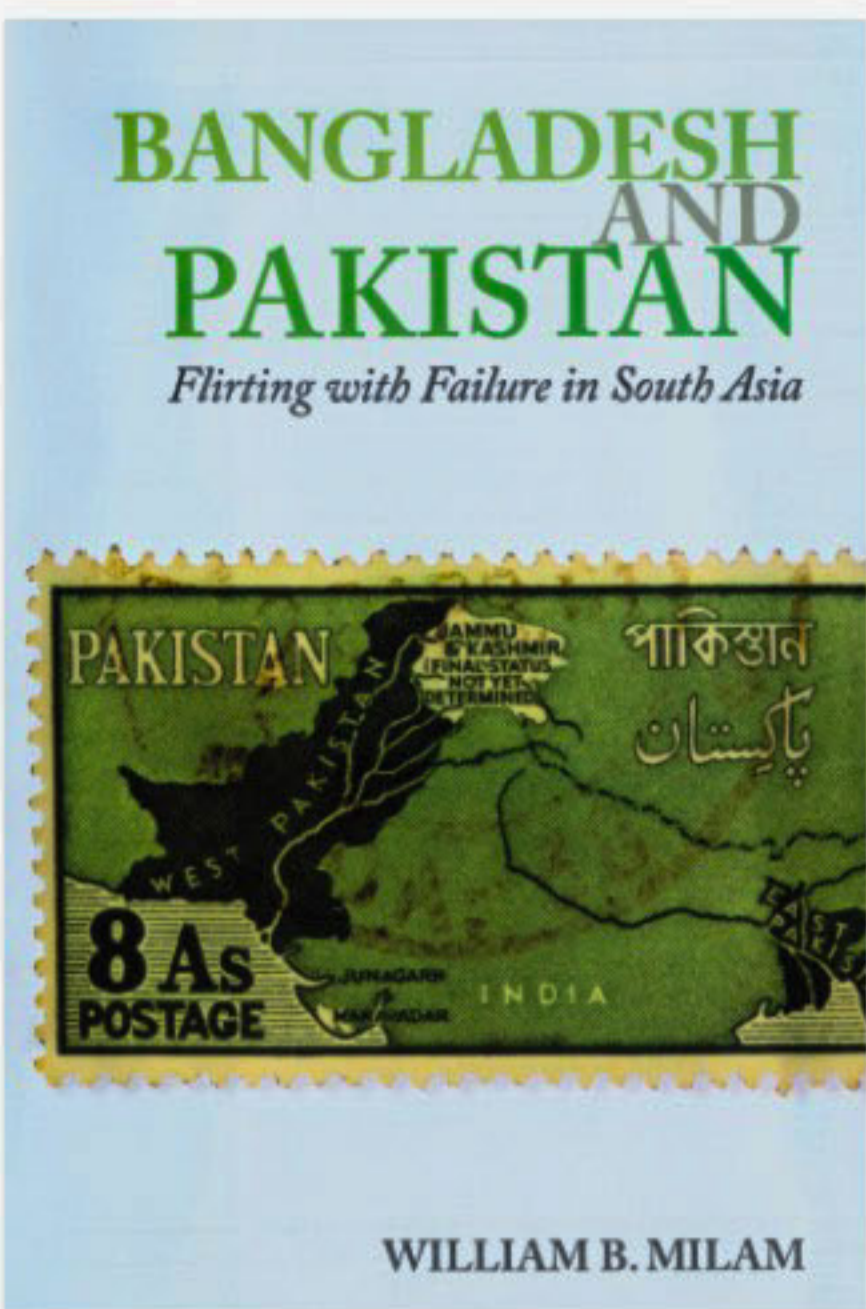


Two countries, their dictators, their politics

Syed Badrul Ahsan has his questions about a diplomat's analyses

WILLIAM B. MILAM served as America's top diplomat in Bangladesh and Pakistan at points of critical and crucial significance for the two countries. You can call that a most opportune happening or a mere coincidence. But the fact that the United States government thought it proper to have Milam serve in countries which once were linked through politics, indeed were a single state, is a rarity. And rare too is something else: Milam witnessed the fall of General Ershad in late 1990 and the beginning of a move back toward democracy; and then, in October 1999, as US ambassador to Islamabad and away in California, he heard about the coup that brought General Pervez Musharraf to power in Pakistan. And over the years since then, Milam has clearly made it his preoccupation to study politics in the two countries, which again would be regarded as analyses of the similarities that have characterized their political landscapes. Milam's subtitle, *Flirting With Failure in South Asia*, is a pointer to the questions he has before him.



**Bangladesh and Pakistan
Flirting with Failure in South Asia**
William B. Milam
The University Press Limited in association with
C. Hurst & Co. (London)

And those questions all relate to the problems of governance that Pakistan and Bangladesh have experienced since the partition of 1947 and, more specifically, since the break-up of pre-1971 Pakistan. Milam does not stay confined to the time frame in which he served as American envoy in Dhaka and Islamabad but makes it a point to go beyond that and indeed into the political background against which the two countries have shaped up since the departure of the British colonial power in India. You can detect a note of disappointment in him, which again is not surprising given the slide Bangladesh and Pakistan have been on, where a failure to build democratic institutions has always been a raw wound in the body politic of the two nations. Milam's disappointment originates with 1971. Under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's New Pakistan, the flawed state crafted by Muhammad Ali Jinnah ought to have reinvented itself in light of the new realities emerging from the Bangladesh war of 1971. That clearly did not happen, owing fundamentally to Bhutto's inability to forge a consensus on the democratic path his country needed to take. In essence, it was Bhutto's political and psychological make-up, as it was shaped in the years prior to his assumption of power in Pakistan, that prevented him from inaugurating the pluralistic process necessary for Pakistan to set a new course for itself. A singular irony of the Bhutto years is that while he believed 1971 had handed him a rare

chance to place the military under civilian control, he also did not feel averse to employing it to quell rebellions in such restive provinces as Baluchistan. As opposition mounted to his increasingly autocratic rule, he hit back in the only way he could: he saw conspiracy at work.

Milam is equally harsh on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman where governance in Bangladesh is concerned in the early years of its independent statehood. He traces the varied patterns of Mujib's period of administration and implies at every point that ineptitude and corruption undermined the ideals for which Bengalis had gone to war against Pakistan in 1971. The very weaknesses he witnesses in Bhutto are also what find resonance in his assessment of Bangladesh's founding father. As his problems piled up, Mujib went for increasingly harsh measures in the clear belief that an accumulation of more power would set matters right. That did not happen, of course, and the Bengali leader went to his doom in August

1975 when some mid-level army officers gunned him and his family down. It is at this point that Milam's point of view regarding the 1975 coup becomes suspect. In his words, 'popular esteem for Mujib had fallen so low that few lamented this brutal fact ...' Obviously, he ignores the element of terror which descended on 15 August when the officers and then an entire army took charge under a brutal regime led by Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed. Milam's assessment of August 1975, as also of subsequent Awami League politics, unfortunately does not go beyond the simplistic. He notes, at a quite a few turns in his work, the Awami League's propensity to describe the Bangladesh Nationalist Party as an anti-liberation force. He quite glosses over the truth of the brand of politics General Ziaur Rahman set in motion in Bangladesh after November 1975. That the communalism which defined post-1975 politics was a negation of the secular principles enunciated through the War of Liberation in 1971 is a reality the US diplomat does not probe deeply enough for us to be convinced by some of the arguments he puts across.

Beyond these flaws, however, Milam certainly provides a brilliant study of the modes of dictatorial rule which have at critical moments marred the chances for democracy in Bangladesh and Pakistan. He is not kind to Ziaul Haq and Pervez Musharraf. He is not sympathetic to Ziaur Rahman and Hussein Muhammad Ershad. Then again, he does give readers an idea of the differences that some of these dictatorial phases clearly have had with one another. An important instance is his study of the two Zias: while Pakistan's Zia systematically went for a consolidation of power through a marginalisation of the political classes, Bangladesh's Zia opted, in however questionable a manner, for a re-inauguration of the democratic process through shedding the one-party structure put in place by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in early 1975. If Milam holds military rule to account for the failure of democratic institutions to take deeper roots in Pakistan and Bangladesh, he also notes the inability and sheer incompetence of politicians to add substance to democracy when they have had the chance to do so. Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif, Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Khaleda Zia have not been able to emerge free of the peculiar limitations that shaped their perceptions of politics in the early stages. Without saying as much, Milam seems to be pointing at the insistent demagoguery which continues to stultify politics in

the two countries. The rest of the world goes by but Bangladesh and Pakistan, with their politics in a state of fragility, with religion making bigger inroads into their social structures, seem caught in a time warp.

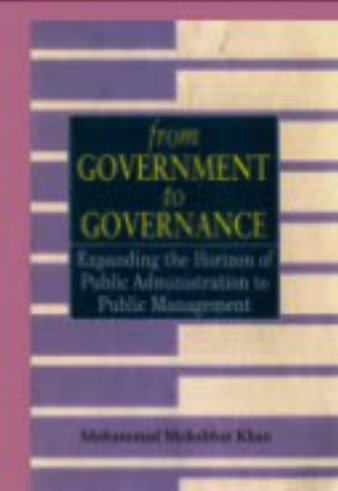
There is, however, reason to be happy if you happen to be a Bengali. Observe the many indicators of social progress in the two countries. Bangladesh has clearly edged Pakistan out, through greater numbers of its citizens finding their way to better living where the bare necessities of life matter. That is encouraging, but it is not something to be complacent about.

William Milam's work is an opportunity for a fresh new look at the ailments which have kept Pakistan and Bangladesh tied to the past, to the point of almost reducing them to being the backwaters of the region. Reading the work could have been somewhat more satisfying and less irritable if the author had double checked some of the historical information he comes forth with. He tells us the Muslim League was established in Dhaka in 1905 (it was 1906), that Jinnah made his defence of Urdu in Dhaka in January 1948 (it was March), that the Bengali language movement took place in 1951 (it was 1952). There are other gaping holes. He notes in a footnote that Dhaka fell to the Indian army on 16 December and so conveniently ignores the factor of the Mukti Bahini and the Joint Command. Milam's assessment that Mujib distrusted the Bengali military officers repatriated from Pakistan is not supported by arguments. He makes a spurious statement about the Bengali leader nationalizing one major Bengali language newspaper. Mujib, says he, 'threatened others that might have the temerity to criticize him or his government.'

But read the book for the western point of view it attempts to put across. Do not be surprised if William B. Milam does not go into the finer details of what led Bangladesh to break away from Pakistan, of the genocide that speeded up the process of Pakistan's dismemberment in 1971. He surprises you with his bland assertion that charges of complicity with the Pakistan army in the genocide against Golan Azam have never been proven. One wonders if Milam's reading of 1971, particularly of the internal situation in 'East Pakistan', leaves a good number of gaping holes in it.

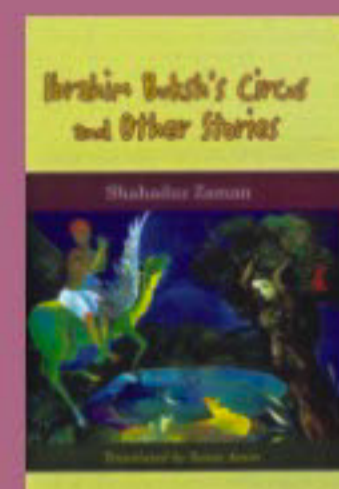
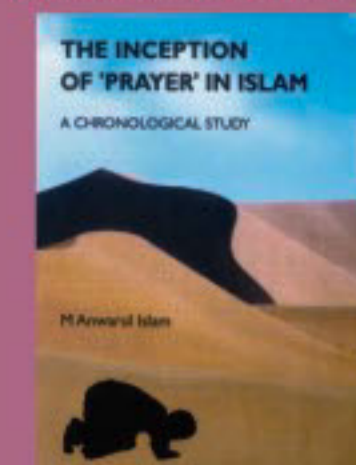
Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

