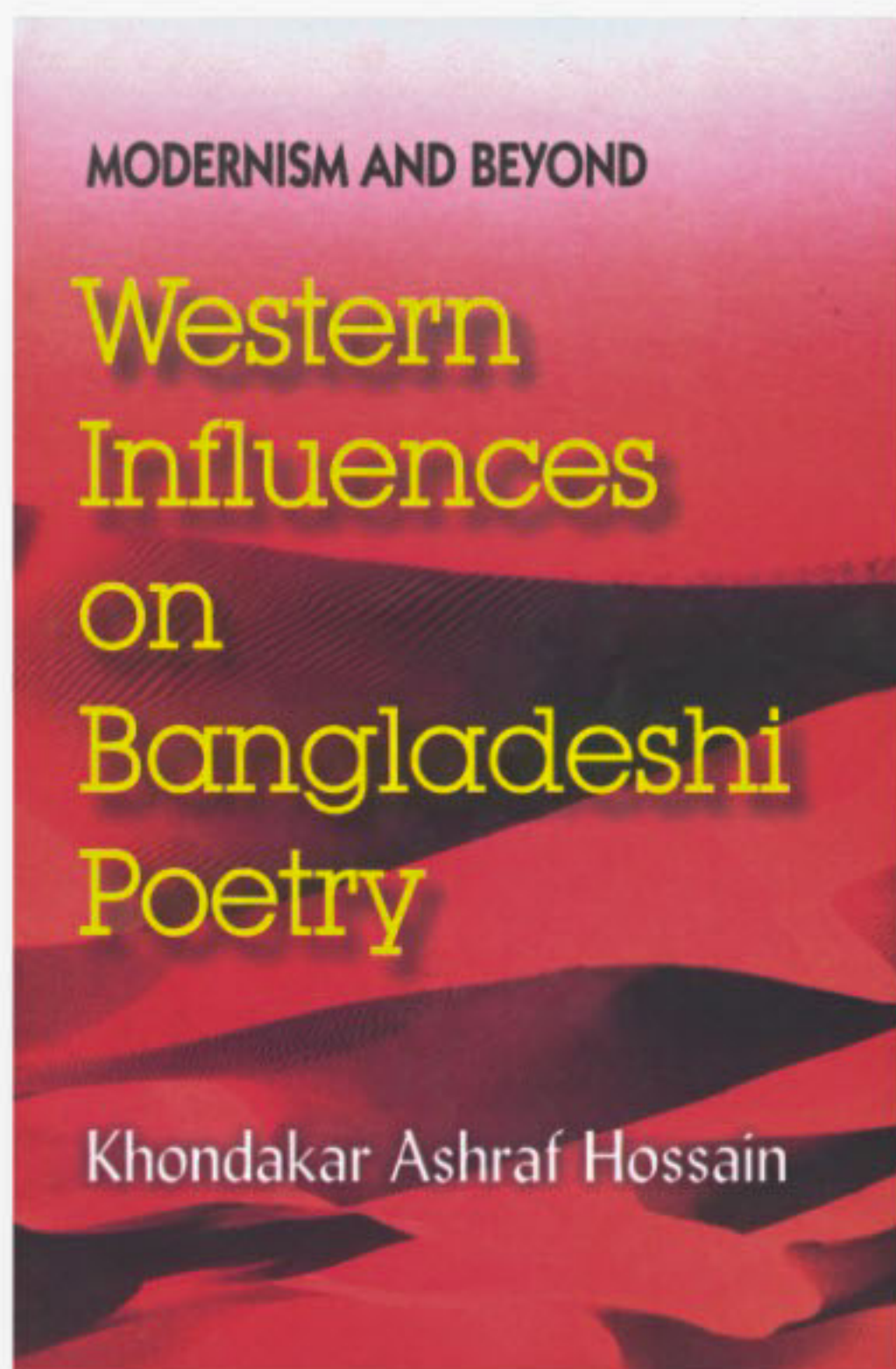


The breeze that touched the poets

Syed Badrul Ahsan recommends a powerful literary work to readers

KHONDAKAR Ashraf Hossain made waves with *Teen Romoni'r Qasida*, his seminal poetical work, quite some years back. And since then he has gone on to write not only substantive poetry but also purposeful literary criticism, especially on the various facets of Bengali literature. His pre-eminent position as a poet and critic has again gone with his academic pursuits as a senior teacher in the English department of Dhaka University. It is thus that he has carved a significant niche for himself as a scholar, proof of which comes through this rather riveting study of the degree to which Bangladeshi poetry has been influenced by the incoming breezes and winds which once shaped literary sensibilities in the West.

There are a couple of reasons, if you think about it, why *Western Influences on Bangladeshi Poetry* should make a difference in any future assessment of literature as it has developed and could yet sprout in Bangladesh. The first, of course, is that Hossain is perhaps the first Bengali scholar, in this part of the old political divide, to have delved critically and so broadly into the question of how Bangladeshi poets have let their works feel a whiff of the powerful western fragrance. And the second is that, in a very admirable way and to his credit, Hossain has chosen to convey this assessment of Bengali literature in the medium of the English language. That last bit is quite an encouraging change, given that readers in the West have hardly had any contact with literature as it has been pursued in Bangladesh. Translation, good translation, of Bengali literary works is always hard to come by. Again, translation of literature or literary criticism all too often leaves certain gaps that do little justice to the original. The good news, though, is that Professor Hossain has now come forth with a study, in the English language, of Bengali poetry that ought to leave readers, in this country as well as beyond it, sitting back in satisfaction.



Modernism and Beyond
Western Influences on Bangladeshi Poetry
Khondakar Ashraf Hossain
Dhaka Viswavidyalay Prakashana Samstha
University of Dhaka

The truth was that modernism came to exercise an influence in Bangladesh's poets in the way it once did with Baudelaire and Eliot. For these western poets, the city emerged as a focal point of poetic thought with its desperation and its despondency and its loneliness. There were too such creative eruptions as the French Symbolist Movement, the English Imagist Movement and French Surrealism, all of which were to find expression, down the years, in Bangladeshi poetry. And when did Bangladeshi poetry begin? Professor Hossain is clear about it: it all began with the partition of India in 1947. Barring the early euphoria of communal politics in Pakistan, Bangladeshi poetry essentially took off with the three poets Hossain considers to have been the vanguard of the secular modernist tradition in the eastern part of Pakistan. And these poets were Abul Hossain, Syed Ali Ahsan and Ahsan Habib. And yet could Ahsan's truly be regarded as a definitive secular presence? Hossain points to his divided poetic persona, that side of it which upheld his secular spirit and that which yet tempted him with its call to Islamic grandeur. This ambivalence remained all too pronounced in his *Chahar Darbesh*. With Ahsan Habib, no such ambivalence was at work. What was significant, though, about his poetry was the Eliotesque which defined it, indeed in the very first volume of his poetry, *Ratrishesh* (The Night's End), published in 1947. Frustration and failure are at the core of the inaugural poem in the compilation. The sense of modernistic alienation was at work.

With Abul Hossain, an avid reader of western literature, the modernist came through a deliberate side-tracking of romantic lyricism and a consciousness adoption of a sophisticated prose style which brought



TS Eliot

his poetry close to quotidian colloquial speech. Abul Hossain's poetry too owed much of its ideas and perspectives to the Eliotesque. The imagery of wastelands and mirages is as much part of Hossain's poetic landscape as it is of the 1930s' poets. Syed Ali Ahsan's dichotomy, caught as he was between the modern and the Islamic, did not however prevent his getting drawn to such metaphysical phenomena as time and eternity. It is a thought which underpins *Uchcharon*, his volume of poetry. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain makes it a point to note a few other trends that defined, even at that early stage, the nature of Bangladeshi poetry. Of those trends, the Marxist and the Islamic happened to be more pronounced than any other. In Sikandar Abu Zafar and Sanaul Haq, Marxism was significant; in Golam Mostafa, Shahadat Hossain and Talim Hossain, the poetic imagery was derived from an Islamic past, with necessarily its roots in distant Arabia.

