

The tears and pride of a mother

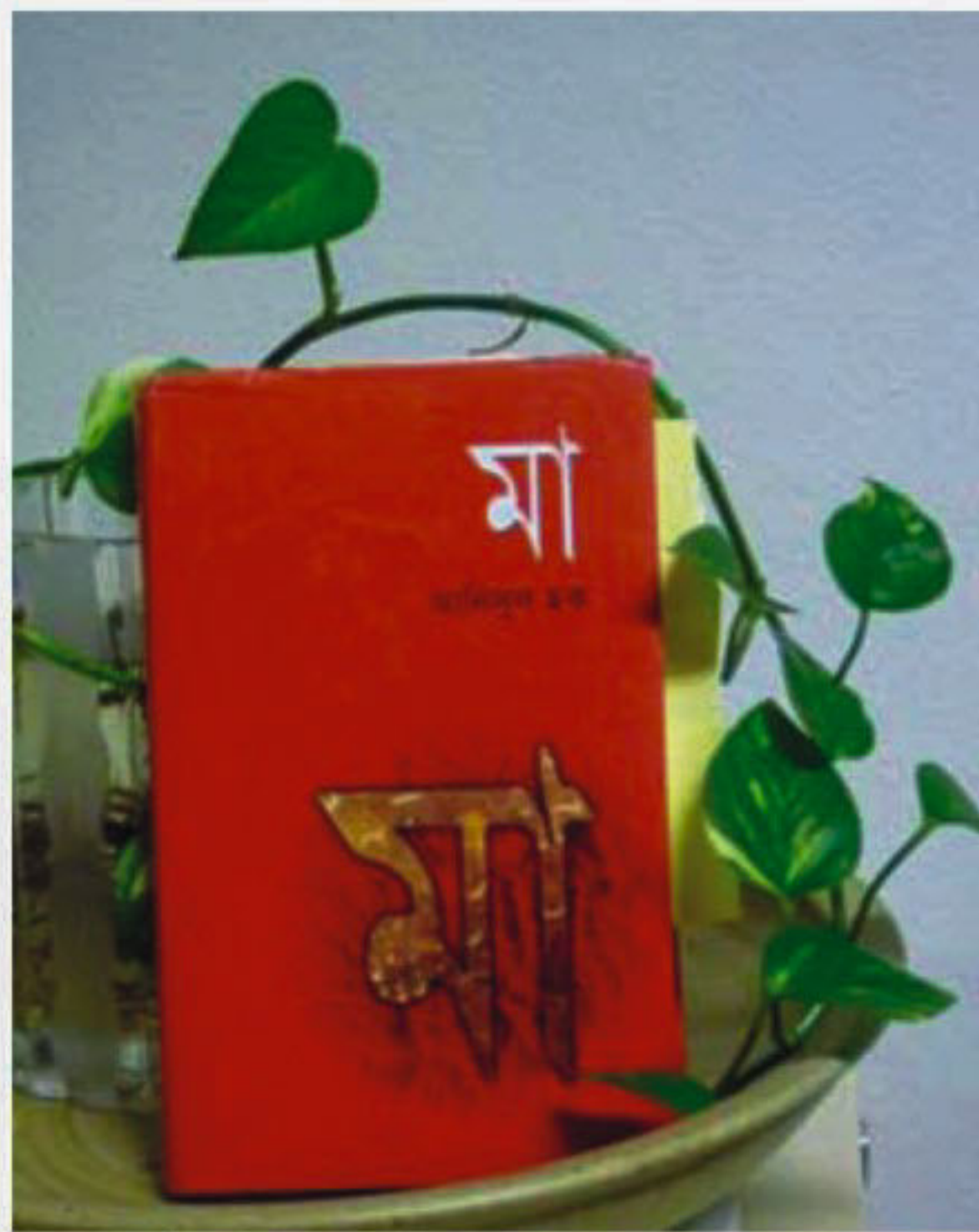
Nahid Khan is reminded of the pathos of war

A mother is desperately looking for her only son through every lead she can get for days after he was seized by the Pakistani military for interrogation about the whereabouts of freedom fighters of the independence war. Finally she meets her son behind bars at the prison cell. The son has been so brutally tortured that he can barely stand or talk. He tells his mother that the military will release him if he reveals the names of the others who are in control of guerrilla groups. The devastated but brave and indomitable mother tells him, "Keep strong son, don't tell anyone's name". This is a mother as strong as the now sovereign country of ours. She would not bend before the fear of losing a precious possession for the greater good, for upholding the rights of citizens, for the liberty of Bangladesh.

This mother is Shafia Begum, our proud martyr Azad's mother, whose sacrifice mirrors that of many other invincible mothers across the land, and resembles the country itself that went through so much agony for nine months of tyranny unleashed by the Pakistani army, eventually sacrificing million people. This mother is brought to the consciousness of readers by Anisul Hoque in *Maa*, which is based on the story of Shafia Begum. It has been called a docu-fiction by Shahadat Chowdhury, but to me it is a literary reconstruction of history. Anisul Hoque is popularly known to everyone for his positive thinking and awe-inspiring writings. He is a diligent dream-distributor who writes to scatter the magic dust of hope among people in order to have them rise challenges they have not dreamed of. To write *Maa* he dug very deep and has presented a well-researched piece that appears to be history based on facts used in the book. There are even real names in the book. His natural flair in telling a story did need a few threads of fiction here and there but the book essentially retains the purity of facts about people, places and the period. The references at the back of the book points to how many resources he has used to make the narrative so authentic. He has talked very closely to Azad's cousin Jayed and people like Nasiruddin Yusuf and Shahadat Chowdhury who are some of the most prominent names in the history of our liberation war.

The first page of the book engages the reader right away, to appreciate the depth of the meaning of our independence war. It is one of very few books which tells the story on the first page, but makes one still want to read the rest of the book non-stop to experience the journey. That journey tells a story of love, courage, sacrifice, resentment, commitment, sadness, tears and triumph. The triumph is embedded in the success of all the heart-wrenching episodes that gave us Bangladesh, and made it all worthwhile. It is a journey no one can make without a tissue box, a constant reminder of caring human beings. For me it meant a lot of sleepless nights; the thought of the anguish in Shafia Begum's heart and the ordeal of war for an entire country kept me awake.

The story begins with Shafia leaving her wealthy husband's affluent home with a small child, Azad, without any of his resources, due to resentment against him for cheating on her. She is determined never to return and raises Azad on her own, all the while struggling with the humiliation of having been cheated on and with not



Maa
Anisul Hoque
Shomoy Prokashon

enough means for subsistence living. Azad, knowing how tormented his mother was, always wanted to write about her. The task has finally been accomplished by Anisul Hoque. When a little light begins to show at the end of Shafia's tunnel, the independence war commences and Azad gets actively involved in it. His mother gives his friends shelter, cooks for them and, most important, blesses them in their struggle. There is much danger and uncertainty but nothing diverts the mother from her focus. Like many of the contemptible collaborators of 1971, one contributes to Azad's arrest and disappearance. The day Azad's Maa gets to see him, he is lying on a cold floor. He tells her he has not eaten rice for days. The next day Maa takes rice for her beloved son but the soldiers have by then moved him to a location no one knows of. Maa never has any rice nor has she slept on a bed for the rest of her life, all fourteen years after Azad's disappearance. She has hoped Azad will come back one day, until death wipes it all away. This is the story in a nutshell but the vast plot of the book describes the true ordeal of the nine-month war in an unforgettable touch that reminds one of Rabindranath Tagore's words from *Gitanjali*, "When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable."

