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Thawra

Collection 01



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ABOUT THAWRA

Thawra is an online literary platform that provides a home for minority creatives. From budding short story authors to critical academic writers, we want to amplify the talented voices throughout the BAME community. Biannually, we also produce an online magazine that collates all our recent published pieces.

We're here to elevate people who for so long have been unable to assert their presence, their thoughts, their art, and the way they see the world. We believe that art is at the centre of society and, therefore, that art should be representative of the people that inhabit it.

As the Arabic transliteration for *revolution*, we want to change and revolutionise the literary landscape so that upcoming generations can depend on the fact that their artistic world is not solely based on bygone Eurocentric standards of relevancy. Social, political and cultural change happens through the exchange of words, words that must hold experience rather than stereotype; integrity rather than sensationalism. Nurturing the creativity of the marginalised is paramount until we find ourselves in a society that no longer works against us.

We're here for a revolution, and what's a revolution without its poets and its artists?

POETRY

Millions

by Oluwarimike Abiodun-Oni

My friend, her name is Emily, had her grandparents die. They left her a silo in Texas, a coastal house on rocky pastures in Massachusetts Bay. Blue lace china they got on their European honeymoon. A dowry. A college education. One hundred thousand dollars in stocks and bonds.

This is her inheritance.

My grandmother, sitting across from me now, has just made a rather cruel comment about my weight. She doesn't understand why this time last year I could not will myself out of bed. She doesn't understand what the sunlight has to do with my mood. She doesn't understand why I shrink when she comes near me, in this packed family hall, why I do not take her gently offered hand.



She doesn't understand why I don't believe that anything she has is gently offered (I know it was not acquired that way — she has been through more than I will ever be).

She shakes her head at my stomach when I walk into a room. Sitting across from me now, she proclaims rather loudly that she thought I had stopped all that eating. Though she says it in broken English, maybe that should blunt the blow. The next instant, she will look at me with century-old concern and ask if school isn't treating me too harshly. She will put a hand to my forehead if I so much as shiver. Sitting across from me now, worry lines older than I am drawn on her forehead. She will clap with unmitigated glee when my mother tells her I am graduating, although she has no concept of International Relations.





She will hold my chin in her hands and pray for me, sitting across from me now, and that is as close to feeling God as I will ever be. She will love me, with a love so potent she has no choice but to ask when I got so big and fat and afraid. She's talked to God about me, you see.

Every night, like a soldier, she gets on her knees, humble, and she talks to God about me.

When my grandmother dies all I will be left is the truth that if you lick enough salt, the pepper you have rubbed into your eye will lose its sting. That if you rub earwax on a boil, it will vanish. That there are special creams (maybe only she has them in the world) for when your thighs start to rub together at thirteen. I will be left with four different ways to fry plantain, and the right way to eat pounded yam so the mound is not desecrated there, on the plate. I will be left the right way to wash a pot, the long way to boil white rice. Her sadness, so thick it starts to slur.

I will be given her skirts (they won't fit), her favourite stories (they won't fit), her endless need to pray (it won't fit).

I will be bequeathed parables; I will remember them in someone else's language.

From grandma, I will inherit an inability to eat without guilt.

I will inherit parcels and bundles of pain, different kinds of passed down and carried over shame.

No hundreds or thousands or dollars.

In stocks or bonds.

I will inherit guilt, motherhood, and a responsibility to all the branches of this wizened family tree.

She leaves me embarrassed, ashamed, aware of everything that lives in the unholy dark.

She leaves me that restoration which can only happen once there is a reckoning.

When Emily asks me how much she left to me, I will miss her ruthlessness, my grandmother.

I will miss her cruelty (this is what they called her, this is what they meant to say, this is why I could not love her, this is why I loved her), my grandmother.

I will miss the soft underbelly of her fleshy arms.

Then I will ask Emily if anyone ever begged a God on bended knee for her sake,

and I will answer,
millions.

For this is my inheritance.



Proposal

by Oluwarimike Abiodun-Oni

When someone asks me to marry them, I want it to be surrounded by stories. I want it to be colourful because it will mean they understand me. I think ultimately, all I want is to be understood. I want to be loved as I am, breathed in and breathed out, held and studied. I want to be made someone's life work. I want love the way you have it, the way you are sure to get it, at least once in your life. Slim white girl, the world bends for you. She breaks her back for you. She will make sure you find your magnum opus love. What about me? Who breaks their back for me, but me? I want, I want, I want, and I want.



Mother, Manman, Maami, Mummy, Mama, Mom

by Oluwarimike Abiodun-Oni

All black mothers, whether religious or not, are praying mothers. They pray over you in the way they hold your hand when you are small, kiss your face, and wash your hair. They pray over you in the way they wash your hair. In the way, they pay the woman on the corner, who braids your hair. In the way, they braid it themselves. In the way, they cook for you. In the way, they give you the last of the money, because they are so tired from working to feed you, that they cannot cook for you. All black mothers are praying mothers. They pray over you in the way they pray over you. Always, and all the time. Black daughter, you are never off your mother's mind.

Oluwarimike Abiodun-Oni

Abiodun-Oni is Irish by birth, Nigerian by blood, Canadian by citizenship, and American by experience. She is a writer with a vested interest in the lives and experiences of young black girls across the world, and is currently working towards a degree in International Relations.



The Girl & Her God by Hikma Riyas

and when she walks past with her sack of rambutan and mango, and pomegranate seeds stuck to her fingers, with her harsh words and hungry mouth, she spills a verse from her ivory lips,

فَاذْكُرُونِي أَذْكَرُكُمْ

[so remember me and i will remember you]".

and as you watch her climb trees, sink her teeth into guavas, return home with sticky palms, she recites and recites and recites until her throat is sore and her tongue is numb,

وَأَشْكُرُوا لِي وَلَا تَكْفُرُونِ

[be grateful to me, never ungrateful]".

and once she has made wūdu, her body pure and clean, she prays to her creator. *oh Allah, oh Allah, oh Allah.* and her creator responds. *yes, my slave. yes, my slave. yes, my slave.*

Hikma Riyas

Riyas is a young writer who began exploring the art of poetry a few years ago. Although she doesn't quite aspire to be an author, she enjoys writing as a hobby.

from the point of view of an 11 year old by Aniqah Bashir

whilst the bliss of adolescent dreams and hopes was everyone else's heart's desire, for me, the air felt mellow like a steamed window after a hot bath and the memories of both my grand-fathers leaving me haunted the passageway, starting secondary school on the other side of the city,

playing with lilac muscat boiled sweets in an old red tin,

hosting talent shows outside the football cages,

rushing humid tsunami chokehold,

finishing reading the qur'an again, the swiss miss of life,

the bittersweetness of the olympics, trying out abseiling and scraping my knee,

discovering my favourite colour is yellow, memorising surah yaseen,

riding bikes with my friends going out to eat with them too, getting a hamster,

florescent pink 12th birthday cake candles melting into the sticky frosting

paired with the constant change in music taste

but i so badly needed everything to pause.

a chance to go back home

before i turned thirteen

to experience my life softly before the chaos,

before they left me unexpectedly.

Aniqah Bashir

Bashir is an artist in every sense of the word. Her poetry focuses on lived experiences, culture and language, and is heavily influenced by dreamscapes, music and the way they manipulate the mind.

01. the creature of affliction

unravel the threads of her home
 allow it to crumble and plummet
 like sandcastles battered by the seas
 kick down the folds of her fort
 she built out of wintry snow
 blow out the candles on her cake
 before she ever makes a wish
 the eyes of a child search for light
 even in the bleakest of hearts
 but when a heart bleeds black
 it is bound to stain another

03. the friend of loneliness

another night in the city of saints
 to flee a warmth that soothes her
 but she falls numb from
 the sting of a frigid winter
 and plead for mercy on her frail heart
 cradling burdened thoughts between
 her knees
 and tired of running from an
 inevitable burn
 a weary-eyed girl sits on the edge of a
 busy street
 knowing she had travelled too far to
 still feel small
 but she is the thunder behind sleepless
 nights
 howling up a storm fuelled by a
 piercing rage
 she will be forced to feel
 all she sought to escape
 and embrace the warmth of her tears

02. the bearer of misery

a beggar of love lies seeping
 through an endless mattress
 she had fallen for a lie
 by the one with no name
 the creature of affliction will forgive
 even if their heart is plastered on the tiles
 due to being loved in the wrong direction
 she tumbled out of line and split into pieces
 love bleeds on a perilous tightrope
 not knowing how far she may fall

Salma Malin

Salma Malin is a Canadian writer who uses the art of writing as an outlet for creative self-expression. Capturing cathartic unease, she embraces turning to the written word as an escape from what cannot be spoken. She has also self-published *Death in a Dream*, a compilation of poems and heart-rending short tales about adolescent fears, loss of innocence and the inevitable journey of adulthood.



The Bride

by Sadiyah Bashir

After Emi Mahmoud

*"And apologize for the things our fathers
taught us through our mother's mouths"*

—Emi Mahmoud

We give birth to future wedding days / not
daughters /

Braid their hair and whisper their duties
into their ears /

Mark the calendar / not the milestones /

Rub extra shea butter into their hands and
feet /

Smooth for when the day comes and the
henna has to dry /

There are rules for being born a wedding
day /

If you wear white it means purity /

And it will cloak the tears / if you must cry /

Bend over in a position like ruku'u /

The water will fall directly on the floor /

Mustn't ruin the makeup / but remember /

This is not about prayer / it's about
bending /

Sadiyah Bashir

Sadiyah Bashir is a mom of two, an award-winning poet, and a Muslim Womxn's Organizing Institute fellow. Her poetry has been featured in media outlets such as Al-Jazeera and the Washington Post. Her first self-published book entitled *Seven* explores trauma and triumph through the lens of Black Muslim womanhood. She can be found on all social media @sadiyahamb



plum juice

by Farzana Ali

every time i eat fruit i'm faced
with the same disappointment
rancid and bitter drops,
my sweetest plum is sour.
maybe i've picked it on the wrong day,
on the day where it's not just ripe and
doesn't feel it's best
but i want to turn it into juice
it doesn't fit right in my belly
i think this disappointment needs to come
out,
stick it down my throat and i'll try not to
choke.
i've never heard of plum juice
perhaps
i'll make it now.

Farzana Ali

Farzana Ali is an English and Creative Writing graduate, and writer who primarily enjoys writing prose, but also dabbles in poetry. Her work mainly focuses on struggles regarding mental health and being a South Asian woman.

Sands of Time by Zarrin Ahmed

I let the soft blanket caress my skin
as I sink deep within
the border between life and death,
hanging loose on a thread.

The rain outside was a constant shower
and with no light from the sun
to comfort me with its warmth,
I lay here, pondering at my state .

The red line on the monitor
beeped pace by pace,
gradually getting slower
within my space.

The hourglass stood on the table-side,
the sand slowly slipping away.
My eyes watched it lose
every last grain.

The sand slowly slithers
between its glossy gap,
reminding me
of what has been gained
and what has been lost.

Time acts a grain of sand,
trapped within a liminal space,
slipping away from our hands,
beating us in its race.

I wonder
how much of the sand I had wasted;
how much I had let go
because no matter how much I grasp,
it still falls away in its gaps.
But time beyond the border
is endless.

Life is temporary,
preparing us for the next.

And like an hourglass
which can be turned to start over,
we can forge a new path.
A paradise, that can last forever.
I close my eyes,
a tear runs down my cheek.
My body, light and frail,
reaching its peak.
The sand finally finishes,
heaping up into a pile.
Then, a flatline
as I drift into an eternal slumber
which will last for more than a while.

Zarrin Ahmed

Ahmed is a university student who has had an on-and-off relationship with poetry. However, 2022 became the year that she decided to take the plunge and, since then, she has been able to express her creativity like she's always wanted.



Where are you from, from? by Hanna Elkaram

where are you from?

I'm asked by curious bystanders of my life
In my mind I'm quick to say England
British
Lived here all my life
Attended their schools and went through
their educating systems, have I not?
Learnt about their treacherous
colonisation of the world
Lived through their ongoing terrible Tory
government
Embraced their stolen cultures of the
cuppa and fish'n'chip Friday
Disguised myself with their language and
dialects

But quickly I'm met with another question,
No, where are you from, from?

I breathe in and think '*here we go again*'
having repeated this answer multiple
times to many curious bystanders that
come
and go

Libya (ليبيا)

Pure Libyan blood runs through my veins
Behind my face lies a forgotten nation
that can only be identified by its
questionable
Ex-leader and its decade long civil war
Behind my blood lies a culture and history
which withstood the tests of time
The lion of the desert, Omar al-Mukhtar
An Islamic scholar turned freedom fighter
He who died a martyr leading the anti-
colonial resistance in Cyrenaica
Behind my eyes lies the beautiful scenes
of Libya

Aquamarine waters engulf its coastlines
Roman ruins of Leptis Magna and
Sabratha, history coming back to life
within a
Blink of an eye
Behind my nose lies the smells of Tripoli's
streets
Fresh bread and *sfinz* fills the bakery's
every morning
Quickly followed by queues of people
determined to get their share of the carb
Goodness
Behind my tongue lies the sweetness of
the cuisine
From fresh cold strawberry and kiwi juice
To the tooth achingly sweet *rossata* and
abambar

*Sfinz - a spongy fried bread, normally eaten for
breakfast and either topped with sweet toppings such
as date syrup, honey, Nutella or savoury toppings such
as cheese, harissa, tuna or egg

**Rossata - a sweet almond drink which is normally
served during special occasions such as baby showers
and weddings

***Abambar - a soft almond cookie which has a similar
softness to macaroons; these are always served along
side rossata

Hanna Elkaram

Elkaram is a British-born Libyan who is
pursuing her passion for literature and
poetry by incorporating ideas of identity
and diaspora throughout. She has a deep
interest in the history of the MENA region,
particularly prior the Arab Spring.

SHORT STORY

the parts of me I have lost

(trigger warning for bulimia/eating disorders/body dysmorphia)

by **Farzana Ali**

I have dreams of cutting up my stomach.

Taking out all the organs and fat so that I am left flat, and empty without feeling anything inside of me. Without a stomach, I wouldn't have to eat

anything. I stand in front of the mirrors at work, lifting my top up so that I am staring at my stomach.

My mama told me that I'm going thinner by the day, but

why can I not see that? My waist seems to be wide, along with my flabby stomach.

I breathe.

I leave the bathroom, pretending that I haven't had a vision of me chopping up my flesh. My colleague, Natalie smiles at me, and I smile back, a grin so

hard that it should've been a clear sign that I'm insane. But she looks away. She goes back to putting the books back on the shelf, and I go to the reception.

Adam comes to check out some books. I think they're about German history or whatever. He gives me a sweet grin, sugar dancing on his tongue.

"Hey. Just these books please." I give him a smile back, taking the books so that I can scan them.

"Library card, please." I say. He leans on the counter, his brown hair flopping down with him.

He passes it over to me, "I can never forget it."

"It should be second nature for you to pass it over then." I tease, sliding his library card through the card machine.

"Maybe I wanted to hear you speak."

I try to hide my smile as he says this, stamping the page on the front of the book with today's date.

"It's due a month from now. If you want to renew it, you can either come in or do it online. But you knew that." I do the same with the other book.

"I know." I think the smile on his face is permanent as his dimples start peeking through.

"Okay, that's all done for you. Do you need anything else?" The questions are clockwork, but it isn't a surprise. I expect him to give me a nod and turn to leave with a flirty comment. Adam comes to the library every week to either study or take some books out. I've gotten used to his presence. He's slowly becoming one of the good things about this job. But right now, he stays standing there.

"Yes, I do."

I look at him, "yes?"

"A date. With you. Let me take you out."

the parts of me I have lost

by Farzana Ali

Mama told me I need to eat dinner. I told her it's something she wants me to do. I don't need to.

There's this game that I play with myself. How long can I go without eating something?

The longest time that I've gone without consuming anything with substance was four days. I was strictly on a diet of water and ice cubes that have been filled with berries. That way I'm getting some of my five a day.

It was great for a while, the little game becoming a competition with me and my belly. Whenever I win, I reward myself by buying a new fruit to put in the fruit bowl. I wonder if I can put it into the ice cubes, but a lot of the time they sit there slowly disintegrating.

On the fourth day, I accidentally ate a Ritz cracker. I said fuck it and ate the whole pack. Mama asked me where the packet was, so I had to tell her it was out of date.

She doesn't need to know it's all down the loo now.

Adam is 20 minutes late for our date. He told me he will make it, reminding me to wear my best dress and look beautiful.

The red-haired waitress comes by my table again, asking if I'm going to order again.

"Y'sure he's coming bab?" She looks at me with pity, green eyes boring into mine, holding the iPad close to her chest. I think she's trying to be kind, but I'm convinced that she's mocking me.

I nod. "He's coming."

I've already stared at the menu enough times to memorise the breakfast menu, lunch, and the different drinks that they have, including all the ingredients that go into it. The white tables are new too, they have no scratches and knife indentations the same way that an old table would.

The place itself is new. It's why I suggested it out of them all. The interior itself is cosy. It's one of those Instagram, aesthetic places that had dimmed lights on top of those tables. Adam sent a bunch of places to choose from, but all of them were a hard no from me. This one seemed like the best option.

The 20 minutes turn into 30 minutes. 40 minutes. 50. An hour. Two.

I stay here waiting for him, haunting the booth for what feels like an eternity.

I send what seems like my hundredth text.

Adam

hey! i'm waiting at the café
 let me know when you're on your way
 is there a lot of traffic? i can still hold the table
 are you coming?
 if you're not going to turn up at least tell me
 shall we reschedule? i don't mind
 you're not coming, are you?
 please tell me what's happening
 did i do something?

read at 22:14

the parts of me I have lost

by Farzana Ali

He's not coming.

I curl up, trying my hardest not to let the tears come out. But I can't help it. The saltiness drips one by one, one falling into my mouth, and I savour it. I didn't eat for two days so I could look beautiful. He told me to look beautiful.

From my peripheral vision, the waitress is cleaning tables and sees me in all my miserable glory. She walks towards me.

"You okay, love?" She says.

I shake my head, "he's not coming."

"Lemme take your order anyway." She coos, and I nod.

In front of me is an aubergine and cumin grilled sourdough sandwich, a bowl of sun-dried tomato pesto pasta, a chicken and watermelon salad, fries with garlic aioli, granola with yoghurt, and banana bread.

If I'm going to wallow in pity, I may as well turn it into a party for one.

I start with the pasta, scoffing down the pesto tagliatelle. I don't even acknowledge the flavours that tingle on my tongue. All I want is for it to go down, down, down.

The waitress stands on the side, placing my glass of iced vanilla oat latte and Coke Zero onto the table. She sits down without any invitation from me, but I don't mind. It doesn't even matter anymore that someone is watching my misery.

She gives me a smile. "Men. Women. They aren't worth it. No one is worth your tears."

"He told me to look pretty." I say after I swallow a bite.

"And y'look gorgeous. He's a prick for not turning up."

"I probably don't look gorgeous anymore." I'm nearly done with the pasta. I think the sandwich is next.

"You are beautiful, bab. No man can take that away. Whether that be from your outer or inner beauty. I promise ya, men don't mean shit."

"Thanks." I say to her, my eyes glassy from the tear residue. Or maybe it's the eye gunk. But she still looks at me like I am a mirror ball. But I am not dazzling. Instead, I am trying to be as mindless as possible so that I can eat all of this in one sitting. I pick up the sandwich, dip it in the aioli and take a bite.

The toilet is my best friend.

I'm perched over it again, waiting for the next wave of food to projectile out of me. I wish to feel empty, like a well that doesn't hold any water. So that the next thing I eat bounces around at the pit of my stomach.

My fingers are touching the back of my throat, the inside of my cheeks warming up with every heave. I can feel the chunks of chicken dancing in my throat. The salty tears roll down and drop onto my hand, mixing in with the saliva.

One of my hands grip the edge of the toilet seat, whilst the other one guides the vomit down the toilet. I'm retching, making sure it all comes out. It splats onto the side, and I lean against the bowl, breathless.

I want to be an angel. They're made out of light. I wish to be that weightless.

REVIEW

A Place For Us is so reminiscent of a life I'm so sure I've lived. Fatima Farheen Mirza writes as if she's recounting a memory from my past. As if the story she writes is one that we've all lived through, despite having not. This is a type of prose that should be awarded for how deep it cuts, and how it fleshes out every type of emotion you've ever felt — even the ones you don't realise you have or necessarily want to.

We follow the lives of an Indian American family of five who have gathered together to celebrate the wedding of their eldest daughter, Hadia. Amar, the youngest sibling and only boy, has reunited with his family after a three-year estrangement. The story unfolds from here, weaving through pieces of the past that have led them to this very moment. In Mirza's distinctive and stunning style of storytelling, we follow a narrative of decades through the eyes of each family member.

