



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Between home and elsewhere

Review of ‘The Strangest of Fruit: Collected Stories’ (Cheek Press, 2025) by Sharbari Ahmed

One of the most aching stories in the collection, “Black Ice in Jackson Heights”, follows Rahima, an 18-year-old new mother who has recently migrated from Dhaka to Queens. The story opens with her sitting on a fifth-floor fire escape in the rain, barefoot, holding her eight-week-old baby. She is exhausted, underfed, disoriented by the new life she is living and cultural shock, and sliding into postpartum depression that no one around her has the language or patience for.

MAHMUDA EMDAD

Some books explain immigrant life through nostalgia. Others through big dramatic events. Sharbari Ahmed does neither in *The Strangest of Fruit*. Her stories focus on the quieter things like small humiliations, awkward encounters, the private wounds people carry, and the memories they don't talk about because talking would make them too real.

But even in that quietness, there is so much force. Reading the book feels like sitting with someone who has lived a full, complicated life and is finally ready to say the things they've been swallowing for years. Her stories circle around immigrants and their descendants, but what she really writes about is grief, loss, survival, and the quiet ways people keep going when no one is listening. *The Strangest of Fruit* gathers 10 short stories—some new, some previously published—into one sharp, emotionally layered collection.

The collection opens with “Noor, Embers and Ash”, where the boundaries between myth and memory blur in a way that only the South Asian imagination can hold. A girl visiting her grandmother's village encounters a djinn-girl named Noor, who feels part warning, part companion, and part ghost of a history everyone tiptoes around. The story sits between myth and memory, showing how children use imagination to name what adults avoid. It becomes a fitting first note, eerie and tender, and it sets the tone for the rest of the collection.

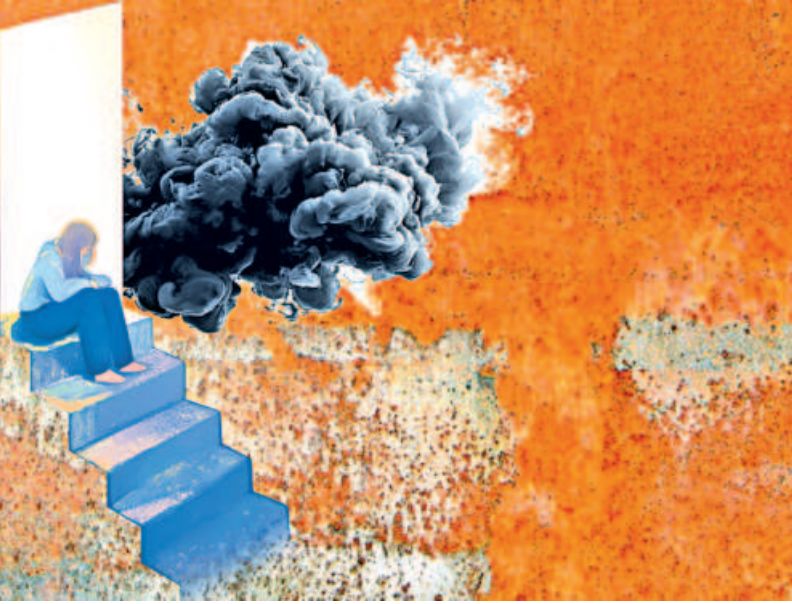
One of the most aching stories in the collection, “Black Ice in Jackson Heights”, follows Rahima, an 18-year-old new mother who has recently migrated from Dhaka to Queens. The story opens with her sitting on a fifth-floor fire escape in the rain, barefoot, holding her eight-week-old baby. She is exhausted, underfed, disoriented by the new life she is living and cultural shock, and sliding into postpartum depression that no one around her has the language or patience for. Ahmed lets the scene unfold slowly: the baby's phantom sucking, the numbness in Rahima's body, the way she drifts in and out of sleep dangerously close to the edge.

