A Deep Understanding of Life

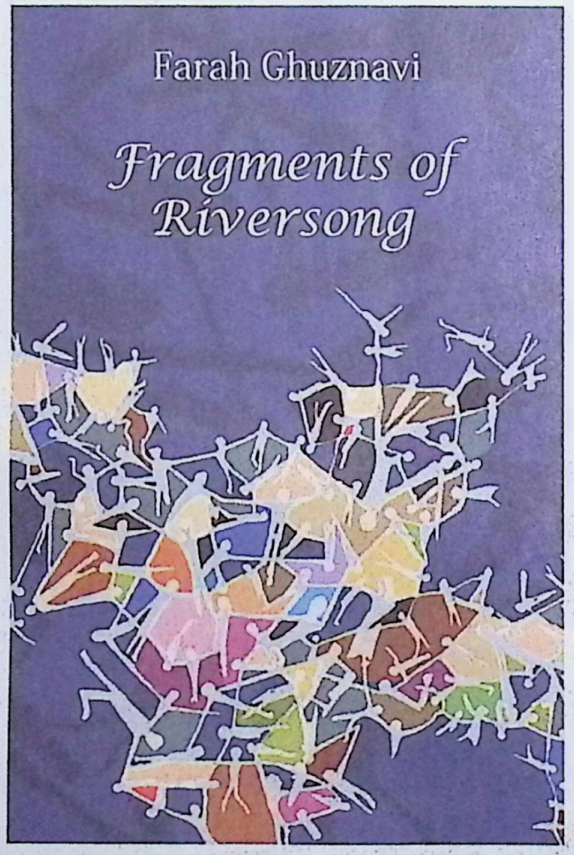
FIRDOUS AZIM

There has been a spate of writings in English this year in our city of Dhaka, spurred on by events such as the Hay Festival, and the entry of many new publishers such as The Daily Star Books, Bengal Lights and Drik/Pathshala, accompanied by established publishers such as the University Press Limited (UPL), who are seeking out new creative writing in English.

This writing is also being welcomed as Bangladesh's somewhat belated entry into the sphere of South Asian writing in English. In our country, of course, the debate between Bangla and English has a lot of potency, and writers in English have always to contend with their place in national culture. Thus even before we, as readers, can sit back and enjoy (or not) this new writing, we are already embroiled in a critical mesh that spans language debates, imperialism and globalisation, and our place within a globalised cultural and literary space.

One of the best books to come out of the emerging writing milieu is Farah Ghuznavi's collection of short stories *Fragments of Riversong*. The stories anthologized here are indeed gems of creativity, and bear the marks of a truly sensitive mind. They are also the culmination of a long experimentation with writing, from Farah's early "Food for Thought" columns to her more recent shift to fiction.

The wide variety of stories contained in this slim volume includes very short stories, sometimes delving into science fiction and drawing dystopian visions of the future. They also span geographical terrains, and bring in a rich multicultural world, ranging from rural Bangladesh to immigrant experiences in the US. Many of the stories have appeared in other collections and online journals, and the way that the author has collated them for her own volume is very interesting. Beginning with a story entitled "Getting There" (anthologized in *Lifelines*, Zubaan Books, Delhi, 2012), most of the stories, such as "Big Mother" or "Waiting" deal with life in Bangladesh, and specifically with the problems of being female in our country. While many of us will recognize our own struggles in these stories, the author has successfully drawn out many new features of the 'woman problem' in Bangladesh.



Fragments of Riversong
By Farah Ghuznavi
Daily Star Books, 2013

My favourite story in this round of reading was "The Mosquito Net Confessions", which some of us had read earlier in *What the Ink?* published two years ago. Recounting the adventures of Diya and Shahana, as they accompany a group of people from the Ivory Coast to a Grameen Bank centre in Mirsarai, the story recounts the challenges that many development workers face, and the many cultural terrains that they have to negotiate with. The two girls are city-bred, with Shahana being portrayed as an expatriate Bangladeshi-American, with no Bangla, who was there to trans-