THE SHELF

Small businesses that female literary characters would bring to an Eid mela

AGNILA ROY

Strings of light stretch across the streets, storefronts glow a little brighter than usual, and the air seems to carry the quiet excitement of Eid drawing near. All across the city, there are melas at nearly every corner. Even if you had no plans to go, the endless stream of photos and videos is enough to give anyone a serious case of FOMO. Somewhere between the excitement and the indecision about which mela to visit and what to buy, one cannot help but admire the women behind these ventures. Seeing so many thoughtful, creative businesses come alive makes it exciting to imagine what our literary women might have brought to the Eid mela scene.

ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

Ashima Ganguli from *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (2003)

Steam would gather first on the inside of steel lids, then on people's memories. Fried onions darkening at the edges, roasted jeera, cardamom cracked open, ghee warming somewhere just out of sight. Her stall would be full of things that look simple until you look closer. Jars of homemade snacks sealed with care. Spice blends packaged in small paper packets. Slim recipe booklets tucked between trays, holding dishes people learn only in kitchens where someone always says, "a little more of this." There would be gift boxes packed for students in hostels, newly married couples, and relatives abroad. Small cards tied to some of them, saying what to serve when guests arrive unannounced, what tastes best with evening tea, what to make when homesickness becomes louder than hunger. Ashima would not only be feeding people but arranging memories neatly enough to carry home in a bag.

A woman might come for achar and leave with an infused oil and strict instructions on how to warm it. A tired college student would buy tea masala and leave with balm tucked into the bag, as though the stall itself had noticed the shadows under her eyes. That is what would make her corner impossible to forget. It would feel like being read.

Joygun from *Surjo Dighol Bari* by Abu Ishaque (1955)

Her stall would be the one people circle back to after all the walking and calculating. No glittering signboard, no shelves pretending abundance. Just things laid out with the kind of order that comes from knowing every item must earn its place. Small, thoughtful bundles made for people who need things to work. An iftar pack of two peyajus, two begunis, and a handful of chola, handed over in a simple leaf plate. A dry breakfast pack of muri, chira, and gur for the next morning. Fresh bhapa pitha for anyone craving warmth on the spot, but also ready-to-steam pitha bundles with rice flour and coconut-molasses filling so customers can take them home and make more with little effort. For children, tiny packets of batasha, nimki, and roasted nuts still make room for a little joy. Handwritten notes might lean against a few items. Best when one meal has to stretch into two: saves both fuel and time. That would be the real intelligence of Joygun's corner. It would understand the consumer before they need to explain themselves: the mother who wants the table to feel festive but is counting every taka in her head, the family that cannot afford extravagance and still refuses to let the day look bare.

Nazneen from *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali (2003)

Nothing on her racks would begin where it ended. That would be the first thing. A tote bag cut from an old saree's achol. A blouse whose sleeves clearly belonged to another orna once. Blankets pieced together from softened cotton scraps that still remember their previous life. Even the prettiest things at her stall would carry a history stitched into them somewhere. You could imagine women standing in front of the display and suddenly recognising a familiar print, the kind that once lived in mothers' wardrobes and old trunks. Off to one side would be the busiest corner of all, a small table where people bring worn-out clothes and ask if they can be turned into cushion covers, patchwork potlis, a child's frock, a new tote. Someone might be choosing scraps for a custom bag, pressing two pieces together, changing her mind. She knows what it means to live inside something already cut out for her and still, slowly, patiently, make room within it. Nothing at her stall would be discarded too easily.

Tilo from *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1997)

Rows of spices would catch the light like little omens. Reds, ochres, deep browns, green flecks caught in glass. Nearby, achars would glow jewel-bright in jars, oils steep with herbs, and small tins of balm wait among folded paper packets tied with thread. Instead of neat cards saying turmeric or cloves, there would be notes that sound almost like secrets. For restless sleep. For heaviness after long afternoons. For kitchens that need better luck. People would arrive thinking they wanted one thing and leave with another, because Tilo is not the sort of seller who simply hands over what was asked for. She would watch a customer hesitate between two jars and already know which belongs in her hand. A woman might come for achar and leave with an infused oil and strict instructions on how to warm it. A tired college student would buy tea masala and leave with balm tucked into the bag, as though the stall itself had noticed the shadows under her eyes. That is what would make her corner impossible to forget. It would feel like being read.

Deepa from *Satkahon* by Samaresh Majumdar (1989)

A knot of students would always be gathered there, trying not to look too invested. One flipping through planners and trying to act casual. Another testing three pens with far too much seriousness. Two more bent over a stack of notebooks, arguing over which cover looks more like someone who has their life together. Planners with proper monthly grids. Folders for certificates and exam papers. Desk organisers, sticky notes, study lamps, candles for nights when the power goes out but the work does not stop. But that would only be half of it. Scholarship lists tucked into clear sleeves. Interview prep cards. Somewhere in the middle of it all, Deepa herself answers the questions young people do not always know where to take. Which subject leads where. Whether one bad result ruins everything. What to do if money is tight. How to begin. She would never run a stall that treats ambition like a cute accessory. Hers would be the kind of place where someone comes to buy a notebook and leaves feeling a little less embarrassed by how badly they want more from life.

Agnila Roy *is slightly offended that exams arrived at the same time as the melas. Send her your favourite startup story at agnilaroyy@gmail.com while she misses them all.*

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A ceaseless stream of being: FOSSE'S PROSE FLOWS LIKE A RESTLESS ROSARY

Review of Jon Fosse's 'Vaim' (Transit Books, 2025)

NAJMUS SAKIB

The novel, as a form, for a long time, has been concerned with the representation of consciousness. From the intricate psychological portraits of Henry James to the stream-of-consciousness experiments of Joyce and Woolf, the great novelists have sought to capture the texture of thought. Jon Fosse, in his quiet and unassuming way, is a worthy heir to this tradition. His slow prose, with its long, unpunctuated sentences and subtle shifts in perspective, is a remarkable instrument for the rendering of inner life. In *Vaim*, his first novel since the Nobel anointing, he narrates the lives of three, no, four ordinary people in a remote Norwegian fishing village, and in doing so, his hypnotic prose exacts the utmost attention from the reader.

Far from being an act of authorial vanity, this demand for attention is the primary tool of Fosse's metaphysical probing. The effect is achieved through a deliberate, almost monastic, set of stylistic choices. Incantatory repetition, for instance, does not serve to advance a plot but to create a sort of liturgical rhythm, turning a character's simple internal monologue into a kind of prayer or chant. The recursive syntax, where phrases circle back and qualify themselves with a constant stream of "I think," "yes," "or maybe," mirrors the anxious, non-linear flow of actual memory and doubt.

By dissolving traditional punctuation and paragraph breaks, Fosse blurs the distinction between speech, thought, and narration, locking the reader into a single, continuous stream of being. The result is that the reader is hypnotically submerged into the life of the protagonist. In the novel's long opening section, a trip to the city to buy a needle and thread becomes a vessel for a lifetime of regret, loneliness, and unspoken love. The reader is made to inhabit the narrator, Jatgeir's state of mind, its rhythm and cadence, experiencing the past as a persistent and palpable presence.

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

The novel unfolds as a triptych, a three-part structure that refracts a connected set of events through the lives of its narrators. It begins with Jatgeir, the aging solitary whose life was irrevocably altered when Eline, his great unrequited love, suddenly left her husband to live with him. The second part shifts to Elias, Jatgeir's only friend, a pensive and isolated observer whose own lonely existence provides a quiet counterpoint to Jatgeir's drama. Finally, the novel circles back in time to give us the voice of Frank, the husband Eline abandoned, completing the Moebius strip. At the novel's centre is Eline—a character we never hear from directly, but whose life and choices determine the shape of all three narratives. The novel seems less like a three sequential stories, and more like one story told in triplicate, an exploration of how a single life, that of Eline, leaves deep and divergent echoes in the consciousness of others, and how identity itself is a fragile construct, perpetually rewritten by love and the relentless haunting of loneliness.

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The plot of *Vaim* is very thin and simple: a woman leaves her husband for an old love, lives with him until his death, and then returns to the husband she first abandoned. And unlike most novels, plot is not of significance in Fosse's world, it barely provides the skeleton of the story. The purpose of the plot, here, is to provide a shape, however faint, around which the vast, nebulous clouds of consciousness can gather.

By eschewing narrative complication, Fosse clears a space for his true subject: the texture of being. The reward of reading *Vaim* is, therefore, not the discovery of what happens next, but the sustained, unbroken immersion in a continuous present—a present, for Jatgeir, Elias, and Frank, that is always saturated with the past. There are no authorial intrusions or narrative signposts to offer respite; the reader is held captive within each man's mind, adrift on the endless, circling currents of his thought. This is literature as a meditative practice, where the story is but a quiet room in which to inhabit the rambling and often painful music of another's soul.

This quiet room is, it turns out, a place Fosse intends to revisit. *Vaim* is the first of three planned works set in the same fictional village. In a recent interview with *The New Yorker*, Fosse clarifies that he views them as "three separate novels," whose primary connection will be this shared imaginary place. He describes Vaim, the setting of the novel, as an amalgam of "various places in the western part of Norway," and also reveals a deeper and more personal connection. As he states, "The language, the landscape, the moods derive from that place"—the village of his own formative years.

Søren Kierkegaard, the founding father of Christian melancholia, insisted that faith required a leap into the absurd, an objective uncertainty held fast with the most passionate inwardness. It is difficult to read the fiction of Jon Fosse, and particularly his newest novel, without seeing it as a long, sustained literary enactment of this leap. The narrative, shorn of full stops and conventional plot, flows like a rosary, its repetitions and refrains mimicking the act of prayer.

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