

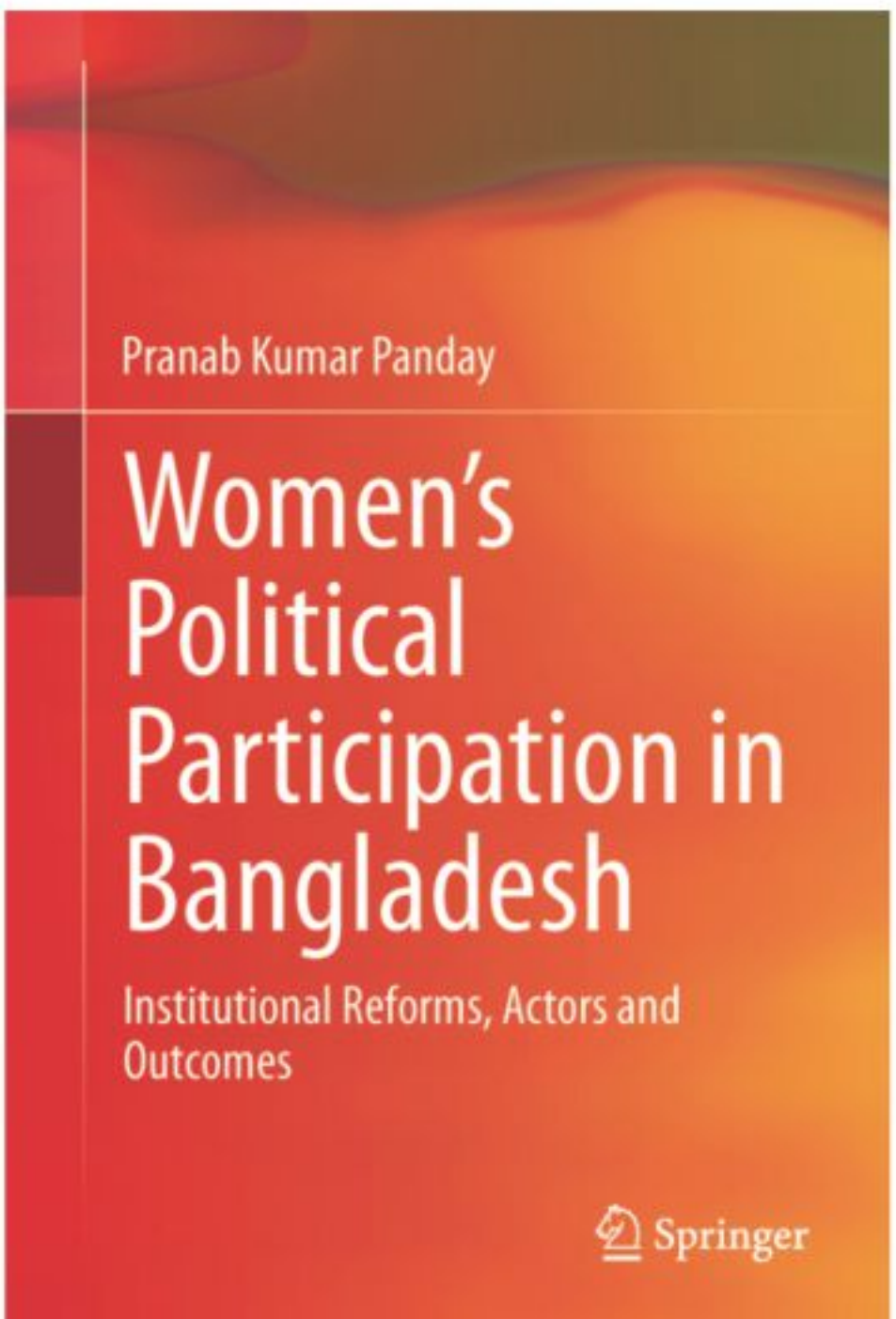
Of politics and the other half

Nizam Ahmed welcomes a work on women in governance

IT is now widely recognised that women, who constitute half of the population in most of the countries of the world, have similar, if not exactly the same, potential as men to engage in politics and in other professions. Until recently, however, politics was considered to be the preserve of men; women were seen as 'unfit' to play any major role in the political arena. In fact, in most of the democratic countries of the world, women were enfranchised much later than men. Elected bodies at national and local levels were considered to be 'men's clubs'. Any attempt by women to enter into these 'clubs' was looked upon with suspicion; it was considered to be an intrusion. The situation, however, has changed over the last few decades. One can now find more women in leadership positions in different countries at both local and national levels than before. Bangladesh is not an exception. More women contest elections and also get elected to different elective bodies in Bangladesh now than in the past. Several reasons account for an increase in the number of 'political' women in Bangladesh, of which a change in government policy to encourage the empowerment of women is crucially important. Development partners of Bangladesh as well as different women's organizations have influenced, through dialogue, negotiation and 'tacit' pressure, a change in government policy aimed at improving the representation of women in politics. Several studies have examined the reasons for the under-representation of women and/or for an increase in the number of women in recent years. But the 'limited' role of women in the making of policies and/or their implementation and reasons underlying it mostly remain unexplored. The issue of 'representation without participation', which is widely noticed in Bangladesh, has not received the kind of attention it deserves.

One major exception is "Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh: Institutional Reforms, Actors and Outcomes", published recently by Springer, an internationally reputed publishing House. The author, Professor Pranab Kumar Panday of the Department of Public Administration at the University of Rajshahi, has produced a first rate study on the actual nature of women's participation in local politics. The book, which is a revised version of Professor Panday's doctoral dissertation, explores different dimensions of women's political participation. The main focus of the study is on the Local Government (Union Parishad) (Second Amendment) Act of 1997 providing for direct election of women members of the Union Parishad who were earlier nominated by the government or elected indirectly. The author has provided an excellent account of the interaction of different factors and actors that actually limit the participation of women to a minimum. The book, as the author has observed in the preface, identifies two perspectives in the process of women's political participation: identification of the actors behind the reform and secondly, explanation of the impact of reform on women's political participation.

The book is well-organised; it contains seven chapters. Chapter one sets the scene, stating the main research problem and dealing with methodological issues. The author has used both secondary and primary sources to collect information and to frame his arguments. Chapter two provides a detailed account of the theoretical issues, focusing particularly on key concepts used in the book and their operationalization. It



Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh
Institutional Reforms, Actors and Outcomes
Pranab Kumar Panday
New York Springer

provides a succinct account of different perspectives of empowerment and identifies a number of indicators to measure empowerment in the context of local government in Bangladesh. The indicators describe the economic freedom and social liberty that these women enjoy after being elected as UP members, as well as their involvement in the political process of the UP. This chapter also identifies actors and institutions that are involved in reform efforts and explains their role. Chapter three provides a detailed account of the efforts made since the British colonial period to reform local government, particularly at the grassroots level. Reference has been made to the constitutional status of local government and measures the successive governments have taken to translate constitutional provisions into a reality. The context of the 1997 reform has been explained in detail in this chapter. The reform, according to the author, can be seen as a revolutionary step toward encouraging women's political participation, particularly creating an environment where women have begun to exercise their voting rights.

Chapter four identifies the attitude of government and political parties toward the issue of the empowerment of women, while chapter five explores the role of other key actors – women's organisations, NGOs, donors and international conventions – in promoting women's rights in the political arena, particularly at the local level. The author argues that internal factors were more important than external influence in encouraging the 1997 reform. The AL has a better record of encouraging local reforms, particularly those that relate to women's participation, than the BNP. The most important factor that discouraged the BNP from adopting any affirmative action was its alliance with the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) which opposes women's participation in public arenas. On the other hand, the proactive role of the AL has been attributed to a number of factors, of which the willingness of the Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina] to promote reforms, her personal relationship with leaders of different women's organisations and the contribution of [LGRD Minister] (late) Zillur Rahman and (late) Ivy Rahman (p.117).

Chapter six provides an empirical account of the role of women members in the Union Parishad. It identifies a number of areas to check the extent of women's involvement – in decision-making in UP, in committees, party politics, and project distribution. The perception of both male and women councillors has been explored and explained, and factors hindering a genuine participation of women have been identified and analysed.

The findings largely corroborate the conventional orthodoxy about the lack of participation of women in local politics – lack of a proper work environment, the hostile attitude of their male colleagues, and the lack of family and societal support. Women members, as the author has argued, "have not yet achieved equal status with their male colleagues in the Union Parishad meetings and work as they are not allocated equal shares in project distribution or committee membership and their opinions in Union Parishad decision-making are generally ignored" (p.x). What has mostly remained unexplored is the extent to which local government as a whole has the scope to play any proactive role. The 1997 reform revolutionised the expectation of those who wanted to play an active role in local politics. But after getting elected to the UP on popular votes, many elected representatives have found their role largely constrained not only because of the hostile social/political environment but also for several structural reasons. For a balanced assessment one thus has to look into the issue of empowerment of local government itself. Under the existing arrangement, local government is no better than an extended arm of government. Local councils are given responsibility for performing functions that the centre does not find interesting and/or profitable, and not those functions that local councils mostly want and/or are capable of doing. Unless the existing imbalance in power between the central government and the local government is corrected, councillors as a whole, no matter male or female, will largely remain disadvantaged. However, within the existing system, women remain more disadvantaged than men. The findings of the study have reconfirmed it. The issue of empowerment of local government has been dealt with briefly in chapter three but more could have been done.

This book is a useful and welcome addition to the existing 'sparse' literature on local government and women's participation in politics. The work stands by itself as valuable and well defined and articulated. It does an excellent job of setting up the problem – both through a thorough review of literature and a sound treatment of the peculiarities of the Bangladeshi case. The actual analysis has applications which extend from Bangladesh to other emerging democracies. In this respect, the book comprises a major contribution to its field of inquiry. It is unpretentious, accessible and stimulating. The chapters are clearly written. Each is succinct. The level of documentation is commendable. Those interested in the study of local politics and the empowerment of women at the local level will find the book an accessible reference and an indispensable reading. Overall, this is a very readable book and an extremely useful contribution to the literature on women's participation and local politics in Bangladesh. It is expected to appeal to a wide audience of feminist scholars, local government researchers, and practitioner of (local) politics.

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When interviews are more than views

