

fortnightly column

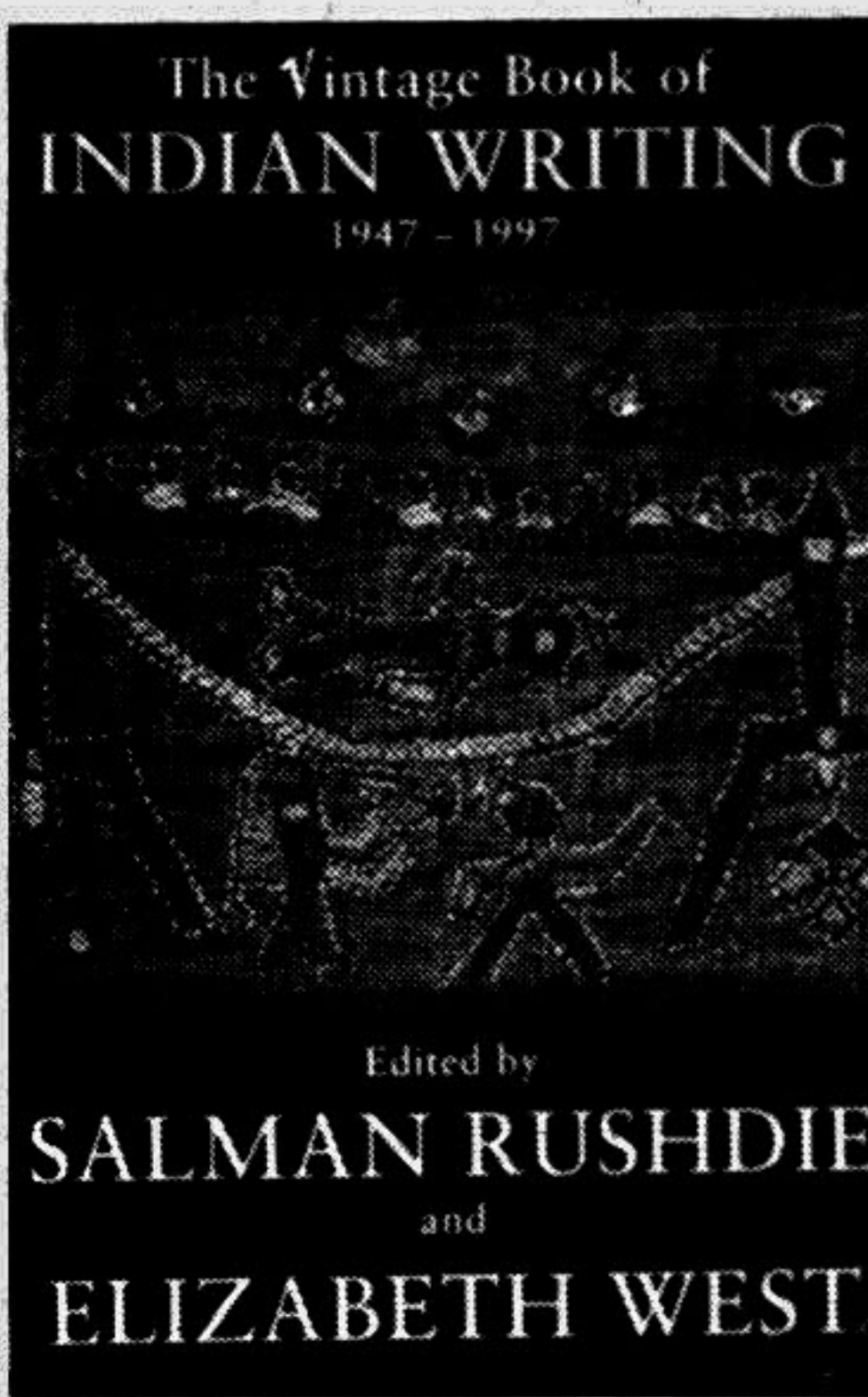
## Imagining The Sub-continent in English

by Fakrul Alam

**A**T 575 pages, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* is a big book. It is also a work which makes major claims for itself. In the backcover blurb, for example, we are told that what the editors, Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, have done is to collect in the volume "the finest Indian writing of the last fifty years" to create "an anthology of extraordinary range and vigour, as exciting and varied as the land that inspired it," and a fitting tribute to the country on the anniversary of India's independence. In his Introduction to the volume, Rushdie is no less vocal in establishing the importance of the book. Brash as ever, Rushdie begins his Introduction by boasting that the Indo-English prose writing that the *Vintage Book* represents "is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages' of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages,'" during the same time. "Furthermore, he declares that this new and burgeoning, 'Indo-English' literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books." A large claim indeed!

In the rest of his polemical Introduction, Rushdie tries to substantiate his claims. He points out that other than Tagore many generations ago no Indian writer has had any impact on world literature until the splash made by Indian English writers recently. He then laments the lack of good English translations of texts produced in the "vernacular languages." But all along he implies that as far as he is concerned the simple but ironical fact is this: "India's best writing since independence" has been "in the language of the departed imperialist." As far as he is concerned, this is a cause for celebration rather than regret since it has made the world take heed of Indian excellence in literature.

Rushdie's Introduction to the *Vintage Book* also attempts to justify the selections he and West have made. He claims that they consider only SH Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" worthy of inclusion from the vernacular languages of India perhaps because of the lack of good translations but possibly also because the works produced in these languages were not as exciting as the ones produced in English. From the generation he dubs "midnight's parents" Rushdie and West have chosen Nehru, Mulk Raj Anand, Nirad C Chaudhuri, RK Narayan, and GV Desani. The next generation of Indian English writers are represented by Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Ved Mehta, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, and Satyajit Ray. On the whole, this is an unexceptionable list, although Raja Rao is left out be-



cause he is found to be "grandiloquent and archaic" even at his best (but why is Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* not even mentioned in the Introduction?). What may surprise us, however, is the presence of Ray who surely has been included because of the influence he has had on Rushdie (for proof one may consult *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*). From the generation that Rushdie represents, and that he has spearheaded with his *Midnight's Children*, he and West have picked Rushdie himself, Padma Perera, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, I Alan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, Sara Suleri, Firdaus Kanga, Anjana Appachana, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, Githa Hariharan, Gita Mehta, and Vikram Seth (this is a rather full list but it should have included Bharati Mukherjee). Finally, from a generation that is just beginning to make its presence felt, Rushdie and West have selected Vikram Chandra, Ardashir Vakil, Mukul Kesavan, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai (here again space could have been found for Adib Khan).

It will require much more space than I can find in a review to show that there is an unacceptable side to Salman Rushdie's assertion that the vernacular literatures of India of recent times — read in translation or not — are basically unworthy of more space than he and Elizabeth West have given it. After all, Rushdie probably knows no other Indian languages other than Urdu and Hindi and West, it is not unreasonable to conclude, knows no Indian language at all. Also, there are translations which read at least as well as the Manto one which the editors could have opted for: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translations of Mahasweta Devi, for instance. Despite Rushdie's dis-

claimer that their "tastes are pretty catholic and our minds ... open" and that they are free of "cultural and linguistic prejudices," it is difficult not to conclude that in his zealotry to promote Indian English writing Rushdie is guilty of overstating the case for it and of underestimating the excellence of the writing done in vernacular languages.

But what about the claims that the writers Rushdie and West have chosen are writing in English because it is an Indian language, that in their English we can at times hear "the music, the rhythms, patterns and habits of thought and metaphor of vernacular languages," that we hear clearly in their work "literary voices" which are distinctively Indian, and that these voices "attempt to encompass as many Indian realities as possible, rural as well as urban, sacred as well as profane?" And what about the contrary claim Rushdie makes when he says that these writers have not fallen in the trap of writing "nationalistically" (Rushdie's italics) and have become "confident, indispensable participants" in world literature? Does the *Vintage Book* bear out Rushdie's final claim that "India's encounter with the English language, far from proving abortive, continues to give birth to new children, endowed with lavish gifts?"

On the basis of the evidence provided in the *Vintage Book* one can conclude that Rushdie is right to say that Indian English writing is quintessentially Indian writing and represents the diversity and vitality of voices heard in the sub-continent. At the same time, it is easy to see that the writing coming out of India in English has a dialogic relationship to the literature emanating from the rest of the world. After having read all the pieces collected in the anthology one can also agree with Rushdie that Indian writing is a healthy and gifted offspring of India's romance with the English language.

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Take the question of the English Language as an Indian Language, for example. Not only is it the case that English became "a naturalised sub-continental language" long ago and is the language of administration and commerce and the principal means of communication across Indian but it is also obvious that the prose contained

in the *Vintage Book* could have only been produced by writers who have made it their own language, even when feeling the pressures of their mother tongues. From the oratorical splendors of Nehru's tryst with destiny" speech with which the *Vintage Book* begins to the elegant memoirs of his niece Nayantara Sahgal, from the "rigmarole English, staining" and no doubt straining (and expanding) the English language given to H. Hatter by his creator G V Desani to the spiced-up — or is it "chutnified?" — English heard in the extract from *Midnight's Children* in lines such as "Oh, I'm sorry, babaji, not to provide for you silk-cushion with gold brocade-work," from the "hip" English heard amidst the Anglicised upper-class youths of India in Upmanyu Chatterjee is fiction ("No Surd, this is just a bad trip. Get some ganja and some sleep, you'll be fine") to the sophisticated postmodern musings of Sara Suleri in her memoir *Meatless Days*, from Nirad Chaudhuri's lyrical and formal evocation of the seasons in Kishoreganj in the extract from his autobiography to the experimental, eccentric prose of Arundhati Roy in the selection from *The God of Small Things* we can witness the ease, versatility, and ingenuousness with which Indian writers have wielded the English language to articulate their visions of India. Occasionally, as in Amit Chaudhuri's languid remembrance of Calcutta, we can see a writer's fondness for vernacular words seep into his English. Thus the extract from his novella *A Strange and Sublime Address* are redolent with Bengali words. At one point, Chaudhuri even has his central character Sandeep (One of the innumerable language-orphaned of Indian's who, of necessity, has adopted English because he had been brought up in Bombay), reacting with delight to the shape of the letters of the Bengali alphabet, "intimate, quirky, graceful, comic, just as he imagined the people of Bengal to be."

Just as the *Vintage Book* bears out Rushdie's claim that the sub-continent's wordsmiths have been forging the English language distinctively to imagine India, it is able to illustrate comprehensively his thesis that the Indian English writers have succeeded in encompassing diverse Indian realities. Within the covers of the anthology

thus we relive life in the major cities of India and in the provincial towns and villages, experience the life lived by its people, and see them caught up in major junctures of the sub-continent's history as well as in their daily routines. Although Rushdie and West could not have planned it that way, the *Vintage Book* confirms that only in the English language can the entire sub-continent be represented in its fullness and multiplicity.

Thus the *Vintage Book* offers us glimpses of the rhythms of life in remote Kishoreganj (Nirad Chaudhuri), a residential suburb in Dhaka in the sixties (Amitav Ghosh), the Bengali middle-class of Calcutta (Amit Chaudhuri, Satyajit Ray), life amidst the struggling musicians of the city (Gita Mehta), an upper-class neighbourhood in Chelani (Padma Perera), colony life in a Parsi housing society in Mumbai (Rohinton Mistry), the club-going aristocrats and the parvenus of the city (Vikram Chandra), Delhi roads, shops, restaurants, and even manholes in Conaught Circus (Mukul Kesavan), a Kashmiri morning (Rushdie), recluses in mountains (Ruth Praver Jhabvala), the proceedings of a literary society in a provincial town (Vikram Seth), rural impoverished India (Kamala Markandaya), office life (Anjana Appachana), going-ons, in third-class train compartments (RK Narayan), and Lahore's Bazaars, restaurants, and parks (Sara Suleri). The anthology tells us about growing up handicapped (Ved Mehta, Firdaus Kanga), the experience of expatriation and hybridity (GV Desani), giving birth (Kiran Desai), the traumas of childhood (Anita Desai), confronting and/or accepting death (Githa Hariharan, Perera), fabricating (Mulk Raj Anand), going to the "talkies" (Arundhati Roy playing tennis competitively (Ardashir Vakil), collecting stamps (Mistry), eating (Suleri), and hunger (Markandaya). The *Vintage Book* also fictionalises major political events of Indian history such as the coming of the Anglo-Indians (I Allan Sealy). The Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre (Shashi Tharoor), Partition and its accompanying religious riots and madness (Manto, Bapsi Sidhwa), the first few years of independent India (Nayantara Sahgal) a religious riot in East Pakistan (Ghosh), and the race riots in and around Delhi after the as-

assassination of Indira Gandhi (Upmanyu Chatterjee). Not a few of the exacts assembled in the *Vintage Book* deal with nature in India: The river, rains, and seasons of Bengal (Nirad Chaudhuri), droughts (Markandaya), the heat of summer (Anita Desai), the first kal-boisakhi of the season. (Amit Chaudhuri) and the coming of the monsoons (Kesavan and Kiran Desai). Indeed, once could almost say about the coverage of India in the *Vintage Book*: here is India in its plenitude!

As for Rushdie's claim that Indian English writers have avoided writing *nationalistically*, it is easy to see that wider world keeps coming into their fictionalisation of India again and again. This could be because so many of these writers are permanent expatriates (Desani, the two Chaudhurs, Markandaya, Ved Mehta, Rushdie, Kanga, Perera, Sidhwa, Tharoor, Suleri, and Vakil) or permanent wanderers, between continents (Chandra, Anita Desai, Jhabvala, Gita Mehta, Ghosh, Seth and Seally). Certainly, almost all of them are cosmopolitans in their outlook, and not a few of them are participants in international literary movements such as magic realism and post-modernism. The fact that the anthology includes three Booker-Prize winners (Jhabvala, Rushdie, Roy), three winners of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Chandra, Amit Chaudhuri, Seally), a winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book of the Year (Mistry), and internationally feted writers such as Nirad Chaudhuri, Mulk Raj Anand, Narayan, and Anita Desai easily illustrates the global appeal of its writers.

In the end, though, the *Vintage Book* must be judged on its own merits and here, too, Rushdie is not far off the mark when he boasts about the quality of his writers. Of course, not everything that Rushdie and West have chosen in first rate — the selection from Vakil's novel *Beach Boy*, for instance, will not sent everyone to the bookshops — and it must be confessed that not all the "classics" of Indian English literature give pleasure in a second reading (Desani's cult classic *All About H Hatter* definitely struck this reviewer as somewhat forced this time). But, on the whole, the *Vintage Book* is a treat and here, and at a special Indian price (five pounds and sixty pence), readers can savour not only familiar delights such as Narayan's depiction of the human comedy, Mulk Raj Anand's story-telling Ved Mehta's preternatural way of describing the world, but also accomplished new spinner of tales such as Amit Chaudhuri, Anjana Appachana, Vikram Chandra and Kiran Desai. Enjoy!

*The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*. Ed. Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West. London: Vintage Books, 1997.

essay

## Critical Social Theory: An Introduction

by Faizul Latif Chowdhury

Continued from the last week

**I**T appears that CT perspective may be utilized for studying human artefacts in order to see the interrelationship between their social roots and technical aspects. CT essentially seeks to find the latent meaning of a phenomenon in order to delve out the hidden forces operative behind it. This means focusing on the non-technical aspects of a phenomenon, in addition to its technical aspects. Despite such intrinsic appeal, CT is as yet to have to its credit any significant political impact. To be true, critical theory has simply failed to make clear its won political implications and how it is to be related to concrete political practice. Any operationalization of the transformational aspect seems to be difficult. This is so, presumably, mainly because of the abstract form in which critical theorists have put forward their arguments. And critical theorists are of no help in this regard. Overtime Habermas himself has shown increasing 'systems-theoretic' overtones, and consequently, the role of individuals in the construction of social reality has been underplayed. It seems that CT is losing its humanistic dimension and characteristic political commitment and reducing to an evaluatory form.

This is illustrated by using a critical perspective in understanding the man-

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agement relationship that were-brought in UK's National Health System (NHS) in the wake of the Next Steps Initiatives of Margaret Thatcher. This installation of NHS illustrates how the orderly program of evolution through improved communicative process is distorted as the steering media gets out of control and internal colonization takes place. The objective of the management reform under the directives of Department of Public Health (DPH) was naturally good; but excessive emphasis on rules and regulations for the sake of establishing accountability resulted in juridification, that is, rules and regulations became constitutive instead of regulative.

How this occurred? The DPH employed accounting methods as a steering media, that would guide the lifeworld of the clinical domain. However, accounting media got out of control and turned out to have colonising effect whereby the clinical domain (lifeworld) was overpowered by the managerial (technical) system. Thus the technical system was no more an expression of the cultural lifeworld. The consequence was the loss of meaning in the lifeworld.

Habermas' critical social scientific methodology may be construed as a three step methodology. In the first step the researcher would develop his theory about the system to be studied. At the second stage, the theory is discussed with its subjects who are being researched in order to enlighten them and achieve a consensus about how to proceed. Based on the consensus, at the final stage, actions are formulated aimed at human emancipation which is the ultimate objective. However, it is not obvious how operationalization of such a methodology will be accomplished. As for example, first, how to accurately recognize the steering media and identify its elements? And then, how to respond to the requirement of discussing with every member of the society?

The dialogic implication is obvious. However, such a dialogue would not be possible if there is a language barrier. So discourse of any science must be modified in order that its subjects are capable of interaction and communication. It seems that despite theoretical validity and normative appeal, applying a CT perspective will be difficult.

At least some adaptation will be necessary to that end.

Apart from this operationalization problem, a critical perspective appears to suggest a consensual approach which particularly seems to be difficult to materialize. In the real world, democracy is a method of reaching consensus among various groups in the society. Two problems arise here. First, how far democracy is good for reaching consensus? Secondly, how will the theoreticians be able to influence the politicians who represent the people? Should the social scientist take part in politics? Or should he keep out and engage in continuous criticism of social order until all domination and exploitation are eradicated?

Critical theory (CT) is distinguished from other social theories by its explicit concern for social change. CT's is a value laden perspective. Using CT not only promises an understanding of a phenomenon and its changes over time, but also the direction of changes in terms of its impact on human emancipation. It expands the concept of rationality. So a CT perspective may be used for evaluating any social (and for that matter, governmental) action or programme. CT is a theory but it is a project in that it is aimed at eradication of social domination. CT attempts to link theory and practice in the pursuit of human emancipation. However, its operational implication for practical application remains to be developed as yet.

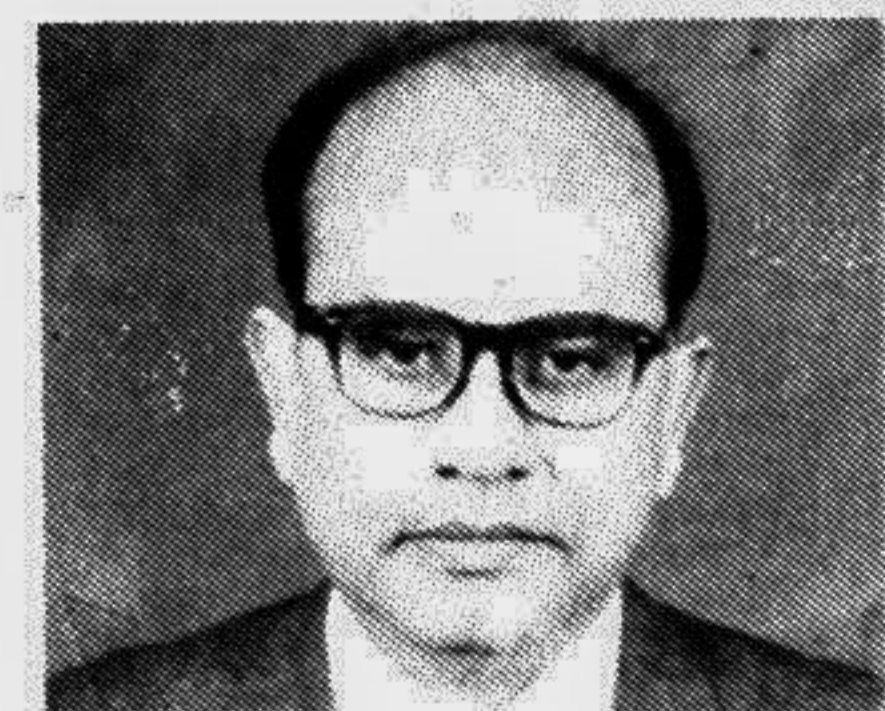
events

## Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta Memorial Lecture on Apr 21

Professor Jasodhara Bagchi, former Professor of English and Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Calcutta will be delivering the *Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta Memorial Lecture* on April 21, 1998 at 4:00 pm at the Institute of Business Administration auditorium. The topic of Professor Bagchi's talk is "Literature of Power and the Power of Literature — the Colonial Dichotomy." The Lecture has been sponsored by the Alumni Society, Department of English, University of Dhaka in memory of Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta who was martyred in 1971.

### Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta: A Profile

**J**YOTIRMOY Guhathakurta was born on 10th July 1920 in Mymensingh. His ancestral village was Banaripara in the district of Barisal. Dr Guhathakurta passed his Matric from the Mymensingh Zilla School in 1936. He studied for a while at Presidency College Calcutta but due to illness discontinued his studies. He then passed his Intermediate from Ananda Mohan College in 1939. In 1942 he graduated from the English Department of Dhaka University in the First Class and in 1943 he completed his MA from the same department. He started his teaching career in Ananda Mohan College and then



Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta (1920-71)

served for some time at Gurudayal College in Kishoreganj. He came to Dhaka in 1946 and began teaching at Jagannath College. On 12th November 1949 he joined the English Department of Dhaka University. In 1967 he was awarded a Ph.D. in English Literature from Kings College, University of London for his dissertation on "Classical Myths in the Plays of Swinburne, Bridges, Sturge Moore and Eliot." Dr Guhathakurta served as a house tutor at Jagannath Hall from 1958 to 1963 and on 20th April 1970 he took up the responsibility of Provost of the same residential hall. It was while serving his term as Provost that he was shot by Pakistani soldiers during the 25th March military crackdown on Dhaka and the rest of the country. Dr Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta succumbed to his injuries on 30th March 1971 leaving behind his family as well as his many students, colleagues and admirers.