

RE-READINGS

Two men and the world they changed

Syed Badrul Ahsan revisits a phase in history

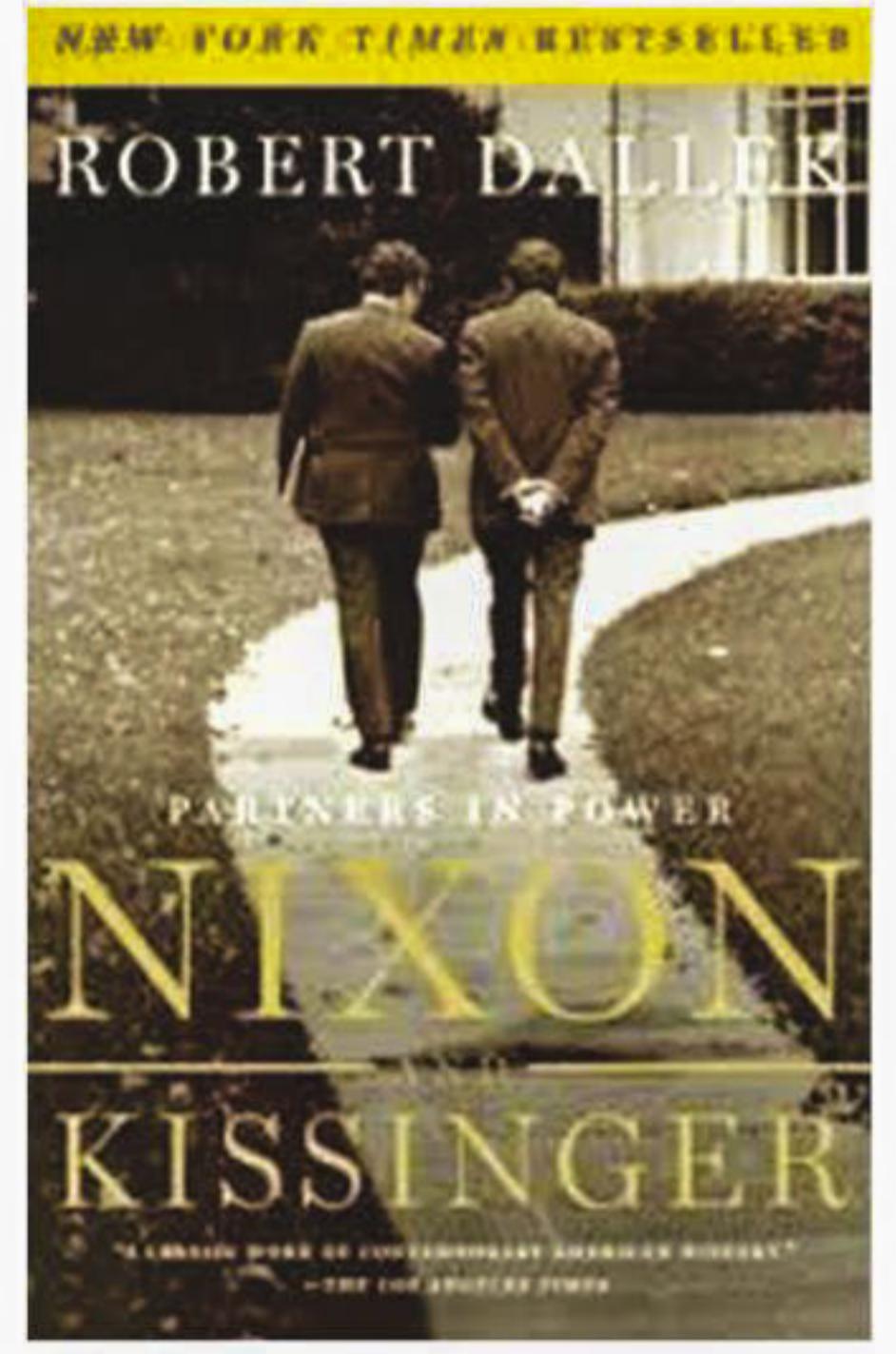


Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger

Both men were obsessed with coming by power and using it to the full. Both were arrogant and looked down on the world around them in huge disdain. And both, in the end, were recipients of less than admiration in the world of geopolitics. That is the core message which springs from Robert Dallek's analysis of the Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in *Partners in Power*. If there are people who still think Nixon and Kissinger were meant for each other, in that political sense of the meaning, they must brace themselves for some very hard truths. One of those truths is the degree of dislike the 37th President of the United States had for his secretary of state-cum-national security advisor.

