

# A Conversation with Saikat Majumdar

INTERVIEWED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

*A powerful voice in contemporary Indian writing, Saikat Majumdar delves into the socio-political complexities of modern-day India and often questions the long-standing traditions and rituals. In this exclusive interview with The Daily Star, the Ashoka University professor shares his thoughts on his most recent novel The Middle Finger (Simon & Schuster, Feb 2022).*

DS. To some readers the title of your most recent novel *The Middle Finger* may sound controversial. But as I discovered while reading, it focuses on something very different. Why did you choose this title?

SM. I was drawn to the idea of retelling the Drona-Ekalavya myth in a contemporary university campus. The title comes from a medieval Jain retelling of that story recounted by Wendy Doniger in *The Hindus*.

In this version, it is Arjun who cheats Ekalavya of his thumb. Drona becomes angry with Arjun upon discovering this, and offers the blessing that a Bhil warrior will be able to shoot arrows without his thumb, using his index and middle finger. The last phrase, indicative of unexpected, disruptive strength, became the title of the novel.

DS. On a previous occasion, you mentioned that this book explores the "limits of the teacher-student relationship in terms of ethics, power, and intimacy." But in a teacher-student relationship, the former wields tremendous power and authority over the other. Is there really scope for intimacy here?

SM. A crucial question! Successful teaching or mentoring is the formation of an intimate relationship, perhaps more so with artistic education. Art forges an erotic connection. The professional relation that comes out of it is always an intensely personal one. Here, emotional intimacy is both life-giving and dangerous. To make it sexual or romantic is destructive, since the teacher and the student are in an uneven power relation. But deeply personalized forms of teacher-student relationship figure in the Indian Gurukul tradition, both in myth and reality – and in the gharana/parampara tradition of performing arts in South Asia. But not everything that sounds attractive in art, myth, or imagination, is desirable in reality.

DS. Education plays a key role in *The Middle Finger*. In all your earlier novels, especially *The Firebird* and *The Scent of God* as well, teaching and learning seem to be significant themes. Is there any particular reason behind this choice?

SM. The theme of education lingers over everything I write – fiction, nonfiction, criticism. While I have an institutionalized life as an educator, I feel a hidden part of me feels education to be a process of control that yokes human beings to the dominant order. I guess my writing life seeks to treat education in all its paradoxes, its beauty, its possibilities, but also its deeply repressive function. I imagined *The Middle Finger*, with a poet and teacher as the protagonist, as caught right in the middle of this – the great power of learning to liberate and motivate people, but also as something commodified, branded and made unevenly available across society. Who gets access to knowledge? Who gets to stake a claim to the teacher? So much of it depends on who you are, and where you come from. Emphatically so in capitalist societies such

as the US, but also very much so within the more socialist higher education landscape of the subcontinent, where the inequities of religion, caste and class, I would say, are far more violent and deeply entrenched than the racial divisions in the US. Artistic education is even more complicated as who knows how to draw the line between talent and learning, identity and language, schooling and de-schooling. So yes,

one can only think of education as something whose greatest strengths are impossibly entangled with its most terrifying problems. For me, it is an eternally fascinating subject.

DS. *I found Megha*, the protagonist of *The Middle Finger*, to be a fascinating and engaging character. As a South Asian woman and academic, I could definitely relate to her. At the same time, I could not help wondering why you chose a female protagonist?

**I think I feel more comfortable imagining women in positions of power than imagining men there. It might be a kind of wish-fulfilment – I think academia, like many other professional spheres, need many more women in positions of leadership. The structure of abuse revealed by the academic #MeToo movement points to this need.**

SM. I think I feel more comfortable imagining women in positions of power than imagining men there. It might be a kind of wish-fulfilment – I think academia, like many other professional spheres, need many more women in positions of leadership. The structure of abuse revealed by the academic #MeToo movement points to this need. While I wanted to create a Drona figure in a contemporary college campus, I wanted her to be a woman. Also, I did not realize it at the time of writing, but I unconsciously created the reality of two women getting entangled in quotidian domestic labor, setting up a home that was a men-free zone. The idea of intimate female friendship without any male presence anywhere draws me powerfully – I think there is much to admire in these friendships. Female characters have always played key roles in my fiction, but this was my first time writing with a female protagonist.

DS. Critics have often called your language lyrical and evocative. Thematically, however, you portray conflicts arising from the clash of different cultures, classes, and education levels. What makes you pull at two opposite strings?

SM. Conflict is lyrical too, isn't it? Conflict lies at the root of art – be it conflict in plot, character, language, emotion, anything. An ethical conflict lies

at the soul of Megha's poetry – does she have the right to articulate a certain kind of pain? Does one have to experience certain kinds of suffering directly to own the right of their representation? Teaching, learning, mentorship, everything is ridden with conflicts.

Who gets access to the teacher, to elite knowledge? And we know intimacy is the most riddled with conflicts – our greatest conflicts are with our intimate ones. *That being said*, of all my novels, *The Middle Finger* is the most divided between cultures, locations, ethnicity, class, sexuality – my previous novels were more uniformly rooted in single cultures. But that is the nature of this protagonist – she is more of a migrant and a traveler, more free and rootless, as it were.

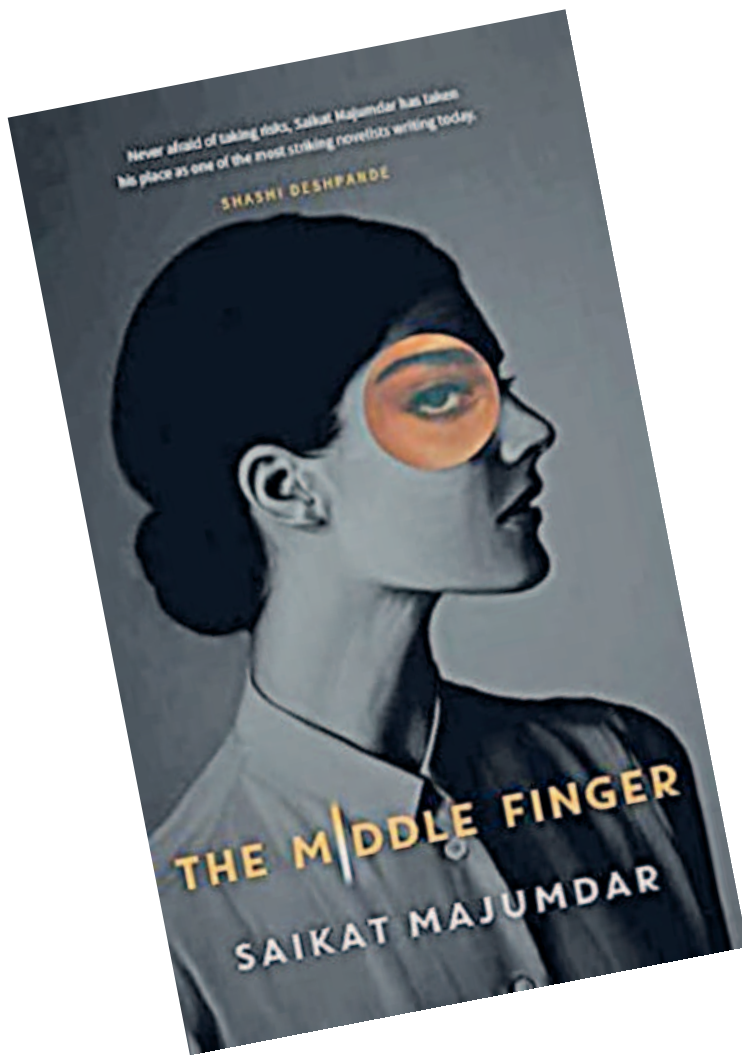
DS. Just out of curiosity: how do you name your characters? Do you think of the story first, or the characters first?

SM. Often my characters have names that mean something relevant to their role and nature – especially characters from the subcontinent. With this novel, I wanted names that sound ordinary, and yet not entirely forgettable. I try to avoid excessively unusual or striking names. I definitely think of characters first, usually characters rooted in a particular place/atmosphere, a conflict in/around them, a character with an innate and interesting tension. What the characters do, where life takes them – which often spins beyond authorial control – becomes the story. I don't really care much about the story, it's the lives of the characters that matters the most. However, this novel was a little different as the myth gave me a path to follow – some of which I ended up ignoring in favor of the demands of local and contemporary reality.

Q. 7. Of all the books you have written, do you have a favourite? If someone asks you to select one of your books as suggested reading, which one would you choose and why?

I think I found my fictional voice with *The Firebird*, *Play House*, and that novel draws on some deeply personal elements of my own life, so that's a particular favorite. But *The Middle Finger* also draws together my abiding concerns as a writer, teacher, student, migrant, and asks questions about creativity and mentorship that are very close to me, so I'm keen to see how readers respond to it.

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## The Garden of Eden

**“Just get down to the launch ghat and tell any rickshawala, ‘take me to Munshaf Quarter.’ You’ll be here. Everyone knows Munshaf quarter, it’s opposite to the D. C.’s office cum residence.”**

RIFAT MAHBUB

My Facebook messenger tinkled a couple of times. All good on a Saturday morning. After all, while Facebook is a swirling fog of people's achievements – someone got married, had a baby, passed a degree, landed a dream job, published a book, the messenger option offers some personal space sharing.

First one was a typical family chat – too long a trail. I could catch all of it over a phone call, so I left it there.

The second one: a photo of a dilapidated house – yellow algae in colour, barren in shape and clearly uninhabited. The sender is a brother from the USA. The messenger bubble appeared, know this place?

A haunted house, and he was asking whether I knew the place. I live in London, and throughout the pandemic, the only place I visited was the Windsor Legoland. I don't go to the so-called English heritage sites, from where this house seemed to crop up. Yes, I could remember, William Wordsworth's house in Lake District was like that, but they kept it well, even built a little museum in it.

Na, I replied in a typical pseudo code.

Hmm, I thought so. The text bubble appeared.

Just a child then. He continued.

Now, I can't remember when I was a child for a very long time. I can't often remember which year I left school and college to be an adult. So I kept quiet, but of course, the 'seen' sign was clear. Messenger's random notification signs always baffle me: 'sent' (grey), 'seen' (blue), and then 'replied' (the text turns blue). In the eras of letters, if we did not receive a reply, we would like to assume that the letters were lost. It made us feel good about ourselves. But now everything is bare and naked. Your email was sent, but you never got a response; your message was seen but not being replied. Google says, 'it means that the person is ignoring you.' But that was not the case here. I didn't know what to reply, so I kept quiet.

I'm actually in BD right now. The bubble, thankfully, moved.

I went to Munshigonj yesterday, he continued.

Conversations these days are normally fragmented. I finally can make sense of

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

I see, I typed hastily to express my eagerness.

And this was your house, the reply came.

The false bubble circled before the text appeared: remember Munshaf Quarter, where we all lived?

Now I could connect 'nothing with nothing.' This was a photo of a house we used to live in nearly thirty-five years ago in Munshigonj. But this cannot be true. Ours was a ... I hastily wrote, do you have more photos?

Four photos appeared:

One was a pond with explosively green water. I was not sure whether it was the untreated algae or the digital colour effect.

Another was a road running beside the pond. A crumbling wall stubbornly stood on the other side of the road, clearly a lost battle against time.

The third one was a close shot of a house with coconut or betel nut tree (I can't now differentiate). But all I could clearly see was some shabby washouts dangling in a rope tied between two trees.

The Final one captured the pond and its surrounding – the crumbling wall, a couple of dilapidated houses, trees and washouts.

Very bad condition, the bubble moved.

Nobody lives, some caretakers only. They are destroying ... I turned my mobile wi-fi off to leave the chat altogether, abruptly.

Munshaf Quarter.

“Just get down to the launch ghat and tell any rickshawala, ‘take me to Munshaf Quarter.’ You’ll be here. Everyone knows Munshaf quarter, it’s opposite to the D. C.’s office cum residence.” That was how my father would instruct any of his friends in Dhaka if they wished to visit Munshigonj for a day or two. In those days, vacations did not mean Cox's Bazar, Khagrachari, Penang or Bali. Most people used to go to their grandparents' gramer bari. But you know the catch we had? We used to live in a mufashal called Munshigonj, and our dada-r bari was in Dhaka. So, we could take a reverse journey to the centre, and our chachas (real and my father's friends) would visit us in Munshigonj on many Fridays.

Munshaf Quarter. The heart of

Munshigonj's civil service – even as someone slightly older than a toddler, I knew the ranks of the detached one-storey houses: the first one was sub-judge chacha's, after that magistrate chacha, then other magistrate chacha, then our own, our opposite was another sub-judge chacha, and the road ended with a big name: district judge chacha. Strange how we now think that kids these days are very smart just because they know the names of Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk. I even knew the positions, not only names.

When we lived, we just lived. But now I reimagine its history. May be in the 19th century, Hindu Babus used to live here



to manage this once Hindu-dominated community, close to then Dacca (now our Dhaka), the Centre of East Bengal. Or maybe from the mid-20th century, newly educated Muslims took over and lived in Munshaf quarter and walked to their offices with their Hindu counterparts. Or could its history be traced back to the lost time of Muslim rulers in Bengal? Maybe there were documents in a shabby public library where we had to go with our father to attend some events. Those were dreary hours as men would just talk and talk. In the end, a dampened shingara with balushai would make us forget our pain!

The houses were sprawling and lavish. Each house had two beds of land at the front and one at the back. It had a servant quarter. But oh, the challenge! The lavatory was a walk away from the house. The house only had a bathroom (literally) with a ground urinal where one could pee but not poop. But we were used to it. If we had to poop at night, our mother would carry a torch or a hurricane accompanying us.

Each winter, we used to have a gardening competition among the neighbours. Ours would often be the winner because our father really had green fingers. Scarlet rose, mild cosmos, sensual dahlia, alert sunflower, velvety chondromollika – my vocabulary of flowers in Bangla and English started and ended there. I now know there was another reason why our garden was the top. We were an exception in that little community: my father was not a government bureaucrat. He was a government college teacher. I don't know how we started staying in that posh place, because my father's colleague used to live in other parts of this semi town. We sisters were para-berani girls. Part of our responsibility was to get to know the incoming families, or to spread the news that another magistrate chacha would leave Munshigonj. We did not go anywhere. Not until 1988, when the nearby pond raged with the devastating flood and our house became an extension of that once quiet and benign pond. Not until my mother started thinking that Dhaka would be better for our education. Not until I turned 7 and still was as unruly, uncontrollable and unwashed as I used to be at 4.

Our garden would look like the Garden of Eden because we never had a gardener. We used to garden ourselves. We wanted to be the winner to belittle the government gardener who used to mow the grasses and planted the seeds for our neighbours.

Munshaf Quarter, my only Garden of Eden, is now a damaged, decaying, dystopian reality. Is that how Harappa and Mohenjodaro also became lost cities?

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