

## BOOK REVIEW: GEOPOLITICS

## The Politics of Losing Home

MD TOUHID HOSSAIN

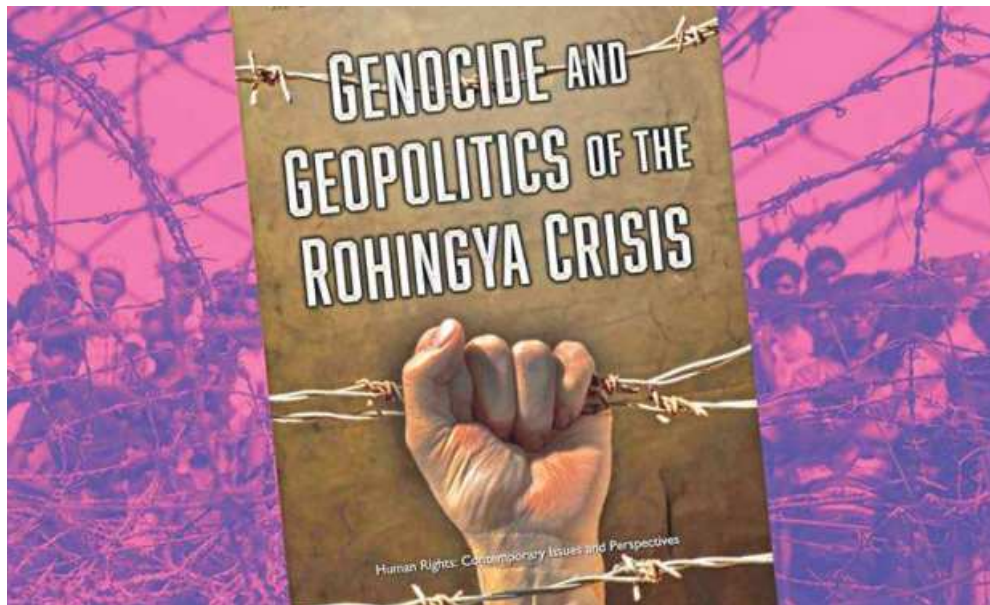
In August 2017, the Myanmar military perpetrated a genocide on the Rohingyas, an ethnic group residing in Northern Rakhine. Large numbers of Rohingyas were killed, women and girls were raped, villages burnt and upwards of 800,000 men, women and children were driven out of their homes. They crossed the border into Bangladesh to save their lives and are now sheltered in camps in Teknaf and Ukhiya, in the southern tip of Bangladesh.

Although this outrageous event was sort of a 'final solution', atrocities on Rohingyas have a long history. The first mass expulsion took place in 1977-78 when 250,000 were driven across the border. Most of them were sent back through negotiations. However, following the second mass expulsion in 1989-90, many of the 250,000 refugees could not be sent back. Meanwhile, the Burmese Citizenship Act of 1982 disenfranchised the Rohingyas of their citizenship. Under continued atrocities by the military and the local Rakhines led by extremist Buddhist monks, a slow exodus continued till 2016, when another 80,000 were expelled. At least 300,000 Rohingyas were displaced in Bangladesh before 2017.

In his book *Genocide and Geopolitics of the Rohingya Crisis* (Nova Science Publishers, 2020), the scholar General Aminul Karim uncovers the broader canvas of the topic, painstakingly consulting the plethora of existing literature, interviewing various experts, and offering his own analysis and conclusions.

General Karim begins with a background of the Rohingyas in Arakan and of modern Burma including its various insurgencies. He then moves on to the strategic importance of the area. Being resource rich, the oil and gas fields are controlled by an enterprise, in which the senior military officers who run the country have economic interests. Major world powers and big corporations have their eyes on these resources. Added to this is the location along the Bay of Bengal, which is vital for Chinese access to the Indian Ocean. Removing Rohingyas strengthens the control of these forces on the area and consequently, upon the resources.

Examining the legal issues in subsequent chapters, the author concludes that the Myanmar regime is certainly guilty of committing genocide, but because Myanmar is not a member of ICC and because implementation of the ICJ decision depends largely on the UNSC, punishment of the perpetrators cannot be guaranteed.



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Chapters 11 and 12 enter into the main theme of the book—geopolitics, and the possibility of a local Muslim insurgency. Through the BRI, coupled with large investments, China has established a firm grip on Myanmar. This allows China to bypass the Malacca strait choke point. China's adversary India wants alternate access to its North-East through Myanmar and a possible land route to ASEAN countries from Moreh in Manipur. The United States, on the one hand, is pressuring Myanmar by funding Muslim insurgency through Saudi Arabia, and on the other, Western oil giants are cosying up with the Myanmar regime to get a hold on the oil and gas fields.

The author considers the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) as a "well organised Muslim insurgency" and suggests that Myanmar might someday ask for US intervention to contain them. This seems a little farfetched. So far, ARSA's only major act has been the supposed attack on some security outposts that triggered the 2017 genocide. It is even possible that the Myanmar military allowed this to happen to create a pretext for the pogrom. In containing myriad insurgencies in the country, Myanmar would probably find China a more reliable partner than the US. However, US overtures could give Myanmar an additional advantage.

In his concluding chapters, through interviews, the author suggests some solutions. Sadiql Islam of Laurentian University, Canada, considers the expulsion

of the Rohingyas into Bangladesh an act of war. Professor Delwar Hossain of Dhaka University thinks even a limited war on this issue is quite unlikely. This reviewer has looked into history, and seen that no such problem involving a crime of genocide has been resolved peacefully. The issue is likely to be prolonged and in such a case, the growth of an insurgency and recruitment of young zealots by international terror groups is a distinct possibility.

To resolve the problem, General Karim suggests that great powers like China, Russia, the US, and the UN and other international organizations work together to ensure citizenship for Rohingyas and their repatriation, and federalism and autonomy in Myanmar. Alas, the Myanmar state looks unlikely to proceed this way; nor are the great powers showing any such inclination. The author agrees that this sounds like tall-talks, but he would still like to be optimistic. Unfortunately, going by the proceedings so far, there seems little space for such optimism.

All said and done, this book is unique in as much as it has the intellectual dimension of an academic. It also reflects the strategic perspective of a professional who has had a decades-old career in military and security matters. A remarkable work, this book would be useful both for researchers as well as policymakers who can devise strategies to handle the issue in the years to come.

Md Touhid Hossain is former Foreign Secretary.

## BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

## The Hypocrisy of Marriage in South Asia

SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

It is a truth universally acknowledged by her many fans that Jane Austen's sharp wit, complex characters, subtle social reproach, and tantalising storytelling are almost unparalleled. As a great fan of Austen myself, I was skeptical when I picked up *Unmarriageable* (Ballantine Books, 2019). Soniah Kamal's South Asian retelling of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. To my greatest delight, this book turned out to be a bold study of the many hypocrisies of modern day South Asian societies: the superficial marriage system which reduces a woman to a baby-making entity and a man to the digits on his pay check, the careful hand picking of religious and cultural practices to serve patriarchal norms, the omnipresent nepotism and classism, and the push for women's empowerment while also demanding traditional servitude and obedience from them. Kamal's storytelling is rich in logic and brimming with intelligent assessment of these social failures.

Set in modern day Pakistan, the Binat family is faced with difficult financial circumstances. Mr Binat hides from his responsibilities by tending to his garden and Mrs Binat spends her days brooding over the futures of her five unmarried daughters. Her only goal in life is to score rich sons-in-law for her girls so that she too can show off wealth and status to the other conceited women of her circle. When the family is invited to attend one of the most prestigious weddings of the season, Mrs Binat puts on her scheming hat and zooms in on handsome, expensively-dressed bachelor guests at the wedding, much to the great embarrassment of her two eldest daughters, who are just trying to make something of themselves in their stunted circumstances.

Kamal adds an interesting South Asian twist to the characters and their love interests made iconic by Austen. Alysba Binat, our Pakistani Elizabeth Bennet, is 31 years old and her older sister Jenazba is 32, to the great chagrin of their mother. Their age is a hot topic among the *desi* aunties of their community, as both women are considered far too old for marriage or bearing children. Worse still, their love interests, Darsee and Fahad Bingla, are a good few years younger than

them at 25 and 26. With this, Kamal sheds light on how, as a society, we have somehow internalised the idea that the definition of a woman's worth is her age and her chastity. I greatly appreciate how *Unmarriageable* stresses that age cannot be the defining factor of a woman's credibility as a person. Sonia Kamal uses powerful examples from our Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s life to back up these ideas: the financial independence and intellectual freedom of Khadija (RA)—who was a widow and several years his senior when our Prophet married her—and her right to choose and propose to a man she deemed a worthy life partner.

*Unmarriageable* is charming and funny, but it is also deep, it will make



PHOTO: SAMEIRAH AHSAN

you question and think. It takes a contemplative look at the practices and traditions that we have normalised and often celebrate with pride. The novel is full of unmatched interpersonal conflicts, delicious satire, and clever humour and banter. It has skyrocketed to one of my favourite books from this year and if I ever have the privilege to meet Sonia Kamal in person, I'd have to borrow part of Fitzwilliam Darcy's famous monologue to express my admiration of her work: "You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

Sameirah Nasrin Ahsan is a mechanical engineer based in Dhaka. She aspires to be an author someday. For now, she is content with reading and sharing the stories that make her think beyond herself. Instagram: @booksnher

## BOOK REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE 2020

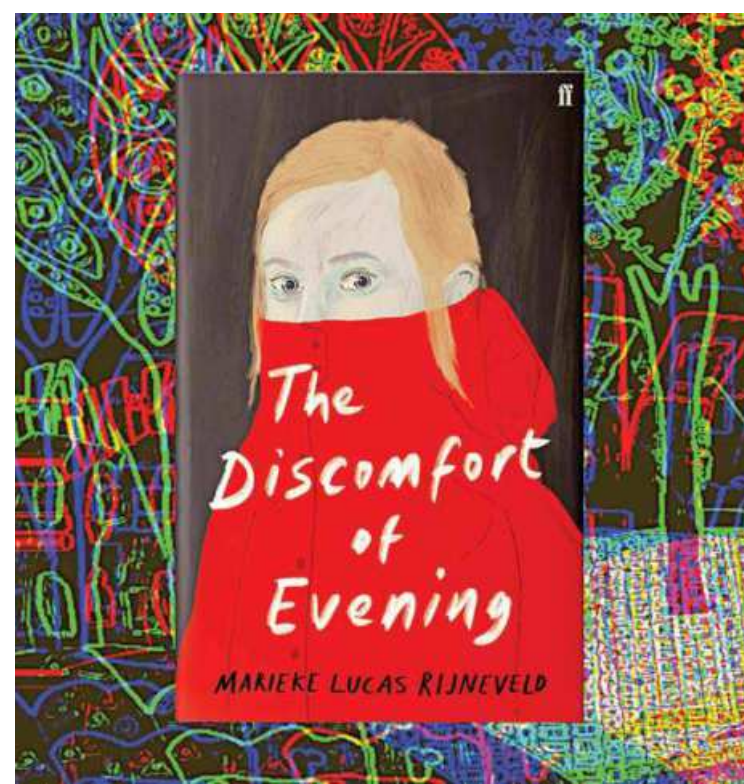
## Repulsive, But For A Reason

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

The mind of ten-year-old Jas—the narrator of Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's 2020 International Booker Prize-winning *The Discomfort of Evening* (Faber Books, 2018)—is a canvas with one enduring quality: the whimsical innocence of a child. And when brushstrokes of a variety of unpleasant experiences drift across it, the reader is left with an image that is dark and at the same time poetic, humorous, and peculiar. Consider these: Imaginary Jewish people hiding from a 20th century war in a 21st century basement. The froth of milk forming a Hitler-like moustache bordering the lips of Jas's father. Jas fearing that her parents might die and holding a tooth fairy captive to wish for new parents. "A mass grave of milk biscuits". And a dead rabbit's teeth growing from the earth, which could possibly puncture Jas's father's torso.

Jas's brother, Matthies, is dead. After losing him in an ice-skating accident, a gloom rolls over their lives, enveloping the farm in which they live in a thick film of grief and longing. His absence is everywhere: "In the middle of the mattress, there's the hollow of my brother's body...a hollow that I try not to end up in." But Jas is also desperate for a Discman, even though she suppresses the urge to ask her parents for one. After all, her "parents' loss is much worse—you can't save up for a new son."

This is what the book is essentially about—the



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

disintegration of a conservative family in the wake of a tragedy.

Jas has two other siblings: Obbe, who tortures butterflies and animals by suffocating them, and Hanna, who thinks Jas' nails are turning black because she's pondering about death too much. Obbe is that bullish sibling who will use the dirt on someone else to resort to unthinkable ways of punishment. Hanna is supportive, easily led to saying yes to every scheme, be it performing a ritual to ward off death or giving into incestuous intimacy. In the presence of

few characters, the exploration of the relationship shared by these siblings is what drives the narrative forward. It results in philosophical insights and adds conflict and thrill to the story.

Before reading this novel, I did not know that the "unrolled wall" of one's small intestine can sprawl over the length of a tennis court, that ants can carry 5,000 times their own weight, and that an earthworm has nine hearts. Strange bits of information such as these are peppered throughout the story, but they serve the additional

purpose of revealing the inner workings of a child's mind, whose whimsy is often a means to processing the dark and grand mechanisms of life on earth. For example, the weight carrying capacity of ants allows Jas to think of how humans so often buckle under the weight of their emotions. Aside from being a shrewd observer, in many ways, Jas is also a rebel. She lives in a religious household, but doesn't want to go to God, only to herself. She wants to be invisible and disassociate herself from the realm of humans.

The characters in the novel are at times obsessed with their own and others' bodies. This can feel discomfiting. It is the poetry and fluidity of the writing that make reading through the vividly unpleasant bits bearable. Even then, the portrayal of the discomfiting offers a glimpse into human nature when it is stripped of normalcy, revealing the lust and violence beneath.

Originally Dutch, this novel was translated into English by Michele Hutchison. But a reader cannot find any uneasy, confusing, or incomprehensible crack in the language that can reveal a failure of translation. Perhaps, that is the beauty of perfect translation—besides the blurb on the cover, there's no way of knowing that the book was not originally written in English.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

## THE SHELF

## The Season of Comfy Reads

STAR BOOKS DESK

Is it just us, or do the cold winds of December make you want to bring down your favourite childhood stories, classics hardcovers, and delicious thrillers from your shelves too?

Read this story online to find out what the staff writers of Daily

Star Books are reading as we try to recreate the illusion of end-of-year holidays. To find the article, follow us on @thedailystarbooks on Instagram, @DailyStarBooks on Twitter, and fb.com/DailyStarBooks on Facebook. Send us your book reviews (600-800 words) to thedailystarbooks@gmail.com.