

Feelings, dreams and desires

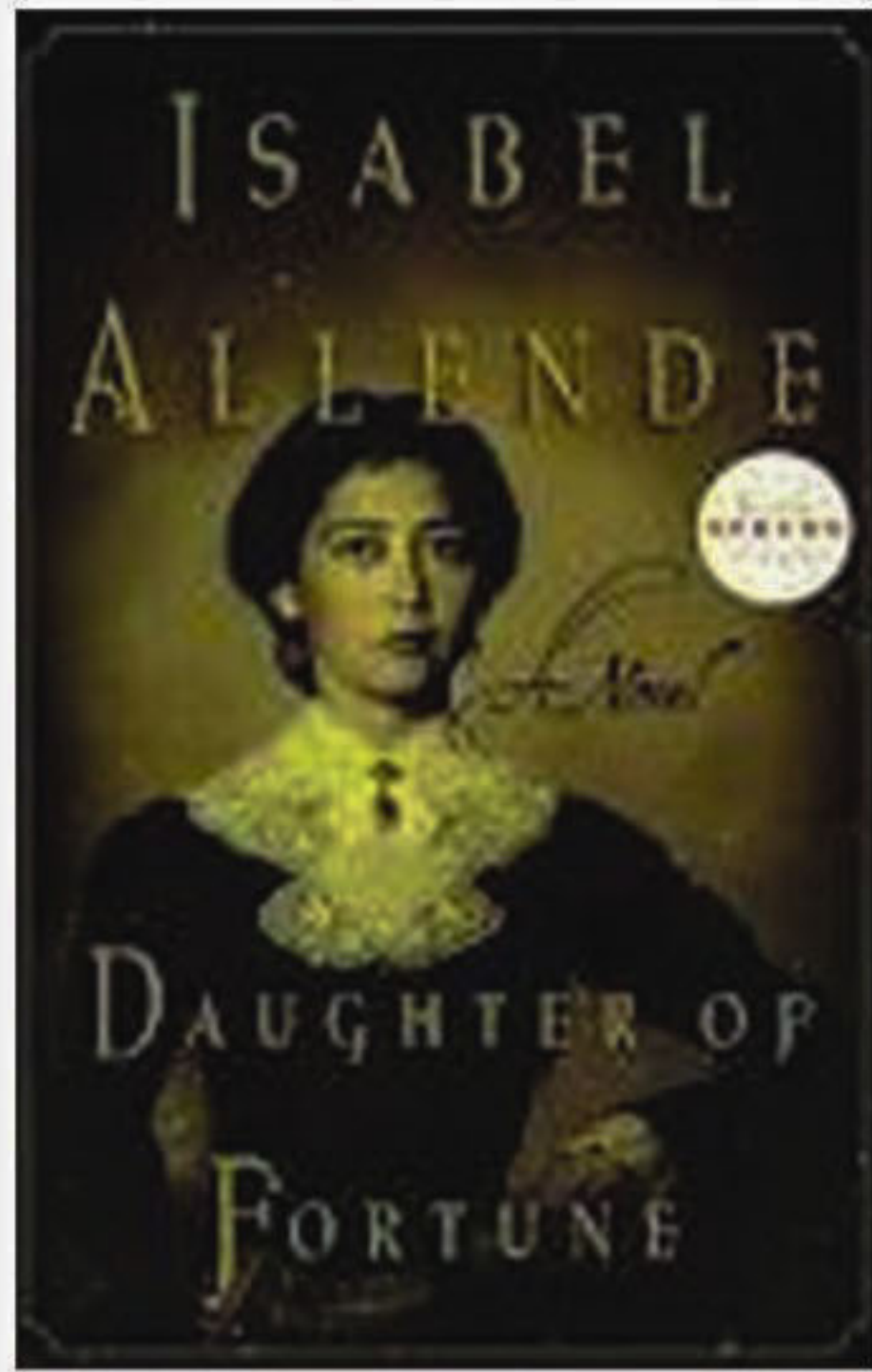
Tulip Chowdhury travels through a tale of love and adventure

Taking Isabel Allende's book 'Daughter of Fortune' in hand comes with expectations of finding some surreal elements, the magical presentation that many of her books carry. But the surprise comes when one finds the book to be down to earth, revealing human endearment, agony and ecstasy, lust and betrayal. Embroidered is an intricately detailed story with pulsating characters.

