



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A mix of magic and reality

Review of Mojaffor Hossain's 'Between Two Lives' (Panjeree Publications Ltd., 2024), translated by Haroonuzzaman

“The Spy” is a story of extreme injustice, deprivation, and exploitation. It is a story which depicts the real picture of Bangladesh, where dishonesty, misuse of power, tyranny, and occupation of others’ resources are common.

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQU L ISLAM

Between Two Lives is a collection of short stories by Mojaffor Hossain, a notable fiction writer of Bengali literature. The stories of the collection are translated into English by Haroonuzzaman, who has rendered quite a few important literary works from Bangladesh. Besides being a translator, he is also an academic. *Between Two Lives* contains 11 short stories, well chosen and adroitly translated by Haroonuzzaman.

The collection explores a diverse range of themes and subject matters, which mesmerise the readers to a great extent. Among the most prominent issues that the author deals with in the stories, memory and trauma are noteworthy. They give an account of the human condition in general and the deplorable state of Bangladeshi people in particular. Bonnie Chau, a Chinese-American fiction writer based in New York, comments on Mojaffor Hossain's stories: “Hossain has the ability to conjure worlds that exist somewhere in the shadows of the uncanny valley—somehow both defamiliarized and explicit about contemporary horrors. Bangladesh and its modern history may be at their core, but the stories point broadly to the larger systems of dehumanization recognizable as pervasive in all of our everyday lives.”

Mojaffor Hossain is an extraordinary storyteller, who has already earned fame for his distinctive style and out-of-the-box themes. Among the established and new or emerging fiction writers of Bangladesh, he is well-known. He employs surrealism and magical realism in his stories and novels.

Reading the stories in *Between*

Two Lives, a reader is launched on a captivating journey that ends in awe and sometimes shock. Like famous fiction writers of the world, Mojaffor Hossain writes his stories with twists and turns, at times keeping the readers in a trance of magical spellbinding. His narratives are not aloof from what we encounter in our everyday life, but the author weaves the everyday experience of the people, especially the people of Bangladesh, into a tapestry of a wide range of elements, such as satire, humour, and wit. The stories finally turn extraordinary and unique because of the narrative style. The readers go through something familiar, but then they experience something bizarre—and this makes the narratives unearthly. As a writer of surrealist and magical realist fiction, Mojaffor Hossain must have already earned a signature name.

One can in no way spell out the psyche or the mind of people, which are replete with weird, unidentifiable, and unfamiliar kinds of violence, destructive acts, strange behaviours, and so on. It seems that the crimes and violence have become normal, the victims sometimes internalise the destiny of persecution. People seem to have started believing that this is how society has reformed and that they are destined to suffer. Mojaffor Hossain subtly sketches out these pictures in the landscape of his fictional world.

In *Between Two Lives*, the writer portrays the reality of Bangladesh in relation to how the people of the country have resorted to violence, depravity, greed, lust, corruption, extortion, killing, and so on. They are also taking all measures to achieve whatever they want at any cost, no

matter the means, whether illegal or if it costs someone else's life. Greed and gluttony of the people have reached such a stage that they seem to be worse than animals.

Readers must be flabbergasted at the very first line of one of Mojaffor Hossain's stories, in which he talks about someone dead talking to a stranger, someone rising up from the grave or a dead person drinking tea with other people in a tea stall. The story “The Flautist,” thus, begins, “I stumble upon Mozzel, today. To the best of my recollection, he had passed from this world some 15 years ago, either in May or June.” The narrator of the story meets Mozzel who died 15 years back, but they're walking together, talking about several subjects such as the sea, family, flute, etc. They talk as if it were a normal everyday conversation between two living persons. This is how the storyteller keeps readers awestruck and at some point the readers begin to internalise the matters as mundane happening in their routine. And in between such bizarre incidents occurring in the story, the writer also adds some truths which turn out to be universal, consequently becoming valuable quotes, “We cannot always expect to find clear reasons for death; it's not so straightforward.”

“The Spy” is a story of extreme injustice, deprivation, and exploitation. It is a story which depicts the real picture of Bangladesh, where dishonesty, misuse of power, tyranny, and occupation of others' resources are common. “The Spy” indeed represents, to some extent, the Liberation War, since the man who is doubted as a spy lost everything and everyone in the war.

Now alone, the main character of the story wanders as if he were a lunatic or the people have made him a lunatic.

