

A life lived in stirring times

Rebecca Haque navigates the literary aspects of a book

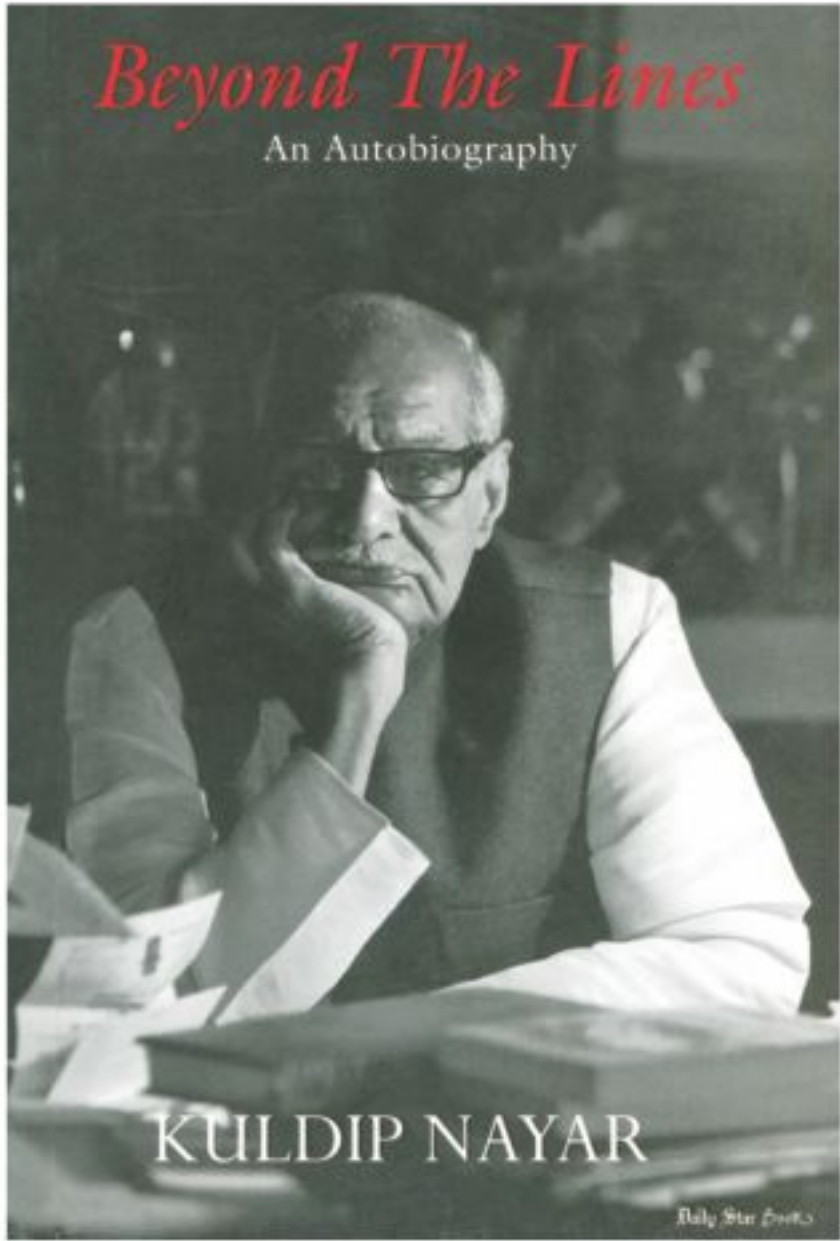
NOTE: It was a special privilege to be a discussant on the panel of the Daily Star Publications launch of the esteemed journalist Kuldeep Nayar's book on 16 November, at 6.30 pm, at Bangla Academy. I was asked by the Daily Star representative to look at the literary aspects of the autobiography. I chose to focus on the 'Culture of Geography'.

One important aspect of cultural studies is what can be called the geographies (or, topographies) of culture: the ways in which matters of meaning are bound up with spaces, places and landscapes. The language of cultural studies is full of spatial metaphors, for example, 'fields', 'maps', 'boundaries', 'margins', 'borders', and 'networks'. Culture is also understood as plural, fragmented, and contested. It cannot be understood outside the spaces that it marks out, like national boundaries or regional territories.

