

DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# FLESH IN RUINS

'Maps of Our Spectacular Bodies' by Maddie Mortimer (Scribner, 2022)

**While there have been multiple stories concerning cancer, and the experiences it involves for the afflicted, Maps of Our Spectacular Bodies is the first book by an author where they have presented the perception of the disease as well. This unique detail adds a much more intimate and realistic note to the text's creation.**

NUR-E-JANNAT ALIF

"I, itch of ink, think of thing, plucked open at her start; no bigger than a capillary, no wiser than a cantaloupe, and quite optimistic about what my life would come to look like."

The opening sentence of Maddie Mortimer's debut novel, *Maps of Our Spectacular Bodies*, is sheer poetry—it cascades off the tongue in rhythmic, ornamental verses. In the first moments that I was perusing the book, I had a rather inapt notion about its premise. For a while, I imagined the book taking place in New York, and I was there, watching it unfold over a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

It does not start in that vein, the book. It takes place in London, a nuclear, happy family the highlight of its restive prose. We accompany the mother, Lia, in the streets. On a dreary, sombre morning, clearing her path among the rush-hour congestion to the doctor's office. Her cancer has resurfaced. After an interval of two years, the tumour is regrowing in the crevice of her body. Only when she had accepted that everything was exactly the manner it ought to be, when life seemed to be lingering again, her nemesis arrived to cut its trip short.

Harry, her pleasant, optimistic husband was fairly alright upon her pronouncement. His ceaseless mantra of "we have done it before and we'll do it again" is recognized in the book as a "burnt shape of hope". Her adolescent daughter, Iris, teetered on the thin line between acceptance and resentment. During one of their word-talks following her diagnosis, Lia had asked Iris how the term Can-cer resonated with her. "It doesn't sound like anything. It sounds flat and cold like a slab of stone."

When cancer arrived, it carried with it very many prayers of friends and foes. Of a mother who was spiteful and of a lover who was lost. It came to Lia baring its claws, clung to a lump

of her flesh and prowled. Misery, anguish, loss, guilt—all slithered into her fickle blood. There was an instance where Iris asked her mother why she had not considered raising another child.

"They told me I might get ill again if I had another child."

"But you still got ill again. So it wasn't worth it. And now I am lonely too."

At another point in the book, her husband said, "But I don't want to be anywhere that you are not."

It is nearly lethal, the value of despair these simple statements hold. It becomes a subject of push and pull for Harry and Iris. Harry with his blatant friendly attraction to a student, Iris with her navigation of juvenility. It manifests in every taunt, every squabble, every minuscule hint of unsolicited jealousy.

We become acquainted with Lia's mother, Anne, too. We receive previous glimpses into Lia's early life as a young girl evolving in a vicarage—an eerie correspondence of her past and Iris' present. It presents motherhood on two sides of the same coin. *Maps* develops an inception for Iris, while Lia stumbles to her end. When asked in a Booker Prizes interview if the book was inspired from her mother's battle with cancer, the author replied, "Parts of the book certainly ended up being just that. But I also wanted to find a space to write about a mother-daughter relationship similar to ours, to preserve some of the magic I felt she passed on, to write of that closeness, and that love."

While there have been multiple stories concerning cancer, and the experiences it involves for the afflicted, *Maps of Our Spectacular Bodies* is the first book by an author where they have presented the perception of the disease as well. This unique detail adds a much more intimate and realistic

note to the text's creation.

Apart from the depictions of agonising chemotherapy, Lia's loss of her breasts, and the painful prickle in her numb feet, it is also a book where the human body is considered a shrine. Or perhaps, a sin. A plague infested itself in Lia's muscles, and now hers is flesh in ruins. But her flesh was gone long, before the detestation struck, to love and to Matthew, her old lover. It went to him in bits, in all their years of a youthful, illicit affair. It disintegrated amid her tug-of-war with God.

Conceivably, it is the disease that maintains the upper hand in the plot. A jarring voice of its own, the toxins spilling across the pages in bold, chaotic words. What initially seems like a narrative of the disease turns into boldly worded essays becoming more and more obscure with each passing chapter. Ultimately it reads as Lia's conscience. Certain viewers might find the author's abstract style of writing unsettling. At times it speaks of travelling to her thoracic cavity, and at others, there are profound references to *Sex and the City*.

In reality, the book is a bundle of frayed nerves. There are thousands of wonders sparsed in there, hundreds of things to talk about. But cancer comes and destroys each of them before fruition. Cancer, the unseen protagonist of *Maps of Our Spectacular Bodies* by Maddie Mortimer. It is daunting how a mere illness can make us lose control over our bodies in a trice, how unsure we can become of our existence due to its malignant presence. We think our body is ours only, but perhaps it is not. Perhaps it is only bound to us through an obligation.

Nur-E-Jannat Alif is a Gender Studies major and part-time writer, who dreams of authoring a book someday. Find her at @literatureinsolitude on Instagram or send her your book/movie/television recommendations at nurejannatalif@gmail.com.

FEATURE

# Where to start reading Samaresh Majumdar

The beloved Bengali novelist passed on May 8, 2023, leaving behind a body of work that inspired generations

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Samaresh Majumdar. A renowned fiction writer in both Bengals. Few other writers have attained such heights of popularity and fame for their novels. Through his books, which have long been favourites among his readership, he was able to easily convey the simplicities of life, as well as the language and sensibilities of lower-middle class masses and ordinary people. His novels, notable among which are *Uttaradhikar*, *Kalbela*, *Kalpurush*, *Satkahon*, and *Garbhadharini*, have reached readers far and wide.

Let's talk about *Satkahon* first. More popular among educated women in Bangladesh and West Bengal, it was as if *Satkahon* had bewitched its readers. Dipabali's character in *Satkahon* said aloud what was on every girl's mind. It was every college and university going girl's dream to be Dipabali. Her character had stumbled early in life, and she managed to not only overcome its shock, but returned to her studies too. Despite her struggles, she strove to gain and maintain her own footing in the world. It is no wonder that she was a character that so many young girls looked up to. When they grew up, they wanted her courage and stability; they wanted to do something for their country and communities. The lives of millions of girls across the nation had been enriched through a novel like *Satkahon*. The book's appeal has yet to run out.

*Uttaradhikar*, *Kalbela*, and *Kalpurush* comprise Samaresh Majumdar's trilogy. It is difficult to come by a reader who has not fallen in love with tea gardens after reading



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

*Uttaradhikar*. The tender call of the Angraava River and the tea plantations of Dooars are impossible to miss after one has read the book. *Uttaradhikar* discusses the Naxalite movement. It also tells the tale of a boy named Animesh, who becomes a singer in *Kalbela*. In *Kalpurush*, he endures blow after blow as his life moves forward.

Honesty is Animesh's most prominent characteristic, enchanting to his readers; it is rare to come by another character who is quite so sincere. He is fiercely patriotic, too. When he grows up, he leaves behind the tea gardens to study in Kolkata, where he falls into the grip of student politics. As he ventures into student life at Kolkata University and becomes acquainted with its politics, a new world opens up before him.

His life becomes entangled with

Madhabilata's, until there is nothing more to his life than her presence. Young men and women who read the book, even today, want to take after its leading couple—they want to be Animesh and Madhabilata. After all, who else can love like they do? Samaresh Majumdar fills the pages of his book with descriptions of their love, life, struggle, and disillusionment.

The trilogy explores society, politics, economy, patriotism, and the connections people come to form with one another. That is where Samaresh Majumdar is most successful. His writing transcends class boundaries. He was able to see the readers' reception to his work while he was still alive, a fate not all writers are fortunate enough to enjoy.

In *Kalpurush*, Arko is born to Animesh and Madhabilata, and their dreams all

revolve around him. The life they lead is truly miserable, and yet they continue to dream. Some say that Animesh and Madhabilata have failed at life, but do they truly face defeat? Or do they find another life because they avoid giving in to greed? Even if it is defeat, and even if they do not live luxurious lives, Animesh and Madhabilata's lives, inextricably intertwined with another, are filled with love. Is there any greater achievement?

*Garbhadharini* is another of Samaresh Majumdar's acclaimed works, with countless readers aspiring to be Joyita, who was incredibly brave and modern for her time. The novel made many women want to leave their homes, and no doubt inspired some to follow through. This is to be expected, after all, and perhaps this is where the writer's labour bears fruit.

*Koshto Koshto Shukh* is another novel where he manages to explore life with a spectacular depth to his writing. *Cinemawala*, too, is an incredible novel about dreams coming true, in which a girl takes her cart from house to house to sell trinkets. She catches the eye of a director's wife; the director had been searching for an actress for his new film. And so, a new struggle begins centering the young girl. One day, she becomes a Tollywood star.

Such is the writer's hand, able to make his readers wait with unending anticipation. New readers will certainly seek out his work and find it, and will so be bound to shower it once more with love.

Translated from the Bangla by Amreeta Lethe.

Shah Alam Shazu is a writer and journalist.

FEATURE

# When the message of Bangladesh's liberation travelled on two wheels

ANSAR AHMED ULLAH

Soon after the independence of Bangladesh, four freedom fighters, Jamal Hasan, Anwar Ahmed, Mahmud Abdul Quayum, and Syed Akhtar Ali, set out on a world cycle tour on a special mission. They wanted to thank the people of the world who had supported Bangladesh's Liberation War, having started their tour from the front garden of Dhanmondi 32. They carried with them a personalised message of well wishes from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to the people—from different walks of life—that they were going to visit.

One of the four, Jamal Hasan, recently published a book to recall their trip. *Goodwill on Two Wheels* (Amazon, 2023) was launched in the Over 50 Club, Southgate, in North London. Dr Naz Rashid acted as moderator for the event. Ian Martin, ex-Secretary General of Amnesty International and currently working as a representative of the United Nations, wrote the foreword. He gave an introductory talk at the event. Author Asaduzzaman Malik also spoke about the author's previous book and expressed his high expectations from *Goodwill on Two Wheels*. Catherine Lepper and Mahmud Quayum read a few excerpts from the book before the floor was opened for questions.

*Goodwill on Two Wheels* is a memoir based on the struggles of the 1971 Liberation War and the celebration of Bangladesh's hard-earned independence. Jamal Hasan made the perilous journey across the border into India, hoping to find a place in one of the training camps for freedom fighters. But the camps were full of volunteers, and he had to wait his turn.

Jamal had an idea. He found three friends and persuaded them to go on a world cycle tour to drum up support for the Bangladesh Liberation War. They spoke to exiled Bangali politicians; a prominent Indian company donated four sturdy bicycles. They obtained Indian travel documents and made the necessary preparations. When they were about to start, the Pakistan military capitulated to the Bengali freedom fighters, and Bangladesh became an independent country.

Jamal and his three teammates adjusted their plan. They decided to go on a goodwill mission instead, for the fledgling state to thank the people of the world for supporting their Liberation War. Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dhaka University, and Bangladesh Sports Federation sponsored their tour. On April 7, 1972, they started their journey from the front garden of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

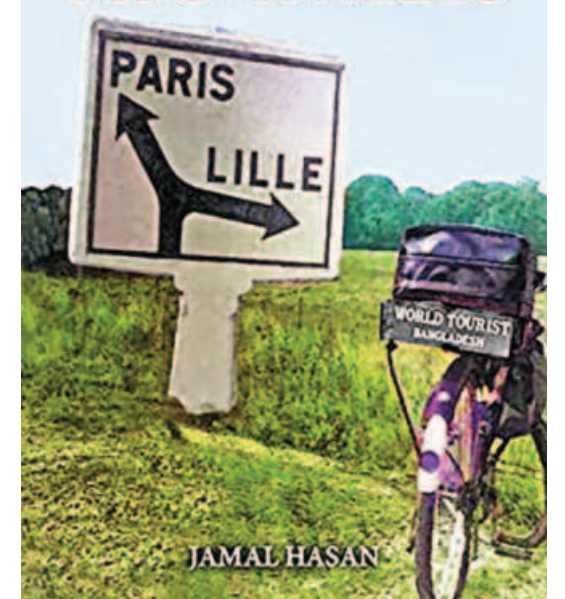
The Bangladesh Deputy High Commission Office, Kolkata arranged a press conference to introduce them to the Indian media. The Chief Minister of West Bengal helped secure the assistance of the central government, and the Secretary Department of Public Works of West Bengal allowed them to stay free of charge in the government bungalows on their way to Delhi. From Kolkata, they cycled to New Delhi and then to Mumbai. Because they could not pass through Pakistan and Middle Eastern countries, they had to take an ocean going liner from Cochin to Greece to begin the European leg of their journey. After seven months on the road, they finally arrived in London.

Each of the 26 chapters of *Goodwill on Two Wheels* focuses on a particular country, city, or a place of interest. The author skillfully takes readers with him through the journey and shares his many insights on life, faiths, traditions, and cultures as he travels from place to place. The descriptions of how he felt watching the endless water during a month-long ocean voyage is incredible.

The author also cites historical references to the places they visit, describing each country's past, glory, and attractions. Although *Goodwill on Two Wheels* is a travel story well documented with rare written materials and photographs, it reads like fiction—even the telling of historical context is never dull.

Ansar Ahmed Ullah is a contributor.

# GOODWILL ON TWO WHEELS



JAMAL HASAN

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