

Brilliant story-telling has the last word

Muneera Parbeen delves into a world of magnificent story-telling

THE *Last Word* is Hanif Kureishi's seventh novel after a gap of six years and markedly different from his earlier work. The story revolves around a young biographer Harry Johnson, laden with the task of writing the life story of Mamoon Azam. Mamoon is a giant post-colonial writer who lives in the countryside of Somerset with his second wife Liana Luccioni, an ambitious and spirited Italian woman in her early fifties.

Ageing Mamoon's first wife was a South American woman who died battered and broken and his second wife has spent a substantial time in India ...

Hold on a minute there, one might say. Why does this sound familiar?

It doesn't take a genius to recall that the plot echoes the real life hiring of the writer French Patrick to write the biography of the real life post-colonial literary giant V.S Naipaul. 'Interesting', one might say, and proceed with some vested interest.

Hanif Kureishi has described his latest work as a "sort of English country comedy, quite light in some ways, but it's also about some of the most serious things: sexuality, passion, love and writing".

Mamoon isn't literally Naipaul, but Kureishi's work is known to be whipped with at least some doses of real life like (if not of real life) events. His works, as *Intimacy*, *My Ear at his Heart* or his most famous work, *The Buddha of Suburbia* - all are understandably drenched with personal life experiences and events. Here he describes Mamoon as a writer with "hooded eyes", who has a nostalgic obsession with the West Indies cricket teams. Also Mamoon's conversation is drenched with such one-liners, as "more like road rage than literary criticism", which can sound uncannily like the way Naipul used to dismiss his own critics.

The reader has to just read on to find out whether these resemblances all tie up together or not in the end.

Harry's editor Rob candidly tells him that it's an advantage as well as a nuisance to be writing the biography of a living person, especially when the person is "a liar, thug, and, possibly, a murderer". He also has a detailed plan on how Harry is to accomplish that. He is to charm Mamoon into liking him and also befriend his demanding wife Liana. In fact, 'you might have to sleep with her, otherwise she could smoke you down like a cigarette', he tells the astonished Harry.

In short, the conniving Rob wants Harry to somehow make himself appear trustworthy in Mamoon's eyes and then fish out all the dirty secrets in his closet to be able to dish out a scandalous piece of work that will be long lasting. For then the book would be sold internationally, translated into many languages and also see a second round of sales when Mamoon dies soon after.

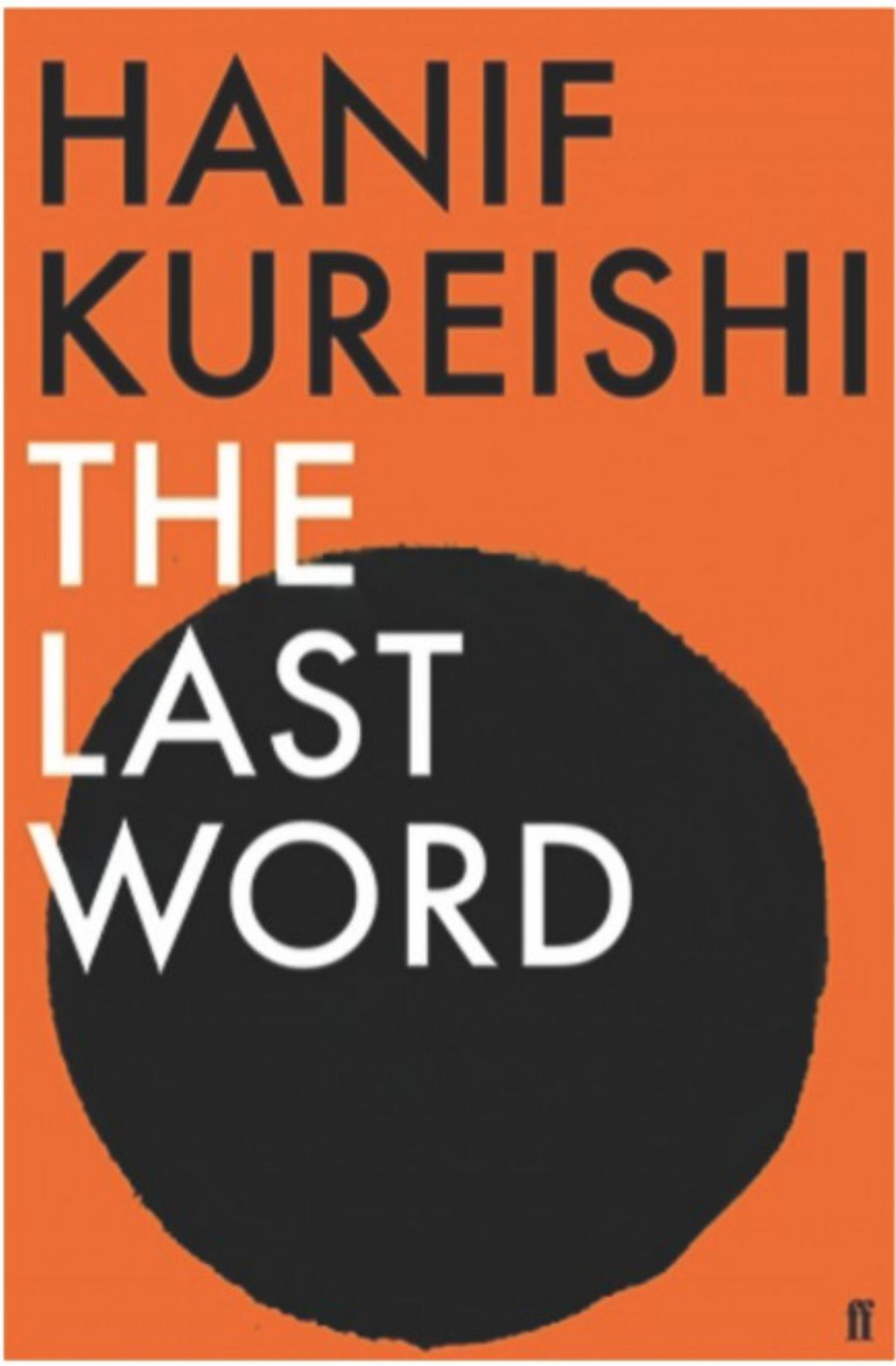
Rob is at least honest about what he wants. Harry, on the other hand, is nervous, not really thrilled at the long separation from his own girlfriend --- the independent Alice --- while he lives in Mamoon's country house. He is also in dire fear of having to resort to the life of being a professor of creative writing if he fails in this project.

Hanif Kureishi is witty as always. He joined Kingston University as a professor of Creative Writing last year.

The story proceeds as Harry settles in at the country mansion, where he discovers that Liana has been promised all creative authority over the project. Mamoon is more monster-ish than expected and the entire project feels like a long task. While reading Mamoon's first wife's diaries, however, he starts feeling inspired about the hidden stories that might be there.

During a book publicity event recently, Kureishi said he sort of put some characters --- two writers, their wife and love interests, one former lover, etc --- into one house and then let events unfold and watch what this brings out in each one of them.

And that is precisely what follows. Sheer madness. Egos clash, violent confrontations ensue as Kureishi explores human interactions. Whether the egoist older writer is a hell of a shabby person --- only brilliant in his



The Last Word
Hanif Kureishi
Faber & Faber

which the revelations happen. Confrontation is a key theme in this book. Confrontation is what brings about the exposures, of the cumulative pain and hurt holding within one household here. He keeps on pricking and attacking until the mayhem of madness almost seems to cross boundaries.

One cannot but wonder whether Mamoon is mad or if Harry is the mad one Mamoon should be worried about. Of if that honour goes to the women in the plot.

There are scenes where Mamoon literally tries to beat up Harry with his walking stick for destroying his relationship with Liana, while Mamoon himself has fallen for Harry's pregnant girl friend in a kind of platonic obsession. Liana storms out of the house, her suitcases in tow, ending up in a dirt ditch from where she is eventually rescued; her hair literally catches fire in a swerving saga of craze that sounds pretty stark mad. It is only once these have occurred that the reader can realise what a brilliant journey of story telling Kureishi has taken us on.

