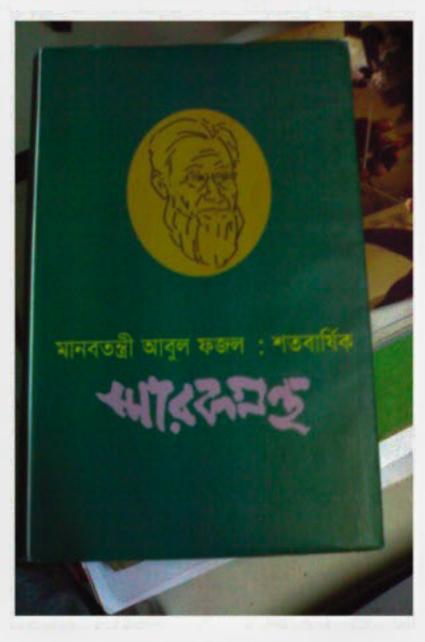
A treat for thinking readers

Mohit Ul Alam finds a commemorative work insightful

Nothing is more in need at this critical time, when political democracy has re-started but a limping journey, than the publication of a centenary commemorative anthology on Abul Fazal (1903-1983), the foremost humanist of the country. He was considered the conscience of the nation in his time. Though primarily a writer, all his life it has been a trademark with Fazal that he participated in and led almost all intellectual and civil movements against the pseudo-religious Pakistani autocratic regimes. At the advent of the Bangladesh movement Abul Fazal became a truly national figure guiding the progressive forces with courage and high morale.

The anthology, appropriately entitled as Manobtontri Abul Fazal: Shatobarshik Shmarankgrantha (Abul Fazal, a Humanitarian: Centenary Commemorative Volume), has been edited by a competent team led by Professor Anisuzzaman, and, in its 576-page thick size, has accommodated thirty-eight essays, of which the first five are based on personal reminiscences by a group of litterateurs who were his contemporaries and were conversant with his ideas and writings when Fazal was emerging on the literary scene of undivided Bengal in the early thirties (Annadashankar Roy and others). Fourteen more essays follow on Fazal's life and literature, written by a later generation of writers, most of whom happen to be Fazal's erstwhile students, who later on became his colleagues, literary friends and admirers (Prof Anisuzzaman, Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury and others), then the remaining nineteen essays (Profs Amlan Datta and Jamal Nazrul Islam and others) The essays focus on various social topics, mostly factual and well-documented, published, as it is to be understood, to highlight issues that were close to Fazal's line of thinking.

Now, what was Fazal's line of thinking? From reading the essays anthologized one can understand that Fazal had imbibed a liberal mode of thinking, non-communal and secular, but at the same time following a tradition of liberal Islamism that took deeper roots in the subcontinent than the fundamentalist Islam which seems to have become widespread, Fazal was willing to give a wide berth to religious conformity (Mafidul Huq, p. 209). Moreover, says the poet Abdul Kadir, a distinguished contem-



Manobtontri Abul Fazal: Shatobarshik Shmarankgrantha Editors: Prof Anisuzzaman et al. **Shomoy Prokashan**

porary of Fazal, in his essay, "Shahityacharya Abul Fazal," Fazal's father, Moulavi Fazlur Rahman, who was the Pesh Imam (chief priest) of the central mosque of Chittagong Anderkillah Jam-e-Masjid for thirty years, had played an important part in Fazal's formative years. Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman, a versatile man of letters of the country, sees no contradiction in Abul Fazal's coming from a traditional Muslim family and yet aspiring after secular and progressive ideas and joining the Shikha (flame) Group in Dhaka the members of which were promoting ideas of liberal humanism and questioning religious bigotry and communal thinking. The title page of the group's literary organ Shikha had an inscription announcing that the letters of the Holy Koran were being blazoned by the flame of liberal human thinking (Rahman, p. 49). Yet then, though, in his personal life Fazal was a nonpractising Muslim, his avowed persistence, however, for keeping Madrasa education in place (spotted by many, including Prof

