

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Dispatches of independence

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NAMRATA

The Bangladesh Liberation War fought in 1971 created history in many ways. In addition to the formation of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, it was also what changed the ties between India and Pakistan, forever.

Author Manash Ghosh was one of the few Indian journalists who covered the entire event from the very beginning till the historical surrender of Pakistan on December 17, 1971.

for eight years to Bangladesh for his anti-government writings, and despite being blacklisted by the then PM of Bangladesh, Begum Zia, he went on to become the country's 'Manashda'.

The shades of grey on the muted cover of *Bangladesh War: Report from Ground Zero* (Niyogi Books, 2021) sets the tone of the book perfectly. It presents a black and white picture of shoes and helmets of army officials lined up before a wall with only doors and windows visible, depicting the missing men who have either been killed in the war or have been

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"What the Jews were to Hitler, the Hindus were to Niazi", Ghosh writes. He narrates the series of incidents with its ugliness and nakedness intact. While the atrocities and the loss of lives are traumatic to read and relive, it is heartwarming to read about the love and support extended to Ghosh. As it is in any war, women and children continue to be the number one casualty, closely followed by the poor. It is devastating to recall the horrors of the war and witness the brutalities at close quarters in these pages.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's planning and preparation, which eventually led to the birth of Bangladesh, are inspiring to read about. He worked on it painstakingly for three decades, liaising with three successive Indian prime ministers, his goal clear, which helped him in gaining a mass following.

The book also stands as a testimony to the struggles of a journalist on the field. Ghosh faced immense challenges, threats, and attacks while reporting this war for years. Yet, he overcame it all to become the much-loved 'Manashda' for everyone, from the common man to the powerful political leaders of the country, owing to his passion for this cause and the desire to report nothing but the truth.

This book is a recollection of tumultuous events at a visceral level. Ghosh has captured memories, mistakes, and mind games brilliantly in his narration. The series of incidents both before and after the war are extremely important in the geopolitical history of the subcontinent. Though it was a war for freedom, it impacted South Asia in countless ways.

Namrata is a writer, a digital marketing professional, and an editor at *Kitaab* literary magazine.

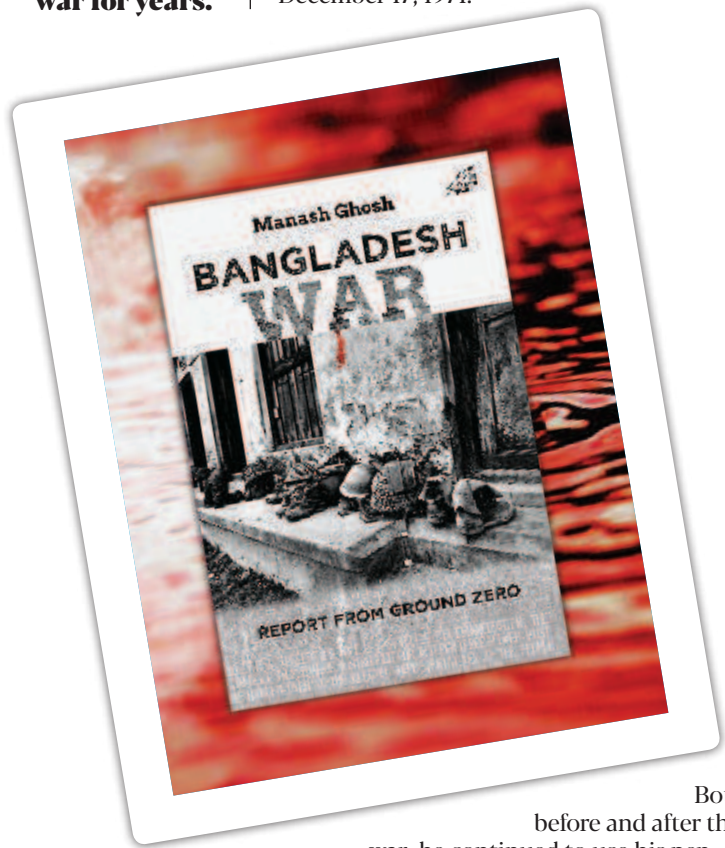
With a detailed sequence of events, accompanied by pictures, dates, and names, Bangladesh War resembles a journalist's diary. Ghosh's tone is neither that of a critic nor a judge. He is neutral throughout the book, like a keen observer who just narrates what he has seen.

taken as prisoners. Only a splatter of blood represents the aftermath of a war.

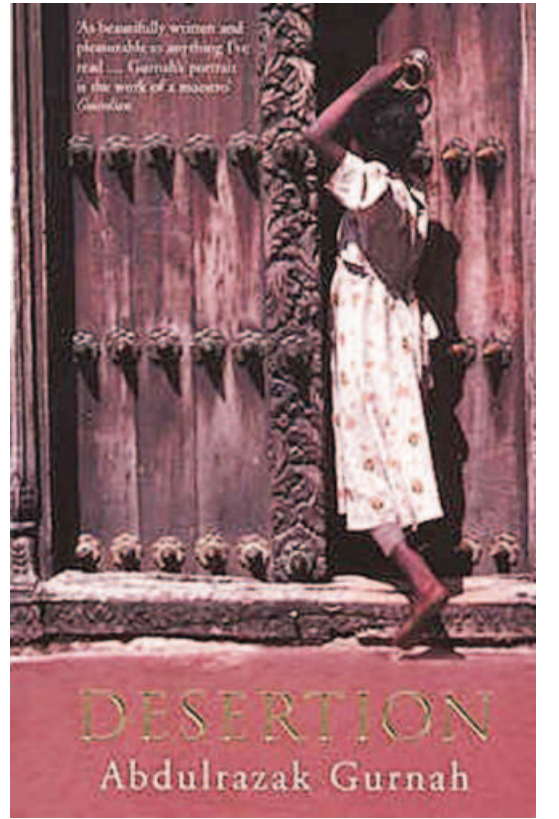
In his book, Ghosh gives us an insider view of how the muktijuddho was planned meticulously for years before being executed, starting with a detailed background of how it all began, to taking the reader deep inside East Pakistan.

Ghosh was on great terms with senior Awami League leaders at the time and commanders of the Mukti Bahini. This has ensured that many hitherto unknown facts have been revealed in the book, making it a gripping read. One of the many things that the writer brings to the reader's attention is that the upheaval behind the war had been triggered by a natural disaster.

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Both before and after the war, he continued to use his pen and fight for the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh. Ghosh was denied a visa



BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Abdulrazak Gurnah's 'Desertion': The politics of leaving

NUSRAT HUQ

Zanzibar-born (now Tanzania) writer Abdulrazak Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021. One of his 10 published novels, *Desertion* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005) is about—like many of his other works—colonialism, racism, cultural and religious biases, migration, and of course, desertion.

The story spans from 1899 in Mombasa to the 1950s in Zanzibar. In part one of three we are introduced to Hassanali, a shopkeeper, his wife Malika, and his sister Rehana. The first page describes Hassanali walking towards the mosque at dawn to recite the azaan, his heart filled with piety. Just then, he comes across a half-dead European slumped in a heap in front of the mosque, and Hassanali's sense of Muslim charity and brotherhood drives him to take the European to his home nearby, where his wife and sister help to revive him. Next, the inevitable happens: Rehana and Martin Pearce fall in love. She is from a conservative Muslim household and he, a modern European, a member of the ruling class. Their forbidden love becomes a part of the appeal of the story.

The narrow, dilapidated alleyways and the mosque depicted in the book indicate that they live in the less-favoured Muslim neighbourhood in Zanzibar. The rows of houses spell squalor and poverty, a replication of, say, the mudir dokan in Bangladesh. Near it was the neighbourhood tea stall which was, in a way, the pulse of the neighbourhood.

In a secondary plot line, the three representatives of the British Empire converse, over pegs of whiskey, about how justified they are to rule over 'savages' who do not know any better. Martin Pearce joins the District Officer Frederick Turner and the Estate manager Burton in these conversations. They would never socialise with the Bohra Gujratis, Arabs, or the rest who they termed as "mongrel natives."

In these conversations, Gurnah makes a significant reference to Shelley's poem "Ozymandias", the oriental despot. The mighty and powerful can one day turn to dust and ruin. Frederick reflects, though, that the British Empire had many more years of greatness ahead of them before such ruin ever befell them. Making an interesting comparison between colonising Africa and colonising India, he says, "Indian ways are antiquated, whereas in Africa there is nothing but beasts and savagery."

