

A quick journey through time

Farida Shaikh quite enjoys the march of history

The book is a journey through time, the past sixty years of Bangladesh; a combination of pictorial presentation in harmony with written words to familiarize the curious reader with major aspects of the country's contemporary history. More accurately it is not '... history of the six eventful years; it is rather an objective account of the events that shape the destiny of a whole nation as precisely as possible.'

This journey through time, a colonial era (1947-71) followed by a period of nationhood (1971- onward), is the workmanship of eight distinguished writers of Bangladesh. The eminent editorial team of three, two of whom are writers in this volume, have succinctly covered the issues and challenges Bangladesh has faced. However, a reader is likely to have an unsettled feeling upon reading the postscript before the end chapter --- the eventful year 2006-7 in this otherwise fine book. Background information of the writers would have added a reader friendly quality to this publication. It is heavy and uncomfortable to hold.

Karunangshu Barua, a rising publisher with a difference, initially conceived this work. He came into the publication scene in 2003. The book with the thematic cover, design and layout in blood, sacrifice, tears, pain and paths, speaks of despair and dreams etched elegantly in black. An earthy background with crimson signifies sovereign Bangladesh, with the time span of six decades in green denoting the nature and youthful quality of the country. It is beautiful art work by S. Bhattacharjee, S. Hazra, Nurul Kabir and Bablu Hasan.

Bangladesh: Six Decades 1947-2007 is a narrative that unfolds with a hundred and eleven photo reproduction. It is a chronicle starting with legendary photojournalist Margaret Bourke White's *Vultures feeding on corpses lying in an alleyway after bloody rioting between Hindus and Muslims*, p.16. The images 'seem to scream on the page.' Equally stunning is Amanul Haq's picture of *Shaheed Rafiquddin Ahmed's skull blown off by a bullet*. The photo by Prof. Rafiqul Islam: *Students of Dhaka University hoisting a black flag on top of the Arts building as a protest against the killing of students on 21 February*. Azizul Haq Shahjahan covers *Governor A.K.Fazlul Haq and Prime Minister Shahid Suhrawardy*. Aftab Ahmed's picture shows *protest against Ayub Khan*. Rashid Talukdar's black and white photos show *Sheikh Mujib being taken to court at the start of the hearing of Agartala Conspiracy case and angry students hoisting blood stained shirt of Shaheed Asad*. From the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting comes, vis-a-vis December 16 1972, *Atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army on the dreadful night of 25 March 1971*. On the cover of Time, December 1971, is *The Bloody Birth of Bangladesh*. And thus the images are revealed, one upon the other.

Upon the departure of the British colonial power in 1947, the Indian subcontinent inherited a 'legacy of hatred.' India became a secular state built on democratic principles while Pakistan, founded on religious politics, quickly morphed into a military oligarchy. Its western wing became the seat of power.

The suppression of Bengalis began in

1948; first the mother tongue, then marginalization in military and civil services, then in matters of policy making and monetary matters. While the west prospered the eastern wing began to sink into poverty. The year 1952 ushered in the language movement, gave birth to Bengali nationalism, secularism and socio-cultural freedom.

Amid the stunning and rare collection of photographs, the reader is often lost in this maze of the pictorial pathway, like a labyrinth that does not connect the



Bangladesh: Six Decades 1947-2007
Eds Anisuzzaman, Mohammad Zamir,
S.Manzoorul Islam
Nympha Publication

narrative with the embedded pictures. Dates are missing. The captions appear to have been put in hastily and are small. There is no listing of the photographs. The reader feels immensely the absence of a photo editor in a rich collection of photographs that this work presents.

The opening chapter, *The Turbulent First Years 1947-52*, is by Anisuzzaman. The first picture of the book shows a

meeting prior to partition of three key personalities--- Lord Mountbatten, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru. It is a sad story of the breakup, the inequality, injustice and hardships faced by ordinary people, with all the uprooting, lost identities and journeys into the unknown. The year 1952 contained the germinating seeds of a runaway nation. The challenge to the idea of nationhood and the fallacy contained in the two-nation theory becomes obvious. Bengalis love their mother tongue. Dr. M. Shahidullah countered the argument for Urdu through suggesting that, as Bangla was the language of the majority, it should be the state language.

