

Barisal by the Bay

Khademul Islam is impressed by beautiful Bengal

The following review was published almost three years back, a year after Fakrul Alam's book of translations of Jibanananda Das's poems came out. Amazingly (for a book of translated poems, that is) that first edition sold out, and a second edition - with a smaller, more pleasing font, with the addition of some more translated poems like *Knowing How These Fields Will Not Be Hushed That Day* and *I Stay in the City All the Time*, and with a few poems reworded, as in *Life's Transactions Have Closed Again now is Life's Mart Has Closed Again - is now out. All of which merits a reprint of the original review, specially for those readers who missed it on the first go-around.*

Every summer for the last six years a friend and I have been going biking through wildlife sanctuaries on Maryland's Eastern Shore, right by the Chesapeake Bay. It is an immediate and exhilarating experience, to pedal through tidal marshes and grassland beneath a vast sky, to pump legs on trails past hickory, beech, pine and white oaks, glide past saucer magnolias and black-eyed susans. On any given ride, we spot ospreys, herons, wood ducks, plummeting sea hawks, wading egrets. Turtles, the striped muds, the yellowbellied sliders and diamondbacks, sense us and freeze. Returning at evening, overhead we see Canada geese ("them honkers" as the locals term it) in V-formation on their migratory Atlantic Flyway routes.

It was then, headed for home, with the bay's waters a lonely, hopeless indigo and golden eagles circling in the dying light, that long-forgotten lines of Jibanananda Das kept coming to me unbidden. Lines from poems in Ruposhi Bangla and Banalata Sen, about Dhanshiriritir teeray, about rivers and dew, about hawar raat. Upon hearing all this my sister sent me Abdul Mannan Syed's volume of Das's poems, complete with appended essays and the stunning photocopy of the poem Abar Ashibo Phiray in the poet's own hand. Since then I have always packed the book on my cycling trips. A vanished Bengal comes alive with Jibanananda Das gently elbowing me in the ribs:

"Look, an owl."
"Where?"
"Oijay Lokkhi pecha."
"Tai to."
"On a shumil tree branch."
In Ruposhi Bangla it is his specificity that I delight in: that particular owl in that particular tree, the "neel shoopori'r bon," the utterly Bengali music of "kochi kochi shaympoka" in Aashin's crop-shorn fields. In Banalata Sen it is the fusion of

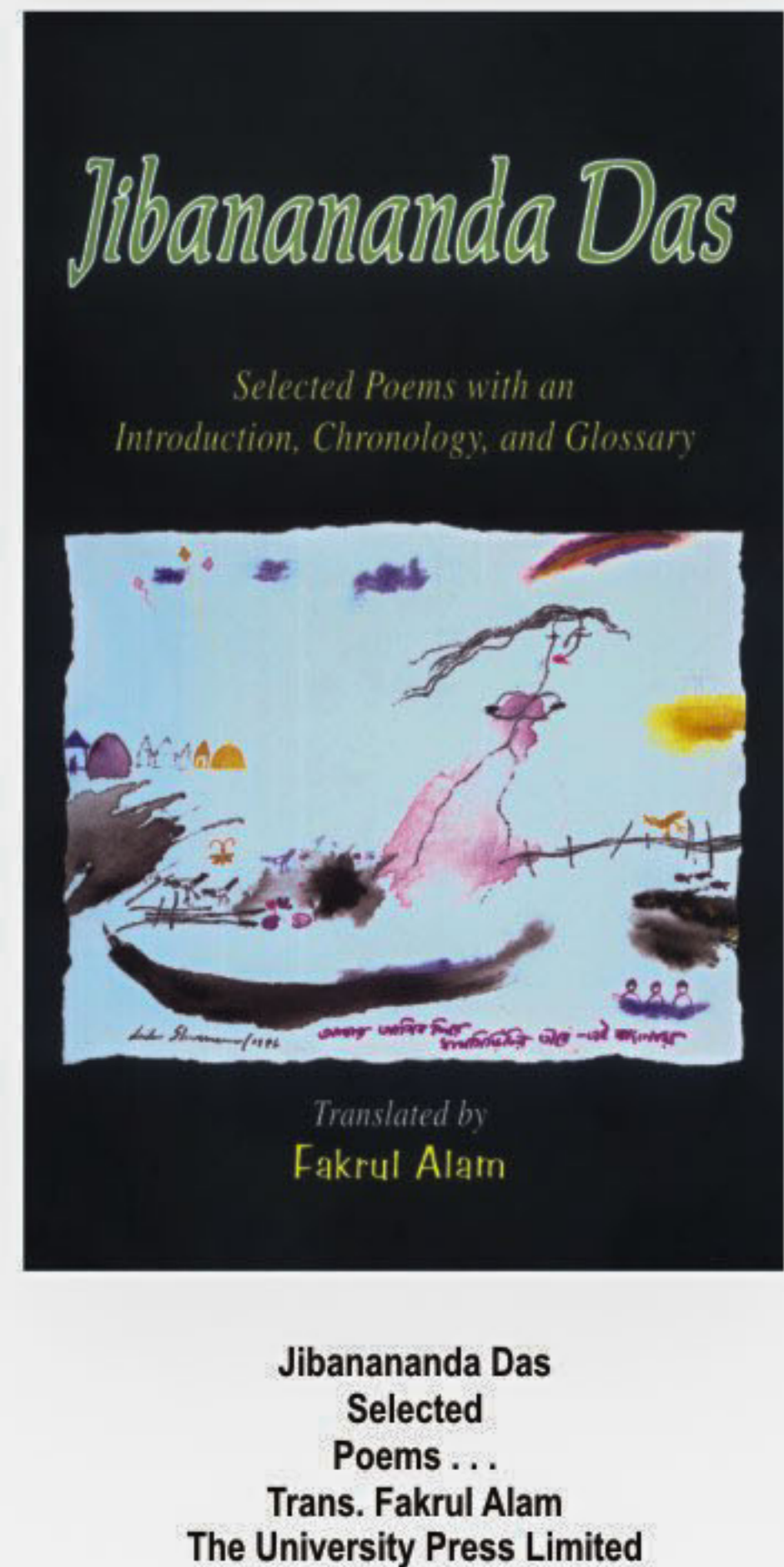
the themes of mortality and death with metaphors of birds and rivers. With the aid of a trusty Samsad Bengali-to-English dictionary, I have ventured further, more tentatively, into the despairing later works, into Bela Obela Kaalbela and the uncollected poems. Into Buddhadev Bose on Das.

I also read Clinton Seely's *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das: 1899-1945*. It is an amazing work, a hermeneutic effort by a Westerner who lived in Barisal and steeped himself in local people, language and natural surroundings. Then, due to the vagaries of mail couriers, almost a year after it was published, my sister sent me Fakrul Alam's translations of Das poems into English. Aha, I thought to myself, what hath the man wrought?

But first things first: I am no poetry critic. Though I have been reading poetry fairly constantly for the last ten years and count among my favorites poets such as Mary Jo Bang, Seamus Heaney and Vijay Seshadri, though I know what is spondee and simile, there is far more between trope and tetrameter than I can ever hope to know. But even more crucially, I have to confess that I have no idea what would constitute rhetoric and mode, or pre-Dasian intonations, in Bengali poetry. Though I can hear its music, its full syllables, I wouldn't know how to scan Bengali poems. A technical analysis, therefore, of Fakrul's book of poems I'll leave to minds more capable than mine. What I write, I write as the wildly enthusiastic, the avidly partisan, reader of Jibanananda Das.

Translations are a finicky, delicate, punishing matter. Dr. Johnson growled that "Poetry indeed cannot be translated." So what, as the revolutionary once wrote, is to be done? Do you do the literal word for word and thereby introduce the poet's world in the most unmediated, direct but "unpoetic" way, or do you choose a richer, but perhaps more dangerous and difficult, rhymed verse? What is it to be, content or style? Fakrul goes for the latter. As he puts it in his scrupulously-worded introduction, he has aimed for "recovering something of the poetic qualities of the original, in transmitting the tone of the poet... for distinct traces of the poetic signature."

The result is predictably of varying success, something Fakrul Alam himself acknowledges implicitly. Of the eighty poems translated, thirty two are from Ruposhi Bangla and Banalata Sen, a fortuitous choice since these contain the poems that a nonBengali should be introduced to. His best efforts are supple creations, aided by a felic-



tous vocabulary. For example, *Abar Ashibo Phire*, which was the first poem I turned to, thankfully translated as *Beautiful Bengal*, not *I Shall Return* (thereby raising the specter of, say, General MacArthur in the Philippines) works for me. On the other hand *Biral* (The Cat), that caress of feline fur by Das, does not. I can't quite pinpoint why. Perhaps it is the line: After its success somewhere in stripping a few pieces of fish to the bone. Maybe it is that muddled "success," and the thoroughly unsatisfying filler of "somewhere." I did read each poem in the book, sometimes going with the poems in the original, sometimes against translations in my own head. I like An Orange

(Kamalalebu), An Overwhelming Sensation (Bodh), the dusky image of: Like a gray owl spreading its wings in Aghrahan's early winter darknessin The Conch-Garlanded One (Shankhamala), the fact that Fakrul rather cleverly wove in all the Bengali names of trees and bushes in Because I Have Seen Bengal's Face (Banglar Mukh Ami Dekheyachi). Windy Night (Hawar Raat) billows. In fact, I like all the translations of Dhushar Pandulipi and Ruposhi Bangla, though it beats me how "ranga megh" became "barred clouds." I agree with the logic of keeping Das's dashes, smile with pleasure at the pointing out of Yeatsian echoes. I am less impressed by some other poems. The principal thing that mars a small number of them is what Anthony Burgess termed the "arty translation," the overwrought reworking that sinks the line, dooms a stanza. There are clunkers too. For example, for me Fakrul's Banalata Sen (the poem itself, not the whole book) was ruined by the word "transaction," which does not at all have the startling effect, the sudden intrusion, of the vernacular "layn dayn," (with its echo of Larkin's "intricate, rented world" in *Aubade*). It disturbs the mood, as if supply-side economics, not the give-and-take of daily Bengali life, our fish markets and our rickshaw fares, slipped into Das's riverside brooding on time. I hate to say it, but here I prefer Seely's Banalata Sen, the literalist's approach, his line:

All birds come home, all rivers, and all this life's tasks finished to Fakrul Alam's version, his line:

All birds homerivers toolife's transactions close again.

I don't get that "all birds home." Does it mean homing in? And that "again" just to set up a rhyme with "Sen" doesn't make sense, since in the original it is life's unceasing transactions coming to a close this one, final time. Though when I thought about it, I couldn't come up with a better word than "transactions." Nor with a better line. See, dear readers, the hellish nightmare of translation!

The glossary is both necessary and a delight. I quarrel only with the definition of the *krishnachura* as "a colorful tree which blooms in spring." That's it? Where is its crimson blaze, its scarlet flowers? Jibanananda Das, a poet of almost clinical exactitude when it came to nature, would, I feel, agree with me. The other caveat I have is that a certain defensive note creeps into the Introduction when Fakrul disclaims lines like "I have never taken the kind of liberties with Das's poems..." or "will show that I was right in opting for..." It is too much the didact's wagging finger, the hyperalert transla-

tor assiduously tending to the potential breaches in his lexical ramparts.

He needn't have fussed. Fakrul writes that he feels "happy" about his translations "because they gave me almost always the feeling that I was involved in the poetic act." That is indeed an endearing confession, since it means that he followed, via the "poem as a ghostly map" (Mary Kinzie's words), the many paths not taken by the author, was able to see the provisional nature of a poem in the making, discern how Das hovered above the abyss as he combined and recombined elements of orthodoxy and the experimental, before conjuring up the finished product. It means that Fakrul Alam approached his task with sensitivity, and that should be defense enough. So the introduction, especially since it is meant for nonBengali readers, should have been a little less studied, should have lofted itself up with a tad more charm and helium.

Aah, but I quibble too much. I should not, but I can't help it. It is one of life's small, but distinct, pleasures to bicker with a translator about a favorite poet and his poems. Fakrul Alam's is an original effort. Every line in it is his own. It is not reshaped material, mimetic exegesis culled from works already existing in Western libraries. For that alone he should be commended. Fresh translations, attempts like Fakrul Alam's, revive Das as a living, breathing poet, force us all to look beyond the entombed figure in the mausoleum busily being erected by the Bengali literary establishment. Fakrul writes that Professor Seely "has done his translations out of his love for the poet." He himself has done no less. His book should be on the shelf of every reader, Bengali and otherwise, of the poems of Jibanananda Das.

