

TIME, TIDE, & TALES

AUTHOR: SYED NAJMUDDIN HASHIM

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REVIEWED BY IMTIAZ A. HUSSAIN

MODERNISATION is not an easy process, but neither is its depiction (or description). Laurence Wylie's Village in the Vaucluse informs us how traditional society can go gently, yet Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart accents a more brutal face.

Syed Najmuddin Hashim's Mosaic of a Lost Era is caught somewhere in between. Though this subject is clear ("our mother tongue and its vibrant aesthetic heritage," 11), the changing context complicates interpretations. Weaving through the Bangladeshi genetic composition and birth-pangs, he softens the brutalities of colonisation and independence, amplifies social-cultural nuances, and ultimately leaves readers a puzzle of their own: what is it that is lost, since his rich cross-cultural comparisons yield only gains? One might begin by asking what he means by "lost": something completely gone, the actual process of going, or resurrecting a theme? The answer might be determined by any author's writing companion, much like it seems to have been with Hashim: the context.

His was shrouded in pessimism. As he acknowledges, his "scribbling" reflects his own "recurring personal crises," set against "a crumbling world of broken columns" (xi). Those "broken columns" involve building Bangalee and Muslim identity, end of colonization, independence from Pakistan, and a "Second Liberation," not only from "inequities, exploitation, misrule, deprivation and destitution" (101), but also a "one-man show" in the 1980s (97). Although a lot of ink has been, and will continue to be, spilled to explain the twists and turns of these "broken columns," incremental knowledge comes from analyzing Hashim's subject.

Hashim's Dhaka "reminiscences" exemplify why the past is not in a zero-sum relationship

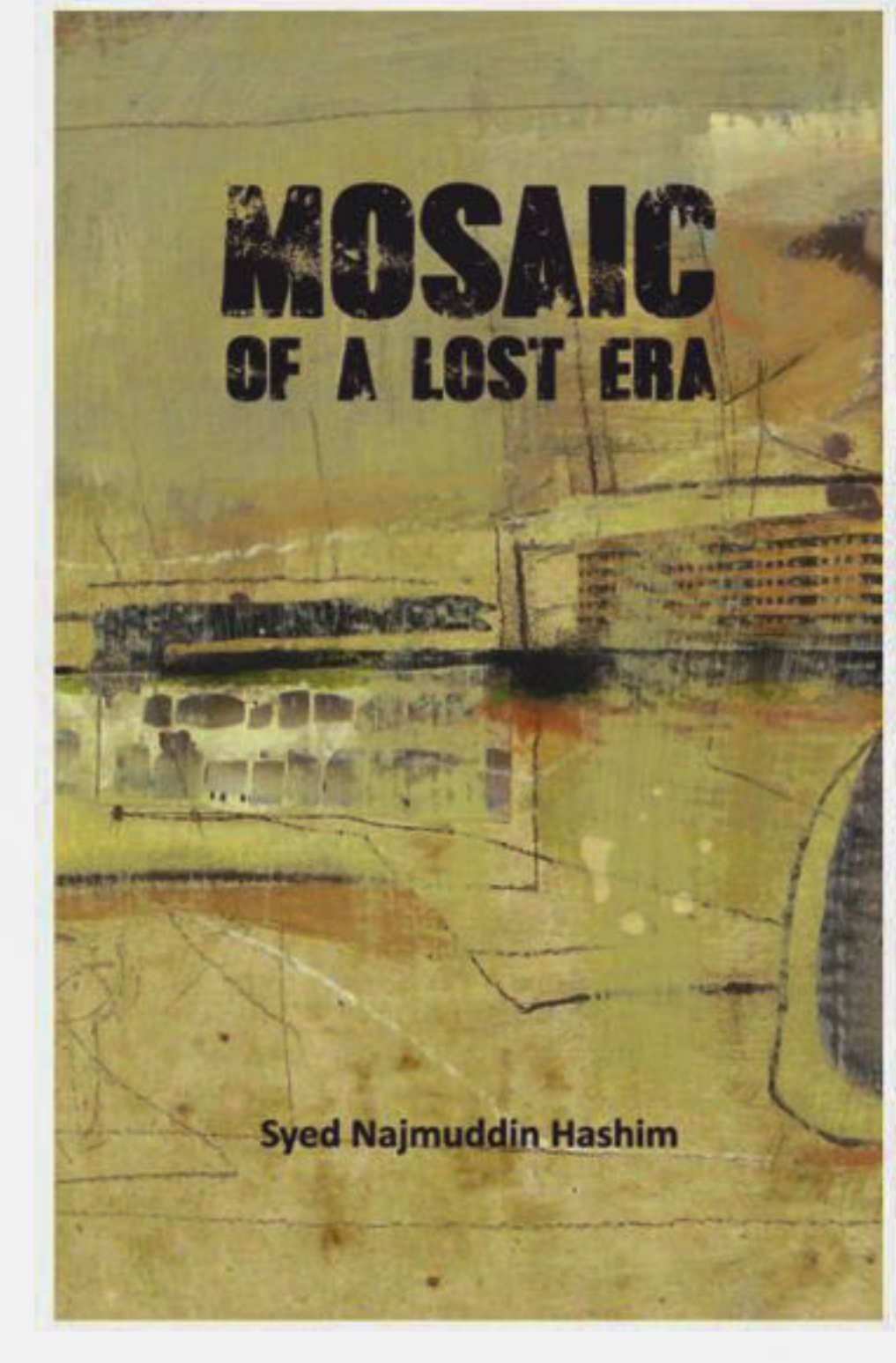
with the present. Drawn from the pre-and post-partition years, their global reach captures attention: Armenians in Dhaka, English cricket in St. Gregory, and comparisons with Jews, Europeans, the Diaspora, and Holocaust. Placing the country's contemporary Islam-west schism within this framework, for example, adds a new discourse.

His "mosaic" includes paintings, sculpture, music, jewelry, cinema, poetry, and democracy, highlighting a person, place, or predilection. Each riddles with dualities: South Asia-West Europe specifically, local-foreign generally, past-present, men-women, romanticism-revolutionary, abstraction-rhythm, and so forth. Each is multi-dimensional: he fits painters/poets/novelists/sculptors/architects/philosophers/scientists into his collage because they "fused" their respective genre, or, as he called it, "mannerism," with a "school of thought," as preached by "Humanists, Pacifists, Surrealists, Beatniks" (46), and the like. Comparing Hamidur Rahman's painting with El Greco, German Expressionists, as well as the works of Donatello, Michelangelo, and others, on the one hand, and on the other, linking his usage of "realignment and correlation" with Renaissance geometry, Hashim shows analytical versatility and intellectual breadth.

He even goes overboard embedding aesthetically advanced European styles into bucolic Bangalee settings. "The bathing ghat is to the village lovers," he boldly proposes, "what the bower and balcony was in medieval Europe" (70). Surely a testimony to his erudition, the observation still begs the question, what is it that is being "lost" when we learn so much from the analogy? Imagine a future Hashim looking back at a "medieval" Bangladesh, using the bathing ghat against another amorous format: the bathing ghat might disappear as a stage, like the balcony, but evolving romantic

gestures and liaisons remain will continue, and enrich thinking.

Hashim's "scribbling" is partly autobiographical, partly historical, and partly advocacy. He unabashedly demonstrates his socialist, democratic, and nationalist sympathies. References to Akhlaqur Rahman on p. 21,



Maulana Bhashani on p. 100, and Ahmed Rafique on p. 111 convey his admiration of socialism, confirmed by his p. 62 statement that "the fortifications built to safeguard urban power and special privileges should be broken down," for "the toiling masses in the country-

side". Democracy, too, is defended against "walls of Jericho," that is, "entrenched autocracy," not only as an independence pillar, but also against our "nightmare phase" of a "nine-year old self-professed 'one-man show'" (97). An undisputed "man of letters," Hashim might easily be a Havel or Shamsur Rahman, in keeping with his philosophy that a "genre" must "fuse" with a "school of thought."

Nationalism robustly holds Hashim's "mosaic" together, but remains conceptually loose. It must share space with his universalistic allusions. His message with poetry ("No song is deemed of a higher order if it does not contain suggestions of the larger world beyond our ken," 66), is extended to language (Bangla within a Sanskrit context, Persian and Arabic through Muslim worldviews, and English through Fort William training and against western civilization nuggets: 32-3); covers painting (comparisons drawn with Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Da Vinci: 44); and applies to conscience-building (Shamsur Rahman in company with Spain's Federico Garcia Lorca, Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Havel, and South Africa's Nelson Mandela: 98-9). Absorbing though these linkages are, we still remain lost in finding what is "lost": could not a future Hashim find a Bangladeshi Beckett, Beatles, or Beethoven from contemporary dynamics?

His nationalism could be political (in killing "the two-nation theory," and railing against the post-independence "weakness and vacillation shown by the leadership," 15-6); cultural ("indigenous culture," he argued, "would serve as the blueprint for the future culture," 57); historical ("a keen desire in Bangladesh society to interpret the past in terms of the present," 75); and urgent (the "imperative," he posited, "for us to constantly remind ourselves of our popular roots and origin," 62).

Hashim's nationalism is not compatible

with his local-global worldview and manifold local-foreign comparisons, and at times even misses the point: his entire two-chapter discussion of theaters and cinemas, for instance, address any audience but Bangladeshis (85-93). What he postulated about music, in fact, returns to haunt his interpretation(57): "... that it was foolish to keep classic music confined within the four walls of the music chamber of the nobleman ...". He unwittingly gives a walled conception like nationalism more room to breathe in an emergent age when no single package can remain an island, and when even the most heartbroken "mosaic" must generate optimism since it will itself come under scrutiny of future Hashims, spawn comparisons, and generally increase the food for thought that breeds optimism than become a casualty of time, therefore pessimism. These could not have been easy tasks for a lifelong spectator of bloody transitions with clenched fists yet unquenched thirst.

Pessimism, for a Bangalee, is not an unknown outcome, what with the tumult we have collectively experienced, from almost always ending up on the short end in foreign comparisons, and just from staring into the past. Yet, since flux has not abandoned us, in fact, has deepened and disseminated the world over at the start of the 21st Century, no society can be better prepared to handle this beast than ours. This is the underlying lesson we must extract from Hashim's "scribbling": open new vistas, even if substituting a "lost" for an "emergent" era is needed. His subject demands so; his advocacies would resonate better; and though his context allowed him to interpret the half-filled glass as being empty, we, armed with hindsight from the book, have the luxury to boast that half-filled glass is, indeed, full.

The reviewer is an occasional contributor.

Contemporary Environmental Challenges in Bangladesh

EDITED BY KHAN FERDOUSOUR RAHMAN

REVIEWED BY DR. HELAL UDDIN AHMED

PUBLISHED BY: CONCERN UNIVERSAL, BANGLADESH; MANAB MUKTI SANGSTHA; STATE UNIVERSITY OF BANGLADESH, FIRST PUBLISHED: SEPTEMBER 2015

DEGRADATION of the natural environment and its impact on human lives is now visible all over the world. As a densely populated country with limited natural resources, the situation in Bangladesh is even more precarious. Environmental pollution, especially those linked to soil, water and air have emerged as big challenges to sustainable development of the country. It is against this backdrop that the volume 'Contemporary Environmental Challenges in Bangladesh' containing 55 articles in Bangla on diverse environmental issues has been published by the Environmental Science Department of the State University of Bangladesh with the financial support of the NGOs Concern Universal, Bangladesh and Manab Mukti Sangstha. The anthology, in fact, has been published as a component of the project 'Promoting Rights and Accessibility of the Ultra-Poor in Char-land Areas through Democratic Local Governance'.

As the editor Khan Ferdousour Rahman claims, the task of bringing out this edited volume was undertaken from the felt need

stagnation in waste management of Dhaka city, air pollution and public health, river pollution, harmful impact of pesticides, gender context of climate change, environmental damages caused by tobacco, utilising jute for improving environment, agro-forestry, social forestry, adulterated food, harmful impact of brick kilns, public health implications of genetically modified crops, hindrances to environmental research, studying nature in Bangla language, children's health and environmental cleanliness, how to save the near-extinct vultures, economy of solar power, Sundarban's struggle for survival, environment and the country's future, environmental education, and greenery at the centre of everything. All these themes provide a glimpse into the present state of environmental challenges in the country.

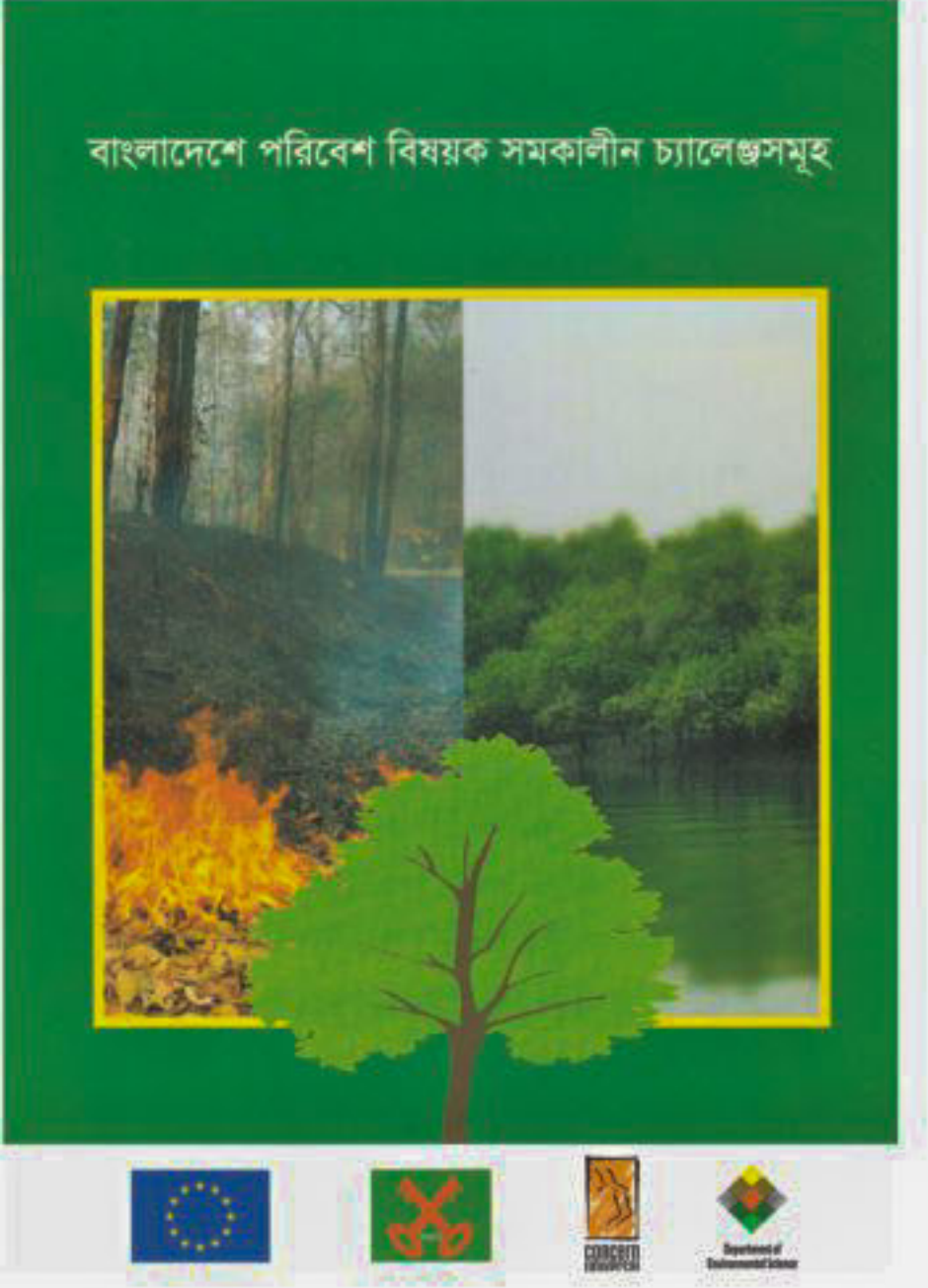
In addition to young scholars, the volume also contains write-ups by some leading figures in the field. Contributions by these environmental experts have added to the value of the book as a reference material.

