

music

Auction with a Musical Zing

by Fayza Haq

THE Watermill Theatre that brought the innovative production of Shakespeare's "Henry V", presented a fascinating morning of a medley of ballads, folk songs, and an excerpt from the play itself at the British Council auditorium. Incidentally, somehow the Shakespearean sonnets, that had been advertised for the day, were put aside. This entertainment with guitars, a violin and a tambourine proceeded along with auctions, with the audience contributing money for the recent floods in Bangladesh. Not only did the performers sing themselves, they lured, trained and guided the enthusiastic and eager audience to sing entire songs like that of "Ned Kelly," Australian origin — but popular in the Anglophelic world. There was clapping, humming and singing among the audience, and they enjoyed themselves immensely, specially seeing the main performer, the violin player, who swivelled his hips and gyrated to add humour and spirited vibrancy to the performance. A young lad and a young woman from the audience were brought on stage to lend fervour and fun of audience participation. The vignette from "Henry V", with Princess Katherine and her maid in the bathroom, with a lesson in the English language in progress, which was an admirable experimental effort, was undoubtedly

delectable, with its farcical and rough and tumble treatment. A book on Shakespeare's works for Tk 5,000, tennis balls, baseball bats used as props in the play, seen earlier that week, posters and autographed programmes were auctioned to collect about Tk 50,000. There had been no entry fee for the occasion.

Tony Bell, talking about his contribution to the music, says that he plays the violin in other plays too by the same company. "When we were doing 'Henry V' with the director, and we all had to stay in the countryside to rehearse. In the evenings we would play music together to entertain ourselves. The director observed 'Why don't we put this music in the play instead of using electronic sound effects?' He wanted to cross the barriers between the audience and the actors, making it more of a participatory event. The music fitted in with the whole style of communicating performance. I play four parts in 'Henry V' such as that of Westmoreland, the governor of Harfleur etc. As in this play, we had Irish songs in another play 'Comedy of Errors'. We call this 'jamming' which is free flow of music with the dialogue and the action. One of the actors Dugald Bruce Lockhart knew some Cypriot songs which he learnt in his childhood in Cyprus, and this was included in one of our productions," he explains.

"The music playing is a fun thing for us and is not basically our profession. It



The Watermill Theatre group presenting folk songs at the British Council Auditorium.

— Star photo

is something we do to relax and entertain ourselves. So the rehearsals for the music was like a combination of work and play," he continues.

"Our type of music crosses all cultural barriers and the 'Poges' played the same kind of music, being a London Irish pub band, and eventually became

very successful. Drinking accompanied this, and we realised that this type of music would have popular appeal. On this occasion we sang 'The Wild Drover', 'Ned Kelly', 'The Drunken Sailor' and 'I'll Tell Mamma'. What makes 'Ned Kelly' famous is that it is popular as a folk song, originating from Australia,

and is something which the English speaking people know as a social experience as teen-agers and individuals in their twenties in pubs. Bob, who was one of the actors, who was with us originally, taught us this song," Tony adds.

Talking about how folk songs in the west compete with video music, Tony comments, "People like our folk music as it is a live presentation. The actual art of performing this music gives joy to viewers as this depicts people having a good time in the flesh which pales before an experience on the video screen. When this is combined in a play it becomes essential to the experience of the play."

Discussing what the group likes to play and hear, Tony adds, "I personally like all types of music from classical Vivaldi to Irish folk. I own about 3,000 albums and I love listening to all of them. For me pop singers like Madonna and Michael Jackson too have their appeal. My colleagues have similar taste and one of them even plays professionally"

Discussing Indian music with its essential *sitar* and *tabla* charm, Tony comments, "I've been to India, to Delhi, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta before, where I played the violin. At Calcutta I bought two harmoniums, and I play this musical instrument in 'Comedy of Errors'. I believe the combination of eastern and western music in the recent past has been very successful. World music is

much more popular now in the west. Celtic music is getting its stream of enthusiasts. These musicians tend to incorporate eastern music with their own genre of music. There are several musicians who do it like Davy Spillain who is from Ireland, Doreen McKenna, who is from Canada, and there is a group called 'Outback' who put the Australian didgeridoo to merge with eastern rhythms. They use the fiddle with eastern notes, for instance."

The songs at the performance at the BC auditorium were "auctioned" in the sense that before each song contributions were collected from the audience by the actor who played Princess Katherine's maid. The music was a fraction of the entertainment included in the play with its bold innovative presentation, with little artificial lights or stage props, and costumes of the modern era. The economy of the props and costumes, the use of male actors for female parts, as was the practice in Shakespeare's days, along with the fact the actors performed at times in the aisles, as was once originally done in the Middle Ages, added to the integral value of the play. The scene of Princess Katherine with the humour over her language learning, plus the fact that she was presented in a despicable chemise, with white plaster on her face, and a bedraggled yellow band on her hair, instead of the romanticised and glamorised conventional manner provided an intrinsically nouveau approach.

book review

An Absorbing Narrative

by James Rogers

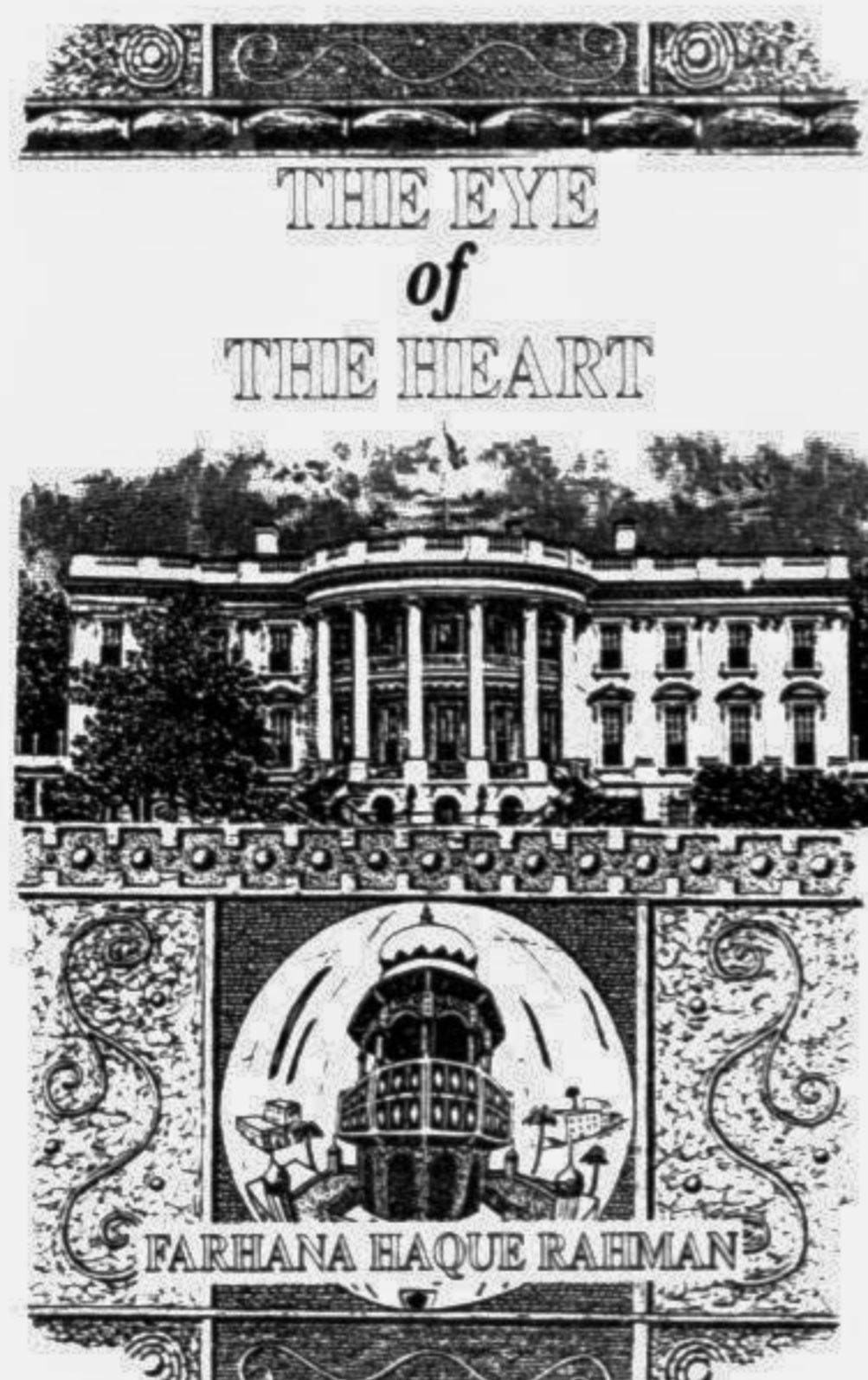
WHenever I introduce a novel to my students, I begin by asking them the question: "What is it about?" The more thoughtful or more experienced realize that what I am asking has less to do with the plot than with what the author has to say about the human condition, what insights he or she has into the endlessly fascinating kaleidoscope of human experience. Here *The Eye of the Heart* is rich indeed.

Just to mention a few of the themes: the conflict (and, at times, convergence) of very different cultures, on both an international and personal level; the struggle of women to be seen and accepted as equals in a man's world; the desire for power and status; the impact of history on the present; the "battle" between emotion and reason; the search for individual meaning and direction. All these are skillfully and thoughtfully treated through a strong, at times compelling story.

A novel is, essentially, about people: their hopes and fears, their strengths

The Eye of the Heart
by Farhana Haque Rahman
published by The University Press Limited
pages: 262, price Tk 350

and weaknesses, their attempts to cope with, give meaning to, their lives, to discover who they really are. The two protagonists in *The Eye of the Heart*, Umber Khan and Brian Randolph, struggle, each in their own way, to find themselves and, eventually, each other. Each comes to life as an interesting, "real", three-dimensional person. Surrounding and interacting with them are a myriad of secondary characters who, with a few deft strokes, also come alive: James Allen, the whirling dervish Director of the CIA; Joseph Blandon, his progressively disenchanted subordinate; Senator Green, Brian's boorish political nemesis; Ahmed, the corrupt 1st Secretary of the Bangladesh Embassy and his self-satisfied colleague Kaleem Siddique; Allison, Brian's alcoholic wife; Lawrence Rawlings, Brian's lawyer; even Mr. Samuel, the professional assassin. They each have their



own personalities, their own mannerisms, their own habits of speech. All

contribute to the rich narrative and thematic tapestry of the novel. I found particularly effective the way Umber Khan's delightful young daughter Alveera becomes an unwitting go-between in the relationship between her mother and the Vice President.

Ms Haque Rahman's control of written English is exceptional. Certainly she does not "write down" to a non-native English-speaking readership, upon whom some of the subtleties of syntax and vocabulary may well be lost. Her prose is crafted to suit a variety of moods — slyly satirical, contemplative, romantic, dramatic — coupled with a fine eye for telling detail of person and place. Her ability to write convincing dialogue is impressive; one can "hear" the various characters speaking in their own voices. Equally impressive is her ability to evoke a wide range of scenes: diplomatic gatherings in Washington, luncheons at Brian Randolph's Virginia estate, confrontations between Brian and his alcoholic wife, a crucial dinner for two at an elegant inn, the opening session of the UN General Assembly in New York, a New Year's Eve party in Dhaka and an assassination attempt. I

found particularly vivid the description of the devastating cyclone, a dramatic and symbolic event that sweeps Umber Khan and Bangladesh into evermounting crisis, and deeply moving Umber Khan's address to the UN General Assembly.

The novelist's craft also involves form, structure, the ordering of material. *The Eye of the Heart* begins, literally, minutes before the end and then goes back over the preceding year — sometimes at a leisurely pace, sometimes at breakneck speed — to fill in the "picture in the frame". Long (though not always quiet scenes) are broken up by shorter ones. The effect is lulling at one moment, dissonant or suspenseful at another, with the author in clear but unobtrusive control of the pattern — the mosaic if you will — of the overall effect, although some readers may find the sudden switches in mood and form difficult to follow and appreciate.

One problem any novelist faces is that of deciding on his or her intended readership: what are readers familiar (or unfamiliar) with, what would they want or need to know about various characters or settings, what can be

taken for granted and what cannot? Here, it seems to me, Ms Haque Rahman addresses two very different potential audiences, Bangladeshi and American [Eastern and Western], and does so with a keen sense of how to communicate with both. For example, her descriptions of Dhaka, a social gathering at an affluent Dhaka home or a traditional upper class wedding are vivid and informative to one unacquainted with her native land and its customs, while also, I imagine, being of interest to Bangladeshi readers. The same can be said, in reverse, of her treatment of rural Virginia, Washington diplomatic life or the UN General Assembly. I was particularly impressed by the effective way she introduces some of the history of India/Bangladesh, especially that involving Hindu/Muslim conflicts, for while most of it is undoubtedly familiar to her Bangladeshi readers, it is presented in a context that makes narrative sense, i.e. Umber Khan musing to herself or talking to less well-informed Americans.

One final comment. In the right hands, this richly rewarding novel would make an excellent film.

book news

"Gandhi was Emotionally Troubled, Jinnah a Secularist"

by Bharatendu Kabi

EVEN as the nation celebrates Mahatma Gandhi's 129th birth anniversary, a British author dubs the father of the nation as an "emotionally troubled social activist" and calls Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the man widely blamed to have been responsible for the partition of India, as "a secularist to the end."

