

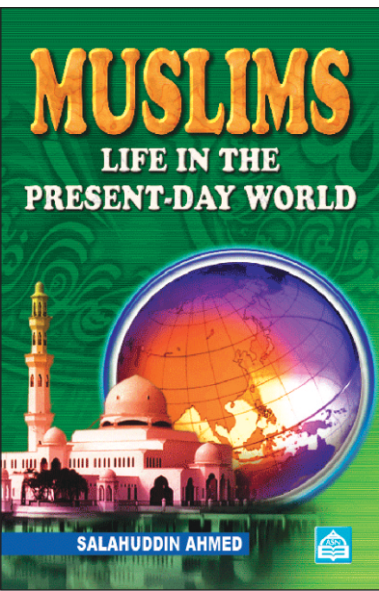
# A community embattled or weakened from within?

## Syed Badrul Haque focuses on questions Muslims need to answer

THIS work by Salahuddin Ahmed is a timely venture towards expending fresh thoughts on the Muslim community living in the twenty-first century. It appears that the present world has been divided into camps, 'us' and 'they'. In the interest of an appreciation of diversity there is nothing wrong in that division; but there should be no animosity between them, knowing that the world is a place for co-existence of mankind with all colours, languages and civilisations.

Today, it may seem that Muslims have been confronted from all sides. But by the same token it is now an urgent necessity for putting our own house in order. The Muslim community is paying too much attention to the rigid formalities of Islam, overlooking the inner and higher duties and obligations towards others, which include people around us not to mention the members of the family.

It just happens that in Bangladesh, the third largest Muslim country in the world, the current interim government has identified corruption as the number one enemy of the country and as such introduced various measures to fight out this contagious social disease in the country. But we need to realise that an inner solution is also necessary towards rooting out corruption from the heart; and in this process it is also necessary to correct our notions in relation to following the guidance of Allah in terms of the Qur'an. It appears that a large section of the Muslim community is more engrossed in earning more rewards (sawabs) through ritual performances, although they may be unaware that they



Muslims  
Life in the Present-Day World  
Salahuddin Ahmed  
A.S. Noordeen, Kuala Lumpur

are failing to discharge their normal duties and obligations to people around them which surprisingly may even include the members of the family. Analysing the hidden cause of this malaise in a Muslim society in a sub-chapter of this book under the title 'Corruption', the author notes:

"Today some Muslim countries have been labelled as nations where corruptions prevail in the various sectors of the society and government. One of the causes might be the notion of some

Muslims who think that attending mosques and performing prayers (Salat) are enough in discharging their duties to Allah so that after coming out of mosques they forget or shut their eyes regarding the commands of Allah in the matter of discharging their duties in worldly affairs as laid down in the Qur'an. The stark result is that after performing prayers (Salat), they are transformed into different persons so that when they return to their office desks or sit behind business counters, they are susceptible to taking undue monetary gains from the members of the public and commit underhand dealings, falsely thinking that Allah would ignore these wrong dealings due to their supposed hardships or special circumstances."

The book has four chapters, under the titles 'Man's Relation to Allah', 'Family Environment', 'Social Environment' and 'Muslim Nation (Ummah): Challenges and Responsibilities'. Rights of women under Islam seem to be a topic in which the Western world takes most interest with a view to contrasting the liberation of women in the West with its make-believe picture of oppression of Muslim women. Brushing aside any negative picture for Muslim women vis-à-vis their entry into any skilled or learned profession, the author says:

"Bangladesh is one of the few Muslim countries to have female soldiers...Pakistan and Bangladesh produced women Prime Ministers...In some Muslim countries like Bangladesh, there are Muslim women judges in the higher courts of the country...In 1920, the first chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim University in India was Sheba Hayat Jhantar Begum."

Feminism or the feminist movement is certainly a Western concept. However, there is a degree as to how far the concept can be accommodated in other cultures, such as Islam. In the view of the author, "the Western concept of feminism is not acceptable in Islam as the women's roles and aspirations in sexual relationships are in sharp contrast in the two cultures. The sexual revolution during the last 40 years which took place in the West has undermined the institution of marriage and family so much that the gap in the aspirations of Muslim women and Western women has become wider and wider. In the view of some analysts, the rise of feminism in the West has a significant part in the increase (in the) breakdown of marriages."

Today more than 950 million Muslims live in 57 Muslim countries all over the world. It is impossible to deny that there is a big gap of communication or consultation between the people and the rulers who claim governing under the principles of Islamic administration. In this book, a reader finds the the following pen picture of the current situation in the Muslim world and how to overcome it:

"A good number of countries are ruled by kings, Amirs and Sultans, while some countries are governed by military dictators. These forms of government are totally alien to the teachings of Islam. Democracy operates only in a few countries. It is an irony that Arabia, the birth place of Prophet Muhammad (s), is now the land of kings and Amirs...he did not leave any monarchy after him. How can the Muslim nation (ummah) return to the past glory? Certainly not by retaining un-Islamic institutions like monarchy,

emirates and dictatorships, which are not supported by strict principles of Islamic law. Allah has reminded Muslims that He will not change the destiny of any nation, which includes the Muslim nation (ummah), unless they change it."

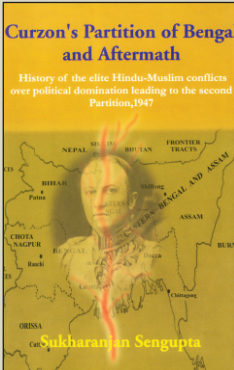
It is no good for the Muslim community preaching before others that in the Qur'an, they have been accorded the position of "best nation" in the world without discharging the responsibilities associated with that high honour. In this reviewer's opinion, the author has done valuable service to the Muslim community in dissecting the various issues dividing them and suggesting some rethinking and possible solutions.

It may be of interest to know that Salahuddin Ahmed studied law at the University of Dhaka and King's College of the University of London. He is a Barrister-at-Law from Lincoln's Inn, London, a member of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and the Supreme Court of New South Wales, Australia. He taught law in the United Kingdom in the early seventies and later at the Law School of the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia for 25 years. He is a former Visiting Professor at the Law School of the University of North Carolina, United States. He has authored a number of books published from London, Sydney, New Delhi and Kuala Lumpur.

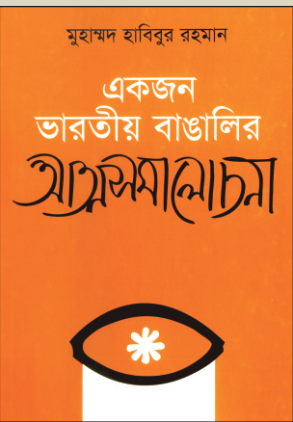
Syed Badrul Haque, formerly Public Relations Officer to the President, People's Republic of Bangladesh, is a contributor to the Daily Star.

## At a glance

Curzon's Partition of Bengal and Aftermath  
Sukharanjan Sengupta  
Naya Udyog, Kolkata



The work is a wealth of information regarding the vicissitudes Bengal has gone through not once but twice. Sengupta, a retired journalist, examines the details of the two partitions, studies the men behind them as also those who opposed them, and emerges with a book that will enlighten a generation which has suffered in sadness on both sides of the frontier.



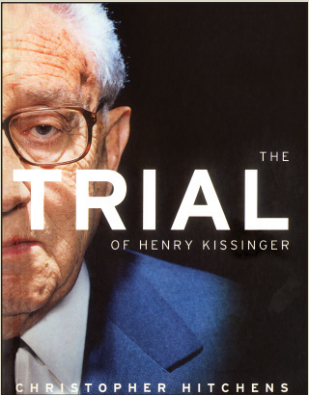
Ekjon Bharatiya Bangalir  
Attoshomalochona  
Muhammad Habibur Rahman  
Mowla Brothers

The writer places Rabindranath Tagore under close scrutiny, the objective being to elicit his many and varied observations of Bengali culture. It is an entire landscape of thought that the bard journeys through, in the process leaving his comments behind as nuggets of wisdom. Justice Rahman brings them alive again, much to the delight of readers.

Probur Jato Ichchha  
Serajul Islam Choudhury  
Anyaprakash



The inimitable Serajul Islam Choudhury once more offers wholesome delight in the form of essays on contemporary issues as also those that exercised minds in the past. It is forever society and its gradual but sure transformation that keep the writer busy. His substantive comments and criticism then find a way into the reader's consciousness at a time when profound thinking has somewhat gone missing.



The Trial of Henry Kissinger  
Christopher Hitchens  
Verso

Absolutely a marvellous book, for it leaves the former US secretary of state shredded of respect. His dubious, dark role in such global situations as Cambodia, the coup in Chile and the murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh is a long tale that Hitchens relates here. There are no holds barred. Even the invasion and occupation of East Timor finds a place. Kissinger's malevolence is everywhere.

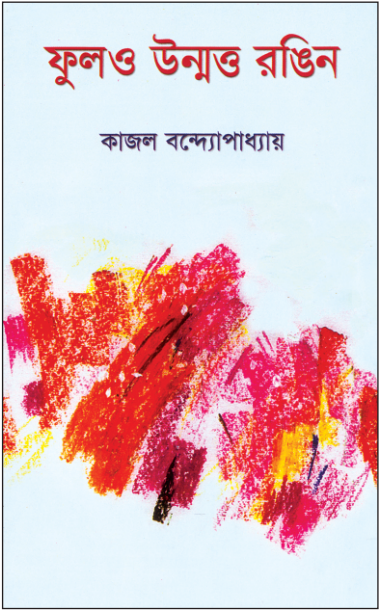
# All about sexual, textual politics

## Saiful Islam spots contemporary issues in passionate poetry

IMPERVIOUS to temptations around them, speakers in Kajal Bandyopadhyay's poems, included in the anthology Phoolo Unmotto Rangeen, are dispassionate truth-seekers. They question established systems and beliefs; they challenge the authenticity of the so-called thought-provoking discourses. They deconstruct grand narratives. God and his devotees, politicians and their lackeys, thinkers and their followers, and especially women and feminism; all these are subject to the poet's bold scrutiny. In short, Kajal Bandyopadhyay's poems are political tracts in verses.

A close watcher of the contemporary scene, Kajal Bandyopadhyay combines the critical eye of a neo-Marxist with a literary critic's insight as he dismantles some of the most influential trends. The poet shows that some of the leading groups of people, for example, religious gurus or nationalist leaders, have lost their moral high ground. However, they have kept on leading because the strategies they use to deceive people have become widely acceptable. Unfortunately, though, they acceptable to people who are victims of oppression.

If we think of an issue that veers around most of the poems included in this anthology, it is the poet's unforgiving analyses of sexual politics between women and men that crosses the borders of home. Phoolo Unmotto Rangeen not only outmanoeuvres the sweeping views of feminist orthodoxy but also subverts age-old assumptions and certainties. His



Phoolo Unmotto Rangeen  
Kajal Bandyopadhyay  
Ankoor Prokashoni

central argument is that the home (a macrocosmic world) has ceased to be hierarchical, as the power struggle between men and women has taken a new turn.

In 'Kshamotar Deho, Shoktir Shitolota', Bandyopadhyay shows how women seduce men into becoming the slaves of lust as they take their revenge in the dead of night through simply withdrawing themselves from giving plea-

sure. Men can only force. When they apply force in bed they rape! Women never use force to win. They use subtle weapons to conquer men. However, the delineation of men as helpless creatures is a lopsided view that stands in the way of the poet's pursuit towards becoming an unquestionable authority on such a delicate subject.

Sexual politics earned its theoretical stature through the rise of feminism. The power struggle of the sexes took refuge in the pages of texts. Though Mary Wollstonecraft emerged with enlightened theories about love, sex and 'universal benevolence', her turbulent romantic life overshadowed much of her revolutionary ideas. In an essay presented at an Ibsen conference in Dhaka, Kajal Bandyopadhyay tried to unmask Nora, an icon for feminists, by pointing out her games and manoeuvres of power in A Doll's House. Who is the doll in the house, Torvald Helmer or Nora? In 'Punji Nari Gale Khai', the poet, a Marxist by practice and a non-conformist at heart, shows how feminists have fallen into a snare cleverly designed by neo-imperialists and capitalists.

Kajal Bandyopadhyay has published seven collections of poems. Introspective and reflective in mood, his poems draw in a diverse range of subject matters. Whilst his poem 'Kon Aranya, Kon Prokriti' raises its voice against the drawbacks of modern civilisation in a glitzy city-life, 'Kutshit Kaal' denigrates the mad rush for amassing wealth. His works are philosophical and serious in mood, concerned

both with the outside and inside of man and the world he lives in.

Writing for more than three decades, Bandyopadhyay has created his own domain in Bengali literature by establishing his signature taut and tight structure, which avoids a single unnecessary word. He handles sensitive issues with great care and subtlety sometimes directly addressing the issue, sometimes hovering discreetly alongside the subject.

However, he writes terribly personal poems which are sad and compelling. 'Drishyer Porihash' is such a poem which deals with philosophies similar to Charles Olson's: 'What does not change / is the will to change' (from 'The Kingfishers I'). What is missing here is the detachment of an artist who considers his creative indulgence a superior source of knowledge from other scholarly sources of knowledge.

The forms of Kajal Bandyopadhyay's poems do not conform to conventional rules, complementing the subjects of his poems which are far from being ordinary and predictable. Bandyopadhyay's obsession with precise and intricate structure building is obvious. His fastidious care for words sometimes makes his works difficult to digest. Linguistically, flawless and perceptive in approach the sentences of his poems run from one line to another, transposing a previously unidentified but experienced problem into a wide context.

A common and influential trend in contemporary Bengali poetry is the use of mixed metaphors which often leave their

marks on the poems as structures are being loosened by the encroachment of a bulk of meanings unintended by the poet. Bandyopadhyay's poems are free of that. Though metaphors in his poems are delicately subtle, they bring home the intended meaning quite reliably. His poems are meant to be experienced on the pages. His line enjambments, use of parenthesis, and reliance on punctuation, italics and other visual cues do not translate when read aloud. A few excerpts, rich in suggestiveness, can be provided in translation for the reader:

(1) *I am doubtful of my being dead, restless.*  
*Is Blake*  
*A happy fly?*  
*Life and death are but similar in nature.*  
*The way I have come*  
*The grasshopper's life*  
*Is not my life.*  
*I live in my death*  
*(Blaker Machhi, Jibonanonder Phoring)*  
*(2) Do you see the dark,*  
*Trapped inside you?*  
*You are against all that,*  
*Aren't they sealed in you?*  
*(Ohom)*

Kajal Bandyopadhyay's poems, though bleak in their prognosis for human life, are all the more necessary since they celebrate words and crafts of art a difficult struggle in search of hope through abstractions, signs and characters.

Saiful Islam is lecturer in English at Stamford University.

# Neighbourhood lives

## Tulip Chowdhury loves a Dublin street

PROLIFIC Irish writer Maeve Binchy writes about Ria and her husband Danny Lynch in her novel Tara Road. The story takes place in Dublin, Ireland. The plot, engaging a ring of people who live on Tara Road is captivating. While reading this story one feels as if the last page seems to come too quickly. The story telling is at its finest epic in sweep. It is intimate and psychologically acute, moving but unsentimental. It is richly authentic in its period detail and fresh and contemporary in its style. The reader falls into a pace with the story and seems to be very much living with the happenings. Each chapter seems to hold light for the next and the story becomes gripping, keeping the reader spellbound to the very last word.

Ria and Danny find each other in a fairy tale love affair. It is love at first sight and they end up getting married. Their first home is on Tara Road, a beautiful house that seems come into their hands like a windfall. Ria gives up her job to concentrate on her home and the two lovely children they have. Danny's career takes off and money begins to roll in. Ria is an excellent hostess and the other residents of Tara Road find her home a warm place to gather like a big family. From time to time she is puzzled by her sister Hillary's inability to accept good fortune in having a dashing husband and grand home. To lighten matters Ria tries to engage her sister in her family affairs. There is also Ria's mother Nora Johnson, who is very happy with her younger daughter's success in family life and does not hesitate to point out that her elder daughter could have done better in getting a good husband.

The story moves on from here. Ria's life is absorbed by the people around her. There is Rosemary Ryan, a beautiful, endlessly selfish career woman; Gertie, the battered wife of a drunkard; and several other intriguing women, each of whom has secrets not to be shared. There is even an all-knowing fortune teller who hints that Ria will travel and start a successful business. Ria has yet miles to cross before she can find the truth of this future forecasting. To her it seems to be a very far off idea until one day a loud bell rings with deeply hidden truths.

Ria soon discovers the truth that life cannot be all roses. Danny seems to turn a new leaf overnight as Ria gets to know more about his secret friends. Out of the blue he announces that he is leaving home to live with his young pregnant mistress. Ria finds dark clouds gathering in the sunny sky she had believed she had over her head. Suddenly her home and the children seem to be of lesser importance to Danny. Ria begins to despair. All that she has believed in, has worked for seem to become hazy and she begins to see the world in a new light. Here by a chance phone call she meets Marilyn, a woman from Connecticut, who is unable to come to terms with the death of her only son. The women exchange houses for the summer with extraordinary

consequences. Ria lives for two months in suburban Connecticut, while American Marilyn comes to Ireland to absorb her own sorrow. On Tara Road the upright remote Marilyn is drawn into Ria's neighbourhood dramas and Ria touches Marilyn's American life as well. The story goes into showing a fulfilling friendship between the two women. And yet both women learn that each of them holds a deep secret that can never be allowed to come to light.

Tara Road is a story of people in their multitudinous roles. One gets a sense of belonging about the entire neighbourhood of Tara Road as the stories of different families unfold. Happiness and sorrow sweep into the nooks and corners of their lives. One remembers Tolstoy's saying that all families are happy alike and unhappy in their own ways. The saying seems to come alive as each of the family lives with its own pros and cons.

Nora Johnson, Ria's mother, lives the life of a widow and yet she is superbly independent. Rosemary the perfectionist wants to have a family and yet she cannot find the perfect man. Here the reader feels like pointing out that to err is human; so how can Rosemary find that perfect husband? There are Mr and Mrs McCarthy seemingly so happy and yet Barney McCarthy needs to keep a mistress. But then Polly, Barney's mistress, is an excellent woman and people cannot help liking her. At the same time a feeling of resentment works when one thinks of Mona, Barney's wife. There is Gertie who holds the world for a husband who is drunk most of the time. There are other people too who share life around Tara Road.

The book blends into the various roles of its varied characters. Yet each of the characters is passionate, witty and unpretentious. They are so believable that the presence of the characters seems to linger long after the novel ends. The story is an elegant window into how perplexing life can be. It teaches tender wisdom, deep insight and yet has some sharp edged humour. Maeve Binchy has created an unforgettable cast of characters and woven a heart-rending story around them.

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and is a teacher.

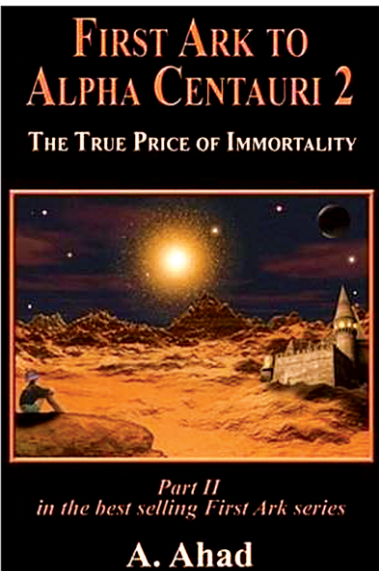
Absolutely a marvellous book, for it leaves the former US secretary of state shredded of respect. His dubious, dark role in such global situations as Cambodia, the coup in Chile and the murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh is a long tale that Hitchens relates here. There are no holds barred. Even the invasion and occupation of East Timor finds a place. Kissinger's malevolence is everywhere.

# Sci-fi that excites the adult imagination

## Hasan Ali Imam goes visiting intergalactic space and likes it

THE True Price of Immortality is a sequel to Abdul Ahad's award-winning first novel, First Ark to Alpha Centauri, released August 2005. It is a young adult sci-fi fantasy series about mankind's survival in the far distant future on a long duration interstellar voyage to Alpha Centauri.

The opening chapter takes us to an extraordinary planet named Pritibee, existing in another part of our Milky Way galaxy at the very dawn of time, long before the Sun was born and the Earth came into being. In that world, set on the edge of a breathtakingly spectacular astronomical phenomenon called a 'globular cluster', the author introduces us to the last surviving family of a race of beings who are on the brink of extinction. A deadly blood-thirsty Empire is cannibalising a weaker variant of its own species on the planet Pritibee. After the slaying of both her parents and one younger sister, an eight-year old female named Roopban is taken prisoner by the predatory race of warriors and entombed along with them inside a frozen chamber, destined to sleep for an everlasting eternity. Meanwhile, their desert home world of Pritibee gets sucked out of existence in a violent encounter with a black hole, the most ferocious monster of dark forces and dark energy prevailing in that part of the universe. Pritibee has a circling moon, however - named Chad - which manages to break free out of orbit in the violent gravitational encounter with the black hole and is thrown out into deep space. It carries within its deep, frozen underground caverns the last surviving life forms of Pritibee. After an endless eternity of wandering the celestial dark and cold reaches of intergalactic space, Chad is eventually captured by the gravitational force of our present day



First Ark to Alpha Centauri 2  
The True Price of Immortality  
A. Ahad  
PublishAmerica, Baltimore, USA

Sun into a distant orbit that puts it into the flight path of the outbound Earth ship named the Centauri Princess (abbreviated CP by its residents).

The first volume in the series introduced the reader to the dreamlike living environment inside the giant world ship, named the Centauri Princess. It gave a detailed insight into how the Ark was first built by world leaders in the late 23rd century in a bid to launch the first humans to New Earth - a planet discovered to be orbiting Alpha Centauri B. The treatise of the first volume covered the entire mission blueprint, from mining of comets and planetoids en route to how the miniature world was being governed

by a succession of presidential rulers and the Mission Management Committee (MMC) on its 50,000 year long projected voyage duration. The story was initially set on Earth, then fast forwarded by 2,000 years to an era when the residents of Utopia were haunted by mysterious, winged "wolf-like" demons in both their sleep and awakened states, through a complex interdimensional wormholing effect that brought them into contact with an alien race. Having resolved that crisis, with serious psychological damage and the loss of two dearly missed girls who were taken by the winged aliens from Utopia's Midsummer Crescent, the Centauri Princess was once again cruising on her silent voyage toward Alpha Centauri. An immensely long 48,000 years of remaining mission time was left to go.

This new novel is set two years after the ending point of the first book, and many of the characters have since moved on in their lives. Caroline Fiorello (now married, was in the previous book still single and known as Caroline Polansky) is haunted in her sleep by a series of harrowing and future-sensing premonitions. It takes a while for her and her husband to figure out what those dreams are about: an impending shortage of uranium fuel - the key lifeblood of all electricity and power needs on board the Ark. To top up the dwindling reserves, commander Nikolaus Zakarov (the lead character in the story) takes a mining crew of seven with him down to the surface of a dark ice world they have found drifting in the Solar System's Oort cloud. Named Delta's ice world by the crew, Zakarov and his people in fact find themselves landed on Chad, the once escaped moon of that far away planet named Pritibee, where the alien race that buried itself all those aeons ago are waiting for revival from their eternal state

of suspended animation.

With as much scientific justification as possible, The True Price of Immortality takes the reader beyond the limits of accepted reality by exploring life, death, suspended animation and alternate cosmic existences that make this a fast-paced, enthralling sci-fi saga.

This is the first novel by any known author to place the reader into a true interstellar location, beyond the immediate confines of our Solar System. The ice world, Delta, was first visited by a robotic probe launched by the Ark's MMC several years earlier. It is characterised in the novel as a "perpetual Night World, gripped in an Eternal Winter." From that vantage point, going forty two point five degrees south of the Solar System's ecliptic plane, the Sun is just another star-like point in the sky and the colonists are surrounded by a permanent night where dawn would quite simply never break. That unique setting in itself adds to the heart racing suspense and intrigue for the horror elements of the story. The mouth watering details of the night sky and 3D visualisations of space are sure to leave astronomy buffs and intellectuals wanting more.

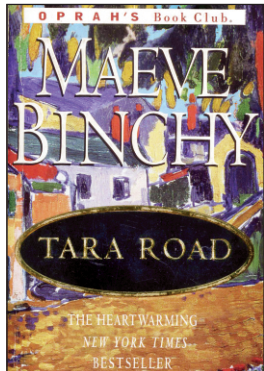
Abdul Ahad once famously stated: "Ever since the first people on Earth stepped out of their humble cave dwellings into the dark and looked up to see those tiny pin-pricks of light flickering across the night sky, there has been a sense of dreaming and wonder about what's actually up there and whether we could some day ever hope to reach these eternally distant jewels..." The title of this, his second novel, is apt in that sense. It acknowledges immortality to be a prerequisite to fulfil humanity's biggest dream. Since physical distances separating us from the nearby stars are

to all intents and purposes "near infinite", then one has to be immortal in order to reach a planet circling one of them. That is what the underlying theme of the novel is and the reader learns this from about half way through the book.

The True Price of Immortality is actually unquantifiable, except maybe by the loss of three human lives in a deadly battle with the ice world's resurrected aliens. That unattainable dream of wanting to reach New Earth within his own lifetime causes Zed Lincoln, the dictatorial presidential ruler, to abandon his current existence on the Ark through deception and by fabricating intriguing untruths. The book reaches an exciting and unpredictable climax towards the end, when Lincoln leaves behind his daughter, Sabrina Lincoln, to lead the voyage toward "distant and unimagined worlds circling the Alpha Centauri system" for a further 48,000 years.

The author is famed for many noted discoveries in astronomy, including the 'Ahad radius'. For his full contributions to science, please visit his Wikipedia biography. Abdul Ahad characterises the plot, the setting and events in his writings from a unique perspective of being a Western Muslim, a British-Bangladeshi and a respected astronomer by intellectual background. Indeed, 'Pritibee' means 'earth' and 'Chad' means moon in Bengali, Abdul Ahad's native language. By drawing on his scientific wisdom, cultural background and a towering imagination, he creates a fantasy tale worthy of enjoyment by readers of all genres and age groups. We unreservedly rate the book 5 stars.

Hasan Ali Imam writes from London.



Tara Road  
Maeve Binchy  
Dell Publishing