

Return to the age of innocence

Syed Badrul Ahsan revisits fairies, elves and ghosts

CHILDHOOD for many of us was much more than a coming by experience. It was all too often a long journey into the lands of the imagination. And those lands were peopled by elves, sprites, fairies, ghosts, gnomes and spirits. And we came to know of these supernatural beings from our mothers by and large, from our fathers to a certain extent. There were all the gripping tales of good, innocent men waylaid by ghosts and demons in the shape of wild beasts even as storms lashed the woodlands on the edge of the village. Branches were ripped off the huge trees and unnatural laughter was heard as the leaves scattered in the rainstorm. The weary traveller, having lost his way in the storm, was now at the mercy of the ghostly beings now dancing all around him in eerie manner. He stumbled, he slipped; and he found, to his consternation, that his natural ability to scream out in fear had suddenly and inexplicably left him. And so it went on till dawn, when the evil spirits fled; and the exhausted traveller, by then unconscious and prostrate beside a clear village pond, was rescued by peasants on their way to the fields.

There were loads of such stories that caused a shiver to run through our beings as we heard them for hours on end. And we heard them in the village, deep in the night, when monsoon cloud-bursts gave way to incessant rain in the pitch dark. When the storyteller stopped, none of us could dream of taking a walk outside, for were there not spirits of the dead up there in the shivering trees? And was the sound of the leaves not a



Elai Dadu'r Ek Baksho Golpo
Badiuddin Nazir
Illustrations Samar Majumdar
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sign that ghosts were up and about? It was such a long time ago and yet there are the moments when we go back to recalling the tales in their vivid detail. It is that particular remembrance of the past which Badiuddin Nazir now brings into our midlife through this remarkable collection of stories. They are rooted in his imagination, for they once sprang from the storytellers now part of the heritage he comes from. In Elai Dadu was the quintessential weaver of tales. And, of course,

he had a box full of the most riveting stories a child would want to hear. Nazir speaks of the clime, in this case a rural setting in what is now West Bengal, from which the tales sprouted. And yet these are stories that a child in any part of the old India, the one that existed before politics made a casualty of it in the 1940s, might have heard. There could have been the slight variations, but the essence would be the same. In a huge way, therefore, Nazirpara of Nazarpur in Howrah takes on a deeper meaning. It is circumscribed by geography and yet it transcends such physical barriers to attain a universality of its own.

The stories here come in a package that bind the biographical and the purely fictional. The biographical relates, obviously, to Elai Dadu and his surefire way of placing himself at the centre of these tales. In a very significant way, they also bring to the fore the remembrances of childhood innocence in the writer. And that perhaps is the thread which holds the stories together. Badiuddin Nazir could well have gone for a simple retelling of the tales. That he has opted to have the Elai Dadu persona run through the tales brings into the recalling of old times an ambience that is as lively as it was when the stories first made their entry into the lives of the young. Dadu mingles with the stories. In more ways than one can imagine, he becomes a participant in the making of the stories. A sign of that is in the tale of Father Richie, who decides to visit his village and would not be daunted by tales of a spirit inhabit-

ing the room he wishes to spend the night in. And then there are yarns on the diversity of spirits one can come across in the Bengal clime.

There are the good ghosts, those with near humane qualities and therefore quite unwilling to put people into a state of fear. There are then the ghosts noted for their arrogance. You find them in a celebratory mood on the night of the Kali Puja, their eyes spewing fire and their mouths emitting smoke. And, yes, there are ghosts in the form of midget women. You call them Jhanpri ghosts. Elai Dadu, you might suggest, was well versed in ghosts and spirits and could reel off their names and background so easily you would wonder how he had come by such information. That was what left his listeners fascinated. And, to be sure, Dadu made it a point to let these boys and girls know of all the many kinds of trees these spirits dwelled in, embellishing the descriptions with images ranging from the plainly ordinary to the frighteningly bizarre.

These are stories you need to revisit. They are tales your children ought to be familiar with. Badiuddin Nazir has done something stellar: he has taken us back to the old age of innocence. And in Elai Dadu you will spot shades of your grandparents and your parents, of the times when the winds howled and the rains fell and they spoke to you of an unreal world that was out there, just beyond your grasp.

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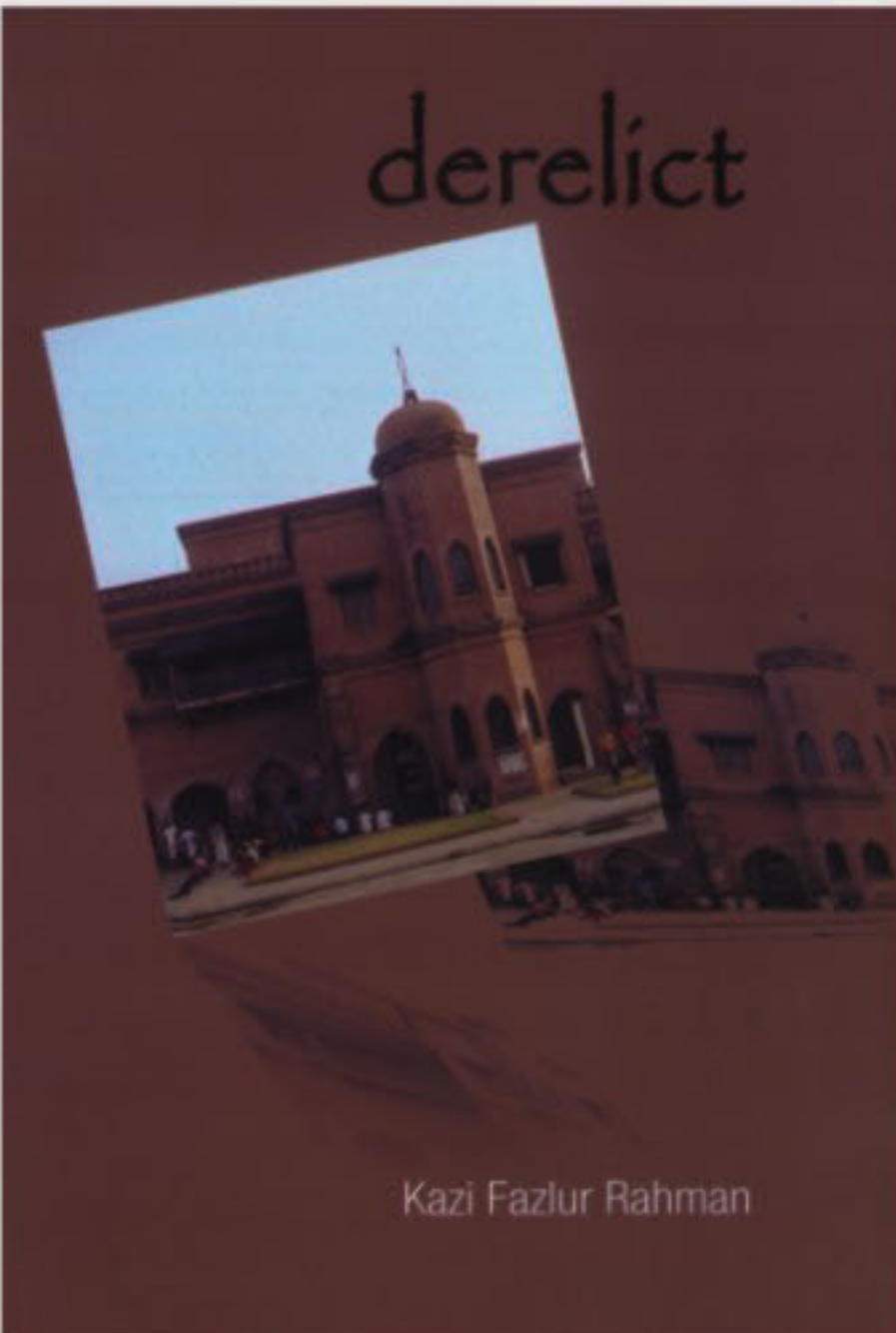
Broken dreams, shattered illusions

Shahid Alam reflects on a tale of a lost era

DERELICT is a poignant tale of a bygone age, of a group of people veritably vanished from Bangladesh, told by a person who, one can safely assume upon perusing his biographical note, is familiar with much of the period in Bangladesh's history that he sets as the backdrop for his modest-sized novel. *Derelict*, though, is a bit more than modest in its putative appeal to the average reader. The era that is now a much-debated period of South Asian history is that of the twilight years of the British raj, and the incipient years of what was properly then East Bengal; the dying breed in Bangladesh is the Anglo-Indian community, a misnomer if ever there was one. Yet the story revolves a male protagonist, Sudhir Sebastian Rosario, a Bengali/native Christian, a group that continues to exist, if not exactly flourish, to this day in this country.

Kazi Fazlur Rahman is a former bureaucrat, and currently is a writer of fiction and newspaper articles. *Derelict*, his first novel in English, is, in its essence, a love story, or, more appropriately, one of unrequited love of one man for the woman of his dreams, but it also encompasses flashes of jilted love, subtle and overt class differences, glimpses of the raj, and political issues that cropped up as the partition of India loomed and, then, as Pakistan came into being. Sudhir's unspoken infatuation, and then deep emotional attachment, for Dora Fernandes are wrapped around deep-seated prejudices within the Christian community in British India. Dora is the daughter of Robert Fernandes, an Anglo-Indian who held the high position of District Commercial Manager (DCM) in the head office of the Bengal Assam Railway Company in Pahartali, Chittagong. Sudhir's father, Bimal Rosario, held a clerical position in the company, and was a direct subordinate of the DCM who, pleased with his work and general deportment, rewarded the clerk with an independent bungalow where he could accommodate his wife Sushila and their only living son.

The very arrangement of the company bungalows marked the rank and status of the company employees, with the imposing structures up in the terraced hillocks reserved for senior management (the "covenanted staff"), which was made up of white English expatriates and Anglo-Indians, and the more modest ones down below on the flat land earmarked for the junior staff. The two types of housing were separated physi-



Derelict
Kazi Fazlur Rahman
writers.ink

cally and symbolically by a wide tree-lined road, and, the inhabitants of the two worlds did not socialize with each other. Robert Fernandes was not even aware that Bimal and he were neighbours until his subordinate informed him one day! Bimal was the progeny of local Indians converted to Christianity, and, consequently, even the fact of his religion did not enable him to break through the barrier of being able to socially intermingle with the Anglo-Indians, let alone the white British expatriate empire-builders. This distinction is despondently articulated by Bimal: "I am a graduate with a good performance record, but am still a mere clerk. I have to work under persons with lesser academic qualifications --- their sole claim to the positions they hold seems to be somewhat fair complexion or fluency in English."

Fernandes exemplifies both of Bimal's closing

laments, but he enjoyed his subordinate's esteem and respect because he was well-read and knowledgeable, an honest and efficient executive, and did not discriminate against other faiths and denominations, certainly not those which "some quirks of history had made them Bengali in look, Portuguese by surname and Roman Catholic Christian by faith." Rahman, through Sudhir's father, succinctly, but eloquently, portrays the other two groups of Christians in colonial Chittagong: "One was the white sahibs born in Britain who passed their working life here, usually retiring to Britain to die. Some of them worked in the railway, and others in government offices and British commercial enterprises. They ruled the country, but never dreamt of making it their home.

The surnames mentioned make the term "Anglo-Indian" such a misnomer, because they are all Portuguese, with none being English, but they were there, too, but, ironically, in view of their total sway over the country for about two hundred years, in much lesser numbers. They were the offspring of liaisons between Portuguese and other European (including British) men and local women, and they came to be collectively known as Anglo-Indians. "They felt closer to the white British than to the dark brown natives. The British gladly extended their patronage to them, and placed them below the full-blooded British expatriates, but higher than the natives." Even after the British left, in Pakistan they would speak English with a distinctive accent, and, when the necessity arose for speaking in the local vernacular in East Pakistan, would almost invariably prefer to speak in Urdu. Once the sun had finally set on the British raj, and, then, with the emergence of Bangladesh, they found themselves in a social no-man's land, neither here, nor there, and eventually dispersed to Canada, Australia, Great Britain, the United States, and other Western countries; in effect, vanishing from the land of their birth. However, as Dora's aunt Laura was to find out, after developing relationships with a succession of white British, and then, American, army officers stationed in Chittagong during the Second World War in the hope of landing one in marriage, but failing in the endeavour, she finally settled on, and married, an English army sergeant, but found herself unacceptable by her in-laws and others in the community when she went to live

with him in Yorkshire.

Laura's was a cruel twist of fate because she, her sister (Dora's mother Becky), and later, her brother Michael would want to have nothing to do with Sudhir when he went to periodically visit Robert Fernandes' bungalow to make use of his library books and newspapers on the DCM's personal invitation, and thought the Bengalis in Chittagong were followers of "that bastard Subash Bose" and would follow him in supporting the Japanese in driving the British out of India. However, Becky's father had a soft spot for Sudhir as had his son-in-law, but had to suffer at his elder daughter and son's hands for his efforts.

Sudhir first developed a crush on Dora when he began his visits to the Fernandes bungalow, and then a deeper emotion as he was completing high school education, without ever eliciting anything more than curiosity, mild flirtation, or a sort of crush from Dora. Eventually, the response from her dissipated into total indifference as she gravitated towards her own kind and white British young men, but, Sudhir's feelings for her turned into deep love, which he did not have the courage to express.

Then there are anomalies. Dora was initially assigned to work under Mrs. Gomez, but later we find her superior's name had changed to Miss da Cruz without any hint of there having been a change in personnel. And, Robert Fernandes has been credited with having multiple sons and daughters on a couple of occasions, but the author unequivocally mentions only Dora and a brother Michael in the rest of the story. And the middle section of the book comes across as rather flat, and some of the emotional details appear as effusively melodramatic. Nonetheless, *Derelict* has much to commend it. Sudhir's eye-opener on sexual encounters is delightfully comical, while Robert Fernandes being perspersed by (which eventually led to his untimely death by heart failure) a non-Bengali refugee to East Bengal due to cronyism and chicanery is a revealing observation on a phenomenon that was to be a harbinger of things to come in contentious Bengali-West Pakistani political, economic, social, and cultural relations.

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An aunt, a niece... and the written word

Pakistan's Bhuttos take Jackie Kabir's fancy

WILLIAM Dalrymple has perhaps rightly commented that if there is anyone born to write the Bhutto family's story, it is Fatima Bhutto. *Songs of Blood and Sword*, published by Penguin and Viking, is a sad but unputdownable. Fatima is the granddaughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan's first democratically elected Prime Minister - ousted by General Zia to be imprisoned and finally hanged in 1979. She is also niece to the first female prime minister in the Muslim world, Benazir Bhutto, assassinated in 2007. The writer lost both her uncle and her father in 1985 and 1996 respectively. As I was poring over the pages, I couldn't help remembering yet another book, Benazir Bhutto's *Daughter of the East*. Some of the episodes from the books were like looking at the same picture from different angles.

Fatima was barely in her teens when her father was brutally assassinated near their home in Karachi. So she followed the trails left by him all around the world to find out more about her father. It was a huge ordeal for her to know about her father's past and meet all the people who loved him. It was like broadening her horizon. She even met her father's ex-fiancee, who was a married woman at the time she was going out with Mir Murtaza. While the Bhutto brothers were living in Kabul which was as close as they could get to Pakistan, they married two Afghan sisters Fauzia and Rehana. Fatima was conceived even before her parents were married. Political turmoil made the brothers emigrate to France while Benazir was in England. The youngest of them all died "mysteriously" in France. This eventually broke Murtaza's marriage with Fauzia. Later he met a Lebanese woman named Ghinwa in Syria whom he married and had a son whom he named Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Junior. He came back to Pakistan while Benazir was running for elections for the second time. Murtaza was denied a ticket from the Pakistan People's Party. He decided to run independently.

Murtaza returned to Pakistan on 3 November 1993. He won the election as an independent candidate. His plane was turned back from Karachi air-

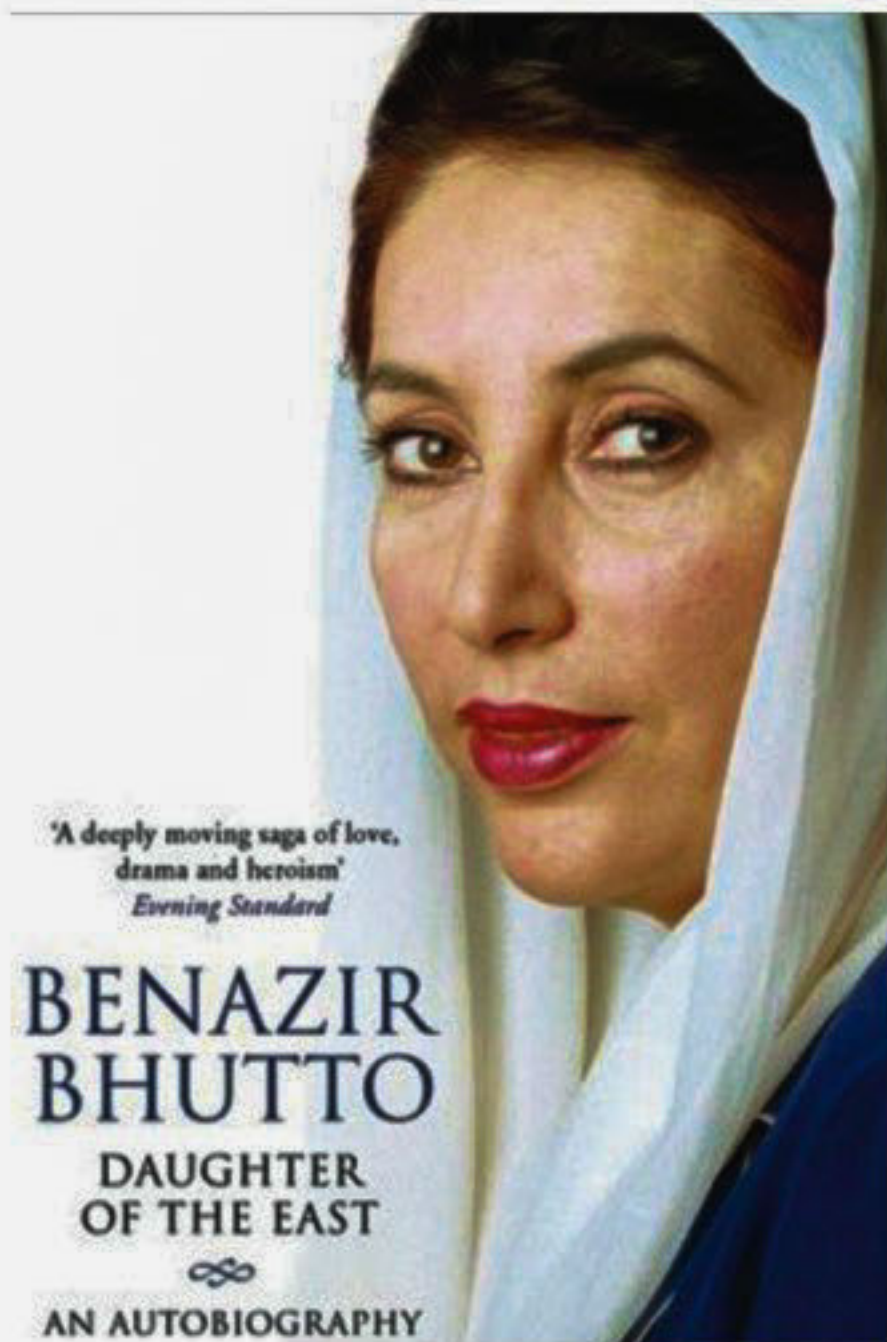
port and later he was arrested. Hundreds of supporters who came to receive him that night didn't get to see him as he was taken by the side exit to prison. When asked by the media if there were any problems between the siblings, Benazir answered, "He's in jail, yes I had him arrested, but aside from my brother being a terrorist we have no problems, only personal ones here and there."

She projected their differences as trivial, familial ones.

"There is no conflict between me and Benazir," Murtaza answered. Sometimes he called her Mrs Zardari because he said she had long since stopped behaving like a Bhutto. There were other differences as well. Murtaza didn't like the way Benazir was running the PPP and Benazir did whatever she could to keep her brother out of it. As Fatima explored her father's life it was quite a shock for her to find answers to many unanswered questions.

Fatima quotes Sohail, a friend of her father's: "It's not about heirs or patriarchy..... Mir had the same background as Benazir- he was a Bhutto, had strong relationship with his father too, and also struggled against a dictator. But that's all Benazir had. Murtaza had clean hands, the corruption- and compromise free record, and the ideological understanding of socialist politics. That's what threatened his sister."

Benazir's book starts with the chapter, *Assassination of my father*, whereas Fatima Bhutto begins her tale talking about her surroundings in Karachi in 2008. Later she goes on to describe the intricacies of political arena of present-day Pakistan, before going on to the day in September 1996 when her father was killed. There is a tale about her great grandfather named Murtaza, who was so good-looking that all the English women stared at him as he walked by. One such lady, the wife of a British emissary, fell in love with him and was poisoned by her husband when found out about the dalliance. Both Fatima and Benazir give this account while describing the family legacy. Benazir describes the story in a somewhat different tone in *Daughter of the East*.



Daughter of the East
Benazir Bhutto
Hamish Hamilton

On Pakistan's politics, both writers are unanimously agreed that Bengalis were maltreated by West Pakistan. Fatima says about 1971:

"The violence of the conflict was staggering. Reports from East Pakistan placed the number of civilian casualties in the millions, citing around 3 million killed.

In addition to reports of sanctioned violence towards women, there were charges leveled against

the Pakistani Army for its use of violence towards intellectuals, academics and minorities, Hindus specially."

Benazir was studying at Harvard at the time and had supported her father's endeavours to keep Pakistan intact and put the blame on India as an aggressor. She admitted that the Bengalis were the denied their rights --- 80 percent of government jobs were allocated to the West, 90 percent of the armed forces also came from there. Urdu was declared the national language which only a few Bengalis understood. She goes on to write about the surrender of General Niazi

"As television cameras focused in, General Niazi approached his Indian counterpart, General Aurora, on the race course at Dacca. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw General Niazi exchange swords with the conqueror of Dacca (they had been at Sundhurst together), and embrace him. Embrace him! Even the Nazis did not surrender in such a humiliating manner. As commander of a defeated army, Niazi would have acted for more honorably if he had shot himself."

Fatima Bhutto describes her feelings at finding out about her father's death:

"I don't remember how we got to Mideast or how we found ourselves in the large recovery room that Papa had been placed in.

I cried from the very rawest part of me, with my lungs and my soul fighting for the air. I wanted to black out, to fall and awake when this was all over. I couldn't say goodbye to my father, I couldn't accept that he had left me. My throat burnt and my body shook."

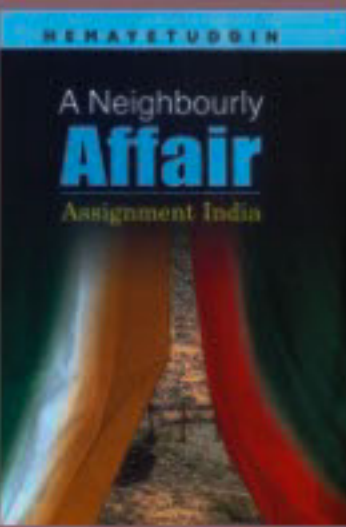
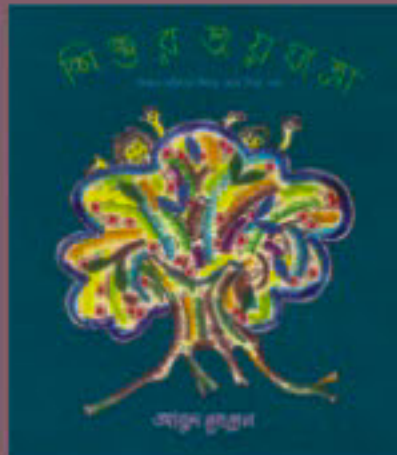
She said that when she called her Wadi (Benazir) on the night of her father's murder she was not given the phone as Zardari told her: " 'She can't speak, she's hysterical.....' " As if on cue there was a loud wailing at the background. It had been quiet before, with no indication that anyone was in the room with Zardari."

It was Zardari who informed her that her father had been shot.

Benazir's father always wanted her to be part of

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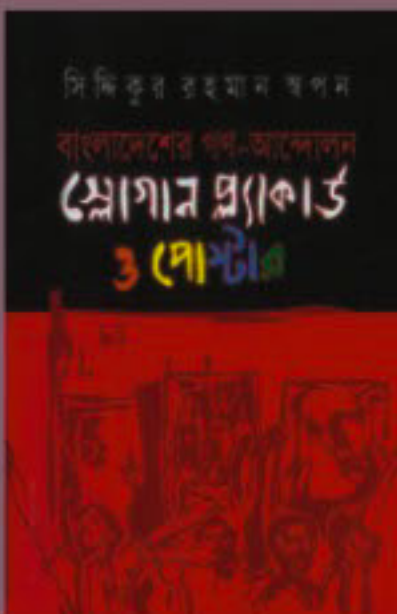
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the greater world. He would take the children to visit foreign dignitaries and he took them along on foreign visits. He emphasized good education and wrote numerous letters to both Benazir and Murtaza, giving them political advice while he was in jail. Benazir and her mother's house arrest is described in the autobiography in vivid detail. Her brother's party Al Zulfikar was considered to be the armed wing of PPP. And the papers reported that it was Murtaza who hijacked a plane, an act of terrorism.

In *Daughter of the East*, Benazir describes her life during and after the assassination of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. She stayed in different jails till 1984. Solitary confinement for seven years had given her an ailment in her ear and left her frail physically. On her release in January 1984 she and her sister took a Swiss flight to Switzerland and then to London for her treatment. It was here that she campaigned against the military dictator and waited for the time to come back to her country. She published a paper named Amul from there. In 1985 Zia decided to go for an election. But the oppression and killing of political prisoners were continued. Finally she went back to Karachi in August 1985 to bury her brother Shah Nawaz in their ancestral home in Larkana. Five days later she was again arrested by the military regime in Karachi, to be released in November to attend a French court hearing on her brother's murder inquiry. She finally came back to Lahore in 1985. There were millions of people to receive her that day, she writes. She describes her arranged marriage to Zardari and her son's birth in the last few chapters. She completed her book in 1988.

Fatima's book, however, finishes on a sad note. She says that she must move away from the shadows, the ghosts of her family. But she also says that she could never leave behind her father for whom she started writing this book. No matter how hard she tries to move away from Pakistan she can never do so.

Jackie Kabir is a teacher and critic and is associated with reading clubs .