



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Boats against the current

Reconciling the Dhaka of old with the new in Nadeem Zaman’s ‘The Inheritors’ (Hatchett, 2023)

MEHRUL BARI

Nadeem Zaman’s *The Inheritors* retells and recontextualizes one of the most famous stories there ever was—F Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In Zaman’s novel, the Jazz Age is transmuted into modern day-Dhaka, the familiar idols of Gatsby, Daisy, and Nick Carraway, becoming Gazi, Disha, and Nisrar Chowdhury. These obvious signposts can be less than welcome, but there is an evident care in the writer’s adaption of his source material, even when *The Inheritors* strays further and further with subplots and subtexts of its own.

Zaman’s greatest success moreover is his understanding of the most pivotal of elements in reading *Gatsby*: the mystery. In both novels, the truth is ever receding—just from arm’s length—not revealed until chapters on end. Zaman’s novel, too, is at its best when the reader is left wondering, even those well-versed in the Fitzgerald novel.

In *The Inheritors*, the narrator, Nisrar, is thrust back into Dhaka from his home in America on matters of property dealings. The best offer on the table is from the elusive businessman Junaid Gazi, who strangely wishes to purchase all of the properties, namely that opposite to the home of Disha, Nisrar’s first cousin. Fans of *The Great Gatsby* will surely know why. Here, though, Gazi and Disha are not just ex-lovers but ex-spouses, and the dynamics of the much-analyzed love triangle isn’t centered at the Gatsby of the story but Daisy—who Nisrar very often admits to having a crush on. Wondering if the new

novel ends the same as the old is ostensibly *The Inheritors’* main hook.

Where the book may lose readers, however, is the narrator’s conflicts pertaining to identity, home, wealth, and privilege—all of which are much more text than subtext in Zaman’s writing. Despite starting strong, the novel makes the conscious choice to forego richer storytelling in favour of class and social commentary. This is unfortunately filtered through the eyes of expat Nisrar, who routinely exhibits an above-it-all attitude to upper class lifestyle. He will also remind us he’s one of *the good ones*, who hands CNG drivers and kids on the street 500 or 1000 taka notes.

The narrator’s characterization, it feels, is that of a Mary Sue, a too-perfect man who routinely receives compliments like “You’re damn smart” or “Always the funny guy” or “Good looking, smart. You know there are women here that would tear you apart like *that*.” The only flaw ever mentioned of Nisrar is his history of infidelity—a masculine ideal of a flaw.

His love interest, Jasmine (the stand-in for *Gatsby’s* Jordan), almost immediately takes to Nisrar, without any convincing flirtations or palpable spark. Jasmine is always seen with doe eyes, pining for Nisrar, who never truly returns her affections, preoccupied ever with something else. Substituting the homoeroticism of the 1925 novel with Nisrar’s incestuous feelings for his cousin is an interesting choice, but it doesn’t jump off the pages.

The Inheritors, ultimately, is more

interested in exploring Dhaka history and life, at least as seen by a foreigner. Some of its outsider-looking-in description of the city sound delightfully alien (when was the last time you heard someone say “Kemal Atatürk Avenue” in full, or utter a phrase like “Bashundhara City, one of Dhaka’s premier housing developments”?) But then the narrator will also make presumptuous generalizations, like assuming the 2016 Holey Artisan attack to be our 9/11, which simply doesn’t translate. These musings start to grow tiresome, given the way in which the narrator speaks on the matters with what feels like authorial intent.

It is a testament to Nadeem Zaman’s writing, of course, that each chapter and passage flows as well as it does. His prose has a calm and self-assuredness to it that keeps the reader hanging on every page. The Bangladesh-born author’s ambition for *The Inheritors*, for its ups and downs, brings to mind Jorge Luis Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” (1939), a metafictional short story which supposes that even if a writer were to re-create, word-for-word, a famous work of the past, the exact duplication would still be a rich text worthy of its own analysis. The same novel would be entirely unique—because the time and circumstances have changed since, and no two authors could be the same.

Mehrul Bari S Chowdhury is a writer, poet, and artist. He received his MA in Creative Writing with distinction at the University of Kent in Paris. He has previously worked for Daily Star Books, and is the editor of Small World City.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

There is always an other to be purged

‘Uttar Khoari’ edited by Shibu Kumer Shill, Agamee Prakashani, 2020

PRIYAM PRITIM PAUL

Akhteruzzaman Elias’s (1943-1997) creative life was cut short with a premature death from cancer, but his works are enshrined among the classics of Bangla literature. His short story “Khoari” (1975), which in English translates to ‘hangover’, is a perfect specimen of his meticulous authorship of post-colonial conditions. Shibu Kumer Shill, who had first made a documentary titled *Eliaser Khoari* in 2014, eventually chose to edit a full-length book around this important landmark in Elias’ literary journey. Shill edited the present volume as a rich collection that includes many memories and evaluations of Elias by his friends and relatives, some renowned literary figures of the Bangla language, as well as some occasional thoughts by Elias himself. This anthology also contains the text of “Khoari” itself, and talks about the background of the famous story.

“Khoari” revolves around a house of a local Hindu family in old Dhaka, which was looted and grabbed by the Biharis in the war of 1971. The illegal occupants vanished with the defeat of the Pakistan army. A new tension arose when the liberation force who led the war set their sights upon the same house, seeking to commandeer it from

the family in the name of overseeing the entire area in the ‘right way’. At one point, Farukh, a close associate of their principal leader Manik, mentions that Manik bhai always says that purging is needed, purging! This is the punchline of “Khoari”—that there are always ‘others’ who must be purged. Samarjit, the central character of this story, has hangovers not only from



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

liquor but from seeing his own friends and fellows pressuring his father to quit this house again.

The subcontinent has witnessed two partitions where majoritarianism played a significant role. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Bengali, Bihari, and indigenous peoples have been purged in different situations in the name of religious or ethno-cultural

nationalism. Shibu Kumer Shill makes the apt observation that in plotting “Khoari”, Elias dealt with two minorities—Hindus and Biharis—in the post-independence Bangladesh. Elias himself stated in 1987 that his times were shaped by the 1971 Liberation War that brought about a second independence, symbolised by a new flag, but it couldn’t bring substantive liberation.

Elias was a keen observer of society, state and people as he mapped out his characters in terms of their particular tastes, classes, and social positions. In building his narratives, he always tried to be faithful to history, even if that pushed readers beyond their comfort zones. Thus his stories or novels do not follow any common underpinning that can be easily accessible.

Khoari first appeared in book form from Rajshahi in 1982, the short story published alongside three other stories in the collection. The publisher Ichke Duyande candidly states that Elias would look at both gold and trash with care; thus, his perspective has been considerably vast. His wife, Suraiya Elias, has said that he planned to write a novel on the war of independence in 1971, but the plan could not be realised due to his sudden death. Ahmed Sofa, meanwhile, has mentioned that Elias once expressed the desire to write a

novel on the miseries of Biharis. If Elias had the chance, his intended novels would have been undoubtedly an outstanding contribution along with his twin great novels.

His friend Abdul Mannan Syed explained the transformation of Elias as a writer in terms of a temporal sequence: while the young Elias was partly a romantic experimentalist and a sentimentalist, the late Elias was more committed to a particular ideology. Yet, this division was not watertight. The two phases of his literary itinerary overlapped.

Elias has been acclaimed for his keen, perspicacious realism. Still, reality has its limitations: the ultimate reality is almost impossible to depict. Syed Shamsul Haq mentions that Elias was highly dissatisfied with his novel *Chilekothar Sepai* and acknowledged that he couldn’t correctly grasp the actual reality of the 1969 uprising in the text. Perhaps genuine writers cannot easily achieve a sense of fulfillment or closure from their works, and this very dissatisfaction drives them towards creating more.

The production, size, and presentation of the present volume are excellent, and many pertinent and rare images enhance its value for readers.

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

FEATURE

Literature showcases a different side to the Korean Wave

RAIAN ABEDIN

Also known as *Hallyu*, the Korean Wave has been in full swing for years, spreading the culture and art of South Korea as an economy through all imaginable means of entertainment. Be it pop culture, music, or cinema, it’s clear that most consumers of any media are at the very least aware of Korean entertainment, if not actively participating in it.

While *Hallyu* has, in some shape, existed since 1999 (credited largely to the movie *Swiri*), it has taken an enormous precedent in the eyes of the Korean government only in the last decade. In 2019 alone, all media attributed to the *Hallyu* movement added a net total of 12.3 billion US dollars, and this has rather obviously prompted the government to invest further into all media released from South Korea to capture audiences’ hearts. To the eyes of millions of fans worldwide, what really makes the K-wave so appealing is the many unique, and often uplifting, stories coming out of the country that challenge social conventions through their entertainment.

All of this brings us to one of the contributing factors of *Hallyu* that frequently gets swept under



the rug in conversations: literature. With massive contributions from the government, as well as the establishment of the Literature Translation Institute (LTI) of Korea, this is a field that has seen exponential growth in popularity over the last decade. They have, however, attracted a different sort of crowd. Where so much of Korean entertainment (both in music and drama) focuses on uplifting or escapist entertainment, the books coming out of Korea are brutal in how they push the audience right back into the bleakness of reality. They are often laced with commentary on the politics and social structure of their country, provided through lenses that are sometimes bizarre yet always gripping.

In hindsight, *The Vegetarian* was the oddest of books for me to use as a gateway into Korean literature, a novel by Han Kang translated from the Korean by Deborah Smith which won the International Booker Prize in 2016. It was—and still is—the most widely celebrated book to come out of South Korea in recent times, but the content of the book is laced with an emotional weight so profound it serves as a whiplash when juxtaposed against the more uplifting counterparts of *Hallyu*. The story follows Yeong-hye after she makes the sudden decision to stop eating meat, something which drives her husband and the rest of her family into confusion and disarray. Abstract in

Where so much of Korean entertainment (both in music and drama) focuses on uplifting or escapist entertainment, the books coming out of Korea are brutal in how they push the audience right back into the bleakness of reality.

presentation, the novel delves deep into the way people react when decisions are made that go against culture. This book, and by extension all of Han Kang’s work, strikes me less as a direct critique of the social structures we live under and more as an exploration of characters attempting to transcend these shackles.

Another notable work coming from South Korea is 2022’s *Cursed Bunny* written by Bora Chung. This collection of short stories made it to the shortlist for last year’s International Booker Prize and presents stories that are always dazzling and grotesque but rarely do they spell out the truth hidden underneath all the creepy tales. Then there’s *Love In the Big City* by Park Sang Young, a queer coming-of-age story also published in 2022, which went on to be part of the International Booker Prize’s long list. All of these books, with their stylistic differences, offer an intimate look at life in Korea, and of the many ways characters struggle with their identity against patriarchy and abuse in a flashy world with an underbelly that’s often overlooked.

Read the rest of this article on The Daily Star website and on Daily Star Books’ Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages.

Raian Abedin is taking book recommendations (in fact, he would love them) on IG: @raian_is_burning