

Memories gleaming in autumnal light

Syed Badrul Ahsan tracks down nostalgia in three admirable works

SERAJUL Islam Choudhury was one of the luckier ones in 1971. Or was he? He moved from place to place, from one home to another, in the knowledge that the Pakistani army would not let him out of its sights. He could have done the easy thing, something that quite a few expected him to do. Syed Sajjad Hussain and Syed Ali Ashraf, both of whom had preceded him in teaching and both of whom had feelings distinctly kindly toward him, offered him teaching positions in West

fellow students were Ghyasuddin and Shafiq Rehman. The former, intensely intellectually defining him, would be murdered in the Bangladesh war by the cohorts of the Pakistani army; and the latter would go on to be a leading figure in Bangladesh's journalism. There were others Choudhury does not forget to remember; and he remembers with a tinge of sadness that they are all now past mortality. And speaking of mortality, he speaks with feeling and quiet passion about Najma Jesmin Choudhury, the academic he married and who would eventually die of cancer. You can feel the pain in Choudhury's narration of the tale. You could slice the agony with a knife.

On a broader scale, the agony takes on a cultural-political dimension. The title of the book says it all. Choudhury is the traveller, on two journeys. The interpretation is yours. It could all be about the times he spent as a schoolboy till partition in 1947 and then all the way through to his adulthood in Pakistan. Or you could segment the story into the Pakistan period and the Bangladesh era. A particular charm of the work is that the writer does not succumb to the temptations of the ego but goes on to provide his views of politics and life as they shaped up before him. And do not forget that underpinning his observation of events is Choudhury's distinctive belief in the ability and inherent strength of socialism to bring about positive change in the lives of the people of this part of the world. But, then, he has not failed noticing the damage done to leftist politics, indeed to nationalism, through such measures as educational exchange programmes offered by the West. He cites instances of individuals who started off with leftwing idealism but then were weaned away from it by the bigger, though not necessarily beneficial, pull of capitalism. Abdullah al Muti is one of the lost souls Choudhury cites. And there are others as well. The sad if not bitter truth, for Choudhury as also for men and women who have held fast to ideology, is that idealism has systematically taken a battering. And that has come about in two ways. In the first place, the state has carefully turned into a machine of oppression. In the second, capitalism has steadily pushed values across the precipice. The people have hardly mattered.

Dui Jatra Ek Jatri is a procession of men and events as we have known them in our times. Choudhury's reflections on the determined assaults made on the Bengali language, coupled as they are with a presentation of Bengalis all too willing to discard their heritage in favour of an uncertain, spurious Pakistani nationalism, are a grim reminder of the darkness that symbolised the nearly quarter century that elapsed between 1947 and 1971. The poet Golam Mustafa ended up being an Ayub Khan acolyte. Worse, the foremost of intellectuals that was Syed Sajjad Hussain would mutate into a loyal, unabashed Pakistani at the precise moment when he could have done the opposite. And yet there was K.M.A. Munim, friend of Hussain's but unwilling to look away from the horrors the Pakistani army was busy inflicting on Bengalis. Munim was in the queue of death on 25 March 1971, ready to be shot by the Pakistanis. But one of the soldiers took pity on him and let him out of that growing spectacle of murder.

In the event, Serajul Islam Choudhury ended up doing rather well for himself. He made friends at school here and then at college. The story reads like a who's who, or individuals who would be who's who, in Bangladesh. His

Munim went away to his village. Syed Sajjad Hussain travelled to the West, to rebut reports of Pakistani atrocities on its Bengali population.

This happens to be a book you cannot easily put down. It brims over with a retelling of events you know of. Or should be reminded of.

Sayed Ahmad's preoccupation with culture has proved enduring. Need evidence? Observe the title of the work under review. He has been a bureaucrat, but even as he has remained in the service of the republic, Ahmad has been unwavering in his belief that for him what fundamentally matters is a link to an exposition of culture. And it is culture that straddles nations and regions, as this compilation of essays demonstrates so well. Sayeed Ahmad pursues culture, literally, through making his way to the lands where he spots powerful heritage, undisturbed by moving time, at work.

Obviously, Japan occupies a major part of the book as it does the author's imagination. In the eighteen years between 1963 and 1981, the writer made quite a few trips to the Land of the Rising Sun, each visit throwing up new ideas for him and especially owing to the rapidity of change the country was going through in all this time. As such visits go, though, it is always the first that leaves some of the most lasting impressions on the traveller. And so it is with Ahmad and his wife, the beautiful Parveen. There is the amusing; and then

real notes of the Samisen with delicate fingers'. And the writer feels like a lord as yet another geisha lights a cigarette for him and props up the cushions for him to recline on.

There are the irritating aspects of travel as well. On a trip to Brazil, Sayeed Ahmad finds his pocket picked by a 'black boy' who quickly melts into the crowd. If that is bothersome, what happens later is positively outrageous. The chief of the local police station, unwilling to file a report on the incident without a greasing of his palms, gives short shrift to the complainants, one being the visitor and another the charge d'affaires at the Bangladesh embassy. Matters eventually do get sorted out, though, but not without loud grumbling and scowling from the officer. There is then the matter of China. Culture apart, Ahmad raises the matter of the Cultural Revolution and the damaged individuals it left behind by the roadside. The scholar Huang Zuolin, humiliated in the course of the revolution like so many thousands of others, nevertheless tries to put all the bitterness behind him as he speaks to Ahmad of his travels in Europe and his education at Cambridge. The Cultural Revolution left China maimed. Huang is a constant reminder of that brutal assault on human intellect.

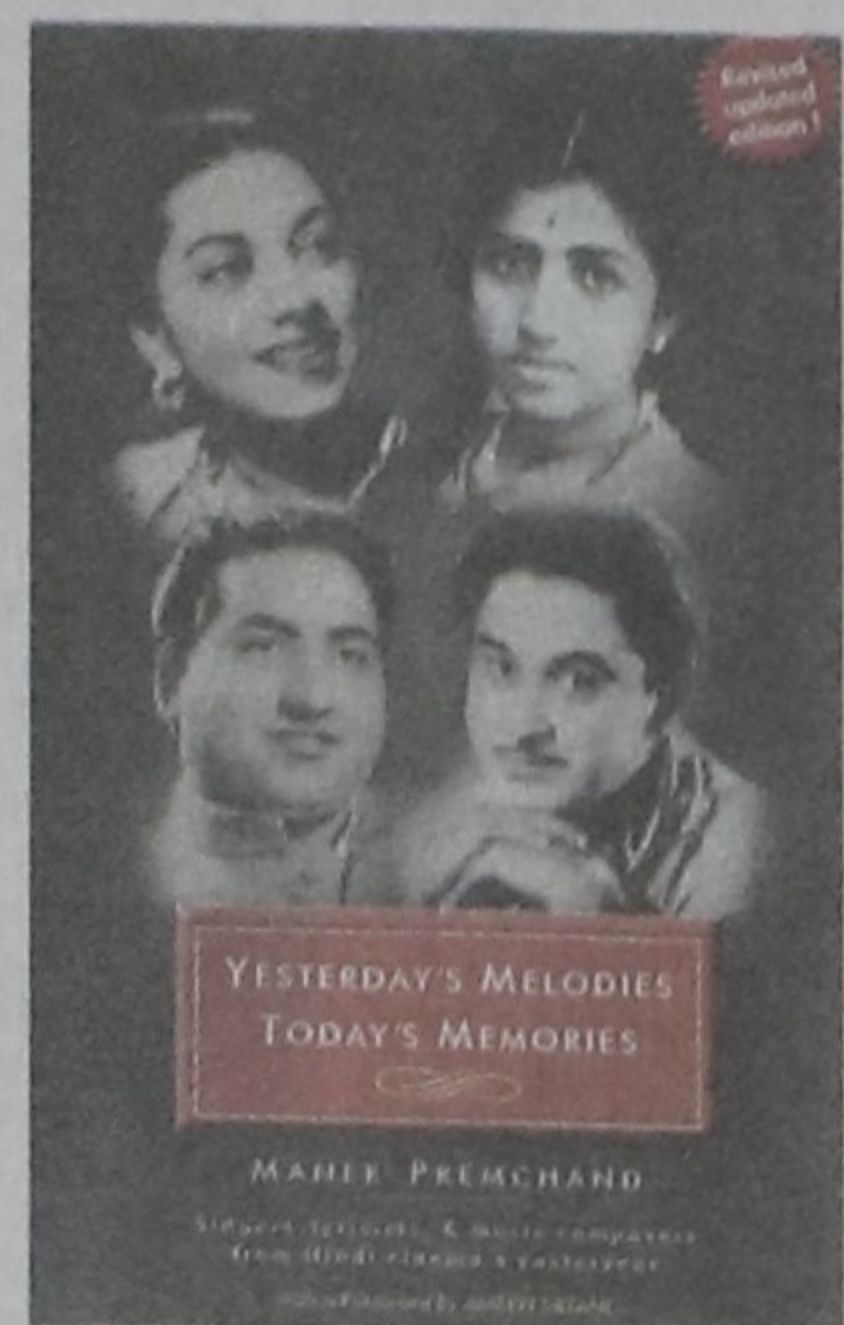
Clearly, one of the most gripping of articles in the compilation is that on Bertolt Brecht and the women in his life. For literature enthusiasts with precious little knowledge of the man Brecht, this is an uninterrupted journey through the landscape of the playwright's life. There were, notes the writer, adoring women in Brecht's life. What more could a man ask for? Names familiar to an earlier generation and perhaps made hazy in these times rise and fall like the waves of a turbulent sea. Hedda Kuhn, Paula Benholzar, Marianne Zoff, Helene Weigel, Elisabeth Hauptmann, Carola Nehar and so many others make it to the list of the playwright's wives or lovers or mistresses. One cannot but be amazed that with all these distractions Brecht yet managed to produce plays that have upheld some of the highest standards in aesthetics.

In Pursuit of Culture does something to our rather philistine sensibilities. It makes us take a peek into a world that may have vanished already.

There is forever a profundity of magic about old songs. You hear them all day, and then you wish to hear them again. Think of the Saigal number, *jab dil hi toot gaya / hum jee ke kya karengi*. Your voice may not approach the tenor or quality that Saigal's possessed, but you will still be tempted to hum it. The reason is plain nostalgia for an era defined by lyrical purity. Or it could be that the song reminds you of love lost long ago.

And that is why, or how, melodies of the past come alive. Or let us correct ourselves. Those melodies stay alive, as this riveting work on the songs that have lingered powerfully as memories so clearly demonstrates. A particular kind of beauty defines the work, in the sense that it not only is a recapitulation of old songs but is also a series of accounts of the lives of those who made the music possible. The biographical details relate to the singers. In a very necessary way, they also tell the tales of the music directors and the lyricists behind the voices

in the songs. Think of Suraiya, the beautiful woman who was both singer and actress. In *wo paas rahe ya door rahe / nazron mein samayen rahe hain*, it is the soul in a woman yearning for her lover, on celluloid. And yet when you read about the loneliness that Suraiya plodded through till her death, you have that certain feeling that the song was destined to be about herself. She loved Dev Anand; and he wanted her badly. It was Suraiya's grandmother who came in the way.



Yesterday's Melodies
Today's Memories
Manek Premchand
Jharna Books, Mumbai

And then there is Mohammad Rafi, truly the man of versatility because of the immensity of moods his voice could create. In songs like *yaad na jaaye beete dino ki and tere mere sapne ab ek hi rang hai*, he creates paths that no one else can. Wonder of wonders again, there is the brisk *mohabbat chhoo jinke haath / jawani paoon parhe din raat*. That sheer talent would have gone missing had Rafi not persevered. He remains a legend, despite the parochialism of some unwilling to accord him the recognition he so richly deserves. With Talat Mehmood, it is the sadness of a musical stream you find coursing through the songs. In *raat ne kya kya khwab dikhaye / rang bhare sau jaal bichhae*, you feel that trembling in the voice, as you feel it in *jalte hain jis ke liye / teri ankhone ke diye*.

It is a book that makes you stop in your tracks, makes you look behind your shoulder for the times you have lost to nature. If songs are about dreams, if you have woven those dreams in your youth, there is a fair chance that in middle age, or even in fast approaching senility, you will awaken to some of the old feelings in all the innocence you can muster. Remember Lata Mangeshkar's *hum ne dekhi hai in ankhone se mehekhi khushboo*? And Suman Kalyanpur's *dil gham se jal raha hai jale*? And Mukesh's *tu kahe agar jeevan bhar main geet sunata jaaon*? They are all here, ready to jump out of the pages, ready to punctuate with a tentative spring the rising autumn of your life.

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AT A GLANCE

Development of Tourism in Bangladesh
Strategy & Beyond
Faruque Hasan
Charusheelon

The state of our tourism being what it is, this small book speaks of what could yet be done to deal with the problem. As the title suggests, there are ways in which a comatose condition can be spurred back to life and maybe even vigour. Tourism experts and those with high expectations of the sector will have much to think over here.

Development of Tourism in Bangladesh
Strategy & Beyond

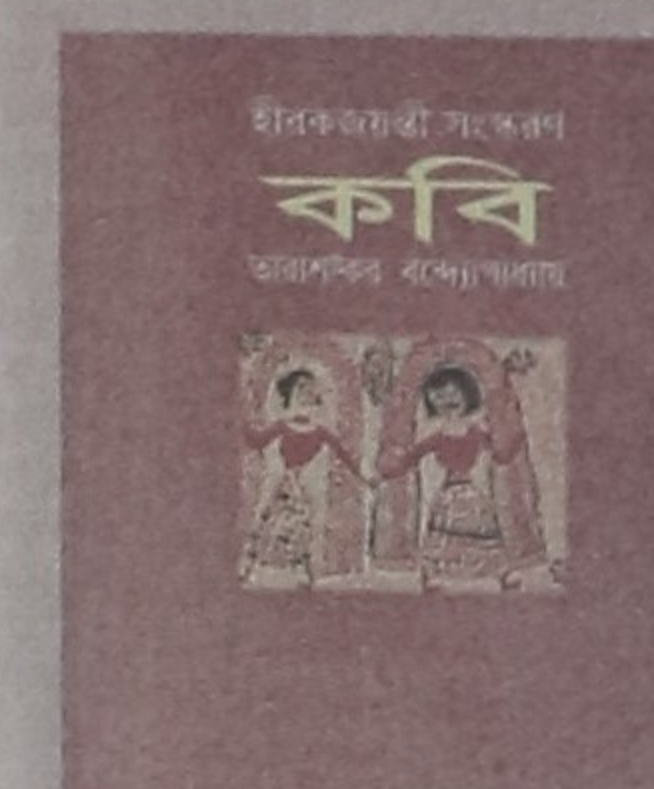


Disciplining Birth
Power, Knowledge and Childbirth
Practices in Bangladesh
Kaosar Afsana
The University Press Limited

Conditions of poverty often have created difficulties for underprivileged pregnant women. In this research-based work, the writer examines the many hurdles that poor women, especially in the interior of the country, face as they go through childbirth. She also dwells at length on how knowledge about the issue can be expanded among these women.

Din Gelo Tomar Poth Chahiya
Bipu Rahman
Botomul

This is fiction based on modern, or call them post-modern, ideas of life. The writer speaks of love that is not quite the romantic expressions we are wont to come across in novels. And yet within such an exposition of feelings between men and women come a completeness of thought that underscores the new fundamentals of the ties that bind hearts.



Hirokijyoti Shongskoron
Kobi Tarashankar Bandhopadhyay
Ed. Bhishadeb Choudhury
Obshor

It is a thoroughly readable biography of the noted writer, especially for one who has heard of him and yet has been lacking in the details of the story. The editor has done a commendable job of bringing Bandhopadhyay before readers in as much simplicity as he can without, of course, losing the focus on the ideas that have immortalised him. A pleasant read.

The passions in poetry

Z.A.M. Khairuzzaman admires some new verses

POETRY is more precious than other branches of knowledge, according to famous critics and scholars throughout the course of history. When religion, science, philosophy, astrology and other branches of knowledge fail to provide a protective shield to humanity, poetry comes to the rescue.

The future of poetry is immense, according to Mathew Arnold, a renowned English critic. Poetry can determine how the invention of science will be used for the betterment of mankind. 'Poetry explores the blankness and irrelevance of religion which actual religion does not support'.

In the modern age, we experience a bitter reality: most often scientific inventions are used to destroy civilisation. But poetry and poets always stand beside distressed humanity. In Voice of Humanity, Sheikh Nazrul's poems have appeared before us as emblematic of human love. He has expressed his feelings of love, fear, emotion and commotion in a lucid manner. Here we can easily find the truth with his poetry.

The society seems as yet rolling stones/Gathering no moss, the steady decline is on!

The picture goes colour from the black-n-white/The gang rape goes on all the same Black marketers still having their heydays!

(Open Letter to Madhabi).

Poetry is like a purgative for mental health. Sometimes, poetry expresses the sufferings of mankind to stir our emotions, whether it is the story of pain, agony, dejection and depression.

The tenor of Sheikh Nazrul's poems differs from the light pleasures of normal life.

And yet men have divided water and land/By barbed wire fencing where creepers. From the two divided lands thrive on/Sometimes, even, embrace in flowery garlands.

But these tales of love are unknown to men/so, hectic war preparation goes on.

Men use deadly weapons to kill only homo sapiens!

(These Tales of Love Unknown to Them).

Sheikh Nazrul's poems make us conscious of the condition of human beings in this modern age.

Wake up Bangladesh! and Flash in flames/Hold gold medals in your hands

Swinging in autumn wind/Reach for and touch the nose pin Of the farm maiden/With dew drops of morn stuck to legs Kiss Polish in the lips/And make some deadly love/At long intervals. Let the coitus be intimate ever/Let the embrace of the turrets even closer.

In butterfly colour.

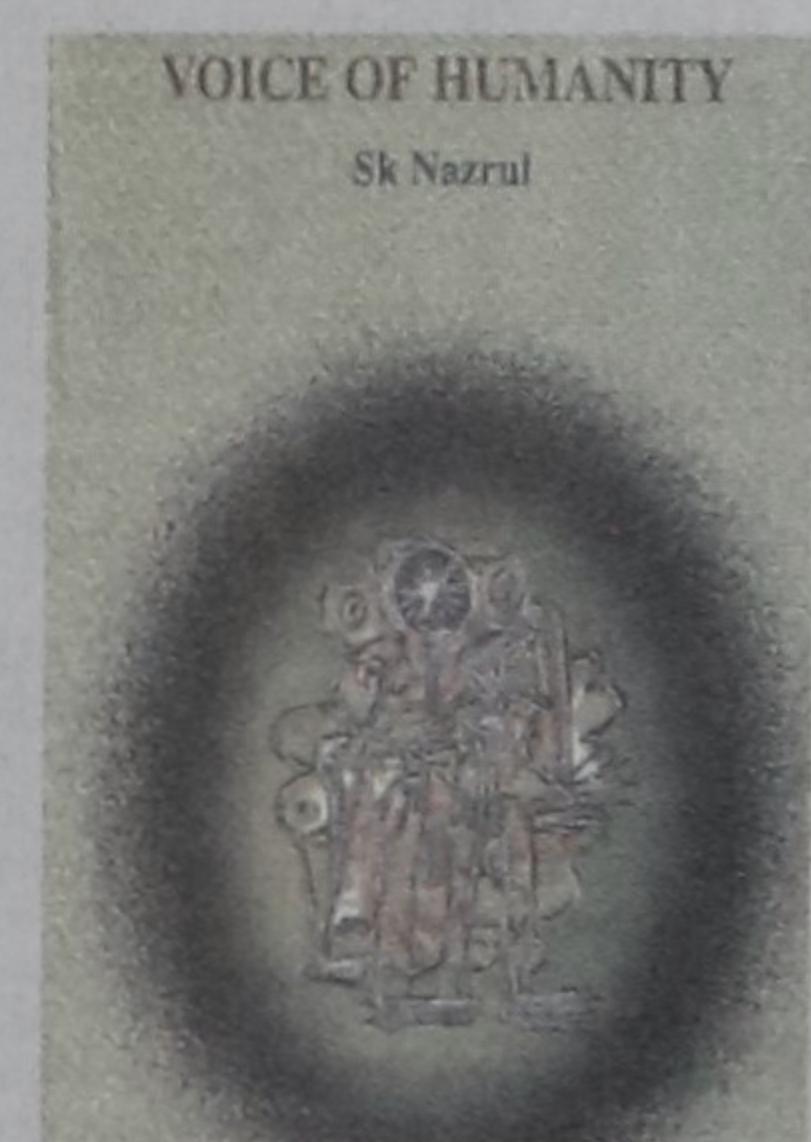
(Awake Bangladesh)

The underlying elements of Sheikh Nazrul's poetry are somewhat different in tone from that of others. In Voice of Humanity, the poet focuses relentlessly on human misery.

For lying once only/My favourite teacher gave me five lashes/Now I understand I need five more

Because I could not turn fully truthful/I forgot some of the letters both consonant and vowel And this forgetfulness was the sign of weak memory/Today I feel I ought to have forgotten more letters For, I suffer much for use of words in excess' (For Lying Once Only)

He has strong passions, as in the following lines: Just drop a drop of Atlantic Ocean/In the sea that covers



Voice of Humanity
A collection of poems by Sheikh Nazrul
Parijat Prokashoni
Translation Aftab Hossain

the heart of Bangladesh. It will dissolve beyond distinction/All will be the one and same/With all the water bodies in a single meandering tear/The river seeks origin of others/It moves ahead in love with another.'

(Manifesto)

Sheikh Nazrul was born in Satkhira district on 16 November 1964. His father was a teacher who helped him write poetry in his boyhood. Being an engineer by profession, the poet did his Masters in Bengali from Khulna BL College. Nazrul is not only a poet but also a renowned rhyme-writer, columnist and short-story writer with 29 books to his credit. He has been honoured with the Sher-e-Bangla Gold Medal for his creativity.

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

A death --- and turbulence in the family

Tulip Chowdhury understands the pain of a mother in a riveting tale

POOR people around the world have the same tale to tell, the tale of poverty. The poor can be poor to a level when they cannot get any poorer. This is a tale of such a family, a family that is torn between its wants and abilities. The family passes days and nights with its back against the wall. The Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz portrays the story of a poor family in Egypt around the mid-1940s.

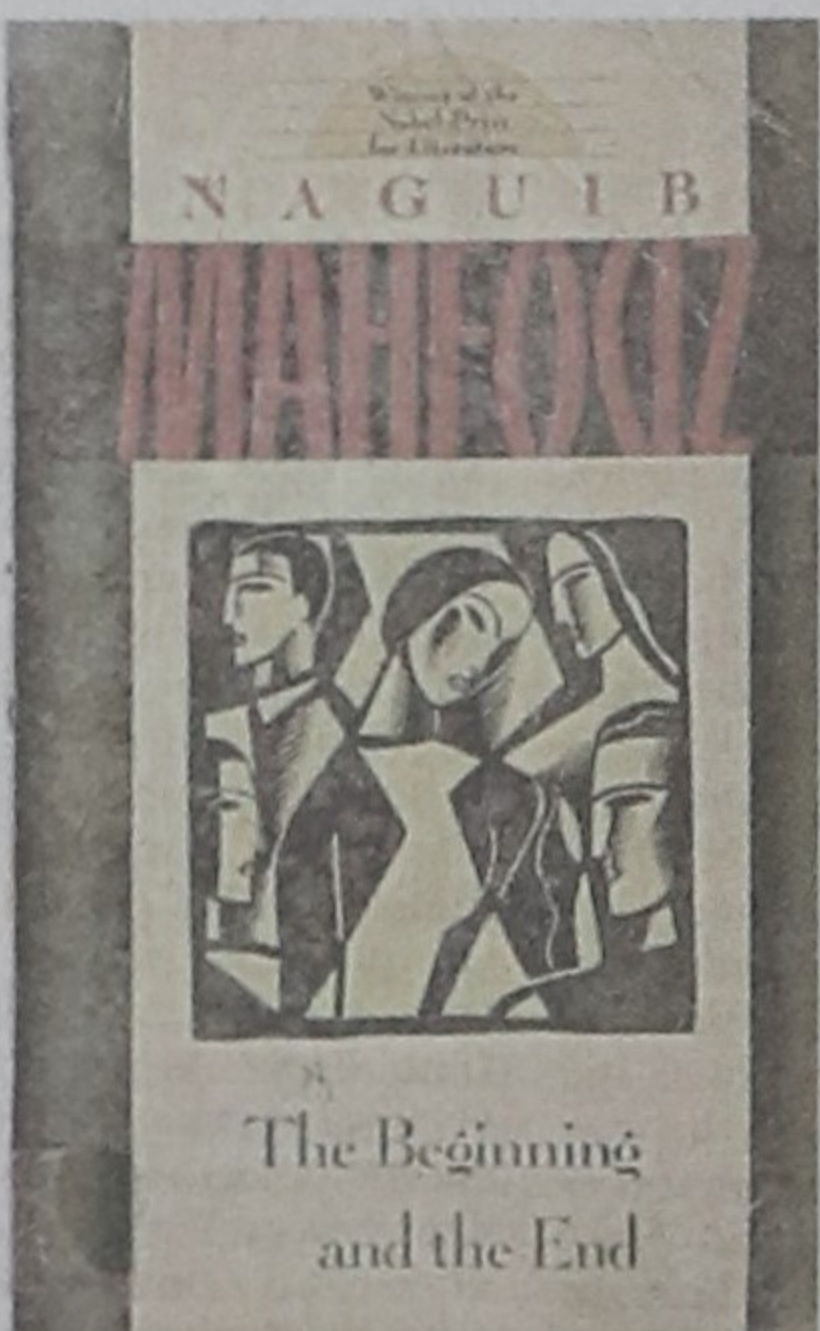
This is the tale of the Kamel family that is thrown into extreme hardship after the death of the father. Left to fend for themselves are the mother Samira, her daughter Nefisa, three sons, Hassan, Hussein and Hassanein. Hassan is the good-for-nothing, a thug and a drug dealer. Hussein is the decent type, quiet and empathic, one who sacrifices his higher studies to help the family. And then there is Hassanein, the ambitious one. He is the arrogant go-getter who does not care whom he steps over to reach his goals.

It is life's rule that time and tide stop for none. The father Kamel Effendi Ali passes away but life for his family rolls on. In the face of extreme hardship, Samira stands firmly to face the world with their small means. She makes no secret of their sudden poverty and tells her children to curtail all their expenses. However, like an ideal mother she makes certain that her children continue their school. The eldest, Hassan, is there only to make demands on the

meagre pension money. Nefisa, leaving her place at home as a lady, becomes a dressmaker. Hussein is the first to graduate from his school and gets a job with the help of his father's friend. He could have continued with higher studies but for the immediate need of his family he goes for the job. Serving in a different city he is offered lucrative marriage proposals through which he can climb the social ladder. But to Hussein his family comes first and he rejects such offers.

The story continues with the tales of the everyday life of the Kamel family. The trivial things stand out as major hurdles in their life. The skimpy meals the family shares and the patched clothes they wear draw a clear picture of their unhappy life. They cut down on all kinds of entertainment and sell out their furniture and television. The late father's bed too is sold. While Hussein and Hassanein pursue their studies, Nefisa helps out with her small earnings. Samira spends her days just counting each penny and letting the days go by. However, she is very concerned about the family's honour and does not beg for help from anyone nor does she take any loans. What touches the reader is how a mother struggles to keep her head up despite the extreme poverty. This depicts the universal picture of the ideal mother.

The tragic figure in this family is the daughter Nefisa, cursed with a homely



The Beginning and the End
Naguib Mahfouz
Doubleday, Anchor Books

face that makes marriage an unlikely prospect, and doubly cursed with a rampant sexual appetite that has no sanctioned outlet whatever for an unmarried woman in a Muslim society. Nefisa herself is aware of her own problems and sheds secret tears of depression. Hassanein, after joining the army,

becomes over-ambitious and his only goal is to rise in society. He has no problem dumping his fiancé at the drop of a hat when he decides her family is not of the class he aspires to belong to. He disowns his brother Hassan rather than be connected to someone who is known as a criminal.

At Hassanein's insistence the family moves to a rich neighbourhood. But it seems as if trouble in the family is a never-ending game. Hassan comes home one day, severely wounded, and has the police on his trail. Nefisa, unable to contain her unbridled sexual appetite, is arrested at a brothel. Hassanein's world is shattered. Nefisa decides that she will not enter her house again. Rather than face the scandal she tells her brother that she will commit suicide by jumping into the Nile. Hassanein is faced with two choices: will he allow his sister to commit suicide while he looks on or will he forgive her and face the scandal? And if he does witness his sister's death, will he be able to go on living his life like another honourable man in society?

All through the story the role of Samira as a mother remains a prominent feature. She is kind and loving and yet very strong when it comes to dealing with reality. She is the one who sends Hassan to his own fate, for he only brings troubles for his siblings. And yet we see the mother's heart crying for

him. She is grateful to Hussein for his contributions to the family. Yet she does not hesitate to rebuke Hassanein when he dumps his childhood love for the sake of securing a bride who is highly placed in society. What can such a mother say when her only daughter is disgraced as a prostitute? Indeed all struggles for survival amidst the hardships seem like a lost battle to the Kamel family.

The story ends in tragedy and the sad tale of the Kamel family once in a while throws the reader into melancholy moods. However, one cannot deny that the story is a stark reality --- of how cruel life can be towards some people. Naguib Mahfouz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, is a slice-of-life author. He gives the reader a good sense of the setting of the story and the characters. His characters and the plot do not seem artificial. Fiction is said to be tied to real life pictures like a spider's web. Naguib Mahfouz holds out this truth like a true word master. There is a sense of street logic that guides the narrative and gives the reader a feeling that the author has 'lived' through the tale. A worthy read if one wants a glimpse of how real life can be and wake up with a real shake.

Tulip Chowdhury teaches and is a writer of fiction.