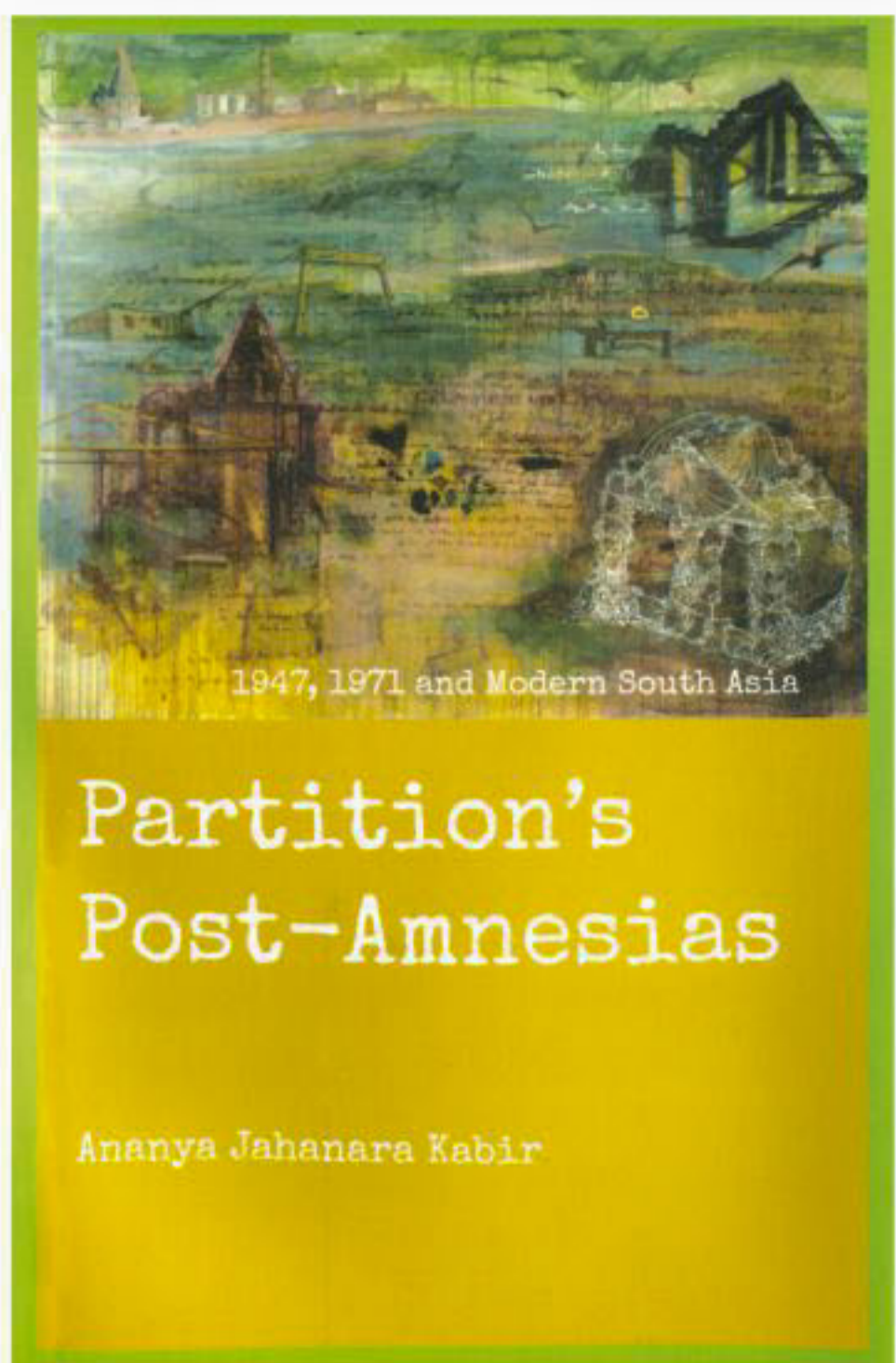


# In search of answers

## Shahid Alam is intrigued by a new look at South Asia

**P**ARTITION'S Post-Amnesias is an interesting book, not the least because it is also intriguing. The author, Ananya Jahanara Kabir, is a professor of English Literature at King's College, London, and, as is usual with many academics, quite a prolific writer of scholarly works. She is also a representative of an illustrious family, originally from Faridpur, which epitomizes the terms diaspora, cross-culture, and a few other globalization phenomena. All of those attributes are to be found in Partition's Post-Amnesias, incorporating the partition of British India in 1947, the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, and diverse aspects relating to modern South Asia. The author weaves her narrative around a personal journey of discovery, aided by that almighty catalyst of globalization, the Internet and one of its accessories, the social media.



**Partition's Post-Amnesias**  
Ananya Jahanara Kabir  
The University Press Limited

the writings of a Bangladeshi (Tahmima Anam's A Golden Age), a Pakistani (Kamila Shamsie's Kartography), and an Indian (Siddhartha Deb's The Point of Return), and conversations with a variety of people.

She is critical of excessive narratology, believing it may cause more harm than good, to humanity: "Excessive narrativization of 1947 and 1971...mires reconciliation and understanding between collective identities both within and across nations, contributing to the continuing persecution of religious minorities, the growth of religious fundamentalism, and escalating geopolitical problems in peripheral frontier zones. Yet scholarship on South Asia regularly grants narrative the role of prime mover as well as the prime vehicle of identity formation." One can visualize red flags being hoisted against her line of thinking, but, nonetheless, her point is very well taken. Drawing upon Marianne Hirsch's formulation of 'postmemory', Kabir comes up with the term 'post-amnesia', which she explains as "a symptomatic return to explorations of places lost to the immediate post-1947 and post-1971 generations through a combination of psychological and political imperatives." Hence, Partition's Post Amnesias, which offers "a comparative examination of memory politics in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in order to reveal imaginative alternatives to modes of self-fashioning that devolve around the persecution of minorities, religious fundamentalism, and ongoing conflicts in peripheral frontier zones."

The author is sanguine enough to acknowledge that, "(p)eople searching for historical facts around Partition and 1971 as well as commentary on what is 'true' and what is 'false' may well find this book wanting", but, in the international system anchored primarily on political realism and its attendant attributes, her espousal of greater use of the arts in peace initiatives and conflict resolution is a little too utopian. Going back to post-amnesia assessment and/or reassessment, her perspective on the Indian Muslims is compelling: that collectively, they are "a cipher for all vulnerable subject positions created through Partition and still beset by tangible insecurities."

Kabir uses several themes in support of her construction. In the chapter on "Terracotta Memories", she observes, citing the famed

archeologist Mortimer Wheeler, in the process touching upon anomalous divisions wrought from a unified whole: "Pakistan is found to include almost all the whole of the known extent of the earliest civilization of India, that of the Indus Valley.... On the other hand...almost all the Mohammedan monuments of the first importance remain in India." Historical linkages are important to her, as they should be for people in general. Therefore, she extols the post-partition efforts of Zainul Abedin in East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh, and A.H. Dani in East Bengal/East Pakistan/West Pakistan/Pakistan, who, through institution-building, endeavoured to reconstruct lost 'line linkages'. In the chapter on "Archeography", she dwells on Pakistan after the creation of Bangladesh. She reiterates novelist Aslam Khan's ironic comment on Pakistan's efforts at self-definition being one of its newness as a nation and ancientness as a civilization. And then poses the following questions and attempts to answer them: "Could the myth of geo-body be constructed anew based on what was left when 'West Pakistan' took on the new identity of 'Pakistan'? What cultural resources could be most efficiently drawn upon for this task?" On a more sobering note, especially in the context of events taking place over the last twelve years or so, Kabir observes: "The amnesias of 1947 and 1971 led...not only to reactionary Islamicization (sic); the 'horror of newness' distilled by a myth of origins centred on Islam also instigated the archaeological search for alternative mythic pasts."

