

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Hashim & Family: A Sweeping Tale of Immigration and Family Ties

TOWRIN ZAMAN

Hashim & Family (John Murray, 2020) takes us on a journey across two countries, spanning two decades. It begins with the titular Hashim moving from East Pakistan to Manchester in the 1960s in hopes of a better living, inspired by his cousin Rofikul, himself an immigrant of a few years. Hashim intends his stay in Britain to be temporary, but after he brings his wife Munira to live with him, they soon find themselves building a permanent life under the grey skies of Manchester.

While Ahsan begins the narrative within the narrow space of Hashim's Manchester family—Munira, Rofikul, Rofikul's partner Helen—she substantially widens it by switching gears to the liberation war of 1971. From an intimate account of immigrant life involving racism, linguistic and cultural adjustments, and the forging of new social bonds, we are transferred to the brutal and grotesque realities of war in East Pakistan. This juxtaposition is stark; it isn't always smooth but it is effective. The struggles of each group of characters in England and Bangladesh feel strikingly similar, as both fight to preserve their identities in the face of dominance, be it racist British locals or Pakistani usurpers.

It is this unapologetic portrayal of brutalities—both the racial tension and the war atrocities—that truly grips the reader. Ahsan does not shy away from bringing to life the violence faced by Bangladeshis both within and across borders.

What isn't as effective are her pacing and characterisation. The former feels uneven, particularly at first. While one wouldn't expect the story of an immigrant family to be enthralling from the start, it is definitely expected to touch one's emotional chords. This happens in minimal doses: we watch Hashim land in

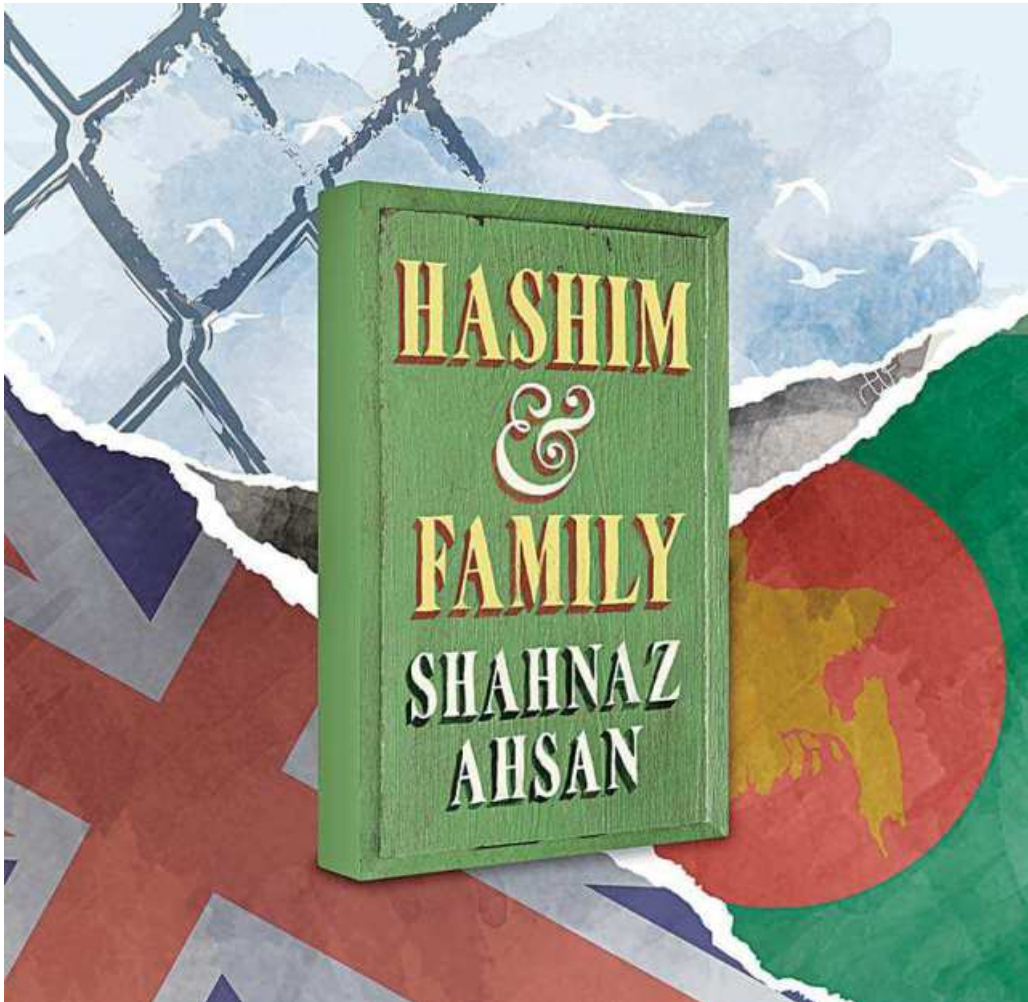


ILLUSTRATION: TANIMA UDDIN

new life. We do not see them unfold in real time, nor their effect on Munira.

Significantly more heartwarming is the instant camaraderie between Helen, Rofikul's Irish partner, and Munira, despite their initial insecurities. By leaving out potentially funny or awkward instances of culture shock and language barrier, however, Ahsan one again deprives us of the emotional payoff of seeing them slowly build this friendship.

The story gains pace when we fast forward to the liberation war, and this most compelling section showcases Ahsan's potential as a storyteller. She manages to capture the energy of the Bangladeshi community in London and her delineation of the situation back in Bangladesh has an impressive rawness to it. Ahsan's biggest triumph is that her characters feel innately Bangladeshi, be it through Hashim's diligence, Rofikul's restlessness, Munira's pragmatism, or Shapla's confidence. This is a rarity in stories written in English.

She also does an admirable job of creating strong female characters like Mala and Shapla, Rofikul's family back in Bangladesh, in addition to Munira and Helen. Mala is a victim of war brutalities, and Shapla her daughter. Each has

her own struggles, but none of these women are shown to be weak at any moment, or defeated in the absence of men. Shapla particularly impresses with her maturity and strength of mind. But it is unfortunate that very few of these characters manage to create any lasting impact. Only Rofikul is written as a mysterious and convoluted character, but when the writer gives us a glimpse into his mind, his thoughts also come off as trite.

This debut novel is not without its flaws, but Shahnaz Ahsan's writing has plenty to offer. Her flowing prose is impressive with an ease and smoothness to it. Made a little sharper and tighter, it could do wonders. *Hashim & Family* is full of heart with family bonds at its core because it is a personal story inspired by Ahsan's own grandparents, who like Hashim and Munira, took the courageous decision to move to England from East Pakistan sometime in the 1950s. As a Bangladeshi reader, it was a treat to find the touch of my country in a British book. This novel definitely takes a step in the right direction for British-Bangladeshi storytelling.

Towrin Zaman is a moderator consultant who writes in her spare time.

OPINION

Do the books on Trump qualify as exposé?

STEVE DONOGHUE

As of this writing, the United States is currently in the final weeks of its most partisan and controversial presidential election in 150 years, in which the Democratic candidate, former Vice President Joe Biden, has been forced to do most of his campaigning online or in carefully-masked and managed events, and his rival, Republican President Donald Trump, has resumed holding crowded indoor campaign rallies despite the warnings of his own government that such gatherings are potentially deadly super-spreader events.

When a political contest is therefore clearly not so much a battle of ideologies as a clash of realities—Biden is campaigning in a US racked by plague and resulting economic depression, Trump is campaigning in a US that's largely put the virus behind it—there can be no neutral corners. This is reflected in the giant glut of books flooding the election season. Two of the best-selling and most-discussed of those books are *Rage*, an inside account of the Trump White House by two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Bob Woodward, and *Too Much and Never Enough*, an inside account of the Trump family by Donald Trump's niece Mary Trump (both are published by Simon & Schuster, which also published former National Security Advisor John Bolton's bestselling *The Room Where It Happened*).

Woodward's style will be familiar to readers of his previous Trump-centred bestseller, *Fear*, but the actual contents of *Rage* will be familiar for an entirely more recent reason: Woodward and his publisher leaked audio portions of the interviews Trump gave to Woodward back in March, interviews in which Trump can be heard confessing that he knew exactly how deadly COVID-19 was and deliberately chose to lie about it to the American people.

Likewise *Too Much and Never Enough*, Mary Trump's much-debated exposé of the Trump family's sordid psychological history, in which her grandfather Fred Trump mercilessly harassed and abused her father Fred Jr while at the same time ruthlessly creating the family atmosphere that would turn his younger son Donald into the kind of twisted sociopathic monster Mary Trump has subsequently been describing on every cable news show, political fundraiser, and podcast that will have her. Mary Trump, too, has occasionally been criticised for the timing of her book by people who naturally wonder why she didn't warn the American people about Donald Trump, say, back in 2015 when many of them were first making up their minds about whether or not to vote for him.

Both Woodward and Mary Trump have offered defenses. Woodward has

said he doubts his revelations would have made any difference back in March. Trump has said it was only when her uncle's administration started putting immigrant children into chain-link cages on the southern border that she was prompted to write a tell-all.

This kind of snivelling has been a hallmark of Trump's first term. At every turn, the responsible people, the "adults in the room," have seen Trump's narcissistic imbecility at close range, heard him talking about using nuclear weapons against hurricanes or admitting on national television that he's perfectly open to receiving foreign interference in US elections, and they said nothing publicly, did nothing publicly, and meekly waited to be fired by tweet. People like former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, former National Security Advisor HR McMaster, General James Mattis, and even Bolton, who announced that he would defy a Congressional subpoena in order to safeguard his book's payday—all of them held their tongue rather than sound an alarm when it might have done some good.

The law of the 2020 election holds for books like Bob Woodward's or Mary Trump's, regardless of the outcome at the polls: there are no innocent bystanders. Both of these authors stayed silent on what they knew until it could most benefit them financially, regardless of the harm it did to the country. They are not exposés of Donald Trump; in other words—they are Donald Trump.

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.

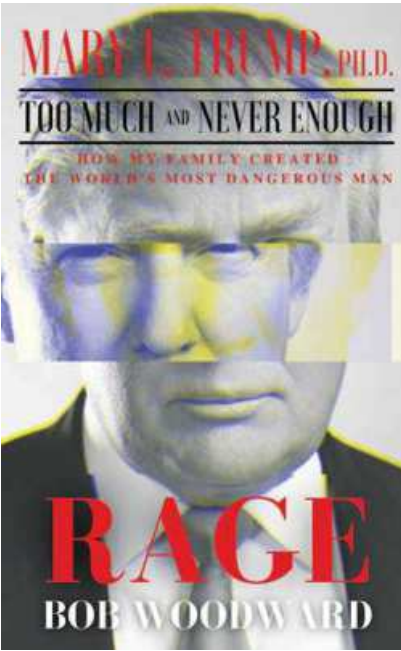


PHOTO DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

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England in mismatched clothes, we watch his displeasure when Rofikul insists they take on "acceptable" British names like Ray and Harry, and we witness the two men facing a racist attack on Hashim's first night out in Manchester.

Munira, Hashim's wife, arrives as a better sketched out character, with real life inspiration drawn apparently from Ahsan's own grandmother. She is smart and well-read, she devours the likes of Charlotte Bronte and Louisa May Alcott, and this explains why so little about a new country surprises her. But the text only briefly describes her struggles adjusting to her

WORTH A RE-READ

On Zadie Smith's Bangladeshi characters

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

I am not a Bangladeshi immigrant living in a Bangladeshi neighbourhood somewhere in Kilburn, London like Samad Iqbal and his family from *White Teeth* (Hamish Hamilton, 2000). But I still identified with them on many grounds—cultural nuances, identity, religion. Geographic boundaries held little value. I know saying this seems unfair on the literary quality of Smith's debut novel, but I bought this book solely because it had Bangladeshi characters at the pulpit of the story.

It is important to note: I am not implying that works like Tahmima Anam's Bengal trilogy, Arif Anwar's *The Storm* or Numair Atif Choudhury's *Babu Bangladesh!* did not accomplish the task of placing Bangladesh on the literary map. I am only expressing my admiration for a writer who, despite not being a Bangladeshi, flawlessly, sensitively wrote Bangladeshi characters without perpetuating stereotypes.

White Teeth follows the lives of Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal as they navigate a world after surviving the Second World War as British soldiers. It swings back and forth through time and poses questions about the legacy of colonialism, about the marginalisation of people of colour, and the things that glue a society together. I can't speak for everyone with my limited knowledge but personally I felt as though the pages of *White Teeth* provided me with a holography containing all things accurately Bangladeshi—from the slangs, the greetings, the food items, and the religious connotations to the sense of loss which stems from having a distinct Bangladeshi identity often muddled with, and overshadowed by, Indians in the Western Imagination.

One could argue that the presence of natural disasters in the novel alludes to

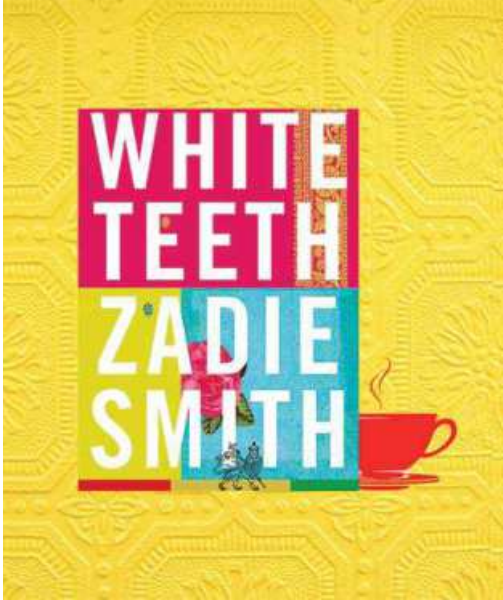


PHOTO DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

another common stereotype: that Bangladesh is a country perpetually stuck in death throes. However, in the late 20th century in which the book is set, these issues were in fact deeply embedded in the collective psyches of residential and non-residential Bangladeshis alike. Political turmoil gripped the nation at the time, coupled with a devastating flood in 1988 and a cyclone in 1991. These events connect the Iqbal family with their homeland. Without them, they wouldn't feel truly Bangladeshi.

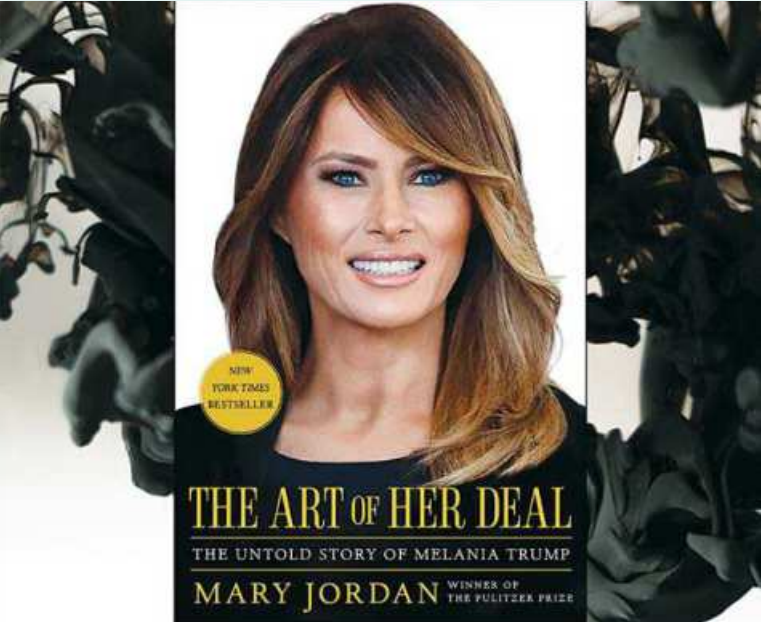
Even then these characters are very much punctuated with individual characteristics. Samad oscillates between spiritual faith and the "real" world, plunging deeper and deeper into

a pit of identity crisis. His wife Alsana is calm and has made peace with their loss of identity unlike Samad. Their son Magid is a precocious child with an affinity for intellectual growth. His twin Millat is his absolute antithesis—reckless, violent, dissolute. These characters are fascinating because each is a world of their own, a world not engineered by a Western gaze obsessed with "exotic" qualities.

In 2016, Lionel Shriver declared at a Brisbane writer's festival that a writer "should not try on other people's hats". Last month, I saw a similar tweet that sadly received a lot of support. "White people shouldn't write Brown Characters," it read. These notions—that someone shouldn't write about someone else—completely obliterate the purpose of fiction, which is, to imagine. They stifle creative freedom and squeeze the life out of diversity in imagination.

The Iqbals in *White Teeth*—Bangladeshi characters written by a British-Jamaican author—highlight how a writer can venture, expand, imagine without succumbing to cultural appropriation, by virtue of unbiased research and non-stereotypical representation. It is both an example of culturally sensitive writing and a reminder that writing good fiction is possible, even if your characters and you have vastly different identities. An intergenerational saga, *White Teeth* delicately weaves the stories of people who have been shaped by colonialism one way or another. It is laced with drama, wit, suspense, thrill, and insight, a novel that can keep one occupied even after the last page has been turned.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor. Email: tazrian1234@gmail.com



BOOK REVIEW: MEMOIR

Whispers of the Muse

MUHAMMAD MUTIUL MUHAIMIN

With the US elections looming, the tabloids are mostly fixated on the orange man. Few know about the roles of his calmer and more composed counterpart, as stated by Pulitzer winning *Washington Post* reporter Mary Jordan in her book *The Art of Her Deal* (Simon & Schuster, 2020). While the life of POTUS is mostly public, Jordan expresses her frustration when researching Melania Trump, who has kept little to no ties with the people from her life as Melania Knauss. Trump has made things even more difficult by forcing people who know Melania Knauss to stay silent with Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs).

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