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**BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION**

# The Code Name for a Bloodstained Era

ISRAR HASAN

Vincent Bevins is an award-winning journalist who covered Southeast Asia and Brazil for the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* respectively. It was during his time in those regions that he saw how the scourge of anti-communist sentiment had risen with demonstrations being held in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, against discussions surrounding the 1965-1966 massacres, which collectively shaped the psyche of a nation, and a region at large. Concurrently, across the other side of the Atlantic, massive protests were on the rise, which paved the way for Jair Bolsonaro, a right-wing demagogue whose supporters played on the supposed "Red Scare" threat.

In his monumental book, *The Jakarta Method* (Public Affairs Books, 2020), Bevins attempts to show how the violent homogenisation of much of the Third World carried out by the United States has come to define an era with ripple effects felt till this day. The book charts the violent trajectory of the anti-communist measures which led to seismic shifts in the politics of the countries, thus supplanting and relegating anti-communism to a position of questionable ideology.

*The Jakarta Method*, as its namesake suggests, starts in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country and the leader of the Third World movement—a movement that looked to neither the US nor the Soviet Union to design its own socio-economic philosophy. Indonesia at that time consisted of a mix of communists, nationalists, and Islamists led by the charismatic Sukarno who coined his political philosophy as NASAKOM. Nasakom comprised Islam, communism, and nationalism. Indonesia had the largest

communist party (PKI) in the non-communist world after its ruling Russian and Chinese counterparts. The PKI had three million card-carrying members and, according to Bevins, had support from a quarter of the rising nascent nation, which had made itself a starlet of the post-colonial world hosting the world-renowned Bandung conference. It was said to be the largest conference of coloured peoples across the world in 1955 and it challenged the status quo set by the twin polar opposite forces of Soviet communism and American capitalism.

Relying heavily on official declassified documents, research conducted with historians and other experts, and a plethora of testimonies from first hand sources, we see the unfolding and subsequent destruction of a nation in this book. Bevins uses stories of Indonesians and their diaspora communities to take us on the journey of a country whose trust with destiny was sidelined by the constant interference of America. The archipelago had endured several bushfire wars of secession, failed assassination attempts on its leaders, bombings, and a smear campaign of President Sukarno in a Hollywood-made sex tape.

Sukarno had kept a delicate balance between his three pillars: communists, army, and the religious classes, primarily the Muslims. In what still remains shrouded in mystery, an obscure left-wing movement by the name of the '30th September Movement' assassinated the top generals of the armed forces in 1965, causing an orgy of bloodbath led by Suharto, the man who would rule Indonesia till the eve of the millennium. A million Indonesian leftists—communists, intellectuals, union organisers, and Sukarno supporters—fell victim to the army's rage and their cluster of religious groups aided and abetted with the help of the United

States, which had provided them with the hit list. It was with this massacre, Bevins argues, that the phrase "forced disappearances" and the Malay word "amok" first entered our lexicon. The world's third largest communist party—democratic and unarmed—had been violently uprooted and remains banned till this day.

This blueprint of mass murder in Indonesia was replicated in the propping up of military strongmen throughout areas of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The Jakarta Method was later known as 'Plan Jakarta' upon which US agencies and their overtly anti-communist allies relied to overthrow governments. A notable example is the marking of the homes of Chilean leftists with the word "Jakarta" and the Dirty War in Central and Latin America which played out in sync with the events of 1965.

Bevins's narrative convincingly describes how the turmoil in Indonesia was not an isolated incident, but the biggest puzzle piece of the US's anti-communism strategy in the Third World—all to make sure none of the newly independent countries fell into "Soviet communism". Covering vast swathes of history, lands, cultures, and geography, Bevins spins a narrative very few of us know or have attempted to acknowledge. Communism still remains banned in Indonesia and with that, the hopes of reconciliation and reckoning with its past remains in disarray. With the rise of right-wing governments across the world, this book is a decisive and insightful look into the making and unmaking of nations and how the spectre of violent anti-communist crusades has left a blood-tainted mark on the world in its current state.

Israr Hasan is a contributor.

**BOOK REVIEW: FICTION**

# The Glamour and Darkness of the Spanish Dictatorship

TOWRIN ZAMAN

Ruta Sepetys's *The Fountains of Silence* (Penguin Books, 2019) takes place in the 1950s, in a Spain reigned by fear and stifling laws, caught between the dichotomy of non-existent human rights on the one side, and a flourishing tourist scene and wealthy visitors wooed by the national regime on the other. The glamour is only for the powerful to enjoy, while the poor are still reeling from the Spanish Civil War.

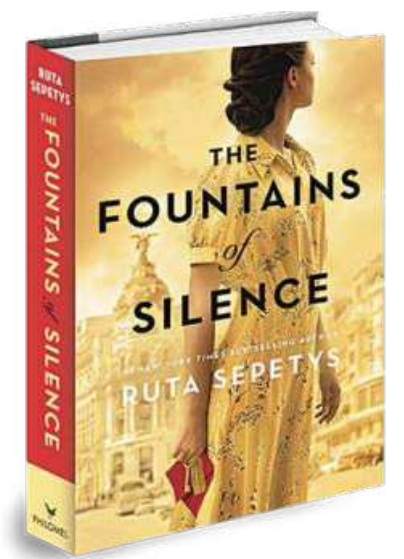
The novel follows the story of Daniel, the 18-year-old son of an American oil tycoon visiting Spain with his family, and Ana, a young woman working as a hotel maid where Daniel is staying, set against the backdrop of a Spain with dangers and secrets lurking on every corner. At the forefront of this story is the Castellana, a palace-turned-hotel in Madrid that caters mainly to Americans. It is the symbol of the new Spain that Franco wants to project to the world. While the guests on the upper levels of the Castellana enjoy scrumptious lobsters, the staff who do their bidding are relegated to the basements, earning less than what a lobster would cost. Amidst this turmoil, Daniel is hoping to capture a photograph that will win him a contest and pay for his way through journalism school. While his initial motivations for capturing Spain's atrocities are selfish, they soon change due to his growing friendship with Ana and fellow photojournalist Nick. Ana had academician parents who were executed for having supported the republican government. She is left living hand to mouth to fend off debts and dreams of leaving the country someday.

Although centered around a romance between Daniel and Ana—he fascinated by her beauty and guarded nature, she by his Texan charm and goodness—the book goes beyond the confines of the hotel. We are taken to the dilapidated Vallecas—home to the working class, cobblestone streets smothered by the Guardia Civil, dark and eerie cemeteries, bloody bullfights, dingy orphanages, and the prowling Spanish police fittingly referred to as "crows". Here, the story boasts of a multitude of characters and their points of view.

The portrayal of these contrasting facets of a dictatorship is raw and striking, even though the alternating narrators can feel disorienting initially. These working-class Spanish locals have given up fighting for their cause, reduced to fighting for their livelihood. There is a clear resignation to and acceptance of the new normal of

dictatorship, similar to the dictatorships and faux-democracies across the world at present. It seems that the passage of time has had no impact on the workings of the world.

Nothing, however, could have prepared me for the darkest and most horrifying aspect of the Spanish rule portrayed in the novel—the stolen children. Through the biased eyes of Puri, Ana's cousin who works as a nurse at an orphanage, author Sepetys very cleverly unfurls the terrifying phenomenon of infants being stolen and sold to the "right parents", while the birth parents with the wrong political and religious affiliations are informed that their babies died in birth. They stay silent because speaking up is



the biggest crime in Francoist Spain.

Through these stories, Sepetys succeeds in creating an environment of fear, uncertainty, and even mystery throughout the book. However, her pacing can be slow and she heavily underestimates her readers by repeating details and leaving all-too-obvious hints for them to catch on to. This lack of nuance takes away from the pleasure of reading. The sudden climax also catches one off guard.

When a story and its characters slowly sneak into your heart, fascinating you with the research that went into it and haunting you with the images they evoke, the disappointment of such shortcomings is multiplied, because the novel was that close to being a perfect read.

Towrin Zaman is a research associate who loves writing in her spare time.

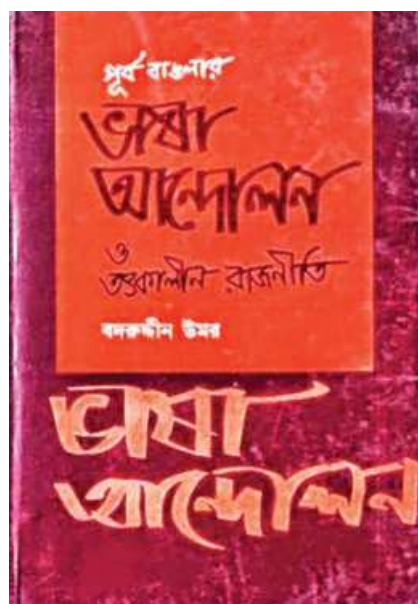
**THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS**

# How 1952 paved the way for 1971

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

Half a century from where we began, *Daily Star Books* will spend all of this year—the 50th year of Bangladesh—revisiting and analysing some of the books that played pivotal roles in documenting the Liberation War of 1971 and the birth of this nation.

In this second installment, we talk about *Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon O Totkaleen Rajneeti* (The Language Movement of Bengal and Contemporary Politics), in which author and historian Badruddin Umar explains the cultural, economic, and historical context behind the Bangla language movement of 1952. Through his research, Umar shows how that one movement shaped a nation's identity and its thoughts on freedom and autonomy, which eventually paved the way for the nationalist struggle for freedom in 1971.



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Similar to the mimicry of life by art, sometimes a book in our hands can acutely imitate the arcs of the love story we are in—like the time a ghost lover stole a paperback *Frankenstein* from the neighborhood café as a last minute birthday gift for me, while our alliance reeked of haunted loneliness and painful assertions, or when one of my friends, a doctor by day and an avid reader by night, spoke about his first encounter with *Harry Potter* and the "cute, sweet girl across the hall." Their story is simple—when he was a young boy, he met a pretty girl who liked *Harry Potter*. Years later when they rekindled the flame, it quickly fizzled out when he "realised that even after all those years the last book she had read and the book she talks about still is *Harry Potter*" and because his "left-leaning principles aren't too compatible with a mind shooting for a life in the corporate world". This particular anecdote stands out to me because it says so much about readers' love-hate relationship with Rowling's magnum opus, and the way books can shape relationships in complicated, often unexpected ways.

A fellow literature major with an unending love for Camus tells me about her blooming love affair infused with poetry—her partner and she recited Khalil Gibran to each other during Nilkhet book hauls and rickshaw rides around Dhaka city. Another soul sister lets me into the memory of her first love, saying, "When I think of my first love, I picture a room full of paper. Messages scribbled on torn notebook pages,



PHOTO: AFRA ANAN SABA

passed stealthily across classroom desks. I recall poetry—painstakingly crafted, repeatedly redrafted and sealed with a final brush of a pair of pale, chapped lips."

Meet cutes at bookstores, too, aren't just limited to '90s romcoms as a lot of cynics would assume. A fellow writer with a brilliant pen animatedly talks about her visit to a quaint little branch of the Kinokuniya bookshop in Thailand. "I spotted a book the size of a boulder on the top shelf at the very back of the store, and collected an impressive number of bruises trying to climb all the way to the top. I think he finally took pity on me and fetched a

step-ladder. I climbed up, grabbed my treasure, whooped in excitement, and promptly dropped it on him. In hindsight, the concussion might explain why we went out for a while." I have quite a hearty laugh and ask about what happened of their shared romance. With a yawn she tells me that he got married and she sent him a vase at his wedding. "He loved Dickens, I loved Bronte, and we smelled like coffee and old paper," she ends with a dreamy expression on her face.

Along the same strain, a bookseller very dear to me tells me of his love story fondly—one that is garnished with verses from the Romantics to the Postmodernists alike. "I told her I was reading Knausgaard, and she told me about a paper she was writing on Buddhadeva Bose. The first time we had our proper meeting was at Mohammadpur's Charcha, the bookshop that had brought us together. The first gifts we gave each other were books—me, Giorgio Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Garden*, and her, the *Diary of a Bookseller* by Shaun Bythell. The first time we talked over the phone, she read me poems by Frank O'Hara. Books somehow find their way into all of our conversations."

An extended version of this article will be available online.

Jahanara Tariq is a graduate of English Literature from Independent University Bangladesh (IUB).

**THE BOOK REPORT**

# For the love of books

With Valentine's Day knocking on the door, we traced some real-life love stories that were touched by books and literature.

JAHANARA TARIQ