

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# Memory is a treacherous and wonderful thing

Review of ‘Olive Witch’ (Fourth Estate, 2016) by Abeer Y. Hoque

RAIAN ABEDIN

Around 14 years ago, I left my life behind in Nigeria. After almost half a decade spent in a land far from home, leaving felt crushing. While my memory of that time is fuzzy, some emotions tend to resurface now and then—the red dust, the bright sun, and so much laughter. Trying to create homes across continents is never a good idea. After a while, no place seems to smell of home. And yet, the belonging one

person, Hoque includes interlude chapters in the third person, describing a part of her life where perhaps everything changed for her. A time when she woke up with charcoal in her mouth, confused and uneasy. These are messy passages, filled with conversations and poems, reflecting her time in a psychiatric ward after a failed attempt at taking her own life. Hoque does not linger on in these chapters—they are short by nature—but allows these passages and poems to serve as a peek into her mind.

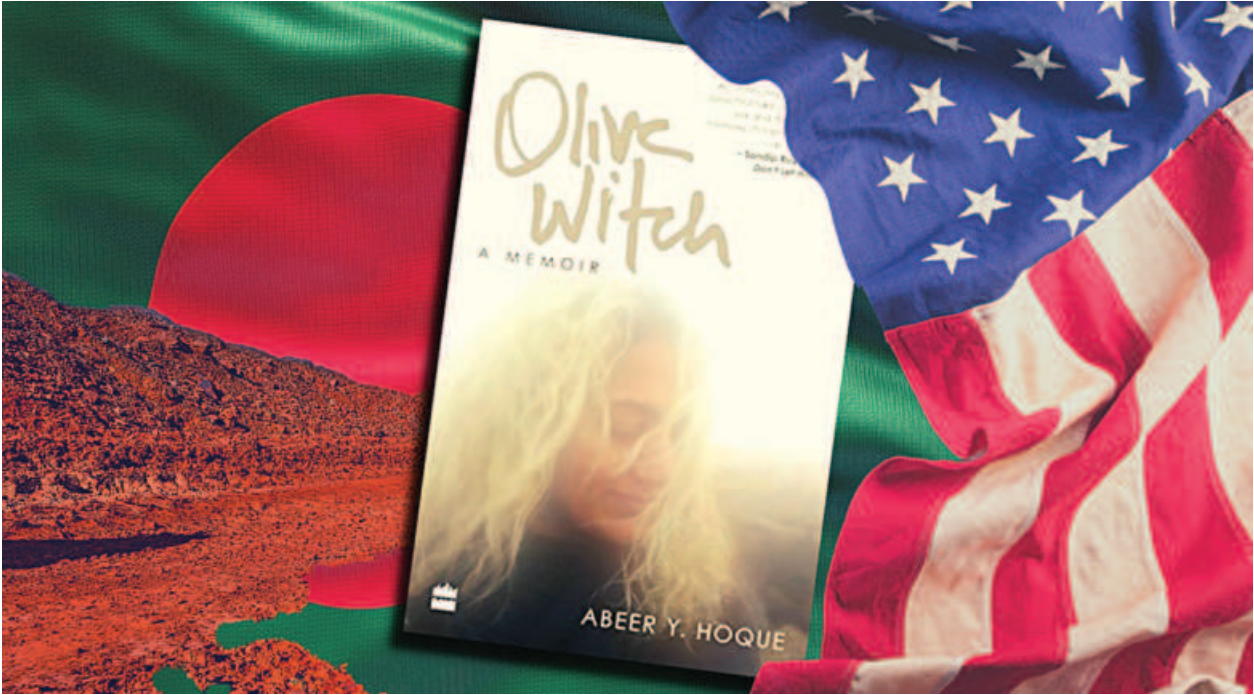
whom were immigrants. It was a scenery I was personally quite familiar with. The scent of the afternoons, the stern voices of the teachers, and their particular accents all came flooding back to me as I was reminded of a place I once knew as home, short-lived though it was.

And yet, it is only in the following section that the book really stuck with me. During her time in the US, we saw Hoque in some of her most volatile moments. Hoque's words felt angrier, more pained, more confused, and more distraught than ever. The shock that comes with changing your entire life, packing yourself up in a few boxes, and moving to a place where no one knows or likes you—all of it seemed to upend much of her sense of self. Schooling felt different, the leering gazes of her schoolmates stuck to her, and her bond between her parents and her sister grew increasingly strained. This is around the time of her adolescence, a time of love, and of discovery.

Then there was the endless barrage of expectations, all of which Hoque dissociated from, but struggled to voice, which eventually leads us to the final section of the book: her time in Bangladesh. This is the part where a journey most tumultuous begins to find some respite. The chapters here are perhaps the most lyrical: we see Abeer Hoque, the poet, in full bloom. After an uncomfortable phase where she drops out of her doctorate program and finds her way out of the psych ward, we reach what may be described as the finale of a journey of self-actualisation. But in truth, it is also a beginning.

We move in and out of events in her life, with the central theme of belonging connecting it all. The search for home encapsulates the journey of this memoir, but it is in the grittier details of the journey that we see her life in full bloom. Hoque is, at times, stubborn, loving, powerful, fragile, and sometimes she is all of these things at once. Wounded though many of these stories feel, I cannot help but see a certain sense of celebration in all of it. Hoque's love for every place she has had to call home, despite it never truly being so, and her love for everyone she has known, is what makes her journey so deeply moving.

Raian Abedin entertains the idea that no words are ever read the same way they are written.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

searches for lies within. Abeer Y. Hoque stated this in a discussion with Nupu Press not very long ago. In her book *Olive Witch*, we see that journey manifested across a length of time whose size is only bested by the sheer geography it covers. From a childhood in Nigeria to spending breaks in Bangladesh, to growing up in New York, and then returning to Bangladesh—the memoir covers the enormous, and multifaceted life of Abeer Y. Hoque in lyrical, almost poetic, prose.

The memoir is split into three parts, each describing her life in different parts of the world. In between the essays written in the first

Aside from the interludes, the other thing that stands out is the opening of every chapter. With every title comes a small poem, sometimes a regional piece, and the weather. We start our journey in Nigeria, in the university town of Nsukka, where the land is dry, and everything is coated in red dust.

As a child, Hoque finds herself exposed to a world that inevitably marks her as other—owing to her skin—and yet it is still a place she comes to call home. It is the only place she has known as home, spending so much time poring through books or playing in the bright afternoons with friends—many of

EDITORIAL

# On MOVING

Reading moves you. The movement is emotional—you feel moved as you read, you feel moved by what you read. To read is to be moved—by the sheer joy and ecstasy on the pages, by the pain and heartache in the letters, by the quiet yearnings of the characters, lives, events. Movement is also literal, or as literal as fictional accounts can get. One moves with the protagonist, spatially, temporarily, psychically. To move is to move inwardly as well as outwardly. Books take us on a journey inwards as often as they take us outwards. A book's power to move its audience—intended as well as unintended—is a magical thing.

To move is to leave home. To move is to find home. To move is to be on a permanent quest to find home.

Movement is also political. Examining movements in literary works means an inspection of settlement, forced migration, removal of native people, enslavement, and colonisation. Movement is the defining trait of the migratory subject. The exilic condition is permanently marked by forced movement. Movement is economic—capital and its accumulation often dictate the physicality of movement.

This week, we are tracing movements in fictional and nonfictional accounts. Here at DS Books, we believe books move us and stage movements, produce affects, create vibrations. Abeer Hoque's poignant memoir moves us, and we travel with her to places far flung and near—from the messy recesses of the author's mind to the dusty roads of Nsukka. Her work is a meditation on the concept of movements and moves.

Elsewhere we list books that moved us with the hope that they will move you too—to read, to reflect, and to stage movement.

Nazia Manzoor



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

## THE SHELF

# Stories that move you

### STAR BOOKS REPORT

In keeping with the spirit of Partition of 1947, we have compiled a list of stories that deal with movements and migrations, displacement and its traumatic aftermath. An estimated 12 million people moved between India and the west and east wings of then-Pakistan during Partition. This mass migration of people made us think about how such movements are portrayed in literary texts.

Given the theme of this week's issue, this list goes beyond the scope of Partition and addresses other kinds of movements.

**The Coming**  
Daniel Black  
Macmillan, 2014

Daniel Black's fifth novel is about the experience of millions of abducted Africans and their experience of the Middle Passage. Presented in three parts and through a collective narrator, the novel engages with the violent objectification of black flesh, life before the theft of a people, and a desire to pass on the tale of the past. Moving and complex, the book is part of a genre of fiction known as neo slave narratives, a narrative form that traces the journey from bondage to freedom. From Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), the genre borrows elements from slave narratives to recover lost history and connect it to the present. *The Coming* bears witness to the humanity of the dehumanised Africans and through individual tales of the unthinkable, the novel not only gives voice to those rendered voiceless by the slave trade but places blame on human greed, exhibited by both Africans and their European captors. At times didactic, the book often tries to do the work of a historian which may not always

appeal to the reader. However, characters such as Dijji make the journey well worth it. Despite the brutal treatment at the hands of the captor, in a moving scene, Dijji stands crying. As Dijji "simply stood on the block as water streamed from his eyes and flooded his cheeks...he couldn't contain his love. We'd never seen a man weep like that." The narrator mentions how Dijji "exposed a heart so naked, so pure, so loyal, we shook our heads. Our capture had not destroyed Dijji's clarity of our majesty."

Through his weeping, Dijji reminded the captives who they were and his tears "paid homage to [their] survival. And from that day till this one, [they] have never been the same." And nor were we, after finishing this book.

**Season of Migration to the North**  
Tayeb Salih  
First published 1966

Salih's is a novel about a trip many make—a Sudanese young man moves to Europe, settles down, studies, and returns. The man who comes back is an altered version of who

he once was—angry, unsettled, and lost. The novel deftly critiques the orientalised of migrant characters, and how sexualisation and self-exoticisation are huge parts of this movement from here to there. In Salih's prose, that movement is as much internal as it is literal—much like the way Joseph Conrad claims in *Heart of Darkness*, the changes take place within. Ensnared



**"Missing Out"**  
Leila Aboulela  
Granta, 2010

Majdy and Samra, a young couple from Khartoum are at the centre of this poignant short story by Leila Aboulela. Majdy, a PhD student in London is enamoured with what the big city has to offer. As Samra joins him in his cramped student quarters after their marriage, the newlyweds clash over religion (he stopped praying, she is aghast by the discovery), the weather, and the opposing ways in which they experience what London represents for them. Majdy sometimes "Looked at the little curls at the nape of her neck, dry now and light, not moist with sweat, and thought that she was meant for brilliant sunsets and thin cotton dresses." She, on the other hand, could not believe he does not suffer from the same kind of homesickness

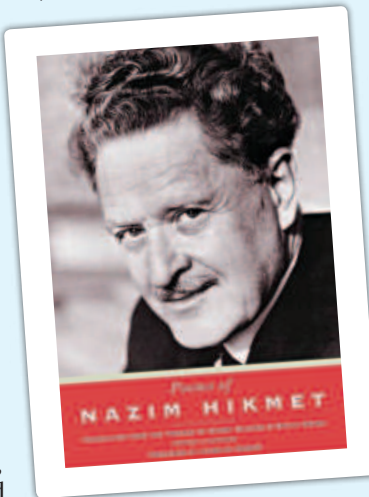
by Mustafa Sa'eed's tortured past in England and his messy present, the narrator, much like Conrad's Marlow, takes an introspective look at himself and slowly begins losing his grip on sanity. A brilliant critique of the empire, this is a must-read for those interested in concepts of identity and gender, tradition and modernity, autonomy and agency.

she suffers from, the kind he terms as "perverse". A beautiful, poetic tale of the pathos of migration and the trauma of nonbelonging, "Missing Out" is the kind of short story that truly moves you.

**"Things I Didn't Know I Loved"**  
Nazim Hikmet (tr. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk)  
Vintage Books, 1996

Translated from the Turkish by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk, "Things I Didn't Know I Loved" accompanies the poet on a Prague-Berlin night train as his mind wanders from one epiphany to another, reflecting on all that he has come to love in a life long lived. From the motionless rivers in the chateaued European hillsides to ones far more fast moving, the poet stops to meditate on his love for the sky, the clouds, the stars, and even the "petit-bourgeois" moonlight. Each stop, though seemingly a poetic cliché, paints a picture of a life that has been at a time poignant, agonising, and joyous. In his portrait of Hikmet, J D

McClatchy dubs him a writer of public poetry whose work is the embodiment of "the self opened and given over", and such is the experience of reading "Things I Didn't Know I Loved" as the poet seamlessly ties parts of his life to the sun, the sea, and the cosmos, making a gentle but powerful case for why they are poetic constants rather than clichés. The poem's political undercurrent—which sees the poet love the skies as he translates *War and Peace* to Turkish and love flowers as his friend sends him three red carnations, both



while he is in prison—mirrors the motion of Hikmet's own life, 29 years of which he spent imprisoned, being transferred between prisons, and exiled for his communist beliefs.

"Things I Didn't Know I Loved" doesn't find its movement in the train journey itself—paradoxically fixed in space and time even as it is in constant motion—but rather in its travel through time. Written just a year before his death in 1963, the poem serves as a point of reflection for Hikmet, who is now 60 and wondering, "why did I suddenly discover all these passions sitting by the window on the Prague-Berlin train...is it because I'm half dead from thinking about someone back in Moscow" as he watches the world disappear "on a journey of no return".

**A Case of Exploding Mangoes**  
Mohammed Hanif  
Knopf, 2008

Contrary to the other texts on this list, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* serves as an example of literature that is inspired from movement coming to a sudden halt. The comic novel, which was also Mohammed Hanif's debut as a novelist, is a fictional account of the death of Pakistani President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq who was killed in a plane crash in 1988. The crash inspired a multitude of conspiracy theories speculating on the series of events that led to the "accident", and so forms the backdrop of Hanif's deftly woven story of humorous political intrigue, satirising as it goes the actions of political leaders and actors, both Pakistani and American, as well as the corruption endemic to the Pakistani political system, heavily influenced by global politics and rising Islamism.