Rose Sommers, an exceedingly attractive, Victorian spinster, lives with her brother Jeremy Sommers in Valparaiso, Chile. It is her beauty that set the heart of Jacob Todd on fire when he came to Valparaiso to sell Bibles among the converting Christians. But Miss Rose holds a deaf ear where Jacob Todd's pleas to marry him are concerned. She is totally immersed in raising the little girl she had found on her doorstep. Eliza, a baby, was left in a basket on a cold day. Miss Rose has it rumored that Eliza was delivered to her with gold coins and had been adorned like a princess. To give the child a befitting place in society she had given her the family name of Sommers.

Miss Rose was childless and her blind love for Eliza came out of this emptiness in her life. Even though her two brothers John and Jeremy are against it yet on her part it is a story of love and obsession. However, love bequeathed does not always give fruitful returns. When Eliza is a young woman, Miss Rose dreams of having her married off to a wealthy suitor with a name. But as luck would have it Eliza, at sixteen years of age, is in deep love with Joaquin Andieta, a penniless young man who had never known his father. Eliza, living in Valparaiso, knows that the Sommers would never give her hand to Joaquin.

Daughter of Fortune is a dazzling historical



Daughter of Fortune
Isabel Allende
Harper Torch

novel. It holds up the minute details of life in California from the time of the Gold Rush till how in 1850, it becomes a state within the USA. It holds a detailed picture of how miners, adventurers, priests and whores lived in a transforming world where a wonderful civilization was coming to light behind the unruly scenario. The story, set off from Valparaiso, trails through the seven seas to California. It is

an eye opener to Chilean society with its characteristic traits. Eliza has no chance of marrying her sweetheart and embarrassing her family. Chileans resolve everything with solicitors and barristers, they have an absurd fondness for tradition, patriotic symbols and routine. They pride themselves on being individualists and enemies of ostentation, which they scorn as a sin of social climbing. They seem amiable and self-controlled but are capable of great cruelty. In this society, in an era defined by violence, passion and adventure, Eliza, an unconventional woman, carves her own destiny.

Joaquin swears that he is blindly in love with Eliza. In his words, "It would be easier to measure the intentions of the wind or the patience of the waves on the shore than the intensity of his love" for her. Yet during the California Gold Rush of 1849, Joaquin says goodbye to Eliza and sets for California. Eliza does not get a chance to inform him that she is pregnant. Though he promised to be back, Eliza knows that when she starts showing, the shame will have a devastating effect on the Sommers. Hence Eliza flees, boarding the ship Emilia bound for California, a sea voyage that will take three months at least. But Eliza is determined to find her sweetheart in California.

The plot in Daughter of Fortune is built of epic climaxes that seem to reach out to each other and the characters in consequence become magnified with purpose. The story, woven so cleverly, becomes more and more fascinating as new characters are introduced. Thus from the time Eliza boards the Emilia we find the Chinaman, Tao Chie'n. Tao Chie'n is the cook of the ship who takes in Eliza as a stowaway. Eliza, the adopted daughter of the

elite Sommers, now finds herself with the dirt and filth of the ship's storage room. Tao Chie'n, abandoned by his parents, has grown up with a Chinese physician and has learned the secrets of acupuncture and herbal medicines from his masters. Therefore, when Eliza is about to die after suffering a miscarriage on the ship, he is the one who saves her life with his herbal potions.

On a flashback to Tao Chie'n's life we see that he has been a prosperous zhong yi, Chinese physician also practising in Hong Kong and had married Lin, a Chinese woman he has loved all his life. He had married her after he liked her "lilies", (bound feet) feet that were hardly four inches long. But Lin died of tuberculosis and unable to bear the loss Tao Chie'n had boarded the ship. He told the captain that after sailing around the world he would have to go back to China, for otherwise Lin's spirit would not be able to find him and because "the gate to heaven was in China".

This story is built on human compassion. One of the five whores sailing in the Emilia is Azucena Placerres, a Chilean woman who Tao Chie'n bribes to look after Eliza when he is busy. The woman develops a tender spot for Eliza and tells her about her dreams of becoming rich once she is in California, for women are still scarce in the fast rising population. Azucena dreams of returning to Chile as a lady, with six trunks of clothes and a gold tooth. Eliza is reminded of Mama Fresia, her Red Indian nanny who had helped her to board the ship and who had loved her like a daughter. Tao Chie'n, Azucena, Mama Fresia and Eliza, are bound by empathy and all these characters are so real like that the reader feels as if they are watching a life drama unfold. After the ship docks in San Francisco, Tao

Chie'n does not want to try his luck in the Gold Rush. But Eliza is not ready to be alone in a place where mayhem seems to be the order of the day. Gold fever has left no one unaffected; smiths, carpenters, teachers, doctors, soldiers, fugitives from the law, preachers, revolutionaries and harmless madmen of various stripes had left family and possessions behind to traverse half the world in search of gold and adventure. Tao Chie'n finds it difficult to leave Eliza amidst all these fortune hunters. Eliza, her spirits as high as ever, suggests that it was here in California that Tao Chie'n could find his fortune, for the thousands of miners here, all need a physician. Try, as she might, Eliza is unable to find any trace of Joaquin, but after earning some money she buys a horse to set out alone to look for him. And back at Valparaiso, Eliza's uncle Captain John Sommer boards the ship Fortuna to sail to California.

In the danger-filled quest in California lies the journey of transformation for Eliza. Will she find her sweetheart? Will Captain John Sommer land in California to find Eliza among the rough-and-tumble world of panhandlers and prostitutes, immigrants and aristocrats? And indeed are Eliza and Tao Chie'n aware of the bonding taking place between them in their fortune hunt? And indeed will they find a future in this mad Gold Rush?

Throughout the story words pulsate with feelings, dreams and desires. The reader is engrossed in Allende's wizardly and florid detailed universe of hope and lust. One is drawn to the characters in this feisty fiction. The extremely lucid style of writing holds the reader spellbound with the power of the story.

TULIP CHOWDHURY, A TEACHER, WRITES FICTION AND POETRY.

Where water is the issue . . .

Yusuf Azad appreciates a study of shrinking rivers

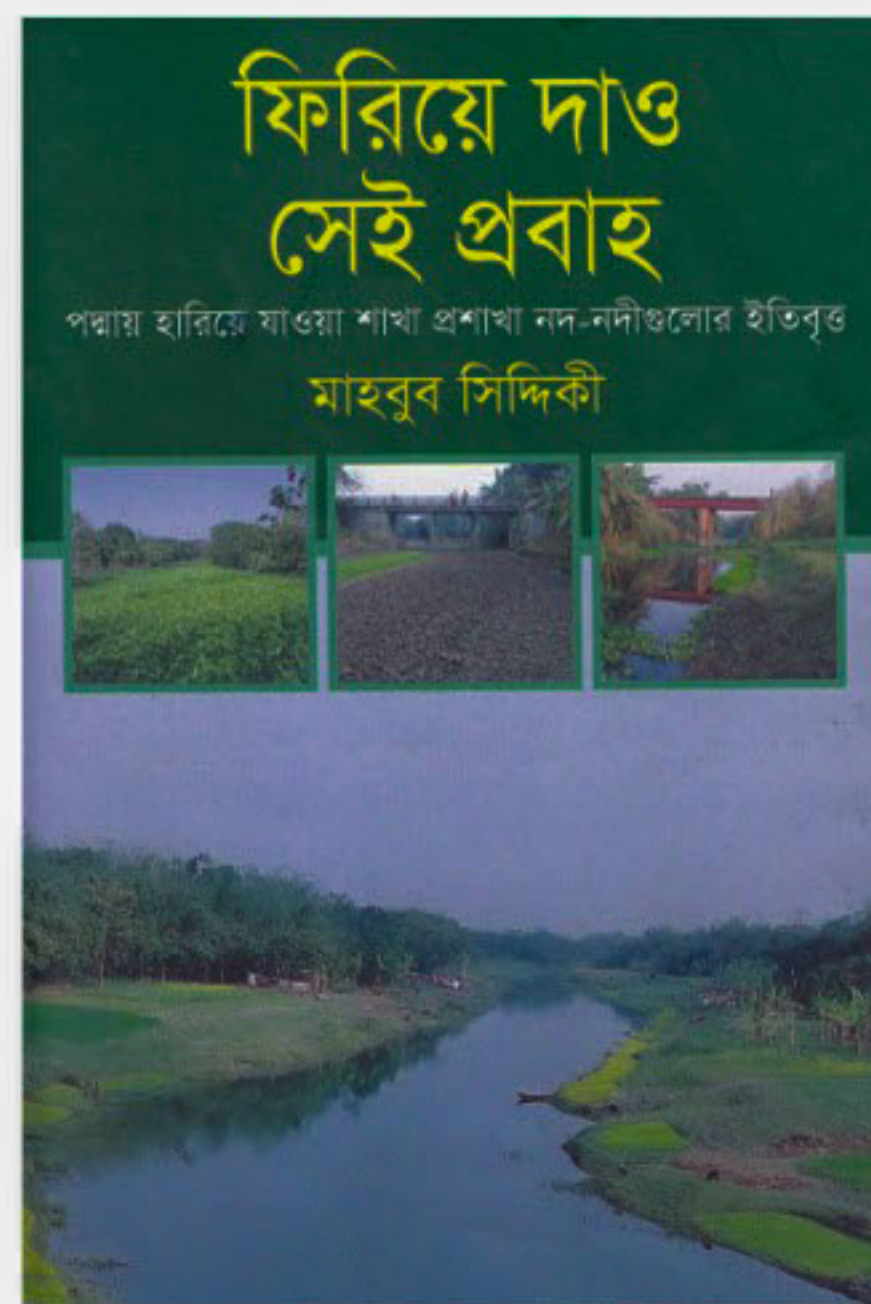
The work is a real tour de force authored by a non-specialist but rarely attempted at in this genre before. The author's tenor rings a shocking loss and a profound concern for the vanishing flow of what were once brimming and thriving rivers traversing and criss-crossing the vast plain of northern Bangladesh. The life of the people of this riverine region and their culture were inseparably intertwined with the bounty of the waves since time immemorial. Rivers occupied a special place in their heart, their environment and ecology, culture and tradition, literature and folklore.

