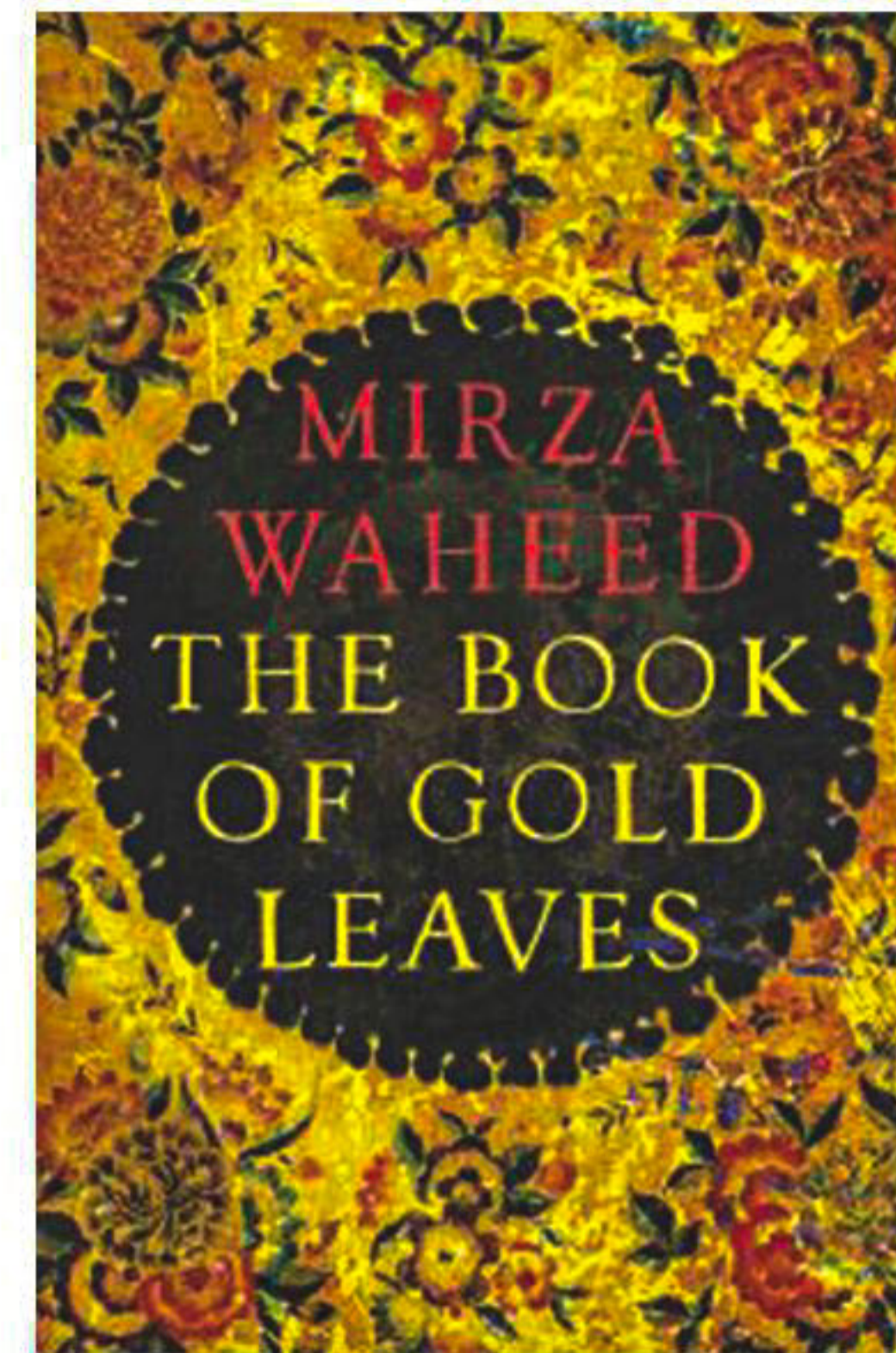


Born and raised in Kashmir, Mirza Waheed is a former BBC journalist who now lives in London. His debut novel, The Collaborator, was shortlisted for the Guardian Book Award and the Shakti Bhat Prize.

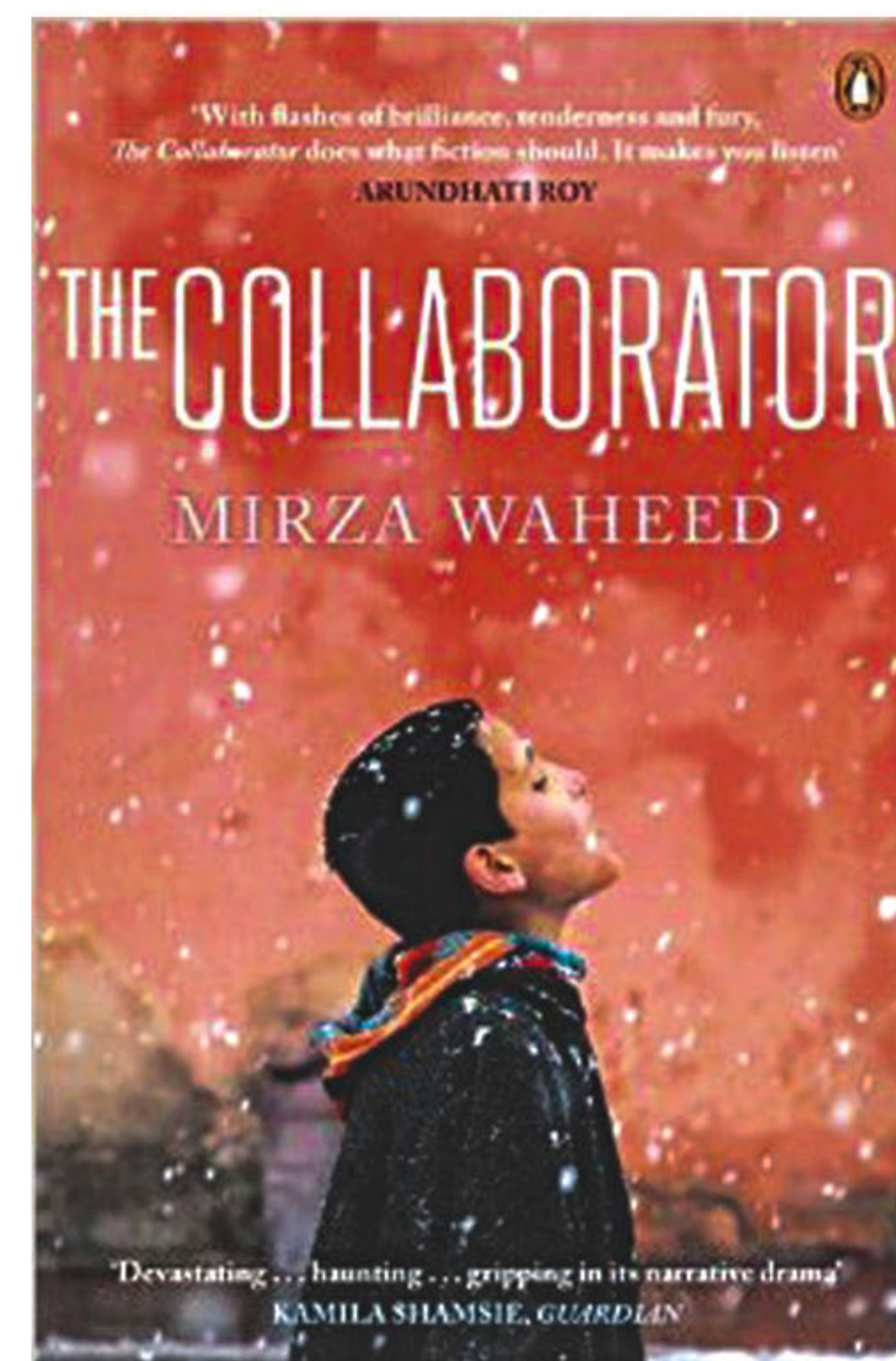


How was Kashmir like when you were a young boy?

During the nineties, the army used to conduct 'operations' every day. In the morning there would be an announcement from the local mosque ordering all men to gather in a field. A masked informer sat in a military vehicle and these men had to parade

'The Collaborator'

AMITAVA KAR



in front of it. All it took was a nod from the informer and you were taken away. A lot of young men disappeared like that in Kashmir—on many occasions, innocent men. I was in one of these parades when I was 15 or 16. As I was walking, I saw some bodies on the ground. One of them was still alive. He was asking for water. But I could not stop. This image stayed with me for years. How do we arrive at a situation when we see corpses a few feet away but we cannot do anything about it?

The protagonist of your novel *The Collaborator* is a young boy who counts the dead bodies. Did you know anyone like him?

A question came to my mind: if this could happen in the city with journalists, poets and writers watching, what could have happened in the mountains? What if there was a hidden valley with hundreds of corpses lying around? That was the first impulse of the novel. And in order to narrate the story of those dead bodies in a valley, I invented a narrator who was a young boy. He is forced by an army officer to do this job. He goes down to this valley of corpses and he has to find IDs on them. What if he finds a friend?

A lot of boys you grew up with became militants. Did you ever face this dilemma?

It's a great question. The reality is so different from the official narrative. These were boys I grew up playing cricket with. I guess I don't have it in me to take up arms.



Mirza Waheed

How does Kashmir, a war torn territory, produce so many talented poets and writers who write in English?

I went to an English medium school in Srinagar. Then I studied English literature in Delhi. I wrote my first novel while I was an editor at the BBC where I worked for ten years. The tradition of writing in Kashmir is very old. One of the first documents of history anywhere in the world was written by a Kashmiri named Kalhana who wrote in Sanskrit. We have poets in the 19th and the 20th centuries who wrote in Urdu, Hindi, Persian and Kashmiri. The English language writers of Kashmir have not sprung from a vacuum.

What is the solution to the Kashmir issue?

I tell a story. I write about the war but I also want to see what goes on in the mind of a 17-year old boy who is overwhelmed by the massive, colossal military machine that impinges on his life. India says Kashmir is my integral part. Pakistan says it is my jugular vein. They have fought three wars over Kashmir. The problem will be solved only by going to all Kashmiris.

“ I tell a story. I write about the war but I also want to see what goes on in the mind of this 17-year-old boy who is overwhelmed by the massive, colossal military machine that impinges on his life. ”

Is there a consensus among Kashmiris about what they want?

The consensus is that military occupation by India is not acceptable.

How has the book been received in India?

Very well, actually. You have to separate the people from the state.

Please tell us about your second book *The Book of Gold Leaves*

Before I embark on a novel, I have written only two, I think about these people, these places for years until a character speaks to me. I have to hear them. My second book is a love story of an artist who becomes a militant. He abandons the brush for the gun. But he remains a tender person. Even while on the run as a militant he cannot help but think about Roohi, the girl he loves.