

Crafted by History

BY HEMAYETUDDIN AHMED

The University Press Limited, 2014

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

GOING through *Crafted by History: An Interpretive Review of the Emergence of Bangladesh* was a perplexing experience in view of the jacket's claim that it is "an unconventional interpretive review of the struggle for democratic rights in the history of Bangladesh" as well as the author's declaration in the Preface that it "is a modest attempt to assess the impact of the newly won freedom of Bangladesh on its own people, and its outlook as a nation-state, towards the world at large and its neighbours in particular." In his defense it must be said that he subconsciously alluded to a "modest" in acknowledging that he is neither an academic nor a historiographer. Hemayetuddin Ahmed was a journalist and a Director General in the External Publicity Wing of Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, among a few other jobs. This slim volume was published several years after his passing away, and, in spite of failing strictly to do justice to its title, is not at all a bad read.

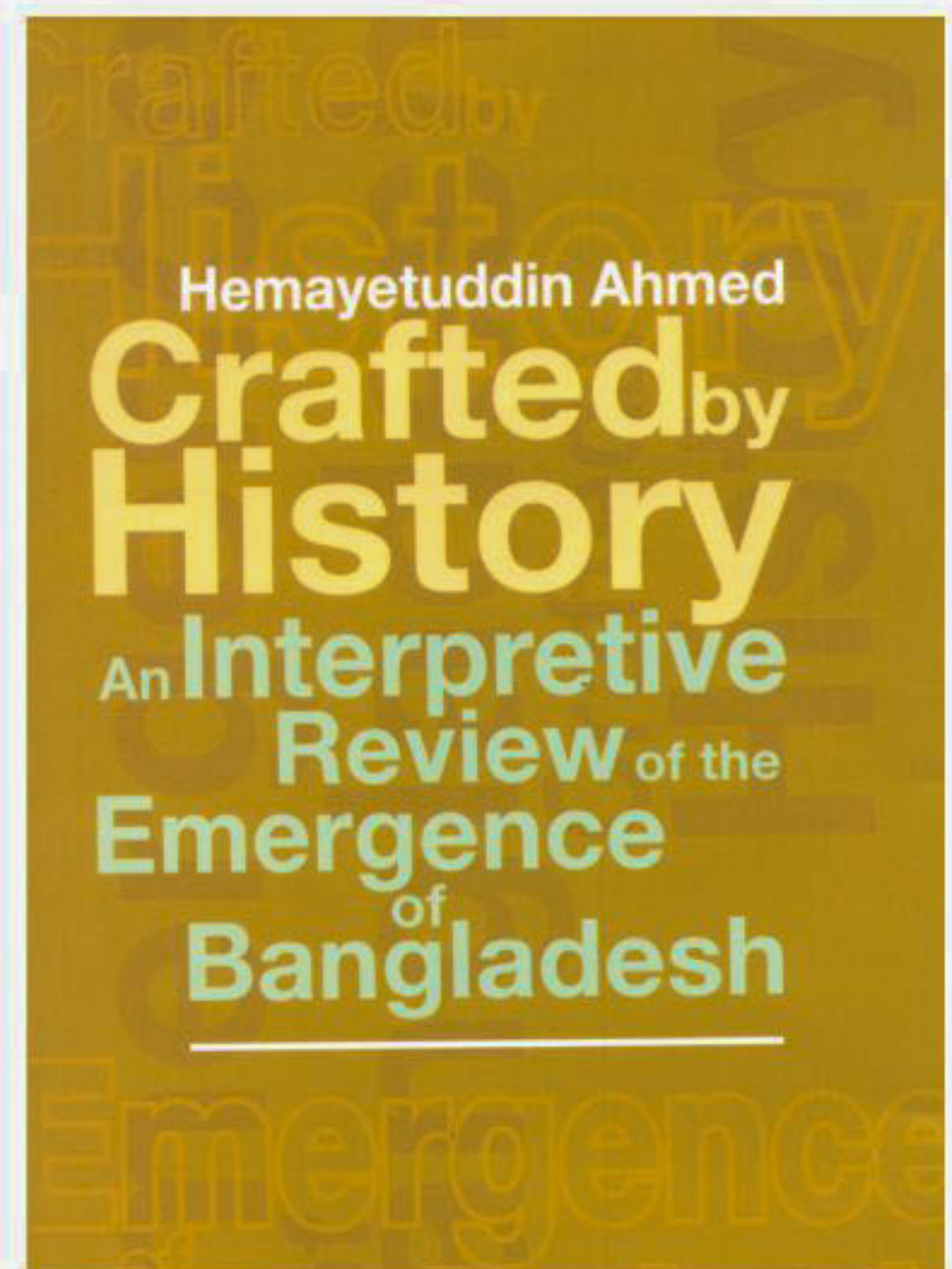
Crafted by History is neither a holistic, nor an in-depth, study of Bangladesh down the millennia, and its author's interpretive review is not much of a revelation either. Others have written along those same lines, although usually with a different emphasis on the subject matters, and a number of the interpretations are similar to those of Ahmed, albeit with more profound investigation and analysis. The book is a sketchy history of Bangladesh from ancient times to that of its emergence as a sovereign independent nation-state, and not much beyond, written in a lucid style. I must confess that when I read the book's title, I had anticipated a work something along the lines, if not necessarily the consummate mastery, of Howard Zinn's Mary's contrary lamb view of American history, *A People's History of the United States* (1980). Zinn has been acknowledged in the United States as being one of its towering intellectuals of the twentieth century, and the perspective reversal content of *A People's History* has been neatly captured by *The New York Times Book Review*: "The book bears the same relation to traditional texts as photographic negative does to a print: the areas of darkness and light have been reversed."

Crafted by History is hardly a perspective reversal; it is a rapid progression from a story of Bengal in ancient times, cultural fusion in this part of South Asia, Muslim conquest of, and East India Company and British Crown rule in, Bengal, to the end of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh. Relying on historical determinism, and risking possible challenges to the use of this method, Ahmed is convinced that Bangladesh's birth "happened by an unending historical process, produced by dialectics and dynamics of the social and economic forces through the ancient and medieval periods, added to, perhaps, by a bit of providential help." His reliance on the course of history leads him to establish a linear progression that eventually inculcated a sense of identity "to an isolated community of rift-ridden Bengali Muslims to break away from Pakistan, a country the Bengalis once largely helped to build." Both the points made here have been studied in detail by several scholars, including the significant, even decisive, contribution that the Bengalis made towards Pakistan's (counting, Jinnah's rueful description of a "moth-eaten" variety) creation. The Bengalis justifiably expected more from the new country; they got less.

Ahmed posits, and this view could be subject

to disputation from a timeline context, that the Bengali Muslims had an "ancient yearning for a separate identity...based on the linguistic, literary and cultural heritage which transcended various racial and religious barriers. Mixing and mingling across the racial and religious divides...made them a cohesive homogenous group." The reader could be forgiven for wondering who exactly the author was referring to: Bengali Muslims or Bengalis in general. Especially confusing is how mixing across the religious divide made the Bengali Muslims a "cohesive homogenous group". It would seem to indicate that the Bengali Muslims felt themselves to be separate from the Hindus, and that would contradict his later assertion that the two religious communities lived in general harmony down the ages.

There are other confusing/contradictory statements on the same issue. Talking about a spate of rebellions from the ones led by Titumir, Haji



Shariatullah, and Karam Shah to the Tebhaga movement, Ahmed believes that, in these instances, the "Bengal Muslims rose primarily against the Hindus as well as the colonial government which patronized them." And, lo and behold, he follows immediately in the next paragraph with the assertion that, "These movements were not religious. They were national." And, yet, with the creation of Pakistan, in the next paragraph he declares that, the Bengali Muslims "found no end to their exploitation. Instead of Hindus, now, it was the Punjabis and Mohajirs (refugees) domination." One could expect a degree of consistency in the writing.

The author reflects on Winston Churchill's choice of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten (really a matter of noblesse oblige!) to replace the sagacious Field Marshal Archibald Wavell as the (last) Viceroy of India and how that appointment (Mountbatten kowtowed to practically all of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's wishes) tangentially had the effect of depriving Sylhet of the whole province of Assam. Once Pakistan was created, Ahmed reiterates the view that the Punjabi-dominated civil-military hierarchy

failed at nation-building by brushing aside the need for democracy, rule of law, equal rights, and other modern concepts on the ground that they were "perceived to be repugnant to the principles of Islam." Was it really that, essentially paying lip service to Islam, since very few of the civil-military higher-ups of that time had little more than a passing acquaintance with the practice of their religion? Or, was it something else, as Ahmed turns to later on in the book, that of establishing their ascendancy in the political and economic life of the country, largely at the expense of the Bengalis?

That Islam was only a convenient excuse to be used by the West Pakistani military, bureaucracy, and political leaders for their exploitative purpose is amply illustrated by Ahmed in the context of the trumped-up Agartala Conspiracy case, aimed primarily at suppressing the growing pervasive influence of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman over the Bengalis in general. Following his release from jail in February 1969 in the face of popular agitation, he attended the failed Round Table Conference in Rawalpindi. Significantly, as the author states, "in the Round Table Conference, Islam was never mentioned, and no leader ever said Islam was at stake...." Interestingly, at the Conference itself, Bangabandhu circuitously exposed his own false incarceration and trial in the Agartala Conspiracy case. In spite of his massive popularity among the Bengalis, he still could declare at the Conference that the Awami League was a party of freedom fighters for Pakistan, that its founder, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, was among the founders of Pakistan, and that the Six-Point Charter was meant to benefit all Pakistanis by providing for complete political, economic, and social justice, and was meant to preserve and strengthen the country. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was in his heart a constitutionalist and a big-hearted person looking out for the people's welfare.

Eventually, Ahmed settles on Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah (not a Bengali), the first independent Sultan of Bengal, as having sown the seeds of freedom some 600 years before 1971 by running a secular government encouraging Bengali art, architecture, literature and culture. And, when Bangladesh became independent "with a new secular profile", Ahmed comments with a choice selection of words: "What the people of Bangladesh failed to do themselves in two millennia of the Brahmins' and Buddhists' pre-eminence to give the Bengal Muslims a separate identity, the Pakistan army junta did it for them in two weeks of heavy-handed 'Operation Searchlight'...."

There are a couple of errors in the book. The national and provincial elections of Pakistan took place in 1970, and not in 1969. And, the years from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D. add up to six hundred years, and not a thousand. *Crafted by History* will not guide the reader through any in-depth analysis of events leading up to the birth of Bangladesh or unearth new evidence, but just might cause one to pause and reflect on a piece of information contained within it that he/she might want to explore further. This book will provide a kaleidoscope of the history of Bengal, specifically that of Bangladesh.

The reviewer is a Faculty member at Independent University, Bangladesh.

Khapra Ward Hotyakando 1950

BY MATIUR RAHMAN

REVIEWED BY TUSAR TALUKDER

MATIUR Rahman's *Khapra Ward Hotyakando 1950* is a record of political history, quite unknown to many of us. De facto, the assassination took place in Khapra Ward of the then Rajshahi central jail on April 24, 1950 and is considered the first jail killing in undivided Bengal. On that day, the firing by the police took lives of seven communist revolutionaries and seriously wounded at least 32 revolutionaries. No particular reason was known about this sudden firing by the police. After five decades of the assassination, Matiur Rahman, a veteran journalist of Bangladesh and the Editor of the Daily Prothom Alo, has tried to find out the possible reasons behind this killing through his research work. Indeed, I would like to consider this book of Matiur Rahman a complete research work rather than a mere book of history because while writing the book, he, like a researcher, has undergone a long process which involves taking interviews, collecting necessary information from different places of Bangladesh, West Bengal and Assam, and going through the books and journals containing write-ups on Khapra Ward Killing. He has given a chronological account of the incident.

Matiur Rahman has divided the book into six chapters which give the readers a complete view of Khapra Ward killing in 1950. The first chapter describes the seven martyrs of Khapra Ward and how some comrades remembered the martyrs and the wounded prisoners in many of their writings and speeches. The second chapter entitled "Seven Martyrs of Khapra Ward: Jail's Condition and the Revolution of the Political Prisoners" denotes the deteriorated condition of the jail and different stages of the revolution of the communist revolutionaries. This part also discusses the ill-treatment of the then Rajshahi jail authority of the political prisoners. Through his analysis, Matiur Rahman shows how the prisoners were deprived of their basic rights. The third chapter, a very substantial one, focuses on how communist revolution turned from a non-violent resistance to a violent and armed one. Having been influenced by the plan and programmes of the then Indian Communist Party, East Pakistan Communist Party took the decision to conduct an armed revolution country-wide. Consequently, the political prisoners were taking preparation for a jail-revolution. As a part of their preparation, they took part in a starvation programme called by the then general prisoners of Rajshahi jail. Furthermore, the political prisoners were preparing themselves for a violent and armed resistance by doing different kinds of physical exercises. The author of this book opines that all the aforementioned things agitated the jail authority of Rajshahi. In a word, the decision of armed revolution within the jail and outside enforced the jail authority to take a barbaric decision of

killing. The main motto of this killing was to shake the basis of communist revolution.

The fourth part of the book describes the events of 24th April, 1950. Most of the veteran political prisoners were transferred to separate wards. As a result, they expressed their deep dissatisfaction. Also, some of them denied to be separated from one another. Following the direction of the then Rajshahi Jail Superintendent, the police transferred some of the prominent political prisoners who belonged to the Communist Jail Committee to Khapra Ward in Rajshahi jail. The fifth chapter provides readers with the events of 24th April. The prisoners did not have an iota of idea that the police would open fire on them. On 23rd April, 1950, some of the members of Communist Jail Committee planned to keep Jail Superintendent locked in his office room unless the then Government of East-Pakistan fulfilled their demands. But



before the execution of their plan, the Superintendent got out of his room. On the other hand, some of the political prisoners were locked inside Khapra Ward. Afterwards, the prison guards following the order of the jailer opened fire on the prisoners. The police firing killed seven leaders while 32 of them were seriously wounded. The last chapter of the book analyzes the manifold impacts of Khapra Ward Killing on other political prisoners.

Matiur Rahman's initiative uncovers a darkened chapter of our political history. It points fingers at the wrongdoings of the then Communist Party. It throws light on the unknown chapters of our history. And no doubt, Khapra Ward Hotyakando 1950 sharpens our historical as well as political sense. Overall, this book has added a new dimension to the political history of the Communist Party.

The reviewer is a critic and translator. He teaches English at Central Women's University. He can be reached at tusar.talukder@gmail.com

Rimbauder Kobita: Trilingual Edition

Introduction and Translation by Binoy Barman

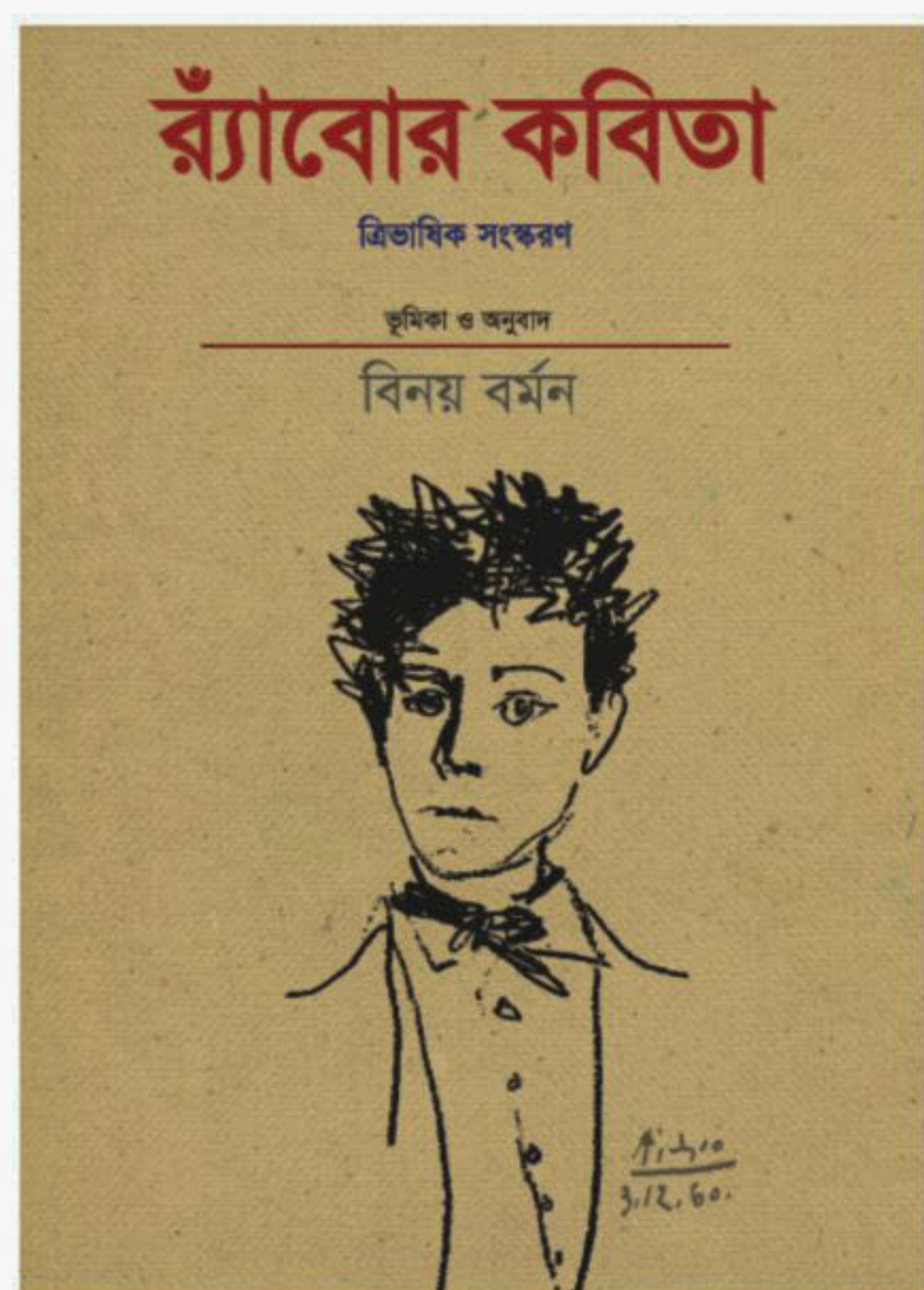
Panthojon: Dhaka, 2013

REVIEWED BY RAKIBUL HASAN

THE trilingual edition of Rimbaud, Rimbauder Kobita (Poems of Rimbaud), with an introduction and translation by Binoy Barman, can be a superb feast for the lovers of poetry, particularly for those who dare to enter the cryptic and labyrinthine, yet the irresistibly beautiful world of the great French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), a prodigy in his lifetime who broke up with poetry only at the age of 21 but astonishingly left behind him an incredible legacy heralding a new movement in world poetry that we know as surrealism. Before I go any farther, i.e. sharing my wonderful experience of savouring the poems as translated by Binoy Barman, I would like to congratulate him for accomplishing a great job by hosting the three versions – original French, Bangla and English of Rimbaud under the same cover. Those who are fastidious as reader and possess an inquisitive mind but lack the knowledge of French will be able to compare the Bangla translation with that of English translated by some of the renowned Rimbaud translators. To make this edition utterly comprehensive, Barman has mentioned the name of the English translator of each of the poem. And those who have the extraordinary linguistic power of accessing all the three versions, this edition is a kind of buffet for them – they will be able to taste three versions of the same poem!

Now the most clichéd but a necessary question would definitely follow – how is the quality of Barman's translation? In this juncture I would like to say something from the viewpoint of modern translation theories and practices, i.e. translation as a creative rewriting draws attention to the fact whether a translator is successful in representing any text artistically and creatively in the target language. So the first concern is whether the translated text remains a creative work after going through the process of decoding the source language to recoding into the target language. Or, in simple words, in case of poetry, we want to know whether it is still poetry after the translation as some people have the (mis)conception that poetry cannot be translated. Besides, the task of a translator is not merely to translate the language of the text but the translation of culture, that is, "the negotiation

between texts and between cultures". In this context I would unreservedly assert that in most cases Binoy Barman is successful in translating Rimbaud in his target language Bangla though the quality may vary in degree from poem to poem. Himself a prolific poet, Barman could easily maneuver his own poetic self while translating the poems. Therefore, when you will



read his work in this volume, you will get the fresh experience of enjoying Rimbaud in Bangla original.

The standard and trend that Buddhadeva Bose had set in his translation of Baudelaire's poems have been followed by the translators of successive generations over the years. The most outstanding feature of that

volume is its insightful introduction to Baudelaire that encompasses not only the essential characteristics of Baudelaire's poetry but also the making up of the poet and the literary movements like romanticism, modernism and symbolism imperative to understand him. Emerging poets and writers, critics and scholars, and the lovers of poetry all have benefited from that volume and are being benefited still today. When I was reading Rimbauder Kobita by Binoy Barman, that volume of Baudelaire's poems by Bose immediately came to my mind, particularly when I was reading the introduction. In fact the present translator has also adhered to the principles set by Bose. Even though it is not as pervasive and as perspicacious as that of Bose, Barman is far above being successful in capturing the life and work of Rimbaud in his introduction. From this introduction we get a brilliant portrayal of the libertine and ever restless Rimbaud, the bohemian genius, who has been influencing thousands of poets and artists all over the world for more than a century by his unconventional lifestyle and extraordinary poetic talent. Truly Rimbaud has got his due tribute in this volume by Binoy Barman. But an intriguing factor about the translation of this volume that may give a scope to the morose and shrewd critics (who don't even spare Buddhadeva Bose) to stigmatize the whole endeavour by Binoy Barman must be addressed at the ending part of this review, that is, the poems have been translated mostly from English translation only peripherally consulting the original French. So in a sense this volume may be regarded as the translation of translation. I would have not known this thing if the translator had not stated the fact in the introduction. And this statement or confession makes our job easy – we can evaluate the translation from that standpoint. And we can proceed with our reading of Rimbaud in Bangla original raising ourselves high above the petty and obsolete ideas of original-copy, faithful-unfaithful and "master-slave" concerning translations which never recognize translation as a creative work.

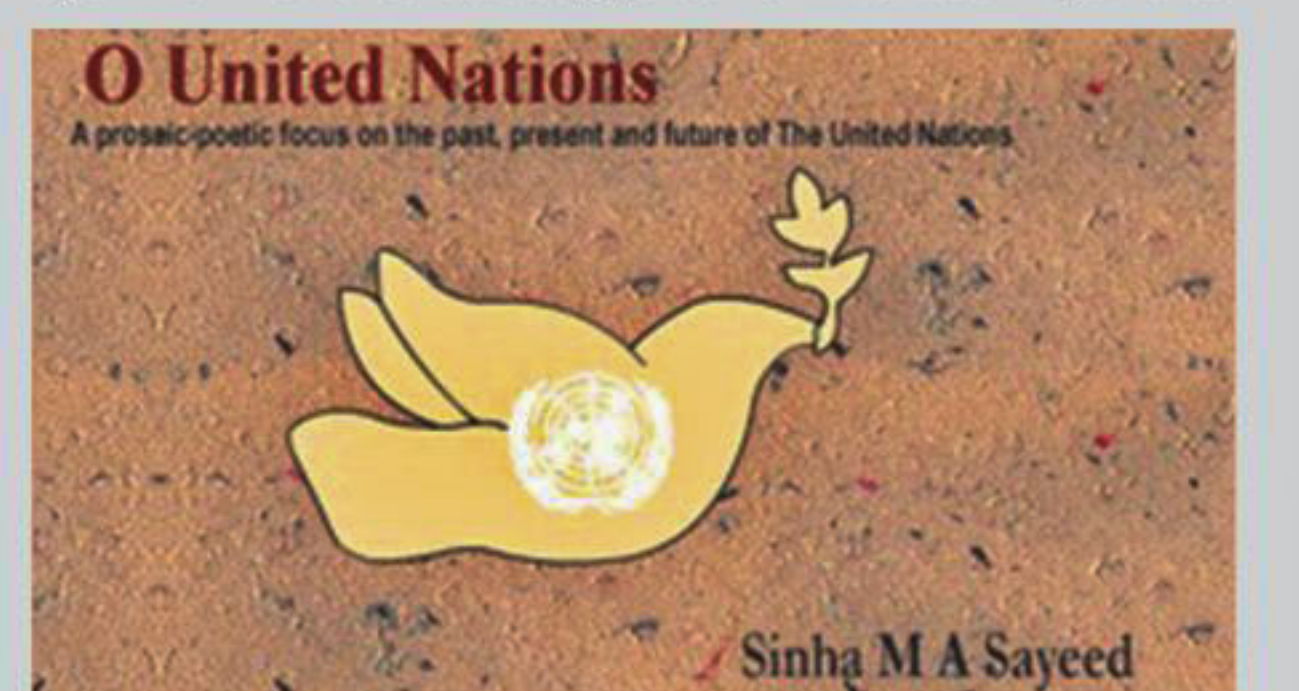
The reviewer is an Assistant Professor, Department of English, Daffodil International University. Email: rhasan82@yahoo.com

'O United Nations'

REVIEWED BY DR. MAHENDRA GAUR

SINHA M. A. Sayeed, a Bangladeshi writer of global awareness and standing, has written a book titled 'O United Nations' published by Bangladesh Political Science Association. This website publication is, in fact, an expanding form of the original book printed in 2007. It's really a challenging and appreciable venture to write a book in prose-poetry appearance on UN touching almost all the leading issues in and around UN, its member states and the world as a whole.

Focusing on the past, present and future of UN, the book is a stunning landscape of UN. Re the continuance and unavoidable necessity of a global body in the vein of UN under the circumstances, approving or not, it carries and passes a message of positivism and optimism for the readers, persons involved in politics



and statecrafts, persons and scholars of various scales, magnitudes, folds, shades and backgrounds at national, regional and international levels.

I welcome and endorse the very title of 'Global Voice' conferred upon Sinha M. A. Sayeed by various national and international bodies including Bangladesh Philosophical Association, Yale Model United Nations XXXV and Bogota Free Planet. Let United Nations, the largest global body standing more comprehensively and inclusively on the remains of United Nations Organization, feels on the house to embrace and make use of Sinha M. A. Sayeed in a befitting mood and mode.

The reviewer is Director, Foreign Policy Research Centre, New Delhi (India).