

## impressions

# Bengali Woman Writes Book, Takes Heat

by Julian E. Barnes

**M**INA Saha Farah, a Bengali dentist who lives and works in Queens and has written for Bengali newspapers, insists that when she started out to write a book last November, she planned it as a critique of organized religion.

But the final product, which Dr. Farah is spending some \$8,000 of her own money to publish next week, singles out Islam for the toughest criticism. It argues that a growing fundamentalism is blinding Muslim Bengalis, preventing them from joining the "high-tech revolution" and prospering economically, and relegating women to subservient roles.

Dr. Farah's thesis has been raised by many Western scholars. But what is different is her role as a well-known member of the city's Bengali immigrant community. Since February, when word of her book and its title, "God on Trial," began circulating within that community, she has been criticized by some immigrant groups whose officials disagree with Dr. Farah's assessment of Islam.

"People should have the freedom to speak and to think," she said in an interview last week. "We are become more of a mosque-based society rather than a free-minded society."

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The book, and the angry pre-publication reaction it has provoked, has brought into sharp relief divisions between religious and more secular Bengali immigrants over what role religion should play in America and how freely Bengalis should criticize Islam or their own community.

"Mina Farah should spend her money and her talents to help her community, not to divide it," said Showkat Ali, the president of the Bangladesh Journalists Association of North America, who lives in downtown Brooklyn. "We all have a responsibility to our culture."

Dr. Farah, who was born into a Hindu family and married a Muslim, said she does not consider herself a member of any particular faith. In the

last few months, she said, telephone callers to her home have cursed her, called her a nonbeliever and made vague threats against her family. The owner of the city's largest Bengali-language bookstore, Bishawajit Saha, said he had also received threatening calls, although he planned to stock "God on Trial" at his shop, Muktaadhar, on 74th Street in Jackson Heights, Queens. "Already some people have called, they say you don't do this," Mr. Saha

said. "I know it is a controversial book but we respect democracy." Mr. Saha said his store was vandalized in 1992 when he sold the novels of the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin, an outspoken critic of Islam. But Dr. Farah's critics say she should not be compared to Miss Nasrin. "People might demonstrate and boycott against her, Abdul Quddus Chaudhury Mohammad, the director of the Muslim Foundation of America, said of Dr. Farah.

"They might even excommunicate her. But I don't believe any illicit action will be taken. People enjoy the freedom of America. People are not going to jeopardize that."

## book review

# The Ground Beneath Her Feet

Salman Rushdie's new novel sets the familiar myth in the glittering world of rock-and-roll celebrities

by Michael Wood

By Salman Rushdie.  
575 pp. New York:  
Henry Holt & Company, \$27.50.

**"T**HERE are two countries," Salman Rushdie wrote in his 1983 novel, "Shame." "Real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality." Rushdie's angle to reality, as we all know, altered violently after he wrote those words, but even earlier, in "Midnight's Children," where the narrator is born at the exact moment of the historical partition of India, there were already slippages. In the novel Gandhi is assassinated on the wrong day, and the narrator can't rewrite or repent: "In my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time."

Much wonderful fiction runs parallel to reality, if we take reality (for the moment) to mean the material world inhabited by live human beings, and some fiction simply usurps reality's space. But there are writers who specialize in the angled relation: Borges, Nabokov, Grass, Garcia Marquez, Rushdie himself. There is a speculative or satirical edge to their divergences; the country at an angle is a quizzical commentary on our own. History disappears into fantasy only to reappear as a haunting or a reproach. In "The Ground Beneath Her Feet," his exuberant and elegiac new novel -- and to my mind his best since "Midnight's Children" -- Rushdie takes this movement about as far as it can go. Just as in Nabokov's "Invitation to a Beheading" the insane inhabitants of the fictional world have glimpses of what we take to be the real world, certain characters in Rushdie's work peer out into our space and see what we take to be the facts. A young man in the novel's India is able, by a kind of scrambled and temporally troubled communication with our world, to sing hit songs of the 50's and 60's before they are released in the West: "Yesterday," "Blowin' in the Wind," "I Got YOU, Babe," "Like a Rolling Stone." By the same means he seems to

