

A world without Shamsur Rahman

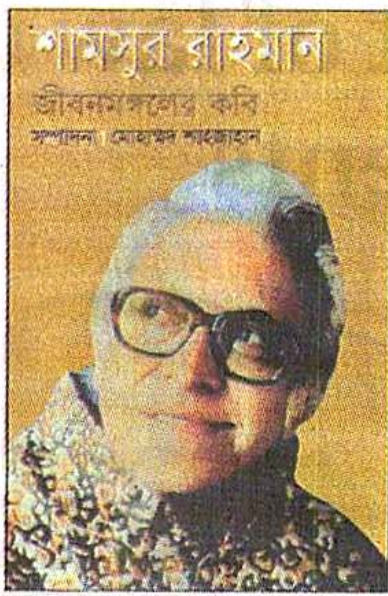
Junaidul Haque is moved by an anthology of tributes to the poet

SHAMSUR Rahman's first anniversary of death was observed on August 17. Those of us who find it very difficult to reconcile ourselves with the idea that he is no more were happy to see our print and electronic media rising to the occasion and remembering him with deep affection. Our cultural activists arranged a big meeting at the TSC and family members remembered him at home. We saluted the doyen of Bangla poetry and promised to remember him for many more years. He could leave us, but how can we forget him?

He was our finest poet and a living legend. He represented the hopes and aspirations of our nation. He loved Bangladesh and her people and the people loved him in return. Perhaps no poet will ever match the great popularity he enjoyed. He was an icon of our freedom for his immortal poems as well as his courageous and inspiring role during all our progressive movements in free Bangladesh. He was an aesthete and a rebel, highly respected and loved. In his own dignified way he fought all oppressions and injustices. He was firmly rooted in his Bangladeshi milieu but was cosmopolitan at the same time. He was our chief cultural figure. No wonder articles and poems written on him after his death were countless.

An admirable anthology of such writings has been edited and published by Mohammad Shahjahan, a journalist, columnist and politician. The book has more than seventy articles and a few editorials, all of which were written after the death of the poet. Writers include elderly personalities like Abul Hossain, Obaidul Huq, Kabir Chowdhury, Khan Sarwar Murshid and Mahbulul Alam Chowdhury, friends like Sardar Fazlul Karim, Syed Shamsul Huq, Zillur Rahman Siddiky, Muchkund Dubey, Anisuzzaman, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir, Rashid Karim, Murtaza Bashir, Sunil Ganguly, Sayeed Ahmed and Shahid Quaderi, junior friends and admirers like Hasan Azizul Huq, Manzur-e-Mowla, Belal Choudhury, Rafiq Azad, Nirmalendu Goon, Syed Manzoorul Islam and Muntasir Mamun, admirers from abroad such as William Radice and relatives like his wife, brother, daughter and daughter-in-law. The collection is definitely rich. The photograph of the poet on the cover is a poignant one. The cover itself is good. Printing is not bad but could have been better. There are quite a few important photographs. The handsome poet was quite naturally a photographer's delight.

In his editorial, Mohammad



Shamsur Rahman
Jibanmangal Kobi
Edited by Mohammad Shahjahan
Bangla Prokashoni

Shahjahan laments that in a country where third rate politicians loot millions and crores are wasted by the government, the country's finest poet died without any significant treatment. People wanted him to be sent abroad for better treatment. He was 'swadhinatar kobi' to the people but since he was not an enlisted freedom fighter, there was no state honour for him. How tragic!

Abul Hossain was very fond of the budding Shamsur Rahman, who later blossomed into our best poet. Obaidul Huq knows that Shamsur Rahman was not fond of death. He is sad that we could not hold him back. Syed Shamsul Huq was a very close friend and has a lot to tell his readers. But he is very sad and feels that his words are in fact tears. He calls Shamsur Rahman our greatest poet.

Khan Sarwar Murshid taught the young Shamsur Rahman at Dhaka University's Department of English. The shy, sensitive and soft-hearted Adonis was chased by many a Venus, the teacher discloses, and pays his former student a glorious tribute, praising him in superlative terms. He feels that Bangladesh was eagerly waiting for Rahman's genius and it was natural that he would become 'an outstanding poet of man's happiness and suffering' and would create a 'superb, glowing language of deep and delicate discoveries'.

Kabir Chowdhury declares that Shamsur Rahman was one of his most favourite persons, not only because he was the best poet in contemporary

Bangla literature but also because of his great human qualities. He had the simplicity of a child. His love for Bangladesh and her struggling people will make him immortal. Sardar Fazlul Karim calls Rahman his most favourite poet. He promises never to forget him. He refuses to weep because he believes in life and not in death. Shamsur Rahman is a noble chunk of our history.

Muchkund Dubey is a proud admirer of the poet. He feels that South Asia's art and culture has lost one of its best stars. He knows a lot about the poet and has translated his poems into Hindi. After Pablo Neruda, Shamsur Rahman was the poet he admired most. He was India's High Commissioner to Dhaka in the early eighties and was never out of touch with the poet. Zillur Rahman Siddiky misses his great friend, the favourite poet of millions. Shamsur Rahman's poems reflect his era and this is a great achievement. Kazi Nazrul's poems contain the rebellion of his age. Rahman's poems have the rebellion, the sorrow, the heart's bleeding and the untamed spirit of his times. Fazal Shahabuddin calls his friend immortal. Although contemporaries, friends always observed him in wonder. The Times of London, in an obituary note, calls Rabinranath Tagore and Shamsur Rahman the best ever Bangla poets.

Anisuzzaman knew the poet since his college days. He used to complain to the young poet that his poems were difficult to understand. At the same time he felt the necessity to 'prepare' himself to appreciate his poems. He has beautifully mixed his love for art and love for humanity. Abul Gaffar Chowdhury is afraid of August because it is synonymous with death. He received innumerable phone calls from all around the globe immediately after the poet's death. He realised how much he was loved and respected. As a young man he was very close to the poet. He fondly remembers their *Saogat* days. Shamsur Rahman is immortal, he feels. Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir asserts that the poet was free in all conditions. He did not know defeat. He lived for and in his poetry. He was different from all the poets Jahangir admired. He always had his own distinct voice.

Shahid Quaderi was quite close to the poet although he was twelve or thirteen years younger. Shamsur Rahman was the first great modernist of the then East Pakistan and was a great source of inspiration to his juniors. Our researchers should work seriously on him. His poems are great in both form and content. He was a master craftsman.

Mahbulul Alam Chowdhury remem-

bers his friendship of six decades with the poet. The latter had a great heart and always spoke positively about others. Serajul Islam Choudhury calls him a great poet and a great human being. He was the best living Bangla poet. When he began writing poems, he was the youngest modernist. Later he became our chief modernist. He could always turn our known world into a new one in his poems. Fundamentalists threatened him and attacked him but he never lost his courage and dignity. He fought for democracy and social justice till his last day. Atiqul Huq Choudhury calls him a people's poet. People loved him endlessly. Choudhury places a few demands before the government, one of which is naming Shyamali after the poet.

Manzur-e-Mowla recalls his long association with the poet. He remembers that the poet was not fond of death. Like yours truly he feels that 'Roudra Korotitye' is his best work of poetry. The history of Bangla literature will be incomplete without him. He is sad that our government, our affluent people or our large organisations failed to send the poet abroad for treatment. Our political leaders or even the director general of Bangla Academy failed to visit the poet in hospital. Faiz Ahmed knew the poet for fifty years or more. He was not only our best poet but an ideal poet as well, or so he feels. Shamsur Rahman was a healthy, beautiful and reasonably naughty child, discloses Sayeed Ahmed, who used to call him Bachchu Bhai. They were neighbours and friends. Bachchu Bhai liked *kachchi biriani* a lot. He was fond of writing and reading, gossiping with friends and eating good food. K.G. Mustafa recalls the poet's friendship with his brother K.M. Elias and himself. The poet participated in progressive political activities even as a student. In 1971 he composed inspiring poems supporting our liberation war. He was an active freedom fighter, KGM feels.

Kamal Lohani will not let the poet die. He has reservations about the poet's bed-ridden pictures on the TV screen. Murtaza Bashir fondly remembers his friend of more than half a century. He used to tell the young poet that he looked like Yeats and the shy poet would go all red. The poet was so kind and so polite that he was unable to hurt anyone. Rashid Karim, in his interview with Bratya Raisu, remembers his very close friend of 56 years. Shamsur Rahman was a celebrity even as a young man. Matiur Rahman, Muntasir Mamun and Mohiuddin Ahmed pay glowing tributes to the poet. Mamun recalls that Sheikh Hasina arranged state honours for Sofia Kamal but none did it for the Shamsur

Rahman, who is a greater freedom fighter than he? Mamun echoes the feeling of millions. Ahmed recalls that Bismillah Khan receives state honours in India but the Bangladesh government fails to honour one of our best sons.

Nirendranath Chakraborty, Al Mahmud, Sunil Ganguly and Kaisul Haq remember the poet with love and respect. Ganguly calls him a universal poet. He was a great human being. Mahadev Saha is an unabashed admirer of the great poet. Belal Choudhury feels that Shamsur Rahman was equally popular in the two parts of what was once united Bengal. He was a giant in a land of dwarfs. Nirmalendu Goon recalls his long association with the poet in a touching manner. Hasan Azizul Huq, for a change, pays a poetic tribute to his favourite poet.

There are a few more memorable articles on the poet by poets, writers, editors and relatives. Barrister Tofayel's account of his elder brother will be appreciated by the readers. Mamunur Rashid reminds us that the poet liked stage plays and also stood beside the activists during crises. Nasir Ahmed calls him a great poet of the twentieth century. How could he not receive state honours? Economist Atiur Rahman admires the poet a lot and writes extensively on him. William Radice writes in *The Guardian* and calls him progressive, secular, liberal and democratic. Kajuhro Watanabe remembers him from Japan. His wife, daughter and his constant companion, daughter-in-law Tia Rahman, remember him very fondly. Zohra Rahman calls him very handsome and very soft-hearted. He was very fond of good food and immensely liked her cooking. Tia mothered him during his final years.

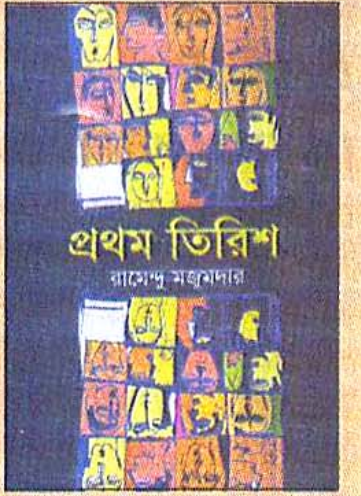
Rafiq Azad, a great freedom fighter among poets, calls him an inspiration behind our liberation war. His poems were powerful weapons for our guerrillas. Syed Manzoorul Islam feels that studying English literature was helpful to Shamsur Rahman as it opened the doors of world literature for him. He loved Yeats and read him a lot. He was an aesthete like Buddhadev Bose and also a poet of humanity at the same time. Rilke and the Chilean poets also inspired him. He was a romantic poet as well as a very successful people's poet.

We never imagined a Dhaka without Shamsur Rahman. We shall remember him for ages to come. He is immortal. He will never fade from our collective memory.

Junaidul Haque writes fiction and literary criticism. He works for an airline.

At a glance

Prothom Tirish
Ramendu Majumdar
Shahitya Prakash

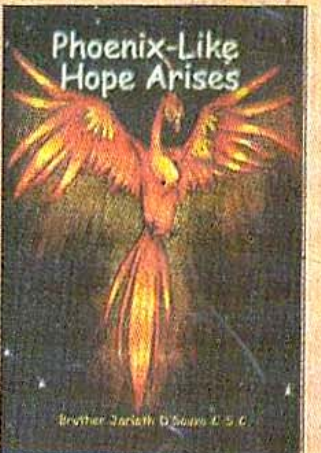


The man so closely involved with Bangladesh's theatre world provides a cheering insight into the first three decades of his life in this work. In a society where the lives and careers of famous people, pre-celebrity, are generally not known, because hardly anything biographical is available on them, Majumdar's book is a breath of fresh, new air.

Narir Shofolota O Shongram
Shoto Narinetir Bhabna
Edited by Mohammad Rafiqul Islam

Academic Press and Publications Limited
Bangladesh's women have been speaking up. In case you needed any proof, here is one. In this anthology, one that can be used as ready reference, you come across brief sketches of the lives of Bengali women straddling years and professions and also get to hear them talk about their thoughts and their aspirations for the society they are part of.

Phoenix-Like Hope Arises
Brother Jarlath D'Souza C.S.C.
BICPAJ



Brother Jarlath has been involved with education at the missionary level for decades. But how many of us knew that poetry has been a powerful element in the shaping of his life? In this collection of poems, some of which date from the mid-1940s, he speaks of his passions, making it clear that they rest on a foundation of hope. The phoenix is all.

Shwadhintoajuddher
Brototshuchok Khetab
Muhammad Lutful Haq
Magnum Opus



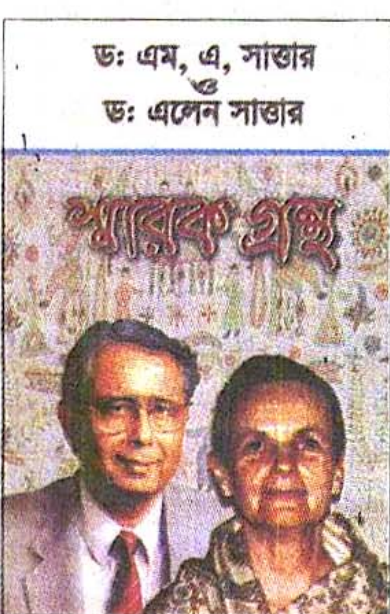
Awards conferred for gallantry on individuals have always fascinated people. It is especially in a region like the subcontinent, which has had more than its fair share of military conflict, that such awards have been part of the consciousness. This work details the story, and the history, behind the gallantry awards in Bangladesh.

Retelling the tale of a brilliant couple

Syed Badrul Ahsan studies a compilation and experiences pathos

M.A. Sattar, make no mistake about it, was a fine civil servant. He belonged to a generation of government officials that had the privilege of serving two countries, in this instance Pakistan and Bangladesh. That, of course, is unusual, as unusual as the earlier truth of civil servants and military officers serving pre-partition India and then, depending on their choice of country, independent India or sovereign Pakistan. But that is where the analogy between 1947 and 1971 stops. When Sattar joined Pakistan's civil service in 1960, having earlier qualified in 1958 in the examinations that promised a fruitful, fulfilling career, there was not much of a sign that East Pakistan would only eleven years later break away from the rest of the country. But before that happened, Sattar, like any other politically-charged Bengali, comprehended the nature of the growing disparity between the two wings of Pakistan and therefore there is reason to believe he did look forward to the province he hailed from transforming itself into an independent nation someday.

This commemorative volume is a good projection of a man who, had he lived longer, could have added more



Dr. M.A. Sattar O Dr. Ellen Sattar
Sharokgrantha
Edited by Nilofar Begum, M.A. Khair,
Mohd. Bahar Mahmud
Bangladesh Association for Community Education

muscle to Bangladesh's development programme. Struggling through poverty and making it obvious to all around him that he was an enormously talented young man, Sattar went on to do wonders. He left school and college armed with brilliant academic results, before moving on to university. His intellectual brilliance would take him to Cambridge (and other places), where he would run into a young, equally talented student named Ellen. That meeting would change their lives, in a hugely positive way. They would marry, with the young English woman flying all the way to Pakistan to marry a man she was convinced was destined for a higher calling. In his turn, Sattar too would have sensed that the woman he had fallen in love with and was entering into a marriage pact with would reinforce his belief in himself. The story of the Sattars is, therefore, a tale of a couple not content to let life slide into the conventional. They were a power couple, but even they would go through vast stretches of suffering before they could truly begin to release their tremendous energy into effecting the common good.

In 1971 era Islamabad, life could not

have been happy for the Sattars. For Sattar himself, the knowledge that his people were being murdered by the government of the very country he served was a sentiment that produced a concomitant feeling in him --- that he needed to be part of the struggle for Bangladesh's freedom from Pakistan. Back in 1971, those who were trapped in Dhaka (call them internal refugees) were one day horrified to know that the Sattar family had been arrested by Pakistan's security forces as it tried to make its way out of West Pakistan through Quetta, hoping to proceed to Afghanistan and then to India. Once there, the family planned to link up with the Mujibnagar government. But that was not to be. Dr. Sattar was detained and subjected to physical and psychological torture by the Pakistani authorities. Not before 1972, a few months after Pakistan's defeat in Bangladesh, was Sattar, along with his family, able to come home to Bangladesh. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, realising the huge talent in the man, placed him at the new nation's fledgling planning commission.

The rest is a tale that ought to be retold. And this compilation of essays does it. The sheer amount of energy Dr.

Sattar, assisted by Ellen Sattar, expended in the establishment of the Bangladesh Association for Community Education, remains the stuff of legend. BACE is today not merely a household word but also a testimony to the ambitions that Sattar entertained for his people. There was the visionary spirit working in him and even after he moved off to Malaysia on lien from the Bangladesh government, he did not stop dwelling on the ventures, new ones, that he would forge in Dhaka once he was back. Death came in the way. Ironically, the end came in May 1992 in Islamabad, the city where he had once worked and which he had tried to escape from. Ellen Sattar survived him by thirteen years and died in 2005 in her native England.

In an age where the best and the brightest in Bangladesh's past are fast dwindling into fading memories or are being forgotten altogether, the essays in this volume are a reminder that M.A. Sattar and Ellen Sattar once made a difference in this country. That achievement makes them stand out, as individuals, and as a couple.

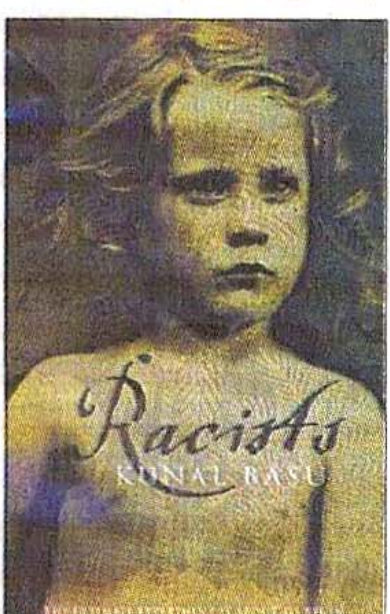
Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Heart of darkness?

Charles Larson spots evil below the surface in a new work

THE year is 1855. On the previously uninhabited island of Arlinda, off the coast of Africa and somewhere near the Canary Islands, two European scientists set up an experiment involving two infants (a black boy and a white girl) in order to prove their theories of racial superiority. Bates, who is British and has already earned a name for himself as "the master craniologist," is convinced that intelligence can be determined by the shape of one's skull. Belvaio, a Frenchman, goes a step further: Europeans and Africans are not even from the same race. They are as different as horses and penguins.

The two infants will be left on the island with a nurse, a woman named Norah, who is mute. Thus, they will be exposed to no language; and Norah has been instructed to show her charges no affection and, further, make no attempt to teach them anything. Twice a year, the scientists will return to Arlinda, and observe their experiment as it



Racists
Kunal Basu
Weidenfeld & Nicolson

progresses for twelve years roughly, until puberty. Bates measures the children's skulls each time he returns and the children are put through other degrading tests by the so-called scientists. Both are supported by philanthropists and other scientists in Europe who are anxious to learn the results of their experiment essentially, that Africans are inferior to Europeans.

On each trip Bates also takes with him an assistant called Quartley, who begins to have reservations about the undertaking itself especially when half a dozen years have passed and the children demonstrate qualities of extreme hostility whenever the European scientists return. Belvaio believes that twelve years will not be necessary for the experiment. It can be shortened. He suggests that a large knife should be left with the six-year-old children and the next time they fight, instead of throwing stones at one another, one child will kill the other with the knife and the other child will be

declared the winner (i.e., the superior). That plan frightens Bates who believes, first, that the experiment will no longer be scientific; and, second, that if the black boy kills the white girl, then Belvaio will insist that black people are superior to white people.

Believable? Sadly, yes, and especially disturbing because much of the novel is based on actual experiments by Europeans during the time frame of the story.

Kunal Basu is a master storyteller, who not only knows how to create spellbinding suspense but also how to plot his narrative so that the reader is constantly thrown off guard, especially by the four adults who have facilitated this outrageous experiment in the first place. That is where the real irony develops, with the increasing conflicts among the four puppeteers, each one with his or her hidden agenda. We get flashbacks to the previous lives of the adults, their work in Europe, their increasing conflict with each other.

And this is exactly as it should be since the children will be little more than victims no matter how the experiment turns out.

It does not take long for the four adults to remind us of the children in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, which is only to say that Basu apparently, like Golding, believes that in each of us evil resides just below the surface. Given an unusual situation, the worst may come out in us. But that is as far as I can go without revealing the extraordinary ending of Basu's imaginative novel.

Yes, we know from the beginning of the experiment that Racists cannot end well. Still, it concludes with a measure of hope, even if we know that there are just as many racists around today as there were in 1855. Sadly, today their experiments are not always so transparent.

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

Dark buildings and bohemian scenes

Efadul Huq goes through literary geography, fascinated

NAIPAUL, as Orhan Pamuk says, is an author who can 'migrate' between languages, cultures, countries, continents, even civilizations. [His] imagination is fed by exile, a nourishment drawn not through roots but through rootlessness. And this comment hits its mark very well in the case of Half-A-Life, Naipaul's Nobel winning novel, as he rushes through three different countries: colonised India, monotonous England and poor Africa.

Willie Somerset Chandaran, a hybrid, is the 'nayok' of this novel. Although an Indian, his middle name comes from Somerset Maugham, a visiting foreign author who was highly impressed by Willie's father and immortalised him in his travel book. This inspiring father is a Brahmin who, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, denies the caste system and marries an Indian 'backward' and has two unlucky children by her: Willie and his determined sister, Sarojini. Willie leaves his family and moves to England with great hopes. But all he finds is the dark buildings, bohemian scenes and enjoys a brief promise of authorship. As the freshness of this identity fades and Willie approaches the risk of graduation from college, he can find nothing to do in order to survive. At such a dire time, he falls in love with Ana, another hybrid, and moves to her home in a nameless Portuguese colony in Africa. Then there is a huge lapse in time, and at the end of the colony's collapse at the hands of indigenous guerrillas Willie's illusions die as well, and he realises that this is not his life; he had been living Ana's life! Thus he leaves for Germany where his married sister lives. Will he start living his sister's life now?

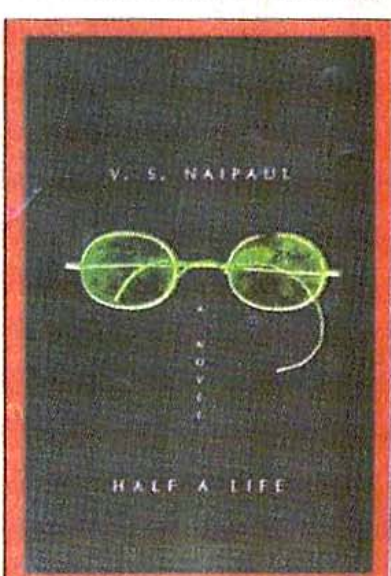
Though the story is simple, its telling magnifies it. Every single detail, like the mosquitoes caught in a net, finds their way to Naipaul's narration. Structurally, the book itself is two half-books, one

that states the story of Willie's life and the other that stages colonisation. The chapters are narrated in the first person and then in the third person and then again in the first person with the past and present taking turns. This playful shift between the omniscient author and Mr. Willie Chandaran; and the time, holds a reader's attention. The neat sketching of characters is another plus point of the novel. You know the doubts in their minds and you know their motives.

Naipaul's fascination for fragmentation is not surprising. An Indian born in Trinidad, he went to Oxford, has travelled widely in Africa, the Islamic world and India itself. In Willie Chandaran we see much of Naipaul Himself.

So to catch the author deeply hidden in this book, grab it the moment you see it. And you won't be disappointed.

Efadul Huq is a critic and reviews books.



Half A Life
V.S. Naipaul
Picador