The book is invaluable for its narration of the atrocities perpetrated by the soldiers, the co-ordination of guerrilla fighters, the commitment of country people. No fictitious character is used to adulterate the truth. The writer makes it a historical piece for anyone who wants to know about our freedom fighters. For new generations, who were lucky to be born in the inde-

pendent country, they ought to know the true price at which their homeland was achieved so that they respect the great martyrs to whom we owe so much. A youngster once asked me about the liberation war and the emergence of Bangladesh, and I gave him *Maa*. The youngster with his somewhat dispassionate feelings, having been brought up abroad, and with little knowledge of Bengali said to me, 'Superb, revealing documentation of the war in a story'. That comment shows how beautifully the book covers the facts of war and engages a reader to the search for truth. War stories are always disturbing because of the brutality involved, as we read in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* or Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. But the brutality of 1971 perhaps tops everything else, touches a Bangladeshi's heart, which is documented admirably by the author in the gentlest possible way so that the greatness of our liberation war does not get lost in remembrances of the worst side of the war.

The description flows from the writer's own feelings and perceptions, so wonderfully portrayed that they overwhelm readers. When he says, on a bright beautiful day which suddenly is drenched in rain and when Maa's body is lowered into the grave, that Azad and his friends are there too, those raindrops take on another meaning. Reading these lines chokes you, you can't help sobbing knowing there is no relation between her and yourself, but somehow she becomes your own, our very own maa. The writer uses many songs and poems in the book in full and it never feels that just a one or two-line mention would be sufficient. George Harrison's song gives a reader the sense of compassion for others, Tagore's song 'Aji Bangladeshher hridoy hotey' gives the true blend of mother and country one can imagine, or Shamsur Rahman's poem reveals the beauty of independence and what it really means. That is because these are very cohesive in the very places of the novel that they were totally worth putting in.

A great book, a novel, history, docu-fiction --- whatever you might want to call it --- *Maa* by Anisul Hoque is a work that will take the reader into the past and a long way forward in feeling patriotism in the heart. Professor Anisuzzaman once visited me and I asked him to name some Bengali books one should read. He readily gave me a list of sixteen books, one of which was *Maa*. I knew in my heart he was right. I felt exactly the same way when I read the book.

The book haunts me and inspires me in feeling for my country and its people, makes me cry in sadness, enlightens me with knowledge of the great war, empowers me with the passion of feeling that one day I will go to Jurain cemetery to find the epitaph reminding me of 'Martyr Azad's Mother' and sit there quietly. That is how Maa wanted her epitaph to be, nothing else. Perhaps I could take this book with me and place it next to the epitaph and whisper, 'Maa, this is your life, this is our love. Anisul Hoque very passionately did it with a lot of love and respect on behalf of all of us. Please accept it. May your soul find some peace'.

Nahid Khan teaches at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

A writer, through a different lens

Asjadul Kibria likes a work, warts and all

Depicting a part of any great man's life cannot be limited within the man. The depiction also extracts something out of the time and society in which the man has spent his life. In fact, when we go through any biography or autobiography, it is the times and life of contemporary society that on the whole attract us. Going through *Dhakar Buddhadeb Basu* is no exception. It is rather more interesting. Though not comprehensive, it is an exciting illustration of the times, the people and the society of contemporary Dhaka which influenced Buddhadeb Basu in his early life.

The book, written by eminent writer Syed Abul Maksud, is a source of immense pleasure. It is pleasure which comes of reading a work that apparently appears to be an outcome of serious research work likely to be limited to literary critics and post-graduate students of Bengali literature.

Buddhadeb Basu is one of the most reputed writers in Bengali literature, one who was able to set his own standards in poetry, short stories, novels, drama and essays in an era dominated by an overwhelmingly Tagorean climate. Basu's literary aspirations had their beginning in Dhaka, where he was to spend fewer than ten years. He left Dhaka for Calcutta (today's Kolkata) in 1931. A brilliant student of Dhaka College



Dhakar Buddhadeb Basu
Syed Abul Maksud
Prothoma Prokashon

and the University of Dhaka, Basu nevertheless felt little drawn to the city, which is a probable reason why Dhaka appears so little in his works. The few instances he cites of the city in his works are not enough to convince anyone that he had any love for it. And yet his recollections of Purana Paltan, where he spent those years in Dhaka, are always a pleasure to read.

For his part, though, Syed Abul Maksud makes tireless efforts to overcome the difficulties involved in writing about Basu. He has been able to collect and collate events and happenings during the period in question from various published and unpublished sources. And he has with finesse given his findings a form that for us is a symphony which until his arrival has not been heard. He divides the book into fifteen chapters in a sequential manner so that the reader can feel the tenor of Buddhadeb Basu's life and work in Dhaka and also beyond it.

The chapter on Basu's last visit to Dhaka in mid-August of 1950 for fewer than three days is illustrative of the man's life and career. Here the writer briefly illustrates Basu's political mindset and his bias toward the United States in terms of policy. A US-based organisation, Friends Service Units, actually arranged the writer's visit to a city that by then had become part of Pakistan.

Or observe the chapter on Basu's university life that commenced in July 1927. Basu also began at this time to edit and publish *Progoti* as he had been awarded a monthly scholarship of Taka 20 for his brilliant results at the intermediate examinations. Maksud makes note here of several letters and quotes from those letters. These missives are certainly part of the invaluable documentation of Buddhadeb Basu's correspondence with such contemporary writers as Achintya Sen Gupta, a leading presence in the well-known Kollol Group.

When Kazi Nazrul Islam came to Dhaka and stayed for some days in the city, Buddhadeb Basu was the leader of the young writers' group who enjoyed the poet's company. We also note that Basu's first collection of poetry, *Bondir Bondona*, was published by DM Library in Kolkata owing mainly to recommendations by Nazrul. Gopal Majumder, the owner of DM Library, published the poetry of a then young and little-known poet of Dhaka as Nazrul had asked him to do so. Interestingly, Basu never mentioned Nazrul's contribution to such a landmark event in his life. Syed Abul Maksud concludes that Basu had some psychological inability in dealing with certain truths.

In fact, throughout the book, one can spot in Buddhadeb Basu some intriguing and conflicting aspects of character. In 1971, Basu was not enthusiastic about Bangladesh's war of independence. He kept his silence even as his friends extended their support for an independent Bangladesh. He also never expressed any interest in revisiting Dhaka after the city had turned into the capital of independent Bangladesh. From his early life, Basu showed some negligence on many contemporary enlightened personalities and so wrote very little about them in his varied reminiscences. Maksud's book thus becomes a different lens to probe anew the times of a great writer of Bengal.

There are, however, a few shortcomings in Maksud's work visible to a reader. A brief sketch of Basu's life could have been added as an annexure. In some places, dates or years are not mentioned clearly. The font settings of all the quotations are too small. Be that as it may, one can only say that those who love Dhaka should read this book.

Asjadul Kibria is a senior journalist with Prothoma Alo

Of fairy tales, of lives really lived

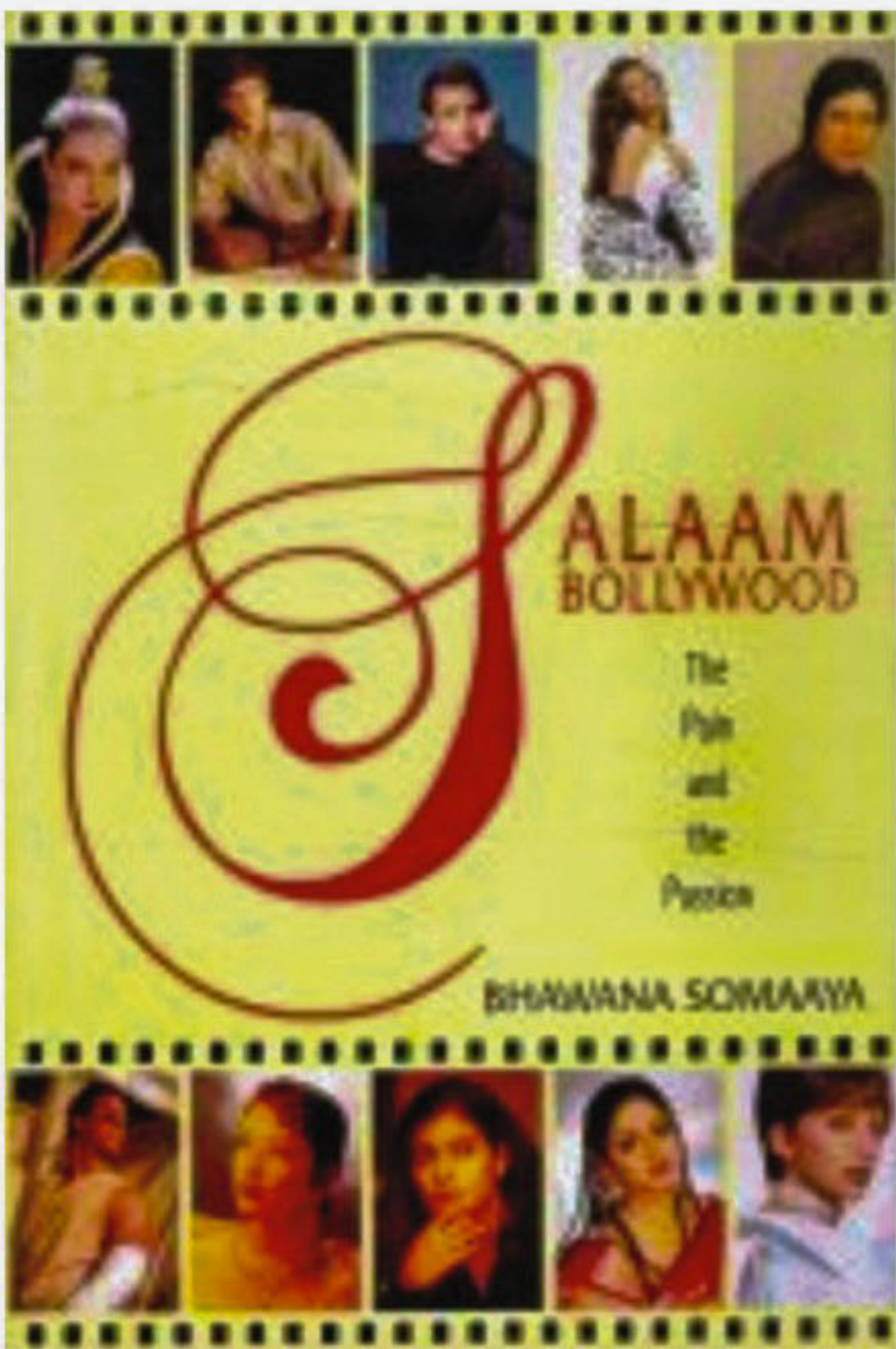
Sadya Afreen Mallick goes through some starry experience

Bollywood is a strange, quixotic place. First, you wonder why that term 'Bollywood' has come to be attached to the world's largest movie industry. Couldn't someone have devised a better term rather than aping Hollywood? That aping has led to such puerility as Lollywood (to describe the Pakistani movie industry in Lahore) and Dhaliwood, here in Bangladesh. Then comes the fairy tale aspect of the Indian film industry. It still tends to operate in a world of unreal songs, fantasy dances and love stories that always end up with the man and the woman ready to live happily ever after. Realism is something you are yet to get out of Bollywood.

Sure, of late there have been movies which have verged on the realistic. But when you think of realism, you tend to think more in terms of what enlightened auteurs like Satyajit Ray and Aparna Sen have produced in Bengal. But, yes, you would be right to suggest that by and large the West Bengal film industry too has fallen prey to the unreal world of Hindi movies. There are the dances, the sudden appearances of chorus boys and girls once the leading man and woman break into a love song and the all too familiar scenes of the hero (as we still describe these lover boys in our part of the world) beating every villain (and there are scores of them) to a pulp in the battle between good and evil. In many ways, the Indian movie is still a morality play. It is yet miles away from the modern sensibilities we are susceptible to these days.

Having said that, we cannot but acknowledge the fact that the lives and careers of Indian movie stars have exercised our imaginations endlessly. The illness which threatened Amitabh Bachchan's career some years ago, the affair he is said to have had with Rekha despite Jaya Bhaduri's presence in his life, the marriage of his son Abhishek to Aishwarya Roy are some of the innumerable instances movie enthusiasts cite in South Asia to explain their deep attachment to the film world. It is in line with that attraction or enthusiasm that quite some years ago Bhawana Somaaya came up with *Salaam Bollywood*. Since then, of course, Somaaya has written other books, notably a well-regarded biography of Hema Malini. In the work under review, it is a whole panoply of stars she strings together and puts across to readers in their celluloid as well as real life form. You could say that there is much that is real about her story telling. At the same time, there is the distinctive feeling that you are into some gossip-mongering here.

You cannot put the book down, if what Somaaya places before you is a recapitulation of the tempestuous relationship Shabana Azmi shared with Smita Patil.



Salaam Bollywood
The Pain and the Passion
Bhawana Somaaya
Spantech & Lancer
Surrey, England

They were rivals and they were friends. They did not wish to be seen together and yet could not resist the urge to get in touch with each other. If you have *seen Arth*, where Azmi plays wife to Kulbhushan Kharbanda and Patil the other woman, you will have a good idea of how the two women related to each other. Then Smita Patil died, young, beautiful and popular. Suddenly, Azmi's world was left pretty empty. But, then, she had another world, one she wanted to share with Javed Akhtar. Much hide-and-seek went into the making of the climax, as Somaaya notes here. In the end, however, Azmi and Akhtar did marry and have lived what can easily be called a charmed life since.

The writer takes readers on a journey, sort of, around

the Raj Kapoor-Nargis romance once more. In the company of Sunil Dutt and Sanjay Dutt, Nargis turns up at the Kapoors' for a wedding. There is tension, initially. And then the ice breaks. Of Sanjay, Somaaya has a lot to say in this narrative. Prone to drugs, leaning to dissoluteness, the child of Sunil and Nargis Dutt is a problem. But when it comes to Meena Kumari, Somaaya is irresistibly drawn to her. Her fascination with Meena Kumari has been there since childhood. As Sarika tells her, the most famous tragedienne of Indian cinema was 'a fountain of love --- ethereal and attractive.' Somaaya thinks Nutan was feminine and Waheeda Rehman was fragile. But Meena Kumari, for her, was an addiction.

Quite a few pages are given over to the romance and wedding of Rishi Kapoor and Neetu Singh. And, yes, there are accounts of Dimple Kapadia we have not known about. On the sets of *Saagar*, she and Rishi Kapoor pour tumblers of water on themselves as part of a romantic scene about to be captured on camera. Director Ramesh Sippy, supervising it all, tells Dimple, "Wet your hair . . .more. . .still more." There are then the tales of Raakhee, her unhappy marriage and her tortuous journey through the film world. With Raakhee, notes the writer, each encounter was somehow a vale of tears. The actress was unhappy about slipping into character roles so early in her career. For her it was saying goodbye to her sex appeal for good.

There are moments Somaaya cannot forget, indeed will not. She remembers the time when Mandakini was in top form; she recalls Waheeda Rehman's diffidence playing an old woman's role; and she will not forget how Dilip Kumar watched Amitabh Bachchan's *Akayla* stone-faced. And the time when Mahesh Bhatt talked about rape scenes in films? In his view, the heroine could not be dressed in trousers 'because it's important for the heroine to look feminine to arouse the villain.' Raj Kapoor said it better: "The more covered a woman, the better she looks."

That surely does little to prevent some women from being in denial mode when it comes to reports of their romance. Amrita Singh was defiant in the face of rumours of her links with the young Saif Ali Khan. She angrily tells the author, "Give me a break. He is so young. I don't understand why people assume it's love. Why is it so difficult to accept friendship?"

We know the rest. That includes the sad tale of how their marriage ended up going nowhere. It simply evaporated.

Sadya Afreen Mallick, eminent Nazrul Sangeet artiste, is Editor, Arts & Entertainment, The Daily Star