

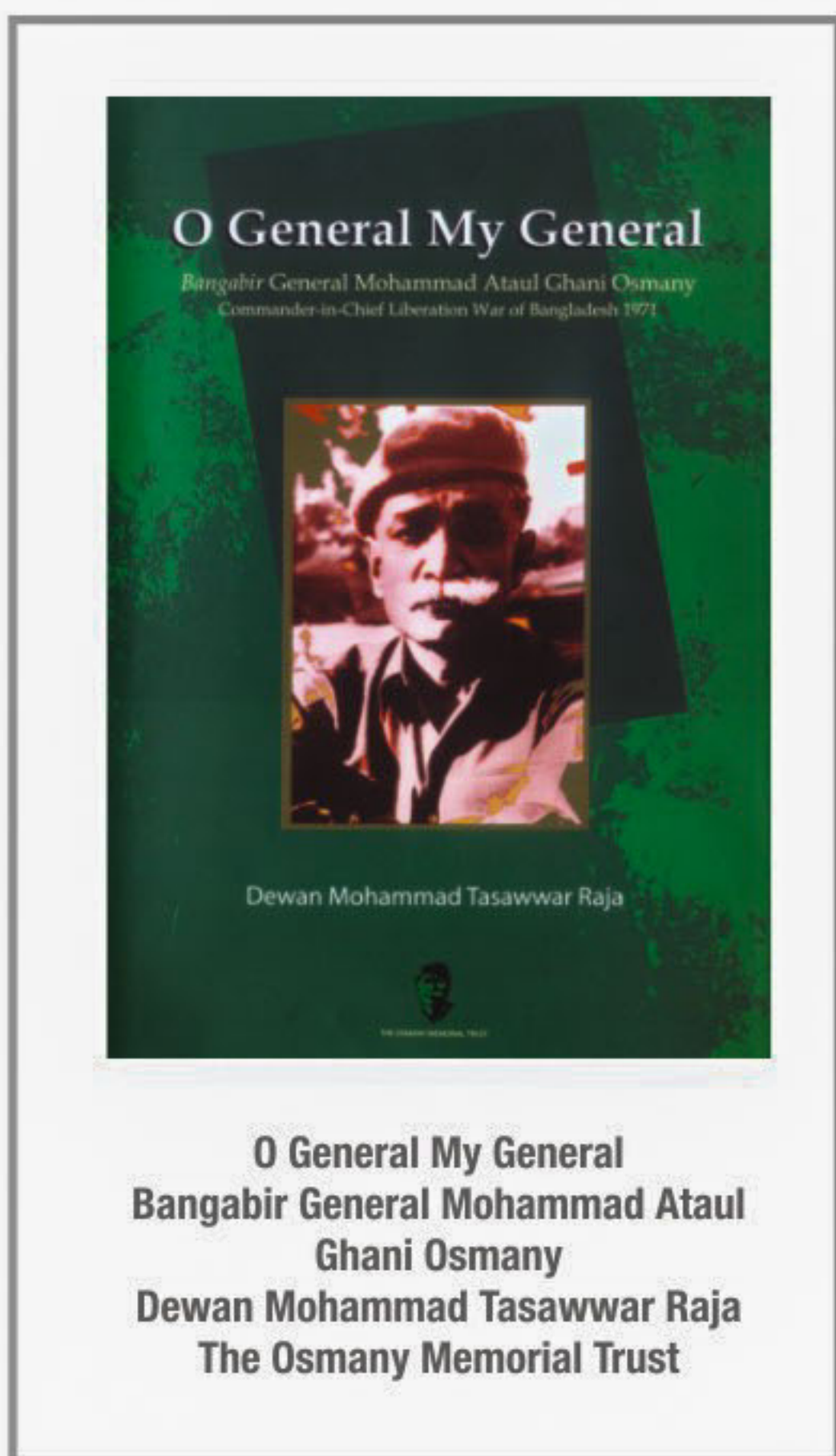
TWO REVIEWS FROM SYED BADRUL AHSAN

An enigma of a soldier . . .