Professor Dilara Chowdhury, in *Quest for Regional Autonomy 1952-58*, notes that '...the very movement of Pakistan... contained the genesis of Bangladesh', p.29 The Lahore Resolution of 1940 was a map for a constitution of independent states in Muslim majority areas. It was '...a charter of East Bengal's freedom ...It was this quest for autonomy and self-rule that eventually blossomed into a full-blown liberation war in 1971.' The decolonization of Asia and Africa after World War II gave rise to diversified nation-states, with federalism being seen as a way to nationhood by strong leaders. For Pakistan, this was problematic as '...it was a classic case of being a nation only in hope.' Separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory, religion was the only bond between the two wings of the country. Pakistan's experiment with federalism eventually was to fail. Martial Law was imposed in 1958, and general elections scheduled

for 1959 were cancelled.

A.M.A Muhith discusses a twelve-year period in *Under Military Rule: 1958-70*. After Ayub Khan took over as president, Iskandar Mirza went into exile in Britain. Nearly 500 politicians across the country were arrested, among them Maulana Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. More details come under this section: martial law and its background, Ayub's constitutional arrangements, Ayub's reforms and economic strategy. In 1962 came the Sharif Commission Education Reforms aiming to make Urdu compulsory and Arabic script envisaged for Bangla.

The subsequent sections on the 1965 Kashmir war and the Six Point programme show the isolation and vulnerable security position of East Pakistan. The government 'unearthed' the Agartala Conspiracy Case, detaining Sheikh Mujib under the Defence of Pakistan Rule. Mention is also made of the mass upsurge and the fall of Ayub, the elections of 1970 and their outcome. Also mentioned are the twenty-two families controlling the industrial wealth of the country. In the financial sector, 80% and 97% of insurance and banking respectively belonged to these families.

In *War of Liberation: 1971*, Muhammad Zamir discusses the elections of 1970. The emergence of Sheikh Mujib as the symbol of Bengali nationalism and Bhutto's 'continued obduracy' are noted. *The Mujib era: 1972-75* by Mohammad Farashuddin covers the Rakki Bahini, famine of 1974, Bangabandhu's address before the UN General Assembly in Bangla, et cetera,

are taken note of. In *Under Zia and Ershad: 1975-90*, Meghna Guhathakurta discusses 'militarization' under General Ziaur Rahman. The political party he formed drew its strength from the military. Institutionalized corruption prevailed. In May 1981 Ziaur Rahman was assassinated, and some months later martial law was declared. The end of the Ershad period saw the polarization of political parties on the superficial ideological ground of 'Bengali versus Bangladesh nationalism' which was further reduced to the ridiculous level of a quarrel between two personalities, 'two ladies.'

Towards a democratic polity: 1991-2006 by Ataus Samad discusses the restoration of democracy in the country. *Postscript* by the editors covers the years 1996-2006, taking into account the caretaker government of Justice Habibur Rahman. The Awami League returned to power after a lapse of 21 years. A coalition government was formed.

Syed Badrul Ahsan's *The Eventful Years: 2006-07* is an action-packed view of the country. Included are events that highlight the swearing in of Sheikh Hasina for the second time as prime minister of Bangladesh. Then there is mention of the 2007 arrest of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia.

Six Decades is highly recommended for all reading rooms, conference and seminar halls. It ought to have pride of place at college libraries, and will be appropriate at airport passenger lounges. A focus on the distribution of the book is most urgent.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and member of The Reading Circle

