

A rare kind of literary talent

Today marks the 39th death anniversary of renowned writer-journalist-politician Abul Mansur Ahmad. In this translated excerpt from a collection of essays titled *Abul Mansur Ahmad Smarak Grantha* published in 2015, Serajul Islam Choudhury, professor emeritus at the University of Dhaka, explains what makes Abul Mansur Ahmad unique in Bangla literature.

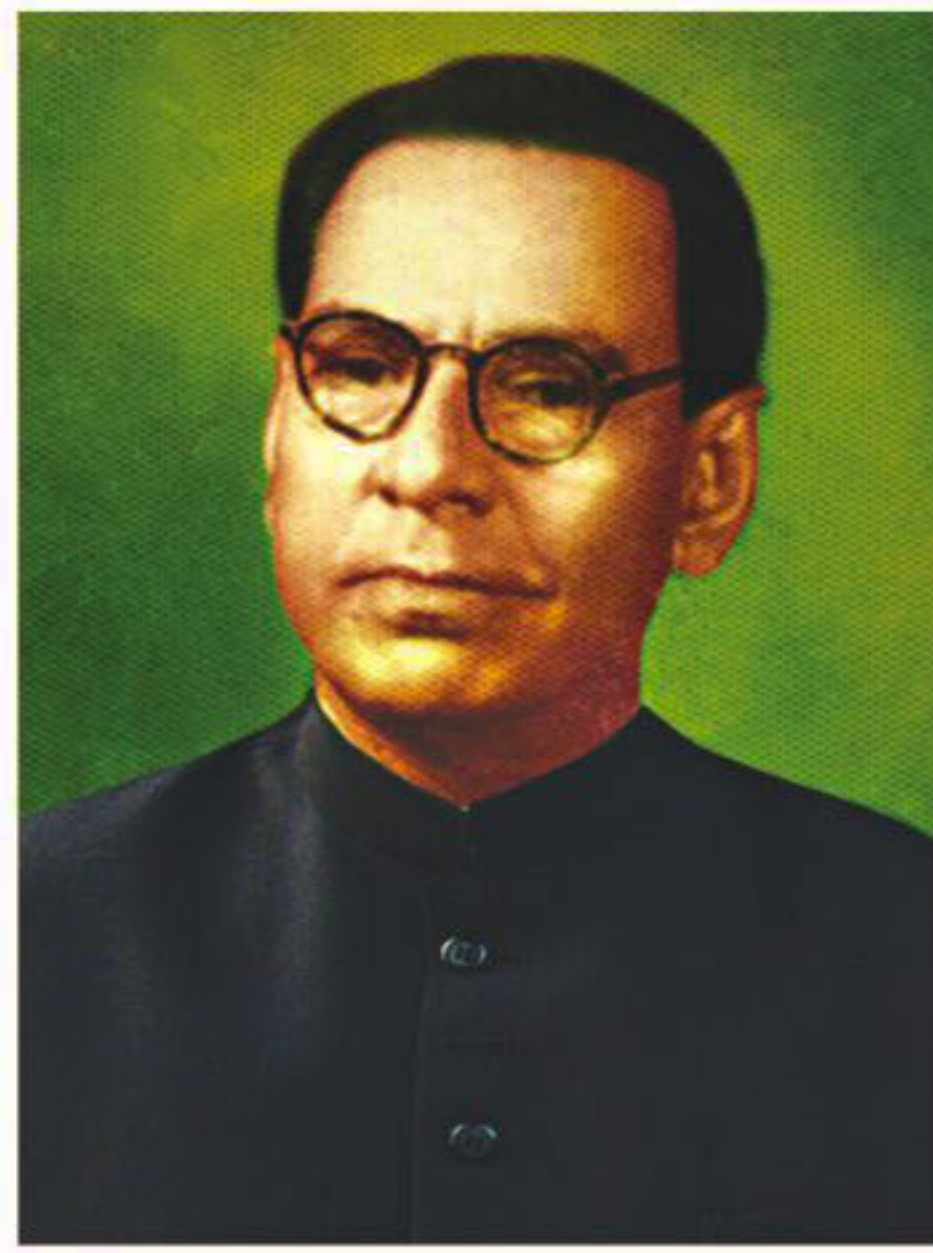
I have always been fascinated by writer Abul Mansur Ahmad's boldness and his political consciousness. Perhaps no other writer of his age was able to blend the two with such finesse. Some of his contemporaries were also known for their candour and frankness; some were quite politically conscious, too. What makes Abul Mansur Ahmad different is that his work was uniformly shaped by a constant awareness of the political reality. He never lost sight of it—partly because he was involved with politics himself.

His identity as a politician, however, makes up only a part of what he was. It was not his dominant identity. He was, we can say, primarily a writer who also happened to be a journalist. A writer who also happened to be an advocate and politician. That singular identity, in a way, outweighed—and outlived—the rest of his identities.

Abul Mansur Ahmad's enduring popularity is a testament to his success as a politically conscious writer. In that he was driven and almost visceral. His candour was but a reflection of the force with which the Muslim middle class was evolving. Take Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Mrityukhuda* (*Hunger for Death*) (1930), which is a story of life but also of death that casts a long, frequent shadow over it. Abul Mansur Ahmad, a friend of Nazrul's, also dealt with death in his novel *Jiban Khudha* (*Hunger for Life*) (1955) but his portrayal of life as an unstoppable force of nature is unmistakable.

Halim, the novel's protagonist, emerging out of a feudal system, counters the challenges of an increasingly capitalistic environment. There's a force at work in this journey, a force that can be noticed in all the works of Abul Mansur Ahmad.

This force, or intensity, however, was not present at all stages of the evolution of the



Abul Mansur Ahmad
(September 3, 1898 – March 18, 1979).

Muslim middle class. Not everyone was Halim. The history of the lower-middle class was quite different. Even the class that Abul Mansur belonged to also suffered from a lower-middle-class complex at times. He was clearly a representative of his class, not of other classes, so if in some cases he seemed to be lacking clarity, he amply made up for it with the fullness of his representation in other cases.

There was a certain forceful quality to whatever he wrote—political commentary, satire, or fiction. His satirical works *Food Conference* (1944) and *Aina* (*Mirror*) (1936–1937) garnered instant fame after they were published. His was a kind of satire that was direct and unpretentious, and came with disturbing images. It lacked subtlety

though. There was, in fact, no need for subtlety since he wanted to expose a society that was immune to hushed criticism and mild satire. He needed to be blatant to get his message across.

Today, one notices an abject lack of quality satire although there is ample material for that. The writers, in their defence, may say that although the society has many anomalies, they are too gross to be made fun of. It's a difficult task, true, but Abul Mansur Ahmad is proof that it is possible. He had courage and a voice louder than the combined voices of anomalies—one that could rebuke and ridicule at the same time.

This forceful nature is also evident in his autobiographies. He wrote two: *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar* (*50 Years of Politics As I Saw It*) (1969) and *Atma Katha* (*Autobiography*) (1978). The first one is a

history of politics and the second one, a history of the individual. What's common in the two books is the writer's forcefulness, his self-confidence. He didn't hide behind the garb of anonymity by introducing himself in some ambiguous terms like Nirad Chaudhuri did while presenting himself as a representative of his class (*The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*)—but didn't want to make a point of highlighting himself either, like Kamruddin Ahmad did in his autobiography (*A Diplomat's Life*). That doesn't mean that there is no class representation in these books. If you take "I" away from *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar*, it may very well cease to exist, whereas his own personal story, which isn't there in the first book, was narrated in the second one.

His friend Abul Kalam Shamsuddin wrote an autobiography titled *Atit Diner Smriti* (*Memories of the Past*). The title of Syed Murtaza Ali's autobiography is *Amader Kaler Katha* (*The Story of Our Times*). Ibrahim Khan wrote *Batayan* (*Window*), while Mohammad Waliullah wrote *Yuga-Bichitra*. Now compare these with the autobiographies of Abul Mansur Ahmad who, while talking about himself, doesn't appear to be impersonal or vague in the least. He spoke with refreshing candour. And through his story came the story of the section of his class to which he belonged. Even when he wrote a commentary about politics, or literature, he was absolutely sure of what he wanted to say, expressing it with the same degree of openness.

Of course, some of his views attracted controversy. Particularly, if I am to make my position clear, Abul Mansur Ahmad and I don't have similar views about language and culture, and often I found his views to be contradictory to mine. Many people also

have the same opinion. But Abul Mansur was relentless, giving his opinions no matter what people thought about them. He generously mixed *tatsama* words with pure Bangla and even foreign words, which suggests he didn't have any "self-consciousness." If what the critics of the middle class say about self-consciousness being an "incurable disease" for this class is right, Abul Mansur was not one to suffer from it.

But it will be wrong to view Abul Mansur Ahmad in isolation from his background in politics. As a politician, he was pro-people. Politics was not a profession for him; it was a vocation. He never used it as a means of getting power or any undue advantage, unlike so many politicians of his time as well as ours.

There was a profound, unpremeditated awareness in him of the fact that politics, of the kind that he believed in, was the panacea for all that is wrong. Which is why, he can't seem to forget it even when writing a novel, and it is because of the same reason that we see his character Halim, much like his creator, strive to serve the interests of the common folk, the peasants. Sometimes, however, Abul Mansur Ahmad failed to place people's interests above his, but it should be noted that maudlin sentimentality about people's interests had never been one of his strongest suits. The life that he lived shamed politicians for whom politics was a business, and the work he left behind serves as a fitting response to those who think literature shouldn't be political.

It is this combination of boldness and political consciousness that makes him a rarity in our literature.

The article was translated from Bangla to English by Baduzzaman Bay, a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

The life that he lived shamed politicians for whom politics was a business, and the work he left behind serves as a fitting response to those who think literature shouldn't be political.

History, propaganda or just a movie?



SHIFTING IMAGES

MILIA ALI

FOR some time now, I have been resisting the urge to add my voice to the *Padmaavat* controversy. The hesitation stems from the fact that I tend to avoid topics that create divisiveness or hurt the sentiments of any group or sect. But

after having watched the movie recently, I have concluded that it would be unfair to my readers if I remain silent. A reaction is warranted since *Padmaavat* has used a powerful art form to distort an entire segment of India's history and violate the modern woman's sensitivities.

The film is based on the 16th-century fictional poem "Padmavat", written by Sufi Malik

Padmaavat totally ignores Khilji's many noteworthy contributions—for example, his agrarian reforms that reduced the burden of landlords on the weak cultivator.

Muhammad Jayasi, 200 years after Sultan Alauddin Khilji's death. But director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's depiction of events and characters in the movie is clearly that of a historical nature. The scriptwriter weaves the fiction to create a myth that Khilji's conquest of Chittor in 1303 was solely driven by his lustful desire for its Rani, Padmini. As a matter of fact, in the entire movie Sultan Khilji has been demonised and his rule depicted as malevolent.

I am not a historian, but my Internet research on Alauddin Khilji reveals facts that are



To what extent has *Padmaavat* ignited feelings of hate and divisiveness?

quite different from the movie. *Padmaavat* totally ignores Khilji's many noteworthy contributions, for example, his agrarian reforms that reduced the burden of landlords on the weak cultivator. He was also known to be a strategic military general and successfully thwarted the attack of the Mongols, thus protecting the Delhi Sultanate from foreign invasion. A patron of architecture and arts, Khilji constructed a fairly large number of schools, inns, and mosques. It's worth mentioning that Amir Khasru, the famous poet, was one of the many literary figures who enjoyed his patronage.

Paintings of his time show Khilji to be a finely attired person. According to historian Rana Safvi, the Sultan followed the "exact code of conduct and etiquette as in Persia. It would have been very formal—the eating, dining and sartorial choices." In contrast, *Padmaavat* portrays him wearing rugged furs, gnawing raw meat off bones, laughing like a hyena and dancing with his slaves in ridiculous gymnastic postures defying gravity. Besides, the film is interspersed with suggestive sensual scenes,

hinting at Khilji's bisexuality—the distasteful undertones obviously designed to smear his character, not just to highlight his sexual orientation.

Despite Bhansali and his team's attempts to paint Alauddin Khilji as a foreign barbarian, the truth is, he was an Indian monarch. Whether he was a Muslim or Hindu is immaterial, especially in the context that he was firmly rooted in India. He lived and died in the Indian sub-continent and had no other home. By dehumanising Khilji, Bhansali has in a way, denigrated the Delhi Sultanate, the country's nexus of power in the 13th century. As I sat through the movie, I wondered: What precise message is the film trying to convey to the new generation of Indians and the world? That India was ruled by a degenerate, half-mad savage for 20 years? By vilifying Khilji and deprecating his contributions to India, has the film not denigrated a segment of the nation's rich past?

