

A long ago war and how it yet resonates

Tulip Chowdhury is touched by a new account of an old conflict

THE war of liberation in 1971 touched the lives of people in myriad ways. As a nation, Bengalis reaped independence at the cost of millions of lives. Many of those who lived through the war have come with their tales of the war. In *Journey Through 1971: My Story*, Farida Huq holds up spell binding accounts of her own experiences. The story is told in first person narrative. The author offers her deep insights and experiences with a marvellous mastery of words.

The novel unfolds with the writer's account of leaving her husband, an army officer, in West Pakistan to join her parents in East Pakistan. She had received news of her mother's illness and was very anxious. And yet her love for her motherland is reflected in the very first pages, in the happiness she feels as the plane she is flying in is about to land on the soil of her motherland. Right from the beginning of the book the reader is impressed with the writer's patriotism and her sense of responsibility towards her family members. Hence we see that although the writer has left her husband behind, she is filled with contentment at returning to her motherland. All along the story the writer is depicted as a woman who is conscious of her responsibilities and at the same time is perfectly aware of the political events taking around her.

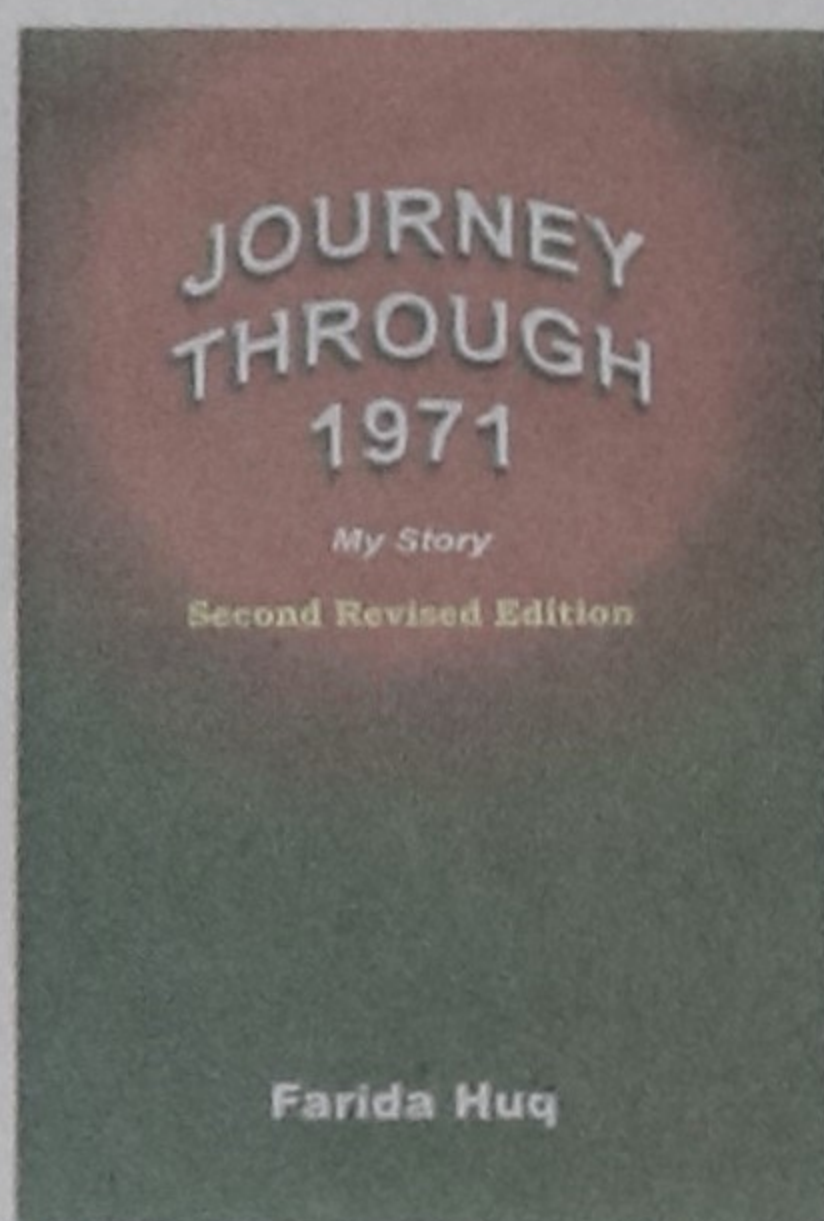
It is the month of March 1971. It is a momentous time for Bengalis because of the way their history is shaping up. Huq is in Dhaka at this crucial time. There are vivid descriptions of the takeover by the Pakistan army. The vibrant descriptions of the brutalities inflicted on the Bengalis is hair-raising and seem to take the reader back to the scenes then and there. Side by side is the also

the story of a resilient people and their courageous struggle for the liberation of their motherland. As political chaos reigns, the author loses her mother. The family is barely able to go through the funeral rites. The eldest child in the family, Huq feels responsible for her siblings and her father. Her two daughters are there, Tanim and Pinku. She is left without the children's father to look after them, her mother gone and the turmoil in the country. With all these the family is thrown into a sudden void. Her two brothers Rajoo and Biroo wish to take part in the ongoing liberation movement but her father puts his foot down firmly. Gradually Dhaka becomes a scene of bloodshed and killings. The author's family decides to go away to a safer place. They go off to Shinepukur, the village of her maternal grandparents.

The journey to Shinepukur with the small children is a perilous one. However, once there, they are amidst the loving company of their relatives. They feel very secure and welcome in the village. For them village life too is a new experience. Over the radio they get news of the happenings in Dhaka. They listen to Akash Bani and BBC. They hear the broadcasts on Shwadin Bangla Betar. There are hundreds of other relatives and acquaintances pouring in every day from Dhaka, escaping the barbarous Pakistani army. The author here also gives a meticulous description of village life. The people of the village are shown as loving and extremely hospitable. There is a sharp contrast between the peaceful life of the villagers and the killings of the Pakistani army across the country.

The writer sketches a picture of herself as a person of iron will. At Shinepukur she takes the decision of going to Pakistan to join her husband in Quetta, where he is at the Defence Staff College. Her father strongly opposes the idea. And yet there is her strong determination to go to the very land that is carry-

ing out mass murders in her country. She is not even sure if she will find her husband at all. And yet with all her trust in God she embarks on her journey on a warm day in May. She is the only Bengali on the packed flight of Pakistan International Airlines.



Journey Through 1971: My Story
Farida Huq
Academic Press and Publishers Library

ing out mass murders in her country. She is not even sure if she will find her husband at all. And yet with all her trust in God she embarks on her journey on a warm day in May. She is the only Bengali on the packed flight of Pakistan International Airlines.

In Pakistan the writer is stuck by the normal way life goes on. She wonders if people have any idea of the genocide in the eastern wing. Reunited with her husband, she gives him an account of the killing in Bangladesh. The other Bengalis do not want even to listen to her accounts. Even her husband is reluctant to believe her story. Farida Huq is torn between love for her husband and the happenings back home. She wakes up every morning wondering if her father and her siblings are alive at all.

The sun breaks into a thousand splendours as word spreads that Bangladesh is free. It is 16 December 1971. There is euphoria among the freedom loving Bengalis. And yet there are some Bengalis who have never supported this war of liberation and still refuse to acknowledge the birth of Bangladesh! The writer here again shows her own patriotism by being a strong supporter of an independent Bangladesh. She is saddened by not being in Bangladesh to witness the glorious day the country becomes independent. However we also do not fail to notice a sense of empathy in the writer as she comes across West Pakistanis who have lost dear ones in the war. She loves her own motherland and she is pained by the loss of people on the enemy side. Indeed, the writer reveals a great compassionate side of her character.

The apparent calm in (West) Pakistan is shattered as Bengali officers are taken to concentration camps. They are scattered as they are taken to separate camps. Here begins a long wait for the trip back home. Only those who have lived in a concentration camp can imagine how the days can linger. The loneliness, the physical and the mental hardship are underlined with uncertainty

about the future.

However, there is the strong will of the people to make the best of what they have. And in the concentration camp people come up with the idea of running a school for their children. There is teamwork among the Bengalis as they live together, repressed and secluded. There is only one thought in the hearts and minds of the people: When will we be free to go back to our motherland? Indeed, will we ever be able to see it at all?

Then, in September 1973, the ordeal is finally over. The happy news comes that the Bengalis will finally be repatriated to Bangladesh. Arrangements are made through the International Red Cross. The writer, in her imagination, is already back home at Old Airport Road, the family together again!

Journey Through 1971: My Story is unique for the explicit details it holds about the liberation war. The hardships faced by Bengalis stranded in Pakistan are also demonstrated with acuteness. It is a living history for generations to be. There are very few books written in English about the liberation war of Bangladesh and this happens to be an exclusive one. It is a tribute to our freedom fighters. It is the story of a woman fully aware of political conditions in a time of war.

The bravery of the writer as she journeys through the days of 1971 can be held forth as an example of how a woman can weather through myriad dangers, no matter how challenging they are. The book is a valuable addition to the history of Bangladesh.

