THE MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL 2020 SHORTLIST

Humanity, freedom, and magic realism in the face of authoritarian powers

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

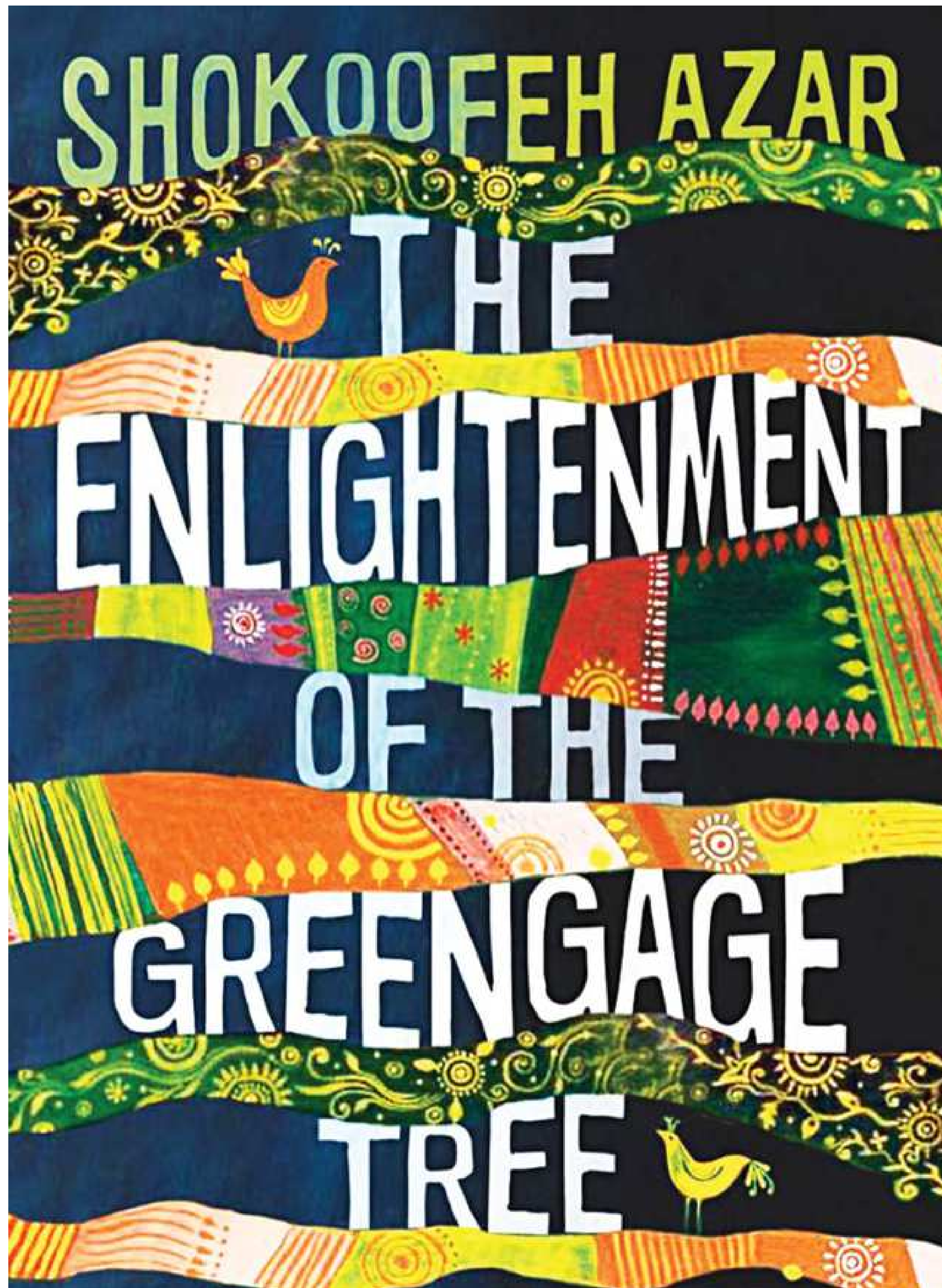
On April 1, 1979, after years of tensions between Western and Islamic values, Iran became an Islamic Republic. Theocracy triumphed monarchy and a massive crackdown on "un-Islamic" ways of life swept across the country, suffocating intellectual, cultural, personal, and physical freedom under the weight of a stringent regime.

It is against this backdrop that Shookofeh Azar sets her novel, *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree*—her first to be translated into English. Originally published in 2017, it has been shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize 2020 and The Stella Prize for fiction in Australia, where she currently lives, having moved as a political refugee in 2011 after being jailed on several occasions for her independent reporting in Iran.

The novel is told from the perspective of a 13-year-old girl. Bahar died in a fire after her family home—a secular and intellectual space—in Tehran is stormed by fanatics. Primarily through her, Shookofeh romanticises death and links it with freedom: "You are suddenly light and free and no longer afraid of death, sickness, judgment or religion." Bahar's ghost narrates the story and is omnipresent throughout her family's turbulent life. After the revolution, they move to Razan, a remote village in northern Iran where there are scarce signs of civilisation.

The village is so disconnected from the capital and other regions that it only comes to know about the revolution years later. There, amid groves, ancient temples, Zoroastrian remains, a sprawling forest, folklore, and spirits, the family build their life anew. This newfound tranquillity is soon disturbed when their only son Sohrab is arrested and later executed by the regime on flimsy grounds. He is one among the many hanged and buried in unnamed mass graves filled with political prisoners. Through Sohrab, the reader comes to understand the horrors—like swallowing fallen plaster out of hunger—of imprisonment without access to basic amenities. Particularly striking is Azar's haunting portrayal of his days in solitary confinement, no doubt inspired by her own experience with it while she was still living in Iran.

The narrator is a bridge between two different worlds in this book, and often, it feels as though despite her death, she is very much alive in a transcendent state. She engages in regular conversations with her father, Mum, and Beeta, her youngest sibling. She is always hovering over them as a guardian in charge of protection. Yet away from the mortal realm, she also interacts with other spirits who become some pivotal characters in their own rights and add significantly to the novel's intellectual depth. Case in point is one Siberian hunter's ghost, who was killed by a bear thousands of years ago. After narrating the tragedy that wrecked his life, he says, "If every one of these wandering ghosts wanted to avenge themselves on another ghost or person, the world would become hell." Besides these spirits, forest djinns also populate the story. Djinns who bless, curse, and wreak havoc in villagers' lives. Djinns who are repulsed by iron, who are heavily territorial and deferential to the laws of nature. Azar uses them as tools of ecological justice. Take, for instance, the man "skinned by twelve forest djinns", his flesh and bones ripped from his body. His offense: the killing of a pregnant tiger roaming in the forest of Razan.



Similarly, it is justice that Shookofeh Azar seeks when she deploys magical realism to punish an authoritarian leader under whose regime the protagonist's family, among thousands of others, suffer. The leader (Ayatullah Khomeini) and his guards are haunted by the shrill cries of those executed. The ghosts' tears pour from the sky and reach the steps of Khomeini's bedroom, staking claim over his sanity. He even soils himself at one point. Shookofeh thus blends fiction with history and punishes a leader by forcing him to reveal his basest human functions for readers with witness. The novel is packed with such irresistible parables and tragic stories of separation and hardship caused by authoritarianism. From the burning of "problematic books" to the monitoring of intellectual growth and culture, Azar's pages radiate what it means to be living in a state that coerces its citizens. "Animal Farm was burning: the cows, donkeys, pigs, dogs and horses braying and squealing; the odor of their roasting flesh filling all of Razan. But the Mullah and his three companions felt nothing," she writes in an especially moving scene. The story revolves around such realities, covering extremism, sexual violence, and environmental degradation.

The only trouble with the book is that the ending—despite being beautiful—feels overstretched. Still, *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* is a novel relevant to our times and a compelling read, not only because of gut-wrenching exploration of human nature and history, but also the extraordinary surrealism with which it pulsates.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor to Daily Star Books.

BOOK REVIEW

Are we reading 'A Seaman's Wife' the right way?

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Something that has always fascinated me about Bangladeshi literature is it's attachment to and exploration of space—be it in prose, poetry, or music, almost all Bangladeshi and even Bengali literary work engages with how we are impacted by land, home, country, season, and other natures of charged atmosphere. While revisiting martyred intellectual Shahidullah Kaiser's classic novel *Shareng Bou* (1962), which was translated as *A Seaman's Wife* (Prothoma, 2019) by his friend and eminent author Syed Najmuddin Hashim, the same relationship seemed to propel both the text and my reading of it this past month.

A Seaman's Wife, or *Shareng Bou* as we originally knew it, is famously the story of Nabitun, the wife of a seaman who is waiting for her husband to return from his voyage. In his absence, she has to learn to fend for herself and her daughter without any kind of support that she can in good conscience accept. In Syed Najmuddin Hashim's translation, the novel effectively draws the reader into these events which are all underpinned by Nabitun's, her husband's, and their village's respective relationships with space—space, in this case, meaning land and sea and society.

Nabitun's husband Kadam and his fellow seamen are all pushed towards the sea by an innate suffocation that they feel on land. Their love for water, for the freedom and drama and adventure it offers, compels them away from home. The novel poses this in direct tension with that of the seamen's families and land, which is, in contrast, wrought with uncertainty, insecurity, and festering gossip, the latter specifically targeting the women who are supposed to remain in waiting for their husbands, facing constant psychological torment from each other. Yet both these parties—the seamen and the "land-locked", as the novel calls them, are also drawn to each other. "The land-locked were safely sheltered. They did not know how hungry the ship-bound were for the slightest intimacy, the lightest affection from the people of the land," Kamal ruminates at one point in the text. These bittersweet dynamics with one's space is what makes *A Seaman's Wife* truly emblematic of the Bangladeshi experience, and is one of the things that gives the novel its strength. The other is anger.

Anger courses through this book from the moment one opens it to find Nabitun warding off lecherous men and the women who pester her about them. As a result, Nabitun is forced to be perpetually angry, irritable, frightened, and even often cruel to her young daughter. The text—its characters, its plot, and its narrator—all look at Nabitun through a male gaze that *should* make reading it an uncomfortable experience. This story really does mirror the ugly experience of being a woman in rural pockets of our country, where their identity and fate are unfairly tied to the actions of their male counterparts. As this new translation opens up the classic novel to a new generation of readers in English, one hopes that they will read it with a discerning eye and notice what ought to be noticed: First, that Nabitun isn't worthy of our respect simply because she holds on to her virtue in a misogynistic society, but because left to her own devices, she is resourceful and self-sufficient as much as she is vulnerable and humane. And second, that to read this novel is to challenge the systems and social structures which continue to be toxic to this day in the lives of men and women in our subcontinent, 58 years after the book was first published.

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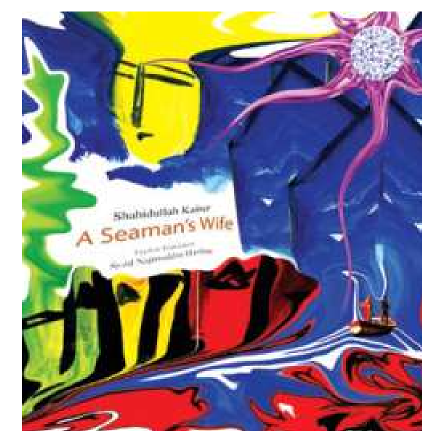

ILLUSTRATION: **KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO**

A longer version of this article will be available online.

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WORTH A RE-READ

Revisiting Rizia Rahman with 'Shurjo Shobuj Rokto'

ALAMGIR MOHAMMAD

In Bangla literature, not too many works can be found which deal with the lives, sufferings, and history of the labourers who work in the tea gardens. In describing the agonies and crises of tea workers in her novel *Shurjo Shobuj Rokto* (1978), Rizia Rahman—who passed away on August 16 last year—sheds light on the history of tea plantation in the Indian subcontinent.

Read the article online on *The Daily Star* website, on Daily Star Books page on Facebook, and @thedailystarbooks on Instagram. Email us at thedailystarbooks@gmail.com.

Alamgir Mohammad is an academic and translator.

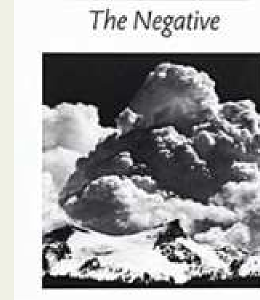
THE SHELF

SHUTTER STORIES: Books to read on World Photography Day

World Photography Day originated on August 19, 1839 when the Daguerreotype was patented by the French government as a gift "free to the world", after Louis Daguerre and Joseph Nicephore Niepce invented the technology in 1837. On World Photography Day this year, DS Books revisits five books that explore the art, the tension, and the technicalities involved in photography.

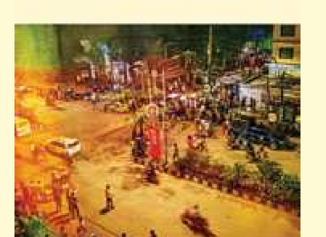
ON PHOTOGRAPHY
(Penguin, 1977)
Susan Sontag
Ironically a book without images or photographs, *On Photography* collects American philosopher, filmmaker and activist Susan Sontag's essays on the history of photography, its inherent voyeurism, and how it affects the way we perceive and experience the modern world through an often capitalist lens.

THE DECISIVE MOMENT
(Simon and Schuster and Editions Verve, 1952)
Henri Cartier-Bresson
Cartier-Bresson, often thought to be the father of modern photojournalism, explicates the idea that the split-second scene captured in a photograph reveals a deeper meaning hidden within that image's corresponding socio-cultural landscape, revealing, in the process, the power of visual narratives.



THE NEGATIVE (Bulfinch, 1948)
Ansel Adams
A classic handbook by one of the 20th century's most iconic photographers, *The Negative* explores Adams' insights on artificial and natural light, film and exposure, darkroom techniques, and more.

KAMRA (2012)
Tanzim Wahab and Munem Wasif
This comprehensive take on photography, written in Bangla, engages with the history of photography as much as it does with debates in photographic theories through critical essays, interviews, and photographs, written and captured by Bangladeshi and international writers, critics, and photojournalists.



THE TIDE WILL TURN
(Steidl, 2020)
Shahidul Alam
Comprising photographs and a brief but potent narrative, *The Tide Will Turn* follows Shahidul Alam as he reflects upon the history of political and artistic movements in Bangladesh and his experience while imprisoned at the Keraniganj jail following the road safety student movement of Bangladesh in 2018.