

Three reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

Wrapped in a shawl, off on a trek...

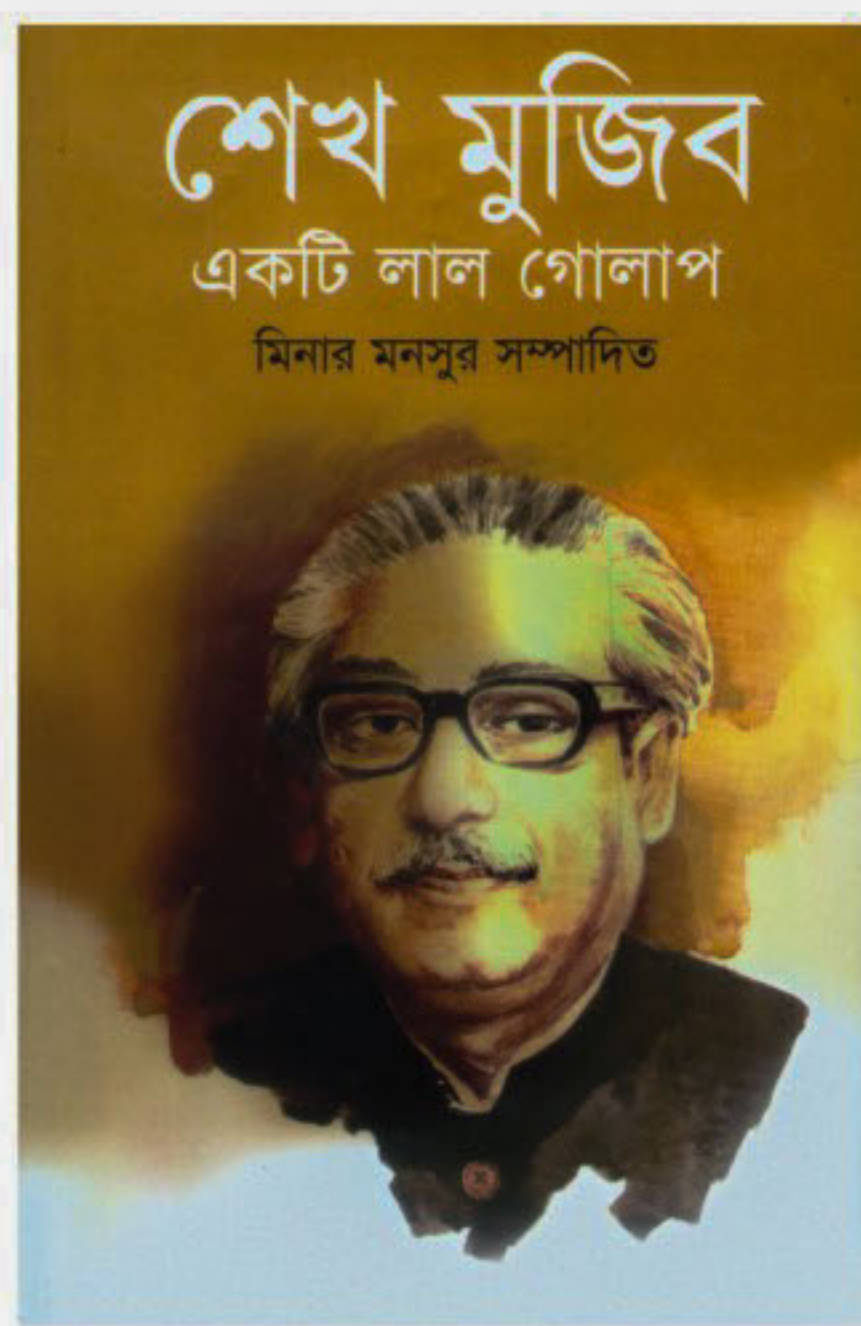
MINAR Monsur demonstrated unquestionable courage when he first placed this compilation on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman before the country in 1979. And it was courage because of the fearsome nature of the times. Bangladesh was under its earliest spell of military rule. And just how harsh the times were can be gauged from the very fact that it was General Ziaur Rahman who happened to be presiding over the fortunes of the country as its first military dictator. It was dictatorship unbridled and unadulterated and not just because politics was in suspension. That Parliament had returned, with Zia's followers in the majority, really did not matter. What did matter were the sure and steady attempts made to airbrush the Father of the Nation out of Bangladesh's history. References to the 1971 War of Liberation carefully excised Bangabandhu's name as also those of the political leaders instrumental in the formation of the Mujibnagar government.

Far worse was the military regime's brazen move to prevent any trial of the assassins of August-November 1975 through the infamous Indemnity Ordinance, which was incorporated in the nation's constitution. Bangabandhu's murderers, rewarded by the regime through recruitment as diplomats (!) at various Bangladesh missions abroad, thus stayed out of reach of the law. And the constitution? Zia and his regime felt little of embarrassment in tampering with it. Short shrift was made of the four state principles. The state of Bangladesh, in stark terms, increasingly resembled the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the very historical symbol of regression Bengalis had thrown out of their land in 1971. It was against such a background that Monsur came forth with these enlightening essays on Bangabandhu. The second edition of the work appeared in 1998. And now, here in 2010, we have the third.

Of course, much has already been written on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and there is little question that a good deal more will be written in the times to come. But what you have here are some essays that provide the sort of insight into Bangabandhu's personality that you quite did not come by earlier. Annadashankar Roy's is a piece that reveals, for perhaps the first time, what many of us have long suspected as the truth. And the Indian scholar makes it a point to inform readers that he had promised to keep Mujib's confidence. But then, Bangladesh's leader died. Roy was free of his obligation to stay silent. And thus it is that we know of the plans Bangabandhu had been making for Bangladesh's freedom even as he waged his struggle for regional autonomy within the Pakistan state. In the earlier part of the 1960s, Mujib had sought Indian assistance to free Bengalis of Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru was not sympathetic to the idea. And when did thoughts of a free Bangladesh first come to him? Mujib's answer is emphatic. It was in 1947, when Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sarat Bose made a feeble attempt to stay out of the Pakistan plan through keeping Bengal united as an independent state. The plan eventually collapsed. No one was surprised.

In Pakistan, as he rose to prominence, Bangabandhu focused on East Pakistan's severing all links with Islamabad. "Do you know what my plan was?" He throws the question at Roy. And then answers it without waiting for a response. "We would suddenly seize power. Every point in Dhaka would come under our control. We had our people in the army, navy, air force, police and civil service. But it was one individual's treachery which ruined it all. A navy officer had talked about the plan with his subordinate, who then spilled the beans. And we all got caught." Annadashankar Roy asked him when the plan would have been put into effect. Bangabandhu laughed and told him, "I won't tell you."

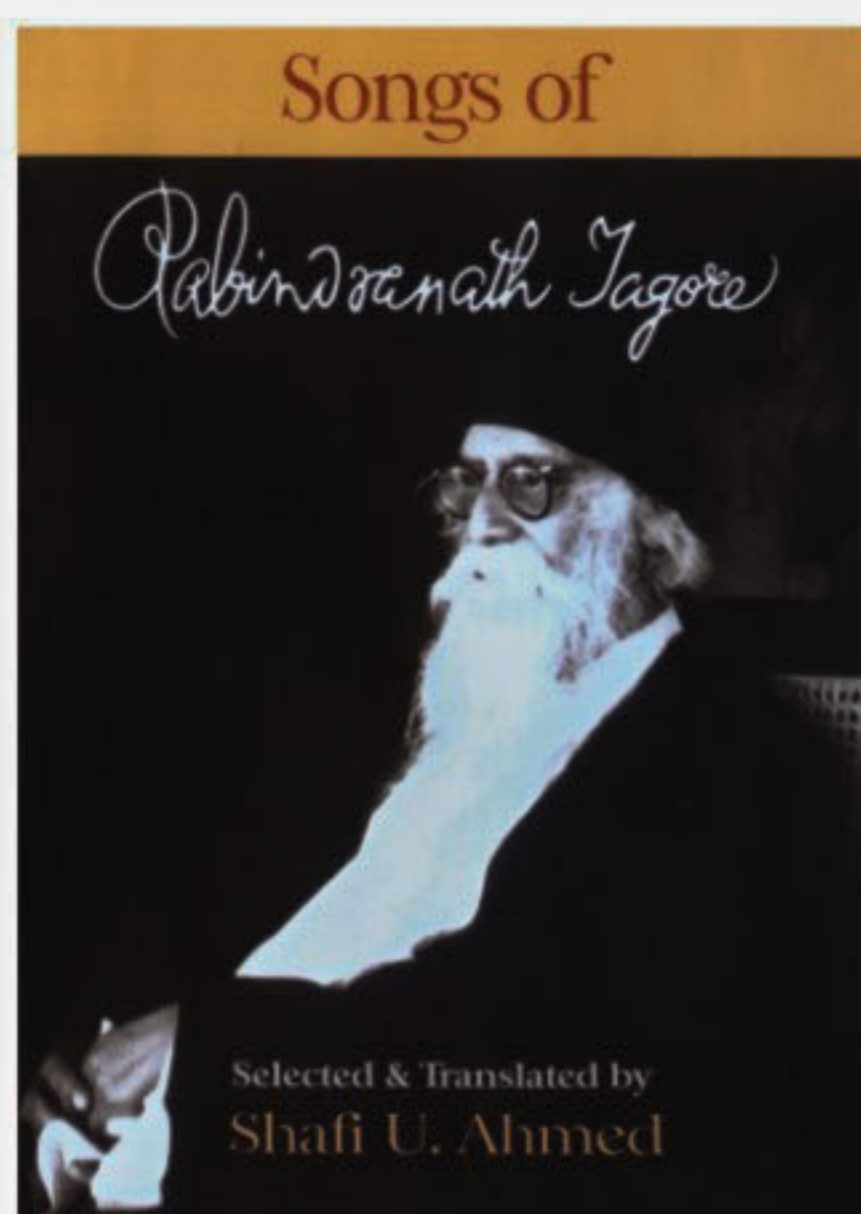
Ataus Samad recalls his flight with a newly free Bangabandhu to Dhaka on 10 January 1972. There were others on that historic journey back home --- Dr. Kamal Hossain and his family, Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, diplomat Faruq Chowdhury. Mujib, says the veteran journalist, recited verses from his favourite poets in a state of euphoria. Then, turning to his companions, he said with satisfaction: "The country is free. My goal has been attained. Now I can wrap myself in a shawl and go on a trek through Bengal's haats, fields, river banks. I will talk to my countrymen and listen to their tales of happiness and woe." Ataus Samad, with that slight hint of sadness, reminds us that such was not to be. And yet if Bangabandhu had indeed been able to put his dreams into reality, things might well have been different.



Sheikh Mujib Ekti Lal Golap Editor Minar Monsur Shahitya Bilash

Khan Sarwar Murshid moves off into a different field, the better to throw philosophical light on Bangladesh's founder. He recalls Andre Malraux's trip to Bangladesh in 1973 to receive an honorary doctorate from Rajshahi University. The French intellectual, who had been engaged in the Spanish civil war and had played a leading role in Charles de Gaulle's resistance to the Nazis, offered to lead a brigade against the Pakistanis in 1971. In Rajshahi, he reflected on the lonely struggle that men like Gandhi and Mujib had led against their oppressors, on the historic changes they thus brought about. Murshid sums it up. In Malraux's intellectual assessment, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was part of a historic procession of victors. The procession fell into a pattern: Mujib-Gandhi, Gandhi-Nehru, Nehru-De Gaulle, De Gaulle-Malraux.

The sheer plenitude of essays in this compilation should be cause for joy. Read on. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in his elemental nature as politician, as bard, as revolutionary, comes alive once again.



Songs of Rabindranath Tagore Selected, translated by Shafi U. Ahmed Shahitya Prakash

... Tagore in a new package

RABINDRASANGEET is the life force of the Bengali. Nothing moves without it. Everything happens with it. Bengali homes, be they in Bangladesh or West Bengal, lose something when no listens to Rabindrasangeet. The more culturally oriented, in that intensity of meaning, make it a point to hum it, even to teach it. In Bangladesh, the pioneering roles of such individuals as Waheedul Haque, Sanjida

Khatun, Kalim Sharafi and others in popularizing Tagore music have ensured that Rabindrasangeet become part of the cultural psyche of Bengalis this side of the frontier. It did not matter that in the 1960s the Pakistani establishment decreed a ban on Tagore in East Pakistan. In the end, it was unified Bengali resistance that put paid to Pakistan itself.

Shafi U. Ahmed's translations of Tagore songs are some of the more prominent manifestations of the pre-eminence Rabindranath holds in Bangladesh's literary space. Translation is, of course, always a difficult proposition. Something is always lost in translation. Conversely, some translations begin to sound a whole lot more substantive than the original owing to the greater facility with language in those who seek to translate. From such a point of view, Ahmed's is a brave attempt. And it is because one is tempted to place his translations beside those of a few others. The *Gitanjali* has been translated by the poet himself. A goodly number of the poems and songs have undergone a transformation into English at the hands of others. In the present instance, it is Shafi Ahmed's selection of songs that is a happy surprise, for they happen to be lyrics one often hears in the Bengal clime.

Where the translations are the matter, quite a few questions could come up. Take, for instance, the song *aaji mormoro dhoni keno jagilo re*... One associates 'mormor' with the sounds of leaves through a passing breeze. Ahmed translates the term into 'murmuring', which quite does not do justice to Tagore. 'Momo pollobe pollobe hillole hillole' emerges as 'touching myself from limb to limb', which takes away the essence of lyrical that the poet employed in the song. But observe the following: 'I will not illuminate my window / with a candle / I will listen to the grave message / sent out by the darkness'. There is a beauty here, as much as there is in the Bengali: 'aami jalbo na mor batayone prodeep aani / aami shunbo boshe andhar-bhora gobheer bani...'

Ahmed ranges across a wide arena of songs in this compilation. And judging by his selections, it becomes fairly obvious that these songs are those that have touched him deeply, that yet go on creating sensations in his being. As an expatriate Bengali, he demonstrates his continued link to his cultural heritage, which is saying a good deal. Despite all that, the old question arises once again: why these new translations of Tagore? The more the merrier, to be sure. On a deeper level, though, it is rather clear that Shafi Ahmed has his eyes on a western audience. And that comes perhaps from his belief that a greater projection of the bard than what has been accomplished so far is an absolute necessity. But listen to the translator explain the subject: 'Obviously the songs as performed musical pieces cannot be conveyed in any translation; the best that can be done is to translate the lyrics into a rendered prose or poetical form for understanding of its theme (which in many cases unfortunately is spiritual, abstruse or elusive).'

The translator is therefore cognizant of his limitations. But that is no reason not to applaud his decision to translate the songs. In an overall sense, these songs as rendered into the English language will convey a fairly rough idea about the Tagorean creativity which has become so much a part of the collective Bengali spirit. Yes, at times there is the pretty prosaic about the translations, as in 'please call me to your side' (from the Bengali 'kache deke lau'). And then there is 'why did you not wake me before the night had gone?' (from 'keno jamini na jete jagale na...'). Something of rhythm has gone missing, but you do get a feel of the emotions that worked in the poet as he shaped his thoughts to his lyrics.

Glimpses of the contemplative Rabindranath are brought out admirably well in some of the songs. Hum, if you will, *amar ei poth chawa tei anondo*. A lilt causes a throb in your heart. Ahmed's translation of the song keeps up the tempo: 'My pleasure is in patient expectation.'

Finally, there is something of double happiness you come by in the work. There is, first, the English version of the songs. And then there are the songs themselves, all laid out before you, waiting for you to sing them as you have heard them sung all your life.

Everything you wish to wolf down...

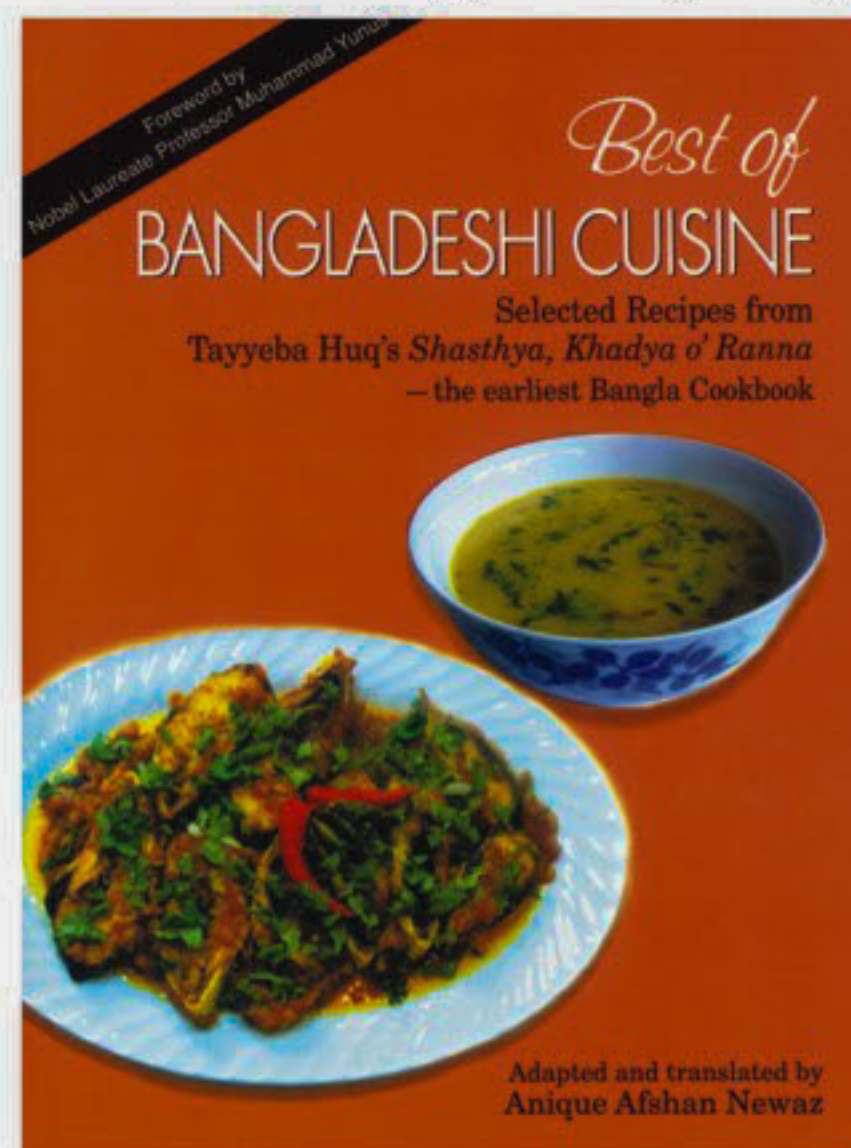
AH, food! For those inclined to gluttony, it is a whole world of pleasure that opens up with the mere thought of what you have here. Call it the

sybaritic or the hedonistic. For those who love food, indeed are connoisseurs of it, nothing could be more alluring to the eye and more inviting to the tongue than food well-prepared and well-served.

But, again, food is not always a call to temptation. It comes to us, courtesy of those who are adept in making it, are in fact expert-like in preparing recipes, as an exercise in suavity. Gluttony may be part of human nature, could indeed be a sign of untrammeled wildness of being. But to look at food as part of heritage, as something which causes a musicality to arise in the palate, has to do with culture. It comes with sophistication. Preparing, serving and savouring good food are always an exercise in education.

It is just that kind of salivating exercise you come across in *Best of Bangladeshi Cuisine*. The recipes are eclectic, having been selected from Tayyeba Huq's *Shasthya, Khadya o' Ranna* which, as the cover informs you emphatically, is the earliest Bangla cookbook we know of. Now Anique Afshan Newaz has taken upon herself the job of reviving tradition through reproducing the recipes for Bengalis quite removed from the era that Tayyeba Huq symbolized in her time, especially where food was concerned.

Be forewarned, though, that the food which Huq presents on your plate, or on your reading table (depending on where you happen to be), is what you may have savoured all your life. The menu, if you can call it that, is something you have generally



Best of Bangladeshi Cuisine Selected Recipes from Tayyeba Huq's Shasthya, Khadya o' Ranna Adaptation, translation Anique Afshan Newaz The University Press Limited

known, perhaps all your life. Take that popular item we call *halim*. Now that another Ramadan approaches, with many of us eager to have the tasty dish on the table for iftar, some of you might be interested in knowing about the way in which it is prepared. Plunge into the recipe here. For all you know, you may not have to spend all that exorbitant amount on buying it. Homemade food, after all, is a guarantee of good health.

Flip through the pages. *Polao* in its various forms, *kachchi biryani*, *khichuri*, *Dhakai paratha*, *moong dal*, *deem mashkolai*, *narkel diye booter dal* --- and lots more --- are what you find in this unabashed invitation to temptation. And if you are in the mood for *pantaras*, here is where you will be informed of the ways you ought to adopt in order to prepare it. And since you are a Bengali, there is forever that taste of fish which is embedded in your imagination. So what must you do then? Simple. Go for any or all of the fish items that fill the pages here. Think of *machher bharta* or baked fish. *Shorshe bata ilish*, one can be quite sure, you have enjoyed more than once. How about going for it again? Ever wondered how *narkel chingri* tastes? Step into the kitchen on a bright morning, or even on a monsoon-dappled dawn, recipe in hand and see what you can make of it.

And, by the way, do not forget that ubiquity of a dish we cannot do without. Yes, it is *daal*, in all its variety of preparation and consumption.

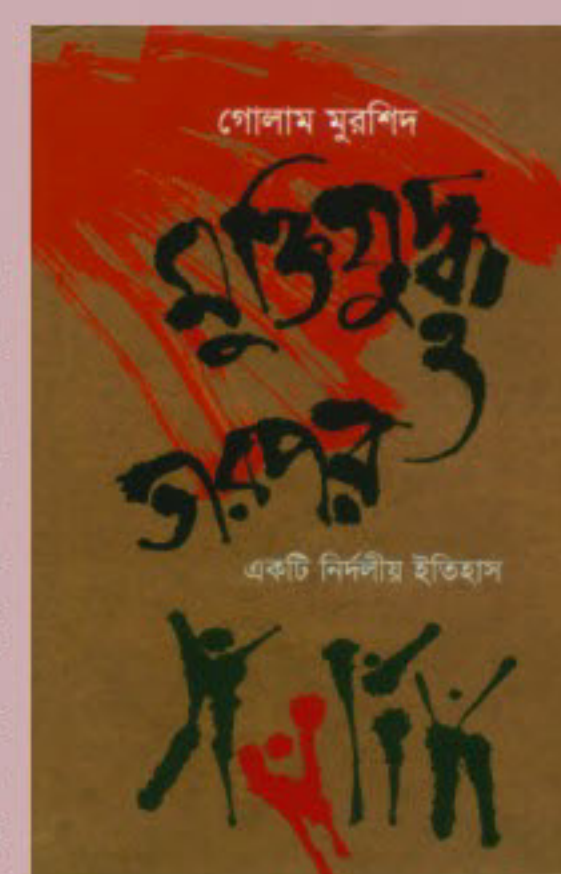
Round it all off with *gajorer halwa*. Ah, do we spot that hungry look in the eyes, that certain excited quivering around the mouth?

The Lord be praised for the food on our table. He giveth. We consumeth.

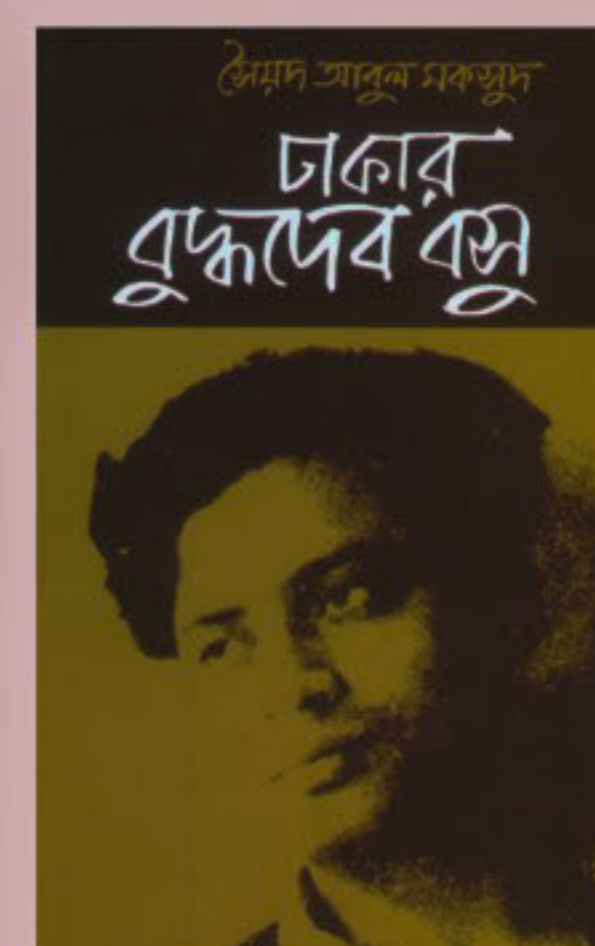
Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Books Review.

At A Glance

Muktijuddho O Tarpor Ekti Nirdolio Itihash Ghulam Murshid



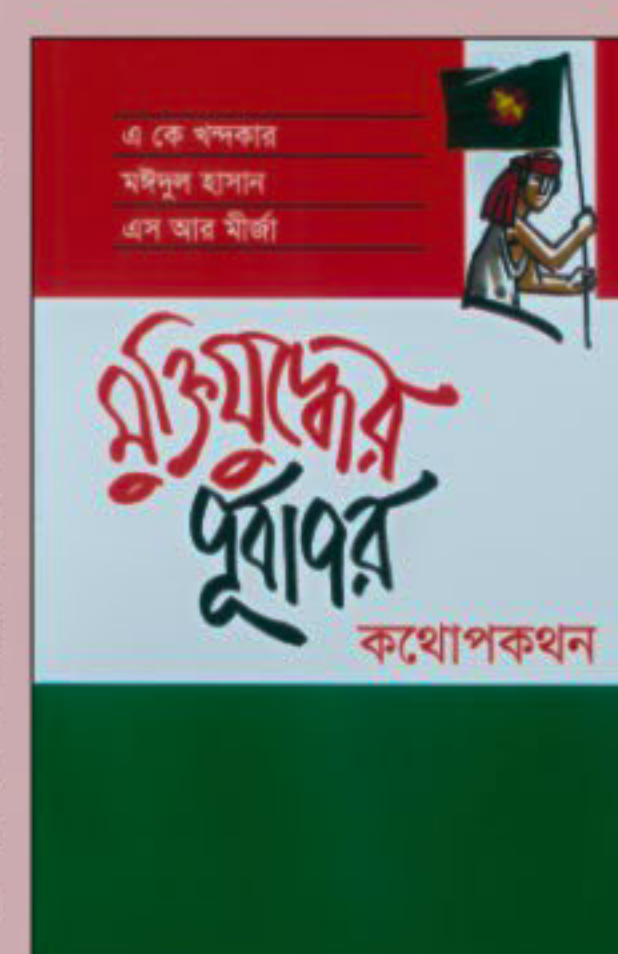
A large number of books have been written on Bangladesh's War of Liberation, in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Now comes Ghulam Murshid with what he calls a non-partisan account of the events that led to the 1971 war and, before that, the movement for autonomy within Pakistan. It should make interesting reading.



Dhaka's Buddhadeb Basu Syed Abul Maksud

Buddhadeb Basu remains a pivotal figure in the annals of Bangla literature. Much has been written on him and his contributions. Compilations have been there about him in both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Now comes Syed Abul Maksud with his scholarly assessment of the times Basu spent in Dhaka. It is an exciting tale.

Muktijuddher Purbapor Kothopokothon A.K. Khandakar, Maidul Hasan, S.R. Mirza

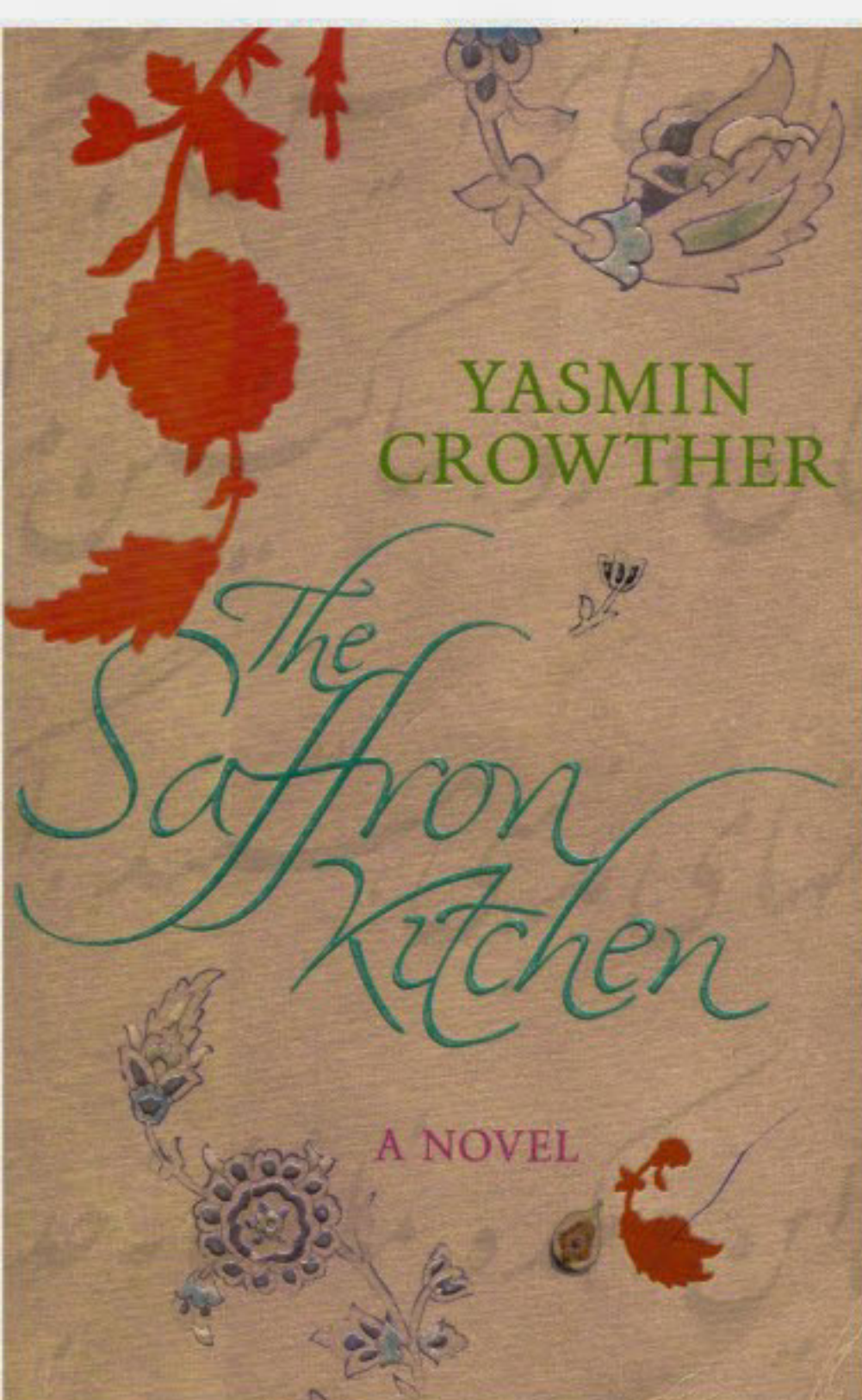
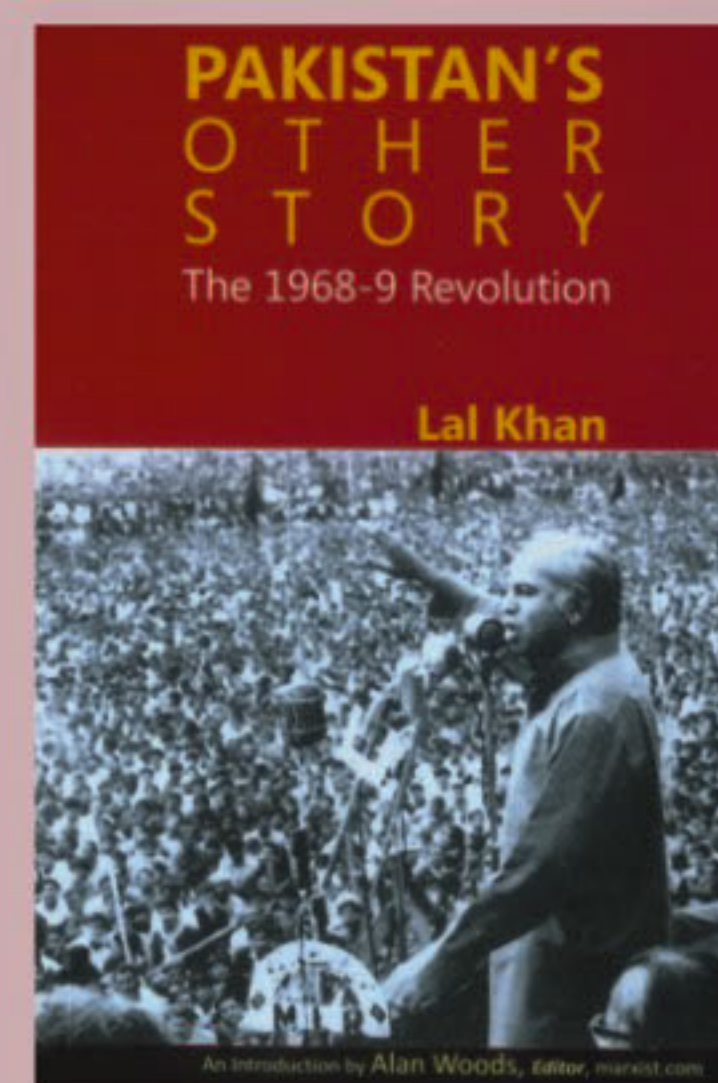


Once again you have a tale of the War of Liberation before you, this time from three men who played an active role in it. They speak of the past, of the events that shaped the Bengalis' epic struggle for freedom and by doing so throw light on the most coruscating moment in our history. The work is refreshing in its candour.

To be had at: Prothoma, Aziz Supermarket, Shahbagh, Dhaka

Pakistan's Other Story The 1968-9 Revolution Lal Khan Aakar Books, Delhi

It is a book whose fundamental premise you might question. Lal Khan seriously thinks the movement against Ayub Khan was a revolution, that Z.A. Bhutto could have heralded a socialist dawn in Pakistan. About the restiveness in East Pakistan, he ignores realities and throws ideas that are plainly laughable. You might want to slice through it, happily



The Saffron Kitchen Yasmin Crowther Little, Brown

Life lived on her terms

Nausheen Rahman is touched by a story of pathos and pain

MARYAM Mazar's complex character and her memories of her difficult past, form the basis of Yasmin Crowther's very interesting novel, *The Saffron Kitchen*.

A major part of the story takes place in Mazareh, a village in Khorasan, Iran, where Maryam spends her childhood and early adulthood. The other part is about Sara's life in London. Sara is Maryam's and Edward's only child.

The book begins with a tragedy. Sara has a miscarriage; it is a consequence of Maryam's strong reaction to an unconscious raking up of her past by her twelve-year-old nephew. (Saeed's mother, Maryam's sister, has recently died and the boy has come from Iran to live with his aunt).

Beset by guilt and sorrow at this sudden turn of events, Maryam departs for Iran without being able to say goodbye to Sara who doesn't want to see or talk to her. The story unfolds as Maryam journeys back to her village and her past appears before us.

After undergoing cruel punishment as a young girl for a wrong she had not done, Maryam had had to leave her home. She had gone away to London, banished from all that she treasured. (Many years later, she tells someone, "Some

freedoms can be gifts of hate as much as love", remembering her father's last words to her, "She can go by herself...she is no daughter of mine").

Although she makes a life in London with her caring husband and beloved daughter, Maryam never really feels that it is her life. A part of her lives on in Mazareh. She occasionally visits Mashhad, a town close to Mazareh, but has never gone back to her village until now.

The background to Maryam's childhood is a troubled Iran during the times of the Shah. Maryam was a spirited, freedom-loving girl who wanted to be a nurse, but her unreasonably stern father had no tolerance for any kind of deviation and wanted to marry her off at a tender age.

Maryam's fate is decided by the circumstances caused by the revolution in her country. She is dealt a severe, undeserved punishment which leaves behind scars, visible and invisible; her personality and psyche are gravely affected.

Her emotional bond with Ali, a young, handsome orphan who serves her father and teaches her all he learns from books, creates an overwhelming tenderness in the reader. It is one of those rare and precious relationships that neither time nor distance can destroy. Maryam finally meets him after four decades; their feelings for each other have not changed.

Maryam's longing to live life on her own terms, and the road her life eventually takes, speak volumes about the importance of being true to oneself.

On the other hand, we have Sara who feels neither totally English, nor Iranian. Despite having an English father and an English husband, and being brought up in England, she has grown up on Iranian culture and memories.

This deeply-moving book about having to let go has some fascinating characters. Fatima, Maryam's wet-nurse, endears herself to us. Here's a very touching extract of Maryam's thoughts: "Her baby is dead because of me. My mother was forbidden to nurse me and I was given to Fatima instead. I sucked her dry and her own baby died. When I found out years later, my father said that her son had been born weak anyway. I know that is not true. I killed him before I could walk. It was the first thing I did in my life. Fatima should hate me, but she loves me".

The understanding and acceptance shown by Edward and Sara relay clearly that loving someone means wanting that person to be happy in the way he or she wishes. Ali's remaining constant in his feelings and intentions, yet not being demanding or expecting anything in return, also

confirms this. He tells Sara, "If we put our own needs aside, the important thing is for Maryam to know her own mind, when it is not driven by fear or guilt or obligation. That is what she always wanted she should have that freedom as a woman, should she not?"

Feeling good about being back in her roots, Maryam writes to Sara to ask her to come and see her there, in her element. Sara's trip to her mother's village helps her to understand her mother better; it brings them closer.

Meanwhile, Saeed gets along very well with Edward and Julian, Sara's husband. This spreads a feeling of warmth, both among the novel's characters, and the readers.

Beautiful verses by Omar Khayyam, Matthew Arnold, W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot herald the chapters and charming tales of Iran's plains and mountains are blended in the narration.

This is a book I recommend highly, mainly because of its protagonist, who in a niece's words is a "strange, foreign aunt, who was awkward and old-fashioned in her Iranian customs, her scarf forever slipping from her hair."

Nausheen Rahman is a critic and freelance writer.