

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

Fragments of an uprooted people

SHOUNAK REZA

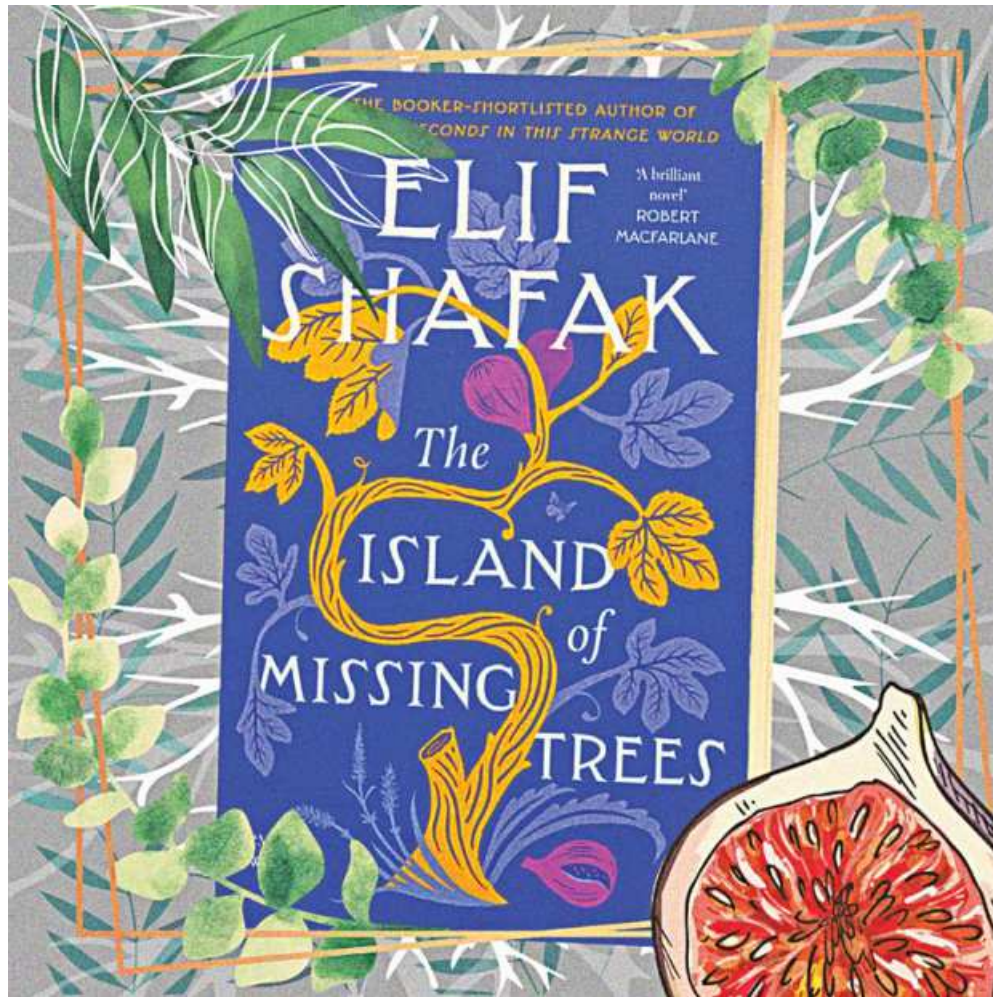
The people we meet in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (Viking, 2021) are haunted by terrible tragedies from several years past, by a beautiful island divided into two. To them, their story is broken, spread out over multiple places and decades. Shafak takes us on this journey and, through deft plot devices, helps us piece them together.

The first (human) character we meet is Ada Kazantzakis, a teenager living with her recently widowed father in London. Ada knows little about her parents' past lives, about the island they came from, and the pain they brought with them. When Aunt Meryem, her mother's sister, steps into their lives, Ada, though initially resentful of her aunt's not being in touch, starts asking questions about a past rarely talked about in the family.

Ada's father, Kostas, comes from a Greek Cypriot background, and her mother, Defne, was from a Turkish Cypriot family. When they were growing up in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, it was still an undivided city, even though tensions between the Greek and Turkish communities were rapidly on the rise. As a result, theirs was in many ways a Romeo-and-Julietesque love—a forbidden love aided in secret by a few.

The relationship between Kostas and Defne, like their island, like the people around them, was fragmented by conflicts and time. Along with Ada, we start delving deeper into a story filled with interruptions. What happened all those years ago in Cyprus, when neighbours turned on neighbours, when the harmony that had existed on that island for centuries was disrupted, when the place of colourful myths and history was marked by death and violence, when the city her parents always held so close to their hearts was divided?

In the unfolding of this tale, a fig tree plays an important role. As we go back and forth between decades, the tree, an occasional narrator, fills in gaps, as she bore witness and heard things several human characters have not. She gathers fragments from creatures, like ants and bees, that communicate with her, connecting dots in the sprawling narrative. Her life, too, has been an existence of interruptions spread over two countries, like that of Kostas and Defne. Like them, she carries wounds and



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

nostalgia, longing for the island she originally is from.

In her interviews, Elif Shafak talks often about the dangers of ultranationalism, of tribalism, of identity politics. How these dangers fracture places and lives is one of the issues explored in *The Island of Missing Trees*. We witness small, inspiring acts of resistance throughout the novel. Defne, for example, repeatedly refuses to put labels like 'Turk' or 'Greek' on people. She refers to both the victims and perpetrators, like herself and Kostas, as children of the island who turned on, or suffered at the hands of, each other.

Time and time again we have seen, both in

reality and fiction, how generations are shaped by disasters, by wars, no matter how much older generations try to hide their traumas. Memories and secrets persist in unrecognisable forms, ever present in the background.

Years ago, Shafak explored the concepts of generational trauma and the long-lasting effects of old tragedies in her celebrated *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006). In her latest novel, she explores these concepts once again, but this time, with a poetic touch so sublime that even I, a devoted admirer of her work, was surprised. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak is at her finest.

Shounak Reza is a contributor.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

The forgotten ones of the Great War

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

As of December 31, 1919, a total of 1.4 million Indians were recruited to various theatres of the First World War. Among them, approximately 563,369 were "followers or non-combatants". Even though they did not belong to the "martial classes" (soldiers, constables), the Indian government pushed them under the military rug so that it could boast of its military contributions in the War. As such, the non-combatant classes—more commonly referred to as "Coolies" or simply "menial followers"—became a subjugated figure; although, in the grand scheme of things, the British empire's military regime during the War had been built on these subjugated figures' backs. Radhika Singha explores this startling irony in *The Coolie's Great War* (HarperCollins India, 2020), and in doing so, brings forth an essential story from the chasm of obscurity, one that is primarily about the casteism that enables military power.

In one of the earlier chapters, we see a "low-caste" sweeper's body being refused by authorities for burial in the designated burial ground. One Reverend, Mr Chambers, chose to bury him in his Churchyard in Brockenhurst. "Surely Bigha Khan has died for England. I will bury him in the Churchyard", the man said. This event sets in motion the more common reality of casteism that the non-combatant followers had to grapple with even beyond the borders of their motherland.

"Caste norms tended to hem powerless communities into the hardest and most stigmatized sectors of work regimes", Singha writes. Those belonging to low-castes were assigned tasks like sweeping, latrine-cleaning, washing, and leather-crafting.

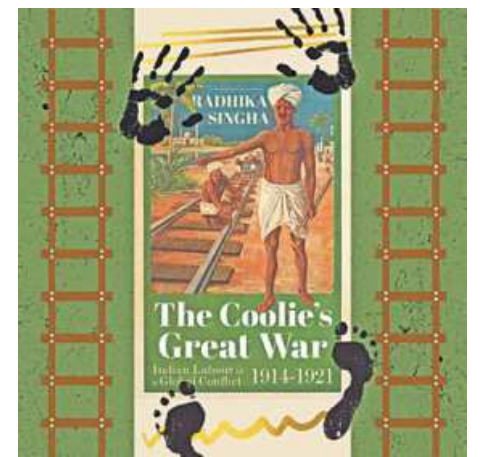
A chart chillingly portrays the heights of privilege that the Indian officers serving in the First World War enjoyed while their menial followers languished behind the scenes. For instance, by the end of the War, we see that the mortality rate of the officers against the followers in France was 176 and 2,218. In other frontier operations, it was 17 as opposed to 1,621.

Most of the labourers were recruited from the tribal areas (especially the Northeast, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa). Considered primitive and ignorant of the ways of the world, they were baited by incentives of getting a better chance at life, especially the jail recruits ("convict sweepers") who served as followers in the Indian Labor and Porter Corps in Iraq from 1916-1921. However, the reality of inequality, subjugation, and poor standards of life despite their backbreaking contributions soon disillusioned them. As such, desertion and gradual imprisonment became commonplace. Owing to starvation and exposure

to harsh weather, many of the deserters even embraced death.

For the followers, especially the tribal recruits, homecoming also became a kind of blockade towards seaming into their regular lives. "The returnee could also materialize in very undesirable avatars", she writes, "in the form of the deserter, the prisoner of war... or one of the 'maimed' beings". The tribal recruits had to bear more brunt than the others because their return was anticipated with the possibility of them joining the insurgents along the Assam-Burma border or the Afridi insurgents around the North-West frontiers.

As for the disabled returnees, a man using crutches, for instance, was more likely to receive benefits than a man who had gone blind owing to injuries during the service. The former would be a more easily marketable image of the War's aftermath.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Furthermore, while the Viceroy Commissioned Officers (VCOs) were able to bask in rewards in line with a 'gentlemanly' status, "[t]he martial classes' would return to the ranks of the substantial peasantry, and followers to the stratum of the *kamin*, low-caste village artisans and labourers."

The Coolie's Great War is a tough read; not only because of its subject matter but also because of the extensive research and details pulsating through its pages. Bloated with archival accounts and evidence, the book does a commendable service in honouring the ones whose blood, sweat, and tears slid into the unknown. This working-class dimension to a popular story of war reiterates that the subjugation of certain kinds of labour and the pervasiveness of unfair hierarchy are deeply rooted in history.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor. Radhika Singha's *The Coolie's Great War* (HarperCollins India, 2020) is available at Omni Books, Dhanmondi.

46TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

Radio, ghazals, and "Islami gaan": What Nazrul's shift to music said about his syncretism

AHONA PANDA

A turbulent political time had emerged by the mid-1920s within the Indian national movement and in Bengal. Poet, writer, and musician Kazi Nazrul Islam was pained at the time by the widening rift between Hindus and Muslims. In August of 1926, he had raised the communal question in a letter to the editor sent to the conservative *Atmashakti* journal, which had criticised Muzaffar Ahmed's group, Ganabani, for spreading Marxist ideas amongst the rural peasantry. Nazrul responded by saying that only Marxist politics and not identitarian/communal politics could bring about change to the miserable condition of the working classes. Though he lived in Krishnanagar at the time, Nazrul decided to contest an election in Dhaka for one of two Muslim seats in the Central Legislative Assembly against an influential Muslim zamindar. Nazrul lost not just the seat, but also his security deposit.

This period thus marked a turn away from the world of journalism and active legislative/electoral politics for Nazrul. He embraced a more lucrative profession—music.

Having initially joined the Gramophone Company (HMV) in 1929, Nazrul eventually started to freelance, composing and arranging music for other private companies like Hindustan Records, Megaphone, Senolo, Pioneer, and others. In this capacity, he trained and composed for singers such as SD Burman, Suprobha Ghosh, Indubala, Angurbala, Girin Chakrabarti, Abbasuddin Ahmed, and Maude Costello. The new technologies themselves led to interesting innovations in both Nazrul's poetic and compositional career and to Hindustani classical music. Kamal Dasgupta recollected two unique programs on the radio that Nazrul had organised, the papers of which are now lost. One was on the idea of the wireless itself, for which Nazrul wrote a song that punned on the word *vina*—"Tomar vina tarer giti bajuk amar vinar tare" ("May wireless song resound on the strings of my vina") and another song, "Akase aj chadiye dilam priya amar kathar phul go, amar ganer mala go kudiye niyo tumi" ("I spread the flowers of my words in the sky, gather the garlands of my songs"). Both songs, Dasgupta averred, would have no literal meaning but would only make sense if the listener figured out that the wordplay referred to a new mode of communication enabled by wireless technology.

Nazrul's move to music was also a good commercial decision. Of the many songs Nazrul had been composing in the 1930s,

the most lucrative was the Bangla "Islami gaan", a genre he would develop after his new professional relationships with the classical singer and *thumri* specialist Ustad Jamiruddin Khan and the folk singer Abbasuddin. In Abbasuddin's memoirs, the genesis of Nazrul's "islami" compositions could be found in the seed of his own idea that the *qawwali* form, so popular in Urdu, could be adapted to Bangla. Abbasuddin would offer this idea to the then-rehearsal officer-in-charge at the Gramophone Company, Bhagavati Bhattacharya, who shot down the idea



COLLAGE: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

immediately. Abbasuddin then asked "Kazida" to consider the idea, who composed the song "O Heart at the end of the fast on Ramzan comes the moon of happiness." Bhagavati-babu would come around, and they would release songs that became immensely popular.

Nazrul's past political associations would come back in the years of his commercial artistic production. In 1935, for example, he would compose the music for his friend Shailajananda Mukherjee's musical film, *Patalpuri* (City of Hell), based on the coal mines of his birth-district, the Rarh region. Here, he would introduce a further musical improvisation and use the tribal folk music

or *jhumur gaan* of the Santals. A prolific music-composer for films in the late 1930s, he would compose songs using the melodies and genres of *dhrupad*, *kheyal*, *tappa*, *thumri*, *ghazal*, *bhajan*, *baul*, *bhantiyali*, *jhumur*, and *qawwali*.

A number of critics, however, have opined that Nazrul's greatest poetic and musical gift to Bangla music was the form of the *ghazal* that he took from a different tradition and translated into a completely different part of the world, to a different language. While Atulprasad Sen was the first composer of *ghazal* in the Bangla language, for Nazrul the genre perhaps meant something personally and politically. It leads one to ask what the form of the *ghazal* would mean for an act of cultural translation in the late 1930s.

Nazrul had been attracted to this genre since 1917, during his army days in Karachi, where he had been taking Persian lessons from an unnamed Punjabi *maulvi*. This early philological interest was a lifelong literary preoccupation, and he translated extensively from the Persian ghazals of Rumi, Hafez, and Omar Khayyam. He also eventually started a translation of the genre, writing original *ghazals* in Bangla. A common trope in his *ghazal* was the idea of loss and exile, of *viccheda* (separation) that would gather urgency in the 1930s when the idea of Hindu-Muslim unity became ever more distant.

Nazrul, suffering from a motor degenerative disease, lost his voice and cognitive capacities in 1942. Though he lived through the Partition of 1947 and the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971, he would not write or sing again. With his literal silencing, a generation of Bengali Muslim and Hindu voices also passed into the realms of oblivion.

The adoption of the *ghazal* by Nazrul, in that sense, with renewed fervor in the late '20s and '30s, signaled an understanding that his earlier literary and linguistic world was an impermanent one, as was a politics in which the unity of Hindus and Muslims was achieved through an appeal to a shared culture and language. The *ghazal*, then, became a way of translating the political reality of separatism and of the rift between two communities into a lament, an elegiac language of loss and the desire for a world and a vision that was disappearing, never to return.

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123rd BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF ABUL MANSUR AHMAD



COLLAGE: MEHRUL BARI

On the occasion of the birth anniversary of author, journalist, and politician Abul Mansur Ahmad (1898-1979) on September 3, 2021, we publish an excerpt from his essay, "Our Language and Our Literature", first published in *The Concept* magazine in 1965.

However shocking and painful it may sound the hard fact and the plain truth is that in long eighteen years of political independence, thirteen years after the February Revolution and nine years after the constitutional recognition of our language, we have not advanced to any appreciable degree in laying the foundation of our national literature through which we are supposed to realize our national identity. To our

great shame we have not moved one step towards rediscovery of East Pakistan. We still remain the literary dominion, linguistic colony and cultural hinterland of Calcutta as before.

Read the full essay on Friday, September 3 on *The Daily Star* website or on *Daily Star Books'* Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages.