

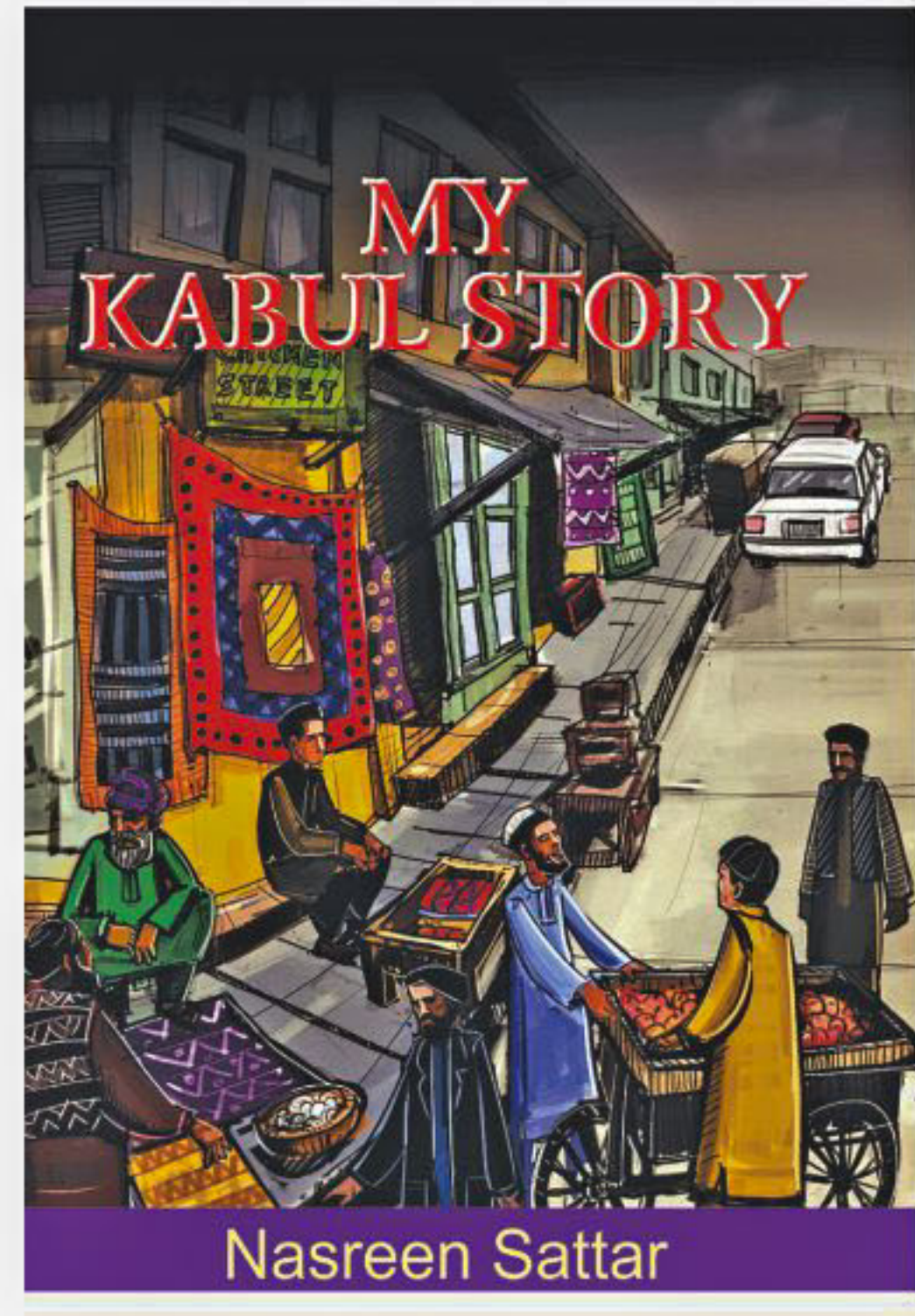
# KABUL DIARIES

AUTHOR: NASREEN SATTAR  
REVIEWED BY SAL IMAM

ON a work trip to Kabul in 2008 I was meeting the only friend I had who lived in the city. As I waited at the hotel entrance to be picked up, an enormous dark grey SUV looking like a battle tank hove slowly into view. The door swung open, heavy with armour plating, and out of this behemoth emerged a butterfly, Nasreen Sattar, dressed in stylish Western clothes, brimming over with self-confidence and authority. Nothing could more perfectly capture the duality of the situation: in the grimmest of surroundings she was a beacon of light. And this is exactly the spirit which carries over into her memoir of Afghanistan, *My Kabul Story*, engaging the reader with its stories of ups and downs, emotions and cool-headed judgment, hair-raising exploits and elegant soirées.

zone) or along the dangerous highway to the UN Compound or escaping with close friends to off-limit restaurants—all of which would leave her security handlers in fits.

Lest we think that her memoir is just a travelogue of her time in a fascinating country I want to emphasize that it can also be thought of as a guide to business management under demanding circumstances. From the day she arrived Nasreen was decisive and put her stamp



upon the Bank's operations: cutting costs, rationalizing processes, rearranging the premises (it was one of her maxims that a happy organization is a productive organization), and above all getting to know and understand the staff. This was particularly challenging because they came from very different countries, ranging from Nepal to the Gambia! Even the Afghan staff were from different tribes who were suspicious of each other. Nasreen Sattar's account of how she tackled internal tensions whenever they arose makes for instructive reading because it shows how much can be achieved by empathy

and sincerity; even when she had to make hard choices she was so upfront that everyone ended up accepting them with good grace.

She also had to deal with Afghan Government officials, all the way up to the Governor of the Central Bank, and was often the only woman at high-powered meetings at which national policies were being decided. I am sure that she left them all impressed and awed, as much by her professionalism as by her charm of Bengali womanhood! She made a similar impact on the senior officials of her own Bank. Being a CEO she was invited to the Bank's Regional Conferences and interacted with all the other heads of the organization including the Chief Executive of the Bank. She is too modest to say so but, reading between the lines, it is clear that Nasreen made a big hit in these rarefied corporate circles, not only because of the profitable results achieved in Afghanistan under very stressful conditions but also because of her striking personality. She must have made her colleague CEO, the enigmatic Obaid Malik, who had originally proposed her for the Kabul post, very proud.

There was another group of high-flyers in town. In those days Kabul was full of the Western world's most capable movers and shakers, of both sexes, ranging from American Congressmen to IMF heads to senior military officers to NGO activists and of course more than a handful of spooks, all desperate to salvage something from their latest ill-fated invasion of the Hindu Kush. Nasreen Sattar became a fixture in this elite society too because she was such good company. Life in Kabul was not all about work and the play was varied and fun, with a healthy dose of flirtation and discreet liaisons thrown in. Thus it was that amidst all the other dangers menacing her Nasreen quickly learned to shrug off unwanted attentions from certain desperados in suits while fantasizing about others, specially those in uniform. All this is told in lighthearted gossipy tones and I will leave it to the reader to find out about the delicious and tempting joys of the so-called art of 'locationship'.

In fact the whole book is a joy to read. Our author has an effortless writing style which flows like water. There is no excess. So natural and immediate is her mode of expression that we feel like we are with her on the journey, experiencing everything from behind her twinkling smile and amused eyes. Finally we come away with a sense of having learnt something valuable about the world—and about Nasreen Sattar herself.

The reviewer is a writer who is currently working on his memoirs of the late '60s in America.

# Strumming nostalgia!

AUTHOR: MILU AMAN  
REVIEWED BY TOWHEED FEROZE

Publisher: Pearl Publications,  
Pages: 86, Price: Tk 135



SOMEONE once said: people who listen to music fervently, retain a sense of innocence in them till death. The proof is right here in front of us in an extraordinarily refreshing narrative of the evolution of rock music in Bangladesh, as seen by an avid music lover. The book is about the development of band music phenomenon in the country with countless references to English rock and pop icons.

