

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

Diversity and nuance marks the Bangladeshi experience

SARAH ANJUM BARI

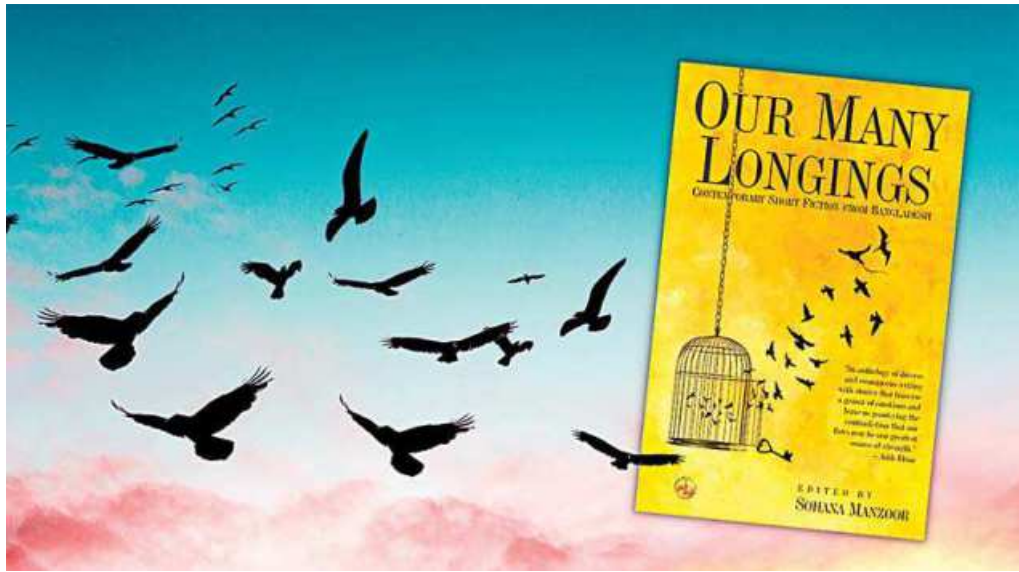
So many words have been used to describe this nation in the last 50 years. Started from a bottomless basket, and along the way we've been called resilient, passionate, corrupt, greedy, full of warmth. "Precocious" is a personal favourite—it is the adjective that always comes to mind when I think about my city and my country, a word I used to describe *Golden: Bangladesh at 50* (UPL, 2021), one of the other short story anthologies on Bangladesh published this year. In *The Demoness: Best Bangladeshi Short Stories, 1971-2021* (Aleph Book Company, 2021) and *When The Mango Tree Blossomed* (Nympha Publications, 2021), critic, translator and academic Dr Niaz Zaman takes the more holistic route of curating a vast collection of stories that each reflect a different class, culture, temperament, and generational experience of being Bangladeshi. In *Our Many Longings: Contemporary Short Fiction From Bangladesh* (Dhauri Books, 2021), editor, translator, and academic Dr Sohana Manzoor settles on yet another emotion that so accurately describes what it feels like to be Bangladeshi. In 19 short stories, the book's authors and translators remind us of how, and how so very deeply, we long for things.

What do we long for?

Freedom. Kindness. Justice. Acceptance. In Farah Ghuznavi's "First Love, Second Chances", childhood memories and mothball fragrances of young love sit alongside the grace and clarity brought about by adulthood. I once asked the author, half in jest and half in fear, how she chanced upon this story in her mind, so real does it feel to anyone who has experienced meaningful connections in their life. Fayeza Hasanat's "Frank and Frida" plays with a similar lightness of tone as it revisits life altering encounters. But it goes a step further with its nods to how Bangladeshi women are made to be exotic in the Western world and are mixed up carelessly with women from India. If the dissection of this Western gaze feels less than precise, this is made up for by the author's trick in the climax—she reminds us gently, but with a tinge of mischief, that the lines dividing characters, protagonists, and narrators are etched as though on sand.

Have we achieved all that we longed for?

The grimmer stories in the anthology remind us of the ways in which independence has not touched individual lives and communities in Bangladesh. Afsan Chowdhury's "Torso", translated from Bangla by Professor Shamsad Mortuza, revisits moments of independence



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bestowed and denied—at the very moment that it was being fought for—due to the most intimate and physical of factors separating Hindus from Muslims. Years later, in Hasan Azizul Huq's "Without A Name, Without a Tribe", Rifat Munim translates from Bangla the ghosts and skeletons left behind by such violence.

