

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# 'Song of Draupadi': An inside story of the Mahābhārata heroines

**Ira Mukhoty, as a writer, is interested in the evolution of mythology and history, the erasure of women from these histories, and the relevance it has on the status of women in India. The Mahābhārata is famous for its historical battle and powerful men. But somewhere along the way, the stories of the great women of this tale were lost. As with her past books, Heroines: Powerful Indian Women of Myth and History (Aleph, 2017) and Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire (Brilliance Audio, 2018), Mukhoty aspires to recover those lost stories—this time through fiction—in her latest novel, Song of Draupadi: A Novel (Aleph Book Company, 2021).**

MALIHA HUQ

The battle of *Mahābhārata* was a righteous war to claim the throne of Hastinapur between two groups of first cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The visual family tree at the beginning of the novel, elaborately illustrated, helped me understand these complex relations. But unlike in the tale of *Mahābhārata*, *Song of Draupadi* neither begins nor ends with the brothers' stories. A circular narrative encompasses the entire life of Draupadi, the protagonist of the story, from birth to death. As the novel progressed, I also encountered other influential women like Ganga, Satyawati, Amba, Gandhari, and Kunti.

My favourite character, Rani Satyawati of Hastinapur, hadn't come from a royal lineage. Despite her background, the fisherwoman became the wife, mother, and grandmother of kings. Satyawati's pragmatic craftiness (she influenced the old, lustful Raja Shantanu to marry her and forced him to vow that only Satyawati's sons will be the rightful heir of Hastinapur) made her the most ambitious regent—more powerful than any king or male regent of that throne. Each of the women mentioned in the novel have thus played crucial roles in shaping the destiny of ancient India's Kshatriya rulership.

Mukhoty's lush poetic language recreated a palpable ambience of ancient India. She borrowed words like *godhuli*, *takht*, *swayamvar*, and *brahmacharya* from Hindi to retain the fragrance of 'Bharat'. Yet it was the tempestuous personality of Draupadi that startled me the most—a dark feral beauty born out of *agni*, with eyes like the blue lotus—vocal, fiery, and deadset on her vow. Draupadi, the Pandavas' wife, was wagered and lost by her husbands in a game of dice to the Kauravas. After the Pandavas lost her, one of the Kauravas forcefully dragged her by her hair and presented her as their slave in a courtroom full of men. All the elderly men of the family were present, yet nobody came to her aid. Bursting with anger and pain, Draupadi took an oath to avenge her humiliation: she would purify her hair with the blood of her culprit. Unafraid to criticise her husbands for their silence, she later incited them to war. As her character unravelled, I realised, Draupadi was not a *devi* to be put on a pedestal, she was a trailblazer.



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

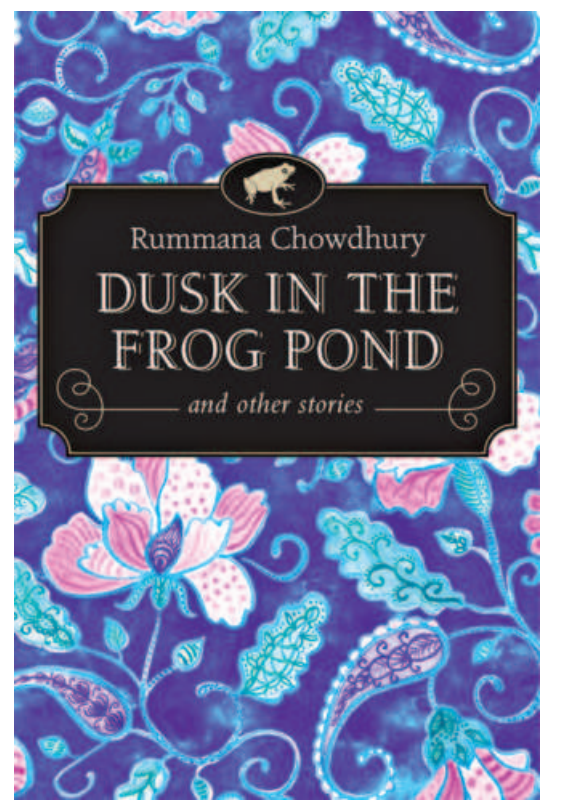
*Mahābhārata* is a foundational story, particularly for the people of undivided India. Its verses were originally written by Brahmin men. This epic of valorous heroes, which was versified by society's upper-class male figures, pushed all the heroines behind the scenes. Their voices were muffled; everything the women said became ventriloquism. Mukhoty lets us hear those voices. Her heroes are flawed, gilded by lust and power and her heroines, clever and determined.

Among many age-old epics, the Ancient Greek epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are eminently popular. Their translated versions have been part of English Literature for many decades. Recently, we've also had the feminist retelling of these myths: Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) and *The Song of*

*Achilles* (2011) are brilliant examples. Since the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* is not as widely read in English as the Western epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, a lot of readers might be unfamiliar with the culture that the *Mahābhārata* represents. *Song of Draupadi* changes that.

Some terms, borrowed directly from Hindi or Sanskrit, might seem foreign to readers unfamiliar with the language. This is the only obstruction readers might face while enjoying this book. Another fact to be kept in mind: this is a work of fiction, not history. One must read the novel with an unprejudiced mind.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

## The invisible colours of yearning for home

SHEJUTI PASHA

Through eight short stories, Rumana Chowdhury's *Dusk in the Frog Pond and Other Stories* (Inanna Publications, Toronto, 2021) brings to light instances of love, loss, solitude, migration and nostalgia as perceived in today's society. The tales span across borders and boundaries and are mostly set in modern, urban cities like New York, Toronto and our home country, Bangladesh.

Women play central roles in the narratives and Rumana Chowdhury paints their happiness and suffering in words as they assume the roles of mothers, daughters and wives. The characters in these stories navigate life's hardships and uncertainties and each of them share a sense of strength and weakness.

One of the common underlying themes in the stories is the concept of arranged marriage and the author uses this as a medium to introduce the idea of travelling and migration. For instance, in the second story, Mou travels to New York right after her marriage and likewise, in "Shadow Over The Henna Tree," Helen, another woman from Bangladesh, moves to Canada to stay with her husband when her daughter turns three.

However, migration does not bring bliss to these women and they struggle with a loss of identity and absence of belongingness. This makes the stories a prominent part of existing diasporic literature and we can see the characters constantly struggling with displacement and exile. In "Rodela's Invisible Colours", the eponymous protagonist struggles to settle into her old life in Toronto after a solo trip to Kolkata and longs for her carefree days in Bangladesh. "The refreshingly sweet, sultry breeze in the month of Falgun haunted her. She ached to return", Chowdhury writes. She feels abandoned and isolated in her marriage and is blown away like a flower in the wind when love knocks on her door. Yet, loneliness and despair do not leave Rodela. Her story ends with the lines, "Living without love, without being loved, would be a long, hard path, [however,] she had to live for herself for today, and for the days to come."

These strong, hopeful women still endeavour to find happiness in spite of their obstacles and the author artfully chooses to show their vulnerability alongside their fights. This human quality makes them relatable to readers. Their apparent solitude makes room for another recurrent theme in the stories—nostalgia. A strong yearning to return home is prominent among these women who have migrated abroad through arranged unions. "Nostalgia set in. There was no place in this world like Dhaka, Brishti felt like bowing her head to her beloved motherland", Chowdhury writes in "Monsoon Breeze."

Although most of the stories carry the idea of troubled nuptials, one story stands out among them all. It shares its name with the book's title and recounts the story of the Liberation War. The story begins with a playful village girl, Ruby, who is eagerly waiting for her husband. Munir works in the city. "Ruby danced as she crossed one paddy bank to another. Her feet were nimble and swift and her spirits high."

But what begins on a note of excitement and anticipation soon takes a grave turn as the peaceful village where the couple resides is torn apart by violence and conflict. War breaks out in the country; Munir joins the freedom fighters and loyally fights for his country. His world never remains the same. One night, while he is away on an operation, a group of West Pakistani soldiers invade his home and brutally torture his mother and wife. Although Ruby survives the horrific incident, she now has her own battles to fight. Ruby is reminded of the dreadful secret. She is agonised by her terrible fate just like Rodela and Ayesha, who were clasped by their own destinies just like the frog pond that is consumed by darkness at dusk.

**Shejuti Pasha is an aspiring writer. Her endless love for books and coffee takes her to many places around the city. Tell her about books at shejutip127@gmail.com.**

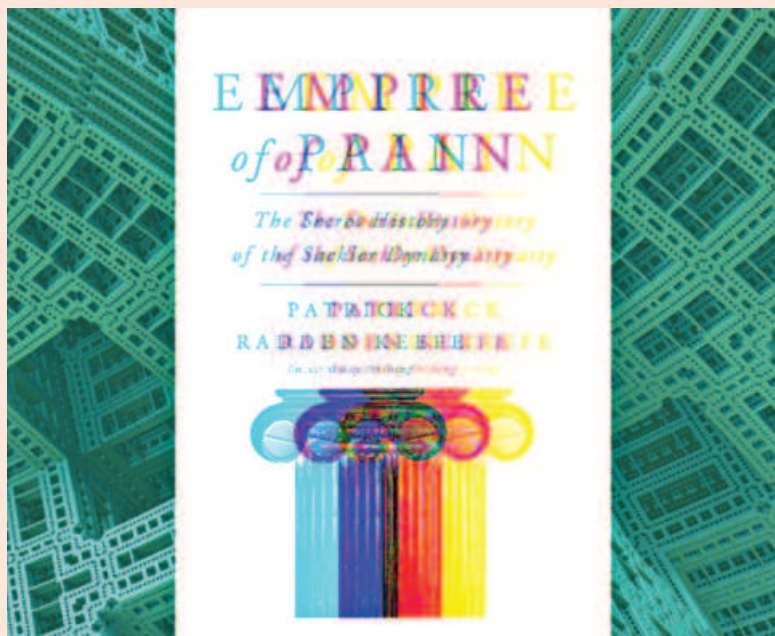
BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# Marketing pills or monetizing pain? One family's greed destroys thousands

MURSALIN MOSADDEQUE

In the last few years, we have heard the name Trump way more than any of us ever wanted to hear. Even before his infamous presidency of the USA, the megalomaniac put his name in large letters in skyscrapers and hotels that he owned. But by no means was he the only New Yorker fixated on the immortality of their name, even if it meant they were immoral.

The Sackler family, another of New York's uber-rich, did it better than Trump. There were Sackler wings in museums like The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Louvre. The family name glared down at exhibition-goers in The Guggenheim and The Smithsonian in the US, and The Tate and The National Gallery in the



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

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the family's immense fortune which would spill out, eventually tarnishing the family name for good—stripped from the institutions where they had contributed generously for decades.

Patrick Radden Keefe, staff writer at *The New Yorker*, wrote a brilliant exposé on the Sackler family in October, 2017. It brought widespread media and public attention to the family's ownership of Purdue Pharma, whose aggressive marketing of opioid painkillers was one of the major factors behind the opioid epidemic in America, leading to addiction in millions and death in more than 70,000 in 2021 alone. Radden Keefe extended his essay to a thorough and detailed account of the Sackler family—from their origins to the heart of the opioid epidemic to a book in 2021,

*Empire of Pain: The Secret History of The Sackler Dynasty* (Doubleday).

Keefe has a penchant for storytelling. He unfolds the saga with crisp details of the intricacies of the family. It is a tale of three brothers: Arthur, the elder brother, was a larger than life figure. He was a charismatic entrepreneur who supported himself and his two younger brothers through medical school. Though Mortimer and Raymond's part of the family were stakeholders of Purdue pharma and have ripped off billions at the cost of human lives and sufferings, the book wisely focuses the initial one-third of the book on Arthur.

Purdue Pharma was able to aggressively promote Oxycontin because of the advertising milieu that was the brainchild of Arthur Sackler. *Empire of Pain* narrates

vividly the machinery Arthur Sackler engineered to ensure the exploitation of the healthcare system. He was at the helm of the leading medical advertising agency, William Douglas McAdams, and also secretly owned his principal competition in the advertising business. He clandestinely funded research works that would garner favourable results for his products, and poured millions to medical journals and FDA officials to keep them in his pockets.

Arthur Sackler used his training as a physician to become an evangelical adman—the Don Draper who pushed pills. He made his sales representatives go door to door in doctors' chambers and clinics; his extravagant advertising zeal overturned the industry norms, and doctors for the first time were using the brand names of medicines instead of their generic ones—practices that are now ubiquitous and taken for granted.

*Empire of Pain* is a wondrous achievement of investigative journalism. It resists the temptation of allowing the sufferings of addiction overwhelm its pages, nor does it seek the cheap thrill of suspense or violence to keep its narrative moving. In a culture so fixated with true-crime podcasts, it does not fail to grab the reader's attention. But the wisdom, breadth, and eloquence of its storytelling about a family sunk knee deep in wrongdoing and their desperate efforts to avoid any culpability can only draw comparison from the greats of all time—like The Sopranos.

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UK, among many others. Dozens of prominent universities including Tufts, Columbia, Harvard, and Yale adorned the Sackler name in their institutes, programmes and buildings.

People were too dazzled by the philanthropy of the Sacklers to question the origin of their wealth. A dark secret lurked behind