

Refashioning of the Revenge Mode

AUTHOR: MOHAMMED HANIF
REVIEWED BY MOHIT UL ALAM

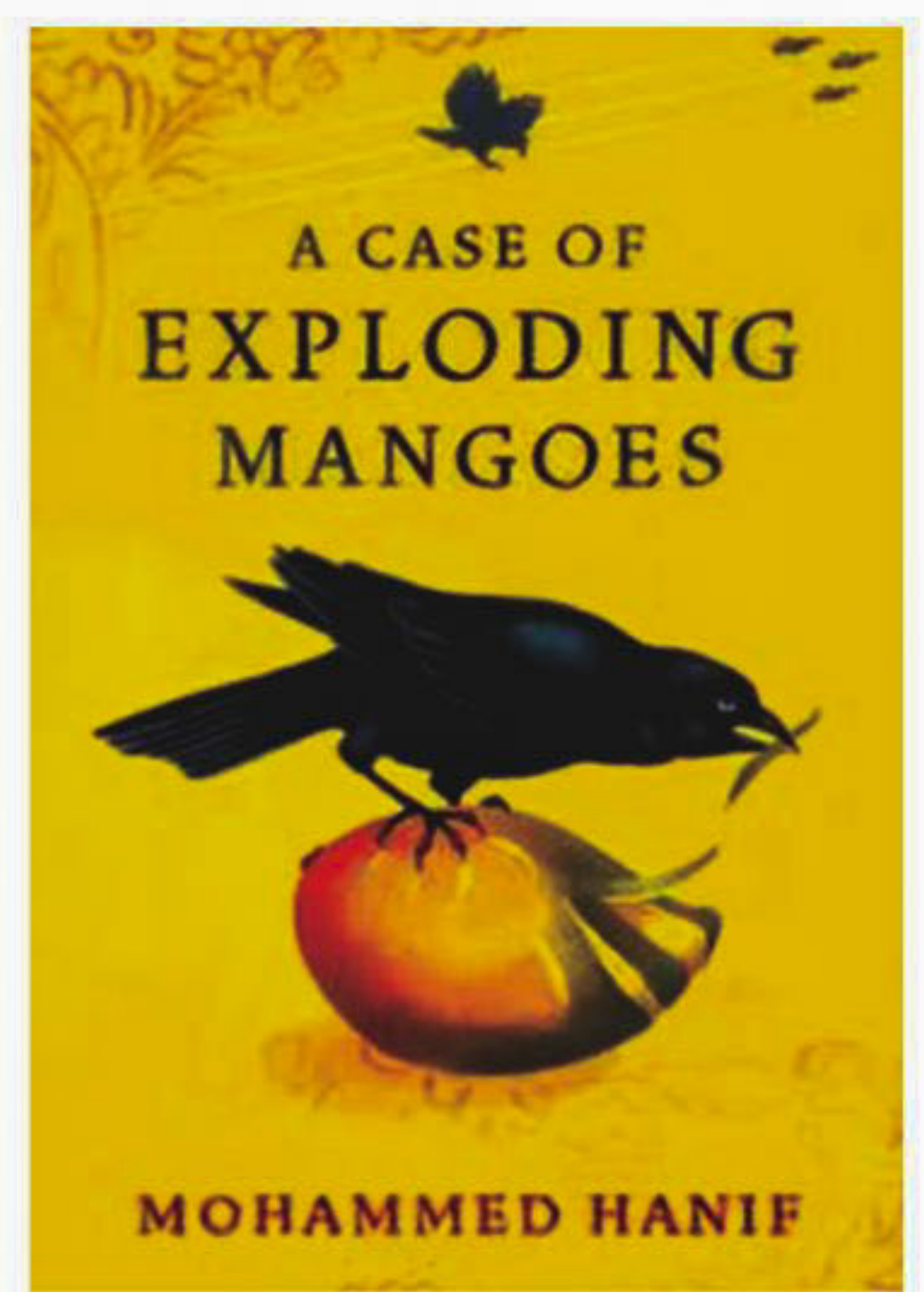
My copy of the novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Mohammed Hanif was published by Random House India from London in 2009. It's a paperback edition consisting of 364 pages, and the yellow cover shows the image of a black crow, not mangoes, being exploded. It's Hanif's debut novel and it received rave reviews from major international newspapers such as the NY Times, Washington Post and the Guardian.

The Wikipedia and Amazon.com have entered the novel as a comic novel, which is less than justifiable because beneath the comic surface the novel is informed with certain probing questions as how far political expediency, being punctuated by theocratic ideology, can be blended with military regimen when the very basis of power stands on murder (here, distantly President Mohammed Zia ul-Huq's execution of former President of Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, but more immediately, the murder of Colonel Quli Shigri, who apparently committed suicide by hanging himself, but whose son, a Junior Under Officer in the Pakistan Air Force Academy, Ali Shigri, also the narrator of the novel, believed that his father was actually murdered by General Zia.) From this perspective, *Mangoes* is a revenge novel spiced up with the features of a spy thriller as much as *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy based on spying. In the play, *Hamlet* seeks the revenge for his father's murder on his uncle, Claudius, and in the novel, son Ali Shigri seeks to avenge his father's death on the President of the country. Strangely enough, not knowing whether the writer was conscious about this striking similarity, in the play the poisoned sword plays a vital role in accomplishing the revenge deed, and so is the case here, Ali Shigri, being in-charge of the Silent Drill Squad, arranges his squad's drill in such a manner that while General Zia is inspecting it, by a moment's confusion he loses his balance and Shigri's poison-tipped sword (poison collected from the laundryman, Uncle Starchy) accidentally hits General Zia ("Accidents in silent drill are rare but not unheard of" (p. 312) and draws a "single drop of blood" (p. 332) from the back of Zia's "flailing hand" (p. 332). Revenge thus is accomplished in the old Hamletean fashion with the help of sword and poison, but there is no knowing actually what brought General Zia to his death.

Hanif is a wily writer and knows the craft of intensifying the storyline with as many subtexts as possible, and since the subject matter is the death of a modern era despot in mysterious circumstances, so he exploits every possibility of filling up the space with conspiracy and counter-conspiracy theories—"cover-ups to cover cover-ups" (p. 3).

General Zia, as portrayed in the novel, is a sick old man, and the tapeworms have eaten up his rectal portion, and immediately before his plane, Pak One, a C130 aircraft, crashes at Bahawalpur in the fateful afternoon on August 17, 1988, the worms, excited by the presence of the sword-inflicted nectar in his blood, travel upward through his esophagus causing him to bleed underside his pants. In the carpet his shoes get soaked with blood, which is being noticed in horror by General Akhtar, who masterminded the plot of the crash but a by a twist of fate is forced to join General Zia's mango

party aboard C130 aircraft. The Lockheed experts and American secret agencies concluded that the accident of the plane occurred either due to mechanical failure or failure to tackle a rising sand storm, but the Pakistan intelligence agencies sharply differed with this view opining that sabotaging elements were found in the wreckage of the plane. The mango party, which General Zia ushered in other guests to be present on Pak One and enjoy, was held with mangoes supplied in crates, and in one of the crates some incendiary chemicals were found (a clue not used by Hanif), and the second theory was that the VX gas was stuffed into the air-conditioner device (a theory used by Hanif) which caused the two pilots' death minutes before the plane crashed. The CIA, the Russian and Indian connections were also suggested as possible conspiratorial lines, but what makes Hanif's attribution to the conspiratorial jamming process is his fine ability to fictionalize the real characters (General Zia, his wife, the First Lady, General Akhtar, General Beg, with the Top Gun Ray-Bans dark glasses and US



Ambassador Arnold Raphel) and realize the fictional characters (such as, Ali Shigri, the protagonist, Obaid, nicknamed Baby O, Zainab, the blind woman, who was charged with fornication and sentenced to be stoned to death by Zia, and who cursed Zia, whose curse is carried symbolically by a mango-eating crow, which unfortunately entered the Code Red Zone and collided with the C130 Pak One, and may well be the cause of the accident, the Secretary General of the All Pakistan Sweepers Association, who had been in prison in the Lahore Fort for nine years, and above all, Major Kiyani, who plays a pivotal role in bringing the murderous plot hatched by General Akhtar to a conclusion by recruiting Ali Shigri to get the job done, but all whose attempts are finally nullified by fate as he also has to accompany the President's entourage into the C130 along with General Akhtar himself) with such believability that fiction and facts freely flow within the structure of the novel, with as much freedom as the worms in General Zia's innards move.

Ali Shigri is a mountain boy, whose four-year long roommate Obaid (Baby O), from

the plain lands, poses to be his lover, but both of them were imprisoned in Lahore Fort for nearly three months, a fact unknown to each other, on the charge of Baby O's plan to steal an aircraft to crash into a zone where Zia would be present and kill him, and because of his disappearance Ali Shigri was confined in the Fort as an accomplice to the plot. They are both released after General Akhtar (seemingly posing like Claudius), through Major Kiyani, plots to enlist their support to remove General Zia from the face of the earth.

Released from the jail both friends take a trip to the Shigri Hill where Ali Shigri's paternal house still stands on the ridge of a mountain, and where over the night Ali Shigri reminisces about the night his father had committed suicide. His father, Colonel Quli Shigri was in-charge of funding the Afghan Mujahideen to fight the Soviets, but at one point he was called back from the front and sent retired home with a dollar-loaded suitcase. "This whole bloody Afghan thing, I have done more than five hundred trips. All deniable missions. And now I end up with this" (p. 300). That is, his very loyal service to Zia was misinterpreted as transactionable with bribe. His ego was hurt, and he made his son burn all the money into the fireplace—except one note which Ali Shigri retained, unknown to his father, in order to help himself remember that what he did the previous night in company with his father was not a dream. So what *Hamlet's* father was to him is Ali Shigri's father to him, and it's his father's heroic honesty that prompts Ali Shigri, his son to wage the vendetta against General Zia.

With no qualms at heart, Ali Shigri can thus proceed with his swashbuckling idea of killing Zia with a nectar-tipped sword, but what is most to be praised about Hanif's style is his way of enlivening his prose with a pungent sense of humour. Zia gets his buttock examined by a Saudi physician with his head resting in a Pakistani flag stand in his office, or the First Lady's backside is commented upon as more alluring to her husband than her front side—an insidious reference to the prevalence of homoerotic culture in the male-dominated society of Pakistan. Even the cadets regularly perforate their mattresses to get rid of their sexual urge. The American Ambassador Arnold Raphel, with his receding hairline, looks like a homosexual business executive, and it's in his embassy that the Fourth of July celebration is held with all the Americans arriving in exotic Afghan dresses and headgears, and amidst whom appears a lonely bearded figure, a Saudi industrialist by the name of OBL, who finds the conversation with a journalist boring and listlessly saunters to the next visitor.

The book's success lies in the way that the balance is maintained between the paranoid atmosphere created through the sense of insecurity suffered by General Zia and the elemental force of the writer to lighten it by the activities of other characters, mainly Ali Shigri. Thus General Zia, the longest reigning formidable Pakistani military despot is reduced to a panicked chicken kind of stuff, but the reader's interest in his character never wanes.

The reviewer is Vice Chancellor of Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Trishal, Mymensingh.

A WISTFUL SENSE OF NOSTALGIA

AUTHOR: NEEMAN SOBHAN
REVIEWED BY ARUNA CHAKRAVARTI

NEEMAN Sobhan's book of short stories "Piazza Bangladesh" is a collection of eleven short stories, richly layered and delicately nuanced, that convey an amazing diversity of insights into different spaces, both actual and of the mind.

Two cities, Dhaka and Rome, form the geographical arena in which a vast range of tensions are played out: between generations, social classes and cultures; the pull of the past and the pulse of the present; the ways of life and modes of thought, particularly as they pertain to women.

Most of the stories are emotionally controlled and character driven, but as much as the female protagonists, the city as an imagined space, is a character, too. Dhaka and Rome, both appear in a variety of incarnations. We are shown glimpses of the pristine Dhaka of the fifties, (sometimes even the Dhaka, prior to Indian Independence) nostalgically remembered and romanticized by the older generation. There is Dhaka of 1971, raped and mutilated, licking its wounds. Then there is the Dhaka of today—a dichotomous city where the poor huddle on the pavements of dark sordid streets and the rich wallow in huge blowy mansions spilling over with ill-gotten wealth. But unlike other authors Neeman does not fall into the trap of showcasing the city's extremes --an exercise conducted ad nauseum by regional writers. Instead, like Jane Austen, she focuses on an area she knows intimately; one familiar to her by virtue of her birth and upbringing --the lives of educated upper middle class Bangladeshis in modern Dhaka.

Again, living, as she does, for a large part of the year in Rome, it is natural that the historic city would find representation in her work. The ancient capital of Julius Caesar, Renaissance Rome and today's modern city with its immigrant quarter, peep in and out of her stories with a remarkable deftness of handling and purpose. Other spaces too, from Europe, India and America appear from time to time. But most often it is the lives of the educated elite living in today's Dhaka and Rome that make up the stuff of her narratives.

Alienation and disconnect are predominant states of mind not only in the outside world but on home turf as well. Generations and cultural gaps are wrestled with, and might or might not be resolved. At the most basic level these stories are about women, sensitive women; their lives, loves and rich inner worlds; yearnings and regrets, hopes and fears, memories and dreams.

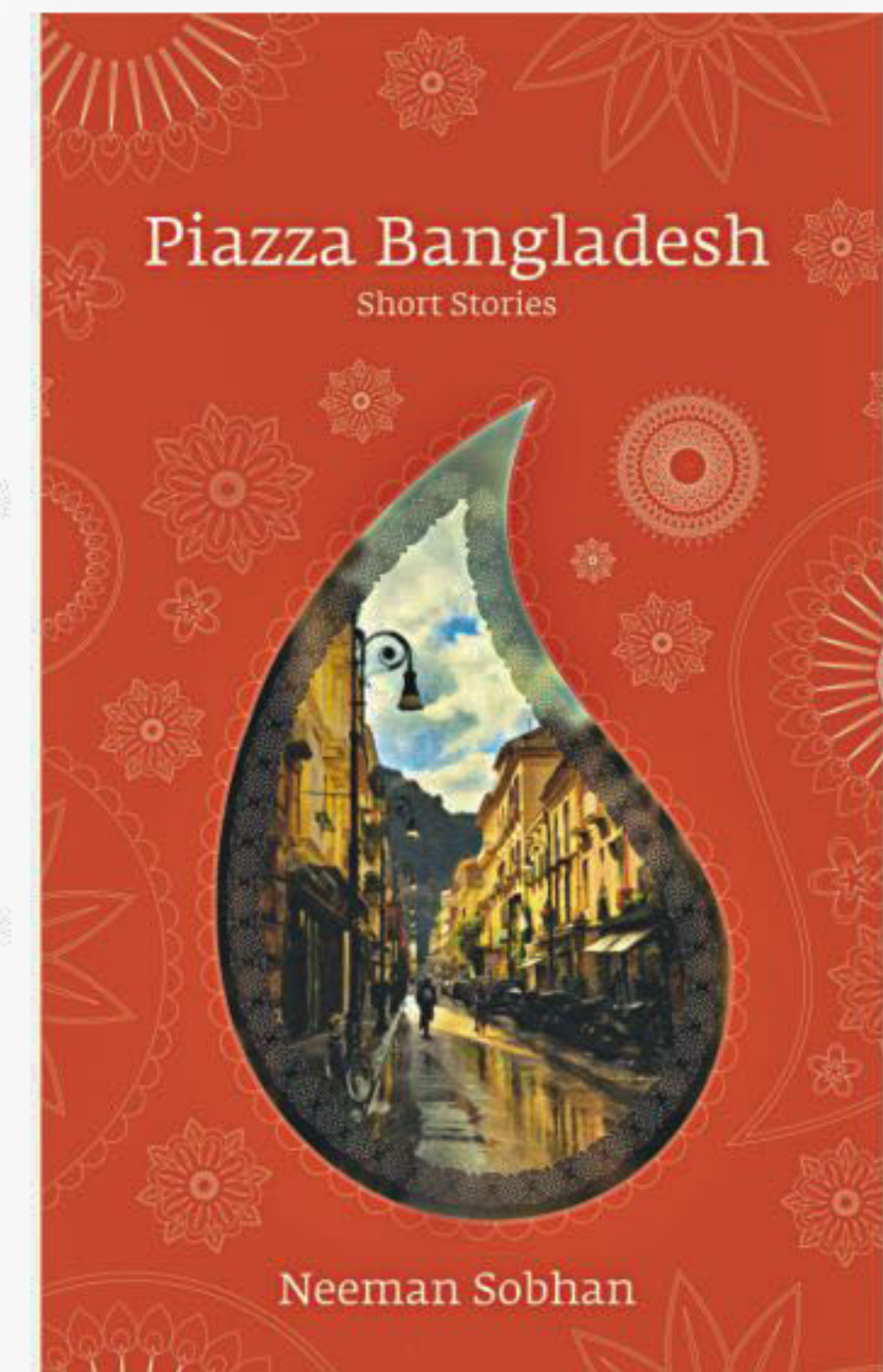
Neeman's prose style is elegant and understated, peaceful and unhurried, and seems to find its ideal rhythm in the structural liberty afforded by the long short story. She avoids explicit dramatic pivots and neat resolutions, creating a sense of the narrative flowing at its own pace and volition. Adept at handling chronology she weaves her stories backwards and

