

SEAGULL BOOKS

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FICTION

Mahasweta Devi

Nabarun Bhattacharya

Rachel Shihor

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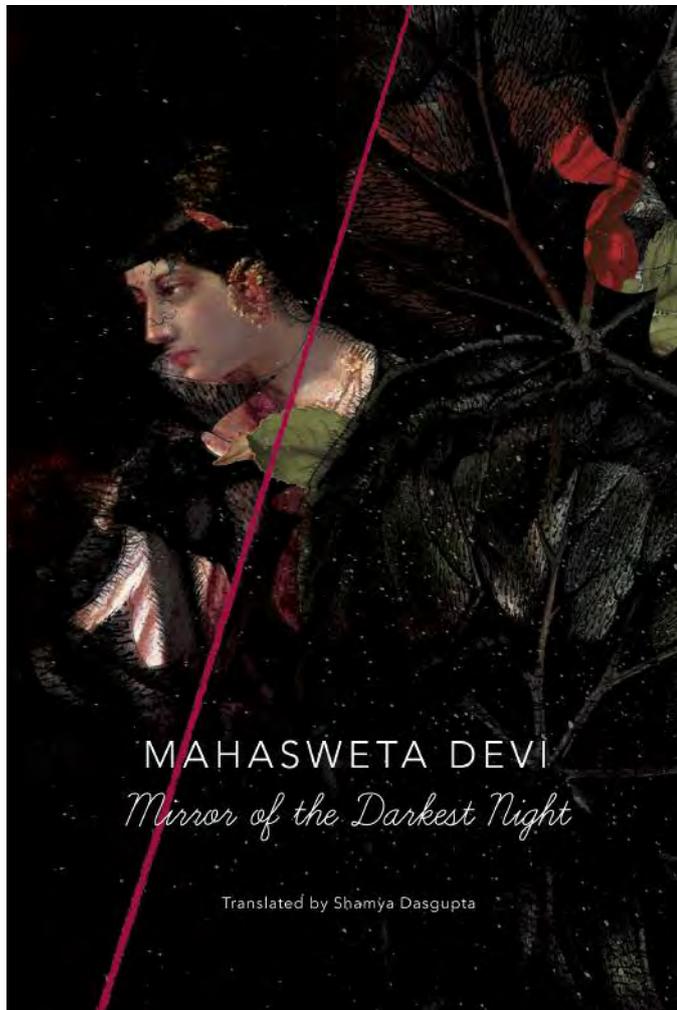
Hasan Azizul Huq

MAHASWETA DEVI

Mirror of the Darkest Night

In her best writing, she captured not only our usual indifference in the face of injustice but the difficulty of precisely articulating what oppression is. That we might not have the right words is the very reason that Mahasweta Devi is still worth reading.

The Paris Review



MAHASWETA DEVI (1926–2016) was one of India’s foremost literary figures—a writer and social activist in equal right. Author of numerous novels, plays, essays and short stories, she received the Jnanpith Award in 1996 and the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997 for her ‘compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for tribal peoples a just and honourable place in India’s national life’.

IT’S THE MID TO LATE 1800S. In the backdrop, the British have banished Wajid Ali Shah, the nawab of Awadh, to Calcutta. In the foreground, to the sound of the soulful melody and the strains of the sarangi, the mercurial courtesan Laayl-e Aasman plays a dangerous game of love, loyalty, deception and betrayal. Bajrangi and Kundan, bound by their love for each other and for Laayl-e, struggle to keep their balance. Spanning generations and cities, the scale of the novel sweeps up the melancholy Shireen and the devil Nissar, the crime lord of Banaras, Babulal, his henchman Bheem, and Emily, Hyderabad, Ganeshilal and many other remarkable characters into a heady mix.

A work of great literary worth, the novel is almost an aberration in the oeuvre of Mahasweta Devi, known for her activism and hard-hitting indictment of social inequalities. *Mirror of the Darkest Night* is a rare glimpse into Devi’s talent for telling a fantastic, romantic and thrilling tale.

FICTION
INDIA

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENAGLI
BY SHAMYA DASGUPTA

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 2018
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MAHASWETA DEVI, *Mirror of the Darkest Night*

AN EXCERPT

Laayl-e had never told anyone what had happened. The news had spread through the city. Those who'd known Laayl-e had been surprised. Those who hadn't known her were sad. Curious too.

Slowly, but surely, the news reached the exiled nawab's house in Metiabruz. *Have you heard? Laayl-e . . . Laayl-e Aasmaan, the same . . . have you heard about Laayl-e?*

The British had sent Wajid Ali Shah, the last nawab of Awadh, to Metiabruz when they took over his kingdom.

He was sitting in his room, the smoking pipe in his hand.

Who will give him the news?

Eleven o'clock in the morning.

As you cross the threshold, you think you're back in Lakhnau. Behind you lies the Calcutta of 1865, smoke, dust, dirt, noise, an orgy of people and movement.

But once you cross over, you can sigh with relief. On one side, a set of small rooms. Full of writers trying to imitate the nawab's poems and songs. Perhaps a young poet with an Urdu couplet, hoping for an audience with the nawab. The ancient horseman of the Awadh cavalry lovingly feeding fistfuls of gram to his ancient horse. Tailors stitching caps. Embroidering. The white threads of the chikan-work. The gold threads of the zari.

Water splashing in the fountain. Gardeners busy in the rose garden. Young servant boys feeding the bulbuls flown in from China and the lamps. In the baithak-khana, some voices singing, some hands stringing their sitars. Somewhere an old maulvi copying out the Quran.

Sometimes, in the large room, the lights blaze, the rugs unfurl. Singers come from Pathuriaghata and Jorasanko. Music lovers come in their palanquins and Landaus. The evening begins with Bhairavi, the nawab's favourite raga. But the nawab cannot listen to it any longer. *Babul mora naihar chhooto hi jaaye . . .* and the nawab's eyes grow bloodshot, then glisten with unshed tears. That song, as though written with a pen dipped in the blood from his heart. A heart breaking with the sorrow of leaving his beloved Lakhnau.

The nawab was lonely. His heart was heavy with pain. But who could share his pain? No one.

When he heard the news, his pipe slipped from his hand. It was an unexpected blow, stunning the elderly man.

'Who—who has brought this news?' was all he could say.

Then with a wave of the hand, the messenger was dismissed.

For a long time he sat there in silence. Then, softly: 'What will happen now? My Ishwarlal's gharana—whom did she leave it to? Whom?'

Everyone in the mansion was astonished.

'So, then, were the nawab and Laayl-e Aasmaan . . .'

'They could have been. He'd send for her time and again.'

'Her beauty was like a flame . . . maybe the nawab . . .'

So many people, they said so many things.

But they were much relieved when the nawab finally spoke. No, not for Laayl-e. But for her song. It was the death of the song that had sent the grief coursing through his heart.

Wajid Ali Shah remained lost in thought.

Thinking not of Laayl-e Aasmaan. But of Ishwarlal. His childhood friend, like whom he had heard no one else sing. Ishwarlal loved Mehroon, Laayl-e's mother. And as a gift of his love, he gave her his style of song, his gaayaki.

'What have you done, Ishwarlal,' Wajid Ali Shah had raged. 'Who have you gone and gifted your gaayaki to?'

'Ali jahaan, I have gifted it to the one I love.'

'Ishwarlal, then you must marry her. Your child will carry on the tradition. Oh, but that's not possible. You can't marry her—you're Hindu.'

'Ali jahaan, I could have left my religion for her. But she doesn't want to marry me. But why do you worry? I will give the gaayaki to Mehroon's daughter. She will keep it for the future.'

'Her daughter? Who?'

'Laayl-e. Laayl-e Aasmaan.'

Laayl-e. Twenty-two-year-old Laayl-e. In her voice was kept secure Ishwarlal's gaayaki. Like a decanter preserves precious and priceless wine for years, Laayl-e had preserved the gaayaki. Within her.

That Laayl-e was gone?

Laayl-e was gone. The decanter was broken. Ishwarlal's unique and incomparable gaayaki was lost for ever.

Wajid Ali Shah shook his head.

He picked up his pipe. And thought with a sigh, 'Oh most merciful, compassionate Lord, send for me now. This body has borne much contentment, such sorrow. Now I must go to you. Let this body turn to dust. One by one, they all go away. And I grow more and more alone.'

'Does anyone know how she died?' he asked a little later.

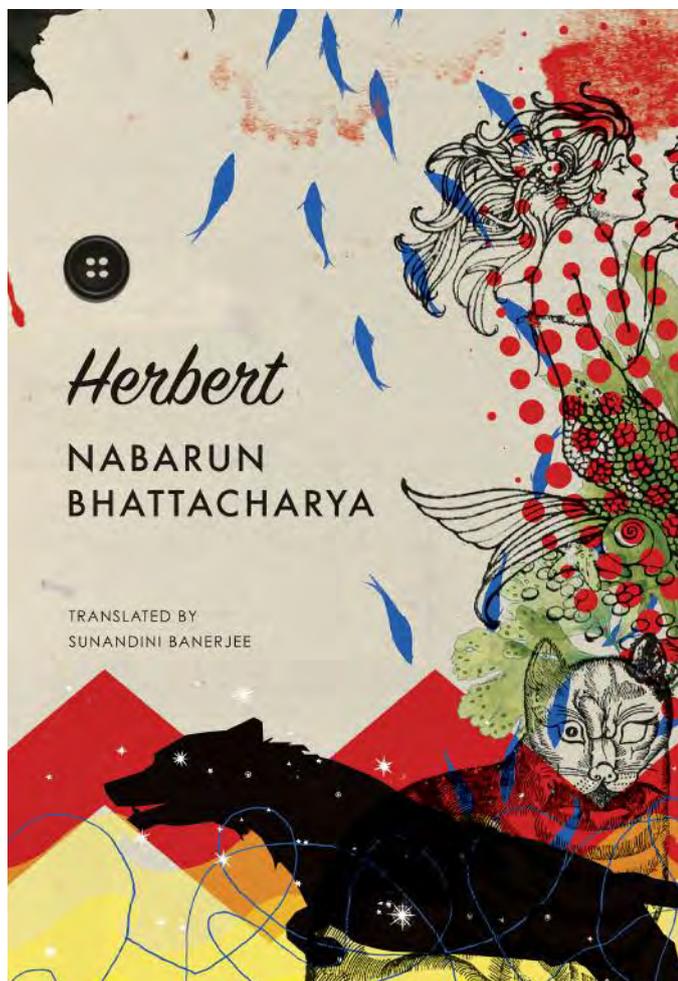
'No,' he said again, almost at once, 'Don't tell me. Let it be.'

NABARUN BHATTACHARYA

Herbert

[He] was one of Bengal's most subversive voices, radical in his politics, forever anti-establishment and outspoken in his views. . . . His works challenged the genteel core of his readers, leading them through the city's underbelly, speaking to them in a language that mocked their middle-class sensibilities and comfort in the status quo.

Premankur Biswas, *Indian Express*



NABARUN BHATTACHARYA (1948–2014) was celebrated as a cult figure in Bengal for his radical aesthetics, and often compared to Russian anti-establishment writer Mikhail Bulgakov. He was the author of several novels, short stories, poems and essays. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Bankim Purashkar for the original Bengali edition of *Herbert* (1993), which was also adapted into an award-winning feature film.

MAY 1992. IN RUSSIA, Boris Yeltsin is showing millions of communists the spectre of capitalism. Yugoslavia is disintegrating. United Germany is confused about whom to include in its team—East? Or West? Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania—communism is collapsing all around. And in a corner of old Calcutta, Herbert Sarkar, sole proprietor of a company that brings messages from the departed to their loved ones on earth, is bleeding himself to death. But why?

As we try to unravel the mystery, Herbert's story unfolds—surreal, haunting, painful, beautiful and astonishing in turn—from his early orphan years to the tumultuous Naxalite times of the 1970s to the explosive events following his suicide. Meanwhile, beyond his fascination with death and the dead, what shines through is Herbert's ferociously tender love for the city of Calcutta, for the underdog and the unloved, and for the city's sky, by night and by day, marvelled at from the grimy street or the rooftop terrace.

Nabarun Bhattacharya's groundbreaking novel, a landmark in Bengali literature, is now available in this daring new translation by Sunandini Banerjee, who recreates in English the madness of the original language, which paints an unconventional, uncompromising and unforgettable portrait of a fascinating character and a plaintive city.

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENAGLI
BY SUNANDINI BANERJEE

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5 x 8 inches, 156 pages

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**FICTION
INDIA**

NABARUN BHATTACHARYA, *Herbert*

AN EXCERPT

When he was 14, Herbert had an extraordinary experience. One afternoon, rummaging through the heap of old books in that last room, he discovered an old tin trunk. In it lay a human skull and some long-ish bones. No one in this family tree's any tendril or tangent had ever studied medicine. Nor magic. Unprepared for the sight of them, Herbert had at first been terrified by the skull, the eyeless sockets, the teeth. But in time, time and time again, Herbert would open the trunk and stare at the skull and bones. Try to imagine the man they had been. No matter who, an overwhelming sadness for him would engulf Herbert.

Two years later, Herbert put the skull and bones into a little cloth bag, and then went to the Old Ganga behind Keoratala Crematorium and threw them into the water.

He used to store his own things in the trunk, later. Later, his money too.

After immersing the remains of that unfortunate unknown, Herbert was filled with an intoxicating attraction for death. He would feel that he was drowning in the darkness of those empty eye sockets, that all around him spun a Ferris wheel of stars or a furious flutterment of fireflies.

Soon after, he began to read and reread those aforementioned two most important books.

Soon after, his friend Khororobi committed *suicide*. Herbert was 19. The boy had a khor-kutter, a straw-cutting machine, at home, so his friends had stuck 'khor' before his name, the name his parents had chosen for their son, Sun. Robi. Hence, Khororobi. Straw Sun. Khororobi was a good boy. Who had fallen deeply in love with the short Jaya from the neighbourhood behind theirs. Every evening, Jaya and a gaggle of girlfriends would step out for a walk, come over and chat with the girls on this side. That Khororobi would begin to act honey-funny whenever he saw Jaya, that everyone knew. Everyone also knew that he didn't have the balls—he'd never dare to venture out of their gang. But that fateful Ashtami day, what madness filled his head, that only he knew. Elbowing his way through the crazy crowds, he strode into Jaya's neighbourhood Durga Puja and handed her a slip of paper and one of those teeny-tiny fountain pens that had then flooded the market. On the paper was scrawled in a crow-leg-and-stork-leg script: 'Jaya, an offering at your devine feet from a humble devotee. Yours, Robi.'

The local boys grab-nabbed him red-handed. Jaya sped-fled back home. Khororobi somehow struggled free. The scuffle had ripped apart his new shirt. That night, Jaya's uncle came to have a word at Khororobi's house. The two neighbourhoods grew dense with hostility. Nabami, Dashami—Khororobi was AWOL. Then, the strains of the idol immersions not yet past when, in the late afternoon of

the day after, a hue and cry and why-why-why. Khororobi had been found. Floating in the wall-encircled Corporation pond. Dead.

Khororobi's corpse floated face down near the water's western edge, floated in water two-men deep, floated and bobbed and swayed and rocked. On the shore stood all the neighbourhood boys, stood Herbert. The sunlight shone on the water, made it a little transparent, one could see beneath the surface a waggle of waterweeds and then the deep green of the moss thickening into darkness. On the shore, a bicycle. Someone holds out a shaft of bamboo. Two boys from the swimming club get into the water. A prod from the bamboo upturns Khororobi and sets him floating away from the diving board and into murky waters. The sun is swiftly sliding. The police have arrived. Striding to the pond, the sergeant asks, 'Corpse come up?' No one answers. The swimmers have reached Khororobi. But as soon as they touch him, he floats away, bobs away on the backs of many little waves. Then each boy swims to one side and grabs a fistful of shoulder shirt. Khororobi is finally caught. Then they kick and kick their way to shore, and the water stretches taut and tight Khororobi's full head of hair.

Herbert looks at him by the dying afternoon light and thinks that Khororobi is coming back as a dutiful and duly obedient school of fish.

That scene, it could have been a photograph.

Although by now it would have yellowed, corner-nibbled and slur-blurred with time. Yet, for a hundred years hence, and a hundred years more, by the light of the moon, in the mists of a winter morning, Khororobi and his love will remain afloat on those still waters of death. Around him will twist and tumble mermaids, the ones who cry but whose tears you cannot see.

*

'My name is Herbert! I'm a tit. You've seen a tit. Now see a tat.'

'On the velvet greens of grass and flower, houri-fairies prance and play.'

'Kite, *aeroplane, balloon*, broom, man, parachute, bird—they all fall down. Yet first they rise. This also rises. This also falls.'

'If man is 1, then 0 is dead man. Man + dead man = 1 + 0 = 1 = Khororobi.'

'Water's riddle in cranny and crack
Fate's flight of fancy in saree edged with black.'

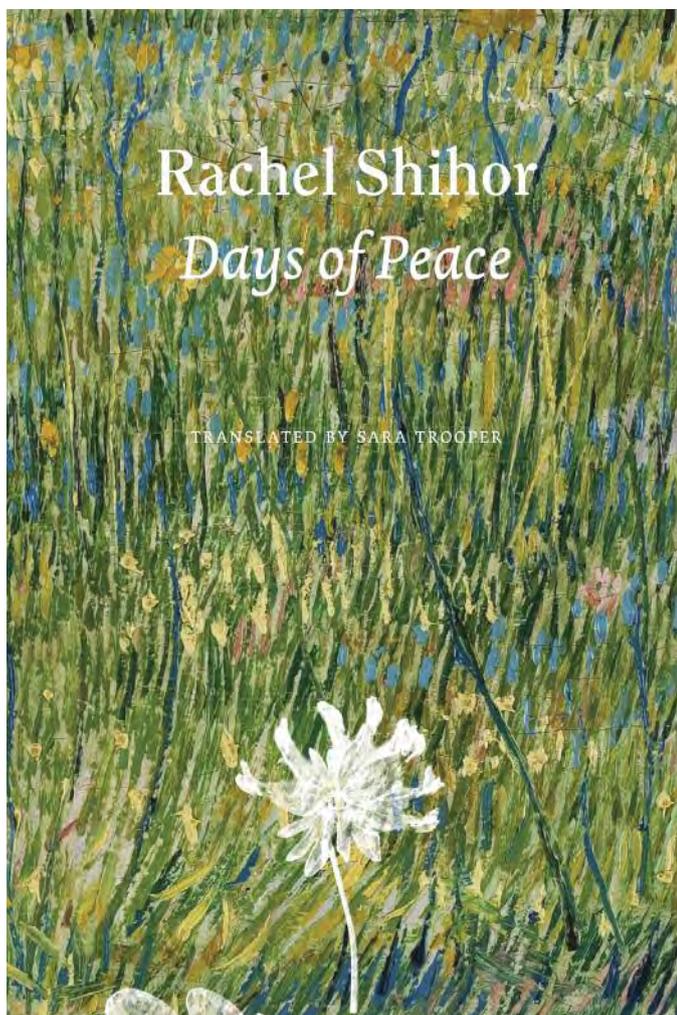
—Herbert

RACHEL SHIHOR

Days of Peace

There is no question that she is a great writer . . . only a master could make such originality feel inevitable. The only question is why so few people have had the chance to read her.

Nicole Krauss, author of *The History of Love*



RACHEL SHIHOR has taught philosophy at Tel Aviv University and is an accomplished editor, working for several academic publishers. She has published both fiction and works of scholarship. Her two published novels are *The Vast Kingdom* (2005) and *The Tel Avivians* (2006), and her short stories have appeared regularly in various literary magazines, including *Granta*. *Stalin Is Dead* (2013) is her second work of fiction to be translated into English, and it will be followed by *Days of Peace* and *Yankinton*.

JERUSALEM. THE EARLY YEARS OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL. Naomi, a former architect from secular Tel Aviv, has just married Jochanan, a religious doctor who has emigrated from Sweden. We Naomi through 1950s Jerusalem, and meet a rich cast of characters, from an Arab beggarwoman in a park on a Sabbath afternoon to a professor of biblical archeology on a life-long quest to produce a hand-lettered edition of the Bible. Kaleidoscopic scenes of the city pass before us: a ritual bath, a wedding hall, carpentry workshops, bookstores, Hadassah Hospital, a former leper colony. As Naomi's marriage deteriorates, she travels to Poland, where the sorrow over losses of the Holocaust intertwines with her nostalgia for the early romance of her now-faded marriage. But as the drama unfolds in the divorce court back in Jerusalem, Naomi is on her ultimate search—to find her place in this historical city. Written in deceptively simple, almost conversational prose, *Days of Peace* is a poignant portrait of a great city and newborn nation as well as that of a young woman's quest to find herself.

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW
BY SARAH TROPPER

TO PUBLISH NOVEMBER 2019

5 x 8 inches, 176 pages

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FICTION
ISRAEL

RACHEL SHIHOR, *Days of Peace*

AN EXCERPT

I do not know how, but I found myself married to a man in Jerusalem. I had thought of that before. I had had a flash of prophesy. And now, when events occurred, they did so as if on their own accord.

On the other side of our wall is the apartment of a secular woman. The only non-religious woman in a building that was not large, seven or eight apartments, entered through a courtyard by way of a winding stone path emerging from the foot of a stairway. Every night, or perhaps only two or three times a week, women in scant clothing, their hair loose, would gather in her home, they, like her, secular. They had come to play cards. But before the game, they would sit a while and chat, and the hostess would serve them coffee and cookies. How my heart yearned to sit among them in those few afternoon hours in which my husband left the house and went to one of the synagogues near our home, Deborah's Tent or Nehamah's Tent, to study Torah among men like himself.

This neighbor, whose name I did not know, as the inhabitants of the building used derogatory epithets when they spoke of her—in their minds the words 'secular' and 'gentile' were derogatory—I knocked on her door that time, and she told me her name and I too was included in the familiar womanly conversation, the likes of which I heard almost nightly from the other side of my wall, when my husband was not with me, and I began to relax. Come again, come every time, the voices trailed me as I left before the game began. And I remembered that I had often heard the sound of the radio on the Sabbath from that apartment through my wall, and knew that my husband would never allow it. Indeed, his face darkened when I told him of my visit with the neighbor. Unbeknownst to me, the other residents of the building had decided that she was not to be spoken with, and the sound of the radio had been in defiance of this decision or perhaps the reason for it, I do not know which. This woman is a rebel, said my husband. He spoke loudly, but did not shout. Lest she hear, I thought to myself. Let us not be the odd ones out among the inhabitants of this building, he said, and I consented. Never again did I knock at the door of the secular woman's home when my husband was out at his studies, and she barely responded to my faint greetings when I happened to pass her on the stairs, as if she had foreseen it all. And I remembered that her name was Helen.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings. Each morning rays of sun light my face and I am not accustomed to these as my previous apartment was in perpetual darkness, whereas here the old cord for the

shutters has torn and the shutters can no longer be raised and lowered. The sun floods the room with light each morning, banishing the darkness, as my husband opens the windows and lets in the cool air and distant noise. I have become an early riser. But my husband does not fix the cord for the shutter nor call in a repairman to do the job. My husband puts off little tasks and will not take care of the cord.

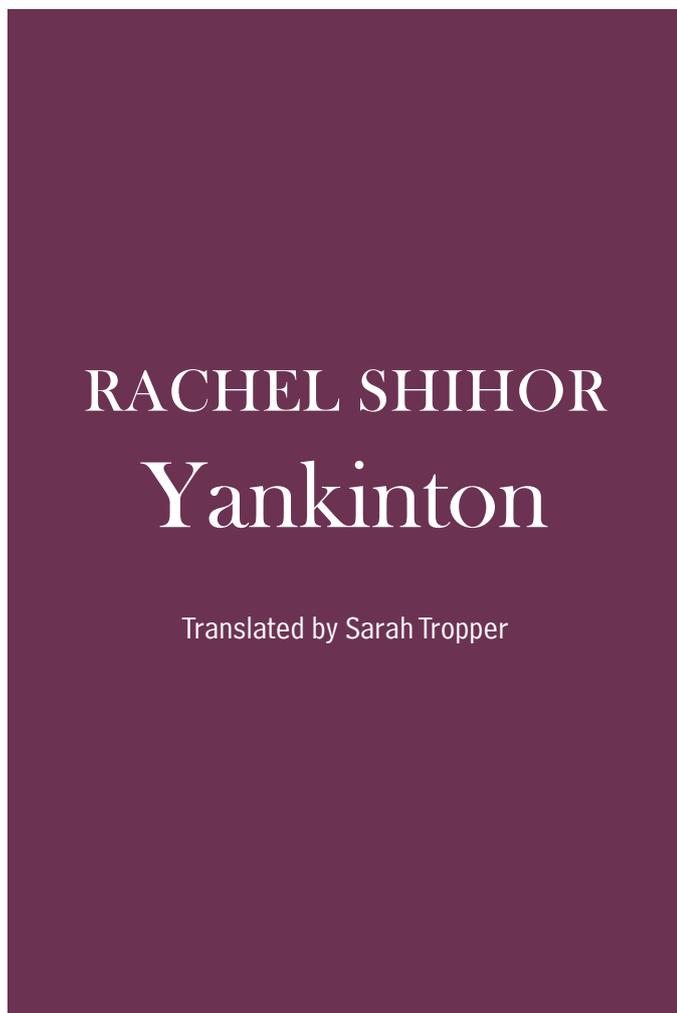
Two months have passed since my wedding, and I have yet to come to terms with being a married woman. My husband has given me a tiny room in the apartment, containing a closet, a small rug, a low table, and a couch. And at the top of the closet are carpets, rolled and neatly lined up, the likes of which I have never seen and which my husband did not roll out for me to view as he did not want to exert himself, and only confided to me his love of his carpets, as both an understanding of cultures and their histories and a sharp eye and fine taste were necessary for that love, along with other things which I knew not of, but I did not ask more, only sat on the couch, at my side a tape player into which I inserted cassettes that I had brought with me, and opened books in order to draw out questions and answers. And then, when my husband left—as he was occupied in those days with mending the worn-out collars of his shirts, and the tailor who had been widowed the year before had reopened his small workshop at the end of Palmach Street, and the way there was sunny even in those early autumn days, so my husband rolled up his shirts, seven or eight of them, and placed them in a cloth covering so he could carry them more easily under his arm on his walk to the tailor—I am at home looking about me: the apartment has three rooms besides the kitchen, and hanging on the walls are an assortment of pictures, among them a nude woman reclining upon her bedding. I was surprised that my husband, who was so strict about fulfilling the commandments, could keep in his rooms a picture of a woman lying naked, even if it was but a painting, and remembered an ancient Chinese fable in a book by Shai Agnon, in which the king's architect is swallowed up by a palace he had drawn for the king. Perhaps it was fear of the king that motivated him or perhaps he reasoned that it mattered not where the palace was so long as it swallowed him once and for all. Yet I recalled a time that one of my husband's relatives came to our home—one of the Orthodox of Jerusalem—my husband being a doctor. The man recounted his ailments. My husband directed him to one of the rooms, and they both sat on a couch beneath the picture of the reclining woman, the man discussing his maladies and my husband listening, neither commenting upon the picture, and I kept silent.

RACHEL SHIHOR

Yankinton

Shihor is the opposite of a misty-eyed writer. Her writing penetrates to the truth of the aches and anxieties all people share, though they must generally suffer them alone.

Quarterly Conversation



RACHEL SHIHOR has taught philosophy at Tel Aviv University and is an accomplished editor, working for several academic publishers. She has published both fiction and works of scholarship. Her two published novels are *The Vast Kingdom* (2005) and *The Tel Avivians* (2006), and her short stories have appeared regularly in various literary magazines, including *Granta*. *Stalin Is Dead* (2013) is her second work of fiction to be translated into English, and it will be followed by *Days of Peace* and *Yankinton*.

AS THE FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR recollects her life as an adolescent girl growing up in Tel Aviv in the 1940 and 50s, *Yankinton* emerges as a searing portrait of a scarred country populated by displaced people whose attempts to survive and to overcome their lot are imbued with both melancholy and humour. A rich and tightly woven tapestry with stories and themes criss-crossing one another, *Yankinton* is about the past, about bygone days, and yet, more than anything, about the present, about what it is to reflect on these bygone days and what it is to live them.

[Shihor dares] to ask what sustains a life when institutions designed to account for its meaning . . . are revealed to be inadequate and disingenuous, daring to ask what replaces them when all illusions and distractions have been stripped away. . . The essential thing is to have the courage and honesty to examine our lives with a clear and steady eye, and this is exactly the gift Shihor so gracefully offers us through her fiction.

Mona Gainer-Salim, *Asymptote*

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FICTION
ISRAEL

RACHEL SHIHOR, *Yankinton*

AN EXCERPT

In the long days of early summer, when the air had begun to shed its light, and the window panes, those not covered by gray blinds painted an opaque metallic color, showed us behind them only hollow tubes of pierced air like the eyes of one half-blind who sees nothing but grey dots on wide, turbid surfaces, I would remember, even against my will, the endless Sabbath afternoons of my childhood when the idleness of the long day still lingered even when the waning light no longer allowed me to read the open book on my lap, and I drew near a window to catch the rapidly disappearing light, and the letters on the page, like the eyes of a sightless person, became pierced with dark air holes until they turned into isolated dots which I could no longer read, and I angled my hand holding the page to catch the last vestiges of light, but my momentary sense of victory melted away rapidly with the light itself and, though I could still make out my mother's and father's faces, the darkness made their features seem stricter.

[. . .]

More than once, during the long summer days, Mrs. Yankinton came to us for one of her visits. It was easy to predict this lady's visits to other people's houses, particularly our house, because her daughter was my close friend, but presumably it was not easy for Mrs. Yankinton to go from house to house, between the homes of her daughter's friends, to ask if perhaps my Karni is here, so involved in playing that she forgot to come home? Certainly not easy during the burning hot summer days which lasted almost six months straight, but neither on stormy days when the blustery wind burned the faces of the few passersby and brought tears to their eyes. But climactic obstacles could not deter Mrs. Yankinton while her beloved daughter's wellbeing, if not her very life, was at stake, even if the woman did not inhabit a particularly powerful body – she was not thin but her legs remained as thin as they had been in her youth, and she was proud of this. More than once she showed me her legs and asked with obvious satisfaction: My legs are beautiful, aren't they? Her concern for her daughter could never be assuaged, for this is a kind of thirst which gives a person strength. And like her, Mr. Yankinton never ceased worrying about his daughter. It was enough for Karni to go on an innocent after-school visit to one of her many friends, since the two had agreed, while still at school, to meet on that day at 5:00 in the afternoon, and for her to neglect to inform her parents out of forgetfulness or weariness, to destroy Mr. and Mrs. Yankinton's peace of mind for all time, for if serenity is lost for even a moment, it will be found wanting forever and nothing can restore it to its former state.

And thus, even when they discovered that their fears were ungrounded this time, Mr. and Mrs. Yankinton's hearts whispered that perhaps next time their fears would not be

for nothing, and ultimately a day would surely come when their fears would not be for nothing, even if they would not live to witness such a day, and that small crack which was cut into their hearts for a moment, only to be smoothed over when the familiar footsteps were heard in the stairwell, would never knit together entirely; and like any repair, could gape open again on the day of the next disappearance, and thus Mr. and Mrs. Yankinton's souls would preserve the steadfast pain of people who suffer an irrevocable lack.

Mr. Yankinton Hebraicized his name, as many residents of the land of Israel did in those days, after he heard his daughter singing the Song of the Hyacinth (in Hebrew, *yankinton*) as she had learned it in nursery school. The song begins with the words, 'Nighttime, nighttime, the moon is watching,' and the father liked it immediately, finding in it a particular innocence which in his eyes was bound up with love for this land and love for his daughter, two loves entwined in his soul.

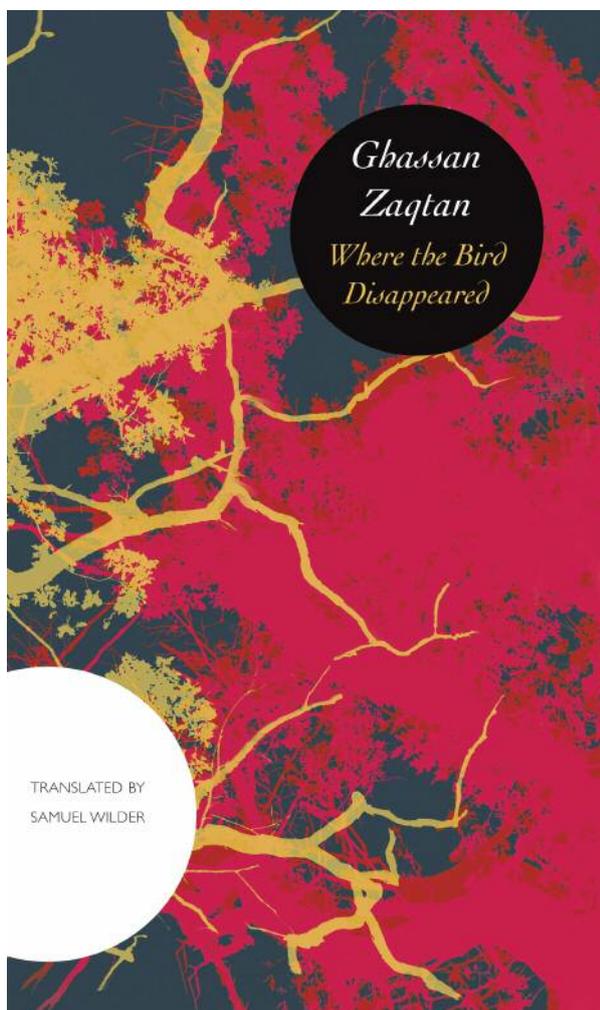
But in those days, proper Hebrew language was not in demand as much as it could have been, such that he accepted his baby daughter's pronunciation without checking it, and the flower which the moon watched remained *yankinton* in his ears and not *yakinton* as it is written in the dictionaries, and thus he recorded it at the Interior Ministry, and Mr. Yankinton, when he lingered in his room crowded with books and manuscripts—all Ze'ev Jabotinsky's speeches, waiting to be edited and readied for printing, as well as figurines and death masks of the leader who had passed away—he closed himself off from the outside world as long as his heart allowed him, up to the moment when he was overcome by a force which propelled him toward the window facing the street, where he opened the shutter which until then had darkened the interior of the high-ceilinged room, and thus he stood motionless, reading glasses in hand and gaze fixed on a random point across the street, along which passed hourly funeral processions of dead from the adjacent hospital. Thus he would stand, unable to do anything else, rooted to the spot while all his senses drowsed save that of sight, but this one remaining sense became preternaturally alert and sharpened, even though it could not announce the joyful news of his daughter's return. It was necessary that she first return, but Mr. Yankinton either refused to or perhaps could not admit this. His spirit could not accept that his daughter should be far away, lost, living her life without him in some unknown place of unknown character. Mr. Yankinton was left therefore standing in his place, hidden in the shadows of the room, trying to give himself over to a moment in time which had not yet come to pass, in which he would again see the figure of his wife towing his daughter after her across the street, downcast and guilty but found.

GHASSAN ZAQTAN

Where the Bird Disappeared

Zaqtan examines states of being in quotidian life with the patience and care of a jeweler.

Arts Fuse



TRANSLATED BY
SAMUEL WILDER

FICTION
PALESTINE

TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC
BY SAMUEL WILDER

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Born near Bethlehem, Palestinian poet, novelist and editor GHASSAN ZAQTAN has lived in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Tunisia. He is the author of numerous collections of poetry, a novel and a play, *The Narrow Sea*, which was honored at the 1994 Cairo Festival. His verse collection *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me*, translated by Fady Joudah, was awarded the Griffin Poetry Prize for 2013, and he was nominated for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in both 2014 and 2016. His name appeared for the first time in 2013 among the favourites to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

SET IN THE SURROUNDINGS of the Palestinian village of Zakariyya and weaving a narrative conveyed by the porousness of memory and precise sensory detail, *Where the Bird Disappeared* is a novel that explores the valences of myth, fantasy, personhood, and sacred space within the Palestinian historical present. It tells the story of the journeys and relationship of two figures of deep resonance for local myth and imagination, Yahya and Zakariyya, figures who live in the present but share identity with two saints bearing their names. As the work ranges through the contemporary to the near and distant past, reaching from pre-1948 Palestine to the present, the converging voices of the novel project a sacred geography that lies beyond and underneath the present state of their world. Like its predecessor *Describing the Past*, the novel is an arresting and profound projection of longing and sensual being-in-the-world set against an unflinchingly examined historical present.

GHASSAN ZAQTAN, *Where the Bird Disappeared*

AN EXCERPT

A defiant desire seized Yahya and led him to the ruins in the countryside, to caves and ancient graves carved in the hills, to valleys, woods and pathways branching out into the great hill.

It was a desire whose source he never knew that woke him from sleep and carried him away from the houses of the village and its four shrines, chanting like a moving tree.

His father could see no reason for this, even after so many attempts at understanding, so many consultations, so much pleading and argument. Ultimately, he had to accept that he was touched by the jinn. Everyone agreed to this with the same simplicity by which they accepted the appearance of the Tree of Yusuf and its transmigration from the Bulis Valley to the eastern entrance of the village, the brides of the jinn that coursed through the shrine of the prophet Zakariyya, and the ambulations of Persian soldiers in the cave of Our Wandering Lady which they protect from the dervishes that rise towards Jerusalem. They attributed a touch of sacredness to the tall boy, whose walk was crooked slightly with some slight inborn lameness. They accepted as part of life in the village that they might meet him sleeping in the woods covered in thorns, or wet with dew before the dawn prayer, or sitting before the great hill on a cold night with a black snake wrapping his arm and an anxious lizard in his palm, or letting a strange bird peck at thorns on his shoulder. It was simply part of the life of the village, like the light that appears on the Night of Power in the cave of Our Wandering Lady, the wailing that reaches from the monastery ruins on winter nights and the calls heard around the Salihi Shrine on feast-day mornings and the birthday of the Prophet.

He once confessed to him:

‘When it starts, I cannot stop, Zakariyya. It’s as if someone is calling me, leading me to the mountain trails, guiding the creatures to me. It goes ahead of me and takes me. Someone who looks like you, Zakariyya. I can almost touch him and see him. I can almost remember his voice.’

‘I cannot stop, Zakariyya, and no one believes me.’

‘I believe you, Yahya.’

He widened the places known to him without any goal in mind, met him in every direction and led him out alone. The cactus hideaway remained their secret. But he was filled with pride the first time Sara crept out, in her first appointment with Yahya.

He thought about Sara now, about how she insisted that first night that he swear on the holy book and the prophets Muhammad, Jesus and Moses, and then swear on all his dead, that he would never tell anyone. He thought about her enduring grief, her life that became a deep fissure of bad fortune.

The passage was narrow, barely wide enough for the two of them. Their bodies cleaved together. He felt her small breasts press against the length of his body. He was trying to leave the hideaway, to leave the place to the two of them. She had stretched into the passage and started crawling inside. Their eyes met for a moment, and a breach of regret grew instantly between them. The breach grew deeper and more obscure as she breathed, as her eyes, nose and lips touched him. She breathed heavily, and her scent covered his body. They then moved again. Her breasts had touched his chest and belly and thighs.

Then Yahya showed him to the monastery hideaway in Nuba Karam, in the ruins east of town. He took him by the hand after school to the edge of the houses, then went off running and shouting, gesturing with his hands to the falling arches and tunnels, the floor mosaics covered in dust and the grasses growing up through their cracks. He called out as if he were possessed, as if he were someone else.

He followed him until they were deep in the ruins. Yahya balanced on the edges of the destroyed walls, moving his hands like a bird. Then he bent to the ground under ancient cactus sheets and, with a heavy stick, uncovered an opening that led to a partially collapsed stone stairway. He gestured for him to follow. He saw horned, feathered vipers engraved in the ruins, and he was too afraid to move. Yahya’s voice came from the darkness, pressing him to descend. There was a light, and the stairway seemed endless in this light. At the end of the stairway was Yahya, standing in a round tiled court, with a lamp in his hand throwing shadows that danced on the walls.

Compared to the outer appearance of the ruins, this place was peaceful. It was clean and damp. He could make out the shape of an altar amid the overlapping shadows that beat against images on the walls. Mary cradled her son on the ceiling above them. Bewildered, he followed the light in Yahya’s hand. Yahya seemed proud. Then he heard the voice that he loved:

‘You see, there are no snakes?’

Where are the snakes?’

You met the snakes on the stairwell?’

Snakes are shy, they are scared of people.’

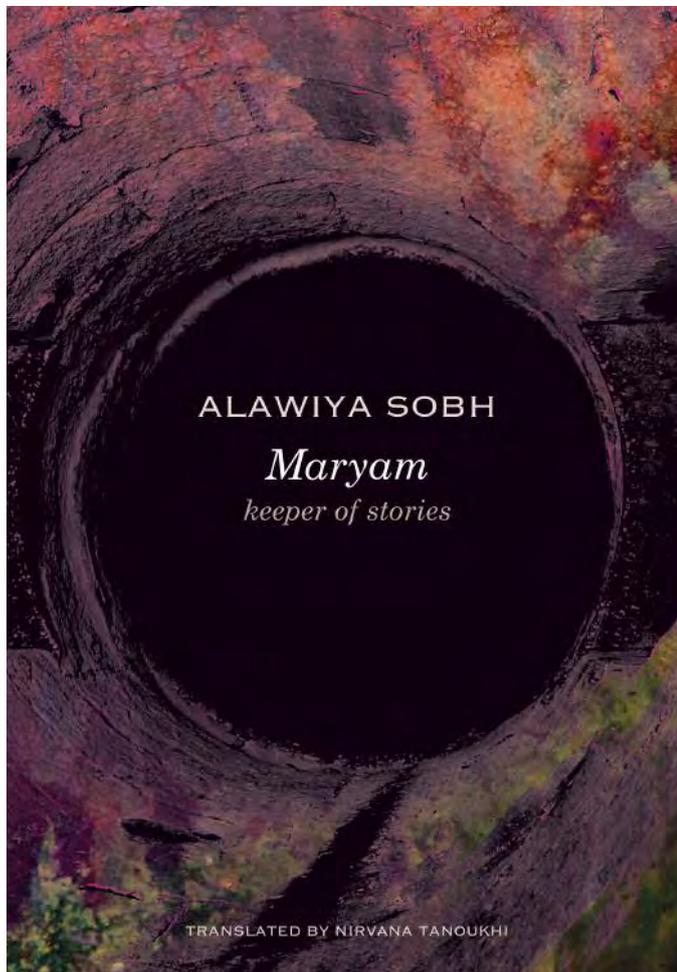
Yahya was still now. Behind him was a corroded statue of Khidr impaling the dragon. Khidr, Saint George as the Christians call him, was on horseback. Everything but the lower front of the figure was preserved, and the figure’s expression remained complete. The dragon was intact, impaled on his way towards death.

ALAWIYA SOBH

Maryam: Keeper of Stories

Sobh is an author of remarkable skill and range. The stories told inside this novel traverse a [...] diverse range of topics from love, female friendship, loss, and survival. Sobh's language effortlessly delivers and engages the reader in the varied emotions carried by these topics as it billows and patters and spirals just like the country she describes.

World Literature Today



Born in Beirut, ALAWIYA SOBH studied English and Arabic literature at the Lebanese University. Upon graduation in 1978, she pursued a career in teaching. She also began publishing articles and short stories, at first in *An-Nida* newspaper and then in *An-Nahar*. In the early 1990s, she became editor-in-chief of the women's magazine *Snob Al-Hasnaa'* and continues to hold the post.

THIS ACCLAIMED NOVEL is set during the Lebanese Civil War and offers a rare depiction of women's experiences amid this sprawling, region-defining conflict. In Alawiya Sobh's hands, the details of everyday life mix with female voices from across classes, sects and generations to create an indelible picture of a climate where violence and war are the overt outbreak of a simmering tension that underlies the life in the region. Here, stories struggle to survive the erasure of war and rescue the sweetness of living, trying to connect the tellers and their audience while transforming pain and love into abiding, sustaining art. *Maryam* offers an unforgettable picture of conflict and its costs.

***Maryam* is like Elena Ferrante's globally popular Neapolitan novels in that it places women's friendships at its centre. Although *Maryam's* women do have romantic (and unromantic) ties with men, it's the relationships between women that give the book its frisson.**

The National (Abu Dhabi)

TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC
BY NIRVANA TANOUKHI

PUBLISHED JUNE 2016
6 x 9 inches, 400 pages

RIGHTS SOLD:
FRENCH
GERMAN

FICTION
LEBANON

ALAWIYA SOBH, *Maryam: Keeper of Stories*

AN EXCERPT

The issue is over, as far as I'm concerned.

I have despaired of the answer, given up on the question and lost any hope of finding her again.

The visa is finally in my hands and a few days remain before my departure. There is hardly enough time to make the preparations, to complete the necessary farewell visits with family, cousins, neighbours, to say goodbye to Ibtisam and Yasmine and to Alawiyya and the rest of the characters in her novel.

But where is Alawiyya Subuh that I may say goodbye to her?

If I see her again, I will not ask: 'How's your book coming, Alawiyya?'

I will certainly not ask her.

Whenever we met in the last few years and I asked her what became of our story, I felt as though my tongue were a hot blade that opened a soft wound inside her. As she looked away from me, I glimpsed a gust of hidden pain fly across her eyes, and I watched her gaze falter and melt into the earth's rotation. But her eyelids would stop fluttering and her eyes settle again on mine. Then she'd fumble for a question, ask thirstily about my latest with Abbas, news of Ibtisam, or recent developments in the lives of her characters—those characters about whom I had once told her everything I knew, many years ago. But, since then, they've all passed on to new fates, fates unknown to her. And all that I told her passed into nothing.

I wonder now why I told her all those stories and why she listened if she never wrote any of it down.

Has Alawiyya really disappeared, like Ibtisam, or has she just transformed herself for the new life she chose? Or has she, like Yasmine, abandoned her youthful dreams of outgrowing the place of her birth?

I want to know if she has changed like all the others, or if she has withstood it all, as if outside the time and space of the war. Did she forget everything, like our village neighbour Abu Yusuf who forgot his name after his wife Khadija died? He started calling all the other men 'Abu Yusuf' and whenever anyone said to him, 'But you are Abu Yusuf!' he would weep and say, 'No. You're all liars. All of you are Abu Yusuf.'

She disappeared just like Zuhair, her hero and counterpart in the novel, leaving all our fates to be lost in her unfinished book. I could no longer find her name on the pages of

newspapers and magazines, or even on the door to her old flat at the top of Hamra Street. Later, I discovered that the whole building where she and her grandmother had lived had been razed to the ground.

When new novels came out, I rushed to the bookstore, pored over the titles and the authors' names, but I never found her name or our stories. A few times, I bought all of them, persuading myself that she could have written our story under another name. But as I leafed through the first pages, my fears would be confirmed—that she had disappeared and our story with her.

I no longer need to read my life in her book, because my story ends here. I just want to find her to say goodbye, to tell her that I have chosen a path for myself outside her novel. I only want to know about her fate and the reason she disappeared.

She vanished, and no more news of her reached me.

She no longer visited me at home, like Ibtisam or Yasmine. Each one of them used to come separately, stand at the flat door and ring the bell, or tap with her fingers when the electricity was off. I could tell which one of them it was from the way they rang or knocked and because I knew their routines by heart. My room is now empty of their chatter. The visits have dwindled and the talks dried up, as the river dwindles to a trickle after crossing a long distance. I don't believe this has happened because they are busy with their new lives. It seems that sometimes people become mementos to one another. Like a familiar piece of clothing, a shoe, or a scent, they evoke an occasion or an emotion in all its minute details. In avoiding the others, each of them flees from the war and its memories.

Before the war ended, Alawiyya did come by sporadically. Sometimes, she would be gone for days, weeks or months, but in the end she would return to knock on my door. I rarely left the flat. Often, I would only go to the firm to collect my salary at the end of each month, since regular attendance was not enforced. Particularly during the early years of the war when the fighting was at its worst, I spent most of my time at home in my room, unless I had arranged to meet Abbas. Ibtisam and Alawiyya, for their part, went to the fronts and disappeared for days. They wandered off like sheep and grazed in the war's meadow only to be brought back to my little stable where they regurgitated their tales.

VESNA MAIN

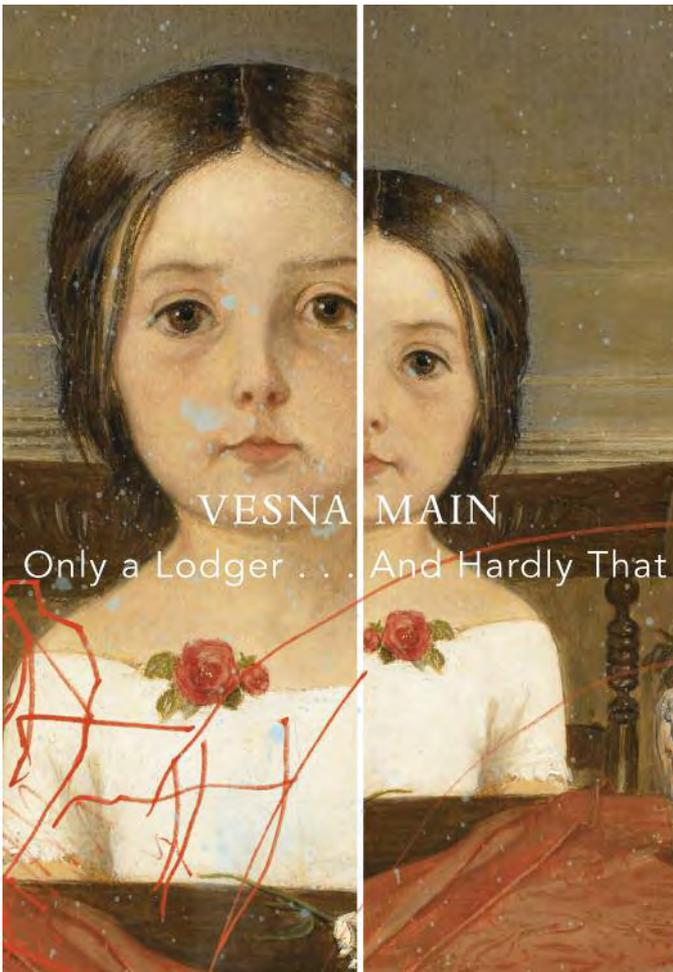
Only a Lodger . . . And Hardly That

The multiple narratives are ingeniously interwoven and the dialogue handled with a deftness of touch that keeps readers perpetually on their toes. Vesna Main shows herself a highly distinctive, adventurous, and formally accomplished writer whose work should find many admirers.

Christopher Norris

VESNA MAIN was born in Zagreb, Croatia. She is a graduate of comparative literature and holds a PhD from the Shakespeare Institute, Birmingham. A lecturer at universities in Nigeria and the UK, she also worked at the BBC and as a college teacher. Main has written for numerous journals and published two novels, *A Woman with No Clothes On* and *The Reader the Writer*. Her short stories have appeared in literary magazines; a collection, *Temptation, A User's Guide*, was published in December 2017.

WRITING STORIES ABOUT OUR ANCESTORS is a way to learn about and mould our identity. With this conviction, Vesna Main subtly strings five narratives into a rich, deep and delightful novel: *Only a Lodger . . . And Hardly That*. In 'The Eye/I', an unnamed narrator recounts the story of She, an obsessional woman near the end of her life, resigned to being a failure. While 'The Acrobat' is a sequence of magic realist prose poems, in 'The Dead', the unnamed narrator returns to describe the secret life of a grandfather she never knew and who, she claims, did not die in the Second World War, as officially recorded, but came back and reinvented himself. In 'The Poet', the She of 'The Eye' looks at four family photographs and from them pieces together a story of her other grandfather, the husband of one Maria. And finally, in 'The Suitor', Gustav Otto Wagner, an older man, narrates how he hoped to marry Maria could not. Mixing narrative styles and diverse voices, Main creates a vivid picture of a family that appeals to all of us who have wondered where we came from and how that past has shaped who we are today.



FICTION
CROATIA

TO PUBLISH AUGUST 2019

6 x 9 inches, 312 pages

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VESNA MAIN, *Only a Lodger . . . And Hardly That*

AN EXCERPT

For a long time, her mother read to her. Since the time she had learned to speak, every morning for the next three years they spent two hours together, with the mother reading stories and poems to her and after each story her mother asked questions. My little V—her mother always called her my little V even when her mother was not happy with her, her mother always called her my little V—can you tell me why Marcela ate the cake that her aunt had kept for her brother's birthday and why did Franz, who was only five years old, why did Franz have to work in his father's garden even though his fingers hurt and he never had enough time to sleep and was that right for such a young boy? She remembered her mind racing as she had to think quickly through the stories to answer her mother's questions and to answer them correctly, remembering the details and turns of each story and then commenting on each story in the way that her mother liked. There was no time for her mind to wander off or listen to those voices running around, the voices that she could hear through the open window, the voices she knew she should not listen to. Her mother was not in the habit of uttering explicit words of praise but she could tell that her mother was invariably pleased with her answers and that pleased her too. At the age of not yet four she was sufficiently needy—without knowing the word and therefore unable to articulate her feelings verbally—to understand that if she could show why it was wrong for Pinocchio to play truant, or why it was not right for Franz to work so hard in his father's garden, if she could think of the right comments, her mother would show affection to her. She wanted to be loved and she had to get love from her mother for there was no one else around: her father was out working most of her waking hours and at the time she had no siblings who could give her love even if siblings were ever inclined to give love.

In the years to come she understood that her mother believed living was about improving oneself and the only way her daughter could improve herself was by being serious and working hard to acquire knowledge. The way she learned to talk about the stories her mother had read to her made her mother think that there was hope that she would one day, but only if she worked hard, that she would one day make something out of herself. Her mother said those words while nodding half-heartedly, and that was important, she understood that kind of nodding at the time, she had a hunch that the half-hearted nodding meant her mother was not sure that what her mother was saying was true, her mother doubted her own words, the words saying that there was hope for her. That she would make something out of herself. That was important. She could tell that from the tone of voice her mother had used. She knew then that she should remember those words. They were the words to guide her in life and she did not have to make a special effort to remember them. But when it came to poetry, her mother's hopes were severely challenged and she knew that her mother must have worried that her daughter would not make something out of herself

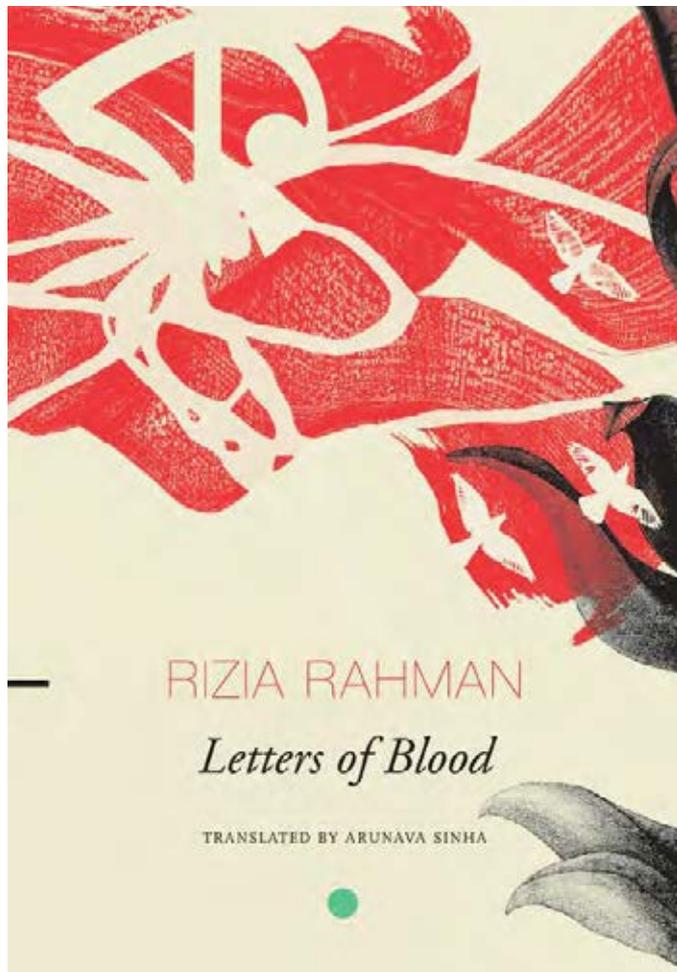
and that pained her mother very much but despite all her efforts, despite all the willpower she could muster at that age, the words of poems came and went or, as her mother used to say, the words of poems entered her head through one ear and went out at once through the other. Her mother expected her to learn a poem by heart every few days, and when more often than not she failed to do that, her mother despaired. It is your fault, why are you not paying attention, why are you resisting my efforts to teach you? You do not want to learn. That much is obvious. What will become of you? Those were the questions she heard repeatedly, she heard them every day, every morning, every afternoon. Her mother was not a cruel woman by any means, she said. If such a thought crosses anyone's mind, they misunderstand her mother's reasoning and her mother's intentions, and very good intentions they were, and they misunderstand her mother's love for her daughter and had someone at the time said anything about her mother being cruel—not that anyone could have since no one was around during their mornings, those mornings when her mother worked with her—her mother would have been horrified at the suggestion, her mother would have been hurt, her mother would have considered the idea absurd, so absurd that her mother would have waved it off, perhaps even laughed at it, her mother would have said it was most unfair to say something so untrue, for her mother loved her daughter, her mother loved her more than her mother could ever love anyone else and her mother's sole desire was to educate her daughter and help her improve, help her improve by increasing her motivation, help her improve by encouraging her to push herself to make more effort, to make more effort so that something would become of her. That was what life was all about: improving oneself, making sure that no day passes without learning something new, something that would make her a better person. Ignorance was embarrassing and most people had no excuse to remain ignorant, that is what her mother said, she said. Telling her to kneel in the corner of their kitchen for ten or fifteen minutes at the time when she was not yet four-years old and the ten or fifteen minutes facing a blank wall, while she was not allowed to talk, seemed much longer—as they would to a child of that age—but she had to do it because she could not remember a poem her mother had read to her several times, a poem that her mother had expected her to recite by heart, and that punishment—for it looked like punishment when she thought about it years later, but not at the time—and she is certain that her mother would not have used the word because she would not have intended the kneeling and facing a blank wall as punishment—that kneeling, that punishment, was intended to, and it did have that effect, to make her daughter feel ashamed, ashamed in front of herself even though she was not yet four-years old, and that shame spurred her to try harder, to make an effort, to push herself, as her mother kept saying, she said, and in that sense her mother was right and her mother's method was right.

RIZIA RAHMAN

Letters of Blood

Rahman's stories are written without any apparent concern for the mechanics of conventional plotting, but are nevertheless beautifully shaped, with a poet's concern for the telling image.

Aamer Hussein, author of *The Swan's Wife*



RIZIA RAHMAN was born in West Bengal in British India and lives in Bangladesh. Rahman began writing at the age of nine and her stories and poems were published in newspapers such as *Satyajug* and *Sangbad*. Her debut collection of short stories, *Agni Shakkhora*, was published when she was a university student. Since then, she has published more than 50 novels, as well as countless short stories, essays, literary criticism, belles-lettres and children's fiction. Translations of her novels and short stories have been anthologized in various publications in Bangladesh and abroad. Rahman has received numerous awards for her writing, including the prestigious Bangla Academy Award, the Swagat Gold Medal and the Anannya Literary Award.

LETTERS OF BLOOD IS SET in the often violent world of prostitution in Bangladesh. Rahman brings great sensitivity and insight to her chronicles of the lives of women trapped in that bleak world as they face the constant risk of physical abuse, disease and pregnancy, while also all too often struggling with drug addiction. A powerful, unforgettable story, *Letters of Blood* shows readers a hard way of life, imbuing the stories of these women with unforgettable empathy and compassion.

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI
BY ARUNAVA SINHA

PUBLISHED JUNE 2018

5.5 x 8 inches, 120 pages

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FICTION
BANGLA-
DESH

RIZIA RAHMAN, *Letters of Blood*

AN EXCERPT

It's still quite bright outside. But darkness has descended within the lane. Sunlight has withdrawn quite some time ago after bouncing off the buildings on either side. The girls are busy in their rooms. A crowd has started gathering at Chheru's shop. Another hooch shop has also opened next door. Laying out skewers of *sheek* kabab on their clay ovens, the soot-covered boys are keeping an eye on the entrance to the lane in expectation of customers. Kerosene lamps are being lit in every room. Many of the girls have dressed up and taken their places in the lane. Kusum goes up to Yasmin's room and stops outside the door. Two other girls share the room with Yasmin. Marjina and Huree, the other occupants of the nine-foot-by-twelve-foot room, have dolled up and gone out.

Yasmin is sitting on her cot, her feet dangling. Kusum says hesitantly from the door, "*Buji*, can you give me a little *chhono*?"

Yasmin turns towards the door. "Who's that? Kusum? What do you want?"

Kusum has indeed bathed today. Asking Shanti and not Zarina for some soap, she has washed her hair and her clothes. But her starving face looks lacklustre. Kusum says again hesitantly, "A little *chhono*."

Yasmin gets up. "I don't have any snow or powder, Kusum. Marjina or Huree might have some. They aren't in."

Looking around apprehensively, Kusum says, "Don't tell them, *buji*. Just show me where it is, I'll take a little with my fingers."

Lowering her eyes, she continues, "Kalu will kill me if I don't get a customer tonight. I won't get to eat. I can't sleep nights from hunger."

Incense sticks are glowing in the room. All the girls light them when evening falls. They also sprinkle on themselves the sacred water from the shrine next to the High Court. All of them believe this will improve their business and protect them from illness. Yasmin alone doesn't do it. Many of her habits are out of tune with the girls in this brothel. She's different. Many of the people here avoid her. Her eyes fixed on Kusum's drawn, miserable expression, Yasmin rises to her feet. Marjina locks her cosmetics away in a trunk. Huree's powder and kohl are in a paper box beneath her bed. Pulling it out, Yasmin says, "Take what you need quickly. Huree will create a scene if she sees."

As Kusum is about to leave, having swiftly grabbed a fistful of power and some kohl with her fingertips, Huree appears at the door. Sizing up the situation in a moment, she pounces on Kusum. "You bitch, you couldn't find someone else to steal from? How dare you!"

Huree shakes Kusum's soaped-and-cleaned hair loose from her ponytail. Yasmin protests, "Why do you have to do this, Huree! All she's taken is a little powder. You can afford it, she can't."

Huree stops raining blows and kicks on Kusum and charges towards Yasmin. "Oh, so much love! If you're so sympathetic, why can't you give her some of your own? Go flaunt your elegance in your own posh neighbourhood. In front of those who drove you out to this place."

She turns to Kusum again in great fury. "You thieving bitch, what else have you stolen from me all these days?"

Cowering under her blows, Kusum says, "I won't do it again, *bu*. Let me go."

Huree shoves Kusum out of the room. Kusum falls on the uneven ground outside under the impetus of Huree's strength. The kohl on her fingers is smeared all over her face. Her freshly washed clothes are caked with mud. Kusum gets to her feet. Blood is trickling from lips cut open by a corner of a brick. She throws a malevolent glance at Huree before walking away.

As Huree rearranges her box of cosmetics, all her rage bears down on Yasmin. It's all the doing of this evil bitch. Behaves like an empress. Can't even afford to cook every afternoon. Eats with Marjina when she can. Survives on tea and biscuits most other days. Or even tea alone. And that Marjina is in awe of her. Says she's not like us, she's an educated woman, after all. Marjina often shares her meal with Yasmin. Huree gets angry. In her head, she says, *what do you give yourself all those airs for, you bitch? Since you're doing business here, you're just like the rest of us*. But no, she makes Thika Mashi get her the newspaper to read. When Marjina and Huree flop down on the cot every afternoon to pick lice and discuss movies, Yasmin lies in bed reading second-hand English novels. Most evenings, she doesn't line up in the lane, though sometimes she goes every day. She earns quite well when she does that. That's when she pays the rent she owes. Then something happens to her and she stays in bed all day. Instead of soliciting customers in the lane, she slumps down by the draw-well without speaking to anyone.

Yasmin is silent. She does not speak. Huree continues, "If you feel so much for her, buy her things with your own money."

Marjina comes to the door with a customer. "Outside, you two. I've got someone."

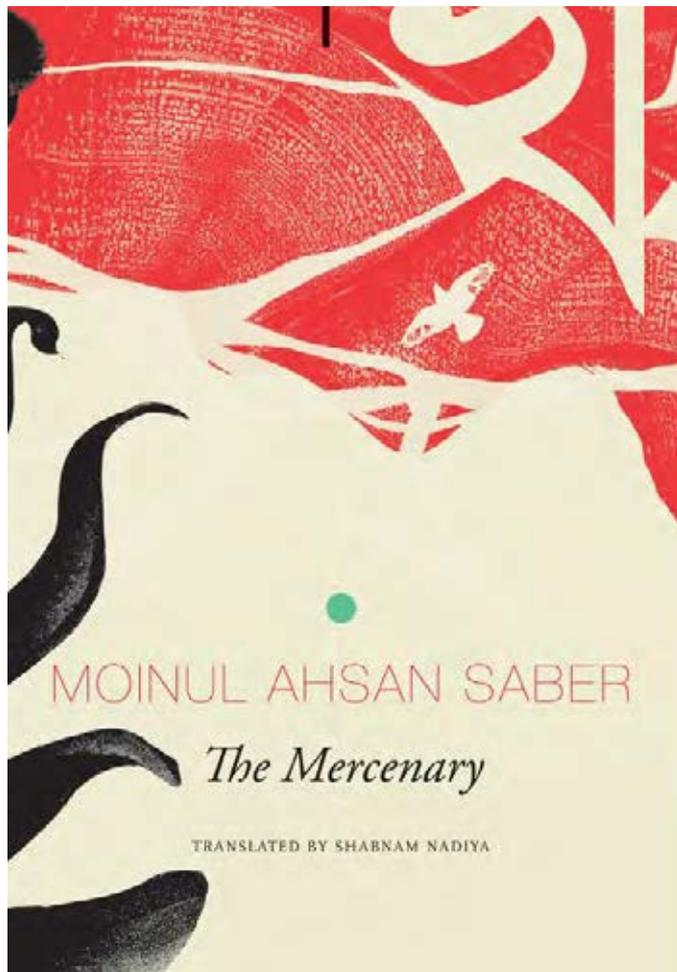
Huree goes off to the lane sulkily to snare customers. Yasmin goes out of the room. A single room, a single bed. It has to be vacated for whoever gets a customer. There's a furore when everyone has a customer at the same time.

MOINUL AHSAN SABER

The Mercenary

Moinul Ahsan Saber is arguably one of the most progressive and sophisticated storytellers of our time.

Zakir Talukdat, *Musolmanmongol*



TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI
BY SHABNAM NADIYA

PUBLISHED JUNE 2018

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FICTION
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MOINUL AHSAN SABER is one of Bangladesh's leading fiction writers, with a literary career spanning over three decades. Saber studied sociology at the University of Dhaka and was the editor of the popular weekly magazine *Shaptahik* before turning to writing full time in recent years. He first came into the limelight following publication of his debut collection of short stories *Porasto Sahish* in 1982. Since then, he has written numerous novels and stories, including those for children. Saber's work has received, among others, the Philips Literary Award, Bapi Shahriar Children's Award and Bangla Academy Award.

THIS GRIPPING NOVEL brilliantly straddles the divide between thrillers and literature. Moinul Ahsan Saber tells the story of Kobej Lethel, a ruthless soldier of fortune employed by a corrupt village chief. Lethel has never had a problem with the job before: he gets an assignment and handles it, even if that entails violence. But during Bangladesh's War of Independence, the chief sides with the Pakistani army as it carries out unspeakable atrocities. Suddenly, Lethel can no longer accept his role—he refuses, and rebels. But the transformation proves temporary: by the end of the war, he's back to his old ways, fighting for nothing more than a paycheck, on nothing more than an order.

A powerful novel of war, history and the deadly draw of violence, *The Mercenary* is an unforgettable look into the mind of a man who cannot escape the killing that has become his occupation.

MOINUL AHSAN SABER, *The Mercenary*

AN EXCERPT

Kobej had broken out of prison around mid-March. It couldn't exactly be called a jailbreak. Because no one had really tried to stop them when they made a run for it. Kobej had found it amusing. He had had to go to the police station or jail several times before this. But there was no question of breaking out on those occasions. There had been no need to, either. Most times the issue was somehow settled after he made several visits to the police station. Only once had he had to spend a whole year in prison.

This time the jailbreak was quite well-planned. A few educated prisoners even gave speeches over several days. Kobej didn't understand most of it. Like everyone else, however, he was very enthusiastic about breaking out. It was when he was out that things got tricky. There were rallies and marches and meetings everywhere. Everywhere. He wasn't interested in them though. He wanted to get back to his village. But he had no money.

His village was quite far from the town where he had been imprisoned. He would have to take the train. He wasn't worried about the train fare. Who could make him pay against his will? But he would need to feed himself on the way. He hated everything when he was hungry. Then he discovered that another man who had broken out with him was in a similar bind. They joined forces and took the opportunity to carry out a little looting here and there. They got enough to last a few days. Kobej was very angry with the police at that time. They were the cause of all his troubles. If they had just locked him up in the prison at the *ganj*, he wouldn't have had to go to all this trouble. But no, as soon as they caught him, they had to transfer him straight to the *sadar* town because "times were bad." The police station didn't have enough space, so they sent him to prison. Now he was a criminal. His case hadn't been heard by the court yet. Kobej thought it would be better for him if the court heard his case as soon as possible. Akmal Pradhan had assured him of that.

Because if the court heard the case, it would be settled very quickly. There were no witnesses against him. So no allegation would stick. But now this thorn in his side would remain. Now the police would be looking for Kobej again. The case would be reopened. All of this was a hassle, a waste of time.

Kobej spent a few days with his friend-in-need. Finally the man said, "My friend, now you head your way, and I'll head mine. If we get caught, those sons-of-bitches will just lock us up again."

There was no chance of them being caught though. Even if they wanted to surrender, there was no one around to lock them up. Still, they headed towards their destinations. Kobej reached his village on the morning of the twenty-fifth. He had been a little confused as to whether he should head straight for the village. Maybe he'd arrive to find out that the police had already come looking for him. But where else could he have gone? Anyway, Akmal Pradhan was there. He would be able to advise him as needed.

Akmal Pradhan was quite surprised when he saw him. "Kobej, you?"

"Yes, it's me." Kobej chuckled.

"Where did you come from? They let you out?"

Kobej laughed again. "Yeah, they let me go. I'm free."

"Why?" There was doubt in Akmal Pradhan's voice.

Kobej told him the whole story, in complete detail. Akmal Pradhan instructed him to remain in hiding for a few days. It was no big deal to hide in his own village. He could spend days at a time in one of the rooms of Pradhan's enormous household. The next day was March twenty-sixth. The apocalypse unleashed didn't touch them, safe as they were in their village. But they heard many things. Akmal Pradhan realised, as did Kobej, there was no longer any need for him to stay in hiding.

Since then he had just been sitting around. All he had to do was eat, sleep, smoke bidis and keep company with Akmal Pradhan. In the meantime, Pradhan had made a proposition which Kobej had been mulling over for the past month. Yes, it was a proposal to kill someone. But Kobej knew there were some snags. There was no rush. He had learned from hard experience that rushing these jobs meant messing them up. Like last time: haste was what led to him being caught. It still made him unhappy. It was just one killing, a single murder, why did he get caught trying to pull it off? Why wasn't he able to pull it off with no impediments, no witnesses? Whenever he thought of his last job, he felt ashamed. Akmal Pradhan had abused him roundly at the time. "You idiot! Kobej, you've behaved like a fool!"

Akmal Pradhan's invectives were justified. Because the murder had been on his account. Kobej had realised his mistake as soon as he had committed it. But he hadn't wanted to admit it. So he told Akmal Pradhan straight up, "Whether I've been stupid or not, I was supposed to kill someone, and I have."

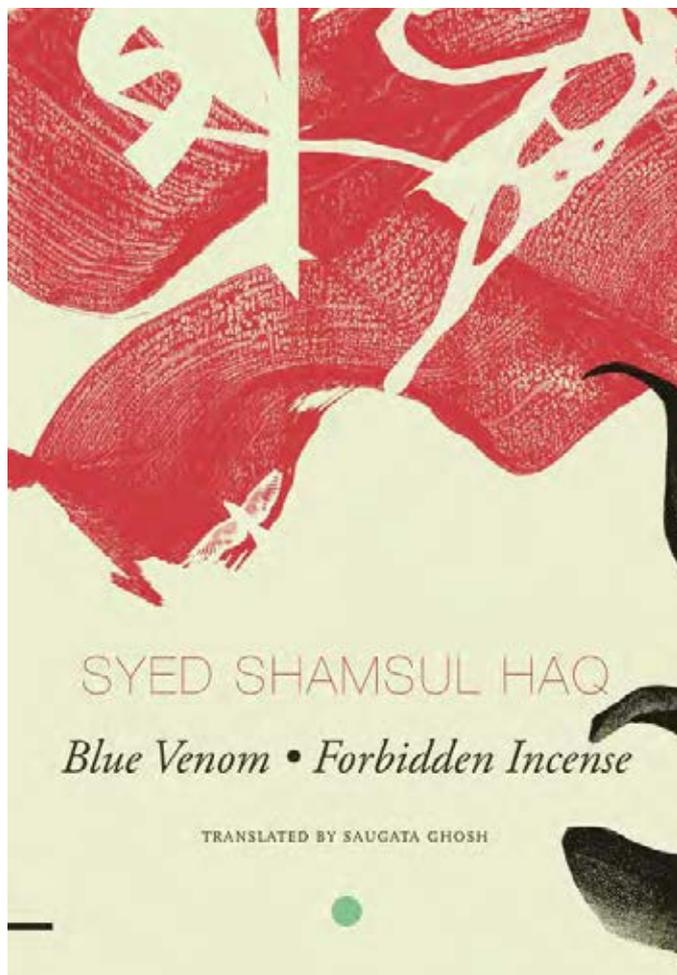
SYED SHAMSUL HAQ

'Blue Venom' and 'Forbidden Incense'

Two Novellas

Syed Shamsul Haq's presence in Bangla literature is so all-encompassing and his brilliance so overwhelming in all the branches of creative writing in which he is present that the accolade that he was a literary genius would not in any way overstate his extraordinary talent.

The Daily Star (Dhaka)



SYED SHAMSUL HAQ (1935–2016) was a leading Bangladeshi poet, novelist, playwright and short-story writer known for his proficiency in multiple literary genres. He was awarded Bangla Academy Award in 1966 (the youngest among all to receive it), Ekushey Padak in 1984 and Independence Day Award in 2000 by the Government of Bangladesh for his contributions to Bengali literature. His notable works include *Payer Awaj Pawa Jai*, *Nishiddho Loban*, *Khelaram Khele Ja*, *Neel Dongshon* and *Mrigoya*, as well as Bengali translations of several of Shakespeare's plays.

BANGLADESH IN 1971 SHOWED VIVIDLY, and terribly, the deadly effects of war. Piles of corpses, torture cells, ash and destruction everywhere in the wake of the Pakistani army's attacks on Bengali people. *Blue Venom* and *Forbidden Incense*, two novellas by Bangladeshi writer Syed Shamsul Haq, bear bleak witness to the mindless violence and death of that period. *Blue Venom* tells of a middle-aged middle manager who is arrested and taken to a cell, where he is slowly tortured to death for being a namesake of a rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. Meanwhile, *Forbidden Incense* tells of a woman's return to her paternal village after her husband was 'taken' by the army. In the village, she meets a boy with a Muslim name whose entire family has been killed; as they attempt together to gather and bury scattered corpses, they too are caught by the killers.

FICTION
BANGLA-
DESH

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI
BY SAUGATA GHOSH

PUBLISHED JUNE 2018

5.5 x 8 inches, 128 pages

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SYED SHAMSUL HAQ, *Blue Venom*

AN EXCERPT

Brown light fills the room all day. And all night. The windows, covered with brown paper, shut off the view outside. A naked bulb hangs overhead. Often, one can hear the sound of heavy footsteps, of one man or maybe two, in the corridor outside. Sometimes a motorcar is also heard, farther away.

He sits alone on the blanket-covered bed all day. He continues to sit the same way when night comes but sleep eludes him. At some point sleep comes to him naturally, and he drops off before being rudely woken up by a sharp prod. He opens his eyes and at first can only see the khaki uniform, close to his face. As his eyes clear he can see the unfamiliar features of the man in uniform. He has not seen this soldier before. Must be new on the job.

“Get up.”

He gets up and follows the soldier outside in silence. Once outside, the soldier pushes him ahead, following him but also monitoring his movements. Soon the two of them come to stand before a row of doors, one of which he is pushed through. Unlike the cell he was in, the toilet he is in now is neat and clean, with a washbasin. The floor is spotless and there is no stench in the air.

He blinks and looks at himself in the mirror above the washbasin. For a moment he mistakes his own reflection for that of someone else. He stands transfixed before the mirror, till the illusion passes and he can recognize himself again. He thinks he looks the same as before and for a moment he finds it easy to believe that he is standing in front of the mirror in his own house for a shave. He notices that his face is covered in dark stubble.

It is now that he discovers a new smell that lingers on his clothes—the smell of gunpowder. For the last two days a one-sided battle had raged across the city with bullets flying, shells exploding, the air turning warm and pungent. The smell of that battle on his clothes now makes him feel nauseated. He still has no idea why he has been imprisoned here.

The soldier guarding him gives him another prod when he comes out and begins to follow him as before, as he walks on till they come before a second door. Another soldier, who stands guard before the door, now takes over and ushers him into a different room. He finds himself face to face with three officers seated across a pair of tables joined side to side. The tables are the color of glue from the *gaab* tree, empty, bereft of paper, pen or other objects. He cannot remember when he last saw anything as starched and well-ironed as the uniforms the officers wear, though the employees of the mercantile firm he used to work in were always encouraged by the boss to dress smartly. The collars, epaulettes and buttons

appear to gleam in the light inside the room, as if they had all been carefully polished with wax.

The soldier who had escorted him nudges him and tells him to give the officers a salute. He hurriedly raises his hand in an exaggerated salute to pay his respects adequately. There is no response from anybody on the other side of the table, which he interprets as a response of sorts. The officers wear a look of quiet efficiency which assures him to some extent that he will now be released soon and be on his way to Jafarganj once again, just as he had been before he was captured.

Only the day before, like many others, he too had been stopped and searched by soldiers near Mirpur Bridge. But unlike the others, instead of being allowed to proceed after the inspection, he had been arrested and brought to this prison.

Shortly, one of the officers opens a cupboard and brings out a file. A red pencil appears in his hand miraculously without help from anyone else. At the same time another man comes in through a door on the other side, carrying a notebook and pencil and sits down at a small table nearby, the pencil poised in an expectant slant over an open page of the notebook.

Finally one of the officers beams at him sunnily and inquires politely if he has had a good night's rest. “Yes,” he replies. Even though he has stayed up most of the night he does not find it appropriate to tell them that now. “I slept well,” he tells them. “Good, good,” the officer nods and says.

The second officer now lightens up and smiles at him. “We are not yet able to bring bedbugs and mosquitoes under our control and curtail their activities,” he says. “We apologize for any inconvenience caused on that account. Sincerely.”

He is touched by their concern, indeed overcome by it. The third officer cuts in after the second and asks if he has been served food or not. Though he has not eaten anything, given the easy bonhomie established between him and the officers, it appears unseemly to rat on their subordinates to them. So he remains quiet.

“Do you mean they haven't given you anything to eat?”

Immediately one of the officers summons a soldier who comes and stands at attention before them while the three pester him with questions. “Go and get food,” one of them finally tells the soldier, “and get a chair too. Why do I have to remind you people that a visitor deserves a place to sit at?”

Miraculously, a chair appears in a moment. He sits down awkwardly, feeling uncomfortable. Even when he tries to change his posture, the discomfiture does not go away. When the interrogation begins he soon loses track of who is asking him what.

HASAN AZIZUL HUQ

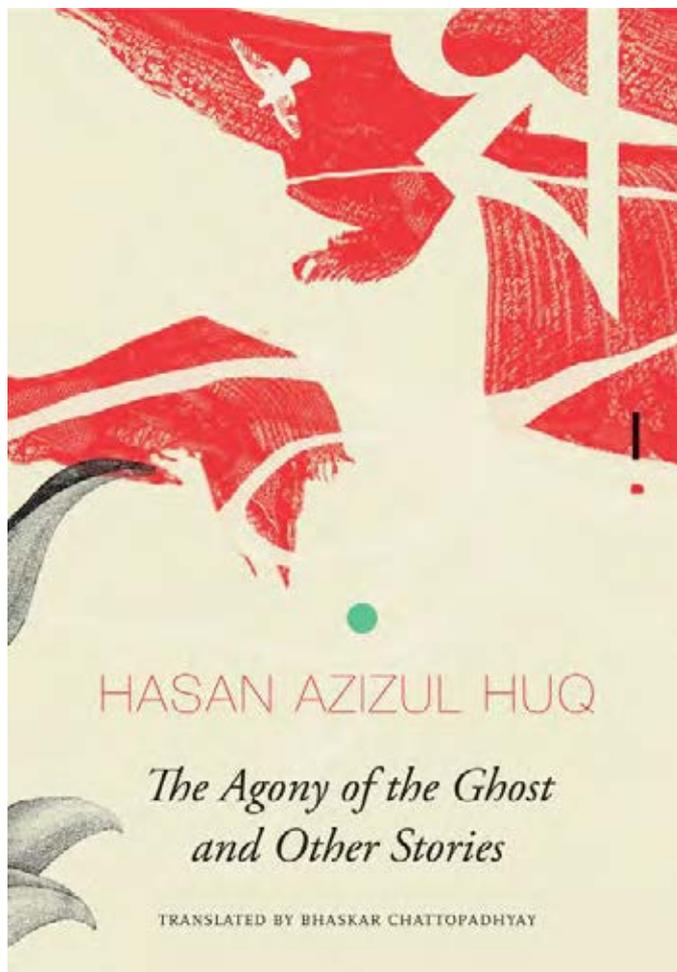
'The Agony of the Ghost' and Other Stories

In Hasan Azizul Huq's stories we find an effort to break down the reality of oppression.

Rashid Karim, *Contemporary Bengali Writing*

How the novelty of language and style may be achieved is demonstrated by Hasan Azizul Huq.

Anisuzzaman, *Contemporary Bengali Writing*



HASAN AZIZUL HUQ is a Bangladeshi short-story writer and novelist. He was the second Bangabandhu Chair of the Department of History at the University of Dhaka. He was awarded the Bangla Academy Award in 1970, Ekushey Padak in 1999, Ananda Puraskar in 2008 and the Independence Day Award by the Government of Bangladesh in 2019. His work has been translated into English, Hindi, Urdu, Russian and Czech.

HASAN AZIZUL HUQ IS KNOWN for his stories that bring a powerful social consciousness to bear on the lives of ordinary people in contemporary Bangladesh—but doing so with surprising twists to what we think of as the typical grounds of realistic fiction. *The Agony of the Ghost* gathers twelve remarkable stories from his large oeuvre that offer a sense of the range of his insights and approaches. In 'Without Name or Lineage', a man returns home in search of his wife and son after the war, only to find them in ways both unexpected and expected. 'The Sorcerer' finds a sorcerer dying without revealing his secrets to three brothers who had been trying to compel him to tell—and strange deaths follow. In 'Throughout the Afternoon', a disarmingly simple story, a young boy awaits his grandfather's death. In all the stories, the lives of the most disadvantaged people in Bengali society are revealed in harrowing, unforgettable detail.

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI
BY BHASKAR CHATTOPADHYAY

PUBLISHED JUNE 2018
5.5 x 8 inches, 176 pages

RIGHTS SOLD:
TAMIL

FICTION
BANGLA-
DESH

HASAN AZIZUL HUQ, *The Agony of the Ghost*

AN EXCERPT

The indigent ghost was sitting on the branch of a neem tree. He was staring at one of the windows of the building with six apartments and wondering whether to enter when the window was slammed shut all of a sudden. The ghost could see part of a kitchen through the glass panes in the upper half of the window. He could also hear the maid of the house clean the plates and pots. The ghost regretted his hesitation—how was he to get in now? He had had a wonderful opportunity to take care of the maid when the window was wide open. All he had had to do was to enter. But the window was shut now, and, contrary to popular belief, ghosts can't walk through walls or closed doors or windows. When he hadn't become a ghost, he used to believe in such stupid stories. But now that he was one, he realised that his primary problem was that he was the past, not the present. He didn't exist now, he had existed at some time in the past. Which essentially meant that there was no place where he could make his presence felt. When he presented himself somewhere, neither he nor anyone else believed in his presence there. Not even once had he imagined when alive that he would have to face such a strange problem after his death. It was true that he could vanish whenever he wished to—the ability to disappear at will was the one true advantage of being a ghost. He never had to try too hard. In fact, it seemed he was always invisible, and that he had to put in a lot of effort to become visible. The poor man would put his hands and feet and head and toes together and try his best to become visible. But much to his horror, everything seemed to float away in a strange manner, and he continued to remain invisible. Jumping up to the rooftop of a five-storeyed building, or flying from one place to another—he could do all these things. He could even enlarge or shrink his body at will—more or less. But walking through a wall? Or flying in or out through a closed window? He couldn't do those. He had asked around, only to realise that no other ghost could do it either. The advantages of a mortal body were no longer with him, but the disadvantages still remained.

It wasn't as though he had been a ghost forever. He had turned into one quite recently. In fact, he still remembered that fateful night quite clearly. It had been more than a fortnight, but the damned rain was showing no signs of stopping. His wife and the three children were starving, just like him. Dusk fell. The relentless downpour continued in the dark. No lightning or thunder, no growling of the clouds, no

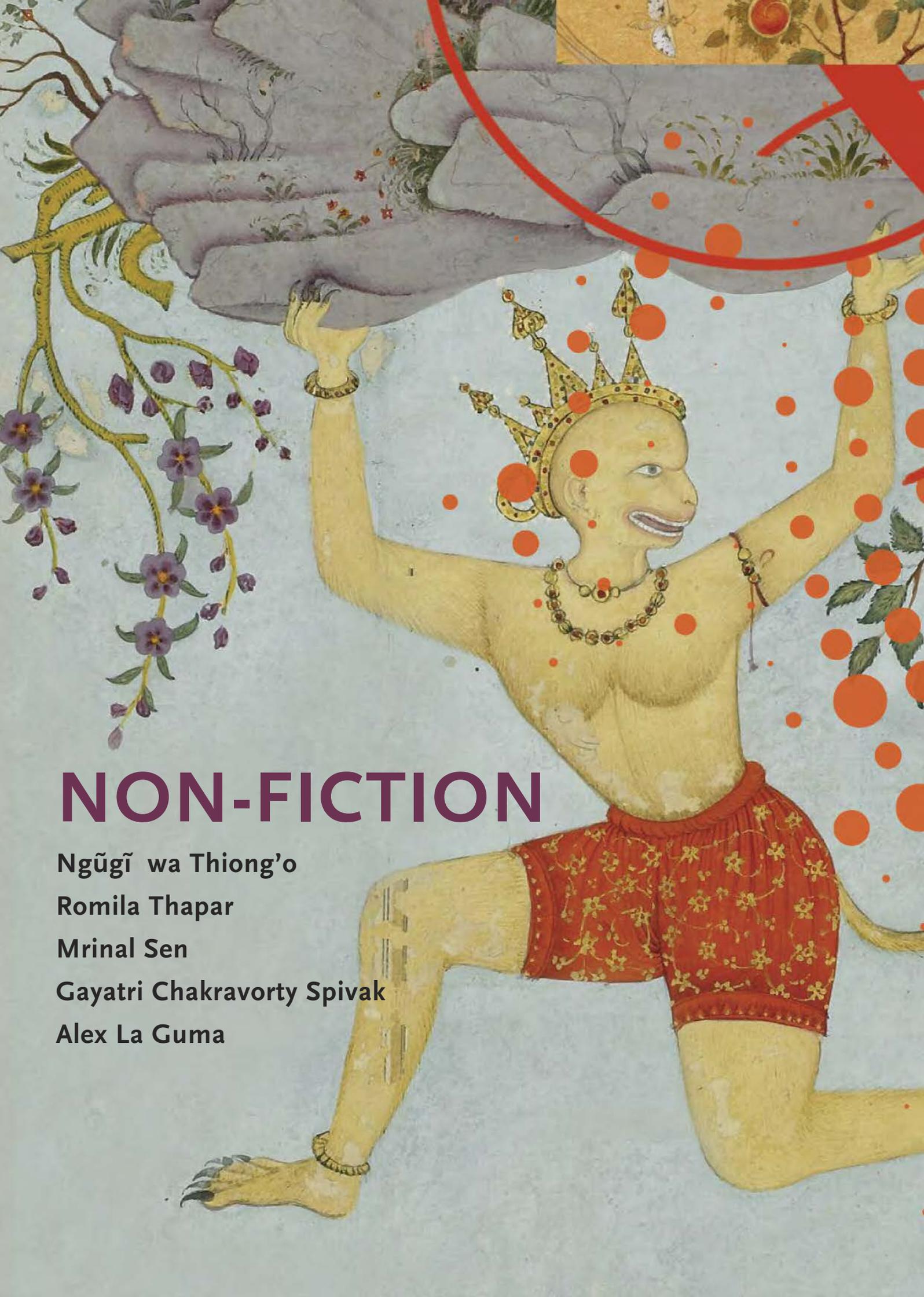
breeze—only the steady monotone of the rain falling around his hut. As he lay there listening to the sound, it seemed to him that everyone outside his hut, everyone else in the world, had been long dead, and there was no point of living any more. Because the rains would melt and wash away the earth. All he should do right then was to bring down the knife from the wall and slit the throats of his wife and their little children one by one.

Rainwater was dripping into the hut from holes in the roof. A lonely lantern stood in one corner with soot all over its face, the wick minutes away from going out. Clouds of smoke were billowing out of the vent. A sudden urge overpowered the poor and indigent man, so strong that he couldn't even wait to murder his wife and children. He flung a torn sheet over the beam near the roof of the hut and hanged himself. The tattered sheet ripped into two, but by then the man was dead.

The poor man had felt only one sensation while dying—sharp hunger. He had heard that it didn't hurt any more after death, that there was no pain. Man could rise above hunger and thirst, affliction and agony, burns and bruises. But after he died the poor man realised it was all a cock and bull story. He no longer had a stomach, but he still felt hungry. When he had a belly he could tie a piece of cloth around it to curb his hunger. But he didn't have a belly now. Still, one indisputable advantage of being a ghost was that you were immune to all feelings and emotions except the sensation you had experienced while dying. The poor man had died hungry. So hunger was all he could feel after dying. His wife had died soon after. He bumped into her every now and then. The strong lust he used to feel for her when they were alive was gone now. And she in turn felt nothing but an inconsolable sense of grief for her litter.

Be that as it may, the window to the kitchen had now been shut. Such a huge building, such a large backyard, and not a single open window! What would he do now?

He needed a well-fed and yet frail human right away. Perhaps a woman. One who would roll her eyes and collapse on the floor. Then he could take his time to take all the food in her stomach into his own. The ghost was afraid of all those fat, rich, broad-chested, pot-bellied gentlemen lying on their beds and chewing on their paan. He never even walked past them—neither in life, nor in death.



NON-FICTION

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Romila Thapar

Mrinal Sen

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Alex La Guma

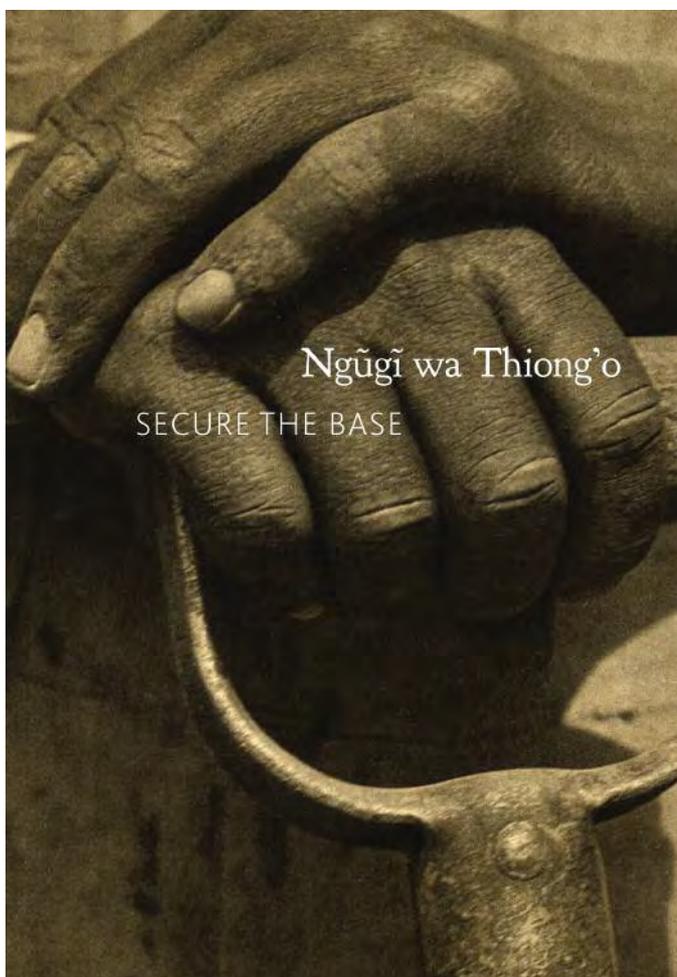
NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O

Secure the Base

Making Africa Visible in the Globe

A vital, timely examination . . . *Secure the Base* is full of hidden connections . . . In this short, tightly argued collection of lectures and essays, he writes with the aim of 'making Africa visible in the world' by tracing the lattice of political and moral ties that stretch across the globe and back to Africa.

The Independent



NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O, born in Limuru, Kenya, in 1938, is the author of many novels, short stories, essays, two memoirs and several plays. His novels include *The River Between* (1965) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). He received the prestigious Nonino International Prize for Literature in 2001. He is distinguished professor in the School of Humanities and director of the International Center for Writing and Translation at University of California, Irvine. For the past several years, he has been a favourite to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

FOR MORE THAN SIXTY YEARS, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has been writing fearlessly the questions, challenges, histories, and futures of Africans, particularly those of his homeland, Kenya. Though Ngũgĩ's fiction has reached wide acclaim, his nonfictional work, while equally brilliant, is difficult to find. *Secure the Base* changes this by bringing together essays spanning nearly three decades. Originating as disparate lectures and texts, this complete volume will remind readers anew of Ngũgĩ's power and importance. Written in a personal and accessible style, the book covers a range of issues, including the role of the intellectual, the place of Asia in Africa, labour and political struggles in an era of rampant capitalism, and the legacies of slavery and prospects for peace. At a time when Africa looms large in our discussions of globalization, *Secure the Base* is mandatory reading.

PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 2016

5.x 8 inches, 152 pages

RIGHTS SOLD:

**DUTCH, FRENCH, GERMAN,
ITALIAN, SPANISH, SWEDISH,
TURKISH**

**NON-
FICTION
KENYA**

NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O, *Secure the Base*

AN EXCERPT (FROM THE PREFACE)

These essays are united by the concern for the place of Africa in the world today. Any discussion of the continent must take into account the depths from which Africa has emerged and the world forces—from slave trade, slavery and colonialism to debt slavery—against which it has had to struggle. A lot of good has emerged against all odds. This is a cause for hope. But such discussion must also look at what Africa has failed to do and the crimes it has brought upon itself. Central to this is the position of the ruling middle class vis-à-vis the people and the external forces. In the past, a section of this middle class has played an enabling role against the deepest interests of the continent. Even slave trade and colonialism were not without an African collaboration. Fortunately in its very midst was another section that sought alliance with the people against both the external invader and his African collaborators. The question which faced earlier generations and manifestations of the middle class is still the same: Does it see itself as accountable to the people or to the external centres of imperial power? Does it see itself as rentiers of their resources or a maker of things from their resources? Though these essays were written for diverse occasions at different times, the theme of a mimic middle class that runs away from its base among the people is one of their common threads.

Another is the question of nuclear arms. At first this may seem remote to Africa's pressing concerns. But there are urgent reasons why Africa should and must be at the forefront in calls for nuclear disarmaments and non-proliferation. It's the only continent with a moral right to do so, being the only one from where two states, South Africa and Libya, voluntarily (though no doubt under pressure) dismantled nuclear programmes. Libya even gave its nuclear material to the US for keeps. And what did Libya get in return? A nuclear-armed NATO invaded it, and turned it into a lawless state, an ironic reward for its compliance. African Union, supposedly the voice of Africa, was brushed aside with contempt. Africa's self-interest demands it have a voice in this matter of weapons of mass destruction, for, whether or not it likes, Africa has been drawn into nuclear practice and politics. France carried out its first nuclear tests in Africa; and Israel allegedly in Prince Edward Island during the apartheid era. Africa is one of the sources of uranium, an integral component of nuclear weaponry. During the American invasion of Iraq, Niger was dragged into the controversy

because of unfounded allegations that Saddam Hussein had bought uranium from it.

There is always the larger historical irony. Three of the leading nuclear states and nations—France, Britain and the US—have a slaving and colonial past. In a way, slavery, colonialism and nuclear armament are driven by the same instinct—contempt of other lives, particularly black lives. Although the First and Second World Wars were of European origins, Africa was drawn into them. Is there any reason to believe that Africa would not be drawn into yet another war, even if it started elsewhere?

There is also the question of survival: Africans are a part of the human race; and nuclear arms, no matter who hoards them, are a threat to humanity. 'No man is an island, entire of itself,' wrote John Donne, 'Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. [. . .] Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.' Donne's call is relevant for our world today, more than when he first wrote the words, for our common planet is threatened by the man-made, profit-driven twin weapons of mass destruction—environmental crimes by the leading powers of the globe and, of course, the nuclear arms.

Although concerns for the visibility of Africa in the globe is my main concern, I wrote these essays for diverse occasions. The first essay, on the word 'tribe' in African politics, is based on the lecture I gave at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, on 28 April 2008, as the holder of the university's Dan and Maggie Inouye Distinguished Chair in Democratic Ideals. While I can understand why detractors of non-European peoples would want to append the word tribe to them, I have not been able to make sense of why African, Pacific, Native American and Indian intellectuals have embraced this pejorative term. It still baffles me why more than 40 million Yorubas are a tribe and 5 million Danes a nation! Or why non-European peoples should have the term tribesmen attached to the names of their communities and leaders. Every community has a name by which they identify themselves. Call them by that name. We talk of the English, or English people; the French, or the French people; the Chinese, or the Chinese People; the Russians, or the Russian people. Accord the same to all communities, big or small, in Africa and the world. Don't put editorial frames to their names. Just call them by the name with which they identify themselves.

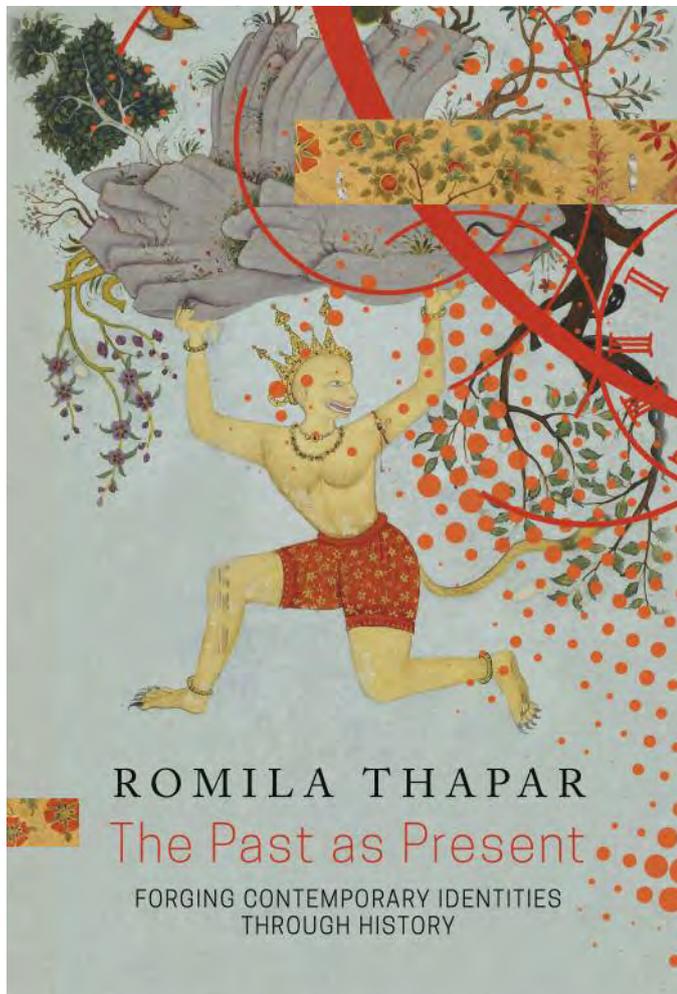
ROMILA THAPAR

The Past as Present

Forging Contemporary Identities through History

The Past as Present presents a fabulous overview of a half a century's work by one of India's most eminent historians, running from ancient India to the charged debates over Indian identity that erupted in the 1980s.

Praveen Swami, *The Hindu*



ROMILA THAPAR is emeritus professor of history at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has been general president of the Indian History Congress. She is a fellow of the British Academy and holds an Hon D.Lit. each from Calcutta University, Oxford University and the University of Chicago. She is an honorary fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and SOAS, London. In 2008, Thapar was awarded the Kluge Prize of the US Library of Congress.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR INDIAN SOCIETY to be secular? When did communalism as an ideology gain a foothold in the country? Why are the fundamentalists so keen to rewrite history textbooks? Or how and when did the patriarchal system begin to support a culture of violence against women?

The answers to these and similar questions have been argued about ever since they were first posed. Distinguished historian Romila Thapar has investigated, analysed and interpreted the history that underlies such questions throughout her career; now, in this book, she argues that it is of critical importance for the Indian past to be carefully and rigorously explained, if the legitimacy of the present is to be portrayed as accurately as possible. This is especially pertinent given the attempts by unscrupulous politicians, religious fundamentalists and their ilk to try and misrepresent and wilfully manipulate the past in order to serve their present-day agendas. An essential and necessary book at a time when sectarianism, false 'nationalism' and the muddying of historical facts are increasingly becoming a feature of our public, private and intellectual lives across the entire world.

NON-
FICTION
INDIA

PUBLISHED JUNE 2019

6 x 9 inches, 336 pages

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ROMILA THAPAR, *The Past as Present*

AN EXCERPT (FROM THE PREFACE)

The essays in this book encapsulate my thoughts on certain themes that I have written and spoken about for half a century. The themes pertain largely to the way history has been used in contemporary times, particularly in what has become the debate on Indian identity. The interpretations of Indian history have changed, especially in the late twentieth century. The earlier focus on political and dynastic history has been vastly broadened to include many facets of social, economic and cultural history. These have led to new questions particularly pertinent to the issue of how a nation formulates its identity. My endorsement of this identity has been an insistence that it be the identity of the Indian citizen, over and above religious community and caste. This has of course met with opposition from those for whom the identity politics of religion and caste are primary.

I have explained in some of the essays why the communal interpretation of Indian history where Hindu and Muslim communities are seen only as religious groups—invariably antagonistic—has been replaced by a more analytical way of investigating the relations between communities, going back to pre-Islamic times. Those who argue that the earliest inhabitants of the subcontinent were Aryans and that Vedic culture is the foundational culture of India, have problems in accepting the new analyses of early history where the role of other cultures has been registered. The controversies have extended to much more than this. They have included the modern readings of the epics, and the need to accept variant forms of the Ramayana that have existed since at least two thousand years. Another theme that has become significant in recent decades is that of the status of women in the past and how that relates to attitudes towards women in the present. The existing mindset that claims to draw from the past needs to be understood in more than historical terms. But if at least the history could be explained without being blurred, it would help change the mindset.

It seems to me that what makes the essays especially pertinent is that the ideas contained in many of them were first formulated at a time when not only the discipline of history but the broader structure of education was changing from a colonial foundation to a system associated with a liberal and secular democratic society and intellectual explorations of various kinds.

My ideas today are not substantially different from what they were a few decades ago although the emphasis on nuances may differ. I must confess that in re-reading the essays in order to revise them, I was saddened that the issues

remain contentious and our movement towards a solution seems distant. But perhaps this may be just my impatience. The noticeable decline in liberal values is disturbing, especially as fewer and fewer persons appear concerned about this decline. My generation grew up on the cusp of independence, with confidence in the new society that was to come soon after. But what has come is not the society we had anticipated. The substratum message of these essays is that despite the events of the last quarter century, hopefully, one day that society can emerge. My intention in publishing these essays however, is that the reading public will be acquainted with some of the ideas and controversies that we work with as historians, and to familiarize a larger readership with the kinds of questions and investigations that we are pursuing. However, the essays are all based on research that I have done on various themes. For those interested in following up on this research, I have included a bibliography of my writing.

Some of the essays in the book examine how a particular issue was dealt with over a period of time—this is the reason the reader will sometimes find more than one essay on a subject. I have arranged and introduced the essays thematically. These essays were addressed to the general reader and in their revised versions continue to do so.

The essays are largely, but not altogether, in response to debates that have surfaced in the public arena on questions concerning historical interpretation. As a historian I have felt it necessary that there be responses from those of us who are concerned about the future of our discipline, and about a rational understanding of our past, even if allowing a hint of romanticism. I have confined myself largely to the early period since that is the history that I am most familiar with and is also the one perhaps most often debated in the public arena. However, my implied comments on some ways of viewing early history would also apply to the history of later times, although the evidence dealt with would differ.

Much of the debate stems from the question of national identity and most people assume that history provides the answer. What is not realized is that if the history is mangled then the identity or identities can be hopelessly off course. If the past is to be called upon to legitimize the present, as it so frequently is, then the veracity of such a past has to be continuously vetted. In speaking of the relationship of past and present we seldom stop to think of how much of our present hangs on what we assume to be the actual past.

ROMILA THAPAR

Indian Cultures as Heritage

Contemporary Pasts

What has always been regarded as Thapar's stellar capacity for systematic analysis, rigorous scholarship and inspired insight has now been distilled into wisdom—the wisdom that can only come from a great scholar who remains engaged with her subject and has a political position from which she apprehends the world.

Arshia Sattar, *Livemint*

ROMILA THAPAR is emeritus professor of history at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has been general president of the Indian History Congress. She is a fellow of the British Academy and holds an Hon D.Lit. each from Calcutta University, Oxford University and the University of Chicago. She is an honorary fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and SOAS, London. In 2008, Thapar was awarded the Kluge Prize of the US Library of Congress.

EVERY SOCIETY HAS ITS CULTURES: the patterns of how people live and express themselves, and how they value objects and thoughts. What constitutes Indian heritage and cultures has been much discussed. Romila Thapar begins by explaining how the definitions of the concept of culture have changed since the last three centuries, and hence require added attention. Cultures, when defined by drawing on selected items and thoughts from the past, remain relatively unknown, except to a few. Yet each has a context and meaning relating them to the past and to their significance as a contemporary presence. Contexts, often regarded as unconnected to culture, can, to the contrary, be quite illuminating. Thapar touches on a few of these, ranging from objects that identify cultures, to ideas that shape cultures, such as social discrimination, the role of women, and attitudes to science and knowledge. Thought-provoking books such as this spark debate, and the debate may lay to rest some current shibboleths about India's culture.

ROMILA THAPAR

Indian Cultures as Heritage

Contemporary Pasts

NON-
FICTION
INDIA

TO PUBLISH AUGUST 2020

6 x 9 inches, 262 pages

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ROMILA THAPAR, *Indian Cultures as Heritage*

AN EXCERPT (FROM THE INTRODUCTION)

We use the word culture quite casually when referring to a variety of thoughts and actions. I would like to begin my attempt to define cultures by a focus on three of its dictionary meanings that I think are significant to our understanding of the general term—culture. We often forget that its more essential usage is as a verb rather than as a noun, since the noun follows from the activities involved in the verb. Thus the verb, to culture, means to cultivate. This can include at least three activities: to artificially grow microscopic organisms; to improve and refine the customs, manners and activities of one's life; to give attention to the mind as part of what goes into the making of what we call civilization, or what was thought to be the highest culture. In short, one might argue that culture is the intervention of human effort in refining and redefining that which is natural, but that it gradually takes on other dimensions in the life of the individual, and even more in the interface between the individual and society.

When speaking of society, this word also requires defining. Society, it has been said, is what emerges from a network of interactions between people that follow certain agreed upon and perceptible patterns. These are determined by ideas of status, hierarchy and a sense of community governing the network. They are often, but not invariably, given a direction by those who control the essentials in how a society functions, as for instance, its economic resources, its technology and its value systems. The explanation and justification for who controls these aspects of a society introduces the question of its ideology and often its form. The resulting patterns that can be differentiated from segment to segment of the society are frequently called its cultures.

Most early societies register inequalities. The access of their members to wealth and status varies. The idea of equality therefore has many dimensions. All men and women may be said to be equal in the eyes of God but may at the same time be extremely differentiated in terms of income and social standing, and therefore differentiated in the eyes of men and women. There may be small social segments such as *jatis* (castes) that may each have a hint of equality—although even among them there is a hierarchy. This would not apply to the entire society. There may be times when societies conform to a greater degree of equality, but such times may be temporary. It has been argued that on a pilgrimage, the status of every pilgrim is relatively similar but

at the end returns to inequalities. Societies are not static and change their forms and their rules of functioning. Cultures are reflections of these social patterns, so they also change.

My attempt in this introduction is to explain how the meaning of a concept such as culture has changed in recent times and has come to include many more facets than it did earlier. This perhaps is pertinent to my choice of subjects included in this book. What we understand as the markers of culture have gone way beyond what we took them to be a century or two ago. The items of heritage that I have included in the first few chapters are an example of this change.

Apart from items of culture, which is the way in which culture as heritage was popularly viewed, there is also the question of the institutions and social codes that determine the pattern of living, and upon which pattern a culture is constructed. The later chapters are concerned with this aspect, where I comment on the perceptions of women in Indian society and the role of caste in providing contexts to determining attitudes to Indian culture. Finally, there is the process of socialization into society and culture through education. There is a historical dimension to each of these as culture and history are deeply intertwined. There is also an implicit dialogue between the present and the past reflected in the way in which the readings of the past changed over historical periods.

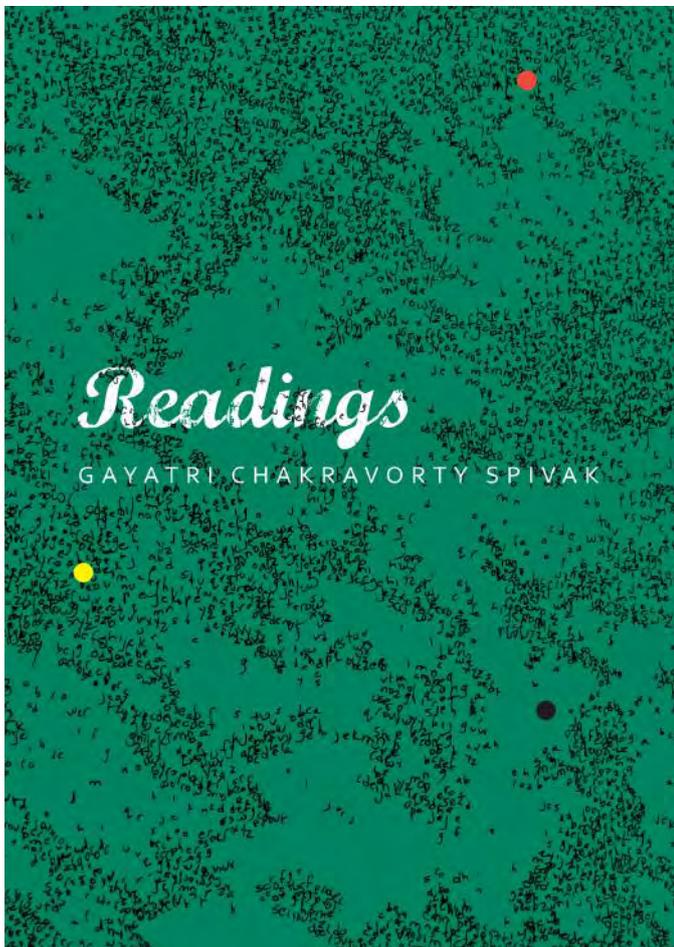
Every society has its cultures, namely, the patterns of how the people of that society live. In varying degrees this would refer to broad categories that shape life, such as the environment that determines the relationship with the natural world, technology that enables a control over the natural world, political-economy that organizes the larger vision of a society as a community or even as a state, structures of social relations that ensure its networks of functioning, religion that appeals to aspirations and belief, mythology that may get transmuted into literature and philosophy that teases the mind and the imagination with questions. The process of growth is never static therefore there are mutations and changes within the society. There is communication and interaction with other societies through which cultures evolve and mutate. There is also the emergence of subcultures that sometimes take the form of independent and dominant cultures or amoeba-like breakaway to form new cultures.

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

Readings

Spivak has probably done more long-term political good in pioneering feminist and postcolonial studies within global academia than almost any of her colleagues.

Terry Eagleton



GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK is university professor in the humanities at Columbia University and the author of many books, including *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990), *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), *Death of a Discipline* (2003), *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (2009, with JUDITH BUTLER), *Nationalism and the Imagination* (2010) and *Harlem* (2012), the last three also published by Seagull Books.

THROUGHOUT HER DISTINGUISHED CAREER, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has sought to locate and confront shifting forms of social and cultural oppression. As her work shows, the best method for doing so is through extended practice in the ethics of reading.

In *Readings*, Spivak elaborates a utopian vision for the kind of deep and investigative reading that can develop a will for peaceful social justice. Through her analysis of specific works, Spivak demonstrates modes in which such a vision might be achieved. In the examples here, she pays close attention to signposts of character, action and place in J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. She also offers rereads of two of her own essays, addressing changes in her thinking and practice over the course of her career. Now in her fifth decade of teaching, Spivak now passes on her lessons through anecdote, interpretation, warning and instruction to students and teachers of literature.

NON-
FICTION
INDIA

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2014

5.5 x 7.75 inches, 182 pages

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KOREAN

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, *Readings*

AN EXCERPT (FROM THE INTRODUCTION)

What is a border? It is, of course, the geographic limits outlining the nation-states, often conflictually. We add to those the internal borders of class and gender, of caste, and the right to health, education, welfare and intellectual, rather than only manual, labour. When I was undergoing the tribulations of Partition, I was not old enough to think Africa. Now I know that the arbitrarily drawn borders that violated African principles of space and made borderlessness impossible would take the Indian discussion into different directions. For we as children, confined to thinking our corner of the world as the World, experienced friendship across borders when Nehru and Zhou Enlai held hands, until the McMahon Line—the border set by the British—created conflict.

In 1961, I left India. The India–China conflict occurred in 1962. Hearing about the war in India, I thought borders were fictions. I thought, for the first time, that the earth came unmarked, except by natural boundaries. I look at Palestine, at Kashmir festering, and mark how history complicates this bit of common sense. And therefore, all facts to the contrary—we who learn from fiction must think a borderless world of unconditional hospitality.

Why do we have to do this? I used to think that this is because human beings are born ethical. Or at least they develop an ethical sign system as they learn their first language as infants, before reason. I am still somewhat sure of this, but I think the possible impulse towards the ethical has to be activated away from the underived selfishness which also operates in all creaturely life. I say ‘creaturely life’ because I try not to be a human racist. In this activation, a literary education can be a great help, because the teacher engages directly with the imagination. The teacher of literature has nothing else to teach. If we teach literary history, it is on the model of history as a discipline. If we teach literature as evidence—and even Frantz Fanon uses it as evidence—it is on the legal model and so on. But by ourselves, we have nothing else to engage with than training the imagination.

It is only with the help of the training of the imagination that we can change our epistemological performance. In other words, we change how we construct objects for knowing. And engaging with the imagination in the simplest way makes us suspend our own interests into the language that is happening in the text, the text of another traced voice, the voice of the presumed producer of the text. I use these words

‘trace’, ‘text’, ‘voice’ because the utility of the imagination is not confined to what we recognize as ‘literature’ today. The element that we might call the ‘literary’, that trains the imagination to step out of self-interest, exists in many shapes and forms in the pasts of all civilizations. In the thinking of a borderless world today, we have to use the imagination through literary training in the broadest sense, including the filmic, the videographic, the hypertextual, learning to read in the broadest sense.

It is the task of the imagination to place a question mark upon the declarative. Imaginative training for epistemological performance focuses upon the detail that often escapes the attention of people who work to solve what seem to be more immediate problems. I draw your attention to the poet and the lawyer in the exchange of letters between Tagore and Gandhi. Tagore is resolute, saying that the only way in which imaginations can come together is through *bajey kharoch*—wasteful spending—spending not on one’s own behalf; whereas Gandhi says: ‘My experience has proved to my satisfaction that literary training by itself adds not an inch to one’s moral height and that character-building is independent of literary training.’

This exchange is important: it is the task of the imagination to place a question mark on the declarative. Imaginative training for epistemological performance focuses on the detail that often escapes the attention of people who work to solve what seem to be more immediate problems. And no revolution lasts or prospers if there is no attention to detail. This is particularly important, because everything that is medicine can turn to poison if the person or the collectivity who is using it is not trained to know how much to use, when and how. This is the training of the imagination that makes revolutions last. It refers not to broad political descriptions but to the micrology of practice.

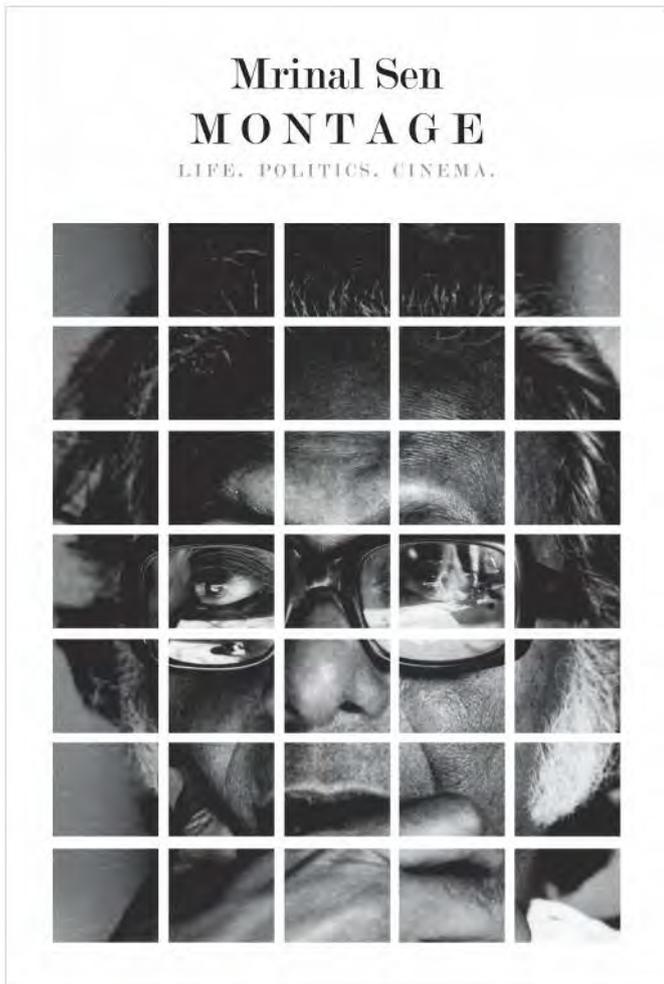
This comes clear with so-called corporate social responsibility. There may be certain showcased features within a private enterprise where social responsibility is evident, but private enterprise today is held within the performative contradiction of borderless capital, and thus it is not possible for it to use its financial and economic policy maximally for the welfare of the state and its people and for the welfare of the world. Social responsibility, therefore, is often a calculation of how much capitalism can get away with.

MRINAL SEN

Montage Life, Politics, Cinema

Extending the humanism of [Satyajit] Ray's celebrated Apu Trilogy in more experimental directions, Sen became a seminal figure of India's 'parallel cinema' . . . Humane, intellectual (but, he claims, not at all erudite), religiously agnostic and politically radical, contradictorily inclined to blunt appraisal and cunning ambiguity, Sen gradually transformed from a polemicist to a poet committed to incertitude.

James Quandt, *The New York Review of Books*



MRINAL SEN (1923–2018) directed over 30 features, documentaries and telefilms over more than five decades. Sen was instrumental in launching the New Cinema movement in India with his critically acclaimed film *Bhuvan Shome* (1969). Sen's films—including *Padatik* (1974), *Parashuram* (1979), *Akaler Sandhane* (1981), *Kharij* (1983), *Khandahar* (1984) and *Ek Din Achanak* (1989)—have received awards from almost all major film festivals, including Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Moscow, Karlovy Vary, Montreal, Chicago and Cairo, and retrospectives of his films have been screened in major cities of the world. He has been member of the jury at international film festivals in Berlin and Moscow. In 2005, Sen received the Dadashaeb Phalke Award, India's highest honour in cinema.

ONE OF THE GREATEST AMBASSADORS of Indian cinema on the global stage, Mrinal Sen has always seen his life and work as part of the social and political fabric of his time. His masterfully subtle and nuanced portraits of urban class tension, leftist politics, and the city of Calcutta itself—which Sen has called his El Dorado—set his cinema apart from that of his contemporaries.

Montage encapsulates half a century of filmmaking. A first-of-its-kind anthology, it includes original writings—memoirs, letters, musings on politics, literature, theater, and cinema; critiques of contemporaries such as Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, as well as inspirations such as Charlie Chaplin and a host of international filmmakers, especially those from Latin America—and intensive interviews with scholars and critics. The result is a unique montage, revealing both the filmmaker and the man, mapping a unique creative landscape, and offering valuable insights into his acclaimed films.

MEMOIR
INDIA

PUBLISHED MARCH 2018

6 x 9 inches, 360 pages

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MRINAL SEN, *Montage*

AN EXCERPT

Talking of cinema, a highly conformist society like ours is most likely to breed conformist viewers. More often than not, they are found to go in for what I would term, ‘stock’ responses. I repeat, ‘stock’ responses. It is unfortunate but only too true.

In the early 1960s there was a little-known man in Films Division [Government of India’s film-production house] called Promod Pati, who defied the prevalent principles, norms and laws of the establishment and let loose a burst of madness on the screen. The results were varied but I was fascinated by the youthfulness and verve of the filmmaker and by the fair amount of gay abandon that he seemed to display.

Soon afterwards, the French New Wave made its influence felt in our country. And I sensed a certain madness in the air. A madness and a freshness. I felt an irresistible urge for change. It seemed to be the best time for me to playfully and yet meaningfully defy the existing barriers, barriers that mainstream cinema would seldom cross. I made *Akash Kusum* in 1965. It was all about the ‘exploits’ of a modern young man, in a desperate bid to overcome the problems of wealth or the lack of it. It may be broadly defined as a comedy.

The evident innovations in *Akash Kusum* were done mostly out of necessity and partly out of sheer playfulness. And, at times, also to shock the conservative Indian audience. A small number liked the film; others thought it was self-indulgent and the rest found it pointless—mere gimmickry.

I did not allow myself to be cowed down but proceeded along my own charted course—steadily, happily, clumsily, desperately. And later, things came to such a pass that for another film of mine made in 1970—*Interview*—I seriously considered introducing a card in my credits, reading ‘Screenplay, Direction & Gimmicks by Mrinal Sen’.

How and where do you draw a line and say, ‘This far and no further or you land into the area of gimmicks?’

To make an honest statement, *Interview*, for what it was worth, called for a very different treatment. There was hardly any plot-driven, calculated ‘story’. It is all about a young man’s day-long search for a pair of suits in the city, which he will need for an interview. All the city laundries are on strike. Everything therefore occurs in a mad rush, typical of life in a metropolis. And the film is a variegated blending of fictional narrative—just a touch of it—newsreel coverage, an almost cinema verité type of documentation and, finally, a provocative session of dialogue between the young man and the invisible ‘me’, followed by a sudden flight into quixotic fantasy. Certainly not every storyteller’s cup of tea. And within the format provided by the subject, I made full use of the fact that cinema was a continuously growing phenomenon—a hybrid art, thriving on cross-fertilization. I went wild. I released

everything that was maddening, restless, nervous, vibrant, buoyant and even flippant within me in a desperate bid to break the frontiers created and closely guarded by the conservatives. And I shall not deny that I did get carried away in the process, and even displayed a certain amount of infantile enthusiasm. In retrospect though, I wish I had avoided it.

It was in the early 1970s that the very air in Calcutta seemed to crackle with anger. Anger and unrest. That was when I made three films in three successive years—*Interview*, *Calcutta 71* [1972] and *Padatik* [1973]. They were, justifiably, angry and restless. And in varying degrees, both passionate and blatant. Here, when I use the word ‘blatant’ I mean it and write it in a positive sense. That was when my team and I could not escape the pressure of our times. That was when we affirmed our condition of rebellion. All this perhaps reads like a pamphlet but that was our reality then.

The third film, *Padatik*, was different from the first two both in content and form because here, without losing their focus on the continuing battle against all kinds of social, political and economic oppression, the characters do a bit of soul-searching as well. The question asked was, ‘Is everything all right on the anti-establishment front? Isn’t it time to examine and question the validity of the mandates of leadership? Isn’t it proper to challenge the establishmentarianism in the leadership? And, if necessary, “to go against the tide?”’

All these three films, like most of my earlier ones, were simultaneously loved and hated—both for the conceptual texts and their modes of expression. I remained as controversial as ever. My unit members and I were always prepared with our arguments, never too tired or uncomfortable to present our case. I remember, whenever I felt defensive, I used to come up with a quote from Niels Bohr, a stalwart in the world of twentieth-century physics, which went something like this: ‘A truth attains a quality only when it becomes controversial.’ [. . .]

Unperturbed, I continued my work and even today, I think I have succeeded in staying the way I want to be. I say a clear ‘No’ to fragile optimism, I confront, I fight, I survive on tension. And as I survive, I look beyond. And I dream. And what is true of me is also true of my characters.

And, in this context, on the technological front, I find it obligatory to use my tools with restraint. I repeat, restraint. Not because I am ageing and therefore mellowing. I am ageing, true, but with age and experience I am becoming more careful, more austere. As I look back, I realize that through experiences and experiments, through failures and errors and also successes, I have tried to understand my medium and myself. I have been constantly changing. I have been correcting my own conclusions. I am doing so. Even now.

ALEX LA GUMA

Culture and Liberation

Exile Writings, 1966–1985

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY CHRISTOPHER J. LEE

FOREWORD BY ALBIE SACHS; AFTERWORD BY BILL NASSON

Alex la Guma's novels of the 1960s and 1970s, banned in South Africa during his lifetime, form an important part to the literature of resistance to apartheid. This new collection of hard-to-come-by shorter pieces, edited by Christopher Lee, is a welcome addition to the La Guma oeuvre. The half-dozen stories set in working-class Cape Town are particularly valuable.

J. M. Coetzee

ALEX LA GUMA (1925–85) was one of South Africa's best known writers during the apartheid era, with several of his books published in the famed African Writers Series edited by Chinua Achebe, including *A Walk in the Night* (1967), *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972) and *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979).

Culture and Liberation: Exile Writings, 1966–1985 captures a different dimension of La Guma's long writing career by collecting his political journalism, literary criticism and other short pieces published while he was in exile. A lifelong activist, La Guma was a member of the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress, eventually serving as the ANC's diplomatic representative for Latin America and the Caribbean in Havana, Cuba. He also was a leading figure in the Afro-Asian Writers Association, serving on the editorial board of its journal *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings* and eventually becoming secretary general of the organization in 1979. Taking its title from one of La Guma's essays, *Culture and Liberation* spans this political and literary life in exile, through accounts of his travels to Algeria, Lebanon, Vietnam, Soviet Central Asia and elsewhere, along with critical assessments of Paul Robeson, Nadine Gordimer, Maxim Gorky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Pablo Neruda, among many writers. The first dedicated collection of La Guma's exile writing, *Culture and Liberation* restores an overlooked dimension of his life and work, while opening a window on a wider world of cultural and political struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century.

ALEX LA GUMA

CULTURE
AND LIBERATION

EXILE WRITINGS

1966–1985

NON-
FICTION
SOUTH
AFRICA

TO PUBLISH NOVEMBER 2020

6 x 9 inches, 432 pages

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ALEX LA GUMA, *Culture and Liberation*

AN EXCERPT

On a smallholding in the Western Transvaal, Mrs. Maria Haasbroek raises pigs, turkeys, and hens, and grows vegetables. She has been separated from her husband for the last six years and apart from the sales of farm produce, gets a welfare grant and some money from her husband.

One day a four-man deputation, including a dominee from the Dutch Reformed Church, the Deputy-Director of Education in the Transvaal, and the Inspector of Education for Potchefstroom, advanced on the small farm.

The dominee was the first to speak, addressing Mrs. Haasbroek with prescribed unction. He said that God had sent them to help her in her troubles. He would open the discussion with a prayer, asking God to help, as the woman stood in the place of her husband and she had 'Hell to fight through'.

It appeared that the 'troubles' all revolved around the fact that while Mr. and Mrs. Haasbroek were 'White' according to South African standards and carried the appropriate identity cards, one of the sons, Flippie, aged 13, was creating 'hell' not only for Mrs. Haasbroek, but for the whole Apartheid State, including the Population Register and the Transvaal Education Department.

The fact of the matter is that Flippie looks Coloured, has a dark skin and kinky hair, and while he is described as a bright and appealing boy, his looks are enough to upset the whole apartheid applecart.

His parents having registered him as 'White', he was sent to a White school for the benefits of a 'White' education. But problems arose when his schoolmates, no doubt acting in the best interests of White civilization, turned upon him and made his life difficult with taunts of 'Coloured'. In any event, Flippie's presence at the Ventersdorp High School became an embarrassment to all and sundry involved in his education, and ways and means had to be found of getting rid of him.

Flippie was thereupon expelled for stealing pumpkins.

But his brother Lewies was also found guilty of stealing pumpkins, but was not expelled from his school. Lewies is fair skinned. 'I see this whole thing as the victimisation of my son on account of his appearance.' Mrs. Haasbroek told the Johannesburg Sunday Times.

When he was at junior school, the principal and members of the school committee had approached Flippie's mother, asking her to withdraw him because, they said, other parents were threatening to send their children away if Flippie stayed. When Flippie passed to high school the 'problem' went with him.

Finding it difficult to make 'Operation Pumpkin Stealer' work, the panjandrums of the Transvaal Education Department took a new course. They would offer to send Flippie, an 'expelled' pupil, to a private school and pay all the expenses. This is a departure from the normal treatment of expelled children.

It is not difficult to imagine the furtive running around to find a White private school that would be willing to gulp down its race pride and admit Flippie into its hallowed Aryan environs. After many refusals and much juggling, the deputation advanced in triumph upon the Haasbroek household, waving aloft an offer from a school, 'Not one where fees are necessary, but no doubt a donation will be made to the school by the department.' It was emphasised that it was a school for Whites.

However, Mrs. Haasbroek, almost gummed up the works. She did not want to sign any papers before she had inspected the school herself. No matter what persecution her child was undergoing for not being the right colour, she wasn't going to let the side down. She was a good White South African.

'I feared that they would send Flippie to a school for Coloureds. I asked them what pupils attended the type of school they had in mind for Flippie, and they said there were mostly English-speaking children, including Roman Catholics and Jews. I said I was afraid Flippie would be influenced at a school like this and become a liberal. I don't want him to become a liberalist. Flippie is a good Afrikaner boy and that's how he should be brought up and that is how I want him to be educated.'

Faced with this outburst of patriotism, the deputation promised to investigate further. The Director of Education for the Transvaal subsequently stated, with official pomp not unmingled with relief and glee, 'The department has obtained the co-operation of the mother of Phillipus Haasbroek in connection with the placing of her son in a school which is regarded in the best interests of the pupil. Both the mother and the school concerned have, at the Department's request, given their wholehearted cooperation and the matter has been settled to the satisfaction of all the parties concerned.'

Flippie went to his new school. The pumpkins have been carefully stored away. What will happen when Flippie finally wants to realise his boyhood ambitions is another bridge to be crossed. When he grows up Flippie wants to be an airline pilot.

One can almost imagine the Ministers of Transport and of Labour already reaching for their aspirins.

POETRY

Ghassan Zaqtan

Alice Attie

Shakti Chattopadhyay

Cyril Wong



GHASSAN ZAQTAN

Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me

and Other Poems

Fragmented, suggestive and vivid . . . With each reading, I found myself struck by echoes I'd missed before, and I am unable to do this wonderful book justice in the space available here. It is rich, exciting, vital, human work that puts everything else I've read this year in the shade.

Rob A. Mackenzie, *Poetry Review*

Born near Bethlehem, Palestinian poet, novelist and editor GHASSAN ZAQTAN has lived in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Tunisia. He is the author of numerous collections of poetry, a novel and a play, *The Narrow Sea*, which was honored at the 1994 Cairo Festival. His verse collection *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me*, translated by Fady Joudah, was awarded the Griffin Poetry Prize for 2013, and he was nominated for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in both 2014 and 2016. His name appeared for the first time in 2013 among the favourites to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

IN THIS INSPIRED TRANSLATION of *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me*, Ghassan Zaqtan's tenth poetry collection, along with selected earlier poems, Fady Joudah brings to English-language readers the best work by one of the most important and original Arab poets of our time. With these poems, Zaqtan enters new terrain, illuminating the vision of what Arabic poetry in general and Palestinian poetry in particular are capable of. Departing from the lush aesthetics of such celebrated predecessors such as Mahmoud Darwish and Adonis, Zaqtan's daily, delicate narrative, whirling catalogues, and at times austere aesthetics represent a new trajectory, a significant leap for young Arabic poets today.

In his preface to the volume, Joudah analyses and explores the poet's body of work. 'Ghassan Zaqtan's poems, in their constant unfolding,' Joudah writes, 'invite us to enter them, exit them, map and unmap them, code and decode them, fill them up and empty them, with the living and non-living, the animate and inanimate, toward a true freedom.'

GHASSAN ZAQTAN

Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me and Other Poems

TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC
BY FADY JOUDAH

PUBLISHED BY
YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
JUNE 2013

6 x 7.75 inches, 144 pages

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POETRY
PALESTINE

GHASSAN ZAQTAN, *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me*

EXCERPTS

You're Not Alone in the Wilderness

In Jabal Najmeh, by the woods, the wizard will stop me
by a passage for boats with black masts
where the dead sit before dawn in black garments and
straw masks,
a passage for the birds
where white fog swims and gates open in the brush
and where someone is talking down the slope
and bells are heard and the rustles of flapping wings
resemble the forest passing over the mounting and nicking
the night!

. . . and peasants, fishermen and hunters, and awestruck
soldiers, Moabite,
Assyrian, Kurd, Mamluk, Hebraic with claims
from Egypt, Egyptians on golden chariots, nations
from white islands, Persians with black turbans,
and idolater-philosophers bending the reeds
and Sufis seeking the root of ailment . . .

the flapping of wings drags the forest toward the edges of
darkness!

In Jabal Najmeh, by the woods
where the absentee's prayer spreads piety's rugs
and the canyon is seen through to its limits,
the furrowed sea scent cautiously passes by
and the cracks are like a jinn's harvest
and the monks' pleas glisten
as I glimpse the ghosts of lepers sleeping on decrepit
cypress

In Jabal Najmeh, by the woods,
I will hear a familiar old voice,
my father's voice throwing dice toward me

Or Malek's voice
as he tows a blond horse behind him in his elegy

Or the voice of Hussein Barghouthi
laid to rest beneath almond trees
as he instructed in the text

And my voice:
You're not alone in the wilderness!

Wolves

The birds' departure from his heart
leaves the plains white
where the story is white
and sleep is white
and silence is the caller's icon

A laugh of sand will sprout when the door is opened
from fear's angle, a hymn
for the grand winter, and the voices
of those who left long ago will jump like grasshoppers
when the door is opened.

Wait, wait a moment
for us to dry a moment
there's in our trace
a reckless lament
and a ceramic bird . . .
and watch for the necklaces on the ceiling

Why don't you turn the lights on
or be happy with sitting

and watch for the fruits on the ground

A Prophecy

Since he has carried it
he's been lying.

The mountain is no longer upright
as in the narrative
and sleep is not enough to dream
where the dead walk about
like incomplete statues.

And no handshakes here
when pedestrians greet their shadows
and throw them a feast

Yet
he has not learned the mirror's vigilance.

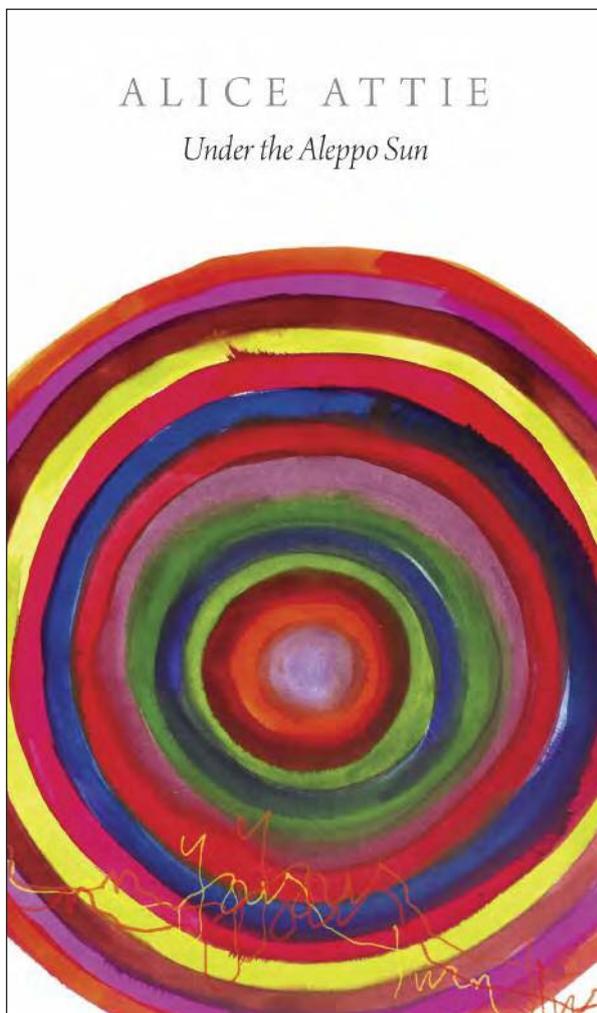
Since he has carried it on his shoulders
like bad news
he's been stumbling in his dreams
like one who's blind.

ALICE ATTIE

Under the Aleppo Sun

Attie is known primarily as a photographer, so this book of poems and drawings—many of them composed of words—is a departure for her, and quite a successful one.

The Independent



ALICE ATTIE is a poet and visual artist from New York City. After graduating from Barnard College with a degree in French literature, Attie obtained an MFA in poetry, studying under June Jordan at the City College of New York. Her photographic work and drawings on paper can be found in collections at The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Jewish Museum, The Getty Museum in Los Angeles and The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, among others. After spending several decades as a distinguished photographer, Attie returned to poetry. Her first volume of poetry, *These Figures Lining the Hills*, was published by Seagull Books in November 2015.

AS THE SYRIAN WAR HAS RAGED over the past several years, the world has watched in horror. And that horror is particularly concentrated on the city of Aleppo, which has been subject to almost incomparable devastation and deprivation. Aleppo is the home city of Alice Attie's grandparents, and with the poems in *Under the Aleppo Sun*, she takes us there—to the months before Assad unleashed his attack in 2011. Through her eyes we see a city that is largely no more: she weaves through the old souk, climbs the steep stones of the ancient citadel, stands in the center of the Umayyad mosque, runs her hand along the walls of the forbidden synagogue. She visits a small shop run by a young man. Over the course of days, perhaps weeks, she returns to see him; as we read the poems, we know what lies ahead for him and his shop, and we can't turn away from what will be lost.

POETRY
USA

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 2018

5 x 8.5 inches, 64 pages

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ALICE ATTIE, *Under the Aleppo Sun*

EXCERPTS

Infinite and Finite

We are transparencies, fleshed into the world.
We ask how far can we go before our dreams take shape,
before our ghostly selves transfigure into presences.
We will utter them, as the truths or
the untruths of the imagination.

We are as ruddy as the sun, as moody as
the moon as it glides into the visible.
Faceless in our dreams, we wake to translate,
to consider being, to hold it and not to linger before
the knowledge of our disappearance.

We are atoms; our bones frame us in certitude.
Our blood runs alluvial,
flowing into the possibilities of ourselves.
We are torqued, spreading into such configurations
as we make and unmake in a day, in a year.

We come into speech as we come into silence.
Our breath will shape and loosen and shape
the intimacies of our birthed and dying selves.
From transparencies to form, we are ephemera
turning and returning as the day turns on its axis.
As ruddy as the sun, as moody as the moon,
we are fleshed in radiance and in darkness,
standing, falling and dissolving into the ether, into the
sky's hue as it runs as blue or mournful as the elegies
named and sung in its fading.

Almonds and Milk

A silver frog with amber eyes,
You held it with your crooked finger.

Here is a gift, you said, take it for good luck.

These are

shards

for the alphabet of the imagination.

A silver frog with amber eyes,
You held it with your crooked finger.

Other Worlds

A squirrel scratches the door of the house in a frenzy
of confusion.
Its failure is portioned out, silhouetted in the landscape.

The hours spin raucous in their orbits.
The pine needles scatter, dry as nettles under our feet.

We think of another time when our coats were zipped,
when lights wove their belts into our bedrooms.

Where are you? Do you hear the children,
their wild bodies dropping into silence?

Of Zatar and Cherries

We walk the silk souk. Its latticed light a pattern on our faces.
A cafe in the centre of the city is festooned with his portrait.
A book by a young poet stirs you to tears.
Someone is calling your name.
Splashing in puddles are the children.
Schubert's Quintet at the heart strings.
Pins, their pink heads mark your place on the map.

We Live and Die Counting

Men on benches
finger worry beads, yellows and greens.

On and on and on,
they move their fingers along the beads.

One man looks at us.
He keeps his fingers moving.

You step into the afternoon to peer at the sky.
Bombs come as sunlight comes.

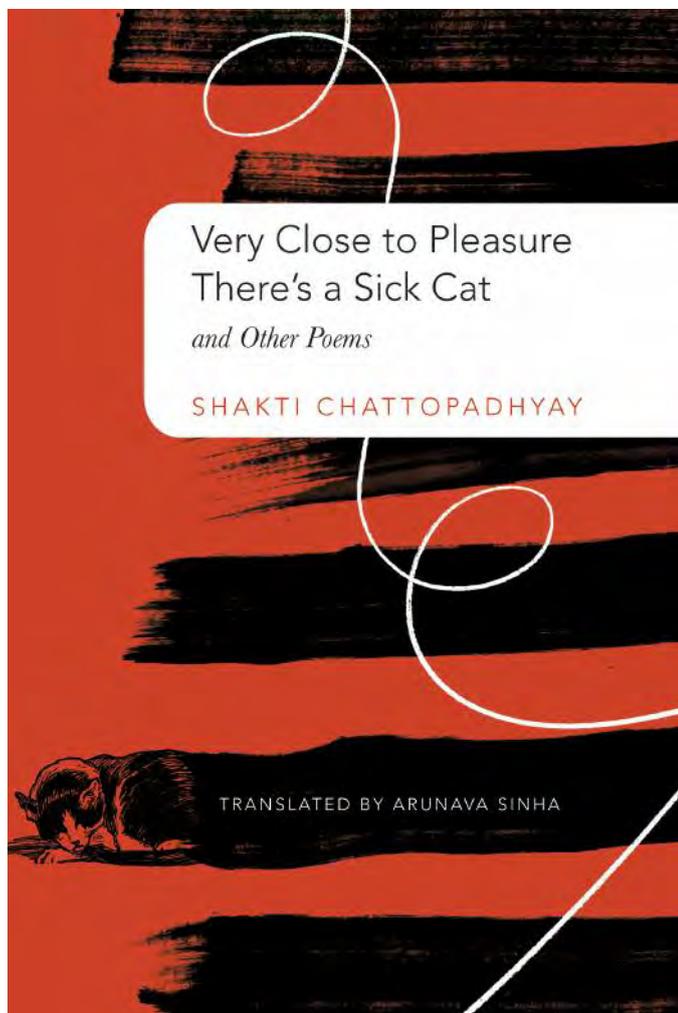
In the equation of death,
light and ruin are one.

SHAKTI CHATTOPADHYAY

Very Close to Pleasure There's a Sick Cat and Other Poems

Urban as well as pastoral, grave similes as well as earthy colloquialisms, elegant as well as vulgar, imperious as well as modest—all manner of expressions burst out of his poetry with a potent but graceful sinuousness. Such a breathtaking experience has almost never before been offered by Bengali poetry.

Shankha Ghosh, in the Introduction



SHAKTI CHATTOPADHYAY (1933–95) was a critically acclaimed and popular Bengali writer and poet, whose books of poetry include *Jete Pari*, *Kintu Keno Jabo?* (1983), which won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. He also published ten novels, several collections of travel writing, one collection of essays, and Bengali translations of volumes by Omar Khayyam, Khalil Gibran, Mirza Ghalib, Heinrich Heine, Federico García Lorca and Pablo Neruda.

SHAKTI CHATTOPADHYAY LIBERATED Bengali poetry from the fetters of scholarship and the fog of punditry. He introduced colloquial street lingo alongside ‘respectable’ Sanskritized expressions to create a fresh, pulsating, truthful idiom that reflected the lived reality of India like never before—a unique style that critics have labelled ‘urban pastoral’. In his striking poems, infused with an inner rhythm, as informal as everyday speech yet worked upon with exquisite precision, he explored loneliness, anxiety, dislocation as well as the redemptive quality of beauty.

This unique vision and style is captured in ‘*Very Close to Pleasure There's a Sick Cat*’ and *Other Poems*, which gathers over 100 of Chattopadhyay’s poems and introduces to an international audience one of the most prominent Bengali poets of the twentieth century. His poetry stays utterly alive and is luminous in the language of every generation—his refusal to fade into nothingness echoed in perhaps the best-known lines of his work: ‘I’ll go / But not just yet / Not alone, unseasonably’.

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI
BY ARUNAVA SINHA

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 2017

5 x 8 inches, 236 pages

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POETRY
INDIA

SHAKTI CHATTOPADHYAY, *Very Close to Pleasure . . .*

EXCERPTS

On My Birthday

Some flowers arrived on my birthday
Amidst the impossible happiness and laughter and music
A cat climbed up the stairs, counting out
Fifty-two steps of its paws, carefully
A spiral iron staircase, atop the stairs
Unobserved by anyone, atop the black stairs
Only I saw
Its hesitant manner
Its melancholy

Some flowers arrived on my birthday
They've wilted now

The Rain on Calcutta's Breast

We hadn't asked for it, still the rain, like galloping hooves
Rang out on the tin shed, flowers were sprinkled on the
road
A stain trickled down the garbage hillock, a different
Black torrent facing ugly houses instead of bungalows
Of Calcutta, the rain came, the rain flooded the bylanes
Swept away stories, rags, fish scales and peel, everything
The humidity in middle-class homes, insurance policies on
Strewn scraps of paper, voting ballots, dry wood shavings—
All of these. From the rain to the
picnic in the rain, all of it
Is useful for Calcutta, dead grass—that's useful too
The labour room on one side, crematorium ashes on the
other
Birth and death, all the details, are neatly arrayed in the
rain
In a satin case, inevitable lumps of cottonwool rest
The rain goes to bed a little late on Calcutta's breast

A Blue Nursery Rhyme

Like a blue nursery rhyme,
the days pass
Just as, in the wind, a fragrance soars
So too does some sort of woman's face in my mind
Through open windows, closed doors

It Will End, This Is How It Ends

I lit it a long time ago
Now it really will go out
Ash from the flames will fly far away
Perhaps all desire
Will die
This is how it ends
The wood rots, decay sets in
So this is how it ends
Sometimes the days will pass
Dragging our feet, bodies
No matter how
One day they
Will burn down
Is there anything left to say?
To the man it's all lies
To the man it's nothing but lies

Sarojini Had Realized

Afternoon, a darkened room—a floor-shrouded wide sky
Sarojini steals a white swan and takes it away
Perhaps it will rain, perhaps a hard wind will blow
Did Sarojini hide the flame of the mouth in the clouds?
The white swans had been ambling alone in the field
Saroj was at home—all she did was gaze wide-eyed at them
At all these swans—when she saw it was about to rain
She went out and was caught in the swan song—fabric love
All she did was gaze wide-eyed, this swan was not for
touching
Sarojini had realized this—only, her heart had not

A Cat

Very close to pleasure, there's a sick cat
Wrapped in wool and fur, there's a sick cat
It sits close by, this patriotic sick cat
Sits close by to get something, get immortality
Hard to keep when close by,
hard to hide in sheets
Hard to hide at home or away,
in disease or infatuation
Very close to pleasure, there's a sick cat

CYRIL WONG

Infinity Diary

Cyril Wong's evocative and sensual poems . . . continue to pulsate long after the lights have gone out. They remind me most of the movies of Wong Kar-Wai, the consummate film-maker of lost love and desire.

Lewis Warsh

A Singaporean born in 1977, CYRIL WONG is his country's leading confessional poet. He received the Singapore Literature Prize for *Unmarked Treasure* (2006) and *The Lover's Inventory* (2016). But to Cyril, success means 'having made someone else feel less alone in the world with what [he's] written, said, or sung'. He is also the author of *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me and Other Stories* (2014).

I'm a poet of intangible things, so my audience doesn't quite exist; their absence is the glare from the newly minted pavement under the unbearable sun where the playground was demolished.

CYRIL WONG

Infinity Diary

INFINITY DIARY IS A LOVE SONG to a man, or in the words of T. S. Eliot, 'private words addressed to [one] in public'. Carefully structured to reflect the many ways in which love between two men can unfold, this volume of poems balances emotionality with meditations on the nature of human relationships. The poetry punctures the sometimes oppressive reality of life in a hypermodern yet far-from-free city and, through twists and turns, ultimately lifts the reader to a place beyond pleasure and pain. Sensual, anecdotal and, of course, confessional, *Infinity Diary* charts an evolution in the work of one of Asia's most intimate English-language poets.

Out of the shadows Cyril Wong has fashioned exquisite poetry from alienation.

TIME

POETRY
SINGAPORE

TO PUBLISH MARCH 2020

7 x 9 inches, 158 pages

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CYRIL WONG, *Infinity Diary*

EXCERPTS

I'm a small animal inside the cave
of your need. As if by some law
of physics, the contents of my head
stop shifting when I rest
against your arm. After a question,
"Because you're my baby"
becomes the only explanation
that matters.

A path through commas of hair
on your chest is a highway
to forever, but there're other paths
demanding to be travelled
alone, longer and more difficult,
the same destination in sight.
What happens when I stop
in the middle of such a path
and turn around to remember
you're no longer there?

I stand on your feet
like how you once stood
on your late father's feet
to dance. If I'm too heavy,
you say nothing, carrying me
in a foxtrot across an invisible
ballroom floor of time.

If the highest achievement
is also its opposite, then
there's nothing to be gained
from winning the lottery
or placing your hand on my face.
In moments when desire recedes
and affection for you glows as if
from a distance, my body is an island
of unbearable peace.

Living is
dying is loving
us for now.

The meditator moves from room to room, but his lover is
everywhere.

If we heard what everyone was thinking, we might choose
to stop thinking altogether.

The unknown rang the doorbell, bearing gifts of knives
and air.

~*~

Creation is the mirror in which we surrender.

What we make gives us form, then swells beyond us—like
love.

Before holocausts in every direction, what first whirls
before the creator?

~*~

The mind keeps waiting to land; a tennis ball violently
served.

Before my head was cleared, I had a vision of you walking
away.

Soon I receded too, our bedroom like a womb I was leaving
for another birth; time peeling off me like a glove.

~*~

What body behind this body of appetite, conditioned ticks
and taunts, kicking to stay?

The embodied mind beyond everything else; a pillow you
still sometimes rest against.

Then when your head is lifted: a clearing at the start of
another infinite day.

DRAMA

Danish Sheikh



DANISH SHEIKH

Love and Reparation

A Theatrical Response to the Section 377 Litigation

Law is essentially how you live your life. When you say, 'I refuse to live my life by these diktats', you are creating your own legal universe. I enjoy showing in my work that law is not a stable entity, it permeates our lives outside the formal domain.

Danish Sheikh, on *Love and Reparation*,
The Indian Express

DANISH SHEIKH
Love and Reparation
A Theatrical Response
to the Section 377 Litigation

DANISH SHEIKH is an assistant professor and associate director of the Centre for Health, Law Ethics and Technology at the Jindal Global Law School. His research largely focuses on the intersection of law and the humanities and the legal regulation of gender and sexuality. *Contempt* was longlisted for the 2017 Hindu Metro Plus Playwright of the Year Award the same year and selected by the Arcola Theatre in London to open their festival of Queer Plays across the World in March 2018.

As in the United States, much of the battle for LGBTQ+ equality in India has been played out in its courts. In 2013, the Supreme Court of India upheld the validity of Section 377, a nineteenth-century colonial-era law that criminalized gay sex. The decision was challenged and the court agreed to reconsider its ruling. Finally, in September 2018, in a landmark judgement, the court decriminalized homosexual activity and put LGBTQ+ people on a new path to equality.

Danish Sheikh's first play *Contempt* explores the hearings in the courtroom over 2012–13 period, while also imagining ways in which the lived narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals might serve as a form of dissent to the violence of the law. In *Pride*, the second play, Section 377 is gone. One expects to move on, except that finding a new story can be harder than it seems, particularly when the law (and life) doesn't neatly fit into a narrative. *Pride* leaps between competing attempts at making sense of the 377 litigation and an individual's attempts at making sense of love outside the shadow of the law. Together these plays record a historic time in our lives that will be cherished by generations to come.

DRAMA
INDIA

TO PUBLISH JUNE 2020

5 x 8 inches, 200 pages

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DANISH SHEIKH, *Love and Reparation*

AN EXCERPT FROM CONTEMPT

Witness 1

I—love—you.

I love you.

These words come way too easily to me. So I'll go on a date with this guy, second date, he picks one of those LBB-featured restaurants, orders the cheapest wine on the menu, doesn't check his phone more than once in the evening, is reasonably non-disappointing in bed and then offers to make coffee the next morning. And that's all it takes, and then it just comes tumbling right out: thanks for the coffee I love you.

And then of course he looks all horrified and goes stumbling out of the house before I can explain that I really meant to say love with a small L, like font size 7, like the outer ring road of love.

You know who got this? The Greeks.

The ancient Greeks, they understood the big difference between the I love you-s of good sex and the I-love-you-s that lead to joint tax declarations.

They knew that no one word could capture the infinite messiness of love, and so they had several. Ludus—playful love. Pragma—longstanding love. Philia—love of the mind, Agape—love of the soul, Storge—love of the child, Philautia—love of the self—and then.

And then, there was another kind of love. A love rooted in erotic frenzy, a love that could shatter worlds. Eros, that's what they called it, and one night, thousands of years ago, a group of men gathered together in ancient Greece to honour Eros.

There were 7 of them that night at the house of Agathon. The tables groaned with food and goblets of wine. A gentle music serenaded them as the summer night breeze wafted through the room, plucking beads of sweat glistening on their uncovered bodies.

There were 7 of them.

A statesman, a doctor, a playwright, a poet, a philosopher, a lawyer. Outside the door of the house, there was another man listening, waiting, hoping. His name was Alcibiades, but he's not important just yet. So here you have these men, getting drunk and delivering odes to the glory, the magnificence of Eros. They tell us how Eros is mania, how it is poetry, how it

is medicine for the soul, how it is a quest for the other half of the soul. They agree that Eros is crucial, that is vital.

And finally, they come to Socrates. Who of course must have the last word, because he is Socrates, the great, Socrates the father of western philosophy. And he says well, Eros eh. Eros is fine, Eros is good. But, really, let's do away with Eros. Let's do away with the carnal pleasures of the flesh, let's climb, the ladder of beauty. Let's move towards a higher good.

Let's reject Eros.

(Witness 1 walks offstage, the lawyer enters)

[...]

Witness 4

My name is Kokila. Kokila means cuckoo. This is not the name on my birth certificate. I will not tell you what that name is. It is not mine.

My name is Kokila. My parents use it for me now. It took some time, but they use it. After all, there is nothing else I will answer to.

My name is Kokila. I cannot remember how long I have known this, or when I realized it. I think I heard it first in a bus.

My name is Kokila. When we are lying in bed I make him whisper it to me as I am falling asleep, maybe I am scared he will forget otherwise. When he leaves in the morning I make him repeat it. Don't say bye, don't say bye my love. Say bye Kokila, say it, say it again, bye kokila, say it like that, yes. It means cuckoo, did I mention that? I don't know what cuckoo birds are like really, or if I am like a cuckoo, but when you say it to me it is the right sound.

My name is Kokila, Kokila is my name. They don't believe it. When I try to make them write it in black ink on green paper with a blue stamp, they look at me like I have come to the wrong place. But there is one document that calls me Kokila. There is one place where you will say it, there is one place where you will allow me to say who I am, that I exist. It is an affidavit. It speaks about my rape.

My name is Kokila. If you repeat a word enough times, it loses its meaning.

I would still very much like you to say my name.

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