

Essays on Bengal of a Bygone Era

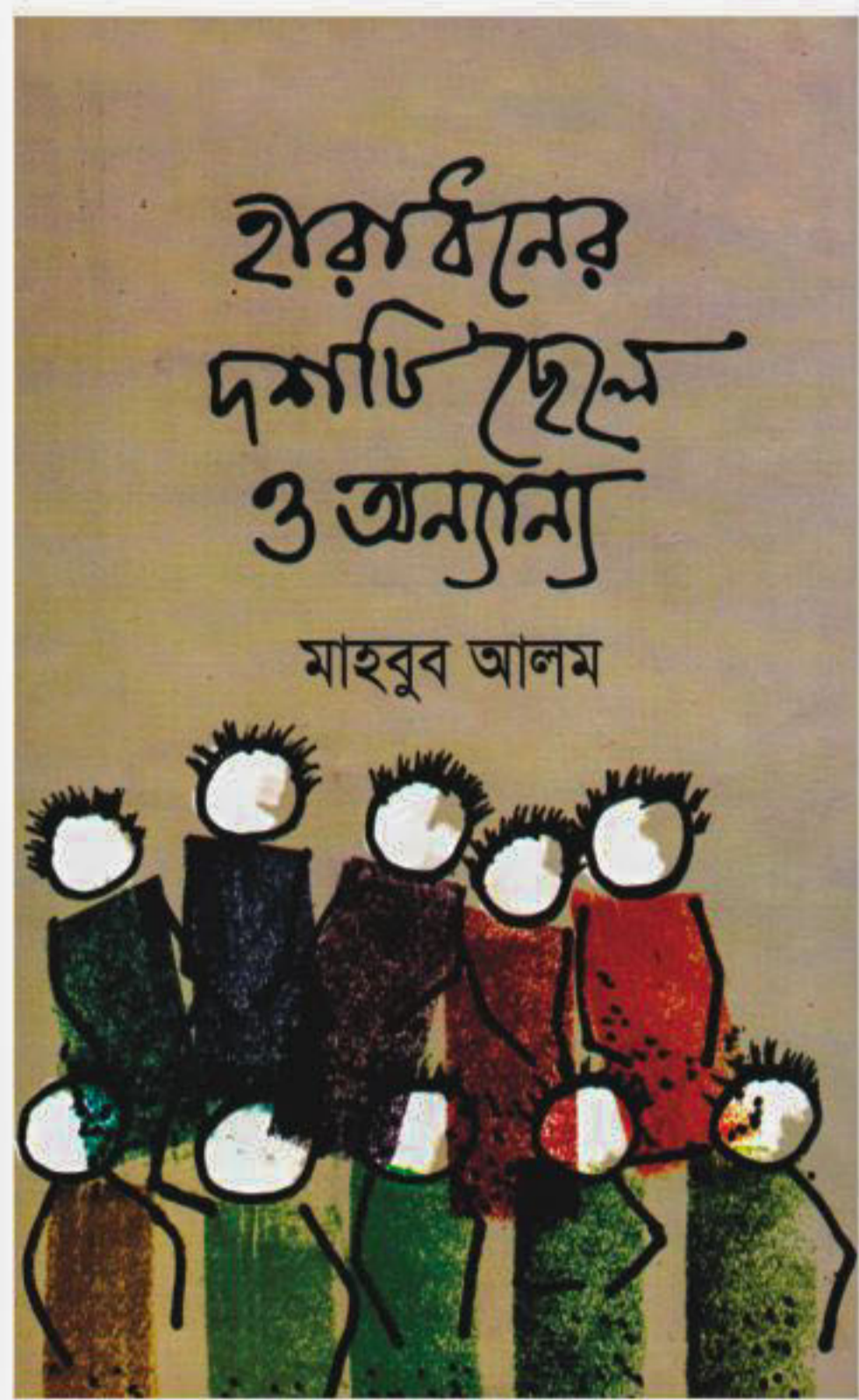
AUTHOR: MAHBUB ALAM

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

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I simply cannot resist focusing on a bit of information provided in the apparently tongue-in-cheek titled *Haradhoner Doshti Chele o Onnanno*, written by Mahbub Alam, former senior career diplomat of Bangladesh, and a history buff. Talking about popular Bangla choras of yesteryears, and possibly also of the Internet Age, he draws attention to one that at least a good number of us have heard: "I come, by come...relgari (railgari) jhomajhom...." And those wordings have drawn some serious *chulchera bisleshon* (sounds more appropriate in this context than the English equivalent "hairsplitting analysis") and ponderous erudition from Bengali scholars and monishis. Sukhomoy Mukhopaddhay pronounced that the correct line should have read, "Rel (rail) come jhomajhom." This view was robustly challenged by Dr. Sukumar Sen who thought it should be, "Rain come jhomajhom." Wow! Go figure! A very simple joyous chhora for all and sundry to enjoy has been placed under a high-powered microscope to minutely examine its contents (maybe every letter therein)! But that seems to be a proclivity of a section of Bengali intellectuals: to create the proverbial storm in a teacup (probably over a teacup, or two)! On a lighter note, the weight of such erudition driving the head into the neck could result in spondalitis! There, I have put in my own two-cent' worth of reflection.

Alam has an insightful observation on the enduring quality of these long-cherished choras: they have endured precisely because they do not pontificate. Long may they continue to delight the young (and old). In the context of the *relgari jhomajhom chhora*, the writer has emphasized in his introductory piece that it would be wrong to assume that all of our enlightening and best choras are based on foreign (read: English) influences. He, though, laments that many of their messages and objectives are being lost to the relentless march of time. He takes note, for example, that the young people these days do not learn arithmetic by following the *Haradhoner doshti chele chhora*; they take



recourse to the easier methods provided courtesy of science and technology.

Other than the introductory piece, the book contains ten essays related to education, some only tangentially. Some serious discussions are interspersed with lighter ones, and the uninitiated will learn about the business acumen of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, the broken friendship between two towering figures in Bangla literature: Rabindranath Tagore and D.L. Ray, Rabindranath's benevolence, and other major and minor facts of Bengal's education-related history. Of particular interest to me (probably others, too), having been at the receiving end of some strong parental (read: father) discipline for some admittedly MINOR indiscretions, the essay on *Bangla Pathshala* is illuminating. We learn about the systematic progression of

education along defined lines on the assumption that the foundation had to be strong (contrast that with the manifold shortcomings at the foundation level these days in many schools with the result that a vicious cycle of weak foundation leading up to the apex level of learning that is ploughed back with the flaws to begin at the beginning). In the early to the mid-nineteenth century, Vishwanath Tarkaratna's *Shishubodhok* and Madan Mohan Tarkalankar's *Shishushiksha* helped lay the foundation for the children's education in Bengal.

Harsh behaviour, rough language, and liberal use of corporal punishment topped off by caning were common among the teachers, and, significantly, as the precursor to a continuing tradition, they were not paid much for their teaching efforts. Nonetheless, in those days, in spite of their meting out severe punishment to erring students, a section of the teachers were revered for their caring and sensitive nature. While they endured their pecuniary privations stoically, they earned great respect and gratitude from the people for their honesty and simple lifestyle. These relatively neglected *pathshala* teachers enlightened so many in remote corners of Bengal of the nineteenth century that their efforts bore fruit for the entire country that made noteworthy advances in the twentieth.

There is a delicious story of an admiring

Brahman pundit who undertook a sojourn from Nabadwip to Kolkata (not an easy distance to traverse in those days) to meet the writer of the epic poem *Brojangona*, Michael Modhushudhan Dutta. On finally meeting the "brown Sahib" dressed in European clothes at Stone Hope press, and learning of his converted Christian identity, he could only blurt out, "Son, you're damned!" An interesting observation deals with the topic of the educational direction of the British Raj during the latter half of the twentieth century. Much of it was aimed at grooming the urban upper and middle class children to become the ruling class of the colonial system. Only a mere handful of books, notably *Shishubodhok*, were written keeping an eye on the agriculture-based economic and social life of the vast rural Bengal.

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar was at the forefront of providing educational opportunities for the Bengalis. He wrote, according to Chandicharan Bandopaddhay, 52 books, of which 30 were in Bangla, 17 in Sanskrit, and 5 in English. He was also in service of the British government. Allegations were rife that he used his position and closeness and influence with the British to push for his own books to be incorporated as school textbooks. There was truth to the allegations, but equally true was the high quality of his books. He was a shrewd businessman to boot, using his own

acumen and the British connection to advance the fortunes of his press.

Bibhutibhushan had a stint in East Bengal as a roving educator on the merits of cattle breeding and their upkeep. In the course of his tour to various districts of this region, he came to the conclusion that the womenfolk of East Bengal were much superior to their counterparts from West Bengal in terms of liberal views, affability, and open-heartedness. Significantly, he observed that they were generally more educated than their West Bengal counterparts. The feud between long-term friends Rabindranath and D.L. Ray was sad. The author demonstrates that it stemmed from a jealousy against Tagore on the part of Ray, culminating in the staging of a particularly crass Ray-written play called *Anondo Bidae*, which, both suggestively and expressly, attacked Rabindranath's integrity. Significantly, Tagore did not use it as an excuse to retaliate, but was bemused by what had transpired.

Tagore was a generous person. Alam gives an account of how he helped the noted Bengali scientist Jagadish Chandra while he was struggling monetarily as he was undertaking his experiments in Great Britain. He recounts how Tagore beseeched and gained the help of the equally large-hearted *Maharaja* of Tripura in coming to the aid of his friend, an act that enabled Jagadish Chandra to successfully conclude his scientific endeavours. In Alam's estimation, other than in Vidyasagar, not many instances can be found among Bengalis of being concerned about the wellbeing and success of another Bengali as could be in Rabindranath. A whole lot of generous gestures that eventually brought glory to all involved. *Haradhoner Doshti Chele o Onnanno* might be sketchy in content, but each of the essays contain elements that are in themselves interesting and also invite the more inquisitive reader to explore in greater depth the stories that particularly interest them.

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

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HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN: The Story of His Life and Works

Author: Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff

REVIEWED BY MAHFUZUL HASIB CHOWDHURY

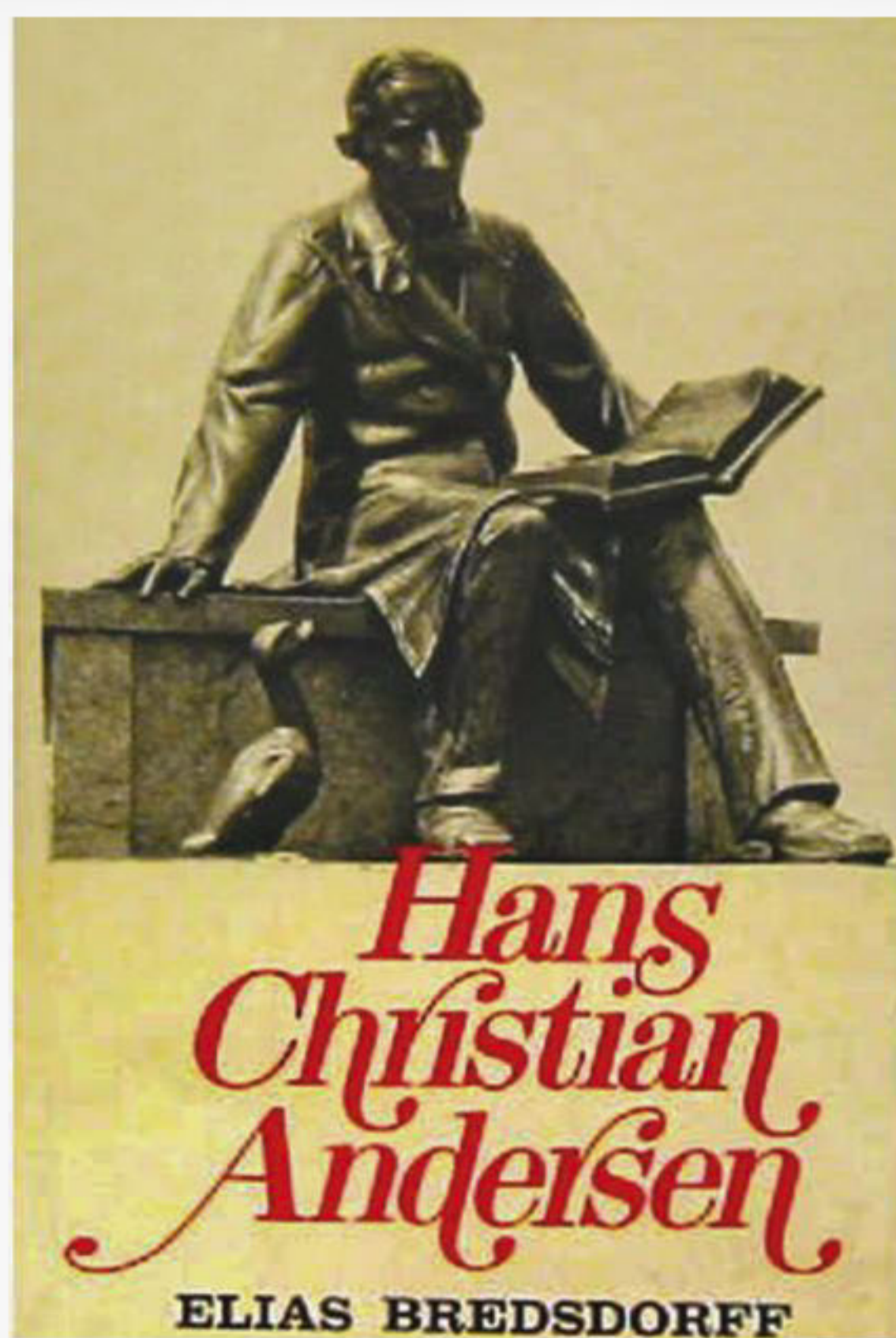
HANS Christian Andersen, an immortal author hailing from Denmark, was the ugly duckling of his own story—"so gawky and peculiar". In the first part of this compassionate book *Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of His Life and Works*, the author, Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff, traces the story of Andersen's extraordinary life and shows how often his tales grew out of his own experience.

Andersen's career was a weird one. He longed more than anything to be accepted by the ruling classes and found it was only by becoming a famous writer that he could break through social barriers. From the humblest background he rose to win universal fame and to find himself courted by the rulers and aristocrats of several European countries. By the end of his life, though often sad, and even lonely, he had virtually become an institution of Danish literature.

Everywhere he went he sought out the leading writers and artists: Victor Hugo, Henrik Ibsen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Dickens, Jenny Lind, all find a vivid place in his letters, diaries and memoirs. In London he was a literary idol with hostesses vying for his company.

However, not everyone liked him, and to his great distress as any form of criticism could upset him for days, he was often maliciously caricatured as a snob and a fawner. These attacks were really provoked by his oddly childish behavior, his naive efforts to please people around him. He was not an ordinary man—as was shown by some absurd paper clips which aimed at poking fun at him.

The second part of the book, a study of the tales by Hans Christian Andersen, will be a revelation



to most people for, as the author says, Andersen has long been relegated to the nursery and few adults realize the full extent of his wit, charm and fabulous dexterity as a storyteller. According to Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff, the blame lies at the feet of the Victorian lady translators whose versions have unfortunately become sacrosanct. These women bowdlerized, mistranslated and sentimentalized most of the original works of Hans Christian Andersen. In fact they committed every kind of sin against the original appeal of Andersen's stories while converting his works into English from Danish language. The author, Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff, lets Andersen speak for himself and shows where his universal artistry as an author lies: the king who turned a somersault for joy saying "You never saw such a beauty" and the tin soldier's parade and the Snow Queen's promise to Kay of "the whole world and a pair of new skates."

This book includes some sketches by Hans Christian Andersen and surprisingly, there is an illustration of some dancing dervishes which reminds of a philosophical trajectory marked by the mystic thoughts of Jalal Uddin Rumi, the most famous Persian scholar of all times. Some self-

portraits reflect the gladness and melancholy, blitheness and despair that flowed simultaneously through Andersen's lifespan. Portrayal of a funeral procession is also found in the book which hints at Andersen's musings over death during the last few years of his life.

It would be a myopic assessment to comment that the fables and myths found in stories by Hans Christian Andersen are all for kids. The people he characterized in his books, the birds and animals he personified in his fables have the tested and proven power to mesmerize readers of all ages. Themes of his literary creations exceed all frontiers of time and territories. This is the principal reason behind his eminence as a widely perused writer across the world and his global acceptability which have transformed his books into classics. *The Steadfast Tin Soldier, The Wild Swans, The Little Mermaid, The Emperor's New Clothes, The Princess and the Pea* are some of his most cited stories. He wrote a number of travelogues too like *Shadow Pictures of a Journey to the Harz, Swiss Saxony, A Visit to Portugal* etc. Soren Kierkegaard, a prominent Danish philosopher wrote a review of 70 pages on his novel *Only a Fiddler*. 2nd April, Andersen's date of birth, is celebrated globally as International Children's Books Day to pay tribute to this illuminated wordsmith. Robert Lytton, a frontline poet and statesman of 19th century England named Andersen "half child, half God" for his plain-hearted but benevolent nature.

Elias Bredsdorff says he first realized Hans Christian Andersen was a man and not just the title of a wonderful book of fairy tales when his grandmother told him that she had once danced with Andersen—then an old man—and that he had trodden on her toes with his ridiculously long feet.

Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff taught Scandinavian Studies in Cambridge University, UK for a long time. An eye-catching number of publications on Hans Christian Andersen and Scandinavian literature enlighten his profile. He collaborated with R.P. Keigwin on his translation of the stories by Andersen and has written and edited several books on the medieval and modern literature of Denmark. In 1973 he was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Prize by the Danish Government. This book *Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of His Life and Works*, the fullest biography in any language, is the culmination of a lifelong study of Andersen, the "unsurpassed master" of fairy tales.

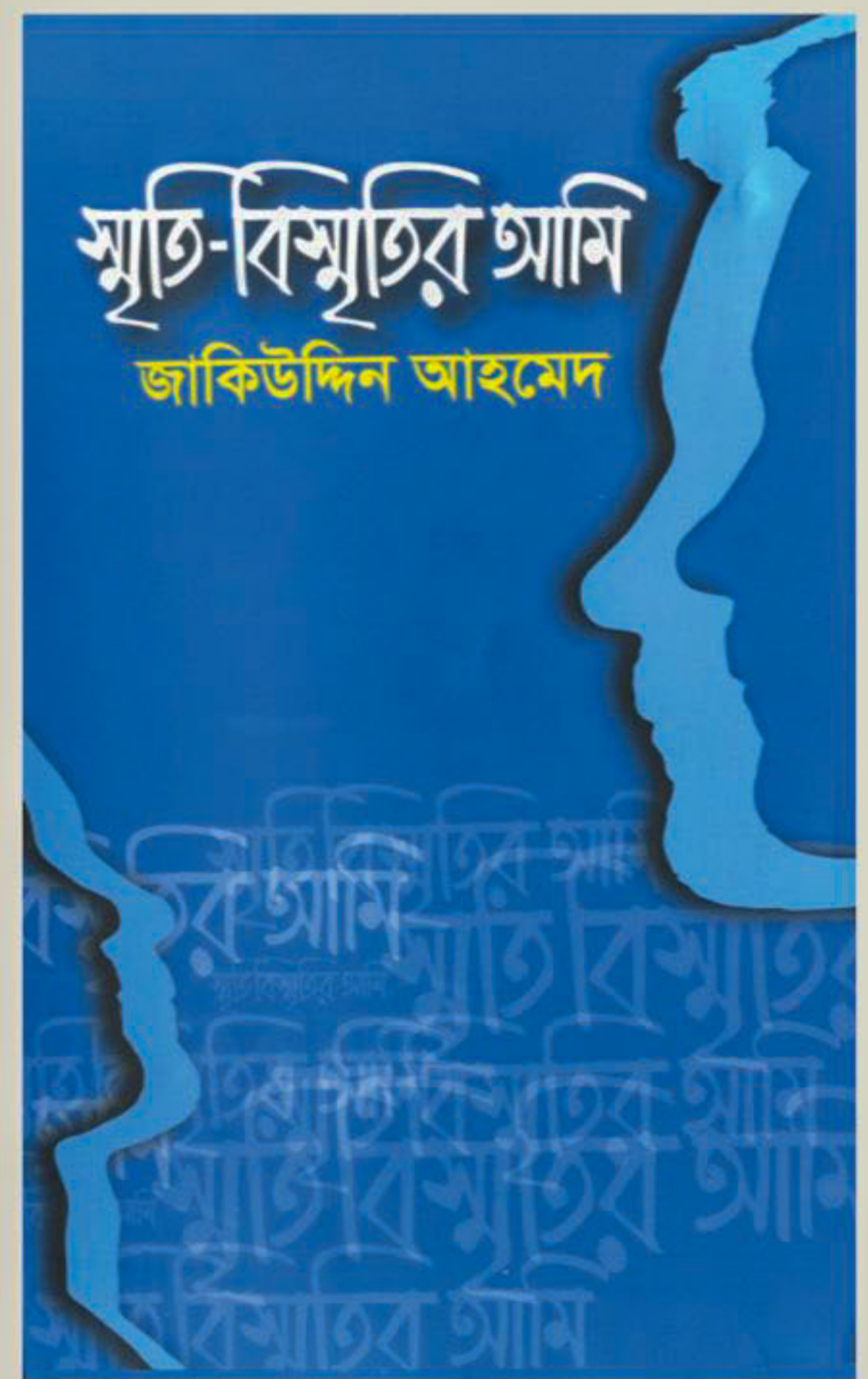
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Sriti Bisritir Ami

AUTHOR: ZAKIUDDIN AHMED

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THE author goes on a time travel through the streets and alleys of his mind in search of the golden moments as he went on his journey of life. He elaborately brings to life the memories of early years of education, work, marriage, rearing children, extended family members etc., in a simple language. Readers will come to know about many hitherto unknown facts relating to involvement of politics, literature and culture in the city of Dhaka. The author paints a graphic picture of the media world in the pre-liberation and post-liberation Bangladesh and one would come to know about the contribution of many media personalities of the time who became famous in later days.

The book *Sriti Bisritir Ami* is a painting of the writer's journey through life drawn with the ink of emotion.

Corrigendum

In an article of Book Reviews page titled "Valiant freedom fighters of the soil" published on September 26, 2016, the word should have read "Melaghor", instead of "Khelaghor". We regret the inadvertent error.

This book includes some sketches by Hans Christian Andersen and surprisingly, there is an illustration of some dancing dervishes which reminds of a philosophical trajectory marked by the mystic thoughts