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher and short story writer.

AT A GLANCE

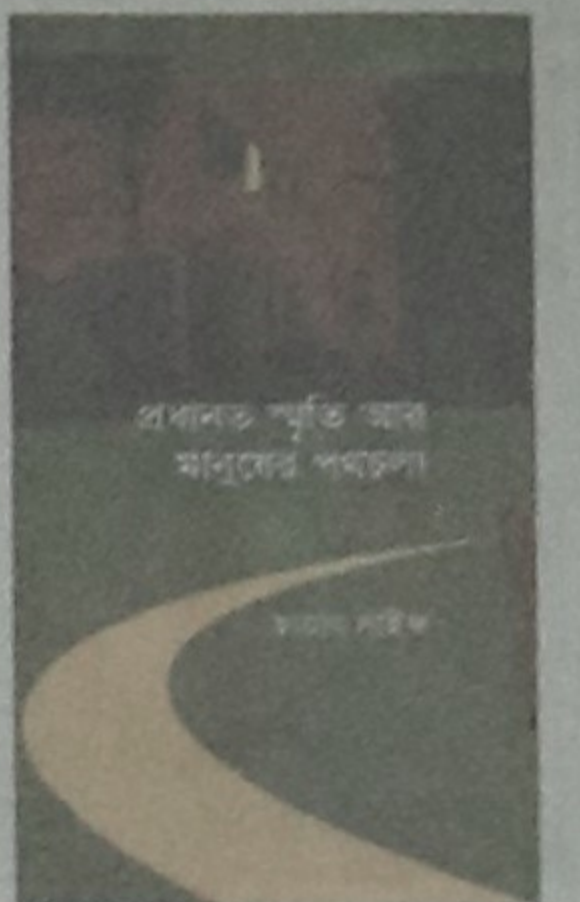


Bahadur Shah Zafar
Zafar Alam
Adorn Publication

William Dalrymple has lately revived interest in the last Mughal emperor. But here now is our very own Zafar Alam with this commendable account of the life of a man who remains a tragic character in the history of the sub-continent. The work will of course mean much to a Bengali-reading public, rich as it is in the wealth of information it offers.

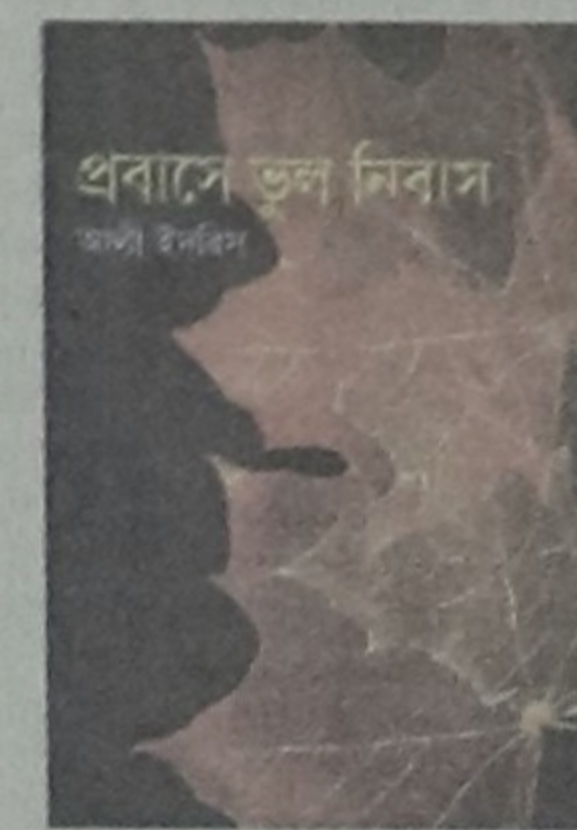
Proddhanoto Smriti Aar Manusher
Pothchola
Hayat Saif
Shamabesh

Hayat Saif has established his own foothold on Bangladesh's poetic canvas. For decades he has espoused his causes, romantic, social and what have you, through his verses. In this new collection, altogether fifty seven poems woven in a fine thread of thought, you cannot but understand anew why he matters in our world of aesthetics.



Probashe Bhool Nibash
Ali Idris
Ekushey Bangla Prokashon

A highly readable collection of short stories, twelve in all, that depict happiness and melancholy and all the emotions common to men and women. Six of the tales relate to the lives of Bangladeshis abroad, with the remaining six dealing with life in the mother country. It is the themes which matter. And they do provoke thoughts.



