

Of death, science and matters of faith

Mohammad Nuruddin studies an unusual book and comes away impressed

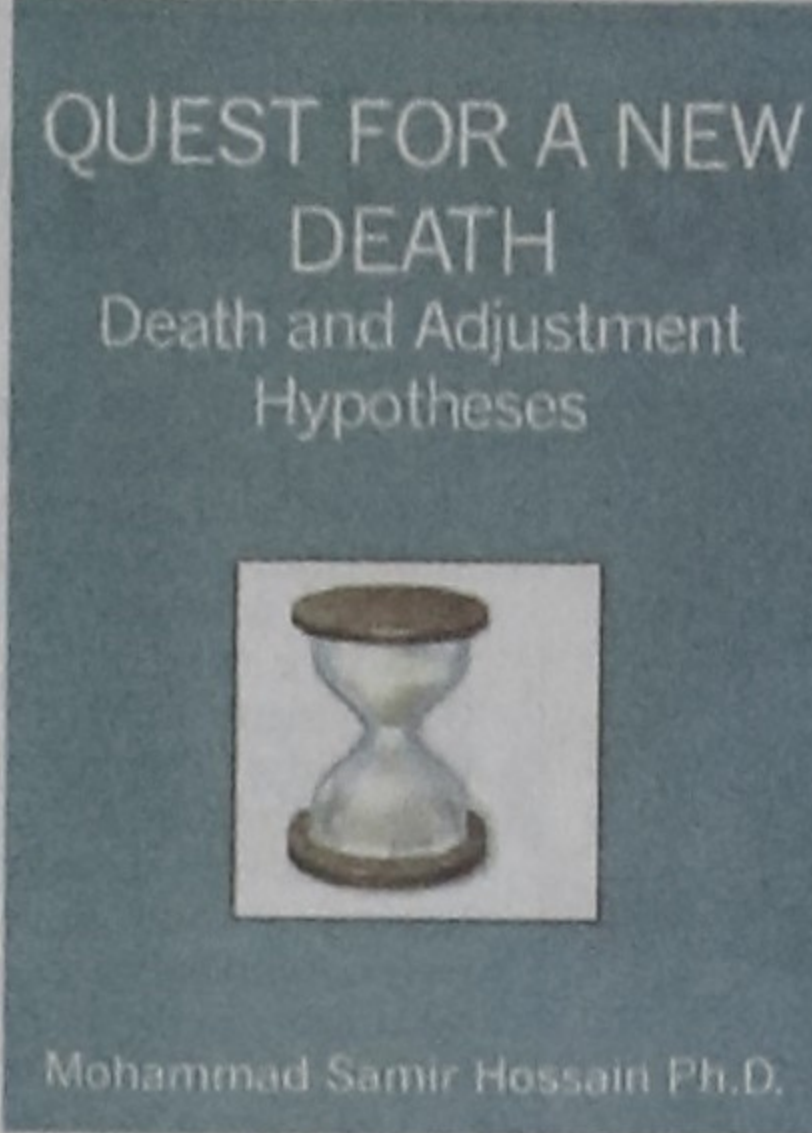
MOHAMMAD Samir Hossain is a physician and teacher of psychiatry at Medical College for Women and Hospital in Dhaka, Bangladesh. His book, *Quest for a new death*, is unique in its methodological focus on the phenomenon of death and our human reactions to it (Concept of death and adjustment, 2007).

While dealing with death as a natural phenomenon for every individual and society, this work abandons a focus on the point of death or dying, and instead investigates the more exclusive concepts pertaining to death as an ongoing state. The 'death' it speaks of is truly new for science. Thus, the book's subtitle is apt: *Death and adjustment hypotheses* as it draws on a foundation of the author's empirical research on Islamic death attitudes as an example of non-scientific conceptions of death (10% of the book) to build a theoretical framework (90% of the contents). The empirical parts are informed by conventional statistical analyses on death attitudes, whereas the conceptual parts mainly follow epistemological methodology, a less conventional way of conducting research in behavioral science. I think a small section describing its methodology could have clarified it for readers, especially for those who are not much acquainted with epistemological methods.

The book is presented in four main sections. Hossain begins, appropriately, by discussing different relevant topics on death. He then clarifies the concept of death, especially in the sense it will concern him in the pages that follow. With these matters of definition accomplished, he highlights the relationship of death as a universal phenomenon to people's mental health, a topic that he explores in some depth as it applies to the problem that death represents for otherwise healthy adults who have to adjust to this reality. Helpfully for his readers, Hossain discusses several of the specific scales he developed for his research,

which are not very available otherwise, such as the Death Rejection Score Scale (DRS), Neurotic Symptom Score Scale (NSS), and others, and puts these to use in the context of a formal research project whose results he summarises. In summary, this section serves to specify some unfamiliar concepts and methods used in this book.

