

Thoughts on the nation's economy

Shahid Alam studies a plethora of ideas

Let me begin this review by being facetious. Every time I come across the somber-sounding term "leading issues" I am tempted to wonder whether they are really leading, or if they are, what are they leading to, or if they are misleading, or why should they, and not other factors, be considered leading, or whether the issues are anointed with the tag of "leading" to serve and/or advance someone's personal or institutional agenda. Therefore, with some trepidation, I leafed through the 300-plus pages of *Leading Issues in Bangladesh Development*, and although, admittedly, the going was not always smooth (more my problem in comprehending easily all that has been written than the authors' expertise in presenting them), I have come away convinced that some serious issues requiring serious attention regarding Bangladesh's development have been covered in the book. The editor, Sadiq Ahmed, invited eight contributors (including himself) to shed light on "these contemporary issues and challenges in a comprehensive yet succinct manner." As with many anthologies, the essays in this volume are not of uniform quality, but, overall, they analyze some critical issues and suggest ways of successfully tackling their ailments, although, regrettably, a few fall into the trap of offering a huge plethora of panaceas that might appear impressive on paper, but would be

difficult to implement in practice in their entirety. The book comprises nine chapters, in chronological order. In the preface, as well as in the introductory chapter, Sadiq Ahmed worries about the deteriorating macroeconomic condition of Bangladesh. He provides several evidences underscoring his concern: rising rate of inflation that has gone over the double digit mark, an unstable stock market, increasing public enterprise deficits, rapidly rising subsidy provision in the budget, growing imbalance in the balance of payments trade account, depreciation of the taka, and difficulty in attracting international financing. Yet, as the author points out, macroeconomic stability is essential for rapid and sustained growth. And, for over a decade, steady economic growth had been taking place in Bangladesh, although, in Ahmed's words, "with coordinated efforts and sustained policy and institutional efforts, achieving an 8-10 average growth rate is a feasible target." But the country has been faltering as of late, and the author urges the government to take "quick actions to correct the situation." Having said so, Ahmed then proceeds to place a spanner in the works of his own suggestion. He believes that two factors make it difficult to restore macroeconomic stability at present: one, the 8-10 percent growth plan is far more complex than that of a 5-6 percent

pattern, and, two, rising commodity prices and depression in industrialized countries have turned the global economic situation rather gloomy. Not much can be done with regard to the second point, except by the advanced countries themselves, but, with regard to the first, are we to take it that it would be more prudent/safe to target the relatively modest 5-6 percent rate rather than risk the more ambitious 8-10 percent rate and, in the process, possibly court disaster? The worry regarding this country's current macroeconomic predicament is that, as Ahsan Mansur stresses in Chapter 2, "Bangladesh has had a long track record of macroeconomic stability. Despite numerous economic shocks of external and domestic origin, the authorities have generally been successful in macroeconomic stability." Consequently, Bangladesh achieved increasing real GDP growth, transformation of its economic structure from a primarily agrarian one, steady decline in its debt to GDP and debt service ratios, and engendered higher levels of domestic investment and national savings. However, continued macroeconomic stability, along with its consequent benefits, will be imperative for this country to achieve middle-income country status by 2021. That stability has now suddenly become elusive. Mansur suggests tighter monetary policy stance, increasing and rationalizing prices of petroleum



Leading Issues in Bangladesh Development
Sadiq Ahmed, ed.
The University Press Limited

products, and enhancing electricity tariff and prices of fertilizers and diesel in agricultural use, but admits that "implementing unpopular measures of this sort in the middle of the government's term will be extremely difficult politically." Zaidi Sattar brings up the issue of trade liberalization and the problems it has encountered in Bangladesh: "Trade liberalization policies that were begun with gusto seem to have petered out in recent times. Somewhere along the way, the message about the benefits of trade openness perhaps got lost in the

hailstorm of often misplaced critique that emboldened the lobbying efforts of vested quarters for whom the status quo ante yielded immediate gains at the expense of long-term improvements in productivity and competitiveness for the economy." He then purports to provide answers to some key questions in relation to trade policy developments: Why did trade liberalization markedly slow down? What are the prospects of resumption in the agenda of trade reform to carry it forward to its logical conclusion --- a trade policy regime approaching that of high performing emerging market economies? After dealing with these two queries and a few other related topics, he ends with another question, "Will policymakers rise up to the occasion and give Bangladeshi export entrepreneurs the opportunity they so rightfully deserve?" Selim Raihan and Bazlul Haque Khondker deal with the crucial socio-economic factor of poverty and inequality in Bangladesh. Theirs is an exercise in sobering reality, one that will eventually determine where Bangladesh stands among nations. They note that this country has made significant progress in reducing poverty, has established a credible record of sustained growth within a stable macroeconomic framework (a phenomenon that, as other authors have noted, has come under threat in recent years), and graduated to the

medium human development category. However, "despite the progress, poverty rates remain...high.... There are pockets of extreme poverty with inequality as a rising concern." And, "despite progress, there is still a long way to go to ensure gender parity and women's development." Sarwar Jahan focuses on what has turned out to be, at least in the context of Dhaka, a nightmarish scenario: rapid urbanization and managing the urban transition. The remedies he suggests to combat rapid urbanization and its effects are so wide in scope and all-encompassing that, realistically, they will probably be consigned to gather dust in the files of most policymakers and implementers. Sayema Haque Bidisha focuses on the state of human development in Bangladesh (one that, as already noted, deserves plaudits), notes the major problems that offset its progress, and suggests ways things could further improve. *Leading Issues in Bangladesh Development* dwells on economic issues. Obviously there are other leading issues concerning this country's development. However, within the parameters it has chosen to concentrate on, the book brings to light important issues affecting the development of Bangladesh.

PROF. SHAHID ALAM IS HEAD, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT, INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY, BANGLADESH (IUB).

Great expectations of a journal

Md. Shafiqul Islam travels back to literature studies

ULAB Journal of English Studies is becoming a pioneer in the study of not only the English language and English literature but also in the study of Bengali literature. This study includes multi-cultural literatures and the reader will discover world reading internationally excellent essays in it. Some of the contributing scholars demonstrate wide breadth of expertise across many literary periods and topics. The introduction by the editor, Professor Mohit Ul Alam, is so exhaustive and pin-pointed that a reader readily knows what a rich treasury this edition is. This is the third issue of *Crossings: ULAB Journal of English Studies*, and is dedicated to Rabindranath Tagore on the occasion of his sesquicentennial birth anniversary. In his honour eight essays have been published, which address many aspects of his works and which are placed in the first section, titled "Tagore." The second section consists of ten essays on various authors, and is named as "Literature," while the third group of essays, titled "Language," consists of six essays that explore the theories of language and suggest ways to implement English with greater efficacy at the institutional level in Bangladesh. The fourth group includes the book reviews, four of them". The first two essays on Tagore are translated from Bangla, one being written by Rafiqul Islam, Professor Emeritus at ULAB and Nazrul Professor, who discusses the personal

relationship between Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, who was thirty-eight years junior to Tagore, but whom the former acknowledged with great affection for his rebellious poetic soul, and would always welcome him whenever they met. Tagore dedicated his play, *Bashanta* (The Spring) to Nazrul and urged him to withdraw his hunger strike by a telegram sent to Alipore Jail, where the latter was interned. The second translated essay is by Serajul Islam Choudhury, UGC Professor and frontline intellectual of the country, who discusses the plays by Tagore from a Marxist point of view and opines that through his plays Tagore showed he rightly identified the problems of a class-ridden society, where exploitation by the rich of the poor is the embarrassing fact, yet because of his class allegiance it was not possible for him to suggest drastic measures that could bring about actual social changes. Both the essays have been translated by Golam Sarwar Choudhury, Professor of English at ULAB and a member of the editorial board of *Crossings*. In the third essay, Syed Manzoorul Islam, a renowned litterateur and cultural personality, comments on Tagore's paintings as being predominantly romantic, which was the result of Tagore's adopting a synthetic approach between traditionalism and modernism. Kaiser Haq, renowned poet of Bangladesh



Crossings
ULAB Journal of English Studies
Fall 2010-Fall 2011

writing in English, and who has now joined ULAB fulltime on lien from Dhaka University, in the next essay, compares several translators of Tagore who worked at the time when his reputation in the world was flagging, but says that it was William Radice who could be given the major honours for pioneering the job of restoring Tagore to global readership. In the fifth essay, Fakrul Alam explores Tagore's missionary zeal in preaching humanism by delivering speeches worldwide, and in doing so, Alam says,

Tagore mastered the English language through much labour and ultimately achieved an acceptable standard in that language. Alam therefore claims that Tagore's prose writings in English deserve greater attention than they have been given. Mohit Ul Alam compares Tagore with Shakespeare in respect of their treatment of young marriageable daughters in their works and opines that both writers deal with the theme of dowry as a questionable social practice. In the next two essays, Mohammad Shahidul Islam Chowdhury and Abdullah Al Mamun both discuss almost the same theme as was drawn upon by Mohit Ul Alam in the previous essay, which is the portrayal by Tagore of the abject condition of women. The next group of essays, under the caption "Literature," introduces Arun Gupto's essay first, in which Gupto discusses the internal dislocation in R. K. Narayan's novel, *Untouchable*, in which the central character, Bakha, seems to be discarded by the novel's elitist language itself. In the next essay, Nuzhat Amin deliberates the important point whether Arundhati Roy is more a writer than an activist or vice versa, and concludes that in Roy's case the question is impertinent as both identities cross-fertilize each other. Mah-E-Nur Qudsi Islam, the next essayist, writes on *Hamlet* from a feminist critical paradigm in order to point out Shakespeare's tentative

approach towards his female characters, thus allowing them to come to the centre at times and then sending them off to periphery, almost like an ebb and flow. The next essayist, Rajyashree Khusru-Lahiri focuses on the literature of Kashmir proving the fact that the translation of that literature done by non-Indians shouldn't be viewed as an act of imperialistic patronage but rather as a trend that has actually helped Kashmiri literature to survive. Milan Kundera's masterpiece, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, has been analyzed by Shahnewaz Kabir from a Nietzschean perspective and the conclusion he makes is that Kundera, like Nietzsche, has allowed the positive value of life (Tomas: weight) to have edge over the irresponsibility (Sabina: lightness), while Nasrin Islam, the next essayist, discusses Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as to claim that it is not only Gregor who is metamorphosed but also his sister, Grete, who undergoes a psychological metamorphosis. In a way, the following essay, that of Musarrat Shamim on Coetzee's *Disgrace*, can be linked thematically with the essays on Tagore published in the earlier section of this volume so far as it shows the role of Lucy as a feminist protester against the traditional aesthetic role of women drawn and assigned by a male hegemonic discourse. The next essayist, Asif Iqbal, raises the question whether Bangladeshi writers writing in English are able to deflate the criticism

commonly raised against the subcontinental English writers that they write from an elitist position, and opines that the Bangladeshi writers in English have not come out of that stigma except for poet Kaiser Haq. Shakil Rabbi, in the next essay, discusses three postcolonialist novelists by putting them in a theoretical framework of travel writings and says that the writers Pico Iyer, Bikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh respectively--have historicized the 'contact zones' by not subscribing to the imperial tropes but rather by erecting their own scaffolding of resistance. Syed Waliullah, one of the famed modernist novelists of Bangladesh has been celebrated in the next essay by Md. Shafiqul Alam Khan Chowdhury for his novel, *Tree Without Roots*, where Majid, the protagonist, is portrayed as an existentialist, who does not suffer from the traditional hangover of having to be ethically accountable for his action. The review of such a good edition of English Studies is an arduous task. This journal, one hopes, will play the role of a forum for the best new research. If my 'great expectations' come true, this may become the largest and most comprehensive work of its kind in the future. It is easy to say but difficult, not impossible, to achieve.

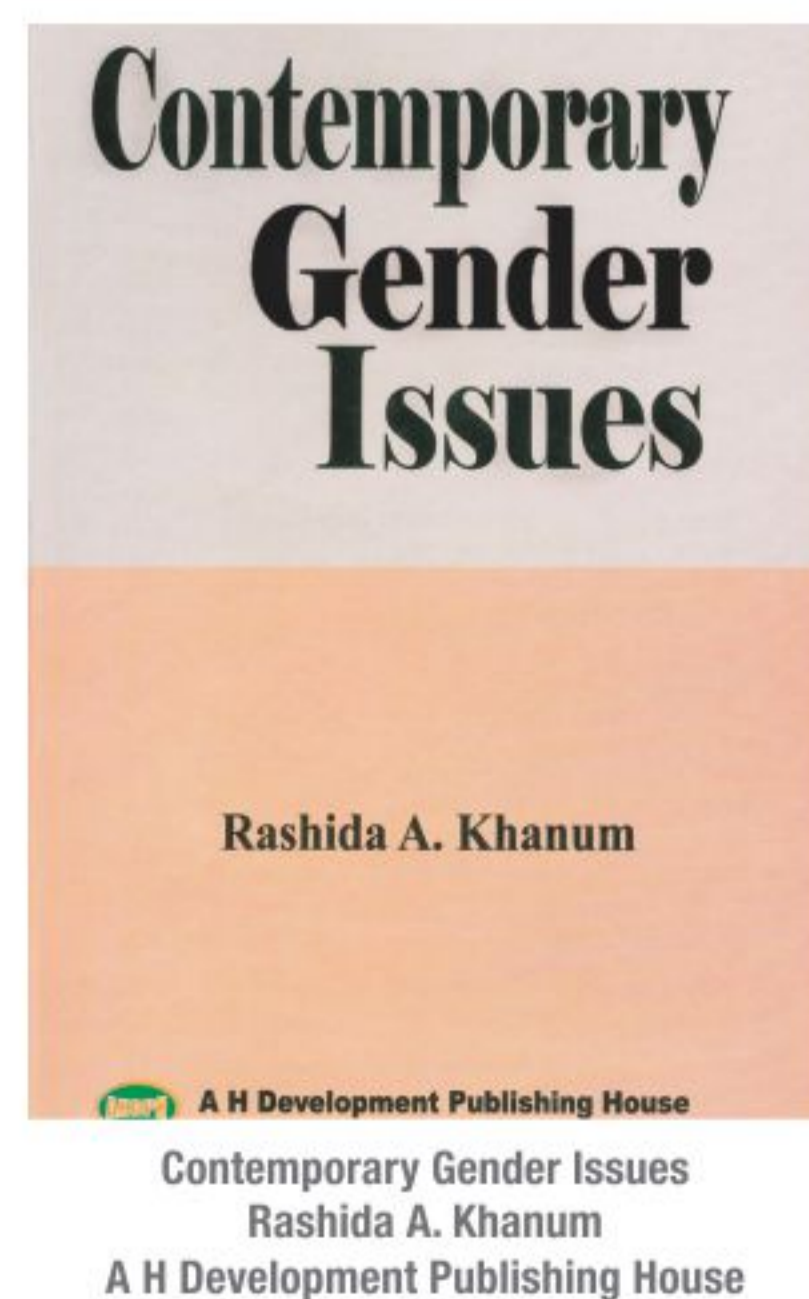
MD. SHAFIQU L ISLAM, A SENIOR CIVIL SERVANT, STUDIED ENGLISH LITERATURE AT DHAKA UNIVERSITY. HIS E-MAIL: MSHAFIQU_ISLAM@YAHOO.COM

Fresh light on gender issues

Fahmina Ahmed is appreciative of a work on women

Professor Rashida A. Khanum's *Contemporary Gender Issues* presents some gender related issues with reference to Bangladesh. Gender issues have received worldwide attention, particularly during the last century with the growing awareness of women regarding their rights and status in society. These issues occupy a central place in women-related books and discussions. Philosophy, especially applied philosophy, deals with the pressing problems of life with a view to clarifying the nature of the problems so that proper understanding of these issues can help us determine what we ought to do in the prevailing situation. Rashida Khanum has done this task excellently. The book consists of six chapters, each dealing with a particular issue. She explains the issues in detail by examining the views of prominent thinkers of that particular area along with her considered opinion. First of all, she considers the recent issue of environmental ethics: eco-feminism. It is an undeniable fact that human domination of nature leads to environmental degradation. Humans dominate not only nature but also their fellow beings, especially women. There is a similarity between oppression of nature and oppression of woman. The cause of such oppression is patriarchal humanist culture. This culture is also

responsible for women's lower status in society. The feminist movement is against this gender based discrimination, while anthropocentric culture is the cause of oppression of nature. The theory of ecofeminism is the outcome of reconciliation of environmentalism and feminism. Eco-feminism holds that both women and nature should be counted as intrinsically valuable and it is our duty to liberate women and nature from their existing status. Environmental ethicist Paul Taylor introduces a nonanthropocentric objective principle, 'respect for nature', to evaluate human conduct. Like Val Plumwood the eco-feminist, Rashida Khanum supports Taylor's non anthropocentric view while she thinks that an objective aspect of the principle is not acceptable in its entirety. Philosophers opine that morality requires impartiality and universality which imply objectivity whereas emotion, feeling etc., are of subjective nature and hence, relative i.e. leading to bias. The sentiments of feeling and emotion are considered to be of lower status. By ascribing such sentiments to women, the patriarchal society regards women as "not dependable, not reliable and undignified". Accordingly, their moral point of view is "valueless". Against this prevailing attitude towards women, Rashida Khanum proposes her unique



moral principle, the principle of 'respect for women'. In a patriarchal society where male value predominates, women are treated in "extremely inhuman and disgraceful ways", such as, battering wives, trafficking women, rape, etc. Rashida Khanum thinks that these compel us to think that women are not considered as 'human'. Deontological principle 'respect for persons' argues respect for every person irrespective of

intelligence, power, position, wealth, etc. The basis of this respect is nothing but humanity. Bangladeshi women fare no better. Here also women are considered subordinate to men. They have no say in the decision making process either in family or in society. Rashida Khanum is of the opinion that like nature women are considered as weak and helpless as well as a means of reproduction. Women are not treated equally with men on the basis of humanity. She rightly observes, "I have given emphasis on considering women as human i.e. as person. Against the discourse of women oppression, I insist that we have to bring into practice 'respect for woman' i.e. the discourse that woman is also a human being. Such a discourse will be helpful in developing new values in the society". (p-16) Feminists, therefore, challenge these traditional beliefs and want change in the structure of scientific procedures so that its experiments are not "biased and misguided by current social beliefs and prejudices". However, it is through women's movements that the scenario is changed, which is visible now. Rashida Khanum is right in her observation that the situation is different in Bangladesh. Here science education is male dominated because of financial constraints (science education is costly compared to other

studies) as well as patriarchal system (sons are considered as old age refuge). It is not that "Bangladesh society is biased by androcentric sciences but more biased by economic condition of the family". (p.57). Rashida Khanum deals with another important issue related to female ethics. While explaining Carol Gilligan's 'ethics of care' she agrees with Gilligan that males and females think differently about ethics "the ethical priorities of women are different than men's.....Care perceptive stress the personal contexts and practical facts of social life rather than a distant, abstract perspective of justice".(p.46). However, the status and the treatment of women justify the necessity of establishing an independent discipline in the academic arena, namely, 'Women Studies'. According to Rashida Khanum, to ignore and avert women's perspective from academic study will not fulfill the objectives of learning in its full sense. Many universities in the western and eastern regions have established Women Studies as an independent discipline, which justifies her observation that "university is involved with finding truths through different disciplines but such a goal remains incomplete when Women Studies as a discipline is ignored" (p.73). It is thought that gender based

discriminations are related to religion. In this regard Rashida Khanum offers arguments to remove some misconceptions concerning the status and rights of women in Islam. She gives her judicious opinion regarding some controversial issues of Islam, like polygamy, purdah and seclusion. Rashida Khanum examines the reflection of women's rights in Bangla literature. She selects some stories for discussion from Ms. Selina Hossain's collection of short stories, *Motijaner Meyera*. She explains with skill from the perspective of different feminist theories how women have been focused upon in the literary works of Selina Hossain. Feminism does not mean only raising a voice for the political and social rights of women; it is important to reveal the feelings and nature of womanhood. The different characters of *Motijaner Meyera* portray that feeling and consciousness. Selina Hossain depicts the inconsistencies of traditional values and derogatory image of women in society and challenges the position of women in her works. Selina Hossain's effort "to create a new image of women by shattering the traditional gender based image" is successfully brought to the knowledge of readers by Prof. Rashida A. Khanum.

FAHMINA AHMED IS PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, JAHANGIRNAGAR UNIVERSITY