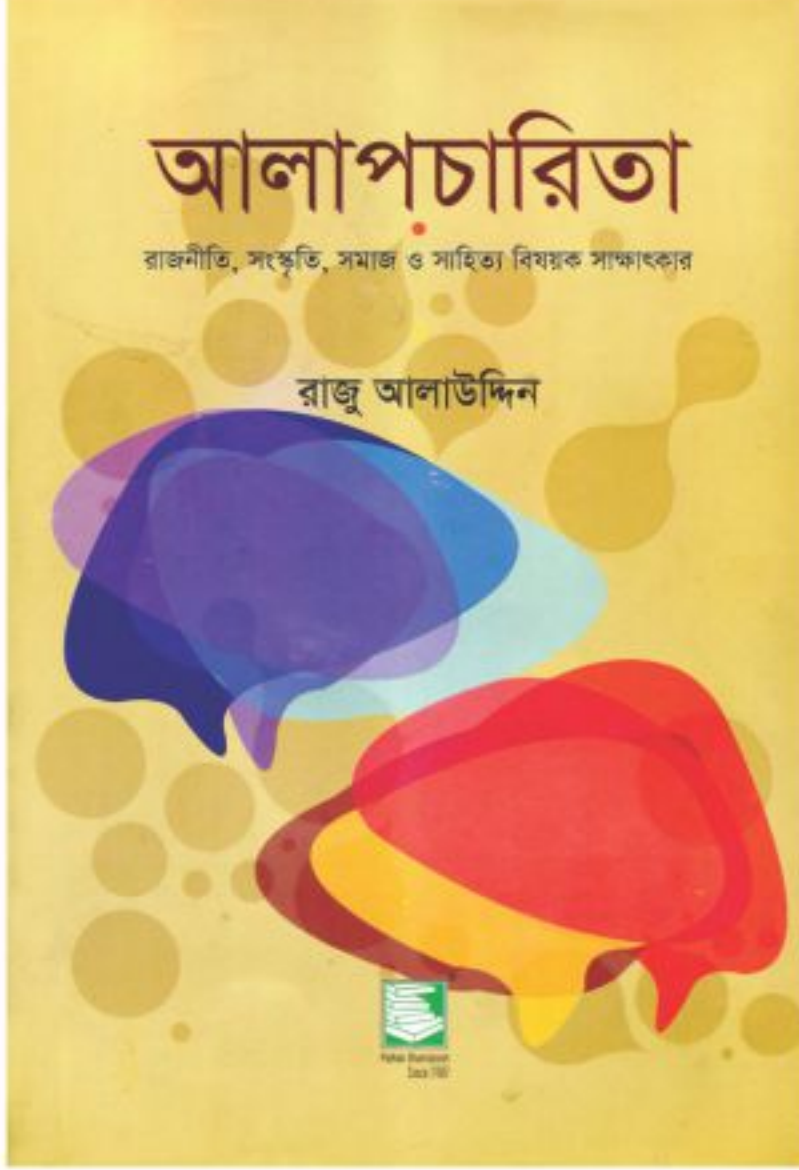
Rifat Munim explores quite a few minds

INTERVIEWERS are indebted to Derrida. It is from his thesis in 'The Law of Genre' that we infer that interviews, too, are narratives, with as much importance as any other form of writing such as critical essays or prose fiction. Of course, not all interviews deserve attention. Like bad poems or fiction, there are bad interviews. But then there are those given by Michelle Foucault, Edward Said, Noam Chomsky and Arundhati Roy. Reading their interviews, one can hope to learn things that are as illuminating as their original work. Eliciting such a response, however, depends more on the interviewer than on the interviewee.

Razu Alauddin is one such interviewer. To Bengali readers he is mainly known as a translator who translates into Bengali from original Spanish. He is also a poet and writes intriguing critical pieces on literature, often drawing substantive comparisons between Latin American and Bengali authors, or between European and Bengali authors. But before he had left for Mexico, which was where he learnt Spanish and read all the major Spanish authors, he was a literary activist and journalist involved with many literary supplements and little magazines. It was then that he interviewed many of our writers, poets, thinkers and intellectuals. *Alapcharita* is a collection of those interviews which present us with many fundamental issues, different trends and long-standing divisions existing in Bengali literature.

In these pages are interviewed Hasan Azizul Haque, Anisuzzaman, Al Mahmud, Shamsur Rahman, Syed Shamsul Haque, Ahmad Sofa, Abdul Mannan Syed, Farhad Mazhar, Humayun Azad, Syed Manzoorul Islam and Shankha Ghose, among many others. The questions Alauddin put to these literary masters are central to most debates in Bengali literature.

The book also incorporates interviews of social worker and founder chairman of BRAC Fazle



Alapcharita
Rajni, Sanskriti, Shomaj O
Shahitya Bishoyok
Shakkhatkar
Razu Alauddin
Pathak Shamabesh

Hasan Abed, politician Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, magician Jewel Aich and eminent painter Monirul Islam. Their reflections on the country's politics, art and social progress are another important aspect of the book.

The interview with Hasan Azizul Haque is indeed revealing. He comments on issues like philosophy, nationalism and the field of criticism in Bengali literature. He vehemently criticizes the invasion of western hegemony in each and every field. Above all, his two interviews are precious for young writers who will find the talk on his formative days as a writer very encouraging.

Professor Anisuzzaman talks at length about the origin of the Bengali language, about communal elements in Bankimchandra's novels, and also about the liberation war in 1971 and the constitution of the country. He makes the case that it is only in *Anandamath* that Bankimchandra overtly constructs degrading Muslim characters whereas in most other novels, the Muslims, whether male or female, are more gloriously drawn than the Hindu ones.

Al Mahmud, in his interview, asserts that the *pancha pandabs* (five major poets) in the 1930s were not Bengali poets; they were rather European, both in terms of temperament and style. Shamsur Rahman, much like Hasan Azizul Haque, defies the idea of any basic difference in the language of the two Bengals.

Thus the interviews appear to be a lot more than just views and reveal their ideological links, sometimes converging and forming one surging flow and sometimes conflicting, splitting into several divisive ones. The lingering mudslinging between Sofa and Azad at the end not only speaks of that split but also constitutes a most interesting part of the book. All these make this book an important collection of many different trends and their trajectories in Bengali literature.

RIFAT MUNIM IS IN-CHARGE, DAILY STAR BOOKS

An artiste, some movies and quite a bit of poetry

Syed Badrul Ahsan goes through a few books, in languor



Jibonto Kingbodonti
Kanon Devi
Research and editing:
Ramjan Ali Khan Majlis
Monolova Prakashani

KANON Devi died on a July night sixteen years ago. That has not, however, diminished the legacy she created in an era where beauty and grace such as hers defined art. Devi was the quintessential artiste in the sense that she brought to music and acting that particular striving towards perfection which leaves an impression on minds. Ask anyone who has seen Kanon Devi's movies or has experienced the mellifluous quality of her singer's voice. The answer will be instant and insistent: in Devi subsisted a world of images, a canvas that could well be taken as symbolic of what life

ought to be.

In this delightful little collage of Kanon Devi tales, almost all of them dealing with her life once the life went out of her in 1992, Ramjan Ali Khan Majlis traces the long story of Devi's rise to stardom from humble beginnings. Nothing is left untouched, not even the matter of privacy. After all, when Devi herself did not have any reservations about her parentage, indeed about the fact of whether or not her mother and father were legally married, there is little reason why anyone else should worry on that score. What matters is something larger. And that is the legend that Kanon Devi turned out to be in life and the heritage she remains in death. You could suggest, if you like, that Devi was a precursor to the era that would in time throw up the likes of Suchitra Sen. Devi was as much a beautiful woman as Sen would be. And that beauty would blaze through such movies as *Shesh Uttar*, *Vidyapati*, *Shathi and Jogajog*. The actors opposite whom she played her lead roles were themselves a statement of the age they inhabited: Pahari Sanyal, Kundan Lal Saigal, Promothesh Barua, Jyotiprakash and Ashok Kumar.

Move on to Kanon Devi's music. Songs like *ogo shundor moner gohone tomar murtikhani and tar bidai belar malakhani* once left the foundations of her artistry strengthened. And, yes, there is the immortal *aami bono phool go*. Oldtimers will recall *akasha helan diye paharh ghumaye oi, rumijhum nupur paaye, laguk dola and toofan mail jaaye*.

Majlis, an avid film buff in his youth, certainly cannot resist the temptation of quoting a Kanon Devi dialogue from the movie *Vidyapati*: *Vidyapati thakur, jara bhalobeshe shukhi tarai jothartha shukhi/ar jara bhalobasha peye shukhi hote chaaye taader dukkho taader hahakar kono din ghuchbe na*. There is hardly any need for a translation. Feel the essence.

Cholochitro Nirmaner Nepothhe
Kothokota
Abdullah Zeyad
Rhythm Prokashona Sangstha

Talk about movies in Bangladesh and chances are you will go back to the 1960s. For that was the era when quality films, movies that appealed to families, were made. That age is sadly not around any more. You only have to walk by a movie house, look up at the billboard there and shake your head in disbelief as you walk on. Something's the matter with the name, the title of the movie. And not just that movie in particular. The outlandish about names is what you get about nearly every movie these days.

That said, there are still people around who recall the times in which a certain sense of the aesthetic went into the making of movies. Abdullah Zeyad was not around when movie pioneers went into action in what used to be East Pakistan (he was born in 1976), but in this rather good exposition of what goes on behind the making of a movie, he throws revealing light on how far the nation's movie industry has travelled since the early 1950s.

Quite naturally, he begins with Abdul Jabbar Khan's *Mukh O Mukhosh*, a challenge that the father of the Bengali film industry took up when men in West Pakistan served the clear warning that the East Pakistani clime was unsuited to movie making. Well, Khan did end up proving them wrong. But there were other problems he faced as well, one being the reluctance of cinema house owners to have the film released in their halls. It was a long night Khan spent trying to persuade them into accepting *Mukh O Mukhosh*. Miraculously, one of them did. And after that, there was no turning back. The Bengali could after all make movies and people were willing to see them. Even Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq was impressed.

It is a long story of movie-making Zeyad comes forth with. The travails that Zahir Raihan went through with the production of *Jibon Theke Neya* are brought out in graphic outline. The reasons were obvious. The Yahya Khan military regime, having just replaced the disgraced government of Ayub Khan, was not however willing to portray the country's vested interests in a bad light. And yet Raihan was unwilling to step back from his endeavour, given that *Jibon Theke Neya* was essentially a presentation of as well as a commentary on the mass upsurge that had galvanized Bengalis between the end of 1968 and the beginning of 1969. Sinister were the moves to prevent a release of the film; and many were the scenes the Islamabad authorities thought should not have been there in it. And

yet Zahir Raihan turned out to be a fortunate man. *Jibon Theke Neya* was eventually released, to public acclaim. It would soon serve as a catalyst for a greater cause --- Bengali national sovereignty.

Zeyad's list encompasses fifty two movies, not all of which will appeal to readers. But then, it is not so much the scripts as it is the methods of production he focuses on. The work ought to keep movie enthusiasts riveted to it.

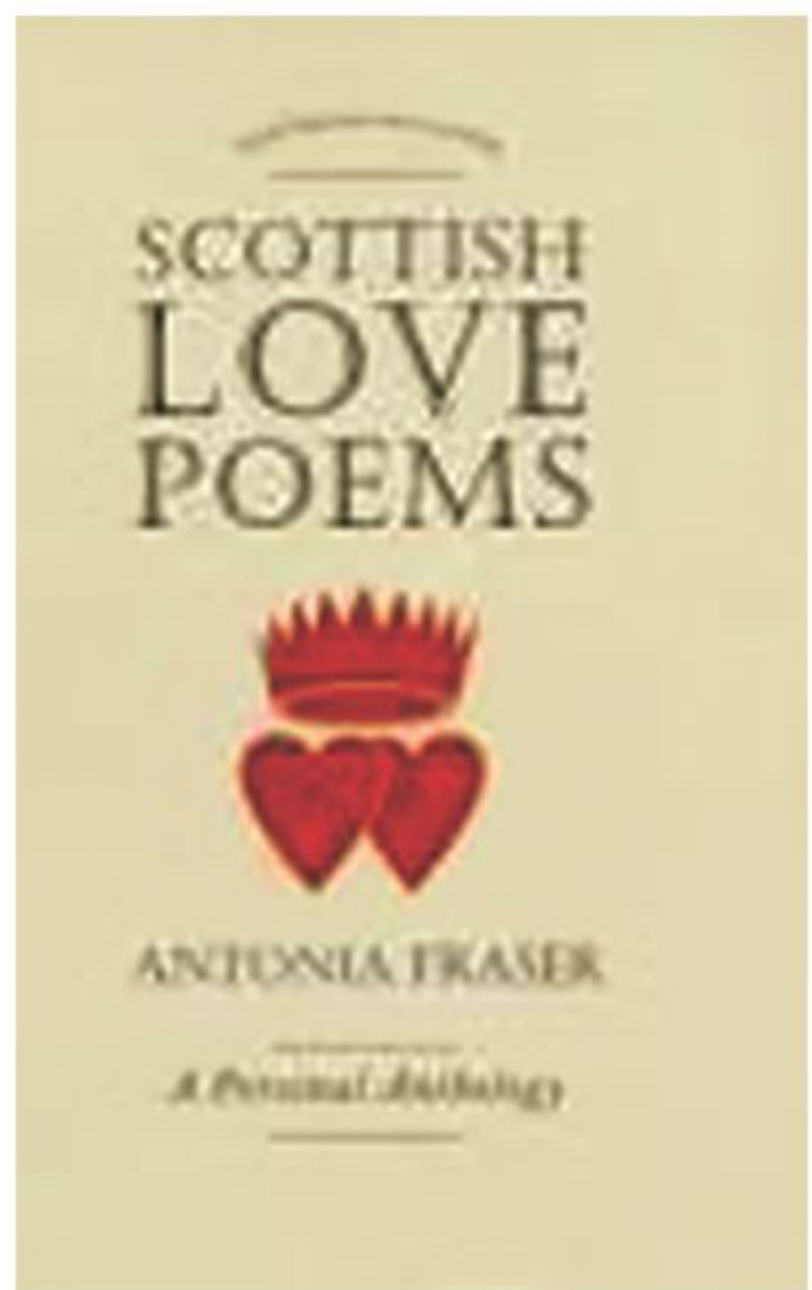
Scottish Love Poems
Ed. Antonia Fraser
Penguin Books

This happens to be an old production. Never mind that, though, for it handles a subject that has had a perennial quality. Love cannot be love when it alteration finds. And so what you have in these pages is a celebration of love poetry that has characterised Scotland for generations on end. The poetry will give a lift to your soul. Love constantly does that. And it does not matter where you are, how young or aged you might be. All that matters is the heart.

Dwell on this Laughton Johnson poem:

Thinking of you/thinking of a bird/that is tied/by the appearance of the seasons/thinking suddenly/that I may be embarrassed/to say this to you/that we may be becoming too familiar strangers...

Fraser, by now a well-known chronicler of history, goes searching for all the poetry that has defined romance among the Scots and comes up with a



remarkably good number of gems. Here is a thought from Galina V. Ogilvie-Laing:

I saw the light yesterday/a long time ago I saw him/when he bathed in the spring/summer came, berries sang, he loved me...

Or think of these pearls from Joseph Macleod:

Soft as the wind your hair / gull-gleaming your breasts / I hoard no treasures there / I do not grope for rest / I seek you as my home / that all your sensitive life / may fuse into my own...

Shall we let it be, for now?

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR