

MIGRANT SOULS

Edited by Tasneem Siddiqui

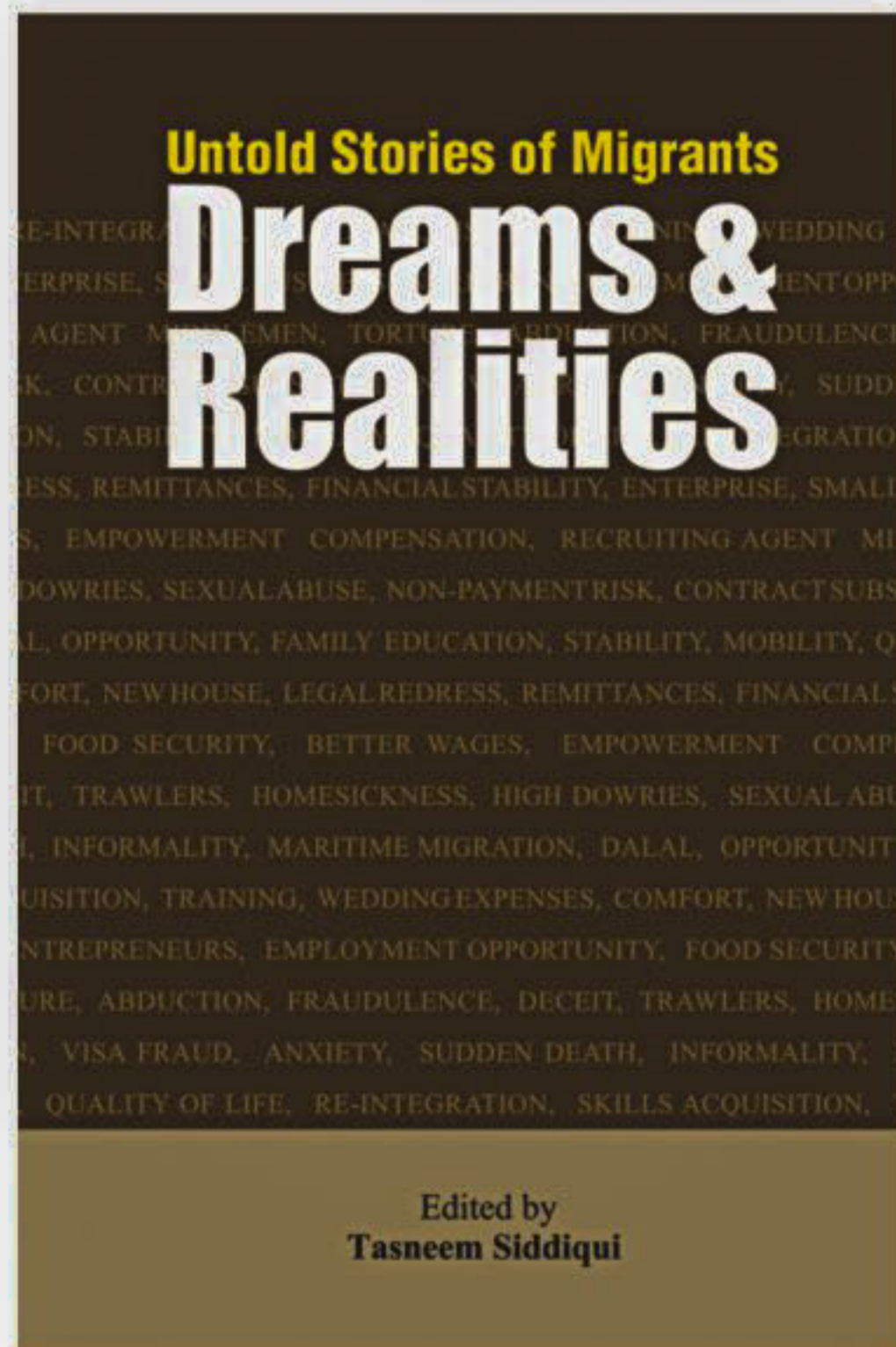
REVIEWED BY DR. FAKRUL ALAM

UNTOLD Stories of Migrants: Dreams & Realities is a book of immense contemporary relevance. The theme of the book—the experience of migration of Bangladeshi migrants in recent decades—has been treated sporadically in written literature for some time now. For example, in the 1980s, Bahrain Mukherjee wrote a collection of stories on migrants to Canada titled *Darkness* and another on the movement of South Asians to the United States in *The Middleman and Other Stories*; at around this time, Amitav Ghosh wrote novels like *The Circle of Reason* and *Shadow Lines* about translational movement of population as well. Somewhat later, Monica Ali fictionalized the lives of some Sylheti migrants in London in 2003 and Kiran Desai those of South Asian ones in New York in her 2006 Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

However, the voices of Bangladeshi migrants working in low-skilled and unskilled professions in the Middle East and Southeast Asia have not been documented extensively and systematically till now. Viewed in this context, *Untold Stories of Migrants: Dreams & Realities* is a significant attempt to tell the stories of such migrants in documentary form. In this work the life stories of many male and female migrants have been recorded vividly and in some detail. We hear them recount the way they experienced migration and coped with the problems of settling down anew in a new world in some detail in the book.

Tasneem Siddiqui has authored *Untold Stories of Migrants: Dreams & Realities* skillfully with the help of a dedicated team of Canadian as well as Bangladeshi researchers. The book itself is a publication of RMMRU, an organization that has been contributing significantly through its pioneering research on different aspects of migration from Bangladesh in recent years. However, this book is more than a scholarly book and is compelling reading for us because of the authentic ring of the stories contained in it.

Moreover, it can be read easily and the accounts of migrant lives reproduced in it can be appreciated by the general reader as well as scholars. Indeed, *Untold Stories of Migrants: Dreams & Realities* is designed for the reading of anyone who would like to relate to the lives of migrants, understand the reasons why they leave home for life overseas, and take note of



the traumas experienced during migration and the disappointments of migrants as well as appreciate the positive sides of the migrant experience.

While the book will be valuable for anyone interested in the Bangladeshi experience of migration, it has to be said that the book has its limitations. For one thing, there is a kind

of sameness to the accounts in that the stories reproduced are more or less of the same length and have the same kind of summary quality to them. It would have been preferable to have some long narratives of migrant lives alternate with the shorter accounts that make up the bulk of the book. Also, because of the summary form that dominates the telling of the narratives, the reader might feel jaded after a while and less and less interested in the later narratives. The work also could have benefited from a concluding chapter discussing the implications of the stories collected in it and coming up with recommendations for policymakers nationally and internationally.

One other criticism of the book is that it limits itself to labor migrants. It would have been more interesting to read the stories of all classes and from the different part of the world to which Bangladeshis have been migrating. It would be interesting to read not only the stories of labor migrants who send money home but also of some of the relatively more affluent migrants who remit money from Bangladesh to the country of destination they decide to become citizens of for reasons other than that of employment.

Nevertheless, *Untold Stories of Migrants: Dreams & Realities* is an important work for anyone interested in the lives of Bangladeshi migrants. The stories contained in the book ring true and are often moving. These are stories of dreams fulfilled and unfulfilled, of lives lived often in great difficulty, but also of lives that are transformed by the experience of migration positively in significant ways. It is a book well worth reading by anyone wanting a comprehensive perspective on the migrant experience of Bangladeshis in our time. This book is also available online at www.rmmru.org/newsite/publications/e-book/ and www.mfasia.org

The reviewer is Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.

A tour de force

AUTHOR: HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR

REVIEWED BY MOHAMMAD FARHAN

Published by The Aleph Book Company Pg.210, Price. Rs.295 THE success of a novelist lies in unfolding the complexities and different hues of our lives. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar seems to be succeeding in doing this with his debut novel. Hansda, by profession a medical doctor, successfully unravels the anatomy of human relations and explains the cultural intricacies of Adivasi life in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*. He was deservedly shortlisted for the Hindu Prize 2014 and the Crossword Book Prize in 2014, and ended up by winning the Sahitya Academy Yuva Puruskar.

The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey is set mainly around the bucolic village *Kadamdihi* which was named after the *Kadam* tree. But ironically *Kadam* Trees are found no longer on the land of *Kadamdihi*. There is another neighboring village *Tereldihi* which too was named after a tree—“the terel or kendu whose leaves are used to roll bidis with”. These villages are located “on the lower most tip of the Jharkhand and is wedged between West Bengal and Odisha”.

The novel is populated with the myriad of characters of tribal people. It is a crystalized miniature of Adivasi cultural practices and their political and cultural past. The novel begins with “the strongest woman of *Kadamdihi*”, *Rupi Baskey* who, squatting in the middle of the rice paddy, bears her eldest son. She’s been recently married to *Sidu*, the educated grandson of *Somai-haram* of *Kadamdihi*. After spending few days in her in-laws’ home, with *Sidushe* moves to *Nitra*, a neighboring town where her husband works as a school teacher, and lives in his colleagues *Bairam*’s house. *Rupi* nurtures a strong bond with *Bairam*’s wife *Gurubari*. But here she is soon afflicted by some “mysterious ailment” which the doctors are unable to cure. It seems a willful attempt by the writer as he wants his reader to ruminate on the causes of *Rupi*’s ailment. In an interview *Hansda* accedes it that “while writing *Rupi Baskey* though I felt neither a doctor nor a writer...And no I never felt diagnosing *Rupi*’s ailment. There would have been no mystery then.”

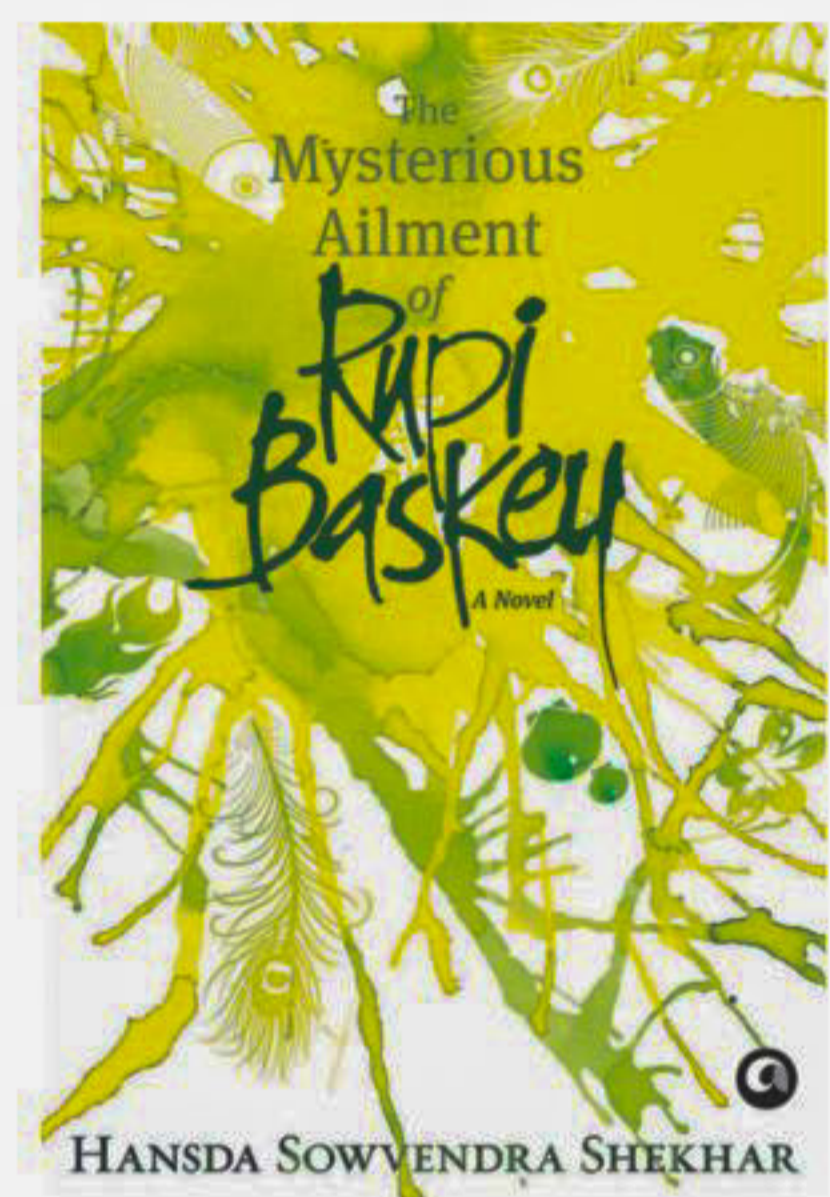
There is always a central theme in the novels that is corroborated by every

characters even the minor ones, life’s mundane details, small fantasies, and cultural practices taking place in the peculiar story. Cultural practices of Adivasis, infidelity of *Rupi*’s husband that causes her ailment and oppression of women in the agrarian society are the recurrent themes of the novel. The essential aim of the art of the novel is to present a perfect depiction of life, and it is achieved by creating the apposite atmosphere with all the necessary nuances, and shaping the life-like characters. *Hansda* is really exceptionally brilliant at his characterization; the portrayal of *Rupi*’s mother-in-law is the evidence of his outstanding characterization. A really complex character, she is the embodiment of a liberal woman who, to some extent, lives a kind of debauched life and breaks the barriers of religious and cultural constraints. In the last spell of her life, she lives too miserably with conflicting relations with her sons but she is always sympathizing with *Rupi*.

The novel offers a universe too rich in life-detail and makes the reader acquainted with the sensory experiences. The writer has adroitly drawn the beautiful landscape of village-life gravitating the reader to enter it, and witness all the occurrences, and savour its beauty as well. The core defining quality of this book is the way it highlights the everyday observations of village life.

The language of the novel exhibits the power and persuasiveness of ordinary speech that is the natural conduit for the prosaic moments and random sensations on which the world of the novel is based. The words of the rural language like “*dhai-budhi*”, “*haandi-togoi-j-majju*”, “*haayechando*” and “*gushti*” often appear on the pages and sometimes may sound unintelligible to an English reader though they mirror an important strand of Adivasi culture. The entire story has been narrated effortlessly with no discontinuity in the flow of narration. Uncluttered language, well-knit plot and no ostentatious narrative techniques are the telling features of the book.

The reviewer is occasional contributor to this page.



Women in Yeats' Poetry

AUTHOR: SUJIT KUSUM PAUL

REVIEWED BY MASUM BILLAH

Publisher: Bengali Literary Resource Centre (BLRC), Toronto

Bangladesh Distributor: Murdhonyo Prokashoni

Price: BD Taka 300

WILLIAM Butler Yeats, the greatest star in the 20th century sky of literature, was at the same time a poet, dramatist, Irish Senator and active organizer. A Nobel laureate of 1923, Yeats, the ‘last romantic’ continuously changed the style of poetry and produced modern poetry tinged with reality, metaphysics, comprehensive life and global theme. Hence, the appeal of his poems is universal and classic. Two principal sources genuinely inspired the poems of Yeats - love for his motherland and intense attraction for women, particularly for beautiful ones. Women were like Muses to him. His biographer *Joseph Hassett*’s remarkable book ‘*W.B. Yeats and Muses*’ tells rightly – “These interesting women rallied around him, trying to keep him alive, trying to keep him inspired.” Among them the most significant one was possibly *Maud Gonne*.

Maud Gonne, the tall, beautiful actress and a woman of considerable social standing, was an Irish Nationalist and an active campaigner for the release of political prisoners in Ireland. She was outspoken and passionate about Irish politics. Despite being raised in France, *Gonne* was well aware of events in her homeland and nurtured in her bosom the freedom of Ireland from British rule. She came to meet Yeats’ father *John Butler Yeats*, the well-known painter and a member London Elite society, at his London house to know his opinion regarding the independence of Ireland. Romance developed between Yeats and *Maud* here at the very first sight. Yeats was immediately infatuated and had fallen madly in love with her. Many males perhaps wanted to woo *Maud* and spent time with her but Yeats was a different kind of man in her life who wanted to hug her soul which is travelling in the world of spiritualism. *Maud* loved Yeats who proposed her five times but embraced rejection each time.

Sujit Kusum Paul, a former student of the English Department of Chittagong University and now an expatriate living in Toronto, Canada, has neatly fabricated all such eventful chapters of *W.B. Yeats*’ life in his first book ‘*Yeats Kobitay Naree o Nikunjo*’ (Women and Domain in Yeats’ Poetry), possibly the first and a complete one on the topic published in Bengali language.

Time could never keep Yeats back, rather he moved parallel with the movement and rhythm of time. His idea of love got evolved gradually while running after *Maud*. As he had to move parallel, his idea of love also got changed with the passage of time. In his early poems, the importance of spiritualism is greater than sexual affair. In the poem of his middle age, the traditional and destructive process of love is described but he did not want to see love as an eternal thing. In the poems written at the last stage of his life, he tried to find the perfection of love in the inseparable and continuous relation between body and mind. That was the final perception of Yeats regarding love. This mysterious woman inspired Yeats to write universal poems like ‘*Among School Children*’, ‘*Leda and the Swan*’, ‘*The Second Coming*’, ‘*Sailing to Byzantium*’, ‘*A Man Young and Old*’, and many more. In an undivided breathing line,

the readers would discover that following the departure of novelist *Olivia Shakespeare* from Yeats’ life, a triangle of love was weaved where *Maud Gonne* formulated a spiritual union with the poet *W B Yeats* who loved *Iseult Gonne*, the daughter of *Maud Gonne* who wrote in a letter to Yeats, “I have prayed so hard to have all earthly desire taken from my love for you ... and dearest, I have prayed and I am praying still that the bodily desire for me may be taken from you too.”

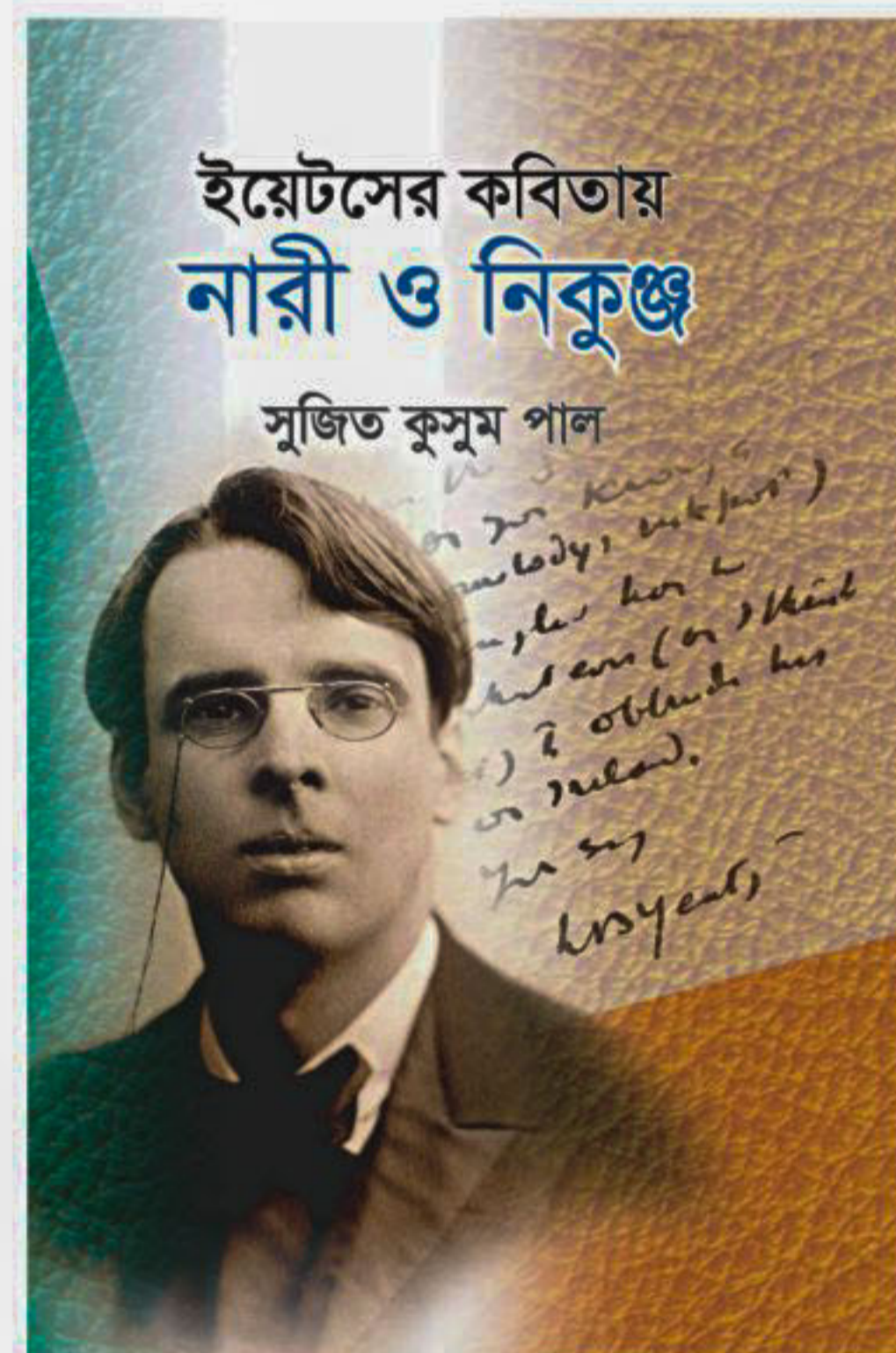
Thus the book ‘*Yeats Kobitay Nari O Nikunjo*’ accommodates a series of events of love, romance, proposal, passionate union, rejection and platonic love in the life of Yeats. *Sujit*, a member of International Yeats Society, has used his colourful touch to make them further lively before us. Bengali Literary Resource Centre (BLRC) Inc, of Toronto, Canada published the book in 2016, which is distributed in Bangladesh through *Murdhonyo Prokashoni*.

The readers will enjoy the meetings and writings between *Rabindranath Tagore* (1861-1941) and *W B Yeats* (1865-1939). Yeats recited *Tagore*’s poems in the London residence of *Sir William Rothenstein* (1872-1945) in presence of *Ezra Pound* (1885-1972) who introduced *Tagore* among the intellectual

The book ... accommodates a series of events of love, romance, proposal, passionate union, rejection and platonic love in the life of Yeats.

readers of America by publishing some of his poems, before the publication of ‘*Gitanjali*’ in London in 2012, in the ‘*Poetry*’ magazine of Chicago founded by *Harriet Monroe* (1860-1936) in 1912 and now published by *Poetry Foundation*. The author of ‘*Yeats Kobitay Nari O Nikunjo*’ has become tremendously successful in creating a context where the Liberation War of Bangladesh and the Irish Nationalist Movement stood in a parallel track. The author *Sujit* reflected the presence of poet *Shamsur Rahman* with his poem ‘*Tomake Paoar Jonye Hey Swadhinota*’ in the same screen where Yeats projected his poem ‘*Easter 1916*’, one of the famous poems of twentieth century. As a student of English Literature, *Shamsur Rahman* might have the opportunity to be inspired by Yeats’ line ‘*O when may it suffice?*’ before writing

‘*Ar Kotobar Vaste Hobe Roktongay?*
‘*Ar Kotobar Dekhte Hobe Khandobdahan?*’



In this chapter of the book, the readers will feel that the souls of all the martyrs of Bangladesh Liberation War have become the imageries of sacrifices while Yeats tried to find and say, ‘*A terrible beauty is born.*’

The students of Honours and Masters of English departments can find this book as a useful one mostly because of its Bengali rendering. It will help them go deep not only into Yeats’ life of love and romance, the readers would also have the taste of the creative aspect of *T. S. Eliot*, *Robert Browning*, *P. B. Shelley*, *John Keats*, *William Blake*, *Jane Austen* and many more who have been discussed in the context of Yeats’ intellect and talent. Basically, the book is a research work based on the poems of Yeats but the lively and artful description of events by *Sujit* and their further knitting with his dexterous hands and devotion to Yeats has given it the taste of a novel. It will take the readers to a world of special interest and enchantment without allowing them to believe that they are reading the critical analysis of poems of love, romance, romantic love or spiritual love that occurred between Yeats and the beautiful women he met in his eventful life. Rather, the book will convince the readers that they are going through an interesting novel. *Sujit* has used very aesthetic and ornamental language to picture the events. In a few cases, some sentences may seem a little bit lengthy and hard to understand to the common readers. Still, the teachers and the students will find it very useful and beyond this circle of people, the common readers can have its special taste as the book deals with love, romance, separation, historical events, and how love can exist without bodily touch or infatuation leading to spiritual union.

The reviewer is a literary critic and writer, works for BRAC Education Program.

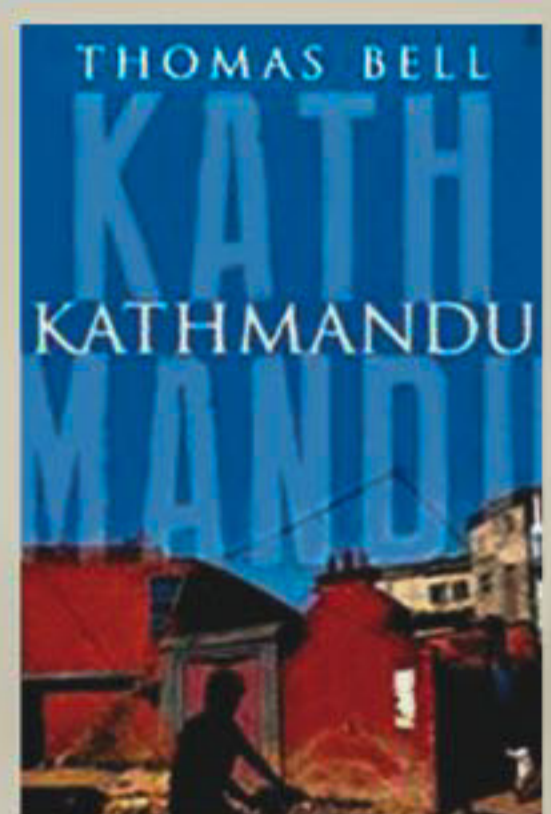
OMNI BOOKS

Kathmandu

BY THOMAS BELL

One of the greatest cities of the Himalaya, Kathmandu, Nepal, is a unique blend of thousand-year-old cultural practices and accelerated urban development. In this book, *Thomas Bell* recounts his experiences from his many years in the city—exploring in the process the rich history of Kathmandu and its many instances of self-reinvention.

Closed to the outside world until 1951 and trapped in a medieval time warp, Kathmandu is, as *Bell* argues, a jewel of the art world, a carnival of sexual license, a hotbed of communist revolution, a paradigm of failed democracy, a case study in bungled western intervention, and an environmental catastrophe. The layered development of the city can be seen in the successive generations of its gods and goddesses; its comfort in the caste system and ethos of aristocracy and kingship; and the recent destabilizing effects of consumerist approaches and the push for egalitarianism and democracy. In important ways, Kathmandu’s rapid modernization can be seen as an extreme version of what is happening in other traditional societies. *Bell* also discusses the ramifications of the recent Nepal earthquake.



Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat

BY HELEN MCCARTHY

Women of the World tells this story of personal and professional struggle against the dramatic backdrop of war, super-power rivalry and global transformation over the last century and a half. From London to Washington, Geneva to Tehran and in the deserts of Arabia, the souks of Damascus and the hospitals of Sarajevo, resolute women undaunted by intransigent officials and hostile foreign governments proved their worth.

