

In search of answers to life's meaning

Shahid Alam is impressed by a collection of poetry

Muhammad Zamir has worn, and continues to wear, many hats. He is a former career diplomat who has been the Ambassador of Bangladesh in various countries, and Permanent Representative to several international organizations, an active member of the civil society, an educationist, a columnist, a prolific writer of books on diverse subjects, and has served as Chief Information Commissioner of Bangladesh's Information Commission. He is also a poet, having composed poems in both English and Bengali. *Dreams and Reality* is a collection of 261 poems that he had written at different times. Through most of these, he goes on a soul-searching journey. "I have, in these poems," Zamir explains, "tried to find the meaning of life that helps us to move forward in our daily existence."

And he has tried, in poem after poem, to find answers to the eternal question of what is the meaning of life. Was it a random beginning, or was life just a coincidence, a miracle, that no one foresaw? The poet thus ponders in the opening lines of "Requiem for a shadow", the first poem in the book. He frames the question relentlessly in various configurations and one of the answers he arrives at in this poem is so expressed:

Life is a game we play ---
we start in the morning
and it is over at the end of the day.
The poet's quest for finding answers is typified by the title of the poem "Past, present and future"; the expression of his struggle towards this objective might lead one to view his work as morbid, or simply existing in a cosmic sphere. Until the reader realizes that Zamir exists in a mystical plane, engaged in an unending pursuit to find the reason or significance of our

existence. This quest has been a longstanding one by mystics down the years, irrespective of any religious affiliation or its absence.

The theme of the inevitability of death is never far from many of the poems. The poet views the perplexing Great Unknown this way:

...we enter the twilight zone
of never-ending sleep.

("Underneath our skin")
In between the beginning and the end of mortal existence, he offers a whole range of existential reflections, like:

We are what we are---
by-products of our responses
conditioned by our religious
handicaps

as we stroll down our own unique
spiritual mall.

("We are what we are")
And,

We often forget
that life is not a potent op-ed
essay,

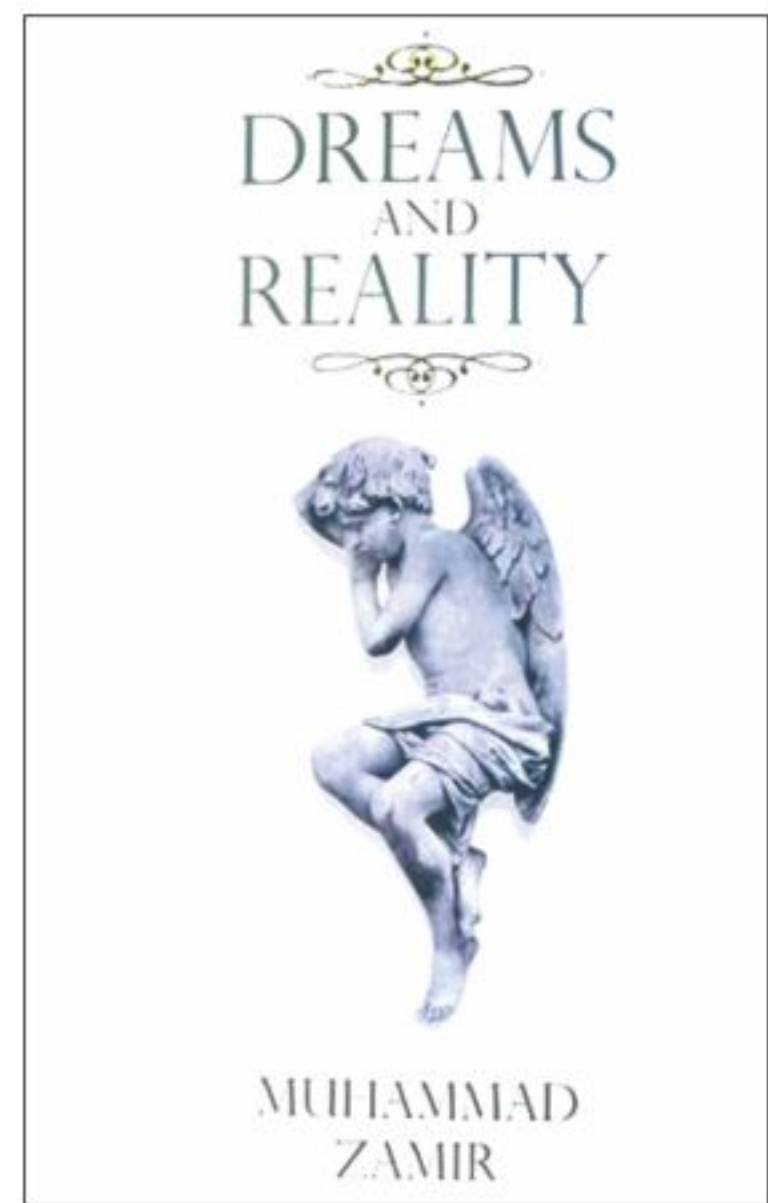
but is really a multi-dimension
filled with animations. ("Life")

Furthermore,
I understand there is life after
death

.....
but what does one do in the
meantime....

("Farewell to the last chapter")
We will return to his almost
thematic obsession with the meaning
of life. But Zamir also writes on other
topics, a number of which should
easily stir the conscience of a
conscientious person. This poem
eloquently testifies to the aesthetically
offensive city that Dhaka has become
(not to speak of it as being ranked, for
several successive years, among the
top two or three most unlivable cities
in the world):

Today, there are so many
soulless housing projects



Dreams and Reality
Muhammad Zamir
Nympha Publication

that have taken over our city
landscape.

.....
Grace is sacrificed
on the altar of conspicuous
consumption.

("Disembodied
architecture")
On religion, he emphasizes on
humanity more than on the rituals:

Does religion live in a cross,
a crescent,
a prayer,
.....

It probably does,
but more so, in---
smiling children,

the fluttering wings of the bird,
fragrant flowers,
bars of music,
compassion and understanding,
decent shelters,

proper meals,
education,
lack of prejudice,
equal opportunities,
freedom to choose,
swaying waves and
blue skies. ("Religion")

Then there is this qualifier on a well-
known adage:

...it is not power that corrupts
but ignorance in the

application of that power.
("Realization")

Zamir does not forget August
15, 1975:

The voice of liberty was
snuffed out

by the very men
trained to save, rather than
maim. ("Fifteenth August")

He longs for peace as the sane solution
to varied problems:

Prayers for peace, let us not
miss,

let us respond in our own way
to every wrong

with music, candles, flowers
and a song.

("Not half-empty but half-full")
Zamir picks up on the agony and the
fury of the Palestinians in Gaza, who
were born knowing nothing but terror,
in the touching poem "The making of a
martyr in Gaza". Staying on Gaza, in
another piece he cries out:

I pity war.

I pity those more who pity war.

.....

I hate war.

I pity more this inaction in
action. ("The citizens of Gaza")

It appears from this poem that Zamir is
raging against himself, and all those
who are unable to stop armed conflict.

"Heart of Darkness" is a sad social
commentary, a poem that the author
has dedicated to a young girl who lost
her innocence to a cruel religious

ritual. His yearning for peace leads
him to cry out, almost in despair:

My Jerusalem has vanished,
.....

Confluence of peace and
happiness,

will it dawn again? ("Jerusalem")
There are a couple of poems that
demonstrate the author's awareness of
acute poverty ("Penury", "The
Orphans"):

Empty eyes filled with despair,
yet clinging to hope. ("The
Orphans")

The poet is, quite naturally given his
involvement in the area, strongly aware
of the political landscape:

As we stand as a witness to history,
we most often, fail to listen carefully
to what is being said about the post,
or what might happen in the future.

("Crossing the electoral wasteland")
On women, he asks, combining
religion and humanity:

why do we think we can abuse her
despite His wish that we mend?

("The veiled gift")
A few poems are set in Italy and gives a
fair idea of life in that country. Then
there is this curious poem "Hashish",
which ends thus:

My head is throbbing

There is a strange calm,
time has suddenly stopped.

It sounds suspiciously like the tale told
by one who has partaken of the
hallowed weed to go into transient
Nirvanas!

However, Zamir's recurring theme
is his search for the meaning of life. I
wonder if he has found it, or, if it is at
all possible to do so beyond personal
applications and inclinations. Here are
more samplings of his quest:

Tonight, I have the feeling
of having created yesterday,
pawnd today,

to pave the way for tomorrow.

("Pawning today for
tomorrow")

On a theme of self-actualization:
Being average helps you exist an
existence

where one will have charm
but little identity. ("Being average")
He poses a dilemma:

Within the bricks and moss of
life

do we sacrifice
our present for the future,
or do we sacrifice
our future for the present?

("Swinging through the trees")
Life, he variously calls "this
onion", "jig-saw puzzle", "traveling
circus", and one which is "not a
mousetrap". The author also titles one
of his poems "Life is an absurd tale",
which he ends with:

that has no ending
because it had no beginning in
the first place.

He comes to some sort of a conclusion,
one which is more pragmatic than
spiritual:

In the end we are but choices
we have made on our own.

("The choices that we have
made")

Zamir, who ponders much on
death, eventually decides to send
words of contempt and defiance to the
Great Unknown:

I do know however that Death
should not be proud,

for Death, you shall die too,
but none shall mourn you.

("Death")
Dreams and Reality might well be
Zamir's tour-de-force, and the poetry-
lover should find much in it to his/her
liking.

**SHAHID ALAM, HEAD OF MEDIA AND
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The travails of a bold woman

Saara Zabeen appreciates a no-holds-barred tale

Novelist Akimun Rahman has produced some very assertive pieces of work in her writing career that began in the late 1990s. Her research works and novels about the pathetic conditions of the women of the country are a significant part of Bangladeshi literature. However, among all her novels a true example of Akimun Rahman's courage would be the novel *Purusher Prithibite Ek Meye* (A Girl in the World of Men). It is a bold attempt to depict a woman's life of tribulation in the world of men. Much has been written on the sufferings of women in a world dominated by the male but few have expressed sentiments on the issue in the way that Akimun has.

The protagonist Shamima in the novel is a woman of the lower middle class community who narrates her life in the stream of consciousness form. Though she begins her story by talking of the present, very often she goes back to her past to let us know of matters which are integral part of her womanhood. Through Shamima we see how mercilessly different a woman's life is from the male's. Akimun tries to show that it starts from the beginning when everyone in the family is disappointed because of the arrival of a girl child. Since her birth Shamima has been looked down upon because she is a girl rather than a boy. She is constantly reminded by the treatment of the family members, including her parents, that she is unwanted and unimportant as she was not born as a son. And by the time Shamima has got used to this attitude of her close ones there comes another stage in her life which bewilders and makes her realize that her life is not like her brothers' or any other man's. With the start of her menstruation she understands that life has taken a new turn. She observes that, along with certain bothersome days every month, her body is changing too; and with that the behavior of the opposite sex towards her. She is baffled at the fondling of her breasts by her male cousin; she is shocked to see that her male teacher suddenly shows a lecherous desire to touch her. But perhaps the greatest shock is felt later when she has just stepped into her youth. In spite of loathing men's attitude towards her in her teen age Shamima falls for a man in whom she puts all her trust. This man, a young dentist, sweeps her off her feet, expressing his love for her and making her feel important.

Shamima in return gives not just her soul but her body as well. But in spite of giving everything what she gets is betrayal. So the plot is nothing

extraordinary. One will say that it is quite a common story in the real as well as in the fictional world. But one has to admit that though Akimun's novel might not include a story never heard of, it still can be considered as unique. The novel differs from numerous other writings on women in the way it presents, expresses and exhibits to its readers the persecution of women in a male dominated society. The strength of the novel lies in the writer's boldness in suggesting through Shamima what not every woman never dares to dwell upon.

The striking feature of the novel is that the leading female character of the novel, who represents all those plain looking lower middle class women in society, has never experienced joy in life. Shamima's life from the start is full of miseries. It is noteworthy that the writer chooses not to spare even a small part of the book to show a delightful side to Shamima's life. Nothing but Shamima's sufferings on being a woman is what the writer wants us to know, feel, realize and thus acknowledge.

An important aspect of Shamima's life is the love that she never gets. Though she has a thirst for love from her close ones, it is never quenched. While her father doesn't even find her worthy enough to sit with her and have his meal, because of her being a daughter, her mother is always there to remind her that she is nothing but a worry for the family. Unlike a lot of persecuted female characters of other literary works, Shamima is seen as a burden not just by her father but also by her mother. Her mother is not the loving figure who protects her daughter from the pains of being a girl child. From the very beginning of Shamima's life her mother lets her know that it was a curse to have a daughter.

Apart from one or two instances Shamima's mother is never affectionate towards her daughter. It can be said that through the mother the writer actually wants to show how cruel a girl's life can be. A daughter who is also not attractive looking is nothing but an obligation for a mother in a lower middle class society because even now it is considered that a mother is to blame for bearing such a child. The presence of the daughter in her life reminds her mother that she had been born from her womb, and that her life would have been much better and respectable if she had a son instead. Through this cruel treatment of the mother towards her daughter the writer shows how

pathetic a woman's state can be.

Forgiving her mother and her family Shamima moves forward to come by love from elsewhere. She puts her faith in a man, believing he will love her with all his heart. But here too Shamima fails to get the much desired love. Shamima ends up in a situation similar to the state hundreds of women everyday find themselves in, by trusting their men. She becomes pregnant. But the worse part is when she is betrayed because of this by her own lover. Caught in a catastrophe like this



Purusher Prithibite Ek Meye
Akimun Rahman
Publisher Aneema Biswas

Shamima does not know what to do. Time and again she goes to her lover and surrenders herself against her will to feed her lover's monstrous hunger for sex in the hope that he will sympathize with her in her predicament. But every time she comes back getting nothing from him but hatred and rejection. Shamima goes to her lover to inform him about her pregnancy in the hope that he will rescue her by marrying her. But her hopes get shattered when the lover becomes furious at the news.

After the betrayals Shamima at the end thinks of committing suicide. But her desire to live wins over her decision to kill herself. Instead she decides to abort her baby. However, Akimun wants to say here that woman's adversities in life don't end so easily. She finds out after the painful process of abortion that she has to go through the process once again as it wasn't successful. The novel ends with Shamima lying on the bed of a clinic waiting for the doctor to finish what had been left undone previously. Whether Shamima could survive the last ordeal or not is not told to us by the author. Rather it is left to the readers

to imagine Shamima's fate. Was she free of her unwanted embryo after all? Could she stand up again and move on? Or did she lose her struggle on the clinic's bed? We don't know.

It is not just the image of oppression of women through the character of Shamima which is remarkable in the book. The excellence of the work also lies in the author's avoiding writing on the protagonist in a subdued or indirect manner. The whole book is an explicit projection of a woman's tormented and tortuous state. The book is proof that to Akimun menstruation in a woman's life is nothing but an unpleasant occurrence. Shamima in the beginning is shown to be at a loss when she has it for the first time. Trying to find out where the smell is coming from, Shamima goes from one end to another outside her house. After failing to get the source outside she finally realizes that it is coming from her. Shamima says: *I understood that the source of the smell was my own body. Realizing this I grieved for myself. But I could not find any way to release myself from the burden of carrying the smell either. And gradually I learned that it was my fate to bear such queer smells.*

The book itself begins with Shamima's concern of not having her period on the due date. Shamima hates the particular time of the month but at the same time cannot relax until it really happens. Her fear that she might have conceived gives her no relief. It seems Akimun's aim at this stage is to make readers delve deep into the mind of a woman.

It is obvious that Akimun's aim is to dwell on as deep as possible into a much concealed part of woman's life. These and other distinct and realistic descriptions of a very private world of women may shock her readers but at the same time they will admit that it is a fact of life whose existence is undeniable. And what women readers will appreciate more than anything is how Akimun has broken taboos related to the matter and delivered whatever she had to say through the character of Shamima in a straight forward manner.

Purusher Prithibite Ek Meye is a novel not for those who seek interesting plots with dramatic twists and turns and which possess superfluous imagery and metaphors of great excellence. *Puresher Prithibite Ek Meye* is beautiful because it has truth in it.

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The world of children

Tulip Chowdhury studies a world of innocence

Children's books usually come with themes inclusive to the little ones, books that focus on a boundary on imaginations to the innocent perceptions of the world around them. However, this amazing book, holding a single poem, "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" by Dr. Seuss opens up thousands of worlds for children. It leads them to dreams of flying on space shuttles to the moon, wakes them to crossing oceans on their own inventions and has the children's imagination delving deeper with each stanza. Each line seems to open a pristine sky with a thousand possibilities and the reader turns the pages, holding his breath until the last line is read. And surely the reader will soon be searching for one more of the 44 children's invaluable books the writer has left to the world. With each line the word master seems to lift the children and give them wings to soar to unimaginable heights, open their minds to eternity. It's a book for parents to hold out to the children and open innumerable doors to the mysteries of life that wait for the little lives as they enter the big, big world with throbbing hearts.

Theodor Seuss Geisel, born in Massachusetts, USA, is better known and loved as Dr. Seuss. He was not an official doctor but his prescription for fun won the hearts of readers worldwide. He wrote forty-four books for children and their lucky parents. In the book, "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" Dr. Seuss manages to impart a lifetime of wisdom. It is the perfect springboard for children starting in the labyrinth of life, be they nursery school graders or newly minted PhD's. The inspiration and the boundless dreams in the poem can make readers of all ages kindle their souls and rediscover their own emotions and perceptions of life. Throwing colored lights to the life that lies ahead of the children, Dr. Seuss begins thus:

"Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose...."

In the middle of the poem the readers get the insights into how life does not hold out only the choicest

flavors. Life comes with flowers and throngs. And so the great writer weaves out his witty words,

"You'll be on your way up!
You'll be seeing great sights!
You'll join the high fliers
who soar to high heights.

You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed.
You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead.
Wherever you fly, you'll be the best of the best.
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.



Oh, the Places You'll Go!
Dr. Seuss
Random House

Except when you don't
Because, sometimes, you won't

I'm sorry to say so
but, sadly, it's true
and Hang-ups
can happen to you..."

In his unique, humorous verses and pictures he addresses the Great Balancing Act (life itself with ups and downs) while encouraging us to find contentment that lies within the individual self. A modern classic, "Oh, The Places You'll Go!" was published one year before Dr. Seuss's death at the age of eighty-seven. Life is a challenge to each life born. This book and other books by Dr. Seuss are like a blessed panacea to parents and children especially when the modern malady like stress is wrecking solace of the mind and families are often in mayhem when it comes to parenting. Read this real "page-turner", it will take a short time but will leave you with a lifelong wisdom and bring a smiles to sail on!

**TULIP CHOWDHURY WRITES FICTION AND
IS A POET**