In a recent interview, Kureishi said he might have put a bit of his own grandfather into the characterisation of Mamoon. When asked if he himself would ever agree to allow a younger writer to live in his house and write his biography when he is yet more older, Kureishi was absolutely clear that it would be a 'mad thing to allow to happen'.

In the story Harry is eventually able to complete his work. All is well that ends well and when a work of fiction ends on a higher note than how it had begun, the reader cannot but appreciate the exquisite journey that has been the story telling.

So, to whom does 'the last word' belong as that is first thought the title evokes in us? Is it the writer, his biographer or any one of the many others who seem to have a say in their lives? This novel explores how varied the last word can be.

Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word* is definitely satirical. It explores human nature, sexuality, artists' ego and human folly. It pokes fun at the writer, the literary world, at the town versus country life, the clichés of the literary world (or persons) and definitely at himself as a writer. For in completing the story he has also shown us a side of the literary creativeness that goes in a process until the final work shapes us.

Kureishi, nowhere near the age of the author in decline in his story, appears to be at his creative best.

MUNEERA PARBEEN IS A JOURNALIST, CRITIC AND WRITER BASED IN LONDON

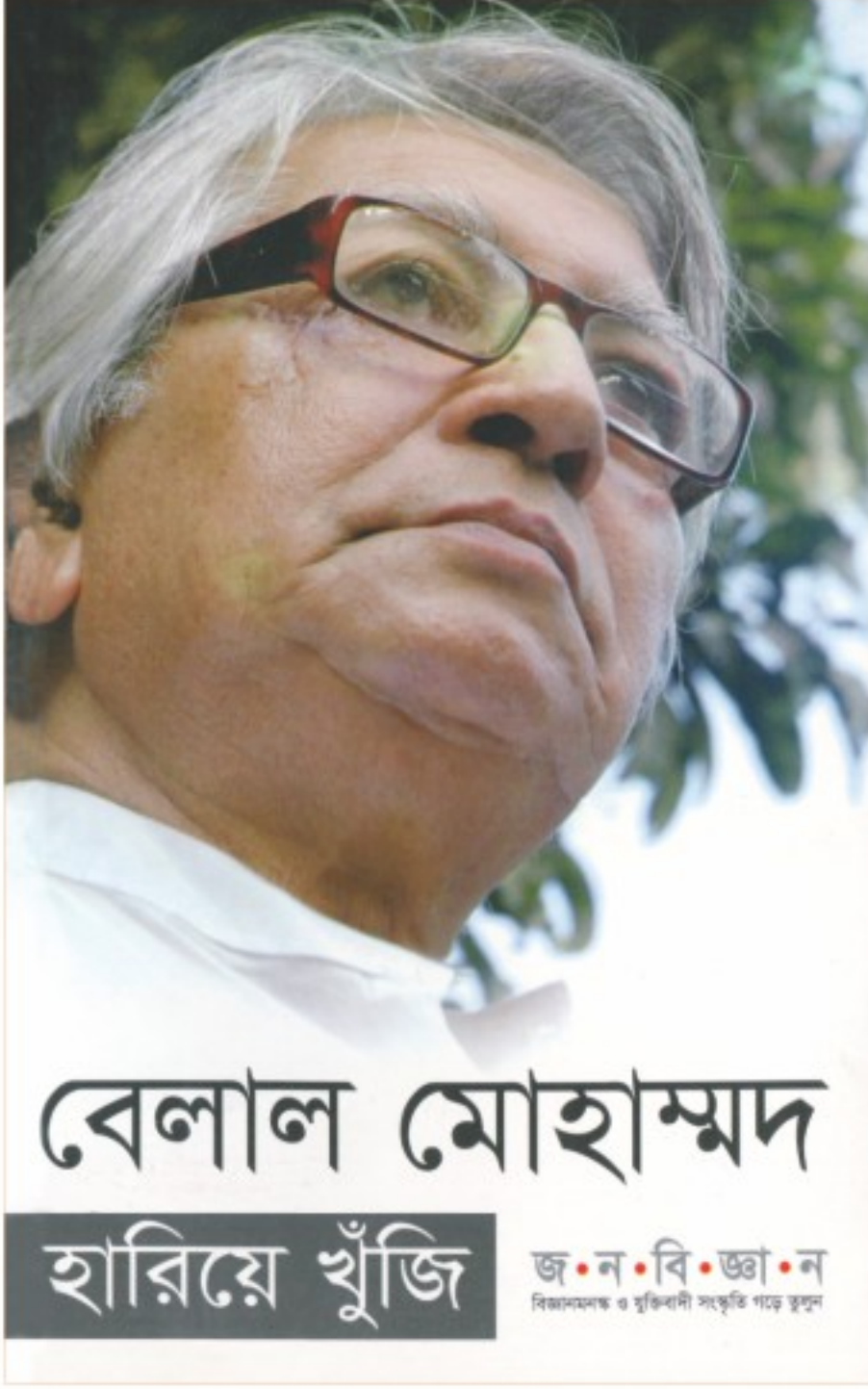
Commander of the broadcasting front

Alamgir Khan reflects on tributes to a Liberation War organizer

BELAL Mohammad had no hesitation, made no mistake and no delay in taking the right step at the most crucial and glorious moment in the history of Bengalis. At the earliest moment of our liberation war, he organized a Bengali army of radiomen to fight against the Pakistani military's rifles, machine guns, cannons and war planes. It was on the day just after the Pakistani crackdown on unarmed, sleeping Bengalis on 25 March 1971, that Belal Mohammad, together with Abdullah-Al-Faruque, Abul Kashem Sandwip and others formed the Swadhin Bangla Biplobi Betar Kendra at Kalurghat, Chittagong. From here Awami League leader MA Hannan announced Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's declaration of Bangladesh's independence on 26 March 1971. Then came others, including Major Zia. These broadcasting soldiers continued their unrelenting struggle till Bangladesh's victory in the war. The commander of this broadcasting front in our liberation war left the world on 30 July 2013. Janabiggan Foundation has paid him a deserving tribute by publishing the current issue of its science magazine almost entirely on him.

Besides being the key organizer of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, Belal Mohammad was a poet and dreamt of a society where there would be no exploitation of man by man, no discrimination against any one, no illiteracy, no poverty, no prejudices and no anti-scientific attitude. He lived a saintly life, with no attraction for property and personal recognition. A man with his love for wearing white clothes, the lungi and fatua, he freed himself from all pettiness and greed. Man's collective happiness in this world was greater to him than the illusion of individual hedonism in the afterworld. In order to free the people of this country from all medieval superstitions and prejudices through disseminating ideas of science, he with others founded, first, Biggan Chetona Parishad and, later, Janabiggan Foundation. One of Janabiggan's initiative is to persuade people to donate their dead bodies for medical use by others. He was the first person to fill up the form of this organization by committing to donate his dead body to it. As per his wish, his body was donated to BSMMU after his death.

Belal Mohammad was born in Sandwip, Chittagong, in 1936. He got involved in the progressive politics of the Communist Party and Bangladesh Chhatra Union, became a disciple of Pir Abdul Latif, worked with the daily Azadi in Chittagong and joined Radio Pakistan. He was the leading person in changing Radio Pakistan to Swadhin Bangla Betar, inspiring people and freedom fighters with mass songs, Charompatri, Jallader Darbar and other popular radio programmes during our liberation war. He received the Independence Award in 2010 and Bangla Academy Award in 2011.



