

A novel of recovered memory . . .

Mahmud Rahman reads a tale and remembers an unforgettable war

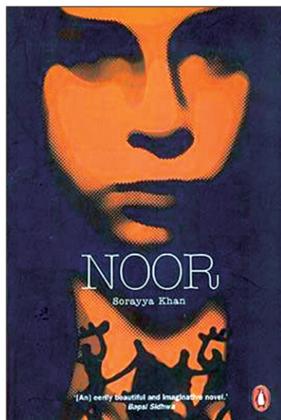
SORAYYA KHAN opens her novel Noor with two epigraphs. The first page has these words from Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali: "Your history gets in the way of my memory."

On the next page, she recounts in a few spare sentences two events from history: the cyclone that hit East Pakistan in November 1970 and the civil war that broke out a few months later between East and West Pakistan, leading to the independence of Bangladesh. She notes that a million people died from the cyclone, and between 300,000 and three million died in the war. The events are stated bare, with a trace of emotion or judgment.

In the next 223 pages, the author will take you inside a respectable, bourgeois family in Islamabad, Pakistan, but by the time you are through, you will have been brought face to face with the horrors of the history from the epigraph.

One day about fourteen years ago I sat down for lunch in the cafeteria of a Detroit hospital where I was then working. A tall man in a doctor's coat who I recognised as a fellow in the paediatrics department, a man who looked like he came from my part of the world, asked to join me. The usual openers followed: what sort of work we did, how long, and where we were from. I told him I was from Bangladesh. He was from Pakistan. He went on to say, "Isn't it such a tragedy that we are no longer part of the same country?" I asked why. He replied, "Because both our nations are believers in Islam." I disagreed, saying that I was grateful that we were not part of the same country. He challenged me, "Are you not for the solidarity of Islam?" I asked how there could be solidarity when Pakistan refused to take any responsibility for the crimes it had committed in 1971. "What?" He wanted to know, "the stories of the so-called atrocities? All that is exaggerated." I asked him how old he had been in 1971. "Six," he said. I had been seventeen and I lived through those times. I told him that he was in no position to tell me what was real and what was exaggerated. He showed no curiosity, no openness, and we never spoke again.

Over these many years since the war, most though not all of my encounters with Pakistanis have been similarly disappointing. Any conversation about the break up of Pakistan runs into a thick wall of denial. Some not born until after



Noor
Sorayya Khan
Penguin

the break up say it is old history, why dredge it up? They may even admit that they do not know what happened. Neither do they show any desire to learn. History like the victims of 1971 should stay buried beneath the earth. Pakistani history books merely repeat the stale lies that Pakistan divided because Hindus and India conspired to break it up.

Needless to say, there have been no reparations, no trial faced by a single genocidaire, and no truth commissions to uncover what happened.

Until that history is acknowledged, perhaps every Pakistani should be encouraged to read Sorayya Khan's novel. A courageous work, its singular achievement is that it strikes a hammer blow at the wall of silence that surrounds what Pakistan did in 1971.

The book opens to a domestic story. Sajeda wakes up early one morning and sees a vision of a strange girl with bright colours in her hair, a girl who cries out in longing for her mother. Sajeda is convinced this girl is the child she conceived earlier in the night.

As the narrative unfolds, we find that Sajeda was an orphan of the 1970 cyclone, a Bengali child picked up on the

streets of Dhaka by Ali, a young Pakistani soldier. He returned before the war was over with Sajeda and presented her to his mother, known in the family as Nanijaa. Ali asked the girl to call him her father, he gave up meat and God, and he took a scalding bath to cleanse himself of his sins. After that ritual, he closed shut the wartime side of his life. Sajeda grew up as a Pakistani in this household, loved and doted upon by both Ali and Nanijaa. She married Hussein, but Ali, disinclined to give up his nearness to Sajeda, insisted that the son-in-law live in his household.

