

IN MEMORY OF HASAN AZIZUL HAQUE

Two tales of violence from the hands of a master

MURSALIN MOSADDEQUE

Hasan Azizul Haque, who passed away on November 15, 2021, began his career with the publication of the short story “Shokun” in 1960, and since its publication till today, it has shocked and stupefied most readers who have found their way to this unique and masterfully crafted story—reading it is not an experience one forgets easily, or ever.

The story is about a group of boys and the titular *shokun*, a vulture. It aims to shatter our anthropomorphic notions of a vulture as a mere foul smelling creature which feasts on corpses, and the common belief of the innocence of humanity in adolescent boys untainted by the phlegm of adulthood. Boys that young can be mischievous but what takes place in the confines of Haque’s story makes you question the very fabric of humanity and its supposed pretensions of justice and righteousness.

An injured vulture finds itself as an object of vile curiosity by a group of boys who chase the poor creature, drag it when it is incapable of flying or running, pluck its feathers from its still living body.

This appalling spectre of violence shakes



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

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us, but these boys have no clue why they are doing it, they have nothing on their minds about what they want to do to this creature; only an untamable impulse of hatred and a compulsion to inflict hurt overwhelms them. They are filled with disgust at the foul-smelling, dirty-feathered bird and are unable to see that after a long evening of chasing the bird, they don’t look or smell any better themselves. Angry at the bird that feasts on the dead to survive, they inflict pain on the alive whose beating heart they are almost near to feel and

hear. They are unwilling to forgive that the vulture devours newborns who are thrown to the gutter, without registering that it is humans like them who throw their own children away. Picturing the image of who they would inevitably become in their adulthood is what terrifies us, as readers.

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In 1966, Hasan Azizul Haque published his unforgettable story, *Atmoja o Ekti Korobi Gaach* (Shahitya Prakash), which narrates another instance of unspeakable violence. A family displaced by the partition is struggling to survive—a daughter, a wallowing mother, and a father who can barely catch his breath from asthma. They have found no way to survive but commit an unbelievable act of violence. When you first read it, it takes a while to swallow the atrocity; it gets under your skin and that moment of gut wrenching debilitation stays

with you long after you’ve finished reading the book.

Unlike the boys from “Shokun”, the parents in *Atmoja* are completely aware of what they are doing, or should we say, what circumstances have compelled them to do. It makes the story even harder to stomach.

Despite what may appear on the surface, the boys, and the parents, in these two stories, are not active agents of violence. The group of boys are slaves to an instinct they have almost no control over. The geo-political and social upheaval that resulted from the partition in the subcontinent caused millions of families to be uprooted from their homes and livelihood, and for these people, survival has higher priority than social or ethical values, as is evident in *Atmoja o Ekti Korobi Gaach*.

The picture that Haque paints of humanity is bleak, and rightly so. His responsibility as a writer and a free-thinker hardly allows him to revel in sunshine in the face of inequality and injustice.

Now that Hasan Azizul Haque is gone, it will be hard and painful to bear that this world will not hear any more of his stories about people in the margins. There is hardly anything more political than telling stories, especially in choosing whose stories to tell. Haque had dedicated his life’s works to telling the stories of the folks from low socioeconomic class in the suburbs and the countryside. He had a voice unlike any other in world literature and his demise is an irreparable loss.

Mursalín Mosaddeque is a writer who grew up in the suburban town of Rangpur in Northern Bengal.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Surrealism and suffering in South Korea

SEJAL RAHMAN

Han Kang’s atmospheric novel, *The Vegetarian* (Portobello, 2016), is an evocative look at the psychosis of a woman plagued by her own humanity. In a masterstroke, Kang creates a world of straightforward prose deliciously juxtaposed with complex characters. While I cannot speak to the veracity of the translation—and there is some debate there—I appreciate Deborah Smith producing an accessible path to this haunting drama as it unfolds over the course of several years.

Kang is a South Korean author who has graduated from the prestigious International Writing Program at the University of Iowa and is now working as a professor at the creative writing department at the Seoul Institute of the Arts. In this Anglophone debut, which won her the International Booker Prize in 2016, Kang’s sparse, quiet narrative lulls the reader into a false sense of security only to constantly stun them with the utterly bizarre situations the characters find themselves in. Here I must issue a disclaimer: *The Vegetarian* is not for the faint-hearted. It is a baffling mixture of psychological horror and erotica, and the metaphors we often use to symbolise the birds and the bees have been converted into something quite literal here.

In 183 pages of poetic anguish, I found myself transfixed by some of the most complex fictional characters I have come across. Yeong-Hye, an outwardly dutiful, if slightly one-dimensional, wife has a dream. A rather gory one. Taciturn and melancholic, our protagonist finds herself giving up meat. This single act of agency earns Yeong-Hye her husband’s consternation (who is appalled at Yeong-Hye’s audacity to choose what she can eat), her brother-in-law’s predatory obsession, and her sister’s rude awakening (that she, too, may not be as okay as she would like to believe). The novel’s three-part structure, each devoted to a family member, is often too harrowing to push through, but, with a lightning-quick build-up to the climax, Kang wastes no time in laying bare where the bones hide in this family.

The first act follows the meandering Mr Cheong, Yeong-Hye’s husband. Detached and content with an average life, he reveals his callous disregard for his “completely unremarkable” wife. But he’s not the only disappointing man in this story. We learn of Yeong-Hye’s father, whose abusive ways spared not even a ferocious street-dog; her brother, who inherits their father’s towering temperament; her husband in his cold aloofness; and her brother-in-law, whose artistic indulgences come first no matter the mental state of his subject.

The only other sympathetic character in this story is Yeong-Hye’s sister, In-Hye, the devoted second-mother-figure of the family who knew that the only way to escape their father’s wrath was to take up the mantle of duty. Her self-aware reflections in the final act are heart-breaking;



she wants her sister to live, but identifies with her desire to give in. Ultimately, Kang’s choice to starve the narrative of any interaction with Yeong-Hye’s thoughts—save for sporadic monologues revealing her dreams—reinforces the distance we, as readers, feel from her. Because she remains isolated, dominated by everybody else, we too are surprised when she finally takes a stand.

With a single decision, like a tree caught in a bad hailstorm, Yeong-Hye uproots the stability of those around her. Her actions express her mind’s break from reality: she runs away to forests unknown, performing laborious handstands with no thought of the unhealthy rush of blood to her head—after all, why should it be unsafe? She photosynthesises; waits for her rebirth to commence. It is a daunting section to read, and each scant syllable uttered by Yeong-Hye speaks of a resolution she believes herself to be on the cusp of.

In this quest to overcome violence, Yeong-Hye recognises in humanity what we tend to overlook often: murderous aggression. The savage face of her dreams is in her “stomach”—it is always a part of her. Her acts of resistance against this innate callousness lead to one goal: to cast the face away. Whatever she does in the novel, she does because she yearns for her true self. And it is not human. Her true consciousness lies with the oldest spiritual force in existence: nature. Kang does not tell us what happens to our protagonist, and as one for non-conclusive endings, I am grateful. Because, while in the novel Yeong-Hye is pumped with IVs, pinned down by careless hands and stifled under the watchful gaze of irritated psychiatrists, I can picture her where she belongs: in the trees, gentle and calm, finally at peace.

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THE SHELF

Staff picks for Nonfiction November

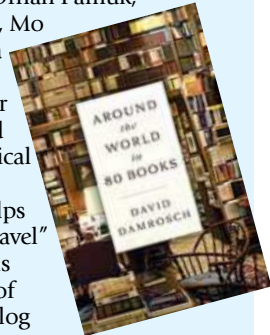
STAR BOOKS REPORT

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 BOOKS

David Damrosch
Penguin Press, 2021

David Damrosch is Chair of the Comparative Literature department at Harvard University and founder of Harvard’s Institute for World Literature, having authored the genre-defining *What is World Literature?* (Princeton Press) in 2003. Taking a cue from Jules Verne’s character, Phileas Fogg, in this latest book Damrosch maps out the way world literature traverses across the globe and evaluates how writers live in two different worlds of their own making: one, that of their personal experiences, and the other, molded by the books that have helped shape their worldview. In what reads like a cartography, the writer includes classics as well as contemporary works, ranging from Woolf and Dante to Nobel Prize-winners like Orhan Pamuk, Wole Soyinka, Mo Yan, and Olga Tokarczuk, each author or book attached to a geographical location.

Damrosch helps his readers “travel” to. The book is an extension of Damrosch’s blog series of the same name completed during the COVID-ridden lockdown period of May to August 2020.



READING LITERATURE IN ENGLISH AND ENGLISH STUDIES IN BANGLADESH: POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES

Fakrul Alam
Writers Ink, 2021

A sequel to his earlier work, *Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English* (University Press Limited, 2007), Fakrul Alam’s latest collection of essays looks deeply into the ideas of post colonialism through the lens of notable Western as well as Eastern writers. In addition to dedicating two chapters of the volume to Defoe—who he terms as a “colonial propagandist”—the writer also discusses South Asian writers like RK Narayan and traces back at length to his well known preoccupations with Edward Said. UGC Professor of English at Dhaka University and a well known critic, translator, and academic, Alam attributes his book to Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury, who he declares, is “truly a mentor for all seasons”.

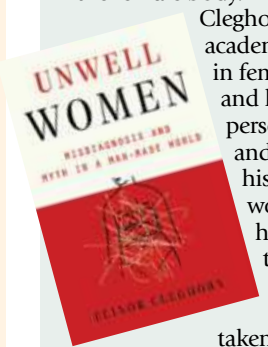


UNWELL WOMEN: MISDIAGNOSIS AND MYTH IN A MAN-MADE WORLD

Elinor Clegghorn

Dutton Books, 2021

After spending years going to the doctors’ who were unable to diagnose her for an autoimmune disease, Elinor Clegghorn writes about her unfortunate experiences in the world of biased medical science where the standard of “healthy” is deemed to be a slender white man; and where countless women have been misdiagnosed owing to their ignorance towards the female body. In her work, Clegghorn, who has an academic background in feminist culture and history, pairs her personal experiences and traces through history how women’s bodies have been taught to be hidden and shamed, instead of being taken as what it is—a biological entity. As a result, the more subtle symptoms of what could be major illnesses are often overlooked and ignored.

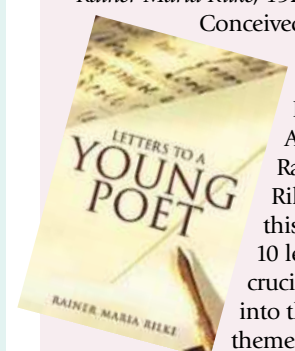


LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET

Rainer Maria Rilke, 1929

Conceived over a crucial part of the Bohemian-Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke’s life, this series of 10 letters offers crucial insights into the underlying themes and ideas of his work.

The correspondence started when a young student at a military academy sent some of his verses to the already prominent poet, asking for his advice and assessment of his work. The first of the letters is a respectful declination to review the work but, in later replies, Rilke advises Franz Xaver Kappus on how a poet should feel and seek the truth in his experience of the world and the pursuit of art. *Letters to a Young Poet* is a brilliant read for anyone with an interest in poetry, scholarship, and in Rilke’s works.

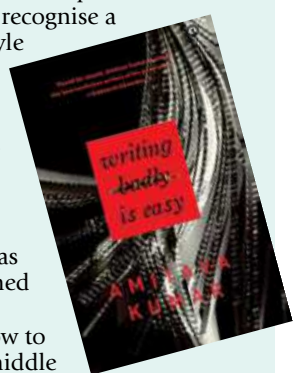


WRITING BADLY IS EASY

Amitava Kumar

Aleph Book Company, 2019

Writing Badly is Easy by Amitava Kumar is a comprehensive style-guide for anyone with an interest in learning how to write or better their craft. The writer, in an easily-flowing conversational tone, follows on the works of notable writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie and highlights defining extracts from their work as examples on how to set tone, recognise a personal style of writing, and make good use of narrative form. He draws from his own experience as an established writer, and explains how to reach the middle ground between an academic and a creative style of writing.



TRICK MIRROR

Jia Tolentino

Fourth Estate, 2019

In a collection of essays, Jia Tolentino talks about feminism, religion, drugs, reality television and the celebrity/influencer culture—cultural tropes that have shaped her perception of the contemporary world. At the base of it all, the former deputy-editor of *Jezebel* and current staff writer of *The New Yorker* grapples with the idea of coming to a “true self” in an age of penetrating, technology-driven deceptiveness. Tolentino writes, in the introduction of her 2019 debut book, “Writing is either a way to shed my self-delusions or a way to develop them”.