

That unmistakable knock in the night

Syed Badrul Haque celebrates freedom through a poet's memoirs

TIME is the unmistakable knock in the middle of the night that must be answered. Abul Hussain is no exception to this truism. In his twilight years he has come forth with his memoirs, *Dushwapner Kaal*, reminiscing on the liberation war. Hussain, our doyen of poets, still throws off sparks in his poem: 'Surely there is no escape to aging'. In such moments of his age, the obviousness of such thought is inarguable by any measure. What is amazing is that even after decades, the minutiae that enrich the memoirs so worthily are drawn from his memory alone and are surprisingly flawless. It is intriguing that the author, who is so well-organised in his personal life should have done without keeping a diary and relying only on memory for information. His long writing career blossomed as far back as the 1940s with *Naba Basanta*, which he dedicated to Rabindranath Tagore. The author came by appreciation for his book from literary stalwarts of the time --- Binoy Kumar Sarkar, Nihar Ranjan Roy and Subodh Sengupta.

Well into his eighties, Hussain is all modesty, charm and intellectual energy. His is a strong influence, albeit in a quiet way, on the Bengali world of letters. His prose has that unmistakable edge which age confers. His unrequited passion for literature must have been the most gallantly fortunate affair when he wrote *Dushwapner Kaal* in liberation saga. These are fine memoirs, based on the liberation war and connecting history, economic and political issues with everyday life and even literature. What is more, the story sings. He writes with such verve and bracing rigour that it is impossible not to be charmed and bowled over by his perceptions. The smothered colours of his prose are one of the most compelling in contemporary

Bangla literature.

It is free of any stain of over-blown prose or over-signification of the delicately woven fabric of the book. Hussain is a cool stylist whose breezily structured narrative reaches the climactic point --- freedom without any rancour. He takes a more measured tone that attempts some degree of historical perspective. In his unobtrusive narration, the author is mindful enough not to make the work heavy reading with a roll-call of facts, for all these blunt the edge of reading. The characters in the oeuvre are few, sketched lightly and economically. It delivers on its promise of elevating even the uninitiated to the status of informed observers.

In a nation's history, nine months of a liberation war is a short stretch, but it was an eternity for the beleaguered Bengalis who had to languish in captivity in their very homeland. Thus the author remarks in anguish. He tells his story in compressed vignettes that give off a brilliant unfamiliar light at the end of Pakistan army occupation of our territory. The inter-war rift had graduated slowly but inexorably to such a confrontational point that no amount of verbal camouflage could hide it anymore. On March 25, 1971 when the constituent assembly was scheduled to meet, the Pakistan army unleashed genocide in Dhaka at midnight on the unarmed civilian population. It had the resonance of a thunderclap. The eerie silence hanging over the city was broken into smithereens by the cacophony of the military machines that were rolled out on roads, gunfire, human cries, and panic-barking of street dogs et al.

As the Pakistani soldiers went on the rampage all over Bangladesh, their campaign was added further with the distasteful idea that what they needed

was land only. But how could that happen when the country lived in the hearts of the Bengalis, quips the author, albeit poetically. The Pakistani rulers' policy was to lull the leadership into a sense of false security so that the crash would be more total, when it eventually came.



Dushwapner Kaal
Abul Hussain
Oboshor Prokashona Shangshta

They, however, failed to perceive that the people had transformed themselves into a new identity of Bengali nationalism in terms of their historical and cultural traditions --- a tectonic shift in the basic tenets of statehood and that the place had already become a nation with the sun-etched Bangladesh flags flying atop public and private buildings. H. V. Hodson, Constitutional Adviser to the Viceroy (Lord Linlithgow), in his book, *The Great Divide*, writes: 'Nothing in

human affairs is predictable, but in retrospect the partition of British India appears to have been inevitable; so too does the repartition of Pakistan.'

The Pakistan army's crackdown was pre-meditated. The talks between President Yahya Khan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that drew a blank was a sham, a whistling in the dark that was not worth a try, a time-killing ploy to bolster Pakistani military might. Our leadership had, however, failed to apprehend the sinister designs of the Pakistani rulers and allowed itself to be duped so easily into the deception of negotiation. The leitmotif of political hatred, ethnic distrust and economic disparity was present right from the beginning between the two wings of Pakistan. Again, that *annus mirabilis* was largely propelled because of that political absurdity of holding together a country separated by some twelve hundred miles on the basis of religion only.

The author infuses a personal dimension that makes the book valuable to readers seeking insights into how the break-up of a country came to a head. It pains him much to learn that his old father, a retiree whom he had not seen for years, had been killed by the enemy. So too were two of his kin --- a police superintendent and a district magistrate --- for their sheer patriotism. Specific incidents apart, there was hardly any family left that had not been a victim of the enemy's killing-spree.

The book, a forthright page-turner, is a welcome arrival, however belatedly, for its value both as a historical document and a personal testimony to one of the most crucial and defining moments in our history. Despite the fact that the author was a victim of the occupation force, he never strays from objectivity and accuracy, without which this book

would not have become what it was intended to be. It is an excellent addition to the burgeoning sub-genre of our liberation literature.

The writer recalls a spine-chilling episode that had happened sometime between June and July 1971, when hundreds of Bengali lives came under imminent threat. It was late afternoon, sunny. A big crowd of Bengalis raising anti-Bengali slogans and armed with knives, hockey sticks and firearms moved menacingly toward Azimpur government quarters where hundreds of Bengali employees lived with their families. Apprehending immediate danger, the writer telephoned inspector general of police, Mahmood Alam Chowdhury, his former colleague at SEATO in Bangkok, and sought his help to save their lives. The IGP rushed to the scene with a contingent of police, and the situation was luckily saved. Despite the xenophobic ethnic schism prevailing at the time between Bengalis and non-Bengalis, officers like Mahboob Alam Chowdhury and Humayun Faiz Rasul, information secretary, both of whom hailed from Punjab in West Pakistan, made all the difference. By their impartial administrative conduct, they reinforced our faith in eternal humanity, a precious rarity in those days.

The war of liberation ended almost suddenly on 16 December with a bang, thanks to the Mukti Fauj and the Indian army. Bangladesh emerged on the world map as a proud nation. It was a new dawn, a new script. In the high noon of freedom, the author clasped the hands of his wife, emoted exquisitely, 'What a relief!' He surely echoed the feelings of an entire nation.

Syed Badrul Haque is a contributor to The Daily Star.

AT A GLANCE



Theatrewala
January-June 2008 issue
Publisher Nuruddin Ahmad Shumon

This issue of the journal should be a healthy addition to theatre-related shelves, especially fans of the late Selim al Deen. There are quite a few write-ups on him and on his craft, all of which can only go to enhancing perceptions on the evolution of drama in Bangladesh. As a journal, Theatrewala enriches understanding and helps shape new perspectives in literature.

Bangladesh Charcha Choturtho Khondo
Ed. Muntasir Mamoon
The University Press Limited, Dhaka

From an academic whose interest in Bangladesh's history remains remarkably vigorous, this new work is a study of two of the most significant episodes in the overall Indian heritage. The Battle of Plassey and the Sepoy Mutiny, in 1757 and 1857 respectively, are here thoroughly examined. History buffs should whoop with delight.



Bhalo Bou
Translation Rahad Abir
Kathaprakash

Rahad Abir has certainly done a good job of bringing foreign fiction writers into the Bengali drawing room. A collection of nine short stories, the work brings together such symbols of eminence as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, JM Coetzee, Tahira Naqvi, Liam O'Flaherty, Helen Lamb and Ernest Hemingway. The book should be compelling reading.

Titmou
Hamid Kaiser
Anyopprokash

It is a tale of a young couple, in love with each other and with the idea of love itself. A journalist and his paramour leave home, get on a boat, sail across the river that seems to be opening up layer by layer before them. Those layers are seamless strands of experience for them. It is a story of these young, of the times they inhabit.



Fiction crafted in a new ambience

Junaidul Haque is bowled over by a set of stories

IN my last book review I tried to describe the brilliance of Shaheedul Zahir's fiction, especially *Dolu Nodir Haua O Annanya Galpo*, and called him one of our best story-tellers. I was happy to pay my tribute to the quietly writing and abruptly dying author. After a lot of thought I decided to write on the stories of Abid Anwar this time. He is slightly older than Zahir and equally brilliant as a literary figure. They have another similarity. The Bangla Academy and our Ekushey Padak department have blissfully ignored them all these years. Much lesser men have been recognised in the past. This makes me all the more affectionate to these highly gifted writers, who are only a few years older than me.

