

BOOK REVIEW: AUTOFICTION

Who is Ayad Akhtar?

SHEHRIN HOSSAIN

When I began reading *Homeland Elegies* (Little, Brown and Company, 2020), all I knew about it was that it was a memoir; an account of the life of the author, Ayad Akhtar—a second-generation Muslim immigrant with Pakistani parents who migrated to America to further their careers as doctors. I also knew Akhtar was a playwright, because I had read about his Pulitzer prize-winning drama, *Disgraced* (2012), and of its attendant controversy.

As I read, I learned, too, that Akhtar's father was a reputed cardiologist, whose work led him directly, in 1993, to meeting Donald Trump, who had been experiencing problems with his heart. In the course of that and a handful of successive meetings, Akhtar's father developed an adoration for the then-entrepreneur that persisted well into Trump's presidential campaign and the bulk of his term in office.

It was at this point that I did a double-take. The Muslim, brown dad fascination with a right-wing, white supremacist president was confounding, but familiar: I have personal experience in that arena. But for Trump's one-time cardiologist to show up in the novel like this seemed a tad fantastical. And that was how, through a series of frantic Google searches, I learned that *Elegies* is, in fact, a novel.

But it is not a work of fiction—not really. The protagonist has the same name, occupation, and parents as Akhtar. He is of the same age. He alludes to *Disgraced* by calling it "my play", never naming it. He says that, despite no longer being a practising Muslim, he finds himself "still entirely shaped by the Islam that had socially defined [him] since 9/11". His academic background, literary career, and position in America's cultural elite—all of it checks out—but that's as far as Google will take you in trying to figure out just who Ayad Akhtar, of actuality or fiction, is.

Initially, I felt perplexed and somewhat annoyed. The form felt foreign; I recognised it as some type of autofiction, but it felt just a little contrived. So how much of it was fact? How much was fiction, and why? I couldn't tell—and that had me on edge.

Yet I could not stop reading. There is a kind of organised grandeur to Akhtar's writing, which

flows lyrically yet feels like a lecture delivered by your favourite English teacher. That Akhtar is a dramatist is readily evident in the way he structures and delivers each micro-narrative, from his father's first meeting with Trump to a harrowing encounter with an armed racist at a grocery store, who tells Akhtar and his father to "go back to where [they] came from". Even Riaz Rind, the decidedly fictional, Gatsby-esque Muslim Pakistani hedge fund manager, and the sole reason for Akhtar's launch into the upper echelons of American society, doesn't feel too fanciful. We read of Akhtar's mother's diary, in which she implies an equivalence between the Holocaust and Partition, expressing distress that the

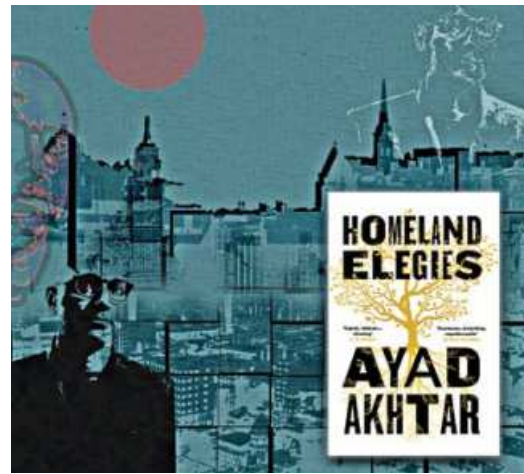


ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

latter has little to no recognition in the West—and can't help but agree.

Elegies, in its way, tells the story of every brown Muslim American, and the stressful collective identity crisis that seems like the natural price to pay for that good life. At one point, the reader realises that it doesn't matter whether the events of the novel are real, because any brown immigrant or their children will read it and recognise themselves in it. That's why it doesn't feel like autofiction, because it relays the universal Muslim

American experience. In many ways, it's a work of hyperrealism; the chaos that has come to define the land of freedom and opportunity is the same element which makes the whole of the novel just as credible as a memoir.

Yet, Akhtar, or rather his protagonist, conducts himself with grace. The reader comes away feeling they have forged a lasting connection with the author, even if it was achieved through a number of disturbing realisations and discomfiting truths—for example, he addresses concerns that arose in the wake of *Disgraced* that he is a Muslim apologist for 9/11 (his Muslim American protagonist in that play admits to feeling a "blush of pride" in the wake of 9/11) by saying that, "while those asking couldn't identify with having feelings like this, they certainly could identify with not wanting to admit them if they did." He establishes the necessity of maintaining a willing suspension of disbelief by putting the onus of misinterpretation on the conflicted (or, more controversially, selfhating) Muslim who reads his work and feels simultaneously appalled and embodied by it. Most notably, when, after an encounter with an Islamophobic man on September 11, Akhtar's *Elegies* protagonist decides to start wearing a crucifix around his neck in an effort to pass as Christian, the reader feels that's all that needed to be said on the matter.

Through it all, I felt that Akhtar's craft, undeniably brilliant, is not some jealously guarded artist's secret, but a means of redemption and recovery painstakingly obtained. He relays with unabashed passion his love of, and dependence on, art. At one point, he speaks of his "adoration" of Walt Whitman, the quintessential American poet, but mourns the impassable distance between them: "My tongue, too, is homegrown—every atom of this blood formed of this soil, this air. But these multitudes will not be my own", he writes. "And these will be no songs of celebration."

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ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

THE BOOK REPORT

Mohiuddin Ahmed and the industry he pioneered

STAR BOOKS DESK

The loss dealt to Bangladesh and its publishing industry this week will be unparalleled—at 12:59 am on Tuesday, June 22, Mohiuddin Ahmed, Emeritus Publisher and founder of University Press Limited (UPL), passed away after surviving Parkinson's disease for 20 years.

Ahmed spent the early years of his career in journalism, first studying at the University of Punjab and then teaching Mass Communications and Public Relations there, while also reporting temporarily for *Pakistan Times*. But the need to curate and communicate information—that most fundamental of instincts in an editor—is what seemed to drive him. And so the student who had once edited the *Blue and Gold* at Notre Dame College, and later the *Punjab University Chronicle*, turned down a PhD scholarship at Stanford in 1969 to become the Oxford University Press Editor for Pakistan. He served there until 1972. And when OUP Dhaka closed down in 1975, after Ahmed's return to Bangladesh, he founded UPL, an organisation that would go on to pioneer publishing standards in Bangladesh, publish invaluable works of research and journalism, and put the country on the global map of the book industry.

In a country that struggles to uphold standards of editing, printing, and content, and where the retelling of history can be a rather fraught endeavour, Mohiuddin Ahmed's contributions are critical. Shortly after the "fall of Ershad", with Professor Rehman Sobhan at the helm of the project, UPL released its four volume *Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990's* (1991). Twenty nine task forces comprising experts of health, agriculture, transport, disaster management, and other sectors put forth their recommendations for future governments. Mohiuddin Ahmed and Professor Sobhan handed the report over to the Prime Minister and other government leaders of the time.

Not long after, in the early 1990s, UPL would launch its *Road to Bangladesh* series, comprising books like Akhtaruzzaman Elias' *Chilekothar Shepai*, Rounaq Jahan's *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration*, Lt Gen JFR Jacob's *Surrender at Dacca*, the Birangona narratives collected in *Rising from the Ashes* by Shaheen Akhtar et al, and significant others—each instalment an effort to represent the Liberation War from as many viewpoints and interpretations as possible. *Pakistanider Drishtite Ekattor*, for instance, collected 28 interviews of Pakistani military officers conducted by Ahmed himself, along with Muntassir Mamoon and Afsan Chowdhury. And then in 2010 came one of UPL's biggest projects: publishing Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's *Unfinished Memoirs* (Oshomapto Attojiboni) (2012)—the manuscript for which passed from historian Professor Enayetur Rahim to Mohiuddin Ahmed, with Penguin India and OUP Pakistan joining in to edit the English and Urdu editions, respectively.

As the disastrous results of this year's Ekushey Boi Mela have reminded us, the state of the publishing industry in Bangladesh requires urgent rescue. Editing services are all but absent, as are enough readers to help publishers stay afloat and ensure quality control across their products. Mahrukh Mohiuddin, Managing Director of UPL and eldest daughter of Mohiuddin Ahmed, has highlighted, in interviews given to Daily Star Books, the poor response that UPL itself receives from global audiences when its books are sent abroad. Quality of research and translation, high transport costs, and logistical inconveniences act as severe obstacles to the best of their efforts.

Despite all of these issues, UPL has introduced and maintained a legacy for books of stellar quality, both physical and intellectual, while stringently following and promoting copyright security—a rare accomplishment in Bangladesh. For this archive of history, art, environmental science, and socio-economic research that UPL has created, this country owes its wealth of knowledge to Mohiuddin Ahmed. May his soul rest in peace.

REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

Colm Tóibín takes Henry James for a ride

SARAH ANJUM BARI

In a detour from all the genres and topics that we review on this page, this monthly column on short stories is a little treat to ourselves—a short and delicious reminder of what the simple act of storytelling can accomplish. There once lived a person, there once lived a place, and the smallest anecdote of their interaction can inspire wonder, grief, and happiness in the people listening to the tale; it can help them find sleep and enter a land of dreams.

Through his 20 published novels and 112 short stories, and all through his worldly travels across London, Paris, Geneva, and more, it was this simple impulse for telling stories that shaped the life of Henry James, one of the most revered litterateurs of the 19th century. In his notebooks he jotted down "germs" that were meant to be nurtured into stories, and these ideas were inspired by things that he witnessed, experienced, or imagined, things he was told. James once wrote in his notebook, "The short story should be a gem of bright, quick, vivid form".

True to this advice, Colm Tóibín's short story "Silence" is inspired by one of James's unfinished ideas—on January 23, 1894, James wrote in his diary about a "plot" suggested to him by one Lady G: the anecdote of a husband who sends his bride back home upon discovering a letter from her former lover. In his rendition of this prompt, Tóibín takes us inside the mind of the widowed Lady Gregory. She lives in James's own time, in a society in which "it did not matter who she was as long as she arrived on time and [...] did not talk too loudly". To reveal the device she employs to feel heard would give away the most

delightful twist in Tóibín's story, but what the Irish writer accomplishes, with one clever leap of plot point, is the forging of a bridge between a silenced woman of the 19th century and the innumerable pairs of eyes and ears from then to now.

But like all good stories, "Silence" works with more than its central concerns—it offers discerning commentary on marriage, on the various iterations of silence in gendered circumstances, and on the basic human need for communication.

And like all good Henry James stories, all of the above is filtered through the muddying lens of memories and their ability to render people into ghosts. "No one seemed to mind that she haunted the spaces they inhabited", the narrator reflects on the living, breathing Lady Gregory, "because no one noticed her". But whereas the men in her life have the privilege of using their voices—employing by turns volume, rage, nonchalance, and the written word—Lady Gregory tempers her silences to communicate, listening intelligently and silently orchestrating the conversations around her like a skilled marionette. "Thus she forced herself to pay attention to [...] every word Lady Anne said, [...] hoping that soon Lady Anne would be calmed and [...] would not notice when Lady Gregory turned to the poet and ate him up with her eyes". It is Tóibín's use of language that adds subtlety to this narrator's nostalgia and mischief—his writing is smooth, slow, sultry with an occasional bite.

Tóibín, currently a professor at Columbia

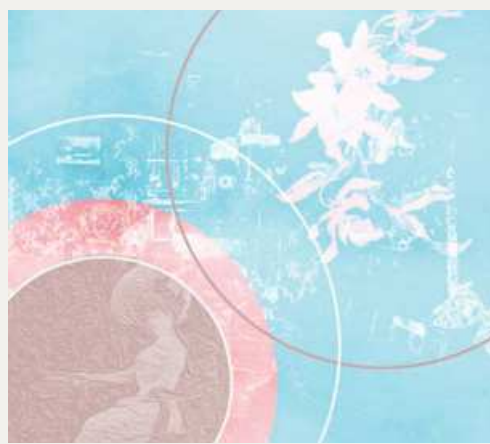


ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

University and the chancellor of Liverpool University, famously based his novel *The Master* (2004) on the life of Henry James. With "Silence", he joins the likes of Amit Chaudhari, Paul Theroux, Rose Tremain, and six others in Philip Homes's *Tales from a Master's Notebook* (Vintage, 2018), as they riff off of James's unpublished diary ideas. All of their contributions take impressive imaginative liberties with Henry James's literary legacy, but Tóibín's is the only one in the collection set in James' own time, and the one that made me want to cry and cheer aloud.

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READ ONLINE: INTERVIEW

Unpacking Bangladesh's obsession with Bollywood

MRRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN

Mrittika Anan Rahman, sub editor of *SHOUT* and a contributor to Daily Star Books, speaks with Dr Harisur Rahman, Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and Sociology at North South University. They discuss his book, *Consuming Cultural Hegemony: Bollywood in Bangladesh* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), which maps historical, social, and cultural elements of the Bangladeshi love for Bollywood.

MRRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN (MAR): What does it say about Bollywood that it became mediators of so many of India and Bangladesh's neighbouring cultures through its adaptation of stories such as *Mughal-E-Azam*, *Umrao Jaan*, or *Laila Majnu*?

HR: With the advent of sound film in the 1930s, regional film industries started producing films in their respective regional languages. As I mention in my book, Hindi

films have a larger audience than Bangla or Tamil films because of Hindi's larger linguistic area. They adapted "Islamicate" cultures such as the *Arabian Nights*, medieval Persian-Arabic folk forms, and the lifestyles of Mughals and Nawabs to appeal to their Muslim viewers.

In addition, with the advent of neo-liberalisation in the Indian subcontinent in the 1990s, privatisation created the

middle class across South Asia, including in Bangladesh. The hegemony of Bollywood films captured the imagination of this middle class, who responded by subscribing to those films and the cultures they mediated.

MAR: Bollywood has often portrayed Bangladesh in negative terms—such as in the 2014 film *Gunday*. Why has this never curbed our appetite for their content?

HR: A hegemonised audience or consumer tends to think that by subscribing to or consuming "superior" products, they can enhance their own status in society. Cultural hegemony works in a complex way in different layers. At the local level, for instance, there is the tendency among urban middle-class Bangladeshi youths of knowing the names of US cities; but do they feel any urge to know the whereabouts of

the minority ethnic communities such as Chakma or Tipra in Bangladesh? Instead, the ethnic communities feel the need to learn the majority-spoken Bangla language to get better jobs.

Read this interview online on Tuesday, June 29, at www.thedailystar.net/book-reviews and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages.