

When governance is local government

Audity Falguni highly recommends a new work, for everyone

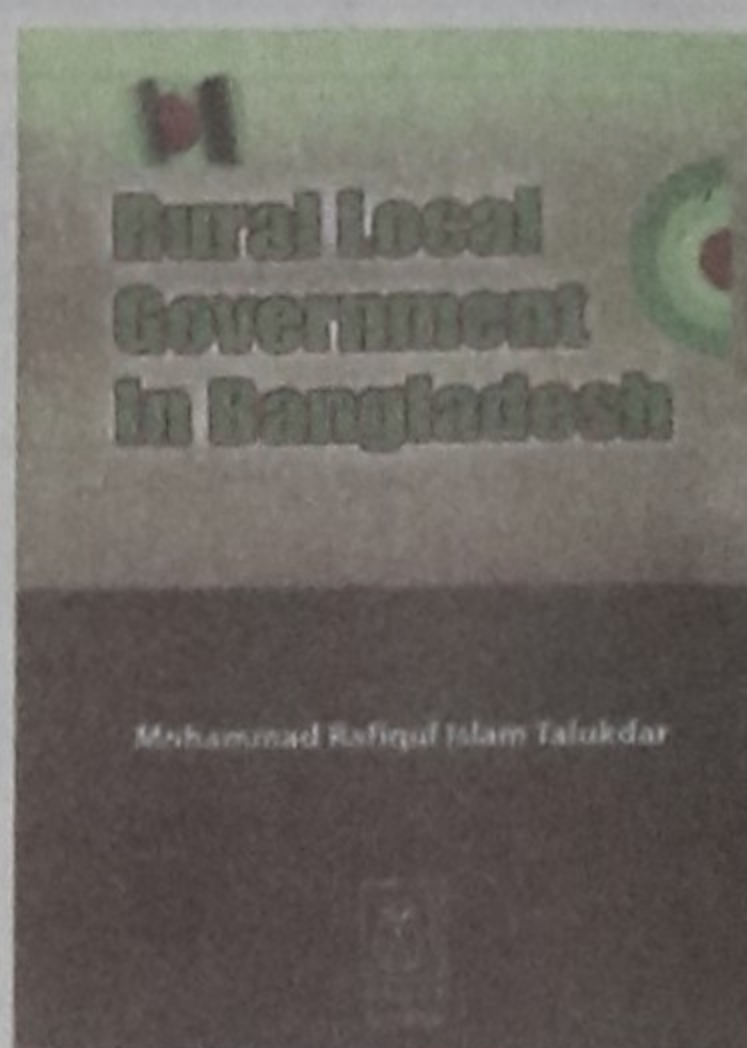
LOCAL government can be termed as the linchpin of good governance for any modern state, specifically to attain political, economic and social welfare of the marginal groups of people within the state. It is vastly acknowledged in today's development paradigms that decentralization can be conducive to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) because local governments are presumed to have better information and higher rewards on the basis of which the central government can afford to plan and implement policies, thus responding to local needs and preemptions. It appears that the reasonable gaps between the political community and the civil society propagation of democratic decentralization are getting widened. They need to be bridged through sincere and stringent academic efforts. Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar, a young researcher, has brought forth a work relating to this particular arena in a modest way. In *Rural Local Government in Bangladesh*, Talukdar has tried to touch upon a number of pertinent issues, such as democratic decentralization, gender mainstreaming in the local government and the regeneration of the upazila system.

The author broadly categorizes his book into two parts and eight chapters. Part One includes the chapters 'Conceptual Framework', 'Legacy and History', 'Rural Local Government in Bangladesh and Local Administration and Local Government Ordinances/Acts in Bangladesh'. Part Two consists of 'Development of the Local Government in Bangladesh'.

Political and Fiscal Perspectives, 'Gender Mainstreaming in Rural Local Governments and Rural Local Governance', 'Regeneration of the Upazila System' and 'Conclusion'.

In the first chapter, 'Conceptual Framework', Talukdar informs us that 'governance does have wide-spread phenomena such as public management (Hood, 1990), coordination of the sectors of economy (Campbell et al., 1991; Hollingsworth et al., 1994), good governance as a reform objective of state government promoted by WB and IMF (Leftwich, 1994), corporate governance (Williamson, 1996), policy networks (Rhodes, 1997) and public-private partnerships (Pierre, 1998)'. He also conceptualizes the concepts of 'Decentralization, Local Government and Local Governance' and elaborates on four forms of decentralization, namely deconcentration, privatization, delegation and devolution in the first chapter.

In the second chapter, 'Legacy and History', the writer offers us some vivid graphs and charts which portray the organograms of the Bangladesh government from President or Prime Minister down to the upazila level administration. In addition, he provides us with facts regarding comparative local government administrative structures during the ancient Buddhist and Hindu periods (dating back to 2300 years), Muslim (Sultani era and Mughal/Nobabi era, 1206-1765), British Indian rule (1765-1947), Pakistani rule (1947-1971) and independent Bangladesh (1971-2009). This chapter also outlines the analyses on local government legislations like



Rural Local Government in Bangladesh
Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar
Osser Publications

Chowkidari Panchayat Act of 1870 followed by the Bengal Local Self Government Act of 1885, The Village Self Government Act of 1919 establishing the Union Boards everywhere in Bengal, the Bengal Municipal Act of 1932 or the Bengal Municipal Act 1962.

In chapter 3 (Rural Local Government in Bangladesh), the structure and functions of the rural local government in Bangladesh with analysis of laws like the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance 1983 or Upazila Parishad (Reintroduction of the Repealed Act and Amendment) Act 2009 have been discussed. It also highlights the structure and functions of the Upazila Parishad, Zilla

Parishad and Union Parishads.

In Chapter 4, 'Local Government Ordinances/Acts in Bangladesh', the young researcher has tried to focus on Upazila Administration in reflection of Article 152 (1) of the Constitution. This chapter also introduces general readers to provisions for administration and logistics in Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad and Zilla Parishads. Besides, this chapter presents us with the matrix of local administration in Bangladesh, informs us about the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 2008, Local Government (Upazila Parishad) Ordinance 2008, Local Government (Pauroshova) Ordinance 2008, Local Government (City Corporation) Ordinance 2008 and Local Government Commission Ordinance 2008.

Chapter 5 deals with the relationship between the central government and local government. Political motives in local government reform initiatives, constitutional aspects and legislative notions, fiscal aspects as well as notions, administrative aspects and Bangladesh perspective on democratic decentralization have also been analyzed. In this regard, the author cites examples of decentralization in Colombia, West Bengal, Brazil, Uganda and South Africa. Concepts and issues of fiscal decentralization, pertaining to the assignment of expenditure responsibilities to different government levels, the assignment of tax and revenue sources to different government levels, intergovernmental fiscal transfers and local govern-

ments' borrowing have been underscored in this chapter.

In Chapter 6, 'Gender Mainstreaming in Rural Local Governments and Rural Local Government', the writer begins with the paragraph: 'Despite the extensive debates on the governance and development approach, there is a widespread belief that Gender and Development (GAD) or gender mainstreaming, poverty reduction and local governance are interrelated and likely to be central to the local government, particularly in Bangladesh context'. The author further informs us that in spite of the wide range of discrimination against women in rural Bangladesh, basically owing to the traditional structure of society -- prejudice, unequal land and resource authority, non recognition of their labour and so on -- extensive strides in gender mainstreaming have been made in the field of local governance since the Beijing Conference of September 1995.

Chapter 7 deals with the contextual analysis of regeneration of the Upazila system. The concluding chapter tells of the role of decentralization in fulfilling MDGs, especially poverty reduction. In *Appendices*, UNDP Study (2008) on the proposed Local Government Commission, Structure/Models of Selected Countries and Report of the Roundtable Discussion on the Proposed Local Government Commission Ordinance 2008 have been added.

Audity Falguni is a writer, poet and researcher.

The sun god in distant Rome

Syed Badrul Ahsan rediscovers a writer in a bunch of letters

SHAMSUDDIN Abul Kalam died lonely and forlorn in Rome on a January day eleven years ago. As this very appreciable compilation of his letters demonstrates amply, there was in him, ever since he left what once was East Pakistan and took up residence in the West, a defining degree of nostalgia that often comes to men who think. And Kalam was a thinking man, steeped as he was in literature and the making of it. The problem, as he saw it and not without reason, was the big hurdle that was always there when it came to an appreciation of his literary talents back home in Bangladesh. And the hurdle was geography. As the war for Bangladesh's liberation went on in 1971, Kalam was enthused by the prospect of freedom for a country he did not quite plan on going back to. He kept in touch with Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury and with others he knew were directly involved in the cause. Once Bangladesh became a *de jure* state, Kalam travelled to the new country, met its important men, including Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and came away with the belief that the future appeared bright despite the travails that yet dotted the path.

The future, as we know it, was of course derailed and the country lurched from one crisis to another, from secular democracy to rightwing dictatorship. In these letters, where Kalam speaks of politics in Bangladesh, one gets a sense of the sense of loss he feels in distant Rome. His missives to Abdul Matin, a distinguished London-based Bengali intellectual who has over the years made memorable

contributions to the field of historical research in Bangladesh through his many works, speak of his anguish at the world he is part of away from the home he is not likely ever to return to for good. There are other letters, to Deviprasad Das and Fazila Rahman, with whom Kalam discourses on literature and aesthetics. With Matin, apart from general conversations, Kalam is forever engaged in debate about the state of the arts in Bangladesh and the evolution that he has observed taking place in poetry and fiction over the years. The author of *Kanchangram* lives, for all his disappointment, in a world of idealism. It is idealism that first stirred in his soul in his days as a student in the early 1940s and embraced a world of reality through the publication of the short stories titled *Shaherbanu*. Not even a recognised literary figure like Somnath Lahiri could resist the temptation of penning a positive review of the work in the Communist Party mouthpiece *Shwadinota*. In 1946, having appeared for his Bachelor in Arts examination, Kalam contributed three poems to a collection of poetry, *Shaat-Shoter*, edited by Shamsuddin Abul Kalam and Professor Shudhangshu Chowdhury, the latter an academic at Barisal BM College.

When Partition came in 1947, Kalam stayed back in Calcutta and was not to arrive in Dhaka till 1950. It was a move, as one of the letters in this collection makes it clear, that caused depression in him. Obviously, for any individual who has discovered himself in as historically rich a place in Calcutta will always feel a trifle diminished,



Shamsuddin Abul Kalam O Tar
Patraboli
Abdul Matin
Radical Asia Publications

perhaps even bitter, in Dhaka. For Kalam, it was a leap from the cosmopolitan to the provincial. He was never to be happy in his new surroundings, though that did not deter him from plunging into writing. But, then again, many individuals disillusioned with conditions around them find refuge in pen and paper. Shamsuddin Abul Kalam was one such man. In 1953 appeared a new collection of stories he called *Poth Jana Nai*. In the same year came another, though unpublished work *Dheu*. Then, in 1955, appeared eight stories in the collection *Di Hridoyr Teer*. A collection of twelve new short stories, *Puin Dalimer Kabya*, appeared in 1957.

The acclaimed novel *Kashboner Konya*, which Kalam finished writing in 1948, saw the light of day in 1954. There are all the other novels which underpin Kalam's cerebral qualities, his contribution to the growth of modern Bengali literature. And within this group comes the *Liberation War*-based *Kanchangram*, which was published a year after Kalam's death and was to earn the Bangladesh National Archives and Library award. A list of Kalam's remaining works testifies to the prodigious energy that worked in him, the frenzy with which he lost himself in the world of letters even as he eked out a living working for various organisations in Rome. In *Jibon Kotha*, Alamnagarer Upokotha, Kanchanmala, Jaijogol, Nobanno, Shamudra Bashor, Jar Shaathe Jar, Moner Moto Thain and Moja Ganger Gaan, Kalam's understanding of what literature ought to be becomes transparent. And yet, as he notes in his letters, a writer should be careful that he does not impose his own personality on the reader. Could it be that he had Keats' negative capability in mind here?

Quite a few of Kalam's works, including the English language novel *The Garden of Cane Fruits*, have remained unpublished. In 1964, the Bangla Academy conferred its literary award on Kalam. The writer, residing in Rome since the mid-1950s when he left the country on a Unesco fellowship, was thenceforth to lapse into a state of near obscurity he was not (who will be?) comfortable with. In a letter, he writes, 'I only get lonelier. I have nothing. There is no scope for

a return to the country.' In the 1980s, threatened with unemployment and rather in a state of panic, Kalam notes, 'I remain busy in trying to finding work of any kind. It seems eventually I will have to leave Rome.' And then a flicker of hope: 'Perhaps in a year or so I will come by Italian citizenship.' But for all his travails, Kalam remains acutely conscious of how literary trends are shaping up back home in Bangladesh. 'Taslima Nasreen's personal frustration,' he writes, 'voices the frustrations of many others. But can simple martyrdom truly aid the progress of this society?' Kalam is harsh on Abul Fazl and makes studious note of the hypocrisy he notes in the late academic. In a 1987 missive he writes, 'Abul Fazl has been projected (as a literary figure). From one of his works I have found thus: 'Sheikh Mujib has misused power and there is no confusion about that'. Interestingly, though, the same Abul Fazl was to obtain a newspaper dealership through Sheikh Mujib for his son.' Kalam's heart, as these letters show, remained consistent in its comprehension of Bengal's ethos. Rivers fascinated him. He writes to Matin, 'If you come across in any bookshop dealing in old books works on the Volga, Danube, Euphrates, Amazon, Yangtze, et cetera, please let me know.'

Fazila Rahman, the recipient of many of his letters and the repository of his trust, sums up Shamsuddin Abul Kalam: 'He looked like a sun god.'

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

Plumbing the depths of feudalism

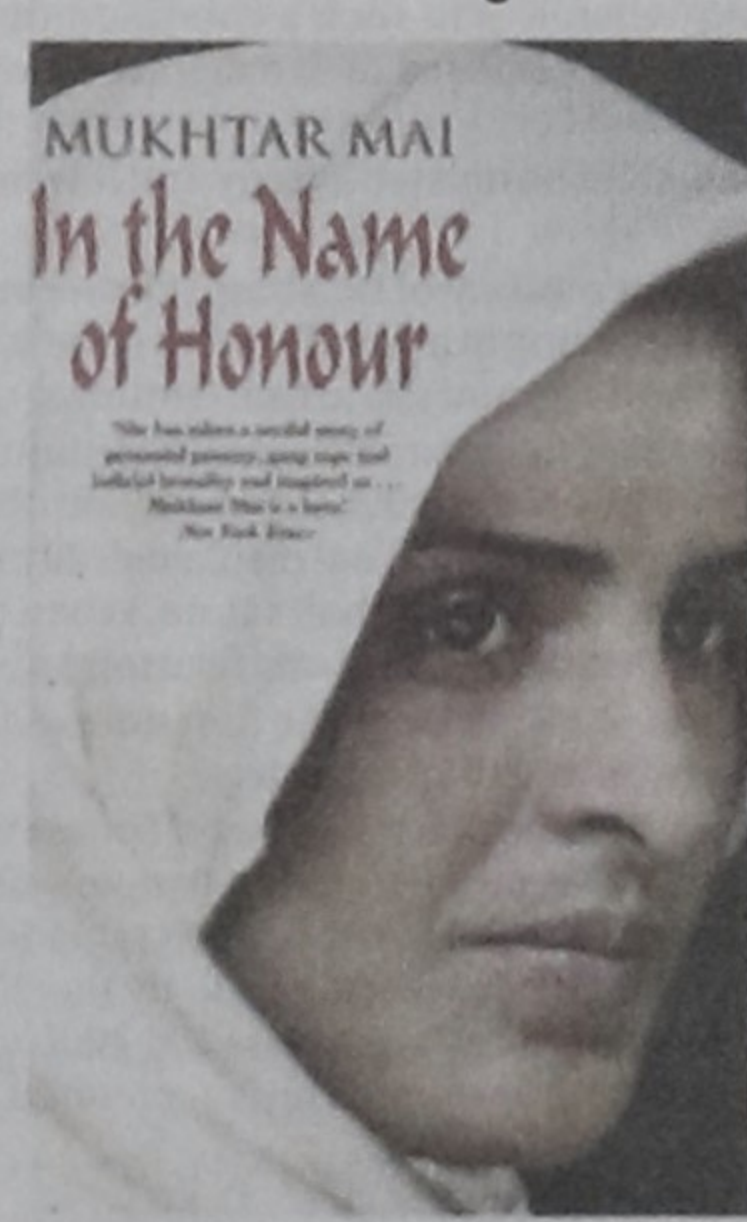
Shahan Huq spots courage in a tale of conviction

MUKHTAR Mai, also known as Mukhtar Bibi, was subjected to gang rape in the village of Meerwala in Pakistan's Punjab province on the recommendations of a village council in 2002. It was an incident as horrible in its ramifications. Mukhtar Bibi, like so many others before her in Pakistan and elsewhere, could have opted for the traditional suicide after the shame that was heaped on her even as a whole village watched, tongue-tied, what was being done to her by men on the higher perches of feudalism in her country. No one lifted a finger, no one said a word, there was none to protest the scandalous behaviour of the Mastoi tribe. Mukhtar was only a Gujar, a member of a community that had for ages been poor and therefore resigned to its fate, which again was what people like the Mastois made of it.

It was no fault of Mukhtar Mai's that saw such shame descend on her. Her twelve year old brother had earlier been accused of having engaged in sexual relations with the twenty-something Salma who, understandably, was a Mastoi. No one among the Mastois could explain how a twelve year old could seduce a woman much older than him. The village mullah, the natural fear of God working in him, went all the way to pacify the Mastois. He knew that these ferocious men were lying and yet demanding that the Gujars be punished for a crime that was of a patently dubious nature. When the Mastois demanded that

Mukhtar appear before them and seek forgiveness for her brother's alleged bad behaviour, he knew what they were up to. He walked off, leaving the village council free to order the young woman, a divorcee in her early thirties, to appear before them. Mukhtar, who since her divorce had been teaching the Quran to the children of her village, did appear before all those fiery-looking strangers. She left many hours later, half-naked, raped repeatedly and fell into numb silence in the confines of her home.

And it is in that long silence that her decision to fight back begins. Her story gets around to the local press, which loses little time in disseminating it to all of Pakistan. And from there, the tale of the hideous cruelty inflicted on her travels out to the world outside Pakistan's frontiers, throwing up in turn a wave of revulsion against her rapists and against the local authorities whose timidity before the Mastois, indeed before an entrenched feudal order, gives rise to fresh scandal. Mukhtar Bibi's attempts to convince the police of the violation of her body by the powerful men of her village cuts little ice. The officer at the police station takes her thumb print on a blank sheet of paper and then puts in her statement from his own perspective. It is a kind judge who dismisses that 'statement' and has her narrate the entire story to him. One would have thought that that would be enough for Mukhtar to come by justice. But the men of the Mastoi clan do not give up easily. They have the police at



In the Name of Honour
A Memoir
Mukhtar Mai with Marie-Therese Cuny
Virago Press

their beck and call. It is, as Mukhtar Mai says in this narration of her ordeal, the media that keep her spirits going and her story alive. Human rights and women's organisations in Pakistan take up her cause. Her cousin Naseem, a lawyer, travels all over the province educating her in all the legal intricacies she needs to master if she means to triumph over her assailants. Meanwhile, charitable organisations as well as the government

come forth to help her. Donations from well-meaning individuals pour into her hands, which enables her to set up a school for girls in Meerwala.

This work is fundamentally a mirror image of the suffering which women still go through in Pakistan, especially in areas where tribalism or decidedly marked streaks of it continue to define social existence. For Mukhtar Mai, for women in her social circumstances, being a woman has always meant being a commodity to be used at random by men. It has also meant a social structure where the writ of the government has never run deep, or has never run at all. The police, generally corrupt and almost always in the pay of local feudal chieftains, have never cared to record the grievances of the poor. Not even judges, excluding a handful, have shown themselves to be aware of the plight of the poor. The judge who turns the trial of Mukhtar's rapists into an interrogation of the plaintiff herself, thereby shaming her a second time, has little compunction in releasing the rapists and having the police accompany them home. It is only Mukhtar's resilience and the public outcry over the judge's behaviour that lead to the re-arrest of the criminals.

But even as the victim moves heaven and earth in her demand for justice, a concerted smear campaign goes on against her. She must prove, through the presence of at least four

witnesses, that she was indeed raped.

A howl of protest greets the announcement, which prompts the authorities to withdraw the measure. The Canadian ambassador to Pakistan visits Mukhtar Mai's school in Meerwala and promises to see to it that justice is done in the matter of her rapists. Mukhtar is feted in Europe and in Washington, places where she boldly condemns the system that allows women like her to be made into objects men will enjoy in all their sexual perversity. She refuses to take things lying down. Unlike Shazia Khalid, the young doctor-wife-mother raped in her quarters in a remote region of Baluchistan by a military officer and eventually convinced to leave the country and settle in Britain, Mukhtar Mai remains adamant about remaining in Pakistan and reclaiming her honour.

Mukhtar Mai is both victim and celebrity. Her courage in taking on an entire establishment that has had scant respect for women and so proving that not every woman is willing to stay quiet in the face of shame has proved infectious in encouraging other brutalised women into bravery. Abroad, she may already have become an icon for people who see in her struggle some early light at the end of what remains a long tunnel of suffering for Pakistan's women.

Shahan Huq writes poetry and occasionally reviews books.

AT A GLANCE



INDIRA
The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi
Katherine Frank
HarperCollins

This is one work which infuriated quite a few people in India because of Katherine Frank's rather frank revealing of details. Look beyond the outcry and you will certainly discover for yourself that the writer is in deep love with her character. This work brings you an Indira you perhaps never knew existed.

The Great Partition
The Making of India and Pakistan
Yasmin Khan
Yale University Press

Khan is of mixed Pakistani and British origin. And yet in this gripping account of the division of India in 1947, she feels no sense of ambiguity, no ambivalence as she relates the heartbreak and the overall tragedy which accompanied the knifing of history. You get a new insight into a story from one who was not there.



Amrita Sher Gil
A Painted Life
Rupia Chaitavali Series

In her pretty brief life, the beautiful and accomplished Amrita Sher Gil turned quite a few heads and nearly overturned some lives. Badruddin Tyabji was enamoured of her. Khushwant Singh has not forgotten her. And, of course, there were all the others. In this work, you glimpse Sher Gil. More importantly, it is her art you fall in love with.

The Spiral Staircase
A Memoir
Karen Armstrong
Harper Perennial

The autobiography of one of the foremost modern scholars of religion, it is a work you cannot afford to ignore. Armstrong explains her life in detail and tells you in no uncertain terms why she decided not to be a nun after all and instead go into a study of faith. The style is riveting. She has a way with words.



Secrets unfolded, grievances addressed

Nausheen copes with a mother's sadness

HAVING just finished reading an enjoyable book on parent-offspring attachments and detachments, coming across another novel dealing with the same subject, but with a very different story, was a welcome coincidence.

Elizabeth Berg's *What We Keep* wrings out silent tears as it takes us along the difficult path of lives irrevocably bound together, yet apart. Apparently a simple book, which the writer dedicates to "women who risk telling the hard truths", it has layers of inexplicable emotions.

While flying out to meet her mother after a gap of thirty-five years, forty-seven year old Ginny Young goes back into her past, a past which holds beautiful as well as ugly memories, a past she wants to forget, but cannot.

Ginny lets us into her near-perfect childhood where she has two loving parents and an older sister. It is in the summer of her twelfth year that their life undergoes a drastic change; nothing can ever be the same again. Now a mother of two daughters herself, Ginny tries to reconstruct her childhood and to see things from an adult's and a mother's point of view.

Temperamentally, the two sisters, 12-year-old Ginny and 13-year-old Sharla, are very different, but somehow they complement each other. Berg does a marvelous job of describing people, feelings, the environment, from the 12-year-old's perspective.

The arrival of Jasmine Johnson, a very attractive-looking woman (who the girls feel could be Liz Taylor), in the neighbourhood and in Ginny's family life, is the beginning of the end, so to speak.

Ginny's mother's behavior sometimes made Ginny feel that something "dark and uneasy" was going on with her but that she would neither admit it nor let anyone else do so. This "internal storm" seemed to get "fiercer" after Jasmine moved in next-door.

We get inextricably tied up with the story as the two girls start sensing the changes in their mother and seeing the distance between their parents growing. The day comes when the mother goes away (from their homes and their lives). The children's insecurities, fears, anger, and tired acceptance, are all described sensitively and realistically. The sisters are brought closer together because of their shared misfortune.

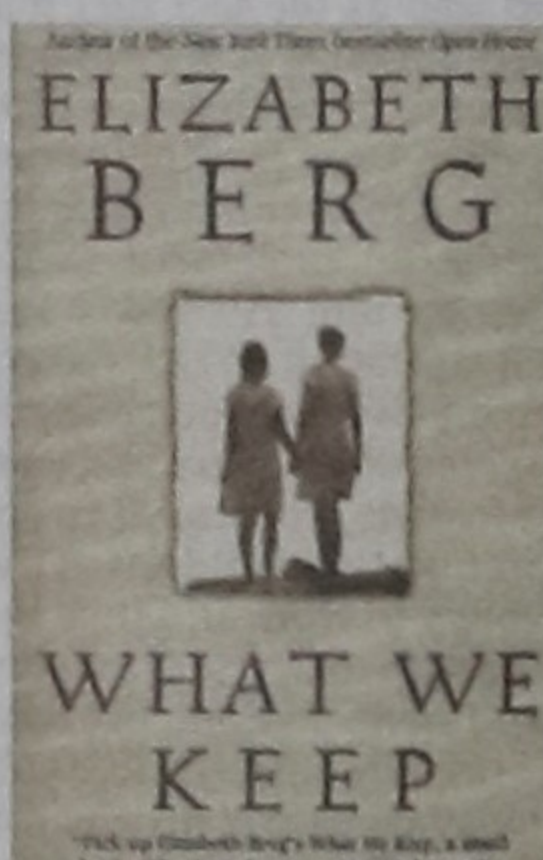
The mother makes several attempts to explain to her daughters, her reasons, but because of their age, they are incapable of understanding. They see her only as a mother, not as a person or a woman. When she wants to talk about how her marriage has not been fulfilling enough, and how she feels happy doing art classes, they are extremely hurt and block her out of their minds and hearts. She fails to convince them that she truly loves and cares for them.

Years pass. The girls slowly and painfully come to terms with the fact that their mother is gone for good. Their resentment becomes a part of their being and they move on with their lives. Their father remarries and they get along very well with their stepmother, a pleasant woman. Meanwhile, they keep up a semblance of a connection with the mother, occasionally talking over the phone and visiting her at times. They reject her overtures as she tries to involve them in her life; they believe she has gone mad. Not being able to accept the new person their mother has become, they refuse to see her or talk to her anymore. Says the writer, 'It's funny how, oftentimes, the people you love the most are given the least margin for error'. Thirty-five years later, Sharla and Ginny go to meet their mother. Their father is dead. They're both married and have children. Sharla has told Ginny that she's ill and wants a reunion with their mother in case the illness is really serious. She later tells Ginny (after they've just met their mother), that it's actually not she who's sick, but just their mother (and that she'd called her to tell her).

At this meeting, this long-overdue reunion, the three women talk, really talk. Secrets are unfolded, grievances are addressed and misunderstandings are cleared. Ginny wants to tell her mother that she knows she never stopped loving them, that she had been an artist, living in an oppressive atmosphere, and that she had done what she had done, in order to survive. Although she doesn't end up telling her all this, the whole matter makes her think more analytically about her own relationship with her daughters. It allows her to finally appreciate her mother's needs and individuality. She and Sharla gladly take her back into their lives hoping to let their children, her grandchildren know and be with their grandmother.

This "ode to motherhood", as the *Greensboro News and Record* calls it, ends on a touchingly optimistic note, washing away the guilt and the hurt and heralding in promises of stronger familial ties. Ultimately, forgiveness and redemption reign supreme.

Nausheen Rahman, teacher and literary critic, studied English literature at Dhaka University.



What We Keep
Elizabeth Berg
Ballantine Books