unpleasant contradiction) is an expression of his realization that social and religious reforms were not possible by deracinating a system unless a substantial alternative was found. Abul Fazal, like Tagore, did understand political and social reforms not as to come from divisive thinking but to be necessitated by a wider intellectual view where society's basis was to be agreement in disagreement. The second factor that many contributors in the anthology have again noted, though perfunctorily, as another act of opportunism is his joining the cabinet of the a military ruler, President Ziaur Rahman, which again needs to be seen as Fazal's holisitic approach towards life. Reaching the fag end of his life, Fazal might have felt the necessity to serve the nation in more concrete terms rather than deny the responsibility on vague reasons. The editorial perception of this anthology has failed in this one regard: that instead of Muslim Bengal. facing the controversial issues the editors have elided them altogether, thereby giving the impression that they have implicitly concurred with the criticism, whereas indepth probing essays explaining why Fazal made some certain moves in his life that contradicted with his basic ideological premise could have given a fuller substanti-

ality to the anthology. His contention with Tagore about what should be the right perspectives of literature, which developed when he was just emerging as a fictionist, however, gives clues to Fazal's quest of life. He sent his newly published novel Chouchir (The Cracking) and two other books to Tagore, when the latter was nearly failing in eyesight. Yet Tagore read the novel and wrote back an encouraging letter saying that if half of Bengali life would remain hidden in the dark like the half hemisphere of the moon that never receives the sunlight. But Tagore also cautioned him not to, in unwarranted manner, introduce Islamic words into the Bengali language, which Fazal in his letter of 31 August 1940 aptly countered by saying that words such as 'dastarkhana' in place of tablecloth, and 'nasta' for 'jalkhabar' were used in the Muslim community so naturally that Bengali synonyms were redundant. But Tagore was not to be undone, and replied in a much longer letter on 6 September 1940 that language had a

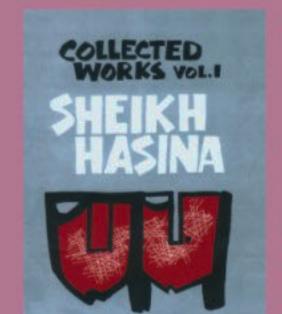
Anisuzzaman and Waheedul Huq, as an natural capacity to accept or reject nonindigenous words. Tagore explained that the word 'khunkharabi' (murderous activities) had been used in Bengali since long, but that was no reason to take 'khun' (which in Hindi means both 'murder' and 'blood', but only 'murder' in Bengali) as 'rakta' (blood). To this letter too Abul Fazal prepared a reply but refrained from sending it to Tagore, who was then severely ill. In that letter Fazal expressed his disappointment that though the world was lighted by Tagore's 'sun', that is, genius, but one part of Bengal had, unfortunately, remained out of its purview. And pointing to the communal politics thriving in both Hindu and Muslim communities, Fazal wrote that the way was to reconcile the positive aspects of both religions together and create a harmonious identity based on Bengali nationality. Otherwise, as he so very rightly predicted, there would be a Hindu Bengal and a

> Annadashankar Roy, whose essay "Rabindranath o Abul Fazal" is the source of my discussion in the paragraph above, has his own share of comments on this dialogue. Roy, referring to Tagore's image of 'the half moon', says that Bengal today is divided into two halves, and interestingly enough, intellectuals like Fazal, who had been advocating non-communal politics, became a supporter of the Lahore Resolution (1940), which sought a separate state for Muslims in the name of Pakistan. So, Roy claims that the logical conclusion that Fazal and other Muslim writers' thinking had to come to was that because Pakistan was created, Bengal got divided like the two halves of the moon, an outcome much feared by Tagore.

The cover so well done by artist Abul Muslim writers were not coming forth then Mansur, Fazal's third son, is a splash of soothing green against which is etched a pen-drawn portrait of Fazal in a yellow oval. There is a portrait-photograph of a thoughtful Fazal on the first inner, but the photographer is not named. The price is Tk 750/-, may be reasonable by today's standard. Somoy Prakashan deserves thanks for such an excellent publication. The book will surely sell well.

> Professor Mohit UI Alam, PhD, is Head, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh,

AT A GLANCE

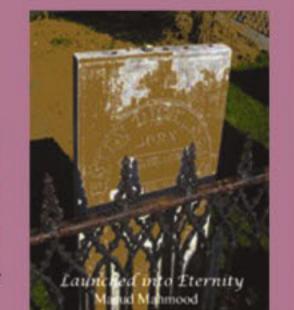


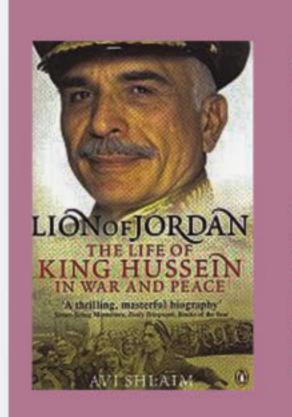
Collected Works Vol. 1 Sheikh Hasina Mowla Brothers

This compilation comes in company with another, in Bengali, and together the two volumes bring forth the ideas Bangladesh's prime minister has given voice to over the past many years. Both as speeches and articles, the write-ups here provide a glimpse into Sheikh Hasina's political philosophy.

Launched Into Eternity Masud Mahmood Writers.ink

Emily Dickinson has always been a mysterious figure in American literary history. In this work, Masud Mahmood, a young Bengali academic, presents an argument as to the factors that made it possible for the poet to find, albeit posthumously, a significant niche in the world of letters. A fascinating read.



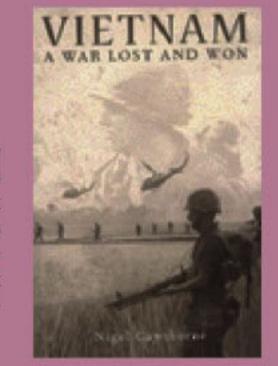


Lion of Jordan The Life of King Hussein Avi Shlaim Penguin Books

The late King Hussein was forever in a tight corner. He saw half his country disappear in 1967. And then there was the battle with the PLO in 1970. But if many consider him a heroic figure, there are also those who have regarded him, as they once regarded his grandfather Abdullah, as a traitor to the Palestinian cause. A good analysis, this.

Vietnam AWar Lost and Won Nigel Cawthorne Arcturus

Essentially a chronological account of the Vietnam War, this work explains the reasons why the United States was doomed to defeat in a conflict it thought it would win hands down. And yet, from a geopolitical perspective, can it be argued that American in fact won the war? Think of the fall of communism or its reinvention.



proceeds. Here's how a balloon-trip

as God saw them, the ruins of the

very old and heroic city of Cartagena

de Indias, the most beautiful in the

world, abandoned by its inhabitants

because of the sieges of the English

and the atrocities of the buccaneers.

They saw the walls, still intact, the

brambles in the streets, the fortifica-

tions devoured by heartsease, the

marble palaces and the golden altars

and the viceroys rotting with plague

battle ends exactly after 51 years, 9

months and 4 days when Urbino dies

in the process of chasing a churlish

parrot parked upon a mango tree.

The final chapter is in fact serene and

GABRIEL

GARCÍA

MÁRQUEZ

Love in the Time of

Cholera

The afore-mentioned long-lasting

inside their armour.'

'From the sky they could see, just

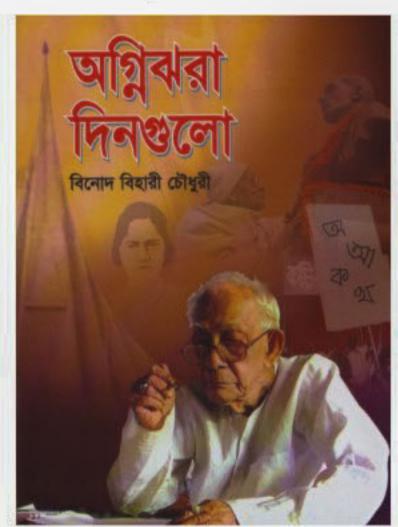
The life and times of a revolutionary

Subrata Kumar Das explores a centenarian's career

INOD Bihari Chowdhury, the iconic revolutionary figure of the subcontinent, turned one hundred on 10 January. By all accounts yet a young man, he has produced a book called Ognijhora Dingulo (The Flaming Days) through dictation where he has deliberated on his long as well as told and untold stories of his eventful life. There is no doubt that the publication of the book will help us learn more about this centenarian figure who has observed the three phases of the evolution of the Bengali nation the British era, the Pakistan era and the present Bangladesh era and thus has made himself an erudite figure in the historical perspective. Born in Chittagong to Kamini Kumar

Chowdury and Bama Chowdhury, the veteran revolutionary Binod Bihari Chowdhury started his academic life at Rangamati Board School in Fatikchhari Thana of Chittagong District. Later on he attended Coronation Uchcha Biddalaya of Fatikchhari, Chittagong, and P C Sen Saroatoli Uchcha Biddalaya of Boalkhali, Chittagong, where he pursued secondary education. Chittagong College and University of Kolkata were to provide him with the opportunity of pursuing higher studies. He did his MA in English in 1939 and graduated in law subsequently. These are the facts that are revealed in this recently published book.

But more than that the book, in fact, delineates the simplified stories of the different phases in the life of the veteran politico-cultural personality. The chapters include 'Amar Priyo Gram' (My Beloved Village), 'Amar Bere Otha' (My Growing Up), 'Amar Biplobi Jiboner Suchona' (Beginning of My Revolutionary Life), 'Jubo



Ognijhora Dingulo **Binod Behari Chowdhury** Savdachash Prokashon, Chittagong

Bidroher Kotha O Jalalabad Juddho' (The Story of the Youth Revolution and Jalalabad War), 'Jalalabad Juddho O Amar Kotha' (Jalalabad War and Me), 'Ferari Jibon' (My Fugitive Life), 'Amar Jailjibon' (My Life in Prison), 'Jailkhanai Porashona' (Studies in Prison), 'Bhasha Andolone Sompriktota' (My Involvement in the Language Movement), 'Bhasha Andolone Chottogram' (Chittagong in the Language Movement), 'Muktijuddhe Amar Sompriktota' (My Involvement in the Liberation War), 'Bangabandhur Hotyar Shorhojontro O Amar Kotha'

(Bangabandhu Murder Conspiracy and and My Statement) are the episodes that Binod Bihari Chowdhury has enjoyed dictating to Tapati Roy and Hossain Anwar who made transcripts of them to be published in a book form.

The titles can easily delineate what spans of his life are demonstrated in the thin but invaluable two-cover production. It is a well known fact that Chowdhury joined the group of revolutionaries called Jugantor and thus became a very close associate of the revolutionaries Mastarda Surjya Sen, Tarkeswhar Dastidar, Modhushudon Datta and Ramkrishna Biswas. His devotion and sincerity in the anti-British movement made him an integral part of our history. But he contributed not only in the movements against the British rulers, but subsequently against the Pakistani military junta as well. His fiery nationalistic sentiments never remained silent whenever the existence of the nation was in trouble.

The stories that the revolutionary relates are not that much unknown to readers who have an inclination toward history, especially accounts of the British colonial days. But the speciality of Ognijhora Dingulo comes through the personal tone which seems to be rather a novel approach for readers. So many events were he involved in, so many great people he met with, so many phases of our historic movements he has been engaged in that it all seems incredible. And yet that is the incontrovertible truth. Chowdhury is polite with his readers. He does not patronize. Think of the qualities that can make a legendary personality like him write: 'As I don't have enough practice in writing, there could be found many errors. But I have tried to picture

some of the revolutionary events in the hope that the youth of today will attain bravery leaving behind all their lethargy. This is the reason behind the writing of the book. I will be grateful if knowledgeable people bring the errors in the work to my notice. This is my request.' Maybe this modesty is a common feature among illustrious people like him?

A particular attraction of the book is the 72 photographs of the revolutionary, though all of them show the elderly Chowdhury. These include some with famous personalities like Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina or Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus; while some others depict his family people in a very informal milieu. Some photographs also tell of the sweet moments of the later-life activist, like celebrating his birthdays, et cetera. It would have been a better collection if photographs covering his whole life, in its various phases, had been accommodated in the volume.

The respected-by-all personality Binod Bihari Chowdhury's Ognijhora Dingulo is a careful presentation of its publisher Sanjit Banik, a real devotee of the 100-year old dignitary and an enthusiast of Bangla literature. As the proprietor of Savdachash Prokason, he has many worthy books to his credit and Ognijhora Dingulo is certainly a rich addition to the list. Sanjit Banik deserves real appreciation for making available to us such a black and white documentation of the momentous days of our pride, namely, Binod Bihari Chowdhury.

Subrata Kumar Das, author of the web site Bangladeshinovels.com, can be reached at subratakdas@yahoo.com .

The surreal sights that dot the path

Efadul Hug reads an old story in new times

is described:

OVE, the eternal two-faced dream, never stops mesmerizing us. Writers all over the world end up contributing to the ever-increasing definition of love at some point in their writing careers because they find almost every quality of life in love. The kingdom of love is so vast that it reigns over every other human emotion and this, needless to say, heaps on love a dual nature on top of its universality

Marquez's story takes place in a Caribbean city and out of its total population, there are three dazzling characters, each unique in its own way, whom we will observe as they travel through time on the boat of love. Fermina Daza is a 'beautiful adolescent with... almond shaped eyes' who walks with a 'natural haughtiness... her doe's gait making her seem immune to gravity'. Expectedly (because who wouldn't want a companion like that?) Florentino Ariza, the carnal and transcendent lover, falls in love with her. His affair transforms him into a poet though his fate binds him to a River Company of the Caribbean. Fermina and Florentino don't get the chance to talk to each other much and therefore fall back on writing passionate and secret letters and

telegrams. When Fermina returns from her journey, she remembers Florentino quite well but rejects the lovesick man and surprisingly meets and marries Dr. Juvenal Urbino. The lovelorn poet's heart is torn in shreds but he is still not disheartened. Having proclaimed his love for Fermina, he decides to wait until the day comes when Fermina will be his. And thus commences the battle of the eternal vow of love against the finite hours of the earth. In between, during these years, Marquez takes time to portray the various appearances of love between men and women as Florentino takes to the street to find lovers who can satisfy his manly needs and Fermina spins the strings of marriage. Florentino and Fermina's love affair at this stage is the unrequited version of love while Fermina and Urbino's state of monotonous love is marital love. Florentino and Leona share a platonic love and with the poetess, Florentino shares an angry love. We experience jealous love in the incident of the adulterous wife being killed because of her affair with Florentino and love becomes dangerous when Florentino develops a relationship with an asylum fleeing

The spellbinding voice becomes

all the more magnetic as the story

lunatic.

Love in the Time of Cholera **Gabriel Garcia Marquez** Penguin

yet vibrant like the dawn. Its tempo is like that of a travelling boat as the author unerringly navigates the readers through a skeptic landscape cut open by a serpentine river. Floating on this river Florentino proclaims his virginity to Fermina as they lie on bed admiring each other. Aye, he was still a virgin of heart if not of the phallus. And even though it is no more possible for Florentino to make love with Fermina, his love has transcended carnal desires and has become spiritual. Love in the Time of Cholera rides

hard on our hearts but in the end alights on a soft melody that opulently states: love's labour is never

Efadul Huq is a freelance writer and

book reviewer.

Pain, sorrow and women's lives

Jackie Kabir empathises with tormented souls

HARNA Das Purkayastha is very well known to Bengali readers. She has written numerous short stories. She won the Annanya Shahitya Puroshkar in 2008. The Blue House is a collection of twelve short stories which have been translated by different writers and edited by Niaz Zaman.

As I was reading the stories an all too well known picture of my surroundings, indeed the surroundings of most Bangladeshi women, came alive in the writing. The trivial events that we seldom take notice of, the humiliation women of this country face with no one taking note of them are the subjects of Purkayastha's stories. It seems as though these happenings are not important enough to be noted but Jharna Das Purkayastha does just that, makes readers see them. She depicts very ordinary events in such a way that she de-familiarises them, makes us see them anew. That is her expertise, her talent. She makes use of it in all her twelve stories.

'The Blue House' tells the story of young girls disappearing in the course of their studies. They get married and simply disappear. Abhimanu seizes his wife from behind which makes the newly wed woman shriek. People around the house are concerned as to what might have happened and thus a commotion is created. Everyone makes a big fuss about the event. Rituparna cannot understand where she has gone wrong and



The Blue House Jharna Das Purkayastha.

what is expected of her in her new found home. It takes her a while to realize that the comfort of her parents' home is no longer there in this house. She keeps reminiscing about her past and realizes that:

"Memories are hardly ever lost. They are just veiled by layers of the present." And that The Blue House will always

burn quietly in her heart.

'The blue, green, yellow faces around us' is the story of a young village girl whose husband changes her name from Gulmohor to Rina as he thinks it is too old

fashioned. She is changed into an urban housewife. It is a tale of how people give importance to wealth rather than to humane qualities, how the world values only moneyed people. So Gulmohor and her husband are dropped off halfway to their house on a stormy night. And the simple small town girl Gulmohor is lost in a he takes his own life. crowd of blue, green and yellow faces.

'Jasmine Oleander Days' shows how all young girls have somehow to let go of their days full of the fragrance of jasmine and oleander as soon as they tie the knot with someone. This story is about Runu and her younger sister Dona. Both of whom must marry the boys their parents choose for them. Life changes for Runu once she becomes someone's wife. Dona fears that may be she will have the same fate. One of the stories, 'Barbecue', draws

comparisons between the needs of the poor and those of the rich. For the simple village girl Jaitun, a bare minimum of food will suffice for survival whereas for Mehnaz appetising heaps of barbecued chicken can be spoiled by Jaitun's inconsolable tears. The storm afflicted girl can only think of the mighty power of the tornado which has washed everything away from her life. As she hears the word barbecue, it comes as the term for a storm to her which only

makes the lady of the house angry.

'Cascading Rain' is another story of pain and sorrow, insurmountable sorrow where the only son of the family commits suicide, as he cannot accept the way of life he and his parents have led. His father's meager earnings infuriate him. Most of his friends are well to do and so he has an inferiority complex throughout his childhood. As he reaches puberty the weight of the poverty just becomes too much for him to bear and The fragrance of 'The Night-Queen'

announces its arrival, but the bad news travels even faster. Two street urchins have died of diarrhoea caused by rotten food from Nigar's house. That makes her very upset but there is nothing she can do. Inspired by her mother, Nigar is dead against the idea of wasting anything. This leads her maid into giving away the fermented polao to the street boys, who apparently fall ill from consuming it. Most of the stories here are from women

protagonists' point of view. Women share pain and sorrow through the changing face of society. The book can easily be termed as a page-turner. The writer has a commendable sense of and a keen eye for the anomalies of society. It is these she depicts in her fiction. It is a work to be highly recommended for readers.

Jackie Kabir and Jharna Das Purkayastha are members of 'Gantha,' a literary circle.