

Reviewed by Abdullah Shibli

THE Way to Paradise is a semi-historical novel by the Nobel Prize winning Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa (MVL). It has two parts, both of which are tragedies based on two seemingly unconnected lives: the French Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and the French writer cum political activist Flora Tristan (1803-1844). The narrative is interwoven through twenty two chapters alternating between the life, times, and struggles of Tristan and Gauguin. For those not familiar with their work, achievements or the evolution of their genius, the author does a good job of providing a coherent chronicle of the twists and turns of their respective life-journeys from cradle to grave. Because both of them are nineteenth century characters, it is a fair speculation that Vargas Llosa delved into the archival records of French municipal and colonial administration in depth before he decided to bring them together and to tie the knot in a single volume, although it is clear from the outset that Vargas Llosa did not scrimp on a generous dosage of his very rich imagination to paint portraits of their work and struggles with the loving touch of a gifted writer's caressing attention. We also become aware of Vargas Llosa's sympathies for progressive causes as well as his deep appre-

ciation of the culture and beliefs of the inhabitants of the Polynesian islands, particularly the Maoris and Marquesians in French Polynesia, where Gauguin was inspired to create his best-known work of art and spent the last years of his life. This book is but one from the legacy of the prolific writer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010, some of whose best known works include "The Feast of the Goat", "The Bad Girl" and "Dream of the Celt". In the citation for the Nobel Prize, the Swedish Academy mentions that among his many contributions, he is unique among twentieth century writers "for his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt, and defeat." Now I take back my earlier statement that there are no direct ties between Gauguin and Tristan, since we learn soon that the former is the son of Tristan's daughter Alina Maria Chazal and there are allusions to the genetic influence Tristan might have had on Gauguin's evolution from a successful stockbroker in Paris to a life of penury, pain, and single-minded pursuit of his later mission in life. In a unique conversational style, the author reminds Gauguin, and thereby offers to comfort him, of the struggles of his grandmother. Thus, after all, one can see many similar-

ties in the two lives and how they are interwoven in the inimitable technique of MVL. One of the main draws of the book is the graphic portraiture of the life of the poor in London, the workers in France, and the primitive but rich lifestyle of the island-dwellers of Tahiti, Hiva Oa and Marquesas. Flora Tristan is a socialist organizer who travels from France to London to escape her brutal husband, but also visits Peru when she was younger, and then came back to France to organize the workers and women to "save women from men and the poor from the rich". She herself wrote several well-known books, including Peregrinations of a Pariah, The Workers' Union, and Promenades in London and her work offers a scathing critique of 19th century British social and civil order. As an example, Tristan strongly criticizes two aspects of the English penal system: "the rule of silence, which required that prisoners never open their mouths and the prohibition that forbade them to work." Another evidence of her keen sense of observation is her description of the condition of the Irish. She had the feeling that "she was walking in a nightmare, among skeletons, old men crouched on little piles of straw, and women in tattered clothing. There was garbage everywhere, and rats scurried between people's feet. Not even those who had work made enough money to provide for their families. They all depended on gifts of food from the churches to feed their children" Paul Gauguin's life, on the other hand, is more interesting for those who seek adventure and yearn for fellowship and knowledge. He had a family and lived a comfortable life in Paris working as a stock broker. In MVL's accounts of Gauguin's emotional development, his sympathy for the artistic community is clear: When Gauguin left his job in August 1883-- at the age of thirty-five years-- he "had reached a breaking point.

Spending a considerable part of the day doing something you hated, since it prevented you from painting--which by then mattered to you more than anything else." However, it is clear that in some instances MVL is letting his romanticism and solicitude for Gauguin hinders a full reckoning of the painter's transgressions and leads to an over-simplification of his life and works. Let it be said, though, that MVL's mastery of the skills of a raconteur is unparalleled, as he goes about weaving the yarn of Gauguin's life as he travels to Martinique (via Panama, where he briefly worked on the construction of the canal) and then to Tahiti. Gauguin wanted to escape the "killing fields of the Paris art world" and in pursuit of his "quests of the idyllic life". The gems embedded in the novel are the descriptions of the artist at work as Gauguin creates some of his better-known work including The Yellow Christ, Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? Vision After the Sermon and The Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch. The author, and through his heart and soul the reader, relives the last few days of Gauguin during which he struggles to finish his last major work of art, "The Sorcerer of Hiva Oa", as he loses his eyesight, heroically holds

back an unknown disease, and finally delivers a masterpiece in the very primitive setting with a lack of any modern amenities. From historical documents, we know that the Impressionist painter had a learning curve as he transitioned from a novice to a landscape painter to portraiture. He then segues for a brief period to sculpting which evolves into his fascination with primitive cultures and his travels to remote islands. Nonetheless, MVL provides a unique and loving portrayal of the trajectory of a painter's life on the path to self-discovery. When an admirer asked him, "What is Impressionism?" he replies, "An expression of the whole human being: his intelligence, his skill as craftsman, his culture, but also his beliefs, instincts, desires, hatreds". But there are some very casual remarks too. MVL writes, "Art had to break free from its narrow mold, from the tiny horizon to which it had been confined by the artists, critics, academics, and collectors of Paris: it had to open up to the world, mix with other cultures, expose itself to other winds, other landscapes, other values, other races, other beliefs, other ways of living and thinking." This is a generic observation and a tad commonplace. The most serious shortcoming of the volume is the effort of MVL to have two novellas under the same roof. The other curious feature is the overly sympathetic storytelling of two very complex lives and historical interesting times into a simple one-sided perspective. Let it be told that we become aware of the causes and fascinating work of Tristan, albeit a little too romantic, waged in the hostile environment of Catholic and autocratic France. In that respect, it must be conceded that MVL is relentless in exposing the misdeeds of police and local authorities. He writes that Tristan was "consumed by the idea of forging a great alliance of women and workers for the transformation of humanity", and then also

points out some of the earlier follies and the resistance she faces. He lovingly recounts the challenges of the 19th century reformer who sacrifices her family and travels from city to city trying to organize workers and draw them to her cause of better pay, workers' rights, and voice in their own life. She travels from one city to another, living in ill-situation motels, trying to raise money for the cause by selling her books. But the police, the capitalists and others are on her tail. Evicting her, harassing her, and using strong-arm tactics to discourage her from meeting with the workers. Something a modern day labor organizer in Bangladesh will understand, since in MVL's words, "workers come secretly to her meeting apprehensive that if their employers find out they will lose their jobs". The joy of reading a book by MVL is not only the story, which in this case is also based on historical research, but also his style and use of language (although somewhat lost in translation), his views of the world and his political sensibilities, and his ability to offer a credible record of our past. Paul Gauguin is part of our universal cultural heritage and MVL's take on his work, commitment to art, imagination, and creative process is a gift for not only for the artists amongst our midst but also for humanity. When Paul (and through him MVL) declares that the pursuit of one's calling sometimes demands sacrifices, it is both a reiteration of a principle from one of the world's great titans but also a roadmap for today's aspiring artists undertaking this hazardous journey. Similarly, the world that Flora Tristan lived in and her determination to change it for the better is a clarion call for action to help the poor and the helpless. After reading the story of Tristan, one almost becomes sympathetic to their causes and is able to see the pain and suffering of the under-privileged classes.

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DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI, CURRENTLY BASED IN BOSTON, IS AN ECONOMIST AND IT PROFESSIONAL.

In 2014, the world observed 100 years of the WWI Waqar A Khan found it opportune occasion to review SOWARS and SEPOYS in THE GREAT WAR 1914-1918

A'soft' launching ceremony of an unique and hugely important book entitled: SOWARS and SEPOYS in THE GREAT WAR 1914-1918, CAVALRY and INFANTRY REGIMENTS, 2014, authored by Ashok Nath with a foreword by Field Marshal Sir John Lyon Chapple, former Chief of the General Staff of the British Army, was held at the residence of H.E. Johan Frisell, The Ambassador of Sweden to Bangladesh in Gulshan on 9 December, 2014. It was attended by distinguished members of the foreign diplomatic corps and other guests. This timely and extraordinary publication bridges an important gap in the historiography of what was then known as the British Indian Empire during the First World War. Focusing on the cavalry and the infantry regiments of the British Indian Army, it records their war services, battle honours and ethnic composition, along

with a detailed record of the regimental iconography worn during that period, all deftly composed and lavishly illustrated in 1200 high fidelity life - size colour images. An early chapter in the book explains the complex class structure, martial race theory, identity and the primary elements that created an effective combat regiment and more importantly how the colonial military authorities structured regiments to exploit and to reinforce a South Asian soldier's most deeply rooted values and sense of self in psychosociological terms. As Major General Raj Mehta (Retd) of the Indian Army, while discussing the finer aspects of Ashok's remarkable book in his own review puts it succinctly: "These attributes elevate the book beyond a costly Coffee Table one of \$125 to also being a stand-alone, well referenced research work of enviable quality which

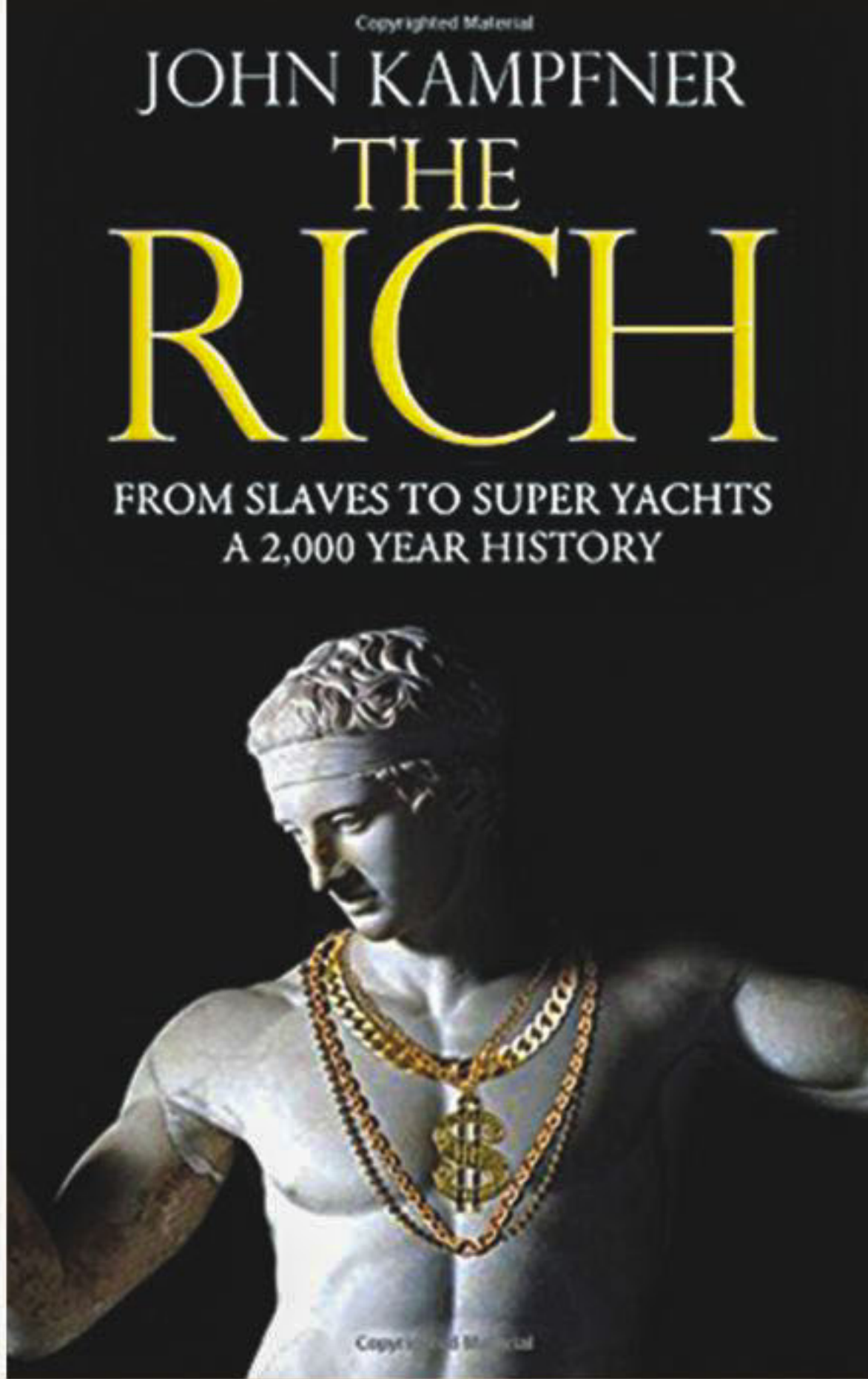
deserves to be labeled as a collector's item". This book then is unquestionably a significant contribution on South Asia and the First World War. Ashok Nath is an eminent Indo-Swedish historian who specializes in the history of the South Asian military. He is affiliated to the Department of History at Stockholm University, Sweden, and is a former cavalry officer. It should be mentioned that the main focus of Ashok's research is on South Asian conflict history and military cultures. A distinguished scholar known internationally for his expertise on the Indian Army during the East India Company (1600-1858) and the British Raj (1858-1947) periods, he is also considered as the foremost authority on South Asian regimental iconography. The writing of this book is part of a series of historical studies undertaken by Ashok on the history of South Asian Armies from circa 1740 to the current times. His earlier book: Izzat - Historical Records and Iconography of Indian Cavalry Regiments 1750-2007, (ISBN 978-81-002097-7-9), United Services Institution of India, New Delhi, 2008, is much acclaimed as a definitive work on the subject.

