

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

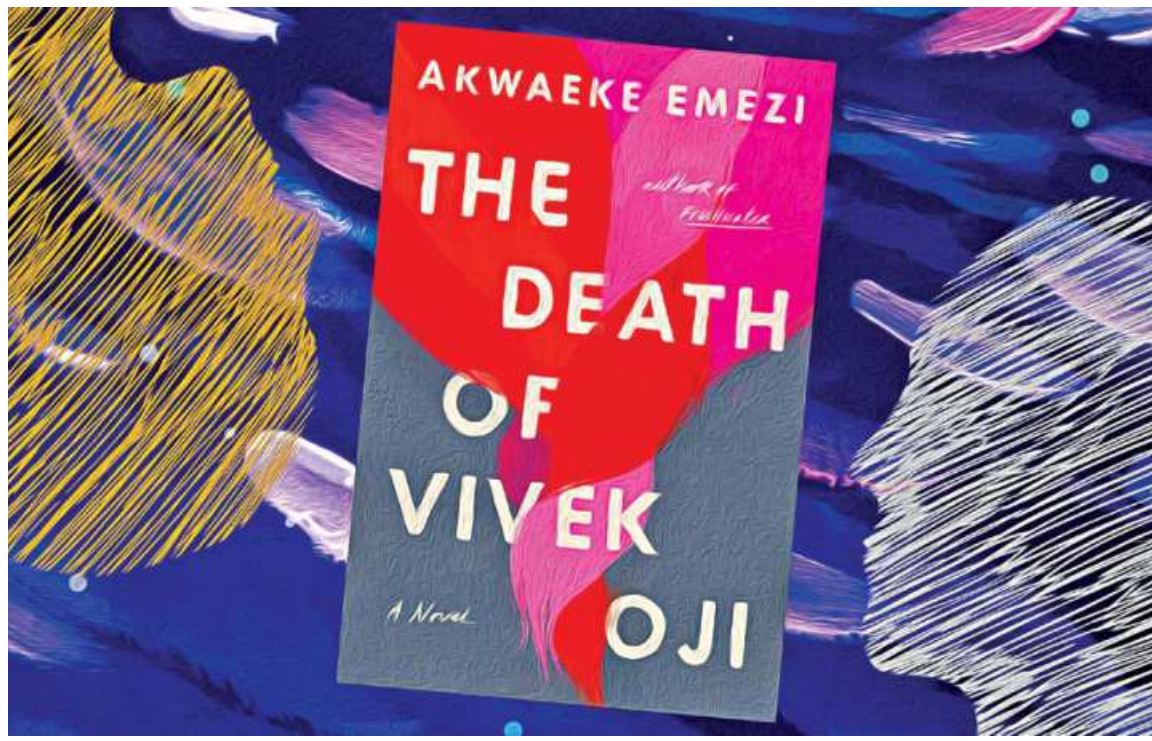
In death, he became visible

ALIZA RAHMAN

Vivek Oji, the titular character in Akwaeke Emezi's second novel, is dead; this is stated in the title, the first line, and throughout the book. However, in every chapter, Vivek keeps coming alive, images of him rising out of the text's surface only to dissolve again.

The Death of Vivek Oji (Riverhead Books, 2020) is set in Nigeria, and follows the story of Vivek, his cousin Osita, his parents Chika and Kavita, his uncle and aunt, and the children of a community of "Nigerwives" who become his friends in what is to be the last days of his life. Vivek is an only child and has always been enough for his mother, Kavita, who will later find her son's corpse at her doorstep, devoid of any clothing and missing even the silver necklace he wore throughout his life.

