

essay

Reading Aijaz Ahmed, Reading Edward Said

by Fakrul Alam

EEDWARD SAID OFFERS US THROUGH theory and practice one perspective on the role intellectuals can play in culture and society. Aijaz Ahmed provides in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) and *Lineages of the Present: Political Essays* (1996), another view on the part intellectuals should hold out for in contemporary life. Although not as well-known as Said, Aijaz has achieved modest fame in recent years, particularly in left circles everywhere and in the world of theory, because of his two books and his public pronouncements on writing and politics. Arguably, Ahmed's best-known piece to date is his critique of Said, "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Works of Edward Said." Published in *In Theory*, this long essay caused considerable interest as it not only critiqued aggressively Said's work and stance but also furnished an alternative vision of what the post-colonial intellectual should strive for. I would, therefore, like to focus on this essay as a critique of Said and as a source of ideas about intellectual praxis, but before I do so, perhaps it is best to give some indication of Ahmed's own strategic location in the contemporary intellectual scene and in India, which is where Ahmed now writes from.

At present, Aijaz Ahmed is a Senior Fellow at the Center of Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi, but Ahmed is a widely traveled man. Originally from UP, he migrated with his family to Pakistan, only to return to New Delhi two years after General Ziaul Haq took over power in 1977. Both in Pakistan and in India he has been active in Left Politics. He has also spent many years in the United States and has published his pieces in journals such as England's *New Left Review*.

To understand Ahmed's concerns about intellectuals and his views about politics and culture, we can turn to an

interview he gave which has been reprinted in *Lineages of the Present*. In it, he discloses his affiliation with classic Marxist-Leninist principles, his distaste for Stalinism, and his admiration for the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the English socialist writer Raymond Williams. It is clear from the interview that he holds on to the socialist ideal of an "egalitarian, multicultural, universal civilization" which he would like to see come true in India, even as he sees the dream being threatened by the religio-fascist forces in the country on the one hand and the percolating effect of global, multinational capitalism on the other. However, he sees himself as an "universalist," even as he makes a distinction between "socialist universality" and "capitalist universality." True to his Marxist roots, Ahmed sees cultural production as based in economic and political processes and is thus highly sensitive to the workings of history in individual lives. True also to his Marxism, he decries the shackling of labour and the insidious persistence of class-based structures in society. As a Marxist, he is opposed to development in theory which undervalues the importance of economic determinism and which project a kind of radicalism without paying heed to working-class politics. In fact, Ahmed is resolutely opposed to the dominant trends of "radical literary theory" in the western world, and movements such as poststructuralism and postmodernism are treated by him with disdain for their distance from the real world. Nevertheless, Ahmed is resolutely theoretical, and the title of his first book, *In Theory*, shows his involvement in theoretical developments, even as the subtitle, *Classes, Nations and Literatures* suggests his Marxist perspective on theory.

The important thing to be kept in mind, then, as we read Aijaz Ahmed reading Edward Said's presence in the contemporary theoretical scene is that he approaches him with some clearly

and rigorously thought out notions of what theory and praxis imply for intellectuals. Not surprisingly, thus, Ahmed is all praise for Said's Palestinian activist and he has no doubt that the parts of Said's work which will endure is not "Orientalism," which is a deeply flawed book, nor... the literary essays which have followed in its wake, but in his work on the Palestinian issue, for example his seminal essay "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims", the superbly inflected prose which he contributed alongside Jean Mohr's photographs in *After the Last Sky*, and generally the role he has played with unrivaled energy and much salutary effect, in redefining the issue of Palestinian national liberation for Western, especially American, intelligentsia. In other words, to Ahmed, Said's Palestinian activist in prose is exemplary, for in writing about Palestinian lives and the predicament of Palestine he is never toying with ideas but writing from a deeply committed position.

Ahmed admires, too, Said the critic of the Orientalist project, the "vivacious narrator of European humanism's complicity in the history of European colonialism," but what he disapproves of is Said's ambivalences about humanism, his admiration for the classical texts of Western Humanism, even at moments when he is tracing the way humanism is mired in the discourse of colonialism. Ahmed regrets, too, Said's propensity to live by the Nietzschean dictum that all representation is necessarily misrepresentation, a position which would invalidate all attempts made to represent reality. What is more, Ahmed finds Said's "Orientalism" fatally flawed because of the way Said, so to speak, has his cake and eats it too, by utilizing Michel Foucault's Discourse Theory which is anti-humanist and anti-realist while admiring some of the values associated with humanism. Worse, for someone as committed to methodological consistency and as prone to historicizing such

as Ahmed, Said is both ahistorical and anti-Foucauldian in mapping in his book a transhistorical Orientalist Discourse all the way from Classic Greek tragedy to present-day scholarship on the Middle-East coming out of the West. Indeed, Ahmed indicts Said of eclecticism, of indiscriminately lumping together not only Foucault and Auerbach, but intellectuals as far apart as Julien Benda and Gramsci. Inevitably, Ahmed the Marxist is piqued by Said's indifference to questions of class struggle and his failure to highlight the history of resistance to imperialism in his representation of the course and consequences of Orientalism. Above all, Ahmed is eager to take Said on because the Palestinian-American writer has dismissed Marx himself as another Orientalist, and has neglected the agency of colonial capitalism in the history of colonization while privileging Orientalist discursivity as the main engine through which Europe conquered the Orient. In fact, what becomes obvious in any reading of Ahmed's 60 page-long essay on Said in *In Theory* and its accompanying piece in the collection, "Marx on India," is that Ahmed finds distressing Orientalism and its author's eclectic radicalism and his slighting of the father of communism, especially since Said has become an exemplary figure amidst left-leaning intellectuals of the decolonized regions of. In sum, as far as Ahmed is concerned, Said is an influence best to be avoided in our parts of the world.

The charges that Aijaz Ahmed brings against Edward Said are weighty and comprehensive, but is "Orientalism" as deeply flawed a book as Ahmed thinks it is, and will it, in the long run prove to be a work of little consequence, as is implied by Ahmed? Also, are the contradictions, the ambivalences, and the other failures that the Marxist theoretician locates in Said sufficient reasons to stop us from thinking about the Palestinian American as an exemplary figure? To

put it a little differently, can Said's work survive the thorough deconstruction job Ahmed has done on it?

The first point to be made in answering the charges brought against Said is that despite what Ahmed has predicted, almost twenty years after it was published, "Orientalism" is still being routinely described as a "seminal" book, and has proved to be of enduring value to scholars belonging to diverse disciplines. About the charge of inconsistency, of using Foucauldian discourse analysis while admiring humanism, of talking about Gramsci and Benda in the same breath, it has to be admitted that Ahmed's logic is impeccable: Said is eclectic and he does mix up things, often indiscriminately. But as Said has stressed in an interview: "Orientalism is theoretically inconsistent and I designed it that way: I didn't want Foucault's method, or anybody's method, to override what I was trying to put forward. The notion of a kind of non-coercive knowledge which I came to at the end of the book was deliberately anti-Foucault." Said's is the kind of mind which picks up separate ideas from sundry sources as he needs them; he is by no means an orthodox "thinker" and is thus not bothered by what Emerson had called in another context "the hobgoblin of consistency." At any rate, the critical question to be asked is whether, despite his eclecticism and ambivalences, the power of Said's thesis — that Orientalism was a way of mastering the world, that knowledge here was in the service of power — is in any way diminished. The answer here must be that it hasn't! Certainly, "Orientalism" has a combative, polemical tone which leaves us in no doubt that Said has designed the book to challenge the Western will to power and to expose their systems of domination and not to acknowledge them as invalid. Also, after "Orientalism," and as Ahmed himself acknowledges towards the end of his essay, Said has endeavored to distance himself even further

from Foucault's anti-utopian perspective and has been stressing the power of the individual and of the oppositional, critical sensibility. Moreover, Said's recent book *Culture and Imperialism* demonstrates clearly Said's attempt to go beyond a position where discursive systems seem to override all else to highlight the history of individual and/or local resistance to imperialism through all ages. True, Said has not written about class struggles, or colonial capital formations, or labour movements, and he has implicated Marx's writing into imperialist discourse, but what of that? Surely, he has done enough to become exemplary for us by engaging frontally with colonialism and its after-effects and by positioning himself in the vanguard of post-colonial discourse. Surely, too, only a committed Marxist like Ahmed will fault Said for not thinking things through like a Marxist, for believing that Marxist thought represents the kind of "grand narrative" of history that we need to be wary of. And just as surely, there are oppositional positions to be taken beyond Marxism and Marx himself is only a little diminished by the Orientalist remarks Said has found in some of his writings.

In the end, one is left with admiration for Ahmed's rigours attempt to dismantle Said's thesis in "Orientalism," but one is also led to think that while Ahmed has all the logic, Said has the nexus of thought and feeling that leave a more lasting impression on our sensibility. It is best to conclude, however, that both Said and Ahmed should be read by us in Bangladesh for they are both exemplary in their commitment to the principles of secularism, their oppositional stance, their combination of cosmopolitanism with a commitment to their peoples and of theory and praxis, and the immense learning which they wield for their emancipatory projects.

About the writer: Fakrul Alam is Professor and Chairman of English, Dhaka University.

media

The Image of Women on TV and Cinema

by Sara Zaker

NAYEEKA IS THE BENGALI word for a female central lead played by the woman actor in a play or a feature film. The role played by the "Nayeeka" is essentially created by the man and the sexist connotation is deeply entrenched in the implications of the Nayeeka. Hardly are there plays of the television or feature films of the film industry of Bangladesh that does not feature the "Nayeeka" in the image that it connotes. This "Nayeeka" that the audience is continually exposed to is undoubtedly a very attractive figure and indeed to be emulated, as made obvious from the endorsement by playwrights through their continuous presence on screen. The image that she conjures up among the target audience however is aptly summed up in the undulating lines, the rosy cheeks and charcoal eyed drawings of the woman from the showbiz on the rickshaw backs plying the roads and alleys of the country.

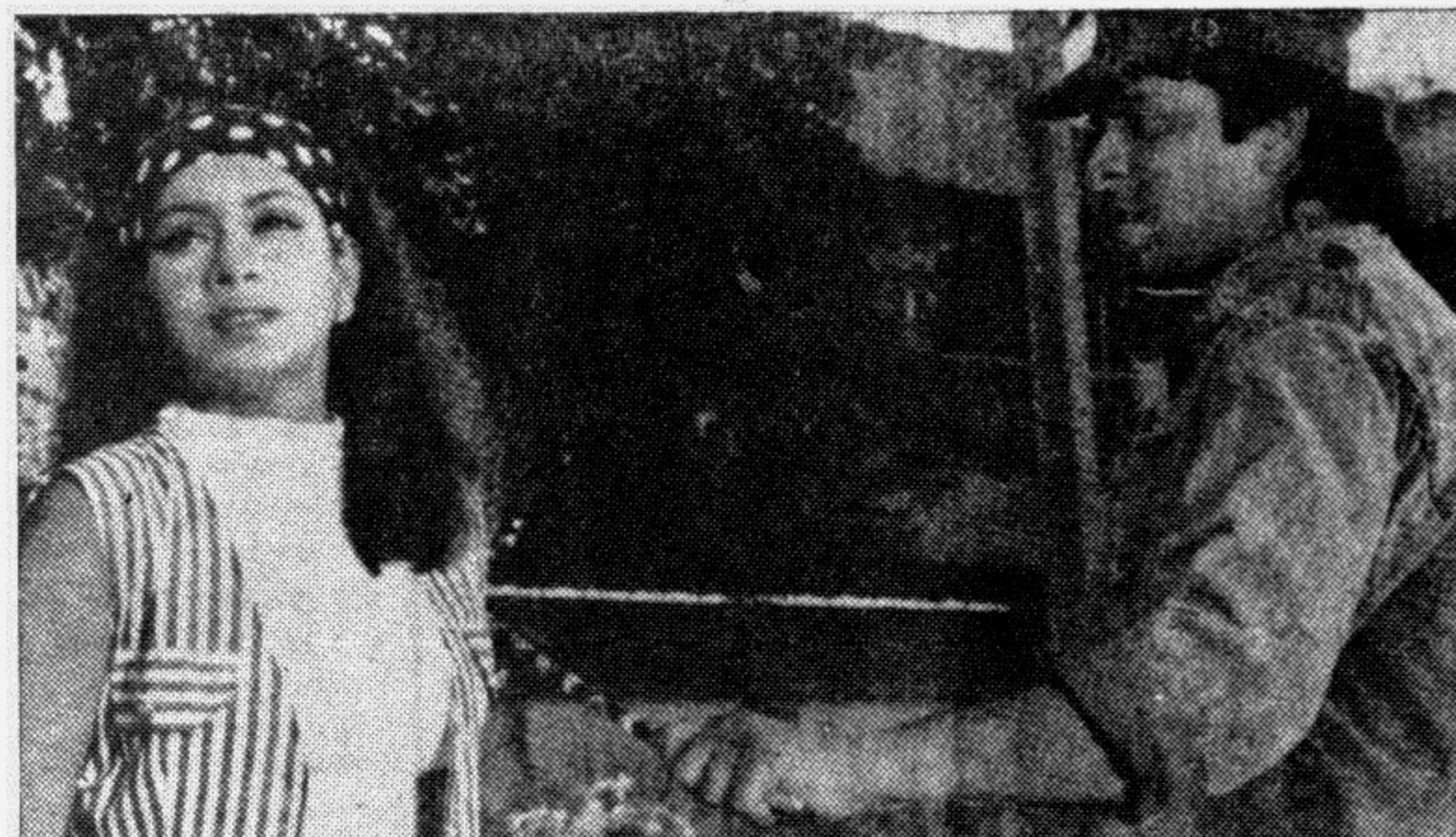
That women are an unequal lot is accepted by all class, colour and creed of the world in various degrees of ire or consent.

That media shapes human minds is also an universal truth. In today's world the power of mass media to communicate and educate the huge cross section of people stands beyond argument. What had once been the domain of commercial marketers has now been usurped by the politicians. As more people are getting access to the mass media of television and cinema the "tube" and the "celloid" areas becoming more and more dear to people who care to have a good share of voice and visual presence on them. Also, in this vastly illiterate world of ours the audio visual medium has a far greater impact than any other medium.

That, that the woman's unequal status vis-a-vis the man is a sociopolitical question is a commonly shared notion by all right thinking people of the world.

Thus, if the lot of the women has to improve, a colossal job remains to be done in the rebuilding of her image through the mass media of television and cinema.

The Film Development Corporation was formed in 1950. Ever since its inception, the film industry has functioned as very good industrial enterprise. As it became more and more important to make the film commercially viable, the women in the films came to be used increasingly as a commodity. In the event where "women" are hooks for commercial success, little can be expected from the role played by them to change the



status in society. Thus, the participation of women in commercial venture defeats the cause of the women and we can presume that it necessitates no further deliberation. Also, as instrument of social change, the cinema has lost its credibility ever since its reach has been overtaken by television. Cinema provides unadulterated entertainment to the masses vast majority of whom are male. What is seen in the celluloid is a fantasy world and emulsion is not the driving force. Thus cinema, as it stands today, is not so much an impediment to the reconstruction of the women's image in the way television is. Television's unique role in bringing social changes is now universally recognized. When speaking of building image, in the way stage is excluded as any mode to reconstruct, cinema too may be excluded from the task of exacting the job.

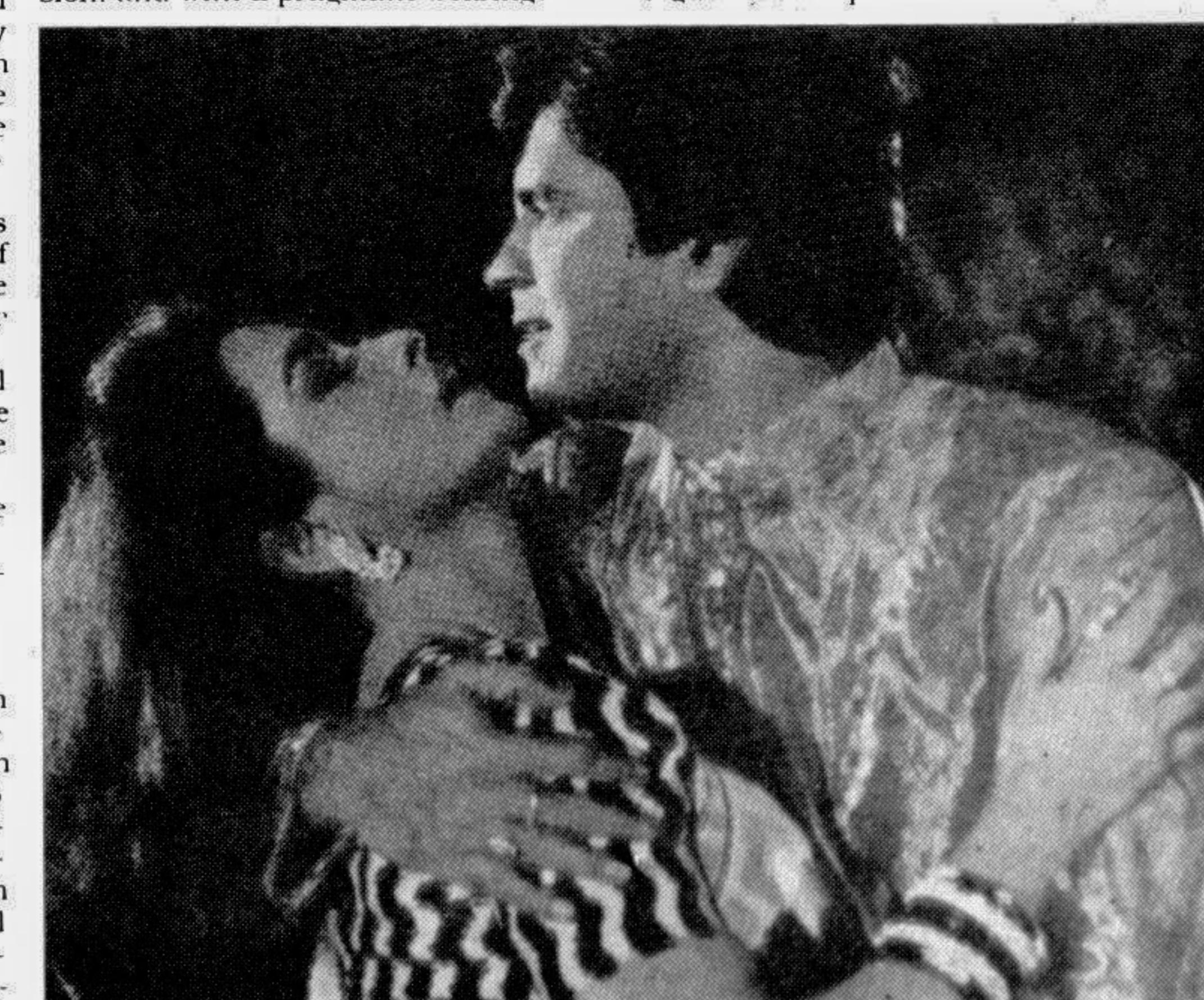
Television had been homely media and on its fringe when it started operating in the early sixties in Dhaka. In the beginning it was only in the capital, but soon it reached out to all corners of the country and even to across the boundaries to India by the mid seventies. This position changed further as more and more TV sets came into the middle class households. A phenomenal change was witnessed in the nineties with the mushroom growth of satellite dishes on rooftops and the webs of satellite cables that crisscrossed the sky soon after. Now when TV has overtaken the cinema in its reach and splendour the TV stars too now adorn the tin backs of the rickshaws on the Dhaka streets which hitherto had been exclusively dominated by the heroines of the tinsel world.

