

Good Woman of Setzuan

by Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht creates the alter ego of a good woman which is not so good and Adnan Chowdhury tells us why...

GOOD Woman of Setzuan is a play written in 1938-1940 by Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright and theatre director. The play opens with Wong, a water seller, explaining to the audience that he is on the city outskirts awaiting the arrival of three gods. The gods are out on a mission to seek if there are any good people left in the world. Up till now they have not been successful and all efforts have been futile. Instead they have found only greed, evil, dishonesty, and selfishness. The same turns out to be true in the Chinese city of Setzuan. No one will take them in - no one except the poor young prostitute Shen Te who allows the three gods to stay at her house while providing them necessary shelter and comfort.

Shen Te is rewarded for her hospitality, as the gods take it as a sure sign of goodness. They are extremely happy because they have found a 'good person' and all is not lost. In gratitude, they give her money and she buys a humble tobacco shop which they intend as a gift. But along with that, they also put her to a test. They know Shen Te is good but the test will find out if Shen Te can maintain to be good with these newfound means in the long run. If she succeeds, the gods' confidence in humanity would be restored. Though at first Shen Te seems to live up to the gods' expectations, her generosity allows people to take advantage of her kindness and she gives everything away. At one point, she realises that if she continues the way she is doing she will be back on the streets so she creates an alter ego in the name of Shui Ta, a male cousin. She tells everyone she has to leave and her cousin Shui Ta will run the shop. As a double character, Shen Te wears the costume of male clothing, a mask, and a forceful voice to take on the role of Shui Ta. Shui Ta arrives at the shop, coldly explains that his cousin has gone out of town on a short

trip, expels the lazy people who are taking advantage of Shen Te's generosity and through smart business decisions, quickly restores order to the shop and brings it back to profitability. In his efforts to bring the business to profitability, Shui Ta made a lot of enemies because of his hard, unpopular business decisions. This is Brecht's nod to the capitalist who has to make cold, calculated decisions that may not be popular but necessary for business purposes.

Where Shen Te is unemotional, and vulnerable, Shui Ta is unemotional and pragmatic, even vicious. It seems that only Shui Ta is made to survive in the world in which they live. In what seems no time at all, he has built her humble shop into a full-scale tobacco factory with many employees. Here, the question of Who is 'good' arises. Is it the good natured prostitute whose kindness is making people lazy or the cold hearted capitalist who is responsible for generating income and prosperity?

Eventually, the townspeople suspect Shen Te for murdering Shui Ta and take him to court. During the process of her trial, the gods appear in the robes of the judges, and Shui Ta reveals to the gods, that Shui Ta is actually Shen Te. She explains being good has got her into trouble and therefore she had to create this alter ego to survive. The gods then realise they are confronted by the dilemma that their divine intervention has caused: they have created impossible circumstances for those who wish to live "good" lives; however, when it is time to make a verdict, the gods refuse to intervene directly to protect their followers from the vulnerability that results from this "being good". The gods leave without providing further guidance. This was Brecht's way of saying that God, or gods or even religion was not the answer to society's problems.



At the end, the narrator throws the responsibility of finding a solution to the play's problem onto the shoulders of the audience. It is for the spectator to figure out how a good person can possibly come to a good end in a world that, in essence, is not good. The play relies on the assumption that the spectator will be moved to see that the current structure of society must be changed in order to resolve the problem. That is what Brecht hoped to achieve when writing this play.

Though being a Marxist with socialist leanings,

Brecht however does not impose his opinions on the audience he also shares the other side of the story. Shen Te's alter ego, the capitalist minded Shui Ta is the proponent of capitalism; so unlike Shen Te, Shui Ta does not lament the injustice around him and has no problem with capitalism. In most interesting way, Brecht uses dual characters to promote two opposite philosophies. Whereas Brecht uses Shen Te to say capitalism is bad, he uses Shui Ta to say capitalism may be good and necessary. Importantly, he wants the audience to decide what is considered good and what is considered bad. So in this play, it is seen that Shui Ta accepts and embraces the idea of competition. This generated a hot debate in Brecht's time and it continues to do so today, particularly in developing as well as less developing countries where labour may be exploited for specific industries. But like Shui Ta, many industrialists today may counter that it is because of capitalism that employment has been generated for the masses who would otherwise would have remained unemployed.

Brecht illustrated the difficulty of being good and staying good in any society. Shen Te continues with the line "It has torn me in two" (Brecht 107). This line is perhaps the most poignant line in the entire play. It is symbolic in many aspects. It represents the class struggle between the bourgeois and the working class, the struggles between good and evil, the conflict between man and woman, the mistrust between neighbours, and the list is endless.

Even after 71 years of writing Good Woman of Setzuan, the debate on the definition of goodness still rages on. We are still nowhere near an answer and Bertolt Brecht is enjoying every minute of this, watching us from wherever he is.

Eat Pray Love

Prof. Mohit Ul Alam recommends the book as a must read for spiritual contentment...

EAT Pray Love by Elizabeth Gilbert is an autobiographical book on a spiritual quest by a young American writer who has suffered a divorce and is on a year long tour across the globe to find out the solutions to the problems of her anguished life. My copy of the book is published by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., London in 2006, and consists of 349 pages, and it is being a pirated copy bought from the Gulshan junction, it has some twenty extra unnumbered pages that include the Chapter One of her next book, Committed.

The book is written in a no-holds-barred fashion and candid in expressing the intimate moments of the author's life in a language unpretentious, racy and moving and adorned with innovative clusters of images. The reading of the book is a mighty pleasure.

Divided in 108 short chapters or tales, following a Yogis rule of having the same number of beads to a meditational rosary, japa mala, the author narrates her experiences in Italy, India and Indonesia respectively in equal number of chapters, that is 36 tales dedicated to each of the three locations she has stayed in for a four-month duration.

Liz, as the writer prefers to use her nick name, is the quesser, and the first thing that will strike the reader is that she suffers from a Hamletean limbo, that is she does things which she knows she does not have to do. In the beginning of the book, we come across this problem that while she is having legal battles with her husband she gets entangled in a love affair with a man called David, who has performed in the role of a character from a story written by her. Look at the analogy she makes while describing her critical situation: "I clung to David for escape from marriage as if he were the last helicopter pulling out of Saigon" (p. 19). Apparently in despair, Liz yet is an incurable believer because "God never slams a door in your face without opening a box of Girl Scout cookies... (p.22). With that substitutional hope she lands in Italy beginning the first phase of her year long quest for mental peace. In the meantime she has broken up with David, and has written a signed letter to God to help her end her divorce, but in Italy what is awaiting her is another love affair with this beautiful language, Italian, aggravated by her acquaintance with the twin-brother language teachers Giovanni and Dario. With the former she makes this agreement that she will learn Italian from him, and he English from her. But Eat Pray Love is a great book not because of the pronounced holy aim of finding the ultimate truth about life but because of the continuous ability of the writer to flare up a commonplace observation with a brilliant touch of wit. Now she wants to make Giovanni laugh, who does not always get her humour, so she says, "Humour is hard to catch in a second language" (p. 59).

Her stay in Italy constitutes the eating part of the title of the book, but she says she is not given to seeking pleasure as her ancestral family line up suggests that she had Puritan relatives with names like Diligence and Meekness (p. 63). So the dichotomy exists—she wants to pray but the pleasure is in the way. And she one day walks home to her apartment in Rome, boils a pair of brown eggs for her lunch and arranges them with seven stalks of asparagus, and on the plate spreads some olives and four knobs of goat cheese that she collected from the formaggeria down the

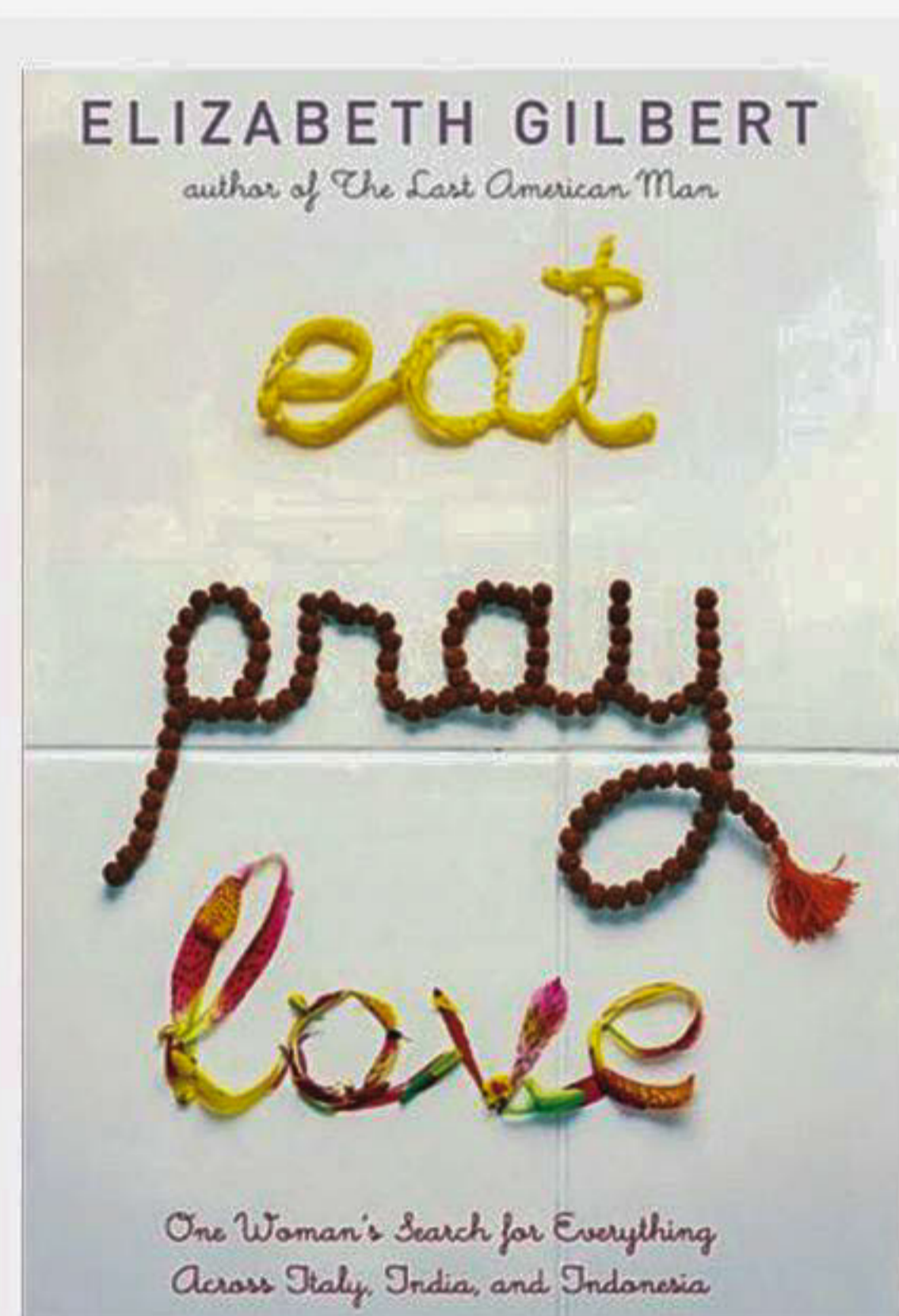
street, and two slices of pink, oily salmon, and a lovely peach for dessert, and as she sits in the balcony under the warm Roman sunlight, she imagines her contentious husband admonishing her, "So this is what you gave up everything for? This is why you gutted up our entire life together? For a few stalks of asparagus and an Italian newspaper?" (p. 67).

Italian, the most beautiful romantic language in the world according to Liz, has fascinated her so much that when her friend Luca Spaghetti takes her to watch a football derby between Lazio and Roma, she is most fascinated by an excited old man sitting behind her who keeps on ranting "Dai, dai, dai, Albertini, dai... aaahhhhhhh!!! Vafanculo... " the word, 'valafunculo' meaning in Italian, 'Go... yourself' (p. 73). And the writer, loving every word that came from the mouth of the man, observes that the "whole stadium was full of such soliloquies" (p. 73).

'Attraversiamo' is the most beautiful Italian word to her, which means to cross over, literally to cross to the other side of a street, but metaphorically she loads it with all suggestions of transitions, from one state of mind to another state. Her physical attraversiamo takes place from Chapters 37 to 72 in an Ashram in India, where she does the job of a floor sweeper while engaging herself in a rigorous life of austerity. The catchword of her life here is Om Namah Shivaya ('I honour the divinity that resides within me' (p. 127). And Yoga is the practice that helps one to discover the divinity within. Tough and exhaustive is the lifestyle here, demanding one of rising from bed as early as three in the morning, and learning to tolerate the excruciating physical pain some of the asanas or postures, or chants, like gurugita, required of the devotees to reach the turiya (the apex) state, and our author passes all of them successfully, but what we readers miss here is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings which lit up the Italy pages or will light up the Indonesia pages, compared to which one would feel that the book if considered in terms of a sandwich, the middle part, the India pages are drab and dehydrated. The one precious thing that she learns here is overcoming the fear of death. She awakened to the fact of "mortality's inevitable march" (p. 160) at the age of ten, but here at the ashram, becoming a devout follower of Buddha, she realizes that what one has to do is "Look for God like a man with his head on fire looks for water" (p. 164). While she recognizes the traditional religious lore in Chapter 57 that the "search for God is a reversal of the normal, mundane worldly order" (p. 184), however, her friend, Richard from Texas, who affectionately calls her Groceries, tells her that in the Upanishads it is said that the ways to find God are as many as there are rivers which flow into the same ocean.

With that feeling of multiplicity she arrives in the Indonesian island of Bali, which she visited even two years ago, and where she comes back to meet the Octogenarian, or whatever his age is, the medicine man, Ketut Leyer by name. The man is everything that the Indian Ashram was not. Discarding the concept of deep meditation accompanied by physical pain, Leyer says only smiling to oneself will do. Detailing the Balinese society historically, Gilbert emphasizes the economic strength of the Balinese people lying in the concept of a strictly stratified society, while her local friend Wayan, a pain healer and shop

owner, and a divorcee herself, teaches her a lesson of what it means for a philanthropic westerner when she tries to meddle with the affairs of the locals. Wayan, a mother of a teenage daughter and adopted mother of two grown up girls, is facing eviction, and to rescue her, the author contacts her American friends through email whose help immediately arrives in thousands of US dollars. She gives all this money on good faith to Wayan for buying a piece of land, which Wayan never seems to be able to do on this or that pretext, but then getting a tip from her newly-gained boyfriend, the Brazilian middle-aged man, Felipe, she threatens Wayan of her donor-friends demanding the money back if the land was not purchased before she left Bali. Wayan obliges, and the author continues to have her sexual life, kept in abeyance for nearly a

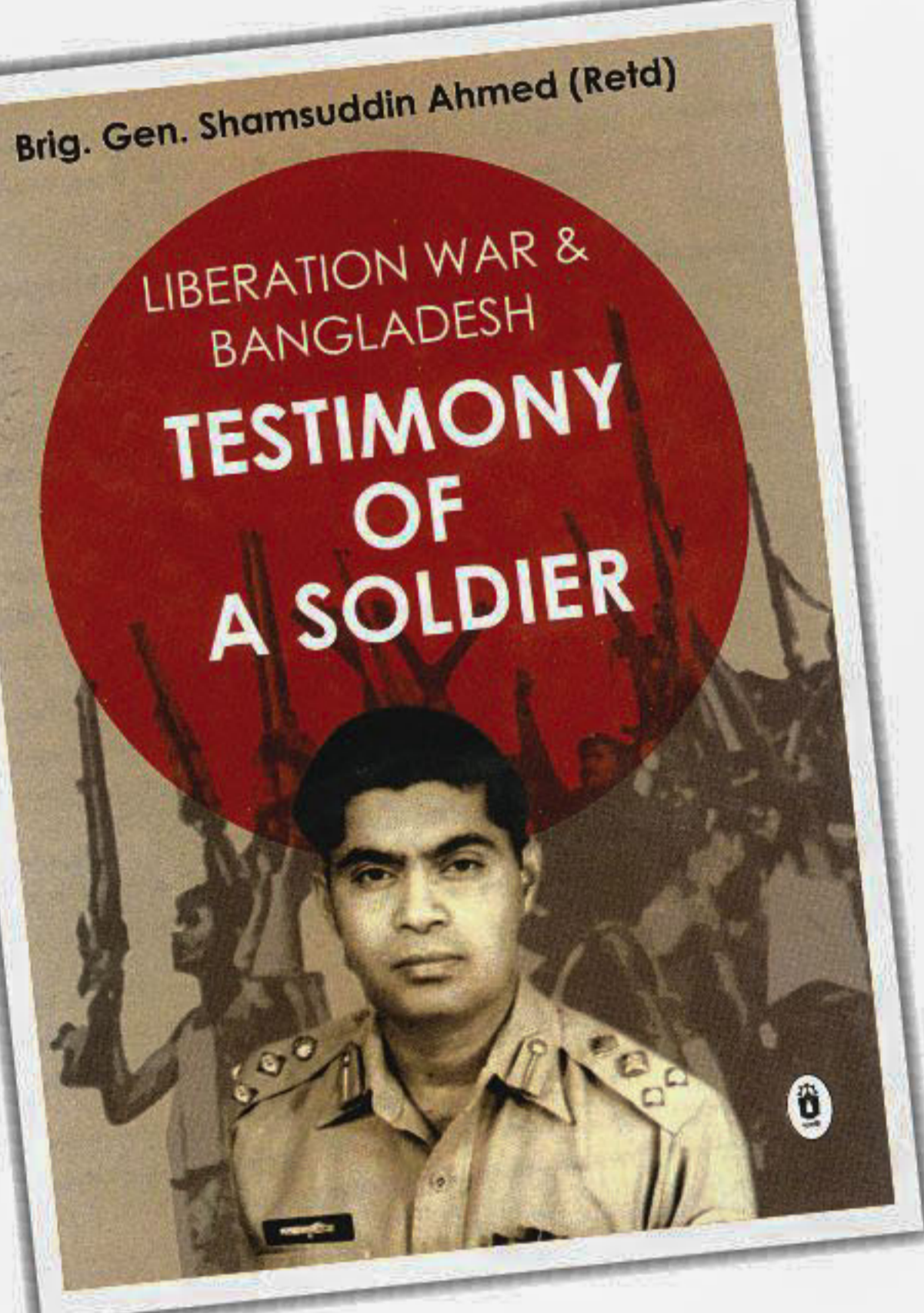


year, with Felipe.

This, her friendship with Felipe, is the finest part of the journey of the soul, I think. This is love, in all senses of the term that engulfs the tortuous life of the author. After withholding his advances for many a moment, she finally gives in one night: "Felipe finally put his palm against my cheek and said, 'That's enough, darling. Come to my bed now', and I did" (p. 301). But what kind of relationship is it going to be? Does she want to be cared for by Felipe? Does Felipe want her to stay back in Bali? Or do they want to pass their remaining days in the small island of GiliMeno, on a fishing boat, sunbathing? Felipe's children are in Australia, she herself is from America, and Felipe is a Brazilian, and he is running a business in Bali, so geographically it fits into a rhyming pattern of AABB, and they both decide that they must let their relationship remain like that, love without fringes. And she says, 'Attraversiamo'. Though Felipe does not speak Italian, we know the meaning now, let's cross over.

A beautiful book it is for readers who are languishing in their hearts.

The writer is a professor and Vice-Chancellor of Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University.



Testimony of a soldier

Shakhawat Liton takes a journey back to the period of trials and tribulations in Bangladesh....

MEMOIR of an individual provides readers with the scope to learn about many unknown facts of events that took place in the past. Thus a memoir always appears as a source of information on those events. Though Brig Gen (retd) Shamsuddin Ahmed has named his memoir, "Testimony of a Soldier", it is basically a historical account or biography of the former general. He has written it on the basis of his personal knowledge and experiences gathered through his long career as a soldier in the army. He joined the army during the Pakistan era; participated in the glorious Liberation War in 1971 and later witnessed closely many significant events in the army. These include assassinations of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, late President Ziaur Rahman, General Manzur, and some coups and counter coups in Bangladesh army since the country's independence.

In his book, the author narrated how the army in independent Bangladesh was structured and shaped. He did not forget to mention the 'cold war' among the then senior army officers. He wrote how in early 1973 an Army Organisation Committee headed by Brigadier KM Shafiqullah, chief of army staff, began to work out broad outlines of the organisational shape and structure of the Bangladesh Army. Brig Ziaur Rahman, Brig Khaled Mosharraf, Brig Shawkat Ali and Colonel MA Manzur were members of this committee. Shamsuddin was the member secretary of the committee. The committee meetings were held over a period of time. Shawkat and Manzur, who had to come from Chittagong and Jessore respectively, could not stay long in Dhaka.

Shamsuddin in his book lauded efficiency of Manzur, who was later promoted to major general rank, and eventually murdered inside the Chittagong cantonment after the assassination of Ziaur Rahman. "But undoubtedly it was Colonel Manzur who dominated the meetings because when he spoke he did so with such clarity, reason and authority that one could hardly disagree with him. He was simply too brilliant an officer one could hardly win over in arguments," Shamsuddin testifies.

He describes how there was visibly a streak of cold relation bordering on hostility between Brigadier Ziaur Rahman and Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf. Invariably Zia would disagree with Khaled on most issues no matter how sensible and logical the latter sounded.

As Gen Shamsuddin worked at the army headquarters for quite a long time, he witnessed closely and gathered information and experiences on some major events in the army and his book is a gift for those who want to know some inside stories of the army in those days.