

1857 and other landmarks

Shahid Alam reflects on history, on decline and fall

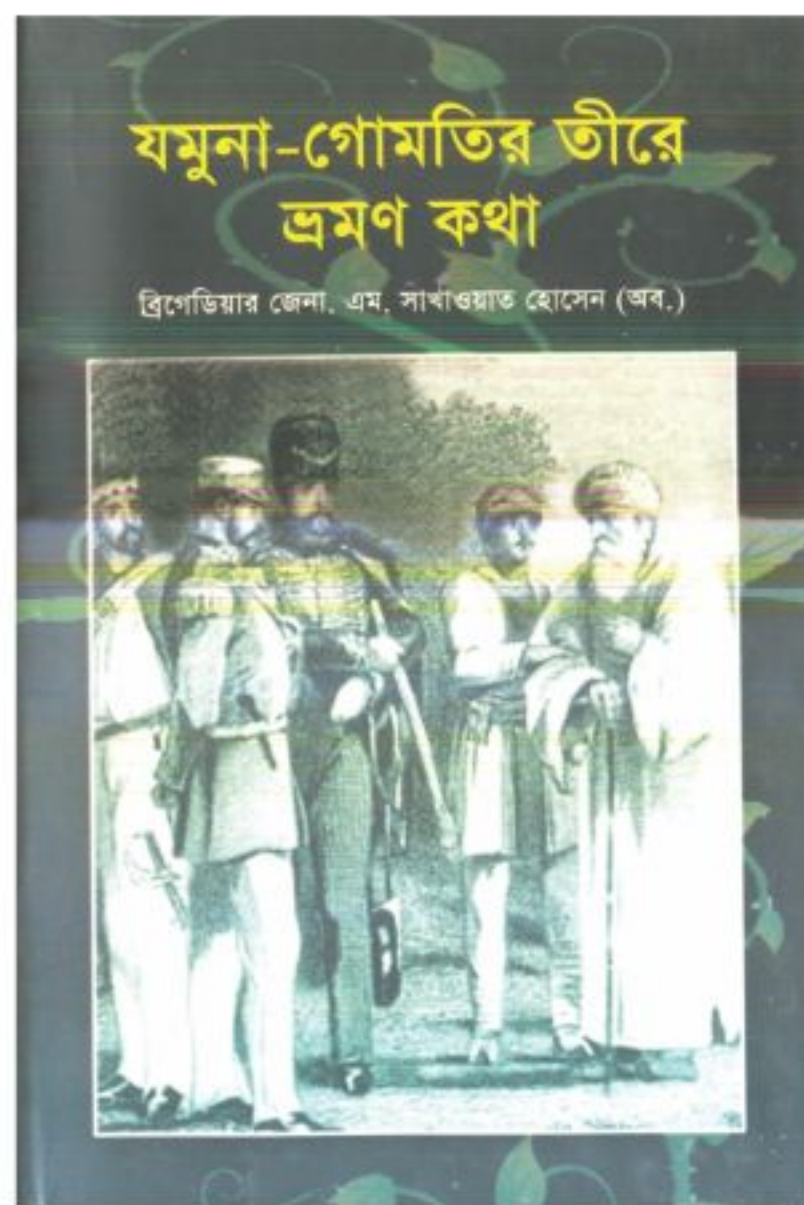
The mesmerizing, poignant cover picture of Sakhawat Hussain's *Jamuna-Gumtir Teerey Bhromon Kotha* in so many ways captures the essence of the book: the story of India's War of Independence of 1857, which, for understandable reasons, the British prefer to call The Great Indian Mutiny. So much can be read into the picture, particularly when combined with the hindsight of history. The octogenarian last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, supported by an attendant and walking staff, is surrendering to Captain (later Major) Hodson of the British East India Company. As a symbol of the surrender, another British officer is holding on to the Emperor's waistband and the sword bequeathed to him down the line of a succession of ancestors going back to the glory days of the Great Mughals. And what splendid and glorious personalities they were: Babar, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb. After all these years, I still recall my professor at Boston University, Walter Clemens, telling the class that the height of human civilization was reached during the reign of the Great Mughals. Everything associated with the splendour of civilization had perforce had to go on a downslide, not in the sense of having become moribund, but of having become rather humdrum.