In fact, it would not be wrong to state that in trying to give us a cohesive picture of how Western instrument based music industry grew in Bangladesh, the book presents a delicious slice of an enchanting past when a large number of urban youth was immersed in exploring a vast world of rock, psychedelic, heavy metal vis a vis the innovative experiments in our own music industry.

On one hand it's a historical work but then, if it had been just a work detailing the hardcore facts then *Rock Jatra* would have been just another read. Thankfully, this is not just another book because the writer, a music connoisseur, gives a minutiae account of his growing up in Dhaka in the presence of some legendary music names like Niloy, Azam Khan etc. Therefore, this is also semi-autobiographical – marvellously profound, since references to TDK cassettes, open air concerts, LP covers, Rainbow Recording Center, Coffee House in Elephant Road and Blue Nile Hotel evoke memories of a lost era.

When I mean lost, I truly mean gone forever, since in our current social credo, the culture of band music, both local and foreign, do not have such a prominent place anymore. Times have changed, five minutes in the Internet can get you anything you want to listen to but this convenience has made us blasé.

For Milu and his likes, in the 80s, getting hands on a rare album meant plenty of effort topped with some mouthwatering adventure. That is exactly why, we see the writer hanging out at a seedy local hooch selling outlet in the company of a Bohemian just to have an album recorded. By the way, the album in question is Secret Policeman's other Ball – a variety show which John Cleese used to moderate between late 70s and early 80s to raise money for Amnesty International. If you want to see a young Phil Collins and a fluffy Rowan Atkinson, then look up the video in You Tube.

Milu brings out the faded history of the fledgling days of band music here when he goes back to the period prior to independence and, to the famous Chameli Room at the Hotel Intercontinental. A fascinating picture emerges with St Gregorians and one Fazle Rob appearing as major catalysts.

The book moves on with the sub theme of a young boy pestering his mother to buy a guitar and then embarking on his journey into music, armed with his instrument. Milu had the opportunity to be trained by the late guitar prodigy Niloy, who died prematurely, but left enough materials for a cult to develop and proliferate. The subtle political allusions cannot be missed and, perhaps, more should be written on this issue – the role of band musicians in Bangladesh in providing a cultural outlet to the protest of the masses during the 82-90 autocratic regime. The band music jamboree at the DU campus which blended with the aspirations of millions of young people after the fall of Ershad is mentioned, whisking many of us back to those days of Utopian ideals, topped with relentless romance. Milu writes passionately about the force of music which triggered a social revolution paving way for names like Renaissance, Miles, Feedback, LRB, Souls, Feelings, Winning, Different Touch and Nova.

The Bengali rock/pop music scenario is also vibrant today, but somehow, the verve of that lost era is absent. Will I be wrong to state that thirty years ago, there was an evangelical zest that drove musicians and music listeners? Alas, that ardour is missing today, we have become way too calculating! There is plenty of music now, though the passion is more controlled. Milu talks of an age when heart ruled music!

*Rock Jatra* is a treasure trove of information not publicized before – how many of you know that when bands from Chittagong came to Dhaka to perform they usually stayed at the Blue Nile Hotel near Science Laboratory? Or that Imtiaz Alam Beg, a noted photographer and the suitable son of late photographer par excellence, Manzoor Alam Beg, spent a large chunk of his time in the early 90s snapping photos of bands in concert? Just imagine, today, almost 27 years later, these images are invaluable records of the evolution of band music in Bangladesh. Inclusions of some of these photos would have made the book even more comprehensive. This is indeed a sensational piece of work: history and the tale of a young boy growing up with a transforming social atmosphere, holding doggedly to unsullied ideals.

And the best thing, his dad did not smash his instrument in the end! All throughout this book, there is a contagious sense of youthful purity and this is exactly why you would want to read it, and then, reread it, because Milu gives us the chance to catch that lost rainbow one more time!

