

THE SHELF

To flee, to remember

Four books that trace the scars of displacement, from Palestine to Partition

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Every year, on June 20, World Refugee Day calls on us to remember and hold in our hearts the millions displaced by conflict, persecution, and political upheaval around the world. With global tensions and the numbers of refugees reaching unprecedented levels, literature forces us to pause and reflect on the stories of those forcibly displaced rather than viewing them as statistics on our screens—the latter offering a swift descent into abstraction and dehumanisation. The following books urge us to consider what it truly means to lose a home, a nation, or a future.

Men in the Sun
Ghassan Kanafani, Hilary Kilpatrick (translator)
Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998
Men in the Sun follows three generations of displaced Palestinians—Abu Qais, an older man; Assad, a young revolutionary; and Marwan, a teenager—as they attempt to escape the despair and desperation of the refugee camps in Iraq and smuggle themselves

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into Kuwait. Several Palestinian symbols and stories that have become hauntingly familiar to us today, from uprooted olive trees to the horror of being pregnant and malnourished amid a genocide, and the unshakeable resolve to one day return to one's homeland, reiterate that the current genocide is but an extension of over 75 years of violent oppression and exile. Disquieting questions reverberate throughout *Men in the Sun*, asking,



“Would you have been willing to carry all your years on your shoulders and flee across the desert to Kuwait to find a crust of bread?” and echoing, “Have you forgotten?”

On Juneteenth
Annette Gordon-Reed
Liveright, 2021
Annette Gordon-Reed's *On Juneteenth* is a powerful blend of memoir and historical reflection that interrogates Texas's fraught racial history through the lens of one of its most significant yet long-overlooked events. While centered on the delayed emancipation of enslaved people in 1865, the book's real weight lies in its exploration of displacement of people, truths, and identity. Gordon-Reed traces how African-descended Texans, despite formal freedom, remained trapped in a legacy of racial violence, segregation, and historical erasure. Her reflections reveal how migration, both forced and chosen, shaped not

only physical movement but cultural and psychological dislocation. *On Juneteenth* is not just a reflection on the past, but a critique of the continued denial of full belonging to Black Americans.

The Beekeeper of Aleppo
Christy Lefteri
Ballantine Books, 2019
The Beekeeper of Aleppo is a haunting yet tender portrayal of love, loss, and survival in the shadow of a war. Through the journey of Nuri and Afra—from the once vibrant streets of Aleppo to a refugee center in England—Christy Lefteri weaves a quiet, aching narrative about the emotional toll of displacement. Afra's blindness becomes a powerful metaphor for trauma, mirroring something that lingers long after borders are crossed, while Nuri clings to memories of bees and beauty amidst loss. In the midst of darkness, there are sunflowers, memories of bees, and

the fragile hope of healing. This novel aches with heartbreak but never lets go of hope. It reminds us that survival is not merely escape, but the struggle to rebuild in the face of ruin. A tender, unforgettable meditation on grief, resilience, and what endures.

Train to Pakistan
Khushwant Singh
Chatto & Windus, 1956
Set during the Partition of 1947, *Train to Pakistan* takes place in the fictional village of Mano Majra, situated on the border of Pakistan and India. The village, with its predominantly Sikh and Muslim populace, lays the backdrop for Khushwant Singh to weave a tale that views the horrors of Partition not in terms of numbers or sweeping political narratives, but rather through the lived experiences of ordinary people grappling with the collapse of humanity and the unraveling of long-standing communal harmony. Of course, the initial sentiment among

the villagers who have lived side by side for generations is to resist such politically instigated disharmony, as Imam Baksh, one of many Muslims forced to flee to refugee camps in Pakistan, pleads, “What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst [Sikhs] as brothers.” However, as trains filled with corpses cross the freshly dissected borders, and the pressures of political turmoil mount, even Mano Majra succumbs to the violent, seemingly inescapable cycles of fear and vengeance.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

When the moon dances with elephants

Review of 'Lakshmi's Secret Diary' (Columbia University Press, 2024) by Ari Gautier, translated by Sheela Mahadevan

NAMRATA

In *Lakshmi's Secret Diary*, Ari Gautier crafts a dazzling, multi-layered narrative that is as whimsical as it is profound. Translated with lyrical grace by Sheela Mahadevan, this South Asian francophone novel reimagines the traditional animal fable, inviting readers into a surreal and poignant odyssey through the eyes of Lakshmi, a temple elephant yearning for freedom.

Set in the richly textured landscape of Pondicherry, once the colonial heart of French India, *Lakshmi's Secret Diary* interweaves myth, satire, and philosophical inquiry into a compelling critique of South Asian society. At the heart of the novel lies a deceptively simple premise—an elephant escapes captivity. Yet Lakshmi's journey quickly expands into a kaleidoscopic exploration of identity, oppression, and transcendence.

Rendered with remarkable sensitivity by Mahadevan, Gautier's prose balances the surreal and the satirical, conjuring a world where animals voice existential dilemmas and the moon dances with elephants. The story's cast is as imaginative as it is allegorical—Tripod Dog Baba, a three-legged sage; a flying fish named Alphonse; and a chameleon grappling with questions of being. Each encounter adds dimension to Lakshmi's awakening, revealing both the absurdity and cruelty of hierarchical structures, from caste to speciesism.

Gautier blends Sanskrit mythology, magical realism, and philosophical musing in a way that reflects the fragmented, surreal nature of modern life. The dancing moon, the existential chameleon, and the flying fish are not merely whimsical touches. They reflect a reality in which the mystical, the absurd, and the political coexist. This narrative style resonates in a world



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

One of the novel's greatest strengths is its ability to toggle between the comic and the tragic without losing emotional depth. Gautier writes with a deep awareness of how animals are entangled in the spiritual and social fabric of India, simultaneously venerated, and violated, divine and disposable.

Beneath the fantastical veneer lies a trenchant social critique. Gautier does not shy away from exposing the contradictions of Indian society, particularly the caste system and its enduring legacy of violence and marginalisation. Yet his critique is couched in empathy, guided by the moral compass of his nonhuman narrators who, through their estrangement from the human world, offer fresh eyes on old injustices.

The novel also serves as an important intervention in South Asian literary discourse. As one of the few contemporary Indian

writers working in French, Gautier challenges linguistic hierarchies and expands the terrain of South Asian postcolonial literature. Mahadevan's afterword enriches the reading experience, situating the novel within broader conversations about reincarnation, translation, and Francophone literary traditions.

Lakshmi's Secret Diary emerges as a highly relevant and timely work within multiple contemporary literary, cultural, and political contexts, both within India and in broader global discourses. Its significance lies not only in its themes and form but also in its linguistic and cultural positioning as a Francophone South Asian novel, a rare contribution to postcolonial literature.

As a novel originally written in French by a South Asian author from the former French colony of Pondicherry, *Lakshmi's Secret Diary*

complicates the dominant Anglophone and regional language narratives in South Asian literature. It highlights the overlooked legacy of French colonialism in India, a history often eclipsed by the British Raj in public memory and literary production. Gautier uses this linguistic hybridity to explore layered colonial inheritances and question dominant cultural narratives.

By narrating the story through the eyes of Lakshmi, a temple elephant, and her animal companions, Gautier offers a fresh, defamiliarised perspective on human society. This device powerfully critiques caste hierarchies, religious hypocrisy, and speciesism, issues deeply ingrained in South Asian society.

In an era of increasing concern for animal rights, climate change, and inter-species ethics, the novel's exploration of animal

consciousness and captivity feels especially prescient. It challenges anthropocentric worldviews and invites readers to reconsider the porous boundaries between species and the moral consequences of human dominion.

Themes of freedom, fate, and self-determination are woven throughout the novel, resonating with contemporary struggles for autonomy and dignity, whether in relation to caste, gender, colonial legacies, or even ecological survival. Lakshmi's quest is as much internal as it is geographical. Her existential search echoes broader human concerns around purpose, memory, and liberation.

Gautier blends Sanskrit mythology, magical realism, and philosophical musing in a way that reflects the fragmented, surreal nature of modern life. The dancing moon, the existential chameleon, and the flying fish are not merely whimsical touches. They reflect a reality in which the mystical, the absurd, and the political coexist. This narrative style resonates in a world where traditional belief systems and rapid modernisation clash, and where storytelling becomes a means of making sense of cultural dislocation.

Finally, the novel's form, fusing fable, satire, magical realism, and philosophical fiction, contributes to its relevance. It resists categorisation, much like the complex identities of its characters and the city it inhabits. For readers and scholars alike, *Lakshmi's Secret Diary* expands the possibilities of what a South Asian novel can be, not just a realist portrait, but a deeply imaginative, subversive, and multilingual expression of contemporary life.

Lakshmi's Secret Diary is a rare and remarkable achievement, a work that is at once poetic, political, whimsical, and weighty. It reminds us that stories told through the eyes of animals can often reveal more about human nature than those told by humans themselves. Through Lakshmi's unforgettable journey, Gautier and Mahadevan offer a testament to the enduring power of storytelling to reimagine the world and to imagine freedom in its most expansive sense.

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