

# Home truths from the great African moralist

Charles R. Larson reflects on a writer in his autumn

THE occasion of a new book by Chinua Achebe, Africa's most celebrated writer and author of *Things Fall Apart*, the great African novel, cannot be ignored. It's been twenty years since his previously published book and more than that since his last novel. Much has happened to Achebe and Nigeria during those years, much of it not good. But even prior to those twenty years there was the civil war in Nigeria (1967-1970), after the country's Igbo succeeded and formed their own country called Biafra. It took years for the scars of those events to heal (if they ever did). Achebe and many other Igbo were left in a state of emotional collapse and, if you talk to Igbo today in southeastern Nigeria, they'll tell you that a similar situation could occur again.

An automobile accident in Nigeria in 2001 left Achebe paralyzed and wheelchair bound. A person of less inner strength would not have survived. Finally, there has been a kind of downward spiral in the country's ability to emerge as the major moral force that it might have become on the African continent, leading the much-heralded but still unrealized African renaissance. Military coups, terrible leadership, the waste of the billions and billions of dollars from oil revenue, rampant corruption even the "Nigeria scam"—a month had a bad taste in many people's mouths. You can't call Nigeria a failed state, but it's certainly difficult to see the country as much beyond that because of the extraordinary toll of wasted potential in all areas. Achebe speaks about many of these issues in his new collection of essays, *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, an especially ironic title given the writer's ambivalent feelings about his country of birth vis-à-vis its current status in the world.

How odd, I thought, when I learned of the title of the new book. Achebe first used the term in a lecture delivered at Cambridge University in January 1993; apparently the text was not published until now. In 1957, he states, after a failed attempt to gain entrance to Cambridge for graduate work, he

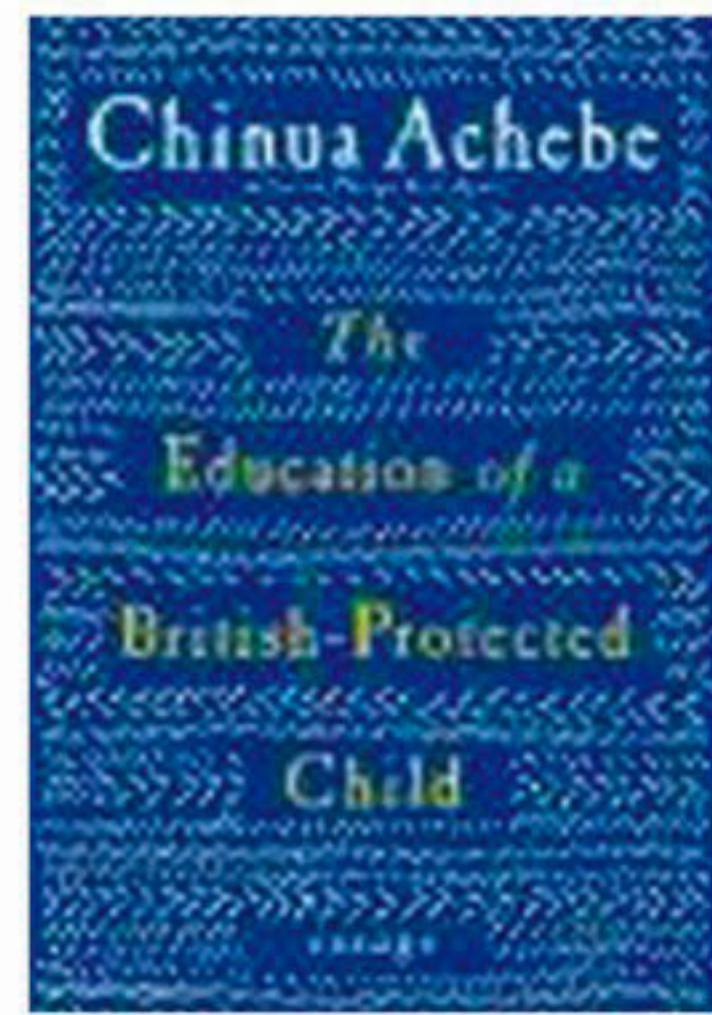
travelled to the United Kingdom "to study briefly at the BBC Staff School in London. For the first time I needed and obtained a passport, and saw myself defined therein as a 'British Protected Person.'" Somehow the matter had never come up before! I had to wait three more years for Nigeria's independence in 1960 to end that rather arbitrary protection."