The second part of the book, set in 1950s Zanzibar, is about the brothers Amin and Rashid, their sister Farida, and their parents. Amin trains to be a school teacher while Rashid aspires to study in Cambridge or Oxford, hoping to improve his situation. The education system is further commented on when we are told that Rehana is not competent enough to get admission into the subsidised state school and a private school was not affordable for her, so she turns to dress-making.

Gurnah's motivation to name the book *Desertion* is made evident with young men like Rashid who desert their native countries for the comforts of the developed countries they migrate to. White men like Pearce desert their lovers. Jamila is abandoned not just by Amin, but by two other husbands before him. One point of view that is debatable is that the British "deserted" their colonies like the islands of Zanzibar before the time was right. I wonder if there is any right time to decolonise. Should the British have left India later than 1947 and would that have reduced the number of deaths of Hindus and Muslims?

The book's language is remarkable and the characters well-drawn. Gurnah, admirably, does not glorify Martin Pearce or Amin as heroes. Like most people in the 1950s and the decades before that, these characters give in to societal pressures and opinions. Even today, you may find yourself under similar pressures. The story appears disjointed at first, but in the end the loose ends are tied up, albeit with some haste. The richness and relevance of the text make it a very worthy and enjoyable read.

Nusrat Huq is a teacher at Sunbeams and a member of The Reading Circle (TRC).

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

From Feni to New Zealand: Trinkets of a life lived

NAZIFA RAIDAH

The thing about the tales of 'modern' women is that they are largely put into boxes. They are often riddled with individual plights, struggles and of course, the final thundering redemption song. Although there is truth sewn even within those stories, it is one that is predictable to the reader. This is where Mastura Tasnim's *Silent Rebellion* (Chaitonno, 2020) offers a fresh set of eyes.

This collection of 30 poems was born within the stirring times of the pandemic—taking even the author by surprise. The birth was unintentional on the author's part, as it was her brother who had neatly grafted all the poems, turning it into a fine piece of reading, eventually presenting it to her as a gift. And for that effort, readers can rejoice since this honest, funny and raw piece of work has surfaced on the face of the earth.

Reading this book gave me an essence of looking through a bioscope, where the author, through each piece of poetry, gives the reader a sense of all the places she has hopped to—starting from the backwater towns of Feni and

Jessore and then on a trip overseas in Singapore, and in New Zealand where she pursued her higher education in public policy. There's a push and pull within all of those journeys. One can sense the author's struggle—of being everywhere and nowhere all at once, in all the places and faces that felt

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like home, and all the goodbyes that were said. The book stitches a subtle yet raw imagery of the stubbornly quintessential 20s when life changes rapidly.

However, even with this rushed mindset, Mastura's penning is sincere. She crafts the details like

a watchsmith, a representation of which could be found in the very first piece of the book, named "Feni". The author paints the town with a great deal of empathy and introspection. I was filled with intrigue as she coloured the most mundane aspects of Feni with great beauty, be it with her observations of Raipur Girls' College or the streetlights keeping away the dark. It also places the reader into the shoes of people living on the outskirts, where there's a lot of quiet but very loud dreams.

In "Rush", the reader gets a glimpse of the writer's playful world-building, where she stretches out the boundaries of imagination. "There was once a dear old man/ With ninja chops that hurt a thief/ He pulled a onesie over his eyes/ And beat him till he couldn't bleed", she writes. Her word play rings of nostalgia; it felt like I was looking at things like I did when I was once a child.

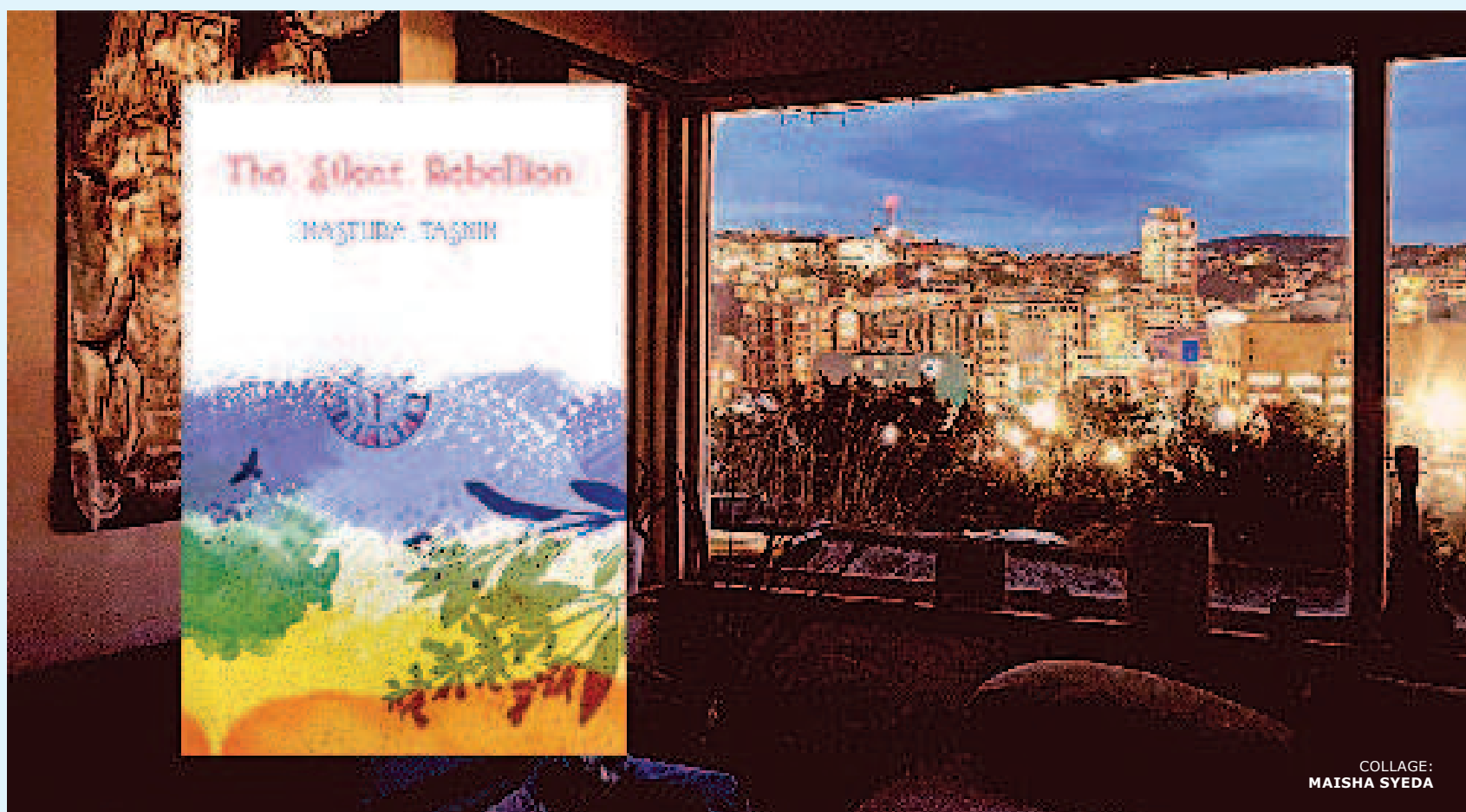
Yet most of her pieces also feel like they were conversations she was having with herself—reflections, advice and the constant checking back with reality that kept the writer grounded in every new city that

welcomed her. This is reflected in her piece titled "Home", in which she confronts her own isolation in freedom. She walks the reader through the prophecy of her own life and the constant strife of meeting expectations, all the while fearing that none of it may come true.

Flipping through the pages of *Silent Rebellion*, one may find themselves resonating with many of the pieces, as they are written from a place that is all too familiar to us all—the struggle of fitting in, being of worth and meeting our own expectations. Mastura lets us know that we're not alone in our struggle, and thus comforts us with her words.

When asked about the motivation behind her writing, she says, "Transitioning into adulthood, with a full time job, and then transitioning into monk-hood with the scholarship, life went by. Although it felt like cheating writing in free-verse, I thought there was no other way to paint it, especially since the only person who I could speak to was myself."

Nazifa Raidah is a sub editor at The Daily Star.



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA