

REVIEW ARTICLE

Out to explore the world

Raana Haider reads of some fascinating, intrepid women

The beckoning counts, and not the clicking lauch behind you: and all through life the actual moment of emancipation still holds that delight, of the whole world coming to meet you like a wave.

--- Freya Stark, *Traveller's Prelude* (1950)

My eyes hit upon the above-mentioned book while browsing through the 'Sale Section' of the bookstore 'Prose and Politics' in Georgetown, Washington D.C. A smug sense of satisfaction settled in. This is what I term serendipity. A brand-new hard-back, lavishly illustrated with portraits of British women travellers selected from the National Portrait Gallery, London; consisting of 143 pages and priced at \$8.98 my sense of achievement was considerable. The book was published to accompany the exhibition bearing the same name held at the National Portrait Gallery in October 2004.

Located in the heart of the up-market Georgetown neighbourhood in the US capital, 'Prose and Politics' is a unique nomenclature that conveys its high-brow links. When I asked the man at the cash counter whether the bookstore had any other branches in the city he replied in the negative. According to him, this independent bookstore could only survive because of its contextual political establishment links. The capital's leaders are also readers.

Off the Beaten Track: Three Centuries of Women Travellers takes the reader on an exhilarating journey through the centuries (1660-1960s) of British pioneering women who yearn for the lost horizon ...for the distant shore. Multi-tasking a combination of roles; these fearless women were adventurers, artists, campaigners, companions, collectors, scholars and writers. Amongst these women could be counted: "bourgeois and aristocrat, scholar and hedonist, botanists and big game hunters and missionaries and reckless aviators and imperialists...What they all had in common was their gender and their guts." Notwithstanding the macho Victorian adventurer Richard Burton who while perpetually setting of on yet another travel; ordered his wife Isabel: 'Pay, pack and follow.'

Long curious about the first travel account by a woman, I came to know here that it was Egeria, an abbess who made a three-year pilgrimage from France to the Holy Lands of Palestine and Egypt relying on her Bible as a guidebook. That was in the year 381 AD. However, the book *The Pilgrimage of St. Silvia of Aquitania to the Holy Places* lay undiscovered until 1884. Some centuries later, the first known travel book in English written by a woman appeared - *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1432-8). Margery Kempe, a mother of fourteen children set sail alone - from England to Jerusalem in 1413. Coincidentally, this book too lay lost for centuries. It was only located in the 1930s. Were there no publishers for accounts by women travelers? Were the women themselves reluctant to reveal their other identity? Understandably, with prescribed norms and often restrictive social barriers in their homeland, travel offered these wanderers the opportunity to forge new identities in distant lands. Importantly, many a woman traveller was the principal care-taker of ailing dependents. Home-bound, these dormant adventurers were only able to spread their wings once free of family responsibilities and then they escaped to roads less travelled. It is worth recalling the words of Gail Godwin: 'None of us suddenly becomes something overnight. The preparations have been in the making for a lifetime.'

Why do women travel? For the same reasons as men. Adventure, exploration, excitement, crossing the seas, seeking new faces and places, a change from routine are common enough reasons. In the words of Louise Nevelson: 'Some of us come on earth seeing some of us come on earth seeing color.' However, gender-defining factors remain which this book explores in fascinating detail. Lacking educational opportunities, many a daughter saw in her father's interests and activities a desire to walk in his shoes, Constance Gordon Cumming (1837-1924) was the twelfth of sixteen children of a

wealthy Scottish family. An avid reader, Constance discovered Captain Cook's *Voyage to the South Sea* in her father's library. She achieved her desire to travel in 1868 when she accompanied relatives to Egypt, India and Ceylon. There was no more stopping her. *A Lady's Cruise in a French Man-of-War* (1882) records her trip with the Bishop of Samoa around his far-flung diocese. Only in old age, did she return to Scotland.

Mary Kingsley (1862-1900) had an absentee father who was a physician to wealthy families on their world tours. All the young Mary had left of him were the books in his library, such as James Barbot's *Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (1732). Upon the death of her parents, she left for the first of a life-long trail of travel. She went to West Africa in search, she said, of 'fish and fetish.' She emerged from a swamp with a collar of leeches and fell into a pit of pointed stakes, - saved by the "blessing of a good thick skirt." Her books *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and *West African Studies* (1899) brought her literary recognition. The London School of Tropical Medicine was founded with her support in recognition of the health threats associated with foreign travel. She died in southern Africa, where she went as a nurse during the Boer War. She was buried at sea.

Women also travelled abroad to warmer climes to escape the long, damp British winters. Consumption was an affliction that ailed Duff Gordon (1821-1869). A poignant comment: 'I look thin, ill and old, and my hair is going grey. This I consider hard upon a woman just over her thirtieth birthday.' (quoted in *Memoir in Last Letters from Egypt* (1875). She was buried in Cairo. Isabella Bird (1831-1904) first travelled to North America to relieve her spinal problems and other illnesses. Yet, all such ailments mysteriously disappeared once abroad. Marrying at the age of 49, her husband claimed he had 'only one rival in Isabella's hearth...the high-table-land of Central Asia.' She made epic journeys to India, Tibet, Persia; spoke on the Armenian question and was among the first women to be elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. The indomitable high flier learnt photography in 1893 and recorded her three-year journey to Japan, China and Korea in *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* (1899). She died at the age of 73 while planning a return trip to China.

India as a destination was frequent usually accompanying male family members on their official posts. Emily Eden (1797- 1869) and her sister accompanied their brother Lord Auckland upon his appointment as Governor General. *Up the Country: Letters Written to her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India* (1866) remains a classic in colonial writings on India. She also made a series of drawings of Indian princes. Charlotte Canning (1817-1861) arrived in India in 1856 accompanying her husband Lord Canning, Governor General of India. She penned *A Glimpse of the Burning Plain: Leaves from the Indian Journals of Charlotte Canning* (1986). While living in Calcutta, she frequently corresponded with Queen Victoria. "where she was 'isolated to a degree I could never have imagined' ...also referring to the 'strange and terrible outbreaks' of violence that were the start of the Indian Mutiny." She succumbed to malaria and lies buried in Barrackpore, near Calcutta. Penelope Chetwode (1910-1986) grew up in northern India. Her father was Commander-in-Chief of the army. In the 1960s, she revisited the scenes of her Indian childhood. Her trek from Simla to the head of the Rohtang Pass in Himachal Pradesh was recorded in *Kulu: The End of the Habitable World* (1972). She continued leading treks in the area till her demise.

A valuable perception was that 'travel made you whole again.' Travel was a panacea. For Isabella Bird writing from the Rockies in the United States: "I am well as long as I live on

horseback, go to bed at eight, sleep out-of-doors, or in a log cabin, and lead in all respects a completely unconventional life. But each time that for a few days at Honolulu or San Francisco I have become civilized, I have found myself rapidly going down again." For Constance Gordon Cumming, while dutifully seeing friends and relatives in Scotland prior to her departure for Fiji, she found: "such visiting involves more wear and tear of mind and body, than any amount of travelling in distant lands." A good dose of travel was the self-prescribed medication from routine chores, drudgery and an over-dose of responsibilities that so often is a woman's realm.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) accompanied her husband who was appointed Ambassador to the Ottoman court in 1716.

attention to the report itself.' At the 1921 Cairo Peace Conference, she was the only woman delegate. Bell went on to draft Iraq's first Law of Excavation and she was appointed the first honorary Director of Archaeology of the Baghdad Museum.

Confronting stereotyped notions throughout, the gender angle comes upfront in the following insightful comment by Freya Stark while travelling in Iran (1893-1993) in *The Valley of the Assassins* (1934). She had learned Farsi. "The great and almost only comfort about being a woman (traveller) is that one can always pretend to be more stupid than one is and no one is surprised. When the police stopped our car at Bedrah and enquired where we were staying; the chauffeur who did not know, told him to ask the lady. 'That is no good, said the policeman, She's a woman.'" In *Letters from Syria* (1942), the ultimate nomad wrote: 'I never imagined that my first sight of the desert would come with such a shock of beauty and enslave me right away.'

On the other hand, there is the Irish-born (1931 -) Dervla Murphy. She was asked how she had managed, as a woman, to travel through Ethiopia, for her book *In Ethiopia with a Mule* (1968). She replied "It was simple. I went as a man. It is she who advises: 'It's important to travel light. At least 75 per cent of the equipment sold nowadays in camping shops travel clothes lines, roll-up camping mats, lightweight hair dryers is superfluous. My primary basics, although it depends on the journey are a lightweight tent, a sleeping bag suitable for the country's climate, and a portable stove.'

Hester Stanhope (1776-1839) was a mistress in the art of travel. She kept house for her uncle Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger till his end. She then left for Turkey, became 'Queen of the Desert' in Palmyra, Syria and died in Lebanon In a letter written in 1813 which is preserved at the British Library, London, she writes from Latakia, Syria with

advice about travelling through the desert: '...and a chamber pot. Imagine, Madam, a plain which never seems to end' where you travel eight or nine hours together. It will be in vain to seek a bush or tree for any little purpose and anyway you cannot stray from the party. The solution? Pitch your tent. Saying you wish to repose or eat and retire with the chamber pot, ordering coffee for the people.' Which of us has not faced the dilemma and discomfort, the hazards and the perils of this need?

Importantly, "Women adventurers did not attract funding from learned societies nor from large commissions from newspapers and magazines. They did not inherit the family estate. Without such financial support, they could never hope to match the grand, gesture-filled explorations of their well-financed male contemporaries. (On his first African journey in 1871, Henry Morton Stanley, sponsored by a national newspaper took, eight tones of equipment, which required 300 porters to carry)." And the popular saying is that 'men travel light?' "So while men paraded, women pottered." And managed practically; as in the case of Isabella Bird who instead of a pillow, recommended a pillowcase stuffed with one's own clothes.

To the contrary, there was Dorothy Walpole (1889-1959) who 'Everywhere she went, she took fashionable clothes and hats with her, as she never knew whom she might meet.' Her portrait shows a delicate and elegant woman coiffed and clothed in chiffon. However, she proved that 'never judge a book by its cover.' Lady Walpole was the first western woman to reach Timbuktu in 1923. It resulted in *The Road to Timbuktu*. Other books on Africa followed; including *Through Liberia* in 1926 and *The Golden Land*

(1929) on her travels in Senegal. *Beyond the Bosphorus* (1926) was the result of travelling east as far as Iraq. Her last journey was way west. She journeyed to Venezuela and that resulted in *The Country of the Orinoco* in 1931.

The feel of the blast of wind in her hair and the over-riding sense of freedom prompted many a wanderer in her intrepid itineraries. The following lines were penned by Barbara Bodichon in 'Ode on the Cash Clothes Club' written on the eve of an unchaperoned European walking tour with her good friend Bessie Parkes in 1850.

Oh! Isn't it jolly
To cast away folly
And cut all one's clothes a peg shorter
(A good many pegs).
And rejoice in one's legs
Like a free-minded Albion's daughter.
And always, the element of humour to survive an anxiety-ridden crisis is advisable. 'When Mary Kingsley, tramping through West Africa in 1893, was lost on Mount Cameroon with a single African porter who showed signs that he might be seriously disturbed, she stated simply: 'Nice situation this... a mad man on a mountain in the mist.'

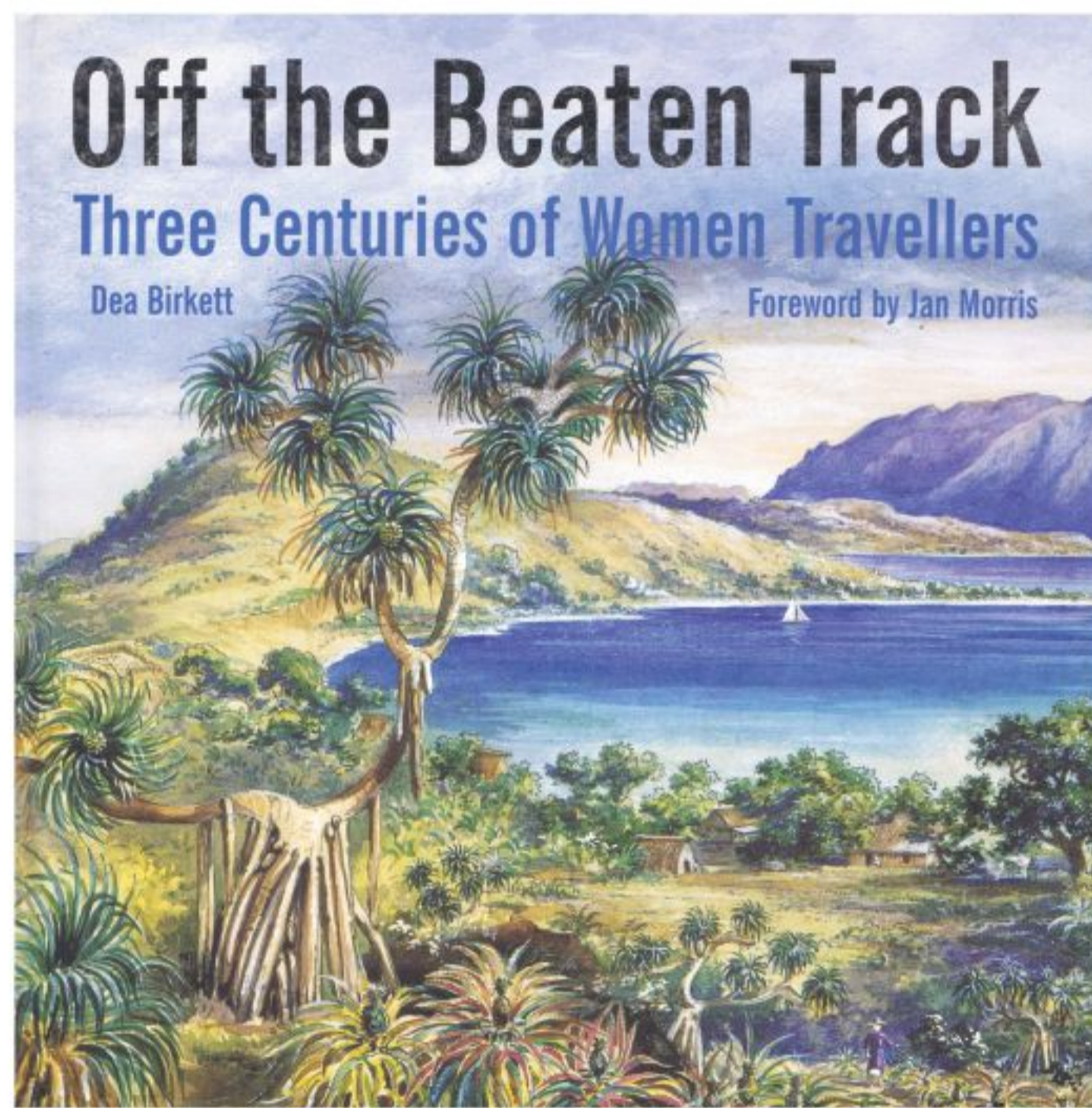
On the role of a male companion traveller; who can match the following comment by Emily Lowe, who travelled with her mother. Lowe's account appears in *Unprotected Females in Norway: Or, the Pleasantest Way of Travelling There* (1857). "We two ladies...have found out and will maintain that ladies alone get on in travelling much better than with gentlemen...The only use of a gentleman in travelling is to look after the luggage, and we take care to have no luggage.'

A humorous anecdote to match the above - has to be the following: Isabella Bird became Mrs. John Bishop in 1881. A much travelled woman, when asked if she would like to go to New Guinea. She replied: 'Oh yes; but she was married now, and it was not the sort of place one could take a man to!'

Created as a literary accompaniment to the same-named art exhibition, *Off the Beaten Track: Three Centuries of Women Travellers* has more than sufficient credibility to stand on its own. Every seasoned voyager and any armchair traveller should read it in order to be informed of the incredibly intrepid women who crossed not only substantial physical boundaries but also battled considerable cultural challenges. The Foreword by the renowned Welsh contemporary travel writer Jan Morris who earlier wrote as James Morris is appropriate to the context: 'I had the peculiar experience of travelling both as a man and as a woman, and I have reached the conclusion, on the whole, that during my own travelling years the female traveller has had it easier than the male...most importantly women are more likely to fall among friends, allies or colleagues wherever they go - to this day the human sorority is stronger by far than the fraternity.'

Biographical sketches of the trailblazers enrich the narrative. *Off the Beaten Track: Three Centuries of Women Travellers* is beautifully composed. Printed on rich glossy paper, the portraits (almost all from the National Portrait Gallery, London) accompanying the biographies are truly a visual treat and most informative. One comes across frequent references to the legendary Hester Stanhope, Isabella Bird, Freya Stark and Gertrude Bell in many a travel narrative. It is only in this book that I have found a face to place on these inspirational icons. Indeed, almost every portrait is quite different to what one expects of her. As mentioned in the Introduction: "Throughout the centuries, this has been the most commonly expressed sentiment when discovering, and continually rediscovering, women travellers. They are rarely as we expect them to be. They surprise us still." This summarises the merits of the book. You too will be surprised.

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Off the Beaten Track
Three Centuries of Women Travellers
Dea Birkett
Foreword by Jan Morris

Fascinated by the land and its people, she wrote reams of letters home. With access to the inner sanctum of Turkish women's living quarters and their lives; her letters reveal much information on clothing, harem life-style, music, Turkish baths and daily activities. These letters, *Lady Mary Wortley Mongagu's Travel Letters 1716-18* were published unauthorized. It greatly upset her family who had hoped to suppress them altogether. Was it a case of the diplomat spouse pursuing her own interest or were the writings offensive to certain quarters or a combination of both?

Prejudices and preconceptions confronting women travelers abound then as now. It was a fellow British traveller Mark Sykes who met Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) in Jerusalem in 1906. He wrote to his wife Edith describing Bell as a 'Conceited, gushing, flat-chested, man-woman, globe-trotting, rump-wagging, blethering ass!' The author elaborates: "This was a strong warning to Edith Sykes and any other woman harbouring secret ambitions of the dangers of stepping out."

Overcoming many an obstacle, battling trials and tribulations; women yet sought to 'step out.' Gertrude Bell was the first woman to achieve a First in Modern History at Oxford- in an age where women were not awarded degrees. It was she who in 1920 wrote a White Paper 'Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia' again a first by a woman, having lived many years in the Middle East. She was unhappy with the public response following its publication the following year. She wrote to her father: 'There's a fandango about my report. The general line taken by the Press seems to be that it is most remarkable that a dog should be able to stand up on its hind legs at all.' A female write a white paper. I hope they'll drop that source of wonder and pay

A Pakistani, Victorian Novel Celebrating Women

Charles R. Larson hasn't a clue about the title of a novel

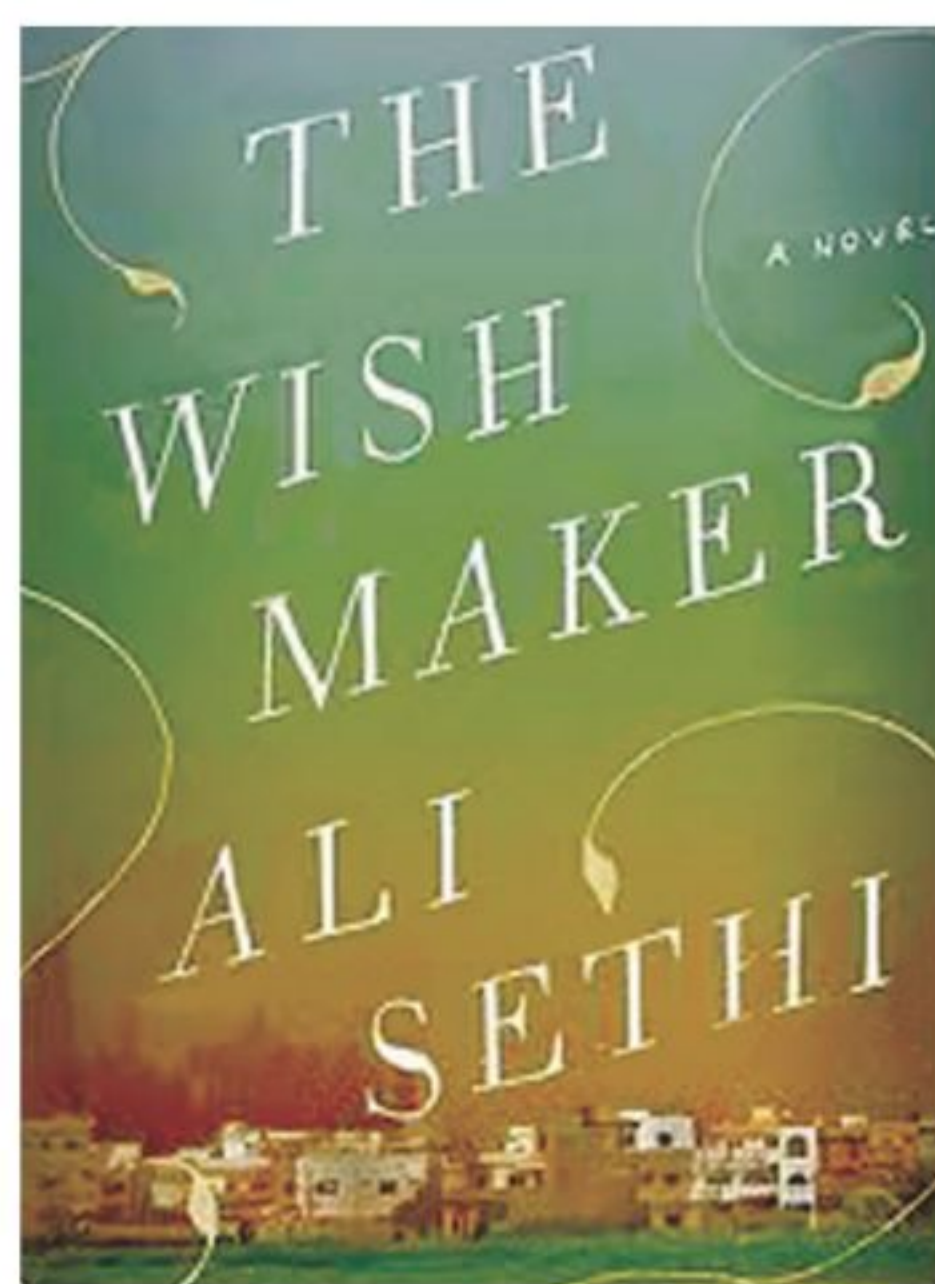
The quotation from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* at the beginning of Ali Sethi's novel is a dead give away: "The difficult task of knowing another soul is not for young gentlemen whose consciousness is chiefly made up of their own wishes." Eighty pages into the story, one of the main characters is reading *Middlemarch*. At the novel's conclusion, there's a quotation from Tolstoy: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Granted, Tolstoy wasn't a Victorian, but his novels share numerous characteristics with his English counterparts: lengthy explorations of family dynamics, rapid social change, and so on.

These are also the stuff of Ali Sethi's sweeping debut novel, *The Wish Maker*. At a recent question and answer session after the author gave a reading in Bethesda, Maryland, he answered a query about Victorian novels-- confessed, in fact, that he enjoyed them. More importantly, he said that many Bengali novels also have the same shape and social consciousness. Certainly these characteristics work well for him in his own novel: covering, roughly, a period in Pakistani history from

Partition (1947) to 9/11. Never, however, can it be said that Sethi's narrative employs chronological order. Rather, there are numerous lengthy flashbacks (some perhaps too long) with his characters locked into historical events in his country's often troubled history.

Two threads work well for this ambitious novel: the troublesome angst of adolescence and the slow but incremental advance of women's rights in a conservative Muslim culture. For the former, Sethi, surprisingly, uses his masculine narrator, Zaki Shirazi, not so much to chronicle his own awakening sexuality as that of his female cousin, Samar Api, as well as her often more worldly girlfriends'. The issue of women's empowerment is explored in parallel fashion by using Zaki's mother, a pioneer journalist, who began her writing career after her husband's (and the narrator's) death, two months before the birth of their son.

Vividly, tellingly, the author depicts an entire generation of Pakistani youths, mostly in the 1980s and 90s, exploring promiscuity, alcohol, and drugs all forbidden, of course, by



The Wish Maker
By Ali Sethi
Riverhead

their faith. Young men and women meet secretly without the knowledge of their parents (sometimes the result of Internet arrangements), watch pornographic films, get high, and sometimes get pregnant. It all seems fairly universal until you think about these activities in conservative societies. Needless to say, these indulgences are those of the children of well-to-do families, who often shower their offspring with too much money. Thus the focus, in part, is upon adolescent rebellion getting away with what's possible, especially out of the eyesight of their elders.

While their parents are much more traditional, Zaki's mother, Zakia, is equally serious about her own attempts to shake up society. She becomes the editor of a publication called *Women's Journal*, boldly confronting the status of women in Pakistan. Politically, the journal becomes one of the early supporters of Benazir Bhutto's move into politics, but then when Bhutto and her husband are accused of corruption, the journal's staff (including Zaki's mother) realize that their own ideals have been compromised. The entire narrative of *The Wish Maker* is steeped in political reality: the rise and fall of

Pakistan's leaders, the volatility and abuse of governments and their often short-lived leaders.

Late in the story, Zaki's own situation takes center stage, but by that time the female characters have already been established as the novel's primary focus. These female characters are, in fact, the novel's imaginative center. Their lives shape most events in the story and tell us more about social change than a concentration on masculine characters would. In the final sections, Zaki has his own horizons to confront at a private boys' school, his own issues with education, and maturity, as well as his determination to continue his advanced education (as the author did) in the United States, but by that time the women in his extended family have become much more interesting.

The Wish Maker is an often lush and revealing story about the last fifty years of life in Pakistan, especially for the privileged. But don't ask me what the title means. I haven't a clue.

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