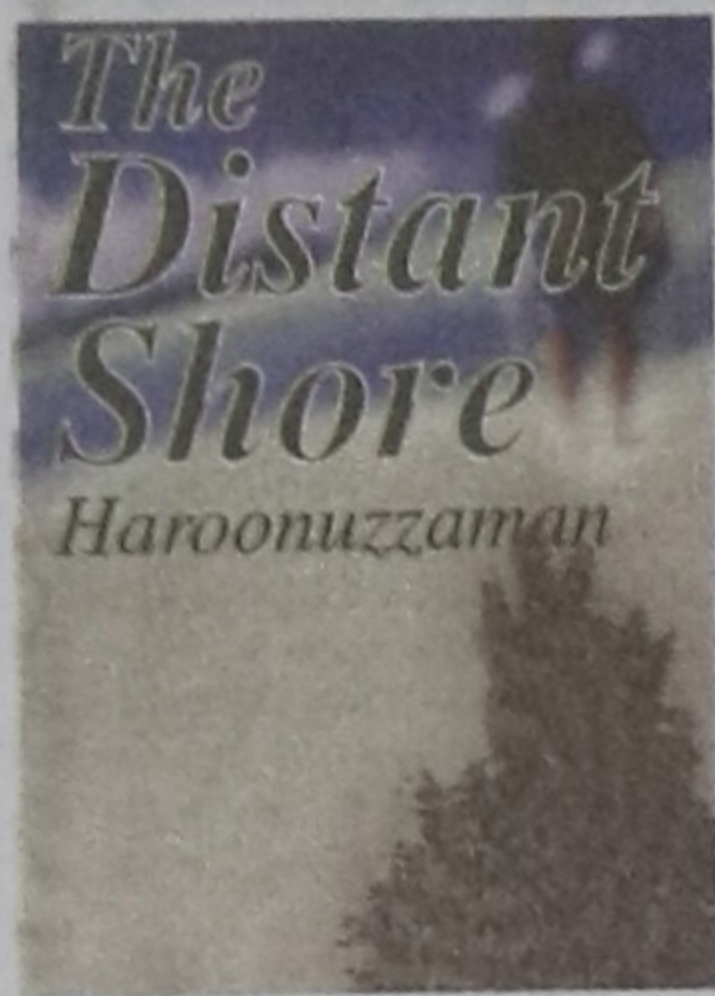


A lock of hair and a brittle cup

Syed Badrul Ahsan reads a novella and falls for some poetry



The Distant Shore
Haroonuzzaman
Adorn Publication

IN the early 1980s, an exodus of English language teachers from Bangladesh to Libya provided hope to many others about a brighter future abroad for themselves and their families. Hundreds of Bengalis, largely men, queued up for interviews at centres in Dhaka and quite a good number among them turned out to be the more fortunate ones among the lot. They went off to Tripoli and from there to other spots in Gaddafi land. Fortunate? Ah, there's the rub.

And the rub comes through a reading of Haroonuzzaman's novella *The Distant Shore*. It is a tale simply told, of a handful of Bengalis making it all the way to Libya as teachers of the English language. It ought to make happy reading, but

what the writer does is to focus more on the undercurrent beneath the ostensible reality of the supposedly good life that these expatriate teachers lead in that distant land. In the tale of Asif, the protagonist, bubbles forth the questions and the suspicions of all men who make their way to faraway lands in search of a living. It is a tale of pain, of hard work and sometimes downright humiliation. Asif is among the luckier ones because the Libyan ministry of education keeps him posted in Tripoli. But there are others whose services are needed in remote areas, which are generally desert-encircled villages quite removed from civilization. It is loneliness at work, to a point where not many are able to endure it. One of these, Saleem, ends up falling in love with his student and obviously must pay the price. The job is lost and in the end he is deported. And the student he has been smitten by? In a clannish society, the consequences of being in love with a foreigner can hardly be encouraging.

