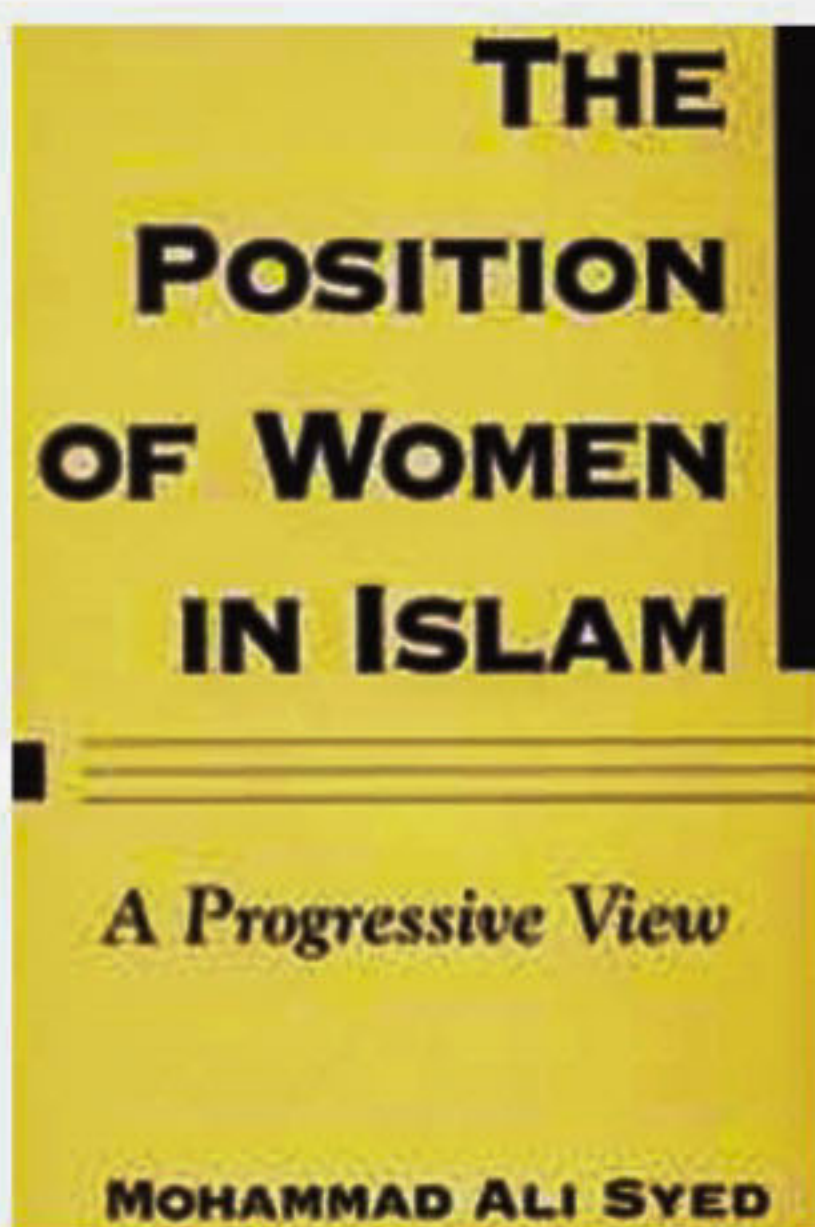


Faith, tradition and the world of Islam's women

Syed Badrul Ahsan ponders a work on Muslim perspectives

MOHAMMAD Ali Syed subtitles his work as 'A Progressive View', which certainly points to the kind of case he makes for his interpretation of Islamic rules and conventions as they apply to women. Syed has little patience with the proponents of radical Islam, those whose view of the faith embraces some of the most conservative, indeed fanatic assessments of the position Muslim women should hold in society. The increasing alarm that in recent times has been raised over such issues as the use of the niqab and hijab by Muslim women does not, for the writer, emphasise the core of the Islamic faith and indeed goes against history. Not for him the bigotry which has long characterised (and still does characterise) the status of women in Islam. Not for him, therefore, an acquiescence in the thought that women in Islam belong in one place, in this instance the four walls of a male-dominated home.

And Syed should know, given his years of practice of the law and study of historical Islamic society. Something of his background also helps. His father was a prominent Muslim politician in pre- and post-partition India and in his own way was an individual who set much store by a modern, liberal interpretation of Islam. The stream of Syed's thoughts in this work is therefore palpable. He makes a beginning through presenting the complex history of the Quran and Hadiths, but especially the latter, considering that the Hadiths for hundreds of years have served as an underpinning of Muslim thought and, incongruously, often acted as a bulwark against the growth of Muslim liberalism. Syed debunks the myths that have regularly stultified the growth of the Muslim mind by taking aim at the Hadiths which, in his view as well as in those of other scholars of Islam, ought not to have been there in the first place. The Hadiths, being the sayings of the Prophet of Islam, are of course a major determining factor in any pursuit of Islamic cultural, religious and political traditions. The trouble, though, is that throughout the ages, since the death of Prophet Muhammad, an entire body of ques-



The Position of Women in Islam
A Progressive View
Mohammad Ali Syed
State University of New York Press

tionable Hadiths has arisen which has readily been seized upon by ill-educated and ill-informed preachers as a weapon to be employed in a sustained struggle against liberalism.

Syed spends a good length of time illustrating the nature and history of the Hadiths, before moving off to the issue confronting him. Women, he puts it plainly, enjoy the same degree of rights as men. He thus slices through the notion of Islam being a place for only macho men ready to order their meek women around. He quotes the Prophet (M 13:11): "The most excellent of you is he who is best in the treatment of his wife". And yet, as in M 15:19 T 10:11, there is a caveat which follows

the advice on treating women: "And be careful of your duty to God in the matter of women, for you have taken them as the trust of God... and they owe you this obligation that they will not allow anyone whom you do not like to come into your home; if they do this, chastise them in such a manner that it should not leave any effect on their bodies".

The question of purdah occupies critical space in Mohammad Ali Syed's arguments. His opinion holds that women in Persia and India had been bound to a purdah system long before the arrival of Islam in their lives. Purdah is therefore a reality that has little to do with Islam, or so the author puts it to his readers. But Syed does not rest on his interpretations of purdah alone. He goes back to the Quran for a vindication of his thoughts: "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and God is well acquainted with all that they do" (24:30). In 24:31, this is the instruction that goes out in relation to women: "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments (zeenatahunna) except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons... and they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments...". Syed quotes Mohammad Ali, whose historical analysis regarding women covering their bosoms dates back to pre-Islamic Arabia, when women sought to demonstrate their beauty through an uncovering of their breasts (or perhaps it was a matter of cleavage here?) although they had their head coverings in place.

Freedom of movement for Muslim women soon comes under Syed's scrutiny. He goes back to some relevant Hadiths to explain why independence is a right for Muslim women. In B 11:12, it is thus stated, "The Prophet (peace

be upon him) said, 'Do not prohibit the handmaids of Allah from going to the mosques of Allah'. Again, in B 10:162, comes this: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, 'If a woman wanted to go to the mosque at night, she should not be prohibited from doing so'." Such freedom, argues Syed, goes beyond the parameters of the mosque: "The Prophet (pbuh) said, 'When the wife of one of you asks permission to go out she should not be prohibited from doing so'." History also bears testimony to women's freedom in Islam: "In the mosques the women were not forbidden to speak to the men. Once Hazrat Ayesha could not hear the last part of the sermon of the Prophet (pbuh) as his companions (ahsabs) were crying loudly and then she had asked a man sitting by her side... 'May God be kind to you. Could you tell me what were the last words of the Prophet?' The man said that the Prophet (pbuh) had said, 'It has been revealed to me that you have to face the test of the grave before the test of your dajjal'."

The Quran, notes Syed, is silent on the issue of whether or not women can become heads of Muslim states. And yet the Quran does not deny women the opportunity of pursuing a political life or providing leadership to governments. The author is dismissive of men who have long used isolated or ahad Hadiths to deny women a role of leadership in politics. He comes down heavily on Abu Bakra, whose reference to an alleged Hadith, quoted by Bukhari ("Those who entrust their affairs to women will never have prosperity") would in time lead to some of the most depressing interpretations of women's role in an Islamic society. Syed holds up Ayesha as an exemplar of free Islamic womanhood. And then he goes on to cite the tales of other women in Islam. In the late fifteenth century, Hurrah Malika Arwa Binte Ahmed provided leadership to Yemen province under the Fatimid caliphs Mustansir, Moost'Ali and Amir. When Amir died, she became sole ruler of Yemen.