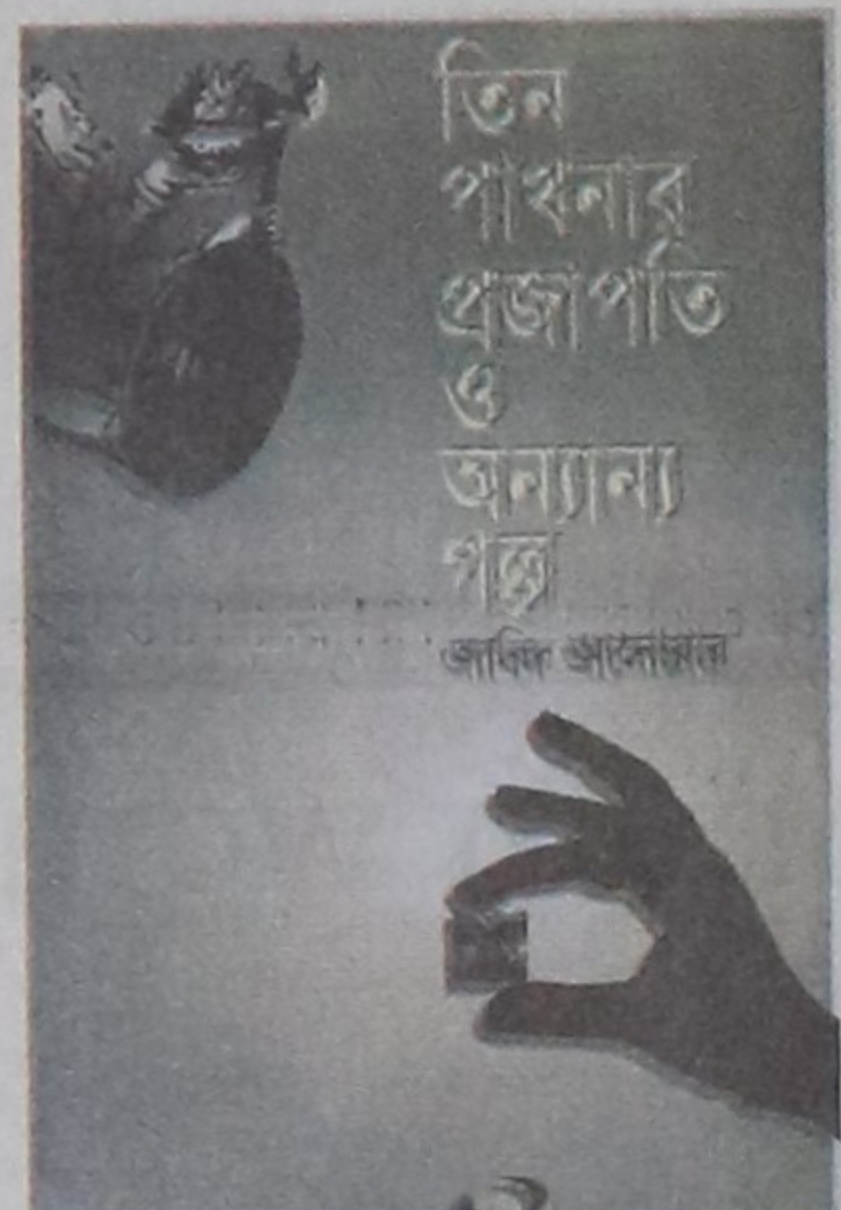
Abid Anwar was born in Katiadi of Kishoreganj on June 24, 1950. His home is not even half a kilometre away from the ancestral home of Satyajit Ray. Abid did his M. Sc. in chemistry from Dhaka University in 1972. He is from Humayun Ahmed's department but there ends the similarity. They are different as writers. Abid Anwar is less popular with general readers but a more serious writer. Serious lovers of poetry and literature respect him and know him very well. It is a very significant fact that he was a commander of the Mukti Bahini in 1971. Very predictably he is progressive and secular. He also studied at the University of Missouri where he did his M.A. in journalism with record marks. He works for ICDDR,B.

Abid Anwar is primarily a poet and a brilliant one at that. He is one of our best poets of the 1970s. He is a literary all-

rounder in the Humayun Azad mould. He has written superb essays, especially on poetry and prosody. He is a lyricist of repute. He started writing stories a little late, in 1999 or 2000. But we found his stories remarkable. The work under review, *Tin Pakhnar Projapati O Annanya Galpo*, is his only book of stories and contains ten stories written by him during the last few years. Humayun Azad and Shamsur Rahman have also written less than a dozen stories. But all three of them are my favourite storytellers. And Abid Anwar continues to excite us with brilliant stories and poems.

As claimed on the flap of the book, there really are three types of stories in today's Bangladesh. The first type gives us a story only, nothing else. But, like poetry, fiction also demands controlled figurative craftsmanship. The first type of stories has nothing of this sort to offer. In the second type, it is all craftsmanship and no story. The third type is the perfect blending of story-telling and craftsmanship and meets the conditions of successful art. Not many stories belong to the third type. The stories of *Tin Pakhnar Projapati O Annanya Galpo* do. The fiction of Syed Shamsul Haq, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Abid Anwar, Shaheedul Zahir and a few others belong to the third type.

Sharifur Jadu-Bastobota (or The Magic Realism of Sharifa) is a superb story depicting the cruel cheating of fake religious men like Peer Hazrat Saifullah Mahmud Farayazi, the male protagonist, whose empire is built on pure robbery. Our simple women suffer at their hands. They lose everything to get chil-



Tin Pakhnar Projapati O Annanya Galpo
Abid Anwar
Mowla Brothers

dren, as in this case. The writer knows our society, our women and our dishonest pretenders very well. His wit and command over his language impress us. *Srijanshil Bajrapat* is an even better story. It is a story of ideas. It is very rich figuratively. It explores the meaning of art. An artist, his sweetheart and her art-loving father are the central characters. Whatever is unhealthy and abnormal in art, or so feels the girl's father. Nature contains all kinds of art, some feel. The story will fascinate all serious readers.

Kodali Begum is full of wit and humour but is a serious story on man-woman relationship at the same time. We can even call it a love story. In this regard it can be mentioned that Abid's brilliant sense of humour makes his stories all the more readable. Kodali's husband Akkas is sick and weak and cannot do hard work. They have married out of love. Kodali works hard as a day labourer to make both ends meet. She is immensely beautiful and resembles film star Babita. Naturally a lot of people eye her. Young Surat Ali gets fond of her. She apparently likes him. Akkas gets a little jealous at times. But when he is seriously sick and Kodali fails to cure him, Surat Ali buys him poison in the name of medicine and kills him. This infuriates Kodali and she tactfully kills Surat, buries him and urinates on his grave in anger. But finally Kodali becomes insane and lives the rest of her life as a *pagli*. A tragic tale of love indeed! Abid knows our poor people quite well.

Muktir Golapi Fita O Iodine Therapy is a metaphorical study of our liberation from Pakistani colonial rule. We are free but our freedom brought us retarded growth like the thirty plus young lady of the story. She behaves and talks like a mentally retarded child.

She asks her uncle, the male protagonist, 'We are independent, aren't we? Why do they bomb and kill people even now?' The readers will certainly receive a mental jolt. *Ekti Ganjakhuri Golpo* is perhaps the richest story of the book, both structurally and content-wise. In a story of the future, the writer depicts his views about the world order and the true

nature of imperialism. His characters include the American President and his wife. He goes to the root and describes the cruel driving out of the Red Indians from their own land by white men. He comes back to the Iraq war. The writer is at his wit's end here. It is a remarkable addition to Bangla fiction. In *Khanchar Manush*, he very affectionately throws light on those people who look after the animals in the zoo.

Khalak Mastarer Dojokh-Behesth is a witty story about a patient and his doctor, an aged person and his family. It depicts the problems of a blood pressure patient with compassion. *Debotar Grash* is a story based on Tagore's immortal poem. *Compuhuter Kando* is a hilarious story on printing mistakes. It deals with *chapar bhuts*. The writer appears to be a master on ghosts. He knows a good deal about the printing industry too.

The title story explores the unfathomable and unreachable beauty of love. The male protagonist is a Hindu youth from Kishoreganj, who travels to the US for higher studies. We get a comparative study of the two societies. We learn about the culture shock that Bengalis go through while in the United States. The writer's wit turns the story into a brilliant one, utterly readable.

Abid Anwar, with only one book and ten stories, is one of our foremost writers of stories. The expectation is that he will write more such stories in the future, alongside his soulful poems and thoughtful essays.

Junaidul Haque writes fiction and literary criticism.

The going gets tough

Ekram Kabir takes interest in a work on the media

THE media are doing wonders in today's world of a continuous flow of breaking news, views and photographs. People these days do not even think of spending a day without being in touch with the media. Frankly, people globally have become very much dependent on the media for the daily developments around them. Politics, economy, lifestyle, human rights, crime and even traffic jams all these matter so much in people's lives that they have to be in touch with the media all the time.

The media, as everybody knows, also work as the fourth estate in every country. Democracy works better and society prospers where the media operate freely. On the other hand, the failure of the media to provide diverse viewpoints and unbiased information also undermines the strength of democracy in any country. Therefore, the media do not only have to free, they should also operate in a way so that the masses do not lose faith in them.

Against such a backdrop, Muhammad Jahangir has tried to place all this in context. *Media Bhashya* is a collection of 38 op-ed articles mostly published earlier in the Dhaka-based Bengali daily *Prothom Alo*. The writer says his articles on media-related issues are his attempt to share his opinions with others. Jahangir divides his newspaper articles into six categories: journalism, television, radio, cinema, media personalities and others.

In the first section, Jahangir tries to explain various aspects of journalism in Bangladesh. The articles that were written after 11 January 2007 detail out the ways in which the caretaker government was trying to prevent the media from carrying out their duty in the proper manner. A lot of restrictions occurred. The writer explains how these restrictions would actually go against the objective of the government.

The second section is all about television in Bangladesh. There was a time when this medium seemed to inaugurate a media revolution in Bangladesh. But as it progressed, many weaknesses were noted by the audience as well as media experts. This book contains about fourteen of Jahangir's articles on the subject.

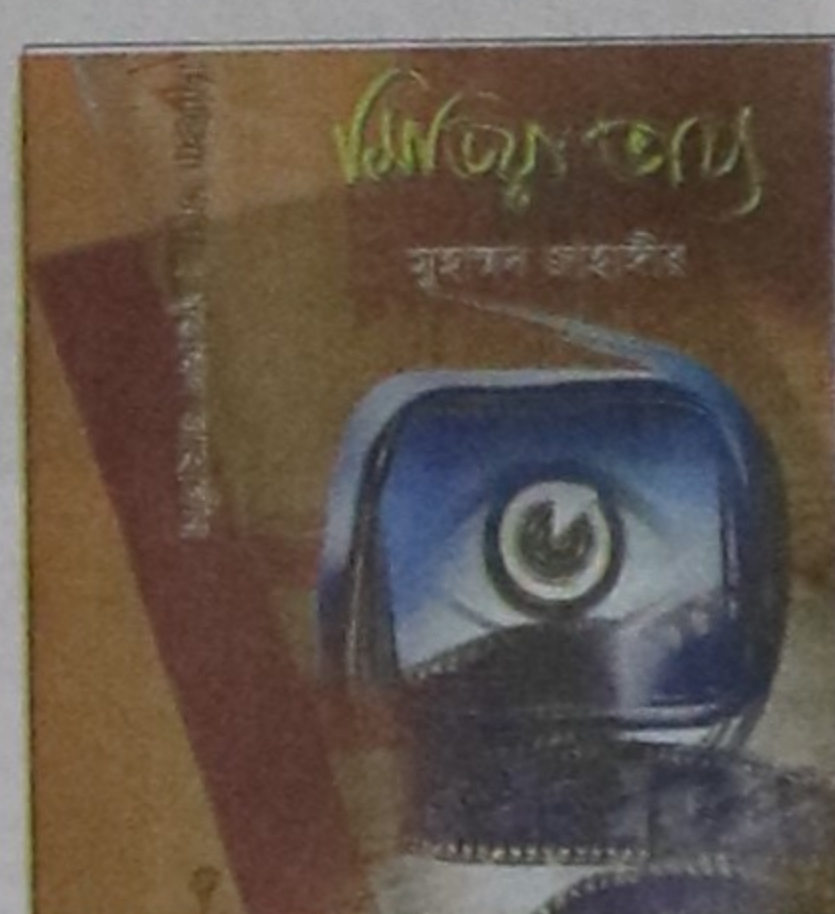
The writer comes up with one article on the newly emerged FM radio. He says FM radios have become the mode of new entertainment for the audience, especially in Dhaka. That was what motivated him into writing the article. These radio stations are indeed a way of new entertainment for the audience. Initially, they were entertaining, but with every passing day, there is increasing scope to survey their performance, both in capacity and quality. Where are these radios going?

