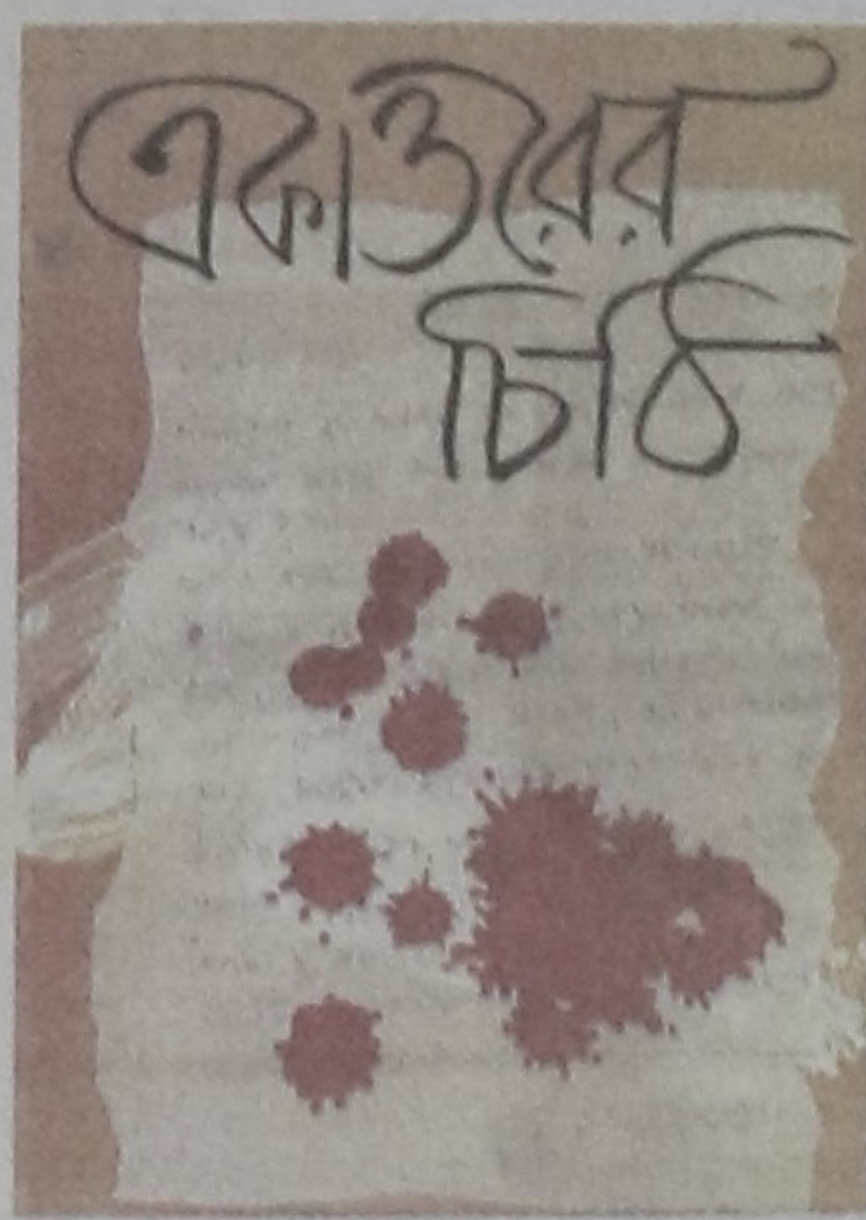


Three reviews by Syed Badrul Ahsan

Savagery unparalleled in human history



Ekattorer Chithi
Edit. Salauddin Ahmed,
others
Prothoma Prokashon

LETTERS from the war zone have always been heartbreaking. Despite all the old yarn about wars being adventures in courage and vanquishing the enemy being a proud tale of heroism, there is the sheer loneliness that comes through in the missives of those who write back home. So it was in 1971, as this rich collection of poignant letters makes obvious. But what does shine through all along is that sure grasp of hope that these letter writers demonstrate in their communication with their families and friends. That their belief in freedom is unalloyed, that Bangladesh will soon be a free nation, is the common principle which binds all of them together.

Gathering and collating letters from a distant wartime era is naturally an arduous job. And especially at a time when much of the historical record vis-à-vis Bangladesh's struggle for liberation has been getting lost or becoming hazy, owing to the depredations of politically dishonest elements, it is doubly difficult to undertake a project of seeking and actually finding letters which the nation's freedom fighters wrote to their loved ones in 1971. The publishers of this work, against such a background of difficulties, have done a creditable job. And just how well they have done that is a truth which emerges from the variety of letters that come encapsulated in this work.

Take the first letter here. Writing to his mother from Rajshahi on 29 March 1971, the young Babul speaks of a tortuous battle between the Pakistan army and the Bengali police. "Yesterday," he writes, "a severe battle took place between the police and the army. In the end, we could not win." The sense of despair is palpable. It is a shame to go on living, he tells his mother, when so many others are being brutally murdered by the soldiers. Babul, whose real name is Kazi Nurunnabi, was fated not to witness the birth of his country. Abducted by the Pakistanis in October of that year, he was never seen again.

ABM Mahbubur Rahman was luckier. He joined the war and survived. On 5 April, he writes to his mother: "Mother, I know you wouldn't have let me go and that is why I am going away without telling you." The sentiments are typical of many Bengali young men who went to the war. Parents, anxious that their children survived in the face of the Pakistani onslaught, nevertheless worried that they would march off to the war and lose their lives in battle. Rahman reassures his mother: "The day I can avenge the humiliation of our mothers and sisters and free this Golden Bengal of its enemies, I shall return to you." And he did come back.

Sadder is the story of the very young Amanullah Chowdhury Farooq. A student of Class X at Chittagong City Collegiate School, Farooq was killed in battle days after writing to his father on 23 May 1971. Idealism gleams in his missive --- and with that dash of unshakeable patriotism. As he tells his father, "I am going away today. I don't know where I am going. I know only that I am going where a bold, freedom-loving child of Bangladesh should be going." A little further on, he puts the rhetorical question to the man who has sired him, "If today your eldest son Farooq has decided to wage war against injustice and in the course of that struggle loses his life, will you feel sad, Father?" He speaks of his dreams of going on to college after school and then to university. And yet he knows that minus freedom all dreams are pointless. He recalls a quote in English, "Mother and motherland are superior to heaven."

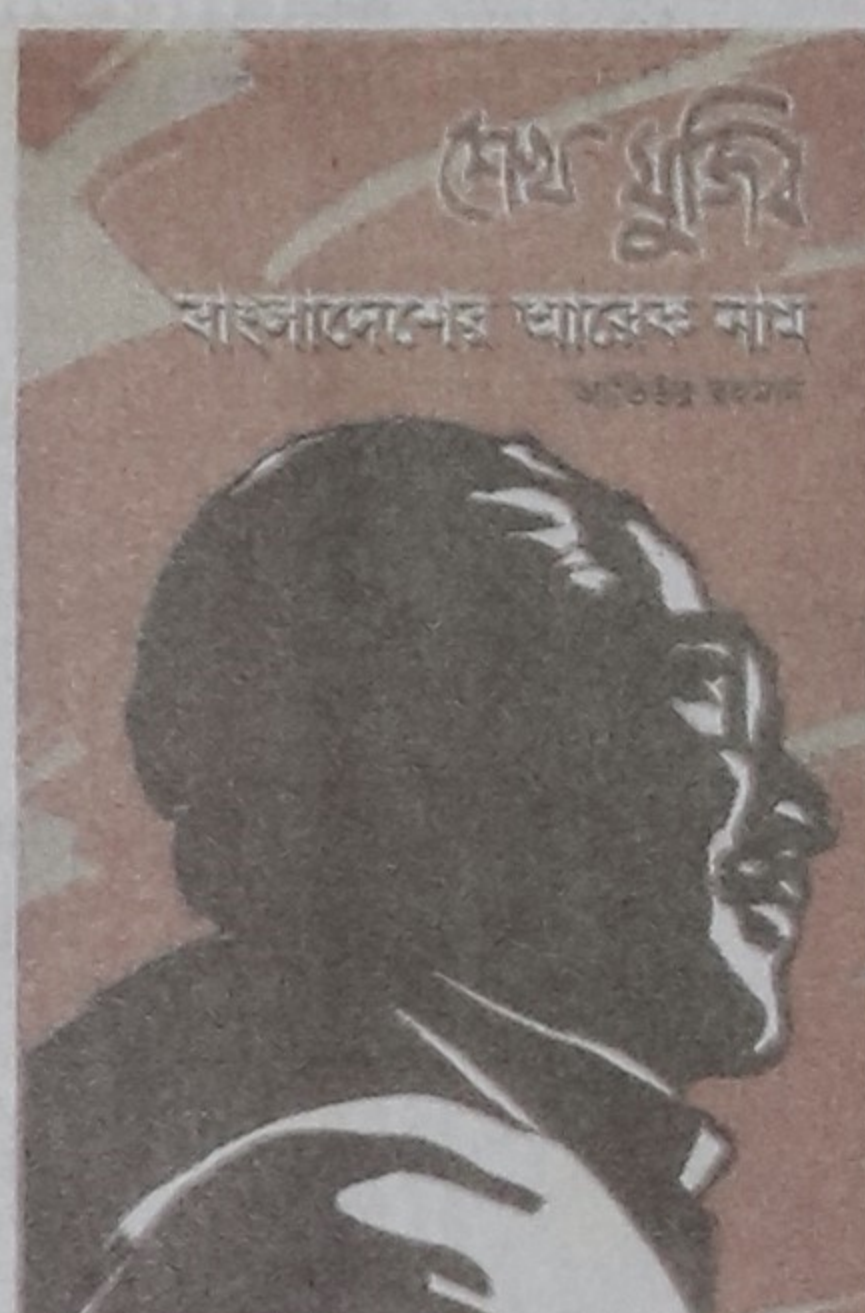
There is then the letter Rumi writes to his uncle from Agartala on 16 June. It is briskly written, a sign of the hurry he is in to get on with the job of getting into battle mode again. He tells his Pasha Mama, "We are fighting a just war. We shall win. Pray for us all. I don't know what to write... there is so much to write about. But every tale of atrocity you hear, every picture of terrible destruction that you see is true. They have torn into us with a savagery unparalleled in human history." If Rumi spoke for the young, Akhlaul Hossain Ahmed symbolized in his own way the dilemma before the political class. Elected a Member of Parliament (the editors unfortunately do not say if he was elected

to the national or provincial assembly), Ahmed writes to his wife Hena from Mahadeo on 16 June: "It is my prayer to Allah that all of you stay well... I am passing through many lands... There is pleasure in travelling, but when I think of you all, my heart breaks." On 16 July, Ataur Rahman Khan Kaiser, subsequently a senior Awami League politician and diplomat, writes to his baby daughter: "My child, I write this letter for the day when God-willing you will learn to read, to understand. Surely there is much sadness in your tiny chest... Why doesn't daddy come to see you? My child, today on your birthday your father is unable to gather you to his bosom; it is a sadness that will not go away from your father's life."

Ekattorer Chithi, when you read through the letters, recreates the terrifying times that would eventually give way to freedom. But more searing is the pain which comes of the knowledge that life for an entire nation had collapsed in a heap, had meshed with disaster of an unmitigated sort. Sons writing to their worried parents, fathers writing to their children, husbands writing to their wives, brothers writing to brothers, brothers-in-law writing to sisters-in-law --- all of these are a backdrop to the devastation that goes on in a land under brutal foreign occupation. Three days before the Pakistani forces surrender to the joint command of the Indian army and the Mukti Bahini, Anwar Hossain (subsequently to be an academic at Dhaka University) writes to Lutfa Taher, wife of the war-wounded Colonel Abu Taher, from Lucknow: "Bhaijan is quite all right. The journey from Gauhati to Siliguri was enjoyable... Bhai only talked about you, wanted to know why we hadn't brought you along."

Those last lines make you wonder. It was free Bangladesh that was to claim Taher's life in 1976, along with scores of others. It was free Bangladesh that would see Anwar Hossain humiliated by shadowy men in an eerie darkness we might as well describe as caretaker emergency.

From tempestuous youth to founding father...



Sheikh Mujib: Bangladesher Aar Ek Naam
Atiur Rahman
Dipti Prokashoni

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is often referred to by his admirers as the greatest Bengali of all times. That, to some, may sound like an exaggeration. The fact, though, is that his contributions to a transformation of the lives of his people, indeed of their history, remains the one point where no one else has edged ahead of him. And it has especially been since his assassination in August 1975 that literature on him has proliferated on a scale unprecedented in the tales of nations.

Atiur Rahman's work is part of that literature. The question that could now arise, however, is: Why this need for a new biography on the late leader? This work is fundamentally a panegyric on Bangabandhu and is obviously geared to placing him in the proper historical perspective. But that is a job which other writers before Rahman have already done. Besides, there have been the innumerable articles, poetry and documentaries that have constantly reflected the life and times of the founder of Bangladesh. Of course, there will be more, considering the hold he has always had on the psyche of his people. But there then comes the matter of superfluity. To what extent does Atiur Rahman's work diverge from those of others? And, remember, those earlier writers too have come forth with laudatory works on Mujib. Which begs the question: Isn't it time for a critical look at the Mujib era, for a wholesome and probing observation of the times in which he dominated the life of his nation?

An answer to that question could be that martyrs (and Bangabandhu was a martyr, in every accepted sense of conviction and tradition) are generally not held up to critical study. Those that love them fundamentally revere them. Those who don't often fall for the temptation of going capacious and being parochial in their assessments. Both aspects of Mujib study

have been noted in Bangladesh, though the scales have generally and naturally been heavier in favour of the murdered leader. It is from such a perspective that this work can be approached. The author, like nearly everyone else in the Bengali intellectual camp, reveres Mujib for the unrelenting struggle he waged in forging a clear sense of Bengali nationalism in the 1960s. That is understandable enough, for Mujib remains the one man whose courage of conviction and absolute refusal to kowtow before or compromise with what used to be the West Pakistani military-civilian bureaucratic complex have never been matched by anyone else before or after him. That said, an extremely powerful reason for this new work is clearly, without Atiur Rahman having to remind us, the many manipulations that have gone on since 1975 to distort Bangladesh's history and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's pre-eminent role in its creation.

Sheikh Mujib is, in that broad sense, a study of not just a man but of the free state that was to be an offshoot of his dreams. Behind the assertive, principled politics of the man dwelled a dreamer. And it was as far back as 1957, when his mentor Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy occupied the office of Pakistan's prime minister, that Mujib wondered aloud before him if East Pakistan could not break away from the rest of the country to be an independent nation. Suhrawardy, appalled, reprimanded him and reminded him of the raison d'être --- the Muslim homeland idea --- behind the creation of Pakistan. By 1961, however, Mujib's thoughts were increasingly moving in the direction of freedom, and for good reason. Pakistan's democratic aspirations had been rudely shattered by the military coup of October 1958. It was then but natural that the ardent nationalist in Mujib would manifest itself. It did barely eight years later, in 1966. The path to Bengali emancipation, so Mujib reasoned, lay through a transformation of the Pakistan state into a confederation on the basis of his autonomy-oriented Six Point programme.

What transpired after 1966 is now part of history. It is a story that has been told many times over. Atiur Rahman tells it again, but with somewhat a difference. The various sections in his work are arranged around a cluster of themes which bring together the various aspects of Bangabandhu's personality as an individual, as a politician and as a statesman. These sections trace Mujib's graduation from the tempestuousness of youth to the somber reality of providing leadership to the Bengali middle class. And beyond. The point is simple and ineluctable: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman evolved, through all the volatility and unpredictability of Pakistani politics, as the unchallenged representative of the Bengalis by his sheer dedication to a cause. Vacuous rhetoric, a weapon men like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were to use, was not for him. Neither was temptation, a weakness that quite felled giants like A.K. Fazlul Huq, part of his journey to political stardom. Unlike Moulana Bhashani, unpredictability never had any place in Mujib's scheme of things. His was a gradual, and graduated, scaling of the heights.

And this evolving man shines through in the chapters into which Atiur Rahman segments his work. The 1971 non-cooperation movement, the declaration of independence, the shaping of independent Bangladesh's foreign policy, national economic formulations and attitudes to culture and heritage are the ideas the author throws up to explain the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman persona. And he adds, for good measure, thoughts on agriculture that Mujib and Rabindranath Tagore expended. And why Tagore? Atiur Rahman, in the manner of so many others and with justification, considers Tagore and Mujib two of the pivotal points of reference in Bengali history.

The appendices should provide useful material for future researchers on Bangladesh's history. Bangabandhu's significant speeches, the proclamation of independence at Mujibnagar, details of the 21-point programme of 1954, the Six Point programme of 1966 and the Eleven Point programme of 1969 are all presented in a pack, which is a cheering thought. A small note, though: the author mentions 23 September 1974 as the day when Bangabandhu spoke at the United Nations General Assembly. In point of fact, he did so two days later, on 25 September, as the records show.

In the transparent waters of the Meghna...

Commercial History of Dhaka is more than a commercial affair. It certainly transcends its title, by going into an exposition of the history of the city in its various social and political aspects. With preparations afoot for the four hundredth anniversary celebrations of what is today Bangladesh's capital, this gigantic compendium (and you could really call it that) brings forth the many diverse and intriguing paths history has taken in the shaping of the city.

In a society where politics is generally the staple of regular conversation, to the near exclusion of everything else, save perhaps poetry, conversations on trade and commerce are few and far between. Now, if you add to that fact a bit of the

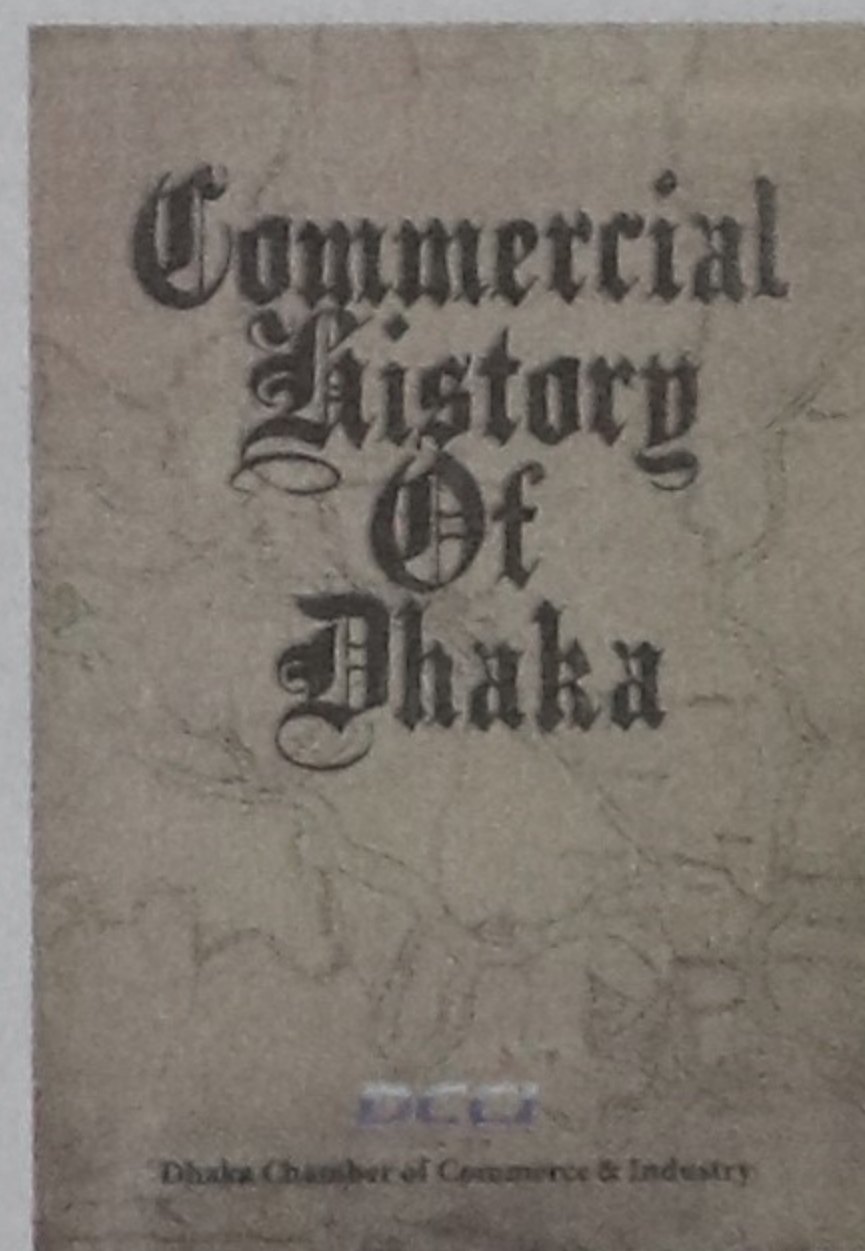
history behind such commercial activities, you are likely to come up against a wall of silence, or almost. This work, coming from the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, breaks that silence. It does so through bringing to readers the details behind the rise of Dhaka and the position, albeit a suffocatingly modern one, it enjoys today.

Begin at the beginning, with Sirajul Islam's enumeration of the tale behind the gradual emergence of the city. He informs us, in his rich essay, that Dhaka enjoyed a reputation far beyond the region of which it has been a part as far back as the times of the historian Pliny. The Roman is presumed to have died in AD 113, but in his lifetime 'he recorded the presence of Dhaka's textiles in the Mediterranean trade.' That was in 73 AD. That might well cause confusion for readers, on the strength of the knowledge that Dhaka was officially established in 1608 or 1610, in any case in the three years between 1608 and 1610. If Pliny did hear of Dhaka or speak of it, should we assume that the city was only then beginning to sprout from rather raw beginnings? And if it did, does it not make sense to press the argument that embryonic Dhaka took shape long before it became known as Jahangirnagar?

Be that as it may, Sirajul Islam moves on to record Dhaka's pre-eminence in the times before the arrival of the British colonial power. Its chief product of trade was cotton. Yarn was bleached in the transparent waters of the Meghna, which is of course some insight into the pristine nature amidst which the city and its inhabitants lived. Dhaka muslin, today more a memory than a reality, served as an item of global trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The principal buyers of muslin were of course members of royalty in Asia and Europe. Islam does not stay confined to narrating the positive about the city. He makes note of the floods that left farmers in a quandary through the destruction wrought on their *aman* and *rabi* crops in 1787. Earlier, in 1763, while at war with Mir Qasim, the English sacked the city and so left a once prosperous economy battered.

Mizanur Rahman Shelley sheds a different sort of light on Dhaka through recording what he sees as some major shifts in its industrial and commercial life. Bernier and Tavernier, he notes, were enthused by thoughts of 'Bengal's plenty and prosperity' which they believed would draw the attention of the business classes abroad. Tavernier visited Dhaka. Sometime in 1669, an English trading agency was set up in the Dhaka suburb of Tejgaon. The French were permitted to set up a *gunj* or market in the city. Such developments notwithstanding, Dhaka's textile industry was to go through a debilitating phase between the early and mid-19th century with the import of machine-manufactured cotton products from Britain. The local cotton industry simply collapsed. Despite that, Shelley notes, Dhaka's population shot up to 68,000 in 1840, transforming it into one of the 'more populous urban centres in Bengal.'

Shelley's study encompasses the rise of jute, the emergence of the boat building



Commercial History of Dhaka
Edit Delwar Hassan
Dhaka Chamber of Commerce & Industry

industry and the inception of local finance and banking. When you add to that Sharif uddin Ahmed's history of Dhaka's artisans, craftsmen and professional classes, you cannot but wonder at the heritage which today underpins the city. From Ahmed you come by invaluable information on such social presences as those of aratdars, baniks, coolies, dalals, darjis, darogahs and dhanurais. And then there is more. Kalu, kamar, majhee, moyna, much, patial, patua, poddar, shankari, et al, are all explications of the professions which have contributed to the making of Dhaka over the centuries.

There are other essays here which in composite manner hold up Dhaka as a historically thriving city of trade and commerce. The work thus reinforces the argument that the city has not always been a rural backwater. That is a powerful enough reason for renewed pride in the evolution of the city, despite the urban jungle it may well have become by now.

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

AT A GLANCE



Gandhi, Nehru and Noakhali
Syed Abul Maksud
Mahatma Gandhi Smarak Sadan

This happens to be a revealing work on the times and the issues involved with Noakhali in 1946. Gandhi's arrival there, as a step toward restoring communal harmony following the August Calcutta killings and their aftermath, was followed by that of Nehru. The author explores the political territory that Noakhali briefly became.

Doorer Hawa
Bishwa Shahityer Probandho Shonkolon
Nurul Karim Nasim
Ayan Prokashon

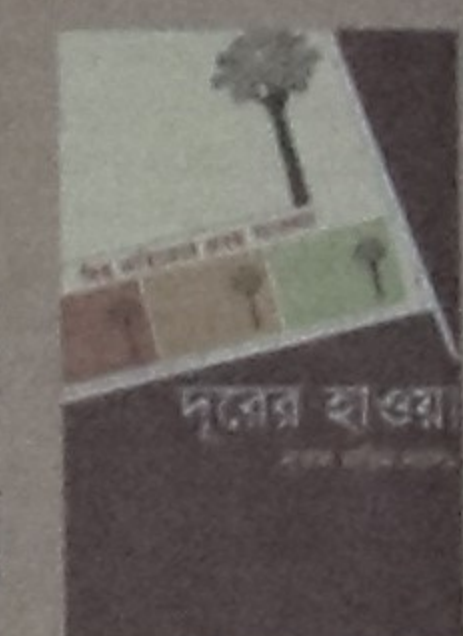
Nurul Karim Nasim has been teaching English literature and writing on varied aspects of it for quite a while now. In this collection of essays on the notable figures of English and American literature, he brings home some of the salient features that have led to the making of literary minds. It is a good read.

Raja Bhawal O Bhawal Pargana
Jaynal Hossain
Adorn Publication

The story of Bhawal Sanyas has been a legend for as long as we can remember, though the younger generation may yet be quite in the dark about it. From such a perspective, this retelling of the tale, by Jaynal Hossain, promises to serve a useful purpose. It takes readers back to a land of myth and reality.

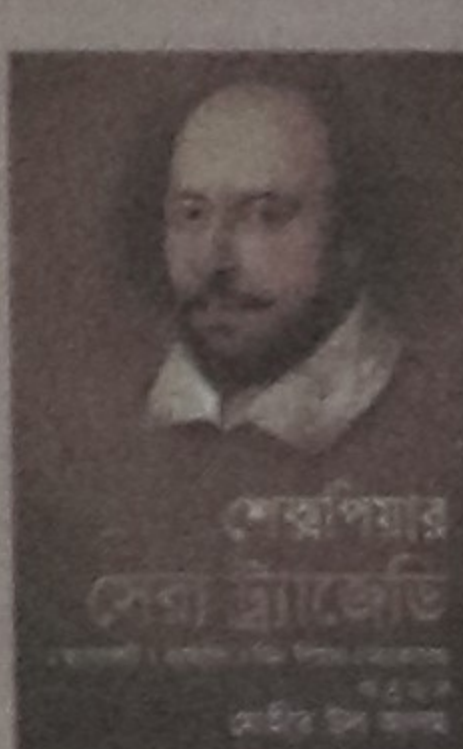
Shakespeare
Shera Tragedy
Mohit Ul Alam
Anupam Prokashoni

From one who has been teaching English literature for long, this translation of some notable Shakespearean tragedies is certainly welcome. A good point about it is that Alam keeps some of the more profound statements in the tragedies intact even as he has them undergo translation. It is certainly a healthy addition to existing Shakespeare literature in Bangladesh.



Raja Bhawal O Bhawal Pargana
Jaynal Hossain
Adorn Publication

The story of Bhawal Sanyas has been a legend for as long as we can remember, though the younger generation may yet be quite in the dark about it. From such a perspective, this retelling of the tale, by Jaynal Hossain, promises to serve a useful purpose. It takes readers back to a land of myth and reality.



Notes of nostalgia

Muhammad Abul Hai is cheered by some short stories

IT is indeed a phenomenal success for a person who, having crossed fifty, can look back at his childhood and youth and then present an honest portrayal of his success and failures during those days in engrossingly simplified language. He deserves to be called an accomplished individual. That is exactly what my impression is about my author-friend, Junaidul Haque. Well, there is nothing surprising as far as my personal understanding of Junaidul Haque is concerned. The English Department of Dhaka University, during our days, could be reasonably proud of having students like Junaid. Junaid, a tall man always wearing power glasses, gave us all an impression that he was flawless a character, cut out for serving a higher purpose. His literary insight and deeper contemplation of the metaphysical aspects of life made him a serious man. In the first story of this book, he wonders why people become old, why they suffer painful diseases, why there is unbearable helplessness in old age. He asks, "Couldn't God make us all ever young?" He also has seen some of his close relatives dying before him, leaving a score of questions in his mind which eventually made him a melancholic man. In the book, as he unfolds his own life, he admits that he has been so preoccupied with the unresolved puzzles of life that he has been unable to avail the share of joy he is entitled to.

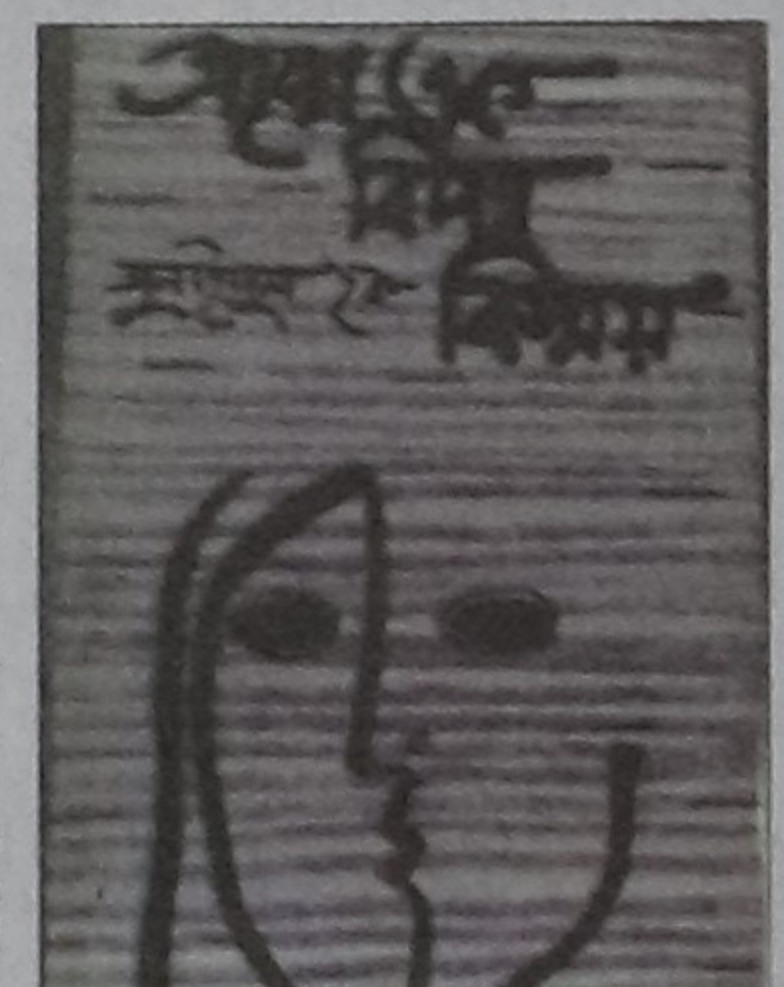
The first story is a kind of looking back at the invaluable time the writer spent in and around the British Council and the university. Although in the camouflage of Yusuf he tries to present himself as a humble man of average intellectual ability, it is the narrator who tells us the truth about him. Yusuf is a great fan of cricket and he has read extensively both modern and old writers. For him, teaching at Dhaka University and perhaps 'writing' could have been the most befitting profession. That is why he declined a government job after topping the list in the public service examination. Securing the highest position in the exams has been described as a disease for him. Junaid, the writer, very rarely exposes the deep rooted pain of his heart, but in one instance in the book, he cannot help revealing his heartache. He doesn't have a child to call him "Dad" in a sweet heavenly voice.

The book is an honest record of the author's rural childhood. Rail bridges, ponds, canals, corn fields and bushes in the countryside have left an ever-lasting impression on his mind. He was born and brought up amidst all these rural beauties and his love for them have inspired him to sing of their beauty in overwhelming lyrical prose. The language is simple: blank verse turned into soothing and refreshing prose that creates a low musical murmur in your ears, similar to one produced by the flow of water over plain land not obstructed by pebbles, and not causing any reader to stumble.

Bandhutta is the second story, incorporated in the book. The writer elaborates on his unadulterated

relations with a lady in plain honest details. His attitudes have never been contaminated by the alluring blue of the oceans that reside deep in the eyes of every mysterious woman. Not being able to teach at the university has been a bane that seems to have kept nagging the author all the time. However, in course of his discussion, it is revealed that his wife has always been an inspiration, and none, not even a woman is responsible for his so called failure. The author, at one stage of the story, appears as a philanthropist. His feelings are seriously injured to see children sleeping on the pavements without clothes to protect them from the cold. He feels a tremendous urge to act like Caliph Omar (R) for mitigating their sufferings.

In "The Story of Son and Father", the writer gives his views about politics. In his brief yet a lively description of the Liberation War, he mentions the role of a few political leaders. He talks highly of the political sagacity of Tajuddin and Quamruzzaman, and their role in the liberation war. Sheikh Mujibur



Aro Ek Boponno Bishmoy
Junaidul Haque
Shandhani Prokashoni

Rahman has been projected as a great leader, his political wisdom has been held high, and due homage has also been paid. Young readers will have something here which will help them wipe out misconceptions injected in their minds by the anti-liberation elements.

In the last story, Junaid has, as usual, painted as beautiful a picture of our country as he has seen in some places in India. He mentions his visit to Jheenaighati, which is a couple of hours drive from Mymensingh. It is a place with hillocks all around that has made the landscape comparable to the beauty of Nainital, Shimla and Darjeeling in India. Although the rural areas of Mymensingh have always been the backdrop to his events, they are typical of the landscape in Bangladesh.

The book has been written with eloquence, and people in their fifties will have a nostalgic feeling of looking back at their youth while skimming through it.

Muhammad Abdul Hai is Principal, ABC International School, Narayanganj.