

# Where Do I Belong

By Rummana Chowdhury  
US: Xlibris, 2014  
Diasporic Dilemma and other Matters from a Muse

While reviewing the book Dr. SHAHID ALAM finds the writer's imagery vivid, colourful, at times romantic, often powerful...

RUMMANA Chowdhury announces herself, or, at least, part of her feelings, in this line: "Some things are forever ingrained in the innermost crevasses of your heart, no matter where you live or what you do" ("Hot Apple Fritters and Hot Roshogollas"). Here she expresses a diasporic dilemma that not a few Bangladeshi expatriates feel, but she also explores a number of other issues dear to her heart in her anthology of mostly poems, with a smattering of prose pieces, that make up Where Do I Belong. Rummana Chowdhury composed them between May 2013 and August 2014, with the (ambitious) "hope that people from diasporic communities, who know what it means to search for home and belonging in multiple places at once, can relate to my writing and possibly be empowered to retell their stories of diaspora, too, because it is by hearing these stories that we all become humans of a global world" ("Preface"). And, as she comes across from her writings, Rummana Chowdhury is a humanist, an important part of which she manifests by her declaration in the book that all profits from its sale will be donated to the victims of the recent Savar tragedy.

Chowdhury has authored eighteen books comprising of poetry, short stories, and essays, and has won numerous awards, including Woman of the Year (Canada 2010), Shouhardya Shommanona (India 2013), International Michael Modhusudan Datta Award (India 2014), and, most recently, Satyendra Nath Datta Award (Kolkata, India, 2015). She is an activist in human rights issues, specifically in the areas of gender inequality, violence against women, immigration, and diasporic life. In her Foreword to Where Do I Belong, Dr. Kathleen O'Connell of the University of Toronto, Canada, fairly sums up what would be the reader's ideal approach to the book: "In all, these poems --- whether prose meditations on the spiritual/philosophical --- comprise a body of work that is not meant to be read casually or in a light manner."

Chowdhury bridges the diasporic gap in her homage to her adopted homeland, Canada, and its various programmes in aid of humanity, in the short essay "The Pitter-Patter of the Blessed Rain", and in her wistful

recollection of her youthful days in her birthplace of Bangladesh in the reflective poem "Monsoon Music":

*"The music of the rainfall  
Resounds in our hearts  
As if there is no tomorrow."*

She lets loose a burst of emotion, of suppressed anger, against man's inhumanity to man and some of the instruments that are used to that effect:

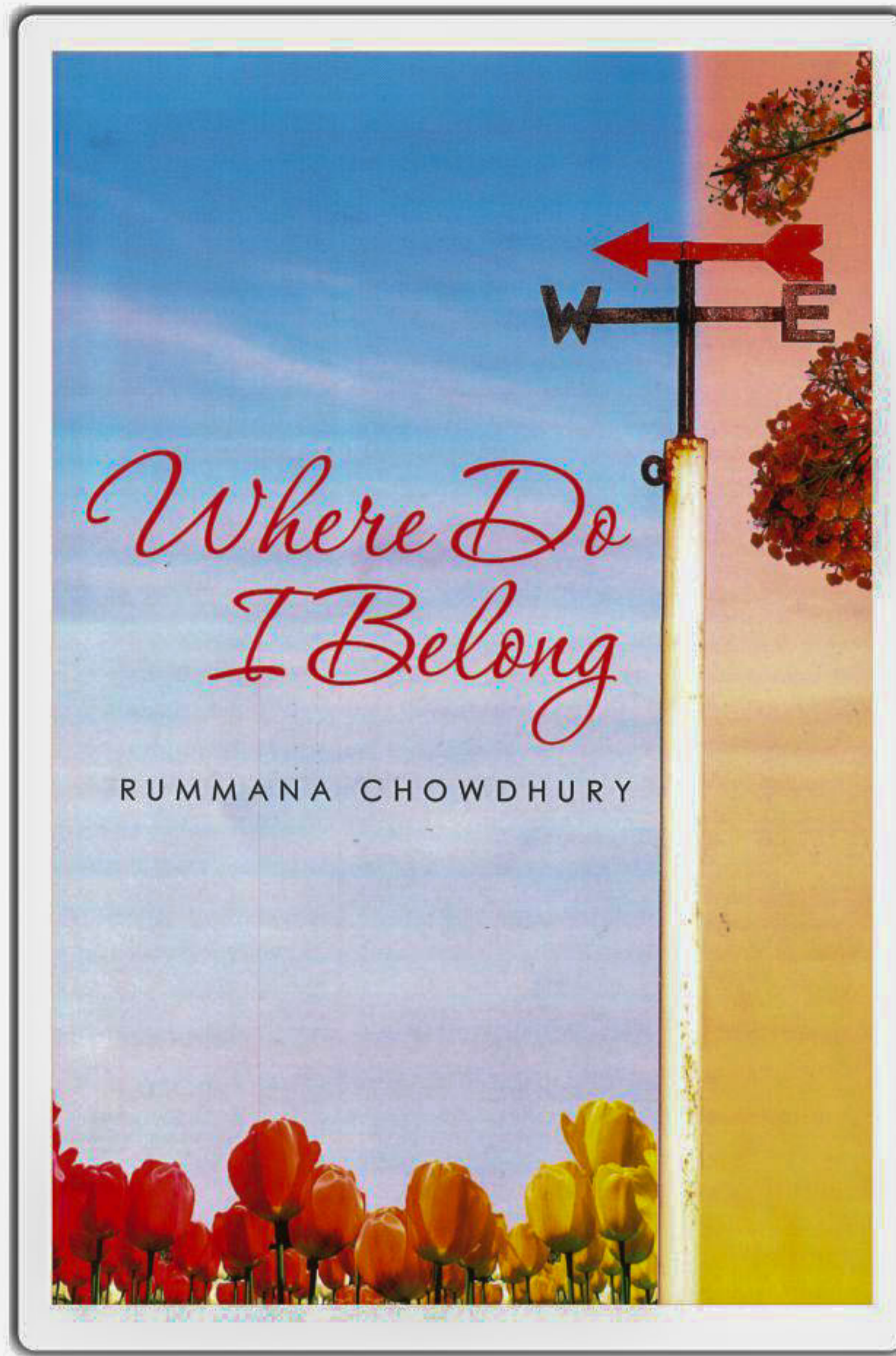
*"...to keep my fingers from the triggers of those guns  
those ugly cold metals breaking innocent lives  
those atomic bombs splattering newborn babies  
I look at the mangled bodies of blameless people  
poetry from the souls of unidentified writers...." ("Not at Liberty")*

She continues on the theme in the poem "A Tale of Silence":

*"Silence which speaks for itself  
a silence after the explosion at Hiroshima...  
... after the Khmer Rouge starts its operation...  
... at a Buddhist monastery in Thailand...  
... after Israel attacks Gaza with double force  
... when newspapers all over the world stop...  
... after the genocide of 1971 in Bangladesh...  
... as the answers are sought in Chernobyl...  
... as the Day of Judgement comes upon us..."*

She relentlessly pursues this theme in the essay "Blood Road", where she adds: "The occupation of Afghanistan. Rwandan genocide. Palestine. Bosnia. Somalia. 9/11 in The United States, and endless such human atrocities." Missing from her passionate indictment is the matter of geopolitics in action, an unpleasant reality in international politics, but that only reinforces her innate humanity and the soul of a poet. In an ideal world....

Chowdhury rails against gender inequality in "Expectations": "I take off my sandals and each and every coloured bangle that had been enclosing me from time immemorial into the captivity of age-old society and religion." And, in "Epic Tale of Women":



*"The downtrodden women down through the ages  
Have been tortured, persecuted, and suppressed  
.....  
They belong to more than fifty percent of all people  
Yet their pain and humiliation is shared by none"*

She brings out the aftermath of domestic violence on the victims: "But even after recovery, the mental and physical degradation leaves a permanent limp as they continue their walk of life" ("Walk a Mile in Her Shoes"). Chowdhury longs to be a catalyst for change, to right the wrongs of her perception, and is

confident she can do so, if only metaphorically: "And I know I could change the next universe" ("I Do Not Want to Survive, I Want to Live"). Her optimism, however, is tempered by a sigh of lament, of a sense of inability to break a cycle, of, in a sense, a despairing surrender to reality, in "From Captivity to Captivity":

*"I was a free-spirited eagle gliding over hills and dales valleys and mountains  
Until I found my destiny in a golden gilded cage of life's endless bounties  
Little did I realize that there were no outlets for me to make my final exit  
There was only the reflected sky which had invisible locks and bars"*

in all directions."

She seems to be equally despondent about the frenetic pace of life in the suggestive title "This Rat Race":

*"No one tries to stop the pace of this rat race...  
And one day the clock of life stops forever..."*

However, Chowdhury does not dwell morbidly on death, except, even after all these years, in poignantly expressing the loss of her parents:

*"I could not embrace my beloved mother as she left this unwelcoming world" ("I See My Tomorrow in Your Smile"):*

*And, in "Standstill":  
"The world had stopped turning  
For me and my unknown universe  
When my precious mother had left  
And for years I could not sleep  
.....  
I had cried out in the pitch darkness  
For my silent beloved father  
Who had left me long before...."*

She is a sensitive soul who celebrates life, who appreciates the high arts, especially music, and uses nature as a metaphor for her own emotions. We come across this nostalgic yearning for Bangladesh in "Radhachura Kathalchapa and Bogainvillea (sic)":

*"But as I gaze at the golden aura of the breathtaking radhachura  
the mellow white of the Kathalchapa  
intermingled with the pink and magenta bougainvillea  
surrounding me  
.....  
my breath is taken away and I relax  
amidst this long forgotten ethereal  
unbelievable bliss of  
my birthplace."*

Chowdhury alludes to music on several occasions, which, on the face of evidence, seems to indicate a love for the eshraj, mentioned at least in three separate pieces, including one

titled "Melody of the Eshraj". Rummana Chowdhury, however, never strays too far off from her innate sense of humanity. In the poem "In the Solitude of the Night", she ponders:

*"Some questions can never be answered  
the questions about life's warm rationality and death's cold reality  
the philosophy of war and peace  
the boundaries of right and wrong  
the imbalance between the haves and the have nots  
The resolute silence of Buddha...  
is most wise under the circumstances"*

In the essay "Friday the Thirteenth of September Two Thousand and Thirteen", she deplores the "Countless masses of unknowing people spread all over the world eradicated and crippled by cyclones, floods, earthquakes, wars, religions, and games of politics and power plays."

The optimist in Chowdhury cannot, though, be drowned by despair:

*"Let us start the clock of life once again  
Let us row our boat together to a new horizon" ("Face to Face").*

Rummana Chowdhury's imagery is vivid, colourful, at times romantic, often powerful, although one might be quizzical about the correlation depicted between Pablo Neruda's poetry and masturbation:

*"...he thinks of Neruda's poetry  
as he masturbates in the shower"  
("Rejoice").*

On a minor note, the word "lightening" is used in at least two separate pieces when clearly the context demanded "lightning" instead. Where Do I Belong will take the reader to the mind of a sensitive soul, one who cares intensely about humanity and all the wrongs done to it, or in its name, but never loses touch with beauty in its most varied and pristine forms.

The reviewer is actor and educationist.

*Classics Corner*

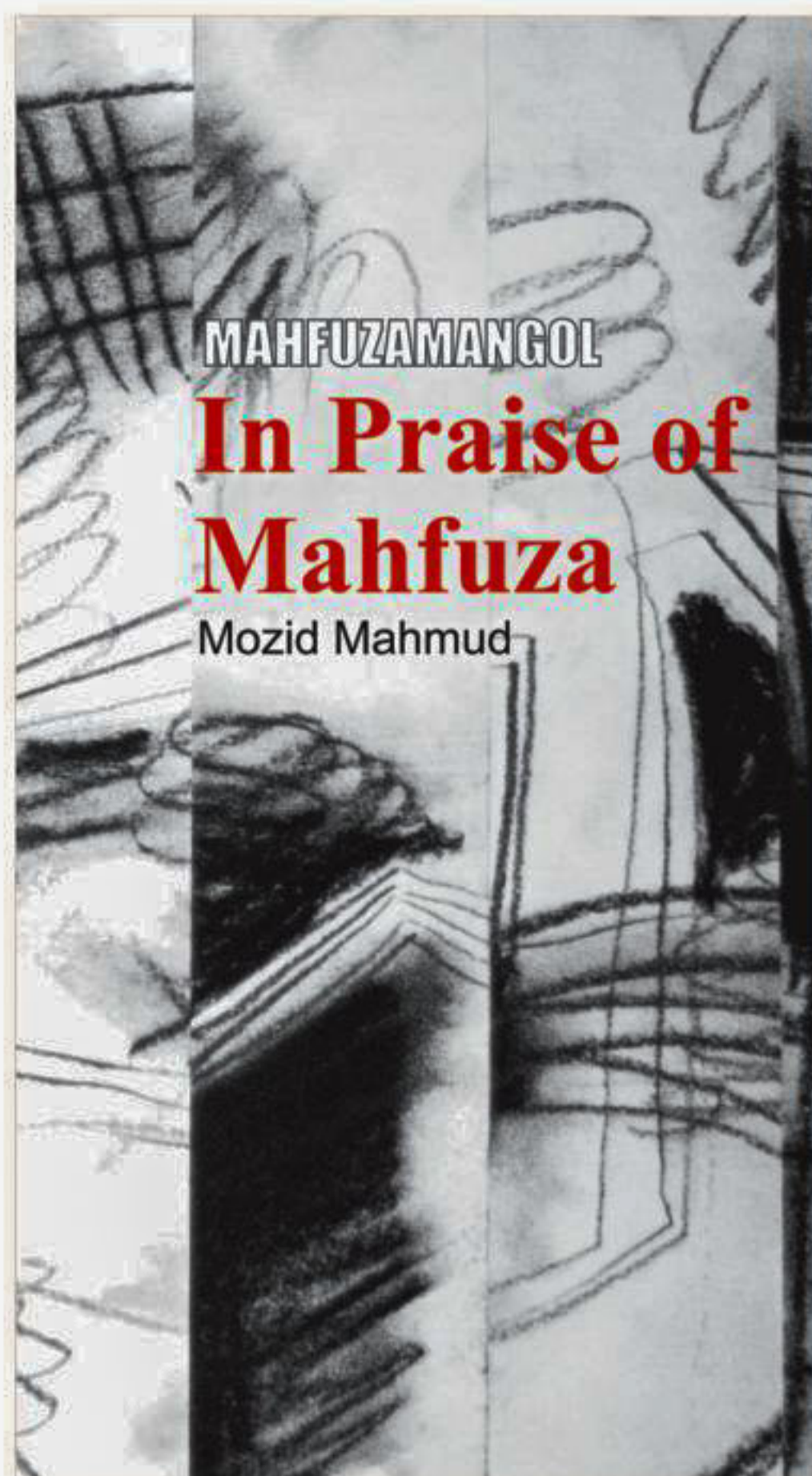
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## MAHFUZAMANGAL

By Mozid Mahmud  
A metaphoric expression of the self

Reviewed By Mostafa Kamal Mollah

'MAHFUZAMANGAL' or 'In praise of Mahfuza' is an extraordinary book of poetry penned by Mozid Mahmud; the poems of which were composed mainly in the 1980s with the exception of a few poems added later to the book. Mahfuzamangal with its 83 poems has three parts. The first part contains the formative period of the poet's spirituality. In the second part, the poet's spirituality is in its full blossom. The poet's spiritual hunt finds a kind of fulfillment in the last part. Though the name of this literary piece emits a medieval aroma, the poems are the attempt at leaving the beaten track through taking a traditional name coupled with a modern approach. The medieval age in our Bengali literature nurtured a special genre which is called 'the Mangalkavya'. The Mangalkavya was an eulogistic effort of some Hindu poets with a view to satisfying some folk deities. Unlike the Mangalkavya, the word 'Mahfuza' has its roots in Arabic, a Semitic language sacred to the followers of Islam. Instead of imitating the descriptive style of the Mangalkavya, the poet has taken a subjective approach. The poet's effort is to fly from subjectivity to universality. The poet reconstructed an old theme by making it go through the fertile land of his imagination and a unique internalization of external facts took place while doing this. The poems of this literary work are of unequal length and arranged in a sequential pattern. The explanation of 'who is Mahfuza?' can vary from person to person. Mahfuza may be the metaphoric expression of the Poet's self. Comparing Mahfuza to Teiresias, the blind prophet working as a unifying factor in the Oedipus Trilogy, will also not be wrong. The poet's Islamic mysticism has found a vibrant and multi-dimensional outlet through



'Mahfuza'. She manifests the mystical path that is designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world.

Every poem in Mahfuzamangal has a separate title. The poems record a variety of feelings

accrued at different times with the all pervading presence of Mahfuza in multiple contexts. Mahfuza's partial role is like the Life God of Rabindranath Tagore. She makes the poet say what he is saying. Even, budging an inch without the will of Mahfuza is not possible for the poet. Mahfuza's delineation has both monotheistic and paganistic tinge in it. Sometimes, She is the goddess. She is at times portrayed as having the supreme power over the most powerful country of the world.

The mystical experience of the poet reaches its climax in the poem 'Name'. This poem is an exquisite blend of the mystical path of the Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist traditions. 'Name' with its mystical theme is one of the best poems of contemporary Bangla poetry of its kind.

Religion is being used as the trump card by the political establishments even in this modern age. The poet takes a firm stand against the exploitation committed in the name of religion and the poem 'Temple' can be mentioned in this regard.

Myths are the best legacy of human survival on this planet. Mozid Mahmud has made extensive use of myths in his poetry. Like T.S. Eliot, the poet excelled in using myths. The myths used in Mahfuzamangal came from the east and the west alike. Synchronizing various myths, he created a mysterious arch of meaning. The poet's handling of Islamic myths opened a new vista for the generations to come. Apart from Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism formed the mythical core of Mahfuzamangal. Probably, no one after Kazi Nazrul Islam has been able to use such a language in our contemporary Bengali literature except Mozid Mahmud. Here lies the reason behind the poet's distinctiveness.

The reviewer is a literary critic.

## "Oriental Tales: Selected Bangla Fiction"

By Helal Uddin Ahmed

Reviewed By Supriti Sarkar

HELAL Uddin throws light on the many aspects of Bangladesh's Oriental Society, through his compilation of "Oriental Tales: Selected Bangla Fiction". The collection of twelve translated stories was originally written in the second half of the 20th century and it includes stories by many well known authors such as Syed Muztaba Ali, Humayun Ahmed and many more. The first three stories are by Balaichand Mukherjee who was a noted fictional writer of West Bengal (pen-name "Bonophool"). Credit is due to the compiler for being able to translate the stories without compromising Bonophool's precision in writing such short stories. The first three stories focus on the human experiences of gaining maturity ("Death of a Reader"), self-preservation ("Jagob") and regret ("Dual Dreams"). These three are then followed by East Bengal's noted humorist, Syed Muztaba Ali's "Saline Water". Set in the early 1900s, this heartfelt story is about a sailor's journey by sea to the land of dreams America in search of prosperity which turns out to be futile. Compiler Helal Uddin also includes three translated stories by noted fictional writers, Humayun Ahmed and Jharna Das Purakayastha. The stories are woven around the emotions of anguish and loss that people experience at the loss of a loved one and how altruism is at times repaid with indifference in a community respectively. This is followed by Nayan Rahman's narration of an adolescent girl's experience with sexual violence and how she plots her revenge on the perpetrator ("The Target"). Amongst the twelve stories, two of Helal Uddin's own stories are also included;

"Oriental Tale" and "Paradoxical Project". The first one narrates a resolute man's struggle in overcoming depression and injustice that he was subjected to by an unethical society and the latter is a satirical interpretation of the drawbacks and inconsistencies in the development projects of Bangladesh. The final story is Sisir Chowdhury's "Lost in Limbo" portrays a man's strife with constant absolutism and perfidiousness in an Oriental Society. The compiler hopes that the twelve translated stories will aid readers to have an idea of the human emotions experienced by the people and the mechanisms of living in Oriental Societies as that in Bangladesh.

