

## The DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2018: Shortlist Announced

In an article early this month we presented the story in brief behind the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and the longlist of 2018. The story has indeed progressed further since then.

On 14 November 2018, the much-anticipated shortlist for the US \$25,000 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2018 was unveiled at a special event, which took place at the London School of Economics & Political Science. The shortlist of six novels was announced by Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Chair of the DSC Prize 2018 jury panel, who along with the other four jury members Claire Armitstead, Nandana Sen, Firdous Azim and Tissa Jayatilaka had met a day prior to the event to arrive at the shortlist. The shortlist comprises four authors of Indian origin and two authors of Pakistani origin and despite some of them being based outside the South Asian region, their work brings alive a wide spectrum of themes and emotions that are so relevant in contemporary South Asian life. The shortlist also includes a translated book where the original writing was in Kannada.

The six shortlisted entries contending for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2018 are:

Jayant Kaikini: *No Presents Please* (Translated by Tejaswini Niranjana, Harper Perennial, HarperCollins India)

Kamila Shamsie: *Home Fire* (Riverhead Books, USA and Bloomsbury, UK)

Manu Joseph: *Miss Laila Armed And Dangerous* (Fourth Estate, HarperCollins, India)

Mohsin Hamid: *Exit West* (Riverhead Books, USA and Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Random House, India)

Neel Mukherjee: *A State Of Freedom* (Chatto & Windus, Vintage, UK and Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Random

House, India)

Sujit Saraf: *Harilal & Sons* (Speaking Tiger, India)

Speaking on the occasion, Jury Chair Rudrangshu Mukherjee, said, "Being the chair of the jury of the DSC Prize has been one of the most enriching experiences of my life. I say this for two reasons. One is the sheer intellectual excitement of reading, evaluating and discussing these works of fiction. The other is the interactions I had with my four colleagues on the jury. I know I learnt an enormous amount from all of them and for this I am profoundly grateful to all of them. Evaluating these books reminded me once again of the importance of reading in human lives."

Administered by the South Asian

Literature Prize & Events Trust, the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature has helped to raise the profile of South Asian writing around the world by rewarding authors who write on the region. Founded in 2010 by Surina Narula and Manhad Narula, the winning author is awarded a US \$25,000 prize. This year the prize received a record 88 entries which included stunning portrayals of migration, war and the pain of displacement, poignant love stories, the exploration of new found relationships and identities, and vivification of the personal struggles, hopes and aspirations that symbolize the urgent and divisive realities of contemporary South Asian life.

Commenting on the shortlist, Surina

Narula, co-founder of the DSC Prize expressed heartfelt gratitude to the judges and said, "The long list announced last month was an impressive list; it must have been a challenging task for the jury to bring this down to a shortlist of 6 books. The shortlist represents the very best of South Asian fiction writing, and the depth, creativity and unique narrative of each of these novels is indeed both impressive and inspirational."

The prize received close to a quarter of the submissions from publishers based beyond South Asia and from countries such as the UK, USA, Canada, Australia etc, highlighting the growing interest of publishers and authors across the world in South Asian writing. The shortlisted entrants reflect this global interest, and include British-Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie and Indian origin author Neel Mukherjee who are both based in the UK. Pakistani origin author Mohsin Hamid is based between Pakistan, UK and the USA, whilst Sujit Saraf is based in the USA.

Following the announcement of the shortlisted entries, the jury will convene again to select the winning author, ahead of the final award ceremony to be held at the Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet which would take place in Kolkata, India between Jan 22 and Jan 27, 2019

In line with its South Asian essence, the DSC Prize Award ceremony is held in various South Asian countries by rotation. The winner of the DSC Prize 2016 was announced at the Galle Literary Festival in Sri Lanka, the winner of the DSC Prize 2017 was announced at the Dhaka Lit Fest in Bangladesh, whereas the winner of the DSC Prize 2018 would be announced at the Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet which would take place in Kolkata, India between Jan 22 and Jan 27, 2019.



## The "Things in Heaven and Earth": Devi and Nishithini

MOTIUR RAHMAN

"The girl who, somehow strangely resembles Ranu, raised her eyes - a slight smirk hanging in the corner of her lips" - thus ended *Devi* (1985), closely followed by the second of the Misir Ali sequence, *Nishithini* in 1986. If you want to understand how Humayun Ahmed became a living phenomenon in his time and remains more successfully so ever after his death, the very usage of the word 'slight' will help you realize that for him less was more. Being the *avant garde* he was, Ahmed, with his writerly skills of a magician attempted to conjure up images that are both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, creating an otherworldly phenomenon altogether difficult to communicate but easy to 'feel' in your bones. The core idea of mystery in the fictional character of Misir Ali (the highly intelligent part-time professor at the University of Dhaka with a keen interest in parapsychology) and his surroundings here, actually, lies at the heart of the writer's conscious attempt to add a decidedly 'slight' touch of the remote over our existing realities. It's an endeavor to find the magic in the mundane. It's the discovery of the inseparable *unheimlich* at your home that makes *Devi* and *Nishithini* two masterpieces of a master, remembered and revered for all the good causes.

The process begins at the very opening scene of *Devi*, leaving the readers in a slightly uncomfortable feeling. Of course, there is nothing particularly exceptional about an old rented house wherein a middle class Bangladeshi young couple lives their nonchalant conjugal life, which, in turn, also reflects the macrocosm of the novel itself, otherwise subtle and undisturbed. Yet, a hint of something lurking in the dark and not quite ready to reveal itself permeates the entire setting. We are told that the home of the two, Anis and Ranu, is also a home to an entity you and I have heard about only in midnight stories. But, the strange sense of 'something more about to be' that never quite leaves the center stage is brought about not by any 'ghost,' rather a '*devi*,' a rescuer, a goddess who saves you when you need her the most. Here, the protagonist is Ranu, the chosen human medium — through whom the goddess descends and then intervenes in the worldly clamors — sometimes made by men and sometimes by things more ominous, beyond human

comprehension. For instance, towards the end of both the first part and the second, *devi* appears in the scene emanating a sweet scent and wearing *nupurs* on her ankles, saving Neelu, the daughter of the house-owner from a culprit in the former and Misir Ali



himself from Firoz, one of his patients overtaken by a vengeful spirit in the latter. And every time, it is Misir Ali in whom you place your trust, for he is the one who seems to hold the key to a possible answer.

As general readers though, our first reaction is that of an irrepressible curiosity since with the progression of the plot a series of baffling things begin to happen, bombarding us with dead ends one after another. Neither the writer nor the readers themselves seem to understand why Ranu can foretell the future, why Jeetu, the little boy who lives in the same house can see a mysterious lady roaming aimlessly in the room, or how the goddess shifts her form into that of Neelu once Ranu dies. In *Nishithini*, the confusion ensues even more intensely as Firoz, a former patient of Misir Ali seems to be possessed by the malevolent spirit of a certain Mashuk Chowdhury, who was a tyrannous zamindar in the distant village called Mohangonj where Firoz went to meet his friend. The direct encounter between *devi* herself and Misir Ali at the end also bewilders us since we do not know whether she really existed or just happened to be a figment of his imagination, a means of distraction

from the excruciating pain he was experiencing in the broken ribs - a horrific act which Firoz committed because the evil spirit 'told him to do so.'

When we are at our wits end trying to understand these situational complexities altogether, Misir Ali draws us more into the stories exhibiting an unflinching faith in the integrity of reason and systematic thinking. In the first part, the way he connects a childhood trauma deeply etched into the mind of poor Ranu and the lifelong struggle it has caused her, gives us a clear idea that this teacher of clinical psychiatry is not to be taken lightly. Through a close investigation of the bygone incidents, he induces hints from a dead body floating in the river and the eerie statue of a certain Rukmini *devi* in a nearby temple. It shows how truly Misir Ali embraces rationality as the chief source of practical knowledge, manifest even in the most anomalous and unusual of things. His chronological analysis of



each of the problems demonstrates how methodical and scientific he is in his pursuit of the answer. Likewise, in the second, he attempts to detect a method in the madness of Firoz where according to Misir Ali, Firoz is turned into a serial killer by a subconscious stimulus he receives from the unforeseen knowledge of a half-naked zamindar in black pants and gold-framed glasses. For our psychiatrist, a return of the repressed shock makes him repeat the history of massacre in Dhaka that the zamindar

introduced back when he was living centuries ago in Mohangonj.

Despite this Napoleon-like confidence Misir Ali shows in the invariability of the truth where nothing is 'impossible' for science to explain, at one point a parallel existence of what Coleridge called 'a willing suspension of disbelief' does withhold him and even us from standing at one extreme end of the spectrum. The minor yet significant insertion of certain details intensifies the aspects of the situation which are already shrouded in mystery. Even Misir Ali himself seems to suffer from delirium in *Nishithini* where he simply cannot distinguish between the imaginary and the real, sharing the same experiences which Ranu did - like hearing noises, smelling *champa* in the air, and literally beseeching the goddess herself 'in full flesh and blood' to reduce his all-consuming pain.

In the end, how Humayun Ahmed portrays these psychological underpinnings might not be apparent to the naked eye. Nevertheless, his personal attachment with transcendental ideologies, as in the sublime qualities of Nature just might be enough for us to realize that where his other creation Himu fails, Misir Ali thrives and vice versa. In other words, it is the never-ending possibilities of how individuals may perceive the world — and how those subjective perceptions ultimately contribute in creating their own versions of truths — which seems to be the prime focus both in *Devi* and *Nishithini*. For Ranu, it is a divine being that is always there for her — a piece of hope that she desperately embraces — so much so that it becomes her living reality, causing others to share the same intuition as well. As for Misir Ali, his staunch rationalism becomes the one simple constant by which he lives and makes the others nurture the same attitude towards any complications. No matter how temporary or vainglorious these brief moments of mutual connection might feel, ultimately, the mystery of the 'many things in heaven and earth,' in Ahmed's words, lies in the world that exists somewhere in between, 'right there for you to see but never to be fully grasped.'

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POETRY

## The Night Falls

NISHAT ATIYA SHOILEE

(A translation of Rabindranath Tagore's "Shondhya" from Geetabitan)



The heart hurts when it does  
Oh, lovely Eve, as you slowly descend!  
Closer, closer- to me you bend-  
For the forlorn soul of mine  
In you alone, does suspend.  
Weep for the same, you and I,  
The same due we deny,  
And you be my confidant  
With love and esteem, hereby.  
All day long I wander  
On your knees to return,  
All the soft sighs, things unsaid  
To you I reveal;  
In you, I confide.  
To your silence I listen  
And your stars do I count  
Before my eyes close in,  
A dawn of passion soon begins-  
Dreams in your dimness  
Slowly to wane, slowly to wane.  
Not a word I ask,  
Silent in your sweet embrace,  
My eyes wide open, courting your trace.  
Slightly you breathe,  
Lowly you sing  
To me lullaby of the stars,  
Your kind caress on my lids  
Eases the pain,  
Soothes the soul, and what's underneath.  
And so I ask of you now,  
As the lone heart of mine  
Has but your heart to claim,  
Your chest to lean on,  
Your bassinet, gingerly and tame,  
Oh, dear Eve, when you slowly descend!  
Grant me your veil of darkness  
And cast away my grief,  
Sing me to sleep  
So the spheres are one, quiet in relief.  
Wrap it all in a mantle,  
The sound, the fury of men-  
Seated in our weariness.  
Tell us your wise tale, time and again,  
So they will mourn,  
See those castles in the air  
And once all's said and done,  
Fall asleep then and there,  
Oh, stunning Eve, as you slowly descend!  
A *dala* full of fantasies  
And verses I carry  
As you gift me a wreath of yours,  
Place it on my head,  
Gently love my fragile frame.  
In waves swims close a slumber,  
Choir of the drowning stars  
And crickets- at once, together.  
The weary wind walks home  
Whistling after a long day's work-  
Leaves of grass, rustled,  
Swollen over the intruder alert.  
Lyrics-never-sung will remain so  
In league with hopes unmet,  
Shifting shapes will they travel  
The corners of my mind, the lunette,  
Oh, sweet Eve, as you slowly descend!  
Cloak the world with your clouds  
Golden on verge of the West,  
Play on if you will, joyful and blessed.  
That curtain you mend each day  
Becomes but a haven  
And to have it yet the way it is  
I want- calm, though tasted.  
How do I go after this mass,  
Fancying rooftops over my head!  
How many times, oh, how many times!  
How much I yearn for the not  
Like the sun on its edge!  
How do I fall before  
The sea and its endless sand sedge,  
Its vast abode of rising tides!  
Those tiny stars of yours  
Rest on my eyes, luminous and fine.  
Patient, they wait  
For me to arrive, they wait  
And then they hymn-  
"When will you be here  
In dark serenity,  
For the last lamp  
Burns on your side-  
In beauty and brevity?  
A no man's land we stand in,  
And hope for you to come,  
To rise, and a lesson begin!"  
This be the air I've learnt from them,  
The stars in your bosom,  
Oh, beloved Eve, as you slowly descend!  
Bury the sight-  
And reunite  
Close to your heart dear, darkness and light.

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