

# A stranger in native land

Jessica Mudditt explores the pains of one who returns

SEASONAL Adjustments traces a man's return to his village in Bangladesh after an 18-year absence. Adib Khan's novel, however, is not in the tradition of expats who return with a willingness to embrace their native land after years of romanticising it. The central character, 43-year-old Iqbal Ahmed Chaudhary from Shopnoganj, simply isn't in the mood. He has recently endured the pain of matrimonial breakdown, so he arrives in Bangladesh with his young daughter and a shattered ego. However, Iqbal is not too preoccupied to discover that spending nearly two decades in Australia has profoundly altered him, and he is shocked to realise that fitting in might not work out. *Seasonal Adjustments* is a poignant, sometimes painful account of a middle-aged man coping with loss and struggling to identify with a nation, culture and family he is no longer familiar with.

It's also a very funny and humane book. Iqbal's caustic wit is brilliantly executed, whether it be directed towards his mother, his hypocritical brother or strangers on the street. One of the most amusing scenes takes place in the post office, when Iqbal almost throws a tantrum over tampered mail. "I wasn't cerebrally retarded," Iqbal tells a fellow customer when his annoyance falls on deaf ears. The novel's charm lies in its simplicity -- it is not packed with dramatic events, but rather a slow and steady stream of everyday experiences and frustrations, mixed with memories spanning four decades and two nations. Iqbal is interesting enough in himself for this to work.

Iqbal's fraught relationship with Islam comes under the spotlight on many occasions during his visit. His lack of enthusiasm is distressing to his parents, who are strongly

devout. His mother is aghast when Iqbal confesses that he has forgotten how to pray. Iqbal's ambivalence stems from his childhood, as Khan writes, "Each day, after returning from school, we found a dreaded, malodorous mullah awaiting us with the Koran and a waxed cane." When Iqbal performed badly on his school exams, his mother dragged him off to visit the terrifying Maulana Azad, who instructed Iqbal to wear a taabaz. He recalls, "The string held the terror of a noose as it was slipped over my head. It became a penitential millstone for several years and a constant reminder that failure of any kind was not permissible in our family."

Another formative religious experience involved taking the advice of a fanatical Muslim a little too far. Khan writes, "Spurred on by Khuda Buksh's religious zeal and keen to do our bit in the holy struggle, one afternoon Hashim and I dressed ourselves as cowboys and went out on a jihad to tilt the balance in favour of Islam. It did not strike us at the time that cowboys belonged to another religion..." In blind innocence the brothers poured kerosene over an anthill and watched triumphantly as the ants died in the flames. Afterwards the boys were so consumed with guilt that they couldn't look at one another for days. And so Iqbal adopts pacifism, and possibly cynicism, from an early age, "Never again did the prospect of a holy war enthrust me into any form of violent action."

Iqbal isn't the type to mould his behaviour according to the sensibilities of his company. Integrity is perhaps his greatest strength; tact is his weakness. During Eid he steadfastly refuses to let his daughter Nadine witness the slaughter of cows, as he remembers the trauma it caused him as a boy. During the



Seasonal Adjustments  
Adib Khan  
Allen and Unwin

feast he is sullen and barely conceals his antipathy for a tradition he describes as an "unpardonable exhibition of selfish greed." He leaves the celebrations abruptly. Yet Iqbal's inability to accept some of the most basic aspects of life in Bangladesh, poverty

being one, causes him a great deal of distress. "What upsets me most," he concedes, "is my inability to slip back into a tradition I assumed was an integral part of me."

Like the author himself, Iqbal went to Australia in 1973 as a "confused young man." Iqbal doesn't spell out precisely why he left newly independent Bangladesh, but he is unequivocal about why he adopted Australia as his new home. It was, he writes, "an opportunity to be different", because no Chaudary before him had been to the continent. It was also a rejection of Britain, which was "an obsessive ideal with the older Chaudaries." On the contrary, at the time Iqbal felt wholly negative towards the coloniser, as he explains, "I despised the British for humbling us, using us and creating the political mess before they left." However, Iqbal did not find paradise in Australia -- it too has its own shortcomings, albeit of a different variety. His identity as a person of Indian descent, a former Pakistani and a present day Bangladeshi, is beyond the grasp of most he meets at backyard barbecues. The happy-go-lucky but narrow-minded mentality and the racism that has barely improved over the years have worn him thin. He frequently locks horns with his Catholic wife's friends and her father in particular. Yet Iqbal doesn't regret his decision to live there, nor does he contemplate leaving for good. Towards the end of the novel, one gets the feeling that Iqbal is developing a new-found tolerance, whilst at the same time becoming more confident in his beliefs. It's a good result; but more importantly, a good read.

Jessica Mudditt is an Australian journalist.

# The afflictions people suffer through

Jackie Kabir finds she is dealing with strange matters

ROUROB is the name of a Hindu hell. In this case, it symbolizes individual affliction. Leesa Gazi, an expatriate and an actor, has had her first novel published --- at this year's Ekushey book fair

The story is about a woman who enters into marriage with an impotent man in all senses of the word. But just as many Bengali women accept their fate without any complaints, she does it too. In the process she suffers and makes her two daughters suffer as they grow up, so much so that so that they all inhabit their individual hells. The girls never go to proper educational institutions, have never made any friends and are always locked up in their own territories. The older girl Lovely always hears a man talking to her. She is more outgoing whereas Beauty prefers to stay alone in her room. She is addicted and gets the grass from the boy working for her as a servant. The sisters are somewhat neurotic as they hardly have any connection with the outside world. And they are just the opposite of each other. More often than not Lovely will be locked up in her room with migraine while Beauty will get the latest Hindi movies for everyone to watch. Beauty is loud and speaks back to her mother, who acts almost like a tyrant, while Lovely is very submissive to her. Even the father's presence is not felt by any member of the household. He is more like a house husband after his retirement and is frail.

The main events of the story take place on Lovely's fortieth birthday. Farida Khanom is annoyed by thoughts of Bashir, which is triggered all of a sudden as she muses on Lovely's birthday. He is a distant relative of her husband and used to stay on payment in her house in earlier times. Farida is too busy to go



Rourob  
Leesa Gazi  
Shuchipatra

out with her daughter that day and Beauty is in deep sleep in her room. So she lets Lovely go to New Market to buy some clothes for herself.

Lovely knows her mother will prepare pulao with hilsa, duck and rice pudding for her birthday. Every year it's the same for both the sisters. They are both appalled by their mother's meticulous routine. The girls hate the rituals with all their might and yet carried

on with them as robots would. Farida Khanom has never failed to carry out her duties religiously.

Farida's family all know very well that the routine will have to be followed scrupulously if they do not want all hell to break loose. So each and every one complies, no matter how much they dislike doing it. Lovely, however, breaks the law that day. She goes around the market to buy some clothes and a sharp knife. 'Give me one with which I can cut the meat..... My husband doesn't like me squatting on the floor to cut things,' she tells the shopkeeper. Her next destination is Ramna Park, where she had never trod before, not even in her dreams. To her surprise she meets a little girl, her namesake, who sells water to her at five taka a glass. She envies the girl, who is flitting about like a butterfly. She sits there, enjoying the sunlight and savouring the gaze of strangers as the most adventurous events of her life. While she is cracking some peanuts, a rather strange person comes to chat her up. She even considers accepting his offer to go to his flat with him for a split of a second. This man whom she calls 'lal muffler' makes her go back in time to an episode of her life years ago.

Her cousin Riaz would come to visit her on the pretext of giving notes to her during their HSC exam. They would spend a lot of time playing, chatting and smooching while they thought no one was noticing. She seemed to have lived for that event. But suddenly one day Farida Khanom declared that Riaz was forbidden to come to the house; it sounded like a death sentence to her. But she acted normally, smiled at her mother as though nothing had happened. Lovely was locked up in the room for more than a week after that

event. Her younger sister was somewhat rewarded for some obscure reason she didn't understand. The man in her head now asks her if she has ever wondered why Farida Khanom had suddenly asked Riaz never to come again. She sits there well after her curfew is over, knowing fully well what the consequences might be.

The plot of the story is well planned though some of its aspects could raise questions in readers' minds. For instance, there is the only mobile phone which is plugged to the charger at all times, with only Farida Khanom having access to it. Most people in this country prefer their daughters married off. So what makes Farida keep her daughters in the state of spinsters is also a question. But then, there are exceptions which makes of them stories for us to read. A husband who is impotent will surely feel helpless. But will he allow his wife to sleep with another man in his presence? Farida's husband Mukhles had rented out a room to his distant cousin knowing fully what the consequences might be. This may be yet another question.

The use of contemporary language and the lucidity of the narration makes the book unputdownable. One can just leaf through the pages without knowing when the end is reached. There is the strong voice of the writer in the narration, the pictorial description of the surroundings almost makes the reader visualize the events that take place. The ending, though, shocks the reader. And makes one wonder if there was any way the writer could at least save one of the characters from their personal hell.

Jackie Kabir writes and teaches. She is a member of various book clubs.

# The imagination, through images

Shafayin Ahmed is happy swimming through the haiku

AMAJESTIC and rather unorthodox book of poetry, Nirbachito Haiku revolves around the theme of nature with human relevancies as the main catalyst, which constructs the prime foundation of the poems written. This volume brings together the works of poet Shamsul Alam Khandaker, who has written these poems in a diverse format that have originated from the lands of Japan, known as haiku. For those who are not familiar with this form of Japanese poetry, a haiku verse falls in the category of a non-rhyme poem that expresses an image or feeling in the span of three lines, usually with a seasonal orientation. In the case of Nirbachito Haiku, the poet has playfully assembled all the poems in order to deal with nature and the place of human beings within it.

Upon entering the world of Nirbachito Haiku, I instantly got transported into a mystical zone, which was beyond the original range of perception. I was face to face with nature and its connection with day-to-day human lives where boundaries and freedom have spun off rebelliously only to later sheepishly re-arrange themselves symmetrically. It brings to mind an unopened, forbidden wardrobe imploded from the force of its secrets. Appearing harmless in its cheap, cheerful, formic garb about nature and its beauties, it beckoned me closer with its relevance to human beings. Paradoxically, the ambitious poems of this book are transparent, revealing other forms and nuances behind its marbled armor. This is a controlled implosion, carefully crafted and manipulated with all praise and tribute to the extraordinary poet.

'Autumn Night' is perhaps the most surprising and my favorite poem. Seen firstly in the illustrations of the poem I was not touched by its unfathomable mass: dark, silent, dead.



Nirbachito Haiku  
Shamsul Alam Khandaker  
Nikhil Prokashon

However, the haiku in the flesh was majestic: complex, intricate and teeming with life.

Lonely guard!  
The scarecrow, vigils,  
The booming cornfield  
It's hide and seek of cloud and moon  
under the dim beam  
digging into the heart

An extract from the poem --- my personal analysis of this line breaks it into component parts. But here is the irony: the line cannot be broken. It has no parts; every word is interre-

lated. Note the beautiful interplay that the poet has tried to create between the loneliness of the scarecrow and the beautiful place of where it is standing, the moon-bathed cornfield! Alone, but not really alone, as it befriends the clouds and the moon and plays with their shadows. What appears in a single glance as dead is ignited upon a second glance and subsequently begins to crackle and smoke and burn as my eye whips around the poem zapping it with life. Suddenly 'Autumn Night' turns into a crawling mass of transcendence and I find myself falling in love with it.

Looking forward, forever  
Sudden lingering departure  
Alas! My birds of the nest...

The first three lines I can relate to any parent as the subject speaking is the mother bird finally letting go of her children out into the unknown sky. This indicates a solid example of the first stage of growing up as we children learn to live on our own, not to mention the excruciating pain of detachment that our parents have to bear whilst we do so.

There are numerous such poems comprising the most beautiful and equally sad lines as they represent the shallow conformist norms of society --- the war taken out on to the streets --- that emphasize the power of the higher class and the vague importance of the lower class. After I had already read the first half of the book I realized that this work of poetry is apparently a representation of overall life --- youth, age, death, the issues concerning modern harsh reality such as importance of social class and even a slight hint of the war: religion against science.

Towards the end of the book, the poems start to carry hints of irony, arousing the likelihood of satire where human foolishness and vices are subjected to sarcasm, derision and exposure. An instance:

No disparity from now on  
Order! Order! Though,  
A daughter is equal to half-son  
King's men!  
Their worth, whatsoever  
Immoral in outfit and attire

The first haiku is subjected to irony, the first two lines adamant in demanding the prevention of inequality. However, the last line suggests the bitter mockery that this struggle has been eternally unsuccessful in being implemented entirely, as inequality still remains in vast and traditional cases. The second haiku can be easily identified as sarcasm as people might be the king's men and be enriched with elegant attire.

All of the haikus have wonderful symmetry. They are harsh and truthful, though the forms are often beautiful and the use of colorful language and texture makes them attractive. The haikus investigate the essence of things and attempts to figure out an answer. Perhaps it is the duality within humans that is the 'real' essence which the poet has tried to portray through this masterpiece of a work. The world is easier to understand when there are positions with which to orientate oneself. These poems have definitely helped me doing so as they rejuvenate the senses, leaving one fresh and full of life.

Nirbachito Haiku is a must-read and I recommend this book as the poems are magnificent, juxtaposed in time and situations. The poet's ability to bring them together in one place suggests boundless affinities with human lives, a thought that will capture your mind and soul because of its timeless charm and splendid simplicity.

