

# Mangoes, lychees, and childhood memories in 'Amar Chelebel''

ELITA KARIM

For me, *Amar Chelebel* (1991) by Humayun Ahmed would not only be a summer read but also a comfort read, a holiday retreat, a walking tour of a Bangladesh unheard of today, and also a sneak-peek into the daily bustle of a family who redefined literature, science fiction, caricatures, humour and so much more. It is a book that I have read numerous times over the years—while stuck in traffic, on flights, at home over tea and just last week, on the balcony while it was raining outside (the best way to read it for sure!)

I absolutely love the book, because it travels from Bangladesh in the early '40s and '50s all the way to post-liberation days and back to when Ahmed was just a child, roaming about the streets without a care in the world.

He talks about how life as a toddler for him began away from his young mother, growing up with his aunt, at his grandmother's. His mother Ayesha Khatun was suffering from typhoid and had lost a year or two from her memories because of the illness. Humayun Ahmed's description of his mother regaining her memory and suddenly remembering her baby boy would have the reader smile and cry at the same time. Because his father Foyzur Rahman Ahmed was in the police, his never-ending transfers would have the family travel all over the country. Each district and city would hold mysteries and adventures.

There are many stories that I look forward to reading when I pick up this book. One is of the family's annual Eid vacations. I wonder in awe at his



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descriptions of the long train rides to his *nanar bari*; the cups of steaming tea early in the winter morning during station breaks, and how Ahmed's *nanar bari* was a tad bit louder than his *dadar bari*—reserved, religious, yet breaking

age-old barriers. Interestingly, most kids back then would grow up with two or three different names. Young parents could suddenly change the name of their 4-year-old to that of a beloved relative

who has recently passed away, or a character from a book they have read. Humayun Ahmed had at one point been Kajol and at another, Shamsur Rahman! In many of the chapters he refers to himself as Kajol, as do the others around him.

Even though these chapters follow the stages in his life, travels, and personalities, the text speaks of everything and anything that probably came to Ahmed's mind while he was writing. Sometimes, his topics overlap.

Now that I have established the fact that *Amar Chelebel* is for all seasons and can be enjoyed the year round, I would however recommend it for the scorching heat of the Bengali summer—whether reading it for the first time or the 100th. Summers in Bangladesh are incomplete without mangoes, lychees, jackfruits and black plums (*jaam*). Believe it or not, so are the stories in *Amar Chelebel*! While some of them will fill you with laughter, others will bring tears to your eyes, for instance when he writes about his father and his honesty, his eccentricities and finally when he was killed during the war. Humayun Ahmed's reflections of the world he grew up in and the many experiences that shaped him are all filled with passion, wit and the urge to return to childhood and relive life again.

Isn't that what many of us yearn for, sometimes?

Elita Karim is Editor, Arts & Entertainment and Star Youth. She tweets @elitakarim.

# Summers with Sarat Chandra

TOWRIN ZAMAN

Before my mother bought me a copy of *Sarat Shahitya Samagra* (2003) one fateful summer back in high school, my exposure to Bangla literature had been limited to Feluda and whatever my textbooks offered. But the literature of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay opened a whole new world to me. As an angst ridden teenager, I was enticed by his grim and melodramatic storytelling but soon I began to appreciate the social commentary, the wit, and the subtle humour infused into his writing.

Sarat Chandra's stories dwell upon caste politics, feudal exploitation, religious dogmatism, child marriage, widows' rights, adultery, and more. His writing is rich in pathos; it is neither mild nor light-hearted. Likewise, one doesn't think of summer as a "mild" season. Not on this side of the world. Here in Bangladesh, summer is a season of extremes with a scorching sun and sweltering heat. Perhaps that is why I have come to associate summers with Sarat Chandra's writing.

He never shied away from addressing bigotry in society. Yet unlike contemporaries who also challenged the caste and religious orthodoxy, Sarat Chandra took a more relatable approach to highlighting class inequalities and the dichotomy between the Brahmin and Hindu communities. Equally awe-inspiring were his strong women characters, against whom his weak-willed, orthodox male protagonists almost always paled in comparison.

