

WHEN RIVER TURNS RED

AUTHOR: SELINA HOSSAIN
TRANSLATED FROM BANGLA BY JACKIE KABIR
REVIEWED BY NUSRAT HUQ

THE book 'River of my Blood' is divided into ten chapters, each named after the months in Bangla. The story starts in the month of *Kartik* and on the first page we have rich symbolisms of the colour red; it signifies birth and life; it is the colour of riots and the 1971 war. It is also the colour of her earliest memories. Red signaled her transforming to a woman from a girl and the colour red heralded a new life into her world, her baby. At the end of the novel after her son is shot Nita remarks that Rais had changed to a blood lotus. I see it as the symbol of an ever-lasting victory. The final sentence of the novel as Boori lay dying, is 'Everything turned Red.' The title of the book is 'River of my Blood' - red is the colour of war, of destruction, of death, yet it is the colour of hope, of freedom, of life.

The protagonist is named Boori, the youngest of twelve children. Her childhood was filled with the joys of village life - enjoying nature, playing with other children, being loved by her family and everything about *Haldi*, her village, pleased and fulfilled her. Some referred to her as the village tomboy but her vivacious enthusiasm for life easily endears her to us.

When her father died she was married off to a much older widower named Gafoor. Being poor and fatherless her brother thought that she would not find a better husband, but she learned to be happy in her new status of being married. Gafoor had two sons, Salim and Kalim and although they were much younger than her, they were often her playmates before she became their step-mother. Her husband doted on her and theirs was a peaceful existence but soon she yearned for a child of her own.

It is at this part in the story that the writer describes to us the religious and cultural customs in our society of seeking divine help by placating saints (pirs and babas) by visiting their shrines and making monetary offerings in specifically devised ways. In this case she was advised by her friend Nita Bairagi and others to visit the shrine of *Kesa Baba* during the *Poush Mela* in *Srinile Dham*. It is thought that by hanging a pouch of five annas to a neem tree near his shrine a faithful devotee may have his or her prayers answered.

The description of the mela itself is rich with words and phrases like 'fire eaters on stilts', 'khelnapheriwala', 'kaporerputul', wooden toys, spinning tops and plenty of home made food. Whether it was the saint's intervention or not, Boori was pregnant after six years of marriage.

In the second chapter of the book 'Agrahayan' we are introduced to one of the most memorable characters in the novel, Nita Bairagi. The image of this *Baul* minstrel wandering the villages and singing to the tune of her *dotara* gives a poetic sublimity to the novel. The *Bauls'* unconventional, gypsy life style is portrayed very successfully in the book. They wander the countryside in their saffron robes and depend on the generosity of fellow human beings for food. Their religion is the religion of love and humanity. Fascinating is the 'monermanush' or companion each *Baul* has. Nita and her 'monermanush' Choron Das have years of a happy companionship, but both move on to other soul mates. We may feel sad when one soul mate is rejected for another, but permanence of any kind is known by the *Bauls* not to last. The only permanence we should seek is to be better human beings. And to achieve this we must renounce material wealth and serve and love our fellow humans.

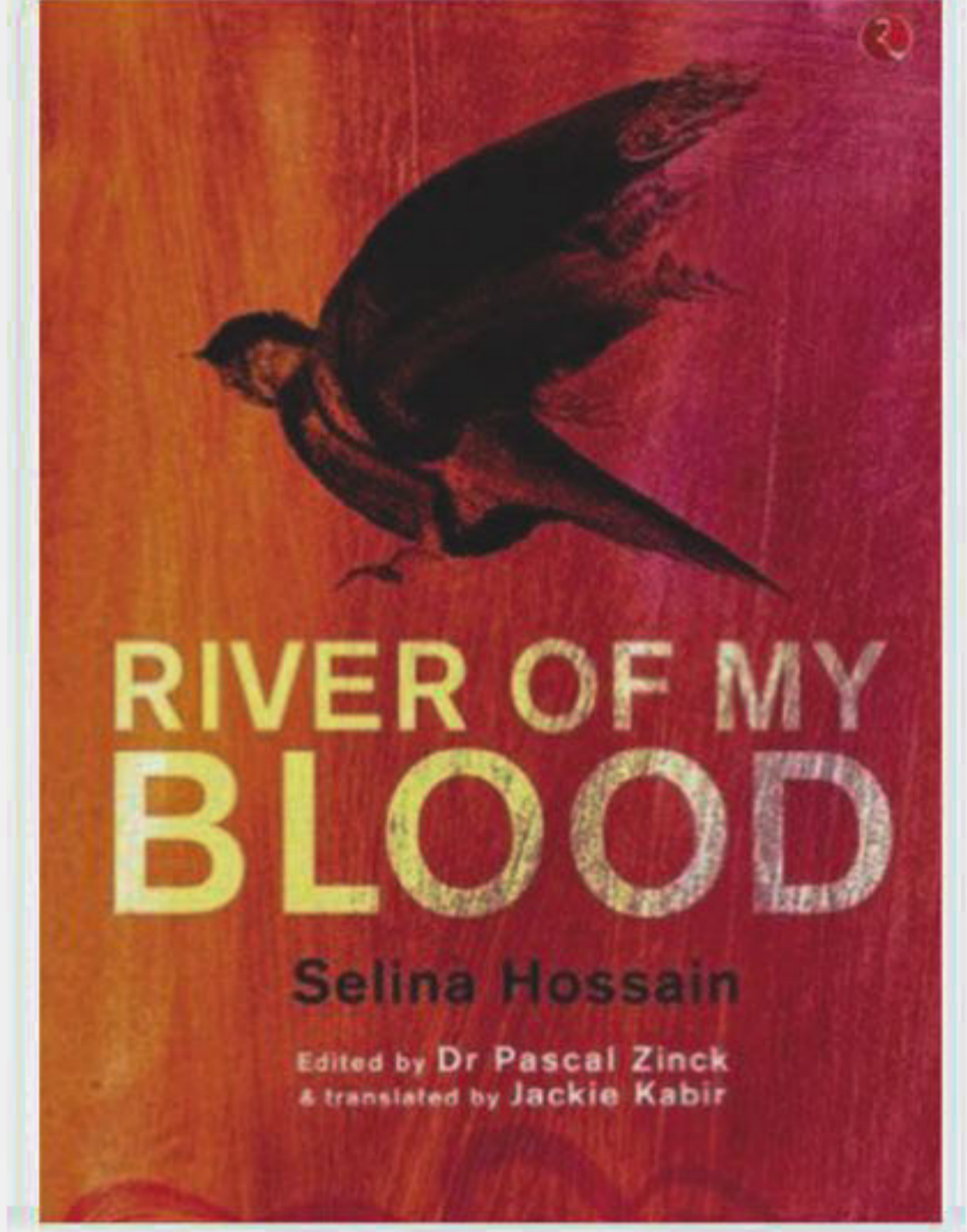
Nita Bairagi is a sincere friend and totally selfless. When at the end of the novel the *ashram* for wounded *Muktijoddhas* is burned down by the *Razakars* we cannot help but realize that the *Bairagis'* contribution to our liberation was by no means a humble one. And of-course the action of the *Razakars* was typically base and inhuman.

Boori's own baby gave her much joy and happiness even though Rais was a mute baby. She loved

him with all her heart and put him on a pedestal, loving him extra for his disability. Village superstitions are often mentioned in a few places in the novel. For example it was commented by other villagers that as a child she wandered the countryside too freely and hence she was exposed to the influence of evil spirits which caused her to have a physically challenged child.

It is interesting how well she takes to her two step sons Salim and Kalim. She nurtures them as her own and gets Salim married to a virtuous girl named Ramija. She finds happiness and contentment in her own world consisting of husband, two step-sons, her own son and daughter-in-law. But often she remembers Jalil, her childhood love.