The young couple had two sons, then after the pregnancy that began at the time of Sajeda's vision, she births Noor. The girl comes into the world afflicted, suffering from some disability, probably autism. Her features are flattened, she is prone to screaming fits, and she is slow to learn. Frustrated, Hussein soon shuts her out of his life. Noor continues to yearn for her father's love but mother and daughter have to fortify themselves against the unfeeling father. The first half of the book focuses on the tensions among these three.

But it turns out that Noor has a gift. She is drawn to crayon and colour, and she learns to draw and paint. She is single minded in her pursuit, and Sajeda, Ali and Nanijaa all encourage the child. Only Hussein remains hostile.

Then it emerges that Noor's gift is even more special. Her paintings begin to reveal Sajeda's past, in clearly drawn scenes. And in the second half of the book, Noor's artwork forces open Ali's story what he saw and did during the war. Both Sajeda and Ali are forced to return to her origins, the horrific circumstances in which she was orphaned and the memories of the war that tied their two lives together.

A remarkable achievement of Sorayya Khan's book is that in one aspect the novel is a domestic story of a family in Islamabad who have to find a way to love and raise a disabled child. It is this child whose existence drives Sajeda and Hussein apart and who then faces the challenge of making the family whole again. It is this child who returns both Sajeda and Ali back to memories of pain they would rather not remember and tosses them into an uncertain space from which it is possible the divisions might reveal a chasm impossible to overcome.

Sorayya Khan's descriptive prose is

vivid and beautiful. The 1970 cyclone in East Bengal came with a fearsome tidal wave the storm went on all night and wave upon wave of water lashed pitiful human bodies in its path. With her command of words, Sorayya Khan evokes the terror of a child lost amidst the ferocious wrath of that cyclone. In scenes that make you shudder in horror, she captures the plight of a soldier caught in a war that no longer makes sense to him. And since in the narrative present this novel is a domestic story, she writes with powerful detail and captures the emotions of a family where a child is born, a first birthday is celebrated, and a girl faces her first period, a family where love comes, goes, and returns, a family in which the power of love is challenged by memory of pain and present-day tensions surrounding a colourful, strange and wonderful child.

The author studiously avoids the politics of what led to the war. The narrative stays close to the characters of this book and none of them have either interest or much of a clue about the politics of the war. Since Ali was in the war, it is through his perspective that we see it. In a single exchange between Ali and Noor, Sorayya Khan displays more than sufficient understanding about the war:

"But what did you do in the war?" Noor persisted, playing with the cracked plastic of her bucket.

"Fight people."

"Why?"

Ali couldn't remember. He wasn't certain that, in the beginning, he'd needed or even had a reason to go to war. He'd rushed into it, an adventure of a lifetime. Now, he wasn't certain any of the things he'd been told (except the facts about the Indians) had ever rung true to him. That Bengalis, dark and stupid, not really Muslims, didn't deserve their own country, their own leaders. What he did remember had an order to it, like fact books on formations. After he landed in East Pakistan, at Dhaka airport, it took one day before he asked himself, *this is my own country?*, another day to know he wasn't fighting the war for his country, another day to realise he wasn't fighting it for Nanijaa, or, for that matter, any family. On the fourth day he felt like a mercenary.

Sorayya Khan underscores how the Pakistani military dealt with Bengalis in colonial and racist terms. To her credit,

Sorayya Khan does not evade what was done. As Ali remembers, "Killing wasn't nearly the worst of it." Indeed it wasn't. Pakistan's war spilled over into those acts well known from the toolbox of genocide: rape, torture, mutilation. Ali's memories bring the reader face to face with the cruelty of that war.

As much as I found to admire in this novel, one thing left me dissatisfied: the perfection of Noor's agency that drives the narrative forward. There it seems to tip over from a sort of magical realism into the arena of religion. Noor's visions occur with the order of a guided hand, either a supreme being or the author of a work of fiction: first they bring back Sajeda's cyclone and then they move on to Ali's war. Meanwhile the scenes she depicts in her drawings are film-like, nearly perfect matches to Sajeda's and Ali's memories. It is too precise, too ordered, and Noor's visions become a transparent literary device. It becomes revelation with a capital R.

A related criticism is one that I will have to make without disclosing a vital piece of the fictional puzzle of the novel. In actual history, the cyclone and the war were connected. The Pakistani government was negligent in its response to the calamity and this became one more grievance that drove the Bengali yearning for freedom. While Sorayya Khan does not touch this aspect of politics, through Sajeda's orphaning and being rescued by Ali she reveals a connection between the two tragedies. But near the end of the book, she reaches far to make this connection too literal and even in a book of otherworldly happenings, this strains believability.

Where official history is awful realist fiction, perhaps it is only a character like Noor a messenger of the supreme being that Pakistanis believe in that can break open the silence and shatter the stubborn wall of official fiction. It will be interesting to see how Pakistani readers respond to such a book.

Mahmud Rahman is a U.S.-based writer on an extended visit to Dhaka.

At a glance

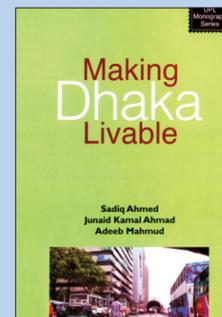
Ei Kaal Ei Desh
A.Z.M. Abdul Ali
Agamee Prakashani

Since retiring from the civil service, A.Z.M. Abdul Ali has carved a niche for himself as a columnist. His articles have developed a reputation for clarity of thought together with precision of language. In this compilation, it is a good number of those pieces that come alive. Anyone keen on studying Bangladesh and the many issues it must tackle will love this work.



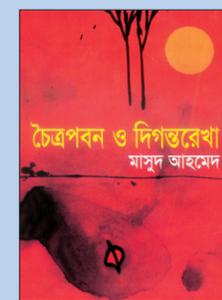
Making Dhaka Livable
Sadiq Ahmed, Junaid Kamal Ahmad, Adeb Mahmud
The University Press Limited

Dhaka for many has lately turned into a synonym for environmental horror. That may be saying it in an exaggerated fashion, but the truth is that there are some very real problems the nation's capital lives through. In this work, a concerted attempt has been made to delineate the problems in the city. Urbanisation and all that it typifies is what you will find here. It is all very educative.



Education and Economic Growth
Lessons from Japan for
Bangladesh
Muhammad Faridul Alam
Adorn Publication

The writer observes social and economic conditions in Bangladesh and Japan, in that comparative manner of speaking, and feels that there could be lessons for Dhaka from Tokyo's experience. Alam, an academic, has been to Japan and so has a fairly good understanding of how the system works there. He draws on his observations and relates them to what he thinks could be made to work in his country.



Chaitrapaban O Digantarekha
Masud Ahmed
Mowla Brothers

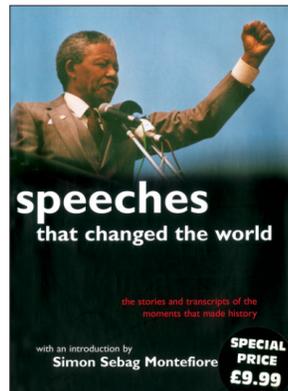
Much has been written on the war of liberation, from the historical point of view. And much continues to be written still. Where fiction is concerned, the war has consistently served as a powerful premise on which to build ideas and themes. Masud Ahmed does a pretty good job of weaving a new tale around what was clearly the most defining moment in the lives of Bengalis.

Words that redefined history and reshaped lives

Syed Badrul Ahsan revisits oratory and recalls the sublime

ORATORY has since the beginning of civilised existence kept people in thrall. Shakespeare provided a clue to the riveting nature of speeches in his plays. You think here of Brutus and Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, of the many ways in which they played with words to convince the audience of the justness of the causes they held dear. But that was literature. In life lived from day to day, through the vagaries of politics, oratory has often been raised to the level of art. In Bangladesh's case, the speeches of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were ammunition, over the years, in the defence of liberty. Gandhi was not a rousing speaker, but the calm religiosity he brought into his words drove the point home. And then there was Syed Badruddin, whose command of Bengali, Urdu and English was demonstrated to huge effect in his speeches, particularly in pre-partition India.

Now comes this admirable tome of a work. In *Speeches That Changed The World*, it is a lost age, or many lost ages that once were steeped in idealism that come alive. You could argue with the editors, though, about the speeches they did not include in the anthology. Even so, there are all those specimens of the mind that recreate the past. History buffs will not quarrel with the inclusion of orations rendered by men of divinity. Read here Moses, coming forth with the Ten Commandments ("Thou shalt have no other gods before me") as also Jesus with his "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". Muhammad too makes a desirable entry ("Turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque"), followed by the Sermon to the birds by St.



Speeches That Changed The World
Introduction by Simon Sebag Montefiore
Quercus, London

Francis of Assisi ('My little sisters, the birds, much bounden are ye unto God').

A particular characteristic of speeches, good speeches (for there have also been millions of tedious ones), is the inspirational. That is how John F. Kennedy, otherwise a not very dynamic figure on the broad canvas of history, galvanised Americans through his inaugural address in January 1961. "Ask not what your country can do for you", he declaimed, "but ask what you can do for your country." It is a speech much quoted by JFK fans

around the world and yet it somehow loses its brilliance once there is mention of Abraham Lincoln. The Civil War-era American president was clearly a natural when it came to oratory. The concluding words in his first inaugural address ("With malice toward none, with charity for all...") were a pointer to what was to be. And, true enough, it was with the Gettysburg address in November 1863 that Lincoln demonstrated the heights he could scale. "Four score and seven years ago", he said with quiet insistence, "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Great speeches come with a flavour of the literary; and Lincoln put literature in plenty into his speeches. Much a similar tenor was noted in Winston Churchill in his 13 May 1940 address in the House of Commons — "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." Words flowed, like a stream, from the wartime British leader. In August of the same year, it was again an interplay of words that fired the patriotism of the nation when Churchill spoke of the sacrifices being made in the war against Nazism, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." Oratory takes the collective imagination to new heights, as Jawaharlal Nehru demonstrated through his 'tryst with destiny' speech in the opening moments of a free India in 1947 ('At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom'). Blood was being spilled in the aftermath of partition, but that reality did not deter India's first prime minister from lighting the path to hope for

his people. Contrast these sentiments with those that Eamon de Valera voices in April 1966 on the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. His is an elegy, dedicated to the patriots he fought with once, all of whom were to perish in what for Ireland was an epic struggle for self-determination. In De Valera's words, "they were all good men, fully alive to their responsibilities, and it was only the firmest conviction, the fullest faith and love of country that prompted their action."

Speeches is fundamentally a journey through political experience straddling the globe. If there are the lofty perorations that find a place here, there are too the manifest lies that do not find an escape route. And thus, more than a year before he would get tangled in his venality, Richard Nixon tells Americans in April 1973 that "there can be no whitewash at the White House." It was, in truth, a contaminated world that Nixon created, and lived in. Morality did not matter to him, but it did for Vaclav Havel, who tells the people of Czechoslovakia in 1990, "We live in a contaminated moral environment." That takes you back to the moral superiority that General George S. Patton personified in his times. His speech, wherein he vows, "I am personally going to shoot that paper-hanging sonofabitch Hitler", is one of the items in this anthology. The same holds true for Nelson Mandela, who defiantly tells the court trying him in apartheid-driven South Africa in 1964, "I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal

opportunities."

And so the caravan of history moves on. Along the way, Charles de Gaulle finds his own place in it. As France falls to Nazism, he takes flight to London, from where he sounds the clarion call that would rejuvenate his dispirited country: "France has lost a battle. But France has not lost the war! Thoughts of war then give way to ruminations on peace, as in this placidity of a statement from Mother Teresa in 1979: "Love begins at home, and it is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the action that we do."

It is a moving kaleidoscope of the ages you have here. For sometime, you go beyond the mediocre, to recall a world once epitomised by sublimity, larger-than-life individuals. Remember Oliver Cromwell? As he dismisses the Rump Parliament in 1653, he rails against the lawmakers: "It is high time for me to put an end to your sitting in this place, which you have dishonoured by your contempt of all virtue, and defiled by your practice of every vice..." His voice rises to a crescendo, as he sends the legislators packing, "Take away that shining bauble there, and lock up the doors. In the name of God, go!"

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

Opening up possibilities and creating brainstorm

Efadul Huq rushes through a mad ride of a book and likes the journey

SALMAN Rushdie, the biological son of the mystic East and the adopted son of the rational West, gives to the confused planet a brilliant family saga in his true style through *The Moor's Last Sigh*. So read on as I review this book in a Rushdie-ish way.

It is said when Hades was heralding Rushdie he penned *The Moor's Last Sigh*, slipping from place to place, hiding and never appearing in public. His protagonist, Moor Zogolby, is a lot like him spending a life in banishment from normal society. But there's a major difference as well: Moor ages twice the rate of normal humans!

So our Moor is now mentally in his thirties but has the body of an old man. He, not Rushdie, is writing this novel, leaf by leaf, and nailing each leaf to a different door or tree as he rushes through the woods, fleeing his final captors.

Most complain that Rushdie's language is flowery and the narration is overloading if that's you then don't pick this book. To cut a long explanation short, Rushdie has done it again in the same so-called complex way. And what is that? Abundant puns, allegories, word play, allusions, Spanish-Hindi language, local dialect and so on. For example, the nailing-to-doors is a reference to Martin Luther's posting of his 'theses' on the doors of the churches, sparking the Protestant Reformation. Ambiguously, it could even be a reference to Rushdie himself, running from place to place and writing this book while his pursuers were chasing him for writing *The Satanic Verses*. That's the beauty of Rushdie's writings; it is open to many possibilities and definitely creates brainstorms.

Sadly, there is a certain drawback in his novels. He gives his works an extra local flavour which makes it unattractive to the person who has never been in that place. In the case of this book, it is Bombay. But I can assure you that any reader can get over with it. Just omit the words you can't comprehend!

Aurora, a budding artist, takes an overlooking yet possessive attitude toward her four children, to the point that she gives them names that sound very much like 'Eeny', 'Meeny', 'Myne', and

'Moe'. Among these, the last one is Moor, whose bigger than age physique is a matter of entertainment for his early teacher a frustrated romance. And later on, a more matured romance delights the readers where Moor is asked to kill himself by his lover by taking a pill!

The novel doesn't offer conventional suspense. There are no surprises. The end of the book is previewed in the beginning. The effect is that we focus not on what happens or why but on how. This inward chase and alienating style takes you closer to the characters more than what the traditional style can do. Magic realism is how you may describe the environment but honestly, tears and laughter never leave your side in this read.

Full of wit, spiralling sentences, it is a mad ride through the mind of an eccentric character. Have you fastened your seat belt yet?

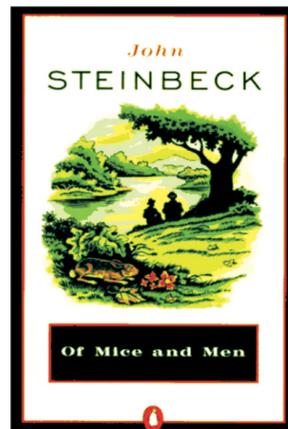
Efadul Huq is a young writer and reviewer of books

A sad story of little broken dreams

Tulip Chowdhury goes back to old fiction and loves it

THERE are times when the most profound tales spring from the saddest thoughts. Rich people, famous people and happy people usually have happy tales to tell. But what about the tales of the poor ones, the not so lucky ones, or the people who are born with some birth defects? Who is going to relate their tales? John Steinbeck in *Of Mice and Men* writes a tale of such men, men who have no one to listen to their sorrows. This is the tale of two lonely young men trying to find their own unique place in the world. This is a tale of a man with the mind of a young child and his loyal friend. It is a tale of an intriguing relationship between a healthy young man and another who is quiet and desolate. Here is a study of how interesting human relationships can be, how people react in different situations. The story holds sadness and yet it is enthralling and the reader does not put the book down until the last word in it is read.

The novella tells the tragic story of George Milton and Lennie Small, two Anglo migrant ranch workers in California during the great depression in America. The title of the book is a literary allusion to the main characters. The name also refers to the beginning episode in the story. The opening chapter of the story shows a physically powerful and develop-



Of Mice and Men
John Steinbeck
Penguin

mentally disabled character, Lennie, accidentally killing a mouse while trying to pet it. George, Lennie's one and only friend in the world, rebukes him gently

George understands Lennie and knows that Lennie never means any harm. He knows that Lennie, despite his physical strength, has a heart that is very soft. When the mouse is killed in the process of being petted, George has little to say to Lennie about it save that it was of no use to cling on to the dead animal.

Knowing well that Lennie cannot survive alone, George does not leave him. Wherever he moves Lennie is taken along, guided and protected. Because of his lack of intelligence, every once in a while Lennie gets into trouble. George stands firmly by his friend and covers up for him when trouble brews. They take up work in a ranch of Salinas Valley in California. George is constantly on guard as Lennie mingles with other people on the ranch. He speaks to his friend of a dream that he nourishes. George tells Lennie of having a little place of their own one day. Together they dream of owning a small house. They dream of breeding rabbits and Lennie would be the one to look after them. Lennie passes days dreaming of tending the rabbits. Although physically extremely strong, Lennie is fascinated by the soft and gentle rabbits. He comes across new people. There is single-handed Candy and Crooks with his crooked spine. Candy and Crooks learn to understand the lack of intelligence in

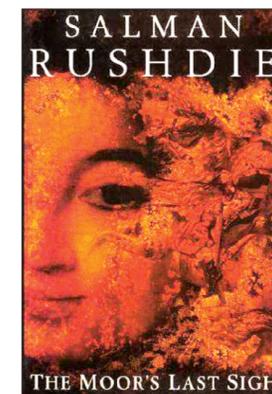
Lennie but they grow fond of him. They all know that Lennie, though he talks no sense, means no harm for anyone. Even when Lennie gets into a fight with mean-minded Curly on the ranch, the others stand up to Lennie. They blame Curly for leading Lennie into the fight. However, things go out of hand when the provocations of a flirtatious woman catch Lennie. George cannot guard his friend from this woman, who seems to be out to land Lennie in troubled waters.

Lennie never wants to hurt anyone, not even the small puppy that Candy gives him. Just like the mice the puppy too dies when Lennie forgets his immense physical strength and plays too roughly with the baby dog. However, Lennie is in real trouble when Curly's wife is found dead. People point fingers at Lennie. This time George finds it extremely difficult to defend his friend. George is confronted with a difficult decision. He cannot defend Lennie from justice if he is guilty of manslaughter. That would mean he has to give up his friend to Curly, the enraged husband waiting with a loaded gun. George knows that Lennie is not a killer in his heart and yet fate seems to play very cruel games with the disabled man. If he does not look for justice for Lennie there are others who will. George's heart cries out to save Lennie from the cruel death that

Curly plans to avenge the death of his wife. George has to decide quickly as he stands talking with Lennie, telling him of their dream. He has to decide whether the gun he holds should end Lennie's life or must he wait for Curly to catch up? What will happen to Lennie? Will he end up behind bars or will he die then and there?

In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck portrays the characters with remarkable vividness. There are not too many characters and the reader is able to follow the plot with ease. The plot is set to riddle the reader's mind with compassion for the main characters and the delivery of justice. The climax of the story keeps the reader in suspense. The reader is in a dilemma as to how he wants the circumstances to be and how events actually take place. The ending leaves the reader baffled. Is this how poor people, helpless people, pay up to their misfortunes? Is this the consequences of Lennie's unswerving obedience to the things George has taught him?

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and is a teacher.



The Moor's Last Sigh
Salman Rushdie
Vintage