Just as the Mughal Empire went on a steep decline with the death of Aurangzeb, and passed into the history books with Zafar's surrender to the Cambridge University-educated Hodson who was soon after to personally shoot to death two sons and a grandson of the Emperor and send him their severed heads. Hussain, a keen traveler and history buff, especially in terms of South Asia, laments the passing of the Mughal Empire in 1857 (although the armed struggle against the British continued for another two years), to be replaced by ninety years of direct British rule. While the failure of the revolt of the Indian sepoys ushered in direct British suzerainty over the subcontinent, the act of the armed struggle also signaled the end of 100 years of East India Company rule (with the Battle of Plassey of 1757 being taken as the benchmark of its ascendancy) and, as the author believes, probably engendered nationalistic feelings among the Indians that restricted British colonial rule to 90 years. This conclusion apparently does not cohere with his (again cogent) assertion that that the British used the ploy of *divida et impera* (divide and rule) of setting up the Muslims and the Hindus against each other to facilitate the perpetuation of its *raj*, but there is compelling evidence to suggest that that the seeds of nationalism, of ridding the subcontinent of the colonial masters, had been sown in the two communities in 1857.

Hussain concentrates a good deal of attention on the commanders and leaders of the rebellion, Bakht Khan, Raja Nahar Singh, Nana Sahib, Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi, Begum Hazrat Mahal, and Tanya Tope, but also mentions the numerous intrigues committed by influential Indians with the British (shades of 1757) that facilitated the British victory, including one of Bahadur Shah Zafar's son's father-in-law, Mirza Elahi Bux. He does not fail to mention the loyalist sepoys who fought in the key battles, and the crucial support provided by the Gurkhas, Sikhs and Pathans. In fact, besides the Kingdom

of Nepal, 21 princely states, notable among them Hyderabad, Jaipur, Udaipur, Marwar, Bikaner, Kashmir, Bhopal, Kapurthala, and Patiala, came down in favour of the British. Hussain, again probably correctly, concludes that the British would have lost had the Punjab not come to their aid.

However, Hussain also directs attention to the lack of proper military leadership among the sepoys that allowed the well-led British forces to gradually gain total ascendancy. The British had the brilliant Lt. Gen. James Outram and Maj. Gen. Henry Havelock leading operations that culminated in a pincer movement by



Jamuna-Gumtir Teerey Bhromon Kotha
Brig. Gen. M. Sakhawat Hussain (rtd.)
Palok Publishers

the two that caused Lucknow to fall in their hands. Maj. Gen. (later Field Marshal) Sir Patrick Grant, then C-in-C of British forces in India, had sent the two to relieve besieged Kanpur and Lucknow. When his term as C-in-C ended, Maj. Gen. (later Field Marshal) Sir Colin Campbell replaced him and brought the war to a successful conclusion. But I am equally struck by the *chutzpah* shown by Hodson who, with only a handful of soldiers, went to Humayun's Tomb to arrest Bahadur Shah Zafar. It must have been an unbelievable act of bravado because he succeeded in ordering 6000 sepoys who were in the vicinity to lay down their arms before attending to the Mughal Emperor's surrender and, later, his sons' and grandson's murders. They might have been demoralized due to defeats, but it still boggles the mind that 6000 armed men submitted in such an abject fashion as their emperor was being humiliated (many were soon to be hung or blown to bits by being strapped in front of cannons).

The book is, of course, not entirely devoted to 1857. The author dwells at some length on Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, and the extreme communal forces that carried it out. He intersperses his travelogue with diverse historical associations with the places he visits, plus adds astute observations and comments that are relevant to the present day. Admirable in the author is his quest to find out-of-the-way places and landmarks, as is evidenced by the length he went to find the ridge and the flagstaff tower that were instrumental in the British victory in Delhi, and other notable, though less remembered, places and establishments that holds great significance in Indian history. He remarks on how the Indian government takes pains to preserve these monuments for people to know and understand the venerable land and its people, culture and history, but

also deplores that Bangladesh is doing its best to destroy or let fall into ruins a number of outstanding Mughal structures in Dhaka. A nation is known by the state of its culture, and, by this yardstick, Bangladesh is not faring too well. There are just too many philistines without much of a cultural pedigree out to degrade the rich cultural heritage of Bangladesh.

