

The world in its many dimensions

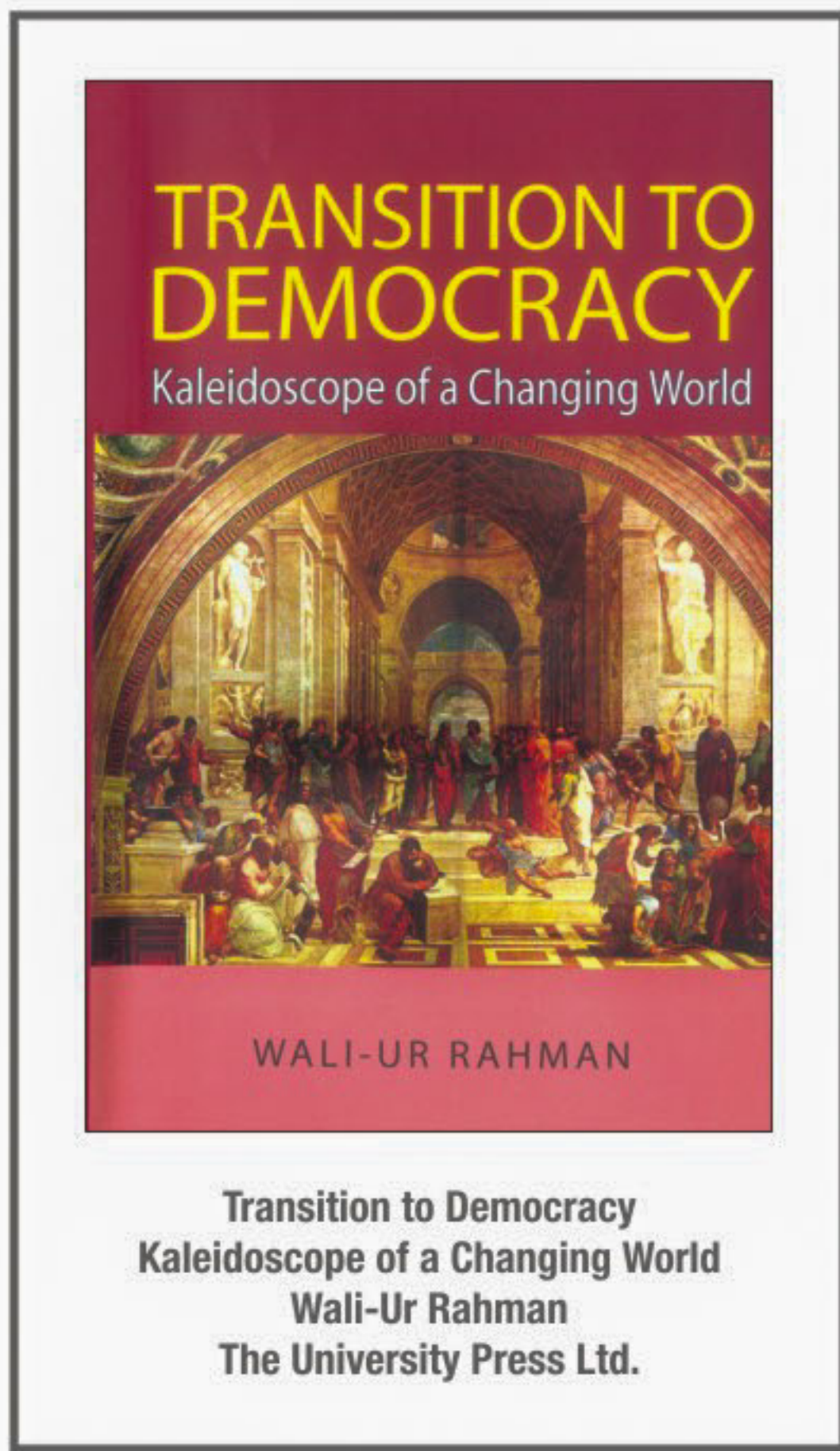
Syed Badrul Ahsan reads a multi-layered work

Wali-Ur Rahman has been a distinctively different breed of diplomat. For one thing, he has suffered for his political convictions and has seen a vindictive government show him the door for those convictions. For quite another, he has consistently made it a point to come forth with his commentaries on a wide range of subjects. Unlike other retired civil servants, who have generally found it convenient to write on the subjects they have dealt with as part of the civil service or have decided to go for an expression of views on politics, Rahman has opted for a widening of the sphere, his sphere. *Transition to Democracy* is proof of the exhaustive view Rahman takes of the world around him. And that, of course, comes through the combination of aesthetics, politics and diplomacy he presents in this work. On the face of it, the book is a compendium of articles he has written for national newspapers over the years. In real terms, it is a good feast he has on offer through bringing before the reader a variety of subjects and themes that the latter can surely mull over.

In Wali-Ur Rahman's writings you will detect a sure, swift move toward drawing the attention of the reader. There is in his expression of opinions a reassuring absence of the conventional, something you spot in such articles as *Ah, But a Man's Reach Should Exceed His Grasp*. Robert Browning at work? Of course. Rahman invokes the poem *Andrea del Sarto* and that famous one-liner to develop his arguments on the essentiality of knowledge as propounded by the world's greatest centers of learning through the centuries. And what happens in such essays is a return to a study of history, a necessary part of existence which we in this country have almost lost sight of because of the overwhelming presence of politics in the national psyche. In this particular article, Rahman ranges far and wide in his efforts to explain the human search for knowledge through a rise of universities as diverse as Oxford and Cambridge and Nalanda and Dhaka. It all adds to one's depth of intellect.

Move on to a different aspect of history, this one the writer's impressions of Victory Day 1997. The implications are obvious. In the manner of millions of others, Wali-Ur Rahman is clearly in celebratory mood, for he sees in that year a revival of the spirit of 1971 in Bangladesh, a revival brought about by the triumph of secular forces at the elections held a year previously. More than the celebration, it is a recapitulation of the past. Quite a good deal space is given over to Henry Kissinger's visit to Dhaka in 1974. Note this

simple yet assertive conclusion: '(The) 1974 visit by Kissinger was a visit that we could have done without.' Rahman has all the reasons for taking such a seemingly hard view. Kissinger was not a friend of the Bengalis in 1971; and his role between 1971 and 1975 where Bangladesh's politics was concerned was not exactly an edifying



one. It is a piece which once again connects thoughts. The writer offers here a kaleidoscope of personalities, with all the history attendant on them. In Madeleine Albright, he spots a sense of justice, of the kind that Thomas Masaryk once epitomized in Czechoslovakia. He is happy hearing the words of appreciation of Bangladesh and its history which come from Nelson Mandela.

In the chapter, *Don't Ignore Diplomats*, there is again a tale rooted in history. We are informed that Uzbek envoys arriving at the court of Aurangzeb generally made gifts of thoroughbred horses to the Mughal emperor. That was not something that envoys from Makkah and Yemen could match. Their unimpressive gifts led to their being given shabby treatment at the Mughal court. In

the course of the Second World War, Ivan Maisky, Soviet ambassador to the Court of St. James, was summoned to Moscow for a meeting with Joseph Stalin. Maisky waited two whole months for an appointment with the strongman in vain before returning to London. Such episodes apart, there is a staunch defence of diplomats that Rahman offers. He notes, 'Many Bangladeshi diplomats have been reprimanded for not supplying shoes and bags and other merchandises to the visiting premier.' A hint at Bangladesh's ruling class? Perhaps, but Rahman is unambiguous in his report on the Sri Lankan ambassador who was dismissed from his job because a book critical of his president was found in his drawer.

The writer does not forget to be appreciative of foreigners who have helped Bangladesh's politics emerge clear of the morass it had become confined in. Peter Fowler, certainly one of the more suave diplomats from the West to have been posted in Dhaka, is one individual held in high regard by Wali-Ur Rahman. Diplomacy apart, Rahman focuses on such a diversity of themes as assassinations which, he believes and correctly too, do not change history. One of the most significant of themes he covers is the life of Francois Mitterrand. Obviously, Mitterrand was the last French president to set great store by French grandeur. It is the man's personality, politics and intellectual acumen that the writer focuses on. And Mitterrand is not the only individual to whom Wali-Ur Rahman is drawn. That much becomes clear from his thoughts on Shamsuddin Abul Kalam, Sullivan Ballou, Emma Lazarus and Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma.

Transition to Democracy ought to rekindle old, near-forgotten emotions in the reader. One reason is the very large canvas on which Wali-Ur Rahman builds his images of the world as he has observed it. It is also our world. He writes as a Bengali who has taken part in the making of history in as much as he has observed it taking shape in earlier times. The essays in this certainly comprehensive work make an impression. Some, because of their rootedness in the historical, stir our senses. Some others simply make us wonder. Wali-Ur Rahman speaks of a world restored, in Kissingeresque fashion. And yet he reflects on the need and the time for renewal.

This is one good book to have emerged from a writer of passion in a long time.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS EDITOR, CURRENT AFFAIRS AND BOOK REVIEWS, THE DAILY STAR.

Images and themes that make your day

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is cheered by new issues of two journals

The Agraphayan 1417 issue of Uttoradhikar, the monthly literary journal of the Bangla Academy, surely upholds the richness of the enterprise. In the earlier issues of Uttoradhikar, conscious presentations of the various aspects of Bangla literature as well as other areas of aesthetics were a palpable sign of the quality it had begun to aim for. The journal now comes with a profundity that should be noted by readers. In the issue under review, it is an enlightening write-up on Khan Sarwar Murshed, the distinguished academic and scholar, which draws attention. Abdus Shakur travels through an entirety of the Murshid landscape and offers up to the reader a pretty comprehensive account of Professor Murshid's life and times. Reading the article is for many who have had the good fortune of being tutored by scholars in the mould of Khan Sarwar Murshid a swift going back to nostalgia.

And that is not all. Selina Hossain's informative write-up on Rabindranath Tagore's birth centenary celebrations in Dhaka in 1961 is one article that you can be sure readers will read with interest. The writer brings into the telling of the story an era that was truly the first concrete instance of nascent Bengali nationalism taking shape. Newspapers competed in their expanding battle to present arguments in favour of Tagore as well as against him. Obviously, as we now know from a reading of history, the anti-Tagore group, blindly associated as it was with the Pakistani establishment of the time, lost out. In 1961, therefore, a great victory was won by the Bengalis of what was then East Pakistan. The Tagore celebrations were the first hint of the secularism that Bengalis were returning to following the trauma of the partition of India in 1947 and the creation of the state of Pakistan. For those too young to recall the events of 1961 as also for those born after the liberation of Bangladesh, Selina Hossain's recalling of that seminal period in our history will come in handy.

Other articles of a definitively incisive nature find place in this issue of Uttoradhikar. Subrata Kumar Das' comparative study of the Nepalese poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Bengal's Kazi Nazrul Islam adds to the south Asian literary ambience. Shibnarayan Roy has some serious thoughts on the Bengali to share. Khalequzzaman Elias' adaptation of an item from Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* promises to rekindle interest in western literature as it came to be shaped in long ago eras.

And so the journal goes on, in all its diverse richness. It is not to be missed.

Uttoradhikar Agraphayan 1417 makes its appearance at a time when *Kali O Kalam* too comes forth with an issue that ought to be a collector's item. The issue is given over wholly to the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore and comes with items which are as engrossing as can be expected. There is a purposefulness which you can spot in the subjects covered in the issue. Altogether, in their discrete form, the articles cover a variety of aspects related to the life of the Bard and in the end project the image of a poet whose links with life and with matters beyond life were to give him a special place in global literature.

The tone is set off by Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, with his *Bangladeshe Rabindranath* and Anisuzzaman with his *Rabindranath O Bangladesh*. Hasan Azizul Haque's *Rabindranath: Shunyo O Purno* demonstrates a new facet to an understanding of the poet. With Ghulam Murshid, it is the search for love in Tagore that says it all. In *Bhalobashar Kangal*, you get a refreshing new dimension of the poet's attitude to romance, indeed to women. Think here of Kadombori Devi and Victoria Ocampo. Abdus Shakur sees the *swadeshi* in Tagore, while Hasnat Abdul Hye comes forth with a brilliant assessment of the traveler that was Rabindranath.

It is the wide scale in which Tagore comes in this issue of *Kali O Kalam* that makes an impression. The contributors to the journal have journeyed across a whole range of the Tagore landscape to give readers a totality of the life and ideals that were Tagore's and that were to leave such huge substance for Bangla literature to build itself upon. His poetry and plays are of course gone through. But then come all those other interests that gave a roundness of character to the poet's personality. You could come across much that concerned Tagore insofar as the mundane realities of life were concerned in Atiur Rahman's *Rabindranath Krishi O Grameen Unnoyon Bhabna*. There is then the translator that was Tagore; and, of course, you have a study of Tagore by Muslims in the early phases of his rising prominence, a reality outlined in detail by Abul Ahsan Chowdhury.

The *Shardhoshotojnomoborshe Rabindranath* issue of *Kali O Kalam* is yours to claim. No question about it.

DR. NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE, HISTORY BUFF AND MUSIC ENTHUSIAST, IS FOUNDER-PRINCIPAL, RADIANT INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL, DHAKA



Mashik Uttoradhikar
Agraphayan 1417
Bangla Academy

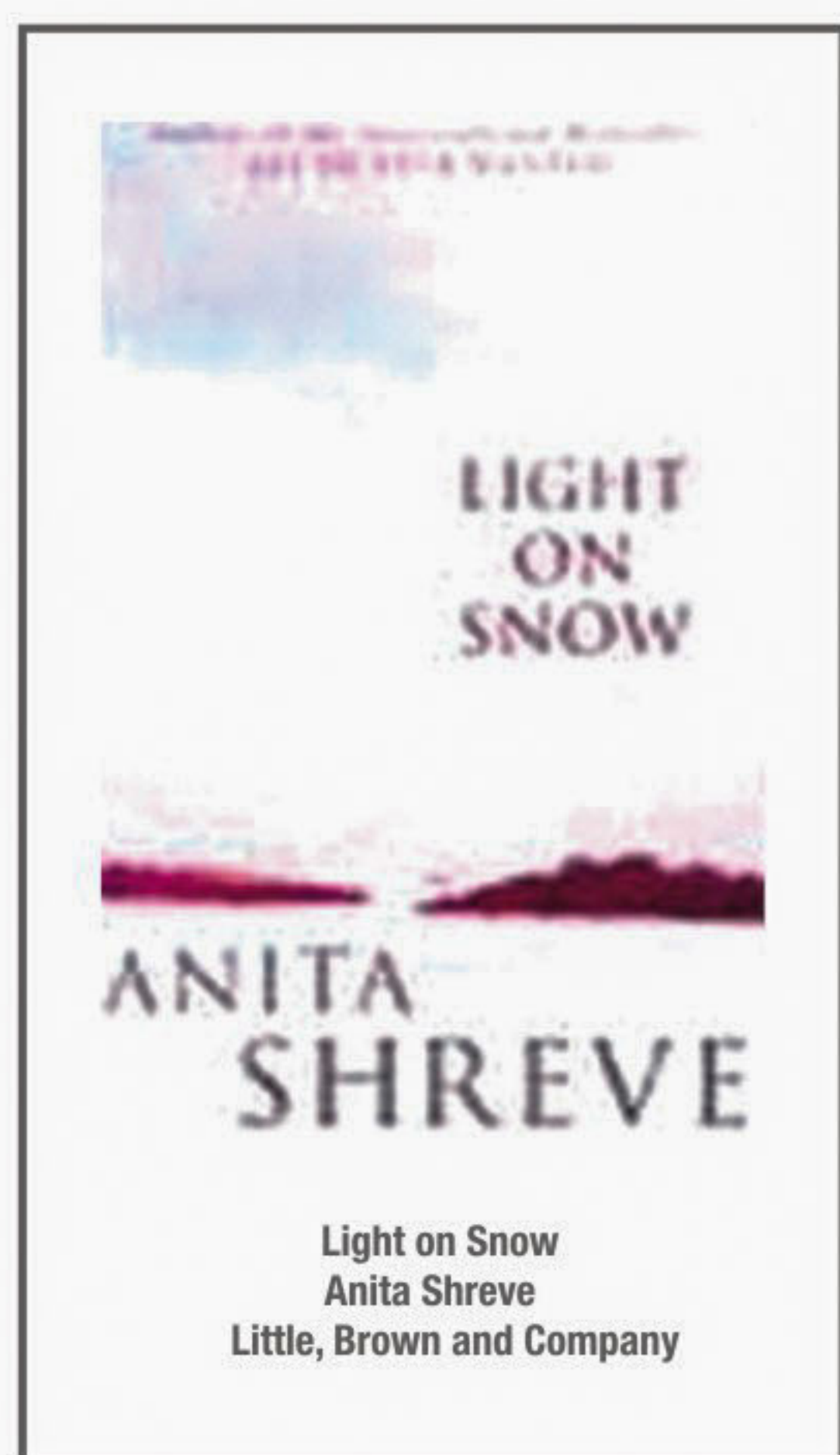
A quietly charged tale

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. 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 Clara. 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.

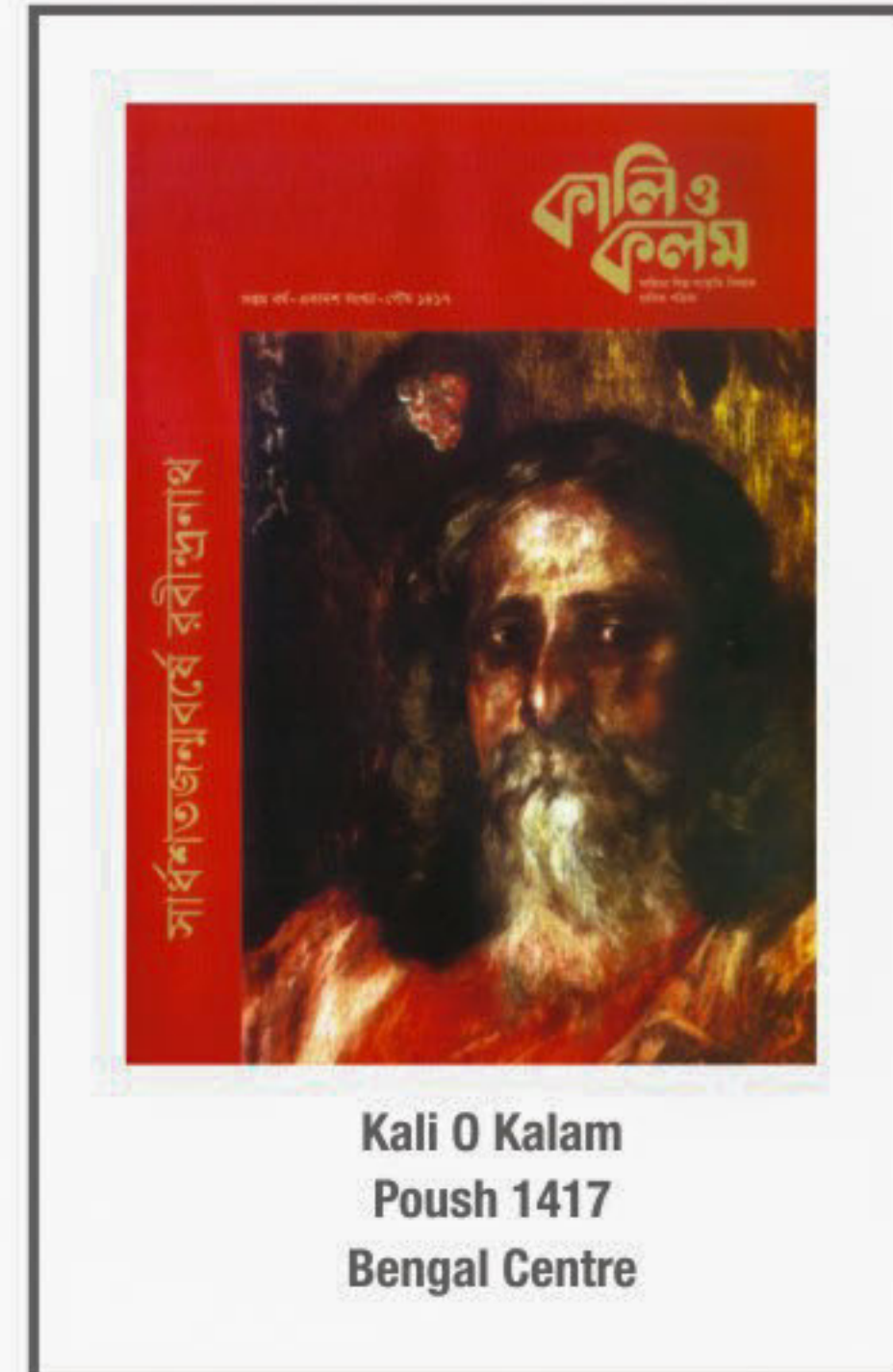
Nicky persuades her father to go to the police. At the police station they have to clarify their position first for helping out Charlotte. But the attempted murder case against Charlotte is not so easy to clear up nor do Nicky and her father find it easy to clear their

own names from the case. However, Nicky is determined to have Charlotte's story of her boy friend 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 topsy-turvy. 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.



Kali O Kalam
Poush 1417
Bengal Centre