BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The occult thrills of 'The Centre'

Review of Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi's 'The Centre' (Gillian Flynn Books, 2023).

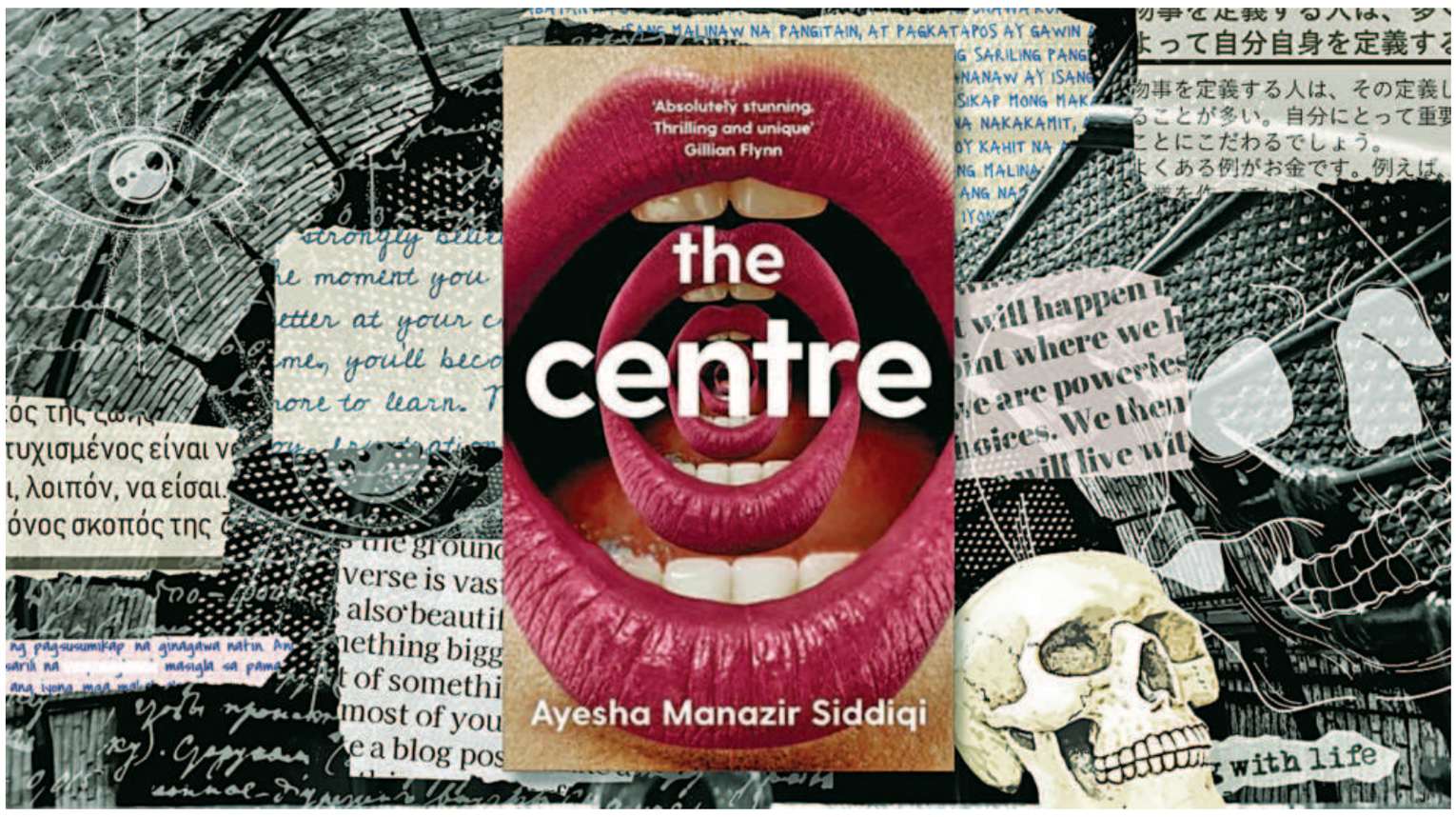


ILLUSTRATION: **AMREETA LETHE**

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Rarely does a book arrive, a debut no less, that feels as inventive and accomplished as Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi's *The Centre*. Her novel is built on the crossroads of interpretation and ownership, of the power of language and of those privileged enough to reclaim it. In this regard, Siddiqi's novel is a contemporary reckoning of our often tenebrous relationship with the others' tongue. Unfortunately, the novel's all too visible flaws also cloud much of its muster.

Anisa Ellahi, an unremarkable subtitler of Bollywood films, meets Adam, a polyglot, at a seminar on "Translation verses Adaptation". She is fascinated with the many languages he seems to know, which is a stark contrast to his otherwise mediocre personality. As they begin to date and their relationship progresses, Anisa invites Adam to her home back in Karachi and Adam, to impress her, becomes fluent in Urdu practically in days. Refusing to believe Adam's obviously untrue excuses, she is made aware of the Centre's existence—a secret, invite-only, language-learning centre which claims to make its learners fluent in 10 days. Wishing to better her career, Anisa enrols for German with Adam's recommendation. Yet, as she gets involved in the Centre, she is slowly immersed into the organisation and its dark secrets.

Siddiqi's novel, so far, is tantalisingly smooth. In Karachi, we see Anisa's family parading around the urdu-speaking white boy to their friends and how a shopkeeper, upon noticing Adam's urdu, had "shook his head and spoke at length about what an honour it was to have someone from the west learn our language". These are instances where the novel excels most. The vestiges of such colonial humiliation and our modern-day co-opting of these are shown with great humour. Yet, at the same time, the story takes some jarring turns, which seem unnecessary in the first place. When Adam explains that he had to give up his phone while at the Centre.

Anisa asks, "But you texted me loads...", to which Adam explains that it was his friend Brian who replied to her texts. But won't a couple, who have been with each other for a considerable amount of time travel to meet one's parents in Pakistan, see through this?

A great deal of why the novel was partly an unpleasant experience for me was down to the author's insistence in commentary through her narrator. While her anxieties are relevant and, above all, true, they come packaged with the smell of complacently "aware" rich people, the "trustafarians" in the author's language, who have the the *luxury* to be aware and duly stop short of making any structural change or change in their behaviour beyond this awareness, rendering this generosity meaningless. When Anisa lies to her best friend Naima about the real cost of attending this elite Centre (because the latter comes from a poor background), she recognises what she has done and says: "Maybe, through these small erasures, which we tell ourselves are 'polite' or whatever, we're covering up a vast network of structural inequality." But what is the point of owning up to this, when she continues with the lie? Anisa's narration, on the whole, veers on the cloyingly casual (one could easily edit out the numerous "whatever" and "stuff"—filler words I fail to see as being part of Anisa's voice). It is remarkable that a book *on* how the elite often use language to bar or play on the disadvantaged (in the later chapters of the book, the readers would see how literal that is, in the case of the Centre), can itself be a subtle example of this.

Siddiqi's clever premise also does not go much beyond the vagueness of the Centre's all-encompassing power, which for all its plans of world domination, does not explain how it intends to do this with merely language labs. Arjun, one of the founders, even says, "We have the best scientists overseeing the process, neutralising all potential toxicities." Yet the book shows all of them working in their house, akin to a DIY project. Anisa's swift infiltration into the Centre, too, is worryingly unbelievable. Her chemistry with Shiba, who runs the Centre, undoubtedly works but one wonders here too how unrealistic and suspiciously convenient this is for the story.

Siddiqi's novel is quite enjoyable when she deals with the politics of the text, when instead of numerous pages of Anisa's boring complaints about her friend's relationship, we see more of the "magic language school," which I presume is what readers are *really* interested in. The novel is full of great lines such as "And prayer, I think, can be a bit like translation. There's a cosmic geometry to it." Or, "Did you see their faces when you said that thing about translation as colonialism? They were practically salivating. You're basically a dominatrix now."

The Centre, discounting some of its weaknesses, is smart, fresh, and full of suspense. Siddiqi and her debut novel deserves all the attention and perhaps more.

Shahriar Shaams *has written for* Dhaka Tribune, The Business Standard *and* The Daily Star. *He is nonfiction editor at* Clinch, *a martial-arts themed literary journal. Find him on twitter @shahriarshaams.*

THE SHELF

When all else fails, satirise

STAR BOOKS REPORT

This week, the Daily Star Books compiles a list of satirical fiction for our readers to feast on. In sociopolitical climates rife with crackdowns and censorship, satire takes on the burden of giving a voice to matters that cannot be spoken about otherwise. Although media literacy seems to be on the decline, owing partly to the spread and rising influence of disinformation on social media, we maintain that the practice of reading, writing, and interpreting satire remains an important implement in the literary tool belt.

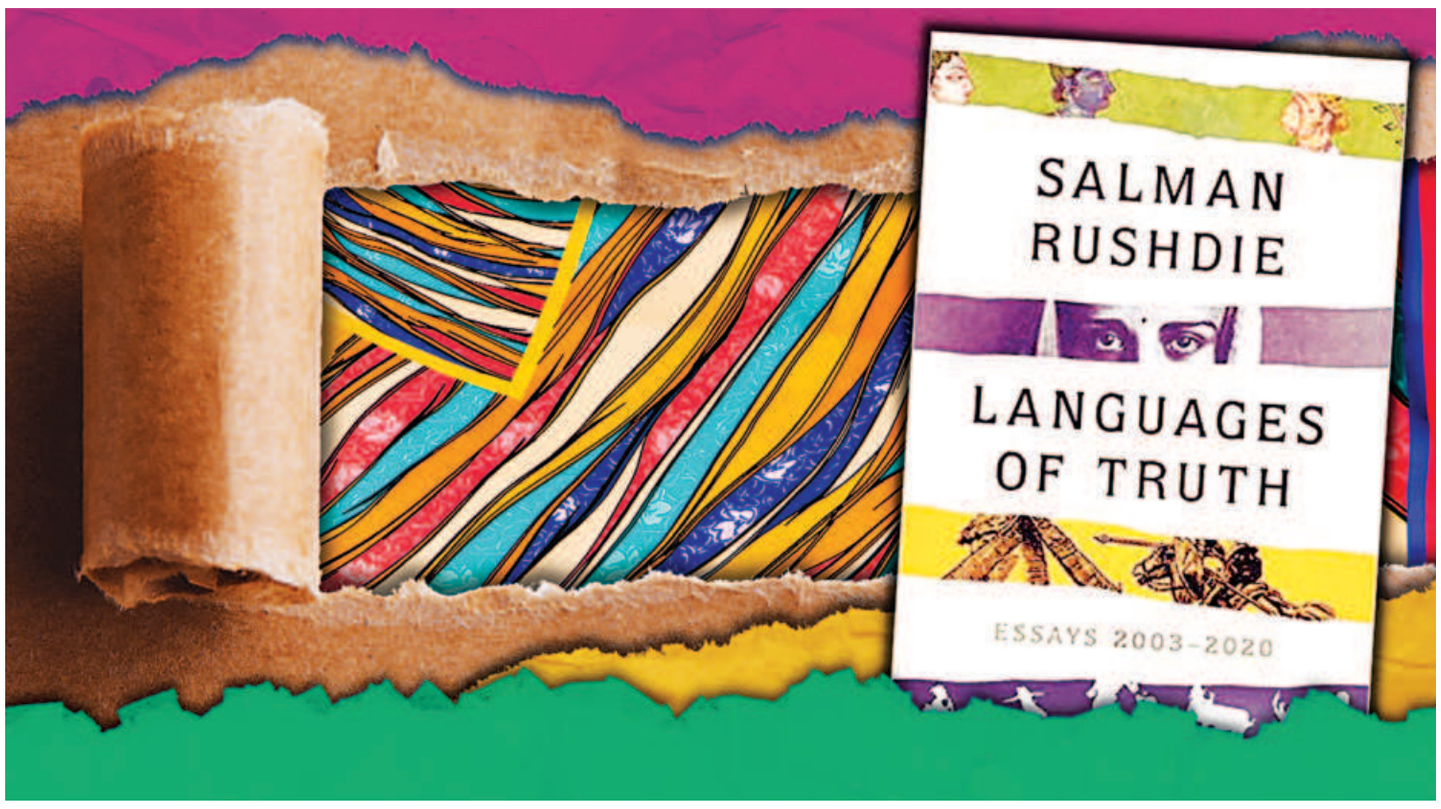
THE CHAIR
Jose Saramago
Verso, 2012

Jose Saramago's *The Lives of Things* is a collection of six short stories touching upon tales of dictatorship, power, and corruption told through, essentially, the lives of inanimate objects. The first of the short stories, "The Chair", is a biting, though slow-burning, satirical tale and political allegory concerning the fall of the former Portuguese prime minister, António de Oliveira Salazar. Told nearly entirely as a tableau of a wooden chair that is in the process of falling after imperceptibly being eaten away by beetles, the story reaches its climax as the dictator takes a seat and the chair beneath him inevitably breaks down. "The Chair" thus captures the essence of political satire, a creeping but sturdy line of defence against repression and censorship, mocking the powers that be. As the imminent death and consequent fall of the dictator approaches, foretelling great changes to come, Saramago writes, "Let us go to the window. What do you think of this month of September? We have not had such weather in a long time." What better short story to read in a rain-drenched, wood-rotting September in Bangladesh?

DEATH CONSTANT BEYOND LOVE
Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Atlantic Magazine Archive

In Rosal del Virrey, a barren village where, ironically, no roses grow, Marquez sets his own short political satire. Senator Onesimo Sanchez, campaigning for reelection, is the only person in the village who wears a rose in his lapel as he parades around making false promises to the villagers in order to secure his reelection. "We will no longer be foundlings in our own country, orphans of God in a realm of thirst and bad climate, exiles in our own land," Sanchez swears. "We will be different people, ladies and gentlemen, we will be a great and happy people." His obviously false campaign slogans are promptly labelled a "circus" by Marquez's narrator. In the end, the politician dies of his illness as was foretold at the beginning of the story, though mired in a scandalous affair. Marquez's is a story of corruption, solitude, and death, rife with elements of deceit and artifice that often become an inevitable part of political satire.

Compiled by Amreeta Lethe. To read the rest of this list, go to Daily Star Books and *The Daily Star* websites.



DESIGN: **MAISHA SYEDA**

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A paean to storytelling

Review of Salman Rushdie's 'Languages of Truth' (Random House, 2021)

NAJMUS SAKIB

Following the trails of *Imaginary Homelands* (Penguin Books, 1992) and *Step Across The Line* (Modern Library, 2003), comprising essays written and lectures given by Salman Rushdie between 2003-2020, *Languages of Truth* is Rushdie's third collection of nonfiction works and is as a delectable read as its predecessors if not more.

Languages of Truth opens with the essay titled "Wonder Tales" in which Rushdie probes deeply into the nature of fiction and the paths literature can and should tread on while ruminating on its past history and where it is headed. "Wonder Tales", perhaps the finest essay pertaining to literature he ever penned down, is a paean to the art of storytelling—a homage to the blending of the real with the surreal, of the natural with the supranatural, a tribute to the immense power of the fictionality of fiction and the imaginativeness of the imagination, an ode to the power of fiction to tell truths better than blunt truths are capable of.

Rushdie sees us as storytelling animals who need stories to sustain the soul. To him, story is the unnatural means we use to talk about human life, our way to reach the truth by making things up. Asgard and Valhalla, Olympus and Mount Kailash are not merely imaginary mythical lands, embedded therein are our deepest thoughts about our own natures and our doubts and fears as well.

Rushdie has always been in favour of the use of the fabulous to reach the truth, to reach the real through the unreal has been the cornerstone of almost all of his works till date. The amalgamation of fact and fiction to explore reality has been the most favourite trope of Rushdie's almost half a century long literary career and it is no wonder that he is a staunch supporter of the use of the surreal.

From *Grimus* (Random House, 2003) to *Victory City* (Random House, 2023), Rushdie's fascination with the wonder tales is palpable in everything he writes. The influence of myths and legends is so apparent in almost all of his works that it doesn't come as a surprise that someone, who has drawn so much from that inexhaustible cornucopia of myths and legends and the wonder tales of the East and the West, would be so enamoured by them.

Human nature is complex, capacious and contradictory in its manifold manifestations and Rushdie is confident to sing along with Whitman—"Very well then I contradict myself." Rushdie rejoices in the protean power of literature to be able to sing the song of contradiction and complexity, to be able to celebrate our ability to be, simultaneously, both yes and no, both this and that.

Rushdie has often remarked ruefully on the present plight of India and likes to compare it with the past India, with the past Mumbai where he grew up. He believes that India in his childhood days was a harmonious place; religious zealots were not running riots back in his days and he seems to believe that he lived in a truly secular India which is now backsliding into a Hindu majoritarian state devoid of the secular ideologies held high by its founding fathers.

In an essay on his friend Christopher Hitchens who staunchly supported Rushdie on all fronts after the infamous fatwa, he writes movingly and reminisces about Hitchens' last birthday whilst likening his late friend to Voltaire. Like his friend the late Christopher Hitchens, Rushdie too is a polymath of the highest order. Profound and sharply well articulated in his idiosyncratic and penetrating prose, almost every page of *Languages of Truth* exudes Rushdie's sharp wit, brilliant humour, and incisive erudition.

A panoply of disparate essays ranging from Cervantes and Shakespeare to Vonnegut and Marquez, from Beckett to Roth, from Hamzanama to Salgado, from defending the freedom of artists to vehemently censuring censorship, from myths to musings on the pandemic—*Languages of Truth* presents some of the very best writings of Rushdie which do not fall in the flank of fiction. It would be a Herculean task anyway to put his best fictional works inside a single binding.

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