

Wild Wild East

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

In the 1950s, giddy with the glory of a blood-soaked independence, Bollywood churned out films that were high on “Nehruvian nationalism”. Undying hope, inclusivity and righteousness formed the bones of films starring Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand. In *New Kings of the World* (2019), Fatima Bhutto takes an inquisitive gaze into this trajectory of Bollywood and how Eastern pop culture is dampening Hollywood’s firm grip on popular entertainment.

By the ’70s, the young Bollywood protagonist became an indignant man from the rural region, socialism roiling within him. He wants to avenge the wounds inflicted on his community by a rich man and his gang. Come the ’90s the landscape changes. Now, the protagonist is a posh Non-resident Indian who “drives a BMW and wears Nikes.” He no longer dances amidst rustic Indian valleys abloom with flowers; his destination is London’s Trafalgar Square. He only chases his love interests and makes a “pornographic show of wealth.”

Leftist ideals once ran unfettered in Bollywood films, but their platform collapsed as the Soviet Union disintegrated and free-market capitalism imbued every sphere. Amitabh Bachchan is one remarkable example—once a bastion of equity in the films of the ’70s, he was lifted off the lands of the farmers and their riots, and planted into aristocratic palaces bustling with petty family drama. In her book, Bhutto points fingers at “[this] intersection of two ominous forces: neoliberalism and Hindutva”. Neoliberalism shifted Bollywood’s focus, she argues, while Hindutva rendered mainstream Bollywood stars politically neutral, unquestioning of Hindu extremism. As proof, we saw mainstream celebrities cheering for war after the attacks on CRPF soldiers in Kashmir in 2019. (Ajay Devgan wrote on Twitter: “Mess with the best, die like the rest.”) Nonetheless, Bollywood stars are loved by many across borders. Even, surprisingly, by the indigenous people of Peru.

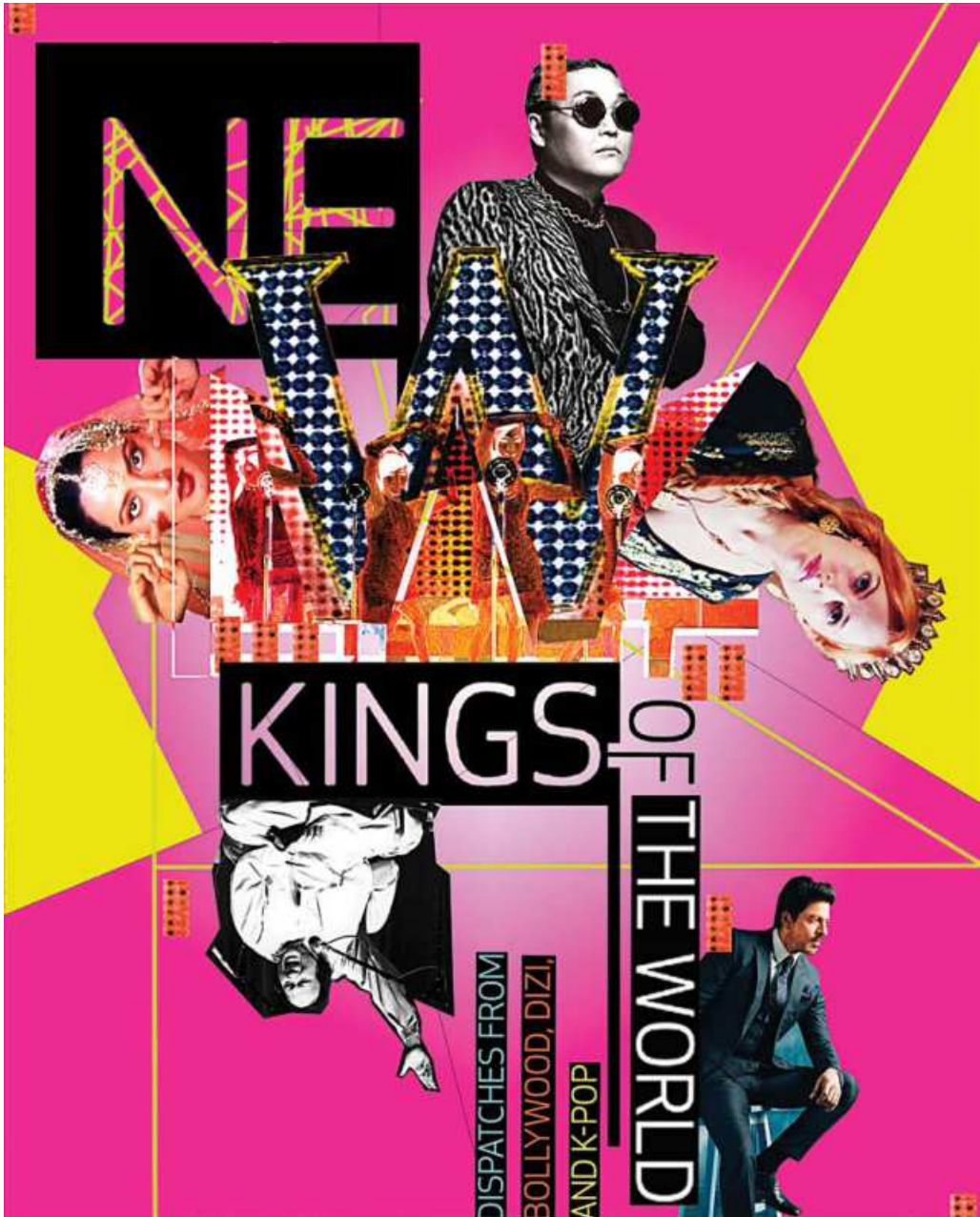


PHOTO COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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Peruvians first fell in love with Raj Kapoor’s *Mera Naam Joker* (*El Joker*). American films were accessible but did not resonate with them the way Bollywood did. These films taught them about values, love, sacrifice and family. These films didn’t make them feel inferior. After all, there was something special “about a brown guy making it big” in a very white world. In Peru, Bollywood fan clubs host regular meet-and-greets, dancers take Bollywood dance lessons, some fluently speak Hindi, some add Indian aliases to their actual names, and some are even cured by the winsome charm of SRK.

While Bollywood is her prime focus, Bhutto also profiles K-pop and the Turkish Dizi—two to three hour-long TV shows portraying epic sagas. She writes about their influence on an increasingly globalised world. When in 2017 Mohammad Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia threw elite individuals into a gilded prison, Turkish Dizi suffered a major loss as it was pulled by a popular television network, proving how entertainment is deeply tied with and impacted by the dynamics of power. But the Turkish Dizi still thrive. From the cosy American homes to

run-down refugee camps in Lebanon, people have grown to love Turkish Dizi as much as Bollywood. Meanwhile, Korean pop music continues to challenge America’s popular grip on the entertainment industry, as testified recently by the billboard awards.

The incessant rise of this trinity—Bollywood, K-pop, Turkish Dizi—is propelled by the invisible hand of globalisation and its offerings of capitalism and neoliberalism, according to Fatima Bhutto. *New Kings of the World* is an anthropological and journalistic delight that can be devoured in one sitting. It highlights the hardliner politics that fiddle with our complicated histories and what we consume, and reminds us how this world we inhabit is very much interconnected. Bhutto’s work pays witness to an amazing irony, which is that America’s very own pop culture machinations are now mobilising other cultures to challenge their singular, global grip. The sands are surely shifting.

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Risky Business: The Company that never left

DR. SAYEED AHMED

The book starts with the origin of the word *loot*, a slang word for plunder. It was imported into the English language while the East India Company and its officers pillaged—for more than 100 years—Bengal, Mysore, Deccan, Hyderabad, and finally Delhi, the seat of the Timurid dynasty in the vast Indian sub-continent. In *The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire* (2019), William Dalrymple tells the gripping story of the Company’s conquest of Mughal India for close to 50 years, using his fluid writing style and research from extensive travels and interviews. Dalrymple lives the history he writes.

One issue the book handles well is the legitimacy of power. When Shah Alam ascended to the *musnad* (throne) of Delhi in 1760, there were several regional military powers across India. Nadir Shah of Iran had already ravaged Delhi and taken away the Koh-i-Noor as his prize, leaving a financially, politically, and psychologically weakened Mughal Emperor. But he remained the legitimate ruler in the minds of his people. In 1765, the Company gained *diwani*, the right to collect taxes directly in the eastern province of Bengal-Bihar-Orissa, but had no responsibility for their welfare. Its officers made brutal use of this power to their benefit—within five years, this region faced a devastating famine causing an estimated 10 million to die.

THE GLOBAL POWER BALANCE

By the mid-18th century, the Ottoman military fell behind the Habsburg and

commanders riding elephants or horses, Clive led daring charges on dark monsoon nights through mud fields or swamps, taking the enemy by surprise. The remaining Indian powers could only turn to the English Company or the French for any help, little realising that both had come to India with the same intention. Could a more unified India have defeated these European enemies? Such a reversal of the tide would only have been temporary. Mughal India was already on the wrong side of history.

The story that Dalrymple tells of these events is utterly gripping, and you never quite feel the length of the book. He writes about personal connections—three earlier Dalrymples, Stair, James, and Alexander who were directly involved at its different stages, and about other small but significant events to set a great tone for the narration. When both Mir Jafar and his son Miran wanted to marry Lutf un-Nissa, the most beautiful of Siraj’s wives, after his death, she replied: “Having ridden an elephant before, I cannot now agree to ride an ass.”

THE RISE OF CORPORATE GREED

In 1773, the East India Company almost went bankrupt from its aggressive expansion strategy and incessant wars in India. But the Crown was obliged to bail it out with a massive loan of about 1.4 million pounds—equivalent to more than 140 million pounds today—because almost a quarter of the Members of the Parliament had stakes in it. Their argument at the time will sound familiar even today: the Company was ‘too big to fail.’ With only 35 odd employees at its head office in London, they conquered and ran a vast empire in India and shipped billions of pounds out of it with brutal efficiency.

Dalrymple argues that this corporate culture pioneered by the East India Company is still prevalent today, as demonstrated by state adventures in Iraq and elsewhere, paid for by taxpayers’ money, to benefit only a few. The pillage continues. In 1767 the Company bought off the British Parliament to safeguard their *diwani* rights in Bengal. Present-day modern corporations operate in developing countries similarly, taking advantage of the weak governance and legal loopholes. A dangerous mix of power, money, and corruption controls the majority of the world economy even today.

Dr Sayeed Ahmed is a consulting engineer who writes on history, culture, and contemporary issues.



PHOTO COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

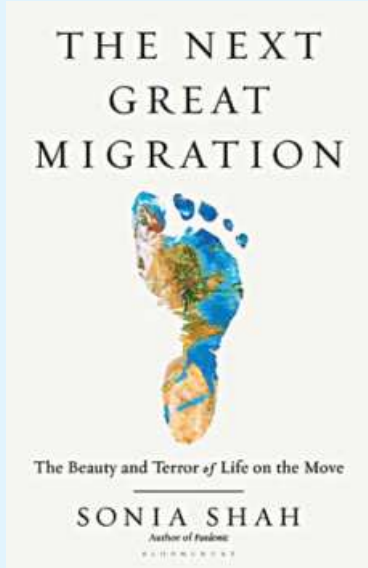
Russian empires. England, France, and other emerging European powers were competing against each other to set up trading posts and colonies in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and particularly the rich but fading Mughal Empire. They were full of vigour and vitality, hungry for adventures and exploration.

Dalrymple uses British military officer Robert Clive as a personification of this attitude, with “a willingness to take great risks and a breath-taking, aggressive audacity.” While conventional Indian warfare was conducted in daylight with their

THE SHELF

WORTH A READ THIS MONTH

Spanning history, politics, science, and anthropology, we feel that these novels and non-fiction books freshly published in the last few weeks each have the promise of being a fascinating read.

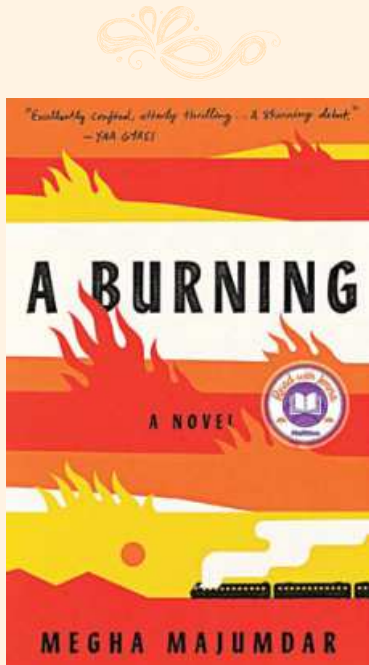
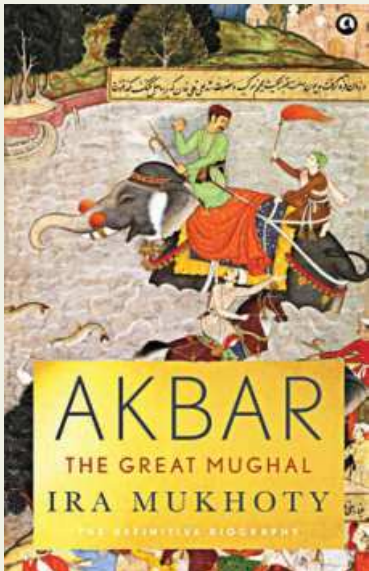


THE NEXT GREAT MIGRATION
(June 2020)
Sonia Shah,
Bloomsbury
Non-fiction

Why do human beings migrate? And does it disrupt or benefit states and societies? Science journalist Sonia Shah has previously written about diseases in the form of travel books. Now, she traces the movement of humans, plants, and wildlife across history to measure their impact on environmental change, myth-busting the principles of anti-immigration policies.

AKBAR: THE GREAT MUGHAL
(June 2020)
Ira Mukhoty, Aleph Book Company
Non-fiction

Having previously explored women in Indian mythology and the Mughal Empire, Ira Mukhoty, in this latest, offers a ‘definitive’ biography of Emperor Akbar. She covers his childhood and all that transpired in his 50 year rule—military tactics, abolition of slavery and *jiziya* (religious tax), his efforts to emancipate women, and more—leaning on current research by art historians.



A BURNING (June 2020)
Megha Majumdar, Knopf
Fiction

A Muslim girl from the slums is blamed for a terrorist attack because of a Facebook comment. A gym teacher tries to climb into a right-wing political party at her expense. But she can be saved by the alibi of someone—a social outcast who dreams of success in the movies. Author Meghna Majumdar, associate editor at *Catapult* and an anthropology graduate from Johns Hopkins and Harvard universities, follows in the traditions of Jhumpa Lahiri and Yaa Gyasi, tackling class, corruption and extremism in a debut set in Kolkata.

MINOR DETAIL (May 2020)
Adania Shibli, Translated from Arabic by Elisabeth Jacquette, New Directions
Fiction

It is 1949, a year after the *Nak-ba* displaced 700,000 people in Palestine. A Bedouin teenager is raped, killed and buried in the desert sand by Israeli soldiers. When Shibli, a writer in present-day Ramallah, discovers this atrocity in a news report, she becomes obsessed with telling the story from the point of view of the victim. The project takes her to the perilous site of the crime in Israel.

