

Human chemistry in urban ambience

Farida Shaikh goes through an amazing maze of life

DURING the later period of the twentieth century, one work which gathered tremendous popularity in Bengali literature and reached the status of a classic was *Kato Ajanaray*. It was a huge achievement for young, nineteen-year old writer Shankar. The work was first serialized in 1953 in the periodical *Desh*.

The book is dedicated to the memory of Noel Frederick Barnwell. He was the last English barrister of Kolkata High Court and first came to Bengal on a military assignment during World War I. Subsequently, he began to practise in the High Court. He is the main character in the novel.

Shankar was at a loss with the sudden death of Barnwell. He wanted to honor his mentor. At first, he wanted to build a statue. This was not possible. Next, he wanted to name a road after him. When this did not happen, Shankar decided to write a book about him. This was Shankar's first novel, and according to some critics, the most 'stimulating' one.

In Kolkata, Shankar took up his first job as a clerk to barrister Barnwell who gave him, Mani Shankar Mukherji, the portable name Sankar and introduced him to the corporate world, and to literary circles. He helped me to familiarize myself with everybody - from the simple shoeshine boy to the senior executive.

In 1959, a cult movie and theatre based on the novel was made portraying Karuna Banerjee, the legendary actor of Satyajit Roy's *Pather Pachali* trilogy.

Shankar was among 50 writers who were in London for the April 20-23 book fair this year which focused on India. Commenting on his first novel, he said, "... It's my wish to see that book translated into English one day."

In 1962, Shankar produced *Chouronghee* on a rainy day at the

water logged crossing of Central Avenue, Dalhousie, a busy business district in Kolkata. The novel is set in the huge hotel Shahjahan. Even though it became a bestseller, the gossip was, "Oh, he is an illiterate. What does he know about writing?"

Chouronghee chronicles life in a hotel called Shahjahan and the bar Muntaz. "Everything comes to the old hotel, either to the sumptuous guest rooms or to the terrace where the staff live. Love and death are never far away." Several people whose lives came together were in the suites and restaurants of the hotel. The story is a microcosm of life in post-independence Kolkata in the 1950s and predates Arthur Hailey's *Hotel* by three years.

The book has been translated into Russian, besides many Indian languages. Literary critics now claim that 'this half-century old novel translated from the Bengali might, to many eyes, supply more unashamed, reader-transporting enjoyment than any other fiction of the year,' meaning 2009, at the London Book Fair.

The English translation of *Chouronghee* into *Chouronghee* is by former journalist Arunava Sinha, who won the Vodafone Crossword award 2007 for best translation. One reader's comment on the work: 'I won't be quite alone in claiming that you want to turn the pages, but you do not want the pages to end.'

Shankar in his first book wrote about the familiarity he gathered and the friendship he built while working as a clerk at Temple Chamber situated in the old post office street in Kolkata. His second book is based on the experiences and impressions he had during the period in working as a secretary to the manager of Shahjahan hotel and later on at the reception desk, which is now defunct Spencer's in the central Kolkata neighborhood of Chouronghee.

Shankar's idea of the book

emerged while he was still in the service of Noel Barnwell, 'who stayed for a long time at the Spencer's hotel... and I was a frequent visitor to the hotel. It was through common friends at Spencer's that I came to know what was happening at the Great Eastern Hotel, one of the biggest hotels in the metropolis then. It was from there that my love affair with hotels began.'



Chouronghee Shankar Dey's Publishing Kolkata

Chouronghee, then, is a sequel to his first novel *Kato Ajanaray*, as Noel Frederick Barnwell connects both novels.

On the charismatic central character of the Shahjahan hotel, the writer noted, 'I got the idea to create the debonair Sata Bose, the receptionist, from a railway employee I chanced across. His name was Satya Sadhan Bose and since he had many sahib friends, he refused to be identified by anything but Sata Bose.' Other characters -

the enigmatic hotel manager Marco Polo, the tragic hostess Karabi Guha - attained almost cult status. The novel became a classic.

Pinaki Majumdar turned this novel into a Bengali cine classic portraying the all time suave Bengali hero, Uttam Kumar. Moreover, his other works, *Jana Aranya* and *Sheemabaddha* drew the attention of the legendary Bangla moviemaker Satyajit Ray, whose cinematic talent supercedes, according to some critics, that of the Scandinavian maestro Ingmar Bergman.

Published in June this year, *The Middleman* is the second translation of Shankar's novels by Arunava Sinha. It is a story of young Somnath Banerjee in search of a job during the 1970s in Kolkata, amidst widespread unemployment of the educated.

The Middleman is the highest selling Bengali novel of all time, having crossed the quarter million mark. The difference between *Chouronghee* and *The Middleman* is that, 'the first is a fairy tale and the second is hard reality... Somnath, the protagonist, is like a tired bird from the sky that comes crashing down to earth,' says Shankar. 'The Middleman is the experience of those Bengalis who looked for jobs but couldn't find any. The shift to becoming self-employed is difficult; full of culture clashes.' The writer has elaborated thus: 'Since independence, everything has changed for the worse - freedom brought the humiliation of partition, decadence, industrial slide and moral dilemmas. The weaker sections lost their ideals and began to look at success with suspicion. How can success be achieved through fair means?' said Shankar, explaining the social relevance of the book. 'But I haven't lost heart and I am still a great believer in relationships and extended families,' he said.

Currently Shankar is working on

biographies, and comments... 'It is a new genre, but biographies are not much different from fiction. Lives are more fictional than fiction. It is only that fiction has fictitious characters,' he said.

Sankar's latest biography, *The Unknown Face of Vivekananda - Part I*, has sold more than 89,000 copies, which according to the author is a feat in itself for a biography. 'I am almost through with my Part II and then I will begin work on *The Unknown Face of Aurobindo*.'

The biography will focus on an interesting detail about the revolutionary-turned-spiritualist's personal life - his equation with his wife. 'Aurobindo advertised on the matrimonial columns of newspapers while in Baroda for a suitable partner. And came to Calcutta to marry.'

Shankar, 75, living the diamond years of his life, is a master storyteller - comparable to Charles Dickens whose stories were also about the common and the ordinary set against the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in England, or Victor Hugo, who wrote against the city background of Paris that shaped up the characters of his novel.

Both *Kato Ajanaray* and *Chouronghee* are contemporary historical novels etched in episodes of humour, irony, pain, passion and a zest for life. In the first one, it is a depiction of emerging urban lifestyles seen and heard from the Temple Chamber in Kolkata High Court Building on the old post office street. In the second, it is all about the fast cosmopolitan city society, western ways in an eastern setting with the rambling roles of personalities. Shankar's *Chouronghee* is a read on human chemistry in an urban ambience. It is fascinating, in beautiful Bangla that flows like a running river!

Farida Shaikh is a critic and social analyst.

AT A GLANCE

Notes from a Prison: Bangladesh
Muhuddin Khan Alamgir
The University Press Limited

Muhuddin Khan Alamgir has had quite a few spells in prison. A civil servant turned politician, he has played an influential role in the Awami League and has been known for his assertiveness. In this highly readable work, he focuses on the sad, bad experience he was put through by the military-sustained caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed. It makes you think: Was Bangladesh supposed to be the dungeon Khan speaks of?

Cryptic Verses
Ikhtisad Ahmed
Palok Publishers

This young poet has a future. It is apparent that his education in the West, indeed his presence in the literary ambience of the region, has shaped his thoughts. But those thoughts, in spirit and in essence, happen to revolve around his country and the cultural heritage it has historically based itself on. The poetry is a refreshing read. The English is admirable.

PLANNING DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH
Jafar Ahmed Chowdhury
Asia Publications

Yet one more work from Jafar Ahmed Chowdhury, whose reputation as a civil servant is well known. But more than that, it is his skills as a writer and indeed his fascination for the printed word, that have always drawn people to him. In this new work, he zeroes in on the development issues Bangladesh faces, in the process expressing his views of the way things should be.

The Making of Dr. Phil
Sophia Dembling, Lisa Gutierrez
John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Psychology for many may appear to be a subject difficult to master and hard to digest. But here comes Dr. Phil, through this splendid work on his life and achievements, to tell us that talking about psychology, indeed applying it to real life, can be fascinating. After all, the good doctor's own life has been an endless tale of some of the most interesting things that can happen to an individual armed with determination.

Inhabiting the twilight regions

Muhammad Abdul Hai goes travelling across snow-carpeted landscapes

THE polar regions, for most of us, remain enchanting places, and the very thought of an expedition across the ice-plated expanses ignites tremendous excitement in our imagination. We tend to make a mental picture of being one of those walking on the snow sea, wearing cumbersome thick clothes, boots and gloves, or being in a ship that is thriving on the waters with white snow pieces floating all around.

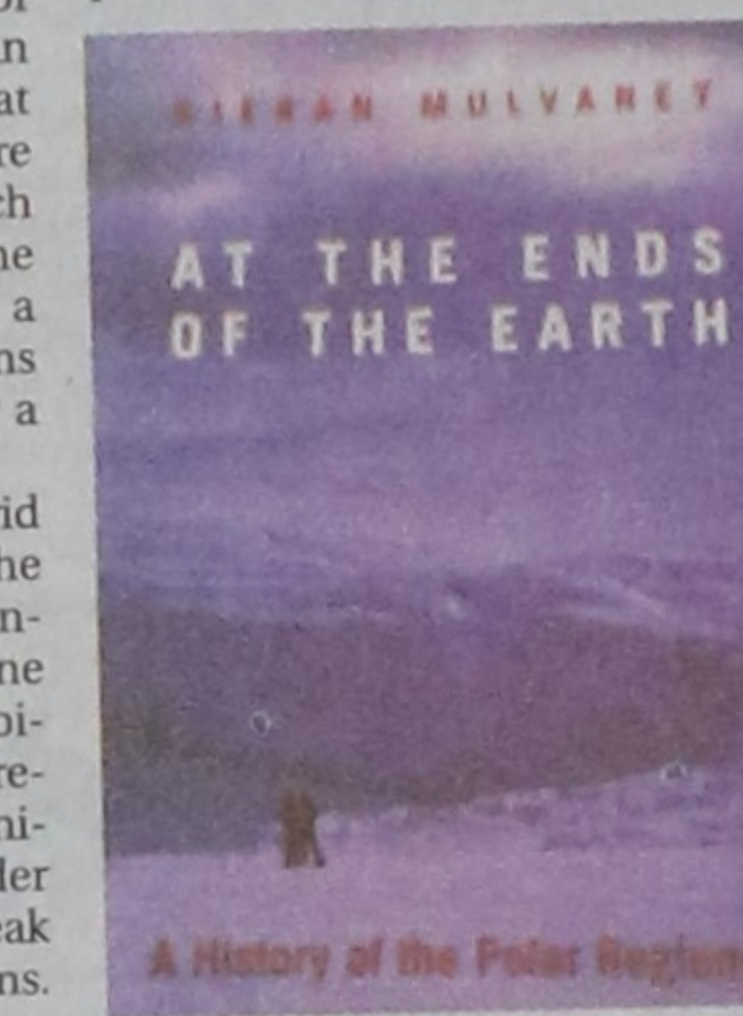
The fascination for these icy regions has been there in many people, some of whom perished while some others returned to tell us of their mind boggling experiences. Kieran Mulvaney, an avid nature explorer, dedicated all his life to the scientific study of the two coldest regions, with the extremely hostile environment they have on offer. Mulvaney has already produced a number of articles on Arctic and Antarctic expeditions, made available to newspapers for publication. He is still a regular contributor for Discovery Channel, and also the founding director of the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society. At the Ends of the Earth is one of the most widely read books ever written on the Arctic and Antarctic regions, and Kieran Mulvaney deserves high appreciation for having made such a rare experience available to readers in the form of a book. The author has finally made the white snow plain of Alaska his permanent abode.

At the Ends of the Earth is an honest record of the geographical, biological, environmental and political history of the two polar zones. The writer has resorted to simple yet graceful prose to interpret his thoughts and feelings being in the vicinity of the all white sea of snow. There is something of an elegant texture in the language that makes it interesting reading. There are a number of references which are thought provoking while some others will give you the feel of a wanderer across the coldest regions of the earth, which is apparently a vast wasteland.

The writer has given a very vivid description of how deflection of the ozone layer is affecting our environment. In the book he defines ozone as being a pale blue gas that is poisonous to humans and yet a pre-necessity for life on earth. O2 signifies two oxygen atoms which under the action of the sun's rays break down, creating free oxygen atoms. These atoms become attracted to existing molecules of oxygen to form ozone. The ultra violet rays split asunder the ozone molecules, but swiftly they reform- these rebuilding of ozone acts as a defensive shield, absorbing much of the sun's ultraviolet radiation before they can reach the ground. So, scientific facts made easy in this book help us understand certain really complicated things. The writer has, with great ease, described the flora and fauna that will make readers more inquisitive

about the mystery lands in the north and south poles.

The book is also an authentic record of the wars waged among nations to acquire their stake in the resourceful lands which once were proud of preserving the pristine



At the Ends of the Earth Kieran Mulvaney Island Press/ Shearwater Books, Washington

beauty of God that displays itself everywhere in the polar regions. Developed countries like the UK, USA, the former Soviet Union and many others had their weather observatories initially; then they

established well-equipped research centres and finally vied for occupying as much land as they could. Alaska promised a staggering twenty billion barrels of liquid gold, and one famous personality even called Alaska "Kuwait" of the Arctic zone. The Argentine-British war over the Falklands has received wide coverage in this book. The Soviet government is also mentioned as having kept pace with the unhealthy competition. The Siberian reserves of oil and natural gas made it convenient for the country to establish heavy industries which over the years led to the pollution of Siberian soil, air and water. So the exploration has given way to widespread exploitation, resulting in the rise of the sea level due to melting of ice, destroying the equilibrium in nature and threatening human habitations in many places around the earth. Whales and seals have drastically been reduced in number. The Alaska water contained about 150,000 sea otters, but by 1911 when hunting of sea otters was banned, the damage was already done - only about 15,000 were believed to survive. Pollution has inflicted the natives of the polar zones (Eskimos and others) with deadly diseases like cancer. These natives, before invasions by developed countries, used to spend a busy time round the year. The whale hunting season for them was quite short, yet there was always something to keep them engaged. In

the entire period before the whale hunting season, they used to make a lot of preparations, and as soon as the season was over they used to indulge in various celebrations.

The first few pages of the book give a brief history of the discovery of the different islands at the extreme ends of the earth. The writer does it in amazingly luxurious prose. He has also made a meticulous attempt to discuss elaborately the similarities and differences between the Arctic and Antarctic zones which readers will find interesting to note. The brief explanation as to how fish survive in the freezing water is quite fascinating. The author narrates that the fish of that part of the world naturally evolve a kind of antifreeze which is a mixture of sugar and proteins that interferes with the formation of ice crystals in their blood and lowers the temperature at which the blood freezes by about 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, enabling the fish to function even as the water above them turn into ice.

Kieran Mulvaney has observed everything minutely and has given elaborate descriptions of whatever interested him. Hence the book is quite rich in terms of scientific knowledge and readers will definitely be more knowledgeable and at the same time draw immense pleasure out of reading it.

Muhammad Abdul Hai is Principal, ABC International School, Narayanganj.

It is all about rights...

Pias Majid commends the Bengali translation of a global document

THE UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007 by a majority of 144 states in favour, 4 votes against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) and 11 abstentions (Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burundi, Colombia, Georgia, Kenya, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Samoa and Ukraine). Earlier the declaration had been translated in 15 state as well as indigenous languages. Those languages include Crimean Tatar, Danish, Greenlandic, Ilokano (spoken in the Philippines), Italian, Kichua (spoken in the Andes), Kweyol (spoken in Saint Lucia), Guarani (spoken in Paraguay), Maori (spoken in New Zealand), Maya (spoken in Central America), Nahuatl (Mexico), Filipino and Portuguese. Fortunately enough, a Bengali translation of this much cherished treatise appeared at the Ekushey February earlier this year. Banglayan, the publishing house focused on giving voice to the fresh zeal of youth, has published this bilingual book containing both the original English texts and its translation in Bengali. In Bengali, the declaration is titled as *Adibasi Janogoner Odhikar Bishayak Jati*

Shangher Ghosana. Freelance media activist and writer Audity Falguni has accomplished the arduous task. The adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples or the efforts to draft a specific instrument dealing with the protection of indigenous peoples worldwide date back over two decades. In 1982 the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) with the mandate to develop a set of minimum standards that would protect indigenous peoples. The whole declaration contains 46 articles and highly concentrates on third-generation human rights, including the right to self-determination and other agendas. For example, article 3 of the Declaration states: *Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.* Article 5 emphasizes the indigenous peoples' right to maintain and strengthen their political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.



Adibasi Janogoner Odhikar Bishayak Jati Shangher Ghosana Translation Audity Falguni

The declaration acts as a pivotal document against forced dispossession of the indigenous peoples from their lands, territories or resources (Article 8) or forced assimilation or destruction of their cultural values or ethnic identities. Relocation without free, prior or informed consent of the indigenous people is forbidden (Article 10). The instrument, in addition,

upholds the rights of the indigenous people to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies (Article 12). Article 13 highlights their right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures... a really unique provision! Article 14 speaks of the indigenous peoples' right to establish and control education systems in their own languages while Article 16 goes for even having them establish their own media in their own languages along with having access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination. Article 22 underscores the necessity of paying special attention to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities. Provisions for non-discrimination in the arena of education, employment and other socio-economic conditions (Article 21), right to practice the traditional health and medicine system (Article 24), right to traditionally owned lands, territories and resources (Article 26), recognition of customary laws of the indigenous people by nation state (Article 27), denial of military activities in the lands or territories of indigenous peoples

(Article 30) are some other glaring aspects of this holistic instrument.

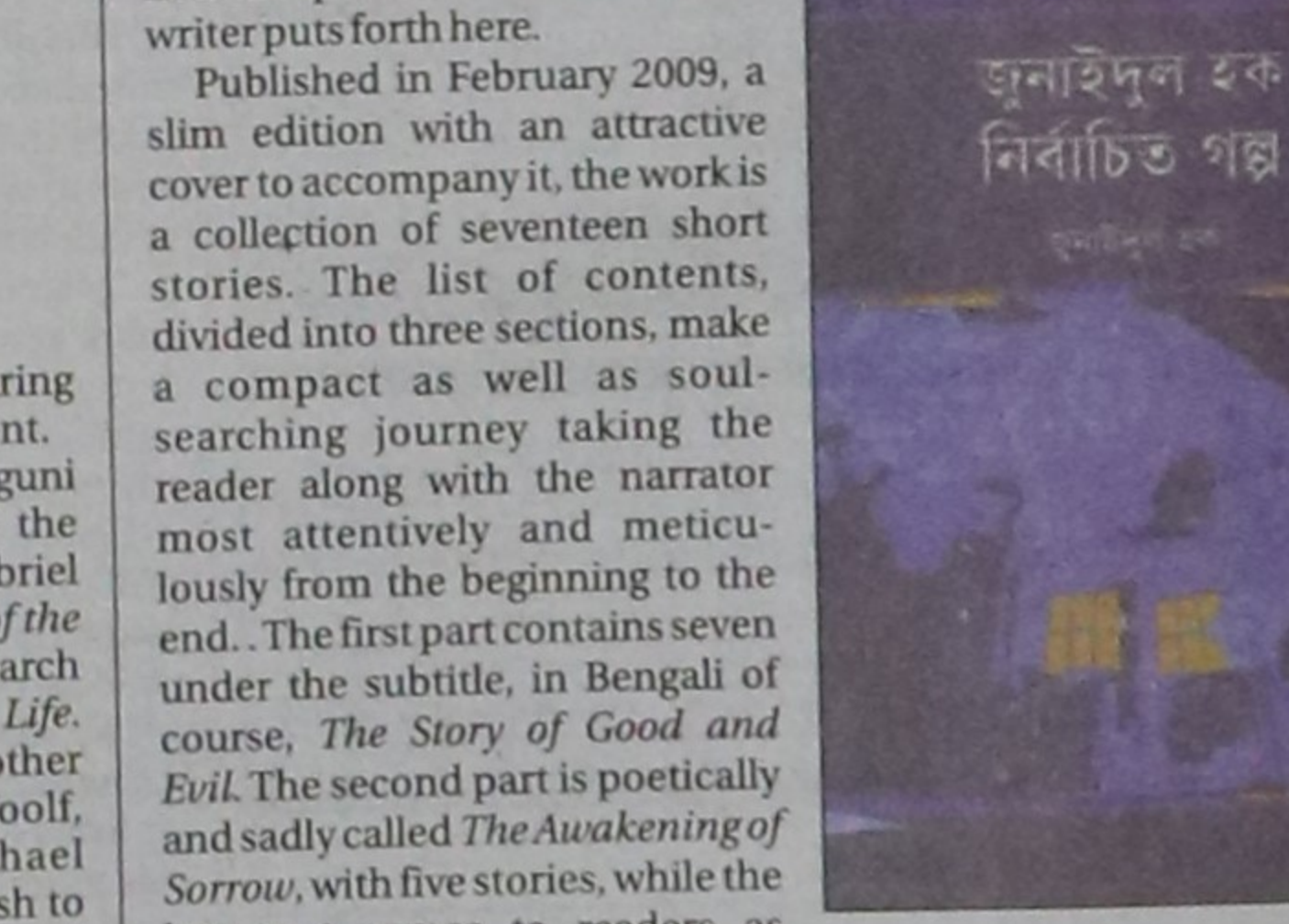
As a translator, Audity Falguni has earlier translated one of the most difficult of novels by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* as also the painter March Chagall's autobiography *My Life*. She has also translated some other write-ups, from Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Michael Foucault and others from English to Bengali with ease. Her pieces of translation manifest sheer brilliance and smoothness. In comparison to those complicated literary tasks, translation of this slim Declaration naturally caused her much less pain. The translation is lucid but the publishing house could have been more caring in terms of printing quality. The cover design by artist Shibu Kumar Sheel, however, appears well in black and white. Thanks are also due indigenous photographer Khameen for his photograph used on the book cover. This bilingual book will be highly useful for academicians, lawyers, researchers, human rights activists, government officials, development practitioners, students and indigenous people.

Pias Majid, a young poet, has graduated in history from the University of Jahangirnagar.

Exploring human nature

Md. Shafiqul Islam goes reading good stories

WRITING short story is a challenging art. Junaidul Haque always prefers to take on this genre, which demands the writer to be more concise and to the point than other fictional prose narratives. And he accomplishes the task with consummate dexterity. Nirbachito Golpo by Junaidul Haque offers up impeccable entertainment, to a point where the reader enjoys the entirety of the book page by page. It is a saga of passionate unrequited love, friendship and loneliness that the writer puts forth here. Published in February 2009, a slim edition with an attractive cover to accompany it, the work is a collection of seventeen short stories. The list of contents, divided into three sections, make a compact as well as soul-searching journey taking the reader along with the narrator most attentively and meticulously from the beginning to the end. The first part contains seven under the subtitle, in Bengali of course, *The Story of Good and Evil*. The second part is poetically and sadly called *The Awakening of Sorrow*, with five stories, while the last part comes to readers as *Another Afflicted Wonder*, containing altogether five stories. Junaidul Haque bases his stories on nostalgia, loneliness, remembrances of the past and the glorious War of Liberation. Most of his protagonists are tall, dark, handsome, well bred, highly educated, cultured and above all irresistible. Some of his characters are reminiscent of Eliot's Prufrock, but he does not mean them to be like him. The main character of the story *Afflicted With Wonder*, Yousuf loves to study literature, watch cricket and listen to Tagore songs. A serious student of literature with fervent passion for D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Aldous Huxley, Junaidul Haque portrays Yousuf as virile, manly and passionate. The love



Nirbachito Golpo Junaidul Haque Pathak Shamabesh

cal style and structure. Some of them focus on the familiar events and problems of the last decades of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first. The stories must be read for the trenchant insights the writer brings into the deepest impulses of life. Junaidul Haque's devotion to illuminating human passion and his original perspective on the problems posed by human relationships shine through in the work. Md Shafiqul Islam is a civil servant and a former student of literature.