Begin with Kissinger. His has been a lifelong tale of looking for acceptance, in that schoolboyish sense of the term. As a refugee from Germany, having fled to the United States with his parents, Kissinger developed the usual syndrome of the dispossessed trying to overcome their past by aiming for the future. And he did well academically, eventually making his way to Harvard, as a student and then as a teacher. But that did not whet his appetite for power and influence. When the Kennedy administration came in, he went all the way to find a place in it. It was only people like McGeorge Bundy who blocked his path. They clearly felt Kissinger was an upstart who obviously meant to upstage others. President Kennedy was not impressed by him. In the next few years, though, a Republican presidential hopeful, New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, was taken in by Kissinger. The Harvard academic would go on to be a senior advisor to Rockefeller, in the belief that the latter would someday make it to the White House.

One of the biggest ironies of modern American politics is the way Nixon and Kissinger found each other. In his years out of office, Nixon burnished his



Partners in Power
Nixon and Kissinger
Robert Dallek
HarperCollins

foreign policy credentials through travelling and writing for such prestigious journals as *Foreign Affairs*. For his part, Kissinger did almost likewise. More importantly, perhaps acknowledging the reality that Rockefeller's presidential ambitions now amounted to nothing, Kissinger made careful overtures to the Nixon camp which, for its part, had already begun to take interest in his analyses of foreign policy at a time when the Vietnam War threatened to tear American society apart. By 1968, as Nixon took his second shot at the White House and as opinion polls indicated a victory for him in November, Kissinger kept watch on the Paris peace negotiations between North Vietnam's Xuan Thuy and President

Johnson's representative Averell Harriman. It was at this point that Nixon launched his 'peace with honour' campaign for Vietnam, prompting speculations that his staff went busily into the job of convincing an increasingly hapless President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam that he ought to keep any deal over the war at bay --- because a Nixon presidency would have better propositions on offer.

And that was the beginning. In the years after January 1969, when Nixon was sworn in as President, and until August 1974, when Watergate forced him out of office, Henry Kissinger and the president enjoyed a partnership that was as bizarre as it was constructive. The bizarre was in the huge degree of distrust that underlined relations between the two. Kissinger's temperament, always massaged by Nixon, constantly undermined Secretary of State William Rogers. Through gradual steps, Kissinger arrogated to himself the rights and responsibilities relating to foreign policy that were properly Rogers'. He and Nixon took almost perverse pleasure in speaking of the State Department with contempt. The contempt would go so far as to keep Rogers out of the whole deal on the national security advisor's secret visit to Peking in July 1971. And yet the truth was that the president was not initially keen on sending Kissinger to meet China's leaders. Nixon was right in believing that Kissinger would in future take credit for initiating Washington's China policy. The president, obsessed with his place in history, wanted everyone --- and that included Kissinger --- to know and spread the word that the new turn in America's China policy was fundamentally his innovation.

Henry Kissinger was not averse to letting his aides know what he thought of Nixon behind his back. The president was a 'madman'. Equally maddeningly, Nixon thought Kissinger was an overgrown child in constant need of reassurance. Between them, though, they left a whole world changed, for better or worse. Their flaws were monumental. Both undermined governments they did not approve of, Chile's for instance. They looked away from Pakistan's atrocities on its Bengali population; and they dragged Cambodia into a conflict in their perverse belief that extending the war into its territory would halt supplies to the Vietcong.

