

## Tales of a dictator and his victims

Syed Badrul Ahsan goes through a searing account of innocent men dying

BANGLADESH'S history in its first decade of freedom was fundamentally a story of bloodletting. You do not have to go into research to arrive at such a morbid conclusion. But you cannot escape feeling a certain sense of irony as you recapitulate the whole episode of the country's actually claiming, and taking, its place in the global community. If the war of liberation in 1971 saw three million Bengalis dying at the hands of the Pakistan armed forces, the post-liberation era turned into a long tale of blood and gore as most of the new nation's founding fathers and war heroes bit the dust through bloody coups d'état and internecine armed conflict. The series of tragic happenings that engulfed Bangladesh between August and November 1975, followed by the execution of Abu Tahir, a soldier for freedom, in July 1976, will remain a blot on the conscience of a nation which yet struggles to find a way out of the woods for itself.

In May 1981 came the assassination of General Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh's first military dictator, at the hands of soldiers who in the event could not quite succeed in pulling off what they had thought would be a revolution. Within days of Zia's murder, it would be the turn of General M.A. Manzoor, ostensibly the leader of the uprising, to be killed in cold blood by Zia loyalists.

All of this is what the country has known over the years. In times that are as far removed from the 1970s and 1980s as they can be, that are clearly a whole lot more transparent than what one could have imagined two or three decades ago, it is now possible for Bengalis to grasp a little more conclusively the factors --- intrigues, conspiracy, et al --- that went into the making of an era that remains sinister in its elemental darkness. And into this story now steps Zayadul Ahsan with his hair-raising account of a failed coup that, once the plot failed to take off, was to leave scores upon scores of soldiers dead after October 1977. Originally conceived and presented as a series of investigative reports for the daily Bhorer Kagoj by the writer, this work is a searing account of the innocent men of the Bangladesh air force who were forced to march to the gallows on flimsy, unproven charges of complicity in the revolt that left some senior and reputed officers of the BAF murdered at the old Tejgaon airport on 2 October 1977. And those were exciting times, not so much for the fact that the struggle for ascendancy among the various politicised factions of the military went on in a seemingly endless pattern as for the truth of what was happening around the hijacked Japan Airlines aircraft at Dhaka airport.

The conspirators struck at the

precise moment when senior air force men, including their chief Abdul Gaffar Mahmood, remained busy in negotiations with the Red Brigade who had seized the plane and forced it to land in Bangladesh's capital. Compent



Rohoshshomoy Obbhuthan O Gonophanshi Zayadul Ahsan Pathsutro

officers, among whom was Ross Masood, were lined up by rebellious air force men before the hangar and simply mown down. The question remains, though: did these men, egged on by individuals whose identities

remain yet unknown, decide to strike on 2 October because the opportunity to stage their coup on 28 September, air force day, was lost when President Ziaur Rahman informed Air Vice Marshal Mahmood he was unable to be part of the celebrations? Ahsan comes up with a hint: Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, meeting Zia in Cairo days before 28 September, warned him of a plot to assassinate the Bangladesh leader over the next few days. Zia took the hint seriously; and then came the suddenness of the JAL hijacking. As the talks with the Red Brigade neared an end, elements in the army and air force inside Dhaka cantonment went on the offensive against the Zia regime. A day earlier, in Bogra, disturbances in the cantonment left one person dead, three wounded and two missing. In Dhaka, at Tejgaon airport, eleven air force officers were murdered alongside ten soldiers from the army. Forty soldiers were left injured.

The facts Zayadul Ahsan presents are set off in an eerie pattern from the moment Zia loyalists, Mir Shawkat Ali for instance, move resolutely against the mutineers. Over the next twenty days or so, it would be an operation of relentless cruelty as the Zia regime, guided by vindictiveness and palpably oblivious to all norms of civilised behaviour, rounded up hundreds

of innocent air force men and inaugurated what would eventually turn into a story of unimaginable horror. Kangaroo courts, officially described as military tribunals, swiftly handed down verdicts of guilty on those taken into custody, and night after night, inside the grim premises of the central jail in the capital, the bodies of hanged men dropped into pits for hours on end. It was Azimpur graveyard which, throughout October 1977, saw brisk nocturnal activity as the dead men were hastily buried, unbeknownst to their families. The case of the widow Aleya remains poignant, and heart-wrenching. In the days and weeks following his disappearance, she moved heaven and earth for news of her airman husband who had gone missing after 2 October. No one deigned to keep her informed until much later, to let her know in a terse notification that he had been executed for his part in the 'conspiracy'. There are other accounts, from men who were among the lucky few to escape the noose but nevertheless found themselves condemned to varied terms of imprisonment. The strand of thought throughout the stories runs along similar patterns. The innocent paid for crimes they did not commit; and ruthlessness was what the Zia military dictatorship employed in its efforts to survive and to ensure

that no dissent remained to threaten its grip on power. Ironically, the fearsome Zia was to die in a botched coup slightly over three years later.

