

REVIEW ESSAY

# Shashi Tharoor's Riot

## A tragedy of our times

SHIRIN HASNAT ISLAM

THIS novel, published in 2001, is the writer's fifth work. It is set against the backdrop of the explosive situation in India just before the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992.

First – some biographical notes about the author. Urbane and suave, a man of cosmopolitan background and education, Shashi Tharoor has been an international diplomat, retiring as Under Secretary General of the UN. He has also worked as a UN peace



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keeper, refugee worker, HR activist, and at the end of his professional life, joined politics and became a minister in Manmohan Singh's cabinet. There was a brief hiatus when he lost his cabinet appointment due to his involvement in the IPL Cricket scandal but has recently regained his seat and is a serving minister again. His wide experience in the public arena as well as a ring-side view of human suffering has contributed to the sophistication as well as the depth and understanding he brings to his characters and incidents of this novel.

The plot of the novel moves along the familiar scenario of inter-racial extramarital involvements/attractions which end, as they usually do, unhappily. E.M. Forster gave us the same story in A Passage to India, in telling us the story of Dr. Aziz and Adela

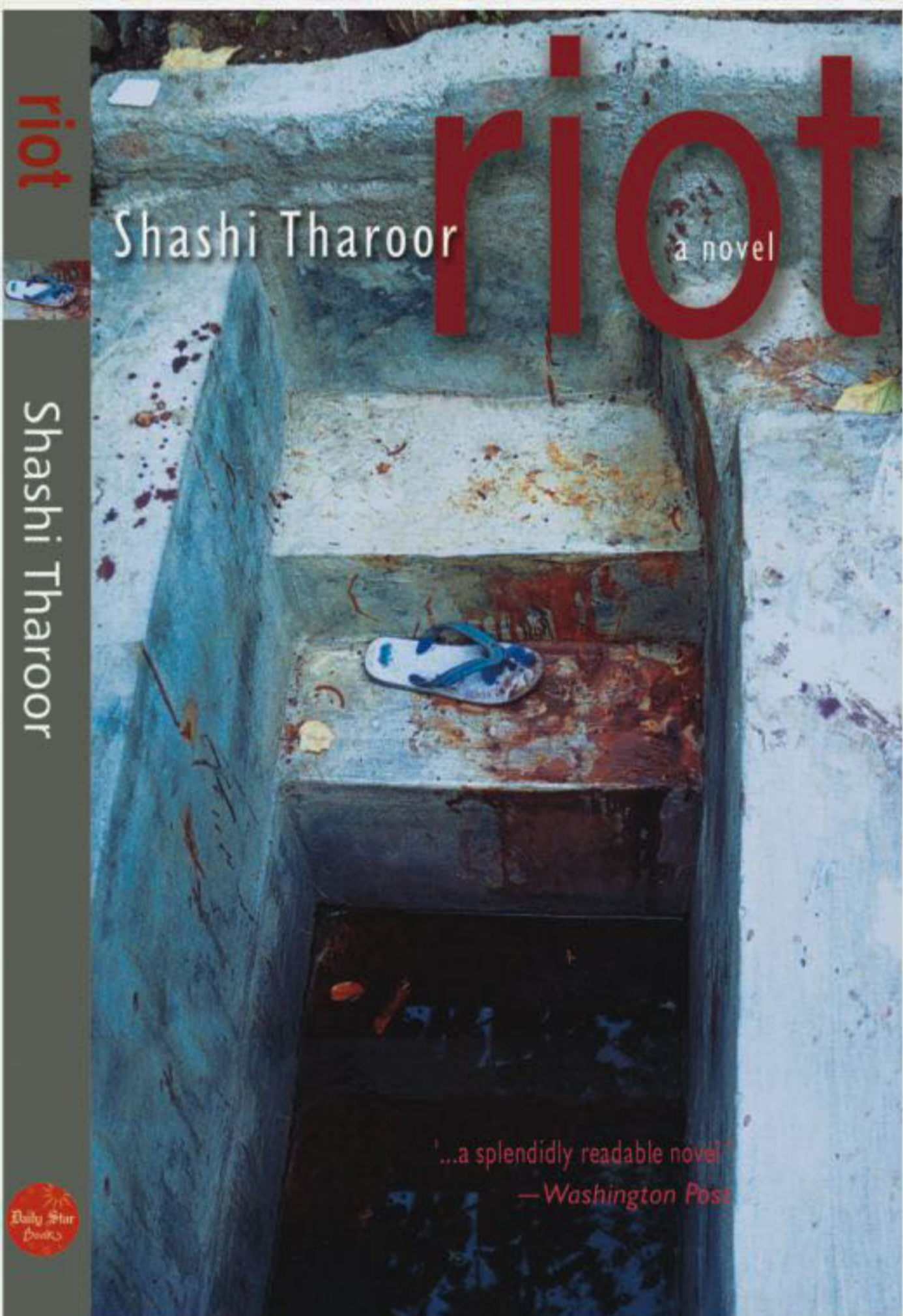
Quested. In Tharoor's book we have the story of Priscilla Hart, a young American doctoral student doing her field research in a small provincial town of Uttar Pradesh, India. She is also a volunteer in a population-control awareness project run by an American NGO. An idealist, whose naivety often borders on silliness, she falls in love with the local District Magistrate, a South Indian officer named V. Lakshman. The relationship which starts on a purely physical basis, soon moves on to a level where both partners begin to think of the possibility of permanence, while recognising the almost insurmountable obstacles that lie in its path. Here, Tharoor adds an interesting twist by making the relationship a parallel to an extramarital affair that this young woman's father had with his Indian secretary during an earlier stay in India, which affair had also broken up his marriage. Tharoor adds an extra-dimension of irony in that the father's peccadilloes which had been harshly and unforgivingly condemned by the daughter are repeated by the daughter in her own life, without her even acknowledging the parallel. The father's action had destroyed and traumatised his family, in particular his daughter, but the daughter in her infatuation with an Indian does not even recognise that she is about to do the same i.e. break up a marriage and a family and that her actions are equally objectionable and morally deplorable.

The love affair plays itself out in the background of the communal violence that sweeps over the small town of Zalilgarh in the period preceding the Babri Masjid riots - the name of the town is an interesting choice in that 'Zalil' is a pejorative term in Urdu and given the incidents both of the background and in the forefront, seems particularly apt. The inter-racial affair ends in violence as the two levels of the story collide in a cataclysm of bloodshed, when the American girl is murdered by unknown hands during the rioting.

The narrative technique and the style that Tharoor uses merit consideration. This is not a linear narrative, either by a first person narrator or by a third person omniscient author telling us the story, the novel is really a collection of extracts from newspaper reports, personal journals and diaries, records of interviews taken by an American journalist and conversations between some characters. The time sequence does not proceed unhindered from past to present, rather the past often intrudes into the present, the story emerging from a conflation of the two. Although the end, the death of the woman, is presented right at the beginning, this in no way diminishes the tension which governs the story for the focus lies on the reader trying to discover the whys and wherefore of the tragedy. This is where I feel Tharoor is particularly successful in holding the reader's interest through his presentation of different and often opposing voices and viewpoints, from the rabidly communal to the liberal enlightened educator, from the agonised hero torn between responsibilities and cultural loyalties to the western heroine with her self-centred moral blind-

ness, her total lack of self-recognition, her personal selfishness as opposed to her public do-gooding. This multiplicity of perspectives not only heightens the tension in the emerging narrative but adds to the richness of depth and texture. It is greatly to Tharoor's credit and a testimony to his familiarity to both Western and Indian culture and linguistic mores that he manages to project the cadences and resonances of a gamut of voices from characters of all types and ethnicities.

A word about character depiction might not be out of place. While the characters' voices are vividly and skillfully individualised, the personae of most of these characters are stereotyped and two-dimensional. Only in the case of two of these characters do we find the complexity and depth which gives us food for thought and raises some interesting questions. First, Priscilla Hart – in her overwhelming infatuation for the dark-skinned Lakshman, is she really seeking to reincarnate a lost love, the dark-skinned African-American boy, who had jilted her? His nature had been physical rather than cerebral and he had had no emotional commitment towards Priscilla, wounding her deeply when he walked away. Is then Lakshman, the anglicised, western-educated, intelligent and liberal civil servant, an improved version of someone she had been involved with in the past? A sort of a Mark II lover? Her father's reaction to the earlier liaison is interesting. Given his history of an extramarital affair with an Indian woman, presumably dark-skinned and obviously of another race, his disapproval of her African-American partner (and we might say of Lakshman had the story turned out differently) seems not only xenophobic but hypocritical, about which aspects both father and daughter are blissfully unaware. There is also the matter of her pregnancy. In a woman who worked in population con-



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rol related matters, such a situation seems unlikely to be an unintended or accidental one. Was it then a deliberate and desperate move to detach Lakshman from his devotion to his daughter which had been a major stumbling-block in their relationship, and if so, does it not make her ruthlessly manipulative rather than the selfless idealist she tries to be seen as? Many such contradictions and incongruities are to be found on reflection.

Then there is the figure of the police chief. Tough, hard drinking, foul-mouthed, yet a dedicated and honest public servant, Gurinder Singh is a study in contrasts. Just as secular as his college friend Lakshman whom he deeply admires, he is a committed Sikh who supports the attack on the Golden temple to flush out terrorists, but also carries within himself the never-to-heal wound of the murder of a beloved nephew killed in the communal attack on Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination. A policeman who had once dreamt of being a modern agriculturist, he had been on the verge of quitting Government service after his nephew's death, but had been persuaded against such a move by his father, who had asked him to continue in service so that he could contribute to the prevention of recurrences of communal violence, as the best form of revenge. Again it is Gurinder who tries to persuade Lakshman not to break up his family, a move which would have destroyed his career, his reputation and his peace of mind forever, but also protects Lakshman from public disgrace by secreting Priscilla's scrapbook after her murder and handing it over to him. He has been a true friend, indeed. These unexpected layers in a character, who is on first acquaintance rather unappealing, does add richness to the portrayals in this novel.

Irony is pervasive throughout the novel and Tharoor seems to invite the reader's attention to the many levels on which this novel operates. He looks at the question of

loyalties and devoutness as well as the racial fanaticisms the religious beliefs evoke. In Ram Charan Gupta and Professor Sarwar, in Ali the municipal driver and Kadambari, the resentful employee of the NGO, we are given examples of the fissures that religion can create in a society. The contradictions in Priscilla Hart's behaviour have been mentioned earlier. The institution of marriage is represented through both Western and Eastern eyes, and the inability of each group to understand, much less appreciate, the other's viewpoint heightens the moral confusion that permeates the tale. Priscilla seeks to justify her desire to break Lakshman's marriage on the grounds of lovelessness, but conveniently overlooks the state of her parents' marriage before her father's desperate licentiousness shattered it, which break-up she so harshly condemns. These inconsistencies are peppered throughout the book, even being confessed to by Priscilla in a letter to her friend, Cindy Valerian, but also immediately being shrugged aside in pursuit of her infatuation with Lakshman. The reader becomes aware of many such contradictions throughout the story which are presented very subtly by the writer in this multilayered narrative.

Ultimately, we have to consider, what the novel is about. Is it a love story, as many have seen it to be? Is it a mystery story, a whodunit, where the reader tries to sort through various viewpoints to try to discover who killed the woman? Was it a murder or an accident, a case of someone being "simply in the wrong place at the wrong time", as the US Embassy spokesman is supposed to have remarked (reported in the Randy Diggs column). None of these questions are satisfactorily answered, for the intent of the novel, I believe lies elsewhere. The book is heavily political in its essence, the politics infusing the thought and actions of individuals, of classes, communities, and of society as a whole in a period of recent history marked by intense violence and upheaval. Clausewitz had said "war is politics

by other means", and Lenin is supposed to have reversed the saying. Here politics transforms itself into war, full stop. Its violence stems from the collision between West and East, the Occident and the Orient, between different religious groups, between rich and poor, between fanatic and liberal, and between men and women, such violence being manipulated and used as avenues to success by ruthless and reckless "leaders". The themes of this novel are layered in complexity and Tharoor seems not only to be portraying that complexity which governs this subcontinent but also trying to make some sense out of it all. That he does not provide facile answers or paint an unreal picture of a 'happily ever after scenario' may be seen as evidence of his intellectual integrity. We are left with what Tharoor calls not only 'the unknowability of history' but 'the unknowability of truth'.

This is fictionalised history, and in his After-word, Tharoor states explicitly, that while the novel is based on real-life events having happened in a small town in Madhya Pradesh, the relationships and personal encounters, especially the death of Priscilla Hart, portrayed in the novel are imaginary. But Tharoor also says that beliefs and motivations as shown in the novel are purely fictional. Here I seek to have impudence to contradict the writer, for it seems while, of course, we cannot find the real-life characters who are the sources for such beliefs and motivations, such contradictory viewpoints rising from similar beliefs and motivations have had to exist for these horrendous events to take place. By projecting divergent views of colliding elements and individuals, Tharoor tries to draw a balanced picture of the collision of communities rather than the conflict of religions, of the fiendish political manipulations that seek to prosper from communal violence, of the polarisation on various levels that cripple a society, for example, the Muslim Prof. Sarwar vs. the Hindu Ram Charan Gupta as well as Prof. Sarwar vs. his co-religionist, the driver Ali.

