

ECLECTIC ESSAYS

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

Antorjatik O Jatio Angoney Biborton, Muhammad Zamir, Aloghar Prakashana, 2017.

Muhammad Zamir is a prolific writer, notably for the national newspapers of Bangladesh, and writes proficiently in both Bengali and English on a variety of subjects. Befitting a former career diplomat in the service of the government of Bangladesh, not surprisingly, many of his writings deal with diplomacy and international relations, but they are not restricted to just that broad area. He writes knowledgeably on other topics, too, as may be gleaned from *Antorjatik O Jatio Angoney Biborton*, a collection of 62 articles written at different times in various newspapers of the country. Being op-ed pieces, it is not surprising that several topics are repeated across time to essentially highlight a pressing issue of national or international interest at any particular point in time. Sometimes it feels like Zamir is covering every topic under the sun!

Again, not surprisingly given the constraints of space in the op-ed pages of the print media, the author's articles indicate at, rather than delve deeply into, the subject matters. The ponderous efforts required to explore the topics deeply and extensively result in tomes, voluminous, slim, and everything in between, and are primarily read by the aficionado or those with special interest in the topics. Those wishing to gain a more general idea on the subject will resort to the op-ed piece, and Zamir usually offers quality in his write-ups. As the book's title indicates, he writes on the changes that have taken place in the international and domestic arenas. Changes do keep occurring in these spheres (a society, local or global, cannot remain static and still hope to survive in any meaningful fashion in a transforming world system), and people might be expected to desire having a complete comprehension of their

implications for them and the society/country they belong to.

The very first essay deals with the easy to state, but difficult to implement, issue of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh. Zamir states the obvious truism in this context: that every country in the world follows its own path towards realizing this objective. In Bangladesh's case he suggests inclusive development, which can be realized if, first, the country can be rid of corruption. Poverty is pretty much endemic in South Asia. The author draws attention to the alarming statistic that, as of 2015 (when this essay was written), of the 1.5 billion inhabitants in this region, 400 million, or a little over 25% of the population, live below the poverty line. He identifies the generally known culprits: poor management, rampant politicization, indiscipline, and suggests the equally familiar panaceas: education, healthcare, and other activities aimed at uplifting the quality of human life. These are stating the obvious, and several essays are, to reiterate, repetitive in content, and also, expectedly, in identifying flaws in governance, policies and their implementation, and in bringing about satisfactory outcomes.

One of the topics that is touched upon on more than one occasion deals with stopping the degradation of climate and environment. As Zamir states, developing countries like Bangladesh are being adversely affected by rising water levels, floods and cyclones. He suggests that those affected by such disasters should be given financial aid rather than loan, claiming that such a measure will be better for disaster management. He also touches more than once on the issue of the judiciary and the rule of law. He emphasizes that, if justice can be meted out in an impartial manner (really an



oxymoron, since justice automatically connotes fairness), then good governance can come about. Other factors will also have to be ensured for that to happen, but the point is well taken. Zamir's essays, besides following contemporary events, also deal with appropriate occasions. Therefore, it stands to reason that, in 2017, he wrote with sadness on the sorrow-ridden month of August, when Bangabandhu and many in his immediate and extended family, as well as others, were killed.

Zamir, who was once the Chief Information Commissioner of Bangladesh, has written on the Internet and its manifold applications, implications, and associations. He has touched on the subject of the Janus-like quality of the symbol of the post-industrial age. While there are so many positives associated with online

communication, there exists at least as many negatives, which have more to do with human nature rather than the technology per se. In a separate essay he has written on the possible measures that could be taken to tame the Wild Wild Web. That would involve limiting peoples' right to free expression over the Internet, something that would be contrary to the very principle of the online medium. Zamir discusses just that in the piece (written in 2017) on China's and Russia's active consideration to control the Internet.

Ambassador Zamir was a career diplomat, and, expectedly, writes extensively on international politics and diplomacy. He has noted with apprehension the rise of populism across the globe and its potential threat to the essence of liberal democracy. He is concerned about the rise of the ultra-right adherents in Germany and the growing number of like-minded people in that country which once had spawned the Nazi Party (although, it must be kept in mind, historical parallelism might be far-fetched and erroneous). This is an unwanted phenomenon, but, by no means, unexpected. The cycle of history theory, which has no specific time span to pinpoint and predict the periodical onset, tries to show that a period of liberalism is followed by one of conservatism, and so on. If we follow this line of thinking, then we are to plumb in an era of conservatism, with populism, ultra-nationalism, and racism/xenophobia being driving forces in societies. We can see manifestations of these phenomena across the globe, noticeably in the affluent democracies, with some notable exceptions. My own view is that the Internet may have exacerbated the situation, with the global connection giving rise to the

concept of familiarity breeding contempt and bringing out more differences than commonalities in the minds of different nationalities and ethnicities.

