

ESSAY

Latin American Poetry: A Quest

MOHAMMED RAFIQ

THE volume is called *Reflection on Spanish-American Poetry* and the writer is Jorge Carrera Andrade. Let me begin with this very Jorge Carrera Andrade. First a note of caution; there are a number of poets in Latin American poetry who go by the cognomen "Andrade." Only in Brazil (let alone in other parts of Latin America) there are three famous "Andrades": Mário de Andrade (1893-1945), Oswald de Andrade (1890-1945), Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-1987). The first two poets are contemporary and are the pioneers of the avant-garde Brazilian poetry. But the third name here is responsible for placing Brazilian poetry at its peak and adding a true Brazilian colour to it.

However, Jorge Carrera Andrade is not from Brazil. He is from Ecuador. He was born in 1902 in Quito, the Ecuadorian capital. In the same year Brazilian Carlos Andrade was born. Actually the year of 1902 is indeed very significant for the history of Latin American poetry. In this very year two famous poets were born- Nicolas Guillen (1902-1989) of Cuba and Jaime Torres Bodet (1902-1974) from Mexico. A good number of Latin American poets were born in this period. To name a few, Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948) and Pablo Neruda (1904-1974) of Chile, Jorge de Lima (1895-1953) and Raul Bopp (1898-1984) of Brazil, Ricardo Molinary (1898-?) and Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) from Argentina, Carlos Pellicer (1899-1977), and Xavier Villaurrutia (1903-1950) from Mexico, Eugenio Florit (1903) of Cuba and Cesar Vallejo (1892-1938) from Peru. Basically Latin America found its way of modernization through these poets of the second generation who devoted themselves in capturing the true essence of Latin American soil, people and culture. It took decades to tell the whole story of discovering this new America.



ILLUSTRATION: KHALED

Jorge Carrera Andrade is surely the one fearless sailor who set his sails of imagination in search of the essential Latin America.

Andrade studied in the villages even though he was born in the capital. While growing up, he developed a good rapport with the aborigines. Evidently, this relationship proved very valuable for his poems. As part of the unwritten rule of Latin America in those days (i.e. poets were appointed as envoys), Andrade was appointed as the ambassador of Ecuador to South-East Asia, Japan and China. It was

at the same time, Neruda was serving as the Chilean ambassador in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. However, neither of these two Spaniards ever met, nor they had any terms with them. Probably, God had different plans for these two poets. Neruda was haunted by his unmatchable fame all through his life, all over the world. Conversely, Andrade's fame was confined to his continent alone. But I am not here to make a comparison of fame of these two great poets. All I want to do is to mention the poetic genius of Jorge Andrade- the poet who still remains

very unknown to many of us.

Jorge Andrade's book on Latin American poetry is divided into five chapters. It is a very carefully knitted volume constructed with five chapters, which are actually five individual essays. The essays are:

1. Spanish-American originality
 2. Poetry and society in Spanish America
 3. Trends in Spanish-American poetry (20th century)
 4. Decade of my poetry
 5. Poetry of reality and utopia
- Each essay is an inseparable part of the entire volume. The book

is a celebration of the uniqueness of poetry as well as its universality.

The very first essay of the book recounts the courageous stories of discovering America. It is well known that, Cristofor Colon, better known as Christopher Columbus, was the first person to set foot on this remote part of the globe. This very incident is now glorified as the "discovery America." But actually the "discoverer" himself was not aware of what he had discovered simply by reaching the shore! Not only Columbus, entire Spain thought that their well-deserved "Admiral" had anchored somewhere in India. And so, each and every Island, which emerged the head from the salty waters, including the Caribbean islands, was named after India. Not only Columbus but also the whole of Spain including the King, the Queen, each and every royal servant is responsible for this mistake.

Jorge Andrade's treatment of the so-called discovery is interesting indeed. It seems that Andrade referred to Amerigo Vespucci as the point of departure of his essay. The essay is the story of discovering America, how Europe looks through this historical discovery, the true picture of the map etc. These are told in few long sentences in a single paragraph. Even this poet-essayist tried to figure out the geographical identities of the both Americans in the very opening of this short essay. Now let us come back to the main point. The writer maintained that at the very beginning of the colonial rule, there prevailed whole lot of suspicions, injustice and doubts between America and the main land Spain, which influenced and controlled almost everything.

The story of the discovery guides us to the stories of the original people of South America. The Spaniard met these half-naked people at Guahani seashores, and the fantasy withered soon. Columbus wrote in his diary- "... How strange! They do not

keep any weapons with them... It seems like they are not included to any religion of the world.... But they are very intelligent."

He was using the right kind of words and his thoughts were in the right track. But not after this, when he wrote-

"...Sooner or later we can use them as our trustful slaves."

At first, the Spaniards were more or less attracted by the mental height and quality of the aborigines, they were compelled to admit that, though these group of people roam about half-nakedly, they surely are not barbarous or wild. These foreign visitors could certainly not ignore the proud and rich civilization of these people, which prevailed in their attitude. Few of the Spaniards started to admire these people. But the upset occurred soon after this. Crude and evil rapacity shadowed their pure and clear inner eyes. And drought of humanity and senses began to dry every last moisture of their hearts. An evil tyrant always says something to justify his crime. The Spaniards did the same thing. They began to invent mouthful stories about the poor aborigines. They started saying that, newly "discovered New Found Land" is full of uncultured, pagan savages. And they, who do not have a religion, cannot be termed as human beings at all. So treating these pagans (!) humanly was out of question. Soon the Spanish ships of yellow and red striped flags started loading the boards with slaves. The evil tyrant slayers started their bloodbath in every possible corner. The despoilers did not let the ancient monuments stand in peace. The possible exchange of two cultures was thwarted forever. Reaching this far to the climax, I guess, Jorge Andrade stopped and tried to take a big breath.

Mohammad Rafiq is an eminent poet and an Associate Professor of English, Jahangirnagar University. This piece was first published in the Daily Sangbad and is translated by Sanyat Sattar.

POETRY

From Century Of The Death Of The Rose

Jorge Carrera Andrade

Nothing

In bookstores there are no books, in books no words, in words no essence: there are only husks.

In museums and waiting rooms are painted canvases and fetishes. In the Academy there are only recordings of the wildest dances.

In mouths there is only smoke, in the eyes only distance. There is a drum in each ear. A Sahara yawns in the mind.

Nothing frees us from the desert. Nothing saves us from the drum. Painted books shed their pages, becoming husks of Nothing.

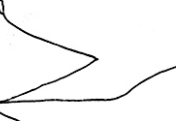
Power Of The Word

You, panther and statue, angel of fruit, sexual bread shop, monument of wheat, with throat pierced by the dart of a sudden word, have fallen into shadow

Oh deadly and fiery word that arrives to engrave itself so accurately in marble, like the rifle that blindly strikes down the soldier from a distance.

Panther of wheat, you now lie like a toppled statue on an empty beach. The sea foam of oblivion washes up around pronged pillars where doves nest!

Blue lightning of the word has scattered your useless wings and fruit, and, in shadows, your abandoned body is a frigid bread shop washed out by the moon



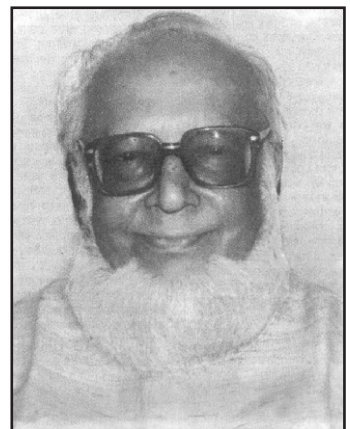
Translated from the Spanish by Steven Ford Brown

TRIBUTE

Syed Ali Ahsan--A Lingerin G Gance

ABU TAHER MOJUMDER

I came to know Syed Ali Ahsan first in the 1960s when I was teaching in a Government College in Chittagong and he was a Professor of Bengali at Chittagong University. He made a tremendous impression on me by his resonant voice, manner of talking, choice of words, structure of the sentences



which first appeared studied and mechanical but soon evinced of spontaneity and sincerity. All taken together, he seemed to be a charismatic man, a scholar in his own right, a learned man who carried on conversation with an effortless ease and made one feel that every minute spent in his company is a minute spent in a very worthwhile way. He was not awe-inspiring. He evinced reverence and gave the impression of having a kind of dignity which one encounters when luck -- good luck for that matter -- favours one. He really had that sort of dignity, but one needed time to make sure of it. He was a rather slow but rhythmic speaker whose tone was adequately measured, but designed not

to increase but minimize the distance between himself and the hearer. I was young and just across the threshold of my teaching career, face to face with a legendary teacher. I was a little shy, hesitant and afraid lest I should offend him by my ignorance, small vision of life and the world. I just wondered at him: a student of English but a Professor of Bengali! When I left him his last words reverberated in my memory: "Be sincere in your commitment, to the last, to whatever it is, nobody will misunderstand you."

Syed Ali Ahsan was a younger cousin of Dr Syed Sajjad Husain, whom he endearingly addressed as Sajjad Bhai and who quite imperceptibly became my guide, philosopher and friend from first year honours class. For this reason I was curious about Syed Ali Ahsan and thought that he definitely had some of those qualities for which I profoundly appreciated and admired Dr Husain. As far as I remember, I was not disappointed; however, I recognized soon enough that as personalities they had also their very distinct characteristics. As scholars they enjoyed a great reputation. However, while Syed Ali Ahsan was an eloquent speaker who literally kept his listeners spellbound, Dr Husain was not blessed with the gift of gab. I shall not venture further on any invidious comparison between the two great teacher-scholars, for my intention here is only a recollection of some memories of Syed Ali Ahsan.

I did not meet this august personality on a great many occasions in Chittagong. But some of the meetings were long enough to enable me to form my idea and estimate about him. My esteem about him reached its zenith when once I heard him reviewing very sympathetically a joint poetical venture of myself and

my friend Md Abdul Bari, a Professor of Bengali, over the Chittagong radio. He recited in full a short piece of mine and advised us to take the muse with more earnest devotion and sincerity. The magnanimity of his soul manifested in this small (but far-reaching for me) incident continued to inspire me ever since that day. He is no more with us now, but his voice, his affectionate and kind words still ring in my ears and instill new inspiration and zeal in me.

I spent part of the last year of the sixties and two and half years of the early seventies in UK. When I came back from UK in 1972 it was a new country -- Bangladesh, my homeland -- established after a tremendous bloodbath and nine months of valiant war of liberation. Syed Ali Ahsan was then the Vice-Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University. Several intimate friends were then teachers there. They encouraged me to apply for the post of Assistant Professor soon after the publication of the advertisement. I met Syed Ali Ahsan at the interview board. As Vice-Chancellor, he was the Chairman of the selection committee. He greeted me with a broad and genial smile and congratulated me for obtaining an MA degree by research from the University of Wales. I was asked to shed light on Sir William Jones' literary contribution (my thesis was about his literary contribution) and I elaborated on Jones' being the founder of East-West literary relationship. My batchmate, who was then the chairman of the department, asked me a few things. Syed Ali Ahsan congratulated me and advised me to join as soon as I could. I shall never be able to forget his typically reassuring and affectionate smile which at once evinced a genial and generously appreciative soul. From that time

onwards I met him time and again. After my joining the English Department as an Assistant Professor I got ample opportunity to become closer to him as a colleague. He was very affectionate and considerate and apart from paying attention to his demanding administrative responsibilities, he was always busily engaged in his second-love (or the first) his literary and scholarly activities. He sometimes made inquiries about whether I was writing anything but I always shyly avoided all sorts of literary discussion with him for fear that my weakness would become exposed to him. He, however, always smiled his reassuring smile and made me divulge my secrets. He could sometimes become most disarmingly sincere and friendly.

After the expiry of his term as Vice-Chancellor Professor Ali Ahsan handed over the charge to Dr Enamul Huq, another extraordinary scholar, a man of the strictest possible moral and ethical principles and sound integrity. At the time of the change-over ceremony which was held in the Vice-Chancellor's office at Road No-2, Dhanmondi, both Prof Syed Ali Ahsan and Dr Enamul Huq spoke of, among other things, their literary and administrative principles. Syed Ali Ahsan spoke of both literary pursuits and administrative responsibilities. But Dr Enamul Huq candidly emphasized his strong penchant for strict administration which he pursued unflinchingly throughout his stay at Jahangirnagar as Vice-Chancellor. During the latter's time the post of Associate Professor of English was advertised. It so happened that I was then the only candidate for this post with a foreign degree which was then a must for any one applying for either the post of Associate

Professor or Professor of English. My batch-mate and first Chairman of the Department was then abroad for higher studies. Besides, he had only a diploma and no degree from abroad, so he was not qualified to apply. When consulted, Syed Ali Ahsan advised me to apply, saying that there was not much sense in my not applying, adding that my batchmate would qualify to apply after obtaining his degree and then he would duly be promoted. I followed his advice and applied successfully for the post. Syed Ali Ahsan also taught in the Bengali Department for a time as a supernumerary professor and remained a well-wisher all the time. His company was ennobling and inspiring and his range of knowledge of world literature was simply astonishing. It was at this time that I came to know of his proficiency in several other languages. He was a scholar who avoided parading his scholarship. During free and hearty chats on the spacious veranda of the old Arts Building he always manifested unequivocally the catholicity of his interest and taste and standard of his appreciation. Call of other responsibilities made him go away from Jahangirnagar University, never to come back except as an honoured guest as an ex-Vice-Chancellor. My contact with him became few and far between.

In 1982 I received a telephone call from Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi, Professor Ali Ahsan's son-in-law a very close associate as well, and an eminent litterateur and scholar of our country. Though older than me, Dr Qureshi was always spontaneously friendly with me. He told me about Syed Ali Ahsan's 60th birthday and the celebration of the occasion at Hotel Purbari and invited me to attend it and then said, "Please talk

with your Sir". I was amazed there was still a niche in his heart for me. He said, "Taher, you will surely come". I made few inquiries about his health and very politely said, "I will come, Sir". I attended the celebration and wondered at the gathering of scholars, litterateurs and admirers of all sorts. The Hall was packed to the capacity. I particularly appreciated the significant speech delivered by Prof. Mohammad Ali of Chittagong University. The magnificent volume, *Festschrift for Syed Ali Ahsan*, included contribution by many eminent literary personalities from many parts of the world, throwing light on his achievements and various aspects of his life. A copy of this volume is particularly important and significant for me as it was signed by him with these words: "Sheher Abu Taher Mojumderke shubashirbad". He presented me with several other books, including a copy of his selected poems. The last favour he did was the contribution of a Foreword to my volume *Fifty Seven Letters of Dr Syed Sajjad Hussain* in which he, among other things, wrote: "The letters, though personal in content, have literary value. These letters, besides showing tenderness and support for Abu Taher Mojumder, have communicated sentiments which every reader can accept as meant for him. I congratulate Abu Taher Mojumder for preserving these letters and for bringing them to light."

Professor Syed Ali Ahsan showed his generosity, sense of consideration and affection for me by personally inviting me over the telephone to the unostentatious celebration of his 80th birthday at his residence. I carried a small bouquet of flowers. When I entered the room where quite a number of his admir-

ers had gathered to felicitate him, I found a very large bouquet before him, containing 80 very remarkably large and fragrant roses spreading the aroma of his personality and scholarship. Eminent poet Al-Mujahid and Dr Sardar Abdus Sattar, *inter alia*, were two of the very eloquent speakers who felicitated him in glowing terms.

The last time I saw him in a public gathering was at Andre Malraux Institute of Culture where Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi's admirers had gathered to felicitate him on the occasion of the publication of *Melanés qureshi: dialogue of cultures*, a volume of felicitations of Mahmud Shah Qureshi, marking his 60th birthday. Syed Ali Ahsan presided over the meeting which was attended by Dr Osman Faruq, the Honourable Education Minister as the Chief Guest. Syed Ali Ahsan had become weaker after protracted illness, but he delivered his presidential speech in a clear and resonant voice, firmly and coherently. All the distinguished guests present there greeted him with sincerity and deep feeling. After a few weeks I visited him without knowing that it was my last visit. My procrastination deprived me of more visits which I regret very much now. He was then staying at the house of Dr Qureshi, I stayed a little longer, then, afraid of tiring him by talking too much, I left. Now he is beyond all visits. A great literary giant has disappeared into a world from whose bourn no traveller returneth.

Syed Ali Ahsan combined talent with devoted hard work to achieve the heights in matters of literary activities and scholarship which his admirers mention with a deep sense of pride. He is most likely to survive the winnowing of time as a poet of

very considerable merit, as a very remarkable literary and art critic, as an editor and essayist, as a literary historian, researcher and thinker. His casual writings also elicited admiration from the readers. He was a great teacher and will be remembered by generations of his students who were fortunate in having the opportunity to travel with him along the frontiers of knowledge. He will be remembered as a brilliant speaker and an engaging conversationalist who turned even ordinary exchange of words into a sort of art. He was a valiant freedom fighter and, along with others, represented the intellectual side of the liberation war. His contribution will remain enshrined on the pages of the history of the liberation war.

Mulk Raj Anand's estimate of Syed Ali Ahsan as a person and scholar is both brilliant and enlightening: "In your person you have embodied the synthesis of the deepest truths of your interested faith with the kind of tenderness which is the essential core of modern humanism. And your own humanity has inspired students and researchers to remain resilient in the hope that love of people for each other will prevail against hatred." The earth can feel proud of having received an 'honoured guest', but with him I have lost an abiding well wisher and good friend. Who knows when another comparable luminary will appear on the horizon of Bangladesh?

The writer is Professor of English, Jahangirnagar University.

FROM THE NET

On Booker Prize

The Guardian with 'gambler's eternal optimism' runs its eye over this year's Booker Prize. We reproduce this survey of the Booker race for our readers' delight. --Literary Editor

...No fewer than three of the final six (Martel, Mistry and Shields) [shortlisted for Booker] are Canadian. This not only must be some kind of record but also threatens to challenge Australian literature's traditional armlock on this prize.

Both Rohinton Mistry and Carol Shields have made the trip to Guildhall before and both have a strong chance this year. Mistry's *Family Matters* is an impeccably narrated story of domestic conflict, set in Bombay. Shields's *Unless* was described in these pages as 'poised and wise'. Yann Martel, a newcomer to the Booker, enjoys the support of former winner Margaret Atwood.

In the absence of Zadie Smith, Martel's is the voice of the new

generation. It's been a long time since a Booker jury has chosen a novel as unusual as *Life of Pi*, but it has surprisingly good odds with the bookmakers.

Another longshot, Tim Winton, is a Booker veteran (short-listed in 1995 for *The Riders*), and *Dirt Music* has done well to sustain his challenge for the prize against the widely touted claims of William Boyd's *Any Human Heart*. Another long-list favourite who came unstuck at this penultimate fence, Howard Jacobson's *Who's Sorry Now?* confirms the Booker's longstanding bias against outright comedy.

Jardine's jury has, nonetheless, let in quite a bit of fresh air into the dusty attic of British literary fiction.

Narrative is back. 'Pompous, portentous and pretentious' fiction is out. The triumph of 'genre' (aka popular fiction) is signalled by the preference of the gifted Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*, a high-spirited and utterly compelling yarn, with a frisson of lesbian sex, set in the under world of Victorian England. On a short-list with such a strong bias towards storytelling, she will be worth a well-placed side bet.

Which leaves the bookies' choice, veteran contender William Trevor. *The Children of Dymnouth* was a runner-up in 1976, the year David Storey won with *Saville*, while in 1991, Trevor's *Reading Turgenev* lost to Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*.

He comes into this year's race with many advantages. He is a widely acclaimed master of contemporary fiction, in both the short story and the novel, an exceptional accomplishment. It's tempting to tip him, with the caveat that the Booker favourite rarely wins.

It's a relief to report that Professor Jardine's panel has come up with a sample of contemporary fiction that may not exactly represent the extraordinary variety and richness of the novel today but which will give a great many readers a great deal of pleasure.

Source: The Guardian.

Who's in for Nobel ?

US novelist Philip Roth is tipped as the frontrunner for this year's Nobel prize for literature, with observers citing Dutch author Cees Nootboom, Belgium's Hugo Claus and Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa as other possible successors to V.S.Naipaul, the 2001 laureate.

The Swedish Academy is keeping its usual stony silence, but even Sweden's literary circles, which usually enter the guessing game with gusto, are unusually mute this time round.

"This year we've heard only very few rumours," said Lars Erik Sundberg at Swedish publishing house Nordstedts. "It's been even quieter than in previous years," he said.

In the absence of any fresh input, Hugo Claus, Cees Nootboom and Philip Roth are the favourites, according to Anna Tillgren at Bonnier, Sweden's other major publisher. "Every year it's the same names," she said.

But some believe that Roth may just be ahead of the pack this time.

"He has never sold as many copies in France as with his last book, *The Human Stain*, it's unbelievable," said Pierre Assouline, editor of French literary magazine *Lire*.

Assouline said that Roth's literary merit is beyond doubt, but that picking a US author just over a year after September 11 could be seen as a little too obviously political. "Roth would make this the American Year, after September 11. But he has produced a body of work, and a verdict for him would not be challenged," he said.

But if it isn't Roth, then Mario Vargas Llosa is an often-mentioned possibility, as 12 years have passed since the last time the prize went to a Spanish speaker, Octavio Paz.

Or it could be the year to look to authors from smaller European countries, writing in languages spoken by sometimes just a few

million people.

Hugo Claus or Cees Nootboom, who both write in Dutch, "would be good choices because they represent a European region that has never won the prize", said Anders Paulrud, columnist at Swedish daily Aftonbladet.

The same case could be made for Hungary's Imre Kertesz, as no author from his country has even won the prize, or for Albania's Ismail Kadare.

Doris Lessing, who has been in the queue for a long time, should probably not hold her breath this year either because she is a Briton, like last year's winner, Naipaul.

JM Coetzee from South Africa, although widely seen as worthy of the prize, may also fall victim to the unspoken rule that the Swedish Academy can rate political considerations more highly than the simple ability to write literature.

Among other names cited as Nobel hopefuls are US novelists

Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates, French writers Yves Bonnefoy and Tahar Ben Jelloun, Britain's Salman Rushdie, Janet Frame from New Zealand, Mexico's Carlos Fuentes, and Pramoedya Ananta Toer from Indonesia.

Also mentioned, with lengthening odds, are Swedish poet Tomas Transtromer, Denmark's Villy Soerensen, Latvian poet Vizma Belzevica, as well as Estonian authors Jaan Kross et Jaan Kaplinski, or poets Robert Ashbury and Adonis, from the US and Syria, respectively.

No date for the Academy's decision has been set, but the smart money is on Thursday, October 10.

The prize will be officially awarded on December 10 and the winner will receive 10 million kroner (1.1 million euros) in prize money.

Source: AFP