DESIGN: **MAISHA SYEDA**

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

THE RUNAWAY BOY

A promise not delivered

"He dragged his body along, like the beast of burden. He seemed to be walking towards his final conclusion—a solitary journey, on which there could be no companion."

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

The Runway Boy (Eka, 2020), written by Manoranjan Byapari and translated from Bangla by V Ramaswamy, delivers an accurate portrayal of postcolonial Bengal, with all its socio-economic issues centering on casteism, inspired to a great degree by Byapari's own life and struggles.

Jibon, the protagonist of Byapari's semi-autobiographical trilogy, arrives at a refugee camp in West Bengal as an infant in the arms of his Dalit parents, shortly after the Partition of 1947. His birth forecasts the shadow of struggles that his life would be, engulfed in poverty and perpetual hunger, deprived of the customary sweetness of a few drops of honey at birth, which too, is arranged after the many hurdles that his poor father, Garib Das, has to face.

At barely 13, Jibon runs away to Kolkata with hopes and dreams glimmering in his eyes. Money flies in the air in the big city, he hears. His naive imagination makes him believe that he can go out into the world, find work, and bring back food for his starving family. However, more struggles await him as he leaves home and goes out to face the real world by himself, in a newly independent India grappling with communalism and caste disparities.

The book starts by painting a quintessential image of rural Bengal. "It was dawn. Crimsoning the eastern sky, the sun emerged like a golden orb over East Bengal's marshlands." "A flock of cormorants flew across the sky, their wings unhindered and free. Who knew where and how far they would take them!" Byapari writes of Jibon's life as it unfolds.

The narrative, however, starts to lose that nuance when the metaphors are stretched further, depriving readers of the chance to make their own interpretations of the text. "The man was now walking westwards," is how a paragraph starts as it describes Garib Das, Jibon's father. But it continues, "The east is associated with sunrise and the west with sunset. That symbolic description was apt for the way the man walked. He dragged his body along, like the beast of burden. He seemed to be walking towards his final conclusion—a solitary journey, on which there could be no companion." Such unpacking of metaphors, word-by-word, overly simplifies the text, which takes away the magic of reading into the story.

Byapari, however, makes up for this through his adept foreshadowing of important political events. Shibnath Bhattacharya, an upper-caste, privileged Hindu man, stays back in East Bengal even after most of his family has migrated to the west during the Partition. However, he regrets the decision during the Liberation War of 1971 when religious minorities (including Shibnath's family members), mostly belonging to the Hindu community, are brutally persecuted by the Pakistan military. The book transcends time to make this forecast of the persecution of minorities, which is still relevant in the context of the subcontinent.

The translation seems like an extension of the original, rather than a work on its own. Paragraphs after paragraphs are repeated in the original Bangla text written in English alphabets, failing to render the essence of the original text, making it a rather difficult read for non-Bangla speakers.

The way the characters—and there are many—are developed in each chapter alongside the protagonist's journey through his life intrigues the reader, but it fails to keep them hooked. Some details are irrelevant and are detached from Jibon's story, adding almost nothing to his journey. These characters don't reach a conclusion of their own either, and it feels as if their purpose was only to strengthen the writer's point on the ply of the existing inequality in the picture of the society that he's trying to paint.

The questions surrounding casteism, classism, and inequality are raised with utmost conviction in this novel, but it feels as though they lack the soul to keep the story going, and contribute very little to that purpose. They take so much away from the protagonist, Jibon Das's journey, that it leaves the readers wanting for more details from his end, and for a closer peek into his psyche. The book seems more like a manifesto than a work of fiction, and this is what ultimately takes away from the initial interest that is piqued in readers and the promise that it offers.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan *is a former sub-editor at* The Daily Star's *City Desk.*

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

In search of American freedoms

Review of Jonathan Escoffery's 'If I Survive You' (4th Estate, 2023)

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Increasingly over the years, American literary fiction has centered upon rage—a rage brought on by family, one's own identity or, through the very cruelty of economic catastrophe. The most popular example of this is perhaps Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), where rage is wheeled in to chronicle the fractures of 21st century Americana. Yet as near-perfect as *Freedom* is, it is not privy to a myriad of experiences and expressions of American rage. A decade and more later, Franzen's rage is a period piece, a little strange, and clearly *white*.

Reading Jonathan Escoffery's debut *If I Survive You*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize this year, I was moved by its thoroughly justifiable rage. The book takes a malleable form: characters shift between second, first, and third person, between Jamaican patois and MFA English, the book's form itself can be termed a collection of stories or a novel proper. Even the characters' economic status changes from running promising businesses to outright homelessness.

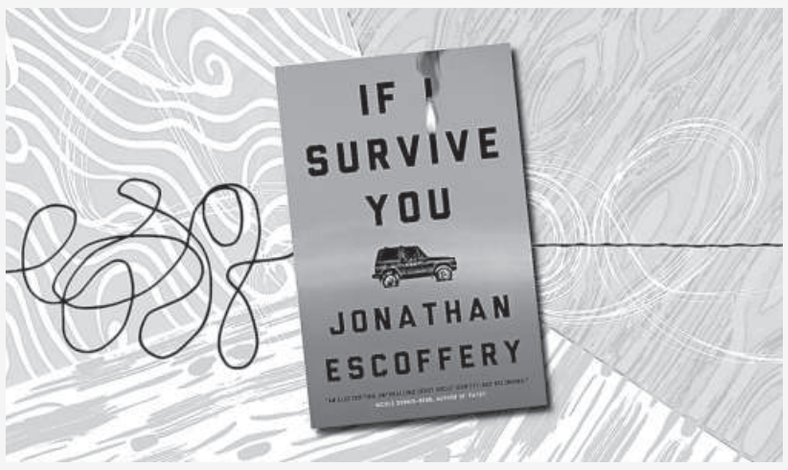

ILLUSTRATION: **AMREETA LETHE**

If I Survive You revolves around Trelawny and his family as they try to make a living in America. We find the young Trelawny dealing with the realities of being a minority, and his shame at the circumstances he inherits. He actively shuns any association with being Black and Jamaican, to avoid being stereotyped. In fourth grade World Geography, he chooses Mongolia for a project, forcing his mom to cook Mongolian food to bring in class. "Me could've brought in leftovers," his mother says, "if only you chose home."

Yet, when he speaks of home, such as when he asks his mother if they are Black, she never answers directly, saying "You're a little of this and a little of that." In High School, he finds he has to play up the role of race to be believable. "You might talk and dress black, but you still write *White*", Trelawny says. Perhaps, this is what prompts Escoffery to write in Jamaican patois of him moving back from a Midwestern college to Miami to be with his father, a seemingly uneventful chapter that only has that stylistic choice as significance.

Trelawny's older brother, Delano, their father's favorite, is the more charismatic of the two, a musician and certified "arborist," doing odd jobs until the recession dries up his work prospects. Though he is less thoughtful of his place in society than his younger brother, he is also less pitiful, a quality that often makes it hard for the reader to appreciate the sentimental Trelawny. Indeed, when we see Trelawny next, working at a senior housing complex, the harsh conditions of homelessness have fundamentally changed him. The introspection is gone, replaced with a cynical desperation to survive.

Escoffery's book is a sincere and sensitive account of the degradation that people of color in America must go through—especially the constant refusal of acceptance they must face. Trelawny's girlfriend, speaking of her family, says, "It's not that they hate you...It's just that every time I visit, she reminds, 'If you have his babies they'll never have blue eyes.'"

But when Trelawny asks if anyone ever had blue eyes in their family, she shrugs, "It's possible," she says.

The rage that this elicits, then, is not only justifiable but also tiresome and never-ending for those who go through them all their lives. The young Trelawny yearns to be just "American" but the real beauty of *If I Survive You* is that he learns too late that American freedoms are not available to all.

Shahriar Shaams *has written for* Dhaka Tribune, The Business Standard *and* The Daily Star. *He is nonfiction editor at* Clinch, *a martial-arts themed literary journal. Find him on X @shahriarshaams.*

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Memoirs of our unsung heroes

Review of Surma Zahid's originally titled 'Violated in 1971' (Bangla Academy, 2014), later translated by Abdus Selim

SABIHA ANJUM

Massacre, murder, torture, violence, bayonet, bloodshed, grenade, displacement, death—these words bring to mind a war scenario. To place an infant country on the world map, Bangladeshi people, irrespective of gender, race, or class, dedicated their lives to achieve independence. This heart-wrecking saga lasted for nine perilous months. Later, the nation acknowledged only one slice of those sacrifices and turned a blind eye to the countless others and their sacrifices. This other group has been sentenced to a lifetime of isolation, shame, and segregation for sins they didn't even commit. *Memoirs of War Victims 1971* presents over 50 narratives from different districts of the country on such themes. Each narrative offers a unique perspective on the female war heroes and other war victims. "The Pakistanis humiliated us, raped us but our own people are no better than them."--thus speaks a frustrated war hero in *Memories of War Victims 1971*. The book illustrates the impact and aftermath of the '71 war on individuals and families by means of a quintessential first person narrative.

The book is originally written in Bangla by Surma Zahid and later translated in English by Abdus Selim. The first edition of the book published in 2014 was titled *Violated in 1971* as per the suggestion of then Bangla Academy President Dr Anisuzzaman. The second print edition from 2018 bore the same title. However, on February 26, 2023, the Standing Committee of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs of the 11th National Parliament decided to change the title to *Memoirs of War Victims 1971*. The present edition contains the Standing Committee decision in its inner page.

This book shares the personal stories of individual female war-victims highlighting the diversity of their experiences in terms of age, backgrounds, socio-cultural, and other semiotic factors. Their tales address the psychological and emotional trauma experienced by female war victims, including the long-term effects of trauma centering on their experiences as freedom fighters,

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

refugees, survivors of violence, or witnesses to atrocities.

The translation fittingly captures the somber and emotional tone of the original narratives with precision. The anguish, fear, and determination of the victims are palpable, creating a tone that resonates with the gravity of their experiences. Through its accessible and engaging prose, *Memoirs of War Victims 1971* stands as a powerful testament to the atrocities that a significant number of women had experienced during the war. It sheds light on the often-overlooked voices of female war-survivors and their struggles for recognition and justice. Through the translator's mastery in the field in which he is critically acclaimed, the book deftly captures the horrors of 1971. This text is neither sanitised nor portrays distant accounts, rather, captures the raw, unfiltered stories of real people who faced unimaginable challenges. More so, the translator's ability to convey cultural nuances and specificities enhances the reading experience, making it culturally rich and authentic.

Memoirs of War Victims 1971 lets the reader behold more than 50 such tales of the female war heroes whose contributions were not only neglected and forgotten by the nation but who were also were forcefully thrown into the oubliette of shame and disgrace for being tortured, for being raped, for being women. Their tales end in sorrowful pleading to the nation for the rightful life they have always deserved to have. It is tremendously unfortunate that many of them have either already passed away or are on the verge of death. Whereas the nation, to a great extent, has failed to provide them with the rightful honour, and the society has failed to give them the respect they deserve.

This text is a valuable addition to the literature on Bangladesh's Liberation War and serves as a reminder of the resilience and courage of those who lived through this tumultuous historical period. It is also a significant reference source to offer reflections and analysis on the gendered dimensions of conflict, including the specific vulnerabilities faced by women during wartime.

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