The title of Kuldeep Nayar's autobiography, *Beyond The Lines*, conjures up images of battle-lines, front-lines, border-lines, behind the lines, and of course, spaces and lives between the lines. Indeed, the history of the sub-continent is one of conquerors and the vanquished from the Persians and the Greeks, the Arabs and the Turks and the Portuguese, to finally, the British. The cradle of Indo-Gangetic civilization and the birthplace of the Indo-Sanskrit languages, with its sophisticated and unique Gandhara art and sculpture of Harappa and Moen-jo-Daro, has been the terrain of countless wars with its subsequent cyclical rise and fall of kingdoms and principalities.

Kuldeep Nayar was in his hometown Sialkot and twenty-four years old, a lawyer (by professional training at Forman Christian College in Lahore), when on 12 August 1947, Partition was announced over the radio: "It was like a spark thrown at the haystack of distrust. The sub-continent burst into communal

flames. The north was the worst affected and to some extent Bengal (p.6). Nayar, now eighty-nine years old, has been witness to tumultuous events following Partition, and has recorded the political developments arising out of the hostilities among nations within the sub-continent. In the first chapter, 'Child-



Beyond the Lines: An Autobiography
Kuldeep Nayar
Daily Star Books

hood and Partition', he tells us that he "stumbled into journalism by accident. My chosen profession was law,... but history intervened India was divided. Making my way to Delhi, I found a job in an Urdu daily, *Janam*." (p. 1) Nayar confesses, with justifiable pride, that journalism has given him the opportunity to write what he considered to be correct. His autobiography reveals to us a man whose moral and social conscience, and deep belief in secular humanism, has its roots in his early life

in the warm, nurturing enclosure of the joint family home in Sialkot. His grandmother was the "effective head" of the household, and though his grandfather was alive, he "took a back seat." Nayar's grandmother was a "great one for astrology" and she had horoscopes of every child prepared by a leading pundit. One day, the pandit read Nayar's palm and predicted that the boy would read the *malechh vidya* (the language of foreigners, thereby meaning English), and travel a lot by *udhan khatola* (aeroplane). Nayar's mother, Puran Devi, was very particular about customs. She "really believed that antiquity gave them credibility" (p.4). Although a practising Sikh, his mother celebrated both Sikh and Hindu festivals since marriages between Hindus and Sikhs were common in those days. Nayar frankly tells us, "It would be fair to say that we blended the traditions of Sikhism and Hinduism."

In the initial pages, Nayar ponders, somewhat philosophically and in a melancholy strain of lyrical prose, the eternal question of whether it is chance or choice which determines a man's path in life. He vividly recalls the image of his guardian spirit: "I have fond memories of my home, at Trunk Bazaar, a two-storey house with a garden at the back where there was an old grave which my mother said was the *kabar* of some *pir* (saint). The grave was like a family shrine where we prayed in our own way and sought refuge from the outside world" (p.2). Later, Nayar reflects upon the influence of the "unseen guardian" upon his moral growth in his remarkable journey through the troubled times in the history of this region: "I carried with me the blessings of the *pir*.... I feel he represents something spiritual; something akin to bhakti or sufism." However, in the face of the reality of the

horror of the reign of terror, the communal slaughter, following Partition, and the violent birth of Bangladesh accompanied by its own holocaust of genocide, Nayar is forced to wrestle with faith, with belief in a god, or in the possibility of god in man. Man's inhumanity towards his own kind, the persisting poverty in the region, and other social and class-based inequities still remain the focus of his writing, a quest to correct the failings within man and within societies. In the Preface written specially for this Bangladesh edition of his autobiography, Kuldeep Nayar offers a poignant and prophetic prayer: "I have seen Bangladesh developing from the days when it was liberated. My contact with many people in Pakistan and Bangladesh is personal and I am proud to own the relationship. I believe that some day all the countries in South Asia will form a common union like the European Union (EU), without abandoning their individual identities, and this will help fight against the problems of poverty and to span the ever-yawning gulf between the rich and the desperately poor of all our countries. I am convinced that South Asians will one day live in peace and harmony and cooperate with one another on matters of mutual concern such as development, trade, and social progress. This is the hope I have clung to amidst the sea of hatred and hostility that has for far too long engulfed the subcontinent." On the threshold of his ninetieth birthday, Nayar, the visionary, is still hopeful. Let his words lead us forward into the wide world of light and love and tolerance and equality and freedom. Let us expand our minds and hearts and embrace the other, the different, and the unknown.

REBECCA
HAQUE IS PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF
ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA.

In renewed search of faith

Mahmuda Islam appreciates a work on two immigrants

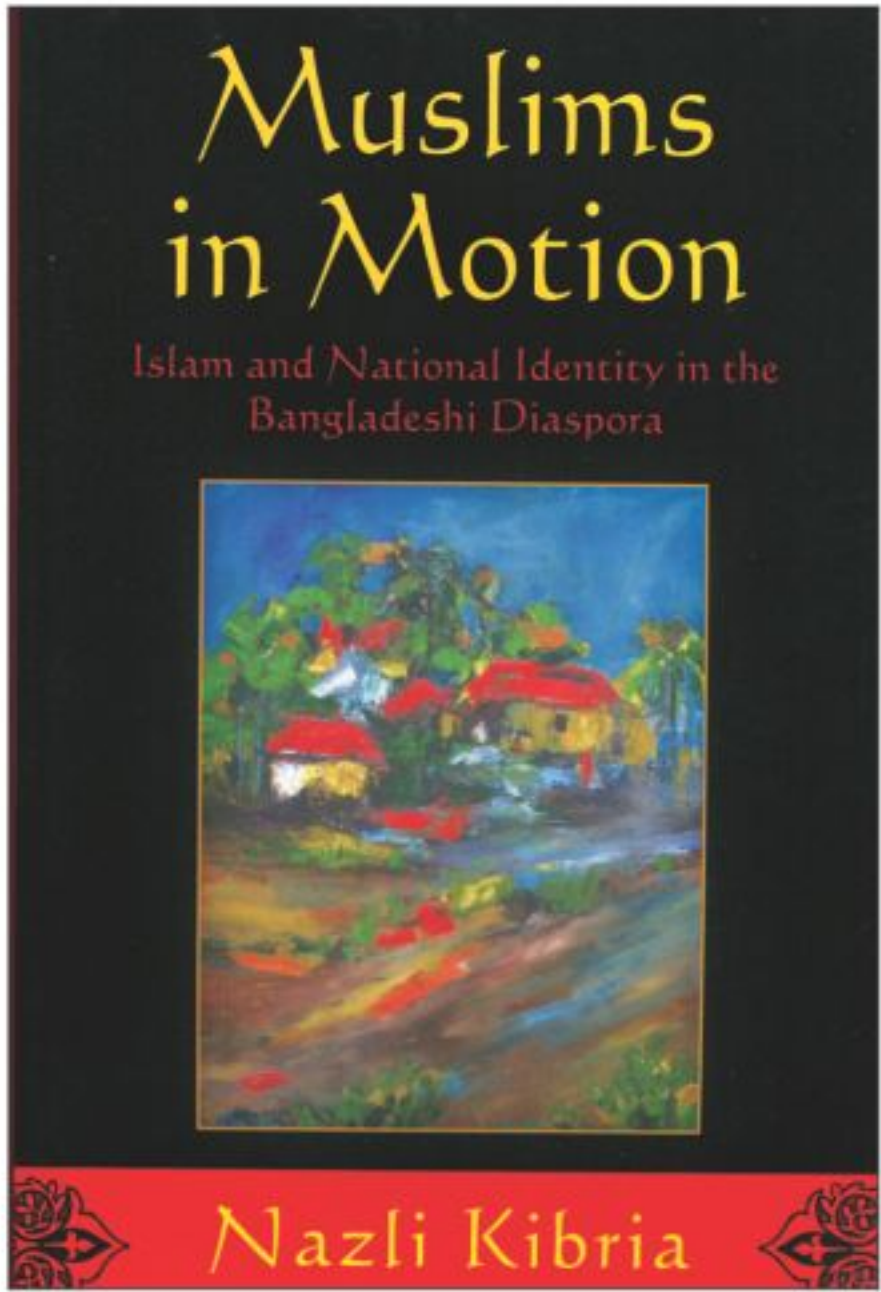
The liberation of Bangladesh witnessed a spectacular surge in immigration outside the motherland. Almost every part of Bangladesh, rural and urban, felt the effects of the new trend. But not much research was undertaken in the academic circles on this aspect of the new country.

Professor Nazli Kibria of Boston University undertook research on the topic and has published her research findings in the work 'Muslims in Motion'. In this sense, she is a pioneer in the field of immigration from Bangladesh. In her research, she has the advantage that, though born of Bangladeshi parents, she has lived in many countries and could bring into her research a dispassionate and open mind with knowledge of a very broad spectrum of life. As a result, she has provided an illuminating academic analysis of the problems and issues faced by Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in such host countries as the UK, USA, Malaysia and the Arab Gulf States.

After giving an overview of changing Islam in the global context and migration of Muslims across the world, based on her examination of a varied dimension of international writings, she concentrates on the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in the aforesaid countries. Though the conditions and environment in these countries differ, she finds one common feature: Muslim migrants from Bangladesh are looked down upon as coming from a poverty-stricken country that depends on international charity. As she has found, "The global image of Bangladesh as a poor, corrupt, and hapless country is one that haunts those abroad, creating a lens through which they find themselves being assessed in the receiving society". This derogatory image and consequent neglect has created in the immigrants a feeling of isolation and inferiority of thinking and generated a failure on their part to integrate with the mainstream of social life in the host countries. Professor Kibria has brilliantly brought into focus this dilemma in the life of the immigrants.

Consequences of this attitude manifested differently in different countries as conditions were different. In the UK and USA, the immigrants could settle down with families. As their children were born and their education and socialization became necessary, the immigrant parents in the UK and USA, having grown to adulthood in Bangladeshi society, wanted to keep their children away from Western influences. Since Bangladesh society is based on Islam, they decided to give their children Islamic orientation and, to set examples before them, they themselves started practising Islam of the Bangladeshi variety in right earnest. While children were sent to public schools in

consideration of the future of the offspring, they were also imparted Islamic education in part-time schools attached to mosques. But these second generation offspring of the original immigrants were not familiar and had no direct contact and participation with the Muslim culture in which their parents had been nurtured. Their direct contact came to be with a brand of Islam which Professor Kibria identifies as revivalist Islam, which she defines as "a surge of religiosity coupled with the expansion of Islamic movements that advocate a greater and renewed focus on religion in the lives of Muslims". This brand of Islam cuts across regional boundaries of Muslim cultures that differ



Muslims in Motion
Islam and National Identity in the
Bangladeshi Diaspora
Nazli Kibria
Rutgers University Press, USA.

from country to country. This second generation of Bangladeshis were also attracted to transnational Islam due to the poor image of their parents' country Bangladesh in the host country and failure to fall back on that culture. They became more Muslim and less Bangladeshi. The result is that they failed to integrate with the country where they were born. Nor could they adhere to their parents' society. Professor Kibria has gone deep into the issue with a clear insight and has shown the direction to which future research should be undertaken to find out a solution.

Malaysia and the Gulf states do not allow immigrants to settle: the immigrants are there only to earn money and must come

back home. They have no problem with children. But they face an Islam which is different from what they practise in Bangladesh. Though these host countries are predominantly Muslim, immigrants find differences. The government of Malaysia promotes its own brand of Islam, while Saudi Arabia promotes another variety. Returning immigrants are exposed to these differences from Islam in Bangladesh and their knowledge and horizons are broadened, but their response is different. Some want to emulate the host country brand while many cling to the Bangladesh practices without dissent. Professor Kibria feels that some changes in attitude on the part of the immigrants are definitely taking place and she considers these changes as revivalist. Much more research is necessary on this issue. However, she has correctly pointed out that the Western conception of Islam as "homogeneous and one-dimensional" is a misconception. Never in history have Islam and Muslim been identical and there was never any dearth of devout Muslims. There are primarily four schools of Islamic thought and all of them claim to adhere strictly to the Quran and Sunnah. Revivalists do not have any better claim on Islam. Moreover, revivalist Islam is also not homogeneous; there are differences in ideas and approaches. So Professor Kibria has correctly stated that to brand immigrants as proponents of revivalist Islam is simplistic.

Bangladesh is recognized as a liberal Muslim country and is amenable to changes. Several decades ago, it was unimaginable that women would enter mosques and pray there. On the other hand, attempt, even supported by Jamaat, to introduce Khutba in Bangla failed. Millions of people attend Pahela Baishakh and Shaheed dibash celebrations and the sheer number of them is proof that those attending these celebrations include many who say their prayers and go to mosques on Friday regularly and are not less devout than the so-called revivalists. Professor Kibria has, however, correctly linked globalization on a secular plane with globalization on a religious plane. Globalization of Islam, termed in the West as revival of Islam, can be viewed as an offshoot of globalization on economic-political- neocolonial perspectives sponsored by the West.

Doubtless, Professor Kibria is a pioneer in the field. The methodology she used is appropriate. She has laid bare a great volume of information and analyzed them with an inquisitive and investigative mind. The language is lucid and easy to understand. She has shown the way and others should now come forward to elaborate her endeavors.

DR. MAHMUDA ISLAM HAS SERVED AS
PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY AT DHAKA
UNIVERSITY.

Of parents and children

Nausheen Rahman has some questions

It is believed that parents know their children better than anyone else. But do they really? And do they always know what's best for them? Jodi Picoult's *The Pact*, like several of her other novels, deals with adolescents and their dilemmas. It is an eye-opener, a wake-up call for all parents.

The story begins with the death of 17-year-old Emily, and in the wake of all the shock and grief, loom huge questions: Was this suicide? If so, why did Emily kill herself? Had there really been a suicide pact between Emily and her boyfriend, Chris - or did he kill her? If it was murder, what was the reason?

Chris, also 17 year old, and the prime suspect, is taken to jail, and the reactions of the two youngsters' family members to the tragedy, are outlined with the writer's signature perception and sensitivity.

The book is fast-paced and will keep you on the edge of your seat. As you read the chapters (under the headings "Then" - followed by the month and year, and "Now" - also followed by the month and year), you will learn about the various relationships. Like the main characters, you will wonder what went wrong - and why. The extremely unexpected event will shake your equilibrium, and you will feel unsettled and unnerved by the unpredictability of life and of people's behaviour.

Picoult's innate skill with words, a distinctive flair, makes even the most profound of feelings recognizable. Another very admirable feature in her books is that you never know what is going to transpire at which point; this gives rise to a healthy curiosity throughout. You become involved in the emotions, observations and arguments of parents, lawyers, psychoanalysts, detectives, etc. The court proceedings are extremely interesting (though the "heavily detailed police testimony" makes the judge and the jury "glassy-eyed").

The victim's parents, quite naturally, are hard-hit, especially the mother, Melanie; she becomes bitter, unforgiving and "mean-spirited". Michael, the father (who refuses to believe that Chris has killed Emily) is guilt-ridden because he feels he should have seen or sensed his daughter's depression.

Chris's mother, Gus, confirms the idea that "Being a mother gives you a singular sort of vision, a prism through which you can see your child with many different faces all at once". James, the father, experiences his own share of remorse; it was his gun with which Emily had been shot and he was the one who had taught Chris shooting.

You get to know Emily after her death (mainly through Chris's thoughts). She was very talented and had ambitions of becoming a great artist, but she also had complex emotions - which had caused her to become obsessed with her own death. Apparently she had

everything going for her - doting parents, a devoted boyfriend, good grades in school, a gift (of drawing). But the human psyche is not so easy to fathom or gratify. It is not necessary that two people who have grown up together, are each other's best friends and who genuinely care about each other, will find true happiness with each other. More mystifying questions crop up: Does familiarity breed contempt? How does one know for sure that so and so is the right person as a life-partner? What things take precedence when one counts one's blessings? Are things actually what they seem?, etc.

Chris loved Emily completely, unreservedly - which is why he did what he did. He didn't seem to have a choice under the circumstances - given the fact that he valued Emily's happiness above

everything else.

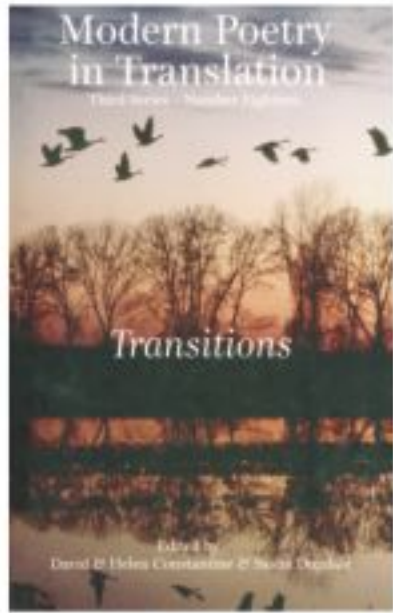
This is not a book you will feel like recommending to others because of the acute sadness it causes one to feel. It comes as a jolt when we read (at the very outset) of a young person's death - and its very unpleasant effects. But, because it has been written with such depth of understanding and clarity of vision, it is definitely worth reading and mulling over. Besides, its ending is somewhat optimistic.

The story will reach out to one and all as it details happenings and emotions with a keen accuracy and insight. It explores the complexities of human nature and relationships - and is very relevant in today's rootless, restless world, a world in which communication is becoming increasingly difficult (for various reasons).

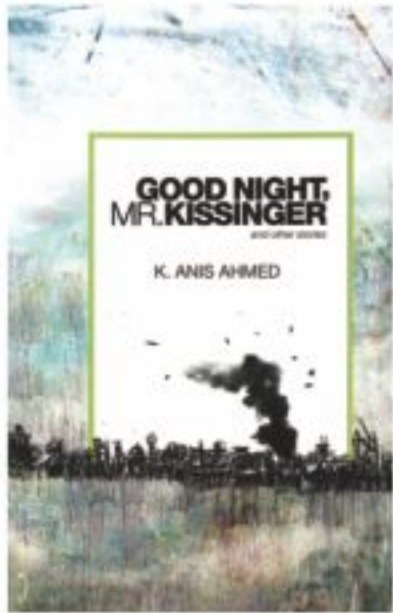
The Pact invites us to be more sensitive to those around us, to look within, and not to take things or others for granted. It most certainly shows us an aspect of life we don't normally see, or perhaps don't want to see.

NAUSHEEN RAHMAN IS A TEACHER AND CRITI

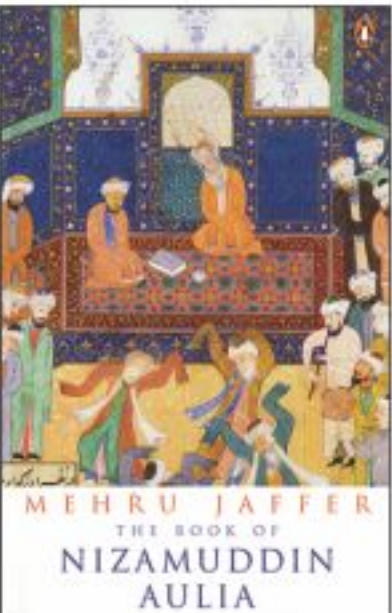
BOOK choice



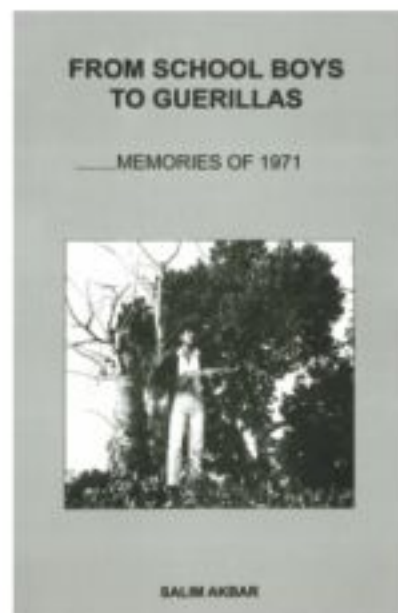
Modern Poetry in Translation
Third Series
Transitions
Eds Constantine, Dugdale
FSC



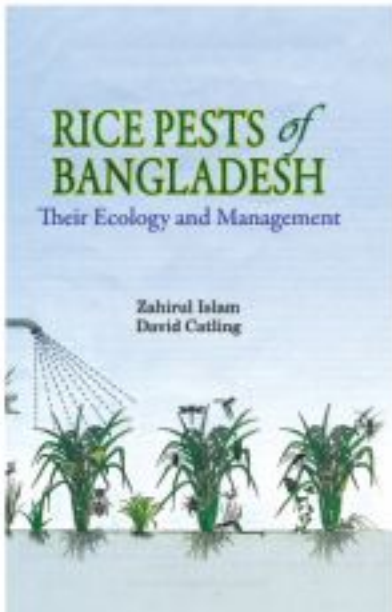
Good Night, Mr. Kissinger
And Other Stories
K. Anis Ahmed
The University Press
Limited



The Book of
Nizamuddin Aulia
Mehru Jaffer
Penguin / Ananda



From School Boys to
Guerillas
Memories of 1971
Salim Akbar
The Malik Library



Rice Pests of Bangladesh
Their Ecology and
Management
Zahurul Islam, David Catling
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ARIA
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