If the trio of the 1940s were the precursors of the modernist trend in Bangladeshi poetry, it was the Fifties Quartet, as the writer puts it, who injected substance into that poetry. These were the men --- and we speak of Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmud, Shahid Quadri and Syed Shamsul Haq --- who, untouched by anything of the communal or the religious, branched out into a wide expanse of secular poetry. Of course, they borrowed from the West --- from Baudelaire, Eliot and from a whole range of others --- as they explicated the themes of pleasure and pain and love and beauty in their poetry. Hossain does not forget to inform us that the quartet actually had its finest hour in the 1960s and 1970s. But he does note that their modernity started off in the 1950s, symbolising a time when the Bengalis of East Pakistan were on their tentative path to a rediscovery of their historically secular identity. Shamsur Rahman's early poetry was fundamentally conceived in the shadow of Baudelaire. Romance gives way to fear of the city. And let us not forget that Rahman was the versifier who brought Dionysian elements into

Bangladesh's poetry. In the end, it was the interplay of the classical and the romantic, in the tradition of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, that sustained much of Shamsur Rahman's poetry. For Shahid Quadri, it was natural for foreign influences to make broad inroads into his poetry and for him to flaunt the occurrence cheerfully. French Symbolism served as a measure of his poetic genius, but unlike the romantic in Rahman, he goes for the cerebral. His images reflect the squalid realities of the city, to a point where, as the writer notes, his poetry can be regarded as an extended diary of a disconcerted and even deranged citizen on his nocturnal rounds. Read Quadri's *Uttaradhikar*. The arrival of rain is symbolic of disorder, even terror.

Like Quadri, Syed Shamsul Haq passed under the Baudelarian influence. That does not detract, though, from the fact of his heavy indebtedness to Jibanananda Das, Yeats and Eliot in *Purana Prasaad*, there is a clear going back to Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. And yet Haq refuses to stay trapped, as it were, in such a mould. The Freudian seduces him, with its powerful allusions to sexuality, a factor that becomes a potent ingredient in his poetry. Haq's poetry is, in that sense, the earliest indication of unadulterated eroticism making its way into Bengali literature. With Al Mahmud, the stream of poetic thought is an entirely different happenstance. He is every inch a modernist and yet appears to be striving to take poetry away from the modernist trend and back to its pastoral roots. Through an employment of colloquial speech, Mahmud seems to be reminding readers of the old traditions that once underlined literary endeavours in the Bengali cultural landscape. To that extent, his poetry comes in the tradition of the Yeatsian rather than the Eliotesque. There is, in Al Mahmud, a profusion of references to nature in Bangladesh, in much the same lyrical manner in which Yeats refers to the natural ambiance of his native Ireland. Ironically, it

