

BOOK REVIEW: HISTORY AND POLITICS

Red terror or revolutionary war?

RAZI AZMI

Lal Shontrash: Siraj Sikder O Sarbahara Rajneeti (Baatighar, 2021) is about the birth, growth, and withering away of a revolutionary organisation about which most Bangladeshis have heard and very many are curious. Given the clandestine character of the short-lived Purba Banglar Sarbahara Party and the turbulent times in which it existed, very little information about this organisation had been available until now. What was hitherto known was in bits and patches, as a bewildering mixture of fact, myth, and fiction.

The party's leader, Siraj Sikder, acquired cult status in his lifetime and turned into a mythical figure after his death in police captivity in 1975 at the rather young age of 30. Compounding the curiosity are the circumstances of his death, which are as controversial as his revolutionary life. In light of this, writer and researcher Mohiuddin Ahmad has taken upon himself a very challenging task and it must be said that he has acquitted himself rather well.

A political historiographer and noted *Prothom Alo* columnist, who formerly served as Assistant Editor at the *Daily Ganakantha*, Ahmad has previously written about the political histories of Awami League, BNP, JASAD, and the events of "1/11". As with these previous books, *Lal Shontrash* is a gripping historical account from beginning to end, a real life story of some naïve young men and women barely in their adulthood coming together under Sikder's leadership to liberate the oppressed and exploited people of Bangladesh through armed struggle.

The book consists of two parts. The first is a summary of the Leftist politics, parties, and movements in East Bengal (Bangladesh), in general, and of the Sarbahara Party, in particular. In the second part, Ahmad publishes the accounts of 11 party activists based on interviews published, unpublished, and some conducted by the author himself.

Published for the first time, for instance, is a written testimony by Bulu, who was not only active in the party for many years but also was married to Taher, Sikder's closest comrade and deputy until his assassination in August 1971. As such, the value of Bulu's testimony lies in the fact that it is a contemporary, first-hand account straight from the heart and never intended for publication.

Some of the facts explicitly mentioned or implied in Bulu's testimony are explosive and certain to invite the wrath of Sikder devotees, particularly his multiple marriages and alleged extra-marital liaisons and advances. But the fact is that these unsavoury truths about Sikder are corroborated elsewhere; they are neither a fig-

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BOOK COVER DESIGN: SABYASACHI HAZRA

ment of the author's imagination nor an effort to vilify the late leader.

The other accusations against Sikder, that of autocratic leadership and a personality cult, which brooked no criticism and led to harsh expulsions and even assassinations, are quite well known. It was this tendency that resulted in a murderous rampage within the party after the supremo's death. Comrades accused fellow comrades of betrayal and some were executed after summary "show trials", leading to a meltdown of the party.

Continuous hardships, secretiveness, violence, and repression cumulatively resulted in dissension and deterioration within the party, aggravated by Sikder's sudden death in January 1975. Ahmad has provided the best available details of the circumstances of Sikder's capture and death from four different sources, three published and one based on an interview the author conducted with a then-serving high official of Rakkhi Bahini.

Very helpfully, Ahmad also provides in his book a list of names of party activists along with the pseudonyms by which they were known within the party. However, although he provides a list of his sources in an appendix, the lack of proper citations in the text often leaves the reader confused. It might have been useful to provide a full chronological list of the party congresses, conferences, and meetings in an appendix for ready reference.

There are also a few inaccuracies and mistranslations which the author ought to rectify in future editions. For example, he mentions that the party's magazine *Lal Jhanda* ("Red Flag") was first published in September 1974. I

am able personally to attest to the fact that the first issue was published sometime in mid to late 1969. It was clandestinely cyclostyled late one evening in an architect's office in Topkhana Road in Dhaka, where Bulu's brother Kalam worked. Being a party sympathiser, he had provided party cadres the key to the office. The word "jhanda" was chosen after some deliberation, being preferred (by Sikder himself) over the more authentic Bangla synonym "potaka". ("Jhanda" resonated militancy, whereas "potaka" sounded too gentle!)

Many admirers of the party and its leader, among other things, will perhaps protest the title of Ahmad's book, which translates to "Red Terror"; but it is neither misleading nor inaccurate. Sarbahara Party cadres, like all revolutionaries throughout history, had no scruples against employing terror, and even execution, against those they perceived as enemies and traitors, including their own.

After all, Sikder and his followers—devotees of the revered Chairman Mao Zedong—were self-professed believers and practitioners of "armed struggle, class war, people's war and revolutionary terror". It is too early to say how history will judge Siraj Sikder and his Sarbahara Party. But this book is a very commendable effort on the part of Mohiuddin Ahmad to preserve the record for future historians to work with.

Razi Azmi was involved with the Sarbahara Party in its formative years. He is a former academic with a doctorate in modern history.
Email: raziazmi@hotmail.com

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

'Who They Was': A powerful voice from the rough streets of London

LABIB MAHMUD

Gabriel Krauze is not your average Booker-longlisted author. He rocks streetwear, Air Maxes, gangster chains, and most importantly a big grin that unveils his signature "iced grillz"—a statement of one's journey on the streets. *Who They Was* (4th Estate, 2020), Krauze's debut novel, is written in British-Jamaican patois, and is an auto-fictional account that mirrors his life as a London gang member in South Kilburn at the time of his pursuing a BA in English Literature at the reputed Queen Mary University. It is the marriage of two polar worlds, academia and violence, that strips London in all its mixed-up glory through a narrative that is brutally blunt and heavily comprised of urban slang. So, how does a book like that, defying all

bare life with rights that can be taken away within the blink of an eye.

It does, however, raise concern for cultural appropriation as the British-Jamaican patois is employed by an author of Polish descent. If we were to consider a positive representation of the marginalised culture, then Krauze does justice to it. Snoozp recognises and puts forth his privileges of being white. He is aware of the fact that he received a shorter jail sentence in contrast to what someone of colour may have received, and through a predominantly slang narrative, the novel dismantles preconceived prejudices as Snoozp is automatically assumed to be of mixed race due to his gang involvements. Krauze criticises the media for its inauthentic and

high aesthetic values of literature and find itself a place among the best? Art in its truest form should be experimental, it should hold the accountability of realities beyond written words, and *Who They Was* is essentially that; a book that will pave the way for a new genre—I dare to call it: 'Thug Literature'.

This unconventional novel starts on a high, as Snoozp (Krauze's street name) alongside his partner Gotti attempt a robbery in broad daylight. Snoozp spends his days "bunning zoots" (smoking marijuana), attempting "eats" (robbery), selling "buij" (heroin) to "nittys" (druggies), facing trial and jail time—all contributing to an individual being excluded from the domain of the political life; and concurrently, he is attending seminars on Nietzsche, submitting 3,000 words term papers, and trying to bridge the gap between him and his Polish immigrant parents. This conflict of the hero and the anti-hero propounds the intricacies and grim realities of the world we live in today. It may seem like there is a deep fetishisation of violence and gang life here, but in a way it gives voice to the criminally marginalised, to those who are included but in a form of exclusion. What it paints truly is an image of a

racist portrayal of street life, and politicians for deliberately not acknowledging the conditions that make violence the norm.

Gabriel Krauze, now in his 30s, has left that world behind him, and through his Booker longlisted-debut novel, has constructed a narrative that captures the truest and rawest essence of gang life. *Who They Was* is unquestionably a work of art, not just because of how it paints a picture of a world so foreign to us, but rather because of how it positively represents the marginalised cultures and gives hope to a whole generation. Krauze has established something that has not been adequately discussed—which is the fact that he has created a distinctive voice which serves as an emblem of revival, and creates a way for more literature of the same. 'Thug Literature', as I like to call it, will help youths make sense of their surroundings through reading and writing, and reclaim what has been lost living in the conditions created by the same society that tries to exclude them.

Labib Mahmud is a freelance writer and designer. His interests lie in subversive literature and discourse. Reach him at labib.mahmud848@gmail.com or @labib.mahmud on Instagram.

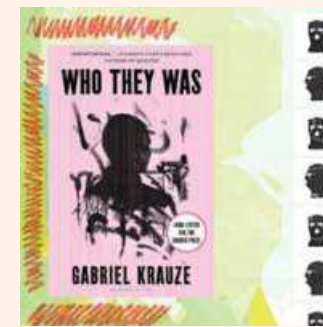


ILLUSTRATION: MEHRUL BARI

BOOK REVIEW: FILM CRITICISM

A journey with 50 Bangla films

NUJHAT JAHAN KHAN

Three years ago, I remember watching Noor Imran Mithu's film *Komola Rocket* (2018) at Bashundhara City with two of my friends. I miss those days when going to a theatre was a normal occasion. While I was enjoying some popcorn and chocolate ice cream, my eyes were fixed on the screen in the darkness. I was wondering how the cinematographer and crew had used such narrow spaces inside a boat to take the perfect shots, and how the scriptwriter had managed to create a feeling of sympathy in the audience's heart for a wealthy garment factory owner whose greed was responsible for the death of hundreds of his workers. I agree with the ideas of independent filmmaker Faridul Ahasan Shourav, who writes in his new book, *Journey by Cinema* (Gronthik Prokashon, 2021), that one of the biggest strengths of *Komola Rocket* was its ending and the way we do not know whether the launch finally reached its destination safely, because the director left the meaning of the last scene open to the audience's interpretation.

In *Journey by Cinema: Dhaka-Kolkata Notun Route E*, writer, photographer, and film activist Faridul Ahasan Shourav analyses 50 Bangla films made in Bangladesh and India, including independent productions like *Live from Dhaka*, *Jonaki*, and *Amalkatha*, thrillers like *Udhao and Khoj*, science fiction films like *Professor Shanku o El Dorado*, experimental films like *Blackout* and *Nirbaak*, and selections from the political genre like *Herbert*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and so on. In its range and research on art films and filmmaking, the book covers extensive ground on the technical aspects of the field. Shourav talks about and offers criticism on screenplay, acting, direction, cinematography, art direction, sound design, editing, make-up, and music composition, all from his unique point of view. His language is natural and accessible, making it easy for readers to connect to the many stories he recounts—this is marred only by his expounding of details that may count as spoilers for some of the films.



The positives, though, offset its negatives. In one such highlight, Shourav, revealing the 'behind the scenes' anecdotes from *Nirbaak*, shares how director Srijeet Mukherjee's creative impulses had been inspired by Salvador Dali's anthropomorphic paintings. These backstories were the most fascinating part of the book for me, difficult as it is to find reliable resources for 'behind the scenes' stories related to Bangla films, amidst the pool of Hollywood- and Bollywood-centric content on YouTube.

Regarding the credo of the author, it is evident in his writing that Shourav is reluctant to strongly criticise art films in the book. He rather picks through a heap of Bangla movies so that the reader can easily select good films to watch, and engage in conversations on interpretation, over a comforting cup of tea or some rice.

Nujhat Jahan Khan is a media professional.

BOOK REVIEW: HISTORICAL FICTION

A poet, a murder mystery, and a vivid portrait of 1857 India

SARAH ANJUM BARI & SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

In 1857, a wave of uprisings sparked through India in a bid to overthrow the British rulers. The Sepoy Mutiny was the first time Indian soldiers rose against the British East India Company in the face of corruption and unjust social reforms—including ruthless land taxes that unfairly penalised the working class. Set in this time period, Raza Mir's debut novel, *Murder at the Mushaira* (Aleph Book Company, 2021), is as much a murder mystery as it is a historical portrait.

On the morning of the 8th of Ramzan in 1273 AH, one British spy and "oily syphiant" by the name of Sukhan Khairabadi is found dead at a mushaira at the novel's beginning, after a night of ritualised poetry readings at Nawab Ifukhar Hasan's haveli. His death gains the highest priority among British officials as they assume it must have links to the brewing rumors of rebellion. As investigating officer, Kirorimal Chainsukh, is entrusted with the duty to find Khairabadi's killer, the fatal threat of meeting a deadline motivates him to seek the help of "amateur detective" and poet laureate Mirza Ghalib, whose wit, intelligence, knowledge, and connections with Delhi's elites make him a valuable asset for solving crime. Pressure from the British mounts, and Ghalib pulls in his forensics-specialist friend Master Ramchandra to get to the bottom of the mysterious crime.

As Chainsukh, Ramchandra, and a delightfully Sherlock-like Ghalib are thrust into the heart of the investigation, they stumble across a sea of suspects and secrets tied with the tensions brewing between the Company and rebel soldiers. Why was Khairabadi poisoned on top of being stabbed? How many killers were involved? Was his death truly connected with the brewing rebellion? Previously the author of *Ghalib: A Thousand Desires* (Penguin, 2019) and *The Taste of*

Words: An Introduction to Urdu Poetry (Penguin, 2014), Raza Mir's detour to fiction here is marked with sharp attention to detail, especially when he describes the food, clothing, architecture, ammunition, and science in the world of the novel. Dum biryani, kebabs, parathas and quail-stuffed goats mount the tables inside a shining haveli, abundant, yet "miraculously soft on the eye", and the prose soon absorbs the reader into a Delhi humming under the 19th century rule of emperors, landlords, and colonial powers; a Delhi in which newsprint is as valuable



ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

as gold, and a grand horizon is framed by the Red Fort, its Lahori Darwaza, and the canals of Chandni Chowk. This is more than vacant imagery, though, because they are filtered by the points of view of servers and house maids, whose outlook on the decadence casts subtle judgment on its careless cruelty and wastefulness. "What could one

expect", Mir's narrator writes on the eve of the murder, "when one served the inebriated and depraved nobility of Delhi, who stood around and spouted empty erotic verse while two-faced foreigners stole their country from under their noses?"

Against this artful worldbuilding, the quick pace of the plot and a stiffness to the characters—whose list is rather long—make it hard to become emotionally invested in the story or its people. Their stories are most heartfelt when narrated through inner monologues; in conversation, their dialogues feel rigid and rehearsed.

In spite of this, a whirlwind of emotions befalls the reader towards the novel's climax, as one tragic event after another, each touched by the characters' acts of bravery and sacrifice, pile up. As we witness, also, the harassment of farmers by jagirdars and zamindars as a means of keeping large sections of people subjugated, Raza Mir's exploration of colonial violence through the lens of India and the Sepoy Mutiny is remarkable. The nod to Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red* (Faber & Faber, 2001) is all too evident in the structure of the text, in the verses of poetry spearheading each chapter and its alternating narrators. But though present, the debate between originality and reproduction of art is secondary in this story.

Murder at the Mushaira, essentially, is interested in the distillation of larger historical and political narratives into the ordinary. It is a masterclass in evocative worldbuilding and the writing of crisp, clean prose. The pleasure of reading it would have been heightened with more seamless execution of some characters and scenes.

Sarah Anjum Bari is editor of *Daily Star Books*. Email: sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com
Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.