

ON THE EVE OF INDIA PARTITION...

AUTHOR: SHONA PATEL
Harlequin-Mira: Ontario.2013. 427 pp

REVIEWED BY GOLAM SARWAR CHOWDHURY

SHONA Patel's debut novel, *Teatime for the Firefly*, can be read as a gripping love story or it could be considered as a Diaspora novel in which the author introduces a new world to people who have lived close to it for years together but could never become a part of it. The work is autobiographical in nature and brings back memories of a time when India was about to be partitioned.

Set in the Aynakhal Tea Estate, in Silchar, Assam, the novel, as Patel told me in my correspondence with her, is also about the life of her own parents who had lived in the estate where her father rose to the position of General Manager. The author, who now lives in Arizona, writes primarily for American readers who know very little about tea plantation in North Eastern India. To these readers the tea industry is not only unheard of but also quite esoteric as they follow the few stories they hear about the British introducing tea plantation in India when they had come across all kinds of challenges leading to premature death of young men and women because of snake bite, malaria and other tropical diseases that were terminal in those days.

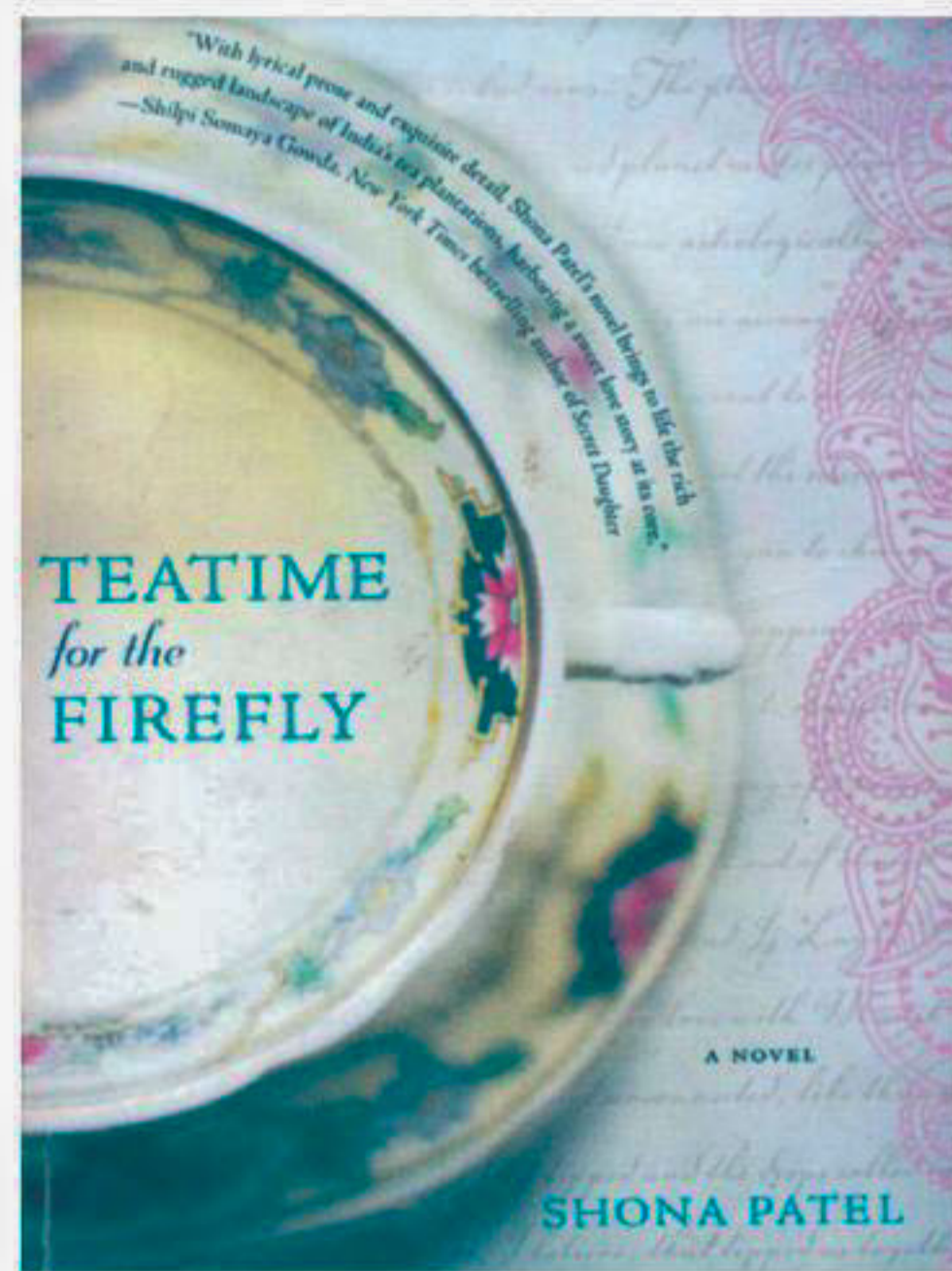
Teatime for the Firefly is a realistic novel with a historical tilt because its setting precedes the partition of India by a couple of years. As one goes through the novel it becomes apparent that a country which was the land of both Hindus and Muslims for thousands of years would be bifurcated as the religious identity of the two communities would not allow them to live together any more. The readers can find no reason as to why innocent people belonging to both the Hindu and Muslim communities are victims of unthinking but aggressive rioting and mayhem.

Patel, who has no faith in organized religion, strongly feels that only the Baul philosophy can unite people of both communities who have lived as friends and neighbors for centuries. Mistrust and hatred did not exist until religion was introduced to politics with the intention of dividing India along religious lines.

Married to a Gujarati, Patel's ancestors are from what is now the Habiganj district of Bangladesh. Before India was divided, Karimganj, now a part of Assam was a subdivision of Sylhet; and Silchar, Cachar and Hailakhandi were closely linked to Sylhet and its people in more than one way. Therefore, the setting of the novel will particularly interest Bangladeshi readers who know about Sylhet and what is called the Surma Valley.

The novel is about the love between Layla Roy and Manik Deb. Layla's grandfather Dadamoshai, a great advocate of English education, a Raibahadur and an Anglophile, is a powerful district judge. Manik Deb is a

To me, Aynakhal Tea Estate is a metaphor for a world unknown to all but only those who work there: the British Mangers and Assistant Managers, the Bengali Clerks known as Babus, and the workers called Coolies. This world is a lot different from the one we live in; for it has its own rules, its own code of con-



highly educated young man who has qualified for the most prestigious job in the Indian Civil Service which required extraordinary luck along with outstanding qualifications for any Bengali to qualify. Manik's exceptional success quickly gets him engaged to Kona Sen, the daughter of the richest person of Silchar.

When Manik first meets Layla in the Raibahadur's house it's not quite clear if it's love at first sight. Only later the readers can tell why Manik would leave his powerful administrative job and instead choose to work as an Assistant Manager at the Aynakhal Tea Estate which requires a newly appointed Assistant to remain unmarried for three years. Manik accepts the condition and breaks his

engagement with Kona and continues to wait for the moment when Layla would become his wife.

To me, Aynakhal Tea Estate is a metaphor for a world unknown to all but only those who work there: the British Mangers and Assistant Managers, the Bengali Clerks known as Babus, and the workers called Coolies. This world is a lot different from the one we live in; for it has its own rules, its own code of conduct, and challenges and dangers that cannot be even thought of by people who live outside a tea estate as big as Aynakhal.

When ultimately Manik marries Layla, after a wait of three years, by exchanging garlands following the Brahma tradition, the Raibahadur's granddaughter gets an opportunity to become a part of this new world which initially shocks her in many ways. Layla, which means night in Arabic, transforms herself into the Chotamemshahib as the glow of the fireflies gradually makes her familiar with the incongruity of the world she has chosen for herself.

Unlike the works of Jhumpa Lahiri or even Zia Hyder Rahman, in Patel's novel there is no travel back to the country of birth after the protagonist decides to settle in the new homeland. The nostalgia for a lost motherland and the struggle to adapt to the culture of the newly adopted country seem to be missing in *Teatime for the Firefly* if it is read as novel written by an author who belongs to the South Asian Diaspora living in the United States of America.

However, Patel's strong longing for the land of her birth and the country of her ancestors transports her, in her imagination, back to the days of her childhood and youth to the land where she had once lived that becomes the setting of her novel. Seen from

this perspective, *Teatime for the Firefly* is also autobiographical containing many attributes common to Diaspora Writing.

After reading the novel I thought Shona Patel's reason for writing *Teatime for the Firefly*, was to pay homage to her parents, her grandfather, and to a culture that she had left behind many years ago. Like an adult remembering their childhood, Patel by writing this novel also goes back to a period in history which was not only significant to her but also to the whole of South Asia.

An episode in the novel that touched me the most is the journey that Layla Roy makes to the Aynakhal Tea Estate where Manik Deb was profusely bleeding after he was attacked by a wild animal. Layla decides to quickly travel to the Tea Estate where trouble was brewing among the workers. At the same time, in the adjoining township of Mariani Hindus and Muslims were killing each other without any respect for humanity. Layla displays unbelievable courage given the volatile situation in the Tea Estate and in Mariani. It was her profound love that makes the apparently impossible journey a reality. She finds Manik grievously wounded with blood gushing out of his body. I thought this powerful image reflected the serious blood-letting that finally made the division of India a cruel reality.

Shona Patel's novel will definitely be of interest to students and academics that follow the writings of new authors now living in the West but originating in our part of the world. *Teatime for the Firefly* will also be enjoyed by planters, and people who are related to the tea industry.

The reviewer is Professor of English at University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

From Subjective Impulses to Universal Echoes

AUTHOR: NAHID KAISER

Published in February 2016

Publisher: The Poetry Society of India

Cover Designed by Farhan Ishraq, Price: 250/- Indian Rupees

REVIEWED BY MAHFUZ UL HASIB CHOWDHURY

THIS is how I sent a message through a social network to poet Nahid Kaiser expressing my eagerness to read her latest book: "I have been waiting for *Eve Unbound* with boundless curiosity." The poet was kind enough to respond rapidly by sending two complimentary books including *Eve Unbound* to my postal address. *Eve Unbound* is still hot and steamy being first published in February 2016 by The Poetry Society of India. Nahid Kaiser teaches English literature in Daffodil International University, Dhaka.

The poet sliced the verses of *Eve Unbound* in six chapters presenting different phases of a woman's life. The titles of the chapters bear vivid reflections that occupied Nahid Kaiser's poetic mind regarding the ordeals people, particularly women have to live through and the variegated particles of memories that at times make us retrospective. This feature is often ticked off as "stream of consciousness", "interior monologue" or "heap of broken images" recalling venerated bards like William Butler Yeats and T. S. Eliot.

The first poem of the book "A Welcome Note" conveys greetings to a baby girl wishing her good fortune in a world where women find it difficult to move along their self-chosen pathways. At the same time this poem reminds us of the accomplishments women are able to secure. A sarcastic theme runs through the poem revealing the fact that women who can implement their dreams are still much fewer if compared to their male counterparts. Most of the women have to compromise with stringent social norms giving up individual ambitions and desires. This poem lays emphasis on women's prolific qualities to work at corporate heights on top of looking after their families as housewives. Moreover, this poem visualizes women as a superb synthesis of beauty and boldness and these two attributes can make women invincible.

The strangeness that flashes across the mind of an adolescent girl just entering puberty is poeticized in the poem "Anything Wrong". A girl undergoes both slow and abrupt psycho-physical changes when she becomes a "teen". Some new regulations from parents, particularly from moms, sound weird to those girls who have not yet grasped what puberty actually stands for. The expressionist mode of rhetoric applied in this poem cannot be missed when we look at the unadorned lines "What's wrong with mother? Or anything wrong with me? It may be the bloody blood flow that wet my panties, I see!" This poem is an unusual portrayal of the weariness that menstrual pang sparks off in a teenage girl's thoughts. "The Three Hours" illustrates the attractions and charms a bridal chamber is known for. Two minds, two bodies, two pairs of lips intermingle in a wave of unprecedented ecstasies while the moon peeps

through the windowpane like a wicked voyeur. This poem has reached the dimension of paintings in my view and this poem is an answer to the question why poetry is known as artwork through rhymes. Newlywed couples remain too excited to figure out how nocturnal hours come to an end to usher in daybreak. Men and women explore one another in overwhelming warmth and depth on the first night of their wedding. The poet has stitched nuptial sensuousness in the poem quite aptly.

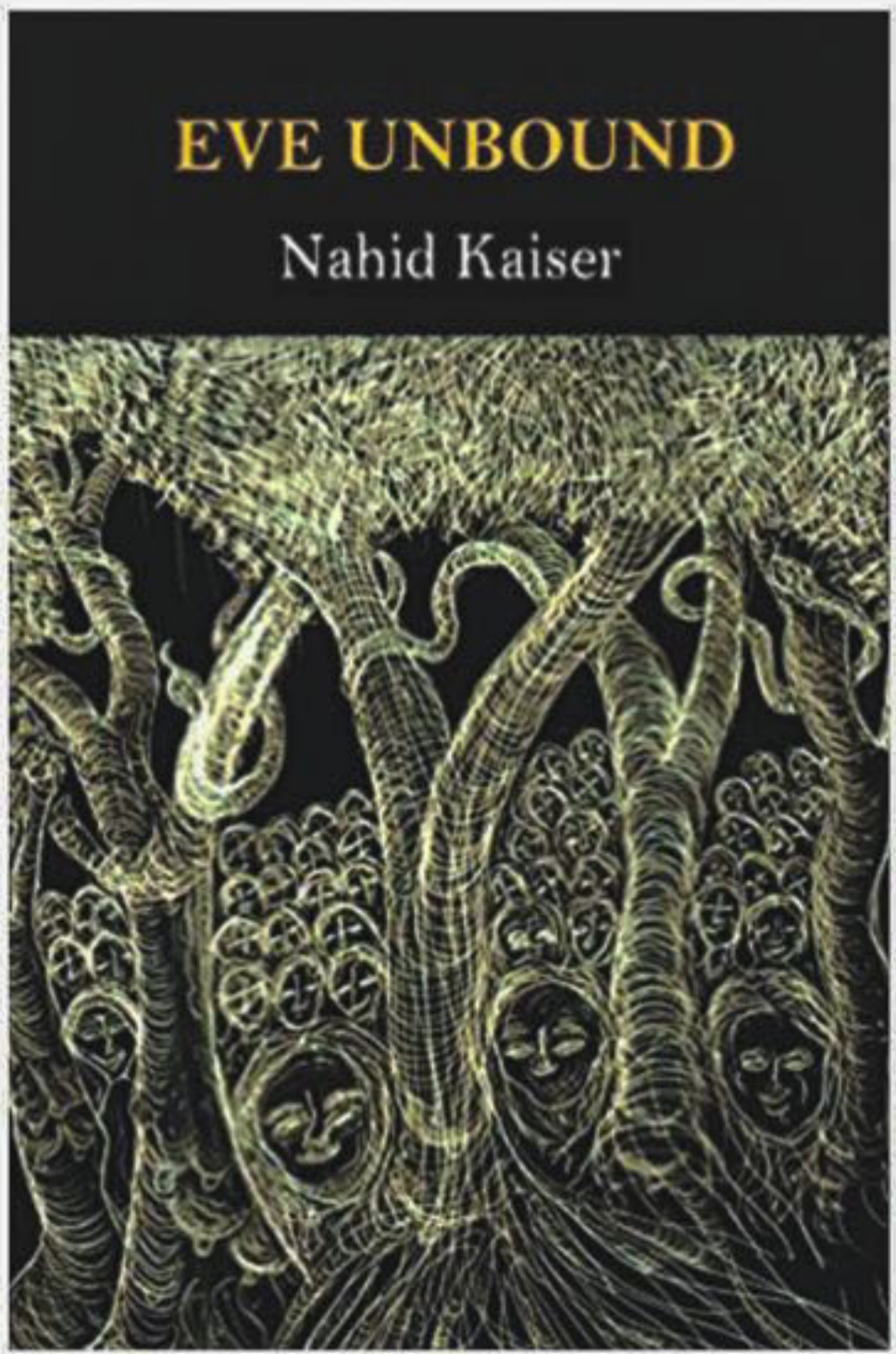
"A Prayer for My Daughters" chimes with the eternal urge of a mother's heart seeking blissful days for her daughters who glance ahead for a future decked with glory and success. Life is not a bed of roses while it is a tougher combat for girls to fight. This concern works at the back of each mom's mind while looking at the innocent, tender faces of her daughter. The poet seeks blessings from God to bestow her daughters with the power of intellect as well as with humanitarian values.

The woes of childless women have been movingly sketched in "The Barren Field." This poem exposes a bitter piece of reality happening every now and then around us. When a woman cannot give birth to children, society views her as an inauspicious and unwanted entity. This is a pathetic, wrong and illogical approach to women because childbirth is no how the only yardstick to judge a woman's worth. But men hardly face questions if they have no child. This is an unpalatable instance of social disparity prevailing in a lot of countries. It shows that Nahid Kaiser is not at all an "ivory tower" poet. Rather some of her poems are packed with social awareness and intimations.

"To the Pilgrim" is a spiritual poem with a profound humanistic undertone. Nahid Kaiser attaches importance to the point of delighting God by giving benevolent service to mankind. Showing love and kindness to human beings is the finest virtue found in most of the people who seek divine grace. This poem bears a tacit ink of pantheistic philosophy by hinting at the concept of trying to envision God's shadow through God's creations.

A few words should be offered to look into the title of the book *Eve Unbound*. Eve, both theologically and allegorically, refers to women while the word "unbound" symbolizes women's perpetual leaning towards freedom, towards the dream of standing on their own feet. While concluding, it would be compatible to remark that Nahid Kaiser's poems throb with broad impulses of her personal observations though she is often found moving out of subjectivity and reaching out for a greater spectacle of social and universal countenance.

The reviewer is Vice President, Chowdhury Philanthropic Trust, Sylhet, Email: mhasib.chy@gmail.com



