

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

History depicted by three Mughal princesses and a Kashmiri queen

As part of the 'Series in Literary Studies', Sabiha Huq's *The Mughal Aviary: Women's Writing in Pre-Modern India* (Vernon Press, 2022) casts hitherto unfocused light on the literary sensibilities shown by Muslim women in pre-modern India for roughly a period of 200 years during the 16th and 17th centuries. Focusing on the writings of three Mughal princesses and a Kashmiri queen, namely Gulbadan Begum, Jahanara Begum, Zeb-un-Nissa, and Habba Khatoon, and ranging from biography, hagiography, and poetry, the book speaks about the subjectivity and self-fashioning by women who created a counterculture which influenced many later writers and scholars.

SOMDATTA MANDAL

The first writer discussed is Gulbadan Begum (1523-1603), who was the youngest daughter of Babur and, asked by Akbar, wrote a biography of her half-brother, Emperor Humayun, in Persian, entitled *Humayun-Nama*. The memoir is a testimony to her father Babur's love for her, the admiration Humayun accorded her, and the reverence her nephew Akbar offered her at the royal court. It is historiography, literature, a first glimpse of feminism, and much more. It reflects upon the lives of Babur's wives and daughters as well as numerous experiences of royal life, showing how the destinies of these women recoiled around the monarch who was the absolute decision-maker of their fates. Gulbadan's narration ends in 1552 and at times she becomes prejudiced while describing fraternal conflicts. She also mentions how a Mughal woman's life in the early phase of the empire was of adjustment to hardships in the new Hindustani climate.

The second writer, Jahanara Begum (1614-1681), was the eldest daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan and most striking of all the Mughal princesses. In recent times there are at least half a dozen historical romances written on her, many of them by Western scholars, most of which focus on her participation in harem politics. Several others capitalise on her supposed romantic liaison with men. But she also took interest in Sufism and became a devotee of the Qudiriya order in India and wrote two biographies. Both hagiographies trace a history of Islam in the subcontinent as well as a parallel history of the Mughal expansion and depict some of the humanitarian sides of the Mughal empire that have been subverted in the recent times.

Zeb-un-Nissa (1638-1702), the eldest daughter of Emperor Aurangzeb was imprisoned by her father for 20 long years, for the free spirit which inspired her writings and made her support her father's rivals. Writing under the pseudonym 'Makhfi' or 'the hidden one', her poetry is full of images and references borrowed from Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism—a true ambassador of secular thought. She made in her poems candid admissions of a woman's response to love, its pangs and bodily and emotional manifestations.

Habba Khatoon (1554-1609), known as 'the Nightingale of Kashmir', was a commoner who married into royalty. Her husband Yusuf Shah Chak was the ruler of Kashmir from 1579 to 1586. As Huq explains, the point behind including Khatoon in



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

this selection is to underscore the evidence that on or off royalty, Indian women, especially from the Muslim aristocracy, were developing a literary sense during the 16th and 17th centuries. Her travails as a Kashmiri poet writing not in Persian, which was the royal language of the Mughals, but in the local Kashmiri language is also to be considered from the peripheral or subaltern's perspective. It is said that she burnt all the written copies of her poetry and renounced worldly life. Hence her poetry has survived through centuries in the Kashmiri oral tradition.

The metaphor of aviary used in the book's title is significant. It is slightly different from the harem or zenana and defines clearly an enclosed space with a semblance of mobility that is but finite. Usually the Mughal harem is understood as an eroticised domestic space where women exercised all kinds of pleasure experiments without much

thoughts on self and subjecthood, and where men went for pleasure, rest and recuperation. Those women who resided there were excluded from the process of knowledge production both by the colonial power and their own indigenous contemporaries. So the narratives about Mughal domesticity are significantly different from what we get from the description by male writers.

The four authors discussed in this book are knit together by the power of female writing and how they expressed the redemption of the feminine self. It envisions individualism as the most important modern trait in these women and their writings are considered as their self-assertion. By breaking patriarchal boundaries they were much more modern than the pre-modern times they historically belonged to.

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FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

What we readers want from Zoya Akhtar's 'The Archies'

MAISHA SYEDA AND SARAH ANJUM BARI

Growing up, I remember hoarding *Archie Double Digest* (Archie Comic Publications, 1941) by the dozen. I remember scribbling my name inside the front cover, a heart dotting the 'i' of 'Maisha'. The stacks touched the roof of my cupboards, shelves were lined with those vibrant images of the old-timey comic books. Like most pre-teens and teenagers, I, too, was obsessed with the love-triangle between Archie, Betty, and Veronica, and as I grew up the comics—having sat in my cupboard for years, collecting dust and cockroaches—were thrown out by my mother.

If the maths is correct, I, Sarah, came to Archie years before Maisha did—another fan of the comics but a surreptitious reader. I read it from the stack of books and magazines in my then teenage aunt's bathroom. Too young to be consuming a high school love triangle, I wedged my way into Riverdale in secret (as I did into Sweet Valley and Central Perk), sneaking in hours inside that bathroom, glued to just how happy and free and grown up Archie and his friends' lives seemed.

From the United States all the way to South Asia, across households and generations, Archie thus managed to gather readers in one space in the same way that it gathered the scattered paraphernalia of the popular American culture of its time. Both of us loved indulging in the bright colours and freshness of Riverdale's stories. We loved the crystallised hope of every crisis, every disaster finding its solution by a panel's end. But we loved, also, the adverts of Hubba Bubba and Tootsie Rolls pasted alongside the stories; the boxes of Captain Crunch; the invitation to write to our favourite characters even though we'd never hear back.



COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM BARI

We began loving the Archie comics for their wholesomeness even though darker undertones always lurked in the artwork and the storylines. What did we know of the complications of a love-triangle between best friends? And of Mr Lodge's condescension for a lower-class Archie? How long till we would notice the silhouettes of the female characters drawn to cater to a male gaze, white lace peeking from beneath their clothing? How long till we grew up?

Deviating significantly from all this was the 2017 Netflix original, *Riverdale*, which included Jughead and Cheryl in the set of main characters alongside Archie, Betty, and Veronica, and turned the upbeat high school comedy-romance into a crime-thriller drama.

Indian film director Zoya Akhtar has recently released her rendition of the Archie universe, a Netflix film by the name of *The Archies*. With an elaborate cast launching Dot., Suhana Khan, Agastya Nanda, Khushi Kapoor, Yuvraj Menda, and Vedang Raina, the 1960s-themed teaser seems closer to the tone of the comic books—just a bunch of friends having fun.

From the trailer it looks like Akhtar's *Archies* has a wider cast of main characters too, but what we want to see is the original comics' innocence revisited. We want to see Veronica boss Archie around and him being the goofy teenager, not really knowing what to do with the high-maintenance but caring Veronica. We don't even mind seeing Betty pining over her crush on Archie and his obliviousness to it, as long as the adaptation steers clear of typical Bollywood drama.

We're hopeful because Zoya Akhtar has been known to dissect seemingly glossy yet problematic social dynamics—as seen in *Dil Dhadakne Do*, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, and Amazon Prime's *Made in Heaven*—with a refreshingly light touch, with humour and empathy and a sharp eye for character building. And what is Archie if not a study of loveable characters with technical flaws?

But there is also a potential weakness and it is that everything about the movie as of now looks immensely whitewashed. Is there the risk of it becoming unrelatable to a South Asian audience? Was it their attire? The hairstyles? Is the film set in South Asia? If so, why do the characters look more from the sets of *California Girls* (1985) than anywhere in India?

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

ENTER ALPHABETICA

Vowels form a unique minority in Roy Phoenix's satire

AAQIB HASIB

Satire is not an easy genre to master. And debut novels are even harder to review. However, Roy Phoenix is not your average debut novelist. His experience in the advertisement industry as well as his time writing screenplays—his debut feature film, *Apna Asman* (2007), winning the "Best Feature Film" award at the Stuttgart Film Festival—have played a role in developing his observational writing style. But more than his style, it is the creative flair to be able to conceive the concept of *Alphabetic* (Notion Press, 2021) that makes him stand out.

Alphabetic is a city-state on Planet Typewriter. It is the central setting of Phoenix's debut novel, and is home to all 26 letters of the English alphabet. The alphabets are divided into two groups of 'open sound makers' and 'closed sound makers', essentially vowels and consonants, with our main character, Ypsi, being the letter 'Y'.

Ypsi harbours disdain for the vowels that reside alongside the other consonants in *Alphabetic*. She believes they have been given an unnecessary amount of power

and preferential treatment—they make 38 percent of the total English words in existence, for example—even though they are the minority.

At its core, *Alphabetic* is a satire on majoritarianism: the political philosophy that the majority (whether on the basis of religion, social class, or language) is entitled to make decisions that affect society as a whole. And Phoenix does a great job of imagining the satirical elements of the story.

He uses Ypsi to tell a narrative of class divide, segregation, fascism, and racial disparity. It's a commentary on dictators of the past and the present. When Ypsi talks about the pride and heritage of the consonants, and their blue bloodedness,

or even when she talks about vowels being impure, it is clearly a reference to Nazis, white nationalists, and Neo-Nazis. These sentiments of race or religion-based superiority is something to which our side of the world isn't unfamiliar either.

One major challenge within satire: not only does it have to be a commentary on the politics and culture of the author's

choice of setting, but rather something which a reader from any country or community can relate to. This is where *Alphabetic* excels.

Roy Phoenix does an excellent job of writing a story that is deeply tied to the context of his country, India, while also ensuring that people from elsewhere can relate to it in the context of their lives. The problems of majoritarianism—where the opinions of minorities are disregarded and decisions are made without any consideration for the challenges faced by them—are universal, as are some of Ypsi's ideologies and beliefs that she presents to justify her narrative.

The only critique I have for the book is that readers might struggle at the beginning to get invested in the story. Perhaps he chose to create a world through the alphabet in order to avoid creating proper human characters, who could be likened to real life political or influential figures. Or maybe he just wanted to be creative about the process. However, this often makes it difficult for readers to become invested in the characters in the book, who lack the depth and motivation that come with being human.

Aside from this one point, I would definitely recommend *Alphabetic* to anyone who is fond of satire. It is not going to be a quippy and hilarious read that has you laughing from start to finish, like the works of Terry Pratchett or PG Wodehouse, but it will leave you thinking about the major problems surrounding race, religion, caste, class divides, etc., while also having a chuckle.

Aaqib Hasib will someday finish writing his book. But not today. Write to him at aaqib.hasib@thedailystar.net.



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

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