Where “Black Ice in Jackson Heights” deals with the invisible hazards of mental health in diaspora, “Perfect Flowers” approaches memory from another angle. Anadil, a 47-year-old Bangladeshi-American MFA student, tries to fulfill an assignment about memory by writing about mouse droppings on a teak coffee table stored in her basement. The table was bought on a honeymoon trip in Bali, now covered in rodent scat. The connection between past romance and present decay is obvious, yet Ahmed refuses to make it neat. The story is less about a failed marriage than about the difficulty of narrating a life at all—especially for a middle-aged South Asian woman in a workshop full of younger classmates who are eager to dissect

her but not really see her.

Shorter pieces like “Alexander”, “Eyesore”, and “Dervish” extend these same concerns in different registers. They return to the questions of how bodies are looked at, who is allowed to belong in a space, and what happens when desire, faith, and shame collide. Names, neighbourhoods, and even buildings become charged—either as sites of aspiration or as constant reminders that someone is “out of place.” Together with the more overtly political stories, these pieces show how the inner life of a character can be just as shaped by gaze, class, and history as by any headline event.

One of the most interesting things about Ahmed's writing is how she uses humour to expose discomfort. “The Eyesore” is a perfect example. The story follows an interfaith South Asian couple who buy a small, unattractive house in a wealthy white neighbourhood



in Connecticut. Their neighbour Archita arrives immediately, loud and overbearing, offering frozen mithai she saved for months and plenty of unsolicited advice. The story is funny, but the humour has a sharp bite. Under Archita's arrogance sits insecurity, class anxiety, caste pride, and a desperate need for validation from the white people around her. Under Farzana's politeness there is quiet fear. She fears standing out, being judged and being seen as the wrong kind of immigrant.

Ahmed captures this dynamic with painful accuracy. Anyone who has grown up in a South Asian community abroad will recognise someone like Archita, someone who polices others because they see belonging as a competition. The story critiques this behaviour gently, without turning cruel.

Themes of aging, desire, and invisibility surface again in stories like “The Length in Six Strokes” and “Dervish,” where characters navigate communities, preserved suburbs, class anxieties, and the layered prejudices that shape everyday life.

The collection is not without

its flaws. At times, the political commentary can feel a little too on-the-nose, with characters articulating points that readers have already grasped from the scene. Some stories—especially the longer ones—are crowded with subplots and name-dropping, and the men can occasionally feel sketched in comparison to the women, who are almost always vivid, contradictory and real. A reader looking for quiet, minimalist slices of life will not find them here; Ahmed is maximalist by instinct. While the collection is emotionally rich, there are moments where the stories lean a little too closely toward familiar immigrant tropes. Some characters feel shaped by recognisable stereotypes—the judgemental in-laws, strict immigrant parents, the anxious “model minority”, the overbearing aunty figure—and at times, the writing risks reinforcing the very

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

An inter-cultural romance

A review of Clinton B Seely's ‘Barisal and Beyond: Essays on Bangla Literature’ (UPL, 2025; first published by Chronicle Books, Delhi, in 2008)

KAISER HAQ

The author of this book is the protagonist of a charming inter-cultural romance. He is one of fewer than a handful of living Westerners who fortuitously fell in love with Bengali literature and made a distinguished career of teaching it—at the University of Chicago in his case. A major in Botany from Stanford, he volunteered for the Peace Corps and spent a year and nine months (1963-65) training high school science teachers in Barisal. In the process he picked up Bangla and, through the desultory chitchat that Bengalis call ‘adda’, gathered some idea about the greatest writer in the language, Rabindranath Tagore. At the end of his stint he enrolled for graduate studies at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations, University of Chicago, and discovered Bengal's greatest modern poet, whose hometown was his familiar Barisal.

His PhD thesis, published as *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das, 1899-1954* (UNKO, 1990), won him West Bengal's most prestigious literary award, the Ananda Puraskar. His other publications include three translated volumes, of which the one of Michael Madhusudan Datta's epic, *The Slaying of Meghnada: A*

sensibility.

“Say it with Structure: Tagore and *Mangal Kavya*” analyses the parallels between the play “Tasher Desh” or “Land of Cards” (1933) and the conventions of the medieval mangal kavya genre. The argument has something to it, though that something may seem rather tenuous. Besides the superficial difference between a play and the traditional pala in payar-tripadi, which is the vehicle of the mangal kavya proper, one also misses the robust and often menacing presence of a subaltern deity. By contrast, much of the play's charm lies in its delightful comic and satiric elements, and instead of forceful deities we have two opposed abstractions, Niyam, the foundation of a rules-based existence, and Ichchha, which allows us to be fancy-free. Of the four essays dealing with Michael Madhusudan Datta, one comprehensively reveals the “Indian Sources of Inspiration” behind his magnum opus, the epic *Meghnad Badh Kavya*; the critical view for long had been that Michael was a “European” poet who wrote in Bengali. Two essays on Jibanananda Das go for intriguing hair-splitting, though the one titled “Shifting Seas and ‘Banalata Sen’”, on the true geographic location of maalay, which features in Das' best-known poem, “Banalata Sen”, as well as in another poem, “Nirankus”, leaves me unconvinced.

The generally accepted rendering of maalay is that it refers to Malaya. This is how Seely himself rendered it the first time he translated the two poems. The poet himself in his English translation of “Banalata Sen” renders the phrase “maalay sagare” as “to/ the seas of Malaya”. But Seely has second thoughts, prompted by a reader's comments, which he has followed up with an examination of dictionaries and atlases. Confusingly, maalay can be the adjectival form of malay, which can refer to the Malabar region. Seely decides to revise his translations accordingly, for two main reasons. First, if “maalay sagare” is retranslated as “to seas up the Malabar coast” (a clumsy phrase), all the geographical references in the poem are contained in India as it was at the time of composition, thereby making it “a strongly nationalistic poem.” Second, in the poem “Nirankus” there is an anonymous Malayali, a word widely used in India to refer to a speaker of Malayalam, the language of the Malabar Coast. Seely therefore retranslates the poem, changing “the Malayan coast” to “On the coast along the Western Ghats” (another clumsy expression).

I find Seely's reasoning quite spurious. Das was never strongly nationalistic—his sense of geo-cultural rootedness applied to undivided Bengal rather than India as a whole—and it is difficult to see why he should wish to limit the peregrinations of the speaker in “Banalata Sen” to India, especially when the opening line describes him as “roaming the paths of this earth” (Seely's translation). More importantly, it is absurd to think that by “Malaya” in his own translation, Jibanananda Das—a college lecturer in English—could have meant “Malabar”.

The present volume is a mixed bag of essays and lectures covering a number of significant aspects of Bangla literature. Though the focus is predominantly on modern or post-Plassey literature, Seely's grasp of the earlier tradition of Bangla writing is palpable in several essays.

Ramayana from Colonial Bengal (Oxford University Press, 2004), got him the A. K. Ramanujan Book Prize for translation. Anyone interested in a detailed critique of it may look up my review, “Bengal's Modern Epic”, in *The Daily Star Book of Bangladeshi Writing* (Daily Star Books, 2006), edited by Khademul Islam. The main point I make there is that although the translation reads smoothly, it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Bengali prosody. The Bengali of the original is written in unrhymed lines of 14 metrical units or matras, which may or may not be equivalent to syllables, depending on whether they are “open” or “closed”. Seely mistakenly equates a matra with a syllable, ignores the importance accorded to the caesura, and ends up with rhythmically limp lines far from Datta's robust amitrakshar chhanda, his Bangla equivalent of blank verse.

The present volume is a mixed bag of essays and lectures covering a number of significant aspects of Bangla literature. Though the focus is predominantly on modern or post-Plassey literature, Seely's grasp of the earlier tradition of Bangla writing is palpable in several essays. His treatment of the earlier writings serves a salutary purpose, bringing out the organic connections between them and modern Bangla literature and thus effectively countervailing the thesis of loyal colonial subjects like the late Nirad Chaudhuri that the latter is thoroughly Western in

This is an excerpt. Read the full review on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature's websites. An earlier, shorter version of this review article appeared in *Asiatic*, Vol. 3, No. 1, in June 2009.

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