

Gathering pebbles on life's turbid shores

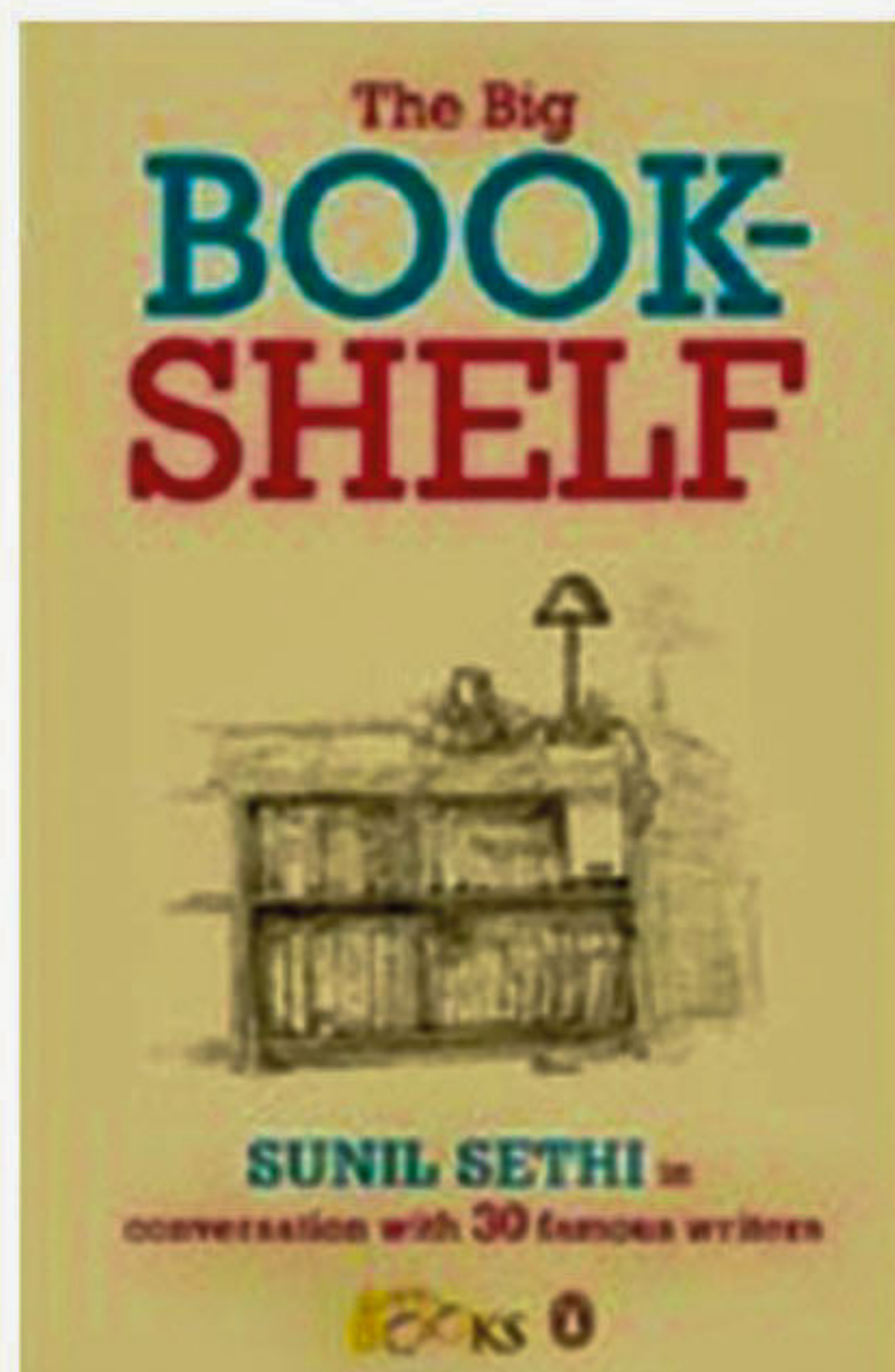
Syed Badrul Ahsan goes through a learning curve

Amitav Ghosh puts it succinctly. 'We are a riverside people', says he. The obvious reference is to Bengalis. That Bengalis have dwelt, like any other historical civilization, beside their rivers is a truth made all the more poignant by an awareness of how constricted those ageless rivers have of late been getting. For Ghosh, Bengal is home, India is home. But America? It is a place where he lives, a spot he is nevertheless in love with. He opens his heart to Sunil Sethi, speaks of the dispersal of people, of the Indian diaspora he has always been keen to write about. And out of that sense of alienation-cum-belonging have come such works as *The Hungry Tide* and *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies*. In his words, he is a *girmitiya*, a term used for 'indentured labourers who left in the nineteenth century because they signed agreements which they call girmits...'

Ghosh is not the only writer who sits back for a conversation with Sethi. In *The Big Book Shelf* it is an entire world of writers, thirty in all, who come forth with stories of how they have made it into the world of writing. And, of course, writing is that creative little corner of the imagination into which the writer brings in a diversity of images, shaped as they are through nostalgia and through insistent observation of the world around them. Khushwant Singh's novel *Delhi* may be a tale of the modernity which assails lives in India's capital and yet he does not quite conceal the truth that Delhi has played a major part in a widening of his creative imagination. Sethi goes probing a little deeper: how has Delhi changed in Singh's lifetime? Good old Khushwant Singh's response comes through a remembrance of things past. 'This was essentially a city of refined Muslim culture', he notes. 'Then it was suddenly invaded by Punjabis, Hindus and Sikhs, and that completely changed its character.' Singh does not love Delhi the way he used to, for he finds living in it 'a pain in the arse.'

That is not a feeling you come by in Bapsi Sidhwa. The author of *Ice Candy Man*, *The Crow Eaters* and *City of Sin and Splendour* remains robust in her portrayal of Lahore, the city of her birth. Lahore, she reminds you, is 'a city I love, the heart of Punjab and very much a part of my ethos.' But speak to Patrick French, which is what Sethi does here, about VS Naipaul. French, having just produced a biography of the fastidious writer (*The World Is What It Is*), would have you know that Naipaul is not one to hold on to his past, that it has consistently been his goal to push Trinidad as far into the background as possible. Naipaul, insists French, is someone who 'was very determined from a very young age to escape from (the Indian community in Trinidad) and to make himself into a world figure.' And did French stumble into difficulties with Naipaul in the course of preparing the biography? No, says he. But he is quite sure Naipaul has not read the work. Naipaul 'is not a particularly introspective person.'

Patrick French has carved out a whole niche for himself through his focused writing of biographies and historical occurrences. You could take down either *Liberty Or Death* or *Francis Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer* and be impressed by the dispassionate approach he brings to his subjects. For him, Indian biographies have been flawed, haven't they? Here's his response to Sethi: 'There are exceptions to that but there is a tradition that probably arises out of a kind of sycophancy, particularly in Indian politics.' He remains conscious of the criticism he was subjected to over his portrayal of Indian political figures in *Liberty Or Death*, but he has no regrets about his observations 'because I treated Gandhi and Patel and Jinnah as



The Big Book Shelf
Sunil Sethi
In conversation with 30 famous writers
NDTV, Penguin Books

human beings instead of as just political icons.' If that is French, there is at the other end the ubiquitous Mark Tully, for whom India is not so much a study in politics as it is a journey into self-discovery. Experience through religion is what the one-time BBC broadcaster finds in the country he was born into, went away from and then came back as a media man. Hear it from the man himself: 'One of the things I have learnt in India is that experience is an essential part of religion. If you have not had religious experiences, if you didn't feel God, if I may put it that way, then you haven't got to the heart of religion.'

India, then, is the underpinning that keeps these writers, as also this compilation, going. Anita Desai's home has, to all intents and purposes, been away from India. But that has not diminished at all the Indian presence, albeit with a caveat, in her creative being or in her sensibilities. Obviously, she is 'in touch with the old India, the India I knew.' It is the new India she has a hard time relating to: 'It has become almost a foreign country to me; it has changed so much.' Small wonder, then, that in *The Zigzag Way* the canvas is peopled with characters Mexican, American and English. Her experience of academia in the United States, of teaching creative writing courses, has been a satisfying one. Not bad for one who, before her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* came out in 1963 was a young housewife burdened with the task of bringing up four children. One of those babies is the equally well-known writer Kiran Desai, whose tribute to her mother shines through her own conversation with Sunil Sethi: 'She taught me how to

think like a writer, how to live a writing life. I had a taste in literature, and I tried to write differently.' Between Anita and Kiran Desai, then, it is something of a literary dynasty which is at work. Here is the younger Desai again: 'Ours really was a house full of books, and that's why I like to come back because all the books are here.'

Move on to Mahasweta Devi. Born in Dhaka to Dharitri Devi and Manish Ghatak, older brother of Ritwik Ghatak, the writer has been as unconventional as a wordsmith can be. Besides engaging in pure fiction and pointed journalism, Mahasweta Devi has readily identified with causes not many appear to be interested in. Her interaction with poverty-driven tribal people in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh has been, in Sethi's apt phrase, a leitmotif of her life and vast output. Devi's literary prowess also has a whole lot to do with her background. Her mother introduced her to Chekhov, Dickens and Tolstoy. So what does the writer have to say about the heritage? Observe:

'We grew up with books; from childhood on, all I have seen is books --- purchasing books and keeping them, maintaining a library. My mother was a great reader as was my father. My maternal grandmother was also a voracious reader. From my childhood, she would give me many books to read, all serious books.'

Mahasweta Devi recalls the significant influence her first husband, playwright Bijon Bhattacharya, exercised on her. And there was Santiniketan, which Devi attended when Tagore was alive. Nostalgia takes over: 'In those days Santiniketan was a very different kind of institution. We were encouraged to read books, use the library, study them and write about what we thought of them. It was something in the air of the country.' And how does she see herself? Nothing of ambivalence clouds her answer: 'As a writer. If I write novels, reportage, stories, it is all with the pen. No computers, no emails. Only a pen and paper.'

Which takes us to this vast question of writing being an art. And art is a product of the intellectual exercises one subjects oneself to. Ask Nadine Gordimer, a writer thrilled at the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States ('... we had Kennedy, and now, all these years later, a black. But, as I say, he is not black. He is black-white, which is even better'). So what is the backdrop to the emergence of a writer? The 1991 Nobel laureate is eloquent in her answer:

'Reading, my dear, is the only training for a writer from a young age. You only become a writer by being a compulsive reader. I can thank my mother for making me a member of a children's library when I was six years old. . . That was my education. It didn't come from convent schooling.'

Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*, focused as it is on the agony of Afghanistan, is at once a study of history and a lesson in the profundity of the human soul. 'Afghanistan', Aslam tells Sethi, 'is a beautiful country but it is a beautiful country that has been torn to pieces.' He explains the motif of the giant Buddha head in his work as symbolic of Afghanistan's history. He goes many steps further: 'It is Afghanistan's past, yet the Taliban said only one book is allowed to exist: the Quran. So the Ramayana, Nizami's *Shahnama* or Homer's *Odyssey* were not allowed.'

And then comes the clincher: 'I don't want to live in a world where there is only one book.'

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs and Book Reviews, The Daily Star.

Of things changing. . .and being the same

Nausheen Rahman empathises with souls in pain

It was a pleasant surprise to find Nighat Gandhi's evocative article, 'Landscapes of the Heart', in the Literature section of the Daily Star. This was because I had just happened to finish reading her book of short stories, 'Ghalib at Dusk and other stories'. I loved the article as much as I did her stories.

