

In search of better government, or is it governance?

Shahid Alam reflects on the imperative of restructuring administration

LEARNING from Southeast Asian countries would be difficult but Bangladesh has very little option. This enigmatic sentence broadly sums up Mohammad Mohabbat Khan's approach to the problem of governance in Bangladesh in the book under review. *From Government to Governance* is a compilation of three articles written specifically for the volume, and twelve others that were published in various publications from as far back as in 1987 to as recent as in 2007 (although the author avers that they were written between 1991 and 2006). The twenty year span shows in the unevenness in quality of the articles. The author states at the outset his mission for cobbling together the anthology: "This book has primarily focuses (sic) on...extension of public administration and describes how certain other countries have changed the role of administration due to change in external environment.... Based on this light, this book has attempted to make a modest effort to highlight both the need for a better public service in Bangladesh and prescribed some measures to achieve it through learning from others."

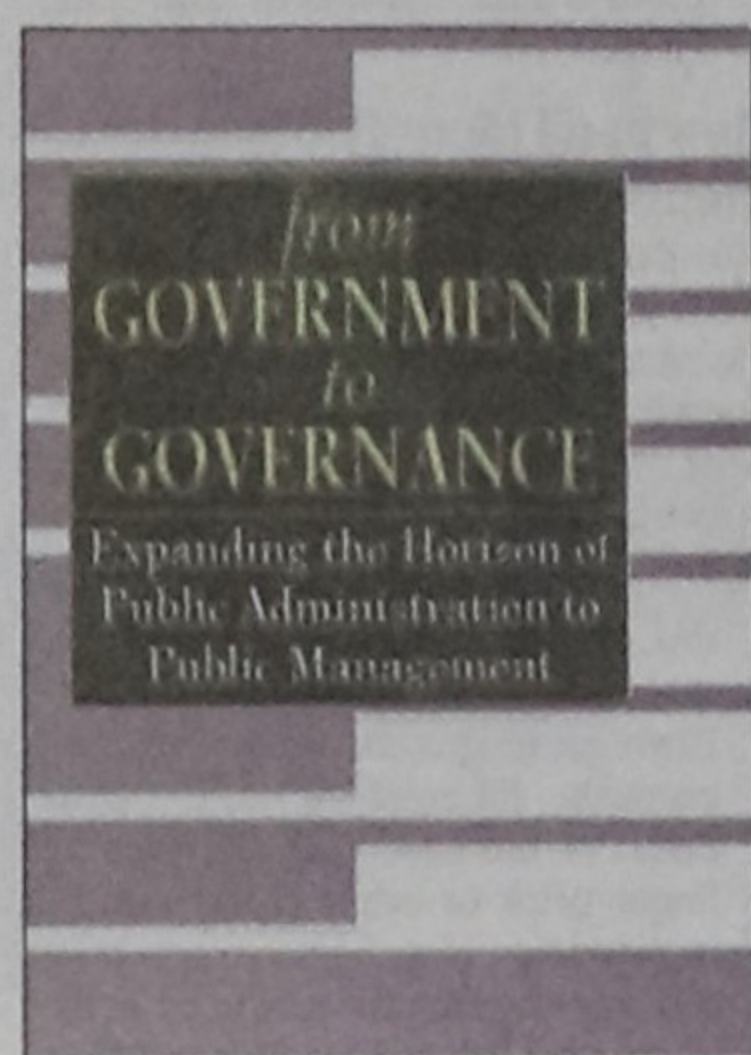
Khan, a professor in the Department of Public Administration, Dhaka University, prescribes the doctrines of the new-fangled New Public Management (NPM) movement --- eliminating or diminishing the difference between public and private administration, and focusing on result-based accountability rather than process accountability --- for enabling Bangladesh to have an efficient public service system. But his recommendations follow the prescriptions suggested by the World Bank, UN functional organizations, and other multilateral agencies, which essentially are dominated by Western, especially American, social scientists (engineers, more like it) out to foist their ideas, with

decidedly mixed results, on developing nations. The magic mantras are those of governance and globalization, which they expect, even demands, that those nations lap up.

