

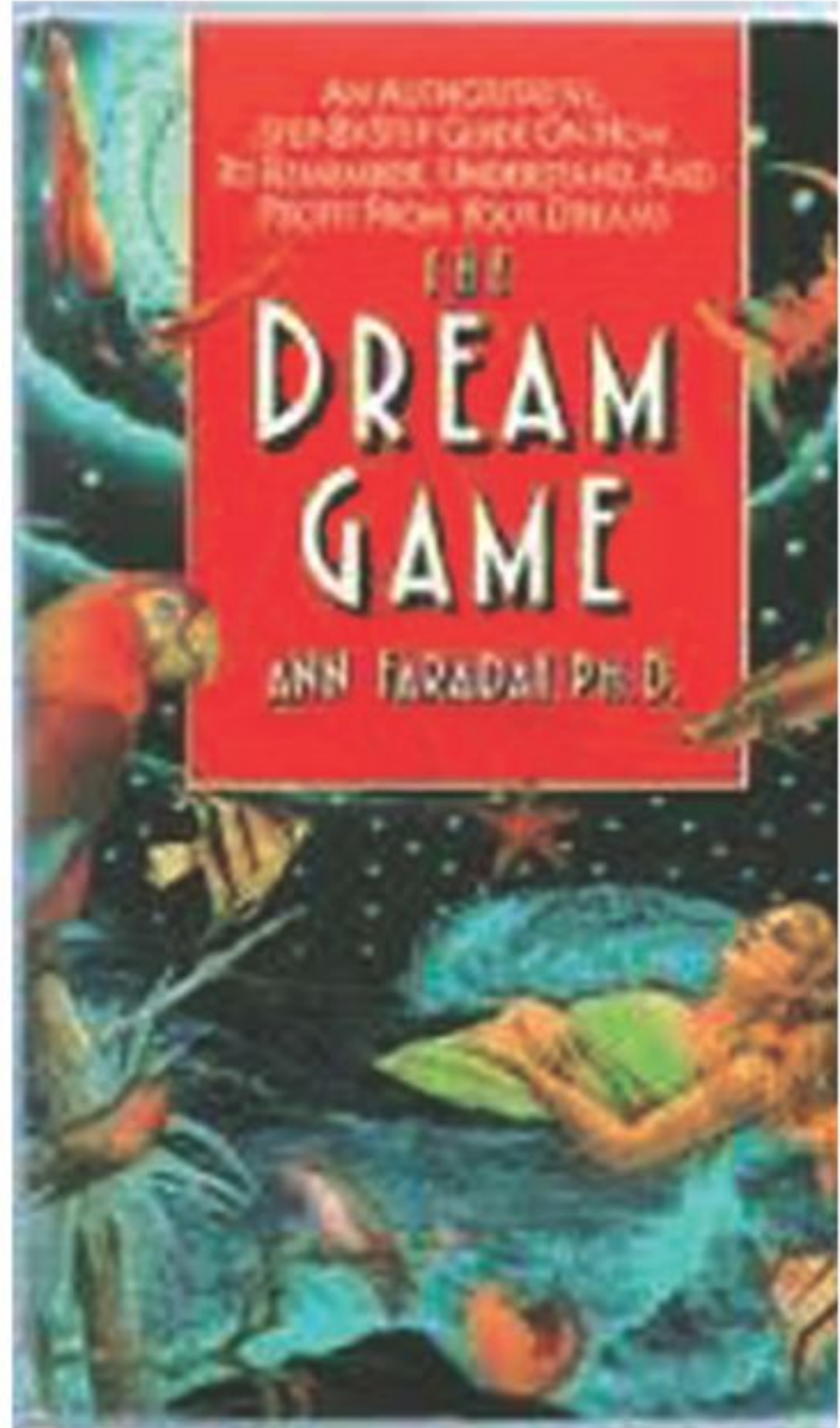
ESSAY

The gift of intuition

NIGHAT GANDHI

'THE intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.'-Albert Einstein

THE Encarta dictionary defines intuition as 'knowing something instinctively or receiving immediate knowledge of something without using reasoning or analysis.' If intuition is instinctive knowledge, how does a writer receive it? Evelyn Underhill in her treatise on mysticism had advised: 'The conscious mind being passive, the more divine mind below the threshold can emerge.' But how to make the overly active and con-



scious mind passive and awaken the divine, intuitive and creative mind? The intuitive mind awakens in a quiet, unhurried, and relaxed state of alertness. Evelyn Underhill elsewhere called this a state of 'restful travail.' Intuition is a gut feeling and is expressed through those moods and ideas that seem to pop up from nowhere. They are a writer's guide. You might have only a vague idea of how a story or oftentimes life will progress, but if you stay with the vagueness day after day, definiteness and openings begin to float into the imagination. This happens to me when I'm not consciously trying to arrive at definiteness. I could be cooking or walking or just falling asleep or waking and a solution to some snag suggests itself.

