

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

A perennial philosophy:
Amitav Ghosh's 'Jungle Nama'

KAISER HAQ

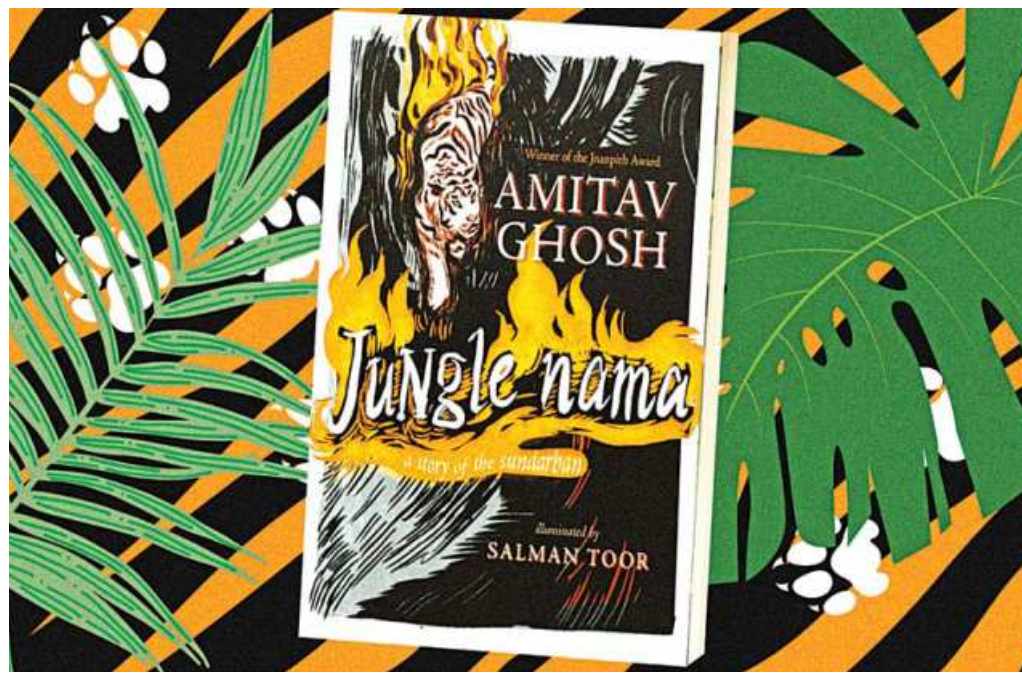
Amitav Ghosh's passionate engagement with the Sundarbans has brought out his best as a socially conscious fashioner of narrative in *The Hungry Tide* (HarperCollins, 2004) and *Gun Island* (John Murray, 2019); enriched his intervention in the discourse on ecology, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Penguin, 2016); and perhaps most felicitously, has brought to light the poet hiding behind his voluminous prose.

Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* (HarperCollins India, 2021) is a verse retelling of the core story of the central cultic folk narrative of the Sundarbans, the *Bon Bibi Johuranama*, available in two late 19th century versions, one by Munshi Muhammad Khatir, the other by Abdur Rahim Sahib. It is intertextually related to the 17th century *Raymangal* of Krishnaram. *Raymangal* introduces the tiger god Dokkhin Rai (King of the South), who is defeated by and makes peace with Gazi Khan and Gazi Kalu, agreeing to share human homage with them. This syncretism is incorporated into the Bon Bibi cult, a unique example amidst clashing fundamentalisms of interfaith solidarity in a shared, inhospitable environment.

Ghosh picks up the narrative at the point where Bon Bibi and her twin brother Shah Jongoli arrive in the forest and are challenged by Dokkhin Rai. They easily subdue their rival, set strict limits to his forest constituency, and assume guardianship of those who have to venture into it for their livelihood. Hence the practice among woodcutters, honey collectors, and fisherfolk of seeking Bon Bibi's blessings before entering the forest.

The stage is now set for a moving drama. Dhona, etymologically "the Rich One", is greedy for more wealth, unlike his brother Mona ("mon", significantly, means heart), who refuses to accompany him with a fleet of seven ships to ransack forest resources. The crew is one short, and Dhona cajoles a poor relation, Dukhey (literally "the Sad-Lad"), a widow's only child, to sign up. Having entered Dokkhin Rai's realm without going through propitiatory rites, they are utterly in his power, subject to fantasmagoric experiences, until Dhona strikes a deal with the tiger god: for shiploads of valuable wax he must leave Dukhey behind to be devoured.

Just in time Dukhey recalls his mother's advice to appeal to Bon Bibi in the verse form of the *Johur Nama*, for meter and rhyme lend magical power to words. Once more Dokkhin Rai is humbled by Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli, and is forced to yield enormous riches to his intended victim. Dukhey returns home to find his mother prostrated by grief. Calling her in the magical verse form revives her, and the joy of reunited mother and son is followed by his



happy wedding.

In an Afterword, Ghosh underscores the significance of the tale in the age of climate change. Bon Bibi propagates a perennial philosophy that humankind would do well to heed:

"All you need do, is be content with what you've got;

to be always craving more, is a demon's lot.

A world of endless appetite is a world possessed,

is what your munshi's learned, by way of this quest"

In a fine conceit, the discipline of verse comes to represent the sense of proportion that conduces to contentment; as Bon Bibi lectures Dokkhin Rai:

"Count your syllables, it'll help rein your appetites in,

the yoke of meter will give you discipline.

It's the chaos in your mind that unbridles your desires,

by measuring your thoughts you'll learn to quench those fires."

The most remarkable achievement of Ghosh's narrative is the verse he has fashioned as the equivalent of the quantitative meter of the original, the "poyar", defined as rhyming couplets with 14 units in each line, and a marked caesura after the eighth unit. These units ("matra") aren't simply syllables, for an "open" syllable like "Rai" will count as one unit; a "closed" syllable like "Bon" as two.

Ghosh has couplets of 12-syllable lines that do not conform to any of the accentual meters of English verse. In fact, read with "normal" English intonation, they sound like rhymed prose—quite dull—but belted out like rap, they work beautifully.

This prosodic innovation is characteristic of the "New Englishes", whose speakers outnumber native speakers five to one. David Crystal in his Youtube video "The Future of Englishes", explains that English has traditionally used "stress-timed rhythm", as in iambic verse, while the "New Englishes" follow "syllable-timed rhythm", as in rap. These syllabic rhythms are akin to the Bangla poyar. I recall the great Bengali folk singer Shah Abdul Karim declaring in an interview that rap or hip hop was nothing new, and was akin to our folk poetry, which he recited by way of illustration.

A discussion of this attractively produced book will be incomplete without an admiring mention of the artist Salman Toor, whose expressionistic black-and-white pictures have truly illuminated the text.

Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* (HarperCollins, 2020) is available for purchase at Omni Books, Dhanmondi, Dhaka. An extended version of this article will be available online.

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Illustration: Kazi Akib Bin Asad

BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC NOVEL

Revisiting the lost
Jewish communities
of Baghdad

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Iraq once boasted one of the world's oldest Jewish communities, encompassing 2,600 years of rich cultural history punctuated with moments of benign tolerance, blatant discrimination, and outright intolerance and persecution. As the cradle of civilisation and a melting pot of different ethnicities and religions, one-third of Baghdad is said to have been Jewish, numbering 150,000 Jews, as recently as the 1950s. Yet there are four Jews remaining in modern day Iraq today. The Iraqi-Jewish diaspora, meanwhile, has gifted us luminaries such as the world renowned advertising executives, the Saatchi brothers; one of Singapore's founding fathers, David Marshall; as well as JFR Jacob, the Indian war hero of Bangladesh's Liberation War who authored *Surrender at Dacca: Birth of a Nation* (UIPL, 1997), descended from Baghdadi-Jewish stock.

testimonials attest to the changing of times from good to bad to worst. The imagery reaches across time periods, but the peculiar and perhaps most engaging aspect of the narrative is that it has no dialogue. This silence seems to signal the widening gulf in the Iraqi-Jewish diaspora of the time, between their memories of belonging and the crude reality of an Iraq that never was.

These memories reveal what happened to the community in the midst of the Judeocide raging in WWII Europe. European anti-semitism seeped into the Arab world, creating pogroms, lynchings, and wide-spread destruction of Jewish life, spelling its end. All departments were purged of Jewish officials, anything resembling Judaism was buried underground, and Iraqi music, a great legacy

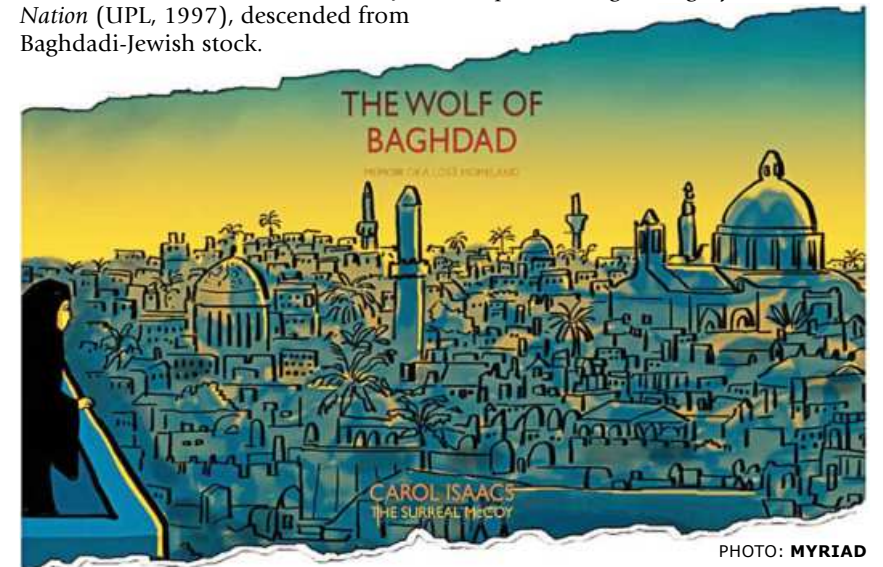


PHOTO: MYRIAD

Carol Isaacs's masterful graphic novel, *The Wolf of Baghdad: Memoir of a Lost Homeland* (Myriad, 2020), takes us back to a time in the 20th century when Jews were an intrinsic part of Iraqi society. Its title is based on an Iraqi-Jewish tale that believes in the power of wolves to protect from demons. In fact, as was tradition, the cribs of children had amulets made of wolf teeth fixed to them to sway away dark spirits.

Isaacs taps into the memories of her family and friends who passed on their memories to her. The novel showcases the changes in 20th century Iraq, and with those changes, the Jewish community evolved from tradition to modernity, all the while placing strong emphasis on being both Jewish and Iraqi—two identities which have sadly been appropriated for chauvinistic nationalism. Isaacs recovers this history under the guise of a black abaya, as was worn by her ancestors, walking in the narrow alleyways of Old Baghdad while evoking a strong sense of nostalgia and deep-rootedness with the land. The market places, mosques, synagogues, and buildings are all shown in thought provoking detail in the novel.

The pages are permeated by miniature portraits of the Isaacs and other Jewish families whose

that Carol Isaacs is the personification of, was systematically purged of its Jewish composers. Contrary to popular belief, it was the venom of European anti-semitism tinged with narrow-minded Arab nationalism that ended the vibrancy of Jewish life there.

A British author of Jewish Iraqi descent, Isaacs works as a cartoonist for *The New Yorker* under the name of The Surreal McCoy, and is an accomplished musician in her own right. She has never been to Iraq and like many refugees, the memories of her homeland linger in the music and stories passed down to her by the generation of yesteryears, the generation which saw the flourishing and destruction of one of the most conspicuously prosperous communities in the Middle East.

As history has always shown, hatred with one minority does not end with one; it amplifies and explodes. As Iraqi Christians and Yazidis flee and the Iraqi Sunni-Shia proxy war continues, the story of the Jews in Iraq remains a vital and important story of remembrance, of the reconciliation of memory and belonging.

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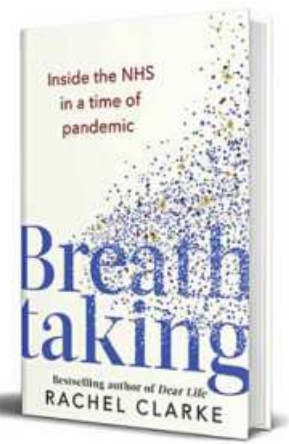
READ ONLINE: NONFICTION REVIEW

The quiet sacrifices of
the NHS

MD TANJIM HOSSAIN

Rachel Clarke reminds us of the intensity of the ongoing tragedy in her autobiographical *Breathtaking* (Little, Brown, 2021), told from the extraordinary perspective of a palliative care doctor. Amidst moments that push the world to the verge of collapse, Clarke holds the responsibility to look after wards of the most perilous patients in Oxfordshire. The book gives an impassioned description of the views from inside the National Health Service (NHS), many of them enough to freeze you in your tracks.

Read this article on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn.



MUSINGS

Friends who recommend books are special

SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

There is no better way to show someone that they are on your mind than to recommend a book you think they would love.

Friends who recommend books without being asked are special. Imagine this: they opened a book and strode right in, leaving their desk, their home, their city, their entire reality behind. They may have slipped on a ring and embarked on a precarious journey for Mordor alone; or hopped down Hogmeade with new wizard friends to try the new Sticky Toffee Pudding; or walked down bustling streets of the coastal cities of Novyi Zem, wondering how peaceful it is compared to Ketterdam. They trekked through the lush forests of Bandarban and climbed its tallest peaks with Topon and his cousins in search of T-Rex. They doubled over with uncontrollable laughter when Himu shaved his eyebrows and inadvertently aided a young parent to discipline her child. They stood still on Daruchini Dip with aching hearts while Shubhro's vision slowly blurred into grey.

They trembled with anticipation, seethed with rage, shared the laughter and tears of the characters, fell in love with the landscape, mourned endings that did not deliver happiness, and rejoiced those that did. They finished reading their book, cover to cover, came out of the pages, and as they slowly reentered consciousness, they thought of you. Your phone beeped with a notification from your friend. It read, "I've JUST finished reading this amazing book and I think you will love it too!"

Typically, when readers finish a really good book, it takes a while for them to recover. They look up and realise that while they were lost within the pages, everyone else carried on with their lives. The reader sits there, pensive: sad and grateful, unable to tell whether they have gained or lost a piece of themselves. They have travelled with the author and the characters and lived each of their lives. They take a



PHOTO: SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

deep breath, heart heavy yet full, their mind a whirlwind of everything real and unreal, their catharsis slow and elusive.

All these feelings experienced by a reader are private because reading a good book can be a very intimate experience; finishing it can lead to an intense, albeit brief, metamorphosis. And during these fleeting moments of confused awareness, readers look for someone to complete them and they reach out to those they know can empathise. This is when they look for you: someone to fill the sudden void in their hearts, someone to understand and feel as they have understood and felt. Someone with whom they can share the ecstasy and the sorrow, explore the world within the book, meet the people in it and know their stories too.

People who recommend books without being asked give away pieces of themselves

without even realising it. When someone wishes for you to read a book that they loved, they are baring to you a part of their soul that transcends all temporal places, because it is within those strange paper-worlds where they are their deepest, truest selves. So the next time a book-loving friend gushes to you about a book that they love, and urges you to read it too, pay attention, because they are showing you what makes them feel, what makes them laugh, things that tear them apart, and the things that make them who they are. These are secrets given only to the best of friends.

Sameirah Nasrin Ahsan is a mechanical engineer and aspiring author based in Dhaka. For now, she is content with reading and sharing the stories that make her think beyond herself. Instagram: @booksnher.