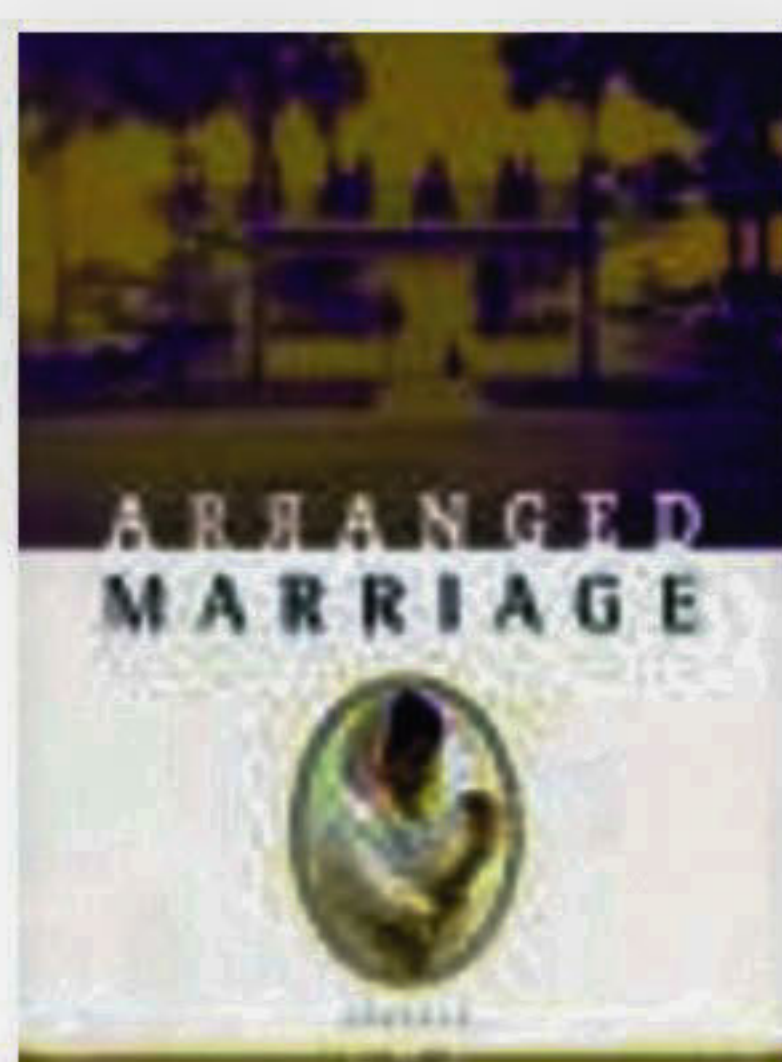
Tales to be read and savoured

Tulip Chowdhury reads of women in adopted lands

This beautiful assortment of short stories is like a box filled with gems, each to be read and savored. These stories are about accommodation and rebellion Indian-born girls and women in America undergo as they balance old beliefs and new desires. And there are also stories that come with the male dominant families in the Asian continent. This is a reflection of how people of one subcontinent settle down in their new homes in the land they have migrated to. In fact, this is also a reflection of the story of immigrants, people who have been migrating for social and economic reasons for ages.

The first story, "The Bats", comes with the story of a little girl listening to her mother crying throughout the night. At times she wakes up in the middle of the night to hear the angry shouting of her father as he throws things across the floor. As time passes she notices her mother waking with deep wounds. Her mother makes excuses about falling here and there but the little girl knows that it has something to do with the angry father and his curmudgeonly ways.

One day the mother takes the little girl and leaves for a far away village and they start living with an old uncle of the mother. The uncle looks after the orchard of the local landlord. The uncle takes the little girl with him when he goes to tend the orchard. Hundreds of bats suddenly attack the fruits of the



Arranged Marriage
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
Anchor Books

orchard. The uncle uses poison to kill the bats. The girl helps the man to clean up the bats and she feels as if she is an indispensable part of the farm and settles down happily. She is happier in her adopted home. But just then her father sends a letter to her mother promising not to abuse her any more. Her mother rushes back to the husband. After a few days the old days are back again. The father comes home and the girl is awakened by his angry shouts and breaking of things. Her mother slips

back to the old mode of crying through the night. The little girl sleeps and dreams of the bats. She wonders if the bats come to her dreams because she was happier when she was with them. She dreams of the green village where she had spent a few happy days. The story portrays the deep love of a woman for her husband even though she is abused. And with it comes the story of an unhappy childhood looking for happiness elsewhere.

The second story, "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs", revolves around a young lady going away to New York. She had always dreamed of walking along the silver pavements of New York, dreamed of living an American life. She lives with her aunt and uncle. The aunt's two-room apartment is nothing compared to the pictures she had seen of great American homes. She had dreamed of driving along the great highways but her aunt does not own a car. As a matter of fact her aunt does not go out without her husband because he has told her to stay home and be safe. One day the young lady argues her aunt into taking a walk in the neighborhood. However, they lose their way and find themselves in a place surrounded by racists. Some young men surround them and call them "Niggers". They even throw garbage at them. The young girl and her aunt are barely able to escape from further harm. This incident shatters the girl's American dreams and she realizes that life in America is not all

about roses.

