

# Of romance and reality TV

In her debut novel, Kate Stayman-London skillfully discusses many issues that women face in this age of social networks

SANA MUNIR

What appears explicitly to be a fictional biography of a plus-sized fashion blogger, *One to Watch*, is implicitly layered with multi-pronged narration to which any woman using the social media networks in today's world can relate, since these platforms are wrought with duplicitous attraction and obsessive compulsion especially for those who gain more traction than others.

Kate Stayman-London, the debut novelist has had a career in screenwriting and has worked as a political strategist, as a lead digital writer for Hillary Rodham Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign and has written for celebrities such as Barack Obama, Malala Yousafzai, Anna Wintour and Cher. The novel, *One to Watch*, is quite reflective of the writer being conscious of her nuanced political tilts, be they about online bullying, harassment, body shaming, ageism, the social and filial pressures of seeking true love, the inclusion of gender-specific identities and colourism.

Stayman-London has skillfully discussed the issues of the dodgy idea of communication through the gadgets we have learnt to hold close to our bosoms. The reader feels a twinge of reality every time there is an incident of ghosting, trolling, doxing or online harassment especially if one is a woman. The age-old maxim about fire being a good servant but a bad master, is quite likely the truth about social media as well, which spins on its ankle in a jiffy and rears its spiteful head without warning.

The novel also plays on the misconception of 'availability' of friends and family. Since people now prefer to send text messages or follow one another online, the definitions of ignoring, avoiding and break-ups have changed entirely. To avoid a 'hello' one no longer has to turn at the corner of the road or look away, but to scroll past, refuse to take a call, mute, delete or block a friend or family member, a lover or a colleague. Quitting the relationship or exiting the building is no more the answer to a problematic relationship since 'unfriending' might still not omit a person's presence from social media networks; since 'friend of friends', 'tagging',



'memories' and 'reminders' that pop up, might put one in a regressive situation, as all of these do to Bea Schumacher, and very much every one of us. The games we play with the 'seen' and 'unseen', the 'blue ticks' and 'DPs' are all there as much as they are parts of our daily lives, ridden with uncertainty and measuring the quality of a relationship based on whether they have blocked, muted, unfollowed or simply chosen to ghost us. Contacts are there, their statuses might read Available, but they are not available, like Bea's love interest, who isn't responsive for most of the time.

The novel is written in a slightly experimental way. The protagonist, Bea Schumacher is a lifestyle blogger who was introduced to the world of fashion one evening in France through a velvet cape, a present she carries with style and thus begins her romance with fashion blogging while being a plus-size woman. The strongest re-

lationship she enjoys is that with her father and although she does not find validation from her mother for various reasons, she seeks it online, and successfully creates a clout for herself.

The novel, since it begins with the story of the protagonist being a blogger and ends with her being a much-coveted prize for a bunch of men in a popular reality TV show, *The Bachelorette*, is replete with examples of the psychological impact of social media among the users. "Post pictures, or it never happened," is a cool phrase one gets to hear upon a declaration of news – personal or general. The need for evidence before one believes anything has given birth to the concepts of data leaks, screenshot sharing, hacking and online abuse.

The experimental part includes the way the text has been written – at some point the reader might get the feel of scrolling a screen which reads off tweets, posts, hashtags and

handles. Now, this experiment can be acceptable or not, depending upon the kind of reader one is – if one is social media savvy, then maybe it can be a literary portal into the world they feel comfortable with. If the reader is the kind who would not want to be reminded of the flimsy personality of the social media when they have committed to literary discourse, this could be off-putting. Either way, both types of readers are reminded of their own dependence and experiences through their exchanges at social networks. The novel has been written to connect with the readers in a similar way – there are excerpts of texts exchanged between characters, entire threads of chats, tweets of fans and trolls, transcripts of TV shows and V-loggers who make news out of social media announcements and the likes. It is satirical to read the transcripts of talk show hosts, weaving entire discussions and narratives over a tweet or a photo shared on a pub-

lic account. Thus, the serpent of the social media comes hissing full circle when the fame gained through followers turns around and bites the hand that feeds it. The narrative of social media is furthered with the discussion of what goes on behind the scenes of 'reality TV'. The scripted reality and shady characters all come forth. The reader realises as Bea does, that there is no 'real' without 'reel' in TV.

The arc about finding true love is probably the one that defines the novel as a romantic piece of fiction, else it is a social commentary on human nature and behaviour. Bea has a bae, Roy, who takes her for granted and shies from professing his love until she is surrounded by a bevy of suitors, and that too, live on TV. The choice Bea makes is a politically correct one since she realises, despite all her efforts to sound and look like a woman comfortable in her skin through her blogs and pictures in swimsuits, how one measly comment or one mean remark can dampen her spirits.

In this arc, the story is one of self-actualisation and self-discovery, through a journey which leads the protagonist from feeling inadequate, incomplete and not enough for a score of reasons for acquiring blazing self-esteem. The novelist has made sincere attempts to take away the guilt of not meeting social standards – regarding beauty and age – and rather put it upon the inoperable criteria the society attaches to the life-plan and goals of an individual especially if that individual is a woman.

This book is a piece of feel-good literature and social commentary. One has no complaints to make in that regard. The protagonist has her shortcomings, but she has agency. She does not pass the Bechdel Test, and one does not expect her to, because she is obsessed with the idea of finding love, yet, the novelist has made sure the readers realize that her obsession is less self-created and more thrust upon her by the social pressures, a yoke that she throws off towards the end. This book might bring to mind Sally Rooney's novels only because the women characters falter and dwindle at times, but majorly, are in full control of themselves and their environments in a discourse built over man-against-society and man-against-self.

## Tales from the diaspora

Part 1 of a series of essays on writers who leave their native land behind but their art tells a story of confusion, loneliness and a perpetual identity crisis

FATIMA ZUBAIR

Every now and then we come across some relative returning from the UK and get amused by their hysterically quick exchange of Punjabi and English vocabulary. While such interactions are usually taken in jest, we fail to understand the struggles people undergo in terms of financial as well as emotional troubles abroad. We paint them all in the same colour. The word colour spells voodoo for the people in the diaspora; it being the root cause of xenophobia people have to face once away from home.

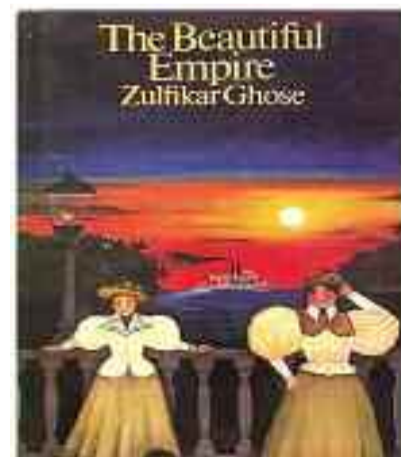
Some of the finest Pakistani Anglophone writers from the first generation expatriates have profusely talked about the diaspora conundrum. Reading about which, one cannot help but come to the realisation that just as their vocabulary was divided, perhaps so were their hearts, minds and even bodies between the geographical stretches of two continents.

This series is but an attempt to gain an understanding of these people away from their roots through literature, and how roots forever beckon them back. The desire to return to the motherland is always thwarted by a phenomenon called 'native alien-hood', a term coined by Zulfikar Ghose, famous Pakistani poet, novelist and critic. The writer has countless poetic anthologies and fiction as well as non-fiction writings to his credit. His renowned autobiography is called *The Confessions of a Native Alien*. No phrase can do more justice to encapsulating the conflict of belonging, dispossession and rootlessness than this. While the emigrants are aliens in the new land they call their own, their native land they leave behind becomes alien to them in no time. Acceptability in either place is a challenge for them. Ghose writes, "This distinction between two countries of my early life has been the schizophrenic theme of much of my thinking; it created a psychological conflict and a pressing need to know that I do belong somewhere..."

For the migratory souls, the thought about belonging is forever their dark shadow; hard to leave behind, even harder to grasp. This particular diaspora tale began when Zulfikar Ghose was born in 1935 in Sialkot, then a part of British India. His father was a trader. The entire family moved to Bombay in 1943. His father expected him to join the family trading business once he grew up. But as the author came of age he grew more interested in literature. Slowly, as the father's business expanded they had to move farther away from their roots to England. This happened in the year 1952 when Ghose was 17 years of age. Ghose has often raised serious questions about his fluctuating identity at that time. He says that they left India because it "half

tolerated them and not even that... Tolerance is the condition of belonging. If the people tolerate you and you can tolerate whatever conditions you get in a certain place, then you belong there". He clearly never belonged in India. It was a passing phase.

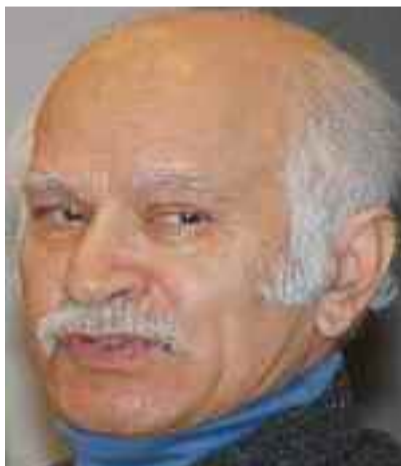
Once in England, Ghose set out on a new journey of self-discovery. He says about the initial period: "I hated to look at people for I felt that they were watching me, questioning my presence... I looked longingly at all and turned inward to myself." The British colonial past has been quite unforgiving. VS Naipaul in his book, *Enigma of Arrival*, delves into a similar state of being away from home in post-imperial England. He says: "... in



the other man's country, I felt my strangeness, my solitude". Writers are sensitive people, and once uprooted from their baseline, the enigma of their identity heightens.

Ghose writes: "Some images of that time persist as obsessions... then how absurd the body is in seeking identification with a particular piece of land! Nostalgia, sentiment possess one merely. Go back, go back." He became a loner, an introvert and started to stammer. Even his name was under scrutiny. "The combination of 'Zulfikar' and 'Ghose' is very odd. Who are you?" Zulfikar is a Muslim name whereas Ghose is Indian in character. "...I can be native only in one, and yet I do not want to be alien to either," he writes.

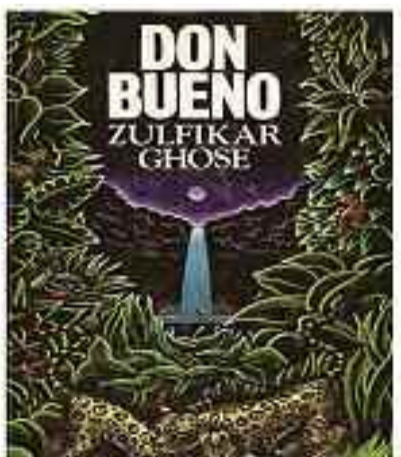
Growing up in a place with a rudderless prejudice for a Muslim Indian boy, Ghose developed a psychosis that only writing proved to address. His aggra-



vated mind found a temporary relief when he went to Keele University where he did his bachelors. He recollects the undergraduate years with zest. He made friends with writers and that helped him with his career.

"If love and work, one's attachments and preoccupations, give one a sense of belonging to a place then I belonged to England in 1960."

Therefore, it seems that even belonging is a fluid concept. One could feel at home and away from it as well, all at the same time. His narrative questions the relevance of nationality as an agent of unity among a certain group of individuals. Interestingly, the author came up with different approaches to his self: a



desperate lover, a silent poet and a worried alien. His personas are despondent, yet they all provide the framework for an escape from an identity crisis in the end. He calls his quest a cause of nausea and sentiment.

"So, does it all come down to this? Mere sentiment? This talk of discovering identity, roots, a country to call one's own. Is it all sentiment? The facts are turning up as nausea, as sentiment." This is how Ghose defines the identity quest, which Sara Suleri – another stalwart among the Pakistani first-generation of Anglophone writers – calls an 'honourable place to be' in her book, *Boys Will Be Boys*. For Ghose, the quest for identity is gruesome due to its evasive nature. Therefore, he soon departs from it to carve out a third space for himself.

When Ghose visited Pakistan and India to report for *The Observer*, his observations gave way to a larger discourse. "...East is no worse than the West"

## A tale of sorrow and hope

SAAD ASHRAF

An Afghan Tragedy, a novel written by debutant Akbar Jan Marwat, is a welcome addition to Pakistani Anglophone literature. The writer claims that it is a "fictional" novel; i.e. two tracks of fact and fiction run parallel to each other in the book, till such time that they merge into one.

It is the story of a Pakistani diplomat Qazi Amjad based in Afghanistan in the early 1970s. It is also the story of the Afghan people who faced death and destruction for decades but did not lose hope. The fast paced narrative of the book alternates between Amjad's personal life and the tales of destruction visited upon the Afghan people. The reader is introduced to a host of characters, both fictional and historical. The novel begins in the fall of 1972 when an under-cover intelligence official is sent from Pakistan to Afghanistan as a second secretary. Diabetic and bookish, Amjad soon settles in his new life as a diplomat. He clearly recognises the increasing communist influence in Afghanistan. A year after his posting, the regime of King Zahir Shah, the monarch for the last five decades, is overthrown by his cousin and former prime minister Sardar Daud, who has the backing of communist elements in the armed forces.

As Amjad gets married to an American diplomat Karen, Sardar Daud's government is overthrown in a Soviet-backed coup, the main reason for the coup being Sardar Daud's efforts at improving relations with Pakistan and the West. The new communist regime soon alienates the conservative populace of rural Afghanistan by trying to stop them from practicing their religion. A large emigration from rural Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran follows. Several political leaders of Afghanistan like Burhan-ud-din Rabbani and Gulbadin Hikmatyar are already in Pakistan. Soon a full-fledged armed resistance, carried out mostly by these Afghan refugees financed by the US, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states, starts against the Soviets who by that time have occupied Afghanistan.

Qazi Amjad, the protagonist of the novel, is posted back to Pakistan, where he falls in love with a ravishing Afghan beauty by the name of Farišta. In the beginning, Amjad is wary of starting a relationship with Farišta, because of his disappointing experience with Karen. But eventually he decides to put everything at stake once again for the woman he loves. The Afghan crises, thus started in 1979, by foreign powers to further their own geopolitical interests continues to date with no end in sight. The story ends with Amjad's stepdaughter Farda becoming a Pakistani diplomat, hoping to continue her father's legacy. Farda also tries to diffuse the factors responsible for bringing so much misery on the Afghan people. I believe that the fictional and historical tracks in the book could have been kept separate. The twists and turns of the tale, along with a well-researched historical and political backdrop make *Afghan Tragedy* a compelling read.

*An Afghan Tragedy*  
Author: Akbar Jan Marwat  
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The writer is a columnist and an author of *A Child of the New Millennium Stories* and