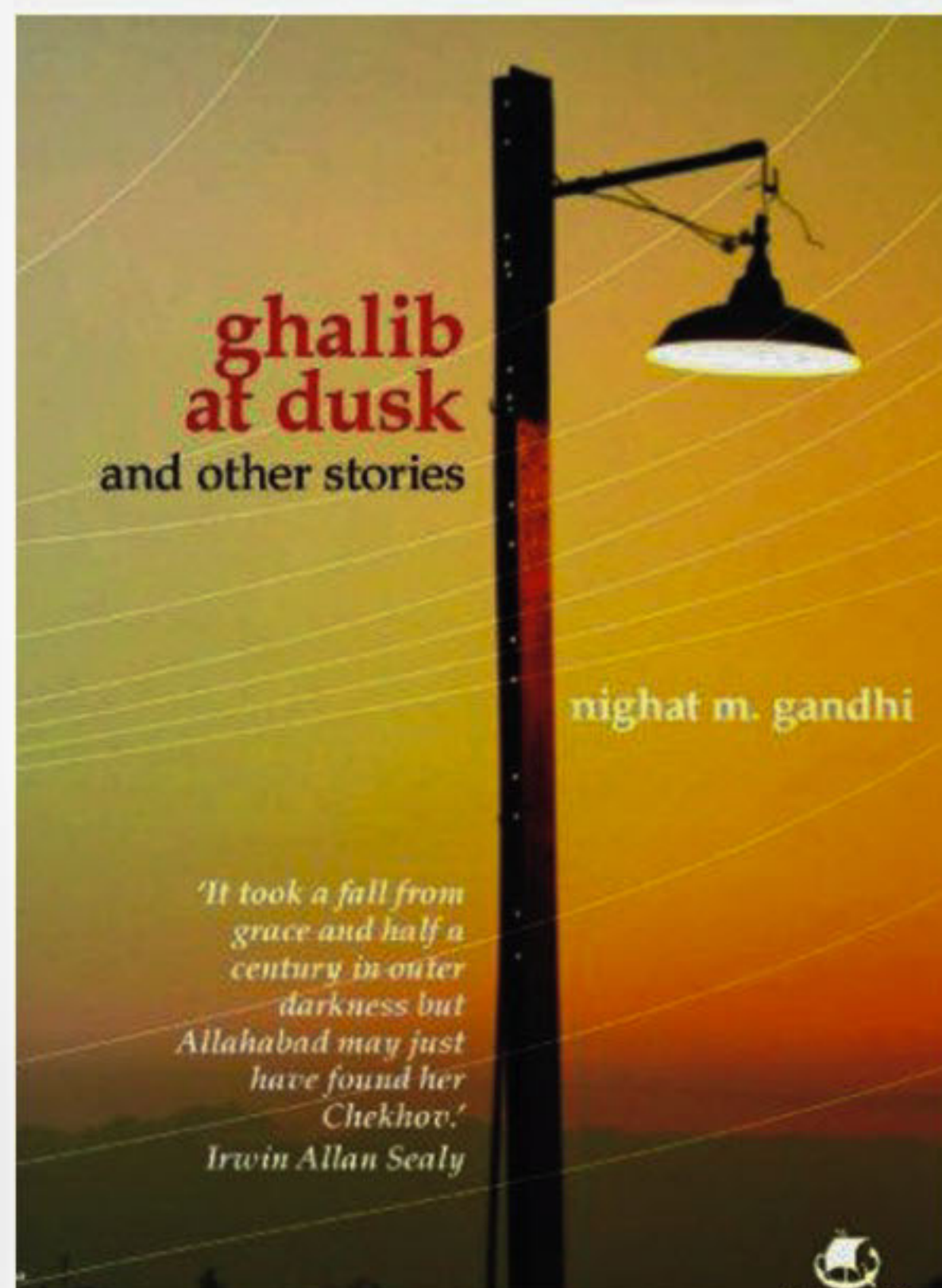
When an ex-student presented me this book several days ago, I was happy, but I didn't know then that it wasn't just any collection of short stories. These stories are by a person who has lived in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (as a citizen of each country). She has dedicated the book to the people of these three nations who, she says, will bring lasting peace to these lands where she "belongs". Thus, my happiness took on a new dimension. It promised to be an exciting book.

The writer's unusual background lends a touch of novelty to her writing; her feeling that she belongs to all three countries is of great relevance in today's world of discord, discrimination and disillusion. Her preface also helps one to understand her thought-processes and style better. Having had homes in three countries seems to have given Gandhi a feeling of deep love and a sense of belonging for all three, as well as a global persona. Apparently, there's no other contemporary writer who lives and writes in India and Pakistan and who feels completely at home in both countries. Both nations have a lot of value and meaning for her, although she relates differently to each.

She talks about the way things have changed over the years, and also about how some things remain the same, citing an example from Mirza Ghalib's time through a couplet of his. Back then, Ghalib had been disturbed by people's cruelties towards fellow humans, and even now, so many years later, senseless violence is rampant in the subcontinent (and everywhere else). She hopes that the inhabitants of this scarred region will be able to overcome all the bitterness of the past someday and move forward.

Gandhi's stories concentrate on the small, precise details of the lives of ordinary individuals. She is drawn by the events that occur in the lives of insignificant members of society, of those who are not treated with respect or understanding. These people could be dwelling in any city of the Indo-Pak subcontinent and be of any religion or ethnic background. She bases her plots on the cracks or spaces created by the differences in gender, class, religion, ethnicity, etc; and the restrictions and limitations they put on people.

The collection (with its enticing title) has short stories which leave behind a long trail of reflections, insights and protests deep in our hearts. The stories take place in three historic cities: Karachi, Allahabad and Ahmadabad. Like



Ghalib At Dusk and Other Stories
Nighat M. Gandhi
Tranquebar

Arundhati Roy, Nighat Gandhi "finds beauty in the saddest of places". She brings out different shades of feelings as she writes about the hold destiny has over the way some people's lives turn out, and how these people grapple with their lot, and learn to accept it.

'Risk' is about a Christian salesgirl in Karachi who is exploited by her rich, selfish boss. It will make you cringe, but will not allow you to be unsympathetic. 'Fishing At Haleji' traces a helpless father's quandary regarding what decision will be best for his unmarried daughter who has breast cancer, and his trying to escape from the merciless situation. 'In Lieu Of Gold' will reach out to readers as they read of a humble man's offerings to his dead wife. 'Mariam's Bath' which is about a "dangerously insane"

woman and a psychology student who is doing research on mad women (and whose own sister had been mad and had killed herself), will leave you pondering about sanity, sympathy and the role of compassion in healing mental trauma. In 'Hot Water Bag' and 'Trains' we have tales that drive home the poignancy of the way life makes people accept unwanted situations. They lay bare the pretences and facades of marriages which are seemingly fine, but are actually shaky compromises, surviving because there's no real alternative.

'Love: Unclassified' is a strange story about a relationship you can't give a name to; it is difficult to analyze, but not difficult to empathize with. It ends beautifully. 'It conveys waves of tranquility to her beloved's troubled being in a way no prayer has managed to, yet'. 'An Undelivered Letter' is a very touching story that looks at the stark truths of life and makes us feel the unfairness of what fate dishes out to some humans.

'Navratri Night' is a moving narrative of a man dying of cancer, his grieving, anxious wife, and their shared past (with its glories and pains). Their bond was a silent one, and as they went through their struggles, this bond grew stronger. The futility of looking back at a happy past is expressed very effectively as the story ends: 'She watched his eyes gazing into nothingness. She sensed their shared helplessness, their longing for that shared past, and the sadness of knowing that not a single moment could be resurrected'.

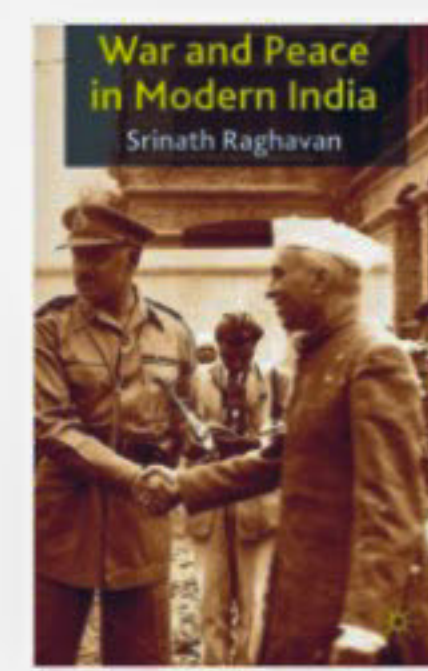
The last three stories probe the "normal" feelings of people looked on as "abnormal" by those who are physically and mentally whole. 'Desire By Any Other Name' is a sensitive (and sensual) depiction of a young man's healthy urges in an unhealthy body crippled by polio. 'Family Duty' gives an insight into a mentally unbalanced woman's life and relationships.

Gandhi seems to have saved the best for the last. 'Ghalib At Dusk' has a personal touch that makes it endearing. Many of us can identify with the nostalgia and experience a kind of *déjà vu* as we go through her story. Simply, but vividly presented, this story is a treat for aficionados of Urdu poetry. This narration also reflects subtly and profoundly an "incomplete" man's yearning for "complete love".

This remarkable collection of short stories is a 'must read' for any and everyone who enjoys fiction.

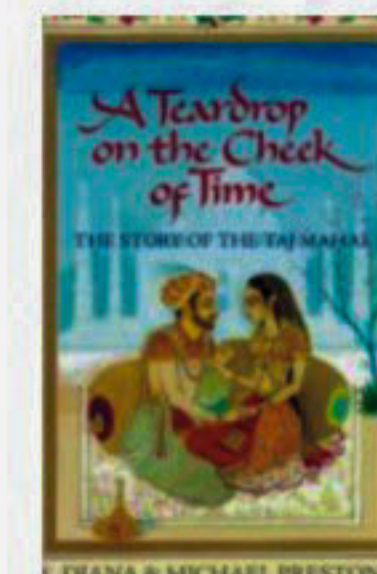
Nausheen Rahman, a former student of English literature at Dhaka University, is a teacher and critic.

BOOK choice



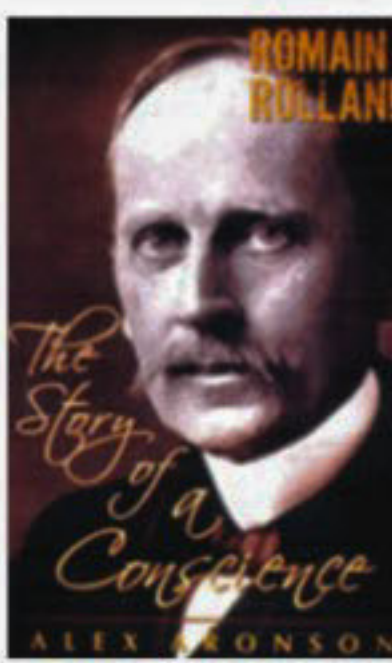
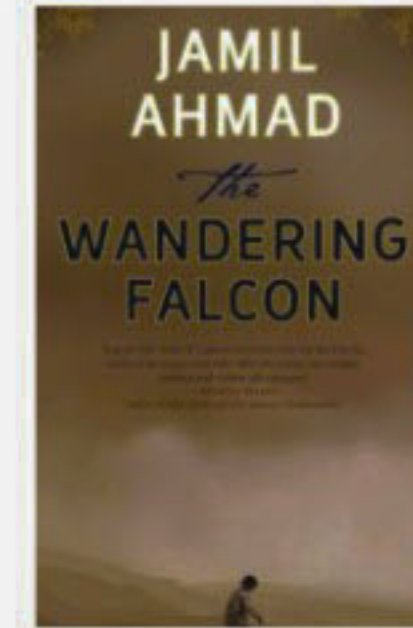
War and Peace in Modern India
Srinath Raghavan
Palgrave Macmillan
ISBN 978-0-230-24215-9

