

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

# A family comes undone in Leesa Gazi's 'Hellfire'

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Bright and cold on a winter afternoon, in the hours leading up to lunch, the kitchen of a Bengali family sizzles with tension. Refrigerated meat is thawed and spices are crushed and pestled. Dishes are washed, helpers are yelled at; some long-standing house rule is suddenly excused amidst the domestic chaos, and unspoken trauma and resentments are pressed back down even as they threaten to bubble over like the brown and green-flecked ochre *daal* simmering on the stove top. We know this scene—we've lived it—and like a fly on the wall we watch it unfold in Farida Khanam's Monipuripara home on the afternoon of her elder daughter's 40th birthday, when Lovely has been allowed out of the house alone for the first time. In Leesa Gazi's words, translated from the Bengali by Shabnam Nadiya, this day will imprint itself upon the minds of Farida, Lovely, her sister Beauty, and the readers watching. *Hellfire* (Westland Publications, September 2020) is a slim and delicious novel.

To experience the trivialities and intricacies of Dhaka life in book form—one that reads well and looks good—is a rare treat for English readers in Bangladesh. The fault for this mostly lies with local publishers, many of whom spare little attention to cover art, formatting, or editorial work that goes beyond proofreading. It's not for readers to know how much editorial input *Hellfire* contains, but the finished product is a well-edited book. The ominous red and black cover promises a potent, seductive read, and the text delivers. The formatting is as neat and concise as the story it illustrates.

And the content itself is clearly the brainchild of an author-translator duo who have fingers placed on the very pulse of domestic life in this country. Leesa Gazi

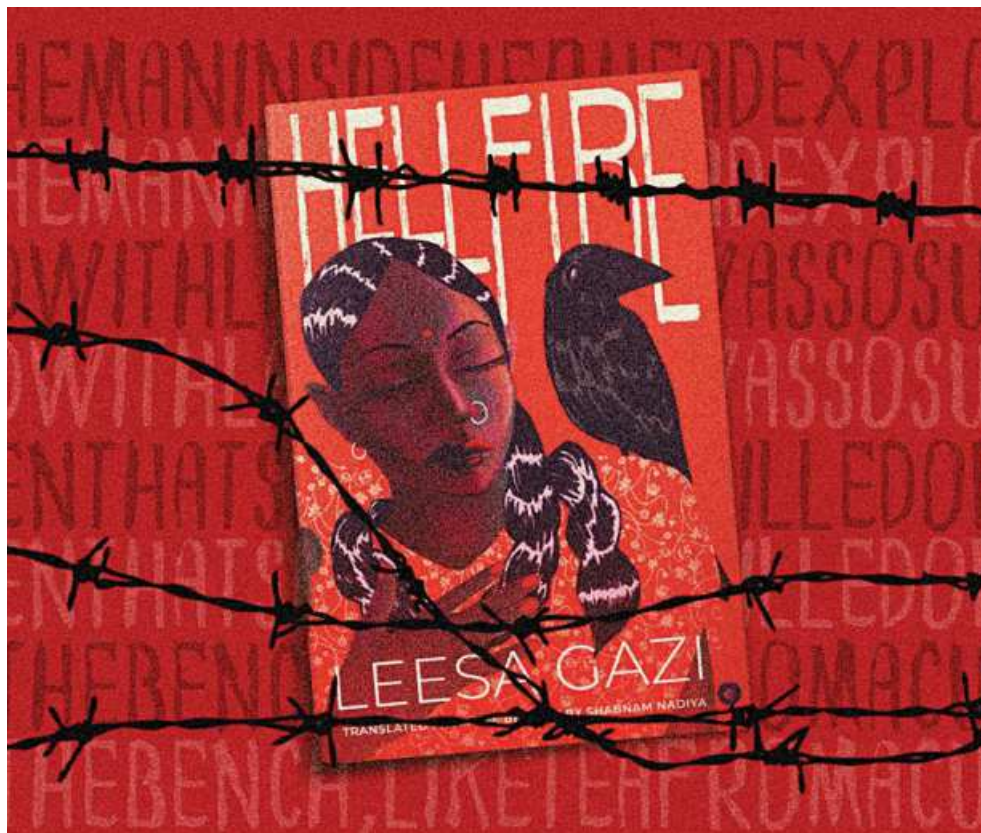


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

has been known to meld dual worlds in her previous works: both writing and directing *Rising Silence* (2014), a documentary about the lives of Birangonas, and reimagining Dickens' *Oliver Twist* as a modern day, female-centred *Aleya Twist* (2019). This time, she goes entirely local, and the constraints of setting, form, and medium produce fascinating results, mirroring the intriguing effects of imprisonment upon her novel's characters.

*Hellfire* is at once a book about patriarchy that bleeds into and invigorates a toxic type of matriarchy, and also a book about freedom, desire, and the possibilities of human nature. Lovely and her sister Beauty haven't been allowed to socialise, attend school, or even find spouses as they approach middle age, all because their mother Farida feels the need to control her household: "My house, my siblings, my parents—this concept of mine was

dangerously alive in her." But just when you begin to despise her for the demons she has helped create in her girls—which incidentally make them fascinating creatures to read about—the text suddenly changes dimensions. If not a rationale, one is now offered a deeper, riskier glimpse into what tied this family up into such ugly knots in the first place, and the causes are sadly all too prevalent in life outside of the book's pages in our society. The finesse in *Hellfire* lies in how realistically it portrays such crossed wires as they must look from afar, undisturbed on an afternoon packed with chores and winter heat, and how ominous they become the closer one steps. Dramatic elements notwithstanding, the novel captures perfectly the convoluted blueprint and

opens with the promise of a lunch (instead of Clarissa's dinner) party and takes place over the course of one seemingly ordinary day. Like Woolf's characters, Gazi's go about their respective businesses—Beauty applying her face masks, Lovely heading out to Gawsia and Ramna park, Farida busy preparing the *luchi*, duck curry, *raita*, and *hilsa polao* on today's menu, and Mokhles Shaheb dosing over his tea on the balcony—until suddenly, the tethers roping them all together are stretched tight, and an unravelling is set into motion. And like Woolf's war-haunted, early 20th century England, *Hellfire* is cheekily grounded in the socio-political landscape of contemporary Bangladesh. Struggle too hard against the powers that be (Farida in this case) and you "might be remanded into custody. You might even be finished off in a crossfire."

Some books deserve language that functions as an independent entity, language that soars and dives and distracts you from the minutiae of the story. But here, in a book whose characters and tightly choreographed plot are the stars, Shabnam Nadiya's translation floats like charged air—transparent yet propulsive. If one had to nitpick, I'd say I would've wanted to see Lovely see more and do more around the city. But it's also easy to see why she stays within the boundaries that she does. Either way, throughout her mini adventure, you sit biting your nails over what might happen next, which could be anything, until the thrust of a climax brings you up short, leaving a disturbing, mildly nauseating flavour in its wake.

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precarious balance holding up nearly every average family, particularly one situated in a South Asian society.

All of this it accomplishes in the short span of little over a hundred pages. Tahmima Anam, whose blurb endorses the book on its cover, has pointed out the traces of Greek tragedy in Leesa Gazi's characters. But it's hard not to also be reminded of Mrs Dalloway. Like Virginia Woolf's novel, *Hellfire*

THE BOOK REPORT

## Silenced soldiers

Revisiting the only book written by an Indian about the Indian soldiers of WWI

ZOHEB MASHIUR

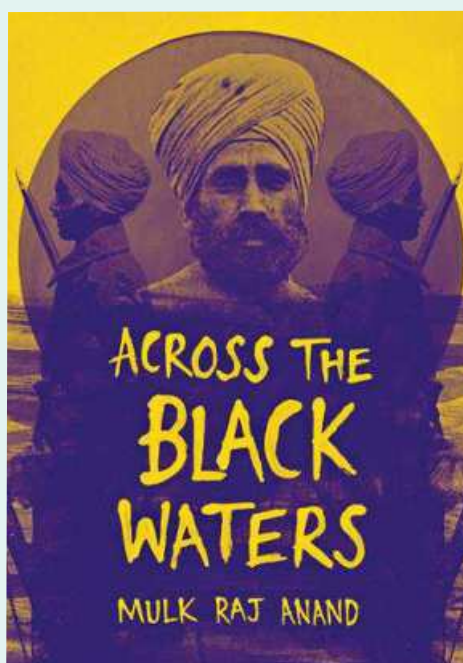
Tens of thousands of men sailed across the ocean to a land they'd never before heard the name of. They fought long and hard, in the world's first industrial war, facing airplanes and flamethrowers though few of them had even seen electricity before. They did this for an empire that oppressed them. They were cold. They wanted to go home. They thought the world was ending. And though they were praised for their courage all the while, they were also kept under strict supervision by a government deeply suspicious of them. Those that survived to return were demonised and forgotten—they had served the masters, for nothing.

It's a good story, but only one person bothered to tell it. Mulk Raj Anand's *Across the Black Waters* (1939) is the only South Asian novel written in English that details the experiences of non-white soldiers in World War I. It is the only novel by an Indian about the Indian army fighting Europe.

There exists a large body of mostly dictated letters written by some of the 85,000 Indian soldiers dispatched to the Western Front. They exist now only in censor reports at the British Library. Unable to speak during the duration of the war, the Indian soldier was spoken for, with a number of British authors such as Rudyard Kipling writing stories from their perspective. This literature tends towards propaganda, using the assumed voice of the Indian soldier to reassure the British public and its allies that they had no desire, or mental capacity, to be anything but simple servants of the empire. If you read any of this literature—Kipling's *The Eyes of Asia* (1916) or Talbot Mundy's *Hira Singh* (1918), as examples—and then stumble onto Anand's book, it's like a jolt of lightning.

The story is simple: the narrator, Lalu, a cynical young man, navigates the war in France alongside his friends, encountering Europe in its beauties, hypocrisies and horrors, and then returns home, changed. It is the novel you would expect it to be, and that is what makes it unique.

