

NON-FICTION

On Manto*

SAADAT HASAN MANTO

A great deal has been said and written about Manto up till now, a little of it in his favour and much of it against him. No one in his right mind will be able to form an opinion about Manto if those writings were to be placed in front of him. As I sit down to write this, I realize how difficult it is to express my views about Manto; but in a way it is not so difficult because I have had the privilege of knowing Manto. The truth is that I am his doppelganger.

I have no objection to whatever has been so far written about this man, but I do know that none of it is quite in line with reality. Some people see him as the devil himself, while others call him a bald angel. But let me first make sure that the fellow is not listening. I suppose it is all right because I have just remembered that this is his drinking hour. He is in the habit of drinking his bitter syrup after six every evening.

We were born together and I suppose we will die together. But it may also come to pass that Saadat Hasan may die and Manto may not. That thought really bothers me because I have always done my best to keep our friendship. Now if he were to die and I do not, it would be like being left with an eggshell that has been emptied of its yellow and white.

I do not wish to go into details but frankly speaking, I have never seen a 'one-two' man like Manto in my entire life. Were he to be added up, the result would be three. He knows a great deal about triangles, but as far as I know his trinity is yet to find completion. Only the most perceptive readers can follow these hints.

While I have known Manto since the day he was born, both of us having come to this world on 11 May 1912, he has always tried to be like a tortoise, who, once

he withdraws his head and neck into a shell, is difficult to find, no matter how hard you try. Since I am his doppelganger, I have studied every single of his tricks.

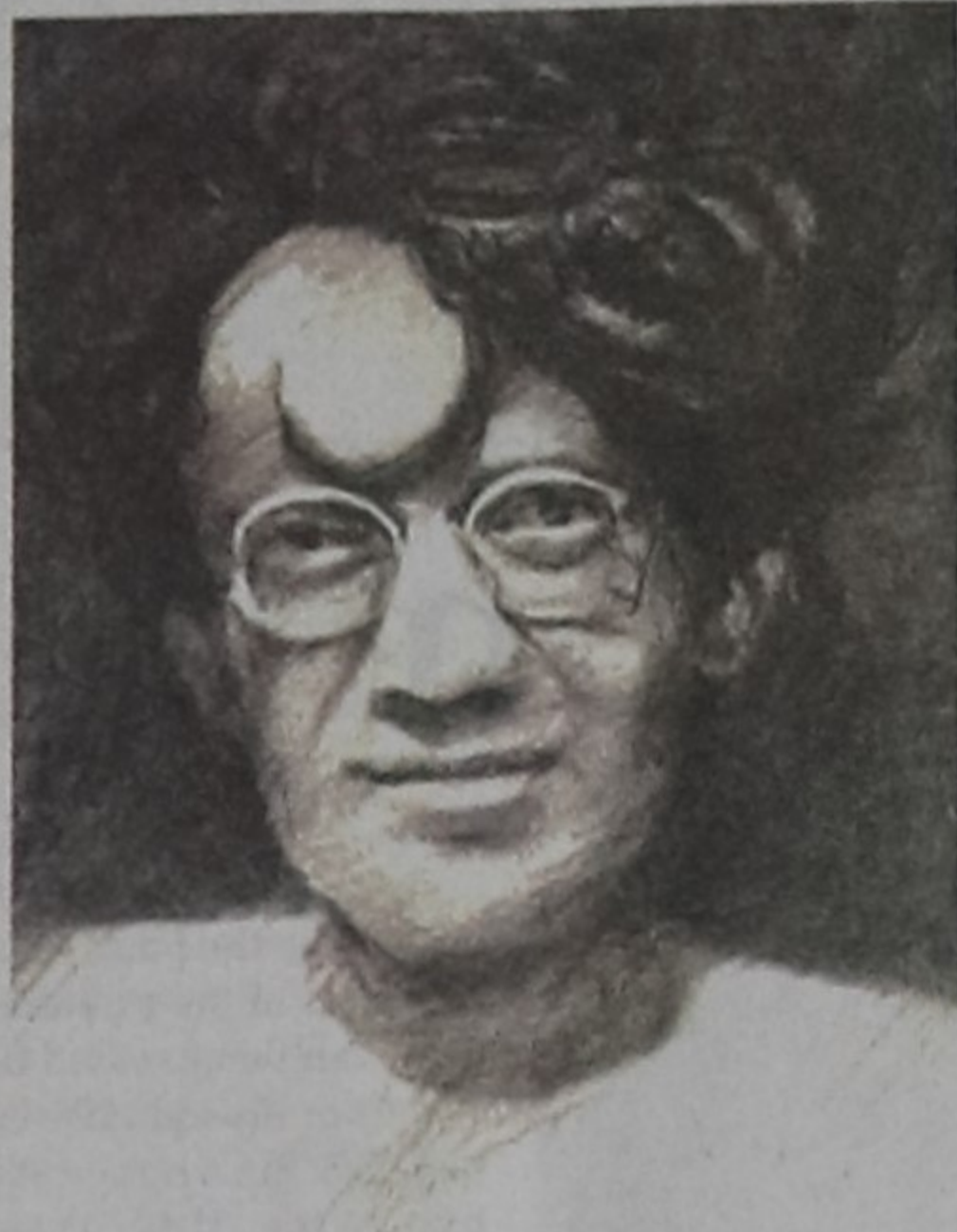
Now let me tell you who this ass turned into a storywriter is. Critics write long, learned articles about him to show off their knowledge, lacing them with references to Schopenhauer, Freud, Hegel, Nietzsche and Marx, but they remain miles away from reality.