Zayadul Ahsan's work is much more than a record keeping of one of the more shameful episodes in the nation's history. It is, in very large measure, a call for those who perpetrated the atrocities on the hundreds of innocent men in the armed forces in light of the 2 October 1977 tragedy to be brought to account. Most of the men who presided over the sham trials of these men, sending them to quick death and putting a few others through inexplicable prison terms, are still alive. Some retired as senior officers in the military, especially in the air force. Others, non-commissioned officers who cheerfully served on the tribunals, went on to serve in the forces till their retirement. In the overweening interest of democratic accountability, all these elements responsible for the horrific executions in the dark need to be traced in order to be brought to justice. Ahsan's work is an eye-opener. It is a warning against men who, in the manner of Ziaur Rahman, think nothing of shooting people down in order to entrench themselves in political illegitimacy.

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

## Aching realism and provocative meditation

Tulip Chowdhury admires a tale of complicated beauty

HUMAN beings are seekers of truth. *The Infinite Plan* is a poignant saga of one man's search for love and his struggles to find the meaning of life. The protagonist of the story is a seeker of truth that can make him free. Isabelle Allende weaves a vivid and engrossing tapestry of how a Mexican family is absorbed into life in America. This is the story of Gregory Reeves telling the story of his life. The story is a mixture of first person and third person narrative. Gregory speaks of his own realisations and life axioms. Other characters and plots, vibrant and richly imagined, enter the story line in the third person.

Gregory Reeves is content to live the nomadic life with his self-proclaimed preacher father Charles Reeves. Poverty has its vicious grip on the Reeves family. The family wanders through the American West in a caravan as Charles preaches a divine revelation he has received about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe. He calls it "The Infinite Plan". Gregory's mother Nora is a blind follower of her

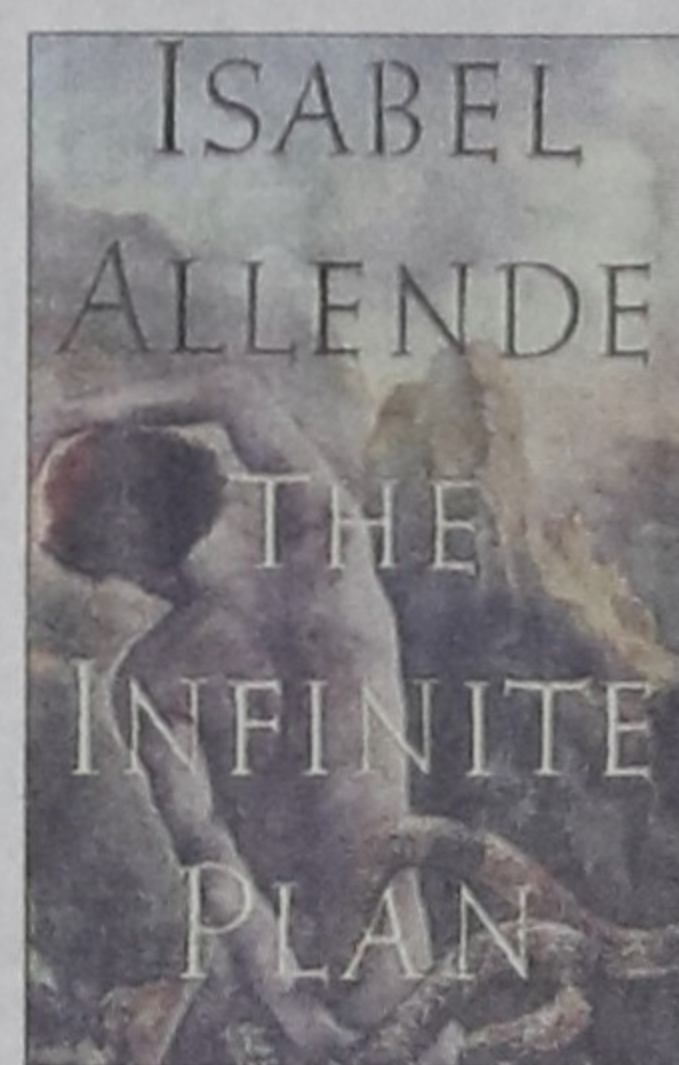
husband's preaching. She is a silent, cold woman. Her world practically hangs on his words. When Charles Reeves becomes sick and bedridden Nora's world crumbles. Gregory and his sister Judy are looked after by Olga, a fortune-teller who travels with them. Olga is motherly to the children and they settle down in the barrio, the teeming Hispanic ghetto of downtown Los Angeles. Here a new life begins for Gregory. He is introduced to books, gangs, ideas of sex and work.

Gregory finds friends in the barrio as he confronts the new challenges of life. There are Pedro and Inmaculada Morales who become his surrogate parents. They give him the love and security that his parents always seemed to lack. Their son Jose Juan becomes his buddy. Their daughter Carmen befriends him and they remain friends through the ups and downs of life. Carmen grows into a young woman of wisdom and shares her experiences with Gregory. Gregory finds another friend in Cyrus, the old librarian who is a firm believer in socialism. Cyrus continues to

give him books to read. The books awaken Gregory's thirst for knowledge. He finds that there waits a huge world for him to explore. Cyrus dies suddenly, leaving a message and some money for Gregory to move out of the barrio. Gregory moves out to Berkeley.

In Berkeley he joins the university to study law. As he settles down in the new place he finds that reality is changing with frightening speed, the world is whirling, traditions are being turned upside down and life becomes a long hassle. He finds his first love in Samantha. But the love affair does not turn out as idyllic as he had imagined it would be. Gregory becomes restless and decides to experience the war front.

He enlists for the army and goes to Vietnam. He finds the meaning of life anew in the battlefields. To Gregory, "War is people. The first word that comes to mind when I think about the war is people: us, my friends, my brothers, all united in the same desperate fraternity. Here everything is black or white, there are no half-tones or ambiguities: the manipulation is behind



The Infinite Plan Isabelle Allende HarperCollins

us, the hypocrisy, the deceit. There is life or death. Kill or be killed."

It seems to be a lucky star that guides Gregory to his buddy Jose Juan in Vietnam. They fight side by side until one day Jose Juan

receives a bullet and breathes his last in Gregory's arms. Gregory continues to serve the army. Carmen continues to keep him informed about the barrio and his home. Carmen informs him of her unwanted pregnancy. She leaves the barrio when her father refuses to set eyes on her again. Carmen does not fail to keep in touch with Gregory no matter where she is. Their friendship is like a solid rock, each being for the other in the roughest seas.

Gregory gives up the army some months after the death of Jose Juan and comes back to Berkeley. He finds life perplexing after his life in the battlefield. He is haunted by memories of the war.

The tale goes on. Carmen is woven in as a poignant character. She is a wild and determined young woman who does not know the meaning of failure. Saying that she has some gypsy blood in her, Carmen starts making jewellery and roams through Asia and Europe selling her products. She goes to Vietnam to meet Thui, her dead brother Jose Juan's wife and

rescues her nephew Dai from the dying woman. Carmen has a series of affairs but does not find anyone ideal enough to settle down. Carmen's character has been drawn as a very kind and yet bold woman who does not hesitate about anything once she sets her mind to it.

*The Infinite Plan* pulsates with life as the story carries the reader on roller coaster rides. It is an infinite blend of aching realism and provocative meditation. It is a mixture of love and humour, violence and harmony. It is incredibly rich in character, classic in style and epic in scope. The characters are sewn in seamlessly into the storyline. Isabelle Allende's novel spans decades and continents and in the process, with deftness, bridges the personal and the universal. It is a magical intervention of characters that keep coming back to the reader to awaken the senses. A highly recommended read for those who really wish to savour their reading hours!

Tulip Chowdhury is a poet, writer and teacher.

