

COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

An elegant meditation on the lies we tell

The novel is erudite and elegantly told, but its central charm is its proximity to its subject matter. The pandemic continues to rage on. We have barely woken up from the nightmare that was the Trump presidency and the question of what is true (and what is not) remains unresolved in our culture.

SHOAIB ALAM

At the start of Amitava Kumar’s latest novel, *A Time Outside This Time* (Aleph Book Company, 2021), the main character Satya, an Indian-born US-based journalist, is at a swanky artists’ retreat in Italy where he is reading *1984* and writing his own novel, *Enemies of the People*. Centred on fake news, his novel-under-construction strives to explore the truths and the lies that make up our reality. Facts, Satya tells us, can “lead you in any direction, it just depends on the kind of story you want to tell.” In the background, Trump is tweeting away from his porcelain throne while a new virus called Covid-19 begins to engulf the world.

Satya’s mission is to weave together a wide range of disparate source material from his own life into a novel. This includes childhood memories, journal entries, tweets, news clippings, scientific facts, his research into the nature of lies, and experiments he learns about from his wife, Vaani, an Indian-born psychologist. Accordingly, we get a nonlinear telling of his upbringing in India and adulthood in America: a touching chapter on communal tensions in the late ’70s witnessed as a child in Patna, his coverage of separatist movements and marginalised communities as a journalist hungry for stories, his marriage to Vaani, alongside a litany of facts and research on lies.

A Time Outside This Time could easily double as a college-level introduction course to psychology and a time capsule of news from the pandemic. We find pages dedicated to the infamous Milgram experiment at

Yale that studied our obedience to authority figures even when it means inflicting pain on others, the Dunning-Kruger effect (a cognitive bias that leads those with low skills in a task to overestimate their abilities), and the marshmallow experiment studying children’s ability to delay gratification, etc., along with the biggest headlines of the past two years. Vaani, who Satya says “lives in a world of experiments,” is our primary vehicle into the world of science. Here, too, Satya contends, scientists are merely telling stories, “the same mixture of fiction and facts.”

The novel is erudite and elegantly told, but its central charm is its proximity to its subject matter. The pandemic continues to rage on. We have barely woken up from the nightmare that was the Trump presidency and the question of what is true (and what is not) remains unresolved in our culture. To have a fictional character navigate Covid-19 and the alternative facts debated so bluntly on the page while we are living through it ourselves is thrilling, disconcerting, and reason enough to pick up this novel. And while other pandemic novels have been written these past two years by Western writers, Kumar’s critical lens on the global South Asian experience is necessary and resonates easily with a Bangladeshi reader.

In an early chapter, Satya meets Farooq, a Pakistani immigrant detained post-9/11 and forced by the FBI to translate recordings of men being tortured. Satya’s writerly inclination is to side with Farooq as a victim of Islamophobia, but this is complicated when Farooq turns out to be

less than truthful himself. Another section takes Satya into the Indian hinterlands to investigate the encounter killing near Kolkata of a young rebel leader, Avinash, a stand-in for the insurgencies that dot contemporary South Asia. Here the facts of systemic state oppression fade into the fiction of nationalism. We see the alarming devolution of the Indian press in recent decades, represented humorously through a conniving television host with a reputation for yelling at his guests. We ponder what these developments along with our tendency to look away means for democracy and the future of the truth in our context.

As the story unfolds, a creeping suspicion of Satya’s own reliability as a narrator may take root. Why is this man so enamoured by lies? His obsession feels personal, hinting at something waiting to emerge from the emotional backwaters, or, perhaps, a sinister intention. This turns out to be more cynicism on the reader’s part, a bit of our past conditioning, than the novel’s doing. Despite Satya’s opening premise that “in our world, we are surrounded by lies”, *A Time Outside This Time* doesn’t betray any malintent from its main character. Satya is an earnest narrator writing a novel about lies while the world around him falls apart.

Amidst the uncertainties of Covid-19, this may even come as a relief to some as it did for this emotionally exhausted reader. It may also make *A Time Outside This Time* an ultimately unsatisfying read for others.

Shoaib Alam is a writer and chief of staff at Teach For Bangladesh.

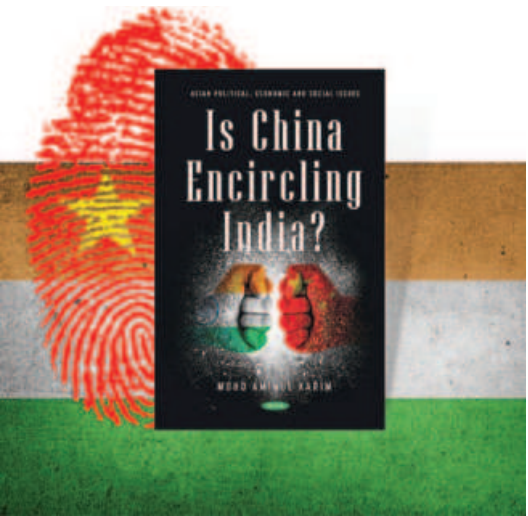
BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION
‘IS CHINA ENCIRCLING INDIA?’: A question worth asking

MD. TOUHID HOSSAIN

The latest book by Mohd Aminul Karim, former professor at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, concerns a subject on which he is a recognised expert. The soldier-scholar has lived and studied in China, has researched and taught in China, and has written extensively on security issues involving the country. Here, we also have India, the other Asian behemoth, and the rivalry between the two giants is not limited to their aspiration to regional dominance only. They also have an active conflict involving unresolved border disputes. In *Is China Encircling India?* (Nova Science Publishers, 2021), Karim analyses the recent Chinese advances in the Indian Ocean and their ramifications for India and the greater region.

A good number of maps and illustrations enrich the book as much as they help visualise the ground situation. Comparing the geopolitical and geo-economic profiles of China and India, Karim points out the growing gap in economic growth between the two countries and rightly opines that funding India’s quest to match the Chinese military modernization may be problematic, since India has an economy about one-fifth the size of China.

He also recalls the Soviet disaster in trying to compete with the USA with a much smaller economic base. India’s advantage lies in its



COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM BARI

youthful population compared to China’s ageing one, and her possible alliances with the USA and other regional powers that are wary of the Chinese hegemony, like Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific theatre. Karim also points to the difficulties of India’s federal parliamentary system vis-à-vis China’s centralised one-party rule. His hunch that India may think of a presidential system, however, seems a bit far-fetched.

The fifth chapter, “China’s Historical Military Posture”, has an interesting observation. The Chinese military stance has been characterised as “non-expansionist and averse to territorial conquest”. While many notables share this opinion, as quoted by Karim in the book, this assumption rests on very flimsy ground. Historically China had always been an empire, not a nation state, and empires are by definition results of expansion. The results of expansion are visible even today.

If we look at the map of the great wall that was built to defend China against invaders from the north, the ‘core China’ is what is on the south and east of the wall. Those on the north and west, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Xin Ziang are all results of imperial expansion. These entities were more often independent of China. The current dispensation in China has only tightened their stranglehold on these territories, gradually doing away with the large measure of autonomy they traditionally enjoyed even when they were not fully independent.

Kissinger’s contention that the “territorial claims of the Chinese empire stopped at the water’s edge” is true. But there are practical reasons why the Song Dynasty (960-1279) did not pursue a maritime empire. The economic reasons for which European powers pursued maritime colonial empires in the 16-17th centuries, did not exist in 12th century China. The 21st century empire-building has a completely different form, and the Chinese are doing that with remarkable success in most of Africa and parts of Asia.

Is China, then, encircling India? Yes, China has created the string of pearls, building Chinese maritime outposts around India. However, they do not really constitute a siege that can bring down the ‘Indian fortress’. The Indian Ocean is India’s home turf and she can devote her entire capacity in this theatre. For China, on the contrary, the Pacific is and will remain of pivotal importance. Besides, in a conflict situation, China may not have the freedom to use these outposts as bases of military operation except for Gwadar in Pakistan. China is investing heavily in strengthening the blue water capabilities of its navy. However, China’s prime concern in the Indian Ocean will still be the safety and security of the Sea Lanes of Communication in which other powers will also have vested interest. The Chinese outposts could have utility in advancing that security.

Aminul Karim rightly believes that China’s race for dominance will continue unabated. He also believes that in spite of that, a kind of Asian peace “should prevail”. No one will contest this idea, but whether it will prevail depends to a large extent on the behaviour of the protagonists.

Xi Chin Ping, unlike his predecessors, seems to be a man in a hurry. He has changed the prevailing culture of the Chinese Communist Party that has existed since the time of Deng and has thereby eliminated the mechanism of regular and predictable change. He would like to confirm his place in history by bringing Taiwan back to China, by force if necessary. Any reckless move by any player could upset the delicate peace prevailing in the region.

Md. Touhid Hossain is a former Foreign Secretary.

THE SHELF

WORLD BOOK DAY
Books about books

STAR BOOKS REPORT

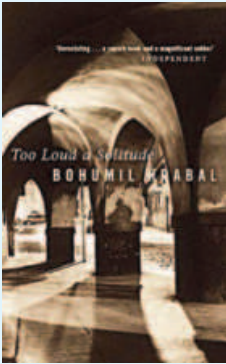
For World Book Day on April 23, we bring together a list of books about books as a means to glimpse at and tap into the vast knowledge, power, and pleasure that is to be found in these complex objects. Are they, indeed, just objects? Or historical artefacts? Or weapons? The books in this list test these notions.

BURNING THE BOOKS: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge Richard Ovenden (Harvard University Press, 2020)

As Israr Hasan writes in his review for Daily Star Books, this is a “vivid catalogue of the destruction of libraries and archives, purges of librarians and intellectuals, self-censorship, and the current threat posed to knowledge by a handful of big data firms”. The librarian-author takes us on a 3000-year journey of the treatment of knowledge, highlighting events like the destruction of Mesopotamian tablets all the way to Trump’s Twitter rampages, and shows us how the sanctity of knowledge is at stake.

TOO LOUD A SOLITUDE: A Novel Bohumil Hrabal (Harcourt Brace, 1992)

Garbage compactor Haňtá possesses a special talent—to quote the Talmud,



Hegel, and Lao-Tzu. Every night, he saves books from being crushed by the hydraulic press at the factory and takes them home to add to his ever-growing collection. Soon, however, his job—and the passion to collect books—is at risk from the threat of automation. So Haňtá decides to go down with his ship.

THE BOOKSELLER OF FLORENCE: The Story of the Manuscripts That Illuminated the Renaissance Ross King (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021)

A work of nonfiction immersed in the cultural vibrance of Florence during the Renaissance era, *The Bookseller of Florence* depicts the lives of the city’s legendary handiworks and the artists behind the art—manuscript hunters,



scribes, scholars, and booksellers. Author Ross King paints a vivid picture of their endeavours to unearth Florence’s rich culture and their vision towards enlightenment.

THE WOMAN WHO DISCOVERED PRINTING TH Barrett (Yale University Press, 2013)

TH Barrett is a leading scholar of mediaeval China. In answering some engrossing questions about the inception of printing—like “Why is early Chinese printing so little acknowledged, despite anticipating Gutenberg by centuries?” And “Why did printing in China not have the immediate obvious impact it did in Europe?”—he brings to us the story of Empress Wu (AD 625–705) and the



revolution in printing that occurred during her rule.

READ DANGEROUSLY: The Subversive Power of Literature in Troubled Times Azar Nafisi (Dey Street Books, 2022)

Azar Nafisi’s book enlists a series of powerful reads of and about resistance. The author, known also for her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, talks about writers ranging from James Baldwin to Zora Neale Hurston to Margaret Atwood and seeks to answer pressing questions, especially crucial in this era: “What is the role of literature in an era when the president wages war on writers and the press?” and “How can literature, through its free exchange, affect politics?”

