

COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: DRAMA

A Conference of World Leaders

ASIF NAWAZ

There are instances when fiction and history go in synchrony and historical accuracies demand an artistic touch. The play titled *Shotoborshi Shonmilon* (*The Centennial Conference*) written by Abdus Selim and Jayed Ul Ehsan, published by the Bangladesh Theatre Archives, could well be on that list. Drawing inspiration from the two memoirs written by Bangabandhu, the authors focus on the personality and charisma behind one of the most revered world leaders.

The premise takes the audience to the ascension of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to an elite club of past world leaders. It starts in the New York Public Library amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. As the library closes in a hurry with books unattended, we are led to the other world with Bangabandhu, Indira Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln,

Shotoborshi Shonmilon reveals Bangabandhu as sensible, compassionate, and a man from whom love emanates towards his family, his fellow inmates, and chiefly the people of Bengal.

Anwar Sadat, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fidel Castro, while in the background, on television, President Donald Trump is declaring an emergency.

Upon Bangabandhu's request, the ceremony at the New York Public Library is shifted to the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum. The leaders begin talking about world politics, literature, class struggle and human emancipation. Fidel Castro is initially refused access due to age restrictions, but Bangabandhu requests the others to give Castro special access to the conversation that follows. Most of the talks centre on Bangabandhu's work, his feelings towards his people, and his life in prison.

Those who never went into a prison would never be able to perceive it! People think that prisons are enclosed with walls, with prisoners crammed together—they aren't. People in prison aren't humans, they become machines. Inside a prison, there are many small prisons. Many small prisons..." (translated)

Shotoborshi Shonmilon reveals Bangabandhu beyond his political identity; we see him as a person who is sensible, compassionate, and a Bengali man from whom love emanates towards his family, his fellow inmates, plants, animals, and chiefly towards the people of Bengal. His famous quote, "I can't deceive my people," reflects his ironclad will and the positivity that he clutched on to until the end of his life.

The playwrights deserve accolades for

their portrayal of Bangabandhu's prison life, during which he dealt with loneliness and was saddened by the suffering of his fellow inmates. He cooked and distributed food for them, planted seeds in the gardens, took care of an ill rooster and even took lessons from the crows, all while being vehemently attacked by mosquitoes.

A surprise guest appears in honour of Bangabandhu as the play is about to end where it started, at the New York Public Library. The aura of the luminaries remains, offering hope that the world can heal itself from the raging pandemic and ignorance.

Historical drama is not a new premise for these authors. Abdus Selim is the Bangla Academy Prize-winning veteran translator, academic, playwright, and a celebrated face in theatre. Jayed Ul Ehsan is an academic with a deep understanding of performance arts from both the artistic and theoretical perspective. This play displays their individual contributions and their strengths of showmanship in harmony, through a bold attempt to display the inner workings of Bangabandhu, who has mostly been explored through his political life. The subtle contrasts between past and present leaders is a major strength of the script. A play of this length has to be seen performed on stage.

Asif Nawaz teaches English Literature at Central Women's University.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

An Ethiopian Story of War

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

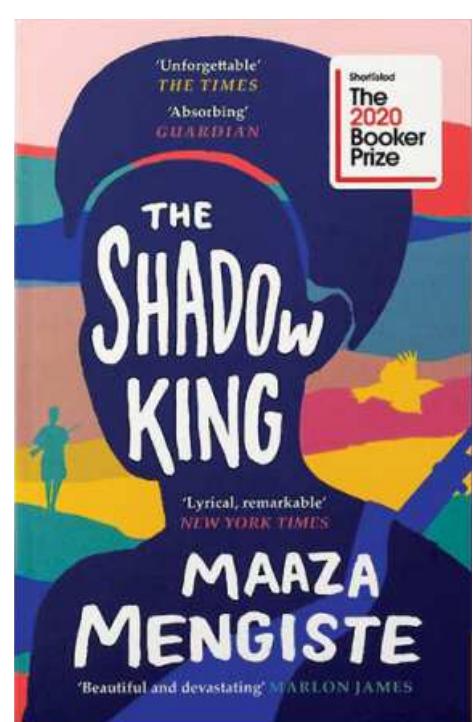
The first Italo-Ethiopian War broke out in 1895, as Italian soldiers marched from Italian Eritrea towards Ethiopia. The Battle of Adwa witnessed Ethiopia's decisive victory in warding off Italian invaders from its soil. This lasted until 1935, when Mussolini's fascist military launched another invasion, plunging the two countries into another two year long war.

Maaza Mengiste's novel *The Shadow King* (Canongate, 2019), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize this year, takes place against this landscape. As much as it is a story about war, it is also one of women's involvement on the battlefield. In a Literary Hub essay titled "Writing About the Forgotten Black Women of the Italo-Ethiopian War", Mengiste wrote, "...when we speak of war, we speak of tested resolve and broken spirits and wounded bodies and imagine them as masculine figures." She contradicts this impulse by fictionalising the story of her great-grandmother, Getey, who joined the war to fight against Italian troops.

In this regard, *The Shadow King* does an excellent job by narrating in great detail what it means to be a woman and a soldier.

Hirut, an orphaned maid, struggles to navigate her life in Kidane and his wife Aster's suffocating household. But Aster, who has recently suffered a miscarriage, grapples with jealousy and rage as she senses the rumblings of a romance between her husband and the maid. Just like Mengiste's great-grandmother, Aster had been married off as a child to an adult Kidane, and a particularly chilling chapter in the book portrays the violence wrought by this child marriage, which may remind readers of a similar scene from Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2008).

After the first few chapters, the scenes of domesticity give way as Italy begins its invasion and all the characters move into



tents up in the hills. To Kidane's dismay—and much like Mengiste's own great-grandmother, who sued her father when he objected to her enlisting—Aster makes an abrupt decision to join the troops. The new reality in this part of the text revolves around wartime necessities including medical and battle training, chalkling out ambush strategies, and designing flanks for the battlefield. At one point we witness Aster's trials in prison, where others like herself are subjugated and reduced from fierce soldiers to insignificant mounds.

Meanwhile, characters like Captain Fucelli and the soldier-photographer Ettore

bring in the Italian perspectives—and therefore the antagonists' psychology—on the war, making the story more layered and dynamic. While Captain Fucelli is the typical, hyper-masculine villain with an overpowering sense of narcissism and nationalism, through Ettore we observe the ethical turmoil inside a human-mind that is witnessing violence, and, in this case, is becoming complicit by preserving the acts through photography.

Throughout these events, the clear, unpretentious and lyrical prose buoys the narrative—particularly during the battle scenes—to cinematic heights. Consider these sentences: "Look: a heap of burnt huts, Ibrahim, openmouthed and lionhearted, leading his men across the rubbed field... See: thick red ribbons of blood. See: vicious sun curving against the belly of the sky." This style of narration offers a vantage point from which the reader can take everything in, be it the ragged, rocky slopes of the mountains or the Italians and Ethiopians melting into dust and sound on the battlefield.

The text is also peppered with short supplementary segments titled "Photos", "Choruses", and "Interludes", which serve as commentary on the scenes unfolding in the text. While they do help to add context, I personally felt worn out by them, because they do not contribute much to the story.

Given its hype, I had expected that *The Shadow King* would leave me thinking long after it ended. But the attention to detail which had a calming effect on me in the first half began to wither away in the second. I felt increasingly disconnected from the characters and their emotions from that point on. The novel is engaging when it begins, but this does not persist until the last page.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

All The President's Stories

STEVE DONOGHUE

A Promised Land (Crown Publishing 2020), former US President Barack Obama's long-heralded post-presidency memoir, is now here, and it arrives at a national moment when a pandemic is surging at steep, horrifying numbers in the US and when Donald Trump, the outgoing President, is loudly claiming he was cheated of victory by the Deep State and the late Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. Obama's two-term Vice President Joe Biden was elected President over a month ago and will take office in a country where over 80 million of its citizens have been convinced by his predecessor that he's a thief and an imposter.

It's a natural human impulse to want *A Promised Land* to speak to the moment, and it decidedly, almost obstinately does not.

There are hints, of course. Looking at the seismic changes in the political landscape during his lifetime, Obama watches for warning tremors and centres on the same one many earlier commenters have: John McCain's selection of Alaska governor Sarah Palin as his running mate in 2008, despite the fact that, as Obama observes, "on just

even so, he's no fool; long, long after he must have seen Donald Trump for the thuggish proto-fascist he is, he still remained silent.

And, maddeningly, he mostly remains silent still in *A Promised Land*. As readers might expect from the spellbinding author of *Dreams from My Father* (1995) and *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), this new book is both unfailingly engaging and often wonderfully written (about the Illinois state capitol building, for instance: "On any given day, under the high dome of the capitol, you'd see a cross section of America on full display, a Carl Sandburg poem come to life"). Its gallery of characters, from foreign leaders to White House staff to the author's family, are realised in vivid, memorable prose throughout. Likewise the drama of Obama's unlikely rise to the presidency and the key points of his two terms in office—including dealing with the Bush-era economic recession and finding and killing Osama bin Laden—makes for gripping storytelling. The language can be salty (surely this book has more f-bombs than all previous Presidential memoirs combined), but the narrative bristles with intelligence.



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All of which feels infuriatingly beside the point, like reading a four-star review of the dinner service on the *Titanic*.

A Promised Land appears in bookstores at the same time when Donald Trump is calling the election he lost "fake" and "rigged" and fomenting sedition among his millions of followers and minions inside and outside the government. This is unprecedented behaviour in a US President and unbelievably dangerous for the country. It strains the patience to watch it all accumulate day by day while reading Obama rehash—however eloquently—the quotidian of his time in office.

As clearly as he sees everything else, he sees the dangers Trump represents, sees the kind of person he is. "[Trump] understood instinctively what moved the conservative base most, and he offered it up in an unadulterated form," Obama writes. "He'd figured out that whatever guardrails had once defined the boundaries of acceptable political discourse had long since been knocked down."

A Promised Land is the most engrossing and effective US Presidential memoir since Bill Clinton's *My Life* (2004), an unfailingly good reading experience through its whole considerable length. If its target readers are a bit distracted by the fact that the US is teetering on the edge of destruction, well, maybe someday Obama will write a book about that too.

Steve Donoghue is a book critic whose work has appeared in the Boston Globe, the Wall Street Journal, the Christian Science Monitor, the Washington Post, and the National.

BOOK NEWS

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