

## Book Review

Tanwi Nandini Islam, *Bright Lines: A Novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015, 296 pp., ISBN 97801431231322

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Tanwi Nandini Islam's debut novel, *Bright Lines* (2015) published by Penguin Books, explores gender identity from the perspective of immigrants in their search for home. This novel, a finalist for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, the Brooklyn Eagles Literary Prize, and the Edmund White Debut Fiction Award, uses 2003 Brooklyn and Bangladesh as settings to explore the notions of gender and home. Both concepts emerge in this novel as fluid, changing their characteristics depending on certain situations. As an American of Bangladeshi descent, the author is in a unique position to describe the inner turmoil of the apparently settled and mundane lives of the immigrants in Brooklyn. Drawing on the knowledge of her own roots and culture as a Bangladeshi descendant and her experience of growing up in small Midwestern and Southern cities, Nandini shapes the characters of this novel.

The twenty-eight chapters that make up the book's two sections—"Girls on the Move" and "The Black Forest"—are separated by an epilogue. The Saleem family—which includes pharmacy owner Anwar Saleem, salon owner Hasi, and their daughter Charu—is the central focus of the story. The protagonist of this book is Ella, a twenty-year-old orphan, the Saleem family's adopted daughter. Ella is naturally introverted and suffers from hallucinations that appear in bright lines.

Two decades ago, the Saleem family fled their troubled home in Bangladesh and made the journey to New York with hopes of starting over. Each of its members have pasts and secrets that they tried to keep hidden from each other. The advent of Maya, a Muslim cleric's runaway daughter, into the Saleems' household, acts as a catalyst in the transformation of Ella. Later on she would come out of the shell of gendered identity attributed to her from birth and decide to be El.

Later, this greatly impacts the rest of the characters, especially Charu. This rebellious teen is always the source of joy and trouble for her parents. She is a fashionista and possesses a very charming personality. Ella's infatuation towards her is never realized by Charu; however, Ella has always been her protector and friend till the end of the story. After their family trip to Bangladesh, a noticeable change is evident in Charu, which momentarily separates her from Ella. However, as the story proceeds, we notice they remain close, and Charu becomes more mature because of her understanding of Ella.

The author aims to portray the unseen story of a South Asian Muslim household, where the characters are not tainted by the stereotypes and conventions of the South Asians, predominantly Muslims. Rather, they are complicated, humane, and, in many cases, break all the established taboos that have been imposed on these communities.

The author calls into question many of the popular stereotypes about South Asian Muslims living abroad. Bangladeshi families, in particular, resonate strong familial ties emanating from diverse rituals and celebrations that are usually religious in nature. The author rather portrays a daring, modern, and more flexible picture through the Saleems, who still nurture a strong bond with each other and try to foster the fundamentals of their culture and religion unapologetically in the way they are.

Throughout the novel, the author focuses on the individuality of each of the characters, who constantly contend with the religious and social standards of their roots. The failure to maintain societal and religious norms becomes visible occasionally as other characters, such as when the Muslim cleric and Anwar's brother Aman point out the flaws in parenting and lifestyle of the Saleems. When Aman started to live for a while with the Saleem family after his divorce, he constantly criticized the dressing sense of Charu calling it 'not modest'.

However, a more modern, accommodating approach is advocated by the author through the characters of Anwar, Charu, Ella, and Maya. Especially the younger generation emerges with a striking and simultaneously controversial amalgamation of a modern lifestyle and sexuality, which is in contrast with typical Bangladeshi philosophy. Not only the young one, even Anwar and Hashi welcome many of the modern perspectives. That is why when Aman criticizes Charu's off shoulder dress, Anwar defends his daughter by saying she looks nice in it. Similarly, Hashi, a hairdresser, gives Ella a boyish pixie cut and even loves to see her in the attire of her brother Rizwan, the biological father of Ella. Both of them are quite friendly towards their daughters. Hashi sometimes objects to certain conducts of Charu. However, in comparison to Maya's father Sallah, Anwar's brother Aman or the typical Bangladeshi households they are more accepting and liberal.

The main concern of the novel is to find a home, or, in other words, to find belonging. Because the idea of identity, home or belonging is less concrete and more made of nostalgic memories. The place that they have left behind and the place where they have settled in both continuously clash with each other. This constant tug at the heartstrings makes them wonder about their homes which are left behind, and the identity now they have gained. The outcome is that they can neither relate properly to the past identity nor can be satisfied with the new one.

Ella, the adopted child in the family, faces this dilemma more tangibly than others, and her inner battle about sexuality continues to torment her. Going through the phases of loss and trauma, Ella finally recognizes herself as a male, a *swadhin* or ultimately liberated, and shortens her name to 'El'. This long-cherished freedom emerges when El accepts her cultural and sexual identities. Thus, *Bright Lines* becomes a multi-voiced coming-of-age novel dealing with generational trauma and the baggage of transnational struggles.

The book is written in a compelling style, which makes the characters comprehensible through their complexities despite their intricacies. The emotive, cultural, and religious issues are dealt with from a modern perspective, which clearly is the author's voice and experience resonating through the words, decisions, and actions of the characters.

Undoubtedly, such a take on immigrant Muslim Bangladeshis is underrepresented in the mainstream literature. Sexual exploration and identification, as well as the flexible/ambiguous representation of Islam in the Western and South Asian communities, are challenging. The author strives to strike a proper balance in this case. Another strong point of this novel is its use of aesthetic language applied scatteredly throughout the novel to describe nature. Whenever Nandini describes the garden of Anwar, the apothecary, the planting bed, seeds or flowers and surrounding nature - it becomes vivid.

However, the focus on sexuality has unfortunately made the author overlook the cultural representation of the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants, in general. Rather, it overarchingly focuses on a liberal, accepting, and forgiving family that is more open to change. This scenario goes well with the drawn characters but doesn't represent the majority. Also, certain flows of the events are rushed and abrupt. For instance, the scene of sex between Charu and a typical village boy right after the funeral of her parents does not match up with the sentiment and characteristics of Charu, who is rebellious but extremely fond of her parents. Sexuality and having sex are sometimes presented as the major issue, which sometimes misrepresents or undervalues many characters like Charu or Maya, who could have been stronger characters.

Overall, this novel significantly contributes to representing a portion of the immigrants living with multiple identities and homes yet yearning for homes to belong to and identities to have. Although it addresses a more liberal and modern perspective to explore the transnational and transgenerational search for home and identity, the fresh approach of the author is undoubtedly praiseworthy.

## Author Information

Sanjida Afrin is a Lecturer in the Department of English at Chittagong Independent University. Her research interests include geocriticism, memoryscape, postcolonialism, ecofeminism, and identity theory. Scholarly journals like the *BAIUST Academic Journal* and the *Journal of African Languages and Literary Studies (JoALLS)* have published her research articles.

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