

## BOOK REVIEW: LITERARY CRITICISM

## The Portrait of the Writer as a Critique

With 'Mrs Dalloway' newly on public domain, Virginia Woolf's literary criticism demand a revisit

JAHANARA TARIQ

The books which are closest to my heart and which evoke a certain sense of otherworldly glee are the ones that are themselves odas to literature, reading, and writing. *Genius and Ink: Virginia Woolf on How to Read* (TLS Books, 2019) is one such book. It is a collection of critical essays and book reviews by Woolf which were published in the UK's *Times Literary Supplement* from 1904 to 1934. Each of the essays is a meditation on an author, a literary genre, or musings on the craft of reading which somehow manage to be witty and romantic, satiric and sentimental, edgy, elusive, existential, and life-affirming all in the same strain.

To someone who is a student of literature and a passionate devotee of the arts, Woolf is nothing short of a literary goddess whose penmanship is lethally captivating in all its shades of versatility. However, we do not get to visualise the tongue dipped in the stream of consciousness that shaped her novels, riddled with quiet desperation and the divergence of different selves, in this book. Instead, much like the brilliant illustration preceding the foreword by Ali Smith and the introduction by Francesca Wade, we see a master of prosaic perfection, acute observation, and unbridled literary passion playing tango with her quill. We get to read Woolf's scathing scrawl about the *Ulysses* being "a memorable catastrophe—immense in daring, terrific in disaster", along with her profound admiration towards Charlotte Bronte, who "has you by the hand and forces you along her road, seeing the things she sees and as she sees them." Of Montaigne she writes, "Perhaps" is one of his favourite expressions: "perhaps" and "I think" and all those words [...] which help one to muffle up opinions which it would be highly impolitic to speak outright." Her reveries about Thomas Hardy's pastoral glories and the spectral qualities of Conrad's prose transfixed me like nothing else.

Woolf entered the world of *TLS* with her reviews of "trashy" guidebooks to Thackeray and Dickens's England, and cemented her role as a 23-year-old critic who would receive a new book to review every week. Her anonymity gave her the freedom to write without hesitation or fear of public disapproval for being a woman, and many of the concepts that Woolf wrote about in these essays crawled into



COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM BARI

the pages of her novels. For example, in her essay "On Rereading Novels", she writes, "The Novelist can put himself at any point of view [...]. He can appear in person, like Thackeray; or disappear, like Flaubert. He can state the facts like Defoe, or give the thought without the fact like Henry James." In works like *The Waves* (1931) or *To the Lighthouse* (1927), it seems that she gave herself that space and went on to phenomenally update the definition of a novel by playing with points of view and alternating soliloquies.

What is even more intriguing is the relevance of her arguments. In "How It Strikes a Contemporary", Woolf draws out the ever-existing anxieties of a reader oscillating between classics and contemporaries, which are subjected to harsh critics and are devoid of the inherent nostalgia older masterpieces hold. Drawing on Woolf's affinity for her contemporaries, we too have to say that for all our rose-tinted nostalgia for hoop skirts and loquacious passages in vintage editions, we feel a certain connexion with the literature of our times—the anxious attempts at inclusion, the political correctness, and new brand of restlessness which seemingly only the internet can induce—simply because it is inherently who we are. I stick to this statement as I opt to read Nicole Krauss's *History of Love* over Montgomery's fire-headed Anne, on this post-global warming January eve of 2021, whilst

attempting to etch something worthwhile on my broken laptop.

Whichever book, era, or genre she dove deep into, Woolf did it through a holistic lens, biting into her subject fervently and sifting through the identities and conflicts to critique the work within. At times, though, she applies little to no context, so if one isn't familiar with Elizabethan plays or John Evelyn's diary, for instance, this book can seem a little intimidating.

