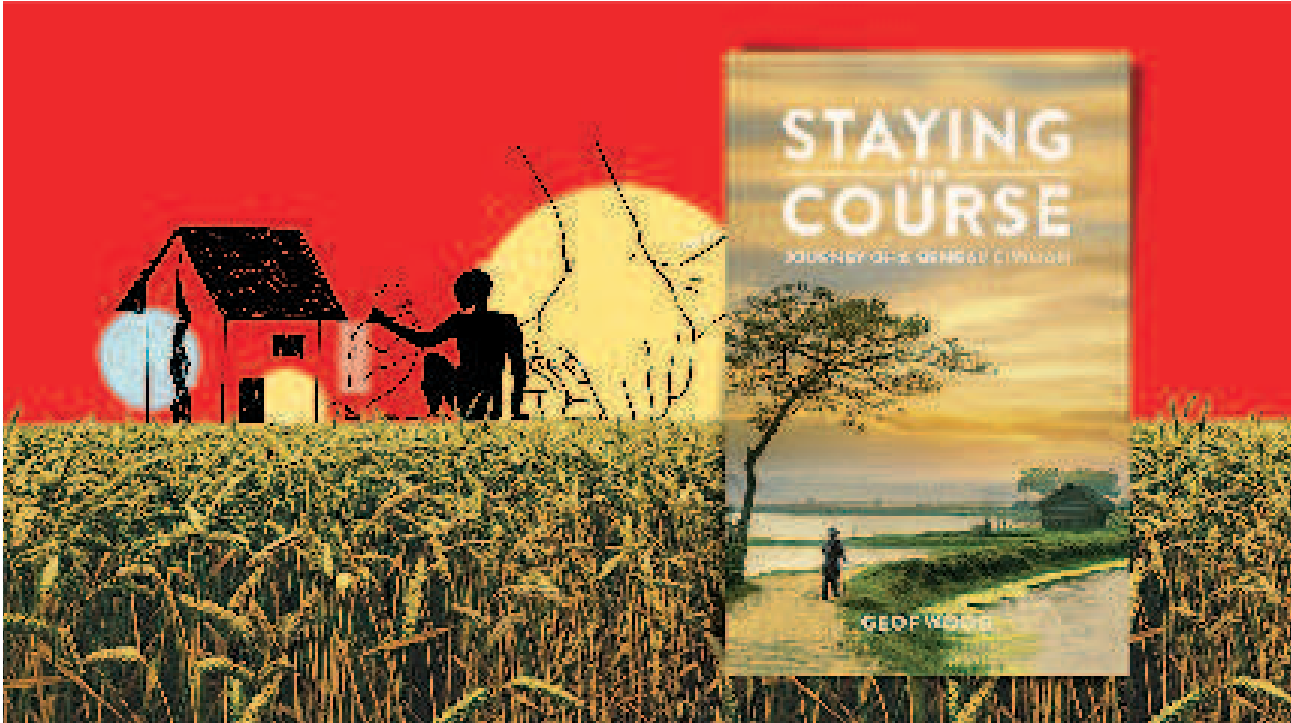


BOOK EXCERPT: NONFICTION

# A memoir that helps understand development

In ‘*Staying the Course: Journey of a ‘Bengal’ Civilian*’ published by The University Press Limited, Dhaka, in 2023, University of Bath Professor Geof Wood reflects on his 49 years of engaging with Bangladeshi NGOs and their work with the rural poor. This excerpt is from the book’s “Foreword” written by Wahiduddin Mahmud, reproduced with permission from the publisher.



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

The author’s experience with one of the large NGOs, namely Proshika, occupies a large part of the book, which is understandable because of his long experience of working with this particular NGO. However, by narrating this experience, the author provides insights into the development contributions of the entire NGO sector in Bangladesh as well as many tensions within the sector.

WAHIDUDDIN MAHMUD

This autobiographical book is important for recording the experience of a social scientist from the Western academia who researched and spent long periods of his working life mainly in South Asia, and specially in Bangladesh and the Bihar state of India, working closely with development interventions at the field level. The narratives in the book are fascinating because of the personal touch, the details, and a sense of genuine feelings and empathy towards the subject of the author’s research, namely the poor households in rural Bangladesh (and elsewhere in the developing world). Underlying the apparent narratives of the happenings, there is a less discernible transformation of the mindset regarding the author’s relationship with, and attitudes towards the development practitioners and professional partners in the host country. This mental transformation—as admitted by the author poignantly towards the very end of the book—was one of overcoming a minefield of prejudices, which have to do with the intellectual dissonance and arrogance of a Western academic, mixed with post-colonial sentiments of guilt and hypocrisy. At the end though, the author comes out triumphant in this mental struggle, content and satisfied with his redefined identity—or multiple identities—as aptly suggested by the title of the book. Perhaps the most important contribution of the book lies in providing intimate insights into how the non-governmental development organisations—commonly known as NGOs—work in Bangladesh. The author’s experience

with one of the large NGOs, namely Proshika, occupies a large part of the book, which is understandable because of his long experience of working with this particular NGO. However, by narrating this experience, the author provides insights into the development contributions of the entire NGO sector in Bangladesh as well as many tensions within the sector. Over the years, the NGOs in Bangladesh have grown significantly in number and coverage, with massive scaling up of their programmes covering virtually the entire range of social development activities—relief and rehabilitation, social protection, poverty alleviation, non-formal education, essential health services, agricultural extension, environmental protection, human rights, education and advocacy, and so on—with the poor rural women constituting the large proportion of their membership. However, the radical stance of social change adopted by NGOs got blunted when nearly all of them, except a handful including Proshika, began to prioritise service provision over ‘consentification’ and collective action. This mission drift reflected both the challenges of grassroots mobilisation and donor preferences. The author describes how Proshika went against the prevailing trend and persisted to work through its “primary groups” formed in the 1980s with the intention of creating a political base for the poor to engage on more equal terms with local power holders. Having had a front-row view of those happenings, the author describes in detail the

consequent ups and downs of Proshika and their impact on its leadership structure and sustainability of its microcredit operations. In doing so, the author alludes to important issues regarding the future role of NGOs, their public accountability and sustainability, and the socio-political space for their future operations. In these narratives, as well as in the numerous academic works of the author on this topic, the emphasis is on the multi-dimensional aspects of human poverty and on exploring the ways poor families experience their marginalisation in different forms. An underlying theme of the book is how the author’s own approach to poverty analysis has been transformed over the span of about four decades and a half since he first arrived in Bangladesh, academically equipped, in his own words, “as a Marxist sociologist with anthropology and development in my repertoire”. The above shift may have been influenced by his observation of how households in rural Bangladesh deal with poverty, whether coping or escaping. Compared to many other societies, rural Bangladesh is characterised by relatively less pronounced social barriers of class, caste or ethnicity faced by the poor. Compared to other developing countries, the poor in Bangladesh have also been found to be more receptive to new affordable development ideas. This largely explains how Bangladesh could have achieved remarkable progress in some social development indicators like reducing fertility rates through adoption of modern contraceptive methods, reducing child mortality through immunisation and the use of oral saline for diarrhoea treatment, and increasing female school enrolment. The question remains as to how a corruption-ridden governance structure based on patronage politics as in Bangladesh could perform such a developmental role. The author, along with his co-authors in his academic works, has sought the answer from the point of view of political sociology. Will it be possible for the government to go against the elite interest to raise the revenue-GDP ratio that has remained one of the lowest among the developing countries? Can the current ‘social contract’ as espoused by the author, among others, continue to hold? Besides being an important contribution to autobiographical as well as poverty literature, I hope the book will be of interest to a wide spectrum of readers including development practitioners, academics and public intellectuals. This excerpt has been edited for brevity. Wahiduddin Mahmud is an economist and a member of the United Nations Committee for Development Policy. He has retired as Professor of Economics at the University of Dhaka.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Can ideology win over desire?

‘The Memsahib’s Foot’ by Kashinath Roy, trans. Shawkat Hussain (Shahitya Prokash, 2023).

ADRIITA ZAIMA ISLAM

Shawkat Hussain’s *The Memsahib’s Foot* is a translation of *Memsahiber Paa*, the 1984 Bangla novella by the late Kashinath Roy. The book was released at the Ekushey Boi Mela this year. Set in 1990s Dhaka against the backdrop of the military occupation, the novella follows the lives of a young university professor named Ahsan, his wife, and their house help, Phulbanu. The story is narrated entirely from Phulbanu’s perspective and utilises dual timelines that slowly converge. It starts in the present day with a description of Phulbanu’s daily activities. These slight glimpses of her day remain interspersed throughout the novella, but the text shifts its primary focus away from Phulbanu and settles on the picture of Professor Ahsan’s family life back when Phulbanu first entered their care. Living on campus at Dhaka University, the professor is visited several times a day by people wishing to converse with him about topics that are far beyond Phulbanu’s understanding. From her limited grasp of what these people speak about and the snippets she reiterates to us, we come to know that the professor is a leftist and the people visiting him are activists rebelling against the military regime. The difficult, incomprehensible words they use and the seriousness behind their tones as they discuss riots and food supplies and revolution, leave a mark on Phulbanu. She is mesmerised and their conversation in turn makes us mesmerised with them. We find ourselves admiring this professor who is



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

choosing a path of resistance instead of one of comfort. Then, suddenly, the gaze shifts to the professor’s wife, whom Phulbanu refers to as Memsahib. Phulbanu is barred from seeing her as anything other than her superior. Her name is kept out of our reach, just as it is kept out of Phulbanu’s reach. This solidifies the class difference between the house help and her employer. Little by little, through Phulbanu’s descriptions of her actions, we see the passive aggressiveness with which Memsahib views her husband’s political affiliations and the financial troubles that result from it. Marital conflict ensues, and unpleasant aspects of the couple’s sexual relationship are subtly brought forth. The professor spends his days fighting capitalism and the military regime and his nights making love to his wife, sometimes against her wishes.

Memsahib feels used, she sees her physicality as being the only thing her husband values in her and it makes her deeply insecure and irritable towards him, towards herself and, in turn, towards Phulbanu, who is a growing girl emerging into her own sexuality. Their volatile sexual relations, the disparity in the ways that the two people regard money, the necessities of a comfortable life and what must be done to achieve it all create a tension between them that crescendoes. As a narrator, Phulbanu does not openly criticise these characters’ choices, perhaps because she doesn’t fully understand them, but witnessing how easily a person’s convictions can waver cannot help but make the reader distraught. Phunbanu, on the other hand, finds in her sexuality the strength with which she can challenge the shackles of class. *The Memsahib’s Foot* is a powerful novella, one that explores multiple

facets of the human condition. It is a commentary on how a pseudo-leftist society crumbles in the face of emerging capitalism as much as it is a criticism of the class divide, the gatekeeping of knowledge that results from it, and how gender solidarity falls before classism. Instead of providing a linear timeline of events, the author chooses to build tension and suspense slowly. This keeps readers feeling frustrated throughout the novella; we are itching to know how these two timelines could come together to make a meaningful ending. But the frustrations of the reader are compensated through a powerful climax that is more shocking and dynamic than it would have been with a linear plotline. It perfectly encapsulates the core theme of the novella—which is that human desire knows no end. The dialogues, the dynamics between the characters, their very aspirations, and actions—everything in Kashinath Roy’s text screams 1990s Dhaka. Shawkat Hussain manages to translate it to English while preserving this aspect. The dialogues flow smoothly, nothing seems stunted or redundant. The prose is simple and unadorned, and the novella focuses more on dialogues than on narration itself. This simplicity adds value to the novella, making it seem more raw and visceral and disruptive. As readers, we feel as though we are trespassing on the characters’ lives, seeing something that was not meant to be seen.

Adrita Zaima Islam is a struggling student, a failed guitarist and a poet in need of better poetic ideas. Send her your sympathies at [zaima2004adrita@gmail.com](mailto:zaima2004adrita@gmail.com).

THE SHELF

# 5 new books to read this week

STAR BOOKS REPORT

The month of Boi Mela may have ended, but the books published at the fair continue to draw attention. Here are five new titles one can read to retain the excitement around books.



EKKI MORAGACHHI O CHARJON NARIR SHONOBHONGO  
Abdus Selim and Babul Biswas  
Ananya, 2023

Set in the backdrop of a nameless forest, the narrative of this play revolves around characters of William Shakespeare’s creation: four noblemen, their wives and lovers, woodcutter, and birds and animals that reside in the forest. Through the interaction of these entities, the main themes of the drama emerge—patriarchy, marginalisation of women, the struggles of human existence, class division, disunity of human needs, and the ultimate question, does our salvation lie in going back to nature and its primitivity? This work of magic realism brings forth Shakespeare’s unparalleled skill of using allusions, metaphors and other rich narrative instruments, in the light of *Macbeth* and *As You Like It*.



RAAT NODI HOYE BOYE JAY  
Niaz Mehedi  
Mowla Brothers, 2023

T R I G G E R WARNING: *Suicide and death.* The fourth novel by writer Niaz Mehedi, *Raat Nodi Hoyo Boye Jay* is the coming-of-age story of a man named Hridoy who once had everything—a happy family and academic excellence. But one day, when a disaster strikes, his father loses his sense of direction and they end up in their old ancestral home. Finding himself completely desolate in his current situation, Hridoy hangs himself from a fig tree. An angel appears to him. Hereafter, jumping back in time to the 1990s, Hridoy, atop a bicycle, tries to find himself in a town and discovers a long kept family secret, along with love and adventure.



MORTYALOK-CHOKRO  
Tanveer Anoy  
Pendulum Publishers, 2023

Tanveer Anoy’s fourth novel highlights the story of Promita, a woman on a journey of solitude and rediscovery of the self. Lurking in the background are issues of class disparity and religious segregation rampant in her society. The story narrates how Promita manages to adhere to her identity amidst these social and personal battles.



AKASH JURE KALO MEGH  
Shamim Ara Smriti  
Bangla Academy, 2023

Novelist Shamim Ara Smriti’s newest book, *Akash Jure Kalo Megh*, follows the life of protagonist Shoma, a well educated and accomplished girl who comes from a middle-class household. She has attained the best education from top grade institutions and is flourishing in her workplace. However, bound by responsibilities and societal pressure, even an independent woman like Shoma is afraid to choose her own happiness. Readers interested in social drama and domestic life might find an interesting read in this text.



AUROI  
Dhrubo Esh  
Mayurpankhi, 2023

Written by Dhrubo Esh, who has previously authored *Koo Jhik Jhik* (Panjeri, 2019) and *Rongdhonur Rong Shaat Ta* (Adorn Publication, 2012), and illustrated by Shreya Sen, this children’s book tells the story of little Auroi, who loves both Purnapipi and Tinapipi equally. Because of the pandemic, Auroi cannot visit them much—she only goes to their house once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening. When, one day, Purnapipi shares with her a secret, Auroi wants to share it with Tinapipi as well. But will Purnapipi become upset that she told? This book is a delightful read for young readers not just for its captivating story but also for its rich, imaginative illustration.