

First Impressions: The Book Cover Conversation

You may have a hundred books in your personal library; some you have read while others are still lying on the shelves waiting for your perusal. If you take the time to take a good look at the collection you have amassed, and take notice of the covers each of these books have, a new world into the realms of the imagery will open up to you.

A book cover is a crucial element in our reading experience. It's akin to the role of the record sleeve on your musical ears. A visual treat - it's the first thing you see and a good cover illustration can persuade you to embark upon this new journey, page by page, or not!

Some illustrations are iconic, some are great works of art, some clever and some prettier than the rest. While some arouse our senses, other book covers end up as famous as the books themselves.

Dr S M Zahid Hossain, Professor, Department of Fine Arts, University of Rajshahi, a noted authority on book covers of post liberation period, sees cover illustrations as an identity to the books themselves. "The graphic art of a book cover or a lexicon will differ from that of a children's novel, yet through this small space the artist must create an individuality of the book." He feels that the artist must build a character, one that will invite the reader and touch the notions of aesthetics in him.

The work is anything but easy.

In the early twentieth century when the printing technology was developing in the Indian Subcontinent, original book covers were mainly done by letter press and more often than not, just stated the name of the book, in mundane forms.

"Some books utilised lithography and woodblock printmaking techniques that dawned the era of artistic book covers in this region" said Dr Hossain.

From such crude techniques we have now come upon the digital era when books are no longer confined to paper, and have transformed into digitalised versions. Yet the need for a cover, even in digitalised copies, still remains.

So, what is the secret recipe to a great book cover?

Dr Hossain says, "The most important aspect is probably the use of colour and the right lettering of the book." He further added that the play of light and shadow and the importance of drawing cannot be over emphasised. "These days, graphic artists mostly utilise computer fonts for the lettering of the books. It makes the job easier but takes away the individuality of the designer from his creation," he added.

It is well understood in the designer circle that the cover must present a 'précis' of what the book is all about and it should be presented in the clearest, most lucid form yet one that is most attractive.

One of the finest designers, who effortlessly blended the aesthetics with the functionality of book covers was the late Qayyum Chowdhury. An exponent of the graphics medium, Chowdhury was in essence an artist extraordinaire. His prowess in executing brilliant line drawings created a

niche for his work amongst the literary circle and it is astonishing that Qayyum Chowdhury has at least a thousand cover designs to his credit. His contribution to our social exercise of aesthetics will forever be remembered, but it is possibly his contribution to graphics design that will render him immortality.

The tragic circumstances leading to his death will forever leave a mark in our minds regarding how trivial our mortal existence truly is, but the colours he drew with, and the rustic images he sketched will enthrall an audience of art connoisseurs for many decades to come.

Amongst the living giants, Hashim Khan is another master of book cover designs. "His work is based on the use of primary colours, forms that are easy to the eye and a distinct style that gives his designs a Bangladeshi touch," Dr Hossain believed. "Apart from these



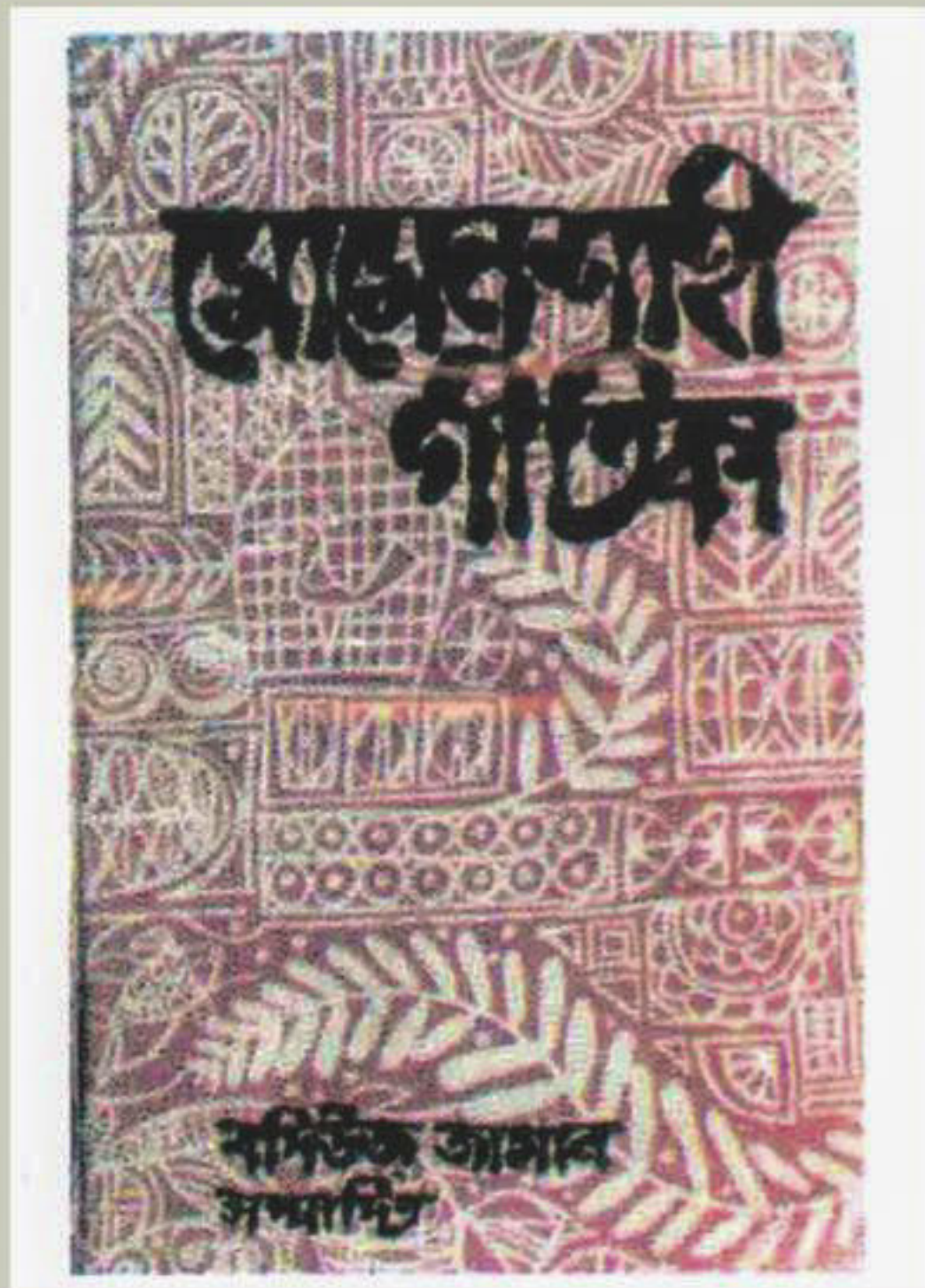
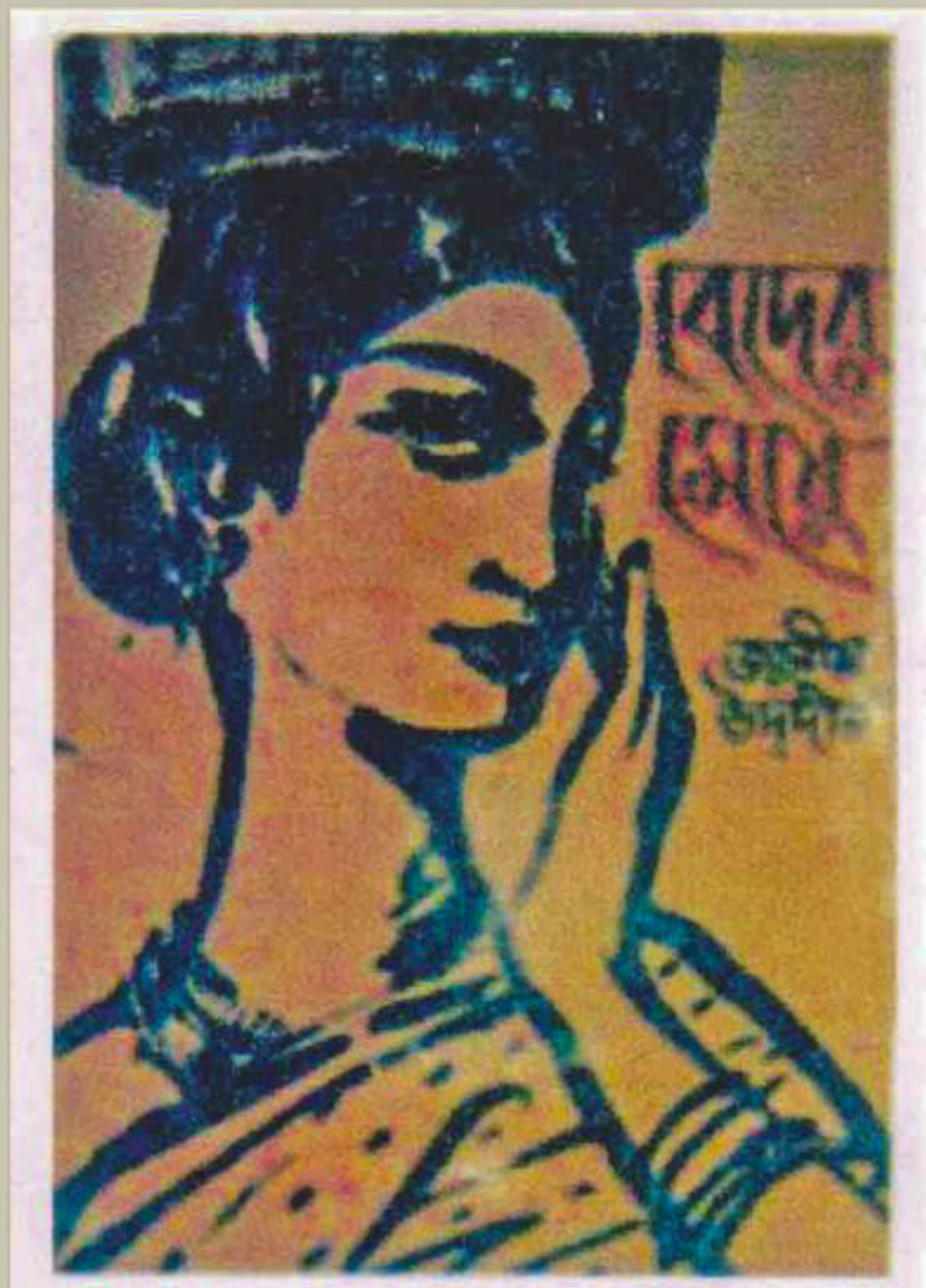
1952, edited by Hassan Hafizur Rahman, which came out in 1953. The cover bears historical significance as one of the first, political works in Bengali," Dr Hossain opined.

But what made book covers a standalone art form in the local, socio political as well as the art scene?

The Ekushey Book Fair coupled with the advent of the offset press.

After liberation Padma Printers brought the offset technology to the scene and this made strides in the industry. Publication became simpler and provided much scope for covers, which were now incorporating various techniques like water-colour, even works in oil, along with the traditional lettering techniques. With the Jatio Grantha Kendra distributing annual awards to artists for their significant work, designers felt a new urge to make quality work.

"With the advent of the Amar Ekushey

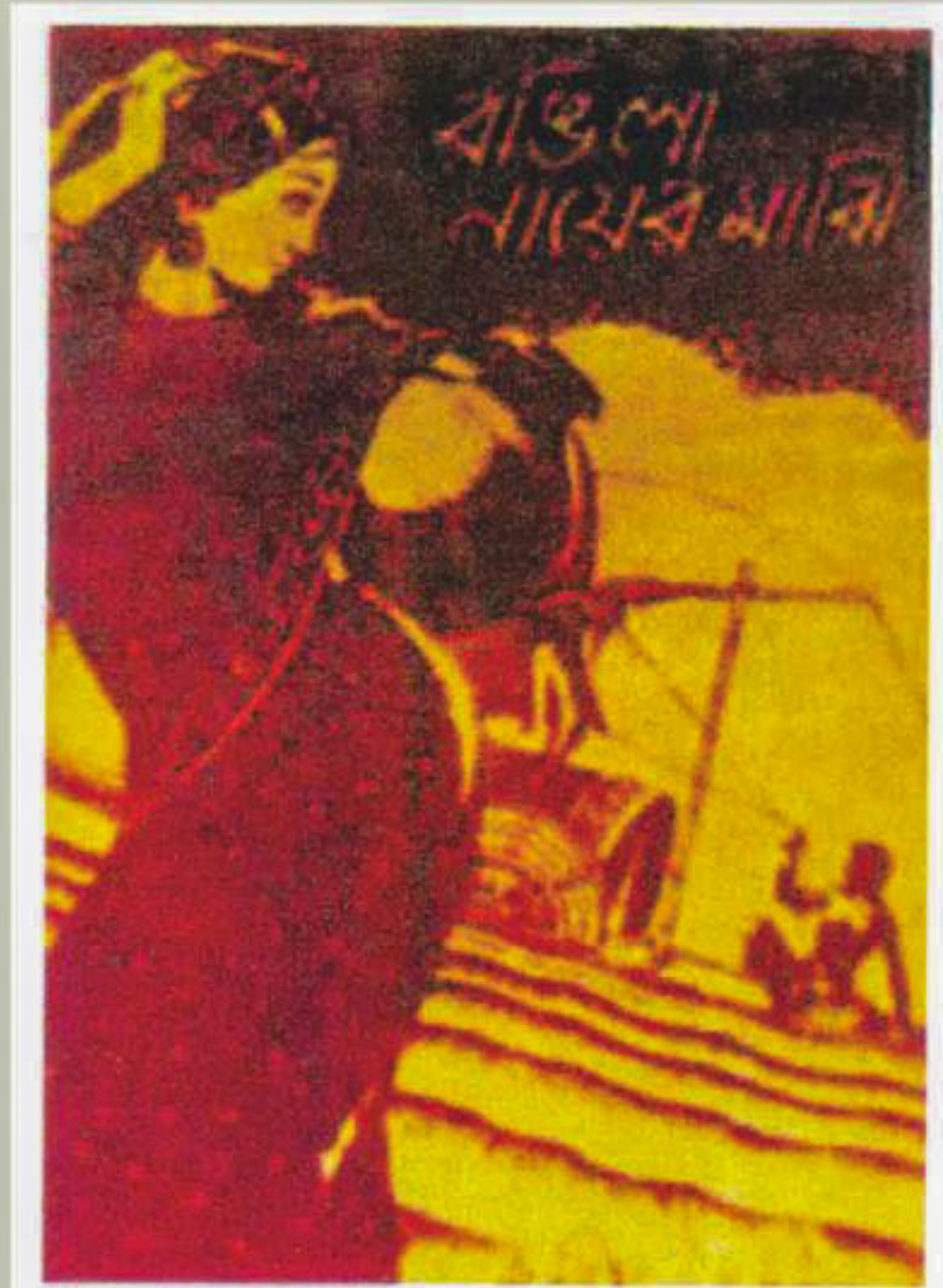


two, other painters have contributed to the genre of book covers, from Zainul Abedin, to Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, Syed Abul Barek Alvi and others."

The first great book illustrator and cover designer of the colonial period was designer Kazi Abul Quasem, noted for his plain, colour illustrations. A pioneer in the field, he made significant contributions to familiarising local publishers and readers alike to the fascinating world of illustrations and to a great extent, cover illustrations.

The post '52 era ushered in a new epoch for Bengali books, and their covers underwent great reformations. Still in the letter press technique, designers strove to bring excellence and considered it challenging to make 'trials and errors' in this new medium.

"The most significant cover of that period is the homage to the events of 21 February



Grantha Mela Bengali publications found new life and the field prospered," said Dr S M Zahid Hossain. And today we find a vibrant industry flourishing not only aesthetically but also commercially.

"Don't judge a book by its cover" is well understood. Clichéd even! Yet, it is only natural to conjure mental images of what we are about to read judging solely by the cover. It is the first thing that catches the eye and probably the most significant factor contributing to the ultimate decision – to buy or not!

So, next time you skim through titles in the book store, give the book cover one good look. It might have a story of its own.

By Mannan Mashhur Zarif

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