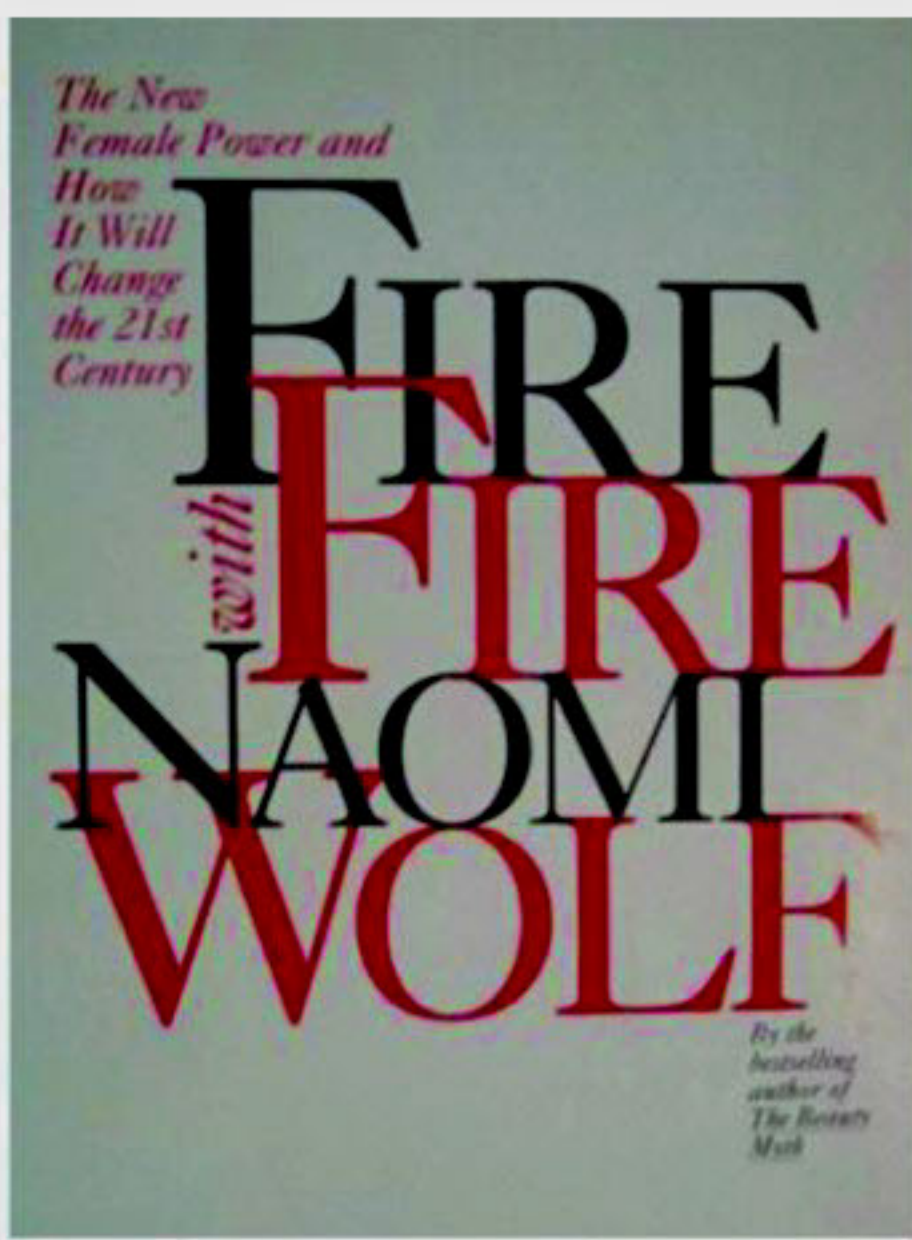


# Inquiries into feminist thought

## Kajal Bandyopadhyay spots a breath of fresh air in an old book

As a critical friend of feminists, I find it enjoyable publicising a non-anti-feminist book on which I could somehow lay my hands. This is *Fire with Fire* by Naomi Wolf, already quite a celebrity for her earlier book, *The Beauty Myth*. Wolf's first book was granted a sort of foremost position in what is called Third Wave Feminism. And it's not at all that the second book is anyway against feminism or its principal causes. Here we get started rather with Wolf's valorizing account of the famous Hill-Thomas hearings (Anita Hill's testimony in the US Senate hearings prior to Clarence Thomas' appointment to the Supreme Court) that took place in September-October 1991, ushering in "a spontaneous women's uprising that brought American women an incredible number of victories". And, this, Wolf feels, could just be the big beginning for men-women equality. But that did not happen. Why? As Wolf finds it, an obstacle stood on the path of women's equality in the shape of many American women's rejection of "feminism." That's how the struggle did not pick up further.



Fire with Fire  
Naomi Wolf  
Fawcett Columbine, New York

In *Fire with Fire*, Naomi Wolf proves to have anyhow developed a sharp opposition to the typical negative mindset true of some people. We find a remarkably revealing instance of this in her long description of the situation in a rape crisis center where she had worked. As one reviewer of her book comments on that, "The walls were drab, the chairs uncomfortable, the lighting stark. A lack of money? No, simply a pervading attitude of victimization, as if it would be "inappropriate" to have a cheerful, comfortable shelter." Wolf is clearly against the philosophy orienting the atmosphere there; the same reviewer observes:

*Who more deserves a little comfort than a woman who has been raped? Surely if anyone would appreciate a vase of flowers and a cup of gourmet coffee, it would be these women. Even the staff were lifeless; they held tedious meetings in which everyone tried not to say anything vaguely negative, lest they upset the "sisterhood." Wolf would have preferred a little honesty, efficiency, and forward drive instead of all this false agreement and wheel-spinning. Eventually the rape crisis center smothered in its own self-pity and had to close.*

And it's then that in Section III of *Fire with Fire* we find some very thought-provoking ideas coming from Naomi Wolf. These are revolutionary so far as their conventionally anti-feministic import is

concerned. Rejecting the typically feministic or "victim feministic" notion that power, money and aggression are necessarily "male" traits that women should not cultivate at all, Wolf acknowledges women's "dark side" also! She admits that given the same scope as men, women would behave in much the same way. Wolf even favours the development of a "vision of femininity in which it is appropriate and sexy for women to use power." (p. xvii). And, this is where I, as a critical friend of feminists, feel highly vindicated. For I have written a good number of essays indicating how power can be female also, or that there's nothing gender-specific in all these. I would, however, more like to check if Wolf's is an acceptable position above either for males or females. Should anyone interact in a powerful manner, of domination? Will that result in anything short of an endless cycle of domination and counter-domination? It's interesting that, basing herself on popular magazines, national polls and TV shows, Wolf also shows that women no longer see men as "natural" wielders of power (a concept of second wave feminism). What then emerge, fortunately, are senses or images of female power, prestige and wealth. Ideas of natural gap between genders in all these are untrue.

To go back to our initial position of many

American women's rejection of "feminism", the second section of *Fire with Fire* explains the gap between feminism and so many American women. That is, by saying that though the majority of American women support the goals of feminism, a majority will not call themselves "feminists." For, feminism has now come to represent a rigid agenda, and many women feel that taking on the feminist label somehow requires them to hold a long list of "correct" opinions. These opinions on highly divisive issues such as abortion, affirmative action, homosexuality and pornography make it difficult for many to go by the feminist name! There's a little more of this story.

Wolf recounts how feminism, never monolithic, has now turned out to be so. Almost all the numerous strands of feminism of the early days of the second wave except what Wolf calls "victim feminism" have allegedly died out. And this one strand is a creation of academics confined to women's studies departments, and does not represent average (American) women. So, Wolf is for a return to the days of heterogeneity when women didn't have to agree in order to be called "feminist." It is a damage done to women's movement, she feels, when it's a quibble about who is "really" a feminist, and there's no appreciation or acknowledgement of pro-women efforts that don't strictly go by exact political ideas. There can be a vibrant, vital women's movement only when there's space for some division and conflict. Naomi Wolf recalls the conservative 1980s when American women had to huddle together to repel certain forces; what she now advocates is the luxury of diversifying without becoming fragmented. She writes, "We should never [glorify consensus] at the expense of challenging and testing our reality through dissent and debate.... If criticism of a movement amounts to disloyalty, that movement has set up the conditions of its own fossilization." (pp. 109-110).

What Wolf proposes in the third section of her book is new and worth exploring: replacing "victim feminism" with "power feminism." As I feel, it is so when power feminism means women's equality with men (not inferiority or superiority), and encourages women to assume the power and responsibility they not only deserve as men's equals, but also already have. I appreciate it when Wolf shows how

emphasis of victimization leads women to only nagging and stagnation when they should positively use the power that they already and very much have. She writes, "Instead of complaining, let's solve the problems! Instead of feeling guilty for earning a decent income, let's use the money to help other women." Wolf's is almost an acceptance that women anyhow have much power, maybe after what she calls the "genderquake." And that is very much a welcome change! Most of the women do not admit their power, may be of a different kind. Wolf's call for bringing about the due change in women's self-consciousness is what I find most valuable about *Fire with Fire*. Wolf writes both about recent changes in women's condition and the changes that is yet to happen in self-realization. Let me quote:

...When I argue that women have enormous unclaimed power, I am not pretending that women are not harmed and held back in every way, or that "everything's all right now" so we can relax and stop fighting. I am saying rather, that if we understand the events of the recent past and act on that understanding, and if we undergo a sea change in our own self-image, matters will become increasingly "all right." ... My hope is that if we interpret the genderquake rightly, we won't stop fighting. We will fight more intelligently and elegantly... When I say that the genderquake has potentially changed forever what it means to be female, I mean this: *It is no longer necessary for women to ask anyone's permission for social equality.* (pp. 51-52).

*Fire with Fire* is a breath of fresh air in feminist literature, which is all too often heavy and negative. Though Wolf has not come up with senses and ideas that logically follow from her initial idea of "fire" being already and always there in women, yet her goal is perhaps to create a new feminist movement that (American) women can again join, to replace exclusionary feminisms. She is for a heterogeneous movement, characterized not by unity of strict beliefs or an idealistic concept of "sisterhood." We wait for women coming up as agents of all-out changes in the whole society. Women cannot have totally self-determined lives; nor are there all sunny mornings for any one anywhere.

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## BOOK choice

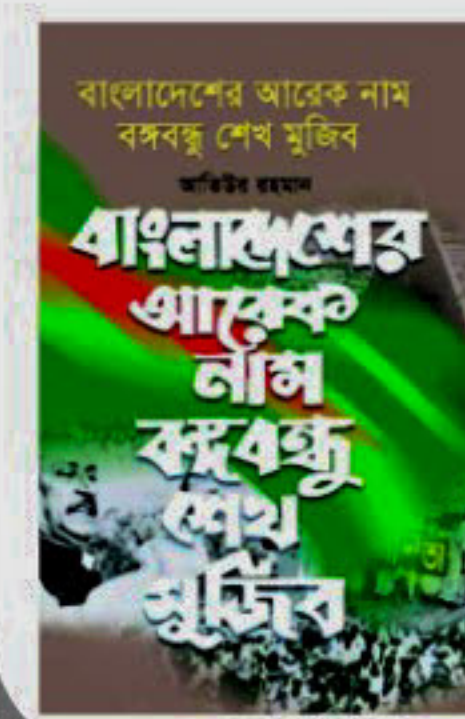
Readings in Microfinance  
Reach and Impact  
Eds S.R. Osmany,  
M.A. Baqui Khalily  
The University Press  
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All Those Yesterdays  
1954-1964  
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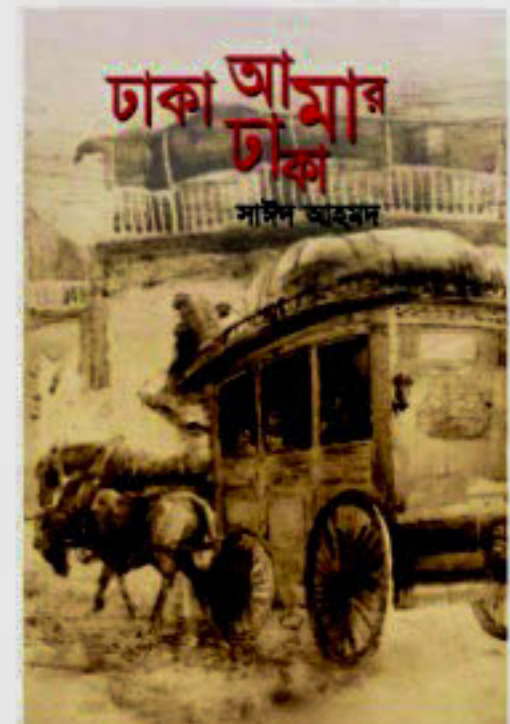