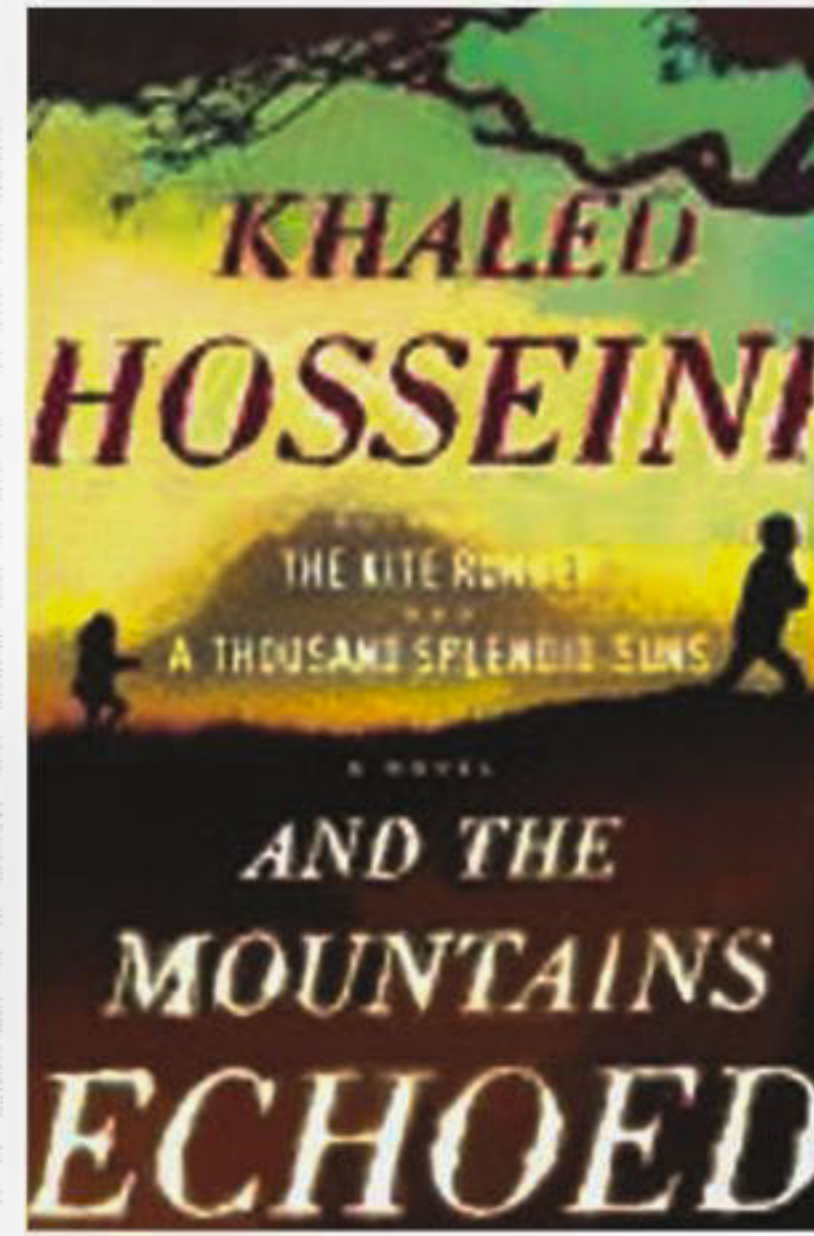
This is a clever book in the hands of a very astute writer, The stereotyped, clichéd story, with very run-of-the mill elements and incidents, that he tells us, is a convenient peg on which he hangs an expansive exploration of historical, cultural, political and religious issues that have led to the present malaise afflicting a society that is not only ancient but rich and complex. The total thus becomes more than the sum of its parts. No solutions are offered and at the end we are left with a pained bafflement as to where we go from here.

SHIRIN HASNAT ISLAM IS MEMBER, THE READING CIRCLE, AVID READER, AND BOOK HOARDER. (DEBT TO SOME WEB MATERIAL, AS WELL AS TO COMMENTS BY FRIENDS DURING THE TRC DISCUSSION ON THIS NOVEL ON AUGUST 24, IS GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGED).

# Book Notes

SHAHID ALAM

THE Lhasa Chronicles is a pithy account of Akhter Matin Chaudhury's fulfillment, in his mature years, of a childhood dream: a visit to Tibet. That dream, before it was finally realized, was an unwitting motivator in the author's life, which he acknowledges in this manner: "Perhaps it made me more ambitious in life than I would otherwise have been. Perhaps it was a small example of how important it is to have dreams and aspirations to make one's way through life." The trip itself was all too short, enough to take in some of the "touristy" sights, but by no means sufficient to explore the off-beat places and to meet broad sections of the people and get at least a fair understanding of their diverse culture: those elements that transform the well-worn tracks of conventional tourism into an exploration of the unusual, of getting a bit more than a nodding acquaintance of what the nation visited is all about. Maybe, on another occasion, if there is



THE KITE RUNNER AND A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS AND THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED

one, the author will get more time to do just that. Meanwhile, Chaudhury takes the reader through the privations he suffered, the elations he felt, probably none more so than on visiting the enchanting and imposing Potala Palace, and the sadness that engulfed him as his very short trip to the land of his childhood dreams came to an end. Along the way, he comes up with this thoughtful observation: "Slow travel allows your body and mind to adjust to changes on the way." And this delightful portrayal of the quintessential Bengali (maybe universal) mother with regard to her children, no matter what their age: "My mother... was so concerned about the trip that you would think that I was going on a NASA moon flight!" The Lhasa Chronicles would be a pleasant read on a lazy afternoon.

PROFESSOR SHAHID ALAM IS HEAD, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT, INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY BANGLADESH (IUB).

# Tales from a tortured land

## Tanzin Sultana feels let down by an author

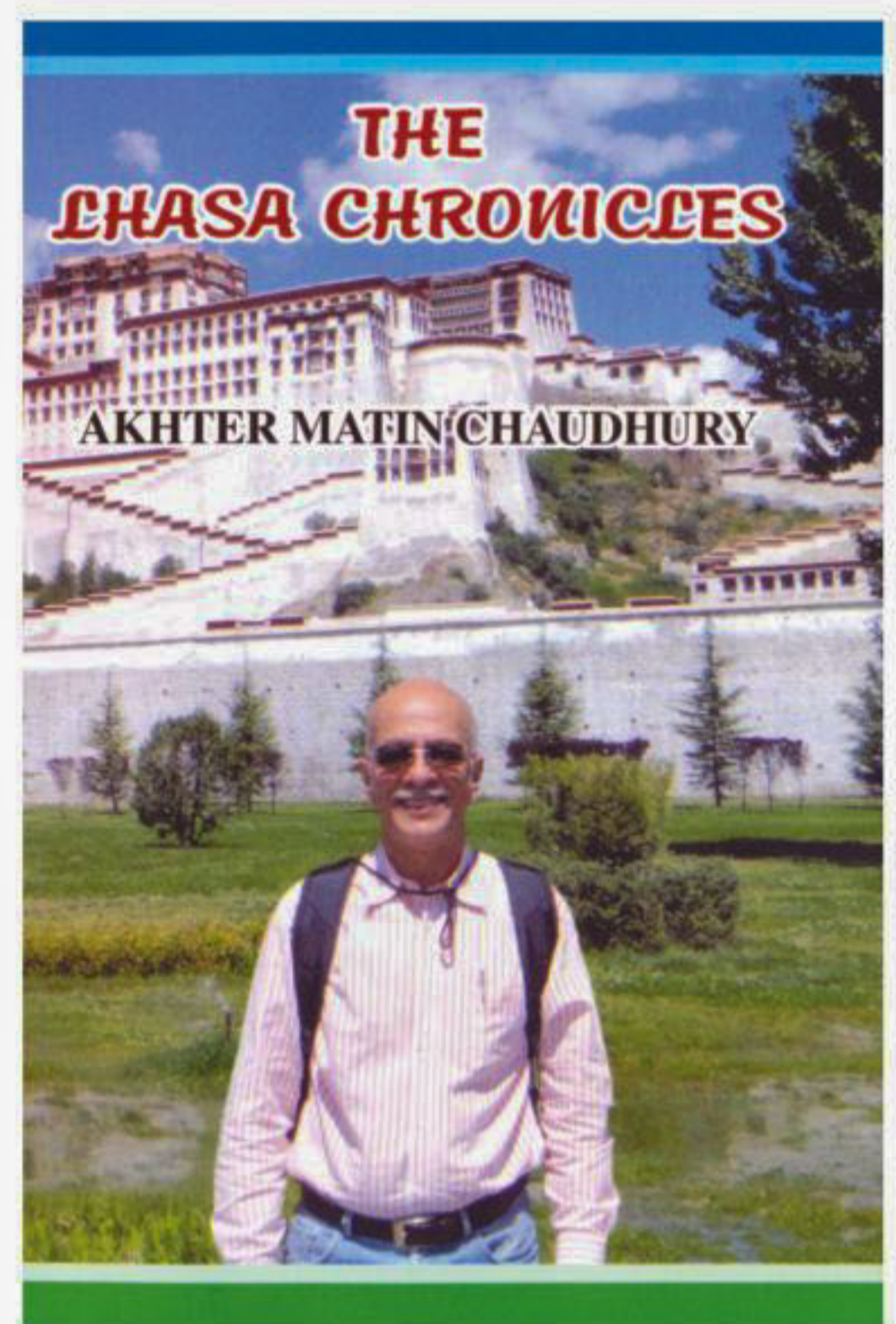
THOSE who have already read the works of Khaled Hosseini know of his ability to weave tales with relatable characters that his readers feel kinship with. Hosseini's third book, *And the Mountains Echoed*, is no different. The story opens with the tale of a div that tears a family apart; a tale that a man, Saboor, is telling his son, Abdullah, and daughter Pari. The short tale centring on a hardworking farmer, Baba Ayub, his son, little Qais, and a div gives us a snapshot of the book.

The main story opens in the fall of 1952 in Afghanistan with the separation of Abdullah and his little sister Pari. Unable to support his family of five, Saboor gives Pari up to a wealthy Afghan couple, thus separating her from her brother. Abdullah, with Pari gone, feels alienated from everything he has known and he sets out for the unknown.

From here on in the book, Hosseini plays with time, taking us back in the past one moment and the next we are leaping across years. Hosseini tells his tale over a stretch of 61 years, starting from 1949 and going all the way to 2010. Even with the time distortion, Hosseini does not lose the flow of his story. The tale does not only stretch over years but also across borders. The story, beginning in Afghanistan, goes through many places, like Tinos in Greece, the city of love, Paris, and America.

New characters are introduced almost at every turn of the page and they are all interrelated and play small and large roles in separating the siblings as well as in their somewhat reunion. Like his previous works, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *And the Mountains Echoed* gives us glimpses of the hardships people face in Afghanistan.

With *And the Mountains Echoed*, Khaled Hosseini explores a different direction. Unlike his previous books, this one is full of unfinished endings and people are left hanging without closures. It makes his stories that much more real. However, all these unfinished endings and fates



THE LHASA CHRONICLES AKHTER MATIN CHAUDHURY

And the Mountains Echoed Khaled Hosseini Bloomsbury

unknown can be a bit jarring for readers. Some of Hosseini's characters are not treated justly; he only lets us see glimpses into their lives before whisking us away to another time and another place.

Khaled Hosseini has a unique gift of creating tales with amazing characters and all of his works are a must read. However, after his previous two books, *And the Mountains Echoed* was a bit of a letdown for me.

TANZIN SULTANA IS SUB-EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR.

# BOOK LAUNCH

## A Directory of Bengali Cinema

INDIRA Gandhi Cultural Centre in association with Shadhona --- A Center for Advancement of South Asian Culture -- and the State Bank of India in Bangladesh organized the launch of *A Directory of Bengali Cinema* on August 29, 2013 at the

Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre in Gulshan, Dhaka.

For the patrons of excellent cinema, the glorious age of classic Bengali films has turned into a cherished memoir of the past. With no dearth of thought provoking stories borrowed from Bengali literature in the 21st century and groundbreaking original scripts, Bengali films touched the hearts of many in India and abroad. Both commercial and parallel cinema gained immense popularity and the Bengali film industry emerged as the new intelligentsia in the world of international cinema. Legendary Film Directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak brought international acclaim and set the path for revolutionary cinema.

In an earnest attempt to relive the glorious past, Kazi Anirban, cinephile and painter grandson of the National Poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Parimal Ray, an associate of Satyajit Ray created a fascinating directory that encapsulates 100 years of Bengali cinema and can be truly termed as 'Imprints of a Bygone Era'. The directory comprises a reproduction of over 1650 movie booklets and posters along with some details, including those of some rare films by Uttam Kumar, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak among others. This book is surely unique as such a compilation on Bengali cinema has never been created before. It is not only for collectors and cineastes, but also for students of Arts and Films and those undertaking research on the subject.



A DIRECTORY OF BENGALI CINEMA Parimal Ray / Kazi Anirban