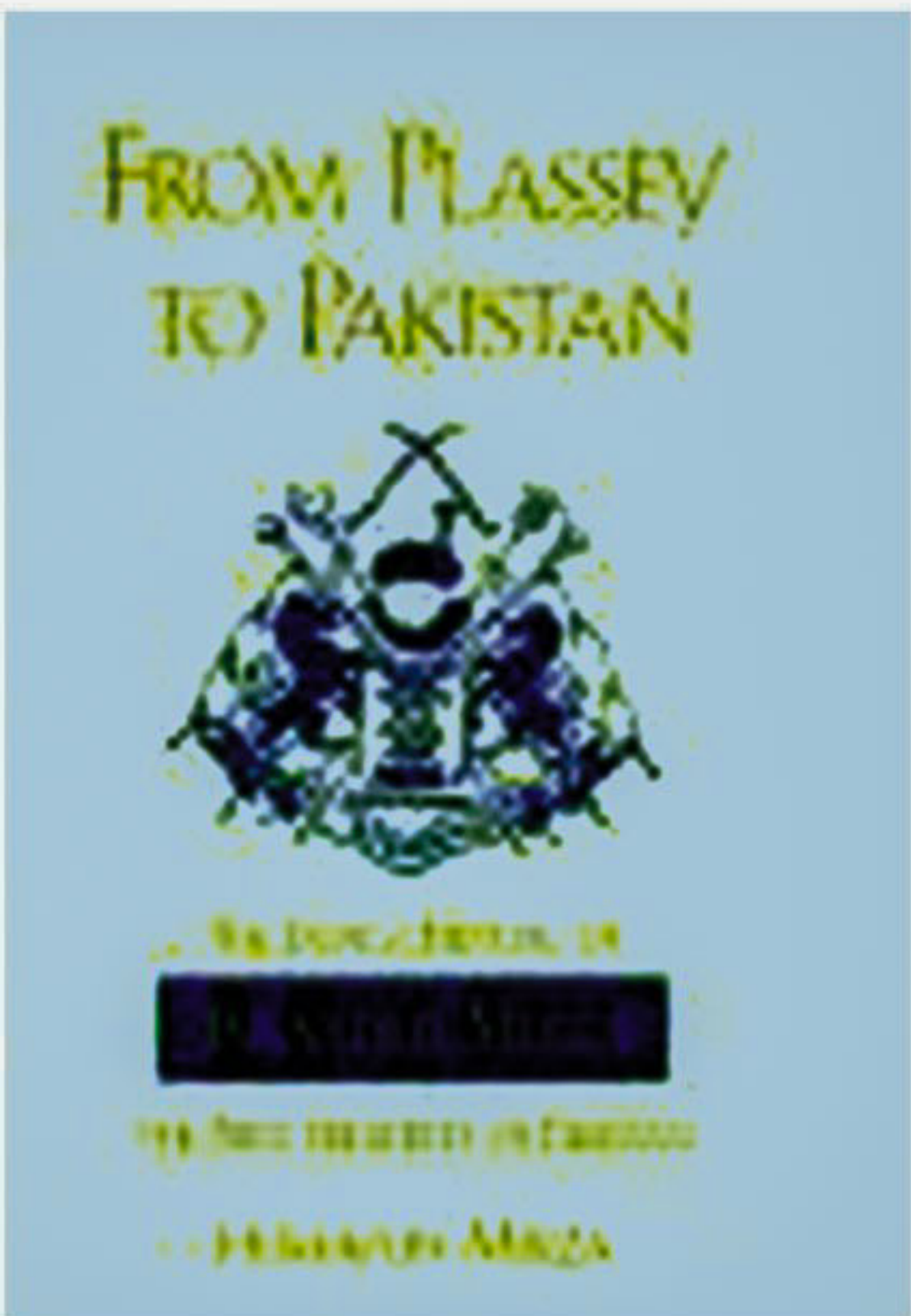


Three reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

## The forgotten Iskandar Mirza



From Plassey to Pakistan  
The Family History of Iskandar Mirza  
Humayun Mirza  
University Press of America

