STAR BOOKS REVIEW

RE-READING

Travels through the Mandela mind

Helal Mohammed Khan analyses the life of the greatest man in these times

TRUGGLE, power and vision. All three waited to be combined by one man. And that brought the South Africans their freedom, and to the world an apartheid-free existence at least the hope of it. It was no surprise to see how anxiously whole world searched for that one black face at Soccer City stadium. Born in the quiet village of Mvezo on the banks of the Mbasa, Nelson Mandela is far more than a legend. He is 'the legend', and a living one!

Surely, you don't need a World Cup in South Africa to remind the world of Mandela. The call for humanity and equality that he universalized from the 1960's to the 1990's saw him well through to the new millennium. After all, our earth is still peopled by the demons of apartheid, with issues of human rights bookshelved into distant libraries. I say, it is easier than ever for every living soul to feel like a Mandela. Time for a Christ reborn? I wonder... Nelson Mandela: born 1918, reborn 2010?

My Mandela reckonings, I hope, did not put you into a state of slumber. The UN has declared July 18 as 'Mandela Day' worldwide from this year on. Then you have all the recent media spotlight on him and his family. The death of his grandchild affected the World Cup opening. And no less captivating was the row over Naomi Campbell's diamond transactions, as it got dragged to an official of the Mandela charity. Clearly, the world is far from forgetting a 93year-old ex-South African president.

All these told me to retrieve the Mandela memoir from my bookshelf. Looking at the 2006 edition (Abacus) of Long Walk to Freedom, I remembered all the engineering it took to have the book first published in London in 1994. The manuscripts were hidden in various places (the story was quite similar to how the 'Rommel Papers' had to be kept away from falling into Allied or even German hands). And Mandela acknowledges it right at the beginning of his memoir: "As readers will discover, this book has a long history". In many ways Long Walk to Freedom does turn out to be an interesting embroidery of South African history. Riveting, and sometimes painfully honest, Mandela constantly reveals the rottenness of politics and depicts the waste of human potential under colonial regimes. With a life-story that is at once appalling and inspirational, he easily makes his reader believe that his triumph in South Africa is only synonymous with the triumph of the human spirit.

And then you have its above-average literature. With sharp, poignant and elegant words, often told with cynical expressions (thanks to the William Phillips' edits), Mandela writes with rare and moving appeal. Great leader and politician that he is, he is nevertheless keen to reflect on himself as a mere mortal. It is a life story of hardship and resilience told with clarity and eloquence. No wonder the Los Angeles Times termed it as "one of the few political biographies that's also a page-turner.'

The first part of this eleven-part work illustrates Mandela's country childhood. The simplicity of life in the villages of Mvezo and Qunu stands as an ideal launching pad for a life of struggle that is yet endowed with great serenity. Like Mandela, you get to be a small 'Xhosa' (that's Mandela's tribe) kid, and learn the essential arts of survival: "...to knock birds off the sky with a slingshot, to gather wild honey and fruits and edible roots, to drink warm, sweet milk straight from the udder of a cow, to

swim in the clear, cold streams, and to catch fish with twine and sharpened bits of wire". Then you carry yourself into some tenderly romantic ventures. Why not? Mandela did! And you sure do not miss the amusements of a Xhosa 'circumcision parade'. Childhood of Rohilala (yes, it is the birth name of Mandela, meaning 'troublemaker') takes you all the way to a distant African soil.

The subsequent parts (two and three) discover Mandela in Johannesburg, his thoughts now shaping into a fresh political mindset. Out of the rubble of apartheid, you see the rise of a leader destined to lead his people from behind bars (Mandela's jail term in total accounts for some 27 years)! And now he gradually unveils the darkness of colonization. Disgust is the only feeling you have, as you come to know how only the 'colour' of the skin governed the fates of people in that age of darkness. And then you are happy to discover the 'Freedom Charter' which Mandela drafted for the ANC in a bid to rationalize its struggle for



a new independent South African nation. You will find its clauses, with their universal appeal, outclass parallel works like the American Declaration of Independence or even the Communist Manifesto.

Your disgust of apartheid turns into sheer horror when Mandela unravels (in parts five to seven) how barbarous 'government machineries' (include the darkest laws) are applied to forcefully silence the anti-apartheid movement. The witty performance of some of the lawyers (most of whom, not surprisingly, were 'sympathetic' whites) in defending those 'helpless' cases, nevertheless, beautifies the struggle. You will also note some of the cynical remarks by Mandela during 'Treason Trial' (as he describes the judiciary): "It is said that the mills of God grind exceedingly slowly, but even the Lord's machineries cannot compete with those of the South African judicial system".

