

# Lest we forget the dead of 1943

Garga Chatterjee speaks of known deaths, hidden genocide

IN late October ended, seventy years ago, the Battle of Britain. Britain roused up through a barrage of Nazi assault. I read about it and thought about the glory of Britain at that hour, of Churchill's leadership. I was in awe - shabash Britain. I am sure many people from privileged circles in India at the time were also relieved. Being of the present generation and coming of a middle-class family, I can vaguely trace this strain back in my life and it is interesting to me how that has lived on and how I have changed.

I grew up in Kolkata, West Bengal. And I do not know where it came from, but an explicit respect, admiration and even aspiration to many things British were there. The same thought, said in English, sounded better, more respectable than in my mother tongue Bangla. Then at a slightly later stage, I learned about the Second World War in its gripping detail, how Britain and the Allies were fighting a life and death battle not for their survival, but for saving the world from Nazi and Fascist dictatorships. The British were occupiers, colonizers no doubt, but they were benign, I learned. The Britishers who plundered Bengal post 1757, or for that matter the Britishers who killed Khudiram or mutilated the thumbs of the weavers of Murshidabad, were not the paternalistic civil servants of the 1930s and 1940s. They understood and empathized, thought we were almost humans or would get there soon. And compared to the Nazis who killed millions of Jews, gypsies, gays and others, the British regime was so much reputed as being compassionate. We were taught that. I learned that. All the major Indian political forces, the Congress, the Muslim League and the Communist Party, collaborated with the British, collected war funds. India's political freedom could wait. These were, after all, times of global danger. At least there was no planned genocide in India during the war, something the German regime



**Churchill's Secret War  
The British Empire and the Ravaging  
Of India During World War II  
Madhusree Mukerjee  
Tranquebar**

of the time was indulging in. Or was there?

With time, and it did take time, doubts started creeping in. This viewpoint that there was a benign colonial occupation during the last phases of the British regime in India is something which many today maintain. They also point to red-brick railway stations, old government buildings and universities and the ridiculous white wigs of court judges, transportation, education, justice. The works. We had been saved, verily. The gods be praised! What

would have happened if the Nazis or the Japanese came? To me there is nothing more fundamental as a marker of humanity than dignity and commitment towards the preservation of human life. The Nazis had a pathetic record on this count. The British were worse, and except for 1770, never more so than in that high noon of solidarity with Britain, during the Second World War.

We have been fed a steady diet of the crimes of mass murders by grain requisitioning and other methods by the regimes of Stalin and Mao. There may be some dispute about the numbers but those supreme acts of inhuman criminality have been bested by the British regime in my Bengal. In the induced famine of 1770 (1176 of the Bangla calendar, hence Chhiyattoror monnontor - the famine of 76), oppressive British policies, including but not limited to taxes and grain monopolies, killed one-third of my people, 10 million of them. In April 1770, as the famine reached its height, land tax assessment for the next year was increased by 10% after a five-fold increase since the British usurpation of power. Around 1770, the world population was approximately 800 million. The British managed to kill off more than one per cent of the world's population, right here in Bengal, without the sophistication of machines. Technologically superior to the Britishers of 1770, the Nazis in their grand visions of cleansing managed to match this: they killed civilians to the tune of 1-2% of the world population, in the entirety of the Second World War. But the British killed too. And they killed us, here in Bengal. We raised money to help Churchill do that.

Three million humans were killed in and around Bengal, by the British and the grainhoarders. Explicit decisions were taken at the highest level of the British government, with then Prime Minister Winston Churchill being directly and explicitly complicit, to kill, as it

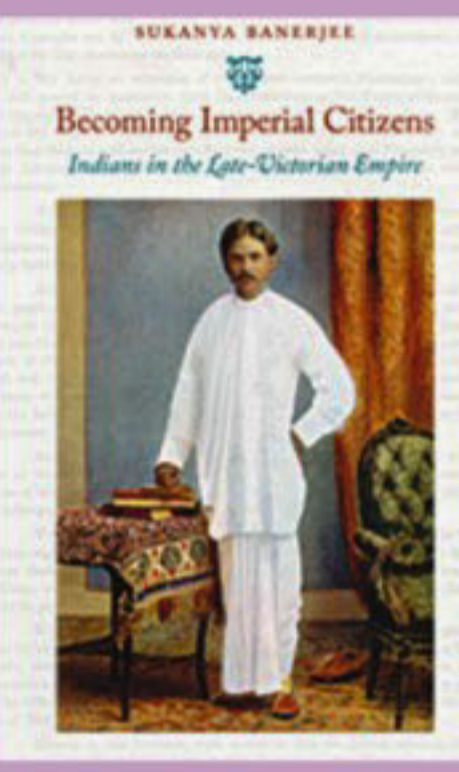
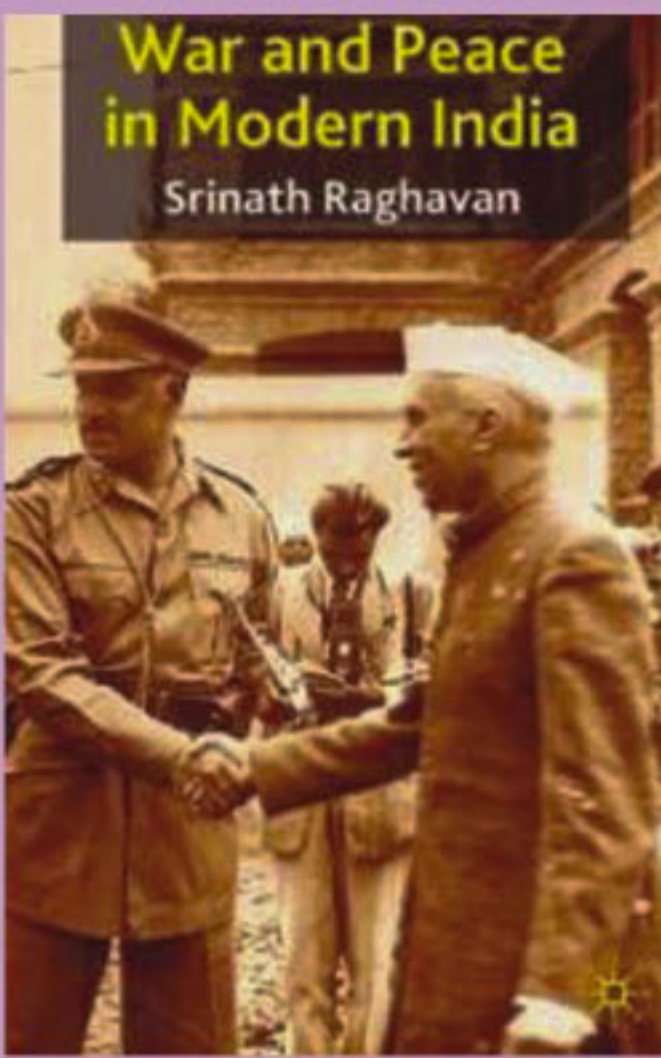
were, Indians by shipping stupendous quantities of grain stocks for the armies in Europe and to feed humans in Britain. This has been exquisitely documented by Madhusree Mukherjee in her recent book, Churchill's Secret War. The provisional government of Free India, led by Subhas Chandra Bose, made an offer of sending 100,000 tonnes of rice as assistance. This was during the Burma campaign. Our non-Nazi benign lords rejected the offer. The armies were fighting the war after all. Our war, indeed. Our army. The brown officers of the Indian Army earned their medals from the British for their collaboration. And the show went on. During the whole period of the war, the number of civilian deaths due to war in Britain was approximately 67,000. In Bengal alone in 1943-44, it was 3 million. In no account do they appear as casualties of the Second World War. It is with survivors' sadness that we have been so dehumanized as to go so far as compare death numbers to demand justice, accountability and, yes, reparations.

It is in perfect order to want reparations from Britain. It is not a thing which is unheard of. West Germany gave reparations to Israel as a consequence of its genocide of Jews. The gypsies have had no reparation; they don't have a country and they are persecuted over much of Europe. But what about our countries, India and Bangladesh? Do our governments have any vision of compassion and a spine? To build a world where the killers of people will not go scot-free but will be shamed and humiliated is what the humanity of the brutalizer's stock and the sons and daughters of the accidental survivors among the brutalized must demand. Be it war or genocide, people who kill must atone for their sins, in terms set by the brutalized. We shall not forget genocides. At least this the dead demand from us.

