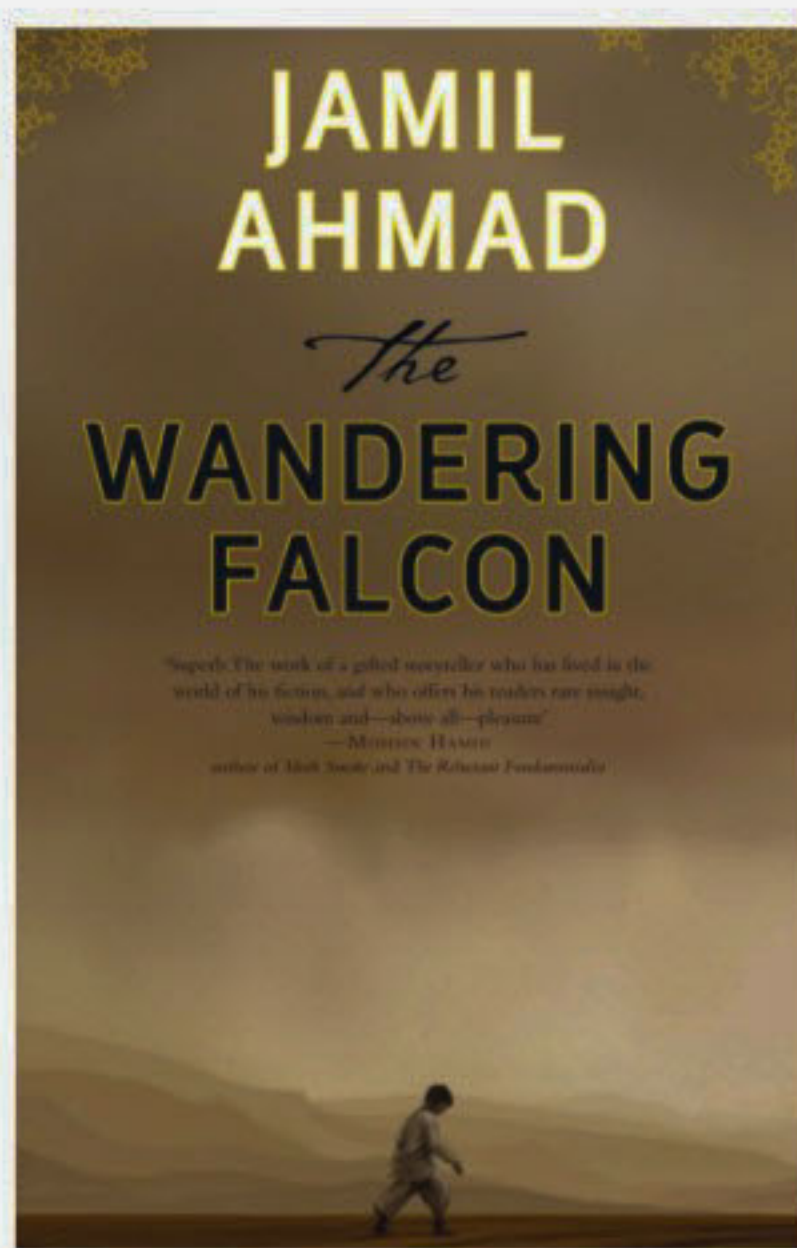


Fear and death along mountain trails

Syed Badrul Ahsan reconnects with bits of history

Let me begin with a confession. I have been drawn to *The Wandering Falcon* because of what I share, even if to a limited extent, with the writer. Jamil Ahmad, as a member of the Civil Service of Pakistan, has served, among other places in his country, in Baluchistan, Quetta to be precise. I spent the first seventeen years of my life in Quetta and finished school there. Almost a quarter of a century after 1971, I went back to Quetta on New Year's Eve in 1995 and ended up walking around the old familiar places for the next five days. Quetta, indeed the mountains of Baluchistan, its desolation and the many tribes who have called it home for centuries, have always held magic charm for me. And it is magic which Jamil Ahmad recreates in this softly spoken tale of how tribesmen, and women, defined and pursued life in the times before the whole region stretching from Baluchistan and all the way up to the North-West Frontier Province (these days known as Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) was laid low by religious fundamentalism typified by the Taliban and then made worse by al-Qaeda.

The Wandering Falcon is the story of the boy Tor Baz, which in English means black falcon. He has no other name, but in his wanderings through the wildernesses of the vast deserts and through dusty little towns seething with suspicion and hostility engendered in one tribe for another, Tor Baz comes to symbolise the traditions which have for ages defined life in Pakistan's frontier regions. Indeed, such life goes beyond Pakistan and spills well over into Afghanistan. The spectacle of shepherds, of tribesmen trekking down to the cooler regions straddling the border in summer and then making their way back into the mountains before winter can stop them dead on their tracks is an image that has come down to us through the ages. And yet that is but one aspect of life. The far bigger one is the sorrow which Tor Baz, even as he grows into a strapping youth, symbolises through the narrative. Which narrative of course begins with a young couple making their way through the scorching desert to what they think will be safety. It



The Wandering Falcon
Jamil Ahmad
Hamish Hamilton/Penguin Books

does not help, for men on horseback, one of them the husband of the woman eloping with her lover, track them down. Tribal justice, as you can imagine, is soon at work. The lover, obviously disturbed by thoughts of what their pursuers might do to Gul Bibi (stoning to death for adultery?), shoots her dead, but not before she tells him, 'Do not kill the boy. They might spare him.' The lover then shoots his camel. Gul Bibi's father, sardar of the Shahpad tribe, has a simple question: 'Who is the boy?' The man's equally matter of fact answer is, 'Your daughter's son.'

You could slice through the anger in the men on camel back with a knife. Gul Bibi's wronged husband, in that company of pursuing Shahpad, barks a question: 'Whose son is he? Yours or mine?' There is no response. And then the stones come flying. They will not stop until the man falls dead. The boy is spared. Riding away from the scene, the sardar has second thoughts. He should have brought the boy, he tells his men. His son-in-law has a caustic response to that: 'Death would be best for the likes

of him. The whelp has bad blood in him.' More tragedy is hinted at in the exchange between the sardar and the son-in-law. It comes full circle with the sardar, divided in his love for his dead daughter and his sense of shame at her elopement, loudly proclaiming: 'Let me tell you all now. My daughter sinned. She sinned against the laws of God and those of our tribe. But hear this also. There was no sin in her when she was born, nor when she grew up, nor when she was married. She was driven to sin only because I did not marry her to a man.'

That last bit proves fatal. The son-in-law, humiliated by the reference to the inadequacies of his manhood, slashes the old man to death with his sword. The tribesmen then scatter. The little boy, having overcome his fear, sits playing with some stones and quartz crystals. The story has just begun. Jamil Ahmad is set to take readers through the familiar landscape of desolation and fear. Men and camels in search of water journey through the night, knowing that the waterhole lies well within the region of the Mengals, a Brahui tribe in Baluchistan. There are struggles pursued through deadly sandstorms, battles which pit tribes against tribes and against the regular army. You get a glimpse of the evolving horror in the words of Jangru: 'Our crops have been burnt, our grain stolen and our animal flocks sold away or slaughtered. We have pointed our guns at them and they at us. We have killed and so have they. By now, even their aeroplanes hold no terror for us.'

Something of history comes into the picture. Back in the 1960s but especially in the 1970s, Pakistan's central government bombed tribal positions throughout Baluchistan. Tens of thousands were killed; many simply disappeared. The killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti some years ago in a mountain cave perhaps was the biggest manifestation of how Pakistan's frontier tribes and its government have felt happy going after one another in tragic happiness. Reflect, if you will, on Dawa Khan. For days on end he waits at Fort Sandeman waiting for news from

his compatriot known as the General. Is it safe to move on? Or will government soldiers put up resistance? In the end, it is Dawa Khan's wife Gul Jana who settles the matter. 'Dawa Khan', she calls out to him as he pleads with the soldiers for water for his camels. 'I am going forward. The camels must not die. I am going with a Koran on my head. Nothing can happen to me.' Moments later, bodies lie sprawled on the ground. Dawa Khan is dead; and the Koran could not save Gul Jana.

Tor Baz moves along the uncertain trajectories of life. After years of being in the care of Ghuncha Gul, he is handed over into the safe custody of Mullah Barrerai. Existence becomes a tentative affair. Tor Baz, blossoming into youth, turns informant for the authorities. His conversation with the deputy commissioner reflects the fears and the hopes which keep life on its toes. 'There are strange doings and happenings beyond your border, sahib', the young man tells the official, whose response comes mingled with gratitude and trust. 'A dependable man alone makes a good friend, Tor Baz. Tell me what your eyes have seen.' Tor Baz speaks of a kidnapping conspiracy in the works.

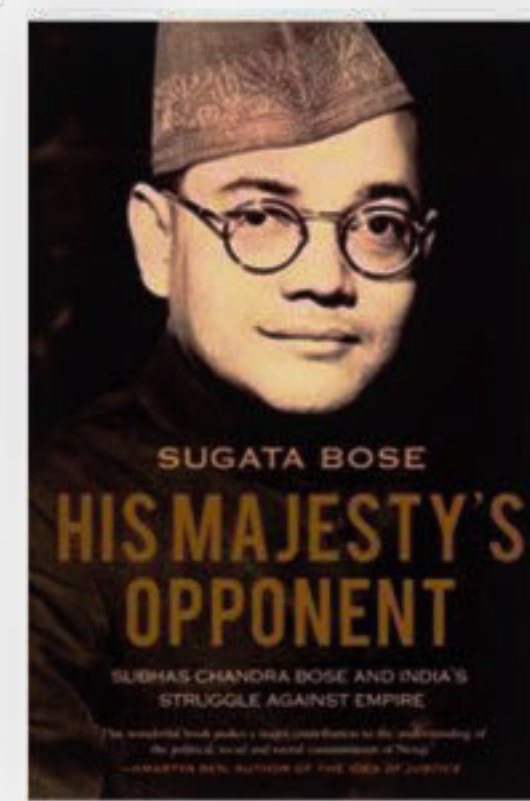
In the end, living is all about honour. Or is it? Tor Baz, for a hefty sum of three thousand rupees paid to Afzal Khan, buys Shah Zarina --- to have her as his wife. The twilight of the tale is telling:

On one of the trails, Tor Baz walked along with Shah Zarina behind him, and fingered the small silver amulet that was stitched to the inside of his cloak. He was smiling, as he did most of the time. While he usually smiled about nothing in particular, this time he was smiling about Afzal Khan.

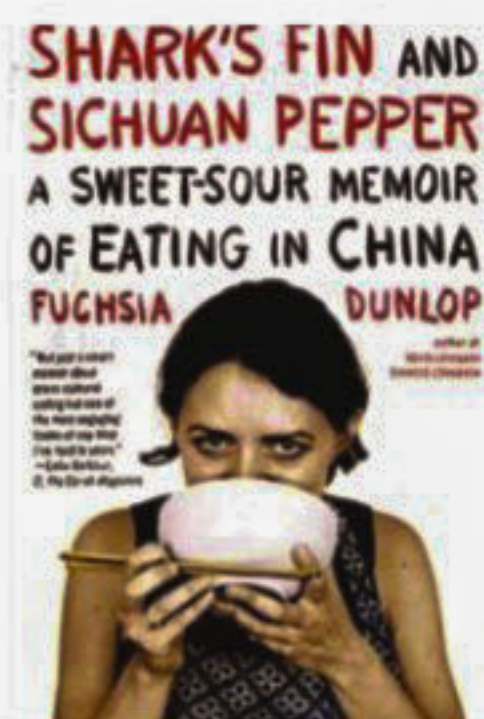
'It's almost incredible,' he thought, 'that Afzal Khan really believed I would marry this girl, to think of such an old veteran falling for the oldest trick in the trade...but, then...who but God knows what the future holds for me and for this land? Maybe it is time now to end my wanderings.'

