

Arise Out of the Lock:

Celebrating 50 Years of Poetry by Woman Poets of Bangladesh

Arise out of the Lock is a collection of 50 poems written by Bangladeshi women poets. Translated by Nabina Das and curated by Alam Khorshed, this book came out on February 21 this year. As Sadaf Saaz in the Foreword claims, the poems in this collection give “a sense of what Bangladesh is, 50 years after its inception.”

FROM THE FOREWORD BY SADAF SAAZ;
Poet, Director & Producer Dhaka Lit Fest

The poems in this ambitious collection are by women poets writing in Bangla, who have emerged from the land that is now Bangladesh—having lived, or are still living here, or are now part of the first-generation diaspora.

What beautifully comes through in this thoughtfully curated and faithfully translated volume, is Bangladesh emerging as a country on its own terms, with this collage of writing from women, rooted in a rich eclectic cultural history, and yet with a contemporary and cosmopolitan sensibility.

Much has been written about the economic success and social progress of Bangladesh, especially highlighting women's empowerment. However, the creative spaces in Bangladesh, especially in poetry, have been largely dominated by men. Dipping into this book will be like the delicious potential discovery of a treasure trove of work by women who bring out varied aspects of the collective Bangladeshi experience.

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The inferences to the culture, the land and nature form the backdrop to women navigating their reality. With echoes of Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, and Kazi Nazrul Islam, they get strength from the familiar, symbolic and concrete, to express themselves, and frame and voice their resistance. The historic influence of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Animism, Tantric, and other practices, as well as the sheer potency and beauty of the fertile land and mother nature, are drawn on, interpreted and used as they see fit.

Fearless, confident, defying expectations, and covering age-old emotions like anger, love, and dissonance with the status quo, many of the poems display a boldness of material and direction that is able to capture the essence of what could represent the modern Bangladeshi women.

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Most importantly, the women in this collection come across as the multi-dimensional beings we are; beyond binary caricatures. Historically, 'ma,' the mother, has been put on a 'pedestal,' given the 'highest' position; the one who gives and sacrifices, is devoted to her family,

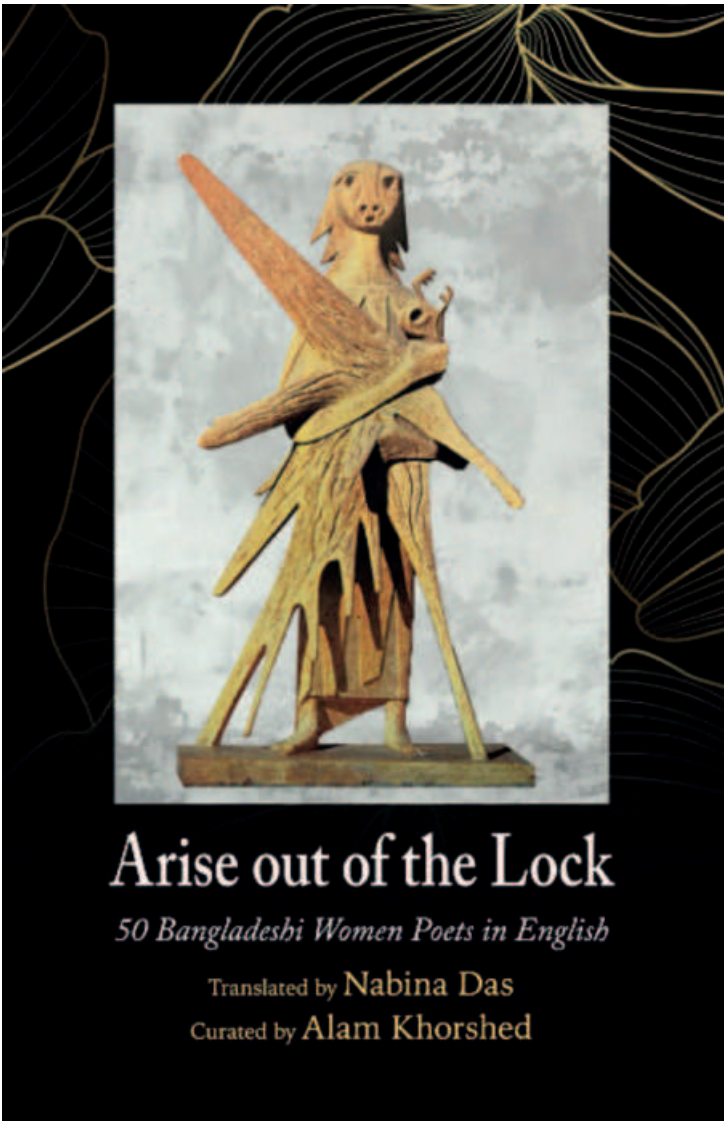
but rarely is expected to have dreams or thoughts of her own. The counter of this is the lack of rights and social acceptance for women actually demanding their voices be heard and their rights to be respected, and their potential to be met. Throughout the ages we have demonized or glorified women with a 'bad' woman/'good' woman narrative. Women have been used as cultural markers to represent the horrors of the war with a 'loss of honour' as women who were raped, or vilified for the violation of their bodies being their fault.

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The poems capture women as I have known many to be in all my years here—passionate in love and purpose, compassionate, courageous, unconventional, not taking no for an answer, full of rage against the unfair structures that be, and wanting to tackle the world at large on their own terms, along with expressing vulnerabilities and acknowledging the tribulations of fighting deep-rooted patriarchy and prejudice. There is a feeling that perhaps the elegance and cadence of their words can only be fully appreciated in the original Bangla. However, this translated collection does convey the philosophical and the practical, and I believe will entice and inspire lovers of poetry to dig deeper and further explore their works, and those of other Bangladeshi women poets (those who write in Bangla, English and the myriad of other local languages) too.

Excerpts from *Arise out of the Lock*:

“Arise out of the Lock”
By SUFIA KAMAL
No time to braid that lock, to arise is the order!
Whether or not the sari has a graceful border,
the beauty mark on the forehead, kajal in eyes, time
to redden your lips is up, it's over. It's life or death rings the chime.
No more just smiling teenagers, young women, and wives:
defined chin, mouth and lips firm, to pledge and strive,
forever alert. Just as the bright sharp sabre
wide eyes raised quick to the moment, not lowered any more.
No longer frightened like the doe, those glances, hark,



show a mind in search, a falcon looking for its mark.
Their hearts sans mercy, hardened like solid stone
to wield revenge against the invaders of our home.
The woman's shy soft form has gone for a change,
all her dear ones, kin, and comrades she will now avenge.
Slim waist and her bosom full of the lion's might
the brave-heart holds boundless strength, no love songs in voice bright.
Hail Motherland, hail the people! Glory be to the Muktsena, hail!

Her aanchal soaked in martyrs' blood, the woman too is ready to sail.

“To the Flower and the Moon”
By MEHERUN NESA
1.
I don't have a garden, I hanker for flowers
the sapling in the pot only flowers in ones or twos—
that barely quenches the core of my desire.
Then do not bloom this way, flowers,
do not make my flower-soul restless
tell me how do I fulfil this garden-desire
of mine planting only saplings in pots?
2.
Whatever others say, you be my moon
atop the bamboo grove, in any such manner
when I sorely miss Kajla Didi , grieve her.
How do I say how much I need you?
Not a burnt roti to me, you are not,
even if the earth is harsher than ever—in
speckless metaphors may you thrive
like the half-veiled face in the chamber,
Bengal's bride.

“What's a Woman Gotta Do in Heaven”
BY SHANTA MARIA
Heaven has no poet
so what's a woman gotta do in Heaven.

Wide-eyed hoors
keep dancing nonstop
along the corridors of Heaven.

No lovers in Heaven
no enchanting flirtations
the ambiance of Heaven? Quite boring
spic and span, all severely arranged in a neat row.

Where's forest in Heaven?
Sea or rivers?
Mandakini, Al-Kawthar, Lethe?
If it doesn't meander wild
breaking banks in frenzied ecstasy
how is it even a river?

In the Heaven-corridor you see pious
men and women
praying day and night
no desire or lust in Heaven
aspiration or disappointment
sorrow and all that enticing tamasha
where are the wild reckless men
in the heart of Heaven?
Neither there's death written
anywhere—
what's a woman gotta do in Heaven
anyway

FICTION

Euphoria

JARIN TASNEEM SHOILEE

It was not very late when he saw her inside the cafe.

He tried to have a closer look. It was not something he usually did. Honestly, he found it uncomfortable to look at a woman he did not personally know. He needed a connection, or at least some familiarity with a woman to look at her. But she was not a complete stranger to him. She was one of the participants in the creative writing workshop in English he was conducting in Bangladesh. The range of their conversation remained within literary purpose, as a part of interactive participation of the workshop among other participants. No private introduction took place between them. Considering from that point, she was somewhat of a

stranger to him too.

There she was sitting inside the shop, alone, her right hand placed beside her right cheek. She let her hair fall around her shoulders, something she did not do any time during the workshop. What caught his attention was the faraway gaze in her eyes, listening to the music playing. He could hear the faint rhythm of some music coming from the coffee shop. It was nothing like a sad or a melancholic song; it was a chilling one. Yet her face was expressionless, as if nothing around her could move her; and her static mind seemed to be lost in some otherworldly, dynamic universe.

He stopped for a moment. Observation grew as a habit to him – he observed even those things with tiniest details that did not require his observation. He saw her breathing quickly. It felt really strange. Was she crying, inwardly? How could someone remain so numb in the face with an incredible sort of metabolism happening inside her body? The strangeness of the situation surprised him so much that he could hardly realize he was staring at a woman's chest. With awkward embarrassment, he lowered his eyes. It was not something he usually did. Also, it was not something he would never do if situation demanded.

He was not sure if he would do this if the coffee shop was not empty. He himself was a reserved person, and the girl seemed to maintain certain distance as well.

Without struggling much with his thoughts, he decided to enter the shop. Her contemplation broke when he pushed the door and got inside. She moved, sat in a proper way and checked on her *orna* if it was neatly on its place. He felt uneasy; he did not mean to startle her that way. "Hello, you're here! Nice to see you," she spoke in Bengali, smiling at him.

He could not speak Bengali well. He grew up in Hyderabad, India; and Delhi was his current city. So, English was his only language to communicate with transcultural people. After publishing his first book in English, he began to feel he should work in the language more. Eventually, his literary career allowed him to meet different kinds of people across the world, and most of them were English speakers. He liked the language Bengali too; he could understand some when people spoke Bengali. He had also read some

“It’s a Greek word — euphoria — to interpret a feeling of happiness which is not entirely happiness. You feel it, but you can’t define. You know why it is happening, yet you can’t find how.”

Bengali literature translated into English.
“Yes, just hanging around.” he smiled too.
“Wow, you understood what I said!” she said in English this time, amazed.
“Ha ha. So, you’re having some time with yourself?”
“Yes, you got that right. It’s necessary for us – the writers – don’t you think?” She laughed lightly. The grave numbness pervading across her face a moment ago disappeared so suddenly that he could hardly find any connection between her previous facial expression and the one he saw at the present moment. But there was one thing he would not deny – she had a sweet, lovely face.
“Yeah.” He could not find what to say next.
“Please, have a seat here,” she invited him, showing the seat opposite to her.
“Umm...” he hesitated for a moment.
“Okay, if you insist.”
“I hope I’m not disturbing your contemplation. Did you want to spend some personal time here?” asked she.
“Oh no, nothing like that.” He realized he had given some unnecessary emphasis on the word ‘no’. To cover that up, he acted reluctant to sit with her in the same table. However, in the next moment he regretted it. For some unknown reason, he thought she deserved some natural reaction from him.
“So, you’re leaving Bangladesh the day after tomorrow?” she posed a rhetoric question – something whose answer she already knew. After visiting the international literary festival of Bangladesh, and conducting the creative writing workshop, it was indeed the time for him now to return to his country.
He replied with a nod. “Yes.”
“The workshop was really helpful,” she said. “Although many people don’t agree that you can be a writer by attending in workshops – they say a writer needs to be gifted. But I think it helps you to identify your problems.”
He nodded again. She was talking too much, and avoided looking at his eyes while talking. It was evident she was trying to hide something – something that would make her insecure or vulnerable. When his coffee arrived, her crimson lips and the pair of dark brown eyes were the only colours he saw through the colourless smoke rising from his cup. He did not know what this

feeling could be called. But he had felt this connection with this young woman—a closeness that was distant at the same time.
“How would you comment on my writing?” she asked, this time looking at his eyes. “I know I’ve still got a lot to improve, I want to know something real about it.”
“Your storytelling is promising, I must say, although I haven’t read much of your pieces. It seemed to me you write only when you feel it – that’s why the tone of your narrator appears much personal and involved.”
She lowered her eyes and gave a little nod. He forgot to sip into his coffee. He was confused. Did she get hurt by any of his words? He was only trying to be honest with his evaluation. Among all the participants of the workshop, it was her thoughts and mode of expression that felt unique to him.
“You’re right,” she roughly bit her lower lip, it pained him that she did so. “I only write when I’m euphoric. That’s why most of my pieces come out so subjective, even when I’m using third person omniscient narrator.”
“Euphoric?”
“It’s a Greek word — euphoria — to interpret a feeling of happiness which is not entirely happiness. You feel it, but you can’t define. You know why it is happening, yet you can’t find how.”

He knew what euphoria was. Yet he let her explain it for him.
There was no smoke rolling out of his cup, but a delicate warmth lingered onto his fingertips.
“Then. Should I try to be more objective while writing... more concrete?” She tucked a piece of tissue paper inside her empty coffee cup. “Being euphoric cannot help in the long run, can it?”
He tried to argue against her statement - she did not need to be concrete, and she should only write when she feels euphoric. Her subjectivity was overwhelming, and it was not something that every young writer could master.
But he could not find anything else to say. When she said goodbye after an urgent call from home, he found himself still holding his cold cup - expecting the cafe’s song to warm the coffee – “Who’s gonna drive you home tonight?”

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