

Quivering Yeats and weeping Ocampo

Adnan Morshed pays tribute to an artist

It is now consensus history that in the 1950s Muzharul Islam pioneered a Bengali Modernism in architecture. His Institute of Fine Arts (1953) at Shahbagh, for instance, exemplifies the beginning of a climate-responsive and site-sensitive modern architectural language in the then East Pakistan. However, what is not widely known is that Islam's work also provides an intriguing cultural foil against which his architectural experiments with modernist aesthetics could also be explored as part of a broader form of Bengali nationalism, rooted in the enlightenment of Raja Rammohun Roy and Rabindranath Tagore. The Chicago-based architect Stanley Tigerman, Islam's Yale University colleague who collaborated with him in the creation of five polytechnic institutes during the 1960s, views Islam's architecture as part of the same search for a *Bangali* identity that helped define the ideological foundation on which the new nation of Bangladesh was eventually built.

Islam has been variously called a renaissance man, a sage, a trailblazer, a renegade who took on the establishment to advance an art-centric and non-technocratic view of architecture. He has been prolific in producing epoch-making architectural ensembles, visionary in inviting some of the Western architectural stalwarts to work in this country (including Louis Kahn and Paul Rudolph), and astute in advocating an architectural pedagogy conscious of the country's cultural milieu. But, unfortunately, despite his immense significance in the annals of Bangladesh's architectural heritage, Islam's buildings have been neither systematically catalogued, nor analyzed for critical learning. It is, then, befitting that the focus of a new monographic study would be none other than Muzharul Islam.

Muzharul Islam, Architect, edited by Zainab F. Ali and Fuad H. Mallick, both professors in the Department of Architecture at Brac University and published by Brac University Press, is a welcome contribution to the meager literature on modern architecture in Bangladesh. Produced beautifully, the book itself is a fine commentary on the current state of the Bangladeshi publishing industry. It presents 14 selected buildings, constructed between 1953 and 1984. Each building is introduced with a pithy experiential description and complemented by wonderfully reproduced photographs and original architectural drawings.

A number of buildings deserve special mention for their photographic representation: Institute of Fine Arts (1953), Dhaka University Library (1953), Chittagong University (1965), Jahangirnagar University (1967),

Joypurhat Limestone Mining and Cement Works Project (1974), and National Archives and Library (1976). These buildings collectively represent Islam's poignant aesthetic sensibilities, his site consciousness and love for local materials, and, most important, his introspective interpretation of the cultural context in which his buildings are situated.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the book, however, is the inclusion of some of Muzharul Islam's academic works at Yale University from which he received a master's degree in 1961. These rarely seen student projects offer a glimpse into how South Asian architects were influenced by the Franco-Swiss architect Le Corbusier's then-recently completed buildings in Chandigarh, the capital of the northern Indian state of Punjab. A rare essay by the maestro himself (transcript of a verbal

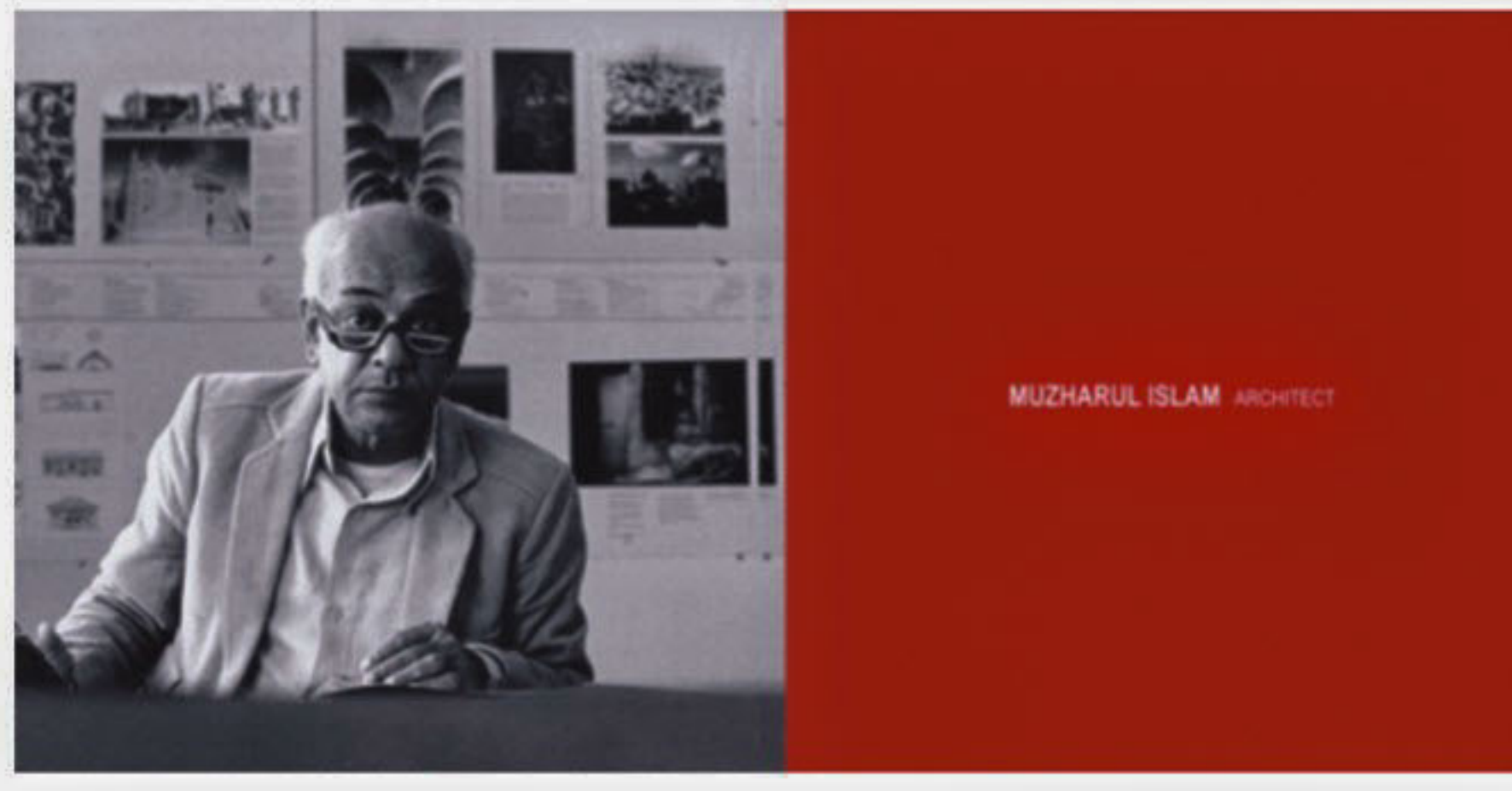
ambivalent and lyrical exploration of Islam's social-reformer persona that straddles the ethical responsibility to find what constitutes the basics of a culture and an unrelenting rejection of all fixed definitions of nationhood and cultural chauvinism. This is why, Ashraf reasons, Islam's architecture yearns to return, in a Rabindrik vein, to its Bengali home, while at the same time denying that there remains an unchanging and unchangeable home to return to. Thus, for Islam, a conflicted protagonist of modernity, the architecture of Bengal is simultaneously local and global. The Institute of Fine Arts, then, could be seen as a concomitant architectural attempt to contemplate what is Bengali in place-making and what makes a building an existential experience that knows no cultural boundary, in the same way Tagore's narration of a local experience "would make a W. B. Yeats quiver on a

Oregon in 1952. What kind of intellectual influence did he bring with him from abroad? The entrance of the Fine Arts building, lifted over *pilots*, is reminiscent of Le Corbusier's Parisian masterpiece Villa Savoye (1929), as much as it recalls the open pavilions of Mughal architecture. One important question that remains unanswered is how did Muzharul Islam evolve in his aesthetic worldview? The formal transparency and free-plan approach of his earlier work were steadily replaced by his later work's formal solidity and a kind of Bengali Romanesque, as exemplified by the National Archives and Library.

Sometimes the building descriptions employ flippant remarks; such as, in the case of Jahangirnagar University, "The façade has strong angularity and therefore very modern." The book, overall, needs the hawkish eyes of a proofreader. It is sometimes "Jahangirnagar" and sometimes "Jahangir Nagar." Typos remain here and there. A timeline of Muzharul Islam's career at the beginning would have been useful for both the architectural and general readership. In addition to the main description at the beginning of each building, brief notes on each drawing and photograph would have facilitated a better understanding of the projects. The plans of the buildings are almost always without the customary north sign that helps readers to understand the orientation of the building.

These remedial problems should, however, not overshadow the enormity of the book's contribution to the design culture of Bangladesh. The book will certainly familiarize Muzharul Islam not just as a pivotal figure of Bangladeshi architecture, but also as an icon of transnational modern architecture whose work deserves to be included in canonical history books of world architecture, such as those by Spiro Kostof, Kenneth Frampton, and William Curtis. Some of the stock concerns of contemporary architectural practicing ranging from the pursuit of what the Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz has called *genius loci* or the spirit of place to the energy efficiency of climate-adaptive sustainable buildings have already been presciently examined in Muzharul Islam's work during the middle of the 20th century. Perhaps, the global availability of *Muzharul Islam, Architect* on Amazon.com (locally distributed by the University Press Limited) is a sign that the octogenarian architect is now ready for a global audience.

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Muzharul Islam, Architect
Eds: Zainab F. Ali and Fuad H. Mallick
Brac University Press

presentation that Islam made at Brac University in 2002) shines a spotlight on Islam's committed advocacy for an architectural education that is grounded both in the humanist ethos of Bengal and Bauhaus-type collaboration that would inspire the architect, in Islam's words, "to interact with other creative subjects such as literature, music, dance, painting, sculpture, cinema, theatre, etc."

In his foreword, Stanley Tigerman reminisces about his lifelong friendship and collaborative practice with Muzharul Islam, presenting clues to how his iconoclastic friend remained underappreciated in Bangladesh, presumably, as a result of an engineering-dominated architectural education system. The University of Hawaii professor Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, who has researched Islam's architectural work, contributes an essay situating the architect's work in its broader sociocultural context. It is a richly

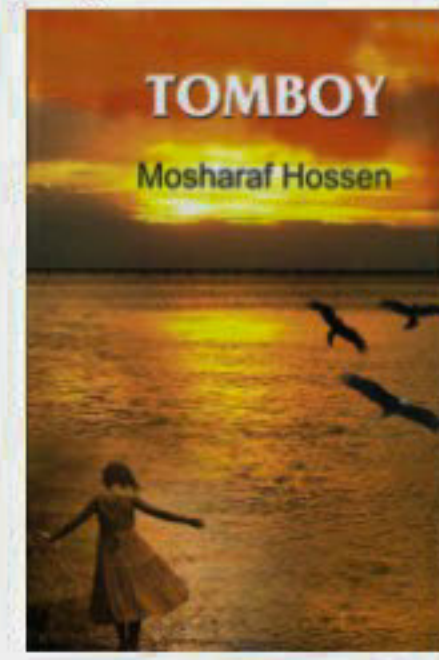
London omnibus, or a Victoria Ocampo weep in distant Argentina."

The editors, Ali and Mallick, have done a commendable job in *Muzharul Islam, Architect*. Not only is the book likely to jumpstart serious scholarship on the pioneering work of Muzharul Islam and, more broadly, modern architecture in Bangladesh, it also reminds us that an archival culture to preserve the architectural drawings and historic photographs of heritage buildings must be a cultural policy priority.

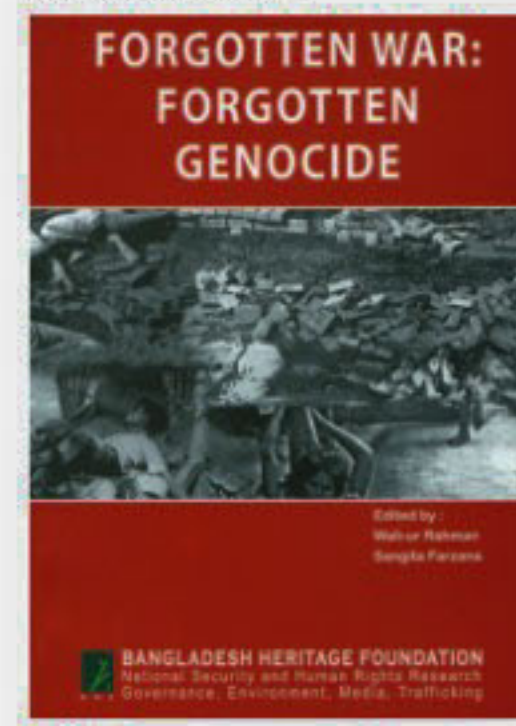
The book, however, is not without problems. The building descriptions, even though they provide useful historical tidbits, do not forcefully attempt to analyze and historicize Islam's buildings. How and why does the Institute of Fine Arts seem to have a universal appeal? Muzharul Islam designed the Institute immediately after returning from the USA where he received his Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of

BOOK choice

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Mosharaf Hossen
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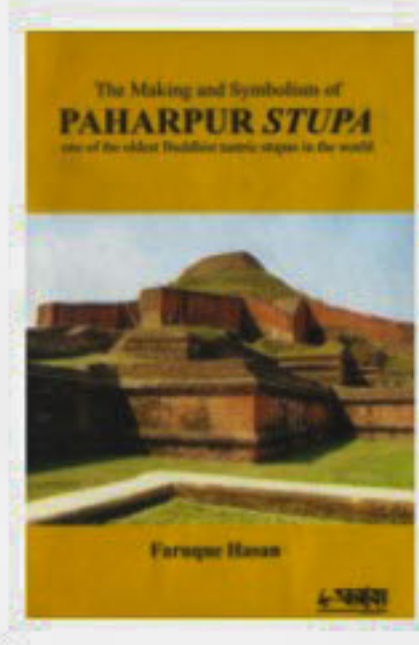
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Forgotten Genocide
Eds Wali-ur Rahman,
Sangita Farzana
Bangladesh Heritage
Foundation



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Mohammad Ali Khan
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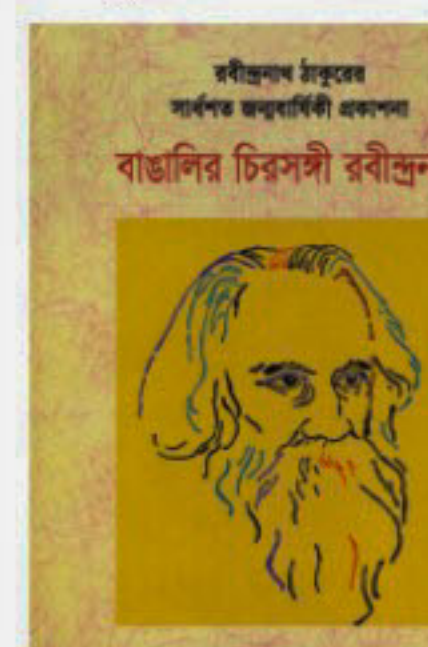
The Making and
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Paharpur Stupa
Faruque Hasan
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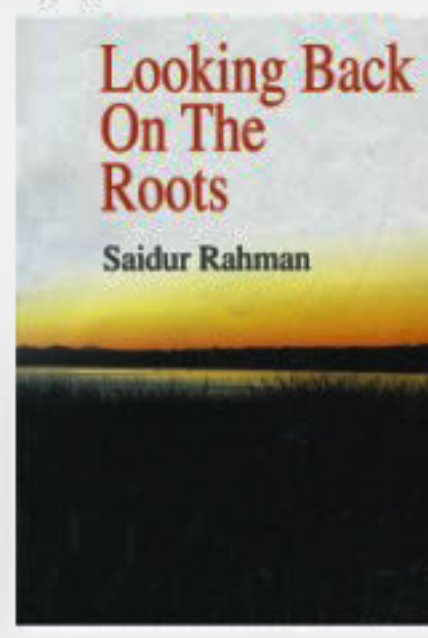
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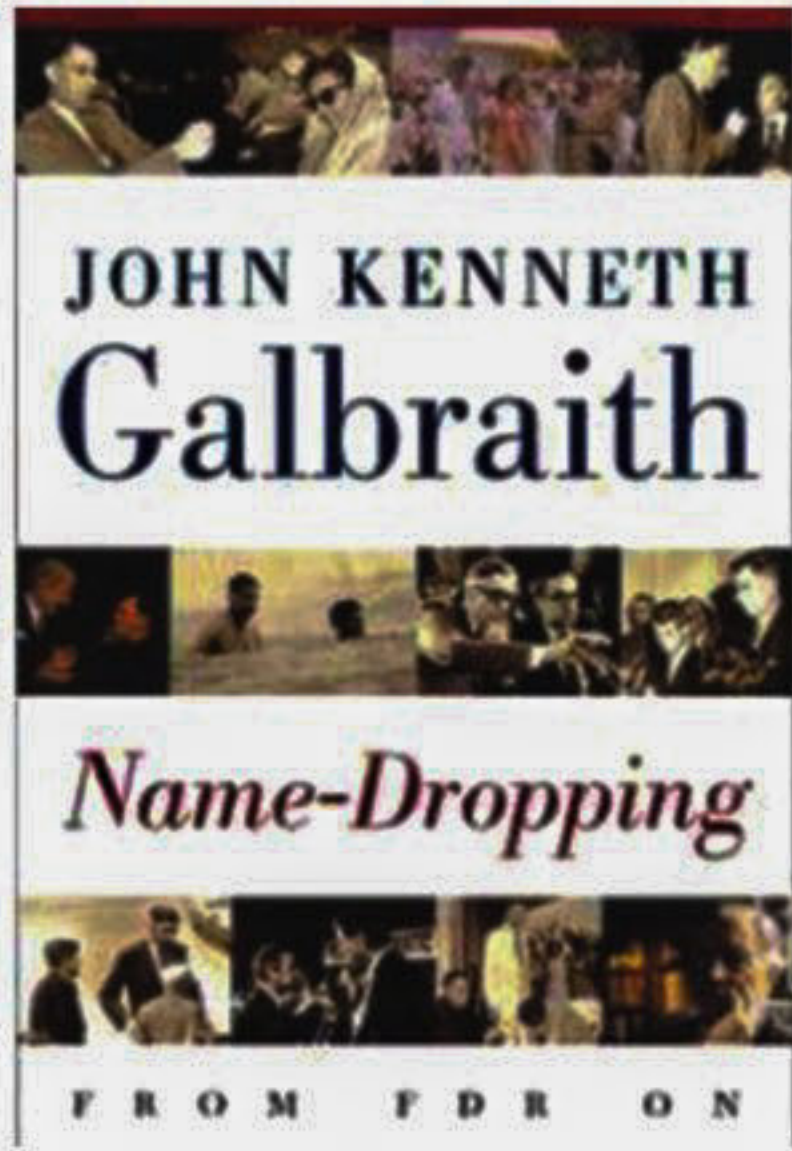


The company he kept . . .

Syed Badrul Ahsan relives a lost era

American liberalism was what men like John Kenneth Galbraith personified, especially from the mid-1950s till the end of the 1960s. And of these liberals, one of the best known was Galbraith himself. With his tall, lanky figure, his boundless erudition and his ease with words, Galbraith came forth with ideas that endlessly tested the imaginations of men everywhere, but especially in America. *The Affluent Society*, *The Anatomy of Power*, *Annals of An Abiding Liberal* and *A Theory of Price Control* are some of the seminal works he remains noted for. His theories relating to the economy, his prognostications on how finance ought to be handled and his overall view of politics as a force for social good have generally been the themes that have inspired thinking among an entire generation of political philosophers. And, along the way, Galbraith has been a diplomat, one of the foremost that liberal America produced in the 1960s. As ambassador to Nehru's India, he did what no one else has been able to do since: he established a relationship of trust between Delhi and Washington.

It is not broad political or economic theory that Galbraith handles in this slim volume. On the contrary, it is easy reading because of the subject --- all the presidents and other individuals he has had occasion to interact with in his long career. Published a decade ago (and that was quite some years before his death), *Name-Dropping* is essentially an enumeration of the author's assessment of the individuals he comments on. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for Galbraith as also for so many others, was an inspirational figure at a time when the Great Depression laid America low and, later, when war of a magnitude yet unimagined loomed on



Name-Dropping
John Kenneth Galbraith
Houghton Mifflin
Boston, New York

the horizon. FDR's confidence was of the infectious kind. He never let his physical condition (he was a cripple from the waist down) come in the way of his exercise of leadership. Galbraith speaks of all these. And more. Even with Eleanor around as his powerful spouse, FDR carried on an affair with Lucy Mercer Rutherford. In the 1960s, following the publication of a book carrying the details of the president's amorous life, Galbraith asks Alice Longworth, daughter of Theodore Roosevelt, about the relationship. Longworth shoots back: "It means nothing. Everyone knows that Franklin was paralysed from the waist down."

Galbraith's admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt, especially after the latter

began to play a more activist role in politics following her husband's death in April 1945, was as equal to, if not more than, the reverence in which he held FDR. And it was natural, then, for him to be allotted the task of convincing her into supporting John F. Kennedy for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 1960. Mrs. Roosevelt was no admirer of the Kennedys, especially since Joseph P. Kennedy, FDR's ambassador to Britain, broke with the president over war policy in the early 1940s. Her hostility transferred to the young Kennedys. Galbraith argued that the sins of the fathers ought not to be visited on their sons. It did not work. In late 1959, though, Mrs. Roosevelt was persuaded by Galbraith to have JFK over on a television programme she was compering at the time. The result was satisfying for Galbraith. As he notes, "... both participants were interesting, even mildly eloquent." Eleanor Roosevelt finally endorsed Kennedy for the White House in 1960, once the candidate had come into his own and had successfully created a public image for himself.

Galbraith drops other names. And with that he brings his sophisticated assessments of the people he studies as he courses along. Harry Truman, Adlai Stevenson, Jackie Kennedy, Jawaharlal Nehru, Albert Speer are some of history's remarkable figures he shines the light on. And you journey back to an era that abounded in great ideas and, with the exception of perhaps Speer, great men.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN EDITS STAR BOOKS REVIEW.

Stories with moral undertones

Rifat Munim reads of middle class problems

The Ekushey Book Fair, indeed, comes as a blessing for emerging new voices. When it comes to getting one's work published, young writers now have easier access to publishers, which is obviously a change for the better. Even a few decades ago when our leading authors had begun publishing, things were a lot different. Finding a publisher was not as easy. Now that gap between budding authors and publishers has largely been bridged thanks to the book fair. Many fresh new voices, who would otherwise have remained unknown, can get their works published now. Shanta Nirupama is one such new name who has stepped into the literary scene with her first short story collection published in the fair.

Onnorokom Phagun goes the title. Instantly, it reminds one of one of Zahir Raihan's fiction of nearly the same title. Nirupama's endeavour, however, has nothing in common with Raihan's classic. Hers, in fact, is an elementary approach to literature which evinces not so much of maturity as of unrefined emotions.

There are a total of eight stories in the book. Although they cannot go down the deeper crevices and layers of life, all of them in some way or other relate to real problems. Their heroes and heroines come from the educated middle class and are saddled with problems mostly marital or romantic. Only one of them is about a child who works as a house help. But most of the stories have a moral undertone which can hardly be overlooked.



Onnorokom Phagun
Shanta Nirupama
Brikkho

'Bodhoday' is about a moral lesson. An elderly man who always tends to find fault with others one day discovers that he himself is suffering from one of those diseases he has always made fun of. 'Mother Dokaner Doctor' also deals with an irony but the tone is again moral. A man who always undermines doctors' profession is saved by an ordinary doctor at the end of the story. The most serious moral, however, is imparted by 'Scaling' which as a Bengali word has a different meaning for students. Scaling is when you copy answers on the back of a wooden scale in

exams. This is still a very common instance of unfair means adopted by our students. The tragic note on which the story ends tells us not to adopt unfair means in exams as well as in life.

The title story is about a neurotic husband who is suspicious of his wife. One story is about an arranged marriage; another is about an attractive divorced woman who is in her late twenties. Readers who are looking for some light stories to channel out their boredom may find it a good read.

The book, however, is marked by several flaws. Construction both in terms of narration and plot is very poor. Sentences are loosely connected and the language needs a lot more artistic input. The most important thing about fiction is creating a tension by manipulating the medium of language in a way that readers automatically will feel at one with the created characters. Above all, it is that tension which is missing in this book.

It is not that events in her stories do not culminate in tension. Instead, it is her presentation that fails to create the tension with efficiency. The author should do really well to read at first the works of our modern fiction writers such as Manik Bandyopadhyay, Syed Waliullah, Hasan Azizul Haque, Selina Hossain and Shawkat Ali; and try to understand the mastery of telling a story.

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