Thus, as a child growing up in a British colony, Achebe was a 'British-Protected Child'. Even if he had been an adult, the British would probably still have considered him a child. But that is not the irony that I mentioned above. Since Nigeria's independence, Achebe has hardly been able to consider himself a "Nigerian-Protected Person." He does not state this as directly as I just did, but one can't help believing that if Nigeria had fulfilled its promise at independence, Achebe would be living not in the United States but in the country of his birth. It's easy to extend the implication that the country's sizeable brain drain (artists, musicians, writers, professionals) would not have occurred with such magnitude were Nigeria able to nurture its intellectuals. Nigeria is only one of a number of African countries that are unable to "protect" its citizens and prevent them from fleeing their homelands—sometimes in search of jobs and a better standard of living but more often today because of wars.

Achebe has not been known for talking about himself, but there are memorable passages in the new collection of essays in which he reveals fascinating autobiographical information. As a child, his concern with education and words earned him the nickname, "dictionary." In an essay titled "My Dad and Me," he writes warmly about his father's religious faith (he was an Anglican catechist) as well as Christianity itself. Inevitably, the new religion and education were fused, as anyone who has read *Things Fall Apart* already knows. "I am a prime beneficiary of the education which the missionaries had made a major component of their enterprise. My

father had a lot of praise for the missionaries and their message, and so have I. But I have also learned a little more skepticism about them than my father had any need for. Does it matter, I ask myself, that centuries before these European Christians sailed down to us in ships to deliver the Gospel and save us from darkness, their ancestors, also sailing in ships, had delivered our forefathers to the horrendous transatlantic slave trade and unleashed darkness in our world?"

Related to the issue of slavery and



The Education of a British-Protected Child  
Chinua Achebe  
Knopf

Africa's "darkness," Achebe includes several essays in the collection that return to his on-going struggle to understand Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), which, he has said on other occasions, became a kind of springboard that provoked him to begin writing himself. Paraphrasing Conrad, who said that all of Europe had contributed to the making of Kurtz, "[S]o had all of Europe collaborated in creating the Africa that Kurtz would set out to deliver and that he would merely subject to obscene terror."

In one of the most important essays in the collection, "Africa's

Tarnished Name," Achebe once again challenges those who argue that Conrad could not be expected to present an enlightened picture of Africa because of the era in which he lived, i.e., no one else did. Achebe totally obliterates that ignorant position by identifying other writers and artists well before Conrad's racist story was published who had nothing to do with that argument. Unfortunately, it is Conrad's version that has mostly prevailed, but that can only be additional evidence it needed?—that racism has always contributed to the West's distorted view of Africa.

Make no mistake. Achebe is just as hard on Africans as he is on myopic Westerners, particularly with regard to his own country. "Nigeria is neither my mother nor my father. Nigeria is a child. Gifted, enormously talented, and incredibly wayward." Bad leadership is at the core of Achebe's on-going litany about "the trouble with Nigeria." Those last four words are, in fact, the title of a book the writer published way back in 1984. His agony over his country and his people has not diminished; if anything, it has evolved to a state of "anxious love, not hate. Nigeria is a country where nobody can wake up in the morning and ask: what can I do now? There is work for all."