Haroonuzzaman portrays the limitations under which life goes on, without exactly thriving, in a regimented society. To that extent, his work is as much a narrative of individual pain and aspirations as it is of the political culture, or a lack of it, that punctuates Libya under Gaddafi. Strident anti-Americanism leads to unforeseen results --- a battering of the country by American bombs. But that comes later. What Asif, through all his observations of life and romance, does not fail to note is the

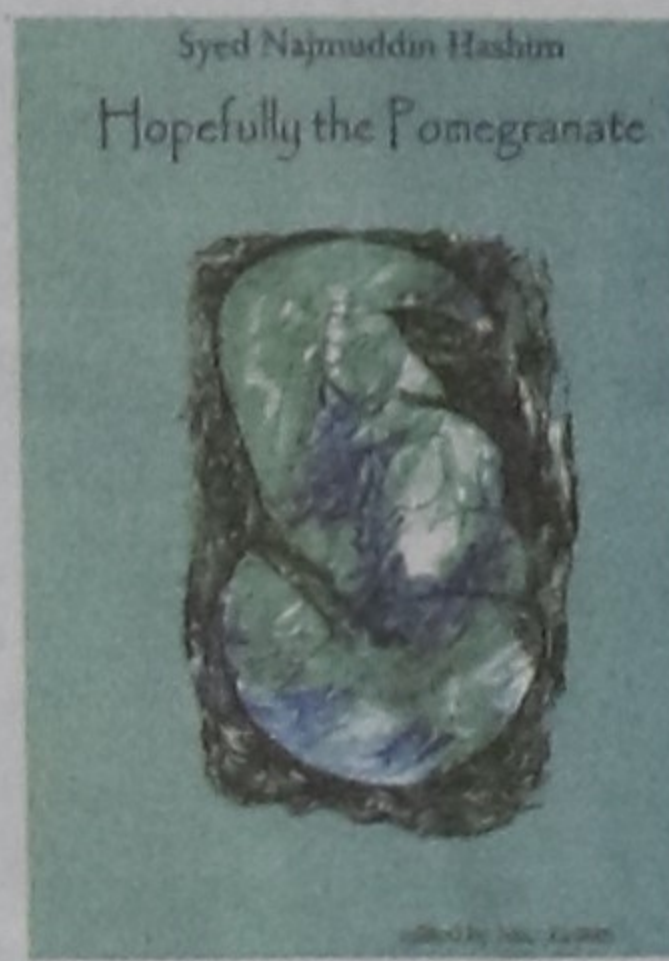
fallacy ingrained in the Gaddafi system. In a state that conducts itself in the name of the people, it is the people who go missing. Abu Zariba must not possess more than one house because the state tells him so. He does the next best thing, as a way of skirting around the law. He rents it out, or loans it, to first an Arab and then Asif. And he swindles Asif out of a tidy sum: he charges ninety dinars for a house that Sufia, Asif's wife, insists could have been had for less. A shrug can be the only response in a country where nothing happens, or queer things happen. Mizrab loses his wealth and tries to drown his sorrows in drink, in the company of the local policeman. The beautiful Swat falls in love with a foreigner and so must be punished for her sin.

And then comes the ultimate tragedy. The bombing of the country suddenly leaves Asif and his fellow expatriates without jobs. End of story? Not quite. Asif is taken by happy surprise when his old pupil Sagyar writes to him: 'I know what has happened to you. It's very sad. ... You have lost your job, but we have lost our future.' Out of the envelope slips a lock of hair, Sagyar's.

These are poems that flowed from the pen of the inimitable Syed Najmuddin Hashim between the years 1949 and 1988. And anyone who knew Hashim will not easily forget the erudition that underpinned the man. He was a civil servant, a diplomat, a minister. Above all, he was --- and remains in death --- a man of letters. These poems, gathered posthumously for

publication by his family and edited superbly by Niaz Zaman, are a testimony to the nature and thoughts of the man.

But before you float through the poetry, for that is what you will find yourself doing once you go into it,



Hopefully the Pomegranate
Syed Najmuddin Hashim
Ed. Niaz Zaman
Writers Ink

read through the Author's Note that Hashim prepared as far back as 1984, a full fifteen years before he died in 1999. It is the modernity of the man that comes through in the note. Hashim offers the background to some of the poems and at the same time enlightens the reader with the literary influence that may have worked in some of the poetry. There are the names he cites, Pablo Neruda and Faiz Ahmed Faiz for

instance. And then come the references to history, the analogies (as when the 'discovery' of the Rawalpindi conspiracy case swiftly reminds him of the Reichstag fire). There is a whiff of Dolores Ibaruri as well (*No pasaran --- they shall not pass*). And De Gaulle makes an entry too when Hashim refers to May 1968. And, of course, there must be Tagore and Sudhin Das and Jibanananda, right beside Donne and Eliot.

