

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Love, lies and loneliness

A review of ‘The Lagos Wife’ (Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024) by Vanessa Walters

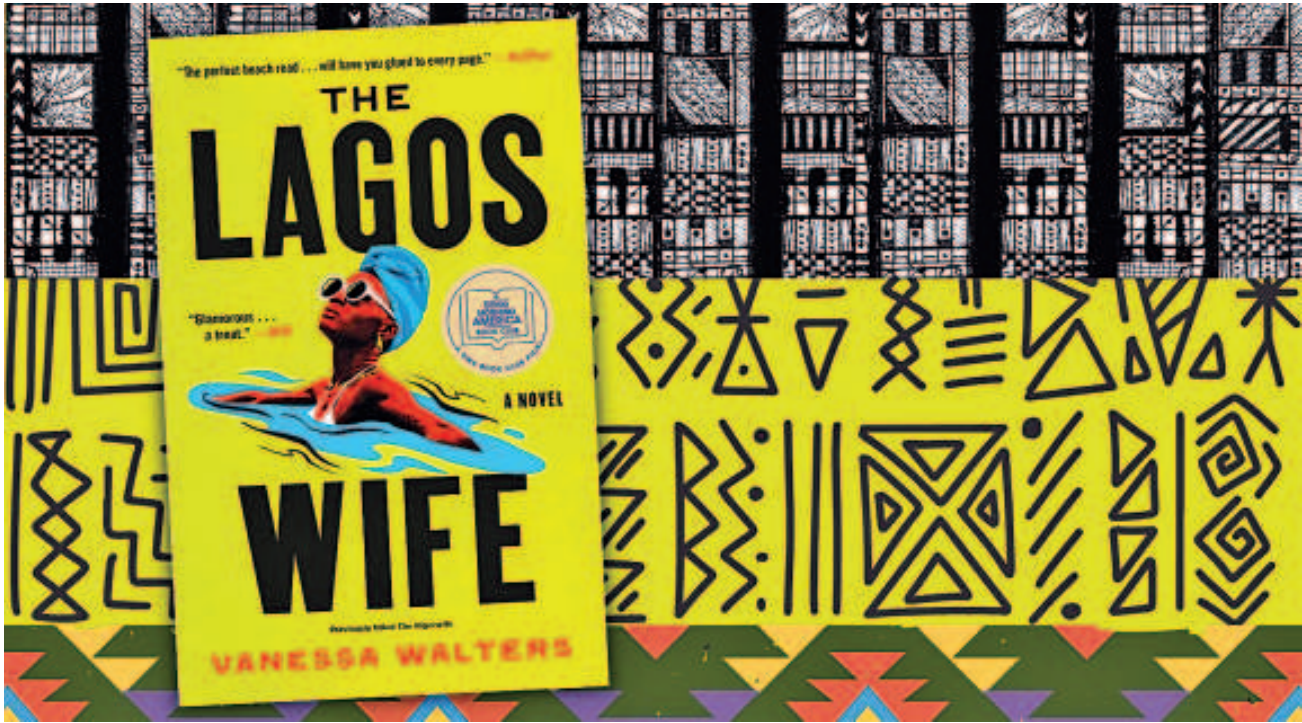


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This story is more than a conventional domestic drama, and it comes with a breathtaking plot twist involving Nicole's relationship with Claudine, that is revealed late in the game (hint: it's probably not what you think). Hence, for a variety of reasons, *The Lagos Wife* is an interesting read—and something of a cautionary tale as well.

FARAH GHUZNAVI

The very first time I came across a description of this book, previously published under the title *The Nigerwife* (Atria Books, 2023), I was intrigued. It tells the story of a young black British woman who gets married to an international student she meets at university. A few years later, seduced by the idea of a more comfortable life with household staff and 24/7 childcare, she moves with her Nigerian husband to live in his parents' palatial compound in Lagos.

