

NON-FICTION

KHADEMUL ISLAM

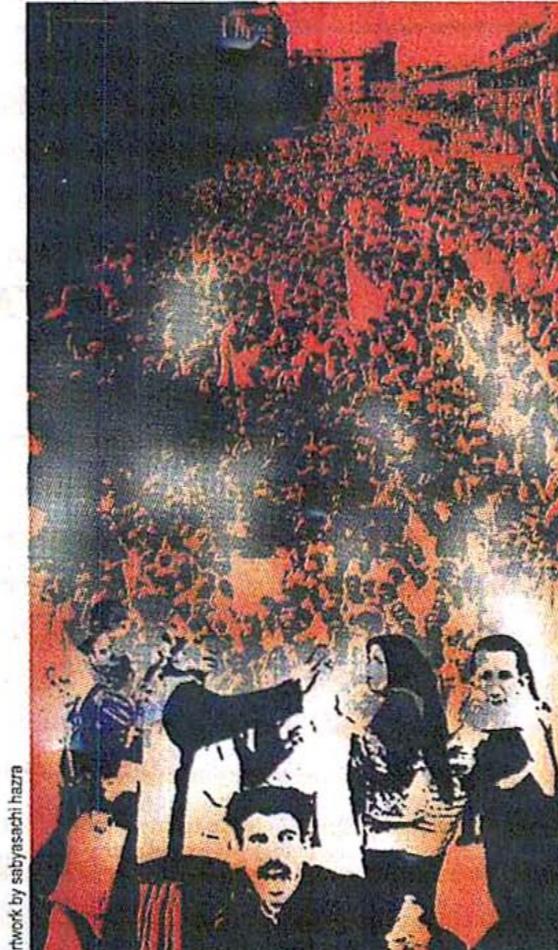
It is late December 1968. In Karachi. I'm walking home mentally rewinding the sickle scene in the Czech movie I've just seen. I'm in class nine, and it's the first 'art' movie I've seen. Curious about the East European film festival being held in the city, I'd snagged my father's invitation card. The afternoon light along Elphinstone Street is clear and bright, like the one that had lit up the stunning Swat-like hills and valleys in the movie. I've almost forgotten that Karachi is burning with the anti-Ayub movement -- demos, protest marches and police action are almost daily events since the student shooting in Pindi in November.

Street protests are something that I, and my friends, are not accustomed to. Unlike East Pakistan, West Pakistan stayed complacent and quiet during the '60s. Until now. We live in the Garden Road Officers Colony, in the center of the city, its spaces dotted with huge shady neem trees. On summer noons camels lugubriously survey the traffic whirling at the roundabout while their drivers clock siesta time beneath parked carts.

Against all good sense Javed and I had ventured out to see the demos. But then we'd stopped. Not because of the tire burnings, or rising crowd temperatures, or even because of the police - who were now firing live rounds! No, it was because of the Pathans, the 'lalas' as all of Karachi called them. A lala to us schoolboys was one 'unpredictable, surly bugger; the toughest kids in school were not the one with the most muscles, but the ones with the Pathan driver. A fight with one of those boys meant you had to deal with his attack dog coming at you when school was over. If the lala wasn't leashed back, you were toast, zig-zagging past street vendors for your life! Traditionally, Pathans had been chowkidars and gatekeepers, but from mid-'60s on they streamed into the city from the northwest frontier to be manual labourers or waiters and cooks in low-rent hotels. As employees they were gold. A lala would slap naans against the sides of coal-fired ovens for four hours at a stretch in the scorching summer heat without a murmur. But cross him, and the next moment you were in a knife fight at the OK Corral! There was a Pathan who

made the rounds of our colony with balloons on a cardboard for target shooting. One day a couple of us boys had a bad day and missed a few. We told him that the sight on his Diana .28 airgun was not right, implying it had been 'fixed'. The lala's green eyes instantly flashed. He strode ten steps back further away from the shooting line, held the airgun in one hand like a pistol, and loading each time from the lead slugs he had in his mouth, popped off fifteen balloons in a row. Then wordlessly he slung his gun and board on to his shoulders and stalked off, body rigid with anger. We never saw him again. What had probably saved us was that we were ten years old! Lalas had impressively high pain thresholds. Once I saw a Pathan, a teenager really, driving a donkey cart loaded with ice blocks covered with a single layer of jute sacking. It was a windy, bitterly cold Karachi winter morning, and he was seated on one block, with the sacking and his shalwar soaked through and through from the melting ice-water. But the lala kid just clip-clopped by, his face set against what had to be the stoniest frost-bitten Pathan arse east of the Suez. Even hardened Karachiites stared. There are more stories I can tell, all of which condensed into the two iron dictums of our schoolboy lore: the lala preferred boys over women (the older boys handed down this nugget); and in a brawl a Pathan never backed down. Never. Ever.

Javed and I didn't realize at first that Pathans were in the fray, too. Ayub Khan was a Pathan, and the lalas were taking the protests personally. If a demo veered too close to one of their hangouts, they would attack it. Aside from the bustees, Pathans occupied open spaces behind streets and shopfronts, where they lolled on charpoys chewing naswar. When the anti-Ayub show began it was Javed who had proposed that we go see some. I couldn't say no, because that would conclusively prove the superiority of St. Pat's (his school), which then had produced Wasim Bari, the national cricket team wicketkeeper, over St. Lawrence (my school, nothing to write home about). Damn St. Pat's, I thought, and went along, both of us peering from a safe distance at massed angry figures. Then, at one demo near Empress Market, with the mike-ing upped to full blast, from a side street suddenly tumbled out, at full Mongolian cavalry gallop, a bunch of lalas. You could



always tell a lala from his charge -- there was no swerving. The demo members vanished. We sprinted into another alley -- but it had been close. One more minute and they would have been on top of us. The second time I knew it was coming. The procession was going to go down Bunder Road (now Jinnah Road). I'd attended Mary Colas school as a kid. I'd use its back entrance on Bunder Road, entering an alley that opened out to an enclosed space where cinema hoarding artists painted giant Waheed Murads, Mohammed Ali and Zebras. At the far end was the school gate. The space was also a lala redoubt. "Here it comes," I said to Javed as the large procession approached the alley's mouth. Sure enough, out charged the Pathans, knives in their hands. As the two columns met head on in a medieval battle, the police

swung into action. That was it. No more demo watching for us.

The Czech film had been a black-and-white pastoral set on the eve of World War II. News about a distant war filtered uncertainly into a remote village where a widower father had raised his son by himself. The son was now a strapping young man, and the neighbouring wife, peasant scarf tied on her head, had taken to dropping by in the mornings before going on to cut grass in the valley below. The scene that had grabbed me by the short hairs was one where the father and son were shaving, standing bare-bodied in black shorts taking turns at the one cracked mirror. The woman gaily walked into the house, then stopped on seeing the men. She slowly came forward to stand behind the son, and burned a long look at his back. The camera lingered on the young man's muscles. She then stepped nearer and as the father looked on and the camera dipped into loving close-up -- very slowly, softly, sensuously, just pricking the skin, her breath in his ear, ran the pointed end of her sickle from the back of his knee all the way up to his buttock. Then she tapped the sickle point on the hard black-clad mound. Twice. When the son turned towards her, she looked back at him, directly, like an equal. He glanced at his father, who shrugged. Next scene, the son and the woman were swimming in a frothing river, where it was evident that along with the peasant scarf and black shorts all other attire had been dispensed with.

That had been a culturally intriguing moment for me. I had never seen something like this before on the silver screen, nor a look like hers. Yet it had been an ordinary moment within the movie -- there had been no 'smouldering' Urdu filmi eyes, no jutting of hips. The father's shrug too I found intriguing. Would my father have shrugged at a moment like that? Not likely -- he was from Noakhali. Like Pathans they had their own damn code. And a Pathan? Hmmm,

what would a lala daddy-o have...

It is when I turn left into Garden Road -- I can see Lyric and Bambino cinema halls in front to the left -- that I hear the shouts. I turn around to see a procession running at full speed towards me. Beyond them I vaguely see policemen. Snapping out of my cultural ruminations in a hurry I join in as the leading edge of men catch up with me. On my left I spot Dr. Habibullah, who was in the health ministry and lived in the building in front of us. For a middle-aged dad in dress shoes his hoofwork's good. I nod at him. He nods back. Just then shouts come from the rear: "Lalas", "Pathans".

That does it. We tear down the street, across the Bunder Road tramlines. Just as we reach the old Chevy showroom to our right, I hear thuds. Tear gas!

