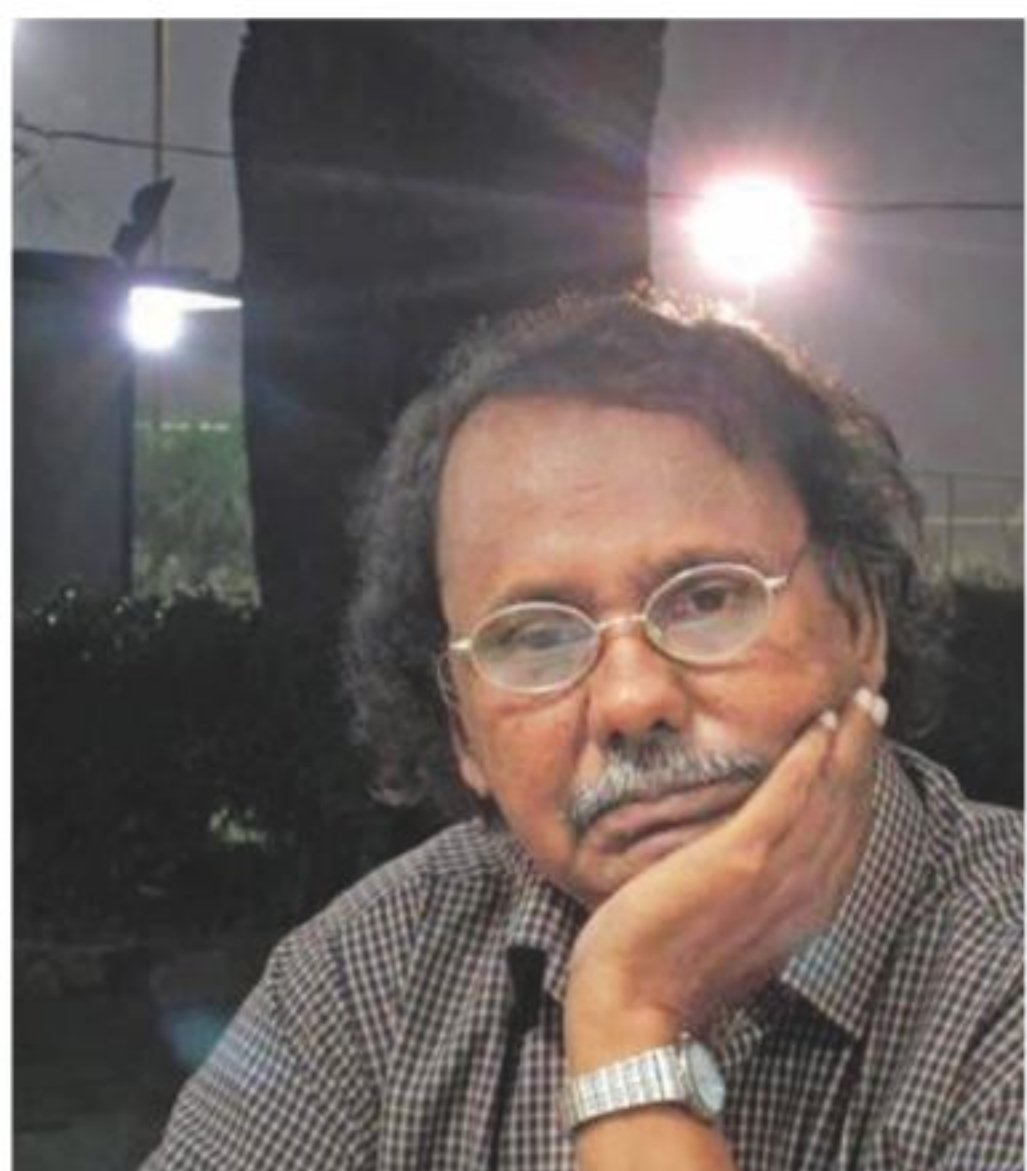


The breeze that touched the poets

Professor Khondakar Ashraf Hossain --- poet, critic, academic --- died of a heart attack yesterday. He will be missed by his family, friends and, above all, his students. As a tribute to him, the following review of Professor Hossain's reputed book is being reprinted. The writer, Syed Badrul Ahsan, was a student of the late academic in the 1970s.



KHONDAKAR Ashraf Hossain made waves with Teen Romoni'r Qasida, his seminal poetical work, quite some years back. And since then he has gone on to write not only substantive poetry but also purposeful literary criticism, especially on the various facets of Bengali literature. His pre-eminent position as a poet and critic has again gone with his academic pursuits as a senior teacher in the English department of Dhaka University. It is thus that he has carved a significant niche for himself as a scholar, proof of which comes through this rather riveting study of the degree to which Bangladeshi poetry has been influenced by the incoming breezes and winds which once shaped literary sensibilities in the West.

There are a couple of reasons, if you think about it, why Western Influences on Bangladeshi Poetry should make a difference in any future assessment of literature as it has developed and could yet sprout in Bangladesh. The first, of course, is that Hossain is perhaps the first Bengali scholar, in this part of the old political divide, to have delved critically and so broadly into the question of how Bangladeshi poets have let their works feel a whiff of the powerful western fragrance. And the second is that, in a very admirable way and to his credit, Hossain has chosen to convey this assessment of Bengali literature in the medium of the English language. That last bit is quite an encouraging change, given that readers in the West have hardly had any contact with literature as it has been pursued in Bangladesh. Translation, good translation, of Bengali literary works is always hard to come by. Again, translation of literature or literary criticism all too often leaves certain gaps that do little justice to the original. The good news, though, is that Professor Hossain has now come forth with a study, in the English language, of Bengali poetry that ought to leave readers, in this country as well as beyond it, sitting back in satisfaction.

Western Influences hints broadly at what Hossain intends to do. He sets off by making a distinction between Bengali literature that has been the hallmark of West Bengal and Bengali literature that has imperceptibly but patently evolved in what was in time to become the independent state of Bangladesh. But, of course, Hossain zeroes in on 1947 as the cut-off year when the two parts of Bengal went their separate ways, the eastern part of the old province branching out towards creating its own literary ethos. To be sure, the excitement generated by the creation of Pakistan was in the years immediately after partition defined by the essential communalism of the new state. You could speak here of Farrukh Ahmed, an unquestionably brilliant poet who nevertheless was too carried away by the idea of Pakistan and to a point where Islamic symbols, with imagery characteristic of Arabian deserts, began to define his poetry. Farrukh Ahmed, then, was a lost cause right from the beginning.

In large measure, modernity was what poets in the mould of Farrukh Ahmed did not have. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain then informs us that the modernity which was to define poetry in Bangladesh had for its genesis not merely the poetic thoughts of the French genius Baudelaire but also such western pioneers of literary styles and formulations as TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, Federico Garcia Lorca and William Butler Yeats, among others. But, of course, these purveyors of western poetic thought had Bengali followers preceding those who were to emulate them in East Pakistan/Bangladesh. You could think here of Buddhadeva Bose, Jibanananda Das and Sudhindranath Dutta. And Tagore? Hossain is emphatic in his assertion that the East and the West fused in Tagore, enough for Bose to describe him as the 'first European in Bangla literature.' It is interesting to note, however, that the western influence which was to work its way into the poetic imaginations of

Bengali poets in the 1930s and subsequently in post-1947 East Pakistan/Bangladesh was a factor that was missing in Tagore's poetry. Every inch a modern man, the Nobel laureate remained nevertheless firmly rooted to his land, to the distinctive romanticism that defined his poetic personality from beginning to end. That was not the case, in large measure, with men like Amiya Chakravarty or Bishnu Dey.

The truth was that modernism came to exercise an influence in Bangladesh's poets in the way it once did with Baudelaire and Eliot. For these western poets, the city emerged as a focal point of poetic thought with its desperation and its despondency and its loneliness. There were too such creative eruptions as the French Symbolist Movement, the English Imagist Movement and French Surrealism, all of which were to find expression, down the years, in Bangladeshi poetry. And when did Bangladeshi poetry begin? Professor Hossain is clear about it: it all began with the partition of India in 1947. Barring the early euphoria of communal politics in Pakistan, Bangladeshi poetry essentially took off with the three poets Hossain considers to have been the vanguard of the secular modernist tradition in the eastern part of Pakistan. And these poets were Abul Hossain, Syed Ali Ahsan and Ahsan Habib. And yet could Ahsan's truly be regarded as a definitive secular presence? Hossain points to his divided poetic persona, that side of it which upheld his secular spirit and that which yet tempted him with its call to Islamic grandeur. This ambivalence remained all too pronounced in his Chahar Darbesh. With Ahsan Habib, no such ambivalence was at work. What was significant, though, about his poetry was the Eliotesque which defined it, indeed in the very first volume of his poetry, Ratrishesh (The Night's End), published in 1947. Frustration and failure are at the core of the inaugural poem in the compilation. The sense of modernistic alienation was at work.

With Abul Hossain, an avid reader of western literature, the modernist came through a

Quadri and Syed Shamsul Haq --- who, untouched by anything of the communal or the religious, branched out into a wide expanse of secular poetry. Of course, they borrowed from the West --- from Baudelaire, Eliot and from a whole range of others --- as they explicated the themes of pleasure and pain and love and beauty in their poetry. Hossain does not forget to inform us that the quartet actually had its finest hour in the 1960s and 1970s. But he does note that their modernity started off in the 1950s, symbolising a time when the Bengalis of East Pakistan were on their tentative path to a rediscovery of their historically secular identity. Shamsur Rahman's early poetry was fundamentally conceived in the shadow of Baudelaire. Romance gives way to fear of the city. And let us not forget that Rahman was the versifier who brought Dionysian elements into Bangladeshi poetry. In the end, it was the interplay of the classical and the romantic, in the tradition of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, that sustained much of Shamsur Rahman's poetry. For Shahid Quadri, it was natural for foreign influences to make broad inroads into his poetry and for him to flaunt the occurrence cheerfully. French Symbolism served as a measure of his poetic genius, but unlike the romantic in Rahman, he goes for the cerebral. His images reflect the squalid realities of the city, to a point where, as the writer notes, his poetry can be regarded as an extended diary of a disconcerted and even deranged citizen on his nocturnal rounds. Read Quadri's Uttaradhikar. The arrival of rain is symbolic of disorder, even terror.

Like Quadri, Syed Shamsul Haq passed under the Baudelarian influence. That does not detract, though, from the fact of his heavy indebtedness to Jibanananda Das, Yeats and Eliot In Purana Prasaad, there is a clear going back to Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. And yet Haq refuses to stay trapped, as it were, in such a mould. The Freudian seduces him, with its powerful allusions to sexuality, a factor that becomes a potent ingredient in his poetry. Haq's poetry is, in that sense, the earliest indication of unadulterated eroticism making its way into Bengali literature. With Al Mahmud, the stream of poetic thought is an entirely different happenstance. He is every inch a modernist and yet appears to be striving to take poetry away from the modernist trend and back to its pastoral roots. Through an employment of colloquial speech, Mahmud seems to be reminding readers of the old traditions that once underlined literary endeavours in the Bengali cultural landscape. To that extent, his poetry comes in the tradition of the Yeatsian rather than the Eliotesque. There is, in Al Mahmud, a profusion of references to nature in Bangladesh, in much the same lyrical manner in which Yeats refers to the natural ambiance of his native Ireland. Ironically, it is Eliot's dictum which Al Mahmud clearly seems to be living through --- that 'a writer writes with the history of his country in his bones.' You only have to go back to Mahmud's Sonali Kabin (1973) to appreciate the thought.

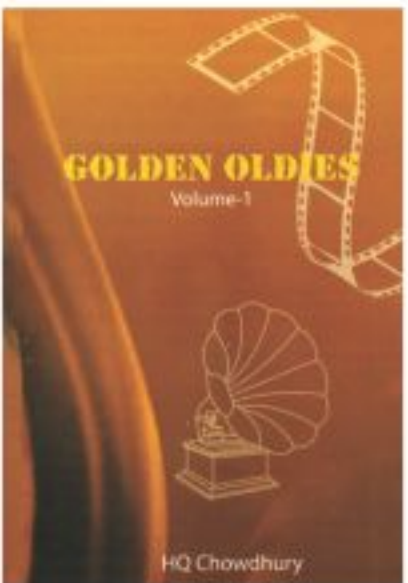
Khondakar Ashraf Hossain's interpretations, at once gradualist and incisive, of the western literary trends that have found echoes in Bangladeshi poetry, flow into the 1970s and into the periods thereafter. The Sixties are a labyrinth for him and into them step Nirmalendu Goon, Rafiq Azad and Abul Hasan, poets he describes as the most remarkable in the decade. The confessional mode, as it defined American poetry, is for a while an attraction for these poets. Abul Hasan

dies young, at twenty eight, but his three volumes of poetry remain a confirmation of the confessional strain he worked on. Indeed, as Professor Hossain shows in his analysis, there is a wide-ranging pattern of influences that have helped shape Bangladeshi poetry. Think here of the Liverpool poets, a kind of poet-singers or singer-poets or, more appropriately, a new kind of troubadors (in Hossain's terms) who were a clear pull for Bengali poets.