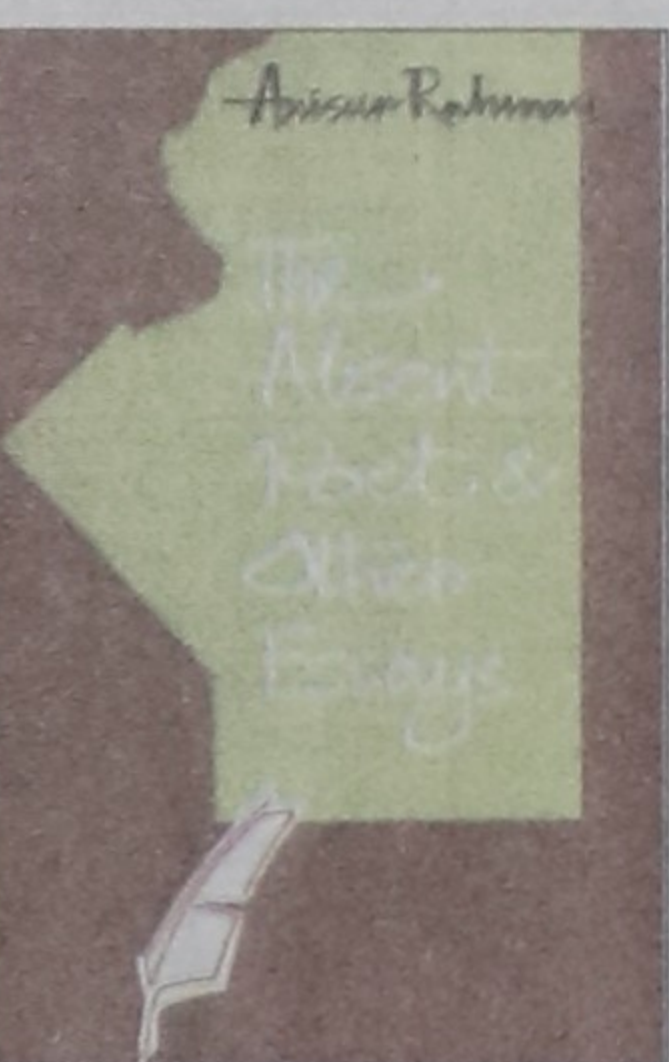
## Through a landscape of ideas

Takir Hossain admires the thoughts in a new work

ANISUR Rahman, a passionate fervent poet, is basically more a poet than an essayist in his

temperament, expression and above all his style. Writing poetry from the mid nineties, he has graduated more to cerebral compositions - writings that have been published in various newspapers, magazines and little magazines - with his own unique and remarkable style of weaving compositions of extraordinary skill.

The contents of his wordings and the analytical power he unleashes have enabled him to win readers' admiration. His distinct art of language is quite surely the first thing about him and, in fact, this is his specialty. At this year's Ekushey book fair, Anisur gave us a sheaf of essays in various moods. Most of the essays are discussions on poetry and its



The Absent Poet & Other Essays Anisur Rahman Biddya Prokash

various aspects in terms of modern and contemporary themes. Poetry has a power that is its own. It opens up the varying facets of civilisation and humanity. That is why poetry is very closely associated with time and situation. In earlier times, Anisur gave us two worthy contributions - *Ibsen's The Metamorphosis*. He translated Ibsen's poetry and play, *The Lady from the Sea*, into Bengali. He adapted *The Metamorphosis* for the Centre for Asian Theatre.

In this book there are a total of 40 essays that can give readers a feeling of novelty as Anisur appears with quite a new approach in many senses. First of all, as one goes through his writings, one must feel a world swinging between a variety of immense emotions and expressions.

Anisur is a very conscious writer.

His gaze is always on all the stages in our society. He

has written on some burning issues such as poverty, Monga, women's harassment, land rights, lack of proper education, political instability, religious zealotry and ethnic issues. These issues have come into his writing significantly and strongly. His open and unbiased expressions help us make out the perfect picture of our society. His observations are very clear and guide us into peering intently into our souls.

Anisur has identified himself inextricably with the cultural heritage of the soil. His central philosophy is that he is a Bengali by birth; has grown up and developed in an environment shaped by the wind and water of Bengal. He is a true narrator of our social, cultural, political and economic conditions. He is among those

few dedicated writers of Bangladesh with a distinctly individual inventive style. He always tries to focus on the desires, pains and mental state of the underprivileged in our society. A number of his essays are very touching and expressive. He writes the essays from very close observations. Some of his heart-rending essays are *Parlours, Factories and Harassed women*, *Sex Workers - The Issue we Look Away From*, *Monga: The Hunger Grip, Our Poor, Our Rich - And Points to Note*, *The Jongis, the Monga and the NGOs* and some other articles.

In this book, Anisur recollects two legendary figures in our country - eminent writer Humayun Azad and veteran journalist Enayeturrah Khan (widely known as Mintu Bhai). Both were very unique, innovative and played important roles in their respective fields.

Khan gave a distinct and innovative look to our

journalism. Without him, our journalism seems barren and poor. Mintu Bhai is always remembered for his thought-provoking and cerebral creations.

Anisur is a journalist by profession, a very risky and uncertain profession in our country. The possibility of one's losing one's job and irregular remuneration are the common features in this field. In Defence of Journalism as a Career and Plight of the Journalist are the two essays where Anisur has tried to draw a picture of this profession for readers.

An essay is a success only when it leads readers towards enjoying the beauty and message of writing. Definitely a book worth reading.

Takir Hossain is a critic and journalist.

## The man behind the caretaker details

Harun ur Rashid is enthused by a documented work

THE publication of *The Ishtiaq Papers* by the University Press Limited on 21 January 2008 on the occasion of the 76<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Barrister Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed is surely a commendable move.

It goes to the credit of the *Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed Smriti Parishad* that it launched the book at the Bangladesh National Museum. The organisation needs to be congratulated on bringing out this valuable book.

The book has been introduced by the late lawyer's erudite and scholarly wife, National Professor Dr. Sufia Ahmed, and prefaced by his able son, Justice (Dr) Syed Rezaat Ahmed of the Bangladesh Supreme Court. The two writings offer an adequate glimpse of the contents of the book.