In "The Enchanted Delta", Kabir makes this point about Bangladesh: "The enchanted Bengal delta, a repository of folksong, myth, and beguiling natural features long contested by the Bengali bourgeois sensibility to a disenchanted, alienated urban modernity, is the exemplary space of Partition's post-amnesia. For the Bengali bourgeois sensibility is also an irretrievably and complexly partitioned one." In this chapter, she dwells at some length on an illustrious member of Faridpur's Kabir Bhaban, her great-uncle Humayun Zahiruddin Amir-e-Kabir (Humayun Kabir to almost all who knew, or know of, him), former education minister of India, whom she describes, quite appropriately, as a maverick, modern, Bengali, and Muslim. In the final chapter, "Darjeeling Chai", Kabir sums up her quest in Partition's Post-Amnesia: "Not memory then, and not even post memory; but post-amnesia, or the attempt to remember after amnesia. Post-amnesia allows us to formulate a response to Ashis Nandy's perspicacious question: 'Why did the older generation not speak out?'" And, "As a subject of Partition's post-amnesias, I have written this book to retrieve a country where that lost language of desire can regain meaningfulness."

There are some major errors of fact in the book. Jinnah was the first Governor-General of Pakistan, and not the country's first prime minister, as Kabir states. Ali was not Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) grandson, but his son-in-law. And this sentence is confusing: "The young doctor was my mother; the son of Jehangir Kabir, my father." It would appear from the configuration of this sentence that Jehangir Kabir was the author's father, when he was actually her grandfather. And, then, some people might find the writing style, especially of the first two chapters, a little too grand for their taste. Nonetheless, Partition's Post-Amnesias is a fascinating piece of work that explores an interesting and intriguing perspective on South Asia.

SHAHID ALAM IS AN ACTOR, ACADEMIC AND FORMER DIPLOMAT

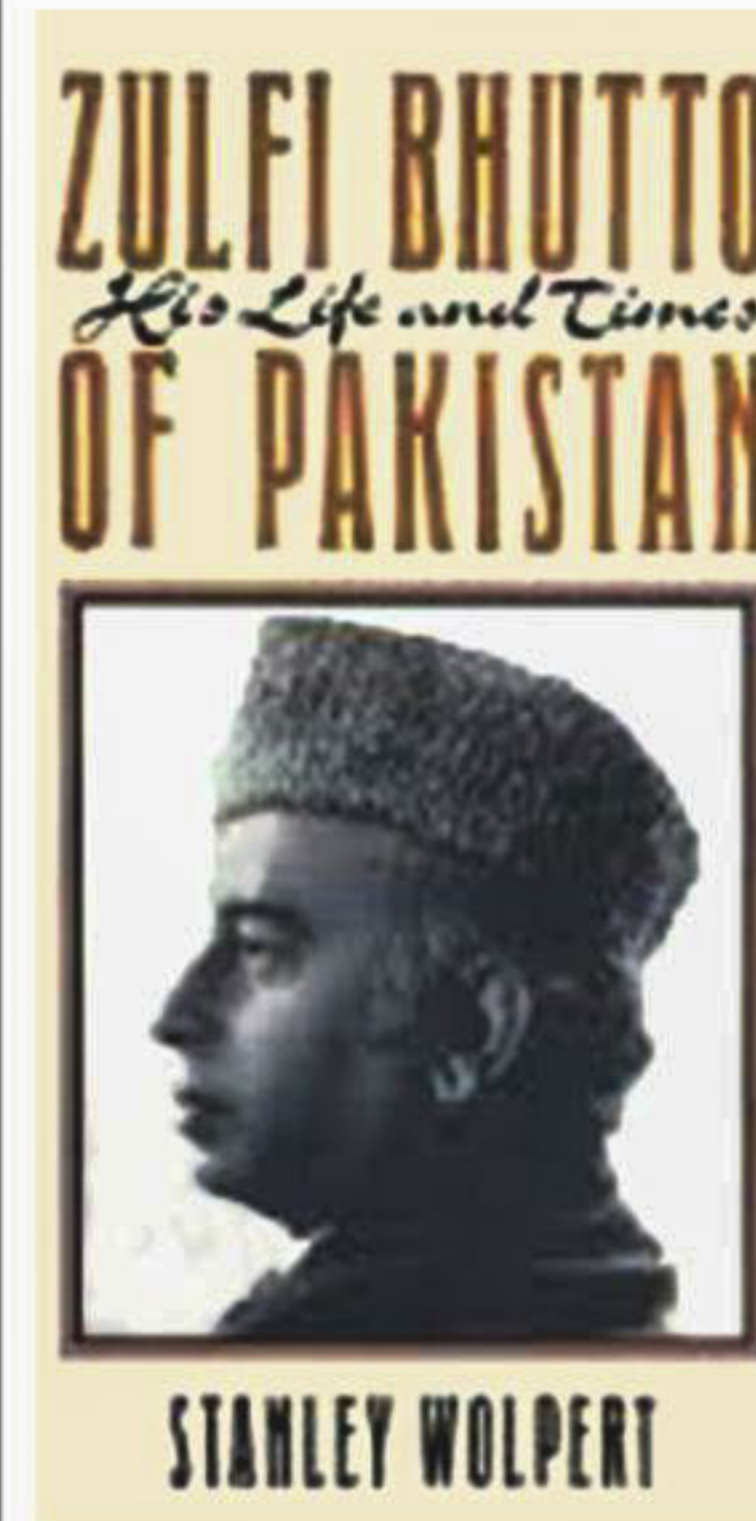
# The story of a complex man

**Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his government were overthrown in a coup d'etat led by his hand-picked chief of army staff, General Ziaul Haq, on 5 July 1977. Less than two years later, on 4 April 1979, after a controversial trial on murder charges, the fallen prime minister of Pakistan was executed and hastily buried in his village. Syed Badrul Ahsan re-reads a biography of the man and recalls the circumstances he shaped and was shaped by.**



**W**HEN he lived, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was a complex figure for those who observed his rise and fall. Thirty seven years after his fall from power and thirty five years after his execution by a military regime, he remains that way. There are his fans, largely within Pakistan, who have consistently believed that he is a shaheed, a martyr, in the defence of democracy. And then there are those who remain convinced that having ridden to power on the slogan of democracy, he did everything he could to bury it under his civilian dictatorship.

A fairly large number of books on Bhutto's life and career have appeared across the years, with the promise of more to appear in the times ahead. And especially since the assassination of his



**Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan**  
His Life and Times  
Stanley Wolpert  
Oxford University Press

daughter Benazir in December 2007, the Bhutto myth has taken on a new and expanded dimension. And do remember that we are speaking of the man who almost behaved like a maniac when he spoke to the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in the early 1970s. Megalomaniac he surely was before her, but the extent to which certain streaks of madness manifested themselves in him left even the shock-proof journalist surprised. Bhutto's aspersions on Indira Gandhi, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and nearly everyone else were too outrageous for polite ears. And even he realized that, subsequently, which is when he sent Pakistan's diplomats in Italy scouring for Fallaci, to ask her to withdraw the interview or to 'admit' that she had made it all up!

