

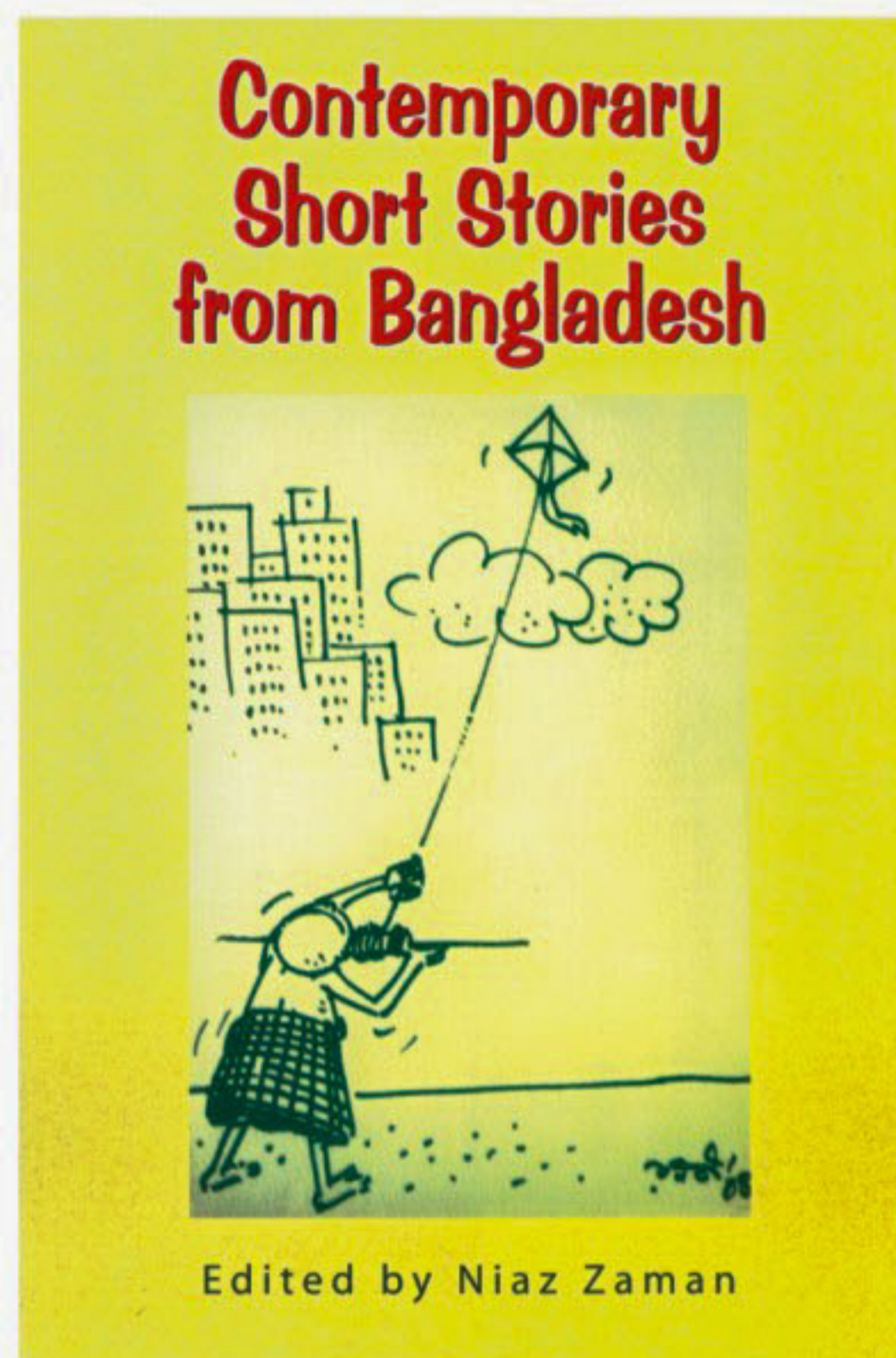
## A feel of myriad experiences

### Sutapa Chaudhuri finds the Bengali landscape in fiction

CONTEMPORARY *Short Stories* from Bangladesh, edited by Niaz Zaman, presents twenty five short stories by veteran and young writers felicitously translated into English by both writers and academics, which gives a glimpse into the rich array of contemporary Bangladeshi writing to the readers without access or familiarity to Bangla. What first sparks the interest of the reader is the cover sketch of Tokai by M. Rafiqun Nabi that speaks volumes about the content of the edition. The simple sketch of a little village boy in traditional clothing flying a kite in the sky while modern day skyscrapers loom large amply describes the atmosphere of most of the short stories in this collection. The stories depict an amalgam of both the rural and urban life of contemporary Bangladesh. The stories are set in both rural and urban Bangladesh. In many of the stories, the characters move between town and village or live in semi urban localities.

The absence of a common theme in this collection of twenty-five short stories augments the vastness of its scope as it encompasses within its purview varied themes ranging from realistic social commentary as in *Justice* by Jahan Ara Siddiqui to the unknown depths of human psychology as in *The Black Cat* by Nasreen Jahan; from deviant sexual passion as in Al Mahmud's *The Cormorant's Blood*, or Anwara Syed Haq's *Pagli* to a simple love story like *A Little Love* by Shaheedul Zahir or Dilwar Hasan's *The Girl Who Sold Incense Sticks*. On one hand the collection foregrounds issues of the Bangladeshi diaspora as in Saleha Chaudhuri's *A Stopwatch and 400 Calories* or *Safar Ali's American Sojourn* by Mahub Talukdar; on the other hand, it brings out the socio-political reality of today's Bangladesh in Audity Falguni's *Crossfire* and Rizia Rahman's *A Poet, A Crow, and The War Horse of Chengiz Khan* or sometimes it spotlights the poignant memories of the 1971 Liberation War as in Hasan Azizul Haq's *Nobody Came to See Him* or Rashid Haider's *Address Uncertain*. The collection addresses the injustices on the pahari folk in Selina Hossain's *Fugitive Colours* and also throws light on the tension apparent in the relations of the so called developed, urban, educated 'Self' with the rural, illiterate, underdeveloped 'Other' as in Shahaduz Zaman's *Clara Linden at Nijkolmohona*. Stories like Syed Shamsul Haq's *To Live the Fantasy or Home and Abroad* by Rahat Khan are built on the often fantastic dreams of the youth looking forward to a bright future while Ahmed Faruk's *The Prison* depicts the poignancy of a freed prisoner who has no refuge in the whole world except the

four walls of the prison that has set him free. Stories like *The Model on the Billboard* by Ahmad Mostafa Kamal use surrealism or magic realism to deal with the multifariousness of the human psyche while Jharna Rahman in her *Ashes of the Veena* or *Gultush* by Shahnaz Munni narrate stories that float in the twilight zone between the real and the unreal. The use of a touch of black humour in the post modernist tale *Ibn Batuta's Diary* by



Contemporary Short Stories from Bangladesh  
Edited by Niaz Zaman  
The University Press Limited

Syed Manzoorul Islam is thought provoking and suggests deeper insights even as it makes for a delightfully fresh reading.

Significantly, women writers in this collection of short stories address not just women's issues like injustice, domestic violence, acid throwing, rape, the unequal nature of marital relationship, the innumerable plights women face in a patriarchal world and brings the condition of women to the limelight as in stories like *Justice* by Jahan Ara Siddiqui or *Fugitive Colours* by Selina Hossain.

The stories also foreground the ingenuity of an illiterate woman, a village midwife, in Clara Linden at Nijkolmohona by Shahaduz Zaman. Stories like *The Palm Thorn* by Masuda Bhatti show the women as silent victims of violence, like the one-eyed Ujiran who dreams of a time when she can teach her man a lesson like the intelligent women of folk tales. This desire in women like Ujiran, though still latent, shows that women are slowly becoming aware of their rights as human beings. The next group of stories brings to light this nascent desire of the helpless Ujiran "waiting patiently for a lashing from her husband Dabir" in a more forceful manner. These stories bring to the fore the agency of women in the present situation where women, no more silent, submissive victims, stand up to the perpetrators of violence and pay them back in their own coin. In *Primeval Anger* by Makbula Manzoor, Suborun tolerates domestic violence and victimization at the hands of her husband but takes the law in her hand by murdering her husband to avenge her sister's defilement. Similarly, in *Alokapuri: The Palace of Bliss*, Jharna Das Purkayastha shows how a young woman, Phuspa, once a silent victim of patrilocal violence by her husband and mother-in-law, could find happiness by defying the conventions of society and setting up an alternate household with a man she loves. Notably Saleha's *Desire* by Purabi Basu speaks of the desire by an illiterate village woman Saleha to live her life on her own terms. Saleha is an indomitable fighter and she becomes the exemplary woman who refuses to be subjugated only as an object of male desire. She has the courage to assert her choice as a woman, as a free person in her own right with her own likes and dislikes. Though ruthlessly tortured by the society she lives in for daring to assert her choice, Saleha lives on "this hope that from tomorrow good days will dawn. They don't. Even then I don't know why it is that I desire to live on."

This rich collection of short stories thus not only provides a feel of the myriad experiences of contemporary Bangladeshi life the current socio-political, cultural, economic and familial realities of Bangladesh but they also strike a chord with the timeless universal experience, the eternal drama of human desires and passions. In their essence, therefore, these stories are at once local and global.

Sutapa Chaudhuri teaches English literature in Kolkata.

## The world of expatriate Bangladeshis

### Md. Jahirul Islam glimpses a society through fiction

THE novel *Snake Dance in Berlin*, written by Ronny Noor, was co-published by Orient Black Swan of India and Parama Publishers and Distributors of Bangladesh in 2009 with an attractive cover page. It is a kaleidoscopic view of Bangladeshis who lived in Berlin during the second half of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. The author was a student in Berlin during that period and so gathered practical experience on the activities of the Bangladeshis there.

This is a story written with wit and humor. The main theme of the book centres on Rayhan, a young Bangladeshi engineer who comes to Berlin in 1978 to study computer science. He is taken to the birthday party of a man called Uncle Kabir. There he gets to know many of his countrymen, students and asylum seekers, who are organized in a cultural group called Golden Boys Association. A few days later, an election is held to elect the executive body of the association. Two students, Jafar Khan and Malekshah, are elected president and general secretary. Other posts also go to students.

When Rayhan becomes a student at the university, passing the language exam in German, he gets a room in the Siegmunds Hof students' hall. He visits other students --- Chapa Kaiser, who was a student leader in Dhaka, and Porno Matin, who studied in East Germany and is now doing his doctorate in the West. He gets to know Saad, an eclectic philosopher whose late father was a poet in Bangladesh. He also goes to Uncle Kabir's house to socialize because a lot of people gather there on the weekends.

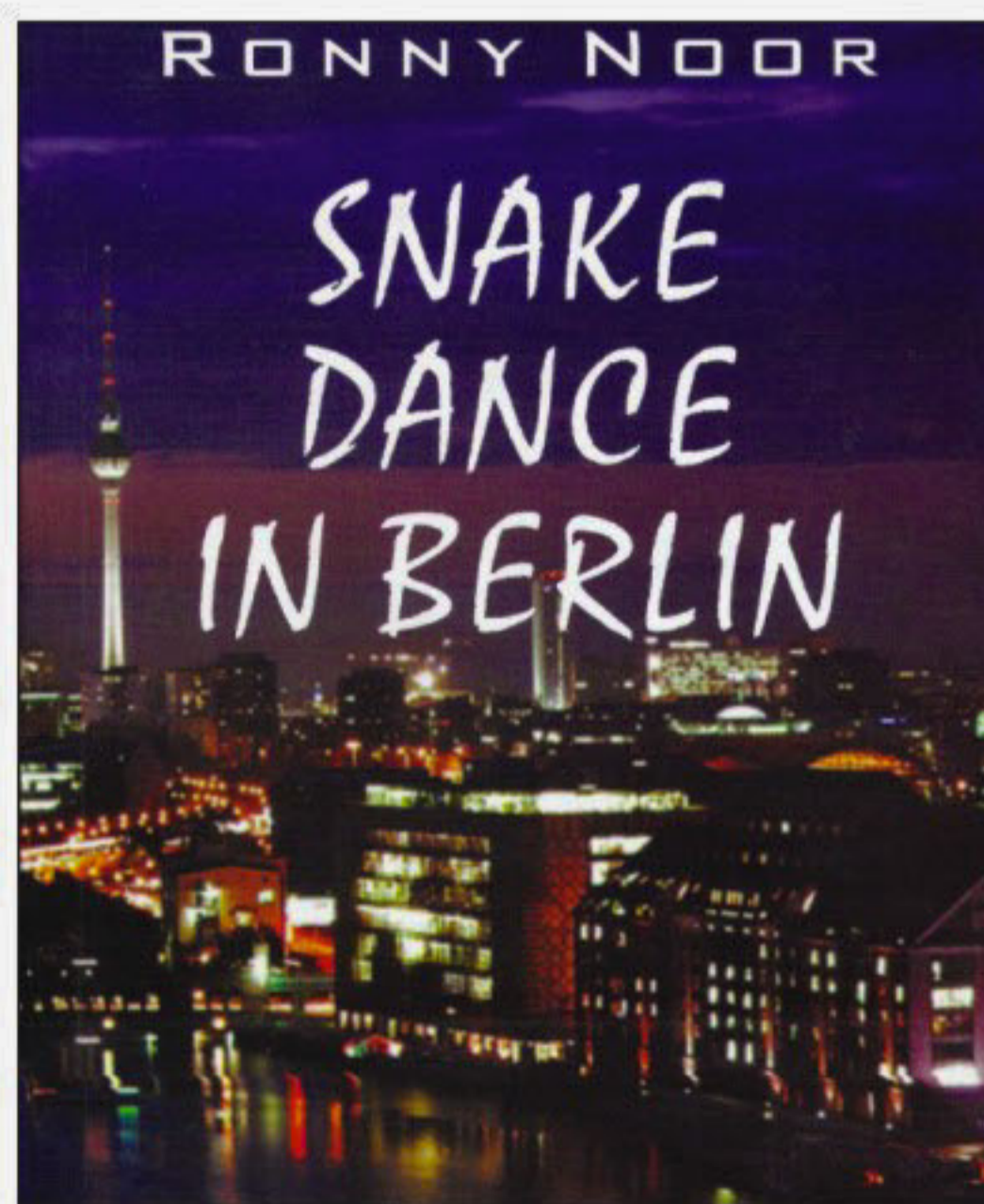
The Bangladeshis live their daily lives, students studying and asylum seekers working. One day they have a picnic. But the association does not have an office yet and is not able to help the Bengali expatriates financially or otherwise. So when the association meets again for the election, Uncle Kabir delivers a fiery speech. He will develop the association if he is elected president. However, he lacks knowledge of German. So he is not elected president, but he does get the post of treasurer. Jafar Khan and Ashok are elected president and general secretary. Uncle Kabir urges Rayhan to teach him German. Thus, Rayhan ends up going to his house almost every week. However, Uncle Kabir's progress is very slow. He is more interested in socializing with Chapa Kaiser, Porno Matin and others.

In the meantime, Uncle Kabir's wife comes to Berlin with her little son, leaving two older children back home. So he enjoys his family life and does overtime at the factory where he works. Thus, he cannot learn much German. But he is elected president of the association at the next election because Jafar Khan could not accomplish what he had promised. Chapa Kaiser becomes general secretary; Jafar and Ashok stay away from the election because someone has threatened them over the phone. They do not know who are behind the threats. But it falls on Rayhan, who is election commissioner and wants to bring his people together, to investigate the matter.

Uncle Kabir has a nephew named Habib, who has been living in his house. He is a handsome young man who regularly goes out to clubs and brings in girls. Thus, he often gets into trouble. At

one point he gets into trouble with a dominatrix. Then he fights with a friend over a girl from Poland. So Uncle Kabir, thinking that a good Bangladeshi girl can keep him housebound, goes to Dhaka and finds a bride for him. The woman is a school teacher with a bachelor's degree although Habib has not even finished his madrasah education. He brings the woman to Berlin and she applies for asylum.

While Rayhan is investigating what is known as Telephone Terror to find the culprits, Jafar, Ashok and Malekshah decide to form a different association because Uncle Kabir's nephew Habib and another young man named Nasir beat up the scholars. Now they do not want to have anything to do with asylum seekers, they want an association only for students. So when the two associations try to celebrate Bangladesh's Independence Day or Victory Day, very few people show up. People have turned their backs on these organizations.



Snake Dance in Berlin  
Ronny Noor  
Orient Black Swan, India/Parama Publishers

However, Uncle Kabir is determined to have the cultural evening on Independence Day as he has promised. So when Rayhan goes to England for a visit, the president asks him to hire singers. He does as he is told.

Meanwhile, Rayhan has fallen in love with Renata, a girl he first tutors. They go out together to music and dance shows from around the world and ultimately fall in love. Renata wants to get married. So Rayhan writes two letters to his parents. But his parents do not agree because Renata, according to Rayhan's father, is not a believer. His father wants to disown him and stop the financing of his siblings' education. So Rayhan, without informing his parents, gets engaged to Renata and begins living with her.

In order to prepare for the cultural function, Uncle Kabir, along with Chapa Kaiser, becomes member of the political party of General Ershad. He

had, of course, contributed some money to that party when he visited Dhaka. Jafar, Ashok and Malekshah, who have in the meantime decided to work together with Uncle Kabir due to Rayhan efforts, think that the president of the association is politicizing the non-political cultural organization. They go to court in order to stop the cultural function, which they see as a political propaganda. So on the day of the function, a German court stops the celebration of the Independence Day of Bangladesh.

In the end, Uncle Kabir, whose application for political asylum has been rejected, leaves Berlin. He of course has bought a house in the meantime and invested money in some industries in Bangladesh. Now he is there, contesting the election to be a Member of Parliament.

The novel works on different levels.

First: The story appears to be a microcosm of Bangladesh, shown through the association. It shows the failure of scholars and politicians alike. As a result, society suffers. People run away from the country to seek political asylum in foreign countries, living in deplorable conditions as social outcasts in many cases. This is not what human life should be.

Second: The story shows how many Bengali expatriates live in Germany and England, at the edge of society, scraping a living. They live between worlds, without any place to call home, to belong to. They do not think they belong to Bangladesh, because the country cannot provide them with a living and they certainly do not belong to the host country, where they are considered foreigners.

Third: The story deals with universal issues, such as why people become poor. Because they are irresponsible. Having many children without food and education is irresponsible. This brings down society. Similarly, a people that cannot work together is irresponsible. The diaspora which cannot solve their own problems like responsible people shows their irresponsibility. Thus people, when they are irresponsible, invite others to lord over them, similar to the way the fate of the Golden Boys Association is in the hands of the German court.

Lastly, in order to bring peace to the world, people must work together, going beyond religious and national boundaries, the way Rayhan and Renata do.

The book shows the philosophical ideas of the author and has been written in lucid English. But like many books, it has its own drawbacks. There are some historical facts which are rather confusing in the book. At one place the author has termed the liberation war as a civil war. It appears that it has been written inadvertently, because in other places he has mentioned it correctly. There are many words which, linked together, slow down the reader. It would have been better if the author could make some comments on why people from Bangladesh seek asylum in foreign countries and why Germans provide asylum to Bangladeshis.

Overall, this is an interesting book, available in Bangladesh and so needing to be read.

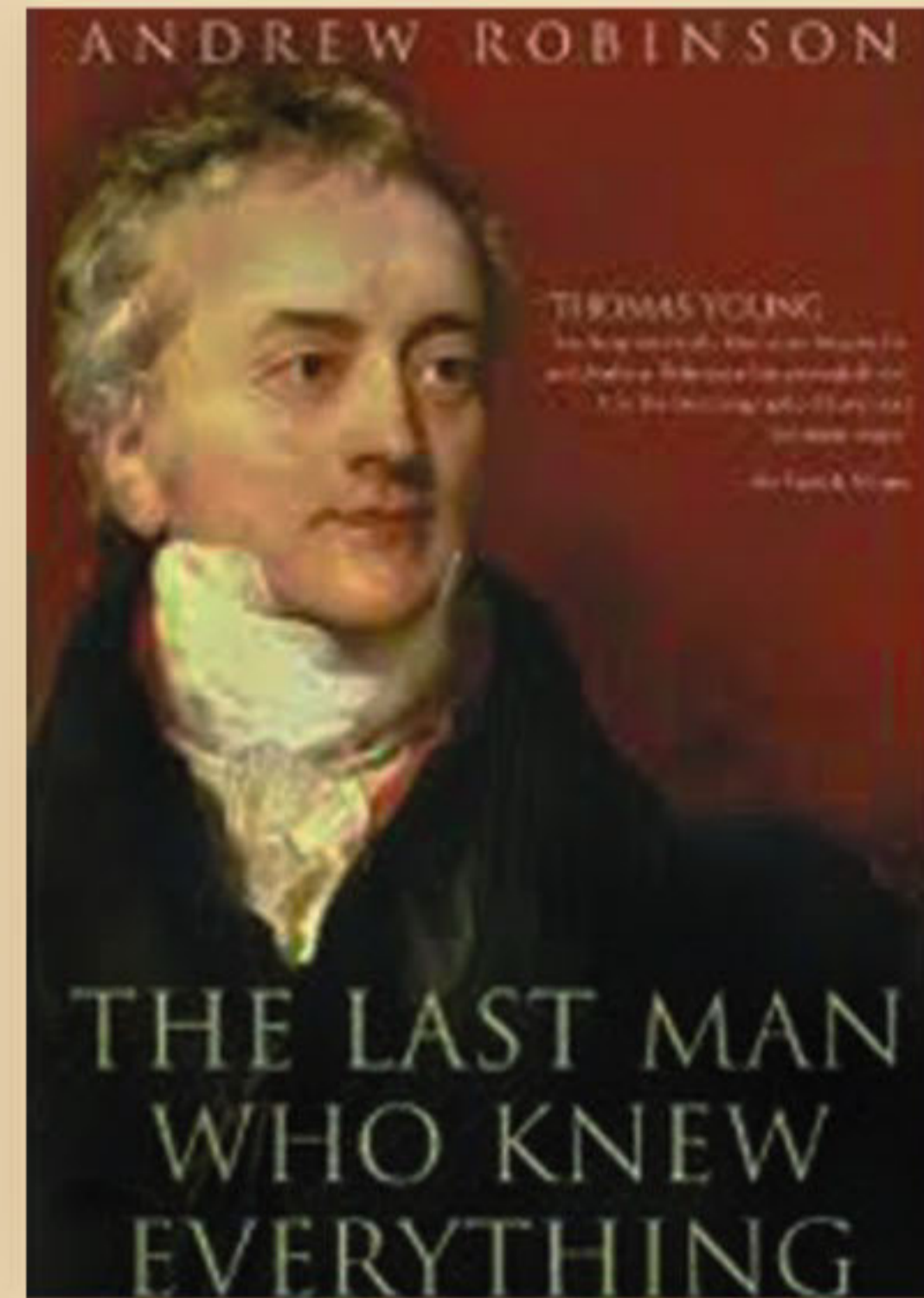
Dr. Md. Jahirul Islam is Joint Chief, Infrastructure Division, Planning Commission, Government of Bangladesh.

## Book Talk

### What more could you ask for?

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

*The Last Man Who Knew Everything*. That is one book you will want to read. It is about Thomas Young --- scholar, mathematician, philosopher, philologist, polymath and what have you. Andrew Robinson does a good job of it. Something stirs in the heart when you come across new books. And then something cracks in it when you remember you simply cannot afford to buy all those books because of the prohibitive prices that come with them. With all this twenty two per cent tax imposed on the import of books, you cannot argue with the bookseller and ask him why he cannot give you the tomes you need at prices you can afford. He too has a life and a career to plod through. Now, the queer bit here is that he is in no position to give you the book the way you want it; and you are not quite ready to spend all that money you happen to have at a given moment on that book you have been eyeing for a while.



Which takes you to the matter of all the pirated editions of new books you often see at some traffic intersections in this hugely unwieldy and maddening city. Those books --- Obama's two works, Hillary Clinton's memoirs and now Jaswant Singh's work on Jinnah --- tempt you hugely. You know you can go into negotiations with the young man proffering them to you as your vehicle stops at the lights. He begins by asking for as much as five hundred taka for a copy. You know that you can pin him down, at some point, to a figure you and he can be quite comfortable with. There is, after all, all that experience you have accumulated at the fish market. The fishmonger began by demanding a thousand. You, the

successful diplomat that you are in such domestic affairs, emerge triumphant when eventually you give him four hundred and march home gaily with that gleaming fish in your tremulous masculine hand. Who knows? You could try a similar approach with this young mobile bookseller. And so you talk. And as you do, you realise with something of delight that this young man has grown to be pretty knowledgeable about books in your time.

At the end of it all, as the red on the signal gives way to green, you have the newest of Shobha De's work in hand. You are happy, for there is that absence of subtlety in De that you have always admired. For that matter, you could even be

thinking of Taslima Nasreen's loud professions of sexuality or Erica Jong's declarations of sensual love. Beyond and above that, though, is that certain thrill which tells you you are the owner of yet another book, one that will add to the beautiful chaos that is your bedroom. That is the place you love, for that is where you love the woman you would die for, where you love to read. Books do tempt, even those that you read ages ago as a child. Think of the fairy tales, think of a collection of these stories published in 1906 and now reprinted in 2009. The format, the cover, the sketches, the print all belong to that long lost year. You grab it from the magazine seller who visits you every week, give him the price he wants and go home. It has been quite a buy, and you are reminded of all the new-looking books you sometimes stumble into at the charity shops in London. Or think of Gaithersburg in distant Maryland, of the second hand bookstores that yield up works as good as new. That is what you know as paradise. What more could you ask for?

There are then the books that saw the light of day years ago but you did not know where there. Does Galbraith's *Name Dropping* ring any bells? It came out a decade ago and you being a huge admirer of the late economist-diplomat-scholar somehow did not know about it. That is when you feel small, diminished in some way. But there is a way to make amends. You get in touch with your siblings in that faraway land, tell them about it and they do the rest. You wait for that copy of the book to come to you all the way from Washington. And then reflect on some books you have wanted to read since they first made it to the market.



Ryback has done a splendid job, but how do you get hold of his work?

But let us not brood. There is that little work of Rumi's, a translation as it were, to go back to. It lies on your coffee table. You turn the pages. And you think of a woman with a pretty face and a profound mind. Rumi and she stir your sensibilities.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Books Review.



Romeo Dallaire's account of the Rwanda genocide of 1994 (he calls it *Shake Hands With The Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*) is a gripping work. You have read more than one review of the work in some journal or the other, but six years go by before you see, as if my a miracle, the actual book before you.

Ah, but why are we complaining? Inhabiting as we do a truly disadvantaged part of the third world, we do not expect to be privy to the good things that happen in Europe or America. That is reality for us. And yet there used to be that other reality, a long time ago, when books came our way, when we thought nothing of spending money on them. Imagine! Who wouldn't love to possess a work such as *Hitler's Private Library*? Timothy