And here in the United States summer has crinkled to fall (that's Americanese for autumn) and it is time to dig out the heavier tackle and gear (Hopkins anybody?) for bicycling in cooler weather. We have to hoist our bikes and my well-thumbed copy of *Jibanananda: Kobita Shomogro* into a pickup truck and head out for the wooded trails, for egret feathers and a sea hawk wiping "the sun's smell from its wings," for my private, my Das-gifted, my very own, Barisal by the Bay. And who knows, perhaps the shy ghost of a reclusive poet, our beautiful, our bright Jibanananda Das, will nod at me from the shadow of an oyster boat or from behind the bole of an American tree as I read his words out aloud into the sunny, chilly October air.

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Of commonplace situations and recognisable characters

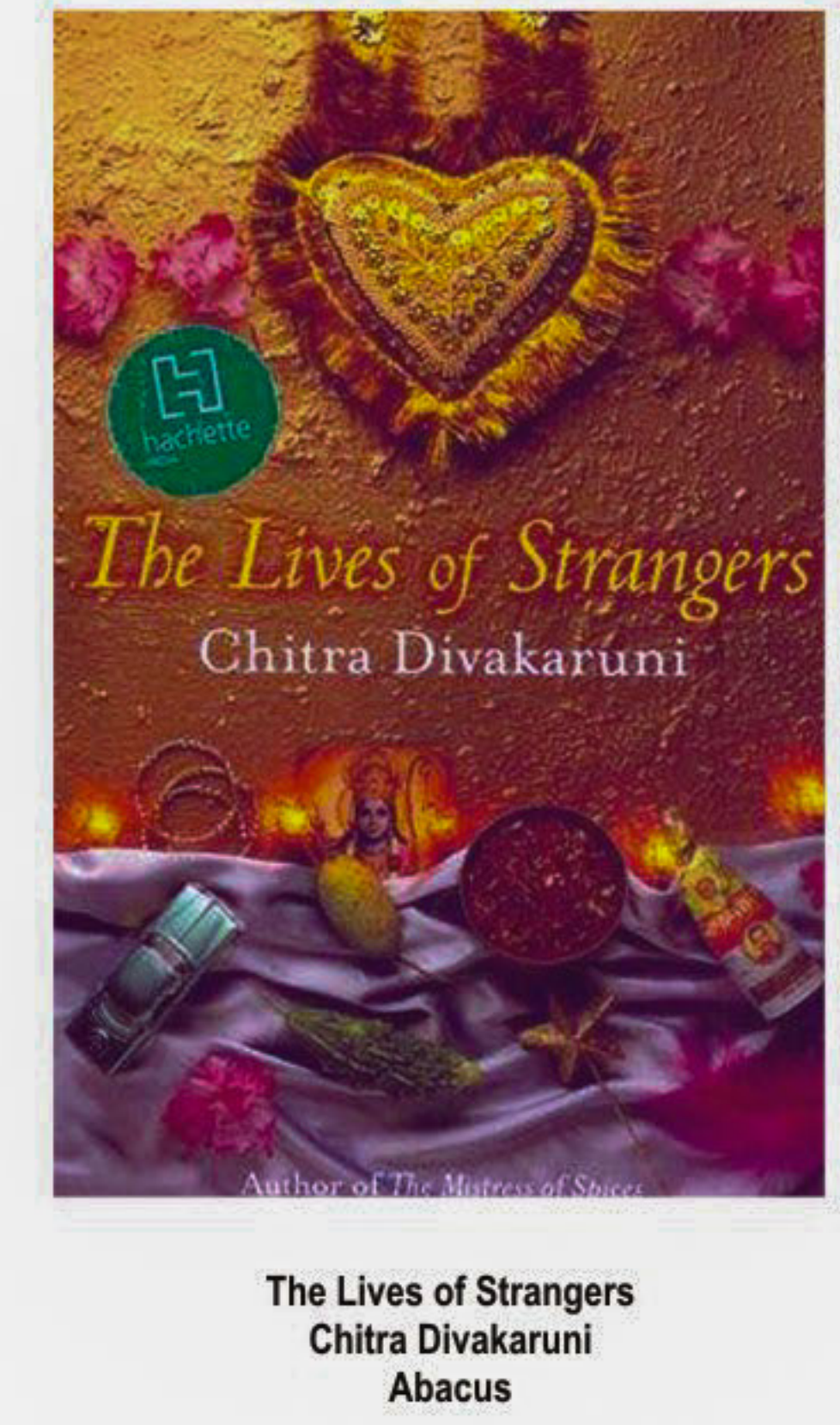
Nausheen Rahman wades into captivating tales