forwards, often comprising a lifetime of experience in one paragraph, exemplifying what short fiction can do. Some of the stories are linked, and the intertwined lives move not only across continents but entire lifetimes.

Her themes are many and varied but most often they veer on the plight of the immigrant Bangladeshi in a western country. Threaded together, sometimes by common characters they try to explore the full range of the immigrant experience. While some of her characters bend

over backwards to integrate into a majoritarian mainstream, others are equally stubborn in resisting it. But whether they embrace or reject the 'other' their emotions remain the same: a wistful sense of nostalgia. For a country, a language and a culture they have held dear over generations and lost at least in part.

Rich in detail yet strikingly economical in expression, these luminous stories transport the reader to a space that the writer herself refers to in the Preface as 'beyond the confines of place, time and cultural differences, to our common and vulnerable humanity.'



The reviewer is a noted and award-winning Indian writer. Her critically acclaimed works are, two novels, *The Inheritors* (Penguin 2004, shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize); the recent *Jorasanko* (Harper Collins 2013); a volume of short stories *Secret Spaces* (Zubaan 2010); her widely acclaimed English rendering of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Srikanta* and translations of Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Those Days and First Light*.

Neeman Sobhan is an Italy based Bangladeshi fiction writer, poet, translator and columnist. She writes in English, and teaches at the University of Rome, La Sapienza.

TALE OF TWO GHAZAL KINGS

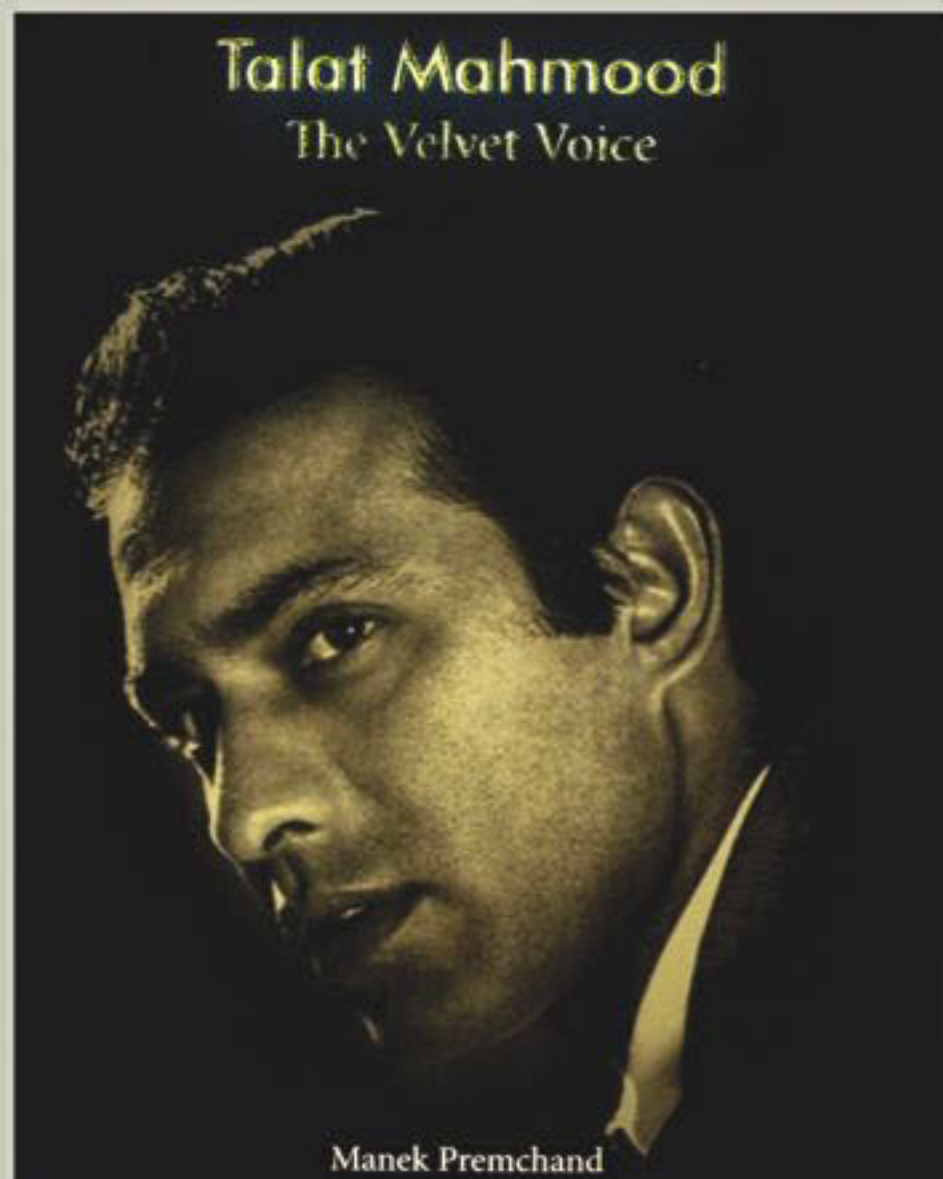
AUTHORS: MANEK PREMCHAND & SATHYA SARAN
REVIEWED BY SHAHNOOR WAHID

IT was memory-evoking undertaking for this reviewer to go through the two books written on two maestros of ghazals who belonged to two different times. The first book is titled "Talat Mahmood: The Velvet Voice" authored by Manek Premchand and the other is "Baat Niklegi Toh Phir: The Life and Music of Jagjit Singh" by Sathya Saran. The first book has been published by Manipal University Press and the second one by HarperCollins Publishers India.

The Velvet Voice.
The introduction to the book on Talat Mahmood has been written by another legend, the inimitable radio presenter Amin Sayani. He mentions the names of some 'musicologists' who wrote on the singer in the first part of the book - reminiscence of his family members and that of some of his avid admirers. Interestingly, one of the contributors to this part is HQ Chowdhury of Bangladesh, a true connoisseur of music, who has published *Incomparable Sachin Dev Burman* and *Golden Oldies*, two books chronicling the development of Bengali, Hindi and Urdu songs of the sub-continent.

It is in the second part of the book that Premchand covers Talat Mahmood's entire musical career - from his film songs to non-film geets and ghazals and roles he played in several films. Ameen Sayani writes: "He was always gentle and scintillating hero, whom many women, young or old, swooned to see and hear." He signs off in his iconic style with the following words: "Whether you are a dedicated fan of Talat Mahmood or knew him closely as I did, you are going to love this book. So, behno aur bhaiyo, read on!"

Premchand opens his preface with the mention of the iconic Talat number "Jaayen to jaayen kahan....." from the film *Taxi Driver*. Many readers will recall watching this movie in Dhaka, maybe many times over



only to listen to the songs again and again. The mention of this all time great song would draw the readers immediately to the book with the heightened desire to read more about the singer, his songs, the lyricists and his music directors. Premchand also talks about another extremely popular number "Jalte hain jiske liye, teri aankhon ke diye, dhoond laaya hoon wohi geet main tere liye" to the delight of the readers. In fact, all of the Talat's film songs were hits among the connoisseurs of melodious romantic and sad Hindi songs. Who would not stop in his track hearing "Tasbir banana hoon, tasbir nahin banti..." or "Ruper oi Prodeep jele, ki hobey tomar..." HQ Chowdhury is witness to the fact that these songs used to be played not only in houses of song lovers but also in every cinema hall in district towns before show time and in every restaurant throughout the '50s and '60s. The old gramophones are gone and gone are the golden oldies.

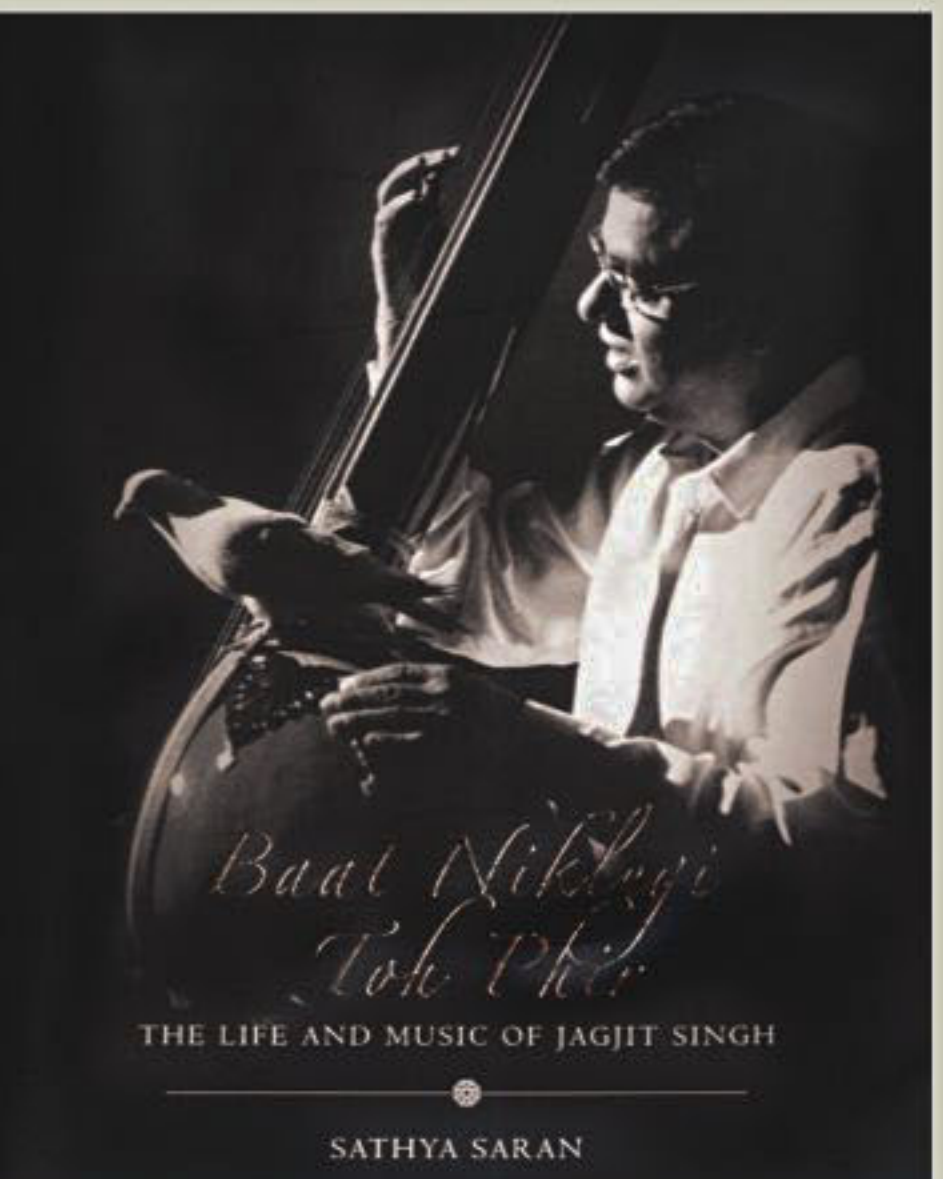
Talat Mahmood used to sing ghazals as well, with such envious perfection and passion. Premchand writes: "Talat was called the King of Ghazals for a reason; his deep study of Urdu poetry compounded with exceptional singing. He rendered ghazals soulfully. Many a composer have referred to his predilection for good poetry, something that characterised his thinking all his life. Almost 200 of his songs are ghazals, and if you consider the singer's hindi/urdu work only, one in three of his songs is a ghazal..."