For example, one of the organizations that he refers to, the World Bank, in the process of assessing Bangladesh's track record in governance, explicitly alludes to both concepts as complementing each other. "While the Public Sector has its pockets of excellence, collectively its performance leaves a lot to be desired. A quantum leap in efficiency and effectiveness of the government is needed if Bangladesh has to accelerate and sustain growth, reduce poverty, anticipate the opportunities and challenges of the future, and enable its enterprising citizens and private sector to realize their full potential and compete in a fiercely competitive global markets" (*Government that Works: Reforming the Public Sector*, 1996). However, a former President of the same institution, James D. Wolfensohn, had a cautionary message for those undertaking institutional reform and development: "...where countries are today affects where they can go.... Social and political factors affect the pace of change, and sweeping reforms are not always possible" (*The World Bank, Building Institutions for Markets*, 2002).

Khan undertakes an extensive and sweeping study of what has been ailing Bangladesh in terms of its governance, and, as noted, provides an impressive array of prescriptive suggestions for at least ameliorating, if not curing, the ailment. He appears to be completely taken in by the globalization mantra in offering his panacea, although he does provide the dim view, of the concept and its operation, that is, held by some distinguished scholars, including a former World Bank chief: Joseph Stiglitz ("The critics of globalization accuse Western countries of hypocrisy and

the critics are right"), Christopher Chase-Dunn ("a fad"), K.K. Jin ("furtherance of the imperialist and capitalist world system under a different guise"), and P. Hirst and G. Thompson ("a fashionable concept in the social sciences"). Khan goes through a series of (donor-induced and funded) reforms that have been periodically undertaken in Bangladesh, and concludes that, in spite of the reform bodies having made "detailed reform prescriptions



From Government to Governance
Expanding the Horizon of Public Administration to Public Management, Mohammad Mohabbat Khan
The University Press Limited

after meticulous examination of deficiencies prevailing in the civil service system of the country," the recommendations have largely been "stalled, manipulated and consequently not implemented."

One wonders if, in addition to the tradition of resistance to change by bureaucrats, the reform proposals were not too unwieldy and too sweeping for them to be con-

veniently brushed aside by both the civil servants and policymakers with their own agenda that would not be served by wholesale changes in the existing administrative structure and modus operandi. Khan falls into the trap of advocating the rapid implementation of Western prescriptions in a traditional developing country like Bangladesh, and expecting almost overnight positive benefits thereof. "The Western administrative concepts have to be clearly comprehended and applied as per the contextual demands," he asserts. "Public administration has to transform, innovate and adapt to these changing trends." However, the author causes confusion regarding his conviction when, just a few paragraphs earlier, he is convinced that, "Developed countries as against the developing ones have been able to reap umpteen benefits from globalization. The concepts and mechanisms that have come up as a result of globalization have originated in developed countries and are more suited in their social, political, economic and cultural milieu." He is right on both counts, but he needs to make up his mind about the extent of reliance on globalized prescriptions from Western prescribers to cure the ills afflicting Bangladesh. He might even want to find out if some of these medicines are not actually causing the patient's health to deteriorate further.

Khan, although at times exploring too broad a canvas, impresses with the voluminous amount of research work he undertakes. Just as he does on the topics of corruption and, to a lesser degree, NGOs, in Bangladesh. Yet, again, after going on a tirade about why corruption has become endemic in this country, he comes up with this gem, one which is as powerful an explanation as any regarding that scourge: "Most people have a tendency not only to tolerate corruption but also to show respect to those who have

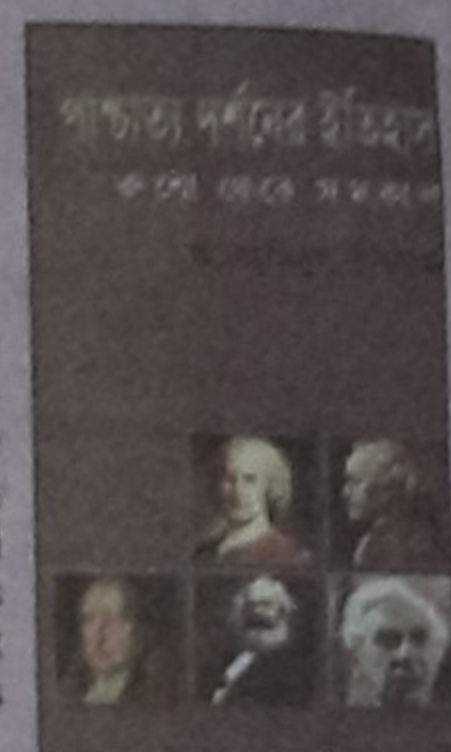
made a fortune through dubious means. The underlying assumption is that it does not matter how one has acquired wealth as long as he has done so." And, regarding NGOs, he has these two astute observations: "It appears that though the number of NGOs keeps on increasing only a few of them are working towards empowering the rural poor. Unfortunately, even the ones that concentrate on this particular aspect tend to limit their attention to local issues of insignificant nature." One might conceivably protest against this point, but one can find little to carp about this conclusion: "In some cases their (NGOs) agenda have become donor-driven. As a result, NGOs are coming under closer scrutiny and persistent criticism in terms of their legitimacy and accountability."

