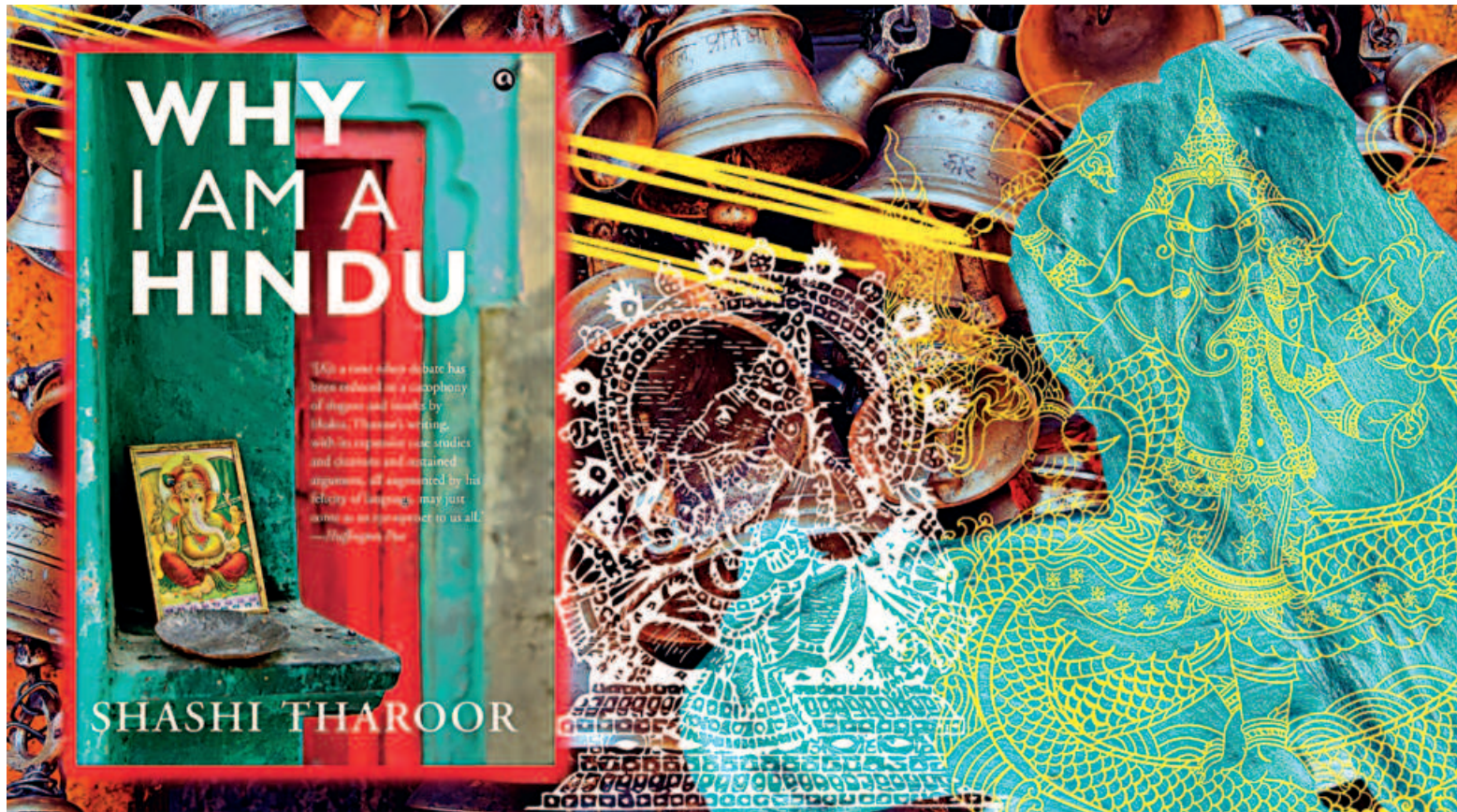


BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

An exploration of Hinduism and its honest interpretation

Review of 'Why I Am A Hindu' (Aleph Book Company, 2018) by Shashi Tharoor



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

The author's frustration with the current political climate and discrimination against minorities, especially Muslims, is an undertone throughout the book.

ZERTAB QUADERI

It's been a while since I had been meaning to get my hands on a book by Shashi Tharoor, and when my sister asked me what she could get me from Kolkata, I immediately said I'd love to read a book by the renowned Indian author, politician, columnist, and critic. And she couldn't have made a better choice than *Why I Am A Hindu* as my first-ever Tharoor read.

The honest, unbiased, crisp, logical, research-backed, and well-written non-fiction is a must-read for

anyone interested in learning about Hinduism, Hindutva, the differences between Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism, and the great scholars and sages who shaped and interpreted the religion in the best light but how groups with vested interests turned these around to use as weapons of social rift and rivalry. I could relate this to Islam easily since we have been seeing a rise in extremism, giving a bad name to the religion of peace, and creating a monster called Islamophobia. And beneath it all lies the games that politicians play in their

ever-ballooning greed for power and money.

Neatly divided into three sections with self-explanatory chapter titles, *Why I Am A Hindu* flows smoothly—from the author's glimpse into his own family practising the faith to the various interpretations of the religion by renowned scholars and sages, to calling out the caste system and other practices, to the politicised version of Hinduism, and how to propagate and practise it the way that it's supposed to be. It is a book that people from any

religion (or none at all) would enjoy reading as it is universally relatable. It teaches us that all religions are about love and tolerance, and that we extend our hands or bow down in supplication to an unseen and greater power. More importantly, it shows us how politics wears religious garb and uses religious sentiments to pit one section of society against another. When we look at what's happening in India today and in many parts of the world, this book helps put things in perspective by analysing the basis of Hinduism as propagated by Adi Shankara, Vivekananda, and Gandhi, versus the Hindutva practices that claim to bring India back to the path of true Hinduism which, however, are divisive and not doing much to project a positive image of the country.

Packed with historical facts and events that throw light on why Hindu widows practised sati, why child marriage was prevalent in the past, why the Hindu temples restricted entry of non-Hindus, and how Buddhism and Jainism have been derived from the mother religion, the book is a compact but comprehensive read that explains, praises, questions, and calls out customs and rituals of the religion. Replete with examples of how festivals are celebrated differently in different parts of India and how Muslims actively take part in them, Tharoor drives home that the diversity of Hinduism is what makes it a capacious and tolerant religion, and India a multicultural and multidimensional country.

Understandably, the author's frustration with the current political climate and discrimination against minorities, especially Muslims, is an undertone throughout the book. Tharoor gives a detailed account of the premises on which the Bharatiya Jana

Sangh was founded, the precursor to the BJP, and how Nazi practices influenced at least one of the founders. He has given his all to reinforce that Hinduism has more to do with the Indian civilisation and culture rather than belonging to a particular region in India or practising a certain religion. He portrays the faith with all its lights and shadows and lauds the openness, logic, absence of dogma, and inclusivity of Hinduism.

The final part of *Why I Am A Hindu* is powerful and compelling, showing the author's pride in being a Hindu who believes in and practises his religion with a liberal and tolerant mindset. He sets down all the points that make him proud to be a Hindu and goes on to condemn the acts of the powers that be in the name of religion. Through this book, the author has successfully conveyed the message that Hinduism is a flexible religion that gives room to its followers to question and cogitate without blindly following a set of rules. For me, the book has been a historical, cultural, philosophical, political, and social take on the oldest religion in the world. Furthermore, it has forced me to ask myself some uncomfortable questions about our daily little acts that are seemingly "little" but may not be so to the one at the receiving end. With so much chaos going on around us, *Why I Am A Hindu* opens our eyes to the fact that we need more compassion and tolerance and that it begins with an inward look into ourselves.

Zertab Quaderi is an SEO English content writer and social media and marketing consultant by day and a reader of both fiction and non-fiction books by night. In between, she travels and dabbles in watercolour painting.

EDITORIAL

What we represent and who we are

As we close the curtains on the first month of the new year and step into the second, here at Star Books and Literature, we are thinking back on the year we had. More particularly, we are looking back on the books we read, the ideas that shaped us, and the concepts that challenged us. One notion we are constantly confronted with is the ethics of representation—whether in terms of whose voices our pages represent and the ideas those voices supply—we remain alert about our responsibility to offer perspectives that are multidimensional and more importantly, ethically articulated. Since October, for instance, we have talked ceaselessly about the genocide in Palestine for the alternative to remain silent is frankly, unacceptable. Our two children's literature themed issues investigated the politics of telling children's stories, and our Royeka Sakhawat Hossain issues debated the enduring legacy of the thinker's influence in contemporary feminist thought. Elsewhere, we were confronted with the quandary of ideas as diverse as ghostwriting, voices of propaganda, Bangladesh's conflicting relationship with secularism, monsters and heroes, being an Anglophone writer in English, and the sometimes torturous, other times poetic marriage between words and music.

Reading is political. Here as well as well elsewhere, as nations and peoples are increasingly retreating inwards, reading remains one of the mediums through which we can examine and hopefully, critique existing structures of power. Here's to reading with intention, reading with joy, and reading with the commitment to reconceptualise the old and revive the new.

Nazia Manzoor
Editor, Star Books and Literature



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The heart will lead you back

Winner of the AWP Prize, Elizabeth Shick's debut novel 'The Golden Land' (University of Chicago Press, 2021) digs deep into the complexities of family history and relationships

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

Originally from Massachusetts, international development consultant Elizabeth Shick was living with her family in Yangon, Myanmar from 2013-2019 and got to witness not just Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy win the 2015 elections by a landslide, but the military crackdown on Rakhine state that led to the Rohingya exodus into Bangladesh in 2017. Seeing firsthand the Orwellian suppression of information at play by Myanmar authorities, she felt a moral obligation to get these incredibly complex stories out there, and the result of that is her shining debut novel, *The Golden Land*.

We find our "outsider going in" perspective from the narrator Etta, who lets us know at the outset that she is "a quarter Burmese". Her maternal grandmother, the formidable Ahpwa, met and married an American during WWII, and moved to America. Etta's mother also married an American man. Determined to stay connected to her cultural roots, Ahpwa takes charge of teaching her granddaughters Etta and Parker the Burmese language and customs, and as an extension of this, convinces her American family to take a sabbatical and travel to Burma for a year. This trip, undertaken in Etta's childhood, has the opposite effect to what Ahpwa had intended, ending early, splintering Etta's family, and bringing her Burmese exposure to a grinding halt. Decades later, Burma is now Myanmar, Ahpwa has passed on, and when she hears that Parker is heading back to Asia with her grandmother's ashes, Etta is compelled to reopen some old wounds and follow her there.

The narrative is split into two timelines, one following the family's first trip to Burma in 1988, where Etta meets her cousin Shwe, who acts as her guide to this golden land; the second timeline covers Etta's return to Myanmar in 2011. The braiding of the dual narrative allows us to discover the events that led to the family's early departure and subsequent dissolution, as well as to underscore the effects of the military coup on the basic freedoms of the Myanmar people. Elizabeth Shick uses this fictional family, one that has a Tatmadaw General in its ranks to give us a close view of the 8888 Uprising, and the subsequent descent into a military state plagued by corruption, state surveillance, unlawful arrests, and delayed justice at every level. The Myanmar that a grown-up Etta finds is one where the basic websites are blocked, and she has to conspire with the cyber café owner to prevent her internet activity from being recorded and used against



ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA ERUM NOOR

her. The adult Shwe is still as fascinating to her, if not more, and once again becomes her guide to the lives of the common people, opening her eyes to their struggles as well as their resilience in a way that would be familiar to readers here in Bangladesh.

Going into the novel, a reader of colour may be forgiven for wondering why it is Shick that gets to tell the Myanmar story, but when one takes into account the degree of censorship and the lengths to which the Tatmadaw regime will go to silence dissenting voices, one can understand why it would be harder for a native to tell the story without consequences. There are those that may recall in and around the time that the Rohingya crisis began to make headlines, news coverage of the same in our local papers added to the diplomatic tensions between our nations. The author has maintained in her notes to readers that she felt duty bound to not let these important images die.

While she turns an unflinching eye on the political evils, Shick avoids the preachy 'West is best' position throughout the story. Juxtaposing the youthful fascination of a young Etta falling in love with the beauty of the country in the 1988 timeline with the nostalgia of an older Etta rediscovering old haunts, unlocking buried memories, making new connections

with a greater awareness, the author pays homage to a rich and nuanced culture with many delightful traditions. The food descriptions alone merit a warning not to read this book on an empty stomach.

Nor does she discount the legacy of colonialism that created the grounds for the military junta to take root. During one of her tourist outings, Etta meets a guide who pauses in the midst of debunking some historical propaganda to tap on a teak wall panel and say "this, this is what it was all about", alluding to the lucrative teak industry and other natural resources that the colonial powers wanted unfettered access to. All these heavy themes are delivered through a seamless blend of the personal and political, via the vehicle of memory and relationships, immersing the reader in an intimate family drama about trauma and healing, of discord and reconciliation, and through it all, a few beautiful romances.

The Golden Land received the AWP Prize for the Novel in 2021, and it was subsequently published by the University of Chicago Press. The paperback version of the book is currently available at The Bookworm Bangladesh.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is a writer, journalist, and the founder of *Shri Tales*.