In describing the movement, Mandela never misses out the sacrifices and contributions of like-minded and sympathetic whites. The selflessness of Bram Fischer, Mandela's lawyer and friend, will touch you to say the least. Mandela does not also hesitate to talk about his own period of life underground. And finally he gives interesting details of his clandestine journey through a newly independent Africa, a journey which, in due course of time, would earn him worldwide support.

Moved by his 'total sacrifice' for a noble cause, you also see a Mandela yearning for a family life. "Time may seem to stand still for those of us in prison, but it did not halt for those outside", writes the off-rooted man, trying to accept the realities of life (his first wife left with his children and who still had his mother's death to confront). "A mother's death causes a man to look back on and evaluate his own life...Had I made the right choice in putting the people's welfare even before that of my own family?" You are not surprised to hear it from a man with a political career of fifty years. And just in case you look askance at the exhaustive list of the book's 'dedications' not making any mention of Mandela's wives, you end up charmed as Mandela's memoir never falls short of crediting his success to the love, care and sacrifices of his wives and children.

The latter chapters describe Robben Island. This is the island-prison where Mandela stayed for the greater period of his captivity (it was later listed as a UNESCO heritage). Ah, there are the unending sorrows, eternal hopelessness and the occasional joys of prison life! Mandela carries you along with him in his six feet by five feet cell. There you come to know (as I did) that "the most important person in any prisoner's life is not the minister of justice, not the commissioner of prisons, not even the head of prisons, but the warder in one's section"; and that it is a place where access to newspapers or even being permitted to put on full trousers beats everything else.

Then there is also the other side of the Mandela coin. Mandela justifies (in chapter eight) the violent struggle by MK, the military wing of the ANC of which Mandela himself was the leader. Referring to MK's May 1983 car bombings which left nineteen people dead and two hundred plus injured (the action originally targeted an air force and military intelligence office in Pretoria), Mandela says unequivocally: "The killing of civilians was a tragic accident, and I felt a profound horror at the death toll. But disturbed as I was by these casualties, I knew that such accidents were the inevitable consequences of the decision to embark on a military struggle . . . Human fallibility is always a part of war, and the price of it is always high" he sure knows what he speaks of! His memoir, in fact, is pregnant with issues of his indirect approach for peace. That is how he rises to the demand of freedom for his people 'at any cost' and is able to say the unsayables.

In the concluding parts, Mandela deliberates on how flexibility of political ideals displayed by politicians on both sides of the struggle brought a peace for all in South Africa. There was always light at the end of the tunnel, and the journey was difficult to say the least. But by mingling perseverance and selflessness with a rare sense of unity so much absent in that cosmopolitan country of blacks, whites and coloured, Mandela's triumph left everyone as winners.

The Mandela memoir thus turns out to be a pathfinder for peace in any part of the world. The deep impression that it creates every time I turn over its pages has an effect of healing in itself. As I take leave of you today, please allow me to remind you of the disputed cartoon that made headlines in July. It featured Mandela's 'dead body', with several other living South African leaders staring at the dissected corpse of their 'father of the nation', as if wondering what all really consisted of a Mandela. As for me, I really wish I knew what unearthly elements in a human being make a legend of him. On your part, dear reader, it might be of some worth to take a walk along the trail blazed in Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom.

Helal Mohammed Khan is a postgraduate (MA) in English from National University. E-mail: helalmohammedkhan@gmail.com

Romeo and Juliet redux

Charles R. Larson dwells on a twice-escaping writer

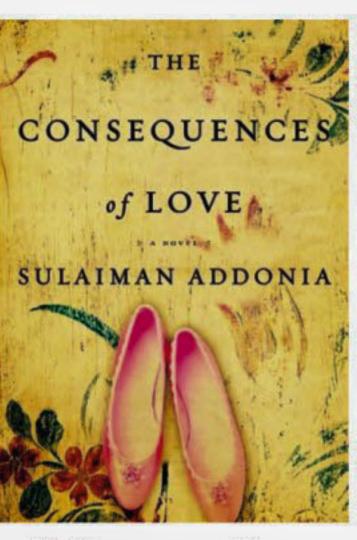
Romeo and Juliet story been retold? Having asked that There are even cafes with rooms set question, I'm not certain that off for men (of all ages) to have sex Eritrean writer Sulaiman Addonia had Shakespeare in mind when he wrote his evocative story of two starcrossed lovers, not in Eritrea but in Saudi Arabia. However, the publishers of *The Consequences of* Love highlight the connection to a story that depicts the near impossibility of love in such a stultifying and repressive country. The young lovers, Naser and Fiore, have Eritrean parentage, but the obstacle they encounter as foreigners attempting to fulfill their love is not familial but religious: fundamentalism.