"If Gandhi is your hero, it can be a deflating experience to read what he actually did and said at crucial points in India's political history. The authorized version of the Mahatma is very different from the real one.

"Far from being a wise and balanced saint, Gandhi was an emotionally troubled social activist and a ruthlessly sharp political negotiator," says author Patrick French in *Liberty or Death — India's Journey to Independence and Division*.

He quotes India's transport minister in 1947 Dr John Mathai as saying "the final failure to reach a satisfactory settlement with the Muslim League stemmed in part from the 'Gujarati mentality' of the Congress leadership — i.e. that of a trader driving a hard bargain."

On the other hand, 32-year-old French describes Jinnah as "the forgotten player in the story of India's independence and division".

"The truth about Jinnah is that his political ideology developed and matured in a gradual and complex way over fifty years, and that the founder of the homeland for Indian Muslims remained a secularist of sorts to the end," says French who has been awarded the "Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award" for the book this year.

Well-researched, "liberty or death" systematically goes on to squarely put the blame on the Congress leadership for forcing Jinnah to take the hardline stand on partition which "altered India's history by cracking the edges off the diamond and creating what was then the fifth largest sovereign state in the world".

"Although the families of Jinnah and Gandhi had at one point lived little more than 30 miles (50 kms) apart in Gujarat, the similarities in their origins did nothing to unite the two men. The fatally antagonistic tenor of their relationship was set at their first meeting.

"It took place in January 1915 at a garden party organised by the *Gurjar Sabha* (Gujarati society) of Bombay to celebrate Gandhi's return from South Africa. Jinnah was the chairman of the society, and in response to his speech of welcome, Gandhi said he was 'glad to find a Mohamedan not only belonging to his own region's sabha but chairing it'.

"This would be a little like a British

politician commenting publicly on a colleague's foreign racial origins, in a situation where such matters were entirely incidental," French says.

Quoting Jinnah's biographer Stanley

Wolpert, he says "had he meant to be malicious rather than his ingenuous self, Gandhi could not have contrived a more cleverly patronising barb for he was not actually insulting Jinnah, after all, just informing everyone of his mi-

nority religious identity."

"What an odd fact to single out for comment about this multifaceted man, whose dress, behaviour, speech and manner totally belied any resemblance

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to his religious affiliation" carrying on his assessment of the "two men from Gujarat", French says "Gandhi remains the most baffling and inconsistent figure in the freedom movement, a man who worshipped truth yet often had

trouble identifying it."

"Although he is perhaps the most documented person in human history, it is at times hard to establish his opinions ... a close reading of his statements on a particular subject usually results not in a sense of illumination, but of obfuscation."

"... he intertwined religion, politics and philosophy with personal health, sexual relations and dietary fads. For him, there was no distinction between the public, the private and the political ... thus, when it became known that he was sleeping with his great-niece Manu, he announced at a prayer meeting that 'he did not want his most innocent acts to be misunderstood and misrepresented'."

"He had his granddaughter with him, she shared the same bed with him. The prophet had discounted eunuchs who became such by an operation ... it was in the spirit of god's eunuch that he had approached what he considered his duty."

French calls Gandhi's famous *Autobiography* an "elusive book ... a work of Victorian moral sermonising, linked to the author's experiences of wrestling with his conscience."

French, whose earlier book *Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer* won the Somerset Maugham award and the Royal Society of literature Heinemann Prize in 1995,

has utilised the forward to the Indian edition of "Liberty or Death" to put forward his point of view after the extracts of the book carried in a leading fortnightly in August last year had created a hue and cry in the country.

"Like Nehru, I remain an admirer of Gandhi. I believe he was a political and social leader of unparalleled skill and determination, without whom India would not have won independence from British rule in 1947. He was the fulcrum of the freedom movement."

"Yet, does this liberate him from scrutiny, or from criticism?... I do not believe that political leaders deserve to be treated with special reverence. Figures such as Winston Churchill, Lord Linlithgow and Clement Atlee emerge from 'Liberty or Death' with their reputations severely clipped; indeed, my conclusions on them are harsher than my view of Gandhi."

"The writing of history should be a dynamic process. Political leaders — even Mahatmas, Pandits, Sardars and Netajis — are fallible. They have prejudices and they make mistakes, just like the rest of us, although usually with more destructive consequences since their influence and power is so much greater," concludes the author.

(*Liberty or Death — India's Journey to Independence and Division*. Author: Patrick French. Published by Harper Collins, PP 467, Price: Rs 295)