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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Is Bhashan Char really the answer to the Rohingya crisis?

SHAHAB ENAM KHAN

Bhashan Char has lately become a topic of critical debate in the refugee relocation discourse. It is a reality that comes with a harsh reminder of demographic changes within the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and the limits of a highly populated state in supporting an incredibly high number of foreign nationals living in its territory. After the textbook case of ethnic cleansing and genocide committed by the Burmese authorities in August 2017, as documented in the UN proceedings and noted by the International Court of Justice, more than 723,000 Rohingyas fled the province of Rakhine in Myanmar and took refuge in Bangladesh. Bangladesh was already hosting between 300,000 to 500,000 Rohingyas by then.

Bangladesh now hosts Kutupalong refugee camp, the largest refugee camp in the world, set up in 1991 for a meagre refugee settlement. This camp, along with some others in Cox's Bazar, is built on steep hillsides and prone to flooding and landslides during monsoons. Even though international agencies and the government have improved the situation in recent years, in July 2021, as per UNHCR, more than six refugees were killed, 12,000 refugees were affected, and an estimated 2,500 shelters were damaged or destroyed due to landslides and flash floods.

Another critical problem that remains for the government of Bangladesh and the international community is the population expansion in the camps. While the country is hosting 860,175 Rohingyas from 187,530 families, each with an average of 4.6 family members, most of whom live in a single room per family, one should note that camps present a staggeringly high population density of 40,000 people per square kilometre. This puts the entire community at risk, both in terms of public health and security; the latter due to the drug, human, and arms

smuggling in Teknaf and Ukhiya Upazilas and intra-camp violence between refugee groups. Hence, providing temporary alternative shelters for the refugees often becomes a necessity for the host governments.

Amid these complex debates, Al Masum Molla, a young and versatile journalist, embarked on an ambitious project to document the life and livelihoods of the Rohingyas in newly built refugee facilities in Bhashan Char. His book, *Bhashan Char: Bastion in the Bay* (Agamee Prokashoni, 2021) is impressive and the first of its kind, available in both Bangla and English editions. Based on interviews and research conducted over several years' worth of visits to Bhashan Char and supplemented by an intelligent observation, the book offers balanced views between the realities and perceptions, facts and myths, and gaps and needs.

Molla identifies that the government, as a temporary solution to the expanding population problem, built a USD 350 million facility on Bhashan Char island, which has fresh water supply, uninterrupted power supply, agricultural facilities, cyclone shelters, health facilities, civic and teaching facilities, and a police station. In addition, Bangladesh's coastal disaster management capacities are well regarded, making the government confident that refugees will be safe and secure like any other Bangladeshi coastal community.

While the government's concerns and responses are clearly valid and transparent, the criticism primarily lies in whether Rohingyas are willing to go there, leaving their near and dear ones in Cox's Bazar. Many have raised concerns regarding Bhashan Char's emergency and logistical response preparations for refugees, humanitarian workers, Bangladeshi officials, and security personnel. Some would

argue that relocations from mainland camps should be fully informed and voluntary, and the authorities should allow any refugee who wants to return to Cox's Bazar to do so on humanitarian grounds. In addition, sea-level rise, sustainability of fresh water supply and environment, and the psycho-social effect of "isolation" as a cause of "unrest" and crime source are being debated.

I was particularly intrigued by Molla's geomorphological argument favouring Bhashan Char in the Meghna Estuary on the Bay of Bengal. He discusses that Bhashan Char can be a global model of protection from natural disasters, but the test lies in whether they will be as resilient as the coastal people. He aptly reminds us of the age of information and globalization, in which stifling information can lead to confusion and become a source of malicious rumours. The victim will be the Bhashan Char initiative itself. Molla nevertheless shows a sense of optimism that Bhashan Char can become an economic model if it can be linked with Bangladesh's blue economy and agricultural and entrepreneurial policies. Time will tell.

I think the book has critically addressed the problems that the Rohingyas and the international community raised, and Molla attempts to offer solutions to the issues that plague Bhashan Char or the complexity of the refugee crisis in Bangladesh. To his credit, the book succeeds in humanizing the rather dire situation. In his own words, "It is a strange love-hate relationship that the Bay has with Bangladesh. Yet, Bhashan Char, amid all that, has risen from the sea like a beacon of hope."

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BOOKS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Gilgamesh through the sands of time

In this new series of articles, we discuss books that changed the course of history.

JAHANARA TARIQ

Unlike the blind, brilliant bard who is thought to have conceived *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or Ved Vyas who put the tale of *Mahabharata* on paper with the help of a potbellied deity, and unlike, also, Virgil's oscillating between a tortured artist and corporate parrot in *The Aeneid*, there are no fabled traces of the artist behind *Gilgamesh*. Yet the text itself stands tall as a myth and seems to almost shed the need for a solitary author. Michael Schmidt, author of *Gilgamesh: The Life of a Poem* (Princeton University Press, 2019), has said in an interview that, "Gilgamesh is made by a river, by fire, by generations of scribes, by shepherds, ruin-robbers, archaeologists, and scholars. In all the debris there are

east. The epic has resurfaced through time in various ways, sometimes quite literally and at others through known tropes and similar narrative plot lines. The fragmented tablets of this ancient poesy are still frozen in fluidity, perhaps still seeking its next puzzle piece.

In the final sections of the tale, Gilgamesh is desolate in the grief of his friend's death, and nowhere near to defeating mortality. After returning to Uruk, however, the sight of the colossal walls of his city incites him to stand in awe at this enduring work of mortal men. And suddenly the readers are back to where they started, too, admiring the prosaic excellence of the city walls. The implication is obvious—that mortals



COLLAGE: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRVAR

literally no vestiges of an identifiable poet to be found."

The epic antedates even the depiction of the famous Trojan war; it is, in effect, the oldest epic found till date. Originating as a series of five Sumerian poems about the adventures of the mythological hero Gilgamesh, the "Epic of Gilgamesh" was sewn together into a 12-tablet Akkadian language epic—decades, or even centuries, later. Most of the poems were written down in the first centuries of the second millennium BC. The most complete edition comes from the 7th century library of Assurbanipal, antiquary and last king of the Assyrian Empire. The debris of the poem was first discovered in the mid-1800s by two Englishmen when archaeologists began uncovering the buried cities of the Middle-East. Since then, scholars and archaeologists have laboured to put the shards together into a unified whole. The main body of the Assyrian epic has not been altered in essentials since the mammoth publications of the text, accompanied with commentary by Campbell Thompson, around 1930.

Its story tells of how Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk (present day Iraq), battles with and later befriends a giant by the name of Enkidu. They then feud with the gods, causing Enkidu to lose his life, and Gilgamesh to embark upon a quest to conquer death.

With time, was buried the Assurbanipal library completely. Historians assume that the Babylonian gods and their universes went underground only to reappear in later Mediterranean religions and that the heroes transformed and survived by travelling westwards as well as to the

can achieve immortality only through dazzling creations and art which will stand tall through the passage of time, unlike fragile, perishable physical bodies; that is the knowledge that Gilgamesh discovers in his conquest over death.

A few weeks ago, news headlines announced that a 3,500-year-old "Dream Tablet" recounting the epic of Gilgamesh was returned to Iraq after it was stolen three decades ago and illegally imported to the United States. One can't help but juxtapose this story of loot and of the tablet returning home to Gilgamesh's own journey against the ticking clock. The clay tablets, like the wounded hero himself, have come back full circle, weathering through terrible wars during the US invasions and attempted erasure by Islamic militants. They have survived the test of time, existing in fragmented echoes of engraved cuneiform, clay tablets; existing, despite the changing topography of the world and despite being dispersed in a wide strip from Turkey to Iraq; existing, despite being written, composed and recomposed, reformed and transformed over a period of more than a thousand years. The tale of it spreading and resurfacing and moving from one time zone to another, from one space to another, is strangely synonymous to the ethos of the epic itself.

To find out more about the story of *Gilgamesh*, read an extended version of this article on *The Daily Star* website, or on *Daily Star Books'* Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The afterlife of colonialism, unveiled

Reading into the most recent novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, this year's Nobel laureate in literature, announced on October 7, 2021

ISRAR HASAN

Abdulrazak Gurnah, this year's Nobel laureate in literature, seems to come as an admirable choice compared to the Nobel Prize's controversial recent history. The Nobel committee has, at times, stepped over viable candidates who in their words were "too predictable, too popular", or at others have selected candidates who were allegedly genocide deniers or apologists, such as the Norwegian master, Knut Hamsun, and the controversial 2019 laureate from Austria, Peter Handke. The prize has been credited for bringing literary lights out of relative obscurity and propelling them to superstardom, while at the same time overlooking some of history's literary heavyweights, such as Tolstoy and Proust. It has also selected only 16 women out of the 118 winners of the award since 1901, and is often critiqued for featuring white, Western authors too often.

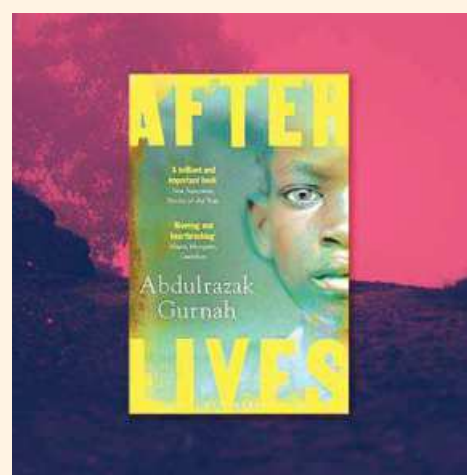
Gurnah, a Zanzibar-born Tanzanian writer living in the United Kingdom, has been chosen for his "uncompromising and

compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents." In many ways, Gurnah's own story paves the way for his novels, as the author escaped the Zanzibar Revolution in the 1960s when the ruling Arab classes were being hunted down by Black African revolutionaries.

Afterlives (Bloomsbury, 2020), his most recent novel, showcases a darker and humane side of the complex relationship between the realms of the oppressor, the oppressed, and the by-standers. It takes us to the region of Tanzania, East Africa comprising Uganda, and Kenya that is expanding under German colonial forces and wrestling with other colonial powers such Britain, in the early 20th century.

Gurnah presents a host of diverse characters, such as Khalifa, a merchant-clerk of Gujrati-African heritage; Khalifa's wife, Asha; Hamza and Ilyas, voluntary soldiers in the German Colonial Army (*Schutztruppe*); and Ilyas's orphaned sister, Afiya.

Together, they paint a devastating canvas of terror, warfare, bloodshed, and



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

exploitation, which occurs in the name of bringing civilisation to Africa. All of this is personified in the rather ambiguous conduct of one despondent German officer sent to the region to lead the military forces. He treats his African soldier, Hamza, with a conflicting mix of contempt and affection—deriding him

for his "savage" backwardness while having hopes of him learning the ways of Europe. It is only after learning German and reading the philosophy of CF Von Schiller that Hamza earns the approval of his superior, but his relationship with the German Colonial Army remains a major site of contestation for which he struggles to reaffirm his sense of worth and identity.

It is Hamza's complexity of character which makes the novel a mediator between the colonial and post-colonial experience, evoking the themes of love, estrangement, uprooting, and reconciliation. And through Hamza's interaction with the Khalifas, and with Afiya, the woman of his dreams, we see the impact of war on African soldiers who were either coerced or compelled into fighting for the colonists.

Written in a third person narrative, Gurnah's prose is just as piercing as his observation is deep and jarring. He humanizes the colonists and the subjects rather than impose constrained binaries. As in his previous books, he brings to life the experiences of Muslims residing near

the Indian Ocean amidst its multicultural setting—the sounds, the tastes, and the smells of their daily lives in East Africa come through in vivid amalgamation. And he creates a sense of intimacy using a smattering of Swahili and Arabic phrases to mesh the worlds of natives, migrants, and colonists into a world of fluid literary imagination.

In *By the Sea* (2011), Gurnah's previous novel, we see Zanzibari refugees fleeing to England; one of the characters refuses to speak in the language of the colonists as a sign of resistance. In each of Gurnah's novels, we find this sense of radical self-imagination and self-invention of the coloniser-oppressor and colonised-victim dynamic in nuanced portrayals, with exquisite attention to detail. Gurnah breathes into his writing a fiery incense in an effort to understand the "afterlives" of the colonial period, whose past can be felt by the needs of today's world. In many ways, we too are the afterlives of colonialism.

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