

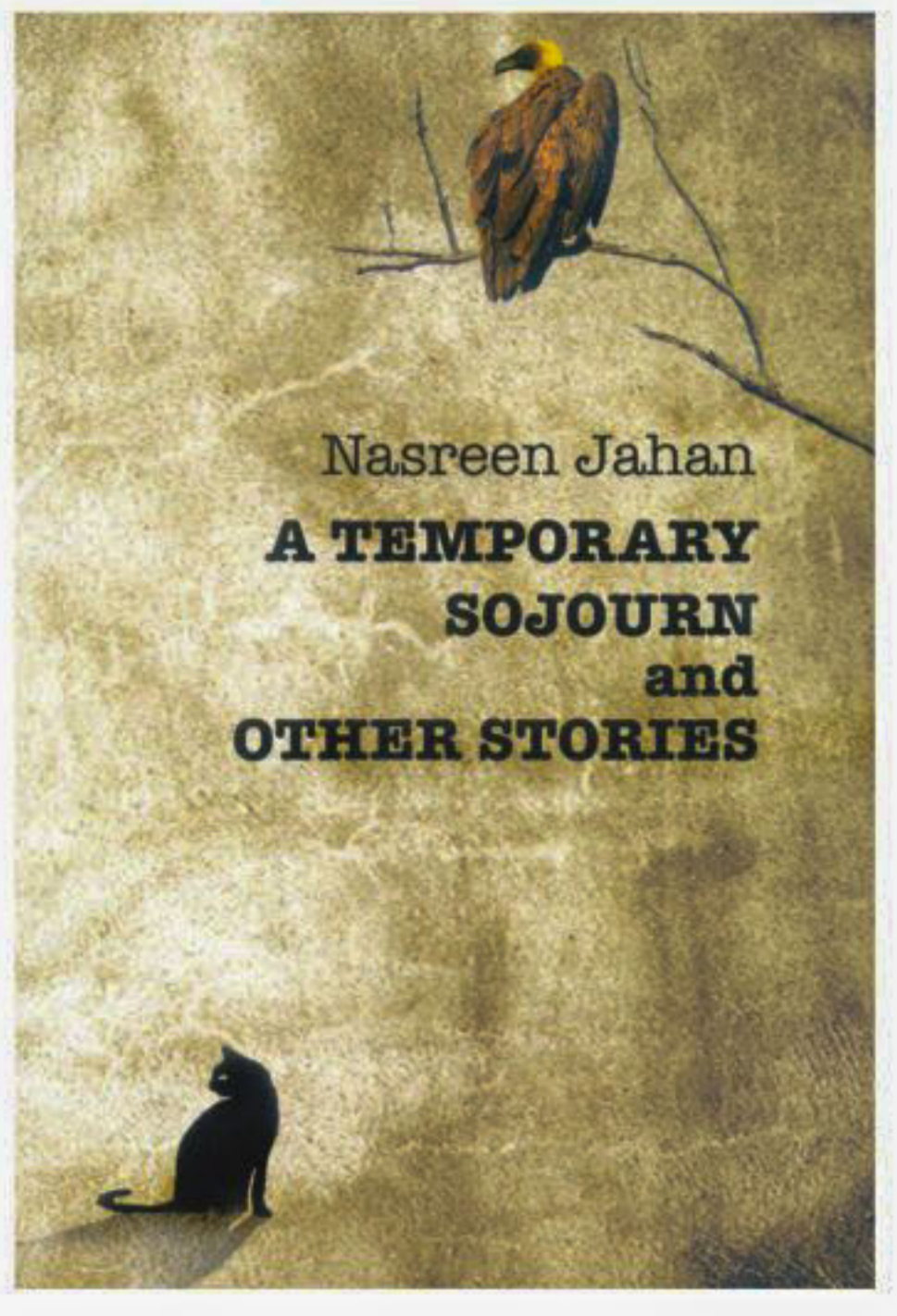
OF HUMAN NATURE AND A DOSE OF THE SUPERNATURAL

AUTHOR: NASREEN JAHAN
REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

A *Temporary Sojourn and Other Stories*, Nasreen Jahan, University Press Limited. Nasreen Jahan asserts, rather grandly, in her Foreword, "In *A Temporary Sojourn and Other Stories*, readers will find that my flair as a storyteller and strength as a writer reside primarily in the imaginative recreation of the borderland between the margins of the known and the preternatural world." Well, the readers will have to judge for themselves the quality of the stories she tells, but there are elements in some of them that support her claim of exploring the overlap between the real and the supernatural worlds. But there are other elements. *A Temporary Sojourn and Other Stories* is a collection of fifteen stories, originally written in Bangla by Nasreen Jahan, translated into English by eleven translators, and edited by one of them, Niaz Zaman.

