



BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Blurry in Berlin

on Amit Chaudhuri's 'Sojourn' (Penguin Random House India, 2022)

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SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Amit Chaudhuri's new novel, *Sojourn* (Penguin Random House India, 2022), is built on life's brevity, on the temporary nature of his characters' travels, jobs and friendships. It is about the transience of nations and homes that will never resurface again.

The book itself, at a little over 100 pages, is a short spell, a momentary sensation that departs without much hubbub. The narrator in *Sojourn* is visiting Berlin in the mid 2000s for a few months as the Heinrich Böll Professor at a university. This is his second visit to the city, he had been here before, but the memory of that visit is blurry and little discussed. Chaudhuri leaves it hanging in the air like so many of our unaccountable past memories tend to be. Chaudhuri's narrators are usually good boys, thoughtful of their actions and of others. Here, too, the professor is often wary of coming across as too vocal. When he asks for the two-bedroom flat he had been promised as part of his teaching stint, instead of the studio apartment they put him in, the reader too is struck along with his discomfort at having to speak up. Later, he muses about using the same toilet as the writer Kenjaburo Oe (when the latter himself was the Böll Professor)—a shared link that brings some reassurance to him. He is taken (and a little surprised) with the

German love for Bollywood, after he discovers Shah Rukh Khan on the television.

Yet passivity defines the professor. To tug him out to the center, Chaudhuri provides him with few companions, two of whom bring about some dimension to his character. Birgit, a German woman the narrator romances with, enables him to play house with someone. When she asks him if he had gotten the video from the store (a movie they would be watching), the professor thinks, "She's increasingly direct. Already addressing me as hunter-gatherer." He grows close to her, but Chaudhuri makes sure no relation ever goes too deep.

The novel's best moments come when the narrator hangs around with Faqru, a Bangladeshi poet who had been exiled here due to charges of blasphemy (clearly, a stand-in for the poet Daud Haider), who takes him to Indian restaurants for local food and accompanies him on coat-buying trips. Faqru is eccentric, but also heart-felt. Taking the narrator to visit some holocaust memorials, he casually points out that his teeth had been all knocked off Neo-Nazis. Incredulous, the professor asks, "What? Faqru, don't you know you should ignore people like that? You don't make eye contact with Nazis, let alone respond to them!"

He, too, disappears mid-way from the novel

before any depth in their relationship can be established, only to arrive later, near the end. The professor, throughout the course of the book, cannot seem to be making any lasting acquaintances.

Amit Chaudhuri is one of our most gifted writers, a Bengali novelist and musician with an accomplished repertoire that includes novels such as *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *A New World* (2000), and *Odysseus Abroad* (2014). He is able to write beautifully of intimacy—especially of our inability to deal with it. In *Sojourn* it is permanence that the characters struggle with. Whether it be architectural imagery of East Germany or flashes of Bengali culture in Faqru's actions and words, they all dissipate amidst the oncoming of modernity.

The novel is disconcerting and unlike any fiction Chaudhuri has published so far. It is written, perhaps, with the desire to be forgotten. But it isn't completely forgettable, only blurry and proving to be repressed.

**Shahriar Shaams** has written & translated for SUSPECT, Adda, Six Seasons Review, Arts & Letters, and Jamini. Find him on twitter @shahriarshaams.



THE SHELF

# 5 new books to look out for this year

STAR BOOKS DESK

**BANGLADESH: A LITERARY JOURNEY THROUGH 50 SHORT STORIES**

Ed. Rifat Munim  
Bee Books

Lush greenery and a crimson sun depict riverine Bangladesh on the cover of this short story collection curated by Bangladeshi writer and editor Rifat Munim, who has been the Literary Editor at *The Daily Star* and *Dhaka Tribune* in addition to serving as a jury member for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2019.

Through the stories in this book, "the reader witnesses the rise of a language-based nationalism and the subsequent birth of Bangladesh in 1971, and also how the country fell back into the clutches of military dictatorship till democracy was restored in 1990", the editor shared on his social media.

**UNSAID: AN ASIAN ANTHOLOGY**  
Ed. Anitha Devi Pillai  
Penguin South East Asia

In her fiction and nonfiction, writer and editor Anitha Devi Pillai has focused on identity, heritage and culture, gaining acclaim for her work on the Singapore Malayalee community. The 15 stories of her latest anthology are all set in Asia—stories about families, the human psyche, pain, pain, power, and the mystical dark side, written by Razia Sultana Khan (Bangladesh), Saras Manickam (Malaysia), Cherrie Sing (Philippines), and 13 other writers and academics from across the continent.

**BLACK RIVER**  
Nilanjana Roy  
Westland Books

Writer and columnist Nilanjana Roy writes passionately of free speech and women's rights in India. Having written

for *The New York Times*, *BBC*, *Granta*, *Al Jazeera* and other platforms, in her latest novel Roy gives us a literary thriller. An 8-year-old girl is found swinging from a tree in a village outside Delhi. Sub-Inspector Omprakash Singh has only one officer and one revolver to stop the angry villagers, nearly all of them Hindu, from attacking Mansoor, a Muslim man found near the body. Roy's story seeks to unpack the growing religious intolerance in India.

**THE MYTH BRIDGE**  
Her Story Foundation,  
Goethe-Institut Bangladesh

"What would Bibi Ma do in a bathhouse? What is Rapunzel's love language? Roll a D20." *The Myth Bridge* compiles in book form the stories created by a four-day role-playing game organised by HerStory Foundation and Goethe-Institut Bangladesh. The characters

include eight heroines of Bengali and German folklore—each created and played by Bangladeshi and German writers, illustrators, editors and translators.

**RUN AND HIDE**  
Pankaj Mishra  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

London-based Pankaj Mishra—fellow at the Royal Society of Literature and writer for *The Guardian*, the *London Review of Books*, and *The New Yorker*—returns with a novel after 25 years. *Run and Hide* tells a "powerful story of achieving material progress at great moral and emotional cost." Its characters belong to the predominantly male campus of IIT, who sail and struggle through the world of finance; its protagonist Arun, meanwhile, decides to work on his writing in a quiet Himalayan village with his mother.

# BOOKS

Find us at the Dhaka Lit Fest this week!

SARAH ANJUM BARI

**SHOUT X DS Books Slam Poetry Nights Day 1, January 5, 5:15 PM at Nazrul Mancha**

Daily Star Books and SHOUT have been jointly organizing our monthly Slam Poetry Nights since September 2022. With each month's curation of the performances, we at DS Books and SHOUT get a sneak peek into the issues and ideas that are on our readers' minds. The first month saw verses that felt passionately about the chaos of Dhaka living. Last month saw an overwhelming amount of submissions on mental health—in particular, how our loved ones don't seem to understand it. Throughout all four months, the violence and the injustice we as women face everyday in our lives has been a constant theme.

Injustice speaks bold and loud in this month's sequence of poems selected for our 5th Slam Poetry Nights session—and this time, we're performing at the Dhaka Lit Fest!

The poems about to be performed at Slam Poetry Nights' session at the Dhaka Lit Fest today are concerned with power, with discrimination, with love, freedom of speech, identity, and justice.

And as we always say, the most moving part about these poetry sessions is the conversations



DESIGNS: SARAH ANJUM BARI

that arise from the performances—conversations on craft, inspiration, on what bothers us and what makes us want to go on.

**Is A Book Worth Reading? Who Decides? Day 4, Sunday, January 8 at 1:45 PM in the PSR Seminar Room**

The books we read form an intimate part of our ideas and the conversations we have. We believe we choose the authors and stories that best reflect our interests. But reality differs—even before the interaction of the reader and the book comes a process of curation. Publishers, agents, critics, and media platforms decide which books readers will even reach readers.

Media platforms that critique literature are, therefore, at the heart of the book ecosystem. They shape a book's public perception and can bolster (or destroy) sales.

How do writers, editors, critics—the gatekeepers of literature—engage with this loaded responsibility? How do we decide which stories deserve to evolve into books, which books make it to recommendation lists and reviews? Why do we read reviews, and have we mastered the art of writing them with objectivity and creativity? Does book criticism truly help the flow and business of literature within and across national borders?

Our session at the Dhaka Lit Fest will unpack all this and more. Moderated by myself, the discussion will include: Professor Fakrul Alam, director of Sheikh Mujib Research Institute for Peace and Liberty, Supernumerary professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka, and former Literary Editor, *The Daily Star*; Annette Köhn, a graphic designer, illustrator and founder of publishing house Jaja based in Berlin; Mashru Shahid Hossain, professor of English at Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, who is presently working on a monograph on *Violence Against Men in Film and Literature* and co-editing a book on South Asian Comparative Literature; and Florence Noiville, a French author, journalist and literary critic who writes for *Le Monde des Livres* and is editor of foreign fiction for *Le Monde des Livres*, its literary supplement.

And finally, find all Daily Star Books publications at the DS Books stall at the Dhaka Lit Fest!

Sarah Anjum Bari is editor of Daily Star Books and Star Literature.