

# A GRAIN OF SALT

REBECCA HAQUE



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

**Is it not hypocritical of me to teach them integrity and ethics and civics in the classroom, give them courage and knowledge and will-to-power, while saving myself from becoming a target of state-sponsored opprobrium and punishment?**

The overwhelming euphoria and pride that I felt at the zeal and orderly conduct of the university and school students on the roads of Dhaka city are enmeshed problematically with self-recrimination and guilt at my own cowardice, at my inability to publicly proclaim my support. I was, and still am, wracked with anxious soul-searching:

can I morally condone my conduct as a public servant in a democratic country, and as a tertiary-level educator? Is it not hypocritical of me to teach them integrity and ethics and civics in the classroom, give them courage and knowledge and will-to-power, while saving myself from becoming a target of state-sponsored opprobrium and punishment? Will not

**MUSINGS**

my loyal students take my counsel too with a grain of salt? Will they not judge me harshly, even though I have provided comfort and positive counsel privately?

I confess that the thin grey fringe around my temple, left untouched with colour during these housebound holidays, shamefully seeks survival and physical safety in these troubled times. I look to other cares, other obligations, other close loyalties as moral justification for my conduct: care and commitment for a sick, fragile octogenarian mother, fidelity to ageing spouse, active support to growing offspring and family living in a city Down Under. All these personal responsibilities are primary duties. Therefore, I choose not to be too bold now, not to be as defiant and outspoken in my sixties as I was in my thirties. These unsettling times of violence against the young and the innocent, of dishonest lawmakers, of cowering constabulary, make me more circumspect, more discreet, than I was in the past. I willingly choose to live longer in the shade of private space. I willingly surrender the limelight of parading in public spaces to those who still have fire in the soul despite the muffling of free speech and restrictions on human rights. I admire these few fiery young leaders. And, a tad cynically, I yield the stage willingly to those among my ambitious colleagues who, though young in years and experience, and somewhat lightweight in intellect, have chosen to grab the opportunity of the moment by wearing the conspicuous colours of separate leading political parties.

It is late afternoon now, and grey clouds loom on the eastern horizon, offering in natural imagery an objective correlative to my own sombre mood. Blue-grey. My city is softly snoozing, convalescing after the tumult and trauma of hundred hours of a new revolution's infancy on the roads, an infant bashed to death by fearful grey-haired politicians, their cohorts and goons. Eid-ul-Adha has taken the human horde — Dhaka's struggling millions — out to distant homesteads. The beastly growl and the chronic chaotic gyrations of this hard metropolis are momentarily quiescent.

Next week, the beast will be woke, the gyrations will resume, and Dhaka will be throbbing with the drumbeat of life's chaotic synergy. I sit in the verandah with the first drops of rain sprinkling the earth. I cannot help but look at the steel horizon, and muse on the fate of the thousands of young students who filled us with so much pride for seven days and nights. What of them in the future? I ask myself. Damaged and betrayed, will they surrender their nationality? Will they choose to leave this land to love from afar, from distant shores where their stupendous courage and leadership will be lauded?

I am afraid. Will the best of the best of my land forever disown me and my generation for having failed them? I ask the easterly breeze as it makes the mango tree sizzle. My heart's cry is reflexively answered by a teardrop on my lower lip. It tastes like a grain of salt.

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**LITERATURE**

My introduction to war lore was an intimate one, removed from any political agenda—they were stories of fear, simplicity, and sheer resilience in the face of ultimate crisis. They were also tales that involved mostly women, of my then middle-aged grandmother, her young daughters, and nieces fleeing from one village to another. She told me of their escape from the 'Punjabi' forces during Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971, crossing rivers and creeks and walking miles in search of refuge.

In later years, I came across many a literature on war, though I noticed that most of them were written by men on 'war waged by other men'.

War literature—at least those considered to be the greatest—is almost exclusively penned by men. In a list of 'The greatest war novels ever written' put together by Pan

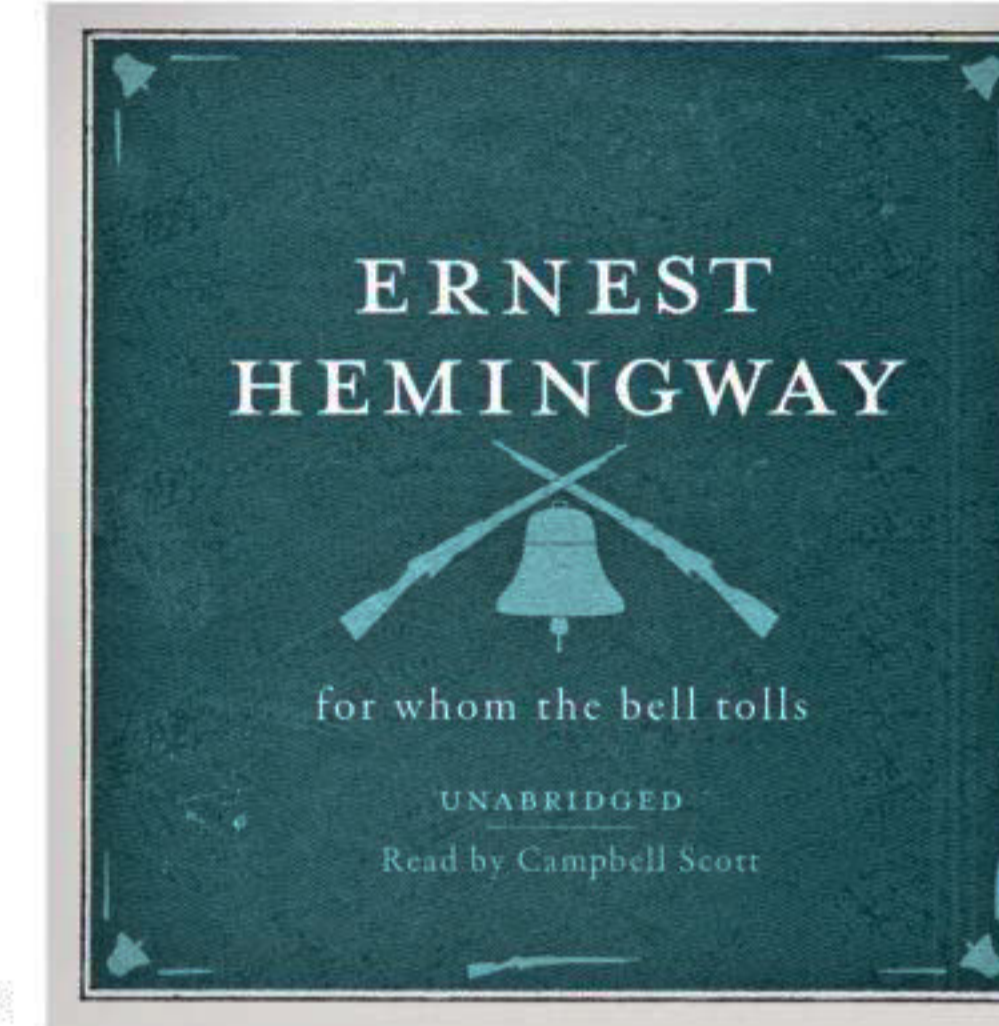
"sentimental" as they tend to focus more on domestic topics.

That war literature is dominated by male and masculine voices is something war veteran and novelist Cara Hoffman seems to agree on as well. In an op-ed published in *The New York Times* in 2014, she argued that "war narratives—in prose, poetry, and film—have always been, and continue to be, dominated by male voices. From the Greek classics to modern story collections, these tales focus exclusively on the male experience of battle, and of return; the stories of women at war, on the other hand, are nearly absent from our culture."

Hoffman's argument also made me think back on the few war novels I have read and it reaffirmed my desire to read more about women stuck in warzones, of my longing for everyday stories of people stuck in war rather than ones

Take for example, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Almost a hundred years since the novel, it continues to remain relevant. It was one of the first modern works of fiction that aimed to look at the aftermath of World War I. Woolf wrote of the experience of shellshock—years later, it came to be known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—that she relayed through her character Septimus. With him, Woolf succeeded in making her readers question and spark a dialogue on the lasting effects of wartime violence.

Or why not explore Cara Hoffman's *Be Safe I Love You: A Novel*. Much like Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Hoffman takes a look at the effects of

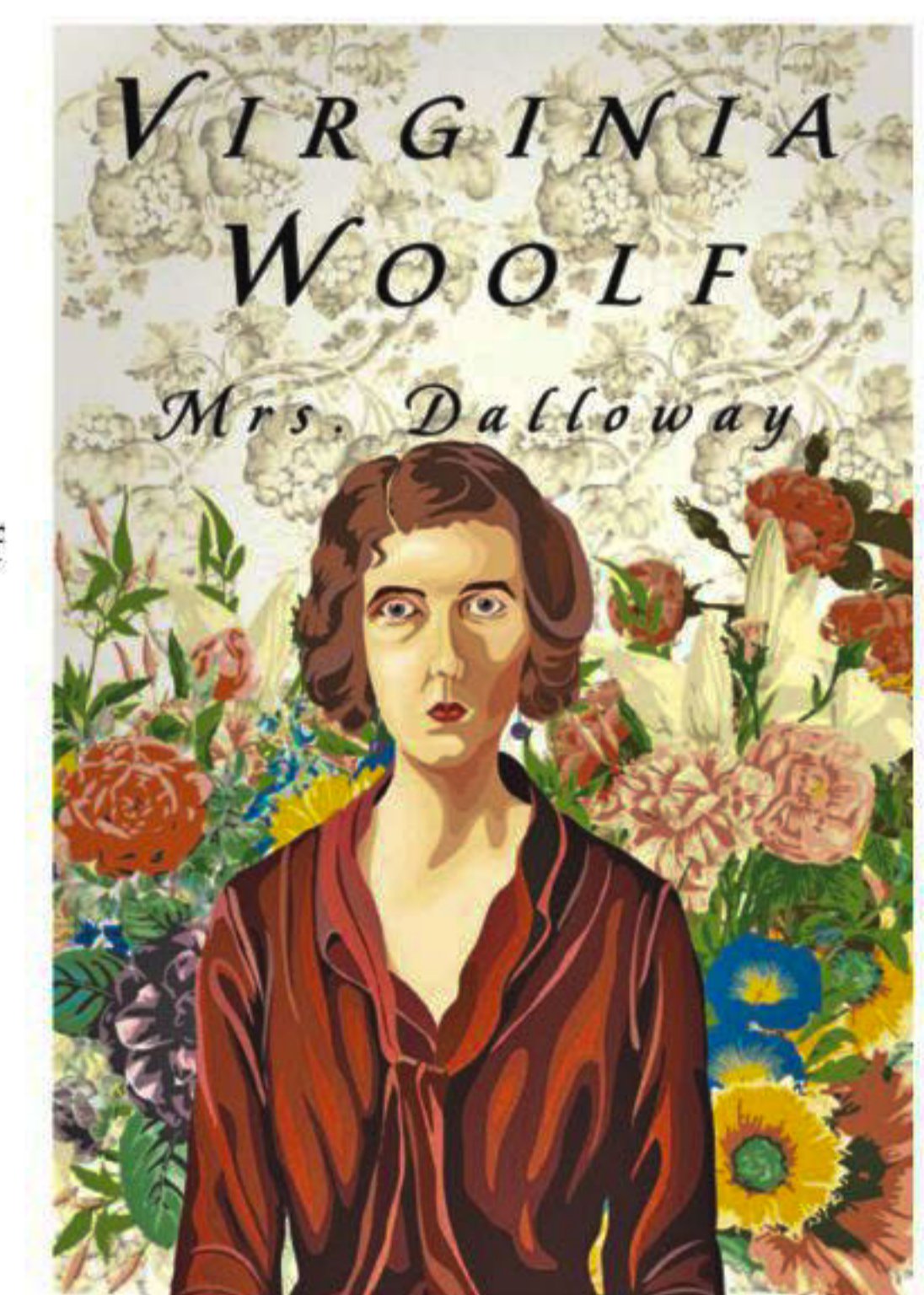
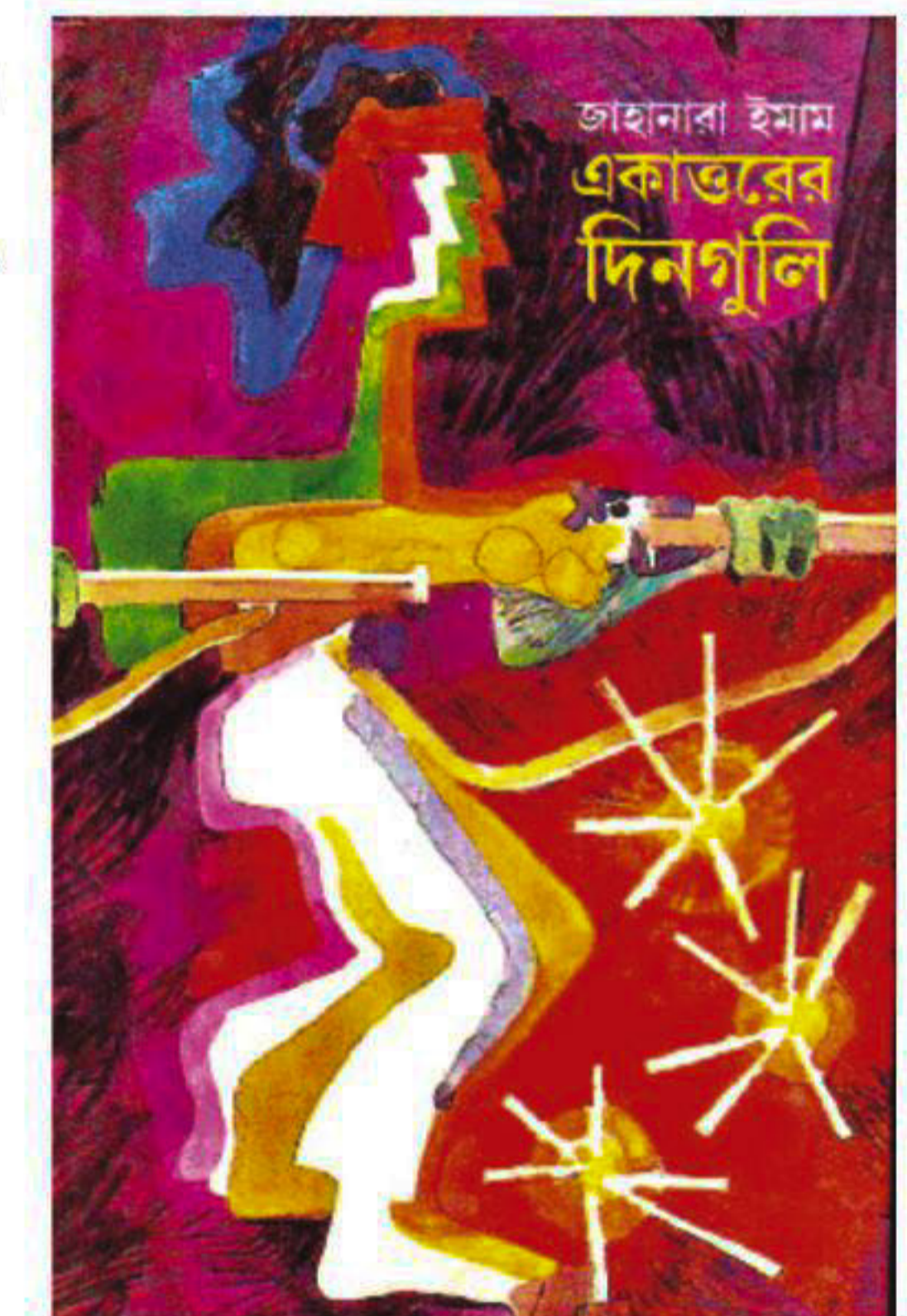
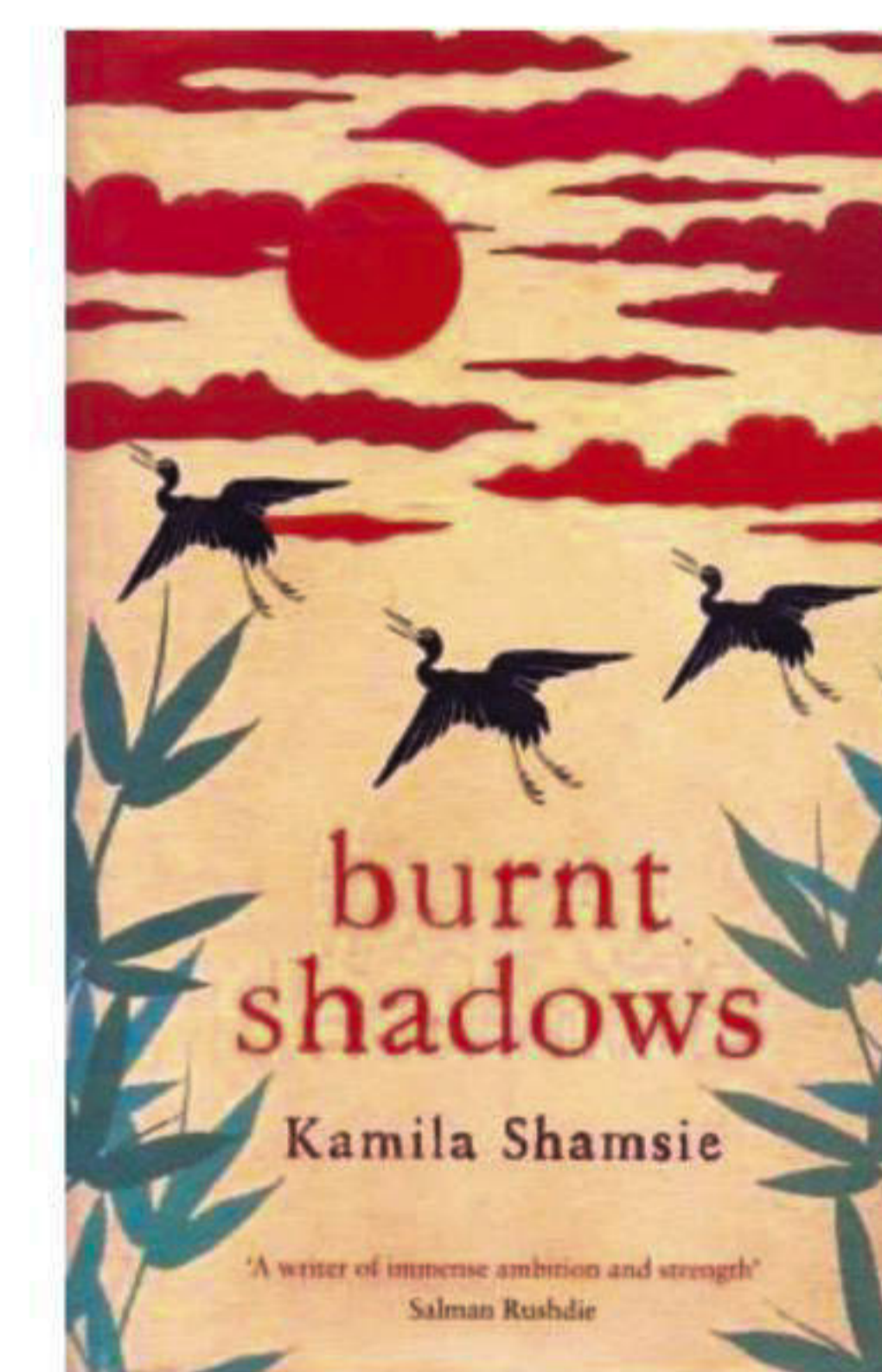
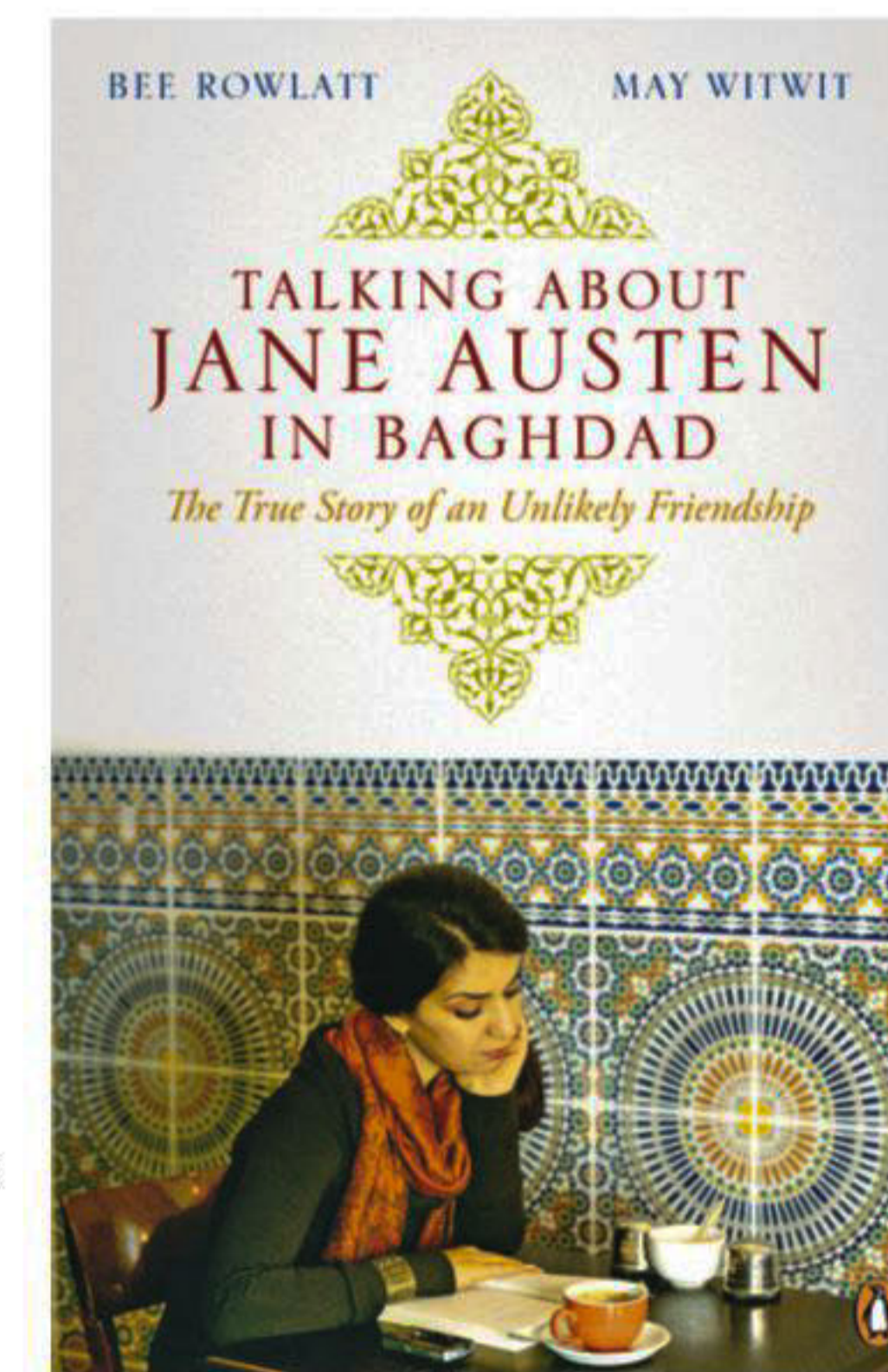


friendship with May, a lecturer of English literature stuck in war-torn Iraq. The book is a story of their emails, contrasting Bee's stories of everyday life in England as a journalist with two young children to May's struggles in trying to get fuel for her car as bombs explode in the background. It is also a story

While their literature is in no way to be discounted, I feel, the narratives are often limited to the rhetoric of heroic masculinity in describing war and do not take into account the 'emotional casualty' of war. Women writers have often been judged for narratives that are considered "too narrow" or which are deemed "sentimental" as they tend to focus more on domestic topics.

## WOMEN WRITING THE WAR

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY



Macmillan, an international publishing company, out of 10 featured novels, only two were written by women: *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and *Testament of Youth* by Vera Brittain. A quick skim through other lists of top war novels feature the usuals: Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* or war photographer Robert Capa's autobiographical *Slightly Out of Focus*. Both fiction and non-fiction are littered with familiar male names—Tim O'Brien, Sebastian Faulks, or Kurt Vonnegut. While their literature is in no way to be discounted, I feel, the narratives are often limited to the rhetoric of heroic masculinity in describing war and do not take into account the 'emotional casualty' of war. Women writers have often been judged for narratives that are considered "too narrow" or which are deemed

of combat written mostly by men. Starting from reading of the experience of Anne Frank when she was in hiding for two years with her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in *The Diary of a Young Girl* to the correspondence of two by-chance friends in *Talking about Jane Austen in Baghdad*, war literature does not have to be limited to the ones written directly from the field of battle and warfare. It can be of consequences too, of the after-effects of war.

war on a veteran struggling with PTSD after returning home. But unlike Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*, Hoffman's protagonist is Lauren Clay, a woman soldier who served in Iraq.

One of my favorites though is the correspondence between Bee Rowlatt and May Witwit in *Talking about Jane Austen in Baghdad*. Bee, a journalist with BBC World Service, develops an unusual

of May's strength in the face of war and how, through her friendship with Bee, she manages to secure an escape both for herself and her husband by getting a position for a PhD in England.

For stories on war, we can also look closer to home. Nearby in South Asia, Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie in *Burnt Shadows* writes about the shared

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