

Greatness put through a twister?

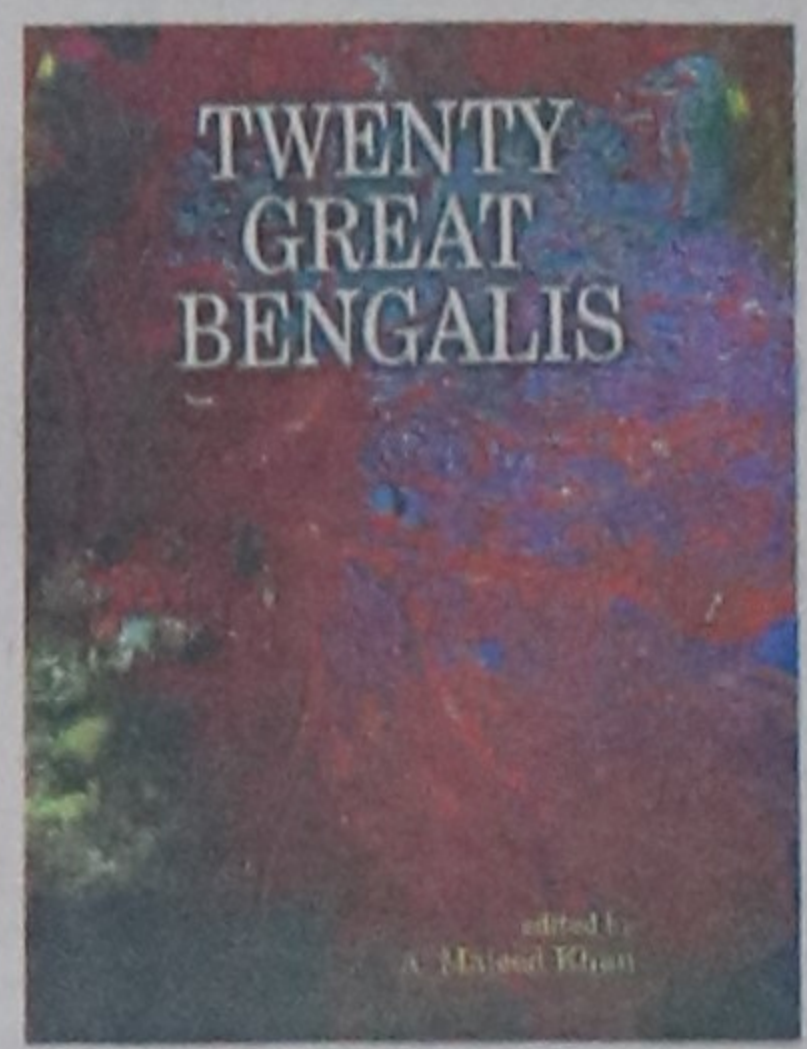
A work on twenty individuals leaves Syed Badrul Ahsan disappointed

HOW do you define greatness? And exactly how many fields can a study of greatness cover? The answers to these questions will likely be as intricate as the queries themselves. But when media organisations such as the Bengali Service of the British Broadcasting Service undertake a programme to assess the contributions of Bengali men and women and so arrive at an understanding of what greatness is all about, the effort should be considered rather encouraging. On second thought, however, history is never a matter of individuals coming by popular acclaim. And greatness is not to be assessed through the opinions of radio listeners, for the chances are that a very large number of these listeners are too close to their times to be able to focus on events of the past. And so they are quite likely to miss out on some significant cogs in the wheels of moving time.

Which brings us to this pretty interesting (for want of a better term) collection of essays on what is purportedly a galaxy of stars in Bengali history. The attempt is surely to be commended, seeing that it brings into focus twenty individuals who certainly have had a

role to play in Bengali life. But were or are they all great? Included in the compendium is General Ziaur Rahman. Precisely what his contributions to history, those that raise men to the heights, are has not been explained in the essay on him. Outside the essay, of course, there is history as we have observed shaping up before us. Zia conveyed, on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the message of freedom on 27 March 1971. After that, especially in the post-August 1975 situation, his role quickly slid into the negative. His overturning of secular principles and the rampant executions of soldiers and officers, on charges of attempted coups, during his dictatorial rule, do not exactly place him on the Olympian heights of history.

That said, there is the matter of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. There is hardly any question that his role in pre-partition Bengal and post-1947 Pakistan was pre-eminent or at least as crucial as that of some of his contemporaries in Muslim League politics. And that says a whole lot, for greatness was not a quality that could be ascribed to Jinnah or anyone else in the organisation.



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

Suhrawardy's reputation, moreover, was marred by the catastrophe of 16 August 1946, when as prime minister of united Bengal he had little qualm about announcing a holiday to observe his

party's Direct Action Day as part of the demand for Pakistan. The result was mayhem and murder. In four days of rioting, thousands of Muslims and Hindus lay dead on the streets of Calcutta, victims of the communal frenzy whipped up by the violence associated with Suhrawardy's move. And that is not the end of the story. In Pakistan, Suhrawardy turned out to be an arch defender of the cause of One Unit in West Pakistan, to the extent that he thought the 1956 constitution had actually granted 98 per cent of regional autonomy to East Pakistan. And then, of course, there is the truth of whether Suhrawardy ethnically qualifies to be a Bengali given his social and cultural background.

Twenty Great Bengalis could have been a good reference work for the individuals not included in it. Deshbandhu C. R. Das was a pivotal figure in Indian as well as Bengali politics till his death, at the relatively young age of fifty one, in 1925. He does not figure in the work. On the Bengali literary scene, Buddhadev Bose remains a leading light. He does not make it here. Absolutely no word is there on Tajuddin

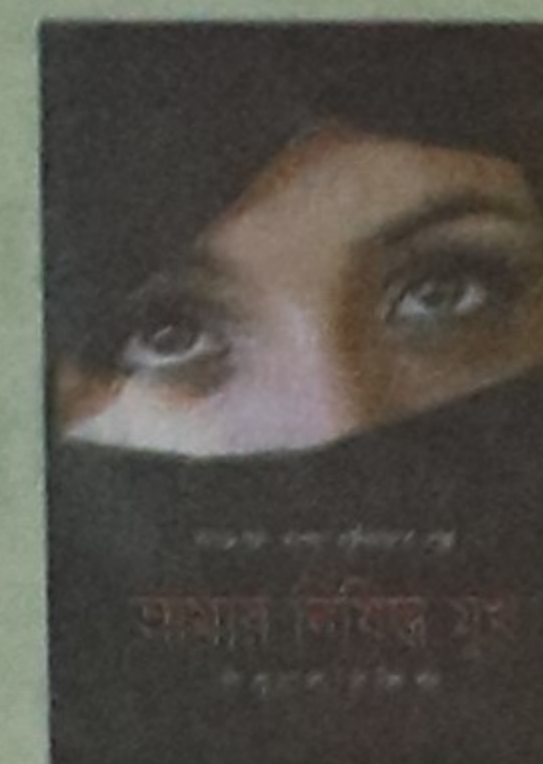
Ahmed, one of the more brilliant politicians of his generation. And there are quite a few other anomalies. With some exceptions, in some of the essays, the standard of English leaves a whole lot to be desired. Bangabandhu, as one essay notes, 'shouted' the call for independence. Jagadish Chandra Bose's year of birth is noted as 1857 below his photograph and 1858 in the accompanying article.

The flaws in the editing are obvious. The goal in producing such a comprehensive work was clearly to present an image of historical Bengal before the global community. That objective has unfortunately not been achieved. Studies of greatness acquire a substantive character when they project their subjects'warts and all. That does not appear to have been the approach here. Gushing praise for the twenty men covered in the work is all, which is a pity.

Note this: in the essay on Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, it is said that he passed his Entrance Examination in 1990, FA in 1992, BA in 1894 and MA in 1896! So much for proofreading.

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

AT A GLANCE



Amar Nishiddho Mukh
Afghan Tonoya Latifa'r Golpo
Translation Shancheeta
Tarafdar Prakashani

This is the tale of a young woman leading a life, or what goes for it, in fanaticism-dominated Afghanistan. Such tales are innumerable and have been making their way out to the outside world in recent times. Even so, Shancheeta does a very good job of doing a Bengali translation for her readers. The tale is gripping.

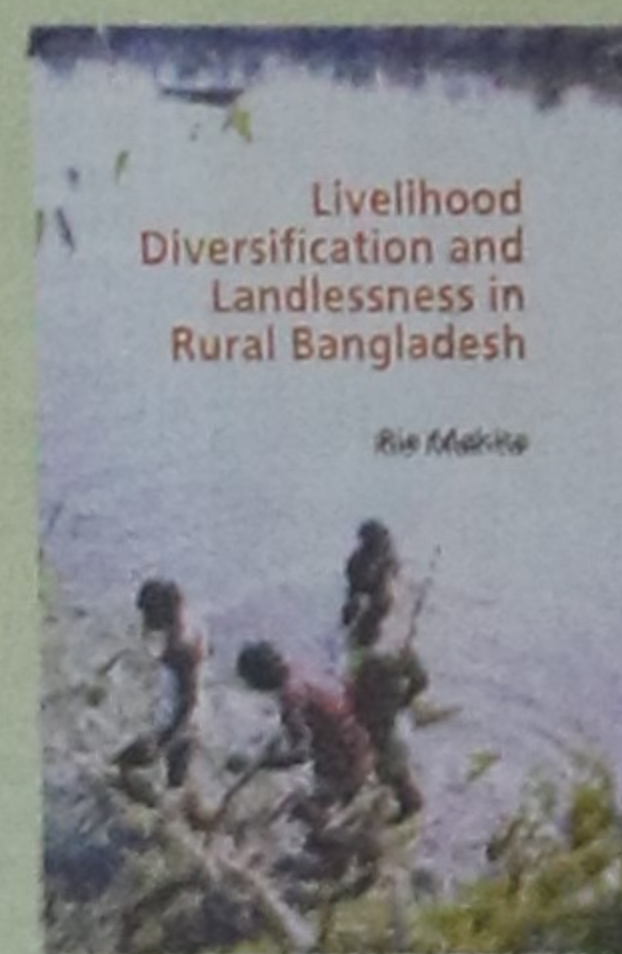
Nirbachito Golpo
Mulk Raj Anand
Trans. Jafar Alam
Pub. Rehana Haque

The writer's interest in subcontinental history has been abiding. He now brings that interest to bear in this work, where the well-known stories of Mulk Raj Anand are offered to Bengali readers in their own language. Alam has done remarkable justice to the tales, keeping the spirit of the stories alive.



Livelihood Diversification and
Landlessness in
Rural Bangladesh
Rie Makita
The University Press Limited

The book is an exploration of poverty engendered by landlessness. At the same time, it is a study in how even the landless can be provided with opportunities to emerge from their fraught conditions. The twin dimensions of growth and poverty-reduction rural based development find centre stage here.



Political Culture in Bangladesh
Perspectives and Analyses
Ed. Syed Saad Andaleeb
The University Press Limited

It is a scholarly compendium on the political issues confronting Bangladesh and what social thinkers in the country make of them. The editor has done a splendid job of collating the articles, comprising an enumeration of the issues as well as possible solutions. For anyone interested in contemporary Bangladesh studies, the book promises rewarding reading.



Political Culture in Bangladesh
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The University Press Limited

Mundane thoughts prattled out

A novel leaves Efadul Huq unimpressed

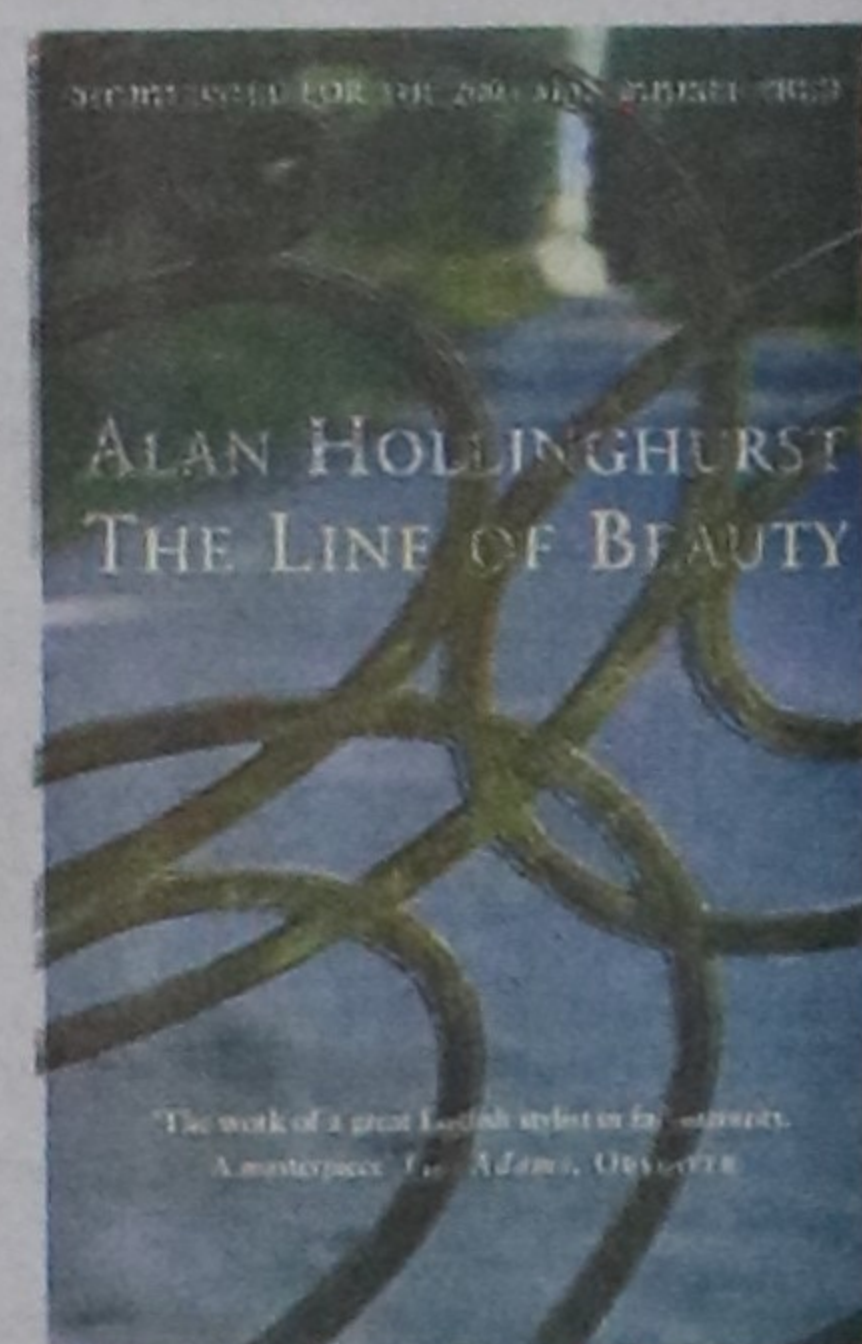
MAYBE *The Line Of Beauty* is not an appropriate title for this book. Maybe 'The Line Of Ennui' would make a better substitute. There isn't one aspect of the book which can be discussed, enviously, and yet it's the 2004 Man Booker Prize winner the deceptive praise that lures readers into the trap of purchasing this book.

The nucleus of the novel is Nicholas Guest, who lives up to his name by being a guest at his friend Toby's swanky family house. Guest is an Oxford graduate who comes from a middle class family of an antique dealer and struggles to discover his sexual and social identity. This being the conflict of the novel, the arid pages roll on. The shallowness of the novel does not allow the conflict to become entertaining. Guest reads a lot of Henry James and looks after Toby's sister Catherine. He also indulges in delightful flights of fancy, that is, lusting after nearly every man he comes across. Fortunately, some of his dreams do come true through Leo, the black council worker from a religious background, and Wani, the rich, spoilt, cocaine and porn addicted, AIDS ravaged man. Be not offended. Of course, there is the popular cocaine culture, outbreak of AIDS and turbulent politics. After all, it's the 1980s!

Toby's father, Gerald, is heavily involved in English politics. Surprisingly, Gerald appears to be a second-hand character collected from newspaper cuttings and clippings and as predictable as our politicians. Furthermore, the female characters are in a worse state than even the hand-me-down character sketch of Gerald. Catherine and Rachel are so thinly portrayed that they become invisible sometimes and when they appear, they seem unconnected like two unnecessary trash pieces populating the novel!