Teen Bigha Jomi
Syed Anwarul Hafiz
Mowla Brothers

It is a story of the Bengali struggle for freedom and yet it is something more. The searing nature of the soul, the pangs the heart goes through in a war that dehumanises people is what Hafiz touches on here. And yet out of the dehumanisation comes a reassertion of faith in the ability of individuals to rise above their various states of misery.



Tales of exile and heartbreak

The plot thickens for Farida Shaikh in a novel

PEOPLE called the fort at Mandalay in Burma, the Glass Palace ... a city in itself ... the story of the last days of independence of the country that became a part of the British Empire in 1885.

And years later the memory of Mandalay Palace returned in the walls lined with mirror and there was a great hall called the Glass Palace. Everything 'there was of crystal and gold ... you could see yourself everywhere if you lay on the floor'.

It is the story of King Thebaw's long exile, over twenty five years. The year 1905 marked the nineteenth year of the king's exile, from Mandalay to Rangoon to Madras and finally to Ratnagiri situated between Bombay and Goa. Queen Supayalat and the four princesses are substantive characters in the telling of the tale. The last princess was born in Outram House during the second year of the exile.

The second princess, who resembled the queen, could only be managed by the maid Dolly, Doh-lee. They grew up speaking Hindustani and Marathi and Burmese only with their parents. They dressed in saris.

The section on the royal residence in Ratnagiri is like a fairy tale. This may have led The Independent to label the book as 'A Doctor Zhivago for the Far East'.

The writer has dedicated the book to the memory of his father, Lieutenant Colonel Shailendra Ghosh, who was in the 12th frontier force regiment unit of the British Indian Army. He was in the

Burma campaign during World War Two.

The seed of the story comes from the late Jagat Chandra Datta of Rangoon and Moulmein. In the novel the protagonist is Rajkumar ... His name meant Prince ... from Akyab, 'the principal port of the Arakan -- that tidewater stretch of coast where Burma and Bengal collide in a whirlpool of unease'.

All his family die of a fever that passes through the town, including the last survivor, his mother, who had tried to ship back to the Raha Hindu family in Chittagong, with Rajkumar. After his mother dies the boy stays on to work on the boat, having nowhere else to go. In Mandalay, the Burmese royal capital, the boat needs extensive repairs, and during the wait Rajkumar goes to work and live at a small food stall in town.

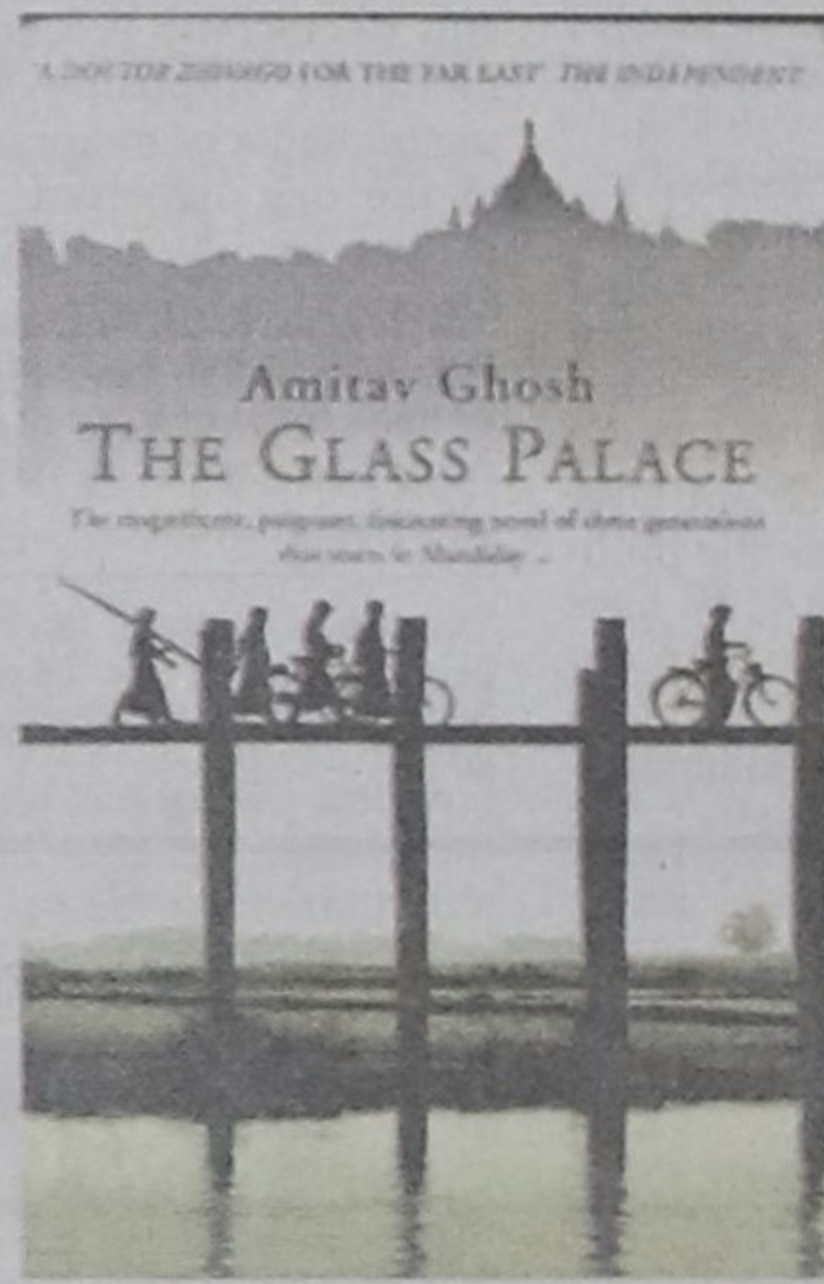
He is there when the British invade and overthrow the monarchy. The British are preparing to send '... a fleet up the Irrawaddy ... for they wanted ... all the teak in Burma.' Soon a 'Royal Proclamation' follows, to the effect that His Majesty will defend the country by leading his forces against the invaders.

A British timber company refuses payment for some fifty thousand logs.

The settlement of the dispute is '... that the British might allow the Royal Family to remain in the palace in Mandalay ... similar to the Indian princes ...' However, the kings of Burma are sovereign and not princes. Under the influence of the queen 'the Burmese court had refused to yield to the British ultimatum.' So a war is imminent.

'The world's richest gem mines lay in

Burma ... the most prized possession the Ngamauk ring set with the greatest and the most valuable ruby mined in



The Glass Palace
Amitav Ghosh
HarperCollins

Burma.' And the collection of gemstones is a royal amusement.

The Hsaya San Rebellion 1930-1932 by Patricia Herbert is adapted to describe the teak camp of the British in the forest slopes of Huay Zedi by the bank town of Pyinmana on the Sittang

River, as shown in a map.

Part five of the work, a discussion on ancestors and Dinu's photography, is adapted from *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, edited by W.T. de Bary.

The writer has a near obsessive urge to create the background of the characters and so has read hundreds of books, travelogues, gazetteers and notebooks. Except for King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat and their daughters, the characters in *The Glass Palace* are wholly fictional.

The first portion of the book makes interesting reading. The interest wanes, though, as the story progresses. The many fine passages and explanations of events from the characters' point of view and detailed information on a variety of subjects, though fascinating, remain shades apart from the rest of the story. One can cite here instances relating to carmakers like Karl Benz or KLM flights in the region. This continues to be a problem throughout the novel, growing worse towards the end.

The family saga -- centered mainly on Rajkumar and Saya John and their families and circle -- is much like the usual big family novel. In the later generation there are the sensitive photographer Dinu and the soldier Arjun and Alison, the woman they are both attracted to. There is Mathew, Sayagi's son by his wife, who is long dead. There is Dolly, her friend Uma the collector's wife. He has discharged the administrative responsibility of the exiled king. He dies when his boat capsizes on the open sea off the Bay of Ratnagiri.

Ghosh's political strand focuses on Indians in military service, doing the British Empire's dirty work. Two-thirds of the soldiers that routed the Burmese in 1885 were Indian sepoys. The role of Indians in the British armed forces remains significant throughout the novel. As Indian independence approaches, the role of its armed forces becomes more controversial. Here it culminates with Arjun and his fellow-soldiers and the issues they face in World War Two.

However, these issues have a weak impact on readers. With intermittent romance scenes, *The Glass Palace* is like a layer of several novels.

The end of the book is rushed, dealing with Burma's recent history. The comments on the tragic current situation in Myanmar/Burma do not quite connect to the rest of the book and seem forced. The book is the outcome of four editors. It is on this count that some reviewer of the book has remarked, 'Ghosh's sprawling, unevenly written book does not read like a finely-edited novel ... The novel fits together badly -- so perhaps different editors were responsible for different sections of it? Or perhaps it is merely proof that too many editors spoil the soup.'

As for readers like myself, I did note the mistake in the name of the short story writer and title of the story referred to in the Indian edition of *The Glass Palace*.

Farida Shaikh is a sociologist and freelance writer.

For women, the long road to equality

Dilara Choudhury finds substance in a researched work

THE tragic fact of life is that women, in most parts of the world, are second-class citizens and they still face inequality in all spheres of life. They are discriminated against at birth, subordinated and exploited throughout their life despite their valuable and noteworthy contributions to society and national development process, and end their life as being dependent on their sons. This fact has been eloquently noted by the author when she writes that 'the index ranking of 151 countries on gender inequality in addressing poverty, education, basic health, employment, violence, political participation' contained in various Human Development Reports prepared by the United Nations Development Programme between 1995 and 2003. These reports show that no country treats its women population as equally as it does its men.

Bangladesh being a Least Developed country is no exception in this regard. Women in Bangladesh constitute 50% of the population but in terms of life expectancy, participation in the work force, economic empowerment, legal protection (against male desertion, divorce and physical abuse) women in Bangladesh are most severely affected. In spite of the fact that there have been some improvements in certain indicators such as mean age at marriage, and female participation in the labour force, the condition of women, according to the population crisis committee, is the worst in the world.

The situation of women in Bangladesh, thus, deserves due atten-

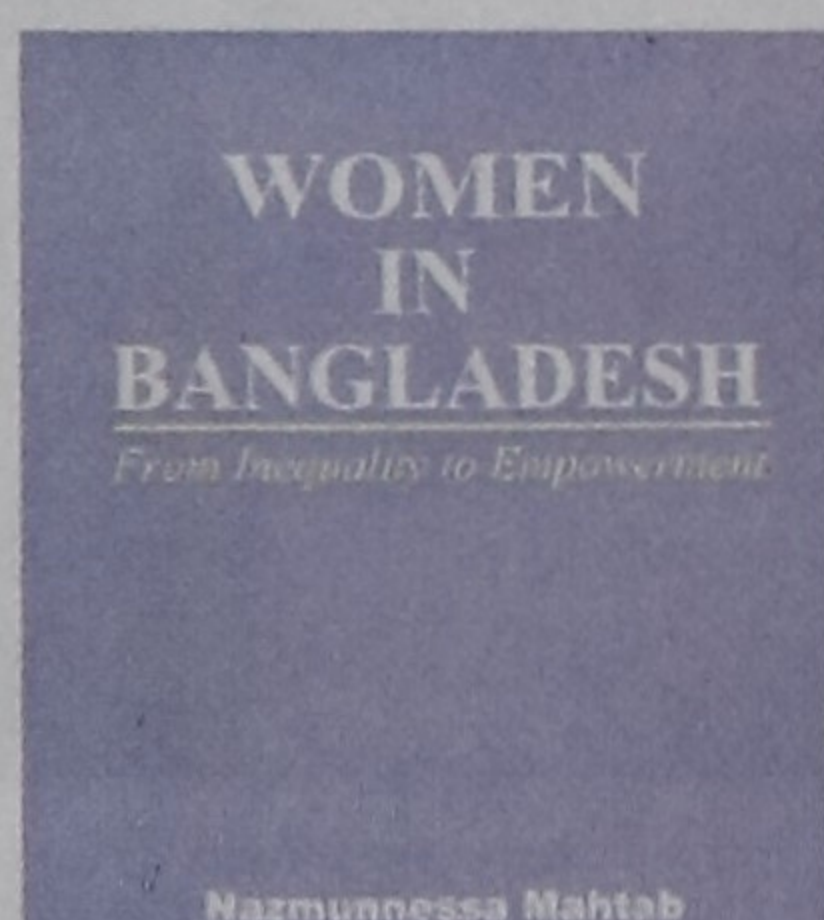
tion nationally and internationally so that proper and timely steps can be taken in order to alleviate their predicament. It also calls for academic research and other activities like seminars and conferences. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of scholarly books on the subject. Professor Mahtab's book, in this regard, will be able to fill that lacuna.

Women in Bangladesh: From Inequality to Empowerment is a collection of papers written by Mahtab for important seminars, conferences and workshops, which cover the entire gamut relating women's issues. She has given a very precise and clear picture about the situation of women, the progress they have made, the problems they face and has given suggestions towards addressing the concerns.

The book begins with an introduction about the potentials and challenges of women's studies and the establishment of the Department of Women's Studies of Dhaka University. It is to be noted that no other university in Bangladesh has a women's studies department. The author emphasises he need for such departments in other universities. She then discusses the initial problems encountered by the department as well as the challenges that lie ahead.

In the following chapter, the overall conditions of the country's women have been elucidated. It portrays global gender inequality and various forms of gender discrimination in Bangladesh. The author in this regard analyses the policy issues of the state and challenges of gender equation in Bangladeshi society, polity and economy.

The chapter on women and education is an analysis of female education in Bangladesh, national education policy and state intervention in female education. Needless to mention that education for women should be of supreme importance as it is a vital ingredient for the advancement of multi-sectoral development and especially in the context of women's dismal literacy rate.



Women in Bangladesh: From Inequality to Empowerment
Professor Nazmunnessa Mahtab
A.H. Development Publication House

The author points out various steps taken by the government of Bangladesh to advance the education of women and concludes that despite the progress achieved by women at the primary level, they have not yet achieved equality at the higher level.

In the subsequent chapters the author deals with the problems encountered by working women and the prospects of their entrepreneurship development. The author thus brings forth such contemporary issues as the role of micro-credit and other efforts for poverty alleviation. The role of micro-credit is specifically highlighted to demonstrate that it not only plays a role in poverty alleviation but also helps women to be empowered. As a case study, sustainable livelihood of the women in the coastal fishing community has been selected that describes the sectors of employment generation, and sustainability.

Chapter seven is about the political participation of women. The author is absolutely right in her analysis that empowerment of women lies through effective political participation. She makes it quite clear that it is a prerequisite in achieving gender equality. In this context, she emphasises a meaningful role for women in the national legislature, political party structures, and their leadership positions in urban local bodies and rural self government tiers. The author, in the course of her analysis, stresses the humanisation of politics and strengthening women's organisations to uphold their cause.

Women's participation in local gover-

nance has been discussed in chapter eight. Introduction of direct election in both urban and rural local bodies certainly enhances their electoral status and involvement in the local decision-making process. However, as the author points out, the non-cooperative attitude of their male colleagues and a lack of appropriate facilities stand in the way of their effective role playing.

Lastly, Dr. Mahtab highlights various international and national efforts taken in order to rectify the persistent inequality between men and women. Efforts by the United Nations, like the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, Declaration of Decade of Women, and various world conferences on women have been analysed in details. The author also outlines specific women's issues under the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and emphasises gender budgeting to address gender inequality.

Professor Mahtab deserves our special thanks for bringing a wide range of women's issues under one cover. She has focused throughout the book on the issues concerned and has recommended suggestions that will alleviate the situation. The book is informative and is a noteworthy reference work for a wide range of readers. The volume is thus required reading for academics, researchers, students and others both at home and abroad.

Dilara Choudhury is Professor, Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University and columnist, The Daily Star.

