

# For casual reader and connoisseur alike

## Shahid Alam delights in the tales of an early traveller

A good number of years ago I was introduced to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* through David Magarshack's translation, accompanied by a learned introduction. After having gone through the novel, I could not agree more with the publisher, Penguin Classic's back cover's observation that, "The reader of David Magarshack's fluent translation can appreciate both a magnificent gallery of characters and the piercing insight which makes Dostoyevsky the most terrifying of all writers." Magarshack translated directly from the Russian original, and he was no less facile in the other works that he translated. Now I have come across a book, *The Wonders of Vilayet*, which has been translated from a translation of the original. Something of the original understandably gets lost in a translation; so one can only speculate on what, if anything, has been lost through the tertiary presentation. Thankfully, though, *The Wonders of Vilayet* is just a travelogue, a fascinating one at that, but with no pretension of having the universal significance of *Crime and Punishment*. Consequently, there is less chance of much getting lost in translation even if tertiary, and especially if the translation has been ably done by a qualified (with four other published translated works) translator like Kaiser Haq.

Haq has translated from Professor ABM Habibullah's *Vilayetnama*, the complete Bengali translation of Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin's memoir in Persian, *Shigurf Nama-e-Vilayet*. He gives a thoughtful, instructive Introduction to the translation of this

"out-of-the-way literature", which includes the information that he undertook the task after an old school friend had claimed that his great-great-great-grand uncle, Mirza I'tesamuddin, was the first Indian to visit Great Britain. Haq points out that the earliest Indians were probably illiterate lascars who did not leave behind any literary work on their lives, but the Mirza certainly preceded by over half a century Raja Ram Mohun Roy, generally thought to be the first Indian to visit Britain and write about it. I'tesamuddin, like Roy, was a Bengali, but he went to Britain in 1766 as a representative, well-versed in Persian, of Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, in the company of Captain Swinton, ambassador of the Emperor to the King of England. Thus began his odyssey to Vilayet, the Indian word for Britain and Europe, and ended with his return to Bengal in 1769. The Mirza has left behind a fascinating account of his travels and the impressions of those two years and nine months.

Haq gives his impression of the man and his historical significance: "The Mirza...was an Indian gentleman, proud of his lineage, well educated in the traditional manner; and he happened to live through the most crucial transition in Indian history. When he was born the East India Company was one among several European trading houses; when he died they were the effective rulers of most of India. Yet he was not...a 'colonial subject,' and this coupled with his elite background makes his memoir unique. He embodies the humane qualities as well as the prejudices of his culture. He is curious about alien cul-



The Wonders of Vilayet  
Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin  
translation Kaiser Haq  
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tures, and is a good observer possessed with an engaging descriptive ability. In this he is a refreshing contrast to the introversion that...often characterizes the colonial subject's response to the West." I will end the translator's commentary with one that is as relevant to the South Asian culture today as it was three thousand years back, and one that is as shameful as it is infuriating. After pointing out that the Mirza "belongs to a culture with the longest history of colour prejudice," he drives home the exclamation point: "None is more

aware of subtle differences of shade than the Indian."

The Mirza comes across as a devout Muslim, but both from reading his account and between the lines, one can surmise that he was no bigot. In fact, two of the chapters (so delineated by the translator) are devoted to serious and erudite discussion on religious faiths and beliefs. His observations regarding the decline of the Mughals after Aurangzeb is particularly important since they were made as the empire was passing into English hands, but they have been identified as cogent by historians writing on the post-Aurangzeb period from the comfortable distance of time and the availability of a wealth of documentary evidence. The Mirza laments on how Job Charnock founded Kolkata after having gained the Emperor's favour in granting the East India Company the right to trade tax-free and tax-free lease of forty bighas of land, and how then the company seized the opportunity to hold sway over much of India: "Those who only yesterday were supplicants for forty bighas of land are today masters of one half of India and have brought to their knees a host of proud and arrogant chieftains!" The Mirza's account is full of such fatalisms, another common enough trait among South Asians of whatever religion. It is also a narrative of wallowing in self-pity, a characteristic not uncommon in the average South Asian.

There is a startling observation about Bengal that Swinton made with regard to the abstemious Mirza: "...you neither eat our meat nor drink our wine. The only reason I think of for this is that you

are a Bengali, and the Bengalis are notorious among Indians for their folly and stupidity." Nonetheless, the Mirza was a great admirer of the British character and industry. He compares the French and the British, where the former distinctly comes off as second best. He acknowledges that the French are skilled in the arts and sciences, and have polished manners and taste, and that Paris "far surpasses all other cities in the Firinghee world." However, there is an element of contradiction here because later he asserts that there is "no city on earth as large or beautiful" as London. His displeasure is with the French who he stamps as "a conceited race, whose conversation is always an attempt to display their own superiority and to unfairly belittle other nations."

We learn from the Mirza the names of accomplished Indian artists and sculptors of his time like Mani, Farhad, and Behzad, but whose works pale in beauty and artistry in the face of the "exquisitely lovely paintings and sculptures of the ancient world" that are housed in Westminster Abbey. The Mirza's sense of beautiful women is an accurate reflection of the common South Asian prejudice in favour of light skin tone. Therefore, to him, the white English women "were as lovely as hours; their beauty would have shamed even fairies into covering their pretty faces." He praises "the generosity of the English.... A traveler from abroad is dearer to them than their own life, and they will take great pains to make him happy." An amusing part of the memoir is the depiction of Oxford University as an "ancient *madrasah*". Of course, the Mirza was equating *madrasah* with a

school, as was done in the India of his time, but it is, nonetheless, a delightfully quaint depiction. He takes time to note the wretched existence of the Jews in Europe and in other lands. "No person respects or esteems them," he remarks, "on the contrary, those of other faiths, including the Moslems, wish to put them to death."

The Mirza contrasts the physical prowess and endurance of even the aristocratic and wealthy Englishman and the Indian nobles and princes of his time, "who gorge themselves on pilau, drink ice-cooled water, recline effeminately on soft velvet cushions and let luxury and self-indulgence rule their lives". And finds the answer to why the English have subdued the Indians in their own homeland. He also holds this wise, if at times a little simplistic, outlook: "...friendship between two peoples increases the wealth of both, while enmity begets poverty." There is also an anomaly that could probably be explained by careless editing. The Mirza talks about Maulana Rumi's *Masnavi*, but, in parentheses, it is referred to as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Persian didactic epic. Now, the Mirza completed his memoir in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and died by the year 1800 at the latest. So, the epic must have been composed by the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the latest. Nevertheless, *The Wonders of Vilayet* is a wonderful read, letting the reader into a keen observer's mind as he recorded events and impressions of foreign lands and home during his lifetime.

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# Ancient land rising out of poetry

## M. Abdul Hai swims out to nostalgia

The oldest written works in the world all come in some poetic form. However, we all know that poetry as an art had been adopted by primitive people before they became literate, because it was convenient for them to express their thoughts in verses which could be memorized and carried to other people. In the absence of any written forms, they could easily store those verses in their memory. Hence the use of verses to transmit their experience attained widespread popularity even in those primitive days.

"Verse (poetry) and music are a match made in heaven" This implies that a verse or poetry has some rhythms that help it to be easily adopted as a song. However, you do not see rhyme in poetry- in prose or blank verse, but it also has its own rhythm and music.

Brooks running over a plain will not create noisy rock music, but definitely will produce a soft soothing sound that will offer the comfort and pleasure of tranquility. The poems in *Looking Back On The Roots* by Saidur Rahman have similar effects. Saidur Rahman, a journalist by vocation, is one among a few Bangladeshi poets who have shown the rare courage of using English in their blank verse.

Using all grammatical structures and natural flow of speech rather than rhythmic patterns, the poet has quite successfully reached his literary excellence. His poems are focused more on narrative and objective truths rather than metres and rhythms. *Looking Back* which is a collection of poems written in English deserves appreciation and applause for two very important reasons. First, it is a book for those readers who have been educated in English medium schools, and those who so long have thought that a book of their taste had not yet been written. The second reason is that it is the most appropriate book for them for a glimpse of rural Bangla. It reveals Bangladesh with its colours, sights and sounds. *Looking Back* is not only entertainment but also a window to real life in our villages. The poems, therefore, carry enormous importance for those who had their upbringing in villages, but now live in cities for earning a living. In fact, we all have our roots in the village. So by reading the poems here, one can easily transport oneself to one's early days in the village. The nostalgic feelings of the poet are also shared by most urban dwellers, living as they do in urban chaos and confusion.

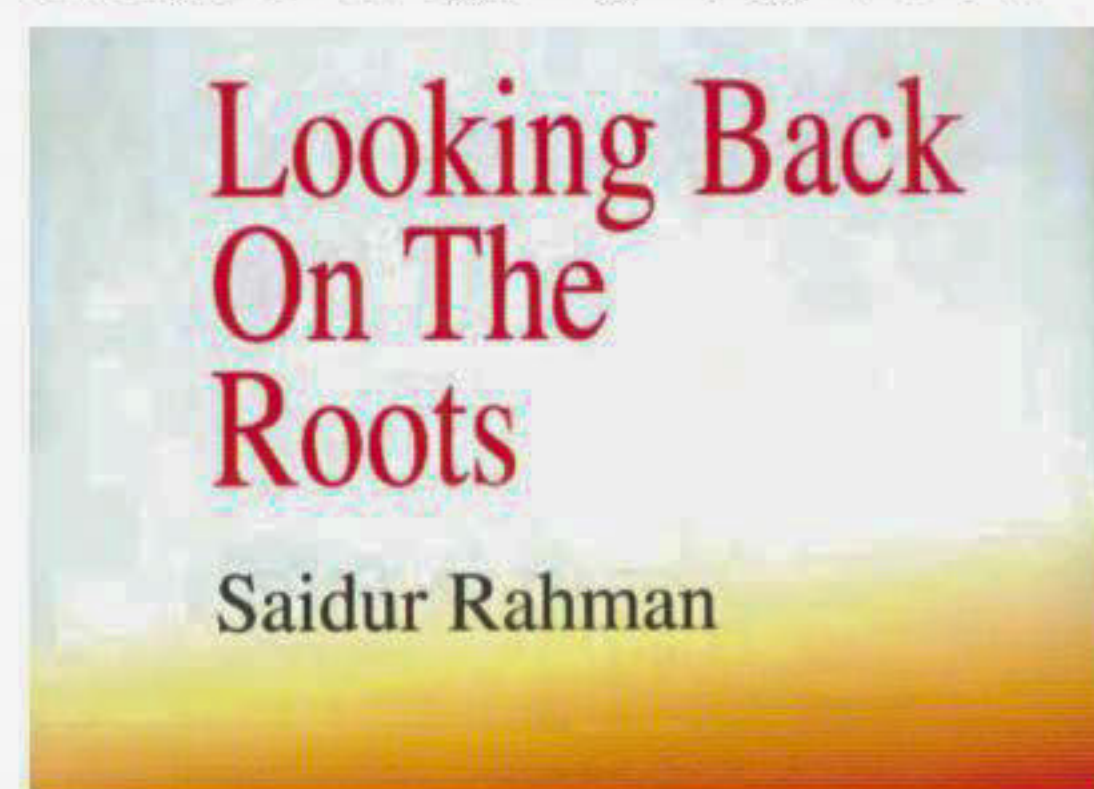
Saidur Rahman's poems do not transport you away into the world of the imagination, but rather bring you back to reality. *Looking Back On The Roots* is a real journey back to our childhood days when we were close to corn fields, trees, bushes, rivers and flowers. They all gave us childhood care and affection for our sound upbringing. Like the poet, we feel like having a dip in the crystal water of the ponds in our tranquil villages. The silence, the greenery and the freshness that we all crave for still await us in our rural homes. The poet feels that the village still beckons him "in an amazing affection". This is a feeling we all share.

"Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful", as Rita Dove, an American writer, notes in her *For the Love of Books*. I think this goes well as far as Rahman's poems are concerned. Having been a serious student of English literature, he has mastered the skills of language and learned the perfect use of figures of speech. It is for this reason that I would very much like all graduates of English medium schools and also those who have a liking for the language to just read the first poem, because then they will be tempted by the amazing dexterity of the poet to read the remaining poems. The poet's love of the language will instill an urge in many to look back and explore the beauty in the language he has used.

In his discussion of both rural and urban topics, with occasional mention of global issues, the poet shows a deep level of insight, but what attracts us most is his ability to discuss these topics with an extremely affectionate personal touch. This is particularly true in his poems relating to rural themes. This is revealed in the interesting piece titled "Nostalgia" which starts thus: "calm and serenity dominate this place, away from the city's din bustle".

And "Vast stretch of greenery soothed their hungry eyes" in "Far from Madding Crowd" invites us, urban dwellers, to take a break and dive into the freshness of the villages. This will help transform our over-stressed mind and body into refreshed and regenerated ones.

"Noon and the Belle" depicts a forlorn rural woman with her heartache and loneliness, as her dearest person is away, toiling in foreign land for a



Looking Back On The Roots  
Saidur Rahman  
Bijoy Prokash

livelihood. "Two springs have rolled by, the man of heart is far away from her". This line occurring in "Noon and the Belle" sufficiently narrates the anguish caused to a woman as her husband is away. This is a common painful experience of many of our women, living in different villages. A quick reading of this piece will enable readers to experience the pain these women suffer.

The Buriganga has been an inseparable part of life in Dhaka. "The Boatman of the Buriganga" is a representative character who laments the days of his youth when he was able to earn enough by ferrying people between two banks of the Buriganga. He is sad to be redundant due to his old age. Scores of chaotic thoughts, as the poet puts it, overtake his already fatigued mind. "Monsoon Rain and Random Thoughts" is an honest account of the problems and vices of urban life which continue to diminish human dignity. This poem will create awareness among us and will guide on to the right track.

Saidur Rahman's work bears powerful witness to his own experience as a person who dearly loves his country. His keen observation digs deep into the natural phenomena of our land. The distinctive personal sensitivities of the poet also capture the minute details of the rural landscape, which otherwise would have gone unnoticed. The poems are also a testimony to his embracing the typical Bangladeshi values which truly define our collective identity.

Reading the poems will create a feeling of overpowering joy, and readers will also love the crisp whisper while turning the pages. A reader curled up on a coach, at the moment of opening the book, will voluntarily have his world fall away and enter another created by the poet.

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# The tears and pride of a mother

## Nahid Khan is reminded of the pathos of war

A mother is desperately looking for her only son through every lead she can get for days after he was seized by the Pakistani military for interrogation about the whereabouts of freedom fighters of the independence war. Finally she meets her son behind bars at the prison cell. The son has been so brutally tortured that he can barely stand or talk. He tells his mother that the military will release him if he reveals the names of the others who are in control of guerrilla groups. The devastated but brave and indomitable mother tells him, "Keep strong son, don't tell anyone's name". This is a mother as strong as the now sovereign country of ours. She would not bend before the fear of losing a precious possession for the greater good, for upholding the rights of citizens, for the liberty of Bangladesh.

This mother is Shafia Begum, our proud martyr Azad's mother, whose sacrifice mirrors that of many other invincible mothers across the land, and resembles the country itself that went through so much agony for nine months of tyranny unleashed by the Pakistani army, eventually sacrificing million people. This mother is brought to the consciousness of readers by Anisul Hoque in *Maa*, which is based on the story of Shafia Begum. It has been called a docu-fiction by Shahadat Chowdhury, but to me it is a literary reconstruction of history. Anisul Hoque is popularly known to everyone for his positive thinking and awe-inspiring writings. He is a diligent dream-distributor who writes to scatter the magic dust of hope among people in order to have them rise challenges they have not dreamed of. To write *Maa* he dug very deep and has presented a well-researched piece that appears to be history based on facts used in the book. There are even real names in the book. His natural flair in telling a story did need a few threads of fiction here and there but the book essentially retains the purity of facts about people, places and the period. The references at the back of the book points to how many resources he has used to make the narrative so authentic. He has talked very closely to Azad's cousin Jayed and people like Nasiruddin Yusuf and Shahadat Chowdhury who are some of the most prominent names in the history of our liberation war.

The first page of the book engages the reader right away, to appreciate the depth of the meaning of our independence war. It is one of very few books which tells the story on the first page, but makes one still want to read the rest of the book non-stop to experience the journey. That journey tells a story of love, courage, sacrifice, resentment, commitment, sadness, tears and triumph. The triumph is embedded in the success of all the heart-wrenching episodes that gave us Bangladesh, and made it all worthwhile. It is a journey no one can make without a tissue box, a constant reminder of caring human beings. For me it meant a lot of sleepless nights; the thought of the anguish in Shafia Begum's heart and the ordeal of war for an entire country kept me awake. The story begins with Shafia leaving her wealthy husband's affluent home with a

small child, Azad, without any of his resources, due to resentment against him for cheating on her. She is determined never to return and raises Azad on her own, all the while struggling with the humiliation of having been cheated on and with not enough means for subsistence living. Azad, knowing how tormented his mother was, always wanted to write about her. The task has finally been accomplished by Anisul Hoque. When a little light begins to show at the end of Shafia's tunnel, the independence war commences and Azad gets actively involved in it. His mother gives his friends shelter, cooks for them and, most important, blesses them in their struggle. There is much danger and uncertainty but nothing diverts the mother from her focus. Like many of the contemptible collaborators of 1971, one contributes to Azad's arrest and disappearance. The day Azad's Maa gets to see him, he is lying on a cold floor. He tells her he has not eaten rice for days. The next day Maa takes rice for her beloved son but the soldiers have by then moved him to a location no one knows of. Maa never has any rice nor has she slept on a bed for the rest of her life, all fourteen years after Azad's disappearance. She has hoped Azad will come back one day, until death wipes it all away. This is the story in a nutshell but the vast plot of the book describes the true ordeal of the nine-month war in an unforgettable touch that reminds one of Rabindranath Tagore's words from *Gitanjali*, "When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable."

The book is invaluable for its narration of the atrocities perpetrated by the soldiers, the co-ordination of guerrilla fighters, the commitment of country people. No fictitious character is used to adulterate the truth. The writer makes it a historical piece for anyone who wants to know about our freedom fighters. For new generations, who were lucky to be born in the independent country, they ought to know the true price at which their homeland was achieved so that they respect the great martyrs to whom we owe so much. A youngster once asked me about the liberation war and the emergence of Bangladesh, and I gave him *Maa*. The youngster with his somewhat dispassionate feelings, having been brought up abroad, and with little knowledge of Bengali said to me, 'Superb, revealing documentation of the war in a story'. That comment shows how beautifully the book covers the facts of war and engages a reader to the search for truth. War stories are always disturbing because of the brutality involved, as we read in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* or Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. But the brutality of 1971 perhaps tops everything else, touches a Bangladeshi's heart, which is documented admirably by the author in the gentlest possible way so that the greatness of our liberation war does not get lost in remembrances of the worst side of the war.

The description flows from the writer's own feelings and perceptions, so wonderfully portrayed that they

overwhelm readers. When he says, on a bright beautiful day which suddenly is drenched in rain and when Maa's body is lowered into the grave, that Azad and his friends are there too, those raindrops take on another meaning. Reading these lines chokes you, you can't help sobbing knowing there is no relation between her and yourself, but somehow she becomes your own, our very own maa. The writer uses many songs and poems in the book in full and it never feels that just a one or two-line mention would be sufficient. George Harrison's song gives a reader the sense of compassion for others, Tagore's song 'Aji Bangladesher hridoy hotey' gives the true blend of mother and country one can imagine, or Shamsur Rahman's poem reveals the beauty of independence and what it really means. That is because these are very cohesive in the very places of the novel that they were totally worth putting in.

A great book, a novel, history, docu-fiction --- whatever you might want to call it --- *Maa* by Anisul Hoque is a work that will take the reader into the past and a long way forward in feeling patriotism in the heart. Professor Anisuzzaman once



Maa  
Anisul Hoque  
Shomoy Prokashon

visited me and I asked him to name some Bengali books one should read. He readily gave me a list of sixteen books, one of which was *Maa*. I knew in my heart he was right. I felt exactly the same way when I read the book.

The book haunts me and inspires me in feeling for my country and its people, makes me cry in sadness, enlightens me with knowledge of the great war, empowers me with the passion of feeling that one day I will go to Jurain cemetery to find the epitaph reminding me of 'Martyr Azad's Mother' and sit there quietly. That is how Maa wanted her epitaph to be, nothing else. Perhaps I could take this book with me and place it next to the epitaph and whisper, 'Maa, this is your life, this is our love. Anisul Hoque very passionately did it with a lot of love and respect on behalf of all of us. Please accept it. May your soul find some peace'. (The review is a reprint).

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