

impressions

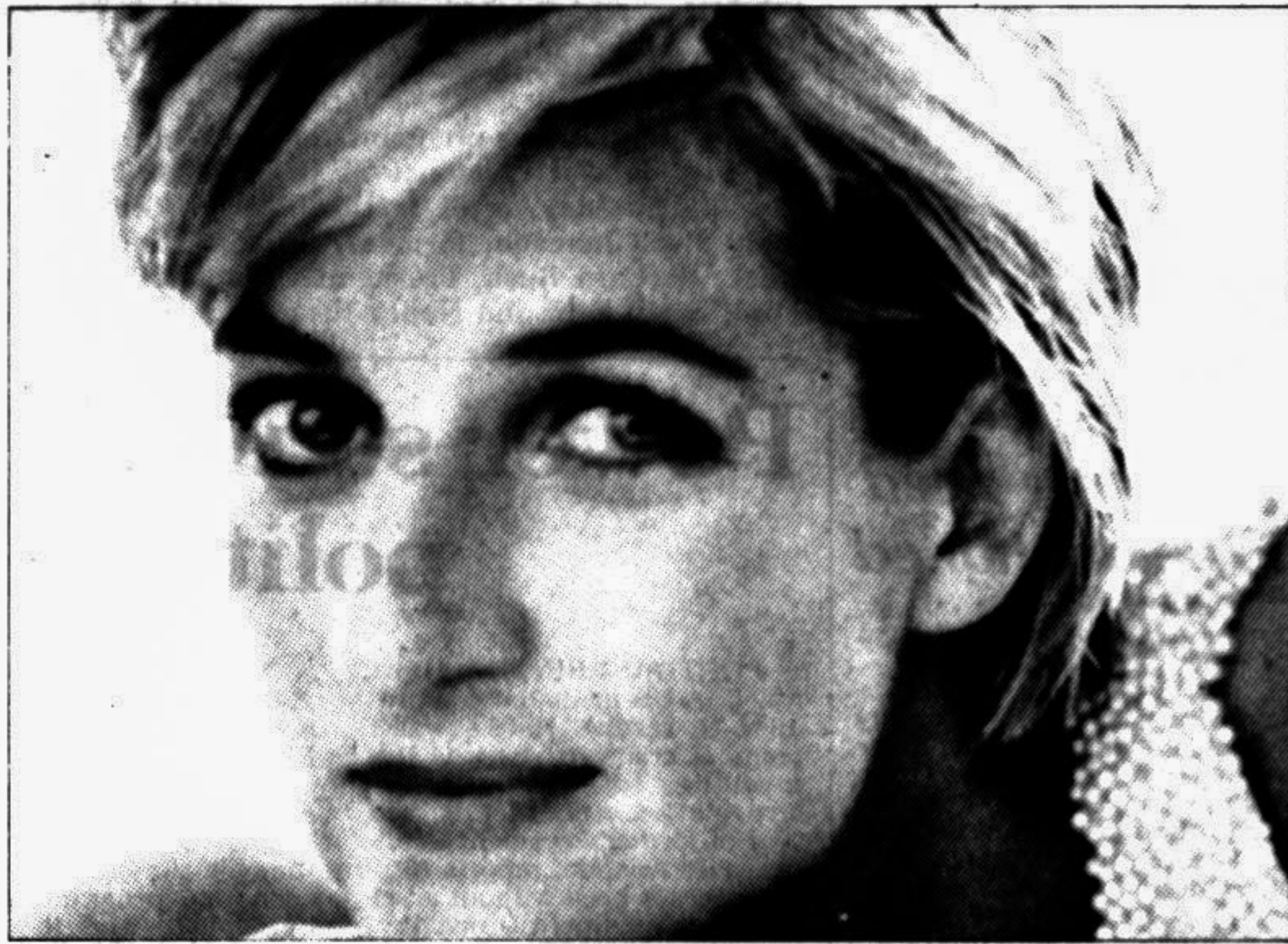
With Diana in Paris

by Salahuddin Imam

SCURRYING along a narrow Paris street which I thought would be a shortcut to Boulevard Madeleine, I noticed with a chill that it was the Rue Cambon and that I was face to face with the back exit of the Hotel Ritz. At this exact spot, Diana had come rushing out that night, as if riding on a fireball: it was the white winged steed of ancient legend that she had her burning legs astride, which comes by sometimes to accompany those who like to fly very high. As if on cue, that day's evening news showed actual video footage of Diana and Dodi at the Ritz. It seemed that the mood had been one of disarray, tight wrinkles of tension in their faces as the cast of characters entered the scene one by one through the revolving door. And in that ungrounded state, minutes later, they were to be caught up in the Hit of a Hellish Wind!

I must touch upon the circumstances of my being there at all. On the Thursday preceding, at 2:30 in the afternoon I had been made, out of the blue, an offer I could not refuse, conditional on my signing a piece of paper while physically present in Paris by Friday midnight, next day. As I was in Dhaka at the time, unwinding slack in the approach to the weekend, this took some rapid sword strokes of arranging. Aided by great wedges of good fortune, I arrived in Paris well in time, and after concluding a handsome afternoon's business, (in the course of which I squeezed in Friday prayers at the Pakistan Embassy just off the Champs Elysees) was deftly deposited at a hotel, not five minutes away from the Place de l'Alma.

Saturday was spent on preparing me. That afternoon I went to seek Kenneth Branagh's "Hamlet" — the 2-hour version. Taking full advantage of the liberties granted by the medium of film, Branagh has illuminated the inner lines of the play with a clarity rarely seen before. The setting is lavish, featuring colour compositions in which vast stretches of white are punctuated by blood-red splashes. But of relevance here is that Ophelia is shown being driven to destruction on an ivory chariot, the very colour most associated



with Diana. Not for nothing was it that a few days later one remembered the fury of Laertes when Earl Spencer was denouncing his sister's sad fate. Shakespeare has a way of pre-inventing reality.

Following the film my head reeled all night with visions of princely chaos, of the way in which a tangle of knots is at risk of ending in cataclysmic dissipation. Sometimes the web is drawn too tight, as in a bad dream — from which the only escape is to quit.

Then I woke suddenly at about 4 am, as is the way with jetlagged sleep. It was dark. I wanted to know what the time was. Instead of stretching for my watch, I drowsily grabbed the remote control from the bedside table and switched on the TV. The After-Glow of the Explosion flooded the room. Bits of distended space, crumpled black Mercedes, and shards of whirling speculation drifted in through the TV window. And all this happening outside my real window, within touching distance.

What was it I had been brought thousands of miles, to the very epicenter of the quake, to witness?

Diana shed her hurtful carapace and woke to New Transcendent Life.

She had solved some key conundrums of living and was on the verge of blissful awareness. So was John Lennon cut down when he had just tasted peace and fulfillment and John Kennedy even as he spied the Portals.

What the House of Windsor could not comprehend, too much crazy inconsistency for them, too post-modern in effect: even white trash has heart of gold.

In the days following the accident Parisian drivers became extremely solicitous, meekly stopping at zebra crossings. It takes bravery to acknowledge how petty one has been, how uncivil in society. And across, on the other side of the Channel, the British people, after all those Thatcherite years of dog-eat-dog road rage, shucked off some lingering vestiges of frigidity.

The measure of the nation's consternation I see in the scene that unfolded on her return to British soil. Through the day, that heavy Sunday, the grief had seeped in. Now late in the evening Diana's coffin was being driven from RAF Northolt base towards London. As it reached West London, on the Westbury Motorway the news spread to vehicles on the other side of the motorway that the hearse was approaching. People



jumped out of their cars, abandoning them by scores on the road, and rushed to the central reservation to watch the passing procession of her body under the dark and lowering sky. Thus did Ophelia's body make a spectacle floating by on the stream with flowers in her hair.

Inside a vast circle of worldwide accompaniment, the British people, young and old, man and woman, punk and professional, were first into the Purging Blaze. All were touched by the sight of a noble stage cornered and gunned down in a crossfire of spotlights. But even when at bay Diana always fought back, defiantly, unexpectedly. Her head was always high, with a crown of horns.

She was like our Universal Sister, who preceded in death the Universal Mother.

In subsequent days, general consciousness seemed to have been raised by an order of compassion. In a similar manner, and on a much greater magnitude of scale, the sacrifice of the Prophet Jesus (Peace be upon his soul) had once violently raised the earth's compassionate-consciousness level by many notches, so much so that we consider a new era begun from that Almighty's

Day.

A diverting side-effect of the spiritual elevation of the British nation was a string of unlikely sporting successes, all consciously dedicated to Diana's memory: Rusedski in the final of the US Open, Coulthard storming through to win the Monza Formula One Grand Prix, and most memorably Gascoine and Ian Wright putting together with the English team some of the most compelling football ever seen in the history of the game in the match against Moldova: aggressive runs which knew just when to taper off into perfectly timed pivot passes.

In her campaign against landmines, one feels that in some recess of her being she identified in pain with the fate of an innocent victim who gets suddenly blown up. The US Government's reasoning against banning landmines, which might have been just plausible before, becomes, after Diana's death, monstrous, betraying the insensitivity of a dinosaur mentality. It will cost the United States much in accumulated bad karma.

Yet she stays in mind, with her lithe body which slipped like a glove into clothes. The last suite of pictures (in

Vanity Fair's July 1997 edition, also used on the *Newsweek* commemorative cover) show her suffused with a melting joy, almost evanescent, uncannily like Marilyn Monroe's final photo-shoot. It seems that before rising one is made a rose.

And who could object when, to intensify the brew, a most unusual prince was thrown in. Complete with all the trappings: palaces, minions, even the minor kingdom of Harrods to inherit! As he proved to be both personable and devoted Diana responded with all the pent-up "wish to love a man" in the make-up of lovely woman. Jemima must have paved the way, showing that it was not disallowed to love a Muslim man, provided he merit such grace.

The suspicion cannot be put away that there was a sigh of relief in certain quarters at the news of her death. Had her course continued as seemed probable, the man who would have ended up holding the keys to the royal system would have been none other than Mohammed el-Fayed; a worse nightmare is difficult to imagine from the Establishment's point of view. The wily oriental gentleman who had grabbed one of the Crown Jewels (Harrods) from under their noses, was he about to snare another?

So did they avert an incredibly unwelcome outcome for themselves by inflicting another incredibly unwelcome outcome on the rest of us? The clue to the most plausible way in which it could have been done is given by the Mercedes' leaving a long skid mark even though the ABS (Auto Braking System) is designed to prevent skids under any circumstances. The car's microprocessor controls could have been remotely accessed electronically — a known technique — and sent viciously off-line (No, no I don't think this is really true but the scenario is worth a view).

A life of Diana charted from mega TV-broadcast to mega TV-broadcast, wedding to funeral.

And now, looking back, emotionally exhausted, at the panorama of the scene, it was truly a Jewel of an Event, which lights up the dying embers of the Second Millennium of messy, glorious human endeavor. Who knows what awaits next, around the corner.

book review

Guns of Honour

By Ekram Kabir

MANZUR Ahmad is an emotionally charged man (and so is his language), and as a writer, like the majority of the people, he stands right on the line that the present-day politicians keep crossing. A revealing book *Amra Kothai Cholechhi* is a breath-taking plea of the teeming commoners, who go through tempestuous hardship everyday to make this country a better place to live in, precisely as was dreamt in the wake of the Liberation War, to our politicians that they shake off their petty "party interest" which is taking the country and its people nowhere.

Regarding this, readers reminded a sentence from the Preface of *Bangladesh, A Legacy of Blood* by Anthony Mascarenhas: "The people must know the truth about their leaders, and may we all take lesson from their mistakes." Yes, our leaders of the past made many mistakes; and nowadays it's glaring that the leaders of today, becoming oblivious of those, are engaged in committing more mistakes ignoring the fact



what the Liberation War means to the majority.

A second thought, however, suggests that they do understand — that the War

MUKTIJUDHO BITORKO: AMRA KOTHA CHOLECHHI
by Manzur Ahmad
Dibya Prakash
Pages 98, Taka 60

of Independence is the sole platform on which the people weather in unity — and they intentionally by exploiting this sentiment rule them by whose grace they are what and where they are today. Ahmad's speedy-reading *Amra Kothai Cholechhi* unveils that without the people's enduring efforts, the present-day politicians would have been nowhere near the pedestal from which a section then tends to dispute over the War, its heroes and the warriors.

When at a time Bangladesh has just celebrated the Silver Jubilee of its independence, what could more dishonouring to learn that there still exists a section of politically active people who are tarnishing the country's self-respect! Yes, here the writer speaks about the anti-Liberation forces who were given an amnesty by the post-Liberation regime on humanitarian grounds although they have carried out the most

inhuman chores by opposing our freedom struggle in 1971.

The writer, a journalist for many long years, documents how that those anti-Liberation elements are gradually taking on the nerves of the people in their strife to distort the "history" that has been created during the last fifty years and especially in 1971. But the pen-man has a strong note of caution for anti-Mukti lesser humans that they can mislead the people for the time-being, but not for long, not for the time to come and not forever. Because "history", as the writer says, has its own strength that of a volcano, an avalanche and cannot be stopped when it takes its due course. Here the writer echoes Abraham Lincoln: "You can fool some of the people some of the time...but you can't fool all the people all the time." History distortions, still active, should take stock to this.

And for other political chieftains who care for the country, the writer's voice is loud and clear — "there can be no debate on national independence." He, in this respect, mentions India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka's independence from the British that there is not an

iota of confusion on the most important national issue — independence.

Ahmad has enormous respect for all the heroes who were the pillar-personalities of the Liberation War; and cites examples — unlike today — how they associated with and complemented each other. In doing so, Ahmad repeatedly put in print Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7th March announcement of war that gave the needed spirit of unity to fight and late President Ziaur Rahman's radio announcement from Kalurghat that started the armed struggle.

According to Manzur Ahmad, both Mujib and Zia had expressed their veneration for each other and never disputed over their respective roles in the War of Liberation. Now isn't it, admittedly, clear that both these two (many of their contemporaries are very much active in current politics) were much more broad-minded about the nation?

The answer should be a definite "yes"; at least so implies *Amra Kothai Cholechhi*. And in regard to this, the people might ask another question to the fellow leaders of the expired two:

"What are you doing for the country right now?" Well, would they be honest enough to answer that "they are engaged — by demeaning the national image — in mud-slinging that only originates confusions among the people and provokes the masses to disrespect each other?"

Manzur Ahmad thinks the leaders who often refer to the past as their source should really brace up in excavating all the confusion from people's minds with crystalline soul-searching answers before Bangladesh enters into an abysmal political fix which is a point of 'no-return'.

At this stage, Ahmad recalls, with a tinge of pain in his heart, the time of the immediate past — before the Liberation — when stalwarts A K Fazlul Haq, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Husain Suhrawardi and the like, apart from their differences in political opinions, introduced one another as "highly educated", "a pundit in mathematics" etc.

He wishes today's politicians could attain to some, if not all, of these qualities and come to a consensus. After all, there was a war fought, with guns, for an independent nation.

travel

Memorabilia

by Syed Waliullah

Continued from 25.10.97

I had a confirmed return Rly ticket for the night of April 9, but I was oblivious of this and at this appointed time I was completely engrossed in the company of my friends. On becoming conscious of the situation I had to request Glen to come to my rescue. He called up the local office of Amtrak at Salt Lake City and got the reservation rescheduled for the following night without any hassle and even without a fine.

My sojourn came to a close with a sumptuous dinner with Jensions and their married children. The dinner commenced with a prayer that included

thanking God for the visit of 'Wali' (this is how they called me) among other reasons, while well-being and blessings were beseeched for all concerned in the family. The prayer was led by Mrs Kathy Jensen.

A transport was waiting to take me to the Salt Lake City Rly Station. While farewell words were being exchanged Kathy passed on to me a paper bag and in her quiet manner said, "here are a few apples, some sandwiches and (home made) cookies for your long trip back to Los Angeles". What an affectionate gesture! While accepting this wonderful bag full of eatables my thought took me to a distant past. I remembered my Nanu.

She did the same. At the time of my return journey back to Dhaka after enjoying a short summer vacation in Nana Bari she used to handover a Tiffin box containing Paratha with bhuna gosh, seasonal Pitha or Bhuna Khichuri and some mangoes and or other fruits to keep me fit in my long trip back to Dhaka. I was permitted to visit my Nana Bari only during the summer holidays. In those days the trip from Kaliakoir to Dhaka was about a thirty hour country boat (Goina Nowka) journey. Now its take barely an hour of car journey.

Every thing has an ending. So was my three (nay four) day sojourn. What I

saw, experienced and felt then are now a part of my nostalgia. My thought at that departing time may be expressed through the words of Sir Suckling.

*"Out upon it, I have loved
Three whole days together!
And Am like to love three more,
If it proved fair weather."*

Epilogue: On return from the sojourn of my last of the three Alma Maters in USA, at times, I can not but compare my first campus, the University of Dhaka, one time "Oxford of the East" to that of Ann-Abour (Mich), University of California at Berkeley and the Utah State University and even the university of

Panjab at Lahore. The comparison is not palatable. The feeling of repugnance inevitably pervades my whole self when I envision the state of the present Dhaka University campus. Along with the arrival of Ayub-Monaem regime we saw the advent of decay, this was accelerated during the BAKSHALI regime, it was extirpated at the behest of Zia and Ershad rule. Eversince the same conditions are perpetuating with vigorous sustainability received from the rulers and the power in opposition. We all saw the moribund state of the "Oxford of the East" and now awaiting further degradation. Now, few international institutions recognize degrees offered in our

universities. What a fate for the "Oxford of the east". Can we blame fate for this tragic status of the university of Dhaka?

The wide-spread Dhaka University campus of the past decades was luxuriantly verdant, serene and succulent with tall trees, while University structures had no blackened wall and buildings were few and fair in-between, professors did only professional job and students were engaged in learning only. Their was no sign or talk of the existence of white, green and so on among professors and students had no "Apa" or "Madam" to be devil their present and future life.