

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The sacred architecture of story

Review of 'The Sufi Storyteller' (Neem Tree Press, 2025) by Faiqa Mansab

Mansab's feminism here is not polemical. It is textured and spiritually aware. In Layla and Mira, she gives us women shaped by grief, marked by exile, both geographic and emotional and yet capable of immense compassion, complexity, and transformation. These are not heroines molded for clarity; they are rendered in chiaroscuro, in shadows and contradiction.

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Faiqa Mansab's second novel, *The Sufi Storyteller*, is a quiet triumph—both elegiac and urgent, intimate and expansive. It arrives as a natural evolution from her acclaimed debut, *This House of Clay and Water* (Penguin Random House India, 2017), and yet it stands apart, not merely in ambition but in execution. Where the former was steeped in the politics of desire and gender within Lahore's elite and unseen spaces, *The Sufi Storyteller* ventures across continents and metaphysical thresholds to bring forth something more elusive: the sacred, storied terrain of the inner world.

The novel traces the entwined journeys of Layla, a scholar of women's histories in a small American liberal arts college, and Mira, a Sufi storyteller bearing the weight of a terrible past. A woman's murder becomes the axis upon which the narrative turns but this is no ordinary mystery. The crime is a disturbance, a crack in the carefully composed surfaces of both women's lives, through which memory, story, and sorrow begin to leak and, eventually, flood.

At the heart of the novel is a profound meditation on the act of storytelling itself. Mira, whose voice carries the cadences of oral tradition, represents the instinctive, intuitive knowledge passed down through generations of women, mystics, and keepers of the unsaid. Layla, in contrast, approaches stories through the lens of research and archival authority. It is this tension between text and telling, history and memory, intellect, and emotion that Mansab renders with delicate nuance.

Her prose is lyrical, spacious, and deliberate. It evokes the tempo of Sufi narrative. There is repetition that deepens rather than dilutes, silences that echo, and imagery that unfolds like a dervish's dance: circular, layered, and revelatory. The "realm of story" that Layla and Mira enter is not merely symbolic; it is crafted with mythic resonance, a liminal space where past and present, dream and trauma, are interlaced like threads in a Sufi's robe.

In many ways, the novel resists Western narrative conventions. Its emotional crescendos do not coincide with plot twists; rather, they emerge from moments of recognition, from fragments of stories buried within stories. The murder mystery, though present, serves more as a structural whisper than a genre anchor. What unfolds instead is a deeply feminist excavation of the silences within women's



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

lives, the silences they inherit, absorb, and sometimes choose to carry.

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There is also something remarkably generous in the novel's embrace of Sufi thought, not merely as a backdrop but as an epistemology, a way of knowing and being. The Sufi pathways that flow through the text serve as both metaphor and method. They are not neatly decipherable; rather, they are offerings.

This refusal to over-explain, to smooth the reader's path, is one of the book's greatest strengths. It invites surrender rather than control.

Compared to *This House of Clay and Water*, this novel is more ambitious in scope but also more refined in its craft. The voice is quieter, more assured. The characters are less constrained by place and more in dialogue with timeless questions of self, truth, and forgiveness. Yet the thematic threads remain: the body and its discontents, the power of voice, the haunting presence of the unsaid.

The world Mansab conjures is lush with metaphor, but it is also grounded in the visceral. A woman's death, a note from a killer, a journey into war-ravaged mountains, these are not

abstractions but anchors, gestures toward how violence inscribes itself upon language, memory, and gendered experience.

In *The Sufi Storyteller*, Faiqa Mansab offers a novel that is not only about story but made of story, its fragments, its echoes, its capacity to both wound and mend. It is a deeply literary work, one that asks for patience, reflection, and above all, listening. For in this world, it is not the loudest voice that reveals the truth, but the one that has endured the longest silence.

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ESSAY

Feluda, the idea of 'Bangali Bhadralok', and the gendered silence in detective fiction

MAHMUDA EMDAD

There's a certain warmth and ache that comes with remembering how we first met the worlds of Feluda, Sherlock Holmes, or Harry Potter; stories that quietly slipped into our lives, often as prizes at school sports days or stumbled upon in the quiet corners of an elder sibling's shelf. Feluda came to us gently. Wrapped in brown paper, or worn from many reads—and once found, he stayed. In our own way, we all wanted to crack a code, spot a clue, chase the thrill of something larger than life. But as we grew older, the lens shifted. The nostalgia remained, but so did the questions. Slowly, quietly, we began to read the silences too—the gaps, the absences, the shadows.

Detective fiction, by its very nature, has always been a well-tailored, pipe-smoking boys' club. When the average reader imagines a sleuth, the mind's eye conjures up a man—sharp, cerebral, and sartorially sound—be it Sherlock Holmes, Byomkesh Bakshi, or Satyajit Ray's iconic Feluda. The genre's gendered legacy is hard to miss: Even as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple or Suchitra Bhattacharya's Mitin Mashi made their marks, they remained mostly outliers in a landscape dominated by men draped in trench coats and deductive prowess. The Bangla literary world, in particular, has long deserved its detective pedestal for the likes of Feluda, Kakababu, Kiriti Roy, or Byomkesh, while early female detectives like Krishna (penned by Prabhabati Devi Saraswati) never quite cracked the mainstream.

It is against this backdrop that the absence of women in Feluda's world becomes not just a narrative quirk but a telling reflection of the cultural and social codes of the Bangali bhadralok. Feluda-Pradosh C. Mitter arrived on the scene in 1965, and over the course of 35 published stories (with four unpublished), he became the very embodiment of the educated, urbane, morally upright Bangali gentleman. His world is scrupulously constructed: We know about his father, his uncles, and the paternal lineages of both Feluda and his cousin Topshe, the narrator. Yet, when it comes to the women in their lives, the silence is deafening. The only mention of Feluda's mother is a single line: He lost her at the age of nine. Topshe's mother, too, is a ghostly absence—no emotional shading, no narrative presence, not even a passing comment.

This is not a matter of oversight. As Ray's

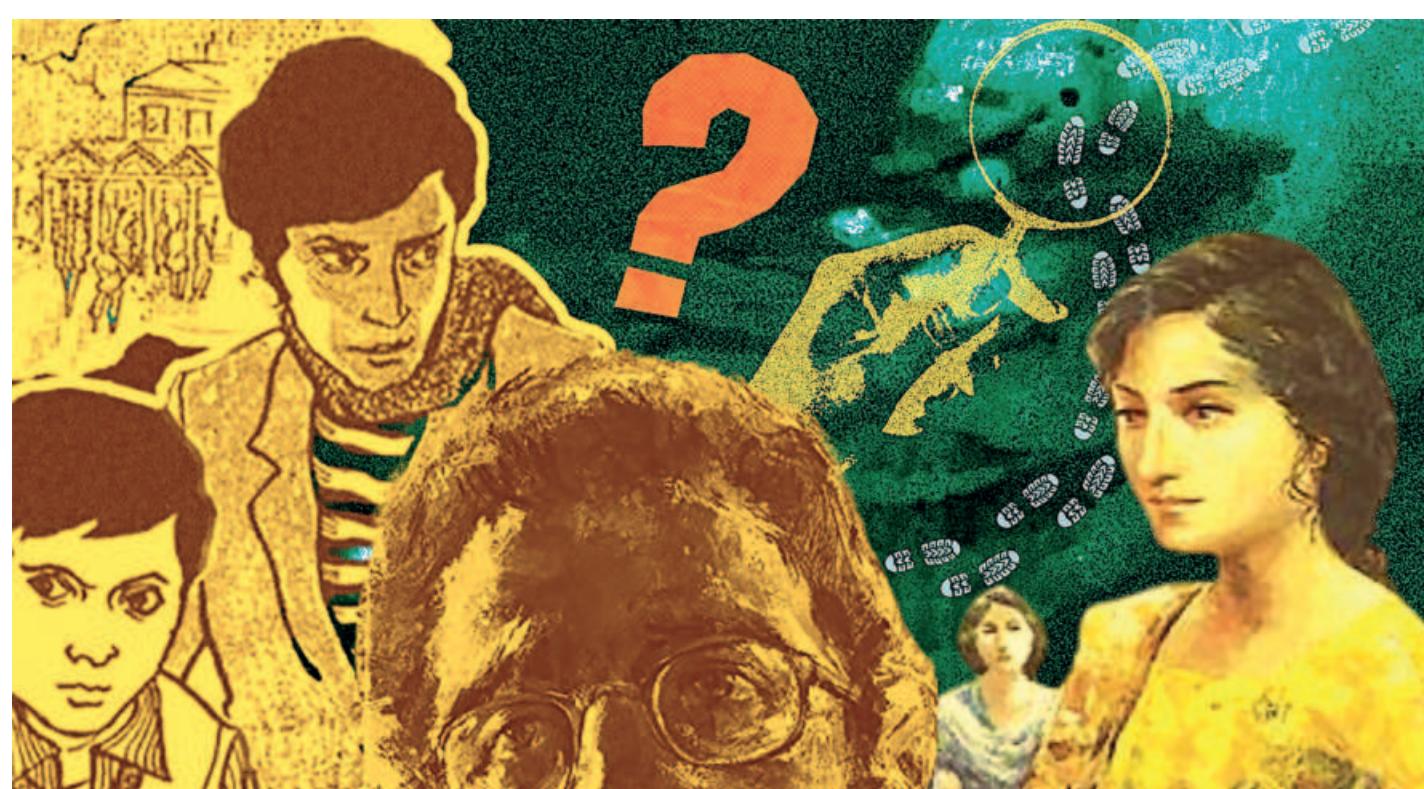


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

aunt, the celebrated author Leela Majumdar, wryly noted in her essay, "Felu Chand" (*Sandesh*, 1995): "...There's something rather odd, you know, in Feluchand's stories and novels. Yes, why is it that we never see any family members or relatives of the detective and his assistant? Even the homes of the villains seem to have no one except servants?" The critique is as sharp as it is accurate. For a series that revels in the minutiae of Bangali life, the absence of mothers, aunts, and sisters is not just noticeable—it's apparent.

Of course, there are exceptions, but they are rare and fleeting. In "Gosainpur Sargaram" (*Sandesh Sharadiya* 1383) and "Jahangir Swarnamudra" (*Sandesh Sharadiya* 1819), elderly women briefly influence the plot. "Chhinnamastar Abhishek" (*Desh Sharadiya* 1385) introduces Neelima Devi, who aids Feluda's investigation, while in "Ambar Sen Antardhan Rahasya" (*Anandamela*, 1983), Mrs Sen and her daughter provide crucial clues. In "Shuktalar Kanthahaar" and "D Munshir

Diary", female characters are central to the mystery's resolution—Mrs Munshi's actions, for instance, are pivotal to the case. But these appearances are rare and lack continuity.

These women—wives, daughters, or informants—may serve the story in isolated moments, but they are never part of the core world. They do not return, they are not remembered, and they are never central. What catches the reader's attention, over time, is not the total absence, but the absence of continuity. Yet, these women are supporting actors in a drama where the spotlight remains firmly on the male trio: Feluda, Topshe, and Lalmohan Ganguly (Jatayu). There is no recurring female character, no female foil or confidante. The adventures, camaraderie, and even the banter are resolutely male.

This narrative architecture is no accident. It is deeply tied to the ethos of the bhadralok, a term that has shaped the Bangali psyche for over two centuries. The bhadralok—literally "gentleman"—emerged in 19th century colonial

Bengal as a social class defined by education, English proficiency, and a genteel, "civilised" lifestyle. They were the torchbearers of the so-called Bangali Renaissance, the intermediaries of the empire, and the self-appointed custodians of culture and taste.

But this respectability came at a cost. The bhadralok project was built on a strict division between the public and private spheres—a division that mapped neatly onto gender. Men were the rational actors, the seekers of truth, the explorers of the world; women, by contrast, were relegated to the home, the keepers of tradition and spirituality. In Feluda's meticulously ordered universe, this separation is absolute. The detective's world is one of logic, mobility, and public engagement—spaces from which women are conspicuously, and perhaps intentionally, excluded.

Ray himself was acutely aware of this absence and addressed it directly. In a note for a *Feluda* collection that was published in 1988, he wrote, "To write a whodunit while keeping

in mind a young readership is not an easy task, because the stories have to be kept 'clean'. No illicit love, no crime of passion, and only a modicum of violence. I hope adult readers will bear this in mind when reading these stories." While Ray's candour is admirable, his rationale inadvertently exposes a deeper bhadralok anxiety: the notion that the mere presence of women threatens the narrative's "cleanliness" or innocence.

But as literary history has shown—through characters like Miss Marple or Mitin Mashi—female presence need not imply sexualisation or moral ambiguity. This unintentional suggestion, that female presence is somehow entangled with moral complexity, impurity, or adult content—speaks volumes about the norms of his time. Yet, this is precisely where Ray's brilliance could have defied convention. In a literary landscape where women were routinely sidelined in detective fiction, a writer as versatile and imaginative as Ray could have shaped a narrative that included strong, witty female characters without compromising the clarity or sophistication of his stories. Far from "unclean," such inclusion would have expanded the imaginative scope of his readers, especially young girls, and offered them a different kind of mirror. It would not only have reflected the intellect and agency of women but also widened the very idea of who belongs in a world of clues, codes, and conclusions.

This absence is not just a reflection of genre or audience. It is a window into the anxieties and aspirations of the bhadralok class—a class that defined itself by its intellectual and moral superiority, its disdain for the "chhotolok" (the uncultured masses), and its ability to keep the messy realities of sexuality and domesticity at bay. Feluda's all-male universe, devoid of domesticity or female influence, becomes a literary manifestation of this divide—a detective who solves mysteries not just for justice, but to uphold the bhadralok's self-image as the enlightened guardian of Bangali modernity.

This is an abridged version of the original essay. Read the full article on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites.

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