

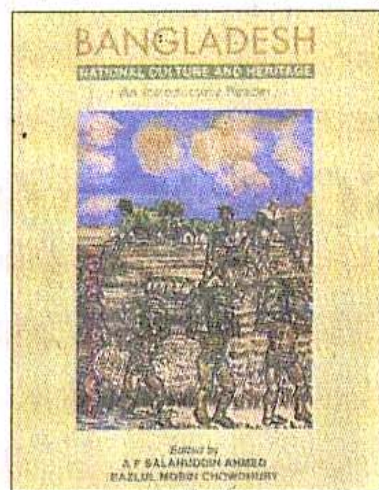
Snippets about Bangladesh's history and culture

Shahid Alam is appreciative of an informative anthology

SURELY, it would be expecting too much for one to gain a detailed, profound and comprehensive account of the history, culture, and heritage of Bangladesh in an anthology of around 450 pages. The saving grace of the book under review, on this count, lies in its very subtitle: "An Introductory Reader". In the preface to the book, the editors, A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed and Bazul Mobin Chowdhury, articulate its modest objective: "This book aims at giving the general reader an overview of the different aspects of history, society and culture of Bangladesh.... Though meant as a textbook for students, general readers may also find it useful." The general reader would find *Bangladesh National Culture and Heritage: An Introductory Reader* a tad more than useful. At the very least, s/he should find it a handy point of reference for diverse issues relating to this country's history, culture and society.

Twenty five scholars, a number of whom are prominent in their respective fields, offer pithy, yet for the most part quite incisive scholarship on subjects ranging from ancient history of Bengal to Bengali language, literature, music and folk arts. Besides an introductory chapter, "Bangladesh: History and Culture --- An overview", by A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed, the volume contains sixteen chapters arranged in two parts. Part I made up of eleven of them, takes up the bulk of the book's pages, and deals mostly with the history of Bengal from ancient times to the birth of Bangladesh. Part II, containing the remaining chapters, concentrates on the major and minor religions of the Bengal/Bangladesh region, its art, architecture, language, literature and music. The subjects, to reiterate, provide a sampling of their content and treatment in books devoted solely to each one of them; and it is not a bad sampling at all. Some of them even provide grounds for much divergence of opinion. And some, following a general trend in eclectic anthologies, are qualitatively superior over the others.

The introductory chapter lays down the essence of the Bengali Muslim's religious outlook: "The Bengalis have been drawn more by the inner spirit of religion than by its outward forms or external rituals. Hence religious orthodoxy or exclusiveness and intolerance could never influence the mind of the



Bangladesh National Culture and Heritage: An Introductory Reader
A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed and Bazul Mobin Chowdhury, eds.,
Independent University, Bangladesh

people of this region." This is a character trait and tradition to be proud of, something that has evolved from the influence of the teachings and activities of Sufi saints, rather than those of fundamentalist mullahs, and which must be nurtured and propagated. However, Ahmed's view that Ikhtiaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiar Khilji's fabled conquest of Bengal was due to the absence of firm social roots of traditional Hinduism in the country may be contested. And he seems almost apologetic while conceding that "the caste prejudices of the...Hindu community and, particularly, the anti-Muslim, exclusive and communal attitude of the upper and middle class Hindu *bhadralok*, also generated anti-Hindu feelings among the Muslims." It should not be that difficult to come out and boldly state that the anti-Muslim attitude that generally prevailed among much of the Hindu political leadership and the *bhadraloks* across much of British India, and not just Bengal, was a prime factor behind the demand for Pakistan, which was to be created as a separate homeland for Muslims who, it was felt by them and their important political leaders, would have been economically and politically subjugated by the majority Hindus in a united independent India. As much as anything else, this fear factor was instru-

mental in bringing about the so-called 'Great Divide' of British India.

Nazimuddin Ahmed's "Land and People" is truly a gratifying erudite piece that provides a panorama of Bangladesh's archaeological sites, monuments, and artifacts, and, at the end, makes this timely treaty: "Bangladesh is heir to a rich archeological heritage which cries out for protection and preservation. For, whatever survives today, are the variable (sic) pages of the land's history." There can be no equivocation over this point, even though the interpretation of historical events, not infrequently, gives rise to divergence of opinion. Although most of the essays in the volume are compartmentalised within their specific subject matters, inevitably there has been some overlap, and a few inconsistencies and variations have crept in. For example, Abdul Momin Chowdhury, in "Ancient Bengal --- Hindu-Buddhist Dynasties", believes that, "By the time Aryan influence reached Bengal, it had become feeble during its long march through the entire area of northern India. Thus the pre-Aryan elements in the culture of the people of Bengal got time to be rooted deeply and even under Aryan influence, which was feeble, they retained many elements in their life and culture which are non-Aryan and definitely pre-Aryan." Shahanara Husain, in "Ancient Bengal --- Society and Culture", however, discerns a greater influence of Aryan culture and social customs on ancient Bengal, while she compares the effect on Bengal in terms of the impact of the phenomenon in other parts of India, and finds it to have been comparatively less than in many of those parts.

Abdul Karim's "Bengal Under the Mughals: Politics, Society and Culture", and Zaheda Ahmad's "Bengal Under British Colonial Rule: Politics and Society" are both informative and thoughtfully analysed, enabling the reader to discern the marked shifts, modifications and transformations that had taken place in society during the two eras. Ahmad points out that the British colonisation of Bengal, later extended to the rest of India, was not, "as some British pundits would like us to believe, the product of a mere accident of history." It was, on the contrary, the end result of a protracted period of scheming and planning over more than a century, which was facilitated by "the prevailing

state of disunity and division within the decadent ruling establishment of Bengal."

Zaheda Ahmad, A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed in "Evolution of Political Ideas and Movements in the Nineteenth Century", M. Mufakharul Islam in "Economic Development --- Bangladesh Agriculture: Historical And Current Perspectives", and Bazul Mobin Chowdhury in "Economic Development --- Changing Class and Social Structure in Bangladesh: 1793-1980" all provide valid rationale for decrying Governor-General Lord Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement as having had a negative impact on the socio-political and cultural life of Bengal. In Zaheda Ahmad's summing-up: "All told, Cornwallis' land settlement would remain as one of the most pernicious and damaging legacies of British colonialism." Bazul Mobin Chowdhury succinctly provides an example of the far-reaching negative effects of the settlement: "The hierarchy of landowners created under the Permanent Settlement appropriated a greater portion of the surplus produced by the peasants. For example, in the 1940's the *ryots* and under *ryots* paid between 120 and 200 million rupees to ensure only 26.8 million rupees to the Crown." Incidentally, another discrepancy in terms of figures presented may be detected between Mufakharul Islam's article, where, in discussing the famous Tebhaga movement, he avers that, under the terms of Tebhaga, "the *bargadars* should receive one-third of the produce of the land cultivated by them," and Tajul Islam Hashmi's "Peasants and Politics in East Bengal, 1914-1947", where he holds that "two-third of crops should go to the sharecropper or *bargadar* and the rest one-third should go to the landlord or *otedar* or *talukdar*."

Staying on the subject of economic development, Wahidul Haque in "Industrialization of Bangladesh in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" has some interesting observations about the present global economic system (terming it "a sort of neo-laissez-faire") and the policies that the South Asian countries should follow in facing up to the challenges posed by globalisation and market economy: an "import-led" development strategy financed by long-term capital inflow. He is particularly concerned by American domination of the global economy: "If Pax Americana

remotely resembles yesterday's Pax Britannica, then South Asia will, along with many other regions including Europe, have to think of a different world order which is hard to visualise at this stage of globalization." However, he appears to be just a little self-serving when he prescribes, as a means of safeguarding Bangladesh's interests against the onslaught of globalisation, "Bangladeshi experts, at home and abroad, should not continue to remain in the wilderness or stand on the wayside", and makes a loaded statement when he states that "neutral teams of advisors from overseas could be consulted" (just how is the "neutrality" to be determined?).

Anisuzzaman's "Bengali Language and Literature" elucidates on the evolution and flowering of those two areas, and he manages to get an impressive amount of information and discussion in within the confines of the limited space. Karunamaya Goswami is almost adept in exploring the rich variety extant in Bengali music. He brings up an interesting point in discussing *tappa*, where the poet-composers "got rid of symbolism and spiritualism of every kind and sought to portray love as a tender relation between man and woman emphasizing mostly that inevitable aspect of the man-woman relationship, namely, *viraha*: separation." Could that explain the average Bangladeshi's penchant for highly emotional melodrama in plays, TV dramas, and films, and a proclivity for sad tear-jerkers of songs? Or could it be that the *viraha*-predominant *tappas* are only a reflection of the average Bengali's trait? The essays on religion are rather too sketchy and bland, and may be the weakest segment of the book.

Bangladesh National Culture and Heritage will not provide any grand vista on any specific subject matter covered in the anthology. But its avowed intention is not to do that. Its objective is to arouse in the reader an interest in this country's history, culture and heritage. It should succeed in this modest yet significant objective, and possibly arouse in many the desire to explore, at greater depth, the larger vista in each subject matter covered in the volume.

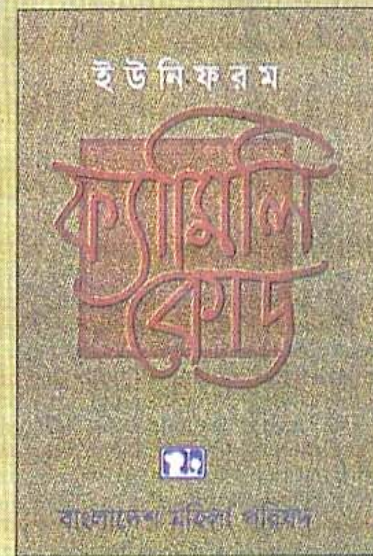
Shahid Alam is a writer and Head, Media and Communication department, Independent University, Bangladesh.

At a glance



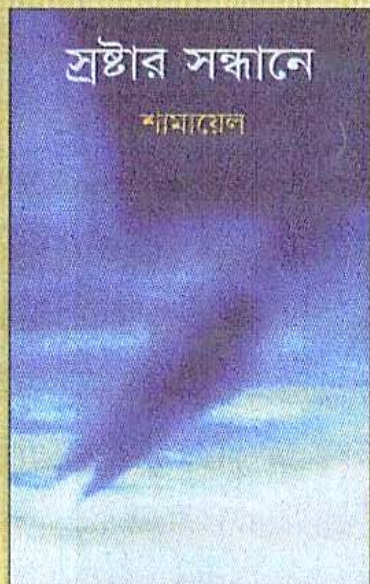
Beje Otho Matal Mollar
Selim Sarwar
Papyrus

This happens to be an exhilarating collection of poetry from an academic who has spent an entire career studying and teaching literature. He has explored literary experience abroad and savoured poetry here in Bangladesh. These poems are a reflection of the modernity he brings into his sensibilities. They are gripping.



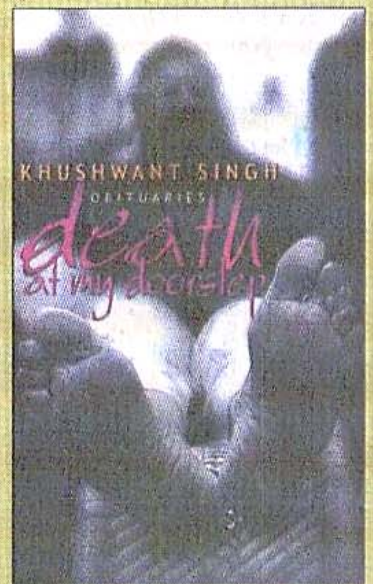
Uniform Family Code
Obhinno Paribarik Aeen
Bangladesh Mohila Parishad

Here is an excellent work on the many and varied laws that govern the family in Bangladesh. And it straddles the various, especially religious, communities. With a good sprinkling of articles on conditions in which family laws have, or have not, operated. Anyone willing to read through the hefty material here will do himself or herself a world of good.



শ্রুতির সন্ধানে
Shamael
Gyankoshi Prokashoni

The work is a reflection on religion, indeed on spiritual experience. Shamael carries the reader through a detailed exposition of faith, bringing into her deliberations facts and tales from a diversity of beliefs. In other words, this is a book that takes rather an intellectual approach to an understanding of religion.



Obituaries
Death At My Doorstep
Khushwant Singh
Roli Books

Another captivating work from the indefatigable Khushwant Singh. He writes movingly on people who have passed on. He knew all of them, many of them as close friends. And then there is the usual dash of humour he brings into a telling of the tales. He writes grimly on ZA Bhutto's end and sadly on his friend Manzur Quader.

The Oriya voice in Sarojini Sahoo

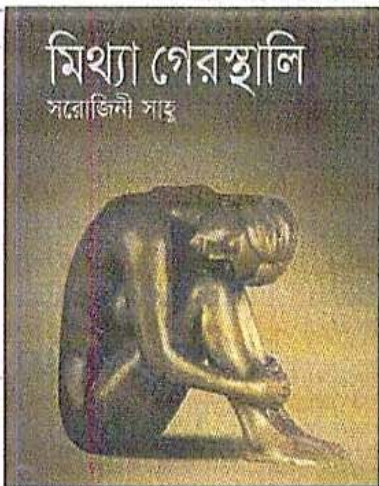
Subrata Kumar Das is thrilled by a translation of a novel

CERTAINLY it can be considered a good piece of news for readers of literature in Bangladesh that a worthy translation of a novel by a noted fictionist of Orissa has come out very recently from a local publishing house. The novel *Mithya Gerosthali*, set in a very familiar context, is able to draw the attention of many for both its loftiness and its lucidity of language.

Born in 1956 in Orissa, India, Sarojini Sahoo did her MA and PhD degrees in Oriya literature and a Bachelor of Law from Utkal University. A teacher in a college, Sahoo married Jagadish Mohanty, a veteran writer of Orissa. Both in novels and short stories she has demonstrated her own views in her individual way, thereby drawing a huge readership, as online materials suggest. Her anthologies of short stories include *Sukhara Muhamuhin* (1981), *NijagahiraneNije* (1989), *Amrutara* (1992), *Chowkhata* (1994), *Tarali Jauthiba Durga* (1995), *Deshantari* (1999), *Dukha Apramita* (2006) and *Sarojini Sahoo short stories* (2006).

Sarojini Sahoo has bagged many awards, including the prestigious Orissa Sahitya Award in 1993. Wide translations of her writings in different languages, including English, have brought the fictionist a newer reading public from a wider region. The recent effort toward translating her novel into Bangla will bring in some more Bangladeshi Bangla-speaking readership for her.

If we look at the recent novels of



Mithya Gerosthali
Sarojini Sahoo
Bangla translation: Dilwar Hossain
Anupam Prokashoni, Dhaka

Sarojini Sahoo, the titles that flash before our eyes are *Upanibesh* (1998), *Pratibandhi* (1999), *Swapna Khojali Mane* (2000) and *Mahajatra* (2001). Her personal website also speaks highly of these novels. And what is noteworthy is that before the publication of the aforesaid novels she had been conferred much regional recognition. We can thus assume that after her great success in the genre of short stories she has turned to the wider horizon of novels.

Gambhiri Ghara or *Mithya Gerosthali* is a very simple novel with a very simple plot creating very simple impressions outwardly. But any reader can identify all these simplicities as the special features of this female author of Orissa, or India, or the world. Yes, the inner web that the story of the novel revolves around, indeed evolves, involves the whole Indian nation and even goes beyond national territory. Truth be said, the novel does have an international perspective also.

It is rather curious that the novel begins with two people, Kuki alias Rokana and Shafique, who have never seen each other, never been sure of each other's true involvement in love. But how is it that they feel so much for each other? The relationship develops only through mails. How did the development start? No, the creator of the story has not exposed it. Maybe it was accidental? People who go online know that it is not very unusual for people in the farthest corners of the world to come in touch with one another. But how does it reach such a zenith where they become no less than true lovers? A search for an answer to this question is embodied by the entire novel.

Such a possibility comes true when real hollowness gets a grip on a victim of this hollowness is Kuki, an Indian housewife, the protagonist of the novel. Her conjugal life with Oniket fails to provide her with anything that is preserved in the core of the heart,

something that people always hanker after, that a human being always cherishes. The case of her Pakistani counterpart Shafique is nothing better, though he boasts: "I have experienced fifty two fair sexes" (page 20). Moreover, the lustful life of his wife Tabassum is possibly the reason that thrusts him into such a lifestyle, or vice versa. Life with her husband has compelled Tabassum into making her own choices.

The ethereal relations between Kuki and Shafique pose as something platonic though not as non-physical as the term meant in bygone days. Shafique writes many mails that brim with physical desire and through them he actually wants to reach even the heights of carnal desire.

But a feature of Shafique's soul that makes Kuki so concentrated and devoted is his openness: thinking nothing of the coming days he opens up to Kuki, the never-seen beloved. Furthermore, he plans to make a future with Kuki, if not in Pakistan, in a European land. And that desire makes him attempt to obtain a scholarship in France. And here arises the globalism of the novel. Shafique discovers his backward position as a Pakistani, or as an Asian, that keeps him at a remove from Europe.

As Shafique is an artist, his mails ventilate many novel ideas that make one an individualist. He raises questions that do not sound very fair to those who govern a country: they detect clues of terrorism in his voice and thus the artistic

personality in him gets crushed.

At the other end, Kuki meets a similar fate. Shafique's arrest causes her immense pain. She loses the nest that once would give her a sort of aesthetic pleasure. But all possibilities end in smoke.

Not that Sarojini Sahoo is a well known literary figure in Bangladesh. Though she has paid a visit here and some newspapers produced reports on her, I did not happen to read any book of hers beforehand. Very recently I got a mail from her and learned that she is a visitor of my website on the novels of Bangladesh called www.bangladeshinovel.com. The mail noted that her novel *Gambhiri Ghara* had been published in Bangla by a Dhaka publisher. In that mail and in the following ones, a desire of hers was explicit: Could I prepare a review of the book?

Much credit goes to Dilwar Hossain, the Bangla-language translator of the novel. I must admit that Dilwar Hossain has been able to come out of the limitations that translators are generally stifled by. At many places the book does not appear to be a translation. The novel comprises a good number of English poems written by Shafique. The poetic writings of the artist have not been converted, perhaps in the belief that they may lose their beauty and essence.

Subrata Kumar Das is a translator and essayist.

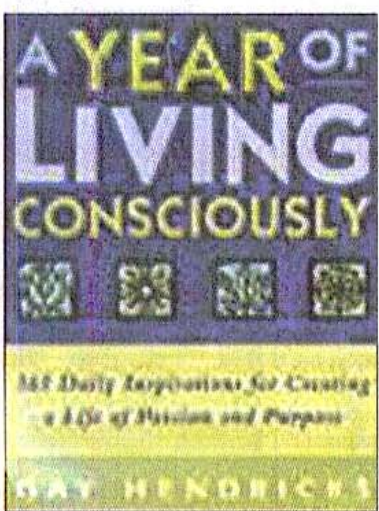
Smile through your days, always

Tulip Chowdhury goes positively happy over a new book

THE book begins on January 1 with this message: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." And then it goes on to say,

"The journey of living consciously begins with a single moment of commitment, saying yes to the impulse within you that wants to grow, to expand, to embrace your largest possible self, to make your largest possible contribution to the world."

When you open the book you feel as if you have found a treasure that is priceless. The writer Gay Hendricks has come up with a gem that seems to touch each and every reader's life with sparks of light. The writer delves into the intricate nooks and corners of life and offers his advice and inspirations. We all want to live authentic, self-aware and successful lives. This book opens the floodgates to the wisdom and inspirations that we need to live a life that is gratifying. As we live our life sometimes we pause and wonder about the perplexity of life. We wonder about the mysteries that seem to make life more precious, mysteries that are beyond our comprehension. At such times we could use advice, a look into other people's insights to shed light into our confusions. *A Year of Living Consciously* is the perfect guide to read when we want some guidance into living our life more commendably. It is a beautiful book holding out advice and motivation for each and every day for a whole year. The book encourages readers to live life more consciously. There are profound details about the conduct of life, self-realisation and affirmation. It



A Year of Living Consciously
Gay Hendricks
Harper Collins

builds up self-confidence in the reader. The book is like a friend who is standing beside you with all the best intentions. It has words of wisdom for the 365 days of the year. One can have a look into the days on each and every day of the calendar and find words of the enlightened casting light on the different paths of life. It is a daytime guide for the reader. The wisdom offered in this book gives pleasure and exhilaration. It gives an epic picture of life. Every idea and practice here has been "kitchen tested" in the rigorous laboratory of real life.

When one reads this book one feels like starting everything anew; it makes one feel like reviving a new life upon lessons learnt on past mistakes.

Open the book and you will find each and every day beginning with a wonderful saying. You open the pages and each day seems to open with a glorious sunrise. Come to January 5 and there is a quotation by Pearl Bailey that says, "There is a period of life when we swallow a knowledge of ourselves and it becomes either good or sour."

Next come the lessons of wisdom. For instance go to April 4 and the note of wisdom says,

"The most powerful strategy of a successful relationship is telling the truth. The very idea appears subversive and dangerous to many people. People are afraid that if they tell the truth they will cause hurt to their partners. A relationship flourishes when it is equal, when people are honest with each other."

And so on. The notes continue for the other days, each with different views. One cannot put the book down until the last note is read and indeed savoured.

After the note of wisdom comes the part that says "A conscious living for today." Under this caption there are incredible pieces of advice for everyday life. On March 17 it says,

"Make a commitment out loud-----to a mirror if you are alone, or to someone else if you are accompanied. Say, 'I commit this day to opening to more positive energy. I choose the daily

increase of love and positive energy as a central focus of my life."

There is advice about three circles of relationships. It reads, "The first circle is your relationship with yourself, particularly your relationship with the creative flow inside. If you keep opening up to your creativity and expressing it in the world, your circle of connection with yourself expands. The second circle is your relationship with others. Here, your circle expands when you open up to appreciate the essences of the people around you, and the ripples deepen. The third circle is your relationship with the earth and the universe. In the third circle you are the stone, the ripple and the pond; you are the relationship between action and reaction."

Open the page to February 15 and here Mother Teresa leaves her words for the day. She says, "Love is a fruit in season at all times, and within the reach of every hand."

If you are feeling down, feeling that life is rather unfair in many ways, go to the month of May and on the 14th of the month and the wisdom of the days says, "Count your blessings. When life gets most chaotic and difficult, the ironies of life are a reminder that there will be dissonance in lives the very things that bring you the most joy are also the things that can bring you the most confusion and anguish. Grief is proportionate to the joy you have known with another in relationship; the more you love, the more you feel loss when that love is changed. Hence learn to count your blessings."

The book goes on to say that it is never too late to start living a life of conscious living. It says,

"Take yourself to the moment of birth. Imagine the work that went into bringing you into the world and the celebration that took place in the room when you drew your first breath, cried your first birth cry. Imagine yourself as tiny and vulnerable and new and full of hope and possibility. This new person lives within you still; access the newborn who lives within you and let your self experience once again the momentous experience of entering the world, of having all the hope, all the possibility laid out in front of you."

On July 8 the quote of the day is from Sir Winston Churchill, who goes on to say, "We make a living by what we get and we make a life by what we give."

And of course there are a hundred other wonderful pieces of sayings and guidance. This book is an elegant window into bringing peace to the soul. Gay Hendricks repeatedly expresses the confidence that a person can live a worthy life from any moment he or she chooses. And in the process the book *A Year of Living Consciously* is a perfect guide for readers to pick up on a day and start a life that will have days shine like the countless stars in the sky. In times like the present, when violence and restlessness seem to shroud the world, this book is indeed like a beacon to our souls.

Tulip Chowdhury is a poet, fiction writer and teacher.

The gloom in a heart

Efadul Huq examines thoughts of pleasure in a gripping story

ONCE upon a time, there was a prostitute called Maria', begins the famous author Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*.

Coelho, whose simple yet inspirational fables had life-changing effects on people, is telling a story that will show you the possibility of sacred sex in the context of love. *Eleven Minutes* is a discussion of physical hunger in a way that's no less innocent than a fairy tale.

Maria, the protagonist of the novel is introduced as a young Brazilian girl who dreams of a Prince Charming like her friends. But her early experiments with romance convince her that love is a delusion. Her boyfriend ditches her because she knows nothing about kissing. She learns to feel that self-pleasure-giving is best. Attaining her maturity, she becomes a shop-girl even though she has high ambitions. But a vacation in Rio helps her meet a Swiss tourist, Roger, looking for dancers for his club in Geneva. Maria accepts his proposal and steps into the world of dancers. She is taught *samba* by a Moroccan man who knows nothing about it! But soon she loses the job and joins Copacabana, Geneva's expensive prostitution! She saves her earning so that one day she may return to her native village in style. But when she is absolutely lost in lust and desires, she meets a handsome artist, Ralf Hart who makes her see her inner light, and begins to regain the lost sight of love. What happens afterwards is for you to find out.

Coelho's language is simple and his message is as transparent as water. His bewitching sentences made me read the book more than thrice already. He says, "When we meet someone and fall in love, we have a sense that the whole universe is on our side. I saw this happen today as the sun went down. And yet if something goes wrong, there is nothing left! No herons, no distant music, not even the taste of his lips. How is it possible for the beauty that was there only minutes before to vanish so quickly?"

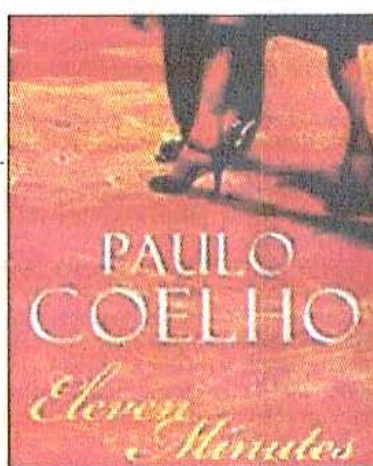
Is there any better way than these simple yet insightful sentences to express the gloom of a heart-broken girl? The novel has diary entries of Maria which are sure to make you think. You may find yourself reading the same sentences again and again, pondering

over it. One can call it a romance novel but very different from Nicholas Sparks or Harold Robbins. Coelho has his magical style! *Eleven Minutes* sweeps you off your feet and takes you into Coelho's world where you learn that life is a roller coaster and once you are on it, you cannot expect it to move gently; it will have its ups and downs. You realize that sex is the synonym of love. Coelho points out the thin border line that exists between love and lust in our lives and invites us to get rid of it.

Besides, the same message of *The Alchemist* echoes here once again: "follow your dream" just the way Santiago and Maria did. "Some books make us dream, others bring us face to face with reality, but what matters to the author is the honesty with which a book is written"; I can assure every reader that Coelho has been truly honest and has used his ability to combine dream and reality in *Eleven Minutes*. Coelho's detailed storytelling is sure keep you enchanted, dreaming and his down-to-earth thoughts will allow you to look at the world from a new angle.

Eleven Minutes is a quest to discover your 'inner light'. Are you ready for it?

Efadul Huq is a freelance writer and reviewer of books



Eleven Minutes
Paulo Coelho
Harper Collins