

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

# A journalist explains the country that banished him

ZOHEB MASHIUR

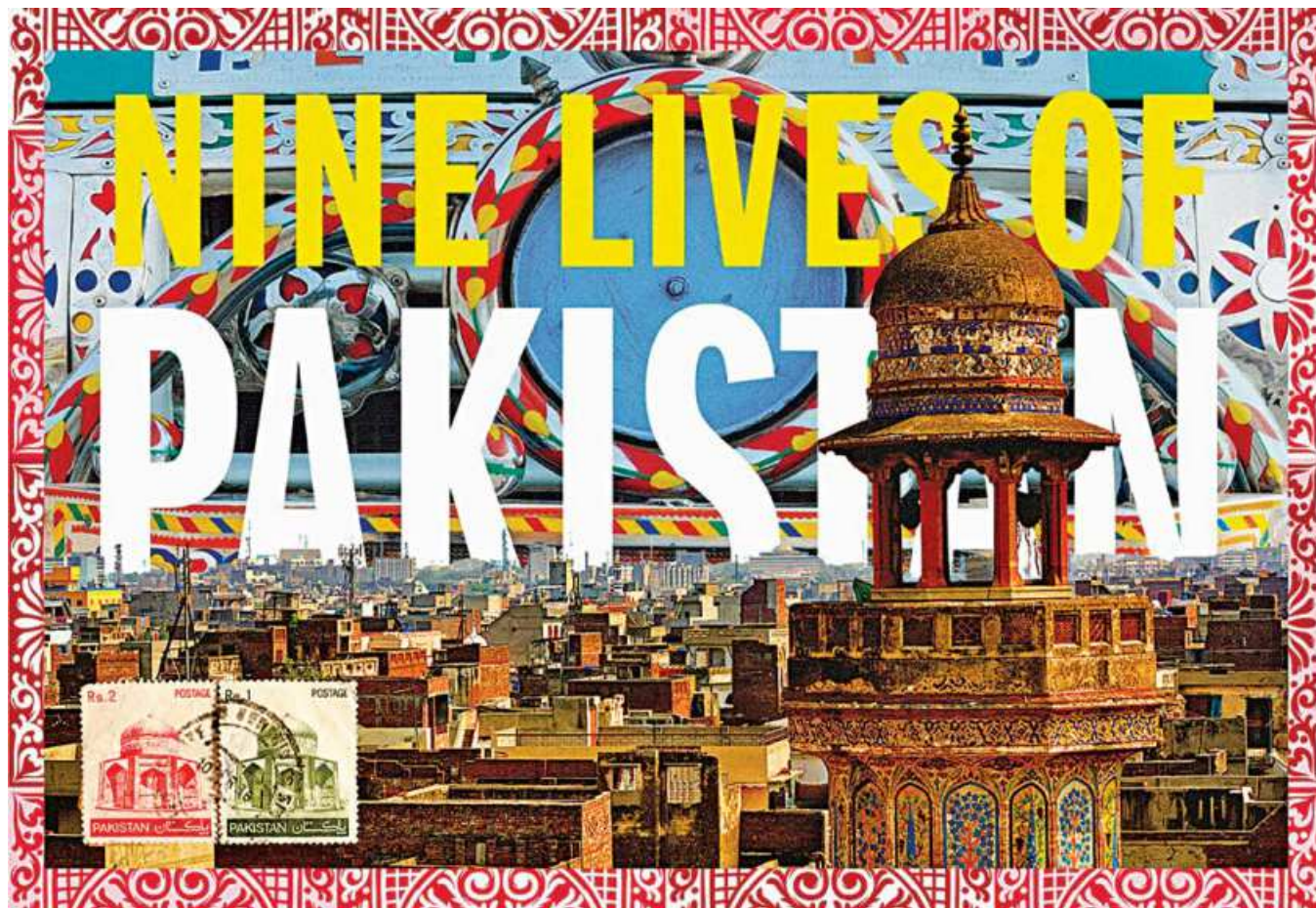
In the middle of an Islamabad night, just before the Pakistan election of 2013, the Irish journalist Declan Walsh was visited by “angels”.

These angels, as Pakistanis call the members of the military’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), served Walsh with a letter of expulsion. After nearly a decade as a correspondent reporting on Pakistan’s politics for *The Guardian* and then the *New York Times*, Walsh was given 72 hours to leave the country. The only reason that the ISI offered: he had taken part in “undesirable activities”.

Released in 2020, *The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Precarious State* (WW Norton & Company) is the story of how Walsh came to learn what these “undesirable activities” had been, though it takes its time getting there. It’s only at the very end that we, and Walsh, discover what he had done to upset the ISI. To understand the reason, we need to first go on a journey through the political history of Pakistan as personified by the titular nine lives: Pakistanis whose life stories bring shape, depth, and clarity to a country that stands as an international enigma. All but two of these lives are people Walsh had previously covered in his reportage, and so we are launched into a narrative that is part history, part memoir, and part travelogue, as Walsh goes from the frontier of Waziristan to the sluggish coast of Sindh, from the anodyne mansions of Islamabad to the bleak fortresses of Balochistan.

Walsh’s chosen nine lives are all key players in singular moments of Pakistan’s history and its present political landscape. Starting with a character portrait of Abdul Rashid Ghazi, a liberal, “Westernized” man who becomes radicalised and dies in a military crackdown on his Islamist movement based in Islamabad’s Lal Masjid, we see Walsh’s method of showing people in crisis—in “precarious states”—and using them to launch into an explanation of the history that brought them to that moment.

We learn through Ghazi about the impact of American foreign policy and Pakistan’s relationship with the Taliban. Through a chapter on Jinnah, we see Pakistan as a country born through identity crises. We meet Asma Jahangir, a lawyer and human rights activist who defends Pakistan’s minorities and calls the



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country’s indomitable generals “useless duffers” on television. The cast goes on. Walsh portrays them all with insight and empathy without condoning their often detestable actions, and the reader feels they understand even the most outlandish, dislikeable of these nine lives.

Walsh was able to write directly from situations only accessible to a writer with outsider status, media connections, and years of experience in the country. And these same experiences that pepper the book, are what ultimately led to him being evicted from Pakistan. In this last respect, *Nine Lives* stumbles somewhat in that Walsh disappears so well into the background of his chapters that it feels almost anticlimactic when the focus shifts back to his own story at the end of the book. Yet it cannot be disputed that he is an expert on the subject he tackles, and to his first-hand experience and deep outsider

knowledge of Pakistan, he adds a clear, graceful writing style. Imagery is kept short but evocative—often efficiently poetic, often wry.

While Walsh takes great pains to portray Pakistan as a tantalisingly complex, bewildering country that defies easy stereotyping—and explicitly condemns the reductionist, Orientalist takes many writers adopt for Pakistan—it has to be said that this is primarily a book about Pakistan’s politics and its security apparatus. International readers—not just Western, but South Asian—who are used to seeing Pakistan as a security problem and a dysfunctional state will find their views enriched, but not contradicted or terribly complicated by Walsh’s work. To an extent he can be a victim of his own success; he humanises Pakistan’s political instabilities enough that readers may come away feeling they

really understand Pakistan now, which is a task no one book and no one author can ever accomplish.

Bangladeshi readers will also be disappointed to note that he does not really delve into the relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan, and in his occasional references to the former East Pakistan and the 1971 war he seems to buy into the narrative of an Indian-instigated uprising, and a final Indian victory. Of course, Walsh never claims to be the definitive voice on Pakistani politics, much less on the country itself, so these are more words of caution to a reader rather than a critique of what is, finally, an excellent book.

Zoheb Mashiur is a doctoral researcher on race and the British Empire. He is based at the University of Kent’s Brussels School of International Studies. Twitter: @ZMashiur

OPINION

# How bookstagram is keeping humanity alive

TASNEEM TAMBAWALA

*Bookstagram, a niche community of book readers on Instagram, has in its unique way contributed immensely to the way social media tips the scales in public opinion these days, be it on the Black Lives Matter movement, gender equality, climate change, mental health, or the horrors forced upon Palestine.*

Since I am a bookstagram novice, mostly watching, listening, and rarely creating content of my own, I feel a kind of motivation from this community to speak my mind about issues that have always been close to my heart. One such issue has been gender inequality and misogyny. Instagram has given feminists and advocates a platform to question patriarchy. It has taken the platform and transformed it into a looking glass that focuses on the core of the problem.

Fiction speaks louder to me, so it’s no surprise that authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have most effectively brought out to me the stories and experiences of women who have lived through gender bias, sometimes with quiet courage, sometimes with fierce bravery. Bookstagram accounts like @wellreadblackgirl, @tea\_with\_c, @zainub.reads, @shesreadingtheworld, and @intersectionalbookclub have also introduced me to books that highlight intersectional feminism and how “smashing the patriarchy” can mean different things in different parts of the world.



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

“It’s okay not to be okay”. It’s okay to seek help. It’s okay to just be. As May was Mental Health Awareness month, my Instagram feed in recent weeks was full of book recommendations on mental health. Recommendations apart, the community has also helped innumerable booklovers to deal with their own trauma and mental health issues by connecting with like-minded booklovers, by reading and listening to each other and validating each other’s feelings. Some accounts worth following for mental health awareness are @sahilpr1109, @projectpurplebd, @cholokothaboli, @wevegonemental and @lenalangcoach.

In the last few weeks, however, the biggest role bookstagram has played is in alerting the world of the crimes against humanity being committed in Palestine. While some of us feel helpless, wondering what we can do from across the world to ease their suffering, wondering whether our single voice is significant enough to make a difference in the larger scheme of things, the bookstagram community has risen to the occasion.

Bookstagrammers have extensively spread news of what is happening in Palestine on the ground, and some of them like @onthesamepagewithcats and @onlyfoxtales organised charities that combined monetary aid with spreading awareness. They reached readers all over the world simply by stacking books in the colours of the Palestinian flag and by using the right hashtags, even going against the platform’s algorithm and reducing their online “reach” in doing so.

Others, like @the\_romantic\_baker and @thebookishbox, generously joined in and managed to raise a few thousand dollars in donations from every corner of the world. The recent ceasefire has barely dulled the fervour of this community as they read and recommend literature from and about Palestine and Palestinians. The UK-based @books\_for\_gaza has organised a donation drive to collect books in order to rebuild the bookshop and library owned by Samir Mansour, which was destroyed during airstrikes in Gaza. One can also visit @samir\_mansour\_bookshop for the link to his GoFundMe that will help in rebuilding it.

With time, I’ve realised that there is much more to bookstagram than sharing book reviews, recommendations, and aesthetically pleasing photos. It is a community of mostly non-judgmental souls who are fearless in challenging norms and opening themselves up to conflicting viewpoints. They are invested citizens of the world who are willing to learn and unlearn with equal zeal. In a time of ceaseless violence and natural threats and disasters, when social media is known so often for triggering anxiety and other mental health issues, bookstagram, to a great extent, is keeping humanity alive.

Tasneem Tambawala is a teacher, librarian, and founder of the Bookcentric library in Dhaka. Reach her at tasneem1109@gmail.com or @tasneemreads on Instagram.

EDITOR’S NOTE

## Today we are 1

SARAH ANJUM BARI

It was during the peak of the coronavirus crisis, amidst the punishing heat of June, that we geared up to launch Daily Star Books on this very day in 2020. To us members of the editorial team—the writers, illustrators, and editors, all devout lovers of the written word—it was catharsis. We channelled the stress of the pandemic into reading, designing, and generating conversations around books that would offer both escape and intellectual stimulation for our readers.

On this first anniversary of Daily Star Books, we bring promises of newer, fresher content beyond the print editions, and ask that you stay with us every day of the week, not just on Thursdays. Find the articles from this schedule that resonate with your interests, and read it all online on *The Daily Star’s* website and on the Daily Star Books pages on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. We also invite you to share what you think of us, at thedailystarbooks@gmail.com.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# The terror of living and loving

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

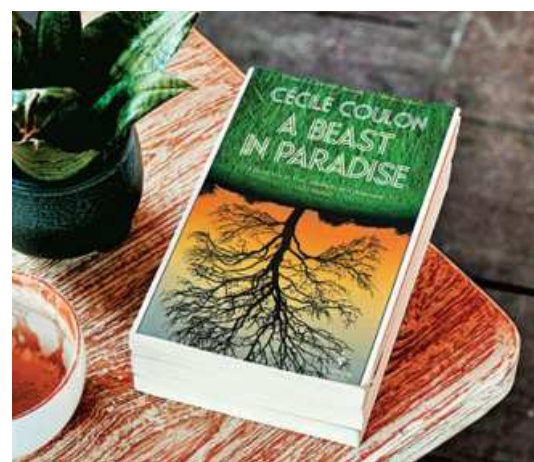
An 81-year-old woman is strolling about in her farm, reeling from nostalgia, dead leaves crunching under her feet. She is planting newly bloomed flowers in an empty pig pen. Why does she mourn? What is her past? In *A Beast in Paradise* (Europa Editions, 2021) Cécile Coulou recollects the events that led her to her current state.

The farm, entitled Paradise, has been looked after solely by Emilienne following her daughter and son-in-law’s untimely death. She lives with her orphaned grandchildren, Blanche and Gabriel, and house-help, Louis. The title’s resonance grows loud as soon as we are introduced to Emilienne’s children’s death a few pages into the novel. Grief is a beast. It claws away at the heart until peace has vanished. Add heartbreak, obsession, jealousy, and fury to the mix, and we see the creature in its complete form pulsing through the story.

Winner of the Le Monde Literary Prize, Coulou has authored seven novels before this English language debut, and her translator Tina Kover is a National Book Award and PEN Translation Prize finalist. This novel makes a convincing case for more literary contributions from the duo. Their writing constantly reminded me of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Enlightenment of the Greengrass Tree* (2017) by Shokoofeh Azar.

Emilienne is a willful matriarch. Her world begins and ends at Paradise and she is intensely protective of this property, and the ones who reside in it. She “patched up the children’s wound like a field surgeon lacking supplies; she made do with what she had”, Coulou writes.

Blanche is a precocious child who shines in her classroom and the farm. It comes as a shock when someone so gifted and adept at academics decides to stay back at the village, helping her grandmother manage the farm, instead of opting for higher education like her classmates. Her brother, Gabriel, is taciturn. Unlike her, he continues to grieve for his parents. “His constant fatigue [...] excluded him from this strange family, whom he loved, certainly, but those arms were too full to gather him up in a hug.” Beyond the blood relations, Louis, even though a house-help, is closely connected to the family. A child living under the shadow of an abusive father, he takes refuge at Emilienne’s and makes Paradise his home. Growing up, he develops an unrequited desire for Blanche, and it soon turns into an obsession that makes him hate Alexandre,



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Blanche’s one and only love.

Blanche and Alexandre’s love affair might seem harmless at the outset. But as their goals and desires clash (Blanche being strongly devoted to the farm and Alexandre longing for the city), their relationship takes an unwanted turn, gutting Blanche in ways that will persist over time.

All the characters here are obsessed with one thing or another, be it Gabriel’s attachment to solitude or Blanche’s to Alexandre and the land. Perhaps it was the author’s main intention to portray the trajectory of a few lives through the lens of obsession, a base human characteristic.

Perhaps she also had the clash of urban and rural elements in her mind as the grand scheme of things. If Blanche reflects the rural landscape in this novel, Alexandre embodies the city. The life courses these two individuals embrace are a clever technique that the author uses to explore the uneasy tension between the two spaces.

Only 189 pages-long, this flighty novel is poetic, fast-paced, and wastes not a single word or scene. The reader is hooked from the beginning, and its hypnotic, nightmarish charms do not fade until the end. The fully fleshed out characters and their exploration of life’s tricky terrains cling to the reader’s mind long after the last page has been turned.

We all have beasts in our own Paradises; this is what the novel screams throughout its duration.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.