

ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Patriarchy is a labyrinth that defies time

SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

I am convinced that while writing her book, *The Begum and the Dastan* (Westland Publications, 2021), Tarana Husain Khan's aim was to leave her readers in a literary stupor, dizzy and yearning for more. A nested tale of love, inheritance, social conflicts, and survival, the novel boasts both real and fantastical themes. The book oscillates between three narratives: the story of the spirited Feroza Begum set in 19th century British India; the story of present-day Ameera, Feroza's great-granddaughter; and that of Mirza Kallan, a *dastango* (storyteller) who sips opium at the bazaar *chouk* and weaves tales so magical that the ambits of fantasy and reality become blurred to him and readers alike.

Wilful and fierce of spirit, Feroza Begum is the beautiful daughter of a wealthy Rohilla Pathan in the princely state of Sherpur during the British Raj. Her keen, inquisitive mind—admired by her husband and siblings but disapproved in a society so patriarchal—becomes the reason for her downfall. Happily married and loved by her family, young Feroza defies her father's wishes to visit the celebrations taking place at the Nawab of Sherpur's palace. At the event, Nawab Shams Ali Khan is enamoured by Feroza's fire and beauty and wants her for himself, as another gem in his glittering harem full of women. The Nawab confines her within walls against

her will, forced to divorce her husband and abandoned by her family. Feroza prays for deliverance but she does what she has to for survival—she marries the Nawab and is swept away in the confusing whirlpool of emotions, the grandeur and squalor that make up the life of a reluctant queen.

In the present day, Ameera, the great-granddaughter of Feroza Begum, listens with rapt attention to her Dadi recounting Feroza's life story as a cautionary tale about female recklessness. Amidst these overlapping narratives, Mirza Kallan charms his audience with the story of a tyrant sorcerer in his magical city where women are tied with chains and tacit rules.

The lives of Feroza and the other women in the Nawab's harem are a stark contrast to his deprived, lavish life. The wives lead a life of puritanical obedience while the Nawab exercises despotism by punishing people who dare to defy him, usurping property of dissenters and capturing women he desires with or without their consent. As Feroza navigates this maze of 19th century court life thrust upon her, and as Ameera absorbs Dadi's account of Feroza's story, both women, despite the century of time between them, realise with grim clarity the cruel, unspoken rules that govern the lives of women regardless of age.

Both women cautiously tread a fine line between propriety and what society has labeled as female vulgarity. Dreams, aspirations and goals become secondary to gendered expectations. Misinterpreted religious texts and archaic tradition govern their lives.

Tarana Husain Khan is a master of imagery; her writing is imbued with elaborate descriptions of resplendent soirees, gloomy dungeons, and busy bazaars, that sweep you into the glamour and delusion of court life. Just as quickly, she will steer you through time and bring you face-to-face with the subversion of women's empowerment in present times.

The pilgrimages of survival across the pages of *The Begum and the Dastan* have not yet come to an end. Written in invisible ink, Feroza's story continues on in contemporary women as we try to navigate the toiling maze of age-old patriarchy. Turning the last page of this book does not constitute its ending; it is but a pause. A pause to breathe, to reflect, and to perhaps rethink our choices as individuals and a society.

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

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A much-needed Bangla text on the history of Sufism

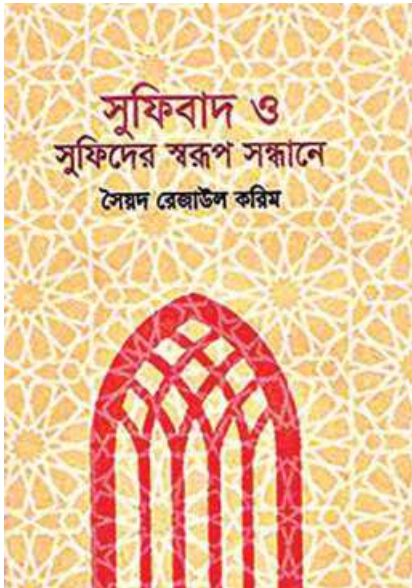
NASIM FIRDAUS

Sufibad O Sufider Shorup Shondhaney ('In search of the nature of Sufism and Sufis'), written by Syed Rezaul Karim and published in 2020 by Bangla Academy, is a welcome addition to the meager collection of books written in Bangla on Sufism. It is well known that Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country because of Sufi influences in its early history, yet books in Bangla on this subject are hard to find. Syed Rezaul Karim's is a product of research not by practitioners of Sufism or Islamic clerics but by a writer who has devoted two decades of his life studying and seeking to understand the concept and connotations of Sufism and the contours of the Sufi path of illumination.

