

INTERVIEW

# In Iffat Nawaz's debut novel, 1971 isn't an open wound

SARAH ANJUM BARI

*Shurjo's Clan* will be available in Bangladesh from November 22, 2022. In a conversation with DS Books editor Sarah Anjum Bari, Iffat Nawaz discusses her inspirations, the impact of her late father's photography on her storytelling, and why magic realism pervades stories of the subcontinent's history.

**How did you begin writing?**

My father was a photographer and he had a strong impact on me in terms of reading, writing, and storytelling through different visual media. In 1994 I had just graduated to Class 10 in Vigarunnisa and we were in the middle of a vacation. He had a heart attack at age 40 and he died in front of us on an airplane. We had lived in America before, so my mother decided shortly after that she would want to raise us there. It was really tough because not only was it that the closest person to me had passed, but it also felt like exile, because I wanted to come back to Dhaka but I was too young to make those decisions. One of the



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

outlets for me became writing.

It stayed with me even though I didn't study literature or writing. Right after college, when I started working in development, I wrote something and sent it to Raffat Apa (the editor of *Star Lifestyle*). She liked it and said, how about we keep this on? So for 10 years I wrote this column called 'Under A Different Sky' for *The Daily Star*. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't have picked up a habit of writing regularly.

I have written three other novels without publishing them—I was very unsure of what to put out there. There was a lot of grievance and baggage; it helped me get it out of my system and come to my own.

I wrote the new draft of *Shurjo's Clan* during the Covid. It's simpler. I realised, to write complex things I must write with simple words.

**Why move ahead with this particular book?**

Both my chachas were freedom fighters. They were among the first waves of muktiyoddhas who were martyred in 1971. I grew up seeing their photos hanging on the walls of our living room. I was always under their presence. *Shurjo's Clan* isn't just my story, it's theirs too and without it being another Liberation War story—it is partly that but not entirely so—I felt like I wouldn't be able to tell any other stories until I told theirs first.

Those of us who moved from West Bengal

to East Pakistan, I felt like we did not tell a lot of our stories because we didn't want to be othered. We love Bangla and Bangladesh so much, we wanted to focus on that and not focus so much on the issues of borders. So I also wondered how I could present this side of the experience—how a little girl growing up would feel about Bangladesh.

**Why do you think magic realism plays such a big part in historical novels of the subcontinent?**

Populated countries like ours—even South or Central American countries—are very close and our energies mix in a different manner. We analyse things differently on a community level. We talk about emotions very bluntly. I feel like it makes more sense to talk about emotions with a little bit of magic. In our heads we convince ourselves that there is more. There also more believers in this part of the continent—more gods and goddesses, as we grow up with Sufism, with Mayan cultures; it's in our soil.

In developing countries we're also dealing with struggle, and to deal with struggle on such a raw level, you end up making tales to survive better. Magic realism is a tool to explain those things.

Read the full interview on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' social media.

Dhaka-born and based in Pondicherry, India, Iffat Nawaz worked as a humanitarian and development worker alongside writing for *The Daily Star*, as well as *Huffington Post*, *Zubaan Books*, *Himal Southasian* and *The Indian Quarterly*. Her debut novel, *Shurjo's Clan* (Penguin India, November 2022), uses magic realism to conjure Shurjomukhi's freedom fighter uncles, who were martyred in Sylhet's tea gardens during the 1971 Liberation War, and her grandmother, who took her own life shortly after the 1947 Partition.



BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# A relative's perspective on an enigmatic hero

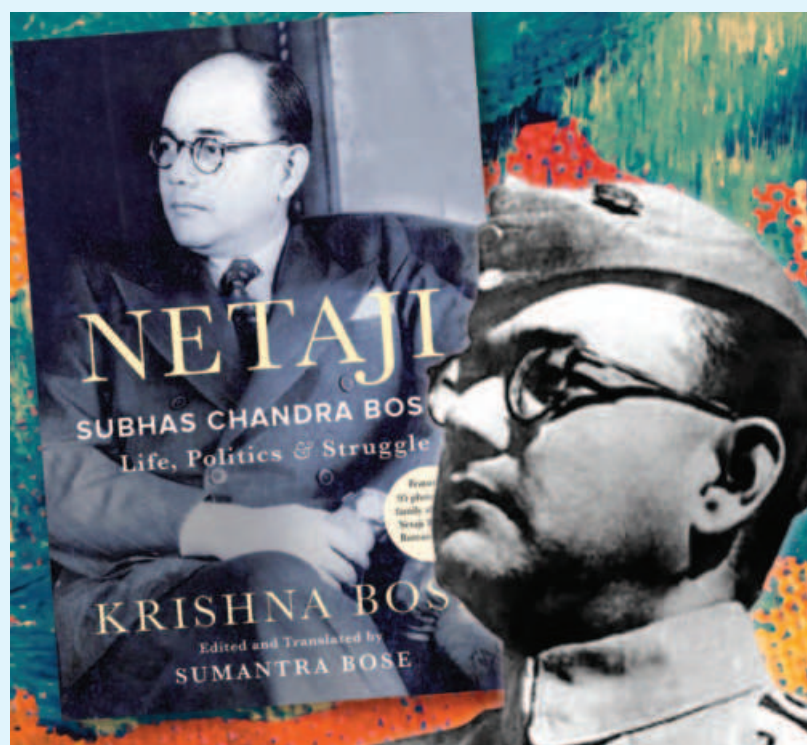
'Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Life, Politics & Struggle' by Krishna Bose, edited and translated by Sumantra Bose (Picador India, 2022)

GM SHAHIDUL ALAM

Subhas Chandra Bose was a leader enough, a warrior enough, and mysterious enough to warrant a look-in by serious writers of political history as well as other areas of study. He was in an aeroplane crash in August 1945 in Taipei, Taiwan's capital, and presumed dead as his body was never recovered. This skeletal account has been filled up by several historians and other writers, including in the book under review, which garners special attention since it was written by a prominent member of Netaji Subhas Bose's family, and a pioneering Netaji researcher, Krishna Bose.

Krishna, now deceased, was married to Subhas Bose's nephew, Sisir Kumar Bose, who was a son of Netaji's older brother, Sarat Bose. And she took it upon herself to unravel the life of a complex person. Krishna, in the process, "discovered that Subhas Chandra Bose is much more than a romantic hero, or a swashbuckling action figure".

Subhas Bose comes out as an intriguing personality who, if only



DESIGN: HRISHIK ROY

days of prestige symbols (very much extant in various global societies), he forsook probably the most prized one: that of resigning from the coveted career in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in order to concentrate on freeing India.

Bose then entered into the world of geopolitics—he was willing to shake hands with the metaphorical devils, and subsequently did so, with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, in order to help get rid of another, the British colonial power, from his beloved homeland. As the book posits, that was not a hard thing for him to do. His determination to free his homeland from the shackles of colonialism made him turn his attention to another Axis power, Japan, in a combined effort to serve

his own interest of bringing an end to colonialism in the Indian subcontinent.

The author describes in generally extensive detail the calculations, intrigues, and modus operandi of carrying out his plans with important assistance from a group of loyal followers, but one could feel that Krishna Bose might have held back on identifying some of the warts that hindered Netaji from achieving his multilateral goals. Eventually, though, the breadth of the war and the changing of power positions of the major players succeeded in helping India gain its freedom from British colonialism, though not in the shape of what Bose had envisaged for his homeland. Bose was dead before August 14, 1947 came

about.

Krishna Bose does provide a fairly extensive account of Netaji's family tree, including her own connection with it, and singles out the influence and care given to the family, especially Subhas, by Basanti Debi, the widow of another legendary nationalist leader from Bengal, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das.

We also learn of his softer side, of the family man Subhas, of his wife, Emilie Schenk who once told Krishna Bose, "India is my first love and only love." Krishna avers that although she was very influenced by him, Schenk does not seem to have influenced Bose politically. ACN Nambiar, Netaji's closest and most serious associate in Europe had this to say about him: "He was a one-idea man, a one-idea man you can sum up—singly for the independence of India." But he also goes on to say: "I think the only departure, if one might use the word departure, was his love for Miss Schenk..."

The book contains its fair share of accounts of Netaji's relationships with global leaders, specifically Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Adolf Hitler, and Eamon de Valera. "The contrast of the formative years of Nehru and Bose," the author writes, "is truly striking." While the young Bose even at that age was tormented by his country's sorrowful plight, for the young Nehru, there was no such sense of mission.

There are imponderables: the mysterious death of Subhas Bose that has not been totally and unequivocally explained, but his place among the pantheon of Indian heroes is safe and sound. *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Life, Politics & Struggle* is, if at times stultifying, an informative and absorbing read.

GM Shahidul Alam is an Adjunct Professor at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# THE EVIL STEPMOTHER REDEEMED

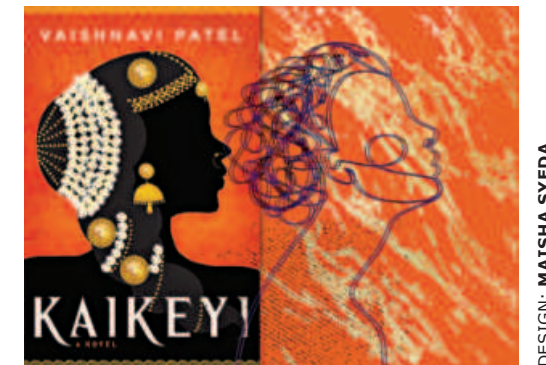
Kaikeyi by Vaishnavi Patel (Redhook, 2022)

SELIMA SARA KABIR

Kaikeyi is a minor character in *Ramayana*. As the step mother, she is often vilified for denying Rama his birthright as king and forcing him to spend years banished to a forest. She is perceived as jealous in her actions, often believed to be manipulated by her long-term maid and mother-figure, Manthara. However, in all instances prior, Kaikeyi is described as a brave and clever ruler and is very loving towards Rama. Not finding any texts or novels that explain this sudden fall from grace, Vaishnavi Patel decides to retell the events of *Ramayana* from Kaikeyi's perspective in her debut novel, *Kaikeyi* (Redhook, 2022).

Patel is a talented writer. She masterfully weaves in the small nuggets of canon from the *Ramayana* texts on Kaikeyi's life, against a larger biographical backdrop of neglect and Kaikeyi's own acts of negotiating for freedom and power in a largely patriarchal narrative. Patel's strong characterisation allows us to watch Kaikeyi grow from a timid young girl to a fierce warrior, saving her husband's life during battle. She and her sisters form an all-woman council, which later allows her to become the first woman to take a role in the formal royal council. Her clever administrative decisions help empower the women of her (husband's) kingdom and in turn help the economy flourish. Even her decision to exile Rama is not selfish, and not from her own desire to see her son Bharata in power, but a clever political gambit and effort to prevent an attack from her father's kingdom. She sacrifices her social standing and power to try to avoid the possibility of war.

The author takes the brave decision of portraying *Ramayana's* protagonist, Rama, in a less-than-favourable light. He is shown to uphold patriarchal values and beliefs, in his rule and in his relationships. While he holds his mothers, especially Kaikeyi, in



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

high regard, he protests against women entering the public sphere as it goes against what the Gods ordained.

Now, retellings of Hindu mythology from other perspectives are not new. Michael Madhusudan Dutt wrote a poem from the perspective of *Ramayana's* main villain, Ravana. However, Vaishnavi Patel states in an interview that her work is different from that of the books it is often compared to—such as Madeline Miller's *Circe* (Little, Brown and Company, 2018) or Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (Flatiron Books, 2021)—in that hers is "retelling a myth from a religion that's still very widely practised and has great modern weight. The critiques that the book touches on are grounded in present day interpretation and belief and trying to navigate current religious waters".

However, there is room for critique.

In attempting to make us root for and sympathise with our misunderstood protagonist, Kaikeyi's characterisation can feel overcorrected. We are exposed to the narrative from Kaikeyi's point of view, reflecting on her life long after Valmiki had written and unfurled the *Ramayana*. She is aware of how she will ultimately be portrayed in Valmiki's epic—selfish, jealous, and easily manipulated—and she directly raises those points in her narration, providing anecdotal examples of her selflessness or caring nature. Kaikeyi learned to fight when other ladies learned to sew; she accompanied her husband to war when her sisters did not; she alone took interests in matters of the court—on par with the men.

The narration thus often feels dismissive of anyone who does not actively champion Kaikeyi's personal political agendas. It left me feeling like *Kaikeyi* celebrates the trope of being "not like other girls", particularly women who were perhaps not as privileged as Kaikeyi was as a princess and later, the queen.

Another unexplored area that I found myself longing for was more nuanced class analysis. In the original myth, Kaikeyi is believed to be manipulated in her decision to exile Rama by her maid Manthara. Patel does a wonderful job of painting Manthara, her childhood caregiver and mother figure, in a firmly positive light. One is left wondering whether Patel missed the opportunity to have Manthara volunteer to shoulder the blame: stating that as someone from the working class—and presumably a lower caste, Manthara would have less to lose than Kaikeyi.

These critiques are, however, not meant to undermine the importance of Patel's success. The book has managed to break into international fame, being discussed by several reviewers on Instagram and TikTok. It helps invite more people to explore the origins of Hindu mythology, as it did for me, by providing an accessible entry point. Patel's prose is richly descriptive. She also masterfully depicts Kaikeyi as being on the romantic asexual spectrum, adding in a slight queer curve to an otherwise strictly heteronormative fiction. Most importantly, it is a well-written book that presents a very fresh take on a story nearly as old as time.

Selima Sara Kabir is a research associate at the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, where she combines her love for reading, writing, and anthropological research.

Read extended versions of all the articles on Daily Star Books' social media.



through one act, showed himself to be a patriot looking to free India from the British raj, but also one who sought ways to better the existential condition of his countrymen and women. In those