The subject of the discourse is the im-

woman who cannot meet the standards of "Nayeeka" in one less in her accomplishment, whatever her achievements may be otherwise. This creates a setback for the woman, as in addition to her other efforts, more than necessary time is spent by her to make herself as close as possible to the "Nayeeka."

In comparison, her counterpart man is better placed, for his attention is more concentrated on accomplishment as he himself defines it, and even if society defines it, it is not merely a superficial accomplishment that is modelled by the "Nayeeka". This contribution of the Art and Poetry towards the Image of woman and mass marketed by media is so strongly embedded in our psyche that we are actually talking of a humungous job, if we are to think about changing the practice altogether.

The "Nayeeka" who recreates the stereotype of the ideal woman is so deeply entrenched in the social psyche that a whole industry of cosmetic and toiletries hinges on the woman's desperation to emulate the "Nayeeka". In the event of such an affair of this gigantic world of commerce with our "Nayeeka" and to propagate and nurture her "image", what solution can we offer in the reconstruction of the image on television, and with a pragmatic bearing?



We cannot hope to remove the "Nayeeka" from the central focus of attention of "Business." However, we can well use this central position of the "woman" in media to the advantage of image reconstruction for the new woman.

Recommendations

The maturity that is accompanied by confidence of facing the world, is a far more attractive and comfortable position to be in for the woman than blushing in her discomfort with the world. Thus maturity could be opted in place of innocence for the reformed "Nayeeka."

In the Bangladesh television, maturity in the central woman lead had not been uncommon in the past. In the recent times though, it is becoming rare. Like the fashion world of the west the women roles in the privately produced TV dramas have only the very young in the central lead and the story is of a courtship prior to marriage. This has also been the norm of cinema. The very narrow span of life and situation, covered of the woman excludes and obliterates all other experiences in her life. In the process it reinforces the stereotyped "Nayeeka" situation once again.

The activity too of the woman "lead" negatively contributes in the construction of her image. Apart from the dialogues it is important to evaluate "business" given to the women in the role she plays. More often she is before the mirror combing her hair or doing the bed. One of our most famous playwright's female leads are criticized for persistently making and serving tea to the family. True, in the middle class household, it is most common activity of the woman to keep the rest of the family in constant supply of tea. However it is also a common phenomenon that she studies, reads the newspaper or works on the computer. These businesses are but very rarely depicted in the women roles on TV. To be informed, makes the position of a person strong. Our new woman of the "media" could be shown as informed and activities could well of reading a book than stirring the tea.

The players of Bangladesh television is also stuck in the groove of the middle class since the middle class sentiments are very marketable for the masses, or so it is assumed. The middle position of this class is easier to treat and gives scope for romanticism using the middle class sentiment. The lower income group is fleetingly touched upon when the support class of servants have to be depicted. To depict the villainy, or the social wrongs, the upper income people are depicted in the stereotyped roles as "bad people." The middle class values put a limit to the "woman lead" which may be overcome by her if she can take a bold step beyond this boundary adding yet another dimension to the new "Nayeeka". For example, the virtual absence of say, a garment worker in a central position is an under-representation of this huge workforce, and it is only indicative of the narrowness of the media's range of vision. Thus the heroine is usually a student who belongs to a middle income household whose future, other than being the ideal match to her partner, is never a concern for the playwright. That the women are coming into the workforce and the ups and downs of her career, and threats thereof can be of equal interest as her affairs to the audience, seems beyond the conception of most playwrights.

Given that the world of "showbiz" supported by the "commerce" will continue to place women in the centre and under the male gaze, it is well that the new Nayeeka is shaped in the place of the stereotyped Nayeeka men think are ideal and continue to construct in their blissful ignorance.

About the Writer: Sara Zaker is a leading stage and TV actor of Bangladesh. Sara read this paper at the three-day Fifth South Asia Dialogue held on 25-27 February, 1997 at Rajendrapur, Bangladesh.