

NONFICTION

Kumu: Meye bela

Chapter 2, section 2

LAZEENA MUNA

The house in Bogura did not shout its presence. It stood quietly, as more than shelter, more than walls and roof. With some walls made of clay, the house was warm and porous, absorbing many things and remembering every monsoon. Others were tin-thin and loud-echoing every footstep, every childhood rush towards something or away from it. The walls also held stories, chatter, and smells. The memory of lullabies sung not only at night but in broad daylight; when the sun slid in through unopened windows and played kutkut on the floor. The hiss of oil lamps lit when the day gave up too soon. Arguments too soft to be called fights, too familiar to be remembered. Words that fluttered and died before they could bruise.

The cement floors stayed cool even on the hottest days, and the verandahs wrapped around the house. The thatched roof was patched just often enough to show care, sagging just enough to show comfort. They did not measure wealth in a well-kept



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

Nani and Nana shared the central room of the house, just off the long, shaded verandah. It always smelled faintly of betel leaf and mustard oil—sharp, familiar, lingering in the air like memory. At the far end of the front verandah, in a small, dim room, Nani's mother lay bedridden, quietly counting her days.

thatched roof or freshly plastered walls, but in new books stacked carefully at the bedside and in small blackboards dusted white with sums and spelling. Wealth was a report card inked with numbers above ninety. Wealth was a glass of hot milk pressed into drowsy

hands at sunrise or a spoonful of ghee dissolved into steamed rice—for brain food.

And above all, wealth was children, boys and girls alike, and their widening gaze beyond the courtyard, beyond the mulberry rows and the low clay walls, imagining a world that did not end where the village path did. Wealth was the understanding and the steady support to send them outward—to rise, to learn, to unfold into their own becoming. Because space on this earth is never simply granted. It must be claimed, with ink on fingers, with books held close to the chest, with the stubborn insistence on becoming.

So, if the house looked modest, it was only because its true architecture stood elsewhere, rising quietly in classrooms and libraries, in sharpened pencils and open books, in the invisible scaffolding of becoming that no visitor could see but that held everything up.

From its front verandah, the world spilled open into a sea of green, miles upon miles of mulberry trees stretching toward the horizon like a quiet promise. In winter, they stood stripped and skeletal, their branches brittle, their silence deep. But by spring, they softened. The same mulberries unfurled, their leaves tender as breath, trembling in the hush before dawn.

These were not trees for shade or show. They were the living spine of the household's survival, leaf by leaf feeding the silkworms that spun gold in silence.

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a guest. Not quite the mistress of the house. Just there, loved but always forgotten. That room held the scent of talcum powder and silence. Her eyes, even when closed, seemed to see everything.

There were three rooms at the back of the house, stitched together by a long, quiet verandah where shadows lingered and time staggered, especially in the late afternoon. The breeze came through the smell of guava skins, kamini blossoms, and mulberry dust, slipping between the slats. The largest of the rooms held the tender democracy of five small lives. There were rules, but broken as needed, and also rhythms—sometimes soft, sometimes wild. Kumu, at 10, already carried the seriousness of someone older, her hair parted with precision, her manner quietly exacting. Tultul, eight, was a tempest in a frock, her voice sharp as shattered glass, beautiful, reckless, and impossible to ignore. Bacchu, six, slept with fists tight and secrets tighter, always plotting the next bit of mischief he'd deny with a grin. And Faruk, four and a half if asked, five if not, wore his bewilderment like a second skin. He cried in installments, pausing mid-sob to follow the trail of an ant or wonder aloud why spoons shine. A spoon's curve with sugar could derail his misery. A beetle's shimmer restored his peace.

"Kumu" is a living memoir of Selina Hossain's early life, unfolding through carefully chosen themes and reimagined by her daughter, Lazeena Muna. This is an excerpt; read the full piece on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature's websites.

Lazeena Muna writes occasionally, weaving together gender and politics, often exploring memory, movement, and meaning across personal and public landscapes.

