

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

HEFTY AT FIFTY: 'When the Mango Tree Blossomed' and other short stories from Bangladesh

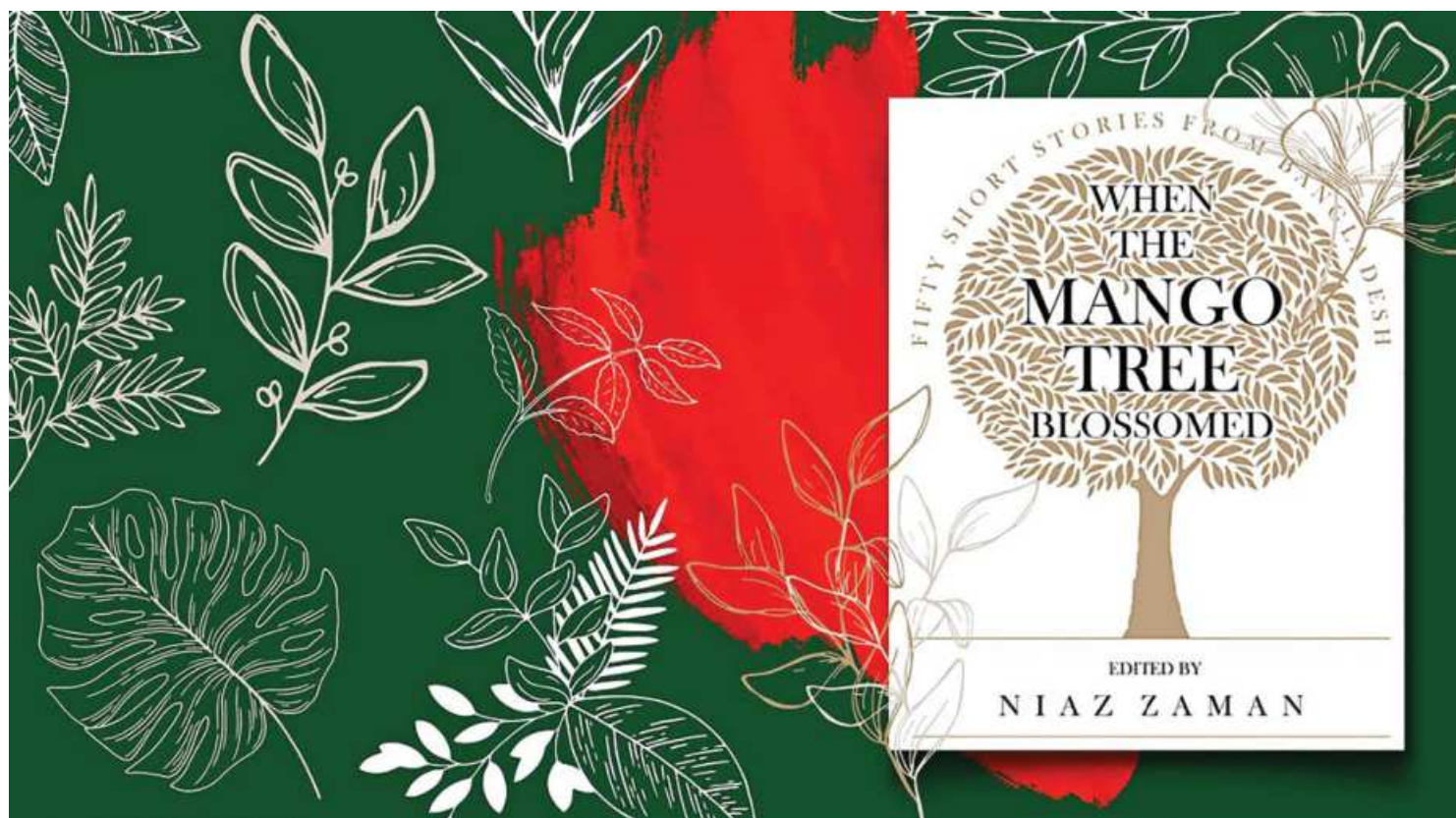
KAISER HAQ

The centenary of the Father of the Nation, and following on its heels the golden jubilee of the country's independence, have precipitated a tireless round of celebratory events and an avalanche of varied publications. Students of literature will be particularly interested in the literary stocktaking evinced by the appearance of anthologies. Three are already three on the market—Shazia Omar's *Golden: Bangladesh at Fifty* (UPL) presents a mix of original prose fiction and poetry in English by 23 contributors; Sohana Manzoor's *Our Many Longings* (Dhali Books, Odisha) presents 19 pieces of "contemporary short fiction from Bangladesh"; antedating them by a few months, and also surpassing them in weight and volume, is the one under review.

Niaz Zaman is not only a prolific writer, scholar and translator, but also a tireless promoter of literary activity. She runs the Readers' Circle, which regularly meets to discuss a chosen title; encouragingly guides those who want to write or translate; and publishes literary works under her Writers Ink imprint. She has edited numerous anthologies of which this is probably the heaviest, fittingly with a story for each year of the country's existence. Like Sohana Manzoor she has included both original English stories (17) and translations from Bangla (33), but with greater attention to thematic structure.

A textbook introduction that will greatly benefit younger readers and foreigners sums up the country's political and cultural struggle, starting with the language movement and culminating in the independence war, before an outline of the thematic division of the stories into six groups; we can safely rechristen them as the political; the rural; the diasporic; the urban; the personal; and the broadly human. One can appreciate the logic behind this, but also wishes that the simple rule of starting with something that will draw the reader had been followed.

Instead, the opening story in its short opening paragraph has such a limp



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA & SARAH ANJUM BARI

sentence as this:

"A huge scream was wailing from inside of him but he was afraid even to let it out."

And on the next page:

"Abir decided long ago to traverse the fields of arts and humanities and is recently said to have found his calling in creative writing."

A reader might well be utterly put off and not bother to move on to the second, eminently more readable and cleverly constructed story by Syed Manzoorul Islam. The sad fact is that the number of stories may represent the country's age but not (only) the

best of our short fiction. Anyone familiar with our literary scene is also likely to be puzzled by the absence of some of the justly celebrated writers: Akhteruzzaman Elias, Mahmudul Huq, Shawkat Ali, Abdul Mannan Syed, to name a few who immediately come to mind.

Evidently, no attempt has been made to include the best available translation of a story, either; the reader is invited to compare the translation of Hasan Azizul Huq's "Shokun" here with the one by Iffat Nawaz in his *Three Stories* (Bengal Lights).

If I seem unduly harsh, let me hasten to

add that there are enough commendable stories to make browsing the book's 744 pages worthwhile. Their topicality is noteworthy. Niaz Zaman's story "The Monster's Mother" is a painful reminder of the psychological havoc wrought by a terrorist on his kinsfolk. She has also turned eight stories into English with characteristic competence. Others who have translated more than one story are Sagar Chawdhury and Junaidul Huq (three each), and Noora Bahar and Marzia Rahman (two each). Clearly they take translation seriously and should be encouraged.

Fayeza Hasanat, herself an accomplished story writer, has translated an engaging piece by Mozaffor Hossain. Arifa Ghani, who has engaged with Sumon Rahman, is another serious translator. Besides those already mentioned, a number of well-known names will automatically draw the reader's attention. Here are a few randomly chosen examples. Syed Mujtaba Ali's "Sweet and Savoury" would have benefitted from more careful editing, but does succeed in sketching a moving portrait of Sylheti sailors and the extraordinary life of one who is forced to jump ship and start life anew with a Frenchwoman. Syed Waliullah, here in his Anglophone mode, is represented by "No Enemy", a haunting narrative that takes us into the troubled inner world of a dying man desperate to square his moral account by seeking forgiveness of all he had wronged. Death amidst high-tech healthcare presents an existential dilemma in Shahaduz Zaman's "My Position on Death is Very Clear", well translated by Sharmillie Rahman.

The placing of original English works cheek by jowl with translated ones demonstrates the commonality of literary culture that unites all writers of Bangladeshi origin. Roughly two-thirds of the Anglophone writers here, and two or three of the writers in Bangla are expatriates. Transnationality is bound to become more conspicuous as days go by, and it is only a matter of time before we have writers of Bangladeshi origin producing literature in European languages other than English.

While anthologies like the one reviewed here help us make a reckoning of what has been done so far, some may find it more interesting to monitor the changes in our literary culture that are bound to show up as the country marches towards its centenary.

Kaiser Haq is a poet, translator, essayist, critic, and academic. He is currently Professor of English at the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh (ULAB).

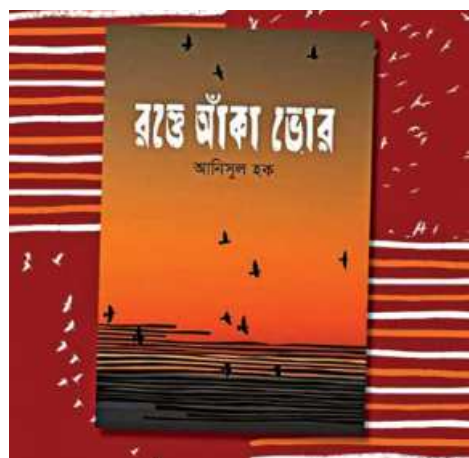
BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

'Rokte Aka Bhor': Anisul Hoque's epic novel commemorates 50 years of liberation

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Anisul Hoque's most recent novel, *Rokte Aka Bhor* (Prothoma Prokashon, 2021), is a work of historical and political fiction that was released on the occasion of 50 years of Bangladesh's independence. Against a vast canvas, Hoque paints meticulously a narrative that will serve as a historical documentation for years to come—rich, albeit fictionalised, it is a portrayal of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination.

Rokte Aka Bhor is the sixth and the last of the novels in the same series, the first of which was *Jara Bhor Enechhilo* (Prothoma Prokashon, 2012). This last instalment in the series begins in March 1971, unfolding



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

in a year of bloodshed and resistance, and it opens with the arrest of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib, his revolutionary declaration of independence, and the barbaric murder of East Pakistanis in Bengal.

Hoque depicts several known and unknown events in the novel spanning from March to August and from October to December of 1971. He paints a vibrant picture of Dhaka all the way to Kurigram, and from Kolkata to Delhi. And masterfully, he conceives the image of the traitors who penetrated the depths of the country at the time.

In a nerve-racking response, Hoque also recounts the tragic murder of Dhirendranath

Dutta, a hero of the language movement of 1952. He describes the story of this patriotic man in stirring details.

On the one hand, Bangabandhu is held captive in a Pakistani prison, in the novel, and on the other hand, his family, terrified for him and in danger with their own lives in this land, are foregrounded in the book. While he is being taken away from his home in Dhanmondi 32, Begum Mujib takes refuge next door. The country is rampant with murder and massacre. Meanwhile, Bengali soldiers, the police, EPR, Ansar, students, and people from all walks of life are building resistance against the Pakistani oppressors. But Bangabandhu's death sentence is being arranged in a secret military court.

While the expatriate Bangladeshi government is formed under the leadership of Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed, millions of people cross the border and take refuge in India, and the Mukti Bahini is formed. Various conspiracies had already started against the Mujibnagar government by then. Against this setting we encounter characters such as Professor Anisuzzaman, Sepoy Hamidur Rahman, Munir Chowdhury, the tragic condition of his family after losing Dr Alim Chowdhury, and the misery of the wife and family of author Shahidullah Kaiser, people who will become integral pillars in the story of the nation's history.

The novel ends with Bangabandhu returning to the newly independent country on January 10, 1972. Apart from the Liberation War, this work also extends itself as a documentation in gratitude to the Soviet government, the late Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, the poet Allen Ginsberg, and more.

Hoque has been working on *Rokte Aka Bhor* since writing the first book of the series 13 years ago, and in it he depicts the long struggle behind the epic war. Other books in the series include *Jara Bhor Enechhilo* (2012), *Ushar Duare* (2013), *Alo Adharer Jatri* (2018), *Ei Pothe Alo Jele* (2019), and *Ekhane Themo Na* (2020).

Shah Alam Shazu is a writer and journalist.

THE SHELF

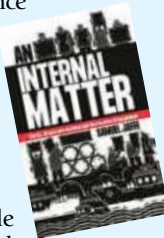
Nonfiction books on the Liberation War released this year

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

AN INTERNAL MATTER

Samuel Jaffe
University Press Limited,
2021

An Internal Matter narrates the story of American activists who supported Bangladesh's campaign for independence. Instead of focusing on diplomacy in general, it sheds light on the activism that surrounded the war, by presenting new evidence and interviews with participants of the campaign, and highlighting the stories of ordinary people who challenged the Nixon administration's pro-Pakistan policies. A New Zealand-based scholar interested in the global response to the Bangladesh Liberation War, Jaffe also explains how people from different social and regional backgrounds participated in the war through international dialogue and advocacy.



SHADHINOTAR SHUBORNOJAYANTI SMARAKGRANTHA

Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury
and Dr Mohammad Hannan
Agamee Prokashoni, 2021

When did this country's struggle for freedom begin? What little acts of rebellion marked the journey over the years? And how did the nation state formulate itself after the Liberation War? This memoir explores momentous affairs behind Bangladesh's struggle for independence, addresses how the liberation war began, how acts of rebellion and sacrifices have taken place over the years, and how a nation-state stood after its independence. The book, in summation, is a rich recollection of all the documentary details, pre and post-war activities.



EKJON KISHOR MUKTIJODHDHAR SMRITITE MUKTIJUDHDHO O BIRSHRESTHA JAHANGIR Md Robiul Islam

University Press Limited,
2021

In his autobiography, Islam, who was a teenager during the Liberation War, provides a glimpse into the life of young freedom fighters featuring field research, data collection, and significant interviews. Significant also is the geographical location of Chapainawabganj, a site that witnessed many massacres and military operations. In his testimony, Islam extensively covers the details of his participation in the Liberation War, training in India, and memories of comrades-in-arms.

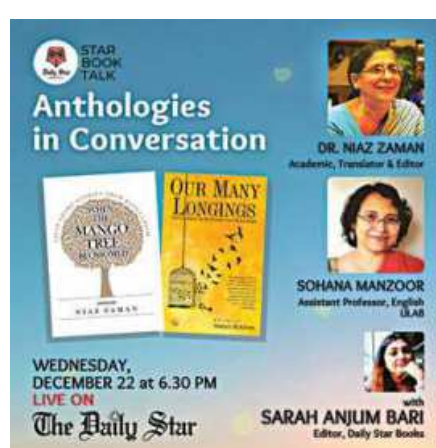


1971: BIJOYER GAURABGATHA Salek Khokon

Kathaprokash, 2021
Khokon's research draws attention to the memories of the heroic warriors caught in the war. He shows the birth of Bangladesh as a nation-state and the conviction of building a classless society, including in his work various documents and rare photographs from the war period. He also explores how the camera was an important weapon used during the war, how Colonel Taher was injured, how the guerrillas carried out the Green Road Attack and Operation Jackpot in 1971, the events of November 26, 1975 at the Indian High Commission, and more.



Maisha Islam Monamee is a medical student who likes reading, scribbling, and blogging. Follow @monameereads on Instagram.



WATCH ONLINE

To commemorate 50 years of Bangladesh's independence, two new short-story anthologies celebrate the spirit and the history of this nation as it has appeared in literature.

Watch us in conversation with editors of the anthologies, Professor Niaz Zaman, noted critic, academic, and translator, and Sohana Manzoor, Associate Professor of English at ULAB and Literary Editor at *The Daily Star*.

LIVE on The Daily Star and Daily Star Books' Facebook and YouTube channels at 6:30 PM on Wednesday, December 22.