this. How about Anjana? A debutante, she could easily have been enmeshed in cliché. No, her language is as fresh as when she compares love with the bloodred fragrant rose rears in her bosom — *Kantar aghat bukey dhorey achhi/rauktol shugondhi golap*. Loose and unredeemed word-clusters peep out here and there but far from abounding they hide their clumsy faces well into salvaging de-

nouement. *Ratir aemon roop bohu din dekhechhi nishithay* and the lines that follow do not rise up to the level she sets for her elsewhere, perhaps everywhere. *Shaumosto shorir jurey kromagauo kaeno photay oar shaumporno auboyob* — there is no question even of an *auboyob* — body — to pierce another even if it be remorse. And why should pang have *ananya* stigmatising it?

But all such notwithstanding this has been a very happy literary event and one only hopes to get more of such volumes of select poems that tell you here is poetry from the word go.

Let me make a trio of the volumes that impressed me in the year that went out. Although first published in 1992 I came across *Sahitya Swanup* — a glossary of literary terms not unlike Abraham's — only last year. It is not a ponderous volume but its 150 pages harbour not only erudition very dependably put to use but also hard labour. Precision and reticence lend the volume quality and there is also innovation at the right places. The entry *chhobita* is a good illustration of this.

Author Badru Rahman has alphabetically arranged the entries as is the way with all lexicographic exertion on any subject. But this he has done in six compartments: poetry, plays, fiction, short story, essays and other prose and lastly but importantly general discussion on certain aspects of literature. What I liked particularly in this rather familiar arrangement are the discussions opening everyone of such sections.

Evidently this volume would capably benefit the students in the academia. But it indeed promises interesting and rewarding fare for all who haven't had their chance of knowing anything about our literature. I would have been happy to go into the book in some detail, an exercise in love's labour would it be, but the present occasion and space and finally lack of competence wouldn't allow me embark on that.

## Recapitulation

by Helal Kabir Chowdhury

It is years in the paradise with her in the hug Euphoric of the close moments with delight in mind.

She made me a happy hubby never complained for the losses that she bore. Love is lovers den. Yester years are beneath my heart, ponder and relish from what I earned.

An ear-ring for her today cannot mend the failed days. But give as a token of joy that shall remain as a harbinger of pleasing minutes.

## Welcome '95

by Ruknuddin Ahmad

The year 1994 passes by None can question why Only a couple of days were left Nobody could halt it may he be deft This is the nature's law One can never find a flaw Let us all welcome the new And bid the year 1994 adieu.

## The Besieged Society

by Faruquddin Ahmed

We wonder if there is anyone who ponders Over what's going on in this land of ours Some demand this, some ask for that and so on We never know who cares a fig for the nation.

Calls for strike, calls for meetings and catcall, By workers, transporters and ferryman all — Set a brake on work and movement and befall The dangers and risks rendering life all the gall

It's bereft of any liberty — full of worry and agony But does anyone really care for the woes that matter That which destroys the vitals of life and peace and threatens to make us all poor, and poorer?