

Laksmi Pamuntjak is an Indonesian novelist, poet and food writer. Her 2012 novel *Amba*, a modern take on the story of Bhisma and Amba from *The Mahabharata*, set against the backdrop of the Indonesian mass killings of 1965, has become a national bestseller.

Why did you pick Bhisma and Amba for the two main characters of your novel?

When the idea for the novel came about in 2004, I was finding a lot of solace in poetry and mythology. I was renewing my lifelong fascination with Iliad and the *Mahabharata*. I was especially drawn by lesser known characters. Bhisma is a well known figure in the Indonesian rendition of the *Mahabharata* but not Amba. I wondered how it was for Amba to be a fallen woman — somebody who was twice rejected, first by her betrothed and then by Bhisma. The Amba in the epic was portrayed as someone who had rage and bitterness in her. I wanted her to be so much more independent and complex—someone who has actually fallen in love with Bhisma and Bhisma with her. I wanted to give them a life of their own. And I thought of casting Bhisma as a political prisoner set against the 1965 communist purge in Indonesia.

And why the *Mahabharata*, the epic poem?

The *Mahabharata* is a timeless allegory of war within a family. There is so much diversity in Indonesia—we are a country of seventeen thousand islands. I could not think about writing something so big and not make it an epic itself. I wanted the novel to accommodate all these different dimensions of Indonesia.

Did you feel any pressure writing or talking about such sensitive issues?

It has been difficult for the Indonesian psyche to talk about 1965. I grew up with a one sided version of history that painted the communists evil. I wanted to tell the stories of the ordinary people. I talked to a lot of ex-political prisoners who shared with me their experiences in the prison camps. When the Suharto

regime collapsed in 1998, things started changing. Major book stores started stocking academic books about 1965. Around 2003, memoirs of political prisoners started getting published. These were indispensable references for me. But when I went to the Buru island along with my journalist friends, we were tailed and interrogated for hours.

Have things improved since then?

Yes, writers now can write almost about anything.

But I am also concerned about the resurgence of intolerance and conservativeness in the past five years.

You also write poetry and about food. What do you like writing the most?

I have what you call a culinary mind. I wake up thinking what to have for breakfast and lunch. I seek good food in every city I go to. And poetry and music are my passion. It is through poetry I rediscover music. I was trained as a classical piano player. I experience moments of clarity when I am in my poetic mode. And when I do I don't think about food. That said, if I want to write about something like 1965 I cannot help but write a novel.

How do you feel about such categorization as 'South Asian writers' or 'African writers'?

I write both in Indonesian and English. So I used to be concerned about what the English speaking reader wants and what the Indonesian speaking reader wants. Then after writing *Amba*, I decided I would just like to write about issues that move me—things that come to me with some kind of urgency. And these days it is family that's so beautiful and difficult at the same time.

Indonesians demonstrated their thirst for change by electing Joko Widodo, a common man, as the president in 2014. What are the expectations?

He has broken a lot of ground in many different ways. He has the people's mandate and that's power to him. He is a 'blusukan' which means he is someone who goes to the street and finds for himself what's happening at the grassroots. He is so much more approachable. He has a track record of solving problems both as a mayor and then as a governor. ■

MENDING THE PAST

AMITAVA KAR



Laksmi Pamuntjak

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS



Javed Jahangir

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

A Promising Author

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Javed Jahangir is a promising Bangladeshi author. His works have been published in the Daily Star, Bengal Lights Journal, Smokelong Quarterly and many other literary blogs and journals. He is a founding member of *beyondthemargins.com*, a website of daily literary essays. He was on the 2011 panel of judges for the RISCA (Rhode Island State Council Arts) Fiction Fellowship award. He has contributed to, and been editor-in-chief of *The Grub Street Writers' 10 year Anthology*. His novel 'Ghost Alley' is launched in this year's Hay Festival, Dhaka by Bengal Foundation Publishers. This emerging writer talks to *the Star* about his thoughts, works and future plan.

What actually inspired you to write 'Ghost Alley'?

I actually felt more triggered than inspired to write this novel. During my stay in the USA I found many of friends from different countries who know almost nothing about Bangladesh's rich culture and history of struggle against oppression. I think the reason behind this ignorance is we don't have that much literary contribution in English reflecting our tradition and history. This triggered me to write something on my country and the society. *Ghost Alley* is a fiction novel but it reflects the challenges and changes Bangladesh has gone through.

How did you put Bangladesh's history in your novel?

I would like to say that *Ghost Alley* is not at all a history book. It's actually a fiction novel. The narrator of the novel is Ludo a 12 year old boy who lives with his mother, aunts, and mad grandmother, Suraya. When Suraya's half-sister, the blind Nadira, comes to their house seeking silent revenge for unknown past crimes, Ludo starts to discover a world of unknown and thrilling stories. Actually the reflections on Bangladesh's society and history have been narrated through the stories of these two women and the boy.

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Why did you choose the name Ghost Alley?

I liked this name *Ghost Alley* which actually is a variation of *Bhuter Goli*. Ghost represents something missing or something that is no more with us and we have to tell about it with other's story as Nobel Laureate Tony Morrison says. Dhaka is actually the city which has been haunted by all the historical persons and incidents significant for Bangladesh whether negative or positive in terms of result we have experienced. Like ghosts these past incidents were the access points for me to get into the history.

Still Bangladesh has been going through a lot of turmoil and changes in the socio-political arena. What do you think of it as a writer?

I think this is the time for Bangladeshi youth to contribute to their country. They have the ability to research on Bangladesh's history and to extract the true facts from a lot of biased narratives. Many people who have seen the days of upheaval of 90, great liberation war of 71 or even the partition of 47. But it is very natural that their accounts may have a flavour of their own point of view. But youth have the ability and the enthusiasm I believe to extract the true facts and this can contribute a lot to solve the current turmoil.

What is your upcoming project?

Currently I am working on my second novel which will be more on contemporary Bangladesh. Though I am currently living in the USA, I am very much interested to know what Bangladeshi youths are thinking of their country and society.

Javed Jahangir can be contacted through his facebook page 'Javed Jahangir, author'.