

Love and loss

BROWSER'S CORNER

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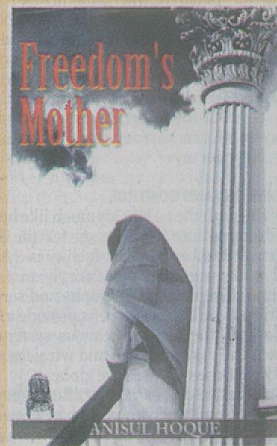
When Safia Begum walked out of the New Eskaton mansion in the middle of the night with her young son to protest her husband's second marriage, she had no clue that the war in her bedroom would soon merge with the war for liberation in Bangladesh. Way before feminism arrived in Bangladesh, Safia Begum held on to her dignity, turning her back on the security of lavish property.

Anisul Hoque's book, *Freedom's Mother*, is as much a testament to the tragedy of the Bangladesh War of 1971, as the story of Safia Begum and her uncompromising personal battle. Her only child, Azad, joins the guerrilla campaign for liberation, and she does not hold him back. After he is captured by Pakistani troops, Safia Begum meets him in jail and tells him not to give away his friend's name — whatever the cost he may have to bear — blowing away her only chance to save him.

The novel starts with the words, "Azad's mother died last evening. Exactly fourteen years after Pakistani soldiers took Azad away. Today is her burial." Right from the beginning, Safia Begum is defined as Azad's mother, and not as anyone's wife or sister. Her motherhood remains her prime identity over the rest of the pages. Safia Begum's burial ceremony has been given a poetic rendition, with the monsoon showers described as raindrops from heaven, filling the air with "fresh fragrance and a solitary cloud floating around".

The book moves in a circle, opening with a burial ceremony and ending with the same, and what transpires in between is seen through the eyes of surviving freedom fighters. All of them are living in the memory of 1971. Nostalgia, laments, regrets and repentance crowd their mind, unsettling their conscience. Grim and poetic, the author romanticises the conflict, interspersing with poetry and melodic exaggeration. Safia Begum's long wait for her son and her loneliness are sketched to perfection. The sensibility of the novel is very sub-continental. We are told that Safia Begum did not touch a grain of rice from the day Azad went

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missing, because her son's last wish had been a meal of home-cooked rice, which was never fulfilled. Based on a true account, and sprinkled with vivid imagery, Anisul Hoque's work underlines personal tragedies with historical accuracy. It is a story of the human cost of war as seen through the eyes of a mother.