

Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

History, with all the facts ...

ABDUL MATIN's interest in history and in Bangladesh has never wavered. As an expatriate, he has found little reason not to reflect on what has been happening in the home country he left long ago to make a home in the West. From the distance of London he has, with something of determination and with a huge deal of principle, focused on the need to set the history of Bangladesh in the proper perspective. That Matin was on his way to being a commentator on Bangladesh came through as far back as the early 1970s, when he ventured into a work that was to emerge as *Geneva-e-Bangabandhu*. He has come a long way since then. And in all the works he has come forth with thus far, Matin has deemed it refreshingly necessary to play by the rules. And that has consisted in adding to the substance of his works through bringing documentary evidence into it.

It is what Matin does in his new work. In *Koyekti Oitishashik Dolil*, he brings into the public domain once more a theme writers in Bangladesh as well beyond its frontiers have struggled with, especially since August 1975. For Bengali scholars, especially for those who had reason to observe the rise of Bengali nationalism in the 1960s and the emergence of Bangladesh in the early 1970s at close quarters, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remains not merely a point of reference but also a fascinating study in political leadership. For Matin, as for millions of others, Mujib remains the pivot around which Bengali politics, pre- as well as post-1975, has conducted itself. More importantly, though, Matin's emphasis has been on the dark propaganda, indeed the innuendoes, that have been made about the Father of the Nation by those who came after him or by those who had ample cause to benefit from his assassination. At the same time, Matin has found it necessary (which scholar of history will not?) to debunk the many myths surrounding the fall of Bangladesh's founder. He goes to considerable lengths, in this work as also in earlier ones, to persuade readers that Bangabandhu's death was not a simple matter of some soldiers shooting him down but part of a wider web of conspiracy laid at home and abroad.

Abdul Matin deals in facts. And because he does, this work (as also his earlier ones) makes gripping reading. Notice that unlike so many others, he does not take recourse to hearsay when it comes to dwelling on the declaration of Bangladesh's independence. He proceeds headlong into a United States government report (Defence Intelligence Agency Spot Report) of 26 March 1971:

"Pakistan was thrust into civil war today when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proclaimed the east wing of the two-part country to be 'the sovereign independent People's Republic of Bangla Desh.' Fighting is reported heavy in Dacca and other eastern cities..."

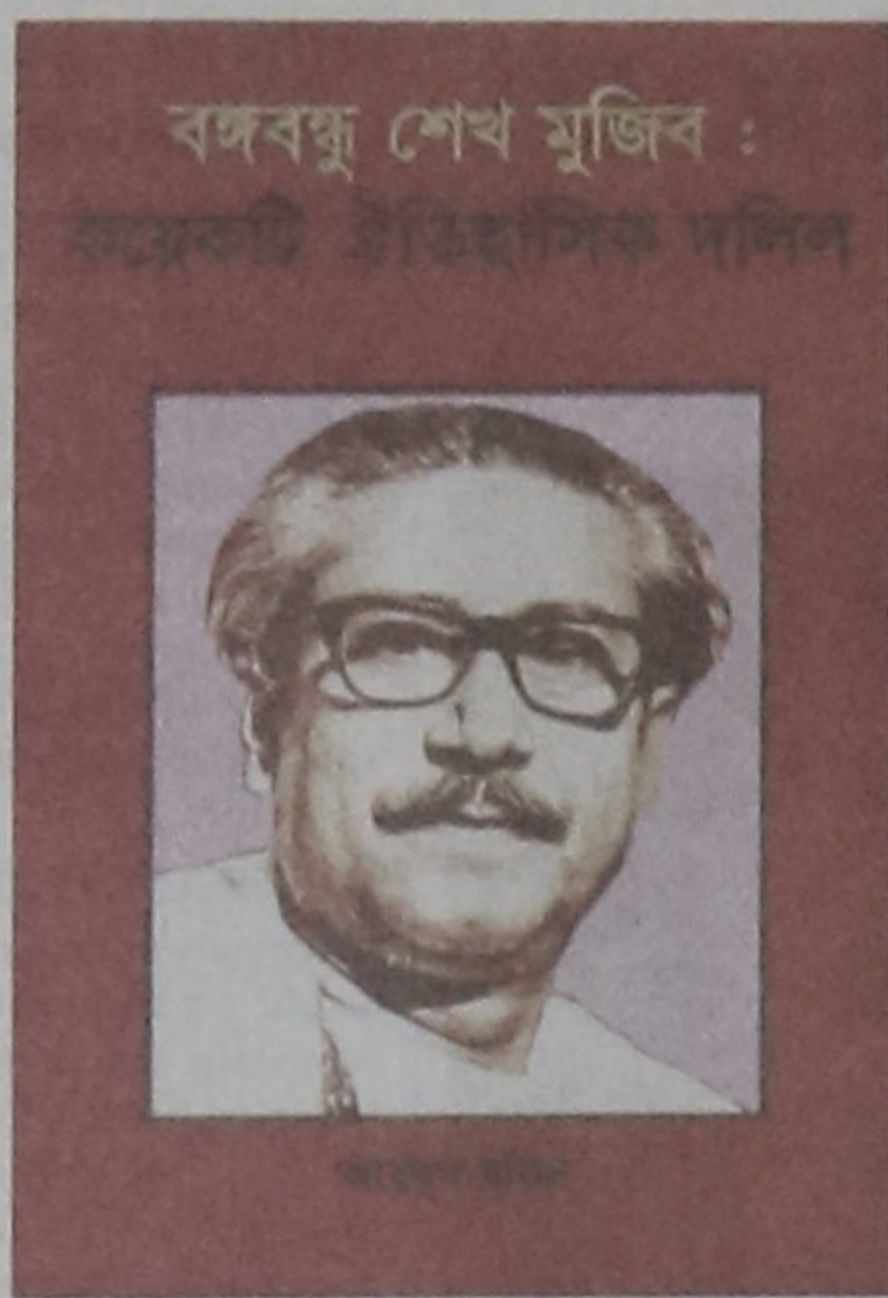
And there you have it. The argument of whether Mujib did or did not declare Bangladesh's freedom has no more validity. The truth is set out in that report. That said, a significant part of Matin's work deals with the events that were to shake Bangladesh violently on and after 15 August 1975. The writer goes to Keesing's Contemporary Archives (16 January 1976) to provide readers with an insight into the happenings between 3 and 7 November 1975. Note the chilling comment on the death of the four Mujibnagar leaders in prison:

"The Majors" had meanwhile apparently given orders for the killing of the four imprisoned ministers, who were shot and bayoneted to death during the night of Nov. 2-3, although reports differed on whether the deaths took place before or after the coup began..."

Keesing's goes on:

Colonel Farook told journalists on Nov. 5 that he regretted the "unnecessary killings" on Aug. 15 but not the murder of President Mujib, which he had himself ordered. It was announced on Nov. 30 that the officers had been granted political asylum in Libya.

Matin sets the record straight, through citing all the unimpeachable sources behind the arguments he makes. He repro-



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib
Koyekti Oitishashik Dolil
Abdul Matin
Radical Asia Publications

duces the famous article (Food Politics) by Emma Rothschild and thereby gives Bangladesh's people as well as those who have long held the Mujib government responsible for the famine of 1974 some serious thoughts to mull over. Consider the following from the Rothschild article:

... U.S. agreements to supply food as aid under the PL 480 program were also delayed, mainly because officials were negotiating in secret as to whether Bangladesh was disqualified from receiving aid because it had sold jute to Cuba earlier in the year. ... By the time the American food arrived in Bangladesh, in December 1974, the autumn famine was over.

The appendices in the book make terrifically worthwhile reading. Matin digs up all the old records of Bangabandhu's assassins publicly gloating over their act (re Farook's 'I helped to kill Mujib', et cetera). The writer specifically refers to Stanley Wolpert's work on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to explain how leftists in Bangladesh were busily engaged in the conspiracy to bump Mujib off. Wolpert quotes from a letter written by Abdul Huq, a leftwing underground Bengali politician, to Bhutto (the letter is now in the Bhutto family archives in Karachi):

Abdul Huq, general secretary of Bangladesh's Marxist-Leninist Communist Party, had written on 16 December 1974 to "My dear Prime Minister" Bhutto, with "much pain and anguish" to appeal "for funds, arms and wireless instruments" to use against the "puppet Mujib clique ... totally divorced from the people." That "TOP SECRET/MOST IMMEDIATE" letter reached Zulfikar on 16 January 1975, when he minuted on its margin "Important," authorizing "help" for this "honest man," whom Bhutto rated as "fairly effective..."

Matin goes on to quote Wolpert further: Abdul Malek, another one of Zulfikar's agents in destabilizing Bangladesh, travelled to Saudi Arabia for support in the promised 'liberation' of 65 million Muslims (of Bangladesh), who are anxiously waiting for your guidance and leadership."

Read on. And you will get a sense of how Bangladesh was betrayed in the years immediately after its triumph on the battlefield against Pakistan. It is a compelling work.

... Toil and tears of the poor

AH, rickshaws! That ubiquity we regularly rail against and yet cannot do without. For Niaz Zaman, an academic who has for as long as we can remember taken huge interest in rickshaws (years ago she wrote on the art fashioned on

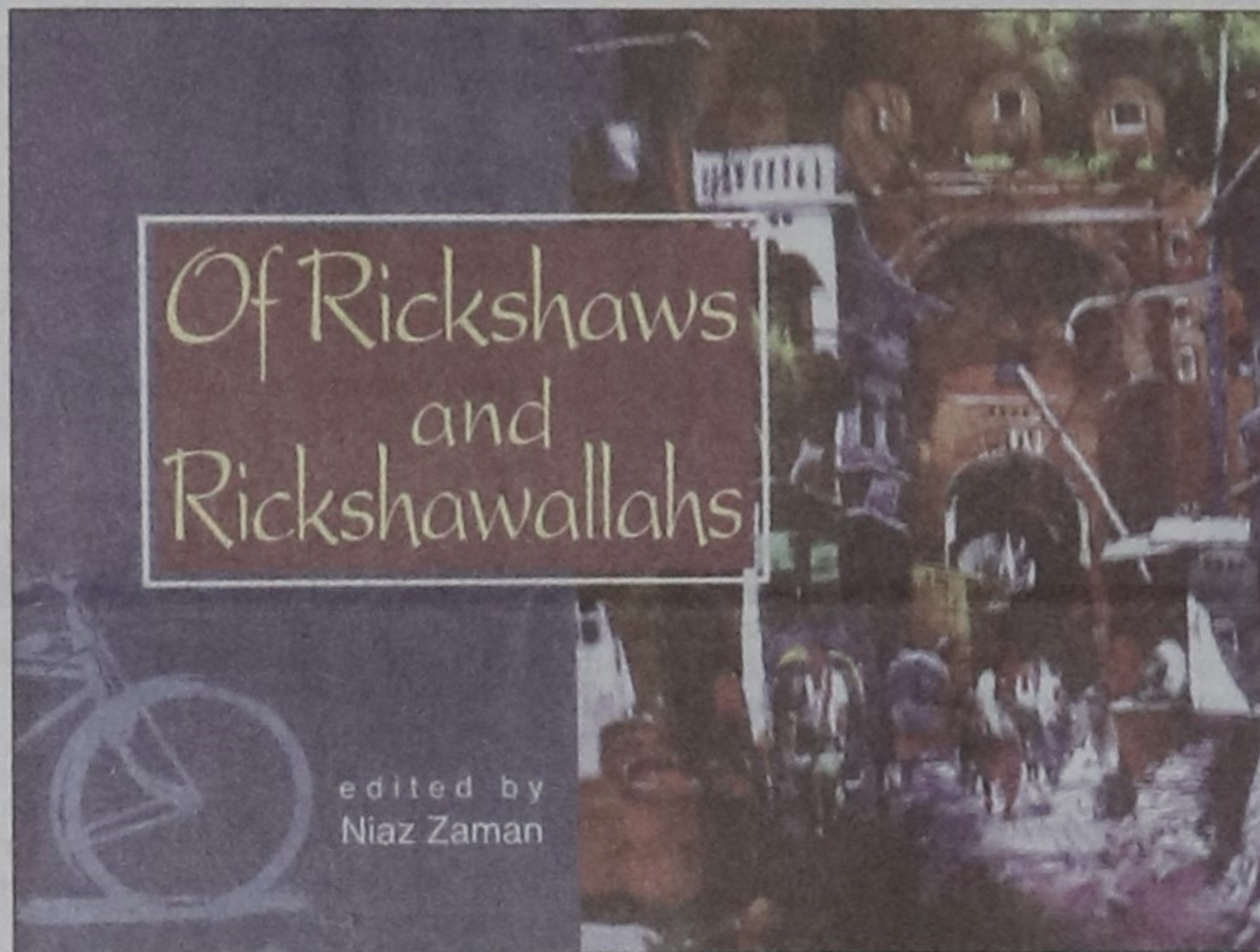
the bodies of these three wheelers), the work in review was clearly something into which she put her heart and her soul. There is the poignance and the pathos about rickshaws she speaks of here, through bringing to you the innumerable facets of rickshaws and how they have impacted on lives. And not just in Bangladesh.

Of Rickshaws and Rickshawallahs is, of course, a whole lot more than deliberations on a mode of transport people have been using for generations. That is the point Zaman makes through stringing together a diversity of thoughts on the subject. And what a pick you have before you. The editor goes back in time, to Rudyard Kipling and ends with the heart-breaking tale narrated by the young Mahfuz Sadique. Begin with Kipling's *The Phantom Rickshaw*, a story first published in 1885 in *Quartette*, *The Christian Annual* of the Civil and Military Gazette. And then you move on, stopping at Dilip Sarkar's poem, *The Rickshawallah's Song*. Ever been on a rickshaw? Sense then the pain that oozes from the man who pulls this vehicle for a lifetime, yes, a lifetime:

We eke out our lives in this country / Men labouring like cows and horses / We wether away, struggling all our lives / Others get rich without labouring! / Is this the game of destiny?

You wonder, even as you observe nonchalantly the traffic constable landing his baton on the back of the rickshawpuller or letting the air out of his tyres for a misdemeanour that even the gods will ignore. But go beyond the pain and sift through the romance a rickshaw ride with the one you love can be. Kaiser Haq speaks for you in *A Freshman's Unsent Billet-Doux*:

The warm length of your thigh / along mine / was it spring or mellow / tropical winter? / ... Now all flowers remind me of you / This is my despair / So many flowers / and only one you / and only once / happy chance



Of Rickshaws and Rickshawallahs
Edit. Niaz Zaman
The University Press Limited

let me share / an all-too-brief rickshaw ride / with you / the warm length of your thigh / along mine.

There is, as Syed Manzoorul Islam notes in *Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh*, something of the aesthetic about the vehicle. He calls rickshaws (along with the jeepneys in Manila and the tuktuks in Bangkok) 'eccentric forms of public transport that add colour and a certain anachronistic flavour to the city traffic.' Islam gives you a rundown on the history of Bangladesh's, especially Dhaka's, rickshaws. And he adds into the telling of the story the demands made by human rights bodies for an end to the human exploitation involved in the pulling

of rickshaws. Isn't reality being ignored here? And have the lives of rickshawpullers and their families not been trifled with already through important thoroughfares being closed off to rickshaws? Islam moves on from such existential questions, to let us take a peek into what he calls moving picture galleries. That is the spin he puts on rickshaws. His reflections on rickshaw art, indeed on the various ways in which such art has evolved over time, are indeed a commentary on contemporary life. Note his comment: 'Rickshaw painting also promotes male power in the images of hunting and chase. A tiger pouncing on a deer, or a woman pursued by a man (he may be a lover or a villain) have been favourite themes since the early 1970s.'

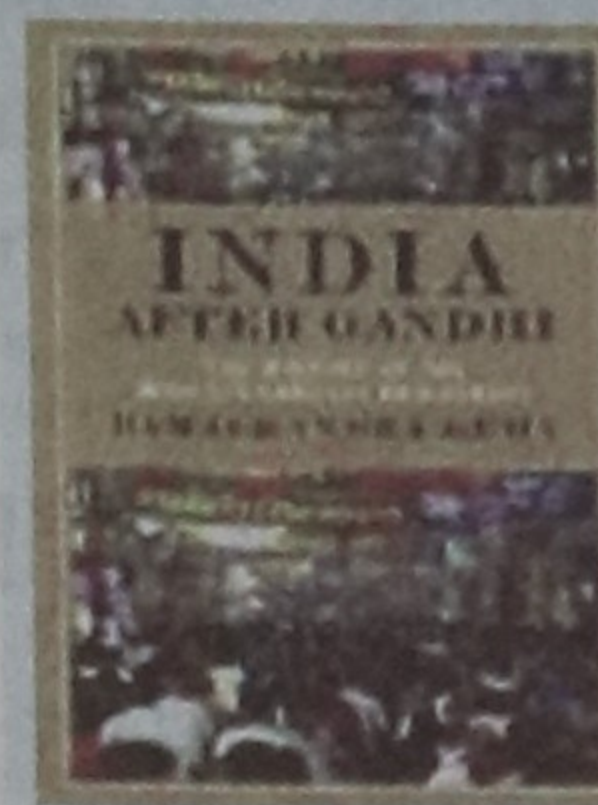
In Hafiz and Abdul Hafiz, Mahbub Talukdar comes up with ironies. The rickshawpuller Abdul Hafiz recalls the Persian poet Hafiz:

For six hundred years the whole world has known him / has known him as a poet ... / Sir! His name is Hafiz. I am Abdul Hafiz / If I die today no one will remember me tomorrow / Six hundred years?

Abu Rushd's *The Driver* makes painful reading and so does Humayun Ahmed's *The Rickshawpuller*. In the latter, the tale of the two Ishaks, one the puller and the other his passenger, crashes into a tragedy of the former breathing his last, but not before begging the latter to take care of his rickshaw. You get a glimpse into the human condition here. And you brood.

Clearly one of the best entries in this volume is Mahfuz Sadique's *Shattered Dreams on Three Wheels*. Sadique goes visiting rickshawpullers, inquiring into their various states of misery. And he emerges with tales that will leave you writhing in

AT A GLANCE



India After Gandhi
Ramachandra Guha
Pan Books

This happens to be a whole-some work on the history of India as it has shaped up in the past six decades. Guha, already a well-known entity in scholarly circles, traces the long, often bumpy road his country has taken since the death of the Mahatma. Anyone in need of modern Indian history must get hold of this tome.

In The Land Of Invisible Women
Qanta A. Ahmed, MD
Sourcebooks, Illinois

A woman doctor describes, in graphic, often painful detail her experience of practising medicine in Saudi Arabia. She is not abrasive, but only brings out the difficulties of a condition where women find it hard to operate. The sketches she draws are revealing and should appeal to anyone steeped in modern sensibilities.



Divided Cities
Ian Talbot
Oxford University Press

The partition of India left an entire world turned upside down. In this work, the reputed Ian Talbot focuses on the twin cities of Lahore and Amritsar as they came of age during the British colonial era and then as they went their separate ways after 1947. You get a sense, once more, that partition left a rich social legacy destroyed.

From Plassey to Pakistan
Humayun Mirza
University Press of America

A rather interesting work from the son of Iskandar Mirza, it is touted as the family history of Pakistan's first president. Obviously, the writer holds his father in huge respect and would have you know how great a defender of democracy Mirza was! Swallow that and then go into the reading, those little snippets that come up here.



Myths, half truths, metaphors

Efadul Huq admires a lyrical novel

NO, the woman wasn't made of stone but the stone showed fading traces of a woman who probably was a pagan goddess. And it is to her that the novel's characters disgorge their secrets it must be her silence that made her a worthy listener.

The *Stone Woman* is Tariq Ali's third book in the celebrated *Islam Quintet*. It is a lyrical portrait of the lives of the members of Iskander Pasha's family as they live under the sky of a deceasing empire, the Ottoman Empire to be precise. Nilofer, the determined daughter, returns home after nine years of banishment as her father forgives her for running away with an ugly, skinny, Greek called Dimitri. On returning she runs to the stone woman and deposits all her hidden pain in the stone. This is definitely the most interesting aspect of the novel. The readers gain an in-depth look at the emotions of the characters as each of them confesses to the stone woman. And the entire novel is unfolded mostly through these confessions and a few bits through Nilofer.

Pasha suffers a stroke and the family members are called for from different places. Along with the increasing number of characters, the stone woman fills to the brim with sinister secrets, violent emotions and conspiracy. Each character is furnished with complexities of relationships, heart-beating worries about survival in the dying empire, narrow-mindedness towards each other, hopelessness and vice versa. In fact, the existence of the stone woman is very crucial to the development of the novel as Tariq Ali's mastery over creating profound characters shines through the confessions that are made and hence the title *The Stone Woman*.

If you are a historical-political-fiction lover, this is the kind of book that will leave you with a lot to ponder over as Ali also attempts to show the growth of a generation that is uncompromising toward the myths and half truths of the good old religious days. I am tempted to add that if Orhan Pamuk portrays the westernised modern days of the fallen empire, Tariq Ali shows how it was in its last days; if Orhan Pamuk talks about what the king's men did to Humpty Dumpty, Tariq Ali narrates who was Humpty Dumpty and what he was doing sitting on the wall.

Well, in a few places in the novel you might lose patience when it becomes tedious or find it hyperbolic. But then you must keep in mind that it is a historical fiction and, above all, the lyrical nature of this novel arises from its dense use of intriguing metaphors to describe actions as well as emotions. For an example, think about a palmyra rising between somebody's legs!

Tariq Ali also takes much time in breaking the stereotypical image of lives under Islam. Most western readers expect the seductive images of harems, silently praying conservative masses and poignant tales of oppressed women in novels that have an Islamic core. But Ali shatters that expectation with the characters indulging in rational arguments about political systems, debates on various philosophies and questioning the odds of their own religion though they don't miss any prayer. Even the female characters join in these conversations with much enthusiasm and, contradictorily to the usual scene, in her bedroom Nilofer is the person in charge.

There's a lot that Tariq Ali wishes to tell his readers and I recommend you this book if you are tolerant even to ideas that are totally unacceptable to you because in *The Stone Woman* Tariq Ali reveals the vista of an Islamic family like never seen before.

Efadul Huq is a critic and regular book reviewer.

The disappearing mother

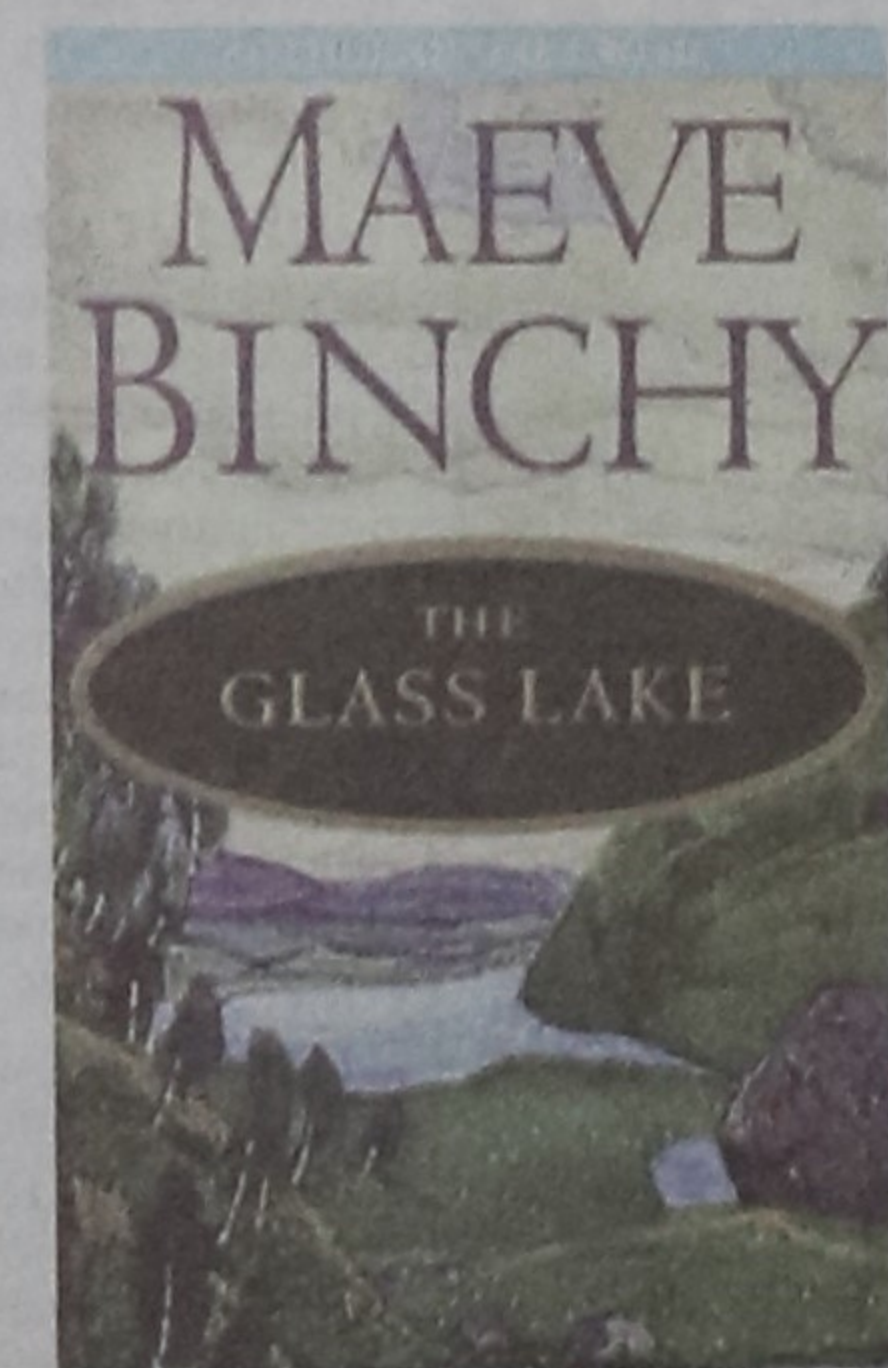
Tulip Chowdhury is touched by sadness

KIT McMahon lived in the quiet Irish country of Lough Glass. Here everyone knew each other. Childhood sweethearts grew up amidst laughter and tears and married. Kit was at the end of her high school. Her life wound around her family, her best friend Clio and the other friendly neighbours. Sister Madeleine, the hermit living in a rundown cottage, was fond of Kit and always welcomed her. Philip O'Brien, her childhood pal, had loved her from very early childhood. To an outsider Kit's life may have seemed charming. But in the midst of all these seemingly good things Kit was deeply troubled by her mother Helen McMahon.

Helen McMahon was a beautiful woman who seemed to find herself a stranger to the people of Lough Glass. Kit's father, the kindly pharmacist, had married her knowing well that she had loved a different man who had deserted her. He had brought her from Dublin. Helen never seemed to have settled down in this sleepy place and just did not fall into pace with the people there. She lived on her own with her two children, Kit and Emmet, her son. While at home she looked after the family and when restless she roamed around the lake, even at night. One day Kit saw her mother crying in the kitchen. She was deeply troubled. She wondered what secret had made her mother so mysterious. And while she continued to

puzzle over the sight of her mother crying soundlessly, Helen McMahon disappeared one day.

When there were no traces of her mother it was concluded that she had drowned in



The Glass Lake
Maeve Binchy
Dell Books

the deep lake. The whispers began that the strange Mrs. McMahon must have committed suicide. Kit found a note in her mother's room. Suspecting that it must be a note confessing to her suicide Kit burned it in the fireplace without even reading it. She destroyed it before anyone else could read it, for bodies in suicide cases are considered to be unholy according to Catholic law. However, soon a body is discovered from the lake. It was impossible to identify the almost decomposed body. And so on the assumption that the body must be the late Helen McMahon's, it was given a decent burial.

Kit, Emmet and their father lived with a gnawing emptiness inside. The house was run by Rita, who having been in the house for many years ran the house efficiently. Kit went away to Dublin for higher education. In the meantime Kit began to receive letters from Nela, a woman in London. Nela claimed to be a very close friend of her late mother. Nela was married to Louis Gray, a man whom she loved to the world's end. Kit found a strange familiarity with Nela as she got to know her through the letters. Sometimes she wondered if Nela was someone else pretending to be a friend. But Kit did not allow herself to be disillusioned.

One evening when the whole of Lough Glass was busy with a dance program a woman was found prying on the outside as if observing the lives of these people. As peo-

ple began to describe the woman Kit found herself having doubts over the death of her mother. She went to London to find the truth of her mother's disappearance. The mystery was solved as she unearthed an absorbing love affair here. She met Louis Gray, her mother's lover. However, she knew that no matter how painful the deception was, her mother must continue to live as dead, she must remain to others Lena Gray, the real Helen McMahon must be allowed to remain hidden. The scandal at Lough Glass would be too much for Kit, Emmet and their father. Although she blamed her mother for disrupting their lives she could not stop loving her mother who was trapped by a love for a man who had no intention of staying with the woman who had abandoned her family for him.

The story in the *The Glass Lake* holds many characters. Though each character has his or her own unique part to play, at times the reader may have difficulty in keeping track of the different episodes. However, the life that goes on in the book is vibrant. The reader feels as if he or she is fully in tune with the characters for they seem so real. The plots are operatic and catch the readers' attention. It is a novel of love, obsession and the secrets that take root in the human heart.

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher and writes fiction.



The Stone Woman
Tariq Ali
Seagull Books