The translations themselves, as might be reasonably expected when considering that they have come from a diverse group, have been a mixed bag, ranging from the very good to the insipid, with a few puzzling words, phrases, and sentences encountered in some of them. For instance, to someone unfamiliar with Bengali expressions, this might be perplexing, and even some Bengalis might have to ponder a bit before getting it: "Who would hold the umbrella above the heads of her daughters? Didn't she have to marry them off?" ("My Birth") The stories themselves, for the most part, should hold the reader's attention. Almost all are set in rural or semi-urban Bangladesh, and they are usually about the poor, the distressed, and the oppressed and oppressors. They include men and women, young girls and boys, and, more often than not, display deformities of the physical self and/or the mind. Disturbing vignettes, often laced with symbolism, portray raw human emotions that are all too real as are the contexts and places they play out in.

"Manhood" is a story, like some others in the book, about the dregs of humanity, but, nonetheless, about human beings and their foibles, sensibilities and cruelties towards one another. It also includes an example of the



myths and symbols pertaining to the Bangladeshi culture and traditions that the author often weaves into her stories: in this case a kite (the bird). She also uses the vulture in other stories, as will be shortly recounted. Bulu is a deformed young man who is the scorn of his family members, including his half-sister Shelly (being usually ignored, he cries out, "Am I a human being or a dog?"), while his mother is torn with anguish that she had given birth to a cripple and yet could not suppress her instinctive maternal love for him. Matters come to a head when, one night, to prove his manhood, he raped his half-sister.

The physical deformity theme, often accompanied by psychological scars, continues in "A Sigh in Moonlit Mist". An old man declares, "I was born ugly and deformed." He deliberately assumed a clownish and self-debasing persona in an effort to lessen other peoples' scornful attention. By a quirk of fate he got married to a beautiful woman who

loathed him, but was drawn to his money and stayed with him. He even managed to get her pregnant, but their offspring was also formed deformed. However, which is also a testament to a mother's unequivocal love for her child, he once "watched the wife who had rejected my body in disgust nurse my son in her lap with deep maternal love, oblivious to his ugliness." This story has an element of the supernatural in it, and contains this piece of observation (delivered by the old man) that may, or may not, be agreed upon by all: "...in the presence of his wife and friends, a man pretends to be a saint." The motif of a mother's undying love for her child can also be found in "My Birth" where the narrator begins by informing us that, "Immediately after the birth of my fourth sister, my father picked up the new born and flung her into the dark courtyard and disappeared." He was a habitual drifter, an occasional jailbird on charges of embezzlement, and who did not want any more children after the first issue. He beat up his wife terribly on being informed by her that she was pregnant with

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their third child, an act that contributed to her premature birth and death. Her mother did all she could to save her fourth child (incidentally all were girls), which the narrator attributes to her mother's steely resolve: "...behind my mother's quiet façade, lay hidden a terribly obstinate animal instinct, a

brazen will power. My father believed that her attempt to save a child, who was an eye-sore for him, was an act of extreme audacity." And, yet, this same man helped with the household expenses and worried about the marriages of his daughters. Perhaps they were all victims of the world they lived in, which, to the narrator, was one "where birth brings no joy, where death awakens no sorrow." Ironically, she became the fifth child, born out of lovemaking when her father returned after having disappeared for seven months.

"Envy" also focuses on a mother's enduring love for her offspring. The author portrays this aspect thus: "...where their children are concerned, women are like tigresses." And adds another perspective relating to women: "...like other women in the world, his wife too wanted to see him behave like a man." The story of "Envy" revolves around a mother who has been impregnated by her husband some time before his death, and their daughter, Hiru, who was also pregnant at the same time, but her husband, Chand, was very much in the world of the living. This situation eventually comes to a climax with the mother crying out in anguish, "You have a husband by your side. But what is going to happen to me, Hiru?"

