

Of values that used to be, of culture that yet remains

Syed Badrul Ahsan is charmed by an academic's autobiographical narrative

OLD values are what Syed Moqsd Ali speaks of in this narrative of what has been a fruitful life. In a work that encompasses an entirety of a family tale, the writer in essence brings forth all the traditions, as it were, that once were an underpinning of life in this country. These are the writer's memoirs and yet they could be interpreted as expressions of the sentiments that have bound Bengali families and clans together for ages. All history begins with the personal before broadening out to a wider swath of experience. And that is the point which Ali makes at the beginning of his narrative. He goes out in search of his roots and comes away from the density of tradition enriched in terms of his discovery. It is discovery that most, if not all, of us can relate to. There is that identification not just with class but with the accompaniments of aspirations which come with it as well.

The thoughts of the writer straddle diverse points of history. He belongs to a generation born in the British colonial era, at nearly the point where Indian nationalism has begun to energise people with the necessary dream of freedom. It is 1925 when Syed Moqsd Ali is born. For those with a sense of subcontinental history, it is also the year when the inspiring Chittaranjan Das passes away, relatively young and in demand on an all-India basis. Ali passes into youth acutely conscious of the demands that swift developing history is making on him and on those around him. There is that sense of inevitability about politics that he goes through, as do so many others, in the build-up to Partition. Lives go through a certain twisting of the knife, and some are left

wrecked forever. For Ali, life simply goes through different layers in the early days of the Pakistan state. It is an idealistic young man who takes leave of his parents and his siblings in his village and makes his way to Dhaka. The classes at Dhaka College are but a turning of the page, for they are the springboard that will carry him far. His intellect, to anyone who must have come across him in those times, must have reflected the promise in him.

And the promise was to be fulfilled. He would find his way to academia, through the meandering and yet defining routes of knowledge-based ambition. Along the way, he would find a wife, an equally enlightened and accomplished individual. He would find fulfillment in life with Noorun Nahar Fyzennessa; the love between them would endure and gather newer substance over the years. Both would travel abroad for higher education. Both would come back home, in all their liberality, to be part of a growing circle of Bengali nationalist culture. It is part of the overall image the writer captures, in sequences, through his telling of the tale. While politics naturally pulls him into an awareness of his self, into a vortex, there is also the domesticity that keeps the writer rooted to the ground. He glows at news of his first-born. It is the safety of this first child, Saad, that would years down the road, in 1971, keep Ali and Noorun Nahar worried. Saad is a friend of Rumi's --- and Rumi is the bright young son of Jahanara Imam who would lose his life at the hands of the Pakistan army. For his part, Saad, stopped at an army checkpoint, would escape certain tragedy through simply making a dash for life towards Comilla.

He stays in touch with the gathering momentum of the war and makes repeated attempts to link up with the Liberation War. He is thwarted each time, for reasons ranging from the eerie to the unbelievable. The pain of almost making it and yet seeing the moment

rooted in. That Saad takes a road to musical accomplishment is a story he relates with undisguised pleasure. That she becomes the daughter-in-law of Azizur Rahman Mallick and carries on with her education, even as she becomes a mother, is an account that only a happy Bengali father can offer to the reader.

And Ali does that, in the case of Saad and Saad's also in that of their younger children, the volleyball-loving Nazia and Arastu, the baby of the family. The marriages of his children, the birth of his grandchildren, et al, and the resultant happiness in him, all fall within the timelessness of Bengali family tradition. Saad's wedding swiftly turns into a celebration of contemporary history, with the entire leadership of free Bangladesh --- Bangabandhu and the Mujibnagar pioneers --- turning up for the occasion. As the writer sees it, it is a tale that adds to the beads in the garland from generation to generation. But that does not detract from the fact of the tragedy visited on the nation only years earlier. On 25 March 1971, as the state of Pakistan goes full-scale into the odious job of trying to wipe the land clean of Bengali political aspirations, Syed Moqsd Ali and Noorun Nahar Fyzennessa gather their children close, appalled at the ferocity of the state. It is ferocity that will claim the lives of millions. When the war is over, it is the viciousness of the enemy that is writ large across the landscape. Ali visits a shell-shocked Jahanara Imam. The loss of a husband, followed by that of a son, gleam tragically in the vacancy of Imam's eyes. On a trip to his village soon after liberation, Ali is quite unable to comprehend the decline that has set in.

Unkempt roads, dilapidated government buildings and plain unruly behaviour on the river vessel carrying him from the capital to his village bring home to him a sense of the intrigue that might already be undermining the newborn state. The intrigue, in the brief span of three and a half years, turns into full-blown conspiracy. The killings of 1975 put paid to collective Bengali aspirations. Values are beginning to be a casualty.

Shaaturusher Itikotha is the history of a family encompassed in the consciousness of its passing generations. It is something more. The frightened young university student making his way to the Alis' university quarters in the early moments of genocide, Nazia Jabeen dancing her way into the room to make the announcement that she has passed her school leaving examinations, Ali presiding over the political science department of Dhaka University as its chairman, Noorun Nahar Fyzennessa taking over as provost of Rokeya are images that flash by. Rewind the story. And go through the tale of the Screw Loose Association the writer and his friends formed at the university in a more innocent era. As part of the Young Pioneers group, Syed Moqsd Ali campaigns for the position of DUCSU literary secretary. He wins. Everyone cheers.

And as they do, it is the canvas of a lost era, somewhat more innocent and more purposeful than the times we live through today, that comes alive. Syed Moqsd Ali has lived a full life. You feel it in the conversational tone flowing through this highly readable work.

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Shaaturusher Itikotha
Syed Moqsd Ali
Jagriti Prokashoni

slip from his grasp will perhaps remain part of his consciousness (even as he pursues a professionally satisfying academic career abroad today). His parents dote on him, as they do on their second child Saad Aftab. On an educational tour of West Pakistan at the head of a group of Bengali students in the 1960s, Ali takes Saad along and vicariously experiences the raptures of excitement the child goes through in a milieu different from the one she is

Rereading an account of a long-ago war

Mumtaz Iqbal takes a critical look at a soldier's tale

RETIRED Indian Lt. Gen. J.R. Jacob is a tactful guest. Invited by COAS Gen. Moeen U Ahmed for the 26 March celebrations, a nice gesture, Jacob at a press conference complimented Bangladeshis by saying that "freedom fighters' gallantry... liberated Bangladesh from Pakistan occupation."

Jacob is an accomplished soldier and author. His book is a valuable account of the events leading to the fall of Dhaka (spelt as Dacca in 1971) because Jacob was an insider.

The book's value lies not so much in the campaign details these are well-covered in *Victory in Bangladesh* by Maj. Gen. Lachman Singh Lehl but in anecdotes and vignettes about people and Jacob's candid assessment and opinion about events and personalities.

Perhaps Jacob's most revealing information is the details on the effective logistics build-up that he and others rightly consider to be "...the critical factor in the success of the campaign" (p. 78-83). Hadn't Napoleon said that an army marches on its stomach? Constructing roads, upgrading signals and other forms of communications, collecting vehicles, transporting stores (54,000 tons), getting bridging equipment, moving ammunition all these and myriad other requirements for waging war successfully were in place before hostilities commenced.

Jacob rightly claims credit for this impressive achievement. He took a risk and started stockpiling by end-May 1971 even before receiving Army HQ's (AHQ) operating instruction and without briefing Aurora. When Aurora later found out, he wanted to suspend work till the op instruction arrived. Jacob with difficulty prevailed upon him to let logistics preparations continue.

This episode is symptomatic of the uneasy Aurora-Jacob relationship. The COs seem to have had little time for his GOC-in-C. Jacob makes the remarkable contention that he couldn't brief Aurora on the logistics preparation because the latter was "...involved in advising the Mukti Bahini and spent time touring."

