

FEATURE

Surviving in a stagnant industry

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MAISHA SYEDA

With the recent emergence of Artificial Intelligence-run writing platforms, there comes the growing fear of work in the publishing industry becoming obsolete—an industry already becoming increasingly stagnated in Bangladesh. Preexisting publishers are struggling to sustain in the market since the Covid-19 and the recent rise in paper prices. How are smaller and emerging publishers faring?

Rumman Tarshfiq, publisher of Pendulum Books, shares that from 2020 to 2021, when the demand for books dropped drastically, producing 50 books still yielded the same costs as

compared to even a few years ago, so the paper which I was buying at BDT 1,600, was now costing me BDT 3,700.” It was hard to ensure how many books would sell to help them break even.

“We decided to buy a POD machine.” Tarshfiq explains that adapting to the print-on-demand system secured for her the leeway to produce smaller quantities of a book in a catered way, depending on market demand.

“By doing some research, I saw which books were doing better in the market and could easily send those specific ones to print. I did not need to stick to the fixed [volume of] 300 to 500 books. It allowed me to minimise cost, which ultimately helped me

360-degree solution—providing editing, translating and writing assistance to other publishers and individuals. Their repertoire of publications is not vast, having produced only nine books until last year. Two fresh titles by Professor Salimullah Khan and a collection of writings by globetrotter Ramnath Biswas will be released in Boi Mela this year. How are they managing to cope alongside bigger publishing houses?

Atikuzzaman stated that the practice of editing has not yet developed in our publishing industry; most publishers do not have their own editorial teams. “As a result, the quality of a significant portion of books produced in the country—in terms of proofreading, fact checking, and other seemingly small but crucial details that make a book fool-proof and communicable to a reader—go unnoticed and fail to meet international standards,” he said.

He also spoke about providing writing assistance for individuals such as cricketers, film stars, etc. who have important contributions to our society and culture but do not necessarily have writing expertise. “This is a practice that has recently become quite popular in India”, the editor added. Notably, this also bridges two big gaps in the publishing industry: one, by elevating the quality of publication and two, creating jobs for aspiring writers, designers and editors.

Rabi Ahmed, publisher of Puthi Puran, which is a subsidiary of Montage publishing house, produces books focusing on films. “This time we have done a different kind of book where film students, currently studying in different universities of Bangladesh, have written articles”, he shares. Puthi Puran has also published *Feluda Pastiche* (2022) ahead of the Boi

Mela, which collates under one book two separate Feluda stories, each progressing simultaneously from the front and back ends of the book. Ahmed said, “We campaigned our books [on film] in various university campuses. We also use Facebook boosting [for other publications].”

While online promotions are a usual practice across industries, it is often one of the few avenues in our country that publishers can employ due to a severe lack of other options. On top of that, the advent of Artificial Intelligence in writing and designing has induced fears of machines taking over for human labour.

“[But] we can look at it from the avenue of possibilities”, Modhupok’s publisher says.

Atikuzzaman explains, “We need to think about how one medium can help another medium and make the exchange between humans and machines a symbiotic one.”

For example, we might be selling 300 print books now instead of 500 because of audiobooks. “However, if we sell 500 audiobooks on top of the 300 printed books, we are ultimately selling 1,100 books, which is benefiting us”, he explains. “Should we, in that case, keep holding onto the idea of merely selling prints, or should we utilise these alternative means to deliver books to our readers?”

Echoing this sentiment, Rabi Ahmed of Puthi Puran said, “*Rohosho Romancho* (2022) is a thriller and horror story collection where we have used AI generated illustrations, but commands were still given by humans and the writing itself was done by writers. AI can never maintain the originality of an artist.”

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and the sub-editor of *Daily Star Books*.



PHOTO CREDIT: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

producing 300, considering the price of papers, plates, and other materials.

“Each print has a separate cost”, she explained. “The price of paper has increased threefold

survive in the industry.”

Modhupok, in that vein, comes with a different approach and goal. Editor and Publisher AKM Atikuzzaman shares that their vision is to become a

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

One life, and a history of two economies

‘My Seven Decades’ Journey Through British India, Pakistan and Bangladesh’ by Professor Mirza Nurul Huda (University Press Limited, Dhaka, December 2021)

SULTAN HAFEEZ RAHMAN

Mirza Nurul Huda’s memoir is a story of his life and times. Having lived through some of the most tumultuous periods in South Asian history, his memoir provides insights on many significant social, economic and political events that took place in the period. He was a highly reputed economist and professor of Economics at Dhaka University for over two decades. However, his memoir also goes into politics, society and the history of eastern Bengal, as it evolved from British India through Pakistan to independent Bangladesh.

Huda writes about his humble beginnings with rare candour, sharing many events and anecdotes about his life, sometimes related with humour, which make for lively reading.

His is an inspiring tale of a little boy with big dreams rising from the backwaters of Bengal to become a fabled student who went on to be a professor of Dhaka University, and to hold some of the highest offices in public service. The book—and its most animated chapters on East Bengal/East Pakistan—is certain to interest not only economists but also those interested in politics, history and more generally, in Bangladesh studies.

Huda was born in 1918, in a village near Tangail. His father was a school teacher and imam of the village mosque, and his mother a homemaker, who ran a maktab for girls in their home. He started formal learning in a ramshackle village school where children wrote with twigs dipped in homemade ink on banana leaves. Seventeen years later, a young Huda was to take DU by storm. He stood first class first in both the BA (Hons) in 1940 and MA exams of the Economics Department in 1941, and was the first student of the department, as well as the first Muslim student in the colonial era, to be awarded the prestigious Kalinarayan Scholarship. He later won a scholarship to study Rural Economics at Cornell University and obtained a PhD degree in 1949, in a record 18 months. At the time he was an officer on leave from the Bengal Civil Service, and on return was obliged to

resume his service before being allowed to leave it. He finally joined DU as a Reader in the Economics Department in September 1949.

Noting that merit alone was not enough for Muslim students, he suggests they needed agency, which in those days came from social networks comprising murubbis and persons with influence who cared for the advancement of their community. By then, Huda was married to Umme Kulsum Siddiqua, who also obtained a Master’s degree from Columbia University and joined him as a colleague at the Economics Department at DU.

In his memoir, Huda states that ideas about treating Pakistan as consisting of two units for economic planning purposes were

two provinces as a single producing and consuming area for planning purposes. The “Two Economies theory”, he argues, originated from this thinking. The idea provoked increasingly acrimonious debates between economists of the two provinces, both outside and inside the government. The state authorities remained stubbornly hostile to it and its proponents until Pakistan disintegrated. Huda, too, experienced president Ayub Khan’s rage in a meeting in 1961, where he derided them as anti-state elements involved in subversive activities to divide the country.

In the last days of his rule, president Ayub Khan appointed Huda as Governor of East Pakistan. In the backdrop of raging student protests, the challenges of the post

it yet another instance of the West Pakistani hegemony denying the East Pakistanis their legitimate economic and political rights, and shutting them out of affairs of the nation by the cabal that ran Pakistan at the highest level. If elections were allowed to be held in November 1969 as promised, perhaps the history of the country would have followed a different course. Unfortunately, such foresight, wisdom and goodwill were lacking from the civilian and military leadership of West Pakistan.”

Huda chides the anti-democratic machinations of Bhutto and Yahya to deprive the Awami League from forming the government despite their clear electoral mandate, and holds Yahya’s inept and indecisive leadership along with Bhutto’s blatant arrogance responsible for the carnage in Dhaka on March 25-26. Huda’s DU residence near Jagannath Hall was raided and looted, and he nearly lost his life at the hands of the marauding Pakistani soldiers. He provides a chilling account of his family’s harrowing experience in those two days. Armed soldiers raided and looted his house twice. They pointed their guns to shoot him, but brave resistance of his wife and elder daughter saved their lives. Huda, whose faith ran deep, viewed it as a blessing from the Almighty.

He continued to contribute to development planning and policy in Bangladesh, serving as a member of President Sayem’s Advisory Council, as Planning Advisor in charge of the Ministry of Planning, Finance Minister in President Ziaur Rahman’s cabinet, and as Vice President under Justice Sattar as President. He resigned twice in this period, first as Finance Minister in 1980 on health grounds, and a second time as Vice President; but in both instances, the two presidents reappointed him as Advisor. After six years of public service in high offices, Huda returned to private life when HM Ershad, the army chief, overthrew the government in a military coup in March 1982 and imposed martial law.

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COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA AND SARAH ANJUM BARI

These photographs were extracted from the book being reviewed here.

floating in the press, but there was no clear definition of the concept until a group of eminent East Pakistani economists issued a report in August 1956. There, for the first time, they called for the necessity of “Two Economies” in Pakistan, at a special conference of the Pakistan Economic Association on the draft First Five-Year Plan at Fazlul Huq Hall, Dhaka University.

Essentially, the differences in resource endowments, levels of development, and geographic separation with little mobility of labour made it unrealistic to view the

were obvious, but after much thought, he accepted the challenge hoping to resolve the crisis and pave the way for a return to democratic rule, thereby saving the country from the hex of another military rule. Merely three days later, on March 25, 1969, Yahya seized power in a coup and imposed Martial Law. Clearly, Islamabad had different plans.

Surprised by the sudden turn of events, Huda writes: “The declaration of Martial Law on the evening of March 25 was therefore both a shock and massive disappointment for the people of East Pakistan. They saw in

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Abdus Selim’s poetry compilation is a time machine

‘Selected Poems from Bangladesh: Poets of the Sixties’, compiled and translated by Abdus Selim (Troyee Prokashon, 2022)

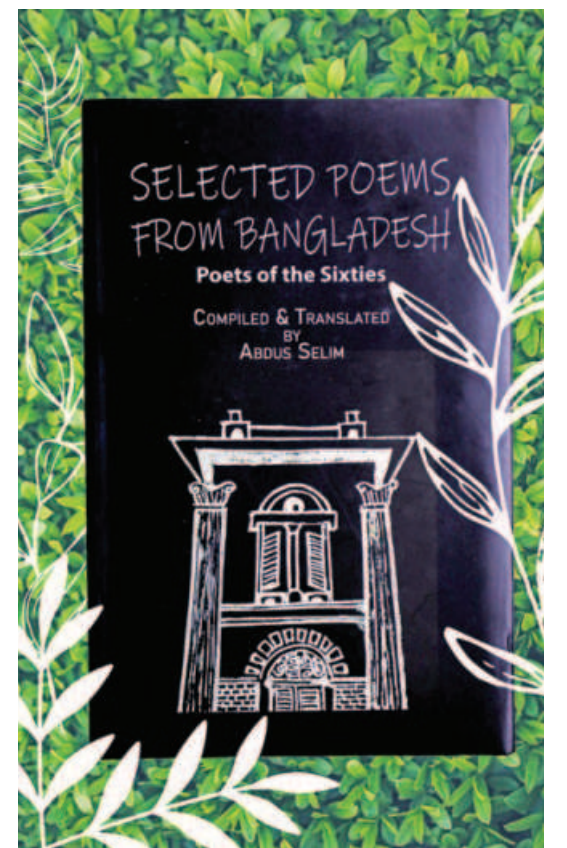
ANUPAM DEBASHIS ROY

Why do we read poetry, especially when they come from a time that is not ours?

Possibly because the poems left a mark in the fabric of the time they represent—marks that are still there. They cause a stir in our minds still, even after more than 80 years of their passing. They force us to think whether or not our imaginary infrastructures are capable of continuously collapsing and rebuilding under the rigours of great poetry.

The book in question, translated and compiled by the academic, writer and translator Abdus Selim, presents poems from some very well known names such as Nirmalendu Goon, Mahadev Saha, Abdul Mannan Syed, Rafiq Azad, Abul Hasan and many others. He has also included poems by Suraiya Khanum and Ruby Rahman. I cannot but feel that gender diversity could be taken further into consideration here—maybe the compiler could have made some more room for non-male poets.

Regardless, Abdus Selim’s translation is excellent. When I read his translation of “Jibananander Kaak” (Jibananda’s Crow), I do not feel lost for having never read the original in Bangla. I follow the metaphors and I follow the trail of blood left by the crow which emerged from a dead poet’s gushing throat. When I read “The Wound”, the translator does not attempt to forcibly translate untranslatable phrases like rakta-tilak; instead he adds a note that leads the author to the back pages where a glossary of such terms is available.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

This flow of language and the beautiful organisation of the book are surely enough to attract aficionados of poetry in any language.

Another feature that I admired in the book is the index of first lines that comes at the very end of the book. This is very helpful for readers who want to browse at a glance and choose a poem which has an interesting opening. Reading this index led me to “Erosion of Sorrow”, a beautiful poem by Abul Hasan, the legendary poet of melancholy. I am breaking from the inside all the time, and the things around me are breaking as well. As a young-ish adult, I feel that as age grows, erosion grows with it. Kabir puts this idea in his beautiful poem and Selim writes the English last verse with such language that the second exclamation mark (even if it is a typo) feels deserving. “The favour of fortune loses gradually!!!”, he writes.

Abdus Selim’s translation and compilation is a time machine for all of us living in the new age, where poems have become much neutered. How many poets living today can start a poem saying “There is no problem at all”, like Mohammad Rafiq does, and then go on to list all the problems in such a satirical way that the readers are forced to realise what is really wrong with their society. The poems of the ‘60s provide us an opportunity to look back at an age when our authors were bolder and our books stronger. It transports us to a vivacious time of our political coming up as a nation and gives us a way forward into the future. This is politically charged poetry aimed at exposing society’s ills.

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