

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

# BATTLE CRIES AND SOUND WAVES

SARAH ANJUM BARI

"Muktishongram-e ami jog diyechhilam bishuddho ekjon biplobi hishebe". Bangladesh's struggle for independence, which began in full form 50 years ago on this day, comprised a collective fight made up of many smaller, individual battles. Civilians taking up arms without any prior military training was but one of them; others included families battling their fear for life to serve a national project, women trying to fight off sexual and physical violence, and writers, musicians, artists and journalists waging a way through misinformation and low morale to help create and sustain a narrative that would carry people's hopes and fears. The daily radio coverage of the Liberation War between June 15 and November 30, 1971 delivered by Alamgir Kabir, one of the most iconic filmmakers to emerge from Bangladesh's post-war cinema, is an example of this kind of *shongram*. *Shunchhen Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro 1971* (Modhupok, 2020), the newly released Bangla translation of the collection of Kabir's radio dispatches, is an invaluable relic from those six months of the war.

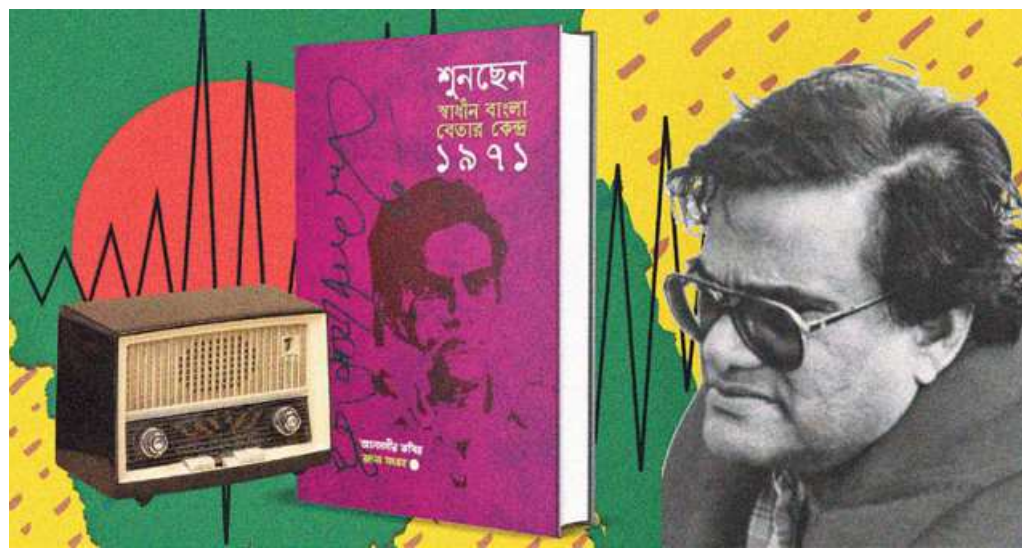
While the struggle continued for nine months, beginning before and continuing after the scope of the book, from the first page Kabir's radio dispatches launch us into the thick of things, with thousands of civilians having lost their lives and foreign newspapers reporting that the horrors of the "Bangladesh tragedy" have exceeded those seen in Vietnam. From here, over the course of 74 episodes presented in this book as separate chapters, Kabir goes on to comment on the geopolitical involvements of other countries including USA, India, China, and Iran, on how Western media was portraying the war, on the narratives Yahya Khan was

best of intentions, runs the risk of smoothing over the fragments and ambiguities that offer a true account of history. But while this nostalgia and sentimentalism are essential parts of how we remember our nation's history, books such as *Shunchhen Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro* offer the experience of reading about the war as it played out in real time.

On September 25, for instance, we find Kabir discussing the intellectuals and teachers—most of whom seemed to teach in the Bangla department of the university—still being abducted and tortured six months after Operation Searchlight. Poet Syed Shamsul Haq had just been arrested, musician Altaf Mahmud was being presumed dead from torture, and *Morning News* journalist Shahidul Hoq had disappeared. Thousands of hostages were

barely over a page or two in the book, it is easy to remain intrigued and invested, alternately smirking over Kabir's tongue-in-cheek humour and nervously anticipating the outcome of unfolding events. It is apparent that he was trying to motivate and stir emotions in his listeners as much as he was reporting news, even if that required a dose of drama. As we near the few final chapters, titled "*Shesh Onko*" (The Final Math) or "*Aro Ekbar Shoron Kora Jaak*" (Let Us Recall One More Time), the prelude to a climax is palpable.

Originally published in English by the Bangla Academy in 1984, *This Was Radio Bangladesh 1971* was translated for this project by Afzalur Rahman, Arastu Lenin Khan, Tahmidul Jami, Priyom Pritim Khan, and Shamsuddoza Sajen, but it never reads as if too



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

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presenting and the ones he really preferred, on the torture of women and foreigners, and countless other vital episodes of 1971.

Many of these events are well known to us by now, written and rewritten as they are for history books, lectures, and newspaper articles. Such constant rewriting, delivered even with the

being held at the Dhaka cantonment, tortured, unclothed, forced to work until they passed out from exhaustion or succumbed to their injuries. "It is clear from these events that the panic that gripped the people of Bangladesh six months ago on March 25 has not ebbed at all", Kabir says in this dispatch. In his September 30 episode, we learn that over 10,000 freedom fighters are ready to join the war.

This isn't to say that this narrative is devoid of subjectivity. On the contrary, Alamgir Kabir's commentary drips with resentment, indignation, and irony every time he talks about Yahya Khan or the hypocrisies of the West. Hope and encouragement wash over his words as he urges his listeners to support the freedom fighters every which way they can. He insists that they take special care of the women and the elderly. And because each episode is kept short and sharp, stretching

many writers were at work on the manuscript. If the Bangla feels slightly dense in some places, this is far outweighed by the care with which Kabir's language was adapted into Bangla—words that are more popularly communicated in English were transliterated instead of being translated, and clean formatting and evocative language constantly remind readers that we are reading the radio, not prose.

This book is meant to be savoured—read it in small doses, reflect on each chapter, and take a step back periodically to notice the patterns forming in this narrative of our liberation war. It is as close as we can get to experiencing the tension and excitement of witnessing a nation about to be born.

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

## THE BOOK REPORT

# Did we need a Boi Mela amidst a pandemic?

MURSALIN MOSADDEQUE

I was in the middle of a hectic shift at Dhaka Medical College Hospital a few days ago when I heard a close colleague was down with fever and severe body ache—symptoms typical of COVID-19. By the next day, his whole family had been critically affected. It is not very likely that his family will come out of this wrath unscathed. Instances like this do not shock me or my colleagues anymore; this has been routine for the last year.

Despite the slight ray of assurance offered by the vaccine, at the time of this writing, 570,878 people were infected in Bangladesh according to the IEDCR. The DGHS has suggested re-enforcing a lockdown and keeping educational institutions closed. And yet the emergence of a new deadly strain has not been enough to keep people confined to their homes or maintain the bare minimum health precautions. So, it is not exactly pleasing to see that just a few minutes' away from my workplace, people are gathering in large numbers for the Ekushey Boi Mela 2021 inaugurated on Thursday, March 18.

Literary and cultural events across the globe have been affected by the pandemic. Most organisers have adapted to the changed reality and shifted events to virtual spaces, as is true for The New Yorker Festival or The Jaipur Lit Fest, while others like the Dhaka Lit Fest decided to postpone their events altogether. The Summer Olympics are on hold for the first time since World War II. Bob Dylan's decades-long Never Ending Tour saw its first year of inactivity, as has every major music and film festival in the world.

What makes the Boi Mela such an absolute necessity that it must go on even at the cost of human lives?

The answer is that it accounts for the largest bulk of annual book sales for Bangladeshi publishers. To discourage readers from purchasing their books this year is to potentially harm an industry that, as of July 2020, incurred losses worth BDT 4,000 crore owing to the pandemic, according to Shaheed Serniabad, president of the Printing Industries Association of Bangladesh.

The loss of this industry would be an irreparable one for our culture, and it would damage the livelihoods of close to five lakh people making up the publishing world—the writers, artists, editors, printers, binders, and publishers who barely stay afloat through the sector's scarce few funds and resources.

These issues are the reason why so many of us complain about the subpar quality—the text, formatting, printing, and expertise of editing—in locally produced books, and this is why we lean towards books from abroad. It is hard to think of any other publishing industry in the world that follows a similar trend.

The circumstances this year offered a perfect opportunity to evolve with the times. But when Bangla Academy initially suggested that this year's fair be held virtually, publishers and creative association representatives protested that this would disrespect the fair's cultural legacy.

For years, the Boi Mela format has been limited to launching and discussing new books, and, of course, devoted fans piling up around writers for autographs. None of these are good enough reasons to be endangering public safety. How sustainable is it for an industry to rely on a single annual event? Could we not have innovated by trying out a virtual format this year, ensuring both safety for visitors and revenue for publishers and writers?

Responding to publishers' demands, the organisers are enforcing as many precautions as they could have—volunteers are checking body temperature at the entrance, regular public announcements are reminding the crowds to keep face masks on, and the stalls are more spread out. But we have to hope that the tens of thousands of people flocking to the book fair will actually follow these precautions and that they will disinfect their purchases upon returning home.

Mursalín Mosaddeque contributes essays and book reviews for *Daily Star Books*. He is currently working as an intern doctor at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Email: [mursalinmosaddeque@gmail.com](mailto:mursalinmosaddeque@gmail.com).

## REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

# A miracle in milk

*Daily Star Books is excited to start this new monthly series, in which we review short stories that deserve to be rediscovered and appreciated.*

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

"Once there was a severe flood in the month of Magh. - Local saying."

So begins "Milk", winner of the Himal Short Story Competition 2019. At first, this opening sentence may not mean much to a reader. But one can realise after reaching the end that the sentence is a very minimalistic forecast of sorts.

Originally written in Bangla by Mashiul Alam, and translated into English by Shabnam Nadiya, "Milk" is the magic-realist story of a toddler who is one day found suckling a dog's teat for milk.

The boy's mother, a 24-year-old farm labourer, is incapable of breastfeeding him owing to her malnutrition. The boy nevertheless is "quite well, growing". The residents of Modhupur—the village where the story is set—are initially unaware of the little boy's source for milk. His father, a farmhand himself, resorts to great violence upon making the discovery, egged on by the villagers and his own rage. Soon, a supernatural event strikes the village, like divine retribution.

Told in a fable-like, sombre yet playful tone, the story is reminiscent of the writings of Samanta Scwheblin, Matsuda Aoko, George Saunders, and the *Arabian Nights*.



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The initial mundane descriptions of Modhupur and its inhabitants betray the chilling absurdity of things to come. As such, the final events come as darkly rewarding surprises that firmly etch themselves onto the reader's mind. Alam's prose as seen through Nadiya's

translation is spare and economical; not a word here is wasteful. The narrative is divided into fast-paced episodic fragments, which facilitate a satisfying and gripping read.

When I first read the story back in 2019, I was bowled over, completely in awe of the

magnificent scope a short story can encompass. Short stories are known and loved for their ability to pull readers into thrilling rides in the span of a brief time. "Milk" achieves just that, setting a precedent for discomfiting, subversive, and unconventional storytelling from Bangladesh.

Shabnam Nadiya's sharp translation of the story does a great service highlighting it before an international audience and retaining its haunting excellence. A Steinbeck Fellow at San Jose University, she is currently translating more of Mashiul Alam's non-realist fiction. She has previously translated Leesa Gazi's *Hellfire* (Eka, Westland 2020) and Shaheen Akhtar's *Beloved Rongomala* (Bengal Lights, 2019), among other titles. Mashiul Alam is a Senior Assistant Editor at *Prothom Alo*, and has several novels and short story collections to his name.

Their collaboration heralds a hopeful breeze for the literary works coming out of Bangladesh.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor. Mashiul Alam's "Milk", translated by Shabnam Nadiya, can be found at on the Himal Southasian website.

## THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS

# The view from the West

RASHA JAMEEL AND SELIMA SARA KABIR



After half a century from where we began, *Daily Star Books* will spend all of this year—the 50th year of Bangladesh—revisiting and analyzing some of the books that played crucial roles in documenting the Liberation War of 1971 and the birth of this nation. In this sixth installment, we revisit both Khadim Hussain Raja's *A Stranger in My Own Country* (Oxford University Press, 2012), in which a retired general gives often problematic views from West

Pakistan's perspective, and Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas' *The Rape of Bangladesh* (Vikas Publications, 1971), a pivotal book in changing world opinion on the then-underreported genocide of East Pakistan.

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