

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Unquiet legacies in Salil Tripathi’s ‘The Colonel Who Would Not Repent’

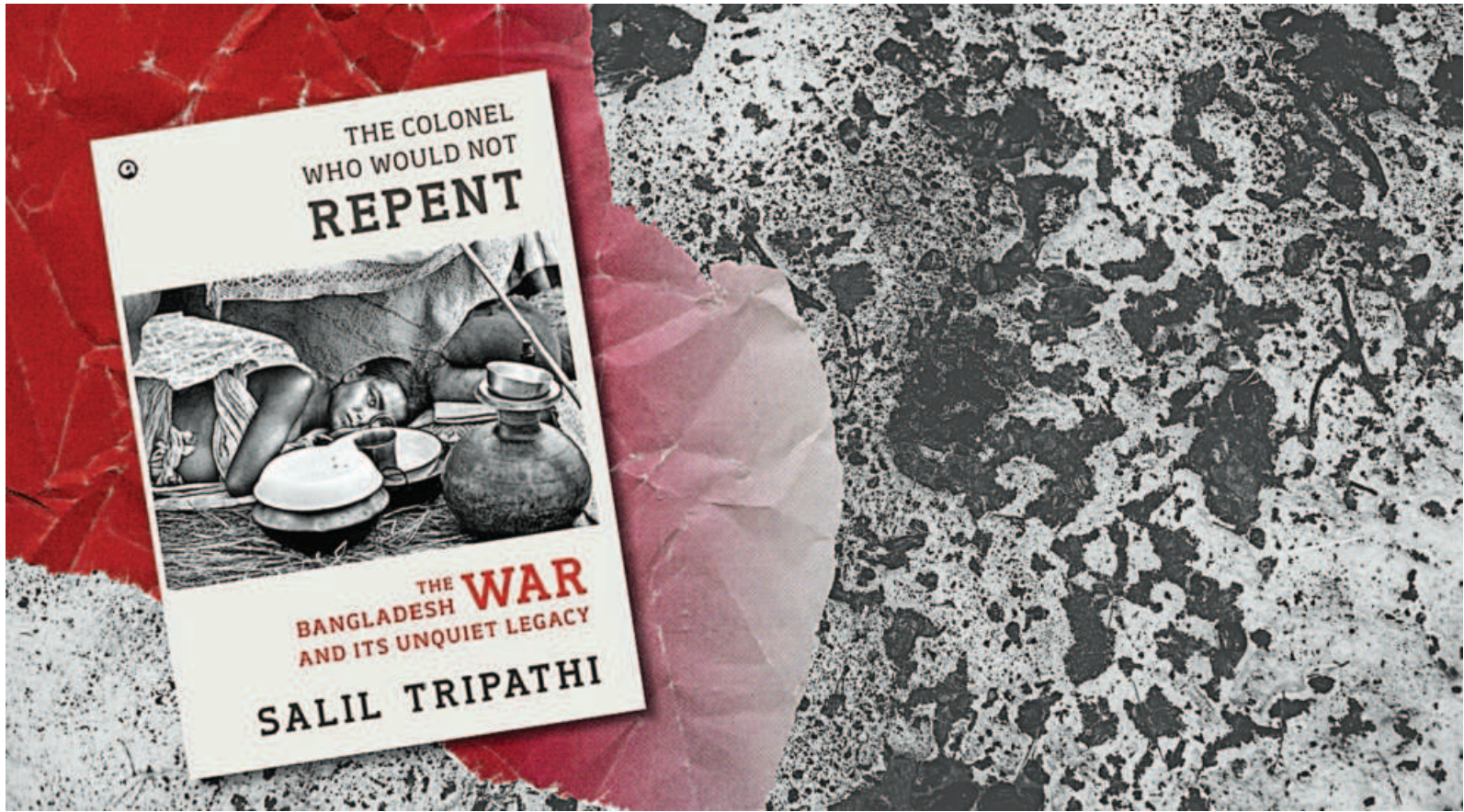


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

I could almost hear the groans of the members of my group when I suggested another book on 1971. They were too polite to ask the questions that I knew was in their minds: Why another book about 1971? Don’t we know all about 1971?

Every December, my reading group chooses a book related to 1971. In 2015, for example, we read A. Qayyum Khan’s *Bittersweet Victory: A Freedom Fighter’s Tale* (2013) and a few years earlier we read Siddik Salik’s *Witness to Surrender* (Oxford University Press, 1977). On December 17, 2016, we chose Salil Tripathi’s *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent: The Bangladesh War and Its Unquiet Legacy* (Aleph Book Company, 2014). I had met Salil Tripathi when he was in Dhaka researching the book. The book was subsequently launched in Bangladesh at the Hay Festival—as it was still called in 2014. Somehow I missed the launch and did not get the book till much later. I mistakenly assumed—from the title—that it focused on Colonel Farook Rahman, one of the assassins of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was only after getting the book that I realised that, though the book begins with the hanging of

Sheikh Mujib’s killers, Farook Rahman is not the protagonist—or even the antagonist—of the book. He is one of the many legacies of the 1971 war. And the war itself is part of the story of this land from its early beginnings in the 1905 Partition of Bengal to the present—and beyond. I could almost hear the groans of the members of my group when I suggested another book on 1971. They were too polite to ask the questions that I knew were in their minds: Why another book about 1971? Don’t we know all about 1971? Haven’t most of us in this group—as we are almost all of a certain age—lived through 1971? And haven’t we read enough historical accounts and fictional accounts about the war? What more is there to read? Or to discuss? And yet, there is more. As Salil Tripathi’s book puts it, the war might be over but its legacies remain. Of course Tripathi tells the story of 1971 secondhand—as he has read about it in books and newspaper accounts and heard about it in the many interviews

strewn throughout the book. It is true that, perhaps because Tripathi is not a meticulous historian but a journalist, the book suffers from numerous errors. Thus, he mentions the destruction of the Dacca Radio Station in March 1971. The name of Abdur Rab Serniabat is repeatedly misspelled. Readers who would want a definite answer to the question of numbers—How many were killed? How many were raped?—are given accounts of numbers given by others rather than any definite answer. In “Between ‘Correct’ and ‘Inclusive’ History”, an article published in the *Dhaka Tribune* in December 2016, Afsan Chowdhury asks whether we want “correct history” or “inclusive history”. “Correct history”, of course, is ironic because it is not inclusive and therefore not correct either. “Correct history” is what is politically correct at a given time because of the powers that be. Tripathi attempts to provide an “inclusive history” of 1971—which also attempts to be truly correct. It is this that gives *The Colonel Who Would Not*

Repent its importance. Above all, as an outsider, Tripathi can look impartially at historical events and personalities. Perhaps he cannot answer all the questions, but at least he can provide us with the questions. Thus, one of the questions Tripathi asks—which does not fit the accepted narrative—is: “How prepared was Bangladesh for the armed struggle?” He notes that Tajuddin Ahmed and Kamal Hossain were two of the last persons who met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the night of March 25. After the crackdown, Tajuddin Ahmed left for India but Kamal Hossain, after moving from “house to house”, gave himself up on April 2. In his interview with Tripathi, Kamal Hossain describes the event. As he was being taken to the airport, he was questioned about what he and Tajuddin Ahmed had been planning to do. He told Tripathi that “They had made no plans”. The absence of preparations for an independent Bangladesh is voiced indirectly through Asif Munier, whose father, Munier Chowdhury, was picked up on December 14 and killed. Asif Munier noted his mother’s anger against Mujib. “Asif recalled: ‘She said the Liberation War was a national movement. But why could he not have prepared the country better? Why did we have to wait for the blow on 25 March?’”. Tripathi does not raise the issue of who declared independence. However, he quotes Editor Mahfuz Anam’s reaction to hearing “the faint voice of Major Ziaur Rahman who declared, in the name of Bangabandhu Mujib, that Bangladesh was now a free country.” According to Anam, “That declaration was a source of moral support for us and showed great moral courage. It told us something was happening; that some effort was being made. We didn’t know where the declaration came from, but it was important that the declaration was made”. Tripathi does raise the issue of the numbers killed in 1971 but does not provide any conclusive figures. Were they 26,000 as the Hamoodur Rahman Commission noted, 3 million as Bangladesh—following Sheikh Mujib’s statement to David Frost—believes, 57,000 as mentioned by David Bergman, between 50,000 and 100,000 as claimed by Sarmila Bose? Tripathi explains the confusion between lakhs and millions and quotes

Peter Kann at length who concludes, on the basis of calculating how many soldiers would have been involved in the killing, that “The three million figure makes no sense”. Tripathi stresses that it is not numbers that matter so much as holding people accountable, as in knowing what happened. Again, he quotes Irene Khan at length on the prosecutions: “Those crimes have remained uninvestigated; it is extremely important that there is a commission of inquiry, if Bangladesh is to put a closure to this chapter of its history. Even if you will have only a limited number of prosecutions, you need a full record of what happened”. Salil Tripathi’s book attempts to look at historical events as objectively as possible, quoting written sources as well as oral ones. He also attempts to look at the legacy of events subsequent to 1971. He believes that there has been no closure either of the killing of Mujib or Zia. He notes how Mujib’s house on Dhanmondi Road 32 as well as the Circuit House of Chittagong where Zia was killed still have the blood that was shed there in August 1975 and May 1981 respectively. Is it time to wash the blood away? Tripathi recognises that healing wounds is not a simple matter, but Bangladesh must move beyond “simplistic notions of victims and perpetrators.” He suggests that “the resolution is through negotiation, and not through violence. It means respecting the dignity of the other. The identities of ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ are fluid, just as one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. When these identities are fluid, we must remember that not all Bengalis were victims, nor all Biharis perpetrators or collaborators, and not all Punjabis killers. Instead of living in the past, it is time to leave the past”. Tripathi’s comments are well worth remembering. Despite its editorial slips and a few factual errors, *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent* is a book well worth reading. In very readable English, it narrates the history of Bangladesh from the seeds sown in 1905, through 1971 and its “unquiet legacy”, to suggestions of future pitfalls to avoid.

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THE SHELF

If you like these books, read these

NUR-E JANNAT ALIF

Sometimes, unearthing your next favourite book is only a simple measure of connecting the dots between what you have loved previously and what you might enjoy next. Whether it is similar vibes, shared themes or a fresh perspective you are in the quest for, we have got you covered. Here are five book pairings to guide your upcoming reading adventure. If you like *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman, read *The Collected Regrets of Clover* by Mikki Bramer Fans of quirky, emotionally complex protagonists would adore this pairing. In *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (HarperCollins GB, 2018), we follow Eleanor, a socially awkward and deeply isolated woman whose structured existence is—unfortunately, but fortunately—disrupted by serendipitous friendships that ultimately help her confront the trauma of her past. Similarly, in Mikki Bramer’s *The Collected Regrets of Clover* (Penguin, 2023), Clover Brooks, a death doula, guides others through their final moments while carefully negating emotional attachments in her own life. When a terminally ill woman tasks her with uncovering her greatest regret, Clover embarks on a transformative journey to reconnect with the living and

rediscover her potential for happiness. Both books offer a heart-warming and profound sense of human connections and healing. If you like *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, read *Talking at Night* by Claire Daverley Quiet explorations of love, class and the inevitable chaos of ‘right person, wrong time’ are the meandering themes of Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* (Crown, 2019). If you relished its nuanced portrayal of relationships, then *Talking at Night* (Pamela Dorman Books, 2023) by Claire Daverley would be a perfect follow-up. The story centres around Will and Rosie, two people who share an undeniable connection but are pulled apart by life’s complexities and their own, misguided, decisions. Spanning decades, this novel explores intimacy, regret and moments that define us, our consequences. Daverley’s poignant writing captures the intensity, frailty of love, making it a fitting comparison to Rooney’s masterpiece. And if Will-Rosie are not Marianne Connell in a nutshell, who is anyway? If you like *Pather Pachali* by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, read *Ma Baba Bhai Bon* by Sunil Gangopadhyay Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s *Pather Pachali* (UPL, 2012) is the cornerstone of Bangla literature



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

that chronicles the lives of Apu and his family in rural Bengal. Its vivid descriptions of nature, intricate family dynamics, and deeply humane portrayal and resilience have made it a timeless classic. In a similar vein, Sunil Gangopadhyay’s *Ma Baba Bhai Bon* (Dey’s Publishing, 2001) is an evocative exploration of family dynamics in contemporary Bengal. This novel examines generational conflicts, shifting societal norms, and the emotional bonds that hold families together. If you appreciated

Pather Pachali’s detailed look at human relationships and socio-economic struggles, with a side of picturesque imagery, *Ma Baba Bhai Bon* is just for you. If you like *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, read *How High We Go in the Dark* by Sequoia Nagamatsu *The Overstory* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019) by Richard Powers captures the integrated alliance between humans and the natural world. Through the lives

of a diverse cast, this book explores themes of activism, ecological destruction and resilience. Sequoia Nagamatsu’s *How High We Go in the Dark* (William Morrow, 2022) offers a similarly intricate tapestry of interconnected stories but expands its scope to include science fiction. The novel begins with a thawing Siberian permafrost that releases an ancient virus, leading to a series of narratives spanning centuries. It is a haunting, beautiful exploration of human resilience,

environmental catastrophe, and the enduring ties that connect us across space and time. If you like *The Rabbit Hutch* by Tess Gunty, read *The Bee Sting* by Paul Murray A dark yet compassionate exploration of the lives of residents in a downtrodden Indiana apartment complex, Tess Gunty’s *The Rabbit Hutch* (Knopf, 2022) is deeply empathetic and multifaceted. There is a permeating sense of loneliness, community and longing carved in the story, making your heart sting in the process of reading. Paul Murray’s *The Bee Sting* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023) offers an aptly layered and emotionally resonant narrative. This Booker Prize-shortlisted novel follows the Barnes family, whose lives unravel in the wake of financial collapse. Combining biting humour and heart-wrenching tragedy, Murray crafts a textured odyssey of family, societal expectations and belonging. If you loved the vivid characterisation and wistful storytelling of *The Bee Sting*, then *The Rabbit Hutch* is a must-read! 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.