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

At A Glance

Local Governance And Political Reform
Keys to Poverty Reduction
Badiul Alam Majumdar
Agamee Prakashanee
Tel: 7110021

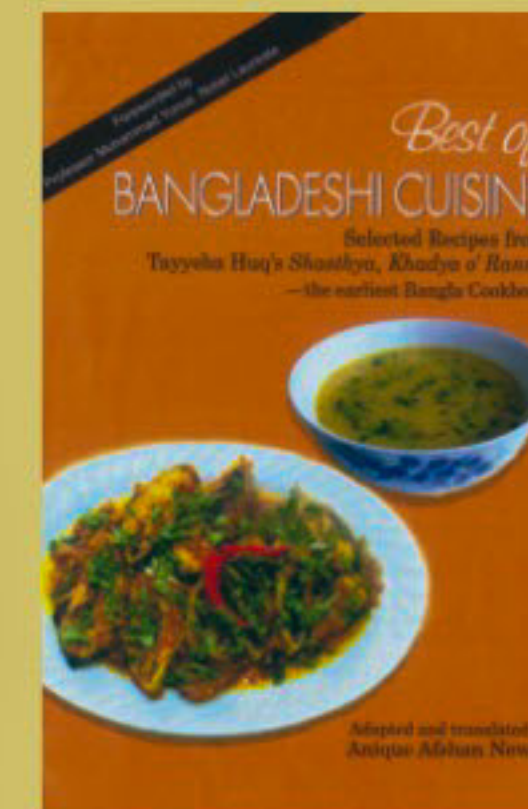
LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL REFORM

KEYS TO POVERTY REDUCTION

Badiul Alam Majumdar (PH)

The writer, closely involved in the civil society movement and having spoken out for years on public issues, now brings his thoughts to readers in a compact form through this collection of his published articles. In a cumulative way, the work is an excellent exposition of how much can be achieved with local government and, without it, how little.

Best of Bangladeshi Cuisine
Selected Recipes...
Adaptation, trans. Anique Afshan
Newaz
The University Press Limited
Tel: 9564441, 9564444



There is hardly any Bengali who has not relished the food of his country. There are all the food shows on the television channels to remind you of all that savoury taste you get from the various kinds of food prepared at home. Here now is a work which gives you a good number of recipes from Tayyeba Huq. Remember here? Try out her advice.

Mapping Women's Empowerment
Experiences from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan
Ed. Firdous Azim, Maheen Sultan
The University Press Limited
Tel: 9564441, 9564444

Mapping Women's Empowerment



It is a powerful contemporary issue the editors deal with here. Women's empowerment has been a subject that has been of specific interest in South Asia, for obvious reasons. In this engrossing work you will discover a whole range of views that shed light on the strides, or lack of them, that women in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India have made over the years.

A doomed love, in new language

Md. Rafiqul Islam admires a play in translation

IF Shakespeare's tragedy Romeo and Juliet is a manifest love story of two young lovers, Antony and Cleopatra is a mature version of love between two mature lovers. "Age can not wither her, nor custom / Stale her infinite variety. Other women cloy / The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies. For vilest things / Become themselves in her, that the holy priests / Bless her when she is riggish" (2.3.240-45). The above words uttered by Enobarbus aptly tell us about the entirety of the magic character physical and psychological demeanour of Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt. Who could evade the terminal spell cast by Cleopatra? Ah, none! The three great Roman heroes: Pompey the Great, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony did succumb to the all encompassing and pulling power of the mysterious queen! Mark Antony, at a critical state of making a choice between his martial duties and his love for Cleopatra, falls in an all-lost, happily of course, love with Cleopatra. Their love triumphs over all other mundane affairs. At the time of their impending doom, however, Antony tries to kill himself and an unyielding Cleopatra commits suicide. Kills herself using a venomous asp's poison. She remains triumphant to herself and their love: "Antony shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'th' posture of a whore" (5.2.214-17).

No, Cleopatra doesn't let it happen that way; she cannot recede to such a state it is not in her proud and worthy veins. She boldly resolves the crux of the crisis: "Husband, I come / Now to that name my courage prove my title. / I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life" (5.2.27881). Two undaunted lovers of amplitude meet the martyrdom of love! Even great Caesar pays tribute to Cleopatra's greatness after her death thus: "If they had swallowed poison, 'twould appear / by external swelling; but she looks like sleep. / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace" (5.2.335-

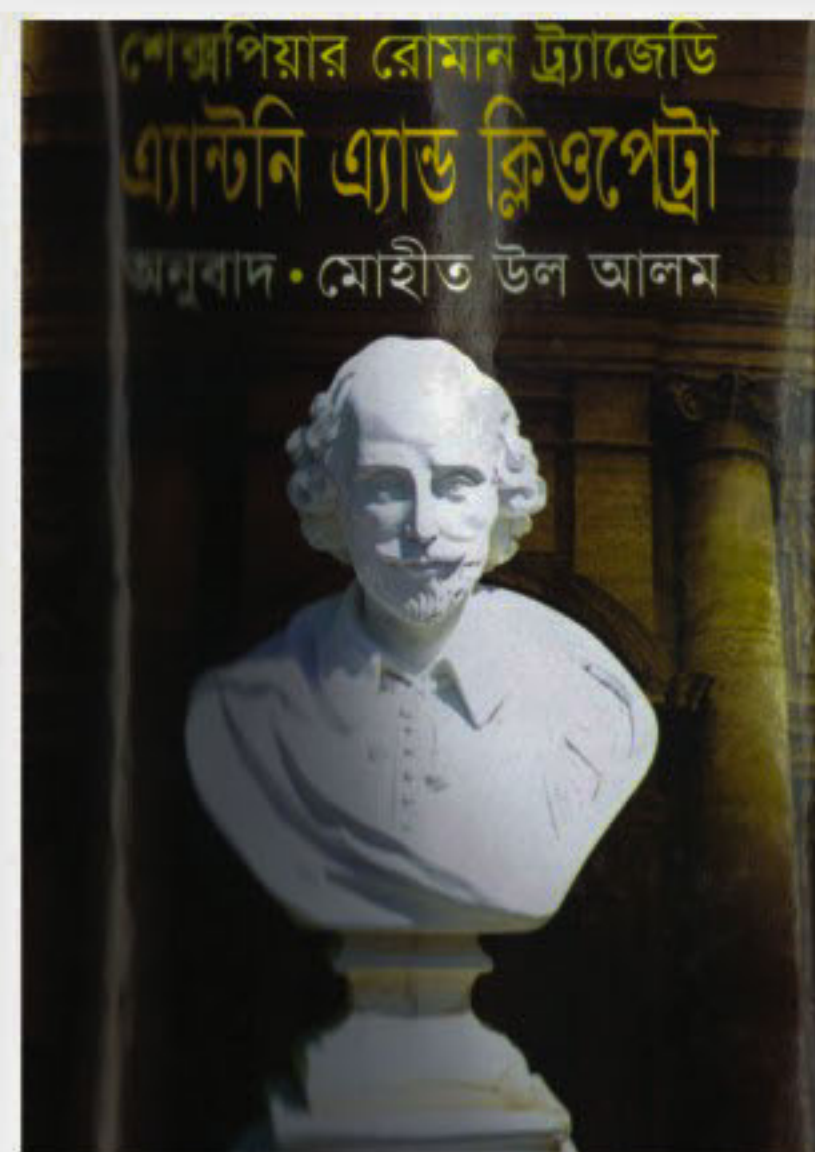
38). It is indeed "paltry to be Caesar" for Cleopatra, who is an incarnation of love, power, passion, beauty and intelligence --- infinite verities wrapped in one unflinching love-longing soul with a unique mental uprightness. Cleopatra remains enigmatic; and their love reaches the heights of immortality.

Professor Mohit Ul Alam has truly accomplished a praiseworthy job by translating the major tragedies of Shakespeare, and the one under discussion in particular.

Alam, demonstrating clear authority over Shakespeare's works (he earned his PhD on Shakespeare's works) and with his long experience of teaching Shakespeare at universities, has deftly maintained the sombre quality and sublimity of the original text in his translation. He has very carefully dealt with the multilayered complexities of Shakespearean diction, tone, image, metaphors, et al, in his translation. It is to be noted, however, that Prof Alam has been writing poetry, novels and other writings on varied social interests in Bangla, all of which has helped him reach the required heights in translating The Bard of Avon's works.

Prof Alam hasn't done a literal or the word for word translation of the play; he rather has maintained the literary verve in his work in a very innovative use of Bangla. He has done it in a thematic manner presented in an impeccably lucid expression. Translating Shakespeare in any language is almost impossible, and keeping that point in mind he has done it in plain prose. And here is where his innovative attempt has triumphed --- the use of a very simple but fitting and lucid Bengali diction. Such employment of diction has helped him maintain a flow of spontaneity throughout the book. Readers will find no linguistic obstacles while reading the book. The serenity of the word-flow and the solemnity of the tone will enhance their reading and relishing of Shakespeare's work in Prof Alam's Bangla.

More importantly, Alam has provided a good number of footnotes along with some



Shakespeare Roman Tragedy
Antony and Cleopatra
Translation Prof Mohit Ul Alam
Anupam Prakashoni

important and famous lines from the original text in original form in the footnote sections. His footnotes are immensely informative. Readers occasional or serious can easily grasp the beauty of the original work through a parallel reading of both the Bengali rendition and the original lines, though not all, of the play. The footnotes and the textual lines amount to as many as 202.

Furthermore, the exclusive introduction that Prof Alam has coined while explaining the historical context, Elizabethan theatre or the theatrical direction and the background information about the characters and the synopsis of the play will immensely help readers to get to the heart of the text.

Amazingly, not a single important point of Shakespearean pun and other subtleties eludes Prof Alam's keen observation. He brilliantly mentions and explains the pun on the word "indeed" and "in deed" (act 1, scene 1) at his footnote 29, to mention one or two from among many! In the initial footnote, he explains Cleopatra's Greek origin and her complexion she was supposed to be white. But, he says, as Shakespeare's Elizabethans loved to take her to be black, the playwright, keeping that point in mind, attributes Cleopatra with a 'tawny front' (1.6) --- (shemla mukh, in Bangla). These, along with many other such instances, are exclusively explained by Alam in his footnotes. He keeps 'Egypt', as 'Mishor' in Bangla will mar the verve of the term, he opines. Let us discuss another one (footnote 60) regarding Cleopatra: "For what good turn? Messenger: For the best turn i'th' bed" (2.5.5758). Here the messenger means sexual intercourse by the word 'turn'. There are ample explanations of the complex and subtle usage of Shakespearean diction, pun, image and underlying ambivalent meanings, which, I believe, will hugely help the readers in relishing the Shakespearean drama in Bangla.

Readers might find the life sketch of The Bard of Avon at the end of the book helpful.

In summing up, it ought to be said that Prof. Mohit Ul Alam's candid approach, lucid and informative expressions that have shaped this Bengali version of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra will evidently help readers in general and English literature buffs in particular, if they make a parallel reading of the drama in the original. Leonardo da Vinci once said: "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." Prof Alam has attained that sophistication in this brilliant translation.

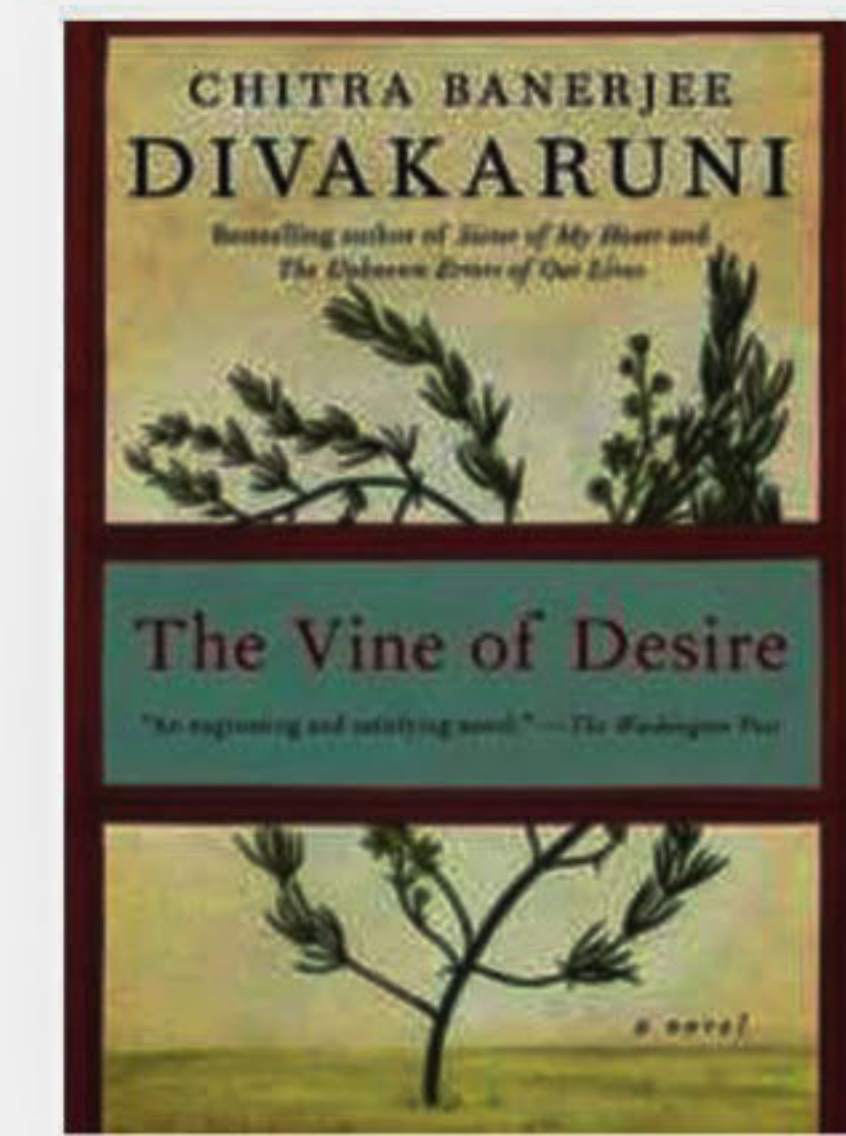
Md. Rafiqul Islam teaches at the Department of English Language and Literature, Premier University, Chittagong.

Looking for love in foreign land

Tulip Chowdhury feels the emotions in a woman's tale

THERE may be few books that can hold up the tapestry of human bondage so intricately as *The Vine of Desire*. Desire and loneliness, love and faithfulness interplay through the tale of three Indian immigrants caught in the dilemma of living under the same roof in America. The story is totally engrossing and leaves the reader breathless with the minute details caught in the emotional upheavals of life. Shudha, a young Indian woman, comes to visit her cousin Anju in New York. Shudha is newly divorced and still under the mental agony such family breakups can cause. She left her husband when he and her mother-in-law wanted her to have an abortion because the baby she was carrying was a female foetus. To escape from them Shudha goes back to her parents. Now she is the mother of the baby girl, Dayita, who is with her in the US. Shudha and Anju have been very close friends ever since they were little girls. Anju had a miscarriage and is very upset and so Shudha has agreed to come to help her out with the trauma.

Shudha falls into the pattern of American life. She tries to keep up with her Indian traditions while keeping track of the holy days on the calendar marked by her mother. Anju is under a depression and cannot keep track of her daily life. Shudha has there supporting her and guiding her. Shudha has the welfare of her cousin at heart. However, she is aware of the long stares from Anju's husband Sunil. Shudha becomes more aware that she is blessed with beauty. The beautiful cheekbones highlight the beautiful dark eyes. The eyes are fringed with long lashes that have



The Vine of Desire
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
Anchor Books

an alluring beauty of their own. The mouth is wide and generous and when she smiles the world seems to open up with it. Her tall figure is like a carved figure of Venus. Shudha avoids being alone with Sunil as she does not trust him. And the strangest thing is that she does not trust herself either. There seems to be a chemistry working between them and Shudha is very much afraid of it.

Shudha finds herself in a tug of war. There is Ashok, her childhood sweetheart in Calcutta who is constantly urging her to return to him. And here is a new life in America that she wants to explore. Shudha has fled from an unhappy marriage and has no intention of becoming Sunil's lover. Her conscience is clear despite her own hidden fears and mistrust of her own emotions. She has no intention of cheating over Anju either. But there is a guilty feeling in Shudha for that sleeping desire which Sunil arouses in her when he plants a kiss on her cheekbone while she is sleeping. A part of her wants more of him. And here comes into Shudha's life Lalit, the great womanizer who with his flirting ways is like a breath of fresh air for Shudha. Lalit starts taking her out. To Lalit, Shudha is the woman he has been waiting for all his life. Every time Shudha goes out with Lalit she has to listen to sarcastic remarks from Sunil. It becomes evident that Sunil is very much determined to have his way with her. One day, with Dayita sleeping soundly, Shudha and Sunil find themselves alone and the inevitable, the sin that Shudha had not wanted to commit, is committed.

Shudha realizes that after that fateful day she cannot face Anju. Taking help from Lupe, a friend she has found through her numerous rounds in the nearby park, she takes up a job. The job is with an Indian family, taking care of an elderly man. She and Dayita move into the new house before Anju is back home. She has a nice room and the freedom to take her own food. It takes time for Shudha to settle into her new life. She had heard that life in America was a challenge and she feels determined to face

that challenge. However, she keeps in touch with Lalit. She likes his wit and sense of humour. From Lalit she gets the devastating news that Anju and Sunil are divorced. She cannot forgive herself for coming between her best friend and her husband. Meanwhile, Ashok turns up in America to take Shudha back to India. Lalit too has finally found the love of his heart in Shudha. Shudha is perplexed, a part of her wants to settle down in the US and a part of her wants to get back to the old familiar life in India. She still is not ready to get married, though. She is caught in an emotional crossroads that leaves her gasping for air. But she has to take a decision; she cannot go on living in her employer's house with her daughter. A decision is taken but not before Shudha goes through emotional upheavals that show how different life can be in America for women like her.

Shudha's life in America is a tale among the stories of hundreds of other lives of immigrants. Quite a number of Indian writers are coming up with poignant tales about immigrants in America. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a master storyteller who fills her narrative with the emotions and intricate details of human life that seem to breathe with the reader. The writer catches the life of immigrants between past and present, between home and abroad, tradition and fresh experience. An engrossing tale of human lives caught in the dilemma of migrating to a new land!

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and is a critic and teacher.

The rise of a star

Waliul Arefin is excited by a tale

ELVIS Presley, the legendary American rock-n-roll singer and Hollywood actor of great fame, was a simpleton but a hard-working fellow with unmatched nervous energy. Almost a god to the billions of music lovers all over the globe, particularly to teenagers, he was a craze and rose to the pinnacle of success. It made him a highly paid singer in his times. But he is not dead to music aficionados as yet and still his smashing hit numbers stir the souls of listeners and take them to a different world of music.

Peter Guralnick, an expert on American music and musicians, has taken up an arduous task to bring to the public the life and events of this legendary singer in his magnificent work *Last Train to Memphis*, in which he explores the rise of Elvis from a simple fellow to superstar with innumerable glorious feathers to his cap.

Son of Presley and Gladys Presley, Elvis was a gentle and goody goody boy with a passion for and love of music from his childhood. An average student at school, what he talked about was music to his friends and peers and nothing else. When he was a fifth grader, his recognition as a singer came when his teachers put him in a talent competition on the radio sponsored by the local station WELO on Children's Day (Wednesday, October 3, 1945). He climbed up to a chair so he could reach the microphone and sang 'Old Stet' which brought him fifth place in the micro. Soon after the contest he got his first guitar from his family. However, from the seventh grade this child prodigy took his guitar to school everyday.