Meditation, breathing, dream work, journaling and active imagination are some intuition-awakening activities. Intuition often needs solitude to arrive. Every day, and especially on my day of silence, I walk, meditate, listen to birds, gaze at the sky and the clouds, and even play the same piece of music repeatedly---this induces a quiet, trance-like state conducive to receiving intuitive insights. I practice Nadi Shuddhi (alternative nostril breathing) for few minutes before sitting down to write. Deliberate attention to one's breathing slows down and focuses the mind. The mind enters a state of restful travail, a state that Wordsworth described as a 'blessed and serene mood.' Much can happen, but often nothing happens in this state.

As a writer, I have stopped gauging productivity in terms of number of words written per day. Making space for a passively active, spacious emptiness, and holding back the demands of the judgmental, utilitarian mind can lead to some of the most fortuitous turns in a writer's life. As a writer I'm only three books old, but the creative process is the same for beginners or seasoned writers. The writing life is a leap of faith into the cloud of unknowing whether you're on your third or thirteenth book.

Hazrat Inayat Khan, the early 20th century musician, poet and mystic, considered working with the breath an integral part of spiritual and artistic development. The atman, nafs, or soul, he said, lies in the breath. Since the breath is of such paramount importance, he was emphatic that 'the way to bring order and harmony to our body, to bring order and harmony to our mind, to harmonize mind with body, and to harmonize body and mind with soul, is [through] the breath. It is the development of breath, knowledge of breath, practice of breath which help us to get ourselves straightened out, to put ourselves in tune, to bring order into our being.' Without straightening and tuning and bringing order to my being through breath-work, I doubt my writing could flow. I begin my writing day with breathing exercises such as alternate nostril breathing and then meditate by watching my breath. This simple exercise helps to convert wordless communications between the unconscious and the conscious mind into a smooth flow of words.

