

ESSAY

# Manufacturing praise

How honest are book reviews in Bangladesh?



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

**The harsh truth is that without solicitation, very few books will be written about. These days, published authors end up doing significant legwork, from supplying media contacts to their publishers, to requesting and emailing scores of academics, journalists, and writers for blurbs, endorsements, and reviews.**

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Sometime ago, a writer reached out to me with a request. His debut novel was being published later in the year and he was wondering if I would be open to reviewing it. I was aware of the book, having read it when it was still only a draft. The author was not someone I only knew, either, but a mentor who had supported my writing in many ways, even through monetary means. Refusing him, then, felt tantamount to betrayal. But I had to in the end, and though he understood, I still came out of the exchange feeling guilty of being unhelpful or, worse, ungrateful.

Much has been written about the machinations that go behind the scenes of book criticism. *The Economist*, of all places, last year mourned the death of the "hatchet job" in a piece called "Critics are getting less cruel. Alas", saying that the book review reads often like "a smug inside job". Indeed, a cursory review of book criticism in newspapers in Bangladesh lays bare the fact that it is very much the case here as well. Book reviews written by a student or well-wisher of the author is unsurprisingly common. When an unfortunate staff-writer is assigned a book, they are often nudged into

writing a glowing review or, if that is not possible, a tempered, "balanced" review. The latter is a phenomenon I had to personally deal with during my time working as a staff writer for literary supplements. Far from being "balanced", the term is used to refer to reviews where the meagre amount of positives of the book is amplified throughout the piece, after which the writer is free to add in a token few lines on what held the book back. I am of course to be blamed for this as well, as I too had "adjusted" a few times, caving into the pressures of producing a "balanced" review.

Mir Arif, a Bangladeshi writer based in the US, with whom I had the pleasure of working alongside as a staff-writer, says of his experience reviewing books in Bangladesh: "A major challenge was learning about the writers' backgrounds and their literary associations, which was somehow important in the existing review culture...In editorial meetings, the editors often discussed their views on the writer even before I read the book. As bad as it sounds, editors' views often influenced my reviews, sometimes even after I had submitted my drafts. On top of it, there was a general tendency to overpraise Bangladeshi literature..."

Bangladeshi writing in English is consistently assessed in this way. Their purported excellence is taken for granted. In an interesting piece by Usraat Fahmidah, "Why don't Bangladeshi books reach international award shelves?" (*The Daily Star*, 2022), the blame on why our writers never seem to win Bookers or the DSC prize is put on literary racism, uneven output, or even a lack of interest in pursuing literature in the language, but curiously there is not one mention on the literary qualities of the books in question by any of the luminaries who had been interviewed. I do not intend to downplay the obviously real factors that the essay talks about, nor am I of the opinion that all of Bangladeshi literature in English is second-rate, but to completely omit any discussion on whether these books deserved to win on literary grounds comes from an understanding that any such critique would disservice a fellow countryman and a burgeoning literary scene.

Those hankering over how we must present (via review) "our" writers positively to a "western" audience, because otherwise Bangladeshi literature in English would not get international recognition and respect,

must explain how supporting "our" writers only ends up meaning that one has to unconditionally stomp for these books and put them up on a pedestal they may not deserve. Does it not, then, achieve the exact opposite of what they want? Do we not end up looking shallow and tribal? And do we ever wonder where this talk of protecting "our" writers seems to come from? Perhaps from the very class of writers who would want that adulation? Perhaps, one must begin to think that it is contention and not celebration that really strengthens literature.

Ikhtisad Ahmed, author of *Yours, Etcetera* (Bengal Lights Books, 2015), concurs that "Our reviewing culture... is rife with sycophancy, intellectual dishonesty, and protection of class interests..."

Ahmed, who had been no stranger to the backlash of critical reviews here, adds that, "We have eschewed intellectual debates and discussions for a celebration of works that fail to even be mediocre... This not only prevents us from taking the writing of Bangladeshis seriously enough to read and engage with our own widely, but holds us back on the world stage too."

I asked Sarah Anjum Bari, former literary editor at *The Daily Star*, how she dealt with conflicts of interest. She wrote back: "I don't believe in publishing a review just to bash on a book or author, so when we did run a negative review it would be one that still engaged critically with the text and had something valuable to say about it. I sometimes got in touch with the author in advance and gave them a heads up if a negative review of their work were about to come out. I also tried to push back on reviews that simply described and summarised the text—which is usually a sign of the reviewer not wanting to share their honest opinions on the text—so we would always send the draft back asking for more analysis. Ideally, we tried not to have a text reviewed by an author's friend (though this is honestly difficult to maintain in a place like Bangladesh where the community is so close knit)..."

It is not shocking to learn that there is an unhealthy overlap of friend and critic in book reviews here and an evangelical need to promote one's own for the collective cause is present among us. I am always distrustful of the praise I see, for instances of a friend of the author masquerading as a generous, conscious critic are numerous. The book review cannot be an advertisement. It is unfair to be a

marketer to an unsuspecting reader.

The harsh truth is that without solicitation, very few books will be written about. These days, published authors end up doing significant legwork, from supplying media contacts to their publishers, to requesting and emailing scores of academics, journalists, and writers for blurbs, endorsements, and reviews. How successful this solicitation is also depends on factors such as class. Well-off and well-connected authors tend to do better. How likely is it then to envision a critical appraisal of these well-connected authors in newspaper pages with personal connections, if one can be frank? Even when their works deserve praise, it is praise that comes out as suspect. Is this the environment through which we are to make literary waves?

Reviewers, in turn, have increasingly become grifters. Far from suffering through the nauseating experience of writing something they may not mean, they enthusiastically heap praise in a bid to be agreeable, or perhaps in hopes of similar treatment when their time arrives, or even for a recommendation letter for an MFA. If nothing, a friendship can be on the table. In a piece in *Esquire* by Isle McElroy, "The Rise of Literary Friendships", the writer asks, "Are writers clinging to each other for support because, as publishing houses consolidate and advances decline, other writers are all we really have for support? Have the crabs in the barrel begun to hold claws?"

From the perspective of South Asia, this has been the case for a lot longer with the absence of needed institutions and opportunities. I believe this very sensibility has significantly contributed to writers receiving undeserving praise in the name of support.

Support is necessary in any case, but book critics must understand they should be servants to the text. When the Master is kind and original, they must capitulate to the magic, and when it is derivative and cruel, one must start planning a beheading. In the course of reviewing books in so many years (the first review I had written for this paper had been over a decade ago as a teenager), there were times I had gone on to worship a writer's books and times when I wished for their early demise. Never did I have the urge to be their friend.

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THE SHELF

## 4 books to read in celebration of Women in Translation month

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NUR-E-JANNAT ALIF

Women in Translation Month is an annual celebration that toasts to women authors from around the globe who write in languages other than English. With the growing interest in translated fiction, it is refreshing to note that curating this year's list was relatively easier than last year's. There was a wide array of options from European to South American works, as well as an encouraging emergence of Southeast Asian literature. However, it is worth noting that the selection of titles by Bangladeshi female authors (or South Asian authors, in general) translated into English remains limited.

**JAWBONE**  
Mónica Ojeda, Sarah Booker (Translator)  
Coffee House Press, 2022

Students of the Delta Bilingual Academy, Fernanda and Annelise are more sisters than friends, impossible to separate, one and the same. Every day after school, Fernanda, Annelise, and their friends assemble to embark on a sinister adventure, one that is simultaneously thrilling and increasingly perilous. They have their own conception of God—albeit introduced by Annelise—and their rituals are eerily anomalous. However, this is not the only secret Fernanda and Annelise share.

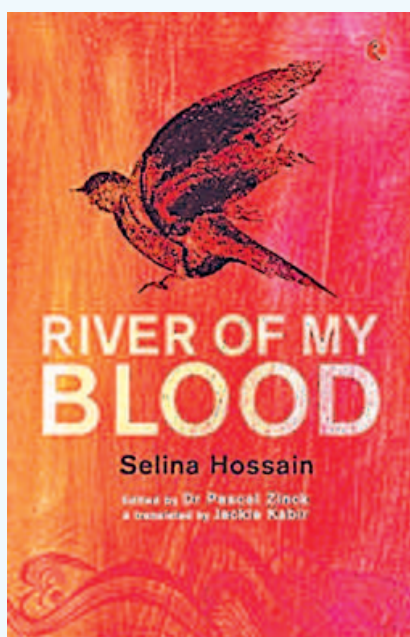
**RIVER OF MY BLOOD**  
Selina Hossain, Jackie Kabir (Translator)  
Rupa Publications India, 2016

A powerful and heart-rending narrative of love and loss, *River of My Blood* follows Boori, a spirited and

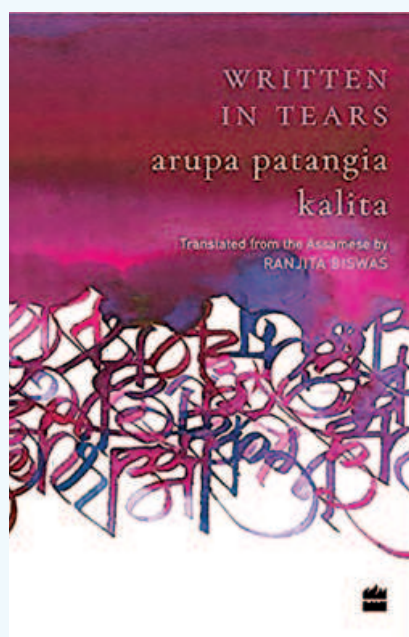


resilient young girl, as she navigates the complexities of adulthood. After marrying an older relative, Boori struggles with the stigma of infertility and later confronts the challenges of raising a son who is born deaf and mute. With the Muktijuddho engulfing the coast of her village, Haldi, the now-widowed Boori must face the most life-altering decision she has ever had to make. Not only is this book a gripping portrayal of the Liberation War, but it also advocates for women's rights and stands firm against patriarchy, leaving an indelible impact on readers long after they finish the last page.

**WRITTEN IN TEARS**  
Arupa Patangia Kalita, Ranjita Biswas (Translator)



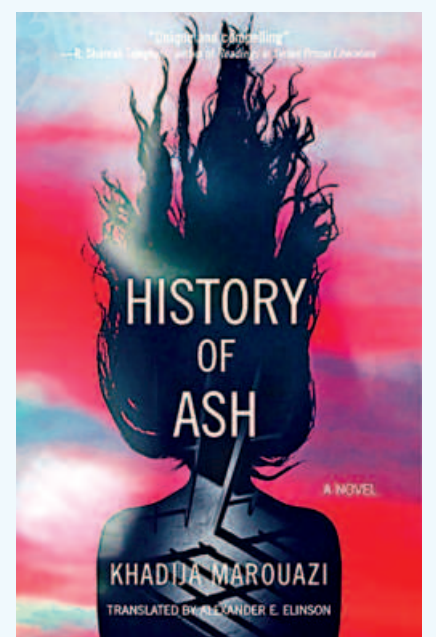
**HarperPerennial, 2015**  
*Written In Tears* is an emotive collection of eight short stories that delve into the decades-long violence in Assam, exploring its profound impact on women. Originally written in Assamese, these stories portray strong female characters who, despite enduring unimaginable suffering, manage to rise above their hardships. In one story, a woman witnesses her husband's family grappling with the absence of her insurgent brother-in-law. In another, a girl's life is forever altered after a brutal rape. Kalita's writing vividly captures the hollow vein of violence, the oppression of women, and the often senseless nature of patriarchy. Through her personal experiences, she transports



readers to an Assam caught amid violent uprisings, where ideologies clash, innocent lives are destroyed, and women suffer both physical and emotional violations—all in the name of freedom.

**HISTORY OF ASH: A NOVEL**  
Khadija Marouazi, Alexander E. Elinson (Translator)  
Hoopoe, 2023

Prisoners during the "Lead Years" of Morocco, a man and a woman, wrestle against systematic oppression for the sake of emancipation. Shifting between past and present, Mouline and Leila recount their experiences both inside the prison cell and beyond it, navigating the torture chamber, the judicial operation, and the challenges



they confronted after their exemption. Narrated in vivid detail, their strategies for survival and resistance offer clear and often intense reflections. Harrowing yet resilient, this is the book about fortitude, power and the sheer will to freedom.

**This is an excerpt. Find the full list on The Daily Star and DS Books' websites.**

**Nur-E-Jannat Alif is a gender studies major and part-time writer who dreams of authoring a book someday. Find her at @literatureinsolitude on Instagram or send her your book/movie/television recommendations at nurejannatalif@gmail.com.**