

Some, not all, love can be divided

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque feels the pain of a writer

THIS is a scintillating autobiography from the highly accomplished writer Maya Angelou, who wears variegated caps as a musician, poet, performer and, on top of everything, a great mother albeit remaining fixated on her only child -- her teenage son, Guy. Although there is an assortment of real-life incidents in this book, yet as one reads it, one gets the feeling of devouring one of the best quality novels primarily because of the way the author presents an array of facts and also her style of language being so lucid. Exactly for this reason, Chicago Tribune Book World has stated that her 'personal narrative' in this book has attained a 'lyrical' quality and so enhancing its literary value. The author's acute perception of characters, who are a multitude, their conversations and interactions, all take place in settings revealing the complex nature of human beings. A kaleidoscopic journey into people, incidents and their loci unveils the truth that humans do have an innate dislike for things and people dissimilar to their own. She does the perfect job of an anthropologist in terms of her incisive observation and, making a record of each and every word and expression along with the body language associated therein, does the job of a perfectly trained psychologist in terms of explaining them in common parlance. For example, we hear the receptionist at the Ghana Broadcasting office who by some miraculous way recognizes Angelou as someone 'different' and starts grilling her on the purpose of her visit. At one stage, she comments, "American Negroes are

always crude."

This makes the author wonder if she is not having an encounter with "a rude white salesclerk in an American department store." In spite of her looks that are so typical of an African, somehow her un-African surfaces in the vision of the African receptionist. Then again, although President Nkrumah gives a call to the nation saying, "West Indians and Black Americans are among Africa's great gifts to the world," when there is an attempt on his life at about the same time, fingers are pointed at, besides others, the Black Americans who form a strong group of skilled and talented émigrés in Ghana. A high-ranking intellectual says, "America can use its black citizens to infiltrate Africa and sabotage our struggle because the Negro's complexion is a perfect disguise. Be wary, Africa, of the Peace Corps Blacks, the AID Blacks, and the Foreign Service Blacks." He goes further, cautioning the Africans about getting close to American Blacks, which implies deep suspicion with which the 'Revolutionary Returnees,' as the author describes the group who came to Ghana from the States, are held. An awareness of being the same yet different in terms of their American-ness gnaws at their conscience even as they cling to their 'motherland'. Such asocial and oftentimes hostile behaviour the writer and her friends experience in dealing with a Black couple arriving in Accra from the States. They, particularly, the man finds the suggestions given by the well-meaning Black Americans ill-motivated and comments, "... It's just like Negroes. They are here, in

their own place, and they don't want us in. Just like crabs in a bucket. Pulling the other one down. When will you people learn?..."

This is all the more strange behaviour from a Black American toward other Black Americans. The author also narrates the reactions of a British academic to the recent riots in Harlem that appeared as front-page news in Ghanaian

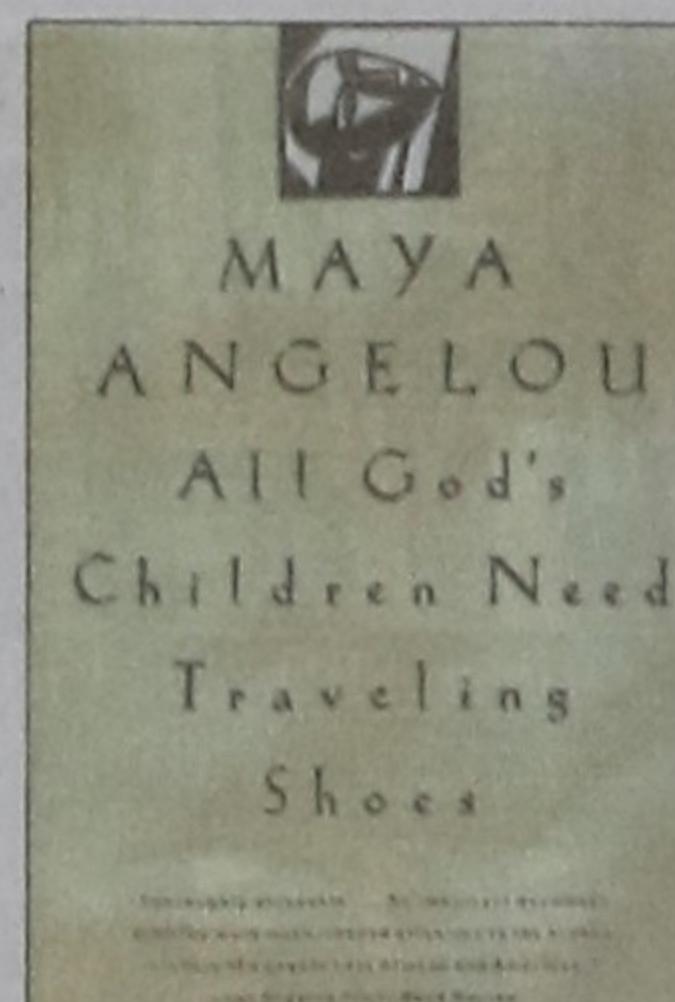
anger, she goes on, "You left your old cold ass countries and came here where you've never had it so good. Now you've got servants and can bathe more than once a month. It's a pity more of you don't take advantage of the opportunity. You stinking bastards." Last of all, as she heads for the door, she utters, "And don't say a word to me, I'll slap the water out of all of you." A stern warning to the imperialists living in their faded glory! While the author travels to Berlin to perform on stage along with her troupe having come from the States, she witnesses the same degree of animosity of Germans toward an Israeli actor.

