

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

How To Build A World For Persons With Disability

SELIMA SARA KABIR & ADEPTO INTISAR AHMED

Sarah Hendren's *What Can a Body Do? How We Meet the Built World* (Riverhead Books, 2020) is a collection of case stories in which she helps one understand the lives of those living with disabilities, and how able-bodied perceptions on assistive technology and prosthetics can fail in practice.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 15 percent of the world's population—a full billion people—live with disabilities. According to the most recent estimates, around 11.4 million people in Bangladesh live with at least one disability, according to the latest Household, Income and Expenditure Survey. And yet, living with disabilities as an experience and as a mode of being continues to be widely misunderstood and, as a result, allowed for very poorly.

Broadly, there are two distinct ideas of what a "disability" even is. The "medical model" defines it as a condition that happens due to some "impairment" of an individual's body. A "social model" takes a broader approach, taking a look at how an impairment (or any other condition) interacts with the world and its beliefs, attitudes, taboos, planning, design and infrastructure, among many other factors. Hendren introduces us to this latter model by mixing scientific literature with individual anecdotes, to reveal that the problems associated with disability are primarily caused by the way the world is built, holding "able" bodies as the standard. Yet able-bodied people are dependent on others too, in need of care and nurturing. So the very act of creating the conceptual categories of "extra" or "special" assistance unfairly privileges some human experiences over others.

As a narrator, instead of presenting them as characters in a case study, Hendren always names the person and adds details about their personality and



ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN MAHIA

physical appearance. Such deliberation helps us keep in mind that disability is individualistic and personal. The book begins with Amanda: "an art historian and a curator of contemporary art. She is Australian by birth and still speaks in the swinging lilt of her native accent. She has a comfortable professorial air, at ease in the front of the room in the geometric clothing that's favored by the gallery set, and she's also a Little Person."

As Hendren's engineering students work to create a simple, portable lectern for Amanda, we begin to realize how everyday objects can be exclusive, unfairly forcing some people to have to "cope". A more inclusive world can begin with building a bespoke lectern that is height appropriate for a little person—thereby bringing the room to them, instead of making them reach for the room.

Hendren also discussed the need for a fairer system for pe-

destrian crossing—the duration of time allotted for the 'walk' sign to be lit up on crosswalks may be insufficient for those with disabilities, or even the aged. She shares with us an example: in Singapore, they have introduced machine readable cards to allow card-bearers an extra few minutes to cross the road.

She also introduces us to baby Niko, who suffers from a rare genetic condition which hinders everyday motor skills including walking and talking. To assist Niko, and promote muscular and neurological development, the Adaptive Design Association designed a chair especially for him made of cardboard. The use of such a commonplace material makes the chair affordable, while also providing room for customisation and upgrades as Niko grows older.

The types of assistive technology Hendren highlights are based on a zero-loss model,

meaning that creating disability-friendly public spaces can actually make them more inclusive to everyone—both able bodied and otherwise. Her examples have reason to pique the interest of a reader from Bangladesh. We understand how bad planning and design on a societal level makes so much of our space so hostile, if not somewhat inaccessible. But her examples make one wonder, surely we also have the potential to remove at least some of the barriers to participation for persons with disabilities?

For the longest time, Bangladesh had an overwhelming shortage of rehabilitative services. New legislation was passed in 2018 however, which formalized rehabilitation work and defined the standards for quality of service and qualification of service providers. One can hope that this standardization will help scale up rehabilitative services, perhaps even to the point where individualized solutions like Niko's can be offered in Bangladesh.

As researchers, this book was helpful in reaffirming the need for the kind of research that institutions like BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, Disabled Rehabilitation and Research Association, and others are doing. To understand the experiences, needs, and wishes of some one billion people better, we must encourage and undertake more research that not only seeks to identify aggregate patterns, but also to place persons with disabilities at the forefront of uncovering their truths.

Adepto Intisar Ahmed is a research assistant at BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, where he tries to put his interest in discovering people's truths to practice.

Selima Sara Kabir is a research associate at the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, where she combines her love for reading, writing, and anthropological research.

INTERVIEW

Revisiting 'Talaash' with Shaheen Akhtar and Seung Hee Jeon

SARAH ANJUM BARI



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

On November 1, 2020, author Shaheen Akhtar was awarded the 3rd Asian Literary Award for the Korean translation of her 2004 novel *Talaash*—which traces the lives of Birangona women decades after the 1971 Liberation War. We spoke to Shaheen Akhtar and translator Seung Hee Jeon about their writing process and the book's legacy.

Sarah Bari/Star Books: Most of us are familiar with *Talaash* and its critical acclaim. For yourself as a reader and author, how has *Talaash* evolved over time?

Shaheen Akhtar: Honestly, *Talaash* has grown a bit distant to me. It was published 16 years ago in 2004. I finished writing it even before that. I actually wanted to create a distance between the novel and myself—I haven't written about the liberation war since 2004 and writing *Talaash* triggered a lot of trauma in me. I wanted to erase the subject from my mind.

Of course, I never expected the kind of acclaim it received upon publication and it was back then that I tried to re-read the book through the eyes of readers or critics. Naturally I wanted to change some things.

But the Asian Literary Award came as the real surprise. By then, Seung Hee Jeon had gotten in touch with me in 2016, having read the English translation of the book, *The Search* (Zubaan Books, 2011). I was touched by her interest because Seung Hee's country also has a terrifying history of war, particularly the experiences of the "comfort women" who were tortured at the hands of Japanese imperial forces during the Second World War—just like the Birangona women of our own country.

I was elated to think that *Talaash* was able to capture the emotions of the Korean people. I could see how the characters stepped out of their borders, and exchanged

places with the female victims of a war that took place almost 25 years ago, in another frontier of Asia. We could hear it resonate with the jury of the Asia Literary Awards.

SB: How and why did you decide to translate *The Search* into Korean?

Seung Hee Jeon: I grew up in South Korea, a country that, ever since my birth, and until today, has been struggling with the legacies of colonialism and the enormous influence of superpowers. One might even attribute the wonderful liveliness of South Korean society today, such as K-culture and its successful industries, partially to the energy of trauma survivors.

So, as a student and scholar of literature, I wrote my dissertation on the search for truth by female war-survivors through creative writing, what might aptly be called "docu-fiction". Soon it was clear to me that belonging in a minority group or colonised nation brings one a different perspective on the experience of war. This realisation led me to Asian literature, as I believe most third-world countries share a common history of modern colonisation by powerful nations.

In 2006, I had the opportunity to serve as an editorial board member for a bilingual Asian literature quarterly, published in Korea, *Asia*. And I encountered *The Search*. I was immediately absorbed in it: its stories sound so familiar and were so moving in the author's superb mastery of literary techniques, which were both so personal, and yet historical and typical, tragic and farcical at the same time. As a literary translator, I felt that I had to make it available to Korean readers.

Read the entire interview online on The Daily Star's website, and on the Daily Star Books Facebook and Instagram pages.

THE BOOK REPORT

'Dhaka Sessions' brings music to a bookstore

MRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN

Cramped amidst the rows and rows of books at Bookworm Bangladesh, performers, instruments, and cameras came together to produce music over the past few weeks. On Saturday, November 14, 2020, the first episode of *Dhaka Sessions* will be aired on YouTube, with the cult favourite band Nemesis as the first performers.

Dhaka Sessions is a promising new project which plans to stream music performed live at Bookworm along with interviews of artists and authors every week, in the same format as NPR's *Tiny Desk* concert series.

About five years ago, lead singer of cover band Stone Free Chotu Khan came across NPR's *Tiny Desk*. "I was amazed by the concept. We had to have something like that but of course with our own unique twist," he tells *The Daily Star*. The idea was to curate a set of musicians who would represent Bangladeshi music—both popular musicians like Nemesis, Sagor Baul, and other less known but talented musicians. All of the music performed would be original—no covers, each episode between 16-22 minutes.

"Musicians, stage hands and technicians have all been hit hard by the pandemic," says Chotu Khan. "Our work involves everyone. I have gotten in touch with street bauls who would come in front of my house and sing with a *mondira*, and her guru who played the *dotara*. They have performed as well."

"A bookstore is an interesting space for a project like this because of its unique setting," says Amina Rahman of Bookworm Bangladesh, explaining the choice of location. "Being surrounded by books makes one feel embraced and enriched. The acoustics at a bookstore are also ideal for high quality recording as the books themselves absorb sound and stop it from bouncing, just like a sound proof studio."

Bookworm had to move shelves around and shut down a section of the store, while ensuring everyone was wearing masks and staying sanitised. "A few of the musicians and their entourage were surprised and excited to see such a unique collection of



PHOTO: TANZIM AHMED BIJOY

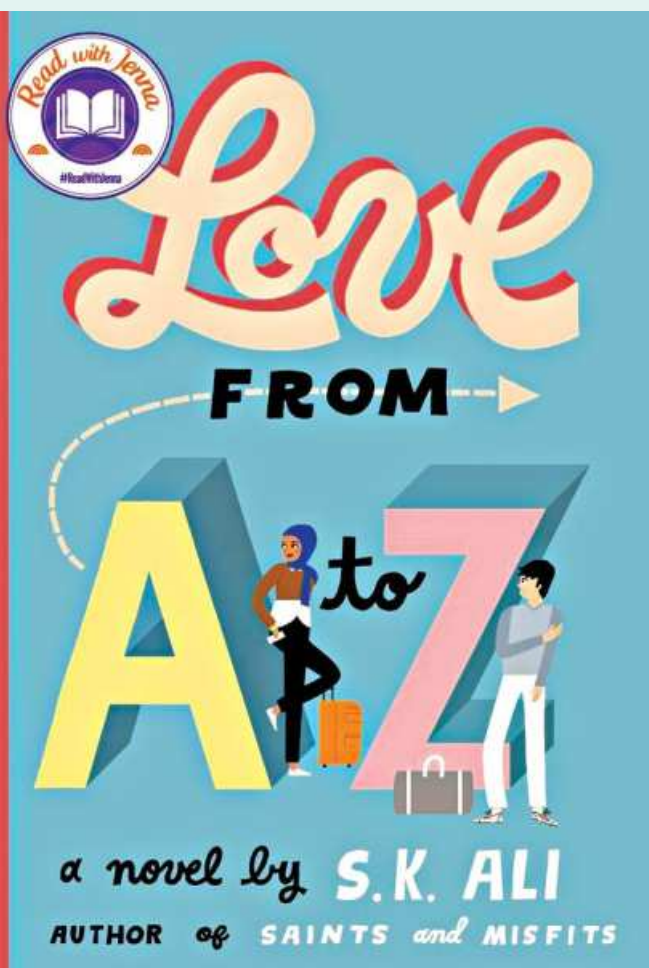
original books available in Dhaka. Each and every artist commented on how unusual and cosy they felt while performing," she shares. "As people watch the performances, they will also see books around them. I hope that *Dhaka Sessions* will introduce Bookworm to new audiences."

"I don't read but there is always something common between writers and musicians," adds Chotu Khan. "I was wondering what kind of space I'd use and I happened to visit Bookworm at the time, which had expanded. Bookworm told me the space was all mine to use for the series. Amina under-

stood the value of what was going on. To be able to take over a place like Bookworm for a day was amazing," he says.

The sound will also be recorded separately for the series and then mixed at a studio so viewers can hear as close to the natural sound as possible. "See people are starved for entertainment. So I want to do this weekly so people have something new coming up that they can enjoy," he shares.

Mrittika Anan Rahman is subeditor, SHOUT, and a contributor to Daily Star Books.



BOOK REVIEW: YA FICTION

Of Love and Faith

SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

DS Books is excited to launch this new series comprising reviews of "light reads" which explore heavier, sensitive topics. In this first instalment, we look at a young adult romance novel that depicts the challenging experiences of adolescent Muslims.

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