Lives in turbulence

Ditio Syed-Haq admires a tale enmeshed in politics

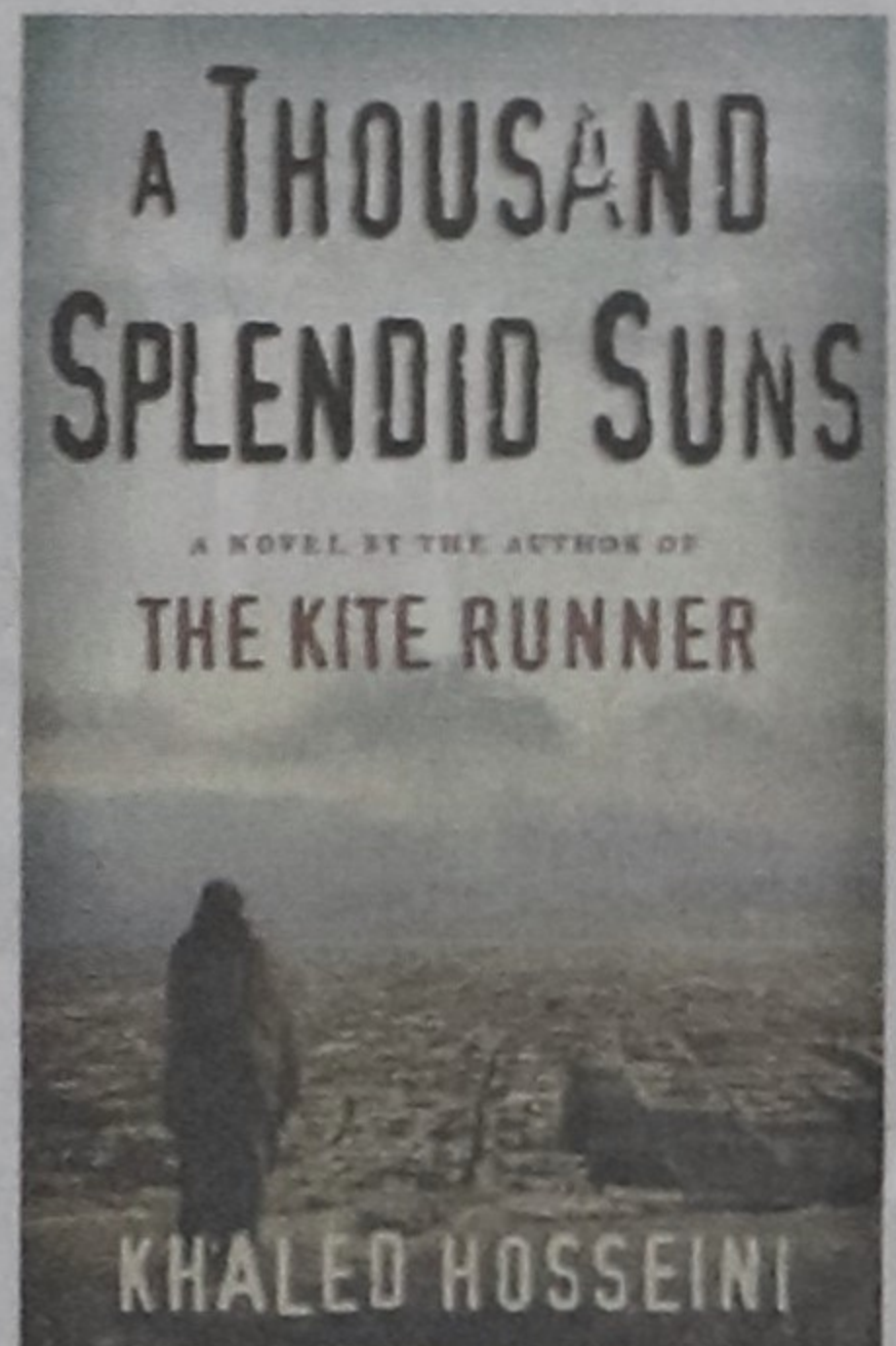
IT'S not often that a work of literary fiction successfully crosses the divide into the popular mainstream, but with the publication of his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, author Khaled Hosseini has achieved precisely that for the second time running. Following the spectacular success of his debut *The Kite Runner* in 2003 -- interestingly, the first novel published in English by an Afghan author -- *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a heart-wrenching tale of endurance, betrayal and an indestructible friendship set in the backdrop of over four decades of the social and political landscape of Afghanistan. Deriving its title from a poem about Kabul by a seventeenth-century Persian, the story chronicles the lives of two women whose destinies become inseparably entwined through a series of personal and, subsequently, common misfortunes.

Mariam is only fifteen when she is married to a man thirty years her senior in a bitter and spiteful relationship that is set from the start to test the limits of her endurance. Almost twenty years later, tragedy then forces fifteen-year-old Laila to set foot in Mariam's troubled household. In a relationship beginning with hostility and ending in unconditional love, the women form an unlikely bond that transcends the crippling circumstances of their bleak existence. Alternating between the companionship of sisters to the intense love between a mother and child, Hosseini demonstrates through his characters that, ultimately, it is love that triumphs over sorrow.

Through this powerful and moving storyline, the author manages to weave the turbulent political events of the times -- from the Soviet occupation to the intense infighting between the Mujahideen, eventually culminating in the age of Taliban rule and beyond. Readers will find themselves at once presented with the gentle message of love and kindness at the heart of Islam and also the mindless and savage brutality that ensues when this message is misinterpreted and manipulated for political gain. This is a sobering portrayal of the horrific realities of living in a country at war and Hosseini uses multiple plot-devices on the recurring themes of fear, uncertainty, separation and grief to considerable dramatic effect. Consequently, the

plot, whilst being somewhat predictable at times, still manages to stay fresh and original. Serious readers will also not fail to notice the total absence of cliché in any form. There is a uniqueness to Hosseini's writing that expresses even the most mundane of everyday events in ways new and unexplored. The end-result is a touching and often tear-inducing account of life in an age dominated by conflict and in a setting that is all-too-topical for modern times.

But perhaps the greatest achievement of this book is not in Hosseini's effortless prose and the heartfelt tenderness with which he brings his characters to life; it is the way in which he skillfully draws into the arena of



A Thousand Splendid Suns
Khaled Hosseini
Riverhead Books

public awareness the plight of millions of untold sufferers and victims in a country ravaged by decades of violence. These efforts have not gone unnoticed and, in 2006, he was made goodwill envoy to the UNHCR with whom he currently tours war and disaster-stricken communities around the globe.

This is a novel of epic proportions and unreservedly establishes Hosseini on the international scene as a master of his craft. With work underway by Columbia Pictures on an adaptation for the big screen, this is one of the books that is almost certain to find its way into your hands in one way or another over the months ahead. Don't miss it.

Ditio Syed-Haq is a UK-based writer and freelance contributor to The Daily Star.