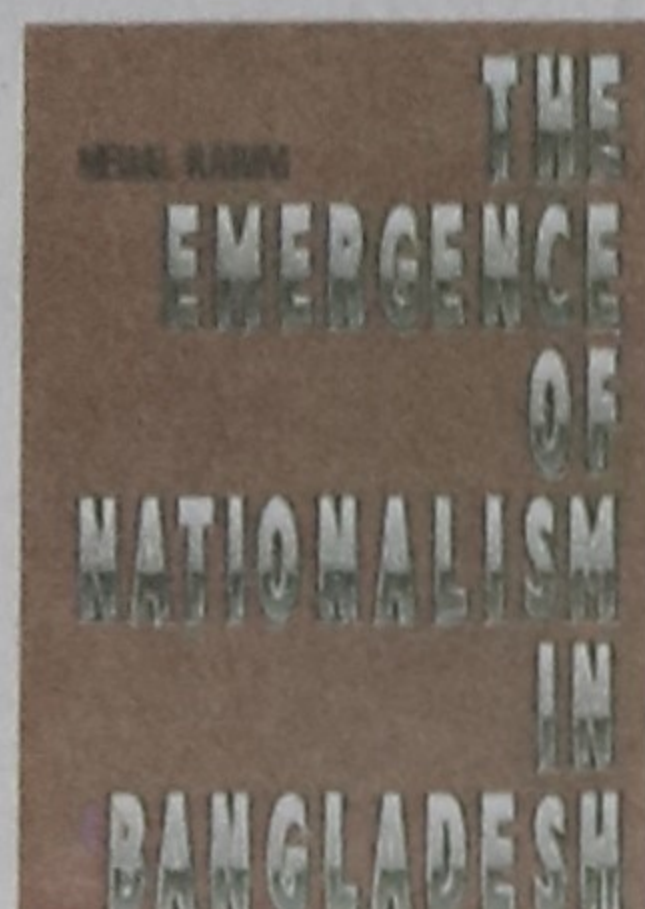


Growth of a nation... and the health of a society

Two books focused on history appeal to Syed Badrul Ahsan

NEHAL Karim does a good job of presenting Bangladesh's history in a nutshell here. Well, it is not exactly a nutshell in that he stays away from the temptation of providing readers with a dry enumeration of events and personalities. On second thought, it is a good deal more, seeing that he offers up a background to the incidents and happenings which were to pave the way to the growth of nationalism in Bangladesh. There is an absence of pontification here, which is why the work acquires a charm all its own. In socio-political conditions where the tendency, or call it trend, is toward an esoteric analysis of history, Karim avoids the pitfalls of seeing his book turn into just another tome to be displayed on the shelf.

This is a work which traces, step by careful step, the politics and the personalities that have mattered in Bangladesh and in the region of which it was an integral part till the withdrawal of the British colonial power. This writer does through taking the reader down that all too familiar road where the tales of the 1857 revolt against the British lead to certain inevitabilities in the years that follow. The style is all, for it is one any student of history will find to be of profit. The chapters follow rapidly, and systematically, one upon the other. The establishment of the Indian National Congress, the



The Emergence of Nationalism in Bangladesh
Nehal Karim
Adhuna Prakashan

1905 partition of Bengal, the rise of the Muslim League, the Government of India Act 1935, the Two-Nation Theory, the Cripps and Cabinet Missions, et al, are the underpinning of the work. And then there is more; and it comes through a detailed account of the factors behind a shaping up of the social structure in Bengal in the years leading up to the creation of Pakistan in 1947.

By far the most riveting section of Karim's book pertains to the relations between East and West Pakistan following the division of India. Scholars attuned to Pakistan and Bangladesh studies, one suspects, cannot suppress a glee of

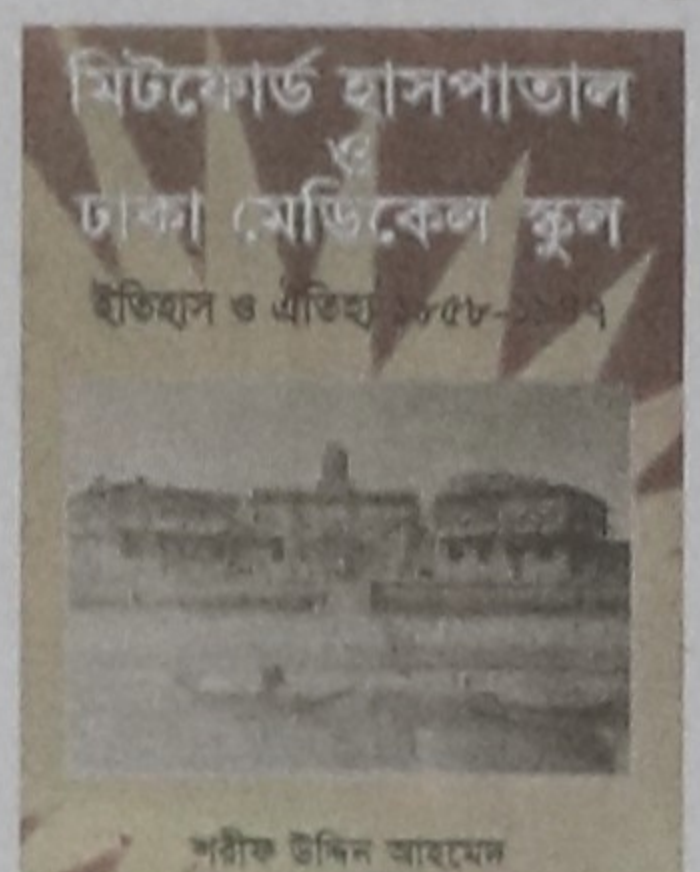
delight as they wade through the tables and figures Karim provides as a way of explaining the exploitation Bengalis went through in their twenty four years as part of Pakistan. Here is a glimpse into some sordid realities of those years: between 1947 and 1955, there was no Bengali serving as secretary in the central government, in contrast to 19 West Pakistanis working as secretaries. Take the case of the armed forces. Up to 1955, there were only 14 Bengali officers in the Pakistan army, with the number of West Pakistanis much higher -- a grand total of 894. When you highlight, therefore, the political struggle that shaped up especially in the 1960s and eventually culminated in a rise of Bengali nationalism, you recall in palpable manner some of the underlying causes behind the growth of the movement that was to lead to Bangladesh's emergence as a free nation.

And that precisely is where Karim deserves credit. The work is as much a recapitulation of history as it is a reminder of the principles that added substance to Bengali nationalism. The writer, an academic at Dhaka University, lists the political aspects of the Bengali struggle, included among which are such seminal events as the 1954 elections, the martial law of 1958, the Six Points movement of 1966 and the general elections of 1970. For good measure, he makes note of such factors as West Pakistani

racial prejudice vis-à-vis Bengalis, the Ayub-era education policy and overall repression of Bengali culture to explain his argument.

It is a gripping read, almost unputdownable.

How many of us remain aware of the historical antecedents behind some of the more auspicious events in our lives? Take the story of Mitford Hospital and, Dhaka Medical School. That Robert Mitford was the moving



Mitford Hospital O Dhaka Medical School
Itishash O Oitijho 1858-1947
Sharifuddin Ahmed
Academic Press and Publishers Library

spirit behind all this programme of health care in the eastern part of Bengal (and we are speaking of the 19th century) is a story not

many have cared to recall or delve into. And yet Sharifuddin Ahmed, a respected academic at Dhaka University, one with his ear to the ground of historical research, does remember. And he remembers for each one of the incidents that led to the growth of the institutions he deals with in this well presented work.

In a society where the high calling of research is all too often sidelined by a propensity for self-aggrandisement and evident hollowiness, the work in review proves almost with insistence that the yearning for scholarly work thrives yet in those whose awareness of history remains as acute as that of the old masters of historical study. Sharifuddin Ahmed, whose newest activity happens to be coordinating an Asiatic Society programme geared to celebrating the 400th anniversary of Dhaka, has sketched in meticulous detail the roots of the enterprise that was to be Mitford Hospital as well as Dhaka Medical School. The emphasis is on the formative years of the two institutions. In a broad sense, the period Ahmed covers spans the years between 1858 and 1947. These two years hold special significance in the politics of what used to be British colonial India. The beginnings of Mitford Hospital came a mere year after the uprising of 1857, indeed when the ramifications of the revolt and its terrible suppression were yet being felt. In

1947, vivisection of the land, indeed of the soul, marked the arrival of political freedom.

Dhaka, for all its grandeur, as attested to in the Mughal and subsequent era, had clearly fallen on bad times in the earlier part of the 19th century. East Bengal did not give any impression other than that it was a backwater not just within the all-India context but from the perspective of united Bengal as well. It was this backwater that provided fertile ground, it now seems reasonable to conclude, for the growth of the medical institutions the book analyses in painful detail.

Sharifuddin Ahmed's approach will not leave the lay reader disappointed as much as it will not give scholars scope to question the quality of the work. It is a study that can complement one's understanding of the social history of the part of Bengal that was to make its mark someday as the independent republic of Bangladesh. Do not forget, though, that the work is a clarion call to those on whose watch medical education and patients' welfare have in recent times gone through a qualitative decline: if public welfare was the ethos in 1858, it may as well be the same in these times, despite the seemingly all-consuming mediocrity all around.

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

AT A GLANCE



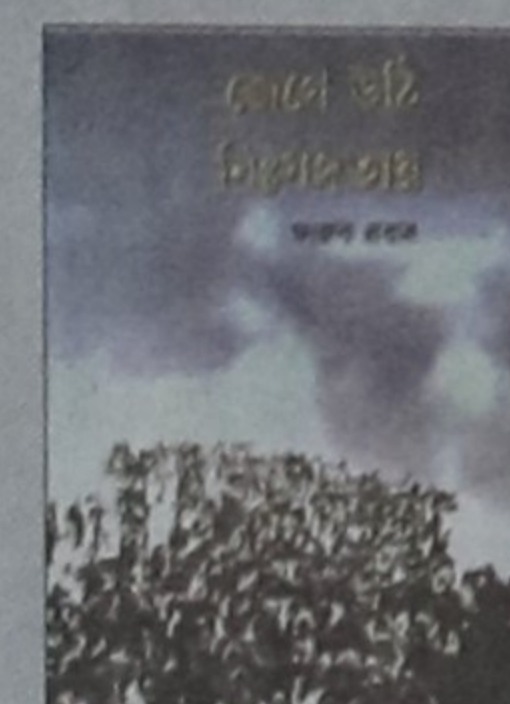
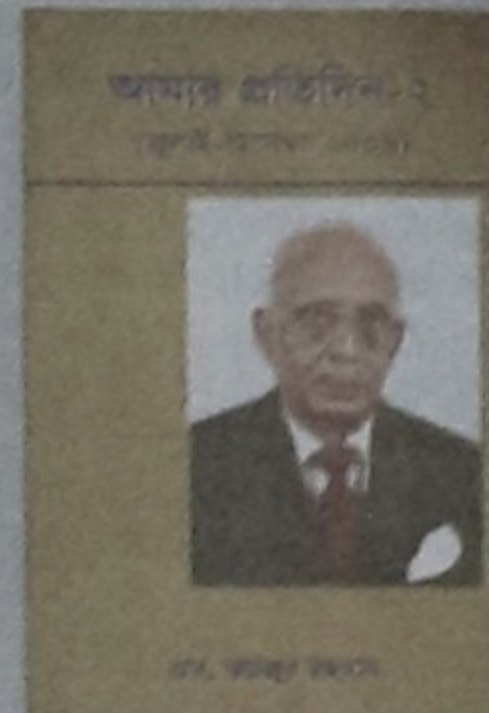
Siddhanta Biponno Upokuler Bibhorno Roop
Rafiqul Islam Montu
BARSIK

The devastation wrought by Siddhanta along the coastal regions of Bangladesh is vividly brought out in this work. The writer, a young journalist, has certainly done his homework, which makes the book highly readable. It is an account of a tragedy that is to be recommended to discerning readers.

Amar Protidin-2
M. Faizur Rahman

Academic Press and Publishers Library

It is a diary, as diaries go. But that is one way of looking at it. More importantly, it is an account by an individual whose interest in life and everything connected to it is as interesting as the men and matters he surveys before him. A good read on a languidly passing afternoon, an exercise that may cause memories to come alive in others.

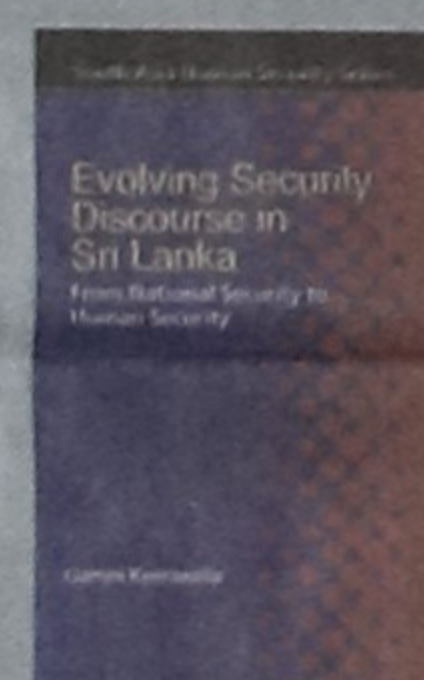


Jege Uthi Nishshongotaye
Faruq Proshan
Muktachinta

A collection of poetry, indeed of thoughts, that reflect the workings of the modern and young Bengali mind, it is to be read to be felt in the soul. Anyone with a poetic turn of mind cannot but be drawn to it. And chances are that he or she may come away with a renewed sense of thrill coursing through the soul.

Economics and Governance of Nongovernmental Organizations in Bangladesh
World Bank Country Study
The University Press Limited

For all the reservations entertained about the activities of donor institutions, this account of NGO operations, the limitations they work under and indeed the governance process within them should appeal to readers. The World Bank study is aimed at drawing a conclusion about the subject matter covered. One may not quite agree with it.



Evolving Security Discourse in Sri Lanka
Gamini Keerawella
The University Press Limited

Conflict has been part of life in Sri Lanka since the early 1980s. Against a background of LTTE rebellion in the north and east of the country, conditions could not but be other than normal. This book examines the parameters within which the security discourse has gone on in Colombo. A revealing read.

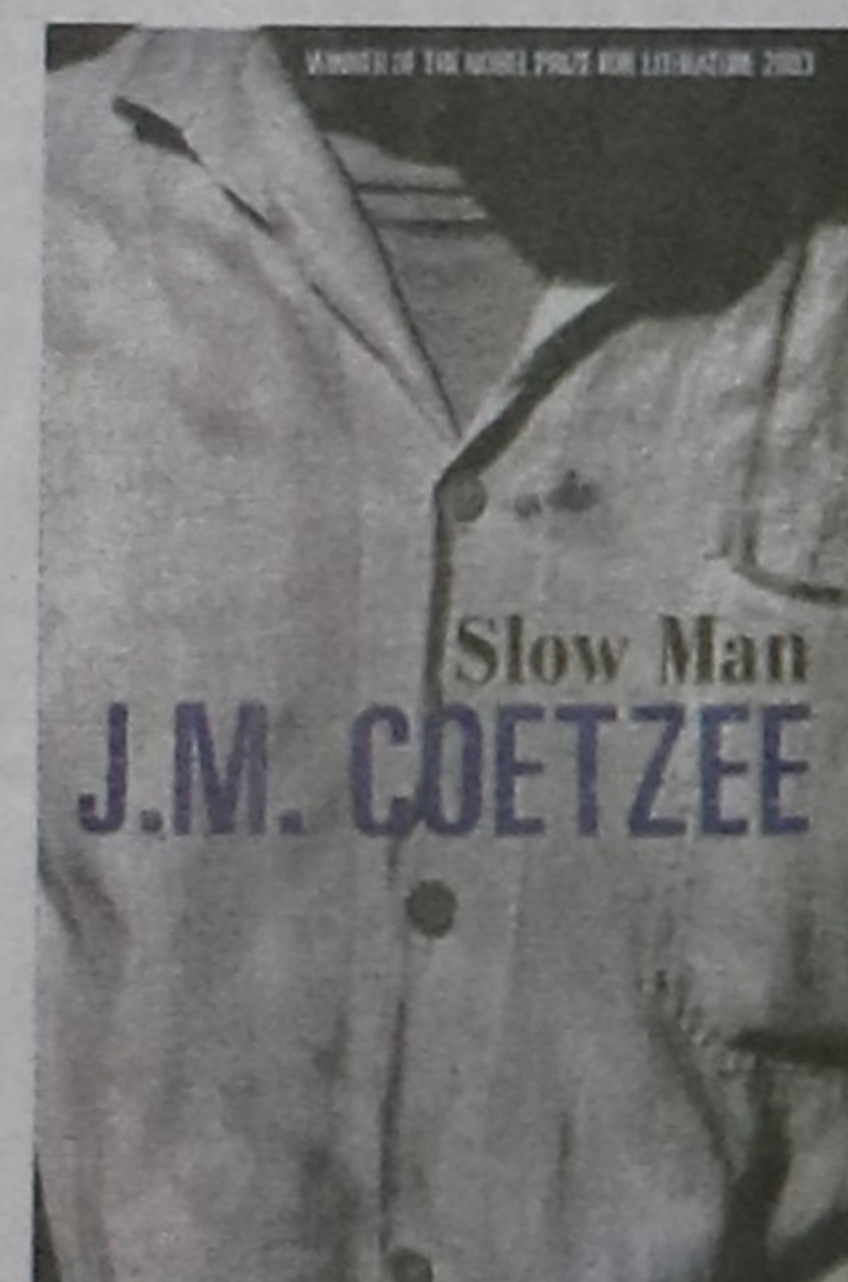
Truncated bodies and ministering nurses

A throbbing tale makes Mahbub Husain Khan happy

SLOW Man is the latest novel by Nobel Laureate (in 2003) and Booker Prize winner (1999) JM Coetzee. After his novel *Disgrace*, which won the Booker Prize in 1999, he has written three novels: *Youth*, *Elizabeth Costello*, and now *Slow Man*. South African literature has now come to mean more than *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and the white South African writers Nadine Gordimer and Athol Fugard. But not everybody realises this truth. I was rather surprised when a senior journalist in Dhaka, who is now with an English language daily newspaper, was asking about the background of JM Coetzee after he had won the Nobel Prize as this journalist had not, till then, read any of his novels.

Coetzee is an exception rather than a typical representative of Black South African fiction writing. His fiction does not exploit the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid and interracial love affairs doomed from the beginning. In *Slow Man*, the setting is in Australia, a country which has to do with '... colonialism, late colonialism and neo-colonialism', like South Africa. The novel's chief protagonist is Paul Rayment, a professional photographer, of French parentage and born in France, who has migrated to Adelaide in Australia after his marriage to the Frenchwoman Henriette. But the marriage does not work out and the couple have no children, and Henriette has left Paul before the story starts. Paul Rayment is now '... unmarried, single, solitary, alone'. He is on the threshold of a comfortable old age when a calamitous cycling accident, where his cycle is hit by a car driven by a youth results in the amputation of a leg. Humiliated, his body truncated, his life circumscribed, he turns away from his men and women friends, well-wishers, companions and lovers. For his daily care he hires a nurse named Marijana, who like him has had a European childhood in Croatia. Tactfully and efficiently she ministers to his needs but avoids sexual encounters. His feelings for her, and for her handsome teenage son, are complicated by the sudden arrival of the celebrated Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of Coetzee's previous novel. She threatens to take over the direction of his life and the affairs of

his heart and to use him as her 'laboratory mouse' for her next 'experimental' novel. Coetzee tells us only what we need to know. But what is left untold creates an extraordinary density of emotional atmosphere. His characters are few in this novel, but are capable of surprising us. Every incident described seems to throb with potentiality, with an edgy, exciting, sometimes titillating, sense of what else might be happening or is going to happen. With a wonderfully controlled series



Slow Man
JM Coetzee
Random House

of modulations Coetzee allows his characters and the plot to move towards some kind of resolution. This is a story of the sufferings of men and women told unflinchingly in prose of spare, stately beauty and with an intelligent potency that makes it as exhilarating as it is grim. Once again, this novel is a masterful work that confirms Coetzee's claim to be considered as one of the best novelists alive.

Mahbub Husain Khan is a former civil servant and critiques books.

Women of magic and men of sweet tooth

History and tales of families excite Farida Shaikh's imagination

WHILE reading *Blood Brothers: A Family Saga*, I felt as if it was a sequel to Shahidullah Kaiser's *Sangshaptak: A Bengal Saga*. Both the books are marvellous works on the socio-cultural history of Muslim Bengal, skillfully crafted prose in beautifully blended fact and fiction. Book-wise the two are blood brothers!

M.J. Akbar's book is a storehouse inlaid with historical occurrences of enormous magnitude within the British Empire, and their ripple effects are felt on the small and simple life of the people in an obscure village Telinipara around 1861, which is the setting of this autobiographical narration covering two and not quite three generations. As the last line of the book reads, 'I was seventeen. Life had begun.'

The Hindu-Muslim relationship during this period is portrayed with pathos and patience. Starvation, famine, migration, polite form of slavery, drought and loss of income, becoming a Muslim, improving sanitation by establishing a municipality, characters, et al, interlink into a narrative of social history authenticated by a powerful memoir.

'Bengal is famous for the magic of its women and the sweet tooth of its men ... The Bihari tooth is different ... Rahmat suspected that class consciousness kept Bihari workers averse to delicacies like the shandesh created by sophisticated Bengali confectioners.' Rahmat told Modak that he wanted to learn how to make shandesh. Modak smiled. 'You are not a Bengali. How can you

make shandesh?'

The tailoring and the meat shops in Matiyaburj make it 'apparent that the population was largely Muslim ... This is because we Avadhis taught Bengalis to wear stitched clothes. Before we arrived from Lucknow Hindus would wear a dhoti and Muslims a lungi.'

Akbar's grandfather was named Prayaag, meaning confluence of the holy rivers Ganges and Jumna. A Hindu Kshatriya, Dadu was born in a village near the town of Buxar in Bihar, the last stronghold that fell under the control of the East India Company. The English company thereby earned the title of Bahadur Company or Heroic Company, having previously defeated the joint forces of Emperor Shah Alam of Delhi, Nawab Mir Qasim of Bengal and Nawab Shuja ud Daula of Avadh.

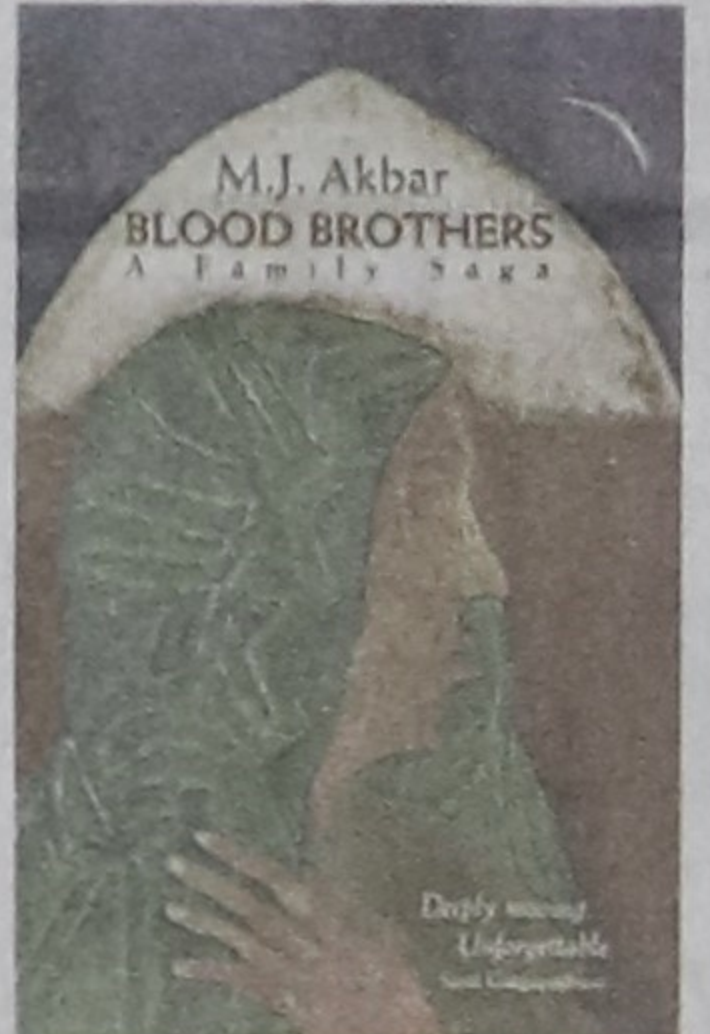
Dadu lost his parents to the 1870 famine, when the whole village emptied through migration and others became indentured labourers. His mother had taught him about the eternal creator, Brahma the originator of mankind,

its division into the four castes to make for social structure and social order.

Half a dozen jute mills were set up along the banks of the Hooghly in Shammugur, Gondalpara, Angas, Titagur, Champdani and Kankinara. Thomas Duff and Company with headquarters in Dundee opened Victoria Jute Mill, protected on three sides by a one-foot thick and eight-foot high wall and the

river on the fourth side, in Telinipara, connected to the nearest railway station Chandanagar, a French outpost some thirty miles upstream of Calcutta, 'the political and industrial centre of the British Empire.'

Wali Muhammad, a Muslim, picks up Dadu from near the door



Blood Brothers
A Family Saga
M.J. Akbar
Roll Books Pvt. India

of his teashop and his wife Diljan Bibi, whom he calls Mai since his mother died, feeds him a meal. Prayaag for Wali and Diljan is Allah's answer for a son. Many years later Dadu builds the first double-storied brick house in Telinipara, near the tea-shop.

Prayaag becomes a Muslim, knowing that 'one of the marks of faith is khatma which is the Arabic for circumcision'. Rahmatullah,

Rahmat's bride, is a Muslim girl, Jamila.

The founders of the Deoband Muslim order fought the British in 1857 -- 'their motive was reform within the Muslim community through a renewal of faith'. There was a growing demand for fatwa and judgments on Islamic laws; their network of schools and mosques stretched from 'Kabul in Afghanistan to Chittagong in Bengal'. In 1867 Deoband took roots at Chhatta Mosque in Delhi.

After the census of 1871 people learnt that Muslims were a majority in Bengal and 'the rift line sharpened between the Hindus and the Muslims.'

Hindu revivalism at the same time found 'a new momentum from powerful and lyrical writers of Bengali prose.'

A mystic, or a dervish, who visited Telinipara gave an account of the spiritual leader Syed Muin al-din Hasan al-Hussain al-Sijzi Chishti of Ispahan, who had arrived from Mecca during the reign of Maharaj Prithviraj. His shrine in Ajmer 'is a place of pilgrimage for Hindus and Muslims, an altar where the prayers of the poor are answered.'

Jamila and Rahmatullah knelt down '... and prayed for a son'. In September 1917 'my grandfather took into his arm a ... baby, his son ...'. The child was named after Akbar, not the poet Akbar Allahabad, but Akbar the emperor, and 'faith and heroism of the Prophet's son-in-law'. The full name was Akbar Ali. The old man on Bakr 'Id day

noted that 'Allah has ninety nine names ... not one describes Allah as a warrior ... Allah is a creator not a killer'.

'There are Hindus who enjoy washing a wound with blood. They exploit what divides brothers and are blind to what is common. The supreme God of Vedas is Brahma ... has no form, Allah also has no form ... mimansa says ... idols are only a means to assist the mind towards Brahma ... Hindu seeks release from life in Nirvana ... And a Muslim seeks assimilation in Allah. Both sufi and sannayasin reach God through meditation. The Hindus kravana is my sama, we both listen, his manna is my muraqaba, we both obey; his niddhyanasana is my tawajjuh, we both contemplate. The buddhi of the Brahmin is my ilm; we both learn; his jnana is my marafat, we both seek emancipation through knowledge ... maya illusion, I call alam-i-khyal, the world of fancy.' It is this that expresses the essence of *Blood Brothers*.

Born on 11 January 1951, named Mubashshir, studied at the English medium St. Joseph's Convent in Chandernagar, for 'the future was written in English.'

The misspelling of his name changed to Mubashar. The three-syllable name was changed to Moby by his peers. He was referred to as Moby Dick the whale and a juvenile joke attached to the extension. He was joined by sister Arfana and younger brother Hashim and surrounded by a joint family of aunts, nieces and nephews. His

Secret thoughts of a romantic hero revealed

Muneera Parbeen enjoys flipping through the pages of a dusky diary

IT is not too hard to imagine Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy writing a diary. Indeed any Austen fan could readily visualise Darcy's handsome, and proud, head bent over a table writing away, most likely wearing his skin-tight breeches and the handsomest cravat ever.

And there is proof of his writing skills. He did write a very elaborate and well-expressed letter to Elizabeth Bennet in the book itself, forming an anti-climax of the best.

Maya's extremely detailed fiction about Mr. Darcy -- the main hero of Jane Austen's classic *Pride and Prejudice* in the form of his personal recordings -- Mr. Darcy's Diary -- gives us what can plainly be termed as a man's perception of that Regency story.

The fictional diary, of this fictional character, has resulted in an extremely readable book that can give its readers a lot of room for thought, and reflection.

The secret thoughts of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, romantic hero to millions around the world, are thus unfolded.

It is a very revealing diary that Darcy keeps, from his moods to his intellects to his frolicking to his taste for the ... ahem, housemaids! It does seem like a very different Darcy than Austen's. However, in Austen's descriptions we get to know very intimate details about Elizabeth Bennett's

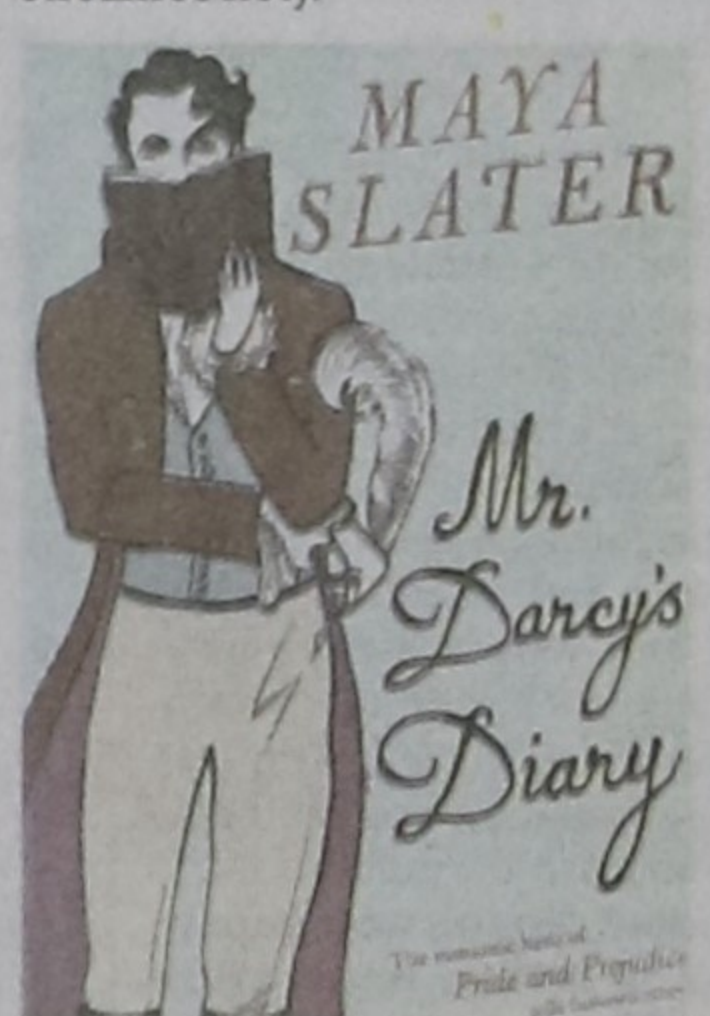
thoughts and views through her conversations, her dialogues with Charlotte and sisterly talk with Jane. Mr. Darcy is spared that kind of microscopic scrutiny.

In the fictional diary, however, Darcy is scrutinised. Maya Slater explores the man of his times. And, as expected, Darcy does turn out to be a bit of a cad. Here Darcy, gentleman as he is, upper elite as he is, admires a housemaid's 'pleasing embonpoint' and then tumbles her on his bed. What a shocker for his fans though!

But the thoughts that this gives rise to is the fact that Mr. Darcy was a bit too good to be true in the first place. At a time in history when being a libertine wasn't exactly ruled out by any man, every hero in stories based in Regency times is more or less a libertine on the side, but ultimately settles down in life with the purest of heroines and her virgin virtues. In other words, she is pure and he is spoilt but that's acceptable.

Austen's characters are based on the virtues, especially more the women. The men are always chosen by the women on the merit of their characters. Captain Wentworth, Edmund Bertram, Edward Dashwood they all falter but ultimately don't trip. However they are less explored than the men. The villains in these stories show a better por-

trayal of the upper class men at the time, indulgent, quite selfish and at least a little bit laced with hypocrisy. They wine and flirt, and keep mistresses and gamble and also father numerous little ones hidden very well from mainstream society.



Mr Darcy's Diary
Maya Slater
Phoenix

In Mr. Darcy's diary, it is these indulgences of the man that are revealed and I quite believe ends up making his character more real than ever. His very dangerous friendship with Lord Byron, not present in the original book, reveals him indulging in such

frolicking that is entirely acceptable in the society of his time. And quite raunchy some of the indulging is too!

Austen puritans might be shocked at first at the depth of Darcy's self, as revealed here, but will grow to accept it.

However, the diary goes without jeopardising the fact that Darcy remains a gentleman, all acts of Regency times. Despite all acts of madness and badness, our hero is spared its taints and he remains the man that Austen reveals him to be. After all, Austen's heroes trip but do not fall. Ultimately Maya too succumbs to that.

So what is exciting about Maya's Darcy? The fact that she recaptures the events of *Pride and Prejudice* through Darcy's eyes, giving the story a different opinion of sorts.

The diary reveals detailed descriptions of Darcy's reactions to Elizabeth Bennett from his admiration of her fine eyes to his disastrous proposal to his galantry to save her sister. In the process he painfully finds out the extent of his thoughts and views on life and comes to a point where he is able to draw a balance on them. This all is revealed in the original book itself. What Maya's diary does is bring them to life from Darcy's points of view.

The book gives a background to Darcy's elusive life; on how he

feels about different matters of which there is very little clue in Austen's book; looking out for his friend Charles Bingley, the guilt he feels of not having been able to protect his sister Georgiana from the terrible Wickham and his thoughts on the scheming Miss Bingley. Also his regard for his formidable aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and his kind consideration of his sickly cousin Lady Anne de Bourgh whose sketchy character in the original book gets a more strength in this book.

We also learn his weaknesses, the reasons behind his not-gentleman-like manners, and the fact that he loves good food, and the understanding that Mrs. Bennet's dinners couldn't have actually disappointed him without mentioning a word about it. Austen says Mrs Bennet keeps a good table and Maya picks up on it and reveals what good food means to Darcy. Beautiful!

So in Mr. Darcy's Diary, Darcy is much more fully explored. Readers are able to see behind the scenes, and find grounds for much of his behaviour. The reason such terrible secrets being let out of the bag don't disappoint us is the fact that Maya gives us more of a feel for the life of a Regency gentleman. In writing up Mr. Darcy's Diary for him Maya enters uncharted territory. And she does a brilliant job of it. She has care-

fully researched the era she is writing about and has painstakingly described details of the period.

She adds more colour to the picture by inventing interesting pastimes and friends for Austen's hero, without degrading him. Poor Lizzy, though! Had she known of her hero's indulgences, I wonder what she would have thought about it, and said? Would she have been disappointed? Or would she have learnt to accept them as vicar of time?

Ultimately, writing a diary for one of the most loved male characters of English literature shows a great marketing mind. The difference is that Maya Slater takes up that common challenge and delivers it with the skill of a brilliant writer.

The result is enchanting, gripping and quite unforgettable. It is a recommended book.

There are many questions that grip the mind of an Austen fan who reads *Pride and Prejudice*. What else did Wickham do for Darcy to detest him so? How did Georgiana live with it? What did Darcy think of his cousin Anne and the proposed marriage to her? How did he exactly feel when he almost lost Lizzy to Rosings?

The diary gives us a chance to

Muneera Parbeen, a journalist, is at The Daily Star.