

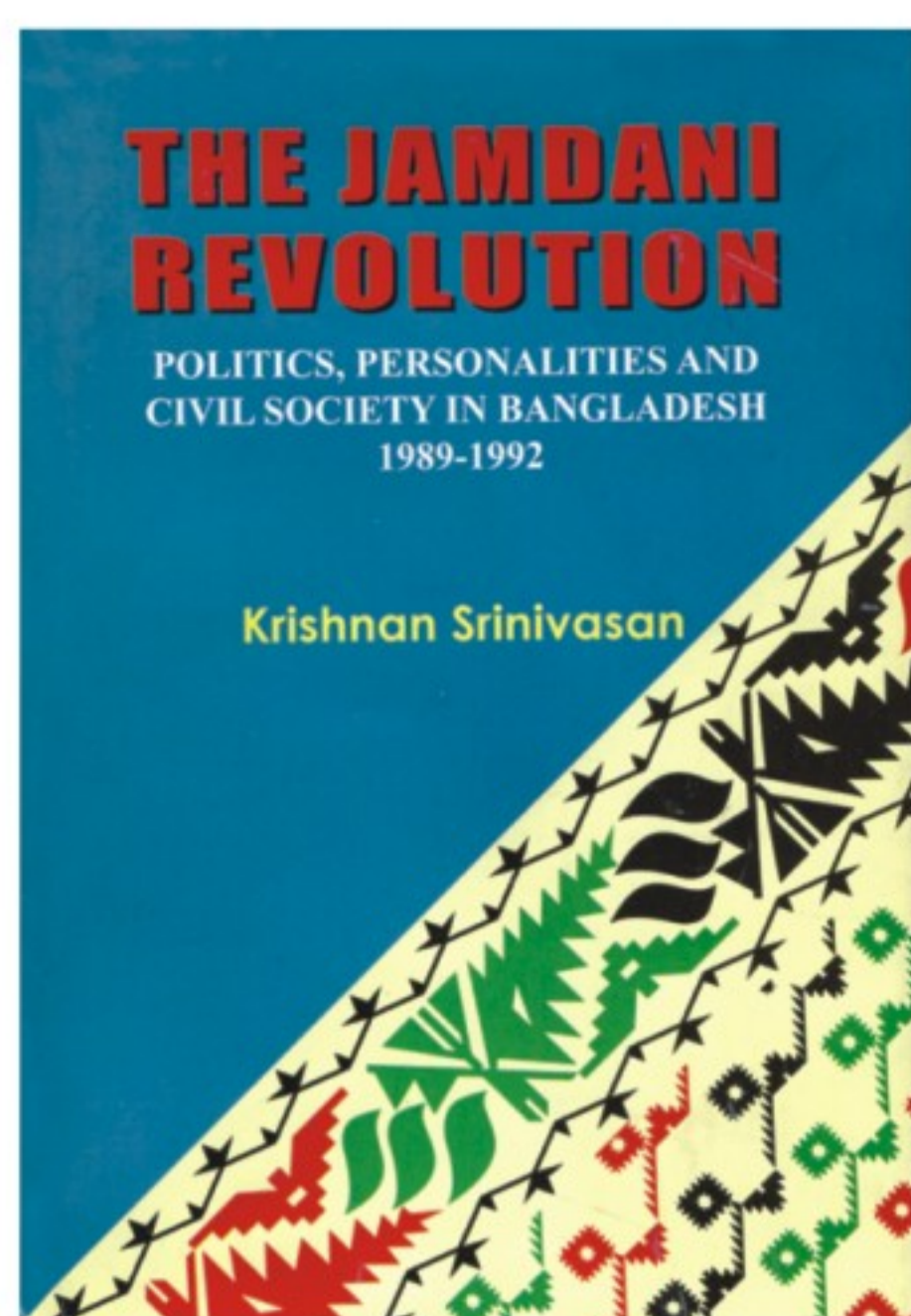
Two reviews from Mahbub Husain Khan

Peregrinations of a diplomat . . .

Since the liberation of Bangladesh there have been three critical periods in the history of our country. These were 1975, when the Father of the Nation was assassinated in August and then General Ziaur Rahman took over power in November, 1989-1991, when General Ershad's army backed government was toppled and democracy was 'born again' with general elections held in 1991, and 2007-2008 when the army and some countries backed a caretaker government into power. Krishnan Srinivasan, who was India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh from 1989 to 1992, wrote his memoirs, which was published in 2008, which covers the 1989-1991 era.

The Indian subcontinent is an elusive quarry. Few pens can adequately convey the Indian subcontinent's magnificent diversity. Many historians become bogged down in dreary lists of feuding dynasties, ancient and modern or its fanciful cultural and political adaptations. But Srinivasan is aware of the potential pitfalls. He shows his experience in not being over-ambitious and his astute commentary on the developments during his tenure in Bangladesh is a delight to read.

For over 400 pages, Srinivasan leads an accurate marshalling of facts, in the format of a diary, without losing sight of the political and social aspects during his stay in Bangladesh. His book gains from his personal meetings with the politicians, civil servants and leaders of civil society, into bringing to light the whys and the wherefores of the crucial three years into the readers' grasp. This is the first book to be published of an Indian envoy's diaries during a diplomatic posting, and the first book I have read by any envoy of any country, posted in Bangladesh. His consultations in India during his stay in Bangladesh and the outcome of his diplomatic efforts in Bangladesh stand out to be mature and instructive. That Bangladesh entered a new age in history after 1991 with its own socio-political scenario is brought into sharp focus in this book. The title of the book, *Jamdani Revolution*, underlines the unique experience of two women leaders who have been governing Bangladesh for the past twenty years,



The Jamdani Revolution
Krishnan Srinivasan
Academic Press and Publishers Library

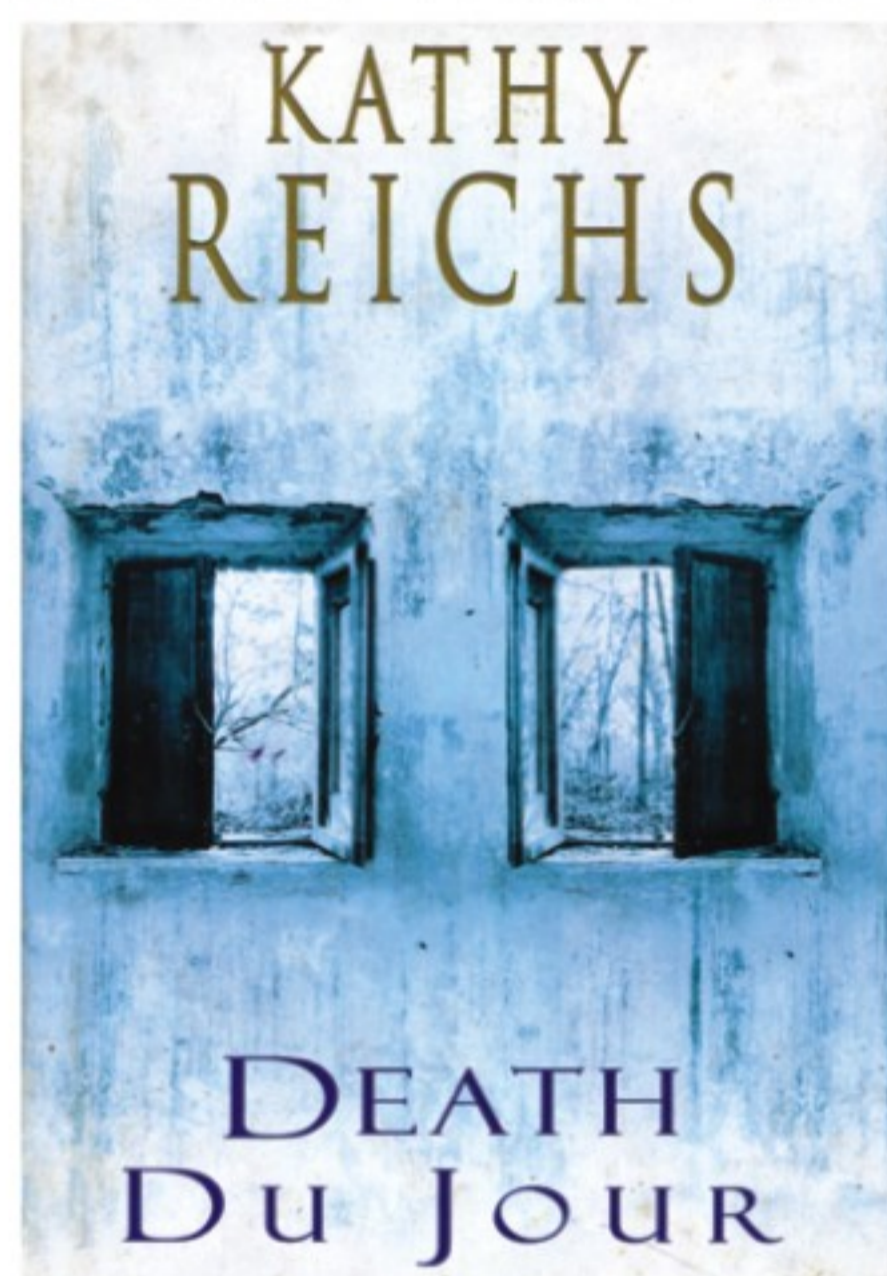
and we can appreciate much about what followed 1992, after Srinivasan left Dhaka. After his arrival in Bangladesh in March 1989, and the presentation of his credentials to General Ershad, the first minister he met was Anwar Hussain Manju, my contemporary at Dhaka University (he was a student of geography and I was in physics), both of us being students of Fazlul Haq Hall. And the first senior civil servant he met (apart from the Foreign Secretary) was Syed Shamim Ahsan, who was my Deputy Commissioner at Rangpur, when I was SDO of Gaibandha in late 1971 and was a proud officer who ushered in the victorious Bangladesh Liberation Forces into the subdivision (which is now a district). Srinivasan's accounts of people-to-people contact and two-track diplomacy will entertain readers in Bangladesh and be an eye-opener for those Bangladeshis who have left Bangladesh to live abroad before 1989. This is a book I would recommend for professionals, diplomats and the lay reader. The good news for potential readers is that this book is available at Omni Books at Dhanmondi.

Before I finish the review, let me quote a few lines from his diary entry for December 7th, 1990: "... A momentous week, which saw the abrupt

collapse of the Ershad government, and events described as a 'revolution' by some and as a second coming by others, especially in India ...". His book describes such history-making episodes with factual details, which occurred during his tenure in Bangladesh.

..... Silence of old churches

I have confessed before in my writings and reviews about literary topics and books that nowadays in my spare time I read books, and that too mostly thrillers and travel books. The first book by Kathy Reichs that I read was during my visit to Canada in 1998. This was *Deja Dead*, a murder mystery set in the summer of 1994 in Montreal. Incidentally this was the first book written by Kathy Reichs. Since then I have read and reviewed other books by Kathy Reichs, but it was only the other day that I found the second murder thriller by Kathy Reichs, *Death Du Jour*, at Omni Books, the bookshop of my friend Neo Mendez. Appropriately enough, the title of the English novel, is in English and French as the locale is Montreal, the bilingual



Death Du Jour
Kathy Reichs

city of Canada.

The novel is set in the mould of the well-worn forensic thrillers of Patricia Cornwell. Kathy Reichs' detective heroine, Dr. Temperance Brennan, is a forensic anthropologist with a gift for sticking her nose in and a refusal to take no for an answer. The mystery does not break much new ground, but as in many mystery stories, particularly those by Agatha Christie, the ending is a surprise. The science of forensic anthropology is detailed in description and easy to follow, if the reader has the stomach for descriptions of wounds and mutilated body parts. The genuineness of the setting and the technicalities have been possible because Reichs herself is a forensic anthropologist who works part of the year at Montreal.

It is a terribly cold night in March at Montreal, where Dr Temperance Brennan digs carefully in the eerie silence of an old church. She is there to exhume the remains of Sister Elizabeth Nicolet, a nun who died in 1888 and is now proposed for possible sainthood. Then, just hours after she returned home, she is called to the scene of a horrific arson, where a young family has perished in mysterious circumstances. Tempe gathers evidence from the arson, a sinister cult activity in the Carolinas, an ice storm in Montreal, and confronts a killer out of control whose motto seems to be 'Another day. Another death. Death du Jour'. The serial killer is finally apprehended with the help of Dr Temperance Brennan's expertise, and teamwork by the Montreal City Police.

Here again the book's success (it has been on the bestseller list for quite some time) is because it offers a vivid look at Montreal seen from the perspectives of some one who wasn't born there and stays in the city by choice. Her description of the city is enthralling with its two dominant and often warring cultures. It is the setting and also the story for which the book is worth reading. I do not want to spoil the readers' engrossed reading of the book by revealing the ending or the procedures leading to the solution.

Mahbub Husain Khan is a writer, columnist and former civil servant.

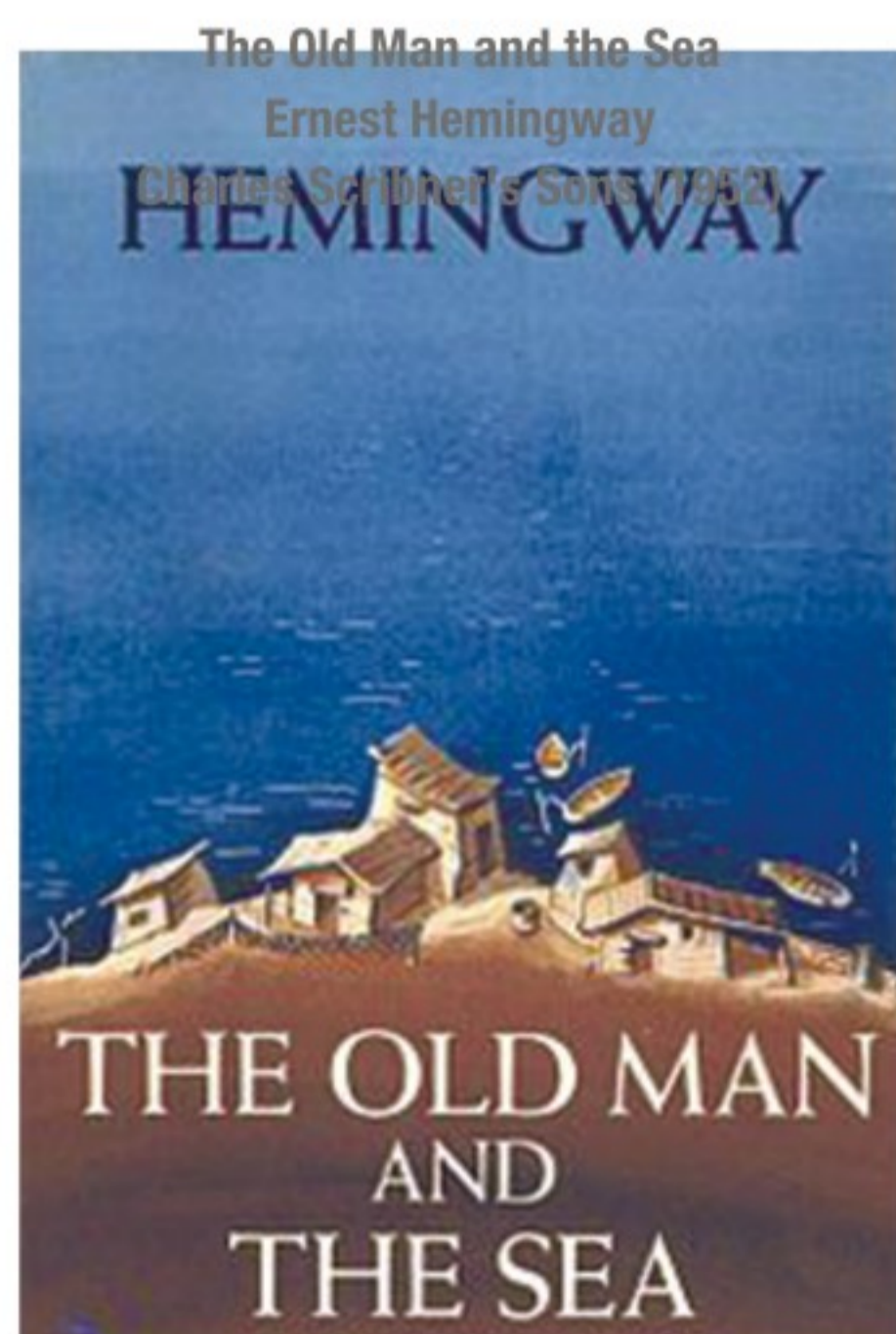
RE-READINGS

The symbolism remains strong *Shusruto Rishik goes through a timeless masterpiece*

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is a classic work that brought him the 1954 Nobel Prize in literature. It has been translated and read in many different languages. It is a book that is familiar, at least by name, to almost anyone who has had a primary education. Growing up, I too heard a great deal about this book. Frankly, I wondered what all the fuss was about. It was met with the reply, as all kids will know, that I was too young to understand. Eventually, I decided to read the book and discover for myself.

The story of *The Old Man and the Sea*, as the name may suggest, revolves around an aged man named Santiago. He is a fisherman in Cuba who has come upon some hard times, in that he has not caught a decent fish in eighty four days. He has been so unlucky that his young apprentice, Manolin, has been forbidden by his parents to sail with Santiago any more. Santiago believes that his bad luck is drawing to an end and sets out on his eighty-fifth day to search for a fish far into the Gulf. He travels farther than all other fisherman and casts his lines. A very powerful fish, which he believes to be a marlin, takes his bait. The fish is so powerful that it pulls Santiago's skiff along. Santiago does not let go and braces the lines with his body. So starts an arduous journey for both the fish and the old man that lasts two days and two nights. On the third day, the marlin is so tired out that Santiago, who himself is delirious with pain, manages to pull it close to the skiff and kill it.

The fish is too big for his skiff and so he ties it to the side and starts for Cuba. However, the trail of blood oozing from the slain fish draws in sharks. Initially Santiago is able to defend his catch against the sharks but it is not long before the inevitable happens and



Santiago has to watch as sharks completely devour the marlin, leaving only a skeleton and the head of the once great fish. Eventually Santiago reaches shore and drags himself to his hut and falls asleep. In the morning groups of fishermen and tourists notice Santiago's skiff and the skeleton of the enormous fish, measured at eighteen feet. Manolin rushes to Santiago's hut and cries when he sees the old man fast asleep with the injuries received from his battle with the marlin. He brings the old man coffee and newspaper and upon waking the old man promises they will fish together again. He falls back to sleep and dreams of his youth, of lions on the African beach.

During my reading it was difficult to keep an open mind, my mind being filled with preconceptions of my mother's and sister's opinions. Their opinion was that *The Old Man and the*

Sea was a testament to the resilience of human nature and our ability to endure pain and suffering in our battle against nature. Of course the old man has to endure a lot of pain and hardship to catch the marlin. The marlin represents nature and the old man humanity. Humanity's resilience and endurance are certainly showcased but there are other characteristics of the human species which have been showcased more prominently. I assume that the old man is quite an experienced fisherman, seeing as he had been fishing for some time and some of his feats of skill have been mentioned. I do not question his bout of bad luck but his attempt to try to fight against the marlin even after its strength had been revealed when it started pulling the skiff. The old man is an experienced fisherman and he knew how powerful the marlin was. Despite that the old man still carries on with his efforts.

Readers are reminded of the old man's past, how he was called 'Santiago the champion' and how strong he once was, how he dreamed of lions playing on the African beaches. I think that his efforts push into the spotlight a quality of humanity that is evident to anyone who but looks: arrogance and pride. The fisherman refers to the marlin in a tone of respect, as a brother, and acknowledges its strength and that it is a worthy opponent. But I think that is just to comfort himself and convince himself that there is another reason why he is trying to catch it. It is conveyed that Santiago yearns for the strength that he once had. He knows that he would have been able to catch the marlin by himself when he was younger. He yearns for acceptance in his community and, most of all, he wishes to prove to himself that he still has the strength that he once had.

It may be evident that Santiago, in fact, does still have the strength and endurance to bring the fish in himself. But take a look at what happens afterwards. Santiago knows that at one point, if he manages to bring the fish in, he will have to slay the fish. He knows that in order to slay the fish he has to harpoon it and he knows that harpooning the fish will release its blood which will bring in sharks. He knows all that and still he cannot bring himself to let the fish go. He goes through hell and back to catch that fish and in the end he can do nothing but satisfy himself with the thought that he still can bring a large marlin in as he helplessly sees his effort and hard work dissolving in bloody water as the sharks munch on it. It seems pathetic, the lengths to which he will go to satisfy his ego, which is almost as big as the marlin. In the end, it is all for an 18-foot skeleton lying on a beach which shows that "yes, the old man caught this". Does nature not reclaim itself? One wonders what would have happened if Santiago had kept on fishing near the bay. As he says himself, his bad luck cannot last forever. Everything that he does is the act of a desperate man who lets his emotions get the better of him. Santiago's actions are not so distant from a depiction of humanity's tendency to act without thinking about the consequences or often ignoring the consequences all together.

Hemingway's style of writing is precise. It is simple, yet elegant and succinct. One would recommend it as a good book to read and reflect upon. One's reactions may seem critical and pessimistic but one is entitled to one's own opinions.

Shusruto Rishik is a student at International Education Centre, Uttara, Dhaka.

BOOK choice

Books from Prothoma

Gogone Goroje
Megh Ghono Borosha
Rabindranath-er
Kobita Gaan Golpo
Probandho O
Chithi te Borosha

Muktijudhe Nari
Maleka Begum

Ila Mitra
Nacholer Tebhaga
Andoloner Netri
Maleka Begum

1971
Bondhur Mukh
Shotrur Chhaya
Hasan Ferdous

Sufia Kamal
Antorongo
Atyobhashyo
Abul Ahsan
Choudhury

Tel: 8110081

Manusher Prithibi Adeem Manusher Kotha Siraj Uddin Sathi Adorn Publication Tel: 9347577, 8314629

On Dreams and Dreaming
Ed. Sudhir Kakar
Penguin/Viking

A dash of poetry . . . *Syed Badrul Ahsan reads some new verses*

Poetry is an ageless experience. There is about it a timelessness that you cannot quite ignore. And that is because poets, being the unacknowledged legislators of the world they are, in Shelley's famous formulation, transcend time and space to ensure their commonality of passion about life and all that it is reflective of.

And that precisely is the message Shahabuddin Nagri means to put across in *The Black Cat and Other Poems*. Over the years, Nagri has demonstrated a degree of intellectual versatility which often leaves you surprised in a pretty refreshing way. He sings, he writes essays on varied themes and, of course, he composes poetry. In this sleek work, the aesthetic charm of which has certainly been heightened by the cover, the sense dawns that Nagri's poetic peregrinations cover a long, sometimes lengthening landscape of experience. Take, for instance, the poem *Barkat's Grave*, where a necessary awareness of history is what the poet goes for. The solemnity says it all.

The solemnity endures, in such short, painful poems as *Death News*, where a friend must be told of the passing of his parent. 'Come back friend, we will share all the clouds of sky with you', intones the poet. Empathy is all here. Your loss is also that of your friend. And, to be sure, there is loss of a greater, more sinister magnitude. In *Machine Unreadable Passport at Frankfurt Airport*, it is a story of embarrassment the poet stumbles into. The machine at the airport cannot read his passport. Questions rise about the authenticity of the visa stamped therein. Something clicks in your mind. Isn't that a fear we share, we who go out into the world as proud Bengalis, only to be humiliated into the knowledge that there is something terribly wrong back home.

But poetry being the wide canvas it always is, Nagri moves on into other, wider spheres of thought. Love? Certainly it is there and the poet deals with it in the way we have done across time. Read: 'I entered love lyric in your cell phone / Take it up with your kisses, touch every word / And hundreds of bits of pains hidden in it . . .'

Read on.

Syed Badrul Ahsan edits Star Books Review