



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

1901 feels a lot like 2020 in Pamuk’s latest novel

Orhan Pamuk’s ‘Nights of Plague’ (Knopf, 2022)

NOUSHIN NURI

There is a woman who writes letters. She sits at her desk overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, day after day, and fills pages to send to her sister in Istanbul. Almost a century later, another woman would derive heavily from their correspondence to write the history of Mingheria and hand it down to us in the form of the book named *Nights of Plague*.

Orhan Pamuk shows Mingheria as the boiling pot of nationalism. As the plague covers the capital Arkaz like an ominous blanket, places where flowers used to grow start reeking of death. The sea turns into steel. Such extreme ordeal breeds the ground for seemingly inconsequential actions by individuals who change Mingheria forever.

The letter writing woman is Princess Pakize. She came to the Ottoman island of Mingheria with her husband, Prince Consort Doctor Nuri—a brilliant quarantine doctor—to put an end to the infectious bubonic plague that was creeping out of control yet was being kept secret by the authorities. The island, called the pearl of the Mediterranean Sea, has an almost mythical quality to it. Famous for its pink-white marbles and fragrant rose biscuits, Mingheria is the birthplace of a contemporary historian, Mina

Mingher, whose voice the writer chooses to tell the story in.

Our historian does a rigorous job of “verifying the authenticity” of the Mingherian history she learns. Her primary source, and inspiration, are the letters of Princess Pakize, and to confirm different historical details, she refers to memoirs of those who survived the time. Perhaps because of all the cross-referencing and promises of accuracy, it took me a hundred pages and a Google search of ‘Mingheria’ to realise that all of it—Mingheria, Princess Pakize, and Mina Mingher herself—are fictional.

Nights of Plague, like Orhan Pamuk’s prize-winning novel *My Name is Red* (Knopf, 2001), is historical fiction with a murder mystery. But as one historical event unfolds after another, with Princess Pakize and her husband constantly evoking for me a sense of Sherlock Holmes while trying to solve the murder, the book’s pages darken with a shadow of Westernisation at the dusk of the Ottoman Empire.

Opposed to most of the Empire, where Westernisation took a firm footing, Pamuk shows Mingheria as the boiling pot of nationalism. As the plague covers the capital Arkaz like an ominous blanket, places where flowers used to grow start reeking of death. With no scheduled ferries visiting the island anymore, the sea turns into steel, making it clear that Mingheria is left on its own. Such

extreme ordeal breeds the ground for very subjective, seemingly inconsequential, but history-altering actions by individuals who change Mingheria forever.

With the island completely cut off, pictures sent by correspondents to foreign newspapers remained the only source that allowed the world to know what was happening in Mingheria. The author, in a solemn but satirical tone, shows how these pictures were misinterpreted by newspapers—either due to lack of knowledge, or to create a more interesting narrative, or both. Reading about this brings a sense of déjà vu of our own struggle with fake news during the Covid-19 pandemic.

How Mingherians responded to the infectious plague in 1901 isn’t altogether different from our response to the Covid-19. They too hid their patients in fear of stigma and isolation, selfishly hoarded commodities, and used the disease as a political and religious weapon. The first edition of the novel (in Turkish) came out in October 2021 and Pamuk started writing it just four years before the pandemic broke out, which lends to him an almost clairvoyant quality.

But clairvoyant or not, he definitely was a painter, as he wrote in his memoir, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (Knopf, 2005). ‘Painting with words’ takes a literal meaning in this novel. Historical landmarks are

captured in paintings that Pamuk describes, taking note of the little details of the background, rendering the mood in their subtle and dominant hues, and creating vicarious visual pleasure for the readers.

After Mina Mingher has told us the story of Mingheria, she walks us through her tiresome experience of writing this book. She is denied renewal of her Mingherian passport for 20 years. The authorities relent at some point, but her possessions would be searched in her absence and the secret police would monitor her every move. It’s the story of many intellectuals who have tried to tell a history without being blind to the Empire’s injustice against its Greek, Armenian, and Kurdish populations. Many writers, including Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak, have suffered because Turkey still holds on to this collective amnesia.

Be it lack of intellectual freedom or the outbreak of a disease, Pamuk constantly evokes the present through the past in this book. Plague has crept through the map of history, cloaking cities in death and desolation. But it didn’t stop at destruction. In Mingheria, the plague was as much about creation as it was about death.

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BOOK REVIEW: MEMOIR

A life in words and images

‘Je Jibon Amar Chilo’ by Imdadul Haq Milan (Ananya, 2023)

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Fiction writer Imdadul Haq Milan has written an autobiography, published at this year’s Ekushey Boi Mela. Against a large canvas, he paints a picture of his life and highlights stories that have not been told before. To a reader, these anecdotes will be delightful.

The memoir is no less than a novel—replete with sorrows, disappointments, love and joy. How many people the author has received neglect from in his life, how much humiliation he has endured, how many relatives have become strangers and how, those who were far away, have come close.

As a writer, Haque struggled early in his career. He went door-to-door to publishers—no one wanted to print his book. He started his career by writing fiction for a weekly magazine through the guidance of Rafiq Azad, a poet he greatly admired.



The two had met through Milan’s writing—he had written his novel, *Dukkho Koshto*, inspired by one of Azad’s poems in 1976. The book gained popularity, and the friendship between the two flourished. The bond led Milan to serialise his novel in the *Uttaradhikar* newspaper published by Bangla Academy.

Over the course of these years, Milan lost the newspaper job and later also moved to Germany in the hopes of better living for his family. But he couldn’t stay there for long. When he returned to Bangladesh, unemployment and depression gripped him.

Taking us from his childhood in Gendaria to the friendship, in later years, with actors Humayun Faridi and Afsal Hossain, other renowned characters, and back to talk of his Nana Bari, the author does not shy away from conveying the truth of his experiences.

The story begins in Medinimandal village, where the author grew up, where his father struggled to raise him and his siblings. The story takes us, also, to Milan’s first TV drama. Reminiscing about those days, he writes, “My first TV drama was *Mayakanan*. Afzal and Subarna’s pair was wildly famous then. *Mayakanan* became popular because of their performance, and people recognised me in the play.” Thus began the journey.

The story ends, at least in the book, with the author comparing human life to a river—its twists and turns, the many ups and downs, the characters who have loved and hurt, humiliated or disappointed him.

Milan’s life, as presented in this book, truly is like a story.

Shah Alam Shazu is a journalist and writer.

BOOK REVIEW: REPORTAGE

Feeling and doing for homeless children

‘Nobody’s Children’ by Rubaiya Murshed (University Press Limited, 2022)

PROTIK BARDHAN

Rubaiya Murshed’s *Nobody’s Children* is a genre of its own kind—it employs both stark facts and literary elements at the same time. As the title aptly suggests, it is focused on the issue of children who are living on the streets without proper care or support from their families.

One reading between the lines would unfailingly get tinged with the warmth and honesty of the author’s feelings. To me, that is the most noteworthy thing about the book.

Its preface starts with a quote from the famous Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky: ‘What is honour when you have nothing to eat’. Surely, it is a way of emphasising that necessities such as food and shelter are more important than abstract concepts like honour when it comes to survival and well-being. Only the victim knows how it hurts when one goes to sleep hungry or half-fed or how it feels to experience public negligence and scorn.

But Rubaiya, despite being an economist, does not reduce her characters to mere economic indicators like poverty, hunger, deprivation, and so on; instead, she

makes a beautiful rendering of them in their totality.

A chapter titled “The Boy Who Loved” offers one such heart-touching example of a street boy named Saiful. He was once forced to take refuge in a bus stop near TSC in the Dhaka University campus.

“For street children like Saiful on such rainy nights”, Rubaiya writes, “the only relatively dryer places to try and sleep are bus stands or under park benches”. But Saiful, despite having no shelter and food security, exhibits a strong sense of affinity towards a beautiful yellow-beaked bird—an ochin pakhi, in his own words. As its wing breaks, we see how a frantic Saiful risks his own life to heal the bird, which was in the custody of a DMC student. Saiful camps outside the student’s dormitory. It rains on and off all night, and he develops a high fever and pneumonia.

The bird cannot be saved, and Saiful cries out his heart for it, as if he were giving vent to all the frustrations and woes he has suffered since his birth.

Making others feel for them

Before joining the University of Dhaka, Rubaiya taught at the Sunnysdale School, Dhaka for a



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

few months. Sometimes as a proxy teacher, she shared the stories of the homeless children with class eight students and then asked them to write down whatever came to mind as they imagined themselves in the position of a homeless street child.

A part of Rubaiya thought that the children would feel bored by her approach. On the contrary, they wrote their impressions beautifully in their notebooks before tearing out the pages to hand over to her. The impressions of Fabiha Anbar,

a student of Class Eight, Sunnysdale School, go like this:

“Frankly speaking, I cannot even imagine myself as a homeless street child. We, the ones who have the privilege to stay with our families and enjoy the luxuries of life, are just so indulged in these that we never realise how important and valuable these things are. We just take everything for granted.”

SDG and Rubaiya’s efforts

Eradicating poverty is a central theme of the SDGs, with Goal 1

specifically aimed at ending poverty in all its forms everywhere. The goal recognizes that poverty is not only a lack of income, but also a lack of access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and clean water. A lack of opportunity is not just an economic problem, but also a moral and ethical issue, Nobel laureate philosopher and economist Amartya Sen has argued. To him, access to education is a fundamental aspect of human development and a key driver of economic growth and prosperity.

Rubaiya, in her way, makes a commendable attempt to ensure that these children can have access to education through the bot-tola school she and her cohorts run for them.

Feeling the same way

In his poem ‘Chimney Sweeper’, published in his collection, *Songs of Innocence*, in 1789, William Blake reflects on the bleak and unjust conditions faced by child chimney sweepers in 18th-century England, who were often forced into dangerous and dirty jobs at a young age. Blake uses imagery and symbolism to critique the treatment of these children and highlight the innocence and purity that are lost

as a result of their exploitation. The poem remains one of Blake’s most widely read and studied works and is regarded as an important work of social criticism, an expression of the Romantic movement’s concern for the oppressed and marginalised.

Both Rubaiya and Blake use their platforms to raise awareness about these issues and advocate for the betterment of these groups. Their actions demonstrate a strong sense of empathy and a desire to bring about change in society. Furthermore, both individuals show a willingness to challenge the status quo and speak out against the injustices they see in their communities.

This book, written in communicative and lucid prose, is a kind of docufiction, which is rapidly gaining popularity across the countries. It is a form of storytelling that uses real-life events, people, and places as the basis for a fictional or semi-fictional narrative. Rubaiya shows mastery in this particular genre. I hope her writer self will not be eclipsed by her researcher or economist self; rather, both will make a wonderful combination.

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