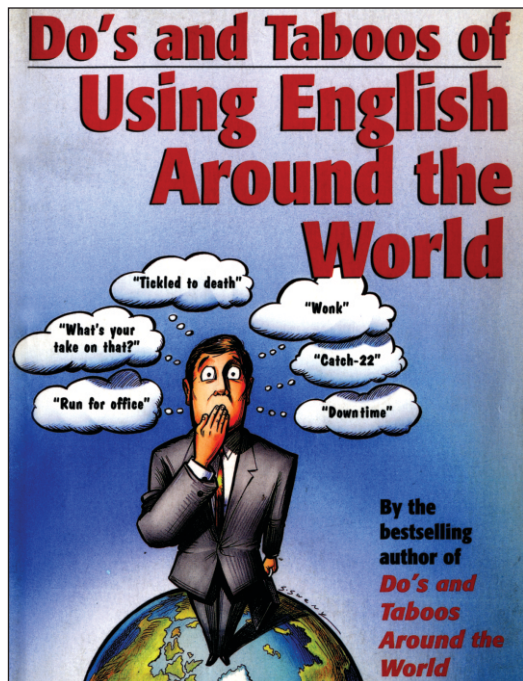


Grabbing the bull by the tail

Shahan Haq tries not to roll over with laughter as he talks about a marvellous little book



Do's and Taboos of Using English Around the World
Roger E. Axtell
John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York

Need a good laugh? In that case, prepare to roll over. Here is a book that will tickle you to death, nearly. All the comic situations that the English language can give rise to are what you get here. Did we say all the comic situations? Let us correct that to 'most of them anyway'. For English is a language which has a very large repertoire of words that can have a multiplicity (or is that multitude?) of meanings. That is generally the reason why it can very often lead to roaring laughter, plain howls of pleasure and stark, naked enjoyment of the strangest things the language can reveal. There are also the varieties of English one needs to learn about, if not exactly master. Do you recall that famous line from the musical My Fair Lady, wherein the protagonist says matter of factly, 'Americans haven't spoken English in years'?

That may be just a point of view out of the many spread all around. But it is also revealing of the nature of the language, about the pitfalls it can lead a person to. Think of the gaffes people keep making when using the language. It was former US president

Gerald Ford who once left an audience mystified by the following: 'If Lincoln were alive today, he'd roll over in his grave.' What do you make of such a mangling of language? Never mind. Let us move on. Here is what a former governor of Michigan, George Romney (his son Mitt is these days vying for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination), once said while trying to wriggle out of a muddle: 'I didn't say that I didn't say it. I said that I didn't say that I said it. I want to make that very clear.' If now you are willing to volunteer your services in an untangling of the statement, go ahead. Do not weep when you get tied up in what Churchill would describe as a puzzle in a mystery inside an enigma.

Smoking is injurious to your health, or so the US surgeon general has determined. But how would he or she respond to such muddle as this, 'Smoking kills. If you're killed, you've lost a very important part of your life'? And so the howlers keep coming in this simply unputdownable book. And just when you think you have gone through them all, you realize

with a fresh hoarseness in your voice that there are lots more to savour. You will find such gems of convoluted thought as this one: 'There comes a time to put principles aside and do what's right.' Or is this one any better, 'I smell a rat and I intend to nip it in the bud'? You know, when you deal with English, there comes a point when you have to 'grab the bull by the tail and look it squarely in the eye.' Why you must go for the tail and then look the beast in the eye is something you can't really explain. Don't bother. Just keep going. As you do, you might stumble upon this lopsidedly peculiar message the Greenville County (South Carolina) Department of Social Services once sent an individual who used to be: 'Your food stamps will be stopped effective March 1992, because we received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances.' By now you must be rolling on the damp floor. But wait for this new one that's coming: 'An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my vehicle, and vanished.' So an already invisible thing vanishes! All so very convenient, but what have you

to say to a person who informs you in all gravity of manner, 'Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don't have'?

By God you will love this gem of a book. How often do you remember that in the United States politicians run for office but in Britain they stand for office? Again, you may be truly upset at the way in which English is reduced to comedy in your country. But you have no real reason to worry here, for it happens all over the world, in other non-English speaking countries. This is what appeared as a notice in a Japanese hotel once: 'You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid.' In a Swiss hotel, this is what visitors found once, to their hilarious enjoyment: 'Because of the impropriety of entertaining guests of the opposite sex in the bedroom, it is suggested that the lobby be used for this purpose.'

Read on, and then pass everything on to your neighbours. They will love you for it.

Shahan Haq spends time watching birds and reading books.

Tales of beauty and ugliness

Mansur Habibullah is enthusiastic about a work he considers aesthetically enjoyable

Junaidul Haque is neither a very popular writer nor a very little known name. He has his own loyal readers and I am one of them. Old readers of The Bangladesh Observer affectionately remember him as a talented teenager who once wrote profusely for The Young Observer. Readers of the Bangla dailies remember his popular column, Pogor Journal. He is a witty and soulful columnist who writes on literature and politics. He is, however, at his best when he writes short fiction for the local dailies and little magazines. Sundar O Asundarer Galpo is his third book of short stories.

Junaidul Haque is a seasoned storyteller. He is serious and very readable at the same time. He has a fascinating prose style that is simple and lucid. He is a trained writer in the sense that he studied English literature at the University of Dhaka in the late seventies and early eighties. However, he is gifted too. He sings like a singer who has gone through his morning 'rewaz' for decades. And he sings like a true maestro. It will be difficult to find a dozen people writing better fiction than Junaid. It is a pity that he is not a household name.

Sundar O Asundarer Galpo has nine short stories. The prose is unfailingly racy and the psychoanalysis splendid. Often the right atmosphere is created with effortless ease. Refer to the young friends in Parkey Manob Manobi

who go through their morning exercise and emerge with a deeper understanding of love and life. Or the old man in Jhora Pata Bhora Mora Nodi who sits in an easy chair, reminisces and fights his loneliness. Or the young couple who discover that they are madly in love in Anadi Juger Joto Chawa Joto Pawa. Or the twelve-year-old boy in Hasanar Shokal who is sad because his parents are separated. In each case, Junaid creates a very real background and handles his characters carefully and affectionately. The names of his stories are mostly poetic. The Dead River with Fallen Leaves is an outstanding line from Ibbanananda Das, symbolising old age laden with sad memories.

Sundar O Asundarer Galpo is the title story and the first story of the book. The writer claims here that he has tried to depict both the beautiful and the ugly sides of life. He truly comes up with beautiful moments of love and ugly sides of life. He truly comes up with beautiful moments of love and ugly moments of corruption and injustice. In the end, love triumphs and vanity and injustice crumble. We get a story of village life with deep insight. Jhora Pata Bhora Mora Nodi tells us about the sixty-six-year-old man who comes to realize that only because of his children, he can't call his insignificant life fully meaningless. He had a truly modern life in the Eliotesque sense, beginning

with a bang and ending in a whimper. Where are my bright childhood friends? From a boy's life of beautiful dreams to the barren,

dreamless life of an old man what a journey man goes through!

It will be difficult to forget the old man. Akritadar or The

Unmarried One is the story of a selfless doctor who fails to recognize his true love at the right time. Years later he realises his mistake and deeply regrets it. He dies of a massive heart attack at only forty seven. He will be difficult to forget too. Anadi Juger Joto Chawa, Jato Pawa has a poetic name borrowed from Sudhin Dutta and is a brilliant adolescent love story. The writer defies his age and is at his imaginative best. The story ends on a beautiful note. The lovers gaze lovingly at a few hundred toddlers in a school playground and feel like possessing all of them! Hasanar Shakal was not easy to handle as the central character was a twelve-year-old. The writer made a nice elders' story out of the child's experience. Mone Porlo, Tomay Porlo Mone (I remembered, I remembered you) is sheer poetry. Like Bankimchandra, Tagore and Syed Shamsul Huq, Junaidul Haque goes into brilliant poetic paragraphs in his short stories, at least occasionally.

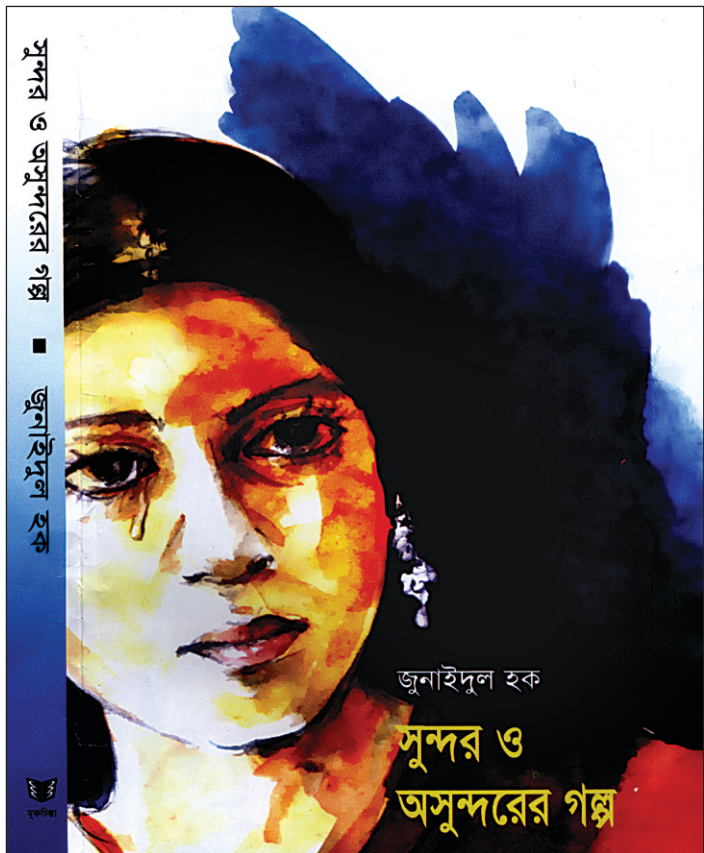
Otit O Bartaman (The Past and The Present) is a story with the cruel death of famed politician Shah AMS Kibria in the background. A nostalgic uncle is reminiscing about his boyhood, 1971 and its enormous impact on his young mind with his bright, young nephew. They talk delightfully about the sorrow, angst and boredom of literary men. Then they talk about Kibria and his tragic death with courage and

conviction. Not a conventional story but a good one. Raja Bhai is the longest and perhaps the most popular story of the book. It centres around adda at the Dhanmondi Lake. The central character is a lonely seventy-two-year-old who had passionately loved a woman in his youth and waited sixteen long years to get her. He believes in loving one woman all his life.

The last story, Parkey Manob O Manabi, is perhaps an outstanding story of love and passion. The female protagonist will be long remembered by readers as a noted heroine of Bangla literature. She is a married young lady, very intelligent, considerate and beautiful. The young man worships her. Their mutual trust and adoration for each other is boundless. Towards the end, the young man's heart sinks in total sadness when he learns that the girl considers him a friend and not a lover. The story reaches a tragic height. Aren't the best stories of life sad and tragic? The young couple are witty and soulful and readers will remember them for a long time.

Junaidul Haque looks at life with a positive attitude. He sings of the glory of love without ignoring its tragic aspects. The human mind is his favourite subject, but he is brilliant at delineating social maladies too.

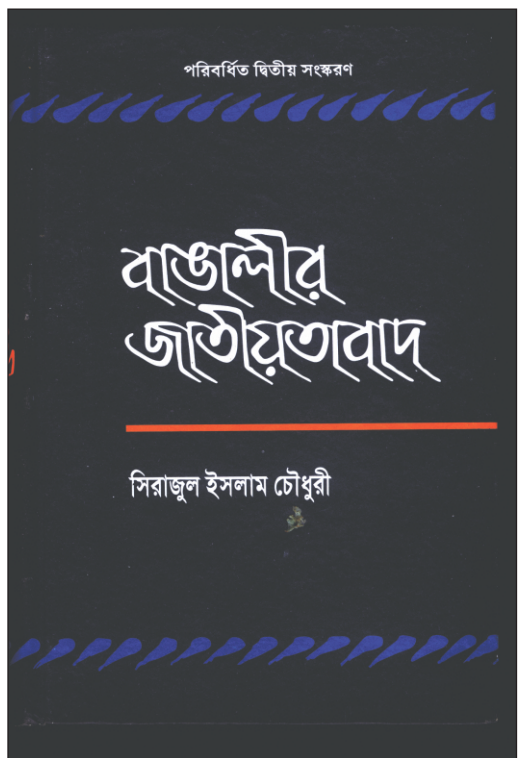
Mansur Habibullah is a freelance writer and periodic reviewer of books.



Sundar O Asundarer Galpo
Junaidul Haque
Muktochinta Prokashona

The many strands of nationalism

Syed Badrul Ahsan admires a rich exposition of a nation's story



Bangladeshi Nationalism
Syed Badrul Ahsan
The University Press Limited, Dhaka

Nationalism for Bengalis has by and large been an on-again off-again affair. And yet that ought not to obscure the bigger reality, which is that the nationalism factor has pretty much been an evolving fact of life for Bengalis on both sides of the political divide. Within the ambience of an undivided India, it was a particular if not special space the Bengalis inhabited. The speciality came of course through the roles leading Bengalis, in such diverse areas as politics, literature and social reforms, played over a long stretch of time. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, C.R. Dutta and Subhas Chandra Bose were all players on an all-India level.

That reality has never obscured the other reality, however. It is that for all their identification with an Indian national cause, there was consistently something of a rebellious, typically Bengali streak in many of these men.

For Serajul Islam Choudhury, therefore, the question is not so much as Bengali nationalism as it is one of the Bengalis' nationalism. In this defining work, he observes the historical evolution of Bengali political thought. That soon turns into a journey of discovery, especially for those who have in recent times based their thoughts on social life in Bangladesh against a backdrop of the revolution which occurred in 1971. There is little question that the emergence of a sovereign republic of Bangladesh was effectively a culmination of the long movement of the Bengalis for self-assertion. But, then again, this entire issue of self-assertion had also been raised earlier at different phases of Indian politics. But even as the Bengali needed his own independence, in that psychological sense of the meaning (if had nothing to do with breaking out of the subcontinental mould), he perceived the many forces of history he was stumbling into. There were the British colonial rulers whose mission to create a bureaucratic class comprising local elements somehow convinced large sections of Bengalis they could be part of the new class. And thus did the nationalistic aspect of the Bengali character, as Choudhury sees it, come squarely up against a new reality.

By far the biggest of the new realities was the vivisection of India in 1947. It was a quirky moment in time for the Bengalis. For the very first time, in a very formal manner, what had largely been a composite race of Bengalis found itself divided along communal lines. The demand for a sovereign state for India's Muslims pitted, to the regret of secular forces, Muslim Bengalis against Hindu Bengalis. Add to that the thought that in the Pakistan idea, the predominantly Muslim Bengalis of East Bengal discovered to their wonderment, or almost, a sense of purpose. Which is when they quickly dumped old thoughts for new ones, in this case doffing their Bengali-ness for their newly found Islamic identity. Their compatriots in soon to be West Bengal had turned, in the eyes of the Pakistan-obsessed Bengalis, into Hindus. And thus was the knife driven into a centuries-old compos-

ite culture of Bengali indivisibility. But, as Choudhury notes, the fluctuations in Bengali political sentiment, or call it aspirations, came one upon the other. The fallacy that was Muslim nationalism would soon be cast aside by the very Bengalis who once enthused about their place in Pakistan. If in the 1940s, the Bengali Muslim sought to give himself a new sense of identity through casting the Bengali Hindu, predominantly rich landlord class adrift, in the early 1950s it was a return to the old secular roots he was beginning to seek. Pakistan was losing its charm; and even a once-upon-a-time Muslim Bengali nationalist as Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq waxed eloquent about the unifying aspects of Bengali culture in a 1954 trip to Calcutta. His euphoria was short-lived. An increasingly jittery central Pakistani government soon sent his East Bengal provincial government packing.

In Banglari Jatiyotabad, Choudhury comes off at his best when he brings in the diversity of thought that has shaped the Bengali imagination, particularly in Bangladesh. Despite their triumph over Pakistan in the armed struggle for liberation in 1971, with all the connotations of secularism ingrained in that struggle, Bengalis ran into rough territory in the post-1975 period when their secularism first seriously came under assault at the hands of a new, rabidly communal ruling class. Besides, there came the matter of the economy. With socialism prised out of the constitution, it was nationalism that was laid low. Bengali nationalism lay prostrate when 'Bangladeshi nationalism' was steamrollered into a system that had already gone through a good deal of battering.

On a fundamental level, Banglari Jatiyotabad is a study in philosophical reflections on the long, twisted course Bengali politics has taken across history. Nationalism, notes the writer, is a feeling within whose core comes a spirit of patriotism. And yet nationalism goes quite beyond the patriotic, for where patriotism is a matter of sentiment, nationalism rests on a base of pure politics. To what extent the Bengali has been able to extricate emotion from politics is a question Professor Choudhury tackles here, in the old scholarly tradition.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Of spiritual and mystical turns

Tulip Chowdhury probes a tale of intense passion

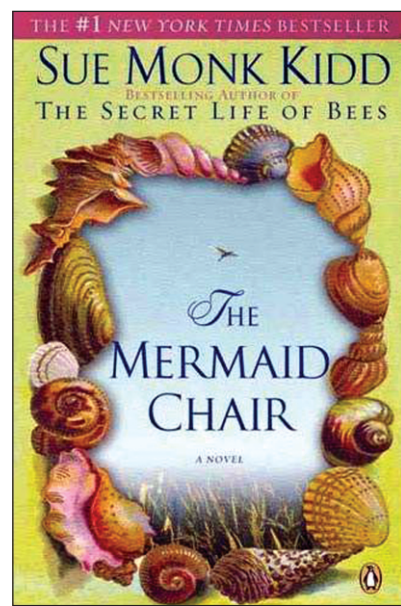
It is an intriguing tale of love in The Mermaid Chair, love that is lost, forgiveness and faith in human bonding. It is an imagined love story between a woman and a monk, a woman and her husband and ultimately the woman and her own soul.

The story starts in a setting in downtown Atlanta, USA. A husband and a wife go about their usual routine life. The monotonous routine has the wife, Jessie, vexed. The wife is a homemaker and hence her life whirls around her husband and her housekeeping. Their two children have left the nest and the syndrome of the empty nest is very much hanging on the mother. Just at that point Jessie's mother cuts off her finger deliberately. Jessie takes this opportunity to go off to her mother on Egret Island. Her husband Hugh, a psychiatrist, volunteers to go with her but Jessie is firm in her decision to go alone, to have a break. Besides, she has a firm belief that as the daughter she will understand her mother's motive behind cutting off her finger.

Jessie goes to Egret Island and is absorbed with nostalgia. She remembers details of spending her childhood on the beautiful island. She finds her favourite spots, remembers the things her brother and she used to do. She remembers the loving home they had until her father died when his boat caught fire while he was in the middle of the bay. But her heart is in trouble too for there is a mystery shrouding her father's death. How the fire started had remained a mystery. Jessie was a little girl when her father died and can only recall witnessing the fire from the island.

The story takes a mystical turn with the mention of a monastery that houses a mysterious and beautiful chair with carved mermaids and dedicated to Saint Senara. Legend has it that Saint Senara was a mermaid before her conversion. The abbey and the chair have always been special to Jessie. There she meets Whit, a junior monk who sought refuge at the monastery after suffering a devastating

loss. Jessie's powerful attraction to Whit awakens an immense sexual and spiritual longing inside her, as well as pulsing in a new sense of aliveness. Jessie is in turmoil



The Mermaid Chair
Sue Monk Kidd
Penguin

when she finds that her attraction for Whit is reciprocal. After meeting Jessie, Whit is no longer certain if he wants to take the final vows only months away. Both Jessie and Whit are ravaged by their love. Whit is in confusion in his search for God and Jessie's conscience is troubled by the marriage vows she had taken to be faithful to her husband.

Jessie's firm faith that she can find the cause of her mother's distress is true and she unravels a deeply hidden mystery surrounding the death of her father. She is devastated to learn that her father had

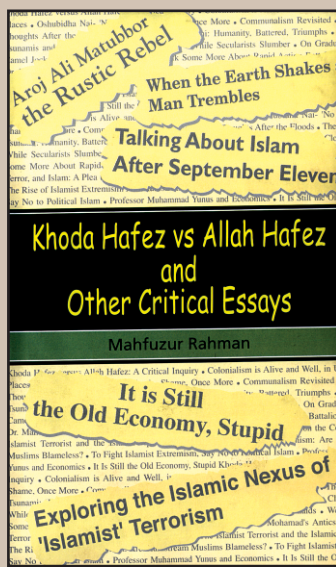
committed suicide and that too was with the consent of her mother who by that time is no more herself. Jessie's mother cuts off another finger as her way of offering to Saint Senara, as a penance for allowing her husband to commit suicide. At that point Jessie's husband comes in to help her but is ravaged by Jessie's confession of her new romantic relationship with Whit.

Jessie is compelled to hospitalize her mother and within this time frame Whit suffers from feelings of guilt about taking Jessie away from her marriage. However, there is a wonderful tale of forgiveness as Jessie's husband finds his way back to his wife's heart. Jessie's husband is ready to forgive his wife. Jessie and Whit are caught in the turmoil of love; and the awareness that both of them have chosen a path that others would not approve of eats away inside them. Whit wants to go back to the cause of God and Jessie feels sorry for the husband whom she has betrayed. And yet both are torn between the terrible forces of their love for each other. However, each finally reaches a decision that can bring peace to their hearts.

A significant part of the tale relates to how human hearts can be lured at times, how emotions can take sudden turns. It tells us how the human heart can react to certain situations, how we can be led to believe in ourselves for a moment and yet wake up the next moment to find that all that we have thought of and done was not the truly heart's desire. It is a superb story of how individuals can make mistakes and can be forgiven too. In this work, Kidd takes on the darker, more complex elements of the psyche and human relationships, spiritual emptiness, infidelity, death and mental illness with a steady gaze and compassion not often found in modern fiction.

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher and writes fiction. Her collection of short stories, Stars in the Sky, was published in 2005.

At a glance

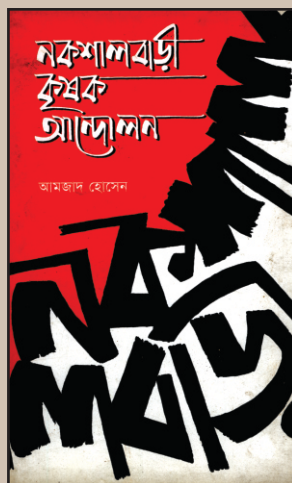
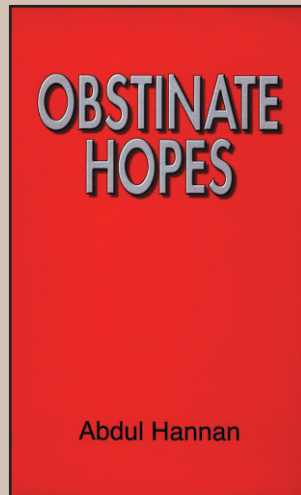


Khuda Hafez vs Allah Hafez and Other Critical Essays
Mahfuzur Rahman
The University Press Limited

A collection of essays earlier published in *The Daily Star*, or most of them anyway. The range of subjects the writer covers is, well, interesting and ought to keep readers glued to the book. A good read for those who care about these turbulent times.

Obstinate Hopes
Abdul Hannan
Papyrus

Another offering of essays published in newspapers, this one from an individual who has been in government service (serving a stint as media spokesperson abroad). Hannan's interest in contemporary issues ought to keep readers focused on all he says here.



Naxalbari Krishak Andolan
Amjad Hossain
Porhua

The Naxalite movement has acquired a definitive place in the history of not just India but of the subcontinent as a whole, for all the right or wrong reasons. Amjad Hossain reminds readers of the context and realities of a struggle that was to produce its own share of tragedy.

Phela Asha Din
Farida Yasmeen
Projapoti Prokashon

In her time, Farida Yasmeen was a playback singer with a riveting voice. It was much the same with her siblings. Three of her sisters took to music, as she did once. Only one cut a path to different territory, in this case education. Read about it all in this engrossing work.

