

REVIEWS FROM SYED BADRUL AHSAN

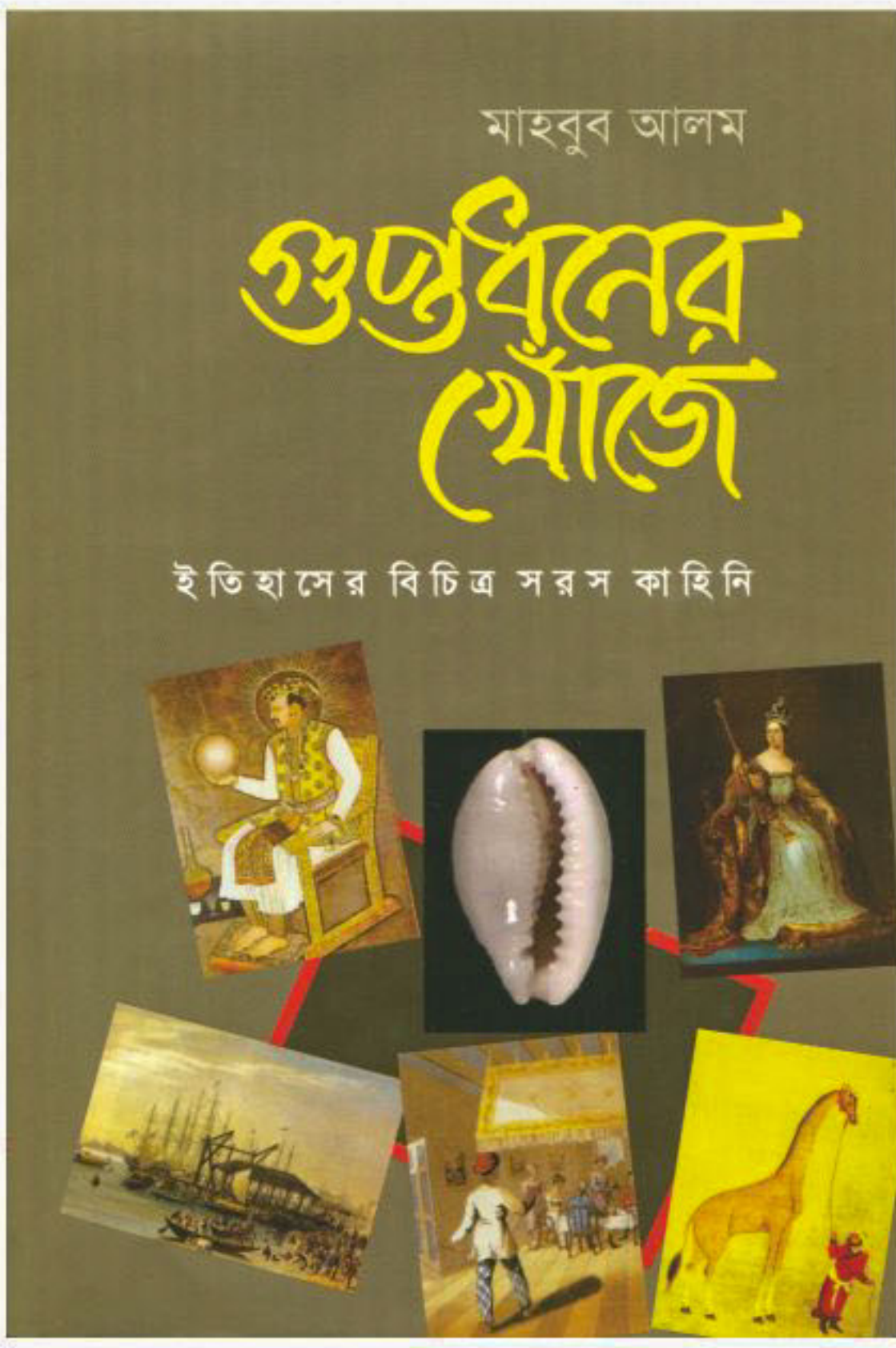
Belly swelling with jackfruit . . .

THE charm in Mahboob Alam's peregrinations across history comes through in his search for the hidden treasures that remain buried in the vaults of the ages. As a former diplomat, with an unusually keen sense of history, Alam goes for an exploration of those nooks and crannies of time you do not generally come by in historical research. In a very large sense, Alam as a history buff can justifiably be regarded as an archaeologist whose readiness to delve deep into buried history has always thrown up remarkable finds.

