

Poetry and prose blending in fashion ...

Mohsena Reza Shopna is impressed by a literary compilation

BEGINNING from December, February and then March, we cannot come out of memories, still fresh, of the liberation war. February reminds us of the young men who laid down their lives to make Bangla the 'Rashtho Bhasha'. This was the threshold of the liberation war and *Writing Across Borders* encloses such reminiscences. In this month, St. Valentine avowed that love is the most beautiful thing that could happen to a person. Such episodes are accommodated too.

It is a privilege to be able to review a book which imbibes this very spirit. To begin with, in Shaheen Akhter's *Five Crows* and *One Freedom Fighter* we can see this essence touchingly exhibited in one line, 'He had gone off to Dhaka just to hear Sheikh Mujib's speech on March 7.' The image is vivid due to the accurate names of places and incidents. Agartala, Gomoti are names still fresh in our minds. The crows have been shown as a symbol of the respect used to freedom fighters. 'The five crows stood around the dumb woman's lifeless body, their heads hung low, their eyes filled with tears.'

Sadness is interrupted by Aruna Chakravarti's *From the Inheritors*, a typical medieval matrimonial picture probably still present in our country. The placing of Jharna Das Purkayastha's *Cascading Rain* is not right at this point because of the immense pain rendered through the narration of Joy's 'third eye' with which he could feel the difference between the big and the bright world outside and his pigeon hole of a house! This diverts our concentration

from the pain of the liberation war to the unwritten sorrow which class difference and low social status bring and the realization that the world is gradually becoming the preserve of the rich.

Times have changed and so have people's values, dreams and aspirations. Joy's suicide was it a



Writing Across Borders
Ed. Niaz Zaman
Writers Ink

protest? Was all the love his mother showered on him meaningless? Is life nothing but a mirage? These are questions to be reviewed by all of us.

First published in 'The Statesman', Sanjukta Dasgupta's *Mrs. Dutta's* is the kind of anthology which lays bare the 'frustration of riches'. The couple had feathered their nest and yet an inexplicable void seemed so unbearable! In common parlance their marriage was on the high road to Needham. Her life hung like a millstone round her neck.

Nobody heard Chandreyi's silent screams behind her gracious smiles. She wondered how Virginia Woolf, who loved the world with so much passion, could leave it so purposefully by drowning herself. She committed the same sin and seemed to smile and say she had cheated life by not giving it a chance and chose security in favor of a full life.

Then you ease with Nabaneeta Dev Sen's poem *Jungle Story*, a relief from 'Mrs. Dutta's'. Audity Falguni's *Crossfire* is a sharp deviation from the typical form of prose. In a note to the story, the writer explains that the past, present and future tenses have been deliberately confused in an attempt to express political realities. There is a vicarious message in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Ephemeral*. 'It is only the musing of man that stretches beyond his lifetime.'

A ceaseless effort to search hell and heaven for a more beautiful poem like *A Truth Bound Sentiment* will be futile. Look at these exquisite lines: 'This hand has touched Neera's face, could I use this hand to commit a sin... these lips have told Neera "I love you", once, could a deceit play on these lips ever again?' I dedicate these classic lines and the ones from Joy Goswami's *This One Noon*, 'Once I promised to have you in my lips and after so many ages I have come to keep that promise...' to Valentine's Day. But the story on which I would like to dwell all my life is Sulabha Gupta's *Valentine's Day*. Here is an extract: 'Deep makes Dadaji give a rose to Dadi', and Dadi says, 'We celebrate our Valentine's Day not once a year but everyday. There are so many rituals when women worship God

for long life of their husbands. At night when my back aches, Dadaji applies balm. In the morning when my knees become stiff he gives me hot water, he even makes tea for me. All these are symbols of love for each other.' Deep replies, 'I bow to your rich culture.'

