

FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

Netflix's 'The White Tiger': A Lukewarm Translation of Rage On-screen

ISHRAT JAHAN

One can't help but be excited about Netflix's recent attempts at bringing to life and screen valuable works of South Asian fiction. Today's focus, *The White Tiger*, which premiered on Netflix on January 21, 2021, was a debut novel by the Indian-Australian writer and journalist Aravind Adiga, who won critical acclaim and the Man Booker Prize in 2008 for his critique of class and caste boundaries in India.

The book is narrated by Balram "Mannu" Halwai, who makes his way from being a tea stall helper in his hometown village to a chauffeur and finally an entrepreneur in the Indian metropolis. Balram shares his dark and transfixing story through eight long emails written to the Premier of China after the news of his visit to India is made public. His voice delivers a scathing commentary on how systemic poverty, religion, and corrupt institutions serve as tools of oppression over the working classes—something that both the film and the book term with dry humour as the "rooster's coop" from which no worker even tries to escape. It takes a white tiger—a rare and precious beast—to break out of the system.

The film follows the same structure and stays true to the darkly satirical tone of Adiga's novel. As a two-hour-long parable dealing with heavy (yet not new) themes of corrupt politicians, income inequalities, and globalisation, director Ramin Bahrani's adaptation feels like a response to Danny Boyle's 2008 *Slumdog Millionaire*—"Don't



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

think for a second there's a million rupee game show you can win to get out," Balram tells the audience at one point. On its own, the film is an entertaining piece of thriller carried through majorly by a good cast including Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Rajkumar Rao, and Mahesh Manjrekar playing Balram's employers. Actor Adarsh Gourav transfers the rage, thrill, and the consistent sinking feeling of loss that characterises Balram in Adiga's book. And the language—English with a smattering of Hindi when the scenes require it—definitely flows more smoothly than other recent adaptations like Mira Nair's *A Suitable Boy*.

However, while the film borrows

generously from the text, it loses much more in censoring Balram's anger. "Here's a strange fact: murder a man, and you feel responsible for his life—possessive, even. You know more about him than his father and mother; they knew his fetus, but you know his corpse. Only you [...] know why his body has to be pushed into the fire before its time, and why his toes curl up and fight for another hour on earth," Adiga wrote in his book. His work was graphic, earthy, and filled with a subversive humour that made Balram's pain and anger feel palpable on the page, and uncomfortable for some. But in the film, many of Balram's experiences with religion as a tool of oppression were skirted past,

possibly because of fear of backlash, and several other details and incidents which helped build a deeper story in the book, were left out.

This leads one to question whether there is a new standardised version of book adaptations emerging—adaptations that seem to borrow, only on the surface, the idea of class commentary to cater to the globalised (but still western) gaze of the younger middle class, while leaving out the discomfort such discourses should invoke for this audience.

The characters of Pinky (Priyanka Chopra Jonas) and Ashok (Rajkumar Rao) are examples of such people, who despite being conscious of the systematic problems they live in and benefit from, refuse to truly challenge them when it requires engaging with their own guilt and complacency.

The irony is that a film such as *The White Tiger*, being mostly in English and despite an effective use of suspension of disbelief while switching to and from Hindi, will inevitably be watched by those same privileged, educated people. What does it say about us when we consume such narratives that are meant to represent the voices of those who are exploited, but in reality cater to the very classes who benefit from and survive because of the exploitation of the poor?

Ishrat Jahan is an early stage researcher who writes in her free time. Reach her at ishrat.jahan1620@gmail.com.

WORTH A RE-READ

A History of the Ulama in Bengal

MD ANISUR RAHMAN

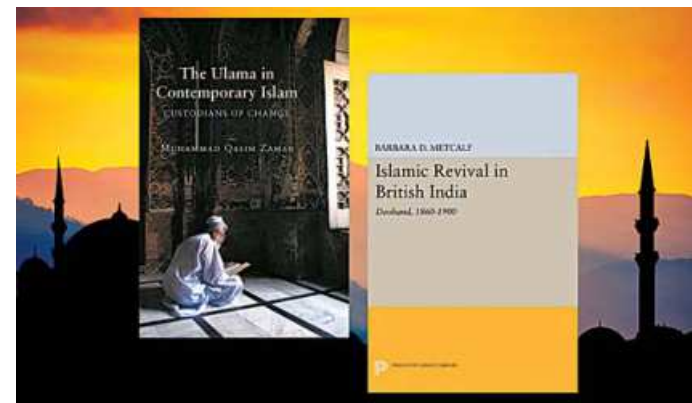
Over the past few years, and particularly after their recent tussle with the government over the statue of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Ulama's involvement in politics has come back under scrutiny in Bangladesh. Since the 10th century, the Ulama have been exercising strong authority over religious issues; yet they have been accused of failing to respond to modernity and to the changes in society. Against this backdrop, the actions, discourses, and history of the Ulama are well worth looking into. Muhammad Qasim Zaman's *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodian of Change* (2002) and Barbara D Metcalf's *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (2016), both published by the Princeton University Press, are two outstanding studies in this regard. While Metcalf looks into the emergence, proliferation, and responses of the Deobandi Ulama to "modernity" when Muslim power in India was declining, Zaman looks at their strategy to establish authority in British India and Pakistan.

Shifting sands of influence

In pre-British India, religious education was a private enterprise and individual tutelage was the usual mode of the dissemination of religious knowledge. This tradition was to change with the emergence of the Farangi Mahall Ulama as custodians of Muslim intellectual traditions.

Farangi Mahall, a mansion in Lucknow, India, was built by the French adventurer. It was given to the descendants of Qutbu'd - Din (d. 1691), a Mughal courtier. The family and students who took lessons from this family were known by the name of Farangi Mahall. The activities of the Ulama of Farangi Mahall, however, were confined to producing graduates for princely services. Their most significant contribution was their systematisation of the curriculum—*dars-i-Nizami*—for religious education. As Metcalf informs us, this curriculum came to Bengal when a Farangi Mahall graduate was appointed as the first principal of the madrasa yi 'Aliyah', Calcutta in 1780.

Farangi Mahall's dominance declined and the centre for religious studies shifted from Lucknow to Delhi by the late 18th century. The person who played a key role in this shift was Shah Waliyu'llah, who advocated for more social and political responsibilities for the Ulama as opposed to those of the Farangi Mahall. Waliyu'llah's successors had studied legal codes and written fatwa for the Muslim community, which had once become the main



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

tool to disseminate religious instructions when the British were about to establish political authority over India. Besides claiming centrality of the *hadith* in the interpretation of the sharia, Shah Waliyu'llah discouraged blindly following the rulings of the earlier generations (*taqlid*). He suggested going back to the Quran or Sunnah for legal solutions.

The 1857 revolution landed heavily upon the revivalist movement initiated by Shah Waliu'llah. Suspecting the Ulama's involvement, British colonisers took all religious institutions in Delhi under their control. Fourteen hundred people were shot by British soldiers in Kuchah Chelan, where Shah Abdul Aziz (son of late Shah Waliu'llah) used to preach, according to Metcalf. The Delhi-based Ulama were forced to move to the countryside and establish a madrasa at Deoband in 1867.

After the revolution, Deoband became the centre for Muslim intellectuals. They introduced formal religious education for Muslims in British India. Students had separate classrooms and a library, and the curricula were organised according to departments, such as Arabic, Persian, and others. A formal examination system was introduced and successful students were issued certificates of award. Graduates came from different corners of India. Most significantly, these graduates went back home and set up madrasas in their respective localities. By the end of the 18th century, nearly every town held the presence of the Deobandi Ulama. One well known Deobandi Ulama was Muhammad Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863-1943), who authored *Bahishti Zewar* (1981)—among the most popular books for Muslims of India, and masterminded the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939—the first reformist legislation for Muslims of British India.

In the late 19th century, the Ulama played a crucial role in upholding the pride of their religion and their community through publications and public debate on religious issues. Their intellectual exercise peaked with the invention of print technology, multiplying the scale of the transmission of knowledge all over India. Publishing in local languages such as Urdu, instead of Arabic, was one of their effective strategies to establish authority. This also served as a medium of communication between common Muslims and the Ulama, and helped renew Muslim traditions against local customs. Following the birth of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, the Ulama consolidated their authority and forced the then government not to pass a law against sharia. Over the next few years, their continuous efforts would force the Pakistani government to establish a Supreme Sharia Board to oversee any inconsistencies in the sharia laws passed by the parliament.

The historiography of these two books may be compared with Geoffrey G Field's *Blood, Sweat and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939-1945* (Oxford University Press, 2011), in which Field understands "class" from multi-dimensional approaches including its relationship with the state, society, and family. Similarly, Barbara Metcalf and Qasim Zaman define the Ulama as a class by providing a social and intellectual history of their presence in South Asia. Metcalf highlights their hardships in the post-1857 revolution and the silent "intellectual" revolution of the Deobandi Ulama. Hers is an excellent cultural history. Despite being published earlier, Zaman fills in what Metcalf's study left to be addressed: it focuses on how the Ulama have played an active role in different social and political contexts, particularly in post-colonial Pakistan. He disapproves of the allegation that the Ulama are against change. The common mistake that most studies make, says Zaman, is not to consider the social and political context.

Dr Md Anisur Rahman is a legal historian at Asian University for Women. His research interests include Islam in Asia and South Asian Islamic Law and Society.

THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS

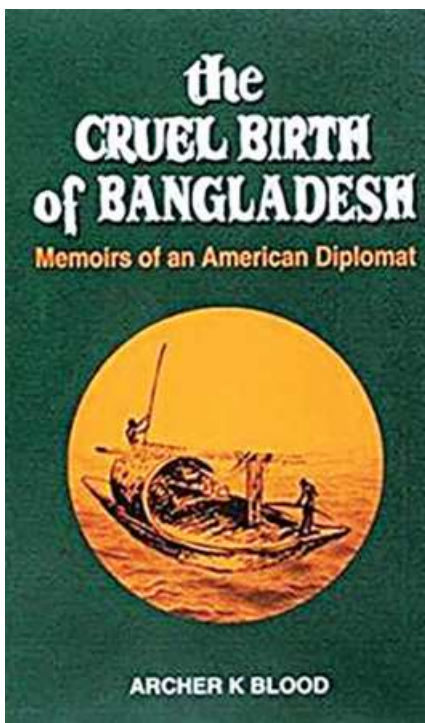
A Testimony to the Cruel Birth of Bangladesh

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

Half a century from where we began, throughout this 50th year of Bangladesh, Daily Star Books will revisit and analyse some of the books that played pivotal roles in documenting the Liberation War and the birth of this nation in 1971. The last issue of every month will feature an elaborate article on these books.

In this first installment, we revisit a book in which, appalled by the brutality and wanton killing of the unarmed Bangalis on March 25, 1971, American diplomat Archer K Blood and his colleagues at the Dhaka Consulate continued to relay as much of the events as possible to keep Washington updated, and to put pressure on the West Pakistani government to stop the killings and go for political settlement.

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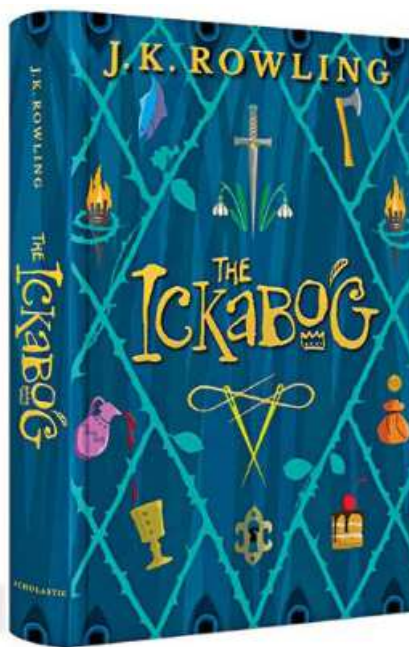
BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

JK Rowling's Disappointing Cry for Relevance

YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI

There are two kinds of children's stories: those which you dust off as an adult and find yourself discovering new depths to upon revisiting, and those that you flick through and donate. *Narnia*, *Three Investigators*, *Coraline*, *Percy Jackson* all bring back fond memories of childhood upon rereading, but usually with added insight into the story—insight that only comes with age. And while *Harry Potter* arguably defined the former category for an entire generation of readers, *The Ickabog* (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2020), JK Rowling's new foray into children's fiction, sadly, falls squarely in the latter.

Let us start with the good parts of *The Ickabog*: the story. It is a classic story of rebellion, one told already in *Star Wars*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and indeed by Rowling herself in *Order of the Phoenix*. A children's book warning of autocracies, fake news, and misdirection is always a pertinent story, especially so in today's times. To subtly weave such themes into a story for children, however, requires an author with a delicate touch, one JK Rowling seems to have lost over the years. *The Ickabog* bludgeons readers over the head with one dimensional plot points, characters, and even



The style of prose also lends itself to a very bullet-point style of narrative. Descriptions are sparse, scenes are non-existent, and character motivations and internal struggles never explored to any depth. Suspense, drama, mystery—none of it builds or stews.

setting. It is a book where cartoonish villains do cartoonishly evil things for paper thin reasons, and cartoonishly earnest heroes thwart them at the end of the day.

Which would all be well and good if this were a book for infants. Indeed, the prose itself seems to suggest so—it is very simple, with an almost nursery story quality to it, albeit confusingly peppered with college-level vocabulary. However, the intended audience for *The Ickabog* is between seven and nine—ages at which children start developing a taste for nuanced storytelling. Many children start reading *Harry Potter* around that age, and to hand them a book like this would feel like being talked down to. The language and storytelling are pandering to its core audience, with no sense of what children are capable of, or enjoy. Granted, this seems to be a stylistic choice to make the story read more like a fairy tale, but that is a goal the prose fails at achieving. It is structurally off—too self-aware to work as a fairy tale, but not self-aware enough to realise this.

The style of prose also lends itself to a very bullet-point style of narrative. Descriptions are sparse, scenes are non-existent, and character motivations and internal struggles never explored to any depth. Suspense, drama, mystery—none of it builds or stews. Events happen, are resolved, and then we move on. While this style of prose works for some short stories and folk tales told by a fire, it fails remarkably when applied to a full-length children's novel.

Everything above would be somewhat forgivable had the pacing of the book not been completely unbalanced. It is nearly halfway through the book before the setup ends and the main story begins. The setup is undoubtedly necessary, but with no suspense, drama, or characters to truly root for, waiting over half the book to get to the interesting parts is a massive ask for any reader. One struggles to imagine a seven or even five-year-old who would stick with the book for over 150 pages with such a flimsy promise.

The Ickabog was intended to be a story for children about the abuse of power, and the power of kindness in the face of hate and bigotry. It was meant to be a reprieve for both parents and children during the COVID-19 lockdown. What it ended up being is a perfect threat for children to stop misbehaving, for it is an incredibly arduous task to finish the book, regardless of the readers' age group. If anything, it is proof that JK Rowling has truly forgotten what it was that made her the premiere children's author for a generation.

Yaameen Al-Muttaqi works with robots and writes stories of dragons, magic, friendship, and hope. Send him a raven at yaameen3112@gmail.com.