

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

In 'Azadi', Arundhati Roy explores the many layers of freedom

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

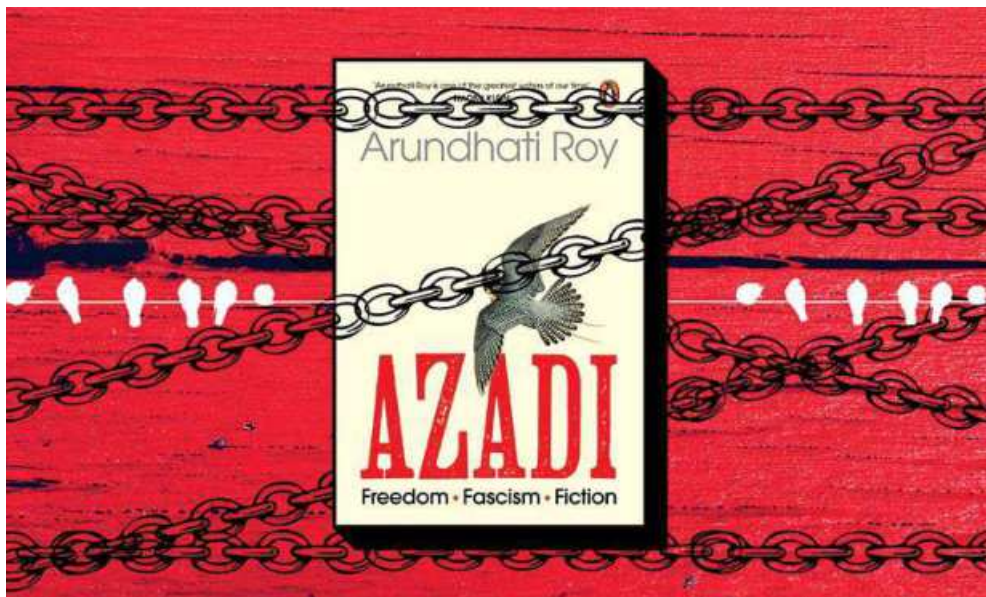
Arundhati Roy's latest, *Azadi* (Penguin India, 2020), is a collection of nine stand-alone essays, most of which were delivered as lectures or published as columns between 2018 and 2020. Published in early September, the book can be considered a documentation of the ongoing political crises in India, but it also reflects the current socio-political climate of the entire world, in which right-wing ideologies and populism are ever on the rise, and dissent is termed as sedition.

The sections on Indian politics highlight the obliteration of Jammu and Kashmir's special status when articles 370 and 35(A) of the Indian constitution were scrapped, after which Kashmir was driven to a communication lockdown with increased military occupation, and the Modi regime's introduction of the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) triggered protests all over India.

In such a world, where the concept and implications of freedom are evolving on a personal and international scale, Roy traces how "azadi"—the Urdu, originally Persian, word for freedom—found its way from the Iranian Revolution to the Kashmiri struggle for freedom and the feminist movement in the Indian subcontinent, and finally to the thousands of Indians protesting on the streets in favour of equal citizenship. And yet, "the Free Virus has made nonsense of international borders, incarcerated whole populations, and brought the modern world to a halt like nothing else ever could. It forces us to question the values we have built our modern societies on," she writes about the COVID-19, in her introduction. Her intention is to point out that even as religious, cultural and nationalistic differences are sought after to justify segregation, life—through language—often leaks through barriers, staking its claim in the form of slogans, art, and experiences.

And so Roy takes us on her personal journey through language. She describes how India's political reality shaped her writing of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), in which the characters all come from diverse backgrounds and dialects, representing pluralism against the very idea of "one nation, one religion, one language" propagated by the current Hindu-nationalist regime.

Elsewhere in the book, Roy highlights how the political reality of the subcontinent is interconnected. In the essay, "The Graveyard



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

Talks Back", she writes, "Pakistan, Bangladesh and India are organically connected, socially, culturally, and geographically. Reverse the Hindu nationalists' logic, and imagine how it plays out for the tens of millions of Hindus living in Bangladesh and Pakistan."

In arguing that this common pattern of oppressing minorities was ingrained and strengthened by the blood-stained history of the 1947 partition, she questions whether the narrative of certain Muslims being "Indians by choice" effectively opposes hate-mongering right-wing tendencies, or strengthens the very rhetoric they preach, implying that Muslims have so many homelands, but Hindus have only India. "This plays straight into the binary of the Good Muslim-Bad Muslim, or the Muslim Patriot-Muslim Jihadi, and could inadvertently trap a whole population into having to redeem itself with a lifetime of regular flag-waving and constitution-reading," she writes.

In "Intimations of An Ending", Roy touches upon the NPR-NRC-CAA debate, calling out the current regime boldly for their communal policies and their politics of altering history to spread hate. But she is non-linear in her approach—in "The Language of Literature", she points out that, "The narrative of Kashmir is a jigsaw puzzle whose jagged parts do not fit together. There is no final picture." In a 2002 speech titled "Come September"

(which was later added to her 2019 essay collection *My Seditious Heart*), Roy admitted to the way in which she talks about power—the paranoia, ruthlessness and physics of it all. In *Azadi too*, as in her fiction, Arundhati Roy's writing underlines the importance of specificity, of allowing the reader to look down over a particular issue and notice the power dynamics at play. This enables her as an author to get into the complexities and nuances surrounding an issue, with specific names and dates, with bold opinions, so that readers know exactly what she is talking about and where she stands.

Some of the essays in this collection were delivered as lectures and speeches in different parts of the world, as we gather from the footnotes. The variety of locations and platforms indicates how far and wide she has travelled to speak out against political injustices. As a writer and an individual, Roy is wholeheartedly committed to the causes she stands for. Yet her prose is so poetic; it always feels like a conversation, never a monologue. She takes us through the grim realities that we live in, and she ends on a vaguely hopeful note, powered by the conviction, the rage and the pain we must feel within.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan is sub-editor of *Toggle*, *The Daily Star* and a contributor of *Daily Star Books*.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

In 'Pachinko', a Record of Forgotten Lives

SHOAIB ALAM

Even in the most extraordinary of political times, someone must tend to the crops. Someone must weave clothes for the winter. These everyday tasks fall not to the revolutionaries who earn our tributes but to ordinary folk persevering through wars and famines without recognition. History, says Min Jin Lee in the opening line of *Pachinko*, has failed them.

In a sprawling family saga spanning four generations from rural 1910s Korea during Japanese occupation to bullish Japan of the 1980s, Lee offers a corrective. The 20th century's most notable events are footnotes in *Pachinko* (Grand Central Publishing, 2017). The spotlight is on the people that history has forgotten.

The novel centers on Sunja, the hard-working and illiterate daughter of a Korean boarding-house owner. Just as the Japanese are tightening their grip on the Korean peninsula, two men arrive to disrupt her meagre existence. With yakuza-connections, Hansu brings starry-eyed glamour into Sunja's privations, leaving when she reveals she is with child.

Isak, a kindly pastor, then transports Sunja from the backwaters to Osaka as his wife, saving her from dishonour and making her the Baek family matriarch. In Japan, Isak's idealism and naiveté burrow the family deeper in poverty as they weather the major upheavals of the 20th century, including the atomic bombings of Japan, where at least 40,000 Koreans died.

Pachinko's ensemble of immigrant characters brings to light the plight of ethnic Koreans in Japan who migrated or were forcefully brought over between 1910 and 1950. Their descendants, known as the *zainichi*, continue to face discrimination and social isolation. "This place is only fit for pigs and Koreans," says Isak's older brother, Yoseb, when the couple arrives at the Osaka ghetto they will call home. For a Korean man, the choice is always shit, Yoseb thinks to himself in another moment of reckoning.

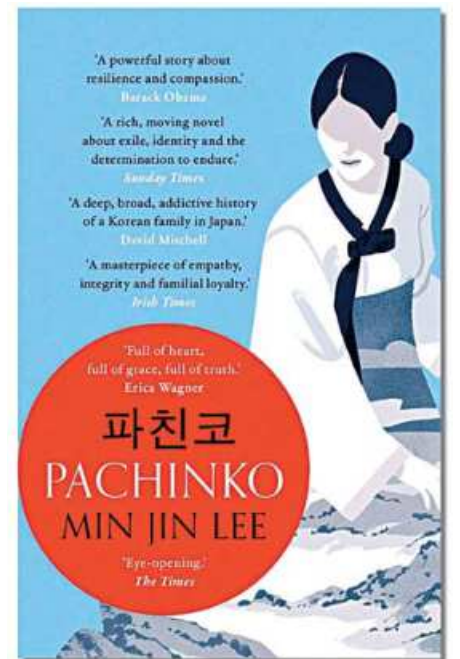
The immigrant's ache for dignity and belonging are captured in the family's second generation, Sunja's sons Noa and Moza. Each takes a different route through education, wealth, and denial of Korean heritage, only to find the deck stacked impossibly high. By the novel's end, the family has been in Japan for three generations. They are yet to be recognised as Japanese. Change, the novel concedes, takes time.

Written in the tradition of the 19th century novel, *Pachinko* is a triumph of interiority. Lee is deft with characterisation

and elegant in introducing and exiting characters seemingly at will. Her roving omniscient narrator flits between men and women, the rich and the deprived, Japanese and Korean, making every scene intimate and revealing.

The book is not without its clichés. Hansu is somewhat of a contrivance, too, carrying the two halves of the story on his back. But Lee knows how to sharpen the edges of her narrative with an observation, context, or commanding interiority, making familiar moments meaningful. Her careful pacing helps tremendously, slowing down and picking up speed as needed.

This is Lee's second novel, published a decade after her first. In this time she lived in Japan, interviewing Korean-Japanese people there, and wrote multiple drafts for what became *Pachinko*. Her in-depth research shines through here, giving us an intimate view of the cultural dissonance of contemporary Japan.



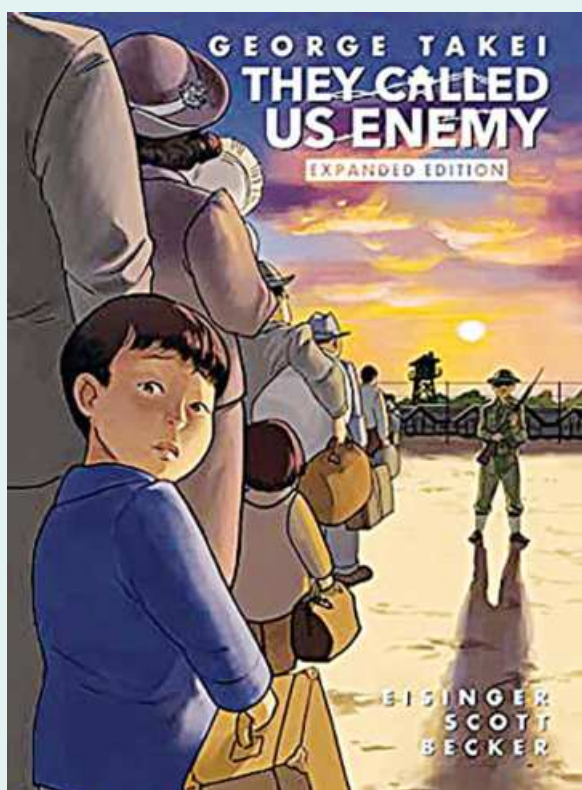
For a Bangladeshi reader, *Pachinko*'s key themes of belonging, racism, cultural erasure, and resilience against the odds resonate deeply. We have had our own tormented history with refugees in this country. With a million more joining in recent years, *Pachinko* offers a sobering glimpse into what the future might hold.

Shoaib Alam is a writer and chief of staff at *Teach For Bangladesh*.

BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC MEMOIR

The Trauma of Identity

ISRAR HASAN



George Takei's visceral and heart-wrenching graphic memoir, *They Called Us Enemy* (2019), dives deep into the cold, dark heart of America's perceived multiculturalism. We follow a four-year-old George and his family as they are forced into concentration camps during WWII—along with 120,000 law-abiding American citizens—because of their Japanese ancestry. In 1942, right after the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan, President Roosevelt had signed an executive order stating that every person of Japanese descent on the

west coast should be rounded up and shipped to one of ten "relocation centers". This book evokes that history through jarring scenes of dislocation, heartbreak, and violence. In the signing of an order, thousands of children are turned from citizens to enemy "aliens" in a land that they had known to be theirs.

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THE BOOK REPORT

Into the World of Bengali Literature with Soumitra

RASHEEK TABASSUM MONDIRA

Though both books and films transport us into the world of story-telling, shaping up our perspectives on life, most readers argue that the true essence of a literary work can never be captured in adaptation. Yet sometimes, by the sheer talent of the director and actors, some adaptations succeed in bringing the text to life.

Such was the career of Soumitra Chatterjee, iconic legend of Bengali film, who played more than 300 fictional characters, many of which were based on literary works. Chatterjee's portrayal of Satyajit Ray's Feluda is undeniably the most significant. Many actors over the years have played the famous detective, but the image of Feluda that readers perceived in their minds fit perfectly only with the version offered by Soumitra.

In the books, Feluda is known for pulling off disguises to catch culprits in their criminal acts—one of the most iconic instances was in *Joi Baba Felunath*, in which Feluda disguises himself as 'Machli Baba' to take revenge on his arch enemy Maganlal Meghraj in an intense bullet throwing act. This singular act portrays Feluda's sense of accuracy, his sharpness of mind and skills as a gunman, all of which were perfectly reflected in Soumitra's portrayal.

Be it with his intense stare or his bold confidence, Chatterjee's work in *Sonar Kella* (1974) and *Joi Baba Felunath* (1979)—both directed by Ray himself—were strong enough

to encourage the author to illustrate the sleuth based on Chatterjee's physique in the later editions.

The Satyajit-Soumitra duo went on to make several other films based on literary works. *Charulata* (1964), *Ghare Baire* (1985), and *Samapti*, all of them written by Rabindranath Tagore, saw Soumitra Chatterjee in lead roles.

Based on Tagore's short story,

"Nastanirh", *Charulata* told the story of Amal and Charu, played by Soumitra and Madhabi Mukherjee. Soumitra's portrayal of Amal, a talented, spontaneous and quirky writer, enchanted the audience as we found ourselves reflected in Amal's conflicting emotions. Amal playing the piano to the tunes of "Ami Chini Go Chini Tomare" combined both Ray and Chatterjee's magic, cement-

ing itself as one of the most iconic scenes in Bengali film history.

Elsewhere in Tapan Singh's *Jhinder Bandi* (1961)—considered one of the best black and white Bengali films of the time—Soumitra played a villain for the first time in a story inspired by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's retelling of Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

The ever-smiling Soumitra's portrayal of a cunning and mischievous Mayur-vahan amazed the audience, at a time when the actor was known for his roles as ordinary protagonists. Here, though, his smiles turned into arrogant smirks. During a scene of the King's coronation, Mayur-vahan's boisterous, scornful laughter played a key part in capturing the character's impudence and audacity.

Yet even as he proved his versatility through the negative role, Soumitra continued to dazzle in roles like Sarat Chandra's Devdas (1979), Ajay Kar's Shekhar in *Parineeta* (1969), and Ashim in Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970), based on Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel of the same name.

Soumitra's brilliance as an actor immortalised several iconic literary stories on the silver screen. His honest portrayal of these characters helped connect rich Bengali literature with the growing and thriving world of Bengali cinema—a gift that endures for generations of audiences even as we mourn his loss today.

Rasheek Tabassum Mondira is a contributor.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD