

Serious issues, considered thoughts

Shahid Alam studies the Bangladesh paradox in a new work

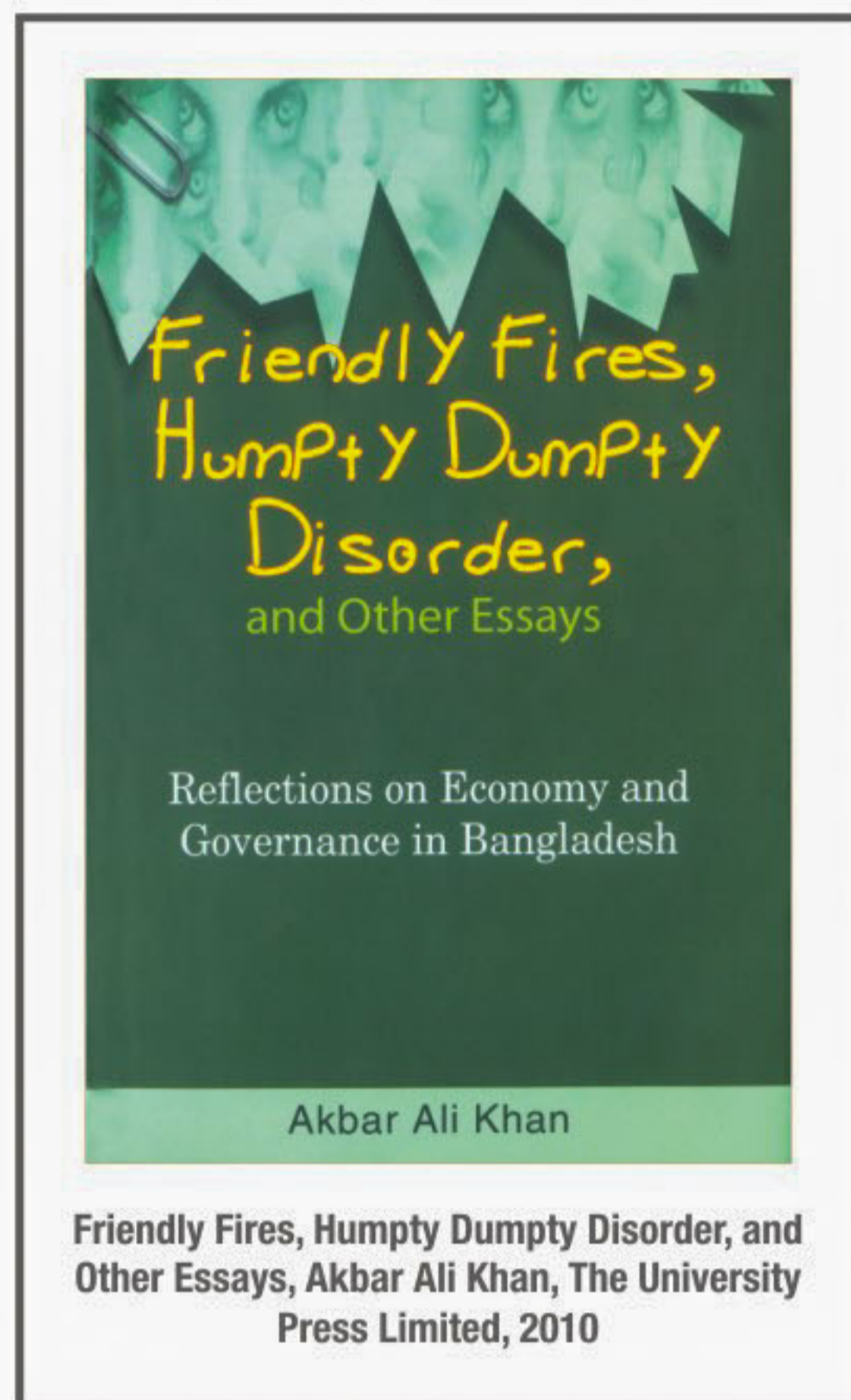
"From ethnic and linguistic points of view, Bangladesh is one of the most extraordinarily homogeneous countries in the world. Yet politically she is so deeply divided that according to the assessment of Failed State Index, she is poised on the precipice of state collapse. With a fragile resource base, centuries of exploitation by alien rulers and recurrence of devastating natural calamities, she was dubbed as an 'international basket case' and a 'test case for development'. Yet in last three decades, she succeeded in doubling her per capita income in real terms and in graduating from low human development to medium development category. These positive developments took place against a backdrop of rapid erosion in governance." Thus does Akbar Ali Khan, in the curiously titled *Friendly Fires, Humpty Dumpty Disorder, and Other Essays* summarize the paradox that Bangladesh appears to people who take more than a cursory interest in that country. He explains the significance of his title in the Preface, and the reader will comprehend its relevance.

In a series of self-contained articles (twelve in all), Khan, a former senior civil servant, elaborates on aspects of the paradox, although he does not confine himself to doing only that, since some chapters deal with other issues. In his words, "The main weakness of this volume is that there is no central thesis", although one is not sure if the absence can necessarily be labeled as a weakness. It all depends on the context in which the book was written, and, given the important topics covered, its varied motifs do not appear incongruous. One may detect a marked tendency on the author's part to be overly didactic with a plethora of panaceas for many of the ills afflicting this country, but, nonetheless, he has some shrewd observations for the reader to seriously mull over. And, with a strong sense of history thrown in for good measure, often in support of some sound analysis, Khan has come up with a book that should get the serious reader interested in the manifold political and economic problems of Bangladesh and get to do some serious thinking.

Khan's acute sense of history manifests itself in one of his most compelling essays, "Administrative Reforms for Enhancing Efficiency of Judiciary in Bangladesh: A Survey of Policy Options" (Chapter 9). Let him introduce the focus of the article in his own words: "First, it questions the wisdom of transplanting the common law system in Bangladesh by alien rulers. Basing on available anthropological and historical research, it argues that the transplantation of winner-take-all legal system by supplanting traditional justice system based on compromise has converted courts into casinos. In transplanted alien legal system, professional lawyers emerged, in the perception of unlettered masses, as betting horses that can earn fortunes for their clients by defrauding the State and innocent citizens through forgeries and blatant lies. It also raises important questions about the viability of separation of judiciary without ensuring the accountability of the Police and Judges." And, he worries that "there is no system of appraisal of High Court Division judges in Bangladesh", although he acknowledges that performance appraisal of the judiciary is in shambles in most countries of the world.

There are other thoughtful observations scattered throughout the book, like, "The real threat to

Bangladesh's graduation to middle income status is political and not economic" (Chapter 7, "Prophesies Belied: The Paradoxes of Bangladesh's Growth"), and proceeds to analyze the country's dysfunctional political culture in "Political Instability in Bangladesh: Retrospect and Prospect" (Chapter 10). Khan delves deep into the past to show that "Political instability in Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon..." In this context, he takes up the issue of *hartals*, which "showed a trend of continuous increase between 1979 and 2006." And, very worryingly for the country, "ironically, political violence is more endemic in Bangladesh today than in the colonial East Pakistan, which fought a sanguinary struggle for independence against a brutal enemy." Khan, then, instructively for the



politicians and political activists of the country, holds that, while "direct financial costs of *hartal* are scanty", there are "three significant indirect costs...political instability coupled with violence discourage foreign investments..., political violence is much more harmful for the poor than the rich...(and) it undermines democratic institutions."

Khan prescribes the creation of political institutions that can survive in a hostile social environment like the one Bangladesh is prone to experiencing. In support of his contention, he brings up the case of France, which "despite low social capital has succeeded in recent decades in mitigating political instability." However, could the explanation not lie in the fact that, after struggling for years in the post-World War II economic doldrums and the trauma of losing her African colonies, especially that of Algeria following a bitter and protracted armed struggle, France has been able

to attain political stability riding on the back of impressive economic prosperity? There is this other point he brings up that requires clarification in terms of its modus operandi. His proposition for improving the political climate through the introduction of "a mix of proportional representation with plurality rule by earmarking 50% seats for proportional representation and 50 per cent seats for first-past-the-post voting system" begs the question of exactly how is the mix going to be executed in practice (like, which areas get proportional representation, which the other, and other such issues)?

The author has these important thoughts in Chapter 3 ("Ethics in Banking") that actually portray a grim broader picture: "Ethical conduct with unethical persons cannot be sustained. Banks in Bangladesh cannot, therefore, function as islands of probity in a sea of unscrupulousness and immorality." And, "Theoretically, financial institutions in Bangladesh are well-regulated. In reality, there is a major gap in enforcement of regulations." This pervasive chasm between appearance and reality shows up in critical areas, as Khan observes in Chapter 2 ("Humpty Dumpty Disorder" and Reform Strategies in Bangladesh): "Most reforms in Bangladesh are zero-sum games where gains are made at the expense of those who do not gain."

Khan takes up the issue of rural finance in Chapter 4 ("The Dilemmas of Rural Finance in Bangladesh: The Tragedy of the 'Missing Middle'") and reiterates what other scholars have also found: "A major puzzle of rural finance in Bangladesh is that the extreme rich and extreme poor have much better access to credit than those who lie in between these extremes." And those who lie there constitute a major segment of the country's population. In Khan's terminology, there are two major drawbacks of microcredit financing operations in Bangladesh: "First, though Microfinance Institutions have shown much promise in disbursing small loans to the poor, they did not succeed in making any significant headway in the credit market for the missing middle consisting of marginal, small and medium farmers and small and medium entrepreneurs. Secondly, it also highlights overcrowding in microcredit and consequent overlapping loans, which is corroding credit discipline."

One of the most interesting chapters is number 5 ("The Rise and Decline of 'Indian Economics' (1860-1945) and the Victory of the Poet"), where Khan concludes that, "Modern India was shaped by Tagore's ideas and not by Gandhi's ideals. The debates on Indian economics ended in the unqualified victory of the poet." And, on a sobering, though realistic note: "...the relevance of Indian values to study of economics in South Asia is fast declining for two reasons. First, traditional values are withering in the face of globalization. Secondly, the standard tools of mainstream economics can easily take into account the distortion, if any, introduced in the economy by traditional values." The serious reader should find enough to engage his/her mind by going through *Friendly Fires, Humpty Dumpty Disorder, and Other Essays*.

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Stories out of a tale of freedom

Syed Badrul Ahsan enjoys an objective reading of history

Revolutions make history. And yet, in more instances than we would care to remember, history becomes the first casualty at the hands of those who try recapturing it in their analytical formulations. In Bangladesh, certainly the product of a revolution brought about by a concatenation of seismic events stretching particularly from the mid 1960s and going all the way up to the end of 1971, history or an interpretation of it has remained an intrinsic part of the national consciousness. Despite our misgivings that along the way (and that was after the rightward lurch the country took in August 1975) Bangladesh's history took a battering at the hands of those who followed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to power, the historical narrative has remained pretty much in place. But, yes, there have been the efforts at an embellishing of it, with sometimes clear, deliberate moves being made to minimize the role of those who were pivotal in the struggle for liberation. And, of course, following August 1975, the brazenness with which history was sought to be diluted was to lead in time to crises of critical proportions. The price is still being paid by the nation.

Ghulam Murshid, in the manner of so many others in Bangladesh, remains aware of the long agony the country has gone through. The extent of his belief, one shared by many, that there is a clear and present need for a dispassionate placing of history before the nation now comes in the form of *Muktijuddho O Tarpor Ekti Nirdolio Itihas*. The objective on Murshid's part is obvious: he means to acquaint readers with what he considers to be an objective view of Bangladesh's struggle for freedom without the frills or the shades of grey which have led so many other writers of works on the history of 1971 to grief. Murshid's views are not touched by what one would generally think of as a partisan presentation of events. In his work you will have little cause to believe that the politically partisan is at work. But what does happen, all the way to the concluding chapter of the work, is the effort of an individual, a scholar to boot, to present the case for Bangladesh in his role both as a nationalist Bengali who observed conditions unfold between the 1960s and early 1970s and as a historian who is not willing to deviate from a reinforcing of the truth as it shaped up in those critical times.

