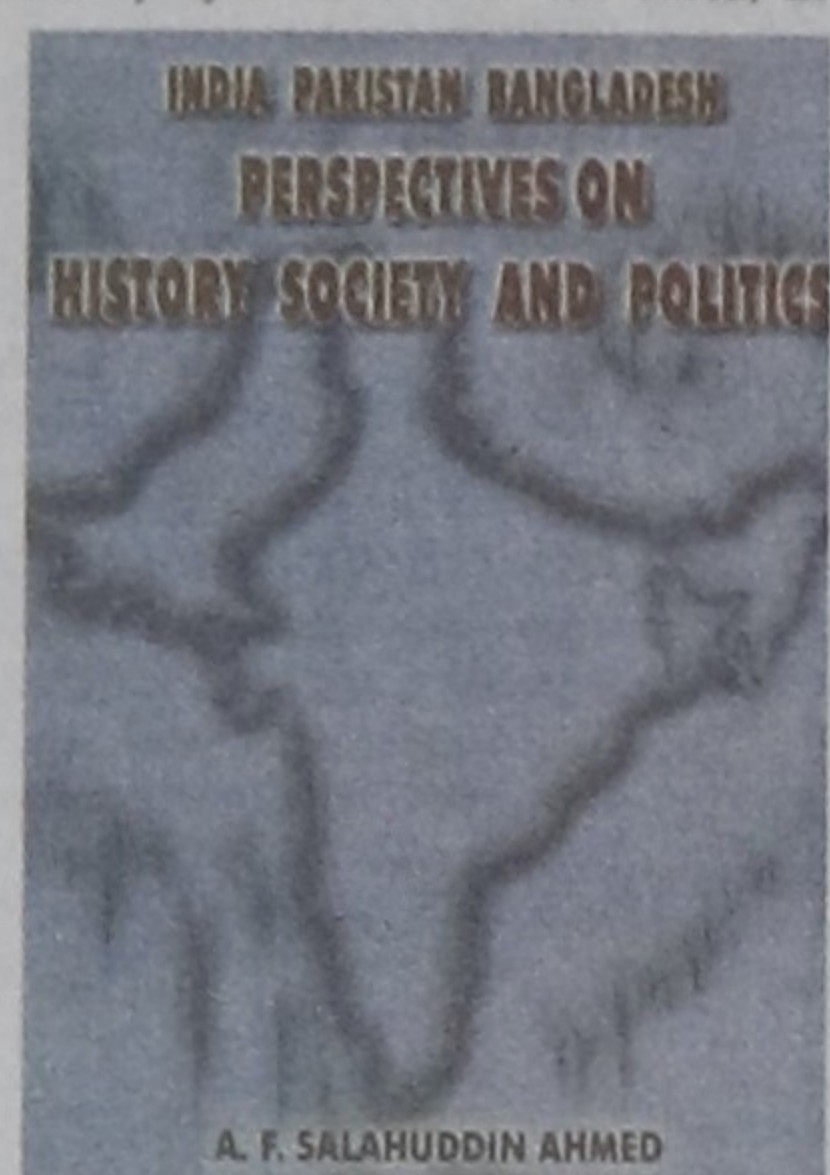


## Interpreting life and its many dimensions Syed Badrul Ahsan is cheered by two studies on South Asia

SCHOLARLY interpretations of politics and culture in South Asia have by and large been a rarity, especially in these times. There is therefore reason for happiness at knowing that A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed has been filling in the gaps, at least some of the larger ones. In *History and Heritage*, there is a sweep that comes into his telling of the tale, obviously because of the large canvas upon which South Asian culture and politics have generally rested. Begin at the beginning. And that of course is Islam as it has evolved in the region. Ahmed's analyses of the circumstances in which the faith travelled down all the way from Arabia are pointers to what may not have been done in recent times to explain the rise of Islam as a compelling factor in the region. Of course, there were the episodes of Muslim warriors making their way to India and in a militaristic way causing Islamic inroads into an ancient culture. Ahmed notes such developments and then does something better. He pursues the comprehensive history of religious scholars, priests and pirs who, inspired by the Islamic zeal, made their way to the subcontinent. That in turn led to new configurations in the region. The lower orders in Hinduism, fascinated by the liberality of the new faith, quickly chose to be initiated into it.