My Days in National Book Centre

AUTHOR: FAZLE RABBI

Published in February, 2015, ISBN 978 98433 8486 7

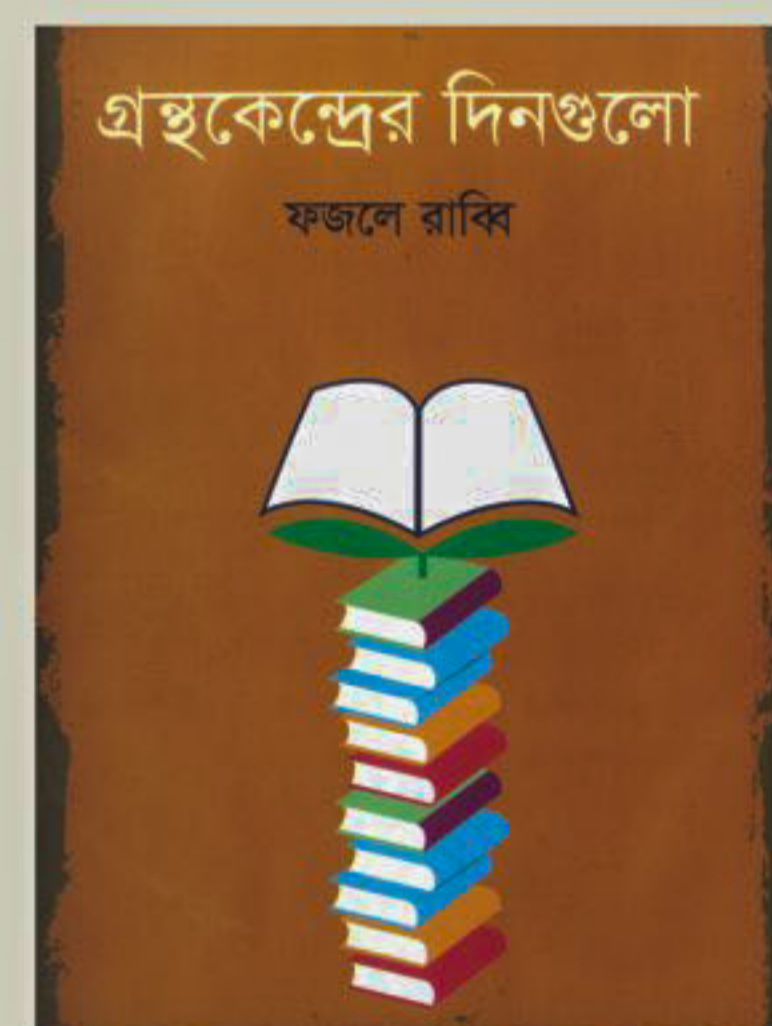
price 15 US\$/ Taka 200., pages 152

REVIEWED BY SIDDIQUE MAHMUDUR RAHMAN

FAZLE Rabbi had a long professional career, almost twenty years in Bangla Academy which is considered a great centre for Bangla culture and literature. For more than three decades Fazle Rabbi studied and worked in the field of printing, publication, book, library and enrichment of library movement in Bangladesh.

His recent book *Gronthokendrer Dinguli* (My Days in National Book Centre) has been the most read book. It's not only a history of crises and problems of his professional life, but it is also a very good piece of literature.

He came across a good number of eminent personalities of art and culture and worked with high ranking officials at home and abroad. From his memoir, Fazle Rabbi frankly



shared his experiences with the readers in this book.

In the first thirty chapters of the book he discusses National Book Fair, book publishers, printing, publication ceremony of

books, library survey, training on juvenile literature, mobile book fair, book marketing etc.

He also writes about the contribution of UNESCO and UNICEF in the development of books in Bangladesh and many other issues.

Fazle Rabbi would be appreciated for this arduous literary work and I am sure he will be remembered especially for these two books on Bangla Academy and National Book Centre. Future researchers will have the opportunities to draw reference from these books for the research works.

The reviewer is researcher, prolific litterateur, successful translator, editor and printing and publication specialist.

OMNI BOOKS

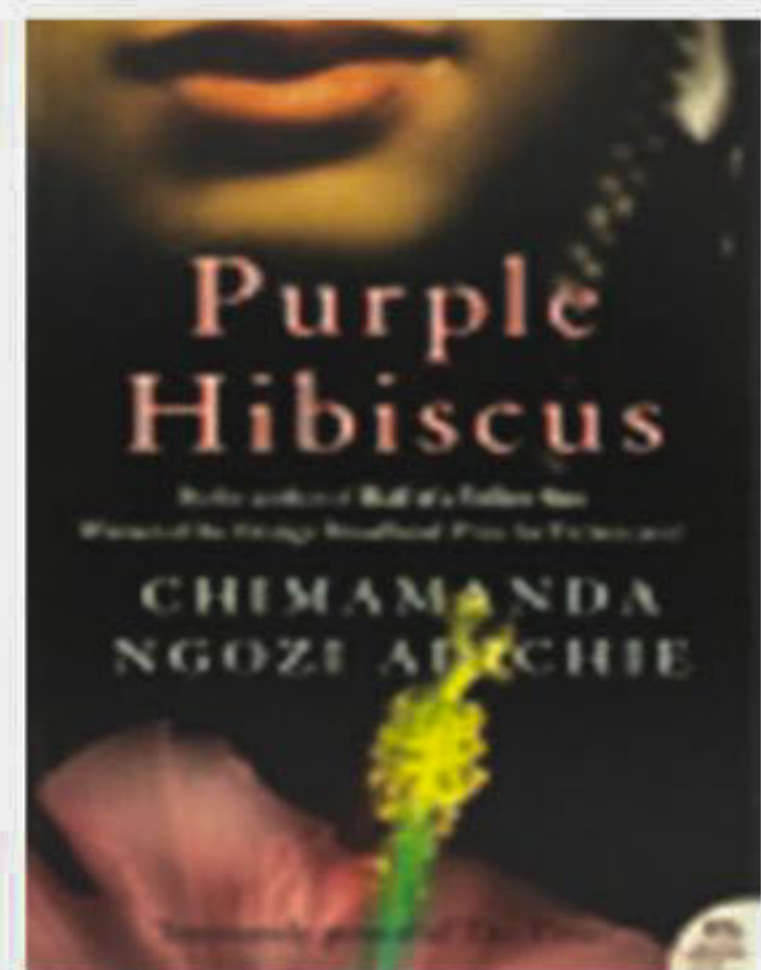
PURPLE HIBISCUS

BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

PURPLE Hibiscus is set in Nigeria at a time when the country was on a verge of a military takeover. Just before this takeover, the young protagonist, Kambili is shown in her house. She has been brought up under the strict guidance of her father, who is very religious, and rigorous. Kambili's daily schedule comprises of strictly monitored prayer routines, along with a fixed study time.

However, things take an unexpected turn when war breaks out in the country, and Kambili's father is compelled to send his two children away from home. He sends Kambili, and her brother to live with their aunt, whose lifestyle is very different from theirs. Her aunt is a fun-loving person, and the atmosphere in her home brings about radical changes in Kambili's life, causing her to enjoy life and love. Kambili, in her father's house, never experienced these things in their true sense.

Purple Hibiscus focuses on the themes of freedom and life. The author has been successful in creating a story that is able to captivate the hearts, and minds of readers around the world. This debut work of the writer has been very successful in displaying her immense talent to the



FLASH POINT

BY FAHAD SAMAR

AN explosive yet poignant account of the lives of those who walk the red carpet and those who photograph them.

Zeeshan Haq, a handsome Kashmiri lad, is forced to relocate to Mumbai after losing his father in a mysterious fire that destroys their ancestral photo studio in Srinagar. With ambitions to become a successful photographer, Zeeshan joins his maternal uncle in the running of a small agency that supplies paparazzi pictures to Mumbai tabloids and newspapers. That is his introduction to the seductive, dazzling, often hedonistic world of Mumbai high society.

Zeeshan is instantly smitten by Hazel Haroon, a model and aspiring Bollywood film star, and yearns to vault over the red velvet rope that separates the paparazzo from his glamorous subjects. Soon enough, he succeeds in becoming chief assistant to Kabir Kohli, Mumbai's most celebrated fashion photographer.

But just when things are looking up for him, Zeeshan gets unwittingly trapped in a web of crime and deceit, the consequences of which threaten his career and very existence.

Set between Mumbai and Dubai, two cities where nothing is quite what it seems, *Flash Point* is a riveting

