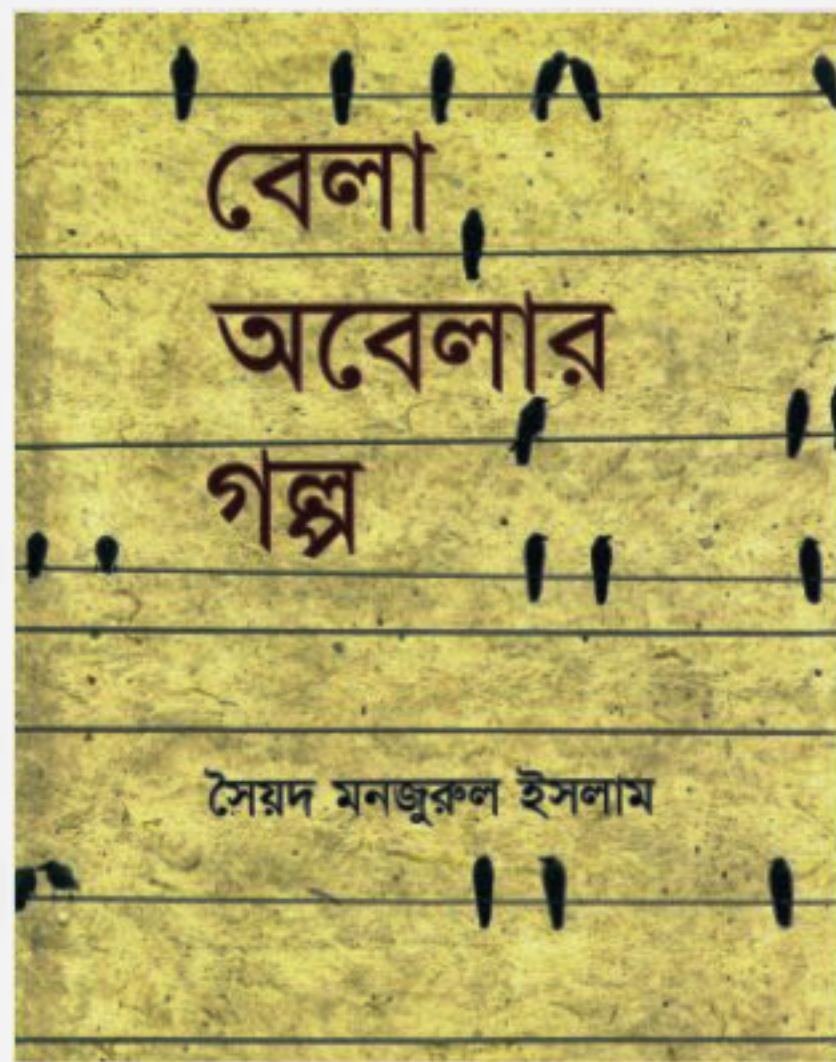


Tales of the conscious and subconscious

Tusar Talukder notes vivid signs of scholarship

Whenever I come across any story of Syed Manzoorul Islam, I recollect the boom-time litterateurs of Latin America, namely, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges and so on. The reason is that the way the story tellers of Latin America tell their tales is very similar to the way Syed Manzoorul Islam tells his stories. I find a resemblance between our culture and Latin American culture because they have a very rich tradition of story telling like us. Since magic realism is an inseparable part of this oral tradition of story writing, Islam's tales are packed with magical happenings which we can relate to our everyday realities. His latest volume of short story entitled *Bela Obelar Galpo* (Stories of good times and bad times) is a collection of thirteen stories where readers will find Islam at the heights of postmodern experimentation. However, he invariably uses his own experiences to make his stories lively and playful. Thereupon, the stories have a direct link with our everyday happiness and grief. Islam has introduced multifarious subject matters before his readers through his latest collection. Therefore, the tales of this volume are of different tastes. We go through a lot of good and bad times in our lifetime. Happiness and grief situate side by side in our life. Stories stem from these good as well as bad times. However, we generally do not keep in mind all the moments of life but those which compel us to recollect particular moments. In *Bela Obelar Galpo*, Syed Islam has tried to capture those moments in the light of his experiences.

