

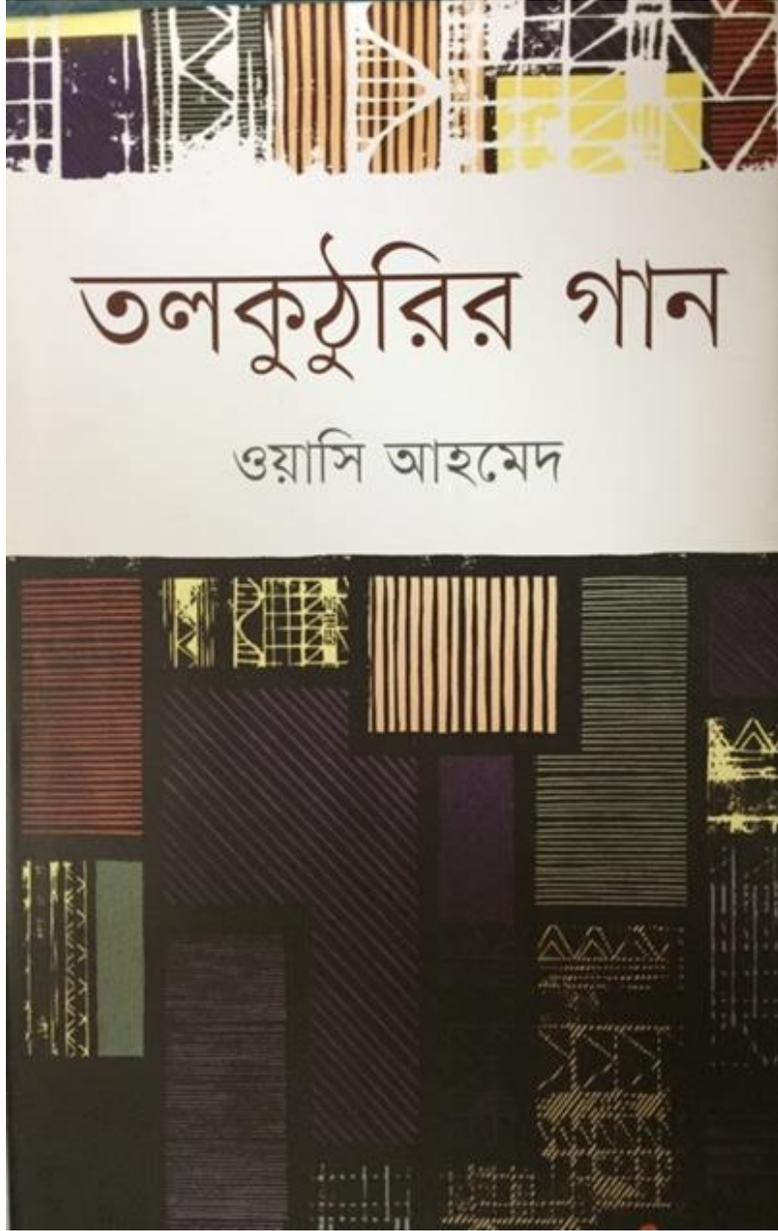
Book Review

**Forgotten past and songs from the abyss**

***Tolkuthurir Gaan* by Wasi Ahmed**

*Prothoma Prokashan, Dhaka, February, 2015*

**Reviewed by Jamil A Chowdhury**



Acclaimed for his short stories, Wasi Ahmed has celebrated his distinctive fictional craft in larger canvas as well – in his novel *Tolkuthurir Gaan* (Songs from the Abyss), published in the *Amor Ekushe Book Fair*, 2015. In the foreword, Ahmed briefly informs his readers that although the storyline owes to historical events spanning over fifty-plus years in the early twentieth century centering on the notorious Nankar system in the eastern region of undivided India (now part of Bangladesh), the novel is not a historical one in the conventional sense of the term. He has taken bits and pieces of the factual events from what was available from records, including from biographic materials, but the scheming of the book is entirely a work of imagination.

The term Nankar sounds too remote to discern what it stood for in those days. Simply put, it means land slaves – not the kind one encounters in Alex Halley's novel *Roots*. It may seem strange to many these days that land slavery was in practice in parts of eastern India, now the greater district of Sylhet in Bangladesh and Karimganj in India (then part of Sylhet) even before the Mughals came to rule India. The term Nankar is derived from Persian words Nan and kar. Nan means Bread and Kar means service. So Nankar was a person who gave his service, also the service of his family members, to Zamindars (feudal landlords) in exchange of bread --

though in course of time bread became illusory. The Nankar was a wretched person who had no land of his own for cultivation or for construction of home and hearth. The person was a saleable commodity along with landed property. The land revenue system which prevailed in medieval Sylhet gave the shape of Nankar system which continued through out the British period until the partition of India in 1947.

These groups of people, aided by left-leaning activists, mustered enough courage to rise against their masters which eventually turned into a long, unrelenting uprising. It was purely a subaltern uprising, not just one, but a series succeeding one after another over a period of some twenty years. These historical details are only obliquely referred to in the novel, and Wasi Ahmed makes these references in course of the well over 250-page book, while building and reinforcing his storyline about a Nankar family in a long drawn chronicle of loss, defeat, fury, empathy and love across three generations of his characters. This is a deftly done job handled with care (caution as well!) and precision. History, despite its presence, merrily makes way for the storyline to fork out to various dimensions involving large number of characters.

The setting of the story, its beginning to be precise, was at a time when the world was in great turbulence. The First World War had

ended, and a second one with its seeds just planted was set to sprout. In India itself, things were worse than ever before. While the impact of the war was there, it was the political situation that looked like for ever shrouded in uncertainty. The dismantling of the Turkish Khilafat fuelling the so called Khilafat movement in the sub-continent, division of the Indian Congress Party, birth of the Muslim League, Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, quit India movement, Hindu-Muslim riot in then Calcutta, the referendum and many more made things so uncertain and chaotic that the Nankar uprising in spite of its pervasive character was barely able draw attention from conscientious quarters, let alone those in authority.

Here is something the novel attempts to bring home strongly: it was a long battle fought, lost repeatedly, still fought—with no one actually caring amid the clamor of all hues. In fact, this constitutes the tragedy of the long-fought battle, and indeed the message the novelist wanted the readers to see through. The ultimate tragedy is that despite the bloodshed and repeated repression of the Nankars by the Zamindars and their lackeys -- the police, the uprising that grew fiercely intense in the closing hours of the partition did not see the end of its fate. Following the partition, Sylhet -- home to the uprising for decades -- came under the eastern wing of just-

independent Pakistan, and in less than two years the Nankar system was abolished.

What did that mean for the Nankars -- being freed at last? They had fought for long, but it was not the fight, but a freak of history that turned things around. What then their bloodshed was for?

Wasi Ahmed tells the story through so many characters. A good deal, however, is recounted by the third generation member of the family – Sharif, who remembers bits and pieces of what he heard from his father as a child. And more than anything, he remembers the scrappy tune of a song – barely audible and difficult to make sense – which his father used to hum in his frail voice. As a grown up man, educated and nurtured in corporate culture, Sharif at one point of his life finds it difficult to get along with his urban middleclass lifestyle, haunted by the ordeal his parents, grand parents and his sister went through. He feels stuck, uninspired to further his career, and even becomes indifferent to his wife and children. In his lingering obsession, he feels drawn to the workers' unrest in his workplace, and in his fancy, he sees it as a modern parallel to his forefathers' ordeal, more than hundred years ago. This is one way he tries to build a renewed kinship with his forefathers. Simultaneously, the long lost faint humming of his father – frail from old age -- occupies him more than anything.

In his narration Wasi Ahmed has often resorted to wit and humor—tools that essentially characterize his writings elsewhere as well. There are occasional reliefs in descriptions, especially in chapters where he creates the atmosphere in details. There are fascinating episodes beautifully told. One such striking episode is a ten mile-long road march of village women with blazing kerosene lanterns held aloft in broad daylight seeking an audience with the British district administrator. The lanterns in flame under the mid-day hot sun held over their heads is symbolic in that it is intended to tell the district administrator that he doesn't have eyes to see the sufferings of the Nankars. The description that occupies a whole long chapter is captivating, to say the least. It is in this road march that one of the powerful female characters of the novel Ambia emerges with a power and blast of energy that best suits the occasion. In a way, Ambia is one of the key figures Wasi Ahmed has chosen to tell a major part of the story. Prominent among others with key roles to carry the story forward are Sharif, his father Sukurchand and mother Motijan. Sharif's wife Munira occupies a significant space in a different setting that allows the readers to delve into the obsessive, at times sickening and wild temperament of her husband caught between urban modernity and primitive slavery—between feudal slavery and capitalistic slavery.

The most curious aspect of the book is that there are stories within stories, heart rending and masterfully crafted. They don't stray away being well planted into the heart of the long tale of three generations. Although the storyline begins in early twentieth century, it closes in with a scathing modern parallel from our contemporary times.

All this scribe has attempted here is a sketchy outline of the book. It deserves more, far more to be able to lend a deeper insight into the writer's motivation in approaching a lost narrative of human tragedy and the craft with which he handles it. A commendable mix of history and gifted imagination.

*The writer, a free lancer, lives in Dhaka.*

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