



RISING ASIA
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA
FOUNDATION

TRIBUTE
ZULFIKAR GHOSE (1935–2022)

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THE LAST ARTICLE OF ZULFIKAR GHOSE

The celebrated novelist, poet, essayist, and playwright passed away on June 30, 2022 in Austin, Texas, leaving behind his wife, the Brazilian artist Helena de la Fontaine, a vast trove of his writings, and several unpublished novels, essays, poems, and a play. We remember him fondly.

Zulfikar Ghose published his last article in the *Rising Asia Journal*. That is how it turned out. There's a tale around how the article came about. But first an introduction for readers who may have missed the excitement surrounding this great writer. In 1989, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* published an edition dedicated to Milan Kundera and Zulfikar Ghose, explaining that "Ghose has both ranked with and outranked several of the best English language writers in England and America," a man who is a "unique figure in contemporary literature," whose "evolution across languages and national boundaries" is comparable to Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, and Samuel Beckett. In 1962, *The Times Literary Supplement* introduced Ghose

to its readers as the most prominent poet from the former British colonies, printing three of his poems in a spread across half a page. The following year, Ghose received a special award from the E. C. Gregory Trust that was judged by T. S. Eliot, Henry Moore, Herbert Read and Bonamy Dobrée.¹

Our discovery of Ghose began with Julie Mehta, who was doing her doctoral studies at the University of Toronto in 2003 under her supervisor, the late Chelva Kanaganayakam, a diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil with a reputation for being a formidable scholar of postcolonial South Asian literature in North America. Professor Kanaganayakam had written his PhD thesis on Ghose's writings, and knowing Julie's keen interest in how magical realism was used as a tool by postcolonial novelists like Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Zulfikar Ghose, he persuaded her to visit Ghose at the University of Texas at Austin where he was a professor. It was Kanaganayakam nudging Julie incessantly to seek a visit with the diasporic British-American writer, born in undivided India before the Partition, that initiated a remarkable friendship.

In the summer of 2007, Harish and Julie traveled to Austin for research. Harish was searching for historical material in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum in Austin for his doctoral research on the war in Vietnam, and Julie set out to meet Ghose. It was a perfect opportunity for us to meet Zulf-ji at the University of Texas where he had taught since 1969. Julie visited Ghose's office, where he taught creative writing, a tall, lean man with a strong clasp of hand, and an affable smile.

¹ Mansoor Abbasi, *Zulfikar Ghose: The Lost Son of the Punjab* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015). Also see, Note on dust jacket of *The Loss of India* by Zulfikar Ghose (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964); and *The Times Literary Supplement*, London, August 10, 1962.



Turning to Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the entire town of Macondo is stricken by the "infection" of forgetfulness, Zulf-ji spoke of the terror of dementia and how he was seized with the fear of being unable to remember when he became older. For three hours he spoke and he listened, and explained how the process of writing and using the imagination to create characters based in South America allowed him to tell the history of colonization and resistance in his works of fiction. With several novels, books of poetry, and essays to his credit—*The Incredible Brazilian*, *A New History of Torments*, *Figures of Enchantment* and many others—he was the most unpretentious celebrity writer Julie had met in all her years as a literary reviewer and interviewer for several Southeast Asian newspapers.

By the time the Texan sky had worn its last blush before dusk, Zulf-ji had scheduled lunch and dinner with Harish (whom he was yet to meet) and Julie over the next few days. The next week whizzed by being driven around in his yellow Mazda convertible, and taken to his hacienda-like home in the suburbs of hilly Austin. Some of the most memorable meals by the most gracious hosts—he cooked up a storm with his artist wife Helena, and served up luscious grilled shrimp and kebabs with vintage red wines selected by him—are stamped on our minds. We took to each other immediately, and the passion for cricket and writing were the engines that drove our friendship over the past fifteen years.

"Shut that sliding glass door behind you, my girl, or the snakes might slither in," he reminded Julie, with a wicked sense of humour, of the wildlife in his garden.



Zulfikar Ghose and his wife, artist Helena de la Fontaine, in their kitchen in Austin.

Photo by Harish and Julie Mehta.

A Long Friendship

Over the years, the conversations with Zulf-ji got more insightful, and trust and mutual warmth led to some rare insights from him.

On July 11, 2020, Harish emailed Zulf-ji saying, “I was wondering if you might do a piece on cricket and racism with an Asian ‘square cut’ thrown in. It would be an accurate Southeast Asian ‘Yorker’ if it appeared in the launch issue of *Rising Asia Journal* in September/October.”

On July 12, he replied: “That’s a fast bouncer you pitched and my immediate instinct was to duck. I’ve been resorting to the amber liquid since to stimulate the old brain under the dented helmet. Give me a couple more days to think about it and I’ll get back to you.”

On July 14, he wrote: “Harish Old Boy: You’ve won the toss. I’ve taken the field with my thoughts. It’s going to be a 5-day Test. I’ll post the result when it ends. Cheers, Zulf.”

He submitted the article on July 21, saying, “I can never predict what I’ll write and know it only after I’ve written it, and here is the article that has emerged out of my old brain thanks to your asking me to write one for your new journal. Julie has delighted Helena and me with her memories of our times together which we often talk about and wish we could renew. Much love to you both, Zulf.”

The article was published in the first issue of *Rising Asia Journal*. We are re-publishing his article in this issue as a tribute to the author. It was the last article he would write in his prolific career. In it, he deals with the idea that on the cricket field, English discrimination was not a case of racist bigotry as much as the old English obsession with class. But finding employment in England in the mid-twentieth century, he recalled, was fraught with racial prejudice.



Left to right: Harish, Zulfikar Ghose, Helena, and Julie at P.F. Chang’s restaurant in Austin. Photo by the authors.

A Thirty-three-Year-Old with Six Acclaimed Books

To define Ghose's output as prolific is an understatement. His work can be divided into the England years and the Texas years. The Ghose family had migrated from Sialkot, now in Pakistan, when he was seven, to Bombay, where he did his early schooling. Then the family left for England in 1952. He graduated in English and Philosophy from Keele University in 1959, where he edited both the university's literary magazine, and a poetry anthology for undergraduates called *Universities' Poetry*. The family was economically prosperous, but soon Zulfikar, with a second-class BA, faced an economic struggle, finding it difficult to find a job in a blatantly racist Britain.²

"Remember that this was 1968 when racial discrimination still excluded non-whites from superior positions," Ghose said. "It was bad enough in England where the best I could do was to be a teacher at a crowded state-run secondary school while my white friends with the same second class, second division degree as mine were executives in advertising agencies or in publishing and broadcasting corporations, from all of which I had accumulated a thick file of rejections."³

The period of struggle, however, was intellectually rewarding. Ghose met several established and acclaimed writers, and embarked on a writing career. He went to work as a cricket correspondent for *The Observer* (which Ghose explains in detail in his article in this journal), a reviewer on *The Guardian*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The Western Daily Press*, and also taught at Ealing Mead country school in west London. From 1952 to 1969, he published two novels—*The*

² Abbasi, *Zulfikar Ghose*, 3-4.

³ Zulfikar Ghose, "Zulfikar's Brush with the American Dream," *Herald*, June 5, 2017. <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153757/zulfikar-ghoses-brush-with-the-american-dream>.



Contradictions (1966), and *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (1967); two books of poetry, *The Loss of India* (1964), and *Jets from Orange* (1967); a collection of short stories with his friend B.S. Johnson, *Statement Against Corpses* (1964); and an autobiography, *Confessions of a Native-Alien* (1965). Of them all, the autobiography by a thirty-year-old was audacious both in its precociousness and presumptuousness.

Life was difficult for the young writer who, in 1964, had married Helena, an artist from Brazil, a country he would later use as the setting for six of his novels. Then, he saw an advertisement in the *Times Literary Supplement* for a teaching position at the University of Texas at Austin, offering a US\$ 10,000 a year salary, five times his pay at the school where he taught. He wrote to the university. "And I mentioned, as if it was something any 33-year-old could do, that I had published six books in London, one of which (it happened to be *The Murder of Aziz Khan*) had just been bought by publishers in New York, Oslo and Berlin."⁴ There was a long correspondence for several months which ended in a job offer.

England, at the time, restricted emigrants to take no more than 350 pounds out of the country. To get around the currency control, he devised the following plan. Ghose recalled that one of his dreams was to own a Lotus Elan sportscar. He ordered one with the intention of taking it to Texas where he would sell it. On reaching Austin in 1969, he found a buyer, a millionaire, who offered \$ 2,500 in cash and another \$ 2,500 in two lots of land. Helena and Zulfikar took the offer delightedly.

Then came the next phase in his writing career. While teaching at the University of Texas he published nine novels, as well as *The Texas Inheritance* (1980), which was published under the pseudonym of

⁴ Ibid.

