

ESSAY

“A TERRIBLE BEAUTY IS BORN” in Gaza and West Bank



PHOTO: COLLECTED

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The Easter Rising of 1916 against British rule in Ireland has both political and literary significance. It marked one of the foundational moments in European history that led to the liberation of the Irish state six years later. WB Yeats’s famous poem “Easter 1916” gives the rebellion a literary expression that transcends political and geographical boundaries.

Through the uprising, the Irish rebels took the British coloniser as well as the people of Ireland by surprise. It was planned so furtively that even a close observer of Irish politics like Yeats was unaware of what was going on among the rebels. They sought to free their country from centuries-old British colonial rule.

Yeats thought that the Easter uprising was premature, and its unpredictability and suddenness initially shocked him. Later he surmounted his shock and reservations about the revolt and composed the poem to commemorate the heroism and sacrifice of the rebels.

In the Easter armed rebellion, about 1600 members of the paramilitary group Irish Volunteers (now known as the Irish Republican Army or IRA) in addition to 200 fighters of the more radical organisation the Irish Citizen Army took control of several key points in Dublin on Monday, 24 April, 1916. The

General Post Office (GPO) in the city was the epicentre of the insurrection.

Initially the British colonial government was unprepared and suffered casualties, but later it deployed additional soldiers eventually totalling about 20,000 against roughly 2000 Irish freedom fighters. On the whole, the British response to the uprising was brutal, cruel and ruthless. By Friday, April 28, 1916, the armed struggle was crushed and the fighting ended the next day. Nearly 500 people including civilians, rebels, British troops, and police officers were killed. Within a couple of weeks, the British government put to death 15 of the key rebel leaders by firing squad.

The steadfastness and determination of the rebel leaders and the manner in which they were killed galvanised retrospective support for the uprising and garnered public sympathy for them. Like many others, Yeats was ambivalent about the Easter rising and had mixed emotions about its leaders. But the rebels’ commitment to the cause of Irish liberation and their resolute conviction that the country they loved needed their support changed Yeats’s perception of them.

In “Easter 1916”, Yeats repeats the phrase “a terrible beauty is born” to refer to what the rebels did for their country and the cost that they paid. The inhuman savagery of the British

was terrible, but the selflessness and bravery that the Irish revolutionaries demonstrated were most beautiful.

Yeats’s elegant oxymoron of “a terrible beauty” can be extended to the situation in Palestine. Most people passionate about the cause of Palestine had conflicting feelings when on October 7, 2023, a group of Palestinians launched a surprise attack on apartheid Israel, their long-term oppressor. Global sympathy was divided, and Israel received comforting words from many world leaders.

However, Israel’s indiscriminate killings of Palestinians in Gaza and continued settler terrorism in the West Bank, and finally over a yearlong livestreamed genocide in Gaza shifted public sympathy in favour of the victims of Israel’s aggression. People of the world have watched the unspeakably sickening cruelty of Israel and its backers and undoubtedly horrifying devastation that the Zionist genocide has left in Gaza.

Pre-occupation Palestine had, to use Anglo-American poet WH Auden’s words, “marble well-governed cities” full of “vines and olive trees.” But Israel and its allies have turned it into “an artificial wilderness.” Gaza is now:

“A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,

Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down.”

During this time and previously, Palestine has been a battleground between some of the most powerful nations and some of the poorest and most vulnerable people on earth. Again to borrow Auden’s words, against their oppressors, defenceless Palestinians “could not hope for help and no help came:

What their foes liked to do was done.”

Israeli government and its allies have killed tens of thousands of Palestinians children, men and women, demolished their houses, destroyed their schools, colleges, and universities, turned their hospitals to rubble, killed doctors who treated them, butchered journalists who told the world about their ordeals, murdered teachers who taught their children and assassinated aid workers who stood by them in their difficulty. Israel and its allies perpetrated all the above and many other atrocities against Palestinians to break their will to resist. But the genociders have been defeated by Palestinians’ willpower, strong resolve and formidable opposition to foreign occupation.

Without any support from the rest of the world, vulnerable Palestinians stood up to powerful nations that have continued providing arms and ammunition and diplomatic support to Israel, especially, Gazans have remained steadfast and resilient in the face of barbarity and evil that epitomise the behaviour of their oppressors.

Despite military superiority, Israel and its Euro-American allies have not been able to break the courage of Palestinians and their urge for resistance. Against the sadistic and bellicose behaviour of the Israeli administration and its sophisticated weaponry, Palestinians are armed with an enormous dose of courage and spurred by love for their land.

The land that has been littered with blood and dead bodies of Palestinians bears a strong testimony that it belongs to those who are ready to die for it and not to those who have come to destroy it. Every injured Palestinian child and bereaved parent declare in unison that Palestinians will continue to live and die in their land and their source of strength is not modern, hi-tech weapons but truth and moral rectitude.

Most Palestinians who live in Gaza and the West Bank have their roots in cities in what is now Israel. They or their ancestors were uprooted from their homes when the Zionist state was established. Even before the post-October 7, 2023 genocide, Gazans were already living in a condition that

commentators regarded as Israel’s open-air prison or the world’s largest concentration camp. By making life in Gaza increasingly unbearable in pre-during and post-genocide periods, Israel and its backers seek to ramp up their ethnic cleansing project. Thus, Palestine’s “casual comedy” is still in play.

Every time we open the newspaper or turn on the news channel, we see scores of Palestinians are butchered or buried in their homes which Israeli bombings have turned into mountains of rubble. Using Yeats’s words, we tend to ask:

“O when may it suffice?”

Palestinian homes that now look like demolition sites were once inhabited by men and women along with their old parents and young children. Their homes were bombed while they were inside them. We now see only the rubble, debris and ruins of destroyed buildings. But how was the experience of those who were living there with their families during the horrifying moments of the bombings?

We are required to raise the level of our psychological adaptability even to imagine the frightening sounds, fallen pieces of concrete, and dust in the midst of which Palestinians regularly die or survive with significant bodily impairments and other devastating outcomes. When houses are bombed and reduced to heaps of debris, how do their occupants and people around feel?

The patience and resilience of Palestinians in the midst of genocide and decades-long human rights violations tell us about the beauty of their “hearts” which have been “enchanted to a stone” of single-minded devotion to Palestinian liberation. This resonates with what Yeats said about the freedom-loving Irish:

“Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.”

By daring to stay put in the face of death and destruction, for decades Palestinians have been affirming their love for their land and confronting injustice with dignity and resilience. Conversely, the ugliness and hypocrisy stored in the hearts of their oppressors are exposed out there for all to see.

While the global conscience is continuously challenged by Israeli aggression, inhumanity and intolerance, as in 1916 Dublin, “a terrible beauty is born” in present-day Gaza and West Bank.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

‘Apni Ki Alien Dekhte Chan?’: A debut with immense possibility

Review of ‘Apni Ki Alien Dekhte Chan?’ (Afsar Brothers, 2024) by Wasif Noor

NAFIS SHAHRIAR

From the early 2010s, Bangladeshi genre literature has been going through a silent revolution. If you want to get technical about it, you could argue that such trends started much earlier, with Zafar Iqbal introducing elements of foreign literature and subsequent writers borrowing liberally from Western supernatural traditions through the inclusion of monsters such as vampires and mummies. But those books—more often than not—were cheap cash grabs, regurgitative copies of popular intellectual properties, or IPs, such as Goosebumps and Stephen King novels. This started changing during the early 2010s, and efforts such as Mashudul Haque’s *Ventriloquist* (Baatighar, 2013) tried to incorporate foreign supernatural elements in a way that they seamlessly entwined with the setting of Bangladesh.

Now, what’s the verdict on such attempts? While early titles like *Ventriloquist* succeeded to a certain extent, writers who later followed this path made the mistake of making their stories too fantastical or too outlandish. The sequel to *Ventriloquist*, *Minimalist* (Abhijan

Publishers, 2020), certainly made an effort to stick to the naturalness of the original book, but it quickly fell into the trap of devolving into a convoluted thriller, AKA Masud Rana, and the second half of the book suffers immensely as a result. I remember reading a book titled *Gadfly* (Adi Prokashoni) by Muradul Islam in early 2015 where it followed the outlandish plotting of a Masud Rana book to the T, so much so that even when I was done with the book, I still couldn’t recognise the Dhaka that was depicted.

I understand it might be silly to split hairs over authenticity in a genre that is dominated by ghosts and goblins and hidden, murderous cults, but what I’m trying to say is that when the masters of the genre write, they can work such outlandish material into the narrative in such a way that they feel completely natural and commonplace. An example of this would be William S. Burroughs’ *Cities of the Red Night*. This book has one of the most daring, outlandish plots and structures that I’ve ever had the pleasure of reading, but nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, seems out of place.

This to me is the benchmark for



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

work dealing with non-reality. This to me is the major strength of *Apni Ki Alien Dekhte Chan?*—the debut collection of 15 loosely connected short stories by Wasif Noor. Not only do the stories feel like they *could* be real, but it feels like Noor has captured the zeitgeist of the period

of 2010 itself.

Some of the tricks used to evoke this authenticity were so simple, they can be termed genius. The loose connection of the stories creates this shared reality through the book, and being immersed in this shared reality for the duration of around 100

pages builds a sense of relatability between the readers and the book. The way Noor repeatedly mentions the same objects/attributes of this shared reality—a Facebook group, an artist disappearing, the narrative of one story becoming background information in the next—gives a

sense of actuality to this world, making it a world that seems to exist out of the confines of the stories themselves.

The use of the Facebook group was a particular standout. As a source of information, Noor repeatedly mentions a Facebook group for the sharing of ‘real’ paranormal incidents. This clever mirroring of the real world through the lens of fiction (for groups dedicated to the paranormal had become something of a hot topic for Facebook users in Bangladesh during the 2010s, particularly due to the re-popularisation of the paranormal due to Bhoot FM and Bhoutist) elicits strong reactions from the readers, and this simultaneously allows the readers to connect strongly with the narrative while evoking a sense of wonder and excitement, something that is important when confronting works of the unreal.

This is an excerpt. Read the full review on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature’s websites.

Nafis Shahriar is currently working in the Ed-Tech space.