What Rushdie is doing goes well beyond joke and whimsy. The world of this novel -- several countries, East and West -- exists at a wide angle to reality but also makes us wonder what would happen if the angle closed. Rushdie is demonstrating not the fictionality of fiction (or of reality) but the difficulty of telling where fiction begins and ends. In his short-story collection, "East, West," he writes ironically of those who oppose "the free, unrestricted migration of imaginary beings into an already damaged reality," but the irony is more complicated than it looks. We need those imaginary beings, and one of the saddest moments in "The Ground Beneath Her Feet" occurs when the young Indian, now older, loses his access to his alternative world because that world itself has died. But we need to look to our damaged reality too.

see that John Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, that there is an American President called Richard Nixon, that British troops are not involved in Vietnam. Carly Simon is not the same person as Paul Simon, and John Lennon is not Mick Jagger. Within the world of the novel, though, these are not facts but weird alternative realities, crazed visions.

Facts inside the fiction include John Kennedy's narrow escape in Dallas, the double assassination of John and Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles by a single ricocheting bullet, a novel called "Catch-18," another called "The Watergate Affair" and the literal reenactment of the plots of several famous movies, like Bunuel's "Exterminating Angel," Godard's "Breathless" and Truffaut's "Jules and Jim." When this kind of disturbance starts -- I began to pay attention to it with the appearance of a singer called Placido Lanza and a film called "Treat Me Tender" -- it seems like a mild allusive joke of the kind often slipped into realistic fiction, particularly in the matter of naming. When I got to a famous photographer, a "tall, sloping Frenchman in his 60's" called Mr. H., I was still looking for a historical connection, but was delighted to discover this personage was none other than Jacques Tati's Monsieur Henri Hulot, certainly one of the most famous photographers of all time, even if he is fictional.

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"In the old stories," Rushdie's narrator writes in "The Ground Beneath Her Feet," "the point is always reached after which the gods no longer share their lives with mortal men and women, they die or wither away or retire. They vacate the stage and leave us alone upon it, stumbling over our lines." The stumbling act here is one Umeed Merchant, a k a Rai, a successful Indian photographer who has long left India behind, but can't stop saying goodbye. Disorientation, he repeatedly remarks, is loss of the East. Westerners can lose it too, just as "a kind of India happens everywhere," in Rai's phrase. But all local losses are different, and India itself happens only in India.

The global loss is that of firm ground, and the novel shivers with accelerating earthquakes, which Rai takes as evidence of a "wider fracturing," an endless moral and political up-

heaval. "We live on a broken mirror," he says, "and fresh cracks appear in its surface every day." There are "places where the fabric of the earth has put itself in question." Later he says, "We can't trust our damaged earth." Rushdie plays inventively with the idiom of his title, but mostly leaves the full working out of its implications to us. We worship the ground beneath a person's feet. Not a good idea, perhaps, if the ground is cracking. And shouldn't we be worshipping the person, if we have to worship at all?

Rai is not religious, and his compulsive and guilty memories amount only to a backhanded worship. His human story concerns the lives of the rock singer Vina Apsara, whose death (in an earthquake) is announced on the first page and flickers in one form or another almost everywhere in the book, and her husband and lover and musical partner, the rock composer, singer and musician Ormus Cama. They are pretty good separately, but together they are "magical": "more Righteous than the Righteous Brothers," as Rai effusively says. "Everlier than the Everlys, Supreme than the Supremes." They were Rai's gods; their love was, he says, "as close as I've come to a knowledge of the mythic, the overweening, the divine." "This is a story," Rai insists, "of deep but unstable love, one of breakages and reunions; a love of endless overcoming, defined by the obstacles it must surmount." Because in another sense, as we learn very early on, the lovers were not gods at all but mere mortals working out their oddly intimate rela-

tion with the kingdom of death. The novel is full of music, of described sounds and snatches of lyrics, but it is also full of murder and self-slaughter. Vina's mother murders her children and her husband, leaving only her singing daughter alive; Ormus's brother murders his parents, along with a number of other people. The singers' agent is killed, their producer kills himself. Rai's parents both commit suicide. It's not only that the dead walk in this novel, as they certainly do. The living keep walking into the company of the dead.

The epigraph from Rilke tells us from the start ("We should not trouble / about other names. Once and for all / it's Orpheus when there's singing") that we should look out for the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, but there is also its inversion, embodied in the Indian myth of Rama and Rati, the love god and his wife, in which "it was the woman who interceded with the deity and brought Love -- Love itself -- back from the dead." In the novel a figure recalling Eurydice or Rati twice gets Ormus to come back to life, but then the original Western story still holds as well. In the end, or just before the end, when the stumbling actors come on, Orpheus fails once again to lead Eurydice out of the underworld. What is happening here? Rai unfolds the possibilities. Does Orpheus' failure prove that love dies? That music cannot vanquish death? That Orpheus didn't love Eurydice enough to join her in death but had to try to get her out? That the gods have hard hearts? And who was Eurydice?

Was she perhaps, as Rai also asks, a child of death herself, merely going home and seeking to take Orpheus with her?

Rai is also in love with Vina, of course, and with her memory, and is trying to come to terms with the fact that he is just the third person who is always a crowd -- Orpheus and Eurydice and Who? He is a garrulous fellow, a little preachy at times ("Love is what we want, not freedom") but also very funny, never short of a multicultural allusion or a terrible pun. Ormus's male relatives are said to be, "all of them in their various ways, a couple of annas short of the full rupee." Vincent Price is a "smooth nocturnal prince of the fanged classes"; a girl totes a small gun that is called a Giuliani & Koch 9-millimeter. "East is East," Rai remarks on the subject of Ormus's liking for English bread, "ah, but yeast is West." Above all Rai allows Rushdie, through the mind and style of the guilty, observant, intelligent photographer ("photography is my way of understanding the world"), to remain brilliantly lighthearted, in spite of his own position in the world we share with him, and in spite of all the yearning and terror and mourning that have gone into this book. The world of music, Rai says, is a "world of ruined selves," and Vina and Ormus, both damaged, "are both repairers of damage." I'm not sure how much repairing Vina and Ormus really do, and the many samples of Ormus's lyrics are not encouraging. ("Everything you thought you knew: it's not true. And everything you knew you said, was all in your head.") But then he is only an imaginary musician, and Rushdie is a real writer, and in this book he not only repairs much damage done to both fiction and the world, he finds, as he says Vina does, "a direct line to the world's ashamed unconfident heart," and makes us laugh with the sheer proliferating energy of his call.

The author teaches English at Princeton. His most recent book is *Children of Silence: On Contemporary Fiction*.

## reflections

# An Evening with Dominique Lapierre (Part 2)

by Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

"Life is a challenge, meet it  
Life is a duty, complete it  
Life is a game, play it  
Life is costly, care for it"  
- Mother Teresa

**L**APIERRE's lecture started right in the scheduled time. The westerners may often seem to be cold and calculated (measured is a better word) in the eyes of easterners, but one thing I have to admire is their fastidiousness for punctuality. I knew Lapierre's lecture is going to be an emotional event. He spent time in New Orleans with his parents right after the end of World War II. Some of his old friends from the days of his halcyon youth was here in the crowd. The organizers of the lecture realize that an "almost native son" had returned home. They placed a huge bouquet of flowers near the podium to break the monotony of austerity of this place. The utter drabness that must have prevailed where Lapierre is standing without the flowers is replaced with respectability. Lapierre was smiling broadly -- cheek-to-cheek -- and his eyes glowing. He threw kisses to the audiences and then

started his anticipated hour-long lecture.

As I have pointed out earlier, writer and humanist Dominique Lapierre was going through a whirlwind book tour in the Western Hemisphere. He sidestepped to come to New Orleans, which I bet, was not even included in his itinerary. Nevertheless, he came and I am eternally grateful to him for that.

He started his lecture by saying that this city of New Orleans holds "Glorious memory of my youth." After saying few words about his time and life in Crescent City (New Orleans is also known as Crescent City because the Mississippi River forms a crescent shape hugging the city on the Southeast), he went right to the heart of his story. The amazing story of Rickshapuller Hasri Pal of Ananda Nagar. To dramatize his story-telling, he pulled out a ubiquitous handbell from his pocket. He then pressed his big finger and the bell started ringing breaking the silence of the auditorium. Like a child who found his new toy, Lapierre cranked this bell few more times and then started telling us the amazing story of Hasri Pal. The Rickshapuller is the central figure in

his novel *Ananda Nagar*. Like a seasoned storyteller, he wove a complex story of love, hate, vengeance, hopelessness, and hope centering this human being Hasri Pal. This small individual, who epitomizes all the hand-drawn Rickshawallas of Calcutta, was immortalized through the flawless writings of Dominique Lapierre. In the story, Hasri Pal died in the arms of an accidental Padre when his only daughter was wedded just hours before his death. Unbeknownst to his family members, Hasri Pal had sold his skeleton for some scanty rupees in advance. He was able to arrange the marriage of his daughter only because of this advance payment from skeleton merchant of Calcutta. By doing so Hasri Pal also spared his family from arranging the funeral rites. Because, there was none! The skeleton merchant wanted unblemished bones. They fetch good dollars. The body collector came stealthily to Ananda Nagar and they left furtively with the cold corpse of Hasri Pal.

Hasri Pal gave his life so that others can continue living in the cesspool of humanity. You see *Ananda Nagar* is such a mixed up place. Death and birth

are a binary term here. One for exiting and the other for entering. As I was listening intently to Lapierre, I realized that *Ananda Nagar* is a microcosm of destitution. As a young'un, I also have seen many faces of *Ananda Nagar* next to the railwayline that crisscrossed the city of Dhaka. At any given moment, you may find one thousand Hasri Pals in the decrepit slumps of Dhaka, on the main thoroughfare of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet and all other metropolitan areas of Bengal. But they are unknown to us. Their untold stories will never surface because they have taken them to unmarked graves in Azimpure or elsewhere. Besides, Bangladesh was never fortunate to have any Dominique Lapierre visiting the country. The thousands of occidentals who converge upon our impoverished year in year out they do so to make a living out of our wretched living conditions. Hundreds of NGOs that sprang up lately in Bangladesh are a testament to this. We are in need of a humanist who will see not only our abject poverty but also the human spirit that drives these God-forsaken people to help each other every minute of their

lives.

Dominique Lapierre claims that Hasri Pal's handbell is a constant companion of him. It is alive with the memory of the Rickshapuller whom he calls the last living "Human Horse." After his talk when he was putting signature onto his new books for the audiences, I touched the handbell of Hasri Pal. I was thinking people spend quite a bit of money to travel thousands of miles visiting holy shrine to become blessed. Nevertheless, here, Lapierre has brought a piece of memorabilia -- an ordinary handbell used by a Rickshapuller in Ananda Nagar -- to immortalize humanity. I felt a severe chill going through my spine when I touched the symbol of hope -- the *Ghanti* or handbell of a plebeian Rickshawala. Well, such is the persuasive power of Dominique Lapierre's writings.

Lapierre then touched on a subject, which had changed every facet of human lives in our subcontinent in the late 1940s and beyond. He joined forces with his American friend, Larry Collins, in the sixties to embark on an ambitious project to write a book on partition of India. At midnight August

14 with the stroke of the clock, India would be divided into two parts. About one-fifth of the humanity had decided to restructure their land at the stroke of the clock midnight. Lapierre said, "I wanted to retrace the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi who Churchill had called -- a half-naked fakir." Lapierre also said, "We stayed two years in India to research for the book."

Lapierre's two years stay in India was a blessing in disguise for him. He started to look at things in India very differently after spending his times meeting and interviewing thousands of people over there. In his tonight's oral presentation Lapierre effusively talked about the "Great Salt March" of Mahatma Gandhi. Not surprisingly, Sir Richard Attenborough also had immortalized this in his film "Gandhi." It goes without saying Collin and Lapierre's vivid description of the "Great Salt March" and the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh in the city of Amritsar had inspired the screenplay of Attenborough's successful and award winning movie "Gandhi."

To be continued