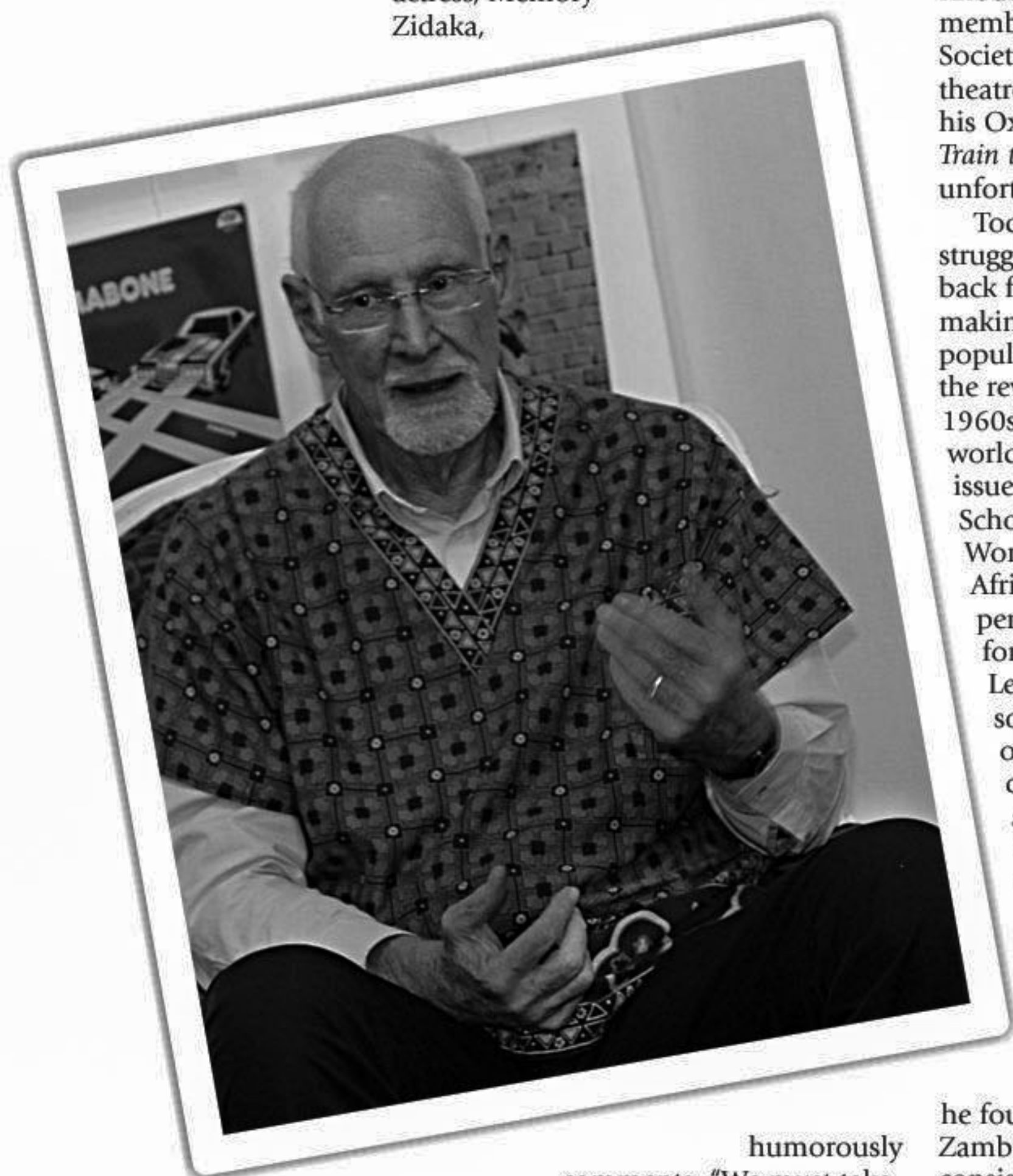


Robert Mshengu Kavanagh: A Strong Voice against Apartheid and Oppression in Southern Africa

SABIHA HUQ

Kavanagh and his team of New Horizon Theatre Company September 7, 2018; a big hall in Ibsenhuset (The Ibsen House; museum, archive and theatre dedicated to Henrik Ibsen in his birth town, Skien). An actors' session of the XIV International Ibsen Conference is going on; a 74 old very tall white man is singing and dancing with two young Zimbabwean actors on the stage. At one point the young actress, Memory Zidaka,



humorously comments, "We must take care of Uncle Robert, after all he is an old man!" The smiling animated face of the old man does not say that he is tired, and the session ends as he bows and dances two more twirls. I got curious to know more about this group and the old man who led the team.

During the lunch I grabbed the first opportunity to talk to "Uncle Robert,"

Robert Mshengu Kavanagh. He was born in Durban, South Africa, in 1944, as Robert Malcolm McLaren. He began his life in the theatre very early in life when he was only nine, with the role of the Duchess in *Alice in Wonderland*. In school he played Tamburlaine and Dr Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's plays and Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Kavanagh's career in theatre was enhanced at Oxford where he went as a Rhodes Scholar. He was an active member of Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS) and Experimental theatre Club (ETC). Being inspired by his Oxford years he wrote his first play *A Train to Pretoria*, the script of which, unfortunately, is lost.

Today's Uncle Robert had years of struggle in his own country after coming back from Oxford with an intention to making political intervention through popular theatre. He was radicalised by the revolutionary changes that the late 1960s brought in many parts of the world, especially over the Vietnam issue. He and his fellow Rhodes Scholar, Rob Amato, founded Workshop '71. He had to leave South Africa in 1976 for both political and personal reasons and went to Leeds for his Doctoral degree. During the Leeds years he was exposed to socialist, feminist and black theatres of that time and worked with companies like 7:48, Red Ladder and Monstrous Regiment. Kavanagh's profession took him to Addis Ababa where he was off to a good start of the Theatre Studies department. After eight years of absence he returned to Southern Africa as Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Zimbabwe. There

he founded a socialist theatre group, Zambuko/Izibuko. This group consisting of university students and community theatre actors, produced four major political plays based on major issues like apartheid in South Africa, the assassination of Mozambican president, Samora Machel, the IMF structural adjustment trauma in Zimbabwe and Nelson Mandela.

After spending ten years at the university, Kavanagh played an

instrumental role in founding CHIPAWO (Children's Performing Arts Workshop), an arts education organization, with which he is still intimately involved. The organisation assists children and young people to explore their own lives and take to independent thinking. The CHIPAWO trust runs a theatre company called The New Horizon Youth Theatre Company.

Kavanagh is the author of several books on the African situation. Some of his recent publications are *Zimbabwe: Challenging the Stereotypes*, *Evesdrop: the Tales of Adam Kok*, *Mangothobane: A Soweto Nobody*, *Jan's Book*, *A Contended Space: The Theatre of Gibson Mtutuzeli Kente*, *The Complete S'ketsh*, *Making Theatre*, *Theatre and Cultural Struggle Under Apartheid*, etc.

In the three major phases of his life Kavanagh wrote many performance texts, the performances of which were successful on stage. However, many of the scripts got lost due to his frequent travels. He has three volumes of selected plays to his credit. However, he is too generous to claim these scripts as his own and vouchsafes the credit to the contribution of his actors and comrades.

In conversation with Robert Mshengu Kavanagh

My interaction with Kavanagh was brief but I have continued to know him and his work. A glimpse of our conversation goes like this:

SH: Could you please give a background to your African name? What is the meaning of Mshengu Kavanagh? When and why you chose to take this name?

RMK: My real name is Robert Malcolm McLaren - my ancestors were Scots. Mshengu is the clan name of the Tshabalala people among the Zulu. I soon came to be called by those names when I started working in theatre in Soweto back in the 1970s as I spoke Zulu. I can say the people gave me that name. I adopted Kavanagh as a pen name in the days of the liberation struggle and then continued using it as my *nomme de plume*. Kavanagh is a Celtic name chosen to indicate that I am from Celtic stock.

SH: Which play as the author you adore most and why?

RMK: I'm not sure what you mean by this. Do you mean which is my favourite play among those I have been involved in or my favourite play generally? I can only say that I never have one favourite but numerous plays I live equally but for different reasons.

SH: What are your dreams for the New Horizon Youth Theatre Company?

RMK: My dream was always that it could become a professional youth company and provide the youth in it with a livelihood as well as with a reputation for excellent and imaginative theatre.

SH: You acted in one of Girish Karnad's plays. What will be your comment on the Indian subaltern struggle?

RMK: Good piece of detective work! Yes, I acted an important role in *Hayavadan* in the Workshop Theatre at Leeds University. Your question is a challenging one and all I can do it to answer it with complete honesty. I think my answer indicates the need for the victims of globalisation and Imperialism all over the world to learn more about each other and co-ordinate their struggles. Though my thought has been strongly influenced by Gramsci, in particular when it comes to the sociology and politics of culture, I missed the concept of subalternism. I must also admit that though I could see when on a visit to India the wretchedness of those excluded from the benefits or participation in India's economic accomplishments, I have to say that I know little about the modes and intensity of what you call 'subaltern' resistance. I would like to know more - and perhaps you can help me in this.

I may recommend my *Theatre and Cultural Struggle under Apartheid* for those who might be interested in the sociology of culture.

SH: What is your evaluation of the changes in the African situation? Do you think your dreams for Zimbabwe or South Africa are realised, at least to some extent?

RMK: This would require a great deal of time to answer. I have few ideas on your experience in India owing to my ignorance, I have a lot in relation to

your question. I can only therefore answer it in the following way:

- Africa has immense potential and its people a great deal to offer. Although we see glimpses of advancement and improvement, international capital, in most cases with the collusion of the politicians, has Africa it by the throat. Unity, independence, self-sustainability, selflessness and the courage to put African interests first, economically and politically, alone will open up to the continent and its people the better life we all fought for during our liberation struggles.

- As for Zimbabwe - it is one of the few countries on the African continent that has taken the painful but necessary steps to ensure sovereignty and ownership of the land and its resources. Ay I recommend my book *Zimbabwe: Challenging the Stereotypes* to you and your readers. This is why I preferred to live in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe rather than Nelson Mandela's South Africa.

- My own country suffers from a process of dialogue in which the forces of liberation were not yet powerful enough to get what we needed to get and what we fought for and the white minority was powerful enough to block transformation. With the result that the ruling ANC went to bed with those who own the wealth in South Africa and the people are excluded. They believe they have one of the most liberal constitutions in the world - true, a liberal constitution. They believe it a democratic one. But Kwame Nkrumah taught us a long time ago that there is no democracy without economic equality. What was needed and is still needed is a constitution not for democracy but for transformation. The apartheid state must be dismantled and the people come into their own.

May Kavanagh's dreams as well as thousand others' dreams of transformation come true against the existent fascism, unipolarity in global politics and mass murder of the less privileged.

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REVIEWS

Ottegsahon: CARESS OF THE MUSE

Mashuk Chowdhury, Sahos Publications, 2018

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

The adage goes that almost every Bengali is born with poetry in his/her heart. Note the word - almost! There exists, blissfully, exceptions to this byword. Happily, simply because 'yours truly' falls in that category of poetry schnooks, and so can have some company to mitigate my misery. So it was with much trepidation that I undertook to give an assessment of the contents of a collection of poems, *Ottegsahon*, composed by Mashuk Chowdhury, a poet and journalist. 56 poems, to be exact, covering a variety of topics and issues. Some of them will be easily understandable to someone like me; others are more esoteric, not always immediately comprehensible to - yes, someone like me.

As I was delving through the poetic offerings, and neared their end, I was struck by a general pattern of themes and subject matters that the author has been partial to in this book. He has arranged them more or less according to clusters of poems fitting a particular thematic motif. So there are compositions on the themes of childhood, love, and nature, with smatterings of personal philosophy on other subject matters, and, indeed, the odd poem on a single topic that does not recur.

Almost all of the first nine poems (from "Manush Howar Golpo" to "Gochhito Smriti") are centered on children, childhood, and reflections on a yearning for the innocence of childhood. In "Manush Howar Golpo" he recalls those he characterizes as doll-children, and observes that they

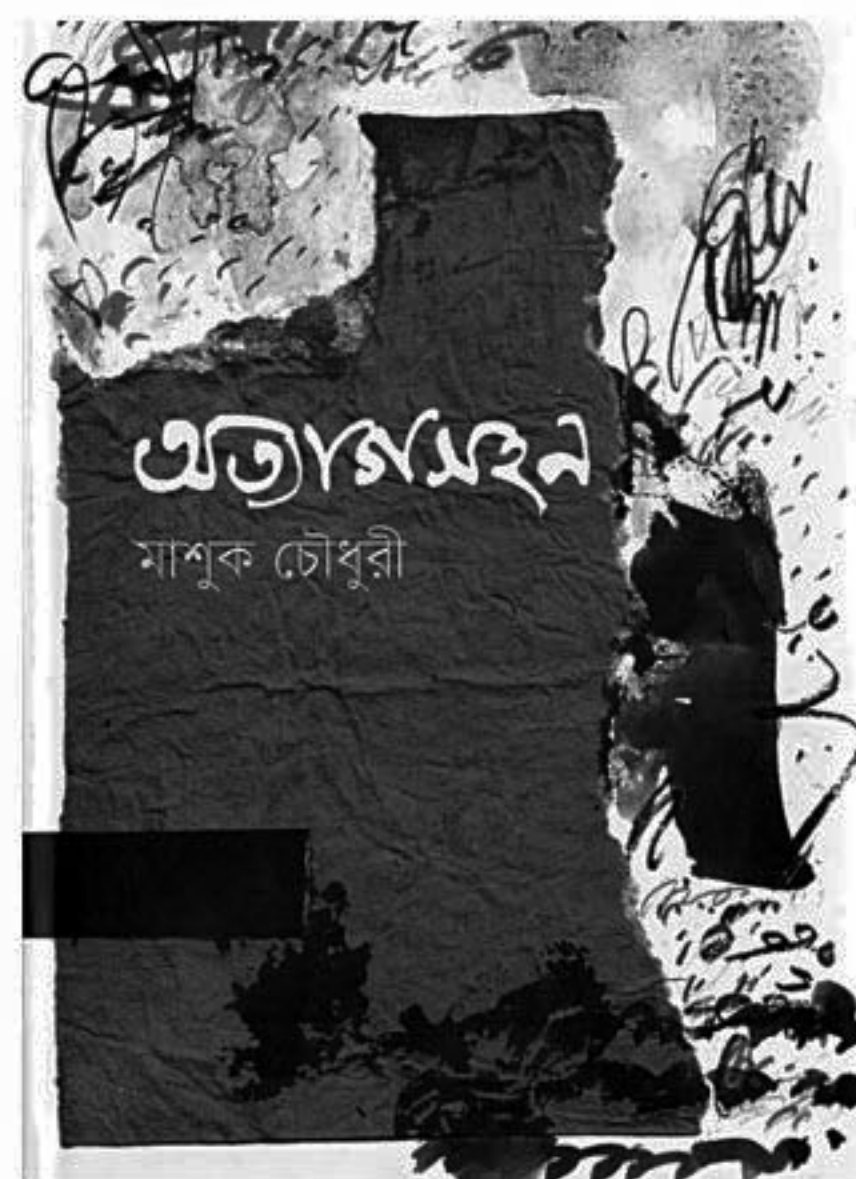
eventually become adults, and then (unlike in their childhood) behave like wild horses which do not care about fetters at all. In "Shishuful" he bemoans the death of innocent children who do so because their poverty-stricken country was denied the donation of polio vaccine. Chowdhury provides several instances of his humanism, such as in "Shob Nodir Naam Roktogonga," which he ends (I am rendering the lines here in English phonetics in order to induce their original significance for the general readers): "Aar koto roktopat hole Bongoposhagorer naam hobe Lohito Shagor" (on a sidenote, I am struck by the Bangla term for the Red Sea as *Lohito Shagor*, though I doubt that it was termed so because of all the human blood that was spilled into it!).

Thus, the poet is drawn to the plight of children. In "Agaam Shokegatha," for instance, he goes on lamenting as his poems cry for the hundreds of thousands of children stating, "Eder jonnoi amaa kobita kande, eder jonnoi ami aaj likhe gelam agaam shokegatha." He seems particularly galled by the plight of underprivileged children in the poem "Tritio Bishwer Shishu" as he says, "Tritio Bishwer Shwadhini Desher Shwadhini Bhukhonder... ek shishu ami, amra dujonei durbhaggyer srinkhole bondhi poradhini manush."

Chowdhury, not unexpectedly for a poet, talks about aspects of love, including in "Nyaeshongoto Premier Pokhhe," where he pens these powerful lines: "Prem amake dukkher cheye beshi diechhe agun...Prem amake eka

poriparsher birudhhe bidroher prerona diechhe." Love has the potential of having/creating significant impact on people as this poem ("Premer Bondhone Shwadhini") illustrates:

"Premer bondhon jotota shorgo chhayar shukh o shantir moto, opremar shwadhinota tototai bedona o bishakto ovishaper jontronay neel." Chowdhury, not surprisingly for such a caring person



for children and their welfare, is equally a strong lover of Nature, and laments its degradation at the hands of human beings. Several poems attest to this, but I am more interested in a couple of thoughtful poems, since they use the symbolism of Nature to represent other

critical elements of life. In "Pakhir Rashtrokotha," for example, he constructs, "Uronto danaee pakhider jatio potaka, shey potaka kere nao, kere nao shwadhinota, gorib pakhider eto shwadhinotar proyojon nei." Likewise, "Cactus" is also highly interesting where the poet asks the readers to imagine Bangladesh, including the Sundarbans, becoming totally infested by the thorny cactus, replacing its greenery, and, in the process, making its people heartless. The point to note here is that the cactus in its usual arid environments is actually a critical fountain of life for the inhabitants there. Bangladesh's greenery would simply wither away if transplanted in those regions.

Still on nature, the poet (in "Hemonto") provides a colourful depiction of the season, "Hemonto hochhe rohosshomoyee neelakash." He includes a few poems on his philosophy of life. The following one, "Ostittobad" sounds profound: "Ashole shob baad-i opo-baad , opobaade osthahir kalponik ostitho... Jibono kolpochitro --- ekta niret chhayamurti." And he discloses his own lamentation by stating, "Dirghoshwasher moto jibono shudirgho shunnota." He pleasingly marries Nature and love in "Pritikhar laal golap," "Tomar protikhae ekta laal golap phute ache, amaa ridoyer moto ek tukro shobuj patar arale." The next poem, "Jibon" is on life itself and can be either interpreted as a poetic expression or the poet's actual pessimism about life in general: "Amaar kokhono kokhono

mone hoy, jibon maaer mritodeher moto dukkher pahaar...mone hoy jiboner shophnogulo laalbat.

There are other poems that deal with the core issues of life as well as the reader goes through the pages of the collection. One, "Chhinno Bhinno Mohakabbo," builds up on a garland of 33 little poems to expound on the poet's life perspectives. There is an interesting poem on "Bibaho" where the speaker utters, "Aaj ratei amra boron korbo shohomoron...tomra esho...amaar shohomoron dekhte, amaa korun mrittu dekhte." Several pieces of nostalgic references can be detected in this group of the poems in the last section, as there is a touching eulogy to Bangladesh in "Jononi 1971": "Jagroti chetonar pourushe bidhho amaa jononi jonnobhumi - ei Bangladesh," and also a touching tribute to the generic idea of poet and poetry in "Kobir shadhona." There is also an artistic portrayal of the dilemma of doubt as well as the dual character of the mind in "Bishwasher Agun Shondeher Chhaya," "Amaar bhitore ekbar bhalobasha jole, ekbar na. Ek chokkhe jole bidroho, ek chokkhe prem."

A collection of poems by one author provides an opportunity for the reader to at least get an idea of his/her talent, and, often, life philosophy. Mashuk Chowdhury's *Ottegsahon* will, in varying degrees, provide all of that, and some more, to the many Bengalis who have been touched by the creative soul of the Muse himself.

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