

DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Some gold, some lemonade, and a whole lot of ambition—the recipe for immigrant success

JAHIN KAISSAR

Sanjena Sathian's debut novel, *Gold Diggers* (Penguin Press, 2021), is set in an Indian American enclave within suburban Atlanta, a pressure-cooker environment where model minority strivers work tirelessly to excel in AP classes, debate tournaments, and teen pageants. Just beneath the gilded surface of top grades, estimable extracurriculars, and Ivy League acceptances is the discomfiting reality of substance abuse and mental health issues. In her novel, Sathian adroitly depicts how her characters navigate the pressure to succeed, as all young, second-generation Americans must do.

Neeraj "Neil" Narayan, the narrator-protagonist, is an underachieving ABCD (American-born confused desi) who struggles under the weight of his family's lofty expectations. After discovering that Anita, his childhood friend, and her mother have been stealing gold—and by extension ambition—from other desis and melting it to make magical lemonade, he decides that he wants in on their scheme. Just a sip of the lemonade imbues Neil and Anita with the drive to temporarily accomplish everything they set their mind to. But when a certain

tragedy strikes, they are forced to reflect on the dangers of "stealing" ambition. Years later, Neil and Anita, each haunted by their gold pilfering past, reunite for one final, adrenaline-rushing heist.

Sathian's prose weaves through various timelines to demonstrate how the past and the present are intimately connected. As the plot progresses, it becomes evident that everyone—from the "forty-niners" (those who sought gold during the California Gold Rush of 1849) to the millennials of contemporary Silicon Valley—is chasing gold and/or glory.

Gold Diggers does not fit easily into any one genre. It is a stimulating fusion of literary fiction, bildungsroman, magical realism, social satire, and what the protagonist, Anita, might call "immigrant shit." It is a sweeping story that derives its power as much from Sathian's sharp and witty writing as it does from keen social commentary. At the heart of the novel is the question: "What does it mean to be both Indian and American?" In attempting to answer this question, Sathian examines themes of cultural identity, generational divide, familial expectation, and the American dream. She pointedly and effectively explores these

issues without getting overly didactic.

While the novel's premise is rich with possibility, Sathian does not always make the most of it. Perhaps she has bitten off more than she is ready to chew. The novel starts to lose its momentum in its second half as the plot meanders and ultimately leads to a quick and less-than-satisfying resolution. In addition, the fact that the misogynistic and crass Neil is the narrator dilutes the story's power. Although Sathian most likely uses Neil's character to counter the stereotype of the Asian-American nerd, the story would have been markedly stronger if it had focused more on Anita and her mother's perspectives since they are the ones with the literal recipe for success.

Despite its flaws, however, *Gold Diggers* is an ambitious story with much to offer. That is why it comes as no surprise that the novel will be adapted into a TV series by Mindy Kaling's production company.

Jahin Kaiissar is a freelance writer and a recent graduate of Brac University, where she earned her MA in English.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Can a writer be a mother too?

NOUSHIN NURI

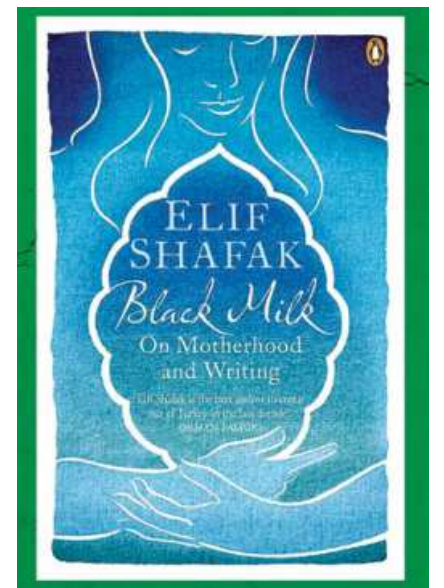
Standing at the crossroads of motherhood and writing, Elif Shafak writes her memoir, *Black Milk* (Viking, 2021), as an attempt to create harmony among her multiple and often-conflicting personalities. She writes, "I am a writer. I am a nomad. I am a cosmopolitan. I am a lover of Sufism. I am a pacifist. I am a vegetarian and I am a woman, more or less in that order." When this woman, who has diligently mothered volumes of fiction, contemplates finally becoming a mother, she witnesses a coup inside her, a commotion breaking loose among the women in her "harem within".

Black Milk is an autobiographical documentation of Shafak's hesitation, anxiety, perplexity, and self-discovery as she is about to enter the phase of motherhood. Six tiny finger-women, each a part of Elif but each blatantly different from the other, represent six dimensions of her personality. The intellectual Miss Highbrowed Cynic, the go-getter Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, the spiritual Dame Dervish, the rational Little Miss Practical, the motherly Mama Rice Pudding, and the lustful Blue Belle Bovary—all the voices are in constant attempts to shut other and take reign over Elif. Our ambitious writer, author of beloved novels like *The Forty Rules of Love* and *Honour*, and shortlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize for her novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*, admits to having always favoured the more cerebral characters in her mind over the emotional "womanly" ones. But as the suppressed voices start revolting louder than she can bear, she is forced to listen. She is forced to ask herself if she should become a mother. In the process of eliciting an answer, she questions patriarchy, reminisces about her motherland, Istanbul, and becomes the voice of many women writers.