Naser and his younger brother, Ibrahim, were sent out of Eritrea by their mother, who feared that they would be killed during the war with Ethiopia. After a brief period of time in Sudan they were sent on to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to be taken care of by their mother's brother. The boys are ten and thirteen, respectively, when they meet their uncle. He turns out to be not much of a protector; in fact he uses Naser to pay off his obligation to his kafeel, or sponsor, which every non-Saudi has to have in order to reside in the country. It's an insidious practice, as we shortly see, of turning young boys into sexual toys for married Saudi men to exploit in the most degrading manner. Naser's uncle's kafeel rapes the teenager, and there's little that he as a youth and as an immigrant can do about it.

By the time of the rape, Naser has already observed the hypocrisy surrounding him no matter where he goes and what he observes. The country's religious police are everywhere, like maggots living off the flesh of the young and the innocent. If the police catch a young man and a woman together, the couple can be carted off and imprisoned, flogged, even stoned to death or beheaded. The clerics have one constant litany: women are evil, and they constantly try to tempt innocent men. (It's really the opposite, but that's a moot point in a society as misogynistic as this one.) Worse, men constantly abuse younger men and boys up until the time of their marriages. So ubiquitous is this practice that one

OW many times has the might conclude that homosexual sex is preferable to heterosexual sex. together.

All of this duplicity is quite horrifying. Other aspects of the repressive society are equally revealing: western pornography, obviously also forbidden, appears to be everywhere. Young men sniff glue and drink perfume (because of its alcohol content) in order to get high. But, in this novel, homosexual activities take centre stage, providing an ironic twist to the title. One of Naser's friends explains to him, "My dear, in a world without women and



The Consequences of Love Sulaiman Addonia Random House

in the absence of female glamour, boys like you are the perfect substitute. Why hide your attractiveness and your tender physique like a veiled woman? You are the closest my customers have to a beautiful and sensual person roaming freely in their world. So why sit on your beauty like a bird without wings, when you can fly?"

What's a pretty boy to do? Fortunately, Naser gets a job washing cars after his uncle refuses to "protect" him. And then the encounter with the person he hopes is a beautiful young woman begins. I say "hopes" because the person who

drops a note on the ground near him is wrapped in an abaya; all Naser can see are the slits that reveal her eyes. She might be ugly or, worse, she might be a man dressed like a woman so that the religious police can trap The machinations needed to

resolve this mystery are as inventive and elaborate as those that Shakespeare used in Romeo and Juliet. That said, it should also be stated that Addonia's novel is as clever and imaginative as it is critical of Saudi hypocritical morality. Once communication between Naser and Fiore begins, the suspense is ratcheted up and this astonishingly beautiful tale works its way to what can only be described as a breathless conclusion as events and their consequences become bleaker and bleaker. You can't help asking yourself when the final tragic coincidence will be revealed. What's more, there's even a minor charactera blind imamwhose role is almost the reverse of the wellintending Friar Lawrence in Shakespeare's masterpiece.

The lovers finally do discover of each other's identity. The abaya does conceal a beautiful young woman, who has been smothered as much as Naser by political repression. Yet finally Addonia's title becomes as ominous as it has been since one's first glance at the book jacket. You will say, of course, that all love comes with consequences, yet they are rarely as bleak as those portrayed in this ingenious and disturbing story of love in a diseased society. As Naser observes, "I was in Saudi Arabia, where love had been erased from the dictionary, yet somehow I had found a way to express my passion for another."

