

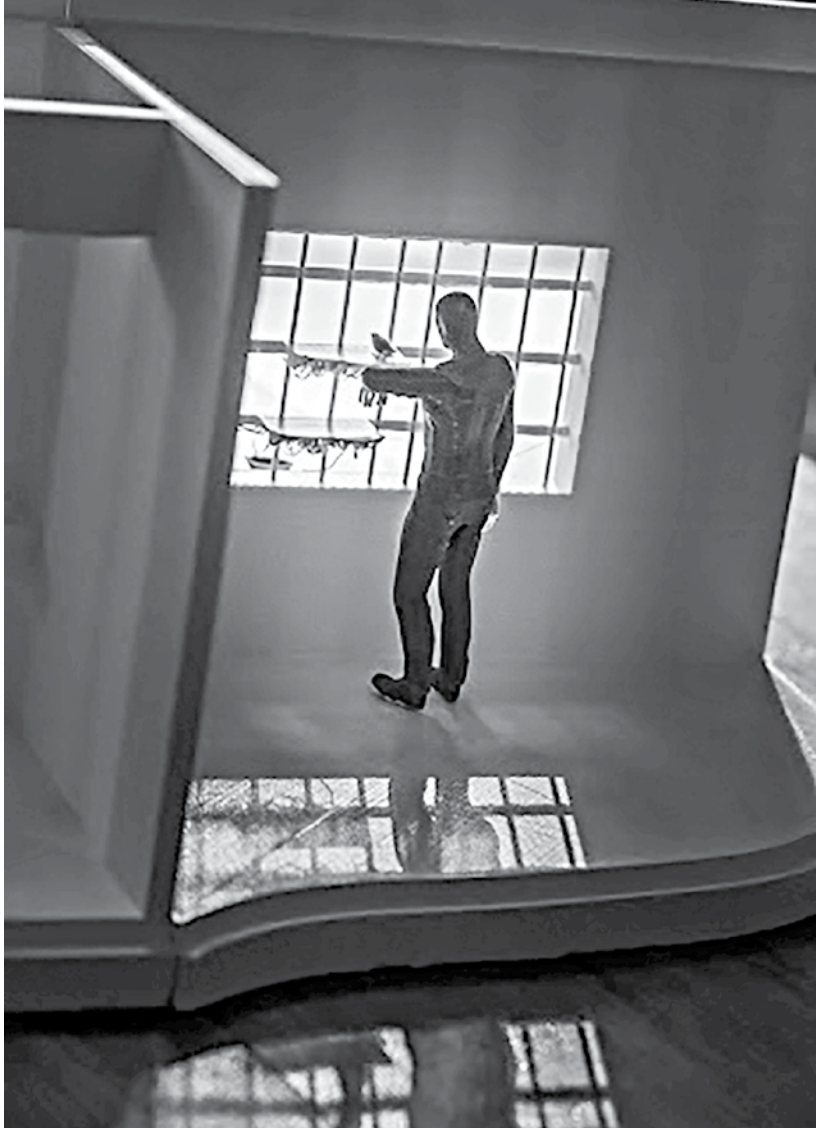
Turning the tide with images

Shahidul Alam's new book remembers Keraniganj jail and the inextricable ties between photography and politics

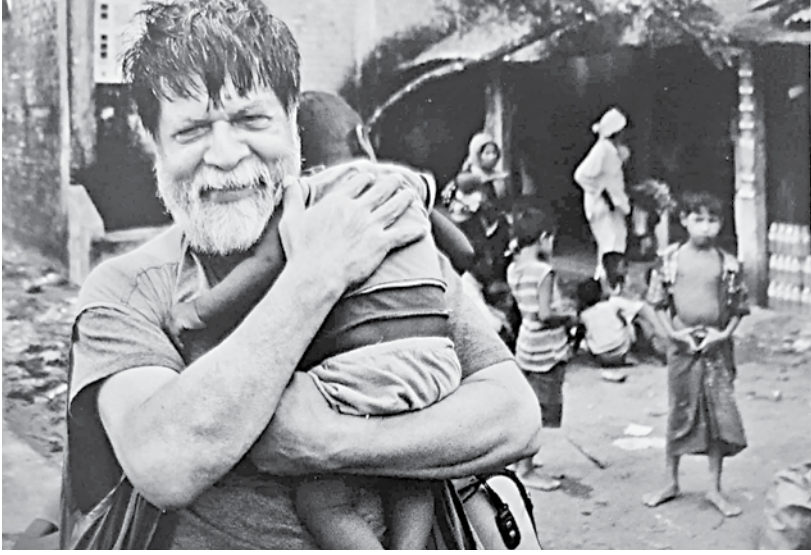
SARAH ANJUM BARI

SHAHIDUL Alam's *The Tide Will Turn* (2019) is a book of absences. In the aftermath of the road safety student movement in 2018, those of us who followed Alam's arrest and the ensuing global backlash will remember the letter he received from writer and activist Arundhati Roy. "This particular malaise, this bout of ill health that has engulfed our planet will pass," Roy insisted in her letter. The book borrows its title from Roy's indignant hope. In a brief narrative comprised of photographs and text, it touches upon the manifestations of this "malaise" across Bangladesh's past and present, and highlights how art—photography in particular—has tried to serve recurrently as an antidote.

It is a book of absences because, as Alam addresses in the first chapter, "Recording the invisible is not the photograph's strength. Absence is implied. The missing referred to in hushed tones." We know why these omissions are necessary and unavoidable—over the course of Alam's activism, evidence of the cruelty he tried to document through his lens was often wiped clean. There were no photos remaining of Chhatoktchori's Nurjahan, who took her own life to avoid the violence of patriarchy, nor was there solid proof of the abduction and disappearance of indigenous activist Kalpana Chakma in June 1996. These gaps form one kind of silence. The other relates to how



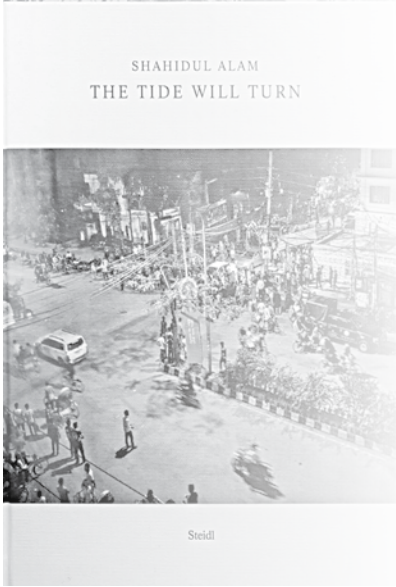
3D printed model of Alam's cell made by architect and artist Sofia Karim, based on recollections dictated by him. COURTESY: SHAHIDUL ALAM



In October 2017, Shahidul Alam travelled with a Rohingya family by boat as they came into Teknaf. PHOTO COURTESY: MOHAMMAD SHAHNEWAZ KHAN



Rohingyas make the hazardous journey, often in moonlight, to Malaysia. PHOTO COURTESY: SHAHIDUL ALAM, OCTOBER 2014



Alam must restrain himself while talking about the circumstances of his arrest on August 4, 2018. And even as he remembers, in this book,

Alam's voice in the text rings with clarity; it is confident about both the specifics of the history he recounts as well as the flaws and triumphs he finds in them. He dwells on each incident, memory, criticism, or word of gratitude only for long enough to drive his point home.

the wardens and fellow inmates who made his stay in prison more tolerable, along with the power

structures that govern our fractured society and inspire much of Alam's activism, he must be careful not to land anyone—including himself—in too much trouble.

It is in "hushed tones", therefore, that he narrates the events that sparked the student movement, his own arrest, and the time he spent in Keraniganj jail in Part I of the book. The journalist in Alam kicks in early. The "5Ws and one H" are promptly addressed: July 29, 2018. An Uttara-bound Jabal-e-Noor Paribahan bus crashes into young students, injuring 11 and killing Abdul Karim Rajib and Dia Khanam Meem instantly. A conscience-raising protest ensues. Shahidul Alam speaks out on social media, gives an interview to Al Jazeera, and finds himself behind bars. Later in the chapter, we learn of the buildings named after flowers and rivers in Keraniganj jail: *Bonoful, Shapla, Jamuna, Monihar*; the gathering of new prisoners at the

case table at 5am every day; the dust kicked up by volleyball matches in the evening. We read of bug-infested mattresses and mosquito nets with holes, and meet inmate *baro tukra* Rimon (his name changed in the book) whose "undisputed authority and well-maintained complexion were all food for [Alam's] missing lens."

Part II addresses the inextricable ties between art and politics that have prevailed in Bangladesh since before independence, a link powered by the likes of Rashid Talukder, Golam Kasem Daddy, Anwar Hossain, Bijon Sarker, Manzoor Alam Beg, Sayeda Khanam, Aftab Ahmed, Amanul Haque, Nasir Ali Mamun, KM Asad, Ferdousi Priyabhashini, Taslima Akhter, and so many others who feature prominently in the book. Here we revisit iconic episodes of Bangladeshi photography, such as when the head of an intellectual

lay submerged in mud, framed by dislodged bricks (Rashid Talukder, December 17, 1971); when the back of a tiger in a zoo stretched vividly across Bijon Sarker's frame; when Nasir Ali Mamun captured artist SM Sultan crouching on the floor eating rice, facing four cats in front of his plate; when KM Asad's photograph of a Rohingya refugee made it to the cover of the National Geographic in August 2019; and when a man and woman embraced in death, half buried in the debris of the collapsed Rana Plaza garment factory (Taslima Akhter, 2013). Following these histories, Part III is a brief body of text many of us have already read before—the letters Alam exchanged with Roy during jail time and which inspire the underlying message of the book: that the "nameless, faceless people will rise".

One mustn't confuse a hushed tone with a weak one. Alam's voice

Have you said these sexist things at work?

SHAMMI QUIDDUS

EVERYONE deserves an inclusive and respectful environment at work. However, women face many challenges in this respect. One such barrier is the daily grind of sexist and misogynist comments, which are a manifestation of the underlying belief that men are superior to women. Dropped casually at the end of a presentation or as crude jokes between male colleagues, such comments belittle women's work, talent, and dignity.

Our default expectation is that the victim is the one who has to fight back, and we often shame them for not doing so. This is the very opposite of what allies should be doing. Instead, they need to take up the fight.

So what is being said in workplaces that is so problematic? I asked both men and women that question and the responses came hard and fast. Women responded with comments that were targeted at them and men responded with what they overhear in all-male settings. This is a simple call to action if you want to be an ally to women: don't say these things and if someone else does, ask them to stop.

Sexual objectification

"Everything my female colleague

says, my male colleague repeats it in a weird moan to indicate girls are sex slaves to us."

"If I wasn't married, I would have taken her to a corner and shown her who is the boss."

Popular media in the subcontinent represents men as having sexual authority over women; they can demand sex, take it without consent and use sexual violence to intimidate women. In the office, the use of sexual insults is a manifestation of men's expectations to have power over female coworkers.

Maternity leave

"Don't hire newly married women, they will immediately get pregnant and you will have to pay for them while they are gone."

"I would rather get a male employee since they won't go into labour."

If only these statements were confined to words; but women are routinely discriminated against for taking maternity leave or due to expectation that they might. Unfortunately, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, which guarantees 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, does not include white collar workers. There is no legal protection for women who face retaliation for maternity leave. What stands between them and losing their job and/or promotion is your standing up against such blatant discrimination that is illegal in most countries.

Husband, husband, husband

"Your husband is such a big shot! Why do you still run after money?"

"When I started my business, some said I couldn't even manage my husband (as I am divorced), how can I manage a business?"

"You work so late? Your husband is very generous."

It is difficult for some people to grasp that women are independent adults who make their own decisions and work for the same reasons as men do: to provide for a family, financial freedom, ambition and intellectual fulfilment. Here's a helpful shortcut before making that husband comment. Would you say the same to a man? If not, zip it please!

Competence

"She must've slept with the boss to get the promotion that I deserved."

"You want to hire a woman for the engineering department? She isn't capable of technical work."

"Men don't want to be mentored by women."

Our culture paints men as being more capable than women. So when faced with an accomplished woman, many feel threatened at a subconscious level and look for other reasons to attribute her success to ("she is a slut"), or they simply deny her capabilities. By not being hired for technical or leadership positions, women's career progression stagnates. So when a woman is being passed over for a professional opportunity, triple check that the reasons are based on qualification rather than insecurities and biases.

Body shaming

"You are such a pretty girl, there's nothing wrong with you other

than a few extra kilos, which you can lose easily if you become active."

"Man takes me aside after the workshop and says, 'You can't be here without a scarf!'"

The need to comment on women's bodies stems from the belief that men have a right to it. Layered on top of that is the expectation that a woman's appearance needs to please everyone around her ("smile more, talk in a soft tone"). In the streets, these manifest as catcalls and groping. In cubicles and open desks, they manifest as body shaming and suggestive compliments.

Responsibility

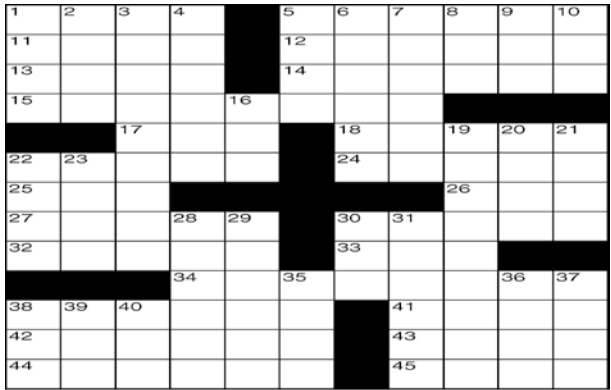
"I can't believe someone said that to you! Why didn't you say something?"

It's a lot to expect when we ask women to overcome the shock of an insult in real time and challenge someone who can impact their livelihood. Yet, our default expectation is that the victim is the one who has to fight back, and we often shame them for not doing so. This is the very opposite of what allies should be doing. Instead, they need to take up the fight. When sexist comments are made, speak up immediately or send an email afterwards to ensure the person who commented realises that their behaviour was wrong. If the behaviour continues, report to HR and senior leadership. Changing deep seated cultural norms is a lot of work but the change starts with each one of us.

Shammi Quiddus is a Product Manager at Google.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | flavoring | 9 2016 Olympics |
| 1 Canyon sound | 38 "The Grass Harp" | host |
| 5 Spuds | writer | 10 -- Quentin |
| 11 Earth orbiter | 41 Storybook | 16 "Gnarly!" |
| 12 Pilot Earhart | monster | 19 Valuable bar |
| 13 Cartoonist Caniff | 42 Puts on a | 20 Lotion additive |
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| 32 Good judgment | 3 Persevering | 37 Cowboys or |
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| 34 Frangelico | 5 Poi source | 38 Upper limit |
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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