

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

The spiritual anatomy of womanhood and folk

Review of Nasrin Khandoker's 'Songs of Desire and Defiance: Subjectivity, Emotions, and Authenticity in Bhawaiya Folk Songs of North Bengal' (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2026)

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In the early 2000s, remixed versions of Bangla folk songs flooded neighbourhood corners during evening street matches and nighttime ceremonial events, which blurred the elusive nature of melancholia and yearning in the beats and celebration. This resulted in divided reactions as some debated the gentrification of pastoral identity and others applauded the defiance of conservative norms.

Khandoker's *Songs of Desire and Defiance* (slated to be published in June, 2026) is a deep dive into the Bhawaiya folk tradition of North Bengal; research ranging from studying the history of India to Bangladesh through ethnomusicology, feminist anthropology, and cultural studies. The text illuminates the nature of Bhawaiya lyrics and speaks for women's desire, longing, and dissatisfactions of conjugal life under the restrictions of the patriarch. It revives Bhawaiya folk lyrics across chapters and amidst sections that make one reach out to their old playlist on YouTube.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

After the 1947 Partition, Bhawaiya music entered the andarmahal of Hindu and Muslim elites through gramophone records and transcended the boundaries between the lower class fields and the upper class living rooms. Following this partition, the areas of Bhawaiya in North Bengal were also divided by religious sentiment.

While Bhawaiya belongs to the larger constellations of folk genres and shares inclinations with Bhatiali and Baul music, its distinctiveness lies broadly with the articulation of subjectivity on womanhood. Popularised by Abbasuddin Ahmed, Bhawaiya music is a blend of yearning and loss symbolised with the ebb and flow of river waves. The unsynchronised nature of the summer breeze presents an ecocentric resilience to the Bangla identity.

Dividing the book into four chapters, the author outlines her

discourse through ethnocentric research and lyrical analysis across Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Ulipur, and Chilmari. The book asserts that the musicality of Bhawaiya sentiment is shaped less by geographical constraints and more by linguistics, history and cultural formations. She situates Bengal's colonial and nationalist history whilst exploring Hindu mythological and theological metaphors in lyrics to navigate how identities are constructed and contested by placing women's position at the centre of negotiations.

In the first two chapters, Khandoker combines colonial historical ideologies and Hindu mythological metaphors, aligning with the lived reality of women. The history of Bhawaiya is a foundation of Bengali nationalism and religious identity that traces with the emergence of the bhodrolok culture. This 'Bengaliness' later became a form of anticolonial resistance through literature but excluded religious diversity with the birth of "Hindutva". The othering of Muslim identity in the nationalist discourse emerged as a

form of new Muslim identity, and under these romanticised formations, the elite Bengali literary class reinvented the "ghor/bahir" spheres. The men believed in adopting the Western materialised identity for the public sphere, but the Eastern spiritual identity was to be protected in private by women. This "new woman" evidently became bearers of religious purity and the image of nationhood.

Under surveillance of patriarchal control, the author questions whether love only existed in an arranged matrimony or whether it remains vigilant in the educated discourse for conjugal life. Folk products such as doggrels, poems, and songs by Bhawaiya challenged such elite discourses of repressed desires of love. However, the folk expressions were derailed as low class emotions, ultimately othering the bhodrolok sentiment. The resilience through Bhawaiya music continued as the public sphere became more inclusive towards the lower-class women.

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The text questions whose voice of desire the songs are presented as the discussion surrounding authorship becomes difficult to navigate. Locating various Bhawaiya scholars and musicians, the author traced the notion that the lyrics are an idea of "male fantasy of women" written by men, but following interviews with women Bhawaiya musicians, it was conclusive that whoever makes a Bhawaiya song, whether a man or a woman often tries to replicate the style of feminine struggles orientated around despair, yearning and rage. Some lyrics written by women are sung as homage to their mothers, sisters, and friendships. The melodious metaphors in Abbasuddin Ahmed's "O ki Ekbar Ashiya" is set on yearning for a lover while evoking the caged anxiety in a forcefully arranged marriage with a deeper narrative of

societal subjugation of consent and lack of agency.

The author pictures the metaphor of the Hindu goddess, Lakshmi, who is known as the "ideal wife" from the bhodrolok's perspective. She is an empathetic, all-forgiving, sacrificing deity whose image resembles an ideal nationalist spirituality. She is the lokkhi, and any figure that would defy that image is alokkhi.

The dangerous woman in Bhawaiya challenges the assumptions of "lokkhi", a poor and voiceless soul. The deviant desire in Bangla folk makes the author ask one fundamental question that encapsulates her research objective: Is one a woman of Bhawaiya or do they become a woman of Bhawaiya? The author believes that it occurs when the listeners move beyond a gendered perspective and transform themselves into a temporal female subjectivity.

The remixed versions of Bhawaiya music produced by high class composers create tensions with marketing when they supersede class confidentiality. The author quotes this as "a new form of old bhodrolok" tension. These transformative pop folk versions have created a space for expressing defiant and deviant emotions, challenging middle-class perceptions of spirituality and decency. Somewhere along the line, it has also reduced the resilient empowering of female singers as invisible products.

Nasrin Khandoker's research is inspired by the subaltern studies and the nostalgic memories of her childhood that are etched with the subliminal tunes of Bhawaiya. The discourse of sensuality and romance is a timely burning issue in the scholarly investigation which her book intends to approach. This book creates a scholarly quest to deconstruct feminine agency and "deviance" as a form of defiance. In a world where oppression is systemic and an easier option to choose for the powerful, it is through art that resilience stands as a protest that threatens those who ritualistically choose to silence others.

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BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

The spark of 'Red Spark'

Review of 'Red Spark' (Creative Dhaka Publication, 2025) by an Alliance of M & N

ABDUS SELIM

Though human beings speak in prose in everyday life, the astonishing truth is that poetry is humanity's first artistic love. In the 16th century, the English poet and writer Philip Sidney said that poetry was the first of the arts, coming before philosophy and history. In other words, the artistic journey of human civilisation began with poetry. Yet the irony is that poetry has no fixed definition—and perhaps that is why everyone loves poetry, and in one way or another, everyone attempts to write it. Although Jibanananda Das famously said that not everyone is a poet, only some are, he could not clearly define the essential elements that transform a piece of writing into poetry. What he did say was this: In the poet's heart, there must be imagination, and within that imagination must exist a distinctiveness of thought and experience. However, Jibanananda never fully explained the nature of imaginative genius itself.

We know imagination does not arise solely from romantic love; many different sources and materials may shape it. And it is the work of this kind of romantic imagination that forms this English poetry collection, *Red Spark*, by the secretive alliance between M & N.

When I first held this book in my hands, the thought that arose immediately was this: beauty has no boundary, no line that says this far and no further; this is the height of aesthetics, and none may go beyond it. The book's production is beautiful in every sense and deeply pleasing to the eye. Not only that, it is also reader-friendly, because the very elegance of its design draws one instinctively toward reading, especially due to its cover, its abstract ornamentation, and its tasteful harmony of colors.

The book is titled *Red Spark*. I am, by training, a student of literature, but



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

professionally a teacher of linguistics. Therefore, I would like to reflect briefly on the linguistic significance of this title. One important area of linguistics is the semantics of colour, the inherent meanings associated with colors, a concept present since the earliest days of human civilisation. Different colors have long been used as symbols of different meanings.

So what does red mean? Linguistics tells us that red is often associated with passion, energy, and action. Red can evoke strong emotions such as love and anger—two extremes of human feelings. Red carries additional meanings as well. It is used as a warning signal for danger—and in that sense, love itself can be a sign of danger. Another word in the title is *Spark*. The collocation of red with spark is itself a domain of linguistics, for collocation concerns how words naturally intertwine with one another. Let us then consider the

meaning of "spark". Semantically, a spark is a very small burning fragment that flies out from a fire. Naturally, if red signifies love or passion, then fire must exist, and fire never exists without leaving something to burn.

That the poetry book is essentially about love is affirmed by the title of its Preface, "The Journey of Love". I was particularly moved by the final sentence of that Preface: "The Journey of Love is more than a collection of poems—it is a love letter written in fragments of the soul, a map of longing traced across the heart, and a reminder that even when love can no longer be spoken, it continues to live, endlessly, within us". In my view, perhaps that continuous state of living within us is precisely the burning fragment—the spark that flies out of love.

In this context, my thoughts inevitably turn to Pablo Neruda whenever love poetry is mentioned. *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924) comes unbidden to mind,

where he writes: "love is short but forgetting is long." And thus, love transcends into an "eternal journey". That's why the writers of the present love poems of *Red Spark*, an Alliance of M & N, say: "Love does not vanish—it only changes form, waiting to be seen again, in a glance, a touch, a forgotten smile."

The collection contains 22 poems, each exploring different phases of love. There is the infinity of love, the pledge of devotion to the beloved, the purity of love, its wonder, separation, depth, measurement, blindness, and recklessness. These are, undeniably, the timeless dimensions by which love has always been understood. But beyond all this, the collection also speaks of love's hunger, the body's longing, the desire for touch, and at this very point, I am reminded of Neruda's line from his *Love Poems*: "Body of

the collection takes its name: "Your beauty, your charm, / Your captivating smile, and touch of your deep eyes— / They awakened a feeling in my heart, / Like a sudden flash of red lighting across the sky."

"Longing Across the Miles" echoes the same emotion: "Not seen you for so, so long, / yet in my heart, you still belong, / I dream of you all the time, / your voice, your smile, your gentle rhyme." The final poem of the collection speaks of physical experience: "When I touch you, my whole body trembles, / As love speaks silently, / Your breath stops at the touch of my fingers, / My heart sways to the melody of your heart."

Notably, *Red Spark* reveals a blending and coexistence of the physical and the metaphysical. Just as M & N echo John Donne in proclaiming the sovereignty of love: "Busy old fool, unruly Sun, / Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy center is, there walls thy sphere"; they also speak, like Neruda, with elemental force: "My savage peasant body digs through you / and makes the son leap from the depth of the earth."

Yet the poem that touched me most deeply is "I Love to Love You: I Live to Love You":

"I love to love you— / like the dawn loves the first golden light, / like the stars love the velvet night, / Every heartbeat sings a single tune, / a melody that begins and ends with you. . . . I love to love you— / for loving you is my sweetest art, / I live to love you— / for you are the very beat of my heart."

Thus, one may conclude, echoing the Preface of the collection: "Love is eternal—a quiet miracle that drifts through time, changing its form but never losing its power."

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woman, white hills, white thighs, / you look like the world in your posture of surrender." Similarly, the alliance of M & N speaks of bodily desire: "I crave your face, your voice, your hair, / Silent and starving, I wander the streets, / Bread cannot feed me..." Or the poem "Red Spark" itself, from which