From Government to Governance could have done with more careful editing. One should be able to easily detect the error that gives a totally opposite view of what the author intends to convey in this line: "Challenges that lie ahead for P(ublic) A(dministration) in future would not be easy to achieve if leaders of all sectors --- political, bureaucratic, private and NGOs --- are willing to face and welcome change." And the reader would find it hard to comprehend the significance of these words: "In spite of its multi-ethnic...heritage, Singapore has achieved notable success in checking its population growth." However, with all its unevenness in quality, *From Government to Governance* is an important book, one that has been extensively researched, and one that should seriously cause one to seriously mull over the imperative of restructuring governance (or government) in Bangladesh.

Dr. Shahid Alam is a filmmaker and Head, Media and Communications Department, Independent University Bangladesh.

AT A GLANCE

Pashchatto Darshaner Itihas
Rousseau Theke Shomokal
Dr. Aminul Islam
Mowla Brothers
Tel: 7175227, 7119463



Aminul Islam remains devoted to the principles of philosophy, as this two-volume work so amply demonstrates. He brings to the fore the various trends in philosophical thinking in ways that will appeal to all classes of readers. That has always been the beauty of his writing. It has set people thinking because there is hardly anything obscure about it.

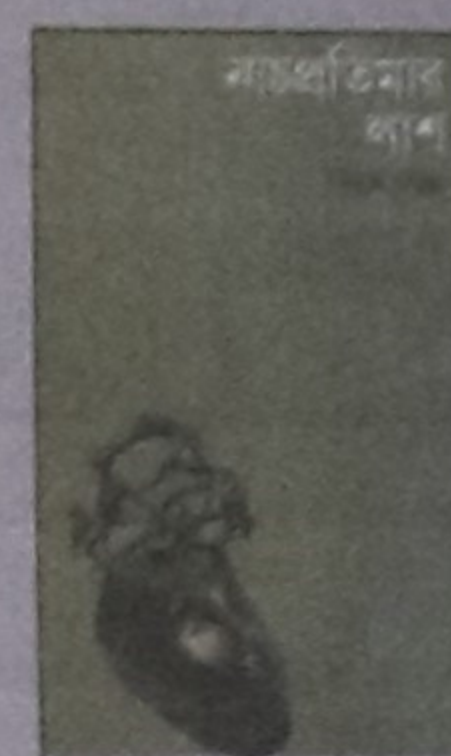


Through The Decade
Khadija Shahjahan
Dynamic Printers
Tel: 9802709, 017413945265

Khadija Shahjahan's last work, a collection of essays on a diversity of subjects, appeared earlier this year. She died in May but leaves behind a legacy her fans and family will only be too happy to promote. Those who have earlier journeyed through her poetry will appreciate the sensitivities she brings up in these articles.

Nachprotitamar Laash
Pias Majid
Banglayan
Tel: 01197193570

A refreshing collection of poetry from a young poet, this work will expose readers to the new trends that have been emerging in the world of Bengali literature over the years. In the form of prose poems, the poetry explores a diversity of human thoughts, ranging from innocent love to the pangs of parting to the essential loneliness of the soul.



Functional Foundation
Anita Desai and Selected Indian Women Authors in English
Shahadat Hossain Azad
Shrabon Prokashoni
Tel: 8651160

Anita Desai and Selected Indian Women Authors in English. Shahadat Hossain Azad. Shrabon Prokashoni. Tel: 8651160.

A work to be appreciated for its in-depth observation of Indian diasporic writing in English, this is one book which should appeal to students of literature. Azad's research has been extensive, which is a sign of the seriousness with which he has approached his subject. The work shows promise of more to come from the writer.

Giving the police a human face

Syed Badrul Ahsan mulls human rights and law enforcement

POLICING has regularly been a difficult proposition in South Asia. That the police are ruthless or inefficient or corrupt or all of these has never been in doubt. That governments in the region have traditionally sought to exercise partisan political control over policemen is another reality from which there is no escaping. You travel to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, your objective being an attempt at understanding the compulsions under which the police operate and the difficulties that the police often subject citizens to. And then, of course, there is that overriding wish in you to come by the measures that may have been taken by the governments of these countries to bring the police level with their counterparts around the world. Disappointment would be staring you in the face.

And such disappointment would be there because of the fitful or halfhearted moves that have over time been made in South Asia toward reforming the police. The beginning of the process of reform, as this excellent survey notes, has generally been one of enthusiasm more than anything else. But then has come the gradual, unabashed dilution of the very reform proposals which earlier cheered citizens. Take, for instance, the Police Order, 2002 in Pakistan. For all the notoriety associated with its unconstitutional seizure of power in 1999, General Pervez Musharraf seriously made a move to reform the police service through 'incorporating some norms of democratic policing into a law governing the police.' The goals were noble, no question about it, for the Police Order envisaged a

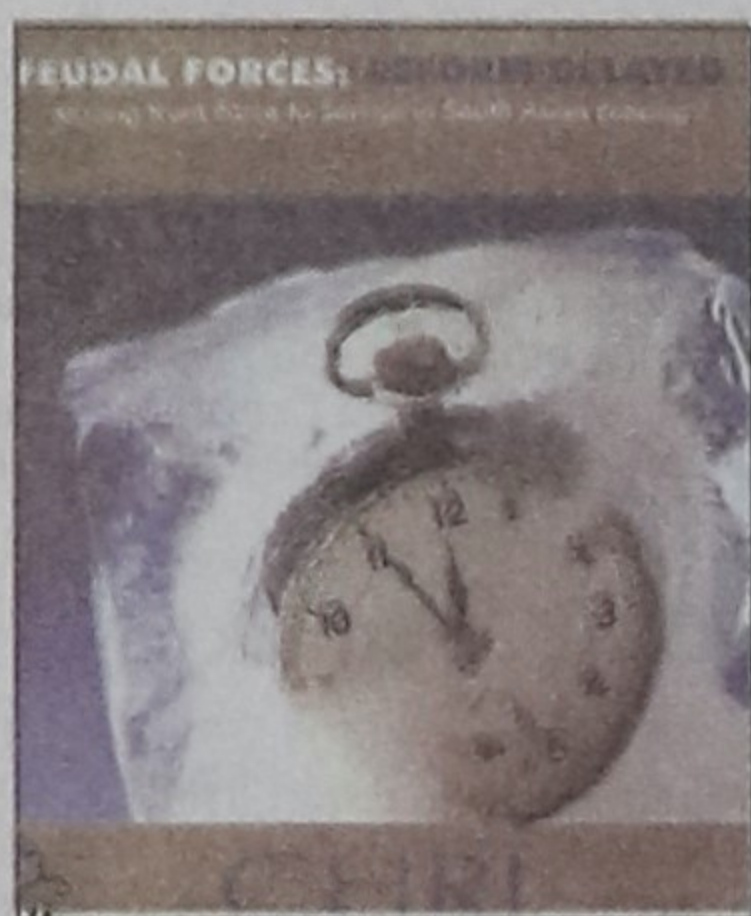
system that would function under the terms of the constitution, the law and in line with the democratic aspirations of the people.

But much of the enthusiasm relating to the Police Order would soon be found to have been misplaced. As in nearly every instance of governance in South Asia, the Order would go through a considerable degree of dilution, obviously as a direct consequence of political and bureaucratic misgivings about an application of the Order in its original form. That being the case with Pakistan, there remains the matter of how the police have been operating in Bangladesh. A caveat here is that for much of the subcontinent, the legacy of the police being a component of the state derives from the Police Act of 1861, a document as archaic as any that could be conceived of in these increasingly sensitive, certainly more transparent times.

It is that old legacy which has appeared to govern the working of the police in Bangladesh, where law enforcers have by and large been regarded as instruments of fear used at will by the state. *Feudal Forces* notes the numerous abuses of human rights committed by the Bangladesh police, especially during the period of the recently departed caretaker government. The survey takes into cognizance the Odhikar Report of 2007, which documents the deaths in extrajudicial manner of as many as 64 individuals at the hands of the police. When you add to that the 94 people killed by the Rapid Action Battalion through its questionable 'crossfires', you get to have a composite picture of the law enforcing

agencies in Bangladesh being pitted against the very people they are expected to provide protection to.

And yet it would be unfair to ignore the other side of the picture. And that is the high decibel pressure under which Bangladesh's police operate. Sanjay Patil draws attention to two instances here. In Dakshin Khan thana, or police station, the Officer in Charge is 'overburdened



Feudal Forces: Reform Delayed
Moving from Force to Service in South Asian Policing
Sanjay Patil
Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

and overstressed' because he must police 700,000 people with a mere inspector, 13 sub-inspectors, 12 assistant sub-inspectors and 40 constables. At what is euphemistically given out as Uttara model thana, Saiful Alam Chowdhury, the Officer in Charge, has jurisdiction over 150,000 people with one inspector, 20 sub-inspectors, 28

assistant sub-inspectors and 62 constables. The police are thus burdened. In their turn, citizens worry about the corruption that undermines the police and by extension the overall administrative system in the country.

Not even India, a state far ahead of its neighbours in terms of democratic attainments, is quite free of the usual constraints citizens suffer from owing to the presence of archaic, even colonial-era policing methods. India's federalism is a significant factor in any deliberation of how the police will conduct themselves. That again tells upon the nature of reforms, or supposed ones, that need to be brought in. Patil sheds good light on the many attempts in India to bring the police service in line with modern-day public expectations. Beginning in 1979, the government has constituted a number of commissions tasked with suggesting the modes and modalities of police functioning. But perhaps a decisive step was taken in 1996, when two former director generals of police asked the Supreme Court of India to issue directives upon the central and state governments regarding the need for measures aimed at plugging the holes in police administration. And then a decade went by, litigation and all. In 2006, in *Prakash Singh and Others vs. Union of India and Others*, the Supreme Court issued a set of seven directives the central and state governments were expected to comply with. What followed was a series of state government acts clearly at variance with the directives. As Patil notes, 'the Gol and many of the states have used every

opportunity to avoid enacting substantive police reform instead of complying with the directives.'

Sri Lanka makes dismal reading. With the Tamil insurgency (which was recently crushed by the military) in place, various administrations in the country have used the opportunity to enhance the powers of the police and thereby undermine the rights of citizens. A culture of impunity has been at work, with state forces such as the Special Task Force becoming notorious for a whole range of human rights violations. The STF has been particularly ruthless against Tamils. And that is not all. Provisions such as Regulation 23 have made sure that Tamils are under constant harassment at the hands of the police. Patil makes reference to an incident in Colombo on 7 June 2007, when police and army officers evicted 376 Tamils residing in lodges or boarding houses in the capital. The Tamils were given less than half an hour to pack up and leave, all because the inspector general of police had made it known that no Tamil could live in Colombo without a valid reason.

The police in South Asia, notes *Feudal Forces*, are yet to transform themselves from a force into service. Reform has at best been incremental and at worst non-existent. And the casualty has been democratic government and human rights. This work should open a door to the imperatives that must come in if the police are to go through a makeover.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

Retracing Japan's legacy

Pratyay Banerjee finds a beautiful world

RETRACING the singularity of a race or a linguistic community poses to be one significant challenge of our time, the world of globalization. Though equally modern in terms of industrial development and living standards, tradition and cultural integrity finds an important place in the life of Japan. Viewed from this perspective, Probrir Bikash Sarker's *Japaner Nadi Nari Ful*, a book chiefly on Japan's traditional past, (River, Geisha, and Sakura) appears to be a significant effort to make us familiar with this aspect.

The first section of the text delineates with the rivers of Japan or more particularly how down the ages Japanese life had been dependent on them. There are around seventy rivers in Japan, Sarkar notes, and of these five, which are bigger than the rest, may be noted. They are Tonogawa (16, 840 km.), Ishirigawa (14,330) Shinanogawa (11,900) Kitakamigawa (10, 150) and Kisogawa (9,100). The word for 'river' in Japanese is Kawa or Gawa (?).

The author has rightly pointed out how even in our time, the word kawa is used in many place names or in surnames of men and women, as in the case of Kawamura, Kawabata and many others. This informative prose in detail discusses how in the past fishing had been one of the oldest trade activities in Japan, in the Meiji Restoration period how most of the modern cities and harbours were established by the side of these rivers, and in the post-war period not only in Tokyo but in other cities as well dams were erected to resist floods. The legacy of indebtedness to the river still continues. People in Japan during the Golden Week enjoy fishing goldfish and crawfish in rivers; those who can afford enjoy a House Boat (Yakatabune) on the river. The writer refers to Basho, the eminent Haiku poet of the 17th century, whose Sumidagawa river journey is famous. A statue of the poet has been erected by the river bank to commemorate the poet's experience of the river journey 300 years back in time.

The next subject Sarkar touches upon is the world of the geisha in Japan. The writer's detailed analysis points out how since the 7th century the geishas or court entertainers came up in Japan. It had two aspects: they were cultural activists as well as sex workers. Although

today only women can aspire to be geishas, in earlier times, the author notes, there were also male geishas, a strange fact which we are ignorant of. This custom flourished during the Edo period chiefly. The author observes that by the 1780s women geishas surpassed their male counterparts. Finally in the post-war period, with prostitution having been banished by law, geishas regained their social status. The concluding part of the essay deals with how geishas have been treated in various literary works, which includes Nobel laureate Kawabata's famous novel, *The Snow Country*.

The last section of the text is about Sakura or the cherry blossom, Japan's national flower. At the beginning the writer quotes a line from Basho, which states that the poet is



Japaner Nadi Nari Ful
Probrir Bikash Sarker
Doshdik, Dhaka

reminded of many things. Sakura as well. Musing on Sakura and the fondness of the Japanese people for it, the writer has touched upon a number of subjects --- the etymological source of the word Sakura, Sakura and other flowers of Japan, Sakura as part of flora, institutions named after Sakura all over the world and finally the festival of Hanami or cherry blossom viewing festival. Truly, few other races can be found to be so sensitive regarding flowers.

Apart from the subject of the book, the illustrations the writer includes deserve praise. There are altogether forty-one pictures on the above-mentioned subjects.

Pratyay Banerjee is Assistant Teacher in English, Pranta Palli High School, Kolkata, West Bengal, India. E-mail: pratyayaditya@gmail.com

A delicious collection of epistles

Nausheen Rahman is thrilled by an unusual book

MARY Ann Shaffer's *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* came to me like a wish granted. For the last few weeks, I had been longing to read a book written in letters. Not only is this book a delicious collection of epistles, it has elements not often found all together in one book: wit, pathos, romance, honest representations of true-to-life, yet individualistic characters, exciting events, lots of literary references and a unique, eye-catching title.