The second section of the book concentrates on the central argument of the death and adjustment hypothesis. In comparison with the other sections it is a vast one, describing the hypothesis in nineteen parts. The overarching focus of this section is directed towards the proposition that the way we understand the relationship of death and existence is incorrect and that this misunderstanding is harmful for us as human beings. The topics discussed in different parts are 1) the experience of death *in vivo* and *in vitro*, 2) the process of identifying a truth, 3) our current stance toward death, 4) people with exceptional attitudes towards death, 5) major non-scientific concepts of death, 6) the way death challenges our wellbeing, 7) traditional scientific attitudes towards death and their validity, 8) basic criteria of life, 9) the possibility of death's ending one's existence, 10) logical considerations of the criteria of death, 11) the necessity of evaluating these criteria, 12) death anxiety and adjustment, 13) the history of attitudes towards death and stages of adjustment with death, 14) the popular adoption of stage theories of adaptation to death in mass culture, 15) consequences of maladjustment with death, 16) the ambiguity of death and our dissociation from it, 17) the vicious cycle of ambiguity and dissociation, 18) comparison of the practical impacts of different concepts of death, and 19) declaration of the hypothesis. Rather boldly, Hossain's hypothesis ultimately demands the installment of the concept, universally, that our existence does not end with



Quest for a new death: Death and Adjustment Hypotheses
Mohammad Samir Hossain
BookSurge Publishing

death. Also, it indicates that we are now dissociated from the phenomenon of death due to our maladjustment in this respect.

Substantively, this sweeping section of Hossain's argument draws upon the important work of Kubler-Ross (1957) in discussing stages of dying, and perhaps more significantly and pervasively, the cultural perspective on death attitudes developed most eloquently by Aries (1974), which informs this book as a whole. Finally, in the last part of this section, Hossain shares some personal feelings concerning the hypothesis and its impact on his life, as well as some discussion of the concept of death and its relevance for Muslim terrorism, which adds to the scientific and social value of the work. But these last commentaries

are actually footnotes to the research, as the author also candidly admits.

Section three of the book is on our attitude towards death. It begins by discussing the problematic aspects of the attitude, mainly the defensive ones that exclude death from conscious thought. Hossain then undertakes a detailed analysis of this attitude from a psychological point of view, explaining why this prevalent attitude is problematic, and how gaps exist between our death-related activities and formal beliefs. Interestingly, this analysis has an historical dimension, revealing the progressive deterioration in the attitude across the course of civilisation, considering the etiology of the changes and their related psychological processes.

The fourth section is the most important of the book, as it represents a synopsis of all the previous parts. Careful reading also reveals that it is a total reconstructive approach for the whole work. The concise primary version of the hypothesis has been installed in this section and a second part has also been developed as a new extension of this basic thesis. This second part ultimately emphasises the importance of morality for a genuine accommodation of death in human life as implied by the first hypothesis. In this section the author tests his hypotheses, conceptually using the theories of Hamlyn (1970) and proposes a new psychiatric diagnosis, termed Death Adjustment Disorder (DAD). This is a bold proposal, as the number of DAD patients will be numerous if such a proposal were taken seriously, as we all tend to experience some kind of difficulty in integrating the reality of death. Thus, the various strands of argument in this section are very important from a practical point of view. They also clarify the primary purpose of the book and thus the whole research.

Following section four of the book,

Hossain provides an "inference" or summary statement to present more succinctly the scientific concern of the work, especially about our current condition and the unknown future. This section clearly elaborates all the aspects of his multifaceted argument in brief. But unlike the summary chapters of many other books, it requires a thorough reading of the whole preceding volume, especially to accept Hossain's statements as scientific ones. Of all the parts of the book, the portion entitled "A Final Statement" is the liveliest, conveying the core of the author's argument with passion as well as a sense of truth. It also acknowledges that the book goes against the traditions of many in contemporary civilisation.

How successful is Hossain in achieving his stated purposes? The major steps he proposes are impossible to complete in a single small book, however much it is anchored in provisional data, theory, and passionate belief. In particular, the book's core hypothesis that death is not the end of human life, and that integration of this knowledge would transform human beings and cultures would require many further steps and analyses to be implemented practically. The historical and psychological development of the book's thesis is intriguing and persuasive, and its implications practical and useful. Hopefully, further works in this line will continue to flourish for the benefits they could carry at both a scientific and social level. As a book for ordinary readers, this work is unlikely to be a bestseller, as it lacks the ease of understanding and pleasurable focus required for popular success. But it surely is a pacemaker in one important movement in science, and in this sense could have a different sort of impact on civilisation, given the centrality of death for human life.

Mohammad Nuruddin is a retired government official.

AT A GLANCE

Dul Jatrae Ek Jatri
Serajul Islam Choudhury
Jagruti Prokashani

দুই যাত্রায় এক যাত্রী
সিরাজুল ইসলাম চৌধুরী

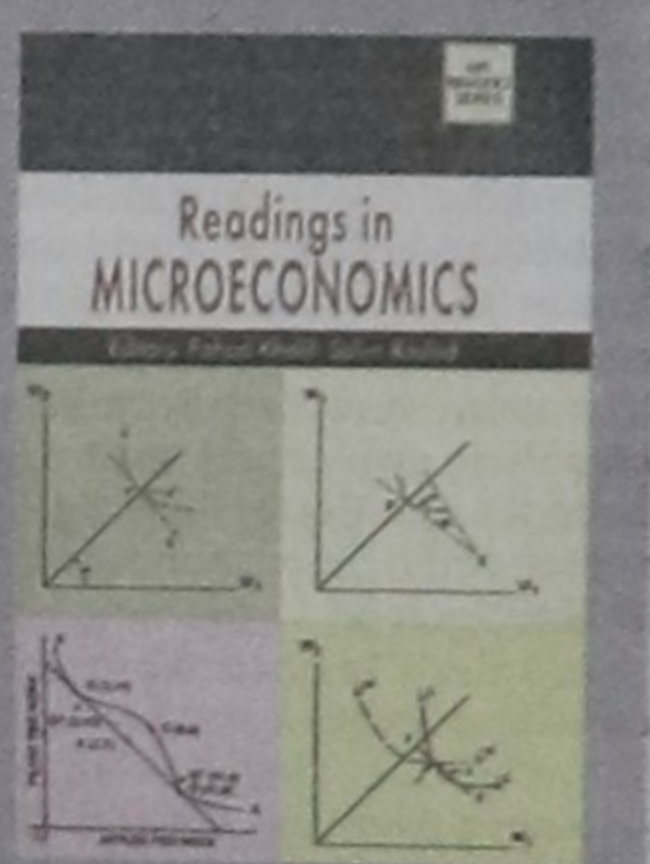


Hitler Theke Zia
Mina Farah
Charu Lipi

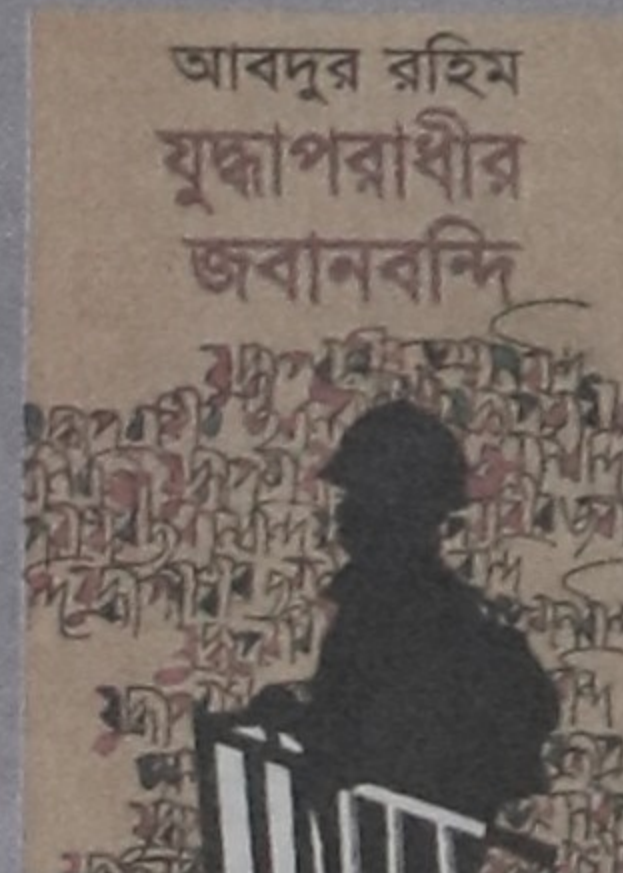
হিটলার থেকে জিয়া
মিনা ফারাহ

The title says it all. Or does it? Within the wide framework of this book come details of Bangladesh's history as we have never known them. And the link with Hitler? It all relates to the many levels of cruelty that have percolated down from one generation to another, from one authoritarian ruler to another.

Readings in Microeconomics
Eds. Fahad Khalil, Sallim Rashid
The University Press Ltd



The work should be a useful text for students in Bangladesh because of the many tools and concepts of modern microeconomics it comes wrapped in. Ideas such as Radford's move on to thoughts on value theories, consumption-loan models and insurance markets -- principles that can only facilitate an objective study of economics as a subject.



Juddhaporadhir Jobanbondi
Abdur Rahim
Distributors: Ramon Publishers

A veteran, respected journalist brings part of his vast professional experience to bear on this exposition of the varied periods he has gone through. And they are stories we have been part of as well, the difference being that Rahim happened to be a witness and often a participant in some of the more significant events in the history of Bangladesh.

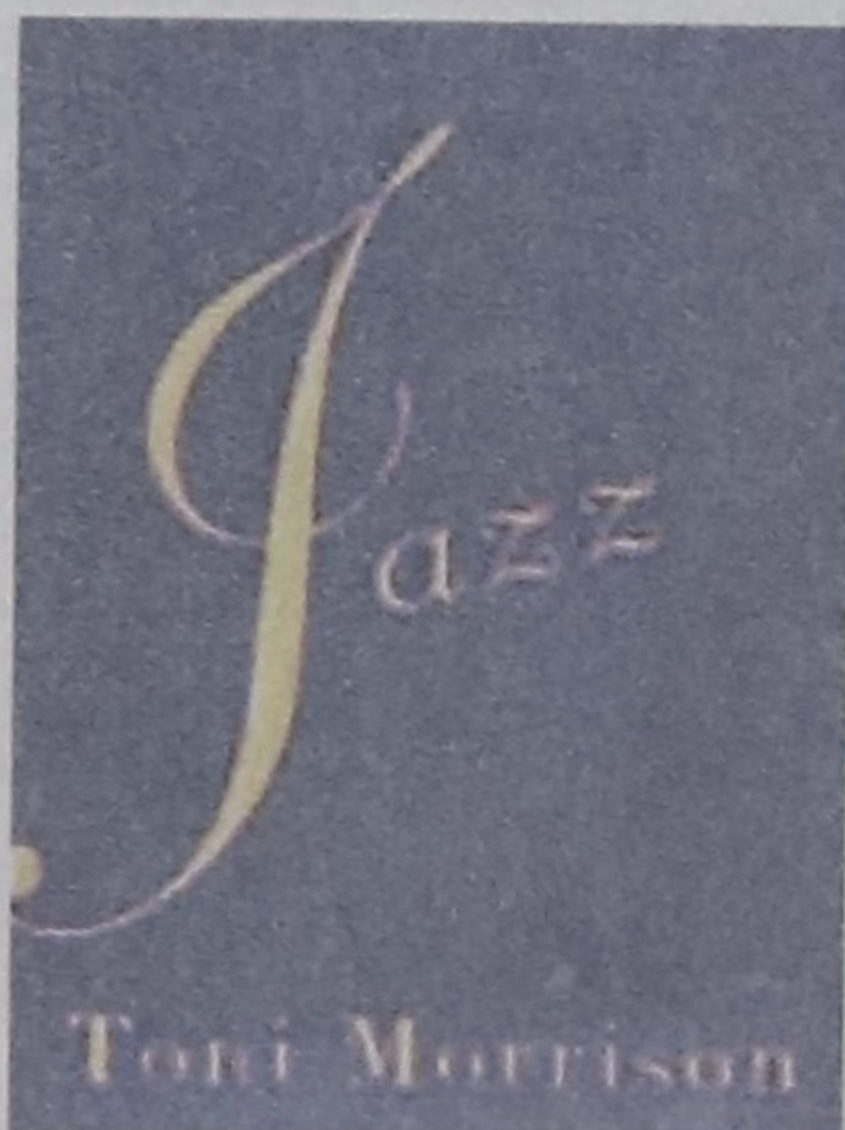
When music is a means of spiritual cleansing

Farida Shaikh examines the history wrapped in a story

TONI Morrison's 'musically titled book *Jazz* is lovely, lyrical, searching and touching,' her 'most experimental' sixth out of eight novels, about 'lived reality of the people,' in the context of the 'musical movement' and forms the second part of Morrison's *Dantesque trilogy on African American history*, beginning with *Beloved* 1987 and ending with *Paradise* 1999.

The novel *Jazz* takes place in 1926, when the Harlem Renaissance originated in a neighbourhood of the same name. New York City, was at its peak, a special time of success and attention for African American artists in literature, drama, visual art, dance and music, especially jazz between 1920 and 1930. The movement initiated cultural and social changes in sociology, historiography, and philosophy. It encompassed urban centres throughout the United States; it claimed to offer a better life for southerners with new hopes of opportunities in the North.

Black males regarded jazz as the essence of the age of the New Negro; for the black women it represented the disenchantment of urban life; it did not provide the promised opportunities, rather a source of the problem. "It wasn't the war that disgruntled the veterans; it wasn't the droves and droves of colored people flocking to paychecks and streets full of themselves. It was the music. The dirty get on down music..." That is Violet, an unlicensed beautician, with her view of jazz music. It challenged the southerner's religious faith, which meant it could only breed evil. Violet argues, "I messed up my life. Before I came North I made sense and so did the world. We didn't have nothing and we didn't miss it."



Jazz
Toni Morrison
Penguin Books USA Inc.

Just like the music, the novel is improvisational and is also influenced by folklores, ghost stories and gospel music. Morrison's writing style is a 'unique mix of the musical, magical and historical.' Essayist Susan Lyndon observes that it 'carries you like a river, sweeping doubt and disbelief away, and it is only gradually that one realizes her deadly seriousness.'

The various characters are 'improvising' solo compositions that fit together to create a whole work. The tone of the novel also shifts with these compositions, from bluesy laments to

upbeat, sensual ragtime. The novel also utilises the call and response style of jazz music, allowing the characters to explore the same events from different perspectives through a narrator whose voice is in the first person and not the third person.

The novel also covers jazz music, its sense of spiritual cleansing, temporary suffering '...she found out that the man who killed her niece cried all day and for him and Violet that is as bad as jail' and a path for emotional release, '...spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going.' It also includes 'giving voice to the voiceless.'

The story line was inspired by an event that Morrison learned about in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978), in which Camille Billops records the story behind James Van Der Zee's photograph of a young woman's corpse; she was shot yet refused to identify her assailant before she died.

Dorcas, lying shot by Joe, refuses to allow those surrounding her to call for an ambulance until Joe has disappeared; by then, she is too near death to be revived. 'Violet went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face...' and becomes known as 'Violent' Trace.

The novel opens with African American vernacular speech and typical text sucking---'St'--- communication gestures. A narrator within the urban cultural context relates that the over-fifty-year-old Joe, in a morose and jealous state, had shot a seventeen-year-old girl, Dorcas, with whom he was having an affair; she had finally turned her attention to a younger man.

The novel then focuses on Violet, an unlicensed beautician married to Joe, a door-to-door cosmetics salesman. During this healing process, Violet develops a relationship with Alice Manfred, Dorcas' aunt and guardian, a conservative Christian ashamed by her niece's behaviour. Felice is Dorcas' best friend who helps the Traces to understand each other.

In 1992, *Jazz* achieved bestseller status along with Morrison's nonfiction critical work *Playing in the Dark*. While most critics responded favourably to the novel, others complained of its structure and narrative technique, and many were simply puzzled and less appreciative.

She grew up Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain Ohio. At the University her name Anthony became Toni and the name Morrison was added in 1964. About her own life, she has been comfortable with one third, proud of another one third, and would like to redo the remaining one third.

In 1970 with the publication of *The Bluest Eyes* she achieved fame with the misname Toni Morrison; she wanted her name to be Chloe Wofford. The work inspired African American women to tell their own stories. She started household cleaning work at 13; her observations found reflection in *The Bluest Eyes*. She worked as editor at Random House for 18 years. Her mission was to get 'African American voices into American Literature.'

The idea of race is central to Morrison's work. *Beloved* is about an escaped slave, Sethe, who kills her own daughter rather than see her in slavery. She wants to do away with words like 'the

slave woman' and 'slave child.' Other works that cover slavery, a state of powerlessness are *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*.

Paradise is Morrison's groundbreaking work on sexual violence. She wanted to write on the totality of black women's sexual experience, thereby destroying the myths and stereotypes on the subject. Ideally *Paradise* is about a place where 'race exists but doesn't matter.' Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Morrison has the ability to reduce horror-----'battle of cruelties of race with her wit.'

Even after writing three novels Morrison chose not to call herself a writer --- 'what you write to pay income tax' --- and made a distinction between work, writing, and the person who does the work, like mother, or editor. In the act of writing Morrison is 'most alive... coherent... stable and vulnerable.'

In 1993, Toni Morrison, sixty three, won the Nobel Prize for Literature. A feel of 'a sense of triumph' pervaded her being. Her sense of excitement was contained by the 'we female writers,' black writers,' and of securing Faulkner's idea to take black people seriously. The opening verse of *Jazz* says it all.

I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name.

I am the sign of the letter

And the designation of the division.

Toni Morrison's works are required reading in English literature, at graduate and post graduate level in Dhaka University.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and member of The Reading Circle.

REREADINGS

A sad book, with sadness lingering

Shusmita Amin Chowdhury goes back to a tale of searing emotions

THE God of Small Things is a politically charged semi-autobiographical novel by Arundhati Roy. It is a story about the childhood experiences of a pair of fraternal twins who become victims of circumstances. The book is a description of how the small things in life build up, translate into people's behaviour and affect their lives. The book was published in 1997 and won the Booker Prize in the same year as well. The rights to her book were sold in 21 countries.

The daughter of a Christian woman in Kerala and a Bengali Hindu tea planter, Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born on the 24 November 1961. Her parents were divorced when she was a child. Subsequently she lived with her mother and at the age of 16 she went for her studies to the Delhi School of Architecture.

Arundhati grew up in circumstances similar to those of the children in the book. She spent her childhood in Ayemenem, now part of Kottayam in the south Indian state of Kerala. The story primarily takes place in this town. A lot of the atmosphere of her book is based on her own experience of what it was like to grow up in Kerala. Most interestingly, it is a unique place where the world's great religions coincide. There are Christianity, Hinduism and Islam along with a strong footing of Marxism. The diverse communities live together and rub each other down as well. She grew up at a time when Marxism had enormous influence. So being raised in such a multi-cultural milieu, Arundhati became very much

aware of these different cultures. Thus, later while she wrote this book there couldn't be a better location to do it than the place she grew up in.

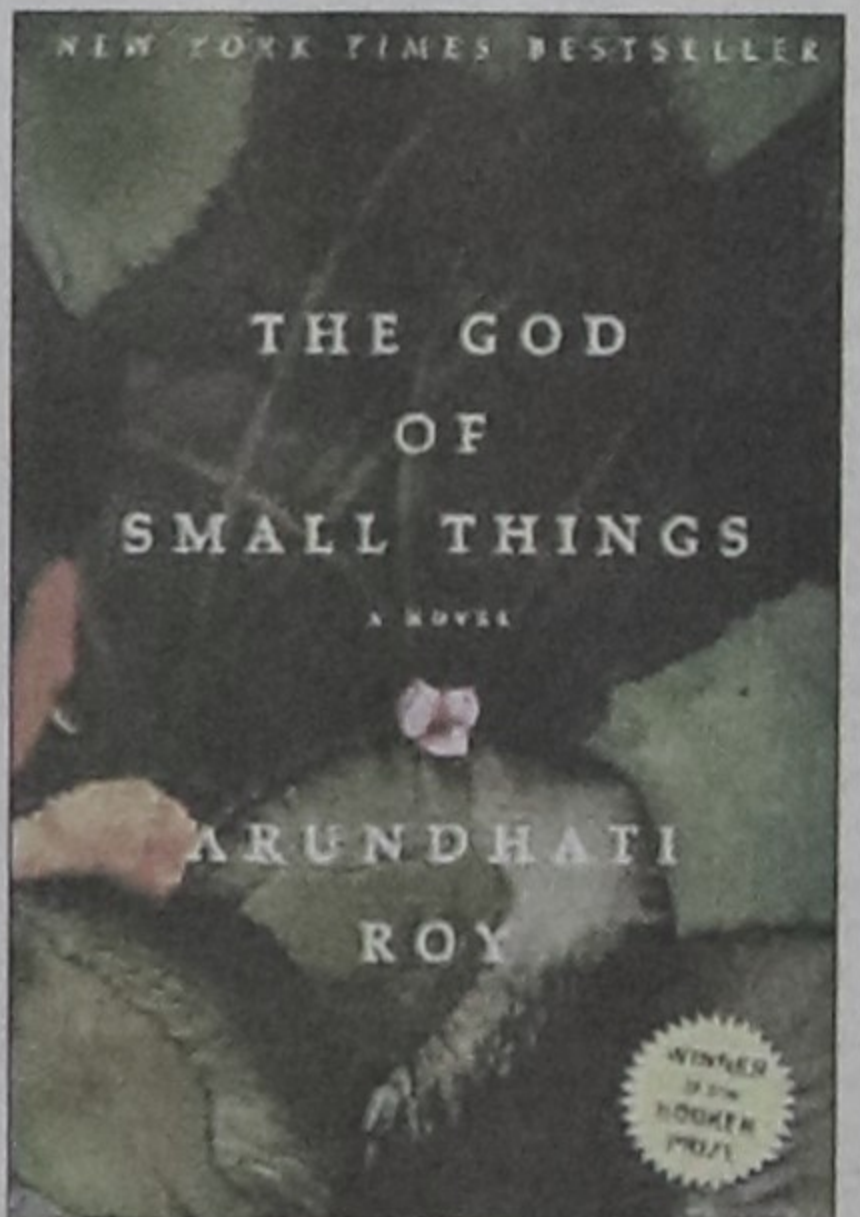
The settings and landscapes of Ayemenem can easily be compared to Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and give it character. It is very much visible in the book that the kind of landscape the writer grew up in is still very much living in her --- the way she loves a tree or a river or the color of the earth. It is a different kind of love.

The story is narrated by seven-year-old Rahel, the fraternal twin sister of Esthappen (Estha), who moves crabwise, backwards and forwards. Rahel, Estha and their divorced mother Ammu, live in Ayemenem. Ammu, a Syrian Christian, has had no choice but to return to her parental home after she was divorced from her husband who was a Bengali Hindu man, the father (Baba) of Estha and Rahel. Ammu and, therefore, the children seem to live on sufferance in the Ayemenem house with their grandmother (Shoshamma Ipe or Mamachi), uncle (Chako) and grand aunt (Navomi Ipe or Baby Kochamma). The family owns a pickle factory that comes into conflict with the communists.

The story centres on events surrounding the visit and drowning death of the twins' half English cousin, a nine-year-old girl named Sophie Mol. The drowning death of Sophie Mol gets drowned in the forbidden sea of secrets which expose the secret love affair of Ammu with Velutha, the family's carpenter and member of the

Untouchable caste.

The story is a flashback and moves from present-day India to the fateful drowning that took place twenty-three years earlier in 1969. The consequences of these intertwined events --- the drowning and the forbidden love affair --- are dreadful. The children learn that things can change in a day and that life can sometimes take an ugly twist. A few



The God of Small Things
Arundhati Roy
Harper Perennial

dozen hours can affect the outcome of a whole lifetime. Estha predicted it took only Chako's English wife, Margaret Kochamma and his daughter Sophie Mol to arrive on a Christmas visit to Ayemenem for the tragedy to unfold. Estha also goes through a terrible experience with the Orangedrink-lemindrink Man that no child should ever experience. Estha at some point thereafter stops speaking. Ammu is banished from her home, dying miserably alone at the age of 31; Rahel is expelled from school, drifts, marries an American, whom she later leaves. The narrative begins and ends as Rahel returns to her family home in India and to Estha, where there is some hope that their love for each other and memories of the past will heal their deep wounds. Reliving a past that had separated them and split a family terminally apart. A past where their mother, Ammu, had loved an Untouchable, an affair they paid dearly for. Estha and Rahel return to the present to a "hideous grief", to be haunted by death; like their mother they break "the love laws. That laid down who should be loved. And how much."

The story portrays Estha and Rahel caught in the entanglements of adult corruption, punished for the sins of a world out of their control. The events that lead to this tragic end, where one mistake can spiral out of control and can implicate the most innocent. The two children are struggling to secure a safe environment, the unconditional love of a parent and the promise of a livable future. Nevertheless, their struggle to

safeguard themselves and the childhood ends one day, a day after which futures are abandoned and recovery is unthinkable.

The God of Small Things is a naked projection of forbidden affections of children abused and criminalised and of families ruptured. The novel presides over all of these, unable or unwilling to stop the suffering, offering no salvation even to the most innocent. A god as weakened and as burdened with the load of tragedy as its victims. Great loss is not marked by ceremony. It is hardly even recognised. A loss is simply a loss, suffering is simply suffering. What occurs is an intensely personal loss which in turns becomes a loss of person, where lives continue but living ends.

The novel is rich with Indian family relationships, social customs and mores, politics and the most universal of human emotions and behaviour. Through the narrator we are confronted with a very conservative society where no one is allowed to break the rules or cross the frontier of long established things. At the same time it is a suspenseful and tragic mystery, a love story and an exposition of the paradoxes that exist in an ancient land whose history was forever altered by its British colonisers.

The God of Small Things is a very sad book and somehow the sadness stays.....

Shusmita Amin Chowdhury teaches English at Independent University, Bangladesh.

Lives withering away

Z.A.M. Khairuzzaman is touched by tales of sadness

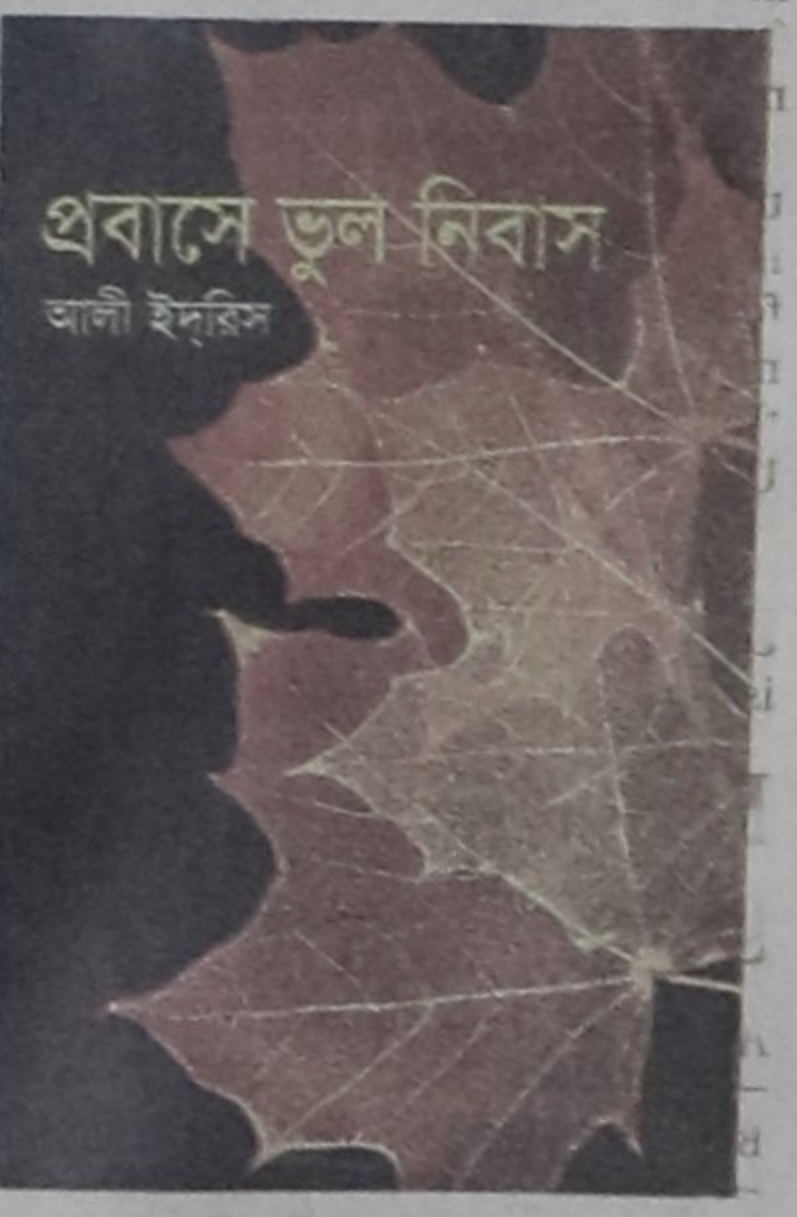
PROBASHE Bhul Nibash is a compilation of twelve short stories, most of which happen to be based on the lives of expatriate Bangladeshis and Indians who live in the United States, United Kingdom and other developed countries.

Apparently the lives of expatriate Asians living abroad seem to be very comfortable, brimming with luxury, wealth and happiness. But at times, incidents turn such lives stranger and bitter than fiction. Although expatriates come by a lot of wealth, live in luxurious homes and ride comfortable cars, in many cases the generations that follow get derailed. In most cases, the younger generation gets de-linked from its original culture, religion, manners and rituals of the family to such an extent that it gets spoiled and goes beyond the bounds of control. The young never remain within the bonds of affection and the love of their parents; and at times they get lost for good insofar as their families are concerned. The parents of such children go through agon. *Shuker Mapkathi*, *Pitamoho* and *Putrosneho* are stories based on such realities.

Often it is not only children but also parents who migrate from their country after selling off all their belongings in the hope of settling abroad or driven by a desire to live with their children living there. That of course leads to disappointment because they become penniless, homeless and disabled at a ripe old age. Consequently they have to work to earn a living at a stage of life when they are supposed to take rest. The story *Probash Bhul Nibash* is symbolic of such misery.

Love and affection in the conjugal life of couples decline and get polluted through clashes of personal interest, ego and monetary matters. The result is unwanted break, divorce of couples and deprivation of children from parents' love and care. Ultimately, family and social values get destroyed, love and affection among members die down. *Shuker Mapkathi*, *Shariri*, *Prorochok* are the stories based on such experiences on the part of the writer in the US and

Britain. The remaining stories are based on the canvas of the Bangladesh scene, depicting the decay in social, family and cultural values. The stories are more amazing fiction, hard like rock, and cold like death. These are contemporary happenings taking place every day around us and we are astounded as well as charmed after going through the incidents. Most of the stories in the compilation have been published in national dailies like *Jugantor*, *Ittefaq* and *Jonokantha*.



Probash Bhul Nibash
All Idris
Ekushey Book Fair

All Idris was born in Shaistanagar village of Habiganj in 1948. He launched his writing career in the 1970s. He won the Atish Dipankar Award in folk literature in 2003, Bangladesh Writers' Foundation Award in 2005, besides coming by other awards. He was also honoured by Sammiloni Mohila Samobaya in 2006.

Idris has travelled widely in Europe, North America and Africa.

Z.A.M. Khairuzzaman is a working journalist at The Daily Star