There is a retracing of the events that led up to the movement for independence which Murshid shows up in graphic detail. A particularly admirable act on his part is to provide the reader with details of movements that are not easily available in present

times. Read here of the student movement against the education report in 1962. The writer does a fascinating job of enumerating the causes that led to the movement, bringing into the narrative the role played by student leaders who were to have a significant impact on the fashioning of Bengali nationalism as the Sixties progressed. Predictably, Murshid sees in the Agartala conspiracy case the decisive moment which turned the tide against Pakistan. Where the Ayub Khan regime had thought the case would destroy Sheikh



Mujibur Rahman, clearly the irritant around them, it was in fact the way in which the case was put into shape and the accused brought to trial that sounded the death knell for the regime. A consciousness among Bengalis that their future was bleak in Pakistan was a powerful sign of their secular nationalism rounding itself into a concrete form. It was also the moment that catapulted Mujib into the position of undisputed leader of the Bengalis.

Ghulam Murshid's focus on the War of Liberation, much as it dwells on the nature and prosecution of the war, takes clear and serious account of the bitter

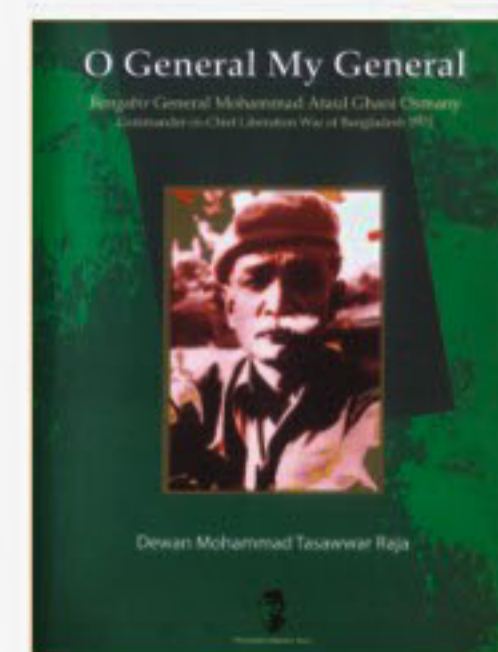
internecine struggle among various elements of the political leadership gathered under the umbrella of the Mujibnagar provisional government. The writer points to the numerous ways in which Tajuddin Ahmed was undermined as prime minister by such powerful quarters as those led by Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed and Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni. Murshid's detailed analysis of the Mujib Bahini, of the way in which it was set up and operated, is but one of the many instances he cites of the divisions that were fast cropping up in the liberation movement. The Mujib Bahini, it became clear soon enough, was being assisted by the Indian military to an extent that not even the Mukti Bahini was. For the Young Turks in Mujibnagar, the Mujib Bahini was one way of ensuring the primacy of the imprisoned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. That was, in a subtle way, an expression of revolt against the Tajuddin government. The force certainly did not endear itself to many and indeed conveyed the impression of being a band of elitist young men looking not to strategy on the battlefield but to a political role for themselves in what was soon to be a free country.

There is a fairly comprehensive account of the war and its aftermath in the work. Bangabandhu's return to Bangladesh on 10 January 1972 and the gradual erosion of his links with Tajuddin Ahmed provide a fresh new perspective on an old tale. It remains rather intriguing that Bangabandhu did not, in all the time that Tajuddin was part of his government, seek to know from the Mujibnagar government prime minister details relating to the launch of the war against Pakistan. The suggestion has been made, and remains, that from the very moment of his return from Pakistani incarceration he came to be under the overwhelming influence of the very men who had been instrumental in undermining Tajuddin in 1971. The parting between Mujib and Tajuddin, when it came in October 1974, was to prove costly for the country. Unmitigated tragedy was the result.

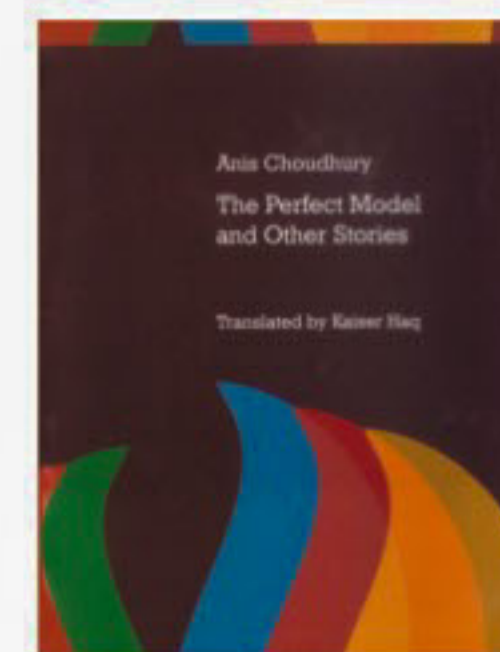
Muktijuddho O Tarpor ought to be on the table of everyone whose interest in Bangladesh's history has not dwindled into inanities. The book does credit to the country. It takes every Bengali back to the age of idealism and struggle that once upheld a cause. It is an opportunity to put the pieces, scattered by coups and counter-coups and political intrigue in post-1971 times, back together again.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS EDITOR, STAR BOOKS REVIEW

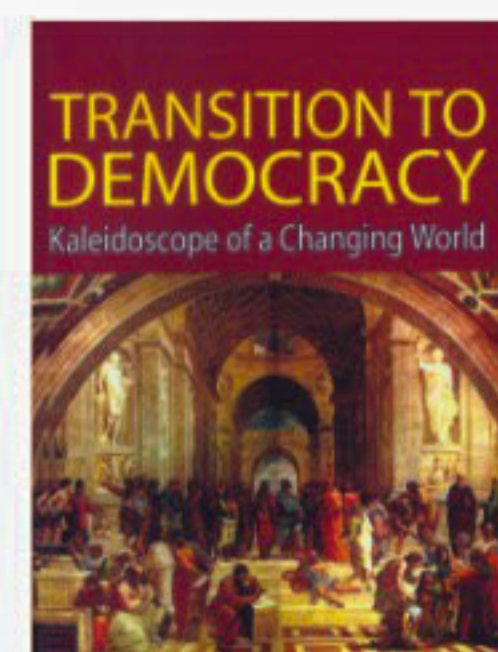
BOOK choice



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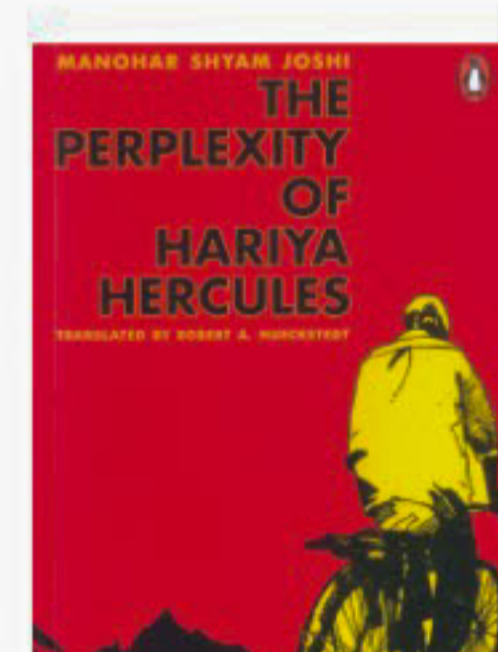
The Perfect Model and Other
Stories
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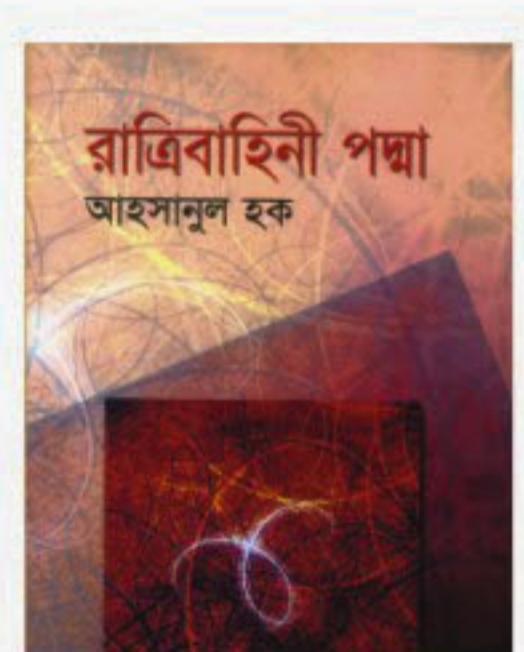
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The Perplexity of Hariya Hercules
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Translation Robert A. Hueckstedt
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Love among the Mughals

Enchantment beckons Efadul Huq

Out of a brothel, perfumed desirably and trailing a mysterious bloodline, an 'overly pretty' traveler reaches the magnificent court of Mughal emperor Akbar. Despite his foolish choice to wear a coat of coloured leather lozenges in the heat of Fatehpur Sikri, the traveler wittily introduces himself as 'Mogor dell' Amore', the Mughal of Love. As Akbar falls prey to his erudite tongue, the yellow-haired eler starts to relate a story of which can 'make his fortune else cost him his life.'

Thus begins the enchantment of *The Enchantress of Florence*. And perhaps at the end of his career Salman Rushdie, pulling colourful threads of history in the background, lore, legends and facts to sea of stories much like the one showed 'Haroun' by his father and talked about by Rushdie in his lectures. This novel, a sea tormented by a tempest of carnal as well as divine love, doesn't fall in between the East and the West but encompasses both of them. And not as a bridge between the two worlds but more of a circle containing everything is the image of a woman: Qara Koz, Lady Black Eyes.

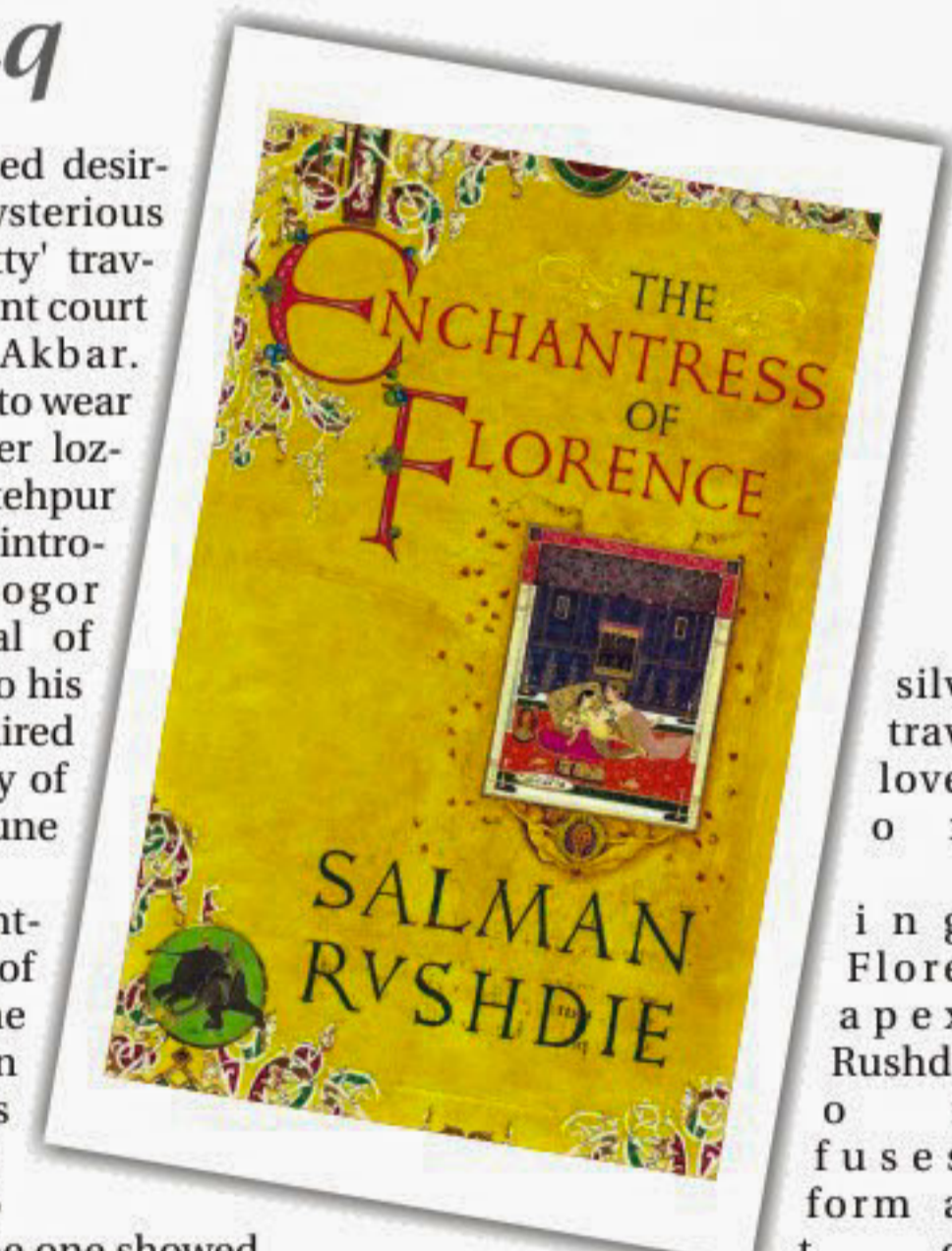
This enigmatic princess is supposedly a descendant of Genghis Khan and is also the Mughal emperor's great aunt. Being the Angelina Jolie of her time, she was captured by a warlord and then, through the skillful use of beauty and sorcery, she climbed the beds of many powerful men, ultimately ending up in the arms of commander Argalia. It is during this dangerous travel across the arms of kings and commanders that Qara Koz moves from the East to the West and reaches the charming city of Florence, where her beauty casts a binding spell on everyone who glances at her. And as you might have guessed by now, by virtue of that gift, she is named as the enchantress of Florence.