The economy, communication and the whole ambience of life were also defined by the same rivers and reflected in our rich boatman and cartman songs. The loss of flow of these rivers and their dying out in numerous cases raises the specter of desertification, dehydration and doom. The people of this region are seen steadily heading toward embracing the fate of the people of sub-Saharan Africa in the not so distant future unless the course of decline is reversed. An immediate contingency plan is needed to be activated on an emergent basis to save those

rivers which are in their last throes.

The author is not a hydrologist or a fluvial morphologist to be technically suave. He lays no claim to specialist knowledge in this field. His methods are simple and to some extent primitive, but his message is frighteningly clear. And despite his many shortcomings and emotional outpourings he stayed the course, never losing sight of accuracy of facts and figures relating to his subject matter. One must be astonished what a task he had undertaken in so extensively and laboriously trailing the courses of dying and dead rivers, tributaries, creeks and distributaries. Most of them are now lost memories, the rest like the most endangered species are now gasping, as if for blood donation. This sorry state of affairs emerged as a logical consequence of the crippling condition of the main feeder canal, the Padma.

The Padma, after being sucked of its normal flow, is no longer capable of transfusing life to her tributaries. The author's journey to retrace the rivers started from the origin to the estuary in the deep hinterland areas and adjacent floodplains, which are now known as beels or wet land, some parts of which are inaccessible and so cut off from regular means



Firiye Dao Shei Probaho
Mahboob Siddique
Dibyaprakash

of communications. In many cases those traces have been replaced by private houses and markets and too disfigured to be identified now. Everywhere they bear signs of the ravages of greedy land grabbers. Initially, he covered the Padma-based nine tributaries: the Narad, the Barahi, the Swar mongala and its tributaries the Daaya, the Musha Khan, the Hoja and the Mirja Mahmood, the Nandakujaj; the Sandhya and the Helencha.

The author identifies the Farakka dam as the root cause behind the whole disaster. India withdrew a large quantity of water upstream through the dam without considering the legitimate right to a fair share of water of a co-riparian country. It is a stark violation of all international norms, laws and practices and obviously amounts to water terrorism by a very friendly neighboring country. The Padma is now a wide expanse of sand dunes blowing dust round the year. The rivers that depended upon a supply of water from the Padma naturally suffered the worst fate.

The book is a treasure trove of information that we can hardly afford to miss in the quest for our own history and destiny. It has been further enriched by a number of graphic maps

and video clips showing the original courses of these rivers as against their current predicament. The book has been dedicated to the populist leader Maulana Bhashani in recognition of the part he played in galvanising world opinion against the unilateral withdrawal of water through the Farakka dam. We need similar such work highlighting the crisis in other parts of the country. The importance of this publication cannot be over-emphasised as India is poised to activate her inter-river linking project which stipulates a diversion of all water from common rivers like the Brahmaputra, the Teesta, the Jamuna, the Mahananda, et cetera, before their flows can reach Bangladesh.

India needs water to artificially irrigate her arid south, but Bangladesh cannot afford to lose a single drop of water to stay alive. It is a life and death question for one hundred and fifty million people. If the environment of Bangladesh is ruined by any man-made mechanism, the integrated global environment cannot escape the catastrophic chain effects that will be triggered by such action.

YUSUF AZAD IS A CRITIC. HIS E-MAIL IS YUSUFZADB@YAHOO.COM.

Old allegories to explain new times

Farida Shaikh spots meaning in drama

Bali, The Sacrifice, has a unique place in the field of Indian drama. The play 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 gods.

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 his voice.

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?'

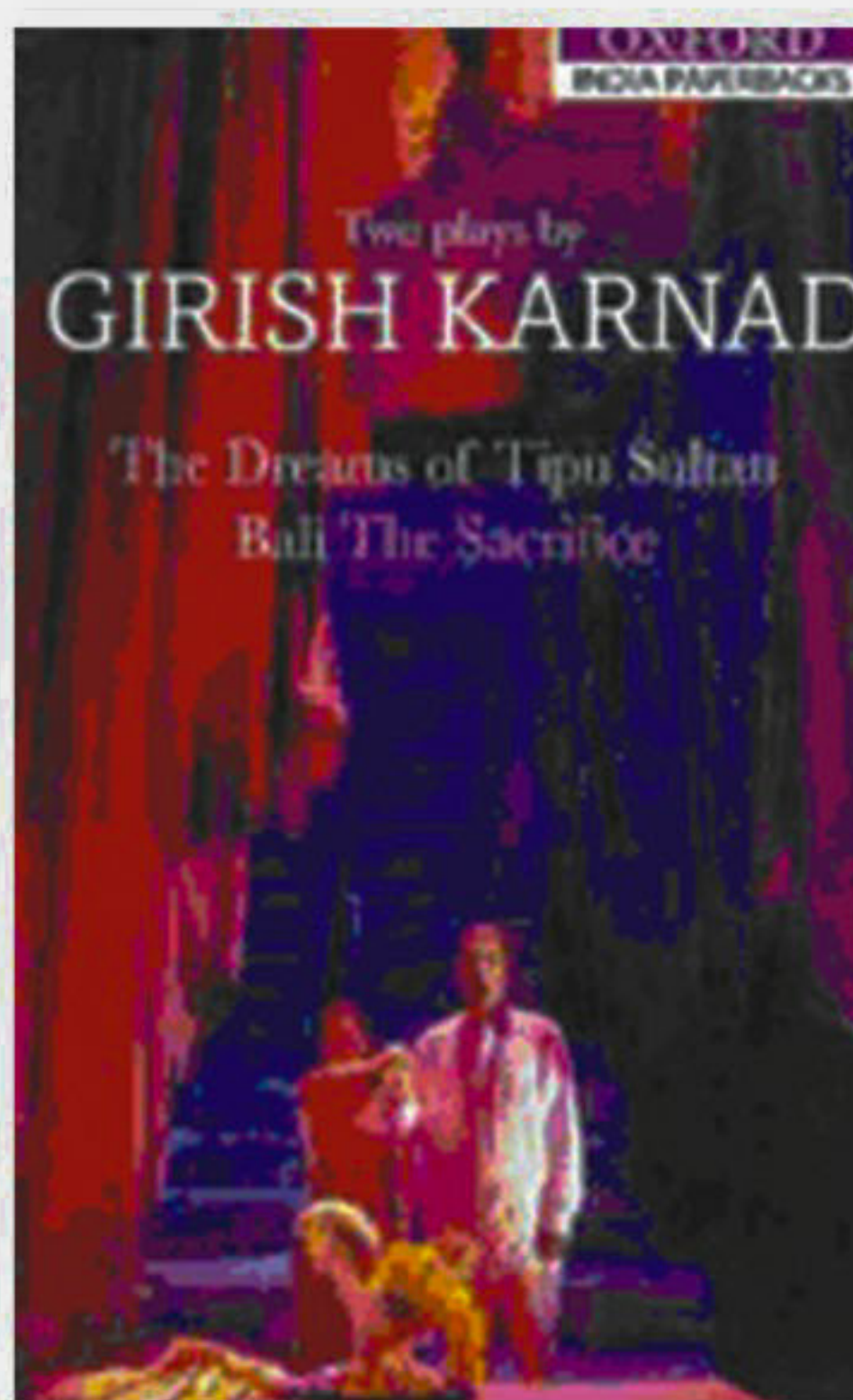
Girish Karnad is internationally known as a playwright and filmmaker. Most of his works are based on explorations into folklore, mythology and history as means of tackling contemporary scenes. His works are anchored

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 the Image of an Alienated Modern Man.

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 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



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

death. The play rescues Tipu Sultan from colonial perceptions and presents him in the context of independent India. More impor-

tantly, 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!

(The review is a reprint).

FARIDA SHAIKH IS A CRITIC