

Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

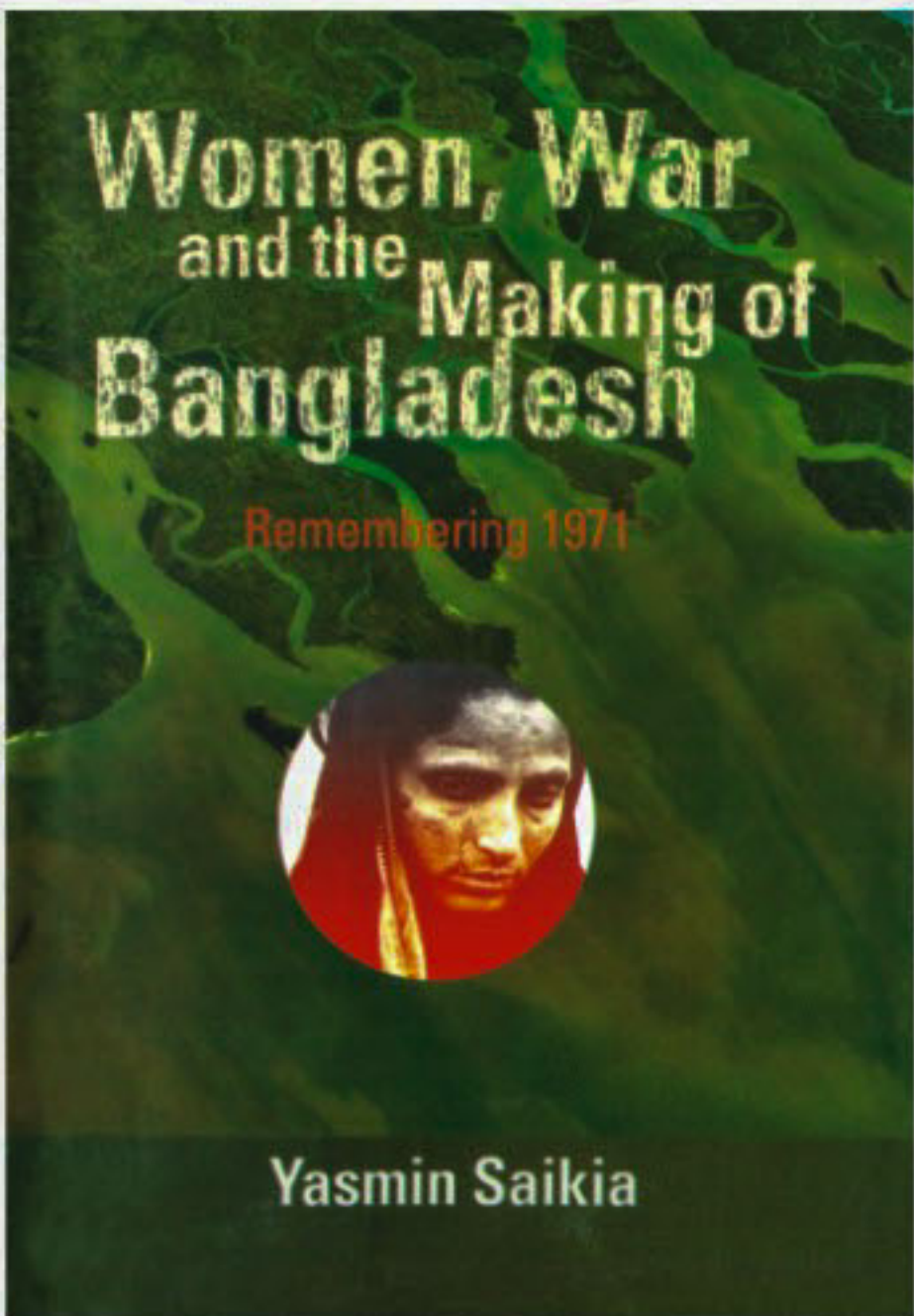
The depravity of Pakistan's soldiers . . .

No one goes looking for a war. It comes suddenly, taking people unawares. And once it does, there is that sure, eerie feeling that huge havoc will be the consequence, that people will die and with them an entire set of values. That being the historical truth over the centuries, there is that other reality of war being a time when heroism and villainy make their appearance. Individuals die defending the nobility of a cause, thwarting the evil designs made by other individuals for whom the idea of a good life comes in a destruction of the lives around them. Some soldiers win wars. Other soldiers, rendered or proved qualitatively inferior to their adversaries, end up losing them, with results whose ramifications can last generations.

But that is not the image of war which Yasmin Saikia brings forth in her rather unusual work on Bangladesh's struggle for liberation in 1971. Her image is distinctly different. War, she seems to be arguing, is not so much a matter of heroism as it is of collateral damage. It is damaged lives that war claims as its legacy. In Bangladesh, it was its women --- two hundred thousand of them, in official estimates --- who were left forever scarred by the conflict which eventually was to claim the lives of as many as three million Bengalis. Saikia remains perfectly aware of the historical factors which went into the outbreak of the crisis between East and West Pakistan in March 1971, one that was to go on until Bangladesh emerged as a free country in December of the year. Over the years, much has been written and said about the war, in Bangladesh and in Pakistan and elsewhere as well. Only, it was the damaged lives that by and large went unreported.

In war, nothing can be more devastating than the impunity with which the participants go about, unconsciously, destroying or severely affecting, the lives of non-combatants. In Bangladesh, the severity of the conflict was a great deal more pronounced than at any other time or place in modern history. Pakistan's soldiers, while telling themselves that they were engaged in the job of preserving their country's unity and integrity, in fact went about killing men before hurling themselves on the women in all their barbarity. In a very large number of instances, it was the local collaborators of the Pakistanis who proved instrumental in having the soldiers go after the women. For nine whole months, Bengali women throughout the occupied country lived in a state of insecurity. Many moved from one village to another and then another. And yet the soldiers had their ways of swooping on them, often in groups. The women were raped in gangs, for weeks and months on end.

And then came the war babies. The story of



Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh Remembering 1971
Yasmin Saikia
Women Unlimited
An associate of Kali for Women

Beauty is a highlight in this riveting work. Shunned by society, unable to straighten her life out, Beauty persuades her mother, Nur Begum, into recalling the terror the latter went through at the hands of the soldiers. It makes for horrific reading and yet read we must, for the good reason that in all the decades which have elapsed since the end of the war, women like Nur Begum have suffered alone. To call them *birangonas* (women who paid a price through being molested by the Pakistanis) is all right, but only up to a point. The bigger question relates to what successive governments in Bangladesh have done for them, if they have done anything at all. Nur Begum speaks up loud and clear:

'I was marked with violence in 1971. Look at the bite marks on my breasts. When I was first captured, the Pakistani military kept me naked . . . The Pakistanis came in group after group. You seem surprised to hear it. They did it in front of everyone.'

Not until the coming of liberation were Nur Begum and others like her rescued. Listen to her again:

'They (freedom fighters) turned the bunker upside down and found us without any clothes. The freedom fighters took off their

shirts and hid our nudity. They were looking away from us.'

These are tales of the piercing kind here. Firdousi Priyabhashini's is of course a well-known narrative by now. Even so, her retelling of the horrors she was subjected to by the soldiers rekindles the old disgust you once felt, still feel, about the animal instincts which drove Pakistan's soldiers in 1971. Priyabhashini's problems were twin-fold and that too before the war. She was beautiful and she was poor. She is not squeamish about telling the writer, 'My continuous poverty was the root cause of why men took advantage of me.' And then the war came. Priyabhashini's courage, a will to survive as it were, kept her going. 'I was struggling to stay alive being raped by five men,' she informs the writer. Post-liberation, she was 'not allowed to attend wedding ceremonies because (my family) considered me inauspicious. The only person who did not say anything rude or mean to me was my mother.'

Memories underpin Saikia's work. And the memories go beyond the agonizing tales of rape. Heroism in women worked at other levels as well, a facet of the war the writer brings to light through recapturing such narratives as that coming from Dr. Syed Ahmed Nurjahan. Women, like Mumtaz Begum, who waged war on the battlefield are portrayed in the full measure of their patriotism. Being the conscientious historian she is, Yasmin Saikia listens to the other side as well. The other side is of course the Biharis, an ethnic group which remains notorious in Bangladesh because of the rabid support it provided to the Pakistan army in quelling the Bengalis. Once the war drew to an end, it was Bihari women as also men who faced Bengali wrath. Saikia does not flinch from noting their sufferings. The objectivity is admirable.

. . . Of passion and walls of granite

You could be forgiven for wondering how the term *Bollywood* came to be. Suffice it to say that there is something called copycat behaviour, which is how our very well-known Hollywood has spawned Bollywood and, bizarrely, Lollywood in Lahore and Dhaliwood in Dhaka. Of course it does not make sense, but there you are, this very human tendency to copy where creation is not possible.

But come back to that Bollywood factor. There is something about the Indian film industry which has kept people in thrall for decades altogether. In this delightful work,

Jerry Pinto brings together a collection of writings on actors and matters related to acting, enough to make old men and women recapitulate their youth and those younger to rush through the history of the industry. Do not forget that the Indian movie industry happens to be the largest in the world. That certainly entitles those who are part of it to be discussed by those who have observed them or their artistic contributions over the years.

Take a peek into what *The Greatest Show* offers. Anupama Chopra cannot resist dwelling on Shahrukh Khan. As she puts it, he is a global icon. Much as you shake your head, for all the right reasons of course, you cannot but accept the truth that Khan has had an impact on the movie industry as no other actor has. But then, do not forget that behind the emergence of this global icon lie the efforts and the ingenuity of Karan Johar. Move on. The journalist Vinod Mehta focuses on Meena Kumari in his affectionate biography of the late star. You get a good deal of information about the collapse of the actress' marriage to Kamal Amrohi. The more



The Greatest Show on Earth
Writings on Bollywood
Ed Jerry Pinto
Penguin Books

interesting part of Mehta's essay brings the tragedian Guru Dutt in relation to Meena Kumari. In more ways than one, both led depressing lives, with Dutt eventually taking

his. In this enlightening write-up, Mehta dwells in great detail on what is given out as the cinematic magic of *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*.

And there is too that matter of the scandalous you would certainly wish to go through. Scandal is energizing for those who spot it in others. And so we have here the queer story of the mess Dilip Kumar once nearly made of his life when he married Asma. It was a fuming Saira Bano he confronted, naturally. Devyani Chahal, the gossip columnist, knew about it all and spilled the beans, as Bunny Reuben will tell you. Scandal apart, though, there has always been that loud whisper about Dilip and Kamini Kaushal, the latter very much a married woman, being drawn to each other on movie sets. The affair would go on until Kaushal's brother threatened to shoot her if she did not put an end to it. Which reminds you of the story of Dilip Kumar and Madhubala and their doomed love.

This work is a fine retrospective on the many heartbreaks and the endless laughter which has characterized the working of the Bollywood industry across the decades. Read Manna Dey's frank account of his struggle to make a mark as a playback singer. You will be impressed and a trifle touched. Which takes you to the phenomenon that is A.R. Rahman, the man who has seemed to set free Indian music out into the wider world, to give to it before taking from it. Interested in reflections on sex in Indian movies? B.D. Garga will happily have you revisit the times of Zeenat Aman, Parveen Babi, Mumtaz and Rekha. And did you know that kissing, even of the passionate kind, was a given in Indian cinema in the 1920s? Sulochana and Dinshaw Billimoria were always locked in a tight embrace, cheerfully lost in passionate kisses in such movies as *Anarkali* and *Heer Ranjha*. Zubeida was another actress who became known for her cinematic display of eroticism. Not so bad, the 1920s. Makes this second decade of the twenty-first century look arid by comparison.

Read on, if you are an aficionado of Indian cinema. You may skip some of the essays if you think you should, but do not miss reading Bhisam Sahni's touching portrayal of brother Balraj Sahni in *Balraj in Bombay*. Balraj spoke of coming up against walls in the movie industry at every step. "In other spheres of social life, these walls may be made of brick and mortar, but in the world of Hindi films these walls are made of granite."

SYED BADRUL AHSAN EDITS STAR BOOKS REVIEW AND STAR LITERATURE.

A plethora of dark secrets

Tulip Chowdhury finds intensity in a tale

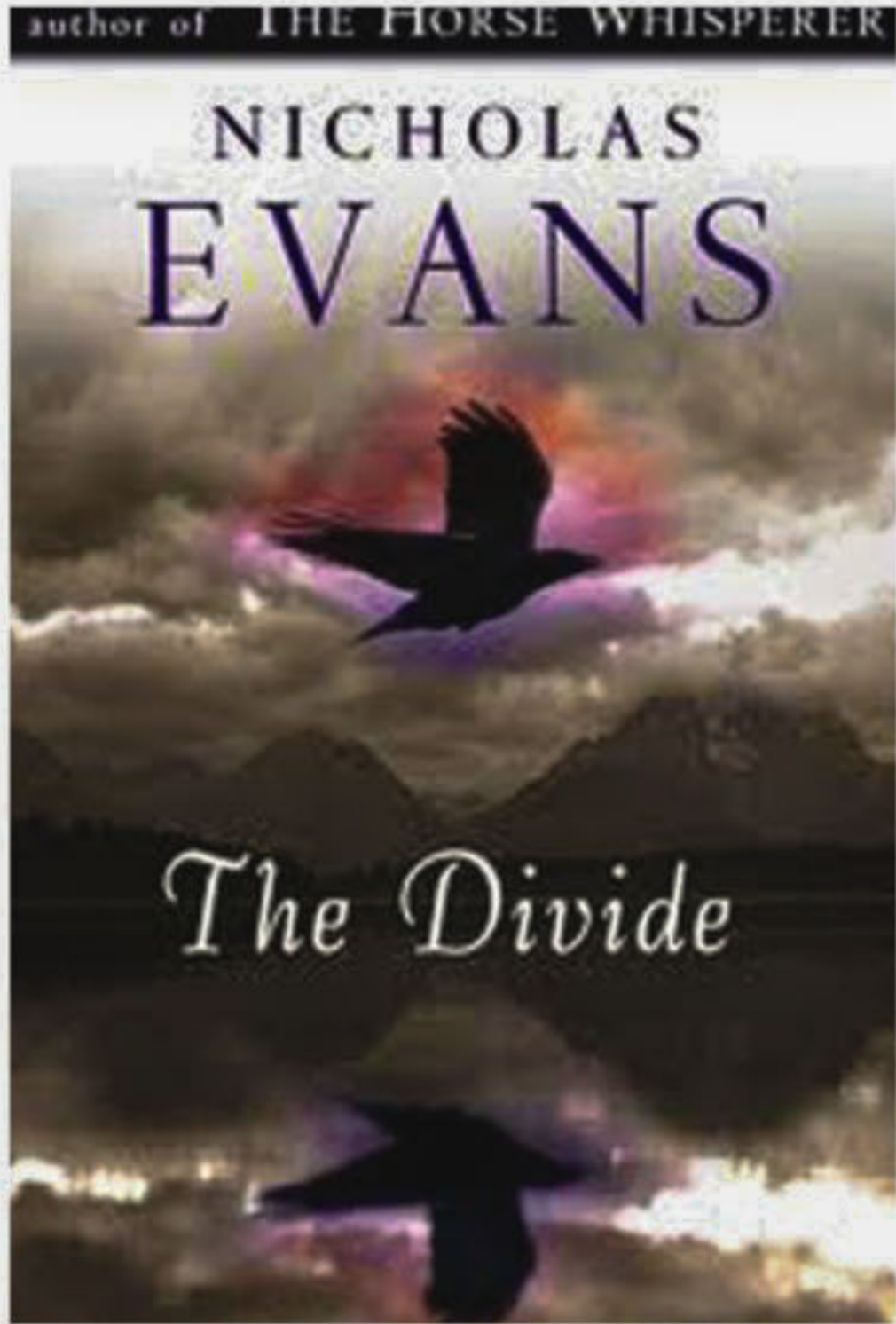
When the frozen body of a young woman is discovered on a crystalline Montana morning, the heart rendering story of a family in crisis begins to unfold. The members of a seemingly perfect family, the Coopers are caught up in event, emotions and twists of fate that alter their lives forever.

The Divide is a compelling novel and holds up a story that is beautifully crafted into its events. It comes with intricate details and gracefully transports us to the sun-warmed open spaces of Montana as well as its unforgiving cold mountain ranges. The Cooper family has been vacationing in Montana for many years. Little did they know that between one year's vacation to the next they were going to be scattered into places. Who knew that loves will be lost and they would end up hating the other? Sarah Cooper has been feeling that her marriage has hit a rock bottom and is likely to crack any moment. Her husband Benjamin is always "sullen and tumescent" as if they are new to each other instead of sharing a marriage of nineteen years. The Cooper family lives in New York and have a wonderful house that was designed by Ben himself. Abigail Cooper, the seventeen year old daughter is in love with Montana and takes admission in Montana University. When Abbie goes away to her university the emptiness between Sarah and Ben seems to spread and they drift more apart. Josh, the son is at home but he is away most of the time with his own friends. At one point Ben decides to move out. Sarah is devastated, she cries and raves but Ben is determined to live alone rather go on living like a guest in his own house. Sarah's friend Elizabeth tells her, "Marriage is like a plant. To keep it alive you've got to water it and feed it. If you don't, when kids are gone, you'll look in the corner and it'll be dead." Sarah feels that indeed she had not taken care of her marriage!

As the family breaks up, Evans draws the emotional upheavals of the affected members so delicately and clarity that the characters seem to jump into the readers' skin. The scenes portraying marriage breakup and its fallout are unsettling and tormenting. Evans handles the male and female characters, kids,

parents and grandparents with perfect precisions. Abbie, living away from home is hit very hard. She calls her mother occasionally but stops talking her father. Ben learns to live with the fact that his daughter for the "foreseeable future was lost to him."

As if looking for solace Abbie befriends a terrorist called Rolf and starts working for a environmental group that burns down building sites that are damaging to nature. They work for protection of green environment but under hand also go for terrorist attacks. In one of such attacks, Abbie and Rolf were engaged in the burning of a house when a man is killed. The police pick up Abbie's dog with her address and she is put under arrest order for murder. Before the arson took place Abbie has



The Divide
Nicholas Evans
Signet Book

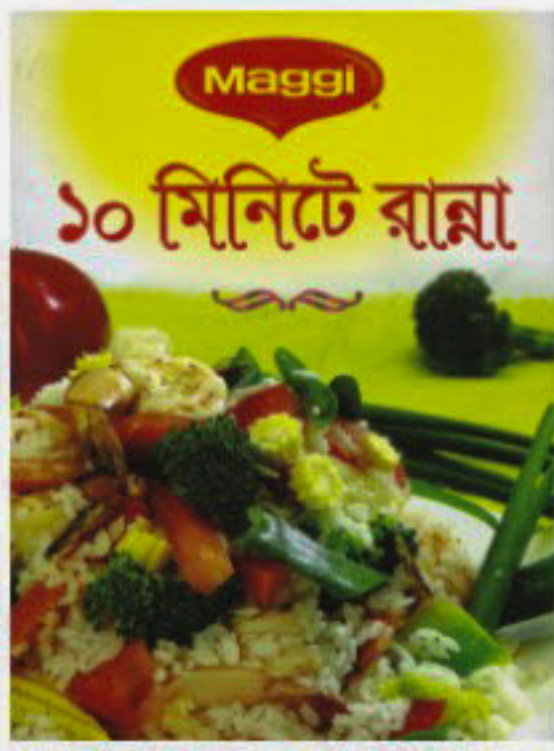
written "Nature Destroyer, Oil Greed, No Need" on the wall of the house and also written their initials. With the police on hot chase the story plunges into suspense and keeps the reader on grip of discovering new poignant details of the plot. Sarah and Ben are devastated when their very gentle daughter is sought for murder charge. Sarah continues to blame Ben to have started all these by deserting the family.

Ever, a woman the Coopers had met during one of their vacations meanwhile moves in close to Ben. Ben wonders if life will offer him happiness on a second chance. Josh is contacted by Abbie to get money for her from their grandfather. But the police are constantly on alert about Abbie getting in touch with her family. Josh is also under the risk of getting picked up by police if he helps his sister. Sarah calls Ben to come and deliver the money. Charlie, the local sheriff in Montana calls Sarah seeking information regarding Abbie's where about. At this point they become aware that their daughter is involved with Rolf, a wanted criminal. The family seems to be headed towards catastrophe.

The story here reaches the climax and events unfold with a plethora of dark secrets of this American family. There is momentary reunion of Ben and Sarah as the news of a dead young woman reaches them but that is a circumstance they would rather not be united for. The unwinding events that take the plot to the top of the pyramid shakes and jots the reader into holding breath and the story continues with its unpredictable events. Throughout the saga of the Coopers' family, Evans uses his brilliant and lucid language that keeps the reader reading and rereading a passage to relish the contents. In *The Divide* Evans marvels with the same intricacy of plot and real life like characterization that defined his international best seller *The Horse Whisperer*. The book begins with making the reader sit up with its intense opening scenario and ends leaving the reader to relive the whole story.

TULIP CHOWDHURY IS A CRITIC AND POET.

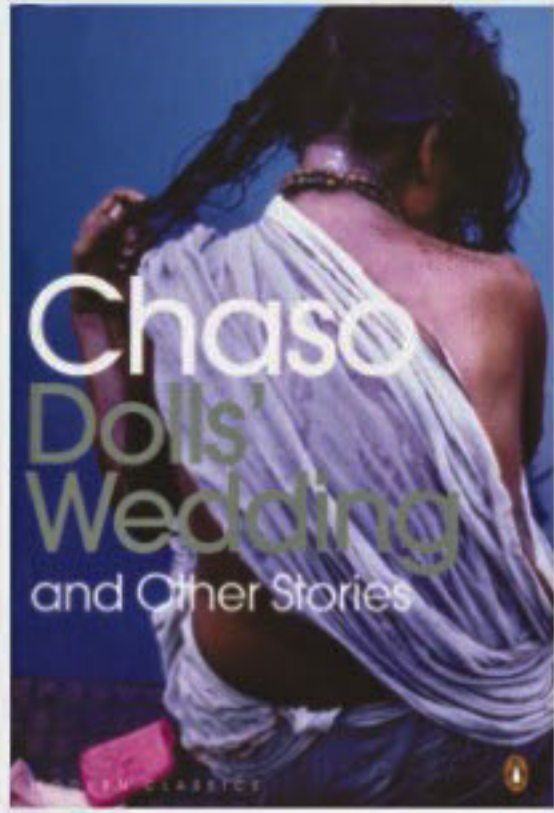
BOOK choice



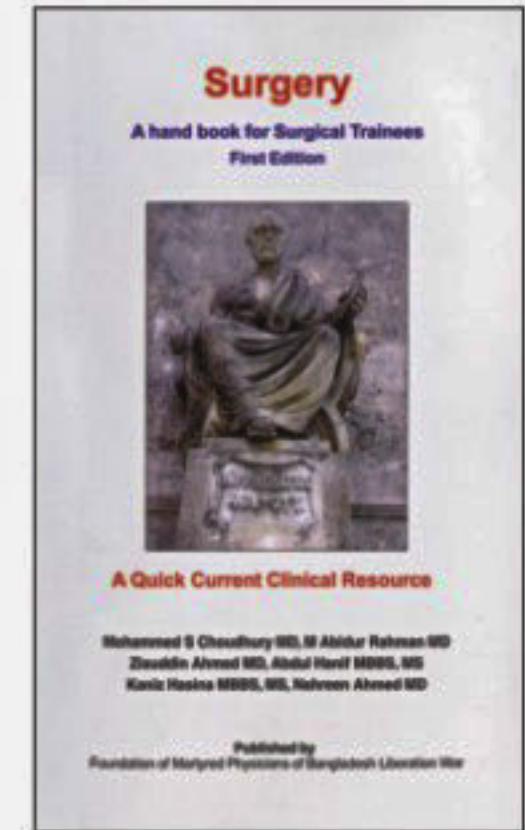
Maggi
10 Minute-e Ranna
Rahima Sultana Rita
Anyaprokash



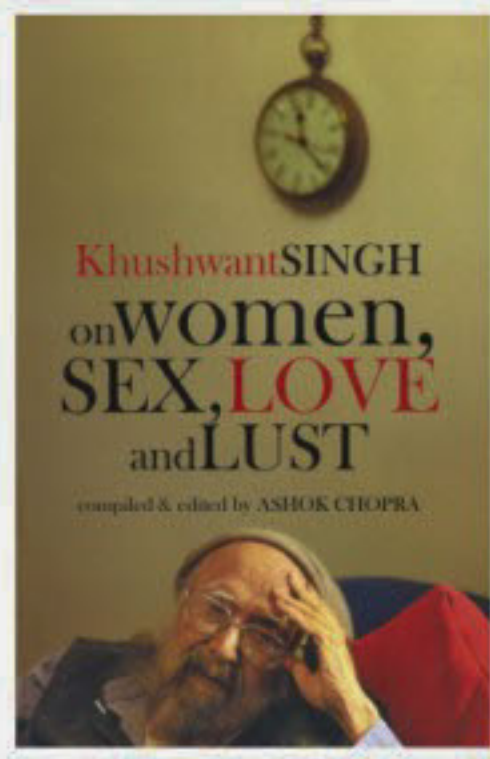
English, August
Screenplay
Upamanyu
Chatterjee, Dev
Benegal
Penguin Books



Dolls' Wedding and
Other Stories
Chaso
Translated from
Telugu by Velcheru
Narayana
Rao and David
Shulman
Penguin Books



Surgery
A Handbook for
Surgical Trainees
Md. S
Choudhury, others
Foundation of
Martyred
Physicians of
Bangladesh
Liberation War



Khushwant
Singh
On Women, Sex,
Love and Lust
Ed Ashok
Chopra
Hay House India



Priyo Golpo
Nurul Karim
Nasim
Arial