

Deena Forkan's 'Fire on the Hills': Revisiting us within

Reviewed by
Faheem Hasan Shahed

'Papa's Choice', 'The Red Tin Can', 'The Day I Lost My Life', 'Shame', 'Grand Finale' and 'Home' are some other stories that will captivate the readers

As readers, we sometimes come across writings that force us to stand in front of some strange, discerning mirror in which we view ourselves in dual identities: one in angelic luminosity and the other in devilish dimness. We feel rickety as we watch our senses of morality taking contradictory topsy-turvy turns. And much to our discomfort, we discover how the devils within us can make us pay immeasurable price. Deena Forkan, a distinguished professor of English Literature and Language at the North South University, has come up with a book of short stories *Fire on the Hills* that persistently reminds us what it feels like being a traveler across the wobbly passage of right and wrong, triumph and loss, love and revulsion.

To term Deena Forkan only as a successful English writer wouldn't do her any justice. Wandering through the pages, one will feel how she has established her credentials as a sensitive story-teller who treats the human mind absolutely from a humane panorama. For Deena, life and living are inextricably linked with wide range of socio-psychological functions and dysfunctions. The occurrences that corrupt human bonding, as well as the traumas that result from sudden, unexpected realities, do hurt her as a narrator. And she doesn't hide it from her readers. Interestingly, though she gets disturbed by the consequences which wreck the spirit of relationships, she allows the readers to feel the same agony expecting them to be better humans who would rise above their limitations.

I find *Fire in the Hills* as a book of exceptionally brilliant short stories. While I don't intend to dampen down readers' interest by discussing everything, let me talk a bit about one story that must touch any soulful reader. It is the first story *Fire in the Hills* where the writer deals with the lead character Asif's inner scuffle of coping with an adultery he committed with an attractive lady Sylvie. Asif, a married young man from Chittagong, was a struggling salesman of a hardware shop in Dhaka while his wife Nafisa and little daughter Tutli were waiting in Chittagong for his gradual change of fortune in the succeeding days. It was during such a period when Sylvie came to his life as a mere acquaintance in a restaurant near his office. Suddenly, things got different as Asif started to drop Sylvie at her home and subsequently, spend his nights there. By the way, the writer's narration of events



without a wee bit of explicit mention of Asif's illegitimate moments with Sylvie proves her command over the language.

Eventually Asif gets withered by guilt, manages to cut off from Sylvie, and return to his family in Chittagong where he joins a school as a Math teacher. When things were supposedly tranquil, a shocking call from Sylvie reveals to Asif that she

was pregnant with his child. Right since that moment, Asif's journey with self-inflicted trauma and unmanageable remorse starts in which readers have to get involved too. Here is where Deena Forkan manipulates her descriptions in wizardly skill. We get to know all these from Asif's friend with whom Asif shared his feelings, and this passive listener friend subtly epitomizes the readers' feelings of helplessness, shock and sympathy. Anyway, in the subsequent events we find quite a complex scenario. Sylvie met a tragic death due to abortion attempts by her unskilled friends which left her mother grief-stricken. Consequently, she started repeatedly calling Asif to verify if he was the man responsible for all the mess.

This is where we get saddened on the one hand by Sylvie's despairing mother's yearning to find out the truth, and on the other by Asif's long-lasting trepidation that came to him through these calls. We see him pretending innocence with herculean effort every time she called him. However, at last when she

eventually stopped calling him, Asif's sufferings furthered as we realize in writer's words: 'In the silence of no calls, in painful waiting, and fearful fantasizing of what might happen next, Asif grew sick again.'

Finally, things took its usual path as Tutli grew up to be a talented girl working in Singapore and

Asif, separated from Nafisa for reasons unknown, lived a solitary life after being hit by a stroke. The story ends here but the reverberation stays. Did Asif really become free? Did God just let him go? The writer feels: '...sometimes young men whose guilt overwhelm them and drive them too long for punishment into death are instead set free, condemned to liberty, sentenced to suffer with memories and ghosts and even with life itself.' Therefore, the issue of a physical fire gains metaphorical significance in the story. We would learn from Asif's friend about a fire at the foot of the Batali Hills regularly lit by the local slum people for cleansing the area from foul insects, and this fire could be seen from the window of the house where he stayed. When Asif used to share his agonies with his friend sitting near the window, the latter could realize Asif's mind looking at the burning Batali Hills. And at times when Asif would remain speechless by emotion, the fire would do the talking on his part. Now that Asif has become aged leaving his past behind, and there is no more fire in the Batali Hills after that area had been made restricted, how would the fire stay back among us? The writer has the answer: 'For some of us...the fires still burn. They burn bright in fearful memories and awe, and in the astonishing sense of wonder that resides in those of us who once were witnesses to their radiance and glory and the power to cleanse.' This is the philosophy that will leave readers rethink about life as they would continue reading the subsequent stories.

'Papa's Choice', 'The Red Tin Can', 'The Day I Lost My Life', 'Shame', 'Grand Finale' and 'Home' are some other stories that will captivate the readers by the writer's inimitable aptitude of dealing with the complexities in romance and kinship in relation to the dilemma and predicament that her characters endure. Striking is her ability of using the first person viewpoint in all the stories giving readers a feel of cinematic entirety (we call it the third person omniscient viewpoint). I heartily recommend *Fire in the Hills* as a must-read-at-one-go book of insightfully ingenious stories. For its sheer repeat value, it can be read many times in many moods.

(Dr. Faheem Hasan Shahed is an academic, author and singer. He is an Associate Professor at the English Department in American International University-Bangladesh.)

The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah

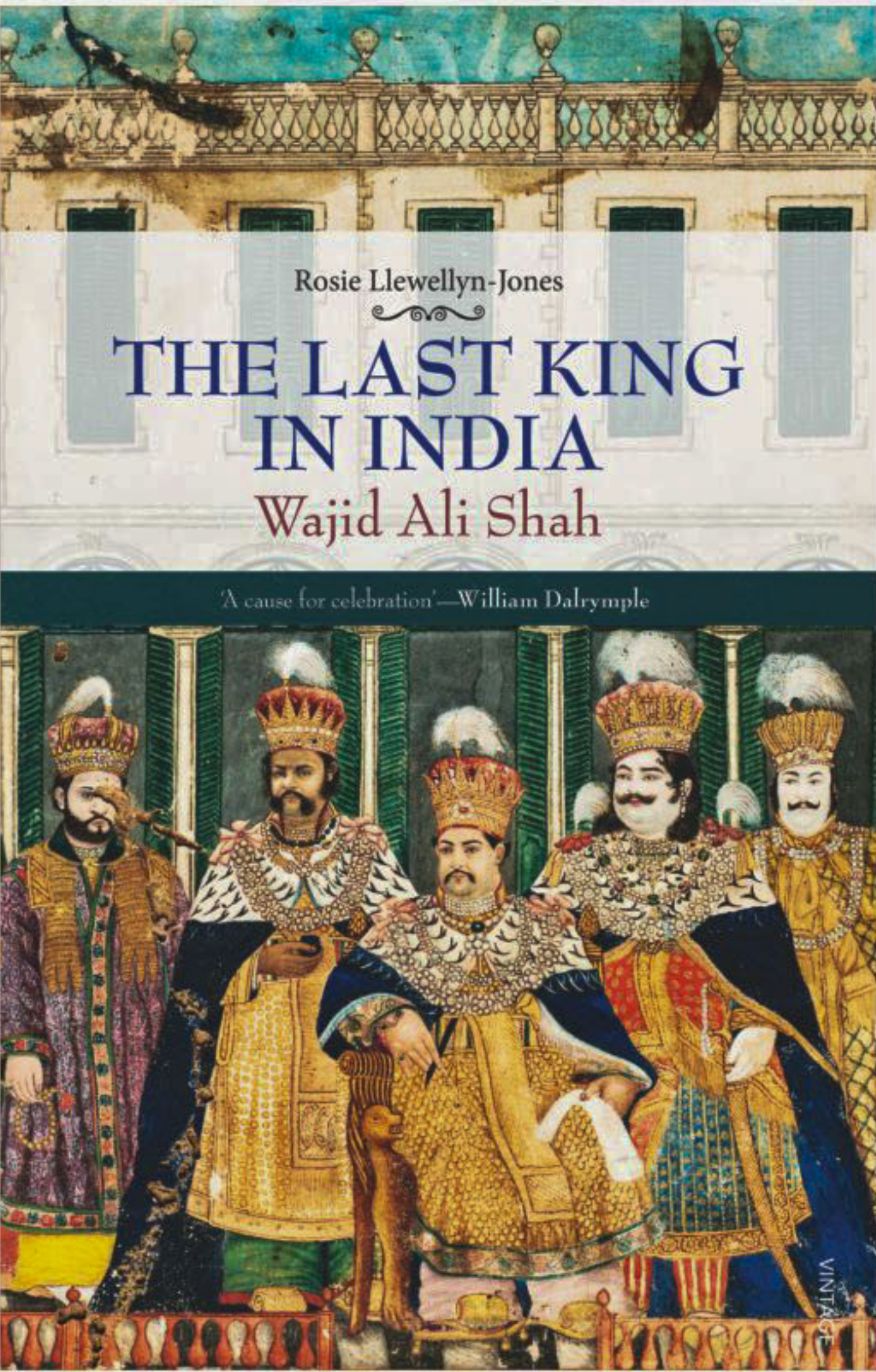
By Rosie Llewellyn-Jones
Hurst & Co., London, 2014

Wajid Ali Shah (1822-1887) was one of the most colourful and confusing characters in nineteenth-century India. His personality has seeped into popular memory and culture, surfacing in the most imaginative of places: from anecdotes about Lucknow's delicious kebabs to the celebrated films of Satyajit Ray. He is variously remembered as a hedonist, a political failure who failed to resist the machinations of the British, and a musical genius. Yet the real monarch behind the stories has remained elusive. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones' biographical study offers an unprecedented insight into the life of the king and his courts in Lucknow and, crucially, Calcutta, where he spent the last thirty years of his life in exile. While most portrayals end with the annexation of his

debauched villain that his critics imagined either. Llewellyn-Jones draws crucial connections between his personal and political misadventures, and presents a balanced perspective on his failings and strengths.

The revisionist biography has been meticulously researched, drawing on a trove of new sources relating to Nawabi Lucknow and colonial Calcutta, including forgotten newspaper stories, the family memories of Wajid Ali Shah's descendants, and contemporary chronicles in Urdu.

However, the real strength of the work lies in Llewellyn-Jones' unmatched ability to read through the bureaucratic archive of the Company and the British Government, and to resuscitate the emotions, confusions, and strategies of the Europeans around Wajid Ali Shah and his family. In his own



kingdom in 1856, either lamenting the injustice of the East India Company or his own weaknesses, Llewellyn-Jones offers a nuanced tour of the local politics in Awadh, and then details the fate of the 'Caesar of the Age' following the loss of his throne. Her account does justice to the complexities of his personality: while Wajid Ali Shah was not always especially agreeable (especially, in his later, towards his wives and children), he was not the

political career. By reconstructing the unique and changing circumstances in which he found himself, this work presents a compelling portrait of the king and his times.

The reviewer, Richard D Williams, is a Research Scholar in the UK. This review first appeared in the *Chowkidar*, a newsletter of BACSA, UK.
Courtesy: Waqar A Khan

The Blood Telegram

by Gary J. Bass

Mahfuz ul Hasib Chowdhury reviews the book on Bangladesh that has received the Cundill Prize recently as a historical literature

When we ponder over the word "genocide", the most gruesome instances that we often recall are the holocaust executed by the German Nazi army during World War II, the carnages that took place in Bosnia and Kosovo during the reign of Slobodan Milosevic, the massacres that occurred in some African countries ravaged by civil wars and so on. However, another appalling and cool-blooded genocide conducted by the Pakistani forces in the towns and countryside of Bangladesh (known as East Pakistan back then) during 1971 also appears with all its direness on the list. It was an annihilation of three million Bangladeshis in which both the Pakistani troops and their local quislings participated. Thinking from a global point of view, how many people of the world are aware of the indifferent, impassive role played by the United States on this issue during 1971? Gary J. Bass a Professor of Politics and International Affairs of Princeton University, USA strikingly unfolds the painfully true story of the nonchalance that the US government showed during that time in his book *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide*.

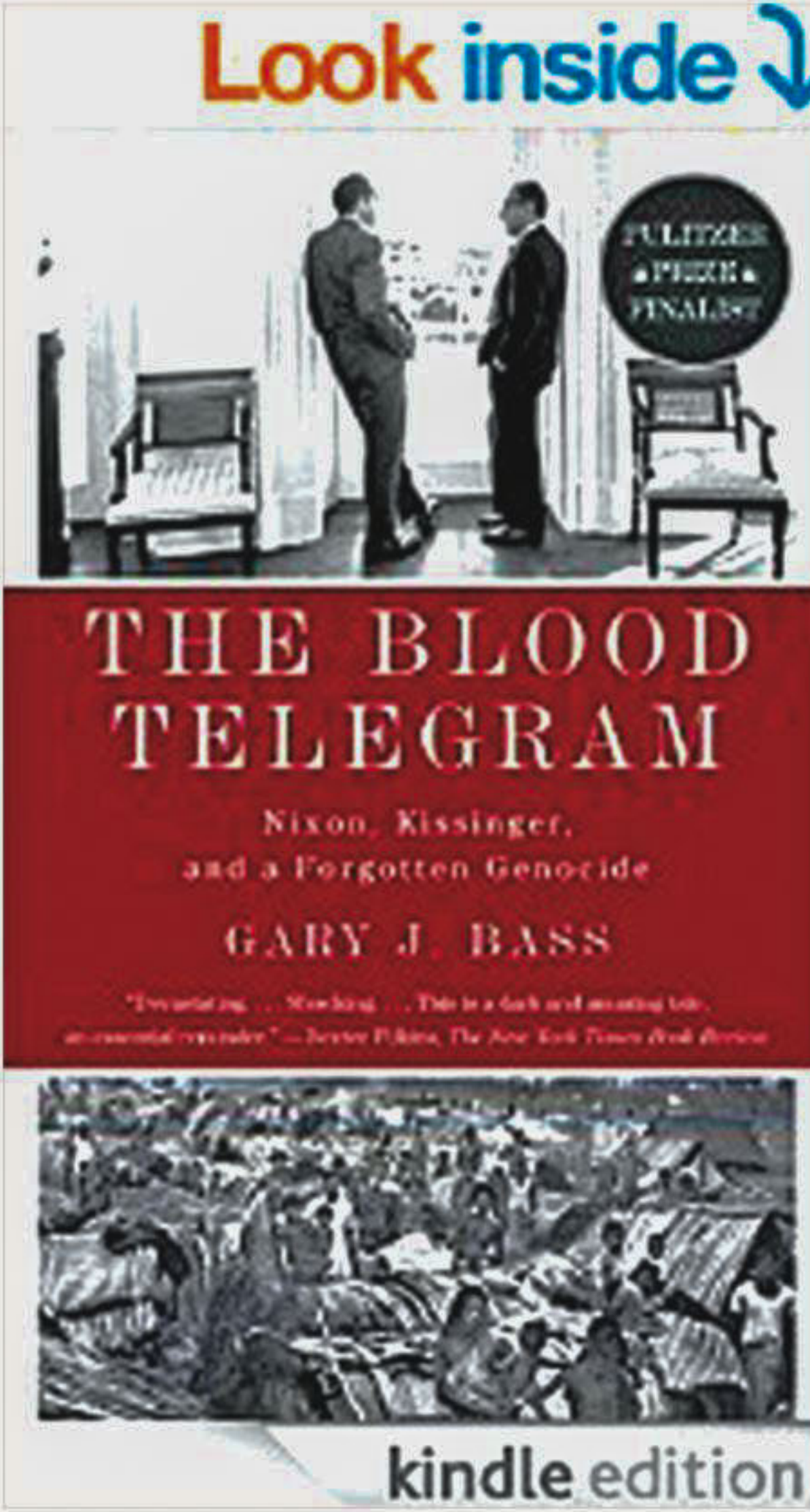
When the pro-independence party Awami League won the polls in 1969, the central Pakistani government denied to hand over the ruling power of East Pakistan to the leaders of Awami League. As the war of independence broke out in March 1971, the Pakistani Army occupied different parts of Bangladesh and started killed millions of common, unarmed civilians including a huge number of people belonging to religious minorities over a period of nine months. Bangladesh achieved independence but for the price of three million lives, an unforgettable bloodbath. Gary J. Bass recalls the friendly role played by the Indian Government of that time who sent their troops to East Pakistan to back up the Bangladeshi freedom fighters. Support imparted by the Soviet government of that time is acknowledged in this book. The book also castigates the collaboration extended by the US President Richard Nixon to Islamabad to defend the territorial integrity of Pakistan and thus to thwart the Liberation War in which the Bangladeshis were fighting valiantly.

According to Gary J. Bass, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were cooperating with Pakistan during 1971 in order to bridge up the chasm prevailing between the United States and China. As Pakistan has always been an ally to Beijing, the US administration of that time sought to get closer to the Chinese rulers by means of having warm diplomatic ties with Islamabad. Gary J. Bass states in *The Blood Telegram* that, the importance of halting genocide in East Pakistan was a far greater issue than boosting diplomatic relations with China. But unfortunately the US leaders of that period did nothing effective to restrain the Pakistani government from murdering the general people of Bangladesh. In this connection the author makes frequent references to Archer Blood who was a US consul general during 1971 and was stationed in Dhaka. He dispatched an urgent telegram to the US State Department asking for immediate steps to stop the atrocities the Pakistani forces were carrying out throughout East Pakistan. Gary J. Bass expresses his resentment over one of the remarks made by Henry Kissinger during 1971 which meant that an international humanitarian crisis was not all the time something to be addressed by the American policymakers.

The US government that held power during 1971 wanted Pakistan to subdue the spirit of independence that emboldened the Bangladeshis to fight for freedom because the White House was observing with alarm the spread of Soviet-sponsored com-

munist ideologies across South Asia during those years which seemed to be an ominous development threatening the supremacy of the US authorities.

The Blood Telegram is a highly informative and evidential book for all those readers who are interested to explore the principal doctrines that construct the foundation of American foreign policies. Moreover, this book contains a great deal of facts and figures that interpret some enigmatic issues about international relations, global politics and the Cold War era. Wars are still going on in several parts of the world where human rights are being trampled and violated incessantly. *The Blood Telegram* is an appeal to the powerful states of the



world to guard humanism and to combat injustice at all possible costs.

The title of the book deserves some attention. The telegram sent by Archer Blood entreated the United States to come up with strong measures on an emergency basis to stop the killings of common men, women and children of East Pakistan by the Pakistani military forces. It was a telegram that wanted the dreadful bloodshed in East Pakistan to come to an end. At the same time, we can refer to the word "blood" as a monumental price that millions of Bangladeshi people paid by laying down their lives for the independence of the country.

The writer is Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Metropolitan University, Sylhet