

Penetrative Tales on Social Aberrations

EDITED BY DR. NURUL AMIN

REVIEWED BY MAHFUZ UL HASIB CHOWDHURY

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religion and politics. Unscrupulous people often capitalize on the ignorance and naivety of ordinary masses for gaining political and monetary momentums. These stories also aim to raise awareness among the people about these masked tricksters and their foul games. Celebrated satirist Jonathan Swift's political lampoon *Gulliver's Travels* has been retold by Abul Mansur Ahmed in a very amusing and witty style with sharp observations about the detrimental aspects which often arise due to lack of good governance in a state. We know that Jonathan Swift poked fun at the royal government of England of 18th century allegorically through the travel

stories of his protagonist Gulliver. Abul Mansur Ahmed rebooted this classical travelogue with dashes of his own to make it relevant to contemporary geopolitical circumstances around him.

The humour-packed approach to short stories exhibited by Abul Mansur Ahmed reminds us of another famed author of our language—Syed Mujtaba Ali. On the other hand, foreign authors and poets who had a powerful knack for satire may also be named while appraising the stories of Abul Mansur Ahmed. In this context we can refer to Aristophanes from ancient Greece, Cervantes from Spain, Alexander Pope from England, Mark Twain from America and some more timeless writers who illuminated their authorial eminence with the force of their sarcastic and creative edges.

Abul Mansur Ahmed also used several words from the regional dialects of the country which have added a comic punch to his stories making them broadly hilarious. The focal traits of Abul Mansur Ahmed's stories call back in our memory Aristotle's thoughts on literature in his acclaimed book *Poetics*. Aristotle wrote in his book that literature should aim to entertain as well as enlighten people by underlining social aberrations in a joyous way. We find the reflection of this thing in Abul Mansur Ahmed's stories.

The appendix of the book *Abul Mansur Ahmed Shresta Galpa* contains a glossary of a wide number of words in alphabetic order along with their meanings. These words are from Bengali, English, Persian and Arabic languages. Adding this glossary at the end of the book is helpful for readers to enhance their vocabulary and also

for better understanding of the stories.

Some people often resort to prevarication and humbugs to beguile other fellows around them. This aura of false impression gets shattered through the piercing lingual brunt of Abul Mansur Ahmed. Abul Mansur Ahmed certainly exposed his bravery as an author by hitting hard at the bottom of pranks and fraudulence which are frequently adopted by hypocrites to deceive others.

Mahfuz Anam, currently Editor of The Daily Star is Abul Mansur Ahmed's son. From this point of view it can be stated that being a prominent writer and journalist, Mahfuz Anam has been able to sustain the legacy of his legendary father.

The book contains adulating remarks from national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam who admired Abul Mansur Ahmed's masterful literary competency. There are comments from some other renowned scholars and writers who all immensely applauded Abul Mansur Ahmed's satirical craftsmanship.

Literature is able to bring about vital reforms in society. That's why we find stories and poems having deep impact on people's mindset as well as on the ruling authority of a country. I hope most of the readers can easily recall the hue and cry caused by George Orwell's book *Animal Farm* which fiercely and allegorically castigated the Stalinist regime in former Soviet Union. In the same way Abul Mansur Ahmed's stories also call for corrections and necessary changes with social patterns for greater welfare of people.

The reviewer is a columnist for different English newspapers and magazines.

Of Paths and Walkers

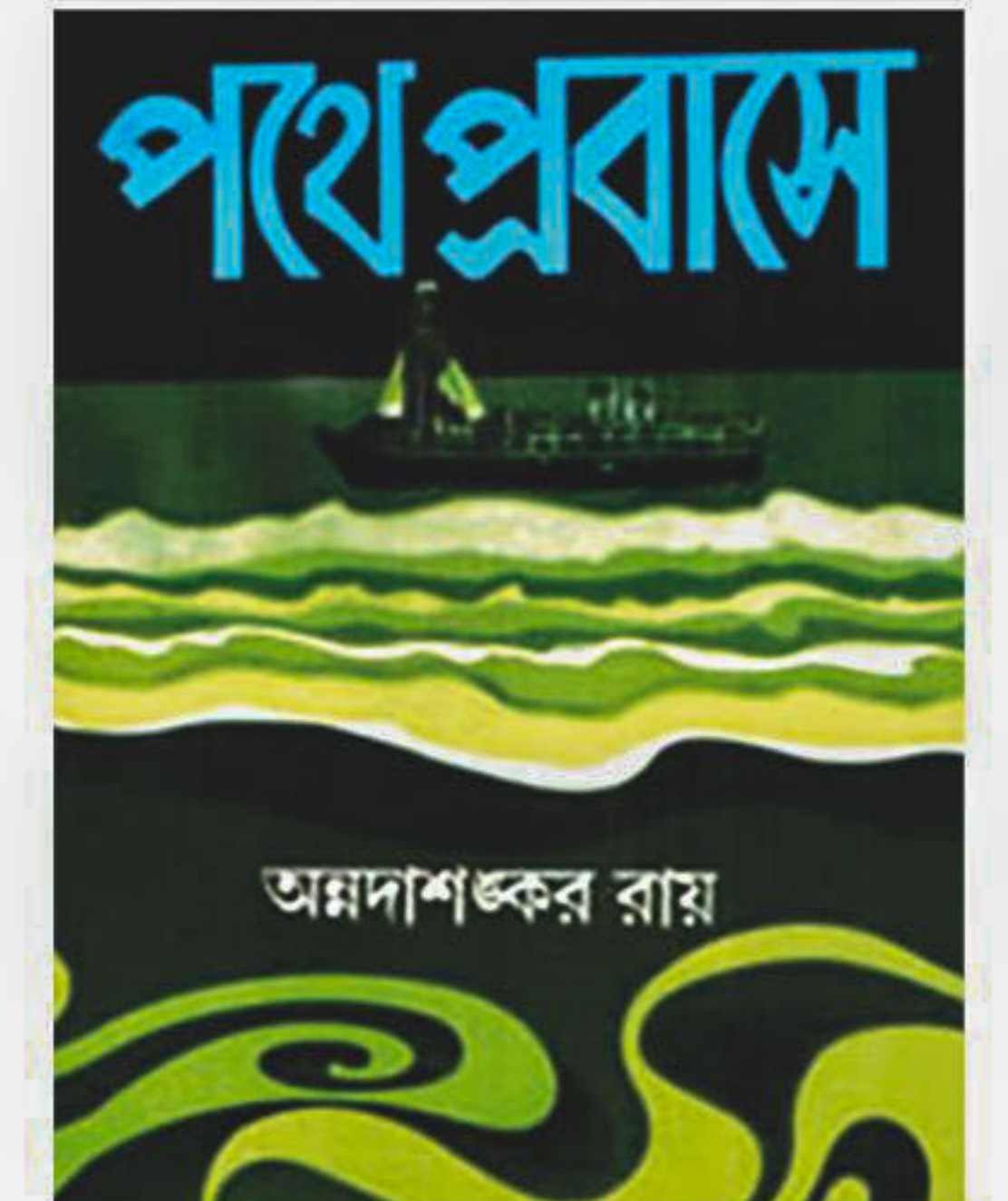
AUTHOR: ANNADASHANKAR RAY

REVIEWED BY BARNALI TALUKDER

“WHAT is great in the realm of art might not be equally acceptable in the realm of morality; similarly what morality finds laudable might fail to satisfy artistic thirst” – this observation, articulated in the course of Annadashankar Roy's essay collection on Tolstoy, reflects on Roy's philosophy regarding art and literature. Distinguishing art from ethics and religion, he eventually rationalizes flaws and follies that human life is essentially imbued with. It is important to represent human life with its imperfections in art, Roy thinks, because only such depiction can bring the feel of aesthetic pleasure. Therefore, a keen observer, Roy, examines human life from multifarious angles and celebrates the laughter and grief, wholeness and holes of humanity side by side. *Pathe Prabase*, a travelogue and autobiography by Annadashankar Roy, accumulates many of such observations of him which particularly delineates European life, but which in depth contemplates on diverse fluxes of life.

Annadashankar Roy patronizes the idea that long-side imagination, litérateurs cannot ignore her/his responsibility of representing their own time. But transformation of time and reality into art should not anyhow hamper the artistic spontaneity that Roy repeatedly emphasizes on. He has a brilliant capacity to maintain both beauty and substantiality in his writing. Most praiseworthy is Roy's contributions to rhymes – his rhymes retain the simplicity of language and the ease of understanding, but at times even deal with issues like the division of India within this tapestry of simplicity. Roy depicts the social, political or ideological crises of his contemporary India in a prolific, simple and catchy language through many of his writings. But in doing so his consciousness regarding the world outside India does not slack; rather he has been able to formulate a 'world-view' more harmoniously through the scrupulous inspection of India. *Pathe Prabase*, therefore, adopts a reverse method; Roy sees India through the eye of Europe and adds a new dimension to his understandings about India and the world outside, sophisticates his knowledge regarding cultural diversity and develops an idiosyncratic stand about the progress of the world.

Roy wrote this travelogue during his travel through Europe in between 1926-29. Pramatha Chaudhuri, in the introduction, appreciates the youthfulness of this book as Roy has not borrowed any eye from the external theories or values to see Europe. Roy's un-shrouded mind discovers Europe gradually and also searches for the bridges as well as breaches that India can develop for improving her relations with Europe. Roy travels different countries of Europe and, as he mentions in the book, digs out new treasures of experiences and wisdom. A new country, the author thinks, not only opens new sights, but also helps one's mind shake off narrowness. When Roy meets London for the first time, a sunless and



solitary city he finds. However, architecture and cleanliness of the city satisfy him. People of London speak little – it amazes the author because Indian people never hesitate to ask even about one's salary, no matter he is shortly acquainted or for long. This single difference widens the gap between the societies of the East and the West in the author's eye as it questions the depth of intimacy and socialization. Although a man-made city shocks the heart-polished *Indian-ness* of the author in the beginning, with the maturity of the journey Roy unfurls countless wonders that the European life believes in. The author discovers a hardworking and utilitarian England with equal participation of men and women in every sector. People are given with adequate freedom to cultivate individualism instead of being restricted with social or religious norms. Such a disciplined nation however is not bereft of the pleasure of life because they believe in celebrations – they celebrate life through dancing, drinking, and traveling – and in this grand arrangement, people, irrespective of class, gender or religion, play parts. In France, Roy encounters a nation full of life. They are spending hours in cafes, gossiping or unconsciously creating timeless arts. Roy smells an underlying connection between the cultures of France, Germany, Russia and Indian subcontinent in character; but he finds many of the practices of England distinct and praiseworthy. From toothbrush to law, people of England earn their rights and act proportionately for the preservation of those.

While Roy was writing this travelogue, Indian subcontinent was under the colonial rule of England and the world was getting ready for another great war. Amidst such turmoil Roy recommends peace through the interchange of cultural practices between England and India. He dreams of a borderless world where truths of one culture would strengthen the base of another. Therefore, *Pathe Prabase* transcends the boundary of a mere travelogue, but becomes a collection of views regarding the world where humanity glues one corner to another. Roy presents diverse realities, but his presentation throughout the book seems like an enchanting and provoking storytelling. Before being entirely engrossed in social, political and cultural affairs of India in later years of his life, Roy's travel around Europe for two years prospectively stimulates his thinking as a global person.

The reviewer is a literary enthusiast. She is an M.A. in English Literature from the University of Dhaka. She can be reached at borna.talukder@gmail.com

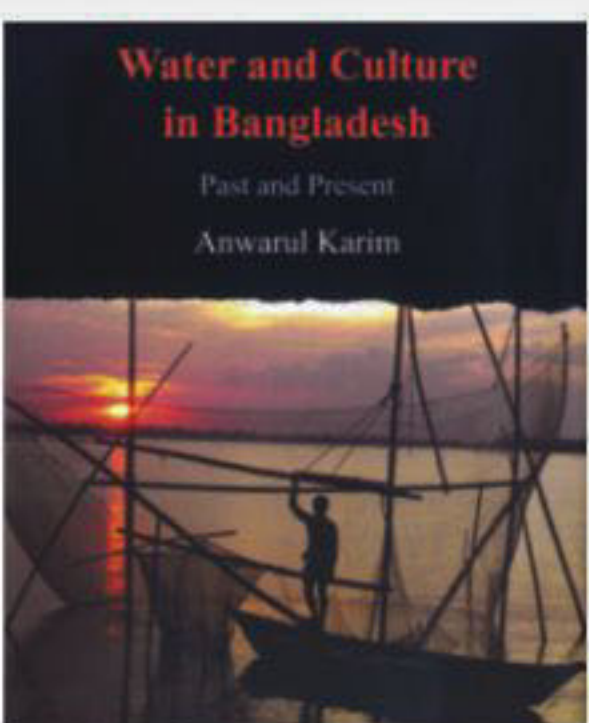
NEW BOOKS



Payraband kahini

Author: Munshi Mohammad Aftabuddin Miyan Talukder
Published by Shova Prokash, February 2017
Price: 350.00 BDT

Payraband kahini is a book of *Puthi Sahitto* (a special genre of literature written in a mixed vocabulary drawn from Bangla, Arabic, Urdu, Persian and Hindi) which was written by Munshi Mohammad Aftabuddin Miyan Talukder. It has been collected, compiled and edited by Samar Paul and published by Mohammad Mizanur Rahman. It is now available at *Shova Prokash*, 38/4 Banglabazar, Manna Market, Dhaka.



Water and Culture in Bangladesh, Past and Present

Author: Prof Anwarul Karim
Publisher: Murdhonno Publication, Price: 700 BDT

Water and Culture in Bangladesh, Past and Present by Prof Anwarul Karim is a research based book which was first published in December 2016 by *Murdhonno* Publication. This book depicts the importance of water as far as it shapes our culture. It also says, many of our cultural heritages are getting lost because of urbanization and also for absence of water in our rivers. Author of this book is an academician and researcher. He has around 25 books in both English and Bangla to his credit.

Men-Women Relationship in Nineteenth Century Bengal

AUTHOR: DR. BILKIS RAHMAN

REVIEWED BY DR. ANM MESHQUAT UDDIN

Publisher: Bangla Academy, June 2013

THE story begins like this. Dr. Bilkis Rahman read the autobiography of noted author Mir Mosharraf Hossain and discovered a rosy picture of a very happy life with his wife Bibi Kulsum. But when she examined the personal diary of Bibi Kulsum, she found a different picture. Bibi Kulsum described her mental predicaments due to her husband's extramarital relationship with other women and absence of any respect for her as a wife. This prompted Dr. Bilkis to undertake a research study and find out the actual conditions of women in the nineteenth century Bengal. She has compiled her findings in this 268-page book, titled: *Unish Shatake Banglay Naripurush Shamparka*.

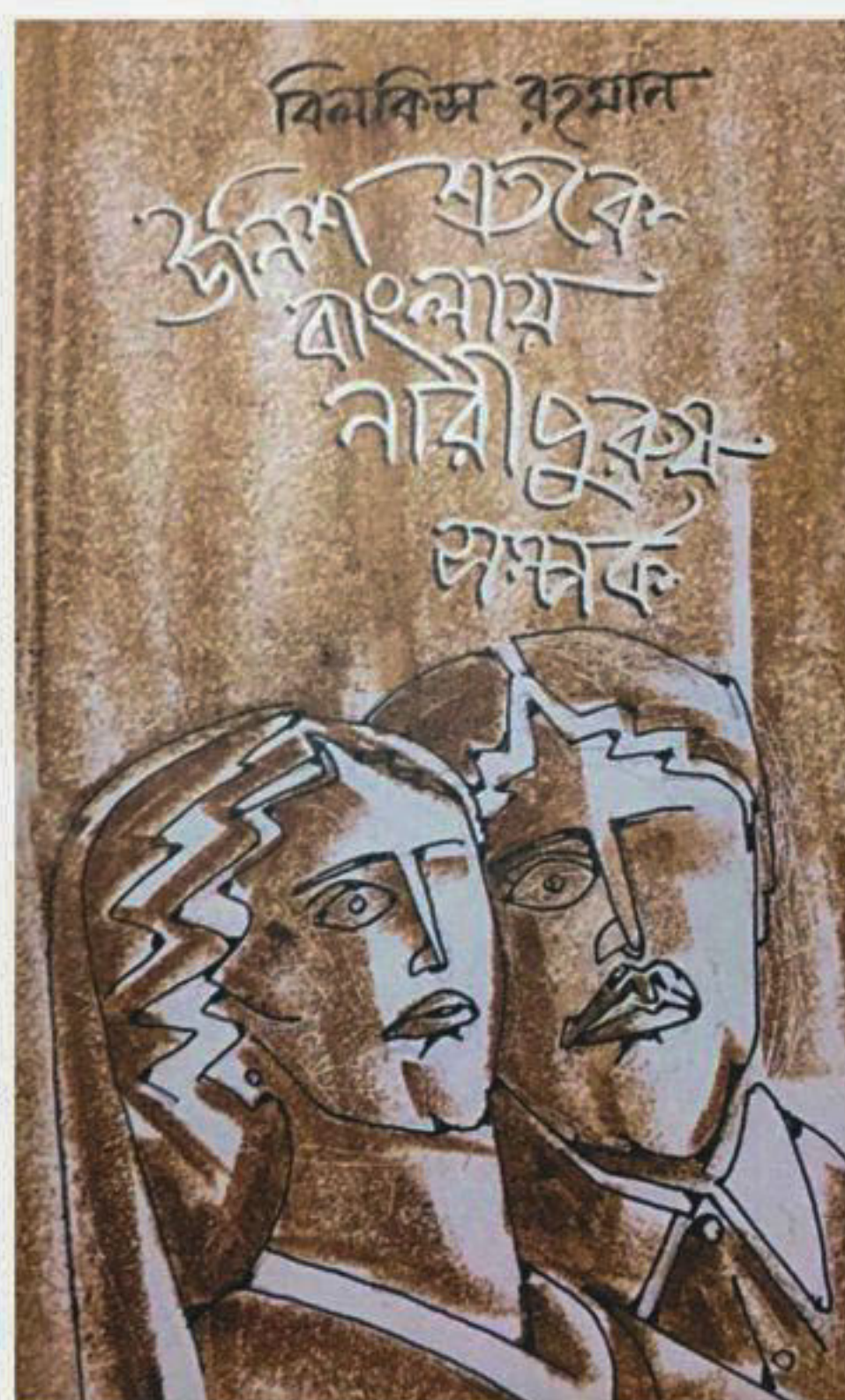
The book is organized into five chapters. Three chapters focus on conjugal relations, men-women relations before marriage, and extramarital relations. The other two chapters examine the impact of traditional values and transitional family values on men-women relations. In the preface of the book, Professor Anisuzzaman acknowledges that the findings of this book are based on various authentic documents, deeds and agreements that were not used by previous researchers. Although the men-women relationship in the middle-class families of the nineteenth century Bengal was primarily determined by religious rules and contemporary social values, Dr. Bilkis's research has unveiled various new dimensions that were not known to us before.

Undivided Bengal comprised of today's Bangladesh and the Indian province of West Bengal in the nineteenth century and was under the British rule. The Hindus and the Muslims represented a large majority of the population. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, religion played a vital role in determining the nature of men-women relationship. Religious rules both in Islam and Hinduism were in favour of men; women were given a lower position in both religions in terms of their relationship with men, right to property and social status. Dr. Bilkis was surprised to discover that both religions allowed men to have multiple wives, while a woman could have only a single husband. In addition, men were allowed to have sexual relationship with prostitutes, maids, concubines and other women.

Most of the previous studies on women were based on data and information obtained from autobiographies, personal diaries and letters, and family documents. In most of the autobiographies, the authors skipped their conjugal relations and sex life, either intentionally or inadvertently. Thus, much of the information about the deplorable conditions of women vis-a-vis a colorful sex life of men in general remained unknown to us. In addition to the above sources, Dr. Bilkis also examined the marriage deeds (*kabinnama* for Muslims and *patipatra* for Hindus), deeds of spouse livelihood support, wills, divorce letters, court records such as lawsuits related to marriages and property inheritance, deeds of donation, loan agreements, and documents related to land exchange. Information was

also obtained from autobiographies, letters, diaries, newspapers, periodicals, books and magazines, government records, reports of civil and criminal cases, magistrate reports, police reports, education reports, medical reports, district records, and census reports.

Dr. Bilkis discusses three theories that explain the nature of sexual relationship between men and women. The first theory postulates that the relationship between men and women is primarily based on physical relationship. A man looks at female body as a cultivable land. A child is the fruit of this process. The second theory is based on feminism that denounces absolute domination by men. It recognizes female freedom and independence regarding a woman's sexual communion with a man. It states that a woman will decide whether she will participate in sexual intercourse with a man, and she can even choose a female partner for sexual gratification. The



third theory is based on equality between men and women. It postulates that physical attraction between a man and a woman is natural, and sexual relationship is a matter of choice and love between the two persons. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the men-women relationship was based on the first theory. Thus a man would feel attracted only to a woman's body and not to her as a person. There was no love in conjugal relations; the wife was treated as a machine to produce children.

Dr. Bilkis addresses different aspects of sexual relationship between men and women. Childhood marriage was quite common during that time. In most cases, girls were married before the age of puberty. Hoimaboti Sen had to marry a 45-year old man when she was 10. She woke up and started screaming when her husband started to take off her clothes while she was asleep. Her husband used to have sex with a prosti-

tute in their bedroom in presence of Hoimaboti. An 11-year old girl died after being raped by her husband. Another man beat his wife to death because she refused to have sex. Harimohon Maiti raped his 10-year old wife and she died.

This book also focuses on economic and social rights of women during that period. According to the Muslim law, a daughter was entitled to some of the property of her father and her husband. But the Hindu law deprived the daughter of her father's property. However, the father, in both Islam and Hinduism, had the option to donate his property to his daughter through a will before his death. Toward the second half of the nineteenth century, men undertook several initiatives to ensure financial security of their wives and daughters, and married women became more conscious about their rights as wives. An examination of marriage deeds, divorce letters, and relevant court verdicts reveals that stringent conditions were included in these documents to protect the rights of women. Dr. Bilkis cites some specific marriage deeds where it was clearly mentioned that the husband would treat his wife with due respect, allow her to visit her parents regularly, and would not remarry without her permission. In the *kabinnama*, the husband would assure that he would not marry another woman, and even if he did, the first wife would have the power to divorce the second wife on behalf of her husband and the husband would accept it. If the husband had any children from his second wife, they would be deprived of his property. If the husband left the country and stayed overseas for four years, or did not have sexual intercourse with her for six months while living together with her, the wife would achieve the right to divorce her husband. The condition of women in Muslim families was a little better. There were fewer child marriages; widows would never get remarried in most cases. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, some women became fairly educated and involved themselves in business and other economic ventures.

Dr. Bilkis Rahman's book is not based on stories from other people. She has used multiple authentic sources to unfold the true status of women in our society in the nineteenth century. She examined the conjugal relations between men and women in the middle class families of the nineteenth century mainly from the perspective of the efforts and initiatives undertaken by men to help women become self-dependent and thus ensure their financial and social security. The book used ample quotes from other studies and cited sources for the data and information she used in her study in the footnote form at the end of each chapter. I believe this will serve as an invaluable document for the future researchers in women and gender studies. It will also remain a useful handbook for those who are interested in the history of evolution and revolution of women in our society.

The reviewer is Professor, Southeast University.