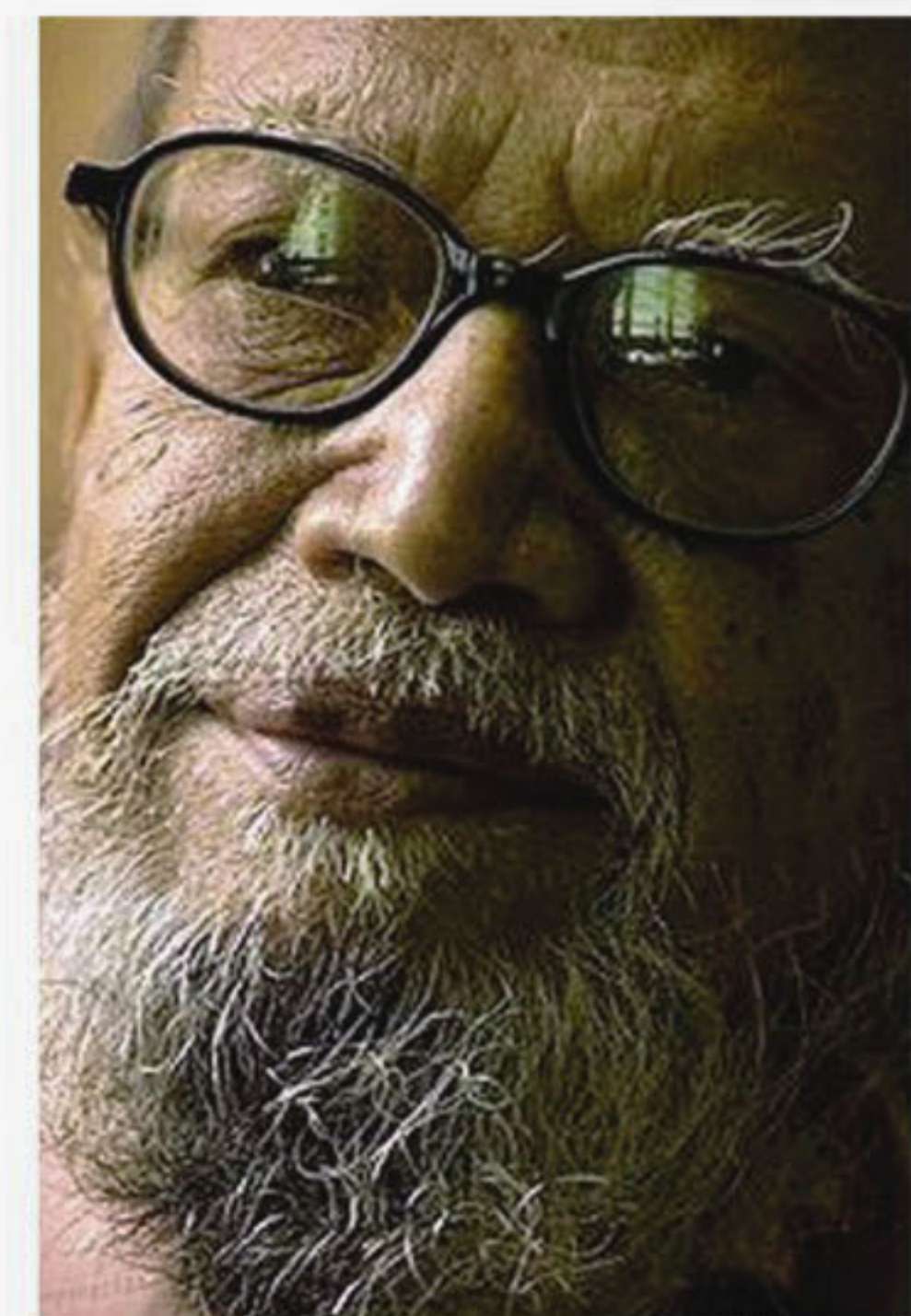


Syed Ali Ahsan

is Eliot's dictum which Al Mahmud clearly seems to be living through --- that 'a writer writes with the history of his country in his bones.' You only have to go back to Mahmud's *Sonali Kabin* (1973) to appreciate the thought.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain's interpretations, at once gradualist and incisive, of the western literary trends that have found echoes in Bangladeshi poetry, flow into the 1970s and into the periods thereafter. The Sixties are a labyrinth for him and into them step Nirmalendu Goon, Rafiq Azad and Abul Hasan, poets he describes as the most remarkable in the decade. The confessional mode, as it defined American poetry, is for a while an attraction for these poets. Abul Hasan dies young, at twenty eight, but his three volumes of poetry remain a confirmation of the confessional strain he worked on. Indeed, as Professor Hossain shows in his analysis, there is a wide-ranging pattern of influences that have helped shape Bangladeshi poetry. Think here of the Liverpool poets, a kind of poet-singers or singer-poets or, more appropriately, a new kind of troubadours (in Hossain's terms) who were a clear pull for Bengali poets.

Western Influences is comprehensive in its examination of not just Bangladeshi poetry but also of the themes and motifs Bangladeshi poets have unreservedly drawn or borrowed from the West. But much more remarkable than the borrowing is Khondakar Ashraf Hossain's painstaking, detailed and transparent elucidation of the long road Bangladesh's poetry has travelled in the more than six decades since its links with the other half of the old Bengal were snapped.



Al Mahmud

This is a work that should reach all enthusiasts of Bangladeshi literature, both at home and abroad. The reason is self-evident: it gives, at last, an authentic voice to the aesthetic and cultural aspirations of a people whose overriding claim on history has been their language and the magic they have wrought by weaving seamless patterns of beauty through it.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star, and Star Books Review.

Rediscovering the richness of heritage

Subrata Kumar Das is all praise for a little magazine

BANGLADESH'S little magazines have a long and rich history behind them. Many literary magazines, though not always considered little and not truly little in the real sense, are the inheritors of a precious heritage. Magazines and journals such as *Saugat Samakal*, *Sinthasuar*, *Purbamegh* of the pre-liberation era were followed by similar worthy ones called *Sundaram*, *Odhuna*, *Dipangkar Sahityapetro*, *Samprotik*, *Mizanur Rahmaner Troimashik Potrika*, *Mati Ekobingsho*, *Boier Desh* and others in the post-liberation period. Some of them have continued publication till date and among these worthy few *Ushaloke* could be sighted as a good example.

Mohammad Shakerullah, the editor of *Ushaloke*, launched his effort in 1982 when he was a youth of only twenty two. Till today he has been working with full enthusiasm for his magazine, an endeavour that has bagged two awards as well. In 1990 *Uttarpath* of Gothenburg, Sweden acknowledged *Ushaloke* as the best little magazine of Bangladesh. Kolkata Little Magazine Library and Research Centre hailed Shakerullah's initiative as the best journal for the year 2005. There can be little doubt that *Ushaloke* awaits more prizes and awards in the days to come.

How pleasantly strange that a little magazine has been alive and kicking for about three decades! After the first seven years *Ushaloke* went through a pause of some thirteen years and with the new century it reappeared in a newer spirit. In the first phase *Ushaloke* produced twelve issues and in the new phase five issues have appeared till 2009. Special issues on the poets Farrukh Ahmed and Ahsan Habib made certainly the most enlightening reading in the beginning. And all the issues in the new phase deserve special appraisal for both selection and contents.

The five issues of the new phase took as many seminal works in Bangla literature into consideration. *Nodi O Nari*, *Banglar Kabyo*, *Kashboner Konya*, *Hansuli Banker Upakotha* and *Padmar Polidwip* are the great literary works that have defined their own eras. No doubt the editor has an affinity for classic literature written in Bangla, and we are hopeful his future initiatives will also include more such classics that will be illuminated more vividly in *Ushaloke*.

Nodi O Nari and *Banglar Kabyo* are two books by the internationally reputed intellectual of undivided Bengal, Humayun Kabir (1906-1969). Born in Faridpur, the writer sadly passed into oblivion where a study of Bangladeshi literature is concerned. And out of that oblivion it was *Ushaloke* that brought the author back to present-day readers. It must be mentioned here that Kabir's books are out of print in Kolkata also and Shakerullah's initiatives have encouraged many from there to bring forth Kabir's works in black and white again. Such a big role played by a seemingly small magazine is an amazing event in the history of Bangla literature, surely. The issues devoted to Humayun Kabir included the full texts of his works that actually helped create a readership too. Shakerullah collected write-ups, written by Kabir's contemporaries and writers of the present day, on these two notable books and thus made the volumes more precious. The mammoth task he has done was surely a tough job for the editor of a magazine which does not make any monetary benefit for itself. As Shakerullah has always enjoyed shouldering tough responsibilities, he takes long periods to produce a single issue of *Ushaloke*.

It is a well known fact that Humayun Kabir, educationist, philosopher, writer and minister, wrote the English version of the novel *Rivers and Women* in 1945 which took a Bangla version with the title *Nodi O Nari* after seven years. It was one of the pioneering novels that played a critical role in laying the foundation for fiction as a genre by Muslim writers of East Bengal. Some critics opine that after Kazi Abdul Wadud's (1894-1970) *Nodibaksh* (1919), *Nodi O Nari* was the most noteworthy fiction written by any Muslim writer.

Kashboner Konya by Shamsuddin Abul Kalam (1926-1997), *Hansuli Banker Upakotha* by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay (1898-1971) and *Padmar Polidwip* by Abu Ishaque (1926-2003) are the contents of the third, fourth and fifth issues of *Ushaloke* in the new phase. In respect of all those three issues the editor is no less creative, no less industrious.

Starting off with the volume of stories *Shaher Banu* (1945), Shamsuddin Abul Kalam's debut novel *Kashboner Konya* (The Girl in the Reeds, written in 1947 and published in 1954) was a book that made waves in literary history. Appreciated hugely by both East and West Bengal literati, *Kashboner Konya* emerged as an important literary piece. Set in the southern part of Bangladesh, it was a tremendous beginning in respect of an incorporation of lower professional people and their dialect in Bangla fiction. *Hansuli Banker Upakotha* (1947) by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay was a magnum opus for Bangla literature. *Padmar Polidwip* (1986) by Abu Ishaque was the second novel by the writer. It was written 31 years after the publication of Ishaque's first novel *Surja Dighal Bari*. A meticulous study of the three novels makes it obvious that all of these three novels speak of the agrarian life that is at the core of society in Bangladesh.

If we look at the list of contributors to *Ushaloke*, we find some established as well as promising names there. Shakerullah has dived into the vast ocean of Bangla literature to come up with some precious gems. He has successfully accumulated articles by Buddhadev Basu, Sanjoy Bhattacharya, Subodhchandra Sengupta and Amalendu Basu. When we see the names of Prof Anisuzzaman, Bashir Al Helal, Abu Rushd, Ahmed Sofa, Abdul Mannan Syed, Pathapratim Bandopadhyay, Shantanu Kaiser, Sumita Chakravarti, Bhishmadev Chowdhury and Bishwajit Ghosh on the list, we feel elated. On the other hand, when we get names like Ahmed Mazhar, Sarkar Abdul Mannan, Tapan Baghchi, Zafar Ahmed Rashed or Obayed Akash, we expect to go through some very readable pages.

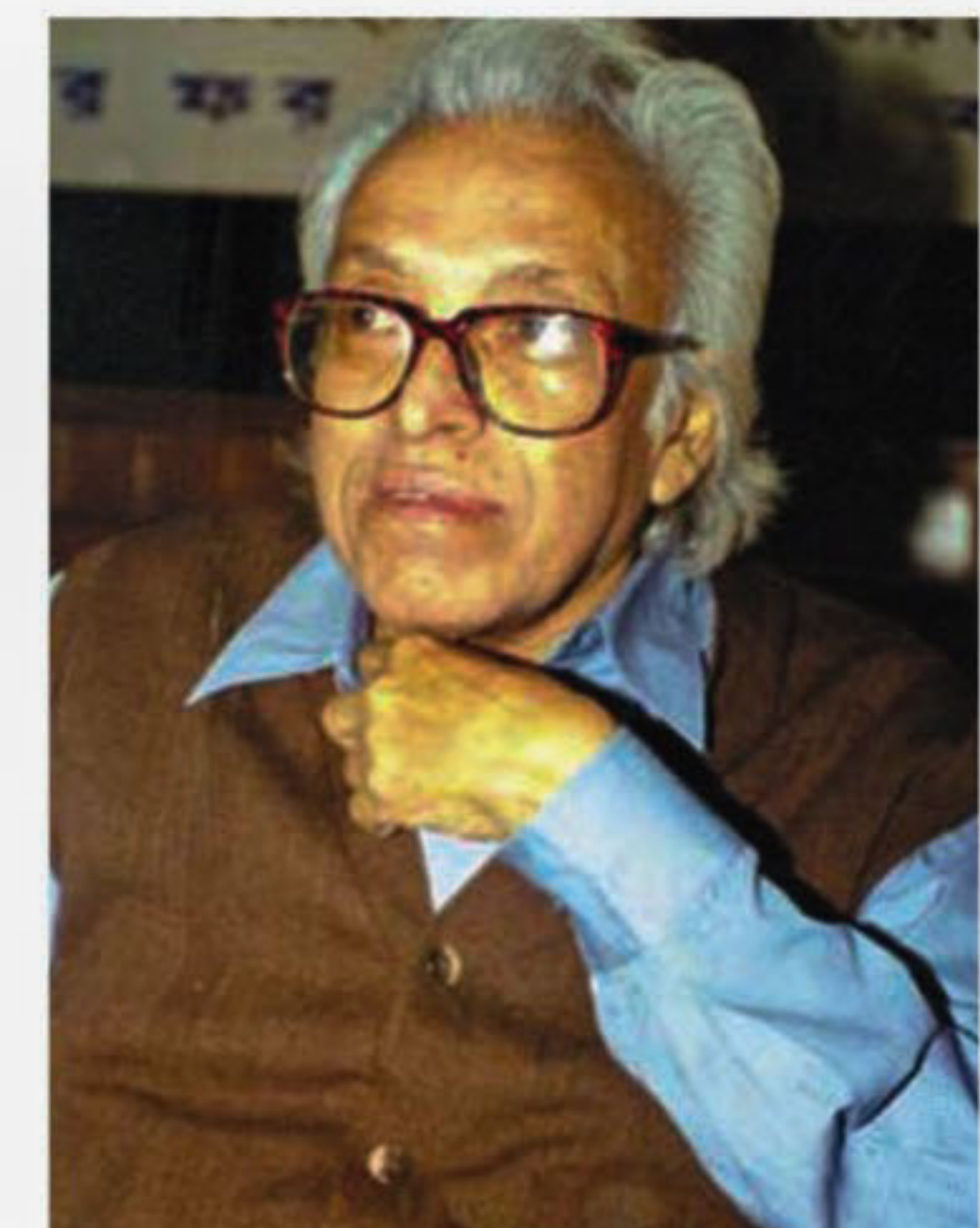
Each issue contains discourses in multifarious categories. Shakerullah first presents the readers with views that are written by critics of the present era. Then he places contemporary critiques on the works of the writers. Last of all come the appendices where we find the list of the writers' books, chronology of their lives and so on and so forth. And thus all the *Ushaloke* issues turn out to be precious enough to be gathered as collectors' items.

The next issue of *Ushaloke*, carrying the ISSN (International Standard Serial Number) 2075-4132 is on Mahmudul Haque's (1940-2008) novel *Jibon Aamar Bone*. It goes without saying that a good number of readers are eagerly waiting to discover an undiscovered Mahmudul Haque through *Ushaloke*.

Subrata Kumar Das, a teacher and essayist, has set up a web site called www.bangladeshinovels.com



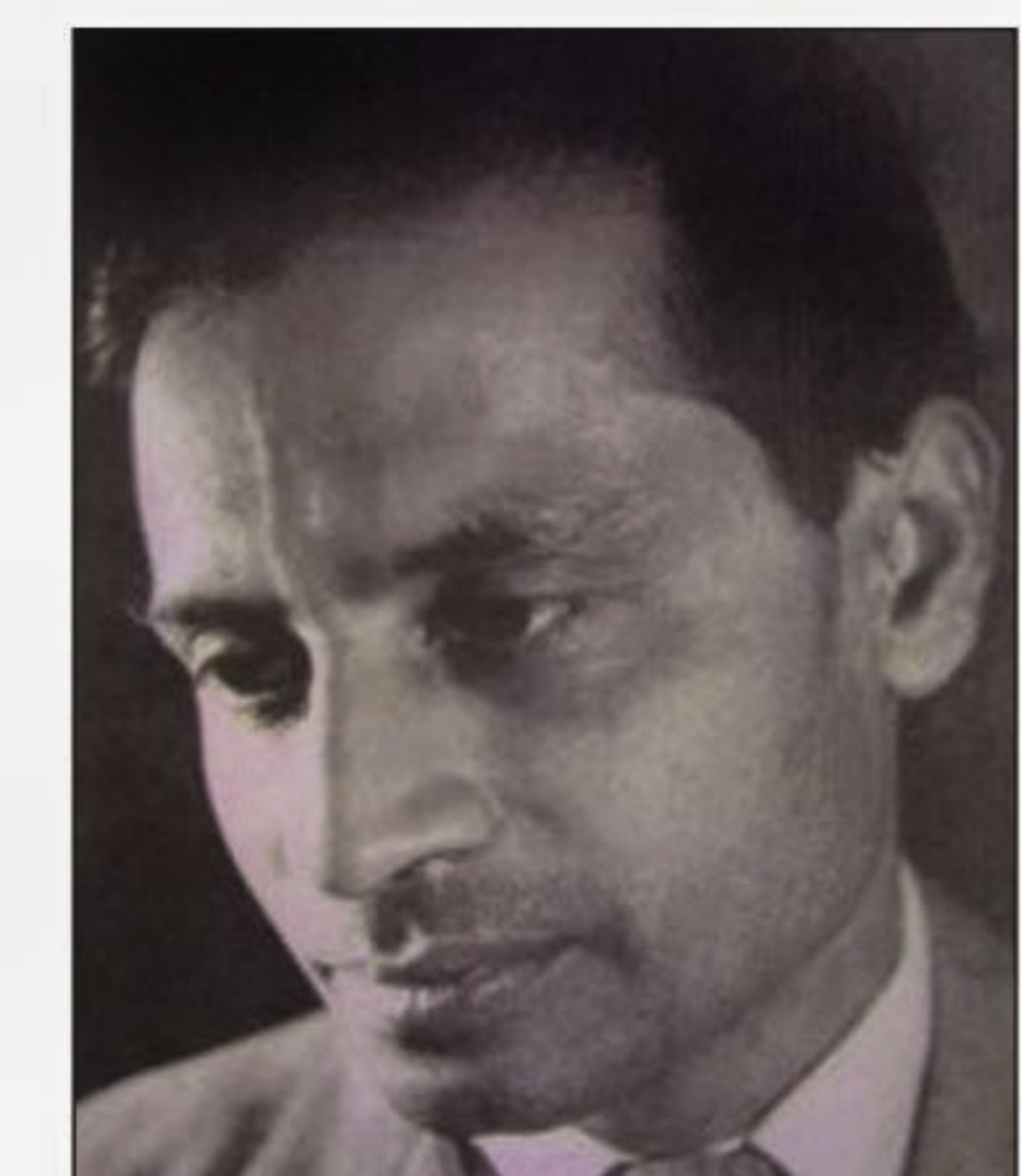
Ushaloke
Mohammad Shakerullah



Shamsur Rahman

Western Influences hints broadly at what Hossain intends to do. He sets off by making a distinction between Bengali literature that has been the hallmark of West Bengal and Bengali literature that has imperceptibly but patently evolved in what was in time to become the independent state of Bangladesh. But, of course, Hossain zeroes in on 1947 as the cut-off year when the two parts of Bengal went their separate ways, the eastern part of the old province branching out towards creating its own literary ethos. To be sure, the excitement generated by the creation of Pakistan was in the years immediately after partition defined by the essential communalism of the new state. You could speak here of Farrukh Ahmed, an unquestionably brilliant poet who nevertheless was too carried away by the idea of Pakistan and to a point where Islamic symbols, with imagery characteristic of Arabian deserts, began to define his poetry. Farrukh Ahmed, then, was a lost cause right from the beginning.

In large measure, modernity was what poets in the mould of Farrukh Ahmed did not have. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain then informs us that the modernity which was to define poetry in Bangladesh had for its genesis not merely the poetic thoughts of the French genius Baudelaire but also such western pioneers of literary styles and formulations as TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, Federico Garcia Lorca and William Butler Yeats, among others. But, of course, these purveyors of western poetic thought had Bengali followers preceding those who were to emulate them in East Pakistan/Bangladesh. You could think here of Buddhadeva Bose, Jibanananda Das and Sudhindranath Dutta. And Tagore? Hossain is emphatic in his assertion that the East and the West fused in Tagore, enough for Bose to describe him as the 'first European in Bangla literature.' It is interesting to note, however, that the western influence which was to work its way into the poetic imaginations of Bengali poets in the 1930s and subsequently in post-1947 East Pakistan/Bangladesh was a factor that was missing in



Buddhadeva Bose

Tagore's poetry. Every inch a modern man, the Nobel laureate remained nevertheless firmly rooted to his land, to the distinctive romanticism that defined his poetic personality from beginning to end. That was not the case, in large measure, with men like Amiya Chakravarty or Bishnu Dey.