

# REMINISCENCES OF FOREIGN OFFICE MANDARINS

## Serving the Nation: Reflections of Bangladesh Diplomats

Reviewed by Shahid Alam

THIS is a first in Bangladesh. A published anthology of the memoirs of 43 career diplomats of Bangladesh, that is. As far as I am aware, a few career diplomats have composed their memoirs and gotten them published as individual efforts, including one that is almost as voluminous as the combined efforts of the 43 that have been compressed into this one omnibus. And therein can be identified an immediate problem that accompanies *Serving the Nation: Reflections of Bangladesh Diplomats*. Because of the brevity and diversity of each of the articles, most hardly go beyond the anecdotal account, some quite lighthearted, leaving little room for in-depth analysis of events that are closely associated with diplomatic endeavours and foreign policy (not that they are totally absent in several of the writings). Notwithstanding the general lack of ponderous writings that would probably have delighted academics, researchers and the interested sage, the book should be a pleasant experience for those who are looking for some relaxed reading, punctuated by serious, as well as trivial, accounts of diplomacy in practice.

*Serving the Nation* contains, to reiterate, the memoirs of 43 career ambassadors of Bangladesh, now retired from regular service, and the articles have been arranged in descending order of seniority in service, beginning with Tabarak Husain and closing out with M. Humayun Kabir. Diplomacy and foreign policy, for most people in almost all countries, are esoteric and exotic, if they care to look in their directions at all, and usually best left to people who deal with those arcane areas of human activity. As one of the writers (Harun ur Rashid) has mentioned, in the words of Sir Henry Wotton, former English diplomat and politician of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, "An ambassador is an honest gentleman sent to lie abroad for the good of his country." People may righteously quibble about this description of an envoy, including how an honest gentleman could take it upon him/herself to continuously prevaricate (even for ones country), but it does manage to convey the general idea of what diplomats at least occasionally do.

The book's Preface hastens to extol the work of the Bangladeshi diplomats in their quest for serving (and lying for!) the nation: "During the last forty three years our diplomats had to work quietly yet assiduously to remove both the doubts and the misgivings of the international community; to project Bangladesh as a democratic and dynamic nation; a nation with a future of hope, a nation with a growing diaspora that needed support but which in

turn could be of enormous help to the country. As a nation, we can take enormous pride that today we have become self sufficient in food, with socio-economic indicators that have been praised the world over. But it was equally important that our diplomats could leverage these many achievements to enhance the image of the country. It can therefore be said that our diplomats took up these challenges and competently performed their duties with commendable dedication, commitment and professionalism." The discerning and interested reader can make up his/her mind on this assessment.

A number of important and interesting accounts dot the map of the 43 articles. For instance, Tabarak Husain informs us how then President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, at a non-aligned Summit in Colombo in 1976, "expressed his unhappiness that Egyptian tanks were used in the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." SAMS Kibria has some shrewd observations and analyses to offer, especially about the general ineffectiveness of SAARC, in the process indicating a fundamental element in the study and practice of international relations: political realism. Taking the postponement of the SAARC Summit of 1992 as the sounding off point, he concludes matter-of-factly that mutual trust is missing from SAARC, and, in its absence, "there is no genuine goodwill and spirit of cooperation." And follows up with thoughts on some hard realities in international relations: "While bilateral relations can change with the passage of time and the changing alignments in international relations, regional cooperation has to be based on more enduring foundations.... Centuries of bitterness and distrust cannot disappear simply because of the expectations of some material benefits." He signs off on SAARC with this sardonic comment: "...the only success...about SAARC is that it is there; it is still able to hold summits from time to time." On a more troubling phenomenon afflicting large parts of the globe, Kibria narrows it down to South Asia, alluding specifically to the Babri mosque episode: "The rise of fundamentalism and fanaticism has been steadily fuelling discord, distrust and hatred in the region."

A.H.S. Ataul Karim also alludes to political realism in the process of commenting on the diplomacy and diplomats of Bangladesh: "...the duty of a diplomat is to protect and promote the national interest of his/her country. For the diplomat of a country like ours, which has no military, political or economic clout, the only instrument available to achieve this objective is friendly persuasion for which the

required elements primarily are training, experience, knowledge, and the ability to cultivate the decision makers in the country of accreditation." Faruq A Choudhury has several tongue-in-cheek observations on his days of training as a Foreign Service probationer and, later on, as a full-fledged diplomat. Particularly delightful is this bit: "The familiarization (with the work in the Foreign Office and in the other government Ministries in Karachi) basically comprised sessions with the Ministry officials, consuming gallons of tea, coffee, or cold drinks...and collecting reading materials that usually found their place in the waste paper baskets even before we

several issues. Reaz Rahman expounds in detail on the question of the ownership of the South Talpatty Island and the negotiations with India over the dispute, while Farooq Sobhan briefly gives a heads up on the origins of SAARC in November 1979. He also touches upon developing a personal rapport with then Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Muhammad of Malaysia when he was posted as High Commissioner to that country. "Thanks to my personal equation with Dr. Mahathir, I was able to persuade him to allow the entry of workers from Bangladesh to Malaysia." He then goes on to point out a malaise following that significant gain, the kind that keeps back

corridors of power, including in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "The very people who made a hard bargain with the Mujib Nagar Government for switching their allegiance to Bangladesh became the most vocal stalwarts of the liberation war. And those who literally walked into totally dark uncertainties without even the least worry about life, food and shelter for their family members including small children, found themselves somewhat marginalized by the late comer "freedom fighters"."

Syed Muazzam Ali details the genesis of, and the role he played in, the adoption by UNESCO on 17 November 1999 of Bangladesh's draft resolution on the proclamation of 21 February as the International Mother Language Day. There is a touch of irony here because the initiative on this issue was originally taken by some Bangladeshi expatriates living in Canada, which once faced serious separatist movement in one of its provinces, Quebec, a big part of which was over language! Getting the resolution adopted was difficult in the face of negative attitude from some countries. As Ali explains, "...language is a highly sensitive political issue in a number of multi-lingual...countries, especially in Europe." He also mulls sadly over what is essentially Bangladesh's horrendous political culture. "It is a pity that this spectacular achievement of our nation got entangled in our polemical national politics.... It is indeed ironic that the UNESCO Secretariat, which had made every effort to bloc (sic) our initiative, was credited with this achievement."

Zia-us-Shams Chowdhury also brings out the factor of political realism when he recounts a meeting that then Bangladeshi foreign minister had with Dr. Henry Kissinger, and which he also attended. The US Secretary of State stated that "...the U.S. was not against the Bangladesh cause. Their concern was that Bangladesh liberation should not be delivered by India's intervention because that would leave a question mark on the genuineness of Bangladesh's independence." Chowdhury makes a terse, but appropriate, remark: "Thus, the humanistic and moral issues of the Bangladesh crisis were considered of no importance or relevance as US pursued its larger geo-strategic goal." Muhammad Zamir recalls a harrowing tale of being almost stranded in mid-air, with the airplane he was traveling in on a special diplomatic assignment to the Middle East running very low on fuel!

