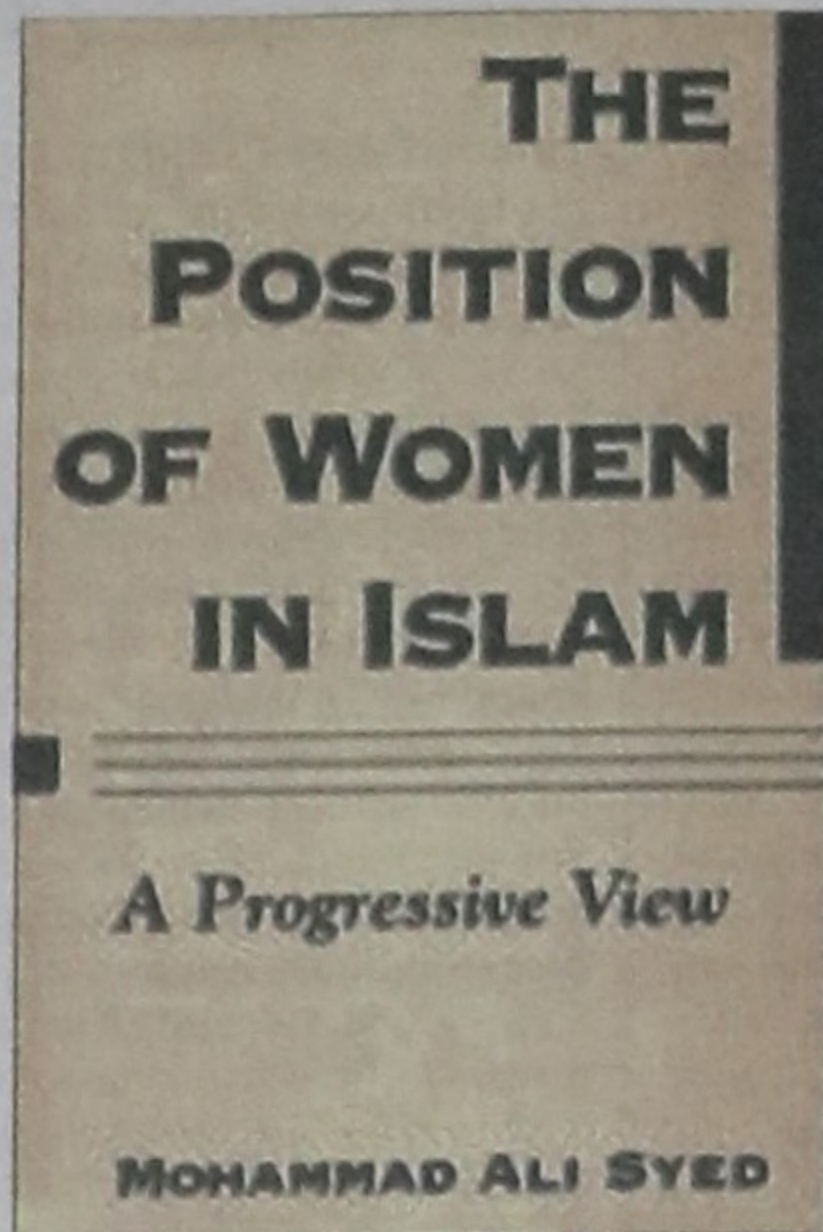


Faith, tradition and the world of Islam's women

Syed Badrul Ahsan ponders a work on Muslim perspectives

MOHAMMAD Ali Syed subtitles his work as 'A Progressive View', which certainly points to the kind of case he makes for his interpretation of Islamic rules and conventions as they apply to women. Syed has little patience with the proponents of radical Islam, those whose view of the faith embraces some of the most conservative, indeed fanatic assessments of the position Muslim women should hold in society. The increasing alarm that in recent times has been raised over such issues as the use of the niqab and hijab by Muslim women does not, for the writer, emphasise the core of the Islamic faith and indeed goes against history. Not for him the bigotry which has long characterised (and still does characterise) the status of women in Islam. Not for him, therefore, an acquiescence in the thought that women in Islam belong in one place, in this instance the four walls of a male-dominated home.



The Position of Women in Islam
A Progressive View
Mohammad Ali Syed
State University of New York Press

And Syed should know, given his years of practice of the law and study of historical Islamic society. Something of his background also helps. His father was a prominent Muslim politician in pre- and post-partition India and in his own way was an individual who set much store by a modern, liberal interpretation of Islam. The stream of Syed's thoughts in this work is therefore palpable. He makes a beginning through presenting the complex history of the Quran and Hadiths, but especially the latter, considering that the Hadiths for hundreds of years have

served as an underpinning of Muslim thought. The Hadiths, being the sayings of the Prophet of Islam, are of course a major determining factor in any pursuit of Islamic cultural, religious and political traditions. The trouble, though, is throughout the ages, since the death of Prophet Muhammad, (Pbuh) an entire

body of questionable Hadiths has arisen which has readily been seized upon by ill-educated and ill-informed preachers as a weapon to be employed in a sustained struggle against liberalism.

Syed spends a good length of time illustrating the nature and history of the Hadiths, before moving off to the issue confronting him. Women, he puts it plainly, enjoy the same degree of rights as men. He thus slices through the notion of Islam being a place for only macho men ready to order women around. He quotes the Prophet (M 13:11): "The most excellent of you is he who is best in the treatment of his wife." And yet, as in M 15:19 T 10:11, there is a caveat which follows the advice on treating women: "And be careful of your duty to God in the matter of women, for you have taken them as the trust of God..."

The question of purdah occupies critical space in Mohammad Ali Syed's arguments. His opinion holds that women in Persia and India had been bound to a purdah system long before the arrival of Islam in their lives. Purdah is therefore a reality that has little to do with Islam, or so the author puts it to his readers. But Syed does not rest on his interpretations of purdah alone. He goes back to the Quran for a vindication of his thoughts: "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them; and God is well acquainted with all that they do" (24:30). In 24:31, this is the instruction that goes

out in relation to women: "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments (zeenatahunna) except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their brothers' sons, their brothers or their husbands' brothers' sons... and they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments..." Syed quotes Mohammad Ali, whose historical analysis regarding women covering their bosoms dates back to pre-Islamic Arabia, when women sought to demonstrate their beauty through an uncovering of their breasts (or perhaps it was a matter of cleavage here?) although they had their head coverings in place.

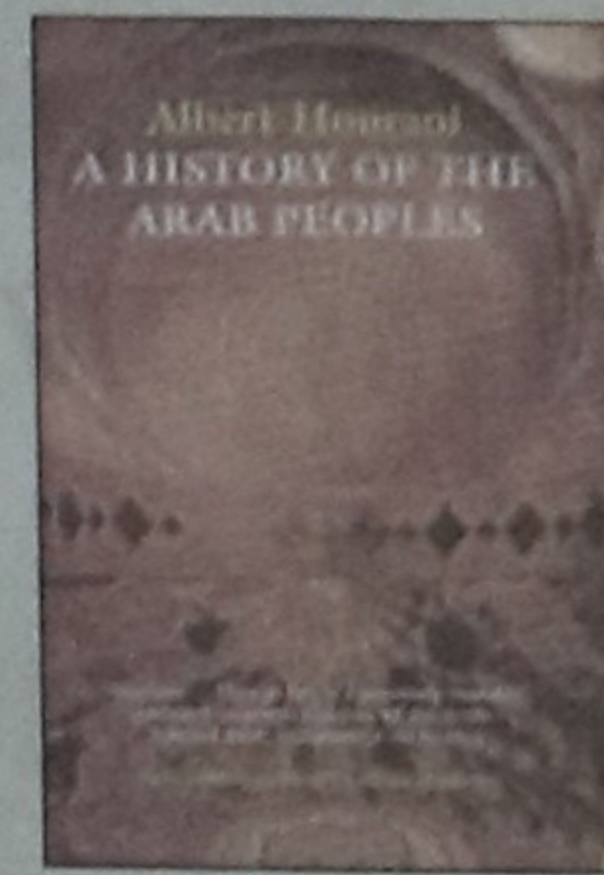
Freedom of movement for Muslim women soon comes under Syed's scrutiny. He goes back to some relevant Hadiths to explain why independence is a right for Muslim women. In B 11:12, it is thus stated, "The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, 'Do not prohibit the handmaids of Allah from going to the mosques of Allah!'" Again, in B 10:162, comes this: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, 'If a woman wanted to go to the mosque at night, she should not be prohibited from doing so.'" Such freedom, argues Syed, goes beyond the parameters of the mosque: "The Prophet (pbuh) said, 'When the wife of one of you

asks permission to go out she should not be prohibited from doing so.'" History also bears testimony to women's freedom in Islam: "In the mosques the women were not forbidden to speak to the men. Once Hazrat Ayesha could not hear the last part of the sermon of the Prophet (pbuh) as his companions (ahsabs) were crying loudly and then she had asked a man sitting by her side... 'May God be kind to you. Could you tell me what were the last words of the Prophet?' The man said that the Prophet (pbuh) had said, 'It has been revealed to me that you have to face the test of the grave before the test of your dajjal!'"

The Quran, notes Syed, is silent on the issue of whether or not women can become heads of Muslim states. And yet the Quran does not deny women the opportunity of pursuing a political life or providing leadership to governments. The author is dismissive of men who have long used isolated or ahad Hadiths to deny women a role of leadership in politics. Syed holds up Ayesha as an exemplar of free Islamic womanhood. And then he goes on to cite the tales of other women in Islam. In the late fifteenth century, Hurrah Malika Arwa Binte Ahmed provided leadership to Yemen province under the Fatimid caliphs Mustansir, Moost'Ali and Amir. When Amir died, she became sole ruler of Yemen.

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

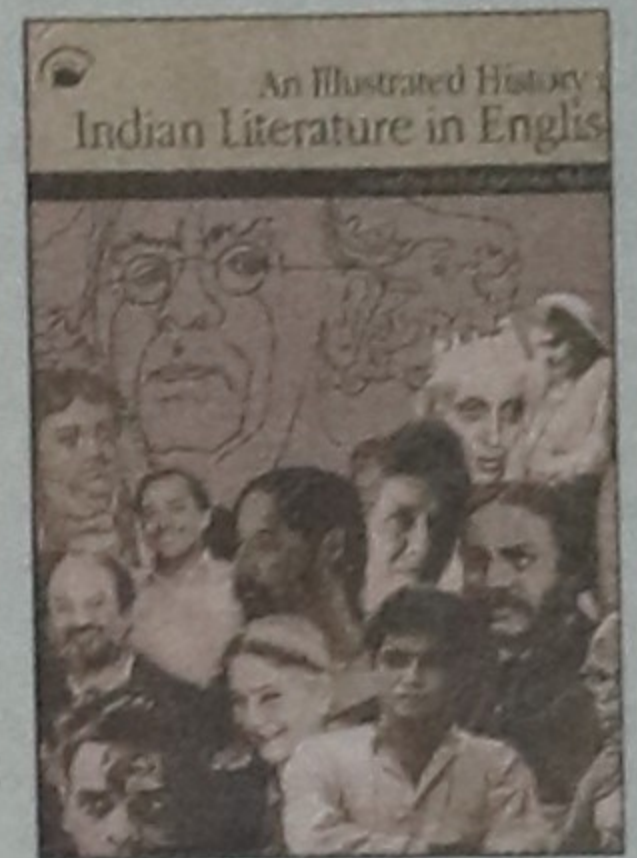
At a glance



A History of the Arab Peoples
Albert Hourani
Faber and Faber

One of the more authentic approaches to the study of a region and a culture distinctive in its many patterns, this book is the dream of any pupil of Middle Eastern history. Hourani does not leave out anything --- literature, politics, economics --- which is why it promises to be a gripping read.

A History of Indian Literature in English
Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed.
Hurst & Company



Those in search of the roots of English language literature in the Indian subcontinent will spot a veritable treasure trove here. From Ram Mohan Roy to Tagore to R.K. Narayan and beyond, it is a journey into a past that was as intense as it was productive. Here come stories of patient endeavour and terrible heartbreak.



Voices from Bengal
Modern Bengali Poetry in English
Translation
Sahitya Akademy

The work does credit to its editors. They have selected a wide range of modern Bengali poets, all with a distinctive West Bengal background, and translated them into useful, coherent English. It is a work which you can make into a gift for one in search of richness in your world of poetry, of course in the Queen's English.

The State of Africa
Martin Meredith
Free Press



African decolonisation began in 1957, with the emergence of the Gold Coast as the free nation of Ghana. In this riveting, all-encompassing story of the half century since that seminal event, Meredith recounts the problems the continent has gone through, not least because of its inept as well as corrupt politicians and military rulers.

Myths, half truths, metaphors

Efadul Huq admires a lyrical novel

NO, the woman wasn't made of stone but the stone showed fading traces of a woman who probably was a pagan goddess. And it is to her that the novel's characters disgorge their secrets - it must be her silence that made her a worthy listener.

The Stone Woman is Tariq Ali's third book in the celebrated Islam Quintet. It is a lyrical portrait of the lives of the members of Iskander Pasha's family as they live under the sky of a degrading empire, the Ottoman Empire to be precise. Nilofer, the determined daughter, returns home after nine years of banishment as her father forgives her for running away with an ugly, skinny, Greek called Dimitri. On returning she runs to the stone woman and deposits all her hidden pain in the stone. This is definitely the most interesting aspect of the novel. The readers gain an in-depth look at the emotions of the characters as each of them confesses to the stone woman. And the entire novel is unfolded mostly through these confessions and a few bits through Nilofer.

Pasha suffers a stroke and the family members are called for from different places. Along with the increasing number of characters, the stone woman fills to the brim with sinister secrets, violent emotions and conspiracy. Each character is furnished with complexities of relationships, heart-beating worries about survival in the dying empire, narrow-mindedness towards each other, hopelessness and vice versa. In fact, the existence of the stone woman is very crucial to the development of the novel as Tariq Ali's mastery over creating profound characters shines through the confessions that are made and hence the title The Stone Woman.

If you are a historical-political-fiction lover, this is the kind of book that will leave you with a lot to ponder over as Ali also attempts to show the growth of a generation that is uncompromising toward the myths and half truths of the good old religious days. I am tempted to add that if Orhan Pamuk portrays the westernised modern days of the fallen empire, Tariq Ali shows how it was in its last days; if Orhan Pamuk talks about what the king's men did to Humpty Dumpty, Tariq Ali narrates who was Humpty Dumpty and what he was doing sitting on the wall.

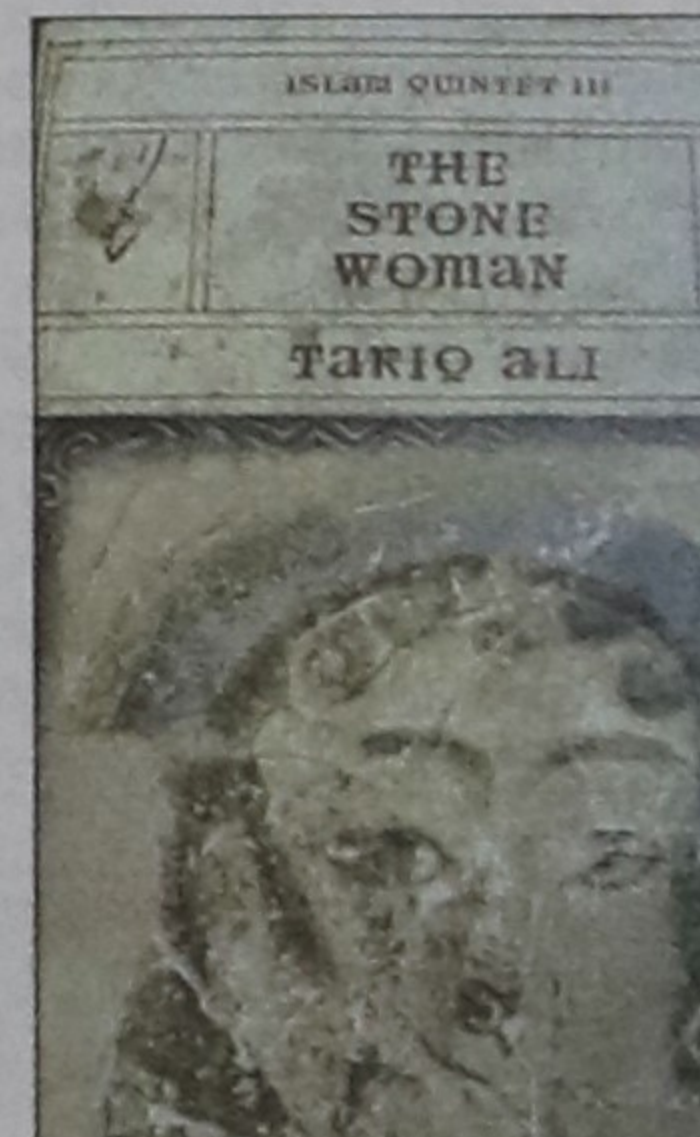
Well, in a few places in the novel you might lose patience when it becomes

tedious or find it hyperbolic. But then you must keep in mind that it is a historical fiction and, above all, the lyrical nature of this novel arises from its dense use of intriguing metaphors to describe actions as well as emotions. For an example, think about a palmyra rising between somebody's legs!

Tariq Ali also takes much time in breaking the stereotypical image of lives under Islam. Most western readers expect the seductive images of harems, silently praying conservative masses and poignant tales of oppressed women in novels that have an Islamic core. But Ali shatters that expectation with the characters indulging in rational arguments about political systems, debates on various philosophies and questioning the odds of their own religion though they don't miss any prayer. Even the female characters join in these conversations with much enthusiasm and, contradictorily to the usual scene, in her bedroom Nilofer is the person in charge.

There's a lot that Tariq Ali wishes to tell his readers and I recommend you this book if you are tolerant even to ideas that are totally unacceptable to you because in The Stone Woman Tariq Ali reveals the vista of an Islamic family like never seen before.

Efadul Huq is a critic and regular book reviewer.



The Stone Woman
Tariq Ali
Seagull Books

Medical science with Shakespearean undertones

Binoy Barman appreciates a work doctors should love

A common allegation against physicians in Bangladesh is that they do not discharge their professional responsibilities with a mind of service to humanity, which their profession is meant for. Maybe it is not applicable to all physicians but it is true of a large number of them. There are multifarious reasons for this. As a nation we lack a humanitarian service-rendering tradition; many physicians coming out of poverty-ridden families set money-making as their only goal in life; at the institutional level it is not ensured that physicians will come to patients' service whenever and however necessary; ethics of medical practice are not inculcated properly in a physician's mind; and a wave of capitalism has driven medical practitioners into a rat race for material gains. It is undoubtedly a sorry state of affairs.

Samiran Kumar Saha is well aware of the situation. So he laments the plight in the country when he relates it to ideal medical practice. He remembers Dr. Rieux, who dedicated his life to the treatment of plague patients in the city of Oran in Algeria, as depicted by Albert Camus in The Plague. He says: "Did we ever come across such a doctor in our society...?" It is a difficult question which flies in the face of medical practice in our country. Of course, there are great physicians like Dr. M. Ibrahim, founder of the Diabetic Association of Bangladesh, but their good image is overshadowed by the 'bad' doctors whose negligence to duty leads to patients' deaths.

The profession of a physician is undoubtedly a noble one, which implies great responsibility to ailing individuals. A physician must be caring, with sufficient knowledge of curing. "Tact, sympathy and understanding are expected of the physician, for the patient is no mere collection of symptoms, signs, disor-

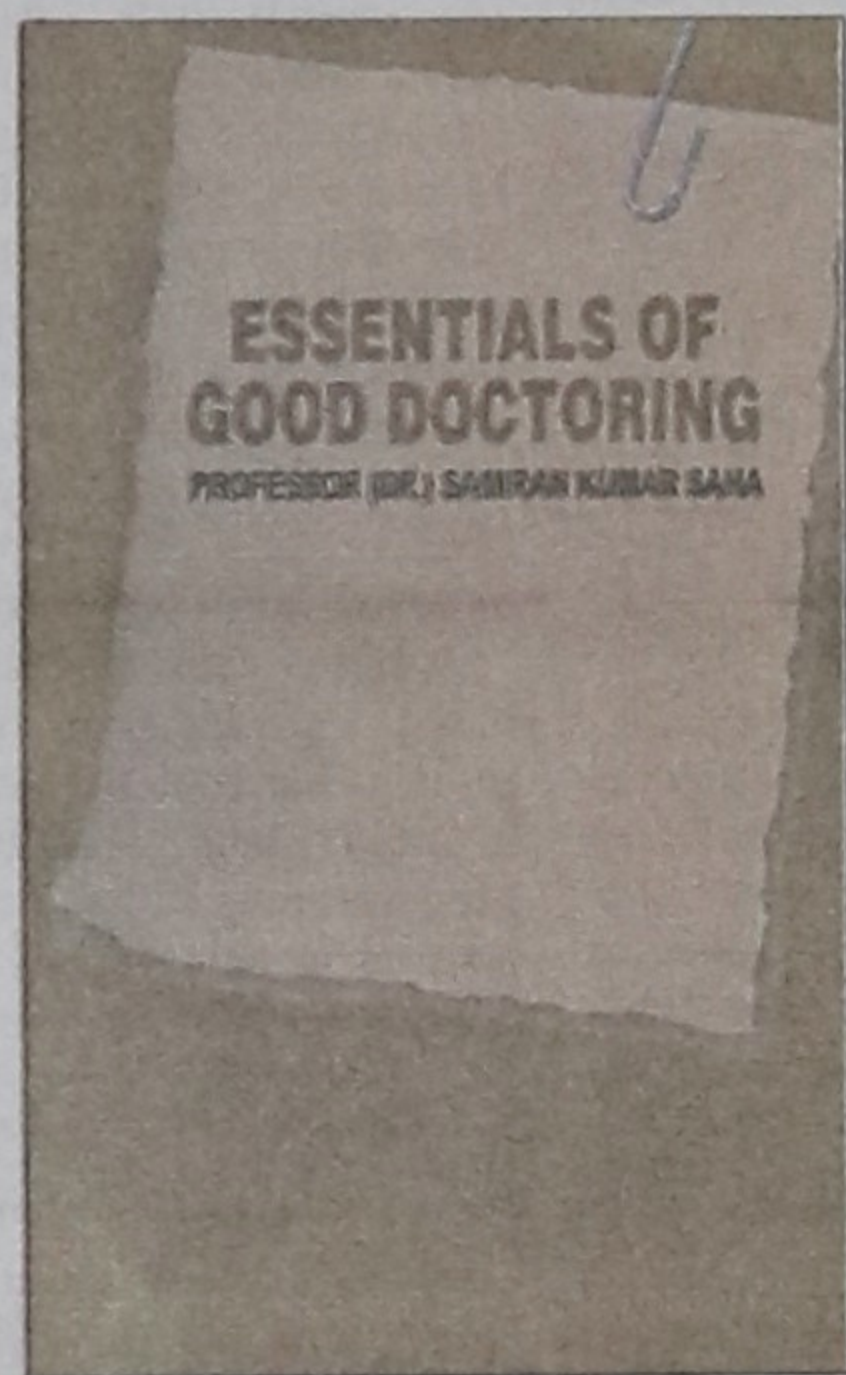
dered functions, and disturbed emotions. He/she is humane, fearful and hopeful, seeking relief, help and reassurance," observes Dr. Saha. A physician is a scientist as well as an artist. He/she knows the art of pacifying a patient psychologically as well as the science of eliminating diseases from his/her body. Almost axiomatically, medicine is the most scientific art and the most humanitarian science.

How should the relationship be between a doctor and a patient? Should it be like master and slave, teacher and pupil, or lawyer and client? No, the relationship should be rather like that of friends, who talk to each other with sympathy. A doctor must patiently answer all the questions asked by patients and their relatives and adopt an agreeable way of treatment. He/she must be a good listener. Dr. Saha says, "To diagnose, manage and treat a person's disorder, physicians must have learned to listen." From a biopsychosocial perspective, a physician must not only have working knowledge of patient's medical status but must also be familiar with how a patient's individual psychology and socio-cultural milieu affect the medical condition, the emotional responses to the condition, and the involvement with the doctor.

A good physician knows the techniques of handling patients. The better a physician knows about a patient's beliefs, feelings and habits, the bigger is the chance of proper treatment. He/she must know how to deal with different types of patients: difficult patient, depressed patient, histrionic patient, dependent patient, impulsive patient, narcissistic patient, obsessive patient, paranoid patient, isolated patient, malingering patient, demanding and passive-aggressive patient. He/she should be able to read a patient's mind correctly. He/she utilises his/her good

communication skills to elicit information about the patient's condition. His/her communication with the patient never fails. He/she negotiates passionately, shares knowledge and responsibility, identifies the real problem and gives effective prescriptions.

The Bangladesh Medical and Dental



Essentials of Good Doctoring
Prof. Dr. Samiran Kumar Saha
Dibyaprakash

Council provides a guideline which prohibits certain acts on the part of the physician. These include issuing false certificates, making improper profit, misuse of professional knowledge, abuse of physician-patient relationship, skipping personal responsibility to patient, and canvassing, advertising and using false titles. To stay on the right track, a

physician must strictly adhere to the professional code of conduct in any case.

Life is invariably associated with disease; it is the weakest aspect of life, taking us to Greek mythology. "We all have an Achilles' heel -- that part of inner self which was rendered forever vulnerable to mortal cares when we were dipped in the waters of the river Styx as it flowed down the wards of our first disillusionment," says Saha. Medical science manifests the struggle against human ailment. Its ultimate goal is probably thwarting death with the assurance of good health. Immortality is the dream which always lures but eludes medical science. Death is still inevitable and its thought makes us feel uneasy and unhappy. Tagore said once, "Who can prevent death? Each star of the sky is calling him." Saha dedicates a chapter to death, reminding us of the harshest reality in human life. How does a physician deal with a patient on the verge of death? The writer gives some advice on terminal care and breaking bad news. "I am sorry" from the doctor's lips followed by a little silence means something which is well communicated to the patient and his/her attendants. Sorry! As a reader, don't get gloomy. Here are a few words from Shakespeare which should cheer you up (cited by Dr. Saha in his book):

"To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause."

The book covers a wide range of medical issues, including physicians' communication skills, medical ethics, good medical practice, patient's right to confidentiality, consent to examination and treatment, evaluation of ethical methods, and evidence-based medicine. It is a

Childhood innocence mutating into adult corruption

Charles R. Larson reads a novel and understands today's Kenya

THE roots of Kenya's current, sad situation---tribalism and corruption---can be identified in M. G. Vassanji's haunting novel, The In-Between World of Vikram Lall. As the narrator remarks late in the story, "The wealthy and the powerful desired no changes." African leaders, reluctant to give up their power, will often do anything (rigged elections, constitutional changes) in order to remain in office. Corruption is often endemic and designed to keep the Big Man's supporters happy; tribalism often impinges on other groups, as in Kenya's situation, because of the significant "settler" communities of Asians and Europeans.

During the weeks since the country's elections, Kenyan blogs have described recent events in the troubled country that have not been widely-publicised outside of the country. Asian residents have become particularly apprehensive of their future position; many have said they want to leave. The fear of the repetition of earlier purges of Asians in East Africa is clearly in their minds. Equally troubling are reports of Ugandan forces inside Kenya (in Nyanza and Western Provinces), supportive of President Kibaki, a Kikuyu. According to one blog, Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, is no friend of Raila Odinga, a Luo and the contender for the Kenyan presidency. All of these machinations are fairly blurred but belie a troubled situation not likely to be resolved quickly or easily.

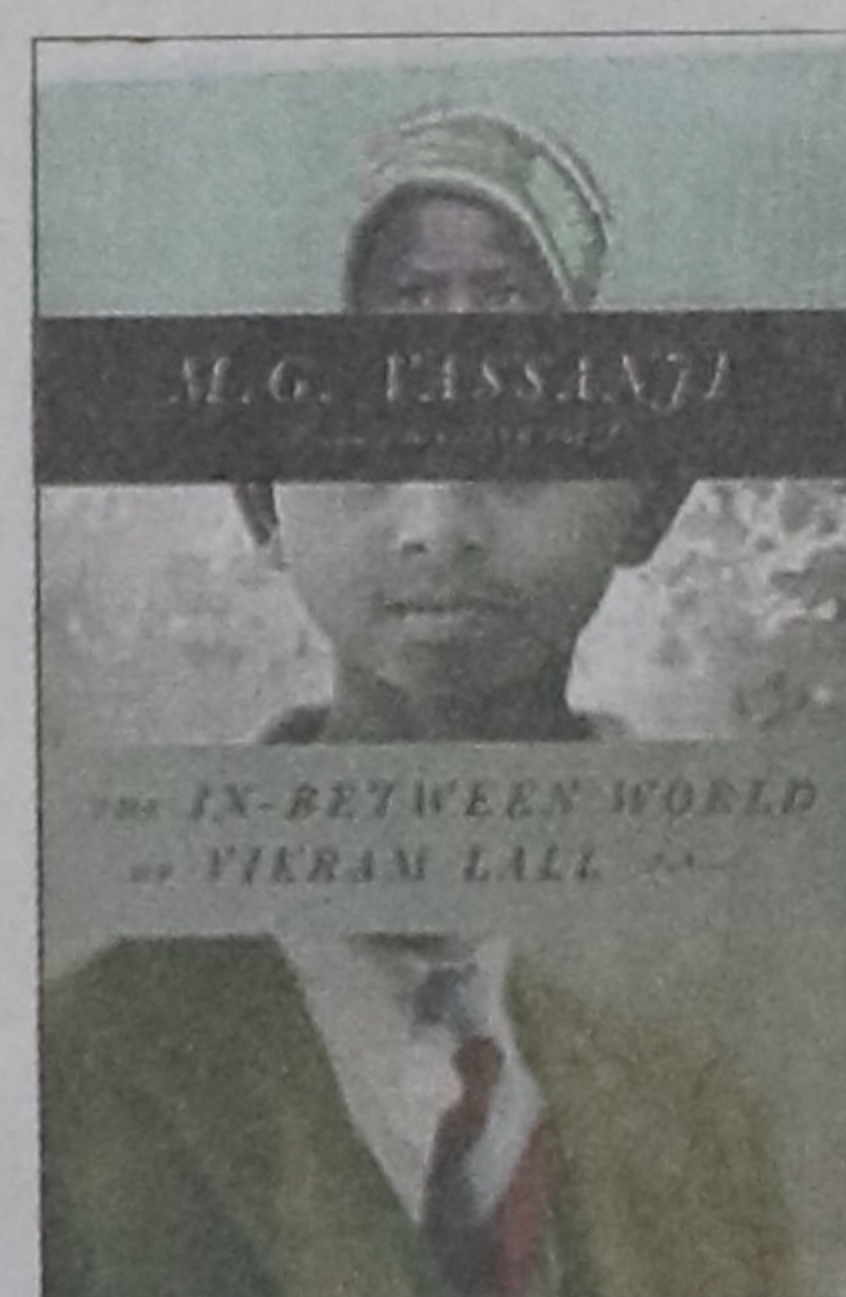
To these contexts, Vassanji (an Indian born in Nairobi but raised in Tanzania and a Canadian citizen for much of his adult life) brings a unique perspective

not widely explored in fiction, in spite of the significant Asian population that helped develop Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania economically and industrially, especially before independence.

The insights of Vassanji's novel are profound and illuminating about the current unrest in Kenya, especially because of the main character who states at the beginning of the story: "My name is Vikram Lall. I have the distinction of having been numbered one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning. To me has been attributed the emptying of a large part of my troubled country's treasury in recent years."

Throughout the entire narrative, Lall identifies himself as a Kenyan not as an Indian and he repeatedly professes his loyalty to the country. He claims this identity in spite of his ambiguous status---neither African (the majority) nor European (the minority). Further, since he is initially presented as a child during the final years of colonial rule, we see his attempts to fit into what he believes will be a vibrant multi-racial society after independence, with all people living harmoniously. His closest playmate and lifelong companion is a Kikuyu boy, Njoroge, who eventually will fall in love with Lall's sister, Deepa. The three youngsters spend some of their happiest times with two white children, untroubled until the Mau Mau revolt. That rebellion was instigated by Kikuyus, the largest ethnic group in the country and, in 1963, led to Kenya's independence and Jomo Kenyatta's presidency.

Thus, as a child, Lall is aware of the



The In-Between World of Vikram Lall
M.G. Vassanji
Canongate

country's ethnic diversity but not troubled by it. His father is a businessman and his family resides in an Indian enclave in the Rift Valley. Lall's grandfather originally left India---as did thousands of others---to help build the Kenyan railroad. There are occasional racial tensions, especially after the Mau Mau uprising when many of the country's peoples, including Africans, lived in a state of fear. Many more Africans died in the revolt than did Asians or Europeans, as tribal differences among

the Africans became polarised, similarly as they are today.

As a young adult, after independence, Lall works in the civil service in the ministry of transport. He holds a fairly innocuous position until one of the governmental ministers begins using the young man as a go-between, essentially to help launder political money arriving in huge quantities from outside the country. As Lall observes on one occasion, "To the African I would always be the Asian, the Shylock; I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma. We lived in a compartmentalized society; every evening from the melting pot of city life each person went his long way home to his family, his church, his folk. To the Kikuyu, the Luo were the crafty, rebellious eggheads of Lake Victoria, the Masai the backward naked nomads. The Meru prided themselves on being special, having descended from some wandering Semitic tribe. There were the Dorobo, the Turkana, the Boran, the Somali, the Swahili, each also different from the other. And then there were the Wahindith wily Asians who were not really African."

As the years pass, Lall's money-laundering for government officials eventually takes him to the highest echelons of the state. He becomes the indispensable middleman, identifying his situation as a "place in the middle...an Asian...my natural place." Like the tar baby he has touched too often, he can't stop engaging in such nefarious work because he is aware that he knows too much. He realises that he might be

eliminated. "Total corruption," he muses, "occurs in inches and proceeds through veils of ambiguity."

Lall's prescient awareness of Kenya's precarious situation is unsettling. In addition to the incipient tribalism, the country is surrounded by unrest that could easily spill over into Kenya: "A small war ravages the north, Somali shifts ambushing vehicles and attacking drought-stricken villagers; in fact, the entire belt of land from northern Kenya through Sudan and Uganda into Congo cries out in an agony of rape and abduction, war and pillage. An ethnic war, a politically inspired cleansing, threatens the Rift Valley. In Nairobi's South Sea, Muslims and Christians, including perhaps youth from the MuKenya movement, or perhaps simply the idle and unemployed, of whom there are plenty, have gone at each other, burning mosques and churches."

Corruption and ethnic strife are the Siamese twins of Vassanji's riveting novel. To the author's credit, the characters---Africans, Asians, Europeans---are fully humanized, be they victims of one another or of self-inflicted wounds. Vikram Lall, especially, is a daringly bold portrait of a man in many ways without a country. A wanderer, displaced and narrating his story from Toronto, he aches for a return to the only country he has ever identified as home: Kenya.

Read the novel and weep.

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