

BOOK EXCERPT: NONFICTION

Toward Ladyland

In commemoration of the birth and death anniversary of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain on December 9, an excerpt from Elora Shehabuddin’s book, ‘Sisters in the Mirror’, published in South Asia by The University Press Limited in 2022.



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

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ELORA SHEHABUDDIN

In 1905, the year of the Partition of Bengal, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain published “Sultana’s Dream,” a parable about a utopian society called Ladyland, a land without religious conflict, war, bloodshed, crime, poverty, or even mosquito bites, where all the men live in seclusion in mardanas and women run society, using science and technology responsibly and ethically. Hossain’s short story appeared in *Indian Ladies’ Magazine*, published in Madras (today Chennai), the first English language magazine for Indian women and one of the first to be edited by a woman. Roquiah Khatun, or Mrs. R. S. Hossein, as she signed her name in English (popularly known today as Rokeya

Sakhawat Hossain, or Begum Rokeya), was born in 1880 into an educated and powerful jomidar family in the village of Pairaband in Rangpur, East Bengal, in what is now Bangladesh. According to her recollections in *Aborodhbashini* (Women in seclusion), a book she dedicated to her mother, Begum Rokeya was made to start observing purdah when she was only five years old. While it could not have been easy, we should keep in mind that at least for the women of elite families, seclusion did not mean being confined in a small dark space but rather a demarcation of distinct male and female spaces in a vast home and estate. Begum Rokeya would remember, “We rise to the cry of the morning birds; the call of the foxes signals that Maghreb (evening) prayer is

near. . . . Our childhood passed in bliss in the midst of shady forests in rural Bengal.” Rokeya later described her education at home as learning the Arabic alphabet, followed by reading the Quran. Comprehension was not an objective, let alone a priority. The furthest a woman might get with Arabic, with her father’s encouragement, was to become a *hafeza*, one who had memorized the entire Quran. As for Persian and Urdu, she remarked, it was difficult to make progress because there were no easy books for new learners. Finally, she complained bitterly, “even in Bengal, young girls are not taught Bengali in a systematic manner.” Begum Rokeya’s protégée and first biographer, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, later reported Rokeya’s deep gratitude for her siblings’ “love and care” in the matter of her education. Although the educated Muslim Bengali elite of her time frowned on Bengali and preferred Urdu and Persian—because they felt Bengali was not sufficiently Islamic—the young Rokeya had the opportunity to master both Bengali and English with the help of a supportive older brother, older sister, and husband. Begum Rokeya wrote primarily in Bengali and started publishing in 1902, mainly essays on social issues. Her 1903 piece “Alonkar na badge of slavery” (Jewelry or badge of slavery), marked the start of Rokeya’s explicitly feminist writing. It was published in the Calcutta journal *Mahila* (Woman), edited by Girish Chandra Sen, a Brahmo who, interestingly enough, had been the first to translate the Quran into Bengali. In “Alonkar” Rokeya warned women against allowing themselves to be belittled and bribed with trinkets and jewels, which were nothing but marks of

“slavery on our bodies,” much like the “iron shackles” of prisoners. A modified version of the essay appeared as “Amader Abonoti” (Our degradation) in September 1904 in *Nabanoor* (New heavenly light), edited by Syed Emdad Ali. One of the earliest periodicals to be published by Muslim intellectuals in Bengal, *Nabanoor* ran between 1903 and 1906 and actively invited women to participate and “assist us in our literary efforts and lead the nation to greater development.” Begum Rokeya heeded the call, along with many other women, Hindu and Muslim. Another version of this article, with the title “Strijatir Abonoti” (The degradation of women), was included in her first collection of essays, *Motichur* (A string of pearls), also published in 1904. In the course of the revisions and modifications, five powerful paragraphs were expunged because of the furor they had already provoked, no doubt because they were critical of religion: “Whenever a sister has tried to lift her head, her head has been pulverized with the excuse of religion or the force of utterances from holy texts. . . . It must be said that, ultimately ‘religion’ has strengthened the bonds of our enslavement; men are lording over women using the pretext of religion.” These passages were removed because they outraged many readers. With her criticism of “religion” generally, she had offended not only her fellow Muslims but also members of the other communities among whom she lived in early twentieth-century India. Even though she was writing in a period of growing Muslim nationalist sentiment among some elite Muslim males that would culminate in the 1905 Partition of Bengal, Rokeya had no interest in claiming the superiority of women’s

rights under Islam in such matters as inheritance or the right to contract. For her all religions, including Islam, were inherently problematic for women. Even though she was writing in the early years of the Indian anticolonial nationalist movement, Rokeya did not subscribe to the Indian nationalist position that the Indian private sphere, and hence its denizens, women, were morally and spiritually superior to their Western counterparts. Finally, writing at a time of imperial Britain’s preoccupation with downtrodden Indian and Muslim women, she was not particularly impressed with the Western model of women’s emancipation or the efforts of some Indian male reformers to usher in modernity simply by unveiling women. In “Strijatir Abonoti” she wondered whether the Parsi (Zoroastrian) women of India, who had been among the first to unveil and wear Western dress, were “truly free from mental slavery.” Her response: “Certainly not! Their unveiling is not a result of their own decision. The Parsi men have dragged their women out of purdah in a blind imitation of the Europeans. It does not show any initiative of their women. They are as lifeless as they were before. When their men kept them in seclusion they stayed there. When the men dragged them out by their ‘nose-rings’ they came out. That cannot be called an achievement by women.”

This excerpt has been condensed for brevity. Find the rest of the chapter on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books’ social media pages.

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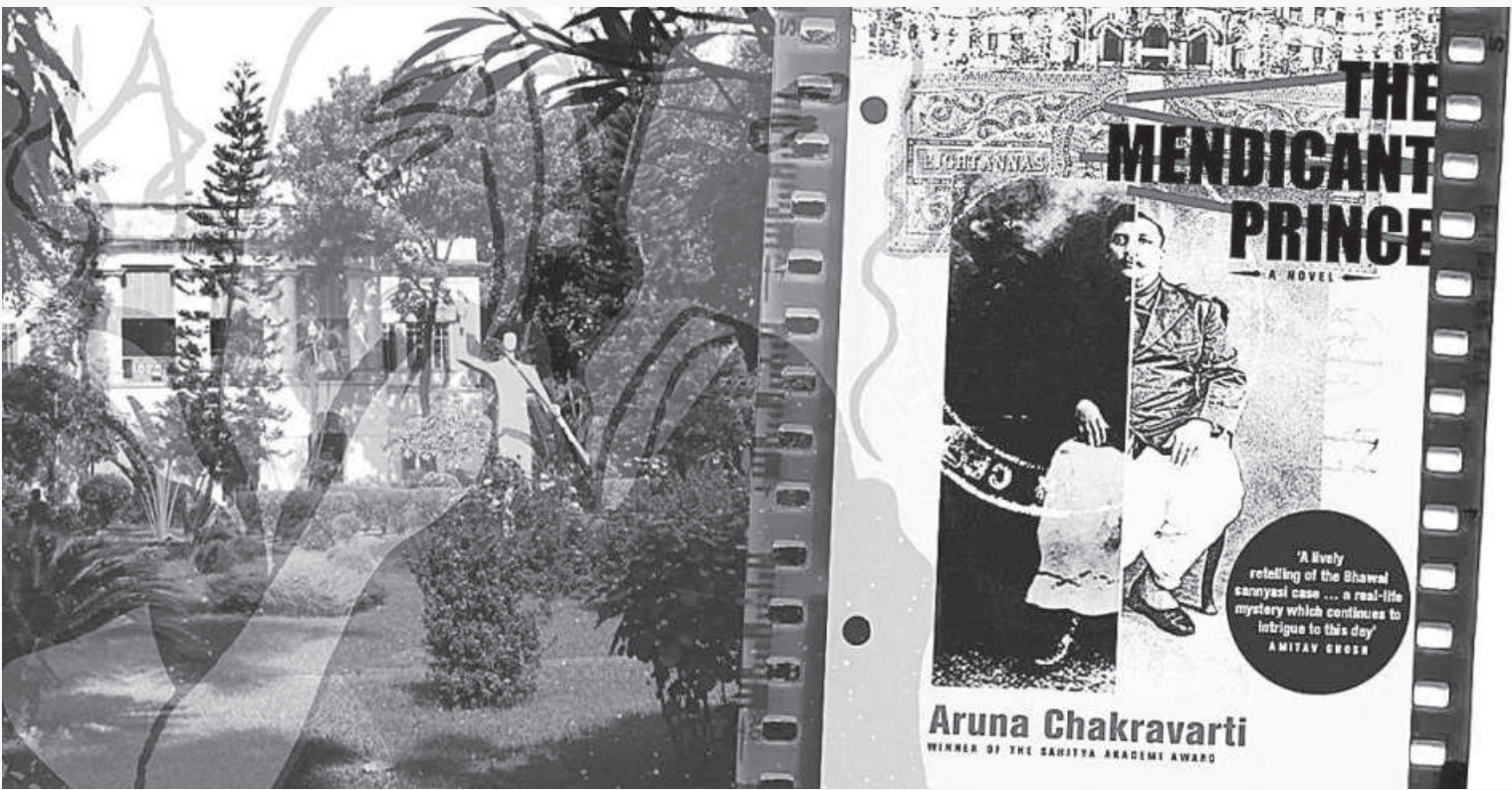
BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

THE DRAMA WITHIN: The Bhawal story through women’s voices

Aruna Chakravarti’s ‘The Mendicant Prince’ (Picador India, 2022)

NEEMAN SOBHAN

Indian writer Aruna Chakravarti has carved a special place in Bangladesh through her notable historical fiction about Bengal of different eras. One of her most popular novels is about the women of Tagore’s family, *The Daughters of Jorasanko* (HarperCollins India, 2016). Now, in her recent and riveting historical fiction: *The Mendicant Prince* (Picador India, 2022) we encounter the qualities that are her forte: a detailed evocation of a period through the inner lives of women. Amitav Ghosh describes the novel as a “retelling of the Bhawal Sannyasi case”. I don’t know about the Bangladeshi readers of today, but for those like myself who grew up in Dhaka in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s, the Bhawal legend is a familiar one. It happened in our backyard, and conjures for my generation personal associations: visits to the Bhawal palace in Joydebpur (now Ghazipur) in what was the green outskirts of Dhaka, and picnics in the surrounding Modhupur forests, later the Bhawal National Park. So, even if we did not know many details about the Bhawal family, as we learn from Chakravarti’s meticulously researched novel, we knew the story of the ailing Bhawal prince, Ramendranarayan Roy, the Mejo Kumar, who while taken to Darjeeling to recuperate, died and was cremated there, under mysterious circumstances, and who then returned years later as a wandering ascetic with partial amnesia! Recognised by his subjects and some family members, he became the focus of the famous court battle to reinstate him as the ruler, against the will of his wife, the Mejo Rani, who contested that claim insisting the man was an imposter. The case that started in 1930 in the District Court of Dhaka, ended 16 years later when a verdict from the Privy Council in London in



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA & SARAH ANJUM BARI

1946 declared the claimant to be the Raja of Bhawal. So, how can a story that is already familiar to readers, become a compelling page turner? Under Aruna Chakravarti’s pen, just such a transmutation takes place. Part of the secret, perhaps, is in the narrative structure: a deft interweaving of chapters that are factual (exposition and backstory spliced with excerpts from actual official communications, legal notices, letters to newspapers, transcripts of court proceedings etc.); and chapters that are fictional (illustrative scenes recounted in first person, and in a variety of voices and personas: Hindu and Muslim tenants of the Bhawal estate; judges, lawyers, doctors and government officials, both native and British; and best of all, the ladies of the royal household).

So, the drama is cumulative, and here is an example of this regarding the Sannyasi’s first appearance: “My dear Lindsay, A very curious... thing...has created a...sensation throughout the Estate...About five months ago a fair complexioned mendicant came to Dacca...A week ago, the sadhu was...brought to the house of Srj Jyotirmoyee Debi... Tenants...and the numerous people present began to utter ‘Hullu-dhani’...convinced that he was... the 2nd kumar...” [Excerpts from a letter by Needham, Manager of the Bhawal estate, to Lindsay, the Collector and District Magistrate of Dhaka] “At last the Rajbari has woken to the fact that the Sannyasi is the mejo kumar. We, the subjects, had recognized him months ago... Yesterday...people started gathering outside the second Rajkumari’s

house...Suddenly a hush fell on the assembly...The Sannyasi was standing on the balcony...Suddenly a little old woman...cried in a... quavering voice. ‘What was your milk mother’s name?...’ ‘Aloka’... The woman burst into...sobs. ‘You remember me!’...And now the people went delirious. ‘Jail! Mejo Kumar er jail!’ Women began ululating...” [Taufique Ali] But, I feel, the immediacy of the narrative is even stronger in Chakravarti’s deeply imagined female characters who bring interiority and unpredictability to what could have been a dry legalistic narrative of foregone conclusions. Instead the tale is animated by the voices of the three sisters and a sister-in-law of the protagonist prince; his mistress Elokeshi, his first wife, the multilayered Mejo Rani Bibhavati and his last wife

Dhara. They come alive as believable women, with their unspoken thoughts (‘Suddenly I felt a presence in the room...he was my golden god... Follow your heart...This is a moment of destiny.’ Jyotirmoyee Debi) or half articulated fears, (‘I got my first glimpse of the Rajbari, which was to be my home...the shadows of dusk were closing around us. A colossal structure loomed...’ Bibhavati), even forbidden thoughts (‘I put up with my husband’s clumsy attempts to impregnate me...by shutting my eyes, and thinking about Jyoti babu.’ Anandakumari); and they in turn bring to life a by-gone world with the sensory details of their cloistered worlds (‘The daily routine of being massaged, bathed and dressed by serving women... became more acceptable...I even got used to...the long ghumta...fixed to

my khonpa with diamond clasps and pulled down whenever I left my rooms.’ Bibhavati). Often, the women provide clarity if not explanation for unsubstantiated aspects of the story, like the rumour of an incestuous relationship between the Mejo Rani and her brother. Chakravarti touches on these with skill and sensitivity that we might arrive at our own conclusions, and through multiple voices, both female and male, gain fresh perspective on long ago lives. We know how the story ends. And yet I could not put the book down till the last resonant page, where an inevitable end is made poignant yet jubilant. Such is the promise of Chakravarti’s fictionalised version of our Bhawal story.

Aruna Chakravarti will be at the Dhaka Lit Fest in January to speak about her book, which is available now at Bookworm Bangladesh.

ANNOUNCEMENT

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Neeman Sobhan is an Italy based Bangladeshi writer of short stories, presently working on her first novel. She has authored a collection of short stories, Piazza Bangladesh; poems, Calligraphy of Wet Leaves; and an anthology of her columns for The Daily Star, Ruminations from Rome.