

Women, Land and Power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur Revisited

Author: Jenneke Arens

Reviewed by Shahid Alam

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FOLLOWING UP ON A PIONEERING STUDY

JENNEKE Arens has undertaken a study of a village called Baniapukur (which she has called Jhagrapur as a pseudonym) in two phases: first in 1974-75, and then between 1998 and 2009. The outcome of the earlier project was the book (co-authored with J van Beurden) *Jhagrapur: Poor Peasants and Women in a Village in Bangladesh* (1977). The follow-up study has resulted in *Women, Land and Power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur Revisited*. Nine chapters and a Summary constitute a significant work, notwithstanding that the significance would be limited primarily to the village under study, rather than to Bangladesh as a whole (although her findings could reasonably apply to the rest of the country as well). Arens sets out the rationale for her undertaking in the Introduction (Chapter 1): "This study is about the relationship between women, land, empowerment and social transformation. Do women who own land have more power in their social relations than women who do not, and can land ownership contribute to a structural transformation of gender and class relations?" The answer she finds to the first question may be summarized as "possibly, but...", and to the second as "probably, provided..."

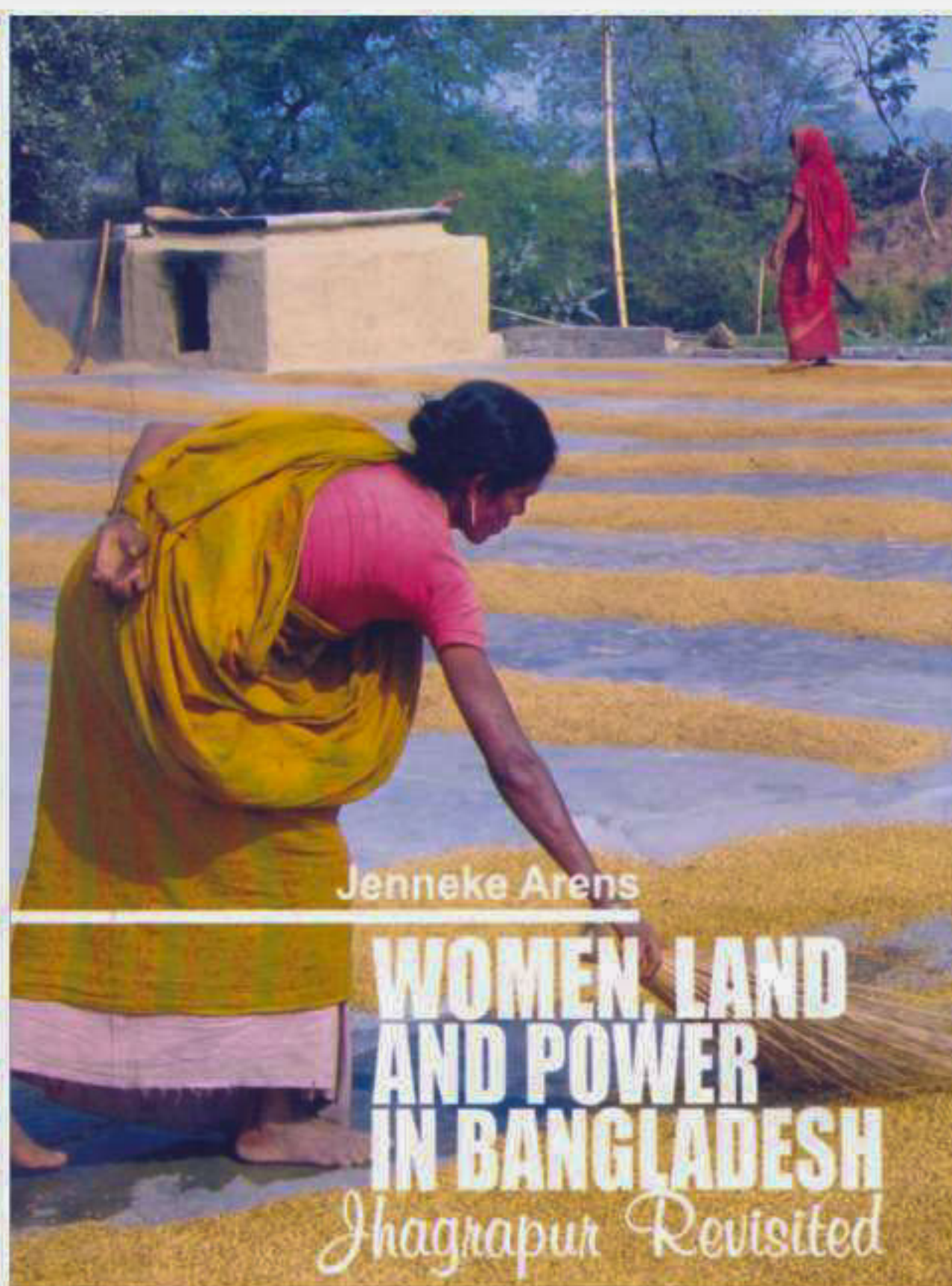
The author looks to contribute to the theories and debates on the processes of structural transformation of Bangladesh's society, and concludes (in "Summary") with this realistic assessment: "...to change structurally unequal relations and injustices implies the transformation of centuries-old ideologies and institutionalized practices." It is a hard task to be sure, but one not impossible to achieve, although it will be an arduous process. She is under no illusion about what this process will entail: "For such a transformation, a dialectical process of women's and men's collective and cooperative agency, fundamental changes in people's mindset from hierarchical thinking to an all-inclusive egalitarian, non-exploitative thinking and concerted efforts to put these changed mindsets into practice collectively are required.... This is a long and complicated process that takes the sustained efforts of at least several generations...." (Ch. 9, "Reflecting on Women, Land and Power")

Arens concludes that the existing patriarchal class structure of the village with its dogma of women's dependency and the non-recognition of their productive role are the primary impediments against women laying claim to land and taking control over it. And the author is an ardent champion of women being able to do just that, not just in individual cases, but structurally. For this to realistically come about, though, laws and regulations that are systematically implemented at the grassroots are an imperative. Arens comes to this point after being

convinced that land ownership does not automatically lead to empowerment. She, however, acknowledges that, in the process of comparing the two periods of her study, there are indications of women's empowerment, and notices fissures in the existing gender relations. These are good signs for Bangladesh, although Arens is correct in not jumping to any sweeping generalization: "The question is: are these processes moving towards structural changes in gender and class inequalities, or are they merely modifications within existing power structures? Are class and patriarchal gender relations and ideologies, norms and values crumbling, or are they merely changing their appearance?" (Ch. 8, "Women's Empowerment in the Family and the Community").

At the outset of the book, the author makes her position clear: "that land would be an effective asset for women's agency to come out of their subordinate position and could play an important role in structural social transformation." She believes that in patriarchal societies (like Bangladesh), land distribution is unequal between the rich and the poor, and between men and women, which is a consequence of structurally unequal class and gender relations. Arens then credibly tempers her views by essentially taking recourse to the convergence-divergence model of societies and polities: those societies converge in some areas, diverge in others. In her words, "However, the shape that gender and class relations take varies in different societies as a result of structured variables like differences in history, culture, religion, ideology, moral values and the structure of the state."

Chapter 2 ("Debates on Women, Land and Agency") is devoted largely to the theories and debates that are relevant to her study. She critically discusses Anthony



Giddens' "structuration" theory which links structure and agency across space and time. Arens contends that the concepts of agency and empowerment are not completely synonymous, and proceeds from there on her own study, the questions it poses, the possible answers, and scope for further exploration. Some of her conclusions include the view that neo-liberal markets are neither pro-poor nor gender-neutral, and that "people on the margins of society are less trapped in social and cultural structures, such as class and gender ideologies, and therefore may be in a better position to act in defence of, or ignore these structures."

Chapter 3 ("Land and Economic Transformation") is fascinating for a few unconventional (as opposed to popular) views that, admittedly, might well be contested. Arens explains in detailed analysis that, "the introduction of the Green Revolution has led to greater class and gender differentiation. More people have become landless, creating a larger male wage labour force with more income earning opportunities, while poor women have lost their main source of income." Throughout the book, Arens takes up the cudgel for women's (especially those that are poor) rights. She continues: "Men, machines and the market have replaced women in their productive tasks and this has further strengthened the patriarchal belief that women play no role in the production process." Of course, and the author alludes to some women from the village having left to work in this sector, women have been found to be very productive in the flourishing readymade garments industry. The author is particularly critical of microfinance: "...the claim that microfinance empowers people and is the solution to end poverty is highly debatable." She goes further: "In practice, microfinance strengthens existing inequali-

ties.... I argue that a focus on women's ownership and control over land would be much more effective against poverty than microfinance." She tempers her view in Chapter 5 ("Jhagrapur Revisited, Class and Gender"): "My observations in Jhagrapur show that, at least for the village, the success of microfinance programmes is highly exaggerated."

Chapter 4 ("Gender Ideology and Social Transformation"), which deals with Islam, moral values, and gender ideologies, contains this thoughtful observation: "In a way, the patriarchal ideology that men are the providers and women the caretakers, and Islamic inheritance laws contradict each other." Chapter 6 ("Moral Values, Gender Ideology and Power") further deals with moral norms, values, and gender ideologies as imposed by Islam, the state, and other local and global powerful forces. Here, too, Arens is forthright in her views. "But morals and values are not uniform and there have been contradictory developments. On the one hand, this has led to stigmatization of women while on the other hand it has created more space for women to defy certain norms and values." She also notices how women have modified and stretched the meaning of purdah or found other ways to maintain purdah. "In this way, women have moulded the structure in a way that enables them to cope with the changed circumstances and to adjust to their perception of being part of the 'modern' world." On another issue that appears to be getting worse in this country, Arens admonishes: "Apparently, this is how 'democracy' works: making sure that you recover the price that you had to pay to get elected and get into power, even over the backs of the poor and powerless. How can people be expected to have faith in this so-called democracy and its leaders?"

Ch. 7 ("Women's Land Ownership in Jhagrapur") addresses the matter of women's relationship to land, highlighting the stories of three women. There is a minor mistake in the book. CO translates into Circle Officer, and not Chief Officer as a section of the book would have it. Jenneke Arens has written an absorbing book based on her extended periods of stay in a village in Bangladesh. She has definitely noticed improvements in general in the village, including in the lot of women in particular instances, over two periods of research and study. That is good news, although more is needed to be done, especially for women. Some will find Arens' views controversial, but few would dispute that the book is compelling reading.

The reviewer is an actor and educationist.

Classics Corner



The Nigger of the Narcissus

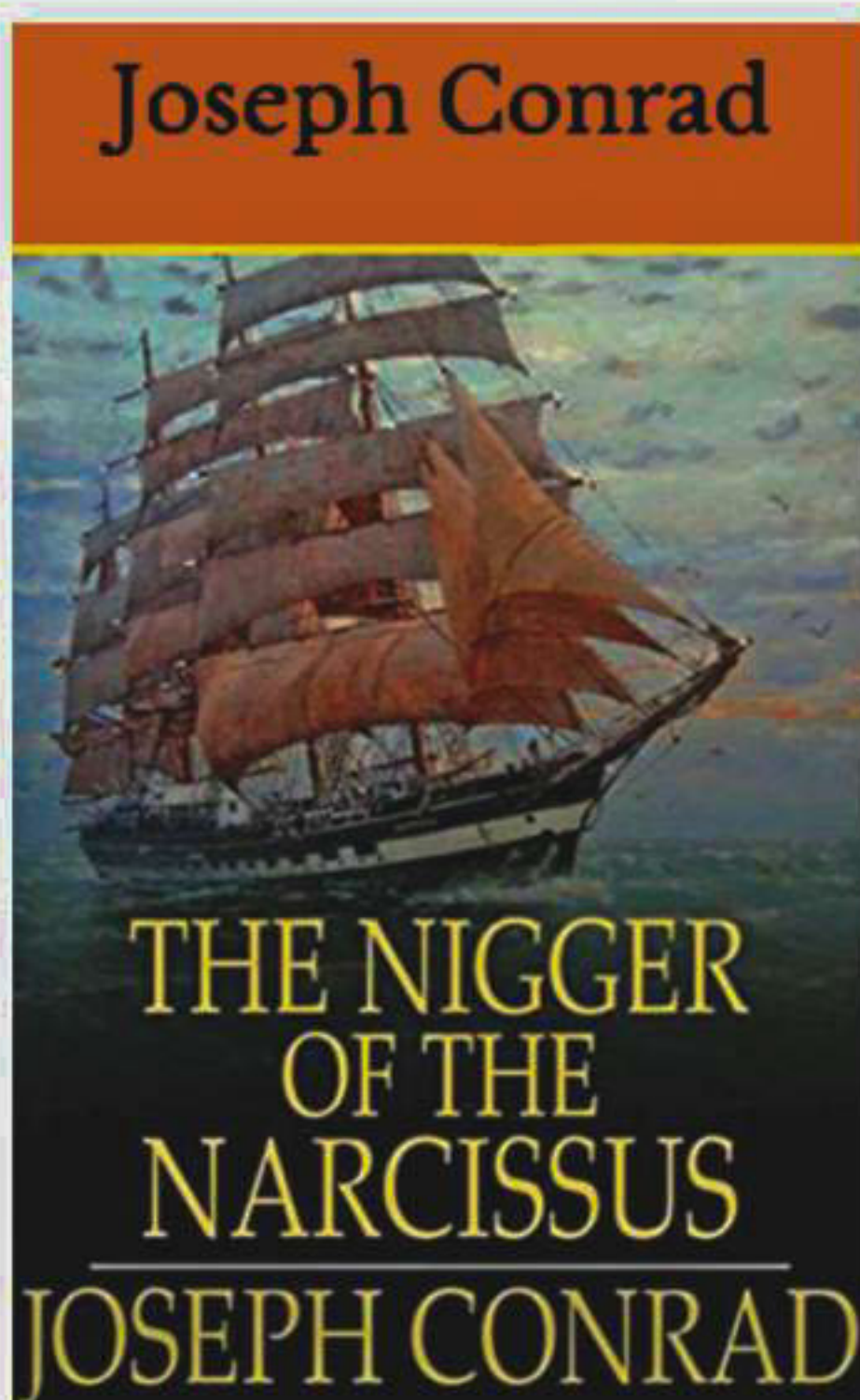
Author: Joseph Conrad

Reviewed by Shahana Yeasmin

JOSEPH Conrad was born in 1857. He was a Polish author who wrote in English after settling down in England. He was granted British nationality in 1886, but he always considered himself a Pole. Conrad is regarded as one of the greatest novelists of the world. *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is one of the best-known novellas by Joseph Conrad.

The Nigger of the Narcissus is a story of troubled interpersonal relationships, racial exploitation and the supremacy of white westerners. It's about the lives of some sailors belonging to a ship called *Narcissus*. Joseph Conrad asserts that seamen are guileless fellows with good hearts. The innate morality or sanctity of untutored, rough, simple seamen is probably the main theme of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

The inner message of the book is that humans must get rid of their irrational forces to become sensible beings like sailors do their duties on ships skillfully in silence without listening to emotional chattering of the crew. Throughout the novel we find several characters, among whom the main figures are James Wait, Captain Allistoun, Old Singleton, Belfast, Mr. Baker etc. The main character, James Wait, is a black man. He is a dying West Indian black sailor on board the merchant ship *Narcissus* sailing from Bombay to London. While he was sailing from Bombay to London he was suffering from tuberculosis. He became seriously ill during the voyage. The captain of the ship, Allistoun, is too busy with his job. Because of this he does not have any idea about the condition of James Wait. On board *Narcissus* all the people are psychologically different from each other. Some people are very humanistic, some people are not. Throughout the novel we also find a tone of racism. On this ship all people are white except James Wait. So, according to the white people, the "Niggers" (black people) are comparable with Satan. This nigger James Wait is also compared with Satan by the white crew members of *Narcissus*. Even after hearing racist comments from others, James Wait does not get angry. His behavior is very polite. And he says politely "I am a black man but I am



a human being. I belong to the ship. I have an identity." He becomes confident about his identity, about his selfhood. However, the behavior of Mr. Baker, a white man, is very arrogant. All crew members have a lot of fun on the ship, but James Wait is always in a sullen mood because he knows nobody respects him for the black complexion of his skin.

The story of the book is based on colonial times. It shows the torment of black people at the hands of the white Europeans. James Wait feels so sad and humiliated that he thinks he will die very soon. Belfast, another sailor seems to be slightly sympathetic with the plight of James Wait. The underlying message of the story is, people should not be differentiated on the basis of the colour of their skin. Rather humanity and benevolence are highly essential to constitute equity and brotherhood among people.

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Celebration & Other Stories

Translated by Masrufa Ayesha Nusrat

Reviewed by Jackie Kabir

THE history of Bangla literature dates back to the seventh century. The richness of this literature cannot be understood by the world audience unless it is translated. *Srimadbhagavata* was first translated from Sanskrit into Bangla by Maladhar Basu. *Krittivas Ojha* translated *Ramayana* into Bangla in 15th century. Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize in 1913 after he translated his *Gitanjali* as *Song Offerings* into English in 1912. The Pen Bangladesh held many workshops and seminars on translation. Professor Dr Niaz Zaman had pointed out in the *Translation Theory and Practice* edited by her in 2004, published by writers.in, that it was declared in the conference on the literary translation by American Center for PEN in 1970 that a translator has a right to be recognized as the "re creator of the work." Many universities in Bangladesh have taken up translation studies since then and many books are being translated by writers writing in English. ULAB has opened up a translation center for famous Bangla texts to be translated. They are also running workshops in collaboration with the British Council for a number of years now.

Today's Bangla writers' works are being showcased more and more as translators are working hard in the field. There was a misconception that no good translations of original texts can be found in Bangladesh. The writers who write in English and translate have come far since then. We now have many translators who have earned their name in doing translation.

Celebration and Other Stories is one such book by Masrufa Ayesha Nusrat. Published by Samabesh Books with 140 pages and a very subtle cover page the book looks very attractive. In the slim book she has compiled five authors' fifteen stories which have been translated by her. Anwara Syed Haq won the Bangla Academy Shahitya Puroskar in 2010 among many other prizes. As a writer and a practicing psychiatrist she has written numerous collections of short stories, novels, autobiographies and children's books. Three of her stories have been included in *Celebration and Other Stories*. All of these stories have strong female figures as their central characters. Annihilation, is the story about a terrorist who eloped with a girl by tricking her. He is an outlaw and has no compassion for anyone as he grew up being maltreated by society. After staying in an abandoned, secluded house for thirteen days the girl Buba becomes hysterical and prepares to go back home. He doesn't hesitate to use his gun on her. But at the same time he is mesmerized by seeing the two beautiful Chandrabhora

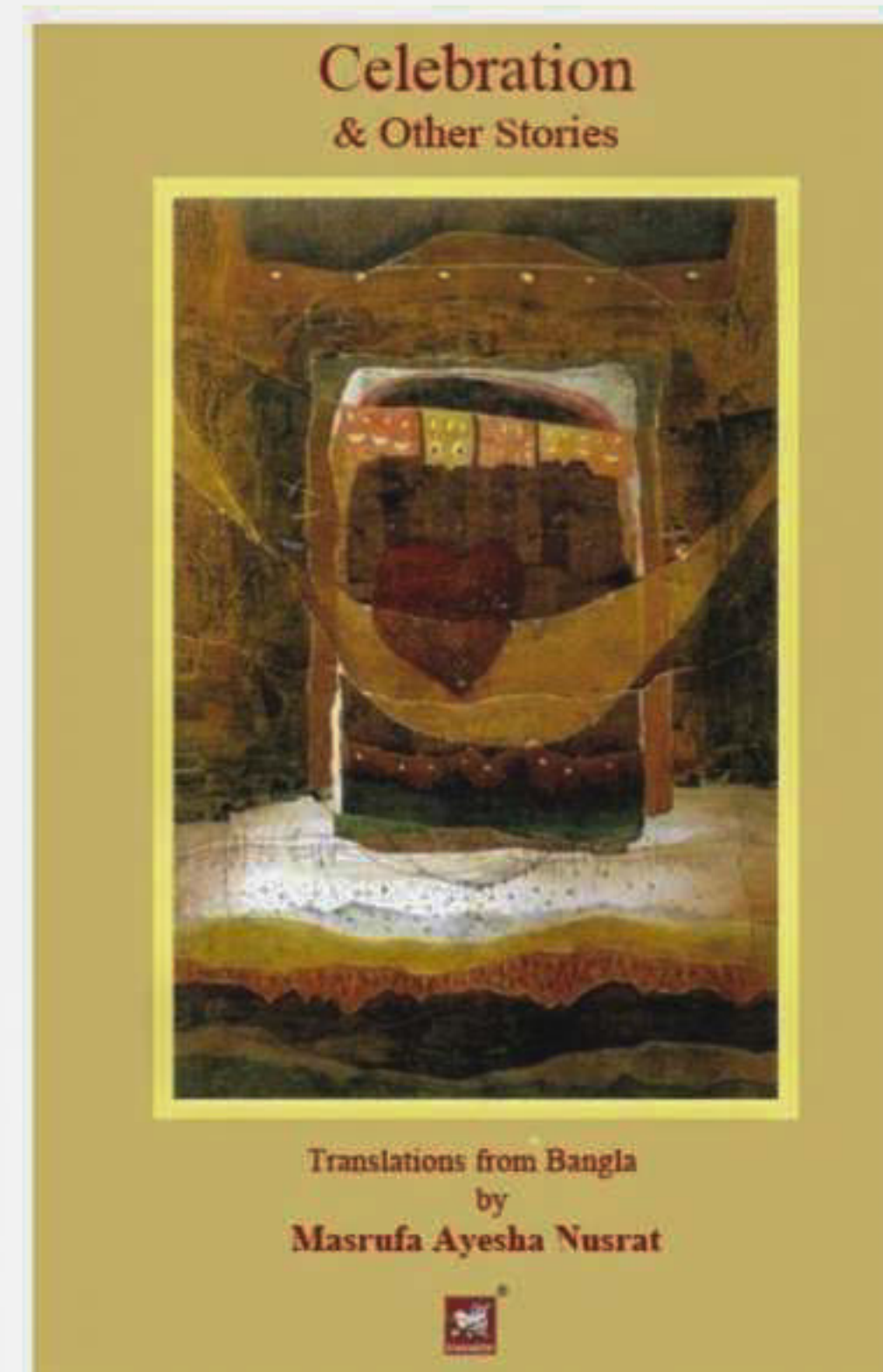
snakes standing up coiling each other's body and mating. Ms Haq may have tried to portray the extreme opposite traits of human beings in the story. In Pagli, the condition of a mentally disoriented person who should have been always taken care of or protected by society is depicted. On the contrary, here the author portrays how simple village people, mainly men, take advantages of her vulnerability. Her third story *Parulee's Flying Episode* is more like a magic realism, the plight of a pregnant

stories I see horses and *The Wise Woman and Magic Mirror* show the position of women in ancient times and now. Reading them makes one realize that women have always been thought of the second sex all throughout the ages. In her other story *The Nameless*, another aspect of womanhood is expressed, which shows that even the name of a woman is not important. As *Sona Mia* tried to find his mother's name he was scolded off by his maternal uncle and driven off from his home. Since his mother was a *Birangona*, a fallen woman in the war, her family members disowned even her memory.

Nasreen Jahan is a renowned Bangladeshi writer who was awarded Bangla Academy Puroskar in 1999. Her novel *Urruku* translated as *The Woman Who Flew* was awarded with Philips Literary Award in 1994. The three stories translated by Ms Nusrat are very interesting, one of them creates a surreal world for a murderer who is in search of his wife's killer, only not knowing the killer was residing within himself. In the story *Evening Mask*, Nasreen Jahan showed how the killer of a young maid goes through psychological trauma and finally confesses his crime to his police officer friend. The unique theme in this writer's writing is that she uses magic realism. And she always gives voice to the poor and destitute, those in society who do not or cannot make their voices heard. This story was adapted into a play by a group of young performers named *Brine Pickles* at the EMK center.

Papree Rahman, the strong voice of the 90s had written the title story *Celebration* with a lot of insight. A village woman would have no place if she fails to produce an heir. So Fulmoti's husband decides to remarry. This made Fulmoti make a decision of having a celebration of death. Her second story *Revenge* is also about making a protest against Efu's husband's second wife. Mohor Ali had taken a second wife when Efu gave birth to two stillborn children. Papree Rahman took the subject of revenge in a very unusual way. Fairy tales of Chahbhadrashon is in fact also a work of magic realism, we find Ms Rahman using this style in many of her works. Altogether the fifteen stories are of diverse topics and portray the rural lives of Bangladeshi women. Most of the writers have made a permanent place in Bangla literature on their own merit. Masrufa had gone a step further by translating them and compiling them in-between two flaps. Apart from one or two typos, it seems to have been worked on very cautiously and carefully. It is a recommended book for all those who are interested in Bangla literature.

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woman living in dire poverty is described aptly. Masrufa has used very simple, lucid language while translating the stories and is successful in being close to the original texts.

Husne Ara Shahed, a columnist and a creative writer's story *Bua and Birthday* once again show the discrepancies and anomalies of our society, things we go through every day without really noticing them. Here the writer points out the facts to the readers, even though the stories do not follow the definite shape of a short story and the message does get across. Husne Ara's other story *Invitation* portrays the stark difference of classes that prevail in our society.

The voices of women writers of 80s and 90s can be heard in Jhama Rahman, Nasreen Jahan and Papree Rahman's stories. Jhama Rahman's