Jahangir has one piece on films in section four. He suggests that Bangladeshi filmmakers should make some movies on diasporic themes. Jahangir makes sense when he urges

filmmakers to be more creative because Bangladesh is falling behind in filmmaking. The days of regular commercial films are gone. A few filmmakers, who call them makers of short films, are trying, but the number of movies is so little that they can hardly make any impact. Since the Bangladeshi audience is not welcoming what commercial filmmakers are producing, they should go for innovation. Different stories as the writer suggests.

Jahangir writes four articles on eminent journalists who have passed away: Waheedul Haque, Aftabun, Hedayet Hossain Morshed and artist Kalam Mahmud. Dedicating a section for these people was very thoughtful on Jahangir's part.

The last section of *Media Bhashya*



Media Bhashya
Muhammad Jahangir
Mowla Brothers

deals with a few aspects of the Bangladesh media. One article is quite noteworthy: *Mass Media: Quite an Achievement*. Yes, the mass media in this country have had many success stories against the social backdrop. The media have campaigned for many good causes. Besides, the media have played pivotal roles during a number of crises in Bangladesh. From the war of liberation through periods of military rule to the latest state of emergency, the media have shouldered great social responsibility.

Jahangir also needs to mull on whether he should write a few articles on media-related training in Bangladesh. Newspapers in Bangladesh, as experience suggests, have hardly any editorial guidelines. That would be another aspect to write about.

The Bangladesh media have come a long way and yet have a long way to go. Analysts like Jahangir should make sure they do not give up talking about the performance of the media. In many countries, there are media-watching organisations. Bangladesh has none. The writer deserves a thank you for publishing his articles in book form.

Ekram Kabir is a journalist and critic.

Making sense of so much nonsense?

An unusual book takes Farseem M. Mohammedy's fancy

THIS book exposes many luminaries/philosophers/cultural theorists' abuse of scientific terms in their writings. Particularly, intellectuals belonging to the genre 'postmodernism' are caught by this endemic. The writers of this book are professional physicists who have examined the various treatises written by these intellectuals and shown that oftentimes they used scientific terms without any honest regard to their true meanings. It is as if to show-off the rigour of their work. 'The story of this book starts with a hoax'. Disturbed by the 'abuse of science' or more explicitly '...an intellectual current characterised by the more-or-less explicit rejection of the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment, by theoretical discourses disconnected from any empirical test, and by a cognitive and cultural relativism that regards science as nothing more than a "narration", a "myth" or a social construction among many others', one of the authors, Alan Sokal, wrote a "parody" of the type of work that was "fashionable" in the mainstream American cultural-studies journals. This was titled 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' and got published in a special edition of the journal *Social Text* in 1996. When Sokal revealed this hoax, it was a big embarrassment for the postmodernists. This particular parody was constructed 'around quotations from eminent French and American intellectuals about the alleged philosophical and social implications of mathematics and the natural sciences'.

Sokal just supplied the 'glue' to make these apparently disjointed quotations to sound coherent, juxtaposed with

trendy words from the latest theoretical physics jargon. Later on, debates and discourses gradually developed on the effects of this parody. Criticisms and counter-criticisms ensued. The authors felt a need for collecting their thoughts and making them available in a single volume. The goal of this book is to criticise the 'admittedly nebulous Zeitgeist that we have called "postmodernism". We make no claim to analyse post-modernist thought in general; rather, our aim is to draw attention to a relatively little-known aspect, namely the repeated abuse of concepts and terminology coming from mathematics and physics'. This makes the book extremely interesting.

This book has altogether twelve chapters and three appendices containing the original parody itself and some discussions. In the main body of the book, the authors discuss various paragraphs and quotations from Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Paul Virilio. Individual chapters are devoted to the works of some of these luminaries. Consider Lacan's student Luce Irigaray.

'If the identity of the human subject is defined in the work of Freud by a *Spaltung*, this is also the word used for nuclear fission. Nietzsche also perceived his ego as an atomic nucleus threatened with explosion. As for Einstein, the main issue he raises, in my mind, is that, given his interest in accelerations without electromagnetic reequilibrations, he leaves us with only one hope, his God. It is true that Einstein played the violin: music helped him preserve his personal equilibrium. But what does the mighty theory of general relativity do us except

establish nuclear power plants and question our bodily inertia, that necessary condition of life?'

Again she went more bizarre: 'Is $E=Mc^2$ a sexed equation? Perhaps it is. Let us make the hypothesis that it is insofar as it privileges the speed of light



Fashionable Nonsense
Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science
Alan Sokal with Jean Bricmont
Picador

over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us. What seems to me to indicate the possibly sexed nature of the equation is not directly its uses by nuclear weapons, rather it is having privileged what goes the fastest...'

What to make of it? Nietzsche could have no way know anything about the nucleus or nuclear explosion simply

because all these concepts developed much later in the 1930s or 1940s; 'accelerations without electromagnetic reequilibrations' is a bizarre concept only meaningful to Irigaray; and finally the famous mass-energy equivalence equation being 'sexed' is beyond comments.

This book exposes, author by author, the 'fashionable nonsense' prevalent in their narratives. They clearly defined how they are defining 'abuse' in pages 4-6: Firstly, using scientific terminology without bothering much about the original meanings and context that they were used; secondly, importing ideas, based on vague analogy, from natural sciences into humanities or social sciences without giving any clear justifications; thirdly, 'displaying superficial erudition by shamelessly throwing around technical terms in a context where they are completely irrelevant'; fourthly, 'manipulating phrases and sentences that are, in fact, meaningless'.

Postmodernism has three principal negative effects: a waste of time in the human sciences, a cultural confusion that favors obscurantism, and a weakening of the political left'. Katha Pollit has commented: 'the comedy of the Sokal incident is that it suggests that even the postmodernists don't really understand one another's writing and make their way through the text by moving from one familiar name or notion to the next like a frog jumping across a murky pond by way of lily pads'. The postmodern idea of deconstructing 'facts' as 'intellectual constructions', or for that matter as mere fiction, has been criticised by historian Eric Hobsbawm and linguist/critic Noam Chomsky. The authors in the book declare that their true focus is 'limited to certain

intellectual aspects of postmodernism that have had an impact on the humanities and the social sciences: a fascination with obscure discourses; an epistemic relativism toward modern science; an excessive interest in subjective beliefs independently of their truth or falsity; and an emphasis on discourse and language as opposed to the facts to which those discourses refer'.

The euphoria of the Third World intelligentsia with postmodernism had appeared particularly 'depressing' to Noam Chomsky when he noted with frustration that Egyptian elite circles, under the brutalities of Nasser's regime, were attracted to the 'latest lunacies from Paris culture' and took it too seriously. On a personal note, unfortunately our country is not immune from such trend and is also very actively immersed in this sort of fashionable nonsense. I knew one such junior Lacanian postmodernist, who while walking in the Dhaka streets back in the late 1990s asked me about my opinion on Baul Lalon Shah. Suddenly he veered his conversation to Jacques Lacan and enquired whether I knew about the similarities of ideas between 'faqr Lacan' and 'faqr Lalon'. I expressed my honest ignorance. Upon my curiosity, I bought some books on these issues and could not fathom anything out of the postmodern texts. Now that I read this book, it is small wonder that all those texts appeared all Greek to me. Good Heavens, the emperor is actually naked (and the queen too!)

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