

ESSAY

Desire, Identity, and the boundaries of silence

The unraveling complexity of Saikat Majumdar’s literary universe



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

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NAMRATA

Saikat Majumdar, a professor of English and Creative Writing at Ashoka University, is a writer whose works delve deep into the intricacies of identity, desire, and the tensions between personal yearnings and institutional expectations. With novels such as *The Firebird* (Hachette India, 2015), *The Scent of God* (Simon and Schuster India, 2019), and *The Remains of the Body* (Vintage Books, 2024), Majumdar has established himself as a unique voice in contemporary Indian literature. A seasoned writer and academic, Majumdar's literary trajectory is marked by a continuous exploration of human longing, repression, and the complex interplay between the self and societal structures. His previous works, such as *The Firebird*—also published as *Play House* (The Permanent Press, 2017) in the US—and *The Remains of the Body*, further illuminate his distinctive voice, weaving together intricate psychological landscapes with critical commentaries on class, culture, and the human condition. In *The Scent of God*, Majumdar's hallmark narrative approach emerges clearly: a sensitive, lyrical engagement with the inner lives of his characters,

whose desires and vulnerabilities often clash with the cultural and institutional structures around them. Much like in his earlier works, Majumdar uses settings that are not merely backdrops but almost characters in their own right. Whether in the suffocating, monastic world of *The Scent of God* or the theatre-focused realm of *Play House*, his settings are carefully crafted to reflect both the outward constraints of society and the internal struggles of the protagonists; these characters often find themselves caught in systems that demand conformity. This tension between individuality and socialisation is a recurring theme in Majumdar's writing, shaping the lives of his characters in ways both subtle and powerful. Themes of desire, identity, and alienation persistently take center stage in his works, offering a layered and nuanced exploration of the human condition. In *The Firebird*, the protagonist's life is an intricate dance between his pursuit of personal artistic fulfillment and the oppressive societal forces that demand conformity. Majumdar delves into the tension between the artist's creative desires and the constraining expectations imposed by the institutions that seek to shape his art. This internal conflict is not merely personal, it is

deeply tied to the broader societal norms and pressures that dictate who one should be. Majumdar's portrayal of the artist's struggle is one of yearning—an attempt to carve out an authentic identity within a world that demands adherence to conventional norms. This thematic exploration of selfhood is not only a reflection of individual longing but also an examination of the dissonance between the private and public selves. In *The Scent of God*, these themes of desire and identity are amplified and made complicated within the context of religious and monastic life. The protagonist, Anirvan, is drawn to the serenity and discipline of monastic life, hoping to achieve purity and spiritual enlightenment. Yet, his monastic aspirations are continually thwarted by his profound emotional and physical attraction to another person, Kajol. This conflict between spiritual aspiration and earthly desire reflects a deeper struggle within Anirvan's identity. While the monastic order professes celibacy and purity, Anirvan's desires—quiet, yet undeniable—force him to confront the contradictions of the very space he has chosen for transcendence. His journey becomes not just one of spiritual enlightenment but also one of grappling with the tensions between the self he

is taught to be and the self he cannot deny. Majumdar's treatment of religious communities in this book echoes the same questions explored in *The Firebird*, though this time with a sharper focus on the limitations and contradictions inherent in the structures meant to guide moral and spiritual lives. Both novels probe the ways in which systems—be it art institutions or monastic orders—create spaces for individuals to form their identities, but these spaces are often fraught with tension. In the case of *The Firebird*, the artist's identity is formed and constrained by the expectations of society, while in *The Scent of God*, Anirvan's identity is shaped by the monastic vow of celibacy, even as he struggles against the desires that threaten to disrupt it. Majumdar's works poignantly explore the tension between institutionalised ideals and human desires, illustrating the ways in which institutions—whether artistic, religious, or societal—attempt to control, shape, and suppress natural human yearnings. Majumdar suggests that desire is not a simple force to be eradicated or ignored, but an integral part of identity that informs who we are. The characters in *The Scent of God* cannot fully suppress their longings, and as they try to reconcile their desires with the monastic discipline they have chosen, they experience profound internal conflict. This conflict extends beyond mere sexual or romantic desires and speaks to a broader struggle between personal authenticity and the external pressures of institutional expectations. Majumdar's exploration of this internal dissonance reveals that desires—whether they are related to love, passion, or simply the yearning for a deeper connection with oneself—are inextricably bound to our sense of self. When these desires are repressed or misunderstood by institutional frameworks, they can distort a person's sense of who they are and how they fit into the world around them. *The Firebird* explores the artist's struggle to reconcile personal ambition and societal expectations similarly underscores Majumdar's central theme: the tension between personal desires and external pressures. The artist in this book seeks creative authenticity, yet finds himself ensnared by the rigid structures of the art world, which demand conformity and subordination. Here, the internal conflict is not just about artistic expression but about the very act of self-definition—how one's identity is shaped by forces both external and internal. Like the monks in *The Scent of God*, the artist here too must contend with the limitations placed

on him by the institutional forces that define what is “acceptable” or “worthy.” Majumdar deftly shows that the repression of personal desires—whether artistic, emotional, or otherwise—often results in alienation. The characters in both novels are forced to navigate their yearning for authenticity in environments that stifle individuality in favor of conformity. The alienation that arises from this conflict is a central theme in Majumdar's work, one that reflects the broader societal reality where individuals often find themselves at odds with the expectations placed upon them. In both *The Scent of God* and *The Firebird*, the characters' struggles are emblematic of the wider human experience of yearning for a true sense of self in the face of external impositions. These institutional spaces—the monastery in *The Scent of God* and the art world in *The Firebird*—attempt to channel and mold the desires of their members, but in doing so, they inadvertently create spaces of profound alienation. The characters' inability to fully reconcile their inner selves with the roles they are expected to play leads them to question their identities, their desires, and the very systems that try to define them. Moreover, Majumdar has a unique way of layering his novels with socio-political undertones. In *The Scent of God*, the cloistered world of the boarding school, isolated from the outside world, is gradually pierced by the outside forces of political tension, social inequalities, and the rawness of human survival. Similarly, *The Firebird* interrogates the world of art and theatre, offering a critique of performance as both a form of expression and a mechanism of control. These works are grounded in a keen awareness of the larger socio-political world that influences and shapes the personal lives of the characters. In *The Remains of the Body*, his most recent work, Majumdar continues to explore the internal landscape of identity, but with a sharper focus on the body—both its materiality and its symbolic significance. This shift suggests an ongoing deepening of his engagement with the notion of selfhood and its construction in relation to both individual and collective experiences. It is this gradual expansion of his thematic scope—moving from the psychological to the corporeal—that marks Majumdar's evolution as a writer. **This is an excerpt. Read the full essay on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature's websites.**

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EVENT REPORT

The space for indigeneity: Discussing ‘Ethnicity and Adivasi Identity in Bangladesh’

The second chapter deals with the colonial archive and its effects, covering topics such as the CHT Manual enacted in the British period and how it protected the hill tracts at that time.

SADMAN AHMED SIAM

The recognition of indigenous citizens and their rights has been a point of contention in Bangladeshi politics for quite some time. It gained more traction after August 5, once Sheikh Hasina was ousted and the hope for a new Bangladesh where all ethnic and religious identities would live with dignity was reignited. This served as the backdrop for the book talk on *Ethnicity and Adivasi Identity in Bangladesh* by Mahmudul H Sumon, which was held at DrikPath Bhubon on February 8, 2025. The discussion panel included the author himself and journalist Saydia Gulrukh. The talk commenced with Saydia Gulrukh introducing the book, which has gained renewed relevance in the present as the subject of indigenous rights sparked nationwide discussion. She talked about the modern state and the conspiratorial role it assigns to groups of people it marks as “enemies”, providing examples of the Bawm people facing systemic subjugation under that conspiratorial narrative. She expanded on how the new political establishment seems to exclude indigenous citizens not only in violent ways, such as the attack on indigenous activists on January 15, but also in non-violent ways, such as reform commissions not actively engaging with indigenous people. Following her introduction, author Mahmudul H Sumon discussed

indigenous activism, which he categorised as a type of “politics of recognition” that can be traced back to the 90s. He shared his own experiences of getting to know indigenous activists during this period and observing how the movement for indigenous recognition took shape. He realised that academic discussions surrounding indigenous people often took a much more romantic and aestheticised tone, which was both unhelpful and ahistorical. Therefore, he wanted to theorise and historicise it, focusing on how previous colonialism and its view of indigenous people affected them. He also wanted to look into how indigenous activists are reclaiming their own heritage and history through their work. According to the author, *Ethnicity and Adivasi Identity in Bangladesh* is about all indigenous people in Bangladesh, whether they resided in the plain or the hills. Afterwards, the author elaborated on the book's five chapters and what each dealt with. Discussing the first chapter, which is about transnational governmentality and adivasi subjectivity, Mahmudul H Sumon dove into what he called the “transnational discourse of indigeneity”—how indigenous activism sprang up worldwide and how the global movement has affected debates about indigeneity, colonisation, land dispossession, etc., transcending



PHOTO: SADMAN AHMED SIAM

national borders. Anthropological studies have both shaped and been shaped by this discourse. The second chapter deals with the colonial archive and its effects, covering topics such as the CHT Manual enacted in the British period and how it protected the hill tracts at that time. He also brought up the systemic dispossession of indigenous communities such as the Garo from Madhupur and Shalban, which is an often neglected issue in indigenous discourse. The reclamation of the identity of Adivasi as their own forms the basis of the third chapter. This includes debates surrounding the recognition of Adivasi or indigenous identity under the clauses 107 and 169 of ILO, which grants a certain set of special privileges to the community, including the protection of their habitat and customs. The

fourth focuses on a very specific festival as a part of this reclamation—Wanna or Wangala, which has seen a revival through activism in recent times. The final chapter poses a heavy question: Do Adivasis exist? Despite the misconception many Bangalis hold about the word, and repeated denials of Adivasi identity on a national stage (such as when former Foreign Minister Dipu Moni said that Adivasis don't exist in Bangladesh), the author concluded that Adivasis do, in fact, exist. This conversation recalled the previous discussion on the transnational discourse of indigeneity. Next, Sumon emphasised the role of the government in finding solutions to these problems, and pointed out that the government has, so far, been reluctant to initiate or enter a dialogue on the issue. He mentioned that the denial of indigenous identity and rights

has only strengthened the movement more. Bangali nationalism was also discussed, considering its role in the subjugation of indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. After this session, the floor was opened to the audience for questions. Questions ranged from the lack of female and working class activists in the formation of Bangali identity, to the geopolitical reasons which are often brought up to justify denying recognition to indigenous people. The lack of indigenous people in the discussion panel was also questioned, and both Gulrukh and Sumon expressed that this was a limitation on their part. The questions surrounding indigenous citizens continue to be complex, as do their answers. It can get easier, but until the state volunteers to come forward and have a meaningful and genuine conversation, progress will not be possible. Discussions such as these are important steps in getting there, and it must include more representatives from indigenous communities themselves. It is hoped that their struggles will pay off in a post July Bangladesh, which held the principles of equality and justice as its leading force. **Sadman Ahmed Siam, as the name suggests, is indeed a sad man. Send him happy quotes at: siamahmed09944@gmail.com.**