

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

Rumaan Alam's New Novel Is Impossible To Leave Behind

SARAH ANJUM BARI

One of my favourite books in the world is Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Not much of this has to do with the usual American dream metaphor. No, I love *Gatsby* because it is deliciously readable, because it speaks to something fundamental in the individual reader's hopes, fears, habits, those flitting half-thoughts that flicker in the twilight zone between thought and speech or act.

Rumaan Alam's latest novel, *Leave The World Behind* (Ecco Books, 2020)—which will soon star Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington in a Netflix adaptation directed by Sam Esmail of *Mr Robot* fame—promises exactly the same experience, except it is more crisp and tense, its concerns a little more mundane and therefore relatable.

Clay and Amanda have booked an Airbnb on a secluded patch of Long Island to vacate with their teenage son and daughter. They have left their cramped New York apartment behind for some respite away from the jobs they're addicted to, the classes Clay teaches and the book reviews he owes to the *Times*, the work emails Amanda needs to feel needed, to indulge in a house that "ha[s] the hush expensive houses do", owned by people

One must, and probably will, read this book with absolutely no idea as to what is about to happen from one paragraph to the next. But fear not for ghosts or psychopathic murderers; the horror of 'Leave The World Behind' is in the prospect that the worst is already happening, as happens in real life.

who are "rich enough to be thoughtful." They are a middle class white family, and this is important. When after two days of gorgeously languorous beach time, pool time, ice cream-on-the-couch time an elderly black couple knocks on the door late at night, bringing news of a city-wide blackout in New York, the two families are stuck together in a capsule, deprived even of the mind-saving powers of grocery runs and the internet.

One must, and probably will, read this book with absolutely no idea as to what is about to happen from one paragraph to the next. But fear not for ghosts or psychopathic murderers; the horror of *Leave The World Behind* is in the prospect that the worst is already happening, as happens in real life, and we are but frogs stewing in a pressure cooker. And so out pop the dormant prejudices,

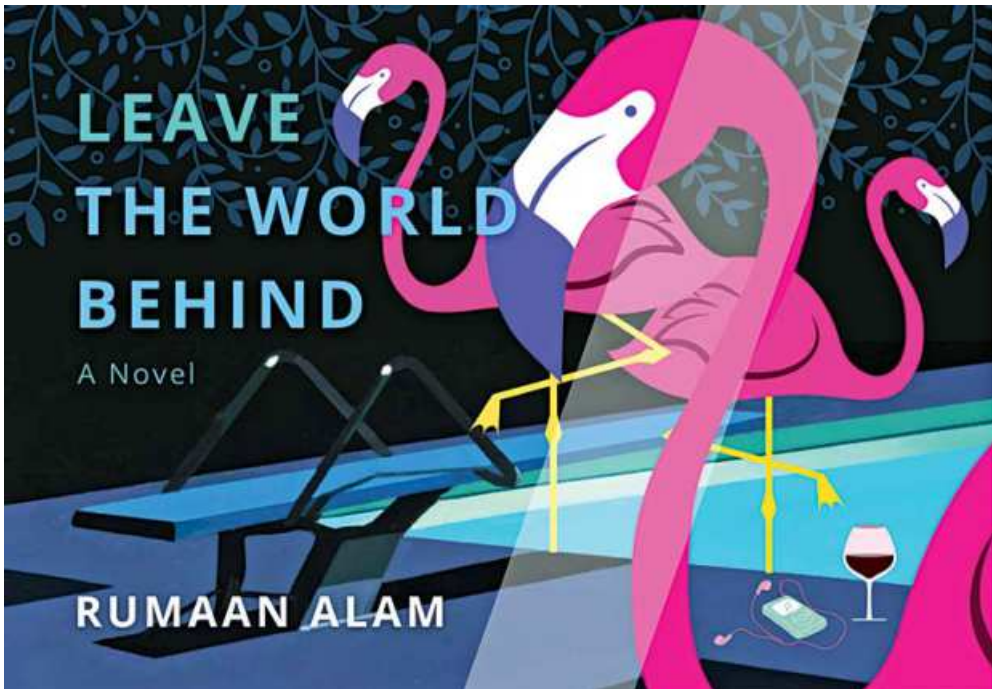


PHOTO DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

the cowardice, selfishness and courage of human nature shaped by class, race, and tribal instinct.

The downside is that there isn't much in the way of character or plot development, and the interiors of one half of the families feels less deeply explored than the other. The plus side is that the characters are supposed to appear fully baked. This book is more about working out the ingredients that went into the mix and facing discomfort and shame when we recognise parts of ourselves in the characters' responses to danger.

All of which could have been tedious reading in the hands of a lesser writer. But Rumaan Alam just has an easy grace about him that leaks into his prose, lending it humour, edge, and a certain fluidity. He is interested in contradictions—our presumptions of who should own what, in the textures of modern life—"an anticipatory scream, then they met the water with that delicious clash", and in letting the detritus of life under capitalism contribute to character-building—"She bought organic hot dogs and inexpensive buns and the same ketchup everyone bought. [...] She bought three pints of Ben & Jerry's politically virtuous ice cream and a Duncan Hines boxed mix for a yellow cake [...] because parenthood had taught her that on a vacation's inevitable rainy day you could while away an hour by baking a boxed cake."

These elements of contemporary life are more than props, however. As the danger

begins to make itself more apparent, this relationship of object-consumer is turned on its head, so that we're suddenly forced to reassess what the things we consume stand for in themselves. What is a human being without her access to news and Wifi? What are DVDs and *Friends* in the absence of human life?

Focusing on these dynamics allows Alam to economise on length and indulge in mood-building, so that one whizzes through the 256 short pages, drinking up the incredibly relatable nuances of what it means to be a mother, a father, grandparents, a black man, a white woman, a teenage boy, an almost-teenage girl and, above all, alive, which is such a precarious thing to be. Alam, whose Bangladeshi parents moved to the USA in the 1970s, writes through the lens of an American family steeped in American politics and consumerism; but the nuances of his writing resonate far and wide.

Upon arriving at the last page, the reader of *Leave The World Behind*—just like the reader of Fitzgerald's last lines in *Gatsby*, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past", is sent back immediately to the very first page. They are stuck in the loop of its compulsive readability.

Sarah Anjum Bari is editor of Daily Star Books. Reach her at sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com and @wordsinteal on Instagram.

FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

"It's you, it's me, it's us": Bly Manor's Homage to Henry James

SHEHRIN HOSSAIN

Effigies with their own minds, tinkling music boxes, mysterious cracks in the wall, and a long-haired spectre trailing the grounds of a vast, echoing mansion in her deathbed nightgown—the Gothic horror story is well and alive in 2020 in Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, the follow-up to the wildly popular 2018 Netflix series *The Haunting of Hill House*.

While *Hill House* revived the eponymous novel by Shirley Jackson, *Bly Manor* is adapted from a few different works of the horror pioneering 19th century American author Henry James, with his 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw* at the centre of the narrative.

The Haunting of Bly Manor, as in *The Turn of the Screw*, features as its primary protagonist a governess, called Dani Clayton in the show, who arrives at Bly to take on the care of the orphaned Miles and Flora Wingrave. The children's family is made up of only the inhabitants and employees of Bly. Soon after her arrival, Dani starts to suspect that the place is haunted by two former employees of the manor.

For fans of Flanagan's earlier project, the ghosts and tragedies of *Bly* might seem tame in comparison to the jump-scares and tangibly thrilling action of *Hill House*; here, they are swapped out for psychology and atmosphere. The narrative drags at some points, with overly sentimental dialogue, convoluted screenplay, a few anticlimactic build-ups and, yes, some bad acting. But what makes *Bly Manor* special is the homage it pays to the very specifically psychotic Gothic horror that James explored in his work.

The Turn of the Screw is not an easy read. Most of its seemingly never-ending passages are dedicated solely to mapping the governess's internal conflicts, with little space for actual plot development. The story shuffles along at a snail's pace that might be considered ill-suited to its genre. And yet, it's bone-chilling.

Inside the great manor, against an idyllic backdrop and beneath the bright-eyed innocence of the orphaned children shift the currents of centuries-old secrets. The governess is faced with new, increasingly existential questions every day, while the reader can't help but wonder whether it's not her sanity that should be questioned.

Psychotic and impressionistic, James's stories lead the reader through such mental mazes where the real terror that rears its head is perception or knowledge itself. The resulting feeling is, of course, entrapment. And trapped is exactly what the inhabitants of Flanagan's *Bly Manor* are as well, whether they are living or dead.

Such entrapment is a state we can all relate to in the current time, stagnating in Netflix-binging loops, monotonous domestic routines and stale interactions—a collective inertia that forces us into the corners of our minds, where memories of happier, easier times taunt us, making us wonder if things ever really were that good. In that sense, with regret as its central theme, *Bly* resonates deeply. It charts precisely the ways in which rage and loneliness have the power to efface and erase us.



ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN MAHIA

The Haunting of Bly Manor might not be the scariest horror story there is, but it's certainly one of the most heart-breaking. Even as it diverges from its source material, it stays true to the lesson contained in James's novella, which is to explore the way memories trap us and regret ensnares us if we don't do our best to move forward. Hopefully, the viewer comes away with something of the notion that there is solace to be found, in words like Jamie, the gardener's: "The fear of losing someone shouldn't stop us from loving them."

Shehrin Hossain is a graduate of English literature from North South University. Email: shehrin@gmail.com

OPINION

The Untapped Powers of Bengali Folk Horror

RASHA JAMEEL

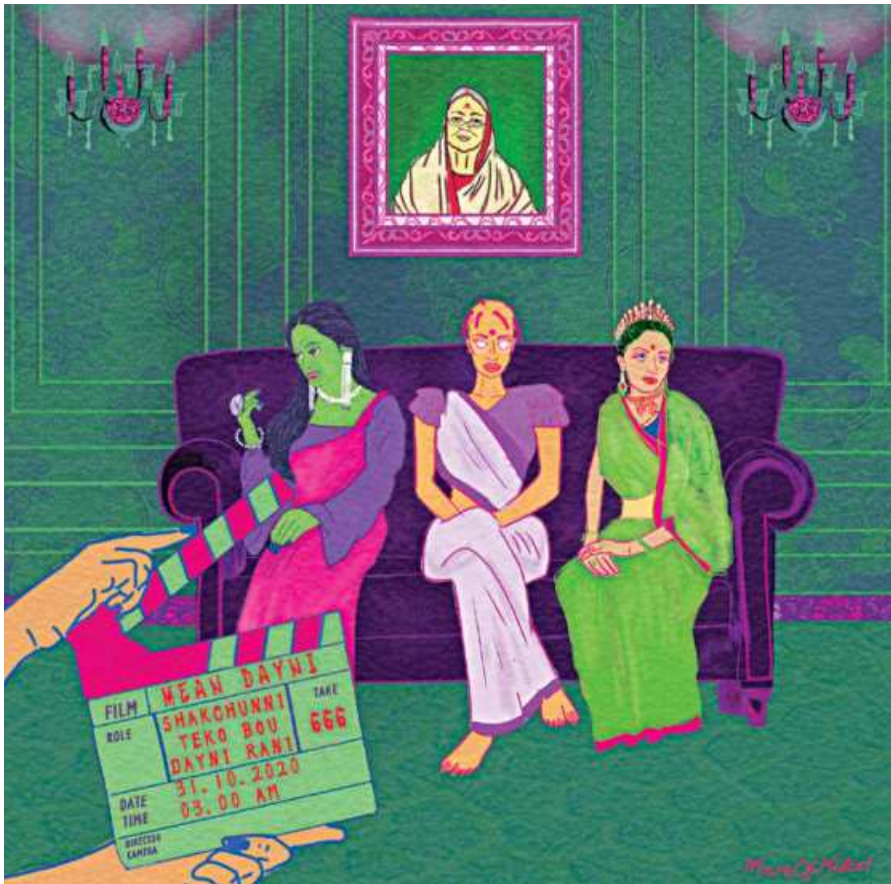


ILLUSTRATION: NAVIRA AZMAT

When I was a child, every night, I'd ask my parents to tell me a story when they tucked me into bed. From talking trees to scheming foxes, the mystical realm of Bengali folklore was a bottomless well from which my pre-adolescent mind drank with thirst. It led me to what can only be deemed as the Holy Grail of Bengali folklore: *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907).

First published in 1907, the four lengthy volumes anthologised mythological stories from all the corners of Bengal, by the late Dakshinranjan Mitra Majumdar. His three other volumes—*Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909), *Dadamashayer Thale* (1913), and *Thandidir Thale* (1909)—all conjure a similarly homely atmosphere, in which children discover mysticism in Bengal through the stories of Lalkamal-Neelkamal, Heeramon, Kiranmala, and Rajkanya Kolaboti, narrated by grandparents.

Those stories feel relatable, filling you with a sense of dread that somewhere, somehow, they are real. Yet the genre's biggest appeal lies in its political undercurrents. There are ghosts who reflect religious segregation—the Mamdo Bhoot and Djinn of the Muslim communities, the Shakchunni and Petni who terrorise Hindus; ghosts who illustrate the disturbing dominance of patriarchy in Bengal—Dainee and Pishachini; and classist monsters like Jokkho and Rakkhosh, who prey on beings inferior to them in both strength and stature. The stories ring with the trauma and regressive practices surrounding religious and class-based differences across the Bengali community, for which blood is spilled in the name of superficial purity. Ghosts appear as spirits of vengeance from horrible tragedies of gender-based violence, notably female

infanticide and forced child marriage.

Many of us are also drawn to the aesthetics of it all. There is always the massive, near-palatial *jomidarbari*, the lavish and intricate décor in the halls within, and the inhabitants dressed with an old-world charm and elegance, all of which offer us Bengali readers a common ground rooted in colonial history, which we couldn't find in the Gothic novels set

in the English countryside.

It is unfortunate that imported horror seems to have trumped all this beautiful, rich local produce. Bengali authors in the past have contributed generously to the preservation of Bengali folk horror in literature, such as in *Konkal* (1892), *Goshaibaganer Bhoot* (1979), *Lal Chul*. That legacy began to wane as the language and style became

less comprehensible—too dense and tiresome—for audiences at home and abroad, but authors like Humayun Ahmed and Muhammad Zafar Iqbal retained the efforts of their predecessors with the *Misir Ali* series and short stories like *O* (2008) and *Pishachini* (1992). But while Anam Biswas's 2018 revival of *Debi* enjoyed both critical and audience acclaim, even that seemed to offer a lukewarm experience compared to the story originally penned by Ahmed.

Enter Netflix's *Bulbul* (2020) and *Typewriter* (2019), inspired by Tagore and Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964), *Fritz*, *Nastanirh* (1901), and Amazon Prime Video's *Tumbbad* (2018), a period horror about generations of men greedy for cursed inheritance.

As impressive as these efforts are, the problem with them is the same as that with Biswas's *Debi*, which is that they seem to have been adapted with insincerity, offering diluted story lines crammed with mythological references. The scale and content of this genre could have been phenomenal, given the platforms and resources at our disposal. Sadly, audiences with access to streaming platforms are only on the hunt for "binge-able" content these days, instead of insightful exploration.

Amidst the sea of *Dracula* spin-offs and *Exorcist* reboots—with more recent additions like *Hill House* (2018) or *Bly Manor* (2020)—the once-glimmering, marshy ghost-light of Bengali folk horror falters. But all it takes is a peek into the mystical realm inhabited by the likes of the fearsome Brahmodaittyo, and one can never look back.

Rasha Jameel studies microbiology while pursuing her passion for writing. Reach her at rasha.jameel@outlook.com.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

THE SHELF 10 HORROR NOVELS FROM BANGLADESH AND ABROAD

STAR BOOKS DESK

Halloween is merely a cover--our lives seem plenty steeped in horror this year, confined within physical and psychological walls, breathing in particles that could be fatal and contagious. Perhaps reading some spooky fiction, instead of scaring us, can offer some welcome escape and the relief of finding one's struggles reflected on the page. These horror novels published in 2020 in Bangla and English promise to do just that.

All the Bangla books are available on Ro-komari.com.

Read about the books on The Daily Star website, or on fb.com/DailyStarBooks and @thedailystar-books on Instagram.