

TRIBUTE

# Remembering a literary personality: Farida Majid (1942-2021)

KAISER HAQ

I find two distinct types among denizens of the world of letters. There are writers single-mindedly focused on literary production in one genre or more, and others I would call, for want of a better term, literary personalities. The literary personalities may write too, but with a certain offhandedness, as if they

jamborees. There are two subtypes of the literary personality: the bohemian and the academic and/or bureaucratic. Exemplifying the bohemian sub-type perfection were Rajat Neogy, poet and founder-editor of *Transition* magazine, and Meary Tambimuttu, poet, book

got to know her. In 1993, Alastair Niven, himself an eminent academic/bureaucratic literary personality, invited me to join his jury panel for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, along with Dr Shyamala Narayan, an Indian academic. Alastair and I were chatting over coffee, when he suddenly lowered his voice and asked if I could enlighten him on something that had been puzzling him.

He had been struck by the existence of two polar opposites among South Asian women. Dr Narayan represented one end, demure, soft-spoken, quietly efficient. And the opposite? "Do you know Farida Majid?" Alastair asked. It was well over a decade since he saw her last, but time hadn't diminished the impression she had made; she was glamorous, vivacious, outspoken, unconventional.

I knew Farida by reputation before I met her in 1977, when her career as a London literary personality was at its peak. Poetry was her passion, and she spent most of her time with poets. They gathered to read out and talk poetry every Thursday evening in her Chelsea flat. She had launched *The Salamander Imprint* with a 24-page pamphlet, *Take Me Home, Rickshaw* (1974), containing her translations of leading Bangladeshi poets, from Shamsur Rahman, an intimate friend, to his younger contemporaries. The proceeds from sales went to a school in Dhaka. The cover was designed by the famous Polish-born artist Feliks Topolski, whose friendship with Farida and her poetry circle deserves

celebratory mention.

While the poets talked, Topolski sat doing portraits. *The Thursday Evening Anthology* (1977), edited by Farida, contained poems by 18 poets, with a facing portrait, and a line or two of comment at the bottom. The most memorable—"Farida's is the last salon"—came from George MacBeth (1932-92). Others in the anthology include Gavin Ewart, Fleur Adcock, Andrew Waterman, John Welch, and James Sutherland-Smith. Ted Hughes, though one of Farida's close friends, didn't come to the evenings, perhaps because he lived far from London.

Farida published a number of outstanding individual poetry collections: *The Horses of Falaise* (1975) by Victor West; in 1976, Jack Carey's *Woods and Mirrors*, and Jim Burns's *The Goldfish Speaks from Beyond the Grave*, which got a Poetry Book Society recommendation, as did Kit Wright's *The Bear Looked over the Mountain* (1977). Farida had been on the jury for the 1977 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, which went to Arun Kolatkar's "Jejuri" (1976), now regarded as a classic. But her sparkling career as impresario, writer, and literary arbiter would suddenly fall apart. The Home Office wanted to deport her for being in breach of laws pertaining to foreigners living in the UK. Eminent literary figures spoke up for her, to no avail. Being an American citizen she moved to New York, where she taught at Columbia and CUNY until her return to Bangladesh in 2005.

I met her in New York in 2000; she

spoke at length about her London years, and gave me two of the books she had published, as well as two touchingly resonant new poems that I published in *Six Seasons Review*: "Garbage Truck Blues," and "An Insomniac's Prayer". I included "Inversion of a Convert", from *The Thursday Evening Anthology*, in *Padma Meghna Jamuna: Modern Poetry from Bangladesh* (SAARC Foundation, 2009). It's a brilliant riposte to the Aruneyi Upanishad.

I called on Farida a couple of times, and would run into her at literary festivals, but most of our communication was telephonic. She published a Bangla poetry collection, and translated a number of poems by Bangladeshi poets, Sanjeeb Purohit among them. They made up an admiring circle, giving her the literary companionship she needed. She was also working on a Quranic commentary. Someone should sift through her papers and see what can be published. The last time we talked it was clear doctors had diagnosed cancer and that she was in denial. I am told that though physically shrunken, her spirit remained unshaken till the end.

Farida is in two iconic photographs on the internet, with Allen Ginsberg, and with John Ashbery. She was young, animated, exuding seductive charm. That is how I wish to remember her.

**Kaiser Haq** is a poet, translator, essayist, critic, and academic. He is currently Professor of English at the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh (ULAB).



From left: Farida Majid speaking at a literary event; a portrait of Farida Majid sketched by Feliks Topolski; Farida Majid with American poet John Ashbery.

COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

didn't want to channel all their creative energy into writing. They also want to experience 'the literary life' in all its varied aspects. They love to hang out with other writers, edit little magazines, run small presses, go to literary

publisher, and founder-editor of *Poetry London*. Farida Majid belonged in their company. In fact, her London friends dubbed her "the Female Tambimuttu." Farida's personality left a vivid and lasting impression on those who

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

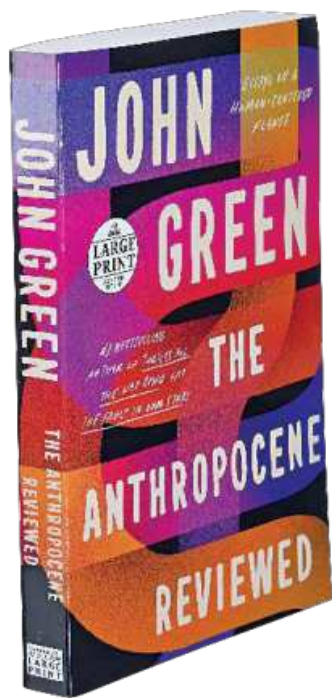
## The American man's anthropocene reviewed

FAHIMA ISLAM LIRA

If you are familiar with John Green, you might already know of the immense popularity of the *New York Times* bestselling author, widely popular for his YA fiction, and often dismissed by critics for the same reason. *The Anthropocene Reviewed* (Penguin, 2021) is John Green's hiatus—away from the world of adolescent drama, it is a Bildungsroman that draws heavily on world affairs.

Green talks about a number of seemingly random topics connected to our epoch and he does so to pull a thread to or out of them. He narrates in the third person limited, and his tone of humble detachment in the backdrop of his characteristic optimism plays out well with the historical trivia that carries the anecdotes through. At the end of every chapter, he rates the topic (out of 5) based on its effect upon his perception of life. In one chapter about the Notes app on his iPhone, for instance, he shares real notes that he took in the past years and explains why he gave the app 3.5 stars. Green gives his first 5 stars to sunsets, which give him strength to be vulnerable.

It is refreshing to read Green's perspective—he has a rich inner world that can only pull you in. Here and there are lines that evoke that greatly elusive feeling of hope. In a chapter in which he talks about the Lascaux cave paintings, the mysterious paintings in the walls of a hidden, prehistoric cave in Southwest France, wisps of hope for the future seep out through the connections he draws. The fact that four regular teenage boys and their dog can discover a cave full of mystical drawings; that Pablo Picasso marvels at the crafting in the cave; that the French government makes a fake Lascaux Cave just to protect the original from the harm inflicted by human presence—all succeeds in demonstrating what combined effort can achieve. At a time when it seems like there is no magic left in the human purpose, witnessing such unity makes one feel that the restoration of lost wisdom is not impossible.



The author addresses the underlying essence of irony that persists in our time and history in the postscript of his book. "A species that has only ever found its way to more must now find its way to less", he writes, as a critical commentary on the work, remarking how it is filled with too many quotes. He concludes by saying, "What a blessing to be Earth [sic] loving Earth". Through his balmy outlook, Green effortlessly infuses insight into ordinary things. The quirky stylisation of his sentences has always succeeded in registering his readers' senses to the subtle enticement of his perspective. Therefore, when he talks about bullying, about how he found solace in Scratch n Sniff stickers (3.5 stars), about his friend Todd who helped him participate in the scholastic competition (4.5 stars) where he gave his first public speech despite trembling nerves, the song 'New Partner' (5 stars) which at multiple points of his life came up and remained as a recurring title track of sorts—he imparts us with a sense of extraordinary quality that is embedded in the ordinary pace of life. And although you might not agree with his ratings, his thoughts will definitely strike a chord with you.

As he spews out his thoughts, however, I couldn't shake off the feeling that the book's title is both ambitious and presumptuous. It claims to review the "anthropocene"—the story of all of humankind as it has impacted the planet—but he presents only the experiences of the American man, and not even of an ordinary one but that of a renowned best-selling author. The book does lay a good foundation for the experiences of a struggling human being in the comforts of sure shelter and food aplenty, but not much about the anthropocene that is in unrest.

I can imagine that if aliens were to go through our literature at a time when perhaps everything had gone wrong for the human species, this book would misrepresent the life of the average population.

Fahima Islam Lira is a contributor to DS Books.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

## Requiem for the textures of time, violent and tender

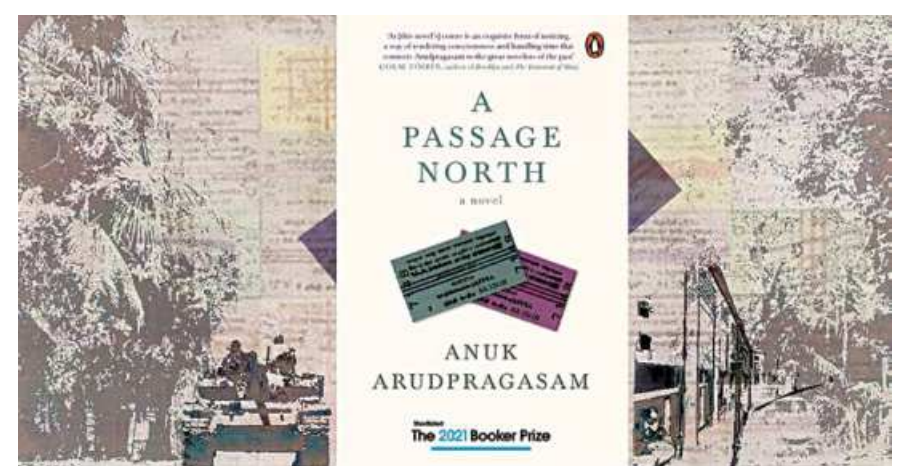
SARAH ANJUM BARI

Sand, water, memory—the grainy, elusive grace they share pervades the experiences making up Sri Lankan author Anuk Arudpragasam's second novel, *A Passage North* (Hamish Hamilton, 2021), shortlisted for this year's Booker Prize. Its project is one of capturing the textures of time remembered and repressed, particularly that of the 26-year-spanning Sri Lankan civil war which robbed hundreds of thousands of civilians of their lives, names, and graves; and it is a project to which Arudpragasam conscripts himself and his narrator as he does his readers.

Krishan, a middle class and liberally educated young man based in Colombo, is plagued by survivor's guilt for having been spared the more extreme manifestations of the war. As life constantly pits him against individuals who are more closely affected than him by violence—his grandmother, struggling against instability of body and mind in old age, his partner Anjum, a fierce activist of caste and gender injustice, and Rani, the Tamil caretaker to his grandmother whose death propels the novel's eponymous journey—Krishan becomes obsessed with virtually experiencing the war through images, video footage, texts, and personal anecdotes.

The news of Rani's sudden death, possibly a suicide, sends Krishan into a Proustian journey inside his own mind, and in the tactile world it sends him northward to Jaffna to attend Rani's funeral. It is here in Sri Lanka's northern regions where the insurgency fought by the Tamil Tigers killed Rani's two young sons, among thousands of others, in a war that erupted along ethnic divides between Sinhalese and Tamils drawn by British colonial forces. But decades since the Tamil Tigers' defeat in 2009, the most painful and unjust legacy of the war remains the state's denial of its war crimes, the families who never got to bury or even find their dead, and the development that masks this national amnesia.

Arudpragasam's debut novel, *The*



COLLAGE: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

*Story of A Brief Marriage* (2006), thrusts its protagonist into the thick of life in refugee camps during the war. That *A Passage North* puts us at a remove from it can raise some questions about the politics of his choice of narrator. Why did we need to experience Rani's trauma from the war not through her own retellings, but through Krishan's belated reflections on his interactions with her? Why are we allowed to traverse at leisure through Krishan's own labyrinth of desires and longings?

One answer could be that the novel is actually inclusive of an entire orchestra of voices and pains, that it borders almost on serving as a philosophical treatise—on desire, on yearning, on memory and ageing, coming from an author who studied philosophy at Columbia University. Yet its tone remains deceptively simple and humble. The prose, in fact, gains an almost toppling strength from its sparkling clarity. Its sentences soar and tumble through the thickets of Krishan's mind, and it drags the reader along through entirely unexpected rhythms and territories of thought. It is exhilarating. But it can occasionally be tiring. And, a little more occasionally, too expository.

The author deftly mines through the nuances of the war's legacy here—Krishan, through his Sinhalese background and his circumstances in life, is culturally and socioeconomically more

privileged than Rani, who comes from the Tamil region, and he has parallelly suffered fewer losses than her. Even more deftly explored are intricate markings of daily existence. "One could tell by observing the movement of their eyes whether a person spent most of their time feeling shame or self-assuredness or desire or yearning or self-containment, one could tell from the readiness of the smile how vulnerable a person was and from the furrows above the brows how much they were plagued by anger or anxiety", Krishan reflects at one point.

And so, a more significant answer could be this—that in imbibing so much silence and so many layers of distance between the war and the present day audience reading about it, Arudpragasam is showing us that Krishan is us, in our fumbling, confused, guilt-ridden roles as outsiders to an act of violence.

To reach the end of each chapter in this book is to come up for a gulp of fresh air after long laps of a swim, and through the sustained absence of a plot and dialogues and pauses, Anuk Arudpragasam is giving us an exercise in listening to survivors of trauma, which often requires a lot of patience and grace, and he is unpacking the politics, the reckoning demanded by the practicing of empathy.

Sarah Anjum Bari is the editor of Daily Star Books. Reach her at sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com or @wordstintel on Twitter and Instagram.