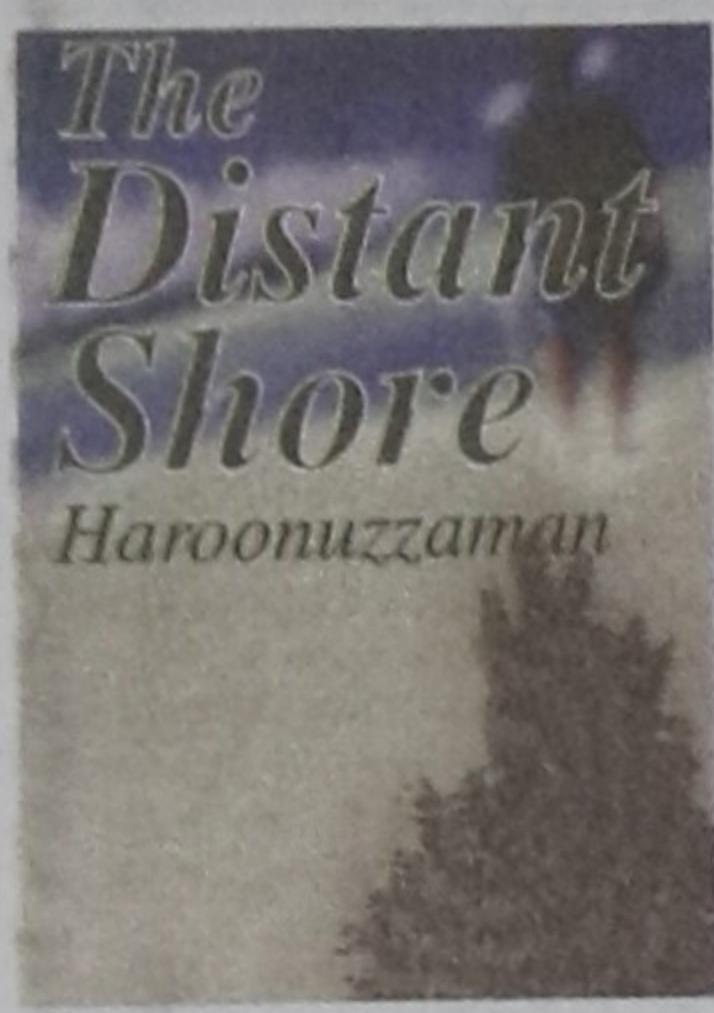


## A lock of hair and a brittle cup

Syed Badrul Ahsan reads a novella and falls for some poetry



The Distant Shore  
Haroonuzzaman  
Adorn Publication

In the early 1980s, an exodus of Englishlanguage 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 Gaddafiland. Fortunately? 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

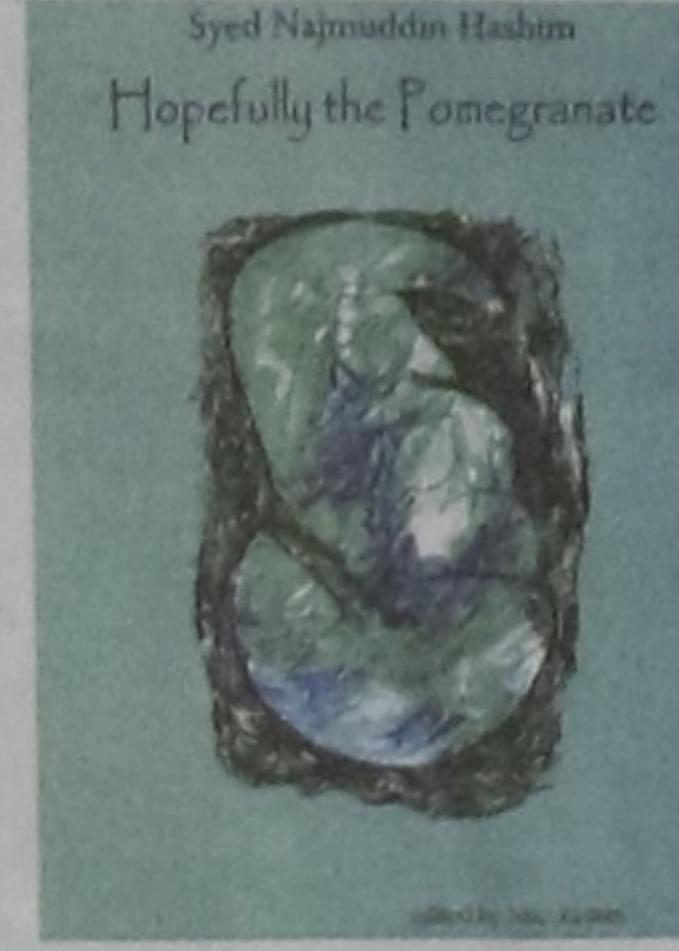
fallacy ingrained in the Gaddafi system. In a state that conducts itself in the name of the people, it is the people who go missing. Abu Zariba must not possess more than one house because the state tells him so. He does the next best thing, as a way of skirting around the law. He rents it out, or loans 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 Sagar 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, Sagar'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 Ibárruri as well (*No passaran* --- 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 reposeful 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.

## 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  
Nazmunnissa 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

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MOHAMMAD AYUB KHAN  
PRESIDENT OF PAKISTAN

A POLITICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

INSIDE SCHOOLS

Samir Ranjan Nath, Amina Mahbub

Academic Press and Publishers Library

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.

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