

ESSAY

# HOPE, RAGE, AND LOVE-WORLDS: The many meanings of feminised tears



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

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In classical studies of sensory experiences, philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggest that bodily sensations constitute our lived reality. Sight, sound, touch, taste, smell construct our life and make meaning of our existence. Senses are not purely biological, but are shaped by culture, environment, and politics. Senses also have a hierarchy—with vision ranking supreme above the other lesser, feminised senses. The physiological and emotional process of crying is often viewed in a gendered way and seen as an expression of weakness. Conventional wisdom suggests that a woman's tears make her feminine, while male tears emasculate. Are tears that simple? Can the action and consequence of crying be simplified in such a binarised way? What about tears of rage, love, healing? Is crying a feminist act? What does the immediate action of crying and the politics of tears reveal about the structures of feelings our society is organised around? Are some tears more legitimate than others? Is crying more than the literal shedding of tears?

I was drawn to the question of tears while thinking through the concept of feminist rage. Many women cry when they are angry and too often, their tears delegitimise their anger. As though if anger is accompanied by tears, that

anger is not justified. How many times have we found ourselves attempting to make a point but were shaken by our own uncontrollable, rage-fueled tears? Our social and cultural codes often disallow or at the very least, frown upon feminine anger. An angry woman challenges the myth of the soft, eternal feminine woman. Oftentimes thus, it is our inability to show anger that leads to crying. Yesterday, as my closest colleague and I attempted to talk about the seven-year-old girl found with her throat slit in Sitakunda Eco Park, we took turns crying and seething. I wanted to simultaneously cry, vomit, and scream. She kept crying and raging. Through tears and rage, we sat in solidarity and helplessness, standing alongside the seven-year-old fighting for her life, the dead eight-year-old from Magura, and the 5,632 children whose rapes led to cases being filed in the last 10 years in the country we lovingly call home.

We have bled for this country. Our foremothers and forefathers sacrificed life, limb, livelihood, safety, and more for this nation. And no, this conversation is not leading towards Ekattor because it is March, but because our sentiments and feelings—expressed through tears of love and loss—led to the birth of this nation. Recall for instance, the tears of the Birangonas, so instrumental in building our national narrative. The

foundational concept of Bangladesh itself rests on the tears of the Birangonas, the women who were raped, violated, killed, maimed, impregnated, and left to bear the consequences of war. It is no small feat that in our collective national imagination, the Birangonas and their pain represent strength and power of the Bangladeshi women and are detached from narratives of pity and shame. The raped women of 1971 are part of the public memory of 1971. As Mojib discovers his dead, raped sister Momena's body in Shahidul Zahir's *Jibon O Rajnoitik Bastobota* (1988), "He fell to his knees, his heart wailed out, and as if in a state of delirium, he merely uttered, 'Allah, Allah.' Bending down over Momena's face and gazing at her half-open eyes staring at the sky, he wept, crying, 'Aapa, Aapa.' Mojib's sobs bear witness to the trauma and the aftermath of 1971, invoking the placement of tears and helplessness as part of the metanarrative of the Bangladesh War.

Similarly, when our national anthem tenderly croons, "Ma tor bodon khani molin hole, ami noyon jole bhashi"—"noyon jol" acts as a site of intense patriotic zeal. Our heart weeps for our nation-state, mythologising her as mother, the mother who needs our devotion, our protection, our care. 'Desh' as mother sustains us and our tears for our mother-nation sustains the nation state. The analogy between

land and woman, between "desh" and "nari" deserves to be problematised. It is after all what has, for centuries, fueled and justified colonial occupation.[a] Women and land are sites that symbolise the colonial desire to conquer and tame, pillage and rape, plough and own. And yet, when Nazrul Islam Babu writes "chokh theke muche felo osrutuku, emono shukhero dine kadte nei" in his famous "Shob Kota Janala Khule Dao na" sung by Sabina Yasmin, we note how the ethos of the nation state does not rest only on narratives of valour and bravery but also on the notions of tears, sacrifice, and emotions. Almost 55 years later, each time the song is played, the essential formation of the modern nation state concretises in its instrumentalising of human pain and sorrow.

Our "bichedi gaan"—a genre based almost entirely on the pathos of unrequited love, the pangs of longing, and the profound heartbreak that comes with a love that changes life—has for centuries sustained our lifeblood in this part of the world. 'Prem' for us is the divine feminine and 'prokiti' the divine masculine, forming the ethos of the natural world in our music, poetry, and philosophy. Binding the human with the environment, in profound contrast to the nature/culture split prevalent in the western ontological order, 'prem' and 'prokiti' explore the 'biched' or rupture between love and nature, marking it as the site where some of our most profound cultural expressions lie. When Lalon laments "ami ek dino na dekhilam tare", that grief is love itself. The ecstatic devotion of Sufi music too, often leads the singer and the listener to tears. Stepping away from the ratio-centric rigidity of 'modern' thoughts, the notes and tunes of longing urge the human soul to seek the Divine. Sufism's celebration of 'fana'—the breaking down of human ego—similarly attests to the act of losing oneself to the divine, accompanied by tears. Between 'bichhed' and 'fana', between seeking and longing, between lover and god, between seeker and beloved, the human spirit rises in love and pain.

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

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## POETRY SPRING STAYED LONGER THEN

NUBISHA RABYA TOPOTE

I miss those spring days  
when the sun lay on my skin  
like a sunflower opening without trying.  
I kept saying your name,  
softly, again and again,  
as if repeating it could slow the afternoon.  
We sat under a tree,  
branches moving gently above us,  
birds filling the silence we didn't need to break.  
The sky felt endless then—  
so wide it made the future seem harmless,  
like something far away  
that would never reach us.  
We didn't think about what comes after warmth—  
how summer rushes in too quickly,  
how storms arrive without warning,  
how winter quietly takes things away.  
We didn't wonder.  
We didn't prepare.  
We just wandered,  
believing time would stay kind  
as long as we didn't look at it too closely.

Nubisha Rabya Topote, a class 10 student at Viqarunnisa Noon School and College, is a budding poet who finds inspiration in every opportunity to write. Find more of her work @nubishawrites.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

# The devil wears Maria B

TASHFIA AHMED

I sit on a chair. Sometimes I wish I were sitting on my old chair of humble plastic, but right now my chair is a plush armchair, with armrests no less, swaying and swooning on its cabriole legs of sturdy s-curve perfection. Its upholstery is luscious mauve velveteen and rapturous foliage embossing embraces its expanse. But my chair is mass produced. It has room for only one. Just me. And even I barely fit on it at times. That does not make it any less expensive.

And though its upkeep keeps my bank balance on its toes till the end of the month, I cannot imagine trading it in for anything less—owing to the vantage point it gives me to watch over all things just as beautiful, to claim them for myself; to look up and find that its height is just right for my hands to reach for more, and know that this chair has the ability to take on more intricate chippendale and thusly raise me to higher heights of bigger, more beautiful boards of claims.

But when you have grown up sitting on sticky plastic, sooner or later, the pins securing the upholstery start to unhook and sting.

I felt my first sting when I was told my bill at a Pakistani multi-brand retailer's counter had amounted to nearly 50K. Suddenly, the velveteen of my chair started stinking of mildew and its wooden skeleton rattled like termite fodder.

50K can comfortably sustain a month of livelihood in a low-income nuclear family.

50K can lavishly dine 50 people for a whole day...right?

Sitting on my pretty chair of Pinterest-core magnificence, I felt out of touch with reality: with the cost and value of money. Thereby, all the posts I shared on my Facebook timeline and all my Instagram reel reposts, all of them about the inbred



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

disease of capitalism and neocolonialism perpetuating patriarchal control and survivalist competition, all rendered meaningless in that one instant of pure, absurd vanity. All in the name of the biannual pandemic of Eid shopping.

I realised that my chair wasn't just fancy, it was also positioned on a pedestal of my own worship, contradicting the virtues that the religious teachings of Ramadan promotes. It's an ironic realisation-slash-observation that bumps and skitters around on Facebook statuses every Ramadan, often accompanied by a hastily snapped picture

of overpriced boutique designs and/or the swarming horde of consumers at Aarong or the tristate mela displays.

The stuffing of frills and bows battering my seat are starting to feel like they're morphing into something alive and biting. I fidget my fingers on a lipstick-cage-bag charm I had bought from a small-business Facebook page selling "aesthetic" products (which they probably sourced from Shein). The cap of the lipgloss I've placed in the "cage" and the other bag charm I've hung my employee ID card from are both matching shades of lime green. My

Instagram Explore page tells me how to add whimsy to my life in 2026 and shows me aesthetics of the "divine feminine" through imagery of pastels and nature and ethereal, gossamer-like fabrics. I consume it all—with my eyes, with my salary.

My salary. To quote Anthony Bridgerton, "the bane of my existence and the object of all my desires." (At this point, I am reminded of and starting to feel an urge to order online the *Bridgerton* collection stationery I'd seen at an Alok event this Ramadan, but I digress.) The point is: my salary (with the rest of my side-hustle incomes) puts

me in a comfortable income-bracket, positioning me as a privileged woman in Dhaka's urban landscape, but this privilege does not come without the caveats of being employed, and thus, being working class nevertheless. And this exactly is why the comfortable armchair of my employed self is, at its joints, creaking.

It's the fact that I will receive a Whatsapp text in my team's group chat from our supervisor of the dresscode on Sunday being any shade of purple or pink, and all of us employees will wear our curated outfits while our students recite poems talking about "oh women so divine, so beautiful, such flowers" at the special morning assembly, and we will take group pictures in our ombre of purples and pinks, and share them on the Whatsapp group and our personal Facebook profiles. It's the fact that I'm all set for this International Women's Day with my solid lilac Dubai georgette coords and matching studs, just like I am every year with a new carefully curated purple or pink outfit. It's the fact that some brand will once again unleash another galling marketing campaign regurgitating the same old message of "je raadhe, shey chul o baadhe" or "ghor and office duto tei expert" while other brands advertise Women's Day Sales to make the women in your lives feel special.

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

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