

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Relationships lost and found in debut novel 'Punyaha'.

QAZI MUSTABEEN NOOR



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

In the middle of nowhere, among the wide expanse of paddy fields stands a wee nursery—an oasis of sorts, a respite from the outside world. There, long lost duo Farzana and Shamita have finally rekindled their relationship, yet their various entanglements painfully keep them apart and away from their sanctuary. On the one hand, there is Farzana's entitled husband, Mahfuz, who wants to exploit what it means to be in a marriage. On the other, Shamita's greedy brothers emerge as land-grabbers who attempt to take away what is rightfully hers. Both Farzana and Shamita are ordinary women, their struggles, too, are distinctly Bangladeshi. Many a woman in literature or film is plagued by the tyrannical husband, greedy brothers, a wayward child, or the return of an old lover. Why then is Tanveer Anoy's *Punyaha* (Boobook, 2021) creating so many ripples that have turned into rather turbulent waves?

The novel is Tanveer Anoy's first of many to come. The author is a prominent, young activist and prolific writer who is vocal about, among other issues, gender discrimination. The two leading ladies of his novel are hence immaculately crafted characters who speak, think, and decide for themselves. It would not be surprising if the world revolved around men in a novel set in a patriarchal society, as does real life. Even so, Farzana and Shamita have other things to talk about, such as books and how to care for the many plants at the nursery. Shamita, whose comfort zone lies in Bangla books, jokes about Farzana's privilege to be able to read her "Austin-faustin" in English. This novel not only passes the Bechdel test, it also subtly hints at the two friends' class differences.

Punyaha raises quite a few poignant questions in the face of current social structures. Even today, it is bold for any work of fiction to begin with a failed marriage. We meet Farzana at a point where she is done making sacrifices, and Mahfuz's true self has already materialised long before the events of the book. Prachi, Farzana's stepdaughter, returns home but has long crossed the threshold of no-return. What used to be a dream home for a family is now under the surgeon's knife, about to be dissected into pieces in the name of rightful inheritance. For a single, Hindu woman like Shamita, inheritance is even more of a crouching tiger that threatens to take away her autonomy and fortitude. Like quicksand, old values are shifting

from under their feet. Like tangled webs, these same old values complicate their dreams in the name of tradition and social order. What, then, is the meaning of family or home for these characters? The reader is distraught in a myriad of relationships, searching for a semblance of warmth where there is none. Such is the gaping hole that the novel digs for us from the very start.

One might face a little trouble understanding stepdaughter Prachi's exact purpose in the story, as to what she helps the reader come to terms with, as a character. The language itself might sometimes appear disjointed, flowing somewhat tensely in places. A peppering of words such as "tobda" or expressions such as "biggoban manush" may read somewhat curiously. But the questions raised, again, are bold and reveal many aspects of society—the rise of a new brand of religious conservatism, eroding social structures, and queer identities struggling to find a voice in the midst of it all.

The word "punyaha" refers to a celebration, a cleansing ceremony to purge the earth. At the same time, "punyaha" was a festival associated with the collection of taxes. One might ask, to whom was "punyaha" a festival, if at all? Who did, in fact, celebrate a day of prejudicial taxation and mercilessness of the zamindars under the British Raj? Tanveer Anoy's novel *Punyaha* does not come to the ordinary person as a bearer of good fortune, nor does it balance their books. It perceives the anomalies of society with a queer lens and keeps it at that.

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BOOK REVIEW: MEMOIR

Soumitra Chatterjee: The one man behind the many

RASHEEK TABASSUM MONDIRA

It is impossible to ascribe any one particular character to Soumitra Chatterjee, as he has immortalised several through his performances. "It is perhaps his greatest achievement that when one thinks of the career of Soumitra, one does not think of any particular persona with a distinct style of delivery and mannerisms", Arjun Sengupta and Partha Mukherjee write in *Soumitra Chatterjee: A Life in Cinema: A Life in Cinema, Theatre, Poetry & Painting* (Niyogi Books, 2020).

Arjun Sengupta teaches on scriptwriting and the cinematic adaptation of literary works, and his co-author Partha Mukherjee is a freelance writer and experienced documentary filmmaker. It is both their extensive knowledge of cinema and literature which gives this book its shape, embellished with snippets of the writers' interviews with Soumitra Chatterjee, and the actor's own account on multiple perspectives.

horizons would perhaps have never been as broad as they were under his paternal stewardship", the book asserts.

It further explores several of the actor's iconic portrayals in cinema and in theatre, discussing the techniques, challenges, and transformations Soumitra went through to perform. We find out that Soumitra always left a bit of himself in his roles. His performance as illiterate, hot-tempered Narsingh in *Abhijan* (1962) was perhaps his most challenging role, as it required him to portray someone different and contradictory to his own persona; Coach Khit Da in *Kony* (1984) was a measure of his own personality and his passion for sports; the role of a Brahmin villager in *Ashani Sanket* (1973) was his testament to a painful memory of famine; and his earnest performance in the semi-autobiographical theatre play, *Tritiya Onko Oteeb*, was a reflection of his philosophies about death.

These milestones in Soumitra's life

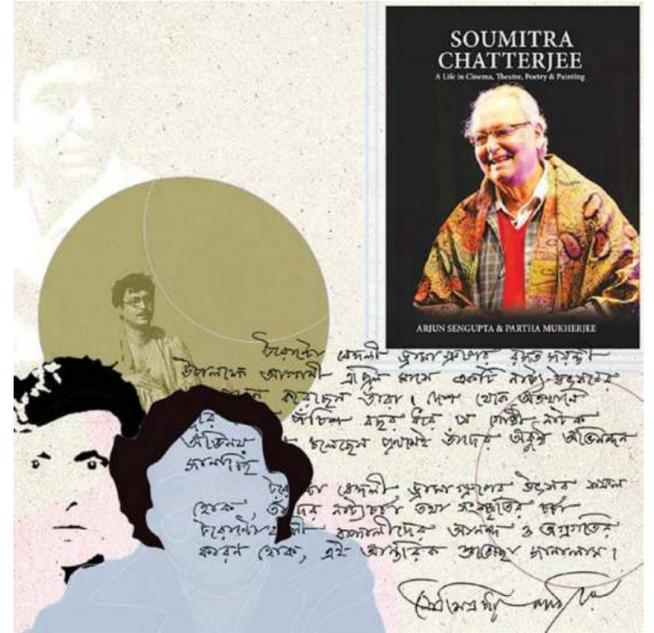


ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

The first few chapters explore Soumitra's childhood, his introduction to acting, how he came to meet thespian Shishir Kumar Bhaduri, and how he learned the artform and dedicated his soul to theatre. The intricate details of witnessing Bhaduri as Aurangzeb in the play *Alamgir* are discussed at great length, a performance that played a most pivotal role in Soumitra's life, forging a strong bond between the young actor and theatre, a bond that lasted a lifetime.

Born in a turbulent time for the Indian subcontinent, Soumitra's deep interest in socio-politics reflected widely on his personality and, later on, his acting. The book sheds light on Soumitra's political ideology and the influence of Tagore, among others, on his life.

Quite a few chapters are naturally devoted to Soumitra's profound relationship with Satyajit Ray. According to Chatterjee, Ray taught him everything he knew about cinema, and also critiqued his performances, directions, and theatre work. The author-filmmaker's strong personality and in-depth knowledge instilled in Soumitra the true integrity of not just an artist, but also an individual. "Ray had taught him to be an educated, well-rounded artist whose intellectual

are accompanied in the book by the authors' reflections on cinematic trends, acting techniques, the lures of stardom, and the downfall of Bangali cinema over the years.

The final chapters reflect on Soumitra's persona as a passionate poet from early adolescence and an attentive painter in his free time—parts of his life not known to all. The book ends with an English translation of a lecture he once gave at a Sahitya Akademi programme in Kolkata, on November 6, 1990, in which he highlights the impact and influence of books in his life—the works of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Jim Corbett, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, James Jean's *The Mysterious Universe*, Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali*, and more.

Having read this book, as an avid fan of Soumitra Chatterjee, a person I knew only through films, I now feel like I know the artist as well as the man, and my admiration for both has only grown.

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BOOK NEWS

Tahmima Anam launches and discusses 'The Startup Wife' at Hay Festival

STAR BOOKS DESK

On June 3, 2021, Bangladeshi-born British writer Tahmima Anam published her fifth book, *The Startup Wife* (Canongate, 2021), a novel about coding, entrepreneurship, human relationships, and finding one's voice. In a conversation with writer and broadcaster Georgina Godwin on the same day, Anam discussed the book at a Hay Festival session broadcasted live on the event website.

Born to immigrant parents and trained at MIT, Anam's protagonist Asha Ray, upon a chance encounter with her high school crush-turned husband Cyrus, sets out to develop an algorithm that generates rituals for its secular, non-religious app users. Asha's brainchild serves as a device through which the author is able to comment on "how power works" and on life in the age of social media—in which the fundamental entrepreneurial impulse is to "disrupt" life as it is and offer something better. Whether Asha is able to assert her own role in her personal journey as a "startup wife" is what drives the novel forward.

"I've had a very complicated relationship with Bangladesh, which is a place that I wrote about for 10 years and something that I will always write about", Anam shared during the Hay interview, addressing the departure in her subject matter for this novel. In her earlier work, the *Golden Age* trilogy



PHOTO: HAY FESTIVAL

had seen three generations of the Haque family evolve along with a newly-born Bangladesh; with the liberation war, military rule, and religious fundamentalism among its main themes, the series had a gravity and "a high body count" that often had its author weeping during the process of her writing it.

"With this book, I just want to think I'm funny," Anam shared.

The Startup Wife is almost a rom-com— with Nora Ephron and Jennifer Wiener on her palette, the author had her fun while writing it, creating Asha's own Spotify playlist and making up a fake website,

utopicollective.ai, which one can still visit.

It almost made her consider using a pseudonym. "I wanted to claim a space that isn't something you'd expect me to claim", Anam said.

Having transferred to a digital platform for the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's Hay Festival is free to register and participate from across the world.

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BOOK REVIEW: SELF-HELP

A handbook for navigating the social media age in your profession

RUMMAN R KALAM

While the world might seem like a place only made for extroverts, who get ahead with the volume of their voices alone, *Personal Branding* (Odommo Prokash, 2021) is a book that is here to permanently lay that idea to rest. Authors Md Tajdin Hassan, Md Sohan Haidear, and Rafeed Elahi Chowdhury provide a meticulous blueprint for an aspiring professional to make themselves noticed.

Those of you who judge books by their covers (and genres) might be put off by the idea of "another self-help book" about corporate life. What's refreshing about *Personal Branding*, however, is that it does not make grandiose claims about the effectiveness of its methods. One big issue with books of this kind is that anecdotes are often shoehorned into fitting the writers' perspective, but for this book, methods are laid out at the beginning where honesty and staying true to yourself

are repeatedly stressed upon. In essence, you cannot have a brand without a product.

As someone who was figuring out how branding works in the early days of social media back in 2008 with Rantages, what the book provided for me was validation for the methods I have practiced for the past decade or so. What took thousands of hours for me to glean from different blogs, books, and talks have finally been condensed into a manual that enables every professional to be their very own public relations agency in the context of Bangladeshi corporate life.

Personal Branding stresses on the myths and misconceptions people cling to about branding, like the assumption that it's either exaggeration or plain lies. This book asks you to think about your favourite brands and people, how they managed to communicate to you what you value in an honest manner.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

That is the undercurrent I sensed while reading *Personal Branding*. It helps you explore your every day life and convey to an audience who you really are. In the age of social media, everyone has an audience no matter how small and when there is an audience, there is opportunity for growth.

The book is structured in the 'Why', 'What',

and 'How' method and the three authors layer their advice so that there is perspective from a well-experienced veteran in Md Tajdin Hassan, who has served for years as *The Daily Star's* head of marketing before taking over as the Chief Strategy and Digital Transformation Officer recently; along with Md Sohan Haidear, who is a rising star in his field, and Rafeed Elahi Chowdhury, writer and cofounder of Torun, who does tremendously to connect the dots for younger readers about to start their careers. With the help of these three voices, it becomes a book one can revert back to during different stages of their life.

The authors have also included personal branding case studies from local industry leaders so the reader can use one of those and reverse engineer their methods through the exercises described in the book.

At 127 pages, it can be finished in a day

and that might be the biggest issue with the book. Going through the entire thing without sitting down to process what you read can lead one to assume there isn't enough content, since the book condenses a lot of important information within very few pages. I felt that the authors can go for a revised or an extended edition of the book. In fact, due to the mercurial nature of social media, it would be best if there were a blog centered around fleshing out the concepts of *Personal Branding* and developing them further over time.

All in all, this book can be a compass for navigating the minefield that is promoting yourself humbly in the age of social media.

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