

ESSAY

Who is feminist LITERATURE FOR?

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Feminist literature in the 21st century largely centres on intersectionality, recognising and exploring how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, disability, and other identities to shape women's experiences and struggles. For today's feminists, the focus isn't just on challenging or breaking social norms, but also on asking, who gets to break these norms? And to what extent?

But even as this body of work grows

by everyone. I felt seen, affirmed, understood and all those other words. And that's usually how I feel when reading most contemporary feminist writing. But "most" is the key word here. These books rarely challenge my beliefs; they tend instead to affirm them or provide better language for me to articulate what I already feel.

So, a lingering question always remains: who, exactly, are we talking to when we write or read feminist literature?

geography, and language that shape women's realities. And that's a gap many contemporary feminist works share, one that becomes especially visible when we consider how geography shapes access to feminist writing in places like Bangladesh.

Writing this piece in English, for an English-language literature magazine in Bangladesh, already narrows its audience. It assumes a reader who is not only fluent in English but also has access to a certain kind of education, leisure, and class position. So, what does that mean for feminist literature's broader goals of empowerment and justice?

A lot of the feminist literature I've read, books that are widely recommended, quoted, and shared, tends to circulate within a specific kind of audience. It's usually those of us who are already aligned with the core messages.

Of course, affirmation is important, especially for those who haven't seen their experiences reflected in mainstream discourse. But I can't help asking, if the literature is only reaching people who already identify as feminists, then who is being left out? And what happens when literature starts functioning more as a mirror than a provocation?

There's a risk that we create what feels like a "feminist echo chamber," where the same ideas circulate in familiar language, among familiar people, reinforcing a sense of moral clarity without necessarily pushing for deeper structural change. When we're constantly consuming texts that make us feel good about what we already believe, we may forget that literature can, and should, also make us uncomfortable. So, what's the political use of literature that doesn't push us out of our comfort zones? If the only readers are people who already agree, can the literature still call itself radical? These are the questions I keep returning to, especially when we hold up certain books as essential

without asking who actually gets to access them, or who might be excluded from their language, framing, or assumptions. Much of the most visible feminist literature today is written in or translated into English, which means that in places like Bangladesh, it often remains out of reach for large swathes of the population.

If mainstream feminist literature often misses the mark in terms of accessibility, then maybe the answer lies in looking closer to home, at the writers, artists, and communities who are already working to make feminist conversations more inclusive and locally grounded.

Bangladeshi writers like Neelima Ibrahim, Shaheen Akhter, and Jahana Imam have, in different ways, brought feminist themes into public discourse through Bangla literature. Ibrahim's *Ami Birangana Bolchi* (Jagriti, 1994) foregrounds the testimonies of women who survived sexual violence during the Liberation War, challenging the silence imposed on them by both society and the state. Akhter's fiction often explores the inner lives and resilience of women navigating trauma and war, particularly through her novel *Talaash* (Mowla Brothers, 2009), which also focuses on biranganas. Imam's *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Shandhani & Charulipi Prakashani, February 1986), though a wartime memoir, offers powerful reflections on motherhood, grief, and moral resistance, centering a woman's experience in a national narrative often dominated by male voices. These writers not only broaden the scope of Bangla literature but also root feminist discourse in local language, memory, and history, making it more accessible to readers outside elite, anglophone spaces.

There is also a slowly growing body of work that speaks to the complexities of modern-day Bangladeshi womanhood. Authors like Sadaf Saaz use poetry (*Sari Reams*, University Press Ltd, 2013) and performance to explore taboo subjects, expanding feminist discourse beyond

historical trauma into the textures of contemporary womanhood. But there remains a noticeable gap when it comes to traditionally published books by younger, Bangla first feminist authors. Beyond traditional publishing, groups like Bonhishikha—Unlearn Gender produce zines and street performances in Bangla, addressing consent, sexuality, and bodily autonomy back-to-back with urban youth audiences. The Young Feminism Network (a collaboration between Naripokkho and Goethe-Institut Bangladesh) supports Bangla-language storytelling through digital narratives and workshops, and for millennial feminist voices across the country. Similarly, organisations like the HerStory Foundation and its Sister Library initiative (in partnership with Goethe-Institut Bangladesh) offer zine making workshops, live readings, and community discussions that invite participation across age, class, and language divides.

What's important here is not just the language of the literature, though that matters, but how it is delivered and whom it is meant for. That's why it's pertinent to create and support more spaces where literature can be encountered in varied, accessible ways. A poem performed in a local theatre, a short story printed in a low-cost magazine, or a zine circulated through student networks might reach more diverse audiences than a glossy international bestseller ever could. Feminist literature doesn't always need to look like a hardcover book published by a global press.

The more we broaden what counts as feminist literature and who it is intended for, the more possibilities we open up for connection, resistance, and change. If the goal is empowerment, then the form, language, and price point of that empowerment matter just as much as the ideas themselves.

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ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

increasingly intersectional in theory, a key demographic seems consistently overlooked. These are the readers without access to the dominant language or cultural capital of feminist discourse.

I remember reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* (Fourth Estate, 2014), a concise and widely circulated text that presents a compelling case for why feminism should be embraced

I mention Adichie's book here because its widespread global appeal has positioned it as one of the most influential feminist texts of the 21st century. After its publication, a free copy of the book was even given to every 16-year-old Swedish girl to help spark conversations about equality and feminism. But that very appeal also reveals a limitation: in its effort to universalise feminist values, it often flattens the very differences of class,

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Reading Baitullah Quaderee: A critic's view of a poetic decade

Review of 'Bangladesher Shater Dashaker Kabita' (Nobojug Prokashoni, 2021) by Baitullah Quaderee

SALAHUDDIN AYUB

When I picked up Baitullah Quaderee's *Bangladesher Shater Dashaker Kabita*, it wasn't particularly out of scholarly curiosity. The book is, by design, a doctoral thesis—its structure conventional, its chapters arranged by academic demand—but what caught my interest was not the format, nor even the topic. It was the author himself.

I have long paid attention to Baitullah as a poet, especially because he writes sonnets, and writes them well. In a time when free verse has become a default posture, rarely earned through prior discipline, his fidelity to meter and form is notable. Baitullah's literary sensibility, as shown in this book, is shaped by that same commitment to structure. What he offers here—perhaps without fully intending to—is a ledger of lines, a record of poets who once cared deeply about craft.

To that end, the most rewarding sections of this book are those where he compiles, excerpts, and reflects on individual lines, metaphors, and rhythms from poets of the 1960s. This is where his voice as a poet-critic quietly emerges. As Abdul Mannan Syed often said, all criticism is selection. And Baitullah, with a poet's ear and an academic's patience, has done just that.

The structure is conventional: a thesis in three parts, with historical background, thematic content, and formal analysis. But in the latter half, something else begins to take shape—a register of lines, metaphors, rhythms, and images that bear witness to a time when Bengali poetry was still deeply serious about form. This catalogue of fragments, drawn from the likes of Rafiq Azad, Abdul Mannan Syed, Mohammad Rafiq, Abul Hasan, Nirmalendu Goon, and others, is Baitullah's most valuable contribution. It is a ledger of attention.

Of course, questions of periodisation haunt any project like this. Among them, Baitullah's inclusion of Shahid Qadri as a poet of the 1960s is open to debate. Qadri, in my view, belongs more convincingly to the circle of the 1950s—not merely because of his publication history or age, but because of the poetic company he kept. In the first edition of



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

his book *Sonali Kabin* (1973), Al Mahmud dedicated the book to "Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin, Shahid Qadri", writing in it, "may our shared-era friendship and ongoing poetic envy live on". That legendary line, widely recognised in the literary community, confirms what many have always known: Qadri stood among the younger figures of the 1950s. Stylistically, too, Qadri shared the lean, urbane, metrically resistant mode pioneered by Samar Sen—drawing from the Euro-American modernist archive without fully absorbing its formal discipline. His place in the literary history of Dhaka is important, but to call him a poet of the 1960s in the same breath

as Abdul Mannan Syed or Rafiq Azad seems, to me, a misalignment—historically and poetically—despite the affectionate authority with which Mannan Syed, often imitating the stylised Old Dhaka accent, would refer to him as "ustad."

Qadri's poetry is often said to embody themes of urban alienation, loneliness, and detachment. But these themes, already explored (and exhausted) by Buddhadeva Bose and the 1930s generation, were never quite authentic in Bengali poetry. Even Rabindranath questioned their sincerity. What the 1960s inherited—through Qadri and others—was not existential angst, but a

stylised echo of it.

In that sense, much of what passes as "urban modernism" in Bengali poetry of the 60s was not rooted in lived experience. It was secondhand—filtered through the literary experimentation of earlier decades and repurposed in Dhaka under the guise of innovation. That Baitullah treats these motifs with respect is understandable; that he need not regard them as historically original is also, I believe, worth saying.

If one wishes to speak of originality in the context of post-1947 East Bengali—and later Bangladeshi—poetry, one must begin with Farrukh Ahmad and Al Mahmud. Of

course, Jasimuddin before them, and Nazrul even earlier, were also original in powerful ways. Jasimuddin's rural realism created an entirely new idiom, and Nazrul's revolutionary lyricism altered Bengali's rhythm forever. But both belonged to a slightly different arc—Nazrul to the Bengal of resistance, and Jasimuddin to a rural Bengal that still spoke from within undivided cultural memory.

Farrukh's *Sat Shagarer Majhi* (1944) must be seen as a transitional volume—standing at the cusp of the old and the new. Composed while Farrukh was studying English literature at Scottish Church College in Calcutta, alongside Subhash Mukhopadhyay, the book reincarnates, quite explicitly, the metaphysical undertow of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*—though Bengali critics have largely failed to grasp the extent of that intertextuality. The sailor who sets out across seven seas evokes not only the *Arabian Nights* but also the symbolist drift of Western Romanticism. And crucially, the sailor is not bound for any clear political telos—not Jinnah, not Pakistan, not even East Bengal as a nationalist project. The destination is unknown. It is this radical, almost visionary, indeterminacy that gives the poem its force. Written just three years before the Partition, the poem is haunted by a sense of uncharted destiny—a Romantic sublimity rare in Bengali verse of the time. The power of the text is amplified by its prosodic precision: composed in 'matrabritta', a meter that, as Abdul Mannan Syed noted, was beloved by both Nazrul and Farrukh. Though Farrukh did not possess deep training in Arabic or Persian, he deployed those linguistic reservoirs with exceptional rhythmic judgment—never ornamental, always musical.

This is an excerpt. Read the entire article on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books* and *Literature's* websites.

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