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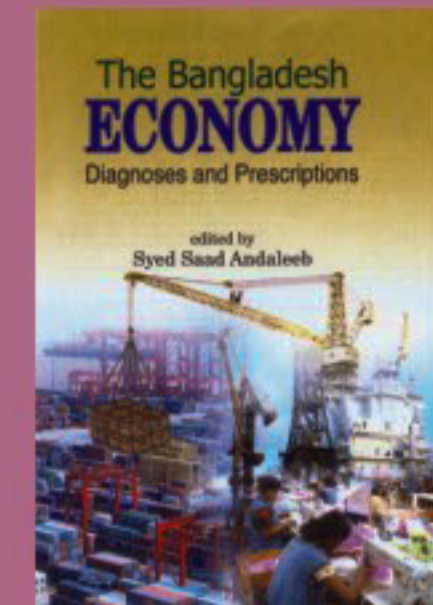
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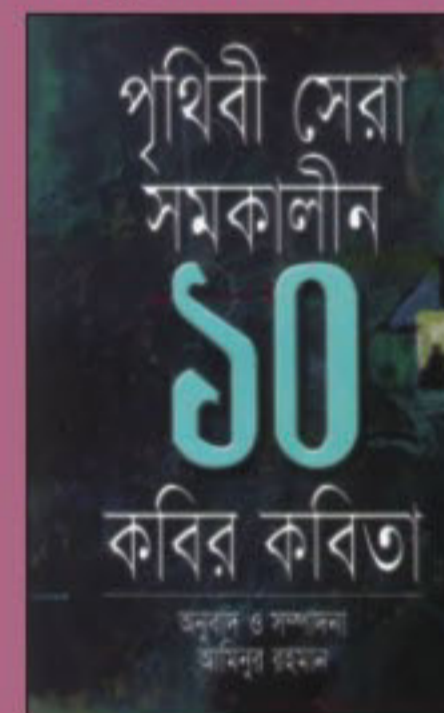
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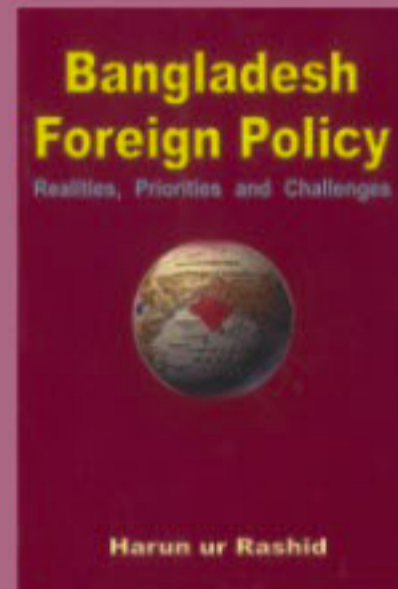
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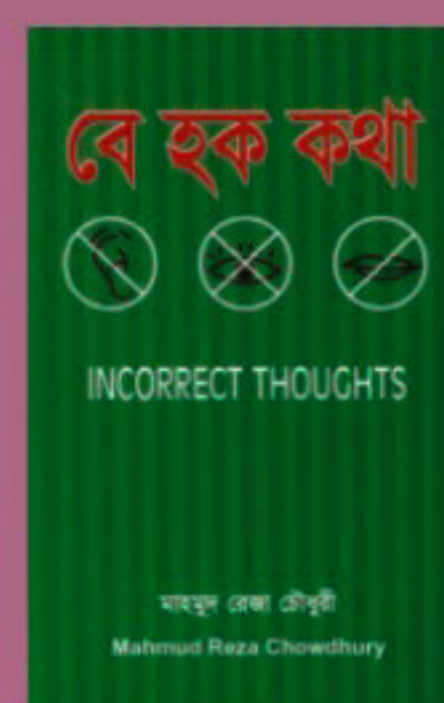
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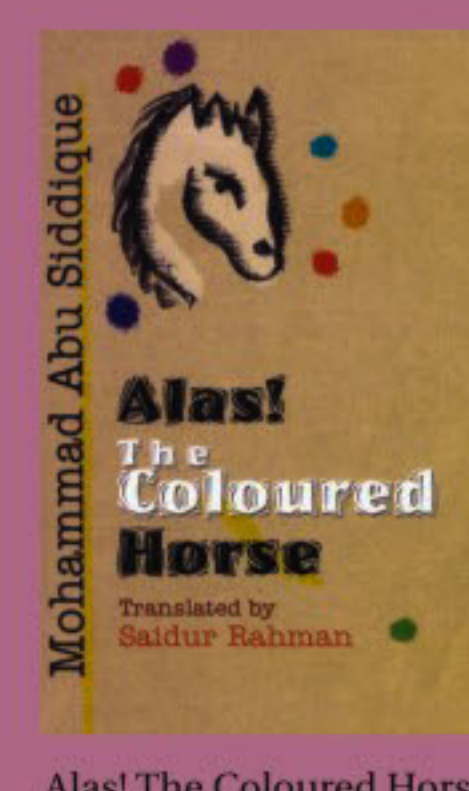
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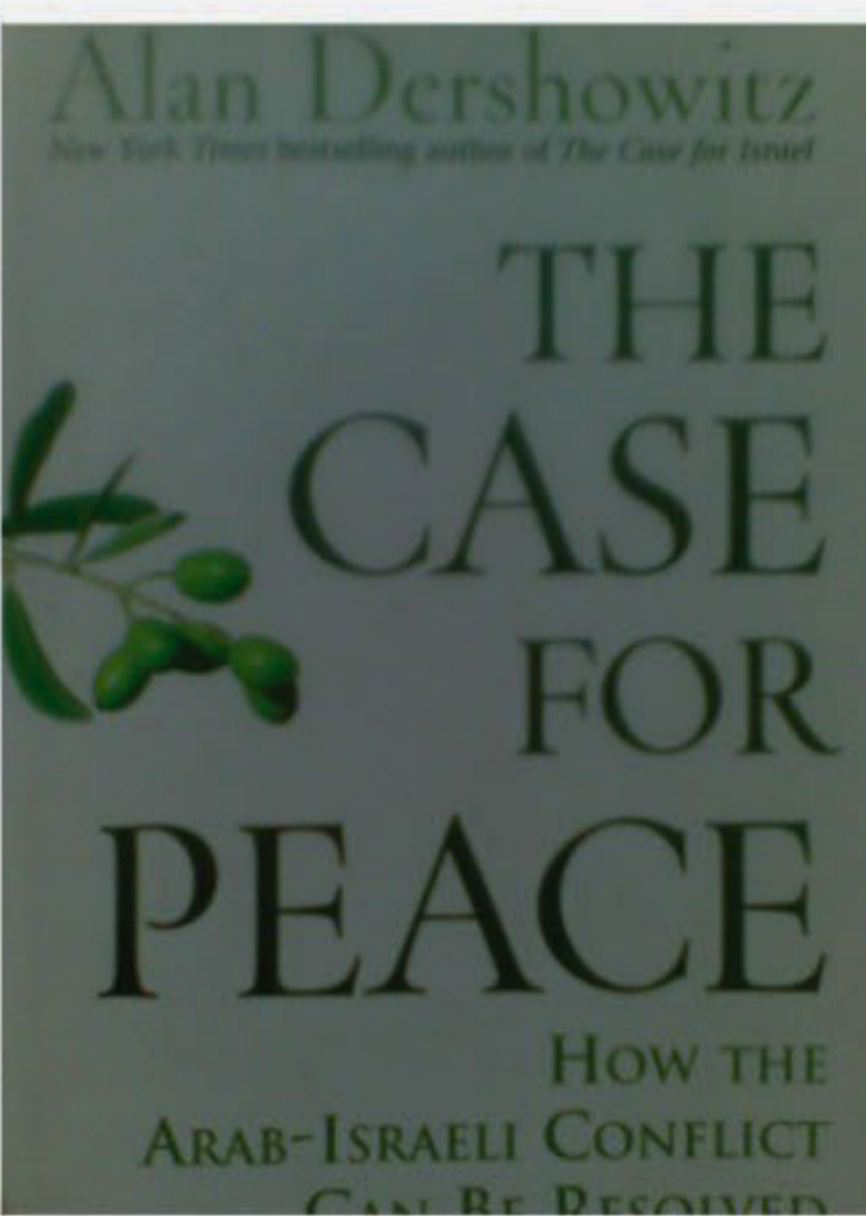


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The dilemma in the Middle East

Muhammad Abdul Hai is skeptical about a new work

THE wound in the heart of the Middle East has been bleeding ever since the Jewish state came into existence. Thousands of Palestinians have been killed, hundreds have been evicted from their homes and abodes have been pulled down to make space for the growing number of Jews migrating from across the world. This never-ending process has the direct support of the United States and many European allies. Despite efforts at eye-washing on the part of the United States to establish peace, nothing concrete has happened. Such efforts have only acted as an intoxicant to keep many a Middle Eastern country in a state of stupor.



The Case for Peace
Alan Dershowitz
John Wiley and Sons, Inc. New Jersey

Palestinians. There has been so much cruelty done to the innocent Palestinians, there has been so much of bleeding caused to them by the Jewish defense forces, that it now looks as

if a peace deal is impossible.

Against this backdrop, Alan Dershowitz has propagated his own theory in the book, *The Case for Peace*. He dwells on how the Arab-Israeli conflict can be resolved. The author is a professor of law at Harvard Law School, and he is a strong defender of the Jewish state against what he calls as 'lies and distortions' hurled at it in recent years. Readers may not find much truth in it since all leading news agencies (newspapers and television channels) have been making systematic false-reporting against Islam and the Muslims. But a thorough reading of the book will give us an insight of what the Jewish idea of peace could be.

The author quite cleverly introduces the issue, and manages to draw the attention of readers at the very early stage by quoting from the Ecclesiastes. In *The Case for Peace*, Alan Dershowitz has resorted to the best of his literary skills to offer a provocative analysis of the opportunities and challenges of mending the damaged- beyond-repair fence between two entirely different peoples. He feels that the one-state theory, comprising two nations of Palestine and Israel, is a utopian idea, and it is a wall in the way of the process of achieving peace which needs to be immediately pulled down for the sake of initiating a dialogue.

The author argues that those who sincerely desire peace will have to agree on a final peace settlement that will look like two states based on Israel retreating from Gaza and most of the

West Bank. As a symbolic gesture of goodwill, Israel will be required to extend its recognition of Palestine as a sovereign state. The rights of refugees also need to be acknowledged, with appropriate compensation being granted to them. Alan Dershowitz, however falls short of recognizing their right to return to the land where they were born and brought up. He is scared to think what might be the outcome a decade later in case the 'right to return' is accepted. He warns that if the Palestinians are allowed to settle in Israel, a day will come when they will outnumber the Jews, and then the state of Israel will be in jeopardy. Putting a tag on the Palestinian authority to denounce terrorism and also to take reasonable measures to stamp out terrorism, in every fair judgment, is one-sided, and needs to be amended by incorporating a clause, making the government of Israel equally responsible to denounce and dismantle all state sponsored mechanisms of terrorism.

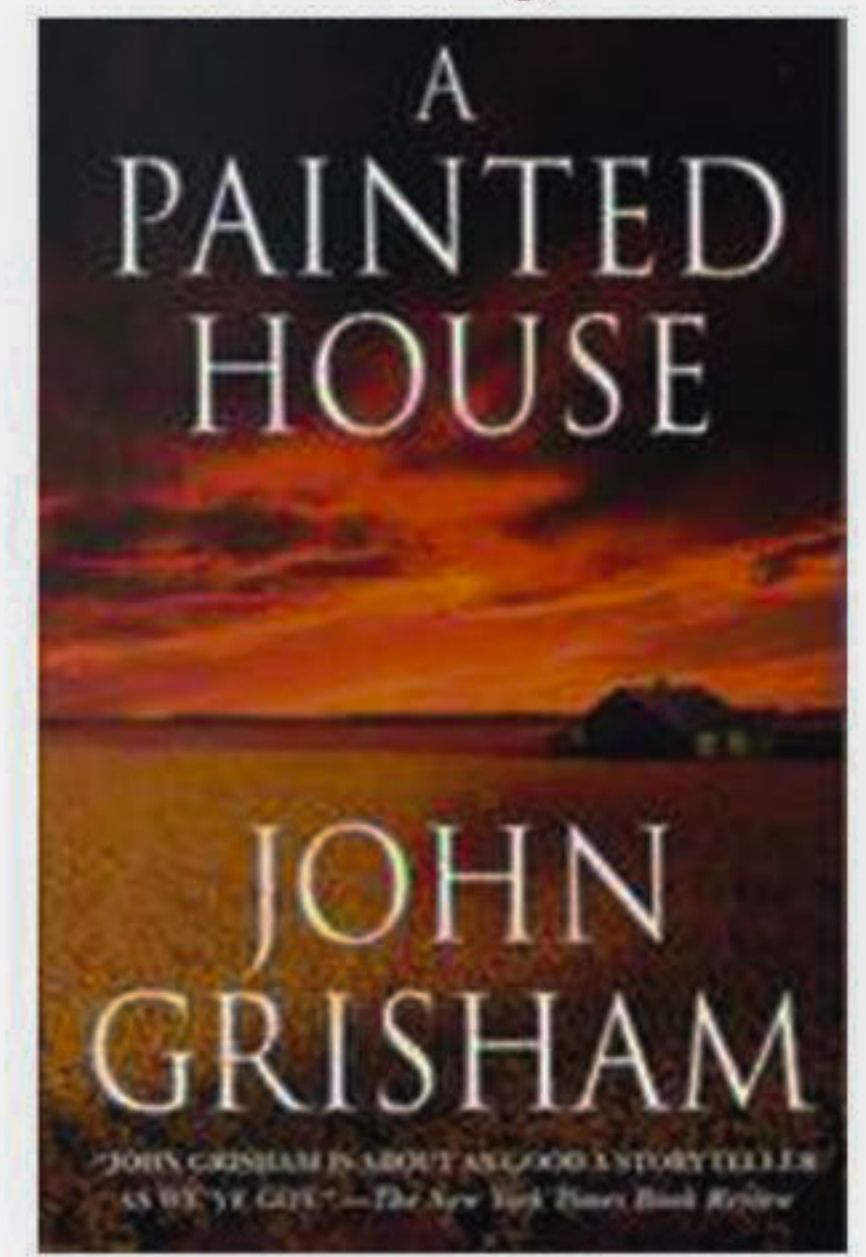
The book, however, confronts, with profound insight, the difficulties of materializing the roadmap to peace. Dershowitz's wisdom and experience has certainly helped him frame his points of argument in flawless rhetoric. And for anyone concerned about the fate of the innocent Palestinians, this thought-provoking, hard-headed look at the prospects for peace will make for encouraging reading.

Muhammad Abdul Hai is a critic and Principal, ABC International School, Narayanganj.

Innocence losing it all to hard realities

Tulip Chowdhury is touched by a tale of a little boy

INSPIRED by his boyhood in rural Arkansas, John Grisham has come up with this unique novel. Set in the early summer and late fall of 1952, it is a heart rending account of a little boy's journey from innocence to experience. It is the writer's first major work outside the legal thriller genre in which he has established himself. Narrated through the eyes of the seven-year-old Luke Chandelier, the story comes with pictorial descriptions of the cotton harvesting season. Arkansas, called the Natural State, is depicted with picture perfect sceneries throughout the moving tale.



A Painted House
John Grisham
Arrow

baseball glove and a jacket from Sears. The cotton picking season begins in the usual way. But the year 1952 comes with packs and bundles of surprises for Luke. He witnesses a brawl between the Siscos, a family with a history of lawbreaking, and Hank Spruill. One of the Siscos dies. Luke is taken in as a witness. Hank Spruill escapes punishment as Luke testifies that he was on self defense. However, Luke is on the alert as

the Siscos might hold a grudge against him. The little boy has nightmares and wakes up in the middle of the night. Meanwhile, he develops a fascination for Tally, the seventeen-year-old girl from the Spruill family. He likes her a lot and is proud when she reveals some secrets about the adult world to him. Luke's grandfather is ten years older than his grandmother. Luke takes the ten years like a magic number and judges the difference between his age and Tally's. He dreams away that maybe there will be something between him and Tally one day. He craves to touch her long, silky dark hair, wants to kiss her rosy cheeks. Then one day he discovers her in the cotton field with another farm hand, Cowboy, and his dreams are shattered.

As the picking season goes on so does the busy social life. Every Sunday is the day to go to church. Saturdays are days in which the trips to the town are made. While the adults do their groceries and other stuff, Luke and Dewayne, his friend, are allowed the treat of a movie and candies from Pop's store. Then one week the carnival comes to the town and Luke does not miss any of its rides. One night when everyone is asleep, Luke hears the Spruills having a fight. He follows Hank Spruill as he is ordered to leave Black Oak. In the darkness of the night Luke sees someone following Hank. His curiosity gets the better of him and he ends up witnessing the murder of Hank. Just when he is about to reach his house, the murderer himself hisses into his ears, "If you breathe one word about this night, I will kill your mother."

Luke does not know how to pass the days and nights. He does not leave his mother out of sight. He cannot reveal the secret either. He spends sleepless nights and days, is

constantly sweating and stops eating. He longs to put a stop to the cotton picking and all and go back to school. His thoughts run, "I missed school. Classes would resume in the end of October, and I began thinking of how nice it would be to sit at a desk all day, surrounded by friends instead of cotton stalks and with no Spruill to worry about. Now that baseball was over I had to dream about something. My return to school would be glorious because I would be wearing my shiny new Cardinals baseball jacket."

Luke has too much on his plate for his tender age. His uncle becomes the father of a Latcher and the cotton season goes on. Hank Spruill is murdered and the murderer is on his trail! In the midst of all these Trot Spruill, a handicapped boy, starts painting their house secretly. The house ultimately does get painted with donations from family members, but Luke and his parents finally leave the cotton farming and start on a journey toward the unknown. But all that happens not before Luke has more adventures with the bundles of surprises that the cotton season had come with.

Narrated in the first person, the book simply holds the reader in the spell of its flamboyant descriptions of rural Arkansas and the family saga. The reader feels in tune with Luke as he goes through stages of his growing up. One cannot but admire his patience and virtue no matter how indomitable his problems are. One feels like helping the little boy to understand the ways of the big world. And indeed the story ends through making the reader wish that it had gone on for a little longer.

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and teaches.