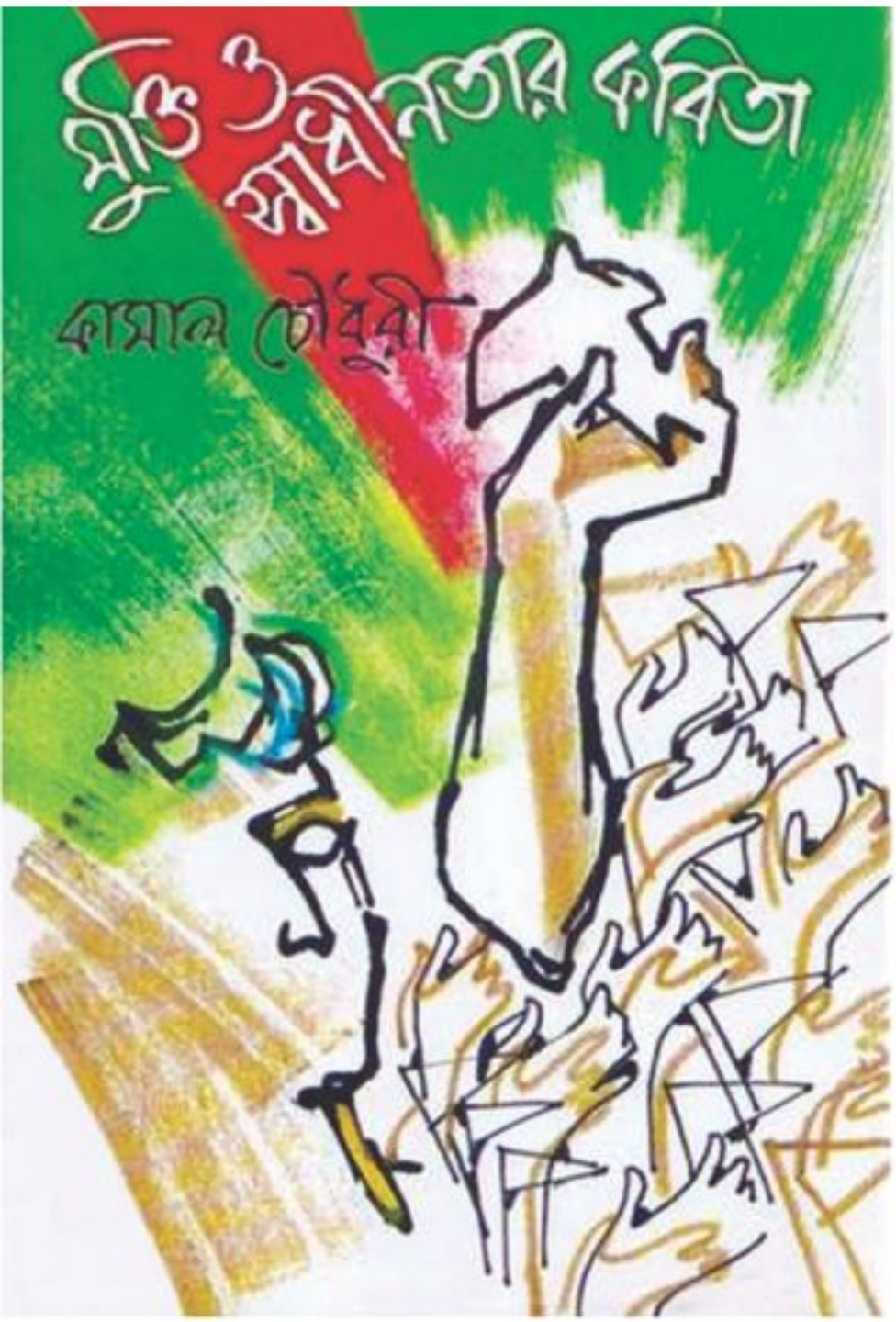


REVIEW ESSAY

# Kamal Chowdhury's journey through the Unreal City

Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman and Shuvo Ahsan

In the tradition of poetry—Bangla poetry, to put it more incisively—where will Kamal Chowdhury stand as a poet? If the question seems naïve, let the quest that his poetic oeuvre has made thus far since its nativity explain the conundrum periphrastically. It appears that the poet's parched soul relentlessly kept meandering about on the lookout for a destination, where he can finally be at repose, although the poet himself is much aware of its illusive nature. The terminus is more like the “unreal city”, which is surrealistically present to the poet now and again; he roams around its streets reflexively; still, he cannot reach it, as if it slides between his conscious effort and quiescent stupor. The tantalizing effect of this soulful journey finds its pathway in due course. It is the identical alleyway towards which are also driven the speakers of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, bearing elusive and fragmented identities. The shifted speaker peers out over a fake modern city (the unreal city, that is), whose dismal surroundings sug-



gest that the city is no more at its prime, even if so, it has been spiritually dead for long:  
*Unreal City:  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
The remnants of the once profuse city are now  
a bygone chimera, and in the heap of the relics,  
people wander around like the dead, who fix  
their eyes at their feet, and hardly interact with  
each other with ardor. Such a cerebral layout of  
an apocryphal city dates back to the French  
symbolist poetry, which substantively abounds  
in a world-counteracting escapism, the bait of  
exoticism, and a violent egoism rejecting con-  
formist ethical, religious, social, and moral*

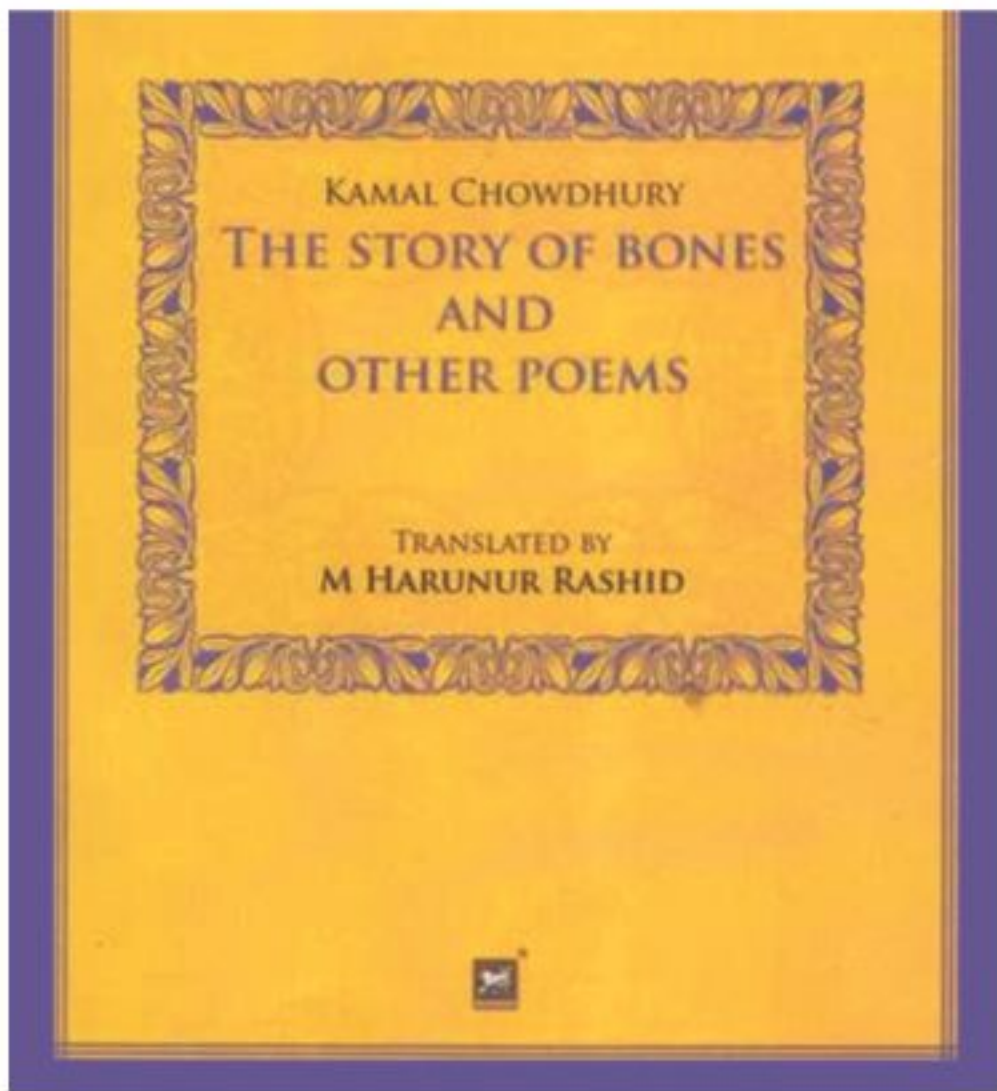
standards. Concisely, such poetry characterizes a hermetic as well as heretic subjectivity, a deep-seated interest in the esoteric, and a pining to detain the subsistence of a transcendental dominion of being where one could communi- cate with the inherent but enigmatic core of existence. Here stumbles upon us the idea of an “unreal city”, a spectral destination where the transcendental form of life yearns to reach, but fails in the face of unforgiving reality. Subsequently, there arises a sort of compromise, much like the “Victorian Compromise”. The compromise is a combination of both negative and positive aspects of life as delineated in some verses of Kamal Chowdhury:

*While I thought deeply of the spring, the winter came  
With its bare boughs and topless trees  
There's a world of dreams in the brown leaves and dust  
Before the leaf-gatherers come and the Shaliks take over,  
A morning has lost its way in the dense fog  
I too am standing on the way  
Deep inside me there's a tall bare tree  
Spreading out green boughs for a new poem.  
("For a new poem", trans. M Harunur Rashid)  
In the myriad of cynicisms there is still trace-  
able a glimpse of hope rising out of the ashes of  
mundane compromises.*

Reminiscent of the Bangladeshi poets of the sixties of the bygone century, Kamal Chowdhury is split between the distress and despair stemming from the loss of expectations and contradictions of the time and the innate desire of liberation at his heart's moorings. The first phase of the poetic endeavor of Shamsur Rahman bathes in the ideation of an eccentric life of the middle-class torn apart by a disputed and non-philosophical trauma. Such trend is overtly distinguishable in the days of fluores- cence of Kamal Chowdhury as a poet:

*I live in this country, in this city soaked with blood,  
I see thousands die here everyday,  
Yet undaunted I am, a fair non-Aryan youth,  
I shatter the hand-cuffs with ease,  
The sky, nature and darkness know me,  
But men with sight do not, for they haven't seen  
The prowess of my hands.  
("Blood-stained verses", trans. M Harunur Rashid)  
Freed from the colonial rule of the British  
Empire, the newly born Pakistan rests on fea-  
dalistic principles and the economic laws  
thereof rely upon coercion and suppression.  
Against such a malicious setting Rahman's  
personal world becomes maimed, introvert,  
nostalgic, solitary, completely sequestered  
from the majority, and indulgent in the plea-  
sure of self-copulation:*

*The new youth is much heard to use  
The illuminated language akin to life  
The grandfather wanders to his surprise:  
Who is it that strolls in that antique house?  
("Tanapoden", Niraloke Dibboroth)  
The self-afflicted verses of Kamal  
Chowdhury resonate those of his predecessor's  
in the wake of a newly born country in the  
individualized style adopted by the poet:  
Last winter I trembled like this*



*Traveling from port to port in a weather below  
freezing point  
Gathering experiences galore  
But you know during the ice age  
When I was returning to your earth  
I had warm blood in my veins.  
The bird with a straw in its beak was my friend too...  
("The floating ark", trans. M Harunur Rashid)  
However, as the poet matures, his unstable  
spirit sedates at the gallows of interrogation,  
self-expansion, and self-purgation. Shamsur  
Rahman seems to attain a sort of multilayered  
consciousness in the quest of introspection and  
soul-searching:*

