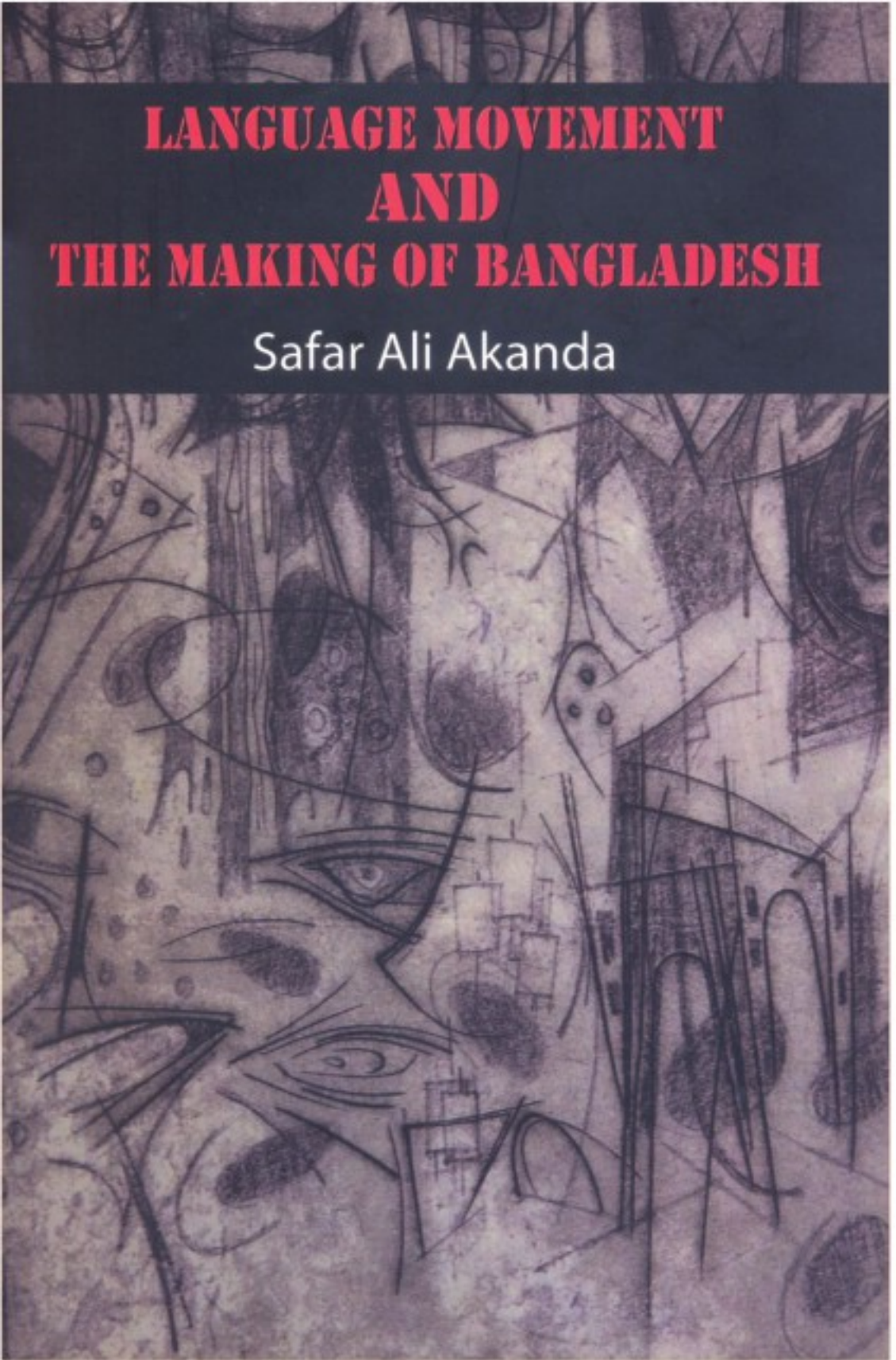


Tale retold of a proud struggle

Shahid Alam takes a fresh plunge into national history

LANGUAGE Movement and the Making of Bangladesh is a fairly exhaustive treatment of the seminal event that triggered the eventual birth of sovereign independent Bangladesh: the language movement. Dr. Safar Ali Akanda's personal involvement in the right to establish the honour of the mother tongue of the Bengalis enables him to offer glimpses of his insight into a story that has been told by several writers. The author of the book under review acknowledges these contributions throughout the text and in a useful bibliography, but has also set himself apart from much of those writings with his stated intent "to see the spirit of the movement as a life-force that was transmitted into subsequent protests and movements to give them a sense of purpose and direction until the victory was achieved in the war of liberation." Readers could conceivably have conflicting reactions to this claim, but, nonetheless, this is an engrossing book offering analytical insights into important events.



Language Movement and the Making of Bangladesh
Safar Ali Akanda
The University Press Limited

The precursor to Bangladesh's independence was the dishonour done to the cultural factor of its language. The struggle for political and economic emancipation of the Bengalis took off, and snowballed, from the language movement, immortalized by the date of Ekushey February 1952. Akanda says as much: "The language movement...became the rallying point to shape a new Bengali nationalism that was a manifestation of a separate linguistic and cultural identity, with a spirit that inspired the entire population for a liberation war that culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state...." He rehearses the familiar story (to most Bengalis) of Jinnah's declaration in Dhaka in March 1948 that Urdu would be Pakistan's state language, the refusal of the ruling caucus of the Muslim League (ML) to accede to the "just and reasonable demand for Bengali to be given the status of one of the state languages", and the resulting protests that culminated in the events of 21 February 1952. The die had been cast, and there was no turning back from the demand for the restoration of the honour of the Bengali language.

Akanda starts off with a succinct, but interesting, discussion on the impact of culture on the growth of nationalism, regionalism, and separatism. It does not always succeed in carving out a separate sovereign entity, as the cases of Quebec in Canada or Biafra in Nigeria attest to, but, as with those instances, enable the nationalists to garner substantial concessions that they might otherwise have not been able to. In Quebec's case, the issue of language featured prominently as both a reason for separatism and a demand for equal recognition with English that was granted. The author underlines the importance of culture to a nation and its identity: "A culture, whether rich or poor, is very much dear to its own people. If it is recognized to be rich and resourceful, then that culture becomes one of the proudest possessions of the people who are identified with it." An interesting observation made by Cyril Dunn in The Sunday Observer (London) in 1969 prognosticating the imminent demise of Pakistan, partly by contrasting the cultural and ethnic patterns of the people of East and West Pakistan, and quoted by the author, is worthy of a mention: "The people of the West are solid farmers and vigorous, even blood-thirsty frontiersmen. The Bengalis in the East are garrulous and sensitive, swinging rapidly from elation to despondency." Touché! A distinct contrast in character traits that the commonality of religion could not quite bridge over. Especially when one tried to impose ones preferred language (itself the mother tongue of a miniscule of West Pakistanis then) on that spoken by the majority of the Pakistanis. Furthermore, as the author states, there was "immense unequal distribution of real political power between the two regions", which resulted in disproportional development and widening disparity in per capita income between the two regions. He states what, in retrospect, has become obvious: "The language issue thus assumed the nature of a democratic movement --- for cultural identity, freedom from political domination and economic exploitation."

The language controversy, as Akanda discusses in two brief, but informative, chapters, began even before the birth of Pakistan; in fact, following the adoption of the Lahore Resolution in 1940, when a number of journalists, intellectuals, and educationists called for Bengali to be made a state language of Pakistan. Some of their writings were prescient. For example, Qazi Motahar Hossain warned in an article in 1947: "Any attempt to impose Urdu on the Bengali Hindu-Muslims by physical force will be bound to fail (sic). Because, rising discontent cannot be kept suppressed for long. In that case, the relation between the East and the West will soon cease to exist." Even before Jinnah made his announcement in Dhaka, the debates of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly in February 1948 regarding the adoption of the Draft Rules of Procedures had to be conducted in English or in Urdu,

but not in Bengali. Dhirendranath Dutt, a Congress member from East Bengal, protested and moved an amendment to have Bengali included. However, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan opposed the motion and declared: "It is necessary for a nation to have one language and that language can only be Urdu and no other language."

The author then engages in a first-rate discussion on why the ML leaders were so committed to Urdu as being the state language, and why Urdu was not acceptable to the Bengalis, who had many leaders in ML, and who played a key role in the creation of Pakistan. His chapter on the prelude to 21 February 1952 contains an observation that characterizes a major flaw in governance in Pakistan in its formative years. When Section 144 was imposed in Dhaka on 20 February 1952, the Chief Minister of East Pakistan, Nurul Amin, maintained that the decision to promulgate it was taken at the administrative level, and he was not consulted about the matter! "It is held that," Akanda finds, "many important decisions were taken by Aziz Ahmed (the provincial government's chief secretary) and he informed the Chief Minister whenever he thought that necessary." The early grip taken on political power by the civil servants after Jinnah's death spelled the doom of the early growth of healthy political institutions in the country as weak and venal politicians played along with their machinations.

The language movement reached its bloody climax on 21 February 1952, meticulously detailed by the author, but its aftermath had long and wide repercussions for both the Bengalis and their language, and the future of Pakistan. The first Shaheed Minar was constructed by Dhaka Medical College students and, although it was obliterated by the authorities almost as soon as it was completed, "since 1953 the area over which the first memorial stood became an invisible Shaheed Minar for the people of Bangladesh." However, as a harbinger of annual rituals to come, for the two days between its inauguration on 24 February and its destruction on 26 February 1952, it became a "centre of cultural pilgrimage for the Bengalis." The current Shaheed Minar was completed by 20 February 1963. Akanda also chronicles language movements that took place outside Dhaka. Some of them, especially in Bogra, in Rajshahi, Narayanganj and Mymensingh, were as intense and passionate as in Dhaka. Their combined efforts eventually resulted in the UNESCO resolving on 17 November 1999 to declare 21 February as the International Mother Language Day.

Once the cultural movement reached its climax on 21 February 1952, political activities took over. The chapter "The Language Movement after February 1952 Bloodbath" is illuminating in this regard. On 10 April 1952, ML Constituent Assembly member Nur Ahmed moved a resolution in its session to the effect "That this Assembly is of the opinion that Bengali language with Urdu language shall be made the State Language of Pakistan." Although this motion was supported by Congress members from East Bengal, none of the ML Parliamentary Party from East Bengal, who was committed to support the demand for Bengali as per the resolutions of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly and the Provincial ML, responded favourably to Ahmed's proposal. Such a turnaround led many to believe that the government had imposed a gag order on them. The motion, though, was supported by some West Pakistani members, prominent among them being Sardar Shawkat Hayat Khan from the Punjab, Sardar Asadullah Jan Khan from the NWFP, and Seth Sukhdev from Sind. Shawkat Hayat Khan also struck this warning note: "If we, from West Pakistan, are going to oppose that urge of the people of East Pakistan, we will be responsible for starting trouble in East Pakistan, which may damage the very fabric of my country and my nation."

Eventually Article 214 of the 1956 Constitution stipulated that, "the State Languages of Pakistan shall be Urdu and Bengali." Akanda then comments basically on the factor of mistrust having been implanted in the average Bengali mind in terms of the West Pakistanis: "By the time the Government conceded, much inter-regional tensions were already generated which only tended to undermine the sense of national unity. In fact, the language movement was responsible for bringing about a qualitative change in the relationship between the two regions. This led to: (i) increased tension between the two regions, fanning fires of regionalism; and (ii) the generation of more or less a permanent reservoir of mistrust in the minds of the people of East Pakistan." The mistrust widened as Akanda's account in the chapter "Attack on Bengali Culture and Heritage in Spite of Acceptance of Bengali as a National Language" eloquently testifies to. The preposterous concepts of "Islamization of Bengali", the condemnation of the poems and songs of Rabindranath Tagore as being "against Pakistan's cultural values", and the categorization of the observance of Pchela Baishakh as being a festival of the minorities, meaning the Hindus, among others, were examples of such crass cultural hegemony. In fact, in Akanda's words, "The effect of the government policy on the cultural front...turned out to be totally counter-productive in East Pakistan."

The author includes some pointed observations on society and power structure in the chapter on the Ayub-Yahya military junta: "In Pakistan, the power groups that dominated the social, economic and political scenes were formed by the semi-feudal landlords, industrialists (monopolists), bureaucrats and the army.... None of these power groups...is known to have great love for democracy.... The imposition of martial law was considered by many to have been engineered by these power groups." These factors and the language movement and its aftermath taken together, almost inevitably, led to this conclusion arrived at by Akanda: "The unique experiment of building up a state on the basis of religion with two regions, more than a thousand miles apart, each having its own distinct culture, proved futile." There are instances of careless editing in the book. Professor Muzaffar Ahmad Chowdhury passed away after 1974, and the 11 March 1948 hartal and demonstrations in Chittagong could NOT have been chaired by Abdul Karim Shahityabisharad if, as is given, he had died in 1933! Furthermore, "the usual powers of judicial review" is not "a characteristic feature of federalism." In fact, judicial review is not even a constitutional provision in the federation of the United States of America. It became a convention in that country following the decision of Chief Justice John Marshall in the Marbury v Madison case. These are minor errors. *Language Movement and the Making of Bangladesh* is a major work on the initial critical step towards a sovereign independent Bangladesh.

SHAHID ALAM IS AN EDUCATIONIST, ACTOR AND FORMER DIPLOMAT

Listening to unheard voices

Farhana Susmita dwells on re-creations of the past

FOR a collection like *Sheesh O Onyanyo Golpo* (Whistle and Other Stories), the strength lies in the extent to which it explores the lives of different people, an attempt that tries to break several boundaries. As a result, the ten stories presented to the readers by Shaheen Aktar are as varied in subject matter as in style. Often it is claimed and not without some justification that women's writing in Bangladesh has a tendency towards a particular style which is too personal, and the subjects with which it deals with are very limited. However, Aktar's new book makes all such claims invalid since her stories delve deep into lives that range from a lonely widow to an estranged Hijra to Lesbians to an ex-drug addict to dead prostitutes and many more, a diversity that makes the collection a unique one.

The book opens with 'Sheesh' (Whistle), a story of Amiron and Mira, both of whom used to live in the same university dormitory as students. They are bound by a strange connection which comes to the surface even after a decade when they meet again in completely changed circumstances. Between their shifting narratives the reader would sense that Mira fails to understand Amiron's life, the poor girl from a village who was once the mistress of an MP for a while, and whose vulnerability was unearthed by Mira's impulsive whistle. Mira retains a superior notion of herself over Amiron, but it is ultimately Amiron who turns out to be richer as a character than Mira.

'Tajmahal' offers a gripping insight into the world of a middle aged widow, Roshni. Aktar shows the pain caused by the loss of a longtime companion but, most importantly, she provides a character who defies norms a widow is supposed to abide by in our society, by her simple claim to life. 'Ambaganer Shokha' (The Friend at the



Sheesh O Onyanyo Golpo
Shaheen Aktar
Bengal Publications

Mango Orchard') takes us to another terrain, that of drug business, addicts, and the chase in which the narrator, an ex-addict, is used by the police. 'Shaap, Shami, Ashalota O Amra' ('Snake, Husband, Ashalata and Us') takes the reader into the realm of repressed and then fulfilled desire, from the point of view of a lesbian who has frequent nightmares about snakes. Interestingly, an indication of a more generalized experience is sensed here, since the narrator uses 'us', rather than 'I' while addressing herself. 'Abaro Prem Ashchhe' ('Love Comes Again'), is a story about our mixed feelings of fear, hatred, mistrust and guilt we all bear for the Hijra community, in a society

divided strictly between two dominant genders: male and female.

'The Make-up Box' is one of Aktar's best achievements in the collection. It is the journey of a garment worker, Mallika, who is carrying the dead body of her sister Mala, a murdered prostitute, seeking a place to bury her. As she moves around from one cemetery to another, she realizes Mala is still marginalised even after her death. The story from the very beginning till the end makes the reader feel a strong presence of an absent character, rejected by her society but acknowledged fully by her creator, the author.

A notable feature in some of the stories is the emphasis placed on the memories of the narrators in recreating the past. In stories such as 'The Hand Fan', 'Make-up Box', 'Tajmahal' or 'Whistle', it serves as a device to go back and forth in time through which the narrative progresses. In other cases, stories like 'Aastan', 'Ambaganer Shokha' are preoccupied with the present but the past, in spite of being in the background, remains palpable, intervening now and then in the present through the narrator's memory, and in many ways determines the course of action the story takes.

Aktar's choice of diction is remarkable. She inserts into the narrative many words carefully chosen from Bengali dialects. This completely fits in since in most cases the narration is rendered through the point of view of particular characters from certain social backgrounds, and does not seem forced at all.

The collection, with this range in technique as well as in content, undoubtedly stands out among other works of contemporary Bangla fiction and deserves a wider readership.

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Paying a price in blood

Shahriar Feroze explores a work on Afghanistan

WILLIAM Dalrymple's *Return of a King* is the story of the British invasion of Afghanistan during 1839-42 (commonly known as the First Afghan War). It is not about successive military campaigns but rather echoes of a country where empires go to die.

But before getting into the subject of the book, a brief on the historical background behind the First Afghan war seems only pertinent.

The late 1830s and early 1840s were a critical period in the unification of British influence and rule all across southern Asia from the Near East to China. In the late 1830s, the British faced a series of crises that stretched them to the limit. The Ottoman Empire, their principal bulwark against Russia's southward expansion, seemed on the verge of collapse, with a threat from within by its rebellious Egyptian viceroy, Mehemet Ali. He had conquered Syria, was on the Persian Gulf at Bahrain and was poised to capture what is now Iraq. His great-power sponsor was France. Meanwhile, Persia had entered into an alliance with Russia with the aim of recovering Herat — and thus much of western Afghanistan — opening Russia's road to India. On top of it, in the East the conflict with China over the selling of opium (the main British export there) was reaching a climax.

In light of such a dramatic military and geo-political scene, the anxious British cabinet in London came to the conclusion that the only counterpoise with any chance of success was to ensure that the ruler in Kabul should be 'reliably loyal' to the British.

This was the setting in which a furious argument broke out among the hawkish political advisors of then viceroy lord Auckland, the dilettante governor-general of India. The viceroy's man in Kabul, the celebrated explorer and traveller Alexander Burnes, urged the case for Dost Mohammad - insisting that his power was effective and that the British should strike an alliance with him. But Burnes was overruled by those closer to Auckland. Thus, a British army entered Afghanistan in April 1839, captured Kabul and dismissed the then ruler Dost Mohammad Khan. He was replaced by Shah Shuja, who had been living in exile since his overthrow by Dost Mohammad and his brother some thirty years earlier. The British expected Shah Shuja to be more a king amenable to their wishes, a client of

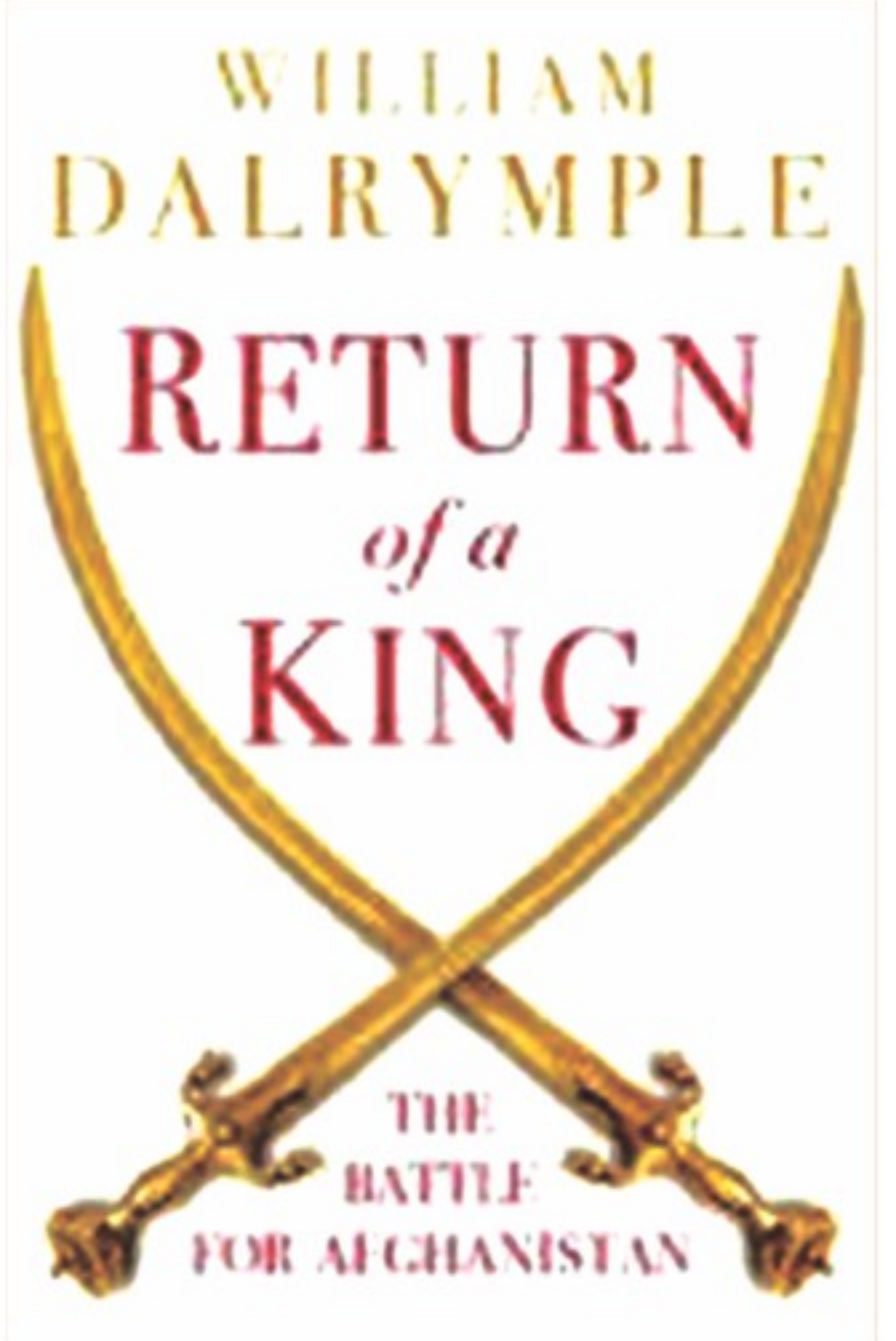
their Indian Raj, and a more reliable ally against the intrigues of the Russians. But they underestimated the resentment that their presence would arouse, and inflamed Afghan hostility by their overbearing behaviour. After failing to crush an uprising in Kabul followed by the British envoy, Alexander Burnes's, relentless philandering and subsequent murder at the hands of local mob, the British agreed to withdraw. But the retreating army of British officers, Indian soldiers and a multitude of camp followers were slaughtered almost to a man as it struggled back through the Khyber Pass in January 1842. Some months later, the British returned with an "army of retribution." After a short stay in Kabul, and some indiscriminate killing, they withdrew once more. Dost Mohammad returned (with their blessings) to resume his place on the throne.

