

100 HUNDRED YEARS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA

Reflections on DU convocation speeches: Part II

FAKRUL ALAM

The second volume of *Dhaka University: The Convocation Speeches, 1948-1970* (Dhaka University Publications, 1989), assembled assiduously by Emeritus Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, is an important publication like the first one for anyone trying to understand Dhaka University's extraordinary role in the genesis and identity formation of Bangladesh. The first volume covered the birth of the university in circumstances having to do with the annulment of the partition of Bengal in 1911; the second contains speeches dealing with the second partition of Bengal in 1947, when East Bengal became a province of the "Islamic" republic of Pakistan. It encapsulates a period when Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan were coming to terms with leaders who were supposed to be their own, but were really men who played the Islamic card to serve their own interests.

The DU campus is where Bengali men and women would most often assemble to resist and thwart their (west) Pakistani rulers. Indeed, the very first convocation held in 1948, the second year of its Pakistan phase, registers the first intense public expression of dissent of East Pakistanis at what their supposed brothers/friends (and not masters!) were doing with them; the last one organised in 1970 unmistakably registers their determination to assert their identity as Bengalis fully and firmly, and their readiness to attain independence unequivocally. From beginning to end, the convocation speeches record subterranean signs of dissent and indications of the spiraling discontent of Bengali administrators, faculty members, and students.

Take the three 1948 speeches, for instance. Vice-Chancellor Dr Mahmud Hasan quite rightly acknowledges in his speech the university's debts to the leaders of the Muslim community of the province for the role they played in founding the institution, but this is followed by two pages eulogising the Convocation Speaker, the Governor General of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and then four pages on the importance of an education system that "must be Muslim" at the university level. The three pages of the Chancellor's speech, the first and last British "Governor" of East Pakistan, are pretty nondescript as befitting the representative of a colonial power that has now abdicated all responsibilities, but Jinnah speaks darkly of Pakistan's enemies and alludes to the way "the recent language controversy" has been "sedulously injected into the province". He declares explicitly afterwards: In Pakistan "the state language must obviously be Urdu" since "it is a language, more than any other provincial language, that embodies the best that is in Islamic culture". Therefore, "there was no justification for agitation".

Bangladeshi historians record that the students present, however, were protesting vociferously even as Jinnah was speaking. They note, as well, that this was the beginning of the end of Pakistan for Bengalis, for the insistence on Urdu and exclusion of Bangla would ultimately prove to be lethal for the state. Here, as elsewhere in the volume, the critical role DU played in the emergence of Bangladeshi nationalism is

reflected uniquely.

I will ignore the speeches of the next few convocations, only noting in passing that in his speeches in 1950 and 1952, Chancellor Malik Firoz Khan Noon insists on imparting Islamic education and pointing out the tendency of "foreign ideologies to enter the portals of [...] our youth by their subtle and insidious anti-state and anti-Islamic doctrines and propaganda", revealing thereby the growing strength of the movement demanding that Bangla be made a national language. One notes, too, that there were no convocation ceremonies in 1951 and 1953, no doubt because of the decisive turn Bengalis took towards Bangladesh on February 21, 1952.

For 1954, *The Convocation Speeches* includes only VC WA Jenkins's wise speech. The British physicist-turned-administrator decides, revealingly, to talk about "Democracy and Universities", indicating that it was being threatened by its opposite—"autocracy". He

knowledge", even more than teaching, are primary functions of a university. I was struck repeatedly by the recurring insistence on campus freedom. In 1961, for example, VC Mahmud Husain emphasises "when free institutions are suppressed civilization itself experiences a setback". Professor Husain, who seemed to have played a key part in DU's expansion, warns in his 1962 speech that "truth, freedom, honor, justice, charity, love, equality, democracy are all concepts" which only cynics dismiss and fail to associate as values civilizations must hold dear.

Dhaka University: The Convocation Speeches indicates that no convocations were held from 1965 to 1969. Things obviously were not right politically; Bengalis were striving forcefully for greater autonomy as the Six-Point Movement was gathering steam. When the 1970 convocation was held, everyone present was in for a major surprise. VC Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, later destined to be Bangladesh's High Commissioner to the UK, the country's Foreign



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

cautions of "an appalling tragedy unless there can be developed a sympathetic understanding between students, teachers, the public, and national leaders of all kinds". I am reminded of what Jenkins implies but does not state—this was the year that the Jukto Front triumphed and the Muslim League was wiped out in an election where DU alumni like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played major parts.

In his 1955 speech, Chancellor Amiruddin Ahmed centres on the "practical application of the concept of freedom to educational institutions in general and universities in particular". These speeches should have sobered those West Pakistani rulers who were doing their utmost to stifle academic freedom. Let me add that they are themes that should be in the mind of all governments, everywhere, in all ages.

Other issues emphasise financial and accommodation problems the steadily expanding university was facing. Justice Muhammad Ibrahim, the eighth VC of DU, in his 1958 speech, makes the important point that "research and advancement of

Minister and President, and Chairman of the UN Commission on Human Rights, spoke in Bangla. In the last convocation speeches presented in the book, both he and the Convocation Guest, the distinguished scientist and educationist Muhammad Kudrat-e-Khuda, spoke in Bangla. Bangladesh's moment had arrived; the national longing for appropriate form had found fulfilment!

My reading of the second volume of *Dhaka University: The Convocation Speeches* leads me to the lessons to be learnt from it: DU has been central to the birth of Bangladesh in every way; liberatory politics has always been at the heart of the institution and has always propelled it forward. Any attempt to throttle autonomy and free thought in it will be self-defeating for those trying to do so. Of course, research and teaching are central to the idea of this university if it wants to retain its importance and advance thought. This volume, like the first, is thus valuable not only in assessing the past of the institution but also in making us think of its future.

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ILLUSTRATION: MEHRUL BARI

REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

2021's Commonwealth Prize-winning story makes human the unsavoury segments of life

In this monthly series, we review short stories that deserve to be rediscovered and appreciated

MEHRUL BARI

On June 30, a virtual ceremony for the 2021 Commonwealth Short Story Prize was held, and for the first time in its history a Sri Lankan writer was announced as the overall winner. Kanya D'Almeida, who is also the second ever Asian winner in the competition's 10-year history, took home the title and GBP 5,000 with her story, "I Cleaned the—". The short story chronicles the "dirty work" entailed in a house-help's 20-year stint in caring for a disabled child—a past which comes to us by way of a gripping framing device, that sees the narrator now as an inhabitant of the Carmelite Sister's Sanctuary for the Forsaken. The place is looked after by nuns who "have taken a vow of silence and spend their days caring for women who've been dismissed, abandoned, maimed or otherwise left for dead"—a place for "people who have no people".

It is in this sanctuary that the narrator (whose name, Ishwari, is written only twice) has met the terminally-ill Rita, with whom she, as the story slowly and delectably reveals to us, has formed a mirroring patient-caregiver relationship. Rita is a companion and eager listener, whose coarse language juxtaposes Ishwari's unadorned, self-censoring narration (the em-dash in the short story's title takes the place of a certain word). "Twenty years of washing one person's backside!" cries Rita, whose own ill-fated life seems beyond regret and reproach. "You should be on your knees thanking God for releasing you" she says, a statement which Ishwari can only agree with, though not actualise.

The narrative is shared between the present and the past of 20 years ago, presented to Rita, and us, as often foreboding campfire stories. We know that the past is haunted; we find out early, after all, that the disabled child, Chooti Baba, has died, and Ishwari had to be dragged by the nuns from the young woman's gravesite. It then becomes the

reader's need to know "how bad" the events turned out to be, and if they will continue to be so for our protagonists, and D'Almeida, a journalist and fiction writer of equal accreditation, is an excellent, deceptive story teller, who prefers to leave large chunks of breadcrumb trails rather than hand anything over.

"I wrote this story for all the women who have taken their stories to the grave," shared D'Almeida in the awards ceremony. And as much as Ishwari detests reliving and relaying her particular story, it is only in doing so that she seems more alive and more capable of moving away from the person she is at the start of "I Cleaned the—".

This short story is a smooth read, that has in its hands two halves that join for one captivating tale. The prose is simple, literate, and perhaps its best instances are the occasions where "she" shifts fluidly from Chooti Baba to Rita, and past and present flow casually, concurrently. The characters are constantly in a state of in-between, as if coming-of-age is still a possibility at 50 or 70.

Pushing the limits of the competition's 5,000-word limit, Kanya D'Almeida's offering is among the Commonwealth Short Story Prize's very best. Its writer holds an MFA in fiction from Columbia University, has worked as a journalist for about 10 years, is working currently on a book of stories about "mad women", and hosts *The Darkest Light*, a podcast which critically analyses birth and motherhood in Sri Lanka—and all of it shows.

Kanya D'Almeida's "I Cleaned the—" can be found on the *Granta* website.

Mehrul Bari S Chowdhury is a writer, poet, and artist. His work has appeared in *Blood Orange Review*, *Kitaab*, and *Sortes Magazine*, among others. He is currently an intern at *Daily Star Books*.

THE SHELF

Kishwar's favourite cookbooks

STAR BOOKS REPORT

In a brief but insightful episode of Star Book Talk last week, Bangladeshi-Australian chef Kishwar Chowdhury, runner up of *MasterChef Australia* 2021, revealed her fascination with cookbooks and books related to food as an artform. Here we find out more about the three books Kishwar highlighted as personal favourites—even, at one point, pulling out one of them from her shelves!

LES DINERS DE GALA

Salvador Dali (Taschen, 1973)

Surrealist artist Salvador Dali (1904-1989) and his wife and muse, Gala (1894-1982) were notoriously famous for the dinner parties they threw, embellished with exotic and wildly imaginative elements. The 136 recipes of these parties are collected and accompanied by artwork in an aesthetically stunning hardcover edition, which experiments as much with gastronomy as with the art of dinner conversation, dessert making, and more. The recipes, though cooked at home, come from renowned French chefs from the likes of Maxim's, Le Train Bleu, and the Lasserre.



DESIGN: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

HESTON BLUMENTHAL AT HOME

Heston Blumenthal (Bloomsbury, 2011)

A self-taught British chef of French cuisine, who runs the renowned Fat Duck restaurant and has appeared previously on *MasterChef Australia*, Blumenthal is known for his innovative and scientific approaches to cooking. In this cookbook, he deconstructs some of these experiments for beginner home cooks, working with vegetables, seafood, and chocolate, among other exciting ingredients.

JERUSALEM: A COOKBOOK

Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi (Ten

Speed Press, 2012)

The 120 recipes of *Jerusalem* explore the culinary

diversity of the authors' home city, which has been home to Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities. Born in the Jewish west of the city, Ottolenghi is among the most revered chefs in the world, with five restaurants in London and two cookbooks to his name. In *Jerusalem*, Tamimi and Ottolenghi play around with vegetables, fish, and desserts, all of which, as Kishwar points out, use "the pulses, grains, and root vegetables, and also the proteins like the mackerel and oily fish that you get in those areas. They were recipes that were really easy to replicate in Bangladesh."

THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS

The Birangona in fiction: '1971' and 'Talaash'

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