What appears in the Fallaci interview is what the essential Bhutto was. And that is the point which comes through in Stanley Wolpert's Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan. Wolpert, the American academic celebrated for such seminal works as Gandhi and Jinnah of Pakistan, was provided with all manner of facilities, including access to Bhutto's library and papers, by the Bhutto family. That being the basis of the study, it follows that Wolpert's analysis of the Bhutto character is by and large a sympathetic study of a man who could

have done much better as a politician than what he actually did. The author traces the rise of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, essentially after his return to Pakistan following higher studies abroad, and the many factors that went into facilitating it. He was a bright young law professor in the early 1950s. By 1958, he was a cabinet minister, happy to be under the tutelage of General Iskandar Mirza, a man not too well-disposed toward democracy. And yet, when only days later, Mirza was sent packing by General Ayub Khan, Bhutto swiftly transferred his loyalties to the new big man in town. It is a picture that you come by in the excellent biography of Mirza by his son Humayun Mirza a few years ago. Bhutto, recalls the young Mirza, earned General Mirza's admiration at the very first meeting he had with the president, so much so that Mirza found a spot for the young lawyer in Pakistan's central cabinet.

And Bhutto was keen to demonstrate his gratitude to Mirza in return. He fired off a fawning missive to the president, informing him in unabashed fashion that history would record that Iskandar Mirza was the greatest man Pakistan had produced, greater than the founder of the state, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. By late October 1958, with Mirza and his wife Naheed on their way to unending exile in Britain, Bhutto made sure that Ayub Khan kept him on. For the subsequent eight years, he was never to look back. He was minister for commerce, for industries and natural resources. In 1960, he worked out a deal on energy with the Soviet Union, impressing almost everyone in Pakistan and outside. By early 1963, upon the death of Mohammad Ali Bogra, he was foreign minister in the Ayub regime. Added to that position was the job of general secretary of the Convention Muslim League, the clutch of pro-Ayub politicians propping up the dictatorship. It was Bhutto's finest hour, from the point of view of genuflection. He proposed that Ayub Khan, already in occupancy of the presidency, remain in power for the rest of his life. It was thus also a moment that made others mock him.

And yet, as the Wolpert book makes clear, a moment would come when Bhutto, grown ambitious and decidedly hubristic, would begin to mock Ayub himself. Informed by foreign secretary Aziz Ahmed late on a January 1966 night in Tashkent that 'the bastard is dead', Bhutto asked, "Which one?" That was one of the many indications of the disdain, even hate, in which he viewed not just his mentor but Indian politicians as well. But Wolpert notes too the confidence Bhutto brought back to a post-1971 Pakistan, a time when the emergence of Bangladesh and the surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers had left his people traumatized. He understood the grave nature of the situation, of the realities that stared him in the face. One needed little persuasion to understand that he had been one of the principal elements responsible for the disaster that had befallen Pakistan, but it was one thought Bhutto was unwilling to accept. He blamed everyone else, including Mujib, for the country's break-up, but he would not bring himself to acknowledge his own guilt in the genocide that led to the Bengali armed struggle for freedom. But he did eat humble pie in the end. He freed the incarcerated Mujib and saw him off at Chaklala airport. As the Bengali leader flew off into the night sky, Bhutto murmured, to no one in particular, 'The nightingale has flown.'

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR

# The tears of women

## Nashid Kamal reads of birdsong in tradition



**Babar Desher Kurua**  
Sharmini Abbasi  
Mawla Brothers

**I**N South Asian traditional societies, women get married to leave their natal homes.

They either live with the extended families of their husbands, or live in nuclear families, becoming the household head by default. This role of raising kids, dispensing traditional roles of being a daughter in law to the husband's family, being a perfect employee at work, juggling parents and their aging process, becomes a herculean task. Amidst this, often women yearn to be the daughter in their parents' home. They recall and reminisce on the carefree, blissful times spent in their own surroundings. This is the subject of the book, artfully titled

Babar Desher Kurua, an obvious legacy from a bhawaiyya song, from the rich heritage that Sharmini Abbasi bears in being the grand daughter of the late Abbasuddin Ahmed. During the times when Abbasuddin Ahmed achieved his fame, the kurua bird was the symbol of a messenger from the father's native land. A fragment of imagination allows the bird to travel long distances and tell the tales of yearning and suffering which the woman is going through in her in-laws' home, in some other village, far removed from where she was.

Sharmini Abbasi has only moved from Hiranman Manzil in Purana Paltan, Dhaka to a flat in Gulshan. Geographically, the distance means very little, but the gap in the times, the perceptions, the morality of the late 1970s and that of today spark out in the penmanship of the author. Abbasi's writing style has always been very alluring; she brings out a novelty in her writing style which turns very simple events into interesting ones. For example, her times spent with the aging grandmother, who talks about coke, while her grandchildren are talking about 'cocaine' is enjoyable to all.

Raised by the connoisseur of folk music, Mustafa Zaman Abbasi and Asma Abbasi, Sharmini Abbasi finds discord in her Gulshan life. In Gulshan life, Agora, PQs, Meenabazaar surround her with pricy objects, yet the simplicity of buying a toy for credit from a vendor in Purana Paltan reminds her of the mercenary atmosphere in which the children are growing up. They do not know their neighbours, they are part of the rat race, they hear about Porsche cars and Singapore trips from their classmates.

The author has an inimitable writing style which makes her ideas very easily understood. For example, she writes 'Ek baganer phul shomule tule onno matir shinchone ropito hoye shei shob ocheno jhor brishti tufaner tandob shesheo shei pushper moti mayera, kade na'. She stands out among contemporary

writers for her writing style. Her phrasing of adjectives or use of imagery is remarkable. For example, she describes her aunt Ferdausi Rahman as crisp as nescafe. Who would attribute such a figure of speech to a legendary figure whom most people would refer to as a 'symbol of poise and dignity' or phrases like 'evergreen and well dressed'?

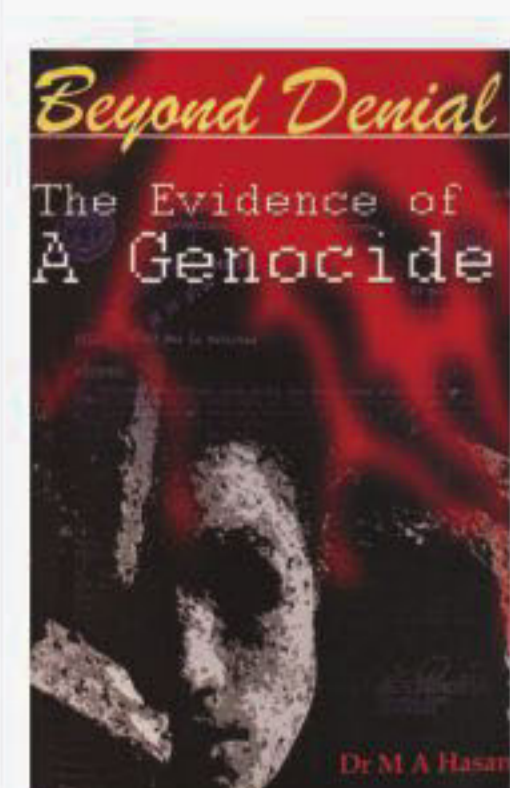
Although the book ekes out with the suppressed sorrows of the woman's soft heart, the final lines are positive '...porisheshe chondralokito bhora purnimay akashey billol shoshi shamne krishno ronger olek ka'baa-Belali azaan baje bhokomito kore snayu moddho rater shesh bhage tawaf korchhi hat dhore meye are baba.....kurua ja ebar tui,ichha moton shukher geet ga, dukho bole kichu nei'.

She tells women to come to terms with whatever they have and accept reality as well as the memorable, enjoyable situations that life has also offered in the newness of it all.

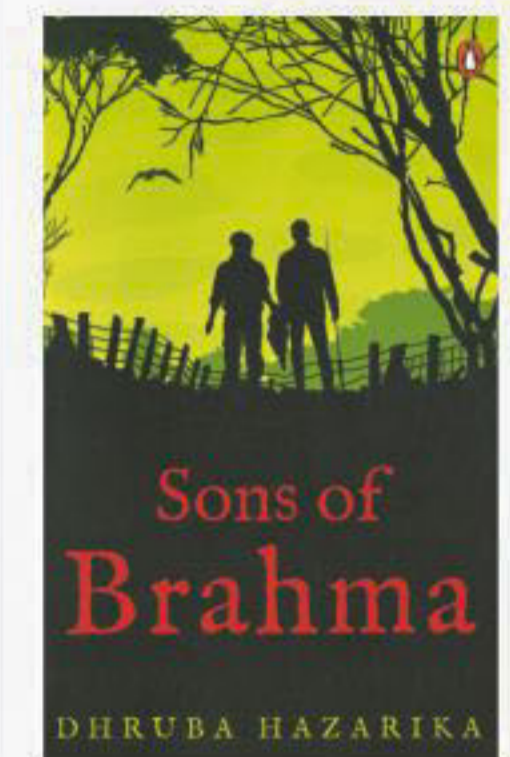
Sharmini's concept of using words and describing situations definitely makes her 'first among the equals', as she sets her own writing style, repeatedly telling the kurua bird, 'Babar desher kurua chhara are kauke je bolte nei. Tui kintu kauke bolish na, dukkho korish na, shona chan pakhi, dukkho chhara je kono shongest shompurno na'. This is where she achieves universality in her writing. The fact that even today, among privileged families, with sophisticated dress and higher education from Western universities, women's sorrow and cries are the same as those from a humbler background, or from different times. Sharmini Abbasi's easy flowing prose reminds me of a three hour long solo drama by Treetpti Mitra. It was all engrossing and the characters, even though invisible, were clear and lucid from her narration, and of course, never a dull moment!

DR. NASHID KAMAL IS AN ACADEMIC AND LEADING NAZRUL EXPONENT

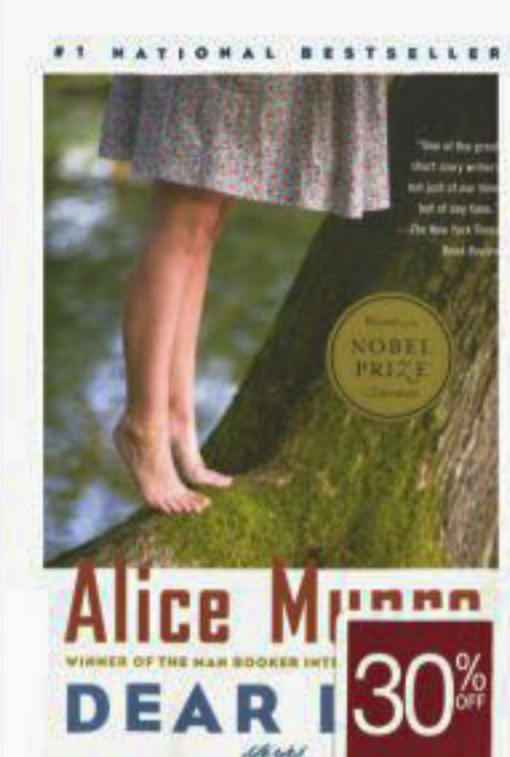
# BOOK offerings



**Beyond Denial**  
The Evidence of A Genocide  
Dr. M A Hasnain  
New Millennium London



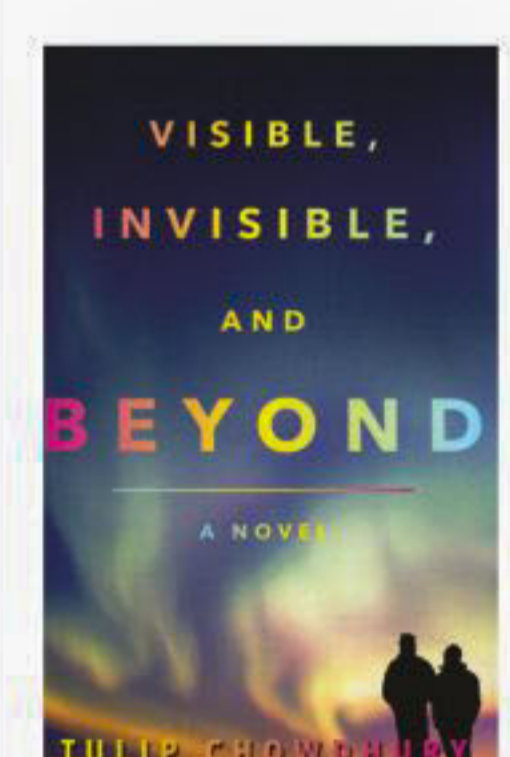
**Sons of Brahma**  
Dhruva Hazarika  
Penguin Books



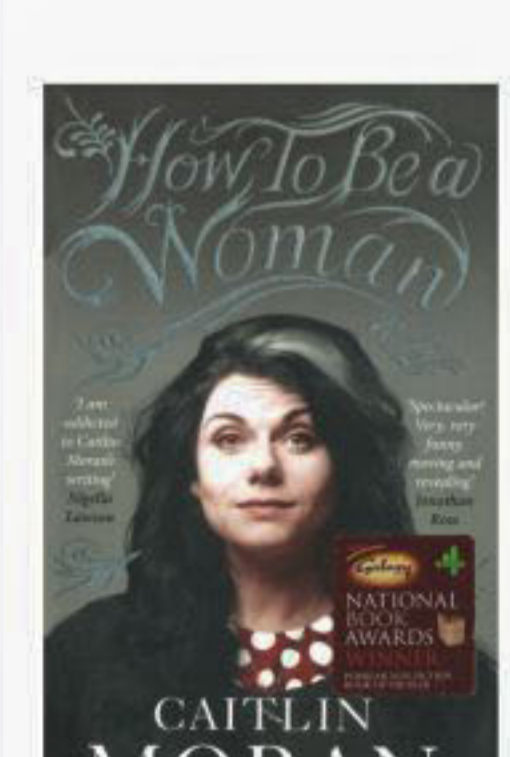
**Dear Life**  
Alice Munro  
Vintage International



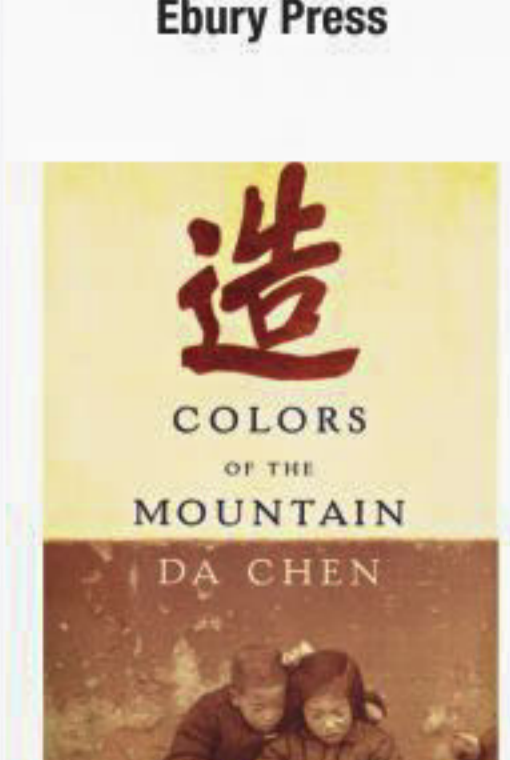
**Sacred Plants of India**  
Nandhita Krishna & M. Amirthalingam  
Penguin Books



**Visible, Invisible, and Beyond**  
A Novel  
Tulip Chowdhury



**How To Be A Woman**  
Caitlin Moran  
Ebury Press



**Colors of the Mountain**  
Da Chen  
Anchor Books