



## book review

# Two Prose in Parallel

by AMM Aabad

**W**HEN an artist, painter or writer (using brush, pen, pencil or musical instrument) makes a viewer/listener forget the medium she is a good artist, offering creativity without any tag attached. A good writer can make a reader forget the language in which he is reading.

Waiting for the late, lazy winter to make up its mind, one mid-morning, when the newspapers did not come out the day after the V-Day, I walked a leisurely kilometre to my friend's (a pensioner, therefore free) for the usual chat. He graciously made me wait for a few minutes and slid a new book he had just received from his son settled in the States.

The name Paul Theroux sounded familiar to my eyes (you hear the sound of the style through your eyes during the silent reading). After my return home, I found in my library another slim volume written by Paul Theroux, *The Consul's File*, short tales of Malay life in the 1970s. In the remarks I had jotted down in the fly leaf of the book, during the first and subsequent readings, I had liked the writer for his story-telling ability.

He is an American writer (born in 1940), and he had the rare gift of writing in 'English English' (try Clifton Fadiman, another American master). He appears to have been influenced by S Maugham, and by his short stay at the U of Singapore where he taught English in the early '70s; providing substance and colour to the Malay characters in the book published in 1977. I went through a couple of stories quickly, and found he had improved upon his craft of writing in his latest book published in 1990, on his 30 years of literary friendship with VS Naipaul, now Sir Vidia (!).

While waiting at my friend's well decorated verandah, I dipped into random pages of the book. The blurb on the jacket was not much exaggerated "I understand again how the pros of a true writer can bring us to a place beyond," wrote the reviewer in the Washington Post Book World. The writer must be true, not necessarily great. Another reviewer smelled Maugham and Conrad.

Back home, I browsed through the biography of VS Naipaul, as seen through Theroux's lifelong friendship with Sir Vidia, a youngish knight at 58 (others got the title late in life, to keep company at the lonely vigils).

After dinner I settled down with Theroux, after I picked up from my library Naipaul's paperback *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977). My notes (1993) on the body of the book mentions some points about the some glittering aspects of Naipaul's writings, more clearly revealed by Paul Theroux in his latest offering of auto-biography: tight composition, economy of style, sharp power of observation, therefore an obsession for hair-splitting, and offering more angles of perspective. Naipaul's plaintive tone which I had noticed earlier has been explained by Paul, marginal living and core thinking during the formative years; resulting in a fixation for good food and close scrutiny of the menus at posh restaurants.

When the pen is facile, and the outcome effortless, why not pile on the effects — that is a temptation difficult to resist, at least in the western world; whereas in zen painting much of the hand work is left to the imagination of the viewer. Analysis, synthesis and mimicry, bustees, skyscrapers and paradise lost; all add to the synthetic rainbow, subject to the traffic jam of the imagination, distilled for reality. I wondered about my 5-year-old note in the book on the wounded civilisation; "The prodigal's revenge — in elegant

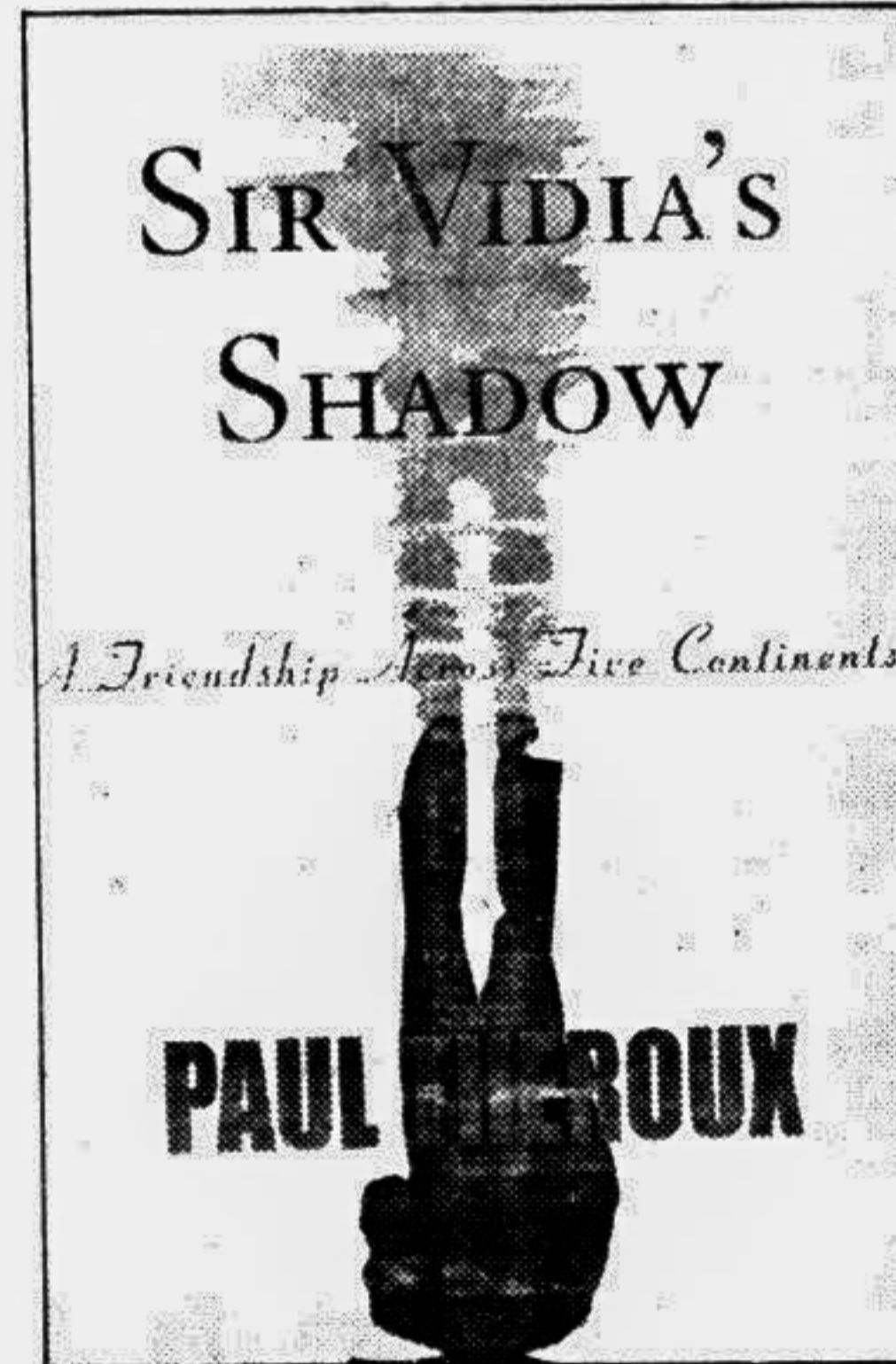
language; a pen-picture to the world."

Reading these literary anecdotes of Theroux reminded me of another fine writer of English prose, editor and publisher Edward Weeks of the institutional *The Atlantic Magazine* (300 issues for 22 years), who also talked about the inner lives of his regular contributors, many of them at the top selling list, in his classical book *Writers and Friends* (1981). That makes it three prose in parallel (not to speak of Maugham and other favourites).

An experienced Editor is an asset in any society. Weeks is extremely readable; and brought to life personalities such as Lippmann, the Sitwells, Maugham, Wollcott, Kazin, and Ved Mehta, when read at the right time. Week's style floats, and he hides his art to wait the flavour of his contributors.

Theroux captures in an entertaining way the man hiding behind the paper pages of the book. Sir Vidia caught the 'Teutonic wordiness' of the English white writers, and differentiated between the Dot Indians' (from India) and the feather Indians' of the States.

I have not yet finished the book on Sir Vidia's scintillations, but here is a paragraph or two from the notes jotted down from the stray browsing of some



of the chapters. Norman Mailer set up a bazaar of metaphors' in contrast to the transparency of Paul's pen. Sir Vidia wrote because he had never enough cash

to spare, and won't write if rich — a mentality of the 'barefoot colonial'. Write for whom — Naipaul did not circulate in the world of Hemingways.

The colonials had a self-destructive instinct for chaos. Perhaps that was the reason G Greene found Sir Vidia's style 'airless'. According to the letter, if a writing was 'fair', it would be noticed, award or no award. As for women, according to VSN, they like witnesses to their tragedies and triumphs.

Perhaps it is polite to leave something for the other readers to find out for themselves what made the knighted writer from Trinidad tick, so charmingly portrayed by Paul Theroux. There is no greater satisfaction than self-discovery, however trivial — life becomes worth living.

As the astronaut remarked on man's first landing on the moon: a small step by man, but a great leap forward for mankind (or something to this effect).

Enjoy your reading hours — mercifully you are left alone. For men, there is another refuge — while shaving. Both these private pastimes provide a great deal of pleasure with minimum economy. Why? You switch off the mind to neutralise it for a while, and then come back recharged, and refreshed.

# Passages in India

by Alexandra Lange

## Father India

How Encounters With an Ancient Culture Transformed the Modern West.

By Jeffery Paine.

324pp. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. \$25.

**I**F you wanted to be terrifically shallow, you could just read Jeffery Paine's seemingly scholarly book for the sex. Or the lack thereof. Never was there such an effusion of Protestant guilt and sublimated libido. Gandhi sleeps with a beautiful 19-year-old just to prove he has no more sexual interest in her than her mother did. E. M. Forster turns a maharajah into his procurer. Christopher Isherwood learns he can have a guru and faceless sexual encounters too. There are pedophiles and couples in "spiritual marriages," princes who like dirty jokes and writers who try not to touch another Indian. It's a rogue's gallery of sexual dysfunction, and Paine seems only too happy to dish.

His premise is grand -- "Father India" proposes to be a resolutely anti-imperialist history of how India influenced the West, and a history not about wars and maps but about messy emotion. Paine, a former literary editor of *The Wilson Quarterly* and now a contributing editor, chooses Boswell as his

"Father India" proposes to be a resolutely anti-imperialist history of how India influenced the West, and a history not about wars and maps but about messy emotion. Paine, a former literary editor of *The Wilson Quarterly* and now a contributing editor, chooses Boswell as his guide: "In my mind, he was the first of a new kind of traveler, who voyaged out not for profit or preaching but rather to spill his innards all over the map."

guide: "In my mind, he was the first of a new kind of traveler, who voyaged out not for profit or preaching but rather to spill his innards all over the map." Charming, and very late-20th-century. Paine groups his seven subjects into three loftily titled sections -- Society, Self, Universe -- each pairing someone who left India with someone who stayed. Viceroy Lord Curzon is matched with the theosophist Annie Besant, Forster contrasted with V. S. Naipaul, Isherwood, in a chapter called "Spirituality's Back Door," compared with Gandhi. Jung, Martin Luther King Jr. and the cross-cultural and the apparently celibate couple Mirra Richard and Aurobindo make cameo appearances.

Paine's hope is that we'll conflate these intellectuals' reaction to India

with the larger West's, and read the changes in their work as transformative on a larger scale. Gandhi and King, linked by their nonviolent philosophy, obviously had an effect. But how much of it can be attributed to India, in King's case, and to the perspective gained from a trip to England, in Gandhi's case, remains undetermined.

Paine's logical chains aren't strong enough to support his subtitle: "How Encounters With an Ancient Culture Transformed the Modern West." He bounces about among psychology, literary criticism and a creative retelling of biographical fact, coddling the reader with brief digressions into Indian history. Partition, the end of British rule, Gandhi's political campaigns -- all these distract from the flow of each character's tale, without giving a real

sense of context.

Paine also occasionally lapses into prose worthy of a romance novel. "On that hot August night in 1891 the world turned upside down, and subsequently nothing would ever make any sense again," he writes, describing Besant's sudden conversion to mystical theosophy. "But trouble was in the air -- in the hot, idle, unsublimated air of Dewas. . . . To grow sickly with desire, to become wan or ill with it, was that to be his fate?" This of Forster, for whom, we learn, masturbation is no longer working.

In the book's most vigorous (and amusing) chapter, Paine gleefully details Forster's daily humiliations as he ineptly propositions a palace servant, then enters into a sanctioned, purely physical relationship with the ma-

harajah's barber. "During the Gokul Ashtami festival, as the noisy chanting resounded everywhere, he and Kanaya met in the secret palace suite. As the festival approached its climax, Forster -- not to make a play on words -- approached his." As Paine rightly points out, it's awfully hard to imagine the man who wrote "only connect" with an Indian concubine, male or female, but it's all true. Forster might never have written another novel, and certainly not "A Passage to India," if not for his daily "grooming" sessions.

Paine has less to work with in other chapters, stretching his intriguing material too thin. He hypes each revelation, padding with prologues, introductions, flashbacks, flash-forwards, to try to add drama. You keep thinking you've got to the bedchamber, then re-

alize you're still in the endless series of anterooms.

Paine's publishers as well seem to have been confused as to what he's up to, and it shows in the packaging. The book's cover is a shocking pink with gold embroidery patterns, like the hem of a polyester sari. Another romantic touch? A Diana Vreeland joke is obviously called for (pink is the navy blue of India, she once famously remarked); had the book been about the so-called modern West's influence on the subcontinent the cover would, no doubt, look like a blazer and a rep tie.

After 300 pages of thwarted sexuality, thwarted spirituality, thwarted imperialism, India seems more like a land of confusion than a fatherly force. Even Jung, supposedly in India to get away from Freud's oversimplification of the psyche, spends most of his time in India in the hospital with dysentery. "What exactly about India could Jung not digest (besides the amoebas)?" Paine asks, reading far too much into a common traveler's problem. Western civilization, whatever its faults, was not transformed by a piece of unwashed fruit.

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## fiction

# Rib Number Thirteen

by Fayeza Hasnat

**"T**HERE is nothing to be scared of," he said. "I'm with you and there is nothing to be scared of. I will show you where the dreamy lily grows and I'll give you a bunch of bluebells. Hold my hand and let us go." Let us go then, you and I, into that deep forest where nothing happens and nobody can be blamed even if something happens there. The woods are lovely, dark and deep, and I have no damn promises to keep. So I put a tiny bit of my heart's Don Juan on my mouth and transform it into a smile. Then I spread my branch of a hand and say, as alluringly as possible, "Let us go then, you and I..."

She trembled like a fallen leaf. Then she opened up her big black eyes and fixed her innocent look over his tensely relaxed face. She did not know how to look differently. She had been taught for ages to take a flickering look when men are around. "This sort of a look arouses a man," Grandma used to tell her, "Go to the mirror and practice that look." Mirror mirror on the wall... She grew up with many others in the light of mirrors. At the end, only mirror survived, teaching her to forget herself. Now, she wanted to remember all the tricks the enchanting mirror had taught but her memory lacked reflection.