It is apt that Mahboob Alam calls his work *Guptodhoner Shondhane* or *In Search of Hidden Treasure*, for he brings into the work all the elements that ought to make history a little more engrossing for the reader than it has generally been. A collection of articles on varied elements of history, the appeal of the work comes through its attraction for both researchers as well as laymen whose interest in history is but a testament to the heritage they have consistently upheld in this part of the world. Take the story of the Mughal Shahjahan --- and that period precedes the time before he took charge of the throne --- and his arrival and stay in Dhaka in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Shahjahan, worried that the influence of his step-mother Nurjahan could lead Emperor Jahangir into stripping him of the chance to be the next emperor, rebels against his father. For Jahangir, his son's rebellion is a terrible blow given that Shahjahan had always had a seat of honour beside the emperor at the shahi durbar. In his memoirs thereafter, Jahangir referred to Shahjahan as the unfortunate one or refrained from mentioning him at all. Even when eventually the emperor pardoned the prince when the latter's rebellion petered out, it was obvious that the father did not regard the son with the same degree of affection he once demonstrated in public.

Shahjahan's foray into Bengal was dictated by circumstances as well as the wealth that characterized the land. But before he could lay claim to the province, he needed to beat the formidable Ibrahim Khan, which he did soon enough. After that, it was plain sailing. Shahjahan made a grand entry into Jahangirnagar, or Dhaka, where the welcome accorded to him by the local nobility must have convinced him of his invincibility as one destined for victory. Shrewd as he was, the Mughal prince, conscious of the possibility of future rebellion against him in Bengal, partitioned the province into four regions. The partition was not to last, though. Shahjahan's eventual defeat led to a restoration of Jahangir's authority in Bengal, with its attendant results.

Alam's account of secret or buried treasure --- and that is how the book gets its name --- reveals the varied means by which goods and valuables were secreted away by those who came by it. The article is, most refreshingly, a study of economics as well. The writer analyses the economic factors which governed wealth accumulation and preservation in early times as well as



Guptodhoner Shondhane
Itihasher Bichitro Shorosh Kahini
Mahboob Alam
Prothoma

those which were based on modern factors, such as the development of paper currency. That said, Alam makes it clear that a significant reason for treasure to be concealed in secret, hard-to-find spots was an act designed to ensure a secure economic future for the family. Those who came by such wealth and had them hidden away were by and large members of the ruling classes. So why did they go to all that length to conceal their wealth? The answer is simple: in the old days, feudalism had its writ run across the land, which meant that ownership of the land and everything in it belonged to the man at the top. Generally, that man was the emperor. If an individual in the service of the monarch passed away at some point, all his property would redound to the monarchy, with the result that his heirs would or could be compelled into lives of penury after his death.

If that was a rational explanation behind such an unconventional accumulation of wealth, there remains a pretty comical underside to the story: in more instances than one, the treasure remained hidden and not until ages or centuries later would they be discovered, only to be deposited with the government of the

day. Thus have museums been enriched. Thus has history come to pass.

Surely one of the most gripping articles in this certainly rich collection is *Bangalir Babu-English*. You will find it rather easy to relate to, given that you happen to be inhabiting a period in history where Bengali elitism is somewhat drawn unabashed to English in ways that can only be regarded as comical. Watch all those programmes on the many private television channels. You will be surprised or nauseated or both by disturbing intrusions of English words and phrases into conversations that can certainly be conducted in good old Bengali. Where an interviewee can with facility, because he or she is a Bengali, refer to *shongheet*, he or she does the unexpected --- by calling forth the term 'music'. And that is how it goes. Think of the many ways and many times when certain urbanized people around you resort to 'wow' to express their glee at someone or something.

Given your perception of half-baked English as you see it bandied around you, you will appreciate Mahboob Alam's take on the subject. The sheer laughter which comes with Babu English, as we know it, is what you will relish. And who instilled into us all this fascination for English? Alam reminds you. It was the Englishmen Macaulay and Bentinck. After 1835, as we know and as the writer tells us again, the English language captured hearts and minds in leaps and bounds in the subcontinent in general and in Bengal in particular. And Babu English? Simple. It has always been a heady mix of English and the indigenous language, in this instance Bengali, of course. Observe an example, which comes from a lawyer defending a widow in court:

Your Honour will be pleased enough to observe that my client is a widow, a poor chap with one postmortem son. A widow of this country, Your Honour will be pleased to observe, is not like a widow of Your Honour's country.

Had your laugh? Prepare, now, for some more ticklish moments. A railway passenger, having consumed a little too much of jackfruit than his stomach could take, must relieve himself outside the train, seeing that toilet facilities are not to be had on the train. But, woe betide him! The train departs before he can finish his job. Infuriated, this is how he complains to the railway authorities:

I am arrive by passenger train at Ahmedpur station and my belly is too much swelling with jackfruit. I am therefore went to privy. Just as I doing the nuisance the guard making the whistle blow for train to go-off and I am running with lotah in one hand and dhoti in the next when I am fell over and expose all my shockings to man and female women in the platform. This too much but if passenger go to make dung, the dam guard not wait for five minutes for him.

Roll over with laughter. Once you are done, read the preceding chapter, *Bangalir Ingreji Shekha: Adi Porbo*. Indeed, this is one work that you cannot but read from beginning to end.

Enjoy.

. . . . History, as shaped by words

ORATORY has since the beginning of civilised existence kept people in thrall. Shakespeare provided a clue to the riveting nature of speeches in his plays. You think here of Brutus and Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, of the many ways in which they played with words to convince the audience of the justness of the causes they held dear. But that was literature. In life lived from day to day, through the vagaries of politics, oratory has often been raised to the level of art. In Bangladesh's case, the speeches of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were ammunition, over the years, in the defence of liberty. Gandhi was not a rousing speaker, but the calm religiosity he brought into his words drove the point home. And then there was Syed Badrudduja, whose command of Bengali, Urdu and English was demonstrated to huge effect in his speeches, particularly in pre-partition India.

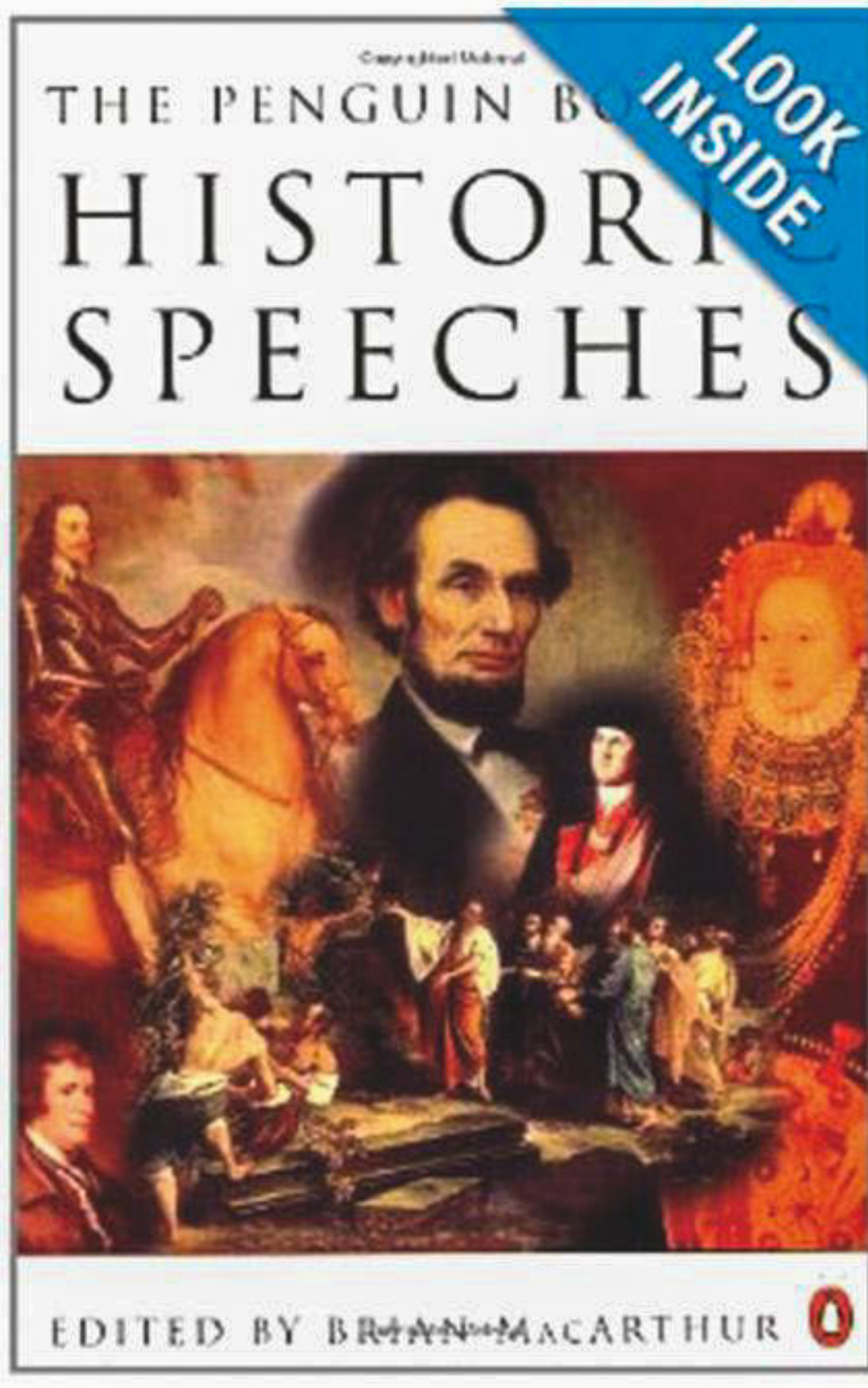
Now comes this admirable tome of a work. In *Speeches That Changed The World*, it is a lost age, or many lost ages that once were steeped in idealism that come alive. You could argue with the editors, though, about the speeches they did not include in the anthology. Even so, there are all those specimens of the mind that recreate the past. History buffs will not quarrel with the inclusion of orations rendered by men of divinity. Read here Moses, coming forth with the Ten Commandments ('Thou shalt have no other gods before me') as also Jesus with his 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Muhammad too makes a desirable entry ('Turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque'), followed by the Sermon to the birds by St. Francis of Assisi ('My little sisters, the birds, much bounden are ye unto God').

A particular characteristic of speeches, good speeches (for there have also been millions of tedious ones), is the inspirational. That is how John F. Kennedy, otherwise a not very dynamic figure on the broad canvas of history, galvanised Americans through his inaugural address in January 1961. 'Ask not what your country can do for you', he declaimed, 'but ask what you can do for your country.' It is a speech much quoted by JFK fans around the world and yet it somehow loses its brilliance once there is mention of Abraham Lincoln. The Civil War-era American president was clearly a natural when it came to oratory. The concluding words in his first inaugural address ('With malice toward none, with charity for all . . .') were a pointer to what was to be. And, true enough, it was with the Gettysburg address in November 1863 that Lincoln demonstrated the heights he could scale. 'Four score and seven years ago', he said with quiet insistence, 'our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.'

Great speeches come with a flavour of the literary; and Lincoln put literature in plenty into his speeches. Much a similar tenor was noted in Winston Churchill in his 13 May 1940 address in the House of Commons --- 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.' Words flowed, like a stream, from the wartime British leader. In August of the same year, it was again an interplay of words that fired the patriotism of the nation when Churchill spoke of the sacrifices being made in the war against Nazism, 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.' Oratory takes the collective imagination to new heights, as Jawaharlal Nehru demonstrated through his 'tryst with destiny' speech in the opening moments of a free India in 1947 ('At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom'). Blood was being spilled in the aftermath of partition, but that reality did not deter India's first prime minister from lighting the path to hope for his people. Contrast these sentiments with those that Eamon de Valera voices in April 1966 on the fiftieth

anniversary of the Easter Rising. His is an elegy, dedicated to the patriots he fought with once, all of whom were to perish in what for Ireland was an epic struggle for self-determination. In De Valera's words, 'they were all good men, fully alive to their responsibilities, and it was only the firmest conviction, the fullest faith and love of country that prompted their action.'

Speeches is fundamentally a journey through political experience straddling the globe. If there are the lofty perorations that find a place here, there are too the manifold lies that do not find an escape route. And thus, more than a year before he would get tangled in his venality, Richard Nixon tells Americans in April 1973 that 'there can be no whitewash at the White House.' It was, in truth, a contaminated world that Nixon created, and lived in. Morality did not matter to him, but it did for Vaclav Havel, who tells the people of Czechoslovakia in 1990, 'We live in a contaminated moral environment.' That takes you back to the moral superiority that General



The Penguin Book of Historic Speeches
Ed. Brian MacArthur

George S. Patton personified in his times. His speech, wherein he vows, 'I am personally going to shoot that paper-hanging sonofabitch Hitler', is one of the items in this anthology. The same holds true for Nelson Mandela, who defiantly tells the court trying him in apartheid-driven South Africa in 1964, 'I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.'

And so the caravan of history moves on. Along the way, Charles de Gaulle finds his own place in it. As France falls to Nazism, he takes flight to London, from where he sounds the clarion call that would rejuvenate his dispirited country: 'France has lost a battle. But France has not lost the war!' Thoughts of war then give way to ruminations on peace, as in this placidity of a statement from Mother Teresa in 1979: 'Love begins at home, and it is not how much we do, but how much

love we put in the action that we do.'

It is a moving kaleidoscope of the ages you have here. For sometime, you go beyond the mediocre, to recall a world once epitomised by sublimity, larger-than-life individuals. Remember Oliver Cromwell? As he dismisses the Rump Parliament in 1653, he rails against the lawmakers: 'It is high time for me to put an end to your sitting in this place, which you have dishonoured by your contempt of all virtue, and defiled by your practice of every vice. . . ' His voice rises to a crescendo, as he sends the legislators packing, 'Take away that shining bauble there, and lock up the doors. In the name of God, go!'

THERE is always something stirring about speeches, especially when they have the soul soar in every possible way. Think of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It is a simple collection of words and yet it has resonated with generations across the world and time. 'Four score and seven years ago . . . ' Who has not recalled these famous opening lines? There was, long before Lincoln, Demosthenes with his 'I have always made common cause with the people'. Demosthenes was an orator, in the way that Pericles was. Oliver Cromwell was slightly different, but when his indignation threw up in 1653 that famous reprimand to parliament, he went into the history books. 'In the name of God, go!' --- and they all scampered off. Puritanism was finally in place.

You get a sense of history as it has generationally been shaped in this admirable collection of famous speeches. Those of you who have heard Martin Luther King Jr's earth-shaking 'I have a dream' address will not likely forget it. It is here, to take you back to an era when Barack Obama was far ahead into the future. The speech promised a rainbow, which was not what Robespierre had in mind when he perorated in 1792 thus: 'Louis must perish because our country must live.' In time, Robespierre too would perish in blood. And blood was what his rival Danton talked of: 'The people have nothing but blood.' In Spain, Francisco Franco caused much blood to flow, but that did not deter the indefatigable Dolores Ibarruri (La Pasionaria) from declaiming, in 1936, 'Fascism shall not pass . . . ' In the end, Ibarruri and her friends were defeated, the poet Lorca was murdered, but their convictions have remained.

And conviction is what underscored John Kennedy's 1961 inaugural speech. The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, said he, 'born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace.' That was moving. Even more inspirational was Winston Churchill's 'blood, toil, tears and sweat' exhortation to his people. It would in time lead to defeat for the Nazis. Decades later, it would be Nelson Mandela's turn to arm his downtrodden people with his infectious confidence at his trial in 1964: 'It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realized. But my lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.' Brave words from a brave soul. One other brave individual was the abolitionist Frederick Douglass who, in 1852, had this to say in his defiance of slavery in America, 'O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm and stern rebuke.'

Words, words, words. That is how Shakespeare's Polonius would put it. And words do leave nations transformed. In our times, V.I. Lenin and Vaclav Havel have made a difference. Even the not so cerebral Ronald Reagan has shaken up a sleeping world, or parts of it. With Gandhi, Disraeli, Jefferson and Gladstone, words simply went into a making of dreams.

Read on. And feel history swirling around you.

