

BOOK NEWS
Rising dollar prices impact book trade

EMRAN MAHFUZ AND RABIUL KAMAL

With the price of paper rising worldwide, the prices of printed books, magazines and newspapers are increasing rapidly. Printed books are becoming inaccessible to readers. As a result, publishers are fearing that the number of readers and buyers will gradually decrease.

Perhaps the most crucial time to sell books in Bangladesh is during the Amar Ekushey Book Fair in February, preparations for which are underway right now. Although the paper for books is produced in the country, the mills are dependent for their supply of ink and plate on foreign raw materials. The price of books is thus



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

subject to increase.

Mofiuddin, proprietor of Amanot Trade—a paper dealer in the capital's Nayabazar area—told *The Daily Star*: “If one rim (item) of local paper was earlier priced at BDT 1,300, the current price is BDT 1,900; glossy sticker paper was BDT 2,000, now it is BDT 3,000. Carbon paper was priced at BDT 2,400, now it is BDT 3,300; foreign offset was BDT 3,500, now it is BDT 4,850. This is happening as the price of paper fluctuates with the price of the dollar.”

“This will dampen people’s motivation to publish books. I think the overall crisis will have a negative impact,” said Mahrukh Mohiuddin, Managing Director of The University Press Limited (UPL).

Shahidul Islam Biju, owner of Pathak Shamabesh, added:

“The dollar price has been rising due to the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, which in turn is raising the price of books in Bangladesh. We have maintained our old prices so far, for the sake of our readers. But I don’t know how long I will be able to do this.”

Welcome Book Port owner, Asghar Zaidi, echoed, “We used to publish 500 books of fiction or poetry but have reduced the number to 300 and then 100 more recently.”

“If this situation continues, we will stop publishing books,” he concluded.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A chance encounter and the rest is history

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

I: THE BACKGROUND

Pierre-Alain Baud was at Theatre de la Ville in Paris by chance. He had just finished listening to a concert by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Party. Like many other foreign ears, before and since, he was mesmerised. He may not have understood the words, but the power of Nusrat’s voice left a mark in his heart that evening.

Serendipity had it, Pierre would meet Nusrat the next day at a railway station. From then, the two became friends. Pierre accompanied Nusrat in many of his concerts around the world.

In 2008, Pierre decided to pen his experience as a memoir in the French, *Le Messenger Du Qawwali* (Éditions Demi-Lune, 2008). The book is the first on Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan through western eyes, as the author humbly mentions in the preface.

An Urdu translation, *Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan: Qawwali Ka Payam Rasan* (Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2014) translated by Shaukat Niazi followed in 2014. A second translation followed in 2015—*Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan: The Voice of Faith* (HarperCollins India), by Renuka George.

Pierre Alain Baud’s book has now been translated into Bangla from the original French, *Shahenshah-e-Qawwali: Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan*, by Kazi Abdullah Al Mukhtar. It was published by Pathak Shamabesh, with support from BEXIMCO in September 2022.

II: THE BOOK

The organisation of chapters in the book is very well done. After a preface and after narrating their first meeting, Baud traces the historical roots of Qawwali in South Asia with emphasis on the Chisti Order. He narrates the religious and secular branches of Qawwali and delves into how it became synonymous with the identity of Pakistan soon after the 1947 partition.

The next chapter details Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan’s lineage over a few centuries. However, the main emphasis is on Nusrat’s father, Fateh Ali Khan Sr, who was the leader of the family Qawwali Party before and after the 1947 partition. In this chapter we see how the Khans separated themselves from other Qawwali parties through classical music and by improvising in tunes and singing in the local tongue (Punjabi).

Nusrat’s father never wanted his son to become a Qawwal. In the next two chapters, little anecdotes of the seen and the unseen dimensions of Sufi spiritualism describe why and how Fateh Ali Khan Sr’s dream did not materialise. Here we see the rise of Nusrat as a national icon in his country.

Nusrat’s journey outside South Asia and the South Asian diaspora starts in 1985 with the WOMAD festival in the UK where he met the label founder Peter Gabriel. Then came France, Tunisia, Brazil, Japan, and South Africa.

But this chapter has one gap. It makes no mention of Oriental Star Agency and Nusrat’s association with Mohammed Ayub. It was Ayub who introduced Nusrat to the Punjabi and Pakistani diaspora in Birmingham, which later opened other avenues that the book discusses nicely.

The next chapter narrates Nusrat’s

improvisation of Qawwali with different genres and the film industries in Hollywood and Bollywood. The final chapter narrates the final days of Nusrat’s short life and the legacy he left.

III: THE TRANSLATION

Kazi Abdullah Al Mukhtar grew up in a village in Thakurgaon. His father once brought two cassettes of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan from Dhaka. There was a collection of ‘filmi’ songs. Mukhtar fell in love with the voice like Pierre did some years before.

Serendipity worked for a second time. Mukhtar joined Alliance Française de Dhaka as a programme officer. Soon he met Pierre. Pierre gave Mukhtar the French book and asked if he would translate it into Bangla. That was it, although the project took years to see light.

The book will fill an emptiness Bangla speaking people have on Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. The translation reads smoothly. The book is by no means encyclopaedic, with only 130 pages of text. It nevertheless provides a good primer to Nusrat’s life as a musician and the legacy he left. If a review is to be taken with a ‘pinch of salt’ then the price of the book is a bit high.

The book will never replace the experience of the voice of Nusrat, but it will provide anecdotes to why that voice was so special.

Asrar Chowdhury is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University and the author of *Echoes*, the fortnightly column in *SHOUT* magazine. Email: asrarul@juniv.edu.

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Moon’s madness

ABDUS SELIM

An excerpt from the prelude of the anthology in question reads,

“The sun grows in us . . . [But] We have gone miles to feed into/the moon’s madness/on quiet nights, in murmurs/in bustling bazaars, in numbers/and in the midnight bloom of a night queen,/wherever the scent of the moon grew/we packed up our senses, even the sixth,/and politely showed it the way out.”

Perhaps this is what Jibananda Das too felt when he wrote: “Not wealth nor fame nor creature comforts—/There is some other perilous wonder/ Which frolics/In our very blood.” (Translation: Clinton B. Seely).

The anthology, *Bare Conversations* (Journeyman Books, 2022), is a debut collection of English poems by Protiti Rasnaha Kamal. We all know English writing in Bangladesh is merely in the budding, especially that of poetry. The only name we can readily come up with is Kaiser Haq, who has been writing English poetry for almost five decades. It is really welcoming that Protiti Rasnaha Kamal has stepped into the world of English poetry with her novel, youthful poetic potential.

Containing a total of 53 poems, the anthology has four sections, each beginning with a page of colourful illustration and an overview of the



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

poems of the particular section in verse fragments. It would be befitting mentioning here that the publishing house of the anthology has done a very good job by bringing out a neat, flawless, and aesthetically worthy looking publication of Protiti’s compilation.

Protiti’s poems are mostly “bare” conversational musings, exploring “selfhood, separation, exile, love and longing”, as Syed Manzoorul Islam points out in the blurb. This happens to be, in fact, the chronological essence of all the poems included in four sections of the anthology.

In the world of poesy, Protiti identifies herself as a nomad, and says “A nomad knows the magic of the fireflies”. The magic of fireflies is her ultimate goal in the path to her home, the home to which all poets hold loyalty. That home happens to be: “Not wealth nor fame nor creature comforts—/There is some other perilous wonder/Which frolics/In our very blood”. To Protiti those frolics are fireflies.

Then comes the prayer for affection for the resistant soul. Interestingly, the poet in this section talks declamatorily about mother, birthright, seed, rain setting sail on the fleet of emotions, boy, being young at heart, to chain me is to free me, independence, garden, and the likes hinting sharply at an optimistic ambience in her catch for moon’s dream.

But then, how does she fare in the world of poesy, and that too not in her mother tongue?

No doubt she possesses a native speaker competence in the English language. Her poetic diction is mostly figuratively appropriate, though at times they appear slightly fragmented and in strangely collocated paradoxes—or perhaps that is her generation’s style of talking, and she draws her similes, symbols, metaphors, and narratives from modern-time discourses and lifestyle. My review reading finds that, covertly, there is an embeddedness of both oriental as well as occidental philosophy of life and living deep within her ‘frank’ conversations.

Though modernism in poetry as defined by TS Eliot and his likes during the 1920s has become almost antique, and quite a strong array of progressive poetic theories have been put forward by many writers, poets and critics during the last one hundred years, one thing that still remains true of Eliot is his “historical sense” as acclaimed in his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). It has undoubtedly shaped generations of poets, critics, and theorists and remains to be a key text in modern literary criticism.

It appears that Protiti has subtle affinity with this historicity as well as contemporaneity—the “pastness of the past” but also of its “presence”. This consciousness is clear when she utters, “I have a hole in me, just a harmless one . . . I have a hole in me, maybe it comes from thee.” In fact, the hole in the boat is personified out of her Bangladeshi folk conscience and has been made to its presence in her occidental mindset that she has acquired from her learning and bringing up in the western world.

That Protiti Rasnaha Kamal’s poetic manifestation is indisputable, is clearly displayed in her debut publication, and she needs to associate her “powerful emotion” with her deeply rooted historical sense of the past as well as of the contemporary and go “miles to feed into the moon’s madness.”

Abdus Selim is an academic, writer and translator. He teaches English language and literature at Central Women’s University. Email: selimminubd@gmail.com.

MUSINGS

On the chaos of teaching English

SARAH ANJUM BARI

This month marks one year since I started teaching.

A lot of anxiety and redemption have marked these 12 months. Funnily enough, these are exactly the things I never noticed in my own favourite teachers—who inadvertently were English teachers—who have significantly shaped my mind and career. This has probably been my biggest takeaway: the avalanche of noise and emotions and information a teacher internalizes, so that what reaches her students is a version of her self that is coherent.

A Business Studies teacher would probably fail entirely in their job without such clarity; a Maths teacher even more so.

English? English is porous. It is bendable, permeable, it is messy because the lives and the chroniclers of lives we’re studying are messy. Good art is often born out of such clumsiness and therein lie the moments of peace for English teachers.

On a morning that felt like the demands of life outside the classroom would all but bury me, last year, we began one particular Creative Nonfiction class with a moment of silence. How did we deal with noise, each of us in that class? What duties were we shutting out by being in class at that time? Was it causing anxiety? Were we mentally sound?

Out of the chaos of that morning—chaos that, it turned out, I had in common with my students—we strung garlands of stories, one anecdote, one fear, one little hope at a time. Topics for the essays they were meant to write emerged.

And so in this very first batch of my students—a fascinating mix of



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

backgrounds, temperaments, interests—we encountered memoirs that took a student back to their moment of birth, amidst tearstained conversations with the mother. We had travel pieces that made museum installations out of grocery aisles at Unimart. Bedrooms were reimagined as spaces never before seen. Old heartbreaks found space for self-reflection. Opinions, on education, racism, discrimination, were given shape.

When I applied for this job, I wanted to be able to engage with books in a way that reading, writing, editing, and reviewing had not yet allowed me. What happens to a book when you bring not one or two or three but 30 minds to it? Does the text shrink under so many gazes? Does it refract into a hundred different beams of interpretation? That is what I wanted to find out.

What I learned, what put me squarely in my place, is the realization that in the classroom we’d be unpacking minds using that one book, not the other way around.

If Sultana’s Dream were meant to inspire equality, why were all the men locked up? But she turns into a monster by the end! Is that the cost of freedom, is that what “The Yellow Wallpaper” says? Why won’t David just accept his feelings towards Giovanni? But ma’am, what does magic realism mean? Can I submit an assignment instead?

As questions upon questions pour down on me into my fourth semester of teaching English in a university, I discover that teaching is more about reading people. That one student with a spark in their eye who is too shy to speak. Another who is struggling to gather the

words, but has grasped their meaning all too well. That one over there who will begin texting in 3...2...1-

It is an exercise in patience, yes, but also one shot through with adrenaline as you process the enormity of the project at hand. If I can read them well, I can teach them to read themselves and others well. From a junkyard of confusions, memories, ideas, fears, we can trace constellations, form stories that beget change.

Imagine the possibilities.

Sarah Anjum Bari is the Editor of *Daily Star Books* and Adjunct Lecturer at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). Reach her at sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com and @wordsintcal on Twitter and Instagram.