

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

The making of Bangladesh in the global sixties

Review of ‘Intimation of Revolution: Global Sixties and the Making of Bangladesh’ (Cambridge University Press, 2023) by Subho Basu

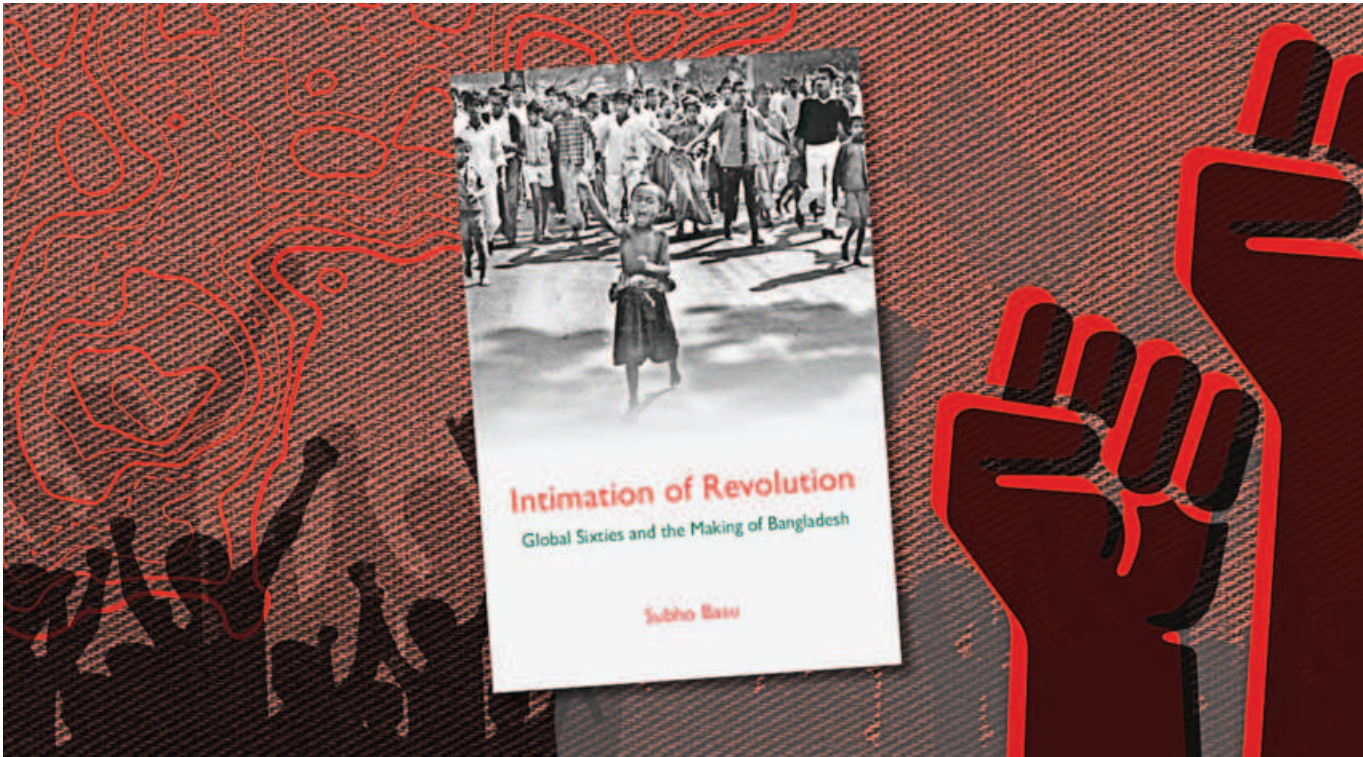


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

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ANISUR RAHMAN

“Mr Speaker Sir, what did Bangalee intend to achieve? What rights did Bangalee want to possess? We do not need to discuss and decide on them now [after independence]. [We] tried to press our demands after the so called 1947 independence. Each of our days and years with Pakistan was an episode of bloodied history; a record of struggle for our rights,” said Tajuddin Ahmad on October 30, 1972 in the Constituent Assembly. He commented on the proposed draft constitution for Bangladesh, which was adopted on November 4, 1972.

How did that struggle—which culminated in the creation of Bangladesh—shape a new nation state in the Global South? Who took it forward and in which way? How was it informed by events of the global sixties? Subho Basu’s *Intimation of*

Revolution: Global Sixties and the Making of Bangladesh maps out this fantastic history of the making of Bangladesh.

Basu begins with two important post-1947 developments that brought about frustration among Muslims of then-East Bengal: the disintegration of the economy and lack of political representation. While the former led to an economic crisis, the second resulted in the development of a nationalist politics which was informed by Bangali nationalism. For Basu, the latter was a reactionary political doctrine developed out of a religio-political culture that considered the Muslims of East Bengal an “Other”. As a result, a mass social movement was in embryo against that oppressive state in East Pakistan. He then explored the emergence of a colonial administrative state in Pakistan, which would be run by a military-bureaucratic government,

depriving East Pakistanis of their desire for a state run by elected representatives.

As a result, they were against strengthening military establishments. The development of the military establishment, suggests Basu, was directly sponsored by Western super powers, such as the UK or the US, who wanted Pakistan to be their client state. In return, the military-bureaucratic regime received foreign aid to be used for development purposes. However, as the military establishment was grounded mostly in West Pakistan, the foreign aid was used there, depriving the East Pakistani masses of their economic prosperity. Consequently, nationalist politicians, such as Maulana Bhashani, opposed the Baghdad Pact—a military coalition led by the UK and USA. The skirmish between Bhashani and other Awami League leaders over the Baghdad Pact ended with the birth of a new political party, the NAP. Therefore, the political change or power sharing with the military establishment in East Pakistan was, Basu highlights, connected to global Cold War politics.

Basu eloquently details the emergence of a linguistic nationalism in East Pakistan in the third chapter. He attributes it to the Bangali poets and literati, through whose writings the idea of Bangali nationalism came about. In the high sixties, the ensuing “Bangali Renaissance”, following a debate over the Bangla language, writing scripts, and state-sponsored ban on the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, inspired Bangali literati to write nationalist songs, poems, stories, novels, and drama that culminated in the emergence of a cultural identity of the Bangali speaking Muslims in Pakistan. Having been conscious about the Calcutta-based cultural domination, they used Arabic, Urdu, and Persian words in their new literature in order to craft a cultural tradition which would be different from both the North Indian Muslim and Calcutta-based Hindu traditions. In contrast, Pakistan witnessed the emergence of a garrisoned Islamic state under the patronage of the US during the military-bureaucratic regime of Ayub Khan. Basu highlights three developments during this regime: first, inequality in resource sharing and income gap between the two wings of Pakistan made the eastern part a colony of West Pakistani industrialists. Secondly, the introduction of basic democracy undermined all democratic processes,

including the making of the constitution. Finally, there were state-sponsored programs to develop an Islamic nationalism that identified Pakistan a Muslim nation.

The three above-mentioned dimensions of the military-bureaucratic regime of Ayub Khan directed political courses in East Pakistan later, which Basu wonderfully narrates in the last two chapters of his monograph. Students were the vanguard of those exciting political upheavals. The students’ movements, Basu emphasises, were informed by global anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements. He has highlighted the way in which iconic figures, such as Che Guevara, inspired students to take to the streets against the military regime. These two chapters are important to understand the diverse political strategies adopted by different political parties and the ways they were influenced by global Cold War politics. Basu has pointedly stated that although Bhashani initially called for an autonomy of East Pakistan, the six points demand of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman added a new vigour to that autonomy movement. The acceptance of the six points by students determined the courses of both the movements. Finally, the general election following the fall of Ayub Khan, the overwhelming victory of Awami League in the National and Provincial Assemblies, the failure of the military junta to transfer power to the elected representatives, and Mujib’s firm determination toward autonomy accelerated the liberation of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh.

This book is an important contribution to the political history of South Asia, which connected the birth of Bangladesh to global Cold War policies. Particularly, this book is an excellent read to understand the way in which global or regional events in the high sixties informed political courses in Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. Moreover, it is an amazing work, which has connected local events to global and regional political developments and, therefore, will be useful for future historians to study the July 2024 uprising and the fall of the ‘fascist’ regime of Sheikh Hasina.

Anisur Rahman is a legal historian at Independent University, Bangladesh.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

An outlandish jumble of cults, cannibalism, and colonial violence

Review of Melissa Lozada-Oliva’s ‘Candelaria’ (Astra House, 2023)

NAWSHIN FLORA

Melissa Lozada-Oliva takes us on a bumpy apocalyptic horror ride in her debut novel *Candelaria*. Spanning across three generations of women, the novel ushers together an unsettled past and an even more bizarre present. Candelaria is the titular character in this story—there are two of them and they have more similarities than just their shared name.

The novel initially appears to be dealing with abuse and generational trauma. But slowly, it emerges as an apocalyptic horror story filled with giants, dead people and a certain stone. The plot is more than a little nebulous. Cultish incidents happen after Candy aka Candelaria, the youngest granddaughter becoming pregnant after a one-night stand with Fernando, Bianca’s ex boyfriend who may or may not have been dead at that moment. While being pregnant, Candy starts engaging in strange activities such as eating her co-worker Jennie and boyfriend, Garfield.

There are striking parallels between the ongoing political topography and the themes explored in *Candelaria*. Lozada-Oliva beautifully uses cannibalism as an



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Ursula K. Le Guin in her utopian science fiction *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (originally published in 1974) reflects on the nature of the relationship between a foetus and the mother. In the book, Takver, the protagonist Shevek’s partner, says that pregnant women are “possessed” by their foetuses and it alters their brain chemistry.

artistic motif here. “This world has made it so that we are terminally the consumer, and without thinking, all of a sudden, we have become the consumed.” This comes across as a translucent critique of late stage capitalism. The cult’s obsession with Candy’s pregnancy and inhibiting her from getting an abortion is a sharp parallel to the political rhetoric of recent anti-abortion laws in the US. The writer cleverly compared the cult with the conservative politics regarding women’s bodily rights. It would not be too radical to imply that motherhood can also be a cult. And the pro-life rhetoric of the right reflects specially in the activities of the cult leader, Maria. In the novel, it talks of a stone called “The Mother”. And according

to Maria, the order of nature can only be restored by birthing babies. In the aftermath of Carmen’s (another pregnant woman in the cult) delivery, she is murdered. So would have been Candy’s fate if she hadn’t managed to escape. The activities and core beliefs of the cult is very much analogous to anthropomorphising nature as women and mothers. And Carmen’s death only enforces the rhetoric of pro-life politics.

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by their foetuses and it alters their brain chemistry. The use of the word “possessed” here indicates something demonic which we also notice in Candy transforming to a cannibal when she is with child. She says it is the child who is harboring cannibalistic cravings, making her do such things. It is very much telling how the state and society in general cares more about a fetus than the life of the mother. Candy here, seen as a baby producing machine, very much symbolises the picture of the “mother goddess” who is young, promiscuous, and fecund.

The consumer versus consumed is also a critique of the continued colonisation of Guatemala. Bianca’s lack of fluency in Spanish gives her an outsider status in

Guatemala. But what’s interesting is the Spanish influence in Guatemala is due to Spanish invasion in the early 16th century and if Bianca were to feel more like a native there through only speaking Spanish, she would still be talking in a coloniser’s language. Hence, it tells us that colonialism can be reproduced and it can be sustained through a language.

These narratives, whilst carefully crafted, still failed to make me interested in the tumultuous lives of the characters. The prose seemed amateurish and leaves a lot to be desired. The real conflict in the book was the family dynamics and how trauma transcends through generations but it was poorly done and was disconnected with the rest of the plot. The novel doesn’t shy away from concocting a complex world but falls massively short in the execution of it. My biggest criticism is that the author failed to make the genre of the book clear to the audience. The conversations between the characters, especially the three sisters, felt inauthentic, as though they were talking to different people altogether, immersed in wholly different conversations; the author also failed to make me care for them as a reader.

The ending especially fell flat considering the amount of buildup regarding the apocalyptic events. At the end we see, their grandmother, Candelaria, being spun around by a “giant wheel with eyes”, but Lucia and her daughters seem absolutely unbothered by it and rather talk about whether Zoe will raise Candy’s baby. The lack of coherence in the story made for a poor reading experience. Besides, the supernatural and horror parts of the story did not seem to fit into the story seamlessly and had me confused. Whilst it could have been a great addition to the historical horror fiction genre, the book jumped through multiple themes and subplots and ended up being a mess.

Nawshin Flora is a writer and poet based in Dhaka.