

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

THROUGH AGNES' EYES: Reimagining Shakespeare's lost years in 'Hamnet'

Review of 'Hamnet' (Tinder Press, 2020) by Maggie O'Farrell



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

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JONAH KENT RICHARDS

One of the great pleasures of reading enough of the plays of William Shakespeare is that, after a while, you feel like you know him. British actor Patrick Stewart famously stated, "... he feels like an old friend—someone who just went out [...] to get another bottle of wine." While Shakespeare scholars have succeeded in creating a rough Shakespeare biography based on historical documents, many of them will admit that there are large gaps in our knowledge. We know the names of Shakespeare's family members as well as the dates of their baptisms, marriages, and deaths. But we remain ignorant of their personalities and family dynamics. Northern Irish novelist Maggie O'Farrell's historical fiction novel, *Hamnet*, attempts to give flesh and personality to our bare bones understanding of these historical figures. Her work illustrates the story of

Shakespeare's meeting with his wife and how the death of their only son, Hamnet, led Shakespeare to write his magnum opus *Hamlet* (1623).

The plot of the novel centres around Shakespeare's wife Agnes (pronounced Ann-yes). Better known as Anne Hathaway, O'Farrell chose to call the character Agnes as it was the name that her father, Richard Hathaway, used for her in his will. The author portrays Agnes as almost otherworldly. The daughter of an unnamed wood-dwelling woman, Agnes was most at peace in the forest. She had a vast knowledge of the local plants, which she used to create treatments for her family and neighbours. She was a skilled beekeeper, and she even had a trained kestrel. Most importantly, she could see into the future. When Agnes' birth mother died in childbirth, her father married another woman named Joan, whom Agnes constantly clashed with. When her father dies, Agnes is

left isolated under her stepmother's watchful eye with her brother Bartholomew as her primary ally. The depiction of Agnes' family life certainly offers a compelling reason for why she would be drawn to an 18-year-old William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare is the secondary character in the novel. O'Farrell deliberately leaves Shakespeare unnamed. Referring to him only as "the Latin tutor" and later as "the husband" and "the father." This depiction of Shakespeare is based on his likely education at the Stratford grammar school where he would have been intensely educated in the Latin language. O'Farrell places Shakespeare in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship with his father, the glover and former town bailiff John Shakespeare. This portrayal of the abusive John Shakespeare is based on the historical figure's social and economic decline. Shakespeare sees

the mysterious and beautiful 26-year-old Agnes, with a proper dowry, as a means of escaping his father's house and starting a household of his own.

Shakespeare scholars know from the date of Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway in November 1582, and the baptism of their first daughter Susanna Shakespeare on May 26, 1583, that Anne must have been pregnant during the wedding. While these circumstances have led some to speculate that Shakespeare and Anne's marriage was the forced result of an unplanned pregnancy, the novel posits that Shakespeare and Agnes intentionally became pregnant to force their parents to accept their handfast engagement to one another. O'Farrell clearly imagines Shakespeare and Agnes as marrying out of love.

O'Farrell also explains how Shakespeare ended up working in the London theatre companies. In the scholarship, Shakespeare disappears from the historical record between the baptism of his twins, Judith and Hamnet, in 1585 to the first reference of Shakespeare as a London player and playwright in 1592. Often called "The Lost Years," scholars don't know why Shakespeare left Stratford or how he ended up in the London theatre companies. The story suggests it was Agnes who encouraged Shakespeare to move to London to set up a branch for his father's glover business. Agnes is motivated by a desire to help her husband escape the emotional and psychological burden of living under his father's roof. Shakespeare ends up selling gloves to the theatre company before eventually joining them.

The novel also explores the circumstances of Hamnet's death in 1596, and whether it had any connection to Shakespeare writing his play *Hamlet*. The cause of Hamnet's death isn't listed in the Stratford Parish records, but O'Farrell conceives of Hamnet dying from pestilence. She crafts a heartbreaking story of Judith originally getting sick with Agnes extending all her efforts to save her daughter only to discover that Hamnet has become sick and to have him die despite her efforts to save him. O'Farrell beautifully captures the pain that the Shakespeare must have felt over Hamnet's death. She has Shakespeare briefly return to

Stratford for the death only to return to London to escape his grief despite Agnes' request that he stay in Stratford with his family.

The climax of the book occurs when Agnes travels to Shakespeare's theatre in London to witness a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In her novel, O'Farrell contends that Shakespeare was not only inspired by the death of his son to write the play, but that he modelled Hamlet after Hamnet. The text describes how Agnes is overwhelmed by the sight of the actor who has transformed into what her son would have looked like had he grown to manhood. O'Farrell has Shakespeare himself play the role of the ghost and Agnes bears witness as father and son symbolically reconnect with one another on stage. O'Farrell writes, "[Agnes] sees her husband, in writing this, in taking the role of the ghost, has changed places with his son". O'Farrell's decision to cast Shakespeare as the ghost is clearly inspired by Shakespeare biographer Nicholas Rowe's theory on the casting of the ghost role. There is something metatheatrical about the idea of the mother watching her husband embrace their symbolic son in a play about a broken family.

If I had to critique anything about the novel, it is that I wanted O'Farrell to spend more time exploring Shakespeare's process of writing *Hamlet*. We know Shakespeare was a great adaptationist who drew upon source material like Saxo Grammaticus' *Historia Danica* and François Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*. I would have loved her to depict Shakespeare using these texts to weave together his version of the story.

Regardless, O'Farrell's *Hamnet* is one of the most compelling depictions of Shakespeare's family life that I have ever encountered. O'Farrell's Agnes is a Shakespearean heroine in her own right, and she brings a breath of much-needed humanity to the historical figure of Anne Hathaway. By showing us the story through Agnes' eyes, we gain insights into the young man whom we have all previously believed we knew so well.

Jonah Kent Richards is a Shakespeare screen adaptation scholar, an English teacher, and contributor for *Star Books and Literature*.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A firebrand's journey to Washington from Barisal

Review of 'Daughter of the Agunmukha: A Bangla Life' (Speaking Tiger, 2024) by Noorjahan Bose, translated by Rebecca Whittington

NUSRATHUQ

"Agunmukha" translates to "fire-mouth" in English. The word mirrors the tumultuous life of Noorjahan Bose, shaped by her early years in cyclone- and flood-prone small towns of Barisal; her experience of sexual violence at the age of 10; the loss of Imamuddin, her first love and husband, to smallpox; single motherhood; and her later marriage to Swadesh Bose, a Hindu man—an interfaith union opposed by society. Noorjahan Bose accepted all of these as challenges, because for her, a firebrand, being defeated by life or giving in to society's unreasonable demands was never an option.

In Barisal, despite the natural disasters, her childhood was a happy one. Several families lived in single units within an area where visiting and consulting one another on matters both significant and insignificant, sharing meals, playing and enjoying all the perks that a rural setting offers (fishing, bathing in the rivers and ponds, enjoying the fresh vegetables, fruits, and climbing the trees that bore them) were the norm. But they also lost family members and relatives to floods and cyclones.

The descriptions of the floods in Barisal are very vivid in the book. The force of the water, its power to destroy entire villages and to mercilessly take lives, shows us how the inhabitants of flood-prone areas have learned survival skills and be resilient. People place their dry food like rice and spices in containers and place them in sacks to retrieve them when the flood waters recede. Other useful information in the work include what relief goods are most required: water purification tablets, cholera vaccine, essential medicine, bandages, clothes, etc.

Life was wonderful in Bose's teen years in

Barisal till the Hindu-Muslim riots led her to question religion itself. If faith led to taking human lives, she wanted no part of it. Her husband Swadesh Bose believed in leftist politics and religion had no place in his life. It was ironic indeed that society had this much antagonism towards their interfaith marriage when faith was not important to either of them. A Muslim fanatic in Washington even threatened to kill her because she had insulted Islam by marrying outside her faith.

Her political consciousness started in school when, during the Language Movement, she staged a walkout from the classroom holding banners in support of the movement. The school had to take disciplinary action against her, as Barisal was part of West Pakistan then, but the headmaster later told her, "I wish I had a daughter like you". She also observed the elders in her family participating in elections, canvassing, delivering fiery speeches, etc.

Unfortunately at age 10 she was sexually abused by an uncle. No one would believe her if she told on him. He was, after all, a respected person in society. He was the only elder considered safe to entrust her in his care, escort her to other relatives' houses, and even to stay in his home. Wasn't she safe in his home as he had a wife and children of his own? She was not. Eventually, the daughter of Agunmukha finally flashed a knife at him and the nightmarish violations came to an end.

In her book, Bose has expressed how important it is to talk to children as early as possible about how to protect themselves from sexual predators. She herself had no idea of what to make of the rogue uncle's actions. She wondered if his actions were normal. Did he love her more than he

loved his other nieces? Like us all, she also expresses disappointment at how the law hardly protects victims of sexual abuse.

After this, she states that her happiest years were with Imadullah, a Jubo League worker whom she married and had a son with. He was from among the small minority who did not believe in the efficacy of the smallpox vaccine. His mother's amulet would protect him, he believed. Unfortunately he died of the disease and

She calls her life in Cambridge "Another Life". Because of her curious nature and a reader of books, she observed, learned and even adapted to the western culture. She made efforts to know English. She was, however, surprised to learn that women's rights were not ideal even in this "developed" country and sexual abuse of women was remained as an unaddressed problem.

Her descriptions about watching the ballet "Swan Lake" at the Royal Albert

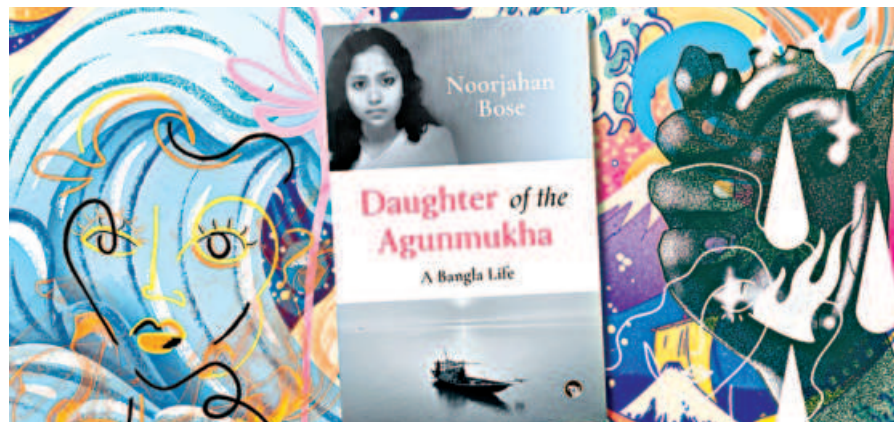


ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

Bose was devastated. The devastation worsened when she saw the rituals that widows must follow. She had no say in when her husband would be buried and what burial rites should be followed. Worst of all, she could not see or touch him because the death of a spouse meant that the marriage was null and void; she was deprived of a last farewell sentence to her dear Imad. But as Imad's widow, she was intelligent enough to choose a white sari with a zari border for her marriage ceremony to Swadesh Bose.

Hall, being invited to the Queen's garden tea party at Buckingham palace and visiting Stratford-on-Avon to reminisce her favorite Shakespearean characters, seeing the magnificence of the camellias and rhododendrons in Kew Gardens were a delight to read.

At Oxford she enjoyed her life in the same way as she did in Cambridge, but she was disappointed in her encounter and assessment of Nirad Chaudhuri, author of *The Autobiography of an Unknown*

Indian. Written in 1951, it was well received as it had in-depth analysis of the recently independent India. He had come to Calcutta after spending his early life in Kishoreganj, East Pakistan, but now at Oxford, he criticised Bengalis, their culture and cuisine. He also had a deep disdain for the working class. Noorjahan Bose's disappointment in him was complete when she saw his wife malnourished and wearing a patched and torn sari. The wife told Bose matter-of-factly that all their earnings went to supporting Nirad Chaudhuri's lavish western lifestyle.

Like every Bengali, she was delighted to witness an independent Bangladesh, but was disappointed when her husband was not considered for a post in the Planning Commission of the new independent country. She concluded that his being a Hindu had much to do with it. She cites other instances when landlords (in Karachi) would not rent their homes to a Hindu tenant. There are several instances of ill-disguised disapproval of Swadesh Bose being Hindu. Religious intolerance is a distinct theme in the book.

Her life in the USA was very fulfilling. On her return to Bangladesh, she worked tirelessly for women's rights, preventing early marriage and ensuring justice for sexually abused women.

In conclusion, this book is inspiring and is an easy read. Her message is that women especially need to be brave, be eager to learn, and adapt to change. The key to succeeding in life is education and having an open mind. Despite narrations of the difficulties she faced in life, *Daughter of the Agunmukha* is a feel-good book.

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