

FEMALE WARRIORS

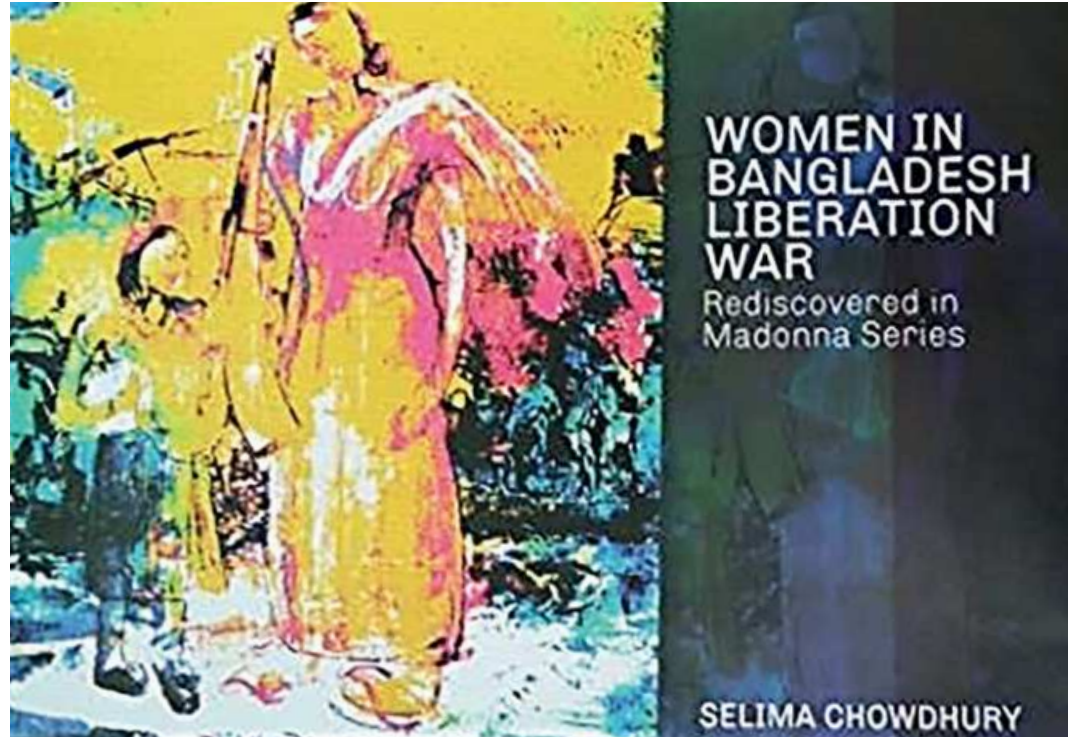
Women in Bangladesh Liberation War: Rediscovered in the Madonna Series.
Selima Chowdhury. ISBN: 978-9843436252. Bangladesh National Museum, 2018

REVIEWED BY KAISER HAQ

I had decided to write a brief review of Selima Chowdhury's book when it was first published, but what with one thing or another making me put it off, a couple of years rolled by, and we found ourselves caught up in a pandemic with no end in sight. Perhaps it's just as well, for I can now review it alongside a recently published Bangla translation by Ashfaq Khan. The appearance of these two books is cause for celebration, for it is rare for a critical work in one language to be translated into the other. In fact, sadly, it is only rarely that we come across critical studies of our art. One hopes Selima's endeavor will inspire others to take up the pen.

The mainspring of her imagination is her experience of being with her protective mother during the terrible days of the independence war. Her mother figures, on the one hand, are related to the Madonna of European art, and non the other, she is a woman warrior who will fight for her child, who is a Christ-like figure. Rokeya depicts women as vibrant personalities playing the crucial roles of helper and care giver to fighters.

Chowdhury's study is sharply focused on a particular body of paintings by a well-known woman artist of the country, but she does a good job of contextualizing it by sketching in the historical background, the author's biography, the Bangladeshi art world, and in particular the portrayal of the independence war of 1971 in paintings, graphic art and sculpture. Comparative comments serve to enhance our understanding of Rokeya's achievement, and also add to our knowledge of Bangladeshi art in general.



The key to Selima's critical approach is Feminism, which through its varied ramifications has made us more sensitive to the uncritically held assumptions that often skew our view of life and art. Characterizing the country as feminine (it is after all the motherland) leads to an identification of womanhood and nationhood; and, following male stereotyping, womanhood is characterized as weak, vulnerable, and in need of protection, which of course is the responsibility of men. From this follows the plethora of images of youths bearing arms to liberate the motherland from the

diabolical occupation forces that sexually assault women. This stereotypical pattern, as a student of mine recently explained in a Masters dissertation (Nasreen Tamanna, *The Depiction of Women in the Bangladesh Liberation War: A Comparative Study of War Based Films and Novels*, ULAB), is pervasive in our cinema as well. Portraying women as victims only renders them passive, deprives them of agency, and perniciously perpetuates patriarchal values.

Selima "deconstructs" (in a broad sense, not a strictly Derridean sense) these stereotypes

by pointing out the insensitive and inhumane attitude to the victims, the "Birangona," by their self-proclaimed protectors, and the "feminization" of the latter when they themselves are the victims of the enemy. She goes on to highlight the pictorial strategies whereby Rokeya avoids falling into these stereotypical modes. Rokeya is inspired by the ideal of empowering women, and depicts them as active agents. The mainspring of her imagination is her experience of being with her protective mother during the terrible days of the independence war. Her mother figures, on the one hand, are related to the Madonna of European art, and non the other, she is a woman warrior who will fight for her child, who is a Christ-like figure. Rokeya depicts women as vibrant personalities playing the crucial roles of helper and care giver to fighters.

Selima concludes: "Rokeya has empowered the women and has attempted to challenge the patriarchal society of Bangladesh by depicting the sufferings and contributions of women during *Muktijuddho* in the light of feminism." If one has to point out something significant that one misses in Selima's analysis, it is an examination of the technical aspects of painting and graphics. That is to say, the analysis is primarily thematic. An account of the technical dimension would have given us a more rounded view of the subject, for art is not made of ideas but emerges from a sensitive handling of the chosen medium; it is the finesse of the technique that evokes ideas. But Selima has made a good beginning, and one hopes she will attempt a study on a larger scale in future.

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Story of Bengal and Bengalis: The Bengali Homeland and its Inhabitants

Subir. ISBN 9788125050537. Notion, 2020

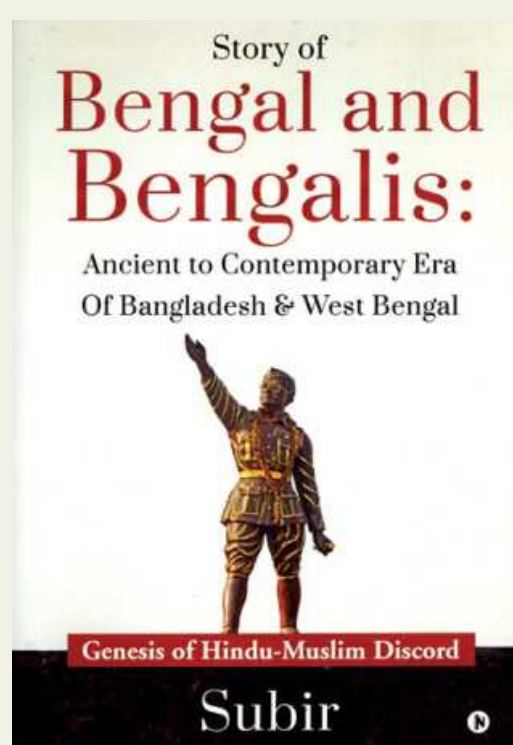
REVIEWED BY SYED MARGHUB MURSHED

With the onset of the new millennium in the 21st century, there seems to be a revival of interest in the space, in the eastern part of South Asia, historically known as Bengal, and the people who inhabit this space, the Bengalis. These Bengalis are people who derive their identity from the language they speak, and who retain this identity in spite of the political division of their homeland. More than a decade ago Ghulam Murshid's monumental *One Thousand Years of Bengali Culture* was published and so was Nitish Sengupta's seminal work, *Bengal Divided* that analyses the political vicissitudes of the people of Bengal from ancient times till it was partitioned. Other writers have now come forward to survey the landmark events that have had a significant bearing on the history of the land once called Bengal, and attempt to comprehend the subtle nuances peculiar to traditional culture of the Bengali people, as well as probe the complexity of the Bengali ethos. Among such works, Subir Deb's *Story of Bengal and Bengalis* is commendable.

Subir Deb, the author of *Story of Bengal and the Bengalis*, fashions himself simply as Subir in this aforementioned book published by the Notion Press. He was inspired to write this book after participating in discussions that take place in informal addas.

Subir begins his story of Bengal and Bengalis by discussing what he calls a bias against Bengalis. In his experience, as in that of many others, people who are classified as Bengalis, are very often at the receiving end of prejudice and discriminatory acts by people who are insensitive regarding their cultural susceptibilities. Subir's observations on the major milestones of the history of Bengal begin from the Vedic and Puranic periods, of the classic antiquity of South Asia and the advent of Buddhism and Jainism. He divides the history of Bengal into what he calls the Hindu period describing Bengal during ancient times, the Muslim period, which covers the history of medieval Bengal, and the Christian period in which he describes life in Bengal under British rule. This is followed by the secular period, describing events in Bengal after August 1947.

He describes the policies of the imperialist British rulers of India, who partitioned Bengal in 1905 without consulting its people and how the unity of Bengal was restored as a result of a protracted political movement, in 1911. Subir writes about the efforts of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, to bring together the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal via affirmative action favoring Bengal's backward Muslim community. This was thwarted by the central leadership of the Indian national Congress (INC). His views on Gandhi's autocratic dominance of the INC and how his policies adversely impacted the



political fate of Bengal are presented from a Bengali perspective. Subir mentions how Gandhi prevented Subhas Bose from forming a Hindu-Muslim unity government in Bengal through a coalition ministry in which the Congress and Fazlul Haque's 'Krishok Proja Party' would, under the leadership of the latter, be partners. Subhas's virtual expulsion from the mainstream of the politics of the INC by Gandhi loyalists like Patel and Prasad (and even Nehru) are discussed by Subir in detail. Subhas however remained, even after being marginalized in the INC, the idol of both the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal, which he became as a result of his role in the demolition of the Holwell Monument in Calcutta (Kolkata). This monument, which was an arrogant symbol of British paramountcy in India, was considered by all Bengalis as an affront.

Subir describes how both Gandhi and Nehru criticized the formation of a provisional government of India and the raising of the Indian National Army (Azad Hind Fauj) by Subhas Bose. Subir quotes the British historian, Michael Edwardes, "it was not Gandhi's movement by fits and starts that led to the independence of India" and that India became free because a bankrupt Britain was pressured by its principle creditor, the United States of America, to grant India independence, in conformity with the principles of the Anglo American Atlantic Charter. In addition, according to Edwardes, Subhas Bose's raising of the Indian

national Army (INA) had shaken the confidence of India's British rulers about the reliability of the Indian army, manned mostly by hitherto loyal (pseudo) martial races, to safeguard British interests during any future political confrontation with the people of India." Though Subir does not mention it in his book, a similar comment on Subhas and the Indian National Army (INA) is attributed to Clement Atlee who was the British Prime Minister in 1947.

We are informed by Subir that Nehru admitted that his acquiescence to the partition of India was because he was exhausted and was keen to be in power. Patel in fact, welcomed the partition of India which he felt would eliminate the political nuisance value of Muslim leaders like Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Muslim community in independent India. Between the lines, Subir seems to hint that had Subhas been around in India in 1947, he would have opposed the partition of the country more vigorously than those who pushed him to the periphery of the Indian national Congress. As for the future of Bengal, both Gandhi and Jinnah were in favour of a United Independent Bengal, in 1947, that was proposed by Sarat Bose (the older brother of Subhas) in conjunction with H.S. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashem. Gandhi later withdrew his support for the proposal of an independent Bengal. The final decision about the fate of Bengal after the exit of the British from the subcontinent was taken at a meeting held in Delhi a few weeks before India was granted independence. Mountbatten presided over this meeting that was attended by Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and Baldev Singh on one side and Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan and Abdur Rab Nisrar on the other. Bengal was, irrevocably, partitioned on the basis of a decision taken at a meeting, in which no Bengali took part.

From what he calls the Christian period in Bengal, Subir moves on to the post-independence period in India which he calls the Secular Period. He writes extensively about the East Bengal refugees in India, displaced by the social destabilization and violence that occurred in the wake of the partition of the subcontinent and the advent of independence. According to Subir, the Indian Independence Act did not confer independence to India. He says India became independent after it was proclaimed to be a republic on the basis of its constitution. Subir notes the hostility that Bengalis in general and East Bengal refugees in particular encountered in Assam. He traces the origin of the anti-Bengali feelings in Assam to the time when the British ruled. The anti-Bengali sentiment in Assam was deliberately fomented by the British who introduced the infamous "Line System," a kind of apartheid

to segregate Bengali settlers in Assam from its indigenous people. The difficulties encountered by the East Bengal refugees in independent India are a recurrent theme in Subir's book. His book in fact begins with a tribute to those who had to leave their homes as a result of the process through which India's freedom arrived. Bangladesh's liberation struggle and the initial years of its existence as a sovereign state are also discussed in the section of Subir's book that he calls the Secular Period.

In the chapter on "Hindu Muslim Discord" Subir attempts to analyze, the roots of Hindu-Muslim antagonism. He is firmly of the opinion that the British rulers of India exacerbated Hindu-Muslim tension through their presentation of the history of India prior to the period of British ascendancy in the subcontinent. The events of the period preceding British rule in India were shown by imperialist historians like Vincent Smith and Valentine Chiron to be a chronicle of continuous conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. Subir praises the work of Sundar Lal, the Gandhian historian and Shashi Tharoor for their revision of the version of history that was imposed on the Indians during the pre-independence period, and presenting readers an authentic alternative view of history seen from a South Asian perspective.

In the final chapter entitled, "Little Nationalism," Subir talks of a sub-nationalism among India's Bengalis which he considers to be something healthy and positive. The author of *The Story of Bengal and Bengalis* is a person with a keen intellect, but without intellectual pretensions. He writes in a style that is relaxed and informal, almost conversational. Readers are encouraged to go through Subir's *Story of Bengal and the Bengalis* attentively as it is a veritable treasure trove of information. Through this review I wish to request the author to bring to the notice of the publishers of his book, Notion Press, the need to include an index of the books contents, at the end of the book, when its next edition is printed.

My most important takeaway from the *Story of Bengal and Bengalis* is a message that Bengalis on both sides of the political divide have to be conscious of their common identity. The Bengali homeland may be irreversibly partitioned, but the border separating the two Bengalis can someday become an invisible border like the border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, in accordance with the provisions of the 'Good Friday Agreement.' Such a border would significantly expand cultural, economic and social interaction among Bengalis from both Bengalis and enrich their lives.

Syed Marghub Murshed is a retired civil servant.