

DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# A woman and her many borders

MAHMUD RAHMAN

There are people who rush to read the winners of literary awards. I'm not one. But I made an exception this year. When I learned that *Tomb of Sand* (Penguin Books, 2021), Daisy Rockwell's English translation of Geetanjali Shree's Hindi novel *Ret Samadhi* (Rajkamal Prakashan, 2018), won the 2022 International Booker Prize, I immediately ordered the book from London.

I was excited when it arrived. A bit daunted, though, since it's 735 pages long. I found a park bench nearby beneath the train tracks, and while trains ran overhead, people walked, jogged, or bicycled past me, a few people occasionally throwing a glance at a person reading a book on a bench—two of them even remarking with joy at the sight—I finished *Tomb of Sand* in six weeks.

What a thoroughly enjoyable read. If you're someone who reads for a rapidly-moving plot, this book may not be for you. There is a plot embedded here, but this novel is so much more: a long, winding journey, centred on a family, with acute eyes on love and distances within a family, but also through language, Partition and imposed borders, and so much more. There's sadness, foreshadowed right in the opening pages, but there is so much keen and delightful observation. And much humour.

The book opens with an apt description of what your reading experience will be: "The story's path unfurls, not knowing where it will stop, tacking to the right and left, twisting and turning, allowing anything and everything to join in the narration."

The story is centred on a family in Delhi, with the focus on 80-year old widowed Ma. The book opens with Bade,

**The way Rockwell translated this book, you also end up taking pleasure in the multiple language echoes of the subcontinent.**

the eldest son, retiring and preparing to move from a government-provided home to a private house. In the midst of the chaos, Ma disappears. She will be found wandering, and the family agrees to let her move in with Beti, the daughter, who lives by herself in a somewhat unconventional lifestyle. There under the cautious eye of the daughter, the mother recovers and builds an engaged life with Rosie, a hijra friend of many years who treats her as a sister. After a series of crises, the final part of the book opens with Ma deciding she wants to visit Pakistan, and Ma and Beti cross

the border. The pair go off on a journey that takes them through Lahore, the Thar desert, other destinations—a trip both in geography and vivid memories of Partition time—and they end up in Khyber.

The plot had enough surprises to satisfy me, but the special joy in the book was in the meanders. At one point you read pages about the tinkling of bangles on Ma's wrist keeping Beti awake at night, worrying about Ma's fragility, and you can yourself palpably feel the unease. In other places, you read a reflection on doors, the doors of eldest sons' houses being in a sense permanently open. Borders, for sure. No surprise, since the opening page promised, "This particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please. Once you've got women and a border, a story can write itself."

The meanders to me, as a reader, sent me on my own tangents. I found myself stopping to reflect on my own doors, not those of an eldest son, but of a wanderer, someone who's moved and lived in several dozen rented apartments. What did those doors signify to me, to those who lived with me or those who visited? Borders happen to be one of my own preoccupations and I contemplated borders of language, borders between men and women, between elders and those younger, between classes.

The other delight in the book is the

language. I marvel at how Daisy Rockwell translated this one-of-a-kind novel. She pulled off a unique transformation. In a few cases, she leaves some Hindi, in other places she creates Hindified words in English. She mutates wordplay. Not knowing Hindi, I missed a few things but those were solved with Google. The book is eminently readable for someone with no knowledge of Hindi. There are many cultural, literary, and political references, and it helped that I knew most of those. The way Rockwell translated this book, you also end up taking pleasure in the multiple language echoes of the subcontinent. In her translator's note, she writes: "I have striven throughout my translation to recreate the text as an English dhvani of the Hindi, seeking out wordplays, echoes, etymologies, and coinages that feel Hindi-esque." She succeeded quite marvellously, and it would be fabulous if Rockwell could use this experience to write or teach some craft lessons to share with others who translate from South Asian languages.

**Mahmud Rahman is a writer and translator who currently lives in California. His second book, a translation of Bangladeshi writer Mahmudul Haque's Partition-centred novel Black Ice, was published in 2012 by HarperCollins India. For more on Mahmud's writing, visit [www.mahmudrahman.com](http://www.mahmudrahman.com).**

REVIEW: NONFICTION

## Syed Waliullah: husband, artist, thinker, writer

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Born on August 15, 1922 in Kolkata, Bangladesh novelist Syed Waliullah would go on to spend nearly 20 years of his life away from home as a diplomat—posted first in Karachi, then New Delhi, then Sydney, Jakarta, London, and Paris. It would be his literary life that would allow room for connection to the self and to his roots. *Lal Shalu* (1948), his iconic novel, was translated to English as *Tree without Roots* (2005) and later to French as *Larbre sans racines*, this one done by his French wife Anne-Marie Thibaud. This journey of a single text through languages and borders reflects the journey the author experienced throughout his life, moored by a connection to home.

*Syed Waliullah: My Husband As I Saw Him* (Nympha Publication, 2022), a photobook authored by Anne-Marie and edited by their children, Simine and Iraj Waliullah, attempts to record this life lived on the move, marked by the conversations and memories that lent it warmth.

Conversations, as Professor Shamsad Mortuza writes in his Preface to the book, played a vital role in the origin story of the Waliullah family. "One early morning in Sydney" is when it began—until recently a Fulbright scholar, Anne-Marie had just joined the French embassy in Sydney, and Syed Waliullah was serving as the press attaché at the Pakistan embassy. They met at a Christmas party, and discussions unfolded between the two about French writers, about God's existence and the purpose of life, about the Korean war and other political affairs. These conversations would pan out on hill tops, over white sand beaches.

Coffee table books are often thought of as devoid of real content, but the text and photographs in this book form a touching, insightful collage of a life built against a momentous time in history.

There is vivid prose: "[t]he red earth, the grey thorny bushes, the lovely silvery gum trees with their smooth trunks and branching, their small leaves constantly trembling in the breeze". There is a

poetic quality to the writing too, with each of the anecdotes beginning with "I remember", "I recall", "I was fascinated"—phrases that situate the author in the role of narrator and observer. And within the anecdotes there are reflections of how social norms dictated dynamics between Hindus and Muslims in the aftermath of the Partition. In a chapter titled "Our Meeting", Anne-Marie recalls the author's elder mama, Sirajul Islam, who would help Waliullah create Comrade Publishing and the *Contemporary* magazine in Kolkata.

But it was the voracious reader and writer in Waliullah that led him through a vigorous literary life. The chapter titled "The Writer" includes excerpts from his diary, snapshots of his editorial for *Contemporary* magazine, and handwritten edits on his pieces for Shaogot magazine, among others. "While collecting my old stories for the book, [...] I came across in bound volumes, old, old stories that I had written ten years ago and had forgotten all about. They amazed me, their discovery. Some of them made me feel embarrassed", Waliullah wrote in a letter dated November 24, 1954.

What begins as light reading into a family's life thus transitions into fascinating material on how Waliullah's mind evolved over the years as a connoisseur of culture. Letters give way to photographs, which in turn make space for a comprehensive bibliography of the author's work and achievements.

Though brief, these stories all coalesce to form fascinating reading for fans of a Bangladeshi figure who held great passion for art in all its forms, be it painting, literature, or music.

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REVIEW: NONFICTION

# Unpacking the language of the Bede community

SERAJUL ISLAM QUADIR

The Bede, or water gypsies, represent a community of nomads in the Indian subcontinent who care little about a permanent settlement and move from one place to another. In Bangladesh, the Bede community live collectively in boats on rivers and canals or in temporary shelters on the plain land and along the banks of rivers. They are dispersed across Bangladesh—mainly at Savar in Dhaka, Kaliganj in Jhenaidah, Munshiganj, Sunamganj, Joydevpur in Gazipur, Mirsarai in Chattogram, Cumilla, and Sonagazi of Feni. According to a survey by the Department of Social Welfare, 99 percent of the Bede population are Muslims and a similar percentage of them are unlettered. Therefore, the nomadic way of life has made the Bede community almost remote from the mainstream of society, underprivileged, poverty-stricken with little or no access to services or privileges as citizens; they are often subject to human rights violations along with discrimination. Significantly, they have their unique and distinct language—Thar, which has remained elusive, with no written form and only used among themselves.

Author Habibur Rahman, like an avid social researcher, has looked in depth into the community life of the Bede population and written a well-researched book titled *Thar: Bede Jonogoshthir Bhasha* (Panjeri Publications,

2022). In 11 chapters, Rahman defines the Thar language and its characteristics, origins, and variations and the ethnic identity of the Bede people, applying Noam Chomsky's theories to the language's grammar and sentence construction. He also presents sufficient examples of transformations, forms of social, economic, cultural, and environmental terms used in the everyday vocabulary. He has shown



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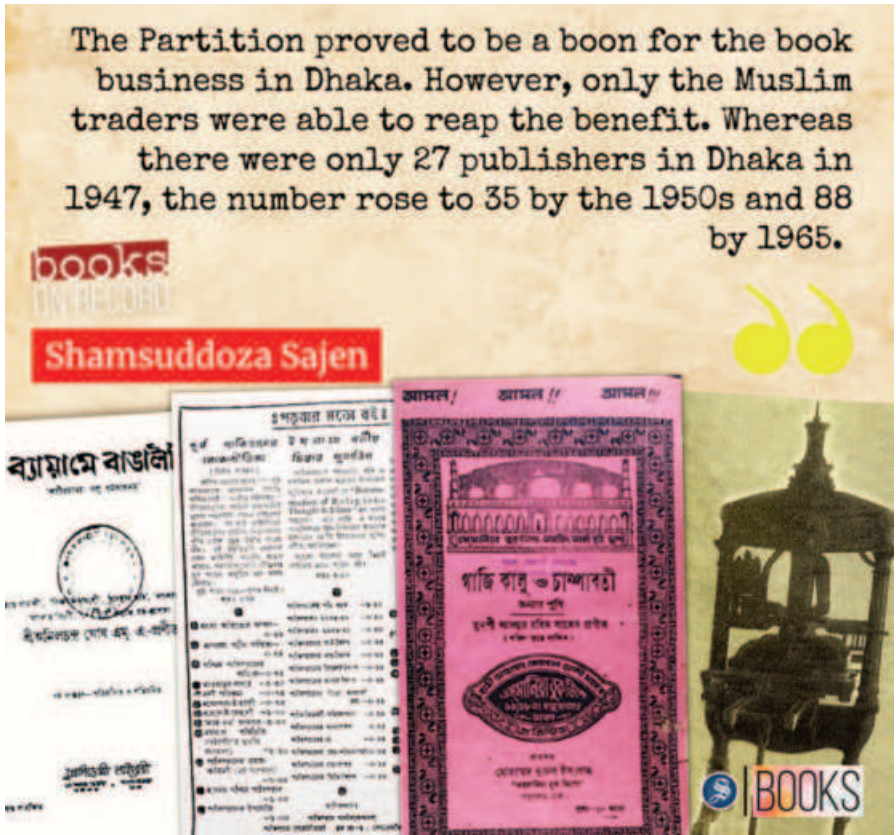
that this language is the mother tongue of a few, but its vocabulary and potential for development are enormous, which requires permanent existence alongside other languages.

Additionally, the author not only depicts the distinct endangered language of the Bede people but also follows established, accepted conventions from a modern linguistic

point of view with a sense of inquisitiveness. His loving and affectionate engagement with the fieldwork in the Bede community and his painstaking, insightful research lends depth and analysis to the book, which permeates page after page. The book, as a result, sheds light on various aspects of nomadic life, including the ethnographic and cultural aspects of the community. Studying this endangered language can be a good supplement to understanding archaeological excavations because the language is a reflection of the life of a community.

The Bede community is exposed to poverty and vulnerability. They struggle to earn a living, yet they have not much regret. These are the tales the author wanted to share with his readers and help them understand the pains and joys of Bede people—often seen as snake charmers or vendors of indigenous medicine or entertainers of monkey game and magic—more humanely. I admit that before reading this book, I did not take much interest in the life of this community and was not aware that they have a matriarchal society. This book has not only introduced readers to their language, but it also has made a bridge between them and the distinct social fabric of this community.

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## Partition and the Dhaka book trade

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

In the first instalment of 'Books On Record', our new digital series on book history, Shamsuddoza Sajen writes

about the impact of the Partition of India on Dhaka's book trade. Read the article on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook and Instagram pages.