

## Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

# The bumpy road to development

Economics is not always a dismal science. But then, when has it ever been in that category? Judging by the wide nature of Rizwanul Islam's reflections on the subject, indeed on the whole concept of development economics as it encompasses the globe as a whole, you would think there is yet much to know about the subject. And you do learn, for in this work the writer brings together a whole set of perspectives on economic theory, or theories as the case may be, that will appeal to readers. But, first, a charming little caveat. The work is in essence a series of observations that take an entire international community into consideration rather than focusing on a region or, more specifically, a country.

Rizwanul Islam's clear objective in preparing this work is made obvious at the very beginning of it. He would have you dwell on economic development, of course. But with that he brings into the scene this wholly new phenomenon, one we have become acquainted with in these past couple of decades, of human development. The idea is simple and not to be missed: it is not enough to speak of development in terms of statistics only, for there is the concomitant matter of how such development comes to be reflected in individual and societal life. Islam takes you through the phases through which the development has passed, to arrive at where it is today. And, yes, you can be sure that the process of development as also the nature of changing perspectives is a thought that will take newer dimensions in the times to be.

So what Islam does here is to bring individuals, and not just academics and experts, level with this overall question of development. There is that much needed exposition and explanation of the standard theories which have defined politics in modern times. At the same time, the writer takes a dispassionate view of where and how approaches to development have gone awry. For an example, a fairly good number of the theories propounded by such institutions as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have in the end come squarely up against a dead end or have simply not been able to make the kind of difference they were expected to. The writer makes note of the predicaments which these institutions have run into as a result of faulty policies, which again have led to adverse conditions for nations trying to wriggle out of poverty. And what might have gone wrong? The answer is not hard to decipher. Policies based on conventional methods of tackling development issues on the part of the World Bank and the IMF have not worked, with ramifications that ought to have been clear from the beginning. Naturally, governments, civil society and countries as a whole have hit back, prompting a considerable degree of rethinking in the corridors of these two institutions. The upshot was the emergence of policies which now targeted a reduction of poverty. Read here the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP).

Islam expends a good length of time on theories relating to economic progress in the developing parts of the world. The approach is significant. In the first place, he goes into an enumeration of varied theories, explaining the circumstances which determined their nature and emergence. In the second, he argues pretty forcefully on the experience of those societies and nations which have tried reworking their economies around such theories. Lest you find yourself at sea with all the treasure trove of facts he comes with, Islam reminds you of the diversity of models of economic theory he has chosen to base his observations on. A particularly notable aspect of the work in review concerns detailed analyses of two significant