The first tear gas made was 1-chloroacetophenone, or CN, which they tossed back and forth in the World War I along with mustard and chlorine gas. Then in 1928 an American company developed O-chlorobenzylidene malononitrile, or CS. This stuff fizzed immediately on contact and was five times more potent than CN. Since then CS tear gas has become the 'non-lethal' riot control weapon of choice of the modern state. If fired heavily and indiscriminately in small, crowded streets and spaces, tear gas can cause symptoms similar to neurotoxin exposure: nausea, dizziness, confusion, fatigue, and central nervous system depression. Especially nasty is methylene chloride, which is used in tear gas as a dispersal agent. Prolonged exposure can bring on acute and chronic health effects ranging from pulmonary edema to chromosome aneuploidy in germine and somatic cells, the last leading to birth defects and cancer. The US dropped an estimated 15 million pounds of it in Vietnam. Israel still airdrops teargas drums -- drums! -- on the teeming alleys of Gaza refugee camps. Though the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which the US is a signatory, bans the use of tear gas in war, George Bush has okayed its use in Iraq. As in the small arms trade, the Americans and the EU (the UK within it) are the major manufacturers of tear gas, with the Chinese coming along fast. It's a business with built-in profits: you push policies that prop up Third World kleptocracies hand in hand with multilateral lending agencies

'structurally' stripping public subsidies on gas, electricity, transport and food supplies that force the poor to take to the streets, then you turn around to sell riot control goodies to those very states. The Americans lead in stun gun development, have unveiled the promising 'pepperball', which fires bursting pepper gas projectiles, as well as a razor wire 'carpet' that unrolls at 5 yards a second...the business prospects are dizzying.

Two canisters fall right in front of me, and hemmed in by the crowd I run straight into its billowing acrid white smoke. Because I'm hurling at full tilt I clear it fast, but not before I have taken in three good lungfuls of it. Seconds later, my face starts to burn hellishly, and my eyes sting like they've been bitten by gnats. My knees buckle as I stop to cough uncontrollably. I smell vomit in my mouth. Other people are doubled up, coughing, swearing, eyes streaming. I start forward again, tears streaming from eyes, windpipe and throat blistered. We all slow down near our colony -- it's safe now. I knock on Javed's door. He opens it, and comments "Those are some red eyes you have my friend." We go to his room and he brings me a wet towel. I sit on his bed with over my eyes. His large, shaggy-haired dog, Siko, jumps up on the bed and thumps me with his tail.

"What happened?"

"What do you think? Tear gas."

"Where did you go?"

"To see a Czech movie at the Ritz."

"A Czech movie?" Javed never watches anything other than action movies.

"Yes, at the festival."

I lift my eyes from the towel. I still feel nauseous. The tears don't stop.

"Why would you do that?"

I don't dignify the question with an answer. St. Pat's! What do you expect? What can you expect from these guys?

Much later, I go home. No dinner. Straight to bed, dodging my mother's queries, tear gas smell still strong in my nostrils.

The other day I learnt that Pervez Musharraf, and his prime minister, are also St. Pat's. Hmmm...shouldn't have come as a surprise! What can you expect...

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Letter from
KARACHI

This Summer in London: Damien Hirst, WH Auden and Tahmima Anam

MUNEEZA SHAMSIE

July in London was freezing cold. My instinct was to stay indoors and vegetate, but of course London has far too many interesting events. First I headed off to the Damien Hirst's exhibition 'Beyond Belief': its highlight was a spectacular diamond skull. Cast in platinum from a real skull, it was embedded with 8,601 flawless diamonds but retained the original (terribly white) teeth. On the forehead sat a diamond of some 56 carats. The skull glimmered and shimmered, mounted in a spotlit glass case, the solitary exhibit in a small dark room. Hirst's aim was to explore themes of human existence, particularly life and death. A row of paintings portrayed the birth of Hirst's child while another, dramatic series was developed from biopsies images of fearful cancers: they had an extraordinary beauty and were scattered with crushed glass and scalpels blades. And yes, I saw saw Hirst's dissected animals - a cow divided vertically and shark longitudinally, each half contained in glasses cases filled with formaldehyde. They were not gory or shocking but a celebration of nature, as was Hirst's array of fish skeletons of astonishing diversity, shape and curve.

The first London Literature Festival also opened at the South Bank. There was a multi-media commemoration of WH Auden's centenary 'With Immortal Fire' against a backdrop of black-and-white photographs. There was a recording of Auden giving a reading. Poets Simon Armitage, James Fenton, Jo Shapcott and actor Kwame Kwei-Armah read out some of Auden's most famous works. While tenor John Mark Ainsley sang Auden's verses set to music by Benjamin Britten, and a short film visually interpreted Auden's 'Night Mail'.

