

NON-FICTION

Tajhat Rajbari and the Making of *Kuhelika Chhariye*

SHAHID ALAM

"That's him, Simon. That's the guy I want." Simon Robert Pereira, my old schoolmate, sitting beside me, gave a wry, tight-lipped smile in response. At least, I thought to myself, he did not evince any negative reaction.

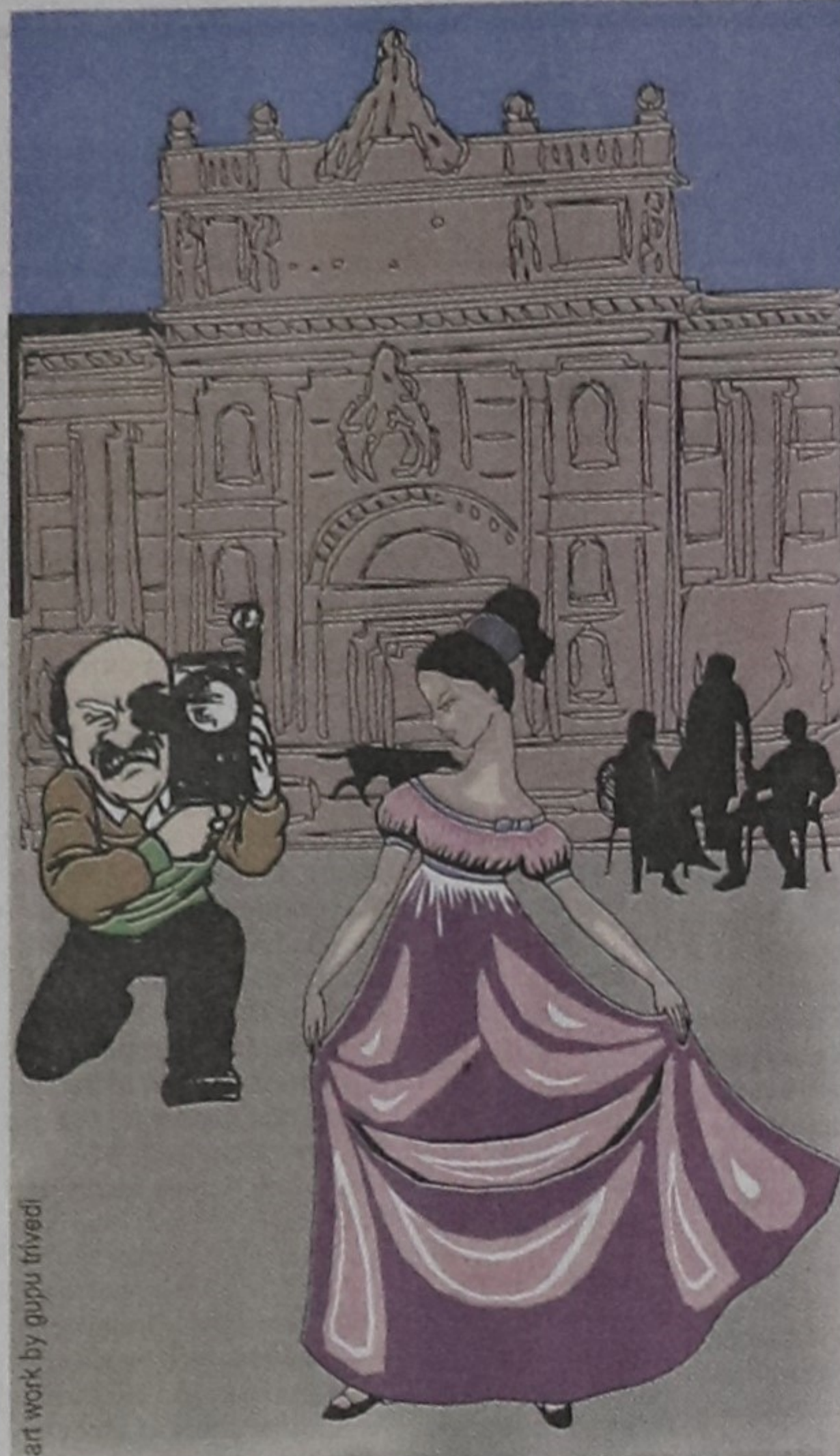
"This is Nagen da, Shahid Bhai," Arif introduced the elderly man who was sandwiched between him and Jahangir. The small wizened man, quizzical eyes twinkling behind round plastic-framed eyeglasses, in white pyjamas and brown punjabi was the perfect fit for the caretaker's role. "Adaab," said Nagen Burman, clapping palms in *namashkar*. That surprisingly deep and clear voice sealed the role for him. And thereby hangs the tale of the making of *Kuhelika Chhariye*, Tajhat Rajbari, and some strange coincidences.

I had just come back to Dhaka from London after a summer stint at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), when an opportunity to direct, and act in, the TV drama *Kuhelika Chhariye* arose. I was mulling over suitable location spots around Dhaka when the producer suggested one.

"But that's in Rangpur. I don't want to go that far," I had protested. Eventually, though, after a good deal of persuasion, I agreed to go. The year was 1999. The newly-built Jamuna bridge was an impressive sight, the river flowing in its awesome might with only the massive supporting pillars forcing it to go around them. The motel we stayed in was tranquility itself, with a manicured garden and splendid service. On subsequent visits I have been saddened to see the mighty Jamuna reduced to rivulets around the bridge's pillars. The motel too, shorn of guests who prefer a resthouse located in the heart of the town, has lost its old splendor.

In early 1999, however, the motel was the staging ground for the production phase of *Kuhelika Chhariye*. The producer and I lost little time in reaching the Rajbari, but our first impression of a majestic building was later belied by the rot that had eaten away at its vitals.

"God, this is the place," I had exclaimed in awe. However, once we finished closely surveying the entire building and its surroundings, we noticed the disharmony that marred this



art work by (ipusa khawari)

magnificent structure. The ruins of the low, plaster-covered railing punctuated by decorative little columns that surrounded the two large ponds on the pathway leading up to the gate were sad reminders of bygone days of zamindari wealth and glory. The water in the deep ponds was covered with green scum. All kinds of people from the vicinity bathed there. Back in the old days, one pond had been the preserve of the rajah and other male members of the family, while the other had been for estate employees. There was another pond situated behind, in a straight line with a side entrance to the building, where the women of the family and female guests had bathed. The walkway from the gate skirted a roughly sphere-shaped structure where a fountain,

now in disuse, stood. In full flow, during the heydays of the rajahs, it must have been a resplendent sight. The path ended at the bottom of an imposing flight of broad stone steps leading up to an open foyer, made of stone slabs, that allowed people to take in the magnificent vista spread out in front of their eyes before they made for the long corridor that lined the interior rooms of the first floor. Exquisitely patterned in geometric fashion, the off-white and black stones gave a regal splendour to the house. A massive hall from the foyer ran the entire length of the long corridor, and continued all the way to the end of the building. A parallel corridor on the western side of the hall connected what were two separate rear sections of the building. There were staircases, one leading to the rooftop, where there were two imposing miniature lighthouse-like structures on either end. At the centre of the front rooftop wall was an even more imposing structure, whose minaret-like top seemed to be reaching for the heavens.

The large hall was reputed to be the dance hall that had kept the rajah and his guests entertained. Alternatively, it was thought to have been the chamber where he oversaw the day-to-day administrative functions. There was another hall of the very same size and dimensions immediately beneath it on the ground floor, and it was uncertain which one had functioned as either the entertainment room or the administration chamber. Somehow one felt that the upper hall had served to entertain. Even after decades of ruin, one could make out the delicate etchings on some of the original glass covering the expensive wooden frames of the massive windows placed at regular intervals on the front and rear sides of the two halls. Many of the etched glass are now missing, and have been replaced by plain glass. According to the caretakers and local people that I met, several of the corridor

stones have also been pilfered and are missing. All the doors of the building were massive, and tastefully carved by master craftsmen of the day. The most impressive room on the top floor, aside from the hall room, was the master bedroom situated at the front of the building. It opened out, to the front and right, to a large balcony, but its most arresting feature was the beautifully patterned mosaic of multi-hued, hardened terracotta floor. The spacious windows opening out to let the breeze in from an orchard with a variety of trees and the high ceiling must have made fans unnecessary. This room was reached from the ground floor by an imposing staircase, made of expensive bulky timber, and intricately carved in places, that carried on to the rooftop. It also led to the first floor through a small vestibule that was separated from the corridor by a truly magnificent stained-glass door. At the end of this corridor was a narrow spiral iron staircase, with a back-ground formed by a patterned stained glass built into the rear wall. It was most probably used by the household help. The ground floor, with minor differences, was a replica of the first floor, and it could be reached from the front of the building via the cavernous space formed underneath the stairway to heaven, as it were. One could visualize grand carriages driving up to the space (as well as to the front of the stairway), and passengers alighting to enter the ground floor hall (or the one on the first floor), either for purposes relating to the zamindari business, or be entertained with wine, dancing women and song. For the record, it must be stated that the present Rajbari was constructed after the original building was destroyed by a massive earthquake in 1887.

From the very beginning of our enterprise there were a series of coincidences. It began with the fact that long before I set eyes on the place, I had chalked out a script that would use flashbacks from modern times to a feudal period to dramatize relationships, feelings, and foibles of a rajah, his rani, and his most coveted court dancer. Then, later, during the course of filming, and on a visit to Rangpur not too long after that (or perhaps immediately before the start of the production phase, I can't recall now), I would often talk with the locals, and with Nagenda about the Rajbari, wanting

anecdotal stories they could relate about it and its occupants. Without vouching for its historical accuracy, this, in a nutshell, is what I gathered: Before the zamindari system was abolished, the rajahs lived it up to the full on the earnings from their vast landholdings. Their treatment of the *proyas* (subjects) varied according to the temperament and character of the zamindar. One of the rajahs, probably the last before the zamindari system was abolished, was particularly addicted to wine and women. Legend has it that if he spied any comely girl or woman from his rooftop, he would make every effort to possess her. And he was obsessed with dancing girls. He had a bevy of them sequestered within the palace grounds. His official consort was apparently resigned to his peccadilloes. My fictitious drama had antecedents of sorts in its film location, and legends surrounding it and its occupants of yore.

"I passed through the vicinity of this Rajbari so many times beginning from my childhood days. And now I've gotten to see its interior for the very first time," mused Nagen da. Those rajahs must have displayed all the manifestations of the quintessential Bengali zamindar!

But then something else happened. A letter was shown to me by Mukul Mustafiz, either just prior to, or immediately after, the production phase. Mukul Mustafiz was responsible for getting me Nagen da. He was the owner, publisher, and editor of a weekly called *Atal*. One afternoon, I went to Mustafiz's place, and he casually handed me a letter addressed to him in Bangla. He did not forget to pass on the envelope. I took a close look at it.

"This letter is from India."
"As you can see."
"Who is it from?"
"Why don't you read it?"
I finished it at one go, at the end of which I stared at Mustafiz. For how long I am unable to recall.

"This can't be real!"
"It is. I was as surprised as you when I received it."
"You know the guy?"
"Never saw him."
"Then?"
"I don't know. But the timing is so strange."
"You can say that again. Hope I don't get into trouble!"

"Make sure you don't." A person claiming to be the son of the last zamindar of Tajhat had written to Mustafiz, since he was a prominent local citizen and a journalist, to try to redress his plight in India. He and his family were in pecuniary straits, and he wondered if Mustafiz could help him by helping salvage something from the government, which was in possession of the estate as enemy property. He gave a lengthy account of his family lineage, and the reasons why the Family Property Act should not apply in his case. And he warned anyone, on pain of being taken to court, not to make any gain out of using his family name and its attendant paraphernalia. "Mukul Bhai, I was going to do it anyway, but I'll make doubly certain that I'll prominently highlight the disclaimer at the end of the film about the story and its characters being entirely fictitious." The story the letter writer had sketched out about his family was, in places, too uncomfortably close to parts in *Kuhelika Chhariye*. It was telecast a number of times by India's Zee TV's then-Alpha Bangla (now Zee Bangla) from late 2001 to late 2004. I must admit that, during the shooting phase, which often went on far into the night, I tried very hard to spot an apparition or two. After all, it was an old house, and unsavoury things had gone on there! Maybe the intense lights with myriad gel sheets to create an illusion of moonlight when cloud covers blocked the moon itself from showering us with the real thing scared them off. Or, maybe it was that the sound of generators and so many voices disturbing the stillness of night that made them stay away from all these creatures and their machines in the land of the living. I certainly would have liked seeing one or two of them, though!

A final note: One of the messages of *Kuhelika Chhariye* was the imperative of preserving our heritage. A nation is also defined by its traditions and heritage. Not too long after *Kuhelika Chhariye* was completed, Tajhat Rajbari was taken over by the government's archeology department. Today it functions as a national museum. I would like to think that the making of *Kuhelika Chhariye* had something to do with that delightful development!

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Stories from Nepal

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Writing in a May 2008 issue of the 'London Review of Books' about turbulent Nepalese politics, Manjushree Thapa began with a memorable line, "In Kathmandu, the conventional wisdom has it that you show up early on voting day: the lines at the booth may be longer, but the chances are that no one else will yet have voted in your name. And trouble, if it comes, comes in the afternoon."



That same striking combination of sharp insight and clear prose has marked her out as the leading English writer from Nepal. It was very much in evidence in her 2006 nonfiction account of Nepalese Maoists, *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy*, one of the more superior pieces of reportage to come out in English on Nepal before the Maoists laid down their arms and participated in elections. It was a clear-headed tour through the tortuous maze of Nepalese power politics—including that Shakespearean palace massacre that effectively was the death knell of royal rule—that ended with an unforgettable account of a hike through the remote, then-Maoist-controlled mountainous western region of Nepal. The trek itself seemed to symbolize that, unlike the general run of women writers in South Asia writing in English whose social concerns and involvement come to rest at the borders of gentility, Thapa had no inhibitions about logically extending it to wherever it took her.

Manjushree Thapa was born in Kathmandu in 1968 and studied at St. Mary's school there. Later she was at the National Cathedral School in Washington D.C. and at the acclaimed Rhode Island School of Design, where she majored in photography. She then got an MFA in creative writing from the University of Washington. Her first book, *Mustan Bhot in Fragments*, was a travelogue, after which came the novel *The Tutor of History*. But it was *Forget Kathmandu*, coming out of seemingly nowhere, that made her a Nepalese voice to watch out for.

In this collection of short stories, titled *Tilled Earth* (Penguin Books India, New Delhi: 2007), one again sees that interweaving of social engagement, realistic appraisal, and what without much demur on anybody's part can be termed as crystalline prose. The stories here range from the short short story (half a page) to the long short story, and written with an abiding knowledge of modern-day Nepal, especially of Kathmandu, its gristle and bone, its alleys and goats. Allied to it is an implicit questioning of modernization and development, and of the West, and the Westerners it brings in its long train, of failed democracies and tottering state structures. Present at times is a satirical bite, oblique, true, but nevertheless there—in, for example, the short story extract reproduced here ('Soar')—in deliberate counterpoint to an exoticized Nepal. Overall, two fine stories dominate the fare, 'The European Fling' and 'The Buddha in the Earth-Touching Posture'. The former is a hard-headed look at the conflict between tradition and modernity through Sharda, a Nepali woman, and Matt, an American man. The two of them had slept together one drunken night, years back at Boston University, and now both of them rendezvous in Europe decades later, to test the limits of Matt's proposition that "love was a bourgeois construct designed to trap

women's labour." In the latter story a bureaucrat leaves his wife, and travels to Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, and comes face to face with himself.

As NGOs and NGO workers, urban decay, rural poverty, government civil service members, dusty ceiling fans, agendas, reports, verandas, small-country angst proliferate in her stories, they become stories of South Asia. Not just a Bangladeshi reader, but all South Asian readers, would have no problems connecting with her stories and understanding the lives, and life, she recounts.

This identification is underscored in the very texture of her language. In Thapa's stories people wear 'mufflers' and 'jean-pants', to just give a couple of examples. And in the same manner, woven in the texture of the language are subtle differences too: our 'rickshaw' becomes a 'rickshaa', and the same mode of transportation, ubiquitous and familiar, acquires that Nepalese difference through the twist in spelling and pronunciation.

Tilled Earth is both a delightful and thoughtful read.

Soar

Putting the water to boil, Nadia remembered that she was supposed to call someone about something, but she couldn't remember who or about what. Was it a gender specialist for next week's women's rights seminar? About trafficking, rape, child prostitution, domestic abuse, the lack of basic rights for Nepali women? This hangerover was killing her. With shaking hands she picked up the day's *Kathmandu Post* and scanned the headlines before turning, to the back pages. There was nothing much in the international news. When she heard the kettle hiss she put down the paper and with some effort made a pot of coffee. She took a cup to the living room, along with the paper. Instead of reading it she examined a potted banyan plant she bought the previous week. A few fresh leaves had uncured overnight: delicate and moist, vulnerable. Under her breath she sang to them: 'Shall I soar above these hills and peaks?' It was a folk song she had learned on a trek a few months after coming to Nepal, when she believed there were simple solutions to simple problems. "These hills and peaks," she broke off. She didn't know the rest of the words. She lifted the coffee to her lips but it was too hot to drink. For a while she looked at the corner of the window ledge, where the egg sacs of spiders had appeared a few weeks back. When would the eggs hatch? She looked awhile at their silky bundles. Then she went back to re-reading the *Kathmandu Post*. The local news was in fine print on the third page. Woman, she read. Woman Considered Witch Forced to Eat Faeces by Villagers. She put the paper aside and gulped down her coffee.

At lunch Nadia flipped through brochures for package holidays to Pataya, Colombo, Goa, Blue waters, white sand. She thought: one gets so wrapped up in the woes of this country one forgets how easy it is to leave. An hour's flight to Delhi, three to Hong Kong and eighteen to the apartment she had given up in Brooklyn eighteen months ago.

When she got home from work that evening she found the maid standing on a window ledge, dusting a hard-to-reach corner. It always surprised her how Nepali women could manage in saris: all those pleats and folds did not seem to trip them up. There was such—resilience—in Nepali women. The maid was lithe despite being middle aged. Nimbly, she stretched across the window ledge and, as Nadia watched on, she reached for the spiders' egg sacs and picked them off with an deft pinch, killing the larvae inside.

That night Nadia got through a bottle of Shiraz scanning United Nations manuals on evacuation provisions in case of emergency.

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The 'Asian Booker' Shortlist 2008



Alfred A Yuson

Kavery Nambisan

Yu Hua



Miguel Syjuco

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi

The winner of the Man Asian Literary Prize (nicknamed the 'Asian Booker') will be announced on November 13, 2008. The Prize was established in 2006 to bring greater worldwide attention to Asian writing and authors. The Prize is open for unpublished works in English, as well as for translations. It is jointly administered by representatives of the Man Hong Kong International Literary Festival, the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and is sponsored by Man Group plc, a leading global financial services firm based in London.

The inaugural prize was awarded in November 2007 to *Wolf Totem* by Chinese author Jiang Rong, and published in English to great acclaim in early 2008. Several short- and longlisted works of the 2007 Prize have also been published.

Out of the 21 names on the 2008 Prize Longlist, the following five made the shortlist:

- Kavery Nambisan, (India): *The Story That Must Not Be Told*
- Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi (India): *Lost Flamingoes of Bombay*
- Miguel Syjuco (Philippines): *Illustrado*
- Yu Hua, (China): *Brothers*
- Alfred A. Yuson (Philippines): *The Music Child*

The winner will receive USD 10,000 and can look forward to publication and wider recognition in the English-reading world. There is additionally a USD 3,000 award for the translator (if any).

Adrienne Clarkson, chair of the panel of judges, said: "All the books breathe with a vibrant sense of what the Asian world is today—modern, yet connected to tradition, aware of change but saturated with the past. I really had the sense that I could feel the living vibrant worlds these novels describe." Pankaj Mishra, another on the three-judge panel, noted that "Reading the shortlisted books, I was struck, above all, by their passionate engagement with contemporary realities in India, China and Philippines. They are primarily concerned, as literary novels must be, with the fate of the individual, but they do not exclude or reduce to a mere backdrop the tumultuous changes in Asian societies. By reckoning with these massive social and political dislocations, they recreate the vitality and urgency of the European novel in the 19th century and Latin American Literature in the 20th. I came away from my reading of the longlisted books thinking that Asia may increasingly provide, to the world's literature as well as to its political economy, the all-important stimulus."

With the 'English' Booker having gone to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, if one of the two shortlisted Indian writers wins the 'Asian' Booker, India will have then made a clean sweep of the Bookers this year.

Additional information on the website: www.manasianliteraryprize.org

Compiled from press releases sent to the Literature Page, The Daily Star.

The vegetable vendor



Rezia Hakeem

The vegetable vendor outside my apartment building is an old man, lips brinjal purple in the heat, dark old-potato skin peeping through the patches in his shirt as he bends over to tend to the greens and reds on the ragged field of broken baskets spread out in front of him...

"Damudia" he says in reply to my query about his bari "Shariatpur!" A childhood spent half in water half in the sun I think before the partition back when the killing was in full spate. "The river ate up my hearth and home." Drifted into town, dug up roads, plied a rickshaw, fled to India in 1971 came back to a free country, built a lean-to till he lost all in a slum fire. Once learnt to play the flute. All these I learn over weeks...

Now he sells vegetables to rich people like me, smiles a bright white smile as I try to haggle and banter, "madam, prices of things keep going up..." and to prove it he unties the knot in his lungi where he stores his cash and shows me eight one-taka notes—every day is a new day as he sinks all his money minus food and rent costs to buy produce that he hauls, an old man, with a bright white smile, all the way in front of my house, my rich-people house this man from Damudia Shariatpur, Who now no longer plays his flute...

Rezia Hakeem is a housewife and linguist.