

DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# A book of longing and belonging

‘The Earthspinner’ by Anuradha Roy (Hachette India, 2021)

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

I found myself holding Anuradha Roy’s *The Earthspinner* when I returned to fiction after a few months’ hiatus. It took me a while to get into the story and understand what it was all about.

The journey was perplexing. Was it a love story? Or one of unrequited love? Does it aim to provide social commentary? The answer, I found soon enough, was yes and no. It was all those things, and probably more.

“Home was my father asking us to be quiet because he wanted to listen to the cricket scores. It was the usual Sunday sound of the newsreader’s posh voice, the dissonant trumpets of a wedding band, my mother at her typewriter in the bedroom, the clacking of it a shower of pebbles, her fingers moved so fast. A time when Tia and I were still close, when any place was home if the two of us were together with the reassuring voices of our parents who quarrelled out of old love.”

With this vivid monologue, the narrator Sara’s story starts to feel more like an attempt to retrace her home, or the idea of it. An idea, which fades a little every day, turning into letters from her mother and sister during her days abroad for studies, filled with incoherent updates of their lives, or long distance phone calls where both parties find it increasingly difficult to convey any meaningful message. As Sara’s journey of reclaiming her home through her memories begins, the story unfolds and introduces us to Elango, the potter and her mentor, and Zohra, a young Muslim woman and librarian. Soon, we embark on the story of the duo’s ‘forbidden’ love—in a land where religion can be used and abused for any and

every purpose, a subcontinent where religion has been used as means to a political end again and again in the form of bloodshed, lost homes and lost lives, both before and after the 1947 Partition.

Elango conceives his masterpiece, a horse sculpture, in his dreams at a time when he falls in love with Zohra. The dream comes alive with Anuradha Roy’s beautiful imagery and subtle mythical undertones of the choice of the animal. In Hindu mythology, the figure of the flaming, underwater horse has been repeatedly used to represent balance and harmony—a state in which both the elements of fire and water can coexist. In the *Mahabharata*, the mythical horse Uchchaihshravas rose from the churning of the milk ocean, along with other treasures like Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune. It is only fitting that Elango’s dream horse should represent his family’s hopes for a fortune earned through his pottery, as well as his personal hopes for the power of his love outweighing religious differences. Elango dedicates his work to Zohra and gets her grandfather, Osman, a blind calligrapher, to engrave Urdu poetry on it, through which their two faiths would mesh into a beautiful and ever-lasting coexistence.

However, on the day of the grand revelation, the crowd spots the engravings on the clay horse and starts a riot, terming the Arabic script as “the language of mullahs”.

What caught my attention is the subtlety with which Roy describes communal hatred and mob violence, keeping the tone from becoming nonchalant—the reason it does not turn into mere social commentary. The riot is narrated by Sara, a teenage girl, who in her disbelief at the sudden turn of events is only able to narrate bits and pieces of the horror

she felt. But she does so with incomprehensible clarity and explains the gravity of the turmoil. Against this background, Anuradha Roy’s prose evokes a sensory experience, where one can not only see the events unfold but also feel, smell, and touch them.

Forbidden love is a recurring theme that Sara has to witness again and again—through her complicated infatuation with Elango at a young age, through her friend Karin who finds herself in love with a woman. It all comes full circle. All the characters are reunited, not in a literal sense, but by common delicate threads that connect them—from the woman on the highway who dedicates herself to a lifelong quest to find her lost dog, to the dog itself finding its way to Elango and then to Sara’s family.

And thus, when I finally finish reading the book, jumping from one emotion to another, the abrupt end catches me off guard. I realise what the experience was all about.

“If sea creatures lived on dry land as fossils, I think now, my father too has merely gone into another element, somewhere I will find him again in another form.” I come back to this line by Sara and conclude that the book has been a story of longing all along. The longing of the woman on the highway for her lost life and her lost dog. Sara’s longing for her lost father, her lost love and, to some extent, her lost home.

Some of it I have already felt enough to know what it means, some I’m about to. That’s how *The Earthspinner* stays with me, as a muse and representation of my own longing, given life through Anuradha Roy’s magic of words.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan is a writer and journalist. She is working as a sub-editor at The Daily Star’s City Desk.

INTERVIEW

# On weaving family, culture and place into a compelling story

USRAAT FAHMIDAH

Towards the end of 2022, I came across a book called *The Halfways* (HQ, 2022), which takes place across multiple cities: London, Wales, New York, and Bangladesh, and focuses on the Bangladeshi immigrant experience.

Born in Shropshire to Sylheti parents, author Nilopar Uddin’s father, like the fictional family in her novel, owned and operated an Indian restaurant in Wales. By profession, Nilopar works as a financial services lawyer. But she mentions during our first meeting that she has always loved writing. I was deeply moved by Nilopar’s writing style, which focuses on the immigrant experience through both physical and metaphorical avenues. The novel’s prose is truly remarkable.

I caught up with Nilopar via Zoom, which was followed by an email conversation in late April.

**What inspired you to write this particular book that spans across all these places?**

As microcosms of society, family dramas are a great platform from which to deep dive into personal relationships and to navigate the gulfs between multiple generations, to explore the impacts of

disparities in education and earnings and the differences in values and faith.

*The Halfways* grew out of an assignment that was set a few months into my MA in Creative Writing at London’s City University. We were asked to write about a character waking up in strange circumstances, and I wrote of a woman who wakes up next to a young child into a world vastly different to the one she had woken up to before. I hung the scaffolding of my ambitions to write a sprawling family saga around this intimate scene of two people grappling with grief, and *The Halfways* unfolded around it—messily at first, and then with more conviction, revealing an abundance of characters and drama that shaped the Islam family’s world.

**What literary influences have shaped your writing?**

Being a daughter of first-generation immigrants from Bangladesh, it

felt important to me to foster an understanding of the Sylheti Bangladeshi community in Britain, their food, their language and their customs. I loved finding a character like me between the pages of a book when I discovered Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*. Her stories about second generation Bengalis living in the West filled me with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and relief.

Over the coming years, I discovered Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Yaa Gyasi, Mohsin Hamid, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,

Jeffrey Eugenides and so many more writers from whom I learnt how the universal themes in literature (love, courage, freedom, family, faith, justice, coming of age) can be beautifully enriched by the specificities of ethnicity and culture.

**What themes or messages did you hope to convey through your debut novel,**

**and how did you go about exploring them in the story?**

The novel is named after an important theme in the book: the Islam family members reside halfway between places—some feel stuck halfway between two cultures, others feel trapped between conflicting expectations and values. I wanted to delve into these experiences which are universal issues facing other diasporas around the world.

I also wanted to explore racism—both external and internalised. Nasrin grapples with everyday racism from her neighbour whilst also struggling to always see herself through the brown lens with which she thinks her husband and the world perceive her. Sabrina has internalised racism, and she loathes in herself and in others behaviours which might mark them out as “others” in a Westernised world.

**Read the full interview on The Daily Star website and on Star Books & Literature’s Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages.**

Usraat Fahmidah loves philosophy. Her favourite philosophers include Simone de Beauvoir and August D. Send her book recommendations: [usraatfahmidah@gmail.com](mailto:usraatfahmidah@gmail.com).

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Rocky ride along the evolutionary scale

‘Women, Gender and Development: Contemporary Issues’ by Nazmunnessa Mahtab (AH Development Publishing House, 2015)

GM SHAHIDUL ALAM

Close to a decade has passed since Nazmunnessa Mahtab has published *Women, Gender and Development: Contemporary Issues*, a fairly all-encompassing book on women and gender issues. At the outset of the book, in her Preface, the author explains her rationale for composing it: “This book is the culmination of a series of lectures I have been offering to the students of different departments of the University of Dhaka who have courses on women, gender and development issues.” That will partly explain the occasional pedantic bent of the book (by no means a demerit) as well as its all-encompassing nature in dealing with a very crucial topic in human and societal evolution: women and gender issues.

Nazmunnessa Mahtab is a Professor in Dhaka University’s Department of Women and Gender Studies, of which, incidentally, she is one of the founding members, after having completed a lengthy stint as a teacher in that University’s Department of Public Administration. The book under review provides a clear pointer to her love for women and gender studies, and in her quest to find answers to the questions that have arisen regarding the evolution of the concept that now understandably grabs the attention of development practitioners as well as curious laypersons on the issue.

Mahtab introduces at the beginning of her book the concept of feminism, which might as well arouse debate among others not in tune with her, and asserts that “the driving force behind women’s studies is *Feminism*” (italics author’s). Echoing Kumari Jayawardena, Mahtab makes the following point that evokes conceptual evolution: “In the context of South Asian countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka the words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ have become emotive words that evoke hostile reactions.”

The author then brings her readers to the contemporary world when she asserts that “the meaning of the word has been expanded to mean an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation within the family, at work and in the society, and conscious action by women and men to change the situation.” *Touche!* Mahtab quite deftly navigates through some expected thorny issues

relating to a vital subject in global developmental issues. What could be a truism is the author’s assertion that “...the final argument is that the legitimacy and autonomy of Women and Gender Studies, as a field of intellectual activity in its own right, must be asserted and maintained in the context of feminist perspective” And, critically, “It is

crucial to maintain the connection between women’s studies and the real world, especially in terms of the creation of knowledge and ways of thinking and doing research that will positively affect policy decisions.”

Mahtab focuses on a different approach for studying women: The Evolutionary Approach, which anchors on the issue that men’s domination of women everywhere was based on male control of strategic resources; The Structural Approach, The Productive Approach, The Traditional, Cultural, and Religious Approach. She takes up quite substantially on the status of women in the Third World.

Mahtab provides her own answer to the cultural theme when she avers: “The virtual exclusion of women, their lives, works and struggles could be understood at the theoretical level from a survey and critique of the dominant perspectives in development models/theory of the past.” She is rather skeptical that, despite positive effects, or because of hindrances, women continue to face formidable hurdles towards gender equality: “Women are pitted against two enemies—First is Poverty which tugs them down on to the lowest rungs in their societies. Second is Patriarchy—which sabotages their attempts to climb higher” (from a study based on just seven single mothers in seven countries—Australia, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Scotland and Uganda—and, hence, subject to limited sample size).

Different currents in feminism are dismissed by her and her point that emerges is that, “Feminism” is a movement, a set of beliefs, that problematize gender inequality. Feminists believe that women have been subordinated by men’s greater power, variously expressed in different arenas. They value women’s lives and concerns, and work to improve women’s status. There are many feminisms with different emphasis and aims.” She goes on to discuss at some modest length the different currents in feminism: Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Marxist Feminism, and Eco-Feminism.

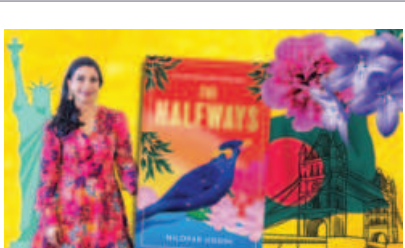
Mahtab advances two important conditions for the advancement of women and promotion of gender equality. One is political commitment at the highest level. The other is to encourage and strengthen partnerships and cooperation between the Government and NGOs, women’s organizations, civil society to form a common agenda and a common platform in the implementation of commitments made at the Fourth World Conference on women....”

Nazmunnessa Mahtab has written a quite all-encompassing book on women and gender issues.

GM Shahidul Alam is a thespian and educator.



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COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA, PHOTO: HQ