

ESSAY

The Portrait of a Poet as a Horseman

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain pays tribute to Shamsur Rahman, the central figure in our poetry, on his 72nd birth anniversary

LET US all congratulate Shamsur Rahman on his having arrived at the age of seventy-two. He is not merely the most prolific living poet in the Bangla language; he has transformed himself into the symbol of the nationalistic and aesthetic pride of the Bangalees living on the Padma-Meghna-Jamuna delta. Growing old by itself, however, does not denote any nobleness; Yeats said that an old man is but a paltry thing, unless the soul claps its wings in tattered pantaloons. But Shamsur Rahman has matured like a palpable fruit; we can take his poetry in our palms and taste it at our leisure, for our profit and pleasure. And "Ripeness is all," said Shakespeare.

Shamsur Rahman's poetic journey to eminence has run parallel to the Bangalee's journey to nationhood and emancipation. In 1952, the starting point of our national struggle for linguistic and political liberty, Shamsur Rahman was still in his poetic infancy; but his poetry even at that stage was noticeably different from those of his predecessors, most of whom, with a few exceptions like Ahsan Habib and Abul Hossain, were engrossed in a kind of jingoistic zeal for the Pakistani ideology. Shamsur Rahman eschewed the common path and chose the one hitherto less travelled: the path of humane liberalism untainted by the dogmatic and the communal and illumined by the progressive understanding of the human situation in the double axes of time and space. With the passage of time, Shamsur Rahman has become the adorable doyen of our literature, "an eye among the blind," a Telesias who has known and fore-suffered all.

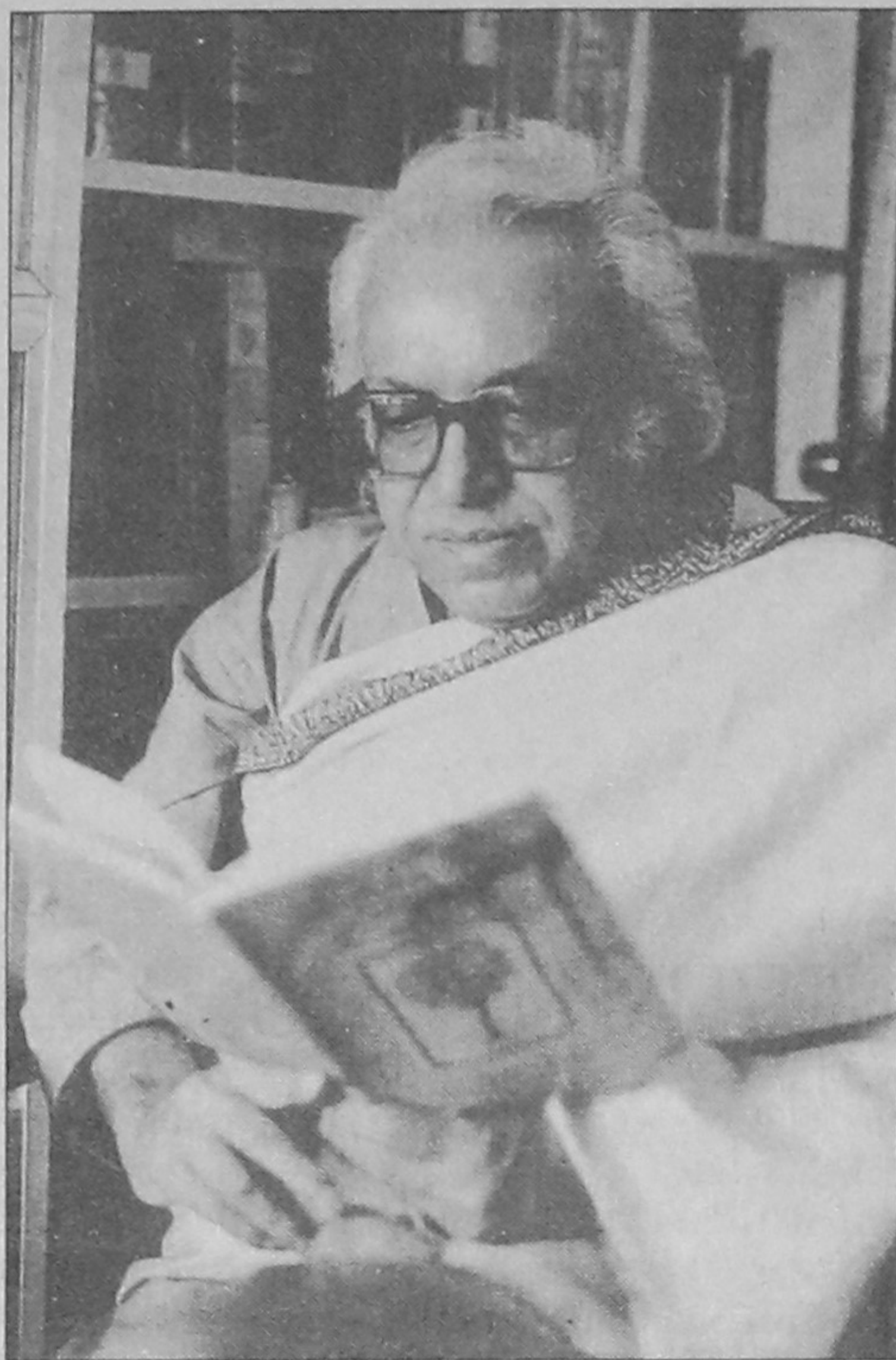
Shamsur Rahman did not have an auspicious beginning as a poet. His first volume of poems, Pratham Gaan, Dittyo Mrittr Agay, did not send any appreciable tremor among the poetry-readers of the time; it was considered at best a pastiche of the Jibananadaseque style, a wallowing in romantic emotions by a sky-gazing poet-would-be. But the second volume Roudro Korotie, changed the sky itself, as the poet woke up from his romantic reverie to the harsh realities of life around him. As the skull got awash with sunlight, the world of mundane concerns impinged itself upon the world of sensuousness. Shamsur Rahman knew that his path lay through darkness, that he had to chart through a dilapidated skyscape to the horizon of light. Biddhosto Nillena and Niralokey Dibbyorath would have us believe as much. Since then, Rahman has been on his onward march; he has never had to repent for the road not taken. And now he is here amongst us, a conqueror with Apollo's laurel bough decking his aging forehead.

Elliot, more than any other English poet, captured Rahman's imagination quite early. Roudro Korotie depicts the ennui and desolation of modern urban life in a language reminiscent of that Anglo-American master: yet the evening of the lonely verandah, the midnight silence of the avenue, the wounded clown of the circus and the sleepless cat on the wall, the chorus of the colony wrung out of life, the star-studded bra of the prostitute, the blind violinist of the lane, Braque's quiet fish, Cezanne's apple.

All know me so easily; I'm known to the tamales grasses on my grave (Self-portrait, Roudro Korotie)

1969 marked a watershed in Shamsur Rahman's poetic career. He had assumed a Prufrock-like mask and had been a rather impassive and sardonic observer of the social going-on. But the mass-movement and the political upheaval of 1969 tore his mask of nonchalance apart: Rahman found himself standing face to face with the time of distress and diaspora. His style changed overnight from the tower of cynically self-centred egoism, he came down to the plane of common men, his coun-

trymen. Nijo Bashbhume and Bandi Shibir thekey ar ehis magnam opuses of this period, which, of course, marks a kind of climax of his career also. The glorification of the Bangla alphabet, the description of hartal scenes and the elegiac remonstrations for the martyrs of the movement everything shows Rahman's newest



Shamsur Rahman

preoccupations: See those bunches of Krishnachura that have bloomed again on the paths of the city in such clusters. When I walk down alone or along with the procession, it seems as though they were not flowers at all; as though they were the bubbles of blood freshly spurted from the wounds of the martyrs, perfumed as they are with memories. (February 1969)

Like clusters of red roktokarabi flowers or the burning clouds of the sunset, Asad's shirt now flutters in the air, high in the blue sky.... Leaving the gentle shade of the pomegranate tree, or the mother's sunlit yard the shirt now flutters without pause on the main streets of the city, atop the factory chimneys, along the corners of noisy avenues, in the sunburst, resounding plains of our hearts, in every alignment of our conscious being. (Asad's shirt)

Then came the liberation war of 1971, the most glorious year in the annals of the Bengali nation, a year that saw genocide and exodus, victories and flights, tears set ablaze by noble rage against death and destruction. The pomegranate of anger burst into thousand flakes of fire. We fretted and fought; we decked ourselves with plumes of blood, dipped ourselves in the dye of death. Shamsur Rahman did not go to the battlefield; but we know where his heart was from the poems he wrote during those beleaguered days in a besieged city. Especially famous are his two poems "Shadhinata tumi" (Freedom you) and "Tomake pawar jonce hey shadhinata" (to get you, O Freedom!). The former is, of course, not directly concerned with the blood and fire of the on-going war of liberation: it is rather an encomium paid to the timeless spirit of liberty itself. The latter is more directly concerned with the devastation of war and the irremediable hope with which the war-ravaged people awaited the arrival of freedom.

Because you were to come, Freedom

Sakina bibi's life is wrecked, Haridas's widowhood wiped the vermilion stain on her forehead: Because you were to come, olive-coloured tanks marauded our streets, bellowing like monster: Because you would come, O Freedom.

Adrian Henry, Roger McGough and Brian Patten. The style of cataloguing things and events and supplying hundreds of different appellations for the same thing has made his poetry a mere mumbo-jumbo of words. Luckily, of course, Shamsur Rahman discarded the cataloguing mode and went back to his earlier mode of cynical social observer with a tinge of self-pity. The following lines of a poem titled "here was a door" will illustrate Rahman's typical stance:

Here was a door, the madhahi plant spreading its beauty over it. Now there is nothing, nothing at all; only a foolish wall, shell-struck, stands there all alone. A few spoilt bricks lie here and there. If you look left, you'll see only a doll, very little else. I stand still in the wreckage, as though I were a wreckage myself; I stir the ashes with my shoes, with the hope, an undying phoenix would suddenly take to wings from there; or perhaps I'd see someone's smile, or get someone's blossoming affection, or love.

Shamsur Rahman's poetry is remarkable for its animal imagery, a fact which very few have made mention of. Of course, he cannot be called an 'animal poet' or a 'zoo-laureate' like Ted Hughes, but the animal world has been the main supplier of imagery for Rahman's poetry. And just like in Ted Hughes, most of Rahman's animals are predators; they prowl about in his poetry as symbols of the evil forces of the society. Shamsur Rahman, of course, never writes about the animals in their natural habitat; they encroach upon and invade the urban centres. Or more precisely, it is the human beings who behave like animals: the feral nature of the lion, the rapacity of the wolf and the wiles of the fox are betrayed through the behaviour of men who eat each other's flesh with cannibalistic zeal. We have already mentioned the rhinoceroses. Here are some other animals:

Then suddenly the moon appeared on the full sky. A priceless, unattainable pearl, And a boar smelt its way into the moonlight, where the desired ballad blossoms in the bubbles of stars. All the sceneries were obliterated at once, and then I was alone; myself and the boundless loneliness. (The ballad of the beautiful)

This town daily fights against a protean wolf. Who does not know that before a true line of a poem gets written a lot of similes drop down like buds; between two sentences prolongs the quarrel of an eagle and a hill lizard; by the side of a lake lie the lumps of flesh of a deer, a tiger's happy kill... (A poem after a long time)

I am so alone at midnight When my eyes are without sleep and I lie on bed like an abandoned cross, then a horse with a human head comes and tells me in a queer voice: "Listen, in your own city, we have just confirmed our unquestionable authority and power." (More valuable than a poet's tears)

It's a queer city where Aesop's animals roam about in the streets... (Staff correspondent)

The most interesting animal-symbol used by Shamsur Rahman is, of course, the horse. It is more often than not the symbol of the phaeton-like aspirations of a poet who is unwilling to give up his fight: the poet is a shonshoptak who clasps the neck of his striding horse and heads into the thick of the battle. Shamsur Rahman deserves our salute because he has never left the battleground, neither in poetry nor in the beleaguered society where he lives under the threat of phillistine fundamentalism.

Thousands of angry rhinoceroses are charging towards us from all sides, their tusks shining in the sun... It's futile to hide, it's better to come out from the tree-holes or dry nut shells. Rhinoceroses and rhinoceroses all over! Helpless you only hear the noise of destruction. Rahman's poetry is marked by narrative eloquence, which often degenerates into verbose prolixity. Quite often he takes recourse to lengthy descriptions of phenomena which might have been done with more economy of words. Particularly in the middle period of his poetry, he indulged in a style imitated from the pop-poets of the sixties in England like

AWARD

Ondaatje Wins Prix Medicis

Return of the native in Anil's Ghost

SRI Lankan-born author Michael Ondaatje and Jamaica Kincaid, who was born in Antigua, won prizes for best foreign novels awarded Monday by France's literary juries.

Ondaatje won the Prix Medicis for "Le Fantome d'Anil" (Anil's Ghost) and Kincaid the Prix Femina award for "Mon Frere" (My Brother).

The Medicis jury awarded its top prize to Yann Appery for his novel "Diabolus in Musica," while the Femina jury crowned Camille Laurens for "Dans ces bras-la" (In those arms).

Ondaatje, who reached a world audience with the filming of his novel "The English Patient", returns to the land of his childhood in his latest novel in which he tells the story of a young doctor sent by the United Nations Commission for Human Rights to work in the war-zone of the strife-torn island.

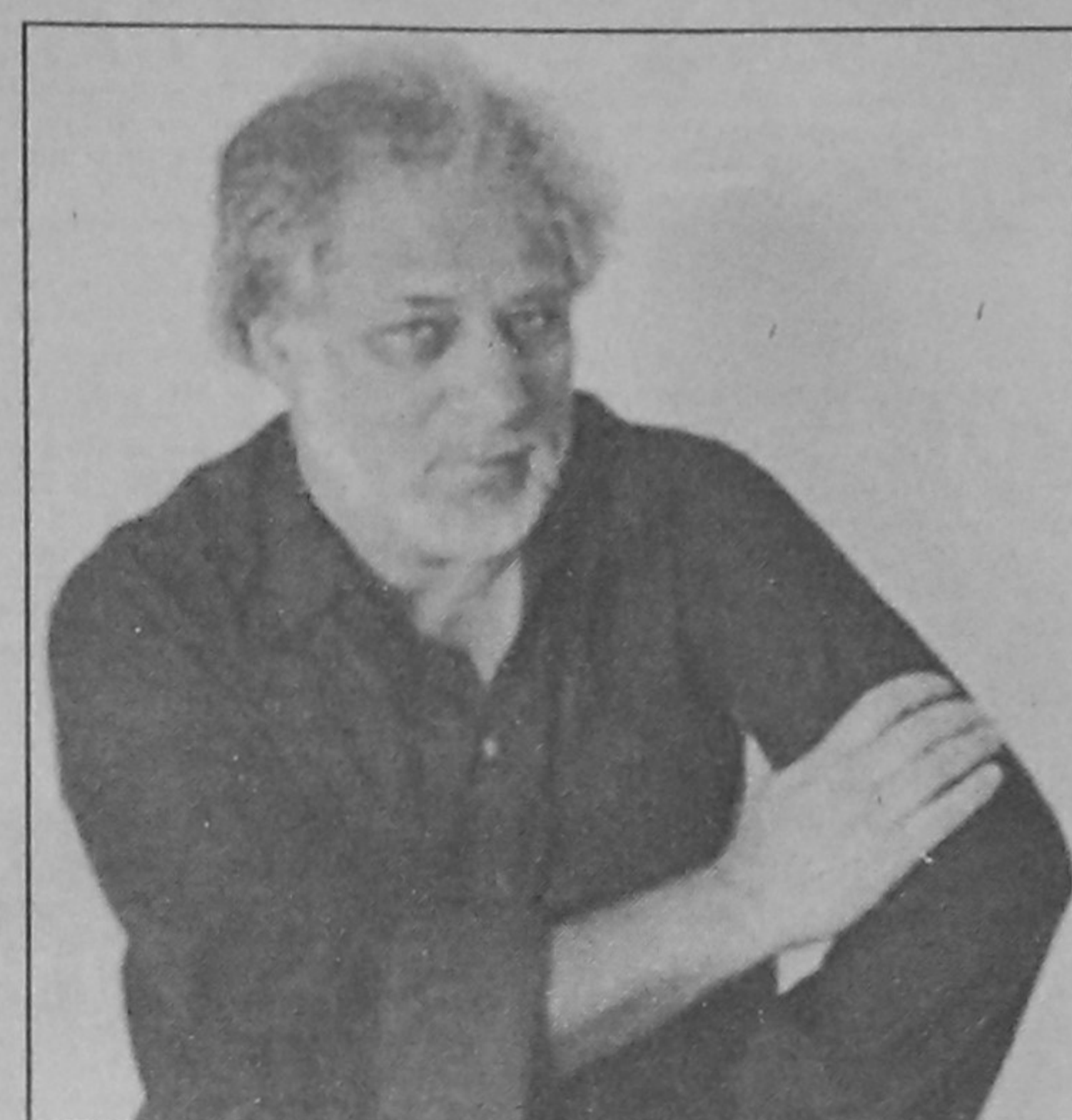
Born in 1943 in what was then the British colony of Ceylon, Ondaatje is now a naturalised Canadian living in Toronto.

