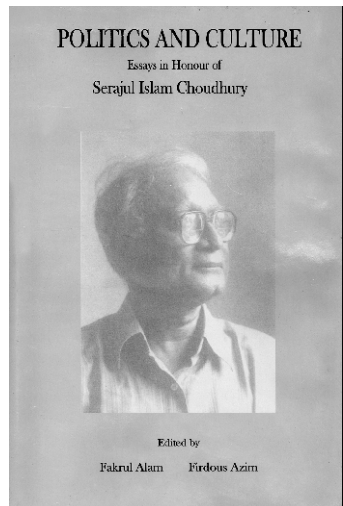


BOOK REVIEW

## Politics and Culture: A tribute to SIC literature and environmentalism: female figure

The commemorative volume, aptly titled **Politics and Culture**, includes essays written as a tribute to the professor who had retired from the Department of English, Dhaka University last June, drawing an end to a long 44-year charismatic teaching career. This perceptive undertaking of the English Department adds up to an interesting disclosure about our politics and culture from some of our very best scholars and researchers, writes **Shamsad Mortuza**



Politics and Culture: Essays in Honour of Serajul Islam Choudhury Edited by: Fakrul Alam and Firdous Azim Department of English, University of Dhaka January 2002, 524 pages. Tk. 500 ISBN: 984-32-0101-4

THE festschrift brought in honour of Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury is a testimony of how the life of a teacher has sparked a fascination that reaches well beyond the academy. The commemorative volume, aptly titled **Politics and Culture**, includes essays written as a tribute to the professor who had retired from the Department of English, Dhaka University last June, drawing an end to a long 44-year charismatic teaching career. This perceptive undertaking of the English Department adds up to an interesting disclosure about our politics and culture from some of our very best scholars and researchers.

A total of 32 essays are included in this volume, of which four are expressly on Prof. Choudhury. The rest are listed under the rubrics of politics and literature; the politics of language; history, society and cultural politics; and women and politics. Needless to say, Prof. Choudhury was, and is, involved with all the issues broached in the book.

The two editors of the volume Prof. Fakrul Alam and Prof. Firdous Azim are students-turned-colleagues of Prof. Choudhury. They have known their 'SIC' sir for

his class performance and also for his social commitments. They know that the life of SIC has touched so many. The introductory note explains the background of the festschrift. The DU English Department has taken the opportunity of SIC's retirement to create a space where academics, activists, journalists, or researchers can pay their gratitude and homage to Prof. Choudhury. In a country where posthumous recognition is more in currency, kudos are due to the DU English Department for its initiative to honour one of its brightest members while he is still shining bright.

Prof. Serajul Islam Choudhury joined the English Department in 1957 after getting a First in his MA. The English Department of Dhaka University then bore the legacy of Prof. C.L. Wrenn, Prof. A.G. Stock, Prof. Jotirmoi Guha Thakurta, and so many others. SIC received a Commonwealth Scholarships in 1965 and did his doctoral degree on the treatment of evil in the novels of Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence in 1968 from Leicester University. In 1978 he won the Bangla Academy prize for prose and research, in 1988 the Dhaka University Gold Medal for research, and in 1996 the Ekushey Padak for education. The biographical details are cited here from the information listed in the festschrift, which is an important inclusion of the volume. Equally important is the list of publications by Prof. Choudhury. If number is any indicator at all then the list of 63 books, 3 edited volumes, 6 journals, and two weeklies to the credit of SIC speaks for a man who has become a living legend in our literary realm.

For many of us, who never had the opportunity to experience his mesmerizing lecture on Lawrence or Conrad (as some of the contributors have pointed out), Serajul Islam Choudhury is a word-warrior who illumined our cultural identity and directed our conscience to the inequities that blight our country. He, as Azfar Hussain puts it in Michel de Certeau's words, critiques 'the practice of everyday life' and makes us intensely aware of the power of his arguments. His left-leaning view needs to be appreciated in its entire force and cogency,

especially if one wants to dissent from it.

Quite fittingly, the volume begins with a personal essay on Prof. Choudhury where Badrul Ahsan underlines humility as the hallmark of SIC's personality. Azfar Hussain's absorbing analysis of Choudhury's works is a must-read for students of critical theory. Hussain equates Prof. Choudhury, almost in a hyperbolic gesture, with Raymond Williams, CLR James, Mahmud Darwish, N'gugi, and last but not the least with Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. Then again, Hussain has convincingly shown that for Choudhury, who started his critical practice when criticism was making its divorce from liberal humanism, criticism is not a noun but a verb. Pias Karim's fragmented encounters with Prof. Choudhury draws a similar conclusion, identifying him as an 'organic' 'public' intellectual. The last essay of this section on Prof. Choudhury is a critique of *Bangaleer Jatiotabad* by Selim Sarwar.

The second section that includes fifteen essays is on politics and literature. Here the focuses of the contributors range from sociology to historiography, from body politics to body of politics, from fact to fiction, from poetry to drama, from text to context. Most of the essays are interesting in their own ways for serious readers. But refreshing is Kaiser Haq's essay on *Vilayeti Munshi*. Haq writes about a Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin's visit to England as a courtier of Emperor Shah Alam II. This trip precedes Raja Rammohun Roy's visit to England by almost half a century, which so far is recorded as the first official trip by a person from the subcontinent to England.

The third section addresses the politics of language. Since one of the major theses of Prof. Choudhury involves the ultimate emergence of language 'as the inevitable force behind the realignment of new nation-states,' this section fits in nicely to the festschrift. All the three essays address the state of Bangla and, by extension, its relationship to English as a Second Language.

The fourth section is titled "History, Society and Cultural Politics." Syed Manzoorul Islam in the pream-

ble to his essay in this section maintains that Prof. Choudhury is a firm believer in the Marxist base/superstructure relationship that plays as 'the overarching frame that subsumes all our economic and cultural productions.' Prof. Choudhury's ideological belief has always led him to locate texts in the larger contexts. The essays included in this section help understand cultural productions and their motives as well as agenda.

By the time we reach the final section on women and politics we come to sense that how arbitrary this categorization has been. The four essays of this section, albeit with their female bias, would have fitted under any of the subtitles mentioned above. This in a way is a further reminder that knowledge cannot be bracketed. It is bound to overreach itself. Say for instance, think of the connection between Manto's Sakeena and Fakir Alamgir's Sakhina drawn by Intiaz Hossain. The essay is a stimulating piece of work. In lack of space and scope, it is probably not possible to do justice to the merit of many of the fine essays. However, one thing needs to be mentioned here that these essays weave a tapestry of scholarship. The ultimate essence of this interdisciplinary volume is a celebration of knowledge at full throttle. By the same token, this is the ultimate tribute to Prof. Choudhury.

Having said that let me make a personal observation. There is something sad about the commemorative volume, *Politics and Culture*. The underexposed photograph of Prof. Choudhury in an off-white background on the book's cover is questionably dull. So is the inner picture of Prof. Choudhury. A book priced at Tk. 500 demands a better photo quality in a better paper. Besides, at least one of the essays is formatted and printed in a font that does not match the other. Some essays include preambles or abstracts while others don't. Such lack of uniformity is an eyesore. Well, even the great Achilles had his not-so-great heel!

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ESSAY

Over the past few years, 41 year old Roy has skillfully played the dual role of an author and environmentalist human rights advocate through evocative writings on the Narmada dam debate, the issue of War Against Terrorism, among others, writes **Sarwat Chowdhury**

MY first exposure to Arundhati Roy was not as an author, but as an ardent environmentalist who is able to utilize her poignant writing to bring attention to the environmental perils of her fellow country people. In my Greenpeace days working in Washington DC, names of environmental activists like Medha Patkar of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* in the international context made me feel proud as a fellow South Asian woman. In gradual school, when we were assigned various writings of Vandana Shiva, I realized this indefatigable activist is much more beyond an eco-feminist. Arundhati Roy has very quickly joined the ranks of such strong female personalities emerging from South Asia.

When she was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 for her first novel *The God of Small Things*, chair of the judges, Professor Gillian Beer, of Cambridge University presented the "unanimous" choice: "We were all engrossed by this moving novel. With extraordinary linguistic inventiveness, Roy funnels the history of south India through the eyes of 7-year-old twins. The story she tells is fundamental as well as local: it is about love and death, about lies and laws."

The novel initially provoked some debate in Roy's native India, where its depiction of inter-caste relations reportedly led to charges that she corrupted public morals. In contrast to the very positive international readers' response to *The God of Small Things*, some of the critics of the English literary scene were also reported to be a bit insular in their response. During that time, I was very curious to read the Booker Prize winning novel. As I read through it, I could see the appeal of Roy's story especially for people not from South Asian origin. That may be my own South Asian interpretation. However, I think Roy's merit is indeed her writing style, where her own personality shines through. It is quite impressive that at 36, she was able to capture global attention through her very first novel! It was as if she already made her powerful presence known along side established male writers of South Asian origin such as Salman Rushdie, and



Arundhati Roy wears the caps of both a female author and an environmental activist

this year's Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul.

Over the past few years, 41 year old Roy has skillfully played the dual role of an author and environmentalist human rights advocate through evocative writings on the Narmada dam debate, the issue of War Against Terrorism, among others. She has more recent works *The Cost of Living*, *Power Politics*; *The Greater Common Good* (the title may remind readers of Dr. Herman Daly and John Cobb's *For the Common Good*)—which have been widely acclaimed. The paperback version of *Power Politics* came out in February 2002. This is Roy's

second nonfiction book in which she returns to the subject she first explored in *The Cost of Living*—iniquities of globalization and the dangers of privatization. Some critics have claimed that in this volume of three essays, Roy's tone is too subjective; however it seems to me that this might as well be intentional on the writer's part.

While the advocates of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* are better speakers for the causes for justice and the rights to life of the many poor inhabitants of the Narmada valley, the issue of relocation of the environmental refugees is consistently discussed among the

environmentalists in the North. In this age of globalization, the plight of those at the receiving end of environmental externalities, and human rights abuses, even at a national level—can be quite quickly disseminated among those involved in the international arena. However, international activists are understandably somewhat limited in their scope of response in a country's domestic matters as seen in the Ken Saro Wiwa case in Nigeria. Writers like Roy have a major role to play in galvanizing the activists, and Arundhati is no way shying away from this role. The March 18 of *News Week* covers an interview with Roy on the recent sectarian violence in her homeland.

The recent criminal contempt case against Arundhati Roy for filing an affidavit suggesting her impression of the court trying to "silence criticism and muzzle dissent" is also an interesting lesson in freedom of speech versus the limits to "scandalize" the judiciary. Roy spent 24 hours in a prison cell for a symbolic sentence of this case. While the case once again brought the writer to the lime light, I think it provides us with some lessons to reflect on—people from all over the developing world not just her fans, readers, environmental and human rights activists, but policy makers as well can learn from this story.

Responding to one of her critics regarding the Narmada debate, Arundhati Roy quite firmly stated that "...almost everyone who wants to rubbish my argument begins by paying me extravagant, backhanded compliments about my 'poetic writing'. Almost as though poetry by definition is imprecise, unsubstantiated mush. Not something that Real Men who build Big Dams dabble in."

In this day and age, Arundhati's own words are a sad but true reflection of the impression of many of the mainstream policy makers especially from South Asia even if the person concerned, in this case, is one of the rare international figures who wears the caps of both a female author and an environmental activist.

IN MEMORIAM

## After the last sky

The writer as Majnoon, this is what Shahid was, seeking beauty and love in a desert studded with sorrow, writes **Amitava Kumar**

AGHA Shahid Ali was a poet and a lover. I can think of no other writer who deserves that description. The writer as Majnoon, this is what Shahid was, seeking beauty and love in a desert studded with sorrow. There is an early poem of his in which Shahid considers a Persian miniature. Majnoon's father has laid his head down to rest "on an uncut sapphire / bereft of prayer." The miniature painting has margins of gold where "verses wear bracelets of paisleys / tied into golden knots of Arabic." It is impossible not to think of Shahid's own poetry when you read those lines, each delicate syllable stitching rubies on what he, with everyone else, sees as desolation.

Shahid left us a few days ago. For many months before he died, Shahid had struggled with a grave illness, and he did not spare even death his love. In his latest collection of poems, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, a finalist for the National Book Award, Shahid is a visitor in the dreamland of death. The opening poem, one that Shahid addresses to his mother dying in Lenox Hill Hospital, finds death's page "filling with diamonds." In another poem, Jesus weeps because he has seen a vision in which centuries later the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Hussain, will be killed on the very site on which Jesus now stands. Reaching across extinction's divide, and also the divisions of time, this image is touched with tenderness. Shahid writes of Hussain's severed head being brought to Obeidullah who carelessly turns the head over with his staff. "Gently," one officer protests. "By Allah! I have seen those lips kissed by the blessed mouth of Muhammad." Once more, I only hear Shahid's loving voice in those lines, finding the memory of love which more than being unrequited actually risks being forgotten.

An important point that can be made about Shahid's poetry is that it drew as much upon English poetic traditions as it did on Urdu literary forms. This needs to be stressed because Shahid's influences were as varied as James Merrill on the one hand, and, on the other, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whom he translated with great delicateness. Indeed, it can be said that no other Indian poet writing in English came close to attempting what was Shahid's great



Poet and lover: Agha Shahid Ali

achievement - the elaboration of a poetic voice that was representative of the subcontinent's own mixed history. *Rooms Are Never Finished* is the last milestone in this yet unfinished project.

A *Nostalgist's Map of America* had introduced an Indian poet to America and the world. But, it was the publication of *The Country Without a Post Office* with which Shahid came back home to India. This latter set of poems was scored with the pain of Kashmir: "They make a desolation and call it peace." And yet, what was distinctive about Shahid's lament was not that it admitted politics. Many have done that routinely. Rather, Shahid, even in addressing the politics of his homeland, presented his strongest protest because he turned away from it incessantly to fashion in his writing something infinitely more beautiful. In other words, Shahid allowed politics to step into his house but boldly drew in its face the purdah of poetry. "The century is ending. It is pain / from which love departs into all new pain: / Freedom's terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir, / is bringing love to its tormented glass. / Stranger, who will inherit the last night / of the past? Of what shall I not sing, and sing?"

In *Rooms Are Never Finished*, this beautiful book of leave-taking, Shahid writes of airports and rooms in hotels and hospitals. In other poems, clad in black, bearing the cry of the gazelle, Shahid goes back to Karbala and Kashmir. This book is not so much a rebuke to death as it is a wailing. Shahid wants to find in death another kind of meeting. After all, there is a terrible solitude about death. It takes one away. It leaves the others all alone. "The Beloved

leaves one behind to die." In Shahid's poems, death is not permitted the tyranny of a singular hold over time and the universe. Even at the level of form alone, the repetitions present in Shahid's poems mean that what has passed always returns. We are bound by the intimacy of a rhythm whose music assures us that we will never be left alone.

I take as my example, a poem crafted by Shahid from the poetry of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: "Violins weep with gypsies going to Andalusia / Violins weep for Arabs leaving Andalusia // Violins weep for a homeland that might return // Violins set fire to the woods of that deep deep darkness / Violins tear the horizon and smell my blood in the vein // ... Violins are complaints of silk creased in the lover's night / Violins are the distant sound of wine falling on a previous desire // Violins follow me everywhere in vengeance / Violins seek me out to kill me wherever they find me // Violins weep for Arabs leaving Andalusia / Violins weep with gypsies going to Andalusia."

Form must be foregrounded in any discussion of Shahid's work because it is that which gave his poetry its intensity. In a remark made about the writing of Roland Barthes, the critic Michael Warner had said that Barthes, who was gay, seldom wrote about his dissident sexuality. Barthes' gayness was expressed not at the level of the signified but, instead, at the level of the signifier. At least for Warner, it was the excess embodied in the language that Barthes used - the complexity and richness at the level of syntax - that marked Barthes as gay. In Shahid's case, it is the extraordinary texture of his verse, the delicate fire that returns us to a sense of tragedy and beauty that is always at the verge of being ground to dust. Shahid's broken lines recall what has been broken in history, and their inventive mimicry restores to history a human dignity. We are now condemned to mourn and to love Shahid in every new poet in English who will pick verses in the rubble that grows around us.

Amitava Kumar is the author of *Passport Photos* (University of California Press and Penguin-India).

MUSIC

## Ravi Shankar and the Grammy: The sound of money

If the Grammys are just about hype and hoopla, what should one make of Pandit Ravi Shankar's award this year, asks **Arun Bhanot**

GRAMMY Night, Holy Night - sort of. It's hard not to get excited when the movers and shakers of the American music industry assemble to "honour their own". Of course, the 44th annual Grammy Awards presented this year wore all signs of the manufactured hype that has accompanied every Grammy Award ceremony in the past few years. But who cares so long as four or whatever billion humans are totally clued on to weep for a time that does not return / Violins weep for a homeland that might return // Violins set fire to the woods of that deep deep darkness / Violins tear the horizon and smell my blood in the vein // ... Violins are complaints of silk creased in the lover's night / Violins are the distant sound of wine falling on a previous desire // Violins follow me everywhere in vengeance / Violins seek me out to kill me wherever they find me // Violins weep for Arabs leaving Andalusia / Violins weep with gypsies going to Andalusia."

There, I sneaked in that dirty word. But is it really dirty anymore? "Money...is the root of all evil today..." sang Roger Waters in Pink Floyd's classic *The Dark Side of the Moon* album in the 1970s. But, then, Mr Waters is highly unlikely to rent a tux and limo or dip his fingers in the avocado sauce at the afters bash. Is it any wonder then that subsequent to (well, actually a few years later) penning that bit of verse he was dismissed from his own band for suggesting that they disband because it had outlived its creative life? Who has heard of a band splitting for "musical reasons" these days?

Anyway, in the cold sobering light of the morning after, it is time to take a quick double take and get those stars out of one's eyes. Hey, life is R...E...A...L. And the Grammys were a dream, and a bad one at that. So, let's sharpen those knives and go for the jugular!

Most anyone knows that the Grammys are the lamest-limpet of all awards shows. The event is billed as "music's biggest night", but there is something rotten about its easy promise of familiarity. Just who picks these people? Methinks it is a bunch of American music-



And the Grammy goes to...

industry has-beens whose main goal in life, it has been seen, is specifically not to reward adventuresome pop music, much less adventurous music of any kind. To their (dis)credit, they have been remarkably successful in that endeavour. Remember Milli Vanilli? Were you even born then? Every year the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences holds its annual debacle, doing its best to reward evanescence. Last year those worthies took a nostalgia trip (Carlos Santana, bless him, long deserved a Grammy, but eight? Why, that puts him right up there on the same

pedestal with Michael Jackson!). What thin theme held together the Grammy Awards this year is anybody's guess.

But this time, particularly, the questions cut closer to the bone. What should one make of this: when the gods presiding over Grammy decide to honour "one of our own" - sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar? Do we rise and cheer, maybe even "jangle our jewellery" as Lennon once famously said? I mean, "This is great! The Americans are at last recognising our classical music!" Or, do we say, hey what's going on? Does this mean that Ameri-

cans are going to rush out to the malls, grab Ravi Shankar CDs and stack them up right next to their Nsync and Backstreet Boys albums?

Of course, Panditji has never had any problem selling his music in the West. Or winning Grammys. This is his third, for the album *Full Circle: Carnegie Hall 2000*, a collection of concert recordings. The first he won in 1966 for the wonderful *East Meets West* jugabandi with violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin. Four years later, his work in the Concert for Bangladesh earned him a Grammy. He had earlier won a Grammy nomination in the Best Folk Music category for his 1966 album *Sound of the Sitar*. He has been, since the mid-Sixties, the most recognised face of Indian classical music abroad, among kings and commoners alike. Thanks to George Harrison and Woodstock and spaced out hippies, the raga entered the Western lexicon through the soulful strains of Ravi Shankar's sitar.

But hey, if one were to take the Academy's chant of honouring the best music seriously, it would seem that Ravi Shankar continues to be the pre-eminent Indian classical musician, if not the only one. That's one more reason why we cannot take the Grammys seriously. The thing is that Pandit Ravi Shankar will always outsell a Ustad Vilayat Khan (to talk of another sitar virtuoso, and to many minds a superior player) or a Ustad Akbar Ali Khan or a U. Srinivas or L. Subramaniam. Because Ravi Shankar has become more than a musician, he is a brand, easy to identify and easier to label (didn't I say that the Grammy gives are lazy too). So hundreds of Indian classical music albums may be released every year, many of them collaborations that could be clubbed under the so-called "World Music" category. But, no, unless backed by an established name in the American music industry they are likely to remain obscure, bought by a select few.

Even Vishwamohan Bhatt (the only other Indian musician to win a Grammy in this category in 1994) got his 15 seconds of fame thanks to his collaboration with American slide guitarist Ry Cooder on *A Meeting by the River* album.

The point here is: does Pandit Ravi Shankar really need a statuette given by a bunch of marketing guys whose business is selling music and not making it? He is so far beyond it? Does Hindustani or Carnatic music need the Grammy seal of approval? It's something Pandit Vishwamohan Bhatt needs to understand. He has been deeply upset that despite winning a "prestigious Grammy" he has not been given his due by the music establishment in India. He should realise that Indian classical music or any other ethnic music shall forever be a stranger at the Grammy table, acknowledged with a nod every now and then, but one who will not be making a grand speech. We have to honour (as we do) our own deserving musicians and get over this Grammy fixation. One can't be a teenager forever.

POEM

### Tolerance

MANZURL AZIZ

Nine and half  
Hard to fulfil  
Advancing to absorb but  
It is too tough.

How came  
Hard to realise  
Beyond the perception  
Time is passing by  
Bare of satisfaction.

Bad smells in the air  
faithless work everywhere  
But proceeds without care  
Will not wipe out ever.

Nobody can do till death  
Revive the fingers of my faith  
What I kept in my mind.