

CITATION FOR TARIQ ALI

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By Professor Paul Maylam

There is an old Rolling Stones song called “Street Fighting Man”. The figure who inspired Mick Jagger to write the song in 1968 was a young student activist, an immigrant from Pakistan, who had recently led a march of 25,000 students to the US embassy in London in protest against the Vietnam War. This “Street Fighting Man” was Tariq Ali.

This spirit of activism went back to his youth. Born in Lahore – then still part of British India – a city he loved, the city where he spent a childhood dominated by kite-flying and street cricket. His mother also an activist, and his father a left-wing journalist. While studying at the Punjab University Tariq Ali emerged as a student leader, organising demonstrations against Pakistan’s recently established military dictatorship. His uncle, who was head of Pakistan’s military intelligence, advised him to leave the country to avoid imprisonment. And so in 1963 he enrolled at Oxford, quickly rising to prominence, winning election as president of the Oxford Union in 1965.

This was his platform to become an outspoken voice against the Vietnam War: in 1966 engaging in a tv debate with Henry Kissinger, a leading proponent of the war – one of the first such debates to be conducted by satellite transmission; in 1967 travelling to Vietnam on a magazine assignment and there compiling a photographic record of civilian casualties.

He has remained ever since a critic of American foreign policy: condemning the US for its support of successive military dictatorships in his home country, Pakistan, and for its unseemly alliances with other nasty regimes across the globe; for collaborating with apartheid South Africa; for its grossly

excessive military expenditure; and for its wholly unwarranted invasion of Iraq in 2003 (the critique to be found in his book, *Bush in Babylon*). The critique does not stop with the Bush administration – it extends to the Obama presidency, which, for Tariq, is more striking for its continuity with the Bush era than for any break with it.

This 1960s activism went beyond opposition to the Vietnam War: there was a visit to Palestinian refugee camps in 1967, and condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia the following year.

As an astute, incisive public intellectual Tariq Ali has also railed against neo-liberalism, denouncing the current hegemony of free-market economics, lamenting its impact on the impoverished masses across the globe: “The sobbing of the weak ...”, he has said, “is the sobbing of the victims of neo-liberal policies. They consist of billions of people all over the world”. But he finds hope in some Latin American countries which have challenged, defied and overturned neo-liberal dictates by striving for greater economic independence and self-reliance.

These strongly held views reach a wide audience. Not just an author of books, Tariq contributes regular columns to the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper, and to the *London Review of Books* – in a recent issue of the latter there is a poignant piece about the recent assassination of the governor of the Punjab, killed because he had defended a Christian woman falsely accused of blasphemy.

Our honorary graduand is as much a cultural figure as he is a political commentator: the author of over two dozen books – historical, biographical and political works, as well as novels. Particularly impressive has been the range of themes covered, and the enormously broad geographical scope of his work. There are books on the US, the UK, Latin America, Eastern

Europe, the Middle East, and most important, South Asia. There is a book on the Nehrus and Gandhis, another on the assassination of Indira Gandhi; and three books on Pakistan, based not only on extensive knowledge of the country of his birth, but also on his contacts with many of the major players in Pakistani life over the past fifty years.

A book entitled *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, written soon after the 9/11 attacks, has been translated into over twelve languages. Taking a broad historical sweep, the book offers a searching critique of two fundamentalisms: an arrogant, domineering American imperialism, and a rigid Islamic fanaticism.

Tariq's perspective is that of a secular humanist. Although born a Muslim he has never been a believer - this not stopping him from making Islam and its history a central theme of many of his six novels. With his interest in cultural interaction and mixing, he has explored the encounters between the Christian west and the Islamic world. One novel, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, is an account of the fall of Muslim Granada in fifteenth century Spain – a novel that manages to capture much of the local colour of the time and place.

We see here an enormous range of interests and breadth of knowledge. Such is his cultural versatility that his work extends beyond writing for a readership: in the 1980s branching out into film-making, forming his own tv production company, Bandung, which produced documentaries and drama for the UK's Channel Four.

Also a playwright who has written for the stage and tv – among these works an earlier piece for theatre called *Necklaces*, a plea for an end to violence in South Africa, and later a play that satirised the politics of Tony Blair. Tariq Ali's output has been extraordinarily prodigious.

Today Rhodes University is proud to honour one of the English-speaking world's foremost public intellectuals who can take a place alongside others like Noam Chomsky – historian, novelist, playwright, film-maker, activist; an incisive, often witty, political commentator; determined champion of oppressed, marginalised peoples across the globe; and, of course, the “Street Fighting Man”.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Tariq Ali the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.