ESSAY

A century of Abu Ishaque and the persistence of the human spirit

ABDUS SELIM

A century after his birth on November 1, 1926, Abu Ishaque remains a paradox in Bangla literature: a writer of modest output and extraordinary literary reach. His three novels—*Shurjo-Dighal Bari* (1955), *Padmar Palidwip* (1986), and the detective novel *Jaal* (1988)—attest to a literary imagination less concerned with prolific production than with the moral anatomy of society. His achievement was not merely to portray the marginalised but to make those whom history routinely overlooks its most eloquent witnesses. His varied career in administration, policing, intelligence, and diplomacy sharpened his understanding of human psychology, particularly the hidden transactions of authority: how people command obedience, disguise self-interest, manipulate beliefs, and persuade the vulnerable that their suffering is inevitable.

Born in rural Bengal, Ishaque lived through the devastating famine of 1943, Partition, and the turbulence of Pakistan's early decades. Yet his fiction seldom approaches these historical convulsions through political leaders or official narratives. Instead, he records their consequences in emptied kitchens, broken households, dispossessed cultivators, and women driven to the margins. For him, history is not simply what happens to a nation; it is what a nation permits to happen to its poorest citizens. His realism thus acquires a political dimension without surrendering its artistic independence.

In *Shurjo-Dighal Bari*, Ishaque's finest achievement, Jaigun's desperate search for food and shelter exposes the cruelty concealed within respectable social conventions. She must work to keep her children alive, but working outside the home invites condemnation for violating purdah. Society insists upon a woman's modesty while denying her the material conditions of survival. The contradiction is devastating: the very activities through which Jaigun fulfils her maternal responsibilities become grounds for her public humiliation. Here, survival itself becomes an act of defiance.

The supposedly ill-omened house crystallises the novel's larger argument. Its orientation is blamed for the family's misfortunes, while the tangible sources of suffering—hunger, patriarchal violence, social hostility, and economic dependency—escape scrutiny. A fakir's promise of supernatural protection converts fear into material profit. Superstition becomes more than mistaken belief; it functions as an ideological instrument that diverts attention from the structures of exploitation. The irony is unmistakable: the house is not cursed; the social order is diseased.

This relationship between belief and authority becomes particularly disturbing when religious functionaries collaborate with village headmen to enforce social obedience. Jaigun's compulsory public repentance before her daughter's wedding party demonstrates how religious rituals can be appropriated to discipline women whose poverty makes conformity impossible. Ishaque's target, however, is not faith itself but its calculated manipulation. His fictional society reveals something akin to Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony: domination sustained not merely through coercion but through the internalisation of beliefs that make inequality appear legitimate which is almost equal to self-subjugation of our women folk.

Ishaque nevertheless refuses the comforts of moral simplification. Jaigun is neither an immaculate heroine nor a self-conscious feminist. She resists injustice while occasionally reproducing the prejudices that sustain it, particularly in her attitudes towards marriage and the unequal social value assigned to sons and daughters. Her contradictions make her psychologically convincing. Emancipation in this novel is not an accomplished condition but an uneven struggle against the very assumptions that have shaped one's consciousness. Jaigun's rebellion is practical before it is philosophical.

Karim Bakhs, her brutal former husband, embodies another, equally compelling contradiction. Violent, possessive and deeply patriarchal, he initially appears an irredeemable villain. Yet his eventual sacrifice to protect Jaigun and her children transforms the reader's understanding of his character. This final act cannot absolve his earlier cruelty; rather, it reveals an unexpected capacity for humanity. Where Jaigun demonstrates remarkable continuity of purpose, Karim Bakhs undergoes a profound moral transformation. Ishaque thus challenges simplistic distinctions between virtuous victims and wicked oppressors. The oppressed may internalise oppression, while even the oppressor may discover compassion.



ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**

This complexity extends to Ishaque's representation of class. The poor are not invariably united, nor are they necessarily virtuous. Poverty produces suspicion, jealousy and rivalry as readily as solidarity. His village is consequently no pastoral sanctuary but a contested social world where landowners, religious intermediaries and local officials exercise power over those dependent upon them. Such realism reveals Ishaque's socialist sympathies without reducing his fiction to ideological propaganda.

Padmar Palidwip extends this inquiry from domestic shelter to the unstable geography of Bengal's riverine landscape. The Padma creates islands that erosion may subsequently erase; labour renders them productive, but power determines who possesses them. The house and the char thus become complementary symbols of precarious belonging. Nature provides land, human labour creates value, yet ownership remains governed by unequal social relationships. Both novels expose the distance between the elementary human need for security and the structures that perpetually frustrate it.

Ishaque's historical imagination is equally perceptive. His portrayal of Partition exposes the limitations of political emancipation when economic and social hierarchies remain intact. National boundaries may change, governments may fall and new political identities may emerge, but the struggles of landless peasants and destitute women can persist almost unchanged. Political independence, his fiction suggests, cannot be equated with social liberation.

I encountered another dimension of Ishaque's originality while translating *Shurjo-Dighal Bari* into English as *The Ill-Omened House*. His colloquial idioms, folk rhymes, religious expressions and socially differentiated voices presented formidable challenges. Their significance resides not merely in their literal meanings but in the cultural experiences they embody. To translate them mechanically would risk preserving information while extinguishing the vitality of the original.

More fundamentally, I confronted the relationship between grammatical tense and narrative time. Having travelled across different time zones, I had become conscious of the distinction between measurable time and its subjective experience. I therefore translated the first chapter predominantly in past tenses, since it establishes the narrative's antecedents. From the second chapter onwards, I adopted the narrative present, shifting into the past whenever necessary. My intention was not grammatical experimentation for its own sake but to recreate the immediacy and uncertainty through which Ishaque's characters experience their lives. Translation, I believe, demands fidelity not simply to words but to the movement of consciousness within a narrative.

At his centenary, Ishaque's relevance remains undiminished. Gender discrimination, religious manipulation, economic dispossession and environmental insecurity continue to trouble our society. Yet his greatest achievement transcends these immediate concerns. He recognised that human beings are neither wholly noble nor irredeemably corrupt, and that resilience must never become an excuse for the injustice that makes it necessary.

Jaigun's survival is heroic, but a society that demands heroism merely to stay alive stands morally condemned. The novel offers neither decisive victory nor comforting resolution. Its final movement affirms something more enduring: the unfinished struggle of human existence. Despite everything, they walk on.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

'LISTEN': Lending an ear to the stories of human trafficking survivors

Review of photobook 'LISTEN: True Accounts of Those Who Survived Human Trafficking', developed by Korea International Cooperation Agency

TIASHA IDRAK

One of the only few things that a person can truly call their own is their body. But what happens when that very body, their very being is controlled by another, to be torn away from their identities, treated as commodity, bought and sold for consumption? That is what it means to be human trafficked, to be sold across borders, have one's dignity stripped away from them, to be reduced to a commodity.

Every year, hundreds of Bangladeshis aspire to rebuild their lives and secure a better future by crossing borders. Behind every statistic on human trafficking, behind every number, lies a story—one of a human life shaped by deception, tragedy, exploitation, and loss.

LISTEN: True Accounts of Those Who Survived Human Trafficking is a photobook that brings these stories to light. Launched by International Organization for Migration (IOM) Bangladesh, the photobook focuses exclusively on the diverse realities of human trafficking, documented through powerful visual storytelling and first-hand survivor narratives. First of its kind in Bangladesh, the publication places the voices and experiences of human trafficking survivors at the centre of the conversation.

This publication was developed with the support of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) under the project "A Comprehensive Counter-Trafficking Programme in Bangladesh", implemented by IOM.

Conceptualised by Pooja Bhalla and Soumin Shahrid of IOM Bangladesh, the photobook features the photographs by Soumin Shahrid. The documentation of the stories was done by Catherine Northing, Pooja Bhalla, Disha Sonata Faruque, Amal Biswas, Tarek Mahmud, Soumin Shahrid, and Fabiha Noshin, all from IOM Bangladesh. The publication was designed by Najnin Jahan Khan of Drik, which also handled its production in Bangladesh.

The book features the stories of 22 survivors of human trafficking. All of the stories in the book are narrated by the survivors themselves, including men and women of different ages, hailing from different corners of the country. Most of them come from humble backgrounds, many of whom had their lands swallowed by the river, some had been struggling with unemployment. Most, if not all of them, had been battling poverty, which compelled them to work as migrant workers in the first place. And it was during these vulnerable periods of their lives that they came across a dalal (referring to a middleman or intermediary) who is involved in recruitment processes linked to smuggling and trafficking. They play the role of a friend, a well-wisher, promising a dignified future and stable income. Sometimes it is one's own family members.



ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

Most of the survivors featured in the publication were trafficked to the Middle East or SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa), while others were trafficked to India and other neighbouring countries. In the Middle East, the dalals betrayed the survivors and sold them to kafeels (sponsor or employer), taking away their passports and stealing their income, and trapping them in a life of physical, emotional and sexual torment and servitude. In its introduction, the photobook states that the kafeel is central to the Kafala system, a labour sponsorship framework in several Arab states that ties a worker's legal status to the employer, which enables these employers to have complete control over the movement, employment and personal freedom of the workers—a total control over their lives.

On its cover photo, the book features the picture of a single ear. A woman's ear, to be precise. Above the picture is the title, *LISTEN*, typed in red. The cover is meant to be striking, to catch the eyes of any onlooker, beckoning them to lend an ear. Beckoning them to listen to the voices of the victims of human trafficking, the ones who have seen the horrors and have returned to tell the tale.

The book includes the stories of Latif, Mukta, Shabana, Rano, Salma, Masum, Robiul, Noor, Jannat, Ali, Putul, Farhana, Jhumur, Beli, Hashi, Nupur, among others. All of them had dreamt of building a better life, only to have their dignity and dreams trampled upon in the maws of trafficking. These stories however are not only about violence and exploitation the victims had faced abroad, but they also reveal yet another price of trafficking, the enduring trauma, silence and stigma that chase around the survivors long after their return.

Each story is paired with a picture of the survivor, a translucent sheet in between. These sheets are not for mere decorative purposes. They carry quotes from the survivors, their agony inked in red. The photographs obscure the faces of the survivors for their protection, but the way in which it is done varies. The team behind the publication explained that every photographic manipulation, whether achieved through the camera or during post-processing, was entirely deliberate. The testimony of the survivor impacted all of it.

This is an excerpt. Read the full review on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature websites.

Tiasha Idrak *is drowning in a swamp of her own thoughts at the moment. She writes and daydreams, the latter is more applicable most of the time. She is still trying to come up with a proper author's bio. Tell her to stop procrastinating at tiashaidrak27@gmail.com.*