

BOOK REVIEW

Parisian Portraits Paints Paris on a Giant Canvas

BY C. M. MURSHED

'Parisian Portraits', by Raana Haider. The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2000. 249 pp. Tk. 375.

'The last time I saw Paris
Her heart was young and gay...'

It has been over two decades since I last visited Paris. It's been that long since I walked the broad busy boulevards and savoured the coffee aroma emanating out of the cafés and boulangeries.

Going through Raana Haider's book 'Parisian Portraits', I find very little has indeed changed over the years and the truth of the French aphorism 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose' (the more it changes, the more it remains the same) is still very much en vogue. I suppose this has really been brought about by basic truths of life which the Parisian holds dear to his heart. Of all the peoples of the world, they were the first to really believe that all men are created equal in the sight of

God and thereafter the credo of 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité'.

The meticulous maintenance by the French of their historical buildings and monuments is a reminder to Parisians of their turbulent history as well as the inexorable process through which they have passed. Presently, Parisians enjoy a quality of life unequalled anywhere in the world. 'Parisian Portraits' depicts this beautifully and those that have visited Paris once, will enjoy the nostalgia of going through the book over and over again.

Raana Haider has very nicely described the political tug of war that took place in Paris during the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century that made Paris the centre of world diplomacy. Somehow Paris provided the environment, the infrastructure and cultural activities that were so conducive for men to come to peace with one another. Several peace treaties in history have been enacted in these palaces, something that long negotiations at Camp David could not achieve.

The bringing together of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Pamela Harriman and Princess Diana was brilliantly done. Paris is indeed a place for kings and queens (although historically they have ceased to have any importance) as well as diplomats, artists and lovers who could find fulfillment of their way of life and aspirations within neighbourhoods of this noble city. People of all walks of life feel at ease and in comfort in this environment. The freedom and cultural environment provided at Sorbonne have made it the cradle of some of the greatest thinkers of our time, nurtured by a liberated *milieu* not seen anywhere in the world.

'And God created woman' - I did not find *Folies Bergère* in the book. Is it still there? I remember in our youth, we made 'a pilgrimage' to this temple glorifying the human female form set in the imperial glory of France's kings and queens.

I am glad Raana Haider mentioned the tragedy of Maria Callas' life. I suppose if she had not experi-

enced this pain, how could she have brought such passion to her singing as *Butterfly* in Puccini's aria 'un bel di'.

Paris' obsession with Egypt is, as the author has elaborately pointed out, in the parallel of *grandeur* between the ancient pharaohs and the kings of France. All of them built grandly (Ramses II and Louis XIV) in an attempt of immortality. Although there was an element of arrogance in France, 'L'état c'est moi' (I am the state) said Louis XIV: 'I am France' stated Charles de Gaulle, there was also magnanimity towards their opponents. Charles de Gaulle was once approached by a scoundrel mentioning that Jean Paul Sartre had criticised some of de Gaulle's actions and asked whether Sartre should be arrested? De Gaulle replied that much as he would like to arrest him, the problem was, he also was France.' A confident Charles de Gaulle is known to have declared 'When I want to know what France thinks, I ask myself.'

I wonder if the inclusion of the

Palace of Versailles and the Bois de Boulogne would have made the book into a tourist guidebook? However, I feel they should have been included, if only to emphasise the *grandeur* of France's kings and their history.

Paris has resisted efforts to change its skyline. Although one or two highrises mar the horizon, *Sacré Coeur* still dominates the skyline. Although, it is seldom used as a church the precincts are a reminder of Man's sociological progress through Time and these buildings stand as a silent monument to Man's achievements to date: having gone to the moon and back.

Rightfully so, there is much emphasis on the gastronomic delights of Paris. The midday meal of Parisians is always a celebration and seldom finishes before three hours. Their exotic creations combined with their excellent wines have attracted people to their tables from all over the world.

Is *La Tour d'Argent* here? At one time it was rated stars in the Guide Michelin. It has wel-

comed kings and presidents, writers and artists as well as bohemians from all over the world to savour excellent escargots, lobster mousse ... all served with superb wines gathered from their farflung and sunswept vineyards.

Paris is indeed a celebration of Life. I think it was Tagore who described the city as 'one has only to visit Paris once to realise what life and love can be.'

In the rapidly changing social and economic environment of today, Paris stands out still as the quintessence of all that is good in Life. The words of the hymn of the French Revolution... 'La jour de gloire est arrivée' (The day of glory has arrived) - though spoken more than two hundred years ago still rings true today.

I have known the author and her parents for a long time. Her late father, Mirza Rashid Ahmad and I were colleagues and close friends. I am now looking forward to Raana Haider's book on Shiraz and Isfahan.

FICTION

An Asian Encounter with Romanian Communism

BY MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

Continued from last week

IVES of diplomats from European countries were involved in smuggling from Romania good quality woolen and fur coats, crystal glasses and chandeliers at a minimum price by offering packets of Kent cigarettes. It was unbelievable but true that a girl would not hesitate to sleep with an unknown person in exchange for a packet of Kent cigarettes, which reminded Rouf of a similar situation after the Second World War. Those were hard days for the people in the eastern part of Europe. Follow-

ing the devastating war, prostitution flourished in Europe because of the economic crisis of unprecedented nature. They were looking for a rich man to bargain in terms of money or kind. Housewives were allowed to go in for prostitution in many parts of Europe for the sake of survival. In Romania, prostitution was legal during the communist era. There were registered prostitutes also. Prostitution in fact increased to such a level that after the fall of the Ceausescu era and the communist system, even schoolgirls were found in the queue in front of hotels in posh areas.

Rouf was always found in the

company of beautiful girls. Either girls were employed as managers or receptionists in his office. One of them was Gabriela, who used to stay with Gupta. When Gupta was confined to jail, Gabriela visited Gupta in jail many times with food. Gupta was apparently an arrogant young man in his mid-thirties. He used to have a carefree sort of life. His lifestyle was reckless. Apart from his own business, he represented accompany in the United Kingdom whose proprietor was incidentally from his native country. Nobody in Romania believed that Gabriela could have established contact with a foreigner without the

clearance from the Securitate. It was, therefore, clear that Gabriela was on the payroll of the Securitate. Since Gupta was an expatriate from Pakistan, Rouf had sought an appointment with the authority in jail through the Ministry of Justice to interview Gupta.

On being permitted, Rouf went to see Gupta in jail on condition that discussions would be conducted in English in the presence of an official of the Ministry of Justice. On the specified date and time, Rouf met Gupta in the jail and also took along a meal for him.

Gupta was brought before Rouf in one of the rooms. Rouf asked

Gupta in Urdu, 'How are you? Are you having any problem in the jail?' As Gupta wanted to explain (in Urdu) the difficult situation in the jail, in view of the insufficient heating system, the Romanian officer concerned immediately intervened and requested them to speak in English. In the meantime, Gupta uttered bad words in Urdu about the behaviour of the police and the inhuman conditions in the jail. Knowing fully well that he would be beaten or harassed as soon as Rouf left the place, Gupta spoke in Urdu against the regime, which was totally corrupt and immoral.

After the meeting, which lasted

15 minutes, Rouf came back to the office.

On the suggestion of Gupta, Rouf sought a meeting with an official in the Ministry of Justice for the release of Gupta, who had already spent about a year in the jail for a minor offence.

It was difficult to fix an appointment with a bureaucratic civilian official in Romania. However, Rouf managed to get an appointment with a Director in the Ministry of Justice. One day, Rouf went to the Ministry of Justice and was received by Vassalle in the Ministry of Justice.

to be continued

BOOK REVIEW

Learning English Made Easy

BY RAZIB AHMED

English for Bangali learners
M Harunur Rashid
Bangla Academy
Price: Tk. 120

"THIS book does not need any introduction. It explains itself and, I am confident, will establish itself as a useful handbook for the Bengali learner of English, who are many and whose number, there is no reason to doubt, will continue to grow in the coming day," writes Dr. Sirajul Islam Choudhury, in the preface of this book. There is no scope to disagree with Dr. Islam.

The title of the book suggests a new approach to learning English. M. Harunur Rashid is a famous academician of our time who apart from being a university teacher and editor of weekly English newspaper was the DG of Bangla Academy and president of Asiatic Society. He starts in Author's note, 'If a reader is looking for originality in the grammatical elements in this book, he will be disappointed, for there is none. No, it is not a book of grammar, nor was it meant to be one. It simply aims at bringing home to the Bengali learners of English. Some of the difficulties they encounter as

POEM

Four Poems from Gitanjali by Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by Fakrul Alam