Salahuddin Ahmed devotes a considerable length of time to a discussion of the conflict between modernity and tradition in Bengal as it came to be in the nineteenth century and later. He raises the necessary question of whether Indian Muslims, in a time when British colonialism in India was rampant, went through a revival or found themselves inaugurating a new renaissance, particularly through the various movements based on the Islamic faith. The Wahhabi movement remains, to be sure, a seminal point in any discussion of Islam in

the subcontinent. But there were too all the other ideas that branched out from it, as also from other socio-religious enterprises. Ahmed speaks of the Tariqa-e-Muhammadiyah movement, led by Syed Ahmed of Rae Bareilly, in



India Pakistan Bangladesh  
Perspectives on History Society and Politics  
A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed  
Readers Service

northern India in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Besides all such discussions of Islam, of such clear new trends of thought as Sufism, the writer remembers at nearly every point to keep attention focused on Hinduism as it tried to deflect the onslaught of Islam. And then there are the inevitable reflections, as it were, on the causes behind Muslim backwardness in India against a background of the rise of English power.

Ahmed traces the reasons, those that we may have been familiar with and yet have in the recent past quite been unwilling to re-emphasise in our deliberations on the history of the subcontinent.

*History and Heritage* is, apart from



REFLECTIONS ON  
SOCIETY POLITICS AND  
CULTURE OF SOUTH ASIA

A.F. SALAHUDDIN AHMED

History and Heritage  
Reflections On Society Politics and  
Culture Of South Asia  
A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed  
The University Press Limited

being a study of the social forces that have shaped heritage in this part of the world, a considered, necessarily sympathetic research into the careers of two men who made an impact on life in South Asia. Mahatma Gandhi's crusade against British colonial rule in India is a story Salahuddin Ahmed begins through recalling his meeting with the Indian nationalist leader in 1946. Those were tumultuous times, with Gandhi

travelling down to Noakhali to help contain the communal riots ravaging the country following the collapse of the Cabinet Mission Plan. And equally tumultuous times were to be in the future, with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman spearheading a movement that would free Bengalis of Pakistani political control. In effect, it is an arc of history Ahmed throws up in his examination of the political evolution between the times of Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The scholarly is also what comes through in the earlier *Perspectives On History Society Politics*. Salahuddin Ahmed approaches his subjects (and there are quite a few of them) from a generally South Asian point of view. Perhaps that is as it should be? There are the grounds upon which the writer prepares his analyses, the central point of which is the growing spirit of cooperation between the nations of South Asia as a whole. Lest the point be missed, though, the South Asian perspective in this work relates specifically to the three nations which today happen to be successors to pre-1947, undivided India. The legacy is all. And it is a terrible one, which is good reason for Ahmed to introduce readers to what he calls a quest for peace and harmony in the region. And yet he does not plunge straight into an observation of reality as it defines the present but goes into tracing the long history of conflict and its resolution in the subcontinent. That surely leaves readers somewhat more educated on the nature of the politics, or varying threads of it, that have underscored the historical aspects of the land.

Take the instance of Bengal. Rare are the instances of a geographical region undergoing so much pain as this province on the eastern fringes of India has. Salahuddin Ahmed traces the entirety of Bengal's history, through pre-Mughal

times followed by the long dominance of the successors of Babar. And then, naturally, the story goes all the way down to modern times, an era that for the first time left the province knifed through the heart. The partitions of 1905 and 1947 will remain sore points, though the first of the two divisions could eventually be rolled back owing to the spirited struggle put up by the Bengali middle classes and intellectual circles against the slicing of the province. Such a movement, unfortunately, was conspicuously missing in 1947, for much water had flown under the bridge by then. If in 1905 the objective of the British power was to help advance the economic cause of the poorer eastern part of Bengal, in 1947 it was sharply polarised, communal politics that left the province reeling from the blows inflicted on it by divisive Congress-Muslim League politics.

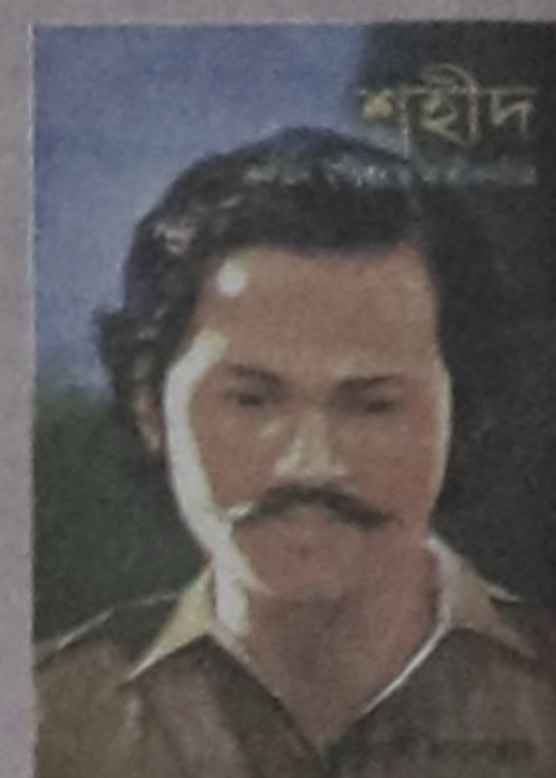
And, yes, Bengal --- or the part of it that linked up with Pakistan --- was to go on bleeding, until it opted to prise itself out of Mohammad Ali Jinnah's creation through a war imposed on it by the genocidal acts of Pakistan's army. These are the accounts of history Salahuddin Ahmed brings to the fore in *Perspectives*. And then too there are the other accounts of history as well. Women's rights, higher education, nationalism and democracy and communalism are self-contained statements on the heritage South Asia is heir to.

And part of that heritage comes in Salahuddin Ahmed's assessment of Urdu and Persian newspapers as they came to be, or withered away, in the earlier part of the nineteenth century in Bengal. You come away enlightened from the conversations Salahuddin Ahmed engages in with you.

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

## AT A GLANCE

Shaheed  
Ekjon Muktiyoddha'r Jibonchitra  
Saqi Anwar  
Adhuna Prakash



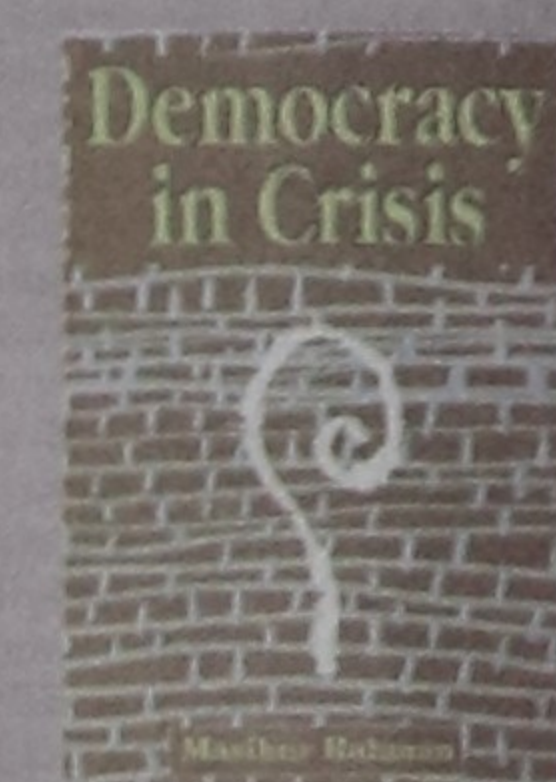
The work is an interesting account of the life of a prominent freedom fighter, one who would go on to serve the country in a diplomatic capacity. With popular interest in the history of the 1971 war showing little sign of ebbing, this book should serve as an addition to the works already on the subject, on all those shelves.



Purbo Bangla'r Uponyash  
Monsur Musa  
Adorn Publication

The publication, when it first appeared in 1974, made quite a splash with its various chapters on Bengali literary history. All these long years later, Monsur Musa has reproduced the work, with certain modifications and additions, all of which will draw the interest of literature buffs in the country.

Democracy in Crisis  
Masihur Rahman  
The University Press Limited



Masihur Rahman's career has by and large complemented his research on politics and economics. In this new work, he throws light on the many ailments the democratic experiment in Bangladesh has succumbed to. The author analyses the causes behind democracy's dysfunction, a task he does splendidly well.



Selected Papers on Security and Leadership  
Mohd Aminul Karim  
Academic Press and Publishers Library

With security issues taking up increasingly more space in everyday discussion in the country, this compilation promises to answer quite a few questions. More for researchers than laymen, the essays in the collection should be able to address, even if partly, the concerns so often raised by security analysts.

## One man's travels in search of family Farseeem Mohammedy rediscovers a troubled region in a tale

THIS is another beautiful piece from Amin Maalouf. This time he details his ancestral history, particularly his grandfather Botros Mokhtara Maalouf, his life and times. The author traces his grandfather's paths by reading Botros' hand-written draft copies of many letters that he answered to his numerous friends and family members. Fortunately, the author got access to this family treasure a box containing many letters from his grandfather's period. The author read and re-read all these letters and juxtaposed whatever he could find from his surviving relatives; and the outcome of this vigorous research into his own ancestry is this book. It is interesting to us because it talks about the life and times of the late-nineteenth and early 20th century Middle East in general.

It is of particular importance that when the end of the once mighty Ottoman Empire was in sight, the characters of this story were alive and took part in the events.

This book gives us the context at which the collapsing Ottoman Empire affected people and politics thereafter. This book is set mostly in Lebanon, particularly in the mountains.

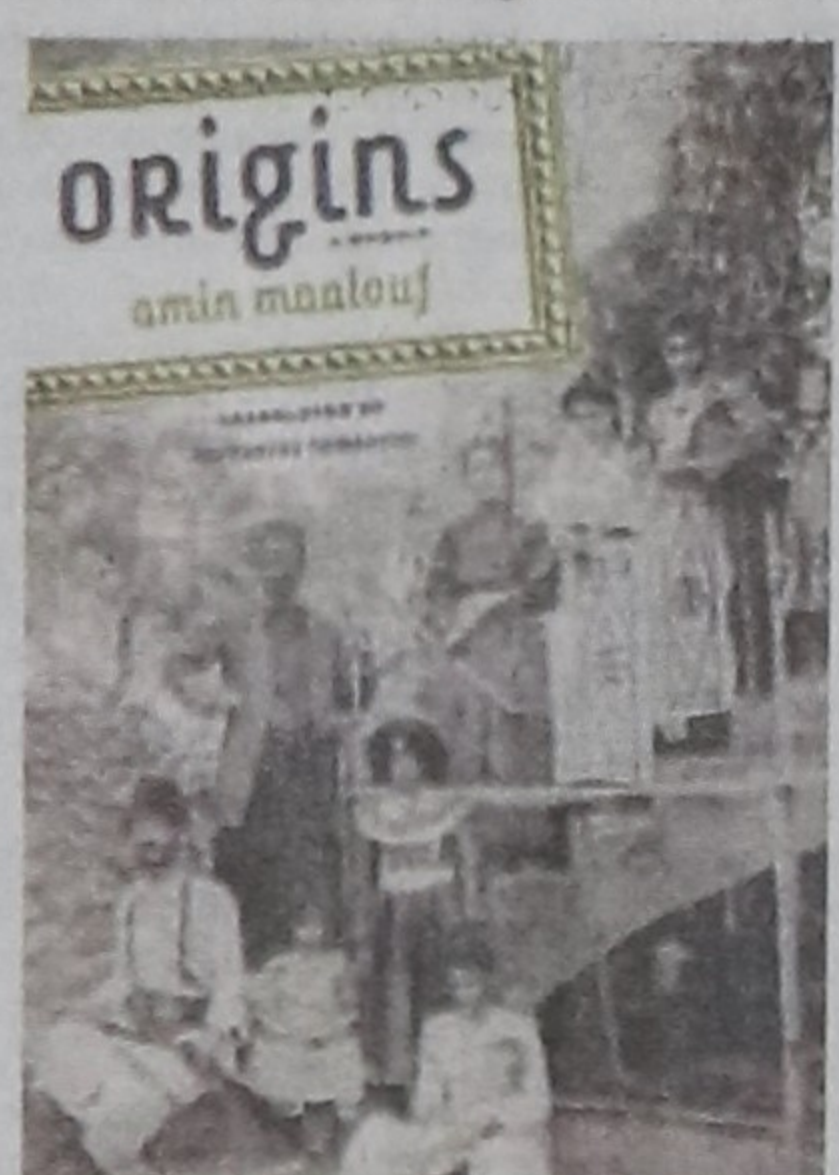
The author's grandfather, Botros, was born in the Mountains of Lebanon, in a village called Machrah, to Tannouse and Soussene in 1868. Botros later became a very successful teacher. He is remembered as Moallem Botros or Teacher Botros. He was an eloquent speaker. He was invited to all important ceremonies. And he used to compose poems for various occasions. The author reminds us that one distinctive feature in Botros was that he always wore the European attire without any hat. At those times you either wore a Tarboush in the Ottoman Turkish way or you would wear

a European hat to show off your secularism. Botros wore nothing, he was bareheaded.

The first part of this book talks frequently about the tension between two opposite trends at that time in Lebanon to emigrate to a faraway country for better prospects or to remain in the country. A lot of well-educated people were leaving for the Americas, including Botros' own brother Gebrayel. Botros himself also journeyed to Cuba where Gebrayel settled, but later came back to Lebanon where he thought he belonged. There was a family story in this regard, that Botros went to Cuba to save Gebrayel from a tight spot or whatever, but on closer scrutiny the author finds out that this was not the true story however. It was his own ambitions that took Botros all the way to Cuba, and judging the prospects he later settled in Lebanon. There was immense tension during those times when we see Botros to be fully grown and constantly being torn apart between a strong urge to immigrate, possibly to America, or to stay back in Lebanon and work in the mainstream. The author notes that 'the fact of not leaving the country, of wanting to believe in its future, was due as much as to his (Botros) convictions as to his family situation and his temperament for he was insubordinate, quick-tempered, impatient, indecisive, and riddled with scruples. ... He had constant doubts about the emergence of his new Orient he longed for, as well as constant doubts about his chosen profession'.

The author, being Botros' grandson, is unkind enough to criticise the ancestor in order to bring out the objective truth from the sugarcoated family legends. During his lifetime, Botros was caught up in the turmoil of the First

World War, the ensuing famine in the land and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. He saw the rise of the Young Turks, namely Enver and Niyazi pasha, and later the rise of Kamal Ataturk, and their rebellions. The secular ideas of the Young Turks attracted him so boldly that Botros named his daughter after him,



Origins: A Memoir  
Amin Maalouf  
Trans. from French by Catherine Temerson.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Kamal.

Botros married Nazeera, the author's grandma, who was 27 years his junior. He was 44 and she a mere 17. Nazeera's family had a long history shared with that of Botros' and there were a lot of intertwining stories of the two families.

For that, one must read the original book. However, into this same family, other than Botros himself, his younger brother Gebrayel and his own sister married. And the father-in-law, the priest Khalil, was once a favorite teacher of Botros.

One interesting bit pointed out by the author is that when Gebrayel sent letters to Botros, the address read thus: "Professor Botros M. M. Machrah, Beirut, Syria, Turkey." At the time, Lebanon was part of greater Syria, the latter of Ottoman Turkey. Small wonder that these affiliations are still creating international political problems. It is in this context that one has to think of the Middle East crisis. It is hard to remove age-old identities for some imposed 'mandate' or so. The author laments at this point: "Since then, scores of people have died for allegedly eternal homelands, and many more will die tomorrow."

Elsewhere, the author himself journeys to Havana to explore any remaining family connections. After some loose ends, he traces one family member from his grandma's brothers' side. It is an emotional get-together. It was here in Havana where his great uncle Gebrayel died in an accident, it was here where his grandpa Botros came for a while in search of brighter prospects; it was here that Gebrayel made some fortune which was quick to go after his untimely death. Botros was also dead in 1924 when Nazeera was only 29 or so, leaving her "with six orphans, the oldest was eleven years old, the youngest eleven months." Nazeera, the grandma, took many austere steps to make the family hold to its original goals. She raised all six kids, and from childhood she so inspired them that all of them ended up having degrees from the

respectable American University in Beirut. There is a very heart-touching scene of Nazeera and her struggles in one of her eldest son's letters to the author's father:

"How can I ever forget the time when I discovered her at 3 o'clock after midnight, in tears because of her worries and big responsibilities, still working with her dear hands at a table, in spite of all the duties awaiting her on the following day, hoping to make a few pennies to meet the needs of the family. I came out of my bed and kissed her and said to her, 'Don't worry, Mamma, very soon we will grow older, and we will take very good care of you,' and then, noticing that her mantilla was worn, I added, 'And I will buy you a new mantel'."

The author undertook the project when his diplomatic friend gave him a clue --- that in Cuba there was an official with the same family name as Maalouf. This actually started off the research that resulted in this book. As a whole, this book is one family saga that is still without end. The author likes to imagine genealogy as a road having so many branches and meeting so many other roads, some with blind alleys. This book catches the reader's attention in slowly unveiling the paths taken by the author's ancestors in a historic detective fashion. The author, himself being the detective, goes as far away as Cuba, to find out any surviving Maaloufs or any other member of the extended family. As a result, the work has not become another boring personal saga but rather a very interesting tale of those times and places.

The writer is engaged in electrical engineering research.

## It is a dark, Gothic tale

### Ditio Syed-Haq picks up a novel he ends up liking

MY missus displays a degree of possessiveness towards books bordering on obsession. It doesn't help that she works in the British Library or that she has a background in English Literature or even the fact that she is unashamedly a self-confessed bookworm. She has, amongst other things, a penchant for leaving her mark on the books she buys. The letters of her name at evenly-spaced intervals are carefully and meticulously etched on the first page of each and every tome. Read between the lines and that means "Take care of this book or die." I have learned from cold, hard experience to treat her books with the utmost respect.

There is another little peculiarity of hers she is possibly unaware of -- the number of times her name appears within a book directly corresponds to how much she has enjoyed it. A run-of-the-mill type of read might perhaps languish with a solitary inscription, while a more enjoyable one might be graced with an additional signature on the following page. And so it was with a smile that I picked up her copy of *The Thirteenth Tale* to notice -- not one, not two, but three separate occurrences of her name within. Read that as "Take care of this book or die a slow and painful death". Three signatures! This had better be good.

It was. Before you accuse me of waxing lyrical about the mistress of the house, let me clarify that not all the books she

likes are to my taste. I do not, for example, find much enjoyment in reading about the Tudor history of England from different perspectives, nor in the non-happening, eventless tales of post-modernist gloom that I feel should be locked up in the cupboard of literary academia and left to rot for eternity. I do, however, adore a good Gothic and the missus knows this well.

It would be difficult to cover *The Thirteenth Tale* without giving the game away and so, to preserve the element of surprise, the plot outline here will be a little patchy to say the least. Margaret Lea, an amateur biographer, unexpectedly receives a letter from reclusive best-selling author Vida Winters with an invitation to chronicle the events of her life. Margaret is confused. Why her of all people? She was no established biographer, her only foray into the world of writing having been an academic article or two. And although Margaret is familiar with Miss Winters' widespread fame, she has not read any of her books.

She is perplexed, curious, even. And this is what prompts her to visit Vida Winters in her Yorkshire estate to find out more. Margaret spent her childhood growing up in and around her father's antiquarian bookshop in Cambridge and is understandably no stranger to books. But her literary pursuits so far have been confined to the likes of Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights and Rebecca -- a not uncommon inclination for women of any age. Vida Winters, on the other hand, has devoted a lifetime to popular



The Thirteenth Tale  
Diane Setterfield  
Orion

fiction. Margaret resolves to discover more about the enigmatic author before their meeting and, upon getting hold of a few of her books, is pleasantly surprised to find herself drawn to the power of her storytelling ability.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of their first exchange. For a moment, it seems their differences are too great for them to work together for

the duration of such a lengthy and demanding undertaking. Miss Winters' health is failing; she is of a temper and disposition befitting one on the verge of death. But she cannot die yet. She has one more tale to tell.

The Thirteenth Tale. There is only one caveat. Margaret is forbidden from asking questions. She must accept the story as it is revealed to her and make whatever sense she can of events. But Margaret too has imposed a condition upon Miss Winters. She must be told the truth.

It is on this uneasy footing that we begin to learn the story of Angelfield Estate, once home to the prosperous March family and which now lies in ruins. We come to know of the disturbed siblings Charles and Isabella and of the destructive red-haired twins that are her offspring. We are shown the decay that runs through the once-noble bloodline and manifests itself in dilapidation and despair within the very timbers of the grand house. Loyal servants, secretive gardeners, village doctors and a fearsome governess to boot -- this book has it all. But what is the connection between all this and Miss Winters? And what, for that matter, is the connection with Margaret?

What ensues is a dark and Gothic delight in no way less comparable to the works of Brontë and Du Maurier that Margaret so admires. It is a tale of madness and sin and debauchery and rage that leaves readers crying out for more. And importantly, it is a novel of the type that simply doesn't get written these

days. Diane Setterfield artfully weaves the elements of contemporary Gothic with a style and maturity far exceeding expectations from a first novel.

"Location, Location, Location!" as they're fond of saying in the world of real estate and much the same can be said of the genre. Each and every setting -- be it amongst ancient ruins or in the blazing glow of a fireplace in the library -- simply oozes with Gothic chutzpah. True to the genre again is the hidden moral message which must be deciphered rather than stated out loud. What I personally took away was this: Blood may be thicker than water, but then, some blood is thicker than others. I leave it to readers to draw their own conclusions.

I should warn you that the first couple of chapters may seem a little slow. The real story begins when Margaret meets Miss Winters and, from that point on, I defy you to put the book down. It's all about "What happened next?" So don't be surprised if you find yourself sneaking a couple of swift pages at lunchtime, a stolen chapter or two before dinner and waking up blissfully next to it in bed. The book, that is, not your dinner. At least I certainly did.

"Tell me the truth", a young man demands of Miss Winters at the beginning of the tale. Truth, yes, and I can only hope I face the same question with a modicum of courage when the missus finds out I've put a little crease on the front cover.

Ditio Syed-Haq is a UK-based writer.

## Bangladesh's war through tender eyes

### Ekram Kabir is happy reading a new account of 1971

THE war of independence certainly is the most important event in Bangladesh's national history. That was the time when Bangladesh changed course, away from Pakistani tyranny, by waging a gory war. Perhaps the war shaped Bangladesh's national psyche to a great extent. After the war, the victors possibly committed their worst folly by neglecting the history of this war. Their nonchalance at paying respect to history complicated the situation. The unity of the Bengali nation in Bangladesh suffered many fractures. The footnotes of history became more important than the real contributions of the masses; real history was shoved into the annoying realm of footnotes.

A six-year-old boy is not expected to remember what happened during the war. But it was such a tumultuous time that it left a deep imprint on a boy's mind. No one will believe that a boy still remembers what happened when he was a mere child. Fine. But what if he does? If you listen closely, with an honest heart, the boy's memory would tell you how low the war drums really were. Because that is the age to see the light of the world, enlighten one's inner being. And that is what exactly happened to boys and girls of this age group. They'll never forget the war when the elders might forget many aspects of it. These boys and girls would perhaps stay away from romanticising on the war as their elders did - that, perhaps, led to various distortions of war history of Bangladesh.

Rasheed remembers the war through his lens. And he felt the urgency of penning them down in *Damama*, or War Drums. He dedicates the book to Bangladesh, his dream-like Bangladesh. He narrates almost every incident with wit but in a serious manner. When he talks about anti-liberation forces and the mind-boggling and sometimes hilarious - acts of the Pakistani army, he turns extremely satirical. It is certainly good style.

The 18-chapter book begins in 1970 when Rasheed's father gets a job with the East Pakistan Health Services as an assistant surgeon. The father becomes a lieutenant physician in Pakistan Army. The job is basically the turning point of the book. If his father had not got the job, much would have happened differently. If his father had not joined the army, he would not have gone to Pakistan on military posting. The family wouldn't have to go there as well. Rasheed would have remembered the war of independence differently. But that was not to be. As the father goes to erstwhile West Pakistan, he takes his family there after sometime. But the book depicts the Pakistan episode in a later chapter. The first eleven chapters are purely about how Rasheed saw, remembers and understands the war.

Rasheed names his book after one of the episodes that tells how the war fought and how it was resisted by the anti-

Bangladesh forces, both at home and abroad. His titles of the episodes are quite literary. Babar Training, Kalbosheki Jhar, Dakat! Dakat! (and others) take the reader on a cruise in the sea of understanding of a boy about the liberation war of Bangladesh.

Rasheed's work could give you a picture of southern Bangladesh during the liberation war and even before that. The whole family starts moving from one place to another. They meet many relatives, sometimes in a countryside atmosphere, sometimes in a township background. For example, he talks about a labourer who runs a passenger 'helicopter'. Now, anyone could be misled by this, but Rasheed describes this mode of transport pretty well. Bicycles with a huge carrier at the back are commonly called 'helicopters' in Sathkira and its adjacent areas.

This is equally true when Rasheed describes life in Pakistan. The attitude of



Damama  
Shuja Rasheed  
Turjo Prashani

common Pakistanis towards Bangladesh's war, the feeling of Bangladeshi officers posted in Pakistan and the helplessness of Bangladeshi civilians in Pakistan all come up vividly in the book.

Rasheed writes in lucid and humorous language. The language is one of the reasons why the book is a page-turner. For example, while describing someone's toothache, he writes: "A few of his teeth revolted together, causing him dangerous pain."

Rasheed work, full of all the wartime social aspects, should be good food for filmmakers. Production of a high-quality film is possible with a boy as the main character.

Ekram Kabir is a journalist.