OCTOBER is that time of year when you tend to remember bits of history as they have shaped up before you. Fifty two years ago, in October 1958 to be exact, Iskandar Mirza and Ayub Khan together clamped martial law on Pakistan and so inaugurated what would be an agonising process of extra-constitutional rule in the country. Observed from a distance of time, or from a perspective of broad history, what these two men did on 7 October 1958 was fundamentally to push Pakistan toward a series of crises that it would never be able to overcome. And they did that knowing fully well that the country was headed for its very first electoral exercise, slated at that point for February 1959. The October coup d'etat put paid to that. It matters little that within twenty days of Pakistan's passing under military rule Iskandar Mirza had been pushed aside and bundled off into exile in Britain. In the struggle for power, it was Ayub Khan who would emerge the shrewder of the two. Mirza had no role to play in Pakistan's politics after 27 October and yet the incontrovertible truth remains that the misery which Pakistan has gone through, especially since the late 1950s, has been as much Mirza's making as it has been Ayub Khan's.

But that is not exactly what you get in Humayun Mirza's account of the life and times of Iskandar Mirza. The writer, of course, is the son of Iskandar Mirza and a retired World Bank official. In *From Plassey to Pakistan*, a work which dates back quite some years, it is a spirited defence of Pakistan's first president that Humayun Mirza provides. The defence is all right. The arguments are not. They simply fall flat, as they must given the reality behind Mirza's role in 1950s Pakistan politics and given too that political biographies by family members suffer from the ailment of glossing over the truth. What does strike you here, and sharply, is the strenuous manner in which Humayun Mirza tries to create the myth of his father as a man who believed in democracy and as a leader who was surely on his way to inaugurating a new democratic order for Pakistan. That is a bit rich, for there are yet people around who recall the disdain in which Iskandar Mirza held the Bengalis of East Pakistan and the contempt with which he regarded politicians like Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. He would shoot Bhashani like a dog. That is what he proclaimed once, loud enough for everyone to hear. And every time there was a phone call from Dhaka, he went for a knee-jerk reaction: those Bengalis must be up to something nasty again!

You read about Iskandar Mirza and then you go back to recalling Ayub Khan's *Friends Not Masters*. A common strand of thought in Mirza and Ayub is the racism that both men give vent to. Should we be surprised? In the twenty four years in which Bangladesh was Pakistan's eastern province, it was this feeling of racial superiority that was the trend in West Pakistan, among its elites and among its common citizens. The lack of a martial spirit in Bengalis is a thought that exercises Ayub's mind in *Friends Not Masters*. And do not forget that at the height of the Six Point movement in the mid-1960s, it was the language of weapons with which he threatened Bengalis. Perhaps he truly believed that Bengalis were incapable of warding off foreign bullets or could not handle guns themselves? Of course Ayub Khan or for that matter Iskandar Mirza would not know that Bengalis could indeed wage war and triumphantly too. Their glib presumptions shattered in 1971.

Humayun Mirza's account, for all its clever attempts to portray Iskandar Mirza as a man devoted to democracy, cannot gloss over the deep mistrust with which the latter regarded Pakistan's political classes. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawady, Choudhry Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Ali Bogra and indeed practically everyone else was for Mirza an element whose overriding purpose in politics was to destabilise Pakistan, perhaps even destroy it. Along the way (and this occurs in the earlier sections of the book), the writer makes it a point to let readers know that his family is descended from Mir Jafar, the British loyalist installed on the throne of Bengal following the defeat in Plassey and death of Nawab Sirajuddaulah. The nawab comes across as a debauch, clearly unfit to rule and therefore deserving of the ignominy that was to push him off the perch of power. If you reflect on Mir Jafar, there are not many works or treatises extolling him that you could stumble upon. The man remains condemned as a symbol of perfidy. You would not expect Hitler's descendants or the children of the Vichy collaborators or the grandchildren of Admiral Tojo or the clan of Khondokar Moshtaq Ahmed to come forth with a robust defence of their notorious ancestors. That is not the position Humayun Mirza takes.