As Kaiser Haq's students at DU, little did we know that he would turn into a *lungi* activist! Extremely amazing and a brilliant piece of work where Kaiser demands equal rights for this ethnic attire! One has only to dip into, peruse and pore over Kaiser's *Ode On The Lungi* to present oneself with an absorbing, gripping and well written ode to celebrate a common object: 'at any one moment there are more people in lungis than the population of the U.S.A.' He terms it as a 'complete wardrobe' read it to find out how. You get a jolt in his unique style of romanticism. 'When romance strikes, the lungi is a sleeping bag for two: a book of poems, a bottle of hoochie and your beloved inside your lungi --- there is paradise for you.' In Syed Shamsul Haq's *To The Press Reporter*, translated by Kabir Chowdhury, he forbids any news of death. 'Is it not enough that when a single flower is plucked, the whole garland heaves and sways, that a single hiatus disturbs the total security of the universe?' But the most moving poem in this entire selection is Khondakar Ashraf Hossain's *The Ballad Of The Gravedigger's Daughter*. Once our teacher and now head of the Department Of English at Dhaka University, he comes forth with his Brobdignagian talent!

Everyone has a craving for life. What is wrong with Tarabanu

wanting the same? This is her doleful story and none could portray a woman's plight in our country as vividly as Selina Hossain in *Leaving Home*. Remember the song 'Urte mana akaashey tor, boshte mana daaley, basha badhiteyo mana ki ache kopaley!' This is because a girl is first under her father, then her husband and finally her son. She is never free!

Syed Manzoorul Islam's *The Merman's Prayer*, a mixture of fantasy and realism, is a very refreshing diversion from the dismal account of Tarabanu's life. His youngish description of the mermaid's torso is quite ravishing and at the same time surprising! But all admiration and respect goes to the person who included *Flores* by Makhbula Manzoor. It is a total history of the liberation war in a nutshell, all one has to do is read it to know what occurred then against the Pakistani army and the Razakars and the atrocities committed by them.

The compilation contains inimitable writings like Razia Khan's *Argus Under Anaesthesia*. There are gems from Nasreen Jahan, Jharna Rahman, Sudeep Sen and Anwara Syed Haq.

This is a book which can boast of clarity with easy diction and a style which is enjoyable. It is studded with beautiful and meaningful imagery. The placing of the compositions is done with a brilliance which becomes only Niaz Zaman, the editor. The beauty of this book is that prose and poetry have blended in the most calculated fashion. Boredom lies at a distance.

Mohsena Reza Shopna periodically reviews fiction and engages in social causes.

AT A GLANCE

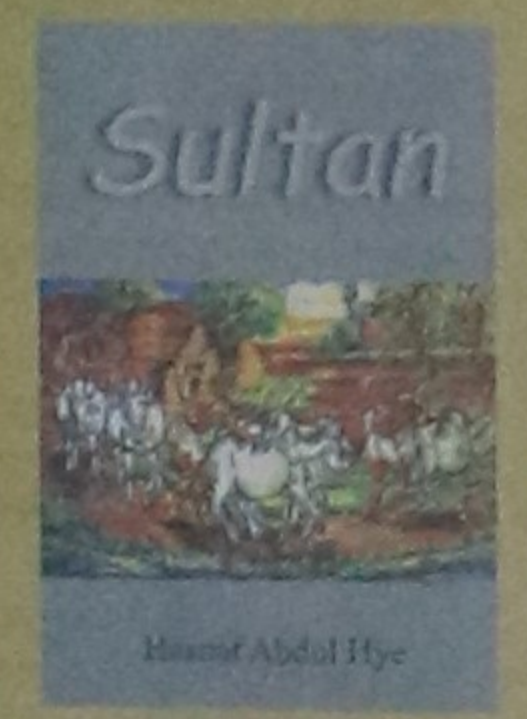
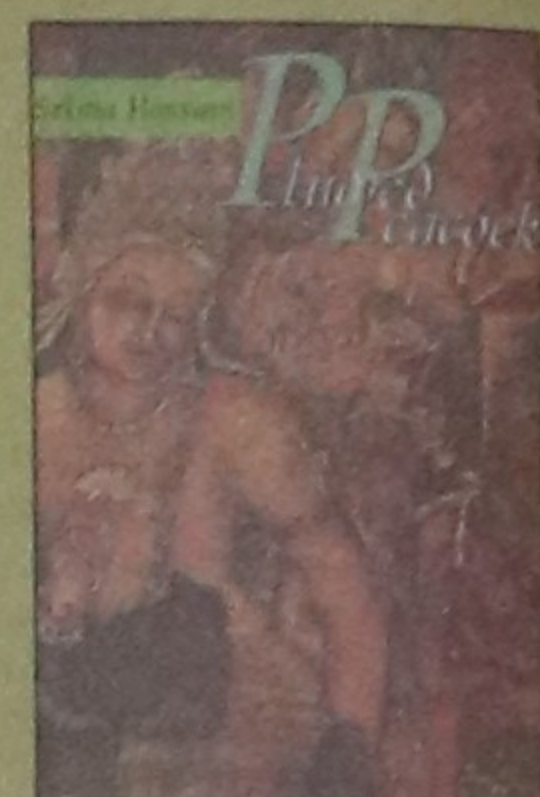