In the end, both men saw their reputations take a nosedive. Nixon went through the humiliation of Watergate and became the first president in United States history to be forced to resign. Kissinger has been repeatedly excoriated by analysts for what they see as his Machiavellian contributions to global affairs. Dallek makes a compelling case for himself in this pretty revealing work.

SYED BADRUL AHSEN WRITES
ON POLITICS AND HISTORY

Triumph of the mountains

Shahriar Feroze speaks of tragedy on the peaks

HERE are some books which could be found in almost every bookshop in a city, and *Into Thin Air* is one of them. You are likely to see it displayed on the shelves of almost all the bookshops in Kathmandu. On the subject of reviewing it, the reader may ask if a book needs to be a national bestseller or well-liked to get reviewed.

The answer is not inevitably yes, but some bestsellers should be analysed so that readers come to know why they become widely read, and especially one that was written some eighteen years ago. But the reason for reviewing *Into Thin Air* is absolutely different.

Firstly, I was forced to be curious about this omnipresent book about mountain climbing written some eighteen years ago and which is still being endorsed by Kathmandu booksellers. Secondly, in a country that's fast picking up mountaineering as a challenge - cum - passion, readers frantically needs to get introduced to adventure stories falling under the genre of mountaineering. Who knows what lessons our Musa Ibrahims and Wasfa Nazreens of tomorrow draw from it?

The book, written by Jon Krakauer (himself an accomplished climber and an outdoor writer), tells the heart-rending true story of a group of men and women embarking on a mission to climb the world's tallest mountain, Mount Everest.

On an assignment from 'Outside' magazine, Krakauer himself was amongst the group of the affected climbers. A witness, climber and writer could have told the tale much better than Krakauer. But before we begin to climb the top of the world a key fact needs be known, and that is: during the entire 1996 season, 15 people (disputably more) died while climbing Mount Everest in a series of expeditions, till then the highest number of fatalities in a single year in the mountain's history. The disaster gained wide publicity and raised questions about the commercialization of climbing the Everest. The book, in particular, describes the events of 11 May when eight climbers died after several expeditions were caught in a blizzard high up on the mountain's summit.

To cut a long story short, the author explains the events leading up to his eventual decision to participate in an Everest expedition in May 1996. From there, the book chronologically builds up between proceedings that happen on the mountain and finally concludes with the unfolding calamity that happens during the final push to the summit and from there when they start to come down.

It's the ascent to the Everest that most of the 21 chapters of the book cover through an awe-inspiring narrative that reads like a blending of day-to-day reporting, commentary and observation of facts - revealing the ordeals of climbing and also the mountain itself. So through chapters 4 to 14 you trek along with Krakauer and tragedy strikes with a forewarning beginning with chapter 15. Fascinatingly, every chapter begins by marking the altitude level, besides a vivid description of the changes in weather, trek proceedings, mountaineering methodologies and intermittent short profiles of fellow trekkers and Sherpas; and not to mention all the sufferings of a climber in the face of extreme barriers. And all this hardship is endured to

reach the extreme top of the world.

But a crucial point the book makes is that in terms of climbing a mountain, coming down alive is even harder than going up. The point is complemented by the cause of a bottleneck for reaching the summit, and a series of unanswered, at times obscure and collective misjudgements by the two climbing group leaders. Both the leaders were internationally acclaimed mountaineers at that time - Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. It's their story too.

Hall was leading his company, 'Adventure Consultants', and its clients, while Fischer was spearheading his company and clients under his banner of 'Mountain Madness'. The disaster that took away the lives of the client climbers of these two companies show climbing into the 'thin air' (the air gets thinner with the heights) is dangerous business even if you are led by the masters.

Combined with delays in securing ropes, bottlenecks formed at the Hillary Step (a landmark before the final push at 8,760 m/28,740 ft) had delayed the ascent of many climbers, and therefore, many reached the peak of the Everest after the safe 2:00 pm

turnaround time. But the sign of a rough, deadly storm was apparent but was not taken seriously or correctly anticipated. And thus begins the tragic part. Krakauer being in Hall's team was one of the earliest to reach the peak and also climb down earlier, and had he been delayed in reaching the summit after turnaround time, there would have been no *Into Thin Air* for sure.

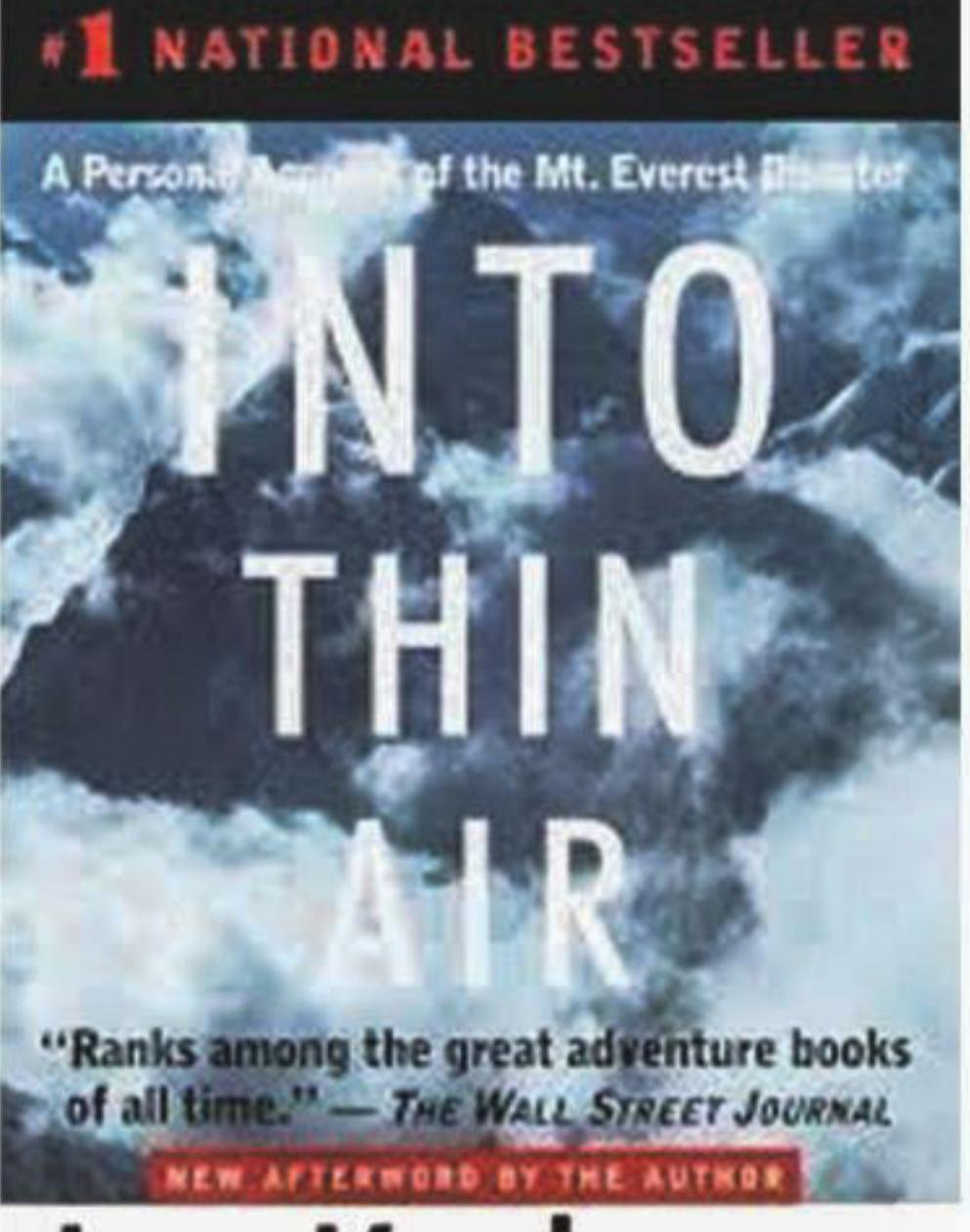
However, there are some questions regarding the cause of this failure that can never be resolved since none of the expedition leaders survived. Upon reaching the Hillary step, the climbers again discovered that no fixed line for reaching the top was placed, and they were forced to stop and wait, while the guides installed the ropes. Meanwhile, some 33 climbers were attempting the summit on the same day, and Hall and Fischer had asked their climbers to stay within 150 m of each other and that instruction was not

followed. Jams formed up along the single fixed line marking from the Hillary Step.

Many relatives of the victims disagreed and even got disappointed with Krakauer's book but then again a writer's job is to write, and Krakauer has written about a piece of mountaineering reality that even beats the best of nail-biting fiction. The ambitious dream for reaching the top of the world, no matter how dangerous it may appear, always tempted some to follow in the footsteps of Hillary and Tenzing. So as long the Everest exists the risks of more deaths will remain.

Two experiences of this reviewer while reading and after having the book read needs be told and those are --- if you can concurrently imagine the scene of some of the events of the expedition you are reading about, then you're sure to get a spine-chilling feel. The second is you can't stop pondering over the facts as the book offers an incomplete and tragic end. Perhaps the unfinished but fascinatingly told tragic end makes the book so widely read. Apart from a few mountaineering jargons the book is a smooth read.

HAHRRI FEROZE IS WITH THE DAILY STAR



Jon Krakauer
AUTHOR OF INTO THE WILD AND EIGER DREAMS

Into Thin Air
Jon Krakauer
Anchorbooks

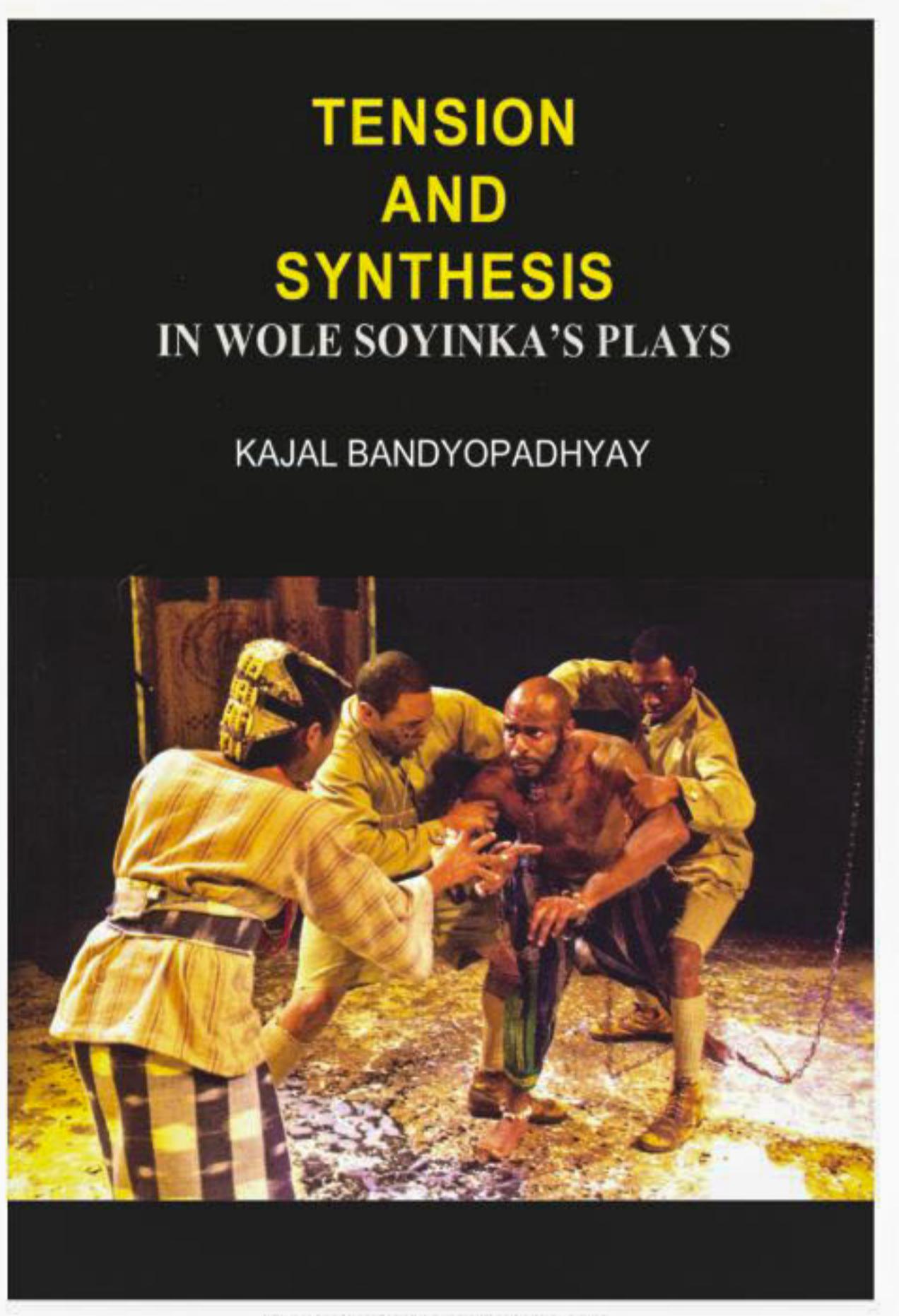
Off-beat work of literary criticism

Yasif Ahmad Faysal observes Soyinka's world view

LITERARY criticism usually is a task practiced by experts, particularly for the more knowledgeable section of readers. But nowadays it's mostly practised with such super-professionalism and zealous use of jargons and terms that it hardly has anything to do with common readers. But literature being a reflection of life, literary criticism shouldn't be confined within limits imposed by profession and its conventions but should strive to connect convention with contingency, heighten consciousness of people and serve as moral correctives to individual and collective errors of society. The experience of reading Dr. Kajal Bandyopadhyay's *Tension and Synthesis in Wole Soyinka's Plays* is bound to evoke this urgent awareness within us. Written in a lively and accessible prose, free from the hot-air of a stubborn theorist, the book introduces us to the world view of Wole Soyinka's famous plays and enables us to use Soyinka's worldview in drawing our own conclusion about ourselves, our time, our uncertain ideological and moral foundation in the troubled era of ours.

The book is a result of Dr. Bandyopadhyay's PhD dissertation which came to be written at a time when he was doing some intense soul-searching "in the late nineteen eighties as to the reasons of big changes occurring worldwide in politics, economics..." that led him "to stop for a while" for some serious reflection and "bouts of some varied reading" (quoted from Preface). He found Wole Soyinka, the voice of Africa, to answer some of his questions. What is unique about Soyinka's stature as a world-famous dramatist is his bold and uncompromising dramatization of the problematic issues of life. The philosophical standpoint of Soyinka's plays is the inviolable truth that the essence of man is contradiction or tension for that matter. A true non-conformist, Soyinka had a different way of interpreting ideas, whatever it is, and he viewed reality as a multilayered texture full of contradictions. It is to this understanding of Soyinka's that the writer turns and finds in the study of his plays a scope of enlarging our consciousness, a scope to understand what it means to be liberal, secular and pluralistic in a world that is so terminally sick with the germs of narrow-mindedness, bigotry, ideological chauvinism and most fatally, a paranoid division between 'self' and 'other'.

Though the title of the book--*Tension and Synthesis in Wole Soyinka's Plays* has a Marxist overtone for readers,



Tension and Synthesis
in Wole Soyinka's Plays
Kajal Bandyopadhyay

Dhaka Viswavidyalaya Prakashana Samstha

the book is as far from being symbolic of dogmatic propaganda. Bandyopadhyay adopts an approach which is historically considered to be the perfect one in analyzing human character and seeking higher truth from the days of Socrates all the way to Marx. This approach, known as 'dialectics', looks at reality as opposing tendencies while overcoming this opposition at a higher turn called synthesis. As a critical approach, this is an interesting one, since it allows a literary critic to bypass traditional views about a character and

makes, instead, an invigoratingly fresh attempt in investigating that character in all its conflicting tendencies and impulses before arriving at anything decisive. *Tension and synthesis* is a testimony to Dr. Kajal Bandyopadhyay's critical rigour and objectivity in a dialectical analysis of Soyinka's characters. Characters like Igwezu-the village hero, Eman- the idealist, the Baroka-the bawdy village chief, the Professor-the mystic are all read three-dimensionally, inside out, taking nothing for granted and leaving no strand of their composition unconsidered. This is a gripping book that keeps its readers always on the edge, as they are made constantly aware of new and pulsating revelations on Soyinka's characters, hitherto unheard of.

The writer emphatically tells us that Soyinka had no faith in those social and political isms that hopelessly compartmentalize human reality into different blocks and then arbitrarily ascribe this and that value to this and that block of humanity. These indeed are false attempts by pseudo thinkers, politicians and prophets of human society. For, no matter how high the barrier is erected between East and West, or how precisely humanity is carved up between Black and White, we are no closer to the truth, in fact further than ever. Bandyopadhyay perfectly understands Soyinka when he informs us that man himself, according to Soyinka, is the greatest of all ciphers. An act can be either good or bad, and it can be done either by a white man or black, but it is as much unjust to say that men of white complexion are by nature rational as to say that those of black complexion are barbarian. Goodness or evil are not peculiar to any particular race of people; they can be found in those places least expected. This is why, Soyinka, the writer comments, is categorically opposed to both Eurocentrism and Negritude, the movement of the Black culturalists. Besides, the writer's detailed analysis of Soyinka's plays leads us to the thumping conclusion that all his characters, irrespective of their color, creed, sex and origin are deeply motivated for power-a fact that shows that, black or white, a character is significant to Soyinka only for its intention, not for anything else. In summing up this and many other interesting aspects of Soyinka's plays that form popular and scholarly debates, this book should prove itself to be of immense value to an academic scholar who may find in it incentive for further research, and to common readers who may have heard Soyinka, perhaps, for the first time.

In its scope, the book is very inclusive; it not only

comments on Soyinka's plays but his other writings as well; for example, it documents the passage of Soyinka's coming of age as an artiste, his unique conception of dramatic art as a means to social metamorphosis, his fascination with socialism, his espousal of local-global cultural interaction, his thoughts on the relation between gender and power, the complicity of religion with power and, above all, his disgust with the Nigerian civil war that posed the threat of new, if not more rapacious, chaos. And throughout the book we are reminded how a historically dynamic view of myths and symbols accompanies every stage of Soyinka's evolution into one of the leading dramatists as we know him to be today. Dr. Bandyopadhyay belongs to the exclusive group of critics who confidently affirm that Soyinka is not at all a pro-colonial writer, as some of his detractors claim, but a man of the soil, representing his land and people to the world.

The book gets an interesting dimension when the African context of Soyinka is compared with the sub-continental context of great men like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Mahatma Gandhi and when points of convergence are drawn among them on their mutual emphasis on social and cultural transformation. This is an absorbing discussion where readers get to see for themselves why Soyinka enjoys his earned eminence as one of the best dramatists of his own generation and earlier ones also.

However, readers will miss a great deal of the book if they simply read it for a literary appreciation of Soyinka's plays. In a deeper sense, the author exhorts us to look at our reality the way Soyinka did in the spirit of liberalism, humanism and dialectics. Soyinka knows that there is no shortcut to the resolution of some of the perennial problems of mankind, and he knows only too well that nothing absolutely is above criticism, whether it is Europe or Africa, Black or White, Capitalism or Marxism. In bringing to our knowledge this radical position of Soyinka's, which otherwise has been largely misunderstood by many reactionary critics, Kajal Bandyopadhyay himself performs the bold task of a critic speaking truth to power, to use the famous Sadian phrase. For those who are really interested in the sociology of Africa as well as of our time, this is a must-read book.

YASIF AHMAD FAYAL TEACHES AT BARISAL UNIVERSITY