

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Celebrating the best of BENGALI SHORT FICTION

Review of 'The Penguin Book of Bengali Short Stories' (Penguin UK, 2024), edited by Arunava Sinha



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Bengali literature has had a rich history of prose, beginning more or less in the early 19th century under the colonial Raj. Calcutta's presence as the British Empire's capital in the colony shaped much of these works and Arunava Sinha is right to claim that "Bengali fiction has always been written in a time of turmoil." The cultural upheavals of 19th century Bengal, the political crises of the early 20th century, the famines, the partitions (of both 1905 and 1947), the violent language protests, the Bangladesh war of independence—all of this had coloured and moulded the

trajectories of Bengali literature.

In a new anthology helmed by Arunava Sinha, *The Penguin Book of Bengali Short Stories*, the veteran translator and editor of Bengali fiction takes on the task of curating a set of stories, a showcase of Bengali short-fiction through the ages. Though he claims in his introduction that these are "the personal choice of someone who found these stories worthy of full-bodied reading..." the reader would find a representative bunch that highlights much of Bengali history with minimal bloat.

It is not Arunava Sinha's first attempt, having edited *The Greatest*

Bengali Stories Ever Told (Aleph Book Company, 2016) before. The present collection does seem to overcome the few faults its predecessor had, such as the exclusion of writers from Bangladesh. The present anthology is far more encompassing, putting on display the Bengali ghost story, the detective fiction (featuring, of course, Byomkesh), the stories of Bengali war-times, of hunger and the cruelty of caste. We have tales of modern love and anguish in the city, and of the illustrious village-life in the delta.

Fittingly, the anthology starts with Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's story, "Dead or Alive" is an eclectic look at the

oeuvre of the poet, a ghost story that seeks to answer questions of familial bonds. Kadambini, who returns from the dead, finds that her presence has changed how her loved ones view her. "Humans fear ghosts, ghosts fear humans too," Rabindranath says, "they occupy opposite banks of the river of death."

The beautifully constructed "Dead or Alive" is concise in action and deeply moving. Arunava Sinha decides to follow it up with a heart-wrenching story of low-caste life in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's "Paradise of the Wretched". In Sarat's story, the reader finds an untrammelled prose that vividly captures the dreams and despair of those cursed to be born off low-caste.

Standouts in the anthology includes Bibhutibushan's black-comedic "Drobomoyee's Sojourn in Kashi," where an elderly woman is sent to live with a religious nut, and Buddhadeva Bose's "A Life," where a schoolteacher's life, as he plans to write a dictionary, is shown with the breadth and richness of a novel. But perhaps the best of the collection can be found in Jibanananda Das's "Women" and Ashapura Devi's "Deceiver and Deception". In the former, the writer documents a day in the life of a bored couple Hemen and Chapola: "...his face was a replica of his paunch. Chapola's face was no different from Hemen's—dreams or imaginativeness never seemed to have encroached on their visages." Their visit to friends, a couple with their own problems, soon descend into a violent conversation of jealousy, self-worth, and marriage. Das's story should be a required reading for any serious writer, wishing to portray the complex, dreary lives of young cityfolk.

The other, in Devi's story, the author takes the reader on a whirlwind of trickery. While nothing seems to happen on a surface level, the intrinsic

desires of the characters, the form of a husband who comes home to find his wife might be dead, bring about the dark truths that are usually best left unsaid.

The inclusion of writers from the "other" Bengal, that is here in Bangladesh, has surely made this anthology more worthwhile and lasting, yet the selection is noticeably patchy, as only six writers have made it (most of these translations, as noted in the credits, have been taken from a single book: *The Book of Dhaka*, an anthology of stories set in Dhaka by Bangladeshi authors). It is still commendable that Sinha includes writers such as Akhtaruzzaman Elias, whose story "The Raincoat" is a fantastic play of anxiety, as a man wears a raincoat belonging to his brother-in-law (who had joined the freedom fighters), goes out into the pouring rain of war-time Dhaka and tries to make it back alive. But Sinha also decides to include, in the same vein, stories such as "The Weapon", a saccharine tale of poverty and crime.

Perhaps, the biggest omission is Kazi Nazrul Islam, without whom any talk of Bengali literature is incomplete and one-sided. Nazrul had been a poet and revolutionary, but his works of prose too had passion and intellectual rigour. The addition of so many novelists whose best works weren't short-stories show that Arunava Sinha selected these writers on the basis of their strength and place in Bengali Literature, therefore it is quite puzzling why he chose to leave out Nazrul.

Still, Arunava Sinha's anthology is a vastly enjoyable read and displays the richness and genius of the Bengali short story.

Shahriar Shaams has written for Dhaka Tribune, The Business Standard, and The Daily Star. He can be emailed at shahriarshaams@gmail.com. Find him on X: @shahriarshaams.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Rising from the ashes

Review of 'Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder' (Penguin Random House, 2024) by Salman Rushdie

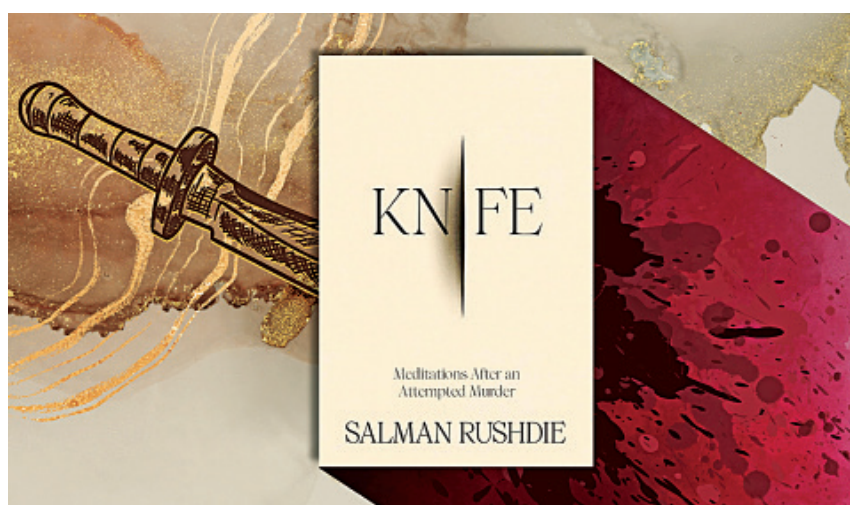


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

ZERTAB QUADERI

The literary world was shaken on August 12, 2022, when the news of Salman Rushdie being stabbed on stage in upstate New York started to pour in. Ironically, he was all set to talk about his involvement in a project to create a refuge in the USA for those writers who are not safe in their country. I have a few fans of Rushdie in the family so it was natural for me to exchange text messages with them as I kept one eye (ironically, again) on the TV, trying to gulp down the latest on this incident. As images of a helicopter and a stretcher being carried inside kept playing, I was anxious (like multitudes of others, I'm sure) about whether he would make it or not. Keeping his religious sentiments or lack thereof aside, Rushdie is one of the greatest authors of our times with an unparalleled sense of humour, keen observation, boundless imagination, and a sharp voice for satire. He's a wordsmith par excellence with the gift of crafting the funniest words and puns in English and Urdu. Therefore, it came as a slight relief when, on the next day of the attack, the news came that he was alive—although he was likely to lose an eye and the use of his left arm.

After being stabbed 15 times in different parts of his body, it was a miracle that he lived to tell the tale in his latest book, *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*. At its core, the book is a cathartic process that helps the author take stock of what ensued, recognise it, come to terms with it (somewhat), and use it to put the past behind and begin a new chapter. It is a testament to Rushdie's resilience, determination, and steel-strong willpower to use his talent and intellect to claw his way back into regular life. An emotional and personal account, *Knife* is a recounting of the 77-year-old author's account of what went on just before, during, and after the horrific incident.

The book is also a standing ovation to the people, especially his wife, immediate family members, doctors and other members of the medical profession, and friends from the writers' community and

otherwise, who sat, stood, and slept by him and literally held him through this difficult stage to nurture him back to life. Rushdie shares chunks of his personal life, dedicating one full chapter to his wife, Rachel Eliza Griffiths, an American poet, author, photographer, and visual artist. He describes lovingly and in his usual humorous way where and how they met and how their relationship blossomed. *Knife* is coming to terms with a new reality for both Eliza and Rushdie. An emotional rollercoaster, it traces the upheavals in their lives and how they overcome the trauma and anger to live a life of peace and love.

Besides his marital bliss, Rushdie shows glimpses into his past turbulent relationship with his father, touches upon the famous fatwa, and shares his close relationship with his sister, nieces, and sons. For someone who has mostly read his works of fiction, it's hard to imagine what the author is like in real life. *Knife* gives a good portrayal of him—he's just like any other human being who's concerned about his Ralph Lauren suit at the time of the attack. Never before have I seen the man behind the works of award-winning fiction like I've done here.

Detailed depictions of Rushdie's physical and psychological suffering during his hospitalisation and rehabilitation, the loss of his freedom of movement, and his dependence on

others are heart-wrenching, but the pain for the reader is a bit dulled through the dry humour—which is his forte; he does make us smile even through the worst pain imaginable. However, when it comes to the loss of his eye, it's an agony he can't get over and in his words, it's "an absence with an immensely powerful presence". The silver lining in all this is the miraculous recovery of his left hand through rigorous and painful hand therapy, proving that where there's a will, there's a way.

Rushdie is unapologetically himself in *Knife*. He reaffirms his belief in not believing in any religion and voices his strong opinion on a politicised and weaponised religion that causes more harm than good. By the end of the book, we see him as a strong man who revisits the place of the attack in a new Ralph Lauren suit, is not afraid to speak out, is determined to stay true to his way of storytelling with grit and gumption, and is very much basking in the love of his wife and family. He promises that the knife attack will not change his writing style or make it appear weak or smell of defeat. Through this book, Rushdie rises from the ashes like a phoenix from a life-threatening 27 seconds, once again free to do what he does best while his attacker languishes in prison.

Steering away from the memoir a little, we recently got a further glimpse into

Rushdie's mode of thinking especially in light of the ongoing carnage in Palestine. As has been widely reported in various news sources including *The Guardian*, Rushdie has added his two cents on the genocide in Palestine and the student protests across in Western university campuses. He justifies the "emotional reaction" to the situation but questions the viability of a Palestinian state "right now" under the Hamas leadership, which, in his opinion, would lead to a "Taliban-like state" under the tutelage of Iran. Being the subject of an extremist's brutal attack himself, we may try to understand his apprehension and aversion toward another potential terrorist/religious fundamentalist nation. However, his opinion that the terrorist organisation Hamas should be mentioned in the university campus protests because "that's where this started" comes across as a bit off-key. October 7, 2023 was not when it started. And there's plenty of debate on who created the Taliban in the first place but that's a story for another day.

In *The Guardian* piece, Rushdie mostly walks the middle path when he opines that student demonstrations are okay as long as other students are not made to feel unsafe. He is sympathetic to the Palestinians and their cause but feels that not enough voices are being raised against Hamas. In my opinion, this is not the time to issue "safe" statements. The horrific and exponentially increasing statistics in Palestine cannot be compared to anything that we have witnessed since the persecution of the Jews almost a century back. We expect a stronger opinion from writers, artists, musicians, film makers, actors, poets, or someone who practises any form of art and has the weapon (not necessarily a knife) to make their voices count. Keeping the art separate from the artist is our job.

Zertab Quaderi is an SEO English content writer and social media marketing consultant by day and a reader of fiction and nonfiction books by night. In between, she travels and dabbles in watercolour painting.

What we're reading this week

MAISHA SYEDA,
Sub editor, Star Books and Literature
Adjunct Lecturer,
North South University

Bornomala: Bangla Alphabet Book Collection

Sabyasachi Hazra (ed.)
Kobi Prokashoni, 2014

I came across this book when I went to an exhibition titled "Primer to Press" by Sabyasachi Hazra. The book was launched there, the collection edited by Hazra himself. It assembles eight selected primers of Bangla language dating from 1849 to 1948. The book is a rich collection of specimens, and, as a whole, a well-researched testament to the evolution of Bangla letters over the years. It boasts an impressive analysis of the practice of printing and publishing used in Bangla primers and is great to have in collection for those interested in the linguistic history of Bangla lettering.

