

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A legacy of women’s freedom in art

‘After Sappho’ by Selby Wynn Schwartz (Picador, 2022)



COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM BARI

Like discovering lost scraps floating through time, the story flits back and forth between their years. We learn that the degrees of violence they encountered differed. For instance, according to Article 544 of the Penal Code of Italian law in 1893, young girls could be given in marriage by their fathers to the men who raped them.

SARAH ANJUM BARI

There is an immobilising power in mirrors. Dorian Gray fell prey to it, as did Snow White’s Evil Queen, as did Narcissus, all obsessed with their reflections. In the chase scenes in action movies, too, it is usually inside a hall of mirrors that the predator is momentarily stumped, colliding into their own repetitions. But it isn’t the reflection that knocks them down. They’re usually defeated by an incapacity for perception, an inability to recognise what is in front of them. Selby Wynn Schwartz’s debut novel is one such hall of mirrors, though it can move as much as it can immobilise. The novel’s beginning may be in 1885 Italy, which is where it opens, or in 1928 England, which is where it ends, or it may even be in 630 BCE, which is where, in the first page of a prologue, a narrator speaking in the first person plural changes their names to Sappho. In antiquity, Sappho was the great Poetess who lived on the island of Lesbos, born circa 620 BCE, authoring historic verses depicting love, desire, and passion for the self. Sappho’s poems survive only in numbered fragments, and that is how Schwartz’s Booker longlisted *After Sappho* is structured—in numbered, dated fragments that peak into (real) women’s lives across the 19th to 20th centuries. Lina Poletti, Italian writer, painter,

feminist. Sibilla Aleramo, who would produce autobiographical representations of women’s lives in 19th century Italy. Anna Kuliscioff, Ukrainian-born feminist, anarchist. Romaine Brooks, the American artist who profiled bohemian American and European faces. Eva Palmer, the famed performer and director who would revive ancient Greek life for the stage. Virginia Woolf, who wove power and grace into her stories of people’s dance across gender, as England evolved in the background. Schwartz’s narrator speaks in the choral “we”, and like a daisy chain, they connect all these women’s shared yet individual experiences of feeling closed in, being violated, feeling misunderstood by society, until they all shed their names and managed to “escape[] the century”. Like discovering lost scraps floating through time, the story flits back and forth between their years. We learn that the degrees of violence they encountered differed. For instance, according to Article 544 of the Penal Code of Italian law in 1893, young girls could be given in marriage by their fathers to the men who raped them. Rina Faccio, who would later become Sibilla Aleramo, met this fate, followed by a bloody miscarriage and a suicide attempt, until she shed that history, shed her family, and her name. Later, in 1905, a book called *The Feminine Note in Fiction* written by a man claimed that the novel as an artform

was beginning to disappear as more and more women wrote and read it. In one of the most triumphant moments in the book, the narrator then recounts, “Those of us who read the English papers in January 1905 were treated to the extraordinary spectacle of Virginia Stephen raising her eyebrows in print. [...] If there were faults with women writers, Virginia pointed out, these merely demonstrated the dire need to educate girls as rigorously as the boys of Cambridge; if our novels were to be judged, let the critics wait a century before pouncing. Lastly, as proof that women writers might range freely from poignant details to the vastness of truth and tragic form, Virginia offered the indisputable example of Sappho.” And so these women, each in their own realms, took after Sappho to battle for suffrage, for autonomy of body, mind, and artistic expression, for a fluid identity marked by self-invented labels and aesthetic choices. Some flaws then emerge in this collage of women’s movements being formed. As the narrator describes some of them as volatile, alchemical, violent, luminous waves, one wonders if a woman of agency is always meant to come across as an exotic creature of fantasies. Must we always inspire such awe? And, while there is nothing wrong with choosing to situate a particular history within the Western canon, there is something to be said when that narrative tries to speak for an all-inclusive “we”, while reflecting only the struggles of women of the white race. There are no women of colour handpicked for this garland of solidarity, and no mention of the issues of class, race, and power imbalances that intersect their feminisms. Despite its stories being drawn from reality, Schwartz asserts in her bibliographic note that *After Sappho* is a work of fiction. As a reader, you don’t feel the need to question this. The text echoes and mutates the same approaches to storytelling as the real-life subjects of this novel once took, melding images, facts, movements and memories to produce narratives that would turn into mythology, into history, ripe with all its power and convenient forgetfulness. Fiction doesn’t just mean made up stories, it means stories that we choose to believe in—and Schwartz’s wispy, musical prose and her decision to fragment history into intimate, diary entry-like selections of memory make the reader reevaluate whatever recognition we find in this choral call.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Why Iceland is a masterclass in equality

‘Secrets of the Sprakkar: Iceland’s Extraordinary Women and How They Are Changing the World’ by Eliza Reid (Simon & Schuster, 2022)