Dreams, visions and the active imagination

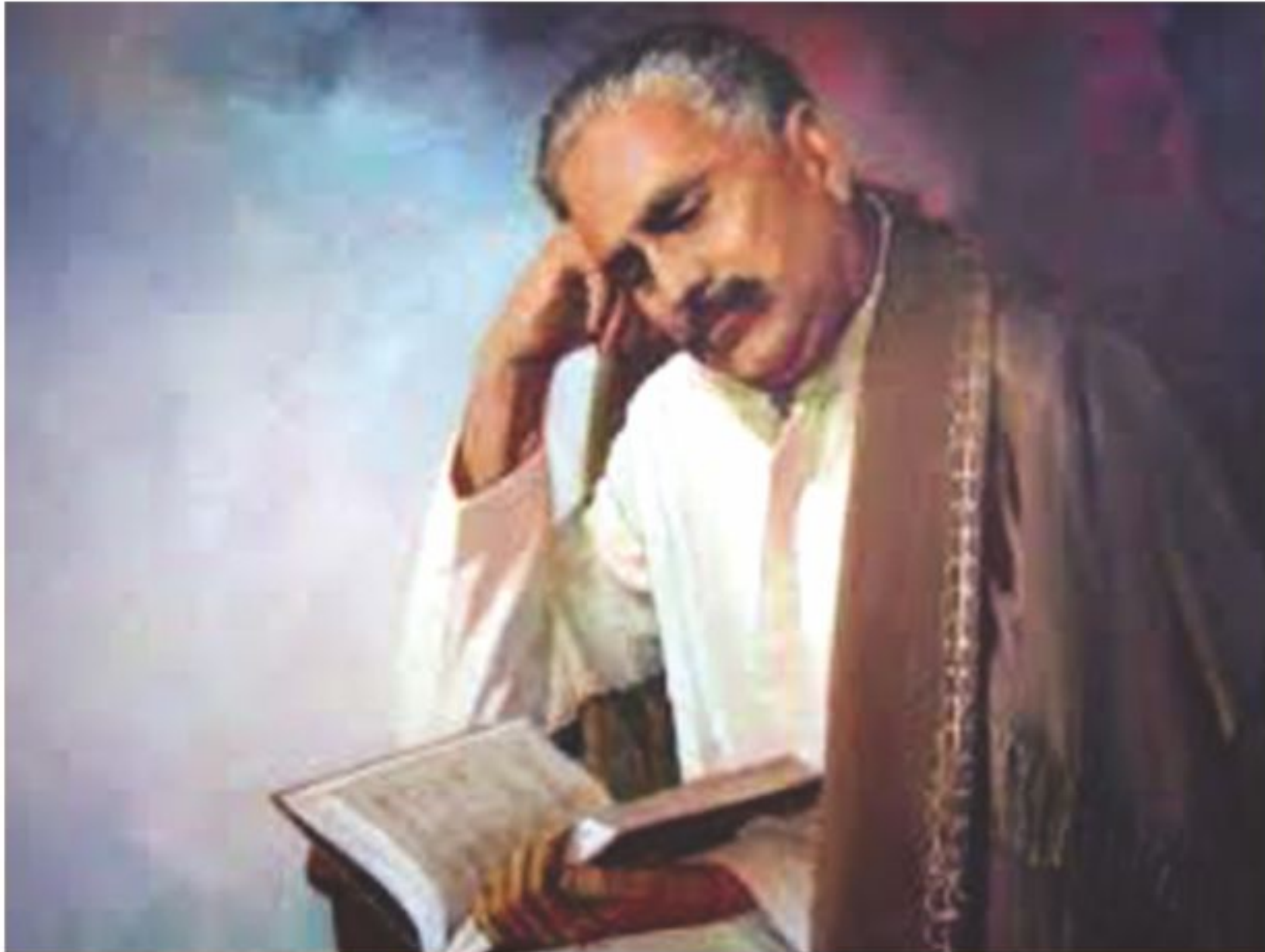
We also awaken our intuition by paying conscious attention to our dreams and daydreams, and to moods and feelings that arise during and after our dreams and daydreams. Insight about a story's plot or a character's quirkiness may



Hazrat Inayat Khan

float into consciousness during these quiet, unhurried states of attention. These are invaluable boons for a writer, especially when feeling blocked or wavering between giving up and plodding on. How to tell if a dream or daydream is offering true guidance? When dreams or waking visions are creative and intuitive in nature, there's a warm, gentle and unhurried quality to them, but when produced by egotistical and fearful anxiety, they are often harsh, guilt-laden and judgmental.

Ann Faraday in her book, *The Dream Game*, offers useful tips for receiving guidance from dreams. Encourage and permit yourself to dream before falling asleep, she says. When you have a dream, record it in your dream



Muhammad Iqbal

journal as soon as you awaken and before it vanishes from memory. If the meaning of your dream eludes you, in a relaxed state ask that an image come to mind that would give you a clue to its meaning. Guy Claxton, author of *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*, says rather than asking what a dream means, you should instead 'befriend' it. Befriending a dream means: 'Enter in its imagery and mood, play with, live with, carry and become familiar with[it].' How you feel about a dream is more important than the concrete contents of your dream. Feelings aroused by a dream can offer surer guidance to unconscious feelings, untapped conflicts and unfulfilled desires. A dream could even tell you how to proceed with your writing or your life.

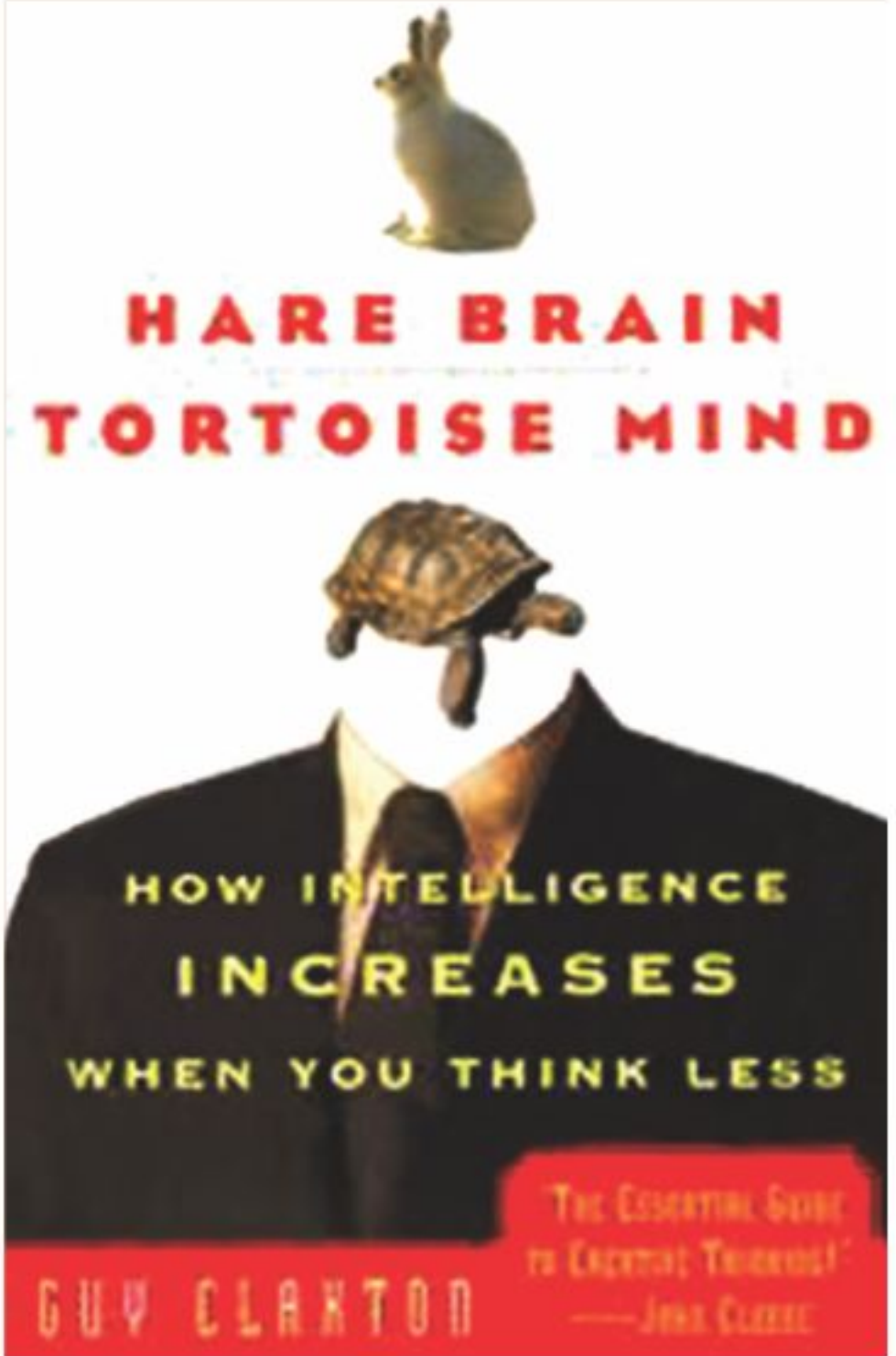
Jungian psychologists take the cultivation of the active imagination further by encouraging us to dream our dreams into the future. We do this by using our imagination. Active imagination is an ongoing dialogue between the unconscious and conscious mind and gets expressed as poetry, music, painting, sculpture or some other creative outpouring. The content of these communications are dreams, fantasies, images, and emotions. Journaling about our dreams, fantasies and emotions is working with the active imagination. Muse in your journal about how your dream could develop further if you were giving yourself complete freedom to see it unfold into its own future.

I begin my writing day with such ramblings in my journal. I'll share with you an instance where meditation, dream work, journaling, solitude and music helped me pull myself out of a period of self-doubt and creative paralysis. I had a dream of which all I could recall was the colour blue and a voice that said: "Blue is the colour of courage." A calm, yet invigorating blue and those six words. I woke up feeling puzzled by the dream, but knew it was important, and yet I couldn't say why. I recorded the dream fragment in my journal. Two weeks later, I had another dream in which I saw a frail but fearless old woman diving into a pool of murky water to retrieve two water chestnuts for me. I was wavering at the entrance to that pool. I was filled with doubts. But she just took the plunge. There was an important message here again but I wasn't sure what it was. A few days later, when I was meditating while listening to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan sing Iqbal's poetry I finally grasped the significance of both my dreams. When I heard these words of the qawwali, I knew what the dreams were trying to communicate to me:

*tu rahnavard-e-shauq hai,
manzil na kar qubool/
apne mann mein doob ke pa ja
suragh-e-zindagi*

*(You are a traveller on the path of Love, don't settle for known destinations
Plunge into your innermost self to discover the secrets of existence).*

As I listened to this music, I realized I was being rescued from the paralyzing depths of a futile depression. My dreams had been sent as gifts from the creative unconscious to launch me on an inner journey of self-discovery. And the music and the poetry I had chosen to listen to had become the conduits for interpreting the dream's intuitive message. I needed to live and write with courage and follow my gut feelings. And the old woman of my dream could be God's guiding spirit and a symbol of creative courage. The old woman was telling me to walk on the path I was most fearful of walking. And the water chestnuts? They were the probable fruit of my efforts awaiting me at



the end of my difficult journey. This intuitive insight appeared in my dream in the form of space, time, thought, action and words. Meditation, music and poetry became the tools of active imagination I used for converting the dream's message into meanings that were intelligible to me.

At the end of the water chestnut dream, I remember peeling the water chestnuts and feeling somewhat disappointed: they were rotten inside. I didn't want to acknowledge the obvious, and it took me some time to accept the other bit of wisdom my unconscious mind was trying to communicate to me. We may eventually get what we desire, but it may not bring us the fulfillment we thought it would!

NIGHAT GANDHI IS BASED IN INDIA AND IS THE AUTHOR OF 'ALTERNATIVE REALITIES: LOVE IN THE LIVES OF MUSLIM WOMEN'

A scattering of lives

Nashid Kamal steps into space between dreams and reality

THE *Lowland* is a book by Jhumpa Lahiri, an American writer of Indian origin, and a Bengali to be precise. The first word that came to my mind, upon reading the work, is 'sensitive', 'unusually sensitive'.

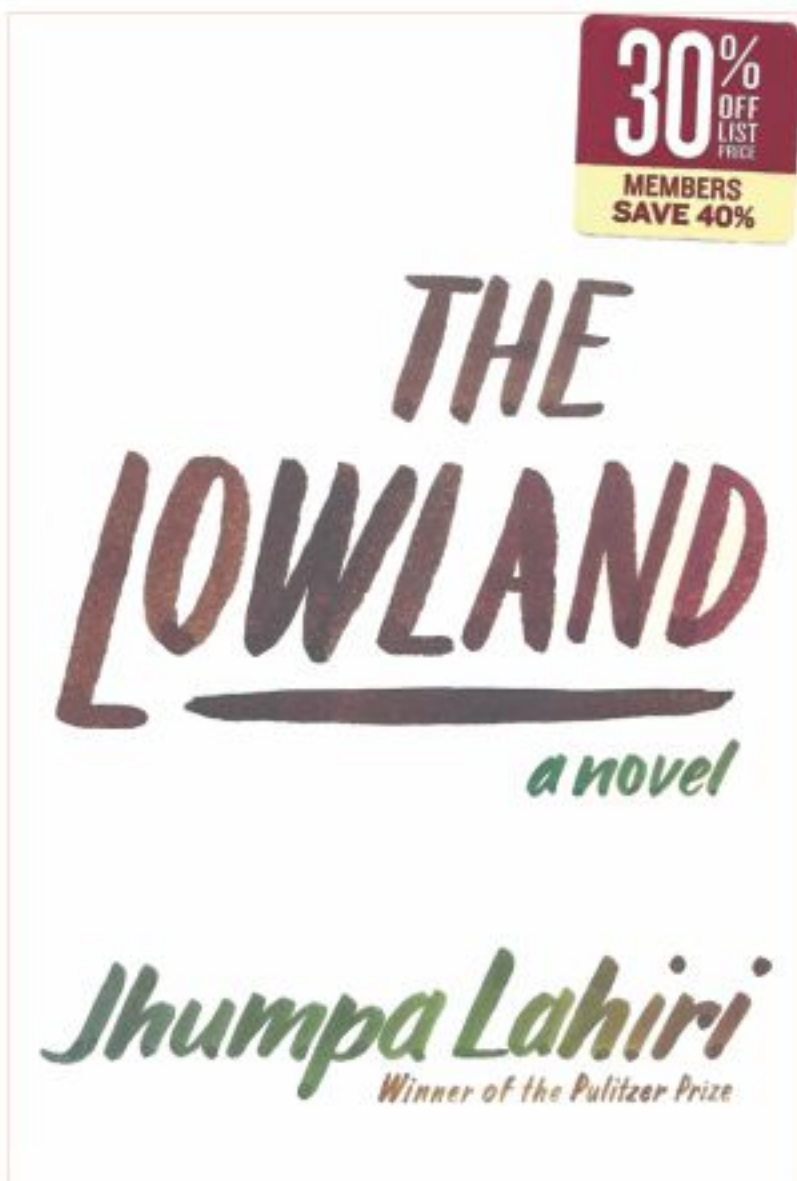
The book starts with Tolly Club of Kolkata, which was built for wealthy people. Residents of the area nearby were forbidden to enter the premises. The two brothers Udayan and Subhash find it very intriguing: what goes on behind the walls of Tolly Club which fancy people frequent in their extravagant chariots (cars). The siblings find tins to stand upon and piggyback on each other and topple the gates of the club, when no one is watching. It is this brotherhood through which the author draws the closeness of the two brothers, one of whom, Udayan, then gets drawn into the Naxalite movement and loses his life. Subhash follows the conformist path of middle class family expectations. He excels in his studies and sets foot in the USA to pursue a PhD, where he learns about his brother's death by a police firing squad in the lowlands, next to their house. The lowlands where they grew up, the lowlands now covered with water hyacinths, where his distraught mother loses her soul and tries to clean the area with her own hands, lest she find her son.

In a very touching situation Subhash comes back to his home in Kolkata and gets to meet Gauri, the widowed wife of his brother Udayan. The story unfolds from this point. It is a story so beautifully told that you can almost picture every character. There is a special treatment of the inner thoughts of each character, which the author has gone into with great detail and attention. It leaves readers with the very satisfying feeling that you knew them all.

Subhash remembers the last time he saw his brother. It was at the Kolkata station where he feels 'He had forgotten the possibility of so many human beings in one space. The concentrated stench of so much life. He welcomed the sun on his skin, the absence of bitter cold. But it was winter in Calcutta. The people

filling the platform, the passengers and coolies, and vagrants for whom the station was merely shelter, were bundled in woollen caps and shawls.' A lot of observations of the east and the west for one paragraph.

Jhumpa Lahiri brings the nuances of eastern culture and western culture into a very enchanting 'Mumbai mix' (of jhalmuri) as she has done in her other books. For example, Gauri leaves for the USA and arrives back in Kolkata after almost forty years. She suddenly phones her brother Manas, who happens to be in Siliguri. Manas



The Lowland
Jhumpa Lahiri
Alfred A Knopf

talks to Gauri on the phone 'in the affectionate mode, the diminutive form of exchange reserved for bonds formed in childhood, never questioned, never subject to change'. The term is so beautifully coined by Jhumpa, it is almost as if one can hear Manna De sing '*she amar choto bone, boro adorer choto bone*'.

All the characters grow in this book. Gauri leaves Kolkata and finds a place in Rhode Island ,USA. From a daughter -in-law helping her mother-in-law with posto dana spread, she now attends classes on philosophy, her thoughts grow, her world

changes, she has a daughter Bela, whom she deserts.

There are very acute observations of Gauri, who arrives in the US as the wife of Subhash, and becomes a student of philosophy. The transformation from a Kolkata girl to a graduate student in the US is a part that many people will be able to identify with, but I enjoyed the scene where she becomes part of the faculty herself. As an introvert she finds the 'obligation to be open to others, to forge these alliances, had initially been an unexpected strain. But over time, these temporary relationships came to fill a certain space'.

Many years later, as Gauri goes back to the place near the Tolly Club, where she had stayed with Udayan, she sees a gentleman, who could have been Udayan's friend, 'He was on his way to the market, wearing an undershirt, a lungi, carrying a shopping bag.' What precise description of a Kolkata man, in mid day!

Bela, Gauri's daughter, is born in the US. She also goes through the trauma of being deserted by her mother at a young age, her character grows too. It is her relationship with her mother, as well as her generosity to allow the choice of the relationship between her daughter and Gauri, that makes the book pragmatic, progressive and exemplary.

Subhash remarries after many years; he finds an American woman who has a similar past. Jhumpa writes 'The years the couple have together are a shared conclusion to lives separately built, separately lived.'

Gauri had helped Udayan, she had found out the bearings of a policeman, who was later killed by the Naxalites. Gauri carries this guilt in her. She visits the family in Kolkata. When someone shows her the actual house of the policeman, she feels like a moth 'She was a like a moth that had strayed into a room, only to flutter out of it again. Unlike Gauri, they would never think back to this moment'. These reflections only tell half the story. The full story is in the read.

DR. NASHID KAMAL IS AN ACADEMIC, WRITER AND NAZULI EXPONENT

The horrors of war

Tanveerul Haque faces the reality of an endless conflict

A scintillating tale of love, death, treachery, greed and all the human foibles – set in an equally stark, barren and desolate countryside that is Afghanistan. A tale of war and its corollary horrors that beset a peace-loving family in a peaceful land.

A love story woven into the fabric of war in which the line between friend and foe is blurred.

It is the story of Rohan (sixty years old and whose eyes have been deteriorating for almost two decades), who lives in a large house with a sprawling garden in a small city Heer. Rohan comes from a family rich enough to have set up a school – Ardent Spirit - with separate buildings that are named after "the six locations of Islam's earlier magnificence and possibility" but is a mere shadow of its better days and now converted to a madrasa taken over by radical Islamists. Rohan had signed over the school to a former student Ahmed the Moth, who had died in Afghanistan and his brother Major Kyra had inherited Ardent Spirit.

Rohan's wife Sophia (painter of portraits) is dead. She had founded the school with him. His has a son, Jeo, and a daughter, Yasmin. He has two adopted sons, Basie and Mika, whose parents were communists but are now deceased. Basie is married to Yasmin. Jeo and Mikal are the best of friends.

There is a widow named Tara, who lives close by Rohan's sprawling house with her marriageable daughter Naheed. When Tara was a young widow she was wrongfully incarcerated for adultery with Sharif --- Sharif who already had two wives. While she was in jail Rohan had reassured her by promising to make Naheed his daughter-in-law. After Jeo and Naheed are married it is revealed that Mikal and Naheed have been secret lovers, exchanging letters for long. Mikal's entreaties to Tara prior to the wedding to give Naheed's hand in marriage to Mikal fall on deaf ears as he is an orphan and has nothing to his name.

Jeo, who has been studying to become a doctor in Peshawar, and Mikal go off to war in Afghanistan, ostensibly to help the injured civilian population but are hijacked by the Taliban who force them into combat.

Rohan goes in search of Jeo and Mikal to Afghanistan and locates Jeo as the hostage of an Afghan warlord. He tries in vain to have Jeo released and is blinded by the warlord.

Jeo dies in a firefight with American forces supported by anti-Taliban elements. His dead body is delivered back to Heer and we learn that Naheed is pregnant with his child. But soon she miscarries and the baby is aborted. In Jeo's absence, Naheed pines for her lost lover Mikal and is determined to wait for his return. The same Sharif, who had once pursued Tara, approaches Rohan with a proposal to marry her daughter Naheed, but the blind Rohan turns him down.

Away in Afghanistan, Mikal is "bartered and sold among various warlords", losing the index fingers of both his hands, then ransomed to the Americans who torture him and doggedly interrogate him for information about the Taliban and his links with Osama bin Laden. He is unaware of Jeo's fate and keeps searching for him.

Back in Heer, the radical students of Ardent Spirit under the leadership of Major Kyra plan and execute a

bloody siege of St. Joseph's missionary school in which Yasmin's husband Basie who teaches there dies from eighty six bullet wounds. After his death Yasmin discovers she is pregnant with his child.

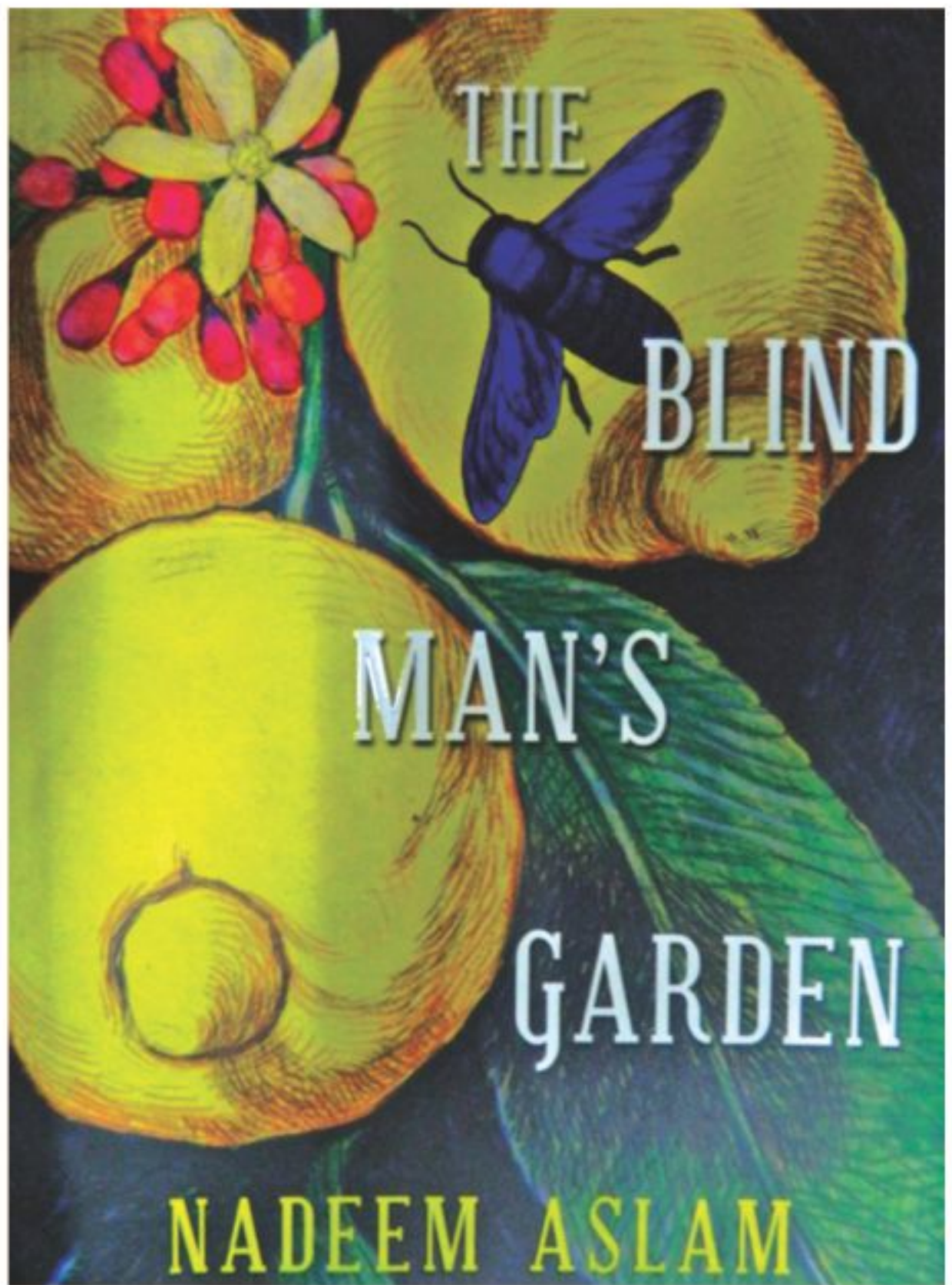
Mikal's survival against all odds, his tremendous mental courage, his wife in escaping from an impossible situation, his single handed capture and detention of an American soldier and his ultimate return to his shattered home, his reunion with Naheed makes for fascinating reading.

The episode of Abdul the bird-pardoner, the half-buried horses of Rohan's great-grandfather, the dogs (saluki, airedales) and the delightful intervention of a snow leopard cub reveals the author's sensitive portrayal of animals.

Nadeem Aslam is a powerful writer who paints with a broad brush on a wide canvas, portraying aspects of the Afghan war in chilling detail, thereby showing his mastery of the realities on the ground.

A heart-rending tale of a close knit, well to do family shattered by the horrors of war. A thoroughly enjoyable read much appreciated by all those of The Reading Circle who read it.

TANVEERUL HAQUE IS A BUSINESSMAN AND A MEMBER OF THE READING CIRCLE



The Blind Man's Garden
Nadeem Aslam
Knopf