

Responses to Manushi

More Ire on Fire

In issue No. 112 of MANUSHI, we had published several responses from SAWNET (South Asian Women's Network) to Madhu Kishwar's review of *Fire* (see MANUSHI 109). Madhu Kishwar's replies to those responses generated still more debate. We are publishing the SAWNET responses in full, along with a few other letters that came directly to us via e-mail. Our whole purpose in engaging in this exercise is to build communication bridges, learn to differ with each other, and resolve our differences through open debate, or at least agree to disagree without ill feeling. We hope that in the future, SAWNET members will communicate their criticisms, corrections and suggestions for improvement directly to MANUSHI.

Well, I read Madhu's response. Think my blood pressure is back to normal now, so I can write this. Interesting—first she spends two paragraphs berating Indian elite women, and how shallow they must be to even bother criticizing her article when, there are oh-so-many, far more pressing articles in MANUSHI! Hmm, if her article was so trivial – why even bother publishing it!

She responded only to the most superficial criticisms, pouncing on stray sentences here and there and jumping on a platform with them. In case of my post, she pounced on the rhetorical question about whether she was ever a joint-family bride and explained in detail why she never married, and proceeded to give the old hackneyed speech “some families are good and some are bad.” Duh! What’s the point? That we have to do statistical tests to prove which is more prevalent?

And finally, she finishes with a hate-spewing diatribe against Indians in western academia. I’d be fascinated to know where she’s getting her facts from!!!! To quote her:

“Western universities are filled with such NRI experts who will descend on India for a few days after every major riot or tragedy so that they can get enough material for presenting a new paper in a forthcoming conference. But gestures of compassion like money for relief work or starting a village school more often than not come from altogether another set of NRIs - computer scientists, doctors, professionals and businessmen who have successfully competed with westerners on their turf and made a respectable place for themselves in those societies. They have no pretensions of being India “experts” but want to stay connected in a useful way with their families and ancestral land. In other words, we are dealing with two sets of responses of emigrants to the problems of India - encashing on India’s misery or using the money they earn in foreign lands to help people in the land of their birth.”

Stereotype, compartmentalise and demonise other social scholars! Just what we need from a representative feminist scholar in India! Or is there

just a WEE bit of insecurity creeping in about HER rivals and those she sees as poaching on HER territory!

Pia, from SAWNET

It would have been a lot more mature and graceful had she just printed the letters as a differing viewpoint without feeling compelled to retort one more time. And on her turf! Seems pointless to invite letters from SAWNET just to use it as more fodder.

Champa Bilwakesh, from SAWNET

Yes, I too, read the MK responses to our critiques of her article. I was dumbfounded by what I read. The MK responses left me with the queasy feeling that she solicited my criticism for publication online in MANUSHI, not because she was being a real trooper and publishing the other side (which is what I’d initially thought and felt rather proud, thinking “Here is a woman for the 21st Century!”), but in order to have the opportunity to entice me to her turf for the proverbial slaughter. In hindsight, that struck me as sneaky and unprofessional. However, it did not surprise me, as I find that to be a tactic among those who seek the comfort and safety of a situation they control.

I read all of the critiques of her article, and nowhere did I find Madhu Kishwar's responses addressing issues and facts, but rather honing in on the critic as somehow inadequate, or ignorant, or, too westernised.

Finally, and foremost, I was quite aghast to read Madhu Kishwar's view that we who criticized her article came forward on an article about sex, while there were plenty of other articles in MANUSHI worthy of readers' attention! HUH???

In any case, Ms. Kishwar, if you or one of your staff members is reading this forum, please understand that there are some of us South Asian women, living in North America with our North American education/degrees/scholarship, interested in discussing issues vs tearing up personalities. My one and only point regarding your article on Mehta was that you could have presented India factually and the film's merits/demerits with no diatribe against Mehta, the woman.

Manjusree, from SAWNET



I read Madhu Kishwar's "naive outpourings..." and my first response was "right on, Madhu Kishwar, may the force be with you." Especially when she said, "some of us even enjoy pouring shit on the heads of our fellow-Indians because it has become a lucrative proposition in the western market." This is one of my pet theories, except that I throw the blame on publishers who select writings that they think will sell because of incipient orientalism. It was a well-substantiated piece where she pinned Mehta with her own statements.

However, without making this a defence of Kishwar in the Kishwar-Pia case, I just want to say:

One, that every reader comes with her own baggage, and clearly, you



and I have zoned in on different parts of Kishwar's points.

Two, Kishwar has often said white feminists and Indian feminists are poles apart, and warned Indian feminists to resist white feminists' neo-imperialism.

Three, I am intrigued by the emergence of a third grouping - the diaspora feminists, of which SAWNET would be a good example. Not that each is a homogeneous group, but it would be interesting to see if there are patterns of advocacy and resistance in each type.

Four, I wonder where I stand in all this. Am I a conservative regressive redneck for liking much of what Kishwar has to say, or a with-it progressive ahead of my times, who is resisting the articulate dismissiveness and/or onslaught on attitudes and approaches of non-western

Madhu Kishwars, such as can be seen in many western feminist essays?

Uma Parameswaran, from SAWNET



I was most surprised by Kishwar's discussion of homosexuality. She says "our tradition does not treat it as a moral or criminal offence." In my childhood I don't think I ever heard of a homosexual person, though other supposed horrors (e.g., intercommunity or inter-religious marriage) were spoken of in hushed whispers. She implies that many families would be less horrified by a homosexual relationship than a 'love marriage', but I would think exactly the opposite.

Lesbian groups appear to disagree with Kishwar, too. A recent news article described The Campaign for Lesbian Rights in Delhi, in which they pushed for the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India. The report describes lesbian women who are scared of being evicted if their landlord 'finds out', who are forced to consent to marriage, who have lost their property, and whose families had threatened them with violence. Most telling of all, the lesbian activists who called the news conference refused to be named or photographed. The report is on the web at <http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/news/news337.txt>

While discussing visible homosexuality in India, a friend pointed out that [AIADMK political leader] Jayalalitha, is well known to have a close relationship with Shashikala [her female companion of the past several years], and that this apparently does not bother anyone. I recall reading a comment from a rickshaw driver in Madras: "I don't care who she sleeps with; just let her do something for us." One could argue that this shows

acceptance of lesbian women, or, on the other hand, that the lifestyles of the rich and famous are completely irrelevant to the poor in India.

Susan, from SAWNET



I think the quote of Madhu Kishwar in MANUSHI reproduced in Pia's letter needs to be examined. I will only comment on the NRI professionals as I know them much closely and in far higher numbers than I do the immigrant social scientists.

I'd be a little wary of romanticizing the NRI professionals as readily as Madhu Kishwar does. Yes, the computer scientists, doctors, etc., have successfully competed with the Westerners on their own turf and have made a respectable place for themselves. However, I don't see how their professional success makes sending a pittance (taken as a percentage of their earnings) to India for some charitable cause an act of nobility. Let's also not forget the remittance sent by NRIs for other 'noble' causes like support of religious fundamentalists and secessionists.

For anybody who is involved in any sociopolitical activity, either here in the US or in India, the apathy of the average NRI professional as well as of their well-to-do counterparts in India is too glaring to be ignored. What makes sending money to India a "useful way of staying connected with their families and ancestral land"? If I send money to Turkey for earthquake relief operations, do I get credit for something deeper? Or would that depend on whether I am a social scientist or a computer scientist? As one of the latter myself (who would probably one day be accused of exploiting my cultural heritage, for surely all this computer stuff is described in the Vedas somewhere), I know and have opportunities to socialise with the "successful NRI" crowd.

If there is any genuine desire or interest on the part of the average NRI professional to right (or even recognise) the social or cultural injustices in India, I haven't seen it. In my opinion, a few token gestures should not be mistaken for a desire to "help people in the land of their birth."

As a person involved with a domestic violence organisation, I also see the successful NRI professional as a member of the group that forms the majority of the wife-abusers that we have come across among the South Asian community. The only time the NRIs speak out about US foreign policy is when the US gives aid to Pakistan. The only time the NRIs talk of racism is when an Indian is a victim. Certainly, there are NRI professionals who do not lead lives of utter self-absorption but given the sheer numbers of NRI professionals in the US, it is amazing how rare they are.

Madhu Kishwar is not a feminist, as per her own declaration.

Veena, from SAWNET



[This is a SAWNET response to Veena's e-mail]

Yup, you're right, should have remembered her famous article *Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist*. Maybe I should have said 'womanist' scholar, or scholar who claims to speak for women. My point was — the women she's trying to pull down by declaring that they 'cash in' on India's misery without giving two hoots are actually women like herself, academic/activists who speak about/ do research on women's issues and often get media attention.

BTW [By the way], I'm curious about whether fellow social scientists have had the OPPOSITE problem, being questioned for NOT working on India. I often get asked why my research focuses almost entirely on women in USA (apart from the sole dowry paper), why don't I instead do

research on women in India, when obviously that's where the greater need is. So any thoughts on that one — why should Indian academicians be EXPECTED to do research on India even if they live here in the U*S.?

Pia, from SAWNET



Well, isn't that true? I have often wondered the same thing. Why would NRI social scientists write articles and make films that focus on atrocities, brutalities, oppression and traumas of the Indian society? More often than not such films taunt Indian society. Hardly any film praises anything good in the Indian society. And yet, you and me have managed to emerge with enough self-confidence trying to gain a foothold on a foreign soil, and doing pretty well. For whom are films like *Fire* made? For the Indians in western countries? Or for the Westerners? Does it not make the Westerners look down upon Indian society and Indians even more? Or for the Indians in India? I have read that *Fire* did not make any impression even on women in India. Who exactly gains from a film like *Fire*? And what? Some more grant money from another western institution that is happy that some Indian herself is confirming the western image of downtrodden lives of 'those miserable Indians with some miserable traditions'?

Anon-soc-scientists, from SAWNET



The latest issue of MANUSHI was full of SAWNET responses to Madhu Kishwar's review of *Fire*. She responded at length, and towards the end of her article she made an interesting point. She pointed out that no Americans or Europeans come to India to study Europe, but there is a growing tradition of Indians in the social sciences going abroad, and yet working only on India. She is less than complimentary about this phenomenon. She says that working on India is an obvious niche with less

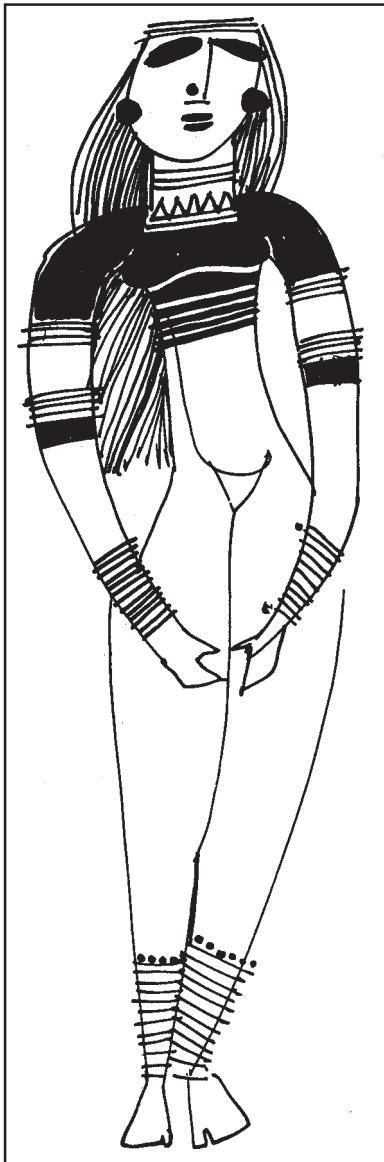
competition than working on, say, Greek literature. She sees it as NRIs exploiting their background, and holds up Vikram Seth, Shekhar Kapur, and Gayatri Spivak as examples of people who don't restrict themselves to India-related work.

On the other hand, one could argue that these NRIs have significantly increased the visibility of South Asia in academic circles abroad, and drawn money and attention to the field. I know SAWNET has many social scientists who work on South Asia-related topics: do you want to comment? If you're living/working abroad, why did you choose to work on India? Or vice versa, if you're working on India why did you choose not to live there (and have data at your fingertips?) I'm not being critical of either choice, by the way.

Susan, from SAWNET

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I live and work in the USA and have written about India lately, though my first book was about the US and my second set in the US, India, and Canada. I have a one-word answer to your question: love. I think you work on what you love, issues you love, places you feel in touch with, what you romanticise, what hurt you, heals you, what you're attracted to and care about. I think it's a compliment to India that so many fall in love with it, study it and write about it.

Of course you 'exploit' your background - you write about what you know. Everyone's thinking, no matter what their heritage, is shaped by their childhood. If Madhu chooses to label it 'exploitation' she is entitled to her point of view. I choose to take the view that our interest is both the continuation and affirmation of a relationship with India no matter where we are. My slogan might read: NRIs refuse exclusion by mere geography – this is the nineties!



Also, what Madhu may not appreciate, living in India, is that it is a political statement to introduce anything 'foreign' into the North American intellectual discourse, and to make it take the stage for a few hours in a reader's mind. It is an act of courage to write anything that starts from outside the paradigm of the Judeo-Christian tradition, from the margins, whether you are an academic or a creative writer. It is an act of courage to write anything that says that residents of developing countries are people

too, with hopes, dreams, fears and economic pressures that are very often caused by the all-knowing West.

Shauna S. Baldwin, from SAWNET

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During the last few weeks, I have been reading many of the posts on Deepa Mehta's *Fire* as well as the critiques of her work by Madhu Kishwar and Sawnettors. I have to agree with the points about accuracy and support those who posted comments about Mehta's use of artistic license. I think the same can be said of *Earth*. I was one of several people that attended the launch of *Earth* in Toronto. I found that *Earth* was not a bad film—it was just a mediocre film. There was nothing in it that made it a film of distinction—I kept thinking that Mehta's take on partition is like any other film I have ever seen by Bollywood about independence and cultural politics/violence of the time.

Her characters lacked development. I kept thinking at the end that I felt nothing for any them, including the child whose story Mehta's is telling. There were many people who felt that it was a powerful tale, but I kept thinking that it was just not moving enough. Why? We have all seen films about the violence and bloodshed during partition. Why is it that filmmakers continue to use carnage as a way to provoke audience reaction? Why is a train full of bloodied Muslim/Hindu bodies used to illustrate the madness of that time?

Doesn't any one see that Mehta exploits the images in her tale of religious hatred for the commercial/shock value? This is not to discount the importance or relevance of partition on India/Pakistan's continual conflict, but I am tired of seeing the same old religious violence and conflicts of interfaith couples dealing with the 'turmoil' unfolding around them. I

suppose, I would prefer stories where people achieve victory despite the madness around them.

There are other things in the film that bothered me too, but not being particularly well-versed in the cultural practice of the time, I will not judge Mehta. However, I know many of you are either from that region or are scholars of that time period. Is it acceptable that a nanny during that time would consort with only men and never have any female friends except for her boss? Would she be able to take the child under her care all over town in the company of single men without fear of her employer? There are many such questionable instances.

My final rambling on *Earth* is that Mehta has selected or highlighted aspects of the story that, I am sure, will no doubt bring her more controversy in India. I think that she uses controversial scenes as a way to distract us from a film which is for the most part quite unremarkable.

Meena Narahari, from SAWNET



Recently I have seen two issues of MANUSHI, the one in which you reviewed *Fire* and the other one that carried details of the discussion on the internet coordinated by the SAWNET. Earlier also I have seen some of your issues which have highlighted the problems of women.

In my opinion, you have unnecessarily given too much of importance to *Fire* by writing an excessively long review. The film by Deepa Mehta does not deserve such attention and the subject of lesbianism occupies a very small place in our society. It is a personal affair between two individuals of the same sex. I think, your review also reflected too much of your obsession with the subject of sex and sexuality. The reasons for lesbianism as depicted in Deepa Mehta's film may be partially true, but there can be other reasons



for it such as too much affection between two persons of the same sex, not getting sufficient opportunity to mix up and interact with the opposite sex and suppression of girls in our middle class society.

What I wonder most is why a woman should be equated or treated as a sex symbol only. There are bigger dimensions to human beings and a women should be treated as an individual and not on a gender basis. Intellectual women like you are doing a great disservice to women in general by confining your whole attention to sexism.

In my various trips abroad, I have met women of all ages from 16 to 60 and I have found them to value their individual worth. Unfortunately in India even so called educated and well placed women are more conscious of their gender and are trying to get attention and concessions on this basis.

I only wish that a social reformer, an educationist and a journalist like you should elevate the Indian woman to the status of a dignified individual who could compete and interact with men on the basis of equality.

G.C. Verma, New Delhi



Just checked MANUSHI website. Thanks for publishing my letter. Also for the response. Taking a cue I am celebrating not being bashed – being alive – all organs intact.

Incidentally, as you know people who admit to being gay/lesbian – keep

their government jobs- have no trouble on that account and live like anyone else – could you please let me know who they might be?

I am a moderately paid management professional but wouldn't mind working as a clerk in any government office which allows me to write 'Ms. lesbian partner' in the appropriate column for Provident Fund nomination. I'd find a partner and move to Delhi.

And why do women respond so agitatedly to opinions on sexual relationships/depiction thereof etc? Because we (particularly lesbians) are obsessed with sex – at least I am – maybe it's the 'less you have of something' principle at work. You are right, it's so terrible really – the trivial preoccupations of the educated elite are the root of much that is wrong.

Question—Do you think the same when you devote columns (*Times of India*) writing on Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* and the propriety and permissibility of mentioning her private parts?

Shreya Kishore, via e-mail



Recently, I happened to look at the *Responses to Manushi* on your review of the movie *Fire*. From this, I have made two main observations about serious-minded Indian progressives and feminists who live in America. First, members of this group frequently view Indian situations through ready-made and inflexible prisms that compliment

neither their academic inclinations nor their creative imaginations. Secondly, many appear uninterested in examining American society in-depth, despite the potential for critically adapting its lessons to the Indian context.

I recall that, during a discussion on the lifting of prohibition in Andhra Pradesh by Chandrababu Naidu, I had suggested that, perhaps the progressive NRIs who were condemning Naidu's action weren't paying enough attention to the American experience with prohibition. Moreover, they were also ignoring the various alternative intervention strategies and tactics which have taken root in American society, such as counseling, medication, propaganda, stern laws to combat destructive irresponsible behaviour like drunk driving, and so forth. These measures have been overlooked despite their capacity to manage and mitigate the destructive personal and social impact of alcohol abuse. The responses to my suggestion ranged from disinterest to insinuations that I had an agenda against the interests of poor rural women of Andhra Pradesh.

There appears to be some sort of curious sociological phenomenon at work here.

K.V. Bapa Rao, via e-mail

Madhu Kishwar responds...

Reading some of the SAWNET responses to my writing in general and my review of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* in particular, I am reminded of the following lines of a song from the film *Devdas*.

*"Jise tu kabool kar le,
woh ada kahan se laoон,
tere dil ko jo lubha le
woh sada kahan se laoон."*

(How do I acquire the graces and gestures that you will find acceptable? Where from do I learn the melody that will win over your heart?)

For years, several SAWNET members have been routinely trashing MANUSHI articles, especially those written by me. Interestingly, many of you at SAWNET notice MANUSHI mostly when you find something to vent your anger at. You have also never had the courtesy to send your criticisms directly to MANUSHI. We only hear of them from others. Some of your members even posted highly distorted versions of some of my lectures delivered in the US and went on to critique them without inviting me to reply to their criticisms. For years we ignored such attacks and chose not to respond in any way.

Finally, I decided it was time to engage with SAWNET members in a direct dialogue. When I saw a whole spate of responses to my review of *Fire*, I personally wrote to each one of the critics, seeking permission to publish their criticisms in MANUSHI. We made sure not to cut short their arguments. Since the purpose of this exercise was to engage in a dialogue, I felt a reply was essential. I find it hard to understand why some of you misconstrued publishing my response to the letters as some form of manipulation.

Manjusree, for example says: "Madhu Kishwar's responses left me with the queasy feeling that she solicited my criticism for publication in MANUSHI ...in order to have the opportunity to entice me to her turf for the proverbial slaughter. In hindsight, that struck me as sneaky and unprofessional." Isn't it bizarre that you should interpret my invitation to air your views in MANUSHI as some kind of a devious trap, when our publication is much more of an open forum than SAWNET, with its policy of restricted and controlled membership? MANUSHI readers are not cult followers of Madhu Kishwar. MANUSHI welcomes a wide spectrum

of readers with varying viewpoints. What was wrong with letting our regular readers and subscribers gain exposure to perspectives which are strongly critical of MANUSHI, while also giving space to my reply? By what stretch of imagination can this be called "sneaky" and "unprofessional"?

Pia accused me of "demonising social scholars" and thinks it is because of "insecurity creeping in about [my] rivals and those I see as poaching on [my] territory".

One of my highest priorities is to encourage as many of us as possible to work to remedy the many injustices that confront us in India, to shake people out of their complacency and passivity. I am not territorial about my concerns. Actually, I am appalled at how few people share them, and I want to do as much as possible to get more people involved.

I do not see myself as a 'scholar', but as a citizen deeply concerned about the problems we face in India today. That is why I write primarily in MANUSHI, which is more of a political forum, rather than in an outlet for academics. At the same time, MANUSHI has always sought to include relevant contributions of scholars working on a wide range of Indian issues, especially those who report findings useful for people working on human rights and social justice issues.

Pia, I did not object to the fact that SAWNET members critiqued my article. I only expressed my disappointment at the fact that SAWNET members merely picked up on a narrow range of issues involving sex, marriage and the family. I recognise the importance of these issues, which is why I also write about them. However, it bothers and puzzles me that SAWNET members have almost never picked up another vital matters that have been consistently raised in MANUSHI.

Veena, you seem to imply that there is something terribly deficient in me because I don't call myself a feminist. It's as though you consider my using this term an essential qualification for being taken seriously on women's issues.

Uma, one small correction. White feminists and Indian feminists are not always poles apart. As this debate shows, Indian feminists can take equally diverse positions. Neo-imperialism doesn't always come with a white skin. It also comes through the agency of those brown-skinned Indians who have as much contempt for their fellow Indians as the worst of European racists.

Some SAWNET members have expressed disapproval of my praise of those NRI's scientists, professionals and others who send money to support organisations providing educational, health and other services for disadvantaged groups in India. I distinguished them from other NRIs who exploit the social predicaments here in order to make a career for themselves, without contributing to the alleviation of those problems.

I am aware that the vast majority of NRIs (of all types) are indifferent to situations in India that do not directly involve their immediate families. Some are even contemptuous of this country's poverty and squalor, while some others support politically harmful campaigns like the one led by the Sangh Parivar to promote hatred against minorities. However, the vast majority's indifference does not detract from the fact that there are many NRIs who have taken the trouble to identify and support good causes in India with their own resources. The relevant point I wanted to make, however, was: what kind of relationship do NRIs who write about India's social, political and economic problems wish to



establish with their society of origin? Is a riot in Bombay or Meerut only an occasion to provide them with data for an academic exercise, for writing up a proposal for a research grant, or for presenting a paper in a foreign university? Or do they also take responsibility for securing help for the victims and working towards resolving these conflicts?

In all these years of working with MANUSHI, I have encountered very few NRI researchers specialising in writing on communal riots and atrocities against women offering even a token amount of assistance to

riot victims or those who have suffered other kinds of violence. These researchers have come and collected reports of civil liberties organisations, back issues of MANUSHI, and picked our brains for the latest developments, but there is rarely direct help forthcoming for those people whose plight forms the subject of their academic engagement. We are living in a very strange world today. The study of poverty, conflicts, atrocities, human rights violations and warfare has become a lucrative profession, even while the objects of their 'concern' languish and die.

Each one of us who claims to care about these issues needs to carry out an honest self-audit. Are we actually serving the cause we espouse or are we getting the cause to serve us? Each one of us will have to evolve our own criteria for evaluating our own role and relationship to the causes we espouse. □

Colour Me

*It's easy to be a featureless silhouette
If you're standing at a darkened window
Until a stranger's hand
Turns on the light
And you see the mess
That you call your life.*

*It's easy to paint a masterpiece in the dark
Until they turn the spotlight on your canvas.
And you see the riotous red rages,
And you see your purple passion,
And you get a good look
At your pale-green goodbyes.
In the harsh light,
You see pseudo blue-blooded intellect
Woven through streaks of yellow yearning
And ropes of golden guilt.*

*But until silver sunlight
Streams upon your windowsill,
You'll never be able to mix
The right shade of lilac for love.*

Richard Bach