The second story in the book is *Brishtir Din* which shows two girls, Sutapa and Kona, being from two different places. They go through the various troublesome phases of their life but never surrender to the situations. Syed Islam shows us how two girls reach a satisfactory level at one stage of life through overcoming a plenty of unexpected and cruel forces of society. Again, in a part of the story, we observe that Sutapa has a deep feeling for her own community and country and, on the other hand, Kona too has intense love for school



Bela Obelar Galpo
Syed Manzoorul Islam
Prothoma

children whom she once taught but was compelled to leave them in order to get rid of a crisis. Their feelings indicate a common love for their roots. In a word, this story informs us how Sutapa and Kona, by changing themselves, change the lives of the other characters who encounter them. In the end, the tales of two girls merge into one.

Since the author has taken his characters from different walks of life, the lives of four terrorists are portrayed in one of his stories titled *Char Santrash* (Four Terrorists). The storyteller tells us how four terrorists, namely Badi, Alfaz, Mati and Sumon, lead a nomadic life by adopting every possible destructive ways. Dhanu Miah, who is a smuggler, deals in drugs with the help of those four top terrorists. Dhanu Miah does not even hesitate to trade his first wife for the sake of smuggling. Dhanu Miah's second wife Farhana loves a man named Limon Miah. She always has an image of Limon Miah before her, especially when Dhanu tries to have sex with her; she dreams that Limon is having sex with her. Farhana always tries to find the alternatives to lead her life

but the four terrorists together with Dhanu Miah never attempt to seek any alternative way to come back to normal life. Finally, the four terrorists face death due to excessive drinking. So, to know what happens next to the lives of Dhanu Miah and Farzana, readers must go thorough the story in curiosity. The dramatic ending of the story will surely distinguish Syed Islam from his contemporary story writers.

If we summarize the story *Uddhar* we gather that in childhood Nazim, owner of Nehal Group of Industries, lost his younger brother, Nehal, whom he loved most. Nehal was only 12. The waves of the sea submerged him. But still now Nazim looks after his lost brother. One day while going to Cox's Bazar, his car collides with a truck but due to the hard brake of the truck driver, Nazim along with his driver survives. Afterwards, with the help of a police officer, they ride in a bus where Nazim hears from a girl that she is also looking for her brother, who has been kidnapped. Now she is going to rescue him to get information about his present stay from a source. To hear the story, Nazim phones his son, Nafis, informing him that Nehal has been traced and he has to be rescued. Nazim replaces Nehal with the girl's lost brother.

Again, coming across the story *Nei*, we observe that Syed Manzoorul Islam has related the same tale from three separate viewpoints, purporting to show how different characters feel someone's absence differently. The story *Sodh* is about an intelligent girl, Urmi, who takes revenge on her opponents by applying some tricky ways. Hakim Ismail, father of Urmi, demonstrates some magical happenings with the assistance of his daughter to drive away his foes from the village. Coming across a lot of deceptive action, readers will find the characters of the tale devoid even of an iota of honesty. At the end of the story, we view how technology is being used negatively for deception, delusion and perversion.

Shikar, which can be termed as a story of mystery, is the story of a banker describing juxtaposing his past and

present time and in this way he is excavating his past memories. At his workplace, he encounters a girl, Monira, who is a new employee at his bank. She informs him that she is from *Duri Angur lane*, an area of old Dhaka city. Hearing the name of the lane he trembles with fear because he used to go to a house of that lane for the purpose of tuition when he was a student of Jagannath. To teach a lady, almost double his age, he faces a lot of unexpected, indecent and dubious kind of activities performed by the lady. For instance, one day the lady, by force, kisses him at the time of teaching. Let me stop summarizing the story here because I desire to leave some mysterious happenings for readers to face.

Most of the stories of *Bela Obelar Galpo* deal with such themes as shattered dreams of individuals, crisis of existence, mismatch between beliefs and practices, predicament of urban life, individual psychological issues, chronological degradation of moral sense. In the case of a number of stories in *Bela Obelar Galpo* it is assumed that the story teller is telling two tales simultaneously within a story. In fact, the tales told by Syed Islam are very graphical. Furthermore, Syed Manzoorul Islam, as in his previous collections, has ably exposed the conscious and subconscious aspects of the human mind through the portrayal of the characters of this collection. His sense of humour is so intense that even while narrating a serious matter, he can infuse humour into it without disturbing the harmony of the tale. And with his characteristic humorous presentation, he takes readers into grotesque realities. Since the diction he employs in the stories is fat-free and facile, he can easily invite readers to be part of his discourse. Needless to say, his stories bear vivid signs of his scholarship in literary as well as cultural theories.

Syed Manzoorul Islam, as an innate storyteller, demonstrates the power of his storytelling.

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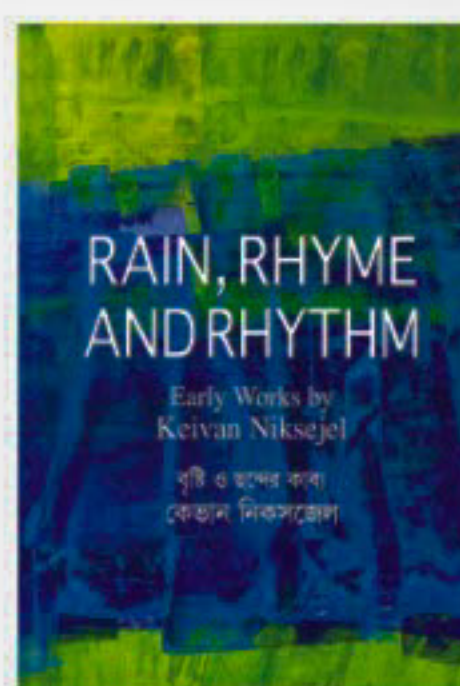
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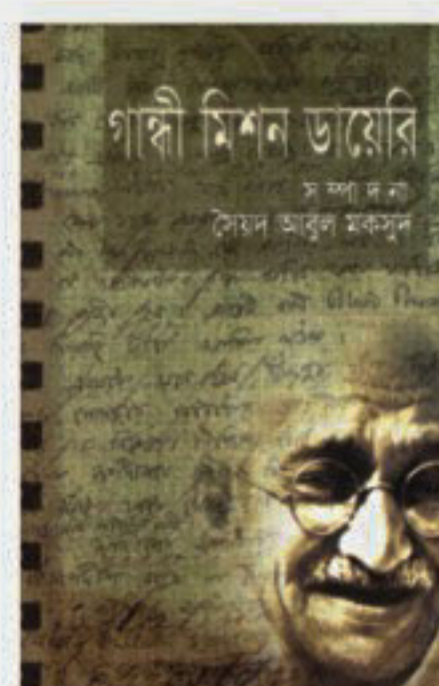