INTERVIEW

BENJAMIN WOOD

From early writing days to 'Seascraper' success

MOHAMMED FARHAN

Benjamin Wood's latest novel *Seascraper* (Scribner, 2025), longlisted for the Booker Prize in 2025, is a tale of a young shrimp fisher Tom Flett who has an extraordinary expertise about sea and beaches. With a dependent grandmother, he ekes out his living from fishing the shrimps, growing sullen of his difficult life. Apart from Flett, there are more dexterously drawn characters in the novel that organically take place in the story as it unfolds further. However, the most extraordinary feature of Benjamin's writing is his exquisite Dickensian prose that makes the novel a feast for the readers. Here we speak to Benjamin about his writing and *Seascraper*.

How did it strike you to write about sea and beaches as a backdrop of your novel? Do you have some personal liking or fascination for the sea and beaches?

I grew up in Southport, a coastal town on the northwest coast of England. Longferry in *Seascraper* is a fictionalised version of that place, scaled down to suit my authorial purposes, amplified and stylised here and there. But I built it from my personal experiences and memories of the beach and the dismal weather conditions which usually prevail there. The scenes on the beach were, in some ways, the easiest—or perhaps just the most instinctive—aspects of the book to write, because I felt I understood what it felt like to stand there in Thomas's place. I can conjure up Southport beach in my mind in a blink. **The novel seems to be set in older times, somewhere in the 1950s rural side. What was your deliberation on this?**

The novel is actually set in the early

1960s—and there are plenty of factual indicators scattered throughout the book which reveal exactly which year, if the reader wishes to notice them and Google them for clarity. But I didn't want to date-stamp the story, because I hoped to give the reader the impression that Thomas is stuck in time—i.e. he is still practicing traditional methods of shrimping in an age of mechanisation, and he can see the world moving on around him while he is still rooted to the same old customs and expectations. I wanted the reader to enter the novel's world uncertain about which period the book's action is unfolding in, for them to think or assume it is earlier in history than it is, and then for it to pull them into 'modernity' along with Thomas.

separation and ensuing grief in the novel?

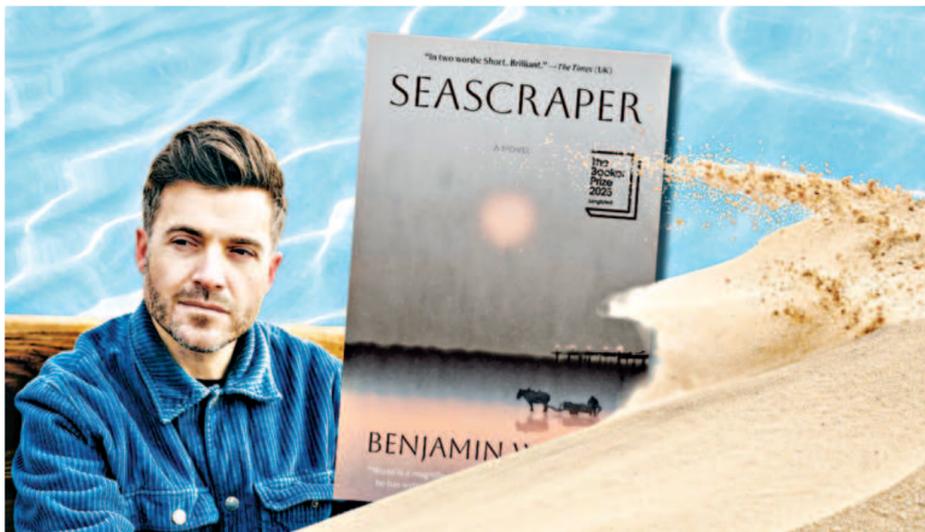
Without going too deeply into the subject here, I have quite a bit of personal experience of parental separation, and of estrangement from parents, to draw from as a writer. With *Seascraper*, I made a conscious decision to use those experiences to shape the characters' situations and perspectives as much as possible. It's probably my most personal novel, in that respect, even though the characters' life stories are a long throw from my own.

Which character did you find the most difficult to carve out while writing the novel?

Every character in a novel is difficult to carve out, or, at least, to render with sufficient authenticity of voice

and while the spotlight is upon them, or they might as well not be there at all. **It's a densely written novel in Dickensian style with detailed impeccable prose. How much do you find that this craft is important for fiction writing?**

Well, 'Dickensian' and 'impeccable' are words every writer wants to hear in relation to their work, so thank you very much for saying that. I'll have to get it printed on a t-shirt! Honestly, I try to make every sentence in a novel as fresh and interesting, as rhythmic and fluent, as concise and particular as I can make it. The music of a writer's prose is the first thing I care about as a reader, so I try to make mine as tuneful to the ear as possible. **This is an excerpt from the interview.**



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

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The idea of separation is enormously intriguing in the novel as it's been depicted through all major characters; Flett's mother is long separated from her husband, Flett has to bid adieu to his new friend Edgar, and Edgar is also somewhat in separation from his wife and daughter. How do you look at the idea of such instances of

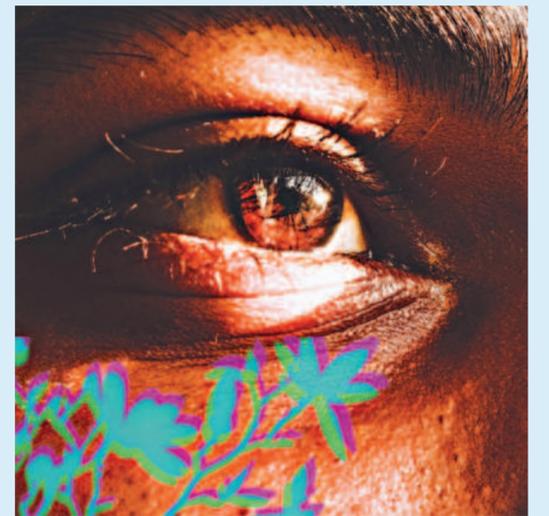
and experience. I'd say that, in *Seascraper*, the side characters were the toughest to render—for example, John Rigby the seafood merchant Thomas sells his shrimp to, or the sparky fella who's a porter at the hotel where Edgar stays—because they don't have a lot of space to declare their personalities to the reader. And even minor or incidental characters in a

Read the full conversation on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature's websites.

Dr Mohammed Farhan teaches English at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He often writes on books, and interviews authors for various reputed English dailies including The Hindu, Hindustan Times, and Hindu Business Line, among others.

POETRY

Unlearning you one syllable at a time



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

TAHSEEN NOWER PRACHI

When your bright beaming dark eyes, matched mine, locked like a stubborn vine, I helplessly surrendered, like the petals comply, Sleeping between the pages in your pale book, tea-dyed. Chanting with each passing breath 'Forever mine, forever thine.' I learned you in quiet ways. Your little habits slipped into my senses, Without bothering to ask. Your favoured words, Became mine. Your pauses, sighs, the lingered quiets, Taught me how to soften a thought, When to smile, through silence, through voids that shine. Loving you was a language now, As if my voice wanted to be your childhood home, where everything's just delusionally fine. Now you are gone, the forever, alas, was actually timed and grief, with its slow work, incessantly dived. I must unlearn what once felt sunk in my skin. Each familiar phrase feels like a mistake, each habit a reminder, I did not choose to keep, to mean. I stop myself mid-sentence and feel the loss of our words again. You are no longer here to recognize these echoes, Your voice, your mirrors. So I carry them alone, mourning your language like shards of broken glass, A million tinkling, deafening me with the warning that, you, I now must unlearn. Your once home, my empire Rome, frozen in time, shall always burn.

Tahseen Nower Prachi is a writer whose head is a koi pond of micro tales too scattered to come down to her keyboard. Find more pieces on The Minute Chronicles on Facebook.