Janabiggan
Issue 13
July-September 2013

In this Janabiggan issue, Belal's life has unfolded through thirteen write-ups by Anisuzzaman, Hashem Khan, Belal's elder brother A A M Yusuf, Janabiggan editor Aiyub Hossain and others. Many of the write-ups have very clearly established the fact that Major Zia announced the declaration of independence on 27 March on behalf of Bangabandhu. It was Belal who requested Zia to come to Kalurghat to provide military protection to the radio centre, which Zia did very enthusiastically. Belal joked to Zia whether he as the only major among all the minors there would like to say something on the radio. Zia agreed and surely it was a very inspiring voice in that early period of the war. This revelation does not corroborate what the BNP has repeatedly claimed in the post-Zia period about the nature of that radio announcement.

In this publication, there is another important article on our renowned scientist Jamal Nazrul Islam, who also died not long ago. Here there are writings by Belal Mohammad: a short article on the great communist leader Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad, who was also born in Sandwip, and two rhymes. What Belal thought and devoted himself to accomplishing can be understood from what he has left behind. His wife and son have not survived him. What are left are Janabiggan, Lalmohon-Muzaffar Welfare Trust and his books, one of which is Arek Muktiyuddho Chai that calls for another liberation war to bring to fruition the 1971 dream of equality and secularism in Bangladesh.

ALAMGIR KHAN IS RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION OFFICER, CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT INNOVATION AND PRACTICES (CDIP)

Of an ambrosial fruit

M. Zahidul Haque admires a mango history

MANGO is said to be the 'King of fruits' and 'Fruit of Kings'. Mango is an ambrosial fruit loved and consumed by people living in every nook and corner of the globe. Mango is widely grown in the Indian subcontinent including Bangladesh. Description of mango is found in the writings of the Mughal Emperor Akbar in his "Ain-e-Akbar". The Emperor had one lakh mango trees planted in 'Lakha Bagh' in Bihar many of which are still surviving. Eminent poet and sufi musician Amir Khasro in his Persian verse said-"for garden pride the mango is sought. Ere ripe, other fruits to cut we ban, but mango serves, ripe or not."

The national fruit tree of Bangladesh is the mango tree. Some books have been written on our national flower, fish, etc cetera, but no book as this reviewer's knowledge goes has exclusively been written on the national fruit tree mango of Bangladesh.

The eminent journalist and writer Sabbir Ahmed has undertaken the much difficult task of writing a book on the history of mangoes under the title, *Jatiyo Brikkho Amgachh* (National Tree Mango tree). The author Sabbir Ahmed deserves appreciation for successfully writing the book

laborating both the science and arts of the mango tree. The book contains eight broad chapters describing the botanical, cultural and agricultural aspects of mango and mango tree. In the seventh chapter the author acquaints readers with some major mango producing countries and incorporates opinions on the mango tree from some professionals including agriculturists.

Printed on white paper, the preface of *Jatiyo Brikkho Amgachh* has informatively been written by Prof. Muhammad Eltasuddin, Chairman (rtd) National Curriculum and Text Book Board, who has termed *Jatiyo Brikkho Amgachh* a masterpiece for the people of both Bengalis. Author Sabbir Ahmed has dedicated the book to two of his favorite school and college teachers and to prominent tree-lover of Bangladesh Kartik Pramanik.

The book has been published by Sayeeda Sultan by Porichoy Prokashon from Design Process and Printing Press, Dhaka. The lively cover is designed by Rafikunnabi.

The book may serve as an academic reference for researchers in the field. This reviewer expects a wide circulation of *Jatiyo Brikkho Amgachh*.

PROFESSOR M ZAHIDUL HAQUE IS AT THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION & INFORMATION SYSTEM, SHER-E-BANGLA AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY, DHAKA. E-MAIL:PROF_HAQUE@HOTMAIL.COM



Jatiyo Brikkho Amgachh
Sabbir Ahmed
Porichoy Prokashon

Citizen at the bottom

Masud Ahmed has some questions on money matters

WHY does one write a book? It may be for providing entertainment, information or throwing light on issues still unknown to potential readers. A manual is usually written for helping users to acquire a certain skill or skills necessary for pursuing a vacation or profession and thus earning a livelihood. Some writers write for advocating an opinion. Edmund Burke or John Milton became famous through this path. This book by M.S. Siddiqui has tried to plead for some seminal changes in the field of apportioning resources in Bangladesh society.