“Between Two Lives,” the story after which the collection is titled, feels like watching a short film about memory, trauma, illness, family, and dilemma. Rahman, the central character of the story, goes through a state of delirium on the hospital bed, while his wife, sons, daughters-in-law plan on minimising the cost of his burial. The story can also be studied through the lens of psychoanalysis. “So Near, Yet So Far” is about dislocation during the Partition, when the subcontinent witnessed unprecedented riots, killings, burnings, and migration. It is the story of Hari, Mira, Shubir, Haradhon, and several others who were the victims of the division based on religion. While going down the memory lane, the characters also talk about politics, sports, and films of the two countries.

“Farewell to Poetry” is a wonderful story replete with wonder, magic, and twists. Vyada, who is known as a poet in the village, has a deep connection to land and river. Coming from a poor family, he sits by the river and composes poetry, but the way of his writing is not common—he rarely writes using words; he composes poetry in his imagination using sound, smell, and scenes. The villagers sometimes chide him and his wife for his strange way of leading his life and writing poetry. One evening, he goes out to the river to write poetry but never returns. But the interesting part of the story is that the narrator meets Vyada at his home, talks to him and seeks his poems for his magazine, although he was no more. Misri, the poet's wife, acknowledges that he has

gone to God but she also says that he's around. The story ends with two notes: “Note-1: Once Misri Shundori shared her heart with Vyada to deliver poems. She herself became his poetry today. Note-2: Most probably, Vyada's passing was the best poetry he could ever create.”

The other stories in the collection such as “A River Story” and “Bonsai Baba,” among a few others, move readers in a variety of ways. *Between Two Lives*, to justifiably comment, is a collection of well crafted stories, which have a lot of qualities to both entertain and enlighten readers. Moreover, the stories also evoke thoughts as the contemporary society enmeshed with the normal and paranormal reality is depicted in the stories.

The translation has a good flow of reading as the translator has attempted to keep to the essence of the original, and at the same time, he has tried to maintain readability in the target language. Just a few glitches are noticeable, especially in the cases of word selection, spellings, and structures. They're maybe typos, but still a more serious and sincere copyediting could have made the collection better. But *Between Two Lives* is doubtless a commendable piece of literary work, which merits wider readership.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

‘Reuters-er Dingulo’: A must-read masterpiece

Review of ‘Reuters-er Dingulo’ (University Press Limited, 2025) by Serajul Islam Quadir

JAGLUL ALOM

It is a known fact that not all historical documents, even memoirs of prominent politicians, researchers, authors, or historians, are prepared from a purely objective viewpoint. Every author brings their own perspective and analysis, shaped by a different outlook. It is often observed that history, written by the winners and the defeated groups, is always contradictory. Seldom do the winners genuinely incorporate the views and analysis of the defeated, and vice versa. This inherent conflict is a primary cause of distortion and manipulation of historical facts.

The only way to achieve an objective understanding of historical facts and analysis is to find a researcher or narrator who is non-partisan, unbiased, and was a direct participant or observer of the events. Ideally, this individual should have no personal or practical interest in the background and impact of the actions. While they may be a direct stakeholder, they must possess the courage to accept the reality and consequences of the events.

When I read *Reuters-er Dingulo* by Serajul Islam Quadir, it had three immediate



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

impacts on me: As a journalist and fact-collector during the same time frame (though not near his degree of capability), I was immediately visualising the events. I was mesmerised by his competence and felt deep nostalgia for the period. Following, I clearly understood that as a practicing journalist, I had missed and lost a host of important events and crucial reviews of the situations. Additionally, I felt a touch of jealousy toward Quadir and frustration with myself because I could not match even a quarter of his work ethic.

In his book, Quadir collected and narrated events from a pivotal and tumultuous period in Bangladeshi history, covering a long span of 23 years. His method involved physically visiting locations, taking detailed notes, and interviewing significant personalities of the time. He skillfully leveraged his position in an internationally leading news agency, extracting every possible drop of potential information—an effort that many seniors, past and present, either intentionally missed or did not spare the time for as an “extra job without pay.”

Quadir's script chronicles Bangladeshi history spanning the period 1996-2019, covering most major events. This includes

political behaviours and transitions, general, local, and institutional elections, important socio-economic developments, the relationships between major political parties, and the frequent ups and downs of the economy. He analyses the background and possible impacts using his interviews and studies, examining the peculiar character of the national media, along with many other areas that I don't have the space or memory to mention.

The book blends this wealth of information with literary excellence, making the entire script a masterpiece on contemporary issues of national and international importance—a true standout among the writings of that era.

If anyone wants to delve into the past, including the events and the masterful analysis, Quadir's book is a must-read script. It provides authentic information and important data, substantiated by a series of interviews and non-biased fact sheets. Students, researchers, and political enthusiasts will undoubtedly find it to be a gold mine for their respective works.

Jaglut Alom is a veteran journalist, a noted author, and a senior researcher.