

The Essential Rokeya

Selected works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932)

By Mohammad A. Quayum

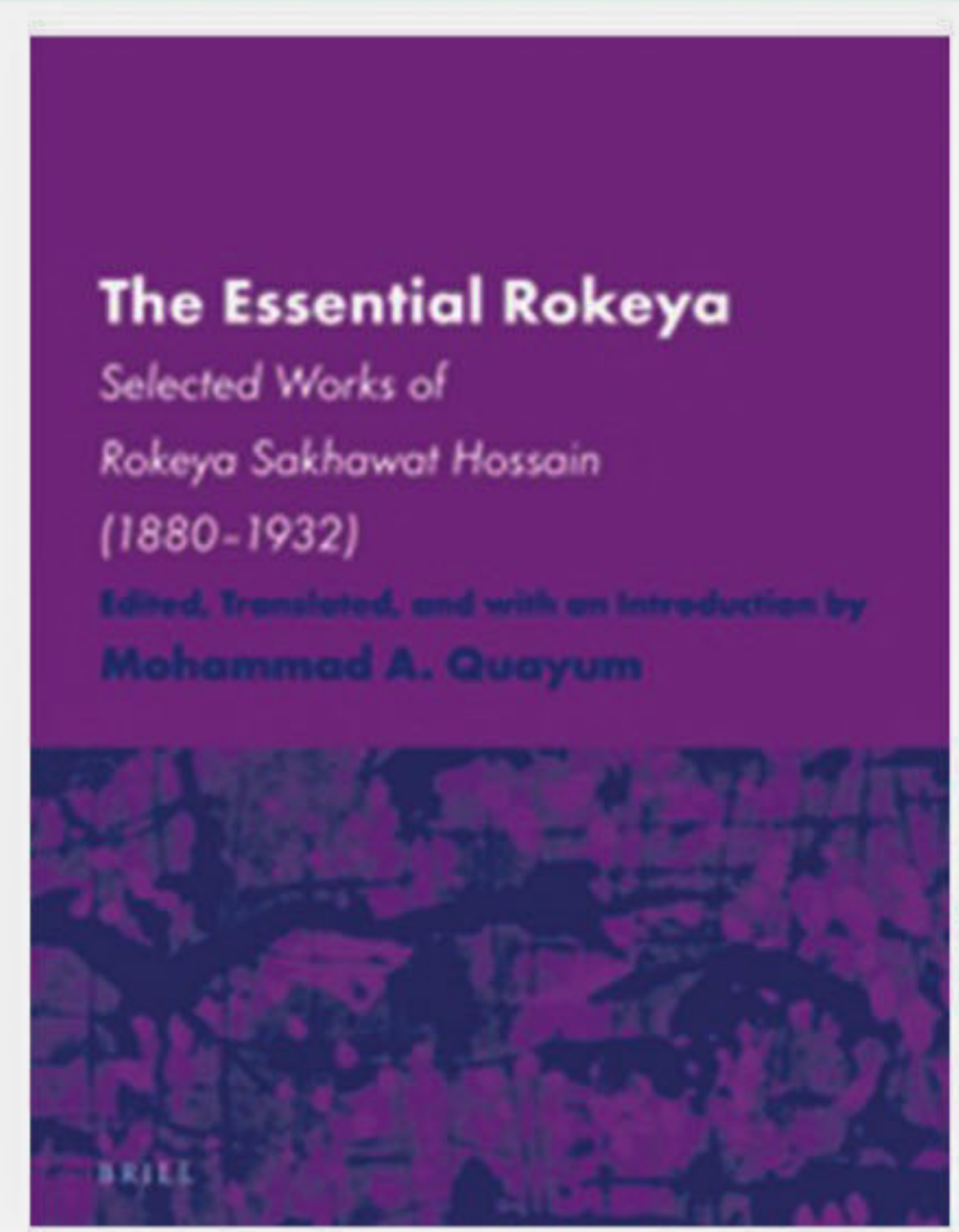
Reviewed by Md. Mahmudul Hasan

IN Bangladesh, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880 – 1932) is highly regarded as a literary, cultural icon and reformist writer who struggled for women's rights, socio-economic betterment and opportunities denied to them. There is a debate concerning her ideological stance. For the most part, commentators agree that her feminist framework was grounded in Islamic principles; but some characterize her as a secular intellectual. Mohammad A. Quayum's *The Essential Rokeya* will aid readers, especially those from beyond the borders of Bengal, to understand her philosophical background and literary traditions and interests.

Although Rokeya's revolutionary writing created huge uproar in Bengal during her lifetime, she was forgotten for a long time after her death. She re-emerged as a formidable literary giant when her capable literary and intellectual successor and the poet-critic Abdul Quadir (1906 – 1984) who collected and edited her works, which the Bangla Academy in Dhaka published as *Rokeya Rachanabali* in 1973. Roushan Jahan made the earliest significant attempt to translate Rokeya into English by producing *Inside Seclusion: The Avarodhbasini* of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (Dhaka: Women for Women, 1981). The second significant translation of Rokeya's work was *Barnita Bagchi's Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005).

Quayum's *The Essential Rokeya* is perhaps the most comprehensive intellectual endeavour so far to present Rokeya's works to readers more conversant with English. It includes Rokeya's most significant work in two parts – *Motichur-I* (1904) and *Motichur-II* (1922) – together with a number of other important pieces, most of which were not previously translated. The selection spans various literary genres and is representative of Rokeya's major themes and concerns. Quayum's translation of 47 nonfiction reportages of extreme Indian-style purdah in Aborodhbasini (*Secluded Women* [1931]) provides readers with an alternative version of Jahan's *Inside Seclusion*. His inclusion of Rokeya's English works gives the work a flavour of diversity and representativeness.

As Rokeya's work merits readers' admiration and respectful compliments, so does Quayum's *The Essential Rokeya*. Quayum's translation of Rokeya's writing is



preceded by a chronology of her life, a detailed biographical essay and an introduction to her work. He also provides elaborate footnotes useful for readers who are not familiar with the cultural context of Rokeya's creative career.

Rokeya is highly critical of blatant patriarchal biases and men's morally indefensible hegemonic roles towards women, and her writing exhibits a strong sense of polemical bitterness in a caustic but agreeable manner.

Dedicating her novel *Padmarag* (1924) to Ibrahim Saber and expressing her debt and gratitude to him, she states: "I have never experienced the love of a father, mother, an elder or a teacher; I have known only you You have always encouraged me and never rebuked me" (*The Essential Rokeya*, p. xx). Such expressions need to be contextualized and should not be interpreted literally and out of context. Deprivation of education amounts to

negligence and mistreatment for such an intellectually-gifted person as Rokeya. It is in this context that Rokeya vented anger over educational deprivation and poured gratitude on her brother.

Quayum's statement "Rokeya's school and her literary writing were basically intended for the upper and middle classes" (*The Essential Rokeya*, p. xxviii) should not be taken to mean that she had elitist tendencies or lived in an ivory tower. She was far away from any such associations. Her writing talks about the problems of people of all classes, colours and religions, as reflected in her style of characterization in creative pieces such as *Padmarag* (1924). However, the reason why she perhaps gave more emphasis to "the upper and middle classes" was that, these privileged groups had access to institutional education and could read and write. Also, they were the ones who could use their social, economic and intellectual leverage to make positive changes for women's rights.

Although the primary target audience of Rokeya's reformist writing was the Muslim community, it would be incorrect to presume that only Muslim society was beset with social ills and misogynistic ideologies and practices. Other religious communities as a whole also did not fare very well in terms of female education and other aspects of women's socio-economic status. Rokeya points to the misogynistic tendency of Hindu society in "Woman Worship" (1905) and recounts the secluded life of Hindu women as well in *Aborodhbasini*. Equally, child marriage and the craze of old men to marry much younger women were not peculiar to Muslim society, but were common to other religious groups too. Although the characters in the three short, humorous stories in "Marriage-crazy Old Men" are Muslims, it would be wrong to suggest that only "old Muslim men" had sexomaniac tendency or "sexual obsession" (*The Essential Rokeya*, p. 5).

In an overall assessment, Quayum's work is perhaps the most significant published work so far on Rokeya studies. The author and the publisher may consider the above observations while bringing out further editions of this magnum opus. Adding some more footnotes especially on Sheikh Abdullah (p. 128), Zakiya Suleiman (p. 131), bhabi (p. 138), dulabhai (p. 144) and baksheesh (p. 153) would definitely enrich the work.

Shiksha

by Nurul Islam Nahid

Reviewed by Supriti Sarkar

ALTHOUGH most of us know Nurul Islam Nahid as the minister of the Ministry of Education, very few know that he always had a knack for writing. He finally debuts as one through his book; "Shiksha", which is a compilation of his own writings that have previously been published in magazines and newspapers. It comes as no surprise that through this book Nurul Islam Nahid tries to highlight the hurdles that he has faced while trying to improve the educational sector. Some could even say that his experiences as a Minister are what make this book different. The writer provides information regarding the work that the ministry has done and additional information that many were not aware of.

The book is separated into two segments, Bangla and



English. The topics of the chapters range from discussing the status quo of education and its pace of development to the TIB report, to speeches given at various international conferences.

In the first chapter, "Bangladesh: A long way to go for achieving the goal of Education", Nurul Islam Nahid discusses about the progresses made so far by the current government and the roles that the education sector plays in the goals set by the Prime Minister herself- digital Bangladesh 2021. He shines light on the determination and dedication that the government is instilled with in achieving this goal, "Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the masses, and the people will be successful; but they will have to tread a long and thorny way". He emphasizes how the new generation can aid in executing these plans but not with the existing current educational system. "We want time befitting world class education, technology, knowledge and skill for our new generation. At the same time we want our youngsters to be complete human beings imbued with morality, gratitude towards the people, honesty, integrity and patriotism."

The second chapter, which is a speech at the 36th Session of UNESCO General Conference, Nurul Islam Nahid discusses the improvements in primary and secondary education as well as the achievement of Gender parity in these levels of education.

The next chapter is an account of the speech given by the Education Minister at the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development-Learning Today for a Sustainable Future. Here, he discusses about Bangladesh's achievements in ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) as one of the GEED champion countries. He also suggests some additions to the Network of Education Policy Centres (NEPC) for sustainable education realization. He hopes that through proper implementation of this policy, socio-economic disparities will decrease; equal educational opportunities for all will increase and therefore make the people more tolerant of varying ideologies. Further discussions in this chapter are about Bangladesh's National Education Policy (NEP) that currently provides free and compulsory education up till the fifth standard. Future plans are in the works to increase it to the eighth. In 2010, the government introduced a new program to reduce school drop-outs by distributing books for free.

The fourth chapter, "A Struggle for Going Forward and TIB's Report" revolves around the research report that was done by the TIB, concerning the Ministry of Education (MoE), the UGC and private universities. He showcases the flaws and proposes counter arguments to the report and also states the consequences of the report that was directed towards the Ministry of Education, the UGC and private universities. Two years of research gave birth to this report, during which period neither the MoE nor the UGC were ever approached by the TIB researchers for opinions or authentication of the information that had been uncovered. Nurul Islam Nahid shares his fears that the TIB report may result in an increase in local students to pursue their higher education's abroad and a decrease in the number of foreign students that would apply to Bangladeshi universities.

The final chapter, "Second SAARC Education Minister Meeting, New Delhi" is regarding the speech Nurul Islam Nahid gave in New Delhi. He discussed the relevance of grooming the new generation; whom he terms as the future "...architects of modern Bangladesh..."; how new programs have been introduced into the educational system to reduce and increase the rates of dropouts and the quality of education respectively, and emphasis is being given to technical and vocational education. The target is to provide the younger generation with all the knowledge required to transform them into a productive and skilled workforce ready to work in local or foreign settings. He emphasized the importance of higher education and expressed Bangladesh's deep commitment to the SAARC Process and its combined efforts.

The book focuses on the value of education to achieve a "...pragmatic, poverty free and knowledge based region free from the curse of hunger and illiteracy".

The reviewer is a major in English Literature and a part-time reviewer.

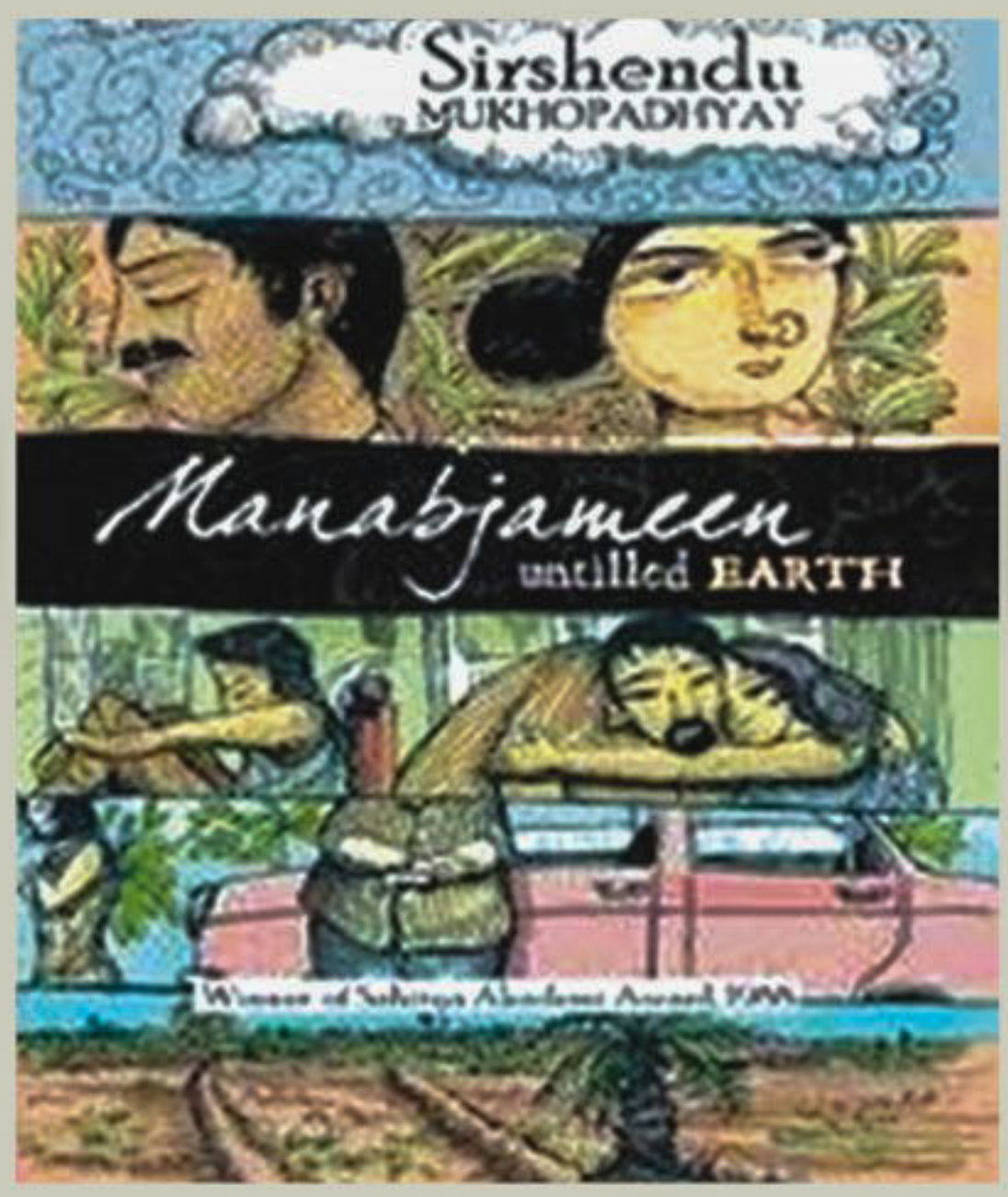
Manabjameen: Untilled Earth

By Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay

Translated by Soma Das

Supernova Publishers (2013)

Set in the troubled last quarter of the twentieth century, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *Manabjameen* is an expansive saga that charts the course of many lives that move in counterpoint, such that even solitude is moored in the others shadow. Amidst the panoply of characters the careers of three sets of people stand out in high relief. In each of these



three sets the happiness or unhappiness of one or two, is ineluctably enmeshed with and consequent upon a third. Srinath and Trisha's marriage has already fallen apart. Srinath's elder brother, Mallinath had bequeathed his property to Trisha, overlooking Srinath. As Trisha takes over the reins of the rural estate Srinath retires to an outhouse, exiling himself in his own home. Consumed by resentment he takes to gambling and womanizing and his descent down the primrose path is steady. Rumors are rife about Trisha's liaison with Mallinath and her eldest ones likeness to Mallinath is unmistakable. Srinath's brother-in-law, Pritam is battling a disease that is gnawing away at him bit by bit; he tries to summon his willpower against the ebb of life. His wife, Bilu is dutiful but distant. Over their tired lives hovers the bright and breezy Arun, Bilu's college friend. Pritam moves from Kolkata to his childhood home in Siliguri, where his mother looks after him. Bilu comes to pay him a visit, she wants to take him back. One morning the household awakens to find Pritam gone. Srinath and Bilu's brother Deepnath, languishes as a factotum to Mr. Bose, a top executive in a mid-dling company. Mr and Mrs. Bose are ill matched. Deepnath and Monideepa i.e. Mrs. Bose come close, only to draw apart. Deepnath rises in life and goes to America to seek a new life or to solemnize the life he has lost. The reader learns from Monideepa that Snigdhabee, a left leader she had once idolized, had gone to America and sold his soul.

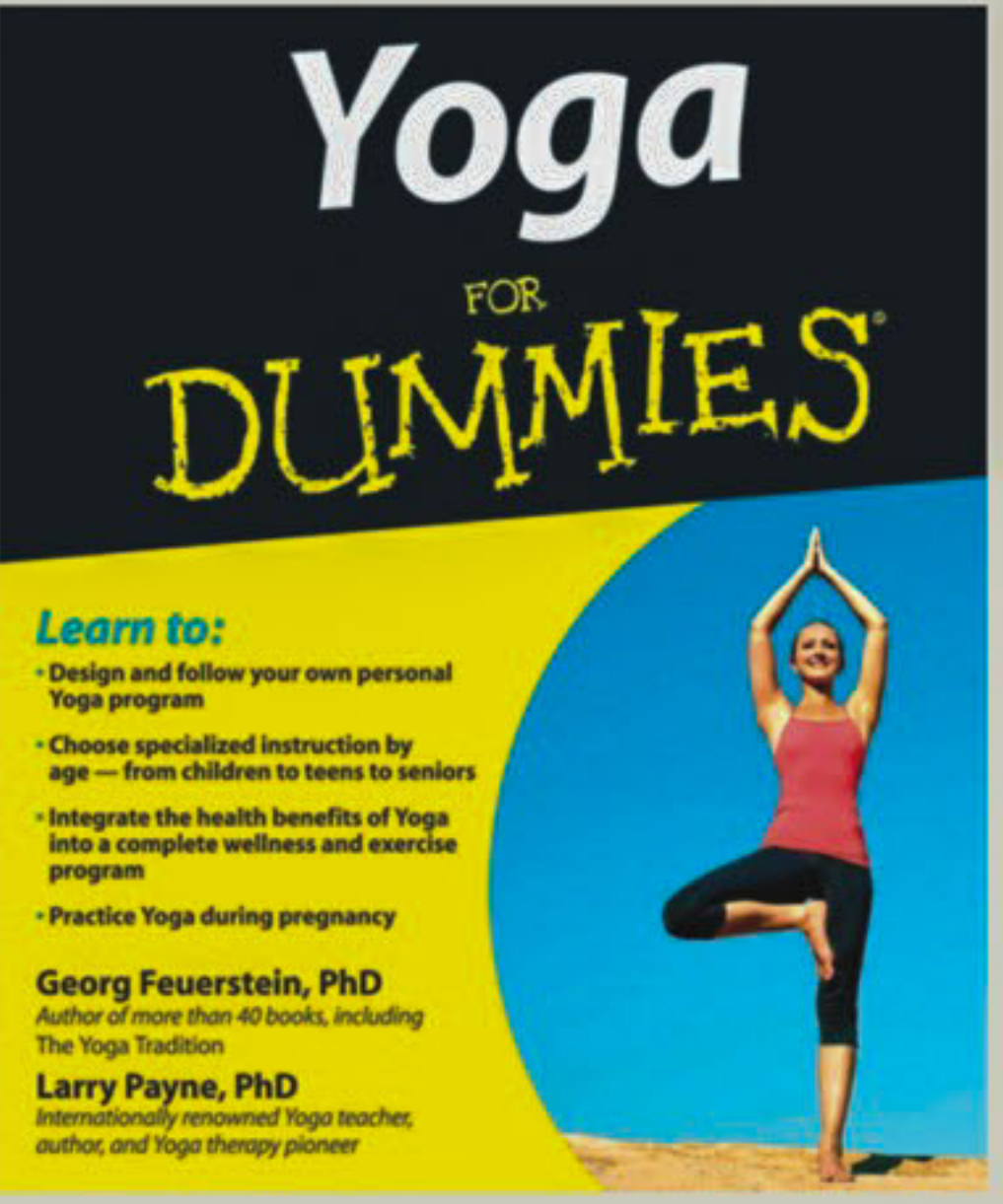
These books are available at Omni Books. Reviewed by the publisher.

Yoga for Dummies

By

Georg Feuerstein & Larry Payne

This revised edition of *Yoga For Dummies* provides 25 percent new and revised content, presenting new concepts for the yoga community, while maintaining its emphasis on safe approaches to the physical practice of yoga, and an accessible discussion of yoga philosophy and meditation. · Part I: Off to a Good Start with Yoga. · Part II: Postures for Health Maintenance and Restoration. · Part III: Creative Yoga. · Part IV: Yoga as a Lifestyle. · Part V: The Part of Tens.



Classics Corner



The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

By Washington Irving

Reviewer Sarab Sarwar follows the headless horseman to discover why he roams the woods and moors

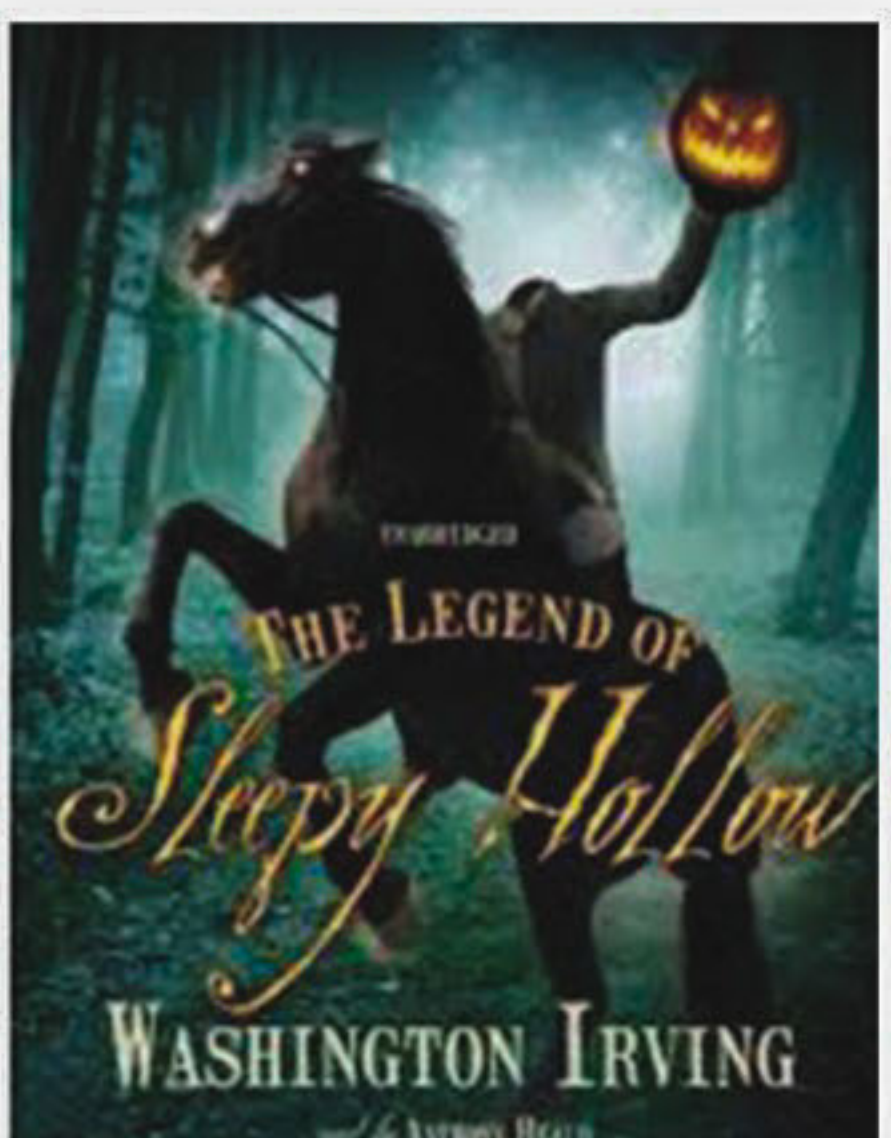
In this age of post 'Pirates of the Caribbean' Johnny Depp fans, very few people are unaware of Washington Irving's tale of fear and terror, 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow'. However, to those who have not watched Tim Burton's 'Sleepy Hollow', here is a simple but honest review of the famous short story that has now inspired a cult following.

The story centers on Sleepy Hollow, an aptly named small, drowsy village situated near the Hudson River. Here, nothing ever happens except for old wives and farmers sitting around fireplaces and discussing ghost stories. In fact, the whole village is one collective group of very lazy people, which Washington Irving very beautifully attributes to "...the listless repose of the place". In truth, they are just plain lazy and the writer of this review is very jealous of these fictitious people. Moving on. The favorite tale of horror of these slothful people is that of the Headless Horseman, a legendary soldier whose head was decapitated during the Revolutionary War. Henceforth, his restless spirit rides around the dark moors and overgrown bridges of Sleepy Hollow

on his wild black horse, forever in search of his lost head. Among the carefree inhabitants is the local schoolteacher - Ichabod Crane, a lover of food, the finer, delicate things in life for which he does not have to do much manual work and a firm believer in the story of the Headless Horseman. In due time, he falls in love with the coveted dame of the village, Katrina Van Tassel. However, he has to contend with other rivals for her hand, amongst whom the most tenacious is the strong-armed Brom Bones. Things take an eerie turn when one night, as Ichabod Crane returns home from a ball in the Van Tassel's house, he perceives the misshapen shadow of a headless horseman steadily following him in the quiet, steady darkness of the rural village.

First published as a short story in 1820, 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' is one of the earliest examples of a bestseller. In the honest, unflinching opinion of this humble but secretly pre-tentious reviewer, it was a beautifully written story but perhaps not the scariest. Narrated as if by a storyteller retelling an old fable to his/her grandchildren, the

descriptions were beautiful and the story comes alive when one is reading it. Whether we are reading the e-book or a hard copy, beautifully strung sentences such as, "...the place still continues under the sway of some witching power,



that holds a spell over the minds of the good people, causing them to walk in a continual reverie..." bring out the sparkling magical element of the story, that spins around the reader and tingles through his/her very fingers. It truly felt as if the story was written by a bewitching hand and the scenes of horror and terror, even after so many versions and re-versions of the story, was still fearful as ever. My only complaint is that the writer did not focus more on the headless horseman himself, the mysterious protagonist of the story. The hype and the fear that was built up in the very beginning seemed to dissipate itself later on. After a while, it seemed less of a ghost story and more of a simple tale of life and love in 18th century rural U.S.A. It is a good read nonetheless but if only Mr. Irving realized how much we modern readers are like the lazy, fictional inhabitants of 'Sleepy Hollow' and that we too relish in a good gory ghost story every once in a while. Perhaps then, he would have added more ghoulish horrors to the story.

The reviewer is a young professional.