Anand treats his characters with respect. We see them not only in relation to one another but also how they navigate their experiences with a whiteness they had been taught to fear and respect. The wonders of Europe reinforce their awe; the horrors of war and the incompetence of British high command break their respect for the British. They kill Germans, see Tommies soil themselves in fear, and play with French children and bed French women. They are



awed when they learn about Joan of Arc who defeated the mighty English, long ago. It is rich in fascinating moments of cultural encounter, infused with an anti-colonial spirit that never sacrifices nuance for the sake of making a partisan point.

In fact, the only reason to avoid the novel may be the rather colourful vernacular the characters talk in, laden with proverbs and friendly, hair-curling expletives. Irritating as this can be, there is a charm to it. The characters talk in a way that shows their lives are lived-in. It is even more remarkable that no one else bothered to write Indian soldiers in this way.

*Across the Black Waters* had been forgotten, in India and beyond, for the most part. It is now seeing a resurgence as interest in World War I is at an all-time high following the Armistice centennial in 2018. Anand's death anniversary of September 28 reminds us to revisit his work, in honour of men whose words were lost but imitated in *Across the Black Waters* with a rare respect.

A longer version of this article will be available online on The Daily Star website, Daily Star Books on Facebook and @thedailystarbooks on Instagram.

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STAR BOOK TALK

## LEESA GAZI'S 'HELLFIRE'

Published by **eka** Westland Books



Moderator:  
**SARAH ANJUM BARI**  
Editor, Daily Star Books

LIVE ON The Daily Star

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4 AT 8.30 PM

YouTube f LIVE

Guests:



**LEESA GAZI**  
Author,  
Actor, Playwright,  
Filmmaker



**SHABNAM NADIYA**  
Author,  
Translator

OPINION

## Should we separate art from the artist?

RASHA JAMEEL

When I was in 9th grade, a friend introduced me to the works of director Lars von Trier, starting with the film *Dogville* (2003). I'd never seen a feature film play out so well, in such intensity, with nothing but a largely empty sound stage for a film set. I grew increasingly enamoured with his works from then on, until in 2017, Icelandic singer Björk accused von Trier of sexual harassment. The first thought that popped into my head was this: *How can such a horrible person create such nuanced art?*

It took me another couple of years to realise that the ugliness always lurks in evil geniuses, alongside a shocking lack of sensitivity in their art. I had just never noticed it.

More recently, British author and philanthropist JK Rowling has come under fire on social media for being transphobic, Islamophobic, and classist. None of the accusations are unfounded.

In March 2019, Rowling confirmed a potential romance between two of her most iconic characters, Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald, in a way that borders on "queer-baiting", a marketing tactic which only hints at LGBTQA+ relationships instead of portraying them with depth. That Dumbledore's character might not be straight was always only alluded to in the *Harry Potter* books, never depicted with nuance. Why explore the angle now—albeit still indirectly—when the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise is failing at the box office? How do we know it isn't a ploy to appear "woke"?

Following that, Rowling went on to ridicule the North American media platform Devex for using the phrase "people who menstruate" instead of "women", refusing to take into consideration individuals



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

who identify as genderqueer, transgender, transsexual, or non-binary, similar to the way in which people of other religions, nationalities, ethnicities, and sexualities have only ever dotted the periphery in her fiction.

Yet it isn't surprising that she amassed such a dedicated fandom starting out in the 1990s. She was a white woman living in a predominantly white country, after all, and social media platforms weren't as active at the time to help highlight coloured and minority voices. She was neither the first nor the only writer to have gotten away with writing through an Orientalist gaze.

Among others—Agatha Christie has sold more than two billion copies of her novels in 100 languages around the world, adapted into 30 feature films. The sheer volume of their reach indicates to what extent Christie's views might have shaped others' opinions, which were often xenophobic. So to answer the question posed in the

title of this article: No. An author can try to portray the world as it is, populated by flawed individuals. This is welcome and necessary, but flaws cannot be glorified, only explored. As the audience and consumers of art, we need to discern the boundaries.

How? To take a popular example—American author HP Lovecraft is posthumously regarded as the "father of modern horror", yet he was a raging bigot, white supremacist, and anti-Semite. Nearly a century after Lovecraft's death, another American author, Matt Ruff, in his novel *Lovecraft Country* (2016) placed Lovecraft's creations at the epicentre of a horrifyingly racist America in the 1950s, as witnessed by the Black protagonist Atticus Freeman and his oppressed family and friends. What Ruff did was take the "Lovecraftian horror" genre apart, and completely reinvent it from a feminist perspective as part of his personal interpretation of Lovecraft's works. Lovecraft himself would've been scandalised.

I could write a thesis on how Rowling, von Trier, Lovecraft, and Christie are all cut from the same cloth, but we're not here to discuss their personalities, only how that has affected their works and how we should consume them. Art is but an extension of the artist, so do we just leave it at that? We do not. We question the art, and subsequently, the artist behind it. We do not excuse their questionable opinions.

A longer version of this article will be available online.

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