In order to understand Sufism better, the author visited some of the places where celebrated Sufis were born, where they lived and walked the 'Sufi path of consecration'. In his search he travelled to Bistam, deep in Iran, where one of the early Sufi dervishes, Hazrat Abu Yazid al-Bistami (804-875 AD), was born and lies buried. Karim also visited the cradle of the Khorasani school of Sufism from the 10th to the 13th century in Nishapur, Iran. His quest to see and "feel" the Sufi path took him to Konya in Turkey where the great Sufi poet, Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi, lived and practiced Sufism.

Karim draws up a kaleidoscopic picture of Sufism based on his research, such as the study of some of the earliest books written by Sufis themselves, including the 10th century's *Tasarruuf* by Kalabadi, and the 11th century's *Risala* by Abu'l Qasim Abd al-Karim bin Hawazin al-Qushayri and *Kashf al-mahjub* by Ali Ibn Uthman al-Hujwiri. Rumi's *Mathnawi* and *Divan* and Fariduddin Attar's *Conference of Birds* are frequently quoted to explain and enlighten the different dimensions of Sufism. The picture that emerges has some reflective characteristics. Sufism emanates from Islam and its esoteric knowledge. A Sufi is endowed with great moral character, a pure heart, and a life clad and concealed in material and spiritual poverty. The outward patched garment of a Sufi is symbolic: they walk on the twin path of self annihilation and of abandoning the material world. The goal is to attain *Marifa*—knowledge of God. A Sufi's constant companion is *Zikr*, which is "remembrance of God for

the love of God". The book under review is divided into 16 chapters including such titles as "Sufism—a pen picture", "Identity of a Sufi", "Pillars of spiritual transformation", "*Marifa*", etc. There is a chapter on *Sharia, Tariqa, and Haqiqa* delineating the relationship between the three systems of the religious path. It also narrates the historical development of Sufism from the early period of Islam and its spread and influence in Bengal. One of the fascinating Sufi characters that is dealt with in the book is the enigmatic and spirited Mansur al-Hallaj (born 858 AD), whose ecstatic and wild utterances led to his death on gallows on charges of blasphemy by conservative rulers. Yet another chapter comments

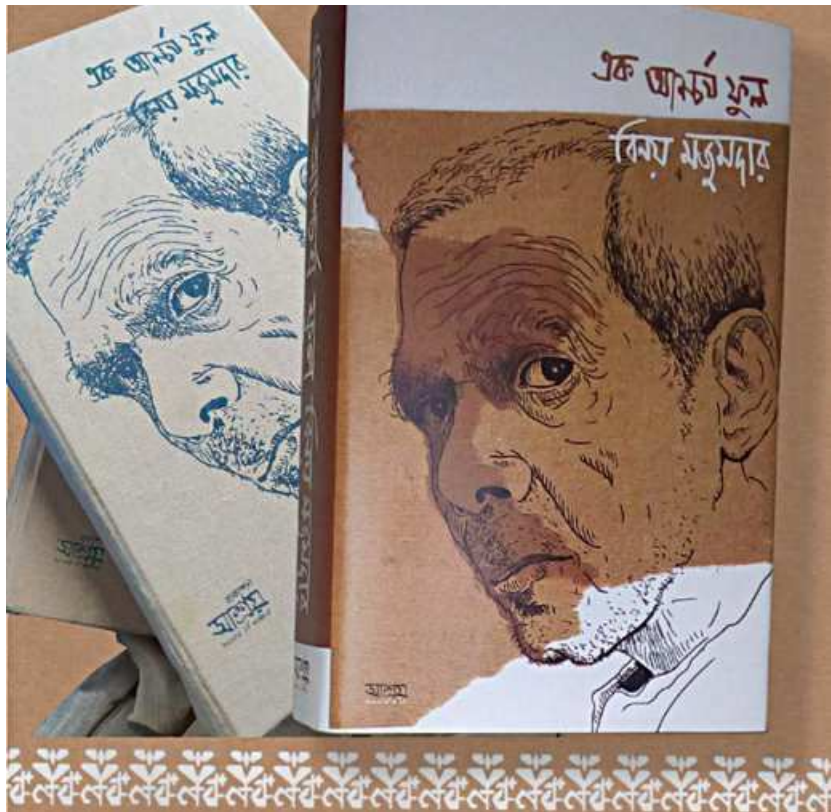


on Sufi music exemplified in Mowlana Rumi's *Sema*, the whirling dance; another chapter looks into the role of women in Sufism.

The profuse use of poetry by Rumi, Attar, and other Sufi poets has made the reading of the book a pleasure. Anyone interested in Sufism and on Sufi masters will find it a rewarding experience.

The book is available at Bangla Academy Library.

Nasim Firdaus is Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Retd) and President of Bangladesh Alliance for Women Leadership.



COVER DESIGN: RAZIB DATTA

WHAT TO READ

'Ek Ashchorjo Phul Binoy Majumdar' is a rare treat for fans of the poet

LAVLU HIRA

Jointly edited by Ahasan Hydar and Snigdhadip Chakraborty, *Ek Ashchorjo Phul Binoy Majumdar* (Ashroy Prokashon, 2021) is a valuable book on the life and work of Bengali poet Binoy Majumdar, who was born on September 17, 1934.

The book is composed of analyses by eminent and emerging poets as well as essayists from both sides of the Bengal border. In the book, friends and colleagues of Majumdar reminisce about the walks they took along College Street together, the lively discussions at coffee houses, and intimate talks at Binodini Kuthi at Shimulpur. The 824-page volume contains discussions on Majumdar's poetry, screenplays, and paintings from the likes of Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak, Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmud, Ahmed Sofa, and Ritwik Ghatak, among others. *Ek Ashchorjo Phul* also comes with a collection of published and unpublished stories, poems, and drawings by the revered Hungry Generation poet himself. At the beginning of every chapter are portraits of Majumdar drawn by different artists.

Editor Ahasan Hydar notes, "This book is the result of a five years-long effort. Readers can learn about the world of Binoy's poetry in a novel way through this book. Binoy was also a great mathematician. His thoughts on society [and] poetry, and the choice of diction in his poems, can charm everybody".

Lavlu Hira is a contributor.

FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

'The Green Knight' adapts the tenets of chivalric romance

MAISHA SYEDA

The mystical riddle that was the film, *The Green Knight* (2021), was initially just that for me: a riddle. It was one of those films where I felt like my experience of watching it would be more rewarding if I had some idea of the actual story it was based on. As I read through *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—an alliterative poem, written circa the 14th century, in a Middle English dialect by an anonymous poet—I realised it was the kind of endeavour that neither my very short attention span nor my patience was ready for; yet I already felt challenged. Being a folklore junkie and not coming across an epic about King Arthur's nephew and heir apparent? Nope, couldn't let that blot my escutcheon.

The poem starts with Britain's bloody and make-believe history. The poet then proceeds to tell of a tale he had heard about King Arthur and Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew and the youngest of the Knights of the Round Table.



PHOTO: A24

During one Christmas celebration at the court, King Arthur demands to hear a marvellous story before he can feast. As if on cue, a giant knight rides into his court in emerald green attire. Not only his clothes, even his skin and his horse are green. This being lays down a challenge for whoever is brave and quick: he declares that a man from the court should strike him with his own axe, which he shall endure without fighting back. The catch, however, is that in a year and a day, he will strike the same blow to the contender in return.

Acclaimed director David Lowery's film opens with Gawain (played by Dev Patel) romancing Essel (Alicia Vikander), a commoner, in a brothel; only he isn't a knight—yet. The muted tones in this first scene, the heavy stone architecture, and the pale makeup of the characters along with velveteen, ornate costumes of greens and browns capture the rotting ambience

of the medieval era. In Dev Patel's flawless rendition, Gawain becomes a gullible and befuddled youth, his naivety and youthful impulses offering a solid ground for the plot to rest upon. However, commoners and people of the court glorify this rather unseasoned knight-in-making because he is nephew to King Arthur.

A point of contention with the source material here is that in the poem, Sir Gawain is aware of his inferiority and incompetence compared to the other knights. He is also said to be shy, cowardly, and morally rigid; the entire point of the quest he embarks upon is to test his courage and virtue. In

like *Beowulf* and *Odyssey*. This subversion is extended further in the way in which Gawain tries to survive the challenges in his journey. But while it succeeds in fleshing out the juvenility in Gawain's character, it causes the screenplay to lose context in some instances, particularly in its handling of the character of Gawain's "witch" mother, Morgana Fay (played by Sarita Choudhury).

Ultimately, I appreciated that the scope of interpretation was subjective and I greatly enjoyed the subtleties of these implications. The pacing, however, (irrespective of the intervening research), was frustratingly slow

for me. The ending was perhaps the saving grace—the grandeur of the visuals, the big plot twist, the brief peak into the Green Knight's beautiful green cathedral, his sudden cheekiness—they all had the potential to create an immensely gripping film, but the expositional details, as subtle and exciting as they were, were unevenly bunched up in the last 30 minutes or so.

I had almost forgotten my staunch loyalty for keeping to the source material by then. I wish the entire film had been just as gripping.

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and a graduate of English Literature and Writing.