

LIVES

THE STORY OF THIS YEAR

A new year arrives for us tomorrow—new plans, new people, new joys and failures. We asked our readers and writers to look back upon one memory from 2022 that sums up their story of this year. This is what they had to say.

The basketball hoop

FARAH MASUD

I don't remember when they took it down. We asked the building supervisor, the cleaners, anyone who would listen, but nobody had a clue. I remember it falling apart bit by bit—first the net, then the ring hanging loosely from the board. I meant to get it repaired, I really did, but I could never make enough time. Time is such an unforgiving teacher. Someone has painted over the holes and you can't even tell that there was a basketball hoop on the wall.

I didn't cry when you handed me the parting letter. I didn't cry when we hugged for the last time, or as you climbed into the backseat of the car with the missing hoop on the wall behind.

15 months and 11,000 kilometers apart. The other day, I saw our neighbour's kid dribbling a basketball in the garage. I looked up at the spot where our hoop used to be. The day we had it drilled to the wall, you complained that it was too high for your small legs, but soon enough you outgrew me in height, and wits.

I realized I had become a coastal town left unchecked for too long, and that grief strikes like a tsunami. Ignore the signs for too long, and just like seismic waves beneath the ground, the rumblings of your hurt will send warning centers blaring. The floodgates break, and all that pain comes pouring out at once.

My experiments with dream

NUJHAT TABASSUM NIRJHOR

As shocking as it was for me, I became a bibliophile in 2022, so it was for my family and friends. I had admired bookworms but never thought of becoming one. The smell of books unleashed a new side of me, a much more sorted one than before.

This year, I sat for the medical admission test for the second time, in which I failed miserably, but it somehow changed my perception on life.

I was always good at English compared to the subjects I have had in school and college, but as per orthodox societal standards, I went with the aspiration of becoming a doctor. For quite some time, my thoughts were corrupted by a little distorted dream of being a doctor, which I would have been most terrible at if I had been one. After MAT, and after a long break from the vicious cycle of societal pressure, I was able to unhinge my mind and started to think about what I actually needed, not what society wanted me to do. Now I'm majoring in English Language and Literature at a private university in Khulna and I have never been happier. I have finally learned to love this side of life which is often neglected.

Cat attack

YASHAB OSAMA RAHMAN

The last thing I wanted in my life was a cat. But there she was, sitting in the middle of the road, the day after Eid. I was not taken with her dishevelled appearance – loose strands of unclean fur jutting out here and there. It wasn't love at first sight. But there was a job to be done here. Stupidly taking my friend's advice, we took the kitten home, bathed her and fed her. On the second day, we christened her Nipsey Bella. On the third day, she had trained herself how to use the little. By day four, we had found her a home: one which was fated. Her constant cooing, following me

around and timid expressions of affections had won me over. My mother, who was not a fan of animals, also took to her soon, with Nipsey often going to her and meowing incessantly to open doors or fill her food bowl. And as she spent each night always next to me, always followed me around and kept showering me in love, I too, broke.

Nipsey Bella had become a friend. Turns out, everyone is a cat person. They just don't know it.



COLLAGE: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

Run!

AMRIN TASNIM RAFA

2022 felt longer than all the other years. Things that happened at the beginning of 2022 feel like a lifetime away. This was very surprising to me, since time usually seems to pass by too quickly.

Then I realised this year was just a yearlong chase. I spent it running, and I was running because I was told to run. I felt like I had to run, everyone around me was running. I didn't know if I really wanted the things I was running after. Exercise is not my thing. Unless you enjoy it, 5

minutes of running feels never ending. It knocks the breath out of you.

A year of tiny museums

FATIMA JAHAN ENA

I've always believed that one of the best parts of new friendships is getting to know them through their trinkets and knick-knacks. Be it old concert tickets, half-decayed bookmarks, a keychain, a second-hand book filled with annotations and dog-eared pages, I love seeing it all.

However, being a person with social anxiety, I have often held myself back from making new friends and ultimately, missing out the opportunity to visit their museum of knick-knacks. But this year has been different. When I think of my 2022 in review, I think of the many tiny museums I've visited on work tables and cubicles.

I think of the watercolour paintings, anime figurines, piles of books, fairy-lights, posters, and even the forgotten stash of batteries in dusty drawers. I think of printed photographs, trophies, and dehydrated plants. When I think of 2022, I think of fondly visiting my new friends' tiny museums.

The likes of us

SADI MOHAMMAD SHAHNEWAZ

It was a cold January evening as I was seated on a rickshaw at Panthapath signal, when I saw a familiar face walking towards me. I reached for my wallet to give Rasheda apa her usual 20 when she held my hand and said "Hero, I don't need your money today, I just came over to say that you look

handsome".

I hadn't realized it then, but it was the first time I'd smiled so unequivocally, so sheepishly in months. Rasheda told me that it was probably her last month asking (read demanding) money from people on signals, because she had gotten a job. "The likes of us wouldn't be on the streets if they treated us like humans," I remember her saying as she walked away, twisting her orna around her index finger. It was the last I saw of her and her impish smile.

Shopping for amends

MD. ZAKARIA

"You see how everything is cheaper here?" she said for the billionth time. It'd been years since my mom and I set foot in Gulshan's DNCC Market. Kitchenware, cleaners, all the imported food, she was zooming past the items, sometimes asking "how much?", getting disappointed by the reply, then scurrying to another shop. It was a special occasion for her, I could tell, but it shouldn't have been.

When my sister was still around, the three of us would always hang out, at restaurants, amusement parks, fairs, anywhere we could find. After she moved away, the distance started to take shape. As I grew up, we got separated while staying put in the same house. And now we're here, bonding through shopping. My mom's final opponent was a man selling nuts. The lady kept haggling for eternity to bring the already low price down but left the shop without the bag of nuts. But she didn't look defeated; the shopping bags in hand proved her triumph. "If you go there again, take me with you," she said right after coming home. I haven't been there ever since. I want to go every day.

TRIBUTE

Razia Khan Amin A Bangladeshi writer in English

In memory of the writer, teacher, and poet who passed away on December 28, 2011.

MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN

As an academic, I often share with students my writings that are related to the courses I teach. I also invite them to read my other works partly to revel in the pleasure of sharing and to inspire them to be involved in knowledge production and dissemination. That was not the case with our educators when I was a student in the Department of English at Dhaka University. The reason was not because there were no writers among our teachers.

Quite the contrary, there were some very capable writers—both creative and critical—among our teachers in the department. Like most writers, they also had the urge to share their works with others. For example, during my PhD years in the UK, I came to Bangladesh in 2002 on holiday and approached several academics to discuss, and to get their feedback on, my doctoral research. I visited Manzoor Sir (Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam) at his office at Dhaka University's Kala Bhawan (Arts Building). When I told him that I was researching the feminist writings of Rokeya Sakawat Hossain for my PhD, he immediately picked a book from the shelf and ran to the Dean's office. He photocopied his essay, "Subaltern's World View: A Reading of *Sultana's Dream*" (included in Firdous Azim and Niaz Zaman ed. *Infinite Variety: Women in Society and*

writing careers. It may sound weird, but at that time I didn't know that some of my teachers were great writers.

The strangest case was that of my teacher, Professor Razia Khan Amin (1936–2011). I was in her tutorial groups during both my undergraduate and graduate studies. If I can claim any merit for myself as her student, I was one of her favourite pupils (I hope this will not be interpreted as my presumptuousness). Once my friend Kazi Helaluddin and I even visited her at her residence in Gulshan.

Despite all these, never did I know that

editor's interview essay titled "A Highbrow 'Hijra': Kaiser Haq in Conversation with MA Quayum" where the interviewee states: "The history of English language poetry in Bangladesh can be easily sketched. Our teacher Razia Khan Amin (1936–2011) is the first we should mention". We didn't receive a publishable manuscript on the work of Razia Khan Madam to include in the anthology. As its editors, Professor Mohammad A Quayum and I are "disappointed" that the book does not contain a chapter on her.

In our Introduction to a special focus



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

Razia Khan Madam had produced her debut novel *Bottolar Upannayash* at the age of 18 (it was published in 1958) and had started writing critical and journalistic pieces long before I was born.

I first came to know Razia Khan Madam as a Bangladeshi writer in English during my PhD years. Later, Professor Mohammad A Quayum of Australia's Flinders University and I undertook three major research projects—one book and two journal special issues—on Bangladeshi literature in English. As I began diving deep in this literary tradition, I became more conversant with Razia Khan Madam's iconic status as a Bangladeshi writer in English.

In our Introduction to *Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology* (2021), Professor Mohammad A Quayum and I write: "Bangladeshi English-language writers in the post-1971 era can be divided into two generational categories. The older generation includes, among others, Razia Khan Amin (1936–2011), Niaz Zaman (1941–), Feroz Ahmed-ud-din (1950–) and Kaiser Haq (1950–)". The book includes my co-

issue of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (Routledge) on Bangladeshi literature in English, Professor Mohammad A Quayum and I note:

Razia Khan, a decorated writer in Bangla, commenced writing in English in the early 1950s. However, her two volumes of poetry, *Argus under Anaesthesia* and *Cruel April*, came out in 1976 and 1977 respectively. She also wrote two novels, *The Enchanted Delta* and *The Tamarind Tree*, both published posthumously in 2020. Her works generally focus on gender, nationalism, and multiculturalism, expressing a deep sense of pride in Bangladeshi history, culture, and identity and a call for the empowerment of women.

Commenting on the merit of Razia Khan Madam's work, her colleague and my teacher Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury says: "Razia Khan was among the brightest of our time. Her talents were manifold and fields of activity both wide and colourful." He evaluates her literary career thus: "She has responded to the world around her, grasped the meaning of her personal experiences and put them artistically in

their proper context with a restraint which is charming."

I have collected all of Razia Khan Madam's English writings posthumously printed in two magnificent volumes—*Razia Khan: Collected Poems* (2014) and *Razia Khan: Omnibus Edition* (2020). These two titles have helped me conceive an idea of using them for major research. In that sense, the current essay can be seen as a precursor to my future endeavour—extensive research on her work.

Although Razia Khan Madam was a professor of English and, in this essay, I have presented her mainly as an illustrious Bangladeshi English-language writer, based on my reading of her critical essays, I can safely say that her knowledge of Bangla literature and our cultural heritage was broad and profound. And this suggests that she was a voracious reader of both Bangla and English literature. When reading her critical pieces, I was amazed by her valuable insights on a disparate variety of Bengali writers and their works.

For instance, in an essay published in 1970, she says: "Nazrul Islam (1899–), Kaikobad (1898–1951), the world-famed Jasimuddin (1903–), Ghulam Mustafa (1897–1964), Abdul Quadir (1906–), Begum Sufia Kamal (1911–) and Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua (1910–) have created a [poetic] genre which is mainly idealised romantic and ornamental." In another essay titled "The Feet of Pegasus"—published around that time—she observes: "[W]hen Farrukh Ahmed like Nazrul Islam uses subject-matter, diction and mood which give his poetry Middle-Eastern characteristics, he uses them with a vitality and judiciousness which make these imports generally acceptable." Considering her critical essays on both Bengali and Western writers and their works, her contributions as a literary scholar are no less remarkable than her career as a creative writer.

Razia Khan Madam is part of a literary heritage that is rich and varied. We need committed, competent and confident researchers, especially from within Bangladesh, to analyse, evaluate and explore the full extent of its breadth and depth. It is my hope that we—current and future researchers—will be able to do justice to the legacies of Razia Khan Madam and her likes who are still largely understudied and under-represented in literary scholarship.

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POETRY

Decaying youth

MALIHA TRIBHU

We grow extinct each day,
Marching towards a slower decay.
With a falsehood of reality and a sense of hope,
Hope is a poison; it prevents us from letting go of things we should have let go
Before it made us question everything in sight.
Fear and void;
The sanity slipping away from the palm of our hands
And then? We run.
Memories of what once was,
Its fragments cut like glass
A thorn, a papercut, its sharp edges touching our skin.
We worry of not having enough, of losing what we have,
Tricking ourselves by outrunning the massacre.
We take a step back
Stuck in a pattern we can never outrun
Falling off to the same ground we rose from—
We grow extinct
Only to be born again.
To face the same consequences again
And name it reality.
Wake up, wash up, face it
Tear yourself apart—duck, roll and shrink.
Run, disappear and avoid.
Seek if you must
If you believe the truth shall set you free
And then? We heal.

Maliha Tribhu is currently studying in the department of Marketing at University of Dhaka.

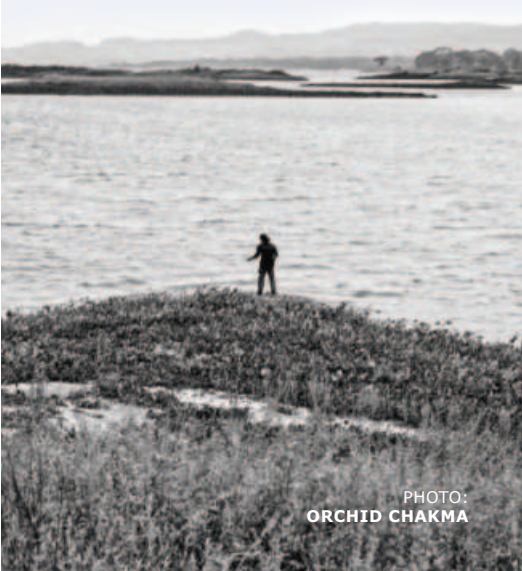


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