

Tales told by a global nomad

Syed Badrul Ahsan journeys through history's landscapes

RAANA Haider is a spirited storyteller. And the stories she relates have all been part of her life, for she has been a pivotal figure in them all. She has seen it all. Her writing is fast paced and her diction vibrant and substantive. As you turn the pages of this work (it would not do to simply call it a travelogue, for there is much more to it than that), you understand the human understanding and the depth of appreciation she brings to her tales. For *Fragrance of the Past* is about the good times lost in history. If you have cared about Marco Polo and Hiuen Tsang and Vasco da Gama, enough to recall the world they saw opening up before them, you will read Haider. She subtitles her work *A Middle Eastern Itinerary*. In a broad sense, though, it transcends geography and reaches out to the ages of glory that simply do not happen to be there any more.

Haider's good fortune is in having come by opportunities in life. Buttressed by good, modern education, she went on to observe lives and cultures first as the daughter of a diplomat and then as the spouse of a diplomat. Those diplomatic stints for her father and then her husband opened up for her the vistas which she now reopens for her readers in her works. She has had other works and you can be fairly certain more will be on the way. Which is as much as to say that in Haider, we happen to have a scholar who, through a sophisticated use of the English language (and that is something you cannot say about many of our Bengali writers in English), recreates

in our times the cultures and social mores and with that entire historical eras which once went into the making of civilization. And where else but in the Middle East can one go looking for the roots that clutch? It is not simply religion --- Judaism,



Fragrance of the Past
A Middle Eastern Itinerary
Raana Haider
Taara-India Research Press

Christianity, Islam --- that the region is noted for. Neither is it those unending regional or geopolitical conflicts that define its basic character. As Raana Haider takes her readers through the chapters of this work, indeed through the composite and yet diverse landscape of the Middle East, she makes you see what you may not have really observed before you stumbled on her book.

And that is most pleasing, for the sensibilities. For it is the sensuousness associated with the Middle Eastern past that Haider causes to sprout in her essays once again. A particularly appealing aspect of *Fragrance* is the references the writer makes to travel literature in earlier periods of history. Haider's scholarship, rich as it is, necessarily takes into cognizance the intellectual achievements of those who have preceded her in observations of landscapes and cultures. She cheerfully informs readers, "I am also tracing the path taken by countless other travellers who have put into writing their remembrances." And thus you get to be reminded of pioneers such as E.G. Browne, Ibn Khaldun, Al-Maqdisi, Ibn Battuta, Dame Freya Stark, Richard Francis Burton and, of course, T.E. Lawrence. It is in such exalted company, we can safely assume, that Raana Haider now finds herself. She is a global nomad.

And well she might be one. Her voyages take her to Egypt, to the chronicles of not just Tutenkhamun or Nefertiti but also Nefertari and Queen Hatshepsut. The Nile, moving through history and through the ages, remains a point of reference for civilized humanity; and Haider takes us along its meandering ways. And then, of course, there is Cairo, with all its eastern symbolisms, its noise, its vigour and its refusal to take things lying down. But if Cairo excites you, there is the eternal city (or call it the oldest capital in the world) which cannot but transport you back in time, almost making you

wish you did not have to return to your own era. That is how Damascus exercises a hold on the mind, any mind. In a larger sense, though, it is the whole cultural mosaic that is the Middle East which holds you in its grasp. You move with ease and with a surer sense of history from Aleppo to Tripoli to Beirut to Esfahan. In Baghdad, the crucible of civilisation as Haider calls it, she relives history even as she attempts to come to terms with the changes being wrought in Saddam Hussein's name. Statues, banners and what have you dot the city. But beneath the surface, the underlying modernity, is that stuff that has consistently made of Baghdad a symbol of timeless exoticism. You could say almost the same about Damascus, for in that old and yet pristine city, there are frequent reminders of the Assads --- Hafez, Bashar and the one who perished before he could take charge. But Damascus remains on a higher level, despite the despots who have periodically commanded it.

The charm in Haider's narrative is as much in offering a discourse on contemporary men and matters as it is on a recapitulation of the glories that once were. Think here of Persian carpets, specimens of art that are trod on. Wonder about the splendour that is no more, the poetic mist you know as Persepolis. History, as Haider reminds us in so many ways, is indeed the moving caravan we always assumed it was. But it is a caravan which is dependent on what men made of it in the past. In the Middle East, for all the

apparent similarity in cultural mores and traditions, there are the differences, subtle as also glaring, which give its various regions a degree of diversity armies have fought over and scholars have consistently tried to decipher. Afghanistan, of course, is not exactly the Middle East. And yet it cannot be seen apart just as Iran cannot be observed in isolation from the Middle East proper. Raana Haider draws your attention to the cultural enrichment that in centuries past embodied Herat. And Kabul and Kandahar were not much behind either. In a way, almost without your being conscious of it, you begin to reflect on the times you inhabit. The interplay of politics involving the Soviet Union and the United States, the serial destruction of the land wrought by the Mujahideen and then the Taliban, followed by the incompetence of the Karzai regime, all give a rude tug to the heart as you imagine the affluence, in cultural terms, that the country epitomised in the past.

For the Middle East, the old halcyon days are no more. But as you read Raana Haider, you spot those days through the rundown windows of time and go through the history they gave form to. And you come away with the sad realization that the world you inhabit is rather mediocre, unlike the one which shines through in *Fragrance of the Past*. And that happens to be the truth.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Fundamental issues beyond personal grievance

Shahid Alam goes through a politician's story

NOTES from a Prison Bangladesh is a disturbing book, written by a deeply aggrieved man. As things stand, Bangladesh is a deeply divided nation over a few serious, and some maddeningly asinine, issues (or, rather, non-issues), and the chasm seems to be getting wider and deeper. For the country's sake, one can only hope that sanity will return, and the ominous fissure will shrink before the possibility of a bloody internecine strife becomes a reality. And, lest one forgets, that very rift was a key factor in facilitating the kind of regime that prompted Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir to spill his guts out in print over the treatment he received at its hands. *Notes from a Prison Bangladesh* is a litany of complaints, often vitriolic, written in a no-holds-barred style, of an outraged person, that is true, but it is also a book that compels one to think about political legitimacy, constitutionality, and undesirable aberrations in the practice of liberal democracy.

Alamgir, alluding to the proclamation of emergency on January 11, 2007, points out that it "was unconstitutional inasmuch as such a proclamation in accordance with Article 141 (a) 2 of the Constitution could be made only on the recommendation of the Prime Minister." It ushered in a system run by "the will of a few men with power flowing through the barrels of their guns and trumpeted by their 11 show-boys." Actually, there were more show boys (a term coined, according to the author, by Barrister Nazmul Huda) and women than that fixed number, who went in and came out of a revolving door at different intervals. In fact, the debasement of the political process started before January

11, when the constitutionally-ordained dubious institution called the caretaker government made a mockery of itself with the President and a gaggle of advisors making merry with their buffoonery. Alamgir, along with many others, fell victim to the antics that eventually led to the proclamation of the emergency, and all its subsequent negative ramifications for the country's political direction, and the state of its economy, among other issues.

One of Alamgir's incarcerated fellow-politicians, although from the other side of the political divide, pinpointed former British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury, with support from US Ambassador Patricia Butenis, as the mastermind behind the army-controlled government. In this context, it would not be out of place to record the views of the International Crisis Group, a non-governmental organization made up of prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business, and the media: "A reformed, secular Awami League and BNP that respect the democratic rules of the road both internally and externally are the best hope for democracy in Bangladesh and the best defense against religious extremism. The longer the parties resist this reality, the longer the military will continue to justify its role in politics" (*Restoring Democracy in Bangladesh*, Asia Report No.151, 28 April 2008). A significant aspect of the Group is that several of its trustees, council members, and senior advisors were influential political figures and diplomats of their respective countries, and whose views still carry clout in important circles of powerful countries.

Alamgir provides a detailed representation of events leading up to his incarceration, various aspects of his imprisonment, the legal proceedings involved in an emergency situation to brand him as a corrupt person, sentencing, his many privations, and, ultimately, granting of his bail and release from prison. Much of this account, dealing with legal matters, is heavy reading, but it is interspersed with engaging chronicles of his personal, professional, and political life in Bangladesh and abroad. Alamgir was an educator (a

teacher in the Economics department of Dhaka University), a high bureaucrat (as a member of the Civil Service of Pakistan), a legislator, and a State Minister in charge of the Ministry of Planning in the 1996-2001 government of Sheikh Hasina. He is obviously very close to his family, none more so than his parents (the anecdotes of his mother's silent sacrifice to maintain a family not too well off, and his father's repayment of debt to society are particularly poignant and instructive), and wife and children, but is also strongly attached to his brothers and sisters. In fact, throughout his ordeal, he singles out his elder brother, Dr. Burhanuddin Khan Alamgir, for constantly being at his side, sustaining and comforting him.

The author identifies the instrument used to arrest him, and then comments on it: "...we had been arrested under R-16(2) of the Emergency Power Rules. This Rule empowered the police and the security forces to arrest anyone, including former Ministers and possibly even the President of the Republic on suspicion of being involved in commission of some unspecified crimes. Once so arrested, the arrestee could not even apply for being posted on bail. The draconian provision was about the worst possible violation of human rights written into our Constitution" (emphasis added). And, in summing up the judicial procedure used in prosecuting him: "The Public Prosecutor spewed out from a heart of darkness. The darkness was around a cesspool of make-believe spitting of the falsehood otherwise inspired by the Special Court itself."

Alamgir spares none who were involved in his persecution. Some would find that he vilifies any and all who were even remotely involved in his discomfiture while sparing those who empathized with him, even though at least a few of them had dubious reputations. To reiterate, the caretaker administration is at the receiving end of some colourful vituperative. Chief Advisor Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed comes in for some special treatment ("Fakhruddin is echoing a low and guttural moan of the World Bank where he worked the better part of

his life"). And, he and his advisors are "upfront showboys of demons destroying democracy in the country", and the Chairman of the ACC and other high officials, "elements of monstrosities created by showboys elevated to celebrated and responsible positions."

There are tiresome, and unnecessary, repetitions of the same information spread across several chapters, and some words are spelt incorrectly or misapplied too often for them to be regarded as typographical errors. "Jig(s)" should have given way to "gadget(s)", and "strutted" to "stuttered", or "started". Nonetheless, Alamgir has some worthwhile suggestions on bringing about overdue prison reforms, which should be seriously considered by the government of the day.

William Shakespeare, to me, has captured the length and breadth of human character and mental makeup like no other. "Misery loves company", he said, and Alamgir's account of the sharing of his piteous jailhouse experience with Awami League and BNP stalwarts in jail could not illustrate the saying better. Along with Salman Rahman of Awami League, Mufti Shahidul Islam of BNP come across as the most helpful and compassionate characters during his incarceration in Kashimpur Jail. If only such camaraderie and unity could be replicated outside the prison walls, and a healthy political culture manifested, there would be no need, or occasion, for such aberrations as the caretaker system, backdoor aspirants to power, and protracted emergency!

Dr. Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communications Department, Independent University Bangladesh (IUB).

Experience in supreme love

Nausheen Rahman recommends a strangely soothing book

THE blurb on the cover says that Elizabeth Gilbert's latest bestseller is "One Woman's Search for Everything"; this woman is Elizabeth herself.

Set in three different countries (Italy, India and Indonesia), the book is thoroughly enjoyable, thought-provoking and generously sprinkled with words of wisdom.

The search Gilbert is talking about involves a search for peace and for the real person in herself. She sets off on this year-long quest all by herself also to find a balance between pleasure and devotion.

Elizabeth, the central character of this superbly written book, is in her mid-thirties and has recently gone through a very painful divorce. A passionate but stormy love affair had followed, which, too, has ended. She is very disillusioned with life in general, and romance and men in particular. She has nightmares, and feels very unsettled and unsure of everything.

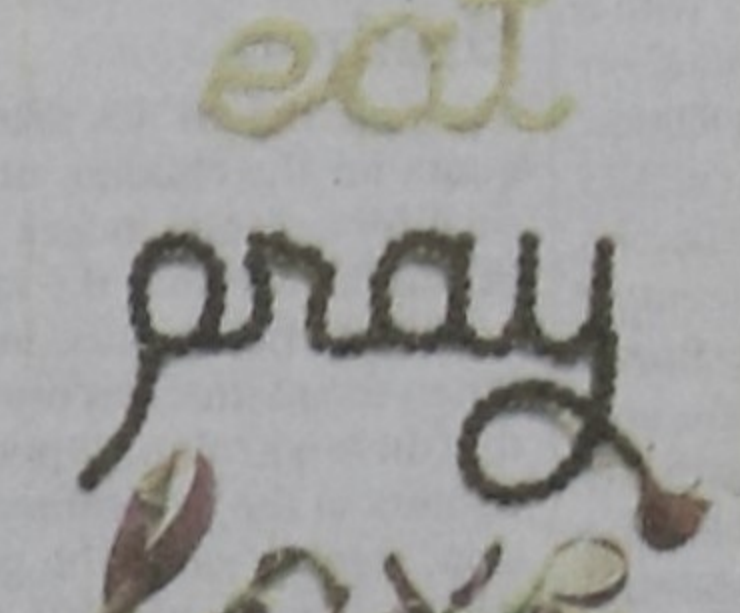
She goes first to Italy and, in her "pursuit of pleasure", she indulges herself (but is determined to stay celibate)! She derives pleasure from learning the beautiful Italian language and eating plenty of the even more beautiful Italian food. However, her loneliness and sadness persist.

Elizabeth gives us a panoramic view of the city of Rome, its people, the language and the food. Other lovely cities, Venice, Florence, Sicily, are visited and described. In the

midst of all the aesthetic pleasure, we come across stirring thoughts: "Even in the eternal city, says the silent Augustine, one must always be prepared for riotous and endless waves of transformation." Elizabeth says she had come to Italy "pinched and thin", but was leaving it knowing that she had "collected" herself.

OVER 5 MILLION COPIES SOLD WORLDWIDE

"It's what I've got going for me!" Elizabeth Gilbert
"A woman of extraordinary talent!" Bella Swan
"In word of mouth bestseller, she brings us to life!" Elle



One Woman's Search for Everything
ELIZABETH GILBERT

Eat Pray Love
Elizabeth Gilbert
Bloomsbury

"through the enjoyment of harmless pleasures, into somebody much more intact." (In other words, she had put on considerable weight).

Her next destination is a tiny,

remote village in India, where she goes on a "pursuit of devotion". She tells us about her life in an Ashram, the different types of meditation and of yoga (Sanskrit for "union"), etc. Very skillfully, she blends Western and Eastern philosophy (Freud's ideas, sayings by Sufis and so on). We get spirituality in its pristine state, side by side with a no-holds-barred sensual and sensuous language.

The concept of God, the "all-inclusive and unspeakable entity", is marvellously arrived at, at various stages of this book, which is not easy to place in a particular genre. Being attracted by the "transcendent mystics" of all religions, Elizabeth Gilbert's version of God is "an experience of supreme love"; she says she believes in "a magnificent God". She also has a lot of faith in her Guru, an Indian woman. (The word 'Guru', we are told, is made up of two syllables, which mean "darkness" and "light").

She wants to be very close to God, but without becoming a monk, without totally giving up worldly pleasures. Her writing is a candid exposition of her own character flaws in a disarmingly honest and straightforward style.

The book contains quotations which are like revelations because although we are not unaware of the ideas, they cause us to look at spirituality with new eyes: 1) "Our whole business in this life is to restore to health the eye of the heart whereby

God may be seen", (St. Augustine); 2) "Meditation is both the anchor and the wings of yoga. Meditation is the way"; 3) "There's a difference between meditation and prayer, though both practices seek communion with the divine. --- Prayer is the act of talking to God, while meditation is the act of listening".

In today's mad, complex world, comes *Eat Pray Love*, a book we can enjoy on various levels. Reading about yoga and meditation is the next best thing to practicing yoga and meditation.

Elizabeth is constantly talking to herself and to God, analysing, questioning, facing up to facts. She has a very hard time with some of the rigorous rituals in the ashram, but manages to overcome most of the difficulties through her willpower.

We realize the truth of "Destiny is a relationship a play between divine grace and willful self-effort." All through the narration, we also see the writer's ability to view things and situations humorously. She leaves India after having found "acres of grace".

Her last stop is Indonesia; this leg of her journey is called "Pursuit of Balance". She arrives in Bali where two years back, an old Balinese medicine man had predicted she would return. Her stay there is full of interesting episodes with intriguing characters. She finds her palmist medicine man, Ketul Liyer (who treats all kinds of ailments and can be anywhere between 60 and 105 years old). She befriends a Balinese

healer, Wayan Nuriyasih; this woman, also, in her late thirties, is a "hands-on doctor". One very touching episode is where Elizabeth helps collect funds to buy Wayan a house. It also gives us an insight into the "culture of poverty". We are shown the wonders of healing, come to know of the "Four Brothers Meditation", a not-often-heard-of meditation and read about the communal life of the Balinese in which the family compound is the most vital thing.

Elizabeth meets a few eligible men and receives compliments; this sets her thinking: "Am I young and beautiful? I thought I was old and divorced". Her relationship with Felipe, a charming Brazilian in his mid-fifties, develops. It is through this development that the writer finally understands herself. She gradually resolves her doubts and fears on her own. In the process, we get a peek into her soul.

We embark upon a soul-searching journey with the author, but into the bargain, also get a good dose of wit, humor and romance, a romance which is a lovely mixture of fairytale and hard-core reality.

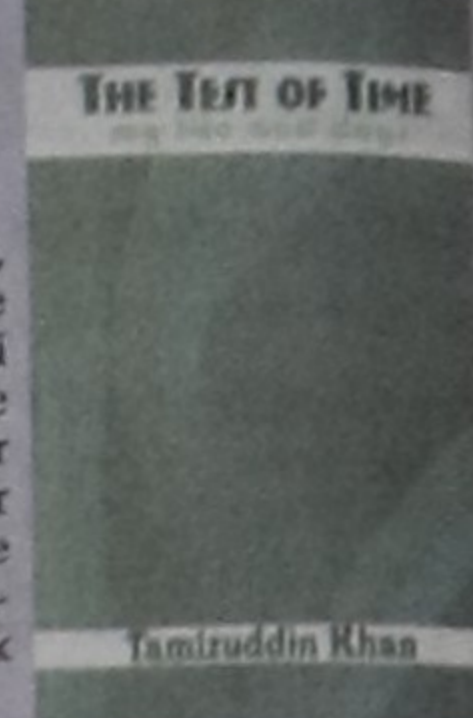
This book has been made into a film. Julia Roberts, who plays the leading role, says she is giving this book to all her girlfriends.

My suggestion to everyone is not to see the movie before reading the book.

Nausheen Rahman has studied English literature and is a critic.

AT A GLANCE

The Test of Time
My life and days
Tamizuddin Khan
Tamizuddin Khan Trust



These are the posthumous memoirs, up to a point, of the late speaker of the Pakistan national assembly, Moulvi Tamizuddin Khan died in 1963, but he had made his name a decade earlier when he got into a legal battle as speaker of the constituent assembly on the division of powers between the assembly and the governor general. This work is quite an insight into a lost era.

National Security
Bangladesh 2008
Ed Sheikh Md. Monirul Islam
The University Press Limited

National Security
Bangladesh 2008
Ed Sheikh Md. Monirul Islam
The University Press Limited

With national security increasingly taking centre stage in Bangladesh's politics, this work should serve as a useful guide to an understanding of conditions as they are in the country today. The editor does a good job of collecting and collating thoughts and perceptions and serving them on a platter, as it were, to readers. Researchers will appreciate the work.

Shei Chhoto Motshyokumari
Sunanda Kabir
Pub Modhubonti Kabir



Andersen has always been part of children's lives around the world. And that has come to be through various translations of his tales. In this simple and yet lulling (yes, that's the word) translation of some of his stories, Sunanda Kabir gives readers, young as well as not so young, a chance to take a stroll through the gardens of innocence. And she does it in style.



Anuranan
Zahida Meherun Nessa
Palal Prakashani

Poetry is always elevating for the soul. And that is one truth which Meherun Nessa holds up much as other poets have done through the ages. In her poetry, there is a softness as also an insistence you cannot ignore. More importantly, you will want to relate to the experience and the sensibilities that underscore her poetry. And you will feel good.

Romeo and Juliet story

Mahjabeen recommends a work, highly

"About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire.

Second, there was a part of him - and I didn't know how dominant that part might be - that thirsted for my blood.

And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him."

When I first heard about the book from my friend, it didn't seem appealing to me, as I couldn't actually understand the connection between the title and the short cut story narrated to me by my friend! Thank God she didn't give me a blow by blow description of the book, or else it wouldn't have been as interesting to me as it is now!

Stephenie Meyer, in her first novel, manages to create a fantastical world in a very real way. In this first novel of the trilogy, named after the saga, the world of vampires is introduced. I personally enjoyed the fantasy elements and the world of vampires, with a few new ideas created by Meyer around the myth of the vampire that stray away from the traditional.

The pivotal point in the book is the excellent chemistry between its lead characters Edward Cullen and Isabella (Bella) Swan. The

author exposes Edward's anger, anguish and love through his eyes and body language, which is so compelling you can't help but fall in love with the character or just fall in love all over again. The story begins with Bella choosing to live with her father in the rainy little town of Forks, Washington, when her mother remarries. She doesn't expect anything to change at all. But things do change when she meets the mysterious and dazzlingly beautiful Edward Cullen. For Edward is nothing like any boy she's ever met, period. He's intelligent and witty, and he seems to see straight into her soul. In no time at all, they are swept up in a passionate and decidedly unorthodox romance because Edward really isn't like the other boys. He can run faster than a mountain lion. He can stop a moving car with his bare hands. Oh, and he hasn't aged since 1918. Like all vampires, he's immortal. That's right vampire. But he doesn't have fangs that's just in the movies. And he doesn't drink human blood, though Edward and his family are unique among vampires in that lifestyle choice. To Edward, Bella is that thing he has waited 90 years for a soul mate. But the closer they get, the more Edward must struggle to resist the primal pull of her scent, which could send him into an uncontrollable frenzy. Somehow or other, they will have to manage their unmanageable love. But when unexpected visitors come to town and realize that there is a human among them, Edward must fight to save Bella.

Twilight is an easy and enjoyable read. It is a modern, visual, and visceral Romeo and Juliet story of the ultimate forbidden love affair between vampire and mortal. Its first-person viewpoint keeps the pages turning. This isn't a masterpiece of literary achievement, however. You have to take it for what it is - a unique and entertaining, if not flawlessly written, story. *Twilight*, as it has done to me, will almost certainly appeal to teenage girls and many women of all ages, but probably not to the majority of males. But it's sure to make readers eager to devour the next three novels.

Twilight is an easy and enjoyable read. It is a modern, visual, and visceral Romeo and Juliet story of the ultimate forbidden love affair between vampire and mortal. Its first-person viewpoint keeps the pages turning. This isn't a masterpiece of literary achievement, however. You have to take it for what it is - a unique and entertaining, if not flawlessly written, story. *Twilight*, as it has done to me, will almost certainly appeal to teenage girls and many women of all ages, but probably not to the majority of males. But it's sure to make readers eager to devour the next three novels.

Mahjabeen is a student of Class XI, Radiant School & College, Chittagong.



Twilight
Stephenie Meyer
Little, Brown and Company