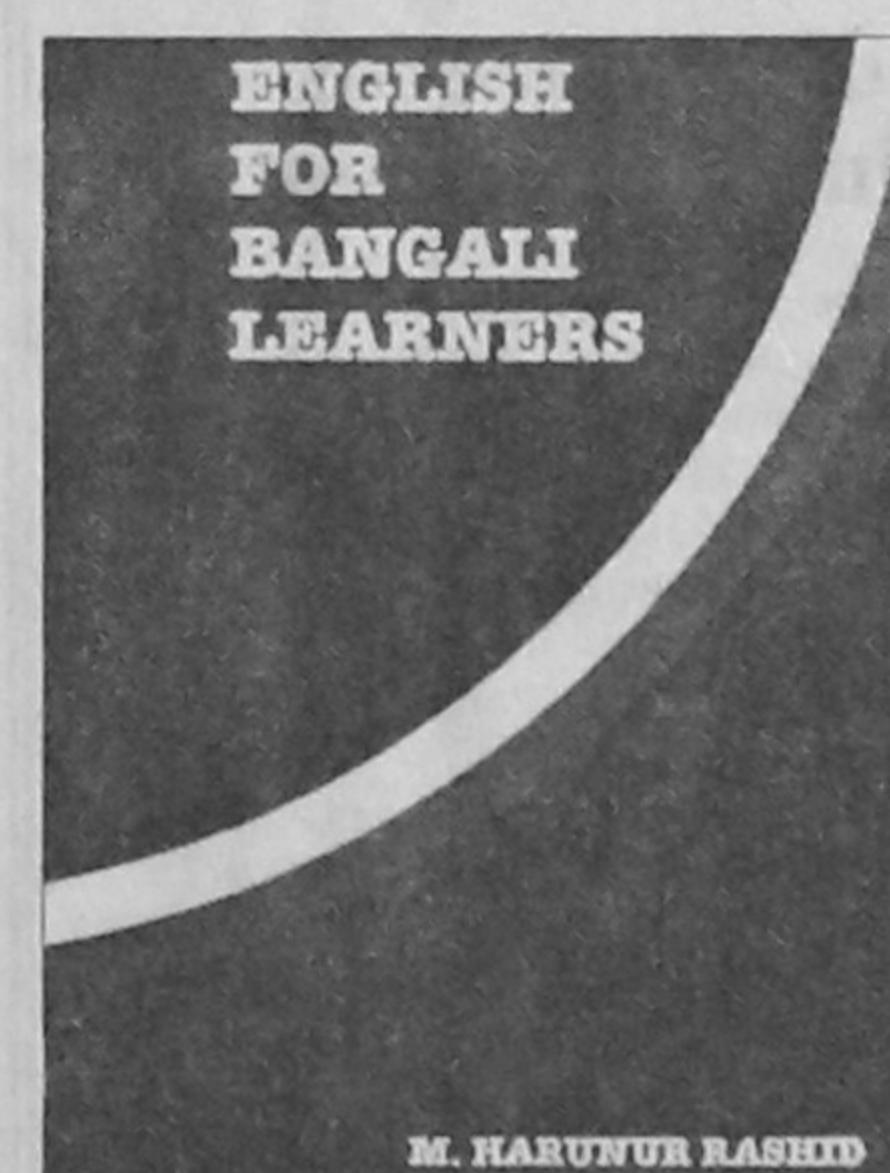
Dirghokal Anabhrishiti

It hasn't rained in my heart for a long, long time now. O Lord, I feel parched. The horizon is barren. There isn't the faintest sign of a moist line. Anywhere in the sky. No one passes by. Herald the coming of the dark rain clouds.

Lord, if you will, summon the deadly thunder. Let it and the torrential rain create a tumult. In flash after flash let lightning strike me. Starting me out of my stupor, electrifying me. Singe me, O Lord, with your silent but searing heat. With a cataclysmic, all-pervading conflagration. Make me writhe in unbearable despair. And then. Like the mother looking with glistening eyes. At the son being chastened by the father, pity me!

Jiban Jhokhon

When life has dried up
Come in a stream of mercy.
When everything graceful lies covered,
Come in a shower of songs.
When work is overwhelming
Creating a din that hemms me in,
In soundless steps, O silent One,
Come to the outskirts of my heart.
When I have made myself poor
And my cornered heart lies languishing.
Open the door, O greathearted Lord,
And come in all you Majesty.
When duststorms of desire blind me,
And I lapse into forgetfulness.
O Holy one, O ever watchful one,



Come to me in a blaze of light!

Dibash Jodi

If the day ends, if birds sing no more,
If the spent wind stops blowing —
Wrap me up on all sides with a veil.
Cover me tenderly in profound darkness —
Just as you wrap the earth at night
With dreams, secretly and slowly;
Just as you shut sleepy eyelids,
Or drooping lotus petals at nightfall.

For this traveler midway through his travels,
Losses showing, provisions all gone,
Clothes tattered dust-covered, humbled.
Strength dissipated, ready to give up —
Relieve his pain and dress his wounds,
Keep vigil over him, and tenderly.

Remove his shame, nurse him through the night.
Letting him blossom again at a new dawn.

Aaji Jharer Raate

Are you out on an assignation this stormy night.
My soul mate, my friend?
The sky cries out despondently.
Sleep won't come to my eyes.
Opening the door, beloved,
I keep looking for you longingly.
My soul mate, my friend!
I can't see anything outside.
I wonder which path you are taking.
Could you be on the bank of a far-off river.
At the edge of a dense forest.
Or crossing a vast expanse of darkness?
Where could you be, my soul mate, my friend?