

A Black Diamond and Shayista Khan

AUTHOR: SHAZIA OMAR

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

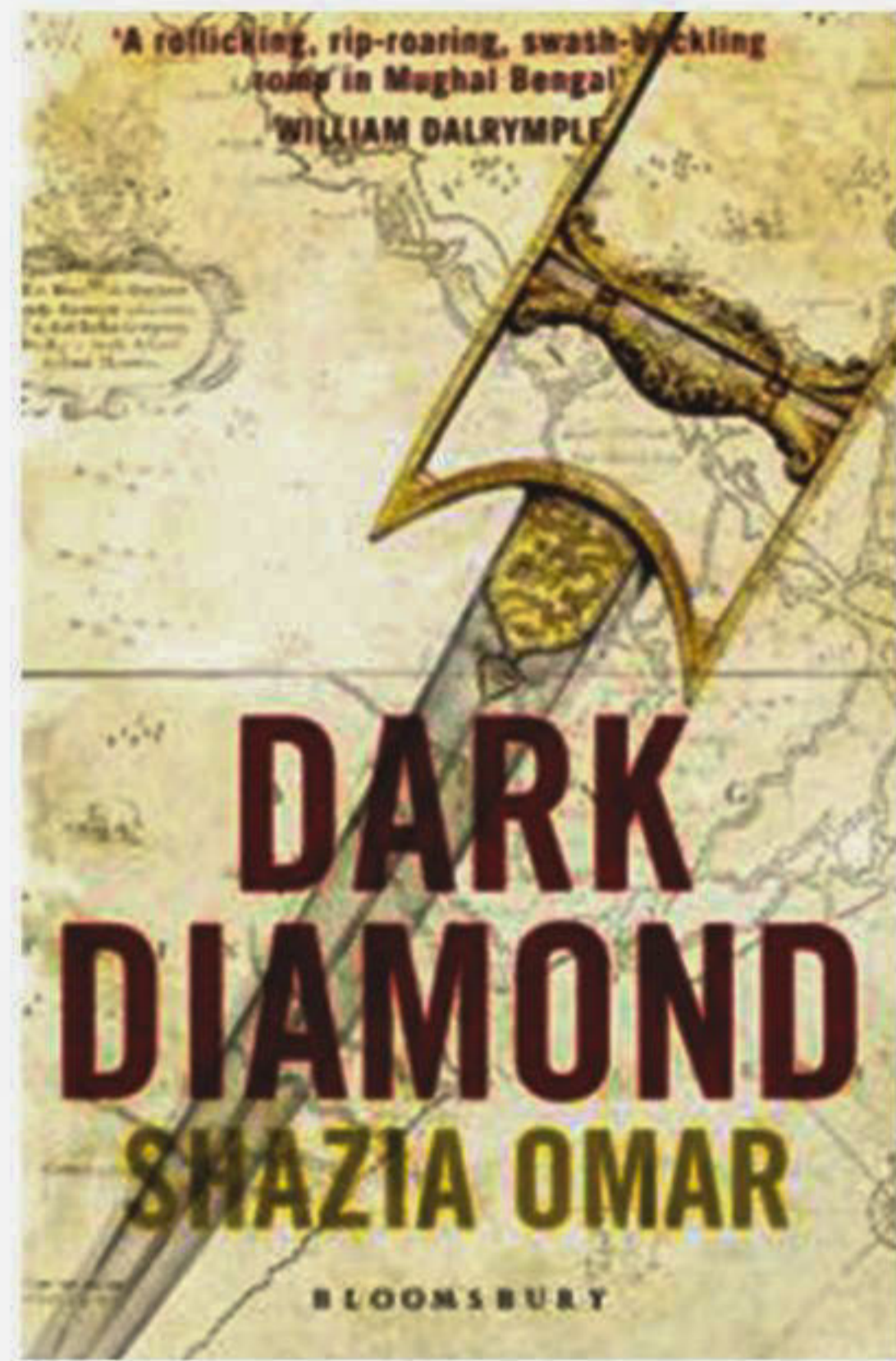
I have always been intrigued by the historical novel. Some of it is composed around real historical figures, events, and locations, and, then, intertwined with fictional characters, episodes and places. The reader may take recourse to flights of fancy, wondering if any of the apparent fiction could have at least some truth in it, or inducing him/her to undertake research to find out, if not any revelation of their veracity, then at least some other relevant facts. Just imagining the possibilities would in themselves be a tantalizing prospect. When Waqar A Khan, founder of Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies, handed me Shazia Omar's *Dark Diamond* to take a look at, I was taken in. It is a historical novel involving the legendary Moghul Viceroy of Bengal during Emperor Aurangzeb's reign, Shayista Khan (he was, as the author correctly identifies, a Subedar of the province, and not a Lord, in the manner of the British, as the back cover of the book would have it).

Shazia Omar has already had a novel published called *Like a Diamond in the Sky* (Penguin, 2009), and, in her note, explains her reasons for writing a historical novel: "I discovered Subedar Shayista Khan: a poet, warrior, Sufi and visionary. Though Bengal flourished under his rule, he occupies only a few dry paragraphs in history text books. Thus I set out to give him some flesh (albeit, scarred flesh)..." Several of the characters in the novel are real: besides Shayista Khan, Shobha Singh, Shivaji, Admiral Nicholson, William Hedges, Wara Dharmaraja, Tavernier, Nasim Banu, Champa, and Pari Bibi, but some others are fictional, and, as the author testifies, Ellora is the only character that has come out entirely from her imagination. The novel is fast-moving, on occasions racy without being vulgar, and ties several stories together with some dexterity. There are rambunctious characters of European origin (probably fictional), and a liberal dose of magic.

The central character of the story is a brilliant black diamond, "once midnight indigo, once stormy violet (that)...glowed like a star from Hell." That last depiction embodies the centrality of the novel, one that serves to bind different stories together. Mined in the fabled city for precious gems, Golconda in southern India, the black diamond, called Kalinoor, symbolizes a curse around it, manifested in the fates of people who have possessed it or have been in quest for it. Bad luck seems to follow them, really brought about by human greed. John Steinbeck had written a brilliant little

novel, *The Pearl*, to symbolize some of the baser human instincts that ultimately leads to ones misfortunes, or, even downfall. In Omar's novel, though, the black diamond holds more connotations than just the ill wind that surrounds it.

Kalinoor began its journey by bringing terrible misfortune to the man who first mined it, Hira Lal, a tantric devotee of the goddess Kali, and his wife Rupa. The stone seems to have become Kali's curse. We are then introduced to shady European characters like the buccaneer Captain Costa, a widely traveled sea dog with a



number of tricks up his sleeve that came in handy in the aid of his friend, Shayista Khan, Madeline du Champs, with her own dark history, and a few others. Through Madeline, Omar delivers a feminist truism, although in the period that the novel is set, this would likely not have been commonly perceived (notwithstanding the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in England almost a century earlier!): "Women are stronger than you think."

The bulk of the story is set in and around 1685, when the Subedar was an elderly man of eighty four, but still robust, alert, and a fierce

and canny warrior. He had fought and defeated a wide variety of enemies, but he had also accomplished much in improving the lot of his people and province when not fighting, probably none more so than that of Dhaka. Imprints of his manifold accomplishments can still be found in Bangladesh's capital city. The vibrant nature of present-day Chowk Bazaar was to be found then and probably with greater colour and fervour: "...in the heart of Chowk Bazaar...lounge sinister mercenaries waiting to catch whiff of a golden opportunity. Here merchants could sell stallions from Arabia, camels from Egypt, gems from the coast of Masulipatam, dark secrets, pink lies, promises and primroses by the dozens. Here one could trade in silver, copper, counterfeit coins and scabbards bejeweled in rubies of cherry red. Here one could hire cutthroats to execute with words or swords any brutality for a reasonable price."

Hired assassins figure in some of the stories that make up the whole that is the novel, and the *Subedar* who is one of their targets. Then there are his numerous enemies by choice or interest, all of whom he overcomes through his fighting skills, aid of trusted allies, friends, and family (one of his sons sacrificed his own life for him), follies of his enemies, and sheer chutzpah and good fortune. He was also a lover of women, although he was not a wanton. The prosperity and safety of Bengal remained his lifelong quest and passion, and he even doubted the sagacity of his nephew, Aurangzeb, in this regard. The family angle is explained, some in poignant detail, with his aunt Nurjahan's marriage to Emperor Jehangir through some wily maneuverings, his support, against his better judgment, for his cousin Emperor Shahjahan in his fratricidal conflict with his brother, his coquettish sister Mumtaz Mahal's marriage to Shahjahan, and, again against his better judgment, his abandonment of Prince Dara in favour of Aurangzeb.

One of the more fascinating characters in the story is Champa, although the reader will find that chunks of her story are almost certainly fictionalized. She turned out to be similar to a modern-day liberated woman, although one is not sure just to what extent she behaved, or was allowed to behave, as is depicted in the novel, by the society of her time. She was estranged from her father, who was an accurate reflection of modern-day Muslim zealots, and was raised by her grandfather, who dabbled in black magic, and, as it turned out, was a fanatic of another kind and a villainous character. Alim,

Champa's father, once explained his estrangement from his father to her, in the process, making clear his and his father's predilections: "I had to leave Champa. Your Dada was obsessed with his search for Kalinoor. His mission lured him away from the only Black Stone that matters, the Kabaa of Mecca. Kalinoor is a symbol of the flawed human condition: the lust of Duniya! How could I stay with him after that?"

Omar has some astute observations regarding human nature and the surroundings he/she lived in. So, "Bengal was a place where one could indulge in worldly pleasures or mystical magic." On another plane, through Shayista's thought: "Marriage corrupts love by removing mystery and gratitude...replacing it with duty and expectation." Then, in a tangential reference to buying sex, "Wealthy people were never lonely." And, before becoming Shayista Khan, when he was called Talib, he "saw that ruling with emotions led to disaster. Love did not conquer all.... Only with totalitarian authority could loved ones be protected. He had to rule with cruelty to protect the innocent.... So Talib became the ruthless warrior Aurangzeb wanted, Amir-ul-Umra Shayista Khan." Yet, "with Aurangzeb's ascent began Shayista's descent." These are historical observations.

But the book is a work of historical fiction. And Omar delivers some astute observations of her own through some of her characters: "Why do men always mask their weaknesses?" Furthermore, this rich portrayal: "Didi Ma produced a smile as insincere as a whore's orgasm." Although there is no record of Champa ever having said so, her free and forward-thinking persona is portrayed thus: "Champa believed that the mind without the body could never connect to the spirit. The experience of living, breathing, dancing were holy to her! Besides, dancing is fun." Finally, "While men with money and power were respected and obeyed, women needed beauty to command." In the last section of the book, in her bid to bring things to a closure of convergence, she seems to hurry, to push through. She seems to be in a haste to get across her own message of love conquering all. Nonetheless, Shazia Omar should go a long way in her literary career. She has the potential. *Dark Diamond* is an engrossing read.

The reviewer is an Actor, and Professor and Head, Media and Communication department, IUB.

Tale of successful individuals and communities

AUTHOR: MALCOLM GLADWELL

REVIEWED BY HAMMAD ALI

IT has always seemed to me that nonfiction books are not as popular in this part of the world as their fiction counterparts. By this I mean both how nonfiction does not seem to be as visible in bookstores, and also how there does not seem to be that many people writing nonfiction.

Maybe it has something to do with how we view reading primarily as a form of entertainment, and not as a kind of training to make ourselves more effective in both professional and personal lives. This is unfortunate, because while there is a lot of fluff in the genre, there are also some brilliant masterpieces which offer lessons that can make us live more consciously and productively.

It was with this thought in mind that I started reading some well-known and positively viewed works of nonfiction this year. It was during this branching out that I came across the book *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell.

In *Outliers*, Gladwell writes about some of the most successful individuals and communities, the outliers alluded to in the title of his book. Although his examples are in the context of the United States, it is easy to argue that the points he makes are universal and ones we can all find some use for.

Gladwell's basic claim is that all these immensely high achieving people had some common traits and also caught some lucky breaks that lined things up in their favour.

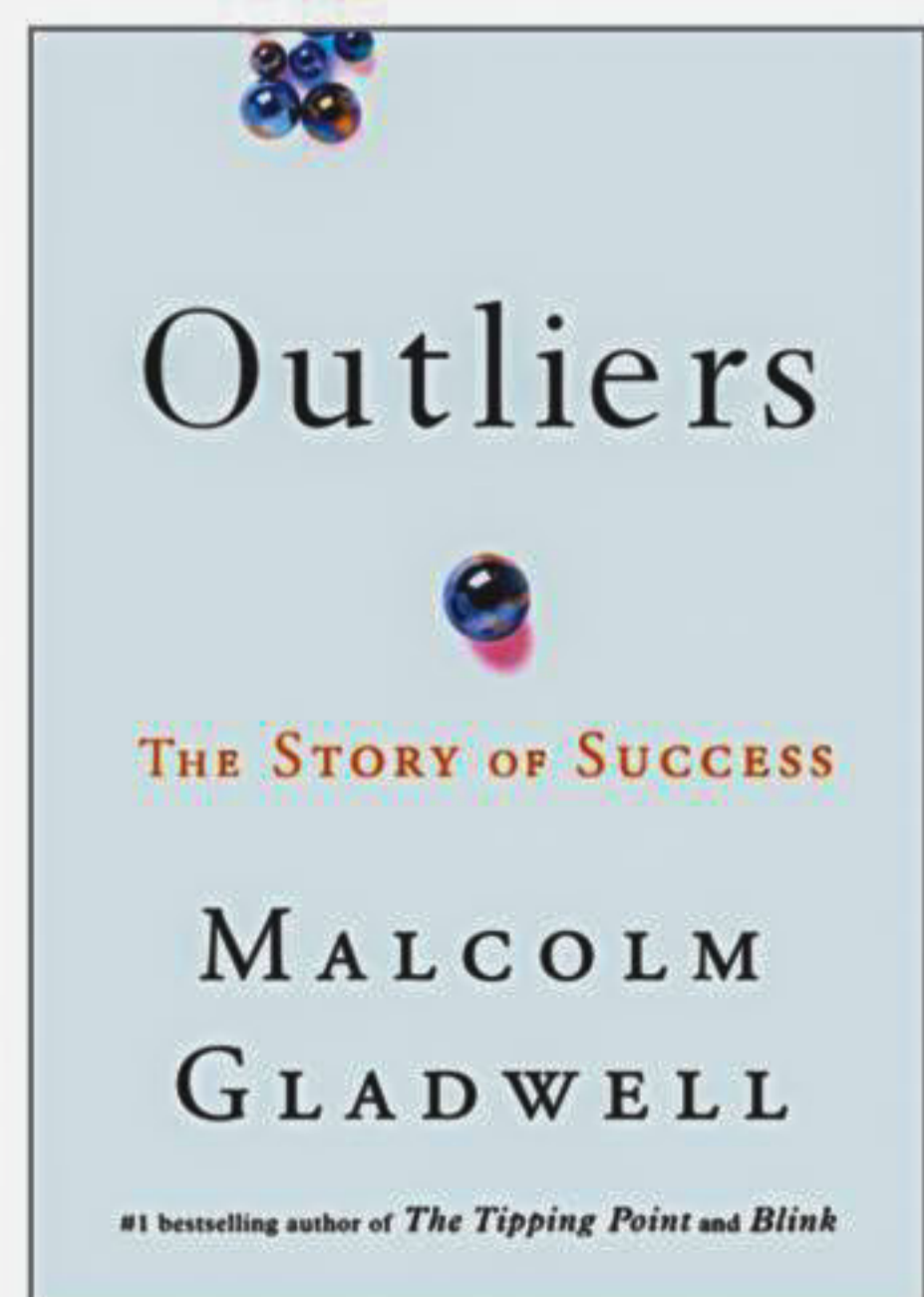
The author does not in any way wish to imply that these people got lucky or that they did not have to work hard. However, a close look does make one appreciate that luck did play a part, in the absence of which things might have turned out very differently for the people in question.

The author starts by talking about how the concept of innate brilliance can often be misleading. He mentions how in any field of human endeavor, one has to put in several hours before they can claim to be an expert. The author estimates this at about 10,000 hours.

10,000 hours is undoubtedly a very long time, and this is where the author's claim about luck comes in. He talks about how one has to be positioned at an exact point in time, and often geographical location, in order to be able to put in those hours of training. He

backs this up with examples from areas as diverse as computer programming, music, and ice hockey. In each case, we are told how some of the key figures in these fields happened to be born at just the right window of time, and in some cases, lived in one of a small number of places where they could get the required amount of exposure to their craft. This list contains names like Bill Gates to The Beatles. Once again, Gladwell is not saying these people did not have the talent. He is merely pointing out how they got some breaks that other comparable individuals did not, and the difference this made in their career paths.

Gladwell then talks about how our



attitude to work, towards others, and towards setbacks, is often rooted in our cultural backgrounds and even our native language. While this is sure to raise some eyebrows, the author is not talking about genetic determinism and that we cannot rebuild our lives the way we want. However, it is once again hard to argue that certain cultural backgrounds do not confer some advantages.

For instance, let us take the author's example of how the culture of hard work and putting in long hours that originated in the rice paddies of China years ago, benefits Chinese kids to this day by instilling a respect for hard work and the

belief that your efforts always pays off. This is far from racial stereotyping. If anything, it is really unraveling and appreciating how beautifully the culture we build at home and society can endow our children with the skills to cope with an intensely competitive world. The author also talks about how this culture of valuing hard work was missing in the Eastern European culture, because the labor force there was mostly engaged in industry, where the payoff to the worker is less readily apparent compared to an agricultural setting. There is also a mention in passing of how the way numbers are represented in a language can either help or hinder students learning to do math problems, and how this can create more lifelong effects.

As many have pointed out, it is easy to take Gladwell's claims here as a thesis against innate brilliance and the notion of self-determination. However, to me and many others, this seems to be a misinterpretation of his work. If anything, Gladwell espouses the value of hard work, of sheer persistence and the faith that efforts bring rewards. Sure, he mentions how these values come more naturally to some cultures than to others. There is simply no point denying that some cultures have something that gives them an edge over the others. The right response, it seems to me, is to value these differences and learn to incorporate them into our own lives. This is essentially what Malcom Gladwell is telling us - to learn from everyone else what works, and add it to our own arsenal in the journey of life.

In statistics, outliers refer to data points that are markedly different from all the other ones in the collection. In his book, Gladwell similarly looks at the lives and work of some of the most successful people in society today. He is not discounting their efforts, merely pointing out how they were often helped by their cultural background, the times they lived in, and how they viewed hard work. If anything, his book is a source of immense hope for all who would want to believe that if they simply give their heart and soul to a cause, it can make all the difference in the world.

The reviewer is an avid reader and contributor to this page.

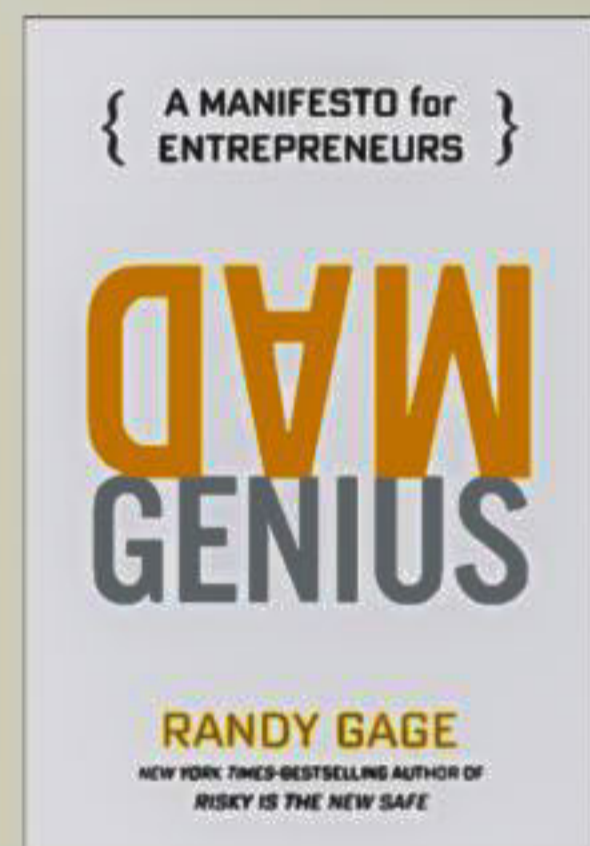
OMNI BOOKS

Mad Genius: A Manifesto for Entrepreneurs

AUTHOR: RANDY GAGE

THIS is a manifesto about ideas. Big ideas, small ideas, and outlandish ideas. Ideas that innovate, ideas that disrupt markets, and especially ideas that irritate. More than ideas, though, *Mad Genius* is about how ideas are born and the role they play in entrepreneurial thinking.

This is a manifesto for managers who want to become leaders and leaders, who want to blow up mediocrity. Because whether you work in a traditional business, a nonprofit service organization, or in the public sector, the best way to create fresh and innovative solutions is to think like an entrepreneur.



The Fall of the Ottomans

AUTHOR: EUGENE ROGAN

THE final destruction of the Ottoman Empire - one of the greatest epics of the First World War, from bestselling historian Eugene Rogan. For some four centuries the Ottoman Empire had been one of the most powerful states in Europe as well as ruler of the Middle East. By 1914 it had been drastically weakened and circled by numerous predators waiting to finish it off. Following the Ottoman decision to join the First World War on the side of the Central Powers the British, French and Russians hatched a plan to finish the Ottomans off: an ambitious and unprecedented invasion of Gallipoli... Eugene Rogan's remarkable book recreates one of the most important but poorly understood fronts of the First World War. Despite fighting back with great skill and ferocity against the Allied onslaught and humiliating the British both at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia (Iraq), the Ottomans were ultimately defeated, clearing the way for the making, for better or worse, of a new Middle East which has endured to the present.