Surprisingly the novel doesn't focus just on the princess. Her presence as the invisible driving force is always felt but simultaneously Rushdie treats his readers with delightful digressions. The whore who is an expert in scents, the painter who disappears into his painting, the seductive Jodha bai who is merely a figment of Akbar's imagination, the amusing Birbal and the miraculous voice of Tansen which can 'open the seals of the universe' are some of the many wonderful sketches from history framed in this book.

Not to mention the fascinating character of Akbar who is possibly the first secularist emperor in this part of the world. Akbar, as Rushdie portrays him, is a 'Muslim vegetarian, a warrior who wanted peace, a philosopher-king: a contradiction in terms.' Walking in the garden, Akbar ponders as much over the curves of his women as about 'I' and 'we': the singulars and plurals of the universal soul. Using the king's curiosity, the traveler's mesmerizing storytelling and the sweet enigma of the princess Rushdie chisels out a multi-faceted artwork that dishes out the paradox of the creator and the created, the controversy of wine over water, the dual-ended fusion of east and west, the debate between atheism and religion about which Birbal says that all atheists believe in one God less than the believers.

And as if to sum up all the worldly contradictions, the book declares, 'The curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike'. Indeed, in a wiser-than-before Rushdie's glorious prose which is florid, entertaining and definitely readable, this message comes out so strikingly that I smiled and nodded as I closed the book in satisfaction.

EFADUL HUQ, CURRENTLY PURSUING HIGHER STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES, IS A REGULAR BOOK REVIEWER FOR THE DAILY STAR



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