Bangladesher Arek Naam  
Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib  
Atiur Rahman  
Sahitya Prokash

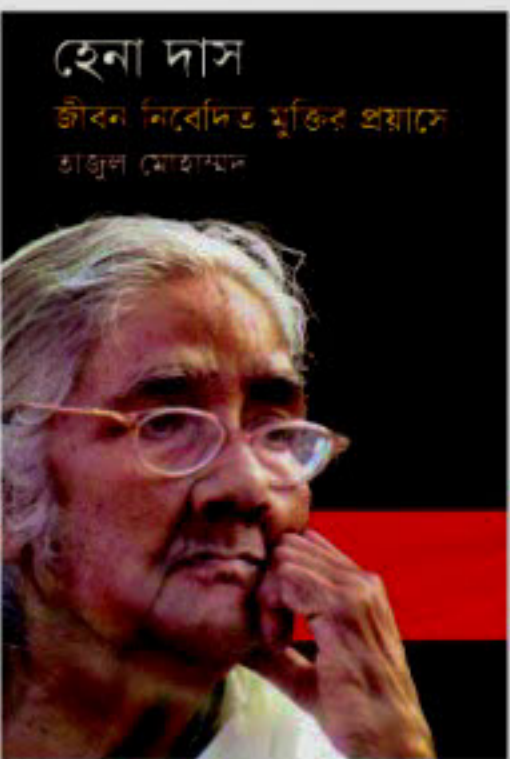


Dhaka University Faculty:  
Satyendra Nath Bose,  
Muhammad Mansooruddin,  
Humayun Ahmed, Humayan  
Azad, Muhammad  
Shahidullah, Jasimuddin  
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Dhaka University  
Faculty  
Satyendranath  
Bose, others  
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Sayeed Ahmed  
Sahitya Prokash



Hena Das  
Jibon Nibedito Muktir  
Proyash  
Tajul Mohammad  
Sahitya Prokash

# Of fathers and daughters ...

## Tulip Chowdhury shares the emotions of a family

A mixture of love, suspense and family, *The Last Song* comes to lovers of Nicholas Sparks as the new spellbinder. In the new saga Sparks weaves his magic, threading together the intricate story of four very different people tied inextricably together.

Veronica Miller, the rebellious teenager, is sent to Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, by her mother to spend the summer with the estranged father. Her parents had divorced recently and that itself is enough to drive the troubled teenager to emotional upheavals. Coming from New York Veronica finds her first ever trip to the south rather nerve-wracking. The beach house of Jack, her father, is very different from the apartment she had lived in all her life among the high rise, tall skyscrapers of New York. The undulated sea offers her some respite. There is a pub house that usually is crowded with young folks socializing the summer through. Here she meets Murcus, the loner who loves to get people into trouble. Some other people she meets seem to reject her presence in the pub house. Veronica realizes that she not only dislikes the place, she is not even getting to like its people either. Even the mild mannered Will Blakelee spills soda on her at a gathering in the pub house. But Veronica remains calm when that happens, accepts Will's apology and quietly goes out. Will realizes that Veronica, the girl with the streak of purple hair, is not just another angry teenager, that she has a quiet disposition of her own.

Jonah, Veronica's ten-year old brother, also knows that his sister is a smart and nice person inside her rebellious self. He has seen her arguing for hours with his mom but then, immediately afterwards, she would be the most loving sister to him. Both Jonah and Veronica are to spend the summer with their father. Jonah is happy to be on the oceanfront and loves his time with his father. Veronica had not spoken to her father since he left home and came away to Wrightsville. After coming to him she makes it clear that she has no intention of staying at home all day or be on friendly terms with him. But outside her home there is trouble in the beach town. Murcus starts stalking her and Veronica has a hard time keeping herself at a safe distance from him. Blaze, Murcus's girlfriend, is jealous and lands Veronica in a false shop lifting case. While bringing Veronica back from court her father tells her that he believes her to be



The Last Song  
Nicholas Sparks  
Grand Central Publishing

innocent. Veronica feels sorry for having been rude to her father and realizes that he loves her very much. Veronica has a talent for playing the piano. But because her father had been a pianist she has not played the piano since her parents' divorce. She did not want to relate to her father in any way. Jack had not played the piano since Veronica's arrival in Wrightsville because she had told him that she hated to hear him play. Then one day thinking her to be away from home he secretly plays a song. Veronica comes in, to see him go into a sudden coughing fit and later spit out blood. Jack then confesses that he has cancer and is living out the grace period of his life.

From here on begins the story of a loving daughter's complete devotion to her father living out his last days in the world. In the meantime, Will Blakelee falls in love with Veronica. But Will's mother is completely against the girl who is accused of shoplifting. When Veronica tells him of Blaze's conspiracy Will believes her. However, Veronica's troubles in the new place do not end. Murcus continues to bother her and Blaze refuses to get her cleared of the false charges. Will and

Veronica grow closer and together they volunteer to look after some sea turtles that are in danger of becoming extinct. At the end of the vacation Will invites Veronica to his sister's wedding. Murcus turns up and creates trouble, offending the invited guests. Will's mother blames Veronica, for she knows that Murcus is there on her account. Angry and hurt by the accusation, Veronica informs Will that she will end their relationship. In the meantime Will leaves to study in Europe. School reopens but Veronica refuses to leave her father alone. She decides to take care of him till the last.

After Will comes back from Europe he and Veronica are reunited through saving Blaze from a fire. Blaze now goes to the police station and confesses to framing Veronica. She also tells the police that the fire that had burnt her was started by Murcus and Blaze was a witness to it. Murcus lands in jail when Blaze reports Murcus's crime. In the meantime Jack's health deteriorates; he is in and out of hospital. Jack asks Veronica to make sure that he is not put on a support system. He asks her to let go of him when the time comes. The pain of having to let go of a loved person makes the story a heartfelt one. Veronica regrets her earlier behaviour with her father and tries to make up for it. The fact that her father is most forgiving makes her cry all the more. She also discovers that the divorce of her parents was not as a result of her father's fault but the fact that her mother was having an extra-marital affair. This makes her feel all the more guilty about having blamed her father. All these accumulated feelings seem to culminate into a deep understanding between father and daughter. Veronica finally starts playing the piano again and completes the song that her father had left unfinished. He asks her to play the song before he breathes his last.

*The Last Song* is a heart-rending saga that delves into love at all levels. It is an emotional roller coaster. The reader is wholly engaged with the joys and tears of the real-life defining plots. The characters are palpably real and their thoughts and feelings are sewn together with a deft mastery of words. The story has been made into a major motion picture. It is definitely Sparks at his best.

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and is a poet.

# The need to look within

## Nausheen Rahman experiences a purging of the soul

Once in a while, we all feel the need to look within, to try and understand things, like our position in the larger scheme of things, our level of endurance, our capacity for contentment, our ability to find beauty not only in the sublime, but also in the ordinary, et cetera. Paulo Coelho's books guide us along this journey of soul-searching and self-analysis.

To many of us who have read and liked this writer's unique works, which endorse his versatility and depth of spirituality, this collection of short stories, observations and quotations, *Like The Flowing River* (with the subtitle, *Thoughts and Reflections*), is a boon.

This book is like no other I have come across. Sagacious, profound thoughts are expressed simply, clearly, concisely and sensitively. The anecdotes are very relevant in today's world.

Coelho is an avid traveller, one who, in his own words, is "more interested in a country's inhabitants than its museums and churches".

He believes that travelling is the best way of learning. In this book, he shares with us the experiences he has had in different parts of the world. His encounters with a myriad of larger-than-life characters are recounted lucidly with masterly strokes of his pen.

The stories include events from his own life, as well as the legendary and mythical tales he has heard from various people in numerous cities and villages. He says he has "a pilgrim's soul". This wordsmith has a charming and captivating gift of storytelling.

The anecdotes are delightful and spread a kind of peace and joy; they are meant to be savoured. When Coelho writes about the occult, the mysteries in nature and miracles, we feel inclined to start believing in them, too. I am reminded of a quotation I had read somewhere: "Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles isn't a realist". Coelho has his own definition for the word 'miracle': "a miracle is something that fills the soul with peace. Sometimes it manifests itself in the form of a cure, or a wish granted. It doesn't matter. The end result is that, when the miracle occurs, we feel a profound reverence for the grace God has granted us."

The book, which has a universal appeal, is replete with gems in the form of quotations, bits of Eastern philosophy, references to the Bible, et cetera. A monk in Spain says, "God knows how far

He can test a soul, and never goes beyond that point". Someone believes that "a voice crying out against wrongdoing is always heard by God"; someone else notes that "the most important things, those that shape our existence, are precisely the ones that never show their faces".

Coelho, who knew he wanted to be a writer since he was fifteen years old, muses over the minutest of things in this world (and beyond it). He is also a "people's person", a creative man with a big heart.

A chapter on translators, "The Other Side Of The Tower Of Babel", tells us about the significant role that translators play, not only in writers' lives and careers, but also in the cultures of nations. We are given valuable information about how translators help to share and spread knowledge. Coelho's

father-in-law is also a translator.

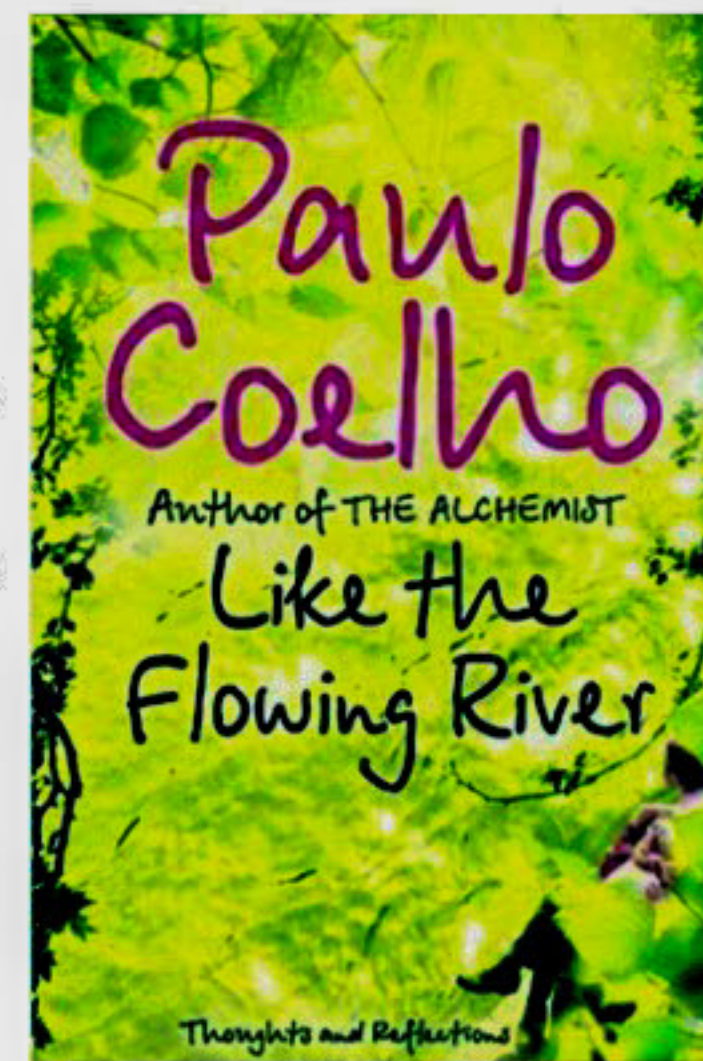
The chapter concludes with an interesting paragraph: "When Man grew ambitious, God destroyed the Tower of Babel, and everyone began to speak in different tongues. However, in His infinite Grace, He also created people to rebuild those bridges to enable dialogue and the diffusion of human thought. That person, whose name we so rarely take the trouble to notice when we open a foreign book, is the translator." It would be pertinent to mention here that the translator of "Like The Flowing River" is Margaret Jull Costa.

Coelho's message of hope reaches out to all kinds of people. His belief in the power of love and charity ends up making many of us believers, too. "Love creates bridges where it would seem they were impossible". In "The Music Coming From The Chapel", we see how worship can be in different forms, that religious or spiritual fervour can be shared, and that "the greatness of God always reveals itself in the simplest things".

The stories, narrated with a clear perception and easy interpretation of difficult, complex situations, have the general effect of making people feel happy and optimistic (as do his other books). Some of the stories move us to tears but these tears seem to purge the soul.

Reading Paulo Coelho's thoughts and reflections is an enriching experience, in itself.

Nausheen Rahman, academic and critic, reviews books on a regular basis for The Daily Star.



Like The Flowing River  
Thoughts and Reflections  
Paulo Coelho  
Harper Collins