The remaining half of the book is about the events that led up to the 1971 war of liberation. Her husband Gafoor dies of old age despite the herbal treatments, incantations suggested by the *Baul fakir* and the '*tabij*' to ward off the *djinn*s. After Gafoor's death Boori does not give up and simply accept her sad fate. She bravely faces the challenge of steering her family to a good future. Although she received minimal education in her village school, with her innate curiosity and keenness to understand her world, she understands the reasons and sentiments behind wanting a free country, free from the domination of Pakistan. Despite her concerns for Salim's



safety she understands that his desire to be a *muktijoddha* is an aspiration of unsurpassed glory. She is proud of him. With the threat of killings and destruction on a daily basis she looks after the welfare of all the villagers of *Haldi* specially those who have joined the war.

From the nearby Pakistan army camp she can hear the screams of tortured Bengali men and the blood-curdling groans of the village girls and women being raped and often killed by the Pakistani soldiers. Her son Salim is being hunted down by the Pakistan army so she is intelligent enough to advise Romija, her daughter-in-law to live with her father. Just as she feared, her other son Kalim is taken away by the Pakistan army and tortured to elicit information from him of his *Muktijoddha* brother. They even bring the severely tortured Kalim to her home and torture him in front of her. The mother in her is torn to shreds at the sight. She rushed to the nearest soldier and clung to his boot to spare Kalim's life but before dying Kalim called out to her 'Oh Maa! Please don't beg them for my life.' 'Please don't fall at their feet. Thousands of Bengalis are dying. If you fall at their feet, you will dishonour those who gave their lives for our country.' Hearing this an almost unreal strength is born of her. She feels the pride of a

mother whose sons never gave in to a moment's cowardice. He is shot in her presence. But the victory was her's and her son's. Her son had just given his life for his motherland, an act that has no parallel.

The changed Boori who wandered the village lanes in *Haldi* as a child and never had a worry in her life is now the lofty individual, fired with patriotism and the spirit of extreme sacrifice for her country. A final test of how elevated in character and spirit she is, is when, to protect two *Mukti Bahini* fighters, she hides them in an urn in her home when they are chased by Pakistani soldiers. She places a gun in her beloved son Rais' hand and pushes him towards them so that they think he is one of the freedom fighters. The Pakistani soldiers thank her for her loyalty to Pakistan and take him away to shoot him in her own backyard. Kader and Hakim, the *Muktijoddhas* she had been hiding asked her why she sacrifices her own son who she loved so much, for them. She saw the tears in their eyes and remarked 'the *Mukti Bahini* don't want cry-babies'. 'If you don't run off right now, Rais will have died for nothing. Go! Go!'

These are the words that ring in the reader's ears long after reading them. The author has given us an example of the splendour of patriotism, moral strength and courage. Boori is an example of an every day woman who transcends to a higher being by her act of supreme sacrifice. It is perhaps a braver thing to do when you sacrifice your child's life rather than your own. It is as noble as the sacrifice Sydney Carton made of his own life in Charles Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities'. He chooses to die in the place of his love Lucie Manette and we all remember how the sacrifice was immortalized in the words 'It is a far far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far far better rest I go to than I have ever known.'

I would like to add a word about the translation. There is an extensive glossary of Bangla words translated to English at the end of the novel. I appreciate and prefer the fact that many of the Bangla words have been used in the novel which can also be understood by non-Bangla speaking readers. Another added flavour of Bengal is the Bangla script used along with the English name for the month that each chapter is headed under. Rural Bengal's birds, trees and foods have been described in detail to create the setting of a typical village of Bengal. The superstitions and village gossip, the melas and religious beliefs all make up the complexities of an apparently simple rural existence.

An important element in the book which I find unique and praise-worthy are the *Baul, Jari* and patriotic songs which are interspersed throughout the novel. Poetry and song always add colour and reveal the essence of what is being expressed more clearly and the appropriateness of each song in the story is a commendable achievement by the author. My personal favourites are the *Baul* songs which convey wise philosophies and ask questions of life's true meaning. There are also a few simple folk songs that reflect the serenity of life in our villages before they were plundered and attacked. Patriotic songs such as '*Amar Bhaiyer Rokte Rangano*' and our national anthem have been infused into the novel to enable Boori to understand life's higher purpose. They are infused to enable Boori to build her feeling of patriotism and also to convey to us readers that the ideals suggested by these songs should be the guiding principle of all our lives.

The novel is about struggle and oppression, of Beautiful Bangladesh and its people and a homage to those whose drops of blood formed the river which flowed silently but surely till the birth of a new nation when we gained independence and victory on 16th December, 1971.

The reviewer is a teacher in Sunbeams, a member of The Reading Circle (TRC) and is passionate about reading books.

A plea for personal space

AUTHOR: SHAMIM AHMED
REVIEWED BY NUSRAT NAHID

EVER since the *Ekushey Boimela* this year, friends have been posting excerpts from a book, *Nimishai Nishiddho Tumi*. Being curious I search for it and get awestruck to find it as one of the best sellers in the 2016 book fair. So what's in it? An anthology with around 48 verses which would make you stand in front of a mirror you have ever dreaded or carefully remained oblivious to in your nearly perfect life. The poet had perhaps decided to shock the readers from the very beginning; which is why you find the last poem in the ToC the very first one as you flip over the pages. The fourth last in ToC is the 2nd. Surprise awaits when you realize the sheer discipline amidst the seemingly acute indiscipline. You got to dig deep as a reader, no short-cuts, but worth a try.

Contemporary issues, metropolitan life, the daily sob, snuffles and smiles make a place in between the couplets. The strong urge for personal space, dwindling mutual feelings and diminishing trust ooze throughout. The poet adopts an approach to protest through use of strong words, which at times may hurt your sober polished nature. But the very next moment you start to think isn't it what you would like to say or do when you would be in his shoes. The poet becomes successful in mocking you, teasing you up to a point when you shun off your fake imposed persona and admit what you have been feeling over a thousand years. He eventually manages to speak your heart.

The stanzas elucidate the limitations of human life, balancing off expectations and in many a cases accepting misinterpretations, no matter what. We may fall in the trap of considering some of the poems pure romantic ones, but one needs to read between the lines to realize these are the words of a nonconformist. These are the words of an apparently mass person, with a hundred thoughts bubbling up in his mind all the time-sufficient enough to create a havoc in the Pacific.

Complexity of human mind, absolute contradiction and apparent trading off highlight the sequencing of events in some of the poems. *Dirghotomo borshar kabyo* and the *Dirghotomo Ratri Kobita* are two of the smallest poems in length, but one knows how time stands still when you deal with a broken heart or await that precious moment. Platonic love therefore wants the other person in the same town where the gale confirms his/her presence. The plea for being controlled is also tabled quite naturally despite the repeated want for space or the irresistible attraction to bohemian life.

Surrealism, melancholy, solitude, seclusion characterize a set of other poems. Innovative choice of words invoke a reader to adopt a new lens for life, for its bountiful blessings around us. *Alta pora shapla pata, kannar jochhna, kanchhanga shopno* helps a reader to visualize something otherwise surreal. The poet encourages to look beyond with the eye of a beholder and keep that eye always open irrespective of where you are- be it in a bar, or in the lone alleys of London.

Altogether a good read, best wishes for the poet Shamim Ahmed. Look forward to reading more from him, more seasoned, more thought-provoking ones. Special thanks to the publisher Chaitanya Prokashon with an anticipation of flawless proof-reading next time. May we all behave sensibly to allow required space for our near and dear one before being "nimishainishiddho"!

Book Fare 2016 best seller *Nimishai Nishiddho Tumi* can be collected from Rokomari by calling 16297/ 01519521971 or through online by clicking <https://www.rokomari.com/book/110544>

The reviewer is a business graduate and development professional working for a multilateral development agency.



NEW BOOKS

Talking about mundane things

AUTHOR: SULTANA NURJAHAN ROZI
REVIEWED BY RAHFAT SALMAN ABIR
PUBLISHER: SAILYPROKASHON, CHITTAGONG;
PUBLICATION: FEBRUARY, 2016

Pother Pore is a book of poems about human love and relationship.

Though she is a professional fashion designer and involved in many social activities, she is very fond of poetry as well.

From the very first poem the author tries to portray the complexities of love in human interaction. Most romantic poems portray the essence of love in their own ways. She has also talked about patriotism and meditation.

This book contains 40 poems, mostly of romantic flavor. The cover also gives a shadowed graphic of love among many hurdles. In *Ashibo Firey* readers may sense abundant influence of Jibanananda Das. There is a poem on the liberation of Bangladesh. The titles of the poems are very ordinary: "Mati", "Premer Pata", "Akash Tomar Jonno", "Priyatameshu", "Kago" are some of the examples.

The reviewer is an occasional contributor.



Celebrating adolescence in enigmatic past

AUTHOR: EKRAM KABIR

REVIEWED BY FAHEEM HASAN SHAHED

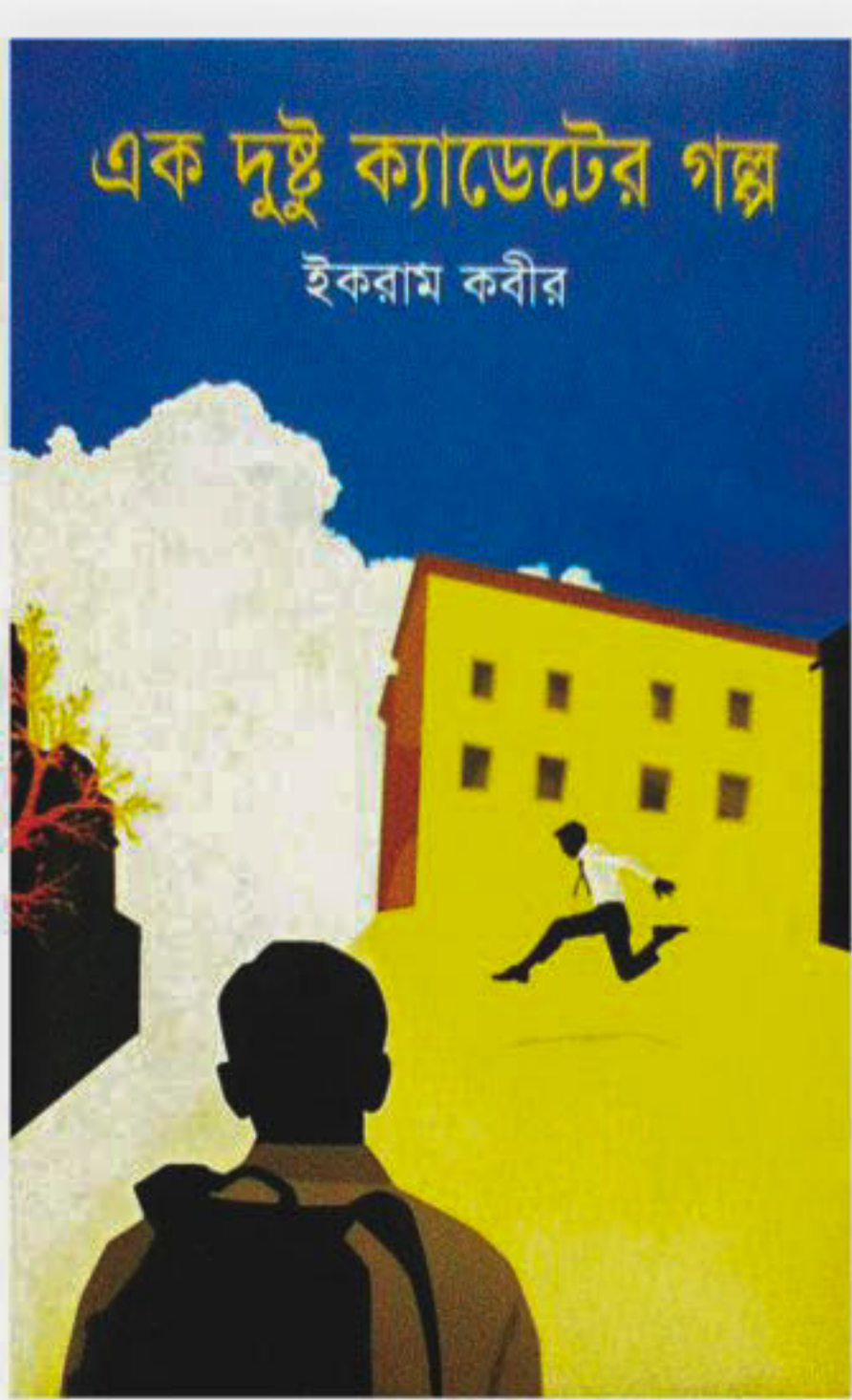
PUBLISHED IN FEBRUARY 2016 FROM ANWESHA PROKASHON PRICE: BDT 160

EVER people with little idea about the settings of a cadet college would tell you that life inside it is a cautious catwalk on a shuddering ramp. The inbuilt mass perception of 'disciplined lifestyle' of a cadet college makes many people synonymize it with harshness and punishment. For lot of parents, this becomes the de facto reason for sending their 'uncontrollable' male kids there with the hope of making them 'humans'.

However, this type of outsider's view may not necessarily reflect the actual intimate scenario unless any insider voices his authentic accounts, despite the subjectivity of his approach. In his novel 'Ek Dushtu Cadet-er Golpo', journalist and communication guru Ekram Kabir has taken readers to a world of enigma encompassing the triumphs and tragedies of his generation's six-year-long life in Fouzdarhat Cadet College. Inarguably, Ekram has devoted his jovial honesty in narrating the interior events in the artistry of an *addabaj* story-teller.

The book revolves round Imrul Kayes, widely popular as Imu, the protagonist with a blend of angelic aptitude and devilish demeanor. Ever since he entered his alma mater, he is the 'kharap cadet' in the eyes of the management. But how bad or naughty was Imu? Readers will find this answer relative. A staunch disciplinarian would view him as a rule-breaker who disregarded the authority

and a revenge-monger who abused his seniors. He would also be deemed as an arrogant brat addicted to smoking and hence a constant victim of cruel punishments. But interestingly, readers can spot the humane and benevolent Imu on different situations where others might choose to stay indifferent. The writer now frankly tells his readers how some people around him had relentlessly transformed him into a so-called 'bad' character. One such incident of the orientation day would stun readers' with anguish and force them to rethink about the lapses of value system within some of us. As the freshmen students were placed in two rooms and the form master Mr. Mahmud asked them who wanted to be a leader, all of them raised their hands including Imu who at that time was totally unknown to everyone. But Mr. Mahmud's abusive shout of 'You are a bad boy! You want to be a leader? Put your hands down!' painfully dispirited Imu. Though none could figure out what had made him a 'bad boy' just at the age of eleven, Imu by default turned devil in the eyes of all. The writer later came to know about the bad relation between Mr. Mahmud and Imu's father (also a teacher in that college) that brought out such immoral, un-teachery behavior toward a tender-aged newcomer. Similar other instances of Imu's victimization of irrational austerity and sadistic outbursts from his senior students will lead



tormented readers engage into a self-inquiry: do we need to replace love and affection with torturous corporal punishments? Do the latter anyhow make one better human being? The writer himself wonders too throughout his narrations: at times overt, at times hiding it beneath words. Thus he unfolds the names of a minority of kind and sympathetic teachers Mr. Ibrahim (Imu's

dad), Mr. Nowshad, Mr. Nur, Mr. Sinha, Mr. Mondal and above all, Mr. Dobir who had been second to none. Rising above teachership, 'Dobir sir' became the trailblazer for Imu and others. The writer narrates how he utilized every student's creative intelligence hidden at the back of his naughtiness and make him excel in whatever he was good at. The overpowering glory of his loving guidance sweetly affects the readers, the way it had affected Imu. Credit should go to Ekram Kabir that he didn't leave any unpleasant realities floating in the air for infuriating us; he has caringly explored the positivity within.

When Imu in his batch's farewell speech uttered how the cadet college had given him a mind, lots of diehard friends and an education worth for his whole life, and eventually appealed to the younger batches to gain strength from even the worst of the things, all the scattered nothingness of his cadet life instantly transform into a collective somethingness with which readers should identify their aspirations. 'Ek Dushtu Cadet-er Golpo' is therefore a cheering song of adolescence. More precisely, it is a fairy tale of innocence for the children inside us.

The reviewer is a poet and an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB).