

The Tagoreans

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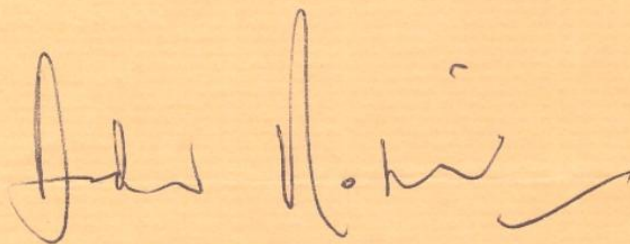
Parminder Vir
Ethnic Arts Unit
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Dear Ms Vir

I thought you might like to read a piece I wrote about Farrukh Dhondy's marvellous TV play THE EMPRESS AND THE MUNSHI for The Listener, since I know you work with Farrukh. I hope you enjoy it. I was very taken with this play.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Robinson



DRAMA

Odd couple

Andrew Robinson has been watching a remarkable play about the man who taught Queen Victoria Urdu.

The collaboration of the playwright Farrukh Dhondy with the actor Zia Mohyeddin has produced a gem of a play that is among the finest I can recall on television. *The Empress and the Munshi* (Tuesday 10.50-11.35pm C4) features only Mohyeddin, but he conjures up, with a range of exquisitely judged accents, Queen Victoria and her immediate circle. It is based on an historical character, the Queen's Urdu teacher, known as her Munshi or, later, as her Indian Secretary. He arrived at court, along with one other Indian servant, in 1887, the year of the Golden Jubilee, as a gift of her Indian Empire, and he served her until her death in 1901, when he was asked to leave Britain after burning all his papers. He returned with various honours given by the Queen to his native Agra, city of the Taj Mahal, where he had been born the son of the jail's apothecary, and died in 1909. After his death, a nervous Raj ordered a second bonfire of his papers.

Some wonderful photographs of the old Queen at her writing-desk with the Munshi in attendance exist. A friend sent Dhondy one, adding that this is how the relationship ought to be. The tease set him thinking. 'Most people probably wonder about the demeanour of the Queen. I wondered who the Munshi was and what their relationship was like.' Digging into some biographies of the Queen and memoirs of her attendants, he discovered intriguing details and hints of a unique, rather endearing intimacy between the Queen and her Indian subject, offsetting the hostility of the royal household towards the upstart. He started to imagine the Munshi as a sort of 'spiritual forefather', and to revise his former view of the Queen as 'the unacceptable face of imperialism'. Instead she came across as 'very charming, very level-headed and with tremendous dignity that would not stoop to the pettiness of the household. I was very playfully taken by the idea of Queen Victoria as the first anti-racist.'

The character is a rare fit with Mohyeddin's background and personality. As an actor he has much relevant experience, from the films of Paul Scott's *Staying On* (as the servant Ibrahim) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (as the Congress Minister M. A. Kasim) and, of course, his much-praised role as Dr Aziz in the stage production of *A Passage to India*. Although he grew up in Pakistan and now lives in Britain, acting and producing for Central Television, his family has connections in Agra and he actually remembers very well a distant uncle, on whom he based his performance, who used to speak of the Munshi and was perhaps the source of two extraordinary myths at that time. Firstly, that the Queen had become a Muslim, and secondly, that the Munshi had enjoyed a very close intimacy indeed with the Empress. The latter has found its way into Dhondy's play in a wonderfully witty scene of saucy implication. Nevertheless, Dhondy believes it to be 'totally untrue—but there were certainly mentions in parts of the yellow press in France, if not in England, so I've used it for dramatic purposes.'

Mohyeddin held his breath when told about the idea of a monologue. 'Then I said to hell with false modesty, I'm going to try.' Dhondy was well aware of the risks with televised monologue and gave Mohyeddin freedom to change the script drastically if necessary. 'A monologue really does need relief. Everything depends on the actor. It's not a writer's piece, and Michael Hayes, the director, contributes an immeasurable amount to the visual relief.' The story is in fact told in flashback. The Munshi reminisces over the contents of his trunk among the leaves of a misty English autumn somewhere in the royal park, as he tosses potentially embarrassing items into the incinerator, not forgetting to conceal 'something for my old age'—the diaries in which he noted, in Urdu to avoid the court's prying eyes, highlights of 15 years of the Queen's correspondence. The memories inspired by objects to be burnt effortlessly give rise to cross-cut scenes inside the palace with the Queen and her suspicious, odious staff.

Economical yet varied direction, the subtlety of Dhondy's dialogue and some mournful, yet mischievous flute music hinting at the Munshi as Shakespearean fool, complement the single performance. Within its 38 minutes Mohyeddin manages to capture the Queen's eccentricity and hypocrisies, and a certain integrity—she forbade Lord Salisbury from calling



'An endearing intimacy': 19th-century photograph of Queen Victoria and her Indian Secretary or 'Munshi'.

her 'trusted servant' a 'black man' by edict—without suggesting a bitter or sentimental character. The jokes, which the Munshi makes at his own expense as well as that of the British who tried to humiliate him, are of devastating refinement. Somehow, despite all the artifice of the play's form, with the Munshi sharing thoughts with himself aloud—and in English rather than Urdu—Mohyeddin makes a Munshi who seems totally real. In doing so he conveys some true and therefore slightly painful insights into the British character, particularly in its snobbish, disdainful, imperial mode.

The *Munshi* is one of a series of films on subjects of great diversity made by Central for the same slot, to be shown, sadly, late in the evening. These include performances by the singer Ruby Turner and the sarod player Amjad Khan.

The original seed for these films was TV's first minority magazine programme, *Here and Now*, which began in 1980 with Zia Mohyeddin as producer and presenters from many backgrounds, transmitting regionally. It has built up an impressive list of television firsts, with films on Rastafarianism, Salman Rushdie and breakdancing, for instance. As Hilary Minster, one of the presenters, says: 'Now we are hap-

py to do a story about almost anyone who isn't a white Anglo-Saxon living in Solihull.'

Here and Now has not shirked political issues—in fact an early sketch featuring a 'Minister for Race Relations' so provoked the Conservatives that a Labour 'Minister' had also to be introduced for balance—but the accent is on cultural matters and the programme is addressed to the widest possible audience, unlike later arrivals *Eastern Eye* and *Black on Black*. Through some understanding of their culture, Mohyeddin believes, an understanding of the minority communities themselves may gradually take place. But he is against undue emphasis on the 'multicultural society'. 'I think one assumes that. One says it is so, now how do you find this piece of music or dance or whatever? Rather than saying let me first set the scene of where this comes from. The other programmes still make an apology and I don't think it's necessary.'

The same confidence underlies the film about the Munshi and the Queen. There, it is the synthesis of ideas and attitudes brought about by their fascinating, mutual empathy that holds our interest. As E. M. Forster realised, the process of contact, of interplay of cultures, is irrevocable.