

Of a symbolic daughter

Shahid Alam reads tales with mixed feelings

“SHE’S like Babushka, the Russian-nested doll. Within the layers of her cardinal roles in her life, the daughter of her parents and for her parents is always there.” The author of *Born Daughter*, Perveen Rasheed, thus, in her own words, encapsulates the essence of her anthology of eighteen stories, an endeavour suggested by “my beloved one, the father of our daughter.” And she has dedicated the book to their daughter, fitting since all the stories revolve around the woman as a daughter, wife, mother, or child, or all in some combination or the other. The men in the stories only serve as lightning rods, as it were, of the tale of the daughter to be told in her different roles from childhood to advanced age.

“The Sacrifice” contains some homespun wisdom in preparing a girl for her shoshurbari. Some of these, while sounding outrageous to not a few continue a tradition among Bengalis going back to recorded (and, especially, oral) history: “Do you have any idea how much a family’s reputation and honour depend on a daughter’s own honour and other behaviours?” one of the protagonists in the story asks. “One small bad gossip about you, my daughter, will throw the family in disgrace. Not so with sons though.” She continues, “A good daughter is she who never lets her in-laws wag their tongues with the khota ’...all that she brought from her parents is her big stomach.’”

Most of the stories deal with women’s suffering, injustice, deprivation, and their rights. Some also focus on cultural misunderstandings. From her writings, one may fairly come to the conclusion that Rasheed is well versed in Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi, besides her native Bengali. In “The Yellow Rose Bowl”, the storyteller’s (a young woman) mother was turned off against roses (her hitherto favourite flower) because their Haripur Hazara cook-cum-garden advisor, Momman Newoz (the story is set somewhere in the West Punjab and former Northwest Frontier Province area of Pakistan), had brought large roses that emitted a “fetid manure smell!” The reason for his indiscretion: “Begumsowb wanted mitti mitti gand.” Until, sometime later, her husband clued her in: “It’s certainly not your fault, my dearest. You can have all the lovely, big, sweet smelling, mishti, mishti gondho, red roses you wanted. But your ustaad Momman Newoz, he is familiar with mitti and not mishti when you instructed him.”

“Khudey Khoday” is a poignant story of a father’s cruelty towards his deformed daughter, a condition he had partly been responsible for bringing about. Yet, the little girl, on regaining consciousness after a severe fall, blurts out, “Bapzaaner bhaat ranti lagbey ney --- [(I) need to cook rice for father --- author’s translation]”. “A Designed Dream” takes a matter-of-fact look at an increasing phenomenon in Bangladesh: a striving for upward mobility by women in a male-dominated soci-



Born Daughter
Perveen Rasheed
Publisher KB Sajjadur Rasheed

ety, to take advantage of opportunity when it knocks, and damn the gossip-mongering along the way, all of which are portrayed in the story of a mother from a rural genteel, but not too-well-off, background, and her daughter. The author speaks her own feelings on the subject through the mother: “Why do people cry when a daughter is born to her parents?... Who said daughters are useless. Daughters are fireworks! Daughters are ‘lokkhi’ --- bringer of wealth.”

“Once Upon a Magazine...” is a tale of self-discovery of her heritage and dignity by a young Bengali girl studying in a posh English-medium school in then West Pakistan in the 1950s. One of her Urdu-speaking classmates derided her for bringing to class a copy of the well-known Bengali magazine BEGUM in which her mother’s poems had been published: “This is not Bengali; this is hindi. The name is Begum --- do they say Begum in hindi.” To the untrained eye, Bengali and Hindi scripts might look very similar, but to her those remarks were an awakening, part of which was, “How fortunate was I to have a language with hundreds and hundreds of years of history and a world class literature.” “The Claimants” is set in Ghana, and gives a succinct, yet accurate, account of the plight of transitory Bangladeshi illegal migrants trying to make it to one of the affluent European countries (in this case, Spain). One of those fortune-seekers has left behind a six-year old daughter who wants him to bring back a boro mem putul and himself, and nothing else.

“Celebrate Me” is more of an anthem for women’s rights than a fictional story. One woman protests the celebration of International Woman’s Day as being just a token homage to women, but not anything that brings substantive or long lasting positive outcomes for them. The author urges women to promote their own causes: “Women have to rise up by themselves with their own individual inner power and collective

strength.” “The Wait” is a throwback to a bygone era of Bengali Muslim aristocrats. Centered on the tale of Begum Saheba Gulrukhsaar Banoo, it relates the customs and traditions of that class, and the Begum Saheba’s rebellion against it. She follows the dictates of her heart and breaks some of the rigid tenets of those customs and traditions. She is a fascinating and very brave and impulsive character. She challenges the “strange type of purdah tradition” of those times, and refuses to “become a mechanical china doll taking lessons and whatever else including proper conversing style and words with elders of aristocrats, public appearances, public speaking in charity meetings etc. in short, making her all ready for the husband’s family.” In the end, as another manifestation of her free spirit, Gulrukhsaar Banoo wanted that her husband build a monument to honour the brave martyrs of the indigo uprising. “The Wait” should captivate the reader.

As should “The Princess of Edens”, which deals with a young woman coming from the opposite end of the social scale from that of Gulrukhsaar Banoo. It is a first-person account of a young Bengali village girl who has landed in a Pakistani brothel to become “Bangal ka jadoo”, the Shehzadi of the Garden of Edens for the habitués of that world of hookers and hustlers. She could be anyone from that dark world, and so could her own story be that of any number of her fellow citizens. She is relating her story to some one from Bangladesh --- “I am a daughter from your country.” She was born in a small village in Kushtia, but “(m)y parents suddenly realized the worth of my age and charm when they could not stretch their meager savings to the amount required to purchase of choice land. More land meant survival for them.” And, yet, she finds it in her heart to forgive her parents “who have long ceased to exist for me.”

In one memorable passage, the Princess of Edens takes a broad swipe at researchers who study her and her like: “Every now and then, young people turn up with papers full of questions on our dhanda and related activities. They say they are doing this in relation to aids. Some questions they ask about my sisters’ activities (are) sharamnaak, rather obscene. Just because their area of service is intimate, it is for a moment like that of husband and wife. Will they ask such questions to a good wife? No, of course not. One will get slapped, scratched and slammed for such questions.” “The Princess of Edens” is a disturbing account of the plight of certain women who, for no fault of their own, find themselves in places they do not want to be in. This is a good story. Not all the stories of *Born Daughter* will leave a mark on the general reader’s mind. But the ones that do should leave a deep imprint on his/her psyche.

SHAHID ALAM IS AN ACTOR AND EDUCATIONIST.

The journey of a music maker

Anis Mohammad finds richness in a memoir

A pearl is the oyster’s autobiography; the autobiography of Pandit Ramkanai Das is his music. He is a legendary music maestro, folk lyric collector and a great musician in Bangladesh. His life is not merely an autobiography; it’s just music. Born in 1935 at Shalla Upazilla in Sunamgonj under Sylhet division and brought up in a traditional music loving family, Das threads himself through the cultural fabric of the common people.