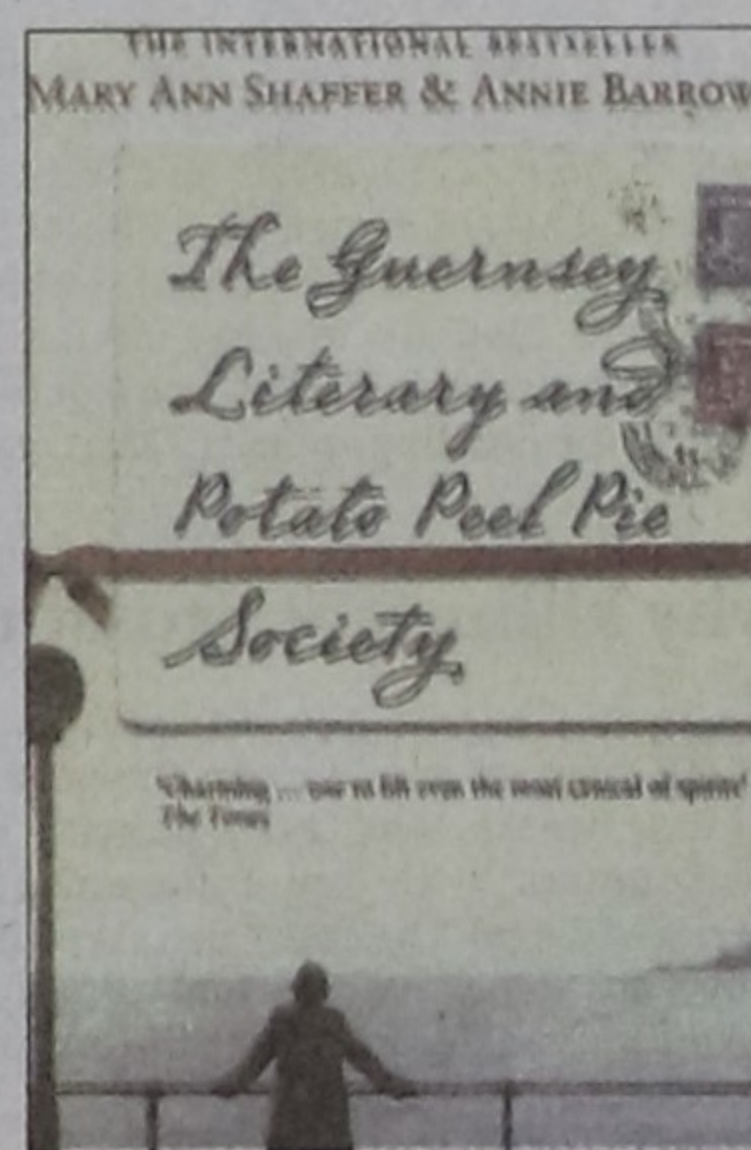
The story starts to take shape when Dawsey Adams (who lives in Guernsey, the Channel Islands) manages to contact the former owner of a book he has read and loves (Selected Essays of Elia by Charles Lamb). This former owner is Juliet Ashton, a writer who lives in London and works for a publishing house, and who is trying to come up with a good plot for her next book. Thenceforth begins a regular exchange of letters between not only Dawsey and Juliet, but between Juliet and the other residents of Guernsey, (sparked off by a shared love of reading) between Juliet and other people in London (like her publisher, her

friends, her suitor, etc).

The spontaneity and ease with which Ms. Shaffer brings in the different characters is truly wonderful. These characters come to life through their simple, down-to-earth, but very expressive missives. A friendship grows between Juliet and her island friends through their correspondence. Readers, your hearts will go out to Isola (who brews potions and elixirs to enhance "manly ardour" among other things); Amelia (in whose house the Society used to meet); Dawsey (the more you read of him, the more you'll like him); Eli and Kit (two charming children); Eben and other lovable characters. You'll want to be in Guernsey with them -- as did Juliet.

Juliet goes to visit the island and to collect material for her articles and she soon becomes very close to the inhabitants. She finds friendship, love, peace and happiness there, and in the process, discovers her real self. She also finds her story which will be based on one of the residents, Elizabeth McKenna (whom ironically she's never met because she'd been taken away to concentration camp before Juliet arrived in Guernsey).

This Elizabeth is, indeed, an intriguing character. You'll be eager to know about her life and fate.



The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society
Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows
Bloomsbury

The episodes take place mostly in Guernsey during the post-war period. Ms. Shaffer blends the past and the present in a very commendable way. She gives us gruesome details of the torture people had to undergo and the agonies they had to bear during the German Occupation. However, these facts do not leave us feeling totally melancholic. This is because of the freshness with which the author surrounds her characters and the courage and strength they possess. We get a solid feel of what things must have been like in Guernsey during, as well as, after the Occupation.

The writer's tone is amusing and humorous (the humour is often aimed at herself), yet loaded with substance. Her innate talent of storytelling (her niece, Annie Barrows calls her "our own personal Scheherazade") makes us appreciate the characters' situations fully; we feel deeply involved as we read about the interaction between Juliet and the Guernsey dwellers and the bonds these people share with one another.

This is a book so different from others (because of its fascinating

people and incidents) that we want to keep perusing it and dread its coming to an end.

The book is largely about people's love of reading and treasuring books. Many of these people have been newly introduced to books; their observations of well-known authors and classics are clever and interesting. How and why this society came into being and how it got its strange name, arouses Juliet's curiosity -- as it does readers'.

Mary Ann Shaffer herself belonged to a writing group, a book club, the members of which were a constant source of support to her, and who made sure that she saw her novel through to the end.

Another interesting facet of this book is that the author's niece, Annie Barrows, also a writer, helped her to finish it (as she had fallen ill).

Finally, this book will make members of existing book clubs feel grateful and those who are not a part of any such club, want to join or form one.

This book guarantees happy hours of reading.

Nausheen Rahman reads voraciously and is a teacher.