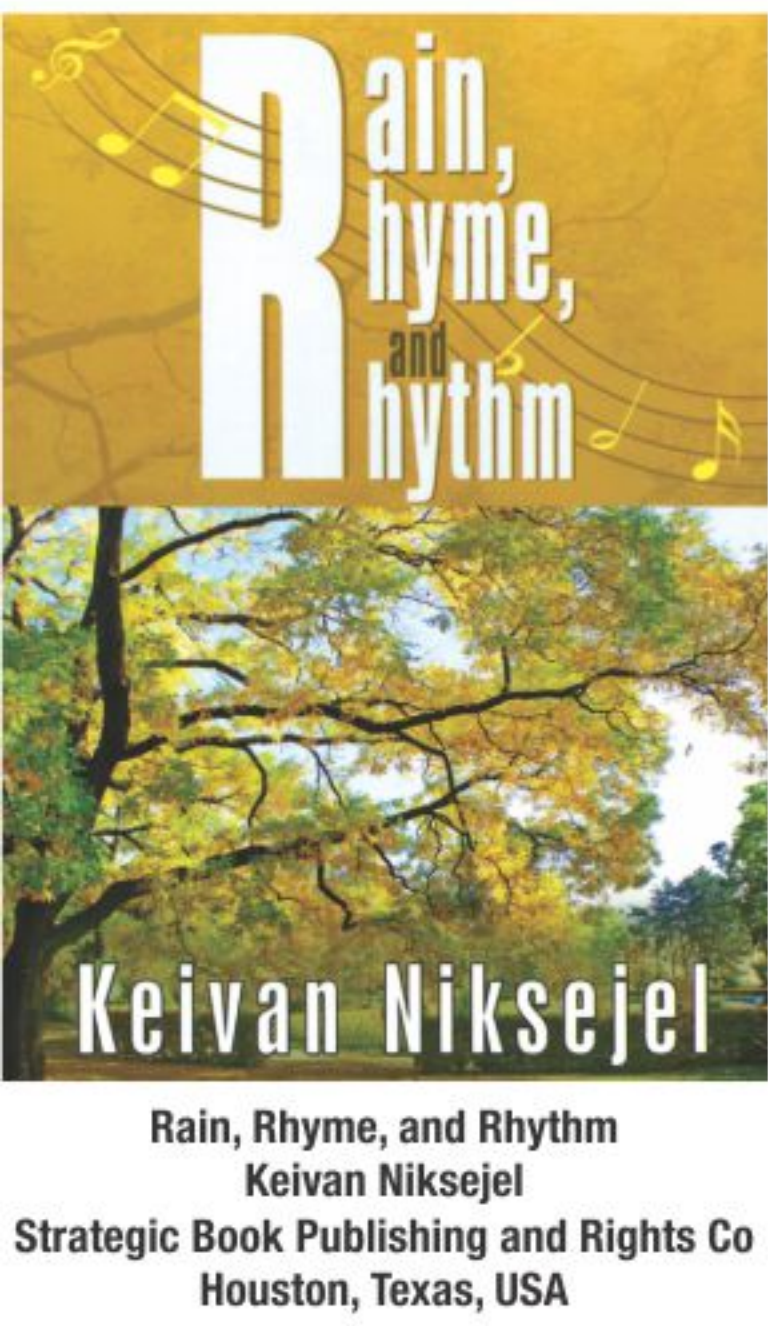


Love, the civil service and imperial lions

Syed Badrul Ahsan goes for some happy reading



Rain, Rhyme, and Rhythm
Keivan Niksejel
Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co
Houston, Texas, USA

IN the season of rains, it is poetry you go back to. Indeed, every time darkness clouds the mind or romance takes hold of the heart, it is to the poet that you go in search of fulfillment, in search of a song.

The young Keivan Niksejel is, at this point of time, the poet you run into in your search for those verses that will add a dash of splendour to your life. He gives you thoughts that can be maddening, in that sensible sense of the meaning. Remember the clowns and court jesters and fools in Shakespeare? They are always the men of wisdom grounded on reality. That being the truth, it is quite possible to delve into Niksejel's Mad Man's Diary: The Mad Man Inside, indeed to empathise with the poet. Observe:

How can you resist this train of thought...
How can you ignore the thinker's pain and gain?...
How can you see what he learns from his eyes?...
How can you greet his wizard of words?

