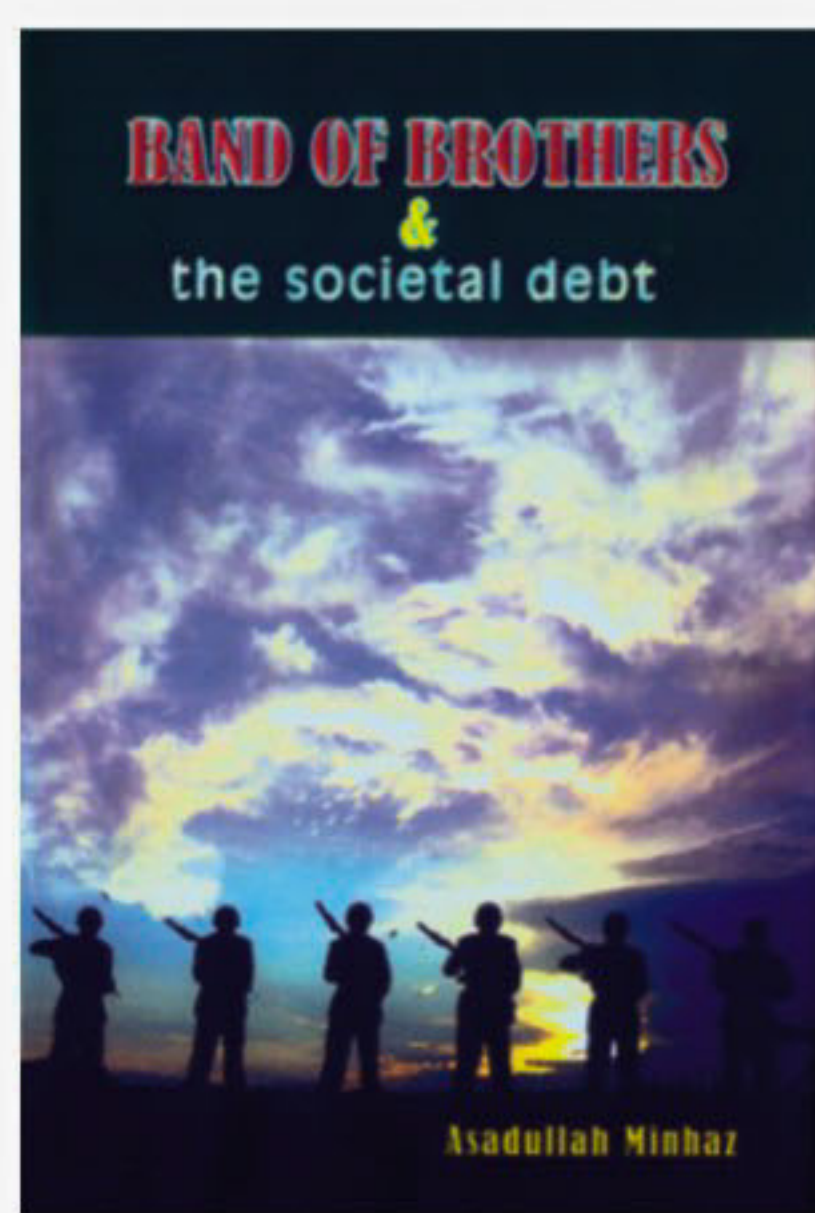


Into the soul of mysticism

Syed Badrul Ahsan takes a plunge into the soulful

There is forever a requirement of culture, a need to go back to it in order to move on. Haroonuzzaman clearly seems to be doing that, especially through a reinforcing of the streams of Bengali thought which have regularly contributed to an enrichment of Bengali cultural tradition. An academic, Haroonuzzaman has in recent years distinguished himself through purposeful forays into heritage territory, through coming forth with original works as well as reinventing the old ties that have bound generations of Bengalis one to another.

And here is evidence of how Haroonuzzaman means to keep us riveted to the ideas that have been of fundamental import for us through our long history. Obviously, these ideas come encapsulated in literature. What Haroonuzzaman does is to take a serious, deep dive into the spirituality of literature, through taking us by the hand, as it were, into a reinvention of the baul literature which has acted as a solidifying element in the construction of aesthetics in this country. In the present context, the scholar brings readers in contact once more with Lalon. You could argue that Lalon literature may have by now earned the reputation of having been much overused, that not much more light can be made to shine on him when nearly everything has been said about him. Haroonuzzaman's take is of a different kind, of course. He selects some seminal songs from the poet of spiritualism and strives to reshape them in the English



Lalon
Selected Songs of Lalon
Trans. Haroonuzzaman
Adorn Books

language. That is just as well, for most earlier translations of Lalon songs into English have lacked the substantiveness one expects of such poetry.

Note the following:
There is the man in this world, I say / What is he? What is his shape? / I can't see. .
Go back to the original *boli re manush manush ei jogote / ki bostu, kemon akaar / na pai dekhi-te*. The translator comes close to how Lalon looked at the dilemma. Of

course, something always goes missing in translation, but Haroonuzzaman's ability to approximate the profundity in the poet-mystic is what draws attention. Observe now the writer's approach to that permanence of a song, *aami ek dino na dekhilam tare*.

Not a single day I could see him / So near is Arshi Nagar / There lives a neighbour...

Shades of the prosaic? Perhaps, but Haroonuzzaman's preoccupation is clearly one of getting the message across. He does that, not least because of the extensive deliberations on baul philosophy he brings into a rendering of the tale. It would be pointless going straight for the translated poetry before you have coursed through the introduction, where Haroonuzzaman expands on the theme of baul literature in its wider dimensions, to an extent that is as educative as it is revealing.

You get more of the same in Haroonuzzaman's study of Radharomon, which for many is an esoteric subject to tackle. And yet Radharomon remains a pivotal figure in the making and growth of Bengali spiritual as well as literary consciousness, his presence a perpetual one in songs and mystic philosophy. Haroonuzzaman begins, as he does with Lalon, through delving into the undercurrent of baul philosophy before he moves on to give readers a picture of Radharomon's background through a graphic presentation of his family tree. He does a similar thing in the case of Lalon.

Now, these family trees are of particular significance because you do not come by them much, in these times. The sadness is in knowing that writers all too often are content to slap on readers the works, original as well as translations, of illustrious men and women, without much thought to enlightening us on the background of such individuals. To be sure, Haroonuzzaman could have opted, to our immense benefit, for extended essays on Lalon and Radharomon. He has not, of course, which is why one must remain content with the family trees. Again, these trees do provide us with the rudiments of material that are so much a requirement all these centuries after the passing of spirituality.

Radharomon speaks to the soul. He is of the soul. Observe how Haroonuzzaman cuts through the mystery, to emerge with these translated lines from one of the poems:

Keeping the golden Moyna inside / It has been locked from outside / Who is that amusing person who has made this cage?

And here is another:
In this man is that man / O my mind, think about it / Take an attempt to see him / With your inner eye wide open . . .

Lalon and Radharomon belong in the thickness of time's mist. Haroonuzzaman opens a few windows for us to glimpse segments of that world.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Books Review.

Insights into a world of science

A new book makes A M Harun ar Rashid happy

Aladdin's Real Lamp by M. Shamsheer Ali is an interesting book written by a well known personality of Bangladesh whose popular science presentations on radio and television have become household words during the last quarter century. The mythical Aladdin's lamp was invented in China, which is now boasting to become the second largest economy of the world, thanks to science and technology. The last page of this book says,

"Since science has now become a way of life, the general masses who pay the taxes for development and for whom the fruits of research must finally be targeted must also be educated about what science can do for them. This would increase their appreciation of science and would encourage them to shape their children to be the active players of the day. We learn about Aladdin's Lamp in stories, little realizing that the lamp is already in our hands in the new millennium. Science is that Lamp".

This is what Professor Ali has assiduously set out to explain in this well-produced book of about two-hundred fifty pages which are enlivened with lovely stories of various personalities of science whom the author has had the good fortune of meeting during his eventful career. One such hilarious story is about the shaving razor for which the Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, passed the order that until the time India attained the quality of foreign blades, ten percent of the people of India should keep beards! It is not clear whether this order was abided by.



Aladdin's Real Lamp
M. Shamsheer Ali
Sucheepatra

Another cute story involves again Pandit Nehru and the famous scientist Homi Bhaba, who was then Chairman of the Indian Atomic Energy Commission.

In Professor Ali's words, "Nehru liked Bhaba so much that one day Bhaba rang Pandit Nehru after midnight. 'What is the matter?' Panditji asked. Bhaba replied, 'Panditji, Apsara is critical!' The term Apsara

has a literary meaning of Sursundari, but here it was just the name given to a reactor.

Nehru said, 'Come on Bhaba! this is no time for a joke.' But when Bhaba explained the concept of 'Criticality' in a reactor, Nehru was beside himself with joy"

I can not vouchsafe the veracity of the story but it certainly reminds me of our long and painful Odyssey with the Rooppur nuclear power plant with which Prof. Ali has long been associated. Rooppur is still a distant dream for the people of Bangladesh!

This well-written book has addressed many vitally important and relevant issues connected with science and technology education in Bangladesh and it is correct when it says;

"The so-called early specialization that exists in the present time is reducing in effect people to an intellectual darkness in other subjects."

The result is that many arts and social science graduates do not have a clue about modern science and technology, even through we claim to be entering the modern "digital age". In the words of Prof. Ali,

"Thanks to the widespread use of information and communication technology people are becoming more and more conscious of the problems of life and environment and are beginning to appreciate relevant issues. Science is finally beginning to emerge as a cultural activity of man."

This is probably true for many, but not for all. The madrasa system of education does not consider science and technology educa-

tion as "the cultural activity of man". In Prof. Ali's words,

"Unfortunately in the Madrasha system of education which is followed by a sizable section of the Muslim students especially in the rural areas of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, lessons in science are not considerable and up-to-date"

Not considerable and up-to-date only? They are above all not modern. In this connection, let us remember the story about Dr. I. H. Usmani, Chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, who was addressing a gathering of government officials. He was trying to explain how heavy elements could be artificially produced by particle accelerators. One bureaucrat in the audience said, "ye ajib baat hai. This is strange. Do you mean that man is doing what Allah could not do?" After narrating this story, Prof. Ali has commented that educated people can also be scientifically illiterate!

The book is a pleasant reading and hugely informative. There is one missing link. There is no index in the book. An index can be a very useful thing for a reference book like this.

Incidentally there are few printing mistakes in the book. For example, the name of the first Prime Minister of Pakistan has been printed as Liakat AH Khan (p 32). This should be corrected by adding a corrigendum, if possible.

I wish this splendid book a wide circulation.

A.M. Harun ar Rashid is former Bose Professor of Physics, Dhaka University and is at present UGC Professor.

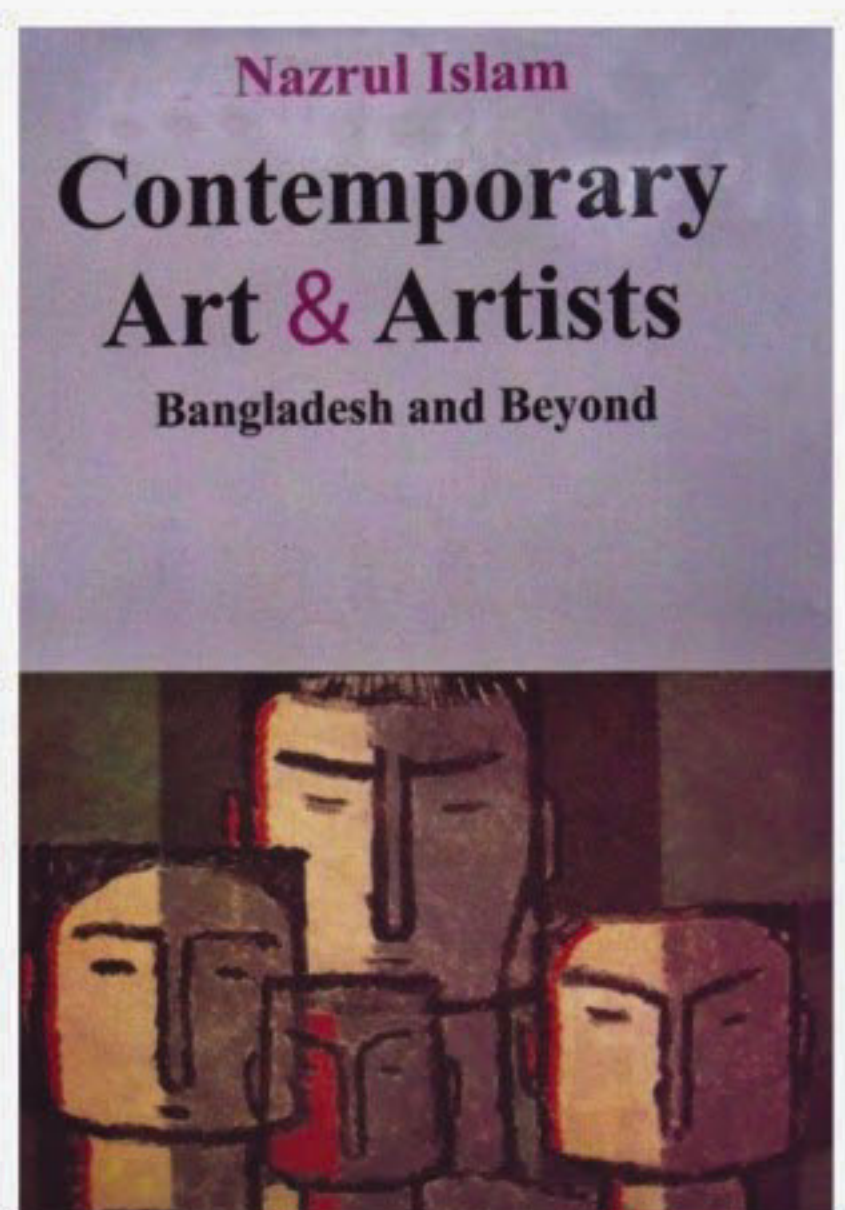
Painting ... another way of keeping a diary?

Shamsad Mortuza welcomes a new work on Bangladesh's art

Nazrul Islam's collection of essays on Bangladeshi art is a diary that paints the journey of contemporary painting and sculpture. Islam uses his privileged position of witnessing the growth of art in Bangladesh, a topic that he has been exploring for the last few decades.

The volume, Contemporary Art and Artists: Bangladesh and Beyond, therefore, is a welcome publication as it reviews the works of key artists who have established Bangladeshi art on the international art scene. There are individual pieces on Zainul Abedin, Abdur Razzaque, Abu Taher, Shakoor, Farida Zaman, Hamiduzzaman Khan, Ivy Zaman, Ranjit Das and Mustapha Khalid Palash. This list suggests that Islam has covered a broad spectrum of artists, and has not confined himself to some obvious names. In addition, Islam has included pieces that trace the rich heritage of art in Bengal, understand the link between architectural design and art, consider the mediation of art and nature by local artists, and focus on emerging popular culture such as rickshaw painting.

The formal inception of what we know as Bangladeshi art began in 1948, with the establishment of the Government Institute of Arts in 1948 with Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin at its helm. In post-Partition East Pakistan, the pioneers of Bangladeshi art had to tread a fine balance between the Bengal School of Abanindranath and the Calcutta School of Jamini Roy in order to



Contemporary Art & Artists: Bangladesh and Beyond Nazrul Islam
Academic Press and Publishers Library
Painting is just another way of keeping a diary.
--Pablo Picasso

find an accent that would capture local sites and sights. Bangladeshi artists had the additional responsibility of negotiating with the dominant modes of western art, such as symbolism, expressionism, surrealism or impressionism. In short, the challenge for the pioneers of Bangladeshi artists was earning a niche on the international art scene while distinguishing them

from other practitioners of art in the sub-continent.

Islam's introductory piece, "Painting and Sculpture in Bangladesh", is a nugget of art history in Bangladesh. It reminds us of a tradition that goes beyond the formal institutional beginning of our art. He briskly touches on the pre- and post-Mughal art works to retrace the early periods of art in Bengal.

The following piece, "Artists on the Sixties", is a brief interlude that contextualizes some of the art practitioners. It is no surprise then that the discussion on individual artists begins with Zainul Abedin. Islam focuses mainly on the life of Abedin whose interpretation of the Bengal famine signaled the dawning of a new era of art.

Islam's style in almost all the essays remains biographical, with occasional comments on individual art work by the artists concerned. This is probably because of the fact that many of the pieces included in the volume were written either as catalogue entries from certain exhibitions or as exhibition reviews that Islam wrote for different journals or dailies. His descriptive and historical-biographical style displays his knack for introducing a painter in simple language.

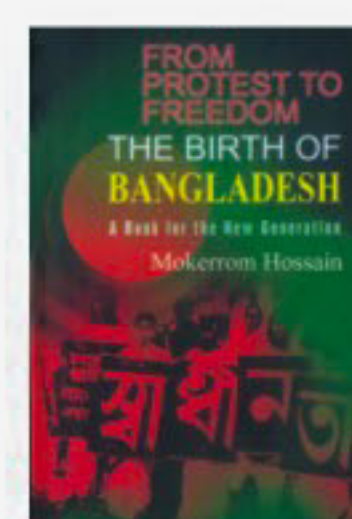
As an urban planner, Islam's interest in the relationship between art and painting is evident in essays such as "The City in Modern Art of Bangladesh", "Art and Environment", "Disaster and Women",

"Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh". Islam demonstrates his skill as a researcher as he incorporates facts and figures to establish his point. It is not so often you get to see quantitative measures in an art review. But Islam shows us, for instance, how the representation of natural hazards remains remote in the art work displayed by artists in the nine Art Biennales that have taken place in Bangladesh. He expresses his amazement at the fact that "even in the exhibitions which closely followed ... catastrophic hazards as the 1987 and 1988 floods, the number of works on such themes (was) quite few."

This is a surprise finding as one would expect an artist to respond to the phenomena of her/his time. Islam lists four categories of impressionistic, symbolic, abstract and semi-abstract paintings or sculptures on natural hazards that Bangladeshi artists have produced, but somehow these art works do not find themselves in international exhibitions. The analytical piece thus hints at a politics of representation without actually spelling it out for readers.

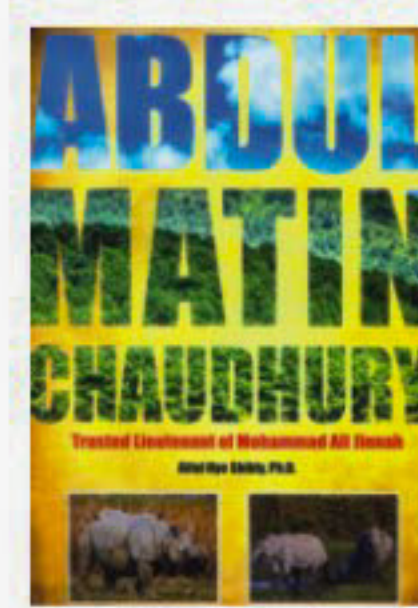
In one of the most interesting pieces of the volume, Islam presents rickshaw art as a mobile museum that blurs the boundary between high art and popular art. Rickshaw paintings cover a wide array of themes that range from Kalighata Pot or scroll painting to scenes from popular films. However, the recent rise of digital printing is fast becoming a threat to one of

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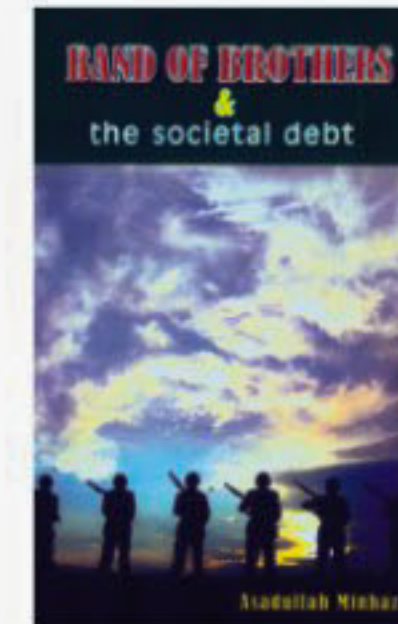
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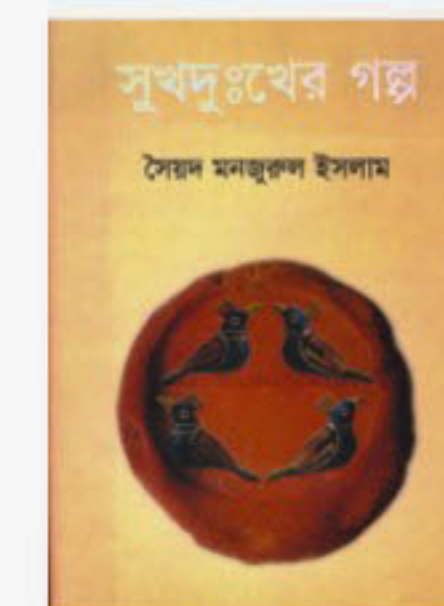
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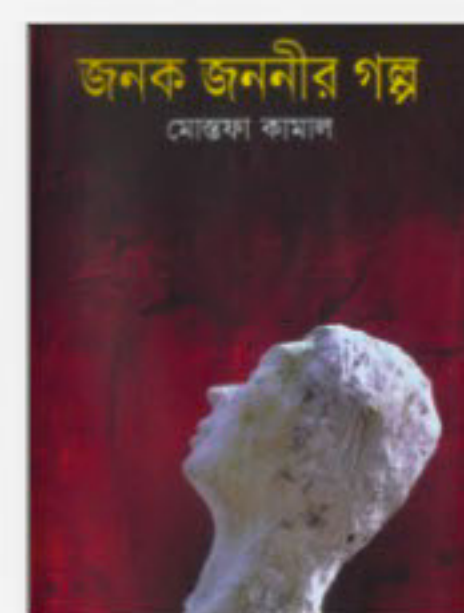


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