

The long road one politician has travelled

Syed Badrul Ahsan finds a new work pretty intriguing

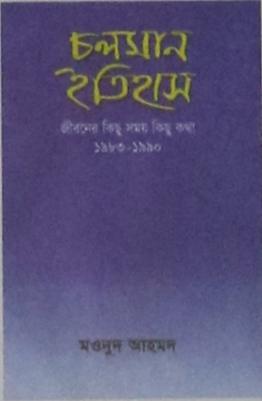
ARE is the politician who has been part of nearly every government in Bangladesh. And in this rare Moudud Ahmed certainly holds prominent space. His career took off in the late 1960s, when as a young lawyer just back from London, he found himself drawn to the Agartala Conspiracy Case as part of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's defence team. In subsequent years, at least for a while, he remained close to the man who would make history as Bangabandhu and come to be revered as the father of Bangladesh. But Moudud Ahmed was never part of the Awami League government and indeed soon discovered, to his dismay, that the very principles of democracy and human liberty he had been waging battle for were being put at risk by the very politicians who had led Bengalis to freedom from Pakistan in 1971. Mujib was irate at discovering that Moudud had come to the legal defence of leftwing political elements who, in the former's view, were subversives intent on undermining the state.

And then came the state of emergency in December 1974. Within hours, Moudud had been arrested and whisked off to prison. As he narrates the story, the move by the government left even some leading figures of the government (and among them were Mansur Ali and Kamal Hossain) surprised. It soon transpired, though, that it was Bangabandhu himself who had ordered Moudud's arrest. That effectively was the end of Moudud's association with the Awami League

government. He had never been a member of the Awami League, but his political inclinations, beginning with his days as a young Bengali studying for the Bar in London in the 1960s, had approximated the Awami League's belief in secular democracy. In London, Moudud was part of a group clandestinely involved in giving shape to an intellectual movement directed at securing East Pakistan's freedom from the rest of the country. Mohammad Ali Jinnah had forged in the 1940s. It was a tentative affair; and on return home, Moudud Ahmed plunged into organizing a viable defence for an incarcerated Mujib. It was not an easy job in the initial stages. Begum Fazilatunnessa Mujib, wary of Moudud and everyone else who offered to help, needed to be convinced that there were indeed friends of her husband's ready to stand up for him. Begum Mujib had every reason to be cautious, for at that point in time Mujib's friends and relatives had as good as shunned the family because of fear of Pakistan's intelligence agencies.

Moudud Ahmed's portrayal of how legal defence for the accused in the Agartala case was organized makes instructive reading. He retells the story of how Thomas Williams QC was persuaded to join the team, an act that swiftly led to a good number of Bengali lawyers, till then loth to come to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's defence, eventually and eagerly putting up the case for the Awami League leader. The rest of the story is today an established

historical reality. Moudud Ahmed was part of the team which accompanied Bangabandhu to the round table conference in Rawalpindi on 24 February 1969 and from that



Cholohan Itishash
Jiboner Kichhu Shomoy Kichhu Kotha
1983-1990
Moudud Ahmed
The University Press Limited

vantage point had occasion to observe incidents and events not many are aware of even today. General Yahya Khan's attempt, even as he prepared to take over from an increasingly dissipating Ayub Khan, to strike a deal with Mujib is one of

the many snippets Moudud throws up in this work.

Cholohan Itishash goes beyond the period it chooses to confine itself in, namely, 1983-1990. The writer travels back to his childhood, recalls his family's days in Calcutta and especially during the riots of 1946. As an adult, he renders poignant the tragedy his and his wife Hasna live through as their sons go through illness, with one of them eventually succumbing to it. The father in Moudud Ahmed comes alive. For the reader, it is vicarious torment which comes with a telling of the tale. And then there is politics, and after that more politics. Moudud Ahmed's foray into 'Bangladeshi nationalism' through association with the country's first military ruler is quite frankly an insight into the many devious methods dictators employ in their bid to claim the political high ground. Moudud praises Zia and then makes it clear the general left him, eventually, feeling hurt. As deputy prime minister in the Zia regime, Moudud wages constant turf wars with the likes of Shah Azizur Rahman, the titular prime minister. It is always, or seemingly, Shah Aziz who has the dictator's ears. A time soon arrives when Zia shows Moudud the door. Amazingly, only the previous night, Zia and his wife had been having dinner with Moudud and Hasna!

Moudud Ahmed devotes a considerable span of his book on the evils that accrue from military rule. He castigates the legacy as it has developed in Pakistan. He speaks of

the times when he was led, blindfolded, by military intelligence into the cantonment and quizzed on allegations of corruption against him. And this happens under the Ershad dispensation, only months before Moudud was to link up with him through ditching Begum Zia and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party she led following the fall of the elected presidency of Justice Abdus Sattar. The writer is unsparing in his criticism of General Ershad and yet somehow does not convince readers of the rationale behind his turn toward the very man whose goons have put him through physical as well as psychological suffering.

These are the stories, one after the other, as they define an intriguing political character in Bangladesh's history. Moudud Ahmed veered away from secular politics during the final phase of Bangabandhu's administration and then clearly went for a reinvention of himself as a rightist following the regressive happenings of 7 November 1975. And then his disenchantment with Zia grew. Justice Sattar did not impress him after May 1981, but he did look forward to Begum Zia's coming into politics. She was then ditched for Ershad. And then he came back to her fold.

If ever there was a book arousing readers' curiosity in the life and times of the writer, this is it. You may not agree with Moudud Ahmed at all, but you cannot resist reading him.

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AT A GLANCE



Bangladesher Lokonatok
Bishoy O'Angk Boichitro
Simon Zakaria
Bangla Academy

Simon Zakaria's interest in Bangladesh's folklore, especially the rich background it springs from, has always been a given. In this exhaustive work, he goes into the details of that background and comes up with all those truths that actually substantiate the cultural history of the country. A very stimulating read you have here.

Crossings
ULAB Journal of English Studies
Vol. 1 No. 1 Fall 2008
Department of English and Humanities
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh



For those who have long felt the need for a scholarly journal on literature, this is it. ULAB and particularly its English department has certainly done a very good job in bringing to literature students and buffs the varied dimensions of a subject that has always aroused passion of a definite sort. The next issue should be even better.



Amar Golpoguchchho
Jafar Ahmed Chowdhury
Botomul

The writer is a distinguished civil servant and yet complements that role through his deep attachment to matters literary. He has earlier written on his travels through various countries and continents. He has commented on issues. And now, in this exciting collection of stories, he takes you closer to emotions and sensibilities you thought existed no more.

Historicising 1971 Genocide
State versus Person
Imtiaz Ahmed
The University Press Limited



That murder and mayhem are not merely the work of individuals or groups, that systematized killings often spring from the core of the modern state is the stuff Imtiaz Ahmed builds on here. It is a simple work in itself. Even so, it examines the premeditated manner in which the Pakistan state machinery went into bloody action against Bengalis in 1971.

An achingly moving story

A tale makes Tulip Chowdhury weep for joy

IT was 1958 and Landon, a seventeen-year old boy, was growing up with the usual ups and downs that growing years hold. In his hometown, in Beaufort, North California, Landon had already dated a girl or two. The last person he had expected to enter his life was Jamie Sullivan, daughter of the town's Baptist minister, Hegbert. Jamie was seventeen and went round with a Bible in her hand. She seemed to be perfectly content to live her life set away from others. When others were having parties she was going round orphanages. When others were enjoying baseball games she was out rescuing hurt animals. Yet by a streak of chance Landon found himself very much involved with this girl, a girl whom all other friends labeled as "strange".

Left without a partner Landon found himself asking Jamie as his date for the school dance. Jamie was too polite to refuse even though he had asked her on the last hour. At the dance Landon was about to get into a fight with a school bully Eric, boyfriend of his ex-girl friend. It was Jamie who came into the scene and settled the dispute in such a way that Eric left the scene smiling. This incident was the beginning of Landon's discovering how special Jamie was behind that façade of plainness.

Jamie was always wearing her hair in a tight bun and she had on her old brown sweater. She seemed to be ignorant where appearance was concerned. She was more concerned about how she could help a blind man cross the street or to help an old woman run her home. This was also the girl who

had lost her mother when she was an infant. This also was the girl who took care of her widowed father. Her father had written a play for Christmas and she wanted to put it up for the church. She asked Landon to play the lead role with her. She was to be an angel and he was to be the main character in the play. She tells Landon that it was a



A Walk to Remember
Nicholas Sparks
Bantam Books

very special Christmas for her and she wanted to please her father also. Landon finds it difficult to refuse although he was aware that his friends might tease him for being in the play with Jamie. But he could not, not after seeing how nice she was and how kind.

On the day the play was staged, Jamie looked very beautiful in the long flowing dress and her long hair flowing down to her waist. Landon was surprised that she kept herself so simple when she could look so gorgeous. As Landon looked at her he realized this was a girl who was just special in her own ways. Jamie was a girl who saved her allowances to buy a basketball for the orphans or she would drop the money in the church basket on Sunday. She installed empty jars in many shops for donations. And she took three or four days to collect them before Christmas. She did not have a car and she took all these troubles walking or moving around by bus. Her good deeds were not limited to people. If she ever came across a wounded animal, she would try to help that too. Opossums, squirrels, dogs, cats, frogs...it didn't matter to her. And without even realizing it, Landon was falling in love with the girl who did not seem to fit in into the usual crowd of their age, a girl who was different from the others.

Landon came from an affluent family and was aloof from the small details of life. Good things of life came to him easily and he did not have time to think of the other less fortunate people. But after knowing Jamie he found a profound change coming over him. Jamie seemed to set him on the march to a caring, God fearing man. Landon started to see Jamie everyday. She agreed to go out laughing and saying that she will go out providing he does not fall in love with her. He felt as if the sun did not set properly if he did not see her though out the day. He started to take her out to special places, places Jamie did not dream of going to. He

cared very little about what the others would say. As he began to know her, he found how caring she was, how deeply she loved God and how she counted her blessings all the time. Most of all she loved people and was always trying to help those who were in need. It seemed to Landon that God had sent a living angel in Jamie. And whenever he commented on her activities she would say,

"God has plans for everybody and I am just trying out carry out his plans..."

Landon was extremely happy and was thinking what a bliss life was. His mother supported him for Jamie and loved her from the moment they met. Then one day when Landon finally had the words out to Jamie that he was in love with her she reminded him that she had told him at the very beginning not to fall in love with me. She added,

"Landon I am dying..."

She disclosed that her life was a short notice to her, that she had a rare form of leukemia. Landon thought that what he was hearing was a bad dream. He could not accept that life could be so cruel to two people who had just found love. However the truth struck home as Jamie's health began to give away and she could no longer go out of her home. Landon now began to stay by her side and thus begins a beautiful love story, a story that ends with tears and yet the beauty of loving and giving breaks the heart the reader. Landon reaches his manhood through the pains of his love. He does not leave a stone unturned where Jamie's last wishes and dreams are. Landon's father, a busy politician who previously had

little time for his son now moves closer and hospitalizes Jamie so that she can get the best care as excruciating pain ravaged her body. Landon is constantly by her side to share her tears. He cries when she smiles her sweetest smile and thanks the Lord for giving her some one to love and be loved back. The last walk with Jamie comes when she walks down the aisle of the church in which they get married. A marriage is supposed to last in happiness or sorrows till the last breath is out. Yet, how many days do Landon and Jamie have till they have to say good bye to the wonderful life, a life so wrapped up in their love?

A more beautiful love story could not have been written. The story, written in first person narration makes the reader feel as if the words of the heart are being narrated with the unfolding of the love story. Sparks throws himself into the voices and hearts of his characters. Reveries and doubts, hopes and dreams are detailed with patience and concentration revealing the ways humans beings can be formed and nurtured. Just when you think what is coming the story moves on and you are astonished at how unpredictable storms can disrupt life. It is not often that you feel you are transformed by a story. However, this story does make you feel as if new axioms are born to you, as if you have found new strings to life. This is a story that is achingly moving and will have one weeping for the joy and tragedy of it all.

Tulip Chowdhury is a writer and teacher.

Dickens in Morocco, sort of

Charles R. Larson spots a catalogue of tensions

IF Charles Dickens had visited Morocco, he might have written *Secret Son*, the tortured story of the twenty-year separation of a father and his son, set to the relevant social issues of Morocco today: young people with diminished expectations; class, coincidence, intrigue, and slum life. Any connections to the great Victorian novelist end there. Moreover, I was almost always more aware of the social and political issues confronting Laila Lalami's characters than their humanity.

Though the novel's protagonist, Youssef El Mekki, grew up in a slum and has managed to gain admission to a university, he realizes that his prospects are extremely limited. Few jobs will be available for him and his friends when they graduate. Protests at the university lead to police brutality. Youssef considers escaping to Europe but understands that he would have to do so illegally. His mother is hard-working and attentive to his needs and his aspirations. Additionally, she has told him that his father died while he was still an infant.

Then coincidence turns Youssef's life upside-down. (Think of *Pip* in *Great Expectations*.) His

father is very much alive, though he has never known of his son's existence. Youssef's parents were never married. His mother has lied to him, clearly to prevent the pain that she has foreseen will result if father and son are united. Youssef ignores her warnings, almost renounces her, and takes up residence in one of his father's opulent flats.

The contrast between the two worlds is stark. Poverty and slum life are replaced by excess—more money than Youssef has even known, expensive clothes, and young women who are suddenly interested in him because of his opportunities. His father is a cut-throat capitalist; Youssef becomes the son he has always wanted, since his legitimate wife has born him only a daughter. Interestingly, that daughter, Amal, is every bit as rebellious as her half-brother. Her life of privilege has culminated in university education in the United States. Though half-brother and half-sister never meet, Lalami draws a number of significant parallels between the two of them. Then, to everyone's surprise, Youssef's father attempts disastrously to assemble a new "family" with both of his children and his wife.

What is perhaps too inevitable happens: Youssef is not accepted by his father's wife, but tossed back to his earlier state, living with his mother in the slum. These events occur at roughly the mid-point of the story. Mentioning these events in no way preempts the rather amazing, if somewhat unbelievable, ending of Lalami's novel. Youssef is paralyzed by the sudden turn of events, close to a mental breakdown, when the author twists her plot in a new direction: the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

The seed for this shift was planted much earlier. Like another recent Moroccan novel, *Leaving Tangier*, by Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Secret Son* provides a fair bit of detail recording the political unrest in the country, especially the way it impacts on the lives of young men and women who yearn for a better life than their country is able to provide. Moreover, the fundamentalists know that young men, especially, are vulnerable, that they can be used to bring forth rapid political change if the disaffected can be convinced to join their cause.

Lalami can't resist. She brings in George Bush's poster-boy torturers at Abu Ghraib, one of the darkest



Secret Son
Laila Lalami
Algonquin

moments in America's recent history. After a catalog of unresolved tensions between the West and Middle Eastern nations, the narrative includes the following paragraph: "The last series of photographs were from Iraq. Men, naked and barefoot, without faces or names, their hands cuffed to beds, rails, and doors, standing in their own urine or sitting in their own

feces. Their heads were covered with black sandbags or with pink, frilly women's underwear. One stood on a box, wires taped to his hands, his arms spread out in a crucifix pose. Another was made to bend, as if he were in ruku', while a soldier sat on a chair in front of him. Men were piled like stones in pyramids of varying heights or dragged on a leash like animals."

I do not object to references to Abu Ghraib in *Secret Son*. America needs to earn back the trust of much of the world. Rather, I believe that social and the personal dimensions of Lalami's novel (so often unified in Dickens' works) do not quite mesh. The story—which has had strong narrative power—suddenly shifts when characters begin to act inconsistently with the way they were presented earlier.

Still, Lalami has impressive talent. A collection of her short stories published three years ago was widely praised. Like so many writers who begin with short stories and then move on to the longer narrative, she has yet to master the novel's form.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University in Washington, D.C.

It is all about movies

Subrata Kumar Das appreciates a journal

A PART from a preservation of 2,169 films in its vaults and 3,053 books, 14,575 photographs, 6,677 posters, 1,986 screenplays, 9,950 film journals and other film related objects and documents in its library, Bangladesh Film Archive (BFA) has set a new record for itself by publishing an annual journal focusing on film and film-related issues.

The first issue published in 2008 included eight articles, an interview and a film script. The second issue published very recently encompasses eleven articles, one interview and one film script. Both the issues have been able to include one writing each from West Bengal, India. The Indian contributors are Sureshwar Bhowmick, research scientist of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, and Partha Raha, Curator of Cinema Centenary Bhaban, West Bengal. Such inclusion will surely make the magazine rich in content and in a multiculturalism point of view.

Most of the essays included in the volumes are by people who are somewhat authorities in this field. Essays on the films of Satyajit Roy by Nadir Zunayed and on background music by Syed Babab Ali Arzu in the first issue draw attention as do essays on censorship in films by Jamil Osman. Zahir Raihan's Films by Ahmed Aminul Islam in the second issue comes to readers' attention. Saibal Chowdhury has written elaborately on *Dhruopodi*, the cine magazine of the country.

Four films that have been meticulously reviewed in the issues are *Antorjatra*, *Nirontor*, *Suryokonya* and *Chitra Nodir Pare*. These highly acclaimed films have been focused on in detail from many aspects in the articles. It will surely help general film watchers to understand them in a more pragmatic way. These reviews, by Khondakar Shakhawat Ali, Prof Shahin Kabir, Bidhan Riberu and Ashrafi Binte Akram, are worth mentioning.

English language articles included in the second issue are 'Initiation into Film Making in Bangladesh: From Past to Present' by Muhammad Sajjad Ahsan and 'Reading Colours in Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours Trilogy*' by Humayun Farid. The two writers should be given special thanks as these will pave the way for writing in

English on films in the country. Such English writings will help us place our knowledge of films in a broader perspective.

Dr. Sajedul Awwal, executive editor of the journal, has enriched the issues through his interview of Baby Islam, the camera artist, and Subhash Dutta, the film director. The tête-



Bangladesh Film Archive Journal
Ed Dr. Mohammad Jahangir Hossain
Bangladesh Film Archive

à-tête has brought to light many of the unseen or less seen facets of the film domain in Bangladesh.

The issues have included articles by Dr. Mohammad Jahangir Hossain, Jatiyo Smriti Sangrahasalar Bhumika (Role of Film Archive in Preserving National Memorials) and 'Bangladesh Film Archiver Sampratik Karjokrom' (Recent Activities of Bangladesh Film Archive) are well written, with a plethora of information.

We are hopeful that film researchers and all professionals involved in film domain in Bangladesh and outside the country will feel interested in contributing to these journals. The two English articles included in the second issue will open up a wider horizon for readers of the journal.

Subrata Kumar Das is a teacher and essayist.