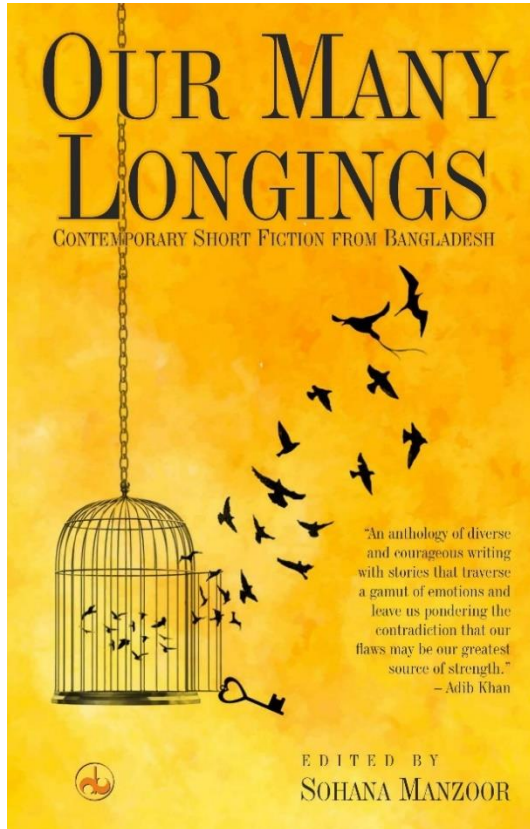


Sohana Manzoor, ed. *Our Many Longings: Contemporary Short Fiction from Bangladesh*. Odisha: Dhauli Books, 2021, 234 pages, ISBN: 978-81-954560-4-8.



Sohana Manzoor's edited volume *Our Many Longings* offers a fresh bounty of English short fiction from Bangladesh, which promises to travel across a global readership. As an anthology, this is significant because Manzoor weaves into the layered folds of the book generations and ideas, times past and present, men and women of all hues from locales at home and the world through her choice of texts. Besides, by including stories both in original English and in translation from Bangla, she has ensured an authentic taste of Bangladeshi culture in literary representation.

Since Bangladesh's liberation in 1971, successive phases of political turmoil and dramatic transformations in national life have repeatedly challenged the new nation. Several such issues that haunted creative writers abound the stories of this volume. The problematised existence of the Bihari community in

Bangladesh, for example, has been taken up in Shaheen Akhter's "The Green Passport" (translated by Arifa Ghani Rahman). In this story, the immobile grandfather Rahmatullah, a victim of the 1947 Partition, could never accept Bangladesh as his country. He helplessly witnesses his grandson's fuss over the Bangladeshi passport that has enabled the latter to travel to Bihar, his imaginary homeland. Narratives of this kind give voice to the issue of stranded "Pakistanis" and the manifold complexities of their lives. The story also highlights the issue of linguistic freedom of the Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh, an aspect that cannot be brushed aside in a land of linguistic nationalism.

Set in pre-independence Bangladesh, Khademul Islam's "Cyclone" brings an altogether different flavour. The ten-year-old narrator reminisces a day of his life when he witnessed the cataclysmic effect of a cyclone in Bangladesh, which readers can metaphorically visualise as the Liberation War that was imminent in the nation's history. The story juxtaposes innocence and experience to critique religious divides and tensions that have shattered life in the post-Partition Indian subcontinent. The question "What will they [the children] think of us, when they have grown up, and we are long gone?" posed by one of the adults, is one of national consciousness. In a nation gone awry through fifty years of independence, one reads the story as a long-lost syncretic dream that ignited communal affinity in both adolescents and adults during the Liberation War. An owl that seeks shelter in the masjid while the cyclone threatens its existence, perhaps embodies the coveted enlightenment of which everyone is in search. Unlike in Liberation War stories that usually present elderly Muslims and Imams as pro-Pakistanis, the Imam of the masjid in this story is presented as an elated keeper of the owl or of innocence with natural insight.

The volume has several stories that subtly explore the misuse of religion to underscore how the issue has problematised the growth of a nation. One cannot miss the pitiful humour beginning in the first story, Rahad Abir's "Beauty and the Jinn," that exposes the dismal effects of such misuse. In this story, a paedophile under the cloak of religiosity in a remote village is offered the hand of a "possessed" girl in marriage, while in reality molestation of the girl by him is the reason of her mental torment. There is no gainsaying that in rural Bangladesh, where majority of the population is illiterate, children become easy prey to adults who pretend to be their mentors. Such a story does expose a deep malaise in society.

Similarly, Kaiser Haq's "The Emperor's New Clothes" draws more on spurious faith in the so-called champions of religion. This time it is the sadhus, the saffron-clad, half naked man that Haq calls *Nanga Pagla* whose habitat he traces to a village by the Sitalakhya River in Bangladesh. By adapting the Andersenian tale to traverse continents, Haq produces a wry sense of humour that makes the reader smile from ear to ear. Haq thus connects in an almost bizarre way the thin-ness of the famed Dhakai Muslin with the nothingness of

the proverbial “new clothes” worn by the Danish emperor. The boy who identifies the emperor as naked in Andersen’s story, spoils a possible spiritual encounter between Europe and the East. As readers are to continue giggling through the pages, Haq writes on:

The emperor is a model of dignity as he keeps walking, flanked by his preceptors, but all three [the emperor and the two mendicants] are painfully aware that Europe has just missed a historic opportunity – comparable to Alexander’s aborted encounter with gymnosophists – to integrate itself spiritually with Asia. (86)

While one need not strive much to invest allegorical meanings, one cannot but say there one sees a hilarious critique of a nation that has gained fame for its corruption! Child molestation that is an important issue in the first story, however, is to be considered a serious concern in the volume, reappearing in Razia Sultana Khan’s “Decoy” in which an uncle figure, Babumama, assaults adolescent girls enticing them with jasmine garlands. These stories show that perversity requires no religious identities.

Through the comparison of the arrival of Kissinger and a rustic young man called Nuru in Dhaka in 1974, Hasan Al Zayed also weaves a tale that connects history and nation. Even though these two arrivals had no apparent connection, they were not “inconsequential” if one thinks of the context that pushed the village youth to come to Dhaka. Over 2.2 million tons of grain that was promised for a famine affected Bangladesh but never reached the country, necessitated Nuru’s arrival in the capital city in search of work and food. Some of the stories in the book thus present the position of the small country in relation to its bigger allies, while some others deal with individuals who dare tread foreign grounds in their quest for a place in the world. Fayeza Hasanat’s “Frank and Frida” belongs to the latter category. The Bangladeshi girl Farida comes to Manhattan where she develops friendship with white Americans. Despite her friends’ warning about the black community, she accidentally meets and gets along well with some of them. Without her typical bag of stories, Farida is an enigma and a pretty maverick that her American friends follow.

Farah Ghuznavi’s “First Love, Second Chances” is another tale of the Bangladeshi diaspora in which a girl finally manages to assert her freedom. Tahmina Anam’s “Mother’s Milk” courts a different level of a challenge, in which a woman, empowered by her financial freedom as well as emotional strength, proves her agency by investigating issues that threaten her peace. Rizia Rahman’s “Petrea” (translated by Sohana Manzoor) is a tale in which a girl’s identity is blurred unto herself, as she is entwined between colonial and colonised cultures. Each male character too, whether in Syed Manzoorul Islam’s “Alter Ego” (translated by Fakrul Alam), or in Mojaffor Hossain’s “After Breaking News” (translated by Nishat Atiya), in Kazi Anis Ahmed’s “Ramkamal’s Gift” or in Nadeem Zaman’s “Next Door,” is unique in his own right. Cumulatively, the

Bangladeshi men and women in the anthology come across as having an infinite variety.

Beginning with the liberation struggle, the range of themes is also a noticeable aspect of this volume. Afsan Chowdhury's "Torso" (translated by Shamsad Mortuza) is a touching 1971 tale of a Hindu wife's struggle to reinstate her husband's honour by offering him last rites. Hasan Azizul Haq's "Without a Name, Without a Tribe" (translated by Rifat Munim) is also a 1971 story that tells of exactly an opposite journey by a man who exhumes the bones of his wife and son who were killed by the Pakistanis. Both stories offer several layers of understanding and present a variety of characters. Nasreen Jahan's "The Bird Keeper" (translated by Noora Shamsie Bahar) and Manju Islam's "Catching Pheasants" are exceptional in their collapsing of boundaries between the bird kingdom and the human psyche. Such alluring ecocritical analyses enhance the relevance of the anthology by aligning it with such contemporary literary trends.

In her "Introduction" Sohana Manzoor mentions an evolution of Bangladeshi short fiction over the last fifty years. By covering nineteen stories of a wide variety of themes, she virtually attempts a mapping of this evolution. Though she perceives the stories as a "small sampling of the breadth and diversity of the literature of Bangladesh" (xv), the editor has executed a commendable task. More of such anthologies will establish Bangladeshi short fiction as a nuanced genre, and pave the way for Bangladeshi literature in English to reach desired heights in the arena of world literature.

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