

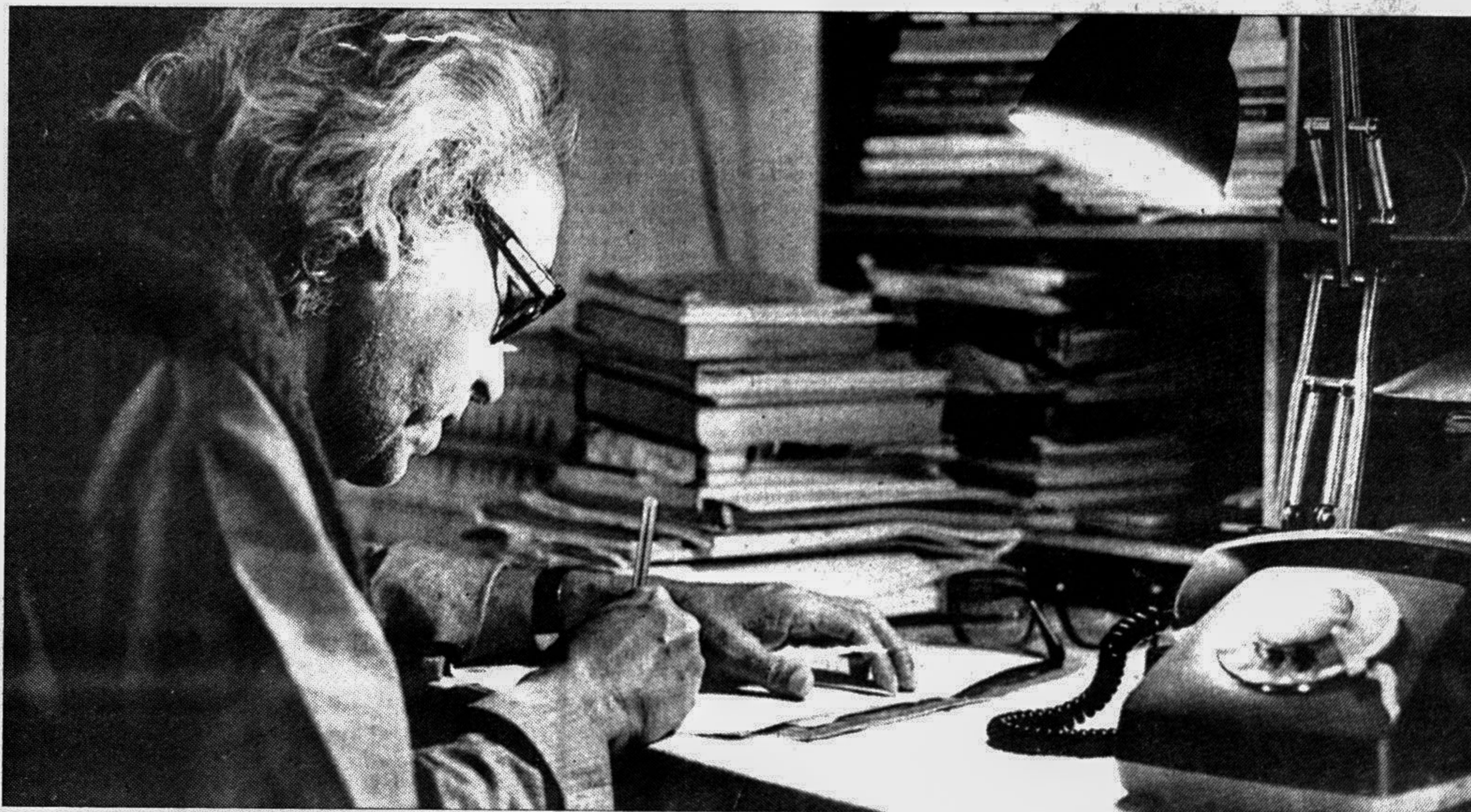
poetry

Introducing Shamsur Rahman

by Kaiser Haq

SHAMSUR Rahman (1929-) is unquestionably our foremost poet. It is also becoming increasingly evident that he is the most significant poet in Bengali since the five great first generation modernists in Bengali poetry—Jibanananda Das, Amiya Chakrabarty, Sudhindranath Dutt, Buddhadeb Bose, Bishnu Dey—who turned away from Tagore's Romanticism and incorporated the lessons of European modernism in their work. Each of these poets was distinctive in the particular variation of modernism adopted. Jibanananda's was a complex post-Romantic sensibility that conflated the real and the dream worlds; Amiya Chakrabarty is a sophisticated cosmopolitan who can write with equal grace about his own roots and about his self-exile in the West; Sudhindranath was a classicist and a post-Symbolist who bore an easily recognizable kinship with Valery; Buddhadeb owed much to Baudelaire but eclectically imbibed the lessons of later modernists; Bishnu Dey was the most Eliotesque of the generation, at least at the outset, and later incorporated a Marxist outlook.

The diversity among these poets was essential to the vitality of their influence, since it gave their successors a wide range of examples on which to model themselves. Shamsur Rahman was conspicuous in his affinities with Jibanananda when he began writing in the late forties, but soon after began blending other influences, both Bengali and Western. The result, spread over more than one score volumes, is a poetic oeuvre remarkable in its versatility and bearing at all points the stamp of the poet's individual voice.



Rahman engrossed in his writing

Broadly speaking, the development of Rahman's poetry, from a languorous dreamy verse to a more vigorous exercise in poetic exploration, has a parallel

in Yeats. Though at the beginning Rahman was through and through a 'private' poet and his audience was a coterie, his position in the broader cul-

tural context was significant. He and those of his contemporaries—Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Shaheed Quaderi and others—

who were, so to speak, his allies in pioneering the modern trend in Bangladeshi poetry, were in effect creating a counterculture vis-a-vis the poli-

cies dictated from Karachi, Pindi and Islamabad. As opposed to poets like Farrukh Ahmed and Golam Mostafa, who were blinkered in their vision by the ideology of Pakistan, the self-conscious modernism of these poets was accompanied by a liberal, secular outlook.

The importance of this became obvious later, because the work of a poet like Rahman paralleled on the cultural plane, and at one point merged with, the economic and political struggle that culminated in the liberation war. As Rahman responded more and more explicitly to the changing socio-political scene, his poetry became more "public", more direct in its technique, yet without sacrificing his personal tone. The sheaf of poems he wrote as "an exile at home" during the liberation war is a case in point.

Always prolific, Rahman has become more so in recent years, and continues to delight, provoke and move his readers with his observations and meditations. One coming to his poetry cannot but be impressed by their range, both thematic and stylistic. From the short lyric to the dramatic monologue, from strictly rhymed verses to flexible mixed forms, he has handled all with effortless mastery. He is equally interesting in his treatment of topical and historical subjects and the timeless themes of poetry—political turmoil, war, political leaders; the many faces of love, the exploration of the self, the passage of time. While remaining firmly rooted in his Bangladeshi milieu (one might even say his Dhaka milieu, for, apart from brief visits abroad he has spent his whole life in this old city) his sensibility is at the same time cosmopolitan; it can draw upon his native tradition as well as upon diverse foreign sources—classical Europe, Biblical lore, modern Western art, etc.

profile

V S Naipaul : A Challenging Contemporary Novelist

By A S M Nurunnabi

VS Naipaul of Trinidad origin is regarded as one of the most challenging of contemporary novelists. His writing is firmly focused on the realities of post-colonial societies and on the legacy of empire. Naipaul's ten "travelogues," discussing his impressions of the Near and Far East, Africa, India, Latin America and the Caribbean are vitally significant in relation to his novels, the latter often doubling back on experiences previously charted in essayistic form.

Always an intensely allusive writer,

Naipaul frequently launches an intertextual challenge to Eurocentric scripts in his fiction. Thus, for examples, 'Guerrillas' recasts neo-colonial issues within a Brontean framework; 'A Bend in the River' forms part of an Argument with Conrad to which Naipaul returns at intervals throughout his career. In similar fashion metropolitan cultural norms are called into question by a blurring of lines between literary forms and a conscious trespassing across the boundaries of novel, history, essay, cultural critique, travelogue and autobiography. 'In a Free State' therefore encloses three short fictional narratives between a prologue and epilogue in the guise of autobiographical travel-writing.

'Guerrillas' emends and recreates the situation of 'The Killings of Trinidad'. In sequence the writings have a self-cancelling quality. In addition the positions of author/narrator/persona/character continually criss-cross, so that the reader finds it impossible to "place" a discourse in terms of origins, and therefore undergoes a process of rethinking events.

Naipaul's early 'Trinidadian' novels provoked the response that he was intent on occupying the ironic high ground, from which to look down patronisingly on the foibles of West Indians. Yet even these early comedies of manners are fundamentally politicised. 'Miguel Street' (the first written), a series

of sketches of life in an urban slum in Trinidad, was followed by 'The Mystic Masseur' exposing the sources of political power in popular myth and superstition, and 'The Suffrage of Elvira', which continued the satire upon populism in the context of a rural election campaign. With 'A House for Mr Biswas', however, a Dickensian novel with epic and tragic overtones, Naipaul increased the range and scale of his achievement. Mr Biswas's attempts to establish his own autonomy, rather than remaining "unhoused", extend the experience of colonial rootlessness to the human condition of displacement, alienation, and transitoriness.

From this point on, however, Naipaul

moved away from Trinidad, and onto a broader political stage, with a series of novels addressing what it is to be a post-colonial subject. The initiative nature of post-colonial society, a major concern in 'The Mimic Men', is also investigated in 'In a Free State'; which expresses Naipaul's childhood sense that reality and identity were always elsewhere, accessible only by proxy.

Naipaul remarked in 'An Area of Darkness' that whereas the English novelist, essentially a realist, can merge with his society, since that society has appropriated reality, the post-colonial must cultivate self-consciousness as a recourse against cultural imperialism. As a result he is often at his

political sharpest when at his most "literary". His later work, 'The Enigma of Arrival', borrows its title from a Chirico painting, and although sub-titled "a novel" it more closely resembles essays. Conventional models of "story" are undercut by plastic narrative structures, in order to conjoin themes of violence and inevitability of change, even in the apparent tranquillity of rural England.

For Third World critics it was an open season on V S Naipaul with accusations of defeatism, racism, and generally of being a lackey of neo-colonialism together with charges of anti-feminism for creating characters as matriarchs or man-eaters.

reflections

Limits of Modernity: The End of the Century Perceptions of Asian Art

by Nanak Ganguly

PRESENTLY, in the subsequent search for treatments in identity, pictorial language and grammar problematized by both sides in the modernity debate, a new agenda for art theory per se cultural theory emerges. An attempt to build up a framework should be designed neither as a full defence of modernity, nor as complete acceptance of the "postmodern turn" but one which nevertheless requires the significance of the points raised by contemporary art practitioners in the West as well as the East arguably for an integrated theory for contemporary world art—one that breaks down the barriers and dichotomies which structure current art practice.

While talking about 'limits of modernity', the misunderstood notion of 'modernity'—a notion wildly used should be eliminated. An attempt to identify two broad 'senses' of modernity. Modernity as mood and 'modernity as socio-cultural form' should be allowed to make its way for an implication for art theory and how such might be assessed.

Apart from its contribution to political theory, modernity as socio-cultural form is without doubt also a central aspect, of the modernity debate. Unquestionably, the late twentieth century is witnessing some very profound cultural and socio-economic changes have enormous implication for art, culture

and politics. Characteristic mechanisms of production are becoming increasingly linked with communication and information structures and this fact, coupled with increasing mobility and time-space compression is changing many of the most significant way in which art is conducted as well as the arenas (political) in which it is conducted.

Unquestionably also, because of the likely effects they are going to have on political and social structure, these changes will be of enormous importance for political and social theory as well as expecting that they will not have any necessary or determinate effect.

Both moderns and post-moderns agree, in general terms, that modernity is, to all intents and purposes bound up with the legacy of the Enlightenment, though they give contrasting account of what the legacy is and take different sites on the question of 'the ethico-political'; the moderns asserting the centrality of both for an understanding of either (though sometimes, as in Habermas, favouring political) and the post-moderns broadly favouring the 'ethical', though understood in a 'Foucauldian' sense and with some post-moderns asserting the necessary political consequences of this view.

The moderns defend 'modern', Enlightenment - derived conceptions of reasons, thought they do not defend them all and are perfectly clear that the most dominant conception of rationality in modernity (i.e. instrumental rationality) is deeply flawed and requires

serious revision. They are very deep differences between moderns as how this might be best done - a rationality in its 'Enlightenment' - derived sense is central to their of discourse.

For some postmoderns, things can still be discussed 'rationally' rather than 'rationalistically'. However, other postmoderns would be suspicious even about this usage, and would want to still more critical of all "rational" arguments on the ground that it privileges one form of aesthetic understanding over another (in case of art theory). This links up with the preference many postmoderns show for 'poetic', radically autonomous readings of ethos as — in Michel Foucault's words, — a manner of being.

Let us characterize the set of assumptions that stem from the limits of modernism that constitute postmodern thinking, at the end of century today, here in Asia. Postmoderns emphasize 'reflexivity, irony, artifice, randomness, anarchy, fragmentation, pastiche, and allegory, cynically regarding the progressivist dreams of modernism, which, hoped to shape the cultural world in the image of technology, industry and science, post modernism is resolutely ironic with regard to the enabling myths of art, culture, society and philosophy — the emphasis shifts from content to form or style.

Within this general framework, a number of contemporary thinkers, writers, artists can be subsumed. It is relevant today to include structuralism in French and American thought, for

example Barthes Foucault, Derrida, Paul de Man and perhaps Stanley Fish. Literary criticism running from Fredrico de Oris in the 1930s to figures such as Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida, Hassan and Eco today, musicians and composers like Cage, Halloway, Glass, Stockhausen and Briers, architects like Jencks, Venturi or Bolin, critics like David Harvey and philosophers and different in other respects as Lyotard and Rorty. This apart from works film, drama and fiction like the novels of Rushdie, Umberto Eco and Hutcheon. Such is the disparity between this huge and multi-faceted group that many have, increasingly unhappy with trying to tie them together, understandably—Richard Rorty, for example, has 'give up on the attempt to find something common to Michael Graves' buildings, Pynchon and Rushdie's novels, Ashberry's poems, various sorts of popular music, sculptures of Anish Kapoor, Damien Hirsts, Bhupen Khakkar's canvases and the writings of Heidegger and Derrida.

There is a common belief, though it is expressed in various ways and to different degrees, that in contemporary culture we are observing a general crisis of 'representation'. By this term is meant simply that there is 'a series of crises' in which other 'modernist' modes of defining, appropriating, and recomposing the objects of artistic philosophical literary and social scientific languages are no longer credible and in which one common aspect is the dissolution of the very boundary between the

language and its object.

While we merge language and object then the characteristic assumption about 'truth', 'value', 'knowledge' and so on made by art, science, philosophy and social and political theory since the late eighteenth century become very problematic.

Here of course we reach the crux of the 'postmodern' for many of the writers who self-identify with it. It is precisely a rejection of 'the legacy of the Enlightenment' that was so instrumental in creating the sets of assumption that go along with the view of representation that sees a key distinction between the world and the language we used to describe the world.

In this sense, I would like to draw the attention to the finest philosophical expression to date of the post modern mood — Lyotard's 'la condition post-modern' and Rorty's philosophy and the Mirror of Nature-Rorty, in a luminous image, has captured the essential post-modern claim about knowledge, language and the world. The modernist assumption was that we had a 'glassy essence' that could be rationally perceived and interpreted through particular techniques. Post modern thinking smashes that glass.

Our presence in the modern situation crystallize, around the desire to have active, responsible, citizens as a counterweight to overweening governments or political problem that dwarf the capacity of governments to deal with them. An active, engaged body of politi-

cal agents — only with such a body can the aporias of modernity be managed and lived with continually. Those elements of modern society that create a problem of trust, and, like them, the fundamental modern problematic is, in some sense or other, the risks that our modern societies are prove to, create and cannot escape. It is this, after all, that necessitates a theory of preference adequate to the historical world in which we have to line.

Today the importance of not remaining within dichotomous oppositions that after seems to dominate contemporary thinking modern/post-modern, domestic/international, liberal/communitarian and etc. The most importance of such dichotomies is probably between the universal and the particular. Negotiating that dichotomy, the central task for contemporary art practice is not to give up its rightful place to the other.

In a sense, however, understanding modernity/post-modernity consist precisely in the juggling of old and new, ideas and practices, moods and socio-cultural forms, thinkers and issues. To try to fit art theory into any kind of conceptual or theoretical strait-jacket is not simply a rude abuse of scholarly etiquette but a procedure that will have a direct consequences for our ability to comprehend the aesthetics in all its multifarious forms — help us to understand more fully the centrality of diversity to the task of understanding the part and the whole, the rational and the good.