

book review

Muktijuddher Galpo: Tales from the Liberation War

by Syed Manzoorul Islam

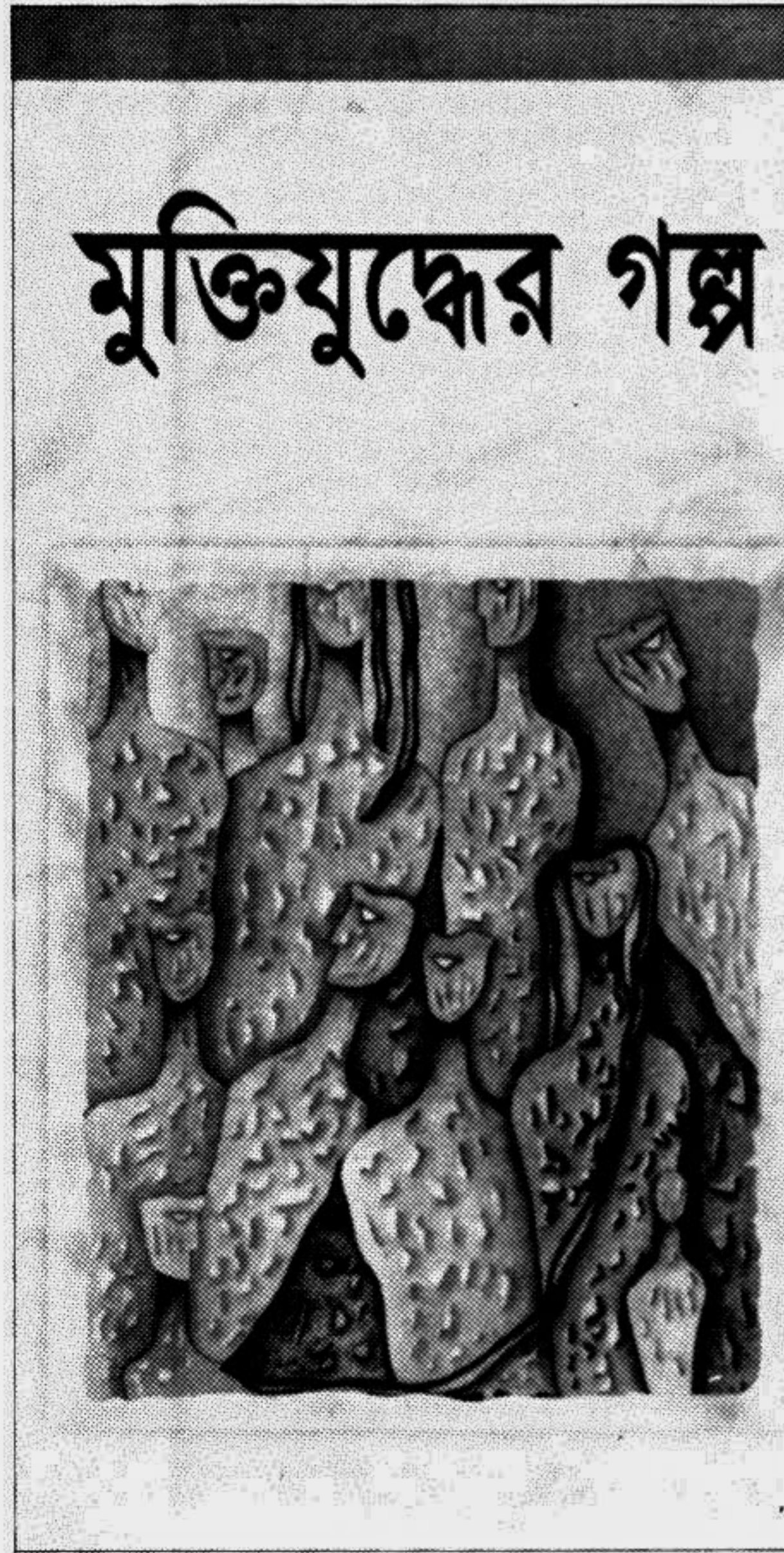
IN reviewing a selection of short stories that have the war of liberation as their focus, it is important to step out of the familiar paradigms of the war as a historical main event, or a culmination of the struggle for Bengali nationalism, and consider, for a moment, that the war was also a rearticulation of our emergent discourse of power and resistance that clearly defined our visions of culture and the way our history would henceforth be narrated. The war of liberation created its own emancipatory discourses but many of these ran dry and were devoid of meaning by the time the country slipped under presidential rule and subsequently, martial law regimes. Like post-colonial literatures elsewhere in the world, the post-1971 literary productions in Bangladesh began by describing and investigating the nation and its new found spaces, but this effort was also accompanied by a major unsettling of the terms of investigation. Borrowing words from Homi Bhabha, we may say that the dominant meanings of the time appeared 'partial' because 'they [were] in medias res ... and the image of cultural authority [was] ambivalent because it [was] caught, uncertainly, in the act of 'compromising' its powerful image' (Nation and Narration, London: Routledge, 1990:3). One of the main reasons for this shift in perspective and the disorientation of liberatory discourses was the re-emergence of the old order. That order -- reflected in the structures of power and politics -- was never dismantled, it quickly readjusted to the new realities, sacrificing only its expendable members and components, and completely usurped the new clusters of authority (the disbanded guerrilla groups, the freedom fighters, youth activists). In the process, the form of the order underwent some minor changes but the substance remained the same, and its edifice became all the more entrenched. Notwithstanding the provisions of a remarkably modern Constitution the state resumed its repressive, often totalising functions.

