

COLLAGE: MEHRUL BARI

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The unfortunate Asians of Uganda

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

In the 1890s, many South Asians were brought to Uganda by the British Empire for administration and development purposes. The Uganda Railway remains a timeless reminder of the South Asian workforce's contribution. Throughout the years, as the Asian population multiplied in the country, their domination in the economic sphere grew rapidly. Many native Ugandans turned resentful at the trend. "Indophobia" was on the rise. In 1972, after Idi Amin rose to power following a coup, he issued a decree requiring all Asians (80,000) to leave Uganda within 90 days, leaving their property and wealth behind.

Neema Shah's debut novel, *KoloLo Hill* (Picador, 2021), is set against this backdrop. Hers is a South Asian history which is rarely portrayed in art. I first became aware of the Asians' expulsion from Uganda after watching Mira Nair's film *Mississippi Masala* (1991) two years ago. I was delighted to hear about *KoloLo Hill's* release given that it is a novel that illuminates this history.

Asha and Pran have been married for a few months when the decree is issued. They both grew up in Uganda, never stepping foot in India, their ancestral country. Pran's parents, Jaya and Motichand, are the only characters through whom we get glimpses of India and migration to Uganda in the novel. Pran and his brother Vijay have tirelessly worked to save the family business that Motichand started many years ago. President Idi Amin's decree at such a moment proves disconcerting for the family. What makes the prospect of leaving more difficult is the intimate and wholesome bond the family shares with December, their native Ugandan domestic help. He is a man from the

predominantly Christian Acholi tribe, which is on Amin's execution list alongside the Lambi tribe. Moreover, being on friendly terms with Asians poses threats to native Ugandans.

Ethnic resentment is evident from the very first scene in the novel when Asha stumbles across a lake full of bodies. As the story progresses, we see how each character comes to terms with their grim reality. Curfews, segregation, soldiers' harassment, fear-laden conversations among friends and family, all

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As they finally leave the country, memories, traumatic experiences, a terrible secret, and the trials and tribulations of starting a new life from scratch hang over the family. It is worth noting how all these factors shape the characters' arcs and make them memorable and alive in the reader's mind. For instance, back in Uganda we see Vijay as a subordinate figure to his brother. But in Britain, circumstances force him to take charge. Another element that brings some variety to the reading experience is

the way all the chapters are arranged according to each character. Aside from Motichand and December, the rest are given enough space to make the novel a multi-protagonist narrative. In just 340 pages, we get a complete sense of each protagonist's struggles.

It was especially satisfying to find that the story divided equally between Uganda and Britain. The plot points in the first half explore political instability in Uganda while in the second half, we witness the characters forging new paths of life and the turbulent trajectory the lives of the many political migrants took then. For South Asian readers, the common cultural elements—from food items to rituals—blended with the knowledge that this is a culture undiminished by change in location, acts as a bonus. I particularly loved the solidarity between the South Asian and the Black community reflected through December's relationship with his employers.

Didactic descriptions of political affairs do not taint this novel. We get to know of the political scenario through its physical manifestations and the ways they affect the storyline, from disappearances to lootings and arbitrary arrests. The simple yet poetic prose reminded me of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (Knopf, 2013) and Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace* (HarperCollins, 2016).

Shortlisted for the Bath Novel Award and the First Novel Prize, *KoloLo Hill* is an essential and searing novel about xenophobia, racism, family, loss, migration, and colonialism's legacy across Asia and Africa.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

A new book explores the mediascape of Bangladesh

MOSTOFA SHOBUIJ

We barely see cross-disciplinary initiatives that try to understand our media, culture, society and politics. In this wake, Dr Ratan Kumar Roy's *Television in Bangladesh: News and Audiences* (Routledge, 2021) offers a rich ethnography of television news practices in Bangladesh, with a foreword by Marcus Banks, Professor of Visual Anthropology at Oxford University.

Dr Roy has been trained in anthropology and sociology from the University of Dhaka and the South Asian University, New Delhi. He formerly worked as a broadcast journalist in Bangladesh and is currently working as a fellow at the Jamia Millia Islamia University (New Delhi). In this latest work, he draws a synoptic history of television media, public engagement, and politics in Bangladesh, and shows how political regimes and public participation have contributed to the development of television media culture.

"[H]istorical analysis reveal[s] that television has neither been an innocent medium nor are its viewers helpless consumers or morbid subjects on the receiving end", Roy writes. He addresses

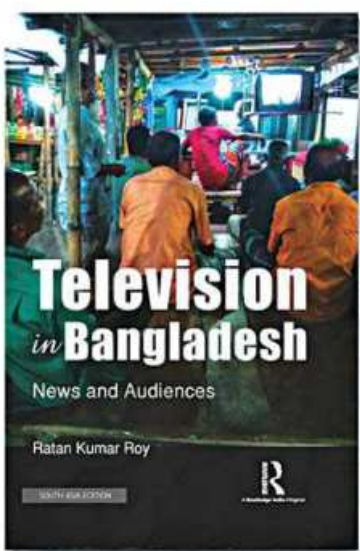
a possible alternative he shows how 24-hour news channels have sustained and contributed to the emergence of youth protests and social mobilisation in Bangladesh, how marginal localities engage with, connect with, and contradict popular representation by mainstream media. On the other hand, he highlights some underlying issues plaguing the news cycle—based on interview responses from journalists, news editors, and high ranking officials from the newsroom, Roy identifies the external forces that often regulate and control news culture. "[A]lmost every second day there is a phone call from these external bodies and at least once a month the key officials have to meet them in person", he writes.

Roy uses interviews and narratives to highlight the discomforts and challenges faced by media professionals. Journalist Tushar Abudullah, who was at the forefront of many news-based television channels in Bangladesh, tells Roy: "[T]he rape case of college student and cultural activist Tonu in Cumilla in 2016 was one such case where the viewers' demand enabled [us] to take up the issue".

"Our managing director himself is a journalist, he understands news values, but when he advises us to undermine some important news, then we understand it is due to [...] pressure from external bodies", Shumee Shahabuddin, a senior news editor at a 24-hour news channel, tells Roy in another interview.

Based on such empirical evidence, Dr Roy's book argues that television news practice in Bangladesh is ambiguously professional and commercial in character. It has not been able to become a mature and profitable business industry because it still surrenders to the whims of ownership, political ideologies, and biases. It also operates with values and ethics that are often contradictory to the logic of the market economy of media. This is why self-censorship has been a prevailing factor for news television, and this is why viewers are switching to digital media platforms.

Following such a shift in viewership, mainstream media has started exploring digital possibilities, such as incorporating special "web desks" and investing in social media outreach, the latter of which can sometimes be sensational. But the challenge of facing the Digital Security Act remains a vital concern.



how the emergence of 24/7 news channels in Bangladesh contributed to the formation of a localised public sphere, wherein tea stalls, *paan* shops, rickshaw stands, clubs, and small restaurants became locations for debate and discussion over current affairs. These audiences can read and consciously engage with televised news and the media practices of news professionals.

On that note, Roy invites readers to delve deeper into the workings of news media in contemporary Bangladesh beyond the parameters of state-control, democracy, freedom of expression, hegemony, and political biases. As

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THE SHELF

Four new books to read this March

MEHRUL BARI

In this list, we highlight four of the very best releases of the past few weeks, featuring Nobel Prize winners, celebrated authors, debutantes and short story writers.

No One Is Talking About This

Patricia Lockwood

(Riverhead Books, 2021)

In July of 2013, Patricia Lockwood wrote the decade's most immediate and pressing poem, "Rape Joke". Already by then Lockwood had amassed prizes and praises enough to fill a few cabinets. Late last month, Lockwood released her debut novel, *No One Is Talking About This*, which as of this writing has been labelled "transcendent" and longlisted for the 2021 Women's Prize for Fiction. Concerning the nervous breakdowns of a social media influencer, and served in chopped-up fragments of prose-poetry text, Lockwood's first work of fiction is perhaps the book to read this March.

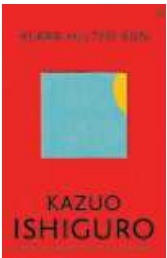


Klara and the Sun

Kazuo Ishiguro

(Knopf, 2021)

Ishiguro's first novel in six years sees science fiction's most humane writer return to themes of artificial intelligence, coming-of-age, apathy, and empathy. Echoing *Never Let Me Go* (Faber and Faber, 2005) in spirit, the Nobel Prize winning author's latest is centred on narrator Klara, an Artificial Friend, who observes human life through the display case of a store, hoping to one day be bought herself. "To some extent as a writer you're always in dialogue with your earlier books", Ishiguro told *TIME*. "Part of me wanted to reply to *Never Let Me Go*, which is a very sad book. It's not pessimistic exactly, but it's very sad. So I wanted to reply to that vision".



Burning Girls and Other Stories

Veronica Schanoes

(Tordotcom, 2021)

Schanoes' stories revolve around her research interests: fairy tales, folktales, fantasies, and feminism. The Shirley Jackson Award winning writer combines genres, disparate moods, and varying levels of vengeance in her debut short story collection, *Burning Girls*. The 13 stories that comprise the book confronts anti-Semitism and American history, reimagines Bloody Mary and the Baba Yaga, dips its toes in politics and anarchy, and all throughout, Schanoes sets a smooth and eased path for her readers to navigate splendidly. Beautiful and horrible, *Burning Girls* and *Other Stories* may be the perfect read for fans of dark fantasy and genre fiction.



Rabbit Island

Elvira Navarro

(Two Line Press, 2021; transl. Christina MacSweeney)

Few directors, let alone writers, warrant comparisons to David Lynch, yet Navarro, Madrid's resident surrealist, through her stories on the absolute mundane has done just that. Of the nothing-special hotel cook of the book's eighth story, Navarro writes: "Her features were so average, so unremarkable, that, on the rare occasion when she left the kitchen, the guests never noticed that a living being was crossing the dining room". The one thing that keeps the cook from quitting her job is that at night she dreams, and in it she inhabits the dreams of every hotel resident and employee. The heroes and heroines of *Rabbit Island* are Gregor Samsas and Laura Palmers—only they would wholly welcome whatever horrific things might come their way, if only just to feel.



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

THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS

War of attrition

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



COLLAGE: MEHRUL BARI

SHADMAN IQBAL AND RASHEEK TABASSUM MONDIRA

When searching for literature covering the role of the Mukti Bahini in the victory of 1971, a noticeable dearth of objective analyses is apparent. Literature on warfare strategy is dominated by narratives of the 13 days of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. History would likely have been different if India did not enter when it did, allowing the resistance to engage in a direct frontal war with the Pakistanis on equal grounds. But the legacy of the Mukti Bahini is the true heart of our story. Books such as *Guerilla Theke*

Shommukh Juddhe, *Muktijuddhe 2 No Sector Ebong K-Force*, 1971: *Resistance, Resilience and Redemption*, 1971: *Bhetore Baire*, and even bits and pieces of Jahanara Imam's *Ektattor Dinguli* offer glimpses of the war from the freedom fighters' perspective.

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