The book comprises 152 pages and contains two papers authored by Barrister Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed that not only offer an insider's view of the state of affairs that led to the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution regarding the non-party caretaker government but also the

working of it. In that sense, the book traces not only the evolution of the caretaker government but also the working of the government in which Ishtiaq was adviser for law and parliamentary affairs.

The system of non-party caretaker government is unique. The two mainstream parties were at loggerheads in the mid-1990s as to whether or not to incorporate the system in the constitution. At core was the issue of whether a party-administered government would be able to hold fair, free and impartial parliamentary elections.

Laying out an idea with a broadsword is the easy bit. It is harder to develop the idea into a concrete proposal. At such a critical juncture, Barrister Ishtiaq, having no political affiliation but prompted by the national interest, moved to invest his time and energy in conceptualising the nuts and bolts of the caretaker government to the satisfaction of all parties.

What made him different was not his extraordinary record of academic and other qualifications

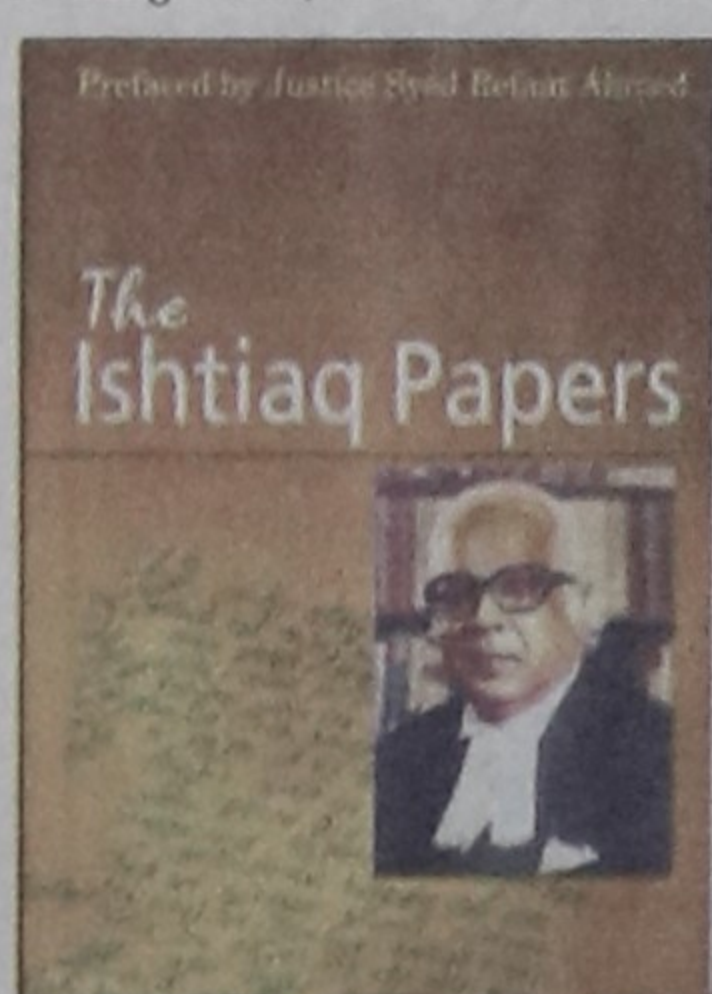
he had amassed in his life but his imperturbable conviction that there was a solution to every problem. Most importantly, he had the uncanny knack of finding answers that eluded most others. His thoughts on the caretaker government in the book are a testimony to this attribute in him.

Ishtiaq's thoughts on the caretaker system were published widely in the media at the time. In that sense, what he did was to publicise his views among the public. He believed in transparency of his thoughts and in people's participation in political debate. And he did it with all his sincerity.

Many books are now available on the working of the non-party caretaker government that is installed after an elected government completes its tenure. The purpose and functions of the caretaker government have been incorporated in chapter II A of the constitution. Articles 58B to 58E describe the composition, functions and other duties of the caretaker government.

*The Ishtiaq Papers* will provide a valuable background to readers and researchers who wish to conduct studies into the working of the caretaker government.

Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed, Bar-at-Law and a former attorney general of Bangladesh, twice adviser for



The Ishtiaq Papers The University Press Limited

law, in two caretaker governments, was a larger than life figure in legal circles. He became a barrister in 1958 and thereafter was a constitutional expert; and in any crisis of a legal nature he attempted to resolve matters amicably among the parties involved.

The eminent lawyer never compromised with the independence of the judiciary; he wanted to keep the judiciary above any controversy and respected it immensely. He never tolerated any outside interference in the working of the judiciary and was quick to condemn it if it manifested itself. It is believed that he completed the process of the separation of the judiciary from the executive in 2001 but could not implement it because of a request to hold back from the elected government about to enter upon office.

Over the years this reviewer has had the privilege of knowing Barrister Ishtiaq. He hardly ever saw his feathers ruffled. Superiority was something he eschewed, relying on logic and

persuasion to achieve his goals. He knew he was endowed with a first rate mind and such was his capacity and so many were his achievements that he had no reason or room for flamboyance or intimidation.

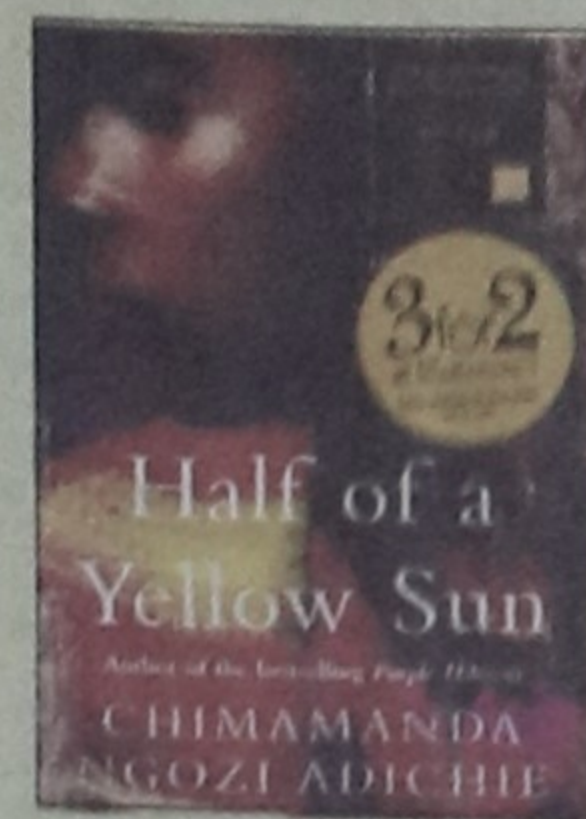
*The Ishtiaq Papers* is the first instalment of a gift to the nation. It is a book within a book and is able to fill a gap in knowledge and understanding of the functions of the non-party caretaker government system.

The strength of the book comes through its clear reflection of the views of Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed on how the dynamics of the system worked in theory and in reality.

It is believed that Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed has left many unpublished works. One hopes the Smriti Parishad is able to publish gradually all his works for the benefit of readers, researchers, politicians, academics and the younger generation.

Harun ur Rashid, Bar at Law, is former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN in Geneva.

## At a glance

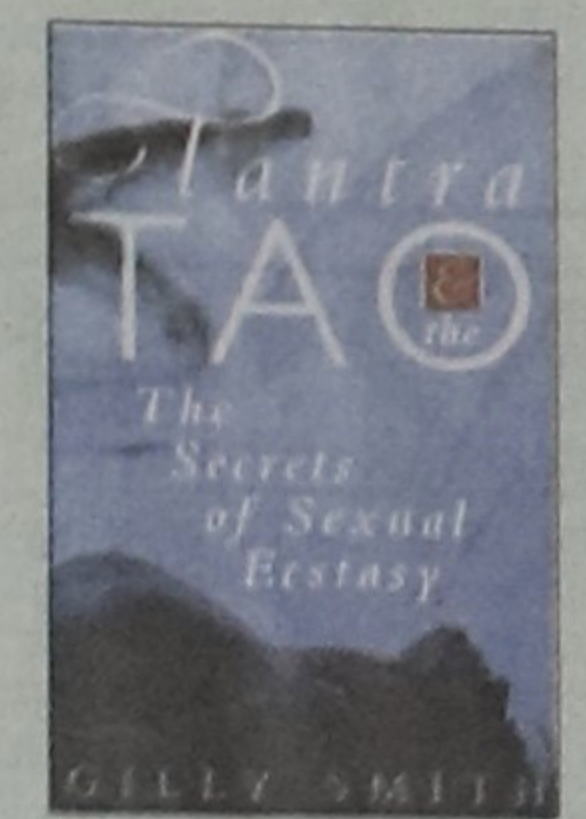
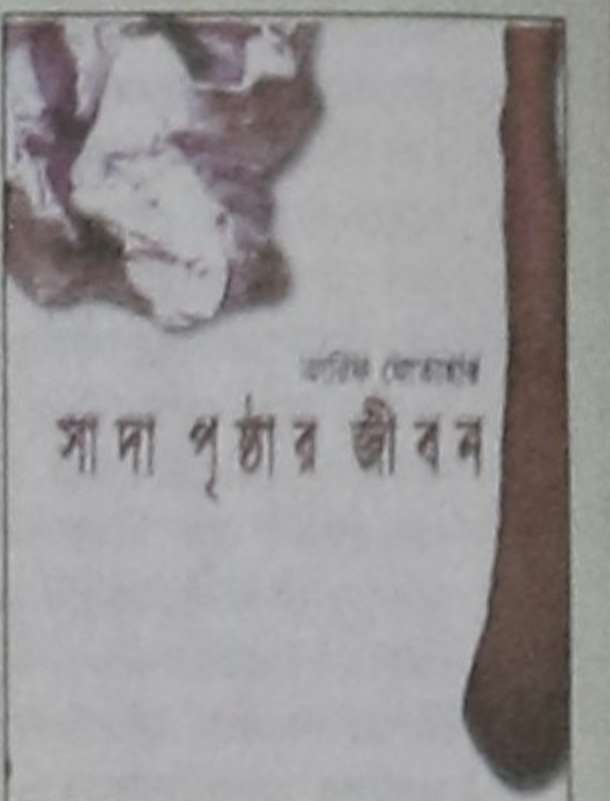


Half of a Yellow Sun Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Harper Perennial

A tale of the dreams that worked in Nigeria in the early years of freedom, this work is perhaps one of the best to have come from a writer with roots in Africa. Adichie writes in a style that brings together local heritage and cosmopolitan behaviour and weaves it all into a pattern that leaves the reader terribly impressed.

Shaada Prishthar Jibon Arif Motaahar Magnum Opus

In this collection of poetry, Arif Motaahar explores a number of areas of ideas that bring into focus the modernity that shapes his thoughts. Obviously, the poet believes in the power of poetry to reshape ideas; and in this work sets out to convince others that his thoughts could become those of others as well.

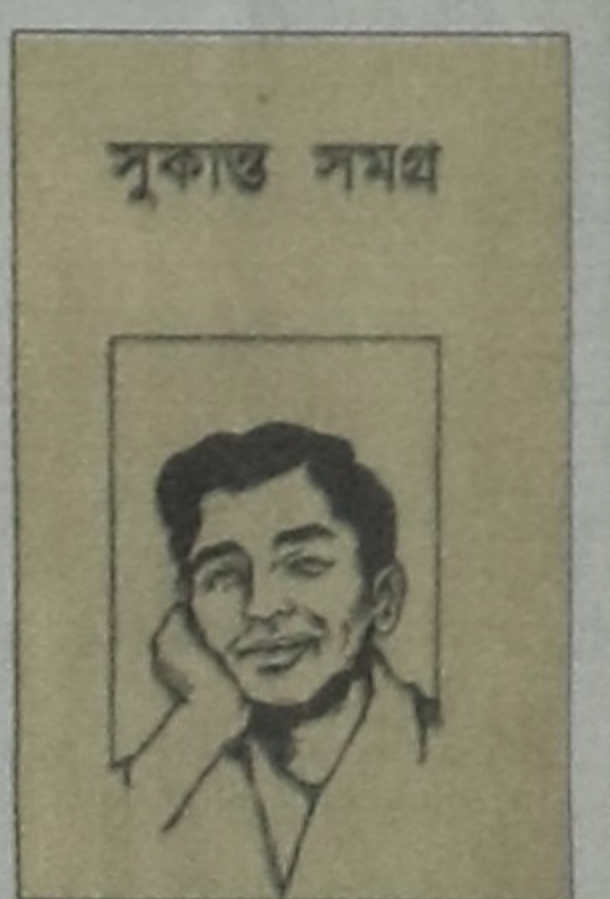


Tantra Tao & The Secrets of Sexual Ecstasy Gilly Smith Robinson

It is a brilliant exposition of ancient, indeed timeless philosophy exercising its power on men and women inclined to the romantic. Sex has been a staple food for generations. When combined with dashes of the philosophical, it can transport individuals to heights of ethereal pleasure. Read on.

Sukanto Shomogro Intro Prof. Abul Kashem Fazlul Haque Mohona Prokashoni

For a generation that has known of Sukanto but has not really known him, this collection of the poet's writings promises to be a valuable addition to the library or shelf of one with deep emotional ties to Bengali literature. The poems here take readers back to what was surely a golden era in Bengal.



## Of sensuality and seduction

Mohammad Shahidul Islam enjoys a tale of Latin beauty

BOOKS about lost love and sacrifice are always available to readers. There are also books about one generation passing on its secrets and lessons to another. There are books about making decisions that can change the track of one's entire life. Marisol's *The Lady, the Chef, and the Courtesan*

The Chef And The Courtesan mirrors all these topics, but does so with warmth and élan that a reader forgives its familiarity and just loses himself in the book.

According to a Latin American proverb with which the novel opens, in order for a woman to discover her power over men, she must learn to be a lady in the living room, a chef in the kitchen, and a courtesan in the bedroom. After perfecting the grace and elegance of each, a woman will in the end understand her own potential in life, and the command she has over everyone around her, including herself. The book marvels at this main philosophy of woman's life success.

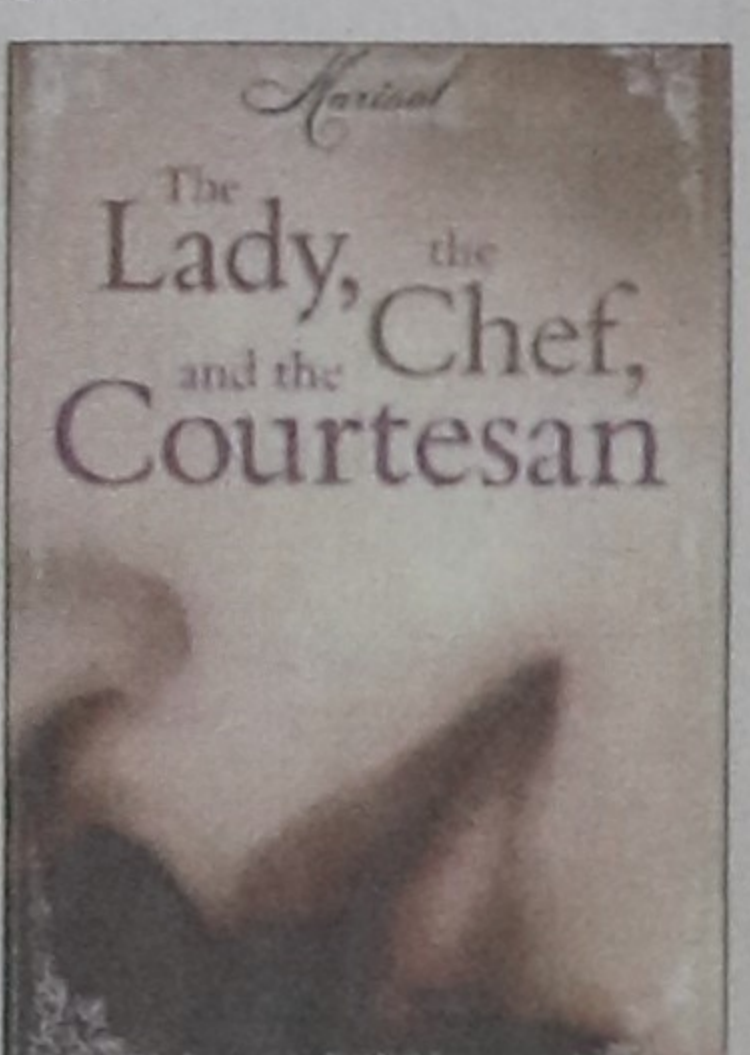
South American women give the impression of possessing a self-confidence and elegant beauty that makes them tempting to men, and a comprehensive mystery to other women. Could it be that they have purely been born with good genes? Or is it something else - a deeper secret passed down through generations that gives power to Latin women and gives them the ability to discover and rejoice at their sensuality and womanliness?

Pilar Castillo, the protagonist, is twenty-six years old, and rapt between two dissimilar cultures. She was born in Venezuela, but now resides in Chicago, where she has learned to live by herself. She takes pleasure in her job as a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, and she dates an all-American photographer named Patrick Russo. Yet her mother heartily frowns on her choices - both in living, and in men. She is expected to come back home to be with her family, and to marry Rafael Uslar, a conceited and flirtatious individual. And all this notwithstanding the fact of the successful lawyer that she was once engaged to.

What is a woman to do when she is being dragged in so many directions? Advice and salvation appear in the form of three leather-bound volumes: her grandmother's diaries which incorporate her life and brim with many words of wisdom. Pilar's grandmother, Gabriela, trusts in the old proverb that states, "A woman must be a lady in the living room, a

chef in the kitchen, and a courtesan in the bedroom". By sharing her own experiences, Gabriela imparts to Pilar the real secrets to being the typical Latin woman, and perhaps the most significant lesson of all --- that a woman should always trail her heart.

There are a lot of lessons to be learned from reading this book, and although the advice may sound dated at times - "a husband wandering around the kitchen could signify only one thing: his wife had failed miserably in her duties" - it also offers a refreshingly open look at relationships, and the gender roles that many of us still play in our daily lives.



The Lady, the Chef, and the Courtesan Marisol Rayo Roma

The gorgeous language, the recipes, the underlying eroticism all unite together to make this book seem like a magical secret digest. Parts of many of the conversations are a key to finding the beautiful woman inside all of us. *The Lady, the Chef, and the Courtesan* is written in a classy manner, and is full of wit, charm and insight into a culture that still seems to be frozen in another time. Weaving together the story of a modern woman with that of a grandmother's time-honoured traditions, *The Lady, the Chef, and the Courtesan* is a convincing novel of history, seduction, love -- and what it strictly means to be a woman.

Mohammad Shahidul Islam graduated in English from Chittagong University and is in the tourism industry.