Sulaiman Addonia is the lucky one. The jacket on the book says thatlike his main characterhe fled Ethiopia following the "Om Hajar massacre in 1976," then went to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia but, later, with his brother "successfully sought asylum in the U.K. as underage immigrants." So he escapedtwice, one might say. And then he wrote this sensuous account of love in an inhumane country.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University in

The many strands of experience

Subrata Kumar Das discovers love, war and misery

MDADUL Haq Milon, who has played a vital role in inculcating I reading habits among Bangladeshis, is hardly considered for his serious works. He is mostly evaluated as a writer of popular fiction. We generally do not remember that Milan is a writer of Noorjahan (1st vol 1995, 2nd vol 2002), Bhumiputro (1985) or Jabojjibon (first published in Journal 1976, in book form in 1990). Along with those he has authored some novels on our liberation war too. Those works may not have been great from a literary perspective, but they are surely good fictional works on that milestone event in the history of Bangladesh. Jibonpur, a novel based on the War of Liberation, is also a significant creation by Imdadul Haq Milon. The main story line of the book is centred on the trafficking of people from Bangladesh to other countries through India and Pakistan.

'I am going to Pakistan today' the first line in *Jibonpur* is a sigh from Lal Mia alias Lalu, the protagonist as well as first person narrator of the book. He is leaving Bangladesh for Pakistan with a view to making a way to Dubai. The son of a common middle class agrarian family, Lalu fails to succeed in any of his career initiatives and is therefore compelled to adopt this new, degrading way of trying to make some sense of life. The book actually narrates the journey Lalu makes with some of his mates to Pakistan, but in the telling of the tale Milon has interwoven the story of Lalu's Liberation War days juxtapositionally, along with memories of his childhood and adolescence.

Lalu is an unemployed young man in Dhaka. With the help of his elder brother he makes some attempts to build a career for himself, but being unsuccessful time and again, he decides to leave the country. That leads to the plan to leave for Dubai through Pakistan. He comes in contact with people who trade in human traffic with Pakistan. Thus the novel actually delineates the tragic situation of contemporary Bangladesh society as well as their hopelessness in the early days of the eighties of the last

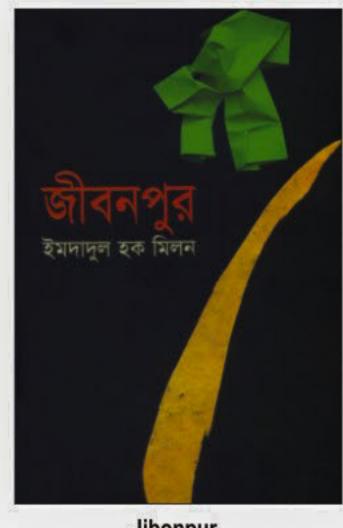
The opening lines create a milieu of sadness as the protaginist was associated with the Liberation War and is now departing for the country against which he had once fought. Lalu starts his story thus: 'I was 17 or 18 in the year 1971'. And along with this he intermingles his own stories, his days in the villages, his love affair, and so on and so forth.

The time when the story of Jibonpur begins is March 1982. The whole team starts from Dhaka, moves through Rajshahi, then it reach Bhagwangola. From there to Delhi and onward to Amritsar and the border of Pakistan. It is a long journey full of risks and hurdles, but Lalu and his fellow travelers have to counter those one after another. One day they fall into the hands of

the Pakistan army, just as Lalu was caught by the same army in 1971. Let us go through the description of the day they fall into Pakistani

"Khorshed said: 'Now is the main job. We've to swim across the canal. Do it in your own way. If you don't want to get your clothes wet, take them off. No need to be shy.' What a sorry saga that even the

female members of the team did not hesitate to disrobe themselves. They just took their saris and



Jibonpur Imdadul Haq Milon Ananyo, Dhaka

blouses off in their hands and, holding them high, began to wade through the water.

Nothing different happened to me either. ... We did put on our clothes back on when we reached the other side of the canal. The search lights were rolling over us. Instantly we lay down as we had earlier. When the search lights went over, we got up. At that moment a tiger-like voice shouted, 'Halt!'"

It is at this point that Milan delineates the matter of how the protagonist had become the captive of the Pakistan army during the War of Liberation.

The single story of Lalu and his associates as they make their hazardous trip toward Pakistan could have sufficed. But the writer has simply added more meat to the tale. During the time the current storyline runs, he very frequently switches back to the incidents that occurred during the Liberation War time and even in the protagonist's early days. Lalu was not a freedom fighter in

that active sense of the meaning. The truth is that because he looked skinny, his commander did not give him a combat role on the battlefield. He was engaged in collecting information for the Mukti Bahini. More than that, one day he tried to flee to join the war from which he had so long restrained himself thinking about the helplessness of his mother. In flashbacks Lalu not only talks about his Muktijuddho

days but also goes back to earlier periods in his life. "We are from Bikrampur," he says in an echo of what could be a tale of Imdadul Haq Milon himself. Gradually the story includes Bilu, Lalu's boyhood friend, who eventually becomes a sensation to Lalu. We find that Bilu becomes part and parcel of Lalu's life; he cannot tolerate a single day without her, though at some point he has to leave her for good.

Lalu and Bilu become so intimate that they become dependent on each other in every respect. In time they develop the practice of indulging in conversation after everyone else has gone to bed. They become habituated to spending the night in the same bed, though the first person narrative notes that it was nothing of a questionable nature, that no thought of an illegitimate relationship had developed between them. That of course may raise critics' eyebrows. One night Bilu's father stumbles upon the truth. Without creating any chaos or confusion he takes Bilu away to

Kishoregonj. Jibonpur may be considered notable from the perspective of two periods in time. The narration of the bygone days is accommodated in the narration of the present, which tells the tale of a hazardous and dangerous journey. The journey is full of inconceivable incidents, such as deaths. Milon has sketched the tale of this dreadful journey with an admirable degree of realism.

Milon began his career as a fic-

tion writer with Jabojjibon, which drew attention of a good number of readers of sophisticated literary tastes. Later he started writing popular novels that brought a greater readership among the teenaged for him and thus established a place for him in literature. O Radha O Krishna and Dukshakoshto came out in 1982 and were followed by Joto Dure Jai, Jodi Bhalobasha Pai, Keu Kotha Rakheni, Bhalobashar Shukhdukkho and other works. His skill as a writer of fiction around the War of Liberation is also worth mentioning. The novels based on the war may not be very great in respect of literary merit, but they certainly make good reading. Such instances are Rajakartontro, Gherao, Dwitio Porber Shuru, Mohajuddho, Baloker Obhiman, Kaloghora and Shutoi Bandha Projapoti. Milon's novels on the expatriate life of Bengalis are also very touching. Poradhinota, published in 1985 and set in Germany, is

Bhumiputro, which confirmed his place among many more serious readers. It was followed by Noorjahan, a much read novel both in Bangladesh and West Bengal. Jibonpur promises to be another feather in Milon's cap.

a defining work. Porobaash (1987) is

A decade later came

another.

Subrata Kumar Das is a teacher and

Old allegories to explain new times

Farida Shaikh spots meaning in drama

ALI, *The Sacrifice*, has a unique place in the field of Indian drama. The play projects belief in God, in Hinduism, queen. 'V projects belief in God, in Hinduism, and Jainism --- one belief whose rituals revolve round blood and the other that abhors killing and blood. Beyond the literal lies the more profound meaning, that violence is an integral part of human existence and that the moral dilemma encountered on account of violence is part of everyday life.

The story line is beautiful, like a fairy-tale! The king and the queen both love each other very much. The king, out of love for his queen, has become a believer in Jainism. Jains are against all kinds of bloodshed and violence. However, the king discovers that his queen has betrayed him. So to ward off the evil consequences of the queen's unfaithfulness, the king and the queen together have to make a sacrifice, Bali, to the blood thirsty Hindu

The queen, nevertheless, is innocent. She is not sorry for or ashamed of her action, for what happened was without her will and it was beautiful! Moreover, the king and the queen are 'coupled in the eyes of God...fire as the witness...bound together in vow.'p.113. By performing

the sacrifice together, the queen, as wife, becomes guilty of adultery. This is a moral

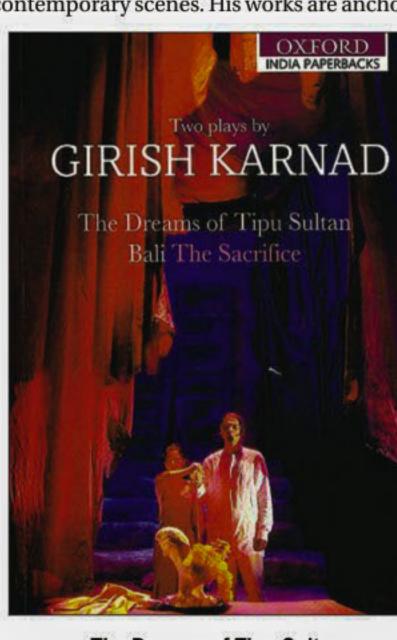
dilemma for the queen. To counter the wrath of the gods the king resorts to substituting a cockerel made of dough to serve as a mock ritual for the Bali. There is no blood, but the purpose of sacrifice, killing a living bird with real red blood, is there. This gives rise to a Catch 22-like situation. The inanimate substitution does not cancel the intent of the action and is just a cover up for the

guilty person and the invisible blood. Wiping away of religious rites creates a social vacuum, and mere substitution may not necessarily be the moral solution. Just as during his birth the king, while still connected to his mother's placenta, was drowned in blood, now his wife, by substituting the cockerel made of dough is 'drowning him in guilt' . So notes the king's mother. She continues, emphatically, that 'the only relationship in the world which does not wither and fade away is that of hate.' P.115

The low caste ugly mahout, who is supposedly involved with the queen, suggests his own punishment to the king --- hang a dough image of him by the tree. And the crass humour is that if dough cockerel is fit for the gods, then why not dough man fit for the king? However, would a dough man satisfy the queen? The man is innocent; he is doing his work regarding the animal, in this case an elephant. The queen desires the company of

The unlettered ugly mahout had asked the queen, 'Who do you talk to when you are lonely---when you are in trouble?' The Jains have twenty four saviours. God is there, and the mahout talks to God when he is upset over his being ugly. And this is what follows, 'Would you exchange your voice for good looks?' To this the mahout answers '...No, I wouldn't,' and then God says, 'Why not leave it at that?'

Girish Karnad is internationally known as a playwright and filmmaker. Most of his works are based on explorations into folklore, mythology and history as means of tackling contemporary scenes. His works are anchored



The Dreams of Tipu Sultan **Bali The Sacrifice** Girish Karnad Oxford India Paperbacks

in history, marked by great plots, consistent characters, precise speeches combined with lyrics and witty dialogue. An instance '...But do you know you can love a city like a woman?' When Yudhishthira tells Draupadi in the Mahabharata that he has lost her in the game of dice, she asks: 'Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?' it is a continuation of the queen's story in Bali when she questions performing sacrifice together and to be regarded as being guilty of adultery.

Karnad, when just twenty three years' old, wrote his first play, Yayati in 1961, in his adopted language Kannada. Yayati is a king who in the prime of his life is cursed to old age

and goes around asking people, 'Will you take my old age?'No one accepts him except his son Puru. This is a play dealing with personal responsibility and has been compared by some critics to Sophocles' Antigone and after

Tughlaq, 1964, is the second Kannada play, translated into English by Karnad. It is now recognized as a classic. The tale is about the dreams and aspirations of an over-ambitious, virtuous king. Karnad engages history and mythology to tackle contemporary themes. The play is an allegory on the Nehruvian era. In contemporary political situations, Tughlaqi is a Hindi proverb.

the Image of an Alienated Modern Man.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan is a play on the great Mysore warrior. He represents the best of Karnataka, the only one who perceived a threat to the country from the East India Company. The play is based on a secret record of Tipu Sultan which was made public after his death. The play rescues Tipu Sultan from colonial perceptions and presents him in the context of independent India. More importantly, the play is, in a collective sense, a reclamation of history, 'a truth too close to our heart for it to ever fail as a play.' It was

produced for BBC in 1997. A Heap of Broken Images, Bikhre Bimb, 2004, is about identity crisis. It highlights the Indian literary scene, the desire for fame and conflict in writing in one's own and in a foreign, English, language. Ananthamurthy, the Kannada writer, says: 'English writers were like prostitutes since they wrote with an eye for the money and global reach the language offers.'

Girish Karnad is an icon of contemporary

Indian drama, similar to Vijay Tendulkar and Babul Sirkar. His dream was to write in English like Shakespeare, like T.S.Eliot. He is an outstanding film director and actor; connected to Television Institute of India: Sangeet Natak Akademi and Director, the Nehru Centre, London. He has been much honoured --- with the Padma Bhushan and the prestigious Jnanpith Award. Karnad is a versatile genius. His latest,

Wedding Album, 2008, compares the past and the present bridal couples. Previously, couples met for the first time on their wedding day. That has now been substituted by many, many e-mails, SMSes, phone calls, tapes and scanned images. Yet, as he notes, one element of the plot remains unchanged: the couple agree to step into unknown, uncharted territory--- each other. And this is revealing of contemporary India and beyond---Bangladesh too!

Farida Shaikh is a critic and is involved with The Reading Circle (TRC).