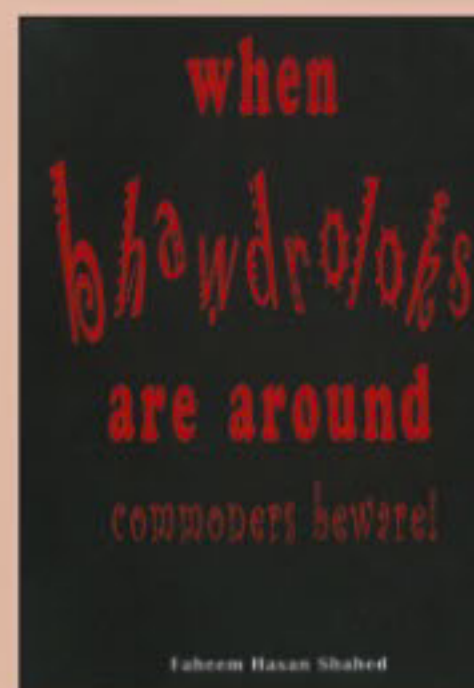
Shafayin Ahmed is a student at Pearl Fashion Institute, Bangladesh.

## New Books

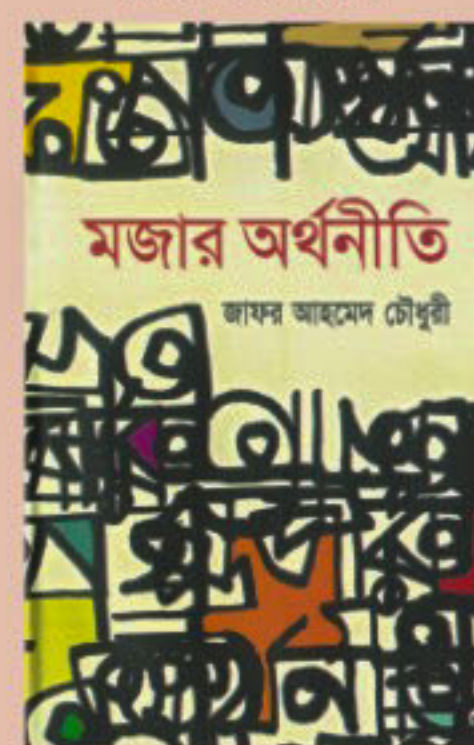


Totyabodhayok  
Shorkarer Dayebbar  
Muhammad  
Habibur Rahman  
Prothoma  
Prokashon

When Bhowdroloks Are Around  
Commoners Beware  
Faheem Hasan Shaded  
Globe Library (Pvt) Limited



Mojar Orthoniti  
Jafar Ahmed  
Chowdhury  
Annesha  
Prokashon  
Tel: 7124985



Zerin Apa  
Jafar Ahmed  
Chowdhury  
Gyan Bitaroni  
Tel: 7173969



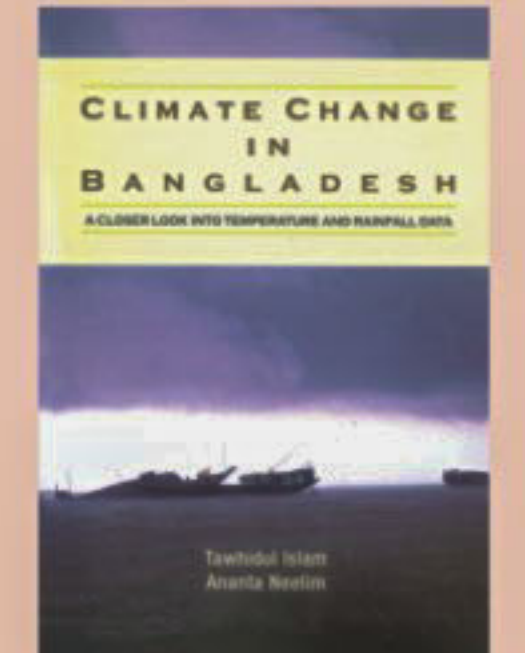
Mymensingh  
Jafar Ahmed  
Chowdhury  
Botomul  
Tel: 01711 239649

Adhora  
Mohammad Azad  
Botomul  
Tel: 01711 239649



Purnimar Pordin  
Sabina Yasmeen  
Botomul  
Tel: 01711 239649

Climate Change in Bangladesh  
Tawhidul Islam,  
Ananta Neelam  
The University Press Limited  
Tel: 956 5441, 956 5444



Muktijuddho O  
Mujib Bahini  
Professor Abdul  
Mannan Chowdhury  
Mizan Publishers  
Tel: 951 2946, 711 1436, 711 1642

Bangamata  
Fazilatunnessa Mujib  
Sharok Grantha  
Ed. Prof. Abdul  
Mannan Chowdhury  
Boishakhi  
Prokashoni



Writing Freedom  
South Asian Voices  
Ed. Radha  
Chakravarty, Selina  
Hossain  
The University Press  
Limited  
Tel: 956 5441, 956 5444

Trikal Trigoon  
Col (ret'd) S.D.  
Ahmad  
Agami Prokashoni  
Tel: 711 1332, 711 0021

