

FRESH OFF THE PRESS

TECHNICOLOUR MUGHALS

Ira Mukhoty brings Akbar to life

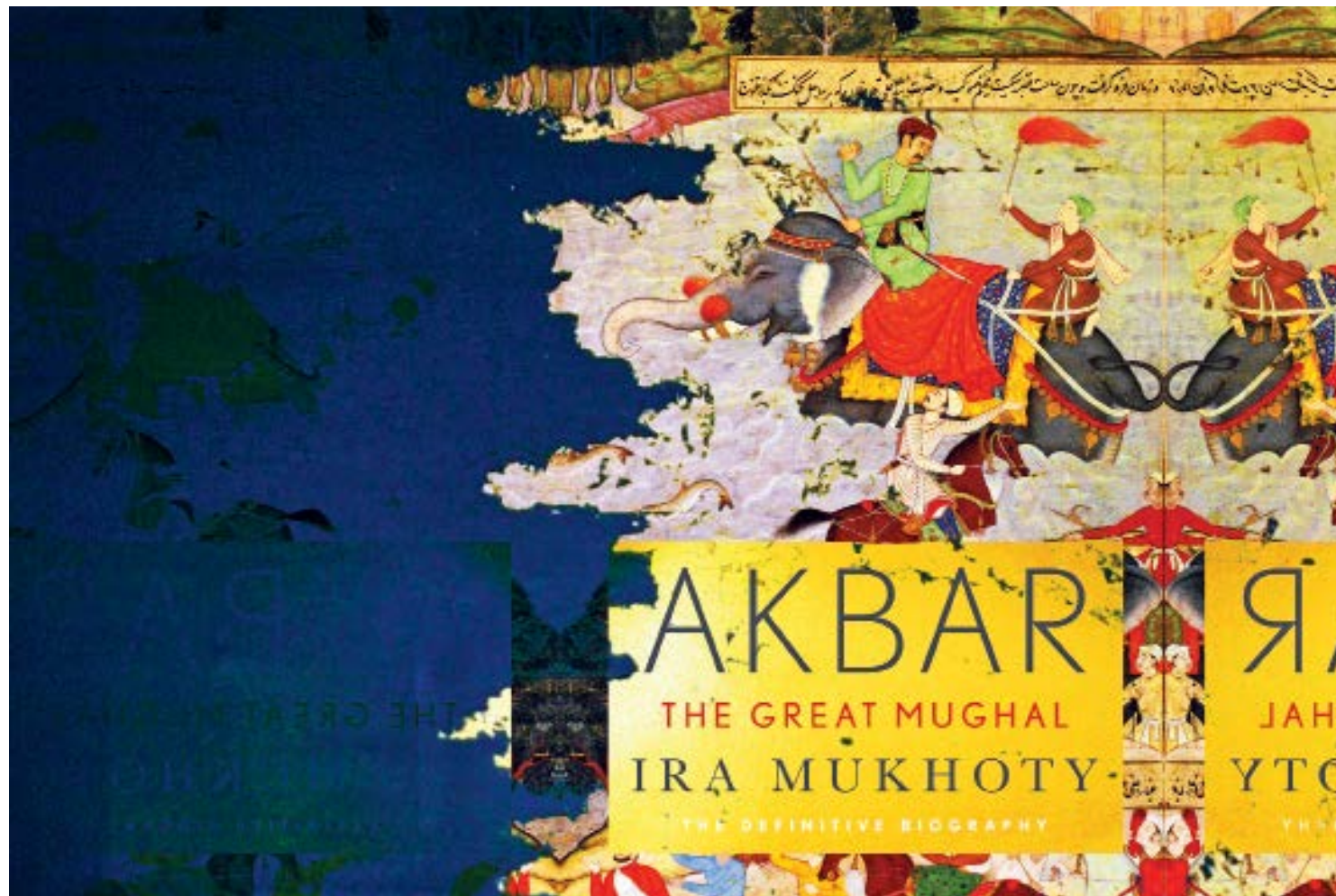
YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI

Humans are a storytelling species. Yet history, which is but the stories of yesteryears, is taught like a chain of facts and dates. We remember kings and conquerors but neglect the finer details—their hobbies and jokes, their families, society and the books they read—that transform history into a living, breathing story that we can pass on for generations. This transformation is what Ira Mukhoty attempts in her book, *Akbar: The Great Mughal* (Aleph Book Company, 2020).

Mukhoty is in equal parts a storyteller and a historian. She weaves tales that are peppered with sources and citations, all the while using vivid imagery that transports one back to the past, so that Akbar ceases to be a historical figure and becomes a man whose victories we rejoice and whose flaws we condemn.

One of Mukhoty's key tools in countering the often dull highbrow academic façade is found in her use of sources. While most historians stick to written primary sources, especially for a time so well documented, Mukhoty also considers the art made by and in response to Akbar. She scours the pieces for clues relating to his and his courts' activities and recounts the stories behind their creation—the most significant of which would be the *Hamzanama* and the sprawling *Akbarnama* and *Ain-i-Akbari*. In doing so, she expertly melds art history with historical texts, and fleshes out the world Akbar lived in far more vibrantly than most other historical accounts.

Indeed, this fleshing out is so prioritised that it is quite a few pages into the book until Akbar himself takes centre stage. Mukhoty takes her time to show us what kind of man Babar and Humayun were as emperors, conquerors, and fathers. We spend time with Akbar as a child, when he hated formal education due to what modern scholars believe was dyslexia. We see him as a rambunctious teen, wrestling elephants for naught but glory.



COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

We also witness his relationship with his mother Hamida Banu and wet nurses, especially Maham Anaga—both the spoiling and reprimanding—and how integral they were to his rise as a political powerhouse. Mukhoty highlights their ambitions, the sociological circumstances that led them to influence Akbar as they did, and how they used their limited means to make lives better for women in the Mughal court. When

contrasted with many women who are left in the margins of history and the hundreds if not thousands of books written about the likes of Birbal and Bairam Khan, it is incredibly refreshing to see the women in Akbar's life and in the Mughal court given due spotlight in the narrative.

Mukhoty similarly examines Akbar's courtiers and ministers and shows us what made them tick. For a while, the growing

ambitions of Bairam Khan and his cold war with Hamida Banu and Maham Anaga become the driving plot of the book, culminating in Khan's fall from grace. For another, the brewing dissent from Uzbeks becomes the focal source of tension, while the threat of rebellion by other Timur heirs looms consistently over Akbar's strategic command over his empire. These details are not just relegated to isolated parts of the book

but are braided in throughout the tome so that the story becomes not just about Akbar, but about how his entire court functioned and interacted.

While both her content and approach are unique, and the book is at its best when Mukhoty adds her artistic flourish to the prose, there are long stretches when the text seems to drag on with names and events. This is exacerbated by her pacing, which often times builds to a climax at the end of a chapter, only for it to be resolved within a paragraph or not addressed until much later, when the details have become murky with the sheer amount of information presented to us. This can make it hard to retain the attention of a non-academic audience.

Regardless, Ira Mukhoty's biography is a nuanced and exhaustive take on a man so glorified. Using text, images, and informative supplementary material before and after the text proper, she presents Akbar and those around him with detailed context and prose befitting that of a story. She also demonstrates the intellect, traits, and emotions with which a 13-year-old boy mourning his father's death grappled with an empire thrust prematurely at him, and expanded it into one of the largest and most innovative empires in the subcontinent's history.

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Watch the Facebook Live interview with Ira Mukhoty on Daily Star Books on Facebook.

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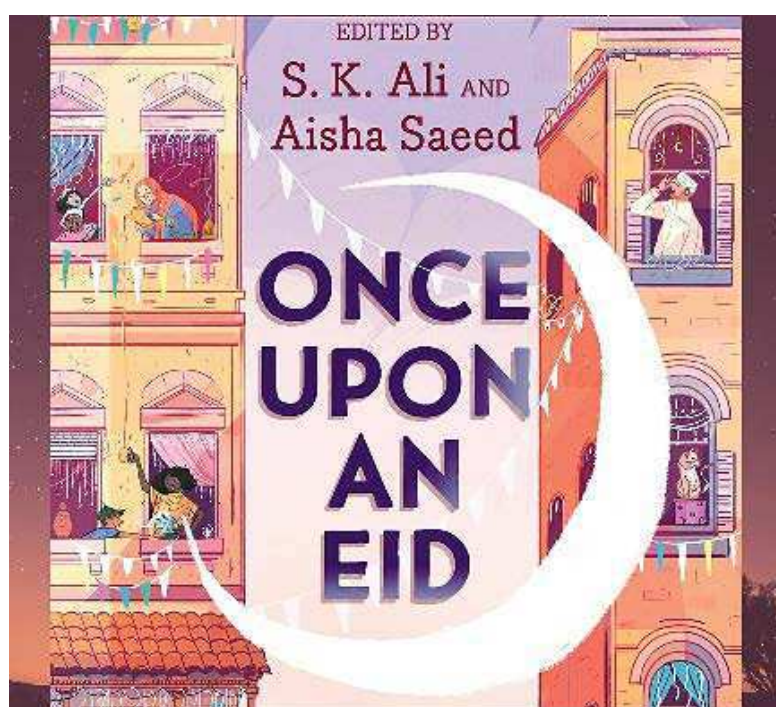
A rare glimpse into Muslim homes

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Diversity can seem jaded when it is employed for the sake of appearing "woke". But books such as *Once Upon An Eid: Stories of Hope and Joy from 15 Muslim Voices* (Amulet Books, 2020), written by individuals who simply want to rejoice in the intricacies of their culture, can be incredibly refreshing for readers who live both in and outside of that landscape. Equally refreshing is the depiction of Muslim practices unscorched by the accusations of being terrorists or "outsiders", even when the characters stretch from New York to Pakistan and all the way to refugee camps in Greece, all celebrating Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha in their own way.

The short stories, poems, and graphic narratives in this anthology don't necessarily deny the complications of practicing Islam in an increasingly hostile world. In fact, most of the pieces focus on Muslim immigrants living in the West. Candice Montgomery's short story "Just Like Chest Armor" unpacks how an 11-year-old Spanish-Caribbean Muslim feels her way around the hijab for the first time—Leila relishes the softness of the fabric against her cheek and having her father brush her thick curls into the hijab every day before school. To her, the hijab represents freedom and the promise of dipping her toes in an adult world (like her Mama), as she watches her father turn the hijab into a cape around his own shoulders. Yet her mother wants to stay the process, wants her daughter to truly be prepared before wearing it "out of the house and in spaces that test who [they] are."

These lighter stories sketch out vibrant scenes of families celebrating Eid. While in "Perfect"



Philadelphia resident Hawa chafes against her West-African Mandinka roots, in another story two cousins salvage burned Eid desserts with the help of elders. Two Pakistani siblings process their shock at seeing mountains of raw meat at their grandparents' home on Eid-ul-Azha and learn its historical significance in "The Feast of Sacrifice". The comic strips in "Seraj Captures the Moon" offer a break from all the text, and feature a young girl who sets off in search for the crescent moon with her donkey, away from distracting city lights, spurred on by the knowledge that "not all the things Allah asks from us are easy."

If these stories seem to skim the surface with their upbeat tone and plot, that's because it's mostly meant for a young adult audience. In the more complex stories, though, the language gathers depth. N H Senzai's "Searching for

Blue" walks us alongside young Bassem, who lost his father to the Syrian civil war. Bassem is a subdued narrator; war has robbed him of the childlike excitement driving the other young characters in the anthology. In reflection of his hard-earned wisdom, the prose here offers subtler but thornier observations by juxtaposing fancy tourist life against the refugees also stranded on the Greek shore: "Solemn and peaceful, the Church of Mary rose at the corner beside a restaurant. The Apollo Hotel came next, a bright pink concoction resembling a fluffy birthday cake. A boy stood at the gates, sweeping the steps."

Elsewhere, Hannah Alkaf's poem "Taste" uses vivid, haunted descriptions of Indonesian cooking to depict a child's trauma of losing a parent. "Candlenuts, round and hard; lemongrass, but only the white bits; / shrimp paste, toasted

so that the smell fills the entire/ house and makes Aiman cough (Stop it, / kakak!). [...] I run a finger over the knuckles of my right hand, smiling at/ the ghost of a hard rap from a wooden spoon/ and mama's voice, half laugh, half scold: The taste is different, Alia!"

In "Eid Pictures", Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow's verse inspires nostalgia and solidarity with Muslims through the ages, tracing as far back as when being coloured meant slavery. "...bright garments making music as they glide against dark skin. [...] The Eid pictures in my family's old photo albums, though—/ they calm, / settle/ and soothe me like Jeddah's arms. [...] Picture Eid for the first Muslims who came to American shores [...] Close your eyes and picture them/ in ships, / in chains, / enslaved."

For most of my life, cosy holiday reads in English have inadvertently involved reading about Western traditions—twinkling Christmas lights, presents under a tree, the warmth of pudding and turkey while the world outside lay blanketed under snow. Beautiful as they are, these tropes have never resonated with my own holiday experiences as a Muslim Bangladeshi woman. *Once Upon An Eid* would have been far richer—and dearer—had it also portrayed Eid celebrations in Bangladeshi homes. Nonetheless it offered the unique thrill of finding myself, my history and rituals, in the pages of a book, that too somewhat unfiltered from a White and Western gaze. On this Eid, which hardly feels like one given the ongoing pandemic, this is the kind of comfort we could use.

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BOOK CLUB HIGHLIGHTS

Conversations from the Daily Star Book Club

DS BOOKS DESK

On the Daily Star Book Club last week, we asked members how they organise and look after their book collections at home. Here is what we learned:

"I started collecting books from when I was 8 or 9. I make 'to-be-read' book hauls out of them and pick each current read from them randomly. I prefer to leave the 'read' ones scattered around the house!"

"I am putting my books in plastic wrap with a silica gel pack to keep the pages safe from humidity."

"I arrange my books according to genres and timeline, a skill I picked up from working at the library. I usually have two books lying on my bed, and

one in my bag because I enjoy reading multiple books at the same time."

"For me it has to do with mood. I stack my books accordingly, so if I'm in the mood for a light read, I know which section of the shelf to head towards. That's also why you'll find the same author scattered across the shelf, some with the fiction, others with non-fiction!"

Join the Daily Star Book Club group on Facebook! Follow Daily Star Books on Facebook, @thedailystarbooks on Instagram, and @DailyStarBooks on Twitter. Email us at thedailystarbooks@gmail.com.



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