

Tales of the famous and the brave

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque revisits history in a village

LOOKING through the prism of life these days, one wonders how far one has strayed from one's roots, become oblivious of the glory that was there in the past that constitutes one's existence. With this feeling and realization that emanates from it when one looks back, one sees trails of stories both elating and saddening that are stashed in every nook and cranny of predominantly rural Bangladesh. One such village lying by the river Gorai in Kushtia is Koya --- an appealing name in itself that moulds an image of a tiny chirping bird in the vision of this reviewer. It takes someone with an immense sense of responsibility and a heart full of passion to weave the things that, although discrete in terms of chronology, are yet arranged into a colourful tapestry. Rakibul Hassan has fulfilled just this task in a masterly way.

Koya, a village adjoining Shilaidaho --- another village that is intertwined with memories of Tagore --- was blessed with his august visit in 1923. Koya not only is distinguished as a village that bears the footmarks of Tagore, but also is the celebrated spot that inspired Tagore to pen his poem *Dhulamondir*, included in *Gitanjali*. This poem was written thirteen years before Tagore actually set foot in Koya. Most probably it was written sometime as he journeyed by boat on the river Padma that took him through the distributary, the Gorai, that flows past the picturesque village of Koya. The thought that is overriding in *Dhulamondir* is having seen the common people working so hard keeping themselves absolutely close to nature, Tagore felt that in essence the Creator lies in the temple dust of commoners rather than within the four walls of a temple built by men. The well-known song "Shimār majhe ashim tumi bajao apon shur" was also written in the same course of his journey by boat at Janipur,

Khoksha, Kushtia --- it remains the guiding principle in Tagore's philosophy of transcendentalism.

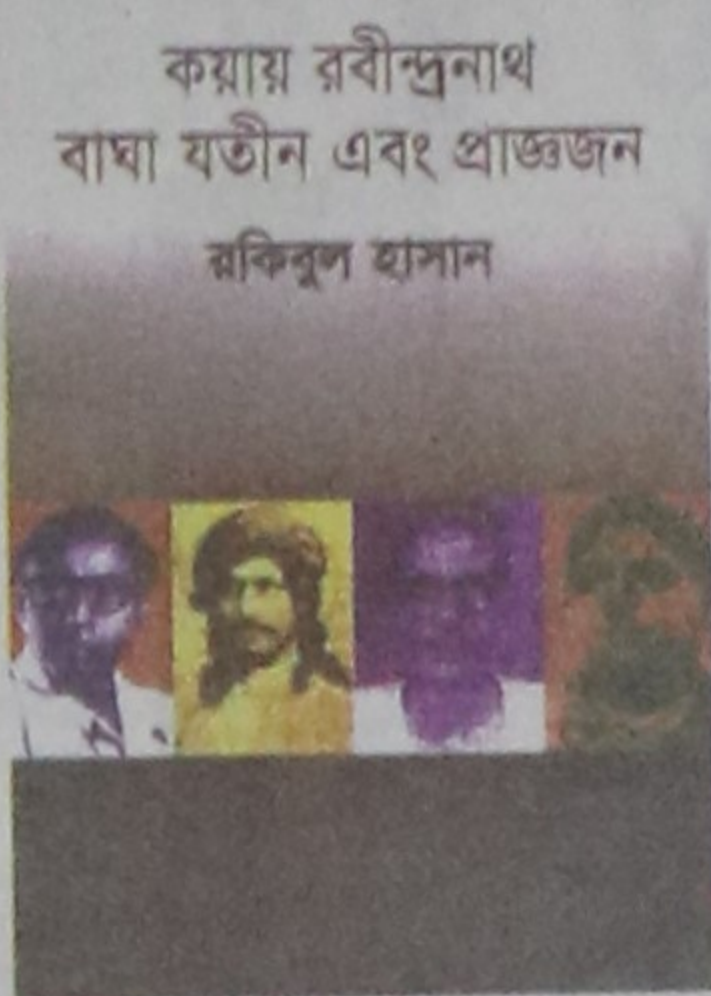
Koya indeed is a lucky village that witnessed the birth of illustrious sons like Jyotindranath Mukhopadhyaya, fondly called Bagha Jyotin, the great novelist of the 1950s and 1960s; Akbar Hossain, the committed worker and leader of the Communist Party; Brojen Biswas and many others. Talking about Bagha Jyotin, who would not be surprised hearing the stories of his immense courage that started budding early in his life primarily through the determination and active involvement of his widowed mother Sharotshashi Devi? She was the living embodiment of inspiration in his life. In his childhood, he was told stories by his mother at bedtime that were not fairy tales but were about life, struggle and the sacrifices of men devoted to a cause they deemed noblest to pursue notwithstanding the hazards that those entailed. The hair-raising story of Jyotin's killing of a tiger all by himself that earned him the title of 'Bagha Jyotin' is an adventurous chapter in our history that all youngsters of our country must know. Equally heroic is the real life drama, when Bagha Jyotin along with only four of his companions fought the well-equipped and well-trained British soldiers for three long hours. The sacrifices of this great patriot were richly eulogized by Tagore, Nazrul, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, the well-known revolutionary MN Roy and many others. The writer laments that in this part of Bengal, although we observe the birth and death anniversaries of so-called leaders, we remain totally oblivious of these occasions centering on heroes of the stature of Bagha Jyotin. Indeed, it is a shame that speaks volumes of our misplaced perceptions and warped sense of history. And it ironically remains the same in Bangladesh as is evi-