It is the geo-political scene that could have been more elaborate to get a clear understanding of the Afghans and the importance behind the military campaign of that time. But Dalrymple's foreseeable lesson is clear: those who invade Afghanistan pay a high price in treasure and blood — and also inflict one on its unlucky people. We saw the truth reappearing even when the Americans invaded Afghanistan some thirteen years ago.

In essence, it is Shah Shuja's tale of getting back to the throne — for he is the book's ambiguous hero. It was he who welcomed the first British mission to Kabul in 1809. His long exile was punctuated by a series of forlorn attempts to recover his throne. But once reinstalled by the British invasion, he displayed calm and courage that shamed his hypothetical protectors. That President Karzai, the current puppet ruler, is from the same Afghan sub-tribe as Shah Shuja is an interesting historical coincidence too.

Dalrymple is usually renowned for his researched based writing, humanitarian stance and, above all, an extraordinary skill in evoking the lost worlds of Mughals and Afghans. Together with going deep into dangerous parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan to research his book, Dalrymple has uncovered and used a wide range of recently discovered Afghan and Indian sources — including some unheard-of new material in Russian, Urdu and Persian from archives scattered around south Asia.

To this writer, it's Dalrymple's boldness in stating that the 2001 campaign in Afghanistan was as needless as the 1839



Return of a King
William Dalrymple
Bloomsbury

invasion had been. He also points out that Afghans (many as yet) regard their deliverance from the British in 1842 as "their Trafalgar, Waterloo and Battle of Britain rolled into one". That says a lot.

The majority of critics acclaimed *Return of a King*, but some also accused Dalrymple of getting carried away by attempts to give unwonted contemporary or didactic relevance to his account when it comes to comparisons with the present. But then again, this writer counter argues, couldn't the uprooting of the Taliban be done in a more strategic manner or, in President Obama's recently used term, 'through limited and targeted attacks?' Or how can the western powers guarantee that Al-Qaida is not operating incognito by using a different identity?

However, *Return of a King* is a definitive analysis of the First Afghan War through which Britain's greatest imperial disaster of the 19th century is narrated in a historical tale-like style. The series of introductory notes, maps and illustrations used in the book helps in getting a vivid understanding of the key protagonists involved in the First Afghan military campaign.

SHAHRIAR FEROZE IS CURRENT AFFAIRS ANALYST, THE DAILY STAR

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