*From one pole to another, echoing  
The burning enunciation, waving the new flag, and  
Blowing the fanfare across the Bengal  
Must you come, o freedom!  
("Tomake Pawoar Jonne, He Shadhinota",  
Bondi Shibir Theke)  
Such exploration is also palpable in Kamal  
Chowdhury's verses:  
O my darkness, o my childhood asceticism  
O rage, o my adored wildfire  
Today I've come back to reclaim my entrance...  
("Aj Fire Pete Eshechhi Probeshadhikar",  
Mukti O Shadhinotar Kavita)*

Shahid Quadri is thoroughly an urban poet. His poetry images the malformed and parasitic city and its half-crazed inhabitants. His trans- formation in his later poetry takes a trajectory towards a positive sensation; still, his dispa- sionate curiosity for nature mirrors his apathy to urban life, though he is hesitant how the city will receive him back once he leaves it behind:

*You are in the boat with an angling pole,  
On the other side of the river smile mustard and  
green peas  
I've never seen  
("Dadao Ami Ashchhi", Kothao Kono  
Kronndon Nei)  
This complex state of an urban poet is much  
distinct in the later poems of Kamal Chowdhury:  
I walked on for miles and realized, the green  
where I was born  
Has an attraction for stones too,  
In this robotic world there's no raincoat except  
The metallic bang of its own.*

("Advertisement", trans. M Harunur Rashid)  
Art is different from the life it derives its inspiration from. It has what Boris Eichenbaum says an “autonomous value”. Practical language differs from poetic language in the sense that poetic language creates a sen- sation, which is perceptible and not knowable. The sensation thus created is unfamiliar and lingers over time for the reader to perceive its relish. The familiar phenomena of life become unfamiliar through this procrastination in the literary world. Victor Shklovosky terms this technique *defamiliarization*:

*Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important. . .*

Defamiliarizing technique is a poetic tool Chowdhury has used abundantly in his poems. Like the French symbolist poetry, his poems are fanciful, inscrutable, esoteric, and somewhat synesthetic. In a short poem “Ochena Postar” (Unknown Posters), the ever-increasing inevita- ble distance between two lovers has been made unfamiliar by drawing on conspicuous imagery:

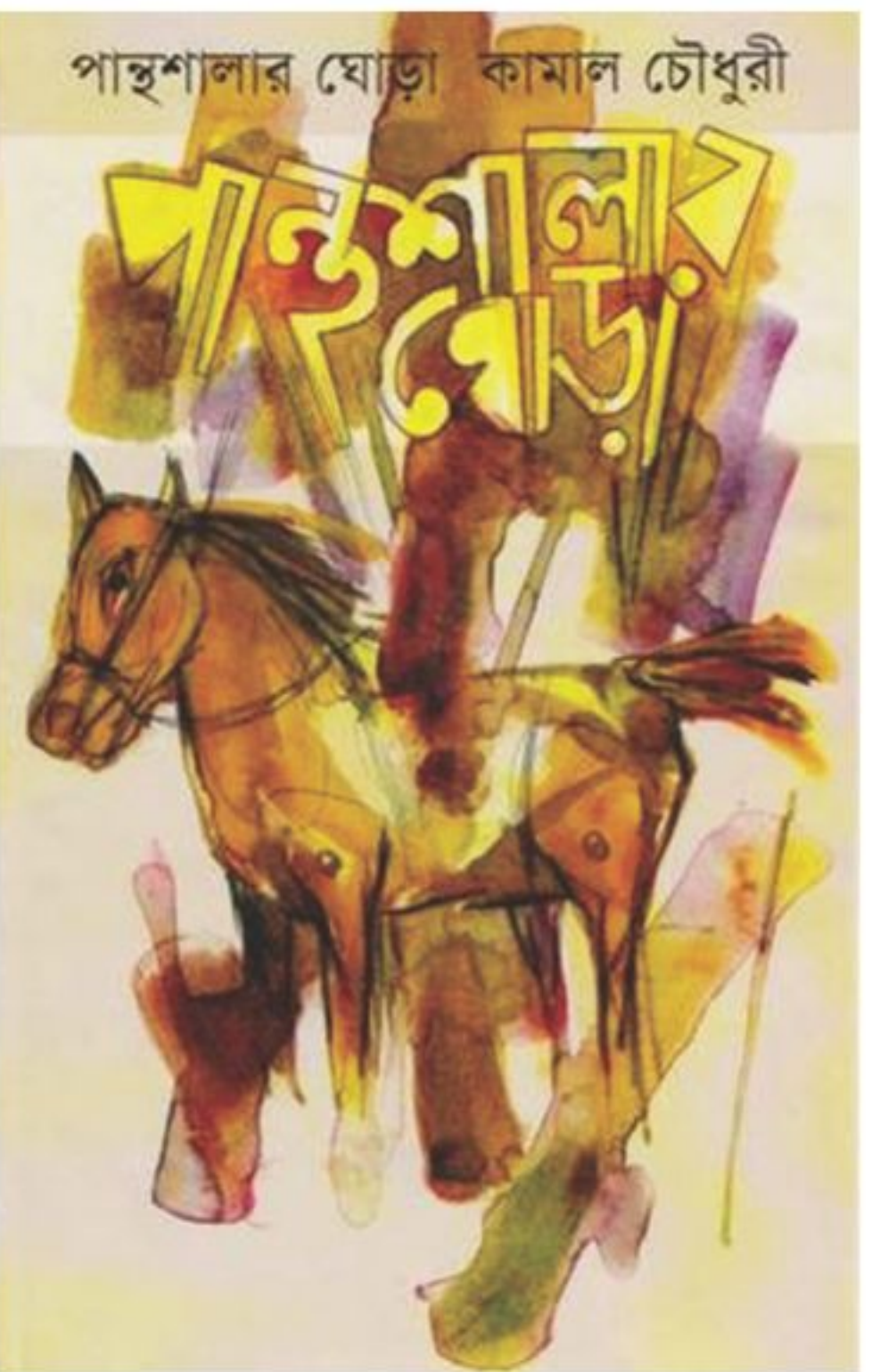
*The times I asked you to extend your hands  
The clang of a coin erects the ancient wall  
Algae know no ethics—however I  
Whitewash the parasitic plants  
I watch your heart cover with unknown posters.  
(Panthoshalar Ghoda)*

Another technique which dominates Kamal Chowdhury's poetry is *motivation*. Tomashevsky calls the smallest unit of a plot a “motif”, which we may understand as a single action. He distinguishes between a “bound” and “free” motif. A bound motif is what a story requires, whereas a free motif is dispen- sable from the standpoint of a story. Nevertheless, the “free” motif is embryonically the hub of art. Though much applicable to the narrative theory, “motiva- tion” finds its roots in many poems of Kamal Chowdhury. He artfully inserts the “free” motif of recounting the ghost story as is tra- ditionally known. The aim he serves is to arrive at an analogy between the mythical ghosts and the modern street hooligans and thus to relegate the mythical creatures to the back- ground once the hoodlums take over their place. The retelling of a ghost story in the poem “Bhooter Gwalpa” is apparently gratui- tious, because it does not set in motion the bound motif the poet wants to achieve; it is rather used to create an esthetic effect.

Albeit heavily burdened with intellectual complexity, enigmatic plexus and inaccessible subject-matter, the Chowdhury poems never lose the sight of Bakhtinian dialogic trend, polyphonic voice and heteroglossic traits. His verses are rich with social diversity of speech types; his characters never merge in the authori- tative unified field of vision, rather either con- textually or diachronically his poems celebrate the carnivalesque:

*What then will keep you awake with dreams to  
dreams?  
Those who were alive with an idea of light—  
They too are blowing out their little lamp*

*The air heavy with the stink of snuffed out flame  
makes the dust bleed,  
Yet the crying and uproar is not audible  
And the abiding earth and life contained in our  
civilized bags slung from our shoulders  
Have fallen asleep.  
("Without the sky", trans. M Harunur Rashid)  
The affluent variety of poetry over the time  
has transformed the psychically tormented and  
introvert poet unfailingly representing the  
middle-class and its plethora of multileveled  
predicaments into a mature poet, one who has  
posited himself in the streak of traditional  
boulders. The poet may not be unique, but his  
creation has transfigured him into an individ-  
ual note in the collective voice of Bangla liter-  
ary tradition. Once started, his journey through  
and into the “unreal city” is incessantly ongo-  
ing, as the idealistic destination and the past  
glory pass by the poet, who cannot quench his  
thirst in consequence of more expeditions: the*



quest he makes is never ending, because the nearer he approaches the further remains his much-anticipated city:

*There a new world is my illusion  
A gentle push cracks the bridge apart  
Imperiled cities on both sides  
Underneath is water, miseries, poser on the way  
("Oddhash", Panthoshalar Ghoda)*

**\*Unless indicated otherwise, all transla- tions of the verses are by Shuvo Ahsan.**

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## Three prayers before marriage

Nausheen Rahman reads a book meant for everybody

All of us who have read Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* will wel- come its sequel, *Committed*, sub-titled, *A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage*. A factual account of her life as it was for several months before she took the very big decision of getting married, this book is a memoir and a treatise on marriage rolled into one. It will also inspire people who haven't read *Eat, Pray, Love* into reading it.

We get so caught up in the tales surrounding women and mar- riage that we don't realize that we're not reading fiction. Facts about matrimonial traditions have been presented in the form of stories – with all the necessary elements: characters, plot, devel- opment, denouement, climax, etc.

Benjamin Disraeli's words set the mood for the book: "There is no greater risk than matrimony. But there is nothing happier than a happy marriage". Today's world, seemingly disillusioned with ideals, cynical about "sacred" institutions like marriage, feeling strongly about personal space and freedom, is surprisingly still susceptible to love, still vulnerable to heart- aches, and very much in favour of marriage (contradictory as that might sound).

The title, *Committed* might sound like it is a resigned and trapped situation, but the sub-title tells us that the writer has reached her decision after much deliberation and contemplation. She and her lover, Felipe, have resisted marriage for as long as they can (despite their firm resolution to always remain true to each other). Having gone through their respective divorces, they had hoped they would never have to risk its painful effects (both technical and emo- tional) again. Then, fate steps in (in the form of the United States Department of Homeland Security), and declares that because Felipe is of a different nationality, it is mandatory for them to be married if he is to get a visa for the USA. This makes Gilbert think: "Destiny's interventions can sometimes surmount our biggest fears". Elizabeth sets out to find all that she can about marriage (to understand what she's getting into). Here is a mature, experienced, well-travelled, suc- cessful writer, giving us a step-by-step review of the different aspects of marriage and all that it entails. Her subject is very well-researched and sensitively, yet objectively projected. But, most of all, it is her gift of being able to make the most mundane of things sound exciting that causes this book to be so wonderful. The humorous tone throughout keeps us constantly entertained and it's amazing how practically every page offers an intriguing piece of information or viewpoint.

This books acts as a travelogue as the writer takes us along on her trips to exotic places and learns about marriage customs in differ- ent cultures. It is divided into eight neatly-structured sections, each section dealing with a separate aspect of marriage. The ambivalence only adds to the charm of her findings.

The writing is interspersed with numerous quotations by histo- rians, writers, politicians, other notable personalities and many

average people – all of which shed a new light on matters hitherto considered familiar.

While the couple wait for the visa formalities to be completed and for Felipe to get his clearance, things become increasingly difficult. However, they manage to deal with the problems. Elizabeth continues her quest for knowledge on matrimony, that elusive communion/union, and in the process, unearths some precious nuggets. Issues like infatuation, fidelity, compatibility, off-spring, divorce, second marriage, same-sex marriage, rituals, ceremonies, are projected in an engrossing way.

Not only does Gilbert describe the social customs (related to marriage) of other countries and other times, as well as her own, she also relates touching anecdotes from her own family history, sometimes drawing parallels. She is passionate about her subject, but does not let that get in the way of her observations, analyses and assessments. Numerous conversations and ceaseless reading and internet browsing render her to work not just a superb piece about her life and her outlook on marriage, but a truly rewarding experience.

After undergoing serious apprehensions that marriage will change her and Felipe and make them typical "spouses", she gradually achieves a state of acceptance: "I have finally found my own little corner within matrimony's long and curious history". She simultaneously believes in the adage "Be- fore going to war, say one prayer. Before going to sea, say two prayers. Before getting married, say three".

This is a book for feminists, romantics, humanists and realists. Moreover, whether you're married (happily or unhappily), single, divorced or widowed, have kids, don't have kids, want or don't want to have them, "Committed" has something for you. It will most certainly be a heartening and worthwhile read.

This book offers quite a few gems (which are not just food for thought, but insightful guidelines). Let's look at some:

1. "Marriage has a bonsai energy: It's a tree in a pot with trimmed roots and clipped limbs. Mind you, bonsai can live for centuries, and their earthly beauty is a direct result of such constrictor, but nobody would ever mistake a bonsai for a free-climbing vine."

2. "A fish and a bird may indeed fall in love, but where shall they live?"

3. "Plant an expectation. Reap a disappointment."

4. "Any intelligent woman who reads the marriage contract and then goes into it deserves all the consequences."

5. "Marriage survives precisely because it evolves."

6. "Matrimony comes to us from the Latin word for mother. We don't call marriage patrimony."

7. "Marriage is a beautiful thing. But it's also a constant battle for moral supremacy."

NAUSHEEN RAHMAN IS AN ACADEMIC AND LITERARY CRITIC

## A wide canvas of literature

Barnali Talukder celebrates a bunch of essays

It is really difficult to solve the puzzle of how a book of essays could make me so spellbound that I couldn't even think of letting go of it before finishing reading it. I think *Olosh Diner Haoua* by Syed Manzoorul Islam really has a magical quality that can mesmerize any reader. The book is a collection of essays written in the decade of the 1980s, published in the daily *Sangbad*. In this work, Syed Islam incorporates essays on those writers who represent partic- ular geography or genre. There are some other essays containing the generalized views of the author on a particular few subjects.

What Syed Islam seeks to provide the reader with in the essays is to give them a platform to step into the wide canvas of world literature. From Rabindranath Tagore to Shakespeare, from Milan Kundera to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, everyone finds a crystal clear depiction of the fundamentals of how these writers think and how Syed Islam considers their role or contributions. It is like constructing a basement for each writer, on which his or her writings can be modeled and facilitated into soar- ing up. On such issues as how Kundera seeks Nirvana through a process of creation or in what way he ultimately chooses to go beyond the labyrinth of pain and struggle, Syed Manzoorul Islam dives deep to resolve this enigma in a very individual way. In two other essays regarding Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, we find an inquiring Syed Islam trying to unfold the mystery of the obses- sion in their married life and to find out whether in their poetry such obsession bears anyhow any reflection of it. Such individual depression contrasts very vibrantly with another essay, where Syed Islam brings forth the context of South Africa. He goes into a serious discussion of how writers like Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee articulate their aversion to racial exploitation. Along with this racial predicament, Coetzee also takes the existential crisis of the individual and his isolation into account, a reality which one cannot be rid of. Another writer who experienced a sense of exile throughout his whole life, even though he was on his own soil in America, is James Baldwin. Syed Islam observes his childhood as it passed through great depression. Baldwin can be metaphorically represented as fire that burnt all his lifetime so that he could give some light to his fellow blacks.

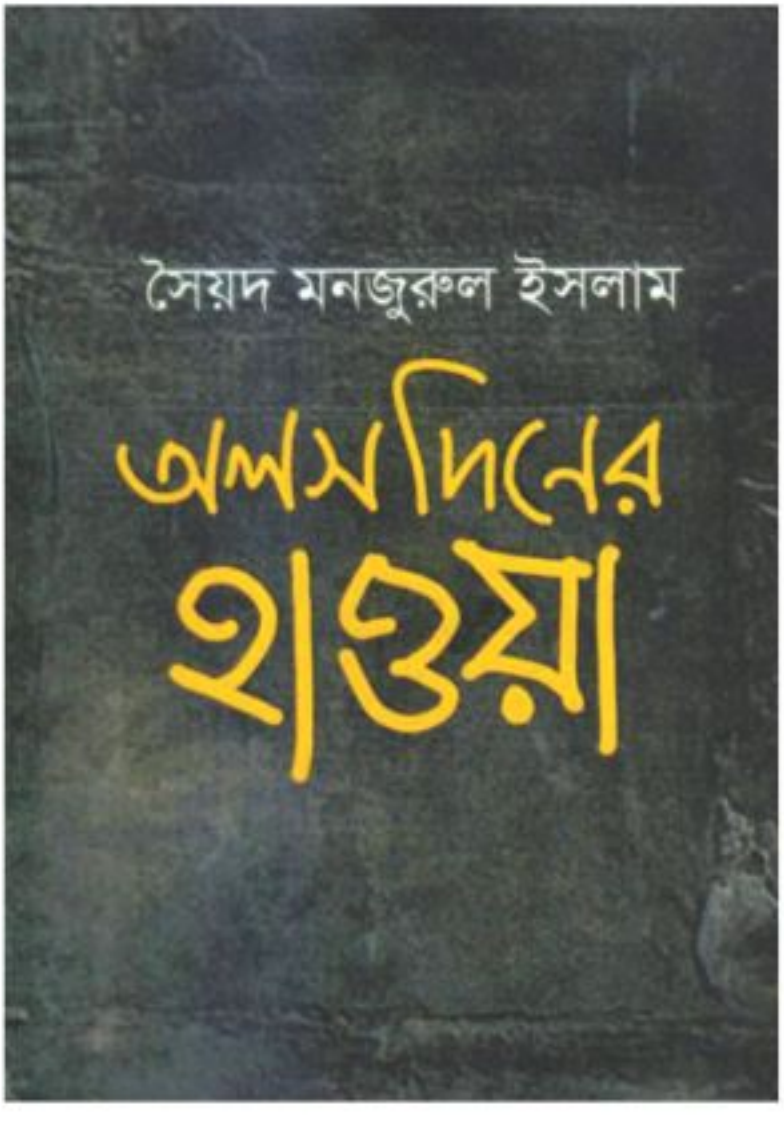
My interest in Latin American magic realism has been

quite pronounced. So when I found an essay on that particular topic, I just wanted to finish it at one go. Syed Islam defines Latin American literature as a mixture of self-consciousness and social consciousness, but rooted in a new dimension. And Islam thinks, in a very uncon- ventional way, there is a new relationship between self- consciousness and non-existence. According to him, magic realism is a fundamental tendency of Latin American literature which features the lives of those beings who never know their destination; but their restless movement appears to be the ultimate source of pleasure to them. In contrast with such a magic realis- tic context of Latin America, Syed Islam also confronts a purely real world of African poetry. The inviolable passion which African poets feel for their history, past and culture, prototypically charac- terizes their poetic repertoire.

Syed Islam observes an unshake- able commitment which black African poets consistently patronize to restore their hereditary identity. And this very commitment is what Bangladeshi poetry lacks to a great extent. Syed Islam reflects on that aspect as well. From such grand discussions on different geographi- cal traditions of literature, Syed Islam shifts his focus to technical aspects, the role of the narrator in post-modern novels for instance. There he discovers the distinctions which the narrator experiences in different types of novels. In tradi- tional realistic novels, the narra- tor can only reach the conscious level of the human mind; but in another kind of novel, the human being goes through a change of mind from one second to another and sees his control over consis- tency slacken. Such characteristics are well portrayed in the novels underlined by a stream of conscious- ness. However, in post-modern novels the narrator appears from different perspectives and ignores any type of centralization.

There are many other subjects and literary individuals Syed Manzoorul Islam deals with in this book. While going through the book, any reader can easily understand the depth of Syed Islam's exploration in the domain of world literature and the yearning on the part of the reader for him to come up with such works more and more. Syed Islam combines his aphorisms and captivating language in such a manner that the book cannot but take extensive hold of the reader's imagination.

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