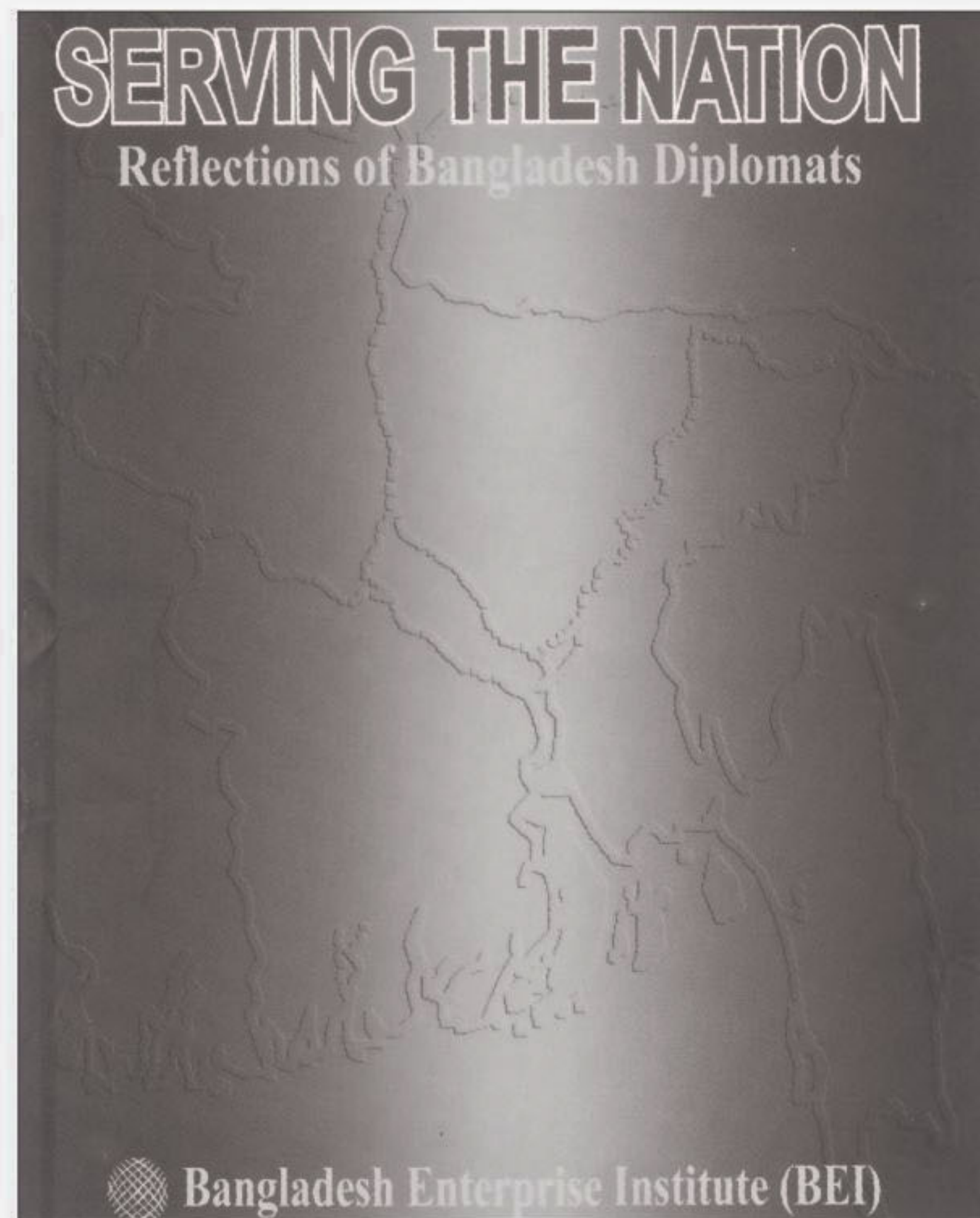
Abdullah Al-Hasan's is a poignant tale of an early Bangladeshi expatriate in Brazil, a scientist, who was working to eradicate malaria from that country, but was himself fatally struck down by a particularly virulent strain of the

disease. Al-Hasan's homage to his "glorious and noble" MEO COMPATRIO: "Dr. Rabbani for sure had put his own life on the line of premature death in order to save those native Indians of the Amazon from the scourge (of) Malarial death in their prime." M. Serajul Islam has a lot of axe to grind in his account of the time when he was the longest-serving director in the office of the foreign secretary. His observation will likely not go uncontested: "...as a result of lack of leadership at MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and its failure to assert its position as a major player in the formulation of foreign policy and its implementation, MOFA is likely to remain marginalized and is unlikely to play the role that Foreign Ministries and diplomatic services in the world, including in our own region, are playing with such great success for the greater benefit and image of their countries."

Mirza Shamsuzzaman, in an intriguing piece, talks about a meeting he had in the company of his probationer foreign and civil service batch mates with A.K. Brohi, once a defence lawyer for Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during the so-called Agartala Conspiracy Case. Asked about Bangabandhu's alleged involvement in the conspiracy, Brohi replied, "as far as I am concerned he was a patriot." Mohammad Ziauddin provides a fast-paced, almost thriller-like, account of President Bill Clinton's historic visit to Bangladesh. One gets a glimpse of how the American security officials function to safeguard their president.

Munshi Faiz Ahmed provides an interesting bird's eye view on the rise of China, where he was posted for a fair part of his diplomatic service, and where he ended up as Bangladesh's ambassador before retiring from the service. M. Humayun Kabir concentrates on his final career diplomatic assignment, as this country's ambassador to the United States. Gleaning from his experiences in that capacity, he suggests four dimensions to modern-day diplomacy: (1) bilateral relations now have regional or global links and implications; (2) diplomacy has moved from clubroom model to the much wider public advocacy model; (3) building partnership and forging coalition with local and global partners to pursue legitimate interests is an acceptable norm in diplomacy; and (4) the element of mutuality could add new value in any relationship. *Serving the Nation: Reflections of Bangladesh Diplomats* will serve up nuggets of serious information, observation, and analysis from a massive platter of, to borrow from Ernest Hemingway, a moveable feast of easy reading.

Dr. Shahid Alam is educationist, actor, former Foreign Service officer.



condescended to glance through much of the stuff."

Abul Ahsan has written a succinct, yet informative and knowledgeable, article on "Consolidation of Independence (External) 1973-75". The country's effort to secure entry into international organizations and establish relations with foreign countries faced serious challenges from several directions, including China and Saudi Arabia, who wanted Bangladesh to come to terms with Pakistan on

Bangladesh from going forward more than it is able to: "Unfortunately the opening up of the labour market resulted, primarily because of unscrupulous manpower agents from Bangladesh, in multiple abuses and the exploitation of our workers."

Mufleh R. Osmany takes us through the incipient days of setting up the Foreign Ministry that finally found its home in its present premises. He does not fail to bring up the issue of corrupt and mediocre self-seekers infesting the

## Memories, Dreams, Reflections

Author: Carl Gustav Jung

Publisher: Vintage Books

Reviewed by Tulip Chowdhury

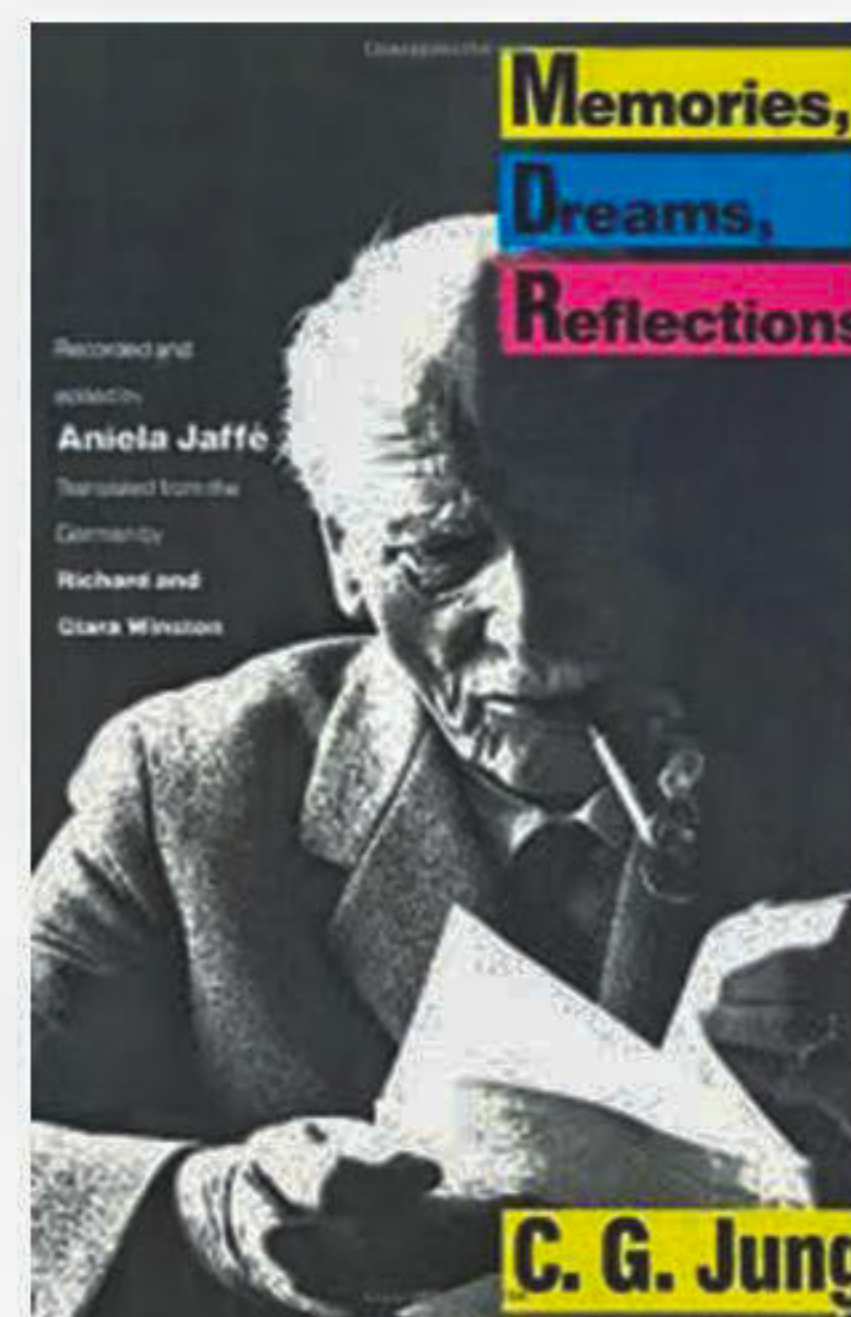
TAKE UP C. G. Jung's book "Memories, Dreams, Reflections" was perfect in the bitter cold weather that we were passing in Massachusetts last week. For voracious readers like myself, it was like finding life with a new light by a great thinker. It is heavy reading and one needs to reflect on each piece of information thoroughly before moving onto the next. However, the book is a masterpiece when one wants insight into human nature. It makes you rediscover yourself and others around you. As one of world's greatest psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Carl Gustav Jung, (26 July, 1875- 6 June, 1961) has astounding facts about human nature. He was a Swiss and was the founder of analytical psychology.

To our conscious self, life comes with different pictures at various stages of life. While the early years usually focus more on knowing the outside world, the later years may make us wonder if we had known our own selves after all. Interactions with other people make us acknowledge that personalities vary and that people regard us differently too. There lies an unknown unconscious being that waits to be discovered, that we cannot exactly lay our hands on. C. G. Jung held up the existence of the unconscious. He writes that the unconscious is the universal inherited theme that carries us to the roots and to the infinite. The unconscious within us appears in overt behavior or dreams. According to Jung, dreams are windows to the unconscious. The lengthy debates of his dreams and their meanings has the readers thinking twice about their own dreams. He gives a spiritual definition of the unconscious very different from his mentor Freud, who was for more of an animalistic presentation of the unconscious.

According to Jung, our dreams communicate to the unconscious and offer guidance to the waking self. He also speaks of the ego as the sense in which humans want to represent themselves. He writes of the opposites of things, such as 'love/hate' or 'light/dark' and continues to say that often opposing factors are like 'the shadow' that works against our ego. He writes, "The pendulum of the mind oscillates between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong." But often the ego is sort of a foreign sense to our own selves. Jung's theories of dreams and the unconscious self are like bursts of

lights into the think-tank of the readers. For once instead of our outer appearances, we think more about the unique unseen within us; invisible and yet so much a part of us.

At a time when restlessness seems to define the present world and we try to delve to its roots and causes, Jung strikes the keys as he writes of the psyche and its endlessly varied recombination of age-old components. He argues, "But it is precisely the loss of connection with the past, our up-rootedness, which has given



rise to the "discontents" of civilization and to such flurry and haste that we live more in the future and its chimerical promises of a golden age than in the present, with which our whole evolutionary background has not yet caught up."

Indeed it makes the reader wonder, if, in our rush to reach perfection in civilization, have we missed some sublime steps that could have given us a more peaceful world? Hence come our thoughts of the trials and errors in life. As we pay for our mistakes, we wish we could rewind time and events to reverse our actions. When one is upset with the mistakes in life Jung's words on this topic explain our errors offer comforting thoughts. In "Memories, Dreams and Reflections", he writes, "When one follows the path of individuation,

when one lives ones own life, one must take the mistakes into the bargain; life would not be complete without them. One must think that there is a sure road. But that would be the road to death. Then nothing happens anymore..."

We know death is inevitable and yet strive to create permanence in life. But there is the hanging question of which kind of permanence we strive for. Is it love and honor from mankind, richness and wealth or the promise of eternal peace with good deeds? Jung gives more food for thought with, "The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not?" He is of the opinion that if we had an answer to a more sublime permanence, perhaps man would be less stressed about temporary possessions. If man understood that what he has in this life is linked to the infinite, perhaps that would change our desires and attitudes. Then material possessions would find second choices in seeking the infinite. In regard to relationships with other people too, he says, the crucial question is the boundlessness in the relationship.

Jung's firm stand on dreams as windows to the inner self and how they throw light on life events definitely makes the reader think twice about his or her dreams. He writes of several instances where his dreams spoke of realities in life more than his own observations. However, for the average man, the perplexity hangs in how to interpret dreams correctly, dreams have such varieties of interpretations.

Throughout the whole book we are brought to the call for awakening of the unconscious. We wake up with a bigger jolt when he writes, "Your visions will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes". There remains no doubt that indeed we need to understand our own selves first and then relate or judge others. If we learned to recognize the inner self and all that can lead us to harmony in life, to the infinite, perhaps the restless world would find some solace of its own. Although I took up "Memories, Dreams, Reflections" in winter, but I know that I will be reading it through other seasons too. If you have not been into reading psychology yet, just take this book and see how hooked you get to reading more of Jung.

Tulip Chowdhury writes from Massachusetts, USA.

## The Storyteller

Jodi Picoult

HODDER

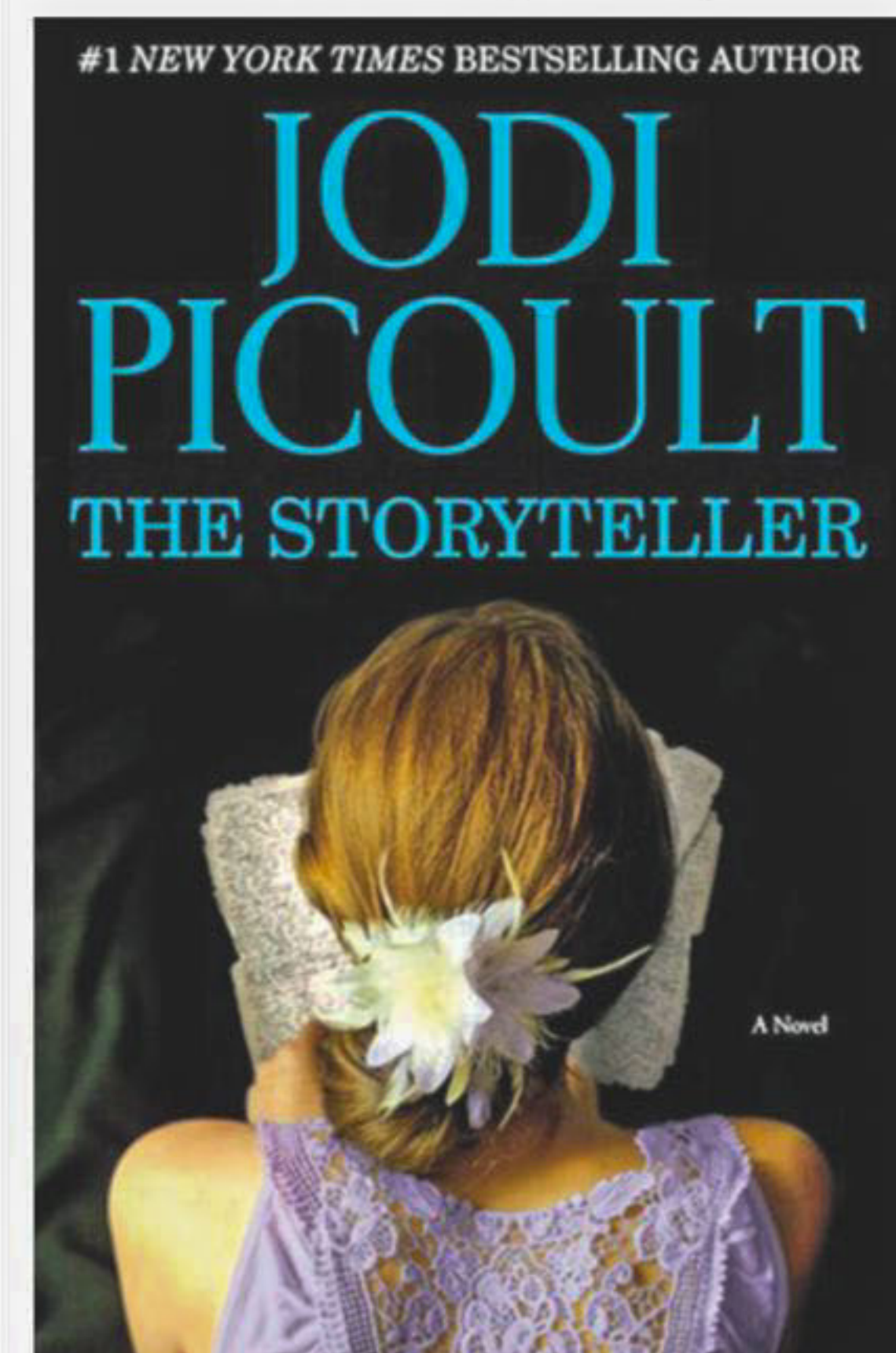
(528 pages)

Reviewed by Dureen Rahman

Jodi Picoult's "The Storyteller", illustrates, once again, how sensitive and perceptive she is, and what a deep understanding of human nature she has. In this remarkable book, the psyche of different characters is delved into.

THERE are several interesting stories in this book: there's Minka's story (a fantasy she had started writing as a young girl); there's the story of her life she's recounting to Sage, and there's Josef's story (also narrated to Sage).

Sage Singer is a young Jewish girl with a facial scar (which she got in a car accident and because of which she has become a near-recluse). She is someone who feels that "Religion isn't in your DNA.



You don't believe just because your parents believe". Josef Weber, an 85-year-old Nazi, living under an assumed identity as a respected member of society, makes Sage his friend and confidante. He tells her about his horrible deeds during the Holocaust and seeks redemption; he requests her to put an end to his life. Minka, Sage's grandmother, a Jewish survivor

who has never spoken of her hellish days as a prisoner, to anyone, finally opens up. She relates her story to Sage; this story is linked to Josef's in a bizarre way. Sage's quandary on hearing the two tales is an integral part of the book.

Picoult takes us down paths that unravel various truths and reflect the complexities of human nature in an intriguing way. We see the conflict between good and evil, the desperation of remorse, the compelling need for revenge and retribution, and the potency of the ability to forgive. Josef's brother, Franz, believes that power isn't doing something terrible to someone who's weaker than one. It's having the strength to do something terrible and choosing not to.

Steely nerves are needed to keep on reading about the unimaginable torture the Jews are subjected to. Picoult makes the rawness of these acts sear the pages and jar the senses. The poignancy of the victims' helplessness hangs thick in the air. "It was as if death had become part of the landscape". Consequently, a sudden, unexpected kindness however slight, is felt acutely: "Sometimes all it takes to become human again is someone who can see you that way, no matter how you present on the surface".

Another awe-inspiring character is Leo Stein. He finds his work of hunting down Nazis and turning them in, very gratifying. Is this work vengeance? Or is it justice? The fine line between the two is scrutinized here.

Picoult is such a wordsmith; she makes even the mundane sound special. Minka's friend tells her that she doesn't just tell stories, but that she paints with words. Minka herself says "I pulled out word after word from my core, like silk from a spider's web spinning a make-believe life". After getting a pen in her hand after a long time, Minka remarks "Holding a pen felt so normal that my past, which I had surgically separated from the current state of my existence, came rushing back"; "The story flowed like blood from my hand"; "When I wrote, I felt untethered, impossibly free".

The most uplifting part of the book is the constant presence of hope in people's hearts, and the good that human beings are capable of. "Forgiveness isn't something you do for someone else. It's something you do for yourself".

Sage observes that history is not about dates and places and wars, but about the people who fill the spaces between them.