These activities kept Aurora so busy that Jacob was "...left to get on with the planning, both operational and logistic, for the regular Army" (p.64).

This astonishing observation doesn't exactly flatter Aurora though Jacob maintains he got on well with his boss despite this and other differences (p.155), nor is it a particularly edifying example of a smooth Commander/COS relationship based on mutual confidence.

Though Jacob fulsomely praises India's Chief of Army Staff, Gen. (later Field Marshal) S.H.F.J. Manekshaw (p.153-54), he berates him for putting the capture of the ports of Chittagong and Khulna, and other territory, ahead of the capital Dhaka as the strategic objective in AHQ's operating instruction and 13 December 1971 directive to Eastern Command (p.65-67; 159).

Jacob graphically describes the conference in early August 1971 in Fort William's war room to discuss AHQ's instruction. Manekshaw, Aurora and Director of Military

Operations Maj. Gen. (later Lt. Gen.) K.K. Singh adamantly rejected Jacob's forceful recommendation that Dhaka should be the strategic objective. Jacob quotes Manekshaw:

"Sweetie, don't you see that if we take Khulna and Chittagong, Dacca will automatically fall." ("Sweetie" was the loaded endearment the COAS used before proceeding to rebuke). Jacob stuck to his guns. But his superiors were unmoved.

Jacob provides a tantalising peek into Delhi's vacillation on the timing of Indian military intervention in Bangladesh. In early April 1971, Manekshaw at a cabinet meeting used astute arguments and with some difficulty managed to convince Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of the unpreparedness and inadvisability of the Indian army intervening forthwith (Appendix 6 gives Manekshaw's amusingly candid account of this meeting).

Jacob corroborates Manekshaw's account. In the beginning of April, Manekshaw had rung up Jacob to say

that the government wanted Eastern Command "...to move immediately into East Pakistan". Jacob protested, observing that "...could be ready earliest by 15 November".

"Upset and impatient" at this answer, Manekshaw called Jacob the next day to say "...senior bureaucrats were accusing the Army of being over-cautious, if not cowardly". Jacob reiterated his position and praises Manekshaw for having the



Surrender at Dacca
Birth of a Nation
Lt. Gen. J.R. Jacob
Manohar

"...courage to uphold our (Eastern Command) stand" (p.36).

What is puzzling in this exchange is that Aurora, Jacob's boss, figures nowhere in it!

The matter on intervention did not end there. Jacob sardonically recalls a visit shortly thereafter by a Border Security Force (BSF) delegation led by its Director General FK Rustumjee. He informed Jacob that Delhi had tasked BSF to throw out the Pakistanis since

Eastern Command would not do so. Would Jacob please send a contingent to take part in the Victory Parade BSF planned to hold in Dhaka two or three weeks hence?

Jacob laughed, told Rustumjee that he was out of his depth and politely ushered him out (p.37).

What is one to make of these accounts, especially the quixotic BSF episode? It is reasonable to assume that policy makers in Delhi, like many others, did not have

a clear grasp in early April 1971 of what was happening inside East Pakistan. Mrs. Gandhi's government was puzzled and unsure about the quality and magnitude of military posture and response (See Muldhara '71 by Mueyedul Hasan, one of the finest accounts of the liberation movement, including a critical analysis of Indian policy deliberations).

Jacob's graphic account of the background events and climactic negotiations, where he played a major role, leading to Lt. Gen. A.A.K. Niazi's surrender on 16 December 1971 is absolutely fascinating (p.129-148). He records Niazi and Indian Maj. Gen. G.C. Nagra, who knew Niazi while defence attaché in Islamabad, constantly cracking bawdy jokes in Punjabi (many of which Maj. (later Maj. Gen.) Siddiq Salek in his book *Witness to Surrender* says are unprintable) while negotiating surrender with the Indians in Niazi's Kurmitola ops room! This is an interesting insight into Niazi's tortuous character and an intriguing reaction of a defeated general under stress.

On the Mukti Bahini (MB), Jacob considers that operation Jackpot, the code name for guerrilla operations inside Bangladesh, probably could have been even more effective had fewer (about 8,000) but more intensively trained fighters been deployed rather than the 100,000 or so that were actually recruited. However, this does not stop Jacob from praising the MB's performance, judging their contribution to be "...a crucial element in the operations

prior to and during full-scale hostilities." (p.94).

The one occasion Jacob ventures into diplomacy, and gets roundly snubbed, is around 18 December 1971 when running into External Affairs Policy Planning Chief late D.P. Dharthee suave architect of India's Bangladesh policy-at Dum Dum Airport, Kolkata. Jacob should get that India should get Bangladesh to agree on "three essentials": guarantees for the Hindu minority; rationalisation of the enclaves and transit rights by rail and inland waterways through Bangladesh with the use of facilities at Chittagong Port." Dhar smiled and in effect told Jacob to mind his own business (p.99).

These three items form an intriguing menu for Indo-Bangladesh diplomacy. The last item is of course a hot button issue of some vintage between Dhaka and Delhi.

Jacob makes interesting assertions about his role in the Bangladesh liberation movement.

Thus, he claims to have suggested to Bangladesh leaders around the first week or so of

April 1971 to "proclaim a Provisional Government...like the Free French Government... (of) de Gaulle" and even prepared the related draft declaration which he gave to Tajuddin (p.41).

Again, Jacob claims credit for initiating the first contact in early April 1971 with diplomat Deputy High Commissioner Hossain Ali in Kolkata which resulted in Ali and his staff switching allegiance to Bangladesh on 18 April 1971. The interesting point here is that Jacob did not inform Manekshaw or Aurora before taking this initiative (p.41-42). This strains credulity.

These and other claims in this readable and informative narrative suggest that modesty is not necessarily one of Jacob's strengths. The book makes transparent Jacob's disappointment that his accomplishments were not sufficiently recognised or rewarded.

Mumtaz Iqbal is a freelancer.

AT A GLANCE



Development or Destruction?
Essays on Global Hegemony, Corporate Grabbing
And Bangladesh
Anu Muhammad
Shrabon Prokashoni

These are essays that reflect the concerns of a vital segment of Bengali society. Anu Muhammad's belief in socialism has never wavered. In these articles, he explains, from the point of view of the common man, why the activities of international funding agencies need to be scrutinised in this country. The points he makes are based on logic.

Bangladesher Chalachitra Shilpo
Shonkote Jonoshongskriti
Geetiara Nasreen, Fahmidul Haq
Shrabon Prokashoni

This happens to be a serious study on the history of Bangladesh's film industry. The various trends and themes that have come into the nation's movies since the inception of cinema here are academically dealt with by the authors, both teachers at Dhaka University. Anyone reading the account cannot but rethink the whole matter.

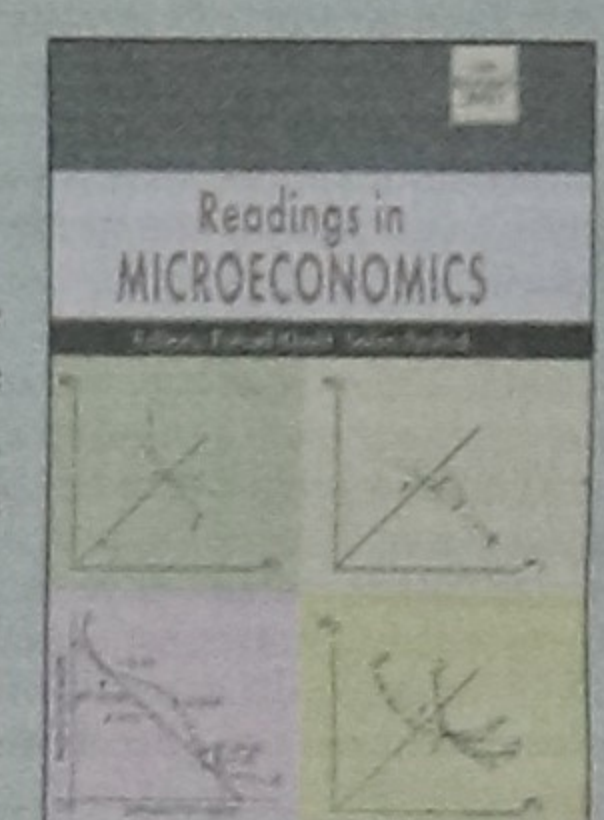


Twenty Great Bengalis
Ed. A. Majeed Khan
The University Press Limited

As the title makes clear, it is an enumeration, in separate chapters, of the lives of twenty Bengalis who have made an impact on their nation's life. It may be that not all the individuals included in the narrative will meet with reader approval. Even so, there are the details of individual lives that need to be re-emphasised for a new generation.

Readings in Microeconomics
Eds. Fahad Khalil, Salim Rashid
The University Press Limited

It is a work that basically deals with the tools of microeconomics. There are the classic articles, such as those of Radford, and then there are the write-ups which deal with value theory, utility maximization, consumption-loan model and the like. An added feature of the work is that it introduces the reader to some of the finest minds in economics.



A story of perpetual discrimination

Dhiraj Kumar Nath retells an old tale of injustice

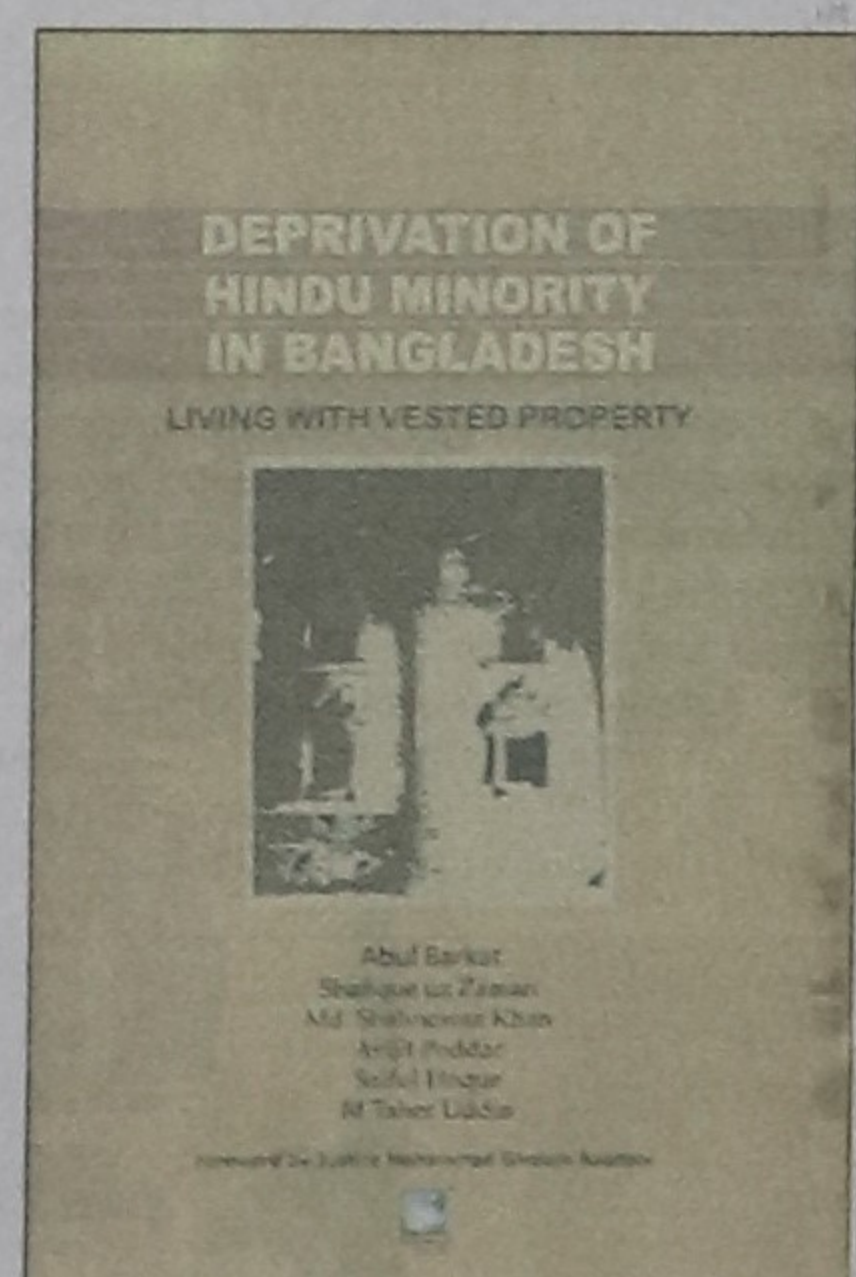
THE title of the book is most meaningful as it relates the stories and events that actually took place to deprive the minority community of its rights and titles of property ownership. A research based book, it is outstanding in nature as it provides an account, with facts and figures, of how the protective security of the minority has been ignored for years together and how the minority community has been unable to enjoy the property handed down to it from one generation to another.

It is perhaps for the first time that such a book has been published, based as it is on authentic findings and in-depth studies of the historical discrimination that has compelled a large number of citizens to leave the country and so leave their ancestral home and belongings behind. Professor Abul Barkat and his co-authors have accurately projected the economic history, lapses in the land laws, willful negligence of the bureaucracy and greed of the politicians for property.

About 1.2 million households and 6 million people belonging to the Hindu community have been directly and severely affected by the Enemy/Vested Property Act. The community has lost 2.6 million acres of its own land in addition to other moveable and immovable property. The approximate money value of such loss (US \$ 55 billion) would be equivalent to 75 per cent of the GDP of Bangladesh (at 2007 prices). The EPA/Vested Property Act has compelled Hindus to break family ties. Stress and strain, mental agony and a fueling of religious fundamentalism have been the offshoot. The deprivation led to the growth of a communal mindset in what had been a historical secular climate and context.

The methodology adopted to collect information is appreciable. With primary and secondary data verified on the basis of documents relating to EPA/VPA and land survey, data from BSS and reports and journals, the work makes compelling reading. Besides, a number of eminent individuals have been interviewed to arrive at an understanding of the extent of the effect of the law on the deprived community. Sample districts taken under the study were sixteen but they covered the whole of Bangladesh in 1997-2006. Assuming the 1961 population

share of the Hindu population was 18.4 per cent, the absolute size of this population in 2001 would have been 22.8 million rather than the 11.4 million reported in the census. In other words, the actual current (2001) figure is half the expected size. Thus the missing Hindu population was estimated to be 50 per cent with the mass outward migration from the mid-1960s onward as an effect of the EP/VP Act (elaborated in Chapter 3 of the book). Chapter 6 deals with case studies and



Deprivation of Hindu Minority in
Bangladesh
Living with Vested Property
Abul Barkat, S Zaman, S Khan, A
Poddar, S Hoque, and Taher Uddin
Pathak Shamabesh

Table 21 shows six broad categories of cases relating to loss of Hindu property. One cannot but agree with Justice Mohammad Gholam Rabbani when he observes in the foreword that the authors have done a historical job. The book, in fact, upholds the spirit of liberation and Articles 27 and 28 (1) of the Constitution. It re-emphasises the idea that "All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law."

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is former advisor/caretaker government.

A puzzle swathed in enigma

Karim Waheed finds himself undertaking a journey of discovery

"For everything that exists there are three instruments by which the knowledge of it is necessarily imparted: fourth, there is the knowledge itself, and, as fifth, we must count the thing itself which is known and truly exists. The first is the name, the second the definition, the third the image..." --- Plato, Epistle VII

THE mangled corpse of an epebe (adolescent male) named Tramachus is found on the slopes of Mount Lycabettus. Signs of an attack by wolves are apparent. Heracles Pontor, the "Decipherer of Enigmas" (a detective), is however convinced that Tramachus, an aspiring student at Plato's Academy, has been murdered. Tramachus' tutor at the academy, Diagoras, seeks the help of Heracles to learn more about the epebe's death. As Diagoras and Heracles investigate, more students of the academy are brutally murdered.

Meanwhile, a second story is emerging in the footnotes. The modern-day translator (who remains unnamed) finds himself in a predicament. The story appears to him to be an example of an ancient literary device called "eidesis". Eidesis is the practice of repeating words or phrases so as to evoke a particular image or idea in the reader's mind. As he continues translating the ancient manuscripts, the translator deduces that the eidetic secret

refers to "The Twelve Labours of Heracles". He becomes obsessed with the imagery; characters seem to refer to him directly... should he stop?

The *Athenian Murders* is the first novel by Spanish author José Carlos Somoza to be published (by Abacus) in English. Originally published in Spain under the title *La caverna de las ideas* (The Cave of Ideas) in 2000, it was translated into English in 2002 by Sonia Soto. The historical novel/thriller won the 2002 CWA Macallan Gold Dagger.

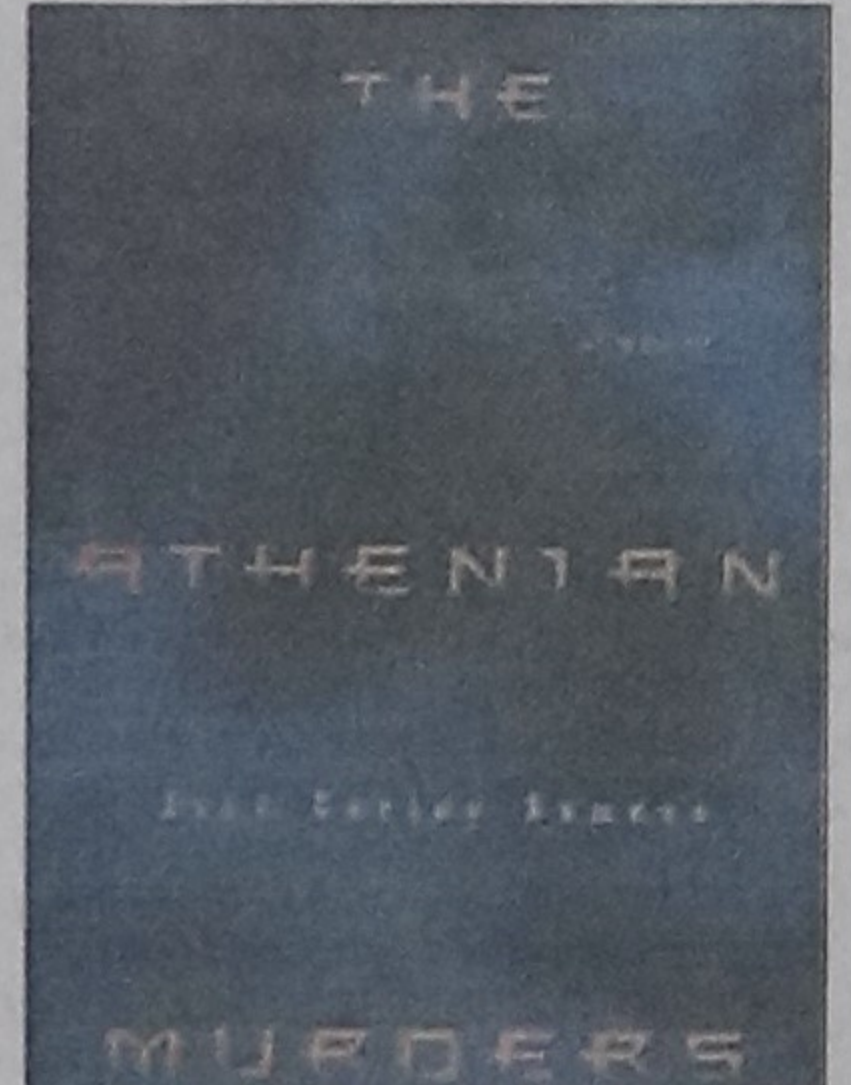
It seems that the English title of the book had to be dumbed down. Set in ancient Athens, and having to do with Plato's academy, as well as his philosophies, *The Cave of Ideas* would have been a more apt moniker. *The Athenian Murders* just sounds watered down and unevocative.

The *Athenian Murders* is definitely a clever book. It is presented as an authentic Greek text. The translator appears only in footnotes. These are not the usual dry, academic footnotes; they tend to be a bit more chatty and self-involved. The unidentified translator is using the one known version of the text, which was prepared by a Greek scholar named Montolo.

As the original story progresses, the two protagonists set out to investigate the murder of Tramachus. Both Heracles and Diagoras have their agendas. Heracles was once in love with

Tramachus' mother Irys, and Diagoras was deeply attached to his pupil. The two -- Heracles and Diagoras -- are contrasting figures, especially in their philosophies. The former has little use for abstractions or ideas; he accepts only what he sees. The latter, being a member of Plato's institution, relies almost entirely on airy abstraction.

Bizarre things start to happen: the text



The Athenian Murders
José Carlos Somoza
Abacus

occasionally turns abruptly to the second person, addressing the translator. Another, very different philosophical acquaintance of Heracles, Crantor, recounts a "widely held belief in many places far from Athens: 'Everything we do and say is words written in another language on a huge papyrus scroll. And Someone is reading the scroll right now, deciphering our thoughts and actions, and finding hidden keys to the text of our lives. That Someone is known as the Interpreter, or Translator...'"

And if that wasn't enough, a prime suspect -- the sculptor Menaechmus -- is working on a piece called "...The Translator".

The story turns into a gore-fest. More carved up bodies of Plato's students, from reputable families, are discovered. Seductive characters like Yasintra, a hetaira (courtesan) are introduced. There are Dionysian rituals. There is a visit to Plato's academy. Danger lurks from unexpected corners, and slowly an explanation emerges.

Simultaneously the translator goes through his share of maddening episodes. The clues and at times the characters start presenting direct threats. He finds out that Montolo, who worked on the original manuscripts, went insane and was found dead in a way that uncannily resembles Tramachus' murder. On the verge of going unhinged, the translator finds himself in captivity.

About the translator's character, the

author Somoza said in an interview, "I had already written the first draft of my novel, in which the action took place in classical Athens. I had seen it as a novel of suspense, with a supposed investigator of that period, Heracles Pontor, and a series of murders to be solved, and that was that. But then it occurred to me that if we imagined that the story had been written back in those days I would need a translator in order to 'read' it, as with any other text in Greek. Just as I thought this, the figure of the Translator -- still ghostly, still sketchy -- was born in my mind."

"And he came to life strongly: he wanted to 'come into' the plot, he wanted to be included, come what may. But what did the Translator of a detective novel, however 'historical' it might be, have to do with anything? It seemed to me that if I included him, my story would turn into something else. It might still be a thriller, and I might even still like it, but it would be another kind of story, much stranger than what I'd first imagined, much stranger than the plots of the other thrillers I'd read..."

And Somoza succeeds with flying colours. Like Russian dolls hidden inside one another, *The Athenian Murders* is a puzzle swathed in a mystery contained inside an enigma.

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