

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

Creating an appetite for Bangladeshi fiction

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Catch Shamsad Mortuza LIVE in conversation with Niaz Zaman, editor of The Demoness: The Best Bangladeshi Short Stories, 1971-2021, at 4 PM on Monday, May 3, 2021 on The Daily Star Facebook and YouTube channels.

A good story is hard to find. Niaz Zaman, the editor of *The Demoness: The Best Bangladeshi Short Stories, 1971-2021* (Aleph Book Company, 2021), has found 27 “best” short stories to create an appetite for Bangladeshi fiction. Zaman has made sure that these stories do not lose the flavour of the original, and in the golden jubilee of this nation, the platter she has arranged can easily be devoured in one sitting—such is the pace of the prose.

Bangladeshi writings often fail to get the attention they deserve in the absence of either decent translation or strategic marketing positioning. The hegemonic role of Bangla literature coming out of the other side of the border coupled with the wilful ignorance of our own literature has deprived local creative works of their expected niche. *The Demoness* is, therefore, a timely utterance. At a time when the world is taking note of the magical goodies coming out of a country that was once written-off by political pundits as a “bottomless basket”, the anthology showcases some of the great cultural ambassadors of Bangladesh.

The title, which is also the title of the first story included in the anthology, however, does not do justice to the collection. While it perhaps subsumes the editor’s personal preferences for Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet, it does not indicate why the interior monologue of a woman who has murdered her husband to prevent him from marrying for the second time should be the overarching theme of a book that is celebrating the best authors of a proud nation.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Similarly, the inclusion of writers such as Kazi Nazrul Islam and Syed Mujtaba Ali is sure to raise some brows, as the temporal bracket in the title limits the anthology to only 50 years for the collected short stories. But the editor, in her elaborate introduction, offers a broad definition of “Bangladeshi”. She posits, “Bangladeshi Stories’ [...] refer to Bengali short stories written by persons associated with the land that gained its independence from Pakistan in 1971 and came to be known as Bangladesh. They are not all contemporary stories written post-1971, but predate the creation of Bangladesh”. Zaman is also conscious of reducing

the gender gap, which is prevalent in any regular anthology. There are 11 female authors against 16 male authors to reassert the strong contributions women writers have made in the Bangladeshi canon formation. Most of these female writers are critical of the patriarchal violence and male gaze in which they must operate. Nasreen Jahan’s story is a case in point, where religious conversion is tinged with fanatic frenzy that leads to a murderous rampage. Authors such as Jharna Das Purkayastha, Selina Hossain, Purabi Basu, and Shaheen Akhtar, according to Zaman, carry on the feminist spirit of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain who could

not be included for “technical” reasons (Rokeya wrote her best short story in English).

The experimental vein of contemporary Bangladesh writing is evident in the works of Shahaduzzaman, Zakir Talukdar, and Mashiul Alam among others. “The Meat Market”, translated by Shabnam Nadiya, involves a macabre murder that will send a cold chill down anyone’s spine. You will never eat your meat in quite the same way again, to say the least. Another highlight, Syed Manzoorul Islam’s “Daedalus’s Kite” is surreal, entertaining, and poignant in its depiction of Old Dhaka.

Quite a few stories involve religious hypocrisy. Shaukat Osman’s “Father Johannes”, set in Chota Nagpur during the Second World War, exposes the greed of a Christian missionary who came to India to preach among the tribal population. Ahmed Mostafa Kamal’s “Waiting”, too, takes up the theme of colonisation where the protagonist reflects on his dervish ancestors who managed to set up a landed aristocracy while preaching Islam. The mighty River Padma devours the heritage to have the final say in a battle between imported spirituality and rooted resistance in nature.

Any history of Bangladesh will remain incomplete without the story of its Liberation War. Zaman includes stories by Hasan Azizul Huq, Rizia Rahman, Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Humayun Ahmed, and Jharna Rahman to make sure that we get a glimpse of the horrors that were entwined with the birth-pangs of the nation. Tales of heroism and cowardice, betrayal and bravery, violence and love come together to remind us of the trials and traumas behind the birth of the nation that this anthology is celebrating.

Etymologically, the word “anthology” means a gathering of flowers. Niaz Zaman has assorted some of the best writings coming out of Bangladesh to offer a bouquet to the world. This is a highly readable book that has the potential to grow into a series.

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THE BOOK REPORT

Between the two partitions of Bengal

M RASHIDUZZAMAN

In my book, *Identity of a Muslim Family in Colonial Bengal: Between Memories and History* (Peter Lang, NYC, 2021), I focus on the era of pre-Partition Bengal, trekking through old family recollections, oral anecdotes, memoirs, and other available books and documents on pre-independence India, and blend them with the larger history of British Bengal. Working on my earlier book, *The Central Legislature in British India, 1921-47: Parliamentary Experiences under the Raj* (Peter Lang, 2019) had taken me back to the undivided subcontinent’s history, which I had researched as a PhD student in England in the early 1960s. Over the years, I reassessed aspects of my old findings and added fresh resonance to the narrative. The recently released *Identity of a Muslim Family* is largely built around parallel memories and Muslim identity imaginations in Colonial Bengal, wracked as it was by religious, social, and political turmoil between its 1905 and 1947 divisions. It explores, therefore, the real-life experience of Bengal between the two World Wars, and even more importantly, this trajectory aims at Bangladesh’s amnesia about its inheritances from the yore.

By the time the concept of Pakistan as an independent Muslim state seriously hit the South Asian consciousness in the 1940s, Muslim

Why, then, did Huq’s “alternative of 1940-43” not gain political traction? How did the Bose-Hashem-Suhrawardy-Roy backed “third way” for united Bengal collapse? In his autobiography, Nirad C Chaudhuri did not hide his discontent for the British-introduced parliamentary institutions that had challenged the Hindu *bhadralok*’s eminence in Bengal. The same sentiments were echoed in the memoir of politician and activist, Abul Mansur Ahmed. Fascinatingly, Ayesha Jalal’s *The Sole Spokesman* (Cambridge, 1985) asserts that Jinnah finally accepted the 1947 Partition when negotiations for the anticipated post-independence federal and provincial configurations



ILLUSTRATION: MEHRUL BARTI

disappointingly collapsed.

As I discuss in *Identity of a Muslim Family*, my father the late M Badruzzaman, an inquisitive schoolteacher and essayist, with predilections for history and Sufism, periodically alleged that most well-known Bengali writers did not tolerably project Muslim experiences in their genre. He regretted that Muslims were the shadowy “others” in most notable works of fiction. Such “literary disenfranchisement” spurred Bengali Muslims towards identity politics.

Several autobiographies from the 1920s also confirmed how both Hindus and Muslims tended to help their own kind more often. Influential zamindar-politicians like Nawab Salimullah of Dhaka, Nawab Ali Chaudhuri, and Nawab Shamsul Huda had earlier helped numerous Muslim young men with jobs and encouraged education among Muslims. Fazlul Huq also looked after Muslim educational interests, and individually, he helped countless young men and women gain employment. So while the Muslims usually approached the Nawabs or senior Muslim politicians and officials for government jobs, Hindus usually contacted their Hindu patrons for such favours.

What my research into such grassroots vibrations, oral recounts, legislative scholarship, and recollections of colonial Bengal have revealed is that Muslim politics in British India and pre-partition Bengal had multiple layers—religion was not its exclusive *raison d’etre*.

An extended version of this article will be available online.

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BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

An ode to cricket, taken with a pinch of salt

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

The Commonwealth of Cricket: A Lifelong Love Affair with the Most Subtle and Sophisticated Game Known to Humankind (HarperCollins India, 2020) is Ramachandra Guha’s latest book on cricket. It is his ode to a game his mother introduced him to at the age of four, and his father told him stories of.

In this memoir, Guha narrates his personal journey in cricket, covering an almost six decade, “lifelong affair”. The book offers us the partisan, though honest, view of an Indian cricket fan (not necessarily a fan of Indian cricket) who has seen and experienced the game at multiple levels. The book also describes the evolution of Indian cricket from its infancy to its current status as a powerhouse of the sport and host of the world’s most lucrative cricket franchise.

There are eleven chapters designed to represent a cricket team. Except for chapters nine and ten, the memoir is written from memory. Only one cricketer commands a single chapter—national icon, Sachin Tendulkar—in chapter six. This is not only a tribute to one of India’s greatest cricketers, but also a portrayal of the transformation of Indian cricket into a global power during Tendulkar’s era, and the craze it continues to generate in a country of 1.3 billion where cricket is “the” only sport.

Guha pens a personal vision of the whole gamut of cricket in India, which he either personally experienced, observed, or heard from his father and mother. It ranges from school cricket, college cricket, university cricket, club cricket, the Ranjit Trophy, and international cricket. It also includes cricketers outside India with a

special chapter on “Some favourite Pakistanis” (Chapter 8), where we see the mutual love and admiration cricketers have for one another, regardless of the fans who view the game as warfare.

Guha captures established cricketers and also those who never made the “big time”, or played the game just for the love of it, as he himself often did, recreationally. This is typical Guha at his best, digging out lesser giants who tend to get overshadowed by larger giants. In *A Corner of a Foreign Field* (Penguin, 2014) Guha portrayed



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Palwankar Baloo, a Dalit, who, in his eyes, was the first great Indian cricketer, though one who has been historically overlooked given India’s caste system.

Guha’s love for cricket is as undying as it is stringent. It is based on the notion of ethics and fairness the storied sport was built on. So it was fate that he, in January of 2017, found himself as an administrator of the BCCI—the highest cricket body in India. Chapters nine and ten narrate insights from his diary on the IPL, and the many conflicts

of interest that arose. He soon found that he could no longer turn a blind eye to the corruption within the system. In less than six months, Guha quit his role as administrator.

In spite of the pinch of salt from the BCCI and the IPL, the book shines with its love for cricket and for cricketers of integrity, as exemplified by the likes of Bisen Singh Bedi, Durai, and others. Guha was present at the quarter-final of the 1996 World Cup, a match between India and Pakistan at Bangalore. After Miandad was run out for 38, he was one of the few in the stadium who stood and saluted Miandad’s last international innings. The rest of the stadium jeered. This jingoism in cricket is something that Guha worries about.

In his young days, all Guha wanted to see was an Indian victory. As he turns 63 on the day this review is published (Apr 29, 2021), he finds himself becoming “less nationalistic”. Like legendary batsman, Jack Fingleton, he looks forward to any good performance so he can say “with joy in his voice, I saw that performance”.

The Commonwealth of Cricket is a beautiful love-letter that captures cricket from its many different angles. It may well stand the test of time and earn itself a place beside *Beyond a Boundary* (Hutchinson, 1963) by CLR James.

Ramachandra Guha’s *The Commonwealth of Cricket* is available at Omni Books, Dhanmondi. Orders can be placed at fb.com/omnibooksbd.

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