The other issue I have with *Padmaavat* runs even deeper. The movie militates against my sensitivity as a South Asian woman. It glorifies

Jauhar or the act of collective self-immolation by women who preferred death to capture or rape—a practice Rajput women followed in the ancient and medieval times after their men were killed or defeated in war. Although Jauhar is now legally forbidden, it represents the most gruesome form of female sacrifice in a patriarchal society. The film chooses to romanticise this act of regression and misogyny. Padmini and an entourage of women are shown dressed as brides walking with great pride on their last journey—to leap into a raging fire. Even if we accept this as sentimental fiction, one wonders why Bhansali would highlight an oppressive social custom that has been banned after years of consolidated effort by both men and women!

Today, numerous women are coming out with their personal stories of sexual abuse through the #MeToo movement in an effort to rightly transfer their shame and guilt to their predators. It is quite appalling that Bhansali's film reaffirms the medieval belief that an honourable woman should self-

destruct rather than suffer the shame of rape or sexual assault! What lesson is the Indian youth expected to learn from *Padmaavat*? That a woman has no existence or identity independent of a man and that raped women have no place in society!

You may shrug off my concerns, saying: "It's just a movie. Let it go." But the truth is that Bollywood films are watched by millions of impressionable people both in India and abroad. Their popularity, and in this case the hype, creates a moral obligation on filmmakers to act responsibly. Why embark on a project that might ignite latent feelings of hate, divisiveness and "otherness"? Today, when our world is threatened by extremism and misogyny, cinema can be an effective instrument for promoting social cohesion and sexual equality. It is indeed unfortunate that *Padmaavat* has used this powerful platform to amplify communal discord and gender disparity!

Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

QUOTABLE Quote

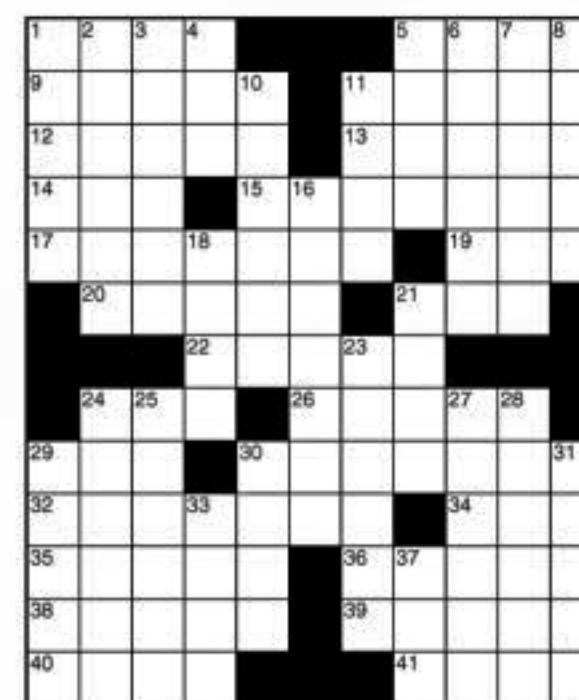


MARTHA GRAHAM
(1894–1991)
AMERICAN MODERN DANCER AND CHOREOGRAPHER

No artist is ahead of his time. He is his time. It's just that the others are behind the time.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| ACROSS | 30 Improves | 8 Secret meeting |
| 1 Latvia's capital | 32 Tops, as toast | 10 Writer Camus |
| 5 Move quickly | 34 Bitterly cold | 11 "Memory" musical |
| 9 Writer Jong | 35 Nepali, e.g. | 16 Maker of weapons |
| 11 Shade | 36 In reserve | 18 Chore |
| 12 Crude home | 38 Scout shelters | 21 Trounce |
| 13 Assuage | 39 Snooped (around) | 23 Admits |
| 14 Hydrocarbon suffix | 40 Advantage | 24 Smiling, perhaps |
| 15 Players at the plate | 41 On this spot | 25 G, for one |
| 17 Old-fashioned ingredient | DOWN | 27 Red shade |
| 19 Acquire | 1 Treatment centre | 28 Shipping inquiry |
| 20 Amulet | 2 Like O. Henry tales | 29 Let up |
| 21 Nap site | 3 "The Lord --..." | 30 Affleck and Kingsley |
| 22 Purloined | 4 King beater | 31 Nobel, for one |
| 24 Bible boat | 5 Blockhead | 33 London gallery |
| 26 Change chemically | 6 State without proof | 37 Japanese drama |
| 29 "I -- Rock" | 7 Laughed loudly | |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

DAY OFF POPE
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MANN TOPS
LODE FINALE
IDO FAT GAY
PERSON LANE
LEER SENT
AUNTS
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