

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Love and caste collide

'Pyre' by Perumal Murugan, trans. Aniruddhan Vasudevan (Pushkin Press, 2022), longlisted for the International Booker Prize 2023

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Coming from a family that boasts numerous elopements spanning generations, perhaps I am uniquely suited to talk about Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*. I have seen, first-hand, the shake-ups of loyalty, the attempts to disinherit one's own and the clear revulsion that stories of runaway love bring. Murugan's novel is, in this regard, a familiar read that takes on these issues with memorable simplicity. Translated from the Tamil by

where social taboos regarding sex are relaxed. The literary merits of the book failed to surpass right-wing propaganda, as is usually the case, and the book came under fire for being "controversial". Murugan, in dramatic fashion, even quit writing. In a Facebook post, he said, "Perumal Murugan the writer is dead. As he is no God, he is not going to resurrect himself. He also has no faith in rebirth. An ordinary teacher, he will live as P. Murugan. Leave him alone."

Fortunately, after a High Court ruling that

Kumaresan comforts his wife that the hostilities are temporary. "For a few days," he advises her, "take off your ears and keep them aside. Put them back on only while talking to me....everything will be all right."

Yet, that is often easier said than done. Kumaresan's naivety soon catches up on him and he starts to drink, frustrating Saroja even more, who feels as if "all her certainties [are] collapsing." Her dependence on Kumaresan worries her, though she continues to believe in his advice.

Meanwhile, casteism colours the villagers' ability to accept the new couple. It affects every decision in their village. Kumaresan himself had been barred as a child from working with the day-labourers, for he would be mixing with men from other castes. Murugan deftly renders the inhumanity of caste discrimination through Saroja's ordeal. We are never told which castes they belong to, though it is certain they are from the South. The ambiguity helps Murugan's realist take on the issue of caste; eschewing any ray of hope, he settles for despair. As Saroja faces the village's snark daily, we see her wait for the better times culminating in a pastoral savagery that is hauntingly biblical.

The singeing heat, the "vast expanses of arid land," the large rock that dominates the landscape of the book all simulate the tone of Saroja's helplessness in her new environment. Murugan is essentially a writer of great sentimental talent, possessing a realism found in the likes of Bibhutibhusan. That is *Pyre's* gift to literature: Murugan's adeptness in marrying the psychological anguish of his characters with the social realism of familial bonds. Aniruddhan Vasudevan's English version has excelled in sifting up the story's humanist, regional essence (from soda shops to *kuzhambu* dishes) from the usual contextual entanglements of translation.

Melancholy and brutal, one wonders if Saroja's jam started the moment she decided on the need for obedience as a way of navigating through her new community. Perhaps she should have held her ground from the start. Perhaps, to crack the boulder of caste, class, and colour, one mustn't tap light in hopes of chipping it away incrementally but to take a hammer and swing at it with violence in mind.

Shahriar Shaams has written and translated for *SUSPECT*, *Third Lane*, *Adda*, *Six Seasons Review*, *Arts & Letters*, and *Jamini*.  
Twitter: @shahriarshaams



DESIGN: HRISHIK ROY

Aniruddhan Vasudevan, *Pyre* is a love story that is a thrill in the vein of Murugan's contemporary, Vivek Shambhag's Kannada novel, *Ghachar Ghochar* (2015), though it is darker, far more serious and nerve-racking in how it accelerates toward its mordant end.

It is the story of young lovers, Kumaresan and Saroja, who get secretly married and run away to Kumaresan's village to start a new life. Murugan has written before about the intricate tragedies of domestic life and how they bring about the worst of our community. In his novel *One Part Woman* (2010), through which I first discovered the author, a couple is unable to have children, a predicament that leads them to consider going to the festival of an androgynous god

dismissed any need for him to apologise or withdraw his book, he *did* resurrect.

*Pyre's* beauty lies in the gradually ascending intensity of its story. Kumaresan's mother, a widow since the age of 20, claims victimhood for this act of "betrayal" her son has committed. Her actions mimic pitch-perfectly how some mothers react to situations of this order in the sub-continent: "I had thought my son would earn some money and walk with his head held high among the people here. But he has thrown fire on me. If he had been killed in a road accident somewhere, I would've written it off as my destiny," she cries, "What did you do to bewitch my son?"

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# BADRUDDIN

## UMAR: The life and works of a revolutionary

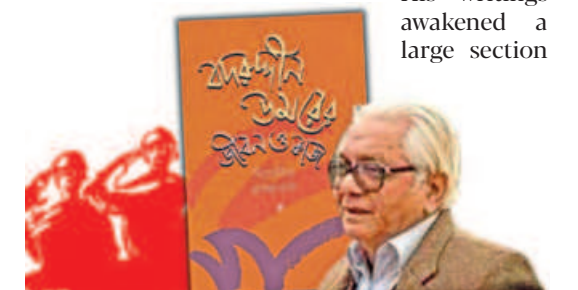
'Badruddin Umarer Jibon o Kaj: Nivedita Prabandhabali' ed. CR Abrar, Omar Tarek Chowdhury, Golam Mustafa, Chowdhury Mufad Ahmad (Bangla Gobeshona Prokashona, 2022)

PRIYAM PRITIM PAUL

Badruddin Umar—a prominent writer, thinker, historian, and political visionary, who turned 91 years old in 2022. This book was published on this occasion to commemorate his eventful life and works. As the editors rightly mention, it took such a long time to attempt this book because a section of our society, who grabbed power and position of the state for years, are uncomfortable with the candour in Umar's writings and opinions.

Badruddin Umar studied Philosophy at Dhaka University, and Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford University, resigning from Rajshahi University as a faculty member to be an active leftist political activist in 1968 when he was just 37 years old. Before his resignation, he wrote three remarkable books, *Sampradayikata* (1966), *Sangskritir Sangkat* (1974), and *Sangskritik Sampradayikata* (1975), which shook the limits and narrowness of the ideology of then Pakistan.

His writings awakened a large section



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

of the budding educated youth to achieve a broader perspective of thinking. This produced much tension among the military and civil bureaucracy of East Pakistan, and Monayem Khan put pressure upon the Vice Chancellor of Rajshahi University to keep Umar silent. Besides, Umar's books on the language movement have been established as classics for years, in which he delineates the entire movement through a broader Marxist perspective. His is a lifelong method to perceive the problems of society and nation.

*Badruddin Umarer Jibon o Kaj* is an excellent collection of essays, articles and recollections about Umar written by many renowned national and international scholars. It starts with a review of *Sampradayikata* by prominent critic and dramatist Kazi Abdul Wadud, who greets Umar's essays with a critical mind when he mentions that, in the golden age of Hinduism and Islam, religions were not perceived as being so overwhelmingly divine as they are now. This short review signifies a great literary savant who was able to properly recognise a young genius of the new age who would lead the intellectual endeavour of this land for decades.

Although Umar has been famous for his unabashed positions on Marxist analysis, his three books played a crucial role in forming Bengali nationalist thought in the Pakistan period based on an anti-communal attitude, as Professor Sanat Kumar Saha states in the book. Umar put importance in acknowledging Chandidas, Vidyashagor, Bankim Chandra, Micheal Madhusudhan, Tagore, Sharat Chandra, Atulprasad, and Abanindra as integral parts of our culture and conveyed that until we recognise that, our cultural heritage will not be forceful enough to create something worthwhile.

Professor Shahidul Islam, in the book, draws an effective comment in this regard. He notes that although Awami League has gained momentum through Bangladeshi nationalism, his generation had learned about it from the writings of Umar, even in his awareness of the limitations of nationalism. Umar's arguments and judgements have been grounded in the truth of history, and he has held the rare capacity to be honest and sincere in his long course of political and social life. Thus Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury rightly argues that Umar has the audacity to reject according to his own class's attitude, desire, or fascination, and these rejections have served the purposes of making an egalitarian society. Apart from his critical analysis of class, Umar was much aware of the environmental issues when this topic was not familiar in this land.

Professor Khaliqzamm Elias states that the journey of the Bangali Muslim has not matured even after witnessing the creation of two states—this has been a core of Umar's writing. This book has been a genuine effort to commemorate the lifelong revolutionary behind such ideas.

Priyam Pritim Paul is pursuing his PhD at South Asian University, New Delhi.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Homegrown heroine

'The Divining Thread' by Anjum N Chowdhury (HarperCollins, 2022) creates an original, immersive new world

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

Over the past ten years or so, a confluence of factors such as the rise of social media 'societies' like Bookstagram and Booktok, and the popularity of events like the Dhaka Lit Fest, have created ideal conditions for Bangladeshi writers writing in English to publish, share and sell their work in an unprecedented way. This has allowed for a whole slew of bold, fresh material to arise from this region, across all genres, challenging existing notions of what Bangladeshi literature should look like.

The return of the DLF allowed me to discover a bunch of these voices, and Anjum N Chowdhury's *The Divining Thread* was one such treasure. It is a tiny novella that unfolds like one of those enchanting papercraft dioramas. Zarene is the daughter of a wealthy merchant, betrothed to a prince. On her way to her wedding, she spots a village girl wearing the most exquisite ghagra. Zarene, who has something of an obsession with handloom fabrics, is so enchanted by the outfit that it costs her her marriage, and sets her out on a journey filled with adventures, discoveries and self-realisation.

"The thing about fairy tales is that they're all about morality," Anjum has said of her inspiration for *The Divining Thread*, continuing, "One trope kept popping up that really bothered me—the self-sacrificing girl is virtuous and thus deserves the prince, while the materialistic girl who likes nice things does not deserve the prince. Meanwhile, nobody is holding the prince accountable."

And so, this story, which originally began as a short story, features a headstrong heroine putting her desires above what society expects of her, in order to realise her destiny. And no one is letting any princes off the hook either! While there are some familiar tropes, the story itself will take you to unexpected places. You look at the size of the book and



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

expect Disney's *Frozen*, and end up with something closer to Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* books, but South Asian. Anjum Chowdhury has lived in Dhaka, Delhi and Kathmandu, and she weaves cultural and folkloric elements of each place into the fabric of the narrative to create a truly original fantasy setting, and I for one, cannot wait to see what she does next.

*The Divining Thread* is available at Batighar and Bookworm.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is an author and journalist. She is the founder of the annual *Sehri Tales* challenge.

FEATURE

# War in the waters

EMRAN MAHFUZ, TRANS.

HRISHIK ROY

Even after 52 years of Bangladesh's independence, many memories and incidents of the Liberation War remain undocumented. A lot of these stories are being recorded through individual initiatives, uncovering previously unknown chapters of the war. An individual who has witnessed many such incidents is Md. Enamul Haque, a freedom fighter naval commando who participated in several operations of the war, including Operation Jackpot.

Operation Jackpot was the first—and allegedly best—campaign of naval commandos during the Liberation War of 1971, a deadly blow against the Pakistani invasion forces carried out on August 16, 1971, at Chittagong and Mongla sea ports and Chandpur and Narayanganj ports simultaneously. Twenty five ships carrying food and oil from different countries were sunk, including arms-laden ships from Pakistan.

Haque's book, *Operation Jackpot: Ek Noucommandor Ohonkar* (Nympha Publications, 2023) discusses his experiences as a freedom fighter, as well as his personal life, the background of the War, the inspiring figure of Bangabandhu, and his display of patriotism through dangerous and often life-threatening operations during the Liberation War.

Speaking about his experiences during the war, Haque recalled, "One day, a few Indian officers in the camp called some of us and asked if

anyone among us had swum in the sea. I raised my hand. They asked if anyone had swum in large rivers and a few others raised their hands. They selected 17 of us and took us to another camp, where a captain spoke to each of us. He said, 'This is a suicidal squad—death is certain here. Instead, you should return to the previous camp and train yourself for fighting inside the country.'

"I said to him that I am aware that death is certain in war, which is why I was there. I wanted to give my life for the country's independence," he said.

Writer Selina Hossain has written in the book's introduction, "While this is Enam's first attempt at writing prose and there are a few limitations because of it, the publication will be widely read due to the subject matter. The book shows that Enamul Haque's involvement in this operation made the movement of the Pakistani invasion forces uncertain. It introduced Bangladesh's liberation war and freedom fighters to the whole world. Such audacity is rarely seen in wars across history. As a result, the book in question is similar to a historical document, thanks to the author's anecdotes."

"However," she added, "I think the quality of editing required for this type of book has to be maintained. It is the responsibility of the publisher as well as the author."

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