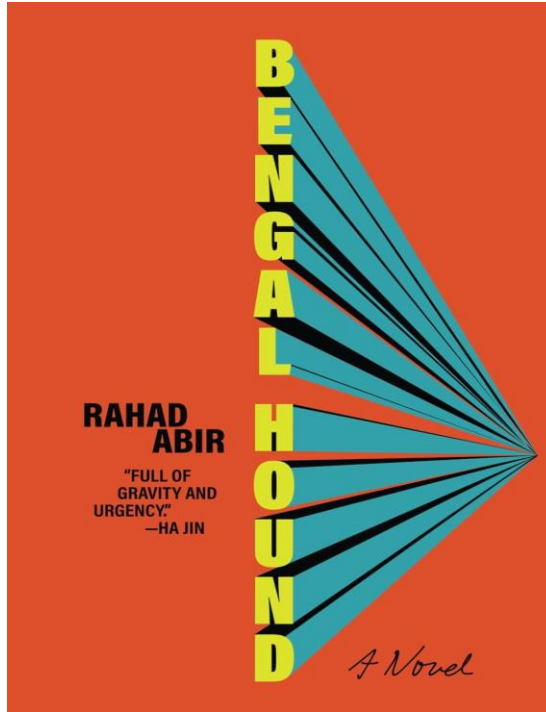


Rahad Abir. 2023. *Bengal Hound*. NY: Gaudy Boy LLC, 228 pp. ISBN-10: 1958652024, ISBN-13: 978-1958652022.



“Every evening a tempest twirls inside me; my blood ignores my heart/ I sit by the feet of humans in the form of a dog/ In order to see the dog inside him” – these are lines of a poem (in my translation) by the Indian Bengali poet Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934–2012). They illustrate not the loyalty of the dog as animal that is legendary in human imaginary and is reflected in literature as such; they can also be interpreted as a conscious attempt of a human to take the persona of a dog to silently witness the bestiality in humans. *Bengal Hound* reminds readers of the poem because the protagonist in it seems to brave the city streets and observe the activities of humans with the keen eyes of a stray dog.

Rahad Abir is a young writer from Bangladesh who has received the Georgia Author of the Year Award for literary fiction in 2024 for this debut novel. He suddenly jolts the readers with a dystopian thought whether the author is being inspired by such animal fiction as Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* (1903) or *White Fang* (1906). The presence of the word ‘Bengal’ complicates it further by juxtaposing the famous Bengal Tiger of the Sundarbans with a hound and one may even think that Abir is sarcastic about the prowess of the royal animal. The

hound itself is not less royal though. However, neither the tiger nor the dog takes shape once the readers dive into the core of the novel. It certainly caricatures Bengal humans, and that too in the high tide of nationalism as Bangladesh was about to be born.

Bengal Hound narrates the story of Shelley Majumder, a young student of Dhaka University in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). He is sufficiently fond of his namesake the British romantic poet P. B. Shelley since he studies at the Department of English, even though there is hardly any reference to Shelley's poetry in the novel. The English department played a significant role in the Liberation War in 1971, and Abir's narrative shows that he conducted thorough research on its history before attempting the novel. The National Student Front (NSF) as well as the then chairperson of the English department find prominent mention among the compradors of West Pakistan that Abir highlights. Dhaka University being at the centre of events during the mass people's uprising in 1969 and throughout the following two years, plays a pivotal role in Abir's narrative. He takes the readers to the streets of old Dhaka, Dhaka University campus with its historical Madhur Canteen and Fuller Road, Palashi Bazar, Fulbaria Railway Station, Azimpur Graveyard, and so on, that cumulatively gives a good orientation of the area for the unfamiliar readers.

The novel is the journey of a young man, or it can be considered as the progress of an artist through his extreme experiences. The fourteen chapters in three parts is a journey of a man who is a romantic, but seems to have become introverted by the situations happening around him. Shelley is a lover who navigates the crowd of Dhaka city in the late 1960s when East Pakistan was preparing for a mass movement against its west wing government after a long-endured economic and cultural oppression. Shelley's part time engagement with a film magazine is also an indication of his preoccupation as a writer. However, it seems that the lover Shelley struggles to unite with his literary and patriotic selves that cry for exposure. In all, the novel may be taken as the seedbed of a young writer in the making, and the elements of becoming one are arranged by his surroundings. He had half of his family migrated to India because of his Hindu background. Naturally so, his mother and sisters left him and his school teacher father in a never-ending negotiation between love for homeland and the consequent despair of its failure to understand their love.

Shelley falls in love with a Muslim girl named Rukhsana and converts to Islam for the sake of marrying her, but tragedy is inevitable since the Partition of India was meant to be manifold, long, and everlasting. His wife is forced to return with her love-jihadi father and eventually she commits suicide after a forced second marriage with a very old man in the village. After Rukhsana's death,

Shelley spends a phase of paradoxical insomnia, in which her return in the form of a statue creates a strange kind of magic realism in the narrative. The author leaves enough indication of Shelley's death-in-life existence. He meets other women in the course of the novel; one of them is a prostitute from the Kandupatti ghetto in Dhaka who resembles one of his sisters, and the other is a mentally unstable sister of a close friend. He cannot decide how to manage these acquaintances, and hangs in a limbo. Maya, the Muslim friend's sister, has her own story. Her would-be husband was murdered in the communal riots in Kolkata and she had to migrate to Dhaka with her family. This is a reminiscence of the massive dislocation during and after the Partition and the settlement of Muslim middle class from West Bengal in Dhaka. In a single plot the author has combined several histories, each talking of an aspect of the social and political systems that were malfunctioning in partitioned India and East Pakistan, which warranted the birth of Bangladesh.

The killing of King Siraj, a street child who is close to the students of Dhaka University, brings the novel to its climactic point. The street dog that Siraj pets is the titular Bengal hound that the readers come to know at this stage. After the boy's death, the hound is seen to be guarding his grave in its phase of mourning. Possibly there lies the significance of the title, the dog symbolizes the loyalty and bravery of the little hero that spoke for the freedom of a small country. Shelley, in a state of dreaminess after the death of King Siraj, murders an NSF goon named KK and goes to the police station to surrender. However, the police officer who is too bewildered with incidents at the national level, refuses to arrest him. He asks Shelley to leave for India. At the end of the novel, the author leaves Shelley and the readers to imagine his forthcoming days. Shelley becomes a representative of thousands of students whose fate was undecided at the wake of the Liberation War.

Abir is a deeply sensitive writer, and has given an artistic exposition to his innermost feelings about a family incident in the novel; the character of Rukhsana is a caricature of his own grand-aunt, as he has mentioned in a recent virtual talk. *Bengal Hound* as a historical fiction is thus able to disclose the private self that resonates with the public life of a nation. Bangladeshi English fiction has enormous prospect if writers like Rahad Abir continue their efforts to highlight the struggles and paradoxes of nationhood in their reflective creativity.

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