

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

A tender, discerning look at where we are now

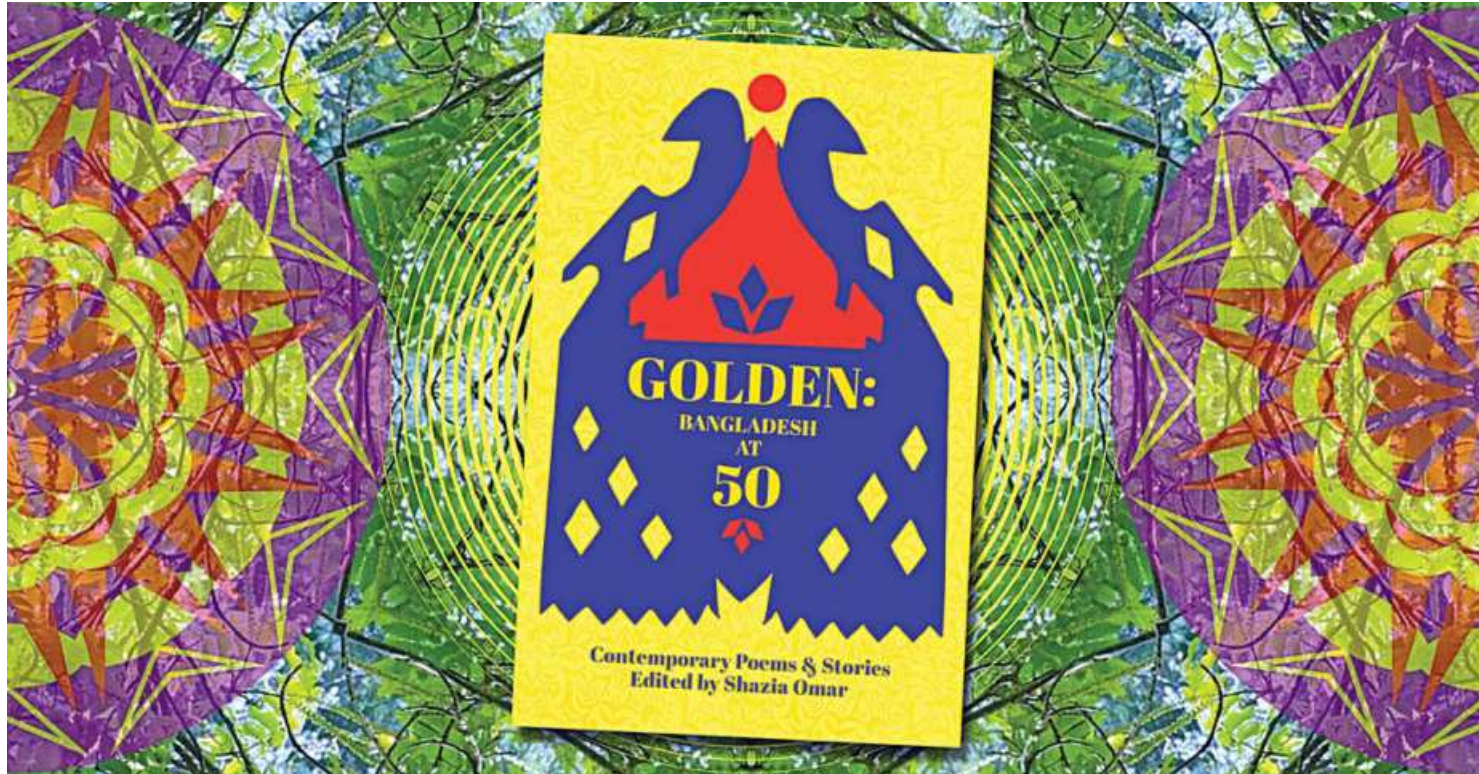
SARAH ANJUM BARI

"Who gave you so much independence?"

Early on in the very first story of *Golden: Bangladesh at 50* (University Press Limited, 2021), readers of Mahmud Rahman's "The Birthday Cake" are faced with an existential question. Dipika has asked the bakery in New Market to write on her husband Russell's cake in Bangla. But not only have they ignored her request—it's not the way "Happy Birthday is done", after all—but they've also bungled the spelling of his name in English. Russell in Banglish, as we know, is Rasel. Dipika is furious.

