

FICTION

24 HOURS, GRANTED

Imagine a Ladyland set in Dhaka.

Their faces told me one thing: these women did not get called into their male bosses' office five times a day to get the same briefing men got only once. I assumed they were not asked for favours to get a promotion or told that they were too inexperienced for the role for which they were applying. I could actually enter the public washrooms. No dangerous-looking man was sitting near the entrance making revolting gestures with his hands.

TAHSEEN NOWER PRACHI

"Okay! Let's do this."
I sighed and clutched the straps of my signature backpack a little tighter as the No. 28 hastened my way in a zigzag line, threatening to kill me and four others. It is Dhaka after all. The kick one gets at the end of every other day for winning the 'alive for another day' lottery somehow feels the same as winning 50,000 taka.

So, there we were, trying to ride the bus from Mohammadpur to Uttara—a daily occurrence for me that comes with the subtle prayer that I don't get mauled or groped trying to get on the bus. It could come from anyone, one could get inappropriately touched by the kind-looking middle-aged uncle in glasses or a punjabi and lungi-wearing old man with henna-coloured beard. Today, though, after a fight through the gate, I managed to get a 'ladies seat'.

The woman to my left was in her late 20s, I'd assume, in a long olive georgette gown with an emerald-coloured scarf wrapped around her head. She was wearing a pair of glasses that seemingly had no frame. But she caught me glaring at the giant emerald ring on her left hand just as I was studying her. I felt concerned. One careless move and her precious ring would be snatched, stolen, or mugged in the "wonderland" called Dhaka.

Wait, was it me that she's smiling at? I quickly turned my head the other way and looked outside through the rusty, broken window, still feeling her eyes on me. It was getting awkward with every passing second.

But I persisted.
My attempts were slowly working, I guess...she wasn't looking at me anymore.

"It's time you wake up, Aava. We are here."
I woke up to a sweet voice flooding my ears. I opened my eyes and the woman beside me was smiling at me as a mother smiles at her child. It's Uttara already? But how does she know where I am supposed to get down?

And how does she know my name?!
Suddenly, I felt as though a bucket of cold water was being poured down my back. The bus was no longer the one I had gotten into. It was cleaner, more comfortable and somewhat chilly. The interior was all white, the glass windows too clean to even be visible and the oddest part was, there were no men in the vehicle. I got up from my seat,



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

rubbing my eyes with one hand and clutching the seat as hard as possible with the other. The woman with the emerald ring was standing at the gate, smiling gently at me.

"Do you feel well?" she asked.

"Where am I? Where are you taking me? Let me go or else I will scream!" I shouted in fear, and I could feel the anger in my voice rising. But I don't think it came out that way. It came out more like a gentle breath, like a request more than a threat.

"Calm down, Aava. You are more than safe here."

"This feels like a case of kidnapping. How am I safe here?"

"Just wait a while and you'll see for yourself", she told me as I fell in my seat, which I suddenly realised felt like leather. Since when do local buses have leather seats?

I held my breath till the next stop arrived, the pounding of my heart slowing as we finally got off. I still didn't know her name but that was the last of my worries. I searched for beggars, creeps, and dirt, but mostly, I was looking for people from the opposite gender. I could not find one, despite trying to adjust my eyes to the point of them not existing.

"Where are the men?" I could no longer try to figure it out by myself.

"It's your 24 hours. 24 hours of no men in Dhaka. You can do whatever you want. You wished

for it. Remember?"
I did remember. I remembered the helpless night when I was groped near the rail crossing amid 20 people. I remember going home with a bruise on my chest. I remember thinking, what if this city didn't have any men at all? Would it stop functioning?

"Nope, it still works. It works perfectly. Sometimes better", she said, reading my thoughts.

I walked with her amid women laughing and walking on the streets without a care.

"Tell me Aava, what would you do in a Dhaka that had no men?"

I was unsure of how to respond. I stayed silent and breathed in the fresh air.

"Why did you wish for it anyway?"

I had answers this time. Elaborate ones. But I shot back a question instead: "Whenever you are out here, what is your biggest fear?"

She was puzzled, "Quite frankly, nothing. Fear is the most foreign of feelings in this land."

"In Dhaka, things are very different. Whenever I am walking down a street or a narrow alley alone, I am afraid of men. I fear for my body. I fear that every second it is under the threat of being exploited, tortured, or raped.

Every second, I have to protect, not just my money or my belongings, but my entire body."

She stared back at me.

"Do you have to dress a certain way out here?"

I asked.

"No, everyone wears what they want to. I wear the hijab and abaya, and my friends wear what they wish. Why would there be barriers as to who wears what?" She was more confused this time.

I felt like laughing. "Well, we have to care for the male gaze in the streets, the judgemental eyes of everyone fostering patriarchy. They look at us like a stalker does its prey, making you feel like you're without any fabric, rendering what you are wearing pointless."

She fell silent. I was saddened by my gentle guide's disappointment of not being able to relate to me. But how I wanted to trade places with her!

I decided to live through this dream alone for a while. Nothing there resembled the Dhaka I knew but the places were named the same. I spent the whole day running on the roads near Ramna park. Riding a bicycle alone through the narrow alleys of Mohammadpur without the fear of anyone jumping out at me from the corners. Peeking inside an office building in Gulshan, rejoicing at how it would look with all women employees. Their faces told me one thing: these women did not get called into their male bosses' office five times a day to get the same briefing men got only once. I assumed they were not asked for favours to get a promotion or told that they were too inexperienced for the role for which they were applying. I could actually enter the public washrooms. No dangerous-looking man was sitting near the entrance making revolting gestures with his hands. There were vending machines of free sanitary napkins at every corner, that too, free of cost!

My reaction to everything "normal" in that place puzzled the lady in green but she never asked me anything else. She just wished me a happy night and said that she would pick me up at dawn. I lay down in the middle of the road. It felt surreal, looking up at the stars at night for the first time outside home, all alone, at the heart of an unidentified copy of my overcrowded Dhaka city.

I had been out before, but not alone. There would always be a male chaperone protecting us from, well, other men.

Tahseen Nower Prachi is a writer and contributor. Follow @purbo on Instagram and read her microtales in *The Minute Chronicles* on Facebook.

Where are indigenous women's stories?

KATERINA DON AND ZAIMA HAMID ZOA

"Bangladesh has become the host of more than 18 endangered languages till now... While there is a lot of awareness around this issue on February 21, it totally gets ignored for the rest of 364 days. But let's ask the big question—are Indigenous languages actually important for us?" writes Susmit Chakma in *Indigenous Exclusive*.

Do we care?
Bangla unifies the land and people, allowing for cohesion and cooperation, but other languages are fast falling out of use, offering cultural value, but little paid work. The gradual disappearance of a language has deep, life-threatening consequences. As language systems disappear, troves of information sink with them, and it is not only the disappearing community that suffers. The larger population also grows weaker in its race towards hegemony, driven by an irrational desire to melt into a dominant, privileged monolith structure. We should care.

Anthropologist Akira Yamamoto points out nine factors to prevent language death, of which three stand out to us: a dominant culture that favours linguistic diversity, the creation and promotion of programs that educate students on the endangered language and culture, and the fact that language must have written materials that encompass new and traditional content.

I would add another factor to Yamamoto's list—participation of women in the revival of the language. Language loss through a gender lens is even more dire, as whole troves of information about womanhood, health, and medicine vanish.

Sister Library in collaboration with SPaRC and Indigenous Exclusive hosted a reading of works by women in Marma, Mro, Tripura and Chakma languages. The session was moderated by Muktasree Chakma Sathi, founder of Supporting People and Rebuilding Communities (SPaRC) and Arjyashree Chakma, founder of the *Indigenous Exclusive* blog.

For the Sister Library reading, Sathi and Arjyashree asked their friends and allies for connections to stories and readers, and were suggested many texts by male authors. I noticed that indigenous women from CHT were more hesitant to speak in meetings or gatherings. Their ideas and knowledge were often not valued by fellow participants and community leaders. The CHT indigenous women are also misunderstood and

misrepresented in media reports and literature", wrote Dr Ena Tripura, one of the readers at the event and the first Tripura woman of Bangladesh to receive a PhD. "With few exceptions, the literature is written by men and/or women from different communities and nationalities because we do not have enough women in indigenous communities to write about our issues and problems", she added. At the Sister Library reading, Ena shared the poem Bonanter Chayai, written by Shuvarani Tripura.

Women are read less. Indigenous women are read even less. There are multiple root causes—lack of editorial support for indigenous authors writing in their mother tongues, the predominance of oral

Bhasin scholarship read her own poem titled "Irukhd Dinot" (Present Day).

"This poem is about self reliance. Nowadays, girls are tricked and trapped in false loves! Girls must be self-reliant so that they do not fall into this trap. When choosing a life partner, choose one who thinks of your dream as their own, who has a strong conviction in their heart to move forward, who is progressive. This poem has some parallels with my personal life as I have learned to live anew after being cheated in such a way. Standing where I am today, I feel like I am moving in the right direction," Purna paraphrased.

The Sister Library, founded by Aqai Thami, who is from the janajati and Adivasi communities of the Himalayas, has been



PHOTO: PAHN CHAKMA

traditions, gender inequality and bias. As a result, their work goes unsupported and unrecorded.

It was so hard to find texts written by women in their mother tongues that the Sister Library, for the first time, read a poem by a Mro male poet, chief priest of Kramadharm Langygang Mro. Run Key Mro, a student of Governance and Development Studies in Bandarban University, read a poem of his titled "Motherland". Born in the hill country, Run Ley loves her nation's mother tongue as well as her unique culture and tradition. A Marma poem by Ki Ki A was read by Malaching Marma, a public health student at AUW and founder of BASE (buy and save eco). Purna Chakma, SPaRC coordinator and awardee of the Kamla

operating for over eight years in India and three in Bangladesh. This is a continuous reading program hosted by the Goethe-Institut and HerStory Foundation.

February's reading has inspired us to continue the search for textual or oral stories, poems and songs written by women in indigenous languages in Bangladesh. We are open to submissions in any language and in any form, written or recorded. The submissions can come from anywhere in Bangladesh, from young and old, female and female-identifying. From towns, hilltops, chars, and camps.

Katerina Don is curator at HerStory Foundation. Zaima Hamid Zoa is co-curator of Sister Library, Dhaka.



ARTWORK: NUZART

POETRY

Advice for Pliny the Elder, Big Daddy of Mansplainers

This poem is excerpted from *Menstrual Matters: Menstruation in South Asia* (Macmillan, 2022), an anthology of fiction, nonfiction, poetry and artwork on menstruation experiences across the subcontinent, edited by writer and human rights lawyer Farah Ahmed.

TISHANI DOSHI

Great Man, now that you are dead, allow me to squeeze your hand. The sage bushes in Umbria are heavy with bees, so I'm killing them with hypnosis. I am a mere woman—inferior lettuce—but I understand swoon aka *mirabilia*. I fill this cup with nectar and offer it to soothe your Vesuvian wounds. I share your love of baths and classification and sure, if we had to point to a god in the sky, why not call him Thunderbolt? I too believe sewers are the great architectural invention. I do all my searching on roads. It has been two thousand years so we can forgive some of your assertions. The sea mouse who helps whales find their way by parting the brows above their eyes. The one-eyed humans and sciapods with umbrella feet, the whole exotic bestiary. If I had no mouth but could live off the smell of apples I'd move to Kashmir—scratch that, maybe Sussex. Once a month, when the blood comes, I go out to lie in whatever field I find to feel the scorch rise and the crops wither. Our powers are much depleted. I can stand among men in full swing of my *menstruus* and nothing will dim their ability to tell me about me. There are birds at the window this morning I can't name and dogs in the valley beyond, who are using their bell-shaped lungs to announce their happiness again and again and again. Nothing has changed. We worry about the wane and winnow. In your time perhaps the ladies used bits of cut-up smocks but these days we have menstrual cups.

Desire is still a kind of ruin—that silly bird fluttering against the window net, trying to get in, the body's steady lilt towards oblivion. They say you had a sister, like Shakespeare's—mostly overlooked. That it was she who first noticed the smoky clouds that sent you on your way. Dear Pliny, I guess you never heard the one about curiosity. The cat is real. The earth never tires of giving birth. If you get too close to a volcano, you should know it may erupt.

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