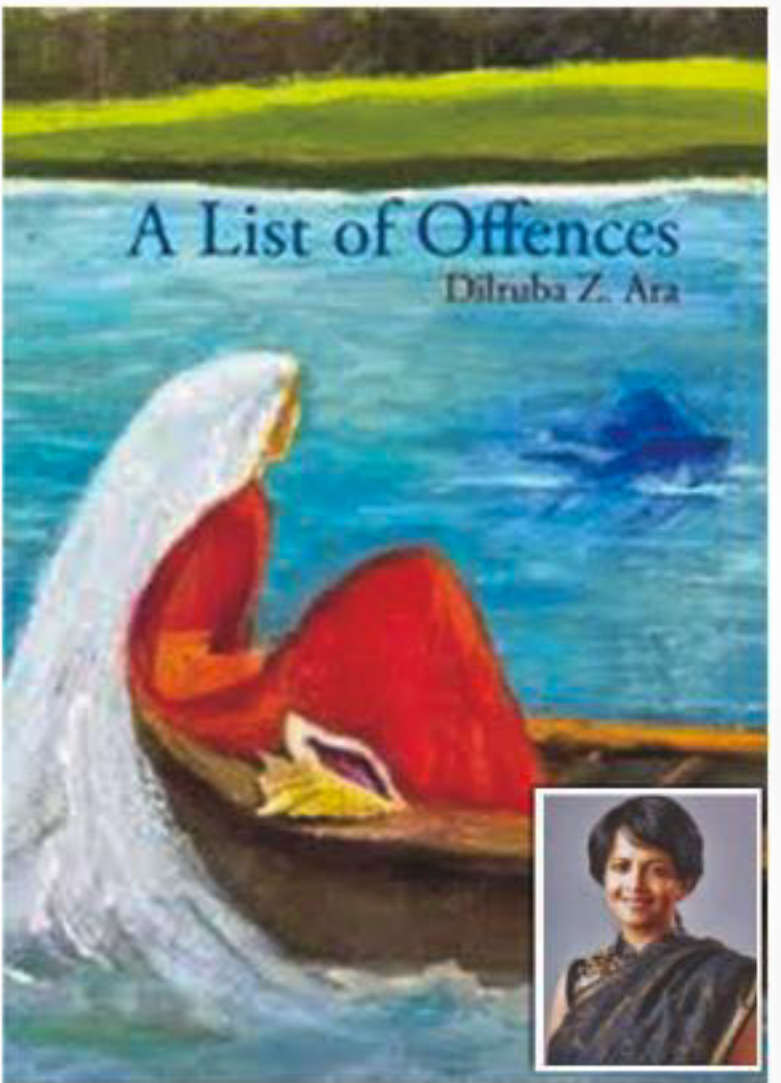
SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.

Portraying man's vulnerability

Claes-Goran Holmberg spots signs of greatness in a writer

DILRUBA Ara is rapidly on her way to becoming an important name in contemporary literature.

Her novel *A List of Offences* is a tour de force in story telling. The book is about a young girl from Bangladesh, Daria, and her painful struggle to get away from the constraints of tradition to hard earned freedom. The characterization is meticulous and psychologically trustworthy. The description of the social and natural milieu is a wonder of wealth of detail and expressive depictions. The pace is more in the imitation of the great novelists of the 19th century than the movie inspired cutting of contemporary prose. The book now exists in English, Spanish and Greek but still awaits the great breakthrough it deserves.



A List of Offences
Dilruba Z. Ara
The University Press Limited

The collection has two main parts, one where the stories take place in Ara's native country, Bangladesh, and one where her new country, Sweden, is the setting.

The short stories from Bangladesh are written with a sensual lustre where loss plays a big part. The reader is acquainted with nature, with people and with careful descriptions of dressing and eating habits. But behind the subtle powers of observation there is an equally powerful eye for the inner side of a person. Human destinies are sketched in a couple of pages and psychologically credible portraits are chiselled with a steady hand. Some of the short stories are built in a more traditional way with an elegant finishing point. Others are more like lyrical pictures and lacks closure.

In *The Theft* Dilruba Ara builds, as in so many others of her stories, upon a state of conflict within a family - and "family" is to be taken as a much bigger institution than it usually is in Europe. It does not only comprise a great number of family members but also servants. The big events in the background: war, political upheavals, etc., are only suggested. The protagonists here are the female narrator, the daughter of the house, and the servant girl, Ambia, belonging to the Bihari community. With her ability to merely suggest the writer lets us know that an important reason for hiring the girl was an ugly gap in her upper row of teeth. It's up to the reader to figure out that the positive thing with having an ugly female servant is that she is not that attractive for the men in the family.

The sister of the narrator is in hospital for a serious pregnancy illness. The narrator takes care of her sister's little daughter at the same time as she is spying on her brother-in-law who she suspects has a love affair with Ambia. In a few pages Dilruba Ara manages to tell the story of a couple of lives who for a while touch each other and depict a series of events that leave both bitterness and happiness in its wake.

A suddenly appearing cow is the reason for a miniature drama in *Voice of a Cow*. A young boy and a cattle dealer get into a collision course and a tragic misunderstanding hurts them both. This is a story that at the same time shows local injustices and human inexorability.

Affection is the story of a young "coolie" and his desperate attempts to get some money for his poor family. He is failing, until he finally thinks of a trick --- a trick involving stealing flowers at the churchyard and selling them.

In *Meeting Cancelled*, Dilruba Ara gets a chance to demonstrate her ability also to handle a more traditional short story style with a classical surprise ending. Rashid has been living in Dhaka with his mother for 35 years. When the mother feels her end is nearing she decides that the son has to get married in order to survive in the future. But it is not that easy to let go.

The protagonist in *Mosque-yard Imam* lives in Sweden but makes a trip to Bangladesh, her native country. Having lived in two very different cultures is not an entirely carefree position. It is easy to look upon yourself as an outsider in both societies. The female protagonist in this and many others of the short stories in this collection is easily recognizable. She is an observer and a soul searcher. She is probably reasonably close to the author herself. In this story she returns to her home to bury her father. Her venture to want to paint the bamboo fence around her father's grave herself leads to a precarious situation where she and the persons around her (especially an imam who sees what she does) have to reflect upon what a woman is allowed to do.

The stories from the new country are in another key, at the same time lighter and darker. The Swedish fairness is pitted against the unequal native country. But the feelings of security are more often associated with the family in Bangladesh. In the new country blondness is for the narrator often associated with an inability for empathy and a feeling of superiority. Persons in authority are often blond. *Detached Belonging* is centered in Sweden. A woman from another country is about to have her baby when it is discovered that the child has a serious defect that threatens the woman's life. Her stay in hospital makes her reflect on how difficult it is to handle a situation like this far away from the caring people at home.

War-child tells the bitter story of a child of the war who cannot get rid of the past, not even in the new, peaceful country. The constant crying of the child is later succeeded by the embedded bitterness of the grown-up woman. The protagonist, who has no name, consults a blond female psychologist in the new country to have some easing of her pain but the past is constantly making itself felt. There is still a war going on in the native country. And a child that is born to emptiness can be filled with evil; at least that is what the woman feels. Her burning desire to be loved makes her commit a terrible crime already as a five-year-old child. She then spends a lot of time trying to atone but now, as a grown-up, she is still oscillating between hatred and despair. Is she really a suitable mother? Is she going to lead her child onto a better way or prepare him for that life of war and destruction? Without pointers and without sentimentality the author draws a portrait of a broken soul.

A young man from Bangladesh and a Scandinavian girl are the protagonists in a love story in student circles, *The Less Trodden Path*. The boy has promised his parents not to fall in love during his period of studies and save himself for a girl from his own country. A common love for the poetry of Robert Frost is the start for the young man's and the Scandinavian girl's walk in the tale. *Window* is a story set in a school environment. The main character, Abdullah Fakru, is a young Arab boy with social problems. He refuses to take part in schoolwork and moves all over as a typhoon in the classroom. His English teacher is the one person who finally gets inside his armoured soul.

Dilruba Ara is not afraid to work with material that in the hands of a lesser writer easily could have been moralistic or sentimental, but by refusing to make her characters stereotypes she always gets out the psychological many-sidedness in them. An annulled marriage between a foreign woman and a Swedish man becomes in *The Frame* a bitter description of the hardships of being an outsider. The woman now must choose between staying in the new country, with children but without husband, or return to the country of her parents. The feeling of emptiness and powerlessness gets symbolical expressions.

As a portrayal of a lonely soul, when it comes to the choice of scene, *Light* stands out. It takes place among Indian migrant workers in Bahrain. The main character, Pradip, is like all the other underprivileged men called "Rafiik" that simply means servant or buddy. With a clear eye for individual destiny as well as for the whole social situation around the South Asian labour force in the Middle East, the author portrays the slave workers of modern times, people who still retain their dignity.

Regardless of where her short stories take place you can be assured that Dilruba Ara in her writings combines an exquisite feeling for portraying individual human beings with an ability to show the vulnerability and alienation of man and this without succumbing to sentimentality or becoming a moralizer. That is a sign of a great writer.

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