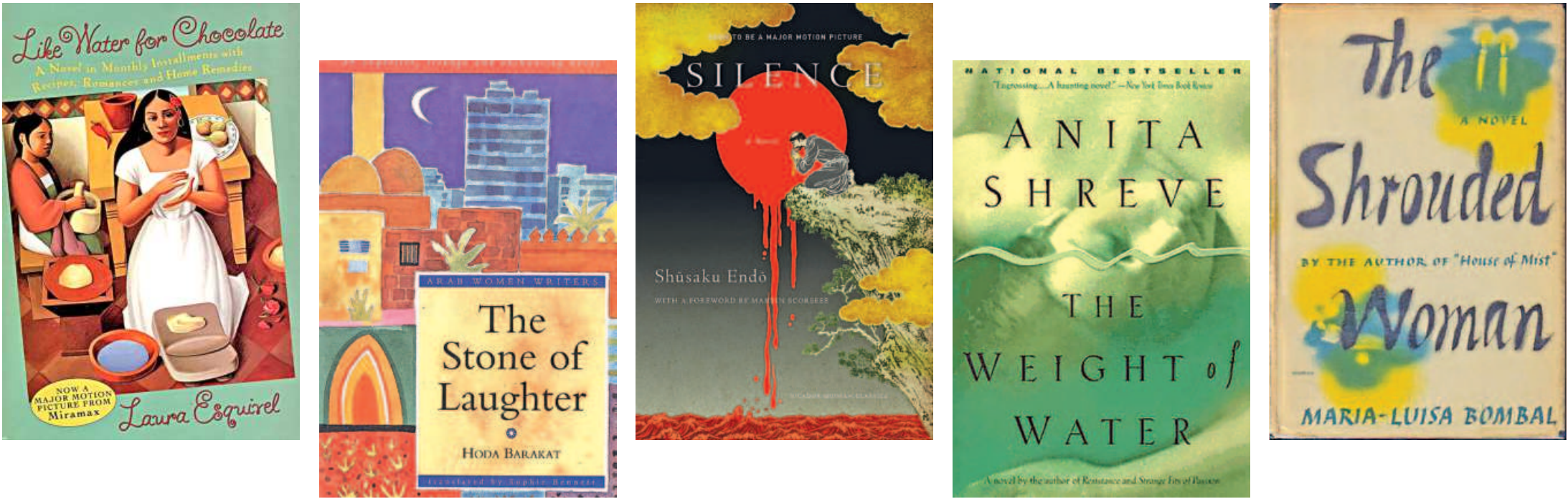




THE SHELF

The knife is always ready

5 books for the season of sacrifice

The novel ends in something startlingly close to peace, maybe because the acts of offering were worth the life, or maybe because she can finally, mercifully, stop.

MRINMOYI

One thing the season of sacrifice whirrs though the air is the reminders of the story behind it. The intention behind the willingness, the grief behind the bravery and the miracle of God's mercy. But not always do heavenly rams come to rescue the unprophetic man from the tragedies of the routinised sacrifices made. Yet, finding the delicate beauty in our shared experience of suffering is a human tendency we are unable to outrun, despite the trembling hands and perspired backs that lead to it. And what better ceremony to celebrate the emblematic than reading about the alliteration of our offerings? That's exactly what these novels glide through—the very spectacle of sacrifices we, as human beings, trace throughout our lives—womanhood, love, duty, faith, survival, making each of us little prophets mimicking God's original instrument for the symbol of sacrifice—rehearsing the oldest story ever told: the offering up of something we cannot bear to lose.

Like Water for Chocolate
Laura Esquivel
Doubleday, 1992

Tita is born in the kitchen and never quite leaves it. The tethers of her tradition decree that the youngest daughter cannot marry, and she must devote herself entirely to her mother's

care until death. When she falls in love with Pedro and her mother refuses the match, Pedro does the only thing he can think of: he marries her sister instead, to remain close. Tita is made to bake the wedding cake and her tears fall into the batter. The body, Esquivel understands, will say what the mouth has been forbidden to and so Tita's grief transfers into every dish she prepares, her desire into every meal consumed by a household that takes and takes without ever honoring her for giving. She upholds a duty she did not choose with the kind of patience of someone who has accepted an impossible situation despite her own wishes. Any daughter who has ever cooked for a household that consumed her quietly will recognise this kitchen—Esquivel's architecture of sacrifice, and the particular devotion of preparing a feast for everyone's satisfaction but yourself.

The Stone of Laughter
Hoda Barakat
Interlink Publishing, 1995

Beirut is at war with itself, and Khalil refuses to be. He cooks, cleans, and he loves quietly, without declaration—a man too soft in a city that decides his quiet existence is some sort of treason. He belongs to no faction, raises no weapon and chooses no side. He believes that remaining soft is its own form of resistance. The war persists to win Khalil over to violence.

Barakat's novel, written in a Beirut basement during the shelling, understands something most war literature misses, that the deepest casualties are not the ones the bombs reach but the ones the atmosphere slowly colonises. *The Stone of Laughter* is sure to make you wonder whether the things you have given away slowly across the quiet attrition of days count as sacrifice at all, or only as loss.

Silence
Shūsaku Endō
Sophia University Press, 1966

A Portuguese Jesuit priest named Rodrigues in the 17th century travels to Japan to find his mentor, rumoured to have renounced his faith under torture. Rodrigues cannot believe it. He goes to witness and to strengthen the hidden Christian communities being persecuted by the Tokugawa shogunate, to prove that a man of true faith does not break. But the Japanese authorities find a way to test Rodrigues' faith beyond his breaking point. They do not torture Rodrigues, instead, they torture his Japanese converts in front of him, and tell him that the torture will stop the moment he steps on a bronze image of Christ. His faith asks to be sacrificed for their bodies—his God for their pain. Despite Rodrigues understanding the theological weight of his act, he offers his faith—almost as though death for their sins.

Endo was a Japanese Catholic writing from inside a tradition that was not native to his culture, and the novel's final theological position and that Christ speaks to Rodrigues in the moment of apostasy and tells him to step—that this too is an act of love, was so radical, it was condemned by the Church.

The Weight of Water
Anita Shreve
Little Brown, 1997

In 1873, two women were murdered on a desolate island off the coast of New Hampshire. A man was hanged for it and the one survivor said nothing. More than a century later, a photographer named Jean travels to the island to research the case, and from a Portsmouth archive, discovers what appears to be the survivor's own account of that night. What it reveals is not what anyone expected, least of all Jean, whose marriage is quietly unravelling around her as she reads. Anita Shreve moves between two women, two silences, a century apart uniting them by the womb of violence: years of swallowed feeling, love that curdled slowly in the dark, the weight of a life organised around something that was never going to be returned. Unconventional within the stereotypes of sacrifices, this is the type of sacrifice built not in the spurred act but the long, unwitnessed endurance for survival

that makes a vast and irreversible veil of guilt shroud the person with what they have done, something they cannot confess, undo, or call anything other than what it cost them.

The Shrouded Woman
María Luisa Bombal
Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1948

Ana Maria is dead. She lies in her coffin in a Chilean drawing room while the people who loved her, failed her, and needed her file past to pay their respects. Beyond her sight of them, for the first time, she can finally see herself.

The novel is a recollection of her memories, the men she loved, lost, and stayed for anyway, the performance of a marriage she carried on long after it stopped being real, the self she set aside so extensively that she forgot to mourn it. By offering herself to her children and duties, she surrendered herself and said nothing of what she actually felt.

The novel ends in something startlingly close to peace, maybe because the acts of offering were worth the life, or maybe because she can finally, mercifully, stop.

Mrinmoyi is a pseudonym for the girl who likes to read too many books and watches too many films. Mail her @uzma131989@gmail.com to talk about anything from plant biology to the significance of Sappho.

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Pias Majid: The poet of the moonlight conference

Review of ‘New Normal and Other Poems’ (Bengal Books, 2026) by Pias Majid

AUDITY FALGUNI

Pias Majid, born in 1984, is a gentle yet prominent voice among Bangladesh's poets of the 2000s generation. He offers his readers tales of those employed to plant moss, of a moonlit pond, and of the scent of sunrise fading before a horde of salt. Just like a true successor of Jibanananda Das, he narrates the anecdote of someone who dies silently and does not wish to be present at any moonlit conference. On the other hand, Pias tells about terrible jealousy of the ropes of living.

New Normal and Other Poems is a collection of poems by Pias Majid, translated into English by Alamgir Mohammad. Alamgir Mohammad, Assistant Professor of Bangladesh Army International University of Science and Technology of Cumilla, endeavoured to decipher the imageries and symbolisms of Majid's poems and retain all those that remain after a language gets 'lost in translation'. Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury has penned a worthy preface of the book.

Personally I began reading Majid's poems from 2006 when he was just a university student. 20 years passed by and he is still steady in his offerings to the Muse—the

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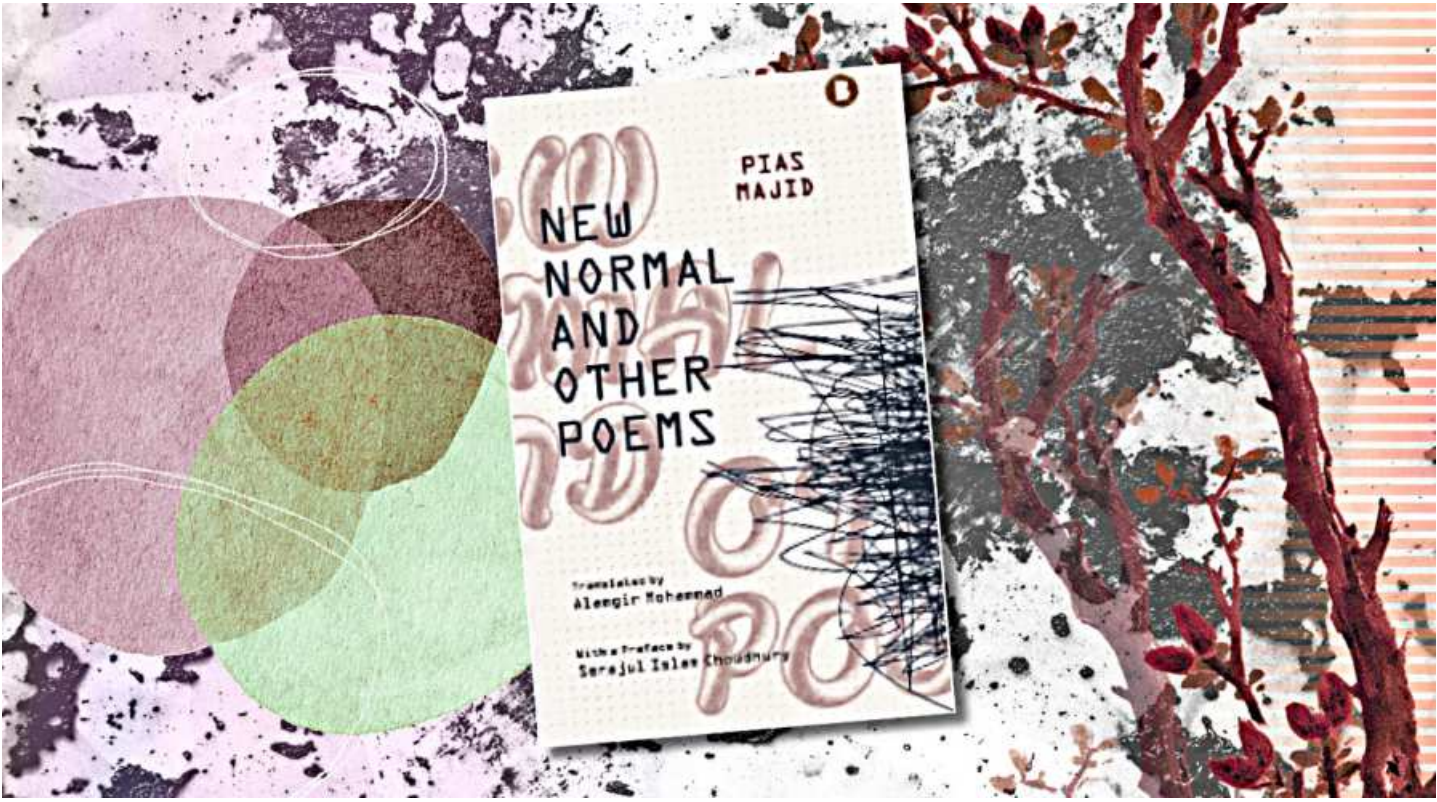


ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

muse of poetry. Who is this muse, his “lady love”, who he can never reach as the path to her is a “shaky bridge” of the poet’s language? *New Normal and Other Poems* mostly connotes a number of small but profound poems which seem like the faint songs of rustling leaves from a distant forest. For example, in “An Afternoon in the Naval”, the poet takes us away to the coastline of the azure seas:

*From the blue strings of the sea,
you saw the sea birds flying.*

*You are tied up fast
to some held-up fog.
Suppose, in your chest
you carry the lives of many ships—
Their speed and destination have crossed
away.*

While browsing through this aptly translated collection of poems, any reader may feel a pang in their heart after reading metaphors that sway like grass. Like the whirling dance of the Sufis, the cycle of seasons shroud the woman's words which

she probably wished to tell him (from “Your Words”).

I, however, won’t deny the gradual changes Majid seems to undergo in his decades long relationship with poetry. Poems in his earlier Bangla collections, like *Nach Protimar Laash* (Banglayan Books, 2009) or *Marble Fol er Mousum* (Oitijhya, 2022), read like an impressionist painting with vibrant colours. On the other hand, his contemporary poems exhibit an association with today’s gadget driven world. The lines “In future we even

wish to/ live-stream our deaths” from the poem “New Normal” may seem too simple but are striking. Sometimes his poems reminded me of paintings by Marc Chagal where “Our ancient love metamorphosed into ghosts-wearing the clothes of green” (“On a Late-Autumn Morning”). For that, kudos to the competence of Alamgir Mohammad as a translator.

Pias Majid uses a milieu of metaphors from Bangla folktales like “Chander Maa Buri”. “The Flickering Flame” reminded me of the late poet Shamsur Rehman's autobiographical recollection of a childhood in old Dhaka. It is in this poem that the lines “The boats from the underworld/ that lost their sails in the sky” may make you recollect the much sung lines of Tagore song: “Dariye achho tumi amar/ gaaner opare/ batash bohe mori mori/ ar bendhe rekho na tori!” I wondered if these boats from the underworld depicted the river of the underworld in Greek mythology which Orpheus had to cross to get back his Euridyce.

Throughout the collection, the poet sometimes behaves sarcastically out of sheer jealousy towards his beloved when the woman leaves him for the land of yellow clothes and returns in the guise of a crocodile's daughter (“Poem on Love”). Again the poet comes into very casual, everyday metaphors like storing “every bit of the evening's sweetness” in the “pen drive” (“Aesthetics”). He seems also to get a bit philosophical as he stands in the race of life “as both a winner and a loser” (“Parlor”).

This is an excerpt. Read the full review in The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature websites.

Audity Falguni is a writer, translator, poet and essayist. A law graduate from Dhaka University, Audity has served in a number of national and international NGOs, the UN, publishing houses and several newspapers.