On the other hand, the story "Affair" toward the end of the book is about Indian immigrants who are very happily settled in America. Ashok and Abha are a very happy couple. Ashok works for a computer software company. Abha is a freelance journalist and is brilliant at her job. But Abha's best friend Meena is too smart for her own good. And Abha is suddenly aware that something is going on between her husband and her best friend. Being in foreign land has given them peace and abundance but it is strife among themselves that makes life miserable. Abha is caught between success in her own life and saving her crumbling marriage. She wonders why one success comes at the cost of another. Abha realizes that love once lost rarely finds its roots again; and she herself reaches out to another soul, tries to find happiness.

The story "Doors" comes with a fascinating plot where the American born Preety, an excellent wife and kind woman, is caught between her Indian husband Deepak and his relationship with his best friend Raj. Preety had married Deepak despite her mother's warnings that she might not be able to adjust with a typical Indian man. All goes well in their marriage until Deepak's best friend Raj comes to live with them. While they are at home Deepak and Raj talk away about Indian movies, they gossip about their life in

India and they are all the time together. Preety finds herself jealous of Raj. But Raj does not understand the house rules of giving some privacy to Preety while he is her guest. He goes to the extent of opening her bedroom door without her permission. Preety, feeling isolated, is also irritated by Raj's behavior and has an outburst one day. The final strife between Preety and Deepak comes when Raj, hurt by Preety's sudden outburst, leaves. Preety now wonders if her mother was right after all about her opinion of Indian men. The worst part comes when Deepak starts sleeping in the living room after Raj leaves.

Toward the middle of the book the reader is treated to a great story, "Perfect Life", about motherly love from a woman who did not have any children of her own. When Meera married Richard there was an understanding that they would not have children. Meera always thought that she was not the motherly type, was not the kind of woman to raise a child. To her, this motherly attitude of women was something not every woman could be credited with. Even when her friend Sharmila swoons over her child Meera thinks she is a show off, that a child cannot take away the whole being of a woman. Then one day she finds a small autistic boy hiding near her front door. She takes him in. She starts taking care of him just like a mother. The boy becomes dependent on her and her

Meera's motherly instincts awaken and she wants to adopt him legally. But before the adoption can take place the boy is placed in another foster home from where he goes missing. By the time Meera has his room ready in her house, she has had him enrolled in a special school and waits for him to come to her. When the boy is lost Meera finds her heart breaking for him, she cries and keeps looking for him everywhere. They story of a woman in whom motherly feelings are aroused is beautifully portrayed through the story.

The other stories in this collection are enchanting and each waits to be read. The reader has a happy sailing since as one story comes to end the other begins with pulsing plots. *Arranged Marriage* is a very strong narrative. The all too imperfect lives of Divakaruni's heroines are like unrecognized treasure, worthy of being praised, protected and held dear. The prose is luminous, exquisitely crafted. Her Indian wives and daughters are drawn with rich, dense details that allow the reader to feel silent, strong undertones directing their lives. Few writers can match Divakaruni's combination of biting wit and mordant humor, precise irony and consummate cool.

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and poetry.

Essay

Neruda and metaphorical frames

Mohammad Mahfuzul Islam analyses the poetry in a movie

Pablo Neruda, poet of human love and equality, wears the garb of a pedagogue, possessing command over figurative compositions during his exile on the island of Capri in Italy in Michael Radford's *Il Postino: The Postman* (1994). Gabriel Gonzalez Videla's oppressive rule compels the master of allegory to take refuge in a villa owned by Italian historian Edwin Cerio in Capri, fictionalized by Antonio Skarmeta in his 'Ardent Patience.' The film revolves around a postman who is assigned with the onus of delivering billets-doux of the passionately overwhelmed discoverers (mostly female) of metaphorical pronouncements to the intractable activist involved in coping with the human condition. His repeated interactions with the maestro take impersonal courses until one day the delivery man chances upon the biggest metaphor of his life in a literal damsel. The punctuated breaths of the lover punctuate the new-found terrain of emotional exuberance before the commander of amorous poetics. Neruda, the pseudonym composer, despite initial hesitation embarks on a journey of winning Troy for the beloved of his self-assured apprentice. He is at the helm, weaving

strings of cloaked expressions for the sake of his disciples' amorous entanglements. The resemblance of smiles to the wings of the butterfly is brought forth as an initial demonstration of emotion in the postman's life.