William Strang. His nine novels are: *The Incredible Brazilian*, a trilogy which comprises *The Native* (1972), *The Beautiful Empire* (1975), and *A Different World* (1978), and *Crump's Terms* (1975), *Hulme's Investigations into the Bogart Script* (1981), *A New History of Torments* (1982), *Don Bueno* (1983), *Figures of Enchantment* (1986), and *The Triple Mirror of the Self* (1991). He wrote critical works too, such as *Hamlet, Prufrock and Language* (1978), *The Fiction of Reality* (1984), *The Art of Creating Fiction* (1991), *Shakespeare's Mortal Knowledge* (1993), *Beckett's Company* (2009), and *In the Ring of Pure Light* (2011). His books of poetry are: *The Violent West* (1972), *A Memory of Asia* (1984), *Selected Poems* (1991), and *Fifty Poems* (2010). He also wrote a book of short stories, *Veronica and the Gongora Passion* (1998). Ghose leaves behind a few unpublished novels which are kept at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas. The unpublished novels are *The Deccan Queen*, *The Frontier Province*, *The Desert Republics*, and *Kensington Quartet*. He has other unpublished works—a play, *Clive of England*; a book of criticism, *Proust's Vision of the Beloved*; and a number of uncollected poems, short stories and essays.

Although he was widely celebrated at a young age, Ghose stayed a marginal presence in the world of publishing, where only a few Indian-origin writers had attained world class status, such as V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie. The scholar Abbasi argues that one reason for Ghose's marginalization is that Ghose's oeuvre is difficult to place within familiar categories or compartments. Put simply, his novels set in Latin America did not resonate with Indian readers, and soon afterwards when the publishing world was in a frenzy of an outpouring of new literature from India, Ghose was forgotten. The image of an Indian-origin writer setting his novels outside India may have been a difficult one to grasp; it was too fleeting, even improbable.

Here's another difficulty with defining Ghose. In libraries, some of his early work, set in Asia, is located under South Asian Literature,



his early short stories are located in English literature, and most of his recent work is found in American literature. The result is that Ghose's work is fragmented and unavailable to readers as a whole.

In an interview with Kanaganayakam, Ghose explained why he had set his novels in foreign lands. Ghose said,

Because it does not matter where a novel is set provided its internal structure works. You could take *A New History of Torments* and change all the Spanish names to Indian names, substitute the Himalayas and the Ganges for the Andes and the Amazon, but the novel itself would not alter the slightest. Seeing that it's set in South America, reviewers have immediately perceived a comparison with Jorge Amado, Marquez, and Vargas Llosa; I suppose if I'd set it in India, they'd have seen a comparison with Tagore, Narayan, and the films of Satyajit Ray.⁵

Ghose's Searing Critiques of Great Novels and Academia

In his seminal literary work, *The Art of Creating Fiction* (1991), Ghose writes with legitimate authority about what is, and should never be, great art. He picks on Ernest Hemingway's use of the "formula" in his writing. Ghose explains that early in the history of the English novel Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe* in which "Defoe hit upon a fascinating scheme: take an Englishman, place him in a hostile foreign setting, and make him survive. Over two centuries later, you take that formula, replace the Englishman with an American (or a group of Americans), and you write *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and

⁵ Chelva Kanaganayakam, "Zulfikar Ghose: An Interview," *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 169-186.

The Sun Also Rises, and the idiotic public, never looking beyond subject matter and easily flattered by seeing images of itself, readily gobbles it up.”⁶

Ghose also holds university professors to account for using racial guilt in teaching and, in the process, corrupting literature. “Art,” he writes, “is not an Equal Opportunity Employer and literature cannot be expected to fulfill some Affirmative Action Programme.”⁷ He explains his position in the following way. “A group of novels by South African writers, for example, makes for a semester’s package tour of racial guilt, moral outrage and historical enlightenment, and the eager economy class students, who are more anxious about their grades than about their culture, don’t even realise that the ride they’re being taken on has nothing to do with literature.”⁸

Ghose drew attention to the use of literature for political purposes, arguing that the latter disfigured the former, as crudeness marred art. His own trilogy, *The Incredible Brazilian*, dealt with the plunder by Western imperialists of the resources of the Amazon. Ghose critiques academia as follows,

You may follow what religion you like, that is between you and the idols on your private altar; but if you insist upon corrupting literature with your deconstructionist or feminist or any other ideological point of view then you are no different from the polyester-clad mums and dads who appear each year at the textbook hearings and insist that creationism be taught in the place of evolution, and what you do not realize is that, in spite

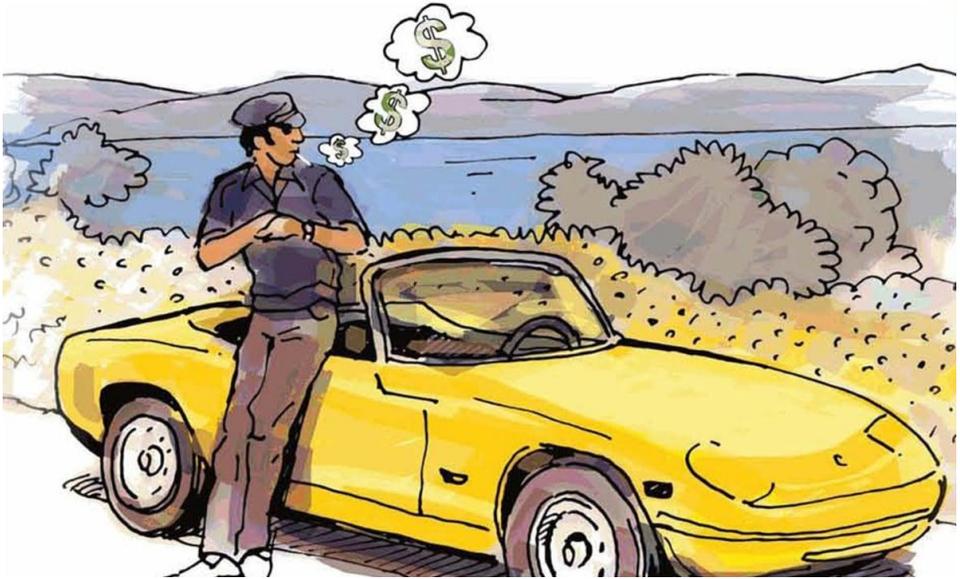
⁶ Zulfikar Ghose, *The Art of Creating Fiction* (Palgrave MacMillan, 1991), 107.

⁷ Ibid, 155.

⁸ Ibid, 58–59.

of all your sophisticated jargon, you are essentially dumb and deserve the contempt in which writers hold you.⁹

Much water has flowed down the Indus and the Colorado River since Ghose's stinging discourses on the art of creating fiction. May he happily drive his yellow Mazda convertible in the great astral sky.



Ghose with his first sports car, a Lotus Elan, that he sold to a wealthy Texan. Image by the courtesy of the *Herald*.

<https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153757/zulfikar-ghoses-brush-with-the-american-dream>.

Note on the Authors

Harish C. Mehta holds a PhD from McMaster University in Canada in the history of American foreign relations and Southeast Asia. He did graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Cambodia Silenced: The Press Under Six Regimes* (White Lotus, Bangkok and Cheney, 1997); *Warrior Prince: Norodom Ranariddh, Son of King Sihanouk of Cambodia* (Graham Brash, Singapore, 2001);

⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen (Marshall Cavendish, Singapore, 2013); and *People's Diplomacy of Vietnam: Soft Power in the Resistance War, 1965-1972* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2019). His articles on Vietnamese diplomacy have appeared in the academic journals *International History Review*, *Diplomatic History*, *Peace and Change*, *The Historian*, and *History Compass*, and his review articles have appeared in H-Diplo. He has taught history at McMaster, the University of Toronto, and Trent University. He has twice won the Samuel Flagg Bemis research award from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

Julie Banerjee Mehta holds M.A. and PhD degrees in English Literature and South Asian Studies from the University of Toronto. She conceptualized and taught the Chancellor Emerita Vivienne Poy-endowed course on Asian Literatures and Cultures in Asia at the Department of English, University of Toronto. Her translation of Tagore's play *Dak Ghar/Post Office* was performed by Pleiades Theatre, Toronto, in 2010 to critical acclaim. She is the author of *Dance of Life: The Mythology, History, and Politics of Cambodian Culture*, and co-author of a biography of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. Her recent major publications are "Toronto's Multicultural Tongues: Stories of South Asian Cuisines," in *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History* (University of Toronto Press, 2012). Her other book chapters are published in *Narrating Race: Asia, (Trans)Nationalism, Social Change* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2011); and in *Writing Asia: The Literatures in Englishes, Volume 1: From the Inside* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2007).