

Stories of love, prayer and the soul . . .

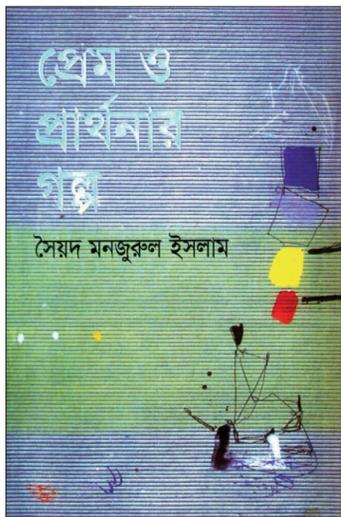
Junaidul Haque journeys through a landscape of experience and enjoys it all

In an appreciation of Syed Manzoorul Islam's short stories, I have previously observed that academics are often brilliant writers but seldom popular and that Serajul Islam Choudhury and Syed Manzoorul Islam are exceptions. The latter is one of our finest storytellers. He has written essays, art criticism and columns during the last three decades or more. But he has been writing stories regularly only since the 1990s and has continued doing so in the present decade. He wrote a story or two in the mid-seventies also. However, like his illustrious 'nana' Syed Mujtaba Ali, he earned his fame as a brilliant writer of fiction a little late - in his forties. I have no doubt that his stories will give him a permanent place in the domain of Bangla literature.

Syed Manzoorul Islam's short stories are not at all traditional. They differ a lot from the stories that we have been reading. He is a post-modernist and a brilliant craftsman. He portrays reality with all its complexities. He mixes fantasy with great ease. He has deep insight, is a careful observer of human nature and is very refreshing and witty at the same time. He deals with a wide range of characters, who he treats affectionately and turns into lively, memorable people. He dips into the conscious and the sub-conscious areas of the human mind with effortless ease. He is brilliantly satirical and a master narrator. He begins most of his stories in an easy conversational style and slowly takes the reader to the bottomless pit that is the human mind. A craftsman like him is rare on either side of Bengal.

Prem O Prarthonar Galpo is his latest collection of fiction containing nineteen stories which delight as well as enlighten. They are stories of love and prayer, but not always in the conventional sense. The characters are urban and subaltern. The alienation and the loneliness, the nostalgia and the angst, the happiness and the sorrow of these people get depicted by a thoughtful and sensitive mind. Readers love the writer's sincere and superior storytelling skills. He mixes the mythical and the personal, the social and the subjective, the historical and the metaphysical with enviable finesse.

Reshmi Rupal or The Silk Handkerchief is a love story set in an inter-city train, the eternal triangle of an indifferent husband, the neglected wife and the eager friend. The writer knows our trains, our stations and our passengers very well. Enter the parallel plot of a hundred years ago - the young wife, her simple husband and the villainous uncle-in-law. They enter the writer's train! The writer effortlessly shifts time sequences. The wife



Prem O Prarthonar Galpo
Syed Manzoorul Islam
Anyopokash

and the husband ultimately unite to foil the uncle. The first trio also solves their problem: the husband's display of affection and genuine concern makes the wife happy and she turns away from the friend. The narrator is at his sensitive and wistful best.

Daedaluser Ghudi or The Kite of Daedalus alludes to Daedalus and Icarus and is the story of a kite-flying father and son duo of old Dhaka. Iman loses his father Setu Miah in a kite-flying accident when he is nine months old. His mother dies of a heart attack on seeing her dead husband. It is quite a miracle that Iman grows into a teenager without either of his parents. His boss, garage owner Hossain Miah, loses his older brother in the same accident. He is fond of Iman and will not let him fly kites. Iman flies them secretly. One day while climbing a coconut tree to get back his kite, he discovers the rape of a young housemaid by a mighty daroga or police officer in the fourth story of an apartment. Before Iman gets down with his

terribly torn kite (symbolising his devastated heart?) he hears the sound of the girl's tragic fall from the balcony. The rest, as they say, is history. Some think the girl fell while playing. (Housemaids stop playing at five, don't they? The writer asks and shakes you.) Some think she fell while collecting clothes. Only Iman tells the truth to Mueed Bhai, the young journalist who fights injustice. His friend Sabrina Neema helps him. They form a lovely subplot. The law quite naturally fails to take its own course as the mighty daroga, the local police station and the local godfather of Bengalis conspire. This is the national game of Bangladesh, observes the writer. Two famous lawyers, powerful members of civil society, fight on behalf of the criminals to punish innocent Iman and Rafiq, much to the agony of Hossain Miah, Mueed Bhai and Sabrina. Miah blames the kite for Iman's suffering! The writer coats a tragic human tale with brilliant humour.

East India Companiar Kroy Bikroy, Teen Takar Note and Jhba-Kata Manush are brilliant stories. The first informs us that the writer is a fish in water in so far as the history and sociology of Bengal and human psychology in general are concerned. The second allegorically warns us against the flood-like corruption that society is submerged in. The third is one of the most soulful stories I have read on the sufferings of garment workers.

Shalboney Jyotsna is tragic, beautiful and brilliant. The moonlight of the Shal forest illuminates the reader's heart. Aulad, twenty three, is a simple young man who loves life. He carries bombs prepared by others to political parties in Dhaka for use during hartals. This is just a source of income for him. He supports his mother and a foolish brother. He has loved and lost Momena. Aulad loses 'a leg, a part of his belly, his right hand up to his wrist and so many other things' when two extra bombs kept in his pocket go off while police suddenly chase him at Shahbagh and he falls. When his mother sees his lifeless body at the morgue, accompanied by Momena, she announces that it is not her Aulad. Momena finds her cruel. But later she dreams of Aulad waiting eagerly for her in the moonlit forest and realises that the young man without his limbs and bowels couldn't be her former friend! The writer shakes us to our roots with his story of the simple young man who dies with dreams unfulfilled.

Ibne Batutar Dinporji, Kushumbapur Abishkar and Bhoishyat Thekey Fera are superb stories. The last named depicts the corruption that has flooded our society in general and the university in particular. We shudder to realise how low some of

our academics stoop for material gains. Ekti Goenda Galpo or A Detective Story is fascinating. Islam's prose is racy as usual, the remarkable wit is there, the events described are real and exciting and his narrative skills are excellent. It reminds me of another brilliant story of his, Ferryghater Rannabanna. The female protagonist wakes up, learns the bitter truth of life and courageously fights her adversaries in both the stories. The detective is also an impressive character.

Chaitraghar or The House of Chaitra is a fascinating tale of passion. There are brilliant poetic paragraphs on the 'union of the earth and the sky', a manifestation of human love in nature. We discover a mature man's desires. The young widow's unfulfilled desires also slowly force her to respond. Aziz Masterer Shathey Ek Shondhya is a brilliant and complex story of love and revenge. It is one of the writer's best stories. Grim village realities haunt us and the beauty and courage of love console us as well.

The other stories are equally interesting and enlightening. Nodi O Tepantarer Galpo depicts the beautiful feelings of a lonely, sad, middle-aged lady. Sad because she is a widow, sad because her young daughter is dead. Most of us have no time for the emotions of a woman of her age. Like a poet the writer dips deep into the human mind. Plabon is a complex mixture of reality and fantasy and centres around human nature and the ills of society. Zinda Lash is the last story in the book, as interesting as the writer's best ones, as brilliant a commentary on society and human nature as his best tales.

Syed Manzoorul Islam paints contemporary Bangladesh quite skillfully in his stories. His is introspective literature and he is always experimenting with his technique. His characters are all known to us but his great storytelling ability turns them into memorable people. He is an effortless turner of the ordinary into the sublime. He brilliantly satirises the ills of society and the follies of those who constitute it. He portrays our sorrow and happiness, our love and prayer with all the accompanying complexities. He teaches us to fight evil. He teaches us to dream of the noble and the beautiful.

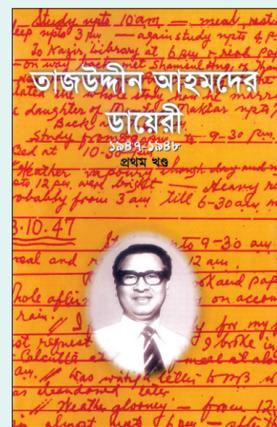
Junaidul Haque writes fiction, literary criticism and political commentaries. He is in the travel trade.

At a glance



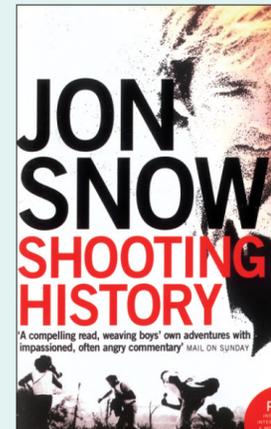
Shei Ondhokar
Prottochhyodorshir Bomonaye 15 August-er
Nrihongsho Hotyakando
M. Hamid

In a season of sadness, this is the book to read. The various accounts of how the Father of the Nation and his family were murdered make macabre reading. The gory details of everything the assassins did in the pre-dawn hours of the day reveal once again the deep conspiracy that was at work behind the murders. Did all the conspirators get caught?



Tajuddin Ahmad-er Diary 1947-1948
Pratihbas

The man destined to be Bangladesh's first prime minister and its wartime leader was one who meticulously recorded everything going on in politics around him. This diary is but the first of two volumes, brought out through the strenuous efforts of his daughter. These diaries reveal already the man in the making. The intelligence shines through. And so does the intellect, all the way.



Shooting History
Jon Snow
Harper Perennial

This happens to be a recollection of all the varied experiences the veteran journalist has gone through in his long career. He has been to nearly every place that has mattered and has often found himself in straitened circumstances. As anchor on Britain's Channel Four today, he commands enormous respect. Read the book. You will like it.



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Samaj-Rupantar Odhyaon Kendro Serajul Islam Choudhury has been doing fascinating work educating readers on a range of issues, from the political to the economic to the social, in this journal over the past few years. This new issue lives up to the reputation set by earlier ones and should convince readers looking for serious matters to read that here they have something worthwhile at last.

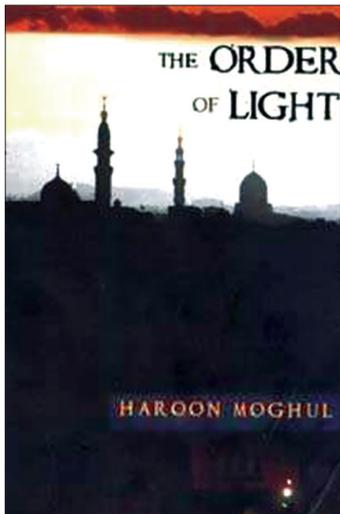
Eyeballing Egyptian women and crying in the dark

Charles Larson reads a Muslim's tale and feels touched by it

WITH The Order of Light, Haroon Moghul, a graduate student at Columbia University, in New York City, has written the most soul-wrenching and honest account of what it is like to be a Muslim male in the world today a brilliant work that ought to be read by everyone struggling to understand the post 9/11 world we are all a part of. Although the book is called a novel by its publisher, I suspect that what Moghul has written is his autobiography or at the very least his spiritual autobiography that close does The Order of Light cut to the edge.

The unnamed narrator (a young Pakistani-American) and his Indian room mate, Haris, enroll in a language institute in Cairo, ostensibly to improve their Arabic and their understanding of the Qur'an. It is the summer before 9/11, when George Bush was clearing brush at his Texas farm, ignoring the ship. Well, Moghul's narrator is also avoiding reality, and, instead, hanging out at a McDonald's restaurant, making incessant trips to the ATM for more money, eye-balling Egyptian women, and, when he really gets conflicted about his feelings, jogging on Cairo's backs streets and alleys. Being a Muslim, he thinks, and especially an American Muslim, "these days is like crying in the dark."

You don't know what hurts more the fact that you're crying, or that no one can see you crying." Of fitting in, the narrator further observes, "Islamic culture doesn't cater to individuals as well



The Order of Light
Haroon Moghul
Penguin (India)

as it does to families, because Muslims find liberty in bondage." Strong words, intense conflicts, living, in short, in misery: "We had become faithless men worried incessantly about faith. We were increasingly unable to come together and more and more plagued by panic precisely because we could not. And we also felt a deeper, harder fear, which came at random hours of the day, walking down the street, or stopping at an intersection: the sense that everything was going wrong all at once."

Nothing is more intensely conflicting for Moghul's narrator than the status of women their widespread availability in the USA and in Cairo, both exploitative, though in different ways. Men in both worlds go through women serially whether because Islam permits four wives or because Western men frequently try out many women before settling down with one.

As a final confession, the narrator muses, "Westerners searched through each and every philosophy till they separated their sacred from their secular, their souls from their bodies, their individual from their social, their meaning from their language and their life from their death." Yet, he confesses, "I had come here because it was a Muslim city, but I spent all my time assiduously avoiding anything that reminded me too much of Islam."

Then one night when he is jogging, the narrator stumbles upon a decrepit mosque on the back streets, sheltering five Kurdish men who claim to

be descendants of the twelfth-century retinue of Salah al-Din, the order of light. These men have come back to save the world, and, by extension, Islam, particularly the lost souls like Haroon Moghul's confused American.

The resolution to the narrative is symbolic rather than proscriptive.

Cairo becomes awash with terrorism (suicide bombers, explosions in public places). Moghul's narrator and his roommate barely escape one of the explosionssaved perhaps by the men from the Order of Light.

Or should we regard these five men as providing an order for Life, especially an order for faith if men could only believe?

Then, in the strangest of all endings, Haroon Moghul provides a timeline for what might have happened if 9/11 had not happened and Haris and his roommate had become part of the Order of Light. It makes you pause and think, once again, how complicated, how conflicted it is to be a Muslim living in the Western world today. Living anywhere in the world today.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University, in Washington, DC.

A new search for old Nazrul songs

Subrata Kumar Das revisits missing spots

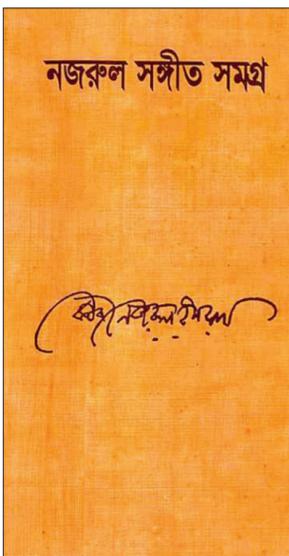
NAZRUL Institute brought out a mammoth work on Kazi Nazrul Islam in the last months of the year 2006. It was the *Nazrul Sangeet Somogro*. The task has been possible only because of the hard labour and inherent patience of its editor Rashium Nabi, a devoted Nazrul song artist and researcher.

The *Somogro* or collection comprises 3,163 songs, among which only 85 songs have references, as their texts could not be collected.

The history of the publication literature of Nazrul songs dates much farther back. Except for the inclusion of the songs in the *Nazrul Rochonavoli* (Works of Nazrul), the first compilation of the first lines of the National Poet's songs was brought out by Prof. Rafiqul Islam in 1969 from the Bangla Academy. Later, in 1970, the veteran Nazrul researcher Abdus Sattar published an anthology of 100 new songs of the poet called *Nazrul Geeti Sondhane* in 1970.

That was followed by *Nazrul Geeti*, published between 1973 and 1975 from Kolkata. The next effort, this one by Talim Hossain, another devotee of Nazrul, was a collection of 500 songs in five volumes. Afterwards, *Nazrul Geeti Okhondo* (Complete Nazrul Songs) emerged as a gigantic success, with 2,111 songs edited by Abdul Azaz Al Aman and published by Horof Prokashoni of Kolkata in 1978. The same publisher brought out a more voluminous anthology of 2,504 songs, revised by Dr. Bhrahmohom Thakur.

The editor of the present collection had been engaged in this arduous and meticulous job since 1991. He had to delve into all the possible sources, along with making use of available resources, to get the job done. About 400 *leto* songs by the poet have been included in the anthology. And the most exciting piece of information is that the editor believes that many more songs could be discovered if some more resources like the film *Patalpuri*, the plays *Aladin* and *Sugono* were on hand. Rashium Nabi also asserts that *Haramoni* aired by Kolkata Radio Centre has



Nazrul Sangeet Somogro
A Collection of Complete
Songs by Kazi Nazrul
Islam
Edited by Rashium Nabi
Nazrul Institute, Dhaka

included some songs by Nazrul that are yet to be collected.

But the drawback of the book is in the serialisation of the songs. It does not follow any alphabetical order. That is when the grandeur of this thick volume diminishes a good deal. Moreover, such an anthology demands chronological information even as information on individual song becomes necessary.

Subrata Kumar Das, a teacher, is Executive Director of Bangladesh Literary Resource Centre (BLRC).

The idea of God, in terms of Hinduism

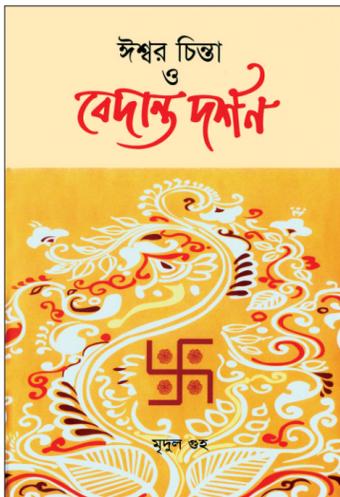
Prem Ranjan Dev studies a work on core religion and seeks to understand it

HINDU thoughts are mostly based on natural philosophy and maybe that is what author Mridul Guha means to say in his book, *Iswar Chinta O Vedanta Darshan* (the Idea of God and Vedic Philosophy).

Iswar Chinta O Vedanta Darshan is apparently a theological book, but it is more a reflection of old Indian philosophy, society, science, politics, character, et al. This is an attempt to seize upon the core matters of Indian civilisation.

There are nine basic philosophies in the original Indian thoughts of divinity, with Vedanta being one of them. God is a symbol of Vedanta. This Hindu religious thought based on natural philosophy is democratic, evolutionary yet ethical. Vedanta is not pure philosophy; it is rather metaphysics.

From the dawn of the history of human thoughts God has been one of the basic of human concerns. In forming an idea of God people from the very earliest days of their consciousness have, by and large, been influenced by contemporary religion and mythology. The author has made a free inquiry into the thought uninfluenced by any existing school. His conception of God hardly has any resemblance with the idea of God taught by the traditional Vedanta religion. And naturally there is a great deal of difference between the thoughts. Notwithstanding this difference, God occupies a foremost position in the author's own metaphysics.



Iswar Chinta O Vedanta
Darshan
Mridul Guha
Alo Prakashani,
Chittagong

A large body of statements is found in the Upanishada or Vedanta in which it is maintained that the nature of divinity cannot be expressed in language, for it is beyond ordinary understanding and reasoning, subtler than the subtlest and perhaps beyond existing logic. This awakening does not come through intellect. The Upanishada and Vedanta suggest the limitations of human expression in connection with the nature of the ultimate, the problem of the ineffability of divine nature. The author's conception of God sharply contrasts with the God of the Vedanta because the latter has manifold functions, the most important of which is creation and destruction from which the author's God often seems completely free.

The author deals with the conflict of thoughts between God the Creator and man the narrator of God. Keeping himself neutral, the author tries to draw a conclusion in such terms as infinity and eternity, and undiminished existence of supreme 'authority'.

The author talks of modern day thoughts on religion and of the oldest, i.e., the Sanatan (Hindu) religion which the Vedanta thoughts relate. In the Vedanta thoughts it has in one way or another and time and again been said that the religion is as universal as all absorbing and makes the follower generous to the point of loving all and sheltering all. Then why must there be any narrowness among its followers just to impede universal peace and fellow feeling among all humans and other living beings and

even beyond? The author puts this question for all to answer.

The writer discusses the lives and teachings of such extraordinary sages as Shree Sankaracharya and Shree Loknath Brahmachari to remind and enlighten the readers of his thoughts on Vedic philosophy and perhaps to stress its authenticity. In fact, he puts stress on the point of accommodation in the Vedic thoughts on religion. There is provision to make it appropriate vis-a-vis time, i.e., appropriate reform can be there for its furtherance - 'Samvabami yuge yuge' -- possible over the ages.

One may find some lapses in the author's conception of or thoughts on God. However, one should not forget that the writer is a theologian and not a philosopher, and in the midst of polytheistic ideas has tried his best to present a monotheistic God, on a rational basis. Iswar Chinta O Vedanta Darshan consists of fourteen articles. Throughout the book the author tries to project the distinction between traditional religion and modern day thoughts with subtlety. There are all the remarkable thoughts and memorable characters ready to attract readers' attention.

In short, the book may well qualify as a sort of comprehensive reading on Vedic religion.

Prem Ranjan Dev is a researcher