

## Realism, surrealism and everything in between

Jackie Kabir explores worlds on some stories

THE word *Oshorombha* is in fact zero. It is Papri Rahman's third collection of stories and her fifth book. Papri Rahman carries the banner of a writer, an editor and a critic, quite comfortably. She doesn't write about the issues related to women which we commonly see in other contemporary writers, as she claims. Whenever she finds a story that is out of the ordinary, she tries to colour it in the canvass of story telling. This makes her somewhat different from other female writers that we come across.

The book *Oshorombha* has eight stories, six of which are in a rural setting; and the remaining two are narrated from an urban point of view. One of the stories, *Shodh*, depicts how a village woman takes revenge on her husband's second wife by urinating on her bed. It is a tempestuous night when the first wife is given shelter at their place. Everything is going on as usual, except that when she leaves the bed it is wet with a pungent smell. Both Hasna and Mohor Ali were astonished at the occurrence. Another story, *Ushob*, is the tale of a husband acquiring a second wife without the permission of his first wife. This is done on the pretext of his wife not being able to give birth to a boy. Before Mojiddi can bring his new bride home Fulmoti, the first wife, takes all her four daughters to the railway station and makes them lie down. This story has a parallel text of verses along with prose, which is



Oshorombha  
Papri Rahman  
Dorpon

unusual in Bengali writing. Most of her other stories are about female sensitivities -- how a woman develops a kind of intimacy with a man while her husband shows little or no interest in her. When the husband finds out about it she is

maltreated by him and as result she kind of welcomes death unduly. Such is the subject of her story, *Lucifer O Paiba Barta*.

*Meghhin Raat Chhilo Purno Grash Chhad Chhilo* is about a little girl working in a house and being sexually molested by the teenage boy of the family night after night. The boy gets up in the middle of the night to collect water for the household as the supply will be exhausted by the time daylight appears. It is an all too common scene where the weak are exploited by the strong. But we also witness the resistance by the weak. As the girl is thrown out by the landlady, she goes to the shelter of a nearby slum dweller. The boy goes to see her and gives some money to her which she leaves at the slum dwellers' bed as she leaves with her baby. That is another way to protest the wrongdoings of the strong and the powerful of society. The narrator here is the boy himself, which makes the story rather interesting. *Kamala Dighi*, a fable about a queen getting drowned in the lake when the king breaks his vow and wants to be with her. This is the story within the story of *Kamalabati*, an elderly woman who is gang-raped by some men as she does not allow them to touch her divorced daughter. Like the queen who drowns in the lake, *Kamalabati* is immersed in the insurmountable pains of her life. That is probably the reason behind the similarity between the names in both stories. It

is a feature known as 'intertextuality.'

All of Papri Rahman's stories have female characters as protagonists. She portrays the inhabitants of her tales from every nook and corner of Bangladesh. The dialects she uses are sometimes difficult to understand on the part of an ordinary reader. This reviewer also feels that the writer uses obscure imagery at times. Sometimes the narration jumps from one person to another. Other than that, we see the use of magic realism and elements of folklore in different stories. The complexities of human life are used in an imaginative way, even though the author claims that she does not use any imagination.

In the inner jacket of her book, Papri Rahman maintains that she does not expect her readers to be overwhelmed by the stories nor does she want to be critically acclaimed by reviewers. She mentions all the theories that exist in literature, starting from realism to surrealism to magic to comedy and many more which cannot be easily labeled in the world of literature. She adds that she does not want these stories to be recognized as one or the other. She urges her readers to be the judge of what they find in her stories. Her stories are for the simplest of readers rather than for those who claim to be 'literary canons.'

Jackie Kabir, writer and teacher, is associated with The Reading Circle.

## Tales of familiar dilemmas

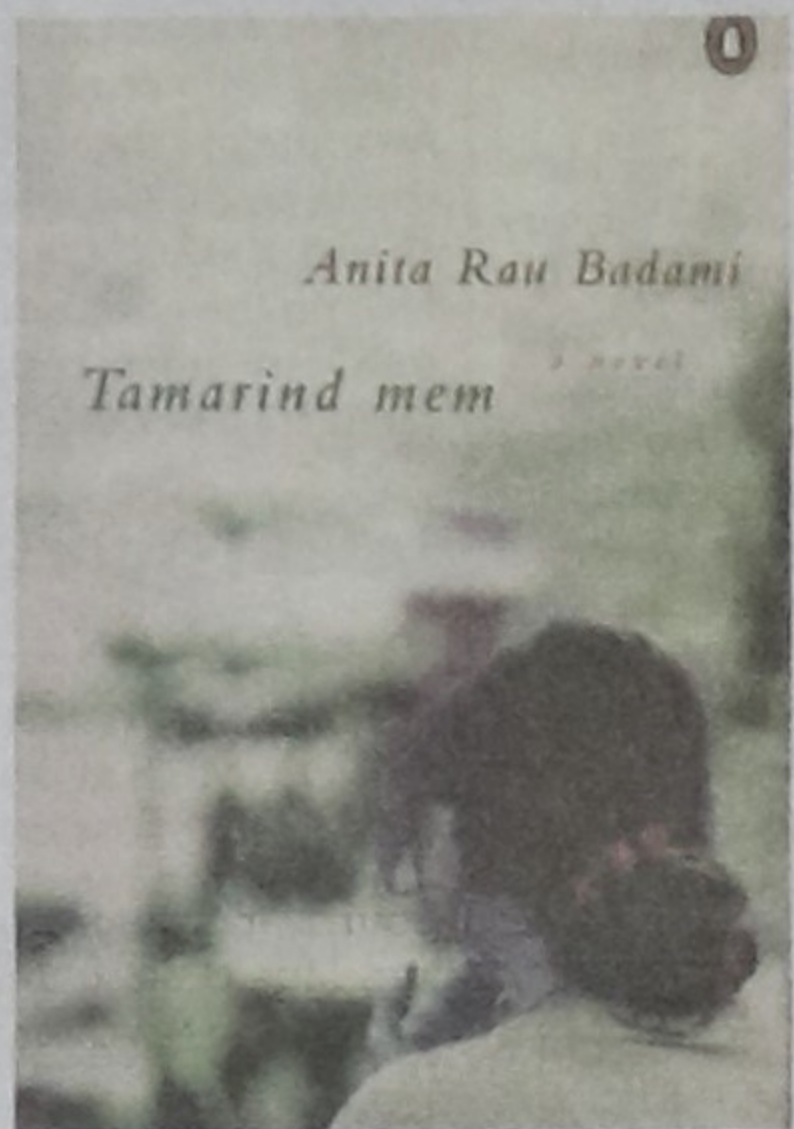
Nausheen Rahman speaks of weaver's myths

THE ingredients of Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem* are: an interesting theme (the relationship between mothers and daughters); an engrossing story (told, in turns, by a mother and her daughter); and recognizable characters with familiar dilemmas portrayed with insight and poignancy.

Kamini, the elder daughter, first tells her story. This narration is split in two parts, which are alternately about her present (her life in Calgary, Canada), and in the flashback technique, much more about her childhood as the daughter of a railway engineer and his discontented wife.

Kamini loved both her parents dearly but never understood their strange relationship. Her recollection about the various houses and cities they lived in (her father being a civil engineer in the Railway, they had to move frequently), and the kind of people she grew up with, will ring a bell for many. This familiarity, however, is accompanied by a sense of wonder, because of the author's incisive understanding of human nature.

A mother-daughter relationship has several shades: the love is often weighed down by expectations, disappointments, recriminations. Badami's characterization, coupled with her fluid writing style, helps us to see and feel for both sides. It's almost like you go inside the minds of the two major characters and think along with them (as they relate



Tamarind mem  
Anita Rau Badami  
Penguin Books

their respective tales).