However, the discourses that survived and carried out their liberatory functions were those that reinterpreted

the nexus between power (the positive and formative) and knowledge as the nation searched for a new textuality. The media, for example began questioning the predominance of power as it preempted any critique of its operation, judicial literatures challenged the state's repressive apparatus, and protests mounted by various radical groups (many of them operating from the underground) unsettled the technicalities of power. But the salvage operation was largely left to literature, as it had the capacity to transform power into knowledge. But literature, too, had to face its own challenges: in a situation where the post-colonial nation was embarking on its uneasy and tenuous journey towards the future while clinging, regrettably, to earlier forms of repression as means of authority, literature was handicapped by these inherent ironies and contradictions. Instead of taking up a fight against the entrenched forces that resisted historical change, and re-embedded the old repressive order in all our political, social and cultural structures, literature became involved with its own fictionality. Its interior was filled up with imagined, instead of real, spaces. It became inclusive, brooding and preoccupied with its own forms.

Writing about the war thus became a vicarious celebration of its power -- which somehow did not flow beyond the printed pages into the spheres of hard reality. Throughout the seventies and eighties, this reliving the great moment of history by proxy became the dominant exercise. As a result, most writing about the war tended to be mnemonic reconstructions of those moments at a remove of time -- and not a record of actual encounters with history itself. There was an undue emphasis on the fictionality of experience, at the cost of the truth of feeling, which often melodramatized the hardcore experience.

However, there have been good works of fiction about our liberation war that did not temporalize history in that narrow sense. There is rather an immediacy of felt experience, and an expression of power transforming our present, in those works. Syed Shamsul Haque's *The Story of the Second Day* is a striking



example of how feelings can be activated and worked up even at a remove of time, and how history can be made co-terminus with our reality of living. Many stories from Muktijuddher Galpo (ed. Abul Hasnat, Dhaka: Abosar, 1997) also perform such a function, although there are a few that cannot avoid the rut of sentimentality and the blood-and-thunder narration that is so common in stories about actual wars.

Muktijuddher Galpo is a well edited selection of short stories of three

decades about the liberation war. Out of hundreds of stories about the war, the editor has selected only 70. It was a difficult job, no doubt, as any selection obviously implies following a criterion or a set of them, which can be easily subverted by a too rigid application of any predetermined value judgement (or an ideological, political or literary bias). There have been other selections of such stories -- in one, 'new' or 'experimental' writers were kept out; in another, stories were chosen to conform to

a party ideology. Abul Hasnat has gone for the 'truth of experience,' and an 'objectivity of vision' -- as he informs us in the brief introductory write up. 'The storytellers of our time,' he tells us, 'have been looking at our war of liberation with an objective and unbiased eye, that expresses their genuine feeling and love for their countrymen. There is passion, but it does not distort our commitment to truth.' The stories in Muktijuddher Galpo turn history into fiction, but does not fictionalize history. There is hardly any attempt by any of the writers to turn the war of liberation into anything more than what it was -- a war we fought for our survival. This emphasis on fact is important, since it gives them a wide field of vision and enough material to work into their fiction. The war -- the historical war, was as it would inspire us through all our lifetimes without the need of fictionalizing or symbolizing any of its contents. The 70 stories have been chosen for the variety of their experience and their 'rich and diverse artistry'. Many of the writers either participated in the war, or looked at it from close quarters, some felt its power at a remove of time and place, while some were too young to participate in the war, but all had made tremendous emotional investments in the war. The stories however, record this intense personal involvement only within the framework of the fiction. Therefore, the stories develop independently of their 'creators' involvement. This is perhaps, what Abul Hasnat called 'objectivity'. It is not a blocking of personal emotions and feelings, but a rechanneling of them in energizing the stories' content and their vision, without in any significant way altering their truth content.

Abul Hasnat has brought together three generations of writers -- from Satyen Sen and Shawkat Osman to Akhteruzzaman Ilyas and Kayes Ahmed to Sudhamoy Kar. The list of writers reads like a veritable who's who of fiction writers of the country, but instead of going for the known, and widely read, pieces, the editor has picked up stories that explore the 'many dimensional depth' of characters and events.

It will be beyond the scope of this review to introduce all the stories of the volume -- it is indeed the prerogative of the reader to discover for himself or herself the intricate world of the stories, their passion, patriotism and polish, their narrative strategies and their portrayal of some unforgettable characters (e.g. Bhubhan of 'One day in the life of Bhubhan' by Hasan Azizul Haque or Amina and Madina of Selina Hossain's 'The Story of Amina and Madina'). Still a few stories need to be pointed out (apart from the two mentioned above) as among the best that have been written about the war, or any war for that matter. 'Two Brigadiers,' by Shawkat Osman; 'As nothing can be seen clearly,' Syed Shamsul Haque; 'Bayonet -- once again,' Shawkat Ali; 'Gold under the corpse,' Bashir Al-Helal; 'Maupassant in 1971,' Hasnat Abdul Hye; 'Sandbank in the Middle,' Rahat Khan; 'Dear ones,' Rashid Haider; 'Black out,' Abdul Mannan Syed; 'Raincoat,' Akhteruzzaman Ilyas; 'Mr. Jalil's Petition,' Humayun Ahmed; 'The Headless Body,' Afsan Chowdhury; 'Twentyfive years,' Wasi Ahmed; 'Razakar's Ghost,' Manju Sarkar; 'The other background,' Ahmed Bashir; 'The Man was a Rajakar,' Imadatul Haque Milon; 'Nurul and his Notes,' Muhammad Zafar Iqbal; 'Thorn,' Shahidul Jaheer, 'The Faith Killer,' Nasreen Jahan; 'Soil -- Pre-ancient,' Intiar Shamim; 'A Sister named Chandrabhanu,' Hamid Kaiser; 'The Translation of Silence,' Parvez Hossain; 'Non-fighter,' by Mashui Alam etc. These stories together bring the eventful days of 1971 to life again, and the readers, including those who were born after the war, are drawn into its powerful world.