Who *did* give us so much independence? To us, of this precocious little nation that spills blood to be able to speak in Bangla, that wreaks war to defy unwanted authority, that succumbs to corruption as its overcrowded cities swell with dispassion and inequality, that communicates all of the above in a unique concoction of butchered Bangla, English, and a smattering of other languages? So many wants, so much defiance, so many contradictions in a country so small and so young, yet so vast in its polyphony. While recent anthologies like *The Demons: Best Bangladeshi Stories, 1971-2021* (Aleph Book Company, 2021) have tried to bottle the essence of Bangladesh by offering flashes of its often violent pre-history, this new collection of contemporary Bangladeshi fiction and poetry, edited by Shazia Omar, seems instead to be in a state of introspection. Fifty years old this year, the country represented in *Golden* is haunted, still, by all that it has survived, and it takes a look at all that it continues to breed, ranging from the festering to the hopeful.

And so it follows that the collection feels wonderfully *young*, even as it comprises some of the most experienced and eminent of our writers, from Neeman Sobhan and Lubna Marium to Arif Anwar, Nadeem Zaman, Sa-



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

brina Ahmad, and many more.

In his "ode on the sari", for instance, poet and academic Kaiser Haq ruminates feverishly on the endlessness of the 18-feet Dhakai muslin, on its tempestuous moods, and on the chaos of the land and climate for which the garment, symbolising the Bangladeshi woman, is far too valuable. Youth filters the gaze through which the characters of *Golden* look back on independence, on the way this history is taught to children, and the way in which women are "groomed" for adulthood in this country—a culture that has endured from the 1970s, where Maria Chowdhuri's

"The Turquoise Necklace" is set, through the decades after independence, when young girls in Farah Chuznavi's "What My Parents Never Told Me" are punished for reading too liberally or showing disinterest in sewing, right up until the present day, in which a young woman in Salahdin Imam's "Tangled Web" is driven to attempt suicide by the judgments of the marriage market. In one of the most heartbreakingly beautiful additions to the collection, Munize Manzur's "Where Here Is", Mim, once a graduate of Comparative Literature and now a lonely grandmother looked after by the lively young Parul from

Gaibanda, goes searching amidst the chaos of a Dhaka city shopping mall to find the place where she had chipped her tooth against the pavement in her youth, when a young love that wasn't to be was meeting its end.

My initial opinion was that the book, as a whole, seems secluded from the experiences of the rural and the extreme poor of Bangladesh, who form our majority. Such characters, when they do appear, do so either in supporting roles—chauffeurs, domestic helpers, rickshaw pullers, beggars—or they appear as flashbacks from a more violent past, as though their struggles were left behind when

Bangladesh evolved into a more working class population. The narrators in charge, who enjoy the privilege of intellectual and emotional development over the course of the story, are either from an elite class, or are expats living abroad, or struggling to stay afloat in the urban middle class.

This criticism has more to do with the overall experience of reading the collection, however, which promises a glimpse at the state of Bangladesh in its 50th year, rather than with any of the individual authors, all of whose stories create rich, immersive worlds with a plentitude of compassion. These are also stories that look satirically at all the affluence amassed—wealth, in this book, is portrayed more as a form of pollution than success. They are interested mainly in the kindness and hypocrisy teased out from relationships built across the cultural and socio-economic spectrum. In the instances in which this filter drops away, *Golden* is at its purest and most beautiful, as in Pracheta Alam's poems on *desh* and Shabnam Nadiya's widening of the definition of a freedom fighter.

What I find most admirable about *Golden* is that it allows us to witness the birth and growth of Bangladesh through intimate moments of kindness, love, and grief. As a result, the book's concerns with the themes of misogyny, dogma, class struggles, and the triumph and trauma of freedom, all of the things that we love and hate about being Bangladeshi, do not come across as boxes to be ticked. At the end of the day, these are stories that one can read to feel moved.

Sarah Anjum Bari is editor of Daily Star Books. Reach her at sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com and @wordsinsteal on Instagram and Twitter. *Golden: Bangladesh at 50* is available for preorder from UPL.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Lessons from history in desperate times

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

Chinmay Tumble's *The Age of Pandemics (1817-1920): How They Shaped India and the World* (HarperCollins, 2020) is a timely read, touching upon three historic pandemics and the effects they had on the culture, economy, and politics of the Indian subcontinent.

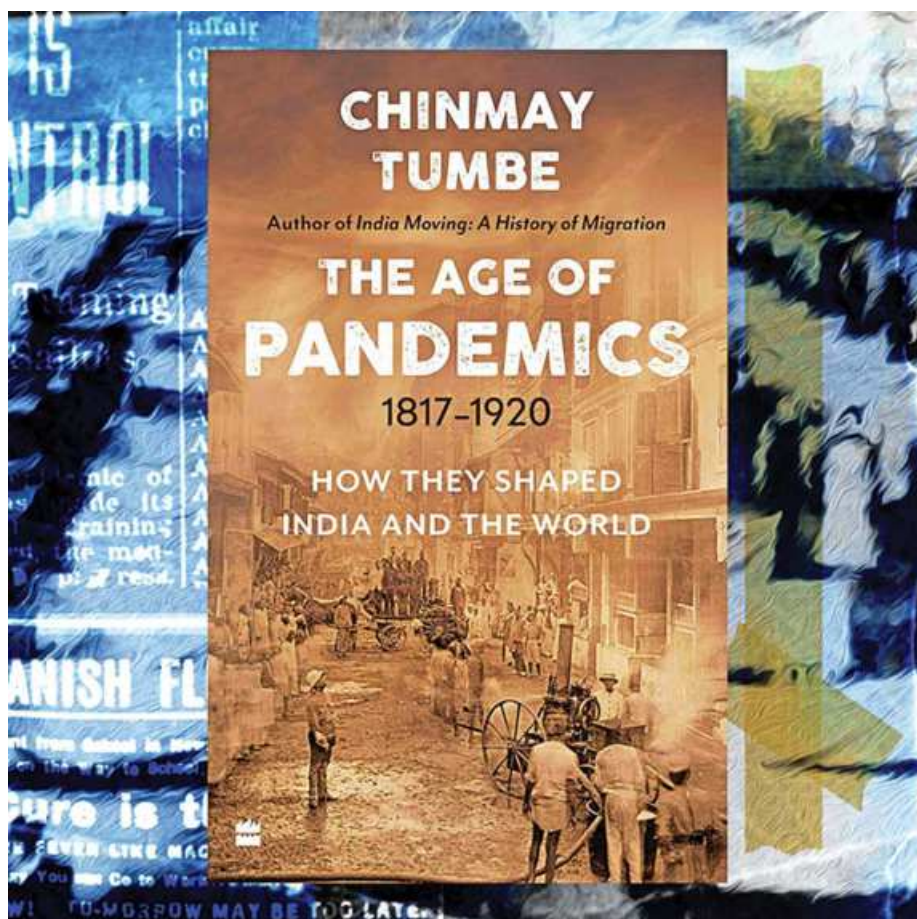
Tumble's light and humorous tone makes reading history easier and allows one to read between the lines. He starts by categorising epidemics and pandemics, and connects seemingly unrelated threads while retaining a clear picture. For example, he connects the mysterious circulation of *chapati* bread to the cholera epidemic and the coup in the army barracks of Barrackpur in 1857. And he reflects on the devastation caused by the influenza pandemic in 1918, when a shortfall of rain caused poor harvest and eventually resulted in a famine.

In the process of documenting this history, the author a faculty member of IIM Ahmedabad who writes about migration, cities, and history, focuses more on the economic and political implications of the events, rather than just the timeline and the numbers associated with them. He unpacks the power of negotiation gained by the labour force in the post-pandemic times or the effects of per capita income on the death rate, all while avoiding academic jargon. While the analyses in the chapters covering cholera and the plague can seem surface-level, Tumble digs deeper in the section covering the influenza pandemic, an episode that has all but disappeared from the collective consciousness of the present-day Indian subcontinent.

One might also feel let down by the extent to which Tumble unpacks the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. I had expected that he would dwell more on the migration associated with the pandemic and the plight of the migrant workers in India. But the author compensates for this with his survey of the larger patterns which have emerged from centuries of mortal crisis.

While the British administration blamed the cholera pandemic mostly on Hindu and Muslim pilgrims, a narrative that most complemented their project of colonial oppression, in the United States, it was declared as India Cholera. This narrative is similar to how the world has reacted to COVID-19, some dubbing it the "Chinese virus", while right-wing Hindu nationalists blamed it entirely on Muslims attending a Tablighi Jamaat session—seemingly individual incidents that cater to and perpetuate casual and severe racism and communalism.

Such nationalisation of disease has



DESIGN: MEHRUL BARI

profound cultural implications. Tumble draws the example of a Catholic propaganda film, *The Catechist of Kil-Arni*, set against the backdrop of cholera-ridden Pondicherry in India, where the locals' way of life intensifies the horror of the disease and the missionaries come to the rescue with their "superior" solutions. "[But] in the treatment of cholera during the Age of Pandemics", Tumble clarifies, "the gap between European medical treatments of cholera and the Indian ones was negligible in the early nineteenth century [...]. But this was sufficient to drive a religious agenda to win adherents and wean them away from their 'superstitions'."