"The Flute Player" is a tale of Bangladesh's liberation war, and contains an interesting twist. "A Temporary Sojourn" is a story where the superstition associated with the vulture in this part of the world is featured. The story, though, revolves around a fleeing murderer, Kader Ali, who has killed his son because he thought that his wife, who was a Hindu but had converted to Islam upon marriage, had not shed her original religion's rituals and was influencing their son towards Hinduism. While he was fleeing from the crime scene, he encountered an enormous vulture chasing him. The superstitious link may be figured out from Ali's thought process: "...has the vulture begun to take me for a walking corpse?" "Vultures" also deals with the bird and its superstitious connotation. Here, too, the association is with a criminal, a cattle

rustler, Kutubuddi, and his helplessness before the concerted attack on him by a flock of the big birds. The symbolism of nature's scavengers, who clean up dead cattle's corpses, venting their wrath on the rustler, would likely fascinate the reader. It is a good story.

"Different" is a story about a woman with deformed legs and a licentious young daughter who tells her lover that, "Mother is jealous of me." This is a thoughtful story that contains these interesting viewpoints on female writers: "The few female writers that I know here are pretty conservative. Their writings are pretty restricted. They describe tyrannical mothers-in-law, adulterous husbands, unfilial children --- these are issues that matter to them.... The other day, a writer friend of mine said to me she had written a story about a woman's adultery. Before sending it for publication, she gave it to her husband to read --- and the husband was furious. Since then, the husband has suspected his wife of the same immorality."

"The Evening Mask" and "The Black Cat" are liberally laced with the supernatural and superstition, although it might be a stretch of imagination to validate the author's claim that, "in 'The Black Cat,' readers will easily see Edgar Allan Poe's influence." The opening story, "Girl Becomes Woman" is about a young prostitute, a daughter of one, who has long been used to the life they have been leading. When she is thirteen, she first menstruates, and thus becomes a woman. Technically, yes, but that mere technicality does not tell the story of how she was transformed into one long ago, when she did not experience much of a childhood. A poignant story, one that is in sync with the quite good quality of several of the stories making up *A Temporary Sojourn and Other Stories*. Those who have not read them in the Bangla, and even those who have, will, I suspect, agree that it would not be a waste of one's time to go through them.

The reviewer is an Actor and Professor and Head, Media and Communication Department, IUB.

Tales of dreams, struggles and triumphs

AUTHOR: MATIUR RAHMAN
REVIEWED BY TUSAR TALUKDER

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IT is really difficult to review *Akashbhora Surjotara* penned by one of the veteran journalists and an avid reader of Bangla literature Matiur Rahman. The book chronicles the lives and times of twenty-seven great personalities. Among them are poets, artists, singers, journalists, composers, short-story writers, novelists, architects, political-social-cultural activists and so on. Apart from the tales of the great, Matiur Rahman has shared his own experiences and memories through the write-ups. The way the author deciphers the contributions of those great men to the development of society, culture and nation will, no doubt, sharpen our knowledge of culture.

The collection opens with the article on Arun Mitra, one of the prominent poets and translators of Bengali literature. The writing highlights Arun Mitra's core philosophy of life. He believed that life and literature are interrelated; literature should be a platform for common people. By delving deep into the essay one can know that Mitra translated, at least, hundred French poems into Bengali and by the same token, one can discover his philosophical beliefs and disbeliefs. The author analyzes how Mitra was greatly influenced by the French poets Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard. Rahman also informs us Arun Mitra had a passion for his root and he always dreamt of forming a plural society. The second essay encapsulates the life and times of Altaf Mahmud. He, throughout his life, raised voice against all kinds of injustices. The author mentions his contributions to shaping this nation in various capacities. His valiant role during the liberation war of 1971 is known to all.

The writing on Kamrul Hasan brings into focus Hasan's rebellious nature as an artist. Hasan always believed in the freedom of mind. Rahman had developed an intimate relationship with Kamrul Hasan. He mentions that whenever he would go to Hasan for motifs or artworks, Hasan would never send him back empty handed. Rahman strongly believes that Hasan had a great role in developing the aesthetic sense of Bengalese. The essay written on Kaium Chowdhury, an influential figure in Bangladeshi arts and paintings, discusses his vast repertoire of works. The author got the privileges to enjoy a long period of time with Kaium Chowdhury. The essay also unveils Kaium's life-time struggle; it tells us the artist, throughout his life, was devoted to upholding our age-old tradition and culture. Matiur Rahman thinks Kaium Chowdhury's roles in 1968, 69 and 71 will give him a permanent niche in our history. The review dwells on the life, times and contributions of Mohammad Kibria, one of the pioneers of modern art in Bangladesh.

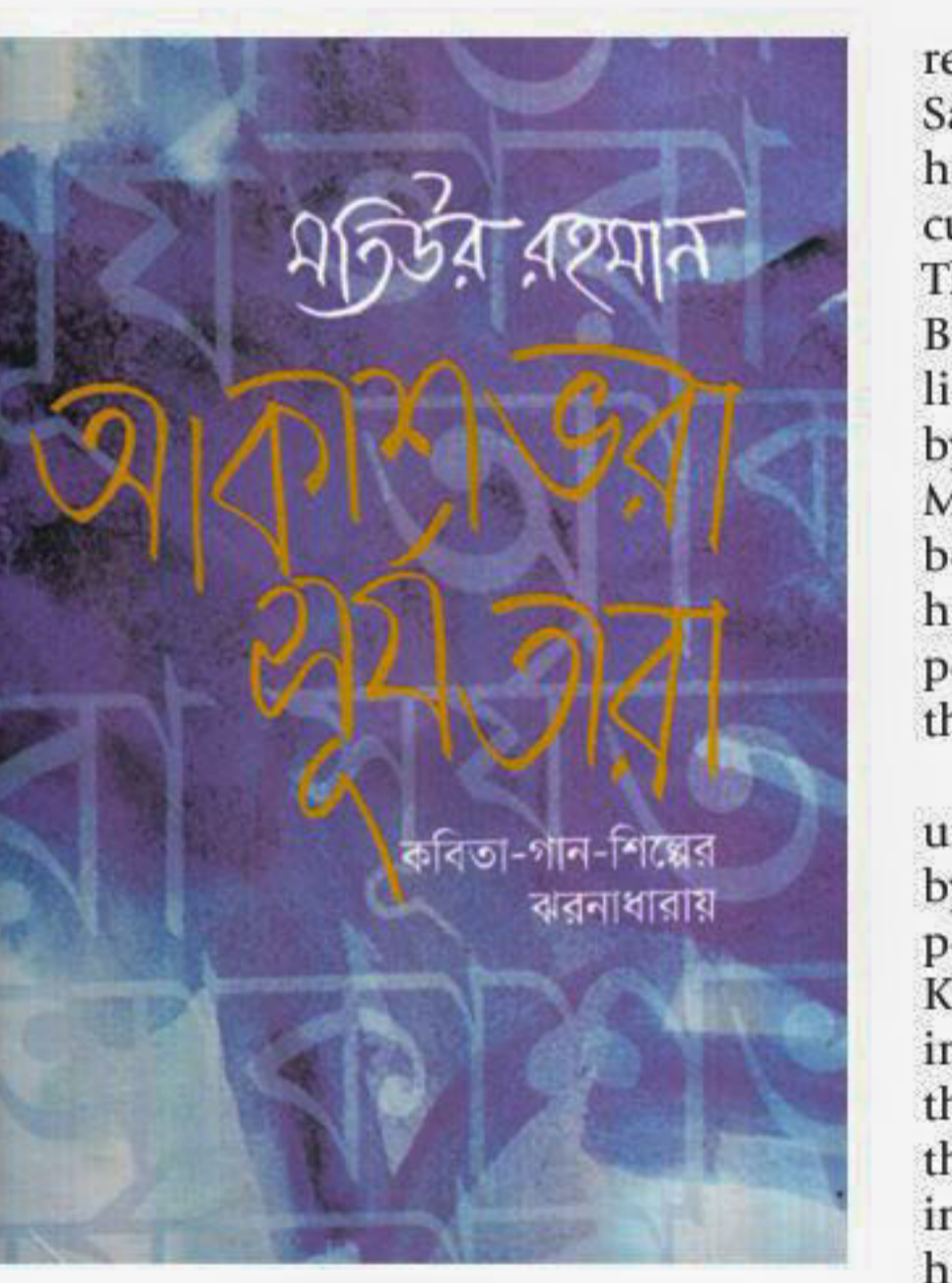
Through this essay, the writer narrates how Mohammad Kibria relentlessly worked to take Bangladeshi art to international arena. The essay enriches us by informing that Kibria believed Rabindranath Tagore rejuvenated the Indian modern art in many ways. The article ends with a maxim told by Kibria that 'Life means to remain active all the time.'

This review also explores the tales of one of the most influential artists of India, Ganesh Pyne. A minute reading of the essay on Ganesh Pyne adds to our knowledge that he was never satisfied with his own works; Abanindranath Tagore was his prime inspiration for paintings. Pyne led a very frustrated life because he thought if art fails to establish a plural and classless society, what purpose does art serve? However, Matiur Rahman opines Pyne's tempera paintings have added a dimension to Indian modern art. The writing on Jahir Raihan will provide readers with a lot of information regarding

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his life and works. The essay delineates that the novel *Aar Katodin* by Jahir Raihan has bewildered Rahman much. Needless to say, the novel brilliantly portrays the war-torn days of 1971.

The write-up on Nitun Kundu tells us a tale of revolution. It captures Nitun's struggles and triumphs; it analyzes his innovative ideas and plans. Rahman brings into focus how Nitun Kundu himself turned into an institution. Likewise, the writing on Paritosh Sen tells us a story of an artist who invariably believed in the strength of humanism and humanity. Paritosh Sen, a revolutionary artist of India, was born in old Dhaka's Zinda Bahar lane. Though he, afterwards, migrated to India, he never forgot the memorable days of Zinda Bahar. Consequently, he wrote a book entitled *Zindabahr*. Broadly enough, Sen's most of the artworks reflect immense love for his root. On top of every-



thing, the part which describes Sen's five-hour long conversation with Pablo Picasso, I believe, will draw special attention to the readers.

One of the finest reviews of the book is Purnendu Patri, a dedicated soul of entire Bengal. Many of us know that Patri equally contributed to different genres of art and literature. He had a special fascination for cinema and art. Rahman thinks that Patri was deeply influenced by the philosophical thoughts of Manik Bandyopadhyay. His novel *Darer Moyra* represents Manik's non-communal thoughts in many ways. The writer also informs us Patri considered the 19th century an age of substantial revolutionary changes in the fields of art, culture and literature. One of the remarkable notions of Purnendu Patri is it needs, at least, two hundred years to evaluate the greatness of a writer or an artist.

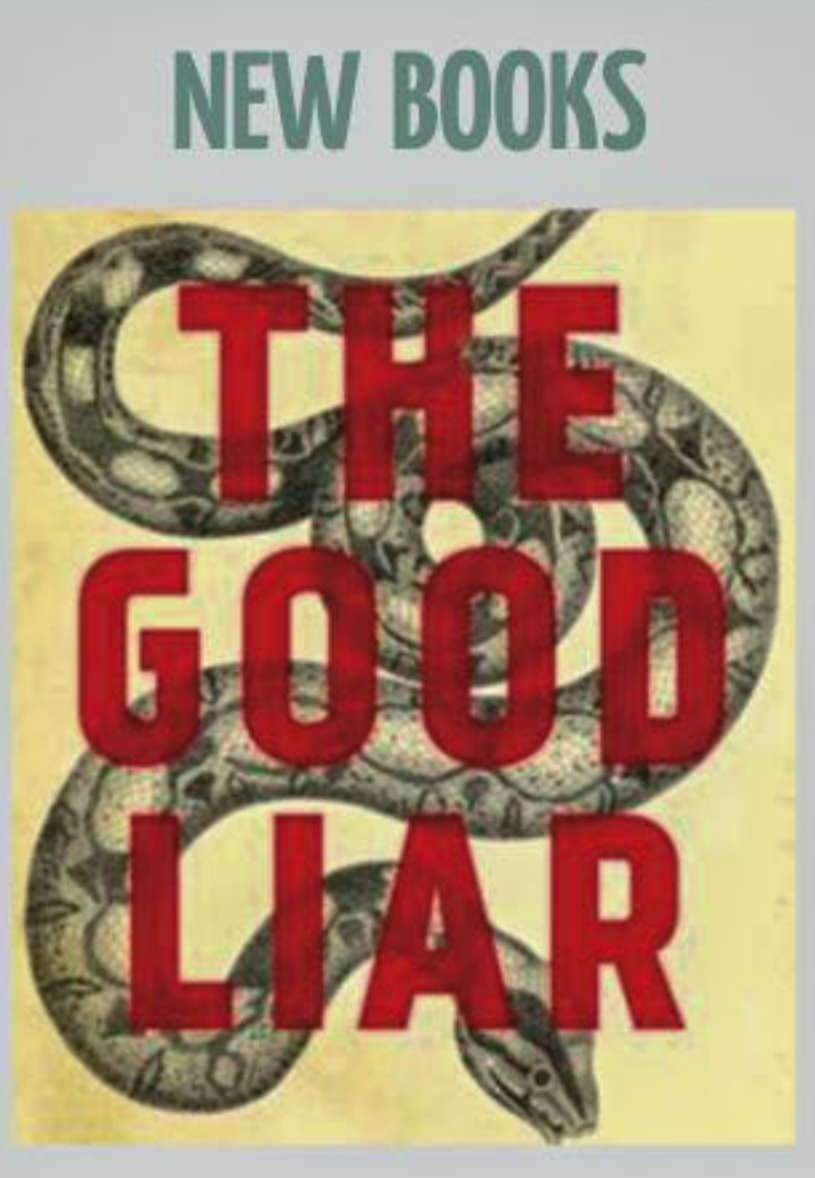
The essay on Bikash Bhattacharya discusses artist's multifarious appeals. It elaborates how he became one of the best portrait-artists in India. In a conversation with Matiur Rahman, Bikash said that he always liked to paint portraits of different great personalities to understand their times and to discover the traits of human beings. On the other hand, the essay written on Ahmedul Kabir focuses on the life of a prominent journalist. Alongside, it brings forth the role of Sangbad, one of the oldest newspapers in this sub-continent, in shaping this nation's progressive and secular character. The author believes that our dreams, struggles, triumphs and those of Sangbad are interconnected. The author sheds light on the contribution of a veteran cultural organizer and Rabindra Sangeet exponent, Wahidul Haque. The writing brings into focus how Haque traveled to different

regions of the country to make Rabindra Sangeet popular among mass people and how he played a key role in refining the cultural sense of the people of Bangladesh. The opening lines of his essay on Murtaza Bashir remind this reviewer of the opening lines of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. Murtaza Bashir's father Dr Muhammad Shahidullah wanted Bashir to be a hafez of Maktab but Murtaza prepared himself to be an artist. The same thing happened both in the lives of James Joyce and the protagonist of the aforesaid novel.

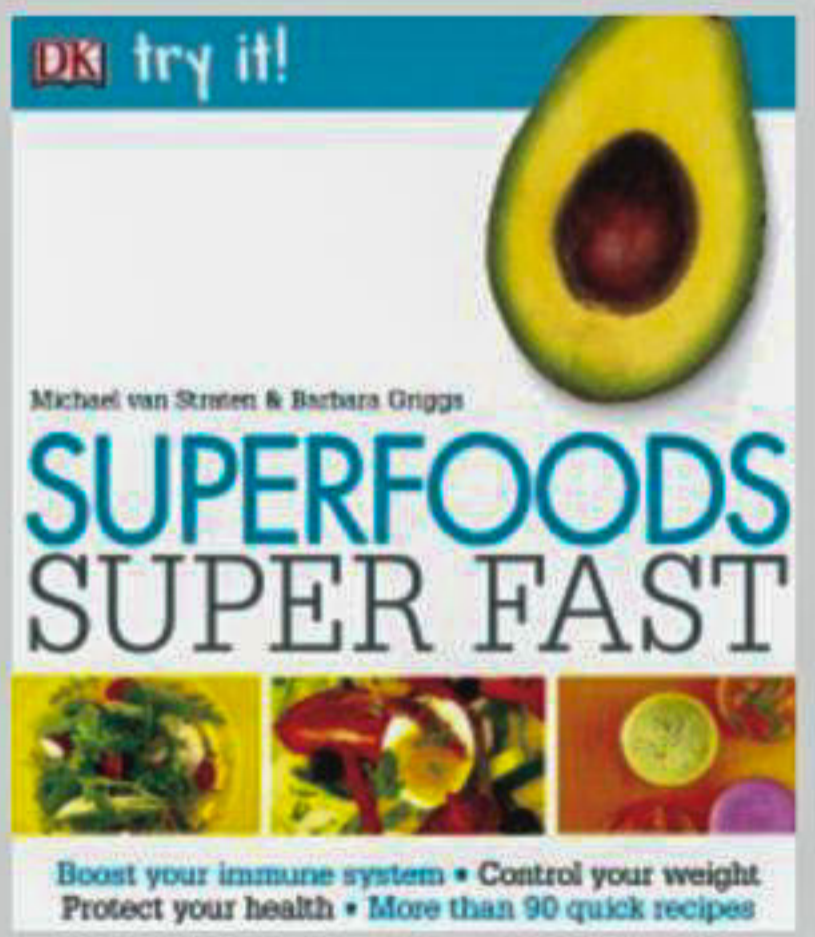
One can come to know of many unknown facts about Shamsur Rahman's life by going through the article written on the poet. Likewise, the writing on Shahidullah Kaiser informs us how Kaiser, having been imprisoned, had played the key role during the language movement in 1952. Moreover, the essay on one of the quintessential artists in the field of Indian art, Jogen Chowdhury helps us know that art is for life's sake; art can bring real freedom of mind. The last article I will be detailing in the review is on Ravi Shankar whom Matiur Rahman regards as a dedicated soul and co-fighter of our liberation war. The article is divided into two parts- one analyzes Ravi Shankar's role during our liberation war and the other incorporates Rahman's conversation with Ravi Shankar. Matiur Rahman along with some of his friends dreamt of honouring Ravi Shankar for his heroic role in 1971 on the 40th anniversary of liberation of Bangladesh but due to Shankar's serious illness it was not possible to do so finally. Indeed, while talking to Ravi Shankar the author found him a pure Bangalee.

The collection also includes write-ups on Muzharul Islam, journalist and writer Santosh Gupta, poet Subhash Mukhopadhyay, artist Somnath Hore, Rabindra Sangeet exponent Zahidur Rahim, artist Debdas Chakraborty, journalist Bazlur Rahman and novelist Humayun Ahmed. No doubt, Rahman has captured the vast arena of human life on a tiny canvas, demonstrating the truth that life consists of a fullness of variety. His sense of proportion about the use of words is noteworthy. Many readers will perhaps agree with my notion that Matiur Rahman will get a permanent place in the cultural history of Bangladesh for penning a book like *Akashbhora Surjotara*. Consequently, it deserves a special row on our shelf. As an overall evaluation of this collection, I cannot restrain myself from quoting a famous saying by Thomas Carlyle: "No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men."

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The Good Liar
AUTHOR: SEARLE, NICHOLAS
Roy is a conman living in a leafy English suburb, about to pull off the final coup of his career. He is going to meet and woo a beautiful woman and slip away with her life savings. But who is he and what he had to do to survive a life of lies? And who had to pay the price of this deceit?



Try It! Superfoods Super Fast
AUTHOR: DORLING KINDERSLEY
Which fruit can build your resistance to disease? Which vegetable is good for your liver? Eat your way to super health with Try It Superfoods, Super Fast.
Whether you want to control your weight, boost your immune system or simply eat healthily Try It! Superfoods Super Fast reveals more than 100 superfood-based recipes - that can be ready in 30 minutes.
Handy shopping lists and meal plans mean you will never be stuck for ideas. Find out which foods are super and why, how to create amazing dishes with them and ways to protect your health from combating stress and fatigue to tackling skin and joint problems.

SOURCE: OMNI BOOKS