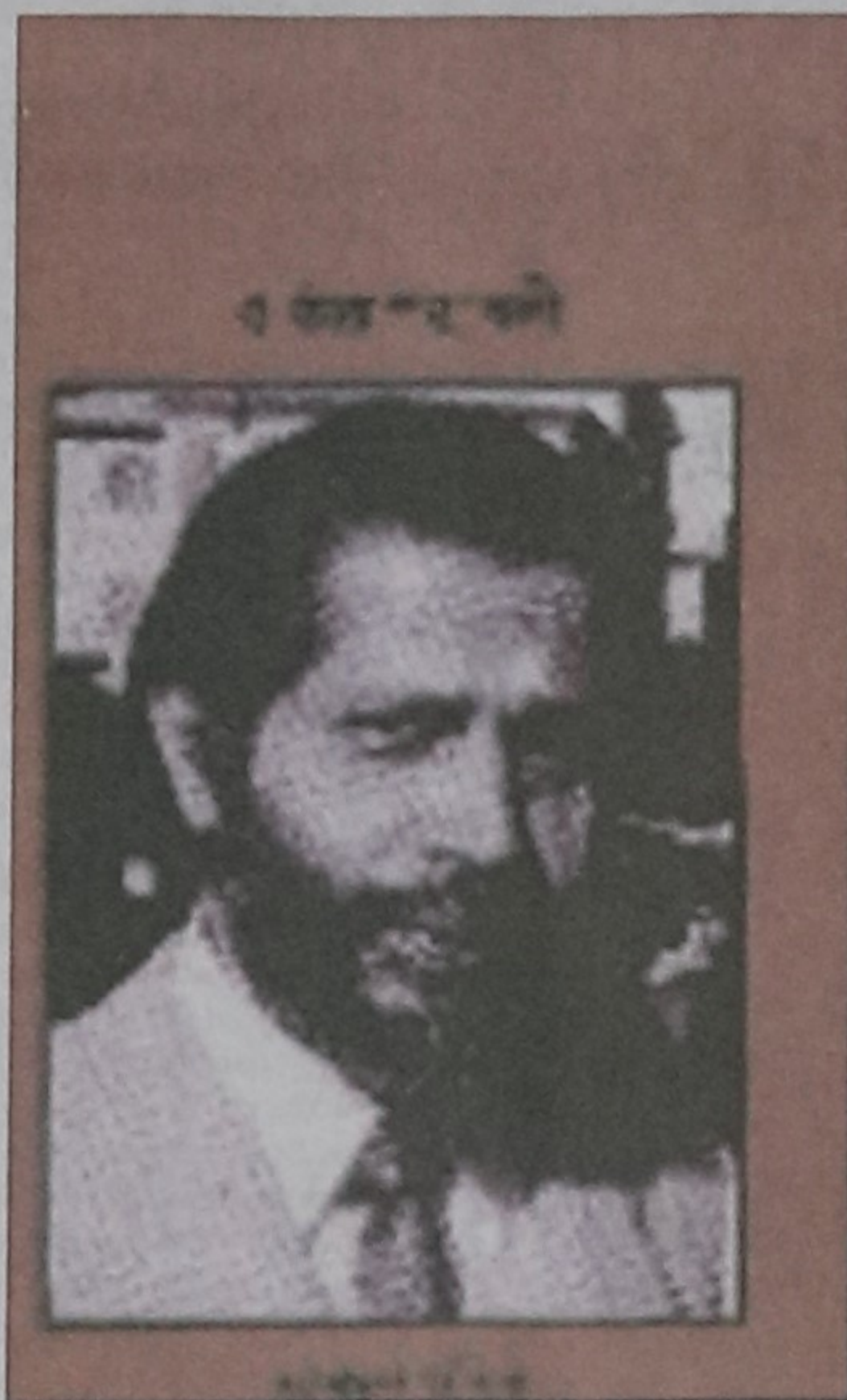


The sun god in distant Rome

Syed Badrul Ahsan rediscovers a writer in a bunch of letters

SHAMSUDDIN Abul Kalam died lonely and forlorn in Rome on a January day ten years ago. As this very appreciable compilation of his letters demonstrates amply, there was in him, ever since he left what once was East Pakistan and took up residence in the West, a defining degree of nostalgia that often comes to men who think. And Kalam was a thinking man, steeped as he was in literature and the making of it. The problem, as he saw it and not without reason, was the big hurdle that was always there when it came to an appreciation of his literary talents back home in Bangladesh. And the hurdle was geography. As the war for Bangladesh's liberation went on in 1971, Kalam was enthused by the prospect of freedom for a country he did not quite plan on going back to. He kept in touch with Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury and with others he knew were directly involved in the cause. Once Bangladesh became a *de jure* state, Kalam travelled to the new country, met its important men, including Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and came away with the belief that the future appeared bright despite the travails that yet dotted the path.

The future, as we know it, was of course derailed and the country lurched from one crisis to another, from secular democracy to rightwing dictatorship. In these letters, where Kalam speaks of politics in Bangladesh, one gets a sense of the sense of loss he feels in distant Rome. His missives to Abdul Matin, a distinguished London-based Bengali intellectual who has over the years made memorable contributions to the field of historical research in Bangladesh through his many works, speak of his anguish at the world he is part of away from the home he is not likely ever to return to for good. There are other letters, to Deviprasad Das and Fazila Rahman, with whom Kalam discourses on literature and aesthetics. With Matin, apart from general conversations, Kalam is forever engaged in debate about the state of the arts in Bangladesh and the evolution that he has observed taking place in poetry and fiction over the years. The author of *Kanchangram* lives, for all his disappointment, in a world of idealism. It is idealism that first stirred in his soul in his days as a



Shamsuddin Abul Kalam O Tar Paraboli
Abdul Matin
Radical Asia Publications

student in the early 1940s and embraced a world of reality through the publication of the short stories titled *Shaherbanu*. Not even a recognised literary figure like Somnath Lahiri could resist the temptation of penning a positive review of the work in the Communist Party mouthpiece *Shwadinota*. In

1946, having appeared for his Bachelor in Arts examination, Kalam contributed three poems to a collection of poetry, *Shaat-Shotero*, edited by Shamsuddin Abul Kalam and Professor Shudhangshu Chowdhury, the latter an academic at Barisal BM College.

When Partition came in 1947, Kalam stayed back in Calcutta and was not to arrive in Dhaka till 1950. It was a move, as one of the letters in this collection makes it clear, that caused depression in him. Obviously, for any individual who has discovered himself in as historically rich a place in Calcutta will always feel a trifle diminished, perhaps even bitter, in Dhaka. For Kalam, it was a leap from the cosmopolitan to the provincial. He was never to be happy in his new surroundings, though that did not deter him from plunging into writing. But, then again, many individuals disillusioned with conditions around them find refuge in pen and paper. Shamsuddin Abul Kalam was one such man. In 1953 appeared a new collection of stories he called *Poth Jana Nai*. In the same year came another, though unpublished work *Dheu*. Then, in 1955, appeared eight stories in the collection *Dui Hridoyer Teer*. A collection of twelve new short stories, *Puin Dalimer Kalya*, appeared in 1957. The acclaimed novel *Kashboner Kony*, which Kalam finished writing in 1948, saw the light of day in 1954. There are all the other novels which underpin Kalam's cerebral qualities, his contribution to the growth of modern Bengali literature. And within this group comes the Liberation War-based *Kanchangram*, which was published a year after Kalam's death and was to earn the Bangladesh National Archives and Library award. A list of Kalam's remaining works testifies to the prodigious energy that worked in him, the frenzy with which he lost himself in the world of letters even as he eked out a living working for various organisations in Rome. In *Jibon Kotha*, *Alamnagarer Upokotha*, *Kanchanmala*, *Jajongol*, *Nobanno*, *Shamudra Bashor*, *Jar Shaathe Jar*, *Moner Moto Thain and Moja Ganger Gaan*, Kalam's understanding of what literature ought to be becomes transparent. And yet, as he notes in his letters, a writer should be careful that he does not impose his

own personality on the reader. Could it be that he had Keats' negative capability in mind here?

Quite a few of Kalam's works, including the English language novel *The Garden of Cane Fruits*, have remained unpublished. In 1964, the Bangla Academy conferred its literary award on Kalam. The writer, residing in Rome since the mid-1950s when he left the country on a Unesco fellowship, was thenceforth to lapse into a state of near obscurity he was not (who will be?) comfortable with. In a letter, he writes, "I only get lonelier. I have nothing. There is no scope for a return to the country." In the 1980s, threatened with unemployment and rather in a state of panic, Kalam notes, "I remain busy in trying to finding work of any kind. It seems eventually I will have to leave Rome." And then a flicker of hope: "Perhaps in a year or so I will come by Italian citizenship." But for all his travails, Kalam remains acutely conscious of how literary trends are shaping up back home in Bangladesh. "Taslima Nasreen's personal frustration," he writes, "voices the frustrations of many others. But can simple martyrdom truly aid the progress of this society?" Kalam is harsh on Abul Fazl and makes studious note of the hypocrisy he notes in the late academic. In a 1987 missive he writes, "Abul Fazl has been projected (as a literary figure). From one of his works I have found thus: 'Sheikh Mujib has misused power and there is no confusion about that'. Interestingly, though, the same Abul Fazl was to obtain a newspaper dealership through Sheikh Mujib for his son." Kalam's heart, as these letters show, remained consistent in its comprehension of Bengal's ethos. Rivers fascinated him. He writes to Matin, "If you come across in any bookshop dealing in old books works on the Volga, Danube, Euphrates, Amazon, Yangtze, et cetera, please let me know."

Fazila Rahman, the recipient of many of his letters and the repository of his trust, sums up Shamsuddin Abul Kalam: "He looked like a sun god."

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

At a glance

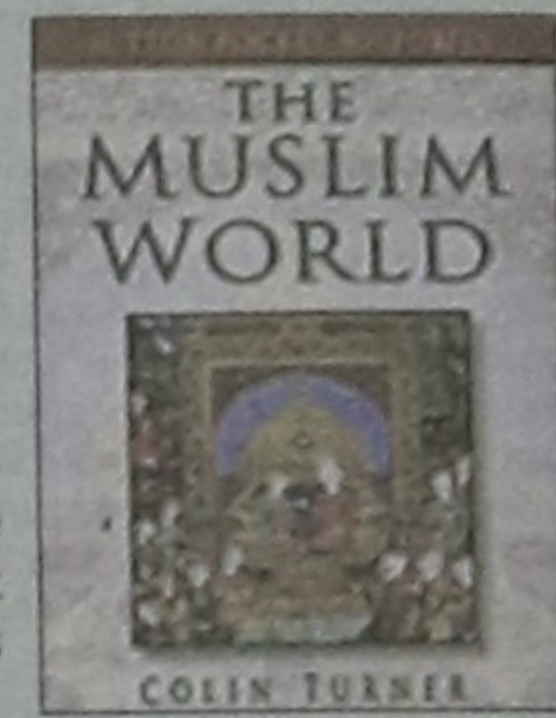


Casanova
The Man Who Really Loved Women
Lydia Flem
Farrar Straus Giroux

An interesting work on a man with what has long been looked upon as a sordid reputation. But Flem does a good job of projecting the intellectual aspects of Casanova's character. Despite the fact that he enjoyed passionate love with 132 women, he still had time for poetry. It is a Casanova you cannot but respect. He gives you tips on love too.

The Muslim World
Colin Turner
Sutton Publishing

The work appeared before all these questions regarding political Islam, before the fall of the twin towers in New York, came up. It is a simple layman's guide to Islamic history, a kind of made-easy narrative of the rise and expansion of a religion. The book should be a useful addition to libraries everywhere.

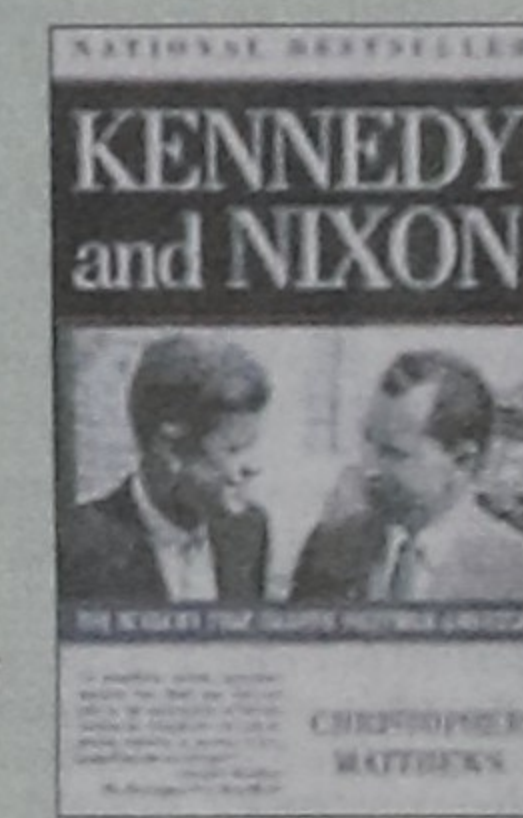


Taliban
Ahmed Rashid
Pan Books

Originally published before the disaster of 11 September 2001, the work is essentially a history of the rise and expanding power of a group of seminarians intent on taking Afghanistan back into the medieval era. Rashid examines the history behind the story. He does not spare anyone who has had a hand in the rise of this band of fanatics.

Kennedy and Nixon
The Rivalry That Shaped Post-War America
Christopher Matthews
Simon & Schuster

Looks like an unputdownable book. The Kennedy-Nixon saga has etched itself in the public consciousness. The 1960 election, television debates and all, are remembered once more. Both men dominated an era that saw war, the race for space and détente. If Kennedy personified dynamism, Nixon symbolised strong leadership.



The surreal sights that dot the path

Efadul Huq reads an old story in new times

LOVE, the eternal two-faced dream, never stops mesmerizing us. Writers all over the world end up contributing to the ever-increasing definition of love at some point in their writing careers because they find almost every quality of life in love. The kingdom of love is so vast that it reigns over every other human emotion and this, needless to say, heaps on love a dual nature on top of its universality. If love is like a soothing ointment from a beautiful maiden, it is also the sword of an angry lover. If love is the reason behind the magnificent Taj Mahal, it is also the reason behind a burning Troy. If love made Lochinvar valiant, it made Romeo take his own life. In fact, at times it seems that literally everything springs from love the love of money or the love of power or the love of a person or the love of God. While you may categorize the contradictory faces of love by good and evil you can't refuse to acknowledge its mysterious duality which is like a surreal sight.

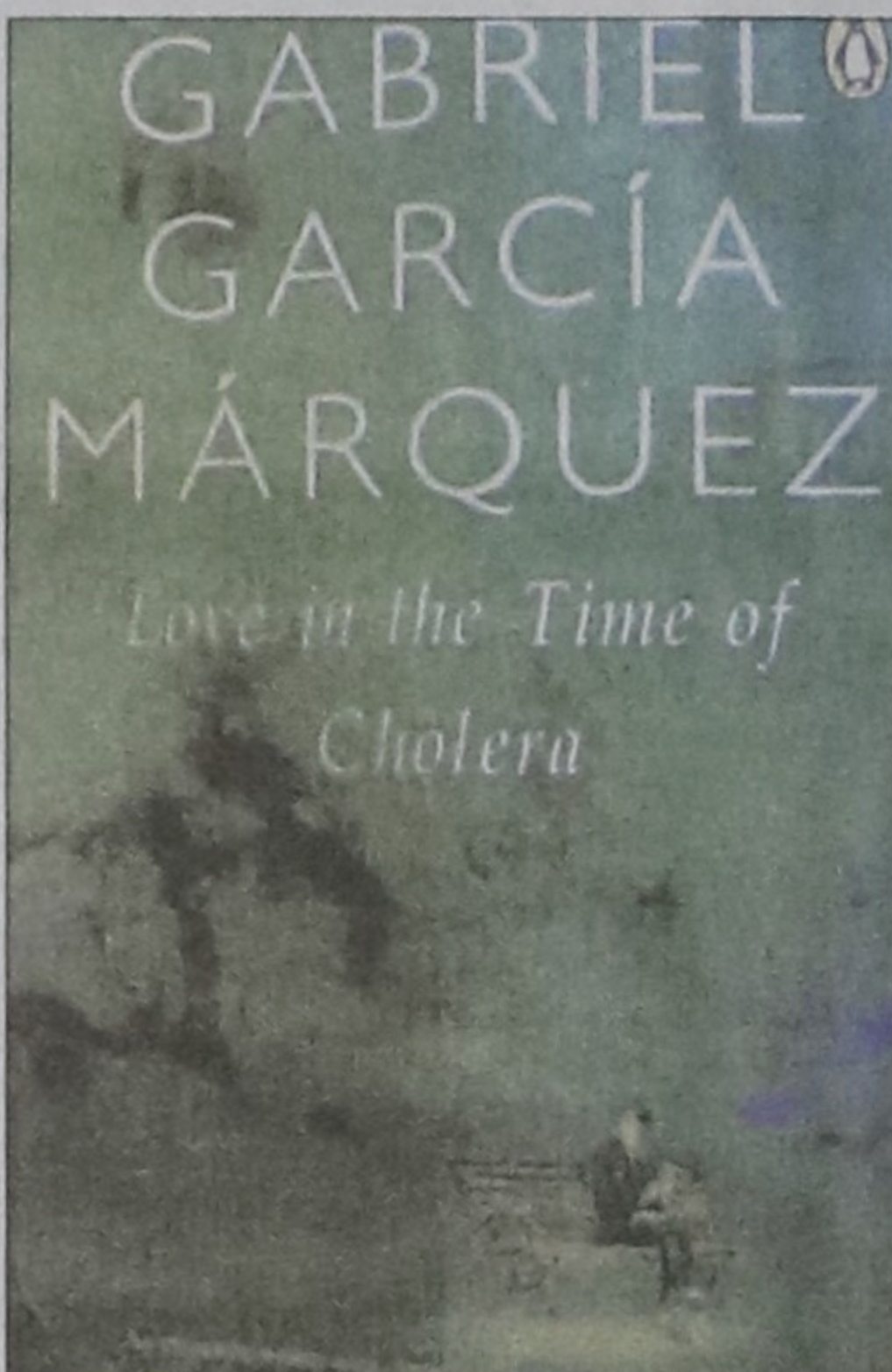
It is this inexplicable dream this love which talks to us through Love in the Time of Cholera. And its prophet is Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The Garcimarcusian voice, set against the backdrop of magic realism, hypnotises readers and tries to give them a vision of the manifold manifestations of love. And once the novel is over, it becomes a joy for a reader to meditate upon the visions revealed.

The story takes place in a Caribbean city and out of its total population, there are three dazzling characters, each unique in its own way, whom we will observe as they travel through time on the boat of love. Fermina Daza is a 'beautiful adolescent with... almond shaped eyes' who walks with a 'natural haughtiness... her doe's gait making her seem immune to gravity'. Expectedly (because who wouldn't want a companion like that?) Florentino Ariza, the carnal and transcendent lover, falls in love with her. His affair transforms him into a poet though his fate binds him to a River Company of the Caribbean. Fermina and Florentino don't get the chance to talk to each other much and therefore fall back on writing passionate and secret letters and

telegrams. Fermina's angry father, on learning of the clandestine romance, takes her on an extended 'journey of forgetting' and Florentino is exasperated in his office (amidst the letter-writing tutorial books) because he is unable to write any business letter at all. Every time he touches the pen or the typewriter, all he can gather are words of ardent love. Oh boy, only Marquez can give you as sweet a humour as that.

When Fermina returns from her journey, she remembers Florentino quite well but rejects the lovesick man and surprisingly meets and marries Dr. Juvenal Urbino who, in contrast to the poor, diseased Florentino, is blue blooded, the hero of the cholera resistance, an attractive dresser, and though somewhat concerned with himself only is charming nonetheless.

The lovelorn poet's heart is torn in shreds but he is still not disheartened. Having proclaimed his love for Fermina, he decides to wait until the day comes when Fermina will be his. And thus commences the battle of the eternal vow of love against the finite hours of the earth. In between, during these years, Marquez takes time to portray the various appearances of love between men and women as Florentino takes to the street to find lovers who can satisfy his manly needs and Fermina spins the strings of marriage. Florentino and Fermina's love affair at this stage is the unrequited version of love while Fermina and Urbino's state of monotonous love is marital love. Florentino and Leona share a platonic love and with the poetess, Florentino shares an angry love. We experience jealous love in the incident of the adulterous wife being killed because of her affair with Florentino and love becomes dangerous when Florentino develops a relationship with an asylum fleeing lunatic. Young love, with its pitfalls, is exhibited in the juvenile affair of Florentino and Fermina in the early days while adulterous love is sketched in Urbino's extramarital affair. May-December love is exposed in Florentino's affair with his ward and, to mention



Love in the Time of Cholera
Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Penguin

beforehand, we spot love between old couples in the last stages of the novel though the fear of social criticism barges into their lovely daydreams.

The spellbinding story becomes all the more magnetic as the story proceeds. Here's how a balloon-trip is described:

'From the sky they could see, just as God saw them, the ruins of the very old and heroic city of Cartagena de Indias, the most beautiful in the

world, abandoned by its inhabitants because of the sieges of the English and the atrocities of the buccaneers. They saw the walls, still intact, the brambles in the streets, the fortifications devoured by heartsease, the marble palaces and the golden altars and the viceroys rotting with plague inside their armour.' Marquez's words are translucently pure like gemstones among gray rocks. His words can praise critically and criticize praiseworthy while they themselves can be labeled with only one word: soulful. Each line strikes a different chord in the reader's heart and a paragraph gives birth to a tune. They can fabulously speak or even harmoniously sing when invoked accordingly. Marquez makes his words soar through time as he narrates the story in equal fragments of past and present on a need-to-know basis.

The afore-mentioned long-lasting battle ends exactly after 51 years, 9 months and 4 days when Urbino dies in the process of chasing a churlish parrot parked upon a mango tree. Impatient as Florentino is, he hopefully proposes to Fermina after the funeral but all he receives is a rude chastisement from a furious Fermina. He leaves but prepares to try again and again until the last day of his life.

The final chapter is in fact serene and yet vibrant like the dawn. Its tempo is like that of a travelling boat as the author unerringly navigates the readers through a skeptic landscape cut open by a serpentine river. Floating on this river Florentino proclaims his virginity to Fermina as they lie on bed admiring each other. Aye, he was still a virgin of heart if not of the phallus. And even though it is no more possible for Florentino to make love with Fermina, his love has transcended carnal desires and has become spiritual.

Love in the Time of Cholera rides hard on our hearts but in the end alights on a soft melody that opulently states: love's labour is never lost.

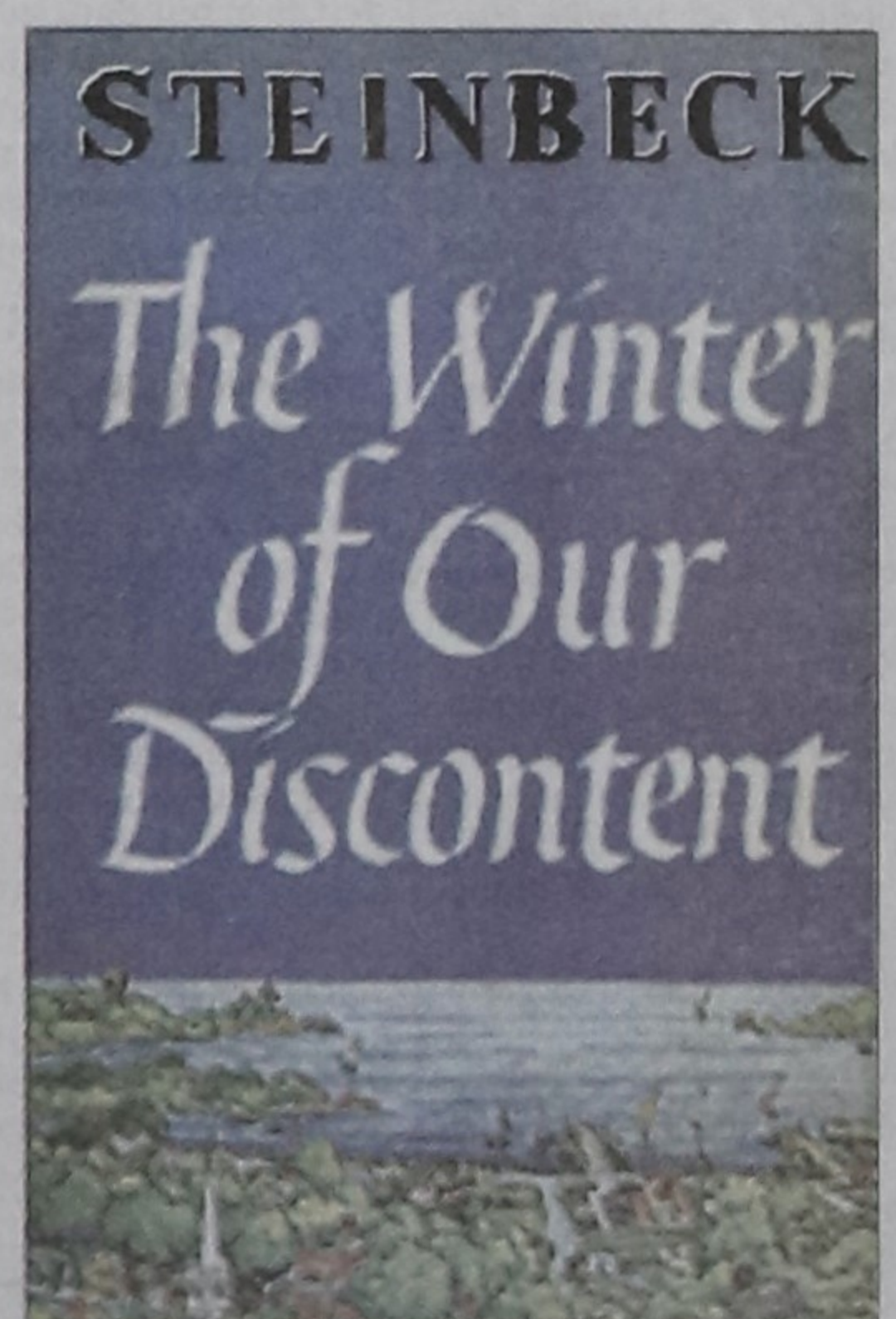
Efadul Huq is a freelance writer and book reviewer.

To be rich and grasping and unhappy

Tulip Chowdhury rereads a work and spots a message there

THE *Winter of Our Discontent* is a richly imagined novel by John Steinbeck. Right from its first chapter, this book plunges the reader into the borderlands between opposing forces; between youth and age, exclusion and privileges. It is a blending into the classical and the familiar, the opalescent and the pure and takes off soaring high into the subsequent chapters. The story is about a New Englander named Ethan Allen Hawley who works as a clerk in a grocery store that he once owned. But fate has turned the hands and the ownership of the store has changed and is now owned by an Italian immigrant named Marullo. Ethan's family, the Hawleys, were sea captains and were respected for their place. Ethan himself had been in the army. But fate, playing its strange games, brought misfortune and the family lost everything. Ethan was left with the drudgery of minding the store.

The book is a first person narrative. Ethan lives in the quiet American town of New Baytown. The paradoxes of life begin for him when his wife and children want more from him than his lowly clerkship is able to provide. Ethan goes through the daily routine and yet at heart he is discontented. He knows that his family desires more from him than the bare necessities and yet he is unable to make any radical changes in his life. His wife Mary sees light at the end of the tunnel through her friend Margie Young Hunt, who is a fortuneteller. Margie speaks of sudden wealth coming into Mary's family. Mary's belief in Margie is so firm that she tries to convince Ethan that there is a golden future out there for them; only Ethan is not seeking it. She implores him to cross the boundaries and find a better life for them through the help of Margie. She



The Winter of Our Discontent
John Steinbeck
Bantam Books

invites Margie and has her read Ethan his fortune so as to have him believe that he really can make changes in their life. Ethan does not believe

Margie's prophesies and yet cannot put them out of his mind either.

Unsettling affairs at home have Ethan in troubled waters. While his wife sleeps peacefully he takes a night walk. He goes to a cave by the seashore. It is his escape from the harsh realities of life. Ethan wonders if everybody has a place like this to offer solace in hard times. Ethan has been living strictly upon his principles. But his determination is now wavering and he thinks of getting more out of life even if it means giving up his moral beliefs. He wants his children to have a place in society, to be known as "Hawleys" with pride. He has tried to win a place of means while sticking to his principles but that has not paid so far. Turned into a bitter man and taking respite from his normally high standards of life, Ethan turns Marullo, an illegal alien, over to the law and receives the store by deceiving him. The story turns a corner when Ethan gives the town's drunk, his childhood friend Danny, enough money to get so incredibly intoxicated as to die shortly of an overdose. There is an arrangement made with the drunk prior to his death and Ethan inherits a large, valuable tract of land. Ethan is aware that he is a wrongdoer and yet he reasons the wrong with his own needs. In his words, "It has to be faced. In business and in politics a man must carve and maul his way through men to get to be the King of the Mountain. Once there, he can be great and kind--but he must get there." And Ethan is on his way to the top.

The author portrays the character of the protagonist remarkably. Here is the picture of a man who tries to live honestly but becomes bitter when honesty does not pay. He is a man with his back against the wall. This is a man torn between two desires, one

to remain honest and one to please his beloved wife and children. At one stage he does strive for happiness by shedding his moral code. Ethan's attitude to life is that of a peaceful man and yet the peace is broken when he reaches out for ill-gotten wealth. He loses tranquility of his mind. The reader is reminded of the story in the classic novel *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The mental anguish and moral dilemmas of Ethan and of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* seem to find some common ground.

Ethan draws some truths out of life. From his own experience he finds that a man who handles poverty badly will handle richness equally badly. Hence he concludes, "In poverty he may be envious. In richness he is a snob. Money does not change the sickness, only symptoms." Ethan does become somebody in the town but his dreams trouble him, he calls them his night thoughts. And as he says, "Sometimes I can direct them and other times they take their head and come rushing over me like strong unmanageable horses." There is a dark shadow always following him after he breaks the shell of goodness.

The *Winter of Our Discontent* spans decades and continents and deftly bridges the personal and the universal. The writer skillfully portrays the roles of Ethan as a loving husband, a devoted father and as a man who lives up to his standards. However, as he begins to swerve from his virtues the reader cannot help but sympathise with him. What can a man say when his children ask him, "Father, when are we going to be rich?"

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and poetry and is a teacher.

Ravishing beauty, sad life

Mrinmoyee Dutta reads the life of a tragedienne

MADHUBALA, aged thirty six, died in February 1969. She had finally succumbed to the pains associated with the lifelong hole in her heart. And then there were all the other pains she went through in the course of a career that was to etch forever her name on Indian cinema. All these decades after her death, Madhubala remains an icon. Proof of that is to be found in the excitement with which today's generation has responded to the new, all colour version of the Dilip Kumar-Madhubala starrer *Mughal-e-Azam*. It was the movie that raised the pair to prodigious heights of popularity. There are those who suggest that it was also a point when their real life romance was on the wane. Remember the moment when Dilip caresses Madhubala's cheek with a feather, causing visible sensual thrills in her?

In this brief, rather gushing kind of a biography, Khatija Akbar draws on all the little incidents and the big moments that led to the transformation of Baby Mumtaz into Madhubala the actress. She made an entry into filmdom as a child in 1942, through being cast in *Basant*. By her fourteenth year, she was already a leading lady, beside Raj Kapoor in *Kidar Sharma's* *Neel Kamal*. The year was 1947 and the road ahead seemed paved with roses for Madhubala. Chaperoned to the studios by her father, whom many considered rather possessive (at least her expected marriage to Dilip was scuttled by her need to keep providing for her family), she was headed for the heights. And she did reach the heights. By 1971, a good two years after her death, the tally of her films came to a whopping seventy one. And include among them such acclaimed tales as *Amar Prem*, *Dulari*, *Mahal* (where you have that unforgettable Aega Aanevala song), *Tarana*, *Sangdil*, *Mr. & Mrs. 55*, *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, *Shirin Farhad*, *Howrah Bridge*, *Barsaat Ki Raat* and *Sharabi*.

It is not just Madhubala's superb acting that keeps her in the public memory. There is the very strong reality of the beauty which abided in her. The extent to which her beauty has been a reference point can be seen in the way some actresses who came after her have been compared to her in terms of looks. There has always been a class of people which has seen in Madhubala something of what Madhubala used to be in her days. And yet it was a sad, indeed tragic life that she led despite all her successes in stardom. Her relationship with Dilip Kumar did not work out. It was doomed once the famous court case came in. It was also a point when Dilip made his now famous declaration of love for her. He would love Madhubala, he declared, till the end of his life. By the mid 1960s, though, Dilip was already a husband, to Saira Banu. As for Madhubala, after the fiasco with Dilip, she married Kishore Kumar on the rebound. It was a bad marriage, for Kishore was a careless, if not uncaring husband. But Madhubala, resigned to

fate, was not willing to dump him. When the musician Naushad advised her to make a clean break with Kishore, she answered him with a couplet from Sheri Bhopali:

Jab Kashti saabit o saalim thi/Sahil ki tamanna kis ko thi? Ab aisi shikasta kashti par/Sahil ki tamanna kaun kare? (When my boat was sturdy and safe/I had no thoughts of the shore/Now with a boat so ravaged/Who can dream of a shore?)

Madhubala's movies are remembered for some of the most stirring songs. *Pyar kia to darna kya* in *Mughal-e-Azam* remains the most instantly recognisable song in any recalling of her acting. There are other movies, such as the one where Bharat Bhushan croons the Rafi number, *Zindagi bhar nahin bohleei wo barsaat ki raat*, to Madhubala. On the stage of *Mughal-e-Azam*, a screen slap that Dilip Kumar's Prince Salim is supposed to land on the cheek of Madhubala's Anarkali turns into a real, hard one. Dilip and Madhubala have been falling out of love, but such a demonstration of vehemence on the part of the former leaves everyone present stunned. Poetry and realism then come together as Anarkali sings *Hamen kaash tumse mohabbat na hoti/Kahani hamari haqeeqat na hoti*. Akbar notes that many an eye among those watching the picturisation of the sequence grew moist at the wistful refrain.

For Indian movie buffs, this work is a good read, on a cool day that could well be a holiday.

Mrinmoyee Dutta is a movie buff and lives in California, US.



Madhubala
Her Life Her Films
Khatija Akbar
UBS Publishers Distributors Ltd.