

Two Reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

Where knowledge is the goal

... where trees are endangered species

THE Asiatic Society of Bangladesh calls its new two-volume encyclopaedic series Junior Banglapedia. In truth, it is much more than that, given that the information the Junior Banglapedia provides to readers instructs not only the young but adults as well. That is where the beauty of a knowledge-based work lies. In recent years, the Asiatic Society has done truly commendable work in such areas as compiling, in a number of volumes, the history of Dhaka on the four-hundredth anniversary of the city. That was truly a stupendous performance, given that the Society covered nearly every possible facet of Dhaka, including such areas the history of Dhakai food, and in the end giving people not just a taste of history but also an insight into the changing fortunes of a city which remains as vibrant as it was four centuries ago.

And then, of course, comes the Asiatic Society's gigantic work in the matter of the Banglapedia, an enterprise which today serves as a rather rich point of reference for scholars and students alike. The Banglapedia series is in a very important way an enumeration of the culture, history and

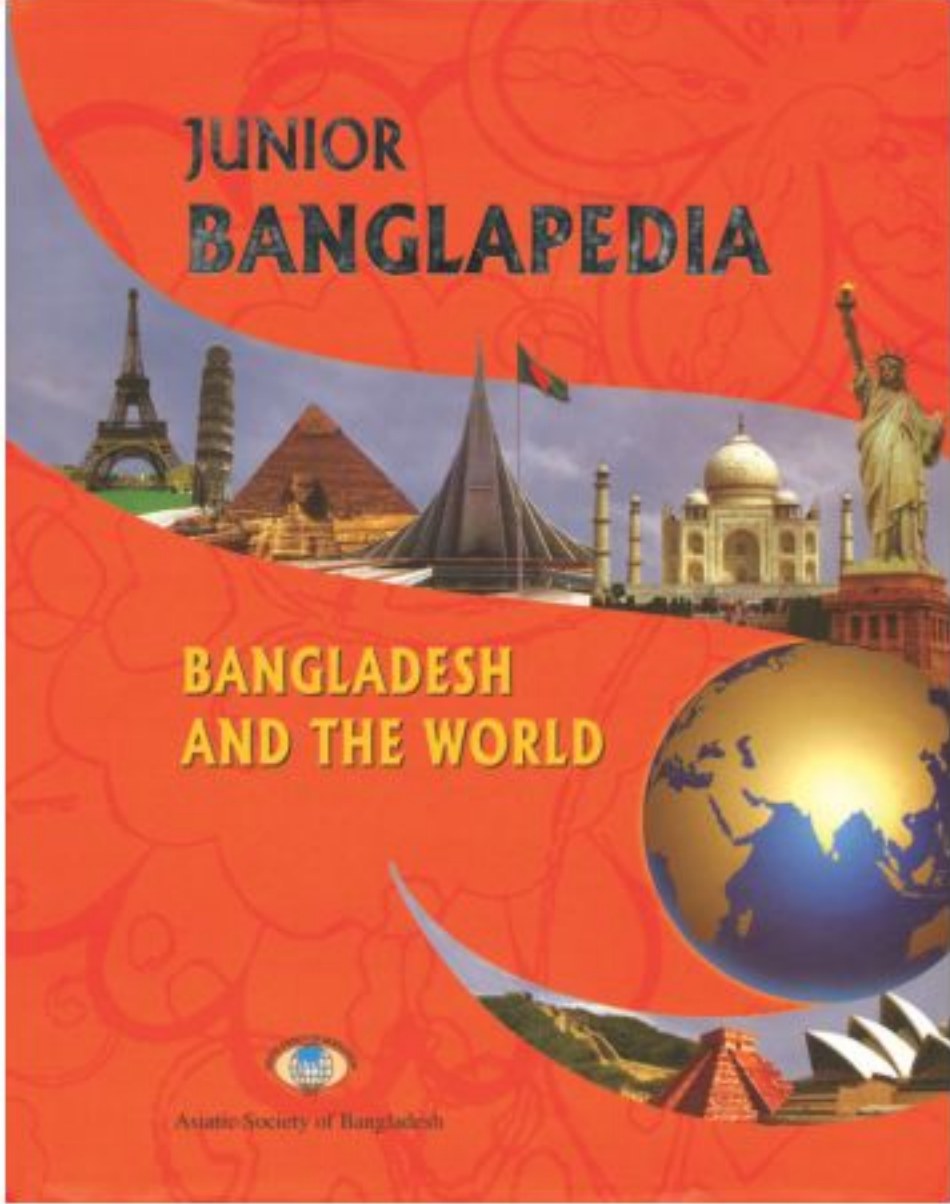
age, is that it comes at a time when the study of history in Bangladesh's educational institutions has quite declined. Indeed, the increasing emphasis on job-oriented subjects of study at universities is a potent sign of how history and politics have been consigned to the backburner, with results that are none too cheering for citizens. Moreover, the pretty inexplicable manner in which school and college-leaving examination scores (read here the GPA figures that supposedly attest to students' academic attainments) are celebrated are followed quickly by the thought that such good results do not include an understanding of the history of the country and the wider world it is part of, on the part of the student. Naturally, therefore, in the aftermath of the academic results, students invariably tend to feel lost or at some point get lost on the way to the future.

The Junior Banglapedia is therefore a powerful statement of why the study of history must become an integral part of curricula at schools and colleges. Moreover, an observation of these two volumes, the second of which is given over to

science and technology, reinforces the notion that the subjects taught at schools, colleges and universities notwithstanding, there is a tremendous need for history to be included as a compulsory theme in classroom teaching. Observe the fields covered in Volume Two of the Junior Banglapedia. Here you have simple presentations of some of the complex subjects that have gone into a widening of the field of knowledge through the ages. In this volume, the young will come by a rich store of information about such significant areas of science as biology, physics, chemistry, the animal kingdom, astronomy and the environment. A particularly rich section of the volume is the one dealing briefly

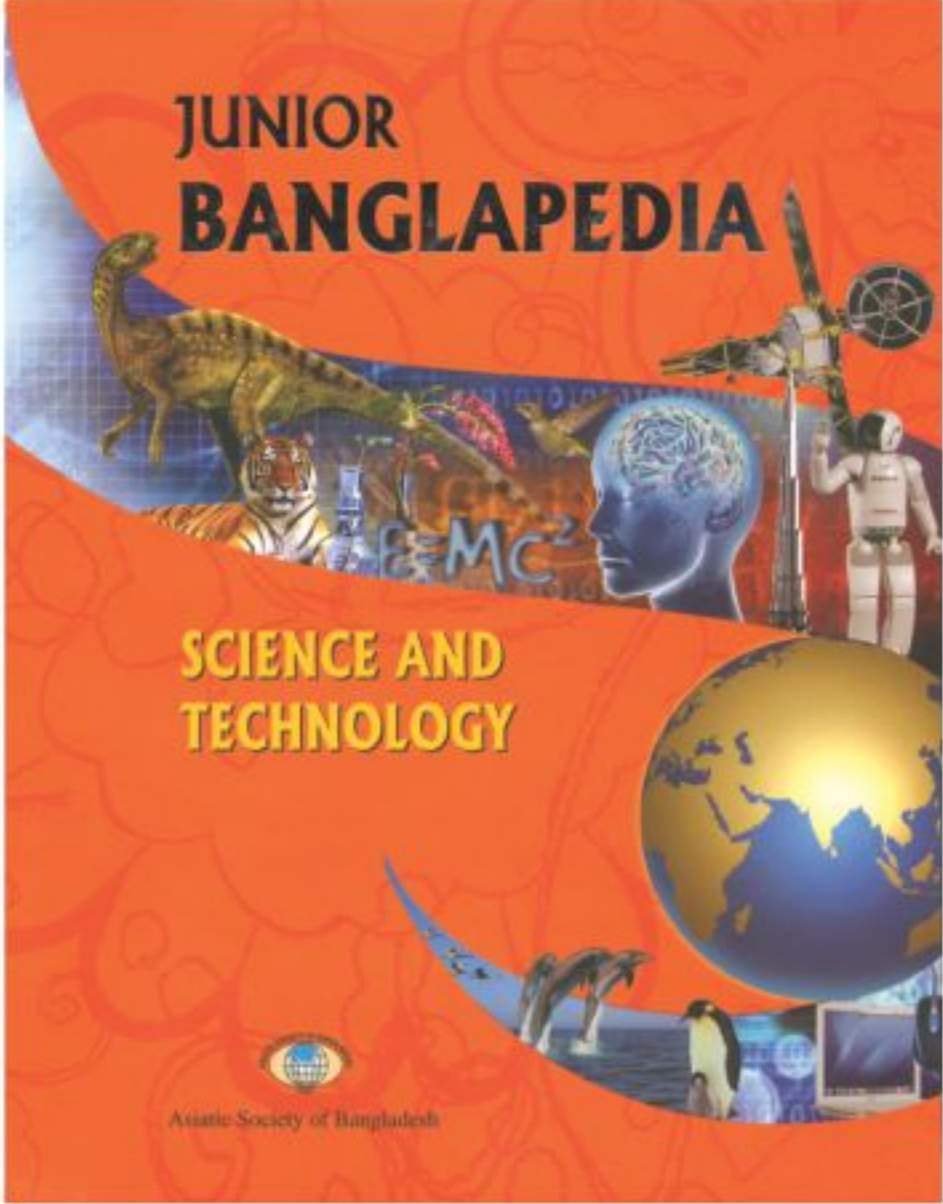
with the lives and achievements of scientists who have across time and generations contributed to an understanding of our place in the universe. It is a who's who in the world of science as we have known it so far; and on the list you have such celebrated names as Archimedes, Aryabhata, Descartes, Fermat, Bose, Ibn Sina, Newton, Pavlov, Hawking and, of course, Einstein.

These two volumes of Junior Banglapedia deserve a place on the shelves at home. And, yes, school and college libraries around the country will be doing much good to themselves, to their students, by adding the works to their library resources. If education is the key to the growth of a knowledge-based society in Bangladesh, the two volumes of Junior Banglapedia ought to be brought in as a necessary structural foundation of such a society.



Junior Banglapedia
Bangladesh and the World

Editor Ahmed Abdullah Jamal
Asiatic Society of Bangladesh



Junior Banglapedia
Science and Technology

politics of this region, with special emphasis on Bangladesh. And because it is, those drawn to history have found in the series information that earlier was hard to come by. The Society has fulfilled a huge need, without question.

Now, with the Junior Banglapedia, the Asiatic Society reaches out to the very young in the country; and by so doing it actually extends its knowledge towards a region where even adults can benefit from. Volume One, given over to Bangladesh and the rest of the world, covers such vital areas --- where the country is concerned --- as its flora and fauna, its administrative divisions, natural environment, culture and history. The importance of the work, which in its section dealing with the world encompasses the ages stretching from the prehistoric era all the way to the modern

In their celebratory moments

Pallab Bhattacharya reads up on two artistes, again!

ONE of Bengali cinema's biggest unresolved mysteries surrounding the stupendous success of on-screen chemistry between and among artistes has been the relationship between two legendary actors -- Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. A lot has been written about them in the media and some books, especially in a Bengali work by Sen's very close friend Gopal Krishna Roy, a veteran journalist. The grapevine is even today abuzz with all kinds of speculations on the subject. One cannot possibly pin the chemistry down to any one particular factor and it could be a combination of various factors. That is the inescapable conclusion one gets after reading web journalist Maitreyee B Chowdhury's latest book, in English, *Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen: Bengali Cinema's First Couple* (published by Om International).

The book is divided into nine chapters and the two longest among them are, understandably, devoted to the relationship between Bengali cinema's legendary romantic pair, who have captured the imagination of viewers across generations in a manner none has ever done, and the evolution of Uttam and Suchitra as actors in their own right. The two have acted together in 30 films spread across a little more than two decades, starting with "Sarey Chuattor" in 1953 and ending with "Priyo Bandhobi" in 1975. Uttam Kumar died and three years later Suchitra Sen retired from films and became highly reclusive.

But before the readers get a glimpse into the on and off-screen chemistry between the two actors, they are dishied out a useful contribution by Chowdhury in the chapter, "The Rise of Popular Bengali Cinema", which chronicles the sprouting of popular commercial cinema alongside the parallel cinema represented by the likes of Devaki Bose, Pramathesh Barua, Bimal Roy and later by Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen and the emergence of Uttam and Suchitra after the 1950s. Was the charm of Uttam and glamour of Suchitra the only reason that made the films

featuring them so popular? Well, the author of the book cites three other reasons for the success of the Uttam-Suchitra pair: one, romance as portrayed by the duo had hardly been explored in Bengali cinema earlier; second, their films shed their rural backdrop and showed the glitz and glamour of city life; and, third, romance was no longer weighed down by sorrow, trial and tribulations. One cannot but agree with the writer that Uttam-Suchitra came at a time when Bengali cinema needed a trend less in terms of scripts, acting or technicians and more in areas of star power with greater mass appeal.

The author of the book makes an interesting--though arguable--observation: "Popular Bengali cinema, especially Uttam and Suchitra starrers, represented the same culture and society that parallel cinema did. This was despite the fact that there was a marked difference between the two genres of cinema. If the single most important reason has to be acknowledged for the huge popular appeal of

Uttam, it is, as the book's author says is because he "was the dream hero, the every day man and flamboyant star, rolled into one". Even more aptly, the author quotes Satyajit Ray as describing Uttam "as a person every mother wanted as a son, every sister wanted as a brother and every girl wanted as a lover".

The twenty-page chapter on the on-screen chemistry between Uttam and Suchitra is bound to be the most sought by readers of the book as it analyses different facets of the professional and personal relationships between them. Uttam was one of the very few people who could call Suchitra by her real name, which was Roma; and Suchitra, when asked on her relationship with Uttam, "is known to have famously said that they were neither brother-sisters nor lovers. She was his Priyo Bandhobi", according to the book. "The two", the author tells us, "had tremendous respect for each other too. Uttam and Suchitra's relationship was based on mutual trust, appreciation and admiration for each other's work and personality". But at the end of the narrative, no clarity emerges on the exact kind of relationship the two shared.

Gopal Krishna Roy and other Bengali cinema personalities known to be close to Suchitra say the actress has zealously guarded her personal life and has not allowed anyone to peek into it. And, therefore it is in the fitness of things that Maitreyee Chowdhury ends her analysis of the Uttam-Suchitra chemistry by saying the following, "whether Uttam and Suchitra were as deeply involved with each other in reality shall forever remain unanswered".

The author finds it strange that none of the Bengali filmmakers who made it big in Bollywood never chose to cast Uttam-Suchitra pair in any Hindi film although both the actors had appeared separately in some Hindi films like "Devdas" (where Suchitra plays the role of Paro), alongside Dilip Kumar, "Bombai ka Babu", "Mamta", "Aandhi", "Chhotisi Mulakat", "Amanush", "Anand Ashram" and "Dooriyan". Some of the films starring Uttam Kumar were remade in Hindi, like Jeebon Mrityu, Bhranti Bilash, Chhodobeshi, Nishipadma. One reason could be that both had their limitations with Hindi accent.

The book also offers some interesting anecdotes in the life of Suchitra Sen. For instance, she is reported to have once declined to work in a film by Ray. How the girl from Pabna overcame her distinct East Bengal accent of Bengali to enter Bengali cinema, why she was the first actress to do modelling for a Bata shoe, how she was well ahead of her time by wrapping herself in a towel and posing for a photo in a bathroom and how Uttam began his career in the role of an extra in a Hindi film called "Mayador" that was never released are anecdotes you get aplenty in this engrossing work.

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA IS AN INDIAN JOURNALIST BASED IN DELHI.

IN our youth, it was nature which defined Bangladesh. The rural regions were emblematic of greenery. And in the urban regions, which again were yet to be strictly urban, a ubiquity of trees was what defined the life and culture of Bengalis. Of course, political freedom was yet quite some distance away, but society was largely based on a very wide ambience of natural beauty as symbolized by trees, rivers, streams, placid villages, furious monsoons and terror-striking floods and cyclones. A balance was what characterized life in Bengal, or the eastern part of it then known as Pakistan's eastern province. Even after the liberation of the country in 1971, when Bangladesh rose as a free nation, nature was yet the driving force in societal existence.

And then came a point where everything began to go awry. Trees began to disappear. Beginning in the latter 1970s and well into the early 1980s, institutional drives to have trees cut down along such places as Manik Mia Avenue in the nation's capital in order for the road to be widened were the earliest signs of what was about to go wrong in the country. Little time was lost in having the green, not just in the cities but in the rural interior as well, losing the battle against human encroachment, to a point where real threats were perceived to be coming up against the environment. Homes built in an earlier and more aesthetically inclined era began to be struck down, to be replaced by the more commercially well-serving condominiums and apartment complexes. The proof of how lop-sided urbanization has led to the death of trees in towns and cities is out there. And in the villages, the encroachment, first by brick kilns and then a host of other industries, today threatens the bucolic spirit and appearance of Bangladesh's rural regions.

It is against such a background of creeping disaster that



Brikkho Banchle Manush Banchhe
Harun-Ar-Rashid
Pearl Publications

three-fold. In the first place, he draws attention to the many sinister ways in which trees are being cut down and forests laid bare. In the second, he points the finger at the organized gangs which throughout the country, with not a little help from corrupt government functionaries, have been ruining forests at random. In the third, he informs anyone willing to listen that unless measures are in place to stem the tide of green destruction, the country will be in danger.

Environmentalists should be drawing invaluable information from this book. Journalists can add material from the book to their personal archives of knowledge. And general readers, particularly students, will find in the work rich facts as reference material.

The essays in *Brikkho Banchle* make you think and wonder.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS EXECUTIVE EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR.

Celebrating cricket's only tiger

Shahriar Feroze enjoys reminiscences on a legend

THIS reviewer's first encounter with the name 'Tiger Pataudi' took place during his school days through a cricketing story narrated by his grandmother. Back then Pataudi sounded more like a legend who had retired from the game long before the reviewer was born.

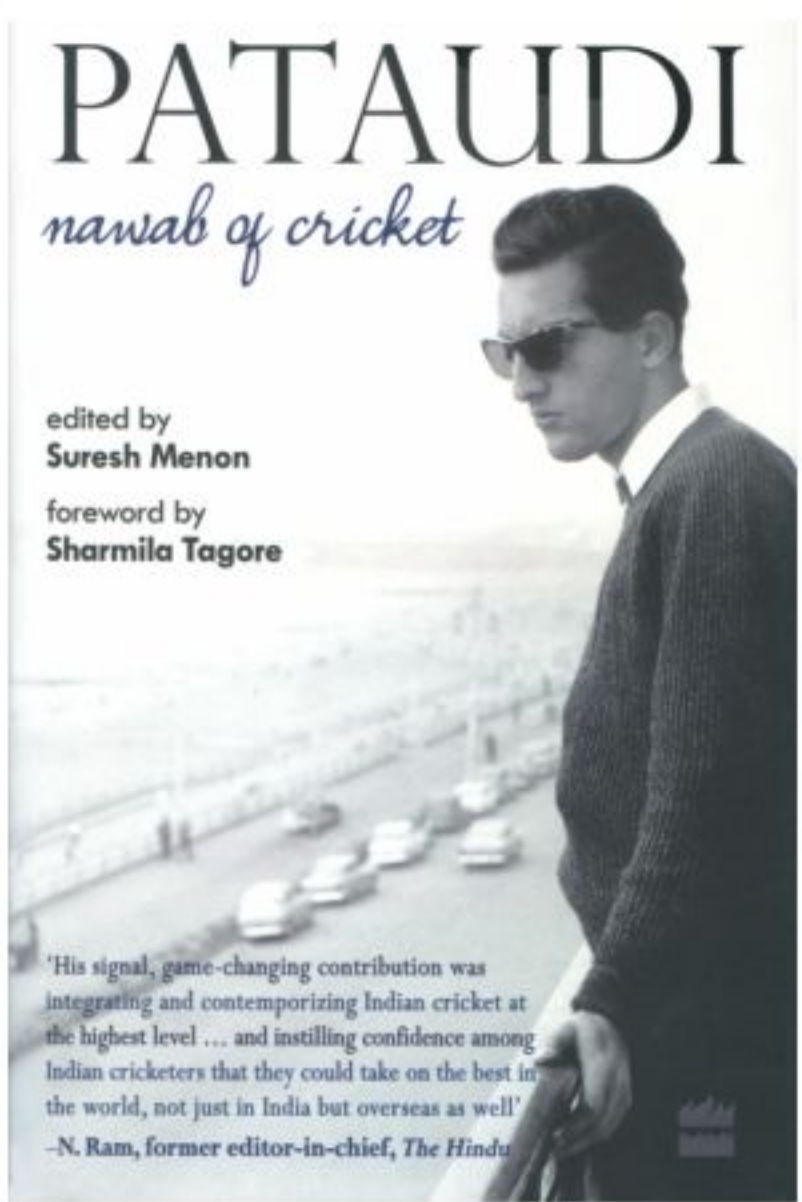
What fascinated the reviewer is the target audience of the book. There are questions that arise: Is the book for the generation who watched the Tiger in his heyday? Or is it for the generation of today who are faintly aware of Pataudi's cricketing immensity?

The truth could be that the book is a great opportunity to connect Tiger Pataudi afresh with Generation Now.

The essays in this anthology capture different elements of the late Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi. The compilation has been edited by noted sports writer and journalist Suresh Menon. It is an enjoyable read since it sheds light on Pataudi the individual, player, friend, captain, husband, father, gentleman, hero and icon.

The Nawab is scanned through the lenses of twenty two close acquaintances at different periods of his life. The intimate and nostalgic foreword by Pataudi's widow and former actress Sharmila Tagore, reflecting on her husband, could not have been better.

Bishan Bedi's reflections on "the rarest of rare phenomena in Indian cricket" shed light on Pataudi the unifier. Bedi's recollections relate to a man of great principle; astute yet fair. Pataudi is remembered by the left-arm spinner great as the first Indian captain who brought the culture of 'Indianness' to the dressing room.



Pataudi
Nawab of Cricket
Ed Suresh Menon
HarperCollins India

A speech delivered before his players in which Pataudi made it clear that narrow-mindedness had no place in the team environment is revealing of the man: "Listen fellas, we are not playing for Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, Bengal or Maharashtra. We are playing for India. Think India, for goodness's sake ..." That is indeed a patriotic binding, something many believe is Pataudi's biggest achievement.

Bedi, in his essay, also pinpoints the moment as having a profound effect on him as he made his first steps into Test cricket. There is also a humorous incident from their domestic cricket days when Pataudi asked Bedi to bowl

Harun-Ar-Rashid's *Brikkho Banchle Manush Banchhe* ought to be read. This is a book which reminds readers not only of the immense damage that has been done to the land through a systematic onslaught on the environment but also warns them that unless careful, purposeful steps are taken to arrest the slide into chaos, an entire country could end up finding itself in a state of the comatose. Rashid has gone into a comprehensive study of the many ways in which trees have been felled in the country. The study, again, is a collection of brief but rich write-ups on the subject. He deals with such subjects, or such variations of the subject, as the prime minister afforestation programme in Sitakunda and the audacity with which forests are being destroyed in Lawwachhara by organized gangs of tree robbers. In Teknaf, jhau trees are being destroyed; and in other regions, the extraction of stones from hilly areas has swiftly led to a decline in the quality of the forests and agricultural fields around them.

The writer's focus in these essays is

the first over of the day even though he had bowled the final on the previous evening, just to see if the umpires were awake.

The anthology has a plenty of off-field reminiscences too which keep readers glued to it till they finish reading it. For instance, Sunil Gavaskar recounts how he, and most others in the Indian team, struggled with the correct title with which to address Pataudi with. Engineer touchingly informs us how he was the first to let his team-mates know that Pataudi, despite being a Nawab, was "a regular guy". Former England captain Tony Lewis reprints pages from his India diary of 1972-73 in which he and Pataudi partook of a sitar concert in what was then Madras. John Woodcock, the man believed to have seen more Test cricket than anyone else in history, reveals how Pataudi, who had an aversion to air travel, produced a bottle of brandy he had 'rescued' from his Bhopal palace to steady the nerves on board a flight.

We have seen few individuals, with noble lineages behind them, turning into enigmas. The one-eyed cricketer was the foremost of players in Indian cricket. As you go through the essays you will also come to know of generations of a single family flourishing in different ways. Yes, generations of Pataudis can be labelled as 'genetically talented' people.

This work is a must read for those who love cricket and the history that lies behind it.

SHAHRIAR FEROZE IS CURRENT AFFAIRS ANALYST AT THE DAILY STAR.

The celebration of women

Charles R. Larson hasn't a clue about the title of a novel

THE quotation from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* at the beginning of Ali Sethi's novel is a dead give away: "The difficult task of knowing another soul is not for young gentlemen whose consciousness is chiefly made up of their own wishes." Eighty pages into the story, one of the main characters is reading *Middlemarch*. At the novel's conclusion, there's a quotation from Tolstoy: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Granted, Tolstoy wasn't a Victorian, but his novels share numerous characteristics with his English counterparts: lengthy explorations of family dynamics, rapid social change, and so on.

These are also the stuff of Ali Sethi's sweeping debut novel, *The Wish Maker*. At a recent question and answer session after the author gave a reading in Bethesda, Maryland, he answered a query about Victorian novels--confessed, in fact, that he enjoyed them. More importantly, he said that many Bengali novels also have the same shape and social consciousness. Certainly these characteristics work well for him in his own novel: covering, roughly, a period in Pakistani history from Partition (1947) to 9/11. Never, however, can it be said that Sethi's narrative employs

chronological order. Rather, there are numerous lengthy flashbacks (some perhaps too long) with his characters locked into historical events in his country's often troubled history.

Two threads work well for this ambitious novel: the troublesome angst of adolescence and the slow but incremental advance of women's rights in a conservative Muslim culture. For the former, Sethi, surprisingly, uses his masculine narrator, Zaki Shirazi, not so much to chronicle his own awakening sexuality as that of his female cousin, Samar Api, as well as her often more worldly girlfriends'. The issue of women's empowerment is explored in parallel fashion by using Zaki's mother, a pioneer journalist, who began her writing career after her husband's (and the narrator's) death, two months before the birth of their son.

Vividly, tellingly, the author depicts an entire generation of Pakistani youths, mostly in the 1980s and 90s, exploring promiscuity, alcohol, and drugs--all forbidden, of course, by their faith. Young men and women meet secretly without the knowledge of their parents (sometimes the result of Internet arrangements), watch pornographic films, get high, and sometimes get pregnant. It all seems fairly universal until you think about these activities in conservative societ-

ies. Needless to say, these indulgences are those of the children of well-to-do families, who often shower their offspring with too much money. Thus the focus, in part, is upon adolescent rebellion--getting away with what's possible, especially out of the eyesight of their elders.

Late in the story, Zaki's own situation takes center stage, but by that time the female characters have already been established as the novel's primary focus. These female characters are, in fact, the novel's imaginative center. Their lives shape most events in the story and tell us more about social change than a concentration on masculine characters would. In the final sections, Zaki has his own horizons to confront at a private boys' school, his own issues with education, and maturity, as well as his determination to continue his advanced education (as the author did) in the United States, but by that time the women in his extended family have become much more interesting.

The *Wish Maker* is an often lush and revealing story about the last fifty years of life in Pakistan, especially for the privileged. But don't ask me what the title means. I haven't a clue.

CHARLES R. LARSON IS PROFESSOR OF LITERATURE AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, DC