

WORTH A RE-READ: NONFICTION

Within the narrative folds of
‘AMAR DEKHA RAJNITIR
PONCHASH BOCHHOR’

A discussion session organised by the Abul Mansur Ahmad Smriti Parishad recently commemorated the 124th birth anniversary of Bangladeshi writer, journalist and politician, Abul Mansur Ahmad (born on September 3, 1898). This article translates and condenses a speech delivered on Ahmad’s political memoir, first published in 1969.

“Throughout the history he relates, Abul Mansur Ahmad is present as a pragmatic observer. His language is clean and simple. The reader can understand the text without having to struggle too hard, even though Ahmad’s ideas are in fact deeply, deceptively complex.”

MOHAMMAD AZAM

Abul Mansur Ahmad grew up during a time when the legal and political parameters of our community, particularly for Bengali Muslims, were being framed. He wrote about topics that are dominant discourses even today, in the time and space which we now inhabit, and in the proposals and programs within which we operate. This is why he remains so relevant.

Ahmad was a positivist and a pragmatic. He was always firm and clear on his stances, and it is through such a perspective that he viewed and analysed the topics of which he wrote. Others have called this quality honesty. I like to call it conviction. His convictions lent his writing clarity; clarity brought them closer to “truth”.

Theories of reading and text are my areas of expertise—it is from this lens that I would like to offer some formulae for reading the works of Abul Mansur Ahmad, particularly his memoir, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochhor* (1969).

We will, of course, look at this text as a narrative—what in Bangla we refer to as a *bayan* or *biboroni*. A narrative is shaped by events taking place in a particular time. Abul Mansur Ahmad, in *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochhor*, selected prime events to offer suitable titles for chapters and sub-chapters of the book, and thus ensured that readers would perceive that particular time in a rather smooth way. This also allowed Ahmad to achieve a narrative smoothness, and coherent transitions, in his text.

We know today that every narrative, no matter how objective it seems, has its own tones and tunes which bear the author’s subjective assessment on the narrated issues. This is present in this memoir, but on top of that, Ahmad’s narrative in this book is particularly interesting because of his focus on what he referred to as *kaltamami*—a review and analysis of the historical events he recounts. All these narratives and analyses are grounded by reason, but not by theory.

Throughout the history he relates in this text and elsewhere, he is present as a pragmatic observer. His language is clean and simple. And so the reader can understand the text without having to struggle too hard, even though Ahmad’s ideas are in fact deeply, deceptively complex. It is reminiscent of the writing of Nirad C Chaudhuri. We can mention here that among the political and cultural texts produced in Bangladesh, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochhor* is the most widely referenced in local and global academia.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

One of the other significant features of the book is the utmost centrality of the author himself. No one other than Rabindranath Tagore, as I have stated elsewhere, could have authored the novel *Gora* (1910)—one cannot simply approximate the events recounted in the book, one has to have experienced them from the central position that Tagore was situated in. Similarly, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochhor* could have been written only by Abul Mansur Ahmad.

Very few individuals enjoy the opportunity of being in such central roles, and for such long stretches of time, as those occupied by Ahmad. This began from a young age, when he joined the Krishok Proja Party as a veteran organizer, with his political ideology eventually shaped by British-Indian politics and particularly the political process of Congress.

He then ascended to the power centre through the politics of the Pakistan movement and Muslim League, the Awami Muslim League and finally Awami League. Even after leaving active politics and until his last days, he had the opportunity to maintain a very close and pivotal connection with all the political parties and state-related activities. These positions allowed him to take on the role of a political philosopher in his memoir.

Consistently, throughout the text, Ahmad presents his philosophies for readers, though not at the surface level. It seems that the text manages some crucial complexities and dialectics in a very coherent, implicit way. One of these might be narrated as the contradiction between theory and practice. Secondly, he was persistently aware of the relationship between

the universal and particular.

Once, in the first essay of his famous book, *Bangladesher Culture*, he defined marvelously the universal as ‘civilization’, while equating ‘culture’ with the particular. In his narrative, however, Ahmad always prioritized practice over theory, and between the universal and the particular, he has always put more emphasis on the particular. In the deeper layers of the text, both theory and the universal play important roles.

At first glance, it seems that Abul Mansur Ahmad is describing and evaluating political events only, as they unfolded. Through a more conscious reading, however, readers come to realise how the explicit particularities are built on implicit theories of both the political and politics. *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochhor* unfolds a very complex process of how the people create cultures, how cultures create political orders, how orders lead to the formation of political parties, how these parties engage with political activities, and how this in turn shapes the central powers in a state.

If we want to understand anything about politics from Abul Mansur Ahmad’s political memoir, it would be that Ahmad conceived of party activities as part of a democratic state structure. The state-structure must reflect the cultures of people, and it will do so only when it takes a secular-democratic shape, an adjective which Abul Mansur Ahmad chose to describe his own political philosophy.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

In the aftermath
of the Palestinian
catastrophe

RUSHMILA SHEHREEN KHAN

In its transition from five sweltering hot days with a stoic Israeli platoon commander, to the narrative of a jittery woman living in occupied Ramallah, *Minor Detail* (Text Publishing, 2020) by Adania Shibli and translated by Elisabeth Jaquette, weaves together a story in two parts that echo off each other. Shibli’s piece masterfully ties together concepts of military violence, war, brutality, and erasure.

In the first half of the book, we are in Negev, 1949, seeing everything through the eyes of the platoon commander and witnessing the gang-rape and murder of a Bedouin girl. The end of the Nakba—the catastrophe that rendered 750,000 Palestinians displaced—is upon Palestine and a group of soldiers are sent on a mission to rid the southern border of any remaining Arabs. When the commander is bitten by a spider on the first night, in a psychedelic few pages, we are given gruesome details of his festering wound and increasing physical pain—the wound almost a manifestation of his progressively abhorrent character and something indelibly evil growing within him.

Despite his worsening conditions, his daily patrols remain unwavered, and when, on one of these missions, the soldiers find a group of Bedouins in the desert, they kill all of them—save a girl and a dog. The dog’s ominous howls remain a constant



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

linkage between the two parts of the book, at times acting as protector for the Bedouin girl. That night, over a festive dinner, the commander organises the gang-rape of the girl, who they kill hours later. This is where the first part ends, leaving the reader feeling disappointed and incredibly angry. It feels wrong to have read something so inhuman through the eyes of the offender while knowing almost nothing about the victim. It seems cruel to just call her the “Bedouin girl”. This is Shibli’s stroke of genius—it is exactly the sort of restlessness that needs to be carried over by the reader into the second half to truly understand our protagonist.

A nervy woman, born 25 years later on the same date as the gang rape, becomes obsessed with the incident after coming across it in an article. She is hell-bent on finding out more about the Bedouin girl. The characters of *Minor Detail*, though disarranged, are very stubborn. The authoritarian regime of occupied Palestine does not stop her from borrowing a colleague’s ID and heading towards the museums in Jerusalem.

This book is an essential read to understand the extent of the erasure of Palestinian history after the Nakba and life under tyranny in its cities, where buildings blow-up in the middle of a work day next to your office.

We accompany her in a rental car on the strict roads of Palestine, our—the readers’—hearts beating in unison at every checkpoint. She follows an Israeli map and occasionally a Palestinian one; peering into the heart of a land that once was. Ransacked villages, remnants of wiped-out homes, streets newly named in Hebrew, a city built on displacement.

We never truly find out who the Bedouin girl was, except that she was a bi-product of the Palestinian dispossession whose story relied on the word of the opponent.

Shibli uses verbose but constricted story-telling, a form of prose that encapsulates the essence of her anxiety-ridden yet stubborn protagonist. She relies on inanimate objects as anchors and to draw parallels between the two halves. A pack of chewing gum distracts the protagonist in her travels. The sand beneath their feet and the howls of the dog evoke the same uneasiness in the characters. The stench of petrol looms above the Bedouin girl and our protagonist as though they are connected somehow.

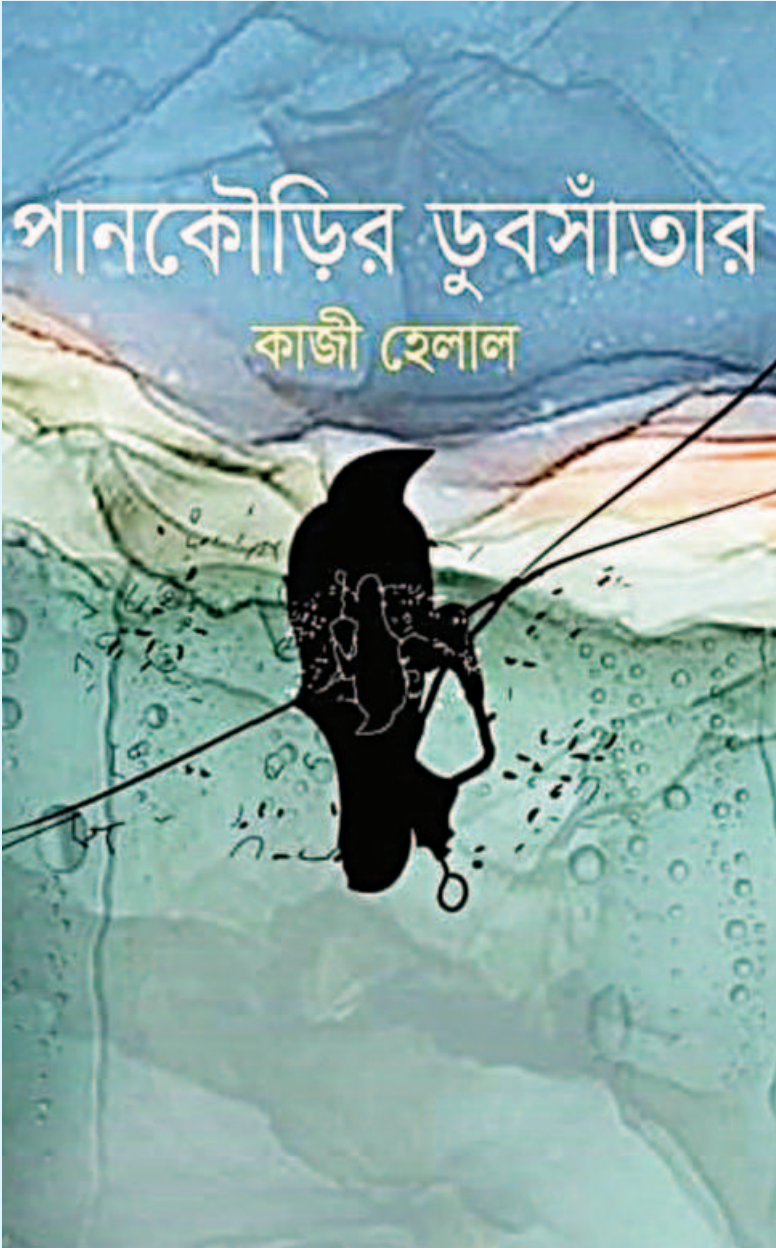
This book is an essential read to understand the extent of the erasure of Palestinian history after the Nakba and life under tyranny in its cities where buildings blow-up in the middle of a work day next to your office. In a conversation with Madeleine Thien on Brookline Booksmith, when asked what life was like in lockdown at her home in Berlin, she said, “It’s almost like Palestine,” she added, “It was a strange feeling, as if the body suddenly remembers something”.

Minor Detail ends as mercilessly as you would expect a story like this to end. It shakes the reader just as it did in the first part. It lays the truth bare and lets you take from it what you will. Shibli traces the footprints of destruction and dehumanization and leaves you with something angry in the pit of your stomach.

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BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

A deep dive into a poet’s mind



NAZIFA RAIDAH

Writer Kazi Helal’s pen leaked poetry from the young age of 14. His words would compile poems of love, his current moods and experiences to the best of his abilities. But like many other writers’ creations, his words too went under the knife.

For Helal, the chopped-off words acted as discouragement, since for him, it was those very words that bore his signature, an essence of his identity.

When he moved to Canada in the ‘90s, the beat of his poetry had died down to keep up with the hymn of survival. He had lost touch almost completely with his craft, so much so that he wondered if he even had it in him.

But even so, for the sake of writing, he wrote.

When the pandemic hit, Helal batted off the dust of his desk and sat down to write. Sitting from a foreign land, the ink flowed again.

The book *Pankourir Doobshatar* (GronthoShopto, 2022) has been compiled and almost reads eerily like a journal. A particularly lovely touch was the date and place stamp under (almost) every poem, that gives the reader a glimpse into the frame of his mind.

The introductory poems—“Dui Shobder Mahakabbo” and “Janani Upakhyan”—act as symbols of the writers’ longing for his motherland and the waves of emotion he feels about the country’s independence. In the former, he describes the weight of “Joy Bangla” in the life of every Bangali—how it had the strength to unite and defy powers that were larger than us.

In “Janani Upakhyan”, the writer describes, with beautiful imagery, the ties of the Bangladeshi people with their land—how it inspired the sacrifice of life for the sake of freedom during the Liberation War, and how, even now, like a candle that never burns out, it awakens the spirit of Bangalis

to stand out from the rubble and proudly hoist their flag.

In most of his works, however, readers would find reflections of his greatest confrontations in life. Echoes of this can be found in “Ishorer notun proggaapon”, where he writes from the perspective of God’s reflection on his creations. In “Mukhomukhi Mukhosh”, the writer plays out existentialism through the use of masks. He writes from the roles of politicians, artists, poets, farmers, teachers, and students, and wonders if children from their cradle are made to wear masks. And do we, then, as grown individuals, end up spending our lives lacking an understanding of ourselves?

It isn’t until we come across “Bornobader Bishbrikkho” that we understand how conscious the writer is of contemporary issues and how much the geopolitical tensions of the West have stirred him. He pays tribute to the late George Floyd, who was the victim of police brutality, immediately after his death, sitting from a corner of Minneapolis on May 26. In “Monikornikar Torbari”, “Shesh Manushtir Golpo”, “Mangal Pandey, Shadhinatar Ogronayok”, we find traces of history and the writer’s prolific penning of his sociological past. We revisit the past and the identities of the heroes that emancipated us, or at least paved the way for rebellion against the British occupation and inspired the fight for our sovereignty.

Kazi Helal is masterful in his word play, giving us the most complicated truths of life and his own reflections, in the most uncomplicated manner. He writes in a way that calls out to his readers to take a dive into his world, as he holds their hand through the journey. Maybe, in essence, that is the deepdive he’s asking us to take—to find ourselves in his work.

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