

History Animated through Words

Muktir Parampara: Bangladesher Muktisangramer Prekshapat o Prastutiparba,
Abul Kashem, Kathaprokash, 2020

REVIEWED BY ABDUS SELIM

No matter Lawrence Durrell defines history as “an endless repetition of the wrong way of living,” we must study it closely for gaining insights into our very own existence and setting our future course of actions. Past is crucial to taking inspiration and cues to chart a roadmap in the present in a bid to ensure a better and shinier future. Although Georg Hegel says, “We learn from history that we do not learn from history,” we should engage with it to at least know what we are—to use George Santayana’s words, interestingly on the same matter—“condemned to repeat.” Front-loaded

sharing my pleasure and takeaways with you.

First and foremost, the book remains singularly focused on putting in perspective the evolutionary nature of politics during the 23 years of East Bengal’s unhappy marriage with (West) Pakistan. It also looks into the causes that motivated the Muslims of the British province of East Bengal to zealously fight for Pakistan. The writer in line with many other objective historians rightly points out how the class tension between minority Hindu gentry and majority Muslim peasantry reconfigured into communal hostility and increasingly exacerbated the political climate. Pakistan appeared as a promised land especially for Muslim Bengalis, an idea that got crushed not much later after its emergence. However, Bengalis gradually discovered their distinct national and cultural identity and prepared themselves through popular movements and upsurges for achieving their freedom. Author Abul Kashem is spot-on in his observation that the Liberation War is not an isolated event, rather the culmination of the long struggle for freedom. He makes no mistake to show how the language movement on February 21, 1952 is the launching pad of Bengali nationalism leading a betrayed people to a search for ultimate self-determination. It does not mean, neither the author implies, that the process was a smooth one.

The whole journey toward the final victory was packed with false starts, confusion, misunderstanding and trial and tribulation. Crucial to the project was the emergence of the Awami Muslim League, a party that over time became the most authentic representative of the people of East Bengal. Starting as the platform for

disgruntled and western-educated liberal section of the Muslim League, the party graduated itself into a progressive and nationalist political organization championing the cause of Bengalis initially within the framework of Pakistan. Author Abul Kashem shows us how the Awami League despite its preliminary Islamic leanings veered off to a secular course to emerge as the vocal representative of Bengalis of all stripes. Also the partnership with left-oriented parties, however various and fluctuating it was, made possible Awami League’s steady liberalization and secularization. That the party adopted secularism as a cornerstone of Bangladeshi constitution following independence—the writer points out smack dab—is an outcome of its love affair with socialist parties.

Quite sensibly, the writer sheds light on the landslide victory of the United Front in the general election in 1954, Awami League being the biggest force in it. However, the constant conspiracy of Punjabi-led military establishment, smear campaigns led by the Muslim League and other religion-based political hypocrites, and the internal weakness emanating from ideological differences between the parties of the alliance proved to be its undoing. Author Abul Kashem sharply diagnoses the factors leading to the collapse of the first political endeavor of Bengalis in the business of

statecraft. Nevertheless, he appreciates the merit of its political potentials that would prove decisive in Bangladesh’s creation. But, the leadership of Suhrawardy—the writer does not fail to show—kept the Awami League as the sole voice of Bengalis

Pakistani statehood. This is really a big turning point in our national history.

Historian Abul Kashem also discusses the emergence and progression of student politics in East Bengal. He tells us how the Students’ League and the Students’ Union interacted with each other and how they delivered the goods when it

mattered the most in scripting the course of our history. He highlights the glorious and at times not-so-pleasant role of student politics in shaping the basis on which to go for ultimate pursuit of freedom. Plus, he puts emphasis on Bashani’s activism being an x-factor in our march towards victory. One more thing, he lambasts the crooked aspects of military dictatorship under quite a few hotheaded generals with Ayub Khan as a kingpin. The historian deserves my kudos for his sharp eyes over minute details of the major issues of the history of that period.

My review cannot do complete justice to the book *Muktir Parampara: Bangladesher Muktisangramer Prekshapat o Prastutiparba*. Readers can discover their own treasure upon reading. Generally speaking, the book is well-researched and brilliantly articulated. The nagging problem though, I must say, is the typos, words missing and a bit of clumsiness especially with regards to quotations. Hope the next edition will have fewer errors. Last but not least, I wish this scintillating academic attempt at the most significant phase of our history a resounding acknowledgement and wide readership.

Abdus Selim is an academic, translator and playwright.



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as it may look with history quotes, it clues you in on my motivation to pick up the book *Muktir Parampara: Bangladesher Muktisangramer Prekshapat o Prastutiparba* (“Sequence of Attainment of Freedom: The Background and Preparatory Phase of the Liberation Struggle of Bangladesh,” roughly translated.) Authored by Prof. Abul Kashem of Rajshahi University and published this February, the book came to me like a breath of fresh air. I finished reading it through in two sittings punctuated by note-taking, and at the moment I am geared up for

but within the context of a united Pakistan. It is our luck that his demise, however sad and deplorable it is, set up a perfect stage for nationalist leaders with Sheikh Mujib at the forefront to push for full-scale independence. The “six-point demand,” author Abul Kashem stresses, was a blueprint for our separation from the

Sweet Dreams and Distressing Nightmares

Boulevard of Broken Dreams & Other Stories, Rummana Chowdhury, Bihaan Music Publishers, 2020

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

Those haunting lyrics of the British band Eurythmics, “Sweet dreams are made of this...”, followed intermittently by “...everybody is looking for something...”, and “...some of them want to use you...” fairly accurately encapsulate the theme of the dozen short stories that make up Rummana Chowdhury’s slim volume, *Boulevard of Broken Dreams & Other Stories*. Chowdhury is, as her profile states, a poet, columnist, critic, and fiction writer, having written forty two books in both English and Bangla. She has other achievements to her credit, including having been multiple national badminton singles champion and once a triple crown winner, a champion debater, host of a variety of TV, radio, and stage shows, and a recipient of a plethora of awards from Canada, India, and Bangladesh. She is a Bangladeshi by birth, but has been a Canadian resident for close to forty years. Her dual experience in the lands of her birth and of adoption forms the thematic bedrock of her book.

The dozen offerings are simple stories simply told of the Bangladeshi diaspora in (not surprisingly, given the author’s lengthy residence there) Canada and a smattering of other countries, and of the confusing identity that the new emigrants struggle with that is almost a reflection of them being caught up in the adage of being neither here nor there. Let Rummana Chowdhury articulate in her Preface: “...it’s no wonder why living in two places has only caused me to feel more and more confused about what home actually means. Can a person’s home exist in a new country if all their best memories continue to exist in a whole other place? I have spent years and years trying to answer this question... I have met more and more souls that seem to feel the same disorientation around concepts of home. I was inspired to write *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* on the backs of these stories. People who migrate, who leave home, who create new homes. People who

will never quite have a home. People who want to know what home ever was.” Given these circumstances, little wonder then that broken dreams result from nostalgia, heightened expectations, and self-doubt.

The opening story, “Boulevard of Broken Dreams”, is about a married couple, Atif (born in Bangladesh) and Rima (born in Canada), who had bought a condo in downtown Toronto (in Canada) against their parents’ wishes (who lived in the Canadian town of Mississauga), and who “wanted their children to live with them even after marriage, as is the Bangladeshi custom.” The conflict of culture and tradition in a new and alien setting is highlighted here. All the other stories, in greater or lesser degrees, carry this theme within them. In “Vermillion on the Diamonds”, the author observes, “Dreams are made with ethereal ingredients.” This point is amply illustrated in the opening story where, to get away for a while from the grind of their existence in Toronto, Atif and Rima take a trip to Florence, Italy. There they discover that the Italians consider sculpture to be the highest form of art, and superior to painting.

But they also discover Bangladeshi expatriate Shabuj by happenstance while the young man was engaged in selling water bottles on the streets of Venice. He related another aspect of the Bangladeshi diaspora, that of reaching for the stars in the Middle

East and Europe, courtesy of predatory manpower exporters, and then having their dreams shattered on reaching foreign shores. “There are so many boys like me spread all over Mecca, Medina, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Sharzeh, Muscat etc.,” Shabuj enlightens them, “whose dreams have been shattered a thousand times, day in and day out.” The poignant part of his own story is that he had to take recourse to a fake marriage (by dishing out quite a hefty sum) to a local woman to gain permanent resident status in Italy,

while thinking of his betrothed whom he had left behind in Bangladesh with the hope that he would be able to marry her once he had settled down in the alien country.

Chowdhury is introspective on the subject of dreams in “Lazy Afternoon,” “...dreams were plentiful in numbers when you are an adult yet not an adult. There was a very thin margin in...visions between

imagination and reality.” This story contains the author’s views and information on the distinctive features of the district of her origin, Chattogram: “The Chittagonians are very proud and passionate about this part of their distinct culture (mejbaan), their language, social rituals and cultural expressions, which are hugely different from other parts of Bangladesh.” It is apparent that Rummana Chowdhury pines for her birthplace, but her faintly disguised diasporic alter ego, through the

character Aarya, also comes through: “She had immense allegiance to and love for this beautiful country of multiculturalism where various people with different backgrounds and origins have come and transferred it into a vibrant society. This multicultural mosaic of Canada has given this country a new, distinctive identity.”

Chowdhury made these observations in the context of Robert Ford, once a reviled Mayor of Toronto, the city of the author’s diasporic residence. She brought him back in “The Melody of Youth”, and evinced her distaste for him by thus characterizing him: “He had earned quite a lot of negative local and international publicity for his alcoholism, drug abuse and language profanity.” That the people had elected him has seemingly galled Chowdhury, as she is obviously smitten with her adopted country. Nonetheless, she is cognizant of the diasporic divides too. In “By the Caribbean Sea: Island in the Molten Sun”, she observes: “Then there were the cultural, religious, social and psychological conflicts between the East and the West. The values, traditions and heritage between Bangladesh and Canada were often conflicting.”

“The Kohl of Her Eyes” takes the reader through some of the unsavory activities carried out by certain people in Bangladesh, like videotaping pornographic relations between ten and twelve year old boys, and then making money out of exhibiting them. This story centers on Bangladesh and also discusses its microcredit programs like that of Grameen Bank. It also contains this pessimistic observation that is not far off from the truth: “...there was no winning in this game of living.” Japan is seen in “Golden Lotus” through the eyes of a Bangladeshi expatriate in that country. He is married to a Japanese woman and they have a son and a daughter. The son looks like him and, in a tangential reference to the matter of race, his father laments: “He cannot adjust with boys of his age here and

he does not want to go and live in Bangladesh without the family.” He himself “could not release himself from his roots and be blessed with the enlightenment of the miracles of a new country, be it good or bad.” And, therein lies the predicament of the diasporic person, the Bangladeshi in particular, but, one suspects, for most other nationalities as well, although some will adjust much better than others.

Rummana Chowdhury takes the reader through a number of countries via the diasporic route, and, obviously,

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being a keen social observer, makes some astute observations on the societies, customs, traditions, and the life of the diasporic Bangladeshi in these places. She dwells at length on the subject of food, and the interested reader will relish the details given on primarily Bangladeshi food items as well as those of several other countries. The twelve stories portray a vivid picture of diasporic life, although some by employing a greater stretch of imagination than the others. They are eminently readable, and *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* does manage to convey the overall impression that broken dreams usually result from heightened expectations.

Shahid Alam is thespian and Professor, Department of Media and Communication, IUB.