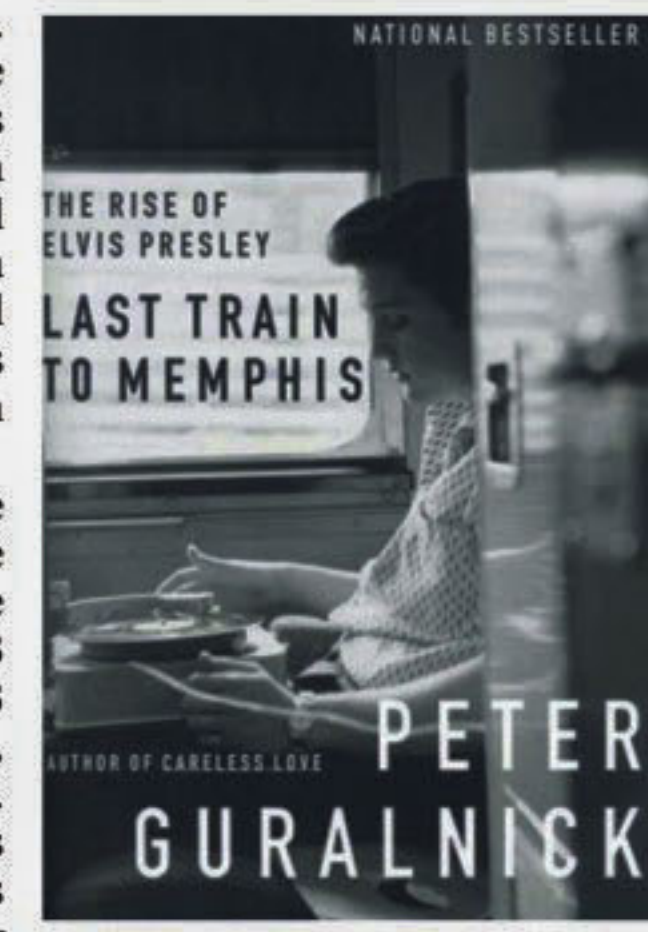
His uncle Vester, a great connoisseur of country music; Gladys' brother Johnny Smith and the pastor Frank Smith taught him a few chords, but Frank was the great influence on the would-be rocker. Though assailed by poverty, his love for music never diminished. On the contrary, it continued to rise with the passage of time. There were times when the family had nothing for food but corn bread and water. But at a point things began to change for the better and the Presleys moved to Memphis on November 6, 1948. Memphis became the local town for them from then on. To support his family, Elvis went on to work at Precision Tool with 27 dollars a week but as he was under aged, he was forced to go back to his yard business. During his sophomore year, he worked as an usher at Loew's estate. He loved to hang out with friends, watched movies and enjoyed partying but was still a shy guy. He loved pranks and practical jokes. He liked sleek cars and loved to experiment with hair-do.

After graduation he approached the Tennessee Employment Security Office through which he got a job at MB Parker Machinists' shop at 23 dollars a week. During this time, he fell in love with Dixie Locke. But Dixie could not rope him in as he turned out to be a ladykiller. As his popularity and fame grew under the able guardianship of Colonel Parker as his advisor and Bob Neal as his manager, he moved away from the bonds of family and Dixie.

Starting off as a ballad singer, Elvis soon entered the domain of country music and then changed over to blues and ultimately to rock-n-roll. Regarded as the 'king of rock-n-roll' during this time, he saw that the crowds would just go crazy watching him shaking his knees while singing. 'That's all right, mama', 'Without You', 'Blue moon of Kentucky', 'Reconsider Baby', 'Good Rockin', 'Tweedle Dee', 'I got a woman', 'I Forget to Remember to Forget' were his smashing hit singles. With friends Scotty, Bill and Bob on his side, he tore apart every stage show with enviable success. Money, popularity and fame were at his fingertips but he was lonely at heart. Girls would die to date and meet him. He could not control himself all the time and had flings with June, Anita, Lime and many others. He was particularly a heart-throb to teen-agers to whom he owed a lot, according to one of his statements in later life. Topping the music scene he soon stepped into the Hollywood movie industry and made his mark in hit movies like 'Love me Tender', 'Loving You', 'Jailhouse Road' and many more. But he was not as successful as an actor as he was in singing.

The various facets of the music world, the nitty-gritty of the stage shows, recording, communication and management have come to the fore along with many unknown aspects of Elvis' life in this magnificent and revealing book. In addition, the glamour and razzmatazz of Hollywood filmdom have been captured well with necessary descriptions of events by the author, which has made the book more interesting and alluring. Music lovers and general readers will appreciate the book. To know more about the glamorous life of Elvis Presley, wait eagerly for the second volume of the biography, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*.

Waliul Arefin is a critic and freelance writer.



Last Train to M Memphis
The Rise of Elvis Presley
Peter Guralnick
Little, Brown and Company