Premchand philosophises: "Around the universe of such music, there is often an unspoken bond between thousands of us. Many of us may have a story to tell, about how we got interested in music, and what remarkable things happened in our journey."

While paying homage to Talat, HQ Chowdhury tells us how the great singer with a unique voice, was avoided by the music directors when he was in the middle of his career despite having given them one hit after another. This is the other side of the story of Talat's life many readers would discover reading for the first time.

Baat Niklegi To Phir
It was in the late '70s, the era of tape recorders and cassettes, when we became aware of another golden voice presenting ghazals of outstanding variety. The deep throated, honey-dipped voice of Jagjit Singh turned heads around when somewhere, someone played a cassette.

The book begins with an elaborate account of Jagjit's birth (Third of eleven children of his parents), growing up in an almost hand to mouth situation, his childhood and education, youthful days, casual singing bouts in school and college, desire and desperation, desolation and dejection, and finally his sauntering into the arena of serious music, an inevitability perhaps



ordained during his birth as a gift from the Divine. About his orientation in music in the early years, Sathya Saran writes: If singer Kishore Kumar copied K.L. Saigol before he discovered his own style, Rafi was Jagjit's idol. In soiree after soiree, he would sing Rafi's popular numbers, choosing the ones that tore at the heart strings."

The story of his early days, his dream to become a playback singer, his journey to Bombay to fulfill his dream, his struggle there and his return to his village penniless and broken hearted will fill the mind of the reader with compassion. After a while, he went back to Bombay, and to survive he took up small roles in films and did small commercials. About his struggling days, Sathya writes: "Jagjit did everything to keep afloat. He did small commercials. He sang at weddings, attended soirees at the homes of rich and famous...he was tireless in his attempt to find that chink into which he

could thrust the proof of his undeniable talent. But as time passed, Jagjit realised that the world of playback singing was not meant for him."

He finally decided to become a ghazal singer. "It was a wise choice. The goddess of music would soon express pleasure over his sacrifice." His break came one day when one of his friends, Jimmy Narula, arranged an audition at HMV. Jagjit became a singing sensation after the release of the album titled *The Unforgettables*. Sathya Saran writes: "The *Unforgettables*, released in 1976, would catapult Jagjit Singh to an unprecedented level of popularity. Sharing the spotlight with him was Chitra Singh, life partner, singer and one time student."

The book goes on to give details of another important turn in his life that came when he met Chitra Singh, when she was still married to her first husband. Sathya Saran tells us how Chitra's marriage ended in a divorce, the two gradually became dependent on one another, they came closer, love blossomed in silence, and finally decided to marry. The entire episode reads like the script of a cinema. They became a happy couple, deeply in love with each other and loved by everyone. They sang together and the world listened with rapt attention. They were blessed with a son who became the apple of their eyes. They had a daughter too. The son grew up to be a good looking young man. And then tragedy struck. On 28 July, 1990, their 18 years old son Vivek Singh died in a car crash in Bombay. It changed their life. Chitra Singh stopped singing. After a long pause, Jagjit sat before a harmonium. The show must go on.

Baat Niklegi Toh Fir is a book worth reading.

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