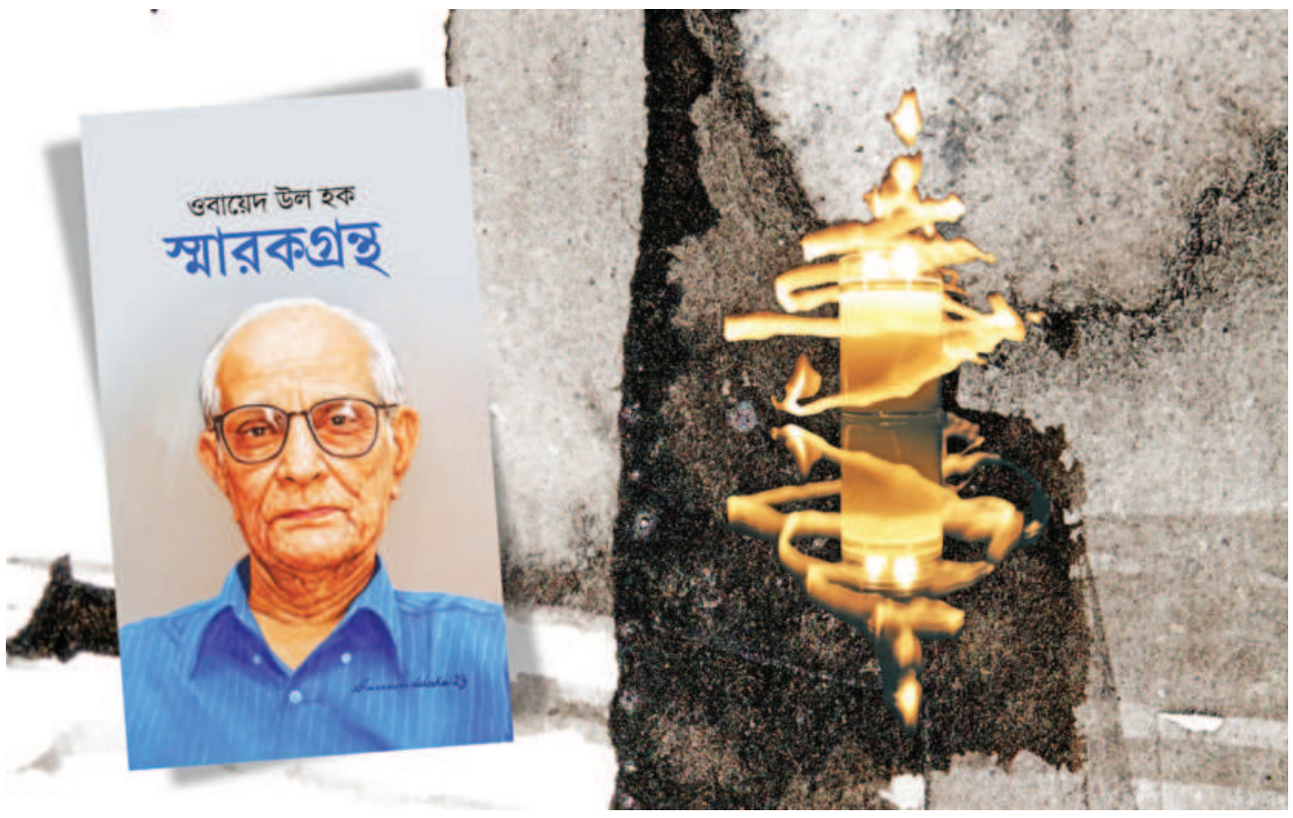
BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

The boss I might have had

Review of 'Obaidul Huq Sharokgrantha' (Anyaprakash, Dhaka, 2026), edited by Serajul Islam Choudhury

KAISER HAQ



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

The late Obaidul Huq (1911-2007) is well known to those interested in our cultural history. He was a journalist, film maker, poet, fiction writer, and playwright. Many remember him for his long association from 1951 with *The Pakistan Observer,* of which he was Joint Editor. When the country gained independence and the paper was rechristened as *The Bangladesh Observer,* he became Editor and held the position till 1984.

During these 35 years *Observer* was the country's leading English-language newspaper. I grew up with it; that was in the '50s and '60s. I would pounce on it to feast on the day's Rip Kirby comic strip before carrying it to father. I felt I had a special connection with the paper because of my father and Mr Obaidul Huq (Kaka to me). My father was an occasional contributor to the paper and Obaidul Huq Kaka was like an elder brother to him.

I found out that Kaka was the Uncle Kim who looked after the Young Observers page. Before long, I essayed a trifle or two that appeared in it. But more than the pleasure of seeing my name in print was the experience of calling on Kaka at his office. The paper occupied a floor in a colonial era building in Sadarghat that also housed the local branch of Lloyds Bank. Kaka greeted me with a kind smile and said some encouraging things that meant the world to me. I have heard from several other friends how Kaka's encouragement sped them along in their writing careers. Many of the contributors to this volume of memorial tributes bear testimony to Kaka's humane mentoring role.

Many of the pieces in the book gratefully acknowledge Kaka's mentoring role among our film makers and film critics. It is worth noting that the most substantial essay is by Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury. His vast knowledge of our cultural history comes into play in his insightful account.

By the time I went up to university I was writing more "serious" stuff and contemplating a career in writing. Hemingway and Sartre were my heroes. Hemingway began his writing life as a reporter and journalistic nonfiction would become a significant part of his oeuvre. Shouldn't I follow in his footsteps? When I finished my MA I considered approaching Kaka to ask if he would take me on. Before I did so the editor of the present volume, Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, then Chairman of Dhaka University's English department, offered me a lectureship. And I took it. But when Kaka left *Observer* and took up the editorship of the short-lived Daily News (1984-87), he asked me to write a weekly column. I did so under the pen name Max. So I did have Kaka as a boss after all, albeit briefly, and part-time.

This memorial volume is a significant publication for several reasons. It enables us to form a clear impression of the life and times of a personality marked by intellectual and artistic adventurousness, an admirable commitment to civic values, and disdain for careerism. His initial plan was to follow in his father's footsteps and make a career in law. He went to Kolkata. He had cleared the preliminary examination in law and was preparing for the finals when a totally unexpected development landed him in the civil service.

His father had passed away prematurely, a victim of cholera. One of his father's closest friends, Mukund Bihari Mullick, who was a highly placed bureaucrat, sought him out and offered him a lucrative civil service job. He couldn't say no. He took the job, got a promotion within a year, and stayed on till the end of the Second World War. Meanwhile he had been writing regularly in various newspapers and periodicals. The man-made famine of 1943 moved him to write a story, "Dukkhe Jader Jibon Gora". It came out in the Eid supplement of the mass-circulation daily *Azad* and was well received.

But the writer was not satisfied. The printed word reached only the educated classes. A popular medium like film could reach the masses. He had already become an ardent cine enthusiast. He recognised the tremendous potential of this modern art form. Serious writers worldwide came to the same realisation: V S Naipaul, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, to name just a few. Obaidul Huq Kaka took a leap into uncertainty, gave up his safe job, and set about turning his story into a film. He scripted, produced and directed it. He signed up a few well known actors, like Jauhar Ganguly. Then the riots of 1946 broke out and everything was put on hold.

When an uneasy peace was restored, Jauhar Ganguly refused to come back unless he was paid more. A lesser spirit would have given up in despair. Kaka persisted, and the film was ready for release. It was the first full-length feature film made by a Bengali Muslim. But the time was so fraught with communal discord that it couldn't be released with Muslim names in the credits. Kaka became Himadri Choudhury; and the actor Fateh Lohani became Kiran Kumar. The disguise worked. The film made it into a list of the year's 10 best films. Sadly, not a single copy of the prints has survived the dislocation of partition.

Many of the pieces in the book gratefully acknowledge Kaka's mentoring role among our film makers and film critics. It is worth noting that the most substantial essay is by Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury. His vast knowledge of our cultural history comes into play in his insightful account. A number of pieces by Kaka's family members add an intimate touch, while the selection from Kaka's own writings affords us the pleasure of admiring afresh his wit and humour and insight into human nature. Anyaprokash has given us a handsome volume, but the copy-editing ought to have been better.

Kaiser Haq *is a Bangladeshi poet, translator, essayist, critic, and academic.*

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A cosmopolitan at heart: Reading Shamsul Bari's autobiography

Review of Shamsul Bari's 'Amar Jibonsritir Jhanpi' (University Press Limited, 2025)

SADMAN AHMED SIAM



ILLUSTRATOR: MAHMUDA EMDAD

"Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."

—*Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche

In *Amar Jibonsritir Jhanpi,* activist and lawyer Shamsul Bari acts as the most ardent student of this statement by Nietzsche. In this autobiography, he takes us on a journey through his life and shows how he saw both the yin and the yang—the darkest parts of the human soul, along with the most irrationally beautiful parts—and, most importantly, how he never became a monster himself, despite looking at those monstrosities in the human soul.

It is difficult to simply categorise *Amar Jibonsritir Jhanpi* as a mere autobiography. It is simultaneously a journey through history, geography, and political science. Born in 1941, Bari witnessed the Partition of 1947, and the catastrophe it induced in both parts of Bengal. He recalls his father helping the Hindu community in an increasingly communal Pakistan in its early years, and with that hands-on lesson, he became sympathetic to the plight of refugees fleeing persecution, perhaps foreshadowing his later activities serving at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

This autobiography is not only a story about Shamsul Bari, but also the story of the origin and development of his beloved country, Bangladesh. As an expatriate living in the United States of America, Bari played a significant role during the Liberation War of 1971. The frontline freedom fighters have been remembered in popular literature and art, and justifiably so, because they were the heroes whose blood secured the independence of Bangladesh. But the countless individuals who fought abroad to steer the foreign policies of different countries and helped to secure the recognition of Bangladesh internationally remain a less discussed part of history

Bari recounts the initiatives he took to inspire US citizens to take the side of Bangladesh through protests, demonstrations, and other creative activities such as producing newsletters. It is hard to overstate the value of these. The USA was one of the largest suppliers of arms to Pakistan, and it wanted Pakistan to remain united, even in the face of genocide. Protesting their policy and even forcing them to change it was a victory for the sovereign Bangladesh. The documentation of this effort is one of the most crucial parts of the book.

As previously stated, Bari was associated with the UNHCR, including as the Regional Director for Central Asia, Southwest Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, and in that role, he went to different conflict-ridden regions such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Tamil regions of Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Afghanistan, etc., to save refugees fleeing turmoil. In rescuing refugees from these areas, offering them legal protection under the UN framework, and helping build their lives in a safe region, Bari unravels stories which seem unbelievable and reflect the innumerable complexities of human societies in different countries.

Bari takes us through the most crooked part of the human psyche and shows us how communalism and racism lead to human beings massacring nations after nations. He shows us how fragile our civilisation really is, how easily it falters and how it takes only one fake news story, or in the modern world, a fake photo or video, to rile up anger and hatred against certain communities. He tells us story after story of cruel steps taken by the refugees to survive their plight. These disturbing details are bound to make one depressed about the current world we live in.

But, at the same time, Bari also shows us hope—the profound humanity shown by many, and how one simple act of kindness can stop decades of bloodshed. His anecdotes also demonstrate how the states, if they want, can contribute to making human lives more peaceful. It is easy to look at the situation and believe that the world is beyond fixing, but it is also worth remembering that it is the choices of human beings which can shape and change the world. Cruelty does not differentiate between race, ethnicity or nation, and neither does kindness.

Bari's autobiography also has the potential to change the reader's minds on the United Nations as well. As an organisation, the UN has a negative reputation in different third-world countries. Bari does not deny their criticism, but rather offers a plausible explanation of the limitations and restrictions the UN can operate under. He defends the role of the UN as a balancing force in an increasingly polarising world, while acknowledging that it has failed to save citizens of the world in many cases. Anyone who is critical of the United Nations as an organisation should have a listen to what Bari has to say as an insider of the UN. The United Nations, for him, represents a possibility of the nations of the earth coming together to solve problems that humanity collectively faces, and in the age of climate change and AI, which have the potential to destroy the human race altogether, these collective actions are needed the most.

After his activities in the UN, Bari came back to Bangladesh and joined the most formidable intellectual institutions Bangladesh has, such as Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust. Through RIB, he has been involved with seemingly small but revolutionary improvements in the lives of citizens of Bangladesh, such as erasing Monga, a yearly cyclical event of hunger and poverty primarily in the greater Rangpur region of Bangladesh and establishing the Right to Information Act, 2009. The most fascinating aspect of his activities is establishing the Kajoli Learning Model, a community-driven education framework, which was later extended to include vulnerable communities such as the Bedes (river nomads) and floating child workers. His tireless effort to make the rural citizens of Bangladesh self-sufficient is exemplary, and this book would remain as an archive on how to think about such initiatives and sustain them for future social activists.

The book ends with the love of his life, Supriya Sen, later Supriya Bari. Although she has a chapter dedicated to her at the end of the book, her presence can be felt throughout Bari's life at every stage. Married in the United States during her tenure as a teacher at the University of Minnesota, she was a talented academic and artist in her own right. She had been a constant support to Bari up until her death in 2013. She was a Rabindrasangeet artist, and Bari's last chapter is a dedication to her as well as Rabindranath. In her memory, Bari built an old home called Sayantan at Gazipur.

In his heart, Bari is a cosmopolitan. His internationalist approach is what allows him to see through the illusions of borders and barriers and see all human beings as deserving of equal dignity, still a radical idea in the period when our notion of justice and humanism is becoming more and more selective. The road to universal equality is hard, but it is through human beings like Bari that we are able to move toward that goal one step at a time. *Amar Jibonsritir Jhanpi* is a must-read for anyone who wants to be more empathetic and kinder, and to learn how, even when looking at the face of utmost destruction, a person can hope and dream for a better world.

Sadman Ahmed Siam *is a contributor at Star Books and Literature.*