

A call for women's justice

-Shahid Alam studies a feminist standpoint



Women and Transitional Justice
Progress and Persistent Challenges in Retributive and Restorative Processes
Mayesha Alam, Palgrave Macmillan

Women's issues. For instance, with regard to the Genocide Convention, her verdict is that, "(w)here gender neutrality was prioritized, gender sensitivity was compromised." She also faces up to the reality of nationalism often prevailing over internationalism in matters of justice: "...international criminal law does not necessarily align with domestic laws and the divide between the two can have severe consequences for the functions of a transnational justice institution, including with respect to women's accessibility, participation, and representation." This point has relevance in the context of Bangladesh, as may be gleaned from Chapter 4 ("The International Crimes Tribunal for Bangladesh: A Delayed, Politicized, and Self-Limiting Experiment in Transitional Justice").

Alam begins by stating how cultural bonds overshadowed religious ties very early in Pakistan's existence. She is categorical about the liberation struggle: "Although it was not categorized as such at the time, the Liberation War in Bangladesh is a 'forgotten genocide,' according to Gary Bass, of the 20th century — one that is evocative, in its horrors, of the Nazi Holocaust." Then, as will become familiar to readers going through the book, the author quickly zeroes in on the topic of women and justice. And yet, and this mortifies the author, till now, in Bangladesh, women are primarily remembered as victims of the war when, in reality, "many women who survived sexual assault were also agents of liberation, performing various functions including fighting alongside men as freedom fighters, serving as nurses and informants, providing domestic support, smuggling weapons and ammunition, and setting traps for the Pakistani military."

In the post-liberation phase, the Government of Bangladesh promulgated the International Crimes Tribunal Act in 1973. However, it achieved very little, if anything substantive at all. In Alam's estimation this happened because, "Unlike in some other places such as Rwanda or Yugoslavia, where peace and justice were pursued within close succession of each other, in Bangladesh, there was a trade-off for peace that overlooked justice." Then, after a lapse of thirty seven years, the Sheikh Hasina government established the International

IN the Foreword to the book, Melanie Verveer, former US Ambassador for Global Women's Issues, introduces its underlying theme: "Women and Transitional Justice: Progress and Persistent Challenges in Retributive and Restorative Processes is an important and much-needed contribution to understanding the crucial role of women in peacemaking and transitional justice." The author, Mayesha Alam, of Bangladeshi origin, is an Assistant Director, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, USA. In her words, "Women and Transitional Justice considers, from a theoretical and practical standpoint, how the inclusion of women affects transitional justice processes and their outcomes as well as how to better practice gender mainstreaming in transitional justice initiatives that are retributive or restorative in nature." She demonstrates through her work that she has not made her claim lightly.

Alam makes her points from a demonstrably feminist standpoint, which goes well with the topic she has chosen to study, but she is definitely not misandrous. In Chapter 2 ("Landscaping Feminist Scholarship on Transitional Justice"), she justifies her approach: "A feminist analysis of transitional justice...offers a conduit to expose the tensions between political versus social, collective versus individual, elite versus masses, and most importantly between male-led agency versus woman-subjected passivity in transitional justice mechanisms which have, traditionally, not only disenfranchised women and their right to redress but also marginalized other non-dominant societal groups." She is troubled that women continue to find themselves on the fringes of international law and in transitional justice initiatives. "This results in not only the exclusion of women's perspectives, aspirations, and talents in transnational justice initiatives but it also results in a preference for male-centric approaches to governance that would uphold unequal gender relations."

Hers is a cross-disciplinary effort, and the reader would tend to agree with the author that the book combines theoretical perspectives from feminism, international jurisprudence, conflict resolution and peace-building, state-building, and psychology of inter-group relations. However, international jurisprudence and feminism predominate, and the title of Chapter 3, "Retributive Approaches to Transitional Justice: A Feminist Analysis of How International Law Shapes National and International Prosecutions", pretty much illustrates that point. She uses the cases of Bangladesh and Kenya to study a new wave of transitional justice initiatives with the hope that the lessons learnt from the experience of these countries "will be lifted, adapted, and applied elsewhere in future transitional justice initiatives." Reading this line, one might be tempted to think that the author has wholeheartedly extolled the efforts of Bangladesh, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Before concentrating on an entire chapter on Bangladesh, she hints at what is going to come: "Despite its shortcomings, the Bangladesh ICT (The International Crimes Tribunal) is not a lost cause, yet." That "yet" is loaded with meaning.

In Chapter 3, she provides a genesis of international efforts since World War II towards establishing transitional justice, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the 1951 Genocide Convention to the creation of the International Criminal Court in 1998. She discusses the shortcomings and inadequacies of each of these efforts, especially in the matter of addressing

Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in 2010. This one has been more active, although, the author points out, it has drawn criticism from local and international observers, including US government officials, NGOs like Human Rights Watch, and The New York Times newspaper. They have based their critique on, among other things, the Tribunal being over-politicized and the non-inclusive nature of the proceedings. On the other hand, ICT officials have steadfastly claimed that it is immune from political manipulation. Furthermore, its defendants have argued that it is a local institution and, therefore, not subject to international laws. For the author, though, and this is consistent with her theme, one of ICT's shortcomings is "the inadequate incorporation of women's voices, perspectives, experiences, aspirations, and participation."

Chapter 6 ("The Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission of Kenya: A Well-Intentioned "Gender Policy" Threatened by Structural, Cultural, and Political Challenges") discusses the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) that was established in Kenya in 2008 with the objective of, among other goals, investigating, analyzing, and reporting on ethnic violence and tensions; of crimes of a sexual nature against female victims. Its findings reaffirmed that Kenya's women occupy "a subordinate position to men in society and gender-based injustices are not only expansive but also multifaceted." Partly based on this factor, the author doubts that transformative change will take place in the country (although, I suspect, she has probably not consigned such change to eternal damnation) because there is "an atmosphere of political apathy and even dismissiveness amongst many government officials toward the TJRC's findings and recommendations."

In summing up her analysis of the two case studies, Alam has been incisive: "Both case studies on Bangladesh and Kenya demonstrate the importance of public advocacy in the establishment of transitional justice institutions as well as the essentiality of public trust in maintaining the credibility of such a process. In both cases, the credibility of the respective transitional justice institutions was hurt by poor political leadership, inadequate political will, limited financial resources, diminished access to citizens, and deeply divisive political culture." The author also explores other important sectors that require transitional justice. One of them is economic justice, a condition that is still found wanting in even many of the advanced countries. She explains the crucial distinction between sexual violence and gender-based violence, which are not one and the same. Here is where she demonstrates that patriarchy is not a part of her outlook. "Gender justice is the notion that men and women deserve equal protection and equal redress," she contends, "that both men and women have meaning and significance, and that any redress should be based on their experiences in conflict and their needs in transitioning from conflict to peace."

Women and Transitional Justice is thoroughly researched and judiciously analyzed. Mayesha Alam has tried to be objective in her presentation and assessment, and, in this endeavour, she has done herself proud. However, she could have done without the almost verbatim repetition of her core arguments in different sections of the book. That was not necessary to get her points across. Women and Transitional Justice is a serious work that will require much concentration and contemplation from the reader.

SHAHID ALAM IS AN EDUCATIONIST, ACTOR AND FORMER DIPLOMAT

The documentary Ray planned to make

Pallab Bhattacharya sees the auteur in new light

WHEN you come across a book on iconic director Satyajit Ray, it is quite natural to expect it to be either about the filmmaker or about his works in various art forms — movies, writings, drawings and music etc. But Satyajit Ray's Ravi Shankar: An Unfilmed Visual Script is not about a completed compendium of his works but is about a documentary film Ray had planned to make, prepared its visual script (storyboard) and even titled it "A Sitar Recital by Ravi Shankar" but could not shoot it. Why? No one knows, not even his family members, including film-maker-son Sandip Ray.

"This is the story of a film that did not happen", goes the apt and very first sentence of the book's introduction, "Unheard Melodies", written by eminent film and music critic Sankarlal Bhattacharjee, who was associated with Ray for a long time.

Film lovers know through Ray's films, like the epoch-making Pather Panchali, Aparajito, Apur Sansar and Paras Pathar, that masterpieces are born when the director and the sitar maestro, the two greatest names in their respective fields, collaborate on a project.

Sandip Ray's highly informative preface to the book, Sankarlal Bhattacharjee's erudite and detailed analysis of the storyboard of Ray's planned documentary on Ravi Shankar and excerpts of old interviews of Ray and Ravi

Shankar, reproduced in the book under review, reveal to the new generation of film and music lovers the deep admiration and respect the two geniuses had for each other, their close friendship and subtle hints of differences between them.

The book also informs readers how the music of Pather Panchali happened in just one day before Ravi Shankar left on a foreign tour and how the sitar maestro was "inspired" by the rushes of the film he saw in Bhavani cinema hall in Kolkata and what are the instruments used in the music of the film. It also recounts how Ray used the tar shehnai to tell effect in one of the key sequences of the film when Sarbjaya breaks down after Durga's death and after Harihar hands over to his wife a sari meant for Durga.

Ray says in his My Years with Apu: A Memoir (reproduced in the book under review) that he was happy with the way things had worked out for the sequence except Sarbjaya's "grief-stricken outburst. It didn't sound right. Then I saw it without sound and found that visually it was perfect and therefore decided to substitute the lamentation with a high controlled instrument like the tar shehnai, which would be suggestive of grief". The tar shehnai for the scene was played by one of its best exponents D M Tagore, says Ray.

Another interesting anecdote Ray mentions in his memoir (the same is told to readers by Ray's wife Bijoya in her book Manik and I: My Life with Satyajit Ray) speaks volumes of the director's ability to bring out the hidden talent of a person. Time constraints

prevented Ravi Shankar from composing the music of "one of the more important scenes" of Pather Panchali when the sweetmeat seller goes around the village selling his sweets. Ray found rhythm in the walking of the seller and wanted music for it and the music was given by, of all people, his cameraman Subrata Mitra who the director says "was also an excellent sitar player".

Ray had known Ravi Shankar much before the latter composed the background music for Pather Panchali and the sitar maestro had read Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's novel much before he saw the film. Ravi Shankar's association with composing music for films began before Pather Panchali when he had done it for Khwaja Ahmad Abbas' Dharti Ke Lal and Chetan Anand's Neecha Nagar.

There is no certainty when Ray had prepared the 32-page storyboard, the centre-piece of Satyajit Ray's Ravi Shankar: An Unfilmed Visual Script, and why he did not translate it into a film. According to Sandip Ray, Marie Seton,

Ray's biographer, says the storyboard was made in 1951, four years before Pather Panchali but "there are film scholars who argue against this date". However, according to the son, "it may not be unreasonable to say that the storyboard was made before the time of Aparajito" (1956) and

Sandip's argument is that his father "left drawing blocks and used red notebooks for the first time to write the screenplay for his second feature film."

But did Ray altogether discard storyboarding after Pather Panchali? As the documentary filmmaker and journalist Nasreen Munni Kabir notes in her book, Conversations with Waheeda Rehman, the actress, who is in Ray's 1962 film Abhijan, tells her interviewer that the director's "storyboarding was extremely helpful".

Ray's storyboard on the planned documentary on Ravi Shankar, containing more than 100 sketches and technical instructions on camera movements and other things, has been carefully preserved in the archives of the Society for Preservation of Satyajit Ray Archives, of which Sandip Ray is member-secretary. As the junior Ray tells us, "this is the first time a whole storyboard comprising sketches by my father is going to appear in book form."

The Society for Preservation of Satyajit Ray Archives and HarperCollins must be congratulated for giving us such an important book. One cannot resist the temptation, though, of making a suggestion that perhaps could be debated wildly: should Sankarlal Bhattacharjee's analysis of the storyboard of A Sitar Recital By Ravi Shankar have preceded the sketches or followed them? It is like asking: should you read a review first and then go to watch a film or vice versa?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA IS A SENIOR INDIAN JOURNALIST BASED IN NEW DELHI

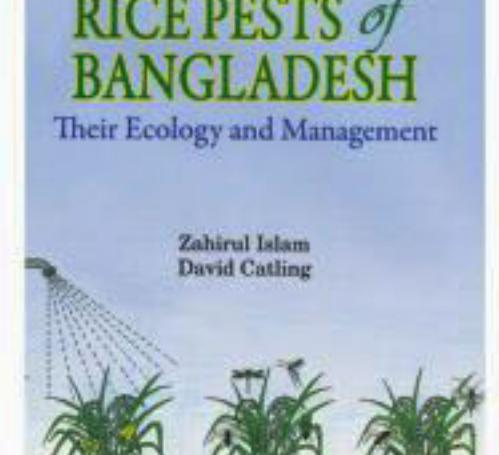
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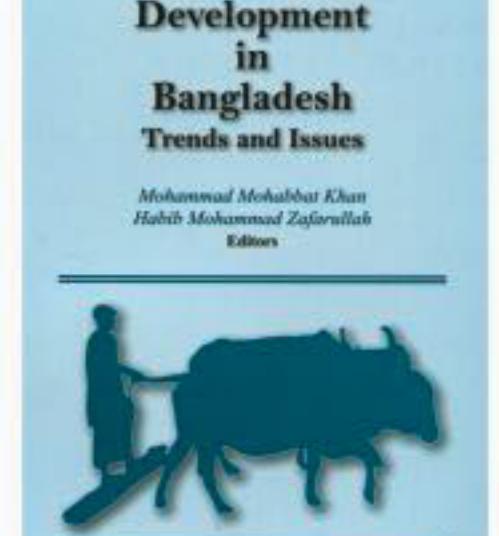
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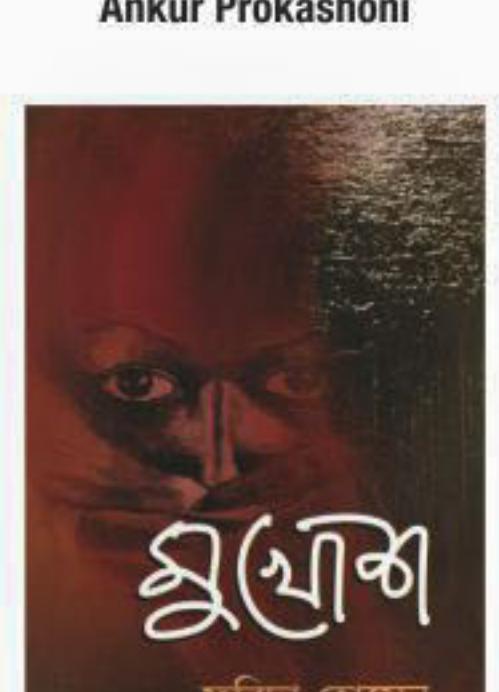
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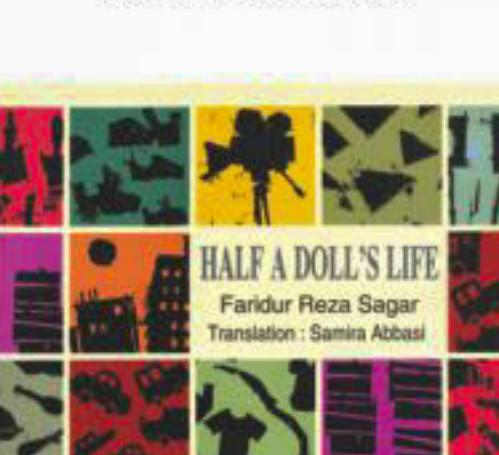
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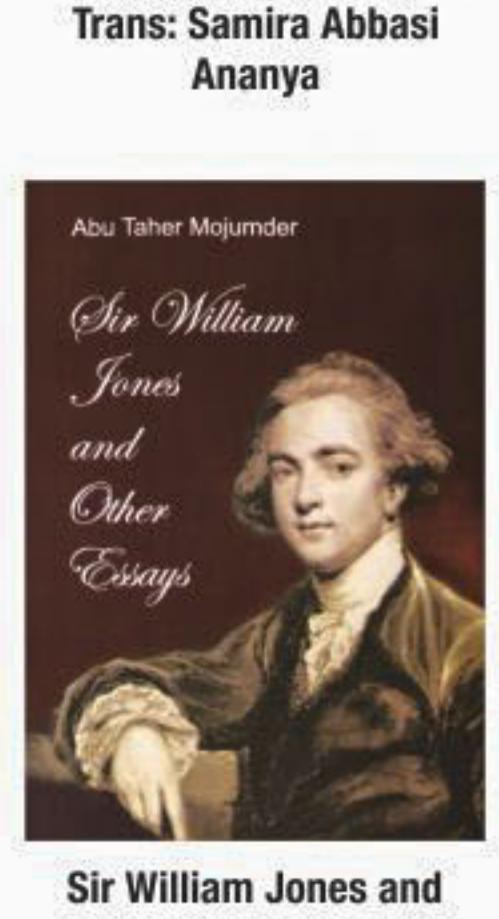
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Sir William Jones and Other Essays
Abu Taher Mojumder
Ankur Prokashoni

In need of a good laugh

Fouzia Reza amuses herself with a new book

ISpy, the title of Shamsad Mortuza's collection of anecdotal pieces, refers to a children's game in which you are supposed to see what the speaker is seeing. Say, for instance, you are supposed to spot the exact crack in the ceiling that I have spotted.

Mortuza's book invites us to see what he has seen in different parts of the world. The pieces are deliberately playful and lighthearted. It demonstrates the high seriousness with which he approaches life and literature as a teacher of English Literature at Dhaka University. Nevertheless, Mortuza remains critical of every experience at hand. The experiences move from personal to public, from local to global, from the real to the hyper real world of social networks.

We meet a honeymooning couple in Kathmandu almost on the verge of repudiating their marriage vows before a lynching crowd. We find the couple in a so-called Juliet's house in Verona and participate in business surrounding Shakespeare. We hear about a young child in Dhaka, left at home by working parents, rendering her emotions with a crow. We join some overseas Bangladeshi students during a careless 'hangout' spree on the U.S.-Mexico border.

The book is remarkably funny. Yet the writer outsmarts us by decoding ads, films, short stories, traditional proverbs, academic politics, religion, Facebook statuses, our craving after LIKES and what not. In all scenarios, Mortuza wins by defying reader's expectations,

always. His witty narrator sees more than what we see in Stephen Meyer's Twilight saga or any political trait long unquestioned.

All these come under one hip cover that gives us another reason to collect the book. The posh black cover seems like a power-off LCD screen. The pair of optical glasses, cleverly put in the middle by the cover artist Meher Nigar Jerin, prepares us for our 'Showtime' with a witty, irresistibly funny presenter.

Readers will find the language easy, toned up to meet the 'smarter' youth in us. Any followers of contemporary South-Asian writings in English can have a break from the 'created' Bengali ambience, a preoccupation with portraying the 'hybrids', an overt interest in sounding 'post-colonial'.

Mortuza's prose is new, fresh and original. The Sherlock Holmes-like decoding of the writer is rather free-flowing, no mask of literary poise, too honest and interested in 'reading' the ordinary. Mortuza sees more than us not only for his academic training in literary criticism, wide travelling experience, or a good cultural capital, but for his keen sense of spying with a penchant for humour.

It's a book that you read in one sitting. Then, you get back to it when you are in need of a good laugh. And, you start to observe more spotting cracks in your world where you had not many before.

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