The idea of this woman moving to an alien culture as a result of her marriage had immediate resonance for me, because as a child growing up in Dhaka long before the internet era, I had often wondered about my parents' friends, and also some of our family members, who were married to foreigners. Didn't these bideshi wives feel lonely, I wondered, living so far away and so disconnected from their own countries and their natal families?

Most of them seemed happy enough to me, making annual pilgrimages to visit their countries of origin. Until they clearly weren't. And that's when one would hear about an auntie or a family friend who had, for example, "gone home to London for a bit."

Sometimes they did return. At other times, their husbands left to join them wherever they

were (that turned out to be the case more than once in my own extended family). And in a minority of cases, their names would gradually be forgotten as time passed, because they were never mentioned again in front of us kids.

As I grew older, the complexities of such international, intercultural, and often interfaith marriages seemed to become ever more obvious, and I began considering the hardy souls who attempted love marriages across distant borders as brave hearts indeed.

These cross-cultural tensions, and sometimes profound loneliness, as well as the flamboyant lifestyles of rich Nigerians, are all themes that feature in the book. But a key element of the novel centres around how tracing a missing person in a city like Lagos is a very different prospect from dealing with, say, the UK police.

Originally of West Indian descent and a British citizen, "the Lagos wife" of the title is Nicole Oruwari, the young and beautiful wife of a wealthy businessman, Tonye, and the mother of their two little boys. Nicole has spent the last several years living in the lap of luxury with her well-heeled in-laws.

So, you would think that when she suddenly goes missing, no stone would be left unturned in the hunt for her. But as her visiting aunt Claudine, who has her own

fraught past with Nicole to contend with, finds out—after she comes from London to Lagos to check on how the search for Nicole is progressing—the situation is far from the fast-moving investigation that Claudine has been imagining. On the contrary, both Nicole's in-laws and her husband seem less than invested in the search. For reasons that will be clear to any South Asian, they appear more worried about the potential of scandals involved.

The Lagos police are also remarkably non-committal regarding Nicole's possible whereabouts. But there are reasons for that too, as Claudine begins to discover to her dismay. Because aside from her suspicions about possible infidelity on Tonye's part—based on the unwelcome discovery of an item hidden in his suitcase—Nicole has been keeping secrets of her own. And her biggest mistake might just be miscalculating what a Nigerian man considers desirable conduct in a woman, compared to what is deemed acceptable in the more permissive western culture in which Nicole grew up.

"Nigerwife" is a (non derogatory) term used to describe the foreign wives of Nigerian men, and it is also the title of an association of women set up to look after these expat wives' interests, and to help them adapt to Nigerian society. What some of the Nigerwives eventually come to realise is just how little power they have in a society where their standing is based on the regard (or lack thereof) in which they are held by their husbands and in-law families.

What really happened to Nicole emerges slowly, and in somewhat ambiguous terms. In the meantime, what the reader learns is a great deal about the culture and values of Nigerian society and what it means to be a Nigerwife, which I found fascinating. This story is more than a conventional domestic drama, and it comes with a breathtaking plot twist involving Nicole's relationship with Claudine, that is revealed late in the game (hint: it's probably not what you think). Hence, for a variety of reasons, *The Lagos Wife* is an interesting read—and something of a cautionary tale as well.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker. Her work has been published in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and the USA. Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, she published a short story collection titled *Fragments of Riversong* (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the *Lifelines* anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). She is currently working on her new short story collection and is on Instagram @farahghuznavi.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

‘History and Heritage’: Reading Bengal in a series

Review of Dr Abdul Latif's 'History and Heritage' series (first published in 2021 by Palok Publishers)

MOHIN UDDIN MIZAN

Even at this moment when Google is under threat of being taken over by Artificial Intelligence and you may search for anything online, the necessity of printed books is still there, especially when it comes to enlightening oneself with the history and heritage of a country or region, which is a broad subject requiring multiple books and sources.

History and Heritage, is one such series of seven books by Dr Abdul Latif, on the history of Bengal, that sheds a clear light on the land and the people, the language and literature, lifestyle and culture, and economy and administration of Bengal from the BC period of human settlement to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

Now, readers may ask why this series when numerous works of literature are there to fill in on these issues? While sources are there, many are in a scattered form, as Dr Latif mentions in his preface to the series. "After my retirement from service in November 2013, I took an interest in educating myself in the history of Bengal and Bangladesh per se...but when I began reading, I found the source materials so elaborate and scattered that for a common reader, it is difficult to collect, read, and comprehend", he noted. This very reason prompted Dr Latif to pen down the series—to furnish the common readers with practical and handy work on the selected aspects of the history of Bengal.

He also admits that this series is a methodical assimilation of secondary materials supplemented by primary information. The primary data in the first three books includes oral history collected through interviews with well-informed elderly people and his observations on matters particularly relevant to the period after the 1940s.

This series is written in an all-in-one format, where the author himself took the pain in assimilating all the secondary text materials, including published books, journals, online and unpublished materials with proper references so that

anyone—academician or the general reader—interested in exploring deeper may find a way to proceed further.

The *History and Heritage* series has chronologically been sectioned as follows: *Land and People of Bengal*, *Language and Literature of Bengal*, *Lifestyle and Culture of Bengal*, *Ancient and Medieval Bengal*, *Bengal during British Rule*, *East Bengal as East Pakistan* and *Road to Bangladesh*, and *Independent Bangladesh*. Unfortunately, the seventh book in the series (*Independent Bangladesh*) has not seen the light, as the author's current physical condition will not allow him



COLLAGE: AMREETA LETHE

to continue with it. Yet, the prospective readers of this series, I think, will never be disappointed.

The first volume of the series, titled *Land and People of Bengal* primarily documents the history of selected geographic aspects of Bengal, such as geologic formation and physiographic regions, climatic conditions, human settlements and formation of the Bengali race, early civilisation and archaeological sites, the spread of Indian and Abrahamic religions in Bengal, and the development of education, health, transportation and communication systems as markers of civilisation, described in historical perspective. Besides the dominant

religions in Bengal, the readers will find a detailed overview of the world's major religions and an extensive knowledge of Bengal and human settlement in the Indian subcontinent, along with the transition that happened later on.

Notably, the third one in the series *Lifestyle and Culture of Bengal*, as the title suggests, records lifestyles (dwellings, food habits, garments, marriage customs, festivities, etc.), art, architecture, performing arts (in dance circus, magic, jatra, theatre, films, and music), veteran artistes and performers. One of the interesting things I found in this book is whether you are aged

administrative policies along with power imbalance and economic disparity in both periods, ending with the birth of independent Bangladesh.

Last but not least, these books will make you a little aware of the economic and administrative system in ancient and medieval times we are less acquainted with—as the author touched upon them along the political history.

One issue that needs the attention of the prospective readers is that, due to the lack of matching information between Bangladesh and West Bengal, mainly relevant to the post-Partition period, the author was compelled to present the issues relating to Bangladesh only and has to be satisfied with the elaboration thereof.

The author—who invested his valuable time and hard work in the series—Dr Abdul Latif taught Economics at the University of Dhaka in early 1975. Later, he worked at different research institutes like the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and Inclusive Finance and Development (InM) and established himself as an economist. Not being a historian in the true sense, Dr Latif took on the task to document the history of Bengal for researchers, academicians, students of higher studies, and general readers. All the books in the series are written in lucid language, and the narrative flows smoothly, and the collection has already gained access to the world's largest and most prestigious libraries like The Library of Congress (LOC) in Washington, DC and the British Library of London.

Mohin Uddin Mizan is a publication and communication professional at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Ministry of Planning. A translator and former journalist at national dailies, Mohin used to write short stories, poems, op-eds and book reviews in national English dailies and online platforms at home and abroad. He can be reached at mohinnmizan07@gmail.com.

REFLECTIONS

Being a third culture kid

SYEDA SAMARA MORTADA

As the title suggests, I am a third culture kid, a TCK, or a TCI (I for individual), the phrase literally translates to "people who were raised in a culture other than their parents' or the culture of their country of nationality, and also those who live in a different environment during a significant part of their child development years". I moved to Saudi Arabia when I was three years old and lived there until I was 13. While we came to Bangladesh every year during our summer breaks, it is safe to say that I was mostly unaware of the Bengali culture, traditions, as well as my roots for the first half of my life, and more importantly my growing years.

Living in Saudi Arabia, as one could imagine, is a jumble of lifestyles and the choices that come with it. To make matters even more complicated, I went to an Indian Embassy school. There were quite a few embassy schools that existed at that time including Bangladeshi, Pakistani and of course, American and British schools for those who could afford it. The Indian school was known to be "better" in terms of education and curriculum than the Bangladeshi school. As middle-class parents would have it, I ended up in the Indian school. And so, I became one of the very few Bangladeshis living in Saudi Arabia, going to an Indian school—it could not get "better" than that. I wrote and spoke Hindi fluently, had Indian friends during day time, and hung out with the children of other Bangladeshi family friends—who all also went to either Bangladeshi, Indian or Pakistani schools. Life, as one would like to think, came to me in multifaceted colours.

But what does it mean really, to be a TCK? For starters, I grew up feeling mostly confused. In class, I would shyly raise my hand and say I was Bangladeshi, when the other children were asked which state of India they belonged to. During family gatherings, I once again felt conscious when I could not write Bengali, or recite the



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

national anthem—although there were others like me, which led us to clutter together in our TCK corners. Our parents on the other hand, who were first generation adults settling in a foreign land, could not leave behind their Bangladeshi emotions, or the cuisine. And so, we would end up having bhaat mach most days at home. Although, we loved our shawarmas. Every year, we had big celebrations on 14th April, 21st February, and 16th December, and us kids, tunelessly sang "Esho He Boishakh", and "Amar Bhai er Rokte Rangano" without understanding its essence, or the rich history of the words.

However, a space I did find solace in was the mythical world of Enid Blyton. I got introduced to reading, coincidentally by a family friend, who was into books much more than the other kids around our age. Her love of reading somehow transfused into me, and I picked it up, even without realising it. I devoured *The Secret Seven* and *Famous Five*. But what I loved most was getting lost in the world Blyton created through *Malory Towers* (first published 1946). The life of Darrell Rivers, while she was in boarding school, somehow resonated with me, although I lived in my own house. Her woes, her struggles pained me like these were incidents happening to me. During my teens, I got into more "mature" books: *The Baby-Sitters Club*, *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys*, then Sidney Sheldon (I don't think I have not read any of their books!). This palate for mysteries and crime novels stayed with me ever since, for I can hardly fall asleep these days, without watching an episode of a crime thriller on Netflix.

Being a student of English Literature, do I wish that I had read Bangla literature? Yes, especially when I see my friends who can read almost anything, even American literature and make it their own, and can combine it to the world of Bengali Literature. Do I wish that I was able to know and read my country and its history through the make-believe, fantastic world of our deshi writers? Again, yes. For Bangla is an essence—it is music, and no language can bring that sense of compassion. I love the sound of it; when I listen to those words, I wish I was able to make that space for myself, only if I were able to read it.

I read Bangla story books with my eight-year-old daughter now—the likes of *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Tuntunir Boi*. Who knows, maybe I will get there someday, maybe I will take that journey into Bangla literature with her. For now, I am happy reliving that Bengali childhood with her, and being a child myself while accompanying her as I see her and her love for the mystical Bangla language.

Syeda Samara Mortada is a feminist activist, and Co-Founder of Bonhishkha, a feminist organisation working to un-learn gender, and in creating a platform for youth to share their gender-based experiences.