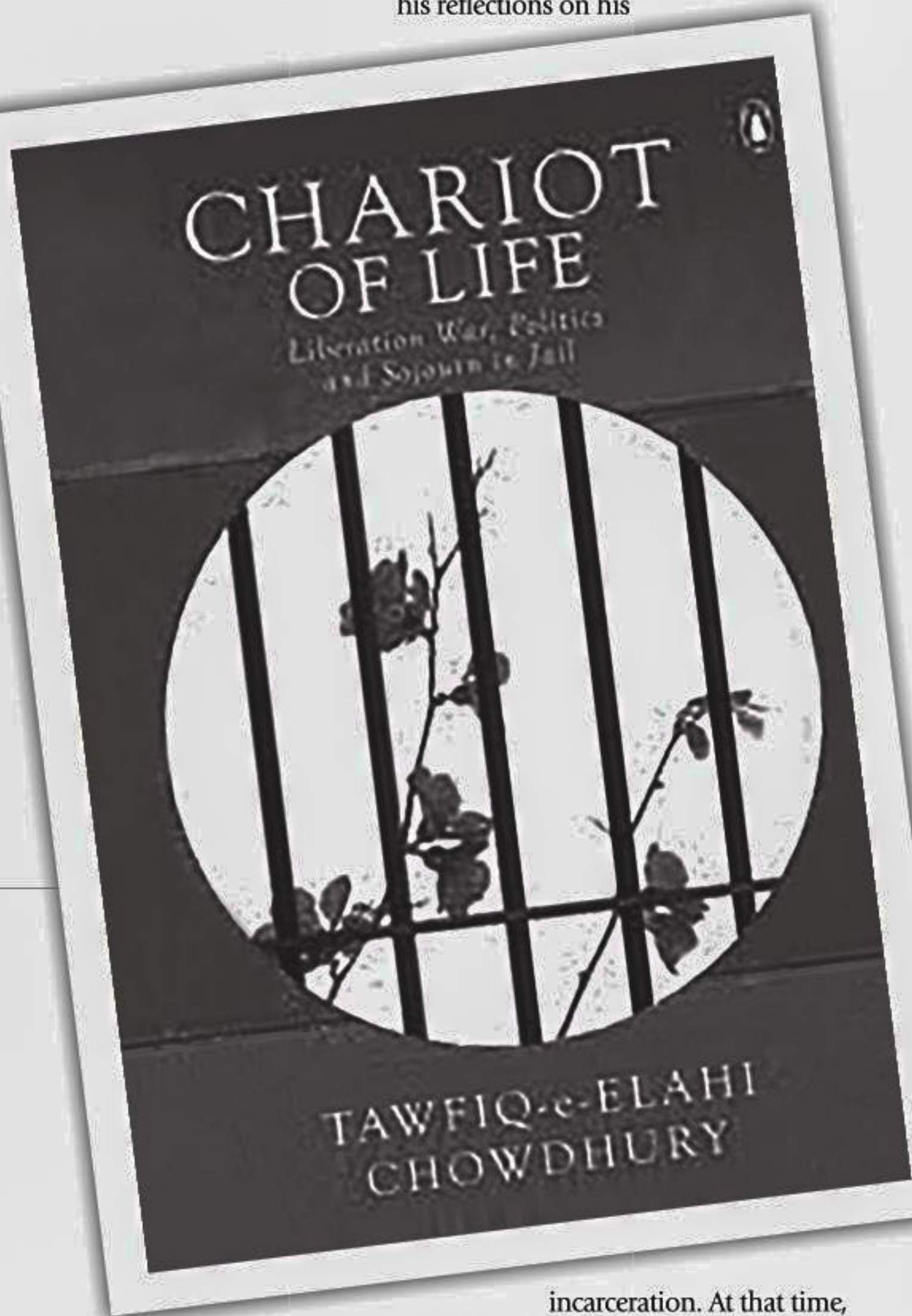


From Liberation War Hero to Prison and After: A Sobering Tale

Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury. *Chariot of Life: Liberation War, Politics and Sojourn in Jail*. ISBN: 9789353055240. Penguin Random House, 2019

REVIEWED BY FAKRUL ALAM

Two narratives counterpoint each other in Tawfiq-el-Elahi Chowdhury's *Chariot of Life: Liberation War, Politics and Sojourn in Jail*. The first is the absorbing story of major events in the author's life till the closing years of the first decade of this century. The second is the detailed account of the disturbing events that led to his imprisonment in 2008, his time in prison and his reflections on his



incarceration. At that time, a self-styled "caretaker" military-backed government had taken over Bangladesh, ostensibly to bring the country back to normalcy and to defang its two major political parties. The excuse given then was that these parties were locked in brutal confrontation that was hemorrhaging Bangladesh; its major leaders and officers, the seemingly righteous usurpers felt, needed to be put on trial to not only punish perpetrators of wrongs that were bleeding the country, but also to get it back to an even keel.

From a CSP to a Bir Bikram

The first narrative lets us know of Chowdhury's background and considerable

accomplishments, although it often does so only in passing. Instead of flaunting his credentials, Chowdhury concentrates in it on telling us how he was inspired by Bangabandhu, particularly his 7 March speech, to join the liberation war after the events of 25 March 1971 and the morning after when Bangabandhu was taken to prison. This narrative then describes Chowdhury's accelerating involvement in the Bangladesh war of liberation. We are given vivid images of the part he played, first as the sub-divisional officer in charge of the border town of Meherpur, and then as a sub-sector commander of the Bangladesh forces battling the Pakistani war machine in different parts of the country.

Chowdhury's narrative of his immersion in the Bangladesh liberation war reveals his justifiable pride in the role he played in it. He had been brought up in a family where defiance against imperialist forces seemed to be instinctive. His maternal uncle, for instance, had taken part in the Indian independence movement by being part of a naval shipboard mutiny against the British towards the end of the Second World War. His older brother, Quadrat-e-Elahi Chowdhury, too, had joined the Bangladesh War of Liberation. Both brothers had abandoned their prestigious jobs as officers of the Civil Service of Pakistan to be part of the liberation war. The older brother, in fact, would be martyred in our war of independence.

A substantial part of the first narrative recounts the steps that Chowdhury took in joining the war. He did so as someone conscious of the economic exploitation and the disparity between East and West Pakistan that led to the Six Points movement initiated by the Awami League under the leadership of Bangabandhu in the 1960s. By the end of March, 1971 Chowdhury felt that he had "a tryst with destiny," a (Nehruvian) coinage that alerts the reader to his historical consciousness. He is well aware that the twists and turns of history propel one forward in life, but knows too that one has to be an active agent in forging one's future. Family history, national politics, Chowdhury's growing skepticism about West Pakistani intentions about East Pakistanis, his correspondingly growing admiration for Bangabandhu and the course he was steering Bengalis towards after his triumphant release from jail, all played a part in Chowdhury's decision to be part of the public meeting on 7 March. This was a daring decision, since as a gov-

ernment officer he was breaching service discipline by attending it.

As Chowdhury puts it midway through *Chariot of Life*, Bangabandhu was “the pied piper” who led him and millions of other Bangladeshis to be part of the liberation struggle and “to be drawn in to [sic] the vortex of revolution.” Although Bangabandhu was taken to prison in what was then West Pakistan, Chowdhury, left his cushy job and switched his allegiance from the improbable country called Pakistan to the emerging one that would be fully independent by the end of 1971 as Bangladesh.

What Chowdhury did between the end of March and the liberation of Bangladesh on 16 December, 1971 strikes one now as quite amazing. By the early hours of March 26, he had made his office "the

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headquarters of resistance forces.” He then made contact with Indian military as well as civilian officers, realizing that this was an imperative in the face of the Pakistani assault on Bangladeshis everywhere. Soon, he hosted Tajuddin Ahmed and Barrister Amirul Islam, two figures who would play pivotal roles in the liberation movement. Next, he would be commissioned as a captain of the fledgling Bangladesh Army. Consequently, he would get involved in skirmishes with the Pakistani forces till he and his men would have to retreat against them. But in retreating, he would take a valiant, indeed, astounding decision—he would load the money in the Pakistan government treasury in Meherpur into trucks, and then be part of a convoy that would see him depositing the money in the makeshift Bangladeshi government headquarter located on 8 Theater Road, Kolkata. Before his convoy would set out he and some of his fellow officers and their men would be witnesses in a border village to the proclamation of Bangla-

desh's independence and the swearing in of the provisional government of the country on April 17, 1971.

The first narrative continues in Chowdhury's retelling so that we learn about his exploits in the next eight months of the liberation war. Reinforced by new recruits, and backed by popular support, the Bangladesh Armed Forces regrouped and began taking on the Pakistani Army purposefully. Chowdhury himself led a group of men as a subsector commander attacking the Pakistani forces according to a plan worked out by his sector commander. He fought on till Bangladesh was fully liberated. The Bir Bikram that he was awarded afterwards was thus well earned!

On Trial for a Concocted Crime
Piecing together the second narrative from the episodes of Tawfique-e- Elahi Chowdhury's life after Bangladesh became an independent country, one is reminded of Robert Browning's famous poem "The Patriot" whose narrator thinks out loud at one point: "Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun/To give it my loving friends to keep/Nought man could do, have I left undone/And you see my harvest, what I reap/The very day, now a year is run."

Chowdhury, whose career after 1971, showed someone as committed to the country as he was before its independence and during the liberation war, had ended his professional life as a bureaucrat with distinction. At its peak, he had come up with a plan as the energy adviser to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during her first term in office that would prove to be a panacea for Bangladesh's energy woes at that time. On his retirement, he would continue to work in the sector as a prized consultant for UNDP.

Ironically, it was for the good work Chowdhury had done in the power sector under Sheikh Hasina was in office that the caretaker government's Anti-Corruption Task Force would be framing him in a graft case that they had concocted with the ultimate aim of implicating her as well. As he puts it, "having lived a life of honesty, integrity and professionalism, without fear or favor...I now stood accused in the lingering afternoon of my life of being an accomplice to graft."

At first, the cynical strategy adopted by the intelligence people where a patriot like him could end up in a penitentiary along with Bangabandhu's daughter almost overwhelms Chowdhury. However, he decides to fight the charges and stays resolute in prison. Inspired by his heroes—Socrates, who "stood his ground"—Bangabandhu, who served years and years for trumped

up charges and grew in stature all the time in his defiance and patriotism—and Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina, who, clearly, has inherited not only her father's leadership qualities but also his grit—Chowdhury survives the harrowing weeks and months in prison courageously. Thankfully, for Chowdhury and the nation the day comes when the Caretaker Government, faced by defiance inside and outside prison, and the knowledge that it had no future at all, releases the political prisoners it had detained deviously and gave up power—fully and ingloriously.

A Book Well Worth Reading

Chariot of Life is ingeniously and intricately structured. For instance, by counteringpointing April 17, 2008, when he was being tried for one imagined crime with April 17, 1971, when he was part of the swearing in ceremony of the provisional government that would direct the birth of Bangladesh, Chowdhury makes the reader wonder—how could true patriots be vilified thus? Chowdhury's book is in fact designed to make us introspect about our country's foundational ideas, the arrogance of self-styled patriots who lay spurious claims to be inquisitors on the people's behalf and the abuse of power by those who are armed and can therefore usurp it. Through his technique of counteringpoint two different times of history where he was involved, his musings in jail, his conversations with like-minded and similarly causelessly incarcerated men in prison, an eye for telling details and a literary bent nourished by his readings, Chowdhury is able to offer us a narrative that is a compelling, captivating read.

One finishes Chowdhury's *Chariot of Life* sobered by what one has read. He surely deserves to be thanked for giving readers a cautionary tale about the abuse of power and the attempted distortion of history by people with questionable agendas for reform masquerading as patriots. But while Chowdhury's narrative is on the whole well-written and the book itself is attractively designed and produced, it could have been somewhat shorter and in places better edited and proof-read. Nevertheless, this is an important book that people seriously interested in Bangladesh's history and politics will find well worth reading and keeping in their bookshelves/libraries. The kind of personal history it records so intensely is too important to be overlooked by anyone wanting to avoid political pitfalls in our nation's past as was 11/1/07.

Fakrul Alam is UGC Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.

POETRY



Not Aliens but Neighbours

MD MEHEDI HASAN

Pass Hollywood over.
It's not the aliens
but our neighbours,
mosquitos,
will take over the world.

How wonderful—
I don't have to study
8 hours a day for BCS examination,
mighty neighbours end our long wait
to meet the ruination;
power plant and bridge projects
are being shut down

as the mega-projects have no use to the mosquitos.

Adios amigos!

Md Mehedi Hasan's writings have been published in The Daily Star, The Daily Observer, The Independent, The Wagon Magazine (Chennai, India), and Arts & Letters-Dhaka Tribune.

Origins: A Memoir

Amin Maalouf. ISBN: 9780374227326. Picador, 2009

REVIEWED BY RAANA HAIDER

The Lebanese-born and Paris resident explores the notion of being an émigré. As he says, "I seldom return to my country of origin, and then only when circumstances compel me to...almost always the death of a loved one." Correspondingly, he is told "Here, families have sons buried in Beirut, Egypt, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, and the United States. Our fate is to be as scattered in death as we were in life." This is the experience of every diaspora. Malouf delves into the sense of guilt and remorse that an emigrant encounters as well as what defines one's homeland.

An ancestral trunk retrieved from his village-home in the Lebanese mountains reveals stashes of letters from his grandfather in Lebanon to his grand-uncle in Cuba – “I now saw looming before me a thousand doors and no keys.” A long journey begins. Maalouf wanders through Lebanon, USA and Cuba in search of lost people, connections and homes – seeking to establish what spurred one brother to emigrate and the other to stay. What prompted the entrepreneur Gebrayel to leave and the other brother Botros to establish a secular progressive village school? Set in the twilight years of the Ottoman Empire, Botros sees himself as a “Ottoman citizen.” Yet “convulsions are undermining the dying empire.” What about “patriotism versus nationalism?” In a telling remark,

Maalouf sorely laments "Our empire crumbled, like the Hapsburg Empire, into scores of miserable ethnic states whose murderous rumblings have caused two world wars and dozens of local wars, and have already corrupted the soul of the new millennium." One has only to gaze in horror at the current scenario in the Middle East to feel his pain and ours.

For someone who has lived long years in the Middle East including Lebanon, Amin Maalouf's biography is a telling read of the internal mechanisms of migration ("*émigré psyche*"), complex dimensions of far-flung families and the historical complexities of the region. Interwoven through these monumental waves, is a riveting family saga replete with third cousins, great uncles and mother's best friend's daughter-in-law.

Maalouf's grandfather wrote on a loose sheet of paper:

"I am weary
Weary of describing
The state of our countries of the Orient,
Replace 'country' by 'calamity'
Replace 'Orient' by 'malediction.'
You will have an idea of what I am
trying to say."

The lines were written in Beirut in 1923.

Raana Haider is a literary pilgrim.

