

BOOK EXTRACT

A double delight

Kaiser Haq is amongst the finest English-language poets writing today in the international literary scene and a translator of great repute. He has published four collections of poetry *Starting Lines* (1978), *A Little Ado* (1978), *A Happy Farewell* (1994), and *Black Orchid* (1996). He translated *Selected Poems of Shamsur Rahman* (1985) and *Quartet* by Rabindranath Tagore (Heinemann, 1993). Kaiser's recently translated *The Wonders of Vilayat: Being the Memoir, Originally in Persian, of a Visit to France and Britain in 1765* (Leeds: Peepal Books, 2001) has been published in London with critical acclaim. The book is a travel account of Mirza Sheikh I'Tesamuddin, the first Bengali Muslim to Britain (his book was written in 1784). Mirza "...wrote frankly about what he felt accounted for India's decline and Europe's contemporary ascendancy, he was a highly educated, culturally self-confident observer with a sharp and quizzical curiosity about the alien cultures he encountered." *The Wonders of Vilayat* and Kaiser's fifth collection of verses *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song* (Jointly published by Aark Arts, London and UPL, Dhaka) were formally launched yesterday at Bengal Shilpalaya. We carry here an exclusive extract from *The Wonders of Vilayat* and a host of poems from the newly published book of verse. These two books together are a double-delight for the literary enthusiasts of the country.

IN Vilayet the arrangements for performances of music and dance are very different from those in India. In our country the idle rich hire professional singers and dancers for private performances in their homes, where they invite their cronies. This practice is quite alien to Vilayet, where a group of impresearios jointly form a company and build a huge performing hall, or theatre, in which they put on public shows. They hire highly paid singers and dancers of both sexes, and musicians who have been trained to perfection by rare maestros, to put on their song-and-dance *tamasha* [show] decked in expensive costumes and jewellery, before an audience that includes both rich and poor Londoners, and even the emirs of the land, the princes of the realm, sometimes the King himself. The entry fee varies with the quality of the seat. The very best, set aside for emirs and princes, cost one *ashrafi* [gold sovereign] each; those of the middle rank, for gentlemen, cost five rupees each; and those for common citizens cost eight annas each. Attendance at a performance may be as high as thousands. But the important point is that gentlemen (for only five rupees) and ordinary citizens (for only eight annas) can sit together in peace and comfort and enjoy a performance fit for royalty, the like of which people in India haven't even seen in dreams; and thereby the performers earn thousands of rupees every day. Truly, the Firinghees can accomplish great things at little expense. In India, on the other hand, luxurious young men squander a couple of hundred rupees on an evening's naught

party; and lakhs of rupees of patrimony, which they may inherit, take wing in a short time.

In Vilayet, when a spectator pays the entry fee he is given a slip of paper on which the class of his seat is mentioned. When he produces this slip at the entrance he is let in and directed to the appropriate section of the hall. Charming music from violins and guitars, many strange dramatic pieces, curtains of many colours, antics of *habshi* performers, dancers lovely as hours all these make a highly entertaining spectacle.

My pen lacks the ability not only to describe properly the many interesting things I heard and saw in such performances, but even to write a short panegyric. Of all the spectacles, that of the curtains of seven colours is quite wonderful, for every instant the scene changes and a new painting is exhibited. Then people disguised as angels and fairies appear on stage and dance, and then suddenly disappear. There is an elusive man with a black face, a kind of devil, called Harlequin, who appears and then hides himself, and sometimes attaches himself to the dancing girls, taking them by the hand and dancing with them, then scampers off and leaps through the window. At seeing his antics I laughed very heartily.

Talking is not allowed in the Theatre. Though the audience is large, there is no noise or clamour. When they are pleased by a performance, instead of shouting *Shabash!* [Bravo!] or *Wah! Wah!* [Wonderful!] as we do in India, they stamp on the floor or clap their hands.

I saw many plays performed, one of which was based on the following story. A Captain's wife discovers that her husband is a bigamist. She raises a great clamour, and in a mighty rage lays her complaint before a court of law. Since bigamy is a capital offence in this country, the judge sentences the man to death. The plaintiff, who in her years of intimacy with her husband has become deeply attached to him, is torn with remorse and vows to die with him. She accompanies him to the place of execution, crying and beating her head and breast all the while. The second wife, her heart on fire, walks on the other side of the man, who looks as pale as a corpse as he proceeds on the road to death.

At the place of execution such intense grief is displayed as I am unable to describe. In the end the judges, on the King's recommendation, pardon the Captain.

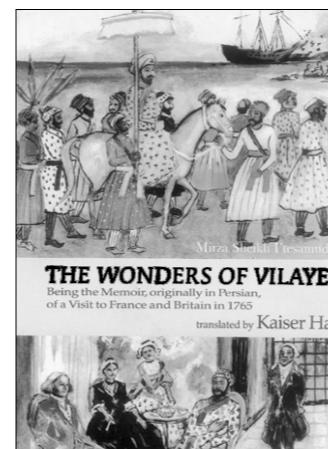
A couple of miles south of the King's palace, in the area known as Chelsea, there lives a horseman unrivalled in his profession, who in skill surpasses the legendary Krishna or Rustum. His trick-riding is so impressive that people flock to see him perform. His house, known as the Circus, stands on a *bigra* of land, part of which had been leveled to allow horses and chariots to manoeuvre. Here he puts on his show to the delight of a large audience. The entry fee is one rupee.

In the performance that I had the opportunity to witness, a horse was brought in and with a touch of the whip made to gallop. The horseman leapt on its back, and springing up stood upright, then stood on one leg and turned round. All this while the horse kept galloping swiftly in a

circle. The rider then danced on the horse's back and wheeled round. Sometimes he lay supine on its back, at other times he stood erect; at one moment he stooped down; at another, he stood on his head and threw his heels in the air, beating time with his feet; and sometimes, lifting his hands from the saddle he clapped them and kept time with both hands and feet. Again, placing both hands on the saddle, he turned over.

But the most entertaining part of the exhibition was when he seized a coin with his lips and lifted it from the ground. In Vilayet, we should remember, coins are very small. *The chabook*, *sowars*, or horse-breakers, of India, can pick up coins with the hand, which is nothing compared to this. After this feat a second horse was introduced and while the two galloped side by side, the horseman danced and turned round, sometimes on one and sometimes on the other. Then a third horse was introduced and he danced on all three in the same way. He then leapt over the three horses from one side and landed on the ground on his feet on the other side.

Next he placed a bar and leapt over it on a horse. The bar was then raised, but this time the horse failed to clear it and both rider and mount came tumbling down. It was a severe fall, but the horseman sprang up instantly, as if it was but a trifle, and quickly remounted, so that none might say his horsemanship was defective. He seemed a little annoyed with the horse for its lack of vigour and punished it slightly. Then after galloping once round the Circus he attempted the leap again, this time clearing the bar with ease.



The spectators applauded warmly.

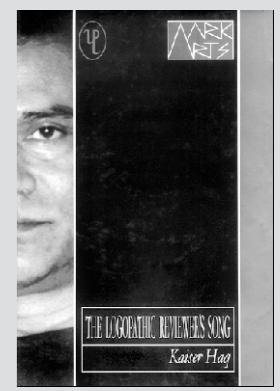
Among the other tricks presented in the Circus was the following conjuring trick. A wooden duck was set afloat in a small copper cistern, around whose rim the letters of the alphabet were displayed. At a sign from the conjuror the duck turned its head towards him and approaching the side of the cistern where he stood, remained there. The conjuror then asked the name of someone in the audience. At once the duck began to swim about and spell the name by dabbing at relevant letters with its beak. I surmise that the trick exploits the innate property of the lodestone. A piece of steel was probably concealed in the body of the duck, and the juggler had a piece of lodestone in his hand, so the duck automatically moved in whichever direction he gestured.

To the south-west of the metropolis, on the other side of the Thames, is a large garden with lovely trees

lined walks and, at intervals, wooden pavilions of various shapes triangular, round rectangular or octagonal containing statuary festooned with creepers. In the centre of the garden is a house where there is music and dancing. Celebrated singers perform here to warm applause. In the recesses of the garden there are arbours, in one of which there are many pictures depicting men and women and, in some cases, beautiful, bewinged fairies. There is also an accurate representation of the scene after the defeat of Nawab Siraj-uddowla at Plassey; it shows Nawab Mir Zafar Ali Khan, Lord Clive and the English officers embracing each other and shaking hands. Elsewhere in the garden there are wonderful displays of fireworks and cascades.

Near the bazaar called Haymarket there was an exhibition of a giantess. Those who wanted to see her had each to pay a fee of a rupee. As soon as she heard that a dark-skinned Indian man had come to see her, she came laughing towards me. She stood well over five cubits in height. When I stood before her I only reached up to her armpit. Her figure was stout in proportion to her height; her wrist was thicker than mine, and in physical strength she was like a champion. Her face was so beautiful and her figure so desirable, that neither my pen nor my tongue is adequate to sing the praises of her fairness. We started at each other for a while. Having never seen an Indian man dressed as I was, she contemplated me with wonder; and I, seeing her resplendent features and magnificent form, was quite confounded.

POEMS

From Kaiser Haq's *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song*

Writing Home

for *Sumi*
On this hundred acre plot
that pretends to be paradise
of all birds I have an ear
for doves and crows
whose cooing and cawing
is just like at home
I remember the frenzy of rickshaw bells
I shut my eyes
and imagine the weight
of your head on my chest.
Hawthorn Castle, Scotland, June 2000

Strange Pleasures

for *Belal Choudhury*
The last time we had prolonged
political disturbances (which
are regular as cyclones or,
in happier lands, carnivals)
nobody knew anything
beyond their own anger
or despair, shops were half-shuttered,
buses ran half-way,
a half-hearted coup aborted,
the sale of tranquilizers
went up, foreign exchange reserves
went down, and nobody bothered
to keep count of bodies sent to morgues.
Mercifully, phones still worked,
were kept busy with chat.
A friend range to tell me
how people still tried
to get on with life, indoors
and out: one man wished
to have his ear cleaned, another
who made a living by satisfying
such wishes got down to work.
The client sat on a stool
beside a pavement near a crossroads,
eyes meditatively half-shut;
the other sighted like a marksman
along a thin steel rod --
on his concentration depended
pleasure and hygiene or pain and infection.
Not far away a few random shots were fired:
one entered the sitting man's ear,
came out his other ear, entered
the ear-cleaner's eye, ruining
for good his delicate concentration.
How the phones rang with our laughter:
politics affords strange pleasures.
But I ought to add
my informant was a poet
and poets, as everybody knows,
are not to be entirely trusted.

Your Excellency

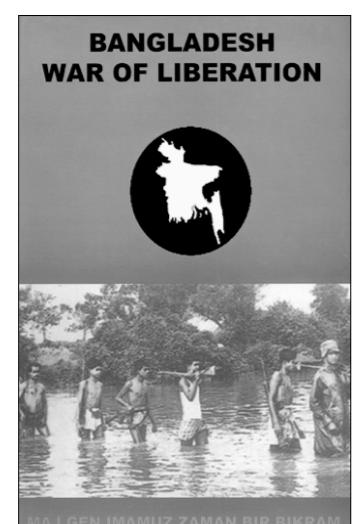
for *Ihab & Sally*
I hope you will forgive my inability
to accept your most generous invitation
to join the noble enterprise
of your party and the people
After all you aren't short of poets
happy to be on your bandwagon
fiddling away
while....
But then
I'm not a poet
As Eliot said to young Spender
one can understand somebody
trying to write poetry
but what on earth does it
mean to be
a poet?
Not his words exactly
but that's the drift.
Being,
you may recall
from the "subsidiary" philosophy
you took to get easy marks,
is the grandest, most puzzling thing
the human mind has dreamed up.
I just try
to write poetry
which is neither a nation-building
nor an income-generating activity
nor is it.
as you vociferously maintain,
divorced from life;
it is not
if I may slip into metaphor
a deep-sea fish
studied by men with infra-red eyes;
it is very much in the swim
of things,
it jostles the crowds
even as it stands apart,
so
I can readily sympathise
with those who, mortified
by its inability to prevent war,
famine, breakdown, or
pay grocery bills,
declare
that poetry is all balls
which,
in fact
is literally
true.
Balls --
Testes --
meaning in Latin
witnesses.
Poetry
may not be the verb
in the grammar of dissent
but by simply being
itself
bears witness
to the system of graft and kickbacks
that governs your world,
the graffiti on mud walls,
the meaningless Morse of gunfire,
love that may hold steady, go flat
like beer, or keep growing in root and
branch,
hatred coursing like blood through
mean alleys,
the wind that picks the branches
clean,
the drama of fresh green,
the rejection
of your invitation,
the putting together
of words
by which it comes into being.

BOOK REVIEW

Simple, well told, full of facts

The book is a narrative of a simple war going by its simple reading but the war of 1971 was part of a process which led to the construction of a state, a complex mission. And reading this book, one would think that the war was just the result of simple intentions, writes Afsan

Bangladesh war of liberation
Maj Gen. Imamuz Zaman BB
Published by Columbia Prokashani
Dhaka, Bangladesh, Pp 200, Tk. 300, ISBN
984-741-036-6



but full of descriptions of events and facts hued by nationalistic fervour and simplistic demonizing of the enemy which has now become hallmark of any look-backs at 1971.

Zaman's book is very commendable because it goes beyond the traditionally personal reminiscences and becomes a military history of sorts of the war, which is so lacking in Bangladesh. What he does is catalogue the activities of many other forces and sub-force which were in operation at that time including informal and even irregular ones like the Quaderia Bahini, Hemayet Bahini, Afsar Bahini etc which were operating with varying degrees of independence though linked by a common purpose. He also describes the sectors, the divisions, the forces and what they meant officially as well as focussing on the structure of the war effort. This is indeed a rare offering because there are very few books which have tried to put all that military facts as close together as possible to present a coherent view of what has always been a confusing war to most including a few participants as well.

But the book is also about the nature of war and the actual descriptions of battles of his own and that of others -- shorn of ornamentation. The following description about the battle of the Nakshi border out post is illustrative:

"An anxious but delighted Brigade Commander Lt. Col. Zia embraced Maj. Amin and said, "Amin, we are proud of you." Meanwhile, Zia had already sent a message to Indian authorities asking for a helicopter to evacuate Capt. Amin. Capt. Amin was given first aid-treatment and thereafter he was evacuated to Gauhati hospital by helicopter.

With the bold rescue action of Maj. Amin, the battle of Nakshi BOP came to an end. After this attack, 8 East Bengal fell back to Teldhala and regrouped for subsequent operations. In this battle, the Pakistan Army managed to repulse the attack, the freedom fighters fought gallantly accepting huge number of casualties. After the battle of Kamalpur, attack on Nakshi BOP had bled the enemy as much as necessary to give her a taste of defeat. A fiercely fought battle is never judged by the outcome it produces but by the qualities of courage and heroism exhibited by either sides. (page 60)

There are many such instances

and that makes the book worth a read by anyone interested in the topic, military history of the formal war of 1971.

Two issues are further noted. One, the book has a fair number of documents originating from the 1971 war and military in nature which are possessions of the land and its people. We are not sure where these documents are and it would be good in this connection to mention that there should be a central depository of such documents. They are not the exclusive property of any branch of the state but in a crude way if you will, of the people. These documents and in many ways the pictures especially the ones with archival value has added much to the book but they should be accessible to all.

But the other point is a little more reflective. The book is a narrative of a simple war going by its simple reading but the war of 1971 was part of a process which led to the construction of a state, a complex mission. And reading this book, one would think that the

war was just the result of simple intentions. As if the complexity is being forcibly denied and it has happened too frequently not to be seen as a pattern. Surely the memory of a foot soldier and a commander has to be different.

The simpler analysis is fine for a "patriot" looking for endorsement of nationalist sentiments but given the complicated journey that we have had since 1971, makes this forced simplicity look less complete a narration than it should be. The events of later years show how difficult that source of such incidents must have been. But that isn't here and it isn't in any of the narrations of 1971 on which we can lay our hands on. Zaman has done a great service by writing a description. He could have achieved more if he had done taken a step further to explain the complex contours of this simple war. He deserves it and so do we. But it's nevertheless a laudable effort.

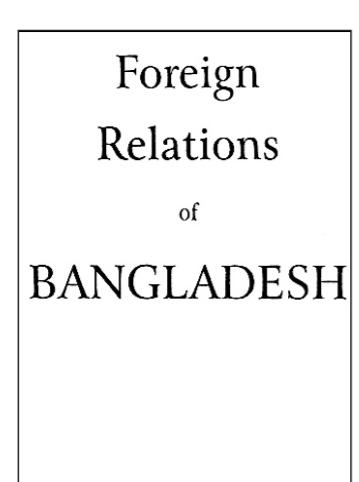
This book is everyone's essential read.

Afsan Chowdhury is Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star

Tracing the evolution of Bangladesh's foreign policy

The book is valuable contribution to the existing literature on Bangladesh's external relations. However, attempts to cover too many issues and too many areas have made the book somewhat lengthy, writes Dilara Choudhury

Foreign Relations of Bangladesh by Harun ur Rashid, Varnasi, India, Rishi Publications, 2001, pp. 304, Indian Rupees: 600.00/US\$30.00



may impact it adversely, and thereby constraining its endeavours to preserve its national interest. In this course of interactions the flexibility/options enjoyed by a state is dependent on the kind of national power it enjoys. The stronger the national power base is the greater are the options for a

iii) Issues and Challenges. In the course of three sections the author adroitly traversed through the entire gamut of Bangladesh's foreign policy. In the first section, he dealt with conceptualization of determinants of Dhaka's foreign policy, its formulation process in the context of its policy options. He then critically analyzed how the initial formulation was impacted by the legacy of the liberation war, geo-political realities, super-power alignment in the subcontinent, inter-state relations in South Asia, and how they constrained its policy options, and thereby explaining that despite regime change there emerged a number of consistent features in the foreign policy of Bangladesh. In this context, Dhaka's relationship with India arising out of India

'factor', relationship with the developed West emanating from its dire need of foreign assistance, good-neighbourly relations conditioned by geo-political realities seeking closer ties with Pakistan, China as well as the countries of South East Asia, promotion and maintenance of fraternal ties with Muslim countries, which was conditioned by the religious and cultural affinities of Bangladeshi Muslim, have been dealt with in an extensive manner. He also noted the expansion of the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and the World featuring mostly in the form of economic cooperation. Another important component of the book is author's thoughtful analysis of Dhaka's consistent attempts and subsequent success in its multi-lateral diplomacy like its role in the United Nations, Commonwealth, and in particular within SAARC. He has aptly highlighted Dhaka's participation in these organizations that has earned a special place for Dhaka among the comity of nations. The author concludes the book by discussing a list of issues and challenges that Dhaka faces in the context of transformed concept of national security and international order, which policy makers should take note of so that appropriate strategies can be adopted.

The book is valuable contribution to the existing literature on Bangladesh's external relations.

However, attempts to cover too many issues and too many areas have made the book somewhat lengthy. Nonetheless, the contribution of the author is immense.

He has done a commendable job by providing Bangladeshi scholars, students and policy makers an analytical volume about Bangladesh's endeavours, as a small state, to fashion its foreign policy in order to pursue its stated objectives. It is expected that the book would be well received.

Dilara Choudhury is Professor, Department of Government and Politics at Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka