



Shaheen Akhtar (1962-)

Arifa Ghani Rahman (University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh)

Prose writer.

Active - in Bangladesh

Shaheen Akhtar was born on 28 February 1962 in a village in the district of Cumilla. Her parents, Abdul Jalil Sarkar and Rahima Khatun, had nine other children. Akhtar was their third child. She attended Chandina Girls' School and completed her secondary education at Cumilla Women's College. Later, she completed a masters degree in Economics at the University of Dhaka. Currently, Akhtar works for Ain o Salish Kendra, a Human Rights and Legal Aid organization. As evidenced by her first job as a documentary film maker in an NGO, Akhtar's career trajectory has not followed a traditional path.

During her early years, Akhtar was involved in filmmaking and undertook training programmes in Bangladesh and India, as well as several short courses on film appreciation. In an interview with Shabnam Nadiya, Akhtar mentions some of her favourite directors, emphasizing German director Wim Wenders's style of making documentaries, a fictionalizing technique that she commented "would be very effective in writing" (Akhtar, "An Interview", 2007). In a later interview with *Galpapath*, she also mentions that, when writing a novel, she watches movies whose subject matter coincide with her themes (Akhtar, "Kotha Shahityik", 2021). Despite her passion, however, Akhtar felt that fiction rather than film would be more suited to the expression of her experiences as a single, urban woman in the 1990s, such as looking to rent an apartment for herself, a challenging task even today. As she states, this is what inspired "my entry into literature [...] as a way to reach an understanding with myself".

Akhtar's family provided her with the kind of environment she needed to nurture her literary interests. Growing up, she was exposed to a myriad of literary works, particularly the Russian classics in translation that her brothers would bring home. In an interview published in *The Daily Star*, Akhtar revealed that she read whatever she could lay her hands on as a child, regardless of whether it would be considered suitable for her age, and this contributed to the development of her already active, imaginative, and creative mind (Akhtar, "Multi-faceted", 2020). While none of her close relatives pursued writing as a career, her brothers and maternal uncle did occasionally write, and inspired her to begin writing in her notebooks. However, a lack of confidence in her skills led her to share her writing anonymously. At the time, writers seemed like distant people, not someone one knew. This added to her anxiety about authorship and how she might be perceived

as a writer.

In this 2020 interview, Akhtar also spoke of her maternal aunt, Badrunnessa, whose manuscripts of novels and short stories, enough material for two volumes, were only discovered thirty years after her death, locked away in a trunk. Akhtar's aunt may have been representative of many women writing in secret, but the literary milieu of Bangladesh into which Akhtar stepped was populated with many women writers. Her mother offered her the encouragement and sanctuary Akhtar needed to nurture her writing talent and, as Virginia Woolf puts it, allowed her to "think back through [her] mothers" (37). Though reluctant to be labelled a feminist, Akhtar's works strongly reflect feminist views and representations. In a speech she gave at the second Asian Literature Festival in Gwangju, South Korea, Akhtar proclaimed that she started writing "as a reaction to gender inequality" (Akhtar, "From *Palabar Path Nei*"). Unlike her contemporaries, however, Akhtar's writing provides unique insights into the experiences of women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, professions, social situations, age groups, and historical periods.

When she was in college, Akhtar's first story was published in *Amod*, a weekly newspaper. However, her writing career was launched in the 1990s when she began writing part-time while working full-time. Akhtar's works initially reflected her personal experiences as a single, working woman in the big city, as shown in her first novel, *Palabar Path Nei* [No Escape Route] published in 2000. Her second novel, *Talaash*, published in 2004, won the Prothom Alo Best Book Award that year. The novel was translated into English as *The Search* by Ella Dutta and published by Zubaan Books in 2011. Akhtar's third novel, *Shokhi Rongomala*, was published in 2010 and translated into English by Shabnam Nadiya as *Beloved Rongomala*. The fourth novel in Akhtar's repertoire is *Moyur Shinghashon* [The Peacock Throne], published in 2014. This novel won the Akhtaruzzaman Elias Kothashahitya Award and the IFIC Bank Award in 2015. Both *Shokhi Rongomala* and *Moyur Shinghashon* are historical fiction. In 2018, Akhtar published her fifth novel, *Ashukhi Din* [Unhappy Days], which was based on the Partition of Bengal. Her sixth novel, *Eksho Ek Raater Golpo*, the title echoing *The Thousand and One Nights*, published in Dhaka in 2022, is centred around a suicide terrorist attack.

In addition to her novels, Akhtar is a prolific short story writer. To date, she has compiled seven collections: *Sreemotir Jibondorshon* [A Woman's Philosophy], her debut collection in 1997; *Boner Shange Amarloke* [To Paradise, 2001], *Poneroti Golpo* [Fifteen Stories, 2004], *Abaro Prem Ashche* [Once Again Love, 2006], *Golpo Shomogro 1* [Short Story Collection 1, 2008], *Shish o Onnyanno Golpo* [Whistle and Other Stories, 2013], and *Bhalobashar Poridhi* [The Limits of Love, 2020]. She has one collection of essays, *Godyo Shomogro1* [Essay Collection 1], published in 2015. With Mowshumi Bhowmick, Akhtar edited *Zenana Mahfil: Bangali Musalman Lekhikader Nirbachito Rochona 1904-1938*, an important compilation of writings by both well-known and forgotten Muslim Bengali women writers from the pre-independent period of Bengal. In 2008, it was translated and published by Stree as *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938*.

Akhtar's interest in the diverse representations of women is reflected in *Sati o Swatantora - Bangla Sahitye Nari* [The Virtuous and The Free - Women in Bangla Literature], an edited three-volume anthology of works by male and female writers from early Bengal to modern times. These massive collections were compiled within the space of about two and a half years and were driven by her desire to learn about the place of women in Bengali literature through the ages. In addition to the various representations of women, Akhtar also found that, contrary to common belief, women did have access to education to a certain extent during the Middle Ages.

Given the diversity of their content and historical and contemporary perspectives, Akhtar's novels have contributed significantly to Bangla literature. In her works, Akhtar consistently attempts to provide a viewpoint that challenges norms, resulting in insightful renditions of common, but unnoticed or ignored, social experiences. Her first novel, *Palabar Path Nei* [No Escape Route], for example, is the story of two friends, financially independent women, haunted by sexual harassments at home or abroad. One eventually settles for a married life while the other moves abroad for higher studies, rejecting the traditional gender role as wife or mother. Unfortunately, neither has a happy ending - one's life ending in suicide, the other forced to re-examine her life - but, as Akhtar comments, "explicit feminist concerns are to be found in my first novel" (Munim, "Voicing the Sacrificial Scapegoat").

Akhtar's second novel, *Talaash*, received much critical acclaim on publication. In addition to its English translation as *The Search*, the book has been translated into Korean by Seung-hee Jeon and Farhana Shashi, and was awarded the Asian Literary Prize in 2020 at the third Asian Literature Festival. *Talaash* is a fictional study of women who were raped during Bangladesh's 1971 War of Liberation, the Birangonas, so named to denote their heroism in tolerating the brutal torture of the Pakistani Occupation Army. Akhtar, however, does not present the common idealized narrative of heroism and patriotism. Rather, according to novelist Kim Nam-il, member of the Asian Literary Prize award committee, the book is "one of the greatest feminist anti-war docu-novels of our time" ("Shaheen Akhtar Wins"). Akhtar was inspired to write this novel during an oral history project when she met many Birangonas. The oral history project, conducted in 1996-1999 by Ain o Shalish Kendra and edited by Akhtar *et al.*, was later published by UPL as *Rising from the Ashes: Women's Narratives of 1971*.

During her work on *Sati o Swatantora*, Akhtar came across a Noakhali *pala gaan* [ballad] called "Chowdhury'er Lorai" [Chowdhury's Battle] in "Noakhali'r Lokonatya" [Folk Plays of Noakhali]. This story became material for her third novel, *Shokhi Rongomala*. The story of the Zamindar Chowdhury and his lower caste mistress, Rongomala, has its roots in a southern Bangladeshi legend and is a piece of historical fiction. Rongomala is killed but she has, by this time, forged a connection with the Zamindar's wife, Phuleshwari, and ironically becomes her refuge and source of strength in troubled times. The relationships between the women show a formation of sisterhood, and while the death of Rongomala, as

Akhtar describes it, “unfolds issues like class, caste, and gender”, the novel also portrays several strong women – Shumitra, the queen matriarch, and Heera Dashi, the high-ranking palace maid, who, “despite their confinement, prove themselves to be quite brave” (Akhtar, “From *Palabar Path Nei*”) and play key roles in determining the fate of the fiefdom.

Moyur Shinghashon, another piece of historical fiction, is named after the famous Peacock Throne commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century. The novel explores the complexities of royal intrigues with Shah Shuja, the Mughal Prince and Subehdar of undivided Bengal, as the protagonist. Shah Shuja loses his throne to his younger brother and has to flee. He finds shelter in Arakan (present-day Rakhine State in Myanmar), where he and his entire family are murdered. Despite its broad canvas, intricate plot details help to establish the human side of the characters and make connections between the distant past and the present. In addition, the novel provides insight into the harems of the palace and the lives of the women there. So, while the novel is centred on a male protagonist, Akhtar manages to bring women into focus as well.

Ashukhi Din is set against the backdrop of the Partition of Bengal and a decade riddled with the chaos of World War II, the famine of 1943, and riots. The arbitrary demarcations of religion created grounds for complicated relationships and history, the results of which persist to this day. Like most of Akhtar’s works, *Ashukhi Din* is woman-centric, with two female protagonists. However, unlike her previous novels, this novel does not focus on gender inequalities. Rather, the plot centres on relationships. The protagonists belong to different generations and are separated by their geographical locations. Their connection is forged when Sabina, a journalist, reads Anita Sen’s Diary and discovers that her father and Anita’s brother had fought together against the British in the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army).

Akhtar’s latest novel, *Eksho Ek Raater Golpo*, is told from the perspective of the family members of an Islamist extremist. Using a terrorist attack on a restaurant by an international Islamist organization as the backdrop, the novel examines the psychology of an extremist, his development and rise, and the impact that his choice of suicidal missions has on his family members, the horrific pain they have to endure.

Unlike the vast canvases of her novels, Akhtar’s short stories centre, appropriately, on the daily, contemporary experiences of women, particularly in the city. Despite this seemingly narrow concentration, however, Akhtar’s stories cover a wide range of characters – all of whom are marginalized, some doubly or triply so. Akhtar writes a lot of these characters from her experience as a single woman in the big city. In “From *Palabar Poth Nei* to *Ashuki Din*: My Fiction”, she comments that, “[a]t the beginning, my personal experiences were reflected acutely in my stories in the form of a freedom-loving woman’s anger and frustration over a society which is extremely biased against women”. This is true of both her novels and her short stories.

In addition to highlighting gender inequalities, Akhtar focuses on different minorities and some taboo topics. “Astaan” [Home], for example, is the story of a female masseuse from a poor, rural background, who dreams of owning a piece of land and giving her orphaned son a better future. In “Abaro Prem Ashche” [Once Again Love], Akhtar portrays a *hijra*, or what is now known as the third gender, character to reflect on how this group is treated. Child marriage and homosexuality are addressed in “Bhalobashar Poridhi” [The Limits of Love] – the latter a taboo topic in Bangladeshi society.

Women from different spheres of life as well as their varied experiences are neatly woven into the fabric of Akhtar’s work. The struggles and discrimination faced by single young women in the city are the subjects of several stories, like “Sheesh” [Whistle], “Boner Shonge Amarloke” [To Paradise], and “Modhuchandrima Raater Golpo” [The Story of a Moonlit Night]. These women are outcast from their families because of their dreams and ambitions. Akhtar focuses on women in all stages of life, however – “Taj Mahal” depicts the experiences of a widow who refuses to mourn in the conventional and socially acceptable manner; the experiences of an older woman going through menopause are addressed in “Mrs. Chowdhury’er Punorjonmo” [The Rebirth of Mrs. Chowdhury]; and “Ma” highlights the plight of a twelve-year-old house maid. The “bua” or house maid, a common fixture of urban households, also features in several of Akhtar’s stories such as “Pushpobag Abashik Elaka” [Pushpobag Residential Area] and “Buri Bua, Ami, o Alsatian” [The Old Maid, I, and the Alsatian]. The life of prostitutes also finds a place in Akhtar’s repertoire in stories like “Onamni” [Nameless] and “Diner Ruposhi” [The Beauty of the Day]. While in “Shaap, Shwami, Ashalota, o Amra” [Snakes, Husbands, Ashalota, and Us], Akhtar portrays a lesbian relationship, yet another subject not commonly found in Bangladeshi literature.

As in *Talaash*, some of Akhtar’s short stories also centre on the Liberation War of Bangladesh in order to bring to light some of the ways in which women have been side-lined – in “Aro Emon Raat Chhilo” [Other Nights Like These], a woman is betrayed and rejected by the men who use her; “Amirjaan Bibi’r Shongbordhona” [The Reception of Amirjaan Bibi] is an incredible story about four freedom fighters who had been raped and tortured by the Pakistani Occupation Army during the war, but remained forgotten when they needed help the most in the aftermath; and in “Tini Guro Moricher Byabohar Janten” [She Knew the Use of Powdered Pepper], Akhtar uses a tongue-in-cheek narrative to comment on the erasure of women from the historical narrative of the 1971 Liberation War.

Without delving into politics but deeply affected by its machinations, Akhtar is also haunted by the condition of stateless people and reflects on political situations that have led to the displacement of many. “Shobuj Passport” [The Green Passport], for example, is based on a Bihari family in Bangladesh. Ahmed, the protagonist, born and raised in the squalor of a Bihari camp, is enthusiastic to receive his Bangladeshi passport. His excitement, however, is dubious because it does not stem from the satisfaction of having gained a marker of his citizenship but, rather, a means of escape to India, to his ancestors’ homeland in Chhapra, Bihar.

“Aloukik Chchori” [The Magic Staff] was triggered by the Rohingya crisis of 2017. Touched by the plight of the tortured Rakhine people who fled their homeland due to persecution, Akhtar crafts this story as a parallel to the story of Moses. The protagonist, aptly named Musa, a young boy fleeing with his grandmother, finds himself alone in a refugee camp by the Naf River, prey to drug peddlers and human traffickers. The situation reflects a 2022 UNICEF report that states that almost sixty per cent of the refugees were children in danger of exploitation. The story is heart-wrenching and typical of Akhtar’s focus on portrayals of injustice.

Akhtar is a voice against inequalities and discrimination. She writes about social ills, especially those afflicting women, irrespective of their class, status, education, family background, situation, or age. Her range, however, is not limited to women alone. With a view to unveiling social problems, Akhtar ensures that her works cover a gamut of experiences and characters, always substantiated by adequate research. Soft-spoken and humble, Akhtar writes with empathy, gently coaxing readers’ awareness, bringing forth lives that often go unnoticed or are taken for granted, thereby lending her works depth and leaving the reader with much to ruminate on.

Akhtar’s works have been translated into English, Korean, and German, and are published from Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Kolkata, India. For her contributions to literature, Akhtar received the “Sera Bangali 2014 Award” [The Best Bengali 2014 Award] from ABP Ananda, India’s foremost Bengali news channel, and, in 2015, the Bangla Academy Award for Literature.

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