The answers to these questions, if you must know, rise from somewhere deep inside the heart. And then you ask, in perfect understanding with Niksejel: What is my philosophy? That is a loaded question and well might you find it hard to come up with a response that will satisfy you. And yet our young poet helps you along as you grope in the dark for support:

...in the sparkle of destination and liberty,
Or in the gilded fences
That separate worship from love,
Or perhaps in the paradise
I've seen in another's eyes . . .
There is yearning in Niksejel, that enormity of desire for a satisfaction of the soul. Wistful? A sense of longing? It is all there, proof once again that the poet before you is capable of weaving the many strands of thought that have together led to these times of discontent, on that individual scale and yet with that touch which speaks of a collective sense of loss:

Not every river flows, like the untamed spring of woes / Not every soul that recognizes you needs you.
Vacuity is the offshoot of such thoughts, sadness if you will. And what is poetry if it does not come entwined in grey reflections on life? For Niksejel, life is an eternal aggregate of questions:

Have we run the endless mile?
Have we seen our final eyes?
Have we kissed our final kiss?
Or have we missed the deepest thing?
Have we landed in each other's arms?
(Farewell: Part 2)

That fleeting moment of hope is swiftly replaced by a fresh acknowledgement of reality. Observe, again:

So, life must be a joke ..

When love can be so untrue ...
And I must've been mistaken ...
When I thought I loved you ...
(Farewell: Part 1)

Keivan Niksejel is squarely up against the predicament which assails the modern soul. There is forever the Eliotesque. Or, to be more precise, there is a Prufrock concealed in the dark woods of the heart. Little of gain, much of loss is the governing principle of life in these hard times. As the poet laments in Funeral of A Friend:

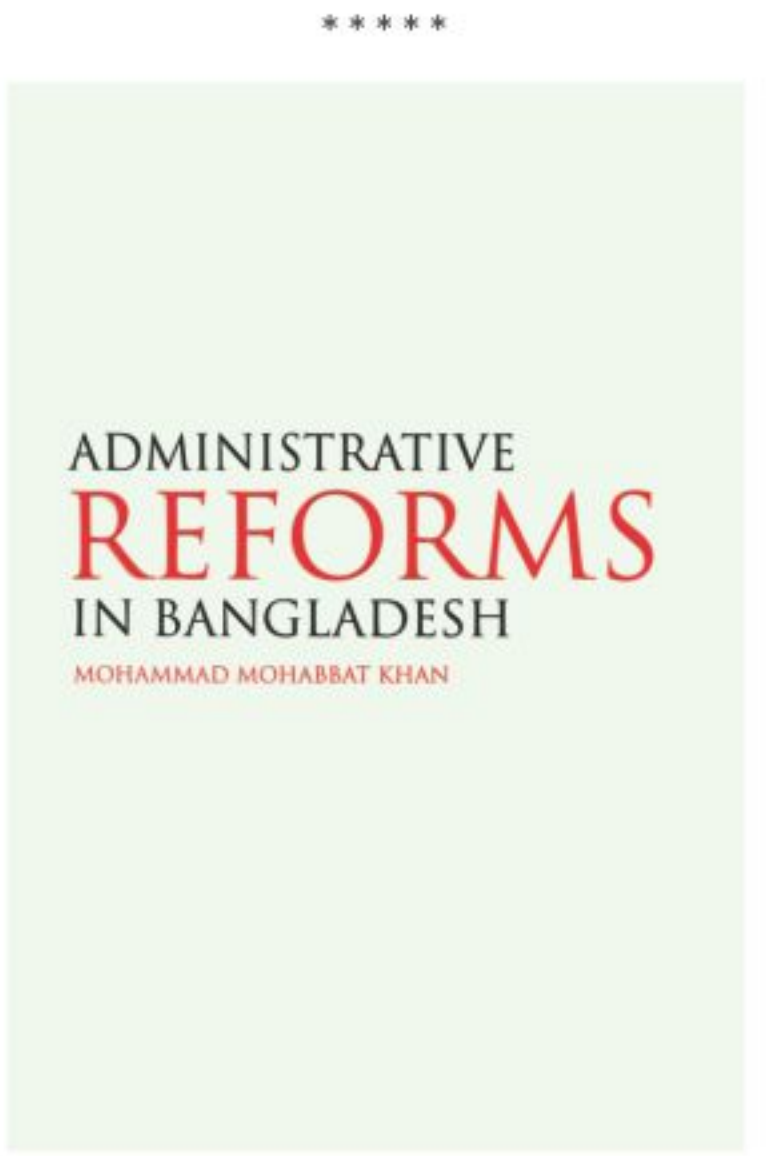
The strangest truths overflowed in that silence ... / And I felt like a mortal again ... / Naked and ignorant, foolish and immature ... / Learning my self through another eye

In Rain, Rhyme and Rhythm, it is the shadows you chase, the images that elude you and yet refuse to move away from you. Loneliness underlines life; and living is but the story of illusions. Love seems to be and yet drifts away. Tactility is an enormity of longing and yet that touch of the beloved is fleeting:

I taste the wine in your lips / And read the mystery in your heart / We make a history of love / But when we finally part / I see those strange waterfalls / And I wonder to myself / If it were all just a dream ...

(Lonely for long).

It rains outside your window. On your table, Niksejel's poetry binds the earth to the heavens, each to each.



Administrative Reforms in Bangladesh
Mohammad Mohabbat Khan
The University Press Limited

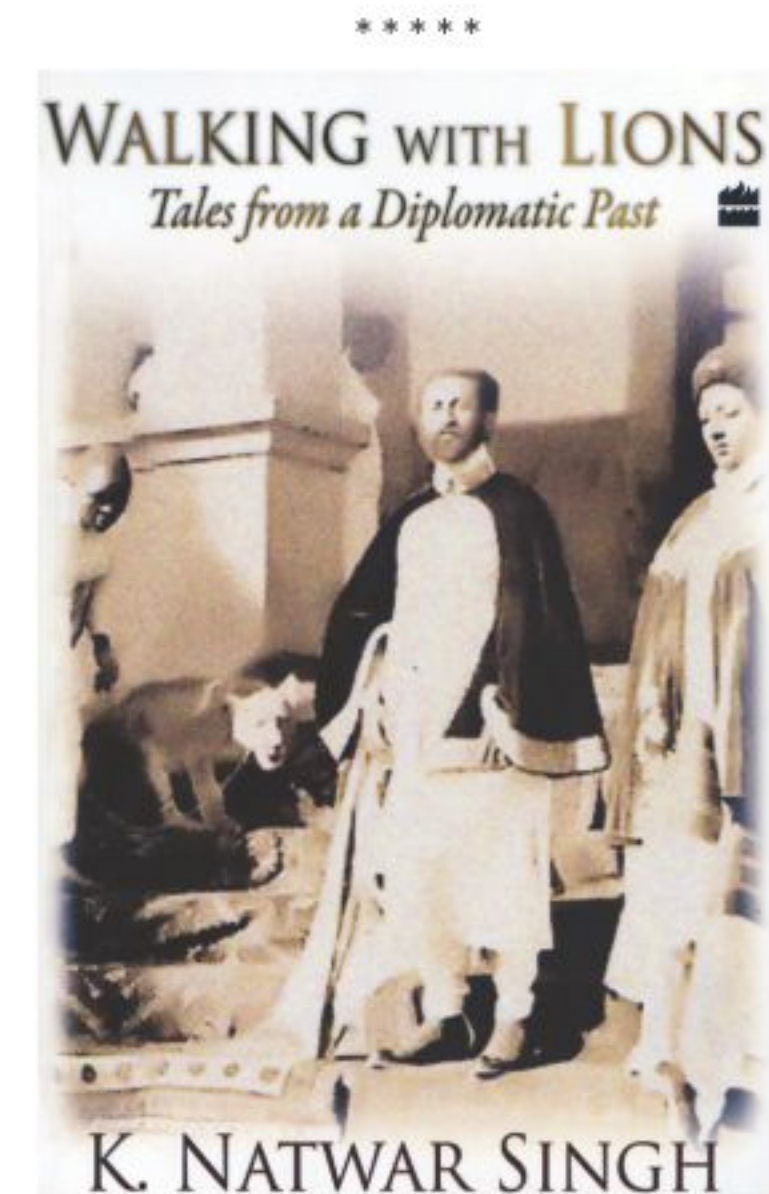
Questions have been there aplenty about the civil service in Bangladesh. Or stretch the time backwards, in pre-partition India and pre-1971 Pakistan. The legacy of an administrative system 'gifted' by the British colonial power prior to its departure from the subcontinent in 1947 has somehow stayed on. In Bangladesh, Mohammad Mohabbat Khan happens to have been one of those individuals who have observed, with deep interest as well as growing concern, the workings or otherwise of the civil administration in the country. Khan is certainly qualified to pronounce judgement on the issue. He has been an academic --- at the department of public administration of Dhaka University --- and he has been a member of the Bangladesh Public Service Commission as also a member of the University Grants Commission.

It is all that expertise you spot in Administrative Reforms in Bangladesh. The idea is self-evident. In this compact work comes a packaging of history as it relates to the civil service. Khan gives you an entire history of the reforms that have been attempted in Bangladesh's civil service since the liberation of the country in 1971. In more ways than one, the

work is an enumeration of the permutations and combinations which have essentially gone into keeping the civil service going, which again could be one more reason for readers to consider anew the question of whether or not such a colonial legacy is equipped to handle administrative issues for a free, ostensibly modern nation. Which reminds you, of course, of the move made in early 1975 --- and we speak of the Fourth Amendment --- to restructure not just the state but, more fundamentally, its civil service. You tend to wonder if the large-scale reforms envisaged through a clear decentralization of government under Baksal would not have paid off. But, of course, Khan does not deal in this work with 'ifs' and 'buts'. He has no reason to deal with matters of a hypothetical nature. Which is why the book makes for refreshing reading and, especially for historians and scholars attuned to serious contemplation of administration-related issues, is ready reference.

The difficulties faced by the civil administration in Bangladesh have had a whole lot more to do with the shifting sands of the country's politics than with the legacy of colonial rule. It could reasonably be argued that where the Indian administrative system has worked pretty well in advancing the cause of the civil service, in Bangladesh the various moves at administrative reform have been proof of the many dislocations the political system has gone through in the more than four decades since 1971. That is a thought which assails you as you read through Khan's work. For good measure, Khan makes a major part of the book a study of the significant reforms that have been attempted --- and carried out --- in South Asia as a whole. His assessments of the record in India and Pakistan, in that broad manner of speaking, make an understanding of the complications Bangladesh has faced in dealing with its civil service that much easier.

All said and done, the author does not miss an essential point in his ruminations on administrative reforms. He gives over an entire chapter to the role of international donors in the planning and implementation of reforms in the civil service. Which begs the question: to what extent are administrative reforms hamstrung by a poor nation's dependence on financial largesse from the more affluent sections of the global community?



Walking With Lions
Tales from a Diplomatic Past
K. Natwar Singh

HarperCollins Publishers India
Visitors to Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie were certainly terrified of the two lions that sat on either side of the monarch when

they went for an audience with him. The emperor was a smallish man, but there was majesty about him, as K. Natwar Singh notes in Walking With Lions. Singh has had a distinguished career as a diplomat in the Indian foreign service. Briefly, he was foreign minister, until a scandal put paid to his cabinet experience. That does not, however, detract from the remarkable anecdotes he brings forth in this work, which ought to be necessary reading for any diplomat, past or present, in South Asia.

The stories are all disparate and deal largely with personalities Singh has had occasion to come in direct touch with. Perhaps one of the more interesting tales relates to the author's interaction, or lack of it, with the cantankerous Morarji Desai. The elderly politician who replaced Indira Gandhi as prime minister in 1977 was convinced that Natwar Singh was Indira's man in London, at the Indian high commission, and had a huge amount of Nehru-Gandhi money stashed away for the fallen leader. Singh titles the essay 'A Spat with Morarji Desai'. He leaves hardly anything unsaid about Desai. As he notes, 'Prime Minister Morarji Desai's knowledge of and interest in Africa was abysmal. This had not been the case with Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.'

On Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi, Singh makes note of the deep hurt the Pathan leader went through when partition rent the subcontinent asunder. He spent altogether twenty seven years in prison, in British India and Pakistan, and yet did not part with his political beliefs. On a visit to Kabul in 1969, Indira Gandhi went to see him, twenty two years after she had last met him. Later, Natwar Singh went to visit Ghaffar Khan at the latter's home in Kabul. It was dinner time, says he. The Frontier Gandhi and his companions, dipping their naans in a large bowl of meat and vegetables, reminded the writer of 'figures from the Old Testament.'

Natwar Singh relates with deep pathos the loneliness of Nusrat Bhutto, whom he meets in Karachi in his capacity as India's envoy to Pakistan. The year is 1980, a year after Z.A. Bhutto has been executed. But Singh hears a different story from Bhutto's widow on her husband's miserable end. As Singh relates it, 'They told Bhutto that his life would be spared if he owned responsibility for what happened in East Pakistan instead of the army as mentioned in the (Hamoodur Rahman Commission) report. This he refused to do. Emaciated though he was, he hit out at the offending officer. A scuffle followed. Bhutto fell and his head hit the floor. He died on the spot.'

Walking With Lions is in large measure a walk with all the men and women of history K. Natwar Singh has interacted with. You get a vicarious sense of pleasure trekking back to a remarkable past, not least because Singh's telling of the stories makes you wish he had more such tales in his bag. He does, of course. Not all of them have come in this bag, though. And yet there is plenty here -- Zakir Hussain, Robert Mugabe, PV Narasimha Rao, Nehru's sisters, the Dalai Lama, Norodom Sihanouk, Vo Nguyen Giap, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Mao Zedong, Nadine Gordimer, MF Hussain and a whole club of other illustrious individuals. This is one book you cannot part company with.

in the book Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis, which he co-wrote with D. T. Suzuki and De Martino: "To become conscious of what is unconscious and thus to enlarge one's consciousness means to get in touch with reality, and---in this sense---with truth. To enlarge the consciousness means to wake up, to lift a veil, to leave the cave, to bring light into the darkness." And then Fromm posed an important question: "Could this be the same experience Zen Buddhists call enlightenment?"

Yes! Imaginal knowledge received from the alam-al-khayal in a writer's conscious mind become the words she writes, making writing her source of creative enlightenment, which brings in its wake a most profoundly felt, yet painfully arrived at sense of well-being. Fromm from the 20th century and Ibn Arbai from the 13th would agree.

(concluded)

NIGHAT GANDHI HAS LIVED IN BANGLADESH AND PAKISTAN AND NOW IS BASED IN INDIA.

In search of lux et veritas

Muneera Parbeen is intrigued by theories of life in globalisation

IN the Light of What We Know is the debut novel of Zia Haider Rahman, an investment banker turned civil rights lawyer turned writer.

Haider writes about the complicated lives of his two central characters, Zafar and his friend. The latter being the unnamed narrator of the story. The two main characters first cross paths at Oxford University while studying mathematics.

Zafar comes from the backstreets of London, his father 'the help' as Zafar describes him. The narrator, whose name is never revealed, is the grandchild of a former Pakistani diplomat; his parents are wealthy citizens belonging to the elite class.

This wide social difference between the two friends sets the tone of the book as the narrator tries to patch up the story of what Zafar has been up to between his sudden disappearance eight years ago before turning up at his friend's house one fine day.

The two friends are brilliant mathematicians, the narrator having moved on to become an investment banker, alas a rogue one, and Zafar prodding the threads of society as a lawyer and then development 'adviser'.

The two friends are not merely highly educated but persons with a high level of intellect -- Zafar more than the narrator -- to whom knowledge of this world is a central way of thinking. For in laying out his story Haider uses a complex and rather cumbersome story telling method as the narrator pieces together Zafar's missing time.

The book is ridden with epigraphs, footnotes, extracts, quotations and phrases from other men, other books and other writings. For a while it seems a bit overwhelming. After all, starting each chapter in a book with three epigraphs can be a tiny bit misleading sometimes. One can wonder how or what to wonder about this.

As the story progresses and the writer intermingles his texts with more complex arguments - mathematical theorems, science and literature and philosophy - always quoting someone else's work, the writing feels a bit overwhelming. There is an extract from David Foster Wallace's article on mathematics as art, frequent references to Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, references to history, or science (there is mention of a rare Mexican Salamander otherwise known as an axolotl), etc.

Is that a bit of bragging about knowledge, or a case of simple showing off? One must read more to find out.

In the very beginning of the book Zafar describes his journey to Sylhet (where he hails from) as a child. It is a charming few pages where he describes his entry into a village where he spends the next four years of a life, a period he describes as the time he was happiest in his life.

In describing his journey to get there, Zafar talks about the colours of the pineapples he sees growing in a field along the journey road and launches into his personal observations of the science and history of it all. Why graves are not marked by some Sunni Muslims (the writer refers to them as the Wahabi 'variety' of Muslims), how one area has more peaceful dominance of people of different cultures and religions living in harmony. This part of the book is perhaps the simplest and most charming part of the entire story.

The writer, who himself is from Sylhet, almost takes a brief moment from his storytelling to delve into some simple reminiscing.

As Zafar continues his story, however, it is his adult years he talks about more about. This is where begins the complex use of metaphors and references and borrowed text to argue and illustrate his understanding of a situation, incident or person or even psychoanalysis of someone's behaviour.

The narrator keeps up with him or at times is lost to Zafar's arguments. The discussions that follow where Zafar explains in elaboration what he is trying to say give rise to more elaborate metaphors, which is analysed further through using more complex arguments and references.

It is at this point that the reader realises the intense struggle within Zafar to get his thoughts right, to be able to explain to his friend what he feels or understands of most everything in his life. That he is about to divulge some great secret or event, or confess something he is holding back. The theories and arguments are just his way of arriving at his own points and being sure of them.

The writer uses such complex illustrations as 'Poggendorf's illusion', or literary extracts from Shakespeare, George Eliot or Robert Frost to set the tone of a chapter. But this is in keeping with Zafar's complex way of finding logic in things.

The chapters do get a little bulky, but in the end the writer more or less is able to reign in the sail of Zafar's streaming thoughts for smooth sailing of the story's continuance.

And what a story it is.

Zafar is a war child. A child born out of rape; his struggle between class and creed in his later life - a main feature of the storyline - is thus not a just simple desire to fit it. It is a much deeper personal identity crisis with which he grapples. He lives a hard life.

He learns that it is not just fate that has betrayed him but also a friend.

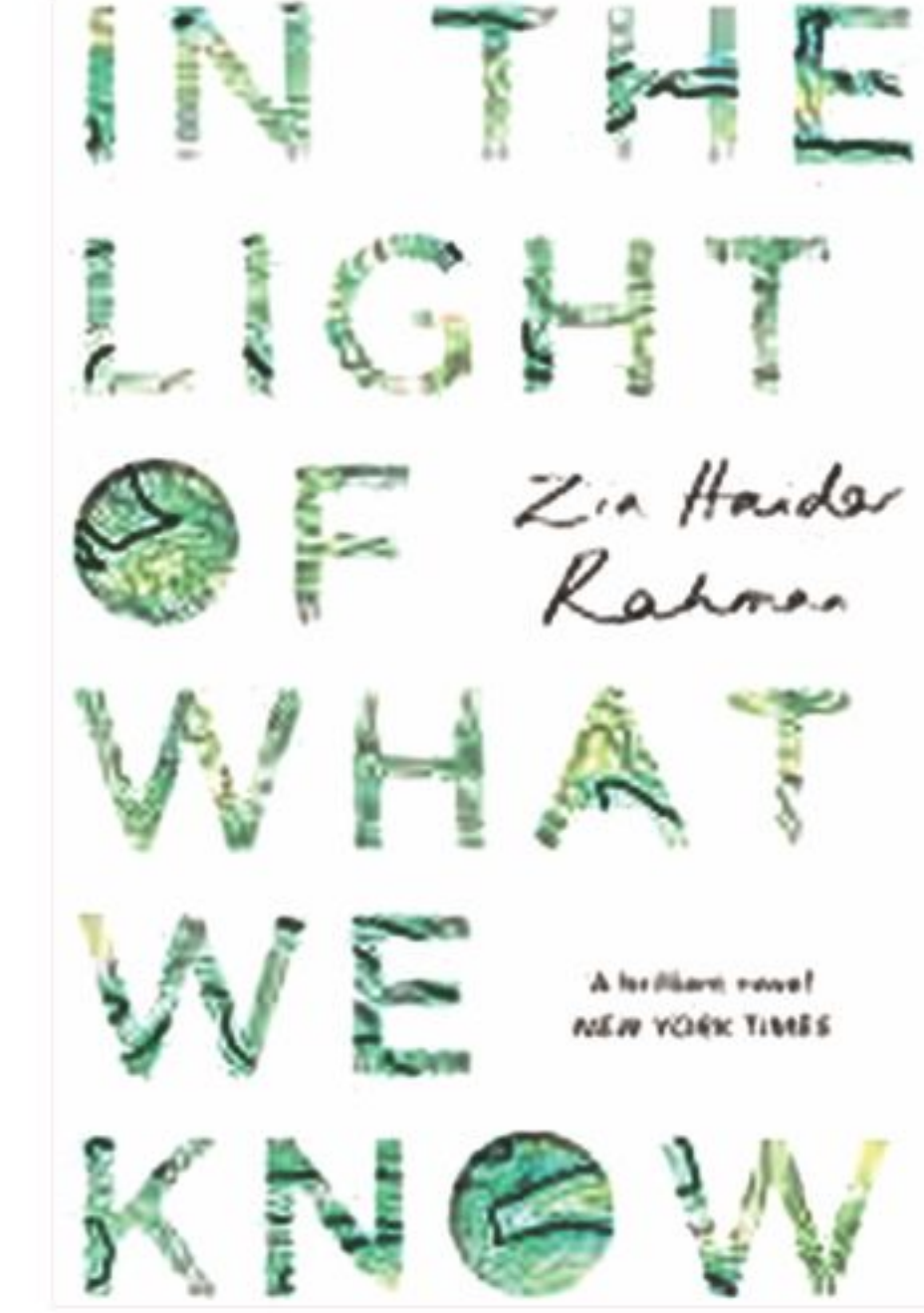
The narrator and Zafar have a complex history of a relationship. Their paths cross time and again not only because of the stars

but because of events of their own unfolding.

In the Light of What We Know is thus a very aptly titled story where what one knows and seems to know or what is known to be by allusion changes in the light of the facts being divulged.

And yet that is not the completeness of things. Zafar is obsessed with Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem -- a theorem that in layman's language could somehow be stated as 'Some things simply cannot be proved'. Zafar's inner frustrations with his love and belief in mathematics and knowledge, and the subsequent discovery of how this still doesn't help him understand many things in life is compelling, heart touching.

The narrator pieces together Zafar's journey and story - from which his own actions are not separable - from the soulful, com-



In the Light of What We Know
Zia Haider Rahman
Picador

plex explanations Zafar gives and the very many notebooks he has kept over time that he lets his friend go through.

Though the book is predominantly about friendship and betrayal, there is actually a bit of everything in the story --- search for love, search for God, class struggle, struggle for one's own unique identity and journey for inner peace and balance. There are also 1971, Wall Street and its practices, the changing fabric of the world after 9/11, new issues of international development in the post 9/11 era -- and some more - in the 500 plus pages of the book.

The story moves from Sylhet, to London to New York to Kabul, much like the path of happenings that shape all of our lives. It is the immigrants' new tale.

Haider tells an excellent human interest story in the context of many things -- love, life, knowledge, fate, destiny in the current setting of a very turbulent world. Though the story begins with the narrator's voice appearing stronger in comparison, Zafar's voice gets stronger and bigger until we know why the narrator is weakening even in his thoughts.

In the Light of What We Know is essentially Zafar's journey.

Like Zafar in the story, Haider himself was born in Sylhet. He rose from very ordinary beginnings to go on to Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard, the money markets of Wall Street. He then changed course to become an international human rights lawyer. His life is almost the making of a complete circle to come into his own being; and here he is sharing those experiences in his first book, which is being called the most brilliant book of the year.

Haider proves himself an excellent and compelling storyteller. His insight into one's mind in light of what is around the person is extremely admirable and this book is definitely not just a work of fiction. It is the result of deep reflection, introspection, understanding and compassion of life in the light of what surrounds us today.

That the book is not only Zafar's story but a glimpse of how Haider's mind works is without contest.

The story is brave and its style bold, but that it could well be one of the few of its kind is evident. Constructing a work of fiction around lines of reference and arguments worthy more of a comparative study is no mean feat. It is hard work.

And yet this is not to say the book is not without its minor disappointments. Many readers will actually struggle with the necessity to understand the complex theories Zafar alludes to. Then there are sudden bursts of footnotes, laid out as the narrator's notes taken from Zafar's notes that constantly come in the way of reading.

But then this is no book for the ordinary. James Wood, the revered critic, called Haider's book the most 'dazzling debut' of the year.

If one thinks of the popularity of post colonial writings and immigrants' stories in the aftermath of the first world war and new millennium, Zia Haider Rahman's book is a new take on immigration, identity, exile and the meaning of life in general under the purview of all this. It is the new state of affairs, the effects of world globalisation he talks about.

If you are up for an intellectual challenge, then this captivating book from a very talented writer is the one for you.

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