Zamir takes up the populist, xenophobic factor closer to home when he discusses the Rohingya tragedy. In an article written in 2017 he expresses his anxiety regarding the fate of the Rohingyas. He hopes that the Western powers would look seriously into the issue and redress the plight of the Rohingyas. The irony here is that, in 2016, he had written that the Rohingyas had found hope in the coming to power of the NLD party (led by Aung San Suu Kyi) and a civilian government, and that 25, 000 of them had returned to their villages and had started rebuilding their lives and homes. What a difference has a year made! Suu Kyi is as much responsible as anyone in Myanmar, notably the military and hard-line Buddhist monks, for the Rohingyas' plight. Any suggestion to her being held hostage to the military and its wishes is pure drivel. Zamir has provided support to this contention in his 2016 piece. When Mishal Husain, BBC's Muslim presenter, went to interview Suu Kyi and wanted to know her take on how the civilian government would treat the minority Rohingyas, the Nobel Laureate flew into a rage and blurted out, "No one told me that I was going to be interviewed by a Muslim!" Finally, it can be said that Muhammad Zamir offers quite a few nuggets of information and wisdom in *Antorjatik O Jatio Angoney Biborton*.

Shahid Alam is an actor, thespian and Professor, Department of Media and Communications, IUB. He is a regular contributor to The Daily Star Literature and Review Pages.

Social "Cannibalism" and the Edible Women

REVIEWED BY ZARIN RAFIUDDIN

The Edible Woman, Margaret Atwood, ISBN: 978-055-33779-27, Virago Press, 1980.

The Edible Woman (1969) is the Canadian author Margaret Atwood's debut novel. It follows the story of Marian MacAlpin, a young woman who develops an eating disorder that makes food inedible for her. Through this character, Atwood cleverly shows that the pressures put on women by the society can have severely adverse effects on their bodies and psyches. Despite being written in the late 60s, it is still considered a classic today due to its nuanced approach in terms of composition style and intricate portrayal of the protagonist and her mental taxation.

In the novel, Marian lives with Ainsley Tewce, her roommate and a sort of "intellectual" woman who has interests in learning about the human mind and its developmental progress. Through her predicaments, the novel captures the true essence of psychological deterioration, sexual dissatisfaction and also identity crisis. Their landlady, here, happens to be a prying woman who keeps on attempting to confine the concerned lodgers within boundaries. She has a ridiculous excuse—the teenager who is under her care will be influenced wrongly through her tenants' 'immoral' activities. In addition, Marian is portrayed as a jobholder at a food sampling company who gets engaged to her boyfriend, Peter Wollander, a young businessperson. One defining preoccupation of her schedule revolves around visiting her perpetually pregnant friend, Clara Bates, who got married to Joe and therefore, had to drop out of high school. The antagonistic rendezvous of Clara's fate, in a parallel connection makes Marian feel constantly frustrated and underwhelmed.

Marian's actual deterioration, however, begins after the engagement as she feels that her would-be husband wishes to control her, and manipulate her into becoming someone else. At the same time, she is troubled when Ainsley traps her

womanising friend, Len Slank into a futile relationship for a baby born out of lovelessness. She feels further distressed and restless, being coerced one way or another to be in an emotionally imbalanced and dissatisfying relationship. Later in the novel, she meets an emaciated, self-absorbed graduate student named Duncan but withdraws herself from her brief affair with this classic narcissist rather wisely.

Marian's eating disorder

pressured to conform to things she does not admire and this affects her ability to eat food, putting her own life at risk. Marian knows this is unhealthy and she does consciously attempt to follow a hygienic routine again and again. However, she fails to identify why she is so reluctant to live a life in the first place. She is not interested in dieting, nor is she interested to be the ideal image of a woman.

Here, the title is a clear pun on

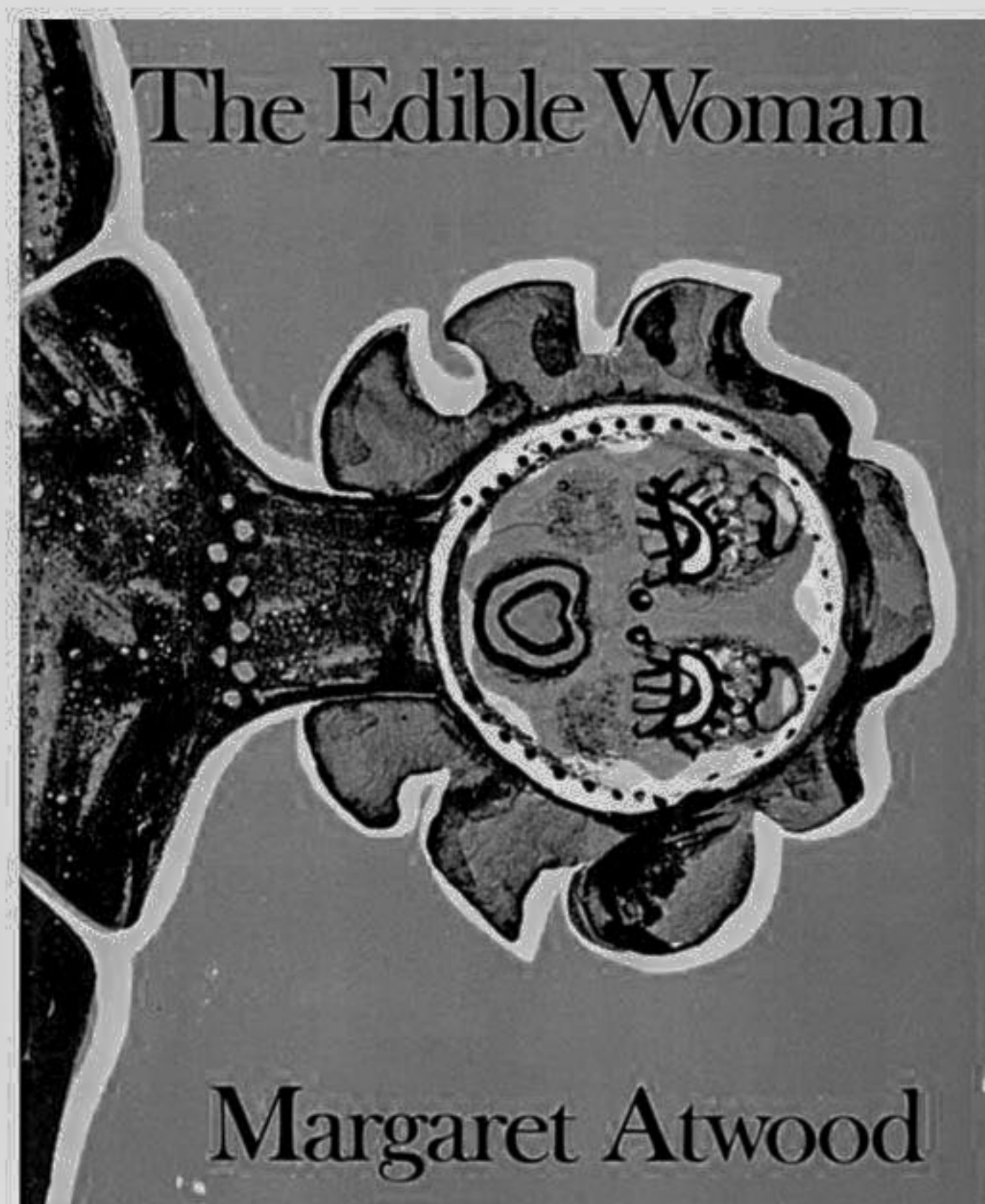
ready to have one towards the end, it is shocking, visceral and almost a spectacle to behold.

Towards the end, Marian gets liberty when she is willing to accept that she does not have to be defined by the stereotypical standard 'x'. She does not have to understand, nor does she need to participate in things she has no feelings for. She forgoes also her reliance on Duncan as an option B for love, leaves Ainsley and Len to their own devices and stops worrying about the landlady. She even desires a better career without feeling inadequate, unwomanly or guilty as charged.

The novel is still relevant today because of its consummate representation of significant socio-cultural issues, such as, sexism, male privileges and also idealisation of female bodies and gender roles. Marian realises Duncan can act aloof and eccentric because he is a young man who is not held responsible for anything. She also realises that Peter is wrapped up with himself and his personal problems precisely because that is how society expects him to be. Ainsley's preoccupation with motherhood and Clara's own are almost two sides of the same coin. One is for research purposes and the other is for attaining some false sense of unity. Both are destined to fail when the women in question deny that they, too, need attention, care and mostly, respect for themselves.

The novel is a good read for young adults and mature audiences likewise, as it talks of issues that we consciously tend to avoid: nervous breakdowns, eating disorders and the sense of identity dissociation that comes with mental illness. A book of its time, *Edible Woman* still echoes today, loudly and clearly for the relevancy of the affairs it successfully depicted.

Zarin Rafiuddin lives in Dhaka and is interested in different kinds of writing.



POETRY



PHOTO: AUTHOR

Going to Hatiya Island

ANDREW EAGLE

At first sight of our island, I confess
I've been known to cry
Trying to conceal it, blaming morning mist
Dabbling laughter from my eye
When she appears, wafer thin
Horizon-painted sliver
Out beyond the nearer shoals
Where cowboys camp in mangrove damp
On oceanic river
As engine drones and current swirls
Add passenger commotion
On the deck must be I'll stand
Buried in emotion

The last stretch to our island, I confess
Nags and irritates
Stomach birds are pecking; bovine calm on show
While Arcadia awaits
See the dolphins arch and play
Jaunty river chase
But never can diversion hold
As edgy heart is churned apart
By that impending place
As ship moves on too slow by far
Begging time to quicken
Buoyed by rusted rail I will
Horizon line to thicken

To reach our island's shore, I confess
Could spur one to rage
Crowding on the staircase; chickens, betel, fish
Feeling trapped inside a cage
So near, so far, gangplank down
Porters push and hustle
Time is pain, can't reach the shore
How locals go the locals know
Through Tomorrow's bustle
Finally I walk the plank
A risky situation
Plant my feet on riverbank
Engulfed in mud-elation

Andrew Eagle is an English instructor and feature writer of The Daily Star.