Hussain had taken his son Shafaq on that trip partly to educate him on the fascinating history that the subcontinent is blessed with. The author at one point reflects on the many wars, conflicts, palace intrigues, quarrels, and love stories that make the history of medieval India so romantic. He also rues the scenario that the Indian national museum chooses to caption Lt. Gen. AAK Niazi's capitulation to Lt. Gen. JS Aurora in Dhaka as "Signing of Surrender Documents Indo-Pak war 1971" but keeps mum on Bangladesh's involvement. The harsh reality of the nation-state-based international system is that a country will look to its interest first and foremost, and, in this case, India is doing just that.

Hussain's comments on the degradation of Dhaka are noteworthy. Contrasting the sprawling greenery of New Delhi, he characterizes Dhaka as an ugly brick-and-concrete slum. A little more than a decade ago I had called it a "glitzy mega slum" while reviewing a book for *The Asiatic Society* journal. It has become worse, and thoroughly deserves the title of the world's least livable city that has been bestowed on it by *The Economist* in 2012. The philistines are running amuck! The author has some astute comments to spice up the book. Not that it is boring. On the contrary, it should hold great interest for the historical travelogue aficionado. Back to his observation: "Politics and self-interest steer people away from truth and reality." He also notes how the political leaders of Bangladesh and other South Asian countries are fawned upon and showered with lavish gifts by sycophants and party activists. This is a terrible practice in a poor country like Bangladesh.

Hussain spends some time on individual characters, famed and not-so-famed. He recounts how the tact and calm (part of the well-known British "stay calm and carry on" in tight situations mentality) of the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten, succeeded in preventing a potentially ferocious riot between the Hindus and the Muslims in the wake of Gandhi's killing. Drawing on the relocation of the Ghazni Gate, he shows how then Governor-General Lord Ellenborough strove not only to distort history, but also to create communal tensions between the two major religious communities. He recalls the artistic temperament of the ill-fated last Nawab of Lucknow, Wajed Ali Shah, who revived the dying arts of Kathak and Bharatnatyam from going into oblivion and making them flourish. And he relates the interesting story of a walking companion of his in Dhaka, Dr. Tanvir Ahmed Khan, who comes to the park all dressed up, does a round or two of strolling, and then whisks him off to a sumptuous breakfast at another friend's house. I will lay any bet that Dr. Khan does not lose any girth as a result of his strenuous exercise! *Jamuna-Gumtir Teerey Bhromon Kotha* is a good read.

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The defeated men of 1971

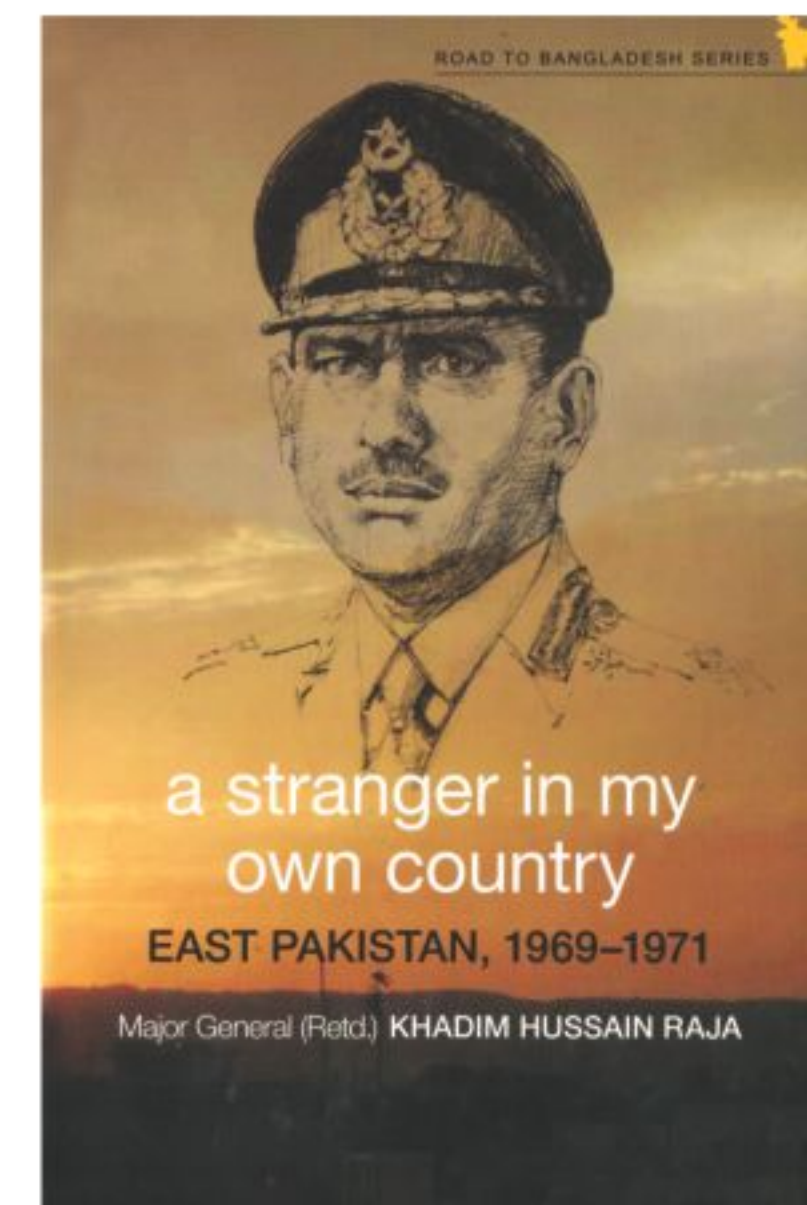
Syed Badrul Ahsan reads a shallow narrative

Khadim Hussain Raja's book on the 1971 Bangladesh war, published posthumously in Pakistan, has predictably created a stir in his country. And here in Bangladesh, a very negligible part of the book, that which deals with Tikka Khan's stated desire to have Sheikh Mujibur Rahman tried in public and hanged, was carried by the media. The impression, at that point, may well have been that Raja's book was sympathetic to the Bangladesh cause. It was anything but. Raja, a senior officer in the Pakistan army and at that point a leading figure in the military hierarchy in East Pakistan (he served in Dhaka from 1969 to early 1971), was fully in on plans for a crackdown on the Bengalis then being shaped by the Yahya Khan junta. Indeed, even as the talks between Yahya Khan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto went on at President's House, Raja and Major General Rao Farman Ali met in the former's office to work out the details of what would later come to be known as Operation Searchlight. If anything, the work makes it clear that the civil-military bureaucracy based in West Pakistan had definitely reached the conclusion that power could not be transferred to the electorally triumphant Awami League.

A Stranger in My Own Country brims over with shallowness right from the beginning, especially when Raja cheerfully disseminates his views of Bangladesh, its political leadership and its people. He naively assumes, like so many others in Pakistan at the time (and even now) that a tiny minority of Hindus were behind all the restiveness among the population of Pakistan's eastern province. He has little time to go into serious studies of the factors which gradually drove East and West Pakistan apart, not understanding at all of the economic and political realities which defined the growing nationalism of the Bengalis. To him, all that matters is the 'Pakistan nation', a point which loses sight of the bigger picture. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, despite having won the elections, is an individual who for Raja remains 'insufferable'. He fails to understand or deliberately looks away from the fact that General Yahya Khan's postponement of the national assembly session on 1 March 1971 only fuelled further the fires of Bengali nationalism in the country. Raja's attitude does not appear to be much different from that of Yahya or his other fellow generals. It was Mujib who was taking Pakistan down the road to disaster. The villain of the piece, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, remains nearly unscathed.

In a very large sense, a reading of *A Stranger* makes it clear once again why Pakistan collapsed in Bangladesh. While dwelling on Operation Searchlight, the writer glosses over the terrible atrocities committed on the night between 25 and 26 March and makes it appear that military operations were only geared to dealing with criminals and once that was done, everything was back in order. There is nothing in the book about the murder of students and academics at Dhaka University, and other readers --- of the macabre behaviour in which the Pakistan army had begun to deal with the Bengalis. General Khadim Hussain Raja says not a word about the ten million refugees who fled 'East Pakistan' and crossed over to India.

Plain disbelief will strike you, for there is no mention of any Bengali woman being raped or any freedom fighter being tortured to death. But, yes, there is mention of women (to Raja's horror) when the writer meets a newly arrived AAK Niazi and tries briefing him on the situation on the ground. Niazi has no time for the briefing, but he does ask Raja for the telephone numbers of his Bengali women friends! Niazi's perverted psychological make-up comes through yet once more when, at a meeting with senior military officers in the cantonment, he loudly states his sinister intentions in Bangladesh.



A Stranger in My Own Country
East Pakistan, 1969-1971
Major General (Retd.) Khadim Hussain Raja
Oxford University Press, Pakistan

Read, in Raja's own words: "To our consternation, Niazi became abusive and started raving. Breaking into Urdu, he said: *Main is haramzadi qaum ki nasal badal doon ga. Yeh mujhe kiya samajhte hain*. He threatened that he would let his soldiers loose on their womenfolk. There was pin-drop silence at these remarks. Officers looked at each other in silence, taken aback by his vulgarity."

Raja makes some rather intriguing claims about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman asking him, through emissaries, to be taken into custody. As Raja would have us know, on two occasions these emissaries turned up at his cantonment residence and spoke to him of Mujib's fear that his life was under threat and that he would like to be arrested by the army. The writer's claim, given that he does not, conveniently, recall the names of the individuals who came to see him, if they came at all, can be swiftly binned. When the Bengali leader was eventually taken into custody, by a lieutenant colonel named Z.A. Khan, he was first taken to a girls' school in the cantonment before being moved to the GOC's residence. Raja does not say when Mujib was flown to West Pakistan. But Raja is pretty scathing about the manner of General Yahya Khan's departure from Dhaka on the evening of 25 March. Listen to him again:

"The President had apparently decided to dump East Pakistan and let it go its own way. He seemed to be concerned about his personal safety only. Therefore, he left Dhaka under some sort of a cover plan at about 7 p.m. on 25 March, which fooled nobody except, probably, himself."

For all his condescending attitude to the people of Bangladesh, Khadim Hussain Raja throws up nuggets of information about some of his army colleagues that might quite take people by surprise. There is the story of Sahibzada Yaqub Khan, a Pakistani whom many Bengalis regard with respect because of the perception that he quit his position as martial law administrator in Dhaka as he did not agree with Yahya Khan's militaristic approach to the crisis. The truth, however, is something else. When Yaqub Khan came to know that the president would on 1 March postpone the national assembly session in Dhaka, he briskly put together a plan he called Operation Blitz, to be switched into implementation mode through arresting Mujib and putting the Awami League out of action. Raja writes:

"In essence, Operation Blitz meant the suspension of all political activity in the country and a reversion to Martial Law rule. This meant that the armed forces of the country would be permitted to move against defiant political leaders and take them into protective custody..."

General Yaqub directed that we be ready to put Operation Blitz into action at short notice. I was also informed that 57 Brigade, ex 16 Division at Quetta, was already on the move to Karachi from where it would be ready to fly to Dhaka at a given codeword."

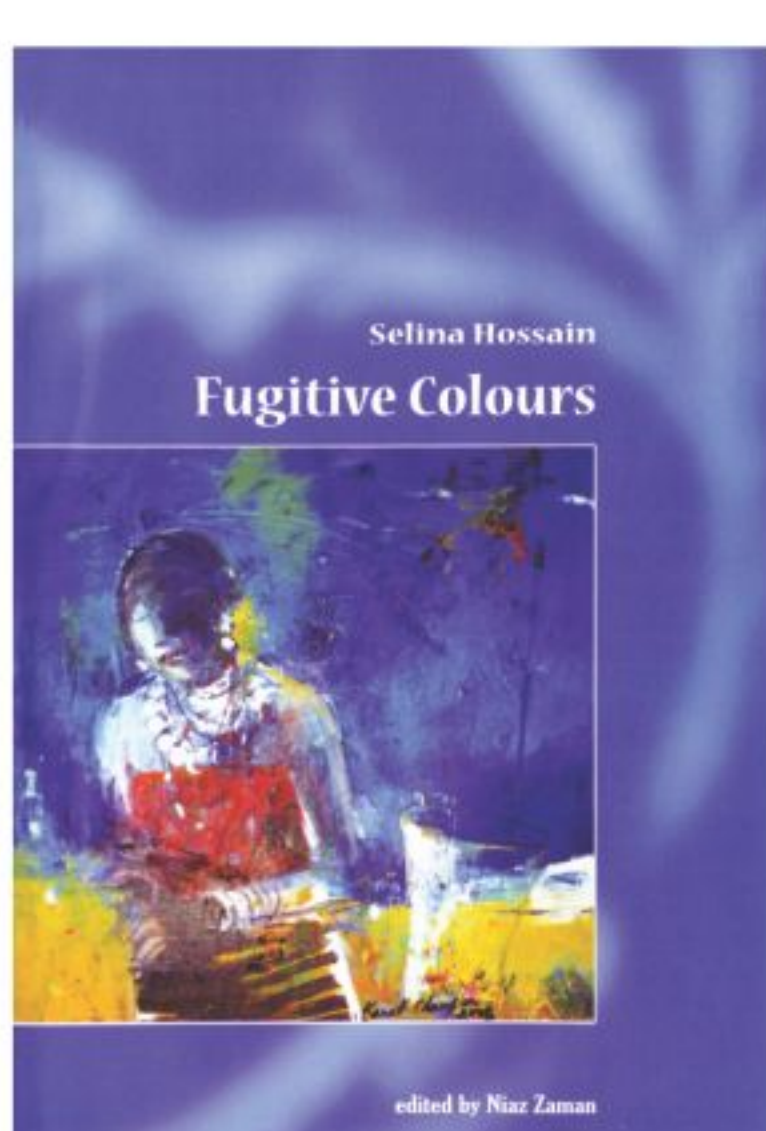
Bengali phobia is what Raja suffers from. In 1971, he is worried about the 'suspect loyalty' of Bengali troops. Earlier, with the East Bengal Regiment coming into place, he feels that a separate army is being built for the Bengalis. His suggestion about Bengali soldiers being made part of existing units and regiments of the army rather than they being part of a solely Bengali regiment does not far, for men like General Khwaja Wasiuddin quickly shoot it down.

The extent to which the junta went to discredit the Bengali nationalist movement shines through the meanness the army employed in keeping track of Bengali politicians and others. Army intelligence fixes a recording device in a car used by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, picks up everything he says and then sends the tape to President Yahya Khan in Rawalpindi. On his own, General Raja tricks Brigadier M.R. Mozumdar, the highest ranking Bengali officer in the Pakistan army in East Pakistan then based in Chittagong, into travelling with him to Dhaka in March 1971. Mozumdar is then taken prisoner, sent off to West Pakistan, where he will stay until his repatriation to a free Bangladesh.

Khadim Hussain Raja left Dhaka on 12 April 1971. Before handing over to General Rahim Khan, he decides to issue a posting order to West Pakistan for his 'Bengali ADC' who 'through no fault of his, had become redundant. He was a fine young man with deep Muslim League connections.' Raja moves on, to shower praise on a relative of the ADC. The relative, Colonel Abdul Quayyum, stayed loyal to Pakistan in 1971 and indeed believed as late as a couple of days after Pakistan's surrender that his brother, the intellectual Munier Chowdhury had been murdered by the Mukti Bahini. The irony cannot be missed. The state the Bengali colonel defends zealously ends up murdering his own sibling.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.

BOOK choice



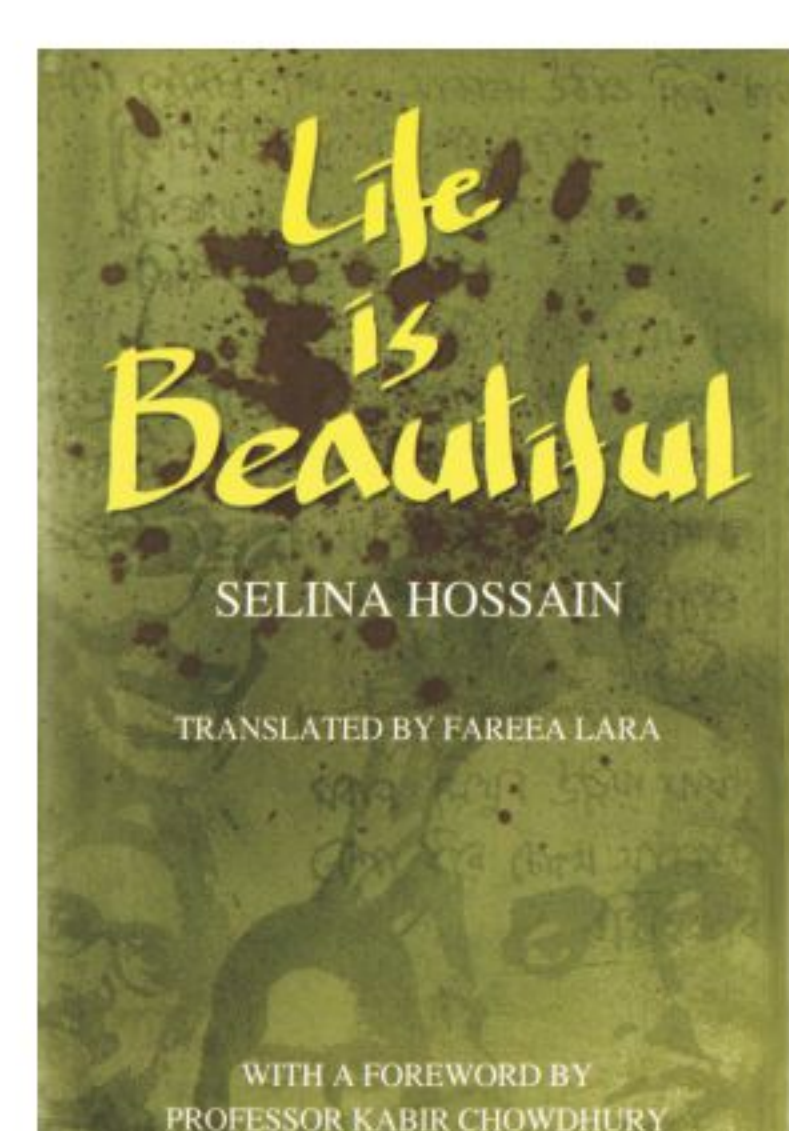
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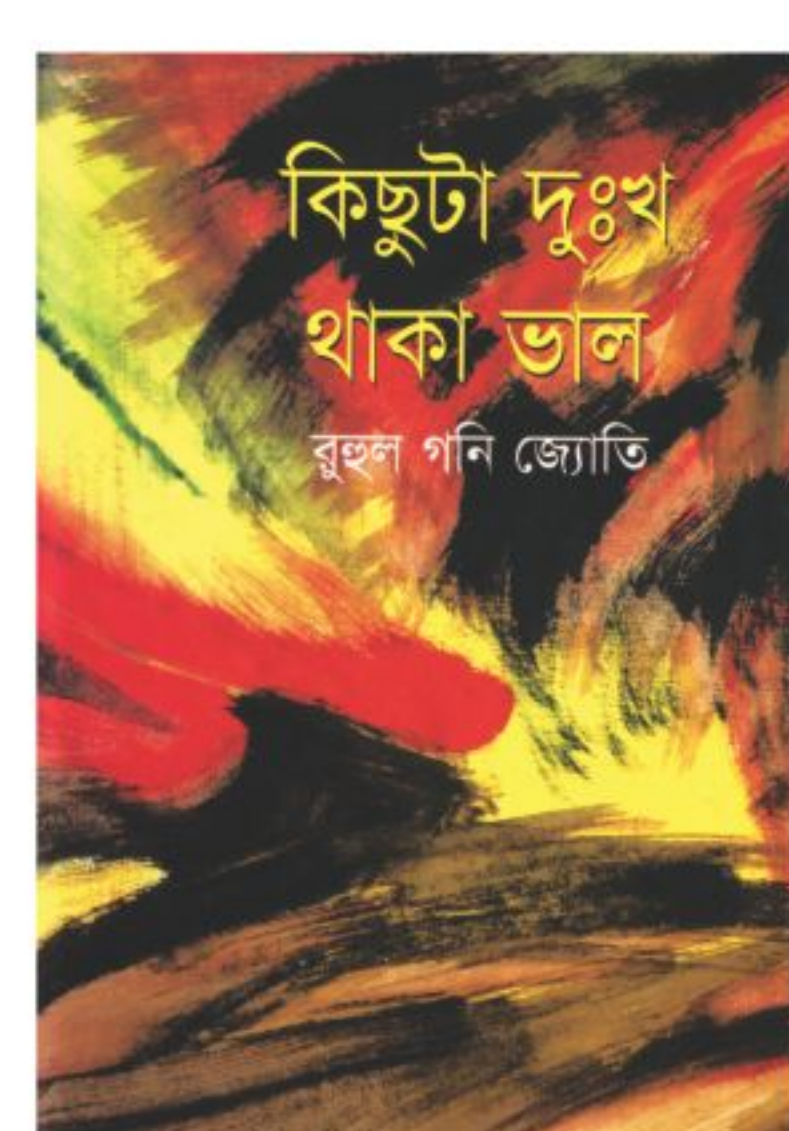
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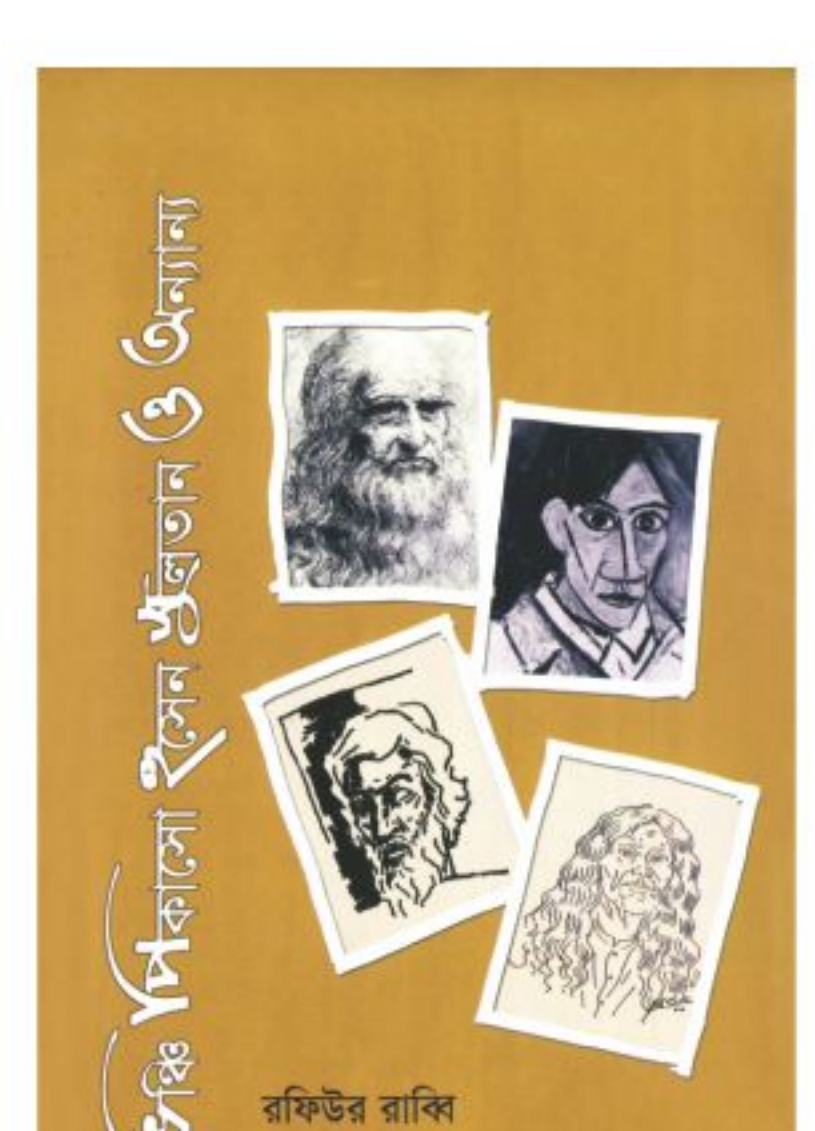
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