

THE SHELF

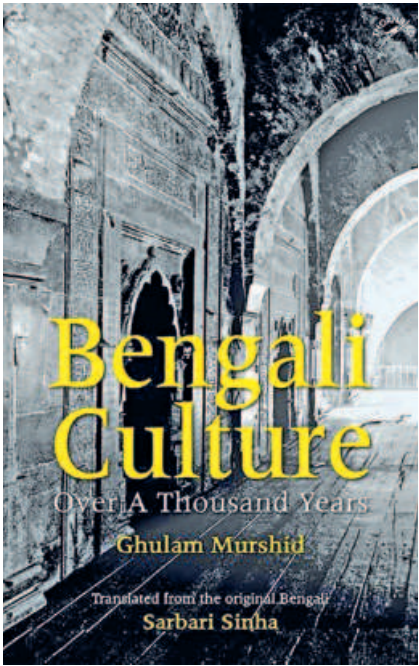
6 books that bring Bangladesh to life for diaspora teens

Step into Bengal in the 1940s, a land still grappling with famine, poverty, and the echoes of peasant revolts. Work is scarce, wages are meagre, and food is never guaranteed. Amid this uncertainty, the elections of 1946, the proposal for Pakistan, and communal riots are reshaping the future of the region.

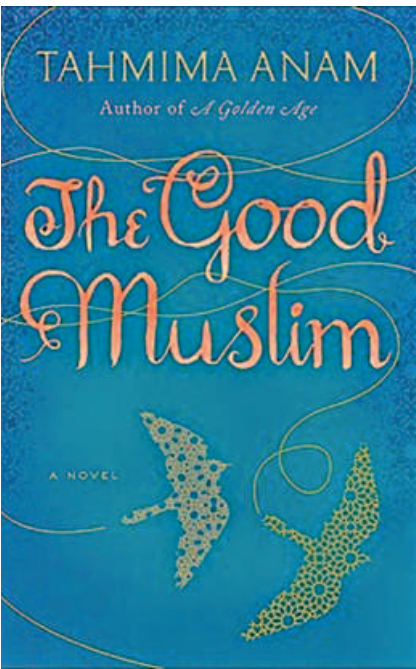
NUR-E-JANNAT ALIF

For teenagers growing up far from Bangladesh, the country can often feel like a patchwork of family anecdotes, festival memories, and half-understood news headlines. Books, however, have the power to fill in the gaps—to offer voices and histories that make the abstract appear real. The following six titles open windows into Bangladesh's culture, politics, and everyday lives, helping diaspora teens connect more deeply to their roots.

Bengali Culture Over a Thousand Years
Ghulam Murshid, Sarbari Sinha (Translator)
Niyogi Books, 2022
First published in Bangla in 2006 as *Hajar Bochorer Bangali Shongskriti*, this book now comes to English readers translated. In clear and accessible prose, Ghulam Murshid traces how Bengali culture has taken shape over

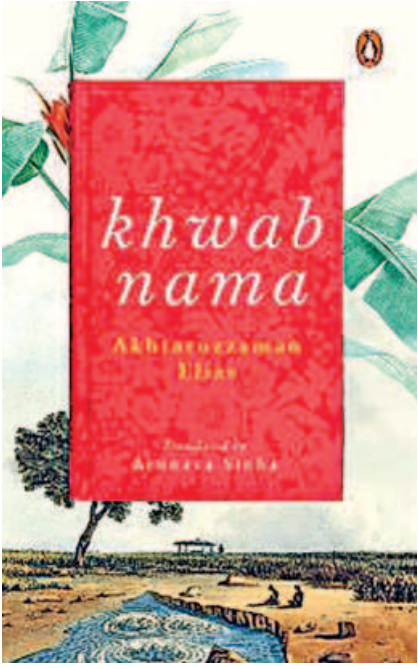


a thousand years: through literature, music, art, rituals, and the everyday customs that make life uniquely Bangali. He captures its plurality, showing how different religious and social traditions have sometimes clashed yet always remained tied together by a shared language and imagination. What sets this work apart is its balance: Murshid neither romanticises nor simplifies, presenting culture as something alive, layered, and constantly evolving. For diaspora teens and young adults, it opens a doorway into the roots of being Bangali, offering context that stretches far beyond family stories and festival snapshots, helping readers see how history, creativity, and identity intertwine to shape the present.



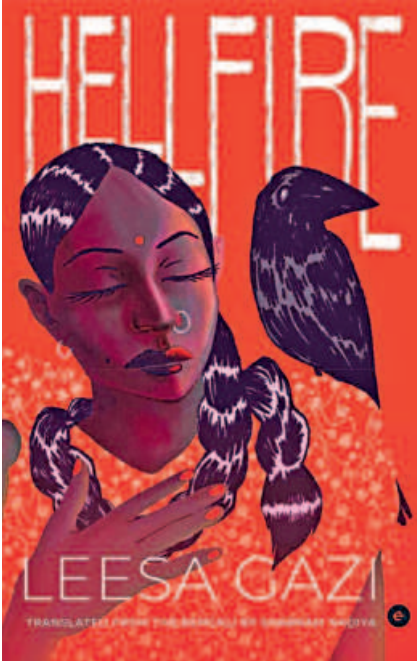
The Good Muslim
Tahmima Anam
Harper, 2011
From the prize-winning author of *A Golden Age*, *The Good Muslim* takes readers into a Bangladesh still healing from the scars of the Liberation War. Through the intertwined lives of siblings Sohail and Maya, Anam explores how the aftermath of conflict shapes not just a nation but the very people who call it home. Maya clings to her revolutionary ideals, while Sohail has chosen a very different path, embracing religious devotion in ways that gradually pull them apart. What makes this novel so compelling is its balance of the personal and the political—you feel the tension in family bonds, the weight of belief, and the long shadows of war, yet it is told with a warmth and humanity that makes the story deeply relatable. This is a novel that brings Bangladesh vividly to life, not merely as history, but as a world of choices, emotions, and relationships that feel immediate and intimate.

Khwabnama
Akhteruzzaman Elias, Arunava Sinha (Translator)
Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2021
Step into Bengal in the 1940s, a land still grappling with famine, poverty, and the echoes of peasant revolts. Work is scarce, wages are meagre, and food is never guaranteed. Amid this uncertainty, the elections of 1946, the proposal for Pakistan, and communal riots are reshaping the future of the region. In a small, unnamed village, we meet Tamiz, a young farmhand whose life is rooted in the soil he tills, yet whose dreams stretch far beyond the mud of his fields. His aspirations are shaped by the land, the memories of his ancestors, and the turbulent saga unfolding around



him. *Khwabnama* is a magnum opus that intertwines memory with reality, legend with history, and personal struggle with collective movements like the Tebhaga uprising, where peasants demanded two-thirds of the harvest they produced. Akhteruzzaman Elias masterfully blends magical realism into the daily lives of his characters, crafting a narrative that feels at once poetic, haunting, and grounded in the hard truths of history. This is a novel that immerses readers in a world of resilience, longing, and the quiet yet powerful heartbeat of a people shaping their own destiny.

Hellfire
Leesa Gazi, Shabnam Nadiya (Translator)
Eka, 2024

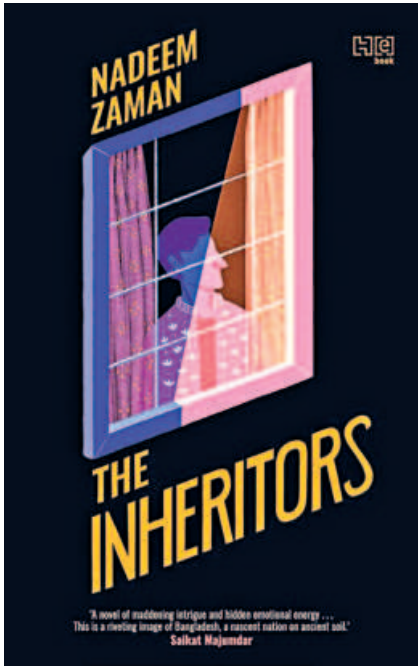


And this one is for anyone who loves family drama that burns from the inside out. Life under Farida Khanam's watchful eyes is suffocating for sisters Lovely and Beauty. Their mother's rules and constant surveillance make the home feel more like a cage than a place of safety. However, finally, on her 40th birthday, Lovely walks out alone to visit Gausia Market, and what begins as a simple journey quickly exposes the fragile arrangements of their household. Secrets long buried start to surface, and the delicate balance holding their family together begins to wobble. This novel is raw, messy, magnetic, and it captures how love, control, and desire can twist together until you are not sure whether you are rooting for escape or for staying. Not only a quick escape from the daily grind, Leesa Gazi lets you comprehend Bangladesh from an entirely different perspective, making even the familiar feel fresh and unexpectedly vivid.



Babu Bangladesh!
Nur Atif Choudhury
Fourth Estate India, 2019
Babu Bangladesh! is a bold, politically charged novel that plunges readers into the turbulent currents of contemporary Bangladesh. It follows Babu Abdul Majumdar, a charismatic and enigmatic figure whose rise from a fiery student leader to a mystic politician mirrors the country's own struggles with power, ideology, and identity. From political upheavals to social transformations, the novel captures the complexities, contradictions, and competing loyalties that shape modern Bangladesh. Told through the eyes of a fictional biographer in 2028, the author's narrative explores not only Babu's life but also the forces that have moulded the nation, from grassroots movements

to the corridors of power. The book is unapologetically controversial, offering sharp insights into politics, religion, and societal tensions. For diaspora teens, it is a rare chance to engage with these realities, understand differing perspectives, and reflect on their own stance. *Babu Bangladesh!* invites readers to witness, question, and decide for themselves, a provocative read for anyone trying to grasp the pulse of contemporary Bangladesh.



The Inheritors
Nadeem Zaman
Hachette India, 2023
Nisar Chowdhury returns to Dhaka from Chicago, expecting the city of his forefathers—a tapestry rich in history and artistry—but finds something fictitiously new. Streets, people, and memories have shifted, replaced by tales of modern ambition, hidden deals, and unexpected alliances. Central to it is his father's decision to sell their family home, a link to the past that Nisar must reconcile with as he navigates this transformed city. *The Inheritors* captures a Dhaka caught between old and new, tradition and change. Through Nisar's eyes, readers glimpse a city full of possibilities, betrayals, and complex human connections. The novel traces a journey of understanding a home that has evolved, holding on to meaningful roots while adapting to the present, and finding where one truly fits.

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.



PHOTO: COLLECTED, ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

FLASH FICTION

The hair fair

EKRAM KABIR

On the northern side of Dholgram, a very large field hosts a fair every year—a Hair Fair, where people gather to show off their hair. The one who has the longest hair gets the highest honour. All kinds of hair can be seen—entangled, shiny, untidy, thin, black, and grey—all sorts of hairy people come. A thousand more audiences join them as well. The spectacle of hair dazzles everyone's eyes, and at the end of the event, judges announce the awards. The poets recite their poems, artists paint their masterpieces.

As the daylight fades into the darker night, another kind of fair takes place. When the spectators fall asleep, the long-haired people secretly unfold their razors

and jump onto one another's heads to cut their hair. They proclaim: "I cannot tolerate your hair". Everyone's head becomes bloody with the razors' strokes.

***This flash fiction is inspired from the occurrence of 2025, when a specific organisation forcefully cut the hair of many of the homeless street people in Dhaka who kept long hair and beard intentionally.**

Translated from Bangla by Sabreena Ahmed.

Ekram Kabir is a Bangladeshi storyteller.

Dr Sabreena Ahmed is Associate Professor at the Department of English and Humanities, Brac University, and a translator.

POETRY

Transmutation

AHADUZZAMAN MOHAMMAD ALI

The torn tune of a broken violin
Signifies the evanescence of joy.
So many faded voices intermingle
This day and the night.
Moonlight has disappeared
In the sky overcast with
commingled clouds.
The wind is sombre with the
sadness
Of Bismillah's 'shehnai'.
The songs of 'Mohiner Ghoraguli'
Leave a rhythmic effect
In the somnolence of the mind.
Feelings are transmuted into
excruciating pain.
A kind of communication
Changes into a complex form.
The bright book of life is
Shrouded with obscurity;
The candle light slowly burns out
Into a darkness deep;
In this night and silence
We'll get lost or
Get back the lost words
By walking through lanes and
bylanes of life.

Ahaduzzaman Mohammad Ali
is a former professor of Dhaka University.

ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