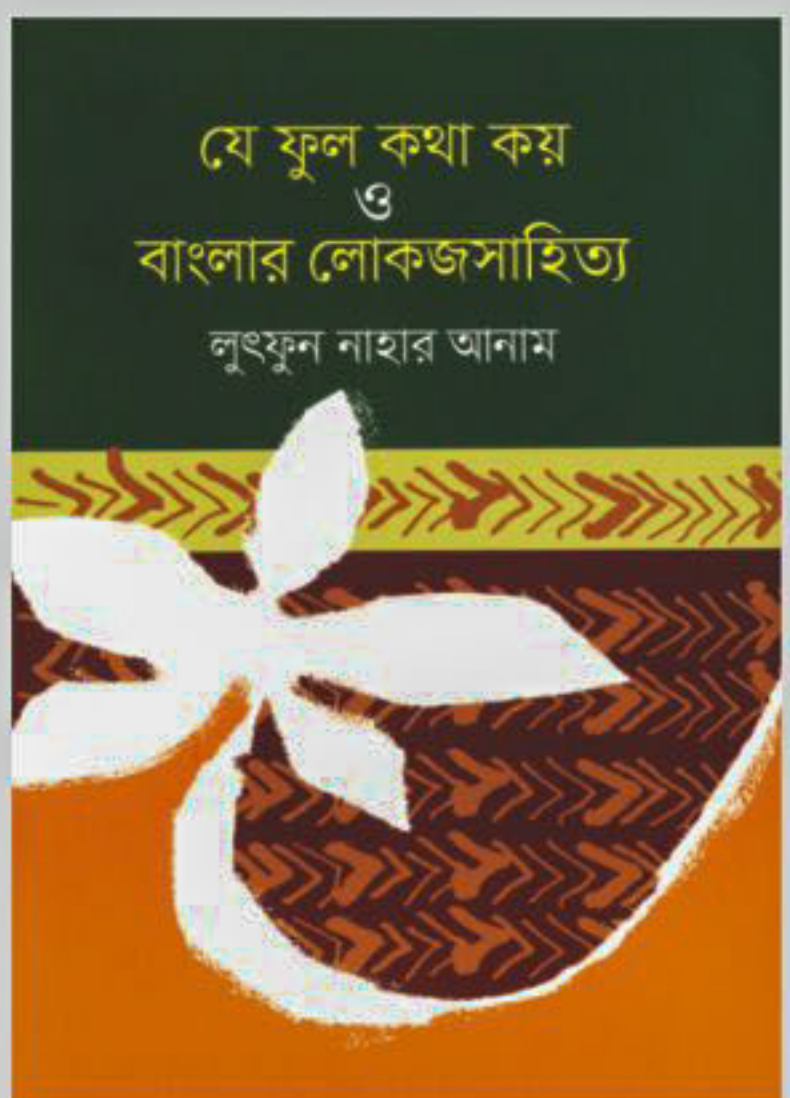
The reviewer is an occasional contributor to this page.

## NEW BOOKS

### Je Ful Kotha Koy o Banglar Lokajoshitto

Collected and Compiled by Lutfun Nahar Anam  
Edited by Emran Mahfuz  
Publisher: Kaler Dhoni, Ekushe Book Fair-2017  
Cover page: Mostafiz Karigor  
Price: BDT: 200

*Je Ful Kotha Koy o Banglar Lokojo sahitto*, is a collection of folklores compiled by Lutfun Nahar Anam. This book consists of two parts - a) Poetry for the juvenile and folk-verses and b) Puzzle, Fable and Fairy Tales of Bengal. The writing period of the book was from October 1959 to January 1990. This book depicts pain and pleasure of the time passed and lessons learnt from society. The contents have relevance to the present time too. It is now available at Prothoma and Pathok Samabesh, Aziz Super Market, Shahbag, Dhaka.



### BANGAJAYI

Author: Md Shazzad Hossain  
Cover Lettering: Rafique Ullah  
Published by Swapnolok, February 2017  
Price: 100.00 BDT

*Bangajayi* is a book of poetry by Md Shazzad Hossain, a textile engineer by profession. The engineer-cum-writer maintains rhythmic style in the book with 983 lines. It is the year-long effort of the poet who tries to highlight the entire life history of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (from his birth to death) in the poetry. The book was brought out at *Ekushey Boi Mela* on February 21 this year. It was published by Firoj Khan, proprietor of Swapnolok. Although the author is an engineer, he has been involved with writing since his boyhood. It is now available at Swapnolok, 19, New Eskaton Road, Ramna, Dhaka-1000.



# Preludes to an avalanche of anger

AUTHOR: MAHBUB AZIZ  
REVIEWED BY EKRAM KABIR

Kotha Prokash, pp 120, Price: BDT 200

PERHAPS, as a writer, Mahbub Aziz is a helpless lonely person, like many out there, in the face of the incurable human injustices around us. Sometimes, he's an onlooker; sometimes he's a lamenter; and sometimes he's an aggrieved human waiting for a miracle to happen when it matters coming to terms with the agonized lives of the characters he's creating.

Aziz has a wonderful ability to create very common but significant characters that are always around us but we hardly notice them through a writer's eyes. Most of his protagonists are the victims and some are oppressors.

The main character in *Kal bhorey johon kolingbel bejey uthhbej* is a common and honest man with normal human dreams but helpless against the fraud and treachery committed to him. He's convinced that there's no place on earth where he can seek redress of the injustice committed to him. He prefers to keep quiet and withstand the calamity and tries to correct his own so-called error that takes place in the form of his innocence.

The salient features of his stories are the clouds overcast with social injustices over the weak, the helplessness of common people in the face of those injustices, and the agony of the wounds that are kept alive when there's no justice for the sufferers.

The most painful form of injustice is portrayed in *Nodir parey boshey thaki shudhu* [We only sit by the river] in which a group of young people, helplessly watch a woman being raped and killed by the people who are meant to save her. These young men are supposed to stand up against the injustice and help the woman, but they show an eerie nonchalance at the crime. This story, perhaps the most striking one in this collection, reflects the psyche of our society – a society full of scared people who perhaps have lost the courage to revolt, to begin an uprising and to change the unhealthy trends.

Aziz depicts many deaths in his stories. *Kono somporiko nei*, *Nodir parey boshey thaki shudhu*, *Mritu Abdul Jalil johon firey elen* and *Mrittu bhojar jam gachher chhaya* are the stories that deal with death.

In *Kono somporiko nei*, two persons – one an elderly man and a young woman – go on a date

outside Dhaka where they die suddenly. The children of the man come and take their father's body but they spend quite a lot of money in order to show that the deceased had died alone; there was actually no lady with him. The dead woman becomes a problem for the people who are alive. They deny any existence of the woman. In *Nodir parey boshey thaki shudhu*, a group of young men cannot do anything when a woman dies after being tortured by local political leaders. When Abdul Jalil, the prime character of *Mrittu bhojar jam gachher chhaya*, everyone wants him dead again; everyone wants him to stay missing from their lives as they have all begun new lives of their own in which Jalil is a misfit and would only create troubles in their new lives.

Aziz's portrayal of death is a portrayal of a strange kind of nonchalance among the characters in his stories; they seem willfully oblivious about value of the dead people, while alive, put in their lives. It's a nice way of delineating how the living neglect the dead in our society.

The writer's language is lucid and there's no willful use of difficult words that might cause the readers to stumble; his diction rather helps the reader to finish a story in one go. Aziz, as a literary editor, has a great advantage regarding deciding about his own writing. As an editor, he has read volumes of short stories, essays and poems everyday for publishing in his magazine and that

gives him an edge to know about thousands of styles that people are following these days. This also gives him an edge to decide on his own style to tell a story easily but imprinting the message of the story into the reader's mind. He is indeed very successful in doing this.

Sometimes, Aziz's stories would give rise of a sense of helplessness but most of the time, I felt, this sense of helplessness is a prelude to a huge avalanche of anger about regarding the injustices prevailing in our society. It seemed to me that there are a billion angry bubbling thoughts in the writer's head. He should do something about bursting those bubbles in order to come up with a revolutionary plot in his next book. I believe he would do very well in that.

The reviewer is a writer and columnist.

