

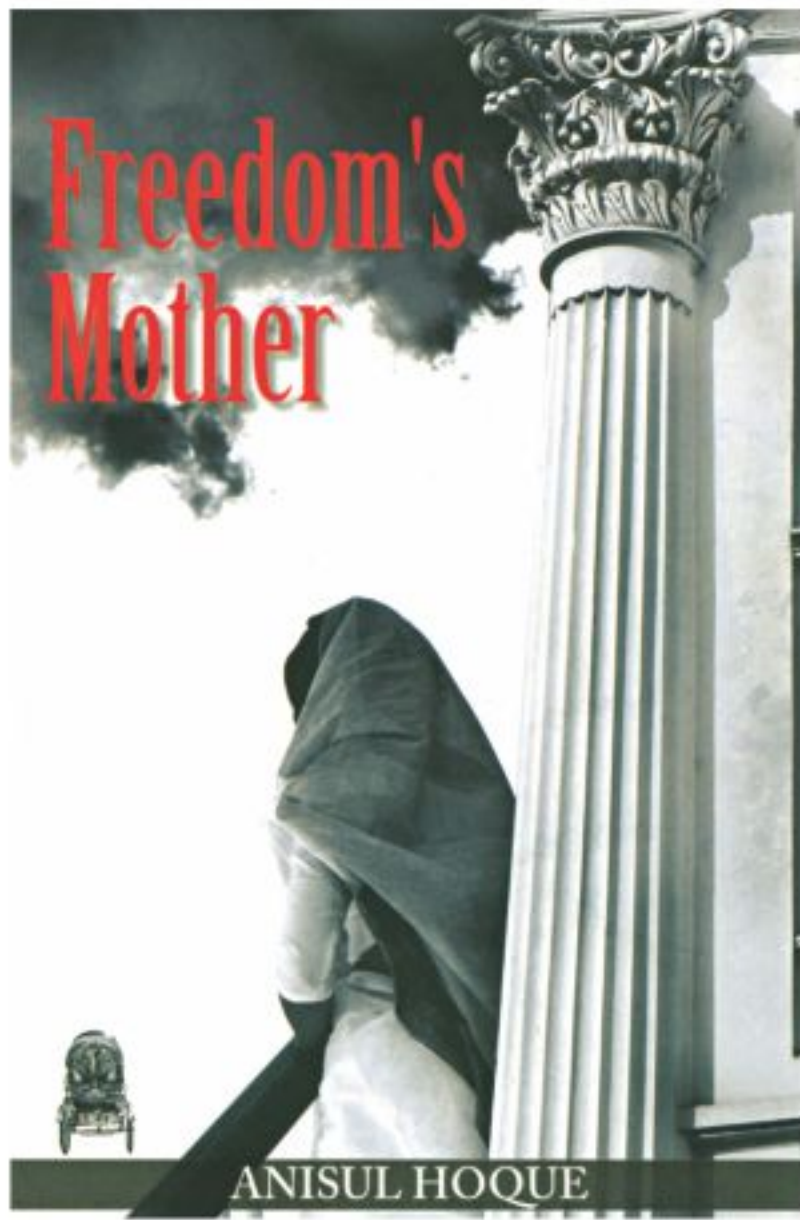
Two Reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

# Waiting for the son who went to war . . .

Anisul Hoque gives us back our history, or our sense of it. In *Freedom's Mother*, it is powerful fiction that he weaves out of the twilight struggle Bengalis went through in 1971. And yet it is not fiction. The narrative transcends fiction, for its roots lie in the realities which shaped the war against Pakistan more than four decades ago. In this work, the symbolism is what matters, for in Safia Begum comes alive the story of all the mothers who paid a terrible price in the struggle for liberty, who found themselves facing squarely a conflict not of their making. With three million people dead, with more than two hundred thousand Bengali women raped by the Pakistan army, Bangladesh's history thrives on a scale of epic proportions.

And it does so in newer flashes of light because Anisul Hoque, through the eternity of suffering that Safia Begum goes through in 1971 and in the subsequent fourteen years, has pushed us into a remembrance of the parents who, deep in the rural interior of this land, have waited for years on end in the expectation that their sons will return home in the light of the stars. It did not matter that the war ended years ago. Neither did it matter that for a new generation unable or unwilling to recall the history of the preceding generation, life was beginning to be dominated by thoughts of a quotidian nature. Those who had sent off their sons to the war did not know or did not acknowledge the thought that those children would not return home, because they would fall on the battlefield. They waited, looking out in expectation at the path stretching away from the village. Those children went away in the darkness of the night to seize the sun, as a poignant song notes. Indeed, the sun did rise on a tormented country. Only, many of the children who seized the sun did not come home.

of liberty, did not come home. The convoluted logic upon which the enemy worked in 1971 dictated that he would not come home, that Bangladesh's freedom fighters or for that matter Bengalis of any class or category seized by the Pakistan occupation army would end up dying a gory death in blood-drenched cantonments. In the perspective of



**Freedom's Mother**  
Anisul Hoque  
Translated from the Bengali by  
Falguni Ray

history, young men like Azad and Rumi, soldiers focused on urban guerrilla operations, would simply disappear. These two young men, along with thousands of others, have remained untraced. And that has only added to their mystique, year after year, to a point where every celebration of Bangladesh, every remem-

brance of the war is in truth a reshaping of the idea of martyrdom. Azad is a martyr. So is Rumi. So is Rumi's father, tortured enough by the Pakistanis to succumb to death only a couple of days prior to the liberation of the country.

But is martyrdom necessarily a prerogative of those who die in the defence of their country? The answer ought to come through a focused study of the sheer helplessness mothers like Safia Begum and Jahanara Imam were put through in 1971. Safia Begum's is a tale that breaks the heart. She slept on the floor, she did not touch rice --- for all of the fourteen years she survived the disappearance of her son. In an era when values mattered, when Bengali mothers held fast to thoughts of their children being their entire world, Safia Begum was emblematic of all these positivist images in society. She saw her bloodied, bruised son lying on the floor in military custody; she could not give him the rice he wanted to eat. And therefore came that huge sacrifice. Sleeping on the floor, not eating rice were how Azad's mother marginalized herself. Hers had been a shrinking world since the day she abandoned her wayward husband and yet she forged a new world in Azad.

*Freedom's Mother* is in its deepest meaning the lonely war an ageing woman faces in a world that has little time for her. By the laws of nature, this woman should have turned into a wreck years before her death, perhaps sometime after she took her son by the hand and walked out of Yunus Chowdhury's affluent society. But something of pride, of hauteur if you will, kept her going. There was a spirit in her which was infectious, which brimmed over with optimism. Even as politics went into a state of turmoil in the 1960s and nationalism was beginning to wrench Bengali society away from its unnatural links with Pakistan, Safia Begum knew it was a

fairly comfortable world she inhabited with her son.

And then 1971 changed her, changed everyone. Azad and his friends, all urbanized and therefore in tune with modernity, none of whom ever imagined that a war would descend on them and leave their lives changed for good, went through a transformation along with the rest of the nation. Freedom is always a transformative affair; and because it is, it left Bangladesh better off than it was when it was part of the Pakistani communal dispensation. On an individual level, a political-military struggle of the kind Bangladesh's people went through in 1971 often leaves lives scarred beyond recognition. For Azad and Rumi, life came to a quick, sudden end. For Bodi, Kazi Kamal, Shahidullah Khan Badal, Ashraf and all the others, radicalization stepped into what till the eve of the inauguration of genocide by Pakistan had been a scene of relative serenity, depending on how you look at it.

In *Freedom's Mother* comes encompassed the story of a generation that went to war, of a nation which felt the sheer necessity of breaking away from the negativism in which it had wallowed for close to a quarter of a century. Anisul Hoque narrates the tale almost in the manner of poetry, which is just as well. Even so, some glitches could have been avoided. It was not Sergeant Fazlul Haque but Sergeant Zahurul Haque who was killed in Dhaka cantonment in February 1969; Ayub Khan did not quit on 24 March 1969 but a day later; the scheduled session of the national assembly was called off by General Yahya Khan on March 1, 1971 rather than 26 February; Tikka Khan did not fly down to Dhaka on March 7 but on March 6; the talks between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were held not at Hotel Intercontinental but at President's House (which, post-1971, would become Ganobhavan).

# Good soldier, better politician, charming lover . . .

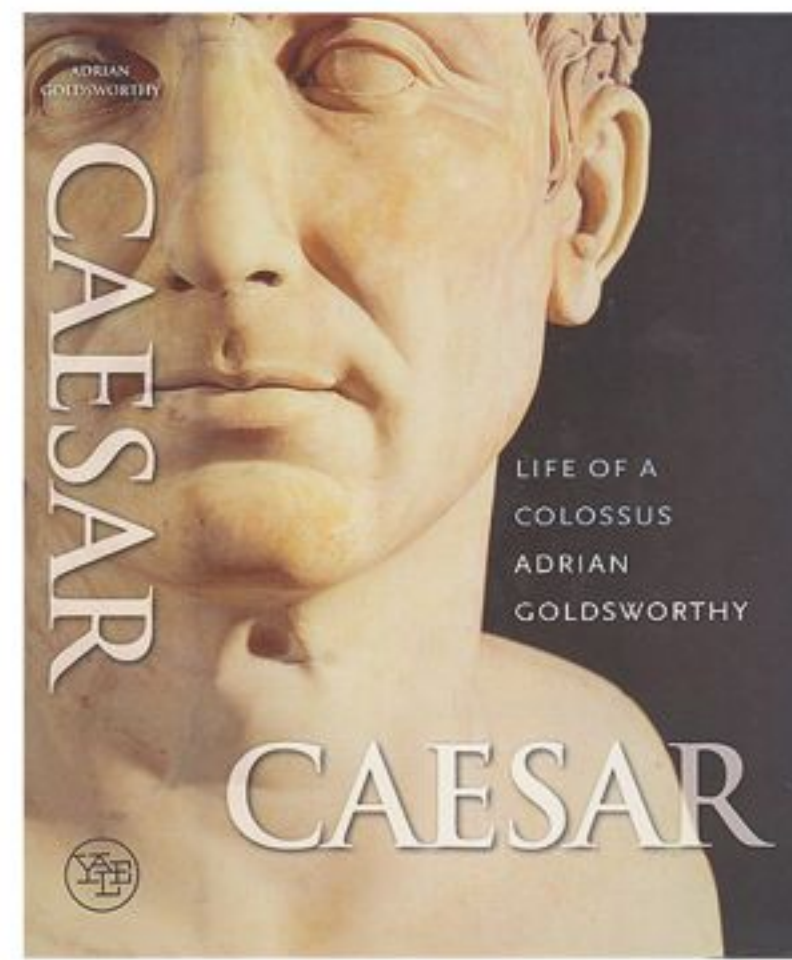
Julius Caesar disregarded warnings about the Ides of March. He believed, as Shakespeare would have us know, that he was more dangerous than danger itself. That precisely is what he told his wife Calpurnia when she tried to dissuade him from going to the senate because of the nightmares she had gone through during the preceding night. As he approached the senate, he came across the man who had warned him of the Ides of March. "The Ides of March are come", said Caesar, almost in a triumphant vein. "Aye, Caesar, but not gone", replied the soothsayer. On his way to the senate, Caesar was handed a scroll by the scholar Artemidorus, who apparently had some inkling of the plot against him. The dictator did not deign to read it. Moments later, he was dead at the foot of Pompey's statue inside the senate building. There were twenty three stab marks on his body. The last one, made by Brutus, was in his groin.

These are the facts that, thanks to Shakespeare, have kept the legend of Julius Caesar alive in history and across lands and time. And now we have an admirable account of the life of Caesar from Adrian Goldsworthy, who pieces together every detail of the Roman's career from his childhood right up to his death at the age of fifty six in 44 BC. And what emerges is a fascinating account, not merely of the life of Caesar but of the times he lived in as well. The work is, in a very broad sense, an analysis of Roman history as it had been shaped in the years, indeed decades and centuries, before Caesar emerged on the scene. Take the story of Sulla, the dictator who cast a long shadow over every Roman's life and as a matter of fact over Roman politics for a long number of years, until the advent of Julius Caesar. Sulla was an authoritarian as well as authoritative figure, one prone to handing out orders that could not but be obeyed. Those inclined to be dismissive about them inevitably faced Sulla's wrath. And yet, as Goldsworthy notes, it was a young Caesar who refused to divorce his first wife Cornelia as Sulla had demanded. The result was ostracism and exile. Caesar did not relent. He

was, more tellingly, extremely fortunate in that he was not put to death by Sulla for his defiance. Contrast Caesar's rebellious streak with the pusillanimity of Pompey who, ordered by Sulla to end his marriage, promptly did so.

In Julius Caesar, beyond the simple tale of his assassination, lived a man in whom politics was the sole defining principle of life. As a soldier, he was incomparable. As an individual, he had great charm. But it was in his understanding of politics that he excelled, to a point where his enemies could never measure his abilities in handling crises. And be it noted that Caesar's enemies were legion. Or you could say that he hardly had a friend as he rose from such positions as aedile and praetor all the way to proconsul. The civil war that was to engulf him and Pompey in a battle to the death in 49-48 BC was prompted in large measure by Caesar's feeling that the senate, by asking him to abandon command of his armies without asking for similar action from Pompey, was positively being hostile toward him and would like nothing better than to see him emasculated as a man and as a politician. It was deeply disturbing, for both him and Pompey, considering that they had once been allies, along with Crassus, that they now were being forced into a parting of the ways. For Caesar, it was a simple matter of self-esteem. For Pompey, for all his sympathy for Caesar, it was the command of the senate that put him at the head of an army determined to bring Caesar to heel. The results were not to be propitious for Pompey. Even as the politicians in Rome backed him in his efforts to defeat Caesar on the battlefield and thereby uphold the authority of the senate, Caesar played the role that would in modern times be considered populist. His soldiers marched through villages and towns, some thought to be loyal to Pompey, without meeting opposition. In some places, they were cheered on by the local populace.

Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 48 BC. It was a move that stunned his enemies in Rome, for it was a brilliant



**Caesar**  
The Life of a Colossus  
Adrian Goldsworthy  
Phoenix

tactical act that Pompey now scrambled to undo. In the event, Pompey did not succeed. Caesar now dictated conditions, which Pompey declined to entertain. In the inevitable armed hostilities that ensued, Pompey's armies were routed and the general himself was put to flight. Captured by men looking to curry favour with a triumphant Caesar, Pompey was murdered and his severed head was brought before Caesar. But Caesar looked away in disgust. There were, after all, the many and varied memories he associated with Pompey. Always a man in fond of women, Caesar had bedded Pompey's wife Mucia while Pompey was away on his military expeditions. At a later stage, Caesar's daughter had ended up being Pompey's wife. In effect, it was the father-in-law in Caesar, despite his being six years younger than Pompey, who was compelled into putting an end to Pompey's life.

There is little question that Julius Caesar was a charismatic individual. Unlike other Roman politicians and military leaders, he came across as compassionate and was unwilling to do anything that would pit citizens against him. In his moment of triumph

over Pompey, he desisted from demonstrating the kind of bizarre spectacle which had characterised men like Sulla, who had the heads of his enemies hoisted on the Rostra in Rome. Caesar entered Rome in the manner of a politician returning from a long exile abroad. In the senate that so brimmed over with his enemies, he displayed little of hostility and indeed appeared to be eager to begin governing in a spirit of reconciliation. That would prove difficult, as the constant hostility of the senators would so amply show. Cicero, Cinna, Brutus and nearly everyone else resented the end of Pompey, for Pompey had been the senate's warrior sent out to quell the rebellious Caesar.

Julius Caesar loved the company of women. Sex was for him, as it was for other powerful men in Rome, an integral part of life's more pleasurable acts. But where he differed from other men was in his obsessive need for sex from women he believed were stimulating not only in conversation but also in bed. He married thrice. Cornelia was followed by Pompeia, whom he subsequently divorced on grounds of adultery! It was Calpurnia who was to outlive him after his assassination. But one woman Caesar loved for a very large part of his life and until the very end was Servilia, the mother of his assassin Brutus. The pair at times seemed to show off their passion in public, as when Servilia sent him a very suggestive note even as he was busy in serious deliberations in the senate. His fellow senators knew he was bedding their wives. They could do little about it.

And then, of course, there was Egypt's Cleopatra, Caesar's other love. On the day Caesar died, she and her retinue were in Rome, having arrived there months earlier as the dictator's guests. After the assassination, Cleopatra would make her way back to Egypt, where in time she would seduce, or be seduced by, an increasingly diminished Mark Antony.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS EXECUTIVE EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR.

# Slices of soulful poetry - - -

## Masum Billah is drawn to things confessional

*The Mystic Inferno*, a collection of forty-eight poems, reached me mysteriously. My first copy was either stolen or lost. However, I procured a second copy and devoured many of the poems. It is difficult, really difficult sometimes to discover the hidden meaning of some of the poems. It is a common phenomenon with almost all the poems. The first poem of this collection, 'Mystic Infinity', shows that the poet wants to seek divine pleasure through closing his eyes and forgetting the pains, anxieties and sorrows of this modern age. He wishes to immortalize this peace and tranquility of mind. I am sure the first poem will captivate the attention of any reader and get him or her into reading the other poems.

All the poems of the writer seem to be very confessional, personal in nature and written most probably in the middle of night. He has developed a very mystical theme in his poems, which might have happened consciously or unconsciously.

The poem "Thought Splinters" is about the magical power of writing and how the power of creative writing makes us more humane.

Poems like "Galactic", "Communion", "The Edge of Eternity" and "Cosmic Serenity" are about the connection between man and universe and how great, grand, impressive, awesome and spectacular the cosmos is and, of course, how man thrives to be at one with the whole universe out of sheer respect. The writer seems to have gathered much astronomical knowledge which has been reflected in many of his poems in this collection.

Poems like "Mystic Infinity", "Aching Desperation", "The Rousing Imminence", "Odepath", "Choice Abundance", "The Hour of the Owl", "The Mystic Rain", "The Light", "The Cosmic Seraph", "The Melting Obscurity", "On the edge and after", "The Pilgrimage", "Revelation", "Desire", "The Divine Frequency", "Wish-craft & wish-spell", "The Truth Eternal", "The Blossoming of Faith", are mostly about the writer's inner-spiritual quest. His efforts to find spirituality, strength, gallantry, honor and peace in his own self, within the great vicinity of this universe, find their expression in this literary form.

Meaningless strife and war, political turmoil and hypocrisy, the sufferings of common men truly get reflected in such poems as "The Demise of Here-After", "The Chair", "Casualties of Now" and "Why".

The rest are more or less confessional, things that the poet goes through, his take on and understanding of life, struggles, ambitions, dreams, longing for positivity and efforts to better himself as an individual by fighting off all sorts of negativity. Poems like "Sick-Tranquil", "Thrill Mesmeric" and "Insomniac", besides their confessional nature, have some extensive word play compared to other poems. Obaidur Rahman has tried to intentionally make the poems rhythmic and hard.

Here we must mention that he is determined to have poems that will rhyme and sound rhythmic, more like songs. The writer is a fan of music and his love for rhyme comes from all that is musical and lyrically magical.

Some contemporary global figures in various fields have already learnt, gone through and passed comments regarding this collection. Nancy Schevell managed time to read a few of the poems and appreciated the message in the poems. Bill Gates, singer-songwriter James Taylor, singer Annie Lennox, guitarists Eric Clapton and Joe Satriani have already got the copy of this book. Ms. Fiddy Henderson, personal assistant to JK Rowling of Harry Potter fame, also received copies. Very recently singer Norah Jones and British singer-songwriter David Gray appreciated the book.

Some of the poems called for repeated reading on my part because of their catchy titles and because of the piquant smell in them of the present ills of society. In the poem 'The pilgrimage' some lines really shake up thoughts. Think here of 'Times are filled with blunder/ some say, ignorance is bliss, wisdom is a curse/ and consciousness is a struck of thunder/ but all shall fade away when the night falls / Behold and reborn, once you are in six feet under.' The poet seems to be very optimistic when he says, 'Out of the wrath of spell, I know the light will prevail/ And I'll rule my realm of wonders.'

The vanity, metropolitan snobbery, covetousness and extreme greed of present-day civilization have made the writer thoughtful. He warns those who vainly take pride in indulging these evils through the lines in 'Demise of Here-After': 'Blindly chasing after riches/Power, vice and lust/ If only they knew/All is but grave dust./ Really nothing will go with human dead body.' Even then, society is plagued with all sorts of vices and lust. These lines almost parallel the lines of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' of Mathew Arnold where he says, "Ah, love, let us be true to one another/ for the world which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new/ hath really neither joy, nor love, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain/ And here as we are on a darkling plain, confused with alarms of struggle and fight / where ignorant armies clash by night."

In the poem, 'The Righteousness', Rahman says, 'I know life is one of trial and error/ But when all hope is gone/ Faith slowly turns into terror.' Life is one of trial and error is very much universal. Again, the next two lines truly speak of the dark side of present conditions in the country and even in the global arena. When people find their hopes shattered, they turn into terrorists.

The cover illustration of the book (the flaming heart with a blue background) is symbolic. It shows the writer's interest in ancient cultures, their mythologies and interest in symbols and their deeper meanings.

Lovers of literature along with social thinkers and professionals will enjoy reading the poetry here. They can escape from the mischievous present and go looking for divine pleasure.

MASUM BILLAH IS PROGRAM MANAGER, BRAC EDUCATION PROGRAM, AND VICE-PRESIDENT, BANGLADESH ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION (BELTA). EMAIL: MMBILLAH2000@YAHOO.COM.



**The Mystic Inferno**  
Obaidur Rahman