But, yes, there are quite a few anecdotes that come up in the book. Humayun Mirza devotes much space to the manner of the rise of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in politics. As he puts it, Bhutto was his friend, newly returned from higher studies abroad and eager to make a mark in Pakistan's politics. It was Bhutto who suggested that President Mirza visit Larkana and join the young feudal in hunting. The younger Mirza persuaded Bhutto, given that it was difficult to have the president of Pakistan agree to visit an unknown young lawyer at his home, to visit the president in Karachi. Iskandar Mirza took an immediate liking to the young man. In 1957, he was sent off on an official mission for Pakistan abroad. By 7 October 1958, Bhutto was in the martial law cabinet, the youngest minister in the country. The rest is of course history. The author makes it a point to mention, though, that every time Bhutto visited London (he was then Ayub Khan's foreign minister and Mirza was in exile in the city), he would call the former president, a gesture Mirza truly appreciated. A particular episode stands out in the

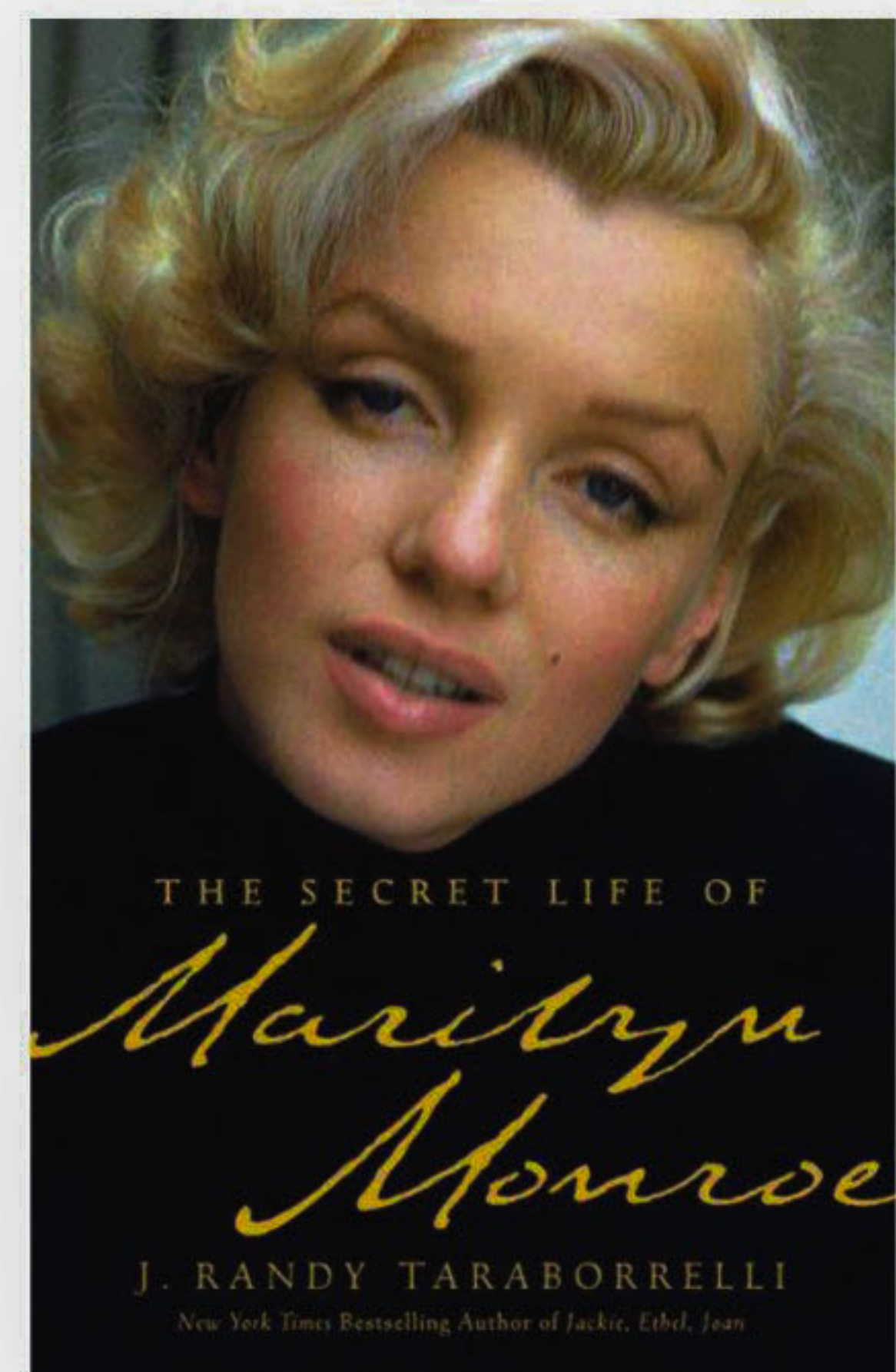
book. Iskandar Mirza and his son were at lunch at a restaurant in Piccadilly when he walked Foreign Minister Bhutto and Pakistan's High Commissioner to Britain Agha Hillaly. As Humayun Mirza puts it, Hillaly turned pale at seeing the former president and tried to block Bhutto from noticing the former president. Bhutto, however, did precisely the opposite. He spotted his former benefactor, walked over to his table and had his lunch with him.

There are then the details of Iskandar Mirza's infatuation for and subsequent marriage to the Iranian Nahid. The trauma endured by Mirza's first wife, mother of the writer, cannot be ignored. It was a scandal Mirza would live with for the rest of his life. Iskandar Mirza was never to make it back to Pakistan. When he died in November 1969, his family requested permission of the Pakistan government, then led by General Yahya Khan, to have Mirza buried in Pakistan. The regime responded with a harsh no. In the event, through the efforts of Ardeshtir Zahedi, son-in-law of the Shah of Iran and alternately ambassador for Iran and its foreign minister, Iskandar Mirza was buried in Tehran.

Observe the irony. The Shah himself was not to find burial ground for himself in his country. His remains lie in a grave somewhere in Cairo. Not many visit the grave. Likewise, there cannot be many who will trek down to Mirza's grave in Tehran. And, yes, no one remembers where exactly Mir Jafar's remains lie buried.

### ...A woman insecure

THERE are certain American obsessions you cannot ignore. Take the fascination with the Kennedys, for instance. Or think of Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson. And then there is the other side of this fascination. Fidel Castro remains a threat for the US government, despite so many changes having taken place all across the world since the bearded Cuban revolutionary marched into Havana in 1959. Today, it is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and



The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe  
J. Randy Taraborrelli  
Pan Books

Hugo Chavez who worry America, especially its ruling elite. And obsession sometimes can go to ludicrous lengths in Washington. *Forbes* magazine has just informed us that Michelle Obama happens to be the most powerful woman in the world. Now that is surely ridiculous, given that Mrs. Obama holds no position in government nor has done anything significant on her own to justify that definition of her capabilities. She happens to share the bed of the current occupant of the White House. How then, you wonder, does she edge ahead of the likes of Angela Merkel as the most powerful woman on the planet?

America's willingness to fall for obsession goes back a long way. If you have had cause to read J. Randy Taraborrelli's rather excellent work on Marilyn Monroe, you will know why. In no other country, not even those in what we choose to think of as the western world, does Monroe hold people in such thrall as she does in her native America all these years after her death in 1962. She is still thought of as a great beauty, sometimes as a great actress (though that last bit appears to be something of an exaggeration). In this work, Taraborrelli tries drawing out the woman behind the image. He does it pretty well, even though he too occasionally falls for the old charm while reflecting on her moods and her idiosyncrasies. In the end, what the writer does is to project the life and death of a woman in constant need of attention despite the all too evident failings on her part. She missed shooting deadlines; she threw tantrums on the sets and she was forever in need of a shoulder to cry on. Above all, it was sex that was an obsession with her. First it was the sportsman Joe de Maggio. Monroe stormed into marriage with him and then saw her dream of a life spent with her husband fizzle out, one reason being De Maggio's volatile nature. He even had goons, led (unbelievably!) by Frank Sinatra, barge into a room (the wrong one) in a hotel where Monroe was on a tryst with a new lover. That was after the end of her marriage to De Maggio.

You then come to the question of why Marilyn Monroe would go for the writer Arthur Miller as a lover and then husband. Like all men acutely happy at being in the company of sex symbols, Miller plunged into wedlock with Monroe, only to discover that she possessed none of the intellectual genius he perhaps had assumed she did. For her part, the actress too acknowledged her shortcomings, though it did make her happy to have the world know that with Miller it was an alliance of intellect and beauty that she had forged. The alliance was not to survive. Monroe would lurch from one affair to another, from one emotional distress to another. When her psychiatrist had her confined, through clear deception, to a sanatorium, she fell back on former husband De Maggio to get her out of the rut.

Of all the tempestuous moments in Marilyn Monroe's life, nothing has exercised a greater hold on the American imagination than her presumed links with the Kennedy brothers. Monroe was a friend of Patricia Kennedy Lawford, sister of JFK and RFK and wife of the British actor Peter Lawford. It was at her place in early 1962 that Monroe met Robert Kennedy and his wife Ethel over dinner. RFK, then US attorney general, gave absolutely no hint that he had been taken in by Monroe and yet, in subsequent days and months, the actress let everyone who would listen to her know that she had had a date with the brother of the president. With the president, of course, it was different. John

Kennedy was obsessed with women, more with thoughts of sex with them. He and Monroe spent a weekend in Florida, a time that Monroe would gush over repeatedly. As for the president, he surely enjoyed the carnal moments with Monroe and then simply forgot all about it. He did not, for all his cheating on Jackie, conceive of Monroe being first lady in the White House. Monroe had other ideas, of course. After Florida, she constantly called the White House asking to be put through to the president, who had meanwhile firmly told the switchboard to do no such thing. Was JFK playing safe? Or did he feel that once he had made a sexual conquest of Monroe he could move on to other women? We will never know. But we do know that in May 1962, at New York's Madison Square Garden, Marilyn Monroe, in shimmering, body-hugging dress that almost made her appear nude, sang Happy Birthday to the president. She was never to see John F. Kennedy after that. Three months later she was dead. From an overdose of barbiturates? From murder? No one will know.

Laurence Olivier, though irritated by Monroe's moods, maintained his calm on the sets as shooting went on. Clark Gable too remained indulgent. His death in 1960 sent Monroe on a paroxysm of grief. Tony Curtis would have everyone know that kissing Monroe was like kissing Hitler.

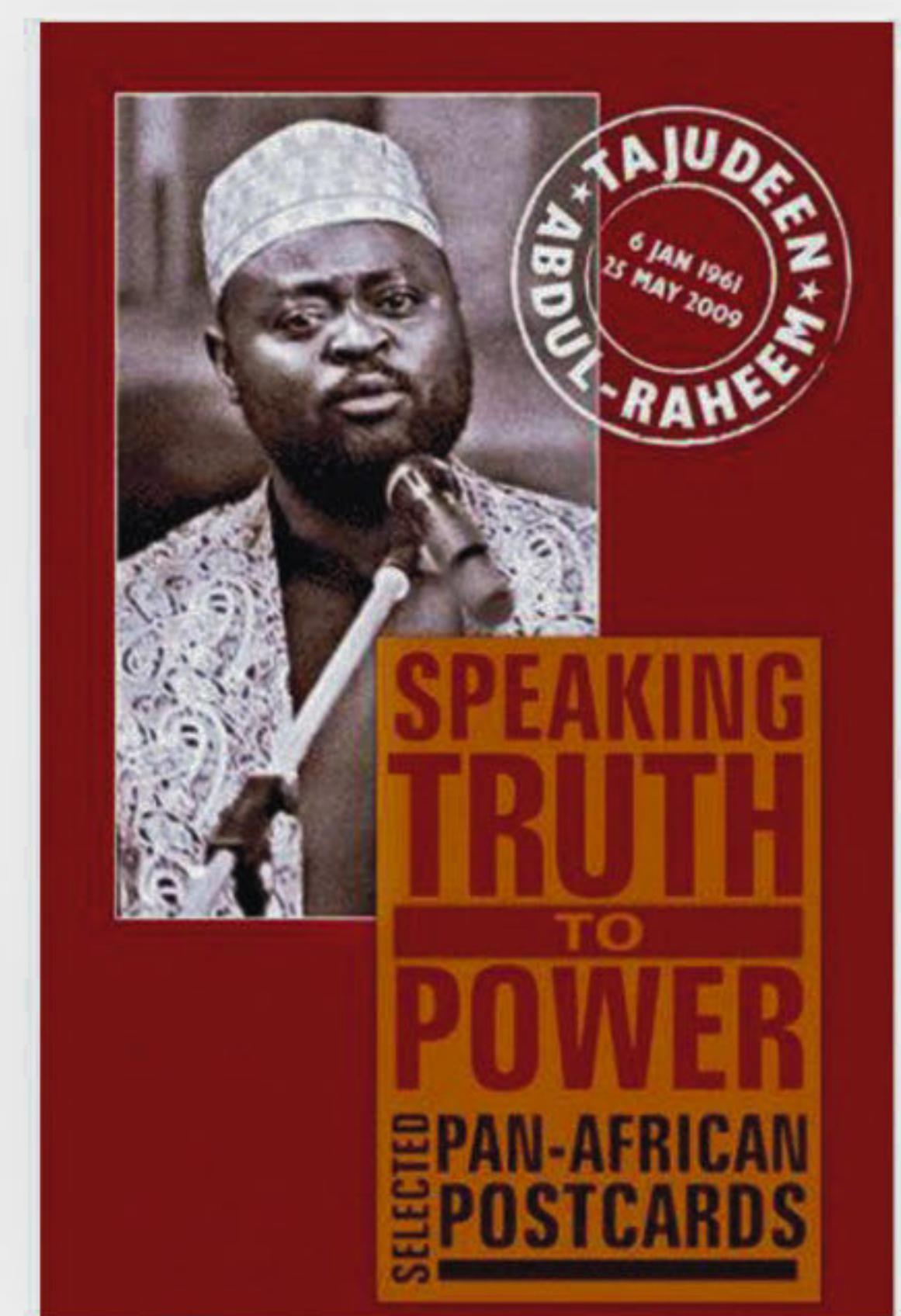
### Thoughts of an African thinker . . .

THERE is much about Africa that we do not know. Yes, there are the civil wars and the pogroms that we are pelted with day after day through the media. The tales of corrupt, venal dictators and of the murderous nature of men, as in the Rwanda genocide of 1994 or the post-independence happenings in the Congo in the early 1960s, are what have kept us bound to the thought that Africa is a synonym for chaos. That is a mistaken belief, for Africa is a place, a continent like any other. Nature has endowed it with beauty. Its people, part of its innumerable tribes, have kept life going in the way their ancestors did long ago.

Africa has had and has its cultural ferment at work. You go back to the era of Leopold Sedar Senghor, the poet president of Senegal, to appreciate the intellectual affluence of the continent. Men like Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda and Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba are synonymous with the political renaissance that freed Africa of colonial domination through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In the early 1990s, it was Nelson Mandela's release from long incarceration that set Africa off into a new journey to political revival.

African writers have created waves around the world. Chinua Achebe is one. Wole Soyinka is another. Ken Saro-Wiwa, the brilliant intellectual and human rights activist hanged by the murderous Sani Abacha regime in Nigeria in 1995, is another name you roll off your tongue. The young Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has given us *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a sad novel on the collapse of Biafra and the resultant misery of the Igbo of eastern Nigeria.

So there is the richness of Africa for you. The richness acquires deeper tones when you stumble upon the late Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem's collection of incisive essays, aptly titled *Speaking Truth to Power*. Tajudeen, again a Nigerian, died young, in 2009. Born in 1961, he was killed in a road accident in Nairobi on Africa Liberation Day, which of course is 25 May. But in the brief span of life that he lived, he demonstrated a skill for conducting informed discourse on the many issues that plague Africa in a way few have done earlier. He was acquainted with leading political and social figures of the continent. As a leading voice in the Pan-Africanist Movement, he crisscrossed the continent trying to bridge the divides that kept Africa unable to come together, indeed unable to put in place governments that could and would promote the aspirations of their peoples. Tajudeen obtained a first class honours degree in political science from Bayero University in Kano, before going on to Oxford on a Rhodes fellowship to do a DPhil. After that it was a long association with the Pan-Africanist Movement that led him on to wider expanses of political involvement with Africa. His was a leading role in organising the seventh Pan-African Congress in Kampala in 1994, with delegates from forty seven countries taking part. In the same year,



Speaking Truth to Power  
Selected Pan-African Postcards  
Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem  
Pambazuka Press

Tajudeen was part of a team that visited Rwanda to assess conditions there. Ambushed on the trip, Tajudeen narrowly escaped death.

*Speaking Truth to Power* is a frontal assault on the hypocrisies that have afflicted the corridors of power in Africa. It is also an objective evaluation of the realities. Consider some of the themes Tajudeen addresses in the work: *Winnie Mandela at 70; Killing of John Garang: who did it?; Presidency in perpetuity; Does Meles think he's Africa's George Bush?; Corrupt leaders are mass murderers; Obama's challenge to Africans; France should be in the dock, not Kagame; Taking Pan-Africanism to the people.*

You emerge from a reading of the essays here wishing to learn more about a continent that has fascinated and intrigued us in equal measure.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs and Star Books Review, The Daily Star.

## BOOK NEWS

### Speaking of diamonds . . .



FARIDA SHAIKH

WE, The Reading Circle, TRC introduced Shazia Omar earlier at our regular monthly reading session on Sunday, 17 January 2010, at Red Shift, Radius Centre, Gulshan 1.

It was a well attended session. In all, 17 readers and discussants expressed their views on the book, the writer, the subject matter of the book and came up with some suggestions.

*Like a Diamond in the Sky* is a debut novel by Shazia Omar. It heralds a new voice in Bangladesh fiction-writing in English. The book highlights the struggle against drug addiction, amidst degeneration, and has references to 9/11 and the aftermath.

Sal, the moving force behind Red Shift, described the work as a journey into realization. It is a modern piece of writing with an uninterrupted story line. Some editing of the text would improve the reading quality of the book.

Mahmuda Haque Chowdhury, a former Bangladesh diplomat, read the book not as a novel. It was for her an informative report on drug abuse and addiction. She was delighted to know the writer, Shazia Omar.

Daulat Husain, a visiting ex-teacher/trainer, commented elaborately on the book. She enjoyed the first part of the book, alternating between two protagonists and through them introducing other characters.

On the title of the book, there were different interpretations, or opinions if you will. The book is dedicated to a person of the writer's generation. Daulat Husain is of the opinion that it should have been dedicated to mothers, for the writer does address issues of concern for the elderly. It is also a question with Daulat as to how much her background in social psychology has helped the writer produce the book since the work goes for a deep insight into the mindset of the young generation. One may as well note the observations on the passer-by, on a preoccupation with sex and monogamy. The social attitudes and interplay of the nouveau riche and the poor --- beggars, rickshawpullers, slum mafia, the unschooled are here thrown light on. Also included as part of the theme are such symbols of affluence as motorbikes and Benz and mechanical devices like treadmills and remote controlled toys. The songs and authors referred to on page 33 do call for some clarification.

On the matter of publishing this book abroad, Daulat Husain thought such a venture would be worthwhile, for it is a Bangladeshi who has commented on the state of things in her country rather than someone from abroad. The appendix needs to explain/ translate some of the Bengali words, like bodna, achol, pohela boishakh and others. The dialogue on page 36-46 is interesting and relates to corruption in the country and is reflective of cynicism involved in a practice of religion. The strength of the book? It is a wake-up call for us all, for we are superficially aware of the symptoms of addiction. It is for readers to spot the problems. Intrinsically the book presents the bigger problem of the cause of this addiction in alienation felt by this generation, page 41-42, vis-à-vis a relegation of responsibility, bad behaviour and holding on to traditional views on societal reactions. The book highlights the problems of this generation: boredom, peer pressure, smugness, hood-winking parents, thrill of secrecy, and freedom without responsibility. The book could be turned around to teach about parental roles, about seeking professional help, and not play the blame game, to assist us to re-examine ourselves. Nancy, an expatriate, was very appreciative of the discussion and suggested serious consideration on copyright issues and inclusion of the book in the Library of Congress. Armeen, a young reader, appreciated the book as she could easily relate to the contents of the work. There is a philosophical side to it and there are issues to be reflected on, for life is the result of deliberate action.

Naila and Aref, part of the Bengali diaspora, thought the book was great and had good prospect of being converted to a stage performance.

Favorable comments were made by Lita, Jackie, Hasna, Asfa, Nasreen and Kuhu, particularly relating to the vivid description of city parts, and the social facts of Bangladesh.

It all ended on a cheerful note: TRC is the best, said Shazia Omar.

Farida Shaikh, sociologist-cum-anthropologist and freelance writer, introduced Shazia Omar at a programme organized by Goethe-Institut, Dhaka, on 10 October 2010.

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