The term environment is closely linked to the concept of sustainable development. The recently declared sustainable development goals of the United Nations are also based on this concept. This concept received global recognition in 1987 through adoption of the recommendations of Brundtland Commission (formed in 1982) through a consensus at the UN General Assembly in New York. As per this concept of sustainable development, the level of natural resources consumed at present should remain the same in future. For this purpose, the costs of technology should be decreased, alternative technologies should be invented, and economic growth should happen in such a manner that the supply of resources could be maintained in the long run. Therefore, sustainable development entails conservation of natural environment and biological diversity alongside improving the living standards of the people.

The editor of the volume Khan Ferdousour Rahman, who is also head of the department of environmental science at the State University of Bangladesh, laments: "It is sad that with a few exceptions, investigative reports and analyses on environment-related reports are almost non-existent in the mainstream media of Bangladesh. Consequently, the views of the general masses regarding the environment do not get much space there. On the other hand, there is scarcity of text-books on the discipline of environment. Under these circumstances, general discussions and analyses of different environmental issues carry much weight".

Against the backdrop of growing importance attached to sustainable development, environmental conservation and climate change all over the world, the present volume would serve as a rich storehouse for the seekers of knowledge on the subject.

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of a comprehensive volume on the subject of environment, which is accessible and meaningful to the general readership. Apart from some well-known writers on the subject, a majority of the contributors were young scholars from different universities of the country. As a result, the discourses have been very frank, elaborate and intensely argumentative about the environmental maladies of Bangladesh. The main attraction of the volume has been the diversity of topics. Starting with the 'what' and 'why' of environment, the themes include political ecology, climate change, drinking water crisis, river erosion, nature as a teacher, natural state of Dhaka, role of youths in preventing environmental disasters, tannery wastes in poultry industry, curse of urbanisation, risks of earthquake, quality of underground water, Arsenic pollution, solid waste management, clinical waste management,

A literary duet of humane attitudes

AUTHORS: ANDREW EAGLE & TULIP CHOWDHURY

(PUBLISHER: BENGAL LIGHTS BOOKS, PRICE: BDT 800)

REVIEWED BY FAHEEM HASAN SHAHED

ADMITTEDLY, we live in a milieu that comprises numerous sprinkled rudiments which keep crisscrossing each other in our personal-social-cultural-political existence. But these either stay beneath our feel, thereby making us misjudge their worth, or we simply take these for granted in our daily routine. Soothingly, Andrew Eagle and Tulip Chowdhury's congruent effort in APRIL won't allow readers to succumb to any of these tendencies due to a simple truth it highlights: our survival is glorified by our attachment to the 'complex everydayness' (to put it in Syed Manzurul Islam's words) of surroundings. And, we should have a caring eye for the nitty-gritty of that everydayness.

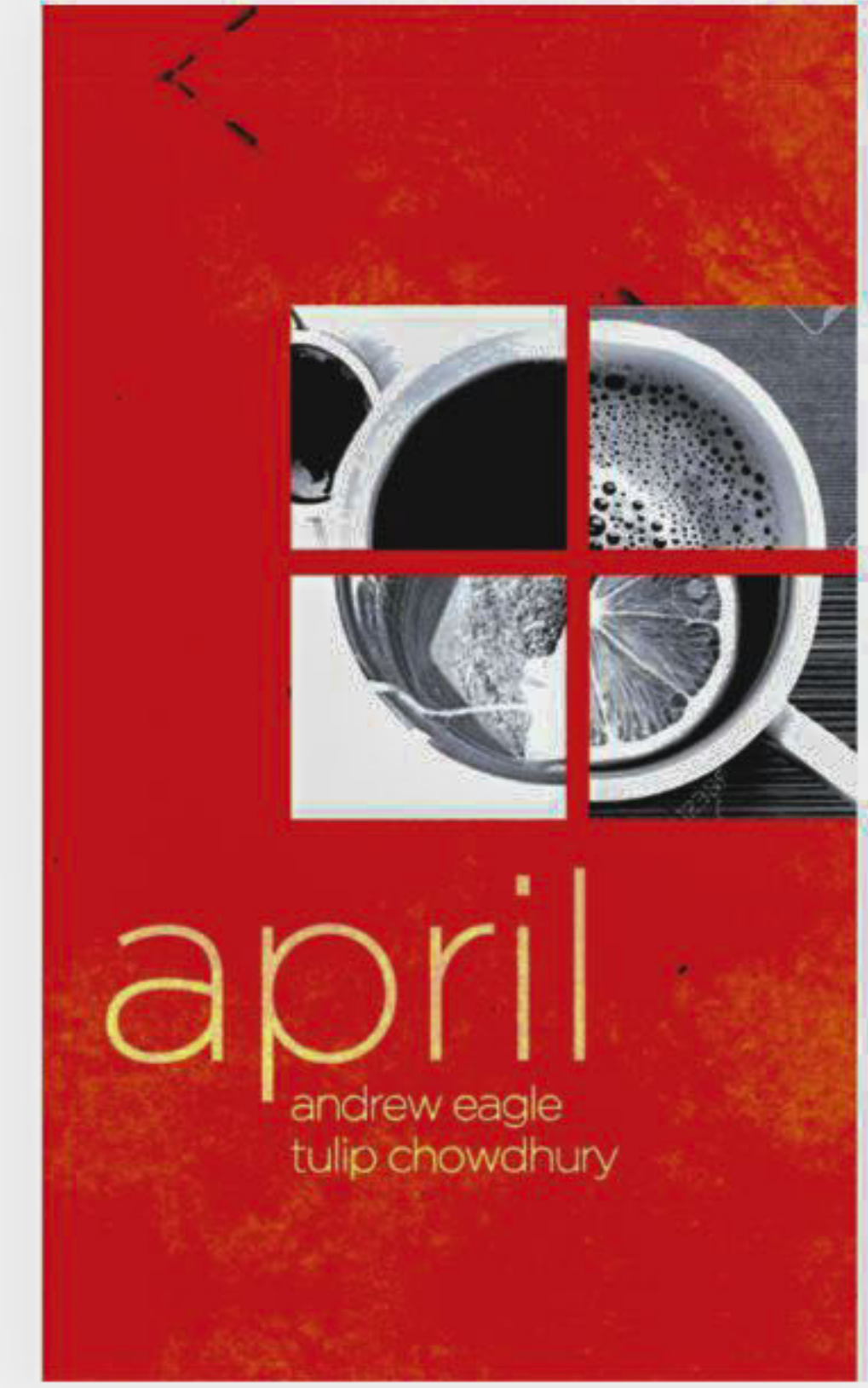
The sweetest surprise of this book lies beyond its words and pages. Tulip and Andrew hadn't known each other before stepping into the APRIL world. They first met in facebook, and their initial social exchanges, quickly shaping into intellectual alliance, eventually found its way toward arty fineness that whirled round the casing of a single month, April. Both of them, subsequently, had decided to make that permanent.

Roaming around its pages, readers will discover a specific power of this book; it has allowed both writers to unearth the hidden poets inside them. Well, they hadn't tried to be poets, but APRIL has made them observe and deem things like poets. You cannot avoid the charm of Andrew's silent scream on his return to Dhaka after a two-month gap, "Welcome mayhem! The mega city lives..." and subsequently by his childlike incredulity at the sight of uncountable people, "...lives colliding like the dodgem car traffic?" Similarly, Tulip will stir your sentiment when she talks of the few moments of 'contemplation or mental digestion' after watching a movie and goes on to remind you, "...It's in that space that imagination finds license." Uncountable instances like this can be cited where Andrew and Tulip dig up the triumphs and tragedies of urbanism in serene sensitivity.

Tulip's portrayal of cosmopolitan consumerism is touchy as she talks of her attempts to cope with the American family system where single dads and single moms have to maintain

lives contradictory to our values. Andrew too pours out his emotion in narrating how a young girl Jhorna in Sirajganj could haplessly tell people that she belonged to her grandfather's house... a house that had forever lost into oblivion by Jamuna's wrath in one night.

For both Andrew and Tulip, who had left their homes behind but carry the evocative past of their homes, the present is a bitter-sweet



affair. Andrew outbursts in poetic realization, "I'm not as Bengali as they are and yet I feel it. I'm hardly Australian except that I am." Apparently, he enjoys this 'privileged duality' or 'multiplicity' and also feels very normal calling his parents 'my Australian mum and dad'. But what about the poet inside Andrew? He perhaps leaves a room for you to guess! And Tulip? She never forgets her comfort-

able home in the 1990s that was one of the 'five happiest model families'. The softness of that memory eventually transformed into the toughness of 'nearly three years of homelessness', forcing her to accept the world as a better home. But then, why would the option of 'married or single' in the American official applications make her yearn for a third option 'heartbroken'? The poet inside Tulip will compel you to rethink through her narrations.

Yet, some readers may find a difference between the poets inside them. While Andrew as an 'outsider' has remarkably inched toward being an 'insider' by gradually discovering our people and society, Tulip's outsider-entry into the global environment of Massachusetts has made her gradually reassess her home much better than us. In this spirit, both are successful insiders who have found commonness in their homecoming.

A striking feature of this book is the insertion of Andrew and Tulip's facebook chats between the chapters. Finding them as insightful clues for a smoother understanding of the chapters, you will discover the juvenile innocence of Andrew who keeps seriously talking to Tulip expecting her instant feedback though she's offline. You will also notice the blue-green Tulip lost in love with the vast horizon in America and lamenting the lack of trees in Dhaka. But on top of everything, those will act as never-to-be-missed chatni-and-salad for readers relishing the chapters like home-made delicacies.

To be precise, the entire book will give you an overview of how human souls gain connectivity in their shared feelings about the life where they belong. A mere review is not likely to do any justice to this extraordinary work. APRIL is not just a book of unorthodox creativity. It is a musical jugalbandi of humane attitudes, a travelogue of shared humanity that has transformed into collective emotion of all readers. APRIL will surely whisper into your ears: 'why not take a look at the LIFE around you?' If you don't hear that whisper, probably APRIL hasn't been meant for you!

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NEW BOOK

A Clutch of Indian Masterpieces

DAVID DAVIDAR

THE stories in this collection will make you see the world differently as the greatest stories always do. The thirty nine short stories in this book will blow you away. Starting with a ghost story by Rabindranath Tagore, India's most famous writer and ending with a fable by Kanishk Tharoor, a writer who has come of age in the twenty first century, these literary masterpieces showcase the extraordinary range and diversity of our story telling tradition. The first recognizably modern Indian short stories were written in Bengal (by Tagore and others) in the second half of the nineteenth century and writers from other regions were quick to follow suit, often using the form to protest colonial oppression and the various ills afflicting

rural and urban India. Over the next century and a half, some of the finest writers the world has seen produced outstanding fiction in every conceivable genre. Many of these stories find a place in this volume, as does work by emerging talent that has never been published in book form before. Here you will find stories of classical realism, ones rooted in folklore and myth, tales of fantasy, humour, horror, crime and romance, stories set in villages, small towns, cities and the moon. They will entertain you and shock you, they will lighten your mood and cast you down, they will move you and they will make you reflect on life's big and little questions. Most of all, they will make you see the world differently as the greatest stories always do.

SOURCE: OMNI BOOKS