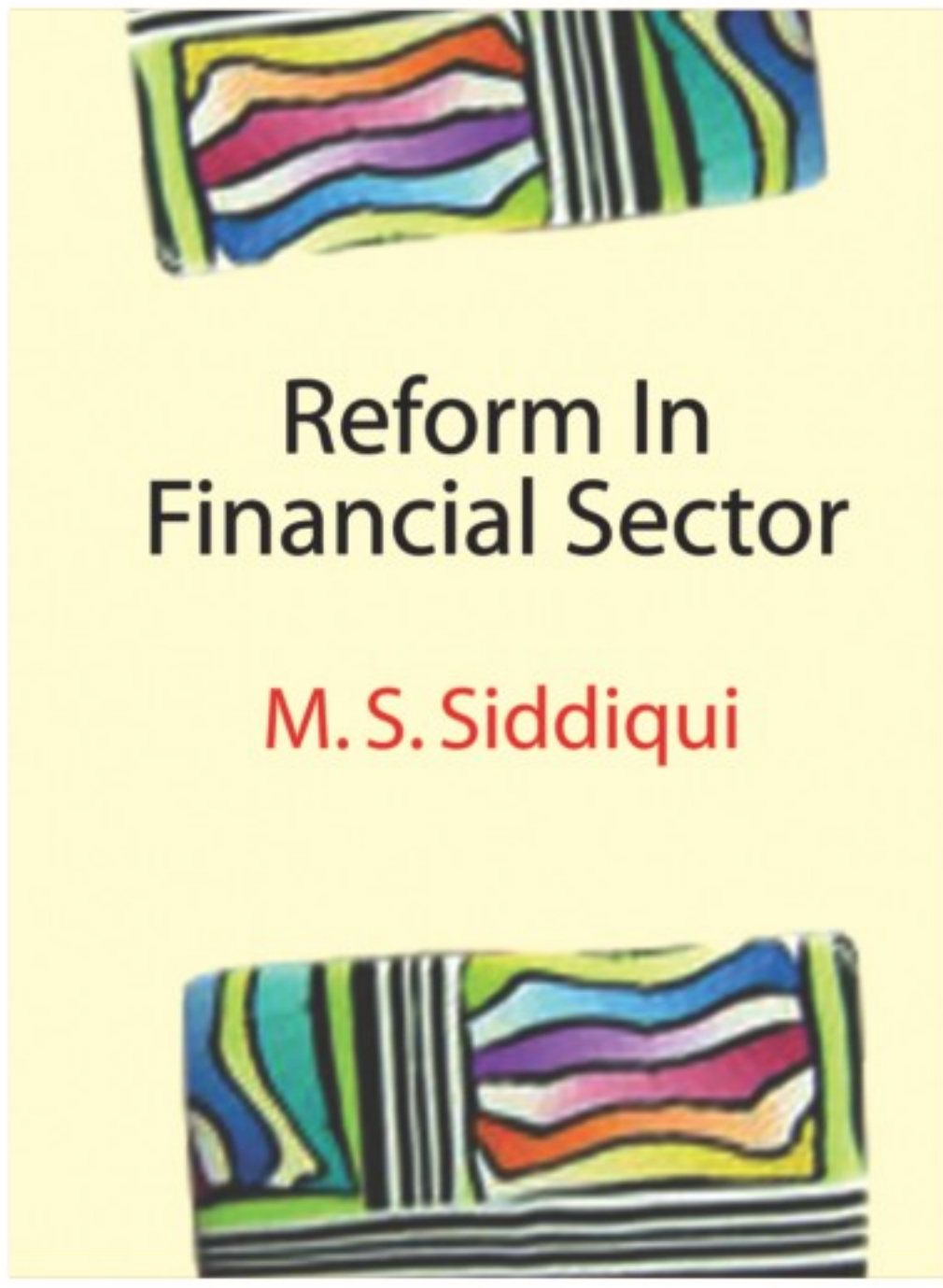
This 247-page long book is structured in 24 major and minor divisions. This shows the writer's high skills in putting and treating complex and important issues laconically and succinctly. The topics are not for entertainment but of knowledge, argument, analysis, support and application for a specific group of people which can be guessed from the title of the book as well as the divisions. Almost everything of a developing economy, its problems and possible resolutions has been dealt with in this book. CIB, Bangladesh Bank, International trade, lending, borrowing, money laundering, F.C. regulation, pension, bankruptcy, BASEL principles, collateral, default loan, share market and the only Nobel laureate's role etc. are the important issues in this long nomenclature, among others.

