INTERVIEW

Unravelling Bangali feminism and female rage

"While resilience can be a survival mechanism to navigate difficult circumstances, it may not always lead to lasting change or empowerment. Resisting, on the other hand, involves confronting the source of oppression and taking a stand against it. In real life, many women in patriarchal societies demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity."

KAZI RAIDAH AFIA NUSAIBA

Feminism and literature share a profound connection as literature gives voice to the experiences of women, allowing us to understand their perspective. However, despite the abundance of information in the technological age, the promotion of feminist books remains a challenge in Bangladesh, often facing criticism from conservatives.

In an interview with *The Daily Star*, author and artist Dr Razia Sultana Khan talks about women-centric characters, and exploring Bangladeshi culture and feminism through her book, *Palki and Other Tales of Seduction* (Ankur Prakashani, 2012). Themes of feminism, oppression, and cultural norms are woven into the narrative, including supernatural elements from South Asia's storytelling tradition.

DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

So...what inspired you to write about the experiences of Bengali women and their struggles with feminism, oppression, and rage?

Right, okay. So, I am Bangladeshi. I'm a woman. Maybe not as oppressed as most people but I see it all around me. Everyday. Relatives, friends, and especially our domestic workers. All of them have stories and I love listening to their stories. It's...I love it in the sense that I get so much information but it's very depressing. So many of us have similar problems. Same thing. And sometimes I think you know, like, is this what happens to all of us? So, I don't know how these stories came about but you know some of these stories are so fascinating I thought I should put them down.That's how it started. Because I felt like not everyone has a voice. I can't be that voice to any and I don't want to take over their struggle, but if I can put it down, I might be of some help.

The title of your book includes the word "Seduction." How does this concept play a role in the stories you present?

Alright, so, one of the stories is actually called "Seduction". And this is not the sort of seduction that is in a romantic manner. This [is the kind of] seduction [where] the British seduced us to fall in love with their tea and pay for it. Back then we didn't drink tea. We drank milk, lemonade, Badam, water, but not tea. But they wanted their tea to be sold here. My grandmother was a born storyteller, and when I was a child she told me an anecdote about the British enticing the population of their colony in Bengal by offering free tea to the local residents in little clay cups around 4 o'clock. The British had discovered that the areas in the Northeastern parts of India were conducive to tea plantation, and though the best tea was shipped away to Britain, it was economically prudent to have a flourishing local market. The story "Seduction" originated from that.

Female oppression and female rage are powerful themes in your book. Can you elaborate how these themes are manifested in the lives of Bengali women? How do societal norms and cultural factors contribute to these experiences?

The thing is that rage is very much there but the way we are brought up, we aren't allowed to express that rage. It is stifled. And I think you know, I hate to say this, but I think it's worse for the people who are more educated because then you know what's happening but still you find yourself stuck. I don't want to use the word class but if you go to the upper class, the society is waiting there for you to make one wrong move, and all of this reflects negatively on the woman. But for the underclass, you can scream and rage all you want and no one will listen.

Throughout your book, you highlight the resilience and strength of Bangladeshi women. Must women be resilient?

'Resilient' is when you are flexible. Resisting and being resilient are not the same. 'Resilient' is not when you resist, but you make do, you manipulate and you take your way out. But resisting, is standing up. There's one story if you remember, "The Good Wife"; the part where she leaves out things for her husband to beat her up with. If he comes home and wants to whip her, he shouldn't have to say "Where is the whip?" Because back then, the husband was something of a god or the master. The women were good wives and a good wife's happiness lied in the afterlife. So till now, "the good wife" in my story was resilient but in the end she resists, she snaps and leaves her husband. So she resists that domination over her.

While resilience can be a survival mechanism to navigate difficult circumstances, it may not always lead to lasting change or empowerment. Resisting, on the other hand, involves confronting the source of oppression and taking a stand against it. In real life, many women in patriarchal societies demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity. They navigate oppressive circumstances and find ways to cope and adapt. However, as portrayed in Khan's story, "The Good Wife", some women eventually reach a point where they recognise the need for change and empowerment. They decide to resist the systems that subjugate them and challenge the norms that perpetuate their oppression.

The Bangali woman's rage emerges from the injustices they face due to unequal power dynamics, discriminatory practices, and limited opportunities. This rage is a catalyst for change, driving women to seek justice, equality, and societal transformation. Dr Khan's characters embody the strength and resilience of women as they confront their anger and channel it into a force for empowerment and social progress.

This interview has been edited for length and brevity. Read the rest of the discussion on *The Daily Star* and Star Literature's website.

Kazi Raidah Afia Nusaiba *is an aspiring journalist who spends her time reading and researching.*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Anjuman and the stories of the mango people

Another story from other elders recounts that ever since the coconut trees which Anjuman planted were cut down from the edge of the old pond, two of the three taal trees went into a state of grief and stopped giving fruit. Very rarely these days, the other one drops one ripe taal into the old pond during the Bangla month of Bhadro.

SHARMEE HOSSAIN

My father's ancestors were Ayurvedic medicine men from a remote corner of the North Bengal. A few generations ago, one of them had cured a long-lasting ailment of the Raja of Taherpur and had received, as a reward, a large chunk of agricultural land or "joat" next to the mighty Joshoi Beel. That piece of land had become an essential catalyst for their social mobility. Based on that land, they had founded their own "para" or neighbourhood in the village. For that very same land, a century or so later, my grandfather, then a medical student, was deemed qualified to marry Anjuman Ara Begum, the graceful third daughter of the Mohadighi Chowdhury household of Naogaon. According to an online translation site, Najm means 'a star' in Persian and 'Anjuman' means a constellation of stars, a congregation, or a garden. True to her name, many elders of our village considered Anjuman a lady of the gardens. To a few, she was a star.

Our elders say that Anjuman was a force to reckon with. She was like a twilight storm with a cool breeze and a happy rain that really nourished scorched souls. They say that she was strong, grounded, and believed in nurturing complex human networks. She knew the value of traditions, rituals, and the passing of heirlooms. That's probably why she would make child-sized kathas (quilts) with her used cotton sarees for every newborn child in the village. Some of those kathas still exist, albeit old and battered like all the things Anjuman thought would last forever. But then again, what good thing lasts forever anyway?

When I asked why she was called the lady of the gardens, one elder told me that Anjuman always saved the good seeds from each rice harvest to plant the next year. She would also bring new varieties of mangoes, tamarinds, guavas, and jackfruits to the village whenever she travelled to a relative's place. Almost all the mango varieties of our para have been brought by Anjuman at some point. Another elder told me to ask this question to the haunted taal (palm) trees by the old pond for they might give a better account of Anjuman's affection for the silent living things of the village.

Another story from other elders recounts that ever since the coconut trees which Anjuman planted were cut down from the edge of the old pond, two of the three taal trees went into a state of grief and stopped giving fruit. Very rarely these days, the other one drops one ripe taal into the old pond during the Bangla month of Bhadro. My chachi says they always sound like a giant teardrop falling into the calm waters shattering the silence of the autumn afternoon into a thousand broken pieces.

Anjuman was like Elvis Presley, a formidable yet lovable character in all the stories of our elders. Just like the stories of Elvis, everything I heard about her seemed less real than reality, more fictional than fiction. It is sad that we never met. I have only seen Anjuman in a 1973 black and white photograph taken at Binimoy Studio in Dhaka where she was sitting on a chair like a mother swan calmly looking straight into the camera surrounded by her children and grandchildren like a flock of anxious pigeons ready to scatter at the slightest move of her hand.

Anjuman died at the age of 56 after giving birth to 13 children and was laid to rest under the heavy shade of a big mango tree that she planted as a newly married bride. Whether she became the tree or the tree became her, only the tree can tell. All we know is that the mangoes of that tree had become a lot sweeter ever since that final embrace. That massive tree not only provided a fine canopy for the passers-by, but it was also home to countless weaver ants, leafhoppers, owls, squirrels, bats, and birds. So many birds!

But, truth be told, she never really seemed too far away from us. We grew up eating mangoes from the trees that she had planted. Maa usually served them in a golden brass bowl that Anjuman passed on to her. We all became experts in the shapes, sizes, sweetness, and seasonal availability of mangoes from a very young age. Anjuman's Kheershapat mangoes inaugurated the mango season in late Boishakh. Then gradually we had Gopalbhog, Mohonbhog, Rani Pochondo, Lilikuti, Lengra, Fazli, and lastly Ashwina in the month of Ashwin. The intensity and the sweetness of the mangoes slowly evanesced from variety to variety as the summer months gradually walk themselves into autumn. The stories of the mango people would also slowly fade as the winter months start to envelop the North.

In the beginning of summer this year, my mother told me to send some money to the person who took care of the Mango trees in our village. I asked her if my grandmother's big mango tree was still yielding fruit. No, she said, a cyclone two years ago had uprooted the big mango tree that I was talking about. She also told me that folks have planted seven fast-yielding mango trees there. These new trees are nothing like the ones planted by my foremother. These are dwarfed hybrid trees that only lived for 10 years but they would start giving fruit from the second year. My chacha said that these mangoes would be big, juicy, and sweet, but they would require regular maintenance, pesticides, and fertilisers.

Mangoes in two years is a good deal, they said. Who has eight years to wait for a tree to bear its first fruit? Who wants a tree that lives for 80 years anyway? Also, the shorter the lifespan of a mango tree, the fewer the stories by the mango people. Amidst these conversations, I secretly hoped that the constellation of stars would forgive us for not being able to pass these stories on to the next generation.

Sharmee Hossain *teaches English at North South University. She can be contacted at sh.sharmee@gmail.com.*

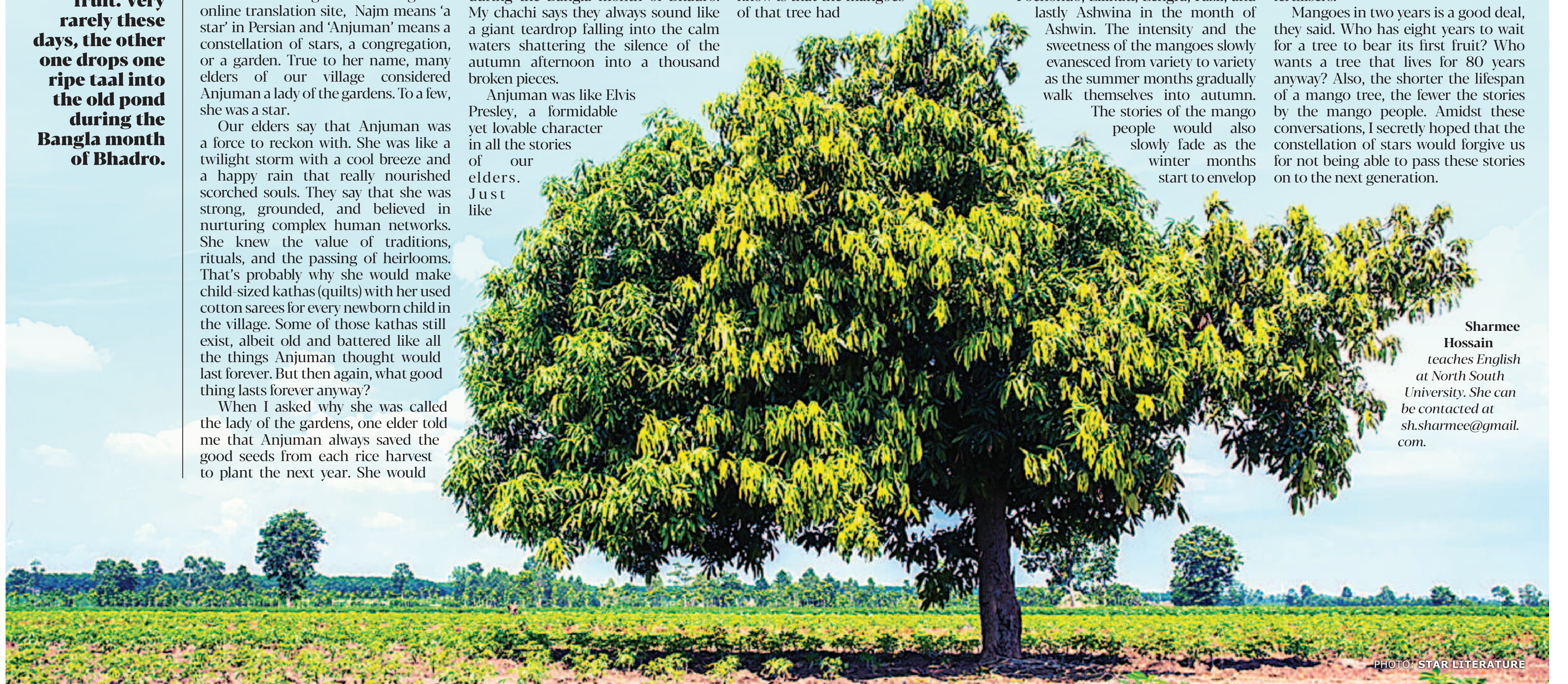

PHOTO: STAR LITERATURE