This simple observation could easily be made about many of the world's populations, especially about Americans, America being Achebe's adoptive land. And, yet, the man has always been a person of good cheer, not a pessimist. We see his generosity of soul in virtually every essay in this collection, whether it be about his family, his defense of English as the language of his writing (and not Igbo as some Africanists have questioned), or the importance of African literature. He asks why African writing in European languages came into being and answers that the African's "story had been told for him, and he found the telling quite unsatisfactory." More specifically, about himself he adds, "The day I figured this out was when I said no, when I realized that stories are not

always innocent; that they can be used to put you in the wrong crowd, in the party of the man who has come to dispossess you."

Chinua Achebe was born near Ogi, in eastern Nigeria, in 1930. The first thirty years of his life, until 1960, were lived under colonialism, but you could say that Achebe had already broken the colonial yoke on his country by writing and publishing *Things Fall Apart* two years earlier. In the early years after the novel's publication, *Things Fall Apart* was read more widely in Africa than in the West as it should have been. But in the last decade or two, Achebe's masterpiece has achieved iconic status in the West where it is often taught as the African novel. The novel merits such status, which is not to overlook Achebe's five subsequent novels, all uniquely addressing more contemporary issues. Last year, Achebe lived to see the publication of a special fiftieth anniversary edition of his masterpiece. Few writers are so fortunate.

But there is an additional side to Achebe's importance that few people know about. In the early 1960s for William Heinemann, the original British publisher of Achebe's work, the still young writer began editing the "African Writers Series," a daring series of literary works from writers across the continent. Achebe selected and edited the first two hundred titles. Thus, almost single-handedly he shaped the concept of African literature in a way no other writer has ever accomplished, defining the inspiration and development of an entire continent's literature.

Both in his own unique novels and in his role as editor of African Writers Series, Chinua Achebe has left an indelible mark on our concept of world literature. Without his own writings and the works of dozens and dozens of African writers whom he midwived into publication, world literature would be much less rich and diverse, still locked into the geography of Europe and America.

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## AT A GLANCE

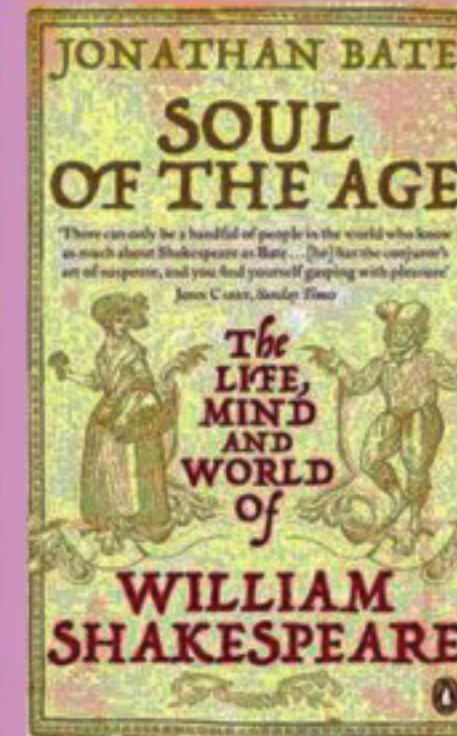
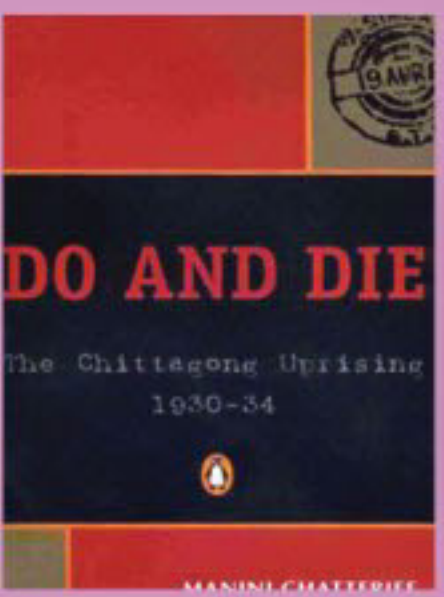


Do And Die  
Manini Chatterjee  
Penguin Books

Translations by Sudeep Sen  
Yeti Books & Monsoon Editions

Here you have an eclectic selection of poetry in translation from one whose devotion to verse is complete. Sen goes hunting gems from poets around him and before his time and renders all those thoughts into English. Tagore, Jibananda, Kaifi Azmi and what have you. The translations are of a cerebrally high quality.

One of the more objective works on the Chittagong Uprising against the British between 1930 and 1934, the work is a necessary recapitulation of history in the Indian subcontinent. The determination of the patriots coupled with the ruthlessness of the colonial rulers is what Chatterjee holds forth in the book.

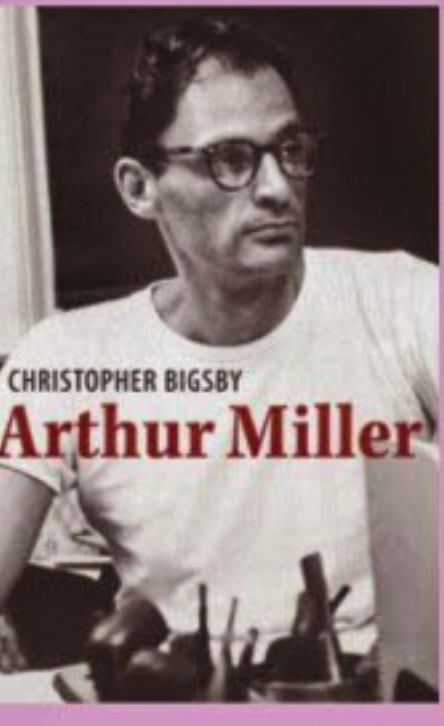


Arthur Miller  
1915-1962  
Christopher Bigsby  
Orion

Soul of the Age  
The Life, Mind and World of  
William Shakespeare  
Jonathan Bate  
Random House

Much has been written about the Bard and much more will yet be written. In this exploration of Shakespeare's mind, indeed the ambience he lived in, Bate breaks new ground. Basically, the work is a study of the circumstances which shaped the imagination in one who remains the foremost English intellectual of all time.

Bigsby goes into a detailed observation of the life and career of an influential American playwright. Born into wealth, Miller saw that wealth disappear in the Great Depression which set in in 1929. After that it was a career in creativity, interspersed by a riotous marriage with Marilyn Monroe. It is a fascinating read.

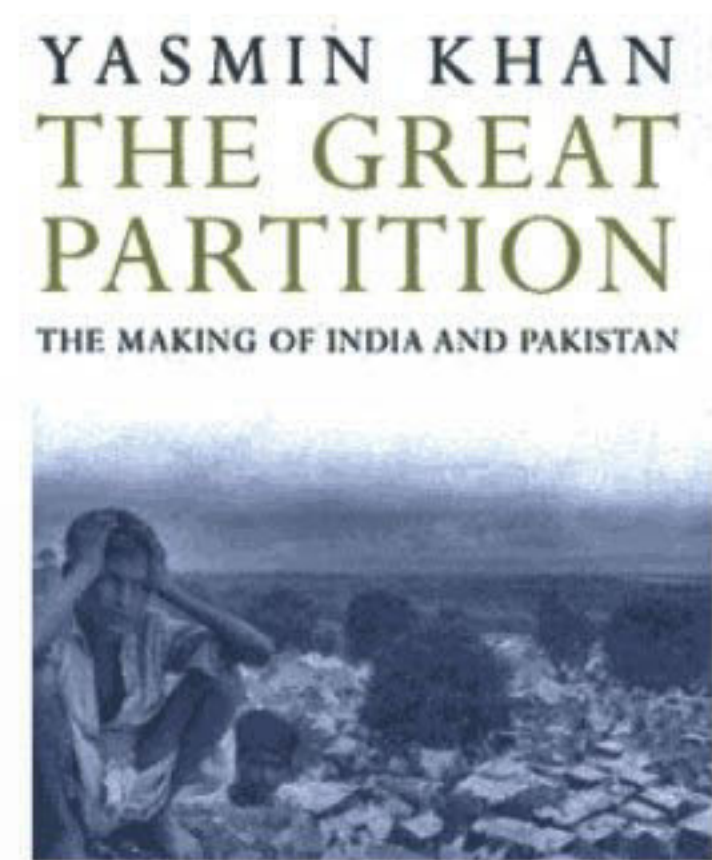


# Jinnah looked haggard, Nehru lost his cool

Syed Badrul Ahsan reads a refreshing work on Partition

IN 1945, the president of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema condemned Mohammad Ali Jinnah through issuing a fatwa, calling him the great heathen, or Kafir-e-Azam. It was a pun on the honorific Quaid-e-Azam with which India's Muslims had honoured Jinnah. In the days immediately following the partition of India in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru was landed a resounding slap by a Hindu refugee from Pakistan at a camp in Haridwar. The man, unimpressed by the prime minister's efforts to assuage the troubled emotions of the men and women in the camp, screamed, 'Give my mother back to me! Bring my sisters to me!' At the railway station in Ambala, Zakir Hussain, a future president of India, miraculously escaped death at the hands of a Hindu mob. The brother of Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, a prominent Congress politician, was stabbed to death. The daughter of Ghulam Mohammad, a future governor general of Pakistan, was abducted. Gandhi sat out the celebrations of independence, for all around him Hindus and Muslims were hacking away at one another in unimaginable fratricide. All across the Indian subcontinent, in the weeks and months before and following the vivisection of the subcontinent, Hindus and Muslims were on the rampage, looking for men to murder, women to abduct and rape and property to

loot. The departure of the British colonial power, in hurried, almost chaotic fashion, in August 1947, as this riveting account of the partition makes clear, was accompanied by human tragedy unprecedented in its scale and unparalleled in its horror. Where Yasmin Khan differs from others who have left their own assessments of the coming of freedom to India and Pakistan is in her near complete focus on the price the partition exacted on the general population all the way from the North West Frontier Province to Bengal. A million people, perhaps more, died in the aftermath of the partition. Of course, as Khan notes, none of the politicians, Indian or British, involved in the process of carving up the country, could contemplate such all encompassing tragedy. When it came, Jinnah, Nehru and all the men who mattered in the Congress and the Muslim League felt at sea. They had only themselves to blame. The League, never having seriously considered the possibility of a mass Muslim migration to Pakistan from the regions where they had been in a minority, simply was unable to work out the best means of accommodating them. In almost similar manner, the Congress had never been prepared for the reality of Hindus and Sikhs making their way to independent India from areas that



The Great Partition  
The Making of India and Pakistan  
Yasmin Khan  
Yale University Press

would be part of the Pakistan state. Altogether twelve million people would travel, both ways, in search of a sanctuary. Trains carrying Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan and Muslims from India arrived in grim manner at their destinations. The travellers had been murdered along the way by roving bands of fanatical Hindus and Muslims.

The exhaustion brought on by the long tale of the Pakistan struggle, as the American journalist Phillips Talbot noted at the time, was all too palpable. He found the political

classes tired beyond measure. Jinnah looked haggard and drawn, while Nehru was forever bursting into extremes of temper. It was particularly after the Cabinet Mission proposals for a somewhat confederal India came to nought in July 1946 that the long twilight struggle would begin in earnest. In a move that was as inexplicable as it was bizarre, the Muslim League provincial government of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy in Bengal, responding to Jinnah's call for a Direct Action Day, ordered a holiday in Calcutta to organise a mass rally. The consequences were predictable. And they would be dire, as Muslims and Hindus went out on missions to kill and maim one another over a period of four days. The Great Calcutta Killings, as the horror would come to be known, was but a prelude to other, bigger horrors only a year away.

To what extent the disaster owed its origins to Mountbatten and his departing administration is a question which frequently emerges from the pages of the book. As the June 3 Plan was broadcast over the radio and disseminated through newspapers, Muslims rejoiced and Hindus groaned. Some eager Muslims, carried away by what they saw as a defining moment (it was anything but), even pictured Delhi being part of Pakistan. At that point, the thought that Punjab and Bengal would be

sliced through as a price of partition simply did not occur. Perhaps the most intriguing part of the June 3 story is that no one had a clue about the shape of the Pakistan being envisaged. And the princely states? They had already begun entertaining thoughts of carrying on as independent kingdoms in post-August 1947 circumstances. Their aspirations would soon be shattered.

And aspirations were laid waste all across India in that summer of frenzy and murderous strife. Despite it all, Cyril Radcliffe, never having visited India before, now stayed busy in a Delhi room drawing up the geographical parameters within which the new states of India and Pakistan would operate. The lines he drew cut across villages and homes. They pierced the soul of a country. In such macabre circumstances, Jinnah went on the airwaves speaking of 'a supreme moment' and of a 'fulfillment of the destiny of the Muslim nation'. Hours later, Nehru would declaim on free India's 'tryst with destiny'. By the end of 1947, three million refugees would find themselves in camps across the new countries. Tens of thousands would, meanwhile, be dying because of their religious affiliations all over the subcontinent.

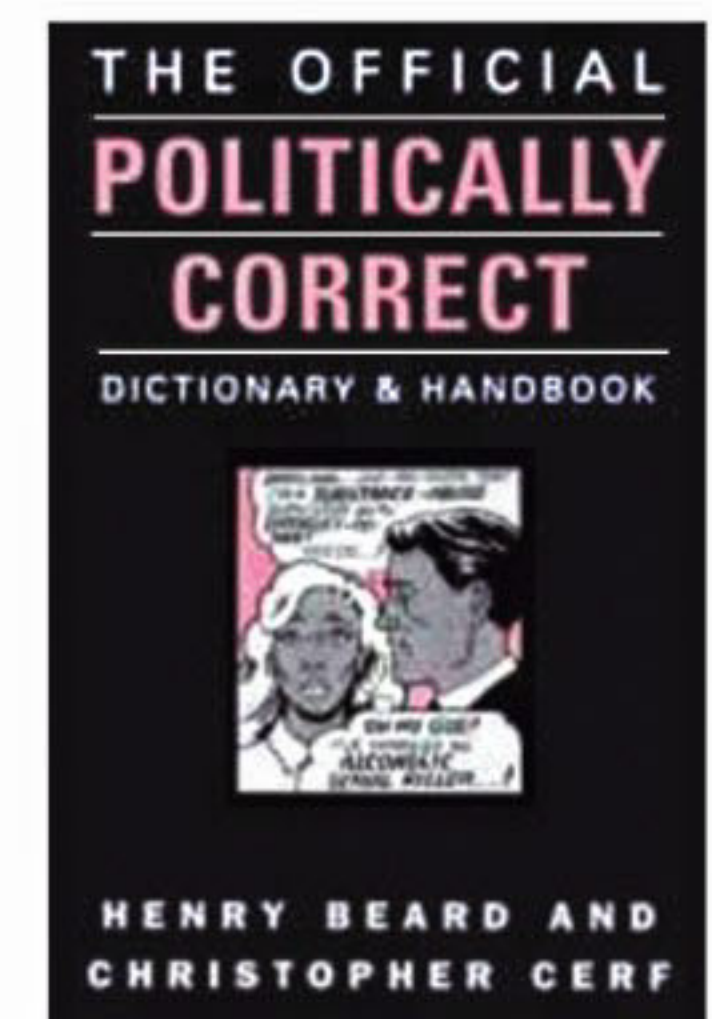
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# Weightism survivors and seasonal employees

Shahan Huq marvels at the gentler side of English

It is these days quite fashionable to consider oneself politically correct. Look around you. You don't have Red Indians any more, only Native Americans. Though you might consider Barack Obama as America's first black president, you must be extra careful in avoiding using the old, denigrating 'Negro' while describing him or any of his kind. It is African-Americans that you have today. On a lighter level, do you realise that there are no housewives any more today? There are only homemakers, whatever that means. It tends to remind you of a rather pernicious term, home-wreckers, one that you associate with men and women who have nothing better to do than making a mess of other people's lives by falling in love, or lust, with other people's spouses. And then there is the way you describe a child whose intelligence is obviously of a poor quality. But, no, you cannot suggest by any means that he is unintelligent. He is merely one who has an attention deficit disorder.

three ways of describing the one who has stopped living for all time. And here's another. When you bump into a pervert, or hear of one, do not use that term. It might be considered too gross for hearing. How about 'sexually dysfunctional'? See how vulgarity is carefully sliced out of the situation altogether? A migrant worker is a 'seasonal employee', a prostitute is a 'sex care provider', a drunk is a 'person of differing sobriety'. The list is endless. The discovery of the sheer richness the English language is home to is absolutely staggering. When next you are tempted to describe someone as a spendthrift, pause awhile. You just might want to tone down your imminent harshness by describing him as a 'negative saver.' The worst thing you may have done in life was actually the 'least best.' Doesn't such a way of looking at the situation give you comfort of some kind? Besides, it is also evidence, for your friends if they need any, of the remarkable facility with words that you happen to be developing.



The Official Politically Correct  
Dictionary & Handbook  
Henry Beard, Christopher Cerf  
Grafton

and coolly offer a 'no comment' to a question. That very response is actually a load of comment, for it says much more than if the one questioned had come up with an emphatic answer. Back in 1967, asked if he planned to seek a second

term as president, Lyndon Johnson replied loftily, 'I shall cross the bridge when I come to it.' That was impressive, much more so than a mere 'I don't know' would have been. Come down to things a little more banal. You do not call anyone a fat person or fats these days. That would be rude, socially unacceptable. Simply call him a 'horizontally challenged person' or 'weightism survivor.' And then observe that such a fine way of putting reality across hurts no one. Therein lies the beauty of the English language. When you wish to kiss or smooch someone, avoid that very kind of language. How about employing 'liplock' to describe your moment of passion? Do not ask for an extra large piece of cake. What you need is a 'generously cut' slice. In the wars the two Bushes have waged since the 1990s, it was not civilian casualties that occurred during spells of targeted bombings but only 'collateral damage.' The horror you might have felt at hearing about the murder of the innocent is thus swiftly minimised through making you feel that the dead were more like buildings and similar structures.

And that, again, is political correctness for you. Never seek to describe one as illiterate. You would

only be insulting him. How about making matters safe for everyone around by appending the term 'alternatively schooled' to the person? And here's another for housewife, assuming of course that her conditions are really dire: she is a 'domestic incarceration survivor.' There is here, despite everything, that certain whiff which once came of places like Auschwitz or Buchenwald. But why should you bother? People are not ugly but 'cosmetically different'; and nations are not underdeveloped but 'overexploited.' You are really not unemployed. You are 'involuntarily leisured' or 'indefinitely idled.'

The list goes on and on. And as you hop from phrase to another phrase, you tell yourself that the world around you has changed. Are you losing hair? Well, you are not bald. You are only 'follicularly challenged.' And you are not getting old but only getting 'experientially enhanced.'

Sorry if all this has been boring for you. Ah, but why must we use that cliché, boring, when we might as well use the politically correct 'charm-free'? Have a good day!

Shahan Huq is a gentleman of leisure who indulges in unconventional reading.

# Ravishing beauty, sad life

Mrinmoyee Dutta studies the life of a tragedienne

MADHUBALA, aged thirty six, died in February 1969. She had finally succumbed to the pains associated with the lifelong hole in her heart. And then there were all the other pains she went through life in the course of a career that was to etch forever her name on Indian cinema. All these decades after her death, Madhubala remains an icon. Proof of that is to be found in the excitement with which today's generation has responded to the new, all colour version of the Dilip Kumar-Madhubala starrer *Mughal-e-Azam*. It was the movie that raised the pair to prodigious heights of popularity. There are those who suggest that it was also a point when their real life romance was on the wane. Remember the moment when Dilip caresses Madhubala's cheek with a feather, causing visible sensual thrills in her?

In this brief, rather gushing kind of a biography, Khatija Akbar draws on all the little incidents and the big moments that led to the transformation of Baby Mumtaz into Madhubala the actress. She made an entry into filmdom as a child in 1942, through being cast in *Basant*. By her fourteenth year, she was already a leading lady, beside Raj Kapoor in Kidar Sharma's *Neel Kamal*. The year was 1947 and the road ahead seemed paved with roses for Madhubala. Chaperoned to the studios by her father, whom many considered rather possessive (at least he expected marriage to Dilip was scuttled by her need to keep providing for her family), she was headed for the heights. And she did reach the heights. By 1971, a good two years after her death, the tally of her films came to a whopping seventy one. And include among them such acclaimed tales as *Amar Prem*, *Dulari*, *Mahal* (where you have that unforgettable *Aega Anawaala* song), *Tarana*, *Sangdil*, *Mr. & Mrs. 55*, *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, *Shirin Farhad*, *Horrah Bridge*, *Barsaat Ki Raat* and *Sharabi*.

It is not just Madhubala's superb acting that keeps her in the public memory. There is the very strong reality of the beauty which abided in her. The extent to which her beauty has been a reference point can be seen in the way some actresses who came after her have been compared to her in terms of looks. There has always been a class of people which has seen in Madhuri Dixit something of what Madhubala used to be in her days. And yet it was a sad, indeed tragic life that she led despite all her successes in stardom. Her relationship with Dilip Kumar did not work out. It was doomed once the famous court case came in. It was also a point when Dilip made his now famous declaration of love for her. He would love Madhubala, he declared, till the end of his life. By the mid 1960s, though, Dilip was already a husband, to Saira Banu. As for Madhubala, after the fiasco with Dilip, she married Kishore Kumar on the rebound. It was a bad marriage, for Kishore was a careless, if not uncaring husband. But Madhubala, resigned to fate, was not willing to dump him. When the musician Naushad advised her to make a clean break with Kishore, she answered him with a couplet from Sheri Bhopali: *Jab Kashti saabit saalim thi/Sahil ki tamanna kis ko thi? Ab aisi shikasta kashti par/Sahil ki tamanna kaun kare?*

(When my boat was sturdy and safe/I had no thoughts of the shore/Now with a boat so ravaged/Who can dream of a shore?) Madhubala's movies are remembered for some of the most stirring songs. *Pyar kia to darma kya* in *Mughal-e-Azam* remains the most instantly recognisable song in any recalling of her acting. There are other movies, such as the one where Bharat Bhushan croons the Rafi number, *Zindagi bhar nahin bhoolegi wo barsaat ki raat*, to Madhubala. On the stage of *Mughal-e-Azam*, a screen slap that Dilip Kumar's Prince Salim is supposed to land on the cheek of Madhubala's Anarkali turns into a real, hard one. Dilip and Madhubala have been falling out of love, but such a demonstration of vehemence on the part of the former leaves everyone present stunned. Poetry and realism then came together as Anarkali sings *Hamen kaash tumse mohabbat na hoti/Kahani hamari haqeeqat na hoti*. Akbar notes that many an eye among those watching the picturisation of the sequence grew moist at the wistful refrain.

For Indian movie buffs, this work is a good read, on a cool day that could well be a holiday.



Madhubala  
Her Life Her Films  
Khatija Akbar  
UBS Publishers Distributors Ltd.

Mrinmoyee Dutta is a movie buff and lives in Darjeeling.