

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

INTIMACIES OF VIOLENCE

Confronting cultural silence on IPV in Bangladeshi communities

Review of 'Intimacies of Violence: Reading Transnational Middle-Class Women in Bangladeshi America' (Oxford University Press, 2024) by Nadine Shaanta Murshid

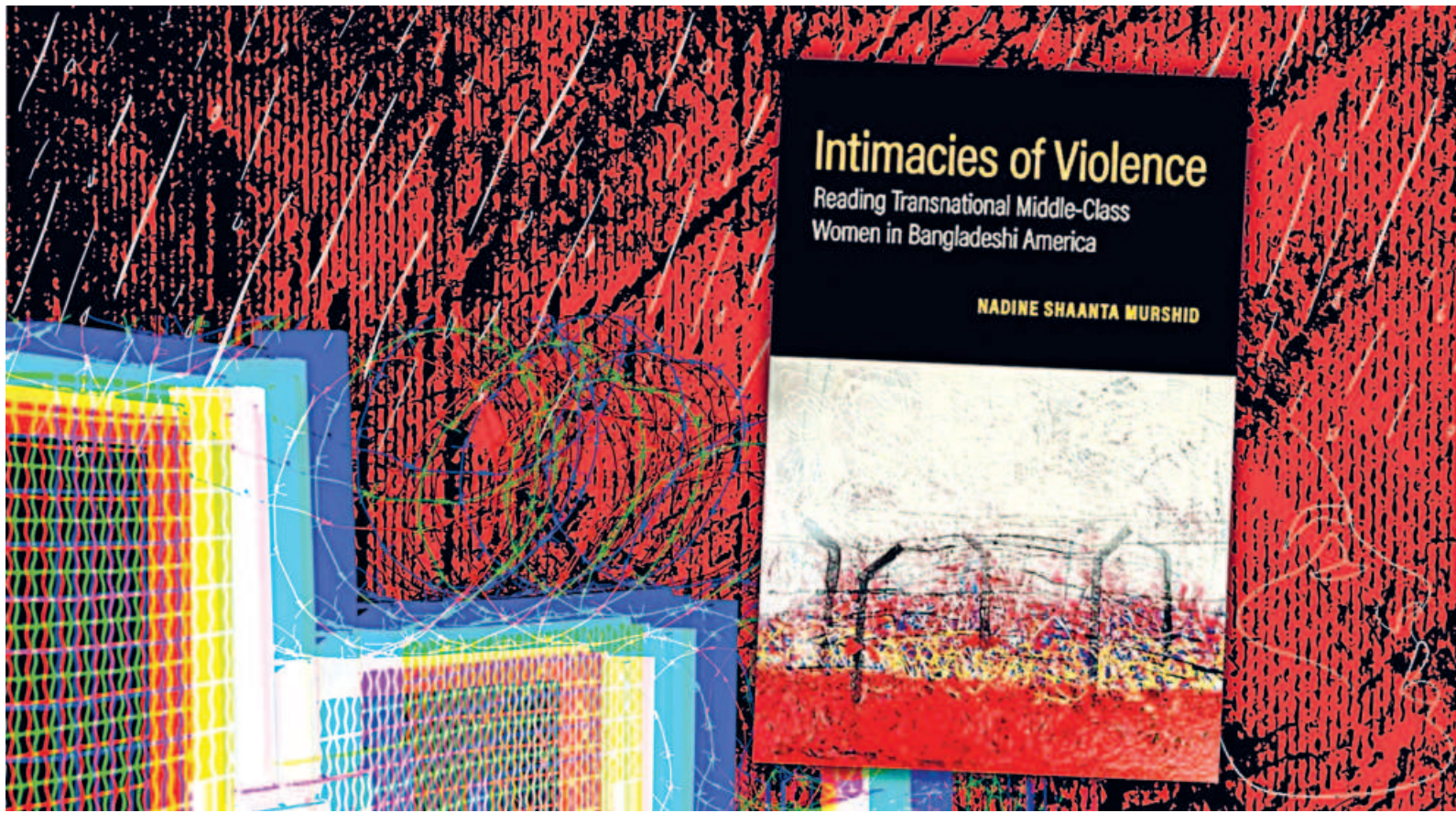


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

It is a nice take on Kamini Roy's poem, "Pachhe Loke Kichhu Bole" (Lest They Say Something), written in the 19th century. The poem aptly expressed as well as criticised women for their fear of breaking social norms.

IRFAN CHOWDHURY

Proverbs, short and profound, often sum up wisdom passed down through generations. Bangla, one of the world's most spoken languages, is rich with such gems. One such saying in the language—"manush ki bolbe?"—is central to *Intimacies of Violence*, a debut book by Dr Nadine Shaanta Murshid, an associate professor at the University at Buffalo.

The book presents a decade-long exploration of intimate partner violence (IPV) among Bangladeshi Muslim women in Dhaka and New York. Through interviews with 40 women, Murshid critiques the middle-class values and cultural norms that enable and perpetuate IPV. Divided into four parts, "Intimacies"; "Kinship Ties"; "Nation and Nationalism"; and "Embodying Structural Violence", each section addresses different facets of IPV within Bangladeshi communities in a sharp, engaging tone. The narrative offers a wealth of insights for readers

interested in gender, migration, culture and South Asian studies. It is also written in easy yet elegant English, and as an academic research, it is a highly engaging read. Readers of Dr Murshid's columns on Bangladeshi newspapers and blogs, of course, would be familiar with her style.

As the title suggests, the book explores the violence suffered by young Bangladeshi females, in varying contexts, inflicted by their (male) partners, who in most cases, especially from outside of the relationships, may appear normal, non-aggressive, even caring. However, abusive partners are only half of the story. The other perpetrators are: Bangladeshi communities, culture, religion and society at large. Elderly roles, such as that of aunts and mothers, play a discursive but active part in tolerating and thwarting intimate partner violence, which maintains the problem of partner violence in Bangladeshi communities.

Why do they do it though—in desh and abroad? The answer lies in an

idiom that Dr Murshid uses frequently throughout the prose: manush ki bolbe (what would people say?). It is a nice take on Kamini Roy's poem, "Pachhe Loke Kichhu Bole" (Lest They Say Something), written in the 19th century. The poem aptly expressed as well as criticised women for their fear of breaking social norms. It is a true yet poignant illustration of Bangladeshi society during the British colonial period when women sacrificed their desires, creativity, or opportunities that were naturally available to men, which benefited men and stifled ambition, aspiration, and independent thinking and self-reliance of women. Perhaps the poem was to inspire progressive thinking in society, especially for women to shrug off inhibitions and self-consciousness in pursuit of their intellectual as well as human growth.

Likewise, Murshid's research findings are scathing of the Bangladeshi middle class, specially of the women who continue their enabling roles, which, as in poet Roy's days (and alas

also now) is mostly benefiting the men (from sacrifices made by women). An omnipresent fear of social stigma follows victims of partner violence who are usually blamed rather than the perpetrators for the violence they experience. Men are seen as human beings—capable of making mistakes and deserving of understanding. What Murshid wants is for that same humanity to be available to women.

The book's section on kinship ties highlights the complex roles of "aunties" in perpetuating IPV. Murshid describes aunties as both enablers and potential allies: some demean victims, aligning with patriarchal norms, while others provide support. These aunties, acting as cultural gatekeepers, wield significant influence over women's lives, whether in Dhaka or in New York.

One of the book's most striking chapters addresses the legacy of the Birangona—a term honouring rape survivors of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Murshid critiques the politicisation of these survivors' narratives, arguing that glorification often obscures their lived realities and reinforces harmful gender norms. Women are burdened with the societal expectation of maintaining honour, leading to silence around rape and IPV. Murshid uses poignant examples, such as Tufan's painting of a submissive woman depicted as a chair, to illustrate how society views women as objects to be used and discarded or ignored. The chapter also examines how class plays a role in navigating violence: while middle-class women may conceal abuse through migration or marriage, those from poorer backgrounds face more overt stigma but also greater opportunities to escape.

In the book's final section, Murshid explores how migration shapes women's experiences of IPV. Many Bangladeshi women migrate to the U.S. expecting liberation, only to encounter familiar constraints within diasporic communities. Interviewees recount navigating societal taboos, professional bias, and legal systems that often fail to address their needs. Murshid highlights how diasporic families often enforce stricter controls over women, particularly around sexuality, than their counterparts in Bangladesh. This hyper-vigilance discourages women from reporting abuse and perpetuates cycles of silence. Even second-generation women face

similar restrictions, revealing how deeply entrenched these norms are.

The legal system, too, presents challenges. Murshid describes how victims of IPV struggle to prove abuse, especially when it involves psychological or sexual coercion, which are often unrecognized as crimes. This burden of proof, coupled with systemic biases, leaves many women without recourse.

Murshid situates IPV within the broader frameworks of capitalism and neoliberalism, which she argues exacerbate women's vulnerabilities. Capitalism pits middle-class women against one another in a competition for resources, while neoliberalism promotes isolation and individualism, making collective action against IPV more difficult. In the diaspora, neoliberal ideals also empower Bangladeshi men to manipulate women's vulnerabilities, often threatening to send them 'back home'. Murshid critiques how consumerism commodifies love, reducing it to material gestures rather than genuine care. While millennials resist some patriarchal norms, such as arranged marriages, they often remain bound by what may appear to be cultural expectations, but is often about "belonging".

While the book provides no easy solutions to these problems, it underscores the importance of education, acknowledgment, and systemic reform. The author's ideological stance against capitalism and neoliberalism may not resonate with all readers, but her insights into the lived experiences of Bangladeshi women are compelling and necessary.

Intimacies of Violence is a significant contribution to feminist scholarship, especially on Bangladeshi middle class Muslims, and South Asian studies, shedding light on a topic often silenced within Bangladeshi communities. This book deserves a wide readership, not only among academics but also among Bangladeshi families, guardians, and community leaders. If we are to address IPV meaningfully, we must first allow victims to speak without fear or stigma—and Murshid's work is a step toward that goal.

A global release of the book is expected in January. It can be purchased online from Oxford University Press.

Irfan Chowdhury is an opinion writer.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A tale of survival, dominance, and self-discovery in colonial Bengal

Review of 'Arkathi' (52 - Bayanno, 2024) by Obayed Haq

TASNIM NAZ

Obayed Haq's Bangla novel, *Arkathi*, is almost a bildungsroman tale filled with adventure and self-reflection. In true bildungsroman fashion, where the protagonist progresses into adulthood with room for growth and change, a bulk of Haq's novel talks about the spiritual journey that an orphan, Naren, takes through a forest in order to mature, and comes out on the other side to realise a community's deep, hidden truth.

Arkathi is situated at the tail-end of the 19th century, somewhere between 1870 and 1890. British colonisers had, by then, invaded the gardens of Assam and Sylhet in order to cultivate tea, and needed labourers to clear the jungles and make way for tea plantations. However, the back-breaking nature of the work meant that none of the locals were interested in such a laborious task. Therefore, the British set out to employ several cheap labourers from the hunger-stricken communities of West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, and Chota Nagpur. The indigenous populations of these areas were encouraged to join in the work, and those employed to bring these indigenous workers to the tea estates were named 'Arkathi'.

The story begins with the advent of the

railway in Bengal, which intertwines with the lives of Naren's parents. Naren's father is memorably gifted a coat by a British settler, Larings Shaheb, and this coat changes the very fabric of Naren's father's being. Although it might seem like a naïve gift at first, it aids in the transformation of Naren's father into a cheap mimicry of the colonisers. He takes up liquor, like the "shaheb babus", and develops a drinking problem. Naren's mother, who had otherwise been happy in her conjugal life up to that point in time, is deeply affected by this. The situation escalates, and Naren's father's alcoholism leads him to become a domestic abuser. Thus, the mother spends her time in quiet disarray, cursing the modern railway for her ill fortune. One day, unable to bear the brunt of her husband's

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ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

abuse, she takes her own life under the tracks of the same railway that had changed her life for the worse. Naren is thus left to fend for himself.

For such a tragic character, however, nature provides a quiet solace—the Ashwath trees that he climbs and jumps off of become his family. Haq provides a vivid depiction of the nature of Bengal with the various flora and fauna that the village

dweller encounter in their day-to-day lives. It is only by chance that Naren meets an Arkathi, and consequently becomes one himself.

When thinking of the figure of an Arkathi, men who essentially trick other vulnerable individuals to work for the "Company", Naren seems like a mismatched fit. However, it is the novel's intention to present us with a kind-hearted

and brave character who is a victim of his circumstances. It re-establishes the notion that power and dominance can take several forms, even that of an inherently harmless child; one's mind wanders back to the "harmless" railway that had shattered the life of Naren's family.

The novel very subtly disapproves of this ideology of dominance. The Bangladeshi characters are at the forefront of the narrative, and the story is a treatment of their temperament with this ideological conundrum: Is it better to die of starvation or work for an exploitative and colonial design?

Returning to the theme of bildungsroman, the story comes full circle only when Naren grows up and is able to comprehend the grave nature of the Arkathi scheme. All in all, *Arkathi* is different from Haq's other works and worth a read for its psychological exploration of dominance and intimate insight into the unexplored history of the Arkathis.

Tasnim Naz is an academician of English Literature at Bangladesh University of Professionals. Her research interests are feminism, motherhood studies, and postcolonial studies. Reach her at tasnimnaz46@gmail.com.