Since the main tune or cord of the book should go to the potential readers, I think it worthwhile to dissect the writer's basic arguments and comments and then appreciate the acceptability or otherwise of the same instead of analyzing every item of the list individually to reach the conclusion. The writer is worried about the inefficiency cost, high administrative cost, inordinate delays in lending, ineptness of the SEC, inaccuracies of the CIB system, impracticality of the collateral, high interest rate of borrowing, indemnity, incompatible environment for local productions and exports in our economy. Having been critical of the above factors, to address these and bring forth a better scenario he shows some way out and cites examples of the workings of those same factors in Canada, UK, USA, New Zealand and Australia. In making this proposal what the writer does generally, as I said at the outset as 'the main cord' is a call for doing away with controls and thus for an ultimate liberalization of many things in the economy

he considers as barriers. It is readable for those he is advocating for in his arguments. But as a stakeholder from the other side, one could ask the following questions-

1. Should developed nations be cited as examples on account of their very low interest, fraud frequency, lead time efficiency, CIB and collateral?
2. What are the population sizes of those countries and 'rules of the law' situation?
3. Their GDP, per capita income and debt?
4. Where has the burgeoning private sector got this seed money from?

On page 24 the writer comments, 'CIB reports have been catastrophic'. One could ask, then how has there been so much growth, reduction of poverty, increased employment, and rise in per capita income which reasonably are the results of increased investment. The problems of more imports and less exports may also be explained. These are high production costs in spite of low labor cost. So it is high profit which is the main impediment in the way of making quality exportable goods and services. The writer has not touched this factor. The examples of India and China could be used for low prices and exportability equation, 'Cerebus spetibus'. It is also to be appreciated that with the tremendous pressure of an ever increasing population (2.2 million per annum, net of death), inefficiency like ghost employees, unskilled and solicited employment are unavoidable in the economy. To correct a system is a better option than to eliminate it. More lending, liberal CIB, rightsizing of workforce, protection of domestic marketing will generally benefit the traders, entrepreneurs, manufacturers or the capitalists more than the consumers. Even in the developed societies 80% of assets is owned by 10% of the population while 20% by 90% of the population. Still the threshold welfare situation is such that the questions of hooliganism do not arise there as the citizen at the bottom has an assurance of enjoying the minimum necessary things. The writer himself is not unaware of this equation and correlation when he says (page-107) about our 'inadequate welfare system'. The writer's maintenance of objectivity about the sole Nobel laureate is praiseworthy. In spite of the writer's poise towards capitalism his mix of the culture and economy (page 237) becomes pragmatic and lasting when he says "a society composed of



Reform in Financial Sector
M.S. Siddiqui

Kant's 'rational devils' will develop social capital over time, simply as a matter of the devil's long term self-interest". One cannot deny this truth. The problems analyzed by the esteemed writer are problems of governance. Overpopulation and culture are two main problems in drifting it towards a path considered by the critical mass as right or equitable. To make further provision for welfare would require skilled taxation. As a rapidly changing society new definition, exemptions, allowances, restrictions and processes are surely required. This book raises and also disposes of these questions. Stakeholders may be led to form opinion as to how much of these can be done for whom with what rationale. That is the most useful essence of this well-researched intellectual work.

The choice of diction and vocabulary is appropriate. Economists, bankers, planners and social researchers will benefit from a reading of this book.

MASUD AHMED, FICTION WRITER AND LITERARY CRITIC, IS COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL OF BANGLADESH