

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# Tracing an uprising in strokes

Review of ‘The Art of Triumph: Graffiti of Bangladesh’s New Dawn’ (2024) compiled by July Shaheed Smriti Foundation

**The Art of Triumph is more than a photo book; it is a reminder of a time when walls spoke louder than headlines. In capturing the spirit of a generation that chose courage over silence, it preserves not just images, but as a record of resistance and imagination, it reminds us that even when erased from walls, truth finds a way to last.**

MAHMUDA EMDAD

Graffiti has long played a powerful role in revolutions around the world. From the walls of Paris in 1968 to the slogans of the Arab Spring, street art has served as one of the most immediate and accessible forms of resistance. In times of unrest, when voices are silenced in traditional spaces, walls become a way to speak: boldly, publicly, and without filter. It's a tool used not just to protest, but to mourn, remember, and demand change. Often spontaneous and urgent, revolutionary graffiti captures the mood of a movement in real time. Graffiti during revolutions function as visceral, immediate forms of expression; these murals become the raw voice of a generation that risked life and limb to literally paint its dissent on city walls.

When Chief Advisor Professor Muhammad Yunus writes in the foreword of *The Art of Triumph* that “as a nation, we must protect and cherish this newfound freedom, ensuring that the walls of our cities continue to echo the voice of the young people, now and always,” he captures the soul of what this book stands for. This isn't just a photo book—it's a loud and lasting echo of a revolution that swept through Bangladesh in July and August 2024. It is an archive of rage, grief, hope, humour, resistance, and above all, youth.

*The Art of Triumph* collects over 50 photographs of graffiti and murals created during and after the student-led uprising of July 2024, often referred to as the Monsoon Revolution. Photographed mainly by Avijit Karmoker, the images come from various parts of Dhaka, especially protest hotspots like Mirpur 10, Shahbagh0, Dhaka University, and Uttara. The selection balances both in-the-moment protest graffiti—messy, raw, powerful and the cleaner—more carefully curated—artworks that came later. Shot in the rain-washed days of early August, the photographs glow with colour and contrast, making the art feel even more alive.

But beyond the visuals, the book is a record of what the youth dared to say when they finally found space to speak. There are murals paying tribute to martyrs like Mir Mugdho, whose last words, “pani lagbe?,” became a haunting slogan of sacrifice. There are paintings addressing racism, the plight of the tea workers in Sylhet, and the rights of indigenous communities—groups who had been excluded from the national conversation for far too long. In that moment of upheaval, students were not just resisting a



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

regime, they were remembering others who had been silenced for years. There are murals on the remittance earners who work abroad and send money home, often unseen, often unheard. A mural on Gulshan Avenue thanks them for keeping the economy running, for reducing poverty, for building a better life, not just for their families but for the nation.

Though the book's price may seem high, it's printed on recycled, eco-friendly paper, an intentional choice that reflects the movement's spirit of responsibility and care. Professor Muhammad Yunus approved the idea of this book and personally selected the cover, supporting the effort to curate the July Revolution through visuals. From the start, the team behind the book held no political affiliations; their only aim was to archive the uprising

through street art and preserve a powerful chapter of history.

Of course, the book also captures graffiti directly critical of the former regime. During the movement, walls were covered in slogans denouncing the fascist government and calling out the now-exiled Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Many of these were painted in moments of sheer danger; students drawing their messages while being chased, beaten, or threatened. That's the real beauty of those walls—not how pretty they are, but how brave; not how polished, but how immediate. But here lies one of the limitations of the book: most of the photographs lean toward the murals painted after the movement had ended, cleaned up, repainted, often beautified. The raw, hurried, and sometimes chaotic graffiti created during the heart of

the uprising is barely present. Perhaps many of them were erased too quickly, perhaps they weren't documented in time. But those imperfect, urgent strokes told us something the polished ones can't. They carried the weight of fear, of adrenaline, of protest born in the moment. And while this book offers a valuable archive, it only scratches the surface of the unrest it seeks to remember. During the movement and even in the days after August, some city walls held unfinished graffiti: abrupt lines, half-written slogans—silent traces of artists forced to flee, likely chased off by the police. In their incompleteness, these works often said more than any finished mural ever could.

Yet, the compilation succeeds where it matters. It tells us what the youth of this country think, feel, and demand. It shatters the lazy assumption that this

generation is apolitical or indifferent. On the contrary, these walls show a generation that is politically conscious, socially aware, and emotionally invested in justice.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Between protest and power: Shahriar’s portrait of a nation in flux

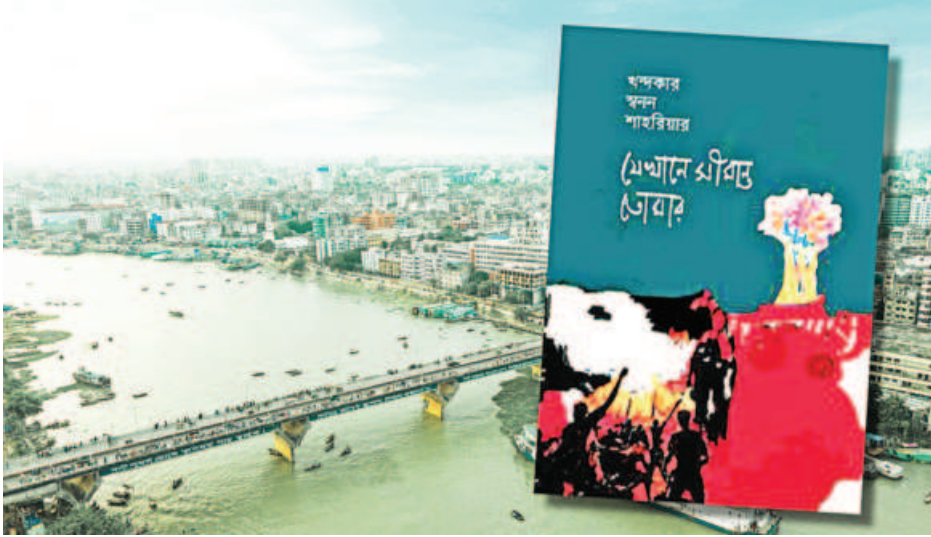
Review of ‘Jekhane Shimanto Tomar’ (Prothoma Prokashon, 2025) by Khandker Swanan Shahriar

MOHIN UDDIN MIZAN

Literary experts often caution against writing a novel immediately after a major political upheaval, arguing that personal involvement may cloud objectivity. However, creative minds are seldom bound by such prescriptions. Just as Shaheed Anwar Pasha authored *Rifle, Roti, Aurat* (first published in 1979) during the Liberation War, Khandker Swanan Shahriar felt compelled to write his second novel, *Jekhane Shimanto Tomar*, stirred by the events surrounding the July Uprising. Wrestling with his inner dilemmas following the days after August 5, Shahriar wrote this novel as an urgent response to history in the making.

While Pasha offered a powerful, empathetic, and humanistic portrayal of the circumstances during the liberation war, Shahriar takes a more critical stance on the Uprising, attempting to unmask the limitations and contradictions of all stakeholders involved. *Jekhane Shimanto Tomar* weaves together multiple subplots or parallel narratives to present a holistic account of the ‘July 36’ events and to document the broader context of 15 years of quasi-fascist rule under the Hasina regime.

One narrative thread follows Mojaffor Hossain, a Member of Parliament, and his daughter Ania. Through them, the author illustrates the misuse of political power: Mojaffor extracts commissions from public projects, arranges for the arrest of Ania's ex-boyfriend, and manipulates systems to secure her a position at a prestigious institute. The novel lays bare how traditional Bangladeshi politics often enables land grabbing, extortion, and environmental degradation,



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

such as river-filling, by party loyalists.

Yet, the novel does not flatten its characters into mere villains. Mojaffor, once an honest politician, is shown as a man trapped in the vicious cycle of power politics—much like the July frontliners themselves after forming a political party. He is contrasted with his old friend Kamalesh, a freedom fighter who leaves the party after witnessing its degeneration. Ania, in turn, disapproves of her father's abuse of power and develops admiration for Kamalesh and her grandfather, both of whom embody integrity and patriotic love.

Through Ania's visit to her ancestral village and conversations with Kamalesh and his comrades, the author unveils the regime's track record of corruption: extortion, manipulation of public tenders,

three uncontested elections, embezzlement in mega projects, systemic bribery, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and the stifling of dissent—all facilitated or overlooked by law enforcement agencies.

Another significant subplot revolves around Mujtaba, a student, and Regan, the son of a former opposition MP. The author critiques the toxic culture of student politics, especially the persecution of students who visibly express Islamic identity, such as by wearing beards or topees. Mujtaba is expelled from his university dormitory under false accusations of political affiliation and later becomes ensnared by Regan's ideological network. Regan exploits the vulnerability of disenfranchised students and manipulates them into joining his cause

with enticing rhetoric. In a conversation with Mujtaba, he declares (as translated by the reviewer): “Ideology is just a pretext. What politicians really want is power. They seek to reclaim it when out of office and cling to it once they have it. Once secured, they exploit it—for themselves or their party. The difference between good and bad politicians is merely in how easily their deceptions are recognised.”

This subplot underscores the necessity of the Quota Reform Movement while simultaneously revealing the movement's susceptibility to infiltration. Trained political actors are shown looting weapons, vandalising monuments, torching politicians' homes, and terrorising innocent family members. As we see, Mojaffor's house is looted, vandalised, and set ablaze; his guard is killed, Ania flees to India, and Mojaffor escapes to Singapore earlier.

Yet another narrative follows the tragic love story of Harun and Shahida. When Harun attempts to marry Shahida, Jobed—Mojaffor's assistant—has him falsely imprisoned using political influence. Jobed then marries Shahida, who is already pregnant with Harun's child.

Though the novel celebrates the spirit of the movement, it also critically explores the moral ambiguities and personal failures of its participants. It was published during the last Ekushey Book Fair, sounding an alarm for all political actors to confront their own ethical boundaries and complicity. As readers, our continued disregard for such critical fiction and essays risks normalising fascist tendencies—extortion and stoning to death, mob lynching, summary executions, historical revisionism, media trials, nepotism,

censorship—all of which persist in different guises today.

The prose is lucid and accessible, somewhat reminiscent of Humayun Ahmed's signature style. Shahriar even adopts some “Humayani” trademarks. The narrative unfolds through parallel storylines, creating an engaging and layered reading experience. The book's structure mirrors its title, *Jekhane Shimanto Tomar* (Where Your Limits Lie), dividing the novel into chapters with evocative titles, some borrowed from famous songs like “Nongor Tolo Tolo”, “Pother Klanti Bhule”, “Dorjar Opashe”, “Peye Haranor Bedonay”, among others, enriching the emotional texture of the narrative. At the beginning or end of chapters—and during narrative shifts—the author incorporates symbolic imagery and language, often hinting at impending doom or its reversal.

In sum, this novel takes the reader on a journey from 2010 to a reimagined Bangladesh, offering not only a reflection on the past but also a vision of the future. It presents poignant observations and raises critical questions that remain unanswered even a year after the July Uprising. It demands that we not only witness history but question it—and, perhaps, change its course.

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