Manto's short story writing is the result of a clash between two factors. His father (May he rest in heaven) was extremely harsh and his mother had a very tender heart. You can yourself imagine in what shape this grain of wheat would have emerged after being meshed (sic) between these two stone-grinders.

Let me now turn to his schooldays. He was very intelligent and very naughty. In those days, he was no taller than three-and-a-half feet. He was the last son of his father, and while he had the love of his parents, three of his much older brothers were studying in England. He never had the opportunity of meeting them because they were his half-brothers. He wanted them to meet him and to treat him as elder brothers treat younger brothers, but this treatment only came his way after he had become famous as a great story writer.

Let's now talk about his story writing. He is a first-class fraud. His first story was called 'Tamasha' which was about the Jalianwallah Bagh tragedy. He did not publish it under his own name because he was afraid of being arrested by the police if he did.

The restless person that he was, he now set his heart on getting a higher education, having failed his entrance examination to a bachelor's degree twice before passing it, but in the third division. It will surprise you to know that he failed his Urdu paper. Now when



artwork by apuba k das

people say that he is a great Urdu writer, I can only laugh because even now he does not know Urdu. He runs after words as a man with a net chases butterflies without catching them. That is why there is a paucity of beautiful words in his writing. He likes to wield a stick, but it needs to be pointed out that he has borne with great equanimity every blow struck across his neck.

The manner in which he wields his stick is not of the crude kind, which rustic folk are known for; he is an artist and he brings great finesse to the act. He is the sort of person who does not walk on a straight road, but on a tightly strung rope. People expect him to fall any moment but he has so far not fallen off. It is possible that he may one day fall, and fall on his face, never to get up. But I do know that when he is dying, he

will tell people that he fell because he wanted to overcome the disappointment that a fall brings.

I have often said to him that Manto is a fraud of the first order. An additional proof of that is his oft-expressed claim that he does not think a short story; it is the short story that thinks him. But that too is a fraud. I know that when he has to write a story, he is like a hen about to lay an egg, with the difference that he does not lay this egg hidden from view but right in front of everyone. His friends and his three daughters continue to create the racket that they do, but there he sits in his chair with his legs up, laying his eggs, which cluck away to turn into stories. His wife is tired of him and often tells him to stop his story writing and open a store. However, the store that Manto has opened in his mind has more goods than any general

store can carry. However, it has sometimes occurred to him that if he ever opens a store, it may turn into a cold storage where all his thoughts and ideas will freeze.

I am writing this article and afraid at the same time that Manto will be annoyed with me. Anything that he does can be tolerated but not his annoyance. When he is annoyed, he is the devil himself, although only for a few minutes. God protect us from that. When he is to write a story, he fusses a lot, but I know why: because I am his doppelganger and I know that it is all a fraud. He himself said once that countless stories lie in his pocket, but the fact is that when he has to write a story, he thinks about it the night before, though nothing comes to him. He will get up at

five in the morning and try to extract a story from the day's newspapers. But it does not work; so he goes to the bathroom where he tries to cool his turbulent head with water so that he can think. When this does not work, he starts to argue with his wife without any reason. When that does not work either, he walks out of the house to buy betel leaf. The betel leaf continues to rest on his table and he still finds himself without a subject. In the end, by way of revenge, he will pick up a pen or a pencil and inscribe the numbers 786 on top of the page and whatever comes to his mind then becomes the starting point of a story.