The trend continues with the ascent of the third plague. France was able to rally the international community and exert pressure over England using the narrative of the "Indian Plague". The British, on the other hand, were opposed to quarantine measures due to the possible losses that they would incur in trade. The consequent death rates were highest in the marginal socioeconomic backgrounds. Women were even more vulnerable, as they faced harassment by administrators while serving as the sole caregivers in plague-ridden

families. Centuries later, this trend still endures.

The struggles were worsened by the prejudices of caste and race. While in India, blame befell the lower caste families as an excuse for witch-hunts and murders, South Africa was making way for apartheid. "The white-skinned ruling class, who anyway favoured strong segregationist policies, used the plague to further their cause and Ndabeni, a separate township for black-skinned residents, was created in Cape Town", Tumble elaborates.

Delving into these histories drove me into a deep state of despair. With each section, it became clearer to me how easily and quickly we have forgotten history and the lessons that it offers, and continue to suffer repeatedly, as individuals and nations. But it also gave me hope, for I observed that we humans have come together in times of crises and showed empathy and resilience over and over again, and survived.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan is sub editor of Toggle, The Daily Star. *Chinmay Tumble's The Age of Pandemics* is available at Omni Books, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

BOOK REVIEW: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Revisiting forgotten babyhood days with 'Babuibela'

SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

Every emotion associated with pregnancy and childbirth is amplified by the impending arrival of the baby. There is exhilaration, stress, anticipation, fear, and preparation. The expectant mother with her rounded midsection, decorated by stretch-marks like beautiful streaks of lightning, spends the last days of her final trimester eagerly waiting for any signs of the arrival. Every movement and contraction feels like an indication. The father, eager and restless, checks and rechecks the contents of the duffel bag that he has packed and placed by the door for when they will need to rush for the hospital. Finally, when the baby arrives, there is indeterminable pain; but this is always eclipsed by the joys of childbirth and rearing.

Reesham Shahab Tirtho does a spectacular job of capturing these early stages of postpartum life in his illustrated children's book, *Babuibela* (Mayurpankhi, 2020). Since the birth of his daughter, Tirtho has been documenting his journey through parenthood in charming little illustrations that showcase himself, his daughter, and his wife in their daily life. The artist began by simply sharing the anecdotes on his Facebook page. Friends and followers, meanwhile, encouraged him to combine the works and publish them. *Babuibela*, thus, came into existence. There are currently two books in this series—the second, *Babuibela Ditiyo Porbo* (Mayurpankhi, 2021), just having been published. The books portray Tirtho's daughter's first and second years of life, respectively. The author's late father, who is also the dedicatee of *Babuibela Ditiyo Porbo*, gave the series its adorable name.

Despite being a children's book, *Babuibela* is very relatable for parents, given its honest accounts of child-rearing. The illustrations are accompanied by simple, one- or two-word descriptions, some of them adorably invented words meant to mimic baby-talk. For instance, an illustration where the child is enjoying a bath is labeled "hapush hapush"; in another, where the author's daughter is happily swinging from his beard, it says "jhulondebi"; and in another, where the child is nestled in her father's chest, it reads, "ghumghumi." For Bangla-speaking parents like myself, these words and illustrations seemed packed with nostalgic reminders of the challenging yet infinitely rewarding days now in our past.

In *Babuibela Ditiyo Porbo*, the author adds

another strata of relatability, and that is: life with a toddler amidst a pandemic. The images in this book are relatable to both children and adults alike. They show scenarios of parents working from home, celebrating a birthday during lockdown, and more. One particular illustration stands out—father and daughter staring longingly out the window with a poignant label that reads, "Amar jana-la diye ektu khani aakash dekha jai."

Both books are illustrated in black and white, which make for excellent colouring books, too. I read the books with my four-year-old son, who instantly became fixated on the artwork. Children do not remember the early stages of newborn life, so my son was particularly enthralled by the illustrations depicting the diaper changes, the breastfeeding, the late nights, the throw-ups, and all the other messy business that make up babyhood. One of the things I really



PHOTO: NIHA HASAN

appreciated about the *Babuibela* series is how the books steer clear of stereotypical gender roles and showcase a man—a father—who is present and is happily shouldering the responsibility of raising his child. The author portrays himself in nurturing roles such as bathing his daughter, changing her diapers, cuddling with her, washing dishes, and working on a laptop with her perched on his shoulder. Such men exist amongst us, but for reasons unbeknownst to me, nurturing roles are not usually allocated to them in traditional children's books. I applaud Reesham Shahab Tirtho for breaking the cycle.

Sameirah Nasrin Ahsan is a mechanical engineer in Dhaka. She aspires to be an author someday. For now, she is content with reading and sharing the stories that make her think beyond herself. Instagram: @booksnher.