I also went to see Pat Barker talk about her new novel *Life Class* set in World War I. I loved her 'Regeneration trilogy' and its seamless welding of fact and fiction to throw insights into historical characters such as pioneering World War I psychiatrist Dr. William Rivers and his patients Wilfrid Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Barker said her interest in that period dates back to her childhood, because her grandfather carried a visible bayonet wound but would not talk about it. Her novels aim to break that silence. In *Life Class* she explores the wartime role of the artist and the representation of war through art through a group of fictitious students who are at the Slade School of Art when war breaks out. Their art professor Henry Tonk, is a historical character, a trained surgeon who pioneered wartime reconstructive plastic surgery through his drawings (which he never exhibited) of pre- and post-operative patients.

Closer to home the Bangladeshi novelist Tahmima Anam has received much critical acclaim for her debut novel *The Golden Age* about the 1971 war. She is immensely articulate too. At the festival she was interviewed by Kamila whose novel *Kartography* deals with period too -- and so we trooped off en famille to hear them.

Tahmima spoke of the challenges of creating a character with the emotional complexities and conflicts of her main protagonist Rehana Haque as a woman, a mother and an Urdu-speaking Bengali. She also read extracts from her book and said that it began as a doctoral thesis, because she had spent many years abroad, heard stories about 1971 and had felt a great need to rediscover her roots and her history for herself. That thesis became a vehicle for her fiction. The novel now sits on my bookshelf and I shall read it very soon.

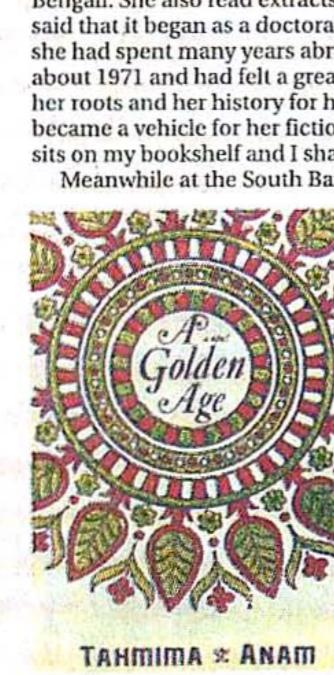
Meanwhile at the South Bank's Hayward Gallery, the title work 'Blind Light' in Anthony Gormley's exhibition, was a glowing installation, a large space with a wet floor, contained by transparent white glass and filled with thick white vapour. Groups of excited children had come to see it. They charged into thick

cloud, groped around in the fog and clearly enjoyed the sense of disorientation, though I felt claustrophobic and dashed out. The exhibition has some wonderful sculptures of the human form including a series cast in solid metal; each figure placed on the rooftops of the South Bank and high up on diverse buildings along the Thames silhouetted against the changing sky.

I grew up on *The Thirty Nine Steps* by John Buchan which I considered a great adventure story always. The stage play of that I saw in London, with a cast of four playing numerous roles, turned out to be a brilliantly clever comedy as the brainless hero Richard Hannay muddles his way through sinister plots, spies and murders. The play which won a 2007 Olivier award is now headed for Broadway. The National Theatre's production of *Saint Joan* was dominated by an inspired performance by Anne Marie Duff. The innovative modern production with stage effects by actors using chairs for different purposes including the sound effects of battle and to create Joan's funeral pyre, also gave a new life to Shaw's 1935 original. Certainly there are fascinating resonances across the ages as Joan is manipulated by powerful men and cynically used as potent symbol against the enemy until she acquires a presence and a voice as an individual that poses a threat to the established order; that makes her a subversive - and an aberrant woman.

Postscript: Damien's 'Skull' sold for a record 50 million pounds to an unnamed buyer.

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TAHMIMA * ANAM

Ode on the Lungi

(for Baby and Shawkat Osman)

KAISER HAQ

Grandpa Walt, allow me to share my thoughts with you, if only because every time I read "Passage to India" and come across the phrase "passage to more than India" I fancy, anachronistically, that you wanted to overshoot the target by a shadow line and land in Bangladesh

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about sartorial equality! How far we are from this democratic ideal! And how hypocritical! "All clothes have equal rights" -- this nobody will deny and yet, some obviously are more equal than others. No, I'm not complaining about the jacket and tie required in certain places -- that, like fancy dress parties, is in the spirit of a game

I'm talking of something more fundamental

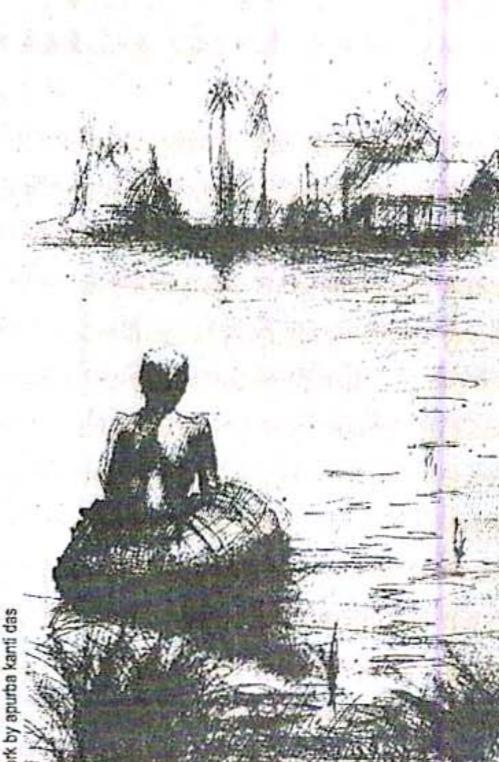
Hundreds of millions from East Africa to Indonesia wear the lungi, also known variously as the sarong, munda, htamain, saaram, ma'awaifi, kitenge, kanga, kaiki. They wear it day in day out, indoors and out. Just think --

at any one moment there are more people in lungis than the population of the USA. Now try wearing one to a White House appointment -- not even you, Grandpa Walt, laureate of democracy, will make it in. You would if you affected a kilt -- but a lungi? No way. But why? -- this is the question I ask all to ponder

Is it a clash of civilizations? The sheer illogicality of it -- the kilt is with "us" but the lungi is with "them"!

Think too of neo-imperialism and sartorial hegemony, how brown and yellow sahibs in natty suits crinkle their noses at compatriots (even relations) in modest lungis, the sole exception being Myanmar where political honchos queue up in lungis to receive visiting dignitaries. But then, Myanmar does behind a cane curtain, a half pariah among nations. Wait till it's globalised: Savile Row will acquire a fresh crop of patrons

Hegemony invades private space as well: my cousin in America would get home from work and lounge in a lungi -- till his son grew ashamed of dad and started hiding the "ridiculous ethnic attire"



It's all too depressing. But I won't leave it at that. The situation is desperate. Something needs to be done. I've decided not to take it lying down. The next time someone insinuates that I live in an Ivory Tower I'll proudly proclaim: I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST! Friends and fellow lungi lovers, let us organize lungi parties and lungi parades, let us lobby Hallmark and Archies to introduce an international Lungi Day when the UN Chief will wear a lungi and address the world

Grandpa Walt, I celebrate my lungi and sing my lungi and what I wear you shall wear. It's time you finally made your passage to more than India -- to Bangladesh -- and lounging in a lungi in a cottage on Cox's Bazar beach (the longest in the world, we proudly claim) watched 28 young men in lungis bathing in the sea

But what is this thing (my learned friends, I'm alluding to Beau Brummell) I repeat, what is this thing I'm going on about? A rectangular cloth, white or coloured or plaid, roughly 45X80 inches, halved lengthwise

and stitched to make a tube you can get into and fasten in a slipknot around the waist

When you are out of it the lungi can be folded up like a scarf

Or you can let your imagination play with the textile tube to illustrate the superstrings of the "Theory of Everything" (vide, the book of this title) by the venerable Stephen Hawking

Coming back to basics, the lungi is an elaborate fig-leaf, the foundation of propriety in ordinary mortals. Most of the year, when barebodied is cool you can lead a decent life with only a couple of lungis, dipping in pond or river or swimming in a lungi abbreviated into a G-string, then changing into the other one. Under the hot sun a lungi can become Arab-style headgear. Come chilly weather the spare lungi can be an improvised shawl. The lungi as G-string can be worn to wrestle or play kabaddi but on football or cricket field or wading through the monsoon it's folded vertically and kilted at the knee.

In short the lungi is a complete wardrobe for anyone interested: an emblem of egalitarianism, symbol of global left-outs. Raised and flapped amidst laughter it's the subaltern speaking

And more: when romance strikes, the lungi is a sleeping bag for two: a book of poems, a bottle of hooch and your beloved inside your lungi -- there's paradise for you

If your luck runs out and the monsoon turns into a biblical deluge just get in the water and hand-pump air to balloon up your lungi -- now your humble ark

When you find shelter on a treetop take it off, rinse it, wave it at the useless stars

You might then say: in this wretched world it's the flag of your indisposition

Kaiser Haq is professor of English at Dhaka University.