

BOOK REVIEW: LITERARY CRITICISM

Razia Khan: Life and Literature Archived

SARAH ANJUM BARI

For anyone looking to immerse themselves in the literary culture of Bangladesh, Professor Razia Khan Amin's name and presence are unavoidable. A poet, novelist, and literary critic (1936–2011) who taught some of the most prolific literateurs of our time, her towering personality reaches the current generation through fascinating anecdotes. She was "a truly colourful person... precocious but also ahead of her time in her ideas and ways", Professor Fakrul Alam wrote in *Once More into the Past* (Daily Star Books, 2020), a collection of his essays earlier published in the Star Literature pages. "She led the young women going out to face the world. Led them into sunshine and self-confident awareness [...] with wit and anecdote, with original insight and analytic criticism", Professor Rebecca Haque wrote of her in another *Daily Star* tribute. "A brilliant woman and writer. I was among the few to never have been scolded by her", my own grandmother, author Farida Hossain, recalls fondly. These impressions from leading writers and academics bookend *Razia Khan: Omnibus Edition*, a collection of Razia Khan's writings published in December 2020 by her family, but it is the author's own voice and mind that shape the book as a valuable record of a moment in Bangladesh's history, as seen through the lenses of literature and free thought.

The book begins at a precarious moment in erstwhile East Pakistan. It is early 1970. Reverberations of India's Partition are still being felt, and doctors, lawyers, and small businessmen from India are beginning a life in East Pakistan amidst social and economic rejection, as the rest of the region hops confusedly between communal prejudice and awe for Western liberalism. "There is in the tense political and cultural atmosphere a pervading danger of narrowness of parochialism swallowing up whatever sanity and balance the East Pakistani has been able to achieve through these grinding years of trial and error", Dr Khan writes in the first essay of the collection, titled "The Exodus". This opening dispatch is short, sharp, and ominous, and what follows is a series of essays that call out the hypocrisies of the East Pakistani society in the making, using the same brevity and clarity of thought.

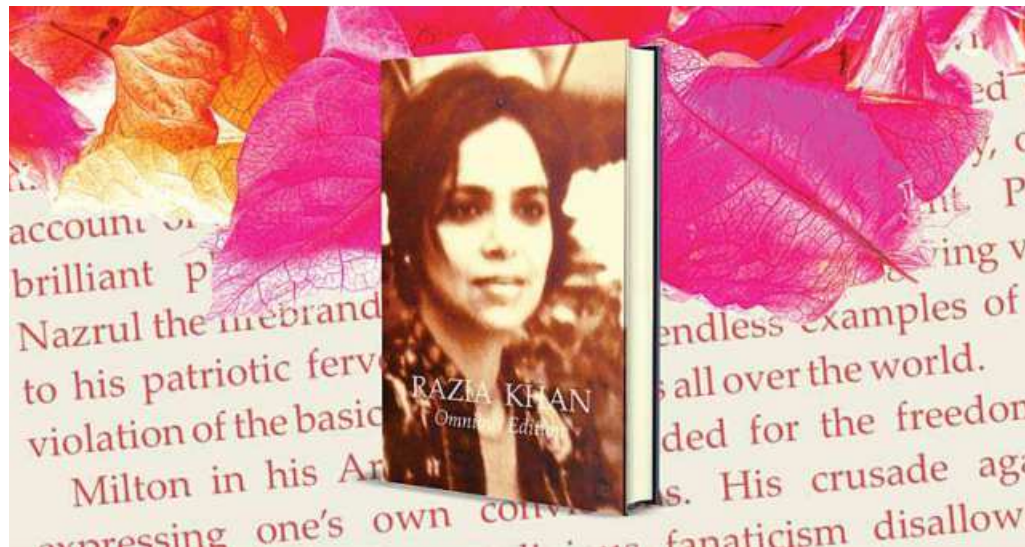
If her choice of topics pins each article down to a particular moment in time, the contexts she provides paint a vivid picture of time in motion. She writes of the poets of East Pakistan as descendants of a regional legacy and analyses the ways in which they engaged in dialogue with writers of the West and contemporary happenings of the East—such as when Syed Ali Ahsan and Sanaul Haq "gained fresh popularity through their translation of [...] Whitman and

Pasternak", or how "[s]oon after Partition the intelligentsia in East Pakistan experienced an acute sense of spiritual disintegration which is reflected in a scattered way in the poetry of Ali Ahsan, Abu Jafar Shamsuddin, Ahsan Habib, Shamsur Rahman". Dr Khan relishes in these groupings and comparisons across her literary essays, both creating and revealing milieus among the poets she discusses, and the result is one in which much of East Pakistani literature ceases to feel like history and becomes accessible to someone looking to explore those terrains now.

One of these non-fiction pieces titled "Pangs of the Pedagogue", along with a speech delivered

weekly that came out between the 1960s and the start of the Liberation War in 1971. These are followed by her short stories, many of which appeared in *The Daily Star's* weekend magazine, and an unpublished novella that was serendipitously found in a laptop, ready to be sent off to a publisher. Tributes by writers including Kaiser Haq, Rebecca Haque, Azfar Hussain, and several others bring up the rear, followed by photographs from Razia Khan's literary and academic life—in Karachi, in Bangla Academy, in Baker Street London, and at Dhaka University's Rokeya Hall, of which she was provost.

When met with a book that compiles



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

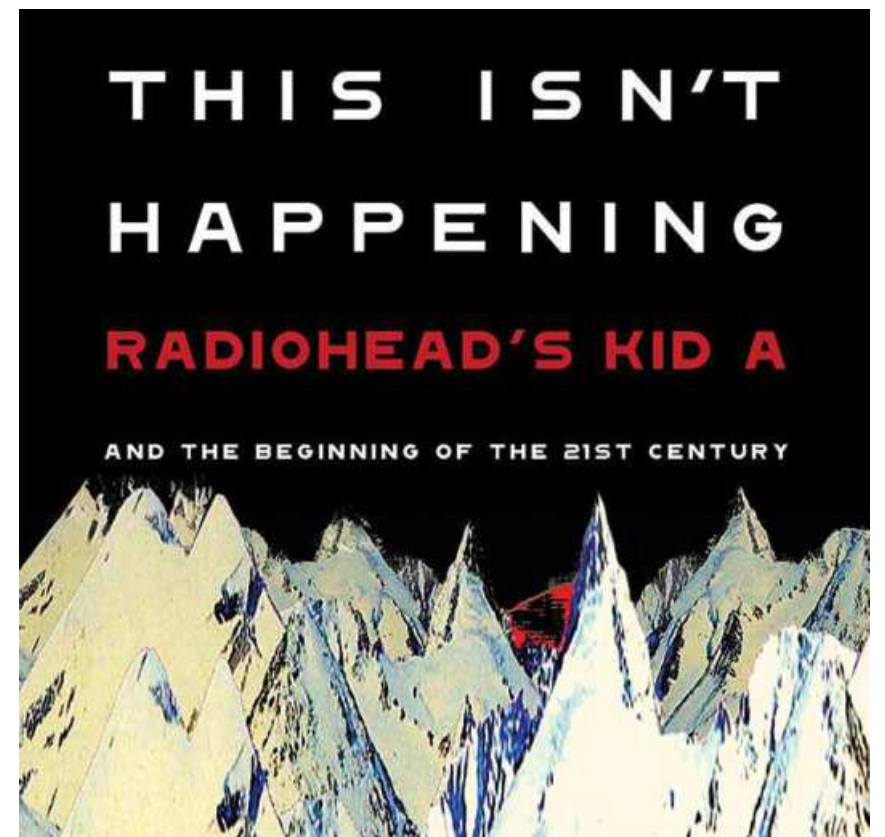
COVER DESIGN: MANAN MORSHED

at a Venice PEN conference in 2006, will resonate with teachers, writers, and journalists today. Here, she writes about the MA and PhD degrees that an aspiring teacher would have to complete in order to make it as an educator, during which time they're unable to financially support a family, deprived of sufficient medical coverage and vacation days, while their contemporaries in business sectors earn up to five times as much. In her speech "Freedom of expression, human rights, writers", Dr Khan unapologetically states, "Coming to this conference from a third world country at my own expense and the innumerable rules that I had to obey have left a bad taste in my mouth." Save for the starting salaries she cites for teachers (Rs 350 a month!), it feels as though no time has passed since those early decades of the nation.

Introduced by writer Serajul Islam Chowdhury and academic-activist Hameeda Hossain, this selection of Dr Razia Khan's columns first appeared in *Forum*, the political

previously published writings by an author, my first question is always, "Why"? Why should I buy this book when its contents might be readily available to me, for free, on the internet? The answer usually lies in the editorial hand whose invisible touch adds something greater than the sum of the parts to a book. In this case, save for a few typing errors, this quality can be found in the flow of ideas permeating the collection. It first introduces a prolific writer's commentary on the socio-political climate of a nation in transition and the arts and culture brewing in that time and space. Then, it showcases how she wove those ingredients into her own rendition of that world, accentuated by characteristics that we lovers of literature especially enjoy—the romances and ideas that bloom in the close-knit English departments of university campuses.

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BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

The (D)Evolution of the Paranoid Android

MEHRUL BARI S CHOWDHURY

To write of Radiohead's 2000 album *Kid A* is to add to the palimpsest of its criticism, at this stage a glowing, impossibly effusive set of texts. The album's legacy, which stands at the centre of Radiohead's mythos, is so familiar to fans and detractors alike that tackling the very topic runs the risk of hearing about the same old, same old. Steven Hyden, though, with *This Isn't Happening* (Hachette Books, 2020), invites us into a long, overenthusiastic conversation about the record and any and all bits of popular media that pop into his mind—in other words, its 256 pages read along like that annoying, affable friend that goes on and on about a story he just has to share, and that you, for whatever reason, want to hear about. Thankfully Hyden, the well-accredited rock critic of *The AV Club* and *Pitchfork* fame, is overqualified to have written the book on it.

Piecing together comparisons and contextualisation on everything from Bob Dylan to 9/11, the book, subtitled *Radiohead's Kid A and the Beginning of the 21st Century*, takes a good deal of time, and joy, in underlining every aspect of the title. It relishes in the band's biography, discography, the onset as well as progress (perhaps the author and the band would call it regress) of the 21st century, the contemporaries, the music scene, and both the band's UK and the author's US.

The most compelling moments of *This Isn't Happening* lie within Hyden's attempts at making sense of an album consciously made oblique—an impulse reaction of lyricist Yorke that the writer connects to criticisms of "obviousness" the band faced on their debut release and the recollection of a college friend complaining to Yorke that his lyrics "left nothing to the imagination." What was a fair bit of friendly critique stuck seemingly more than any praise or disdain the band would ever receive.

The book does well to convey the multitudes that can be brought out of the album. With clipped and sudden, and just as easily lost, sounds wafting

in and out of the record, Hyden is conscious of its free improvisation and Dada-inspired nature, and wisely presents the generational ennui at the heart of *Kid A* rather than tread old ground, though he perhaps spends too much of his breath restressing and re-analysing the same points.

The book is at its worst not when it draws comparisons to Oasis or Linkin Park or *Vanilla Sky*, but when Hyden steers a bit too much into "world" problems of the early 21st century. He describes the atrocities occurring between 2000-2003 ("the 2000 US presidential election, September 11, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq"), which he frames the album in, as the most traumatic of his generation, which only reminds us that this book was published but not written in 2020. If there's one cataclysmic event that shook the 21st century, we're presently living through it, and the book sounds dated the more Hyden writes on about that time period. As for politics, as the writer himself points out, Radiohead truly ever wrote the one overtly political song, "2+2=5," with the band themselves rejecting merely political readings of their work as "shallow." To Hyden's credit, he never really goes too far, and even when it feels like he might, he is only expressing his own experiences—a credit to his conversational style more than anything.

This book, ultimately, is one of history, written like chapters of Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*. For all the readers who spent the better part of this century illegally downloading music ("older" readers may pop at the mentions of LimeWire), this book may be one to hold close. When the writer traces personal and professional history by way of the signposts that music has taken the form of, you realise you're not like him, you are him.

Mehrul Bari S. Chowdhury is a writer, poet, and artist. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Kitaab*, *Sortes Magazine*, and *Marias* at *Sampaguitas*, among others.

WORTH A RE-READ

Hope springs eternal

MINHAZ MUHAMMAD



The natural and political world bloom to life in the pages of Ali Smith's *Spring* (Penguin Random House, 2019), the brilliant third installment in her seasonal quartet of books. In this book dedicated to the season that in now upon us, the formally experimental writer sews together refugee crises, migrant detentions, and climate change in one single narrative thread.

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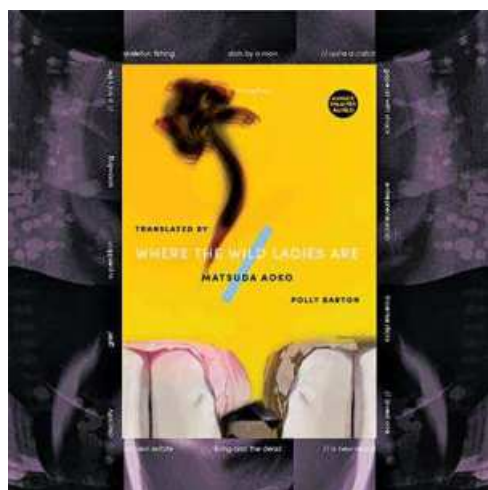
BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Where folktales meet social commentary

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

I stumbled across a short story written by Aoko Matsuda called "Quite a Catch" in the *Wasafiri* literary magazine last month. The story is a modern and feminist rendition of "Skeleton Fishing", a popular Japanese folktale that is often found in Bangla stories too. It is a haunting and delightful account of the female narrator "catching" lost skeletons while fishing. The skeleton, it turns out, belongs to a woman from centuries ago. This woman appears every night, caked with slimy mud, in the narrator's house, thanking her for rescuing her bones after so many years. She was slain by a man for rejecting his marriage proposal. With time, these women develop a romantic relationship as the narrator teaches her the ways of the modern world.

Reading this story, I could not help comparing it with the quiet eccentricity of



DESIGN: MEHRUL BARI S CHOWDHURY

retellings of popular Japanese folktales—mainly the ones revolving around female ghosts who are traditionally seen in a villain's haze. Each story begins with a brief introduction on the folktale it draws inspiration from.

In Matsuda's world, ghosts are not supernatural entities one gapes at with shock. They are as mundane as startup companies and office employees. In "Loved One", for instance, one sees how grief blends with the blessing of entrepreneurship—a company sells incense sticks that revive a person's (dead) beloved relations. In the eponymous short story, alongside a few loosely connected others, ghosts manage office operations alongside mortal humans.

Here, ghosts—and other supernatural elements—are not bone-chilling characters deployed to intensify the horror genre. They are tools that shed light on mental health, grief, disability, belonging, deception, urbanisation, patriarchy, and violence. In "A Fox's Life", a hardworking woman suppressed by a

patriarchal workforce turns into a fox—an allusion to her wit and cleverness. In "Enoki", a tree around which a sprawling body of local superstition has grown reminisces about the days when it was popular, revealing accounts of violence and blind, harmful prejudice. In "A Day Off" a woman forges an alliance with her giant pet toad to protect other women facing violence. In "A New Recruit", the narrator can see both the dead and the living as an ancient estate filled with departed souls, teetering on the brink of demolition. In "Having a Blast", a husband works at a company alongside his dead first wife; his second wife works alongside him when he, too, passes. In "My Superpower", an eczema-ridden writer can read people's minds.

What makes all these stories stand out is the subversive quality they all possess of cleaving a traditional narrative and rebuilding it as a mirror of modern society, all the while gripping readers into a frenzy of philosophical enquiries and suspense with candid, restrained, and unpretentious prose. From the very first story, "The Peony Lanterns", one grows keen to explore and completely lose themselves in Matsuda's topsy-turvy world. Not the slightest hint of boredom and dull descriptions of objects taints the pages; an endless flow of speculative elements—which are inherent in supernatural stories—keeps the narrative entertaining and suspenseful. At the beginning of each story, you think you are entering a normal setting but then something lurches forward and shatters your conviction.

With Polly Barton's agile and artful translation, *Where the Wild Ladies Are* teems with wit and invention. It is a must read for anybody who, like me, is a big fan of *Mouthful of Birds* or is simply into contemporary and disruptive retellings of folktales.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.

Samanta Schweblin's short fiction collection, *Mouthful of Birds* (OneWorld Publications, 2019; tr. Megan McDowell). As someone who deeply admires the collection, I knew I had to read Matsuda's *Where the Wild Ladies Are* (Tilted Axis Press, 2020; tr. Polly Barton), of which "Quite a Catch" is a part.

The remaining short stories from this collection are also contemporary, feminist