As the story progresses, the number of people touched by his presence increases; each character altered by grief in their own ways,



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

The story is firmly rooted in Nigeria, but Bangladeshi readers in particular might find it intimately familiar. The children in this novel protect their parents by suppressing themselves, even as they waste like Vivek did.

each holding onto little secrets as if guarding the man even after death. While his father Chika succumbs to a deep melancholy, his mother Kavita begins a frenetic search for what happened to her son, a search that comes with the cost of distancing those she has spent decades caring about. Her possessiveness over her son morphs into a possessiveness over who are allowed to mourn him. Rage and frustration pour out of her as Vivek's close circle—the ones who gave him the space to be himself and the ones who Kavita comes to realise knew

her son better than she ever could—keep their lips sealed. Kavita comes to the awakening, unravelling and rude, that she never truly saw her son when he was still with her.

The first time we learn Vivek isn't a cisgender man, it isn't a dramatic coming out nor is it a scene of anxiety and anguish—he simply is, standing resplendent in his mother's jewellery and comfortable with himself. The suppression of his true self weighs on him, his ribs poking out of his chest as he refuses to eat the necessary amount of food. He emerges comfortable, however, saying to himself with calm assurance, "I would stop being a man. I was never one to begin with, anyway." "[H]e said we could refer to him as either he or she, that he was both," Vivek's friend Juju tells Kavita at one point.

The novel is firmly rooted in Nigeria, and as the reader delves further into the story, words, foods, and places like *akamu* (a cereal pudding), Owerri (capital of the Imo state in Nigeria), and "tukiakwa!" ("God forbid!") sound as natural as any other words

we know. However, while it is common for well-written stories set in a specific place to often have characters and feelings that are universal, Bangladeshi readers in particular might find a significant part of this novel intimately familiar, from the father's gruff irritation at Vivek's long hair, to the fussy mothers perpetually concerned for their children, the fear for and actual loss of people's lives in riots they neither caused nor participated in, societal judgment upon the most innocuous deviations from the sociocultural norm, and the often unintentional lack of sympathy from parents and elders bewildered by aspects of their children's personalities. As a result, the children in this novel—as they do in life in Bangladesh—protect their parents by suppressing themselves, even as they waste like Vivek did.

A noticeable characteristic of the novel is its emphasis on the body, how emotions and histories come alive through it—the scar on Ahunna's (and later Vivek's) foot in the shape of a limp starfish, Osita's chipped tooth that acts as a mark of

his childhood with Vivek. Feelings "s[i]ng", "bubble", and "boil" in this novel, love is "tactile and rich", and death and grief "cut [one] down like a tree". At one point, Kavita rests her hand on a young Vivek's "skull", a funny choice of words, until we find her looking at her adult son's corpse with a fractured skull later in the same paragraph. This emphasis on the physical in Emezi's writing adds a potency to the prose that allows readers to feel in their own bodies the characters' fragmented experiences.

Emezi's lucid and visceral writing enables the reader to clasp two concepts simultaneously: that Vivek once was and Vivek no longer is. At its heart, *The Death of Vivek Oji* is a book about relationships, particularly when it is impacted by the traumatic passing away of a loved one, and the unanswered questions it leaves behind.

In the end, what kills Vivek Nnemdi Oji are the place, its politics and its people, even those who love him.

Aliza Rahman is a contributor.

THE BOOK REPORT

Serajul Islam Chowdhury speaks about the state of Bangla education

ASIF NEWAZ

Language and education are prime markers in identifying one's participation in society and politics. Having just commemorated the International Mother Language Day on February 21, that too on the verge of our nation's silver jubilee, it is perhaps a unique opportunity for us to question, reflect, and make changes to our politics on language, education, and social identities.

On this topic, writer, academic, and Professor Emeritus of Dhaka University, Serajul Islam Chowdhury delivered an insightful speech on the occasion of *Shaheed Dibash* and the International Mother Language Day on February 21, 2021. The webinar, titled "Mother Language and Education, Bangladesh" (translated), was organised by the Central Women's University, Dhaka.

Professor Chowdhury spoke about the history of the Bangla language and how it has impacts our current social fabric. Bangla as we know it, according to the speaker, is an arbitrary implementation of the methods set in place by the College of Fort William which rejected the usages of local language as the standardised form. The communal tensions created by the British Raj resulted in further separating the two largest religious communities. With Hindus participating in what was hegemonically constructed as modern education, the Muslims lagged behind. This resulted in two major political parties backed by the British: the Muslim League and the Congress.

Professor Chowdhury argues that Bangla's potential of becoming one of the most widely spoken languages of the world has stumbled throughout history. Before the Language Movement of 1952, the last terrible blow dealt to us was the defeat of Mirza Muhammad Siraj-ud-Daulah, the last Nawab of Bengal, in The Battle of Plassey in 1757. It cemented an overwhelming cultural and capitalist hegemony upon Bangla speakers.

Professor Chowdhury expresses concern about the policies being undertaken with regard to language,

which is weakening both the strength of language and hampering the education system.

The importance of proper education as a knowledge seeking enterprise is being ignored. Knowledge is no longer related to progress and livelihood, it has become a capitalist venture. The exclusion of literature from textbooks and the negligence of history as a subject have been serving these capitalist agendas.

Professor Chowdhury points out two major tasks that must be undertaken to establish a good educational practice. The first being writing of more books, more research, and more nurturing



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

of reading habits. The second is the translation of more texts into Bangla, so that the language also gets richer. As Vice Chancellor of the Central Women's University, Professor Chowdhury points out that the role of proper translation is paramount in modern education, so that arbitrary impositions on its working are avoided.

Most importantly, class conflicts have to be broken through to ensure a collective and inclusive education system.

Asif Newaz teaches at the Central Women's University.

THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS

Prelude to a national disintegration

YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI AND MONEESHA KALAMDER

After half a century from where we began, Daily Star Books will spend all of this year—the 50th year of Bangladesh—revisiting, celebrating, and analyzing some of the books that played pivotal roles in documenting the Liberation War of 1971 and the birth of this nation. In this third installment, we revisit Rounaq Jahan's *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (Columbia University Press, 1972), in which the Bangladeshi author and political scientist examines the erstwhile Pakistani ruling elites which caused the separation of East and West Pakistan.

Read this article online, on *The Daily Star's* website, on facebook.com/dailystarbooks, @thedailystarbooks on Instagram, and @DailyStarBooks on Twitter.



PAKISTAN

Failure in national integration



ROUNAQ JAHAN



Book Road Khulna held on February 1, 2021 was the first community-wide book exchange of its kind in Bangladesh. Dhaka will host its own version on February 26, 2021 in Rabindra Sarobar.

PHOTO: MD REPON BHUIYAN

BOOKS BRIEFING

The spirit of sharing defines the end of February 2021

MEHRUL BARI

In this last week of February, a shared sense of optimism, however cautious, is pervading much of the world and indeed our own. Slowly, and now safely, more and more events and programmes are opening their doors. Book enthusiasts can enjoy the following events this week:

Boi Bondhu'r Shathe Boi Binimoy Utshab: On February 26, Dhanmondi's Rabindra Sarobar will host Dhaka's first ever book exchange festival from 10am to 6pm,

organised by the open library Boi Bondhu. The event is unique in its nature—it advertises simply that you come with one book or more in your hand, leave it among the sprawl of novels to be displayed, and take one, take two, take three books in exchange.

Boi Bondhu have been maintaining several book-reading facilities around the city since 2018. This latest effort will see only the second ever book exchange festival

in the country, following an event in Khulna on February 1, 2021. The festival is free to enter.

Shobar Jonno Boi: The AIM Initiative Foundation are seeking to collect 5,000 donated books from around the country in order to set up libraries in five disadvantaged school in and outside Dhaka. Those interested to donate books can register online until February 28. The endeavour is designed with the sole intent of educating

the generations to come through stories and words beyond those of mandated texts.

Registration can be done either through the Google Form link posted on the Shobar Jonno Boi Facebook event page or by messaging the AIM Initiative Foundation page with the required information. Once the registration phase ends, the books will be collected from the addresses provided.