## উন্নয়নের অর্থনীতি

রিজওয়ানুল ইসলাম

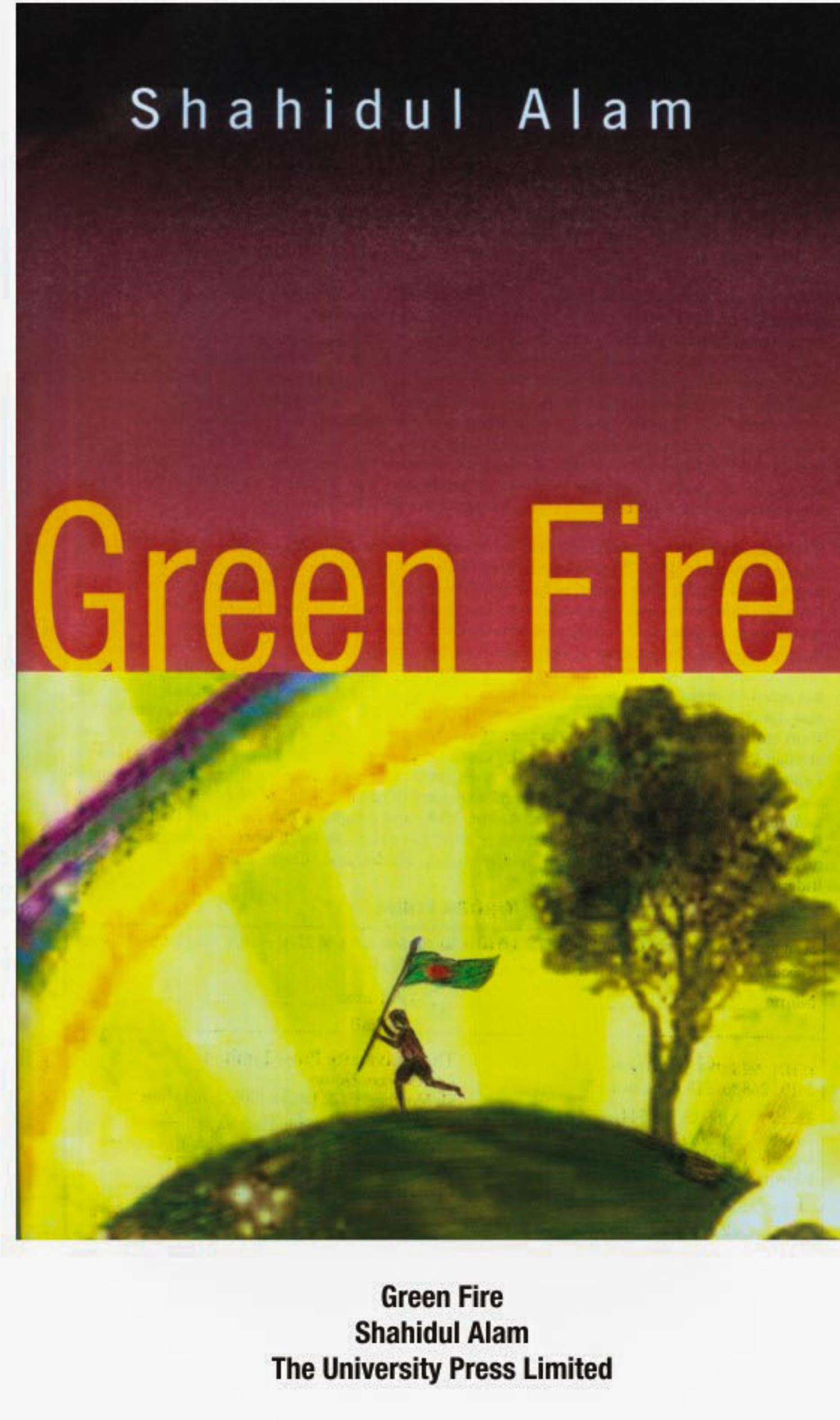
Unnoyoner Orthoniti  
Rizwanul Islam  
The University Press Limited

aspects of development economics, namely, industry and agriculture. That the economic base of a modern state is no more limited to a specific field but is in fact widening with the passage of time through embracing a number of factors is a reality which is addressed at length in the work. Agriculture, of course, is key to economic progress in our times. To what extent agriculture contributes to economic growth is a subject on which the writer holds forth in much detail. For good measure, quite a bit of history comes in, in the sense that Islam refers to a number of proponents of economic theory (this is something he does through nearly the entire work) to substantiate his views on the subject. Read here of Johnston and Mellor who in 1961 argued in an essay in defence of agriculture that the vocation was a huge contributing factor to industrial progress. Now, that makes you think. The mind dwells on Africa, on the various states of neglect in which agriculture found itself as a result of the misplaced emphases placed on development-related areas by global financial institutions. If thoughts of agriculture being a necessary appendage to industry could arise as far back as the early 1960s, why did it take international bodies and governments so long to come to terms with those ideas?

Rizwanul Islam makes you think, every step of the way. Agriculture is what drives rural economies, doesn't it? Well, conventionally it does. But how do you deal with the fact that a non-agricultural approach could just as well lead rural societies toward a new understanding of economic and social realities? An entire image of nature comes in, for it is on the vagaries of nature that the progress or otherwise of rural economies depends. Think here of the cottage industry, of village trade and transport, as alternative sources of rural happiness.

*Unnoyoner Orthoniti* is a work that needs to be read by anyone interested in or intrigued by economic theory and practice. On a larger canvas, it ought to be perused by those involved in politics as also those engaged in development activities. A fundamental characteristic of the work lies in its being appealing to all categories of readers. It should be on shelves at home, properly thumbed through.

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Green Fire  
Shahidul Alam  
The University Press Limited

## A war and the end of innocence

The War of Liberation in 1971 remains, for historians as well as for citizens across the spectrum, a seminal event in the history of Bangladesh. The symbolism that has come to be attached to the war has reflected itself in Bengali fiction to a degree that is as impressive as it is gigantic. Indeed, the war has since the end of Pakistan in Bangladesh been an idea writers of fiction and makers of poets have worked on, producing in the process some of the finest instances of literature in the country. But rare has been the writer who has come forth to depict the war in a foreign language, which fundamentally means English. Now, with the appearance of Shahidul Alam's *Green Fire*, part of that need for fiction in English and that too centred on the War of Liberation, appears to have been met. An initial observation about the work is the modern English, meaning English devoid of clichés of the sort we in this country are accustomed to, the writer employs in the narrative. Alam is eminently qualified to do the job, seeing that he has played, and continues to play, various roles in life. He has been a diplomat for Bangladesh before deciding that he needed to branch out in other areas. He is an actor and combines with that a penchant for teaching that he clearly enjoys. He has taught at Dhaka University and these days does a very good show of teaching at Independent University Bangladesh (IUB) as head of its media and communication department.

Alam's narrative focuses on characters whose background reflects their pretty elitist upbringing. They are all, in school in the later part of the 1960s, children of men and women whose positions in life have given them a certain edge over others. More to the point, these children go to English-medium schools, largely unaware of the social and political upheavals beginning to take form around them. You imagine an oasis or an island quite unaffected by happenings on the mainland when you read about these children. These are characters some of you could relate to, for they serve as a reminder of the kind of education you went through in the period in which the story in this book takes off. We are, of course, talking here of the education that was imparted at missionary schools in what used to be East Pakistan, with nearly every child looking forward to a career in the Pakistan civil service and other places of glamour in the social structure. You then get to inquire if the writer here is not talking about himself, indeed if he is not there in the tale as one of the protagonists. Again, as if through a sudden jog of memory, you realize with a start that you identify with the characters since they sound a good deal like yourself, for you too went to the kind of schools which underline the story.

So here you have this oasis or this island. Take your pick. You would think that those who inhabited it would remain untouched by the winds that were beginning to buffet the whole country. You would be wrong to draw such a conclusion, as Shahidul Alam appears to be informing us. And he does it through taking the fiction through the long street of hard facts which were fast reshaping the history of the Bengalis. The history of the evolution of politics in Bangladesh is thrown up before the reader, which is just as well. There is clearly a double purpose here. The first is that Alam weaves a poignant tale around the course of the war. The second is that he believes that for the story to acquire substance it is essential to have the facts placed before the reader. Now, you could argue if such an approach mars the quality of the writing. It all depends on what your perceptions of literary writing are. The war, the movement for autonomy that preceded it, the atrocities of the Pakistan army, the rejection of the elections of December 1970 by the junta are all placed here. Literature thus becomes a full-blooded lesson in history. You cannot complain, obviously.

And within this presentation of history comes a sense of growing tragedy in the literature Shahidul Alam builds layer by layer. The boys-turned-young men he speaks of are representative of their age, of their clime. The arrogant son of the police officer sees nothing wrong in jumping the queue in school. The boys who first feel sexuality taking hold of their physical being are curious about exploring the carnal aspects of life. The one who was a nuisance in school and college evolves into a studious soul at university and is sometimes mocked for his diligence in class. And all this happens even as Pakistan's eastern province flares into agitation, with all its attendant violence, as a response to the repressive measures adopted by a west-based regime. In 1971, Bengalis will take to a new course. In much the same manner, Tanvir, and his friends will chart, unbeknownst to themselves, a new path to a new life --- of struggle and tragic consequences brought about by the policies of a myopic junta.

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## A sage, a boatwoman and a river

### Subrata Kumar Das appreciates a novelist and his translator

The English translation of the Bangla novel *Vyasa* by the powerful writer Shahzad Firdous (b. 1950) from West Bengal is no doubt a praiseworthy achievement in the translation arena of Bangladesh. The novel has been much appraised by now, and the time to appreciate the translation of this book by eminent Professor Kabir Chowdhury (b.1923) has come.

Creating newer literature by remaking mythological stories is nothing new in Bangla. Since the mid-nineteenth century hundreds of plays, novels, and poems have emerged which have taken their main stories from the myths. The big names in Bangla literature, like Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), are the mostly mentioned literary figures in this regard. Buddhadeb Bose (1908-1974) and Samarendra Bosu (1924-1988) of the later half of the twentieth century are creators who successfully followed the paths of their predecessors. Shahzad Firdous is another meritorious devotee to work on mythological treasures.

What a surprise to know that this great novel is the debut attempt of the author! The novel was first published in a journal in 1993 and later on took a book form, in 1995. And immediately the novel drew a good readership and brought much commendation for its writer.

To all Firdous readers, though the number is very few in Bangladesh, the story behind the writing of *Vyasa* is well known. That much-known story has also been included in the 'Author's Preliminary Words' of the book. It notes that once, much before the mid eighties of the last century, Firdous came by a proposal to write a film script for the celebrity Bollywood actor Dilip Kumar. For this unprecedented work Firdous selected the story of Vyasa or Vedavyasa or Krishnadvapayana. The principal reason was his preoccupation with the Mahabharata. For the last twenty five years, after reading the Mahabharata, Firdous was planning to do something with this mythological sage. Though, sorrowfully, his script was not accepted by the film businessman, the script got the approval as a masterpiece by the literary non-business commoners.

It is true that Firdous' *Vyasa* is about Krishnadvapayana Vedavyasa, the Hindu sage who had a great number of scriptures to his credit. The foremost job that Vyasa completed was the division of the Vedas for which he was crowned with the title Vedavyasa. Moreover, he authored the monumental Mahabharata as well as most of the Puranas. The epic Mahabharata has depicted the life sketch of Krishnadvapayana too, though not clearly and chronologically but rather in fragments. And what Firdous has done is a clear and chronological outline of the life of Vyasa.

What does the Mahabharata say about the life of Vyasa? He was the son of Satyabati, begot by the sage Parashara. Satyabati, when a maiden, would row her boat across the river. One day Parashara happened to be her passenger and incidentally the knowledgeable person felt affinity with the black boatwoman. He soon gave way to desire and after their sexual union the sage gave her the boon that the child to be born out of the union would be the wisest man under the sun. This man was to be Krishnadvapayana. Firdous delineates the bringing up of this black boy and his growing up in youth. We find that at some time Parashara leaves Satyabati and takes away Krishna to a faraway ashram to provide him with proper teaching. But he does not become a commoner; he raises questions and thus turns disobedient to his father too. And thus Firdous makes the sage an ordinary man for which the novelist deserves much appraisal. Firdous' *Vyasa* runs through the maze of the Bharata family where Krishna's mother had been married to Shantanu. Crossing all these, the story moves through historic events, such as the Kurukshetra War and even after that Vyasa is alive to console Gandharai, the mother bereft of all her one hundred sons. And what a miracle that in between all these stories come the final chapters of the Mahabharata where we get Vaishampayana narrating the historical story to Janamejaya, the great grandson of Arjuna.

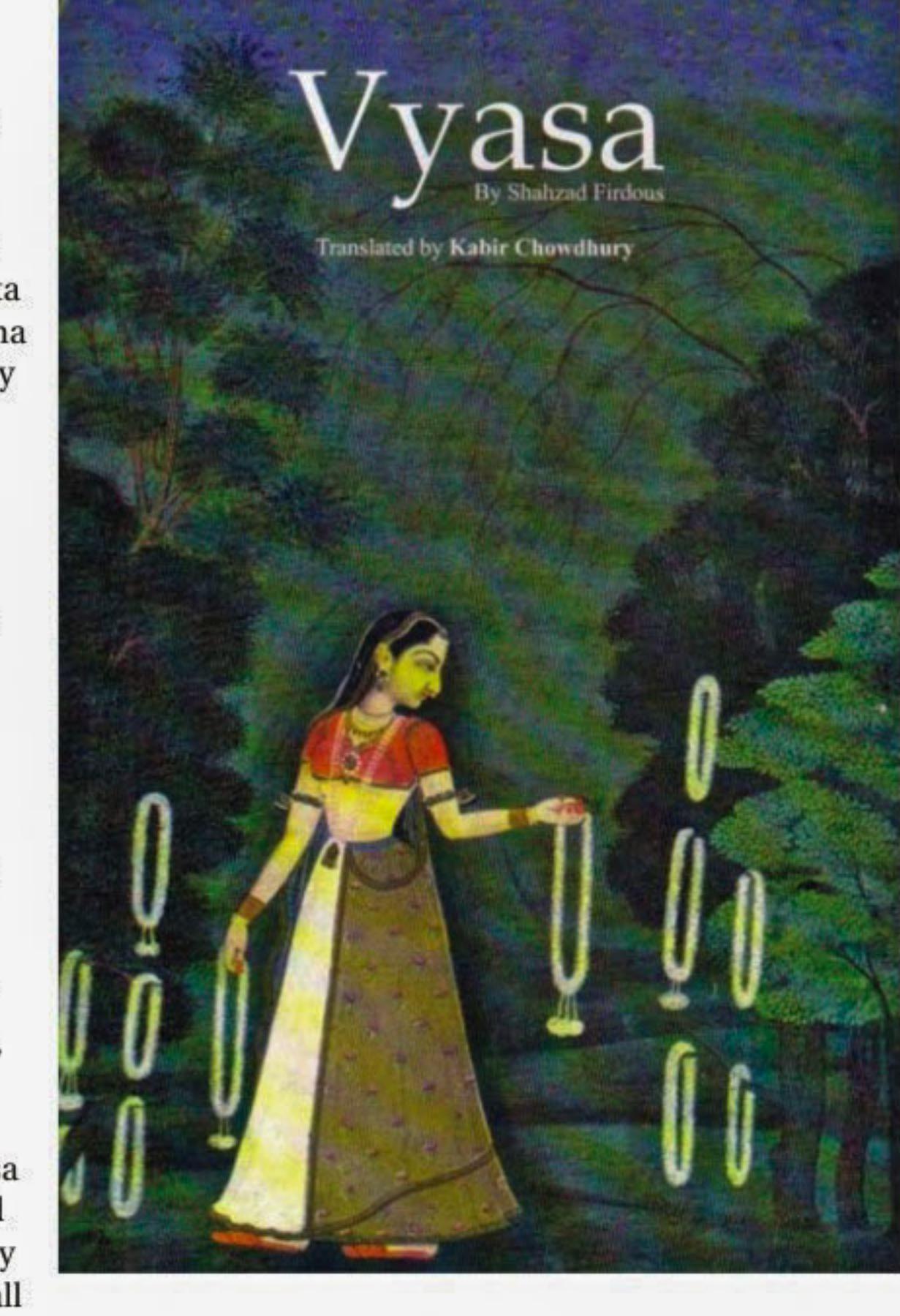
As an ordinary human, Firdous' *Vyasa* throws questions at his father Parashara; he brings up the question of the right of the Sudras. Vyasa asserts: 'All men are equal.' Very forcefully he announces: 'The learning of the wise is for the wise, the learning of the illiterate is for the illiterate. The illiterate will never know the learning of the wise. Similarly, the wise, too, will never know of the learning of the illiterate' (p 17). To his father's face Vyasa declares: 'If the entire world abandons me I shall bow my head before the Sudra, I shall bow my head before the particles of dust, I shall bow my head before the worm in the mud for the sake of knowing life' (p 20). And thus he denounces the entire establishment, all the truths established in society and so becomes the wisest. Let us not forget that it is Vyasa who puts questions to Parashara about the legality of the relations that Parashara had with the fish-smelling Satyabati. Vyasa bursts forth with the eternal truth: 'No wealth in the universe belongs to any one individual. Everybody has equal right to all things' (p 44). Firdous makes a modern man out of the mythological sage character.

Let us take a look at Kabir Chowdhury's translations from Bangla to English. Along with a huge number of translated poetic volumes, he has translated fiction like *Laughter of a Slave* (1970), *Portrait Number 23* (1975), *Rifles, Bread and Women* (1976), *A Slave Laughs: Sultan* (1993) and other works.

Perhaps *Vyasa* is the most readable translation work by Prof Chowdhury? He has done this job in very lucid English, an absolute necessity in modern translation. The simple sentences have added a new dimension to the whole text. The wisdom of the translator in avoiding Victorian vocabulary, as is seen in most of the translations of Bangladesh, will surely serve as an example for translators in future.

Shahzad Firdous cannot be identified with popular trends in Bangla literature. He has been coming up with experimental fictions that have won the hearts of readers interested in serious works. *Altamas* (1995), *Plague* (1996), *Mohabhar* (1996), *Palot Mudra* (1996), *Ohinokul* (1998), *Shailoker Banijo Bistar* (1999), *Kanangon* (2000), *Mrityu Jonmo O Mrityu* (2000), *Laden Waf* (2000), *Atmabhanjaner Khela* (2002) and *Shyam Jonjoj* (2002) are the novels that his mighty pen has produced to date. Moreover, another volume of three novels called *Dwipode Swapode*, *Baroi September*, and *Somoysima Dosh Second* came out in a single cover in 2003. The noted critic Parthapratim Bandapadhyay wrote a critique on Firdous' novels a decade back. Along with all those, a little magazine named *O-e-Ojogor* dedicated a special issue to him in 1999.

Omni Books, Dhaka, has done an excellent job by publishing this English version. And yet there are some faults in the book, which we expect will be corrected in the next edition.



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