It is to be noted here that the War also resulted in the historic raising of the first ever all Bengali regiment in the British Indian Army, the 49th Bengal Infantry (1916 - 1920), better known as the 49th Bengalis. Many young men from Dhaka and elsewhere in East Bengal volunteered and joined this regiment, under the command of British military officers; this was a precursor to the now renowned East Bengal Regiment of the Bangladesh Army. Additionally, Ashok mentions in his book, and previously unknown that a complete company of Sylheti Muslims from Sylhet served in a regiment known as the 18th Infantry during the First World War. Although, a contingent of the 49th Bengalis was pressed into active service and shipped off to Mesopotamia in battalion strength, it did not experience actual combat operations during the War, other than line of communication duties and an expedition into Kurdistan. Regretfully, the 49th Bengalis was disbanded after the War in 1920. It should also be recalled here that our beloved National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, Nawab Khawja Habibullah of Dhaka and R P Saha, an illustrious son of our soil, later on a Rai Bahadur and famous philanthropist, had all voluntarily joined this regiment and rose to the ranks of Havildar and Jemadars (VCOs or Viceroy Commissioned Officers equivalent to a 2nd Lieutenant) in it, respectively. The War also reflected in Bengali literature through the publication of songs, poetry and drama during that period.

'You can be young without money but you can't be old without it.' Towheed Feroze delves deep ...

WHAT Tennessee Williams said will hold significance as long as the world lives! The interesting thing is that most people usually discover the true meaning of wealth or money after they have crossed their best years. By that time, it's of course too late to strike gold. However, what most do is curb their maverick ways and settle down with financial security taking top priority in life. But there are those who understand from an early age the power of wealth and the force of more wealth. The Rich is a book about people who, over the course of human history, have startled millions with their rise in social status by the sheer power of wealth. Some have made it themselves through hard-work, shrewd steps and some skullduggery, whereas others have inherited it. The book is a fascinating read not only because it gives a detailed glimpse into the lives of the wealthy but also for its inherent ability that helps us shed any feeling of guilt that moral brigades have linked to the pursuit of richness and ostentation. Take Louis XIV for instance. The Sun King of France was the master in spending money like water. He became king at a time when France was a supreme European power with arts, culture and debauchery flourishing at the same robust pace. He built palaces that still give dizzying headaches with their blinding extravagance, patronized the arts, loved women, launched wars at whims and made France into a spectacle. Louis regarded himself as a God and people surrounding him made him feel like one. His everyday actions, even the waking up (lever) and going to sleep (coucher) were ritualised. Trust me, people of noble birth considered themselves fortunate if they could sit before the king defecating in a gold and gem encrusted commode. Talk about glamourising 'royal relieving'. But for most South Asians, the most intriguing section of the book is the part which talks of an obscure British East India Company official called Robert Clive who, with the help of an astute brain and plenty of shenanigans, became Clive of India. In between he brushed aside a superior military force of an incompetent Nawab Siraj ud Dowla, made a Faustian agreement with the Nawab's main military chief Mir Zafar and took control over most of Bengal. We know the results very well: Bengal, Bihar Orissa came under the British, establishing the first concrete foothold for an imperial power, enriched the company plus the shareholders in England and, in the process, made Clive a wealthy man. The moral here is sometimes shrewd tactics, not necessarily honest, can be adopted for a greater cause. Obviously, we would not regard it as a noble deed since our independence was lost and under the company stranglehold Bengal faced successive famines due to excess taxes. But that is another aspect of wealth for you - affluence attained through the optimum usage of imperial policies. How about those who live right now and flaunt their millions? Say hello to the oligarchs and the Sheikhs. The former struck rich after the hammer and sickle fell in the Soviet Union. While general people stood on line for the piece of bread, others manipulated the post Communist anarchy to either control the resources or the industries to quickly become billionaires in no time. As for the Arab Sheikhs, tales of their lifestyle are essential ingredients for modern day urban myth. Rolls Royce, blowing up millions at the gambling table on one night, wanting to buy everything that takes their fancy - one can go on and on with stories of fabulous decadence. But wait a second: many Arabs are intelligent business people too! After all, oil is not here forever! So, let's not define all Sheikhs and oligarchs in one simple definition of debauchery. Look at it this way, he has millions so throwing a party with champagne flown from France, olives from Spain, women from the best escort agencies around the world are not abnormal. He has to spend it right and spend it so new boundaries for comfort are created. I know all this sounds a little vulgar. But how many of us will be different if we have so much? A compelling read without doubt!

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The Rich, Author: John Kampfner Publisher: Little Brown, Pages: 454

SOWARS and SEPOYS in THE GREAT WAR 1914-1918 CAVALRY and INFANTRY REGIMENTS

ASHOK NATH FRGS
Foreword by Field Marshal Sir John Chapple GCB, CBE, MA, DL

It is particularly gratifying for us here, that by a fortuitous coincidence this monumental work: SOWARS and SEPOYS in THE GREAT WAR 1914 - 1918, CAVALRY and INFANTRY REGIMENTS, is written and self-published by the author in a limited edition in Bangladesh and befittingly so in 2014, the commemorative centenary year of the First World War. The Great War was barely noticed or felt in the then East Bengal (now Bangladesh) a hundred years ago for understandable reasons, as it had otherwise impacted in the rest of British India, including some of the Native Indian Princely States, in terms of both men and material. Mass recruitment most of it voluntarily, of ordinary Indians mainly from the peasantry in the colonial Indian army took place to fight in the different theaters of the War overseas. By December 1918, the Indian troop strength had swelled to a staggering 1,440,337 men, with over 64,000 regulars dead and twice that number wounded; the soldiers of indomitable cour-

age earning 11 Victoria Crosses and over 13,000 other gallantry awards. It is to be noted here that the War also resulted in the historic raising of the first ever all Bengali regiment in the British Indian Army, the 49th Bengal Infantry (1916 - 1920), better known as the 49th Bengalis. Many young men from Dhaka and elsewhere in East Bengal volunteered and joined this regiment, under the command of British military officers; this was a precursor to the now renowned East Bengal Regiment of the Bangladesh Army. Additionally, Ashok mentions in his book, and previously unknown that a complete company of Sylheti Muslims from Sylhet served in a regiment known as the 18th Infantry during the First World War. Although, a contingent of the 49th Bengalis was pressed into active service and shipped off to Mesopotamia in battalion strength, it did not experience actual combat operations during the War, other than line of communication duties and an expedition into Kurdistan. Regretfully, the 49th Bengalis was disbanded after the War in 1920. It should also be recalled here that our beloved National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, Nawab Khawja Habibullah of Dhaka and R P Saha, an illustrious son of our soil, later on a Rai Bahadur and famous philanthropist, had all voluntarily joined this regiment and rose to the ranks of Havildar and Jemadars (VCOs or Viceroy Commissioned Officers equivalent to a 2nd Lieutenant) in it, respectively. The War also reflected in Bengali literature through the publication of songs, poetry and drama during that period. The author Ashok Nath currently resides in Dhaka with his wife Ylva Sorman Nath, a senior diplomat with the Swedish Embassy. Ashok is also a visiting senior research fellow with the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) in Dhaka. Heartiest congratulations to Ashok for this highly commendable book - a work of meticulous research, dedicated scholarship, aesthetic delight and shall I say... truly a product of consummate artistry!

THE REVIEWER IS FOUNDER, BANGLADESH FORUM FOR HERITAGE STUDIES