

Making Revolution Strange/r: Viktor Shklovsky and the Bolsheviks

MASHRUR SHAHID HOSSAIN

1978. When Serena Vitale, an Italian writer and translator, managed her third meeting with Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984), the proponent of Russian Formalism, she ventured a point-blank query: “How would you explain why the younger generations [in Russia] consider you a writer, so to speak, of the establishment?” the senile yet spry critic turned red and yelled, “Get out of here!”

Vitale’s reference to the “establishment” must have reminded Shklovsky of a series of stormy events following 1917 – a curious year that witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution and the publication of Shklovsky’s article, “Art as Technique,” which provided impetus to Formalism, the artistic revolution that shook the literary world for a while. The coupling of the two revolutions is telling and ironic. It is telling as the emergence of Russian Formalism, a critical school that foregrounds the liberating power of art, coincided with the Bolshevik Revolution. It is ironic as Shklovsky’s presumptuous promotion of making art autonomous surfaced only to confront the Soviet dictates of socialist realism that assert the social functions of art but that sometimes discount aesthetics for the sake of propaganda.

But Vitale’s suggestion of conformity to the “establishment” must have also hurt the old Shklovsky who in his youth dared a consistently troubling – neither antagonistic nor obeisant – relation with the political and artistic establishments in both pre- and post-Revolution Russia. At an early age, he had become a part of pre-Revolution Russian Futurism, an anti-establishment literary movement, which brought him close to the poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky, who would become the major poet of post-Revolution Soviet Russia. He had fought in World War I, become a driving trainer, and had a bomb exploding in his hands. At the same time, in 1916, he had founded OPOYAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language), the Petrograd/Leningrad Formalist group. He participated in the “bourgeois” February Revolution in 1917, which succeeded in overthrowing the Tsar; but he also took part in the anti-Bolshevik movements in 1918, which forced him to go into hiding. In 1922, he had to flee Russia for Berlin with an arrest warrant issued against him as a political enemy because of his involvement with the Socialist Revolutionary Party. But the very next year he was back due to the

intervention of Maxim Gorky and Mayakovsky. In 1930, it was the same Shklovsky who publicly recanted his formalist precepts while Formalism, deemed by many Bolsheviks “cosmopolitan,” was officially banned in 1936. For the curious souls who were wondering what was wrong with Formalism that it would so perturb post-Revolution Soviet ideologues, here is the one-word answer: *ostranenie*, that is to say, “defamiliarization” or “estrangement”!

For Shklovsky, art is an emancipatory means, which glides a reader from her/his complacent way of recognizing reality to an enabling way of seeing things. *Recognition* is an “algebraic” mode of “automatized perception”: due to habituation, we often just recognize a thing as it appears to be without noticing what it is like. On the other hand, *seeing* is perceiving things “in their entirety.” So, what makes art *art* (and literature *literature*) is not what it is ostensibly about; rather, the artistic-literary devices the artist deploys are crucial. Thus, the suicide of a young man can make for an interesting piece of news or an intriguing sonnet, yet, in spite of having the same *content*, the news and the poem may not have the same *theme*: news presents the event as just one of the many events on that day, while the poem laments the loss.

What, then, makes news literal, objective, and informative, but renders a poem literary, perceptive, and affective? For Shklovsky, art is art because of its artistic techniques. To be precise, art is technique: “Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.” But what is the use of experiencing this “artfulness”? It shakes us out of our habituated boredom, slavish sluggish complacency, and readymade acceptance, getting us to understand that things are not only as we have perceived them; they can be different; they *are* different. This experience of difference is what art generates through *ostranenie*.

Ostranenie is estrangement, i.e. making a thing strange or unfamiliar through literary techniques, so that we are mobilized to look at it again, as if we are seeing it for the first time, developing thereby a high level of awareness and a renewed sensibility. The enormous potential of innovation and freedom it offers both to writer and reader made Russian Formalism instantly popular. During its short yet

enthusiastic heyday in the post-Revolution Russia, young Russian scholars and students of philology and literature enthusiastically embraced formalist methods. However (and therefore), the state-centric intelligentsia discovered in Shklovsky a seductive radicalism, which had the potential to destabilize or unpopularize the Bolshevik historical materialistic approach to literature. Consequently, Shklovsky was allegedly subjected to political and public pressure to recant his theory. In 1930, he disavowed Formalism in *Literaturnaiia Gazeta* in a public declaration, entitled “Monument

of extra-literary impositions.

So, did the promoter of “estrangement” not estrange his disavowal? For many, Shklovsky’s imagery of a monument is a shrewd parallelism, a double-edged irony that Shklovsky claimed Lenin was adept in his 1924 essay, “Lenin as a Decanonizer.” Shklovsky’s “Marxist attackers” too, as Boym noted, identified the “textual ambivalences” of the declaration; Boym suggests that he thereby “confused the revolutions” and re-endorsed his “interest in civic freedoms and artistic independence” (*Another Freedom* 223). Let me use

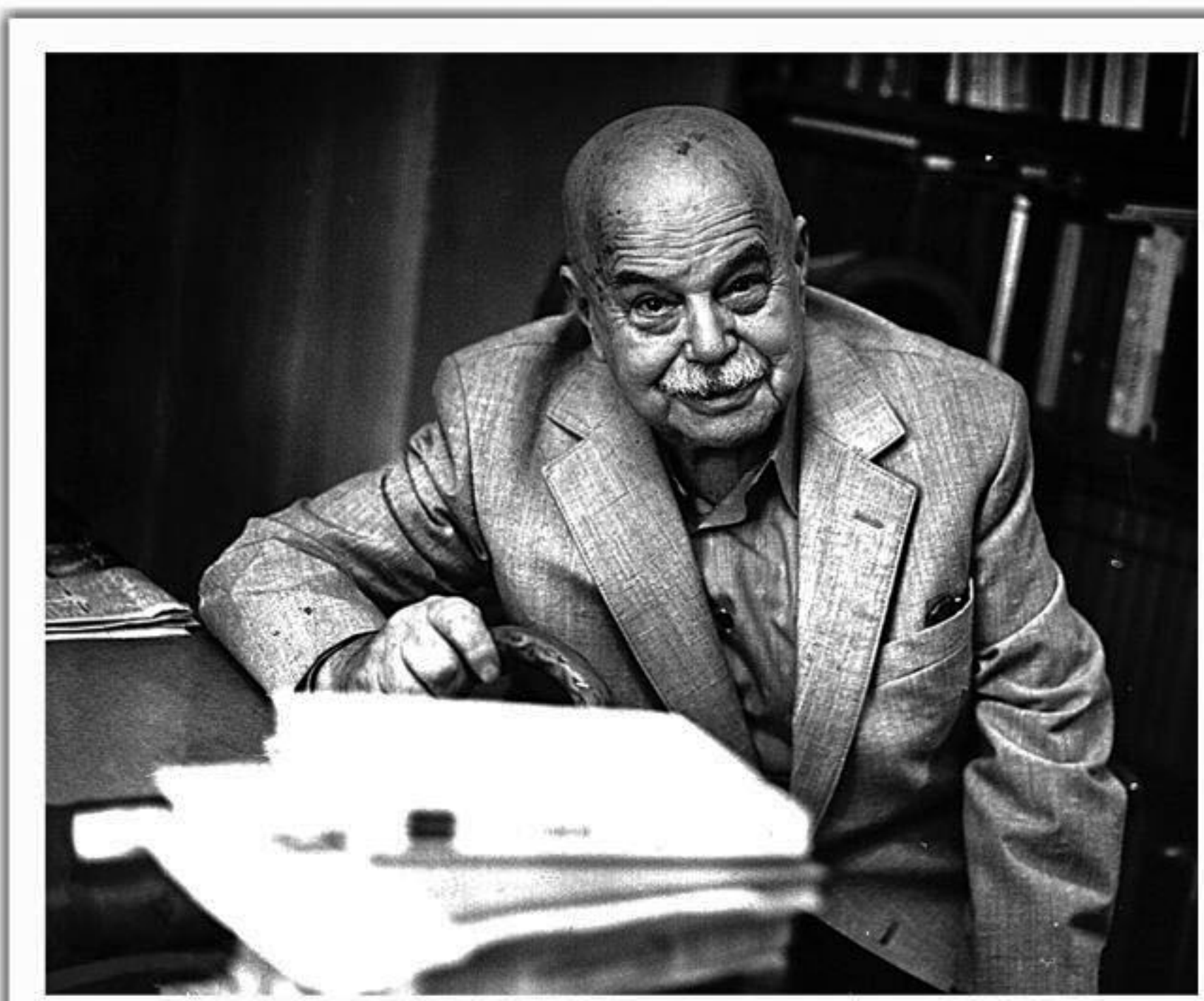
world. “Estrangement,” often dubbed “bourgeois aesthetic,” is not meant to defamiliarize the socio-political scenario, marshalling one away off a lived reality to some remote lands of forgetfulness; rather it is defamiliarizing the habituated or apparent reality, leading one thereby to refresh one’s perception and renew one’s performance.

“Estrangement” is not estrangement from politics; it is *estranging* politics, which might too chillingly but accurately describe the post-Revolution state politics that disillusioned many pro-Revolution writers and artists, ranging from Osip Mandelstam and Sergei Esenin to Mayakovsky and Kazimir Malevich. While the success of the Bolshevik Revolution estranged the naturalized capitalist concept of private ownership as well as the concept of masturbatory high art, the post-Revolution “state art” estranged the way politics and art, the state and the individual interact. Mandelstam phrased this estrangement of state-craft as art precisely thus: “Only in Russia is poetry respected, it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?”

It is, then, valid to surmise that what makes Shklovskian “estrangement” equally appealing and appalling is its endorsement of communication techniques and tactics – both artistic ones and ones deployed for survival – that offer an individual relative autonomy and freedom to see, read, live, survive, even dissent, and transform. This revealing potential of estrangement to make a thing *strange*, even *stranger*, is what renders “estrangement” dangerously autonomous!

Is this, then, a major reason why Shklovsky has been severely misunderstood (sometimes deliberately), underrated (in literary criticism), and under-represented (in the curricula)? Not only has his theory of “estrangement” revolutionized the way the arts are viewed, but it has also generated and influenced many later -isms and trends, ranging from Constructivism and Structuralism to Brecht’s *Verfremdung*. Why, then, is he not included in most of the syllabi of the Departments of English in Bangladesh?

Mashrur Shahid Hossain is Associate Professor, Department of English at Jahangirnagar University.



to a Scientific Error,” proclaiming: “I do not wish to be a monument to my error.”

So there are reasons why later young Russians found Shklovsky a writer “of the establishment.” But there are people who were suspicious of Shklovsky’s renouncement. At the beginning of the Soviet period, Shklovsky was cunning enough to voice his defiance and opposition but by estranging the same through literary devices like irony: for example, as Samuel Eisen enumerated, Shklovsky predicted that what might “ruin” Russian literature was not the renewed conditions of government intervention or harsh censorship, but the writers’ idealization and idolization

Shklovsky’s favorite device of parallelism to summarize his ironic recantation: like Galileo, Shklovsky recanted his theory with a paradoxical whisper, “*Eppur simuove*” – yet it moves!

What is important to note, and what both the Bolshevik and later Western scholars cared to ignore, is that Shklovskian “estrangement” is estrangement of the world, not estrangement *from* the world. Not unlike the way Coleridge and Shelley conceptualized the transformative potential of defamiliarization, “estrangement” mobilizes social and individual transformation. It is re/invoking wonder and astonishment, which helps one re-engage with the

Going Beyond Gossip and Name-Dropping?

An Unsuitable Boy. Karan Johar. Penguin India. 9781366922366. 2017

REVIEWED BY MANZOORUL ABEDIN

“Biographies do walk the ‘precarious high wire between fiction and non-fiction’ (Claire Battershill in “No One Wants Biography”). Fictional engagements with biographical tropes are irresistible as the author renovates the past straddling between past and present, and perhaps future, argues Svetlana Boym in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2011). *The Unsuitable Boy*, published a year ago by Penguin India, is a quintessential celebrity biography and written, interestingly, at a point in life of the author when the sun has not set for Karan Johar (as is the case for most celebrity biographies); rather, when he is at the top of his game.

Why a biography at this juncture of Karan Johar’s life? We shall explore it further, but a more fundamental question needs to be asked at the outset – is the author, important for us at all? Does celebrity culture really matter? Why are today’s sub-continental youth obsessed with Bollywood celebrities? These are complex and plural questions, and we may not have concrete answers to them. But it cannot be routinely ignored, not any more, now that Bollywood is so ubiquitous and a source of young people’s sense of agency, even in Bangladesh, no less than in India and Pakistan.

Johar—and his influential production house—is worth a few hundred millions in the multi-billion-dollar Bollywood entertainment industry. He himself is a big brand, by his own admission, and the biographical book is (or can well be) yet another PR-stunt to generate press coverage and fast create explosive conversations to be and remain in the public eye. Such marketing spectacles, in this age of viral videos and social media, are not unheard of. But we must not dismiss the book so readily.

If you’re smirking, or giving a stern, thin-lipped stare in your black-and-white picture, and if you go out of your way in every interview to talk about how “unserious books do not deserve serious

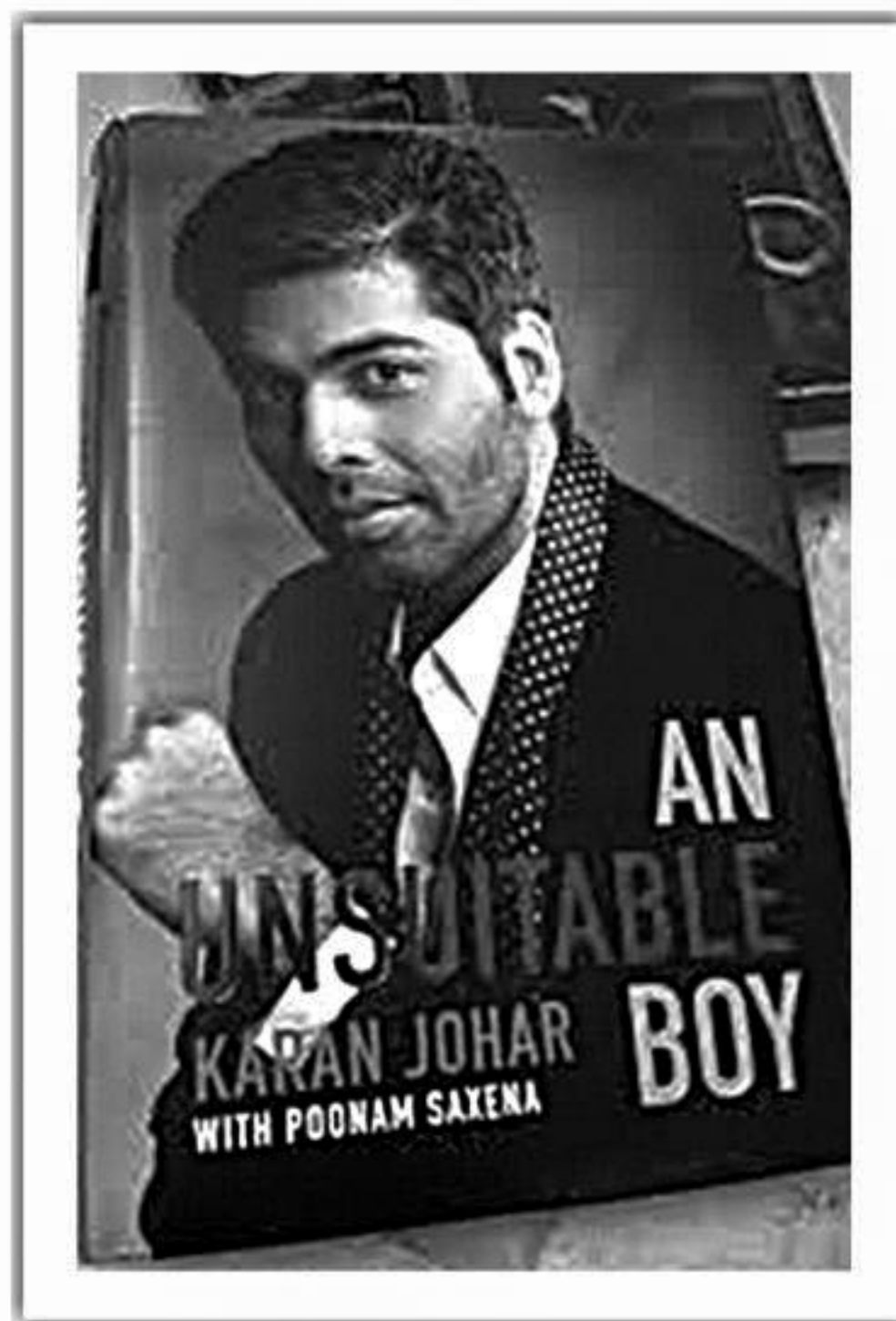
attention,” then it’s literature,” quips American writer Jennifer Weiner, in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Johar’s book, with its black and white cover, appears to fit the criteria perfectly. So, what is in the memoir that we don’t know? Much of his life is already public knowledge, particularly to those who follow Johar’s flippant, high-society celebrity talk shows, including *Koffee with Karan*, or read his articles and interviews, which are churned out ever so frequently.

The title reverses Vikram Seth’s epic novel, *A Suitable Boy*; the ‘un-’ prefix is a reference to Johar’s adolescence when he was ridiculed for being effeminate. Yet, unlike Seth, who has publicly criticized the draconian Indian law that criminalizes homosexuality, Johar has opted to leave just bold clues about his sexuality in the book, and later clarified: “The reason I don’t say it out loud is simply that I don’t want to be dealing with the police complaints. I’m very sorry. I have a job, I have a commitment to my company ...”

However, he is not always so guarded in the *The Unsuitable Boy*. To counter the ridicule, Johar reminisces how he secretly took classes in voice training to cultivate a baritone. More such candidness follows when he chronicles about his running away from boarding-school, asking for costume changes for a beggar girl or recounts the poignant memories of living in a South Bombay bubble. He is in his elements – like a classic emotion-laden and extravagant Johar film about family values and friendship – when he nostalgically talks about being the ‘prodigal son’ and then how he has evolved as a businessman following his father’s death, trying to live up to his reputation.

The minute details of Johar’s father’s cremation in *The Unsuitable Boy* are marked by an unmistakable honesty; the reader does not miss the emotion that is attached to it. The reader, however,

one cannot but notice that his relationship with his mother is mentioned by the author just in passing. Even after the reader is made aware that by the writer that he lives with her, he often leaves no stone unturned to exhibit his admiration for her in public. There must have been honesty in admitting



to the relationships that have soured, and matured, but most of these are public knowledge and we get know just about the Johar we already know.

Johar’s earlier films of the 1990’s are remembered in rich details, yet the most recent

ones, which are said to be influenced by his struggles of coping with unrequited love and sexual identity, are left out, much to the disappointment of his audience. His snide remarks about certain artists are typical of Johar, the articulate and opinionated talk-show host, and the reader understands fully it that it tells only half the story, his side of the picture. His monologues in the process however, provide a sneak-peak to the ‘good-bad-and-ugly’ that resides behind the glitz and glamour of the entertainment industry. By the end of the memoir, Johar’s increasing consciousness of his mortality: “I am in and out of hospitals because my mother sometimes keeps poor health ...” foreshadows his recent experience of fatherhood through surrogacy: “I wonder, do I want a child just because of my needs?” - his most recent headliner that swept Bollywood by storm.

Over the course of more than 200 pages, Johar’s memoir (co-authored with journalist Poonam Saxena) comes across as conversational; a lengthy interior monologue that does not get monotonous. *The Unsuitable Boy*, particularly in its boy Johar episodes, is an emotionally riveting tale of struggle and fears. The road to success and personal solace episodes are less fluent and occasionally frivolous, and do not live up to the vivid, affectionate, and gritty earlier portrayal of the boyhood. No-regrets, confessions and naming-shaming about friendships-gone-sour project, a personal vendetta appear to tell the reader that it is the publicity hound Karan Johar talking (“happy to be in the limelight”), not the man who is haunted by some inner demons. Perhaps that is what is new about the book – compared to his TV shows – it is not entirely gossipy, and at the same time, it does not try to be overtly philosophical.

Manzoorul Abedin teaches sociology of education at the University of Cambridge, UK, and is a film buff.