

# THE POWER OF HUMOUR

AUTHOR: SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

REVIEWED BY LITON CHAKRABORTY MITHUN

Publisher: Chandrabati Academy, First Publication: February 2017, Price: Tk. 250 US \$ 13, ISBN: 9789849286653

Fun, pun, humor and satire are what characterize most of Syed Manzoorul Islam's works and his newly published *Bichitra Swader Galpa* (2017) ceases to be an exception. An intuitive power of evoking fun out of otherwise an ordinary and mundane situation, gives him a cutting edge over many of his contemporary literary colleagues. The new collection of twenty-one stories will tickle you into laughter every now and then. But, I can bet you cannot rule them out as apotboiler or "light stuff" although he claimed so in the foreword. They make you laugh, but the laughter at times stings you, pricks you, taunts you, teases you, and galvanizes you into consciousness. They also act as a gibe against political wrongdoings, social anarchy, degrading of cultural values, economic corruption and many other corrosive practices. Nevertheless, optimism and positives shoot up at regular intervals that make the stories an interesting read. It must be noted, however, that most of the stories were previously published across fun magazines of the national dailies such as *The Prothom Alo's* now defunct "Alpin", current "Rosh-Alo" and *The Ittefaq's* "Thatta".

The book commences with a story titled "Ekti Asharhey Galpa 1" (A Weird Story 1) that puts forth a utopian picture of Bangladesh that is utterly digitalized, technologically hip, and incredibly modernized with Dhaka University leading from the front on research sectors. Bangladesh regularly sends up rockets to the moon and the mars topping the whole world. The national cricket team beat Australia 5-0, but the skipper gets slashed in media for getting out in the 190's. Sabrina, a Tongi girl has recently won the Wimbledon trophy in tennis. The young communication minister shows up on a commuter train and gets angry hearing that the train delayed for a while the day before. Air-buses and underground trains have boosted up communication. The minister for food resigns from the cabinet to avert a slight allegation of food adulteration. Media is transparent and pro-people. A 24/7 active high-power hotline service called "hi-mail" allows people send in allegations on ano-

nymity and two or three such cases provoke an immediate response from the authority. This sarcastically presented and laughably exaggerated account of the country exposes and points up the bleak reality of actual Bangladesh.

The second story is a sequel named "Ekti Asharhey Galpa 2" which hits hard at the core of power-blind political set-up. The narrator terms schoolmaster Majeed, his communist son Assim, banker son Hashim, college-student daughter Nishat, Hashim's honest journalist-friend Pijush Roy a party of fools for their tremendously naïve, tactless but honest dealing of things. Especially, in their approach to convince the Powerful to manage to release Assim from imprisonment on a trumped-up case put by the Powerful himself. The journalist Pijush Roy got a hard beating on his outing at Dinajpur at the hands of the henchmen of the Powerful and a strong reprimand from the editor of his daily Satchinta (The Honest Thinking, ironically though). Nishat got kidnapped by them on her way to Dinajpur along with her father. This incident enraged Mr. Majeed so much so that he took out an ax to take revenge and rescue his daughter. To his surprise, one by one a huge crowd followed him shouting "We are with you!" This armless crowd frightened the Powerful almost mortally resulting in release of both Assim and Nishat. By rendering the Powerful comically and pitifully helpless in the face of non-violent popular upsurge, the writer makes light of the powerful class and pushes the idea of resistance home.

The story titled "Kraanti" (Crisis) is the story of an apparently miserly old man called Mr. Kalam. His overly economical attitude repulses his children, even their housemaid Razia does not miss out a chance to make fun of him. The narrator later comes to learn that Mr. Kalam's low-income job forced him to be economical what his children mistake for miserliness. However, on an economy class train he met Awlad, a member of a doping gang who misjudged Mr. Kalam's words to think that his bag was full of valuables. Doping him with juice, he robbed the bag,

Incidentally, the senseless old fellow was taken to a hospital where Dr. Reefat, daughter of Dr. Azizul Haq of Satkhira works. Dr. Azizul Haq, a self-declared cancer expert was responsible for the death of Mrs. Kalam and he fled Satkhira after a few such occurrences. Dr. Reefat and Mr. Kalam recognized each other in a turn of event. Learning from her that her father donated all his money for setting up the clinic out of remorse and for expiation, his mindset totally changed. The miserly Mr. Kalam too donated all savings to



build up an extension of the clinic after his deceased wife's name. Thus, the story comically explores a human dimension of an otherwise misunderstood fellow. On the other hand, the story "Bhejal" (Adulteration; Fake; Artificial) is a brutally comic exposure of the effect of the availability of adulterated products, fake notes, artificial stuffs deluging the market. A funny man named Mr. Shamim who utters only "Yeh" to mean almost everything is forced by his wife to go to an empo-

rium famed for quality and genuine items for Eid shopping. There he comes to learn that prices of articles he bargained for reduced in four times less after a mobile court led by a magistrate had launched an anti-adulteration-slash-fakeness drive in the market with a TV channel broadcasting it live. This amused him so much so that he agreed to come back to the market again this time with his wife and daughter despite his wife's wish to spare him such trouble. He asked his TV reporter cousin to accompany them with a camera and replied that there was "yeh" when his daughter asked about the move. Although his wife and daughter understand without fail what he means by "yeh" in all contexts, they could not figure out the meaning of "yeh" this time. This story, therefore, spotlights the ubiquity of adulteration and fake elements in the country and our passive acceptance of the reality.

"Chair-erGalpa" (Story of the Chair) and "Qursi Puran" (Legend of the Chair) are thematically twinned stories that deals with our craze for the chair which is symbolic of power and authority. In the first story, the writer humorously says that there are two types of government in Bangladesh: Caretaker and Chair-taker. He also goes on to say that the chair-taker government does not take care of common people. He further says, "In fact, all politicians, political parties, bureaucrats and hypocrites chase one aim and objective: that is the chair." (p. 59) He also classifies the chair into two categories: the good chair and the bad chair. The writer quips that the chair with lesser power and more popular orientation is bad while that of the politicians and other highly powerful people is good. He also expects that the hair-raising electric chair can make the country fair by killing all the bad people. Yet, the load-shedding and power outage is so common in the country that the electric chair will be rendered ineffective. In this manner, the story laughs at the power-craze of a group of people and acute power deficit on the national grid. In the same vein, "Qursi Puran" allegorically depicts a long history of pre- and post-liberation Bangladeshi politics

that is characterized by unrestrained greed for the chair or power. The archrivals Qazi Habib and Qazi Qadir sit one after another on an old chair, their common family legacy, this time only to be bloodily wounded in their bottoms. The young members of both the families put some pins on the chair in a bid to punish their hostile seniors. This comical treatment of the power-hungry people is indicative of both dismissal of and popular resistance from the young generation to the age-old, worn-out political status quo. Another political allegory that receives comical negation and satirical assault is "Haar-Jeet" (Win & Loss). The story develops around a football tournament which allegorically represents the national election. The tournament committee represents the election commission or the caretaker government while the two archrivals signify the two main political parties of Bangladesh. Humorously enough, public opinion is here in the story compared to "public onion", onion that makes you cry when peeled off. Thus, the power of common people as opposed to that of the political forces is reinforced.

Syed Manzoorul Islam brilliantly criticizes our sociopolitical reality in the volume *Bichitra Swader Galpa* in a somewhat Swiftian manner and pushes home a Bakhtinian resistance triggered by subversive laughter and fun. His signature style of playing with words, use of pun, employment of comic irony and sarcasm, coinage of funny words, fluidity of idiomatic Bengali, an appropriation of real-life events and witty presentation of storylines make the volume a page-turner. He deftly puts his points across and adroitly hits his criticism home without compromising the literary value. I reckon, this is a scintillating addition to contemporary, Post-Modern Bangladeshi literature, and also in the genre of satire. My review is but a skeleton of the book, and there are much more to explore in the text. I believe, your bucks and time are worth spending when it comes to buying as well as reading the book.

The reviewer studied English Literature at University of Dhaka.

## OMNI BOOKS

### Extreme Food - What to Eat When Your Life Depends on it...

BY BEAR GRYLLS

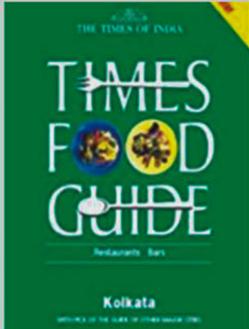
"There's no getting away from it; I've eaten some pretty extreme things in my time - live tarantulas, raw goat testicles, elephant dung, you name it. In a situation when your life depends on it, you need to put your prejudices aside to keep your stomach filled and your strength up. Whether it's mastering the art of foraging and cooking up a tasty feast around the campfire or learning about the more extreme end of wild food (ever tried a scorpion kebab?), there's a lot to learn when it comes to dinner time in the wild. This book will teach you all the necessary skills and techniques to get your teeth into meals you might never have thought of as food in the first place - and, crucially, how to recognize plants and animals that might end up doing you more harm than good. In today's world, we rarely need to venture beyond the local supermarket and we turn our noses up at the thought of snacking on bugs and grubs. But out in the wild, mother nature has provided us with a plentiful supply of nutritious - if not always delicious - food for the taking. And when needs must, we just have to know where to look. Some of it might take you out of your comfort zone. Some of it might turn your stomach. But it's saved my life more than once. And one day, it might save yours..."



### Times Food Guide Kolkata

2014 BY SALMOLI MUKERJI

The Times of India Guides are targeted at both Local Residents, and Domestic and International Tourists. Reviews of Restaurants include cuisine served, opening times, price of a meal for two, Alcohol served or not, Take away or not, and if Credit cards are accepted.



# Weaved through history

AUTHOR: JESSIE BURTON

REVIEWED BY ARPEETA SHAMS MIZAN

Publisher: Picador Publications

Date of Publication: July 2016. Price: 6.99 GBP

"THEN one day, a stone is hurled - and by accident or design, that stone hits the car window of a powerful idiot who wants revenge, or who wants to impress his mistress, and-whoosh- the foot soldiers move in. The next day, your village is burning down, and because of your stupidity, because of sex, there's a coffin for your bed."

Educated at Oxford, Burton brought a fresh voice with her debut novel *The Miniaturist* in 2013 which became a bestseller. She was 33 then. She returned last year with *The Muse* to tell the story of life guided by chance encounters. Three girls, separated through the distance of thirty odd years, a civil war, a world war, yet tied with the thread of one secret that joins them in a sisterhood of more secrecy.

The first one is Odelle Bastien, a Caribbean immigrant to London of 60s. Dreaming to become a writer, Odelle finds herself working in a shoe store, catering to women's feet which come in various sizes and stinks. Odelle keeps applying for new jobs, and lands as a typist at the prestigious Skelton Gallery. Enter Marjorie Quick, her pretentious yet composed boss.

Miss Quick seems upright and confident, but Odelle slowly gets to know another Quick: a woman totally unsure of her life, her actions, and her decisions: Quick who pushed Odelle to keep writing, seems at a loss when a mysterious painting from the days of the Spanish Civil War is submitted to the Skelton by Odelle's boyfriend Lawrie Scott. The painting is suspected to be by Isaac Robles, a painter lost to the war. It is clear to Odelle that Quick knows more about the painting than she is ready to admit, but little does she realize, until it is too late, that Quick is ready to play with her life to keep her secret intact.

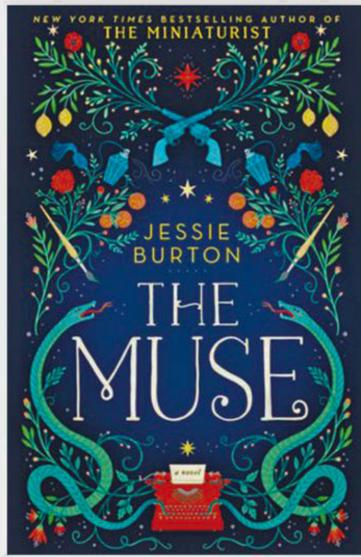
What is Quick's relation with the old painting? What does she know? How did Scott get the Robles painting? It is not before the last few chapters that the reader understands how Quick, Odelle and Olive are connected. There is where the genius of Burton lies. There is a story within a story: Olive's story of love, and Quick's story of life. Burton's

gripping storytelling keeps the reader glued to the pages instead of getting confused and bored.

Jessie Burton's writing is vivid. The description of the textures, brush strokes and color application is like one written by an experienced painter. Each of the chapters portray faithfully the inner conflicts of the characters-Odelle's struggle as a writer, Saraa's fight against depression, Teresa's tussle to keep her brother safe. Burton has craftily spread stimulants throughout the text: there are mentions of postcolonial racism (she knew no other blacks...when I replied that I hadn't known any either by that name till I came here, Odelle writes about her English colleague), mental health (her mind's like a honeycomb, chamber upon chamber, broken, rebuilt again. She sees her pain in colors...it's wretched really, Olive says about her mother), colonial hegemony (Most English people I'd met would ask me questions about the island...none of them had ever been there, so to them we were specimens of curiosity, realities risen from a tropical petridish that until very recently sat under a British flag), the Nazi vandalism of artworks during the Second World War. The impeccable portrayal of Caribbean pronunciations and dialogue style, the picturesque description of the Spanish countryside, the gloomy London environs makes the reader feel part of the story. The little hints of Spanish legends are enough to push a reader to google for details without making the narrative over-informative. The balance between entertainment and education, literature and history is wonderful.

Burton's forte seems to be weaving fiction through historical frames. *The Miniaturist* portrayed the mysteries of unwanted marriage through Petronella's bedchamber in Medieval Amsterdam. *The Muse* continues the magic with mistaken identities and the eternal charm of chance encounters that defines the dangerous fatalism we call life. Read her, you won't regret.

The reviewer is a socio-legal analyst and teaches at University of Dhaka.



# Our Lifeline

AUTHOR: ANWARUL KARIM

REVIEWED BY SHAMS AL MUZADDID

Murdhanno, Dhaka, Price: 700 BDT

PROFESSOR Anwarul Karim, a noted educationist and researcher, is best known to the people within and outside the country as a very dedicated scholar on Lalon Faquir and the Bauls of Bangladesh. He is a folklorist and founded Lalon Academy in Kushtia in 60's with support from local people and the administration. He also founded Folklore Research institute in Kushtia in 1970.

It took several years to complete the work and finally it has been published by Murdhanno. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs funded the project. Initially Professor Karim worked for a monograph on water and culture. It was then funded by the Bangladesh Water Partnership.

Professor Tone Bleie, a noted anthropologist of a Norwegian University made wonderful appreciation of his work. She said, "This new book by one of Bangladesh's most prominent folklorists, cultural historians and educators is a treat for scholars, government officials, development practitioners and environment journalists alike. Karim combines passion with a rigorous analytical mind, creating a multi-layered narrative about one of the great riparian civilizations. These intricate pre-historic and historic dynamics are sadly unknown not only internationally, but also among Bangladeshis."

"This book seeks to avoid bombastic and purely mythological narratives of who the early natives were -who over decades formed this water abundant and earlier forest-clad civilization. I dearly hope the book will be read by many and help replace ethnocentric myths with new and well-established evidence about the country's rich Pre-Arian past and make us realize that Bangladesh's woes as a lower riparian country should be considered an international issue of mega proportions."

In fact not only Professor Tone Bleie, but also others belonging to Harvard and London School of Economics spoke very highly about Professor Karim's research on water and Culture in Bangladesh. Dr. Phil Parshall, a Merrill Scholar of Harvard said about Professor Karim, "He expertly delves into the history of water usage in Sub-Continent. Interestingly, he explores the centrality of water in the religious rituals of Hindus, Muslims and other traditions. Particularly insightful is Dr. Karim's explorations of the life and customs of rural Bangladesh." And lastly, Chris Brown of London School of Economics commented, "I can highly recommend this fascinating book to anyone who plans to travel this often neglected country with so many wonders hidden away."

Karim's book is a unique work and should be widely read, more particularly by the youths as they should know the heritage the country possesses and how these need to be protected or preserved against all odds.

The reviewer is occasional contributor to this pages.

