

THE SHELF

Your guide to feminist resistance

“What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.”

STAR LITERATURE DESK

This International Women’s Day, Star Books and Literature brings to you a list of five books that delve into the history of feminist movements and feminist resistance. As women continue to face increasingly intolerant and indeed, violent attacks from different quarters in contemporary Bangladesh, it is essential that we turn towards our feminist foremothers—whose hard work helped pave the way for a more equitable society—and remember to remain cautious and alert about our hard-earned rights. For as history teaches us again and again, the struggle for women’s rights is constant and ongoing. An even more important reminder is that rights, once won, are not permanent and can be taken away by forces that want to oppress and silence women.

Feminism is for everybody
bell hooks
Pluto Press, 2000

For many, feminist theory, and in turn feminism itself, can seem like a daunting undertaking. Because theoretical texts tend to be dense and difficult to make out, people often come to know about feminism “thirdhand”, as hooks puts it, from the media and social circles they interact with. As such, feminism is easily and sometimes maliciously misconstrued, leading to women being labelled “feminazis” or, as is more commonplace on Bangladeshi social media, “neribadi”. But feminism isn’t “man hating”, and men themselves are not free from patriarchal oppression. bell hooks’ short but welcoming treatise on feminism—and its intersections with politics, class, and society at large—invites readers to close the distance and learn firsthand what feminism is, what it stands for, and how it advocates for all.

Sisters in the Mirror: A History Of Muslim Women And The Global Politics Of Feminism
Elora Shehabuddin
UPL, 2024

Challenging the western feminist preoccupation of rescuing “third-world Muslim women” from oppression and otherness, Shehabuddin’s work presses against the monolithic categorisation of “Muslim women” and takes a closer look at the construction and development of Bengali Muslim female identity from pre-colonial times to the post-Independence Bangladeshi



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

feminist landscape. The book’s attempt to destigmatise the categories “Muslim” and “women” from the hegemonic, Eurowestern ideals intent on seeing them as separate and therefore, othered is significant. The “mirror” from the title is Shehabuddin drawing a parallel along the lines of empathy, camaraderie and solidarity between the west and the east and our collective feminist struggles.

Women, Race, Class
Angela Davis
Random House, 1981

A classic for a reason, Davis examines the American women’s liberation movement and asserts the issue of blackness and femininity into mainstream feminist discourse. One of the earlier texts to incorporate the intersectional approach of race, gender, and class, Davis’ text is foundational to our understanding of the role class plays in women’s emancipation and access to quality life.

The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House
Audre Lorde
Penguin UK, 2018

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Whether oppressive systems can be transformed from within has long been a subject of discussion, with theorists such as Lorde concluding that, without a complete overhaul of such structures, it is impossible to effect meaningful change. In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, Lorde also criticises the feminisms of white and other “socially acceptable” women, who conveniently leave more marginalised out of their activism because it requires them to acknowledge their own privilege. In another essay from this collection, “The Uses of

Anger: Women Responding to Racism”, Lorde highlights the importance of women holding on to the anger they feel at the constant barrage of injustices they are subjected to, and urges women to channel it constructively as a means of both taking up space and bringing about lasting change.

Ekattorer Dinguli
Jahanara Imam
Shandhani Prokashoni, 1986

Drawn from daily diary entries written during the 1971 war, Jahanara Imam’s memoir *Ekattorer Dinguli* offers a powerful firsthand account of the country’s nine-month struggle for freedom, weaving a personal story with the country’s political fate. The book is a significant historical and literary work on the Liberation War, providing first hand testimonies of violence within the larger framework of the independence struggle. To preserve authenticity, Imam thoroughly verified details, especially concerning guerrilla tactics,

by reviewing 80 audio recordings of interviews of surviving freedom fighters who fought alongside her son, Shafi Imam Rumi, and other witnesses of the war. In subsequent interviews, she revealed her awareness of the dangers associated with documenting sensitive information about guerrilla activities and explained the methods she employed to safeguard the journal’s contents. Imam filled her journal with mundane details, creating the facade of a bored housewife’s thoughts. While her longing for her son was central to her, as she waited for him every day of the war, she also used coded language, such as replacing “six rifles” with “six sarrees,” and employed pseudonyms to safeguard the identities of the soldiers. The book underscores women’s active participation in the larger political struggles that have been foundational to the existence of Bangladesh as a country.

FICTION

Retribution

MOJAFJOR HOSSAIN

Trigger warning: Rape

Every day, five newspapers arrive at Mohsin’s house. He is a retired college professor, and although he spent more than half his life teaching, his habit of reading newspapers hasn’t grown old. For the past 10 years, he and his wife have been reading the papers together. One particular event drew them in, and since then, they’ve become addicted to the daily news. These five newspapers are among the most prominent in the country, and one of them is in English.

The newspapers arrive quite early in the morning. But the two of them—after finishing breakfast and bathing—sit down with it together. This ritual has become something sacred for them, almost like a prayer. They pore over each page, taking their time, carefully flipping back and forth. Since they have no children, there’s no rush to do anything for anyone else. When every page has been thoroughly read, Mohsin’s wife, Rabeya, brings the scissors. Mohsin hands her each news item he’s marked in red ink, one by one. With great care, she cuts them out—if there’s a picture, she includes it; if not, just the article itself. She’s so meticulous, making sure nothing is misplaced. She takes her time, as if cutting quickly would drain the pleasure too soon. Far from feeling annoyed, Mohsin watches her with even more interest. In the shared quiet of their days, he has never looked at any other task of hers with such keen attention.

Every story of rape and every news report about such horrors, Mohsin would hand over to Rabeya, who would cut them out one by one. With each snip, her face would light up, a glint of satisfaction playing across her eyes. And as soon as Mohsin held each cutting, that same gleam would spark in his own eyes. The more reports of assault, the greater their delight. If a report described parents wandering from place to place for years, seeking justice for their violated daughter, Mohsin would burst into laughter, saying, “Justice for rape? Is that even a crime worthy of justice?”

Rabeya, laughing alongside him, would add, “People expect justice for rape these days? I’m speechless at their naïveté!”



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

They sort through the newspaper clippings. On one side, they place reports of recent assaults; on another, follow-ups on older cases; and on yet another, articles or surveys by NGOs or organisations on the topic. Their main interest, however, lies in the fresh incidents.

“How many today?” Mohsin asks, once they’ve sorted everything into categories.

“12,” replies Rabeya. They only keep track of the new cases.

“That’s two fewer than yesterday,” Mohsin remarks, as if genuinely disappointed. He hadn’t felt this let down even when Bangladesh narrowly lost a cricket match by two runs in Asia Cup.

“Not every piece of news makes it through, you know. So many stories get buried in the local pages. How can they possibly publish every incident of rape?” Rabeya speaks as if consoling her husband.

“True. And many don’t even report such things for various reasons. They keep quiet. The actual number is surely much higher.”

Mohsin now seems a bit reassured.

Setting aside the other papers, they begin sifting through the clippings of news about rapes. For a long time, their gaze lingers as if fixed on some uplifting piece of news. They looked at the paper with that same intensity when their daughter’s scholarship award in the talent pool was published. And later, when she placed herself second in the university entrance exams, the coaching centre placed an ad with her photo—a display that her parents seemed to have framed in their minds 24/7. Professor Mohsin had one of his students laminate that clipping and handed it to his wife. He said, “Keep it with the scholarship news.”

Today, once again, he gathers the newspaper clippings, hands them over to Rabeya, and says, “Place these with the others on the rape files.” Even without his instruction, Rabeya would have done it anyway—that’s what the clippings are for—but he had a habit of saying it out loud.

Rabeya would take the clippings to the

bedroom and would open the largest drawer of the almirah, one drawer nearly full and another on its way. Every day, when placing new clippings, she would go through the old ones. It had become a ritual for her, a habit. Mohsin would come up behind her, as he would do every day, watching. They both enjoyed this strange ritual. The drawer in their almirah was filling up with news of rapes.

Leaving the drawer open, Rabeya would stand there, pulling out more clippings from under the bed, old ones laminated from years ago. She would run her hand over the image of a young girl. A few more clippings would fall from the stack—about ten years old. In one of them, there was a photograph of Prof. Mohsin and Rabeya Khatun, standing alone, demanding justice, placards on their chests. Mohsin would pick up this clipping, chuckling, and show it to Rabeya. “Look at us,” he’d say, adding, “Two fools on a mission. Is rape really a crime deserving justice? A pair of

idiots crying out for days and days. What nonsense!”

Rabeya would get angry but would laugh, too. Laughing, she’d reply in a raised voice, “Yes, of course, rape isn’t a crime. Just a trivial incident.”

When every household suffers a rape, the people of this country will surely understand. Mohsin will join in, laughing like a madman himself. This time, they both grab clippings of rape news from the open drawer, scattering them above their heads. The room fills up with the fragments—on the bed, in the corners of the mattress, under the bed, on the dressing table, the floor, near the chair legs. On the walls, hanging from the clock—rape news clippings are scattered everywhere. And their laughter doesn’t stop. They keep laughing, deranged, even as they carefully, almost lovingly, begin gathering each piece, forgetting even their midday meal. Once they’ve collected all the clippings, Mohsin retrieves the iron from the top of the almirah. On a low heat, he irons each one and hands it over to Rabeya, who cradles it like a newborn, with the same tenderness. For a moment, she sees the face of a child she first laid eyes on years ago in a hospital bed. Rabeya breaks down, wailing.

Mohsin stops ironing and joins in her sobs.

Suddenly, as the night fades, light crosses their faces—they know the morning will bring fresh newspapers.

Translated from Bangla by Haroonuzzaman.

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