



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

## Exploring feminism through a South Asian lens

**Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhary's chapter on the trafficking of women, with a focus on India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, teases out the differences in the lived experiences of the Adivasi, Dalit, and other marginalised women. The more pertinent question it provokes the reader to ask is how the social reproduction of space is hinged on the politics of body, labour, and capital.**

SHWETA SINGH

*Women and Work in South Asia: Rights and Innovation* (UPL, 2022), edited by Amena Mohsin, ASM Ali Ashraf, Niloy Ranjan Biswas, and Mohammad Atique Rahman, is a fascinating read from the standpoint of critical feminist theory in the global south. The strength of the work lies in its carefully selected subject matter and the well-crafted empirical meat that the contributors bring to the volume. The gamut of issues covered ranges from politics of care and trafficking of women to the plights of migrant labour women both in rural and urban spaces across South Asia. What is more interesting is how the editors juxtapose this in a comparative frame through the reading of colonial/postcolonial South Asia, and show how modernisation and industrialisation were different in the region. This, in many ways, is the first comprehensive analysis of women and work in South Asia, and is of immense value to scholars and practitioners interested in a textured analysis of feminist politics in South Asia.

The book underlines the need to rethink the epistemic frames of feminist theory "differently" in South Asia. The work critically engages with the ideas of women and work, voice, agency, power, and more importantly, the blurring of lines between the public and the private. In many ways, the reading of this book brought alive to me the writings of Henri Lefebvre and George Perec, on space, scales, and the everyday. But what this book does differently is that it speaks to theory with hands deep down in the field, which is rare in

the world of desktop research and parachuting academics.

It is interesting how each chapter transcends and jumps scales through the reading of 'work', which are personal yet political, local yet national, regional and yet international. The chapters offer sharp insights on the inscriptions of 'work' on body and sexuality, which provide a quick peep into the capillaries of power, and questions of agency and voice in South Asia.

It is important to underline why ideas of scales and jumping of scales are so pertinent from the standpoint of South Asia. The rich textures of empirical analysis offered by the contributors of this volume push the margins of feminist thinking on scales that emanate from the Global North. For instance, I was quite intrigued by Ilira Dewan's chapter on indigenous women, with a focus on the Chittagong hill tribes. I think when we are thinking about scales and social reproduction of spaces, Ilira very succinctly teases out the idea of "difference" in her engagement with the category of women itself. The distinction she highlights between Bengali women and indigenous women is particularly noted, as in the context of South Asia, gender is mediated by intersectional filters.

Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhary's chapter on the trafficking of women, with a focus on India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, teases out the differences in the lived experiences of the Adivasi, Dalit, and other marginalised women. The more pertinent question it provokes the reader to ask is how the social reproduction of

space is hinged on the politics of body, labour, and capital.

Secondly, on the idea of space, through a very careful reading of the public and private sphere, the empirical analysis put forth in each of the chapters very clearly problematises the western idea of space that fits into scalar hierarchies—like body, community of nation, and so forth. For instance, Meghna Guhathakurta's chapter emphasises on the shift from subsistence based agricultural economy to cash based agricultural economy. It demonstrates the politics of the social constitution of spaces, marked by differing power hierarchies in terms of sexuality, labour, capital, and power.

What I found fascinating is a running thread across chapters—the emphasis on the mundane, the everyday, or what George Perec would call the 'Infraordinary'—so clearly articulated by Bindu Pokharel, Saba Gul Khattak, and Paula Banerjee. Last but not the least, through the entry point of women, work, and agency, the book provides a much needed alternative conceptualisation of South Asia embedded in the idea of networks and its attempts to feature women in the civilisational chain.

The book is a must read not just for scholars and practitioners of gender and politics, but anyone interested in seeing the global, through the realm of the local.

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ESSAY

## Disassociation and an MA in Creative Writing

MEHRUL BARI

I recently received my MA in Creative Writing. I went abroad and did all the things they say you should do. I wrote more than I otherwise would have, and I technically "mastered" something I taught myself. It was a nice little program which saw me live in Paris, where I spent almost all my time in movie theaters, watching films in English (there were times, of course, when I'd find out all too late that the movie was dubbed in French). I didn't engage too much with classmates and fellow writers, though they were more than friendly. I didn't converse too much with teachers, though most praised and heavily encouraged my writing. I didn't even write too much. Most of my assignment submissions were short stories I had written, or was working on, from years ago. And I didn't read too much. I only bought one book, and that was because the author's quote on the back spoke of how Mr. Dickson Carr "went to Paris to study: this probably being the only thing in Paris I did not do." Carr, it would seem, partied a lot, another thing I didn't do.

See, a writer's worst enemy is a combination of time and themselves. How much time do you have in a day to sit down and write anything worthwhile? How do you allot time for work, for yourself, and for writing? Worse even, what do you do when writing is your work? I can't speak for everyone, but "time" is a distant second in my enemy ranking. The biggest problem really is yourself—it is motivation.

What do you do when everyone encourages you to write but yourself?

We can be defeated; we can stop writing; we can say, "Hey you were right" to those uninterested and discouraging people (and some of them will be friends and family); and truthfully, these feelings will always circle back to us. This is every writer. But writers don't write for these moments, we write it for those lucid moments where things just fall into place. It's this place in-between that we need a bridge to, where we find ways to reverse-engineer motivation. The ways work differently for different people, but the process, at its core, will be identical: you will have to find something that *forces* you to write and to think about writing. In my case it was my master's program, whether I knew it at the time or not.

Now, most degrees in Creative Writing would

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COLLAGE: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

be MFAs (Masters in Fine Arts), where the whole program is structured around writing and no real coursework beyond that. The program I did at the University of Kent, though, implemented reading as well—reading to improve your writing, reading to better understand writing. These classes and discussions, built around reading, were more informal. There were no real obligations to participate, and no grades were lost in not reading your weekly readings. This, again, will force you to consider writing, even in the case where you're like me and you'll study everything one week and nothing the next. You will at the least absorb the discussion, the varying thought processes, by being in that same space.

The other half of the MA—and this is where grades are tallied—is exactly what you'd get from an MFA. The assignments, workshops, workshops, workshops. These were the sessions I'd look forward to, giddy with anticipation the night before. Someone actually reading your work, studying it, telling you what you do well, telling you what you can improve on, all phrased constructively ("I like this!" was a banned phrase). If you're pursuing writing, workshoping—on some level or another—is what you'll need. I got great feedback from my teachers, supervisors, and classmates. A lot of it, I still go back to; their criticisms, their praises. You don't grow to anything if you don't go beyond yourself. The MA, if nothing else, forced me to try more, to reverse-engineer a habit.

It's been a few months, and I'm writing again finally, submitting stories again, thinking of things to do again, and the fluffy bit of text I'd written on my application essay just to get accepted (something about "bettering the literary scene of Bangladesh in terms of English writing") is something I'm actively interested in. For our writers to go abroad, or even to stay here and advance their craft, we can come back and actually do something here. We just need something to force us to write more, and writing more will always be the only way to get better.

**Mehrul Bari S Chowdhury** is a writer, poet, and artist. He received his MA in Creative Writing with distinction at the University of Kent in Paris. He has previously worked for Daily Star Books, and is the editor of Small World City.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

## Life in modern Dhaka

SM AKRAMUL KABIR

*A Strange Coincidence and Other Stories* (ULAB Press, 2022), by QM Billah, is a collection of 11 short stories that encompass a number of ideas, mainly the binary oppositions of the human psyche, all covering the inner conflicts of human life.

In the story "Demand and Supply", the plot is wrapped through the discourse between the consumer and the consumed. The consumed here explores the free will in sexuality and existentialism alongside a developing city dweller's identity. In another story titled, "The Creditor", the protagonist deals with the dilemma between his secret past as a debtor to an escort and the scepticism of facing that creditor in his present life.

Billah, in every story, has consciously constructed in the modern format of short story writing—stories that deal with a single event with an abrupt opening, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a particular situation. However, in terms of genre, this can be identified as "mixed genre writing", as the stories intermingle elements of fiction with that of the author's reflections.

The characters, such as Tamanna, Gulbanu, and Kifayet represent real-life people and are reflective of everyday events. To add the local setting and imagination, the author uses several Bangla words, such as banorer khela,



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

kachari ghar, badamwala, dugdugi, etc. However, it would be convenient for non-Bangali readers if the writer could explain the Bangla words in footnotes.

The story "Passport and Ticket,

Please!" focuses mainly on two key themes: death and regret. The narrator here goes both into retrospection and introspection by interrogating into his past events. The protagonist narrates

the story interchangeably through a realistic narrative and interior monologue but he ends the story with surreal elements of a dream—the symbolic language of the subconscious.

In "Dress as You Like", readers explore a mother (Tamanna) with a dilemma. Her son Tahrir, who has had a seizure, is keen to perform in a 'Dress As You Like' event as a man with a real dancing monkey. Tamanna tried, by all means, but it was next to impossible to find a real monkey in Dhaka that could perform alongside her son in the event. Finally, Tamanna's maid Gulbanu comes up with a solution by offering her son, Maher, to be dressed up as the monkey for the event. The story familiarises readers with the mental crises of modern beings. It also sheds light on the psychological oscillation of a working mother between the reality of life and moral obligation.

Billah unearths a complex range of emotions and moods felt by these characters. Each story poses a significant number of questions during the narration. Throughout the stories, readers are not told exactly what may happen next. They need to read between the lines and beyond the direct answers.

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