

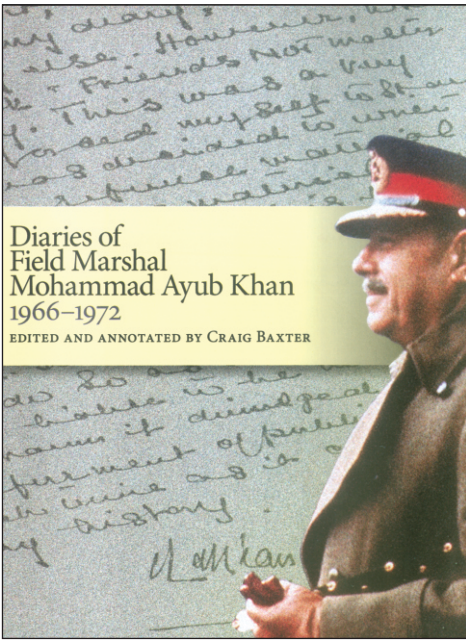
The ghost of a fallen strongman speaks, in shrill tenor

Syed Badrul Ahsan reads a dead dictator's journal and comes away unimpressed

WHEN one hears of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan's diaries, incredulity is what one is struck by. There is a reason for that. When towards the end of his decade-long presidency of Pakistan in the 1960s he came forth with his memoirs, bearing the arrogant title of Friends Not Masters, a goodly number of questions were raised about the ghostwriters who probably had worked on them. And indeed there were the ghostwriters, all of whom in later years were spotted explaining away their roles in the making of the memoirs which, incidentally, amounted to little that was enlightening or revealing.

Now the diaries are upon us, raising a wholly different set of questions altogether. Why do they cover the period from 1966 to 1972 and not that which came earlier, when Ayub was at the height of his powers? Again, why did his family, son Gohar Ayub in particular, wait thirty three years after the old dictator's death to let the world in on the news that Ayub had actually left his diaries behind? Perhaps the most audacious question of all relates to how much of the diaries comes in Ayub's language and how much of it is addition and embellishment by others. The American academic Craig Baxter has of course edited and annotated the diaries. But that is not the point. The more relevant issue is the authenticity of the diaries. F.S. Aijazuddin in Pakistan has mischievously pointed to the fakes that were Hitler's diaries in the 1980s. Like him, there are quite a few others willing to ask if some considerable portions of Ayub Khan's diaries were composed after his death. Take your pick. After Friends Not Masters, it has never been easy to trust Pakistan's first military ruler.

As for the entries in the diaries, there is little mistaking that the thoughts are quintessentially Ayub-like. He respects no one and is forever ready to pronounce judgement on the reputation of all the good men who simply cannot take a liking to him. Of course he admires the likes of Justice Munir, a man who remains notorious for his ingratiating loyalty to the general who for no rhyme or reason began to call himself a field marshal. In life, Ayub admired few men. In death, his comments take on a vicious hue. Not even Abdul Jabbar Khan, the Bengali speaker of the national assembly, escapes his sarcasm. While commenting on Jabbar Khan's worry about the Agartala conspiracy case in a 9 January 1968 entry, Ayub has this caustic comment: '(Jabbar Khan's) misfortune is that he has several sons who keep on going in and out of jail for their misdeeds. This must be a source of great



Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan 1966-1972 Edited and annotated by Craig Baxter The University Press Limited

worry to him'. In another entry on the same day, Ayub reveals his suspicious streak, this time about his own loyalist Abdus Sobur Khan: 'I sent for Abdus Sobur Khan and questioned him on the part he is alleged to have played in the (Agartala) conspiracy. He denied all knowledge and tried to show that the people in East Pakistan are greatly shocked by the incident'.

There are the regular intervals in which the then military ruler takes a swipe at Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, his former foreign minister. Bhutto, he notes in a 2 December 1967 entry, had 'held a two-day convention in Lahore to launch his so-called People's Party'. The man's inability to read the writing on the wall is mind-boggling. Even when the writing gets to be bold and the wall draws closer to him, he pretends not to see it. But of all the men and matters that leave his nerves on edge, it is Bengalis and a rising Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that exercise his mind. This is how he speaks of Mujib on 26 April 1967: 'One revealing thing that came to light was

that Mujibur Rahman had been telling his followers that once they raise the flag of rebellion in East Pakistan, the Americans will rush to their assistance'. A few lines later, this is the acidic comment, 'It is quite obvious that this man is a menace and will continue to mislead the Bengalis as long as he lives'. You tend to get the feeling that the dictator was already cooking up the conspiracy case that was to come in December of the year. It was a case that would eventually lay him low and catapult Mujib to the status of a Bengali national icon. By 22 February 1969, the day the Agartala case is withdrawn by the regime and Mujib walks out a free man, Ayub Khan is defeated. Amazingly, however, there is no entry in the diary for that day. On 23 February, though, Ayub notes, 'A serious political situation is emerging. Bhutto in West Pakistan and Mujib in East Pakistan are gaining ascendancy. Something has to be done to prevent such a dangerous combination'. The entry must have been made only hours after Mujib had addressed a mammoth rally in Dhaka, where he had just been honoured as Bangabandhu, friend of Bengal. Three days later, on 26 February, there is a perceptible, though slight, change in Ayub's tone toward Mujib: 'Incidentally, Mujib came to see me last night. Our talk was cordial. He seemed conciliatory though making no bones that he was the uncrowned king of East Pakistan and he must be recognized as such'. In his twilight, the military ruler makes no mention of the offer he makes to the Bengali leader, that of the office of prime minister, a gesture Mujib spurns.

The diaries are replete with fulminations against what Ayub sees as Bengali leanings toward India in general and Hinduism in particular. In May 1967, he is blunt: '... East Pakistan will go under Hinduism and be separated forever'. Ayub Khan's contempt for Bengalis is a constant refrain throughout the diaries. As early as 11 April 1967, after a meeting with Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, his new foreign minister, he writes: '(Pirzada) said that East Pakistanis are incapable of seeing beyond their nose. In their hatred for West Pakistan, and especially the Punjabis, they were capable of doing anything stupid. They got an empire as a result of the partition of Bengal in 1905 with Assam included. They lost it through sheer stupidity'. The president must have enjoyed these crass remarks, for he seemed to making his own at a meeting with Altaf Gauhar on 23 July 1967: '(Gauhar) asked me how long will they remain with Pakistan? I said till India was ready to swallow them'. A little while later, this is how he insults Bengalis, '... the Bengalis have no

stomach for self-criticism nor for listening to the truth about themselves'. His myopia reaches a new extreme a month later. In a 23 August entry (during a visit to Dhaka where he meets what he calls a cross section of intellectuals), he notes, 'I told them that through emotional upsurge the East Pakistani had cut himself off from Urdu, the vehicle in which Muslim thought and philosophy is expressed. In consequence, he was now totally at sea, drifting. This will prove very dangerous for their future.'

Ayub Khan papers over the truth behind his departure from power in March 1969, trying to make it appear that he has opted to quit voluntarily. But bitterness is all over the place. The bitterness nearly explodes in December 1971, when East Pakistan finally and irrevocably becomes Bangladesh. On 16 December, as Dhaka stands liberated, he notes, '(The Mukti Bahini) are busy butchering the nationalist and Jamaat-e-Islami types.' A few lines later, this: 'The expectation is that Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won't last long. They will be superseded by the communists who will soon join hands with Naxalites and other communists in West Bengal.' In a 1 January 1972 entry, he notes: 'Individuals like Maulvi Farid, Fazul Qader Chaudhary have, of course, been murdered, but Sobur Khan apparently was skinned alive first and then hacked to pieces.' Obviously he did not verify the better part of the information he had come by. On 10 January, as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrives back home in Bangladesh, Ayub Khan notes, clearly in suppressed anger, 'After a three hour stay in Delhi, Mujibur Rahman flew on to Dacca where he was given a grand reception. In a public meeting, he declared that all ties with Pakistan were snapped and that Bangladesh was a free and sovereign state. The separation of Bengal is now complete. What the future now holds in store for the Bengalis is not difficult to guess.'

The diaries are, in a sense, a reminder of all the reasons why Bangladesh needed to cut itself loose from Pakistan. You can read them out of sheer curiosity. If you choose not to, you lose nothing.

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

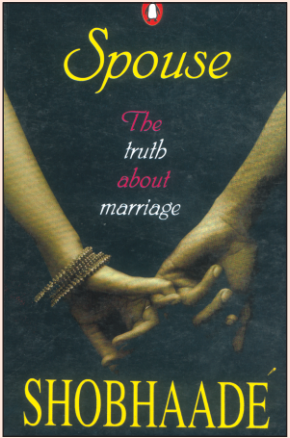
At a glance



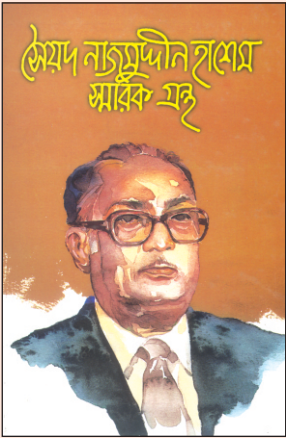
Begum Sheikh Fazilatunnessa Mujib Nilima Ibrahim Jagriti Prokashoni
Published in the early 1990s, this is a moving portrayal of a woman who kept the home fires burning as her husband moved from prison to dark prison in search of liberty for his people. The author, who herself died a few years ago, recreates an individual who experienced life at its toughest and yet never let go of the resilience in her being.



Aponjon Serajul Islam Choudhury Vidyaprakash
It is a touching tribute for a wife from a man who lives with her memories. And yet it is something more. The author speaks of the life the couple once led and gives it all the nuances of literature. In monologue-conversational form, the book is a poignant tale of a scholar seeking to reinvent experience through recalling another scholar lost to mortality.



Spouse The truth about marriage Shobhaa De Penguin Books
This is a sizzler of a work from India's pre-eminent socialite writer. De leaves nothing concealed and talks about everything that can keep a marriage going, even in the worst of times. Of course, sex is part of the tale. But beyond that comes the matter of intellectual satisfaction. You will enjoy reading the book.



Syed Najmuddin Hashim Sharok Grantha Vidyaprakash
A collection of commemorative essays which appeared quite a few years ago, the work is a splendid study of a man who was a scholar, a media personality and diplomat all rolled into one. And do not forget that Hashim was also a wit and a raconteur who lighted up any room he walked into. These essays will make you miss him even more.

Forty years of fascinating poetry

Junaidul Haque goes ecstatic over verses coming from his hero

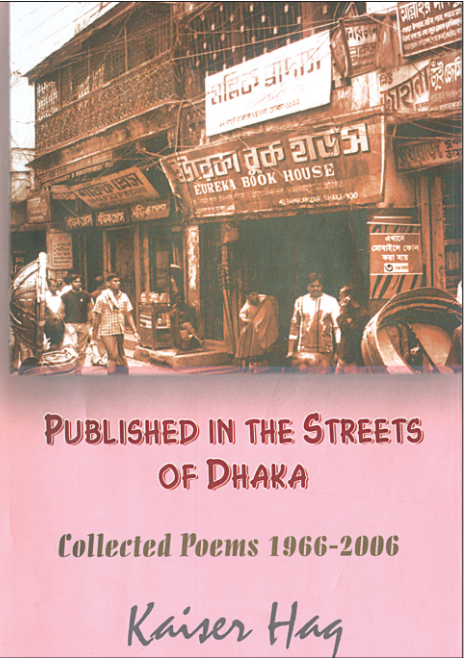
KAISER Haq is without question Bangladesh's finest English language poet. Form the Journal of Commonwealth Literature to eminent scholars and writers like Syed Manzoorul Islam and Fakrul Alam, no one will disagree with that. He has had capable contemporaries in Feroz Ahmeduddin and Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan and brilliant juniors in Nuzhat Amin Mannan and Rumana Siddique. But in so far as reaching the peak of the mountain is concerned, he is Humayun Azad's 'lonely climber' (words used to describe Shamsur Rahman's success as a Bangla poet). Published in The Streets of Dhaka holds his excellent oeuvre within its lovely cover.

In March 1978 Gore Vidal decides to settle a score with EM Forster and writes against him in the New Statesman. Therein the streets of Dhaka get a disrespected mention. Who finds it difficult to ignore it? Our premier English language poet. He asks:

*What are we to do, Mr. Vidal?
Stop writing, and if we do, not publish?
Join an immigration queue, hoping
To head for the Diaspora dead-end,
Exhibit in alien multicultural museums?*
No way, the poet replies. He will stay 'plumb in the centre of monsoon-mad Bengal, watching jackfruit leaves drift earthenward in the early morning breeze like a famous predecessor used to'. He will be 'proud to be published once again in the streets of Dhaka.'

Kaiser Haq writes in English but his poems are rooted in Bangladesh. Their appeal is universal but he mainly writes about the contemporary Bangladeshi scene. He also fought in the Bangladesh independence war of 1971. How could he help not being proud about his land of birth and her people?

Carlo Coppola feels that the overall excellence



Published in The Streets of Dhaka Collected Poems 1966-2006 Kaiser Haq writers.inK

of Haq's oeuvre places him among the best 'not only in South Asia but also in the contemporary world of letters' 'His poems are thoughtful, well-

constructed works, frequently sinewy, often delicate, in which sensibility is matched by notable imagery and poignancy.....'

I remember Shamsur Rahman expressing a similar opinion a few years back. He thought that Kaiser Haq could rub shoulders with the major poets of the western world. Khushwant Singh wrote about Kaiser Haq in 1990 and highlighted his jovial nature. He pointed out that Haq had a macabre sense of humour. Kaiser Haq himself admitted that he was fond of the comic or satiric. I would give more importance to the thoughtful and insightful Kaiser Haq, his unforgettable images and his stunning craftsmanship. He fiercely controls his emotions, but the careful reader will not miss the fact that beneath his wit lies an almost sad poet who often deeply moves his readers.

Consider A to Z, Azad, the poem he wrote for Humayun Azad, the brilliant Bangla poet and man of letters who was brutally attacked by Islamic militants when he was leaving the Ekushey Boimela in 2004. Haq superbly affirms his kinship with all poets who use their poetry to protest against the forces of evil.

*I am not concerned here with Poetry.
My subject is life, and the protest
Against the enemies of Life.
The Poetry is in the Protest.*
Azad means to be free. Kaiser Haq firmly announces:

*To be azad, to be free/to walk, talk, write, sing,
love, draw, dance/is the A to Z of life/the rest is death/death/death/death/death*

In Dateline, Dhaka, 25 March 2006, the poem he wrote for his fellow freedom fighters, he is not sentimental but doesn't fail to come up with memorable lines:

It was precisely/Half a biblical lifetime ago/Though on this day once again/It feels like it

was yesterday.

Homage to Robert Lowell is touching. Read Cousin Shamsu, Durzi and feel how thoughtful and tender he can be.

*Each time he rises from work and stretches
he's a little less straight;/I may live to see him turn/into a bow/with the string missing.*

His shirts and trousers are oversize/or under like the bodies/they are made for; they sell well.

As Syed Manzoorul Islam points out, Kaiser Haq is moving and insightful, but smart and refreshingly witty at the same time. He can be satiric about Tagore and can parody TS Eliot and Jibanananda Das. He defines love as follows.

Love Is/Simple/as a sum/of addition/on two fingers/complex/as a computer's/binary/manipulations

Kaiser Haq has 'western know-how and eastern wisdom'. Two of his many unforgettable images: through the window a rain-washed garden looks in like eyes prettified by tears,

His Four Poems in Subcontinental English are delightful. I prefer his tender love poems (Writing Home) to his 'sexy' poems. In An Apology for Bangladeshi Poetry in English the poet states that his translations of Bangla poetry and prose have all been labours of love.'

Kaiser Haq writes in English but is a Bangladeshi poet. He is a rooted cosmopolitan, says Fakrul Alam. He is not only our best English language poet but also one of our major poets. At present he is 57 and at the height of his poetic powers. Reading him is always a rewarding experience.

Junaidul Haque is a novelist and critic and is in the travel industry

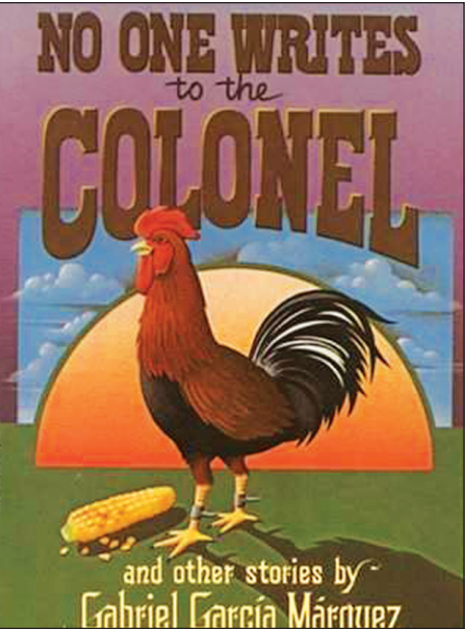
Ominous Octobers and tales of roosters

Tulip Chowdhury is happy with a novella brimming over with symbols

IF a reader wants to be engrossed in a captivating plot and an enchanting character, then No One Writes to the Colonel is the book he should go for. A reader will not feel like putting it down until the last word in it is read. Then the story remains at the back of the mind, the reader reliving the hours spent reading it. This novella was originally written in Spanish and then translated into English. The Colombian author, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, explores the life of a retired colonel who lives with his ailing wife on a hand-to-mouth basis. They live in a small town of Colombia under the rule of martial law. As the colonel struggles with his life, in the background is the beautiful image of the love shared between the husband and the wife. The opening paragraph shows the colonel serving coffee to his ailing wife with the last little spoonful. He empties the coffee can and tells his wife that he has just had his own. Next he prepares to go to the funeral of a young musician. He puts on a coat that he has been wearing since his marriage for special occasions only. The funeral is special, for somebody is dead from natural causes after many years. Political killings and corruption are just a way of life.

The colonel is going to a funeral but he himself too faces something like slow death, the death inherent in being an impoverished man. Poverty and his wife's asthma play havoc in their quotidian struggle for survival. There are times when he takes refuge in superstitions. He believes that October always comes with the worst days. He suffers his worst health in this month. October to him is replete with evil omens. He considers the dead musician unlucky, for his burial is taking place in October. The colonel owns a fighting rooster. Some children

come to stare at his rooster but he shoos them away, for he thinks that will make the bird wear out. The rooster is a legacy left by his only son, who was



No One Writes to the Colonel and other stories Gabriel Garcia Marquez Penguin Books

shot by political opponents.

The colonel's wife is eager to sell the rooster, for she thinks it will fetch them a good price. She is against the expense of keeping it. The colonel holds on to it in memory of his son. He feels that he has some solid ground to hold on to as long as he owns the rooster. It is the best fighting cock in town. People show him respect as he is its owner. Besides the rooster the couple have an old clock that they can sell. The colonel does not want to sell either of them and yet to escape from hunger he might have to give them up, one by one.

As days pass slowly there is a distant hope of getting the colonel's pension money that he had been promised fifteen years earlier. Every Friday he dresses up and goes to the harbor to catch the launch that brings in the mail. Every Friday he is confirmed that the letter ensuring the delivery of his pension money will be there. And yet no writes to the colonel. He consoles his wife that there is yet hope that one day the letter will come. The wife replies that hope can sustain them but they cannot live on hope, eat it as it were. She reminds him that the dire need of the moment is to be able get food for every living day. The colonel loves his wife but feels helpless when she comes up with the naked truth of their extreme poverty.

The colonel is a good man. He is a kind soul. There is a certain vulnerability mixed with his desire to remain honest that makes the reader feel compassion for the man. His poverty makes him an easy prey for some cunning people in the town. His rooster has to be sold but he cannot be sure if the buyer is being fair with the price. His good reputation and honour cannot be tarnished under the

stigma of poverty. The colonel and his wife, as the main characters, are not named in the story. This sheds light on the insignificant life they lead under martial law and its censored life. The colonel does not want the other people to know of his hard days even if it means eating corn mush made of corn bought for the rooster. He does not complain against his wife's rebukes for falling short of many things, for he knows that the truth cannot be denied. And yet in the midst of all the problems the colonel's honesty, his gentleness and his way of clinging on to hope for brighter days reach out to the reader. The reader too is left wanting the best for the man. And then there is too the letter for the pension, the readers too wish that somebody would write to the colonel about the recovery of his money and maybe finally the bad days would be over. Hope and despair seem to threaten the colonel, to rob him of his dignity. The readers feel the deepest sympathy for the man. This blending in with the characters of the story takes the book to its greatest height.

A Nobel Prize winner, García Márquez is said to have found inspiration for this book from his experience of unemployment after the newspaper for which he had been working was shut down. He was also inspired by his grandfather who was also a colonel and never received the pension money he had been promised.

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher and writes fiction

Absences and silences

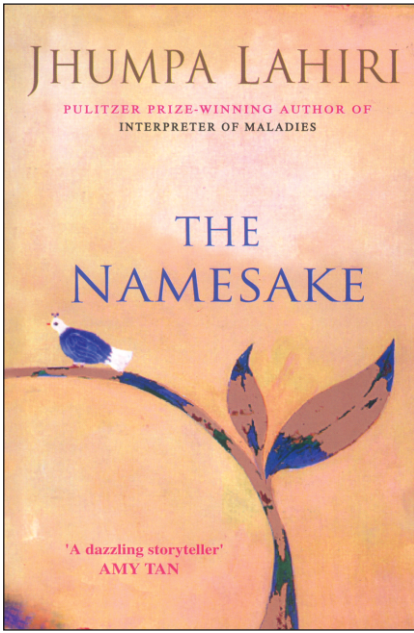
Mahbub Husain Khan enjoys a tale that speaks of home and beyond

THE Namesake is Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel. Her first collection of stories, The Interpreter of Maladies, won the Pulitzer Prize, as readers would know. The first two chapters of The Namesake, set in Massachusetts in 1968, the year that shook the world, gives us a foretaste of what is to follow in the rest of the novel. Gogol Ganguli is born to Ashima and Ashoke. Ashoke, an avid reader of Russian authors, is saved after a train accident in his youth, when he is reading Nikolai Gogol's story 'The Overcoat'. Just before the accident Ashoke is in conversation with a fellow traveller, Mr Ghosh, a resident of England, who asks Ashoke to see the world, particularly England and America. Then Ashoke goes on to read his book. There is then the train accident and only his shaking hands clutching the book identifies him as a man still alive amidst the wreckage of the train. He is rescued, grows up and marries Ashima, the couple go on to Massachusetts, and then Gogol is born. A letter suggesting the child's name does not arrive from Ashoke's or even Ashima's parents at Kolkata, and Ashoke names his son Gogol after his favourite author and the saviour of his life from the other world.

A letter does arrive finally, but it bears the news of Ashima's grandmother on her deathbed. Then there is a phone call informing Ashoke that Ashima's father has died of a heart attack. So the Gangulis travel to Kolkata with an American passport for the boy now named Gogol Ganguli.

The blurb on the front page of the book says: "...spanning three decades and crossing continents." However, the novel does not really cross continents, as most of the 291 pages of the book are about ABCD-American Born Confused Deshi-and their interactions with the 'American' Americans. The total number of pages devoted to the Ganguli family's visit to India and Kolkata, after the death of Ashima's father and the eight months' sabbatical that Ashoke has earned for a visit home, are only twenty. This novel is all 'Westward Ho!' giving readers in the Indian subcontinent a view of Brooklyn and Banglatown, Boston and Bondi Beach, not the other way round. On the other hand, the 2006 Booker Prize winner Kiran Desai, daughter of Anita Desai (short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1999), has focused on characters and settings in the Indian subcontinent in her novels Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard and The Inheritance of Loss.

Much of this novel from Lahiri is about the members of a new race of post national souls --- born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere, fighting to get back or get away from their homeland and ancestors, all their lives. A paragraph in the novel epitomises the essence of the story. "He knows that his mother will sit silently, staring at the clouds, as they journey back to Boston. But for Gogol, relief quickly replaces any lingering sadness. With relief he peels back the foil covering his breakfast, extracts the silverware from its sealed plastic packaging, asks the British Airways stewardess for a glass of



The Namesake Jhumpa Lahiri Houghton Mifflin

orange juice. With relief the puts on his headset to watch 'The Big Chill' and listen to top 'forty' songs all the way home."

This novel has a smattering of sex, no violent action, almost no surface drama. All the characters are defined by the words and emotions they stifle. Lahiri's story is precisely made yet shadowed by absences and silences, balanced between elegy and irony. The Namesake does achieve a balance between joy and sorrow, the death of an old style of life and beginning of the new, aptly beginning with Ashoke reading Nikolai Gogol's story 'The Overcoat' and ending with Gogol Ganguli also reading 'The Overcoat'. Expatriate writers like Jhumpa Lahiri have mostly come of age in a foreign environment and in an alien language. One looks forward to the future where they will enrich the treasure trove of writings in their native language.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London of Bengali parents, and grew up in Rhode Island, USA. Her stories have appeared in many American journals and her first published collection, The Interpreter of Maladies, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for fiction, the New Yorker Prize for Best First Book and the PEN/Hemingway Award. Jhumpa Lahiri now lives in Brooklyn with her husband and their son.

Mahbub Husain Khan, a former civil servant, is a writer and critic