

## BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

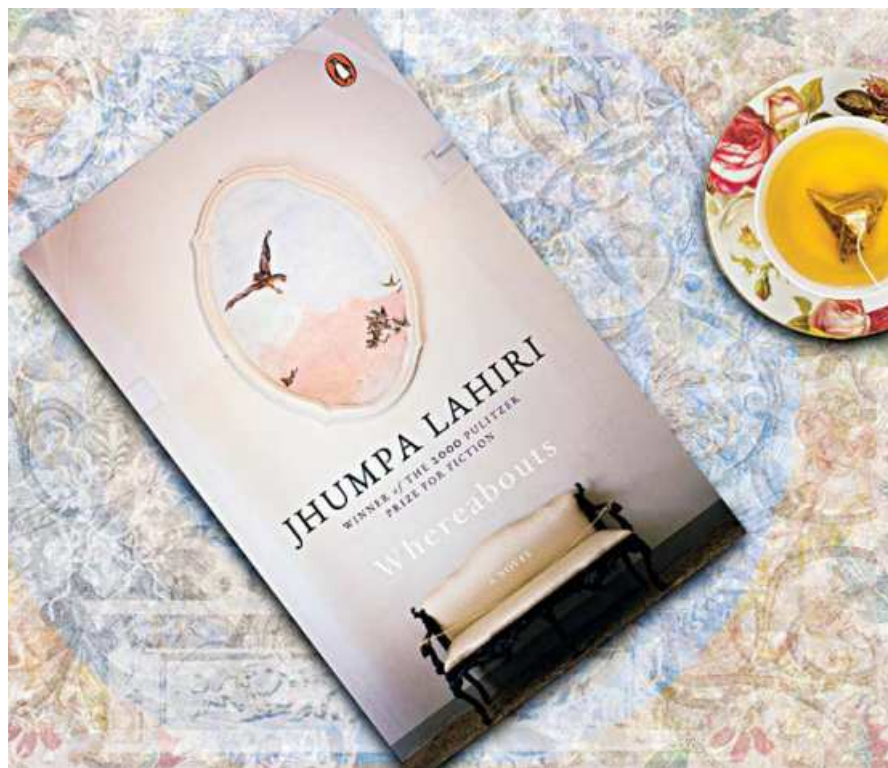
## The universality of solitude and good books

ISHRAT JAHAN

*Whereabouts* (Penguin India, 2021) is Jhumpa Lahiri's third novel, published originally as *Dove mi trovo* (2018) in Italian and translated to English by the author herself, as she did with her work of nonfiction, *In Other Words* (2015). The book is an indication of Lahiri's skill in navigating between languages without compromising the depth of her storytelling. In nearly all her previous works, such as *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013) or the Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Lahiri took the reader into the cracks and fault lines of immigrant experiences brought to life with vivid settings and compelling characters; she left us there to absorb the conflicts and sense of loss, even if one has never been in an unhappy marriage, or been an immigrant. The heartache she wrote about was universal.

In *Whereabouts*, this universality is reflected in Lahiri's handling of space—fluid and ever-changing, a palimpsest of experiences, and instrumental to the story. While we are made privy to the day-to-day experiences of an unnamed narrator “At the Supermarket”, “In the Country”, “In My Head”, and “At His Place”, among other spaces, we notice that the character seems consistently at an emotional distance from her surroundings. This is reiterated with the recurring chapter heading of “In My Head”, a space where the narrator most often dwells. It is at this site where the world of her mind and body play out, rather than unfolding in her physical reality.

In the instances where the narrator does interact with others—a friend's



DESIGN: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

young daughter, a woman sleeping beside her on the beach—there seems to be a visible contrast in how they are often more secure in the spaces they inhabit than the narrator herself. At times, the text seems like a dialogue between all these women in different stages of life.

Lahiri's prose here upends her generally agreed-upon style of “showing rather than telling”. Without any names or labels, and suspended in a murky bubble of space-time, we

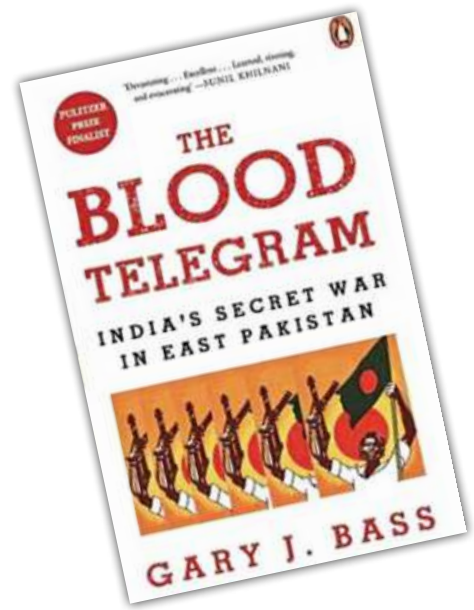
find bits and pieces of a character emerging page by page in this novel. The narrator eventually becomes a middle aged, unmarried university professor, living in an unnamed Italian city. Nearing the end, one is familiar with her innermost characteristics and histories. She is quick to judge people, sometimes harsh about the choices that people around her have made, yet she is compassionate in surprising moments. She lives with unresolved grief for her childhood. As you follow

her through the liminal spaces she inhabits, she turns from the person you met on a busy street, to a friend you accompanied to watch the sun rise.

In the larger context of representation as performed in books, this body of work adds to the discourse about the reduction of South Asian or minority voices into a singular aesthetic that allows only some voices to fit into what is deemed as respectable or desirable styles of telling diaspora stories. Jhumpa Lahiri's work in particular has raised debates around whether the publishing ecosystem ends up obscuring diversity in writing when they champion particular styles of authors deemed as trendsetters, such as Lahiri herself. But it's easier to grasp this discourse not as a debate but as a (fair) demand by writers that the world, especially the mechanical, consumer-driven ecosystems of publishing and writing, be more open to different aesthetics and be conscious of how it judges the respectability or desirability of books based on a very narrow status quo of “what good books should look like”.

It felt like the author herself, in writing this book (in Italian primarily), was navigating an exit out of the label of being the voice for a genre or an introduction to an entire community's lived experience, which is a burden that no one author should bear.

Ishrat Jahan is an early stage researcher who writes in her free time. You can follow her on Twitter @jahan1620.



## READ ONLINE: THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS

## The legacy of blood

Half a century from where we began, Daily Star Books will spend all of this year—the 50th year of Bangladesh—revisiting, celebrating, and analysing some of the books that played pivotal roles in documenting the Liberation War of 1971 and the birth of this nation.

MONEESHA R KALAMDER

Henry Kissinger is infamous in Bangladesh for allegedly terming the newly-independent country a “bottomless basket”, but this statement appears to be the least of his crimes against the people of Bangladesh. An account of the hidden role of the then-US president Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, in abetting and strengthening the genocide led by Yahya Khan in 1971 comes to light in *The Blood Telegram* (2013). Author Gary J Bass, former reporter for *The Economist* and a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University, utilises two primary sources for the contents of his book—tapes of Nixon's conversations during his term as president, and interviews with witnesses. Bass' painstaking and well-rounded research creates a thrilling read entrenched in a heavy cloud of apathy, cruelty, and tragedy.

Read this review on Saturday, August 28 on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages.

## BOOK REVIEW: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

## Around the world with Tilmund and the travel bug

SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

Samai Haider's *Tilmund's Travel Tales* (Guba Books, 2020) is a story about a little boy named Tilmund who has a great wish to follow in his grandfather's footsteps and travel the world. Unfortunately, Tilmund finds that he is lacking in courage when it comes to venturing outside of his comfort zone. That is, until he gets bitten by a backpack-wearing, map-carrying travel bug! With a little help from this unlikely new friend, Tilmund dares to pursue his dream. He grabs his passport, packs his bags, and sets off for new and exciting places. He visits the Sahara atop a camel, stares in wonder at the Colosseum in Rome, races kangaroos in the flat lands of Australia, sails in the bubbling rivers of Bangladesh, and plays football in the golden beaches of Rio. The travels leave Tilmund a little braver, more confident, and a lot happier, with a nascent taste for adventure and a new understanding of the world.

Samai Haider, who is a passionate traveler and travel writer herself, reinforces the benefits of travel for young children (and adults!). A mother of two, Samai loves to be on the move with her family and believes in human connections that transcend barriers of language, race, and geography. As a fellow parent, I couldn't agree more. Children are keen observers and are quick to pick up human biases that are prevalent around them. For these impressionable little minds, travel can be a juggernaut for positive change and deep understanding of how the world works—a means for them to curb prejudice and make their own judgments free of bias.

The first and the last page of the book open to identical world maps, the latter charting Tilmund's wonderful journey around the globe. These maps show famous landmarks, both manmade and natural, which present a fun geography lesson for readers. It is a great way to teach children about the distribution of land and water around the globe and give them a general idea about the locations of other countries relative to our own. What is special about this book is that one can open it to any random page and be transported to a new, exciting destination with stunning imagery showcasing landmarks and scenery that are native to that region—a feature that makes *Tilmund's Travel Tales* a perfect companion for children who have short



ILLUSTRATION: REESHAM SHAHAB TIRTHO

attention spans. The images and the tone of the accompanying text are upbeat and fun. Artist Reesham Shahab Tirtho's illustrations do a brilliant job of enshrining Tilmund's (and Samai's!) love for travel in every image.

Personally, what got me excited about this book is the colour of Tilmund's complexion. He has a warm, bronzed skin tone similar to people of our subcontinent, a colour that was hardly featured in children's books during my childhood. My first reaction was delight followed by appreciation—delight for my son who will get to experience a story told by someone who looks like him, and appreciation for the author for adding this small detail that will undoubtedly have a huge impact on brown representation in children's books.

*Tilmund's Travel Tales* is a sincere translation of Samai Haider's passion for travel and adventure. I would highly recommend this book to parents of young children for its overarching themes of personal growth, overcoming one's fears, and of embracing chance. For our children, the future is filled with boundless possibilities; I personally believe that adaptability, open-mindedness, and self-guided improvement are key for fulfillment and success in life. Tilmund strives to achieve all three in his journey and shows us that all it takes is a little bit of faith in yourself.

Sameirah Nasrin Ahsan is a mechanical engineer and aspiring author. Instagram: @booksnher.

## BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

## Taran Khan maps Kabul through memory

SHEHRIN HOSSAIN

In 2006, five years after the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Indian journalist and reporter Taran Khan arrives at the nation's capital, Kabul. She is starting at a new job where she is tasked with teaching video editing to Afghans. Spurred by a naive optimism and by the echoes of Pashtun lineage in her ancestry, Khan imagines she is “returning” to a lost homeland. Over the course of the next eight years, Khan departs from and returns to Kabul again and again, discovering the city anew each time. In *Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul* (Penguin India, 2019), Khan delineates a personal map of Kabul, taking the reader through the “shadow city” that can be found in its still-standing monuments, libraries, pleasure gardens, graveyards, shopping malls, and theatres.

In her foreword, Khan tells us that the first instructions she receives after landing in Kabul is “never to walk.” As a foreigner, and a woman, the city is inaccessible to her. But of course, Khan ignores this dictate, and promptly begins her exploration of Kabul on foot. She likens her gradual discovery of the city to norms of mystical Persian poetry. *Zahir*, she tells us, is the overt meaning of a verse, while *batin* is its implied, “shadow” meaning. The real Kabul—removed from its long history of war and devastation—lies in its shadows. And as she walks, Khan shows us how native Kabulis, expatriates, and soldiers have come to inhabit a place that is both there, and not there, and one that keeps transforming, but continues to wear its rich history defiantly, if you only know where to look.

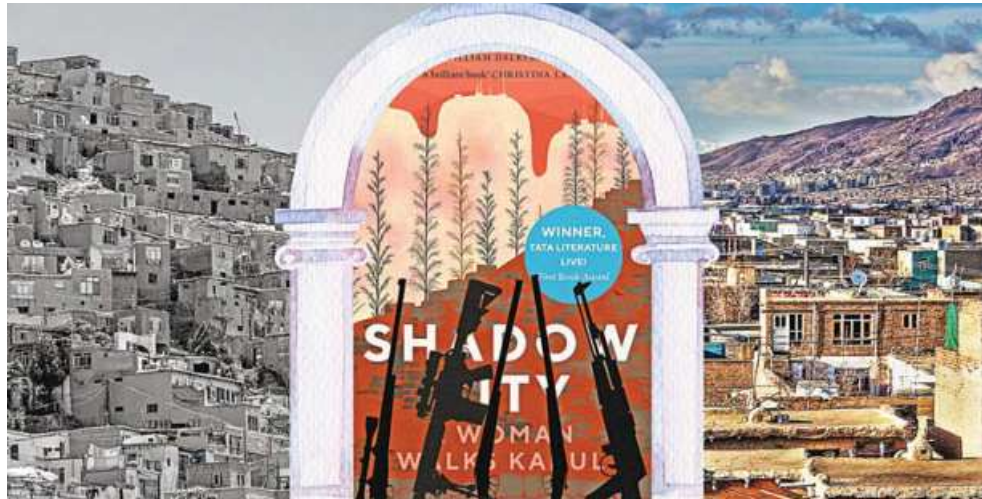
On each successive return to the city, Khan always finds it changed beyond recognition. Bombings and evacuations are constantly altering the metropolitan topography, producing a city spatially defined more by blast walls and security enclosures than the mountains that surround it or the old monuments that lay in ruin on its peaks. By night Khan joins her expatriate friends in parties at upscale homes, and by day she finds herself picking her way carefully through paths laden with active landmines. Khan acknowledges that there is something confusing about Kabul to outsiders, to whom inhabiting such a place must seem inconceivable. And yet all of the Kabulis she befriends, particularly those who returned

to the city after living as refugees in Pakistan and India, want to continue living here. Kabul's past is always permeating the present of its dwellers, yet their desire to remain there despite the country's torrential misfortunes undercuts all pessimism.

Part travelogue, part memoir, and part reportage, *Shadow City* is at once a work of quiet lyricism and unfettered honesty. In many places, it reads like a guided, handheld tour of the city: a seasoned researcher, Khan deftly interweaves the city's history into her descriptions of the city, allowing the reader to walk with her through a city couched in the contradictions of modernity against antiquity. She does not balk at outlining Kabul's pain as well as its poetry, both of which take on a kaleidoscopic nature. She dedicates entire chapters to the city's artistic legacy, while in another she fleshes out the city's

motivations to do so. Khan's personal narrative in Kabul, which centers heavily on her relationship with her late grandfather, does not overshadow her depiction of the real stories and lived experiences of Kabulis, but rather exalts them in the author's personal inventory of the *batin* city.

Most of all, *Shadow City* reveals something about hope, a seemingly impossible aspect of living in Kabul. In the first chapter, entitled “Returns,” Khan remembers reading of Kabul being described as an “amnesiac city”. “In this ‘amnesiac city’,” she writes, “I found that walking offered a way to exhume history... as well as an excavation of the present.” Recalling these lines, as I sift through one analysis after another on what the return of the Taliban means for the country that



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

heartbreaking opium epidemic.

In one sequence that stood out to me, Khan shares her experience of domesticity in Kabul that is life-affirming in a way only living in a war zone can be. She writes, “At the house, we celebrated birthdays with barbecues, plotted escape routes with the neighbours in case of an ambush, and remembered not to sit down too abruptly on the couch that had the box of grenades under it.” In this way, Khan's prose has a unique precision that, coupled with her unpretentious wit and sometimes wry humour, allows her to tell the story of the shadow city while staying true to her

houses this wondrous city, and especially for its women who might no longer possess the agency to walk its streets, I realise a bittersweet truth: the beauty of Kabul is eternally and irrevocably intertwined with its tragedy. Is amnesia not, after all, necessary? Would the Kabulis' rage, and their grief, permit them to continue if they could remember them? Would they want to return, again and again, to a city that is increasingly there and not there? Is love not founded on forgetting?

Shehrin Hossain is a graduate of English literature. She can be reached at shehrin@gmail.com.