context of the subcontinent. It then becomes a matter of the Western Conscience and that elicits ecstatic reviews, boosts sales, wins prizes. This gives rise to various fads masquerading as fiction.

Hamid's latest book, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia,* falls in this category. A self-help manual, it aspires to be a sort of allegory of the 'human condition.' The story has to do with economic possibility in "rising Asia" and follows the fortunes of the impecunious addressee transported with his family from country to city where he is 'helped' to make good. The book is really about a largely parvenu, and illicit, Pakistan. Hamid's curious genre, denying itself the luxury of fiction proper, poses as the real thing by staging a social cliché in more or less basic human terms. This allows for mordant social comment. But the book remains frozen in its particular posture and, as in the case of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist,* is merely a form of classy journalese.

The poverty formula was used with distinction by the Indian author, Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger.* We have yet another example of a piece of writing which records social reality with a measure of ingenuity though by foregrounding it and without an eye to generic niceties. The focus is on success in the context of a globalised India. Adiga sets out to expose the 'system' while at the same time pointing to the range of possibilities, social as well as economic, in the 'new' world.

The narrative mostly runs on manual. Adiga makes no bones about this. The writing is slick and the central character has no real identity. No Raskolnikoff, he lacks inwardness. Flat, he is among the social stereotypes that people much work currently being produced in the subcontinent. And the setting is irredeemably local. Such texts are transparently 'made up' and reek of retailing rather than creation.

However, fiction in the subcontinent will have to seek ways of reinventing itself - as will fiction in general. At the same time, fiction cannot afford to renege on its traditional concerns or what TS Eliot calls 'pastness.' That is to say that some link with moral consciousness or a quest of sorts, some abiding intuition of value, is called for.

Writing, of course, has its own dynamic. But the reality of a piece of writing speaks for itself. Not only does the narrative voice in such cases ring true. Whether because of a distance or disinterest, we know it is true. A perfect example is *A Bend in the River* by Nobel laureate VS Naipaul who has invariably shied away from fads. The story is set in postcolonial Africa at the time of Independence. Catharsis is central to this great novel. The 'idea' of Africa, together with place and perspective, matters as much as day to day happenings. Salim, the narrator, with his elegiac tone, understands far more - about animism and primal identity, the colonial moment and the complexity and pain of modernity - than he lets on.

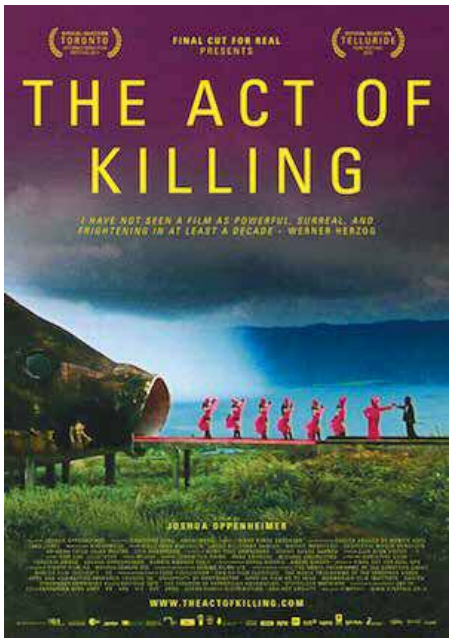
There is an unknowing and angst throughout, heightened by classic understatement. Descriptions of a pristine landscape are there not for their own sake but to convey the idea of an implacable nature. The work intrigues specially because of coming across as simultaneously local and transcendent, everyday and yet timeless.

It is unfortunate that no one on the subcontinent is writing like this today. Kitsch and gimmickry have always existed. But one presumes that they were not always the norm. The fear is that they may already constitute the prevailing aesthetic in the sphere of fiction. Market forces - assumptions about readers looking for instant gratification - are largely responsible.

That rather doubtful construct, the 'average' reader and the industrial yardstick seem, at least for the time being, to have won out. There is nothing wrong with fiction involving sweepers and rickshaw drivers. However, such populism is just slightly hollow and patronising. And it is depriving us of a more thoughtful, real and lasting art. ●

CINEMA NOTES

Waqar Ahmed



'The Act of Killing' is a film within a film (or a film within a documentary). It is built around the pretense of the dramatic reenactment of killings by paramilitary gangsters who hope to become stars as a result of making their own movie. What follows in these segments is the reconstruction of murders in various stylised mafia/film noir/surreal nightmare/Western/fantasy sequences. Film-maker Joshua Oppenheimer encouraged the gangsters to create murder scenes in "whichever way they wished."

In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of 1965, General Suharto, Indonesia's future dictator, backed by the CIA, executed between half to two million alleged Communist citizens in his country. The killings were carried out by paramilitary gangsters that to this day are celebrated as heroes in Indonesia. Oppenheimer initially wanted to make a documentary about the survivors (and victims) of this massacre, but the Indonesian army blocked his attempts. So, he decided to interview the aged "heroes" of the massacre—the executioners—who, to his surprise, were not only open, but boastful about the atrocities they had perpetrated.

The "larger" documentary follows Anwar Congo, a (now) gentle grandfather and his band of retired paramilitary friends, who, when not graphically describing the machinations behind their atrocities, give Oppenheimer's film crew a tour of their daily routines and family lives. These scenes throw into sharp relief the true reputation of Anwar and his posse—more than budding movie stars, they are still-feared gangsters who run for local office, extract protection money from Chinese shopkeepers, and hobnob with powerful politicians who, in turn, proudly declare to the latest paramilitary crop that they too are gangsters. Oppenheimer has remarked in recent interviews that Indonesia felt to him as if he'd "walked into present day Germany only to find that the Nazis were still in power."

The documentary opens with Anwar showing Oppenheimer's crew an efficient execution tactic he used to employ on his victims using wire and a block of wood. After the demonstration, he starts dancing the cha-cha-cha. He admits that dancing had often helped him forget the killing. Later in the documentary, Anwar reveals that he has frequent nightmares in which the people he has murdered come back to haunt him. These nightmares are also recreated in bizarre horror sequences in Anwar's own film takes. In the climactic scene of the documentary, Anwar returns to the rooftop where filming began and is unable to continue. Retching uncontrollably, the internalised trauma of his actions would seem to have finally caught up with him. Oppenheimer, however, spent more than five years gathering footage in Indonesia, something not shared with the audience, and it remains unclear whether Anwar's internal transformation—sparked by the recognition of his own culpability—occurred so efficiently at the conclusion of filming. Al Jazeera's '101 East - Indonesia's Killing Fields' (a great twenty-five minute companion piece to the documentary)—produced more recently—shows a still-defiant and unremorseful Anwar, speaking of his crimes as born of patriotic necessity.

Yet the neat arc of Anwar's realisation is a minor quibble. As is the lack of mention of the CIA's involvement in the decimation of alleged communists. Mainly, 'The Act of Killing' echoes Hannah Arendt's statement about the banality of evil ("Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil"). Anwar and his men couldn't have enjoyed all their murders. In recreating the executions in different film genres, it appears these gangsters are unconsciously struggling to assign a formulised label to their killings. But that isn't how Suharto's gangsters murdered more than half a million people. They had orders to carry out. And for the sake of expedience, sometimes entire villages had to be burned down and efficient methods of execution, like Anwar's wire and slab of wood implement, had to be devised. Try as they might, the gangsters in Oppenheimer's documentary are unable to put a stylised face on their atrocities. ●

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