

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Sufism and the emergence of Bengal's syncretic culture

Review of 'Needle at the Bottom of the Sea: Bengali Tales from the Land of the Eighteen Tides' (University of California Press, 2023) translated by Tony K. Stewart

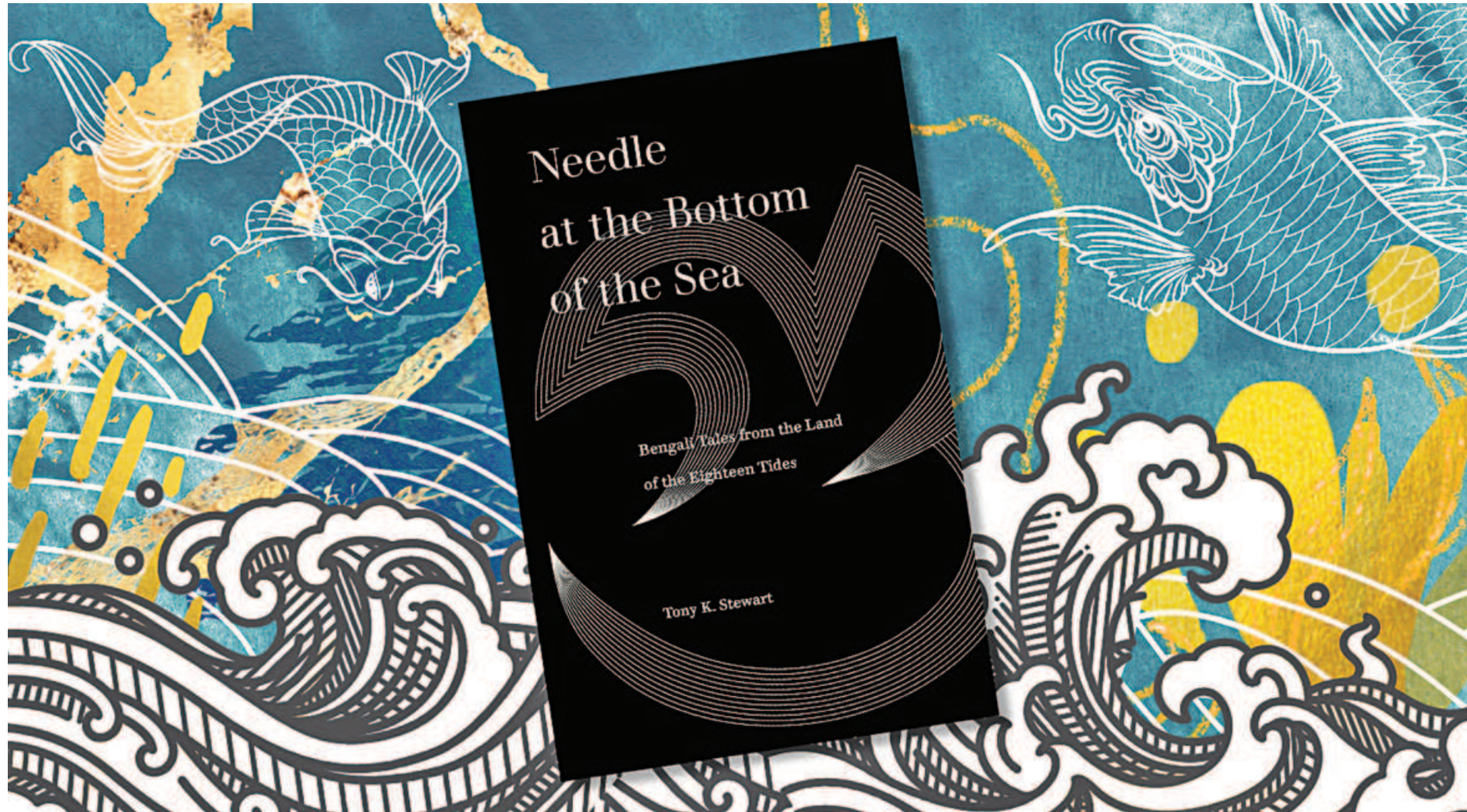


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

There are several potential reasons why Sufism, rather than traditional Islam, is valorised in the tales. First, Sufism has been in Bengal since Bakhtiyar Khalji's conquest in 1205 AD, and it became the dominant strain in the region during the Muslim rule of India as many Sufi poets, scholars, and saints came from Iran, Turkey, and Yemen to preach the religion.

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

Needle at the Bottom of the Sea is a collection of five enthralling and inspirational 'kathas' or tales of miracle-working Sufi saints from the early modern period of Bangla literature. These stories, ranging from the 17th to the 19th century, include Krsnaram Das' *The Ray Mangal* (The Auspicious Tale of the Lord of the Southern Regions), Abdul Ohab's *Gaji Kalu O Campavati Kanyar Puthi* (Scouring the World for Campavati), Mohammad Khater's *Bonbibbi Jahura Nama* (Glorifying the Protective Matron of the Jungle), Kavi Vallabh's *Satya Narayaner Puthi* (Wayward Wives and Their Magical Flying Tree), and Saiyad Sultan's *Khoyaj Khijir's Instruction to Musa in Nabivamsa* (Curbing the Hubris of Moses). The stories have been curated and translated into English (with collaborations from Ayesha A. Irani in the last of the five tales) by Tony K. Stewart, a renowned scholar and translator of Sufi Islamic literature from the Bangla-speaking world.

The stories vary in length, and though they are not arranged in the sequence of their original publication (as the fourth tale in the publication order is placed first in the book), they are held together by their physical setting, narrative style, and thematic focus. Much of the actions of the stories occur in the treacherous but fertile and alluvial regions of the Sundarbans or the southern mangrove swamps of the Atharobhati, the low-lying islands of the eighteen tides, where humans, saints, deities, and animals clash, compromise, and cooperate for supremacy, solidarity, or survival.

The stories share the characteristics of romance: a narrative genre in which magic, miracles and mysteries abound, and protagonist

of superhuman bravery and powers, often on a spiritual quest, indulge in the fantastic. The marvellous, an essential ingredient of romance, remains preponderant in these puthis or kecchas, wherein tigers and crocodiles talk, fight, rant, and mock themselves; a colossal number of animals or soldiers gather in a flash to fight for a king, saint, or god; the dead spring back to life to fight again; rocks float, rivers part, and trees fly; a pir (male Sufi saint) can retrieve a needle from the bottom of the sea and a pirani (female Sufi saint) can turn into a giant or a white lily through her keramati (miracle-working power). One can travel to, marry, and live happily in the underworld, and fairies carry a Muslim holy man to the bedroom of a Hindu Brahmin princess on a whim to fulfil Bidhata's (God as the dispenser of destiny) wish for their union.

The stories are not didactic *per se* but have some underlying religious themes. They allegorically portray how Islam spread in the southern part of Bengal and how Bangali culture became increasingly syncretic through the mingling of Hindu and Islamic beliefs—the latter best demonstrated through the recurring presence of Satya Pir or Satya Narayan, a Bangali folklore hero, considered a composite of Hindu deity Narayan and Islamic God Allah and revered by the adherents of both faiths.

The Islam extolled in these tales is not its formalist version centring on everyday observances and traditional customs, but the mystical sect that stresses love rather than fear of God and the possibility of an intimate bond with the divine through a deeper, inward path of selfless devotion and detachment from the object world that the phakirs and phakranis (religious mendicants, male and female) in these stories represent.

There are several potential reasons why Sufism, rather than traditional Islam, is valorised in the tales. First, Sufism has been in Bengal since Bakhtiyar Khalji's conquest in 1205 AD, and it became the dominant strain in the region during the Muslim rule of India as many Sufi poets, scholars, and saints came from Iran, Turkey, and Yemen to preach the religion. Among them were Shah Jalal Yemeni, Khan Jahan Ali, Jafar Khan, Shah Daula, and Shah Fariduddin, and the numerous miracles performed by Bada Khan Gaji in *Ray Mangal* and *Gaji Kalu and Campavati Kanyar Puthi* or *Bonbibbi Jahura Nama* are, in fact, comparable to the supernatural feats attributed to these historical figures, thus making the tales imaginative histories. A second reason for extolling Sufism could be its parallels with Hindu mysticism, which creates the possibility of Hindu-Muslim unity. It is believed that the ideals of Sufism greatly influenced the spiritual teachings of Vaisnavism, the mysticism of the Bauls and Bengal's greatest poet of the modern era, Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore was an ardent advocate of the Sufi poets like Saadi, Hafiz, Kabir, and Lalou Shah Fakir, and recurrently saw himself as one of their modern day descendants, trying to bring the humanity of all castes, creeds, and colours into a single "nest".

In his brilliantly thoughtful and incisive opening introduction to the volume (the book also provides a separate introduction for each of the tales), Stewart explains why he chose to translate and collate all five kathas into one book: "The heroes and heroines of these tales are indigenous to Bengal, and they cross-populate from one story to another in a closed set," and even though they "do not constitute a cycle," "several of the characters and events repeat". Two of the

characters featured in several of the stories are the Hindu godling in the lineage of Shiv, Daksin Ray, and the Sufi warrior saint, Bada Khan Gaji. They begin as antagonists fighting for supremacy over the Sundarbans but, after much hubris, hostilities, and humiliations, end up as "brothers".

Their initial encounter occurs in Krsnaram Das' *Ray Mangal*, in which they clash over social slights and insults, fight with large armies of tigers, and slay one another in a solo pitched battle but, eventually, through the intervention of Satya Pir, return to life and become friends of equal standing. Their second confrontation occurs in *Gaji Kalu o Campavati Kanyar Puthi*, again, as adversaries. However, after Daksin Ray is comprehensively defeated and humiliated by Gaji, they accept one another as "friends" (though the disgraced Ray is now required to serve Gaji). In *Bonbibbi Jahura Nama*, Gaji and Ray appear for the third time but under very changed circumstances. Bonbibbi has now become the new protective matriarch of the Sundarbans, and Gaji is more like an eminence grise. Ray's powers have also diminished considerably. To consolidate her administrative control over Atharobhati, Bonbibbi first battles Ray's mother, Narayani, and after defeating her conclusively, they reconcile as sisters. But their hostilities are not over yet. So later, Bonbibbi's brother and deputy Sajangali engage Ray in combat, and when Ray is on the verge of defeat, he seeks protection from Gaji, who in his benevolence intervenes, affectionately chides Bonbibbi, and through his influence, they all become one "family".

This profound message of inclusivity and unity across the religious divide is further echoed in the fourth tale, *Satya Narayaner Puthi*, in which Shiv, Satya Narayan, Satya Pir, God, Khoda, and Allah all become one, and an offer of worship to one becomes worship to all. Thus, in an exchange with Sumati and Kumati, two central figures in the narrative, Khoda explains, "When you exhibit great devotion toward and perform worship for Siv, that Siv is actually me: I am that Siv". However, with the rise of identity politics during the British colonial period and the first partition of Bengal in 1905, the Bangalis cast aside this vision of Hindu-Muslim fellowship and cultural convergence and embraced religious monolithism and tribalism. The consequence is the countless inter-communal riots that followed during Gandhi's Swaraj and Swadeshi movements and the subsequent Partition of Bengal in 1947, which has dismembered the ethnic community for good.

It is hard to overstate the excellence of Stewart's research and translation in the book. He is thorough, scrupulous, and rigorous in his research, and his rendition of the stories in English is so fluent, elegant, and eloquent that one may assume that they were written originally in English. The book will appeal to general and specialist readers of all social and cultural backgrounds and actively encourage them to reconsider the xenophobic and cynical images of Muslims and Islam willfully propagated in the Western media in the wake of the harrowing events of 9/11.

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SHELF LIFE

'Golpo Shomogro'

Humayun Ahmed, 1991

Ahmed's short stories are a class apart. They leave you wanting more, they tell the saddest, most profound human stories, they represent the quotidian disgrace and triumphs of life with equal tenderness and poignancy, and even compel you to shed a tear or two. Ahmed's range is vast in this collection—from the heartbreakingly romantic tale to the experimental, genre bending science fiction narrative to the story that makes room for the utter collapse of the binary separating the normal from the supernatural, there is something for every kind of reader in this collection. It is hard for me to pick a favourite from this stellar collection but one that stayed with me decades after reading it for the first time is "Shonkhomala". The protagonist, his elderly mother, and his visually impaired father all harbour a quiet, deep-seated trauma which gets reopened with the arrival of Pori, a new mother who is part of the family's traumatic past. At barely three pages, "Shonkhomala" manages to stun the reader. Other memorable tales include "Opekhhka" where Keramat who is a "kamla" at the union council chairman's home waits to get married but his malik never gets around to organising a wedding for this negligible, expendable worker. Don't forget also to check out the devastating "Beenar Osukh", the clever "Newtuner Bhul Shutro", and the absurdly adorable "Rurur Golpo".

Nazia Manzoor



Sister Library

IN-ZINE

Zine exhibit Aug 30-31 | 12 - 7 pm

REBELS WITH A CAUSE

Friday, 30 August

Music and reading | 3 - 4 pm
Zine making | 4 - 6 pm

SHALA Neighbourhood Art Space, Aoki

Illustration by Nafisa Islam