Bir Konya Pritilata
Ed Pankajakravarty
Balaka, Chittagong

One of the books you could look for at this year's Ekushey Boi Mela is this extremely good work on the life and struggle of Pritilata Waddadar. It was published in 2007, but for those of you who have had no opportunity of coming by it, now is the moment to get a copy. Pritilata comes back, to retell the tale of a brave generation.

Plumed Peacock
Selina Hossain
Trans. Kabir Chowdhury
Adorn Publication

Another valuable addition to the gems at the Ekushey Boi Mela, this work is pure symbolism. In the person of a poet, struggling in defence of his soul and that of his country, Selina Hossain brings forth a poignant story of the dignity of language. Behind the symbolism lies the very real historical happening of February 1952.

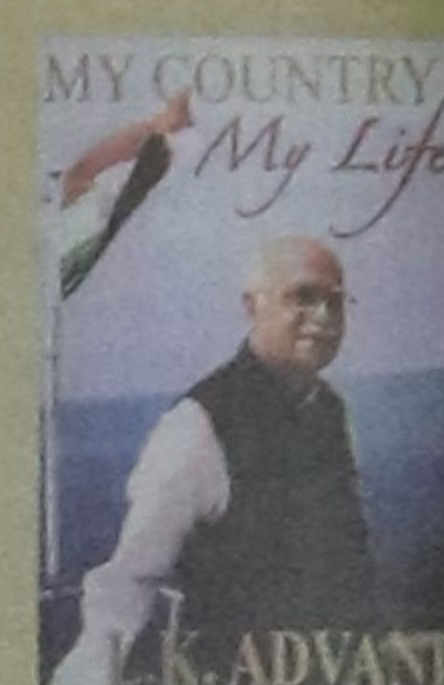


Sultan
Hasnat Abdul Hye
Adorn Publication

It is reality that the author turns into fiction. It is the story of the artist S.M. Sultan. Hye takes the finer details of his life and moulds them, as it were, into a novel that leaves the imagination in a state of quiet excitement. As William Radice says in the introduction, this book is about an alternative way. Get a copy from the Boi Mela.

My Country My Life
L.K. Advani
Rupa & Co.

For a man who these days is the prime ministerial candidate of India's rightwing BJP, Advani brings a freshness into a telling of the story of his life. Born in Sindh in the pre-partition era, he was heart-broken, like millions of others, when he was compelled to leave the land of his birth and find his way to India. The narrative makes you think.



Only free men can laugh ... and love

Farida Shaikh reads a tale twice over and likes it

KREETADASHER Hashi is Shaukat Osman's masterpiece dedicated to A.K.M. Ahsan, civil servant, poet Sanaul Huq, and Harihar Juglashu. More significant is Abdul Bari Warsi who supported the publication of this work. There are remembrances of atrocities committed during the rule of Ayub Khan, the period referred to in Osman's work.

Kreetadasher Hashi was awarded the year's 1963 best literary award. It is interesting how the manuscript leading to this work was discovered. The writer and two of his compatriots set out on a visit to a village and came upon Roufannessa, a meritorious student of English literature at Dhaka University. She had been jilted in love. She dedicated herself to education for girls, and had set up a school in the village. She lived with her ninety year old grandfather Shah Fariduddin Jaunpur. During World War II he fought in the Lusai sector and in Bihar. He returned to the village as an Arabic-Persian scholar. His library of books was a treasure house.

It was over a festive breakfast session in Roufannessa's house that Maulana Jalal jokingly made a reference to *The Thousand and One Nights*. As the grand old man Dadu Fariduddin heard this, he at once made a correction and said the title of the book was *Thousand and Two Nights*. *Alif Laila wa Lailanai*; the literal meaning is two nights, and not Alif Laila wah Laila, meaning one night.

Dadu also said that the reason

behind this misconception was on account of seeking information on Oriental subjects from British sources. The people of the subcontinent were their slaves for over one hundred and fifty years, which fact had framed the mentality of the people to accept their point of view without challenge.

Dadu Fariduddin got a copy of the manuscript from his library. It was during the reign of Halaku Khan that Baghdad was destroyed and this document passed through many places and reached Hindustan. It then reached Shah Shuja. As the later was escaping to Arakan, the document was left in Murshidabad, from where it went to Jaunpur and into the hands of Shah Fariduddin.

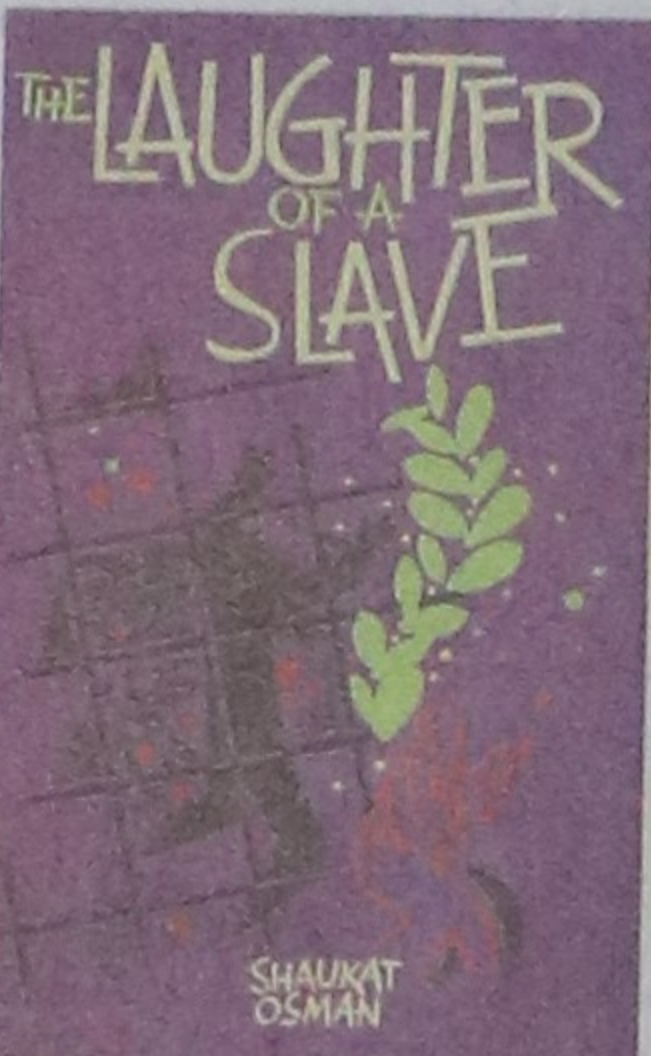
Everyone began looking at the book. The last tale in *The Thousand and One Nights* was on Shahjada Habib, as everyone knew. The next story after this was *Jahakul Abad*, meaning slave's laughter.

After the writer's return from the village, he sought cooperation from Maulana Jalal and began translating in Bangla the last story; he had obtained permission from Dadu and made a copy of the manuscript for the library, even though a page was missing.

So *Jahakul Abad* translated into Bangla is *Kreetadasher Hashi* and translated into English it is *The Laughter of a Slave*.

The story is about love, life and living. Laughter is symbolic of living with 'a happy heart' or 'to live profoundly', as Milan Kundera would say. *The Laughter of a Slave* is a farce and sarcasm on

the prevailing social order. Slavery is a social construct. Physically the slaves are bonded to their masters' or mistresses' whims. However, the soul of a man is always free; so even though a man may be a slave, his soul is not bonded if he has a clear conscience. *Laughter* signifies



The Laughter of a Slave
Shaukat Osman
Translation Kabir Chowdhury
Adorn Publication

that freedom of the soul. Laughter and good words are reflections of man's soul.

Harun-al-Rashid is the fifth Abbasid Caliph (786-809) of Baghdad, Begum Zubaida his wife and Meherjan is Zubaida's slave-companion. The black slave Tatari and Meherjan love each other and are secretly married.

The Begum knows about this and encourages Meherjan to enjoy herself with her lover. But without the consent of the Caliph, the master of all slaves, the marriage is illegal.

Man is a solitary being and mental loneliness and heaviness of the heart are part of everyday life. The voice of the dead is louder than that of the living. Man is not capable of making judgments of the self or make distinctions between the morally right and the wrong. Masrur, the slave companion, notes the Caliph's reflections as he strolls through his palace.

The Caliph is a sad man. He has punished his sister for loving a man from an enemy tribe. He has also signed the death warrant of the chief minister. In the midst of such melancholia he hears the mirthful laughter of two beings, one full-throated and the other high pitched. It is the laughter of the slaves. The Caliph exclaims, 'They will laugh, and I can't. No, no, that can't be.' He wants to laugh like slaves, but alas he couldn't as his conscience was so much burdened.

The Caliph finds that slaves keep awake till late night, for 'sleep is not the only form of rest.' He orders a search for the laughing slaves. When they are found, Tatari the African slave is rewarded with a gift of the Caliph's garden estate, all for his laughter. The Armenian slave girl Meherjan is no longer a slave girl and returns to Begum Zubaida.

Tatari is grateful for his reward, but he is not happy, so he does not laugh. He tells the caretaker that

slaves do not feel comfortable unless they earn their reward by their own labour. That enjoyment is attained only through 'effort, intelligence and physical strength.'

'And the real slaves of this world are the people who crave reward without any work or worth.'

Tatari is whipped and tortured for not laughing. On orders from the Caliph, Meherjan beseeches Tatari to speak. He does not; seeing this, the Caliph begins to laugh. Meherjan, the free woman, announces Tatari's thoughts --- that there is a difference between the love of a slave and the love of a wealthy man. The rich understand the value of wealth. For the rich money is a miracle, it can make the impossible possible. 'Power of money is immeasurable. It is limitless.'

Reading Shawkat Osman's original Bangla alongside Kabir Chowdhury's translation, any reader will be impressed by the 'completely faithful' presentation. The re-creation comes close to the original, and this is a tremendous satisfaction for the reader. Reading *The Laughter of a Slave* is a joy!

If an opportunity to make suggestion arises, then let it be said that this work, both in English and Bangla, should be recommended for a course in the sociology of literature.

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

The glow in a poet's soul

Jesmima Shanta spends time looking for meaning in verse

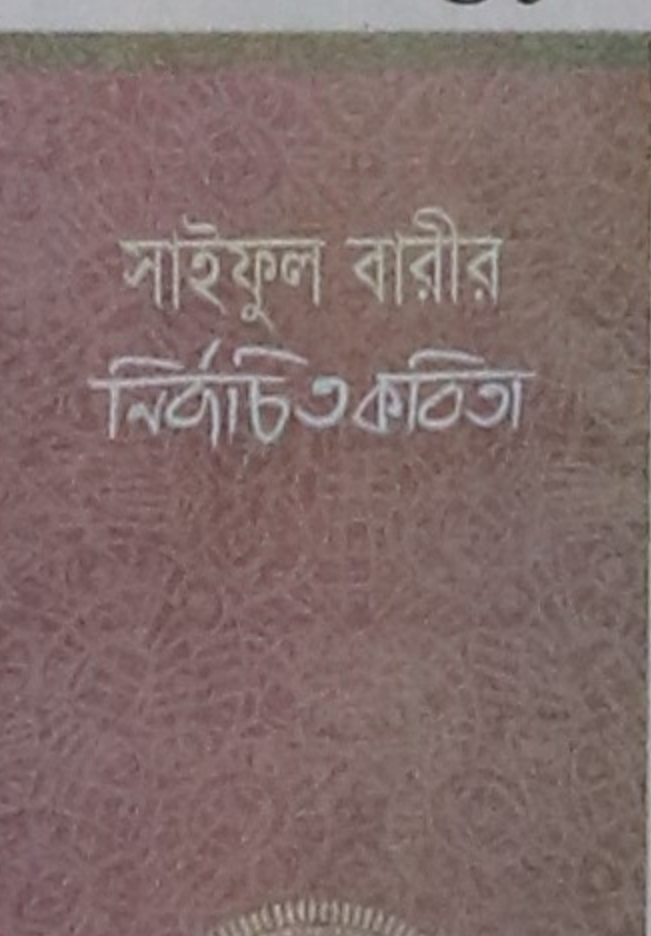
IT is indeed a pleasure to write on the works of a poet whose heart cries out for the distressed. Saiful Bari's tribute to the poor is extremely pure and high, and in some of the poems I felt the tribute could be turned into deep love as well. One is here reminded of Rabindranath Tagore, whose songs of the *puja parba* are similar to the love songs of the *prem parba* in *Geetabitan*. Perhaps all love starts with respect, with very strong love ending in puja or devotion. Love for a physical being turns into love for God, for Allah, for Christ or for the *prabhu* in Tagore music.

'Saiful Bari's Nirbachita Kabita' is a collection of some selected pieces by the eminent poet. The 96-page book has been brought out by Mizan Publishers. Though prizes and awards are not the ultimate goal of a poet, Bari has obtained tremendous popularity and quite a few awards for his poetry. But his best award, to be sure is his poetry, which is loved by his readers. Indeed, some of his poems have given him a niche in the hearts of many Bangla poetry lovers.

The collection consists of many new and old poems from Bari. While love and romanticism are the oldest material of the poet,

contemporary events, including natural disasters, the uncertainty of the present age, the touch of romance in our day-to-day mechanical life and, finally, good old history, the flavour of 1950s Dhaka city are reflected in the poetry. Going through some of the poems is truly a journey back to the past.

The poet has dedicated this book to the hapless people of his country. And they are the poorest, those afflicted by Sidr. Saiful Bari's mastery lies in bringing to his sentiments that necessary touch of life and hope for the hereafter even in the portrait of the wreckage or the aftermath at Sharankhola. In the poem *Shudhu tomar jonno*, the poet has turned his tears into a poem; it's a tribute to a single woman who has lost her home, her spouse, sons, daughters, village and her belongings... everything as a consequence of Sidr. The courageous woman still stands against the odds, with zest for a new life. For life is beautiful and life goes on. The natural calamity has taken the life of her husband, and his body might be lying somewhere under the uprooted trees. She is searching for the corpses of her near and dear ones.



Saiful Bari's Nirbachita Kabita
Mizan Publishers

The woman's cry for her beloved has made her forget to stand in the queue of the destitutes for a slice of relief. The poet wonders how in a magical move he can appear before her to calm her? How will help her get back to a consciousness of the real world around her? In Sharankhola the last drop of water has been turned poisonous as it has mingled with the dead bodies. The water looks like the

black poison of the snake. The poet dedicates the poem to her on Victory Day. The poem itself searches for her among the poor Sidr affected women. Many years will pass, the victims of the disaster will forget their pain and agony. But one day, this poem will be read once again, the picture of the disaster of Sharankhola will appear again. And thus Saiful Bari captures the essence of the tragedy in his poetry.

Naimuddin etodin tomake is a poem on a poor man. Naimuddin symbolises the poor working class, whose sweat has been exploited by the affluent sections of society. Naimuddin is a freedom fighter too; his wife and children wait in a long queue to come by relief materials.

Saiful Bari at the end of the poem seeks forgiveness from Naimuddin, from the million Naimuddins whose lives have not matched their expectations in this free country. It is a picture we watch every day: freedom fighters and their family members often begin in the villages, without getting any honour, benefit or remuneration. War heroes are not honoured, but other people celebrate national events with great enthusiasm.

Saiful Bari has painted historic

places, roads, highways, hills, seas and deserts in the poem *Shawpar haat dhore*. Nevertheless, he remains a lonely soul even after watching the natural beauty of many countries he has visited. He has been searching for an isolated island throughout his journey in life. Within the ambit of this poem he understands that time has been his companion. And he is aged now.

In the poem *Apurba golap*, Saiful Bari dwells on romance. His lover springs a surprise by keeping a bunch of roses on the poet's table. She leaves his table before he arrives, giving him no chance to demonstrate his gratitude to her. She writes on a small card, accompanied by flowers, that she had come to a real person. The poet takes this praise as great and admits that he will remember her forever, but he will not disclose her name to anyone and this will be the sad part of the story.

Saiful Bari searches for emotional attachment with pure souls in his poetry. He is more on the lookout for the beauty of the soul than for the physical. And that makes him remarkable as a thinker, as a poet.

Jesmima Shanta is a freelance journalist.

Paradox of the creator and the created

Efadul Huq spots glorious prose in a Rushdie work

OUT of a brothel, perfumed desirably and trailing a mysterious bloodline, an 'overly pretty' traveller reaches the magnificent court of Mughal emperor Akbar. Despite his foolish choice to wear a coat of coloured leather lozenges in the heat of Fatehpur Sikri, the traveller wittily introduces himself as 'Mogor dell'Amore', the Mughal of Love. As Akbar falls prey to his silvered tongue, the yellow-haired traveller starts to relate a story of love which can 'make his fortune or else cost him his life.'

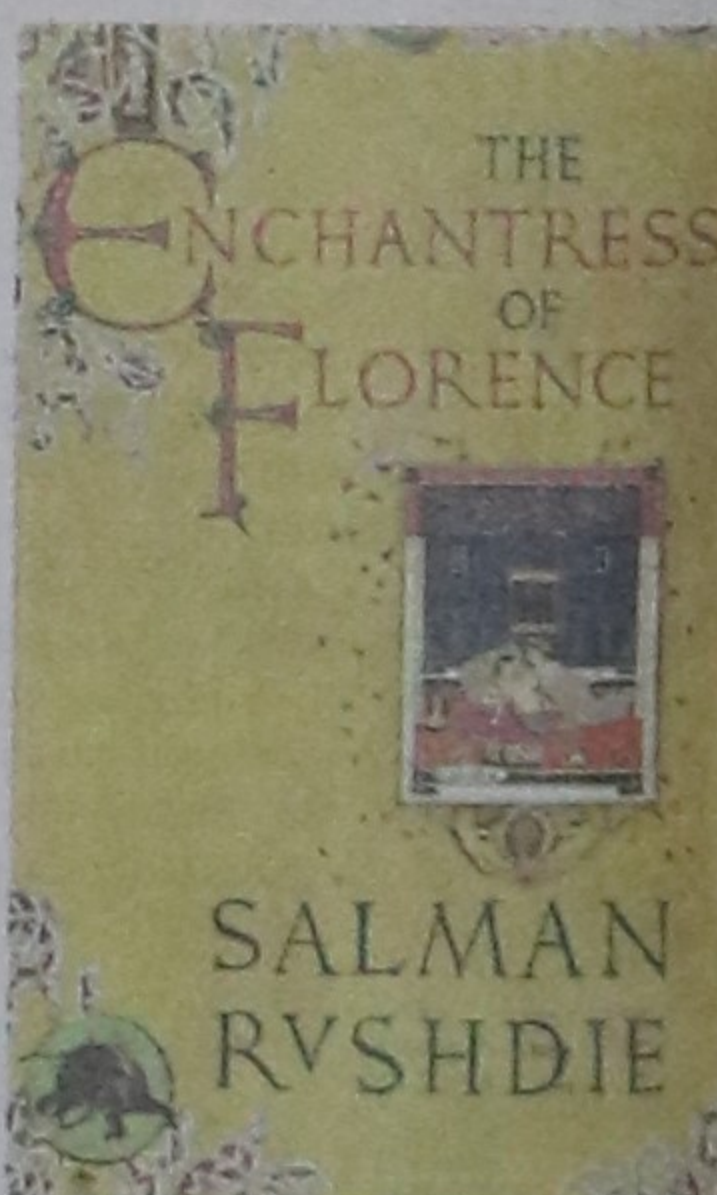
Thus begins the enchanting tale of *The Enchantress of Florence*. And perhaps at the apex of his career Salman Rushdie, pulling colourful threads of history in the background, fuses lore, legends and facts to form a sea of stories much like the one showed to 'Haroun' by his father and talked about by Rushdie in many of his lectures. This novel, a sea tormented by a tempest of carnal as well as divine love, doesn't fall in between the East and the West but encompasses both of them. And not as a bridge between the two worlds but more of a circle containing everything is the image of a woman: Qara Koz, Lady Black Eyes.

This enigmatic princess is supposedly a descendant of Genghis Khan and is also the Mughal emperor's great aunt. Being the Angelina Jolie of her time, she was captured by a warlord and then, through the skillful use of beauty and sorcery she climbed the beds of many powerful men, ultimately ending up in the arms of commander Argalia. It is during this dangerous travel across the arms of kings and commanders that Qara Koz moves from the East to the West and reaches the charming city of Florence where her beauty casts a binding spell on everyone who glances at her. And as you might have guessed by now, by virtue of that gift, she is named as the enchantress of Florence.

Surprisingly the novel doesn't focus just on the princess. Her presence as the invisible driving force is always felt but simultaneously Rushdie treats his readers with delightful digressions. The whore who is an expert in scents, the painter who disappears into his painting, the seductive Jodha bai who is merely a figment of Akbar's imagination, the amusing Birbal and the miraculous voice of Tansen which can 'open the seals of the universe' are some of the many

wonderful sketches from history framed in this book.

Not to mention the fascinating character of Akbar, who is possibly the first secularist emperor in this part of the world. Akbar, as Rushdie portrays him, is a 'Muslim vegetarian, a warrior who wanted peace, a philosopher-king: a contradiction in terms.' Walking in the garden, Akbar ponders as much over the curves of his women as about 'I' and 'we': the singulars and plurals of the universal soul. Using the king's curiosity, the traveler's mesmerizing storytelling and the sweet enigma of the princess Rushdie chisels out a multi-faceted artwork that dishes out the paradox of the creator and the created, the controversy of wine over water, the



The Enchantress of Florence
Salman Rushdie
Jonathan Cape

dual-ended fusion of east and west, the debate between atheism and religion about which Birbal says that all atheists believe in one God less than the believers.

And as if to sum up all the worldly contradictions, the book declares, 'The curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike'. Indeed, in a wiser-than-before Rushdie's glorious prose which is florid, entertaining and definitely readable, this message comes out so strikingly that I smiled and nodded as I closed the book in satisfaction.

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