As if to etch the pictures of 1971 into the conscience of the readers, paintings by the country's leading artists are included as headpieces to all the stories. The 70 paintings are also about the war, although their images do not always conform to the leading thought or idea of the stories. They finally converge on the wider planes of emotion and passion. In that sense the paintings complement the stories, adding their own interpretation and reconstruction of the experience of the war.

profile

Arther Conan Doyle: An Eminent Novelist with Versatile Talents

by A S M Nurunnabi

IN the opinion of competent literary circles, there are a few characters of fiction who step out of their books and become known almost universally. The literary eminence of their creators seems to bear no relation to their fame. The best known of them in Sherlock Holmes who has been described as "the most famous man who never lived." Even without Holmes, Arther Conan Doyle would still hold a reasonably high place in the literature of adventure stories and historical romance. He himself wished to be remembered by his historical romances, notably 'The White Company' and 'Sir Nigel', though these are ponderous compared to two volumes of Napoleonic short stories, 'The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard' and 'The Adventures of Gerard'. In Gerard he

created a really memorable and living character, a vain French brigadier, as brave as he himself boasts to be, though with an amusing touch of stupidity, who narrates his own exciting adventures in a delightfully flamboyant manner.

Doyle's narrative, in fact, makes almost all his fiction eminently readable. Besides the Gerard stories, Doyle also produced an excellent volume of miscellaneous historical tales, 'The Last Galley', later issued with one additional story as 'Tales of Long Ago', which he considered the best of unaffiliated short stories. He was certainly a master of the short story of plot rather than character, but, apart from the Holmes and Gerard collections, he was probably at his best with 'Tales of Terror and Mystery' and of 'Twilight and the Unseen'.

In 1912, trying to escape from Ser-

lock Holmes, Doyle strove to create another memorable character as different from him as possible, and wrote 'The Lost World'. The story is of an expedition to a plateau in South America isolated from the rest of the world, where prehistoric animals and savages in a very early state of development still survive. It is told in a series of reports by the journalist member of the party -- an excellent method of creating suspense -- and remains one of the most popular of Doyle's books.

Doyle really lives as an important author by his long and short stories of Sherlock Holmes, the first private consulting detective, who made his rooms at 221B Baker Street, London so famous that large numbers of letters addressed to a fictitious character at a fictitious address turned up long afterwards.

Doyle did not invent the detective story of the detective. There were detectives in the novels of Dickens and Wilkie Collins. The first appearance of Sherlock Holmes, 'A Study in Scarlet' created little stir among critics or readers; the second of the longer adventures, 'The Sign of Four' had more popular success. It was not until 'the Adventures' began appearing month by month in the Strand Magazine in 1891 that Sherlock Holmes took the public by storm.

Doyle's achievement lies in creating the first short detective story with the eccentric detective whose interest for the reader is focused on his mind rather than his soul, and who is accompanied by a companion who is a little more dull-witted than the reader is assumed to be. Doyle, the professional doctor with the scientific and analytic mind,

trained to observe and report found his perfect subjects in Holmes and Watson. He also captured the setting and atmosphere of the period and background in a way that created some unexplained spell. This produced the unique activities of Sherlock Holmes Societies all over the world and a library of Sherlock Holmes literature.

Probably most critics agree that 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' is Doyle's masterpiece. Many of his short stories, including 'The Speckled Band' and 'Silver Blaze' are in the same class. Although Doyle describes Holmes as "the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen," he was able to create externally a character and a period setting as unique and recognisable as the more deeply drawn characters of the great novelists.

'The Hound of the Baskervilles' remains among the most popular and memorable of the 56 stories and four novels Doyle based upon Holmes and his friend and biographer Dr Watson. In this novel presenting a structured sustained narrative that is difficult to achieve in detective fiction, we see Holmes and Watson locked into a brooding, even hostile Darwinian universe, an indifferent cosmos whose presence overshadows their lives and throws the world of Baker Street into its proper perspective. Doyle implies this cosmological perspective by establishing an historical framework with the story. This novel also shows that Doyle modified his traditional detective formula slightly to allow his hero to peer beyond the physical facts into the mystery of life itself.

reflections

Desultory Talks on Knowledge, Learning and Modernity etc

by Mozaffar Hossain

THE quest for knowledge began not for any fashionable urge for identifying oneself as 'wise' or 'learned'. It began for the sake of life itself. At the dawn of civilisation life was very tough and tedious. Tiny men had to face innumerable inimical gigantic forces of nature. To fight against these forces men had to maintain unity amongst themselves. To solve their basic needs of life, viz, food and shelter, the primitive men had to maintain a society based on equality and fraternity. In such a society, individuality was unknown as it is understood now-a-days. People had to work together, fight together as allied forces against nature. In course of thus fighting, men gradually became aware of some secrets of nature hitherto un-

known. These secrets helped them to control nature. Such acquisition of the power of controlling nature constitutes knowledge GE and learning. Strictly speaking, knowledge is theoretical and learning is practical. They go hand in hand as theory and practice help each other.

With the growth and development of the primitive simple fraternal society as intricate and complex society knowledge and wisdom have lost their original meaning and spirit. These words are now playing an offensive not against nature but against man himself. The spirit of unity and fraternity has already been lost with the decay and disappearance of primitive fraternal society. Like all other material possessions knowledge has also become a property of the few. It has also become a prestige symbol to some.

A cross-section of our intelligentsia

is proud of identifying themselves as 'learned' and up-to-date in the sense that they were up-to-date clothes, they eat snacks in up-to-date restaurants, they live in up-to-date houses and they enjoy or witness the spy-thrillers and blue-films in televisions. There is no denying the fact that such signs and symbols speak only about the get-up of a book not the contents.

In the present society situations are created by the authority in power to thrust their news and views upon persons who are prone to accept the outward glamour of things without going deep into the details. The thinking of such persons is moulded to serve the authority in power, and it is through these persons that the whole society is notoriously exploited.

During the British regime, the efficient thought-controlling machinery of the Government used to motivate the

thinking of our people in a definite direction quite opposite to the nationalistic line. Newspapers, radios, professional orators were the main tools of controlling thoughts. To justify the evil designs of the ruling class these machineries used jugglery of flowery words which were composed mainly by the native educated people. The innocent mass had no other way but to surrender to this glamorous propaganda. But this state of affairs cannot last for an indefinite period. At last came the eventful year of 1947 when the Britishers left the country, left with a parting kick of partition which came as a perdition for both the major communities of the sub-continent -- the Muslims of India and the Hindus of Pakistan. Communalism, which was the main tool of dichotomy, became the prime weapon of exploiting the mass. The fallacy committed in 1947 had no chance to be corrected. But

the urge for fraternity of the two communities and a hankering for freedom had not died out. People's upsurge and revolt against exploitation came as the Great Liberation Movement of 1971. Hence came the conception of Secularism as one of the main objectives of Bangladesh.

But a cross-section of our educated men always are in the habit of alienating themselves from the general weal and interest of the common people by playing the dirty game of using man against man. Man is mortal, but the collaborators are immortal. Individual collaborators die only to give birth to a second generation. They are like the Indian mythical giants Shumbha and Nishumbha who by the grace of Brahma became immortal for long causing much trouble and pain for peace-loving creations. Historically it is due to such collaborators that the historical fight

of man against nature has changed its course and character to fight against his own species. This is quite contrary to the goal of education and learning.

Now, what is the modern and up-to-date knowledge that we were talking about? Is it a sum total of some visionary and unrealistic jargon of vocabularies hitherto unheard? The answer is a big No. A Knowledge is modern and up-to-date when it serves humanity in fighting all the up-to-date forces against peace and happiness. Thus, an up-to-date knowledge is a tool for attaining the desired peace and happiness based on fraternal human society. The earth is only a cradle for human civilisation. Man is now matured enough to leave this cradle and advance for other planets with the banner of peace and progress. Is it not unbecoming of us to quarrel with ourselves like adolescent boys?