Syed Badrul Ahsan is with The Daily Star.

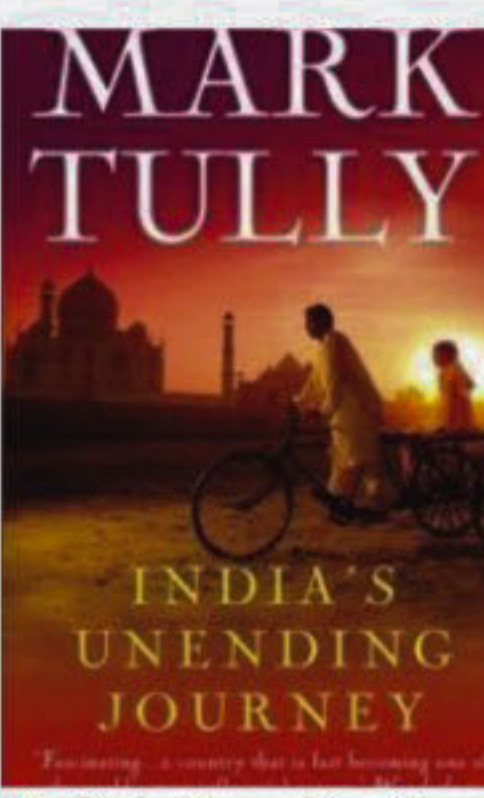
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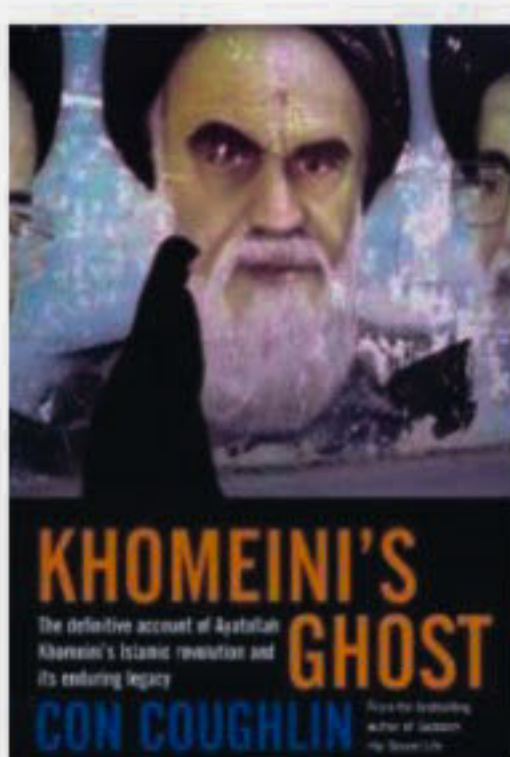


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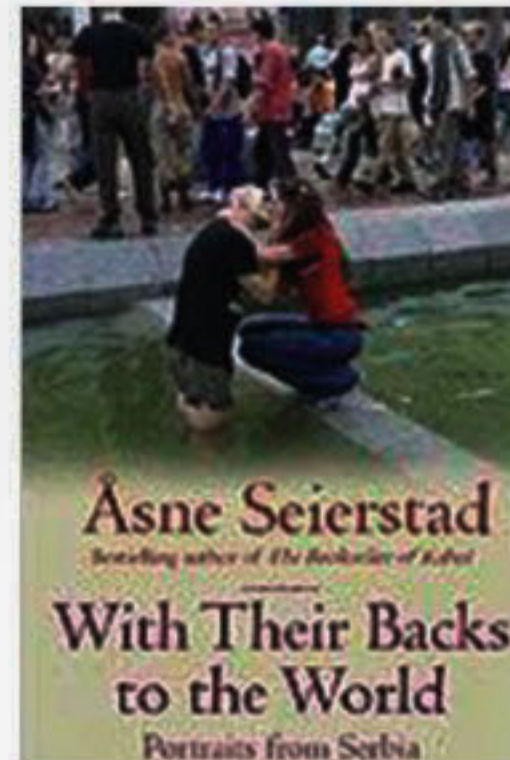
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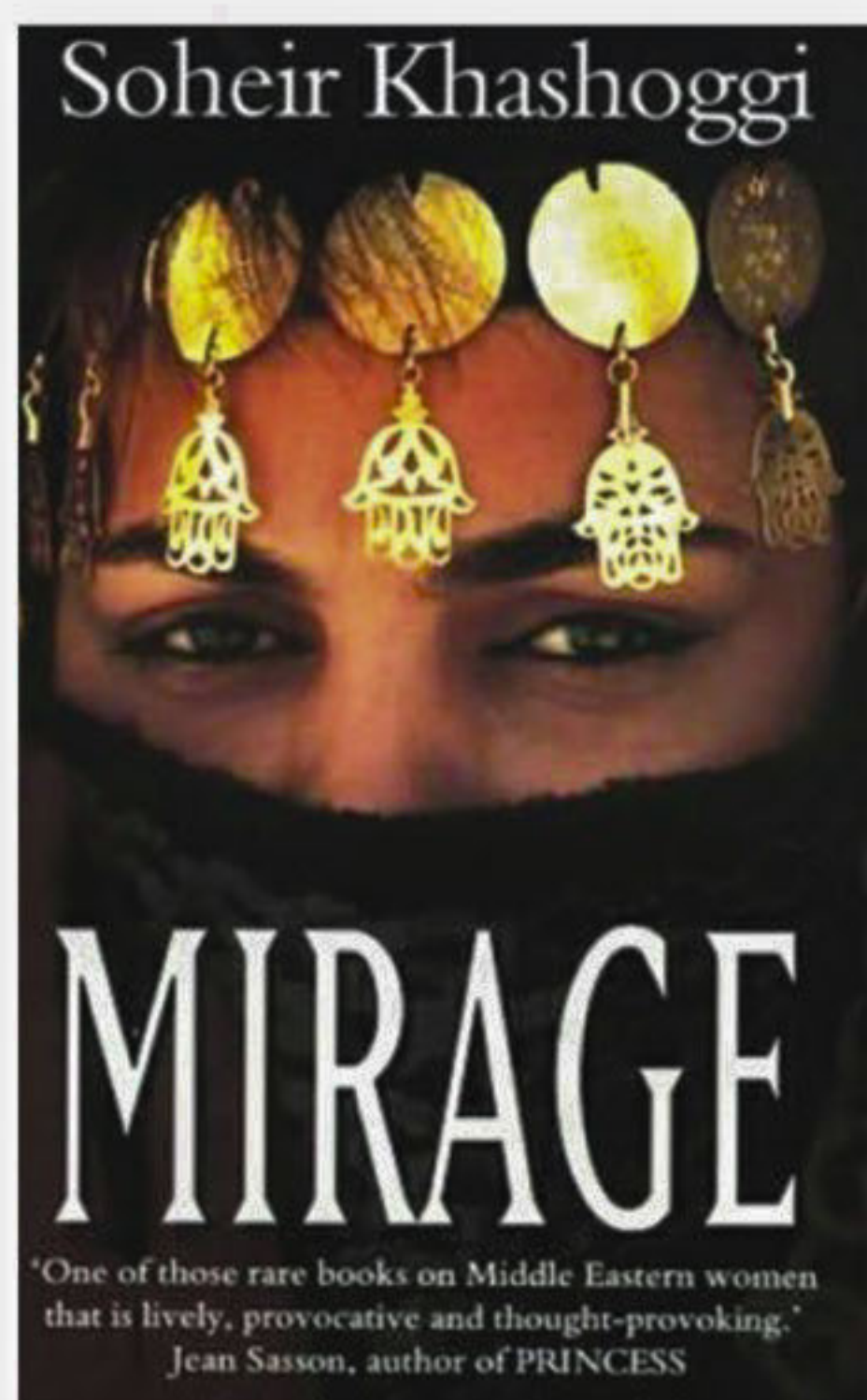
A tortuous struggle in defence of dignity

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is moved by an Arab woman's tale

One hears the story of an enchanting land comprising people who are a world unto themselves in terms of ways of living their lives, their demeanour, emotional outbursts, moral standards set by themselves, however wide the deviations might be from the edicts of religion entailing double standards and many others. A reader keeps on peeling off layer after layer of darkness only to discover a nadir of darkness sown in their character as reflected particularly in their private lives unknown to the world outside. One common factor that binds all such people in all such families is that they are all 'obscenely rich'; their men are free to do as they like while women as lesser beings are ruled by them and are the arbiters of their fate. There is dissatisfaction, resentment, fear and sorrow among the womenfolk but all in a hush-hush way. Then the reader is startled coming face to face with a rebel, a belligerent young woman who is determined to fight tooth and nail for her freedom as a human being, knowing full well the price she will have to pay for it. In other words, Amira, the protagonist, later known as Jenna Sorrel in America, risks her life along with her baby son to win freedom.

She comes of an exceptionally affluent family in Al-Remal, which means 'The Sand' a name, although fictitious, yet gives hints to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The reasons are not difficult to guess, particularly in view of the fact that Soheir Khashoggi, the author, spells out the names of many other countries that come within the purview of Islamic culture and tradition. She also takes the names of the people who are 'men of substance', of course, in their own estimation; but in a very circumspect way she refrains from taking the name of only one country. Such cautiousness is rightly understood by a sensible reader.

Amira spends a childhood of fairytale, grows up under the tutelage of a Dutch governess who is her window to the world and who herself is heartbroken in her personal life; witnesses odds, discriminations, maltreatment of her mother at the hands of her overbearing, autocratic father and always suffers from a sense of insecurity for the life awaiting her. Meanwhile, she is haunted by the fate of Laila, who was her idol and was stoned to death for bearing the child of Malik, Amira's brother, outside wedlock. Her emotional syndrome gets acute soon after marriage and drives her to break away from the



Mirage
Soheir Khashoggi
Bantam Books

cruelty, raw sensuality and an all-out irrational savagery of her husband Ali, who is a prince of the kingdom of Al-Remal. She becomes a living witness to a conglomeration of vices that Ali manifests in his daily life both at home and outside that were so long absolutely inconceivable to Amira. Eventually, with the assistance of Dr. Philippe Rochon, a French family physician whom Amira loves, she ventures to escape from Al-Remal to America through an arduous journey by plane, by road and last of all by sea. She gets herself highly educated there and finds herself as a practising psychologist, a writer of best selling books championing the causes of women. Nevertheless, for her a peaceful life centering on her son Karim turns out to be a mirage, an illusion.

Jenna Sorrel is distraught and devastated at hearing the news of her adolescent son Karim's going back to Al-Remal, having discovered that he is a prince of that kingdom and that his mother had lied to him all along about the identity of his father. A great fighter that Jenna Sorrel is, in this case, she feels

defeated. A mother's determination is shaken and her sacrifice for so long is reduced to rubble. At this stage the reader encounters the word 'mirage' in its full impact although at the beginning of the prologue there appears two quotations using the word 'mirage', revolving around life, that apparently are in contradiction to each other in their connotations. The first one has longing for 'sweet mirage' as opposed to "...bitter, barren truth"; the second one is a warning to guard life in such a way that it does not get transformed into a mirage that is so fragile. There is much food for thought right here and also in many other places in this book on a powerful drama of life. Last of all, having gone through trials and tribulations of various kinds and of various degrees, Amira emerges triumphant and perceives that she is ready after all this time to be with Brad Pierce, who has loved her passionately and persistently since his loving wife's death and whom Amira has turned down on more than one occasion earlier. She feels the need of his vibrant presence in her life that so far has been mired in pain and panic.

Some other writers as well have been drawn to the apparently enchanting but repressive and tragic tales of women in veils in the affluent segments of societies in the Middle East. Nevertheless Khashoggi's *Mirage*, stands out as more reliable and therefore an authentic portrayal of Middle Eastern women's lives in their environs because of the fact that she herself hails from the region, thus validating the stories taken from the primary source. However, she deals with the sequence of events in a rather tortuous way, bringing forth a big crowd of characters with long deliberations that eventually brings a reader does not see the woods because of the trees. Nevertheless, this distinctive style of writing of Khashoggi does not fail readers: it makes them feel the poignancy contained therein. A moving story that demonstrates a woman's courage to not only withstand travails but also fight for victory in times of dire adversity. Soheir Khashoggi creates a great hero in the character of Amira. And in that lies her achievement. (The review is a reprint, in readers' interest).

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque, critic and music enthusiast, is founder Principal, Radiant International School.

On the wings of freedom

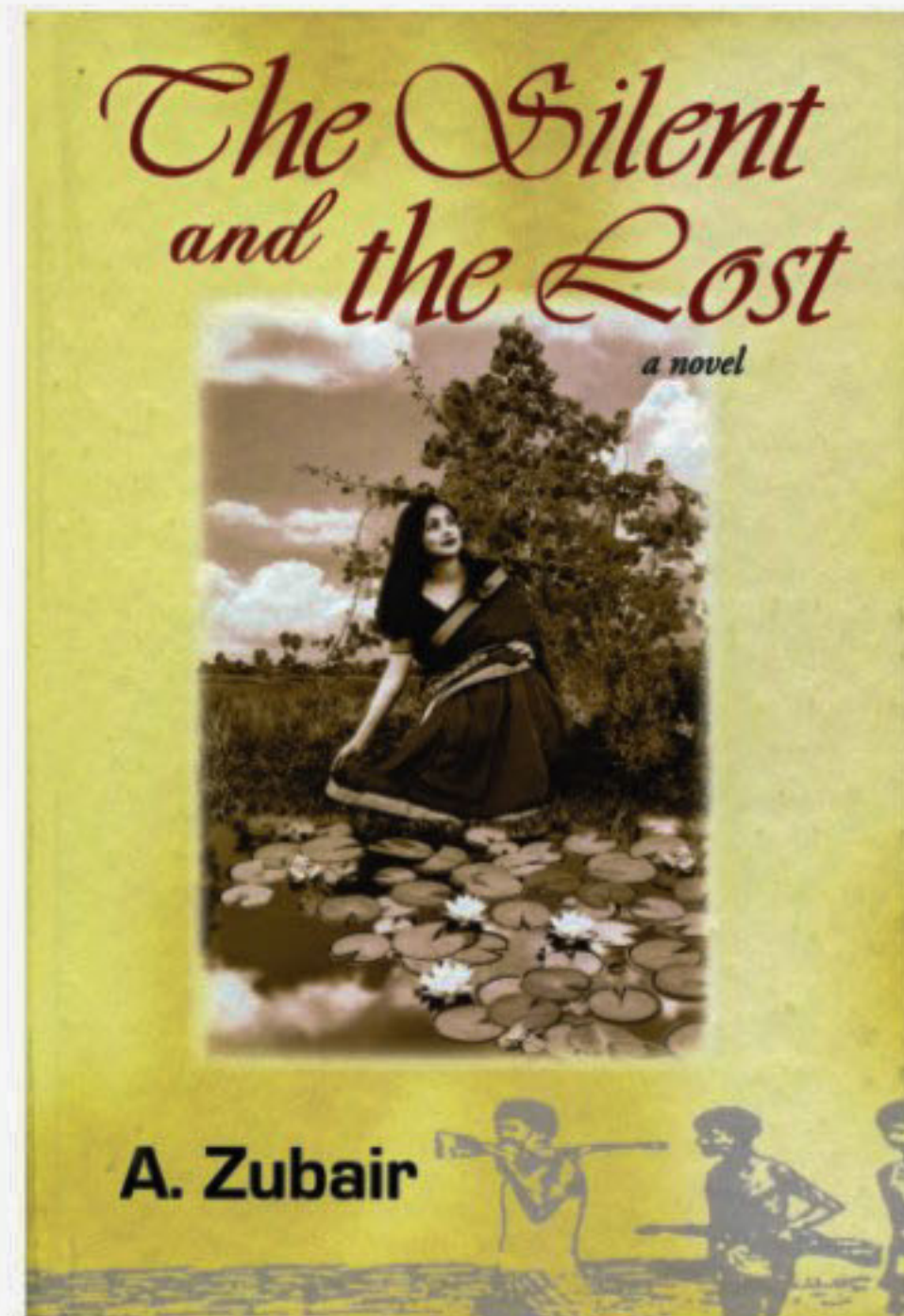
Nameera Ahmed remembers the pains of war

Debut author Abu Bin Mohammad Zubair's first foray into the world of literary fiction is a showcase of some of the most ignored and in effect forgotten facts of the blood and tear-stained glory that is 1971. A tale of both choice and consequence, *The Silent and the Lost* stands as a new biting portrayal of the lives before, the lives during and the lives after the brutal nine-month war for hope that gave birth to Bangladesh.

The Silent and the Lost begins in a sense with the end, dated 5th April 1997. The opening chapter of the first book views the haunting emptiness coupled with the dark shame of being born a war child even in the bright Californian sun. Zubair's writing itself of the initial chapters is extremely detailed, and despite the occasional overdose of adjectives the author effectively depicts a very real picture of the late nineties American-Bengali community. The delicate nuances that establish the inexplicable differences in perspective of the two generations in the book are remarkably well constructed, so much so that at moments the reader can almost smell the light fumes of spices, can hear the dramatic dialogue so many South Asian mothers are prone to and can even relate to the inexplicable state of limbo the cultural changes have put them in.

Book Two is much different, darker and tinged with a constant indefinable need. Where Book One leaves but wisps of longing, Book Two brings forth a truth that is tangible, almost vivid and bleakly inescapable. With its essentially more thought provoking storyline and dramatic reality this part is a vision of the entire nine-month journey of Bangladesh's Liberation War through the youthful eyes of a passionless third person who illustrates the lives of every lost Birangona as a Nahar, Amira or Fatima, of every forgotten war hero as Rafique and Nazmul and of every muted, every denied child as Alex. Starting with Bangabandhu's historic speech of 7 March, the beginnings of Operation Searchlight and a suppressed version of some of the more rabid betrayals, A. Zubair entwines his tale with flashes of a post-Vietnam America and post-'71 support, as he weaves a poignant tale of camaraderie, bare, naked dialogue and nearly flawless characterisation.

And then comes Book Three. Following the devastation in the wake of nine months of forgotten and ignored sacrifice, the author comes back to the present as he traces the



The Silent and the Lost
A. Zubair
Pacific Breeze Publishers

remnants of the lives of the still left standing, of the courage people were too small minded to acknowledge as he concludes this epic tale of heart-breaking reality with an ending filled with more regret than remorse, and more helplessness than hope. It is almost as if in the eyes of these broken souls, the torture of 1971 with the hope of a better future, were in a number of ways better than the bleakness of the early twenty-first century that refuses to even try knowing how it all was.

As a first time author, A. Zubair presents his first novel as a bit of a rough diamond, a compelling heart-rendering read which develops striking imagery in itself. The author brings vividly to life every scene he has illustrated with his words despite the occasionally stiff dialogue. One would not be overstating in claiming that *The Silent and the Lost* is an evocative tapestry of deep emotional scars and broken lives that brings to life characters that will linger long after the book is read.

Truly a tale that touches the soul. Note the quote-worthy line: "Freedom is never free."

Nameera Ahmed, a freelance writer, is currently doing honours in law at BRAC University.