During her final trip, that is to Eastern Ghana, the author comes across an unusual experience while visiting a market place in a village. The women remember a heart-breaking tale of their ancestors, who were either killed or chained and who before being huddled up killed their own infants, holding them by their feet and bashing their heads against tree trunks as they would rather have their children dead than see them being sold into slavery. And these wailing women are descendants of some of the children who managed to run away from the slave traders and were orphaned. From her features it appears to them that she must have descended from those stolen mothers and fathers and, therefore, they are mourning for their lost people, if not for her. The most shocking revelation to the writer is to learn that not "all slaves were stolen, nor were all slave dealers European." This carries a message that is not only most frightening but extremely hard to believe. The author ponders over the matter only to lay bare the truth that some

family members traded their near, if not dear, ones in slavery and, secondly, some stronger and clever tribes traded people of other tribes who were weak and gullible into slavery. Collaborators in crimes are aplenty everywhere in the world. To them only the present time is permanent. She herself has traveled a long distance, her people and her foreparents have travelled an enormously long distance barefoot, experiencing the pangs of uprootedness and the barbarity of the traders in human soul and transforming them into sold out merchandise to be used by buyers in any way they liked. The question is: when will they get their shoes to wear to make them feel somewhat comfortable and at the same time less fearful? After all, are not all of them, all of us children of one and the same God? A tailored civilization takes no notice of this axiomatic truth, the writer contends.

This is a fondly woven story taken from real life where there is a yearning for finding out, for knowing the heart and soul of one's origin which, however, limps often but eventually persists in a strong tie of love. Much love and hate and ambivalence in accepting or rejecting one for the other operate in the mind of the author like the pendulum in a grandfather clock. In the midst of all this, America beckons, for that is where she has her family, friends and familiarity to go back to after a long stay of two years in Ghana. Yes, some love can be divided, not all.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is a critic, music enthusiast and Principal, Radiant International School.



All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes
Maya Angelou
Vintage Books
New York

newspapers, which is no less shocking. Expressing his revulsion, he says, "Democracy was never created for the lower classes. Everyone knows that. Just like at Ghana." Instantly the author protests, saying, "You people are idiots, and you dare speak of Ghana. You rejects." Overcome by her justified

about a beautiful woman.

There are commendable and concise pieces of writing on political personalities, starting with *The life and times of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman*. Mujib is unequalled in stature and 'only he could have led Bangladesh to freedom' -- and he did. Under him the administration made a move in framing the country's constitution.

That a politician is arrogant in the head and heart comes clear in *Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan*, the next piece of writing. *Bangladesh 1975: coups and murders most foul*, are about assassination conspiracy and lawlessness.

When Tajuddin Ahmed came home is an exemplary piece of writing on the magnitude of the man, particularly during the chaotic period between 25 March and 17 April 1971 in an occupied country.

The three stories record the essence of Bengali elements that evoke varying impressions and emotions. Together, the essays and stories open the door to learning about the land.

The sad short tale of Sakib Khan is on the liberation war and the question of repatriation, the politics of equating the exchange of the civilian population with military prisoners, and the moral question of the stranded innocent versus the surrendered war criminals. On a personal level there is the trauma of

the senior civil servant during the 1947 partition and the communal question of the divide that followed. The end of the story focuses on beli in one's roots.

The story *Men, women and lovers* is told in a Diaspora scenario. The young generations emerging out of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war do not talk of that war.

In fragmented style, with deep emotions dissecting the narrative in many hues, is the longest of the stories, *A woman called Minimoyee*.

It is refreshing to read these writings of a creative mind, powered by a wide span of reading from the simple and small to the complicated and complex. The impressions that emerge are a mixture of the deeply personal and the dispassionately outward.

Personally a camouflaged connection comes to my mind between this relatively young writer and his book to the octogenarian writer Khushwant Singh and his work, *Not a Nice Man to Know*. The truth of the titles aside, both books contain eloquent and entertaining journalistic writings. More significantly, the attribute of the senior writer --- 'the ability to talk to the reader and not at him' --- is equally appropriate in the writing style of Syed Badrul Ahsan.

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

Of men, politics and love

Farida Shaikh swims through a trim collection of ideas

ADORNED with a creamy color cover, the title of the book framed in a set of green and red bold lines and the writer's name center below and more on the back cover, the work is adroitly assembled in a trim 126 pages of essays and short stories by a career journalist, poet, short story writer and a sometime diplomat.

Interest in writing was encouraged by the author's teacher while he was still in high school in Quetta, Pakistan; and as the interest heightened over the years, it led the way to a career in journalism with special focus on current national and international affairs.

The writer proffers the reason for such a book: These essays... are... a prism through which I have observed individuals and life in general around me. About the short stories, he adds: 'The Bengali ambience in the stories is the way I have seen society work in my country. It's... a pattern of fiction.'

The essays also include write-ups on subjects beyond the purely political. There are '...the myriad ideas' that are 'thrown up... for a serious journalist to shape his views on them.' These in-depth etchings of our time are a mark of the scholarship of the writer on living history.'

This small sized book is tightly packed with twenty-seven literary pieces and write-ups, with end notes, three short stories, preface

and a foreword. The writings make a deep acknowledgement of the writer's senior and junior family members.

The foreword to the book labels these writings as 'journalistic jottings covering a period of four years.' Even so, an erudite reader would seek more, and want all the pieces of writing on difficult and dramatic times dated so as to add more meaning to the narrative. It is also disturbing to see the lessons of *Die Bien Phu* in recapitulation.

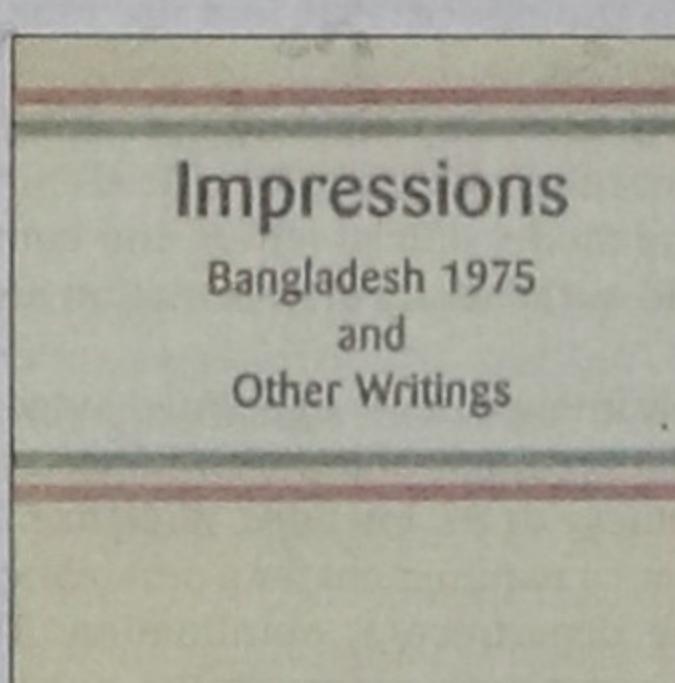
The sensitivity of the writer to music, songs and poetry is captured in the section on *1971: Our songs, our war*. The inspiration for freedom and the 1971 Liberation War was derived from the lyrics that were composed and rendered vocally by an assortment of Bengali singers.

On a different note, *Old songs and the passing of Anjuman Ara Begum* is all about music, songs and singers that are so much an integral part of culture in Bangladesh. There is a mention of scores of artistes and their 'soul-searing rendition' and an appeal towards 'preserving their music.' *Rafi and life as a wisp of smoke* is a piece of eulogy on the immortal music maker and his contemporaries.

Away from Bangladesh, the man Nefita Reyes or the poet Neruda had 'fought in his poetry.' There was an intermingling of his poetry

and the country's politics, the destruction of beautiful Chile through death, killing and suicide. This is there in the essay *Pablo Neruda, spring and cherry trees*.

Nissim Ezekiel: poetry in time and space draws attention to a descendant of the Bani Israel clan of Jews, a Marathi who crafts poetry



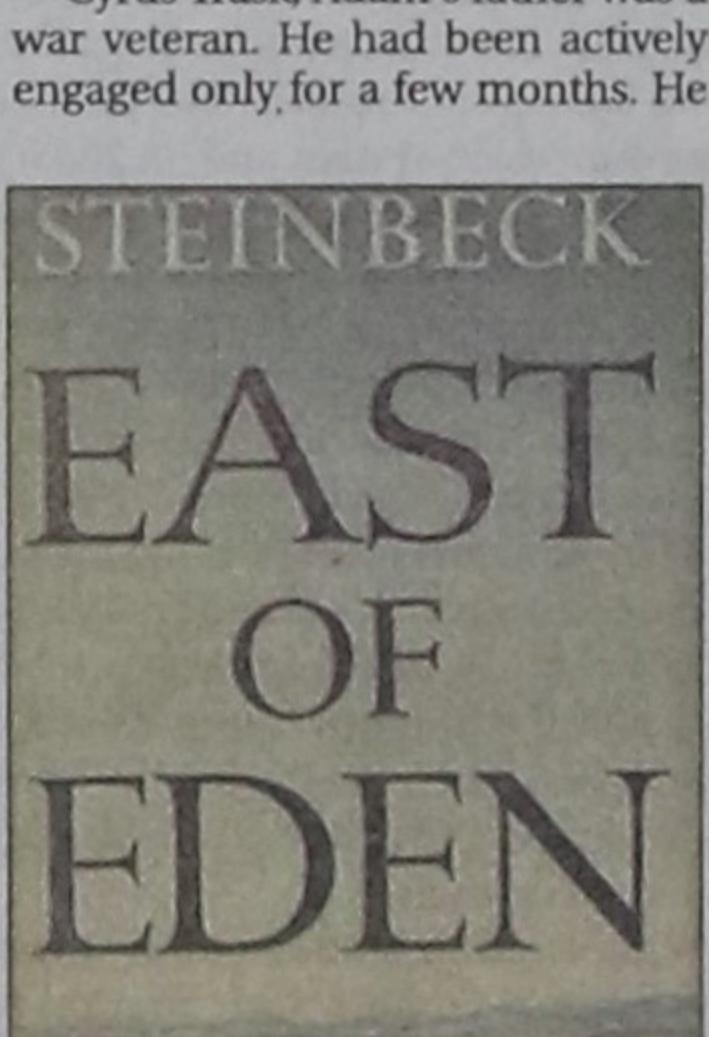
Impressions
Bangladesh 1975 and Other Writings
Syed Badrul Ahsan
Wessex Press (Wantage) Ltd
Oxfordshire

in the English language --- for poetry for him goes beyond frontiers. He has been called the 'poet-laureate of the ordinary.'

With a definition of beauty --- charm, grace and deep emotion is the content on Reflections on beautiful women. And *The People's Princess*, six years after Paris, is

just as physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or malformed eggs can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul?

Cyrus Trask, Adam's father was a war veteran. He had been actively engaged only for a few months. He



lost one leg and returned home. Then he taught himself about warfare so thoroughly that he began to believe that he had been there for the whole of World War-I. He began to write to the secretary of war and gradually got himself a top position in the government. After his death Charles and Adam inherited lump sum money from their father but

were never at peace with the money for doubts over their father's honesty. Charles stayed back on the farm in Connecticut and it was Adam who moved to Salinas Valley with Cathy.

Cathy hated Adam with the intensity of an animal. And Adam loved her blindly. When Cathy became pregnant against her wishes she just let the days go until she could move again. Repeatedly she told Adam that she would go away and yet Adam thought it was all her foolish self speaking out. After Cathy had two twin boys she shot Adam on the shoulder and fled. The secret of her whereabouts was known only to Horace, the sheriff and Samuel Hamilton. They promised each other that this secret would not go beyond them for it could ruin the lives of the new born twins. How could they let the twins know that there mother was working in a brothel and had five to six regular customers? Cathy, the adulteress was vicious enough to poison Fay, the owner of the brothel after the old woman called Cathy her daughter.

Charles Trask dies leaving fifty-thousand cash money for Cathy. It was like new window opening for Adam. He wonders if this is the answer to his son Caleb looking so much like Charles. However he still loves Cathy and wants to give her the inheritance hoping that she might become a bit human, might give up the brothel and accept her children. He reasons on the thoughts,

"Saints spring from soil. There is no springboard to philanthropy like a bad conscience." He continues to

hope that Cathy will mend her ways. The lives of the Trasks, Hamiltons, Cathy and Fay in Salinas Valley weave in to an intricate, mind engrossing tapestry. It is a poignant saga of Adam's search for love and his struggles to come to terms with the twisted turns of fate. Cathy, to whom love and kindness never found meanings is surprised to find an emptiness inside her when her own son comes to see her in the brothel. She is surprised that she is even scared off.

The characters in this story are palpably real. Mind blowing windows seem to open one after another as the reader glimpses into the thoughts and actions of the characters. The reader gets to wonder how a writer can build up the story with so many elaborate details. The story is a finely organized and satisfying assemblage of the things that matter; among them family life, childhood, debt and obligations, loyalty, imagination, faith, hope, desire, innocence and guilt. *East of Eden* is a complete story that spans the history of USA from the Civil War to World War-I. The story holds glittering vignettes of a Californian small town life to a vivid picture of a growing nation. In *East of Eden* the author holds time and space with his breathtaking account of the intractability of human nature and his plots unfold with surprising and thought provoking life axioms. John Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

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Tulip Chowdhury writes poetry and fiction and is a teacher.

Of hazel eyes and button noses

Tulip Chowdhury revisits an old tale

EAST OF EDEN is described as Steinbeck's most ambitious novel. It is the story of two American families as they settle down in the Salinas Valley, North California. This is the story of the Trasks and the Hamiltons and their interwoven life. The story holds a rich assortment of diverse characters. As one reads the story the characters seem to open up with new faces in every conceding chapter. The reader is bound to be amazed at how different people can be; how docile or cruel, how easy going or a hard a nut, how loving and yet wise. Throughout the story the relationships among the amazing characters are perfectly articulated.

Samuel Hamilton came from Ireland with his wife and settled down in Salinas Valley. He came there, full blown and hearty, full of inventions and energy. He farmed his land and was also a blacksmith. People came to hear his talk about poetry and philosophy that were going on outside the Salinas Valley. He had nine children, all healthy and rosy. And he delivered them with his own hands. In fact he was so gentle with the deliveries that people from all around often preferred to call him for delivering their babies rather than go to the doctor. Yet this man also was the best friend to all his neighbors in time of need.

Liza Hamilton, Samuel's wife, her apple cheeks flaming moved like a caged leopard in her home. After presenting her beloved husband with nine children she was a firm believer in a woman's strength and vitality where a family was con-

cerned. She was up on her feet throughout the day and the darkness of the night found her tired body on the bed, blissfully happy to have lived another good day from God.

Cathy Ames, Adam Trask's wife was her husband's prized possession. Adam found her on his doorstep, beaten and bruised. He took her in and never asked her where she had come from. Pretty, tiny and delicate Cathy was not like other women. Her eyes were hazel, widely set and the nose was a button nose, set like a doll's. The mouth was curved and sweet. Yet there was something unfathomable about her. You wanted to know her, felt little close to her and yet something seemed to set a warning bell. The eyes of Cathy had no message, no communication of any kind. There was nothing recognizable behind them. They were not human eyes; as if a hidden animal lurched behind them. One long look at the eyes, the idle hands lying on the lap, the curved fingers; her childlike shoulders, her delicate frame; and you would feel as if a goose was walking over your grave. Yet you would be drawn to her as man is drawn to a sea despite knowing that there are unknown dangers hidden in its depth. She was a soul that did not hesitate to burn her parents for the simple reason that they had stood on her way when she wanted leave her home.

Reflecting on Cathy, Steinbeck writes, "I believe there are monsters born in the world to humble parents. And

were never at peace with the money for doubts over their father's honesty.

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AT A GLANCE

City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi
William Dalrymple
Flamingo

An old novel, it is nevertheless rather timeless in its exposition of life in the Indian capital. Humorous and serious, in that order, the book brings to light the variegated life which has always defined the alleys and streets of the city. There are too portraits of the powerful and influential.



Aditiya Dolly
Ed. Rashid Haider
Shomoy Prokashon

Dolly Anwar ought to have lived, as this work on her life and achievements so amply hints at. She died young in unfortunate manner. But as long as she lived, she did so in dignity and with all the determination to bring a touch of class to her performances in movies. It is a good read and a deeply saddening one too.

Bitter Fruit: The Very Best of Saadat Hasan Manto
Ed, trans Khalid Hasan
Penguin Books

Manto hardly needs any introduction. Here, in a very long time, you have a compendium of his works before you. There are the stories here; and there are too his analyses of personalities and themes. Khalid Hasan's translations are captivating and keep you riveted to the book.



Learning to Reach Health for All
Ed. Jon E. Rohde
The University Press Limited

The title explains it all. The question of health has always been a paramount one in Bangladesh. And in this excellent work, thoroughly edited by Rohde, come the analyses of the situation. The goal is to produce healthy men and women all around. That is explained in a variety of ways.

A timeless story
Nusrat Jahan Pritom enjoys a tale

WHEN the book review editor asked me to get some book, I was at a loss.