Life has been kinder to Sultan Ahmed, the protagonist in Shaheen Akhtar's "The Green Passport", translated by Professor Arifa Ghani Rahman; kinder than it was to Sultan's Dada, who identifies as a "stranded Pakistani" and still mourns for his homeland Chhapra, for the son he lost in the war. Resentment for Bengalis is ripe among the Bihari family making up this story. "Underneath that country's smooth skin lies an open wound, pus, blood, and tears", they reiterate. Yet the Bangladeshi passport—an object we seldom associate with freedom or privilege these days—is a contested talisman of trauma and agency for the characters of this story.

In her introduction to the collection, Sohana Manzoor addresses the divides between stories written in Bangla and English, or the stories written by Bangladesh-based and diaspora authors of Bangladeshi fiction. Her motivation for curating this anthology was to "take stock [of] and bridge" some of these gaps. Choosing our collective state of longing as the unifying thread is an elegant and compassionate approach in itself; but I especially admire that the divides are deliberately made to seem inconsequential in the way that the stories were curated—stories of love and friendship resting alongside wartime trauma; stories of marginalized or expatriate lives

resting alongside those set in the homeland or a majority community.

Personally, I enjoyed reading most of the stories in this book because they revel in the joys of storytelling and the empathy and whimsy it can inspire. This, coming from some of the major Bangladeshi authors writing and translating today—Professors Kaiser Haq, Razia Sultana Khan, Syed Manzoor Islam, Kazi Anis Ahmed, Khademul Islam, Tahmina Anam, and more—is a privilege to experience.

I enjoyed reading this book because it alludes to the nuance and the contradictions that mark the thousands and thousands of lives who have identified with or been marked by the Bangladeshi experience, which is something that often gets outweighed by the significance of the Liberation War. But it is people and their ability to care that makes up this country. In her short story, "Mother's Milk", Tahmina Anam spells out this sentiment most poignantly: "[Y]ou are pressing the buttons on your phone, or you are stirring the milk into your tea, or someone has tapped you on the shoulder, and the sorrows of the whole world, the woman whose baby has died in the flames, the little boy with cigarette burns on his torso, become yours, yet although you see and smell and feel everything, the edge of your own sorrow isn't blunted, not for a small, bare fragment of a moment."

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REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

The uglier side of holiday parties

In this monthly series, we review short stories that deserve to be rediscovered and appreciated.

SEJAL RAHMAN

Two years ago, I read Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The Christmas Tree and the Wedding" (1848), and even though I don't celebrate Christmas in the traditional sense, I come back to this story every holiday season. It has a timeless charm. In his trademark prose, as in *Crime and Punishment's* notable line, "The deeper the grief, the closer is God!"—lilting but undemanding, soft but striking, loving and loveless—Dostoevsky writes another dry, cynical tale that juxtaposes perversion and innocence, using characters that are careless and depraved.

I have always found that reading Dostoevsky is an act of sober reflection. His literature is a vehicle for social expression and it holds up a mirror to our most secret ills and inclinations—think again of the intense corporeality of guilt and its consequences in *Crime and Punishment*.

This short story begins with an unnamed, omniscient narrator chancing upon a wedding. The beginning is significant; it acts as the catalyst that whisks him away into nostalgia. Cut to five years earlier, and it's Christmastime, where our storyteller finds himself observing the actions of an indecent adult who fixates on a young girl at an upper-class Christmas party.

The titular tree derives its significance from the party, the people around it. There is no Christmas cheer, no holiday-season pomp, no familial warmth. The gathering of bourgeoisie; the untarnished views of children, unperturbed by their parents' mindless conversation; the enforcement of decorum, even when attendees don't particularly enjoy each other's company—these are the things that the tree highlights.

The party is a classic Dostoevskian motif. It is not subtle, but it doesn't need to be. Our narrator, an astute onlooker, loves watching children. He reports to us of the hushed whispers describing a hefty dowry, the exclusivity in the distribution of one's attention, and the isolation faced by the child belonging

to the lowest rung on the class ladder. At this party, guests have brought letters of recommendation in their favour, children's presents diminish here "in value in accordance with the rank of the parents", and we are introduced to Julian Mastakovich, who has just finished a conversation with the host owing the aforementioned dowry, and begins to count on his fingers the amount by which it would increase should he marry the latter's daughter in five years.

At the time of his diligent calculations, Julian has not even seen the girl, and she is eleven. It's an impressive change in the narrative; we move with the narrator, first taking in a young girl playing with her doll, then witnessing a degenerate exhibition of greed by one of the party's most distinguished personalities. When Julian finally approaches

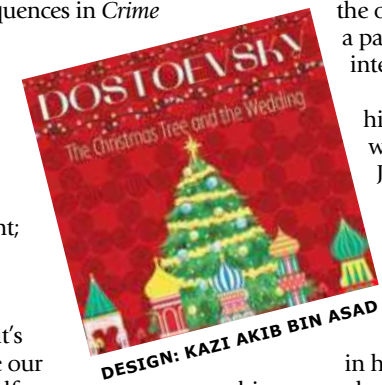
the object of his affections, a painfully uncomfortable interaction unfolds.

Dostoevsky, through his story, makes it clear what he thinks of the Julian Mastakoviches of the world. But he also knows of the influence they have on this world. Julian is safe in the knowledge of his importance, secure

in his stature, saccharine in his approval, scathing in his morals. His assurance in himself is the most prominent heirloom passed around in his class. Wealth and entitlement give him free rein. As a result, it's a strong indictment of society when he succeeds in his goal, as witnessed by our narrator at the close. It's what we expect.

The ending is poignant. An earlier scene—where the young girl cries due to Julian's overbearing actions—informs the pathos of the climax. At the end, she is left "pale and melancholy", "red with recent weeping"—robbed of what the world owed to her as a birthright: innocence. We cross the street with the author, because like him, we cannot help her. It's the ultimate betrayal. And we are all guilty.

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DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

How can we tackle climate change and food shortage in Asia?

DR MAHMUDUR RAHMAN

Climate change and food security issues are multifaceted and transcend national boundaries. Therefore, regional organisations are optimally positioned to address them while actively engaging global partners to slow down or reverse current trajectories. Using tools such as a robust content analysis and institutional ethnography, Md Saidul Islam and Edson Kieu, in their book *Climate Change and Food Security in Asia Pacific: Response and Resilience* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) make a sociological survey across three regional organisations—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). They investigate the multifaceted obstacles that impede regional organisations' ability to effectively cope with these problems.

The authors have qualitatively reviewed the efficacy of policies and examined the connections between politico-economic processes that affect the development, cooperation, and execution of regional policies. In doing so, they have reviewed regional policies using five key criteria: planning, implementation, cooperation, legal obligation, and international contribution. Their findings suggest that regional organisations face fundamental problems in the implementation of extensive policies due to the lack of cooperation and legal obligation between member nation-states; this stems from fundamental prioritisation of national development agendas over regional cooperation.

According to the book, the world population now stands at 7.8 billion, and one in seven of these people are already hungry. The world population is expected to reach 9 billion by 2050. What does that mean for food security and hunger?

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, most of these people in hunger are, unfortunately, found in Asia, with

about a billion living on less than \$1.25 per day.

The book argues that, despite Asia's unprecedented economic growth and advances in science and technology, there has been an increase in poverty and stagnation in average crop yields. It is clear from the regional impacts of the 2008 food crisis that the central dilemma for Asia is the problem of food security because of certain destabilising factors, such as competition for land, rural-urban migration, rapid urbanisation, population growth, climate change, and the increasing shortages of energy and water.

To feed its growing population, Asia may need to raise productivity by 70 percent by 2050. However, the impacts of climate change

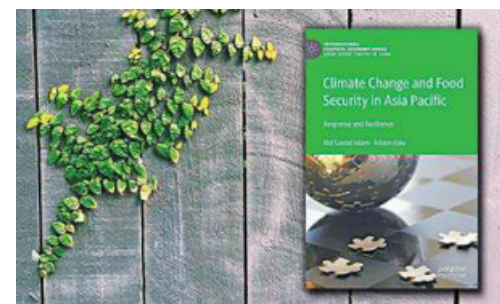
of ASEAN, SAARC, and PIF regarding climate change and food security in the subsequent three chapters. Climate change pushes national and regional actors to embark upon numerous initiatives. As these initiatives are often driven not by a genuine intention to protect the environment, ensure food security, and address the needs of the poor, but by protecting a "green façade" and finding economic opportunities alone, the chances of success through such initiatives are slim. Though there are prospects for regional cooperation and opportunities, competing and conflicting interests on power and resources further fragment the region.

Chapters 6 and 8 focus entirely on India and China, elucidating not only their comprehensive policy apparatuses regarding climate change and food security but also their land and water grabs across Asia and Africa. The remaining chapters are largely the solutions offered to combat the climate change and food security problems of the Asia-Pacific region, which focus on, for example, urban food security, food sovereignty movements, and sustainable food systems in Asia.

What becomes apparent is that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient to tackle climate change as well as accelerate reduction of hunger and malnutrition. It has to come with robust public policies accompanied by consultations with the poor and disadvantaged. Food security can be sufficiently solved by higher income and trade, with distribution and equality improvements.

Taken together, this book is a crucial read—empirically rich, theoretically sophisticated, and analytically rigorous.

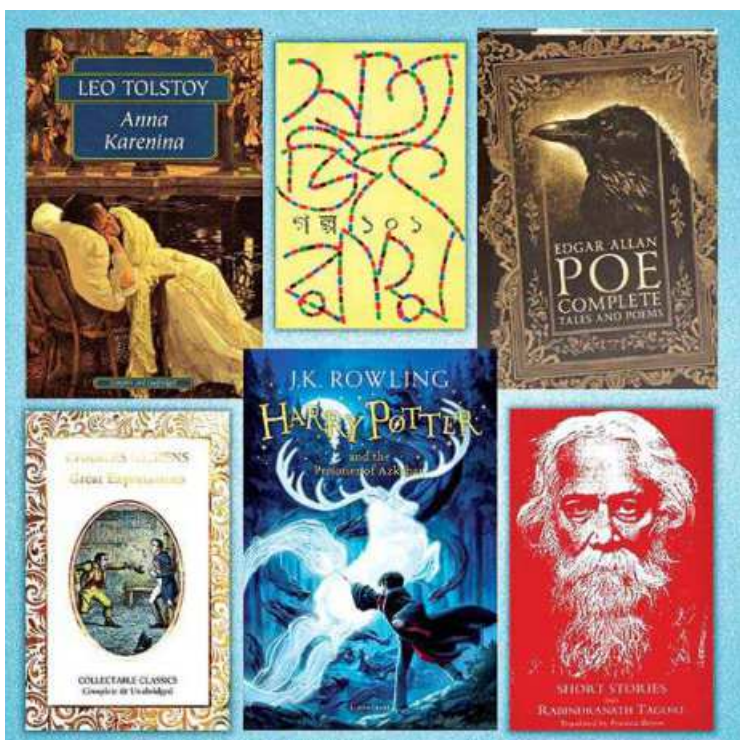
Dr Mahmudur Rahman (PhD, University of Malaya), a registered Graduate Engineer certified by the Board of Engineers Malaysia, is working on climate solutions such as vibration and control aspects of wind turbines. Email: mahmud220711@gmail.com



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on the four dimensions of food security—availability, physical and economic access, and utilisation—are also linked to other factors influencing changing climate; scientific findings have shown that rising temperatures increasingly impact food crops. It is projected that, based on a scenario of an increase of 2 degrees Celsius, without considering changes in rainfall patterns, production of major food crops will decline.

After a rigorous background and critical conceptual nexus between climate change and food security in the first two chapters, the authors have meticulously examined the initiatives



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

THE SHELF

Six of my favourite winter reads

MAISHA SYEDA

As the nip in the air gradually changes to more of a chill, my inclinations to skip work, wrap myself in a warm blanket, get a steaming mug of coffee, and dive into my favourite winter stories become increasingly tempting. Be it for their nostalgic pull or the promise of escaping into a rich, evocative world, these tales have been consistent go-to's for me over the years. Read this article online on The Daily Star website or on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn pages.