

FEATURE

CENSORSHIP IN BOI MELA

A cause for concern?



PHOTO: STAR

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HRISHIK ROY

Bangla Academy has recently banned Adarsha publishing house from participating in the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela. A press release signed by Mohammad Akbar Hossain, Deputy Director of the public relations sub-division of Bangla Academy, stated that the publication was barred from having a stall on the grounds of one of their books containing political obscenity.

The press release by Bangla Academy stated that the book in question, *Bangalir Mediocrityr Shondhane* by Faham Abdus Salam, contains obscene and distasteful comments about Bengali nationalism, about the country's justice system, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his March 7 speech, and about the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Reacting to the news, Mahabub Rahman, Chief Executive Officer of Adarsha, has said to *The Daily Star*, "We do plan to take legal actions against this issue. In terms of our defence, we are unsure as to why a book which is not banned in Bangladesh can be banned from the Boi Mela. We believe that this is not justified."

As we know, the Boi Mela originated through an informal initiative by Chittaranjan Saha, the founder of Muktohdhara, who sought to celebrate the Language Movement in February of 1972. What began as a three day endeavour, with a single stall set up at the Bangla Academy's southern gate, has evolved to become an integral part of the nation's identity. It resonates with a value omnipresent in our nation's founding: freedom.

These humble origins of the Boi Mela reflect freedom in two iterations—freedom of speech as it manifests in book publishing, as well as the freedom to occupy space for these books without requiring permission from policies that can be subjective. Most importantly, its ties with our Language Movement make freedom of speech and expression an inherent aspect of the Boi Mela.

Are these recent incidents of censorship, then, an antithesis of the original spirit of Boi

Mela, or has the book fair always been at the intersection of political censorship?

"We had never come across censorship in Boi Mela back in the days. Everyone used to freely participate in the Boi Mela", Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Chowdhury of University of Dhaka tells *Daily Star* Books.

"But, in more recent times, we have seen examples of censorship when Avijit Roy and his publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan were violently murdered [in 2015]. Censorship causes disorganisation and takes away the reader's right to read freely," he added.

Publisher and editor of *Shuddhashar*, Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury, who was attacked for publishing materials written by atheist and secular writers and is currently in exile in Norway, offers an adjacent viewpoint. Echoing how censorship takes away the reader's right to read, he says, "There was always some hidden censorship. I remember during the government of 1/11, I suspended publication of a few books."

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Daily Star Books wanted to find out how the taskforce plans to preserve freedom of speech in the book fair. However, Boi Mela Convener Dr AKM Muzahidul Islam declined to make any further comments about the issue concerning Adarsha, beyond what has already been explained in their press release.

And so the question remains, what defines "obscenity" in books that are banned from the book fair?

"People say that regulations can be present in dealing with obscenity. However, the bigger challenge is to define obscenity itself", commented Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Chowdhury. "Given how debatable the issue itself is, I don't think such regulations should exist".

"If anyone thinks that a particular book is wrong or that a particular book is problematic, then they should come forward and write another book or essay showing the faults of the writer in question, resulting in productive and fruitful discourse. It is futile to simply censor or ban authors", he adds.

Shuddhashar publisher Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury points out that Bangladesh needs to formulate a national book policy, as well as a comprehensive bibliography policy, alongside guidelines for the rights of authors and publishers, for contracts, and higher standards for editing and translating.

"However, until the democratic sense of the state is awakened, it is hopeless to expect such a book policy," he warned.

For most publishing houses, including Adarsha, Boi Mela is an essential platform for annual sales, that too at a time when rising paper prices are nearly destroying the industry. Adarsha is publishing about 60 books this year, including the autobiography of Monjurul Ahsan Khan, the former President of the Communist Party of Bangladesh. There is also a book on the Liberation War by renowned journalist and freedom fighter Ajay Dasgupta.

"We will not stop the publication of books in the face of such adversities; we have also published books during the pandemic", Adarsha CEO Mahabub Rahman tells us.

A lot of these books are still stuck in the press due to the uncertainty over how many copies can now be sold. The volume of books to be published will have to be reconsidered. "I am still hopeful that Bangla Academy, being a public institution founded on the values of the language movement, will reconsider their decision and allow us to have a stall at the Boi Mela", Rahman says.

"But, even if that does not happen, we are trying to make up for it by trying to widen our distribution channels. Currently, we are trying to reach out to book shops across Bangladesh, and our marketing team has already begun to contact booksellers and is trying to get our books available in these shops within the shortest possible period of time. So, my team is prepared to deal with the situation regardless of how it turns out."

"After the assassination of Avijit Roy", Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury recalls, "the books published by *Shuddhashar* created a huge interest among readers. This seemed to us to be a symbol of solidarity with free intellectual practice. However, the booksellers were afraid to sell our books, and this had a detrimental effect on our business. Also, the reaction of other publishers after the killing of a writer on the premises of the book fair was very disappointing."

It is more than evident how the Boi Mela has strayed farther away from its initial goal of making books and literature more accessible to the general public. With strict censorship measures—as was seen when Shrabon Prokashani was banned from the Boi Mela back in 2017—alongside the lack of subsidies or financial support offered to the struggling book trade, we are gradually witnessing an ever-shrinking space for creative and intellectual spaces to operate in the country, starting with the Boi Mela.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Spare us the drivel, please

Prince Harry rallies against the Paparazzi in *Spare* (Transworld, 2023), his new 'tell-all' memoir

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Fighting through Prince Harry's memoir *Spare*, one is tempted, after each paragraph, to call it quits. You can only endure so much, but perhaps it is self-hatred or the morbid curiosity of *how worse can it get* that had me waging on. If anything, I wanted to know as a fellow human the extent of the prince's pains. Under all the decorative glitz and glamour, he is apparently just like us, as he so convincingly tries to tell: he relates to Stewie from *Family Guy*. He doesn't read books. Though somehow, in Eton and later at Sandhurst, he clearly has done it through the hard work of never hitting the books, as he claims. He does his own shopping and laundry, and even though every year he "receive[s] from Pa an official clothing allowance", those are just for "suits and ties, ceremonial outfits." Truly, he is just like us.

Harry's dig at the paparazzi is the underlying theme of his life-story. It is them that the book vilifies. And perhaps it is not that wrong to do so. The tabloids are not saints after all and do deserve criticism for all their law-breaking and immorality.

Yet, Harry's appeals for us to join him in condemning these "ghouls" of the media are not reassuring. For a hundred or so pages, he rallies against the lies and trickery of the paparazzi (Paps, as he calls them) and tells us how a pap tried to blackmail him by terming him an addict. One almost starts to sympathise with the innocent prince until the next page when he casually reveals, "Of course...I had been doing cocaine around this time."

Such is his antipathy with the tabloids that, at one point, he describes them as "emboldened, more radicalised, just as young men in Iraq had been radicalised. Their mullahs were editors..." Surely, equating journalists (even the lowliest entertainment correspondents) with "radicals" is absurd, let alone the baseness of his worldview that comes to light through this uninformed comparison.

Harry is unambiguous. The paps have killed his mother, the Princess Diana. The paps have ruined his childhood, his relationships, and now they are hell-bent on ruining his marriage with Meghan Markle. The Royal family is too scared of fighting back, too used to the parasitical tabloids that bring them relevance as much as intrigue. But it is hard to understand Prince Harry's direction with his memoir. He rallies against the Paps' crude caricature of him being "lazy" and "thicko" and then proceeds to write pages upon pages on himself going to clubs and parties. He hates it that no one understands him to be the thoughtful,

intelligent person he is but then, almost without thought, writes about how he dressed up as a Nazi for Halloween or called a fellow soldier "a Paki." Both events did end up with him apologising, but one wonders to what extent he is the kind of person he is marketing himself as.

Because, if we're honest, this is just that: marketing.

Harry, therefore, must walk a fine line. He is the rebel Prince, but a Prince nevertheless. He is not against the monarchy (he goes ahead and even writes a high school level defence of the institution in one chapter). He writes of being impressed with the work ethic of his father and grandfather. These princes, of course, do labour away night and day with their ribbon-cutting and handshaking.

Two-thirds of the book in, Meghan arrives and Harry is smitten with her. Understandably, she is described through-out as an angel, to the point where one wonders if she is human at all. Harry, bless his heart, feels insecure because Meghan is cultured. She reads books. She has read *Eat, Pray, Love*, he says. Isn't she great?

Finding Meghan completes Harry. He may be the spare to William as heir, but he need not be sad any longer. He will have his own family. The little brother syndrome he undergoes all throughout the book, finally, does not matter anymore. But the Paps! They are to ruin him again.

But Harry makes it hard for us to take him seriously when he treats Meghan and Kate rowing over lipstick as a monumental event, or when he worries over his livelihood and in the same breath casually mentions reaching out to Rihanna, Tom Hardy, or Tyler Perry, something the common man would also relate with.

After Harry and Meghan, married with a child, are cut out of their allowance by the Prince of Wales, Harry, frustrated, starts to make sense: "After decades of being rigorously and systematically infantilized, I was now abruptly abandoned, and mocked for being immature?" It is the only time one genuinely gets him.

It is not hard to see that Harry's problems will never go away until he stops being royalty for good. He may be a literal prince but he cannot have everything he wants. Commenting on an essayist comparing the Royals to Pandas, he says "I knew as a soldier, that turning people into animals, into non-people, is the first step to mistreating them, in destroying them." But is the Prince ready to admit that one prevents this not by complaining or changing one's terms of service, but through ending, completely, the institution he belongs to and hates?

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

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Family of feelings

Iffat Nawaz makes a heartrending debut with 'Shurjo's Clan' (Penguin India, 2023)

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

As an 'elder millennial', I was born a full decade after the Liberation War, coming of age around the time that a military dictatorship was giving way to a nascent form of democracy. A middle-class girl, attending an English Medium school in a time before the system had figured out its curriculum for Bangladesh studies, I always felt a little rootless in my own homeland. Less 'authentic' for not having witnessed firsthand the horrors of 1971, not quite as jaded as my Gen X cousins who bought into the 'bottomless basket' analogy and fled for fairer shores.

Iffat Nawaz explores those feelings of longing and unbelonging in her debut novel, *Shurjo's Clan*. Shurjomukhi is the daughter of a freedom fighter who lost both his brothers to the war. She lives in an 'asymmetrical' house in Gendaria with her family, spending her days in the 'Known World' of everyday life, and her nights in the 'Unknown World', where her dead uncles (and maternal grandmother, who drowned) come back to share their stories and reunite with the family. Every night is a repeat of the night before, literal ghosts telling the same stories and singing the same songs. Shurjo's maternal grandparents had fled from Calcutta during the Partition, a fact that earned



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

the girl the racial slur of 'ghoti' from her school bullies.

Part memoir, part magical realism, this is a story about identity and the idea of home. "They had always been united by their unborn journey across the border", she writes, "but now they had developed separate identities. They looked at the blossoming cherry trees with different understandings of beauty, they interpreted the blue jay's spring songs in separate dialects. They stored and melted disappointments in their own ways."

Using magical metaphors of ghosts and fireflies, Iffat explores the many

ways in which grief and trauma impacted a whole generation, and the generations that followed. Shurjo feels the burden of a family legacy, struggling to understand her role in this narrative. The adults in her life are torn between wanting to shield her from the truth and enlightening her about things like national and familial pride. There is that desperate flight to foreign shores, the subsequent push-pull of homesickness and assimilation. Through it all, those unspoken questions: *Who am I? Where is my place?*

Despite the way it begins, the book is not another story about the Liberation

War; rather, it talks about why we cannot stop talking about it. Halfway through the novel, you realise that this is probably the only way one can tell a story like this, the only way to relate to the complexities of the emotions. The prose is poetic and heavy with the kind of language that makes great Instagram posts. Writing on the emerging generational disparities after relocation, Iffat's narrator reflects, "Even if their parents gave them names like Shurjomukhi, the children born after the liberation war were taught to bloom in the depth of night. Too young to understand these complexities, they held on tightly to the rhythms of the saddest songs when they were awake, as they slept, and even more intimately in their dreams."

Is it an entirely new story? Probably not; Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explored some of these themes more than a decade ago. But is it a completely fresh take on the Bangladeshi diaspora? Absolutely. A wrenching, heartbreaking, but ultimately hopeful story about new ways to be Bangladeshi, this is not an easy read, but this reviewer at least, is glad she read it.

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