

OUTLLINE OF *TALES OF FLOWERS, TREES AND BIRDS*,
by AHMED SOFA (Dhaka, 1996, 80 pages)
Translated by Mary Frances Dunham

Note: In order to be as brief as possible, this outline includes only typical anecdotes, often chosen at random. Because it is difficult to convey the gentle satire and inner meanings of Ahmed Sofa's descriptions without citing whole passages, this outline is limited to mentioning the events narrated in the book. The book's text contains references to Bengali historical figures and writers, past and present. These references are also omitted in this outline, with the exception of Rabindranath Tagore. Sofa refers to historical events following the Bangladesh War of Liberation (1971). The translator suggests that historical and cultural notes be included in the publication of the translation, and that illustrations of the plants, birds and tools mentioned in the text should also be included. The translator has divided the text into chapters; the text in Bengali has no such divisions.

Chapter 1: A New Home

Ahmed Sofa, a well-known poet, novelist and activist living in Dhaka, reluctantly lets his friends move him to a roof-top apartment which they have found for him because they want to take over his former flat for themselves. Fortunately he is pleasantly surprised with his new home. He is especially pleased with the roof-top terrace overlooking his neighborhood and the city beyond. Standing there he feels that he is a part of the universe in its natural and man-built manifestations. His former landlady and new landlord are among the characters which he depicts with humor. The landlady has little formal education but much common sense. The landlord has considerable education, but is foolishly enslaved in the rules of conventional society.

Chapter 2: Terrace Garden

The young man whom Sofa treats as a son discovers sprouts of plants growing out of the terrace floor and sets about to save them. Sofa at first sees no point in this, but gradually becomes enamored of the project. Eventually the terrace becomes covered in flowers. Birds flock there at seed time. During this time Sofa

acquires a *shalik*-bird (type of mynah) which becomes a close friend. Stories about this bird and other birds are featured later in the book.

Chapter 3: The Apple Tree

Sofa reminisces about the vines and trees which he planted in the yard of his former residence. He describes how the apple tree communicated with him showing sympathy when he mourned for the death of a close relative. He remembers that when he went to Calcutta one time he dreamed that the apple tree was weeping. He hurried back home to find that the lime he had been advised to put on the roots of the tree was killing it. He describes how he saved the tree.

Chapter 4: Sofa Farmer

Sofa remembers his adventures when he lived at the Dhaka University International Hostel in the 1980's. The radical newspaper, of which Sofa was a co-founder, was failing. As Sofa returns from the newspaper's office in a depressed state he spies a trampled eggplant sprout and brings it home to the hostel. He plants the sprout near the hostel wall and to his surprise it revives. This leads him to buy and plant a few seedlings of eggplant. Gradually through fascination he is drawn into a whole farming enterprise. Growing plants restores faith in himself and a new life begins for him. In the initial stage of his farming he has a misadventure with one of the snobbish ladies of the hostel due to a leak in his hose.

Chapter 5: Planting Begins

With the help of two young sons of a couple living at the hostel, Sofa digs up a section of the vacant field which lies in front of the hostel and they plant one hundred eggplant seedlings. The hostel warden tells Sofa that it is illegal to use the university land for this purpose, but Sofa dismisses his warning without qualms. Students and teachers passing by are so fascinated with seeing the farming going on that some of them volunteer help with the digging. Sofa remarks that he has initiated a "game of peasanthood" among these people who have forgotten their ancestral roots in the soil of the Bengali countryside.

Chapter 6: The Invaders

Sofa's plants start to flourish. Serious trouble begins when cows, goats and insects invade the garden. Sofa describes how he combats each type of invasion. One of

the invading goats belongs to an eminent professor who is still teaching today. (The characters in the book are all real and Sofa uses their actual names unaltered.)

Chapter 7: A Flourishing Garden

With the help of the two young boys and with the advice from the plant seller and friends, Sofa's garden has grown in size and contains not only eggplants but other vegetables as well. A man usually revered because he looks like a *maulvi* (Muslim pastor) turns out to be a skilled farmer and shows the amateurs how to bind the cabbages.

Chapter 8: Sultan School

During this period in Sofa's life he meets with a journalist who has the same love of plants and children as Sofa. Together they start a school for children in the neighboring slum. Sofa describes how he inveigles the Islamic Foundation into giving money to erect a school building. He names it after a famous Bangladeshi painter, Sultan, who came from impoverished circumstances like the slum children and whose genius Sofa was the first in Bangladesh to recognize.

Chapter 9: Harvest Feast

The time has come to harvest the produce of the garden. Sofa decides to have a feast for the slum children. He tricks the wives of the professors living in his hostel into doing the cooking by telling them he is going to get married. The children and their parents do most of the preparation. When the high-class ladies get their turn to eat they tease Sofa mercilessly.

Chapter 10: Garden Predators

Sofa is obliged to go to his village near Chittagong to settle a family land issue. During this time he has a dream that his plants are suffering. He telephones his journalist friend who confirms that plants have been destroyed. On returning to Dhaka, Sofa finds that someone allowed their cows into his garden. He remarks that such crimes caused by jealousy exist in rural areas, but should not appear in the "high citadel of learning" which is Dhaka.

Chapter 11: Sarada-babu

Sofa reminisces about Sarada-babu, his elementary school teacher in his village near Chittagong. He depicts how this excellent, amiable man would go mad

during the winter months. When in this state he would run wild around the countryside talking to trees. Sofa depicts the madness and how the family dealt with Sarada during these periods. Sofa feels he learned the language of trees from this man. During the presidency of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, before his assassination, the teacher naively told Sofa to deliver a message to the Sheikh urging him to change his political slogan. Sofa fails to deliver the message and Sarada-babu blames Sofa for the murder that occurred.

Chapter 12: The Tagore Tree

Sofa remembers more childhood stories having to do with plants and birds. He tells about an exceptionally large and productive mango tree near the house where he grew up. He loved the tree for its lofty height, its delicious mangoes, and how it was a home for birds. He made the tree his own by naming it after the poet Rabindranath Tagore. The naming got him into a fight with his older sister because she claimed he was silly. While he was away with his mother attending a wedding, the tree was cut down because it threatened to crush his house if blown down in one of the storms that beset his area. He describes his grief.

Chapter 13: My *Shalik*-child and Other Birds

Sofa tells about a pet *shalik* that he had during his childhood in his village home. He remembers how he mourned the death of this bird. He also tells the story of a pet parrot which he had during his early years of living at the International Hostel. The parrot's wings had been clipped by the vendor. Sofa tells how he used to carry it around with him by wearing a ground-length shawl which the parrot could use as a ladder to climb up to his shoulder. (The jacket of the book contains a photograph of this.) Sofa describes the *shalik* which lives on his present terrace and the deep relationship that he cultivates with it. It escapes one day, but eventually returns. Meanwhile crows have taken to visiting his terrace. He feeds them regularly at breakfast time. He describes how he resolved the dilemma of feeding different kinds of birds, including his *shalik*, at the same time.

Chapter 14: More About my *Shalik* and Other Birds

Sofa describes how his *shalik* returns to his terrace, this time with a "bride." By now, more varieties of birds are feeding on the terrace. Sofa describes in poetic detail each of the regular visitors: *bulbulis* (song birds), *doels* (doves), a "yellow bird" (Golden Oriole), *koels* (cuckoos), sparrows, and crows.

Chapter 15: The Sparrows

A sparrow couple boldly builds a nest behind a picture of Tagore which hangs on a wall in Sofa's writing room. Sofa asks his cook-friend, Idris, to clear it away, but Idris refuses on the grounds that his wife is expecting a baby which could be affected by harm done to the nest. On returning from Rajshahi on a stormy day, Sofa finds his room flooded with rain water and the picture and nest floating in it. Again Idris refuses to throw the nest away. When Sofa touches the nest, he finds baby birds have been born. From then on he succumbs to allowing the sparrows to desecrate the picture of Tagore with their nesting activities.

Chapter 16: More Crows

The problem of feeding different varieties of birds increases, especially because the crows are so rapacious. Sofa reminisces about a fable in which a crow devises a way to get water from deep in a jug. The crows mysteriously cease to come for the breakfast he provides. He thinks about a Bengali custom in which crows are fed at funerals. If they do not eat the ritual food, this signifies that there are some debts unpaid. His adopted son notices that ravens, generally rare in Dhaka, are arriving in increasing numbers from the countryside and are chasing the crows away at feeding time. Sadly Sofa observes that poor people in Dhaka are invaded by the rich in the same way. He ends the book with the observation that jealousies and bullying exist in the bird kingdom just as these traits exist among humans. He resolves to return his thoughts and energy to the world of humans where he, since he is a human, belongs. At the same time he is grateful to plants and birds for the sensitivity to the many wonders of the universe that they taught him. He is especially grateful for his close relationship with his "*shalik*-son," a relationship in which both parties are emancipated because they have emancipated each other. He compares the joy of this relationship to "*amrita shamudra*," a sea of heavenly nectar.