

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Did Western education really uplift the colonised Bengalis?

In her book, Paul provides a fascinating description of the communal tension surrounding the foundation of the Dacca University, which “became a symbol of Muslim higher education without any prejudices or biases against Islam, as they were in the Calcutta University curriculum”.

AMINUR RAHIM

Muslims in colonial Bengal and western education is a topic much discussed, but few scholars have attempted to delve deeper into the issues and problems surrounding the topic. *Bengal Muslims and Colonial Education, 1854-1947: A Study of Curriculum, Educational Institutions and Communal Politics* (Routledge, 2022) is a slim volume by Professor Nilanjana Paul that ventures to highlight the effects of colonial rule and education policies on colonised people.

Macaulay, the first Director of Public Instruction of British India, envisioned western education through conservative values: the manufacture of a subordinate urban class of subjects as the defender of social order. Such policies adversely affected Bengali Muslims in the rural Bengal delta. They lacked access to English-language schools or resources to send their children to urban areas for education. In the 1850s, the introduction of jute as a commercial crop changed their fortunes. 'Jotedars', surplus Muslim farmers, began to show an increasing interest in western education.

Amidst this changing colonial economy, the Wood's Dispatch in 1854 encouraged the Raj to provide education to the colonised at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, but

no action was taken. Accordingly, English education has often been portrayed as a modernising agent to reorient class and caste structures. Through her five chapters, Paul argues that colonial education rather sowed discord and contributed to unequal divisions of labour between Hindus and Muslims.

As Paul asserts, it was not only about the lack of resources and the urban-rural dichotomy but also about formulating an appropriate curriculum that addressed the specific needs of aspiring Muslim scholars who were very different from their Hindu peers. Despite the importance of these issues, as Paul points out, the Muslim community itself was divided as to how to implement the changes in the curriculum so that Muslim learners would be benefited. Ashraf Muslims favoured Urdu over vernacular education and Muslim women were prohibited from participating in western education for fear of brewing disrespect for Islamic ethos. Likewise, they were also concerned that Islamic learning and culture should be prioritised over secular education. Due to the absence of free primary education in rural areas, maktabas and madrasas became the preferred sites for mass education. However, as meticulously recorded by Paul, reading the Quran and memorising verses did not improve Muslim students' abilities to compete with students educated in the

western educational system.

The appearance of Fazlul Haq on the political scene is described in the book as the “High time of Muslim hope”. Indeed, Haq provided a glimpse of hope for the Muslim community. Haq's inclination for positive discrimination enabled him to be an indefatigable promoter of English education for Muslims across gender lines. A major achievement of Haq's was founding Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta, the first Muslim women's college in Bengal, and passing the Primary Education Bill, which made elementary education free and compulsory for all. Finally, Haq managed to remove the barrier to Muslim women's education and mass education with a bold action.

In her book, Paul provides a fascinating description of the communal tension surrounding the foundation of the Dacca University, which “became a symbol of Muslim higher education without any prejudices or biases against Islam, as they were in the Calcutta University curriculum”. Hindu Bhadrakols badmouthed the University's founding in 1920, saying it would be an Islamic propagation centre rather than a learning site, calling it the “Mecca University of the East.”

Paul's observation corroborates Hunter's observation that the absence of Muslim instructors and an appropriate curriculum impeded Muslim education. Paul could have added that the lack of Muslim student hostels in subdivisional and district towns also deterred rural Muslim parents from sending their children to urban centres, where they faced difficulties obtaining housing due to discrimination from Hindu landlords. Disproving the innuendo, the Dacca University became a premier learning centre in the Indian subcontinent for faculty and students of different ethnicities. However, sectarian politics harmed communal harmony, while colonisers continued to play the communal card, implying that colonised people had a natural tendency to return to their primordial instincts no matter how well educated they were.

Despite Paul's painstaking research, the book contains a few shortcomings. Lack of detail in discussing the curriculum obscures its content and pedagogies and, in turn, the dehumanising effects of rote learning on colonised populations. With fewer than 104 pages, the reader gets an authoritative view of colonial education in the dying days of the Raj.

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DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

In “Lucky”, innocent lives encounter destructive politics

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

Have you ever read a story that moves through you like a quick, soft breeze and at the same time shifts something inside your heart? “Lucky” (IBUA Publishing, 2021) by Doreen Baingana is one such literary gem. Shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2021, the story is a mix of first-person plural and singular narration (like “Hitting Budapest” by NoViolet Bulawayo). Despite this hybrid feature, in my mind, the story lingers in the “we” voice due to its prominence and abundance overshadowing the “I”. As a perk of the former, the reader rides the wave of an effortlessly energetic, insightful, and witty language. Reading “Lucky” feels as though the musical voice sprang forth spontaneously from the story, without much altering or tuning. It manages to hypnotise from the start to finish without a dent of dullness.

Besides Bulawayo's 2011 Caine Prize hit, the first-person plural bits in “Lucky” also reminded me of “Fanta Blackcurrant” by Makena Onjerika and “Come, Japanese” by Julie Otsuka.

We follow an unnamed narrator, his classmates, and their Math teacher as they wait out an ongoing civil war (between the government forces and the infamous Lakwena rebels of Uganda) in their boarding school campus. They pass their time scavenging for maize and mangoes, cooking, cleaning, playing make-believe war games, and reluctantly solving math problems at the teacher's persistence.

We are pushed into the conflict as the characters run into their dorm and cover under their bunk beds upon hearing a deafening clamour. An armed group of Lakwena rebels are passing through their campus. Once they are gone, one of the characters emerges out of hiding and

“Ask me what prison is like and I'll tell you: whole hours, days, stretching out like an endless line of ants, filled with nothing but the same routine chores, and then sitting around staring emptily at the same few pimply faces, listening to our stomachs growl, our thoughts roaming the carefree past or a fantastic future, circling, circling to avoid the wide, flat, dry now”, the narrator says.

their lives change forever. The climax is perfectly restrained, no overdone sentimentality at play. It is a masterclass in striking grief into a reader's heart without painting drawn-out scenes.

Baingana infuses the story with political criticism (which avoids the risk of sounding preachy and didactic) and humorous encounters. Consider this scene where our narrator is told by the teacher to stay down while the rebels are passing by: “Don't move,” Koma hisses...Like I was about to do what, tour the school?” And, “Don't ask me what the war is all about: the new government army of former rebels was now fighting rebels who had been the old government army. So what's the difference?”

The story's excellence lies not only in the grand themes it touches—grief, war, nostalgia, and displacement. It also lies in the child-like, unapologetic simplicity of the language.

For me, the key takeaway from “Lucky” would be the perspective one can gain into living in the shadow of war, which creates around its victims a prison of undying misery. “Ask me what prison is like and I'll tell you: whole hours, days, stretching out like an endless line of ants, filled with nothing but the same routine chores, and then sitting around staring emptily at the same few pimply faces, listening to our stomachs growl, our thoughts roaming the carefree past or a fantastic future, circling, circling to avoid the wide, flat, dry now”, the narrator says. The quote opens the reader's consciousness to the fact of suffocating monotony and pining for stability. Be it regarding the civilians in Tigray or Ukraine or the Rohingya in our own backyard, Baingana's story remains relevant despite being set in the 20th century.

Add the usage of children as some of the main characters to that takeaway, and we see the clever irony Baingana builds before us: innocence bearing the brunt of evil.

“Lucky” was published on The Ako Caine Prize website. Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

AT THE BLUMS'

A review of *The Netanyahus* by Joshua Cohen

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Like many, I was introduced to Harold Bloom through his commentary on writers I admired. I vehemently disagreed with his terming of John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978) as a “period piece”—living now in an age of renewed trans-phobia and the American pushback against abortion, he could not have been more wrong there. Yet, I also agreed with his denigration of JK Rowling and his championing of Philip Roth and Don Delillo. Bloom was a tiring defender of the “Western Cannon”; he had famously called the feminist and Marxist interpreters of literature of his time “the school of resentment.” In short, he was a character, the way Nabokov or Gore Vidal were. He had been fictionalised before (Bloom himself maintained that he was the inspiration behind Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*). Here, in his Pulitzer winning novel *The Netanyahus* (2021), Joshua Cohen's treatment of Harold Bloom is a finely combed comedy that rivals its Jewish predecessors in how brilliantly it converges the anxieties of academia with the eccentrics populating history.

Post-war, Harold Bloom was once asked at his university to “co-ordinate the campus visit of an obscure Israeli historian named Ben-Zion Netanyahu, who showed up for a job interview and lecture with his wife and three children in tow and proceeded to make a mess” of his house. Of the three children, the middle one would one day go about to be the Prime Minister of Israel, shaping the future of the region influenced greatly by his father's brand of Zionism. It goes without saying that any writer worth his salt would seize upon this bit the minute they come across it.

Cohen's book confidently deals with the comedy of the Jewish family. Joshua Cohen's Bloom, Ruben Blum, is a historian teaching at a mediocre university upstate so

he can fast-track a tenureship. He is the only Jewish faculty member there (Bloom too had been the first Jewish person to receive tenure from Yale's English Department). His hands are tied when the head of his department requests him to chaperone one Netanyahu, an historian they are looking to hire and interview. Blum's wife Edith is unhappy and works at the library. Their daughter Judy hates the shape of her nose and in the first half of the novel, before the



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

Netanyahu family arrives, tries to convince her parents to sign off on a nose-job. The sequence reminds one of Alex Portnoy (from Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*) going around to meet girls with his hands over his nose, lest anyone sees he is a Jew!

As Cohen's Bloom traverses through the sensitivity of his task—how does a token Jew go about recommending (or not) this historian and let it be a purely academic decision?—he is overwhelmed with conflicting letters of recommendation that only add to his discomfort. The letters, of chapter length, are some of the gems

of the novel. One of them by a professor at the Hebrew University reads: “...Netanyahu himself, who for weeks and weeks has been inundating the faculty here with telegram requests for letters of recommendation, to be sent to you as the secretary of the hiring committee. I do not know how many of my colleagues refused him...I hope I am not the only one who did not refuse him...”

Ruben Blum's discomfort is a necessity. The academic humour (earlier on in the letter, Satan is referred to as “the angel who fell when he failed to get tenure”) works much of the time because Cohen has adeptly toned down Harold Bloom's real-life character into a weary one with a noticeable absence of a strong opinion. The change textures in the contrast of the wacky Netanyahu present in the later half of the novel.

In the end credits of the novel, Cohen tells us of sending a draft of the book to the real Judy, a young female relative who had stayed with the Blooms one time. In response to the manuscript, she wrote to him: “No one reads books anymore and the Jews are either on the wrong side of history or just irrelevant. IF YOU'RE HAVING AN IDENTITY CRISIS, I'm sorry...”

On the contrary, it seems to me that Cohen has finally found his place in literature. I remember when a previous novel of his, *Book of Numbers*, was making the rounds as the “*Infinite Jest* of the Internet”—a line even Cohen will agree now doesn't excite anybody. His time as Edward Snowden's ghostwriter isn't exactly what a literary writer wants to be solely known for. However, with *The Netanyahus*, Joshua Cohen fits in perfectly among the Bellows and Roths of American literature. Surely, he has written a novel even Harold Bloom would approve of.

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