

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# The plight of immigrant Bangladeshis in the west

Review of *The Children of This Madness* (7.13 Books, 2023) by Gemini Wahhaj

**As the US war in Iraq plays out a world away, and Beena struggles to belong to Houston's Bangali American community—many of whom serve the same corporate masters she sees destroying Iraq—she comes to view the entire immigrant status of the Bangali Americans with ambivalence.**

SOMDATTA MANDAL

What happens when a diasporic Bangladeshi author who has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Houston attends a fiction-writing workshop at the same university offered by the noted Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and as a result makes the utmost effort to follow all the rules and tricks of the trade and give in her best? It results in a debut novel where the author writes a historical fiction—a complete tale of modern Bangalis, one that illuminates the recent histories not only of Bangladesh, but America and Iraq at the same time. It tries to bring in both the gains and losses of immigration at the personal as well as the political level.

Divided into 50 neatly arranged chapters, each one short and with a title to clarify the way they have been deliberately juxtaposed against each other, the story of *The Children of This Madness* begins with a house party in Houston on March 19, 2003, where the diasporic Bangali community meet, have chatpati and other delicious snacks, and among other issues, the usual topic of whether to go back to Bangladesh or stay back in the US emerges. The protagonist Beena is preparing to complete her PhD program in Houston when her mother and brother are killed in a bomb blast in her hometown of Dhaka. She's eager to leave everything and return to Bangladesh, but her father, Nasir, urges her to stay put for her safety. Beena reluctantly agrees, though she's uneasy about remaining in the US due to her opposition to the war in Iraq, which she holds strongly as a fellow Muslim and because she spent part of her childhood in Mosul.

Going back to Dari Binni village in Jessore during the years 1944 to 1947 from the second chapter onwards, a parallel narrative traces Nasir's life, offering a panoramic view of his impoverished childhood and his later pursuit of engineering and teaching jobs in Iraq, where he sought a haven for the family during Bangladesh's fight for liberation from Pakistan. Nasir eventually finds his way back to his



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

homeland in 1982, only to discover that corruption and new bureaucracy have made it impossible for him to thrive in his engineering career. After a reluctant visit to his daughter and American son-in-law, Roberto in Houston, the recently widowed professor Nasiruddin who is equally sagged by ill-health and mental ennui, decides to go back to his village home, and complete his circle in life. Eventually he offers a feast there and remains immersed in idyllic memories of his past childhood.

As the US war in Iraq plays out a world away, and Beena struggles to belong to Houston's Bangali American community—many of whom serve the same corporate masters she sees destroying Iraq—she comes to view the entire immigrant status of the Bangali Americans with ambivalence. Many of these engineers were her

father's former students, but they now profess a totally different worldview. Very skillfully Wahhaj dramatises this mingling of generations and cultures, and the search for an ever-elusive home that define the Bangali American experience.

If juxtaposing scenes between Houston (March to July 2003), Dari Binni (1944 to 1947 and 1953 to 1954), Rajshahi (1953), Dhaka (1958 to 1962 and 1982 to 1995), Jhenidah (1995), Mosul (1975 to 1982) was not enough, the novelist goes further to add more history and geography to her narrative and introduces another location in the middle of the book as well. This is a subplot set in Ottawa, Canada, from 1967 to 1969, when Nasiruddin is busy doing his doctoral research and consequently goes on neglecting his wife and keeps on behaving strangely

with her. So, Wahhaj suddenly thinks that an intrusion written from a female point of view in a diary form narrating the lonely wife's plight in an alien land, along with total indifference from her husband, would add some more masala to the plot. Naturally, the question arises in our mind whether this all-inclusive history of immigrant Bangladeshis throughout the world is necessary at all in the first place, and if so, who is her targeted readership?

All said and done, one must admit that reading this debut novel, despite its laboured proforma and setting, has been pleasant because of the simplicity of the author's narrative style. Wahhaj is very particular about culture-specific details, like, "Kemon achen?" is immediately followed by "How are you?" so that the Western reader is not confused with the meaning.

Also, as is the present trend, Bangla words and terms are not italicised and glossed at all. One is reminded of Tahmina Anam's novels and how she managed to bring in the socio-cultural perspectives of Bangladesh to the worldwide readers several years ago. Hope Wahhaj will rectify her didactic tone and present us with new novels in future that might be narrated in multiple voices but not spanning so many successive eras. Also, trying to include any and everything under the sun within the two covers of a single novel speaks of a sort of childishness, especially from a writer who is an English teacher and has written many good short stories earlier.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Jhumpa Lahiri's Italian renovations

Review of *Roman Stories* (Knopf, 2023) by Jhumpa Lahiri

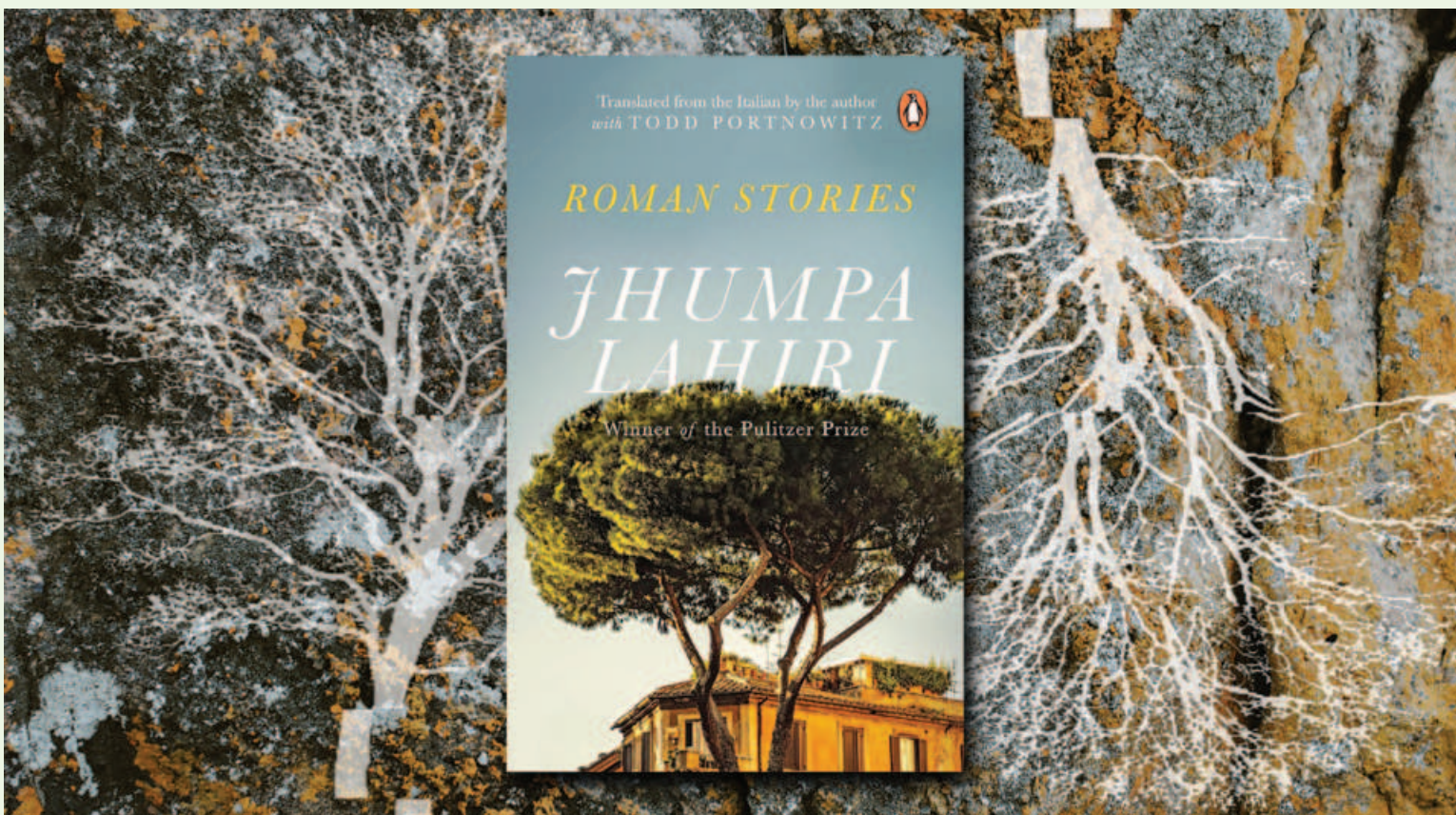


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Jhumpa Lahiri has always been the rare author whose prowess in the art of the short-story far surpassed her novelistic talents. Her Pulitzer prize winning debut, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999) had set the stage for an illustrious literary career, including her 2008 sophomore collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (which I considered, albeit controversially, better than her

debut), and the novels *The Namesake* (Mariner, 2003) and *The Lowland* (Knopf, 2013). Since 2015, she has written only in Italian, a language she learned from scratch. This has helped her flee the confines of her usual American settings and mostly Bangali, academic households. Her new collection *Roman Stories*, too, chronicles the lives of foreigners living in the west, but the American dreams have been replaced with European longings and affairs. The Bangalis,

at least overtly, are out of the picture altogether.

Indeed, it isn't until we reach the penultimate story, "Notes," when an 'alna' (wooden rack) is mentioned in passing. The story of a widowed mother living alone and working for a tailor after her children grow up and move out, "Notes" is most reminiscent of her previous work. In Todd Portnowitz's translation (he had translated three of the stories here, with the rest being

done by Lahiri herself), characters seem more resourceful when dealing with European racism. The narrator of "Notes" resorts to old habits when faced with schoolboys at her sons' old school sending her notes to leave. In "Well Lit House," where a family is pressured out of government housing because of their foreignness, the wife's refusal to weather the humiliation leads her to leave the country altogether, throwing her husband into a state of misery. As the man walks around outside, his helplessness colours all his interaction with the city—a conversation of melancholy that reverberates through the story's cityscape.

Perhaps the strongest story in this collection (this, too, a Portnowitz collaboration) is "P's Parties," a sublime piece of fiction whose strength rivals most of her full-length works. In "P's Parties" the narrator finds himself enamoured with L., a woman at a party of his wife's friend, P. The parties thrown by P. are regular occurrences, full of people from outside the city. The narrator muses, "They were so different from the group I belonged to: those of us born and raised in Rome, who bemoaned the city's alarming decline but could never leave it behind. The type of people for whom just moving to a new neighbourhood in their 30s... was the equivalent of departure, displacement, complete rupture."

His obsession with L. stems from a display of parental distress, of still worrying over one's children even when they are older and may not need worrying. The narrator is alienated by his wife's nonchalance regarding their son heading to another continent to study. When we see them visiting this son in America, who now has a new

girlfriend, the narrator's melancholy is obvious. "He was thriving in this new city," he mentions, referring to the loud American restaurants and the "bizarre and expensive" food. The scene lays bare Lahiri's transformation. Her characters now convey a European distaste of the new world more so than an aspiration to be at one with them.

*Roman Stories* ends with a story titled "Dante Alighieri," a memorable story of a young woman reminiscing the various turns and mistakes her life takes her through. The earlier portions of the story bring back a rare glimpse of the American in Lahiri. We see the narrator as a teenager feeling guilty for desiring her best friend's boyfriend, who has written her a letter signed as Dante. "The handwriting itself felt like a dense cage around the heart of that poor boy", the narrator says, a line that would not feel out of place in a story such as "Hell-Heaven" from her *Unaccustomed Earth* collection.

What *Roman Stories* is not are sketches by an author trying out a new language. Even in the weaker stories, such as "The Steps," Jhumpa Lahiri finds a sliver of the human condition to shed light on. The tendency for the occasional bland description (the women seem to always be slender or thin), too, does not take away from the power of her stories.

Whether or not her writing in Italian surpasses the reputation of her work in English, one can say with good authority that *Roman Stories* will remain a significant achievement in her oeuvre.

**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 X: @shahriarshaams.