Just as Sarat Chandra made me cry during *Devdas* (1917), he inspired laughter with *Nishikriti* (1917), an entertaining tale about familial politics. *Srikanta* (1933), a semi-autobiographical novel regarded as his best work, portrayed a bohemian soul who transforms from a morally upright male chauvinist into a self-aware individual after meeting various strong women on his journeys. These stories aren't "breezy", nor the characters mere caricatures. They tend to be as idle as one likes to be on a warm summer day, but the feelings they evoke with their nuance and complexity are no less potent than the aftertaste of the hottest day of summer—difficult to forget.

I can still remember reading *Parineeta* (1914) that first summer I was introduced to Sarat Chandra and being shocked at how cowardly and selfish the male protagonist Shekhar was as compared to his Bollywood adaptation, whom I had watched and loved. This was my first experience with reading a romance hero so un-hero-like. Neither was he an anti-hero. I remember feeling frustrated and enraged. And yet I could not bring myself to hate Shekhar. I discovered for the first time that summer my preference for imperfect and raw characters over flawless ones. It was from *Parineeta* that I became aware of intricacies related to the caste system.

Even the secondary characters in Sarat Chandra's novels have an impactful presence. The domineering Bilash from *Datta* (1918)—a love story between a Hindu and a Brahmin—provoked in me the strongest urge to enter the pages and commit violence. Perhaps the blistering heat of the summer while I was reading the book played a part in heightening my annoyance. But it is the mastery of Sarat Chandra's storytelling that led me, by the end of the story, to an understanding of and muted respect for the character. Sarat Chandra relied on the humane actions or lack thereof of his characters to create conflict. They invite suffering for themselves with their own cowardice, indecisiveness and obstinacy—all layered complexities—but the ease with which one can empathise with them is testament to the author's prowess.

While the social issues explored in his works are ever-relevant, there is also a sense of nostalgia brought by reading about a bygone era. The emotions his works invoke are timeless—perfect for a summer read.

Towrin Zaman is a research consultant who writes in her spare time.



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# Rizia Rahman, an antidote to apathy

HUMAYRA ALI  
TRANSLATED BY MUHAMMAD  
MUTIUL MUHAIMIN

For lovers of short story collections, Rizia Rahman's *Char Doshoker Golpo* (2011) can be great company on lazy afternoons. Rahman is undoubtedly among the finest writers of literature in Bangladesh, yet her craft goes unnoticed by many from the younger generations today. Seldom has any facet of life or society gone untouched by the light of her smooth and free-flowing language.

First published in 2008, her story "Shonar Horin Chai" depicts the life and struggles of a Bengali Muslim living in the United States. We read about Bengali students living inhumane lives in hopes of being granted immigrant status, their struggles with food and daily life, and being profiled as terrorists simply for having "Muhammad" as part of their names—all of which still feel relevant today.

In 2006, while paying her sister a visit in the States, Rahman meets a Black housekeeper named Donna Walker. From Donna's life story, Rahman is able to relate first hand with the violence perpetrated against African-Americans by White supremacy. The author compares these instances with the situations that domestic workers have to bear in Bangladesh. Small differences creep up in her mind—despite being a minority, Donna works in a healthy environment, is still paid for working overtime, and still drives to work albeit in an old car. The plights of the working class of Bangladesh would be unimaginable to even the poor in America. Even then, Rahman's thoughts on Donna and her husband losing jobs, being accused of theft, and facing ceaseless harassment because of their skin colour resonate with those of us still reeling from George Floyd's death in Minneapolis this year.

In "Shamne Juddho" first published in 1986, Rahman tells us the story of 10-year-old newspaper hawker Amin, who lives with an NGO-worker and their family. Amin reads the newspaper every day to educate himself about the ways of the world. When he is arrested and released on bail with the help of his guardian, Amin delivers a monologue and cites the example of Nelson Mandela, who is also serving time in jail. Is Mandela, then, also a criminal? Amin has seen many Mandelas in the jail he just left behind. This story was published while Bangladesh was living under an autocracy and yet Rahman manages to convey so much without outrightly addressing politics. Such are her lucidity and finesse as a writer.

Unlike the wars, pandemics, and natural disasters of history, our current crisis prevents humankind from standing beside each other in solidarity. Isolated from each other, we are forced to offer greater strength to ourselves, fight for ourselves. As the world burns in the heat of this unique summer, literature—Rizia Rahman's literature in particular—feels like a tall drink of water that cools the body and the mind. Her words teach us that humankind has indeed lost repeatedly at different points of time, but it hasn't remained stagnant.

Humayra Ali is an author and voracious reader of Bangla literature, who has taught Bangla in classrooms for 30 years. She has taken her writing to @humayra363 on Instagram and Tobuo Jibon by Humayra Ali on Facebook.

Muhammad Mutiul Muhaimin is an aspiring engineer who blogs about social reforms. He writes because he finds it therapeutic. LinkedIn: Mutiul Muhaimin



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# Bibhutibhushan, an unlikely adventurer

MONEESHA R KALAMDER

For anyone sitting through heat-stricken afternoons on forever-long summer days, reprieve can come in the form of escape into a fictional world, and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay is a master at offering it. He is a magician with words, luring the reader in from the get-go. While early 20th century Bangla literature focused on domestic life and socio-political struggles, boasting work from luminaries such as Manik Bandyopadhyay (*Putul Nacher Itikatha*, *Padma Nadir Majhi*) and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (*Srikanta*, *Parineeta*), Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay broke away from the norm and placed some of his protagonists right in the core of untamed nature.

Two of my personal favourites are *Chander Pahar* (1937), often categorised as a young adult novel but perfect for anyone who loves a good adventure-thriller, and *Aranyak* (1939), a story about a metropolitan man falling in love with the wild, discovering innumerable facets of life in the process. The former is set in the beginning of the 20th century, before World War I. The protagonist Shankar, in search of excitement beyond his lacklustre job in West Bengal, ends up as a stationmaster at a remote railway station in Uganda. Through a chance encounter he embarks on a danger-laden journey into the unknown heart of the Richtersveld mountains in search of a fabled diamond mine. What appears to be a nerve-wracking adventure on the surface is a story essentially about resilience and an indomitable spirit, compelling the reader to reflect on their own desires and their pursuit of it.

*Aranyak*, more relaxed in tone and pace, is set in the 1920s. A city man through and through, the protagonist leaves urban life for the forests of Bihar to manage the zamindari estate of a friend. He becomes enticed by the beauty of the wild—the woods, the animals, and the people. The novel then paints the picture of a man becoming one with the forest, and in great irony, ultimately becoming instrumental in its destruction and its way of life. The poetic language and rich descriptions of nature offer an insight into the lives of locals who coexist with their landscape—the poor Brahmins, Gangots, Santals, the rich Rajput overlords, and legends of the gods of the forest who carefully guard their realm. The god Tarbaro protects wild



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bison from being hunted in these jungles, and the protagonist laments the absence of the god when bison are trapped in city slaughterhouses. Perhaps the gods lose their powers when removed from their homes.

There is something about the nostalgia these books evoke for a time that no longer exists and neither do the places, in the way they used to. Both these novels also serve as a commentary on our ideas of civilisation and propriety, inherited from our colonisers, questioning the ethics of imposing such ideas on cultures that have survived for thousands of years on their own. Bandyopadhyay's strongest attributes are his vivid descriptions and flowing language. The reader is entirely transported into the world where the events of his stories occur, and there is never a dull moment. During a summer such as this when we must stay confined to the spaces of our homes, we could make use of delving into these classic Bangla masterpieces where our minds can roam free on the desert mountains of Africa or the long-gone forests of Bihar.

Moneesha R Kalamder is an Economics grad and editor-in-chief at Rantages. She reads everything and mostly writes comedy. Reach her at mkalamder9.75@gmail.com

## EDITOR'S NOTE

### The Bengali summer read

Come June, the season of light reading arrives with the promise of filling lazy afternoons freed from school work or, for adults who can't manage a vacation, escape in the form of relaxing books. Summer reading means something different for each of us—unwinding with a frothy romance, channeling the weather's warmth to face a horror or a thriller, or finally make time for that 1,400 page classic that always goes unfinished. But this summer is different; it's one we have hardly experienced as we try to lock ourselves away from a contagious virus. And so it calls for some good ol' and healthy nostalgia. We asked some of our contributors what books they associate with the Bengali summer we are missing out on this year. Their answers took us down labyrinths of memory lanes. We hope you'll enjoy this 'summer issue' of Daily Star Books.

Sarah Anjum Bari  
In-Charge, Daily Star Books