

Love and art in a restless world



In an open letter written on his visit to India to launch his first novel, *The Carpet Weaver*, in 2019 Nemat Sadat wrote: “By allowing the voices of queer campaigners fighting for equal rights to be heard and letting subversive literature like mine be published, India has demonstrated that it is honouring its commitment to democratic principles and ideals.” Sadat’s novel is “subversive” because it is a story of same-sex love, the first such to emerge from Afghanistan. He calls India “home” in the letter, celebrating the fact that it was an Indian agent who seized upon his manuscript after 450 rejections from British and American agents. That he held on is an expression of the spirit that makes Sadat refuse to accept victimhood in what he calls the meta structure that is rigged against the aspirations of an ambitious gay Afghan refugee (in America) from Duranni Pashtun and Sunni Muslim tradition to live a fulfilling life.

Kanishka Nurzada, the first-person hero of *The Carpet Weaver*, embodies his creator’s painful struggle to overcome the hurdles to ‘be himself’ in a culture that almost goes out of its way to condemn homosexuality. He never has any doubt about his own preference, and he detects, as a sharp-eyed 16-year-old who longs for sexual love and affirmation, covert revelations of same-sex attraction among adults leading apparently fulfilling heterosexual lives. For Kanishka, the situation is made even more

THE CARPET WEAVER

By Nemat Sadat,
Viking, Rs 599

painful by the fact that his family is loving and liberal — his Sunni father having married his Shia mother against his family’s wishes — enjoying prestige and prosperity in the free-mixing, cosmopolitan Kabul that preceded the Saur Revolution of 1978. Yet even here same-sex love is prohibited and threatened with violence, in spite of which the love of Kanishka and Maihan, one of the two closest of Kanishka’s school friends, blossoms in deadly secret, and is portrayed with sensitiveness, conviction, and a striking lack of sentimentality that enhances its power. In terms of space, the relationship takes up only a fraction of the novel, which is the first part located in Afghanistan, yet *The Carpet Weaver* is as much a love story as it is the story of Kanishka’s search for a fulfilling life as a gay man and an artist.

Creativity is the other theme of the novel. It emerges almost inconspicuously from the fact that Kanishka’s father runs a flourishing carpet shop, Marco Polo Rugs, close to the open-air market in the Mandawi district. Sadat’s descriptions convey the rich allure of the market as well as the plush variety of the carpets in the shop. Although Kanishka has no wish to continue the family

business he dreams of being a designer, creating unusual shapes and figures in his little exercise book since the time he was a child. But here, too, he receives a rude shock when his father, whom he loves and admires, tears up his drawings and insists that he should be a philosopher or a scientist, not a servant to the rich. Yet in the second part of the novel, where Sadat’s flair for description unveils the horrors of the refugee camp on the border of Pakistan where Kanishka has ended up with his mother and sister in their desperate bid to escape an Afghanistan ruined by violence and disorder, it is Kanishka’s art that rescues them from the ire of Tor Gul, the cruel boss of the camp, and gives them some respite from hopeless misery.

But Kanishka’s story would lose much of its power without the background of Afghanistan’s changing political destiny. Sadat weaves the course of the main characters’ lives deftly, almost inconspicuously, into the country’s history. The only direct contact that Kanishka has with politics is through his father, whose ‘love story with China’, where he had gone to study, not only resulted in the unusual name for his carpet shop but also developed into a form of Maoist politics outlawed in Afghanistan in 1969. Once imprisoned soon after his marriage, Kanishka’s father had continued with his politics against his wife’s wishes and knowledge, letting only his son into the secret. His fate is the trigger for the change in his family’s fortunes.

Perhaps the first-person narrative becomes a little limiting when Kanishka is in the refugee camp in Pakistan, because there Sadat is engaged in revealing the numerous forms of exploitation and barbarity that continue unchecked in the grey areas on our maps. The scene where a group of refugees is about to be taken away because they have been sold off by Tor Gul is almost unbearable, but Kanishka’s fruitless intervention in it seems contrived. What is far more realistic, and painfully honest, is his complicated relationship with Tor Gul although, once again, the plot to escape and its outcome are less convincing.

What is most disappointing, however, is the third section of the novel, when Kanishka and his family have gained political asylum in America and are among friends who escaped earlier. Kanishka’s response to American peace and plenty does not ring true to the articulate personality that Sadat has built with such care. He may be reflecting his creator’s ambivalent response to the country he now lives in, some of which Sadat describes in his open letter. There is an indefinable sense of loss, of unpleasant surprise at the ways in which old friends are trying to merge into the new culture, a feeling of rejection that spills out of the novel’s emotional structure and is left hanging. Maybe a neat closure would not have done for Kanishka, forever seeking to be himself, or for his creator.

Bhaswati Chakravorty

Deep into the past

Much like Stieg Larsson, Jan Stocklassa is a Swedish journalist and writer, and *The Man Who Played With Fire* — a meandering account with a dense, complex backstory — has its origins in the author’s access to Larsson’s files. Stocklassa makes no bones about the fact that he is using Larsson’s name and analytical research to help solve Sweden’s most famous political assassination: that of the then prime minister, Olof Palme, in 1986. Palme was a vocal leftist politician, and his assassination shook Sweden because the killer, who accosted him and shot him at point blank range, escaped easily. Earlier that evening, Palme had sent his security detail home.

Years before he wrote his thrillers, Larsson — most well known for his *Millennium* series — was a journalist trying to highlight the



danger posed by white-supremacist, neo-Nazi groups in Sweden. Others dismissed such bodies as fringe, but Larsson foresaw almost four decades ago how their sexist, racist and violent rhetoric would gain legitimacy. His predictions have been coming true all over the world, as aggressive, ultra-nationalist governments come to power — even in India.

Larsson spent years trying to decode the mystery of Palme’s assassination. Unlike the murder of John F. Kennedy, which stands officially solved, Palme’s is not. Stocklassa minutely examines Larsson’s archives on the Palme case and picks up where the deceased journalist’s work had tapered off. While there were numerous witness interviews over the years following the murder, contrary accounts and police incompetence — cover-ups? — botched the probe. And while an estab-

THE MAN WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE: STIEG LARSSON’S LOST FILES AND THE HUNT FOR AN ASSASSIN

By Jan Stocklassa,
Amazon Crossing, Rs 599

lished criminal was finally arrested, put on trial and convicted, he eventually walked free owing to the paucity of real proof against him. Still, for years after, the police’s prevailing attitude was that the case was closed even though it was actually open.

The book’s first half has Stocklassa deftly outlining Larsson’s own investigation. He uses original research and correspondence to take readers through the trajectory of Larsson’s inquiry and the two theories he was investigating. The first involved Swedish right-wing extremists who were known to be hostile to Palme; the second revolved around the South African government’s anger at Palme’s outspoken denunciation of apartheid. (Stocklassa also makes a compelling case about how these theories are connected.) In the second half, Stocklassa inserts himself into the story and talks honestly about grappling with the heavy toll and ethics of a project of such proportions. Especially engaging is an account of how Stocklassa, while contacting leads, comes across an ally of such diligence and ability that the reader thinks instantly of Larsson’s famous heroine, Lisbeth Salander.

It is not often that true-crime narratives read so effortlessly like spy thrillers, but *The Man Who Played With Fire* does. Not all of Stocklassa’s inferences might be convincing — there are ends he is unable to tie up, and he regretfully says, “like Stieg before me, I... tug on the strings that stick out from the ball of yarn that is the Palme assassination”. But his thinking has caused old questions to be asked again, and he throws new light on the insidious underbelly of shadowy State operations.

Nayanbara Mazumder



Different music of the hills

The book, *Against State, Against History: Freedom, Resistance, and Statelessness in Upland Northeast India*, by Jangkhomang Guite, is a welcome addition to the literature on historiography and the conceptualization of the State through the highlighting of “counter-cultural narratives”. It lays out a framework to reformulate the relationship between history and geography, state and statelessness and plainsmen and hillmen, and debunks the evolutionary/typological model which is often used to represent tribal communities as the ‘relics’ of pre-historic society. Grounded within the methodological framework of creating a culture of plural concepts (Syed Farid Alatas), Guite takes a “long view” of history. He not only utilizes oral narratives but also critically analyses social structure and cultural systems and practices to undertake his intellectual odyssey into the life world of the communities (“unlettered race”, he calls them) of the Zomia highland massif.

The book is divided into nine neatly arranged chapters with a comprehensive introduction that presents his philosophical, cognitive and theoretical assumptions and the arguments thereafter. At the very outset, Guite, inspired particularly by James C. Scott, makes clear his intention of unravelling the civilizational bias and the epistemic violence of the European system of thought that most societies in the mountain massif have been subjected to, thereby making his reader aware of what to expect in the following pages — an insight into the indigenous knowledge systems. A crisp conclusion gives the kind of logical ending that a book like this deserves.

The idea, “Against State”, mentioned in the title, is conceptualized as the state of evading the control of the war-machine State and the

AGAINST STATE, AGAINST HISTORY: FREEDOM, RESISTANCE, AND STATELESSNESS IN UPLAND NORTHEAST INDIA

By Jangkhomang Guite,
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oppression and domination of the cultural yardsticks of the plains people. The hillmen’s attempts at evading the State has been seen by the author as “tactical”. He conceptualized the process as “re-enactment”, where the people choose to be “unstate” instead of getting subsumed within the Western civilizational model of the modern State. Such an attempt has allowed the author to analytically engage with the concept of State by bringing in elements of geography, ecology and typography along with people’s emphasis on attributes of freedom and egalitarianism. As one reads through the introduction, one is immediately reminded of Diana L. Eck’s engagement with the idea of sacred geography in describing India. The difference is that she looks at the expressive role of geography while Guite’s book privileges the instrumental aspect of geography where mountains have emerged as an unsurmountable barrier between the hillmen and the plainsmen and as a check on the freedom of the hillmen themselves. This geography is seen as a zone of assemblage by Guite. By using geography as an important medium he shows how landscape plays a major role in creating a divide between the two sets of epistemological frameworks. More, he looks at these not as two ends of a spectrum but as parallel processes making a way for understanding ‘State’ through a more inclusive conceptualization.

Furthermore, he sketches the history of these communities within the framework of histories from below, hence the phrase “Against History”. This history can be only be retrieved by going beyond what is written, which, as he mentions, is often rooted in civilizational bias, being written from the State centres. He thus takes the long view by looking at migration history, settlement patterns, livelihood strategies, social, economic and political organization, gender relations, ideologies, cultural systems and the relationship between the hillmen and the plainsmen. The latter seems more distinct because of the conscious attempts of the hillmen to keep their freedom, egalitarianism and attributes of cooperation and reciprocity intact. Thus, their system of cultural beliefs, ideas and values that was looked down upon by the people of the valley Guite terms “safe conduit”, a counter cultural collective where resistance to oppression and domination both at the macro and micro level is embedded within the system. It is this embeddedness that allows one in an unstate to constantly be in the process of becoming egalitarian, which societies the world over lack.

In times when there is much discussion about the State, its definition and role, its conceptualization of and relationship to resistance, and the freedom of individuals and communities, Guite’s book shows a way to address such concerns in the context of the Northeast in India. This is particularly relevant since history, geography and culture are closely intertwined in the context of the Indian Northeast and must be paid heed to for a comprehensive understanding of issues at hand.

Rashi Bhargava

PAPERBACK PICKINGS

Bound by secrets

■ **THE ALCHEMY OF SECRETS** (Tranquebar, Rs 399) by Priya Balasubramanian is a surprisingly engaging account of friendship, loss and family against the backdrop of the Emergency and even the religious polarization in the wake of a mosque demolition. The deftness with which Balasubramanian weaves a fictional narrative that balances political events that changed the course of the nation’s history is praiseworthy, especially since this is her debut novel.

Set in Bangalore and revolving around two friends, Mira and Anisa, who are unable to escape the after-shocks of an act of religious violence that touched every corner of the country, *The Alchemy of Secrets* asks some important questions about the nature of memory, familial ties and political ambition, particularly through the storyline involving Mira, who is haunted by questions about her mother’s death at the time of the Emergency. There is one quibble, though: while Subramanian has the makings



of a consummate storyteller, grammatical errors and careless editing mar the book.

■ **OUT FLEW THE WEB...** (Vishwakarma, Rs 360) by Jaya Lahiri-Mukherjee is a crime thriller where the dynamics between a motley crew of women set the stage for a tale of deceit, jealousy, love, and murder. The suspicious death of a young woman, Supriya Choudhury, attracts the attention of a senior cop, Ravi Kumar, whose investigation of the residents of a housing society in Pune reveals a sinister plot.

Lahiri-Mukherjee’s plot suffers from several infirmities. The plethora of characters are carelessly etched, the red-herrings unconvincing, and the climax predictable. Surprisingly, the author is also fairly conventional, reiterating the hackneyed trope of the ‘scorned woman’. The book could have done with better editing.

Kamaliika Basu

A woman’s guide to wandering the city streets

In large cities, writes Victor Hugo, “[t]o rove about, musing... is... a good way of spending time”. Across centuries, authors have partaken in this joyful exercise, scribbling their observations as they wander the city streets alone. While the English essayist and self-proclaimed “walker of the streets”, Thomas De Quincey, mapped out London with his feet, wobbly under the influence, Charles Dickens’s night walks bound him with the city in a shared sense of “restlessness”. To forge such intimate bonds with a city, to be a *flâneur*, a ‘passive observer’, it is necessary to be, in

the words of Charles Baudelaire, “at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from [it]”.

Yet women have traditionally been deprived of this inconspicuousness, and loitering unseen, undisturbed, has remained the privilege of men. With ‘respectability’ invariably being the woman’s burden to bear, the figure of the solitary woman was largely absent from the Western cityscape until the 1880s. To not be labelled a ‘street-walker’ once out in the city, she had to wait either for the advent of consumerism (when many women began to work as shop girls) or of the war

(when millions of women entered the workforce to, figuratively, step into men’s shoes). Even if the woman did appear on the streets, say, on an errand, it was likely that she would be arrested by the male gaze. Consider the passer-by

in Baudelaire’s poem, “*A Une Passante*”, who was hurrying down the street when the poet’s eyes detected her and began to delineate her “limbs of perfect poise” visible under the hem of

her dress. Could she be rushing just to avoid this very encounter? It is a pity that John Gay, who penned a 1,000-line poem on the tricks of safely navigating city streets, did not have a word of advice for women.

Unsurprisingly, this dominance of the urban public space by men cast a shadow so dark on the woman’s mind that it made her wary of even the concept of wom-



anhood. A 19-year-old Sylvia Plath, who, like Dickens, had a taste for night air, writes in her journal that being born a woman was her “awful tragedy”, her body being always under the threat of assault. But shackling the mind is only one step in this game of power. In *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit observes how standard women’s clothing — high heels, corsets or narrow skirts — seemed designed to cripple women’s mobility. Is it a wonder then that the 19th-century French author, Amantine Aurore Dupin — she lived and wrote prolifically as ‘George Sand’ — rejected femi-

nine apparel for those of men, even though this was illegal in France until as recently as 2013?

While it is true that women have many more miles to go before attaining the invisibility that Virginia Woolf seeks in “Street Haunting”, of shedding one’s identity to “become part of [a] vast republican army of anonymous trampers”, shunning femininity cannot be an option. The only way for a woman to merge with the crowd lies in a paradox: to be so frequently visible that she gradually becomes indistinct — invisible.