

THE BOOK REPORT

Masud Rana, the faulty hero

RASHA JAMEEL

He's mysterious. He's charming. He's strong, skilled and agile. He makes you think of James Bond, or perhaps Jason Bourne.

Except that he's *deshi*. He's Masud Rana.

Conceived in the 1960s and tweaked after the Liberation War, Masud Rana featured as a spy of the Bangladesh Counter Intelligence division, formerly a former major of the Bangladeshi army. The books gained a cult following in Bangladesh, so much so that Walther PPK pistols, known to be both Bond's and Rana's preferred weapons, became popular as kids' toys all around Dhaka city.

"I used to live in a small town. A huge part of my childhood was Sheba Prokashoni books—borrowing them or buying them with lunch money from the neighbourhood stationary shops," shares Moneesa Kalamder, 24, Editor-in-Chief at Rantages. "It was hard to get hold of English books, so for most Bangladeshis living outside of big cities—especially during the internet's dial-up days—Sheba opened up a window to the spy/thriller genre and the outside world." That was in the early 2000s.

From 30 years earlier, Masud Rana books were captivating the minds of adolescent readers.

"Three kinds of books were available to us in the late '70s to the early '80s—stories translated from the Russian, literary classics by the likes of Saratchandra, and popular fiction like *Feluda*," recalls S A Bari, 55, telecommunications businessman who grew up reading Masud Rana in classes 7-10.

"All had the barrier of either difficult language or a foreign setting/characters, even if they were set in the neighbouring Kolkata," Bari explains. "Masud Rana books filled this vacuum with its fluid, easy language and vivid descriptions of European cities."

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"One of the biggest allures lay in its depiction of explicit content," another reader says, "so the adolescent crowd often ventured into this 'forbidden territory'."

Bangladeshi men came to idolise Rana as a symbol of masculinity and escape. Sometimes, it could be "toxic" masculinity—feelings were best left unexpressed and beautiful women were only regarded as accessories, while Rana himself was a two-dimensional figure with little room for moral ambiguity.

He was no pacifist either. The books' war-favouring sentiments popularised and falsely justified Rana's amoral life as a mercenary-for-hire. In the first chapter of *Durgom Dурগম* (1967), for instance, Rana and his sidekicks violently threaten a harmless army captain to gain command at a bungalow in Karachi. They kill Indian soldiers with assault weapons and explosive devices. A soldier, Mahbub, challenges the immorality of Rana's plans, only to be called "dudh er baccha" and have his patriotism questioned. Rana insists that Mahbub not use his mind and conscience during battle. A weak

monologue then attempts to justify Rana's vigilantism, describing it as a one-man war against the injustices of the world.

By the 2000s, these tropes were starting to lose their grasp on readers as the Western thriller slowly became replaced by the bildungsroman.

Nonetheless, since 2000, 150 books have been published in the Masud Rana series, meaning on average Sheba Prokashoni was churning out books once every two months. This sheer volume would not have been possible without ghostwriters. It was in mid-June this year when this was thrown into debate, when

wealthy businessmen in each respective novel. Both spies meet the antagonist at a beach hotel. Both antagonists share similar pseudonyms, 'Goldfinger' and 'Gold Deer', and the same appearance complete with the distinguishable red hair.

Even some of the dialogues are translated directly from Fleming's text. During a poker game, Bond asks Goldfinger, "Don't you cut for seats? I often find a change of seat helps the luck." In *Shornomrigo*, while playing poker, Rana advises Gold Deer, "Ami dekhchi jayega bodlale onek shomoye bhagyo fireh jaye. Apnara jayega bodle nilei paren."



PHOTO COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

the Bangladesh Copyright Office granted the copyright of 260 Masud Rana books to its ghostwriter Sheikh Abdul Hakim, initiating a much-needed conversation about who should own the actual copyright of a literary work: the "official" writer—in this case Qazi Anwar Hossain, or the ghostwriter?

The Office's decision hinged on a rather loaded legal technicality—for their 39 years of working together, Qazi Anwar Hossain never gave Hakim a contract clearly stating that only the creator would retain the copyright. Nor was Hakim a salaried employee. He would just come over with the manuscript and receive the money in return.

Copyright Registrar Jafor Raja Chowdhury told *The Daily Star* that in the absence of such a contract, the relationship between the two became that of publisher and author, granting Hakim not just the copyright of the books he wrote, but also claim over the royalties. Initially, Hakim had apparently received only a lump sum of Tk 800 for writing each 'khond' of the book, which rose up to Tk 4,000 per part towards the end of his work with Sheba.

Most Masud Rana books have had six editions, but a lump sum payment means Hakim only received payment for the first edition. He filed his first complaint in 2010, two years after leaving Sheba. The copyright office never investigated until last year.

Yet one wonders whether the issue of copyright is even valid here, given that most of the books are—infamously—plagiarised foreign novels.

Shornomrigo (1967), for example, is more or less a copy of the Ian Fleming classic *Goldfinger* (1959) in everything from the title and premise, to plot holes. Both spies pose as

"Unfortunately, Mr Bond, that is not possible or I could not play. I suffer from an obscure complaint—agoraphobia—the fear of open spaces. I must sit and face the hotel." Goldfinger responds to Bond. In *Shornomrigo*, Gold Deer tells Rana, "Agoraphobia rog acche amar. Chokher shanne khola bistrith shojho korte pari na. Tai hotel er dike mukh kore boshil shobhomoye. Ulto dike boshil khelte parba na ami."

Such instances of plagiarism are common in *Shagor Shongom part 2* (1967), inspired Fleming's *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1962), *Gupto Shongket parts 1-2* (2006) copied from Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *Boro Khuda parts 1-2* (1995) mostly plagiarised from Peter Benchley's *The Beast* (1991), and many others. Ironically enough, the fact that only Hakim could name the books he had borrowed from was the winning argument that granted a verdict in his favour, the Copyright Registrar told *The Daily Star*.

Like its plots which once thrilled three generations of Bangladeshi readers—and in contrast to the nuances they often lacked—this journey of Masud Rana in the real world tells an intriguing story. It reflects the porousness of boundaries, and how stories can, on one hand, travel between cultures, defying codes of ownership and accountability, latching itself only to readers' thirst for imagination and escape. Yet they can also fail to age well, and decades after their time, expose the flaws both in their creation and their consumption.

Rasha Jameel is a writer majoring in microbiology. Email: rasha.jameel@outlook.com. Zyma Islam and Shamsuddoza Sajen contributed to this article.

WORTH A RE-READ

Reading Sontag in the pandemic

What happens to a body when the world around it is wrecked by a disease that has no history?

ISHRAT JAHAN

At the time of writing this article, the number of coronavirus cases in Bangladesh crept towards 140,000. This crisis has brought forth an old conundrum: we rarely think of diseases as a part of ourselves, until it becomes personal. Until it creeps into our lives and uncovers cracks in our normalcy which we never knew existed.

Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors*, first written in the late 1970s, provides the words for our current collective struggle. As an American philosopher and political activist, Sontag is best known for her essays that brought in a philosophical approach to modern Western culture in the 1960s-90s. Her essays in this book analyse the myths and metaphors surrounding tuberculosis, cancer, and AIDS,

drawing references from Nietzsche, Camus, and Kant, literary works like *Iliad*, *The Black Swan*, and *Doctor Faustus*, and the life histories of Keats, Katherine Mansfield, Kafka, and Chopin, among others who suffered from tuberculosis (TB) when it was incurable.

She writes with emotion and force, and her arguments come from a personal place of struggle with breast cancer. The first essay in the collection began as a piece for the *New York Times*. Eventually it became a book of two detailed essays written a decade apart, both articulating the core argument that "diseases themselves are, at times, less dangerous than the cultural discourse which creates our responses and behaviours around them."

As the world tries to navigate

the implications of a novel coronavirus, this idea still rings true. Our discourses of the disease do not focus so much on the dangers it has for a body with underlying health conditions or the preventive/curative measures it requires, as it does on accounts of sudden death and dying in wait to access care. It centres on systematic failure particularly in a developing country, where social distancing is hard and vulnerable populations have no social safety nets or sufficient access to quality healthcare.

The relationship that Sontag teases out between our emotions, our lived experiences, and social and political biases with a disease barely understood, resonates. When reflecting on the romanticization of TB or the belief that cancer "resulted from feelings of guilt or longing for punishment", it echoes

quotes painter Marie Bashkirtsev's journal in which consumption gives one "an air of languor which is very becoming". Sontag unpacks how this popular fashion and etiquette of the time viewed looking sickly as glamorous, thus offering a roadmap of how myths and metaphors spread in social and cultural spaces.

It's worth remembering, though, that these essays are personal reflections and are significantly distanced from South Asian realities of illness. They create more questions than they answer, which has a benefit to itself—they challenge us to reflect on the effect of our fears and biases. When Sontag traces the romanticization of TB or the belief that cancer

how the coronavirus is viewed in similar ways—the notion that this is nature's revenge on humankind for their greed and destruction or that one's religion can make them immune or susceptible to the disease.

Diseases take on the form of metaphors perhaps because they are hard to articulate; they are fluid and this characteristic evokes fear, and fear needs something to settle into. Those sick are viewed as taboo and contact with them is feared. Sontag's essays illuminate how myths become powerful in the absence of certainty, and in some cases, construct the edges of our realities.

Ishrat Jahan is a researcher who writes in her spare time. Email: ishrat.jahan1620@gmail.com



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THE INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE 2020: SHORTLIST

Humanity invites its degeneration in 'The Memory Police'

ALIFA MONJUR

On an unnamed island, the townspeople awaken to an unsettling feeling. Something has disappeared from their memories and dropped into a bottomless pit, joining perfume, hats, and birds, to name a few. From today, the townspeople are incapable of remembering anything about this 'something'.

Disappearing objects aren't what makes Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* so dismal, though. Its true tragedy is about people giving up and giving in. Forgot about roses? Just gather all proof of them ever existing—photographs, poetry, petals pressed into a journal—and burn them to ashes or hurl them into the raging river. Pain does not exist in oblivion.

To maintain this ignorant fantasy—to 'help' the society—the island's authoritarian controllers, the Memory Police, enforce disappearances. They raid homes for illegally hidden objects, and arrest those immune to the erasing force.

Our unnamed protagonist's mother, who was murdered by the Memory Police, was one such disturbance. After realising that her editor, R, can also remember, our protagonist—



PHOTO COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

novelist decides to hide him under the floorboards of her late father's office with the help of an old man she has known since infancy. R's memories are alive but her own are "sudden flower petals sinking into the waves or ashes at the bottom of the incinerator".

This remarkable work of Japanese literature sat undiscovered by the English-speaking world for 25 years before the 2019 translation by Steven Snyder. Ogawa, whose other translated works include *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, *The Diving Pool* and *The Cafeteria in the Evening* and *A Pool in*

the Rain, has already won every major literary award in Japan. Floating through her gentle storytelling makes it easy to understand the acclaim.

Unlike fiction's traditional nature but like the world it describes, things escalate ever so slightly in Ogawa's novel. You sit at the final page dumbstruck at how things ended this way. This pace fits her narration of social detriment. By not questioning authority, by not staying alert, the townspeople have invited their own destruction, ignoring the chipping until everything was chipped away.

"By detaching meaning from people and objects, Ogawa shows just how one-dimensional people can become without creativity, thought, and knowledge. By not questioning authority, by not staying alert, the townspeople in the novel have invited their own destruction."

It would be easy to class this as political commentary, but Ogawa goes kilometres deeper. Even when R is locked away, he is more alive than our free-living novelist ever was. She goes to work, speaks with neighbours, but her functionality by no means proves her humanity. Her writing does. Towards the beginning of the novel, she and R share this exchange:

"It seems strange that you can still create something totally new like this—just from words—on an island where everything else is disappearing."

"And what will happen if words disappear?"

You see, things can fuse into one's identity and become boundless vehicles of expression over time. What if the pianist forgets how to play? What if the artist forgets about paint brushes? People are what they are in this book. So who would our novelist be without novels?

By detaching meaning from people and objects, Ogawa shows just how one-dimensional people can become without creativity, thought, and knowledge. To her, humanity is the boundless universe inside one's head—the birthplace of art, music, poetry, and human connection.

This is where people thrive, and it is what Ogawa urges us to never loosen our grip on. Even if the world forces us to. Even if it means we must go underground.

Alifa Monjur is studying commerce and law in Sydney.