Ataul Ghani Osmany remains a point of reference for Bengalis who take justified pride in his role during the War of Liberation. There is then a class of people who have never failed to underscore Osmany's credentials as a democrat through reminding everyone of the manner of his resignation from parliament in January 1975 once the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution came to pass. Osmany was unwilling to accept a switch over to the one-party state that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman brought into being with the setting up of the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League in that year. Osmany will remain noted for his valedictory remark in the Jatiyo Sangsad --- that he was not willing to see a Mujib Khan in Bangladesh. The allusion was of course to the dictatorship of Ayub Khan in Pakistan between 1958 and 1969.

*O General My General* is, in more ways than one, a eulogy to Osmany nearly three decades after his death. The man remains larger than life, despite his slight appearance and a propensity to stay in the background. Having suffered through his years in the Pakistan army, a phase that saw him repeatedly being passed over for promotion, Osmany nevertheless did not yield. It was the spirit which mattered in him. It can fairly be suggested that there was much that was indomitable about him, that he was not willing to kowtow before men like Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan in order to come by promotions in the army. And having left the army through retirement, of course, Osmany simply made his way into politics at a time when Bengali nationalism first began to manifest itself in the mid 1960s. His political instincts were sharp to the point of telling him that it was Bengali rights which needed to be addressed. There was, for him as there was for others like him, only one way in which those rights could be ensured. And that was through a restoration of democracy in Pakistan. He saw in the Six Point plan of the Awami League a surefire way that would guide all of Pakistan toward a democratic era.

Osmany's finest hour came as the political negotiations between the Bengali leadership and the Yahya Khan military junta collapsed in late March 1971. He found himself in the position of the most senior Bengali military officer, albeit one who was retired, on whom fell the responsibility of shaping guerrilla strategy against Pakistan's occupation army in April 1971. It is facts such as these that Dewan Mohammad Tasawwar Raja highlights in



**O General My General**  
Bangabir General Mohammad Ataul Ghani Osmany  
Dewan Mohammad Tasawwar Raja  
The Osmany Memorial Trust

this work. Obviously, the varied accounts of Osmany's life and achievements are encapsulated in what is truly a paean to the late general. The author goes on a long trajectory to sketch and then flesh out the details of Osmany's background, both in terms of his upbringing and his education. For Raja, Osmany remains a true Bengali commander as well as a pragmatic commander. That last bit may not sit well with others who have observed Osmany. During the war, the commander-in-chief of the Bangladesh forces often drew attention to himself for his acerbic tongue and for his repeated threats, every time his views were opposed by others, to quit command of the Mukti Bahini. There is little question that eccentricities sometimes held sway over him. Despite his threats, though, he did not quit, but there are reasons to think that being the straightforward soldier he always had been, Osmany may have felt piqued by the reluctance of others to take his point of view without question.

The author certainly keeps such perceptions of

Osmany out of his lexicon. His appreciation of the Mukti Bahini commander-in-chief brings to focus the overall impression that he made on people around him, especially on journalists, scholars and soldiers. In this work, Raja reproduces what they have to say about Osmany. You can safely include among them AMA Muhith, Lt.Gen. JFR Jacob, JN Dixit, Mohammad Ayooob and K. Subrahmanyam. The annexure to the book says much that has so far remained a matter of speculation about Osmany, particularly where his absence at the surrender of the Pakistan army is concerned. Indeed, the fact that it was General Niazi and General Aurora who affixed their signatures on the surrender documents has often set off a good deal of debate about the importance given to the role of the Mukti Bahini in forcing Pakistan to a defeat in December 1971. The argument that AK Khondokar was present at the Race Course in Dhaka on 16 December as Bangladesh's military representative has somehow not convinced many that he was standing in for Osmany, for two reasons: he appears in old photographs of the scene as merely one of the many onlookers at the surrender ceremony and he did not share the table with Aurora and Niazi. To such a perception of Osmany's role on the day Pakistan came to an end in Bangladesh, Raja offers a series of responses from a varied class of individuals, the sum of which is that the helicopter Osmany was in was hit by hostile fire on 16 December as it flew up to the south bank of the river Surma. Earlier, on 14 December, Osmany had flown to Agartala. On 15 and 16 December, helicopter-borne, he visited Chandina, Daudkandi and other liberated areas. He expected, once these inspection trips were over, to fly to Dhaka. The attack on his helicopter put paid to his plan. He was not to reach Dhaka until the next day.

*O General My General* is a fascinating addition to the archive of Bengali history. It is a totality of a portrait of the War of Liberation which emerges from this study of the man who fashioned the military struggle against Pakistan. Perhaps a set of commentaries on Osmany's role in the post-1971 period, especially his place in Khondokar Moshtaque's usurper regime and his electoral battle as the presidential nominee of the opposition against General Ziaur Rahman in June 1978, should have been put into the narrative. But, of course, this happens to be a laudatory account of the general's life and career. Which explains it all.

. . . A dictator and his victims

Bangladesh's history in its first decade of freedom was fundamentally a story of bloodletting. You do not have to go into research to arrive at such a morbid conclusion. But you cannot escape feeling a certain sense of irony as you recapitulate the whole episode of the country's actually claiming, and taking, its place in the global community. If the war of liberation in 1971 saw three million Bengalis dying at the hands of the Pakistan armed forces, the post-liberation era turned into a long tale of blood and gore as most of the new nation's founding fathers and war heroes bit the dust through bloody coups d'etat and internecine armed conflict. The series of tragic happenings that engulfed Bangladesh between August and November 1975, followed by the execution of Abu Tahir, a soldier for freedom, in July 1976, will remain a blot on the conscience of a nation which yet struggles to find a way out of the woods for itself.

In May 1981 came the assassination of General Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh's first military dictator, at the hands of soldiers who in the event could not quite succeed in pulling off what they had thought would be a revolution. Within days of Zia's murder, it would be the turn of General M.A. Manzoor, ostensibly the leader of the uprising, to be killed in cold blood by Zia loyalists. All of this is what the country has known over the years. In times that are as far removed from the 1970s and 1980s as they can be, that are clearly a whole lot more transparent than what one could have imagined two or three decades ago, it is now possible for Bengalis to grasp a little more conclusively the factors --- intrigues, conspiracy, et al --- that went into the making of an era that remains sinister in its elemental darkness. And into this story now steps Zayadul Ahsan with his hair-raising account of a failed coup that, once the plot failed to take off, was to leave scores upon scores of soldiers dead after October 1977. Originally conceived and presented as a series of investigative reports for the daily Bhorer Kagaj by the writer, this work is a searing account of the innocent men of the Bangladesh air force who were forced to march to the gallows on flimsy, unproven charges of complicity in the revolt that left some senior and reputed officers of the BAF murdered at the old Tejgaon airport on 2 October 1977. And those were exciting times, not so much for the fact that the struggle for ascendancy among the various politicised factions of the military went on in a seemingly endless pattern as for the truth of what was happening around the hijacked Japan Airlines aircraft at Dhaka airport.

The conspirators struck at the precise moment when senior air force men, including their chief Abdul Gaffar Mahmood, remained busy in negotiations with the Red Brigade who had seized the plane and forced it to land in Bangladesh's capital. Competent officers, among whom was Ross

Masood, were lined up by rebellious air force men before the hangar and simply mown down. The question remains, though: did these men, egged on by individuals whose identities remain yet unknown, decide to strike on 2 October because the opportunity to stage their coup on 28 September, air force day, was lost when President Ziaur Rahman informed Air Vice Marshal Mahmood he was unable to be part of the celebrations? Ahsan comes up with a hint: Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, meeting Zia in Cairo days



**Rohoshshomoy Obbhutthan O Gonophanshi Zayadul Ahsan Pathsutro**

before 28 September, warned him of a plot to assassinate the Bangladesh leader over the next few days. Zia took the hint seriously; and then came the suddenness of the JAL hijacking. As the talks with the Red Brigade neared an end, elements in the army and air force inside Dhaka cantonment went on the offensive against the Zia regime. A day earlier, in Bogra, disturbances in the cantonment left one person dead, three wounded and two missing. In Dhaka, at Tejgaon airport, eleven air force officers were murdered alongside ten soldiers from the army. Forty soldiers were left injured.

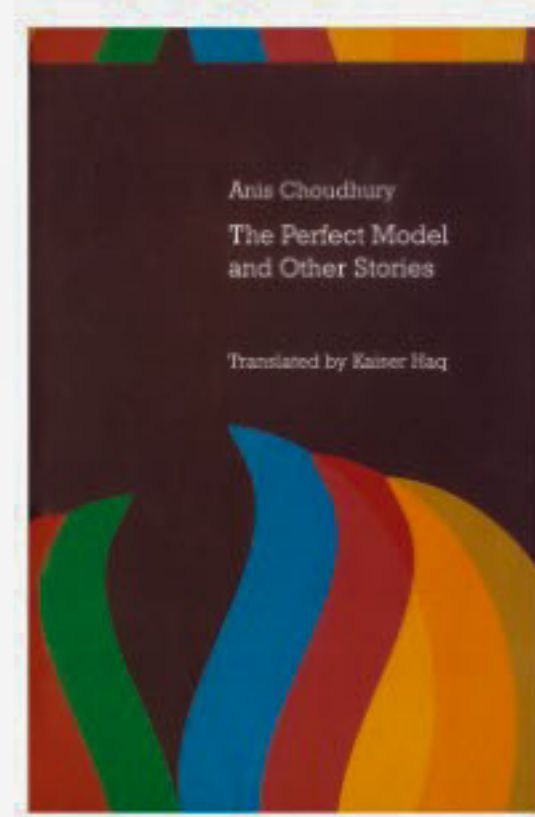
The facts Zayadul Ahsan presents are set off in an eerie pattern from the moment Zia loyalists, Mir Shawkat Ali for instance, move resolutely

against the mutineers. Over the next twenty days or so, it would be an operation of relentless cruelty as the Zia regime, guided by vindictiveness and palpably oblivious to all norms of civilised behaviour, rounded up hundreds of innocent air force men and inaugurated what would eventually turn into a story of unimaginable horror. Kangaroo courts, officially described as military tribunals, swiftly handed down verdicts of guilty on those taken into custody; and night after night, inside the grim premises of the central jail in the capital, the bodies of hanged men dropped into pits for hours on end. It was Azimpur graveyard which, throughout October 1977, saw brisk nocturnal activity as the dead men were hastily buried, unbeknownst to their families. The case of the widow Aleya remains poignant, and heart-wrenching. In the days and weeks following his disappearance, she moved heaven and earth for news of her airman husband who had gone missing after 2 October. No one deigned to keep her informed until much later, to let her know in a terse notification that he had been executed for his part in the 'conspiracy'. There are other accounts, from men who were among the lucky few to escape the noose but nevertheless found themselves condemned to varied terms of imprisonment. The strand of thought throughout the stories runs along similar patterns. The innocent paid for crimes they did not commit; and ruthlessness was what the Zia military dictatorship employed in its efforts to survive and to ensure that no dissent remained to threaten its grip on power. Ironically, the fearsome Zia was to die in a botched coup slightly over three years later.

Zayadul Ahsan's work is much more than a record keeping of one of the more shameful episodes in the nation's history. It is, in very large measure, a call for those who perpetrated the atrocities on the hundreds of innocent men in the armed forces in light of the 2 October 1977 tragedy to be brought to account. Most of the men who presided over the sham trials of these men, sending them to quick death and putting a few others through inexplicable prison terms, are still alive. Some retired as senior officers in the military, especially in the air force. Others, non-commissioned officers who cheerfully served on the tribunals, went on to serve in the forces till their retirement. In the overweening interest of democratic accountability, all these elements responsible for the horrific executions in the dark need to be traced in order to be brought to justice. Ahsan's work is an eye-opener. It is a warning against men who, in the manner of Ziaur Rahman, think nothing of shooting people down in order to entrench themselves in political illegitimacy.

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

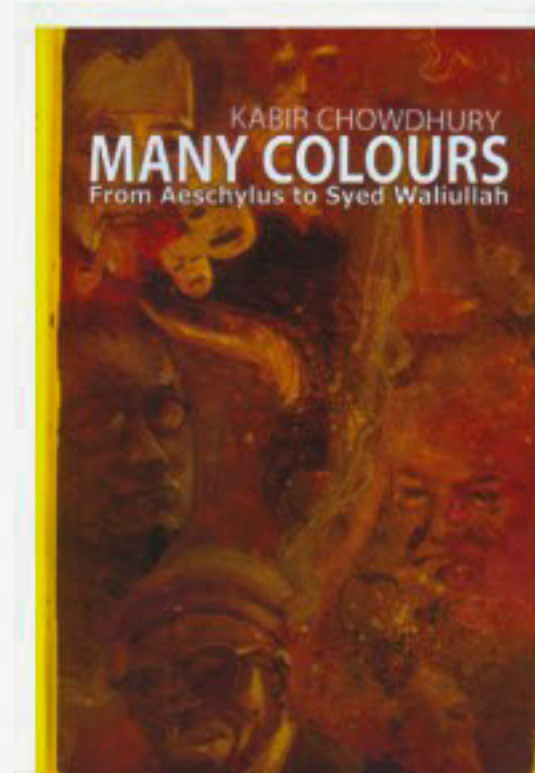
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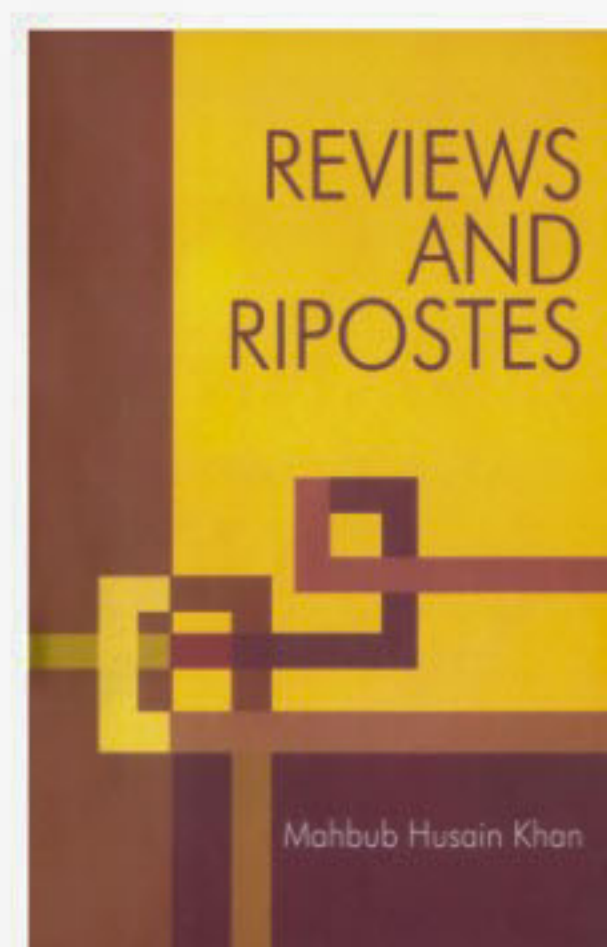
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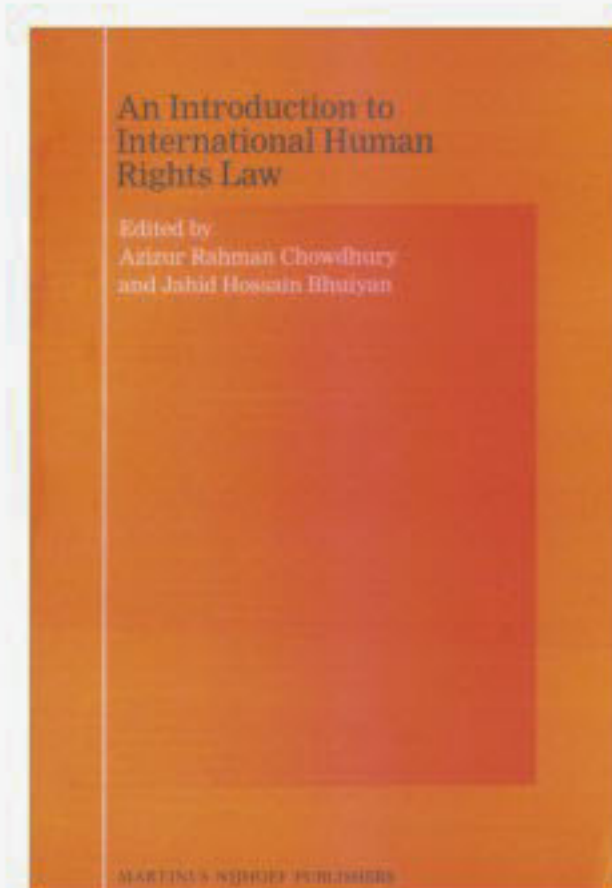
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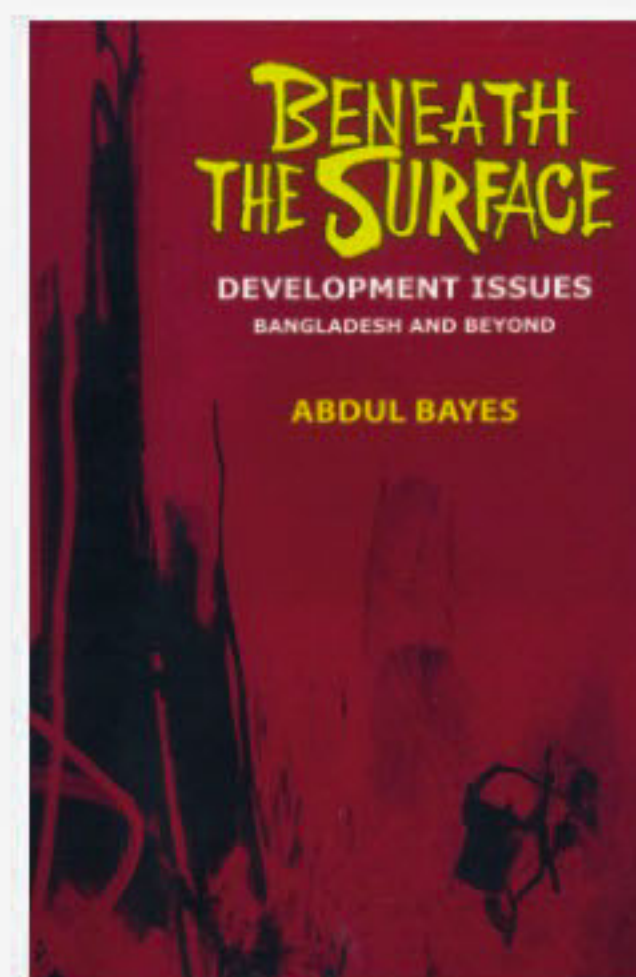
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