

# A human is human because...

Nora Nahid Khan goes for a dissection of an essay collection

"STORIES are not always innocent," states Chinua Achebe in his new essay collection, *The Education of a British-Protected Child*. Whether told by a colonizer, a correspondent on the news, or in a children's book, a story can be insidious, dispossessing, and difficult to un-root from collective consciousness when disseminated without care. To illustrate this point, Achebe recounts reading a children's book he bought for his daughter, in which a white boy's kite is caught on the wind and lands in a coconut tree outside an African village, where it is then solemnly worshipped as a supernatural object. Sacrifices are offered, and a witch doctor leads "the village in a procession from the coconut tree to the village shrine." How do we understand the telling of such "African" stories by people who are not African? With great circumspection, Achebe replies, and with a keen eye towards the story's origin, and maker (Achebe went on to write his own children's books). Without such vigilance, he warns, we become intellectually complacent, and "we run the risk of committing grave injustices absentmindedly."

Chinua Achebe, the world's most-translated African writer, has, through his polemic, continually shown himself an advocate for such vigilance, for complexity and rigor of thought, and conscientious questioning. He is best known for his 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart* (a world classic translated into over 50 languages), which depicts Igbo tribal life through the struggle of Okonkwo against his father's disreputable legacy and the encroachment of Anglican missionaries. He also founded the renowned African Writers Series in 1962; in 1972, Achebe began his career as an academic and lecturer at University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He began to write elegiac poetry and essays consistently over the next two decades, winning the Man Booker International Prize for his body of work in 2007. He has written four other novels; many of the essays in *Education* are gleaned from past speeches, lectures and writings. He is currently a professor of literature at Brown University.

In the introduction to *Education*, Achebe modestly claims his position is "unspectacular"; his prose and insights, however, are anything but. He reflects over the course of 16 essays on his life as a writer and a Nigerian, an existence both "abysmally frustrating and unbelievably exciting." Achebe claims to speak from a "middle ground" perspective, caught in dual language loyalties, Igbo and English. His more gauzy memories of his British public school days run parallel to clear-eyed critiques of the "complex psychology of the imperial vocation," which is "planted and watered by careful social, mental and educational husbandry." Achebe's conclusions are as devastating as the old Igbo and Bantu proverbs that he drops in his writing (including the powerful He who will hold another down in the mud must stay in the mud to keep him down): Victims must know the names of their oppressors; Nigeria is a child; Africa's gift is the art of cooperation with people and communal aspiration.

Achebe's main strength is the skilled hand he uses to steer the reader calmly towards his revelations. Buoyed within these waters are moments of outright thrill, as when Achebe de-constructs overly easy rationalizations and the arguments of his critics in a single flourish. In an essay again critiquing Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, he counters the statement that Conrad "shows great compassion towards" Africans with a cool riposte: "Africans are not really served by his compassion." His humour, too, is dark and wry; Achebe terms the old practice of "giving slaves the names of European heroes" to be "rather like someone calling his cat Napoleon."

Achebe's interests are often in historical figures: from Jesuit priests and missionaries to Dom Afonso I, the converted Christian King of Congo with ties to the Vatican, to Olaudah Equiano, all who traversed the former Congo. Achebe also writes of his experience teaching and advice for teachers worldwide, raising four children, of his relationship with his evangelist teacher-father, of meeting Nuruddin Farah, and of sitting in the front of an all-white bus on a trip to Victoria Falls. Throughout, one considers the force of Mr. Achebe's polemic, as in his essay "Politics and Politicians of Language in African Literature." Attending to attacks by writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who accused Achebe of being unpatriotic for writing in English, he notes: "Language is a handy whipping boy to summon and belabor when we have failed in some serious way. In other words, we play politics with language, and in doing so conceal the reality and complexity of our situation from ourselves..." For writers like Thiong'o, then, language is less a matter of fluid communication, but a question of resistance; their sense of self-respect is tied up in a story, or fantasy, of a monolingual Nigeria that did not ever exist, here deployed in the name of patriotism. Achebe's ultimate support of the English language is

for its practical and economic power to unite Nigeria. In one of the most beautiful essays of the collection, Achebe describes the art of Mbari, a traditional art form which seeks to invoke the gods' protection through celebration of the world and of the life lived in it. In a constructed temple, stage and auditorium, artists build clay and earth sculptures, of deities, human beings, scenes from mythology and village life, fights, marriages, and deaths. On the day of the festival, the community gathers for feasting and viewing of the house of mbari, where all significant events in the community not simply ideal are portrayed. Hence, Europeans were eventually enshrined, as well ("seated amongst the molded figures, complete with his peaked helmet and pipe [...] his iron horse, or bicycle, and his native police orderly") in order to acknowledge his presence.

To the Igbo mentality, art must, among other uses, provide a means to domesticate that which is wild; it must act like the lightning conductor which arrests destructive electrical potentials and channels them harmlessly to earth. The Igbo insist that any presence which is ignored,

pause, but Achebe doesn't feel it necessary to explain or delve into the emotional fallout of his own stories, so focused are his reflections on the abstract, on the significance of language and post-colonial identity.

This meandering style is, on one level, a function of retrospection. In the title essay, we find crystalline images from his childhood in pre-independence Nigeria: reading *Oliver Twist* and *Treasure Island* with pleasure, along with Church Missionary Society yearly almanacs, filled with pictures of bishops and other dignitaries, including "King George V in red and gold, with a sword". Most vividly rendered are the various influential Englishmen in Achebe's childhood, though British citizens' physical presence was minimal in Nigeria. He warmly remembers J.M. Stuart Young walking along New Market Road, "bareheaded in the sun," and his teacher William Simpson who enforced a "Textbook Act", forbidding students to read schoolwork after a certain hour, and delve into novels instead.

On the topic of his infamous criticism of Conrad, claiming *Heart of Darkness* and its depictions of Africans as maddened savages make for "poisonous writing", Achebe here responds to counter-criticism, that argues the racial insensitivity of Conrad was a norm for his contemporaries: "Even if that were so, it would still be a flaw in a serious writer a flaw which responsible criticism today could not gloss over. But it is not even true that everybody in Conrad's day was like him." Citing David Livingstone, an older contemporary who advocated racial tolerance and openness, Mr. Achebe concludes, "Without doubt, the times in which we live influence our behavior, but the best or merely the better among us, like Livingstone, are never held hostage by their times."

Here, one may worry that the worth of some thinkers, such as the philosopher David Hume, are dismissed by Achebe because of their moral failings or outright prejudice against blacks. A number of questions are raised: How are we to contextualize writers who were, in fact, "held hostage by their times"? Should a great author of dubitable moral conviction be cast off so (just as Conrad's reputation has greatly suffered from Achebe's critique), or should the criticism itself respond to account for all the potential biases an author may have had? If Milton, for example, were revealed to have had written an overtly pro-slavery tract, how should his legacy as a writer be altered, if at all? In a sense, Achebe's concerns could conceivably tend to a blunt, even irresponsible criticism (that nonetheless claims responsibility).

Returning to the question of story-telling, Achebe is unambivalent about his feelings about colonialism. He presents, clearly, the confluence of religious, moral and institutional prejudice in orchestrating the uncomfortable historical realities, to say the least, of slavery, and later, colonialism. Doing so, he falls in the tradition of many thinkers and philosophers before him (notably Hannah Arendt) who probed the psychology of evil - how entire societies organize themselves around the production of atrocities. When the "event" in question (slavery) stretches across five hundred years, the orchestration of social forces is more than simply political and economic. Only through appealing to the moral sense of Europe could pro-slavery tracts suggest slavery was both desirable and good.

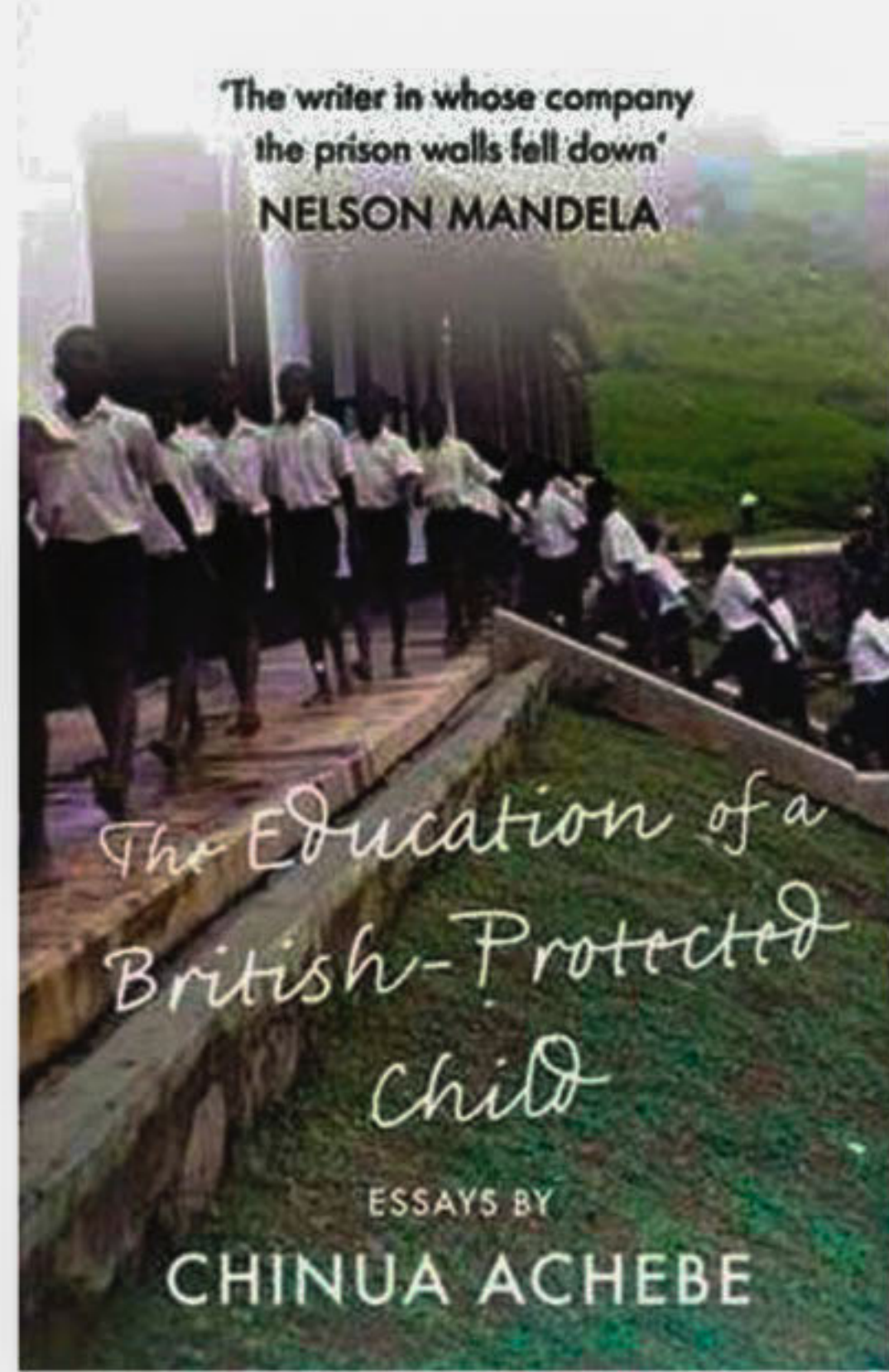
Some of Achebe's darkest humour is saved for these reflections. Reflecting on pro-slavery rhetoric, its widespread image of Africans as people with "no soul, no religion, no culture, no history, no human speech", he then asks, "Any wonder, then, that they should be subjugated by those who are endowed with these human gifts?" Deconstructing the "Africa that never was," Achebe elegantly delineates the progression of the colonizer's story-making:

If there are valuable things like gold or diamonds which you are carting away from [a man's] territory, you prove that he doesn't own them in the real sense of the word --- that he and they just happened to be lying around in the same place when you arrived. Finally [...] you may even be prepared to question whether such as he can be, like you, fully human. It is only a few steps from denying the presence of a man standing there before you to questioning his very humanity.

Shortly before this, he notes that the "moment when churchmen began to doubt the existence of the black man's soul was the same moment the black man's body was fetching high prices in the marketplace for their mercantilist" cousins. In order to live with his deed, the oppressor must create a story that legitimizes him.

Countering these false stories, of course, is the divine simplicity of another favourite Bantu proverb of Achebe's: A human is human because of other humans.

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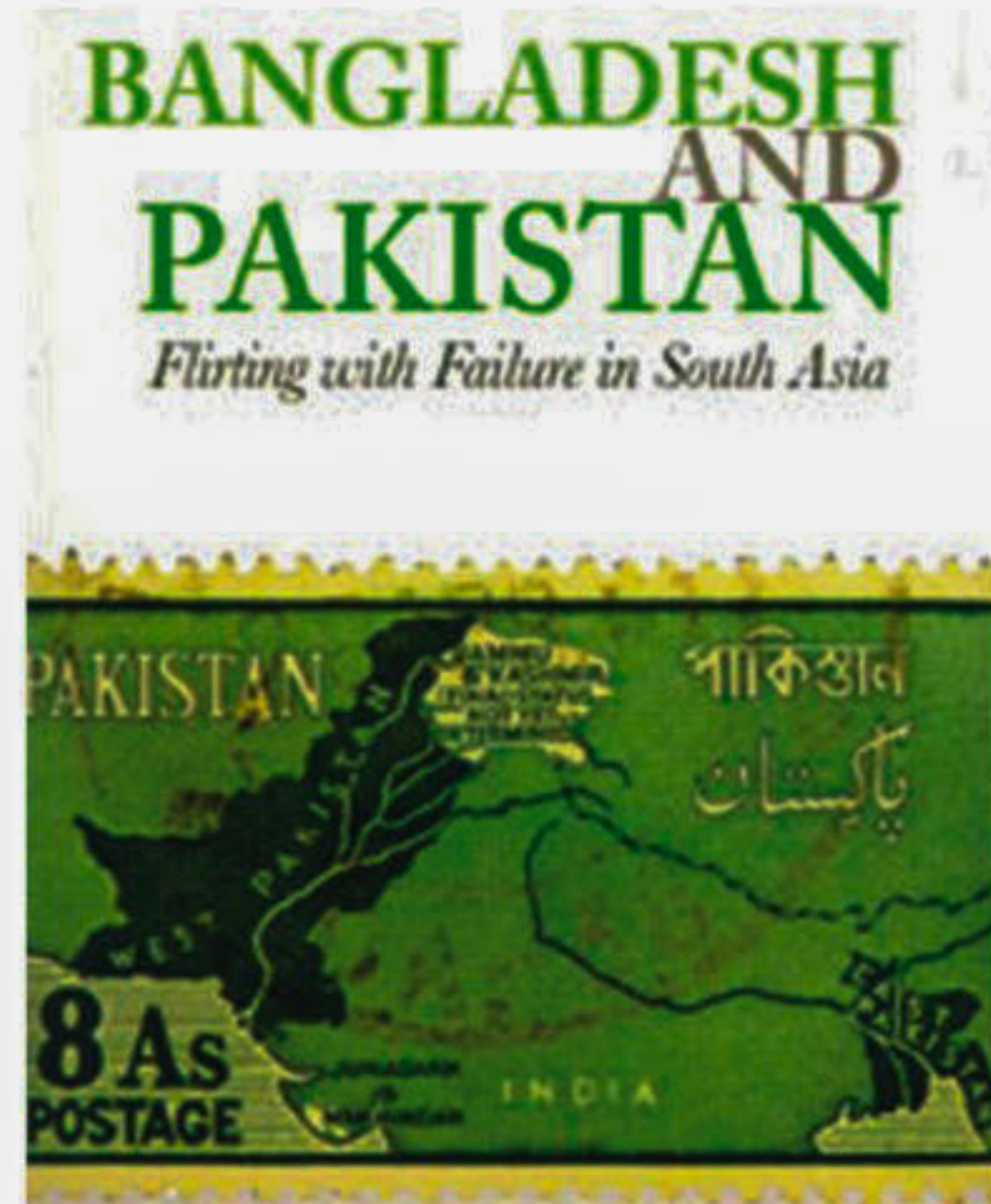
The Education of a British-Protected Child  
Chinua Achebe  
Knopf

denigrated, denied acknowledgment and celebration, can become a focus for anxiety and disruption. To them, celebration is the acknowledgement, not the welcoming, of a presence. It is the courtesy of giving everybody his due.

Mbari, or the communal use of art as celebration, seems to encourage a more tempered vision of reality; instead of worship of a perfect world, the Igbo acknowledge the world as it is, and sublimate harm within their cosmos through art.

Not all of Achebe's meandering digressions are productive. One wonders that the essays, originally delivered as lectures, were not edited down with a firmer hand. I felt, while reading, as though I were quickly thumbing through a stranger's childhood scrapbook as they peered disinterestedly over my shoulder. I hungered for anecdotes in Achebe's "novelist" voice, for more rich story and less aphoristic summations. As the collection seems intentionally cast as the moseying reflections of a grand man of letters, Achebe's meetings and encounters with personages of note are notable cultural evidence: small glimpses into a generally elusive literary figure's life. Nonetheless, the thinly outlined anecdotes would have done well with more detail and colour within. Achebe's narrow flight from Nigeria during the separatist Igbo Biafran War in 1967 is captured in one passing sentence. Achebe boils his meeting with James Baldwin down to what Baldwin said to him ("This is a brother I have not seen in 400 years"); in "Africa is People," Achebe stands before a committee of economists and asks, "Have you thought, really thought, of Africa as people?" These moments are droll and give

South Asia would draw attention to the many problems that still beset its more hapless neighbours. Wracked by debilitating ethnic and religious violence and struggling to keep their economies afloat, they appear to be in an unenviable position. Yet just why these states, which all once shared a common history with India, should have evolved so differently remains a matter of intense debate.'



WILLIAM B. MILAM

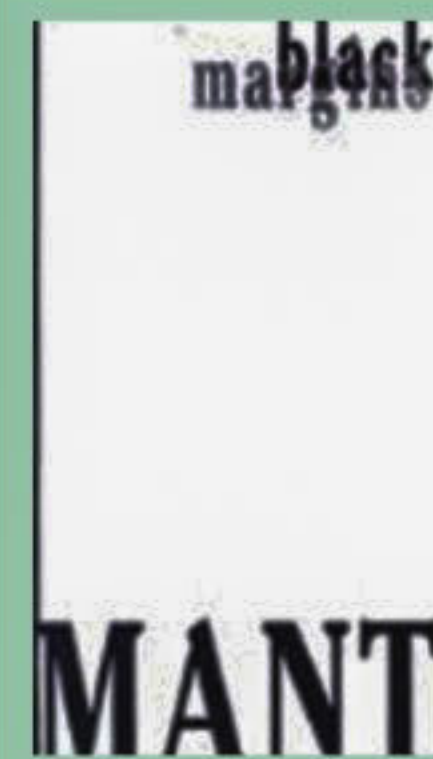
Moreover, "Milam's comparative history of Bangladesh and Pakistan... highlights the damaging legacy of two bloody partitions (1947 and 1971)...(and) leave readers with the impression that the fate of these countries is inextricably linked. This is most obvious in relation to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, three countries once

joined at the hip and then brutally torn apart to emerge, battered and bruised, in their current incarnations. But the scars seem to have lingered longest in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where as Milam demonstrates, unsettled issues of identity have thwarted political stability and delayed the onset of what he calls a 'sustainable democratic culture'. These issues have centred overwhelmingly on the role of Islam. Although Milam recognizes that the interaction between religion, local cultures and the specific historical experience of each country has been different, both have been plagued by the lack of resolution about the public role of Islam that, in turn, has left a decisive mark on the pace and direction of their political change. Indeed, most readers are bound to remark how the conflict over religion in Pakistan and Bangladesh has produced broad similarities, predisposing them to favour military rule and thus frustrating their attempts to pursue meaningful political reforms. Nor is the irony of this shared trajectory lost on Milam, who observes that 'while religion could not hold them together when they were united, it is the only aspect of their separate existence in which they now appear to be converging in their shift from the secular values of their founders, and vulnerability to Islamism.'

Yet, even while he recognizes these similarities in their political and even economic profiles, Milam is keen to emphasize that as societies, Pakistan and Bangladesh are markedly different and set on divergent paths. This has yielded significant dividends for Bangladesh, 'where the comparatively enhanced position of women and the force of a strong and vibrant civil society have placed the country well ahead of Pakistan in terms of key human development indicators, notably education and health. Social differences have also been important in accounting for the vulnerability of each country to the threat posed by political Islam. Here too, Milam suggests, Bangladeshi society has been better able than Pakistan to resist the damaging effects of Islamism -- notwithstanding 'Faustian deals' made by virtually every government in both countries that have brought them ever closer to the extremist abyss.'

More important, 'Milam's first hand account should serve to extend our understanding of a region that is fast emerging as a key global foreign policy concern.'

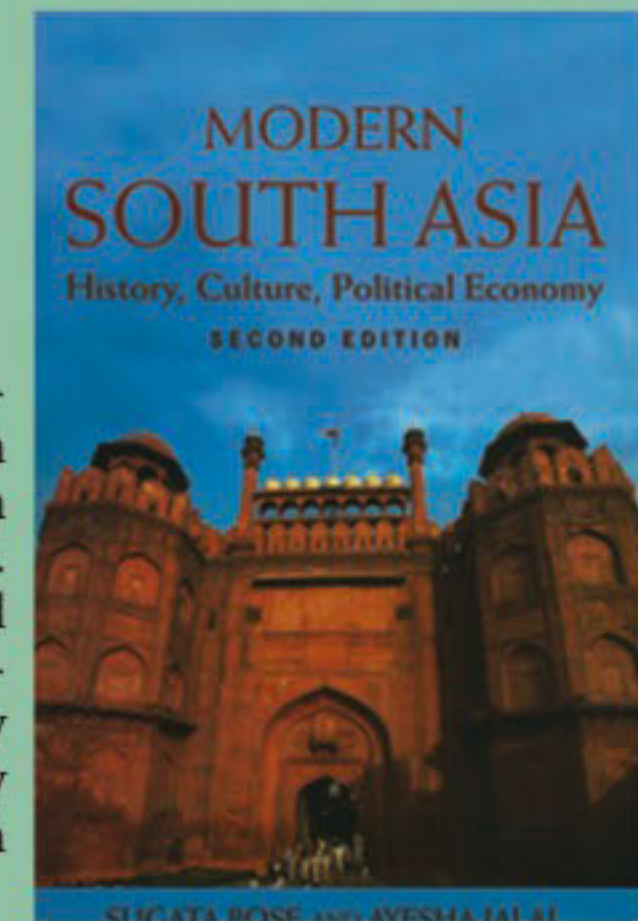
## AT A GLANCE



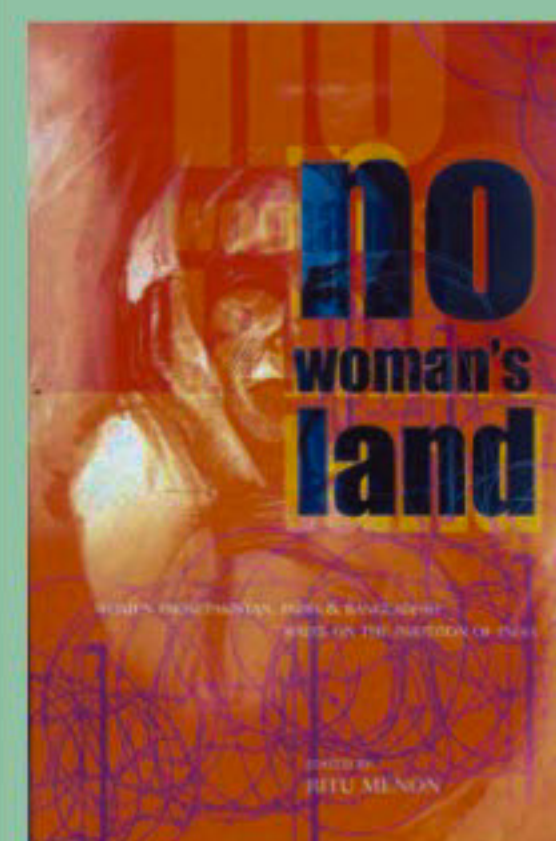
Black Margins  
Sa'adat Hasan Manto Stories  
Katha

Much has been written about Manto and his stories have been published repeatedly since his death in the 1950s. The present collection is once again a charming offering of the writer at his best. It is one collection that not only gives you fiction but through it a huge chunk of sad sub-continental history.

Modern South Asia  
History Culture and Political Economy  
Sugata Bose, Ayesha Jalal  
Oxford University Press



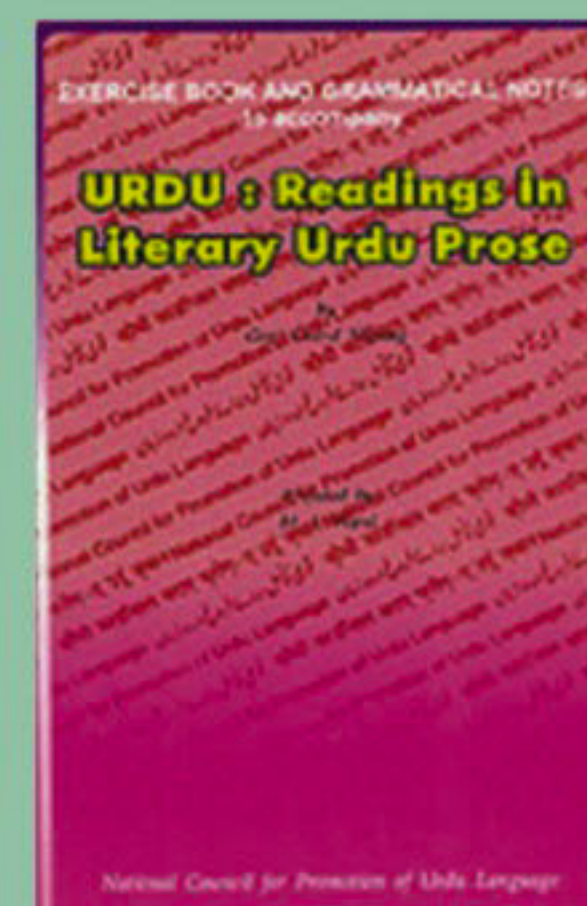
Written five years ago, the subjects the work deals with remain as relevant today as they did when Bose and Jalal first handled them. The two authors go into a detailed examination of the political legacy of South Asia and also try understanding the present-day compulsions its various nation states are caught in.



No Woman's Land  
Women from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh  
Write on the Partition of India  
Ed. Ritu Menon

The tragedy of 1947 cannot easily be forgotten. That is once again the lesson emerging from this excellent compendium of women's writings from the three countries which were once part of one whole. Menon has done a commendable job of bringing forth the pathos women have felt over that summer of madness.

Urdu: Readings in Literary Prose  
Gopi Chang Narang  
National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language, India



There has always been a richness about Urdu where its literary aspects are concerned. Narang underscores the theme once more through presenting instances of good writing in Urdu, which again is geared to helping one comprehend the grammar, syntax and prose style involved in such writing.

## Women, food, climate

Farhana Milly is impressed by a new work

OUR National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's well loved poem Jago nari bohni shikha, written in the 1930s, is an estimable tribute to women's empowerment. Enlightenment personified, Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, who was born in a respectable but conservative family of Rangpur, pioneered women's advancement in the then colonial British India. An eminent writer, Rokeya established a high school in her beloved husband's memory in 1911 in Kolkata. She also founded the Anjuman e Khawaten e Islam (Islamic Women's Association), which was active in holding debates and conferences regarding the status of women and education.

Parvez Babul, journalist and writer, has been writing articles on development issues. He has brought these essays together in his maiden book, Women's Empowerment Food Security and Climate Change. The articles included in it were published in the weekly Holiday, The Daily Star, The Bangladesh Observer and the Sexing the Political, a US-based Journal of Third Wave Feminists.

Gender equality and women's empowerment are human rights that lie at the heart of development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. As the UN observes, despite the progress that has been made, six out of ten of the world's poorest people are still women and girls, less than 16 per cent of the world's parliamentarians are women, two-thirds of all children are deprived of literacy or education.

Parvez Babul writes in one of the articles, Poor women's plight: "Historically, women have been the key to food security. But they are not secure; especially poor women die many times before their death. They receive less, but have no rights to demand more. They say less, but are bound to

listen more. They eat less, but must produce more to feed others. If we analyze the lives of poor women, we become amazed at how they survive."

The book contains 23 articles among which the following are notable: Elimination of violence against women; Say 'No' to dowry to stop it; Ensure food and nutrition security for the poor women and children; Invest in nutrition for the girl children; Women's empowerment; Food security and nutrition; Poor women's



Women's Empowerment Food Security and Climate Change  
Parvez Babul

plight; Climate change and the media; Begum Rokeya: Legend of women's education; Helen Keller: Sighted without eyes; Empowering women through ICT; White cane: Symbol of safety for the blind; Girls and women suffer more from anaemia; Jahanara tackles munga through her vegetable garden; and HIV/AIDS: prevention is better than cure and others.

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## BOOK NEWS

### UPL emerges with Milam book

FARIDA SHAIKH

ON Thursday 11 February 2010, on a fading winter afternoon, Lauren Lovelace, director of the American Centre, orchestrated the book launch event of the University Press Limited Dhaka edition of *Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia*, by William B Milam.

Amid a select, small audience, the writer, who has served as US ambassador in both countries, made a categorical conclusion on the book: that it was 'one of negative outcome.' The subtitle of the book, flirting with failure, elaborates his deliberation.

The UPL edition of the book was set in motion on 15 July 2009 when C Hurst & Co. proposed a reprint of an edition in Bangladesh.

UPL immediately agreed to this offer. Hurst sent a copy of the book and publication work was soon underway. It was done through the good offices of a competent editor, who ensured a smooth publication of the UPL edition.

On a related subject, Hurst's new publication is *Military Orientalism Eastern War through Western Eyes* by Patrick Porter.

UPL plans to publish a series of books on events in South Asia in 1971. *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh; Memoirs of an American Diplomat* by Archer Blood has already been published.

William B Milam, a senior policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington DC since his retirement from the US foreign service, takes a hard look at the political and religious realities of Bangladesh and Pakistan. He draws attention to the al-Qaeda linked jihadi network that threatens Pakistan, and the influence of Islam on the culture and society of both Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The President and Director, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, has noted that 'understanding the dynamics and complexities of South Asia is more important now than ever before. Bill Milam provides the essential historical background of Pakistan and Bangladesh, with an insider's perspective and first-hand knowledge that only a seasoned and gifted diplomat can provide.'

The review of the Hurst edition in International Affairs, Chatham House, London, in September 2009 notes... 'It was perhaps inevitable that the seemingly unstoppable rise of India as an economic powerhouse and its emergence as arguably the only functioning democracy in