

BOOK NEWS

ULAB Literary Salon to discuss Bangladeshi short story anthologies

STAR BOOKS REPORT

After hosting the Bangladesh launch of the novel *Cyber Mage*, the critically acclaimed novel by science fiction writer Saad Z Hossain, the third ULAB Literary Salon will acknowledge Bangladesh's passion for short stories by showcasing three remarkable recent collections: *When the Mango Tree Blossomed* (edited by Niaz Zaman), *Our Many Longings* (edited by Sohana Manzoor) and *Golden Bangladesh at 50* (edited by Shazia Omar). The event will take place on Saturday, July 23 between 5 pm – 7 pm at The Auditorium, 6th Floor, ULAB Research Building, House 56, Road 4/A Dhanmondi.

Noted editors and writers Rifat Munim, former Literary Editor at *Dhaka Tribune*, and Sohana Manzoor, Literary Editor at *The Daily Star* and Associate Professor of English, ULAB, will lead the conversation with other writers, including several contributors to these volumes. They will discuss their work, this vibrant literary art form, and the ever-enriching context of Bangladesh.

All three collections will be available for display and sale of signed copies at the venue. ULAB Literary Salon is open to all.

The Lit Salon is an initiative of the Department of English and Humanities at ULAB—University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. The Lit Salon is a first of its kind literary platform in Dhaka to bring together writers, readers and publishers from Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia in an informal, engaging setting.

Once a month, each month, the ULAB Lit Salon offers Dhaka's literary minded a Saturday evening of book launches of leading authors, book readings, discussions, book signing, and sale of books at a discount by Bookworm Bangladesh and ULAB Press, ULAB Lit Salon's partners.

More information is available on the ULAB Literary Salon Facebook and Instagram pages.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Getting a grip on the Bangladesh development narrative

MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

The celebration of 50 years of Bangladesh's independence has been a welcome opportunity to revisit and put on the spotlight Bangladesh's developmental experience over the past five decades, from a diverse range of perspectives. As is to be expected, a number of books have been published on this occasion covering the broad theme of economic development and dealing with a wide spectrum of areas. However, as the writers of the volume, *Bangladesher Orthonoitik Unnoyoner Gatidhara: Subarnajayantite Fray Dekha* (University Press Limited, 2022) rightly point out in the preface of the book, regrettably only a few scholars have ventured to write books in Bangla. For this, the authors—three of the most highly acclaimed economists writing on the Bangladesh economy—deserve to be particularly appreciated. And one should hasten to also add that they—Rushidan Islam Rahman, Rizwanul Islam and Quazi Shahabuddin—have penned their interpretation and assessment in such lucid and eminently readable Bangla that even readers unfamiliar with the complex concepts of economics and development studies will feel comfortable going through the volume and learning from the excellent analysis and discussion that the authors offer.

The book poses a number of questions: which factors have contributed to Bangladesh's growth? What were the drivers of the turning points in the growth? What were the trade-offs involved? What are the puzzles that call for explanation? And what are the emergent risks and challenges? Drawing on the analyses, the book then offers a number of policy suggestions in view of the journey forward.

In undertaking this task, the authors dive deep to identify which factors and policies had triggered success, where new challenges and tensions are emerging and how these will need to be addressed with appropriate policies, fit-for-purpose institutions, by stimulating and incentivising the private sector and through capacity building of labour market participants.

The arguments and analyses put forward in each of the nine chapters of the volume are based on most recent available data and evidence and survey results, the richness of analyses also lying in the extensive reference to global literature to substantiate, refute and challenge conventional explanations and draw useful conclusions.

The authors point to important transitions, from aid-dependence to trade-dependence, import substitution to export-orientation, subsistence farming to commercial cropping and changes in the labour market, by relating



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these to shifts in policies and practices. This allows readers to appreciate the path that Bangladesh has crossed, with deeper understanding about the causal relationships and the associated drivers. Thus, when the authors discuss GDP growth, investment, employment generation and agricultural production and food security, they contextualise these with issues of poverty and distribution, women's participation in labour force, technological changes and human development and issues of structural transformation, and relate these to policies and actors.

The authors argue that in industry, the challenge is to encourage private sector investment by incentivising product diversification and broadening the export basket underpinned by upgradation of skills and transfer of technology. In agriculture the challenge is to raise productivity, go for crop diversification and deepen backward and forward linkage of agriculture with industry. Going forward, agriculture will need to be less dependent on weather, industry will need to be founded on a more diversified base, public sector investment will need to be cost-effective and private sector investment will need to be driven by skills and productivity, the authors argue.

While discussing issues of investment, the authors discuss why efficiency factors assume heightened interest if Bangladesh is to remain competitive both in domestic and foreign markets. This is very pertinent from the vantage point of Bangladesh's upcoming LDC graduation. They convincingly argue why not just employment creation but creating opportunities for decent employment will be increasingly important for Bangladesh; why women's greater participation has emerged as an urgent priority; why crop diversification has become a necessity for food and nutritional security at a time of shifting

consumer behaviour in the backdrop of rise in purchasing power, also more so in the backdrop of the current rise in global food prices. Backed by evidence, they show why in agriculture a new technological frontier will need to be opened as the advantages of the HYV-driven technological frontier are almost exhausted. One is, however, tempted to ask if Bangladesh is poised for a Lewisian turning point.

