



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

SEASON'S READINGS

# OF LOVE AND RESISTANCE

## Revisiting Zahir Raihan's 'Aarek Falgun' this spring, and every spring

**The conviction to unite against an authoritative power and challenge the establishment, forgetting personal differences, spells the essence of spring for me.**

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

Winter was slowly taking off, with the February breeze following through, with the falling of the Debdaru leaves, with the advent of a new season. A group of well-dressed people, mostly university students, were seen on the streets near the Victoria Park area. Oddly, they were barefoot and came in a group when it was the most dangerous of times to be seen in groups. It was the spring of 1955, and the wind brought with it an air of resistance.

Zahir Raihan starts his book, *Aarek Falgun*, against the backdrop of the tumultuous days of 1955, only three years after the infamous shooting on innocent students peacefully protesting for the inclusion of Bangla as state language on February 21, 1952. Raihan's story spans a short period of three days and two nights, when the students are preparing to observe the 21st of February, in remembrance of the language martyrs. The period of preparation for the events is marked by memories of the movement in 1952, a past spring that was marked not by the red of the Krishnachura, but by that of the martyrs' spilt blood. Based on that experience, the characters of *Aarek Falgun* silently prepare themselves for the worst to come, passing sleepless nights in constant vigilance.

Spring, a season known for bringing lovers together, takes them apart. Mumim, a

senior in university who is on the frontline of the movement, suffers a fallout with his beloved Dolly because he considers leading a resistance—no matter the intensity or the magnitude—a responsibility that needs to be fulfilled with utmost conviction. Salma, another associate in the movement, suppresses the longing for her husband Rowshan, who is imprisoned in Rajshahi

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and has lost both his hands during a jail shooting.

What strikes me every time I read this book is how, as in *Hajar Bochhor Dhore*, or *Ekushey February*, Zahir Raihan uses fiction to document a people's struggle through the simplest and most personal human interactions. Empathy for each other's struggles brings these youths together for a

cause they all believed in. In a way, this too is another form of human love. As one of them says during a meeting, "I cannot forget Barkat's face."

The story reaches its climax when mass arrests rise to the point where the jail can no longer contain prisoners. "Make more space, Sir," they are heard saying. "*Ashche Falgune amra digun hobo.*" "We will be doubled by next spring."

This last line is what brings me back to the book every spring. The conviction to unite against an authoritative power and challenge the establishment, forgetting personal differences, spells the essence of spring for me, thanks to this novel. *Aarek Falgun* was published in 1969 when the people were on the verge of a mass uprising to uproot a military dictator. From the armed resistance in 1971 to the movement against another dictatorship in the independent country in the 1990s to the very recent student movements in the last few years—each time we have been stripped off of our right to dissent, or of a voice, and cornered to the point from where there would be no coming back, authors like Raihan have reminded us to scream and rage against the dying of the light. Spring doesn't just replace the gloom of winter with joy and love. It also brings with it the hope and power of resistance.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan is a sub editor at *The Metro desk*, *The Daily Star*.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

## In Shillong, childhood secrets, adult memories

NAMRATA

Shortlisted for the JCB Literature Prize 2021, *Name Place Animal Thing* (Zubaan Books, 2021) by Daribha Lyndem evokes feelings of nostalgia in a reader merely with its title—it is a popular game among kids. Now, as I hold the novella in my hand, my heart is in a strange turmoil.

The story is based in Shillong and is told through the voice of D, a young Khasi girl. Reading through her experiences, one cannot help but chuckle at how we might live in different parts of the subcontinent, and yet, what binds us together are the childhood experiences we have had while growing up.

My mother grew up in the northeast of India and whenever she was asked about her childhood, she would say, "It was a fairy-tale I spent in a fairyland." The virtual tour of Shillong in *Name Place Animal Thing* reminded me of her fairy tale, with its cherry blossoms, pine cones, rain-soaked serpentine roads, and lush green hills all around.

D's story is set in the early 2000s and can be easily called a bildungsroman. The character's first-person narrative gives us a close glimpse of her years in Shillong. As a game, *Name Place Animal Thing* revolves around identities and categorisation. Reading *Name Place Animal Thing* makes one see themselves lost in the many identities we foster—name, gender, caste, sub-caste, skin colour, sexual orientation, mother tongue, facial features... The list is endless and today, unfortunately, each identity has battles of its own which lead to chaos and confusion.

Picking up this thread, Lyndem weaves an intricate tale that takes us through experiences of bullying, sexual harassment, racism, and xenophobia. Retaining a childlike innocence in D's voice, the novel reads more like confession diaries than a fictitious account of things inspired from real life.

"At ten, I understood mortality. I learnt it that one summer evening when I caught and placed ten milky white butterflies in a large empty Horlicks glass jar...I grew worried when I saw them start to crumple

down and, in an attempt to save them, I opened the lid and tipped it over. They all dropped in a white powdery heap on the ground. None of them had survived. In that moment, my inchoate mind understood that life is a thing that can be taken away...". Lyndem's narrator confesses in the novel. Her debut novel flows freely like a river of emotions. The language, narrative, and descriptions evoke a million feelings ranging from anger, hurt, to anguish and dejection in a reader's mind before dousing the fire with cold water-like reality.

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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

ESSAY

# Ode to the book, my forever Valentine

**Going back to the age of eight, to that memory of relishing in lunatics and lovers on tired monsoon afternoons—the sight of my trembling fingers flipping nervously through pages due to an inexplicable exultation, seemed to me to be a rare occurrence.**

JAHANARA TARIQ

In a particularly American but artsy, cinematic production depicting the friendship between David Lipsky and David Foster Wallace, the character of Lipsky played by Jesse Eisenberg narrates to the audience how David, the author, thinks of books as "existences to stop you from feeling lonely". I was watching this last Saturday night to sop myself with some February gloom. As simple and perhaps clichéd the statement sounds, something about it coming from the bandana-wearing creator of the postmodernist opus, *Infinite Jest*, made me reflect upon it for longer than I would have anticipated. Those of us who dwell within mounds of books—a Sahara of them in one chamber, a sierra in another, colossuses in the kitchen, heaps in the hallway—do we not feel, in addition to the bliss of holding them, a desperation to be entrenched in teetering piles of literature? On top of that, there is perhaps a want to shield ourselves from, and simultaneously use, it as substitution for human interaction. To reminisce and reflect on the times I have used books to lean on and breathe and the many, many occurrences when I have felt maddened by certain books would take countless hours.

The first time was when my grade 3 English teacher, with the wide stripe of crimson on her forehead, directed us to break the spine of watered-down Shakespeare by Charles Lamb. Something about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, even in its abridged vessel, caused sparks to fly and for small, seismic shifts to occur in myself.



PHOTO: HASTBUL ALAM TURAN  
COLLAGE: RAIDA MOMIN

Tatiana's throne of roses and eglantine, oxlips and violets and the ambiguity of the dream world was enough to birth a romantic sentiment in me, along with an affinity towards golden eye glitter and snowy lace—because that is what I imagined the lovelorn, Athenian protagonists to be donned in.

Fast forward to the now hazy memories of

hours spent in libraries and bookstores during my teenage years, I remember finding myself plotting love stories with fictional characters; sometimes I was a broody protagonist in some pirated John Green about faulty stars and many Katherines, and at others, it was me, Amit Ray from *Shesher Kobita* stumbled across in scenic Shillong. As years went by, my subject of adoration shifted from the characters to the creators. My interest in plot-driven narratives had also taken a backseat and my senses now flutter whenever I come across authors whose languages are steeped in experimentation and sensuousness.

If I had to talk about one writer who was 'the one' for me, with all her delectable prose, the edges of whose works seemed to be laced with ecstasy yet simultaneously with silent contemplation, it would be Virginia Woolf. My days start off with one mandated espresso and excerpts of her *billet doux* to Vita. I find myself reaching out for *The Waves* whenever I sit down to write anything.

If Woolf pulls my heart strings too tight, Wilde, with his sensuous text, ploys of decadence and ruminations on the nature of beauty, makes me want to leave lipstick stains on his grave situated at the heart of Paris, like so, so many others. He is my forever Valentine, not because of the amorosness of it all but the theatricality of the romance; the stylized poses and shams sit too well with my jovial cynicism.

Other notable volumes which have inspired 'dear diary' moments are *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, *Possession* by AS Byatt,

*Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson, and *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino. While the former two helped me glamourise and escape my lengthy, languid hours during the lockdown, the other two—rather svelte metafictional masterpieces—were full of fragments and quiet desires, leaving me unsatisfied in the most luscious way possible.

Going back to the age of eight, to that memory of relishing in lunatics and lovers on tired monsoon afternoons—the sight of my trembling fingers flipping nervously through pages due to an inexplicable exultation, seemed to me to be a rare occurrence. As time went by, I realised that whatever the sentiment was, it was not rare.

In my room, my books spill from sagging shelves into my lap and pocket poetry library editions of Neruda and Buddhadeva lie nestled between my pillows. I realise how books have called out to me always, in dissimilar ways. Be it through the witty, feisty feminisms of Austen and Alcott or the delicious Victorian morbidity and decaying grandeur found in timeworn volumes of the Brontës and Dickens, books inspired the cocoon of my mind constantly, helping me to cleverly write and rewrite myself. To be enamoured with literature, to make a summer sweetheart or a lifelong companion out of a book, means that one is always satiated in the pursuit of knowing, learning, and engaging with the self and the world.

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