

INTERVIEW

# RIFAT MUNIM ON BANGLADESHI FICTION 'This is a diverse terrain you are going to tread on'



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

working closely with the directors of Dhaka Lit Fest, I felt there was, and still is, a serious lack of an anthology that makes a comprehensive attempt to introduce foreign readers to the richness of Bangla fiction emanating from Bangladesh. Yes, there are many anthologies but they either exclude many important writers of our Bangla fiction on arbitrary grounds or they combine original English writing with translation of Bengali writing.

Therefore, I wanted to present an anthology focussed solely on the translation of Bangla fiction that would be inclusive both in terms of containing the representative authors from the 1950s to the 1990s and showcasing the rich diversity of our fiction. Above all, I wanted to give the target audience a sense of how the modernist, Marxist and feminist impulses of Bangla fiction from this part of Bengal have evolved into newer strains that not only challenge European modes of storytelling but also combine western and non-western traditions of storytelling. I also wanted to make sure that all the seasoned and emerging translators of our fiction are represented in this anthology.

But no matter how hard you try and how thoroughly you research, there comes that inevitable moment when you have to include some at the expense of some others. That's the tricky part of editing an anthology like this one. A couple of writers have alleged that they have been excluded even though they belong to the 1990s generation. Their allegation is true but this is not a 3000-page academic anthology. It has to exclude some and it does not mean the excluded writers are not great writers.

The unifying principle for this anthology is the thematic and stylistic diversity and development of our Bangla fiction. That's precisely why popular writers like Humayun Ahmed and Imdadul Haq Milon are selected alongside Hasan Azizul Haque, Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Selina Hossain, Rizia Rahman, Qayes Ahmed, Manju Sarkar, Wasi Ahmed, and Shaheen Akhtar, among others. Some readers/writers have expressed disapproval about including popular writers in this book. The popular elements in Humayun and Milon's work do not disprove the fact that they both have written very powerful stories and novels and plays. While editing an anthology of classic authors of Bangla fiction, if an editor includes Tarashankar, Manik, and Bibhutibhuson but excludes Sharatchandra because he was a popular writer, then I'll say this is a poor editorial choice.

I am a politically oriented literary critic with some solid fondness for innovative and authentic storytelling techniques. But my own predilections should have no bearing on the choices I make as an editor. As an editor, my job is to make sure that every significant aspect or strain of our literature is represented.

**This is an excerpt of the interview. Read the full discussion on Star Literature and The Daily Star's websites.**

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SARAH ANJUM BARI

When Rifat Bhai and I sat down to talk about Bangladeshi fiction one evening, last year, in the golden glow of the Daily Star Books cubicle, we veer messily, into and out of topics and time periods. We're there to discuss *Bangladesh: A Literary Journey Through 50 Short Stories* (Bee Fiction, 2023), the first short story anthology Rifat Munim has compiled after a lifetime spent reading and eventually translating literature, having worked for over six years as a literary editor at *The Daily Star* and *Dhaka Tribune*. I had close to eight questions that I wanted to ask him about his relationship with Bangladesh's literary scene; he answers in twos and threes at one go, without even knowing I would've asked him to address each of these points. Our conversation shoots off and stutters in random directions, from the literary heyday of the 90s to how customs charges make it difficult to bring one's own books into the country. We discuss the unwieldy, exciting process of putting a book together.

*Bangladesh*, like its namesake and much like my conversation with its editor, spills in many directions. Syed Shamsul Haq's "A Life Like A Story", steeped in political realism, rests in the collection alongside Anwara Syed Huq's magic realistic "Hands", translated to the English by Shabnam Nadiya. There are stories by Syed Waliullah, Shaheen Akhtar, Syed Mujtaba Ali, Selina Hossain, Akhteruzzaman Elias. Translations by Naeem Mohaiemen, Shahroza Nahrin, Fakrul Alam, Arunava Sinha, Noora Shamsi Bahar. It is a heavy book—I struggled to carry it when I first received my copy—and the scope of its stories, the literary strains it covers, and the writers and translators it puts in dialogue with each other would spill messily out of any reader's hands. "With this book I wanted to show how diverse Bangladeshi literature is", Rifat Bhai reiterates through our hour-and-a-half long chat. These

are the anthologies that, as a reader, I find most exciting—the books unconcerned with "organising" a literary landscape into a neat picture, books that are more interested in difference, contradiction, movement.

**An anthology can be an equalising force as much as it can select and exclude. A glimpse at this book shows a dialogue forming within and beyond literary timelines: in the table of contents, we have commercially popular writers like Humayun Ahmed listed alongside academically revered writers like Syed Manzoorul Islam. We have literary giants such as Akhtaruzzaman Elias listed alongside emerging translators. How do you edit an anthology? And what do you think the form can accomplish?**

Back in 2021, I attended a four-day virtual workshop focused on the challenges of literary translation and editing translation. It was organised by the Commonwealth Foundation. On the second day, acclaimed writer and Chinese to English translator Jeremy Tiang—who was the 2022 International Booker Prize jury member and who has written powerful essays about decolonising translation—stressed that the best way to promote the writing of a particular language or country on to the world stage is through anthologies because an anthology presents to publishers, critics and editors of the target language a variety of writers who each have their different ways of storytelling. I totally agree with Jeremy.

But different editors make different choices. The most important aspect of an anthology is to decide on the angles or themes around which an editor wants to organise their book. An anthology may focus on a particular theme, such as the partition of India, the Liberation War of Bangladesh, feminism, modernism, etc., or it may aim to feature powerful writers from different eras. In my case, in addition to my personal attachment to Bangla fiction, my working experience as a literary editor shaped my choices. As a literary editor, and also while

POETRY

# Tongue

AMREETA LETHE

I heard myself speak today  
It made me want to  
Cut out my tongue.  
But I could not anticipate  
The loss of a tongue  
Or the alien muscles I had  
cultivated myself  
As an unsuspecting replacement  
The loss of teeth  
is felt in bloodied gaps  
Under a restless, rolling tongue  
But a missing tongue isn't  
detected  
Until you play back  
That video daring  
Your brother to down  
A wasabi ball  
That sets his tongue alight  
And you realise yours is  
no longer there to combust  
Until you mouth your own  
Name into a silver backed mirror  
and are only handed  
Germanic dissonance  
I have recently been  
writing  
Of what the virus has taken  
Taking inventory:  
A tongue trained to never  
be lost  
Half of self  
Company that now only hears  
The invasion; foreign  
Taste lacing my mouth  
Knuckles bloodied banging  
on plexiglass screens  
Trying to shatter your way  
Through;  
watch your Mother's parched lipstick  
lips pucker sweetly  
O, like in the English orange—  
Incapable  
of even miming your  
own name.  
You breed scales, slit  
eyes, and forked tongues  
and are taken aback  
At your own  
Mutilation  
floored that they would not  
rest at the kohinor, or severed  
Muslim thumbs—  
But take your forks and  
your fangs too  
Then charge you for it  
in decades of proficiency tests  
cut out your tongue  
bottle it  
To later chuck into the ocean  
And wait  
for it to grow back  
as your own.

Amreeta Lethe is a Sub editor at Star Books and Literature and the Editor-in-Chief at The Dhaka Apologue. Find them @lethean\_ on Instagram.

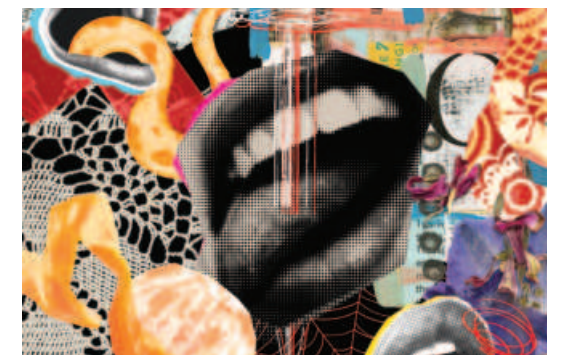


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

CREATIVE NONFICTION

# Bangalis and the "cutification" of English

TASHFIA AHMED

I hate winters, coffee, and having to remember the rules of English grammar. I suppose I should have used the past tense for the first two of those things because the last few winters have been growing a sense of appreciation in me for the feeling of cold winds seeping through layers of coarse khadi fabric, the sensation of icy dews pricking the bare face, and the warmth a steaming gulp of coffee trails down one's insides. Sitting in the passenger seat of a friend's car, watching a barrage of vehicles zooming in and out of view from the windshield threatening to blur our vision with the winter night's fog, that's the feeling I craved—of coffee and its scalding greeting on my tongue. But we had already left Banani's luscious café landscape by then and were about to enter Mirpur's meagre offering. I told him I wanted coffee and the swift brainstorming session led to an option we both despised: Crimson Cup.

I don't necessarily have anything against the crimson colour nor do I have particular beef with cups. Rather, I think they're quite cool as receptacles willing to serve any texture or season of food. But there's something about the aftertaste, as well as just the regular taste, of Crimson Cup coffees that makes my wallet weep at its regretful loss of a

500 taka note.

With a sigh of resignation, I told him I would just have one of those Nescafé sachets lying around in the kitchen drawer at home (forgive me for the blood money consumption, I hadn't done my BDS movement research yet). The friend in question works at the very organisation that produces those Nescafé sachets. He happily chimed in about the allegedly exciting new flavours being concocted in the Nestlé machine and I informed him that I enjoyed the hazelnut flavoured concoction in spite of it being a tad too sweet. He told me more about the factory, his role in it and about its people and I told him about how I enjoyed mispronouncing the Choco Mocha as "chokmoka."

I suppose this is where my recollection of this otherwise unremarkable memory was meant to lead us all along: to my friend being reminded of a factory worker at Nestlé by my intentional mispronunciation. I don't properly remember what his role there is or his name and I have obviously never seen him, but the reason why this man is imprinted onto my memory is because of his alleged difficulty in pronouncing the word "cappuccino." I picture this man as a scruffy, middle-aged Bangali overall—it's the stereotypical image of a working-class man with a rural drawl to his speech that hints at



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

his being new to the city. Nothing extraordinary about that. But what strikes me about him is how he mispronounces it: he apparently calls it "cup e picchi." This instantly gave me a mental image of a cherubic face made of coffee foam peeking out at me from my cup and the following exclamation just bubbled out of me: "That is so freaking cute!" I squealed.

Hence, we discussed more such instances of "cutification"—as my friend would call it—and I recalled to him how on a single visit to the Chadni Chowk gully at the Gawsia/New Market area, I had witnessed, store by store, the gradual devolution of the name for Mysore cotton to Maisha cotton. We were so engrossed in this conversation, so intrigued by this epiphanic

witness of real-time evolution of language and pidgin-like instances, that when we reached the spotlight gates to my home, we passed it and had to snail into a jam-filled u-turn a few hundred metres ahead.

I bade him goodnight and a thanks for dropping me home, and on the walk to the elevator, thought about a distant memory of a teenage me sniggering at the waiter of a Shawarma House branch:

"We have kafasino and lathi", he had said in his regional Bangla dialect.

Throughout that night, I had laid on my back, with that old memory perching like a bird of prey on my sternum. I looked this memory into its hollow eyes.

I am nothing if not a lump of

ironies. My prefaced hatred for things like winter and English grammar are probably the most integral elements to my identity as a high school English teacher born in the deep winter of a "shouto probaho" mid January.

I allowed the bird to poke its beaks into my guilt-infested snobbery.

I turned 28 this January. Although each number I have turned since 25 has felt like a state of limbo prior to my 30s, 28 feels like a number of reckoning. It feels like those few inches away from coming full circle. From this vantage, I can see the podium of privilege I stand on, as well as its lack thereof that makes this podium so precarious. I am speaking of all those memories, of times when I'd corrected my mother's pronunciation of "general" in the typically Bangali style, phonetically sounding more like "genarel;" of when hearing someone refer to a belt buckle as the colloquial "bokhless" felt grating to my ears and of cringing internally at my tailor pronouncing satin as "shartin" or tassels as "tarshells."

The bird was going to eat me and there would be nothing left of me to bury.

In the teachers' room, I hear the Bangla teachers discuss the new proclamations of Bangla Academy for the rules of the Bangla language. Language is ever-changing. My students tell me: even

Shakespeare would not understand the elevated diction I ask of them for formal writing genres. And I agree. Obviously. Language is ever-changing. Another friend tells me his mother's theory: that the colloquial "pera" in Bangla is a bastardisation of the Sanskrit and shadhu Bangla, "pira." Language is ever-changing.

I wondered about the necessity of being a so-called "grammar nazi" in online forums as I stared at the bird. The curve of its beaks did not look as sharp anymore. I dared to wonder if this carnivorous beast on my chest was cute in any way. Or perhaps, could I cutify it myself?

It's February 16 and Ammu is telling me about her friend who wants to get a cat. We talk about how some of our relatives would be the worst cat parents and how much better her friend would be at it.

I say, "Aunty shundor take care korte parbe."

What I say strikes my own ears. I smile, and 28 finally brings me reconciliation from the irony of uttering such grammatical blasphemy I would once have scoffed at.

I look at the bird again. Its weight on my chest feels lighter. It is now a sparrow.

Tashfia Ahmed is an educator, poet and contributor for Star Books and Literature. She teaches English at Scholastica school.