You then waltz into the poetry. Some of the Keatsian comes alive in the post-modern An Ode to Her Hands: *My demented brain / claws at them / hungering for the touch of those your reproof hands / right across horizons / my love cannot reach*.

Hashim has not forgotten (who has?) Guernica. It is Guernica he spots again, through the indifference of the state to the dead and dying along the Bay of Bengal coast in 1970: *The spectacle of millions / naked, and rotten / and unshrouded dead / Who will lead the congregation / of the damned / when Christian hands / bury the Muslim dead?*

Poetic sensibilities are all. You bump into them again and again:

My peace is a brittle cup / that breaks at the touch / of a passing thought / my happiness stands / on tiptoe / on a yawning precipice / an avalanche behind / an eternity below...

Shades of Neruda? Perhaps, but then, Syed Najmuddin Hashim is Everyman, in that particular poetic perspective.

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

Odyssey of a politician in the making

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque sketches the rise of a future American president

BARACK Hussein Obama casts a spell on us. He does it here as a writer in *Dreams from My Father*, with a very meaningful subtitle, *A Story of Race and Inheritance*. Although it is obvious that the narrative is in line with the travails of the author's discovering and re-discovering his father, nevertheless at the same time it is his finest tribute paid to his wonderful mother who was his friend, philosopher and guide. A burnt offering from a son to his mother when he says in the preface that he sees his mother everyday --- her joy, her capacity for wonder, in his daughters. He does not stop there but adds that "..... what is best in me I owe to her." Thus a weeping soul that oftentimes is tired, somewhat baffled; and although it bends somewhat somewhere, it never breaks. There emerges a strong-willed young man, facing an antagonistic society at large and aiming at putting the pieces of his life into one mosaic in order to recognize his own self by tracing his roots that lie thousands of miles away in a village in Kenya, in the generally less tempting continent of Africa.

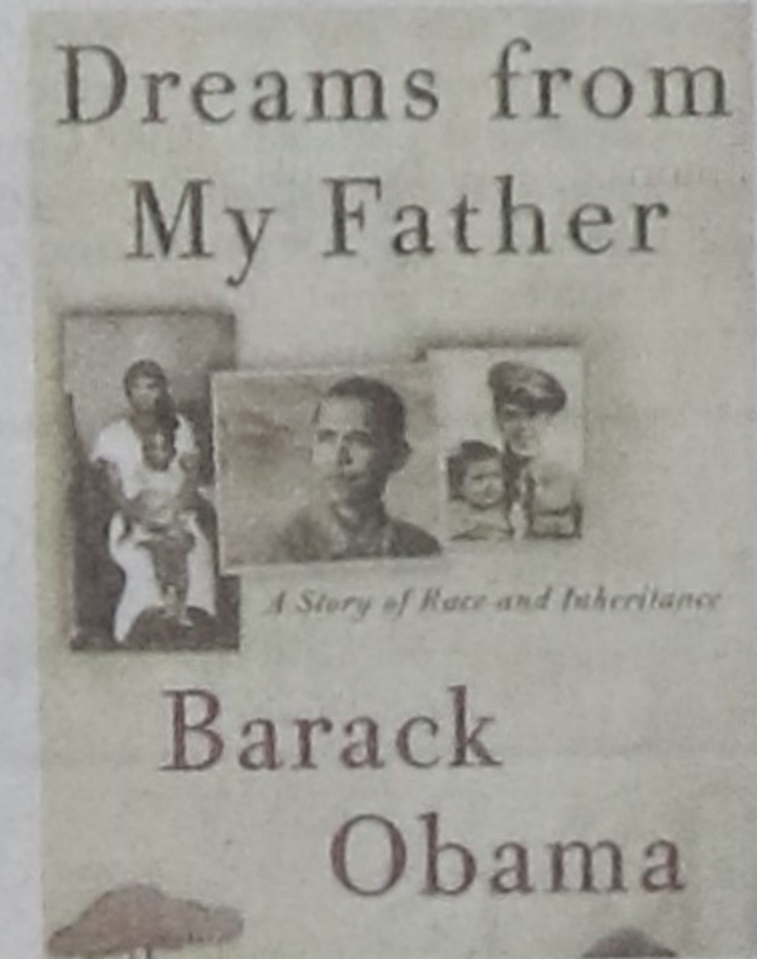
This is a real life story that was partly unveiled to Obama by his mother; and partly it was the writer's own discovery through firsthand experience when he made a trip to Kenya immediately after he got accepted at Harvard Law School in 1982. The same year he receives news of his father's death in a car accident over the telephone from an unfamiliar voice that introduced itself as his Aunt Jane from Nairobi.

The father whose advice regarding his education and other things he quite resented when he (Obama senior) paid a visit to his family in the United States in 1972, now takes full shape in his mind's eye. The author begins to measure his personal loss in its totality. In fact, with this episode the first chapter of Part One of the book under *Origins* begins conveying the mute silence of grief to a reader, as it once did to the writer.

The significance of the writer's dream of his father a year after his death is immense in its content, duration and vibrancy. There are graphic details of every bit, making it larger than life. His description of the conversation between the father and the son is so charged with emotion and profound in its underlying meaning that it can be felt only by a receptive mind. The dream is so overwhelming that the writer feels a stronger urge to search for his father and talk with him again. In other words, the father once again comes back alive in his life. Tears are rolling down his cheeks as he awakes from sleep. The experience is traumatic yet most fulfilling, almost cathartic. It seems paradoxical, though, that a child who was deserted by the father in his early infancy along with his mother and whom he met only once briefly at the age of ten, will now occupy his world in such an all-pervasive way. It would not have been so but for the mother's conviction that her son must know his ancestry that gives him a sense of identity through knowing his father.

She not only kindles the image of the father in his son but also sustains it by nurturing it at every opportunity that she can seize. And all for the sake of rearing up the child.

Although she has no clue as to how, when and why her husband



Dreams from my Father
Barack Obama
Canongate Books Ltd

has disappeared, she bears no grudge against him for that, which if she did would have been rather normal. Instead she sees to it that the bond of love between her and Obama's father 'survived the distance' and in this regard the writer feels that there is this 'distant authority of his father on his mother'. She would defend her

husband in the absolute sense of the term, which is a manifestation of other unalloyed love and respect for him; and she would find reasons behind acts that he did, however whimsical those might appear to others. She upholds before the son the image of the father as a gifted person who had studied at Harvard, thought independently and was forthright even at the risk of his career. Thus an image of a missing and an absent father comes to be etched in the mind of the child, one that would remain with him permanently. His carrying the letter written by his father to New York and reading it again while he waits for the Pakistani Sadiq, whom he has known from his days in Los Angeles, to be back from his night duty exemplifies how he treasures it as his inheritance. The same way he collects letters written by his father and also those in reply to his applications that he gets from his grandmother, who had reared up his father, while visiting his extended family in Kenya and utters, 'My inheritance.' There is a constant search in his mind for his father. Thus any memorabilia that he comes across constitutes his treasure trove. Also resonating in his mind are his father's words, 'Confidence. The secret to a man's success.' Combined with such pictures frame by frame, his realization of his father's struggling life in Kenya during the regime of President Kenyatta, when tribalism eroded the socio-political fabric of the country and also afterwards, makes up the configuration of his father's life against a background that is

discordant and much variegated.

The writer has seen poverty in the streets of Djakarta, in his own life as a school student when he could not be sent to the International School there because of limited funds. He is an object of derision at Pinahou Academy in Hawaii because he has a funny surname and he looks different. At one stage the children even ask him if his father eats people. As someone involved in the Developing Communities Project in Chicago, young Obama comes face to face with the condition of the blacks living in a cesspool of misfortunes perpetrated by the dominant segment of society, of which there is seemingly no end in sight.

The most attractive feature in this book is the author's sense of detail in every event that has woven a tapestry of a rich life story. He surpasses any social scientist in this regard. Simple language flows at ease and with facility throughout the book, making it a masterpiece of literature. His adaptability to his people who are absolute strangers to him, except for his two half siblings, Roy and Auma, and to the surroundings of his ancestral village is remarkable and bears testimony to his quest for finding a sense of belonging. This is the lesson he learns from his mother who remains a tower of strength to her son. In fact, in this emotive saga, Ann Dunham, the writer's mother, is the celebrated hero.

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque, a music and history buff, is Principal, Radiant International School, Dhaka.

Maturity above and beyond youthful years

Shahid Alam finds a work on the mind's complexities disturbing

IF one would just let one's imagination run loose, *Her Story* could just as well have been one's story. Mercifully, it is not, and the reader will realize why as s/he comes to the end of a compelling, in patches, disturbing, first novel. Zahrah Haider is a fifteen-year old British national with Bangladeshi roots. And her novel is set in England. It revolves around Amelia, a fifteen-year old girl who was born in August, the very month that Zahrah was born. Like the author, her fictional character enjoys listening to music, and being around pets. That, on the face of it, is as far as the superficial similarities between the author and her principal protagonist.

Her Story is the story of a teenager all right, but it is not one about the regular everyday existence of an average adolescent. It delves into the dark recesses of Amelia's mind, and it is a disturbed mind, one which teeters between normalcy and a manic-depressive state. Having lost her father by way of cancer when she was nine, and her mother as a result of an automobile accident when she was fourteen, she had no choice but to enter an orphanage because none of her relatives would take her in their respective homes. She had shown ample evidence of neurotic behaviour before her mother's death, including habitually mutilating her wrists with a knife that "sometimes...made signs, and sometimes...were just the symbol of a depressed girl." Haider states at the outset of the novel that Amelia "was

not a normal child." More significant, as well as worrying, was the puzzling reaction of her school-teachers to her self-mutilation: "She never bandaged her wrists, and went to school with blood running from her clothes. Her teachers tried not to take any notice of it; to them, a wayward child would always be a wayward child."

There is an irony about Amelia's middle name: Felicity. "Felicity meant happiness, although she was anything but happy." She went into an even more unhappy state of mind when she was adopted, and taken into their magnificent mansion, by the wealthy movie director husband-and-wife team of Thomas and Jeanne Marie Moore. She lacks for nothing in terms of lavish living at her new home, where her room felt like it was bigger than her parents' house. "It was like a fairytale place, the mansion, with fountains and little rock gardens. For a minute, her nature changed, just for a second, and it became more 'girly'." For the first time she could actually see the beauty of the garden itself, but one shake of her head and it was gone. She became what she started as.

The garden theme would return, more constructively and lastingly, later on, in a different place and setting, reinforcing her love for flowers and nature, but the exquisitely manicured garden of her foster parents could not lift her depression, and, consequently, surly, rude, and rebellious behaviour. Her demeanor does not change a whit at the exclusive prim and proper high school her new

parents sent her to, driven to and from her house in a chauffeured limousine. She drives her robotic teachers to the wall with her antics, and there is this delicious little observation about her headmistress that could be interpreted in a



Her Story
Zahrah Haider
Author

number of ways: "Amelia found herself wondering why being part German had anything to do with someone's temper." Then there is the amusing equating of the cosmopolitan school's cafeteria with a farmhouse. And here is this bit of wisdom that many would agree with: "It was always imperfect food that tasted perfect..." Amelia was mentally contrasting the burgers

and French fries she was eating at McDonald's with the food she used to have at the mansion, which was cooked too perfectly for her taste.

By this time she had run away from her synthetic soulless spic-and-span existence at the mansion to an aunt's house where she finds a semblance of normalcy, and actually begins to relax. Nightmares have never abandoned her altogether, though, but, except for the odd occasion, they do not overwhelm her into becoming a nervous wreck. The author takes the reader through the feverish mind of a disturbed teenager with impressive insight. In fact, Haider's efforts at capturing the depression, hopelessness, angst of the adolescent mind is a notable *tour de force*. Nonetheless, notwithstanding her periodic black moods, Amelia finds some tranquility to the point where she "no longer hated thinking about her parents." She enjoys happy moments with her aunt, cousin Michael, neighbour Louise, and, most of all, her son of Amelia's age, Chester.

Eventually, Amelia's near-idyllic existence at her aunt's comes to an end as her foster parents have her tracked down and forcibly brought back to their mansion. The novel's denouement then proceeds. But, before that, she spins some thoughtful homegrown philosophy to Chester and Michael. To Chester: "...killing yourself won't help you find what you're looking for." And she began writing "Her Story" at her aunt's house, after having admitted to self-doubt about her writing

ability. "Where did I even get the idea that I could write..." Her relationship with Chester was not the normal teenage romance. It was not even romance. When they went to visit his grandparents' farm, they "got separate rooms each." Nothing unusual in that, but they never even desired to take the plunge of sneaking in to the other's room. They appear to want to be just friends, but one could reasonably read into subliminal desire for something more, particularly on Amelia's part, or in Chester's vehemently defensive indignation riposte when a friend suggests that they should become an item.

This is noticeable in *Her Story*. There is almost total absence of any physical relationship. There are passages and passages of serious psychological probing of a disturbed teenager's mind, but a distinct effort not to come anywhere near any physical relationship. That is not to say that the author should have gone down that road, but only that the artless, teenage Zahrah Haider coexists with the precocious author of the dark corners of the human mind. It is fascinating. The author's first novel should not be her last. Zahrah Haider has years left in front of her, and the welcome luxury of further exploring the complexities of the human mind, and the human being's relationship with each other and the society she happens to be a part of.

Dr. Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communication Department, Independent University, Bangladesh.

AT A GLANCE

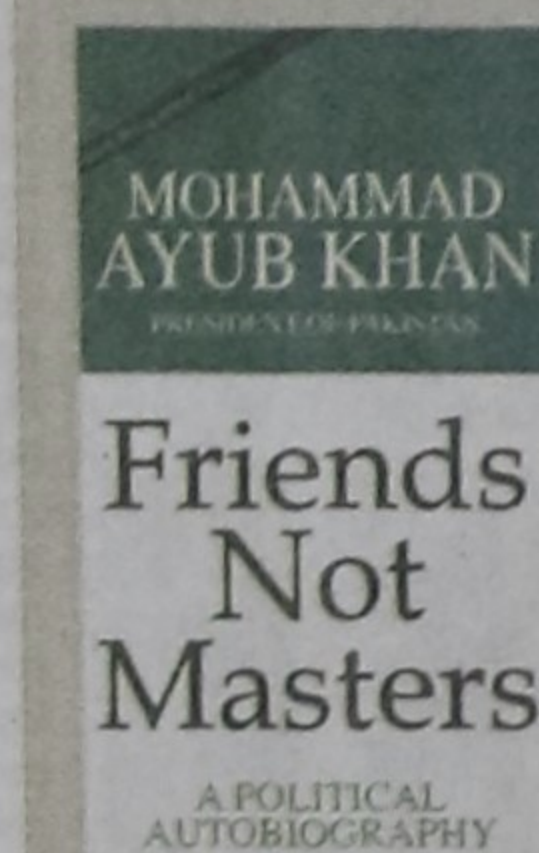


Jibon
M. Faizur Rahman
Academic Press and Publishers
Library

These are a humble collection of poems from M. Faizur Rahman, whose fascination for poetry began in his schooldays. He confesses, though, that once he composed them, he could not recover them. But he now makes sure that they come together in a book. Those who love verses might want to take a peek into the treasure trove?

Women in Bangladesh
From Inequality to Empowerment
Nazmunnessa Mahtab
A.H. Development Publishing House

One of the finest books to come forth in recent years on Bangladesh's women, the work is a detailed study of the history of women's struggle and empowerment in what remains a hidebound conservative society. Mahtab's research has been excellent, to a point where nearly every query about the issue can stumble on a response.



Friends Not Masters
A Political Biography
Mohammad Ayub Khan
Distribution: The University Press Ltd

Really an old book that is now part of the Road to Bangladesh Series, Ayub Khan's memoirs ought to add to the history of the Bengali struggle for freedom as it shaped up in the 1960s. It is also a useful explanation, though the author would not agree, of how a military dictatorship pushes a country toward all kinds of bad health.

Inside Schools
Samir Ranjan Nath, Amina Mahbub
Academic Press and Publishers
Library



Primary education remains a major concern in Bangladesh, with focus annually falling on enrolment and the quality of teaching that goes into them. In this remarkable study, Nath and Mahbub carry out an ethnographic study of four medium category primary schools located in a couple of rural areas. Images of a school culture bubble up.

A world beyond war

Razia S. Ahmad dwells on security matters

SELECTED Papers on Security and Leadership is a collection of papers and essays presented at various national and international conferences, some of which were published earlier. Lieutenant General Mohammed Aminul Karim is both a professional soldier and a trained academic. Thus, combining the knowledge of the battlefield and scholarly rigour comes to him naturally. The essays cover a broad range of issues such as security (both national and global) and other strategic issues.

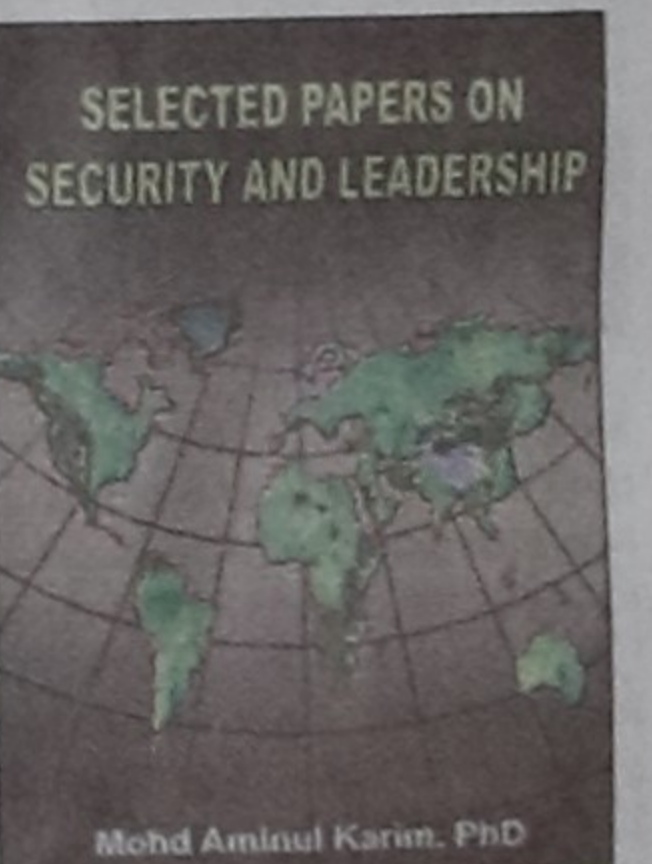
The most interesting essays in this compilation are on security and strategic power, US-China relations, role of security forces in democracy, and counter-terrorism and leadership education. Generally speaking, Mohammed Aminul Karim belongs to the realist school of thought and rejects the ideas of deterrence, clash of civilizations, and hard intervention. In fact, he is a proponent of "soft power" or "smart power". He likes to see a conflict-ridden world move beyond war and reinvent the culture of hope and cooperation. Although human beings are instinctively combative, "such concepts may not fructify but merely aiming for it may provide a cooling effect". Aminul Karim's thoughts on conflict and security are original and have deep policy implications. For instance, he enters the domain of social science with an ease unknown to a soldier and will provoke any security expert into new thinking. For example, he says that "security is tied with food, environment, migration, public health, poverty unemployment, etc., and not just protecting borders. Regional ingeneration and sharing resources must replace border-based paranoia".

Karim's second interesting discourse is centered on U.S.-China relations. Given China's meteoric rise, it is only natural in the security and strategic circles to brand China as a contender for power with the superpower (or hyper power), resulting in serious and extensive conflicts. The author proposes various caveats on possible conflicts but constructs a number of responses and scenarios, most of which assure a shift in future policy because economic and political relations are dynamically based on interests. For instance, the

launching of the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) has reduced the immediate tension between the two countries. In fact, "as two of the world's largest consumers and importers of oil, the U.S. and China are natural allies when it comes to energy security". (H.M. Paulson in *Foreign Affairs*).

Finally, one of the most interesting sections is on the role of security forces in democracy in Bangladesh. The author introduces the concept of tyranny of geography which gives rise to "defense vulnerability and on the other hand, its unique geo-strategic location directs its focus to its external national security".

Mohammed Aminul Karim introduces a short historical review of political development and the role of the military in



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

the process and its shortcomings and flaws in the political arena. It is the leader's imperative that ultimately brings about stability and development.

Lastly, General Karim's responses about civilian-military relations and legitimacy of any government are to be taken seriously as they have deep policy implications and provide a way to work towards achieving a balanced political environment and pave the way towards a stable democracy.

Professor Razia S. Ahmad is a graduate of the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University and has taught at Dhaka University and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET).