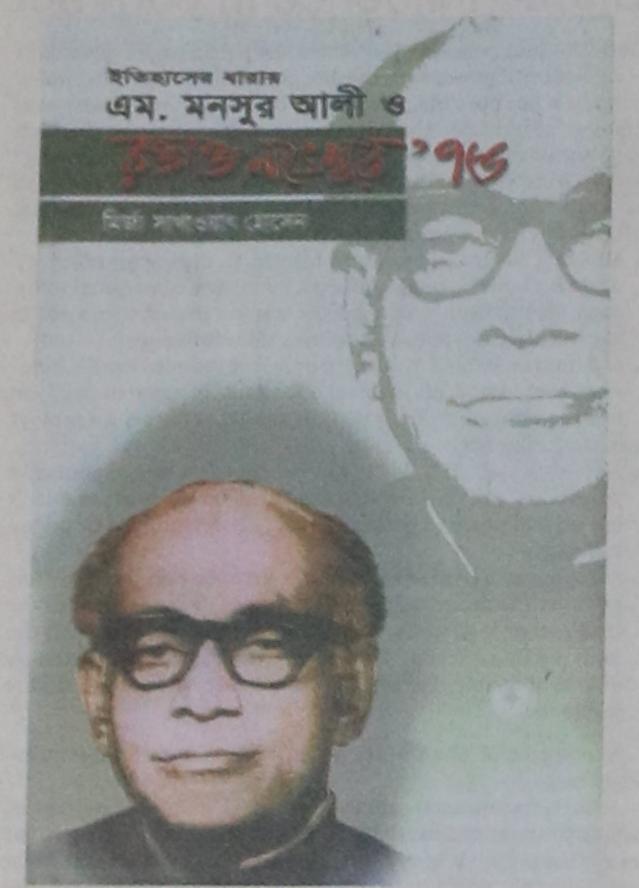
STAR BOOKS REVIEW

When death stalked the land of the free

Syed Badrul Ahsan retraces tragedy, through two works of seminal importance



Itihasher Dharae M. Mansoor Ali O Roktakto November '75 Mirza Sakhawat Hossain Polon Prokashoni

N the final days of his life, M. Mansoor Ali was a prisoner in the country he went all the way to free from Pakistani colonial rule. He was part of the Mujibnagar provisional government between April and December 1971, one of the many inspirational voices in what would turn out to be an annus mirabilis for the Bengali nation. He was part of the team that organized, in the absence of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (by then a prisoner in an undisclosed location in Pakistan) the guerrilla war which in nine months would lead to the emergence of Bangladesh as a free socialist, secular republic. As finance minister in Mujibnagar, it was a difficult job he was compelled to carry out. In post-liberation Bangladesh, his mettle was sorely tested when, as home minister, he was expected to handle law and order in a society where the disorder that follows a revolution was soon to manifest itself. He proved equal to the task. And in early 1975, as Bangabandhu took the country into the Baksal political system, Mansoor Ali took charge as prime minister.

It was a heart-breaking year, 1975. For within a space of three months between August and November, the Bengali nation lost all the five pivotal figures who had guided it, through slow and patient degrees, out of Pakistan and back into its heritage as a cultured, independent society. In effect, the assassination of Bangabandhu and most of his family on 15 August was a clear sign of what the conspirators led by Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed were out to do. Within the spaces of this excellent work, compiled some years ago, the story of Mansoor Ali rapidly turns into a tale of the entire long tragedy that was to push Bangladesh down the road to disaster. Ali wept at dawn on 15 August when the murderers went on radio to proclaim eerily and Mujibur Rahman and his family. A couple of days later (and this story is related once more through eye witness accounts), K.M. Obaidur Rahman accompanied, on Moshtaque's instructions, Mansoor Ali to Bangabhavan. A desperate Moshtaque needed the support of his fellow Awami Leaguers to have his illegal regime come by legitimacy of some sort. Tajuddin Ahmed was out of the question. Syed Nazrul Islam had refused an offer to be part of Moshtaque's cabal with contempt. Even the soft-spoken A.H.M. Quamruzzaman had said no. Moshtaque's last hope was Mansoor Ali. Would Ali agree to be prime minister? That was the usurper's question. Ali made no response. He only stared at the long-time Bangabandhu associate

who had ended up murdering Bangabandhu. 'Why are you looking at me like that?' Moshtaque asked. Alí opened up. 'I am looking at you and thinking of Bangabandhu. How could you kill him?' And that was it. An irritated Obaidur Rahman (about whose role in 1975, especially in the jail killings, questions have never gone away) conducted Mansoor Ali out of Moshtaque's presence.

On 3 November of that sad year, Mansoor Ali was surprised, as were his three detained colleagues, to see his cell being opened in the witching hours of the night. Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam and A.H.M. Quamruzzaman, he was told, wanted to meet him. 'A meeting at such an hour?' Ali wondered aloud. He did his ablution, put his skullcap on his head and had his prayer beads in his hand as he walked out of his cell toward Tajuddin's. He had a premonition, as did the three other leaders, that life was fast coming to an end for them. Within minutes, all four men --- towering figures in the war against Pakistan --- lay dead in their own blood. Mansoor Ali, as witnesses have testified over the years, did not die instantly despite the bullet wounds. He faintly asked for water. That prompted one of the prison guards to run back to the exiting killer squad, to inform its bloodthirsty men that Ali was still alive. The murderers came back, to bayonet this illustrious man to death. The three others had already gone lifeless.

It is a book that touches your heart, in that hugely painful way. Of course, the events and incidents of August and November 1975 have been repeated over the years. That does little to mitigate the national pain and the collective sense of loss that have always been there. The work is a compilation of news reports, statements and eye witness accounts of the tragedy. Mansoor Ali's children, two of whom would eventually go into politics, speak of their father with feeling. Dr. Mohammad Selim, one of the finest and most decent of politicians in post-1975 Bangladesh, slipped into his room when news reached him of the jail tragedy and wept quietly without informing his mother. Begum Amina Mansur speaks (and she does so fifteen years after the murders) of her husband with pathos. And, of course, jail officials at the time, now all in superannuation, recount the horrors that they, and with them an entire nation, went through on that sinister night long ago. The scars have remained, probably never to heal.

AHIR Raihan's end remains a national ordeal. He disappeared on 30 January 1972. Note that it was a month and a half after the liberation of Bangladesh. One would have thought by that time security would improve and the defeated enemies of the new state would have lost themselves into the crowd or slipped into oblivion. But the truth is always stranger than all the tales you can weave about the trauma of war and the euphoria engendered by victory.

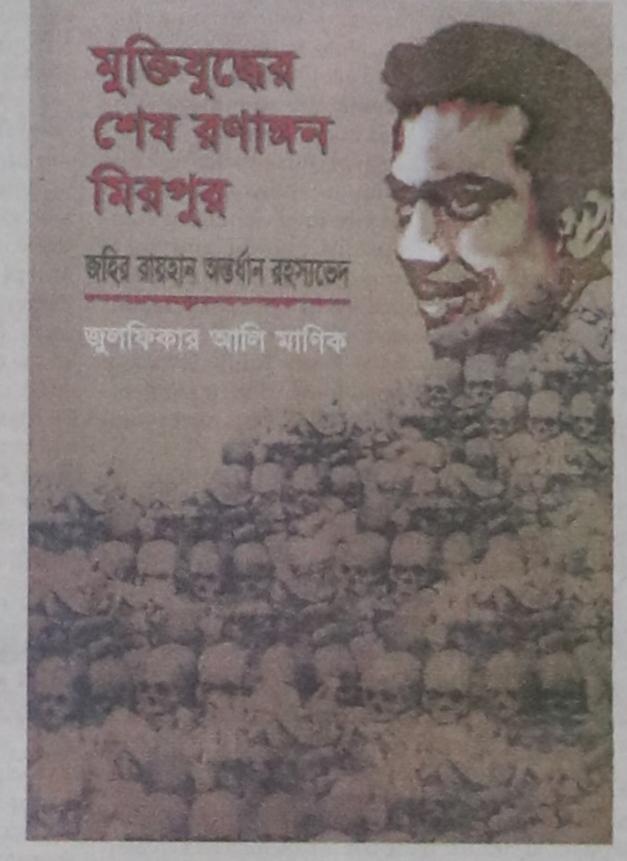
Raihan's contribution to cinema, indeed to Bengali nationalist politics, is a matter of record. It is all there, preserved in the movies he made. As an active participant in the War of Liberation, he brought home to people around the world, through such documentaries as Stop Genocide, the enormity of Bengali suffering at the hands of the Pakistan occupation army as well as the resolve of a captive nation towards driving the murderous foreign army into the sea. In that war, every Bengali was marked out for death, be it in occupied Bangladesh or in the refugee camps in India. And, obviously, Zahir Raihan was one individual in clear sight of the Pakistanis and their local quislings. And he did die at the hands of those quislings, as this admirable collage of reports, interviews and articles from Julfikar Ali Manik makes clear.

The message comes through loud and clear: on 30 January 1972, Zahir Raihan did not disappear. He died in a hail of gunfire when a large group of Biharis, all of whom arrogantly that they had just done away with Sheikh had collaborated with the Pakistani military in 1971, pounced on him and on the soldiers of a fledgling Bangladesh army. A freak accident? It most certainly was not, for those marauding Biharis knew Raihan only too well to leave him unscathed. With the filmmaker died a whole lot of others. And, mystifyingly enough, by the time Bengali forces reclaimed the place of horror in Mirpur, all the bodies had disappeared. Not one was traced. Zahir Raihan, a foremost intellectual who had gone to Mirpur along with a platoon of Bengali soldiers in the hope that he would be recovering his kidnapped brother Shahidullah Kaiser (who had already been murdered by al-Badr goons on the eve of liberation), was destined to go missing as well. He had earlier received information that Kaiser was alive. And it

was hope that made him link up with some freedom fighters, such as Lieutenant Syed Muhammad Ibrahim (subsequently to retire as a major general and form a political party, the objective being to ride with them to Mirpur where he presumed, or was given to believe, that his brother was yet alive.

Manik's narration of events, set off by a discovery of human remains inside the compound of a mosque in Mirpur in the late 1990s, is hair-raising reading. For those who have remembered the monstrosity of the tragedy perpetrated by the Pakistanis as also those who, born after the war, have heard of the multi-faceted dimensions of the tragedy, Ronangon is a living testament to the collective triumph and individual travails Bengalis went through in 1971. Former soldiers recount the horrendous happenings of the day. One of them, a survivor, has his memory clear enough to take readers to the spot where he saw Raihan collapse to the ground after being hit. As he tells the story, immediately after the massacre had taken place, a body of Urdu-speaking men, all Biharis, turned up and dragged the bodies away. His narration of events is corroborated by others. What remains inexplicable, though, is how such a large body of Pakistan supporters remained active in a part of the nation's capital for so many weeks after liberation. Bangabandhu had returned home by that time; his government was at work and elements of the Bangladesh army as well as the Mukti Bahini were very much around.

The work is an impressive recounting of the tragedy of 30 January 1972. It is conclusive evidence, despite some of the cynics still around, of how Zahir Raihan met his end. Ibrahim, Moinul Husain Chowdhury (today a retired military officer) and a number of other individuals leave the reader in little doubt about the facts behind the mystery of Raihan's sudden disappearance. And yet the questions keep piling up. Why was security in Mirpur so lax on the day as to allow a group of armed thugs to pounce on an army



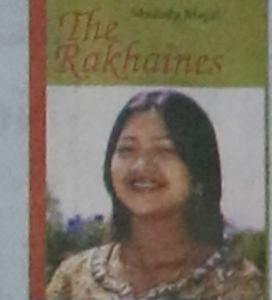
Muktijuddher Shesh Ronangon Mirpur Zahir Raihan Ontordhan Rohoshshobhed Julfikar Ali Manik Subarna

platoon? And why was no effort made to dissuade Zahir Raihan, in such a risk-prone situation, from setting off with the soldiers to Mirpur? Finally, why were there no purposeful investigations into the killing of Zahir Raihan and of those others who perished with him?

The questions keep coming. Perhaps some of the answers will emerge from the pages of this book. Perhaps.

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

AT A GLANCE

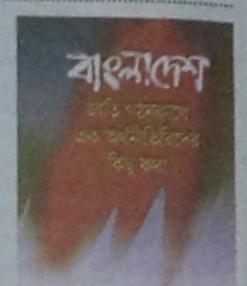


The Rakhaines Mustafa Majid

Bangladesh has been home to a variety of cultures since time immemorial. That thought has perhaps become lost in time because of narrow political reasons. In this excellent study, Mustafa Majid brings into focus the traditions the Rakhaines have followed for ages and the difficulties that have dogged them in recent times.

Bangladesh Jati Gothonkale Ek Orthonitibider Kichhu Kotha Nurul Islam The University Press Limited

The writer was once part of an evolving Bangladesh. After 1971, he served with distinction at the planning commission despite the innumerable hurdles Bangabandhu's administration was confronted with. In this reflective work, Islam looks back at those hard yet idealistic times and lets readers in on some truths they did not know about.



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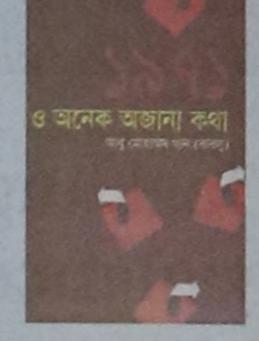


Language For A New Century Ed. Tina Chang W.W. Norton & Company

Poetry straddles countries and continents. In this exhaustive collection of verses from all over Asia, the Middle East and beyond, Tina Chang presents to readers what you could truly regard as the poetry of diversity. It is sheer pleasure going through the metaphors and imagery as they arise from the varied landscape the compilation covers.

1971 O Onek Ojana Kotha Abu Mohammad Khan (Bablu) Publisher Nurnahar Khan (Tuni)

It is one man's story of the War of Liberation. And yet it is a tale of the millions who waged war against the Pakistan occupation army in 1971. The writer narrates what he knows; and he also brings before readers new information in the form of correspondence with individuals in and outside the country. Surely a good read.



Sights and sounds

Tulip Chowdhury is enthused by an old tale

Zoo in My Luggage is a hilarious account of Gerald Durrell's world of animals when he starts collecting them for a zoo of his own. It is a refreshing experience to enter the animal world and get insights into how the animals behave under different situations. Once the reader starts reading the book it is impossible to put it down until the last page comes with the last burst of laughter and keeps the reader smiling for a long

time. Gerald Durrell and his wife Jacquie go to Bafut in the British Cameroons to collect animals for a private zoo. This is the romping true story of the writer's sixth trip to Bafut. The following letter is from a hunter in Bafut to the writer when he starts to collect the animals:

"Dear Sir,

Here are two animals I am senting you like those you see me in the picture. Any tipe of money you want to sent to me try and trapp the money in a small piece of paper and sent it to that boy that brought animals. You know that a hunter always be derty so you should try to send me a bar of soap.

Good greetings

Yrs...Peter N'amablong" While the writer Gerald Durrell meets different people of Bafut he comes across people who at times make him angry, confused or sometimes have him double up with laughter. The chief of Bafut, called the "Fon" has twenty wives and forty children to boast of. Each wife has her own hut. The huts are all lined up with the chief's villa at one end. The writer notes with curiosity that the Fon moves with three or four of his favorite wives. Although the Fon has so many children, he is very much the dominating father to all of them.

The wives are simply terrified of him! When Gerald Durrell wants to cross a shallow river that contains hippos the boatman at first refuses to go. After much cajoling and a reward of a large sum of money the boatman does agree to cross the dangerous river. And then they pass by a hippo but the creature does not attack them. The boatman smiles grandly and says,

"Sah dat ipopo no be man.....dat a woman.

For once the writer feels glad that women are considered to be the weaker sex after all. And of the huge hippo the writer says,

... A rock we were passing some fifteen feet away suddenly rose out of the water and gazed at us with the bulbous astonished eyes, snoring out two slender fountains of spray, like a miniature whale. We sat and stared at the hippo and it stared at us. Of the two, the hippo seemed the more astonished. The chubby, pinkgrey face floated on the surface of the water like a disembodied head at a séance. The great eyes stared at us with the innocent appraisal of a baby.....

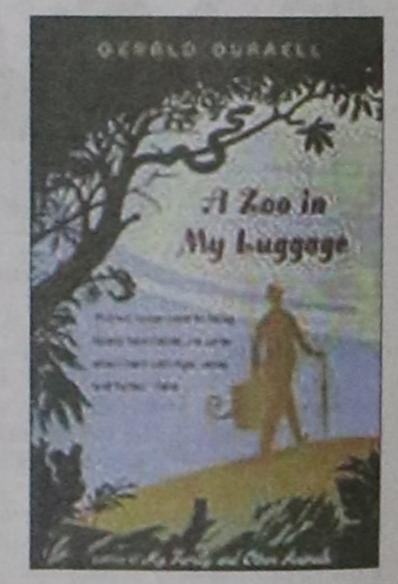
Gerald Durrell gives varied accounts of his various adventures while he collects animals. There is a long battle with a python that the

writer wants to capture. At the end the snake sits at the end of a cave where it is impossible to reach it. The python hisses loudly. The writer thinks that the snake is making fun of him and is teasing him. Although the writer gives humorous accounts of the animals he meets, the reader is well aware of how many near-death experiences he encounters. One cannot but respect the writer for his courage and humor.

Writing about a bushbaby he captures the writer writes,

...it was a neat grey face with ears folded back like fans against the side of the head and two enormous golden eyes that looked at me with the horror-stricken expression of an elderly spinster who had discovered a man in the bathroom cupboard."

In Bafut the writer declares prizes for the people who collect animals for him. Every morning there would a long queue of people with animals. He has owls, monkeys, squirrels, antelopes, snakes, water chevrotain



A Zoo in My Luggage Gerald Durrell Penguin Books

and all other animals he can get hold of. There are interesting stories of these animals settling down in their new homes. Providing food for them is no easy job either. The writer requests the villagers to provide the food. So he finds long queues of children coming to him with beetles. beetle larva, frogs, snails, worms,

birds'eggs, etc. The writer heads home to Bournemouth with his animals. It is a month long preparation to get the animals ready for the voyage by sea. All goes well till the zoo in the luggage comes home. Difficulties begins when the writer and his wife find themselves back at home with Cholomondeley, the chimpanzee, Bug-eye the bush-baby and the other members of the zoo and nowhere to put them. Thus begins the writer's account of another humorous story that simply cannot wait to be read.

Tulip Chowdhury teaches and writes fiction and poetry.

A gourmet's delight it surely is ... Kaiser Haq is delighted by a new work on food

ATING is a biological necessity, but cooking is an art. Instruction in the art is codified in recipes. The first recipes must have been orally transmitted, but with the invention of writing, recipes, like other forms of literature, began to be inscribed. A Babylonian clay tablet from around 1500 BC preserves the recipes for certain appetizing ancient dishes. This may well be the earliest known precursor of the cookbook.

The modern cookbook is of course a post-Gutenberg genre; in bookstores worldwide it is as conspicuous as fiction, memoirs or travelogues. In this country, though, it isn't yet a thriving genre. The reason no doubt is that those who do most of our cooking still belong to an oral culture.

But things are changing, and at least one Bangla cookbook has become a bestseller. Tommy Miah, the NRB chef, became the first Bangladeshi to publish a cookbook in English. And now we have our very own homegrown chef Shawkat Osman carrying the tradition forward with this handsomely produced quarto volume embellished with mouth-watering photographic illustrations by his daugh-

Shawkat is a successful businessman with an artistic bent, whose passion for food and cooking has opened up a fascinating sideline. He took sitar lessons for seven youthful years and taught himself to play the piano. Hearing him give an impromptu recital of Beethoven's "Bagatelle fur Elise" on the upright piano in his living room was a revelation. His handling of the arpeggios lent an insight into the exquisite composition of tastes and flavours in the meal we had just consumed.

Shawkat's charming wife Nahid is both his muse and collaborator in the culinary art, and the two of them have conducted a very popular cookery show on Tara TV that had the same evocative title as the book: the khunti or spatula, and the korai or Bengali wok, are essential utensils in our kitchens. The book is therefore the product of a steady, natural progression: from gourmet (and gour-

mand) to amateur cook to serious chef to TV star to writer. Shawkat's charming wife Nahid is both his muse and collaborator in the culinary art, and the two of them have conducted a very popular cookery show on Tara TV that had the same evocative title as the book: the khunti or spatula, and the korai or Bengali wok, are essential utensils in our kitchens. The book is therefore the product of a steady, natural progression: from gourmet (and gour-

mand) to amateur cook to serious chef to TV star to writer. In a brief preface Shawkat makes certain very inter-

esting and very bold claims. In a world devoid of certainty where one "has to settle for half-baked politics and watered-down doses of culture", "cooking has a visible finality about it." I thought at once of Matthew Arnold: what the Victorian critic had claimed for poetry, that it can provide spiritual solace, Shawkat seems to be claiming for the culinary art. In addition, cooking can be therapeutic: it "helps to hold back dark thoughts", whereas "other obsessions can create bitterness and pain".

The introductory essay on "Bangladeshi Cuisine" that



Khunti Korai: Bangladeshi Culsine. Shawkat Osman.

Kolkata: Mapin Publishing Ltd; Bangla (Tara) Television; Ocean Township, New Jersey: Grantha Corporation. Distributed in Bangladesh by Words and Pages.

interest to students of culture though it isn't entirely free of boo-boos. In explaining certain traditional concepts, "Egg, onion, garlic and rice wine" are lumped together as "passion foods," and "pork, beef and scaleless fish" as "'hot' (gorom i.e. arousing)". Leaving aside the classification of wine as a food, there is a more basic question: do Bengalis consume rice wine and pork? The ethnic minorities in the hills do, but their cuisine is not included in the book. I wish it were.

The recipes are classified in an original and imaginative manner, under eleven heads; among these are festivals, as well as social and other occasions. The first, "Friends and Family", offers nine items, ranging from maan kochu malaikari (Taro in coconut milk gravy) to fish kofta to moong dal that should go down well in a homely feast. Next, "Jamai Shasthi", the annual visit of the daughters and sons-in-law of a family, requires a selection of traditional delicacies like rui bhaja (deep fried rohu fish) and doodh aam bhat (mangoes with warm milk) to pamper the jamais. The eids, bijoya and Christmas are covered, as are peculiarly Bengali occasions like our new year, the rainy day in the monsoon season, when the palate longs for

something special, and the hilsa fest. The most engaging aspect of the book, to this reader at least, is the cultural commentary accompanying the recipes. Two of these notes deserve to be singled out for special praise. The first is the robust defense of the use of siddhi or cannabis, also known as ganja or charas, which possesses medicinal properties, besides being an exciting recreational drug, and was banned in this country just to please the USA. The other relates to katchi biriyani. Until reading it I was unaware that the distinction between kaccha or katchi and pucca or pakki foods derives from the Vedas and has to do with the way they are cooked whether with ghee or water and with the way the ghee is used. Mughal cuisine therefore is a delectable fusion, materially as well as con-

ceptually. Bangladeshi readers may notice the omission of beef dishes, but that is quite understandable in a book meant primarily for the Indian market. A fastidious reader may wish that it were more carefully edited and proofread. But one has only got to try out one of the recipes to be perfectly pleased with it.

Dr. Kaiser Haq is a poet, writer and teaches English literature at Dhaka University.