Shakhatkar
Byaktiyo O
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Gandhi Mission
Diary
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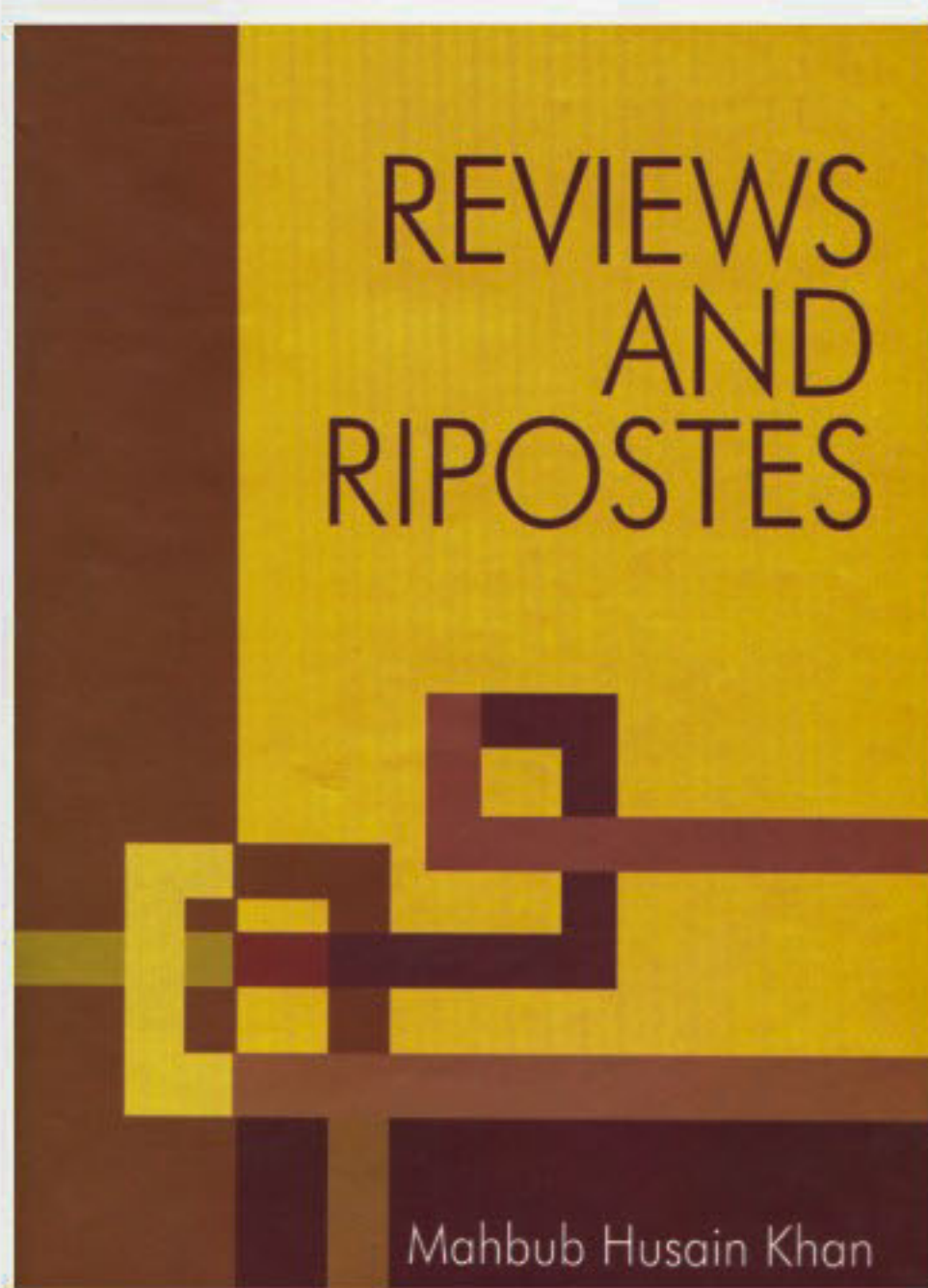
Thoughts of a liberated man

Sheikh Sabruzzaman and Syed Abdus Samad examine a writer's mind

Reviews And Ripostes is basically a collection of newspaper columns by the writer published in the period 1996 -2005. The author says in the foreword: "The essayist is a self liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about everything that happens to him is of general interest. He is a fellow who thoroughly enjoys his work, just as people who take bird walks enjoy themselves." The essays in this book contain the writer's perception of various national as well as international affairs and issues during the last decade, which was eventful. They span a vast domain of subjects like the historic water sharing treaty, the decisive role of education, Political Rhetoric: Use and Abuse, Bangabandhu Jamuna Bridge, strategies for redesigning government, etc. It is a vast canvas. Mahbub Husain Khan wields a facile and multicolored pen which flows like the rivers of Bangladesh. His style is simple, lucid and attractive. It pulls readers toward the many themes he articulates in this collection. His concern for contemporary issues and their analysis are in a sense very original.

Khan's experiences as a civil servant, journalist, development analyst, researcher and teacher combine magnificently to give the book a rare blend. Throughout the book we get the benefits of the keen observation of the author about recent incidents occurring around us as well as subjects of general interest like industrialization in the private sector. In one such article he recommends the following: withdrawal of all private investment licensing and sanctioning procedures; transformation of all government agencies relating to private sector development, such as the Board of Investment, from a regulatory to a promotional role. This of course is wise counseling. But the decision makers perhaps have other ideas. On market economy Khan writes: "... "what guidance and control this machinery must have so that it will serve and not impair the public interest. ..? When people are economically deprived, the most readily available recourse is escape from harsh reality by way of criminal violence". Well, all may not agree with this but it is inescapable that the parallel or the underground market develops largely because of this. His articles on Indonesia, the US presidency, General Pinochet, Lanka-Bangladesh ties, Korea, China are well researched and make very interesting points. They also bring out the global man in Khan.

As the writer has long experience of writing columns in various newspapers, he has described his subjects with rare clarity, transparency and efficiency. The book is a very good blend of experience and wisdom. And the most important and attractive thing about this book is its simplicity of thought and clarity. They lead the readers through the maze of some very serious subject matter and events of contemporary history with ease like a good road map. The compassion and detachment of the author in handling such a diverse universe of themes are indeed remarkable and extraordinary. This book has wide and in-depth coverage of contemporary national and international affairs which are never easy to evaluate since they impinge on one's objectivity and impartiality. But Mahbub Husain Khan has done this with remarkable candor. His brief stint in the Civil



Reviews and Ripostes
Mahbub Husain Khan
Gyan Bitaroni

Service of Pakistan (CSP) might have provided some insight in this respect. He realized that nothing much can be achieved by the government, or any government for that matter. And hence he quit very early and devoted himself to research, development and writing. The government might have lost an outstanding civil servant but the world of intellect gained a priceless member. It is not easy to measure the welfare implications of this. However, the fact that the author continues to write and inspire is in itself a benefit whose attendant costs must be worth bearing by society. We all know what an outstanding mind he possesses and, as the savants tend to say, a human mind is a terrible thing to waste and more so when such a mind is exceptional in what it contains.

There are some essays on our national affairs like "Who'll Protect us from Our Protectors?", "Lethargy in Administrative Reforms", "Truth and the Freedom of the Press", "Nagging Thoughts of Law & Order", "Education and Human Resources Development", etc., which are well analysed. At the same time, there are some essays related to international affairs, such as "The Beleaguerd US President", "Indonesia-a Nation Crying for New Leadership", "Birth of African Union", "After Arafat Who?", "Fifty Years of the People's Republic of China" and so on. But most of the essays of the book are on domestic affairs like our socio-economic situation, government policies, law and order, infrastructure, environment, corruption prevailing in our country etc. Some of those essays express grief about the social disorder, corruption-especially corruption in government sector. According to him we, the common people of our country, are helpless everywhere; we are just victimized by the present order which is a legacy of more than 300 years and stubbornly refuse to change. In the essay, "The New Millennium: A Depressing Beginning for Us" he

has said, "Dies the victim, Dies the City. Nobody flees Dhaka, because of accounting malpractices or share scams. People run from murder and fire. Those who remain express their fear in words of impotent anger." Some of the essays are very much informative also. In the essay, "Impediments to Increase FDI in Bangladesh", the writer has presented much concrete information regarding the prospects of investment in our country, its barriers and remedies of the barriers, etc. His deep sense of angst at the malfunctioning of many of the institutions of the state and the market which limit growth and advancement convey the author's impatience. But he knows that things do take a long time before they actually change.

There are some essays on the environment, like "Waiting for Environment-Friendly Autorickshaw", "The Disappearing Greenery of Dhaka", "Save the River Buriganga", etc.. On the other hand, some are related to the prevailing education system of our country ---"The Decisive Role of Education", "Higher Education and The Private Universities of Bangladesh" and so on. Most of the essays show the frustration, disappointments and lamentations of the writer about the present situation, though his erudite pen captures some positive aspects in them as well. Although the essays are not coherently arranged, there are inter-linkages and inter-temporal sequence among some of them nonetheless. The essays remind us about the "Waste Land" of T. S. Eliot. If we cast our eyes on the essays, we will find that most of them bewail the devaluation of the moral values of the present generation, malpractices of power, continuous deterioration of law and order and socio-economic environment. But then most of the countries of South Asia are in the same league. Lack of proper governance for decades, decadence of the system of education and moral values, economic recessions, extreme forms of inequality in the distribution of income and wealth, market failures and injustice of the legal-judicial system have all combined to make the present scenario what it happens to be. It would take horrendous efforts to disentangle them and they can be done only in the very long run when, according to Lord Keynes, "we are all dead". But we want it now and we of course want to live. That seems to be the underlying message of *Reviews and Ripostes*.

We may agree with the writer that common people have nothing to do but suffer all the negative fall-out of flawed policy and poor governance. But then we must remember Thomas Jefferson's dictum: "Those who would enjoy the fruits of liberty must bear the fatigue of defending it." We may bemoan the degeneration of South Asia into a racket run by an elite for the benefit of the rich and the powerful citizens. But then the cult of efficiency alone cannot be a substitute for democracy and justice. As the French would say: il faut lutter (We have to fight). And then the immortal lines of Percy B Shelley from his poem, "The West Wind": "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

We may just be beginning to see the end of a rather long winter.

SHEIKH SABRUZZAMAN AND SYED ABDUS SAMAD ARE CRITICS

On the streets of Cairo

Charles R. Larson reads a deliciously wicked novel

Of the many novels with settings in Cairo, Albert Cossery's *The Colors of Infamy* captures the frenzy of the metropolis more vividly than all the others I have read. Cossery's novella was published in French in 1999, more than a decade before the recent events that have altered Egypt so thoroughly, though all the seeds of the current revolution are present: the decrepit sections of the city; the traffic on the streets, making them impossible for pedestrians to cross; the minions of street-people with little hope or expectations in their lives. The narrator a professional thief stopped short in his tracks one day when he discovers a new occupation: Street Crosser.

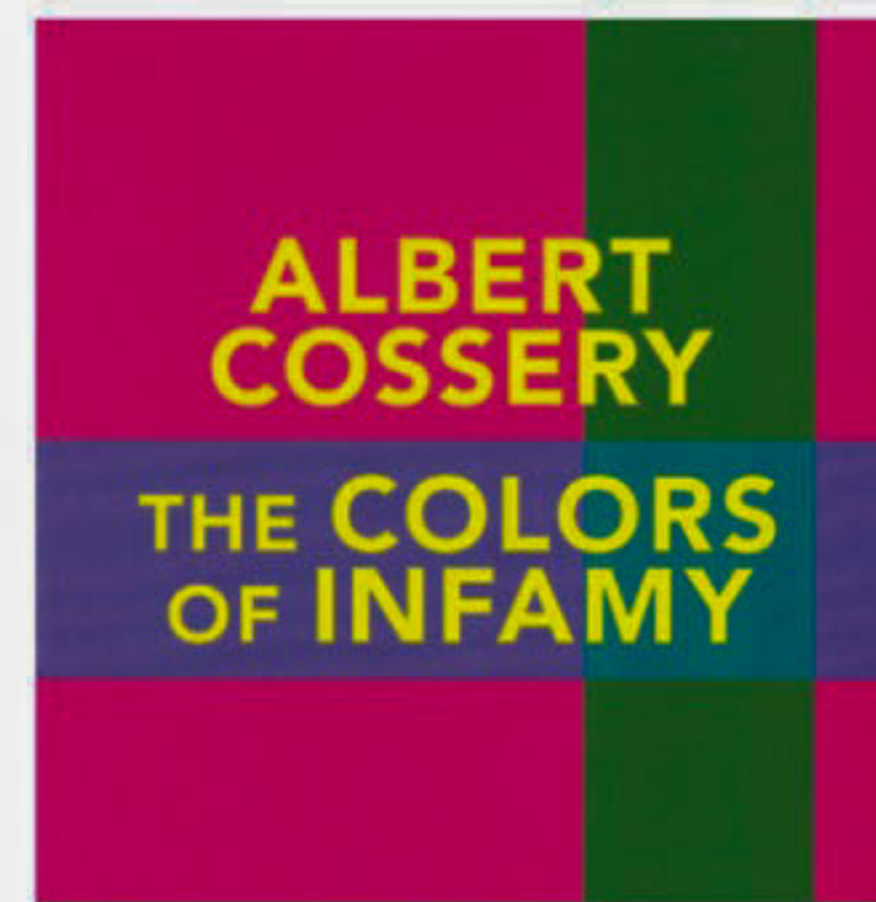
"This was a new trade, even more daring than that of thief because one risked a violent death; it was a trade he could never have dreamed up even in his wildest theories about the ingenuity of his people. The man who had invented this astounding profession in order to make ends meet deserved his admiration and undying friendship. He

simply trying to survive in a society ruled by crooks, "without waiting for the revolution, which was hypothetical and continually put off until tomorrow." And the system he's worked out? Dress like the well-to-do in expensively tailored suits and hang out in the haunts where the rich spend their time. He's been, in fact, rather successful, since anyone looking at him would never conclude that he's a simple pick-pocket.

One day the billfold that he picks from a man leaving the "Club of Notables" not only contains the anticipated money but also a letter addressed to a man who has been the center of an on-going scandal in the news for days. The "fabulously wealthy real estate developer was being sued for causing the deaths of some fifty tenants of a low-rent apartment building constructed by his firm," i.e., constructed from shoddy materials. And the letter, "written by hand on the letterhead of Ministry of Public Works," identifies the real estate developer's accomplice in the government who, because of kickbacks, has hugely benefited. Ossama reads the letter several times, recognizing its enormous economic potential for blackmail, yet also realizing that "he was holding a bomb in his hands and he did not know how to explode it."

What slowly evolves is a dialogue about honor for Cairo's poor. Ossama's education got him nowhere. He was "starving to death in honesty and ignorance," while the people at the top were getting filthy rich. When he switched to pick-pocketing the rich, he felt that he was at least contributing something to society and to the economy. The money he stole he spent at shops that would be out of business were it not for him and his peers. As another character observes, "Honor is an abstract notion, invented like everything else by the dominant caste so that the poorest of the poor can boast about having a phantom good that costs no one anything."

The ending of this deliciously wicked novel pits Ossama against the owner of the billfold, Atef Suleyman, the corrupt businessman, in a clever debate of values, class differences, and questions of one's fate. The dialogue especially because of Alyson Water's delightful translation becomes the highlight of *The Colors of Infamy*. Sadly, this was Cossery's final novel, reasserting once again his unofficial title: "Voltaire of the Nile."



The Colors of Infamy
Albert Cossery
Trans. Alyson Waters
New Directions

would have liked to congratulate him and even write to the government to request that he be decorated as a model for a new generation of workers. This inventor of a job as yet undiscovered by the hardened unemployed of the beleaguered capital was unquestionably entitled to a medal."

Ossama himself Cossery's hero/thief isn't lacking in imagination. The thinks of himself, "Not as a legitimate thief, such as a minister, banker, wheeler-dealer, speculator, or real-estate developer; he was a modest thief with a variable income, but one whose activities no doubt because their return was limited have, always and everywhere, been considered an affront to the moral rules by which the affluent live." Sound familiar? Ossama is

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