Western Influences is comprehensive in its examination of not just Bangladeshi poetry but also of the themes and motifs Bangladeshi poets have unreservedly drawn or borrowed from the West. But much more remarkable than the borrowing is Khondakar Ashraf Hossain's painstaking, detailed and transparent elucidation of the long road Bangladesh's poetry has travelled in the more than six decades since its links with the other half of the old Bengal were snapped.

This is a work that should reach all enthusiasts of Bangladeshi literature, both at home and abroad. The reason is self-evident: it gives, at last, an authentic voice to the aesthetic and cultural aspirations of a people whose overriding claim on history has been their language and the magic they have wrought by weaving seamless patterns of beauty through it.


BOOK choice



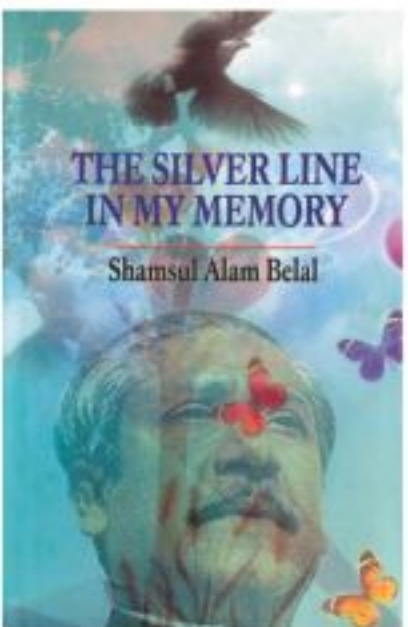
Golden Oldies
Volume-1
HQ Chowdhury
Shimantik



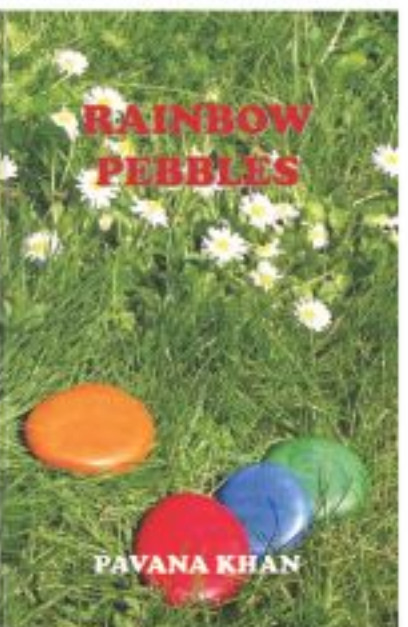
Jol Bole Gholo Hoi
Mahbub Reza
Anindya Prokash



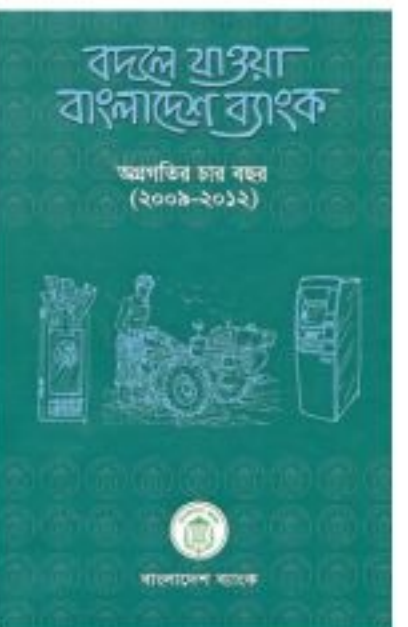
Shoishobkaler Dhaka
O Onanyo
Syed Najmuddin Hashim
Shuddhoshor



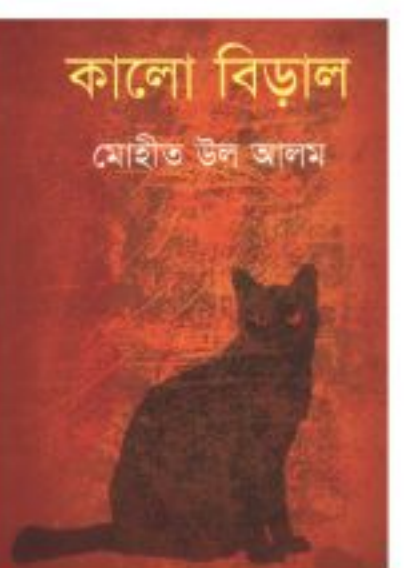
The Silver Line in
My Memory
Shamsul Alam Belal
Dibyaprakash



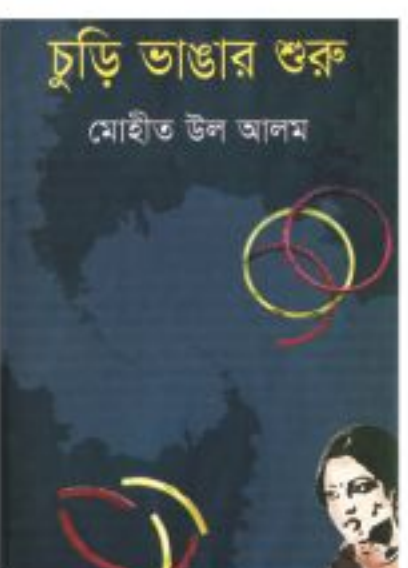
Rainbow Pebbles
Pavana Khan




Bodle Jaowa
Bangladesh Bank
Orogotir Char Bochhor
(2009-2012)
Bangladesh Bank



Kalo Biral
Mohit Ul Alam
Kalikolom
Prokashona



Churhi Bhangar Shuru
Mohit Ul Alam
KaliKolom Prokashona



Brikkho Banchle
Manush Banchbe
Harun-Ar-Rashid
Pearl Publications

GANTHA ADDA

Bringing minds together

GANTHA organized a book discussion program of its members at the EMK Centre on 8th June as its regular monthly afternoon adda over tea and refreshments.

The prominent scholar, writer and critic Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam gave a lively discussion of Jharna Rahman's *The Dawn of the Waning Moon*, published by writers.ink. According to Professor Islam, story telling requires the writer's keen observation of one's surroundings and ability to create stories out of everyday events. He gave instances of his own story writing, how the care giver and an elderly woman of his childhood inspired him to create stories from imagination in the post modern style and the nitty-gritty of meta-fiction and story writing in general. He then gave a critical appreciation of Jharna Rahman's stories which has a strong sense of capturing readers' minds in spite of their ordinary subject matter mainly due to the writer's spontaneity and perspective of storytelling. He also pointed out how experimentation could bring forth more variety to a writer's work if narrative and structure could be properly blended together. The problem of cultural translation also came up in his discussion and he gave full credit to Professor Niaz Zaman for this collection of stories by Rahman that includes stories by young translators at whose hand the editing of the book deserves such accolades.

The other discussant of this book, writer and translator Faridur Raham, shared his experience of translation and its difficulties,



since he himself had translated one of Rahman's toughest stories and thus urged writers to translate their own works to avoid the hassle of people translating others' work. He also spoke about the difficulty of translating regional dialects and the

problems of translating poetry and fiction. He stressed the essentiality of skilled editors in our country in his praise of Zaman's editing this book in translation. It is mentionable that the editor of this book, Professor Niaz Zaman, had initiated 'Gantha' six years ago to make a platform for uniting women writers and translators writing in Bangla and English from Bangladesh. She is also the proprietor of the publishing house writers.ink.

Bornandho Raat O Diary, a debut collection of short stories by Monika Chakraborty, was discussed by Nurun Akter, a Gantha member, and Jahanara Nowshin, writer and also member of Gantha. Akter praised the promising writer for her passionate way of writing short short stories about familiar events with a different touch. On the other hand Jahanara Nowshin critically praised her for paralleling Hindu mythological characters with common folk and emphasized using the right choice of words in the narrative of story writing.

Some eminent writers and poets, among whom were Mohan Raihan, Shafi Ahmed and Nurjahan Bose, were also present in the program.

MASRUFA AYESHA NUSRAT

Nazrul at CSUN

TANVEERUL Haque a member of The Reading Circle, Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a co-translator presented "Unfettered" to Dr. Phyllis K. Herman, Professor, Department of Religious Studies, College of Humanities, California State University Northridge (CSUN). "Unfettered" is the translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam's epistolary novel "Bandhon Hara" done by members of The Reading Circle. The presentation was organized by "Taranga of California" (TOC).

CSUN has been working with TOC by starting "The Kazi Nazrul Islam Endowed Lectureship in Bengali Arts, Culture and Literature". The 7th Kazi Nazrul Islam Endowed Lectureship Program sponsored by TOC and CSUN is scheduled to be held in September this year (2013).

Founded in 1958, California State University, Northridge has a 356 acre campus with an enrollment of more than 30,000 students. Located in the heart of Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley it is among the nation's largest single-campus universities. It is one of the 23 campuses of the California State University, the nation's largest public education system.

Taranga of California (TOC) was established in 2001 with the "Principal objective to promote Bengali Arts, Literature and Culture and in particular, introduce the literary work of our National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam to the Western World". TOC established the Nazrul Endowment Fund at CSUN in January 2004.