This novel is more of an excuse for Alan Hollinghurst to prattle out mundane thoughts about the world. There are innumerable descriptions of how a character thinks he might react to something that has just been said, but decides not to, and why he decides not to, and how his unresponsiveness might affect the speaker differently to how he would be affected if he had actually said what he nearly said but didn't. This say-or-no-say deal would not really be annoying if what they wanted to say or did not say were

interesting. But it is not. For example, at one point 'pansy salad' becomes the euphemistic term for homosexuality and a group of men wink, nudge, nudge and talk about homosexuality on those terms. One renames it as 'bitch lettuce' and another says everyone should try 'pansy salad' at least once. The others have their individual thoughts as well. What imagination! The incident may sound cheesy because of this review's swiftness, but, trust me, Hollinghurst



The Line Of Beauty
Alan Hollinghurst
Picador, London

makes it too long to sustain the humour. Hollinghurst's character assassinations are so sophisticated that for the judges of Booker Prize, they became beautiful murders. If a hundred pages fled from the middle, you definitely would not know the difference. Guest would remain the not-so-heroic hero. Don't buy and trudge through this swammy book unless you are a fan of the 1980s and want to read every piece of work that mentions the era.

The best use of *The Line Of Beauty* would be to gift it to an insomniac friend who bothers you by calling late at night!

Efadul Huq is a regular reviewer of books.

It is business ethics that matters

Mohammad Mohabbat Khan takes delight in corporate matters

DR. Ehsan Imdad's work, *The Art of Marketing Communication and Corporate Culture*, is a different kind of book for a number of different reasons. First, it addresses a new and more or less neglected area of marketing communication and corporate culture. Second, it attempts to link the two different areas with practical examples. Third, the book contains practical tips to make marketing a rewarding career. Fourth, the author shows with ease and finesse how a rather complex area, live marketing communication, can be made easy to understand.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, consisting of eleven chapters, is devoted to marketing communication. The second part on corporate culture includes eight chapters.

A number of chapters in the first part,



including client service "motivational technique" and "understanding the human race", contain information and tips of practical significance. Similarly, a number of chapters in the second part, like the ones on corporate culture, global corporate arena, attire, etiquette and core competencies for corporation can surely help our corporate executives to sharpen their skills and behavioral finesse to rise further in the corporate ladder.

Overall, the book is an essential read for present corporate executives and CEOs as well as those business students who aspire to become successful executives in the future.

The author wisely observes that business faculty professors do not usually make successful executives in corporations. The moral of the story is clear. You need to know from experience what you are lecturing on. Principles and theories may not come handy in the real business world.

I conclude through a few words about the book. First, the book is full of observations based on the author's long experience with some of the top pharmaceutical and financial companies in the USA. It may be added here that the author has judiciously annexed his observations with wisdom.

Second, Dr. Imdad's observations on how to be successful in marketing communication should be an eye-opener for our entrepreneurs. It would appear that

the present state of marketing communication and corporate culture in this country could be immensely benefited from the understanding, appreciation, and adoption of observations made by Dr. Imdad.

Third, it is imperative in view of the above that graduate level courses now offered in Bangladesh in business faculties at both public and private universities need to be redesigned to face the challenges that lay ahead.

Finally, I would strongly recommend this book as a must read for researchers, business graduate students, and most importantly, entrepreneurs in our country.

Dr. Mohammad Mohabbat Khan is an academic and teaches at the Department of Public Relations, Dhaka University.

The tale of 'an Oriental martyr'

Fence-building is what Shamsad Mortuza finds in a biography

THE nineteenth century begins again: nationalism, colonialism and imperialism, ethnic and religious violence, growing extremes of wealth and poverty, all reemerge today and with a virulence that calls up their earlier nineteenth-century versions and all the physical and mental struggles against them.

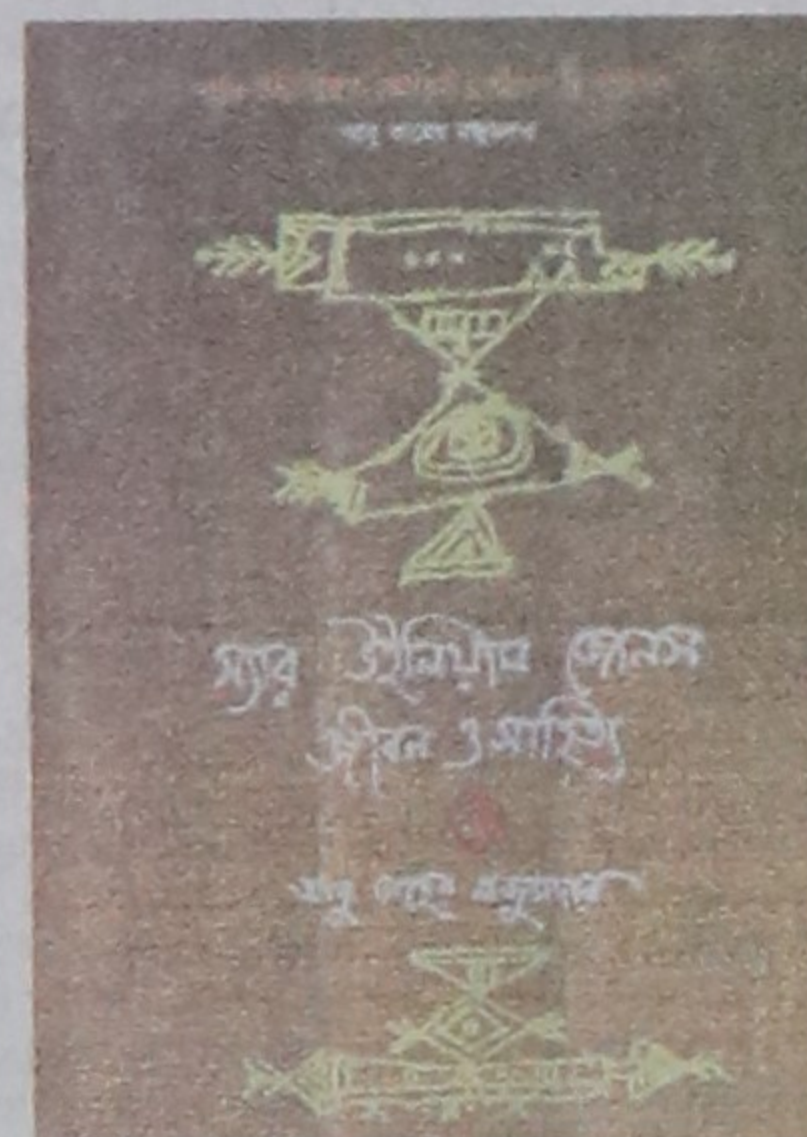
Jerome Rothenberg, Poems for the Millennium, Vol. 3.

(I am grateful to Rothenberg for allowing me to use the introduction to his forthcoming anthology.) In a postcolonial milieu, the construction of the Orient from the vantage Eurocentric position is critiqued without any mercy. The Orientalist scholars are criticised for the supposed superiority of knowledge through which they 'invent' the Other. However, such a view often leads to an under-representation of the humanist values that appealed to the early Orientalists. Hence, it is sometimes essential to take off the theoretical lens to view the purpose of Orientalists like Sir William Jones and his contribution to the meeting of the East and the West. The scholarly engagement with contextuality of New Historicism and

the New Formalist search for deficiencies in new historical reading often problematise our appreciation of the Orientalists. There are times in life when we need to keep things simple. Abu Taher Majumder's book takes a simple stance in declaring the contribution of Jones in the shared growth of literature.

Majumder is not totally out of fashion, though. With the reappraisal of Romanticism, as has been done by Rothenberg, quoted above, the connection between Orientalism and Romanticism is being revised. Instead of taking a theoretical position of an 'ideology critic', it is once again becoming important to trace the fissures, the moments of ruptures through which the past erupts into the present. Majumder identifies different areas in which the signature of Sir William Jones is to be found. As is known, Jones died while working in India, which makes him an 'Oriental Martyr'. While it is easy to brand him as a gone-native scholar, Majumder's collection of essays on Sir William Jones, published from the Bangla Academy, casts an uncritical, albeit sympathetic, look at the Orientalist scholar of the eighteenth

century. Majumder has no inhibition in highlighting the sincere effort of Jones in showcasing the great literary work from



Sir William Jones: Jiban O Shahitya
Abu Taher Majumder
Bangla Academy

Asia that can rival the canonical work of the West. The supposed inferiority of the Orient is subverted by Jones's translation and allusion to writers like Kalidasa and Ferdous. There is no doubt that Jones had a lasting impact on the following generation of writers. Majumder maintains that many creative writers of the Romantic and Victorian periods used the raw materials gained by Jones from the literary minefield of Asia. While the Orientalist influence on these creative writers was discussed, the actual contribution of Jones to the building of the bridge between the East and the West was somewhat relegated. Indeed, Majumder deserves credit for his life-long passion for this scholar, who happens to be the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

Majumder's interest in this Welsh-born Orientalist grew while he was working for his Master's degree at the University of Wales in the early 1970s. He has written a number of essays and monographs on Sir William Jones. The present volume brings together his ideas on Jones' aesthetics, poetics, Persian grammar as well as his influence

on American, Romantic and Victorian literature. Jones was a poet, critic and linguist all rolled into one. But his professional identity was that of a judge, who held a post at the Calcutta Supreme Court. The book begins with a brisk survey of the life and work of the scholar.

Majumder's language is lucid. And the book, by design, avoids over-interpretation. Instead, the writer has opted to mention the comments of others on Jones. This at times may seem patchy and pedantic. Nonetheless, it becomes a great sourcebook for anyone who is interested in understanding a man committed to mending fences across the East and West divide. This work is equally important for those who think that the colonial aspects of the early Orientalists should be reviewed and re-written. In either case, this reviewer is convinced that to go back to history is to reactivate it. To repeat Rothenberg: History begins again. Thanks to Majumder for telling his story!

Professor Shamsad Mortuza is Chairperson, Department of English, Jahangirnagar University.

Re-readings

Travels down the pathways of the soul

Tulip Chowdhury recreates the serenity of old tales

THE Prophet is a novella the reader can complete reading within a short span of time. It is comprised of 115 pages only. And yet the wisdom and the insights that the reader gains from this book can seldom be achieved in a whole lifetime. Kahlil Gibran was born in Lebanon and was a poet, philosopher and an artist. The book, a spiritual reincarnation with twenty-six poetic essays, is a pure treasure trove. The reader only has to dig into it to come out feeling that he or she has found the ultimate light of life. It is a book that grips your soul from the first page to the last and shakes your senses awake.

The book opens with the Prophet Almustafa about to leave Orphalese after living in the foreign land for twelve years. His ship awaits him as he is about to return to his home. On his way he is stopped by a group of people to whom he speaks of the revelations and the insights he has found in life. Almustafa, the first woman to believe in him, begins by asking him to speak of love. Then he continues to speak of human life and the different conditions under which life holds out new meanings to people. The book is divided into chapters on love, marriage, children, buying and selling, crime and punishment and several other subjects concerning human life. The chapters delve into each of its subject very deeply and come up with worldly conclusions.

Answering Almitra and speaking of love Almustafa starts with these words, "When love beckons to you, follow

him, though his ways are hard and steep. When his wings enfold you yield to him. Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you. When he speaks believe in him."

Love is forever a subject held in awe by mankind. Each and every person finds his or her own world of love. And yet we seek the true meaning of love from those who can shed light on it. Speaking of love, Almustafa further says, "Think not that you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course. Love has no desire but to fulfill itself. Let your desires of love be to melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night, to know the pain of too much tenderness, to be wounded by your own understanding of love and to bleed willingly and joyfully." Among the group of people saying farewell is a woman holding a baby. She requests Almustafa to speak of children. Almustafa says,

"Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come to you but not from you. And though they are with you they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts for they have their own thoughts."

As Almustafa continues to speak to the people of Orphalese we see that he is a great believer in individual freedom. Even when people are held in the great bondage of love he still speaks of each other's freedom. Almustafa also speaks of everyday things like giving, joy and sorrow and of teaching.

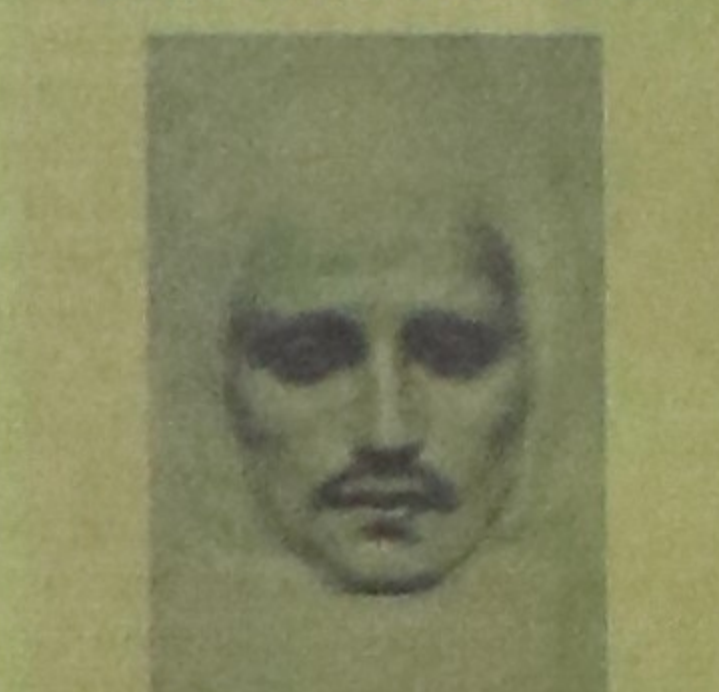
Everyday things like eating and

drinking have a special place with Almustafa. It is an old man, a keeper of an inn, who wants to know of these daily rites. Almustafa notes that eating and drinking shall be like an act of worship.

After speaking about eating and drinking, Almustafa speaks of work. Work bears the fruits of life that keep us going. The people of Orphalese want to know the prophet's insights into work. And Almustafa says,

"You work that you may keep pace

THE PROPHET
KAHLIL GIBRAN



The Prophet
Kahlil Gibran
UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd.

with the earth and the soul of the earth. To be idle is to become a stranger unto the seasons. When you work you become a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music."

As Almustafa gives his sermons he repeatedly advocates freedom. And about freedom he tells the people of Orphalese,

"You shall be free indeed when your days are not without a care nor your nights without a want and a grief. You can only be free when even the desire of seeking freedom becomes a harness to you and when you cease to speak of freedom as a goal and a fulfillment." Then he goes on to say,

"In the grove of the temple and in the shadow of the citadel I have seen the freest among you wear their freedom as a yoke and a handicap."

And indeed this saying is true even in our everyday life. How often do we abuse our freedom without understanding its fruits? Freedom that is supposed to bring glory to individuals and to nations so often loses its true meaning.

Almustafa's other sermons also evoke questions for the reader in multitudes of ways. Each and every word he says seems to hold a grain of truth and sparks the readers' mind with thoughts.

Almustafa also talks about prayers, beauty and religion. And he speaks of reason and passion, pain and teaching. When evening draws near Almustafa is ready to leave the people of Orphalese. And bidding farewell he says,

"We are the seeds of the tenacious plant, and it is in our ripeness and our

fullness of heart that we are given to the wind and are scattered. Brief were my days with you and briefer still the words I have spoken. But should my voice fade in your ears and my love vanish in your memory, then I will come again."

Although Almustafa leaves, his words are like pearls delivered to the people of Orphalese. And to the reader the words of wisdom from Almustafa are solidly written in the heart as life's lessons.

The Prophet is considered to be the best work of Kahlil Gibran. The author spent the last twenty years of his life in America. *The Prophet* was followed by *The Garden of The Prophet* (published posthumously in 1933). Gibran was about to come up with the third part when he died. A perennial best seller, *The Prophet* has been translated into more than twenty languages. It is an elegant window into our beliefs and truths of life. The book also holds twelve illustrations of Gibran's original paintings. It will definitely stir countless questions about life in the reader's mind. And do we not live a vibrant life when we learn to question our own self, learn to challenge our own beliefs? The book is available in many bookshops of Dhaka. The locally available book comes to us from UBS Publishers, Distributors Ltd. The reader will not put down the book without recommending it to others. And so make haste and get your copy and spend some real God-sent hours reading!

Tulip Chowdhury teaches, writes fiction and reviews books.