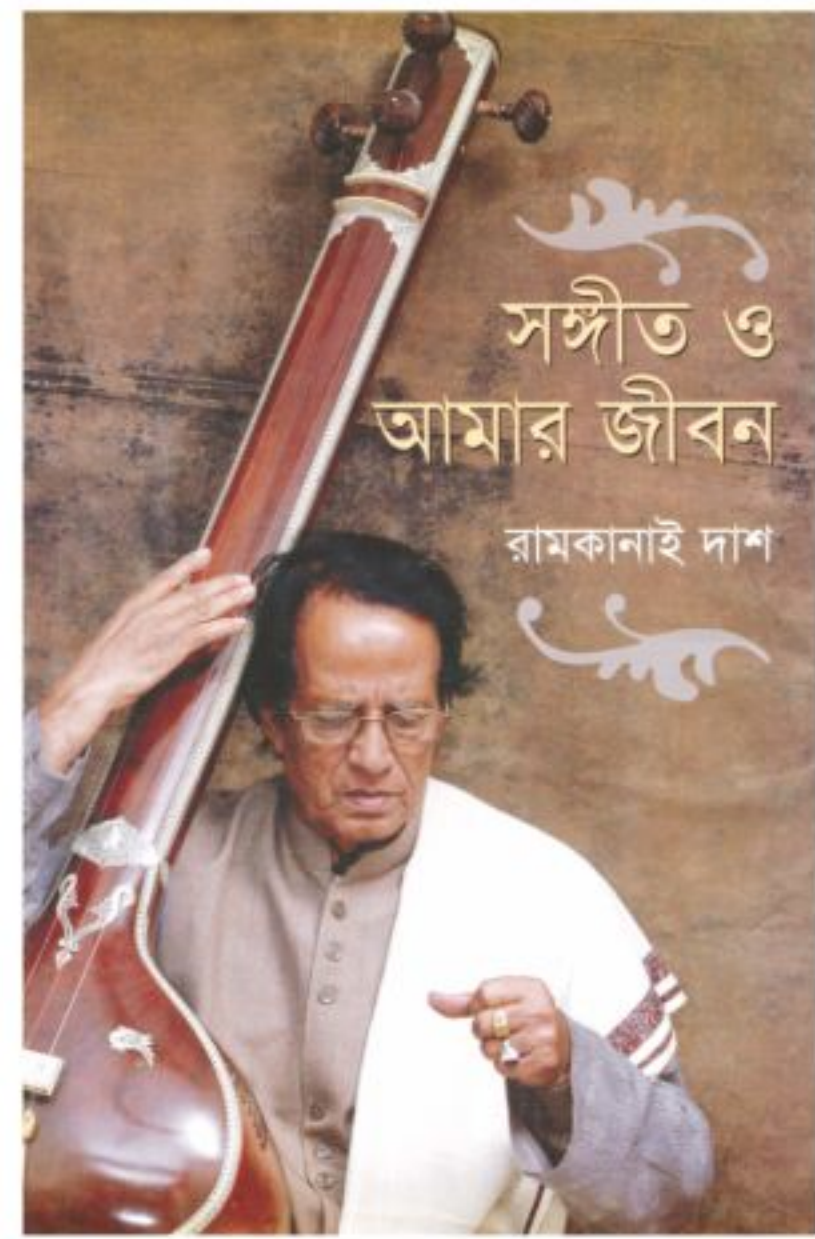
Music flows in Das’s blood. This veteran artiste’s family has been preserving and practising music for generations. His parents Rashiklal Das and Bibyomoyee Das, grandfather Prakash Chandra Talukder and great grandfather Ramcharan Talukder were all renowned bards of the greater Sylhet region. Das’s daughter Kaberi Das is also a prominent musician. In this memoir we get to know how the people of his time acquires moral lessons from mythical stories. Music is not only his profession, but also his fascination. He himself is the architect of his fate and music is his worship.

Childhood is an eternal source of divine bliss for him. In his childhood he felt amazed at seeing singers, musicians, actors, actresses and dancers together. His poverty could not come in the way of his boundless aspirations and musical genius. In the melancholic voice of his mother in his very infancy he realized that sweetest songs were those which spoke of the saddest thoughts.

It is also learnt that a river in spring cannot be understood by its frozen condition in the winter. Life has both winter and spring and it should be realized by understanding its multiplicity. As music did not bring any mentionable financial input, Das’ wife always felt anxious about his music profession. In 1967, when he commenced his musical career as a tabla player and a regular performer of classical, semi-classical, modern, and as a Nazrul Sangeet at Sylhet Radio, his wife Divya Mayi Das for the first time felt very contented.

From his very tender age, Das had a deep fascination for such branches of folk songs such as Kobigan, Boul, Kirton, Urigan, Tikloranir gan, Noukabaicher gan, Trinather gan, Murshidi gan, Jari gan, Shari gan, latra gan and the like. He had affiliations with musical groups like Joy Durga, Volanath and Vaggolakhshmi. He has interacted with Nilufar Yasmin, Khan Ata, Kalimohon Choroborthy, Umacharan Sarker, Samar Das, Khadem Hossain Khan, Dhir Ali Mia, Waheedul Haque, Sanjida Khatun, Anup Vottacharja, Torun Roy, Binod Choudhury, Ganga Thakur, Panchanon, Shukla Boidya, Krishnakantha Roy, Mohendra Chokroborti, Pandit Arun Vaduri, Khitish Nag and Khondker Faizuddin. He has high regards for Waheedul Haque. According to him, Waheedul Haque had fathomless knowledge in music that was beyond Das’s bounds of knowledge. He always learned something new about music from Waheedul Haque whenever he came in touch with him. Das also affirms that Waheedul Haque, whom he regards as one of his mentors, had a great influence over him.

Sanjida Khatun is a gifted voice of



Shongheet O Amar Jibon
Ramkanai Das
Nabajug Prokashoni

Tagore music in Bangladesh, Das adds. He can never forget the happy moments of playing tabla with this singer. He appreciates the performance of Nilufar Yasmin as well as her behavior. He feels proud to have been acquainted with the versatile cultural personality Khan Ataur Rahman, husband of Nilufar Yeasmin and father of singer and actor Agoon. On the other hand, he has come by much appreciation through accompanying prominent artistes such as Ustad Bahadur Hussain Khan (sarod player), Ustad Amanat Ali Khan, and Ustad Fateh Ali Khan on the tabla. He received classical music training from Kalimohon Chakrabarty and table training from Sri Shurendramohan Sutradhar. However, as he was determined to become a full-fledged vocal artiste, he chose to give up playing the tabla and underwent intense classical vocal training for twelve years under the guidance of Padit Umesh Chandra Roy from Brahmanbaria. He has made frequent visits to almost all parts of Bangladesh, such as Bhairab, Brahmanbaria, Sylhet, Hobigonj and Narayanganj.

We come to know from this work Das used to practise music sixteen hours every day. He would go on to establish the Sangeet Parishad at Dariapara. Later he opened a branch of it in the US to expand the bounty of Bengali music there.

Ramkanai Das portrays an apparently incoherent picture of his life and music history in a very intimate and simple arrangement of words, but one that is complete. He consciously reveals the facts of his life and everything he observes. He has tried to portray the innumerable interconnected and progressive sketches of his upbringing along with the musical history of his time.

In the guise of a musician, he has music transcend into healing. He knows well that without being burnt to ashes, no musician can be a musician. He falls upon the fire and thorns of life; he bleeds to the maximum; he purifies himself through a continual extinction of greed, conspiracy and selfishness. His selfless, sincere and humane qualities will leave a significant footprint for

decades in the musical history of Bangladesh. Despite much conspiracy against him, he has established himself as a reputed singer, musician and music director.

Das observes that the traditional teaching system does not fully reflect educational awareness. A true learner does not know while he is learning and an ideal teacher does not know while he is teaching. Learning and teaching are intermingled and sometimes it cannot be understood when their exchange is happening. He does not feel sorry about his lack of formal education. Self-education has illuminated his life to the fullest. His self-education has helped him to of know true intimations of humanity. He has acquired his cultural inheritance from his family and village environment.

Kanai Das is hilariously self-conscious. He truly observes that at the end of life to be a destitute cannot be expectable by a musician. To avoid a musician’s misfortune in old age, he/she should not be barred from being somewhat professional. According to him a musician must keep himself update with the passing of time and has to cope with its changing phenomena. Continual update is mandatory for every musician. Moreover, decentralization of genius is to be the goal of every artist. Emancipation of knowledge and intellectual property can help transform the chaotic world into a balanced one.

He also admits that sad memories sink into forgetfulness. A true and enlightened musician is gradually born through long struggle with others and within. Time is a great healer. A musician must believe in the panacea of time. Musicians also need to gather at intervals that can open a gateway to be familiar with one another. Through such gatherings a space of discussion is created that may help increase their artistic excellence.

From this book we come to know that racism is so deep-rooted in human genes that sometimes it can be found even in musicians. That singing classic music can slice away at the wrath in a musician’s soul, as he has been told by musician Toroon Roy, is a thought which inspires him profoundly. The more a musician devotes himself to music, the more he comprehends it. The whole of his consciousness is endowed with music. From his autobiography we also know that war is nothing but awaiting uncertainty. The cruelty of the war in 1971 has occupied his mind in all this time since the end of the conflict.

This is a great book and works at many different levels --- as intimate autobiography, as powerful literature, and as the story of one who transcends suffering into healing and makes us believe how interesting life is. He offers a roadmap of wisdom to self-discovery and wholeness, both individually and culturally.

As long as music shall last, he will live, especially among music-loving people of Bengal as well as the people all over the world. I wish wide reading of this great book. We pay tribute to his musical talent as well as to the clean image of his character.

ANIS MOHAMMAD IS A FREELANCE WRITER.

REVIEW ESSAY

In the company of writers

TULIP CHOWDHURY

AMHERST, a college town in Massachusetts, USA, has started experiencing the fall season with a buzz of literary events. This place is also called *Happy Valley* for blends of art and literature that seem to come so naturally with the conglomeration of five well known educational institutions, including the University of Massachusetts and Mt. Holyoke College. Book launches and reading sessions brought me in touch with some contemporary writers who have been contributing to different fields of literature.

Aaron Becker has authored and illustrated his children’s book, *Journey*, (Candlewick Press). This children’s book comes with a difference, for it is a wordless picture book. At Jones’ Library, in Amherst he presented his book to an enthusiastic audience of adults and children. A very tall man, he began by sitting down to join the children who sat on the floor and opened up the colorful pages of his hard cover book. He showed them the picture of the lonely little girl, who had found a red marker and had drawn a magic door on the wall of her bedroom. Entering through that door the girl began her journey into an unknown world. Excited, a little boy from the audience spoke up, “I have lots of markers!”

Aaron Becker paused and told the wonder-struck children that even if they had markers he would not advise them to be drawing on their walls though. That brought giggles from the audience of the tiny-tots. Gradually opening the pages, he went further into telling the story of his wordless book. He showed them how a girl created a boat, a flying carpet and a balloon and ventured into a wondrous world of fantasy. But adventures can hold trouble and she was captured by a sinister emperor. The girl was brave and she used her wit to be free. On her journey she also found an unexpected friendship that was truly a milestone in her life.

The rich imagination and fantasy of the author in painting out the little girl’s story in *Journey* is commendable. Though wordless, it is brilliant enough to evoke interest in children’s minds, coming as it does with visions of their own possible ventures. Sitting with rapt attention they listened and watched, asking questions, wondering what would happen to the girl. Knowing a story through just a turning of the pages containing pictures, without the hassles of spelling, was a welcome to the world of books for the little ones. For the parents the book is a refreshing way to introduce their children to the world of books at an age when video games and cartoons on TV seem to keep them glued. Aaron Becker certainly captured the children’s minds when he linked his fantasy to reality and showed them a real red marker like the one the little girl was drawing with! The book has found its place in the bestsellers list in *The New York Times*. During my brief encounter with the author, I found him warm and friendly enough to give me his e-mail address so that I could be in touch with him for any question regarding his book.

Food For Thought Books in Amherst is a bookshop that speaks for itself through its name. It is a non-profit workers’ collective that has been in the field since 1976. At a book launch hosted by the shop, *Mothers in Academia*, (Columbia University Press) were heard the voices of experience of women who have been mothers in



Tulip Chowdhury with Irena Mata



Aaron Becker



Mira Bartok



Jedediah Berry

their academic life as undergrad or graduate students and as professors, administrative or staff members. They were mostly from the University of Massachusetts, State University of New York and also from Wellesley College. At the book launching event the authors spoke on their writing, portraying pictures of their expe-

riences and challenges of balancing their job and family. Kirsten Isgro is one of the editors came from SUNY, New York. She related the details of struggle she has gone through as an academic with twin daughters, one of them terminally ill. Irena Mata from Wellesley College, coming from a Mexican background, narrated her troubles and trepidations raising her children in a white society as she settled in as an immigrant.

There was Vanessa Adel, a graduate student who has four adopted children. Raising four children from different backgrounds is a challenge she has been battling every day along with her graduate program. As she talked to me she told me of how her eldest daughter, aged around twenty, wants to adopt a Syrian child or opening their home to a Syrian family. I could well imagine how these children were trying to give back the love and home they had been blessed by their generous parents.

Among other authors was Brenda Bushouse, from the political science and public policy departments of the University of Massachusetts, who spoke on her subject. There was Wendy Wilde, also from the University of Massachusetts, with her account of a tough fight with the challenges of raising her child while paying for quality daycare. Mari Castaneda, one of the editors, was there as a speaker at the event.

In the modern education system, with moves towards more corporate-based models of teaching in the higher learning institutions, structural and cultural changes have added new

responsibilities as well more challenges to women in academia. These women are also pivots of their families. In *Mothers in Academia*, through their experiences these women in academia spoke of reforms and recognition that could help them come in touch with women scholars and so add more substance into academic life.

On a literary evening at *Food for Thought Books*, there was Mira Bartok, an American visual artist and author reading from her first award winning memoir, *The Memory Palace* (Free Press). It is a hard cover book coming with beautiful original art by the author and the story of her growing up with a schizophrenic mother who had been a vibrant personality prior to her mental disorder. Mira Bartok has also authored some children’s books, among which are *The Stencil Book Series* and *The Big World*. Talking to Bartok about her books was like connecting to a dynamic mind holding countless lights to the creative world with her writing and her art!

At the same reading session with Mira Bartok was Jedediah Berry, a pleasant young American writer was there to read from his prodigious debut novel, *The Manual of Detection* (Penguin) with short dream-like spy stories like *The Night Watchers* from his collections of other published works in various literary magazines. Jedediah has also revealed a highly imaginative mind that finds inkblings in mysterious happenings and spies. Listening to his readings other creative minds could find ladders that were not known before.

Reading the books along with meeting the authors and getting the authors’ signatures on the personal copies of their works were like lighting a hundred lights for me. I could hardly wait for the next group of writers who may be on their way to this college town that is always bubbling with creative works of all sorts!

TULIP CHOWDHURY, WRITER AND CRITIC, WRITES FROM AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS, USA