A Teardrop on the Cheek of Time
Diana & Michael Preston
Corgi Books
ISBN 978-0-552154-15-4



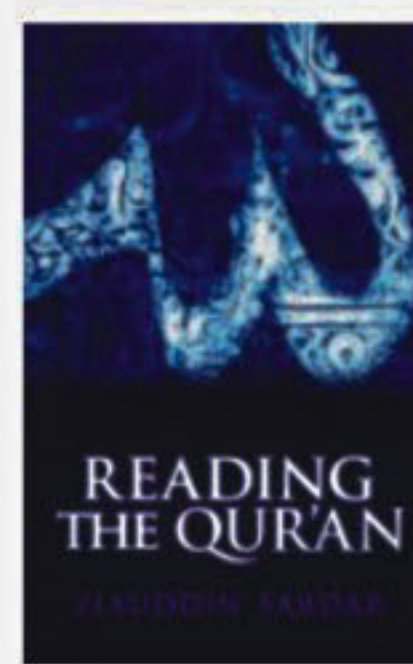
Pakistan's Foreign Policy
A Reappraisal
Shahid M. Amin
Oxford University Press
ISBN 978-0-19-547912-6

The Wandering Falcon
Jamil Ahmad Hamish
Hamilton/Penguin
ISBN 978-0-670-08533-0



Romain Rolland
The Story of a Conscience
Alex Aronson
Rupa & Company
ISBN 81-291-0161-0

Reading The Quran
Ziauddin Sardar
Hurst & Company
ISBN 978-1-84904-107-2



Love, hate, compassion Ali Mustafa spends time with poetry

*Hunger and food
Always work
In the very vein of brain
Coactions by evil rulers
Only
On the back*

With an aspiration toward salvation out of such entire coactions, the poet Nurun Nabi Babul yearns for a revolution. This is the prime spirit of his work, an enlightening bunch of poems he calls *Megh Hao Bristi Hao Na*. The poetic creation of Nurun Nabi Babul culminates in revolution and struggle. His enduring subject since his boyhood has been the human being and the philosophy behind the existence of the human being. Growing to maturity against the backdrop of the mighty river Padma, Babul was involved with popular movements after graduation from Rajshahi University. A large number of poems and articles, to his credit, have been published in various newspapers in Bangladesh. He was made a target of vested interest groups several times. As a matter of strategy, he sometimes remained dormant. Even so, as a believer in Marxism, he has never deviated from his political and moral ground.

Dwelling on hate and love in the poem 'Megh Hao Bristi Hao Na', Babul avers:

*In class sentiment
I hate mankind
I have love for the human being.
Whether he is blind
Mad
Deaf
Or a farmer*

The poet's openness and honesty regarding love is revealing. As an instance, he proclaims loudly in his poem 'Shironam Hin':

*Change the mindset, bring rains,
Creation evolves through eternal love
Let waves of emotion overflow day
And night
Be content with physical touch.*

Nurun Nabi Babul is very much concerned at the deprivation poor people go through in the name of small credit programmes, diversified looting by multinationals and extra-judicial killings. Nevertheless, he remains hopeful:

*Fire is spreading, fire
Let's take the initiative
To protect the disadvantaged.
The universe becomes stagnant
Under the claws of the Pentagon
Raise your hand in strength
Fire spread, fire.*

Megh Hao Bristi Hao Na of poet Nurun Nabi Babul comprises a total of fifty-four poems. The poet is now working as Project Coordinator of Dhaka Urban Comprehensive Eye Care Project, where victims of poor eyesight, largely from the margins of society, are provided with free, philanthropic treatment.

Ali Mustafa is a criti