

Questions of faith and travels in poetry

Syed Badrul Ahsan admires a scholarly work

A major problem involved in dealing with Emily Dickinson is the essentially reclusive nature of her individuality. In death she has been what she was in life, a symbol of obscurity and distance for those who would study her poetry and with it her personality. And then comes another problem. And that is fundamentally the difficulty in an understanding as well as appreciation of her poetry. Scholars of American literature, and not just in the United States, have gone to various lengths in attempting explanations of her poetic works and yet, in more instances than one, have quite been unable to present Dickinson in clearly outlined dimensions before readers. That has been quite a tragedy.

But, again, not quite. Now, here before us, we have an exhaustive study of Emily Dickinson by Masud Mahmood. This work, as the writer makes it obvious in the subtitle, is a study of Dickinson's poems and letters. That is a difficult calling owing to the pretty vast correspondence as well as the large body of poems she has left behind. But Mahmood, for all that clear statement in the sub-title, goes for something beyond the letters and the poetry. And yet who can argue with confidence that it is through the letters and the poetry that he seeks to discover Dickinson? There is, after all, the old truth that a writer is to be discovered in his or her works. Mahmood makes it plain in the preface that Emily Dickinson's creative self was but an outgrowth of the Calvinist branch of orthodox Christianity. He is thus dismissive of all the arguments that have been placed over time to explain the poet in terms of modernity or post-modernism.



Launched into Eternity
A Study of Emily Dickinson's
Poems and Letters
Masud Mahmood
Writers.Ink

Mahmood takes a broader view of the times that Dickinson lived in. That certainly stems from the writer's view that an intellectual figure cannot be studied in isolation or even in the context of his or her own times. There

is always something of heritage, something of history, which explains the presence of a creative personality at a given point of time. Which is why Mahmood travels back to old times, to the Puritanism propounded by Oliver Cromwell in the mid-17th century. It was this Puritanism that was to be transported to the New World, indeed to New England, and to turn into a powerful assertion of faith there. Could Dickinson have been a repository of such ideals? You might try answering the question in terms of the religious fervour of the times. You might even suggest, having plodded through Dickinson's works, that religiosity lay at the core of her poetic beliefs. It most assuredly did, but not in quite the simplistic way one sometimes might make it out to be. Observe Dickinson's poetry again. There are the illogicalities, as she perceives them, in an exposition of the faith she is born into. From such a perspective, it is a certain eclecticism she puts herself in. You spot it in the poems and in the letters.

Masud Mahmood's good fortune, apart from it being an arduous enterprise, is in his ability and sheer willingness to study all the 1,775 Dickinson poems and related items (coming to him by way of Thomas H. Johnson's *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*). And then there were the letters, more than a thousand of them, that serve as an incredible insight into the life the poet led. Out of these poems and letters Mahmood proceeds to a reconstruction of the societal circumstances which defined life in Dickinson's era. He delves deep in

New England eschatology, as he calls it, and holds up for readers a comprehensive picture of the religious sentiments and proselytizing that shaped life and its attendant concerns in the area. The Puritan eschatological concerns, the writer informs us, in his words, were basically these: 'transcending profane time, neurotically keeping a vigil against death (and, therefore, perpetually asking questions to learn about the life after death...'. And these concerns served as the underpinning of Dickinson's creativity. There was in her 'a continual sense of the End and an obsessive interest in the process of ending in life and nature.'

The chapters following the one on eschatology only serve to deepen the Dickinson persona in relation to the social and religious circumstances that concretized her thoughts and indeed her view of her place in the cosmic scheme of things. The hints are broad. Observe the chapters as Mahmood fashions them --- *The Shaping Circumstances, Degreeless Noon, Problems of the Dust, The House of Supposition* --- and you get a fairly good idea of the profundity that comes alive in the discussion.

Launched into Eternity is a reflective journey into Dickinson land. It takes you closer to the world the poet inhabited. On a larger scale, it makes you part of that world through that certain identification with the poet. The landscape is cause for sheer spiritual pleasure. Masud Mahmood's work is a splendid instance of scholarship.

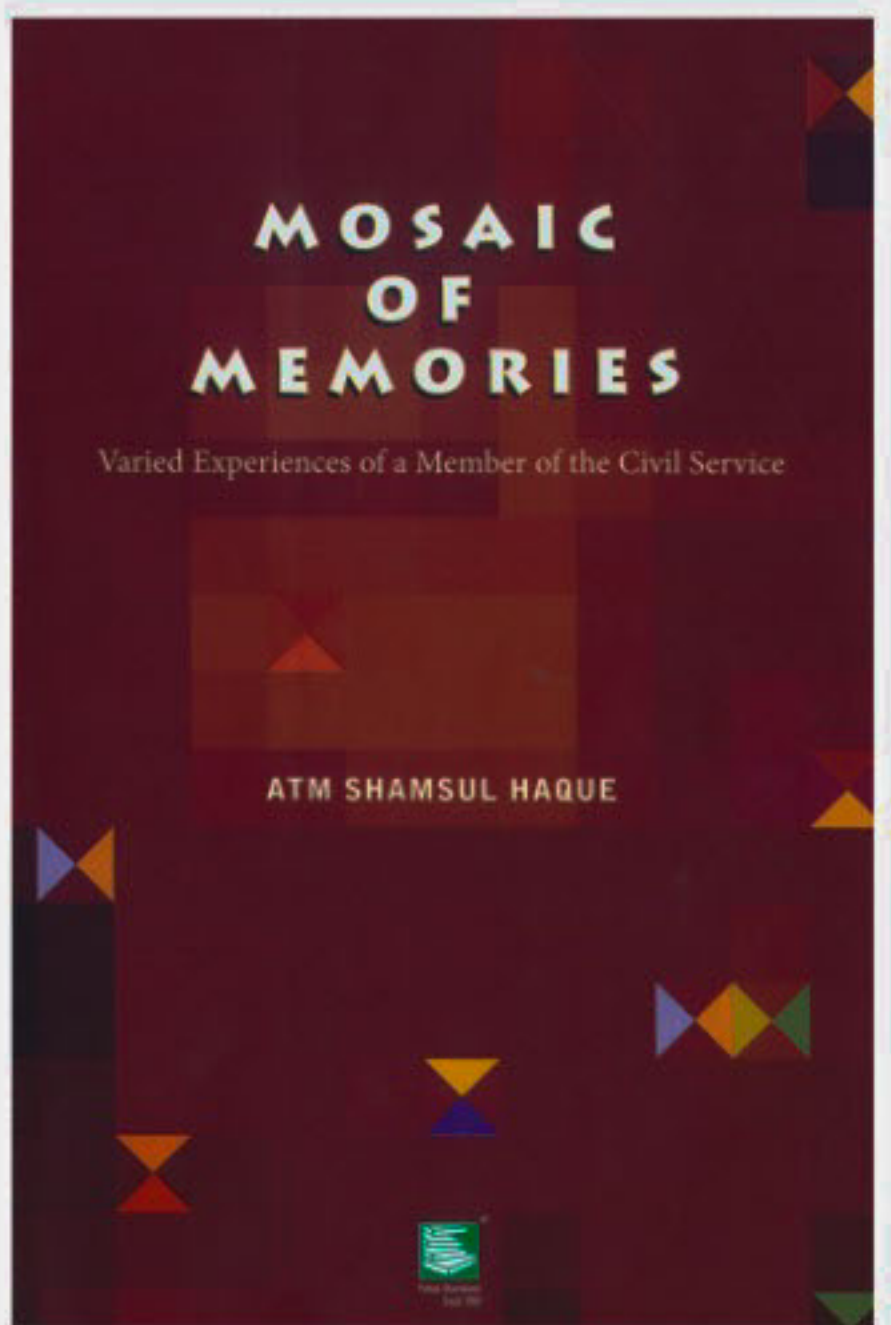
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On stage, playing various roles

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury trawls through one man's career

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES are generally interesting for the obvious reason that they deal with graphic and narrative accounts of different events and that often range from the early days of the individual to the last ones. When the writer has varied experiences professionally and otherwise finding an opportunity of traversing in different occupational fields at times in somewhat conflicting ones an autobiography may be even more exciting. Mosaic Of Memories more or less falls in this category as the autobiographer seeks to bring the readers to the changing pattern of six decades that cover the period between his initial schooling and the last of several professions he has been in including a politician contesting national elections, despite the fact that this stint has not been very fascinating as far as electoral success is concerned. But the bottom line is that the author had the unique opportunity of working as a teacher, civil servant, international bureaucrat, lawyer and last but not the least politician. Whether politics is a "profession" or not like the earlier professions of A.T.M.Shamsul Haque may be a subject of intense debate, but this in the nearly last phase of his career definitely provided enthusiasm and stimulation to a person whose student life especially during prime time in college and at Dhaka university was not devoid of student politics that was also somewhat inextricably linked with the national political psyche.

A.T.M.Shamsul Haque is basically known as a distinguished civil servant being from the 1960 batch of the erstwhile Pakistan civil service (CSP). He served in many key positions in a long career, including those of critically important ministries as diverse as information and food. He has also been member of the planning commission. But what makes him quite different from almost all other CSPs is that he chose to quit his job and



Mosaic Of Memories
A.T.M.Shamsul Haque
Pathak Shamabesh

go for early retirement while working as food secretary to the government. Barring very few exceptions, one will find it difficult to believe that the CSPs were willing to come out voluntarily from the attraction, grandeur and big high-flying image attached to their jobs before the normal retirement. But A.T.M.Shamsul Haque did it and probably this is one of the main reasons that could prompt him to write a book covering his myriad experiences. A civil servant, however distinguished he or she may be, is likely to be familiar with more or less similar kinds

of experience career-wise. That Haque chose to take a different line before superannuation is in itself definitely quite a rarity and it has certainly inspired him to go for this book as he knew his was a case different from that of a typical civil servant. It is true that his experience as a civil servant, particularly being deputy commissioner of Dhaka during the tense and crucially important time that 25 March 1971 was, gave Haque an altogether totally different taste of the coveted position in any district. For apart from the normal charm and importance, the ordeals that the DC of Dhaka can go through --- and that stemming from the critical situations of the Bengalis longing for freedom --- is aptly described in the book because of his posting in that position at that particular time. Otherwise, the experience of a DC in any district, not even that of Dhaka, can be worth writing about as such or full of thrilling experiences. A.T.M.Shamsul Haque is somewhat lucky to have had the opportunity of witnessing such events even though he had also a providential escape from danger in that difficult period of national history.

The book starts with Haque's childhood and finishes with his Haj pilgrimage to Mecca. It contains many chapters dealing with particular events and phases. He was not a stranger to politics, having been general secretary of the Dhaka college students union and subsequently general secretary and vice-president of the S.M. Hall students union of Dhaka University the "Oxford of the East" in those days. It goes without saying that anyone being elected to such positions in student life must have possessed something to attract others ideologically or otherwise. The author gets the benefits of these stints when he eventually joins politics, quitting government service, even though two unsuccessful bids at the parliamentary elections from Comilla sadden him, even though he

basks in the glory of being in the thick of the game of politics.

Haque, appointed chairman of the public administration reforms commission (PARC), was thus entrusted with great responsibility. He takes credit for several successes, but also bemoans what could not be accomplished. He happily enjoyed his job as director-general of CIRDP, the only inter-governmental organization based in Bangladesh capital. He considers that whatever contribution he could make towards rural development and poverty alleviation was satisfying. However, throughout his career, Haque had also a feeling of frustration at not being able to deliver what he wanted to and he gives vent to his uncontrolled feelings in different ways in the book. Descriptions are galore and instances abound about many interesting incidents and matters surrounding his times in various capacities in different professions.

A.T.M.Shamsul Haque's work is readable and interesting. This also provides readers with an opportunity of knowing of many political figures and events that are inseparably linked with our national history, eventually highlighted by our struggle for independence. The language is lucid and many of the events he narrates appear lively because of the descriptions. The work will serve as an important document of our long history covering political, economic, social and cultural life. Many of the chapters were mind-boggling. However, this writer has a mind-boggling question at the end: Why Mosaic Of Memories should have a sub-title at the cover that reads "varied experiences of a member of the civil service". The contents of the book are far wider than the experience of a "civil servant" notwithstanding that this part of Haque's career certainly comprises the important segment of the book.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and columnist.

A quietly charged tale

Tulip Chowdhury goes through a family's travails

HUMAN life can turn tragic corners without any notice and yet leave traces on the cycle of eternity, leave stigma that refuses to go away. Nicky Dillon and her father stumble upon a new born baby left in the snow in the woods. They take the baby to the nearby hospital and save the infant. However, the hospital authority notifies the police and the inquiries begin. From this moment Nicky and her father's lives change and overnight they become the hot news of New Hampshire, the place where they live.

Nicky is just twelve years old. Her mother and her little sister died two years back. She and her father leave their home in New York thinking that it will help them overcome the grief. They find their new home in New Hampshire. But Nicky realizes that she cannot at all forget her mother or her baby sister Clara even for a moment. In every nook and corner of their new home her mother and her sister seem to be breathing and her mother seems to be talking to her all the while. However, Nicky, for the sake of her father, hardly talks about it at all. And then when they find the baby there come so many new hurdles, so many suspicious queries that Nicky and her father find it quite impossible to go on with their normal lives.

Then one day life turns another new corner when Charlotte, the abandoned baby's mother, turns up on their doorstep. Charlotte has read the news about the discovery of her baby in the newspaper and knows that her baby girl is alive. She has come to thank Nicky's father for saving her baby. But that very night they are snowed in and Charlotte is stuck at Nicky's house.



Light on Snow
Anita Shreve
Little, Brown and Company

Nicky and her father soon find out that Charlotte did not leave her baby in the snow. It was her boyfriend who had done the horrible deed. Meanwhile, Warren, the local sheriff, drops in. Nicky has a hard time hiding Charlotte. She knows that both her father

and she become Charlotte's accomplices by giving her shelter. Although it is risky to keep Charlotte, Nicky has grown fond of her. The nineteen-year old young mother is a very soft and a gentle person. Fate has dealt her a cruel blow when her boyfriend refuses to accept their baby.

Nicky does not want Charlotte to go away. She thinks that God has set their fate on saving the baby when He takes away Clare. She feels a moral obligation towards the mother of the baby they have saved. But Nicky's father is firm that when the snow is cleared Charlotte must leave their house. He hardly talks with her and retains a distance from the young, troubled mother. Nicky is upset but has to let go of Charlotte when the snow is cleared. However, Warren has been on the lookout and the moment Charlotte is out in her own car he has her arrested.

Nicky persuades her father to go to the police. At the police station they have to clarify their position first for helping out Charlotte. But the attempted murder case against Charlotte is not so easy to clear up nor do Nicky and her father find it easy to clear their own names from the case. However, Nicky is determined to have Charlotte's story of her boyfriend told and the young woman released from the custody of the police. At Nicky's insistence Warren finally goes after Charlotte's boyfriend and Charlotte is released.

Nicky often wonders what it means to be a happy family. She tells her father that they can adopt the baby they have saved. She learns that Charlotte's baby will never be given back to her. The baby finds a foster home. One day Warren takes Nicky and her

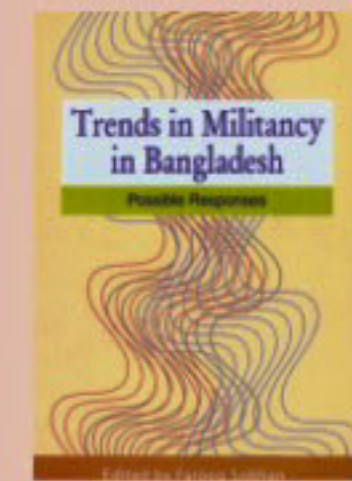
father to the foster home and Nicky sees that the baby is very well cared for. She feels happy knowing that maybe the baby will have a happy family after all. Nicky and her father go back to their home and settle down. Charlotte is taken home by her brother. In the meantime, Nicky has her first menstruation and in the midst of the storm blowing over them she seems to have become a young lady. She is thirteen by this time. She misses her mother and her baby sister all the time but she learns that life can be topsyturvy. She settles into the path of becoming an adult. Her father's attitude changes towards her. He treats her like a young lady and they have a heart to heart talk about growing up. Nicky knows that the road ahead may still be very bumpy indeed! The discovery of the baby has added one memorable chapter to her life and she gets ready for many more.

Light on Snow is an intimate, quietly charged novel. It is a close up portrait of a loving father and daughter caught together in their grief and separated by a gulf of unspoken emotions. It is a story that draws in the reader and fosters a strong sympathy for all involved. The story, told in first person narration is diverting and pleasurable and touches the very deepest of human emotions. The plot is captivating and engrosses the reader's mind. In the writer's mastery of words, the smallest moments are rendered with exquisite stylistic care. A must read for readers who are on the lookout for some sublime hours of reading!

Tulip Chowdhury is a writer and regularly Reviews Books.

Book Choice

Trends in Militancy
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Ed Farooq Sobhan



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Anis Choudhury
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Criminal men

Waliul Arefin likes a riotous work

MARIO PUZO's classic work *The Godfather* was immensely popular when it first hit bookstores throughout the globe. Based on the saga of the Corleones, the topmost crime family of New York, the much acclaimed novel and probably the best known work of Puzo wowed the readers. So it was not a surprise when it got its exposure on the silver screen of Hollywood. But the book in review, *The Godfather Returns*, is not a sequel to the original Puzo masterpiece or the script of any Hollywood flicks with Pierce Brosnan in the leading role. So Godfather enthusiasts are likely to be a little bit disappointed by the feat of Mark Winegardner, who has incorporated new characters and made experimentations with some characters in the plot of the story. But on the whole, Winegardner deserves kudos for this brilliant piece of work.

As the story unfolds, the readers go back to the depression period of the 1920s. Then Vito Corleone, the head of the Corleones, was working in a grocery store to eke out a living. But as history was in the making, he happened to murder a local gangster and so shot to the limelight, eventually taking the lead in community affairs. This unfortunate incident propelled his entry into the underworld. Soon he was engaged in illegal trade and businesses and acquired enviable power and riches he never dreamt of. Although he proved himself to be a powerful don, he never wanted his children to be engaged in the tentacles of the shady crime world. His son Michael, the protagonist of the storyline, did well in studies and was admitted to Columbia University but was compelled to drop out because of conflict with his father. He despised his father's illegal businesses and wished that he never had a life like his father. During this period as the First World War was on, he joined it like others as he had nothing to do in particular during this time. But then, destiny had other things in store for Michael. After the expiry of Vito Corleone, he found himself holding the reins of the Corleone family in the 1950s. He proved his mettle in the criminal world through eliminating his rivals such as the Barzins.

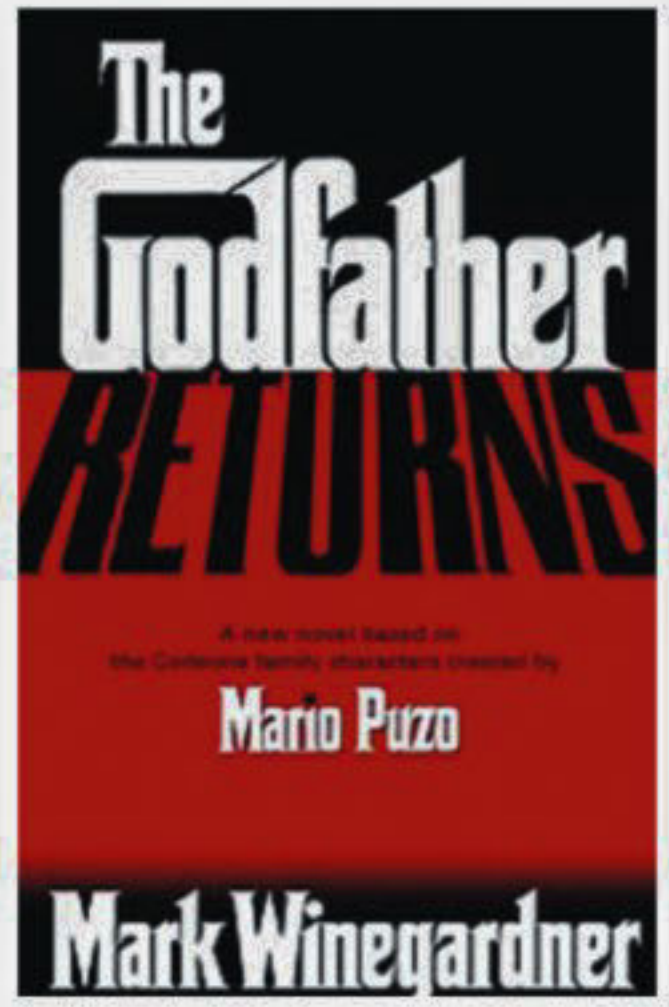
With smart and dependable cohorts Tom Hagen, Nick Geraci and the likes in his side coupled with a vibrant network in the underworld from New York to Washington and from Las Vegas to Cuba plus different tiers of the government and administration, he focused on consolidating his power and aimed at making all the illegal businesses legal which would put the Corleone Family in the limelight as the Kennedys.

In the meantime, Michael's loving wife Kay came to know of the true colors of her beloved husband as Tom Hagen, one of the accomplished figures of the Corleone Organization, informed her about all the secrets of Michael, including his innumerable murders and sins. Kay was crestfallen at first but regained her composure soon. Interestingly, she did not desert him as she believed that though he was a criminal, he still loved her. She even took for granted his first marriage with an ordinary girl when he was undercover during the police hunt. Michael was cunning enough to convince her about his feelings for her -- taking her to travel with him to dream places and showing genuine care for her and the family through various means. But when her perceptions were proved to be wrong and she realized that Michael's love was fake, she had no other alternative but to divorce him in order to regain her dignity. However, in the parallel of the storyline, other incidents such as Francesca's (Michael's brother Sonny's daughter) falling in love with Billy and his infidelity, Fredo's (Michael's brother) marriage with Hollywood actress Deanna Dunn and her secret wantonness, Michael's long-lasting cold war with his right hand man Nick Geraci provide spice to the whole plot.

In the grand finale, Michael proved himself to be the top man of the crime world of New York, coordinating and controlling various international crime syndicates and eliminating his rivals, including Nick Geraci. He was also tough in dealing with human emotions but was successful in taking care of his own Corleone family and protecting it well from all dangers. But he had to pay a heavy price for all these. His family disintegrated, Francesca's family broke down, close associates were not found nearby but he stood alone with his cunning and intelligence as the kingpin of American dons. You et difficile vous, Michael Corleone.

In this fast paced book of crime, murder, intrigue, infidelity and betrayal, readers are most likely to get the taste of a first-rate crime novel. The entire gamut of the crime world and its nitty-gritty have come to the forefront, to the delight of readers. If you are scheduled to travel by air or train, keep aside this book in your travel bag. This masala book and new sights and sounds are a formidable combination.

Waliul Arefin is a happy bookworm and reviewer.



The Godfather Returns
Mark Winegardner
Ballantine Books