She kept on looking down, twisting the anchal of her saree with her point-

ers. The autumn breeze started to blow gently and her unruly hair started dancing around her glowing cheek. She thought she was looking beautiful. Eyes like bird's nest, Banalata Sen. Bird's nest. Straws, dried grass and grass roots. Quite itchy imagery. But she wanted to look like Banalata Sen. Kamini told her that Miss Sen was the dream girl of everyman in this country. Almost every boy had fallen in love with her as soon as he crossed his puberty. She could not figure it out how all the boys fell in love with a Hindu woman without raising a riot! She had not seen any portrait of the nest-eyed beauty. But she thought she should look like the woman who is the idol of everyman. Who else could she look like? She had not read that much of romance stories. Father would kill her if he found her reading bad books. Only female gossips told her about Cleopatra and Helen. Kamini informed her that bad books are real good books and parents did not let them read the books because they themselves read those books secretly. Else, how would parents know which part of a man's body is aroused when a girl gives him a sweet look? How did grandma know all that? Kamini gave her a collection of the best love poems of the century where she read about this nest-eyed woman who asked her beloved, "where have you been so long?" Was not that a dying dream? To kill your beloved with a simple blink and an interrogative? She was also dying with such a dream and before she could even



ask him the most tender question in a passionate way, he informed her that he had been in London ... In London? And she was chosen by a man who had seen the queen's country! Where did Banalata Sen's lover come from? O, well, that did not matter any more.

Grandma used to rebuke her when she wanted to hit father when he was hitting mom. "Don't be obstinate," Grandma said, "A woman has to be chastised if she talks back to her hus-

band, you see, a wife's heaven is under her husband's feet." She would scream, "But grandma, father never washes his feet. When he takes off his socks, they stink. Heaven stinks grandma." Hush, hush, silly girl you will also be a woman. She used to wipe her mother's dewdrop of tears and whisper, "Why do you let him beat you Ma?" Mother then told her a very strange story. She was made out of the thirteenth rib of her husband's chest.

Every woman was an extension of her husband's thirteenth rib. The owner would eventually find out his extended part and claim it through marriage. Mother was only an extended part of her father and ribs did not talk, did they? But why was she made out of a single rib was an enigma she could not understand. Did God run out of clay? Mother told her that God did not need woman, man did. Adam told God that he needed a woman for mere personal reason ("which God would not understand, mother said, "Because God was not a person"). So, the thirteenth rib came into being for man's very personal reason and for that reason a woman should never defy her husband. She was too innocent to defy her mother's axioms. "You'll see mother, I will be a very pretty woman and my husband will always love me."

She is always being told that she is pretty. But that has been more like a casual compliment to her. Every night she dreams of an adoring pair of eyes. Everyday she waits to see the trees at her window covered with letters for her. Tree at my window, window tree. But there is no Orlando in this town for the lovesick Rosalind. Then one day, just like a dream he comes to claim her. How can she refuse? It takes him a long time to reach the perfect place. Tall trees, creating dark shadows beneath. Then he walks back and forth. The scorching sun is still determined to intrude. The lonely skylark shatters its wings for some unknown fear. He seems to be

disturbed. Softly she touches his wrist, "Stranger, are you lost?" Her curly hair forms ringlets around her forehead and her face. He strokes the ringlets and says, "No. I am a man and a man is never lost."

She has read that life flows like a river. She has felt her thoughts flowing like an endless stream. She also knows that pains are endless. None of them has ever been lost in the deep forest. But after each journey into the deep, dark wood, she finds herself last in the wilderness of pain. In her life they came and go, talking... But she is still waiting. The lonely woman waiting for her demon lover. How long can she wait? How many times can be broken into pieces?

He says he has been madly in love with her. He promises to give him one hundred and one red roses. He speaks of killing the dying day and bring the starry sky down to cover her dazzling beauty. And then he leads her toward the forest. Seeds of promises are sown around the rosethrub. Caterpillars tread and the slanting sunlight steals her secrecy once more. The stooping branches of Devdaru and Ashatha make efforts to spread up a shawl of comfort. "Don't worry," he says when he can finally bring his lost breath back. "Are you crying? Don't cry. Everything will be alright." Pulling back her unruly anchal from the roaring wind, she starts her journey. "I am not crying," she says, "I am tired of tears and laughter."