The first composition penned by the maestro of decorated phrases moves to possessing the girl of love gradually. The postman is internalizing the rudiments of poetry as a linguistic outlaw, although the composed geometry put to use by him always are the expert manifestations of unflinching poetry. In fact, the political commitment (communist slant) of Pablo Neruda turns him into a poetician. He thus joins the exclusive club of Gorky, Akhmatova and Lorca, all noted poeticians. The postman is a learner of a different order, learning the ropes of using extant embellishment rather than being the author of new metaphors. It is worth noting that metaphors are always given life and definite shape in terms of at least two literal expressions. Interestingly, metaphors can never come into existence metaphorically.

The game of allegorical resemblance continues until the emotional grey areas are obliterated by the trained soldier of

love. The contingent equation of triggered-off love could end up in smoke in the absence of language appropriate for an emotional state of being. Since linguistic appropriateness connecting the dots of passionate feelings is an important episode for the desperate lover, the safety net of poetic adornment is summoned for reaching a foolproof conclusion. The lyeum of metaphors spear-headed by Neruda brings success for the lovelorn subject. His encounter with the poetician in exile fattens the chances of efficacy for his love-soaked foray into the throbbing arena of excitement. Neruda salvages the solicitor of untapped love stored in utmost care in the alleys of his rib cage. The postman's unfiltered use of Neruda's poetic verses articulates trust reposed in the intrinsic magic of the masked impression. The lack of mastery over the art of composition makes him an uncritical apologist of the produced texts. Although one-dimensional reciprocity is prevalent, the postman restores the equilibrium by repaying the maestro with the recorded metaphors of natural sounds of the island. The repayment has another plane of implementation in that his life ends as he attends a communist congre-



gation, where he was to have given a rendition of self-composed poetic frame.

Both Neruda and the inhabitants of the island (most of them fishermen) share a striking similarity in that while he is evicted from his country of origin, the fishermen on the other side are displaced from their share of equitable value of labour. It is the innocuous metaphor of poetry that fails to capture the dismal plight of the exploited souls, but the trenchant ones do provide the tool of remonstrating against the scheme of

exploitation. Again, the faith of all in the innocuous metaphors can ensure a just world for everyone, where the caustic ones are turned gratuitous.

Neruda, because of his expressive skills in conjoining pairs of allegorical formations, enjoys prominence over the naive and simple postman. Although he himself points to the delimited scope of his poetic performance the elevated status of figurative compositions is commonplace. The reason could be that thoughtfully chosen words clad in embellished attire seem to elude our cognition more than the process of mundane actions shorn of imposed decoration. So, struggling with the purpose of those released words we come to appreciate the partially deciphered statements. Moreover, in an imaginative pursuit like poetry the confines of fettered relationships are transcended with comparative ease rather than the actual materialization. Despite that, recalcitrant words, which do trigger off the initial spark along with planned activism, can topple an exploitative Leviathan. The pedagogy that Neruda takes up is to equip the learner with spontaneous ingenuity of designing poetical frames, not to hark back to the

original script of didactic perseverance.

Although we find the presence of the general orientation of metaphors in the postman unbeknownst to him, he nevertheless puts his faith in the power of the recognized composer. While watching the film one comprehends gradually that the individual metaphor of the poet eclipses the communal ones of anonymous composers of folklore and folk songs. It is worth noting that communal poetics was given due attention in a field of study called ethno-poetics, with the conceptual repertoire of Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, along with that of others, where a community's poetic expressions were arguably to be preserved in the orbit of total performance. Despite that, the individual accomplishments of a poet like Pablo Neruda and his pedagogical pursuit of a poetician cannot be downplayed. Getting back to the film, it can be said that the whole enterprise of making poetry work and ushering in change for the toiling millions is both explicit and implicit in the involved sphere of the poet.

Mohammad Mahfuzul Islam is an anthropologist and poet.