Reading *Genius and Ink*, I couldn't help but wonder what role Woolf would play today as the voice of the critic. Would Arundhati Roy's troubled Anjum remind her of her gender-bending and immortal Orlando? What would her thoughts be on the feminist dystopian TV adaptations of Margaret Atwood? Or what would she make of the less literary, more "drinks over dinner" kind of questions—from a scale of one to ten, how would she rate Sally Potter's rendition of her account of Sackville's biography, speckled with serenades of androgynous angels? How would her face twitch up when reading Rupri Kaur's new poetry collection?

Jahanara Tariq recently completed her undergraduate thesis on Virginia Woolf's Orlando. Her hobbies include snorting caffeine while listening to Vivaldi's "Winter" and praying to the ghost of Tagore on desolate mornings.

## BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC FICTION

## 'A Gift for a Ghost': Spain's Great New Graphic Novel

MEHRUL BARI

Borja González is a self-taught illustrator, and you both can and cannot tell while looking at his resplendent new work, *A Gift for a Ghost* (Abram ComicArts, 2020). You can't tell looking at the splendid artwork—so precise and so assured, dense with mood lighting and many a background flourish to admire—and you can tell in the way that only makes sense after learning the fact. The panels, and often the story, eschews the conventions of a graphic novel, if such things can be said to exist. Pages go by without any words. Scenes, just as much, stripped of consequence. The book instead shows a story—two stories, one in 1856 and one in 2016—held together by the phantom, fleeting forces of time.

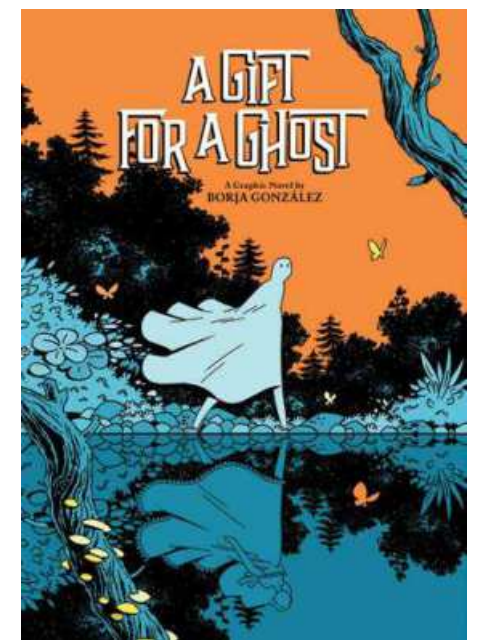
González's illustrations are so endlessly lovely, and his characters so human, that there is a spell of universality cast among its negative spaces. *A Gift for a Ghost*'s 114 pages, limned in the colour palette of its cover, are there for you to gape at; the little worlds each panel leaves behind, a time capsule. One can find traces of *Love and Rockets*, Daniel Clowes, and Charles Burns (the graphic novel was originally called *The Black Holes*), but the work is very much González's.

None of the characters are drawn with faces or fingers, and we never see the ends of their feet. Rather, they dissolve like stick figures into the ground, and the ground itself is often grassed or earthy. The central cast appear as extensions of nature, stretching onto, or growing out of, the forest floors they frequent. The more aristocratic sisters and mother of the 1856 protagonist wear long frocks that hide much of their selves away, and it is they who stick out sore in the confines of the graphic novel. Fundamentally a narrative of ill-fitting, the artwork very simply and very concisely informs us who belongs and who never will.

Not unlike the central Teresa of 1856, we have Laura, Gloria, and Cristina in 2016, a trio punk-band-in-training, who recall the Shaggs more than they do the Clash. We never see them truly interact with others, but it is very clear how poorly they fit in from a look into the posters that adorn their practice space. (It goes without saying that you should immediately read this book if you can't decide which

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is the greatest film ever made.) Even among the misfits, it is Laura who is most alien. Body-conscious and with interests few share, Laura goes out every night in varying personas. "I'm coming from a costume party, okay?" she always informs, pre-emptive, even when no one asks or listens.

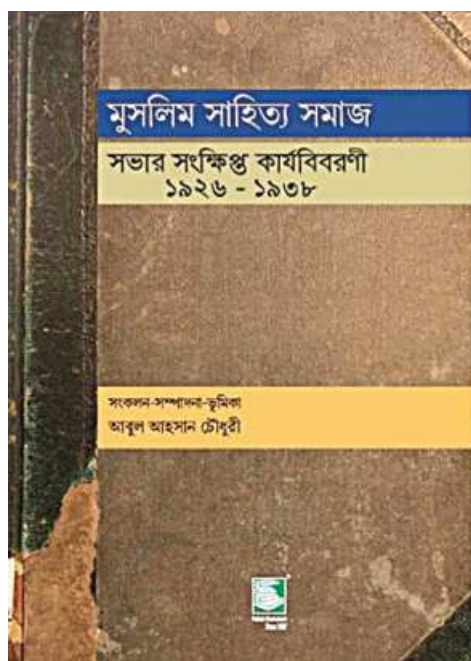
At some point untraceable, the lives of 2016 and 1856 intersect, and the disparate worlds strip away and commonalities emerge. The world we get really is just ours, save for a few twinkles of twilight that hang just below the cloudless skies. Even Magic Lake Ice Cream, the ice cream parlour they frequent by the side of the forest, glimmers under the nightlight, and promises to "never close."



*A Gift for a Ghost*'s art is sheen and linocut-like; dark, foreboding, pretty, exciting. If you've heard of the term "visual poetry," this is what they've been referring to. This book is as poetic, as visual, and as beautiful as it can be, and within the first few pages it will enchant you for minutes, hours, and days.

Mehrul Bari S. Chowdhury is a writer, poet, and artist. His work has appeared in *Cathartic Literary Magazine*, *Six Seasons Review*, and *Twist & Twain*, among others.

## THE BOOK REPORT



## Muslim Shahittya Shamaj: Dhaka's First Movement for the Freedom of Thought

EMRAN MAHFUZ

As societies and economies started transitioning in the aftermath of the First World War, the Indian subcontinent, too—albeit belatedly—caught up with the wave of socialist thought. A new way to think about religion, in particular, began to emerge. In Bengal, some students and teachers of Dhaka College and the University of Dhaka stepped forward to liberate society from regressive thought and practices.

On January 19, 1926 under the guidance of Dr Muhammad Shahidullah—then professor of Bangla and Culture at the Muslim Hall of the University of Dhaka—the Muslim Shahittya Shamaj took birth as an initiative to promote free thinking.

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## BOOK REVIEW: GENDER POLITICS

## On Gender Mainstreaming and Governance in South Asia

KRISHNA MENON

Despite much of the conversations and advances across countries since the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), gender mainstreaming still lacks a solid theoretical grounding, primarily because it grew outside academia as a movement under the ambit of feminism, and not as a part of social science. Therefore, gender mainstreaming is seen more as a political commitment and as a development agenda, and its advances remain murky as an academic discipline.

*Gender Mainstreaming in Politics, Administration and Development in South Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) edited by Ishtiaq Jamil, Salahuddin M. Aminuzzaman, Syeda Lasna Kabir, and M Mahfuzul Haque uncovers these issues in South Asian and sub-Saharan politics. With contributions from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, the Maldives, and Malawi, the strength of this volume lies in its approach, which is to look at gender mainstreaming from a policy and governance perspective.

A notable feature of this book is its ability to span both the national and local. In the chapter on "Gender Budgeting", professor Aminuzzaman offers an exhaustive study of the policies introduced in Bangladesh in 2008, noting the absence of a sound framework of gender analysis and a glaring lacunae in allocation and prioritising of funds. Meanwhile, Mizanur Rahman and Sangita Dhal both engage with the impact of gender mainstreaming at the micro levels, such as emerging leadership in rural Bangladesh and the possibilities and limitations of empowerment through e-governance in the state of Odisha in India.

Elections, which form the bedrock of politics and government formation in South Asia, are a good

entry point into understanding the sociological complexities of a given society. Who votes, who does not, why not, and how do they vote?—as Sanjay Kumar's perceptive analysis demonstrates, these questions reveal the shifts in power and the nature of social transformation underway in India. Professor Ragnhild's paper draws our attention to interventions possible in the funding of election processes. Meanwhile, Professor Kabir examines the proverbial glass ceiling and the glass cliff as experienced by the women in Bangladeshi higher civil service, which has wide manifestations

across this region.

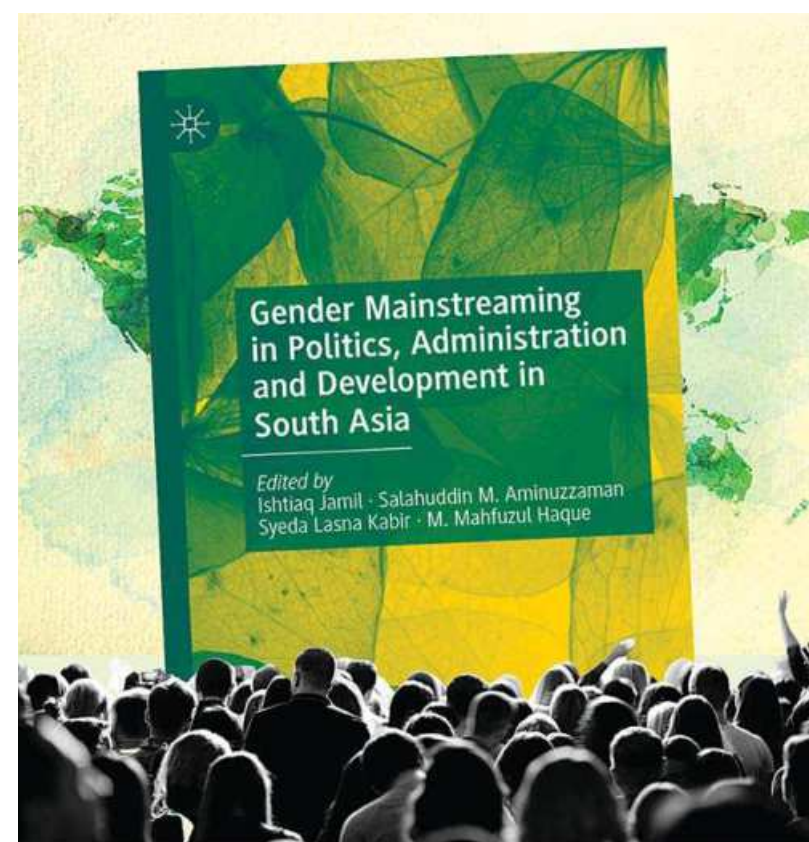
In other chapters, Jinat Hossain and Samrin Shahbaz examine the legal structures that govern property rights in Bangladesh and sexual and reproductive health rights in Pakistan respectively, while Janethri and Kamala Liyanage advocate eloquently for substantive equality for women, exploring gender-based sexual harassment in higher education campuses in Sri Lanka. Mohamed Faizal's paper provides further evidence of the existing work and wage inequalities faced by women in the Maldives. All these discussions emulate trends across the

South Asian region.

A book such as this, urges us to ask what it is that we mainstream when we mainstream gender. There are broadly two answers—one is to think of "gender" as a fixed, descriptive category; this leads to it becoming a stand in term for women. The other way is to think of gender as a complex set of relationships of power which result in specific forms of inclusion/exclusion. We need to think of gender as a verb—as "gendering"—and not as a noun alone. Otherwise, gender mainstreaming simply becomes a professional project, without invoking the emancipatory and egalitarian ethos of feminist politics.

Global prescriptions and international formulations tend to homogenise people's experiences. In the nation states in this region, there is a growing realisation that the responses to feminist demands do not actually tackle questions of structural inequality. The title and focus of this book reminds us of the historical, economic, socio-cultural, and geographical specificities of this region, while admitting to the hierarchies that exist here. Yet feminist knowledge has never been known to exist or emerge on its own, it has always had deep roots in feminist politics. This bond is what will nourish the creation of knowledge both about people and about governmentality. Instead of depending on knowledge created by the structures of power, feminist knowledge needs to speak truths to power.

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