

## Understanding the soul in an artist...

Hasnat Abdul Hye looks at a biographical work with a critical eye

IN RECENT times, a few books have been published on the leading artists of Bangladesh, an initiative which now appears to be a full-fledged trend, deserving appreciation and praise. Artists need to be introduced to the art world both through their works and informed discourse about their creative process. Comprehensive books on the works of artists thus become their biographies tracing the evolution of their works and the internal and extraneous forces that were brought to bear on them. Both the text, the art works, and the contexts, the traditional and contemporary practices within which the artists work, become important. The object, the art works, attains its full meaning through circumstantial explication, the contextual analysis.

Javed Jalil, the writer of the book on Mohammed Kibria, is aware about the need to look at the historical perspective as well as the creative process that took shape in the artist's mind for adequate appreciation of his works. He has discussed the inter-action between the creative process and the external forces represented by tradition and contemporary trends in the domain of art. The introduction to the book describes the 'process' and the 'context' and their inter-action at some length. This is most valuable to understand the making of the artist that Kibria is today. However, statements like 'To Kibria, a work of art is like the process of life. It is conceivable deep within the artist which grows and moves towards its destined course', is not unique to Kibria and, therefore, is not helpful in understanding his works. But when it is revealed, 'Feelings of melancholy come very naturally to

Kibria. They are the driving forces behind his creations,' it immediately becomes a signpost to the innermost recesses in the artist's creative mind. Equally revealing to outsiders is the information that by temperament he is an 'emotionally isolated recluse who finds relief in the silent doodling of lines and colour.' Also, in the same vein, 'Feeling of depression and despair eventually yielded to his trapped creativity so that he could convey empathy for life's insecurities' gives insight into the psychological aspects of Kibria's works. The book being an authorised album with commentary, these observations can be treated like autobiographical notes of the artist.

As regards the context, the introduction mentions the movement against Western art among the artists in Bengal and the new movement inspired by nationalism and patriotic sentiment, giving rise to the emergence of the New Bengal School. The readers learn that although Kibria was exposed to the works of the New Bengal School, 'he sought his own path.' His preference was for individual expression rather than following an ideology. But it does not follow from this that by expressing his innermost thoughts in works with universal themes he sub-consciously revealed his patriotism; it is contradictory to equate universalism with nationalism, not to mention individualism.

The readers come to know of Kibria's interest in Western art as a student, developed through art magazines, that made him familiar with works of Matisse and Picasso. Though the Calcutta School of Art, Kibria's alma mater, was very much influenced by

British academic tradition, Kibria came under the influence of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists. They helped him to understand the use of colour to depict inner moods.

Though Western art continued to inspire Kibria after he graduated from Calcutta Art School, it has not been mentioned which of the movement have predominantly influenced his works that are compiled in the album. The collection in the album does not



Kibria  
Javed Jalil  
Society for Promotion of Bangladesh Art

show any work in the tradition of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism or Expressionism. The movement that has perhaps influenced Kibria's works most profoundly, Abstract Expressionism, has not been mentioned at all. On the other hand, much has been made of the

influence of Japanese artists on his works which may be true in woodcuts and in the serenity of colour composition in his abstract paintings. It is also mentioned in the introduction that Paul Klee's compositional elements (geometric lines) and Giacometti's elongated human forms inspired him but the works in the album do not bear this out. It is also far-fetched to say that Goya's paintings from his 'black period' had their effect on Kibria because no such work has been included in the album nor has seen in any of his exhibitions held so far. The Zen-like serenity seen in the 'space and structures of his works' most probably owes to the Japanese aesthetics and the writer has rightly pointed this out.

The public are as ignorant about prints of Kibria as they are about his drawings because these have not been shown in exhibitions in recent times. In graphics, Kibria has used mostly etching followed by aquatint, dry point, wood-cut and lithograph. The writer has described some of the prints highlighting their minimalism and nuances; this could be done in a more satisfactory way if the different mediums used by Kibria in the category of prints were grouped together (e.g. etching, wood-cut, etc.) and discussed separately rather than referring to prints at random.

The last chapter in the album covers works of Kibria in mixed media. The writer observes that 'Kibria looks at mixed media as a journey of interplay and coherence. The blending of media elements fosters plurality of thought.' Everyone would agree with the view as this captures the essence of mixed media. But it is not correct to say that

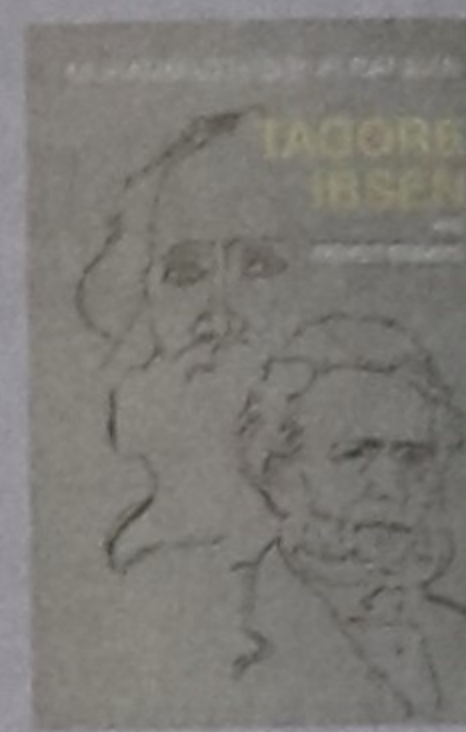
'harmonized image through mixed media results from use of materials in their independent dimensions to express their unique characteristics.' A torn piece of cloth used in a mixed media does not retain its original characteristics and has a new role. In a mixed media the emphasis is on collective association and meaning and no element can or should 'establish itself as the focus of the composition.' The writer acknowledges this at the end when he concludes: 'Kibria's expression in mixed media finds dimension through the correlation of various media.' This is given added emphasis when it is observed, 'The relationship of media unifies the artist's thought to bring out a more dynamic image.' There is no question that by blending the different media together, Kibria has displayed a strong sense of movement and diffusion in his mixed-media works. His works in this category are textually rich, perhaps more than in his abstract paintings, which make some of them outstanding.

25 reproductions have been included in the album of the book. Javed Jalil is right in observing that Kibria looks at mixed media as a journey of interplay and coherence. But as already pointed out it would not be correct to say that the artist uses materials in their independent dimensions to express their unique characteristics. The concept and practice of mixed media does not allow uniqueness of individual materials to overwhelm the coherent whole.

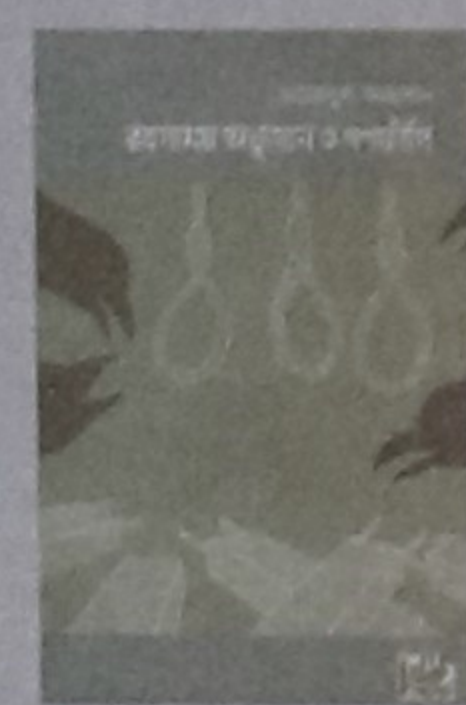
Hasnat Abdul Hye is a writer and critic and has served in senior positions in government.

## AT A GLANCE

Tagore Ibsen and Other Essays  
Muhammad Habibur Rahman  
Adorn Publication



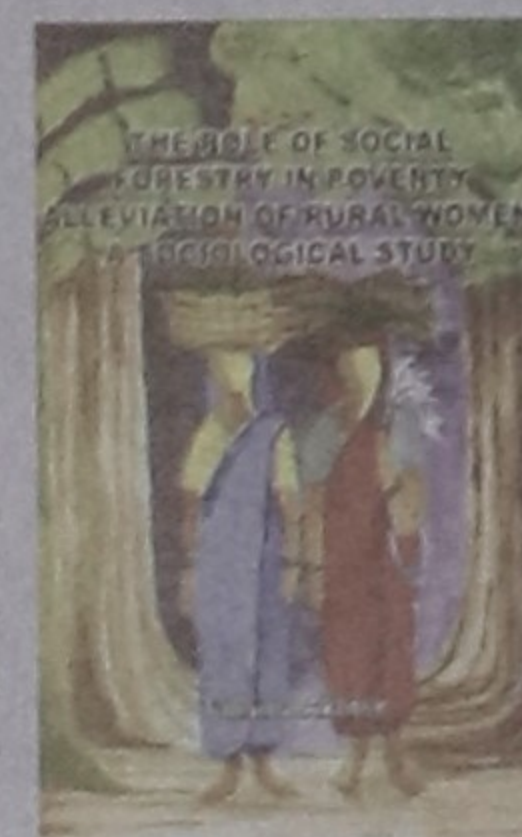
A deeply respected figure in Bangladesh, the writer has over the past many years been making his valuable contributions to studies of culture and heritage through his prolific writings. In this work, the expanse of his readings and consequent analyses of issues come through most admirably. Any student of Bangladesh's history will admire the work.



Rohoshshomoy Obbhutthan O Gonopanshi  
Zayadul Ahsan  
Pathshutro

This is a riveting account of the executions, seemingly endless, carried out by the military regime of Ziaur Rahman in the aftermath of the abortive coup led by men of the Bangladesh air force in October 1977. The writer's research has been thorough; and emerging from it are the sordid tales of injustice and innocent lives destroyed. It is a severe indictment of the nation's first military ruler.

The Role of Social Forestry in Poverty  
Alleviation of Rural Women: A Socio-  
logical Study  
Tahsina Akhter  
Academic Press and Publishers Library



With women increasingly becoming a factor in Bangladesh's development schemes, it is quite natural to examine their role through social compartments. And that is precisely what Tahsina Akhter does in this carefully worked out detail of how social forestry has an impact on women's lives in this country. A useful point of reference, this.

KAMURAN GURUN  
THE ARMENIAN  
FILE

The Armenian File  
The Myth of Innocence Exposed  
Kamuran Gurun  
Turkiye Bankasi

Over the decades, there have been all the stories and news accounts of the sufferings Armenians have gone through at the hands of the Turks. For their part, the Turkish people as well as successive governments have long portrayed such reports as false propaganda. And that is precisely what this book attempts to do again.

## Frayed sensibilities, angry explosions

Farida Shaikh examines a writer's anger

THE book continues to be a top best seller in Italy, and has been in that position in other European countries. This book broke the writer's ten years' silence, until 9/11. The central theme revolves round what is described as Islamic terrorism and the incompatibility between the Western world and Islam. It is to be noted that the comparison is on uneven ground between secularism in the West and religious order in third world countries.

Would she have dared to compare the two monotheistic religions and the subsumed terrorism content? The book might as well have done with the title 'Freedom from Fear' which, as the writer notes, is the first of the Human Rights? It deals with the weak response of the West towards Jihad. The writer has pronounced some uncomfortable truths.

The book in an essay form was condemned as bigoted, hysterical propaganda, not only by Muslim leaders but also politicians, media figures, and academics. The author calls this work 'my small book' and 'the portrait of a soul.'

The book has been translated into several European languages and into Italian-English by Fallaci herself, and published in America, with a note to the American reader by the writer. 'The translation... contains... what my critics define as "the oddities of Fallaci's English"'

Oriana Fallaci, the veteran Italian semi-exile journalist who died not long ago, was one New Yorker who did not fight with her fury; she let it erupt, like a volcano in a book, at first published in Italy's leading newspaper 18 days after the attacks, under the title *The Rage and the Pride*.

Similar to the writer's well known work, *Interview with History*, it is supposed that if the writer could interview Osama Bin Laden, (spelling used by the writer) she would ask what pleasure his psyche got from destruction? And how his defunct ultra-polygamist father who begot fifty-four children portray the seventeenth, Osama Bin Laden, as the 'nicest, sweetest and best?' And why his sisters when in London or the Riviera like to be photographed in uncovered head and face... exposing plump breasts and fat buttocks. No burkah... no chador? Further, Osama's relationship with Saudi Arabia; how much money Al-Qaeda receives from the royal family of Saudi Arabia; are issues to reflect on. Upon reconsideration, such an interview with Laden would be a waste of time and it would be more befitting to inform him that he has not succeeded in bringing New York to its knees.

About her own country, the writer notes that if Osama had destroyed the tower of Pisa, the Italian opposition would have blamed the government, and not the Islamic terrorists.

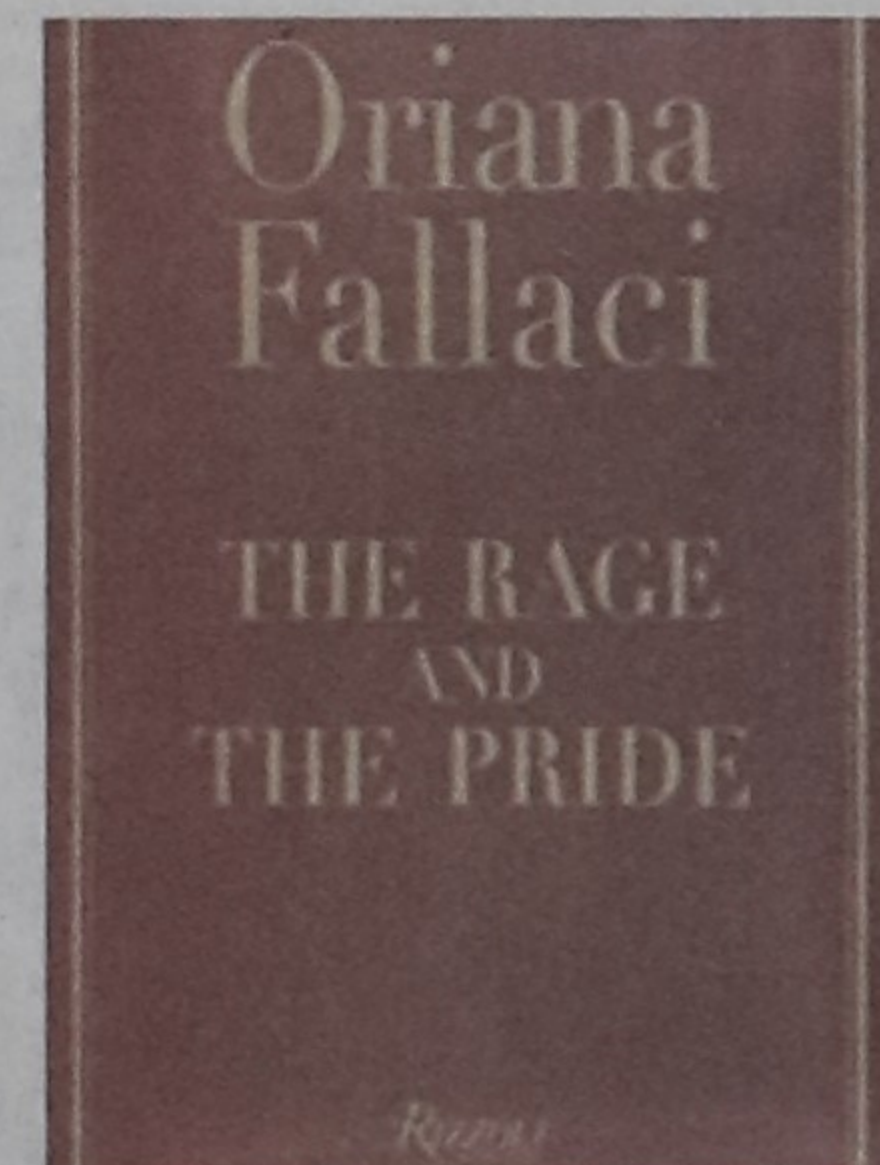
Fallaci praises the American capacity to unite, to react to misfortune and enemies. This quality is compared to the compactness as revealed before the bombing of Pearl Harbour. The major political parties getting together to fight terrorism is contrasted with conditions in Italy, which is

sectarian and politically divided. Political parties are obsessed with their own glory.

The execution of twelve impure men executed in 1975 at Dacca, Bangladesh, is cited as an example of religious atrocity. The case of Ali Bhutto, the Pakistani prime minister, is an instance of ultra-Moslem realities. The writer had interviewed him earlier, and his double and arranged marriages are cited as glaring examples of despicable polygamy.

Cultural differences are elaborated. There is her account of her seeking an Iranian visa, the dress rehearsal she had to undertake to reach Qom to interview Khomeini and dealing with the question of marriage so as to avoid being unmarried in a room.

About the book, there is always this nagging question whether *The Rage and the Pride* would have been a better book had Fallaci been less caustic in rhetoric, and written with more control of her passion. In all probability, the book would not



The Rage And The Pride  
Oriana Fallaci  
Rizzoli, New York

draw the sharp reactions it did. But then this is a document written amid the smoke rising from a crematorium down the street from Fallaci's apartment, and as a critic notes, 'I can attest that this elderly Italian virago perfectly captured the mood of the moment, when so many of us who are less articulate than she felt nothing but pride in our country and rage at the Islamic holy warriors who had done this to us (and their co-religionists who cheered them on).'

Many Americans have lost much of the righteous anger they felt in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 crime. And Fallaci's book is not really meant for American readers. As has been noted, 'Oriana Fallaci brings it all back home, and speaks more necessary truth in her unfettered fury than you'll hear from more politely equivocating souls.'

Farida Shaikh is a critic and is involved with The Reading Circle.

## Of Bengal, Japan and a hundred years

Subrata Kumar Das relishes some facets of intellectual history

BENGAL --- or today's Bangladesh --- has a long history of relations with Japan. In the last one hundred years there have been cultural, political, social and economic ties between the two countries. Many known and unknown different facets of the Bangla-Japan relationship have been presented in Probrir Bikash Sarker's formidable book *Jana Ojana Japan*, recently published from Dhaka.

The writer of the book has been a devoted cultural activist in Japan vis-a-vis Bangladesh. For more than two decades, he has been residing there and has turned into a great lover of Japanese culture. His profound love has helped him to undertake worthy research in bringing out the details of the century-old relationship between these two nations in the Asian continent. The work under review, a commendable initiative, promises further volumes to follow. He has been working on a voluminous book on the Rabindranath-Japan relationship also.

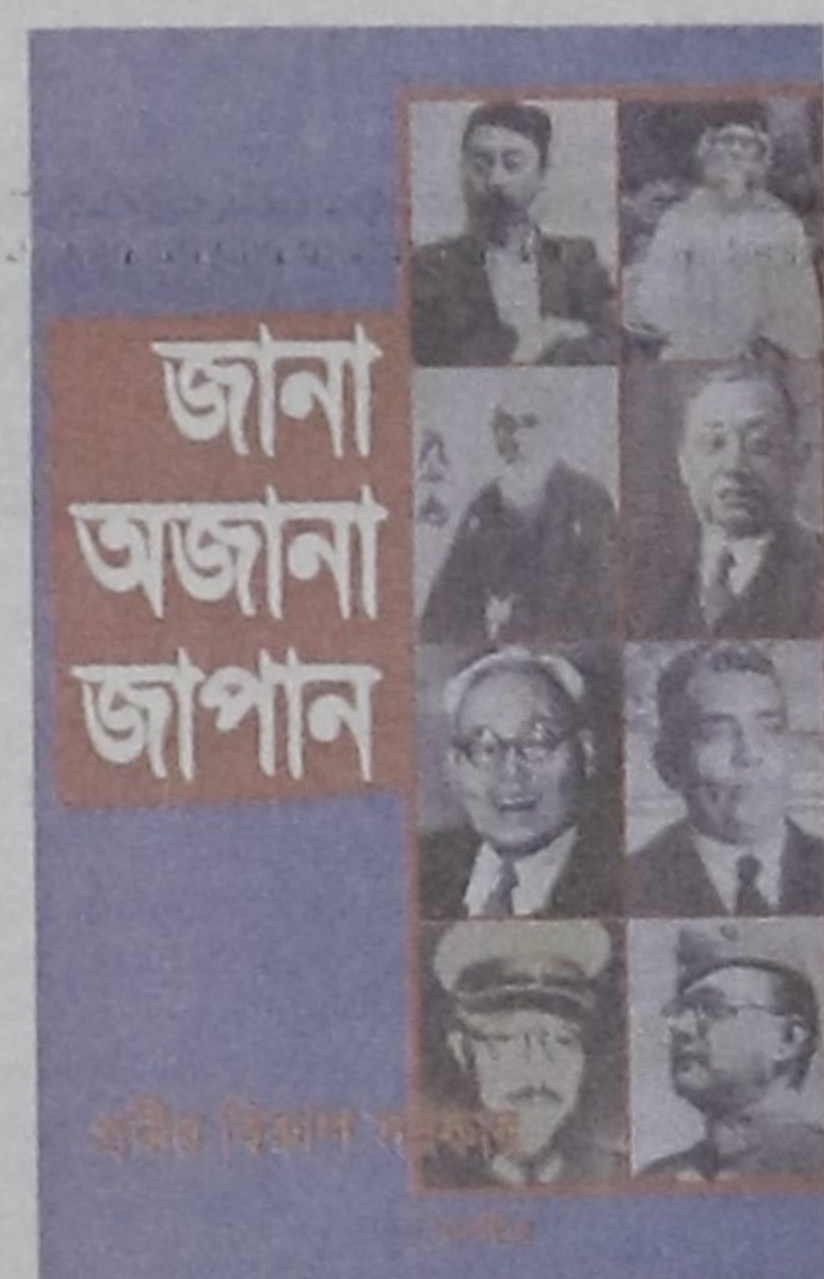
The articles in *Jana Ojana Japan* include 'Tenshin: The Forerunner of Japan-Bangla relationship', 'Recently Liberated Bangladesh in the Eyes of Ichinosei Taizo', 'Sheikh Mujib in the Eyes of Masaaki Tanaka', 'The Century Old Relationship of Japan-Bangla', 'Were the Indians the Ancestors of the Japanese?', 'The Greater Asia: The Burning Eyes: Toyama Mitsuru & Genyosha', 'Revolutionary Rashbihari Bose and the Independence of India', 'Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Japan', 'Dr. Radhabinod Pal: The Envoy

of Peace to Japan', 'A Feature of Japan-Asia Relationship', 'Shapla Neer: A Worthy Example', 'Agriculture: The Heart of the Japanese', 'Haiku King Matsuo Basho and One Toshiharu Aseko', 'More Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Asia', 'Noh: A Theatre of Masks', 'An Indian Film-Loving Japanese Lady', 'Burakumin or Dowa in Japan' and 'Isse Miyake: The God of Fashion & Beauty, Japan: A Different View'.

The book opens with an article on Okakura Tenshin, who played a vital role in developing Japan-Bangla relations at the very outset of the twentieth century. It is well known that Okakura's *The Book of Tea* (1906) served as an intellectual base for the unified 'One Asia' philosophy which was conclusively demonstrated in his book, *The Awakening of the West and The Ideas of the East*, both written in India. It may be noted here that Okakura first visited India in 1902, and in 1912 for the last time. He got associated with the leading personalities of the Bengali community, including Swami Vivekananda, Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore et al. at the time. The writer of the present book has also given authentic references regarding Okakura's romantic relationship with the Bangladeshi poet Priyamboda Bandopadhyaya (1871-1935). A graduate in 1892, Priyamboda emerged as one of the pioneer social workers of the then society. Her writings included a long story called 'Renuka' based on the geisha women of Japan.

The long article 'Japan-Bangla Shomporker Shotoborsho' can be

treated as an introductory piece. The century-old relationship started with Okakura's visit to Kolkata and was enhanced by Rabindranath's visit to Japan. Though it may here be worth



Jana Ojana Japan (Volume One)  
Probrir Bikash Sarker  
Manchitro Publishers, Dhaka

mentioning that during the latter's visit Okakura was no more alive. Then Rabindranath was welcomed warmly by Okakura Tenshin's son Kakuzo Okakura. The major events in this century were the five visits of Rabindranath

to Japan (1916, 1917, 1924, 1929-twice). Japan's role in the liberation of the colonial dependent countries of Asia, and as the abode of many Bengali revolutionists like Rashbihari Bose, Herembalal Gupta, Tarakanth Das, Romanath Roy, involvement of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose (1897-1945) with Japan, etc., are the other major events to recall. The opening of the Japanese department at Shantiniketan in 1954 also drew much attention. Celebration of the birth centenary of Rabindranath in 1961 in Japan was also noteworthy. The publication of the Japanese translation of Works of Rabindranath in 1988 and establishment of Nippon Bhaban in Shantiniketan in 1994 are some other events worth mentioning in this regard. Probrir Bikash Sarker presents all these historical features with necessary information.

An important essay in the book is on Rashbihari Bose and the independence of India. Rashbihari Bose, who left India in 1915, is treated as a pioneer revolutionary who sacrificed everything in life for the liberation of his motherland from the British. There is a long tale behind his departure from India for Japan. It is now well known that he was a suspect in the eyes of the British police. So he collected documents from Rabindranath himself as if he was a distant relative of the Tagore family and these documents helped him to flee India. The significance of the articles lies in the wealth of information provided about Rashbihari Bose's personal life in

## Loneliness and the strange ways of the heart

Tulip Chowdhury is moved by the poignance in a tale

WHERE the Heart Is comes with stories of people who live their lives through tears and joy. Novalee Nation, the protagonist of the story, lives in a chaotic world riddled with problems. Novalee, just seventeen and seven months pregnant, finds herself abandoned by her boyfriend Willie Jack. This happens to be the tip of the iceberg for henceforth each and every sunrise seems to come with more trouble for her. Billie Letts, with her mastery of story craft, brings into the scene the kind, good hearted people who show how sharing and caring can make a world of difference for Novalee. With these people Novalee is able to smile through her tears. The author sews into the story line unique tales of how people can together overcome mountains of trouble. Among these people are those who are happy and someone who are unhappy. And yet they are eager to help the homeless girl. The reader will be touched by Novalee's life, for she is a troubled teenager, a good soul who does not foresee the cruel blows of life.

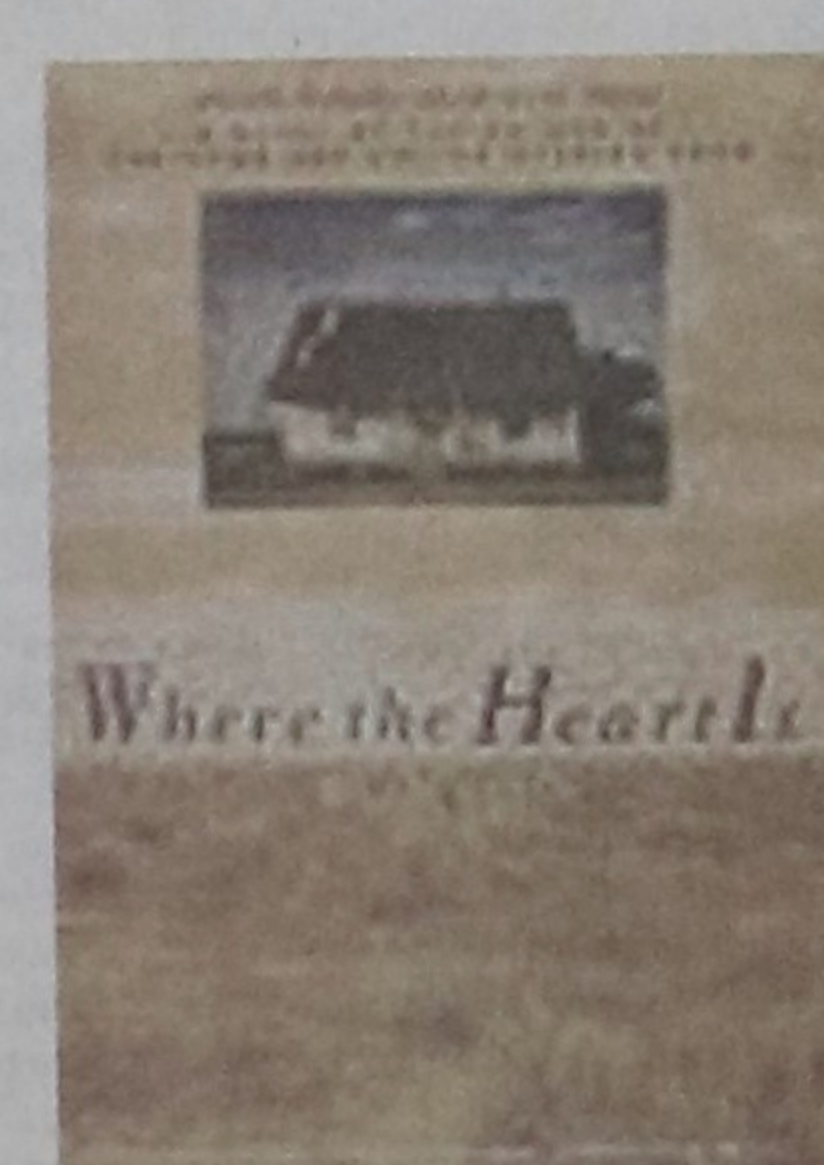
Novalee is not superstitious until the unlucky number seven strikes her. Her history of striking it bad about 'seven' begins the day Moma Nell runs away when she is seven years old. And then when Novalee is in the seventh grade her only friend gets caught in a case of car lifting by mistake and is sent to jail. And now at seventeen, seven months pregnant and seven pounds

overweight, she is alone in the big world. She works as a waitress at Red's and is just sailing along till on the seventh of July she gets stabbed in a break-in at a shop. Then Novalee has enough of 'sevens' and takes to the road, hitting for California with Willie Jack, her boyfriend. Willie, a musician, dreams big and there are promises of having a home with real silver and china. However, unlucky 'seven' still chases her and Willie, taking her car, abandons her in Sequoyah, Oklahoma, and that too at seven in the morning.

The story moves on. On a day out of Wal-Mart Novalee strikes up a conversation with a young boy Ben Goodluck who is sitting in a truck while the driver has gone for some soda. Ben gives her a small buckeye tree, saying that it will bring her good luck. Novalee is touched and wants to hold on to the boy's beliefs. The buckeye tree gives her hope for better days. Novalee visits the public library and on her third visit she meets Forney. The library is housed on the ground floor of Forney's house while he lives upstairs. Forney takes an instant liking to the young, troubled girl. He gets to know the date of her birthday and gives Novalee the very first birthday party of her life. With the two of them enjoying a quiet home cooked dinner Novalee is impressed and touched. No one had ever attached so much importance to her before.

The story starts its climb to the climax when Novalee's baby is born

inside Wal-Mart. It is a baby girl and Novalee names her Americus. Americus becomes a celebrity and is called the 'Wal-Mart Baby'. One morning Sam Walton comes walking into the hospital



Where the Heart Is  
Billie Letts  
Warner Books

room to meet Novalee. He informs her that he has a job waiting for her at the store. He leaves \$500 for the baby. Novalee wants to pay back all the goods she has used from Wal-Mart but Sam

Walton refuses to take any payments.

Novalee's curse of 'sevens' seems to be still chasing her. Many people send greetings and some send money too. When Americus is seven days old, Moma Nell appears from nowhere and declares that she is there to take care of the baby. Novalee hands her all the money she has received so that she can find them a home. Moma Nell disappears with the money. On the day of her release it is Sister Husband who drives up to take Novalee and the baby to her trailer home.

Novalee settles into her job. Her neighbours babysit for Americus while she is away. Forney is constantly by her side helping with the baby. However, Novalee meets Troy and starts dating him. Life goes on with its ups and downs. Novalee is yet to find the surprises that come her way as she settles down in the small town. She buys a camera that is on sale and starts on her big dream, photography. Soon her pictures are the talk of the town. But the joys are smeared with tears when Americus is in trouble.

The story continues with deft twists and turns. Billie Letts throws herself into the voices and hearts of her characters. The story spans out, taking the reader on roller coaster rides as the protagonist and the other characters of the story play their parts, revealing the ways people can grow and be nurtured. Imaginations are stirred and curiosity aroused. Will Novalee Nation, the home-

less girl, become a celebrity for her photography? There is Forney waiting for her with all his patience; where will this sweet, budding love lead? The neighbours, the characters that are palpably real, will they continue to stand firmly by Novalee? Will she, a single mother, be able to bring up her daughter? And will her curse with the number seven continue to chase her? The greatest question that stirs the imagination of the reader is: What happens to hundreds of other homeless girls in reality? It is Letts' special skill that she can make us feel the distinct yearnings of her characters, where nothing else matters, and allow us to stand back and perceive the parts they play in a larger collective pattern.

Where the Heart Is has found its place in Oprah's Book Club. Letts has created characters that are so fully realised that one feels as if they have known them over the years. The romance between Novalee and Forney is deep and touching. In fact, prize-winning writers like Clyde Edgerton, E. Annie Proulx and Barbara Kingslover may have to move over to make room for Billie Letts. Where the Heart Is has been made into a major film by 20th Century Fox.

It is a work that will not fail to cause smiles to bloom and tears to follow while you read.

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher, poet and fiction writer