The novel "The English Patient" won Britain's top literary award, the Booker Prize, in 1992, while its screened version went on to win nine Oscars.

"Anil's Ghost" is the second novel in which Ondaatje has written about Sri Lanka but the first in which he has dealt with the civil war that has riven the island since the 1980s.

"I didn't know the war at first hand... but I was obsessed by this conflict taking place in the country where I grew up," he told the Canadian media last September.

The novel has already sold 28,000 copies in France. Kincaid, who has lived in the United States for the past 30 years, took the story of her brother's fight against AIDS as the basis for her novel.



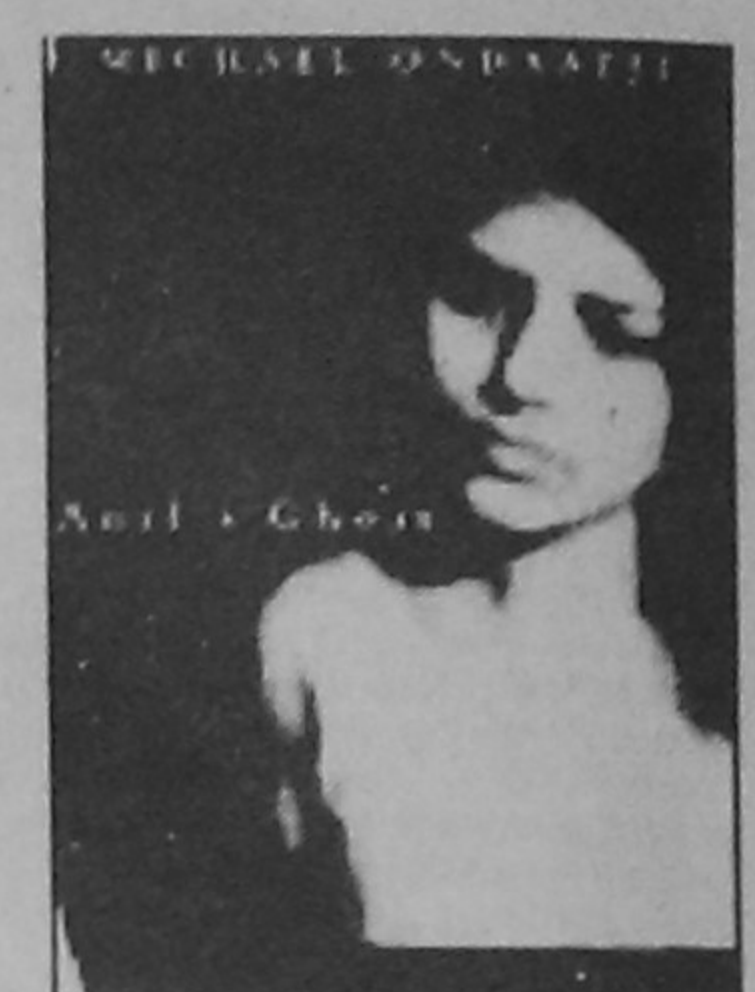
Recent photo shows Sri Lankan-born author Micheal Ondaatje who was awarded November 6, 2000 in Paris with the Prix Medicis -AFP photo

Born Elane Potter Richardson, Kincaid left her native Antigua at the age of 18. Her first job was working as an au pair girl, and she went on to become a writer on the magazine New Yorker before publishing her first novel "Annie John" in 1985 to massive critical acclaim, including tributes from Salman Rushdie.

Now 51, Kincaid said she was "deeply honoured, grateful and surprised" at receiving the Femina award.

She said that if she had an ideal audience, "it would be either French or German. Because... people still take literature seri-

ously in places like that. "In literature, you always risk something, you risk offending somebody, especially the powerful. I don't think a lot of American literature does that. "I always write about things that are happening to me... My brother was dying of AIDS and I wrote about it because I wanted to understand it better. And I wrote hoping that people where he lived might read it and might learn something about themselves." In his third novel, the 28-year-old Appery recounts the story of a young boy who is brought up by his drunken, vio-



Jacket cover of "Le Fantome d'Anil" (Anil's Ghost). -AFP photo

lent father and saved by his love of music. Laurens, whose heroine describes her life through the men she has known, from her father to her child, draws her title from a song by Guy Beart.

Other awards announced Monday included the Femina essay prize awarded to former justice minister Robert Badinter for "L'Abolition", in which he recounts his long struggle for the death penalty to be abolished (he succeeded in 1981) and the Medicis essay prize awarded to Armelle Lebras-Chopard for "Le Zoo des Philosophes".

Last week, France's top literary prize the Goncourt was awarded to Jean-Jacques Schuhl for "Ingrid Caven" which narrowly beat "Allah n'est pas obligé" (Allah doesn't have to) by the Ivory Coast-born novelist Ahmadou Kourouma.

However Kourouma's novel won what is generally considered the runner's up award, the Prix Renaudot.

-AFP

INTERVIEW

One-on-One with Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Timothy Dwight. Master's Office. He walks in for the fax machine, returns to his suite, I follow. Dazed. In awe. Yevgeny Yevtushenko the celebrated poet of the post-Stalin generation of Russian poets, a monument by himself: political dissident, film director, politician, writer, novelist, but above all a poet. Yevtushenko talks to Sabrina Sadique

Sabrina Sadique: What do you consider to be your best work? Yevgeny Yevtushenko: It's very difficult to separate all your works and choose. My best? I don't know, but surely the most important would be the novella in verse "A Dove in Santiago". It's about a suicide that I witnessed in the Carrera Hotel in Santiago, Chile. A boy around 18 years of age slowly walked to the edge of the roof and jumped. He did not die when he fell down on the ground but in the air, where we saw his body in convulsions, it struck by electric cables. His body landed on a dove on the asphalt and killed it. His mother found my portrait in his room and she called to ask me if I could write a poem on him to prevent young people from ever considering such a death for themselves. She had no idea that I had witnessed the suicide. Coincidence. Amazingly enough, this incident happened just when I was thinking about ways to kill myself. It was a low point in my life filled with accusations... so the poem came across as something very personal and when it was published first in 1978, over 300 people who were taking suicide into account as a mode of escape called or wrote to say the poem saved them. When I think of

A Dove in Santiago in this regard, all my other works seem dwarfed. SS: Who is your favorite poet? YY: Pushkin. He was a son of harmony; he recreated Russian language. Today, we speak Pushkin's words. A political poet with a childlike curiosity toward life. Definitely, Pushkin. SS: You are a writer, a novelist, a film director, and a poet. In which position do you feel most satisfied? YY: I am a writer of those who don't write. What is important is the ability to get the thoughts across to them and for them it may be in the form of a film, it may be poetry. That is my focus. As long as I am able to express myself, the genre does not matter. SS: We tend to think that for poets of your repute writing comes easily. Does it? YY: Writing is a form of spiritual pregnancy. Therefore artists understand women like no one else. Of course, the pregnancy in this case sometimes lasts longer than nine months. It is very important to find form and each time it has to be a new form. In addition, when you write about the common mass, you have to write according to the way they understand or interpret language. But when you write for intellectuals, the writing has to cater to their tastes. And I am

only slightly intellectual. SS: Is your favorite poem your own or someone else's? YY: It is an eight-line poem by Pushkin "I loved you; and perhaps I love you still." Many have tried to translate it but failed because of the deceptive nature of what seems to be transparent simplicity. It is like images of little stones at the bottom of a clear mountain-like that impresses upon you to think the water is shallow when it is rather too deep. I admire his poems because they are accessible even to the moderately educated mass. Yet they are neither banal nor primitive. SS: Form what would you derive greater pleasure winning the Nobel Prize for Literature or a little girl being able to completely understand one of your poems? YY (smiling): But of course the latter! SS: Your happiest memory? YY: The time of World War II. I was lying on a hayloft. Starving. Deep in the night. And there was something special, something so different about the way the fresh hay (a littlity in places) smelled. My fingers prodder through its layers and I suddenly felt at almost unnatural softness a wild

strawberry. As I groped through, I came upon one straw berry after another, like little miracles. [pause] Nothing is sweeter than the small wild strawberries in hay. Hiding. The poet's work From the macabre scene of Stalin's funeral that Yevtushenko describes in his autobiography and references in his movie, to the denunciation of Nazi and Russian anti-Semitism and, finally, to the smell of wild strawberries in hay, Yevtushenko is all about diversity. However, a dazed tone runs throughout his work. And so one may ponder on him and his corrugated memories with a few lines from the work he calls his best ever... Fatigue of the weariest body weighs so little Compared with the soul's, but if the two join forces You haven't the strength even to cry... And when You are too tired to cry, then is the time You especially want to... That's how tired I was One time, Of what? Of life? No, not of life. It's about accusations. I was tired of all I found in it that resembled death, not life. -From a Dove in Santiago

BOOK REVIEW

There is Something for Everyone

Mahjuja M. Taznin investigates Harry Potter's unprecedented popularity in publishing history

THIS book is the fourth and latest in a seven part series of novels about a boy named Harry Potter. The story in this book is based on the past and present happenings of his life. Harry is the protagonist of the series, which originates from Harry's unique past. At the age of one, his parents are murdered by Voldemort, who was at the time, reigning as the all-powerful Dark wizard of the secret wizard world, while at the same time, Harry becomes the innocent cause of Voldemort's downfall and so, Voldemort's greatest enemy.

The story is set in a magical parallel world of wizards and other supernatural beings. His past gets Harry involved in the adventures depicted in the novel. Besides these events, the story is really easy to pertain to, because it deals with the common strife that might arise in the life of teenagers e.g. adjusting with the crowd, crushes, etc. However, there are hidden themes in the novel dealt in a subtle way which would easily penetrate the understanding of young people, for example, the spirit of fellowship, consideration for others, doing what is just and the need to evalu-

ate a person by abstract qualities. There is the common tale of a hungry sort of dictator. This Voldemort is the prime antagonist of the series. So there is a good versus evil theme in the story too. The author seems to get some of her ideas from real history, like the attitude of Dark wizards of the wizard world is similar to nazi racism. The terror of Voldemort's reign reflects that of the region of Hitler. Then the trial of Dark wizards after Voldemort's fall resembles that of the trial after the defeat of Hitler. Also there are adaptations of real world phenomenon, ordinary wizarding levels or O.W.L.s substitute O levels. There are moreover, wizards of different nationality e.g. British, Bulgarian, French, etc., forming a parallel world of their own, internationally. Harry Potter is a British wizard and so, the story takes place in the parallel wizard world of Britain. The quidditch game represents soccer, which is one of Britain's popular games and the International Quidditch Cup signifies the Soccer World Cup. Also, while the Dark wizards support a dictator, Lord Voldemort, the good wizards have a democratic system in the form of a Ministry of Magic, heading different wizard nations. The

British wizards have security agents called Aurors who spy out Dark wizards and a wizard jail for those who break wizard laws. The author confesses she has an obsession for names and throughout the novel one finds a colorful array of names e.g. Dumbledore, Hermione, etc. She also states that most of these names have been developed from words, which describe some special nature of that character and, some of them are actually the names of places, e.g. Snape (J.K. Rowling, on Larry King Live, CNN, October 21, 2000.)

Though the novel is aimed at older children and adolescents, it deals powerfully with some serious matters such as death e.g. the murder of a stock character, a good, brave, and considerate boy, killed by Voldemort at the climax of the story. The episode is treated in a penetrating way so that it gets depicted as a somber truth and not a distant, disengaged event. This gives evidence that the book is not a happily ever-after story. All these things give the story an easy acceptance but also, reality which makes it apart from fiction.



Adventure entwined with the life of the protagonist (i.e. Harry) at the age of one, becomes the cause for the downfall of the region of the all-powerful Dark wizard Voldemort, making Harry a hero in the wizard world. Voldemort is the Dark lord, an evil and power