Chitra Divakaruni's first volume of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, was so good that when my eyes alighted upon another such collection, *The Lives of Strangers*, in a bookshop, I had to buy it just then.

Divakaruni takes commonplace situations and recognizable characters and weaves haunting tales around them. This collection has nine stories which are set in both the East and West, and which deal with various relationships, dilemmas and emotions. All the protagonists are women.

Mrs. Dutta Writes A Letter, the first story in the book, is about a widow who goes to live with her son and wife in the U.S. She soon realizes this is not an arrangement that suits her. It is a simple story, told convincingly, of what happens to numerous women who have to live with their sons, especially in a different culture. The ending really uplifts the spirit, as it shows a woman's fortitude and good sense.

The Lives of Strangers is a thought-provoking story about Leela, who was born and brought up in America and goes to visit her home country, India, for the first time. Her parents (who never talk about India) giver her advice before she sets off (not to get involved in the lives of strangers, among other things). Her aunt Seema thinks going on a pilgrimage to Kashmir is the best way to see India in the heat, "a journey which is going to earn them comfort on earth and goodwill in heaven". This story presents an interesting depiction of the two sides of Leela's personality as we see some kind of a conflict between her American and Indian selves. Her American upbringing gets in the way of her humane Indianness. Contrary to her parents' warnings, she befriends a Mrs. Das in a way she never would've thought possible, surprising even herself. Mrs. Das' character confirms the significance of destiny in people's lives. She is believed to be accused and Leela's chance encounter with her brings about a self-revelation: "How amazing that it should be a stranger who has opened her like a dictionary and brought to light this word ('intimacy')



macy') whose definition had escaped her until now". She is convinced, that "there's always a connection, a reason because of which people enter your orbit, bristling with dark energy like a meteor tent on collision", and that destiny is a seductive concept".

Divakaruni's short stories are narrated with a

sensitivity and an ease that leave the reader with a feeling of gratification. *The Forgotten Children*, gives a young girl's perspective. She, her brother, her insecure mother and a violent drunkard father make up her unhappy family. There are parts that will make readers choke with emotion: "and in that way I came to know something of love, how complex it is, how filled with the need to believe". A child's protective attachments to her little brother ("We. That was how I thought of my brother in those days, as though he were as much a part of me as my arm of leg"), her innocent longing for a normal life, her escape from harsh reality in her daydreams, and her brother's fleeing away from it all, are the elements of this story.

The Intelligence of Wild Things is a subtle narration of the complexity of blood relationships. A widowed mother anxious about her son, Tarun's safety due to Naxalite movement in Calcutta, sends him away to America against his will. Her daughter lives in America with her husband and two children. Tarun has been a very quiet boy, very attached to his mother and sister. His stay in America makes him more withdrawn and a distance comes between him and his mother, and between the two siblings. They find it difficult to communicate. "Is there ever a way back across the immigrant years, across the foreign warp of the heart?" The mother wants to see her son before she dies, but the sister doesn't know how to tell her brother this. This is a moving story about people growing away from one another, although their love remains intact.

The Love of a Good Man talks about a daughter's complicated feelings for her mother and hatred for her father who abandoned them for a life in America; not long after, the mother dies of cancer. Monisha, the daughter, gets married to a "good" man and has a son. Ten years after the father's desertion, he wants to come and see his grandson. Monisha can't find it in herself to forgive and forget. Her refusal, then reluctant agreeing, to let him

come and stay with them for one night, and the outcome of this visit are so beautifully described, most of us are likely to read the story again. Divakaruni's words, chosen with precision and imagination, make her stories even more delightful: "We buried our hurts inside our bodies, like shrapnel"; "perhaps happiness, which I'd given up on, was an uncharted possibility, a brave geography worth the long effort of exploration". Her empathy with her characters is also awe-inspiring.

What The Body Knows is a compelling read. Although it gives graphic details of Aparna's illness, pain, surgery and slow recovery, surprisingly, one doesn't recoil from it; on the contrary, one goes on reading with undivided attention. Aparna has a caesarean baby, but shortly after has to go back for another surgery, and spends a difficult month in hospital. She loses the will to live due to the pain and helplessness. Then she finds interest in living again through a chance happening. She falls in love with the surgeon who had saved her life but doesn't tell him anything. She regains her health and returns to normal life. One day, while shopping, she runs into her doctor who looks at her with a new interest (he who had never been anything but professional before). When he wants to take her for coffee, she feels saddened because she realizes that he is no different from other men. The protagonist's delicate emotions expressed in very effective language make this s remarkable piece of writing. The writer's use of imagery is also very impressive.

The Blooming Season for Cacti is about rather different circumstances. Mira has lost her mother in the Bombay riots and goes to America to her brother and his wife. Her horrifying experience has a deep impact on her psyche and she can't bear to think of getting married. This causes trouble between her and her sister-in-law and she decides to go away to California. In Sacramento, she finds a job and meets Radhika. They become friends and gradually Radhika develops feelings for Mira. "If a

woman finds joy in the spare, pared flesh of the dessert, if she finds joy in another woman's sand-brown body, who is to say?" Mira's not reciprocating drives Mira to try and kill herself. This story sheds on other aspects of women's lives and relationships, as we read about the different problems in Radhika's and Mira's lives.

The Unknown Errors of our Lives: Ruchira is about to get married to Biren. As she packs boxes/cartons to take to her new home, she finds an old notebook of hers. As a teenager, she used to write in this 'book of errors'. Suddenly, one of Biren's old girlfriends (who is pregnant with his baby) drops in. Arlene, the former girlfriend, tells Ruchira, that Biren thinks she has had the baby aborted as he had wished; then goes away to live her own life. Ruchira wants to call off her wedding, but a message on Biren's answering machine and remembering that Biren had told her all about his past, stops her from committing another error.

The Names of Stars in Bengali: Two little boys come with their mother to India from America for their first visit. They have a fun-filled time, enjoying the newness of everything (even their mother's different appearance and nickname, Khuku) and loving the stories their "Didima" tells them. We learn about Khuku's childhood, of her mother's one and only visit to America. Khuku goes for a scooter ride round the village, and it occurs to her that she is nostalgic and that she wants to read out the names of stars in Bengali and other things from a book to her husband and children. She wants to reach home quickly; the story ends on that happy note.

Today, with so much of immigrating to the West, especially America, these stories hold much relevance and are enjoyed so much because of the writer's skill of imbuing them with so much depth and meaning.

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Peregrinations in the world of faith

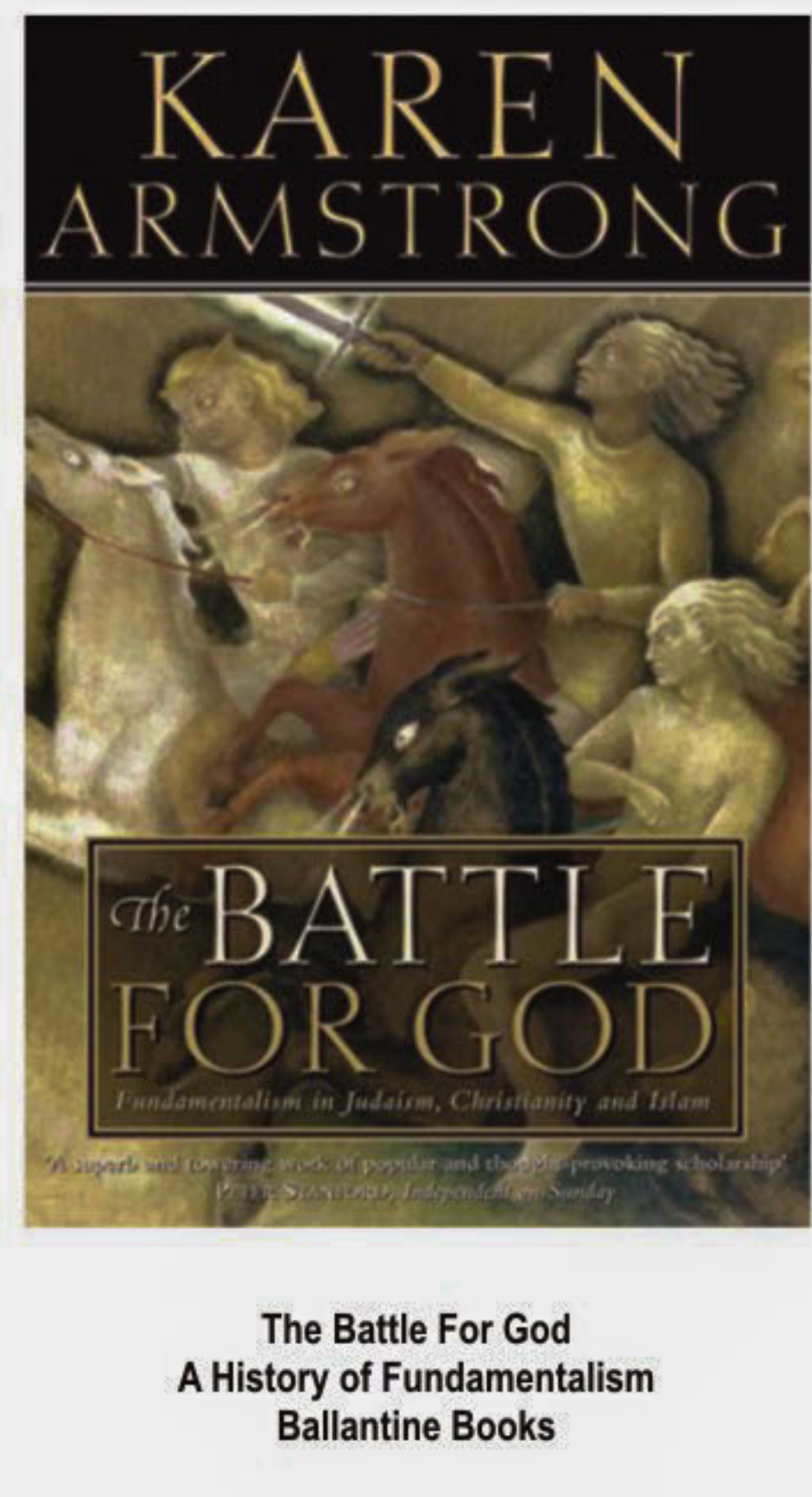
Syed Badrul Ahsan reflects on wars and skirmishes waged in God's name

God has always been elusive. Or the search for Him has been. Then too there are all the instances where looking for God, putatively finding Him and then claiming Him for a particular religious community has spawned issues over which vast global regions have become involved. Witness the aftermath of 11 September 2001 in the United States. Suddenly, because of the destruction in New York, Western interest in Islam as also its fears of it have become a considerable many degrees more pronounced. Karen Armstrong, happily for us, is not guided by these immediate considerations. For a basic reason, which is that she has for a very long time been writing on religion and has particularly remained busy expostulating the diverse aspects of the Islamic faith. Reasoned analyses have been part of her assessments of the place of faith in life. And it is just such an approach she brings into *The Battle For God*. As the subtitle makes clear, the work is a study of the history of fundamentalism not just within Islam but also among Christians and Jews. That is as it should be, for with the rise of the neo-conservatives in the United States, a fact earlier preceded by the arrival of the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, religion has come to acquire a harsher appearance than was earlier considered possible. Christianity, much to the chagrin of its tolerant sections, has in more instances than one been commandeered by the neocons in as much as Islam has been radicalized, and brutally so, by Osama bin Laden and his fellow fanatics. At another end, consider the rise of Jewish extremism, especially when it comes to a question of settlements in occupied Palestinian territory. You find it rather incongruous that the very

followers of Judaism who have suffered through centuries of repression and exile at the hands of other communities and governments should now be taking upon themselves the role of people not unwilling to make others suffer.

Karen Armstrong's peregrinations in the world of religion lead you to thoughts of all of the above, perhaps more. But note that she does not hesitate to inform her readers that the fundamentalism which is so dominant a factor in global politics today has had its origins in the thoughts of political leaders and religious thinkers. An instance of how religion can swiftly turn into a weapon for those looking for emancipation from an oppressive state comes through an observation of Iran as it was under the Shah. Between the early 1950s and late 1970s, Iran served as the perfect breeding ground for Islamic militancy. You can point the finger of blame at Ayatollah Khomeini, but do not forget that, backed by the Americans and directly assisted by the CIA, the Shah thwarted the nationalist politics Mohammad Mossadegh sought to enforce in Iran in 1953. The monarchy's insistence on Western-style development came alongside its obtuse belief that demands for democracy could be kept under the lid. SAVAK and all the instruments of repression were around to ensure that the Shah remained on top. That was when popular discontent was taken full advantage of by Khomeini and channeled into a popular uprising.

Fundamentalism, then, is often a consequence of bad politics. But there are, from the perspective of history, the original conflicts inherent in the struggle for dominance within a faith. Martin Luther, for all the reputation he was to gain as a



The Battle For God
A History of Fundamentalism
Ballantine Books

reformer, is historically an individual whose goal was to steer Christianity back to its guiding principles. The concept of the Trinity, the belief that a set of clerics could claim to speak for God, was not what Jesus had struggled for. Move on to the world of Islam. The schism that has persisted for centuries between Sunni and Shia owes its beginnings to the fact that Ali, cousin of Prophet Muhammad, was passed over as many as three times when it came time for the growing Muslim community to choose a caliph. And when he finally succeeded in making it to the top, he was assassinated. And then his clan, personified by his grandson Hussein, perished in Karbala. That was the point when the line between religiosity and politics in Islam began to blur. It would over the centuries take the form of an intense struggle that would test the ability of the faith to survive in a world where other faiths were already arrayed against it. Armstrong brings the tale of Abul A'la Maudoodi, the Pakistani preacher and founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami. Maudoodi, all too often a cause for sectarian tension in Pakistan and eventually an instrument come handy for a military regime engaged in a genocide in the country's eastern province, came forth with his own version of what Islam ought to be. Westernised governments, believed Maudoodi, constituted rebellion against God. The implications are clear: Muslims everywhere had the right to send such governments packing. Maudoodi's ideas were to be taken over by Syed Qutub in Egypt. An enlightened man well versed in literature and active in other liberal regions, Qutub gradually gravitated to a point where he not only embraced fundamentalist Islam but also tried

hardening its core. It is then that you understand what the Muslim Brotherhood was all about. Gamal Abdel Nasser had no time for the likes of Qutub, who eventually was executed by the regime in 1966. Fundamentalism thus got a shot in the arm and went on to acquire newer dimensions. And new dimensions came to Judaism too, through the long centuries of persecution. A revealing case concerns the zeal with which Tomas de Torquemada (1420-98) served as the first Grand Inquisitor in Spain. Once a Jew himself, before repudiating it, he appeared to take particular delight in stamping out any sign of the faith both in himself and in the lives of those he persecuted. The flimsiest of excuses were applied to up the pressure on the Jews. Any Jew who lighted candles on Friday evening or refused to eat shellfish was promptly marked out for torture. The Promised Land was thus to prove illusory. The Jewish community has been driven from one country to another, almost always made the butt of prejudice and ridicule. Rare have been the times when Jews were made to feel welcome or provided with shelter. And yet Armstrong would have us know that it was only in the Islamic world that Jews were not placed in fetters. "The Jews of Islam", she notes, "were not persecuted, there was no tradition of anti-Semitism..."

The Battle for God goes beyond a search for the roots of radical faith. It is in essence a history of philosophy, of the distinctions between *logos* and *mythos*, that Armstrong has given shape to. An engrossing read. And a vastly enlightening one too.

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