

THE SHELF

5 literary characters you might run into at a biye bari this winter

Tenida and his gang would have finished round two of the buffet and moved on to dessert. He would loudly complain that the firni is not as good as the one in his neighbourhood sweet shop while eating three bowls anyway.

AGNILA ROY

As the breeze takes on its familiar chill and exams finally come to an end, my favourite season quietly takes over the city. It is not the long vacation, nor the crisp winter air. It is wedding season. All I want from this stretch of the year is a fresh stack of invitations, each promising a feast for the senses and, of course, a plate of biryani. For someone who secretly indulges in wedding films and cannot stop scrolling through endless pictures of celebrations, the thought of literary characters appearing at these venues adds an extra layer of delight to an already intoxicating season.

Lady Bracknell from “The Importance of Being Earnest”
Oscar Wilde
1895

No deshi wedding is complete without those sharp, sweeping glances that feel like they can slice through your soul. We have all walked into a hall only to feel a wave of judgment before the biryani even arrives. Lady Bracknell would not just participate in these exchanges, she would be their gravitational centre. The aunties would orbit around her, drawn to the sheer elegance of her disapproval, delighted to find a worthy leader in the noble sport of gossip. She would smile at you with a sweetness so polished it almost feels generous, yet behind it, the judgments bloom like fireworks. Her eyes would narrow at uncles whose kurtas lack the crispness she considers morally essential, and widen dramatically at aunties who dare to arrive without enough gold to trigger retinal damage. Her sole mission is to measure the world against an invisible standard and mentally sort them into her vast archive of societal shortcomings.

Pagla Dashu from Pagla Dashu
Sukumar Ray

M.C. Sarkar & Sons Pvt Ltd, 1940
Have you ever had a saree hem yanked by a rogue child sprinting past you like he was training for the 2032 Olympics? If not, count your blessings. If yes, then you already know the particular brand of havoc younger cousins unleash at every wedding. Pagla Dashu would be the beating heart of that chaos. While the bride’s carefully curated Pinterest aesthetic tries its best to remain intact, Dashu would treat the venue like his personal adventure park. He is that cousin who cannot remain in one location for more than five seconds, whose footsteps sound like drumbeats of



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

incoming chaos. You would look down to pick up a tissue and look up to find him sprinting across the stage, tripping over cables, nearly knocking down the ring light stand that the photographer begged everyone not to touch. While relatives ask him to stop, he only laughs louder. By the time someone decides to scold him, he has already escaped to another corner of the hall.

Hamlet from “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”
William Shakespeare
1623

If there is one person who absolutely should not be invited to a winter wedding—especially one at a cavernous venue like Shena Kunjo—it is Hamlet. Because while the rest of us struggle with long queues at the buffet, humidity-ruined makeup, and the eternal wait for the bride’s entrance, Hamlet would struggle with the meaning of existence itself. One can only pray he does not get lost in the sheer size of the place and drift into a philosophical meltdown

about whether marriage is worth it in the first place, ideally not within earshot of the bride and groom. While everyone else takes selfies near the floral arch, Hamlet stands there brooding, arms folded, questioning why people smile in photographs when life is so fundamentally unpredictable. So while the rest of us worry about whether the biryani will finish early, Hamlet quietly debates whether attending this wedding was fate, an accident, or the first step toward a tragedy only he can foresee.

Keiko Furukura from Convenience Store Woman
Sayaka Murata
Bungeishunju, 2016

Wedding invitations take on a different weight when you are well past society’s preferred age of marriage, yet perfectly content with your life. That alone can trigger an entire ecosystem of reactions from aunties who whisper in tight little clusters to those who look you up and down as if happiness without a husband is a puzzle they must urgently solve.

Keiko Furukura would walk straight into this atmosphere with her quiet, unfazed grace. Some aunties would adore her independence and immediately begin offering thinly veiled proposals for their sons. Others would stare with polite discomfort, confused by a woman who chooses routine and her own rhythm over the expected script of marriage. In their eyes, she becomes someone who must be corrected or at least explained. She simply does not understand why certain unreasonable rituals exist, and that alone is enough to make half the aunties glance at her with polite alarm. But Keiko would not mind, she simply notices them.

Tenida from Tenida Shomogro
Narayan Gangopadhyay
Ananda Publishers, 1996

There is always a group that appears out of nowhere and leaves without anyone knowing which side of the family they are from. Tenida would march into a Gulshan Club wedding with the confidence of someone who owns the

building. Behind him, Habul, Kyabla, and Pyalaram would follow like slightly bewildered backup dancers who are not sure what performance they have been dragged into. On the way, he pats strangers on the back as though they are old friends and laughs so loudly that heads turn. Between mouthfuls of roast and polao, he would narrate stories of how he once wrestled a tiger (he did not), swam across the Buriganga (he did not), or ate 32 shingaras in one sitting (this one might actually be true). By the time the groom’s cousins begin their group dance, Tenida and his gang would have finished round two of the buffet and moved on to dessert. He would loudly complain that the firni is not as good as the one in his neighbourhood sweet shop while eating three bowls anyway.

Agnila Roy is hoping for wedding invites every other weekend to keep the winter blues at bay and cannot wait to bump into familiar faces at the dawats. Send her wedding invitations at agnilaroy@gmail.com.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Borders, blind spots, and broken histories

Review of Sam Dalrymple’s ‘Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia’ (W. W. Norton & Company, 2025)

ZARIN JUNAINAH ANAM

I have officially read the first nonfiction book of my life, *Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia*, by Scottish Historian Sam Dalrymple. The reading was aided by a South Asian literature and Bangladeshi History course I have taken this semester, and I found myself engrossed to have come across familiar records the writer has shared in the book that I already read in depth for this class. It was equally invigorating to witness the gaping holes present in our national history.

These omissions are brought forth in *Shattered Lands*; the book looks at Southasian history through telescopic vision connecting dots from the Partition of Burma to the making of Bangladesh, intertwining it with modern day politics. Dalrymple introduces the book as one of the “epics” of the 20th century, and he unfolds this tale as the beginning of the end of Indian administrative colonialism in 1928. Initially, the author stars well-known characters like Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Mohandas Gandhi, Lord Louis Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru and their ilk, embellishing the novel with glimpses into their love life and internal relationships that have shaped their politics. The author briefly explores the controversial friendship between Mountbatten and Nehru—that the commander of the Viceroy’s Bodyguards called him “Pro-Hindu”—despite Nehru’s love affair with Edwina, an English heiress and wife of Lord Mountbatten. The narrative further discusses the aristocrats often prioritising them as their desires and power remaps the land, using quotations from their own biographies to provide further historical information. For example, he uses an excerpt from VP Menon’s biography to allude that at a



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

party Mount Batten had a ‘friendly talk’ with the princely rulers who had not yet decided whether to accede to India or Pakistan.

As the book progresses, it expands to include people on the periphery, however, they are addressed as a collective. Dalrymple’s practice in oral history allows him to shed light on the people who were deeply connected to such historical events—from a Sikh mining

engineer in Burma to a Bihari who underwent his third nationality change—ones whose identities were abandoned in mainstream history. Although the book features accounts of people like the king of Chakma tribe, Tridiv Roy, who later chose to stay in West Pakistan due to anger over Bengali Nationalism, and the Hindu Urdu poet Fikr Taunsvi, it could have also benefited from oral records of

women from marginalised backgrounds.

Notably, Burma’s Partition is largely omitted from our national curriculum despite the country sharing a border with us. Dalrymple refocuses his historiographical lens on the borderlands. The author provides the history of the Arakan state that has enabled the military to otherwise and justify the Rohingya genocide. Dalrymple

also zooms in on the Naga independence movement and the Mizo uprising, and their connection to Bangladesh’s war of liberation. The author underlines the people’s suffering as he talks about how these movements were co-opted by politicians in a geographical competition between India and Pakistan. The historian writes, “it is perhaps more useful to see it as an attempt to undo the partition of India and Burma and reunite the Nagas on both sides” rather than secessionism. He doesn’t just share historical information but takes historical stances by recognising East Pakistan’s liberation before moving on to address the breaking of the nation as the “Partition of Pakistan”.

The book also dives into the partition of the Arabian Peninsula from India where the formation of South Yemen led to an exodus of Indians and Pakistanis, in the same way Arabs were othered and exiled from Hyderabad after its annexation to India. Dalrymple tells a succinct tale of the fall of Shaykhs and the rise of the nationalist leaders, propelled by Britain hurrying to end their imperial rule. More than that, the author revives the forgotten connection by reminding readers of Haleem, a Hyderabad Sultan of Yemen and Oman’s temples.

Sam Dalrymple’s *Shattered Lands* should be an essential read across South Asia. The book is a reminder of a recent, shared history where the blindspot on one narrative often acts as a censor and a nationalistic tool. It is a reminder of the violence and fragility of borders.

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