Shafak pondered over whether all her personalities could coexist. She tried to decipher if it is possible to be a mother despite being an author. In an attempt to solve her dilemma, she resorted to her predecessors—women writers throughout history. Through the lives of Zelda Fitzgerald, with whom Elif's daughter now shares her name, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Sylvia Plath and many others, she shows us how likely it was—and still is—for motherhood and authorship to become mutually exclusive.

From this aspect, the book has a flavour of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) but with a spin of

motherhood on it. In her book-length essay Woolf alludes to the importance of financial security and independence for a woman to emerge as an author. Shafak, on the other hand, recounts how women writers, in times contemporary and past, have chosen to deal, and more often part, with the responsibilities of motherhood to nurture their careers. Virginia Woolf points out the disparate privilege of male writers compared to their women counterparts by making an elaborate inquiry into whether Shakespeare's hypothetical talented sister could have ever made it as successful a writer as he; Woolf walks through this imaginary woman's life to show that she would have never had the same freedom, opportunities, or support, just because of the perceived role of



women in society. Shafak poses the same question for the Persian lyric poet Hafiz and his sister.

Black Milk smells of nostalgia and melancholy as Shafak shares parts of her self-imposed exile. As she falls into the hands of a monstrous postpartum depression, the book presents the writer's very personal unrest created by the inner choir of discordant voices. The consequent narrative speaks out the strife of female authorship throughout ages. This memoir reads as a diary of a woman's oscillating allegiance between motherhood and ambition in a world where women are expected to do it all. It is an elegant piece of feminist prose.

Noushin Nuri is studying business in school and literature at home. She can be reached at noushin2411@gmail.com.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Killing the false woman: 'The Harpy' dissects parenthood, femininity, and domestic abuse

MEHRUL BARI

A book's epigraph usually either leaves you droplets of hints of what's to come or purposefully perplexes, with abstract quotes that leave you feeling rather than knowing. Megan Hunter's *The Harpy* (Picador, 2020), a mesmerizing, disquieting tale of suburban infidelity, starts with quotes from Virgil and post-structural feminist writer Hélène Cixous. And if you weren't familiar with either author, the quotes themselves will very much set the scene, and tone, of Hunter's psychological-magic-realist-fiction.

"It is the last time", the novel's first line reads. "He lies down, a warm night, his shirt pulled up, his head turned away." Within moments the reader can grasp the style, the tenor, a certain kind of content that might soon come gushing out. "Jake is not squeamish: he is like a man expecting a tattoo. [...] His eyes are closed: not screwed shut, just closed, like a skilful child pretending to be asleep." By the turn of the first page the reader can sense not only the story—that of a mother of two finding out, through a succinct phone call, that her husband has been having an affair—but the way the story will come to us: in images, a flash of words, a string of thoughts—bad thoughts, understandable thoughts, horrid, horrible thoughts you wouldn't want getting out. We receive these clear images and sounds, and are left to observe and comprehend them as we like. "I lift the razor", reads the closing line of the prologue, "and a fairy-tale drop of blood escapes from under the silver."

The titular harpy, a half-bird, half-woman creature of classical mythology, is a long-time subject of interest for Lucy, the narrator, the aggrieved. She had studied the



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

creature through school and college, and had almost finished her PhD on it. The legendary creature, now used commonly as an epithet to describe an ill-tempered woman, a "shrew", was originally simply the personification of storm winds and thunder. Throughout history, harpies have been interchangeably described with beautiful poetry and hateful scorn. "Bird-bodied, girl-faced things", as Virgil defined

them in the epigraph, with a sneering selection of adjectives and verbs to go with: "abominable", "droppings", "talons", "haggard", "hunger", "insatiable".

Like one may fixate on a character, a myth while coming of age, like a Dora the Explorer or a Ted Bundy, Lucy fixated, obsessed over the harpy almost from the moment she first encountered them: as a child, her mother reading to her from an

illustrated book concerning unicorns. The harpies there are more of the antagonizing nature, but Lucy is awestruck. What is a harpy, she asks her mother, a pitiful, mostly disagreeable character in the haze of the novel's memories. "[S]he told me that they punish men, for the things they do."

"There is a trail of anger flowing through my bloodline, from my great-grandmother, to my grandmother, to my mother, to me."

The novel asks, and is equally stumped by, the question of where a family ends and one begins. To what extent can selfishness be driven; when does selfishness begin?

Hunter's sophomore novel is at its best when it ponders this, which it commendably does through actions more than words. My teacher, who has assigned this book and whose praise for it is repeated multiple times in the jacket and opening page, likens *The Harpy's* prose with the Kuleshov effect, a practice in film which presents the viewer with only a key few images, leaving interpretation solely on the viewer's part. It is, in other words, a more extreme form of "show, don't tell", and reading this novel it is apparent the writer's proficiency in this practice. Similarly apparent is Hunter's background in poetry, which often pushes through the prose to take centre stage.

While there is no faulting the rich writing and provocative left-of-fable narrative, the overall reading experience, I felt, could've been improved with some condensing. When the novel is approaching its middle point, it repeats itself more than it should. Comparing its 193-page count with the more direct 117 of Rachel Ingalls' fantastic *Mrs. Caliban* (1982), which tells a similar story, if by feel more than plot, it is evident that such a tale benefits a great deal from brevity, letting the quick, impulse-like storytelling take a firm hold of you before the downs of the rollercoaster pulls you in from start to finish.

Mehrul Bari S Chowdhury is a writer, poet, and artist. He is currently pursuing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Kent and has previously worked for Daily Star Books.