dent from the skewed evaluation of the leaders of the nation by many.

The story of Bagha Jyotin is not complete without mention of his only sister Binodbala, who combined within herself a number of laudable qualities as her mother had. It is noteworthy that way back in the nineteenth century, for a young girl coming from a remote village, Binodbala had her educa-

the literary genius Akbar Hossain, who ranks high not only among the Muslim novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth century but also among others. One very magical prophecy by Tagore about Akbar Hossain when the latter was a little boy of seven years is narrated by the author. Way back in 1923, Tagore made an unscheduled stopover at Akbar Hossain's home and was so much charmed by the way he recited two of his poems that he blessed this young lad by commenting that some day he would become a great poet, which turned out to be true not exactly in that sense but in Tagore's uncanny foresight signs of genius were obvious. *Abanchhito*, Akbar Hossain's first novel, was a great sensation among readers. He wrote it in only eighteen days when he was a student of the BA class. It is most heartening to know that having read the summary of *Abanchhito*, the renowned film director Sushil Majumdar was so impressed that he expressed his desire to make it into a film, which plan unfortunately did not materialize due to the outbreak of a bloody riot in India. Akbar Hossain's bold novel *Dishokhato*, written in 1981, portrays the atrocities committed by the Pakistanis on the innocent Bengalis in a very concrete way.

In his next essay, Hassan narrates the mindless killing of all three earning male members of a family in Koya. As if taking the life out of them was not enough, the murderers merrily engaged themselves in mangling the bodies beyond recognition an incident that has been repeated recently in the BDR carnage at Pilkhana, exposing the ruthlessly beastly nature in us, the so-called human beings. It is most regrettable, as the author points out, that in spite of a number of influential people wielding power in their locality who could come to the aid of such a family, no one cared for them. It was only Begum Anjuman Ara



Kayai Rabin Dranath Bagha Jatin
Ebong Praggajon
Rakibul Hassan
Botomul

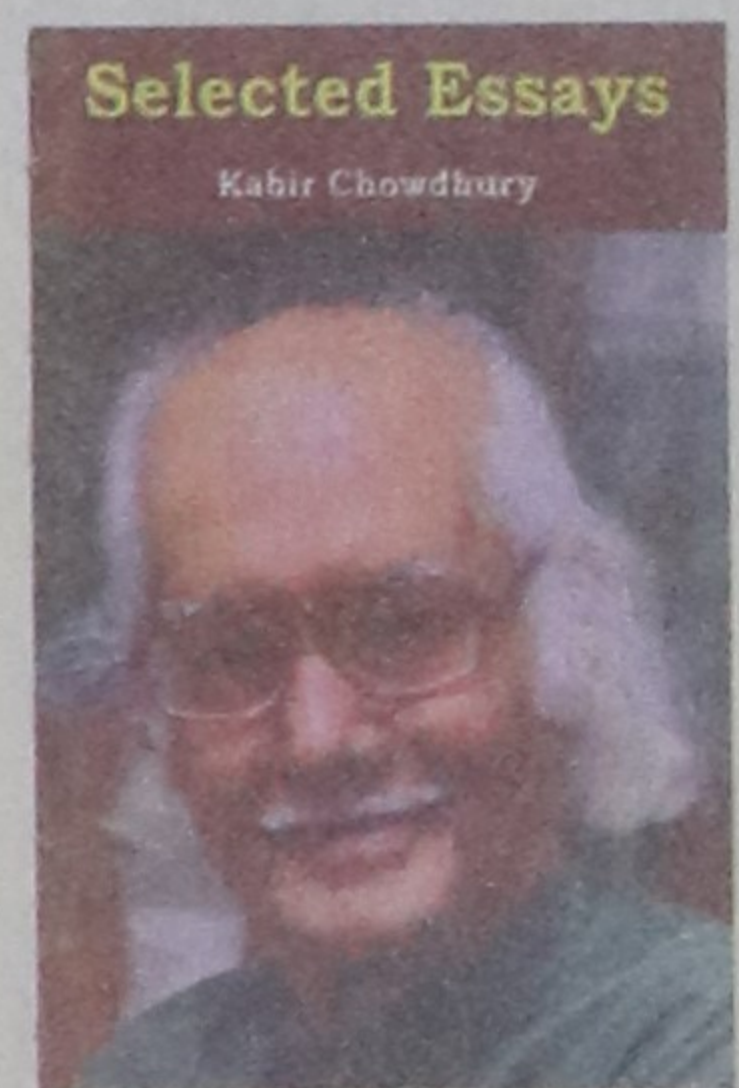
tion in the English medium at a time when educating a girl child was itself considered a sin. Nevertheless it was decided and done because of the sagacity of her mother. The sister remained the bedrock in the life of Bagha Jyotin, upholding his commitment to the country first and foremost although not much is known about this enlightened and indomitable personality. The same social perception exists today even in the 21st century when it comes to recognising the contributions of women to any justifiable cause.

Next, the author dwells on

Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

A book, a flavour of culture ...

KABIR Chowdhury is perhaps one of the last of our men of letters who have known history as well as have a hand in the making of it. He defies age (he is in his mid eighties) and he continues to make his presence felt when it comes to raising and popularizing issues of public interest. He has taught literature, has had a stint in government; and his has over the years been one of the loudest voices in defence of the demand for a trial of the war criminals in Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971.



Selected Essays
Kabir Chowdhury

Selected Essays
Kabir Chowdhury
The University Press Limited

Chowdhury's essays in this collection reveal the agility which yet make him a driving force in the world of Bengali aesthetics. With altogether twenty seven essays here, he brings to light a good number of salient features of life, literature and history that have mattered to him, to his peers and in a large way to his students over the decades. Begin, though, with the very touching piece on his brother Munier Chowdhury, the very last one in this work. It is surely not a happy occasion for an elder sibling to reflect on the life and career of a murdered younger one, which is why every sentence on Munier drips with pain. Chowdhury recalls the childhood he shared with the rather large brood of brothers and sisters in the family and notes the particular passions that drove Munier into what appeared to be an endless cause in defence of democratic rights. Munier's intellect and his stupendous capacity for courage are today part of the Bengali folklore. Yet his brother gives them a new shade of meaning. The pain in Kabir Chowdhury seeps through the pages. You feel it when he writes about the scholar's gruesome end, "... Munier's body was

not there. It was never found."

The essays are a collage of men and history, or you could call it history that some men moulded in their distinctive individual fashion. You get to have a fairly good grasp of the author's style and approach to his subjects as you pore over his assessments of Goethe and Tagore. The title of the essay says it all. The German and the Bengali, says Kabir Chowdhury, are two titans of world literature. Tagore, of course, is your usual cup of tea. But don't be too sure about it, for here in these pages Chowdhury takes you on a *tour d'horizon* of the poet's life, encompassing as it does his travels across the globe. For the Tagore enthusiast, therefore, there is yet newer territory to be discovered. But it is in the discourse on Goethe that the revelatory comes through for the Bengali student of literature. And bringing them together gives out an unmistakable message, which is that both these men are responsible, more than anyone else, for raising their nations to global heights. Without Goethe and Tagore, Germans and Bengalis would certainly have traditions to lay claim to. But perhaps that moral compass would be missing?

Kabir Chowdhury's deliberations are a pointer to the rich accumulation of experience which today defines his being. He sheds new light on Swami Vivekananda and sifts through Kazi Nazrul Islam in all his panoply of poetic brilliance. Move on, then, to Chowdhury's reflections on Lal Shah and move back to Vidyasagar. Overall, the author brings forth a complex and yet at the same time mellifluous portrait of the Bengali cultural heritage. Mahatma Gandhi may be a household word, but Kabir Chowdhury goes a good many miles further when he presents the foremost South Asian Big Man of the twentieth century through the prism of literary criticism. One who teaches or has taught literature does have an advantage over others in his journey through the varied phases of history. Chowdhury dissects the Gandhi character with the same precision he would bring to a critical appraisal of Eugene O' Neill and Michael Madhusudan Dutta. The latter remains for him 'our pride and glory.' With the former, it is the Bengali translations of his works that the author focuses on and so reminds readers of the excellent work that has been at work in the translation industry in this country. When you observe theatre enthusiasts in Dhaka going ecstatic, you could tell yourself, just a little, that the process of presenting foreign literary works began in this country quite a while ago. Chowdhury brings you proof

of it.

It is an intellectually enriching compendium (yes, you could call it that) which deserves a place on your literary table. Kabir Chowdhury's thoughts on Bangladesh's theatre movement are a powerful insight into a world that has redefined the country's culture, especially since the political liberation that came in 1971. Ah, culture! Chowdhury slices through the Hindu-Muslim divide and religious fundamentalism to vindicate the widely accepted belief that politics based on hate and intolerance have no place in the Bengali scheme of things. For within that scheme fall all things of lofty note --- our lullabies, our Ekushey, our poetry and flowers and, to be sure, a preponderance of nature on our world of thought and action.

You put aside the book feeling you are a better Bengali than you were before you went into a reading of it.

Reading books and murdering people...

FOR one with a humble, indeed inconsequential background, Joseph Stalin was an intellectually accomplished man. His library was exhaustive and so was his reading. Not for him a mere exploration and propagation of Marxist philosophy. Not for him a rejection of foreign culture being a means of bourgeois exploitation of the masses. He read Shakespeare, went into a deep study of Western poetry and easily threw what he had learnt at his comrades in the Kremlin. At the height of his power over the Soviet Union, he read other people's articles, edited them and made them printable.

That is part of the truth about Stalin. And yet there is the other part, a necessarily cruel one. In the 1930s, as he embarked on a long, ambitious plan to consolidate his authority as Lenin's successor, he was driven by the thought that plots were being hatched all around him, that the fellow communist magnates, as Simon Sebag Montefiore puts it, he was regularly dining with were men he could not trust. It was thus that the seeds of the Terror, which would effectively begin in 1937 and go on to the early 1940s, sprouted in his mind. Swiftly and without remorse, he would order the arrest and murder of such powerful Kremlin personalities as Kamenev, Zinoviev, Kirov, Bukharin, Rykov and a whole line of others. As his hold over the country grew, Stalin not only provided leadership to the Terror; he came to symbolize the Terror. He had his henchmen invent seditious and scandalous stories

about his colleagues. Once that was done, these colleagues were picked up in the night, subjected to days and weeks of torture until they 'confessed' and then dispatched swiftly, with generally a bullet to the head.

And the Terror was not merely the end of his trusted comrades. It was expanded to include farmers who did not produce crops to Stalinist specifications; it covered Jews (the anti-Semitic was as much a factor with Stalin as it was with Hitler); it cast its shadows on Georgians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Lithuanians, indeed everyone that the Soviet leader cast his gaze on. Millions were displaced and deported to regions as inhospitable as anyone can imagine; tens of thousands were done to death, the murders being part of a programme to be implemented by regional leaders. Nikita Khrushchev, the man who would denounce Stalin at the 1956 congress, heartily went into the job of carrying out the leader's wishes. Men like Yagoda, Yezhov and Beria, all of whom would reveal their cannibalistic nature through eventually going after one another, cheerfully fulfilled their quota of murdering the 'spies' and 'imperialist agents' Stalin thought were endangering the Soviet state.



Stalin
The Court of the Red Tsar
Simon Sebag Montefiore
Phoenix

It did not matter that Kalinin was officially president of the Soviet Union. His wife was carted off to prison, charged with spying. Even the oleaginous Molotov could do little when his wife was arrested and subjected to torture by Beria on Stalin's orders.

Unreal were the times when Stalin ruled. The poet Anna Akhmatova suffered at the dictator's hands. So did Osip Mandelstam. Stalin's children

Jamil, wife of Col Jamil, who as the lawmaker from this constituency went forth to address the plight of this family for herself and helped them with cash and kind. This tragic story of Renu Nessa is one of the millions of incidents perpetrated by the hyenas of the Pakistan army as they went on a killing spree dictated by their ferocious and obtuse masters.

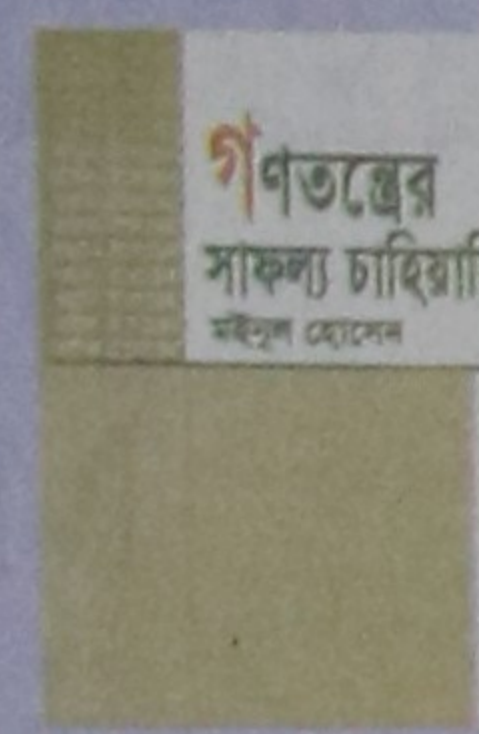
In the last chapter of the book, the author portrays a person having such qualities in his character that are not only rare in these days but perhaps may never be again. The height of commitment to the cause of the downtrodden, self-denial to attain a goal despite being troubled by financial and other associated constraints, never to compromise one's ideals in the face of threats of any kind, imaginable or unimaginable for realizing personal advantage were some of the landmarks in the person of Brojen Biswas. They sound like fairy tales because such personality traits do not exist any more in most of people, let alone among politicians who recognize only power, not principles. In every sense of the term, Brojen Biswas was a complete man, an ideal person to look up to, one who dies a physical death only but remains immortal.

The preface of the book by Dr Shahid Iqbal is a highly scholarly discourse that enlightens a reader thoroughly. In spite of the sparkling look of the pages, reading is marred by a number of printing mistakes one comes across every now and then.

Rakibul Hassan has done a great job by bringing back some almost lost names and placing them once again in the mirror of our mind. It is a task of both pride and job for the author and for all of us at the same time.

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AT A GLANCE

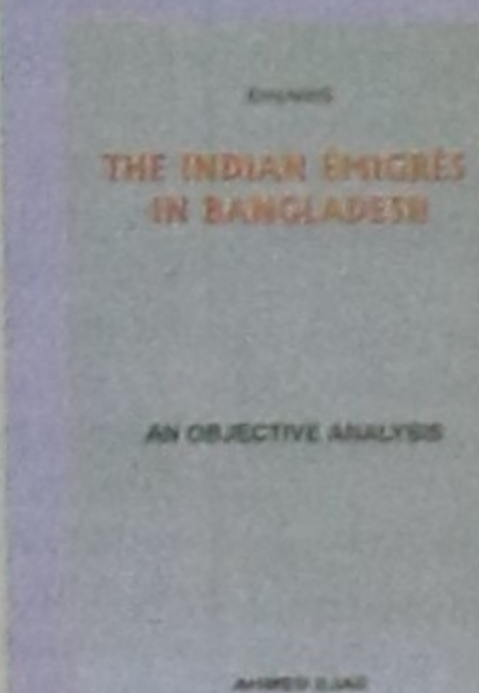
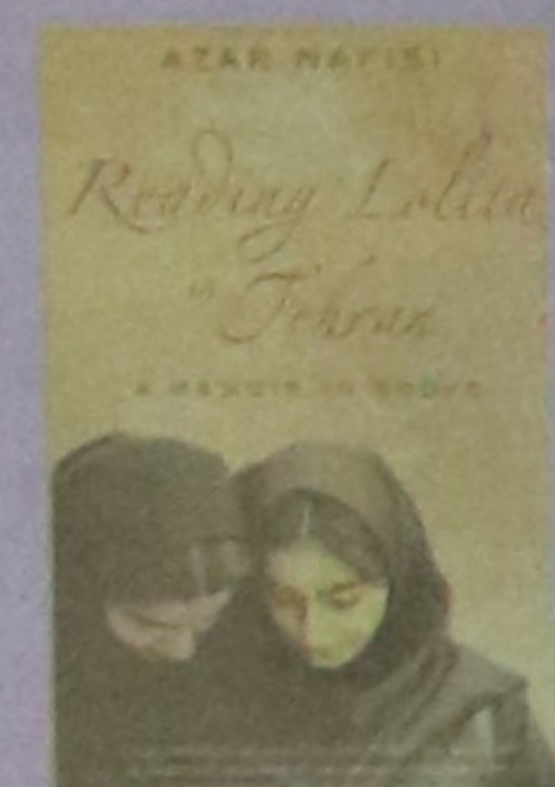


One Eleven
Gonototr Shafolyo Chahiyachhi
Mainul Hossain
City Publishing House Ltd

The lawyer and former caretaker advisor offers in this work an assessment of his role in the Fakhruddin Ahmed administration. His stint in the government lasted just a year, but in that brief period he managed to draw people's attention to his policies as also to his sharp comments on the issues. The book makes interesting reading.

Reading Lolita in Tehran
Azar Nafisi
Fourth Estate

When it appeared some years ago, the book created quite a stir in the West. After all, reading English literature in rigidly Islamic Iran is no easy matter. Yet in this real story of real persons, Nafisi demonstrates the idea that thoughts cannot be killed by government, not even if government comes through a revolution. A brave tale of courageous women.



Biharis
The Indian Emigres in Bangladesh
Ahmed Ilias
Shamsul Huque Foundation, Syedpur

Biharis émigrés have never had a good time. When they opted to settle in East Pakistan after Partition, they thought Jinnah's Muslim state would be a solution to all problems. Barely a quarter century later, they saw the rise of Bengali nationalism and sided with Pakistan. The results were grievous. Here is a sympathetic portrayal of their sufferings.

Amar Prithibi
Khurshid Erfan Ahmed
Ain O Salish Kendro

It is all about children and all the good things they need to learn as they prepare for adulthood. Segmented into twelve chapters, the book is both an imbuing of practical lessons and an initiation into the moral aspects of life. Schools in Bangladesh will be doing themselves a favour if they impart these lessons to their pupils.



Life's story told with feeling

Tulip Chowdhury is touched by a tale of love

THE Pursuit of Happiness reminds the reader of an acknowledged truth that as human beings we are always pursuing happiness in life. Betsy, the sixteen year old young woman, is doing just that, pursuing happiness after the death of her mother. Betsy Irving, her teenager brother and her father are left in a house that seems to echo with the memories of her mother with each and every breath. The troubles and grief the family goes through is touching enough to hold the reader glued as if he or she is a part of the Irving family. Most of all the doubts, the confusions of the motherless young girl do not fail to touch parental hearts. It is a touching story of love and loss taking part in Morrisville, New Jersey.

The first person narrative of the protagonist Betsy touches the heart of the reader. The language is lucid and makes reading sheer pleasure. Expressions like, "...one summer was like a thousand summers..." or "...everything feels wrong like I am dragged to adulthood kicking and screaming..." are indeed thought provoking.

Betsy narrates the story as each day comes, unfolding truths of her life in grief. The book opens with Betsy facing a morbid world soon after her mother is dead just in the beginning of the summer holidays. Betsy finds it difficult to face people. Friends and relatives seem to hold her at bay. She writes in her diary, "...with a special attitude of showing their sympathy". It is always, "...your mother this..." or "...your mother that..." She wants to feel like a normal person, she wants to get along with life and yet people at every step remind her of her grief.

Betsy is supposed to be another of the confused teenager like her other friends. And yet she finds her plate full of the hard realities of life after her mother dies of cancer. She finds herself guiding her twelve year old brother through his horde of boyhood troubles. Her father takes the easy way out for food and they become regular fans of Taco Bell, McDonald and Wendy. At one point Betsy realizes this fast food adventure has to end and cooks the first dinner after her mother is gone. Her father and brother honour her with laying out the table lighting candles for their home cooked meal. Betsy tries to balance her summer job, family and her social life. She finds that life after all is a hard nut to crack.

To Betsy one summer is like a thousand summers as her boyfriend Brandon dumps her for another girl. And then her dearest friend Mary misunderstands her and becomes aloof from Betsy. Her summer job at the colonial village is a real challenge to her, for the biggest freak at her school Liza also works there. At home to escape from her miseries Betsy starts silhouette art in the basement

of their house. She finds herself taken to drinking too many beers. Her father's lack of interest in his work is alarming. If he is put out of work how in the world would they get by?

Just when her life seems to become a havoc, James, a lanky surfer who works for the neighborhood, starts carving Betsy things out of wood. Being with him is the only thing that makes her feel normal. Life seems to be black or white except the hours she shares with James; those hours are like million shades of gray. Betsy finds herself deeply in love with James but he has a girlfriend and



The Pursuit of Happiness
Tara Altebrando
Pocket Books

that makes her dreams hazy. And James, though his heart seems to be calling out to her keeps himself at bay. Things seem too complicated for Betsy. However she finds that there is after all a light at the end of the darkest tunnel. Liza turns out not to be such a big freak after all and her father settles down to his teaching job and starts writing his first novel. Betsy finds that the sun rise with some good promises after all. James reaches out for her but not before going through difficult soul searching questions. Betsy she has to drag through the dark hours of the nights before she sees the sunlit hours.

There are five stages of grief namely agitation, intoxication, experimentation, resignation and reinvigoration. The Pursuit of Happiness is a book that holds the summary of these in a heart throbbing tale of human tears and grief. This is a story of everyday sad and happy touches that can touch any one. Thus the reader has a feeling as if one is witnessing a real life story in which the people are palpably real. It is a tale that holds out human emotions with profound touches. It is a life story told with great mastery of words and has life axioms woven into its lines.

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher, poet and fiction writer.