

BOOK REVIEW: HISTORY

THE OTTOMAN
WHO CONQUERED HISTORY

STEVE DONOGHUE

Yale University Department of History chair Alan Mikhail's new book *God's Shadow: Sultan Selim, His Ottoman Empire, and the Making of the Modern World* (Liveright, 2020) takes a much-welcomed fresh look at Selim I, a figure of signature cultural and historical importance in Turkish history.

Selim falls between two titanic figures in Ottoman history: his grandfather, Mehmed II, conquered Constantinople in 1453, in what Mikhail quite rightly calls an "earth-rattling victory, a conquest both actual and symbolic." And Selim's son went on to become known to history as Suleyman the Magnificent, "his legacy shaping the empire until its end in the 20th century." (And this is not to discount Selim's father Bayezit, who added ferociously to the empire's territories during his reign).

In writing what he refers to as a revisionist account of Selim, Mikhail seeks to rescue this pivotal figure both from the reflexive antipathy with which the West has viewed Islam and the Ottomans for centuries and also from the hagiography of the *Selimnâme* (Mikhail styles it throughout his book as the "*Selimname*"), a collection of primary sources about Selim's life. Mikhail's organising approach here will strike many of those Western readers as astounding: "The ineluctable fact," he writes, "is that the Ottoman Empire made our modern world—which is, admittedly, a bitter pill for many in the West."

God's Shadow captures the seemingly contradictory aspects of Sultan Selim I's life and rule with scrupulous scholarship and a storyteller's spirit.

More than virtually any other single figure in its history, Selim expanded and solidified that empire in a series of battles and conquests that still make for stirring reading in the hands of an author as skilled as this one. Mikhail tells the story of the curious combinations that governed Selim's life: he was a scholar but also a merciless warrior; he was a sensitive poet, but also a tyrant who issued a death penalty for anyone caught using a printing press in his kingdom; he tried to adhere to a strict, warm morality, but his path to power was paved with dead bodies, including those of his own brothers and nephews. The shadow he casts over history is immense, and yet his reign lasted for only eight years, and when he died in 1520 he was still a fairly young man.

God's Shadow captures these and other seemingly contradictory aspects of Selim's life and rule with scrupulous scholarship and a storyteller's spirit.

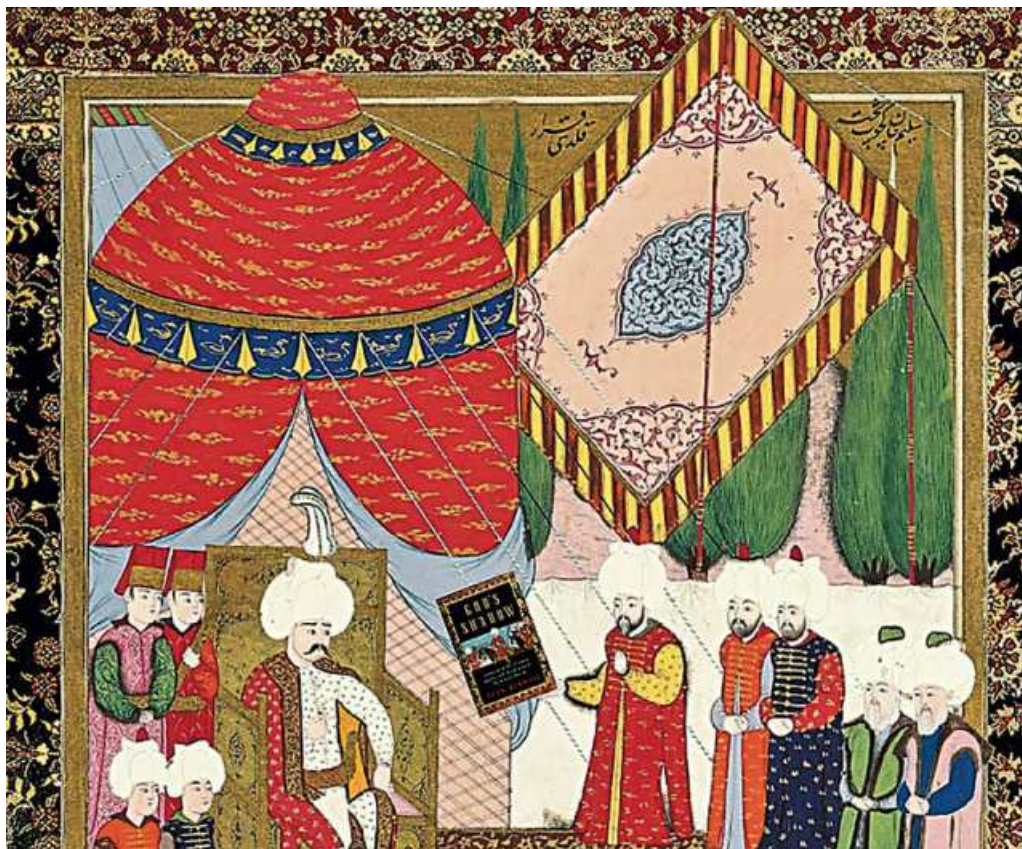


PHOTO DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Selim was born around 1470 as Bayezit II's youngest son, and Mikhail's narrative makes clear that the *Selimnâme's* frequent allusions to Selim's will to rule are no mythological additions: ambition seems to have been his animating principle even from his early youth. His impatience with the preference shown to his older half-brothers is palpable in Mikhail's account; Selim filled a number of important military commissions on behalf of his father, but when he visited his father at the Topkapi Palace overlooking the Bosphorus in 1512, he had only one goal in mind. Mikhail relays the scene with delicate skill: "Speaking quietly, Selim presented his father with a dramatically insolent choice: either abdicate now—willingly, peacefully, and with dignity—and discreetly leave the palace for a comfortable retirement, or watch Selim's Janissaries seize the palace and empire by force, raving the city on their way," he writes. "Should Bayezit choose the latter path, Selim added, he could not guarantee his father's safety—or even his life."

Bayezit chose the better part of valour and became the first Ottoman sultan to leave the throne alive. At 46, Selim was finally ruler of the empire.

What followed was a series of iconic battles—the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, where Selim's forces, using guns and artillery, broke

the growing power of Shah Ismail and gained his enormous territories in Iran, Azerbaijan, and Armenia; and the Battle of Ridanieh in 1517, where Selim wrested from the Mamluk Empire great swaths of land from Syria to Egypt (including Mecca and Medina). Through these and other key campaigns, Selim gave the Ottoman Empire a sprawl beyond even the dreams of his father.

As Mikhail makes clear throughout, he did it all with an eye turned warily on the West, to Islam's "civilizational kin and territorial rival", Christianity. *God's Shadow* does an invigorating job of redressing the balance between those two powers. As Mikhail puts it, "In the decades around 1500, it was not the Venetians nor the Spanish nor the Portuguese who set the standard for power and innovation; it was Islam."

This portrait of Selim and the world he did so much to shape feels like a great gust of fresh air in off the Bosphorus. It's no hagiography itself—the Selim in these pages is, among other things, a brute and a slave-trader—and it all feels bracingly real.

Steve Donoghue is a book critic whose work has appeared in the Boston Globe, the Wall Street Journal, the Christian Science Monitor, the Washington Post, and the National.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A concoction of medicine, history, and drama in 'A Ballad of Remittent Fever'

MONEESHA R KALAMDER

Ginger, lemon juice, or a dash of honey added to a warm cup of tea. Some variation of this remedy to common cold is a familiar one in Bengali households. I have often wondered about the history of these home remedies, and by extension, the subcontinent's ancient practice of Ayurveda within modern health science. I was excited to pick up Ashoke Mukhopadhyay's *A Ballad of Remittent Fever* (Aleph Book Company, 2020), which attempts to explore this idea alongside invoking thoughtful questions about how we view and deal with illnesses and epidemics.

Translated from the original *Abiram Juworer Roopkotha* in Bangla by Arunava Sinha, the story is told over the span of a hundred years, the narrator shifting between three different timelines and generations of doctors from the Kolkata-based Ghoshal family. A trait shared by all three men is that they defy traditions in their quest to learn and heal.

The author probes and demonstrates how we came to be in an age that is nothing short of medicinal wonder. In the late 19th century, Dwarikanath Ghoshal helps his patients battle malaria and a cholera epidemic, and his son combats Spanish flu in the battlefields of World War I. It is easy to forget that diseases that are easily treatable now were not always so. To progress into the future, we must recognise and make use of our relationship with the past. As one doctor in the book notes, "...many of today's treatments owe their origins to Stone Age exorcisms." Modern medical science and practices are results of consistent effort and perseverance in a fight where facts and reason are weapons. This observation is something to be cognizant of now more than ever as we face another global epidemic. All of this is explored and mused upon in *Ballad*.

Mukhopadhyay also offers vivid descriptions of Kolkata and West Bengal spanning from the late 19th to the latter half of the 20th century, offering readers a fascinating glimpse into how society and daily life has changed with the advent of technology.

While the monologues and conversations on medical breakthroughs are thoroughly enjoyable, the plot and protagonists in *Ballad* leave much to be desired. Character portrayals barely scratch the surface; none of them experience development or growth and the women in the text have no flaws. This is a form of benevolent sexism common in Bengali male writers. The flow of the story is reminiscent of Sunil

Gangopadhyay's historical novels, but the plot lacks focus, with loose story threads that are never resolved. The reader will be less frustrated if they read the novel as a chronicle of illnesses that have plagued humankind time and time again, and how we have fought back. Even then, the ending is rather removed from the discussion of medicine, which is a bit unsettling.

Seasoned translator Arunava Sinha appears to be at home within the story. He manages to translate some distinct linguistic quirks of the original Bangla, which often made me forget that I was reading the book in English. However, the language feels rather awkward in some places and this distracts from the reading experience.

Overall, *Ballad* has a promising

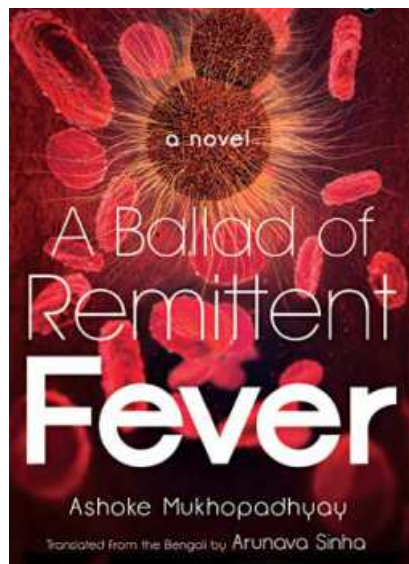


PHOTO COURTESY: ALEPH BOOK COMPANY

start and it is an enjoyable read if you want to encounter thought provoking questions or get an insight into how we've handled illnesses as a historically superstitious society over the last two centuries. However, be wary of expecting resolutions to all your queries. The book would have worked better if the author attempted a different style of storytelling instead of a long-winded novel that began as an ode to the practice of medicine, and became a tale of family drama midway through, executing neither successfully.

A Ballad of Remittent Fever is available at Bookworm Bangladesh, Dhaka.

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MUSINGS

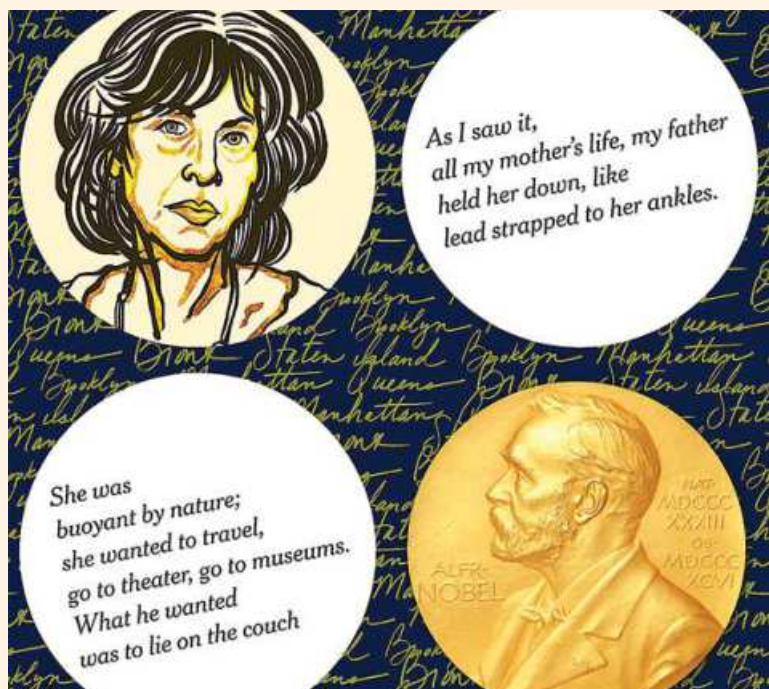


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

On discovering the poetry of Louise Glück, Nobel Prize in Literature 2020

ALIZA RAHMAN

Louise Glück's poetry is at once deeply personal and ubiquitous. Articles explaining her work demur from calling it confessional, and they may be right. It doesn't feel like the thoughts and feelings of another; the speaker confessing seems more vulnerable, as if they're opening up directly to you. The sceneries she weaves are odd and alluring, and behind the deceptively simple lines are layers of meaning.

Read the full article on *The Daily Star* website, or on Daily Star Books on Facebook and @thedailystarbooks on Instagram.

THE BOOK REPORT

The mango-powered superhero you need to know about

NUREN IFTEKHAR

Of all the notable works done on visual media in our country, *Shabash* by Mighty Punch Studio came as a welcome surprise to me. From the tone of storytelling to the beautiful visuals, Mighty Punch Studios paint a unique stroke.

The story of wacky Shabash, who gained his superpower after consuming a magic mango which stemmed from a meteor (yes, you read that right), is not the one we will be talking about here, however. We'll be looking at Ms Shabash, who shares the same origins in a parallel universe set in Dhaka. Like Shabash, who bears with him a goofy, endearing personality, Ms Shabash too wants to help the 'mango people', but she also has to deal with the challenges that every woman in Bangladesh faces without superpowers. From casual harassment and patriarchal mindset to forced beauty standards, Ms Shabash encounters caricatured antagonists who don't stray far from reality.

Ms Shabash stands out in her simplicity. She has not been whitewashed into a fairer complexion. She is not described as overtly beautiful. Her personality isn't defined just by the fact that she's a woman. Her adventures, accompanied by her colourful companions and magical powers involving mangoes and fairies, pull off a lighthearted, humorous tone that is accessible to people of all ages. And the comic book's portrayal of prevalent misogynistic traits manages to send an important message without sounding patronising.

"We believe that through art, entertainment, storytelling and endearing characters, we can not only captivate audiences but also inspire them to bring about positive change in the world," Samir Asran Rahman, CEO and creative



ILLUSTRATION: ASIFUR RAHMAN

director at Mighty Punch Studios, tells *The Daily Star*.

They have made the 42-page third installment of the *Ms Shabash* comic series free for download on their Facebook page, in light of the ongoing conversation around sexual violence. They have also cropped the panels to ease the reading experience. Written by Samir Asran Rahman and illustrated by Asifur Rahman, the book follows Dhakaites

celebrating Pohela Boishakh at Ramna Park, when some men decide to assault the women enjoying the festivities. Suddenly, a shalwar-kamiz clad Ms Shabash crashes the scene to fight the villains. "These creeps don't respect women because they've only been taught to objectify them by society, not regard them as equal human beings. Broken bones will not change that mentality," she later points out to her friend.

"While most of our comics promote moral values, empathy, and kindness (in a subtle way of course, because no one likes being preached to), we have tackled more serious issues such as harassment, albeit in a way that is suitable for children," Rahman explains.

In all of their running series, Mighty Punch's artwork takes influence from old cartoon network series as well as local art. Rahman shares how their attempt at the traditional art style of *Tepa Putul* seeped into other projects, resulting in an amalgamation of local and western visual styles.

So what's next for Mighty Punch Studios? Rahman shares, "While we don't plan to stop making comic books, we are concentrating more on animation these days. Eventually, we want to be able to pitch a series to a streaming platform like Netflix." A pilot episode of Ms Shabash is also in the pipeline. With unique projects including *Shabash*, *Ms Shabash*, *Lathial*, *Team Dalim*, and *Captain Kathal*, Mighty Punch Studios are doing an excellent job of mixing humour and socially conscious stories in an accessible and colourful format.

Nuren Iftekhhar is a contributor for Daily Star Books.