ABAK HUSSAIN

If the Nordic nation of Iceland did not already exist, we might just have had to dream up such a place. It is consistently ranked as one of the cleanest, greenest, happiest, healthiest, most peaceful, most educated countries in the world. But as we learn from Eliza Reid’s joyful book, Iceland’s most remarkable achievement yet might be achieving that most elusive of things: the gold standard for gender equality. This is no mere opinion: Year after year, Iceland takes top spot in the Gender Gap Index, and it is all part of a deeply egalitarian and evolving culture that makes up Icelandic society. The ancient Icelandic word ‘sprakkar’ refers to extraordinary women, and the Icelandic sagas and folklore are full of them. In putting together a picture of modern-day Iceland, Reid interviews numerous Icelandic women across all fields—politics, business, sports, the arts, and other professions thought of as traditionally masculine, such as search and rescue operations—and highlights the lives and achievements of these individuals on a very personal, human level while at the same time painting a broader picture of Icelandic society and where it is headed. The book feels like a seamless blend of memoir, feature journalism, extended op-ed, and treatise on gender, and manages to be more than all those things. The interviews bring out individual stories on a micro level, while the narrative deftly switches to the macro level to shed light on Icelandic culture and policy that make it possible for women to flourish in this way. Reid writes with candour, humility, and a sense of humour (I laughed out loud at least twice) which makes *Sprakkar* a fast and entertaining read, and manages to avoid sounding didactic or condescending. I burned through it in one weekend.

At the heart of all these stories is Eliza Reid’s own improbable journey. Raised in rural Ontario, she met Gudni Th. Johannesson while studying modern history at Oxford University in the UK. The two became a couple, moved to Iceland, got married. Reid worked as a journalist and freelancer for various publications, including Icelandair’s in-house magazine, and co-founded the Iceland Writers Retreat, an annual writers’ conference held in Reykjavik (for which yours truly is an IWR Alumni Award Winner). Meanwhile, though Johannesson’s



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

primary interests seemed to be academic rather than political, as fate would have it, he ended up entering the presidential election and winning. This is how in 2016, Eliza Reid, who immigrated to Iceland for a reason as simple as love, found herself First Lady of her adopted country. *Secrets of the Sprakkar* is a part of her attempt to use this platform to influence positive change. Before diving into the story of various sprakki, we learn of Reid’s own journey, her challenges as an outsider in a new land, as a writer and journalist, as an entrepreneur, as a mother of

four. Then we meet a series of Icelandic women, all trailblazers in their own way, all examples of what is possible if the playing field is levelled. There is Ragnhildur Agustsdottir, entrepreneur and co-creator of the immersive Icelandic Lava Show, who also worked in the tech sector and became a CEO at age 25, a fact that shows that it is possible not only for women, but young women, to be taken seriously in fields largely gate-kept by men. There is Halldora Kristin Unnarsdottir, captain of the fishing vessel Andri, who shows that achieving expertise at running fishing vessels in harsh waters and sub-zero temperatures, where the waterproof suits have not been designed keeping women in mind, is not exclusively male territory. There is soccer player Margret Lara Vidarsdottir, one of the biggest names in sports in Iceland, one of the rare countries where the excitement and importance surrounding women’s soccer is on par with the men’s game. Heroes aside, we also learn about, for example, Iceland’s permissive culture. There is virtually no stigma attached to casual sex, and no outmoded expectations for men to make the first move in the dating scene. Babies born outside of marriage are quite common, and the government is better than any other nation in supporting single mothers. Parental leave is generous, and the choices and decisions by all are respected. Consent is paramount, and on the legal level there is absolutely no tolerance for sexual assault, harassment, or abuse of any kind. As a Bangladeshi, I have always thought of Iceland as a kind of conceptual opposite of Bangladesh. My capital city, Dhaka, boasts a lot of superlatives, none of them desirable. Our air and water are the most polluted, our cities are the most densely populated and our traffic congestion the worst in the world. My country is a

hotbed of crime and violence. In terms of gender equality too, Bangladesh has performed disastrously. The political field here is far from participatory or inclusive. Child marriage is still rampant, our conjugal laws are stuck in the Penal Code of 1860, and the understanding of the concept of consent is appallingly low among young boys and men. The Covid-19 pandemic only dealt another blow to an already bad situation. The process of reading Reid’s book then, was simultaneously uplifting and depressing for me: Uplifting because it showed what was possible, depressing because it made the contrast with my own country all the more glaring. One should not fall into the trap, though, of thinking Iceland is some sort of perfect world. Even in Iceland, misogyny still exists, abuse does happen. At the end of the day, a nation is made of its people—imperfect human beings trying to do their best. I shuddered with recognition at Reid’s account: “Gudni and I had been a couple for five years when I moved to Iceland in my late twenties. From the outset, there were nudges, winks, and often outright questions from well-meaning in-laws and new Icelandic friends about when we would get on with it (since Gudni already had a daughter, it was clear to them that any delay in our procreation must be entirely my doing). When we got married a year later, the pressure only increased [...] Someone asked me if perhaps I was simply scared of having children.” Ah, nosy in-laws! It is strangely comforting to know that, Iceland or Bangladesh, some things just never change...

Abak Hussain is a journalist and Contributing Editor at MW Bangladesh. He is a winner of the Iceland Writers Retreat Alumni Award.

THE SHELF: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY 2023

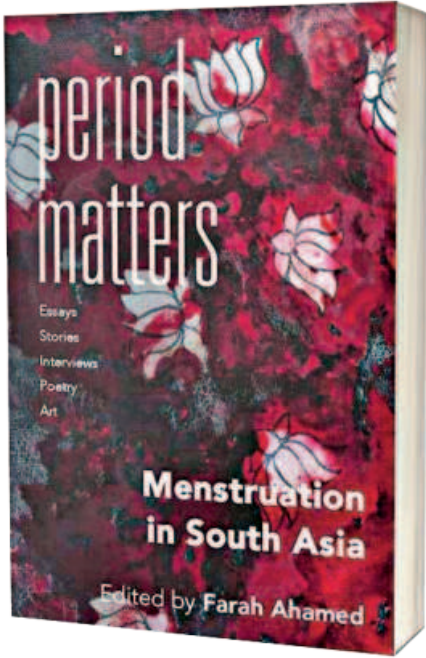
4 nonfiction books that unpack South Asian feminism with nuance

STAR BOOKS REPORT

PERIOD MATTERS: MENSTRUATION IN SOUTH ASIA

Ed. Farah Ahmed Macmillan, 2022

A writer, editor and human rights lawyer based in Lahore and London, Farah Ahmed began the *Period Matters* project with the aim of unpacking the diverse experiences of menstruation—which differ across communities, cultures, classes, professions, and across the gender spectrum. The collection comprises essays, poetry, short fiction, feature pieces, interviews, research reports, and photographs and artwork that explore the physical, psychological and political experiences of menstruation across South Asia. Among other pieces, Tashi Zangmo writes about menstrual health in the Buddhist nunneries of Bhutan. Radha Paudel writes about preserving menstrual dignity as a human right in Nepal. Shashi Tharoor comments on the Menstrual Rights Bill tabled in India’s Lok Sabha. And Farah Ahmed interviews women in Bangladesh’s RMG sector, who reveal the need for period-friendly workplaces in the country.



WOMEN, VEILING AND POLITICS: THE SOUTH ASIAN CONUNDRUM

Ed. Imtiaz Ahmed University Press Limited, 2019

“In recent times, the territoriality of societies in the name of ‘modern state’ and the power of both patriarchy and masculinity reinforcing it made the veiling of women, in one form or another, an exercise in patriarchy, masculinity or gender politics, often crisscrossing national, ethnic, racial and religious boundaries, with women as its main victims”, writes Imtiaz Ahmed, the book’s editor and Professor of International Relations and Director, Centre for Genocide Studies at the University of Dhaka.

His book tries to address the instances in which “ignorance” surrounds the subject of women wearing the veil. In this effort, the volume includes Anastasia Telesetsky exploring how Taliban rules of law impact contemporary Afghanistan; Amina Mohsin addressing the politics of knowledge and the veil in Bangladesh, alongside Dina M Siddiqi’s unpacking of Muslim bodies as seen through feminist and imperialist lenses. Sreeradha Datta and Nandini Bhattacharya Panda writing about food, faith, and the body as it relates to the veil in West Bengal, among other chapters focusing on Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, and India.

RUMOURS OF SPRING: A GIRLHOOD IN KASHMIR

Farah Bashir HarperCollins 2021

A former photojournalist for Reuters currently working as a communications consultant, Farah Bashir was born and raised in Kashmir. Her memoir—a debut book—explores her experience of growing up in Srinagar in the 1990s, when militants and Indian troops were sweeping the city streets. Farah found simple acts such as combing her hair, falling asleep, and walking to the bus stop transformed into fatally risky activities. Against this backdrop of fear and anxiety, Farah grew up going to the cinema, listening to pop music on a banned radio station, writing her first love letter.

Though the book isn’t written from a specifically feminist perspective, the memoir unpacks the little and powerful ways in which a young girl retained a sense of freedom in a landscape imprisoned by terror.

WE SINFUL WOMEN: CONTEMPORARY URDU FEMINIST POETRY

Ed. and trans. Rukhsana Ahmad Woman’s Press, 1991

Rukhsana Ahmad is a writer, journalist and teacher of English literature, and the verses she curates for this collection record the history of women’s movements in 1990s Pakistan. Courtly Urdu love poetry has long been a male literary tradition. In this seminal collection of verses, Pakistani women poets challenge the forms of oppression imposed upon their right to education and bodily autonomy. They “refuse to conform to the notion of the ideal woman, they set out to defy it and to claim a new identity.”

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