Kamini's younger sister, Roopa, who is very different from her in every way, their "Linda ayah", their usually taciturn father, and Paul da Costa, an Anglo-Indian car-mechanic, are just some of the characters who complete the circle of people in Kamini's life. The father reveals a different side of his personality when he is with his daughters; he is a treasure-trove of stories with which he

regales them whenever he returns from his work-tours.

After her father's death, Kamini goes away to Canada to study, and in the cold, lonely place her mother refers to as the "North Pole", gets attacks of nostalgia: "In real life, I reflected, you warmed yourself on cold winter days in a foreign land by pulling out a rag-bag collection of memories". Kamini's telephone conversations with her mother leave her feeling lost. Her sister gets married and their mother, Saroja, starts living a solitary life.

Saroja decides to travel around her country, India. This travelling is different from the travelling they had to do every time her husband got transferred. She sends her daughters postcards from the places she visits. There is a deep bond, yet a distinct distance, between the mother and her daughters, especially Kamini. Each tries, in vain, to understand the other.

Saroja, who has a very sharp tongue and blunt manner (hence the appellation "Tamarind Mem"), has had a hard personal married life (though a very comfortable existence otherwise, being a high Railway official's wife). She had to give up her dream of becoming a doctor when her parents married her off to a man much older than her. This man is a good provider and an affectionate father, but does not, or cannot, satisfy any of his wife's emotional needs, for which she turns to an Anglo car-mechanic. When faced with the choice

of either living life the way she wants, or resigning herself to the security and comfort of her "normal" life, she does not have the courage to choose the former.

Saroja tells her story to some fellow-female passengers as she travels in a train. She does not hold anything back, and in her customary outright manner, tells them all. Now, we see the story from a different angle. It is outlined in the same pattern: reminiscing, then bits of the present (with different reactions from the different women in the compartment who listen to her story).

One of the passengers, a teenager, at one point, comments "scornfully", "I would have walked out if I didn't like my husband", and an old lady replies "Going away is the easiest thing in the world. It is like dying. Living is hard, to make this small amount of time loaned to you by the gods worthwhile is hard. The real test is life itself, whether you are strong enough to stay and fight". The same teenager later says "I am taking a holiday from my mother. God knows what happens to parents when their children grow up".

The book ends with Saroja preparing to get off at her station. She says to herself, "If my companions are awake, I will smile farewell. Otherwise, I shall slip away, leaving them with memories of an old story-teller, a weaver of myths."

Nausheen Rahman studied English literature at Dhaka University and is a teacher.

## Begunpura, fish jhols, chhana --- all yours

Zakia Badrudduja is excited by a work on cuisine

CHITRITA Banerji makes us happy and makes us remember all the culinary traditions we are heir to in this gem of a book. Indeed, it is at the very beginning of Bengali Cooking that you get to remember that certain cultural aspect of your being. As a host, you will likely implore the one visiting you thus: "Do please grace my poor hovel with your presence and share our simple meal of dal and rice." Sounds familiar? You bet it does, for who has not heard of Bengali hospitality? It is as spontaneous as is the manner in which a Bengali loves to eat with his family.

But this is not a mere book on the variety that comes into Bengali food or the preparation and consuming of it. Banerji projects an essential component of Bengali culture, on both sides of the political divide, as it has developed over the ages. Take, for instance, the way cooking is undertaken in West Bengal and Bangladesh. A Ghoti (and that is exactly how Banerji puts it) will forever have the feeling that the Bangals of Bangladesh have absolutely no idea of cooking; they ruin food by 'drowning it in oil and spices' and 'even the best of fish can be ruined by their peculiar habit of adding bitter vegetables to it.' At the other end, the Bangals will declare with gusto that the Ghotis 'are the greatest philistines on earth, who can cook nothing without making it cloyingly sweet' and in their hands 'the freshest and most succulent of fish will be reduced to leather by the way they fry it...'

Methods of cooking apart, it is a commonality of heritage that matters in the preparation of Bengali food. And that commonality encompasses something that any inhabitant of Bengal will proudly refer to as culture. Way back in



Bengali Cooking  
Chitrita Banerji  
Serif

1788, Sayyid Gulam Husain Khan Tabatabai noted that Bengalis considered the people of Maharashtra to be an uncivilised lot because the latter did not add phoron to their dal! That says a whole lot about Bengali food, moving as it does from such items as bharta, begunpura and matarshak to fish jhols and all the way up to polao and biryani. There are, as you will have noted, even before getting your hands on Banerji's book, food lovers in all of Bengal. The tradition, despite the inroads made by western fast food concepts, has really not been broken. Even if it is true that

quantity-wise the number of items on the Bengali's menu may have declined (Bharatchandra's eighteenth century narrative poem *Annadamangalkabya* speaks of 51 varieties of fish consumed by Bengalis of the time), his capacity to consume has not registered much of a change.

Banerji's repertoire, for repertoire it is, of the varieties of food items the Bengali can prepare and serve to his guests remains as it has by and large been. Rice and fish continue to be staple items for both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis. Add to them vegetables like aubergines, the many kinds of gourds and the rather bitter leaves of the jute plant and you get a fairly good idea of the sheer innovation that comes into the making and eating of food in historical Bengal. Then comes the matter of the ingredients that go into the preparation of the food. Banerji informs us that since the fourteenth century Bengalis have relished eating rice drenched in ghee. Is it any wonder then that the little potbelly on the average Bengali is perhaps a most natural occurrence? In these present times, rising prices and a change in social circumstances may have caused a fall in the use of ghee, but watch out for all those religious occasions, Hindu as well as Muslim, and what you have before you is splendour that comes in the richness which only food dipped in ghee can provide. In nineteenth-century Calcutta, the writer notes for good measure, many 'great feudal families would rather die than serve food cooked in mustard oil, which was considered fit only for the poor.' A hint of elitism here? Perhaps. But, again, such elitism is what most Bengalis have historically aspired to. The trend has continued to this day. Ever heard the

rude comments made by guests (and this after they have already partaken of the food at a wedding or some such occasion) on the absence of spices or an adequate amount of ghee in the preparation of the polao?

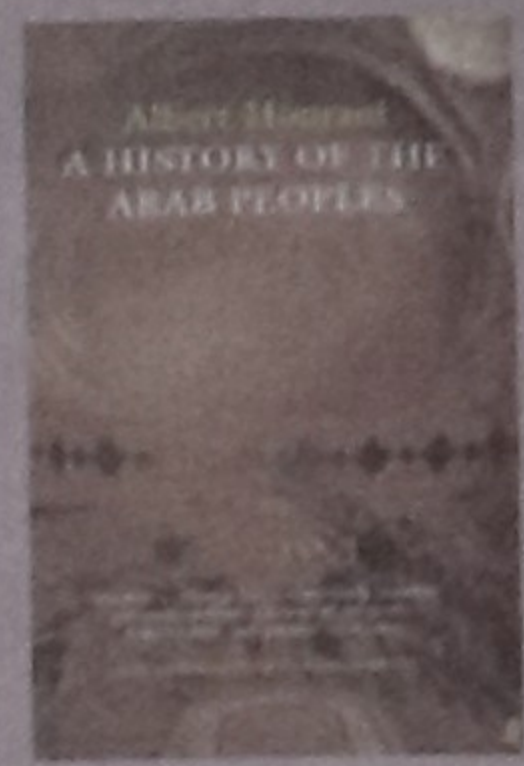
The medieval period of Bengali poetry was the time when, as the writer points out, elaborate meals began to be prepared at home even when there was no festivity involved. As a Bengali phrase notes, during that period a proper banquet comprised 66 dishes. And then, through the passage of the times, as politics took newer shapes, food began to be a rather all-inclusive affair. The arrival of the Muslims in the subcontinent was a point when certain new touches, which in certain instances meant new embellishments, were given to food. In time, a Bengali Muslim cuisine developed. Onion and garlic entered the Muslim Bengali kitchen, a development that the Hindu Bengali did not exactly look upon with favour. And yet there was common ground elsewhere. It was in the preparation of sweets that both Hindus and Muslims excelled, and continue to excel. Think here of the many varieties of pithas, together with such delicacies as the sandesh, the rosogolla, the pantua, the chancham, the roshomai, all of which are prepared, wholly or partly, with chhana. Such chhana sweets, or sweets made from the solid part of curdled milk, are 'Bengal's contribution to the Indian universe of sweets.'

But let us speak no more. Go into the book. And then into the kitchen. All in the interest of historical tradition.

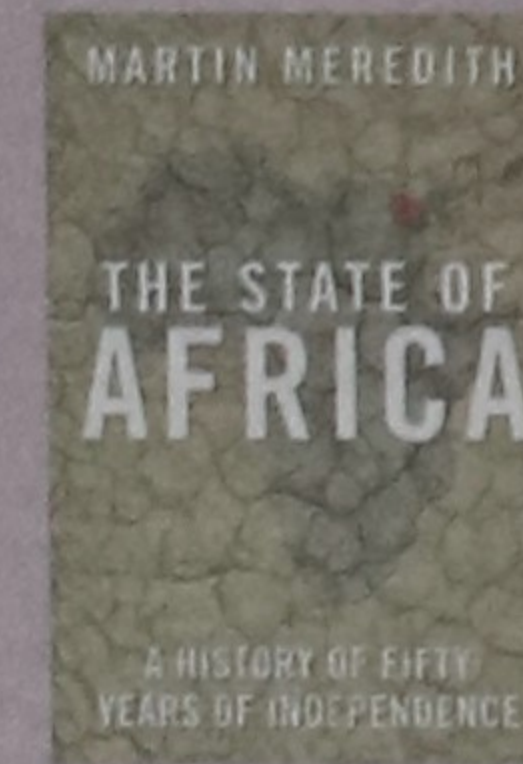
Zakia Badrudduja teaches and is involved in social work in London.

## AT A GLANCE

*A History of the Arab Peoples*  
Albert Hourani  
Faber and Faber



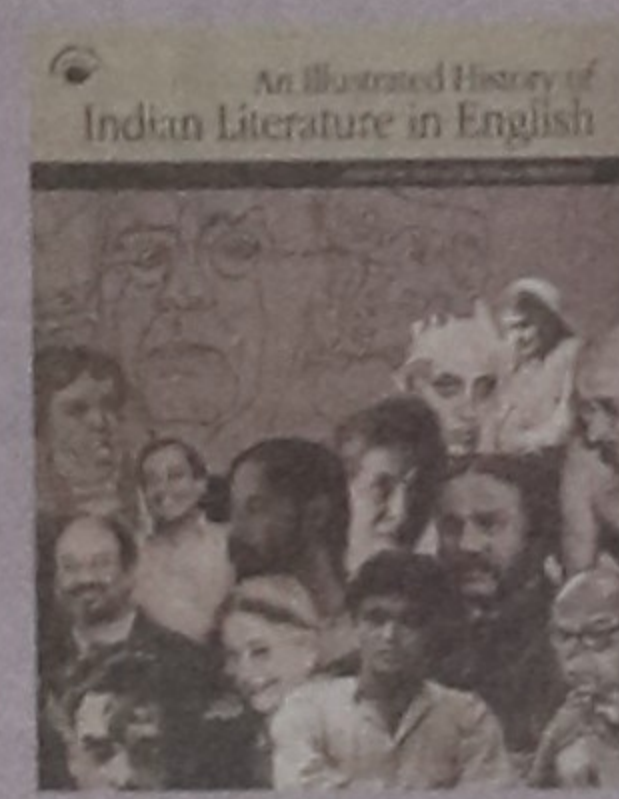
One of the more authentic approaches to the study of a region and a culture distinctive in its many patterns, this book is the dream of any pupil of Middle Eastern history. Hourani does not leave out anything -- literature, politics, economics -- which is why it promises to be a gripping read.



*The State of Africa*  
Martin Meredith  
Free Press

African decolonisation began in 1957, with the emergence of the Gold Coast as the free nation of Ghana. In this riveting, all-encompassing story of the half century since that seminal event, Meredith recounts the problems the continent has gone through, not least because of its inept as well as corrupt politicians and military rulers.

*A History of Indian Literature in English*  
Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed.  
Hurst & Company



Those in search of the roots of English language literature in the Indian subcontinent will spot a veritable treasure trove here. From Ram Mohan Roy to Tagore to R.K. Narayan and beyond, it is a journey into a past that was as intense as it was productive. Here come stories of patient endeavour and terrible heartbreak.



*Voices from Bengal*  
Modern Bengali Poetry in English Translation  
Sahitya Akademy

The work does credit to its editors. They have selected a wide range of modern Bengali poets, all with a distinctive West Bengal background, and translated them into useful, coherent English. It is a work which you can make into a gift for one in search of richness in your world of poetry, of course in the Queen's English.

## What diplomats should, and should not, do

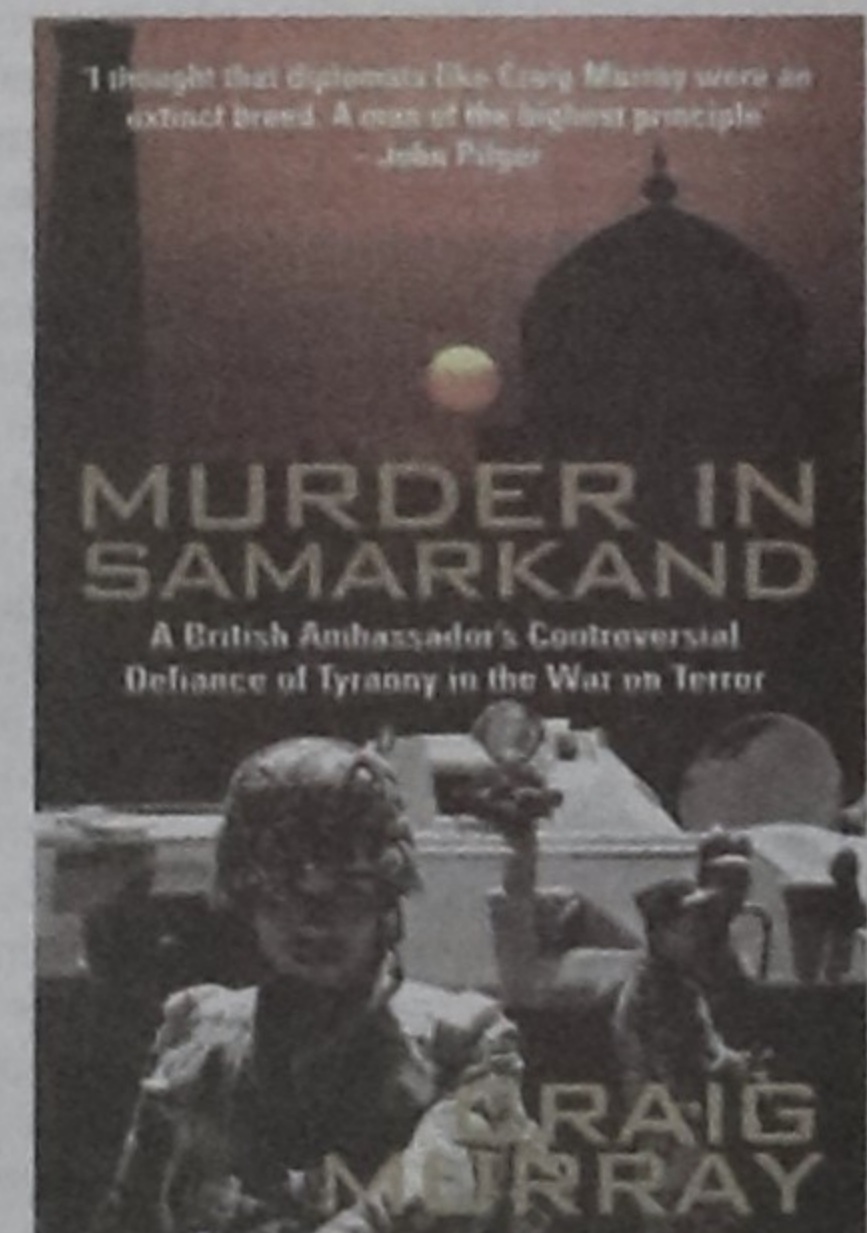
Syed Badrul Ahsan pities a fallen ambassador

CR AIG Murray lives these days in quite pitiable conditions in London with his Uzbek girlfriend Nadira. In these past few years he has been a candidate for a parliamentary seat and then rector of a university. It was in Blackburn that he took on Jack Straw, the man he considers his nemesis, at the 2005 elections. He lost, but then he actually did not expect to win. It was his way of getting back at the man who he believes linked up with the mandarins in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Straw was then foreign secretary) to deprive him of his job as British ambassador to Uzbekistan.

In this account of his brief yet dramatic period heading the British mission in Tashkent, Murray defends himself against all the accusations of improper conduct on his part. His peers in the FCO believed, and still believe, that his behaviour in Tashkent went beyond accepted norms of diplomatic conduct. And they may well be right. What clearly did not worry Murray was that in his crusade against corruption in Uzbekistan he was perhaps discarding that very element of subtlety needed to goad a regime towards change. He freely spoke out against the repression employed by the regime of President Islam Karimov, in sharp contrast to the more restrained comments of other diplomats in Tashkent, such as the US, French and German ambassadors. Indeed, he thought the British government was ignoring his reports on the human rights situation in Uzbekistan and, in line with American policy on global terrorism, was simply looking away from the wrongs that Karimov and his friends were regularly committing.

Murray certainly made things worse for himself when, every time news came to him of an incident somewhere in Uzbekistan, he dashed off to the spot, staff in tow, for a first hand account of it. He constantly ran into trouble with Uzbek police and heroically (that is the impression he tries to convey) skirted past them in his drive toward a dissident's home or a meeting planned by the anti-government opposition. The Uzbek authorities got exasperated, while back home at the FCO, he was increasingly being considered an embarrassment by those who manned the Eastern Department. Straw, Simon Butt and others take quite a number of raps in this book. These people, Murray argues throughout the work, were simply closing their eyes to the terrible policies that Karimov was pursuing in Tashkent. Dissidents were boiled to death and some were simply picked up late in the evening, only to be dumped as dead bodies before their homes at dawn. Murray's human feelings come across poignantly here, but they did not cut any ice with the British diplomatic establishment in London. Of course, it was much later (as the writer points out) that he learnt about the rendition flights, authenticated by London and Washington, to Tashkent that clearly may have prevented the West from coming

down hard on the Uzbek regime. There is little question that Craig Murray is much more than a diplomat. He speaks openly of his fascination for women, of the many times he ogled young Uzbek beauties at the bars and restaurants of Tashkent. When he meets Nadira, she is working as a dancer in a night club to supplement her income and so help the family. Soon the two are in love, despite the presence of Fiona, his wife, and their children in Tashkent. Confronted by Fiona, he confesses and tells her plainly he cannot turn his back on Nadira. Fiona turns her back on him and flies off to London with the children. And then there are the bouts of illness, the passages out, with Murray in hospital in London. Meanwhile, his battles with the FCO, where no one is ready to speak up for him, continue. He turns up at the FCO,



Murder in Samarkand  
Craig Murray  
Mainstream Publishing

sits in the ambassadors' waiting room and dozes off. He peeps into a conference of officials, cheerily says hello to them and finds some of the men there positively hostile to him. He is in good health now, he tells them, and plans to go back to his duties in Tashkent. In the event, he is prevented from doing so. Not long after, he is dismissed from the Foreign Service.

It is the story of a sensitive man who certainly has his heart in the right place. The unfortunate part here is that in his battles against the Uzbekistan regime, the fine line between diplomacy and the crusading zeal in him often gets distinctly blurred. The work ought to be seen as a lesson on what diplomats posted abroad should not do.

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