

fortnightly column

No Spices Wanting!

by Fakrul Alam

REVIEWING can be a thankless job. With the hope of beginning a regular review column in *The Daily Star*, I turned to my copy of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* only to read Coleridge's derisive comments about reviewers: "usually people who would have been poets, historians, biographers, &c., if they could; they have tried their talents at one or the other, and have failed; therefore they turned critics." If this was not bad enough, the only other entry on reviewing in the *Oxford* is a line from a Tennyson poem about "indolent reviewers".

But if creative writers damn reviewers for being failed or lazy writers, reviewers have almost always been in demand. Indeed, another major problem that reviewers have to face is the demand for reviews from creative writers themselves. The predicament of the reviewer in such circumstances can be summed up by the saying: "And you will be damned if you do — and you will be damned if you don't". Writers write, and then want to publish what they write, and if they succeed in publishing their works, they want other people to know how good their work is. Inevitably, then, writers seek out a reviewer whom they will badger until they are able to get some laudatory comments on their works. Woe betide the reviewer, however, if he manages to come out with any disparaging remarks or if he thinks he is smart enough to damn by faint praise!

Not surprisingly, then, while I enjoy writing reviews and look forward to being reasonably regular in publishing this column, I am, on the whole, somewhat wary of writers who will ask me to review their works. Muzaffar Abdul Jabbar, the author of *The Spice of Life*, the book with which I would like to begin my column, did not ask me to review his book though. All he wanted, he told me in giving me a presentation copy of his collection of essays, was for me to read them and tell him what I thought of them. Evidently, the bulk of his essays had been published in the short-lived Dhaka daily, *The Morning Sun*, and he had decided to make use of his retirement to make a compilation out of them.

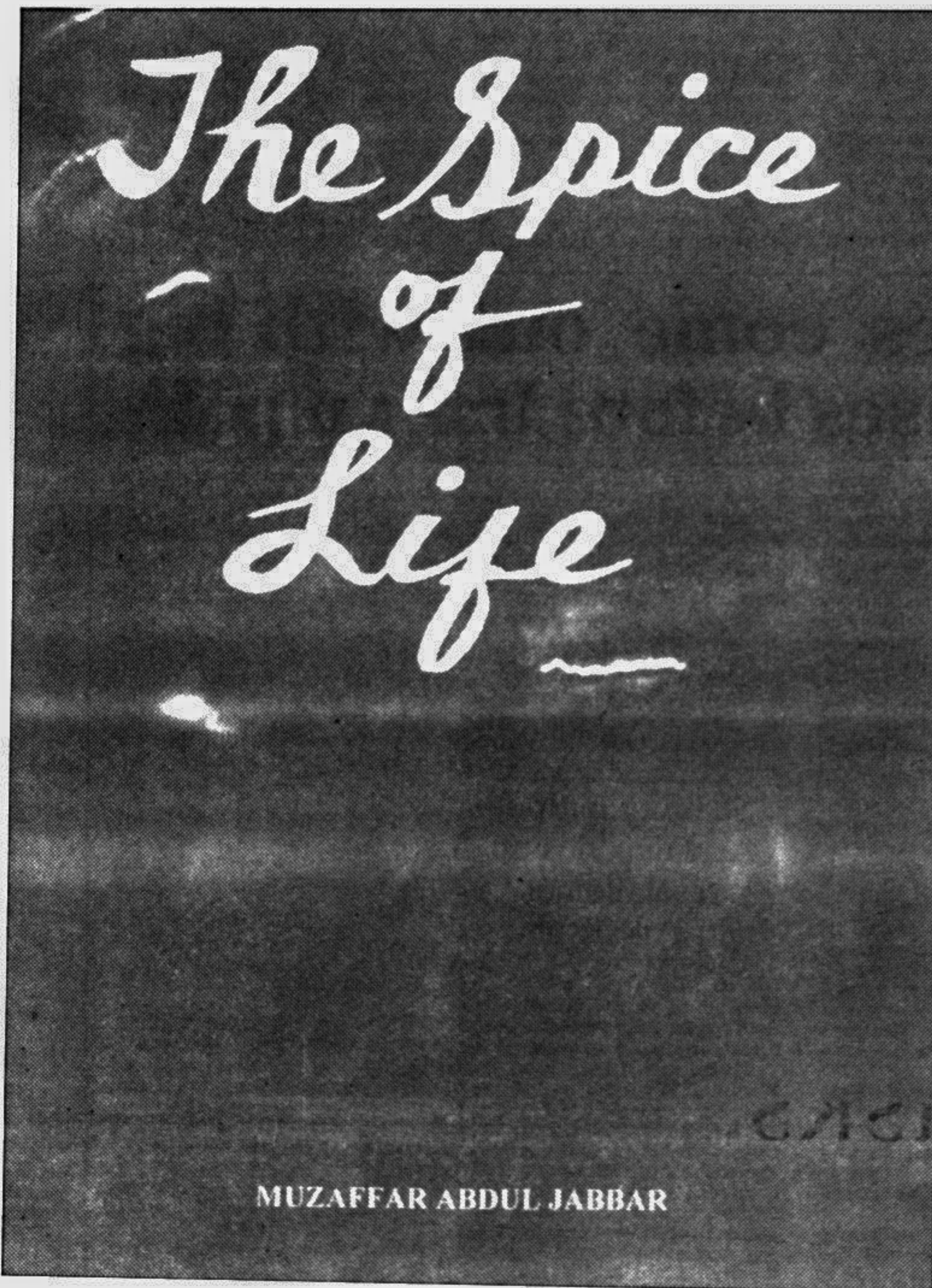
I had to read only a few of the essays in *The Spice of Life* to conclude that here was a book worth reviewing so that a wider public could know about a very readable book of essays published in Dhaka about a variety of issues which may interest us. Jabbar's range of topics

is really amazing: he writes about linguistic quirks, the life of expatriates, astronomical happenings, comets in the sky, rodents in our midst, historical monuments, the delights of youth, aging with grace, advertisements, rickshaw paintings, private imaginings and public disasters, Dhaka's ubiquitous traffic jams, campus violence, bureaucratic bungling, contemporary urban nightmares, national foibles, personal griefs as well as the consolations of life. Jabbar, in fact, lives up to the promise implicit in the title of his collection of essays: he is committed to demonstrating through his books that variety is the spice of life. Certainly, I can confirm that what he has produced for us is a delicious *khichuri* where very few spices are wanting!

The essays collected in *The Spice of Life* remind me that Jabbar is one of the few practitioners around — at least in our country — of a vanishing genre: the personal essay. It was in the eighteenth century that this genre emerged in the English Language in periodicals with names such as *The Tatler* or *The Spectator* or *The Rambler*. The intentions of the writers who made these periodicals immortal were never to provide news or objective accounts; what they wanted to do most of all was to delight and to instruct their readers in the art of living through perambulatory essays into life. In other words, these essayists blended an essential seriousness of purpose with a lightness of touch to use the brief compass of the form to comment on contemporary society. In the less didactic nineteenth century, and in the hands of writers such as Lamb, the personal essay became more fanciful and inclined to explore moods as well as interpret happenings in the world around us.

Jabbar's essays in *The Spice of Life* represent both forms of the personal essay: some of them are intensely personal or idiosyncratic while others tend to be pungent, moralizing excursions into unsatisfactory aspects of contemporary existence in Bangladesh. The last two essays of the book, for example, are moving and tender testaments to his wife; the first celebrates his relationship with her without being vulgar, while the second is elegiac and avoids sounding maudlin at any point. At times whimsical, as when giving us the rat's point of view on humans obsessed with poisoning them out of existence; at times meditative, as when he reflects on the almost mystical experience of watching the occultation of Venus by the moon; at times nostalgic, as when evoking the sights and sounds of the

Muzaffar Abdul Jabbar. *The Spice of Life*. 262 pages. The University Press Limited; June 1997. Tk. 350.00.



Calcutta of his boyhood, and at times thankful for the bounty of God, as when he looks at the variety and beauty of nature; Jabbar at his best is a writer of exquisite perceptions and delicate feelings evoked in beautiful prose. Indeed, the comment Jabbar makes in concluding his essay on the colorful paintings on our rickshaws, "Folk Art on Wheels" — "a touch of humor, a whiff of phantasy, a little laughter and a bit of

homespun philosophy laced with common sense" which "has momentarily brightened our lives" — could also be applied to his own work.

By far the largest section of *The Spice of Life* consists of acerbic essays which deal with the unsavory tendencies so pervasive in present-day Bangladesh. Jabbar is worth reading for his bemused depiction of "our highly distorted and arbitrary traffic sense" ("Fantasy

River"); his breathless catalogue of our teaching profession ("There are good teachers, bad teachers, indifferent teachers, conspirator teachers, rabble-rousing teachers, note-reading and note-giving teachers, club-going teachers, non-teachers and money-gathering teachers, callous teachers, non-studying teachers, disinterested teachers, procession-joining teachers, arms-flailing teachers..."), his sarcastic portrait of our government offices where the intimidating staff connive to "keep the files moving and the government going haltingly, slithering forward at a snail's pace", and his "absurdist" treatment of our endless meetings where usually a "Minister for This" is the Chief Guest, the "Minister for That" is the "Super Guest", and where there are, in addition, "High Guest of High and Mighty Guest" (136); in effect, special guests ad nauseam. There is an almost Swiftian piece on the endless and senseless processions which bedevil Dhaka streets that I would particularly recommend for anyone wanting to sample Jabbar in his whimsical-satirical vein. In this essay, titled "Puncture their Precious, Pompous Egos", Jabbar imagines himself leading a procession "to end all processions in the country for ever" only to suddenly encounter a group of people screaming the following slogans at him: "*Michil kora cholbey, cholbey...michil kora cholbey, Abdul Jabbar jhulbey; aro michil michil koro, jabbar key key bondi koro*".

Reading Jabbar's satiric essays on the irrational, the nonsensical, and the decadent in our present-day world, and on violence and the lack of principles, discipline, and responsibility in our public life, we get a view of him as a quiet but concerned, passive but admired a great deal of his work and can share his anguish and annoyance at much of what goes on in the name of politics and civility in our streets, our campuses, and our corridors of power. I must say that I have at times been alarmed at what I will not hesitate to call a reactionary side in him. I was thus horrified to read the following sentence in the essay titled: "Count Your Blessings" where he ironically catalogues our *uddyan* and takes time out to comment on the particularly historic green space that is Suhrawardy Uddayan: for him, this "is the place, where Jinnah, in clipped accents, spoke of discipline and Sheikh Mujib's *Bajro Kantho*, years later, succeeded in planting the seeds of indiscipline, where a grateful Bangladesh welcomed Indira Gandhi and where, now, free people of a

free nation are free to hold court (*Gano Adalat*) in the manner of the revenge-seeking riff-raff of the French Revolution." Now the "father" the Pakistani nation may have been impressive because of his dandified demeanor and posh accent, but the nation he sired can by no means boast of a better record than our country in matters of discipline or civility. Indeed, Jabbar must be pretty blind not to have noticed that the history of Pakistan is, in essence, a sorry record of coups, counter-coups, assassinations, violence, organized mayhem inside and outside its parliaments, loot, murder, arson, and rape. I am also amazed at the way Jabbar confuses the *Gono Adalat* with the worst aspects of the French Revolution: hasn't he read about the "mock" trials organized by distinguished philosophers and pacifists during the Vietnam War? And why shouldn't Bangladeshis be grateful to Indira Gandhi for helping them overthrow the likes of Tikka Khan, "Tiger Niazi" and their savages? I, for one, will be grateful till death to Indira Gandhi and her countrymen and women for being delivered from the butchers of 1971, even though I may have my reservations about some aspects of Indian foreign policy afterwards.

I found Jabbar's intemperate outburst quoted above (and a few other instances when he seems to be harbouring similar reactionary thoughts) particularly distressing because *The Spice of Life* leaves me with little doubt that he is essentially a gentle man, a humanist who loves the classics of western culture as well as our own classics, and a sensitive soul. But perhaps his outburst is a reminder how even the most caring sorts will bear the scars of an ideology (in this case that of the supposedly pure state created after Partition) interpellated at them during their formative years.

But I do not want to end this review on a negative note. Muzaffar Abdul Jabbar has presented us in *The Spice of Life* with a book which we can read with pleasure as well as edification. Because most of the essays of the book was published in *The Morning Sun* — a paper which, I believe, never enjoyed a wide circulation — he must have rued the lack of readers who could respond to his work. That these delightful essays and the other pieces that he published outside Bangladesh have now been reprinted in an elegantly produced, carefully proof-read volume is all the more reason why I hope they will get the widest possible readership in our country.

essay

Whose English Is It Anyway?

by Firdous Azim

Continued from the last issue

FROM that period of Bengali history, I would like to concentrate on a literary personality, who, by fluctuating between poetic composition in English and Bengali, illustrates, from a moment of "high" colonialism, the complex and problematic relationship between language and subjectivity as it pertains to the colonial situation. The story of Michael Modhu Shudhan Datta is told as a "cautionary tale" as well as a moralistic one. The moral is painted as a contrast between dissoluteness and duty, between wallowing in desire and a recognition of reality, between indulging in dreams and actively donning the mantle of responsibility. The English writing of the poet is usually dismissed as juvenilia, and seen to represent an adolescent, self-indulgent and irresponsible phase of the poet's life. Poems such as "I long for Albion's distant shore" or the one addressed to "My Fond Sweet Blue-Eyed Maid," written around the age of seventeen, embody in an undiluted, and some would say, to a nauseating degree, an expression on colonial desire. England and things English, distant and strange as they are, are intensely longed for — "As if she were my native — land!" Written in imitation of romantic odes and lyrics, the poems portray a sighing, longing, languishing, pining hero. The poet is drowned in an idle and languorous torpor. He is woken from this reverie by a conscious and deliberate decision to write in Bengali, his mother tongue. This movement from English to Bengali is often seen as the correction of an adolescent aberration, as a correction

of youthful mistakes.

The fluctuations between Michael Modhu Shudhan's writing in English and Bengali are connected to the split and fragmented terrain in which he was writing. This split colonial terrain is usually divided along linguistic lines. The division is further fragmented into private and public spheres, and the linguistic bifurcation is extended to perform this task as well. Within such a formulation, the public sphere, the official self is seen to belong to the colonial realm, of government, administration and academia. English reigns in this domain — the language of the coloniser becomes the official language of government and administration. Bengali, or the vernacular mother tongue, belongs to the private realm, in the affective world of the home and the family. Moreover, a notion of essence is brought into function, and the essential self, at moments of intense emotion or creativity, is seen to belong to this affective realm. Therefore, our poems — our stories and songs — sites where desire gets played out — are to be written and sung in our mother tongue. But, Michael Modhu Shudhan does not fit within this formulation at all. The seventeen-year-old young man had composed reams of soppy rhyme in English, had formulated his dreams in that language. The decision to write in Bengali is a self-conscious act, generally viewed as the poet's entry into adulthood, of a donning of a notion of responsibility, or an awakening to the duties towards one's nation and race. The prodigal son is seen to have returned. (Significantly, it is after his return to Calcutta after a long sojourn in Madras that Michael

Modhu Shudhan starts writing in Bengali).

However, Modhu Shudhan never stops writing in English. All his letters are written in English. Again, it is in the so-called private realm that English continues to be used. The letters express his joy at his various literary triumphs, they debate the introduction of blank verse into Bengali poetry, his letters from Europe betray a homesickness — but they are all written in English. The authentic realm, which Ngugi had seen to be accessible only in the mother tongue, is lived and expressed only in English by Michael Modhu Shudhan Datta. If we keep the private/public division, it is the poetry that becomes the public act — the work for publication — on which his public reputation rests, that gives him his identity in Bengali literature and history as a poet, and that also, significantly, erases the stigma of early failures and disappointments, a compensation and also a fulfilment of the promise and ambitions of his youth. There is a constant harping on the enrichment of the Bengali language, of his contributions to his mother tongue. The writing becomes the performance of a filial duty, where the prodigal son, on his return, makes up and compensates for his past misbehaviour. The compensation, in this case, however, is dual — the poet compensates for his earlier disregard of his filial duties, as well as the compensation that the fame and recognition as a Bengali poet makes for his failure as an English one. The attitude towards his role as Bengali poet is always half-hearted, a duty performed, or something he does in lieu of what he would have

really liked to do. A letter, written in 1862, on the eve of his departure for England, illustrates this sense of duty that Michael Modhu Shudhan had towards Bengali.

You must not fancy, old boy, that I am a traitor to the cause of our native Muse. If it hadn't been for the extraordinary success the new verse had met with, I certainly should have delayed my departure. Or, not gone at all. I should have stood at my post manfully. But an early triumph is ours, and I may well leave the rest to younger hands, not ceasing to direct their movements from my distant retreat.

"Extraordinary success" and "early triumph" have crowned his efforts, and the sense of responsibility and duty performed permeates the letter. His native muse has been served, he has left a rich field of composition for his younger compatriots, in short, he has "manfully" performed his duty. Now, at this moment of triumph, he feels free to retire, to go back, (again, a return), and to succumb to that current, that tug of desire, which is constantly driving him, pushing him, towards that English shore, and that unattainable blue-eyed maiden. A ten-year spurt of activity had resulted in the poetry that made him famous, after which he can go back, retreat, return, to that site of original desire. To that end, the poet boards a ship, heaves a sigh of relief, and lets the soft breeze waft him towards that intensely longed-for English shore. (Modhu Shudhan had to face penury and frustration in England and France, and this period of his life is cited as another chapter of that moral cautionary tale.). From nineteenth-century Bengal,

and that moment of "high" colonialism, I would like to turn to modern-day Britain and to look at that unique event in literary history that had rocked that country early last year. The controversy — the battle of the book — generated by Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* brings the questions that this paper has been grappling with into sharp focus. The political dimension of the entry of the other into the purview of the coloniser's language becomes obvious. The other subject is, at this state, laying claim not merely on the English tongue, but on the British nation-state. The notion of a British national identity has had to be re-examined, and perhaps will have to be re-constituted, as a result of this controversy. Salman Rushdie's use of the English language is assured about its right to that language, as he unhesitatingly blends Indianisms, both into the English language as well as into the genre of the English novel. But the controversy that has risen round his book goes beyond, and even ignores it, to highlight the question of the identity of the British state. By asking for the extension of the blasphemy law to include other religious groups, the protesters in the "Islamic Republic of Bradford" are asking for a reappraisal and a redefinition of Britain itself. Like Agard's immigrant in Clapham Common, the protesters would like to include the Queen in changing the face of Britain and of the British — the demand is for a formal constitutional acknowledgment of the other presence in Britain.

The other question that the controversy highlights, and that springs up whenever the colonial (or post-colonial) subject uses the coloniser's language,

pertains to the identity of the writer. Identity, as we have seen, is related to a notion of identification, which is proved by taking up responsibility and commitment. Who is Salman Rushdie writing for? as a writer/intellectual of the diaspora, belonging to no definite place, fitting between myriads of worlds, Salman's Rushdie's audience is as difficult to locate as the writer's identity. Ironically, Wordsworth's definition of the poet as "a man speaking to men" with its vision of a homogeneous society springs to mind. Salman Rushdie is writing for people like himself, and the writer's voice echoes strangely across this heterogeneous domain. Notions of allegiance and belonging become very difficult, but at the same time, cannot be ignored, as they keep cropping up, always trying to pin down identities and identifications. The controversy around *The Satanic Verses* illustrates, poignantly and pointedly, the impossibility of ignoring questions of allegiance, of nationality, of the identity of the author as also of the responses, the identifications, that the writing evokes.

To speak a language is to take on a world, culture.

When we speak the English language, we take on many worlds and many cultures, we are presented with diverse and conflicting positions of power and domination, of desire and identification. It is a complex arena, and exciting in the possibilities that this complexity creates. But, most crucially, English spans a disturbed and disturbing terrain, which does not allow for fixed and comfortable positions, either for the writer or reader.