The authors draw attention to a number of puzzles. Why did the savings rate show signs of decline at a time when poverty rates were coming down sharply? Was it because dissaving by the poor also contributed to poverty reduction? Based on global literature, the authors note why a fall in inequality has emerged as a precondition for sustainable reduction of poverty in Bangladesh. If that be the case, then the question arises as to whether in Bangladesh, where income inequality has been on the rise, the fast pace of poverty reduction will be sustainable in future. The authors do not elaborate but raise an important research question.

It is to be noted that in undertaking their analyses, the authors have been constrained by the lack of reliable and up to date data, which they go on to identify as a major weakness of Bangladesh's official statistical system. They rightly point out the importance of generating up to date data, data reliability and data integrity for sound policymaking.

Indeed, this is a very timely publication deserving attention and appreciation of both experts and general readers keen to understand the Bangladesh narrative with its shifts and turns, and how the country can sustain the current momentum and realise its developmental aspirations in the context of a fast-changing domestic scenario and dynamic global developments.

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BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

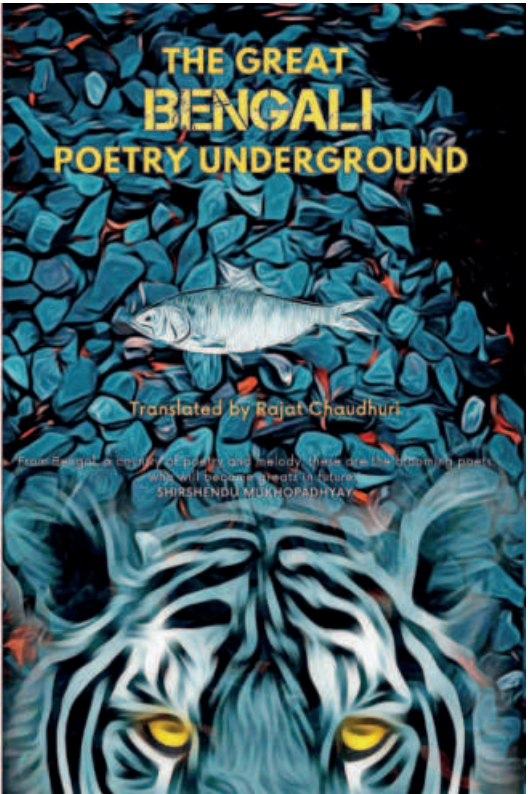
More poets than crows

MINHAZ MUHAMMAD

What is underground poetry?—you may ask. Editor and translator Rajat Chaudhuri offers somewhat of an answer in a sparse introduction to this book. During the late '90s, he spent a formidable chunk of his time mingling with poets from Kolkata. They were primarily writing for the love of the form and the way the language made them feel. But then things changed as they often do, life went on, and these poets never quite made it to the mainstream of Bengali poetry publishing. There's hardly any patronage for writing, let alone for poetry, that too in Bangla, a name that stands for both the language and the land. And as the saying goes over here—there are more poets in Bengal than crows. I suspect that there is some truth in this. Our parents would share life-lessons couched in rhymes in the form of bedtime stories. In school we would be forced to memorise and write them in exam scripts. While some certainly develop a hostile relationship to the medium, and understandably so, there's a great number of us, who see its power and what it can do. Think about all the protest poems, some of which are presented as songs, think about the influence of Rabindranath Tagore or Kazi Nazrul Islam. Then think about the time you fell in love and wanted to profess it, but instead of writing a novel, or a story, you wrote a poem. It was probably a bad poem, but nevertheless, even you are aware of the value of the form, and what it can accomplish.

Chaudhuri picks some of these poets from both sides of Bengal, who despite the trial and tribulation life threw at them, never stopped writing. Unlike us, they kept honing their craft, publishing at avenues like little magazines. And then came social media which granted them a second life. Chaudhuri locates 'underground' as these spaces, far from the mainstream and deep within the terrains, one that doesn't sustain but nourishes writers and their writings. And in hopes for new audiences and greater engagement, he selected some of their poems and translated them into English.

What comes across in the translations, from the very beginning, are the poems' distinctive Bengali origin, in the way their atmosphere has



been constructed, the elements that have been borrowed. Arpan Chakraborty writes about his first encounter with the summer storm—Kaalbaishakhi—in a poem titled "I Wish". As with many of his poems, this too is free-verse, written compactly, its architecture built on image, one on top of another. But what makes this one memorable is the way it gauges the body and its immediate response to different senses. The writer hears the clouds rumble, feels scared, gets stunned in silence and recalls the past where he would walk in the rain. There's an unmistakable longing to get back to a state of innocence that's no longer available, yet, the success, as stated in the last line—"Today you're in the spark of light that crosses the darkness / Don't you remember!" is in the pursuit of convincing the mind to travel to childhood through memory.

Atanu Chakraborty's poems feature a wide range of characters, from the mythical—Draupadi—to the ordinary, everyday man. But his primary concern seems to be the corporeal body: its various functions and adornments. The poem titled "Body" recalls Jibanananda Das to mind. Perhaps it was designed as an homage, at least any conscious reader of Bangla poetry will take it as such—body being one of Das's favourite topics to explore. While it would be unfair to compare anybody to Das's mighty and singular talents, in the context of the book, this poem offers very little. Its rhyming feels forced, perhaps due to the clunky translation.

In terms of "formal experimentation", the collection brings a few prose poems to the table. The one by Novera Hossain titled "Arrow-pierced Hornbill" takes advantage of the form. The result is long and meandering. It's ominous in its tone, achieved through short and clipped sentences. It's a story—in the way a poem can be called one—about birds, nature, city, and their existence and place in the world. But it also acts as an allegory, a warning bell about death, decay and destinations. Nevertheless, it seems to suffer from the same illness as much of the other poems. It uses its economy to create simple images that are at best mildly interesting, and at worst repetitive and boring.

If this collection proves anything, then it's that Bangalees will take to poetry like flies take to freshly cut mangoes on a hot summer day. But then, this can't all be it, can it?

Minhaz Muhammad is a contributor.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The human cost of progress

SHOAIB ALAM

Malaysia's economic progress has long fascinated the aspirational among us. More than 4,000 wealthy Bangladeshis have invested in Malaysia's expensive 10-year-residency visa programme, eager to bask in its tropical shores and sleek modern infrastructure. Since the 1980s, poorer Bangladeshis have relocated to Malaysia in droves for work until labour import from Bangladesh was banned in 2018. Nearly 800,000 Bangladeshis are still toiling away in Malaysia's plantations, staffing factories, and constructing skyscrapers, symbols of economic might, in jobs that Malaysians are too prosperous to do.

This formidable ascent has its costs. In 2015, authorities discovered multiple mass graves deep in the forests of the Malaysia-Thailand border. The victims, migrants from Bangladesh and Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar, had been starved, raped, and tortured before being killed by human traffickers. It's likely they had dug the very graves in which they were later hastily buried. Under the tinted glass canopies of rising Asia, hidden in its gleaming concrete jungles, lies a haunting tragedy, one that only fiction can—and must—unearth.

In *We, the Survivors* (2019), Malaysian writer, Tash Aw, dissects his country's transformation with tact and sensitivity. He writes not from the lens of a hip "KL urbanite" but a provincial man, Ah Hock, whose Chinese ancestors fled persecution to



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settle in Malaysia. This is a deliberate and strategic choice: Ah Hock's life mirrors the fate of the migrants in his country in ways big and small. In the fishing village where he grows up, Ah Hock receives little education and has few prospects. Like millions across the continent, he is locked out of the Asian dream. The only road out leads to a bustling cosmopolitan city.

It is in Kuala Lumpur, working alongside migrants, that Ah Hock finally finds being Malaysian to be an advantage. The foreigners release him from the curse of manual labour; in a slew of low-paid jobs, he is quickly promoted to supervise them. Ah Hock watches their bodies waste away while he marries up, moves into a new house, and plans for an even bigger one. Tash Aw is particularly adept at capturing the toll of relentless manual labour on the mind and body. Passage after

passage describes the blood and sweat, the physical and mental degeneration imported from abroad.

It is fitting, therefore, that a sudden labour shortage finally puts a break on Ah Hock's social climb. Workers with papers, it turns out, are in short supply. In desperation, Ah Hock turns to the black market, a crucial mistake. When his attempt to crack a deal goes wrong, Ah Hock ends up brutally murdering a Bangladeshi broker. Though he is eventually caught, it takes the police two months to nab Ah Hock because the victim is, in his own words, "That type of person. A foreigner. An illegal. Someone with dark skin."

Thankfully, it isn't in Ah Hock's nature to make excuses for his crimes. At the start of *We, the Survivors*, he has recently been released and approached by Sui Min, a researcher and US returnee, seeking to turn his story into

a book. Much of this novel takes the shape of Sui Min's notes as Ah Hock downloads his past to her. Urbane, idealistic, but ultimately disconnected, her elite, socially conscious rage against an unfair system is a necessary foil to Ah Hock's resigned acquiescence to what fate offers him. Their nuanced tensions lay bare the chasms between Malaysia's contemporary social classes.

Unfortunately, the novel sacrifices some of this febrile forward motion to take us back to its crucial set piece, Ah Hock's crime scene. Some narrative tension fizzles out in lengthy flashbacks. Nevertheless, careful construction gives Tash Aw licence to rove through the myriad injustices of globalisation. Ah Hock is, ultimately, the novel's namesake, one of the survivors. In Tash Aw's novel, as in real life, the migrants don't fare quite as well.

With remittance as one of our chief economic engines, Malaysia is an especially important market, hosting one of the largest Bangladeshi diasporas. A recent deal will enable Bangladesh to send close to half a million more workers over the next five years. As we reap this windfall, we must look modern migration's harsh realities in the eye. Few novelists can show us with depth and heart that which we would rather not see. *We, the Survivors* deserves to be widely read in Bangladesh.

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