

# Across a landscape of memory and timeless poetry

Syed Badrul Ahsan glides through two works, feeling quite happy

**A**IDE-Memoire is quite a few strands of thought coming together. And with Hasnat Abdul Hye's telling of the tale, or tales as the case may be, there is a feeling that readers will get to enjoy vicariously the experiences he relates in these accounts of his life. Ah, but then the writer, or perhaps a reader, might protest. Whoever said these accounts relate to Hye's life as he lived them between 1943 and 1954? There is --- isn't there? --- a narrator here, one who speaks impersonally, in third person singular? You do not get to spot Hye anywhere. It is always a 'he', always 'his' world of experience. And there lies the charm in the tale.

The charm, to be specific, comes in the conscious doing away of the self-seeking, or even the self-aggrandising 'I' that many weavers of autobiographical yarns are wont to use. In Hasnat Abdul Hye's instance (and these are episodes from his life he once enlightened readers of a national English language daily with on a weekly basis), this willing dissociation from the 'I' in favour of the impersonal 'he' leaves him free to travel all across geography and history, of a varied sort. He was a mere child in 1943, that time of Indian life when the process of decolonisation was beginning to set in in this part of the world. It was not a time Hye ought to be remembering in vivid form. Similar are his reflections on the riots of 1946, when he was a seven-year-old. And seven year-olds are not particularly adept in recording the moments of historical significance they stumble into. So why should the writer be so keen about reminding his readers of that part of his life, when life was yet in its childlike innocence for him?

A good question, that. But Hye has

his answers ready too and you cannot have him trip over himself. His accounts, he makes clear, are more than his own. They have in fact been embellished with his readings, those he made in subsequent years. And the readings have touched upon a whole

## AIDE-MEMOIRE

1943-1954

Boyhood in British India and Pakistan



Hasnat Abdul Hye

Aide-Memoire

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Adorn Publication

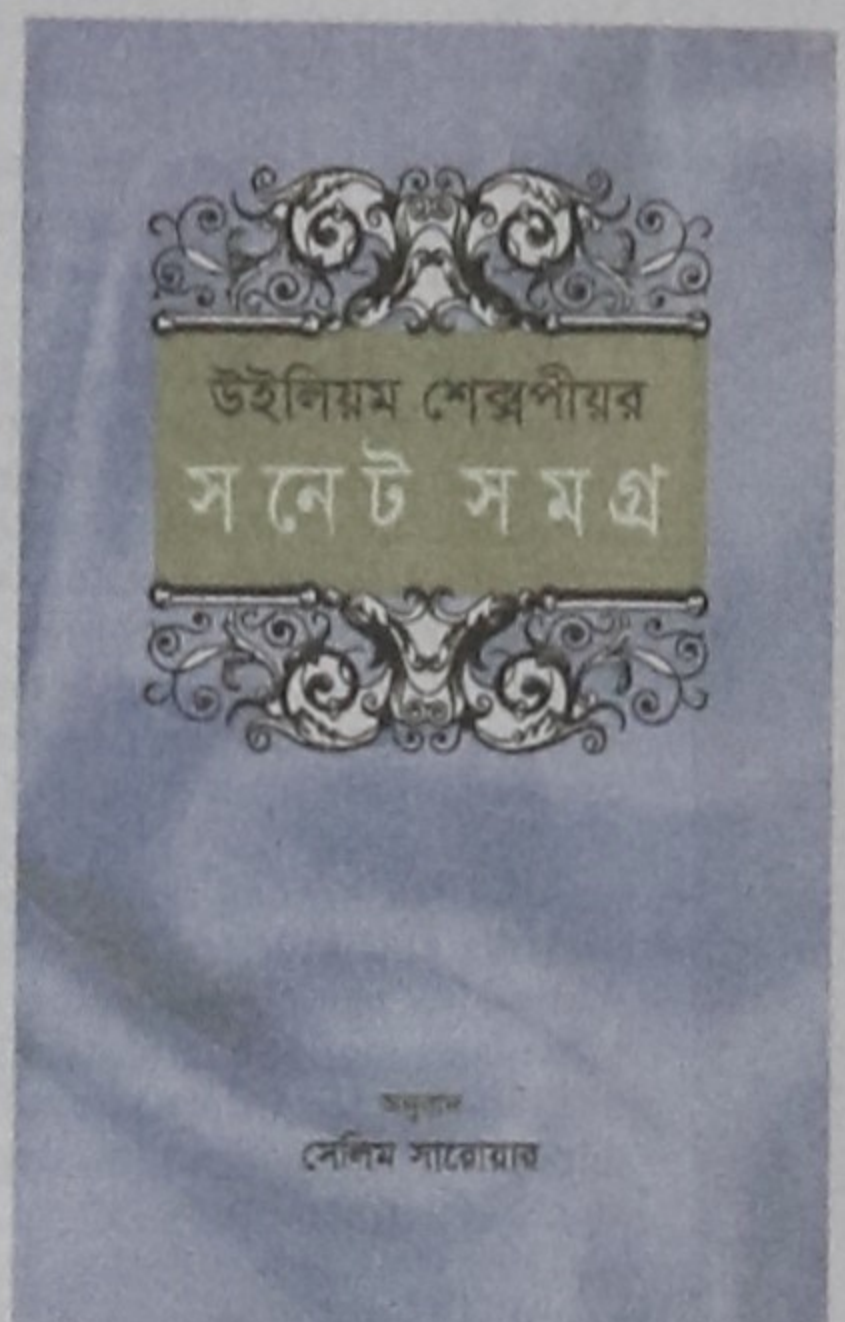
range of subjects. Notwithstanding the fact that Hye has been a civil servant who rose to the heights of his career, he has been a master craftsman of the human story. His fiction, his literary and art criticism have given him a niche of his own. His recent talk at a discussion on Rabindranath Tagore's

tourist instincts revealed yet once more the sense of humour he often brings into his study of human character. And it is the humorous as well as the serious you tend to get in *Aide-Memoire*. Politics is an issue he mulls over, politics as he saw shaping up in his boyhood or as he came in touch with through his exhaustive reading in later times. And then there is the commonplace and yet those extraordinary facets of life, those we live through in the days of our innocence. Remember something called *Boma Ghuddi*? Or a kite with a snake tail known as *Hapa Ghuddi*? These are images that you associate with your childhood, in your little village or with the small district town you lived in. And they are images Hye recreates through his stories. The danger is, you might fall prey to nostalgia --- and deservedly too.

Clear streams of history mingle with stories of childhood passing inexorably into boyhood. The writer expends good time in relating the genesis of the royal family of Tripura, a conglomeration of facts that not many readers are aware of. And then, of course, there are those timeless descriptions of Calcutta, those we cannot do without. Jhautala, where stood the home once inhabited by Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, comes into the picture. Move on, to Dacca as it was in 1947, that disastrously seminal year in the long tortuous tale of undivided and yet fractured India. It is nearly a pristine Dacca you recall, with its historical streets and its monkeys swaying from the branches of trees.

*Aide-Memoire* is travelogue. It is history and a peek into the ideas that go into narrative prose. It is, finally, the shaping of sensibilities in a child whose interest in the world around him is as large as the huge canvas he forges his tales on.

**S**OMETHING is invariably lost in translation. That is the conventional wisdom you have been suffused with for years together. And that, just so you do not fail to recall, is also the truth. But then translations sometimes are a huge improvement on



William Shakespeare  
Sonnet Shomogro  
Trans. Selim Sarwar  
Bangla Academy

the original. Maybe Selim Sarwar would not agree. The fact remains, though, that these Bengali translations of Shakespeare's sonnets appear to have attained their objective.

And they have because of the strenuous work Sarwar, an academic engaged

in teaching English literature for more than three decades, has put into it. In conditions where Shakespeare remains a difficult proposition even in terms of a comprehension of his works in modern English, a rendition of the sonnets in Bengali should sound like foolhardy business at best and futility at worst. Sarwar has made sure it is neither. His hold on the English language, never less than impeccable, has consistently exercised a hold on the imagination of those he has taught, as also those he has not. And now all those individuals will be in for a pleasant surprise with the scholarly, particularly apt Bengali he brings to bear in transforming the sonnets into a field the Bengali young (and not so young) can relate to. There is charm in the translations; and it comes in the modernity of language Sarwar employs in the exercise.

An especially delightful aspect of the work is the detailed social and historical background Selim Sarwar provides to the sonnets, at the beginning of the translations. A reader who misses reading it or chooses to ignore it will have precious little comprehension of the ethos involved in the poetry. And the ethos relates to Shakespearean times. But then again, being Shakespeare is also being modern. It is that modernity, or call it the timeless, that defines his worldview. Sarwar moves that modernity from an English ambience to a new, Bengali one. These 154 sonnets should cheer the soul. If they do not, Shakespeare will have been a pointless term of historical reference. But that he surely cannot be, as Selim Sarwar tells us.

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

## AT A GLANCE



Boi  
June 2008  
Jatiyo Grantha Kendro

This happens to be a rich journal, one which serves as a link to the Bengali cultural past. In effect, the articles here are not merely about books as such but also draw attention to the lives of individuals whose contributions remain as pertinent as they have always been. It should be good reading, especially on languid afternoons.

Poton O Prarthona  
Sumon Probahon  
Sumon Probahon Shoron Proyash

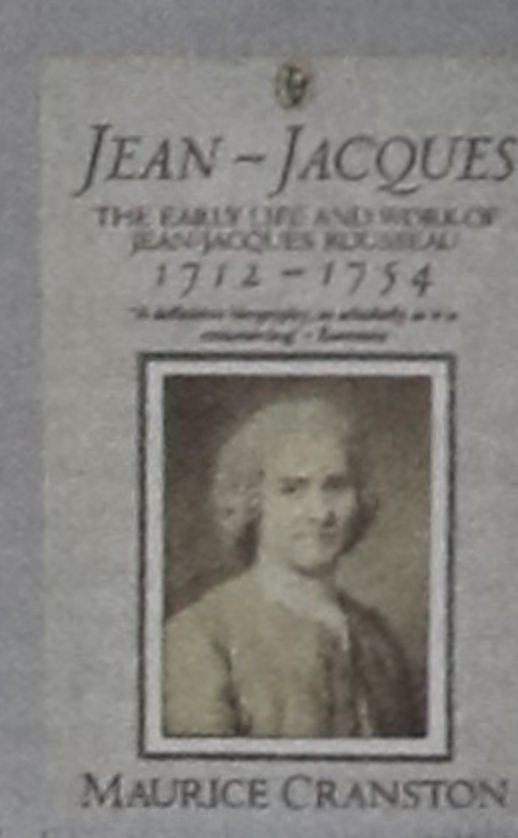
These are sad poems from one who had not long to live. He died young; and his friends, unable to come to terms with his passing, sought to keep his memories alive through having these poems see the light of day. It is posthumous work; and yet the young man behind these creations lives on, a force ultimately undefeated.



Dinajpurer Tebhaga Andolon  
Prastuti Porbo  
Mesbah Kamal  
Utsho Prokashon

An insightful study of the events and incidents that led to a seminal movement in the Bengal countryside, the work should be a point of reference for all students of history. Mesbah Kamal's continuing interest in the lives and struggles of the underprivileged and the deprived get a new spur in the book.

Jean-Jacques  
The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques  
Rousseau  
Maurice Cranston  
Penguin Books



Rousseau is forever a topic for hard discussion. And rightly too, for the hold he has on the public imagination the world over remains a testimony to his greatness. In this work, dealing as it does with the early phase of his life, there are signs of coming fame. It is easy to see why Rousseau was to be the man we now know as the philosopher.

# In search of new storytellers

Ekram Kabir appreciates a new collection of Bengali short stories

**S**OMETIMES Bangladesh seems like a literary wasteland. No time-winning fiction gets published. No new writers are promoted. Despite being a pro-stalwart literary area, none of the established novelists makes it a point to write in such a way that people read them, get back their lost reading habits. Too many people here exhaust themselves wrestling with poetry. Or is it? Do they find composing poems easier than writing short stories or novels? Writers who show potentials of writing good fiction spend most of their time writing newspaper columns on politics.

It is against this backdrop that Bengali literature seems to be struggling through a cruel time. It is said and believed that literature speaks of society, speaks of history, and above all speaks of the people of a land. On a different note, literature does not talk only about these aspects, but also offers the audience simple storytelling.

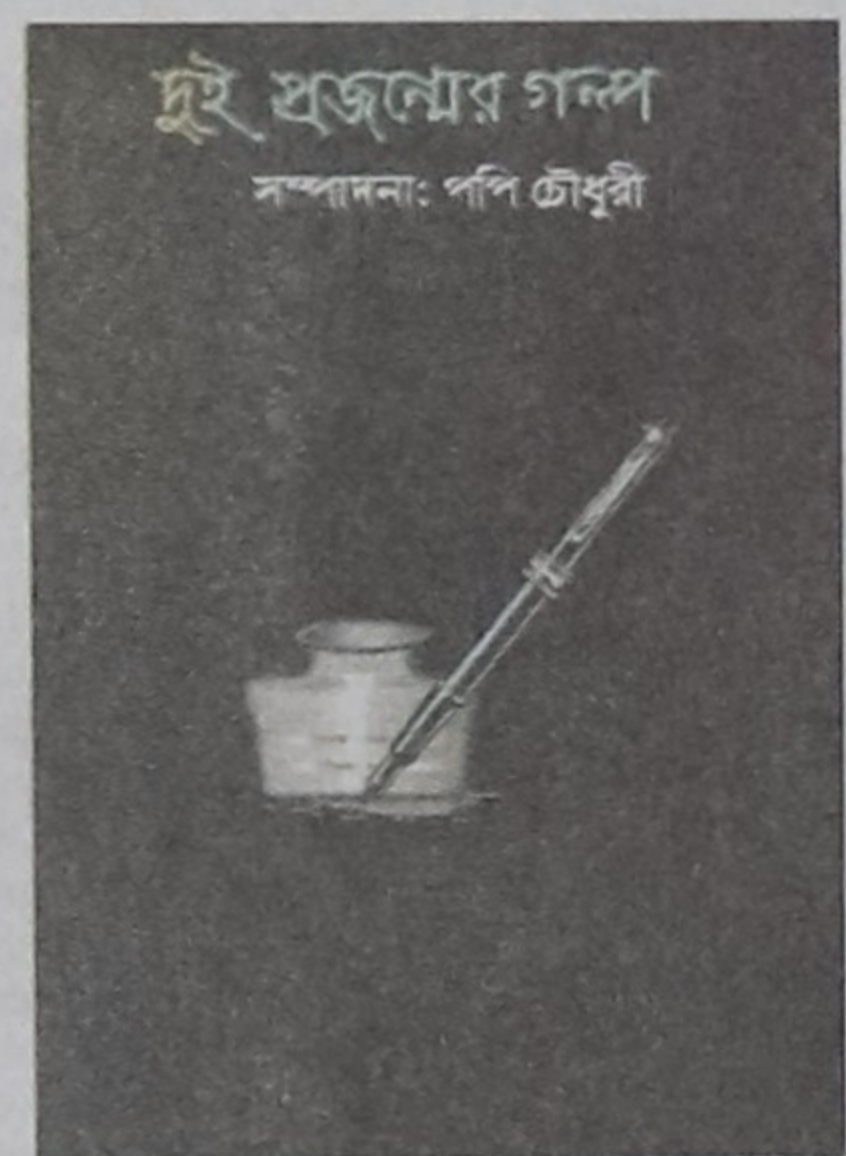
Poppy Chowdhury, a relatively new writer herself, has edited *Dui Projonmer Galpo* and dedicates the book to all new writers. What can be more satisfying for new writers than that? Her initiative would also prove to be good for Bengali literature itself. Well, of course, no book-seller can solely depend on new writers for a voluminous anthology such as *Dui Projonmer Galpo*. And that is why Chowdhury possibly mingles the old established writers along with the new. Stories written by assorted writers old and new give the readers a chance to compare both categories of writers. Tale spinners such as Rahat Khan, Ashraf

Siddiqui, Zubaida Gulshan Ara and Sajjad Quadir have been included in the anthology. This has certainly been a good decision on the part of the editor.

Still, Bangladesh's literary world lacks many aspects that constitute worthwhile presentations. Books and writers are not promoted here except in the month of February. And new writers are never promoted, not even in February. Crime and adventure stories are hardly written and sold in this country. There is absolutely no writing competition in the country. The literary arena would achieve many things if writing competitions of micro-fiction, sms fiction, graphic fiction, et cetera, were organised here.

However, if you go through a few stories in this anthology, you will start appreciating *Dui Projonmer Galpo*. Take *Desh Bidesh* (Home and Abroad) by Rahat Khan, for example. The protagonist of the story suddenly gets an American visa. He is more than happy that he has come by something that thousands of others have not. But a conflict begins to gnaw at his thoughts. He does not actually want to leave the country. He is in love with a woman and expects she will stop him from going to the US when he offers his love to her. In reality, though, the woman encourages him to leave Bangladesh. It seems she feels relieved that she can now avoid his weeping. The man is not really hurt by her rejection, but amazed by the fact that no one absolutely no one, even for one single moment, tries to prevent him from leaving the country.

He finally leaves. The main character's inner agony about this fact is more significant than what he feels after being rejected by the woman. This is a perfect story in the current socio-economic scenario of this land. There is hardly anyone who would be willing to



Dui Projonmer Galpo  
Ed. Poppy Chowdhury  
Pritom Prakash

stay after "winning" a US visa, a ticket to heaven.

Another story, *Chena Mukh Ochena Alo'y* (How People Become Strangers), is perhaps more relevant for many migrants, not only Bangladeshis but

also all Muslim migrants in the USA. A Bangladeshi happy couple, living in Connecticut for many years, suddenly discover that their college-going son has become an extremist. Their son even orders his parents to become good Muslims, in the way Allah would want them to be. The parents try their best to convince him to return from that path, but the son finally leaves home to join the extremists. This is a very good story against the backdrop of post-9/11 America. In fact, enthusiastic filmmakers should spring in joy and buy this story in the interest of making a movie. Filmmakers in Bangladesh's neighbouring countries have already made a few movies on this theme.

Immigrant by Sohrab Zisan is another story that deals with the diasporic theme. A young woman has to return to Bangladesh after her father's death in the United States. Her Italian mother goes off with another man. The girl comes back to Bangladesh to her grandfather and she starts running a charitable organisation set up by him.

One interesting aspect of the anthology is that the stories which deal with diasporic themes are all US-based. None of the stories have been written against a backdrop of the United Kingdom or Canada or Australia!

Meanwhile, most of the stories in *Dui Projonmer Galpo* have been written with various social, political and human causes in mind. Take *Bidogdho Chokh* (Burnt Eyes) by Fazlul Haq Aakash, for example. The writer has tried to portray the prevailing political situation in

Bangladesh. The main character discovers himself in a dead land, burnt, with people there surviving on dead leaves and fruits. The character meets the people of the land who appeal him to rescue them from their plight. The people of that land also confess their bad deeds to him. The story explicitly delineates the result of conflicts between two political streams in Bangladesh and what ultimately can happen if they continue to lock themselves in conflict. But the writer ends the story in a cumbersome way. He makes it a point to show that everything has been happening in someone's dream. The story would have been fine without the dream factor coming into it.

The book brims over with love stories. Many critics think there cannot be a good story without a romantic theme. True to a great extent. The reason, they say, is that "love" also accompanies intense conflict among the characters, and that makes the story highly readable. Take *Paromita*, by Poppy Chowdhury herself, as an instance. Well, the charm of the story would decay if you already knew the summary.

There are a few stories that seem to have been off-hand writing, but most of them are worth reading. They are likely to shoot into your imagination.

Bangladeshi writers, and of course readers, would feel better if anthologies like *Dui Projonmer Galpo* were frequently published. The editor deserves kudos for her courage.

Ekram Kabir is a journalist.

# Making a case for new, democratic politics

Al Masud Hasanuzzaman finds a book on elections compelling

**I**N democracy, the institution of election is held in high esteem. Democracy theorists consider this institution greatly essential not only for political legitimacy of the rulers and stability of the political order but also for integration of societal arrangement, system capability, participatory behavior and above all political institutionalization. It is through the means of election that the politicians bolster their assurance to deal with the crises involved in the process of nation and state building. The essence of this commitment is general agreement on the rule of the game of politics that in turn establishes trust in the election process and peaceful transfer of state power.

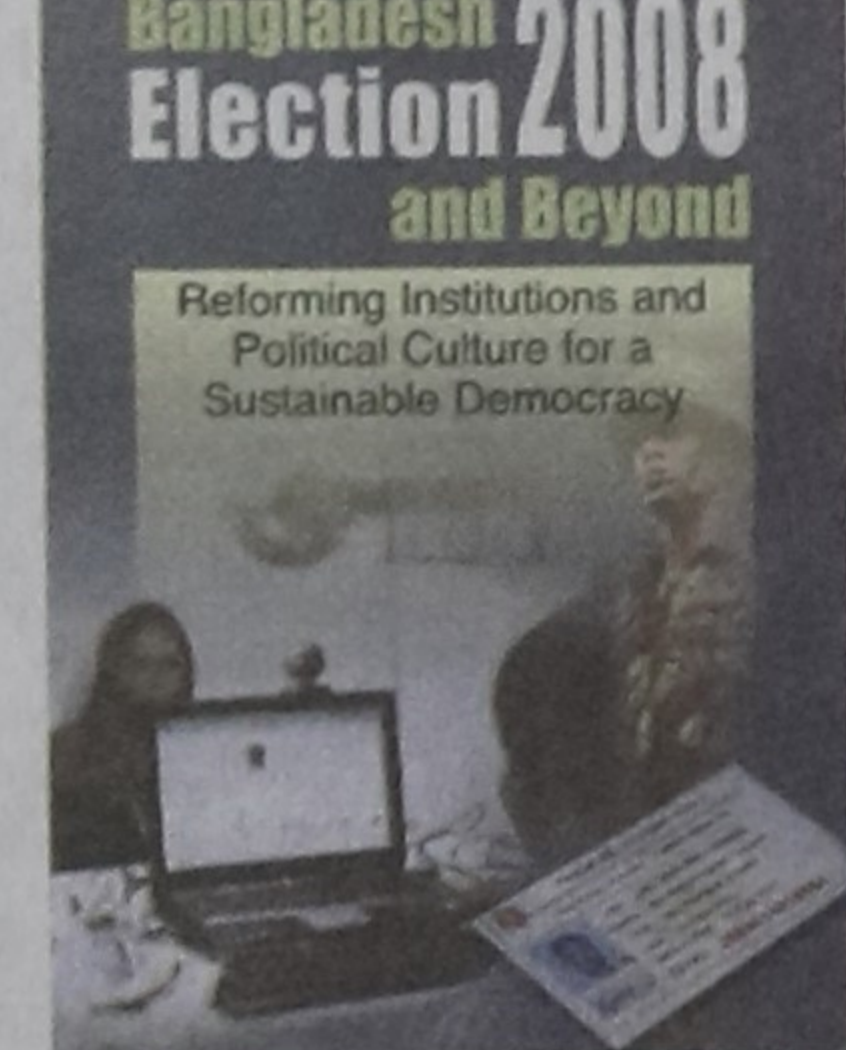
In Bangladesh, attainment of such a situation has not been possible owing to a stage-managed election process in the post-liberation period and alienation of the people from this very institution. In this context, the demand for a neutral caretaker government was raised and the same was formalised through the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution in 1996. The system of caretaker government in Bangladesh has been unique in existing constitutional states. Even so, it was the outcome of intense distrust between the party then in power and opposing political forces. This was in fact a cautious means to facilitate unhindered transfer of state power and acted as the last resort toward making

democracy functional. Such a procedure certainly necessitated simultaneous comprehensive reforms in both the formal and informal sectors of the political system.

Despite such electoral pledges of the competing political parties, lack of their translation gradually aggravated the country's on-going political crises that ultimately led to the events of January 11, 2007 taking place. The caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed as such began its two-year long mission of instituting multifarious reforms in the process of holding the ninth parliamentary election scheduled to be held in December 2008. A.T. Rafiqur Rahman, a serious analyst of Bangladesh's politics and development has discussed in detail the context of the formation of caretaker government under emergency, on-going debate regarding its legal status, perception and role-playing during its self-imposed tenure.

The central theme of this volume is a review of the multi-sectoral reforms initiated by the interim administration since its origination on January 11, 2007. More distinctively, the author explicates the supplementary reform measures that he considers significant in order to sustain the on-going experimentation. The responsibility of the next popular government will be to keep up the momentum through constitutional ratification for the sake of good governance and sound demo-

cratic order. The book is divided into five broad chapters along with a postscript to update views. With regard to the on-going reforms, the discussion is centred on the major areas of electoral process, judicial separation, corrup-



Bangladesh Election 2008 and Beyond  
Reforming Institutions and Political Culture for a Sustainable Democracy  
A.T. Rafiqur Rahman  
The University Press Limited

tion eradication and formation of constitutional commissions for democratic governance. It is stated that despite a dismal effect in the business sector, measures like voter registration, issuance of nationality certificate, initiatives for democratisation of party structures, and more specifically the anti-corruption drives have been well accepted by the masses at large.

Certain steps that negatively affected the reputation of the government were the policies regarding the 'minus two' formula, clearing hawkers and slums, and dealing with the turbulence on the university campuses. Also alarming has been the depressing performance of the country's economic sector, including lack of investment, lesser exports, greater pace of imports, fertiliser crisis and most notably the price hike of essentials. The author thus says that 'there is evidence that macro economic indicators are deteriorating, indicating symptoms of a slowing economy' (page 35). It is indeed very challenging to keep the cadence of the gains and as such unremitting support of the public and endorsement of the political parties and civil society remain very crucial in sustaining the governance reforms taken up by the government.

The key thrust of the book is the author's prescription for further reforms without which the current governance measures will remain incomplete. For constructing the foun-

ation of a durable democracy, a host of additional reforms are recommended, involving the means for holding credible elections, structure of the caretaker government, agreed rules for a functional legislature, establishment of local democracy, improvement of the quality of education, evocative deregulation of the executive departments, breaking the culture of agitational politics and unrest, and manufacturing economic efficiency. Another significant need is the establishment of a congenial political culture characterised by democratic values and human rights. Considering the gravity of the forthcoming ninth parliamentary polls, it would be strategic for the popularly elected leadership, policy makers and other stakeholders to stress institutional reforms based on general agreement and accomplish the tasks ahead.

The publication of the volume is indeed timely and it gives thought provoking ideas and informed Bangladeshis, as the author says, will obtain new insights on democratisation and proper governance. The author has been able to provide an analytical assessment of the scenario in a very scholarly manner. The book is required reading for researchers and everyone else.

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# General Zia brought back still again

Charles R. Larson finds a fictional account of some deaths riveting

**I**T is never difficult to lampoon a particularly flamboyant politician. In the United States, Richard Nixon was the subject of numerous novels, both while he was in office and shortly thereafter. Bill Clinton was the hero of *Primary Colors*, published anonymously early in his presidency. George Bush has been satirized on stage in two devastating dramas--and certainly more are in the works. American (and Western) writers certainly have no lock on the tradition. One thinks immediately of Nigeria's greatest writers--Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka--both of whom have borrowed lead characters from real life. The list is actually endless, once it is opened up to Latin America and Asia.

Where would Salman Rushdie be without the real-life models for the outrageous characters who appear in several of his novels? To the list of talented political satirists the name Mohammed Hanif (a Pakistani) must now be added. What's more, Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* pushes the boundaries of his story so close to reality that often the reader doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Enter Pakistan's General Zia ul-Haq, president and military ruler from 1977 until his death in August 1988. While Zia was still alive, Salman Rushdie attacked him mercilessly in his novel *Shame* (1983). Hanif has chosen another method: endless speculations about what and/or who killed General Zia when his airplane crashed near Bahawalpur on August 17, 1988. Others in the mysterious plane crash included the American ambassador, Arnold Raphel, resulting in innumerable conspiracy theories.

Hanif, wisely, advocates no single theory. Rather, he suggests multiple explanations for General Zia's presumed assassination, a couple of them totally ludicrous and, therefore, the source of amusement for the reader. Hanif, it should be noted, graduated from the Pakistan Air Force Academy and must have heard numerous speculations about the general's death.

The novelist has also worked as a journalist and as a playwright. The author's irreverent tone in a dazzling 'Prologue' provides an immediate context for what is about to unfold: "Third World dictators are always blowing up in strange circumstances, but if the brightest star in the U.S. diplomatic service (and that's what will be said about Arnold Raphel at the funeral service in Arlington Cemetery) goes down with eight Pakistani generals, somebody will be expected to kick ass..." The New York Times will write two editorials, and sons of the deceased will file petitions to the court and then settle for lucrative cabinet posts. It will be said that this was the biggest cover-up in aviation history since the last biggest cover-up."

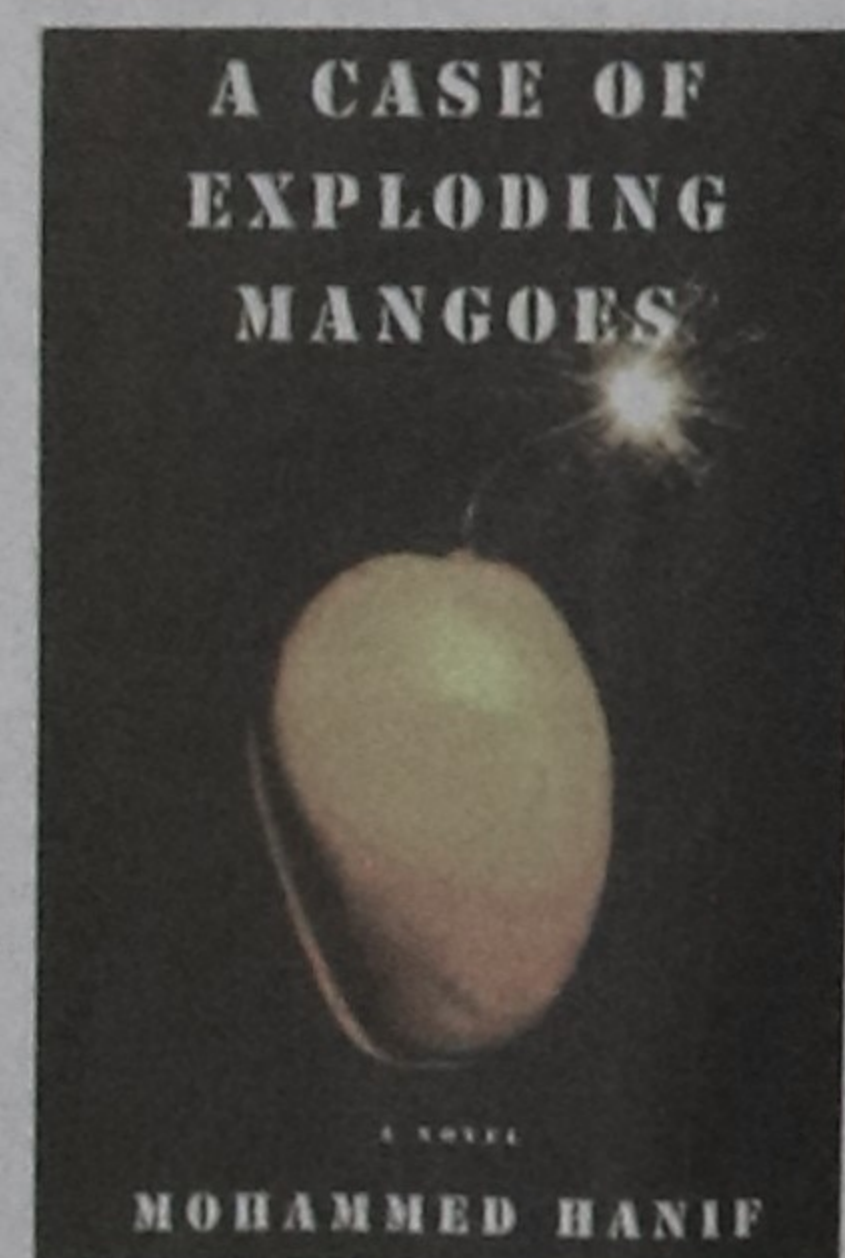
Ostensibly the major explanation for the airplane crash focuses on Ali Shigri, a

rookie Pakistani Air Force pilot whose father, and one of Zia's colonels, purportedly committed suicide. Ali believes it was not a suicide and provides the initial motive for avenging his father's death by killing General Zia. As the events unfold, literally with hi-jinks that read more like farce than tragedy, the author cannot resist making barbs against not only Pakistani leaders but everyone else too -- Gandhi, Nehru, the Russians, the Americans, the Saudi princes.

Hanif is a master of the one-line put-down, often used as closure for individual chapters. From heads of state down, no one escapes his sarcasm. When Ali is temporarily incarcerated, he remarks about his country as a whole. "Our people get used to everything. Even the stench of their own garbage." Hanif is equally at home with characterisation and voice: the story is narrated from multiple points of view. Moreover, he can't resist the inclusion of scenes that have little to do with the actual plot but provide, instead, memorable vignettes of international diplomatic excess.

There is an absolutely wild description of the American ambassador's Fourth-of-July party in Lahore that will leave anyone who has even observed such fanfare in hysterics. As the inevitable death of General Zia approaches, the author is relentless in whipping up still additional explanations for Ali's revenge plot/coup, a total tongue-in-cheek debacle. How all of this will play in Pakistan is the unanswered question. Still, credit must go to Mohamed Hanif for his exploding narrative.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University in Washington, DC.



A Case of Exploding Mangoes  
Mohammed Hanif  
Knopf