'Babu Gopi Nath', 'Toba Tek Singh', 'Hartak', 'Mummy', 'Mozail' were all written through this fraudulent method.

It is strange that people consider him irreligious and a pornographer, although I would concede that to some extent he does fall into those categories. He takes up profound themes and he employs words which can be considered objectionable, but I do know whenever he has written something, he has begun it with the numbers 786 which means 'Bismillah' or 'I begin in the name of God'. A man who does not believe in God becomes a believer on paper. That is the paper-Manto, somewhat like those almonds with paper-thin skins that you can crack open with your fingers. It is another matter that he is the kind of person whom even an iron hammer cannot crack open.

Let me now come to Manto's personality and do so by conferring some titles on him. He is a thief, a liar, a cheat and a man who likes to hold forth before others. Taking advantage of his wife's preoccupations, he has stolen hun-

dreds of rupees from her. On occasions, he has brought her eight hundred rupees, and with his spying eye made note of where she keeps the money. The next day, one of the green bills is found missing. When she discovers the loss, it is the poor servants who get it in the neck.

Although it is said of Manto that he speaks the truth, I am not prepared to buy that. He is a first-rate liar. In the beginning, his lies used to work at home because they always had that special Manto touch. Later, it was found out that whatever he had told his wife about something or the other was a lie. Manto's lies are told with economy, but the trouble is that the family has come to believe that whatever he says is a lie, like the beauty spot a woman makes on her cheek with antimony.

He is illiterate, considering that he has never read Marx, nor any of Freud's books. Hegel he knows only by name, and the same goes for Havelock Ellis. The funny thing is that all the critics say that he is influenced by these thinkers. As far as I know, Manto is not impressed by anyone. He says that all those who try to teach him are all fools. No one should be told what to do; people should learn what to do without being told.

By trying to understand things by himself, he has become something beyond anyone's comprehension. Sometimes he talks such nonsense that I begin to laugh. I can tell you with full responsibility that Manto, who has been tried on obscenity charges many times, is a very neat and fussy person. At the same time, I would like to add that he fusses far too much, constantly dusting himself, as it were.

*Reprinted from *Bitter Fruit: The Very Best of Saadat Hasan Manto* Edited and Translated by Khalid Hasan, also reviewed below.

The Full Manto

NAZNEEN SADIK

Saadat Hasan Manto, the most well-known and controversial master of the Urdu short story, needs no extensive introduction. *Bitter Fruit* (Penguin India, 2008) is a thick volume of his short stories, non-fiction pieces and even of his one play, here titled as 'In the Vortex,' as translated by Khalid Hasan. It is the nonfiction pieces that provide the real surprise even for those readers otherwise familiar with Manto's stories and style.

In these pieces we come to know, in the writer's own words, of his steady decline into alcoholism and eventual untimely death. The 1947 Partition to him was incomprehensible, responsible not only for the murder of millions, but for his anguished banishment from the Eden of his Bombay to Pakistan's Lahore, where he couldn't find regular work, lived on a meager income from his writing (the reason behind some of his stories being obvious potboilers, which he had to produce on a daily basis in order to eat), hounded relentless both by the state and mullahs, and hauled into court on charges of writing pornography. Even then, these were his most productive years as a short story writer, and as can be seen from the piece reprinted above, despite all, or perhaps because of it, throughout the final years of destitution and ill-health, Manto

remained Manto - somebody perfectly able, and willing, to slyly slice himself better than even the most vicious of detractors could. But it is his love for Bombay and its film world, where he made a good living as a scriptwriter, that animates some of the best nonfiction pieces: Unforgettable portraits (ranging from Jinnah to Nur Jahan!), biting sarcasm at the United States (far ahead of his time!) in his 'Letters to Uncle Sam', unforgettable 'Sketches'. Some of the nonfiction pieces are on Manto, with the one by his nephew Hamid Jalal titled 'Uncle Manto' being a very painful record of Manto's decline and death. By including these pieces, Khalid Hasan has given us the most complete picture and record of the man and the writer to date.

Khalid Hasan's translations, however, have been criticized on the grounds of willful distortions. M Asaduddin in the journal 'The Annual of Urdu Studies', in fact, wrote that Hasan "flattened (ed) out uneven contours and cultural angularities of the original" by changing titles of stories, leaving out large portions of the original and by summarizing whole paragraphs. Asaduddin did concede that Khalid's "English is good and idiomatic and his translation fulfills the goal of readability in the target language." The judgment one feels is still valid. Even though Khalid in his introduction in *Bitter Fruit* admits that he has taken note of such criticism, one sees that he has retained, despite a hail of objections from translation experts and critics, the title of the famous short story 'Thanda Ghost' in English as 'Colder than Ice' - when it really should be some variant of 'Cold Meat.'

But still, warts and all, this is a very readable volume of translations, and until something better comes along in terms of size and volume, will no doubt be pressed into service again and again.

Nazneen Sadik lives in Washington D.C.

Arundhati Roy at the London Literature Festival - 2009

SI AHMED

She entered the stage of the Southbank Centre from the far left of centre, similar to her beliefs, stepping up to the podium to speak about "dark talks", of failed promises and diabolical designs in the name of democracy. She ended the evening, the faded pink *anchal* of her sari draped on the armchair, with the audience applauding and listening to her chosen ghazal by Farida Khanum:

If there is no hope, there must be dreams
If there is no love, there must be yearnings...

Arundhati Roy, writer, activist (a term she dislikes) kicked off the London Literature Festival-2009 with a public interview conducted by an exuberant Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty (a British pressure group) and Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University. The last time Roy had been at the Centre was to pick up the 1997 Booker Prize for her *The God of Small Things*. Her political journey over the last decade has produced four more books, all increasingly focused on issues like the "language heist" by so-called democracies who use coded terms to mask their real political and social intent ('Operation Enduring Freedom' in Iraq, Operation Restore Hope' in Somalia, 'Operation Uphold Democracy' in Haiti, etc.). Roy has been an outspoken activist on issues such as Indian policy on Kashmir, its nuclearization, Sri Lanka's attack on Tamils, and most famously, on water-dam issues.

Hers was an Indian voice, with subcontinental *thali* samples floating in the accent, thin but unbreakable, like a fishing line strong enough to reel in a twenty-pound carp of dogma and land it on the writer's beach to be expertly gutted of its insides. Shami's cross-cultural modulated mate'ism acted on the audience with morning chat show familiarity, while Roy's

remained the voice of principle, embellished with flashes of poetic metaphors that illuminated the socio-economic issues that burn in her. At times there would be lapses, as if she was thought-lagged, but never veering from the topic, attempting to convey her position with facts while leaving the conclusions self-evident to the jam-packed audience in the Purcell Room.

Her range and grasp of topics is impressive or expressive, perhaps, of a remarkable genetic mix and activist upbringing: Born in Shillong, to Keralite Syrian Christian women's rights leader Mary Roy, and a Bengali tea planter father. As all the world seems to know by now, Arundhati earlier had dabbled with architecture, screenplays, films, even running aerobic classes until her voice began to draw attention, beginning with her blistering critique of Shekhar Kapur's internationally applauded Indian film 'Bandit Queen' (1994), based on the life of Phoolan Devi. Her film review, 'The Great Indian Rape Trick' questioned the right to "restage the rape of a living woman without her permission," and charged Kapur with exploiting Devi and misrepresenting both her life and its meaning. Thereafter the topics changed but the defiance of popular perceptions and the relentless exposure of hypocrisy grew, as did Roy's exploration of injustice and its global dimensions.

Roy's first nonfiction book appeared to mark the beginning of the end for her as a novelist, as



ment agenda - physically embodied in the obscene Sardar Sarovar Project, with its dam across the Narmada river.

She was ambivalent about her Booker, stating that it gave her money, fame and the instant recognition with which she could explore her subsequent social passions, but insisting that writing was "about bridging the gap between thinking and language." Since "all writing has to have a political dimension," reaching her inner self was more necessary and by doing so touching the lives of others thus writing was activism, but not the other way round.

Roy detailed the workings of the American military-industrial complex and the emerging one in India, where the tribal poor were being evicted from their land to feed the demand for bauxite, to be exported to Western armaments factories that fed the wars in these developing democracies. She answered questions about the Indian Supreme Court gone 'Demon Crazy' - they often referred to her as the "other woman"

she continued to indefatigably question, probe and campaign on national and international issues, as a spokesperson of the anti-globalization movement and a vehement critic of the United States' foreign policies, especially the post 9/11 agenda of carnage and conquest. She has spared few, repeatedly criticizing with razor-sharp words both the USA and the Taliban, and India's adoption of a neo-liberal industrialization and develop-

ment agenda - physically embodied in the obscene Sardar Sarovar Project, with its dam across the Narmada river.

She was ambivalent about her Booker, stating that it gave her money, fame and the instant recognition with which she could explore her subsequent social passions, but insisting that writing was "about bridging the gap between thinking and language." Since "all writing has to have a political dimension," reaching her inner self was more necessary and by doing so touching the lives of others thus writing was activism, but not the other way round.

Roy detailed the workings of the American military-industrial complex and the emerging one in India, where the tribal poor were being evicted from their land to feed the demand for bauxite, to be exported to Western armaments factories that fed the wars in these developing democracies. She answered questions about the Indian Supreme Court gone 'Demon Crazy' - they often referred to her as the "other woman"

SI Ahmed is an occasional contributor for The Daily Star literature page from London.

Playing Cricket in India and America

KHADEMUL ISLAM

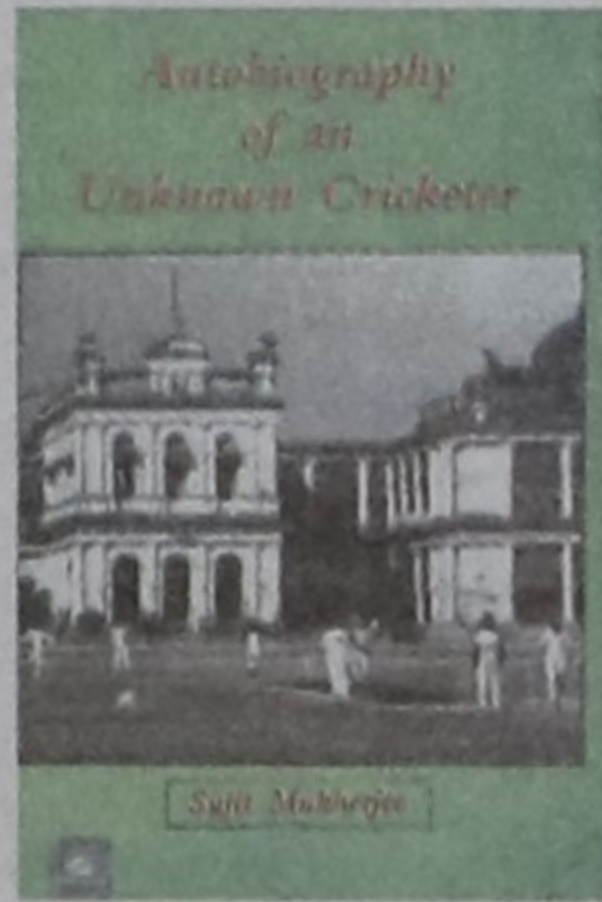
Admittedly, this is a niche book, for those who read cricket books - not to be confused with the crowds to whom cricket is part spectacle and part national flag-waving, or celebrity sports stars and outsized contracts, but definitely not books. Cricket magazines perhaps, or the sports pages of the dailies, or nowadays, blogs with their coffee-fueled wisdom and instant insight, but not books. Like the long form of cricket, hardly anybody really reads cricket books anymore - both take up too much time. It's a shame, for good cricket books (and not the formula ones on bestseller lists), can be savoured like Test matches where a whole day can go by with an arcane, fascinating battle being fought by a wily spinner against a class bat.

Again, admittedly, the title is hopelessly a borrowed one, and yes, this book will not particularly appeal to those who have never played cricket (at an ordinary or club level), who have never been a part of a team in desperate straits in the second innings, and who don't have vivid boyhood memories of being unable to sleep the night before a match. But to those who have, this one's a keeper. Sports writing by Bengalis is a rare thing, and rarer still in English. And in Bangladesh, what passes for sports writing (naturally, since we are Bengalis) is actually on the politics of the sport, on association elections and selector choices, and hollow cheer or empty gibes at the national team, but never on the techniques and the beauty of it, and never in prose that lifts and sways with the side batting or fielding on the field.

This context makes Sujit Mukherjee's (1930-2003) account of his cricketing life quite novel. The author had another whole identity as Dr.

Sujit Mukherjee, distinguished academic, literary critic (a well-known work of his is *Translation As Discovery and Other Essays*) and later long-time editor at Orient Longman. India's wife is the equally distinguished academic and critic Meenakshee Mukherjee. But as Sujit Mukherjee, he also penned a number of cricketing books. A Bengali born and brought up in Patna, Bihar, it was there that he started playing cricket, starting with St. Xavier's school and moving on to college and club cricket, then for Bihar at the state level, including a few Ranji Trophy matches. Along the way he met and played with some of the star names of Indian cricket of yesteryears, including C K Naidu, Mushtaq Ali and H R Adhikari (who toured Australia with the national side and was India's vice captain during their tour of England in the early 1950s), as well as "the lesser luminaries but still famous names such as C T Sarwate, BB Nimbalkar, Hiralal Gaikwad."

The book is memorable for its portrait of cricket playing in small towns of India of the 1940s to the 1960s. Descriptions of the Bengal-Bihar matches are electric, where Bengal's team would include Pankaj Roy, Shute Banerjee, D G Phadkar and B P Gupta. His cricketing yarns are hilarious, such as the accounts of games with pucca English sahibs during the last decade of the Raj with one "Priyo Babu, who invariably played in a dhoti but wore white socks with tennis shoes, his dark calves showing between dhoti-border and sock-tops and seemed to suffer no handicap as he bowled offbreaks quite effectively." One notable feature of the book is that, as far as I know, Sumit gives us the first extended account of how it felt to play cricket in America when he went to Pennsylvania University on a Fulbright scholarship and



prevailed upon to bat for the home side. This he proceeded to with murderous effect, hitting everything out of sight for about half an hour or so. He stopped only when his dark glasses slipped off and he happened to tread on them." Could have been Clive Lloyd in shades!

Which reminds me, in the grand tradition of cricketing adda, of a little tale of my own. In the mid-eighties, when I was at the Fletcher School in Boston, the library security guard was Nigel, a stocky, cheerful West Indian. He was always trying to explain cricket to mystified Yanks, while we, Fletcher's South Asian student bloc, would advise him, give up, Nigel, it's hopeless. But Nigel was a leg spinner, somebody used to working all day. One day he announced that he would bring a West Indian team over the weekend to play cricket with a Fletcher School team - no better way to learn than by playing, as Nigel put it. The match was to take place on the ground at the side of the school. We rounded up a scratch team, half of

whom were Indians and one Bangladeshi, and half were hastily-coached Americans. Came the morning of the match - I couldn't sleep the night before, with nightmare visions of 6'4" Guyanese guys bounding in to hurl bouncers that would take our heads off - and everybody turned up in whites. The American women watched in amazement as the Indian wives commandeered the dorm kitchen and began to cook up a biryani storm for the team lunch. "You ***** Indian men," they said to us, "are unbelievable!"

"Hey, back off," were replied. "Ours is a patriarchy." However, 9 o'clock, coin-toss time, came and went. So did 10 o'clock, 10:30, then 11:00. The Yanks broke out their beers, throwing caution six sheets to the wind. Nigel finally called around noon to say that their team microbus had met with an accident en route, and while nobody was hurt, match cancelled. More beer followed this announcement - followed by a gargantuan lunch. In the afternoon we played softball (the gentler version of baseball), where we South Asians performed badly, unable to truly lay into a ball whose trajectory was all in the air, that didn't slant down and bounce off a surface, handed a rounded bat whose 'swing' felt weird. The day ended in a happy haze, though.

Especially in these days of The Ashes, with books on it coming out, one is in want of a proper Bangladeshi cricket book, perhaps a Bangladeshi team Test tour book. Of, say, England, or Pakistan. Readers would be surprised to see how absorbing it can get, as they come face to face, via a game, with their deepest selves. After all, what do they know of cricket who only cricket know?

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.