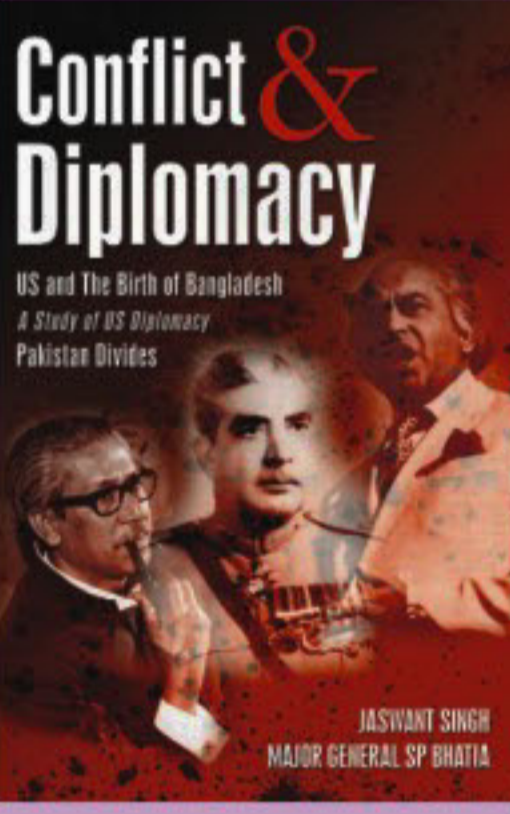
Garga Chatterjee is at Harvard University.

## Book Choice

War and Peace in Modern India  
Srinath Raghavan  
Palgrave Macmillan



Conflict & Diplomacy  
US and The Birth of Bangladesh  
Jaswant Singh, Maj. Gen. SP Bhatia  
Rupa & Co.



Becoming Imperial Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire  
Sukanya Banerjee  
Duke University Press, Durham and London

# The liberated soul of a poet

Waliul Arefin sifts through some brave poetry

ANNE Sexton (1928-1974) has been a prominent figure in American poetry for the past fifty years. A Pulitzer Prize winner and a Phi Beta Kappa poet at Harvard, she was principal poet in delineating bold issues of menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, drug addiction at a time when other poets did not consider these as poetic materials. This 'bold and the beautiful' poet also dealt with love, alienation, loneliness, madness, death etc which has been one of the main themes of her poetry. It is said that poetry is an expression of one's thought and ideas. This is clearly demonstrated well in the poetry of Anne Sexton. The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton comprises ten volumes of verse and six poems from her last years. All the details of her life have been laid bare in this brilliant piece of work. To read the book is to know her in totality.

Sexton was unfortunate in going through a chaotic and troubled life as a child. From the beginning she was a loner. She was unwanted in the family and her parents were busy in mending their shattered and miserable conjugal life. They could not give proper attention to her upbringing. Consequently she turned out to be a problem child and later to be a person with manifold personality disorders. Subsequently in her own conjugal life she was not happy at all and was abused by her husband.

To describe herself in all such situations the poet says in 'Her Kind':

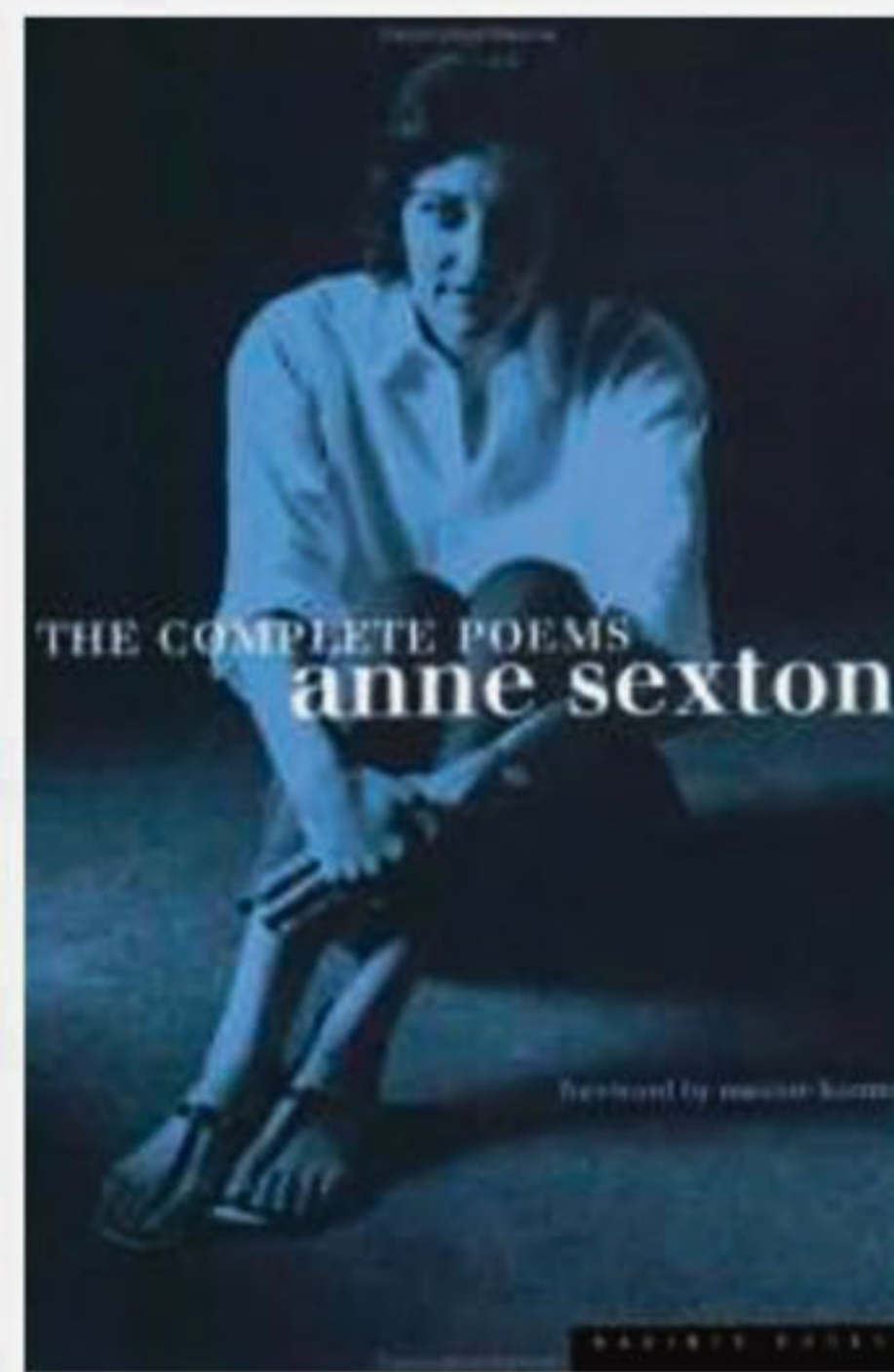
Dreaming evil, I have done my/Lonely thing,  
twelve fingered, out of mind / A woman like that  
is not a woman, quite/ I have been her kind

Recalling the neglect of her parents she writes in 'Those Times':

Of the nightly humiliations when Mother  
undressed me / of the life of the day time,  
locked in my room / being the unwanted, the  
mistake / that Mother used to keep Father /  
from his divorce

In 'Cripples and other stories' Sexton writes:  
Disgusted, mother put me / on the potty /  
She was good at this / My father was fat on  
scotch / It leaked from every orifice

In the poem 'Walking in Paris' she notes:  
I have deserted my husband and my children /



**The Complete Poems  
Anne Sexton  
Mariner Books**

the Negro issue, the late news and the hot baths /  
My room in Paris, no more than a cell / is  
crammed with 58 Lbs. of books.

Tormented and deeply saddened in life, she could only be compared to her fellow poet Sylvia Plath: 'When everything else soured; when a succession of therapists deserted her for whatever good, poor, or personal reasons; when intimates lost interest or could not fulfill all the roles they were asked to play; when a series of catastrophes and physical illnesses assaulted her, the making of poems remained her one constant'. 'Out of furniture (she made) a tree'. But disgusted with life she did not wish

to live in this cruel world and tried to commit suicide several times:

My supply / of tablets / has got to last for years  
and years / I like them more than I like me

Yes / I try / to kill myself in small  
amounts, / an innocuous occupation

I, who chose two times / to kill myself  
Death was simpler than I'd thought

Let the witches take away my guilty soul / I  
pretended I was dead / until the white men  
pumped the poison out

The town is silent / The night boils with eleven  
stars / Oh starry starry night! / This is how I want  
to die

Incest, adultery, lesbianism and other types  
of sexual adventures were some of the main  
themes of Anne Sexton's poetry as has been  
mentioned before. Critics of poetry have  
severely criticized her for such frank and  
straightforwardness on such hush-hush issues.  
But she did not listen to their words and wrote  
on:

In the poem 'All the pretty ones' she says:  
Now I fold you down, my drunkard / my  
navigator / my first lost keeper, to love or look at  
later

In the poem 'Housewife' she speaks thus:  
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah /  
into their fleshy mothers / A woman is her  
mother / That's the main thing

In 'Young Girl' she claims

Dear love, as simple as some distant evil / we  
walk a little drunk up these three flights  
/ .....for we do not explain my husband's  
insane abuse / and we do not say why your wild-  
haired wife has fled. .... / Tell them need is  
an excuse for love. Tell them need prevails /  
Tell them I remake and smooth your bed and  
am your wife

It can be presumed from the poetry how  
brave this woman poet was, from her reflections  
on incest and lesbianism. She can be  
considered as one of the first voices of female  
sexuality and the feminist movement in  
American literature. And feminists would be  
proud of her contribution to their cause. A  
couple of examples would suffice.

In the poem 'The Sun' she writes:

I undress under the burning magnifying  
glass / .....Let me be sick with your  
heat / .....Now I am utterly given / I am your  
daughter, your sweet-meat

In 'Flee on your donkey' she says:  
Thirty-three years of the same dull incest  
/ that sustained us both / You, my bachelor  
analyst / who sat on Mandborough Street  
/ sharing your office with your mother

In 'Mother and Jack and the rain' Sexton's  
vocal manner is all:

On my damp summer bed I cradled my salty  
knees / and heard father kiss me through the  
wall / .....I made no voyages, I owned no pass-  
port / I was the daughter / Whisky fortified / my  
father in the next room / He outlasted the  
weather / counted his booty and brought his  
ship into port

In 'Rapunzel'?

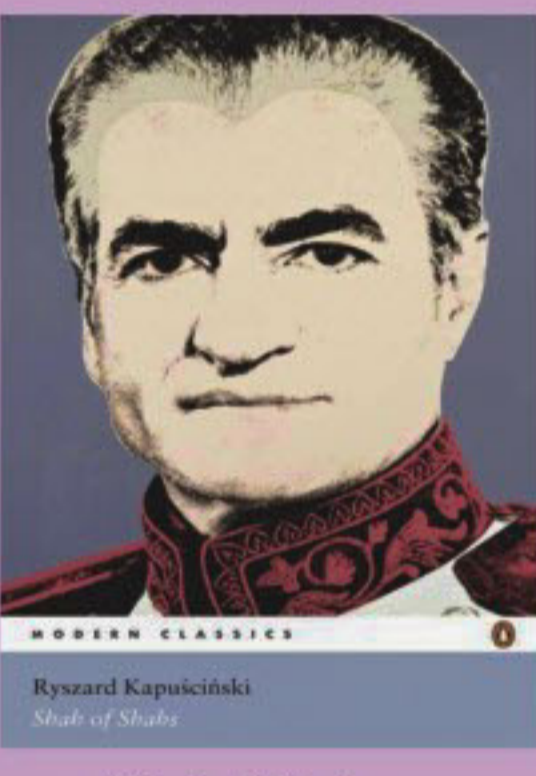
A woman / who loves a woman / is forever  
young / the mentor / and the student / feed off  
each other / Many a girl / had an old aunty  
/ .....they would play rummy / or lie on the  
couch / and touch and touch / old breast again  
young breast. .... / They play mother-me-do /  
all day. .... / Hold me, my  
good dear, hold me, and thus they played  
mother-me-do

Apart from the revealing issues of sexuality,  
the poet is also concerned about the war-  
mongering credentials of American society.  
During that time America became involved in a  
couple of wars around the world and she  
expressed her feelings in her poetry. She criticized  
the identity of American society in this  
regard. She asserts in 'The Fire bombers':

'We are America / We are the coffin fillers /  
we are the grocers of death / We pack them in  
crates like cauliflower / ..... / America / where  
are your credentials?'

You will have to like the poetry of Anne  
Sexton due to its depth, aesthetics and easy-to-  
understand language. This omnibus of Sexton's  
poetry will definitely enthrall poetry lovers and  
will take them to cloud nine --- to enjoy the real  
and hard insights of life, death, madness, lone-  
liness and sexuality.

Waliul Arefin is a freelance writer.



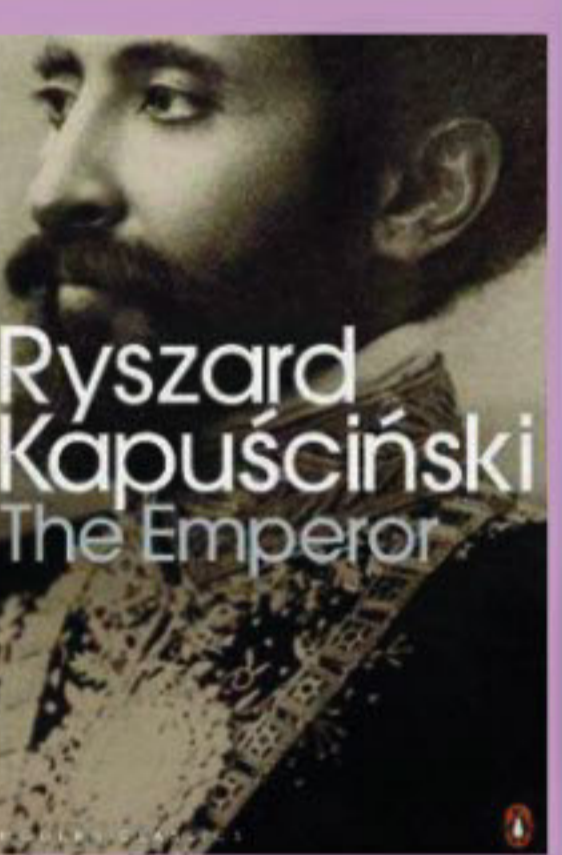
**Shah of Shahs  
Ryszard Kapuscinski  
Penguin**



**Dhaka'r Buddhadev Basu  
Syed Abul Maksud  
Prothoma Prokashon**



**Mitford Hashpatal O  
Dhaka Medical School  
Iitahash O Oitijho 1858-  
1947  
Sharif uddin Ahmed  
Academic Press &  
Publishers Library**



**The Emperor  
Ryszard Kapuscinski  
Penguin**



**The Hindus  
An Alternative History  
Wendy Doniger  
Oxford**

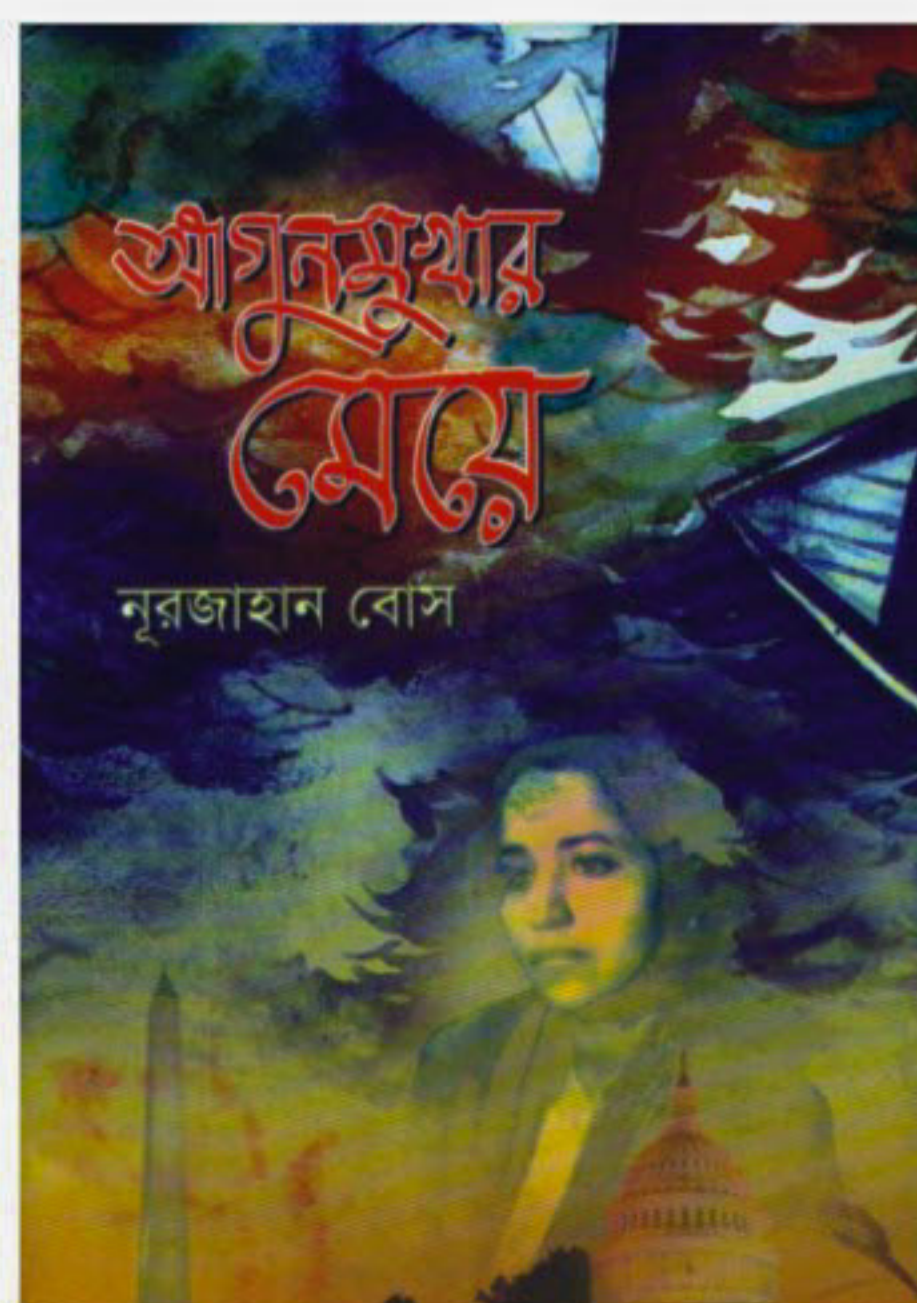
# A river, a woman

Mozaffar Hossain praises a story of life

AGOONMUKHA is a terrible and turbulent river in the South Bengal coastal area. There are other rivers also of the same nature. But Agoonmukha has seen a rise in its intensity by the added flow of six other rivers like the Tentulia, the Lohadia, the Buda Gouranga, the Babnabad, the Darchida and the Degri rivers. Owing to the natural play of loss and gain of the river flows some strips of sandy land were raised out of the bed of the rivers or the sea above the water level where fortune-seekers made their shelter from time to time. In course of time the Burmese and Arakanese came to establish links with Bengalis.

The violent and untameable swelling of the sea waves and the deep roaring sounds with billows of the Agoonmukha have given birth to many myths and much hearsay. The coastal inhabitants have had no other way but to fight courageously with nature for their routine daily life. Capture of boats and loss of lives have been their common experience. Their struggling lives were at par with the nature of the restless and terrible rivers.

The Katakali was one of the islands of the coastal zone where Nurjahan was born to fight against the innumerable inimical forces of nature, society and fate. Her misfortunes came rallying in, jousting with one another. Poverty, destitution, death of nearest kith and kin, including her father, her growing youth in a



**Agoonmukhar Meye  
Nurjahan Bose  
Sahitya Prokash**

victim-dominated society all tried to make her a victim of dejection and despondency. But she did not surrender as she was a child of the Agoonmukha.

Every cloud has a silver lining. Nurjahan's urge, zeal and inborn thirst for knowledge and study brought her to Barisal town where she had to take shelter with her friends and relatives. Her feelings for the poor and the distressed drew the attention of the then young student leader Emadullah, who after some time, asked for her hand. But the happy marriage lasted only for a short period of time. The sudden unfortunate death of that promising young leader of the 1950s of the twentieth century made Nurjahan a widow with one child, Jasim. Yet she did not lose her courage to stand on her own feet. In the course of her journey to a path of life full of struggle, she found Swadesh Bose, a communist-to-core worker, as her friend, philosopher and guide. Swadesh married her, taking upon himself the entire responsibility of Jasim, the living reminder of Emad. And thus Nurjahan became Nurjahan Bose. The couple joined hands to walk a long way in various progressive movements far and near. They had to go to Karachi and America for both studies and service. Nurjahan's humanitarian service in Catholic Charity was a resplendent study in the acquisition of varied experience.

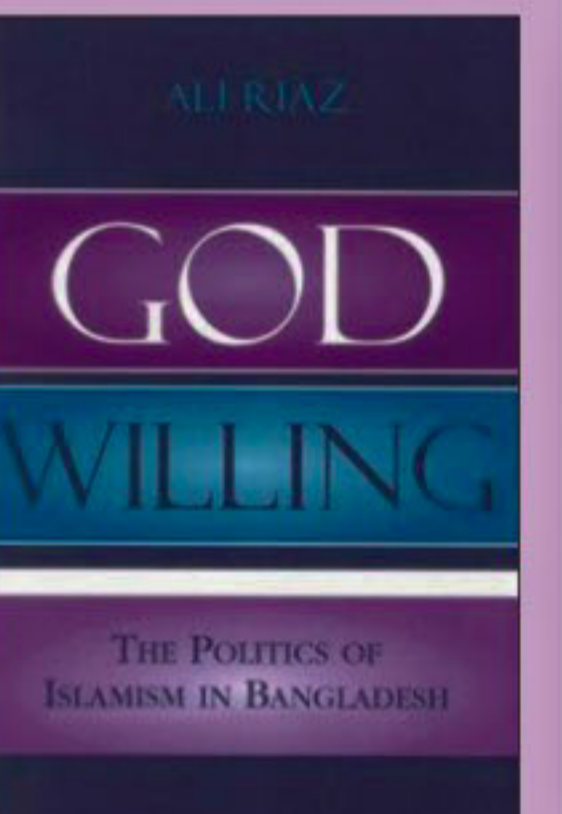
During the course of the liberation movement, Nurjahan was in Bangladesh. Bangabandhu had deep affection for her. She had to go abroad again. For the second time she became a widow after the death of Swadesh. Nurjahan had to leave her village at the age of ten in 1949. Now she is again in her village on the banks of the Agoonmukha with her lifelong varied experience. She is a spent force now.

Nurjahan's autobiography *Agoonmukhar Meye* speaks not just of her own experience. She brings forth a panoramic picture of different countries, of home and abroad; an honest exposition of great personalities, social picture of many countries and a keen observation of mind, faith and culture. Her story speaks of her instinctive and indomitable spirit of serving humanity irrespective of caste, creed, colour and faith. This spirit of serving the poor and distressed inspired her to form many humanitarian organizations that gave her a myriad of experience. The book itself is a world in miniature in 307 pages. The reader can enjoy the pleasures of the journey by poring through the work.

Sahitya Prokash deserves cheers for such a great job.

(This review is a reprint.)

Mozaffar Hossain is Chairman, Bangladesh Literary Resource Centre (BLRC).



**God Willing  
The Politics of Islamism in  
Bangladesh  
Ali Riaz  
Rowman & Littlefield  
Publishers, Inc.**