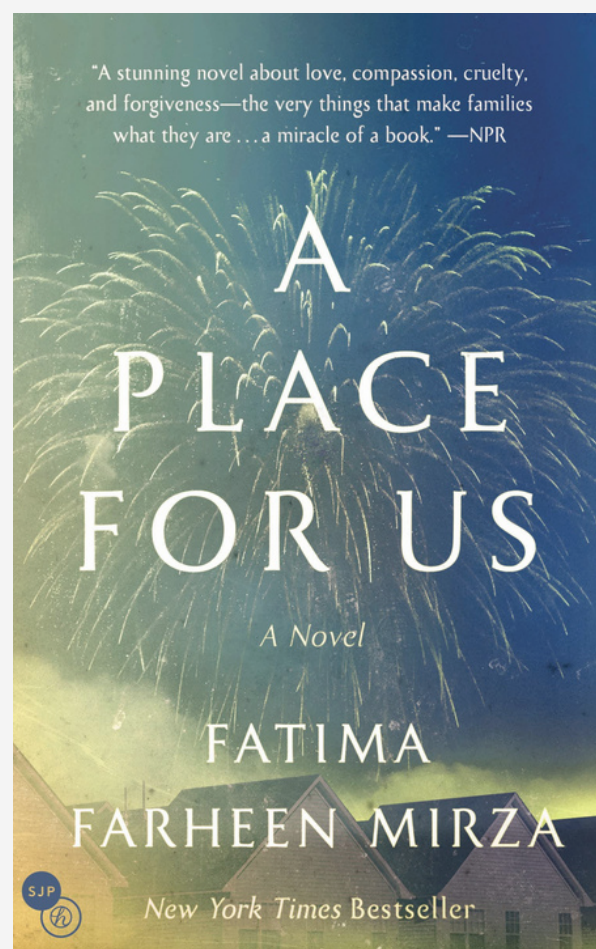
At its heart, this book is about family and how parts of a whole sometimes do not align with each other. It is an incredibly moving and poignant family portrait, rife with faith, culture and identity. *A Place For Us* explores the struggle in truly finding one's place in this world, both physically and in the presence of others.

In a particularly emotionally charged scene between the two sisters, Hadia and Huda, Mirza prompts the question: 'How were they to know the moments that would define them?'

A Place For Us

by Fatima Farheen Mirza

Reviewed by Saberín C.



Mirza manages to encompass the dire importance of actions and choices made against, with, and around others — reminding readers that what one may find insignificant, may be entirely different for another.



Photograph by Christian Alegria

I feel so incredibly attached to these characters, I've felt anger and betrayal and pity and joy and pride for these characters throughout the book, as if I was able to pry into the lives of every family member in less than 400 pages. I'm not entirely sure how I got through the last hundred pages, inching towards an ending to a novel I will probably remember for the rest of my life, crying every few pages to the point that I genuinely couldn't see through my tears when reading the last few pages at 3am!

A friend of mine describes this book as feeling like home, and I genuinely couldn't agree more. *A Place For Us* has opened my eyes in countless ways, and I truly believe it'll be a book I return to often, if not only to indulge in the stunning prose but also as a guide on how to approach the lives of others. Mirza emphasises that we are amalgamations of all our experiences in life, regardless of how little and insignificant it may seem on the surface.

Saberin C.

Saberin lives in London and works in publishing. She sometimes writes but, more often than not, you can find her with her nose in a fantasy book or doing whatever it takes to get her cat's attention!

ESSAY

The Story of Birangona

by **Lamisah Chowdhury**

(trigger warning for sexual abuse)

Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan on December 16 1971, following its victory in the Bangladesh Liberation War. The development of the Bengali nationalist and self-determination movement in what was then East Pakistan served as the catalyst for the Liberation War for 9 months of intense guerilla warfare. Whilst 1947 for some is widely known as the start of a new independent era for India and Pakistan, the devastating struggle and loss for Bengalis had only just begun.

In a systematic campaign of annihilation against Bengali civilians, students, intelligentsia, religious minorities, and armed personnel, members of the Pakistani military committed mass murder, deportations, and the genocidal rape of thousands. The war did not discriminate against anyone — child, adult, man, woman, Hindu, or Muslim, as 30 million Bengalis were internally displaced, and an estimated 10 million escaped as refugees to neighbouring India.

Pakistan's religious leaders openly supported the crime by labelling Bengali freedom fighters as "Hindus" and Bengali women as "the booty of war". But in reality, more than 80 percent of the Bengali people were Muslims at that time. The largest military surrender since the Second World War took place in Dhaka on December 16 1971, after India formed an alliance with Bangladesh and advanced its military forces, forcing Pakistan to wave its white flag.

According to the ministry, around 200,000 women and girls were abused during the Liberation War, but independent sources put the number at 400,000. Estimates of the War Crimes Fact Finding Committee shows that around 468,000 women and girls were abused in 1971. The Pakistani Army also kept numerous Bengali women as sex-slaves inside the Dacca Cantonment. Most of the girls were captured from Dhaka University and private homes. It was said Pakistani soldiers had been instructed to rape women in order to create a new generation of Bengalis 'who would not be willing to fight their West Pakistani fathers'.

A woman's war is unique because she must combat not just on the front lines but also at home, supporting her family through the hardships of war. They performed a variety of roles, including spies, mothers, nurses, spouses, informers, and guerrilla combatants. Their pain was as varied as their roles: they experienced death, physical impairment, mass rape and the subsequent pregnancy, psychological trauma, and destruction of their homes. They were the ones expected to rebuild families after the war all while coping with the scars it left.

The Story of the Birangona

by Lamisah Chowdhury

The aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War meant thousands of these traumatised women had to face ostracisation and shame in the predominantly Muslim and Hindu communities they lived in. 20,000 pregnancies were estimated resulting from the rape of Bengali women. It was in tradition that most Muslim husbands decided against 'taking back' their wives if they had been touched by another man, even if they were subdued by force. Officials said that, despite efforts by Bangladeshi authorities to break that tradition, 'very, very few' men took their wives back after they had been raped. Many women killed themselves, some left the nation to work as servants overseas, and a large number were killed during abortions by inexperienced midwives.

On December 22 1971, the Bangladeshi government designated women who had been sexually assaulted as Birangana or war-heroines. Birangona became synonymous with dishonoured and violated women. They were casualties of war, who bore the seeds of evil in them, reminding Bengalis of times of misery. However, President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman referred to them as his daughters and urged Bangladesh to "provide appropriate honour and dignity to the ladies victimised by the Pakistani army."

The Bangladeshi government not only carried out the unprecedented task of referring to women raped during the war of 1971 as Birangonas but, in 1972, the independent government set up rehabilitation centres for Birangonas who undertook abortion, put their children up for international adoption, arranged their marriages, trained them in vocational skills and often ensured for them government jobs.

In order to elevate the status of Birangana as freedom fighters, the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association filed a petition with the Bangladesh High Court. The High Court requested the government in January 2014. After much deliberation on upgrading the status of these women, and more than forty years after the war, the Bangladeshi government officially recognised 43 Birangana as freedom fighters for the first time on October 23 2015.

Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque said that now they would enjoy the same government benefits as freedom fighters. Including the most recent addition at the 73rd National Freedom Fighter Council meeting, sixteen more Biranganas were added to the list, bringing the total Biranganas that now qualify as freedom fighters to 416 by June 2021.

Thus, despite assumptions of silence in the last 40 years in Bangladesh, there now exist assertions of a public memory of wartime rape through various literary, visual (films, plays, photographs) and testimonial forms, ensuring that the Birangona endures as an iconic figure.

The Story of the Birangona

by Lamisah Chowdhury

Though the concept of freedom fighters may be alien to diaspora in the West, the case is in Bangladesh they are most highly respected in society. From being taught about them in the school curriculum to having designated funds in their name, they are specially honoured by Bangladesh and its citizens. Although there are still women who do not wish to disclose their identities because of social taboo still present, the list grows longer as recognition and significant progress is made socially. Hope remains in victims of the war that all women be given dignity and the freedom to live without shame.



Photograph by Kishor Parekh

Lamisah Chowdhury

Chowdhury is a writer and journalist. She currently works for the BBC News & World Service and for the Digital Sisterhood podcast. Based in London, her passions include politics, history and learning about the Muslim women around her. Her instagram handle is @lamisahc and personal blog is nurhayati.org.

OPINION

Mahsa Jina Amini: The Catalyst for Another Revolution by Parmis N.

My name is Parmis. My parents moved to this country in their 20s to study and work, and eventually build a better future for themselves. They decided to stay here when I was born because they knew I had no future in Iran.

I woke up on the morning of 16th September to the news of Mahsa Jina Amini. A cold wave rushed through my body as I read the report that she had died due to allegedly being beaten for improper hijab. The mandatory hijab was instated in April 1983 by the Islamic Republic of Iran as a means to maintain modesty, consequently creating the “morality” police that patrol the streets for women who do not comply to these laws.

The call for modesty has also gone far beyond the veil. Imagine being arrested for walking with a male counterpart that is not visibly your father. Imagine being arrested for wearing a graphic t-shirt of the band you love. Imagine being arrested for practicing a religion that is not Islam. Let’s sit with that for a moment. Many communities, such as Baha’is, Orthodox Christians, Jews etc., who do not practice the Islamic faith are incriminated and persecuted which has resulted in a mass migration of non-Muslim Iranians out of the country. There is no peaceful coexistence. The forced nature of the Republic’s interpretation of one religion has resulted in the veil becoming a symbol of oppression. As the Iranian government has bastardised the veil, protesters use the symbolism of burning a veil to act against their contextual version of oppression. This is not a fight against Islam. It’s an endeavour to burn a system that oppresses its people in the name of Islam.

But why Jina? Why now? There are women who are reported to have have been allegedly tortured and killed at the hands of the morality police all the time, so that leaves the question: what makes Jina different? Her family risked their lives to speak out against the regime, which is a crime in itself. Her family took their grief and turned it into an outcry for the women in Iran. This Kurdish family brought the Kurdish feminist phrase “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” into the limelight, which translates to “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi” in Farsi, and “Women, Life, Freedom” in English. The Kurdish political feminist movement has been using this phrase for decades and this has been a part of their activism.



Watching videos of Jina dancing in that glorious red dress haunts my mind every day as I think of the pain she must have endured whilst conforming to a version of herself that was a lie. A common phrase I heard amongst my friends when the news first came out was: "that could have been me". Since her martyrdom, many others have also been killed in light of protests within Iran. Their names, their faces, their testimonies, their smiles, their histories have been shared on social media and every day since the 40th day since Jina's murder, a 'chehelom/چهلّم' has been held for the martyrs of the movement, and masses of people have gone to celebrate and mourn the lives of those who have risked it all for the future of Iran. As Iranian diaspora, it's a disabling feeling seeing all of this behind a screen. I find myself constantly scrolling, listening and feeling my heart break with every name added to the list of those killed. It is normal to feel helpless, but we must continue to raise awareness. With the masses of false propaganda, the cover-ups, the silencing of microphones as fans chanted "Women, Life, Freedom" in the Iran World Cup matches, this must be bigger than the people.

When you see the photographs of female sports people taking their mandatory hijabs off, when you see the throat-tearing screams of women leading the protests in the West, when you see the anger in the faces of the Iranian football team as they refuse to sing the national anthem, know this is bigger than us. When my mother teaches the younger generation of Iranians in London 'سرود ای ایران' instead of this illegitimate national anthem and they sing it with such heart and soul that it brings chills to your body, it's bigger than us.



It's for a better future for Iranians. We want to go home. To home, to safety, to a life where we're not living in fear of not getting arrested and raped before we're killed. I'm imploring you to learn about Iran because with every name that gets added to the list of children, women and men who are arrested and/or murdered, you remember that this is someones child, sister, brother, mother, father, aunt or uncle.

To Iranians: the united front is the most important thing to maintain right now. The fight is for all of us, not one of us and when this is all over and solved **به امید خدا**; we need to maintain this unity.

To non-Iranians watching this unfold: listen, learn, share. Stay curious. Your support in raising awareness is the reason why global platforms and the UN are investigating the Iranian government.

Parmis N.

Parmis is a 4th year Medical student with a passion for women's health and rights. Her Iranian heritage inspires her everyday, and she strives to make the world a better place. She is currently working on projects in period pains and the advocacy of medical students feeling empowered in critical pedagogy.

Saving London's Oldest Arabic Bookshop

by Mona Sharif

By the time you read this, Al Saqi, Europe's largest SWANA bookseller will have official shut its doors. With its closure, hundreds of people flooded to social media to share their thoughts on the recent announcement. Since opening its doors in 1979, it has been a valued pillar of literary and cultural expression for the London Arabic-speaking community — and it truly does feel like a monumental loss to the community. The current owners of Al Saqi, credit its closure to difficulties bought about by Brexit, rise in price of Arabic-language books, and the cost-of-living crisis.

And it's not just Al Saqi. In the last two decades, independent bookshops have struggled to keep their doors open with the boom of Amazon and other online book retailers. In 2015 a survey conducted by the British Book Association, found Amazon as cause for competition in print books being unbalanced and 64% of them believe that Amazon is the sole cause. To add, the pandemic catalysed the closure of many independent bookshops across the UK — despite crowdfunding efforts. In short, independent booksellers are facing a long-term threat. A quote from The Boar, stating “bookshops cannot survive if all they sell are books” indicates that current and

aspiring bookshop owners need to recognise the needs of the community to stay afloat in what seems like a dying souk.

So, what are the community's needs? And what does this mean for the Arabic-speaking and reading community?

I spoke with award-winning author and activist Heba Hayak and former Al Saqi bookseller and SWANA literary enthusiast Mohammad Masoud on how they plan to combat the threat against independent bookshops with their initiative, Maqam.

Al Saqi was very popular amongst our parents' generation, with many children of the Arabic-speaking diaspora sharing fond memories of visiting with their parents. The current owners addressed that part of Al Saqi's decline was a “generational issue”, that the younger generation do not share the same passion or interest as their parents. I asked Heba and Masoud about this “generational issue” and whether they fear it may hinder their success. Masoud, who oversaw the day-to-day runnings of Al Saqi, put it eloquently that “it isn't so much an issue of disinterest, rather a disconnection”. Many children of the Arabic-speaking diaspora do not possess the fluency to truly enjoy Arabic literature. Heba added that their vision for Maqam goes beyond conventional bookselling, and their goal is to not only sell books but to provide an inclusive space for all genders, sexual orientations, ages, races and ethnic



backgrounds. This will include Arabic-language classes, events for SWANA creatives to showcase their works, as well as a coffee shop. Masoud and Heba both reiterated that Maqam will be for everyone and anyone who has an interest in the Arabic language and culture.

The economic issue still stands. Since COVID-19 and other hardships within the Arab-world, booksellers sourcing stock from the SWANA region are facing the sharp increases in Arabic-language book prices, shipping charges and exchange rates.

"The future is digital."

Maqam will not only have a physical presence but prospective customers will be able to access the shops stock online. They shared that Maqam aspires to digitalise its stock, allowing people to download anything from new releases to rare vintage collections at a fraction of the cost. They hope to sell secondhand books to combat the issue of raising costs, as well as promoting a more sustainable future for Maqam. Masoud added, "I believe I have a nice voice, and I will do a good job at recording audiobooks", so that's another thing to look forward to.

Heba and Masoud's vision is ambitious and now need the community's help. They will be sharing their campaign on Maqam's Instagram soon which will share further details on how you can support the initiative.

Mona Sharif

Sharif is a British-Iraqi writer and trainee solicitor with expertise in Politics, International Relations and British Law. She loves a good book, and sometimes shares her thoughts on @reclaiming_literature



Julie Begum, Activism and The Bengali Community in London

by Asia Khatun

The presence of Bengalis in Britain can be dated back as early as the seventeenth century through their work as lascars on European ships. However, the largest waves of migration occurred after the Second World War up to the 1970s as Britain clamoured for cheap labour in its factories across the Midlands and London and the British Nationality Act gave people in the Commonwealth the right to claim British citizenship. Many Bengalis came to escape war, poverty and to give their families a chance at a better life, and many settled in the heart of East London.

When I sat down to speak with Julie Begum, a British Bengali activist who has spent the past three decades immersed in grass-roots anti-racism campaigning, I was completely inspired by the passion she had for preserving Bengali heritage. Begum grew up at a time where the National Front, who placed their headquarters a stone's throw away from Brick Lane, were emboldened; racists were throwing faeces through letterboxes and the Bengali community were ghettoised. With the rise of violent hate crimes, including the death of Altab Ali whose name now stands memorialised with the creation of Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel, there was a great mobilisation by the minority community and allies as they marched and protested through London towards Downing Street. Begum recalls this all too well as she remembers her and like-minded friends taking up every opportunity to organise against far-right extremists and bigots — many of which were protected by the police.



Police brutality and institutional racism was (and, unfortunately, still is) commonplace in Britain and British Bengalis bore the brunt through generations of political and economic scapegoating. Hate crimes were rarely prosecuted, police officers, at the least, often dismissed requests for protection and, at the most, partook in violence against the community as they protested against discrimination. At a time where the leader of the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher, proclaimed that “people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture”, there was little push towards real community cohesion as immigrants became further otherised. Thatcher went on to win the election only a year after these words were televised — words that spread the same inflammatory sentiment in regards to immigration through the same political party today.

As it became apparent that Bengali heritage wasn't going to be accepted by the larger society anytime soon and newer generations were at risk of forgetting their roots in order to assimilate, Begum saw that the cultural contributions of her community were not being celebrated. This led to her co-founding the Swadhinata Trust:

community-focused organisation that aims to preserve Bengali culture and share its rich history with the world. The trust has arranged seminars, workshops, exhibitions and more in order to educate London's own Bengali community as well as the larger community about crucial parts of Bangladeshi history and local history about the establishment and plight of Bengali Britons in Tower Hamlets. From local walking tours to projects like Brick Lane 1978 - The Turning Point, these programs are moments where diverse backgrounds and experiences can be appreciated and critical junctures can be remembered.

The importance of knowing one's birthplace or heritage is a steadfast way in which one can become confident in their identity, aiding their awareness of their place in society and how to socio-politically mobilise against institutionalised racism and xenophobia. Julie Begum has hope that the younger generations will carry this torch towards progression by firmly knowing their roots and challenging any threats to a more fairer and equal society.

Asia Khatun

Khatun is a writer, poet, and founder of Thawra. She received a BA (Hons) in English with Creative Writing and has since worked on making the literary scene more inclusive and accessible. She has also recently published her debut poetry pamphlet, *Waterlogged*.

BRICK LANE E.I.

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Muslim Online Dating: The Quest for Halal Prince Charming

by Sara Wasim

I have believed in “Happily Ever Afters” for as long as I can remember and as things have become more digital in our lives, I’ve noticed that people are seeking out new ways of meeting their potential spouse. Although often considered an oxymoron, Muslims today frequently turn to Muslim dating apps for this purpose. After hearing a fair share of success stories from people I know, I recently set out to find my own Prince Charming using a renown Muslim app. While dating apps are certainly not for everyone, this post compiles advice for women considering taking the leap and joining the Muslim dating pool in 2023.

1. Understand Your Worth

Before starting your journey, it is important to have a stable relationship with your own self. While online, the stranger you converse with accumulates your worth based on how effectively you convey the value you hold for yourself and your time. If the person you are speaking with gives you uninterested, inappropriate, or staggered responses, they are probably not interested.

While many candidates may disappoint, remind yourself of your worth and how wholesome your existing relationships are. Remember, you are looking for treatment on par with your closest friendships, so do not settle for anyone’s half-hearted messages. Instead, focus on people that are curious and eager to learn more about you.

2. Discuss Non-Negotiables

Draw up a list of non-negotiables while navigating the app. While there are basic qualities that constitute most relationships – including honesty, communication, and respect, it is important to form a list that is relevant to you. Make use of the filters that apps provide to exclude people who do not meet your criteria in terms of religiosity or location. Prior to your first meeting, schedule a phone call to discuss your non-negotiables. When addressing topics you are apprehensive of, ask for the other person’s thoughts before revealing your own, as people often match their answers to fit your criteria when they wish to appeal to you. If things seem off during the call, trust your instincts and politely call off the meeting. While it is daunting to be straightforward about the qualities you seek, a phone call will help determine whether the person you are speaking with is worth meeting, saving you both heartache in the long-run.

3. Skip Social Media

By liking each other’s profiles, you have established your mutual attraction, and interest in learning more. Between the butterflies, pretty talk and undivided attention, you may feel tempted to reconvene on other social media platforms, but refrain from doing so. In my experience, people become more enthusiastic about

knowing you after glimpsing your life on social media. It is crucial to form your opinions of one another based on who the other person is, void of any influence of their social media persona. You need to know that the person on the other side of the screen is interested in you for the right reasons; for your passions, your personality and character. This strategy also helps highlight more serious candidates who are willing to stick around and get to know you solely on the app.

4. Be Cautious When You Meet

You have been talking for a while, have established that you like one another, tackled some of the trickier questions, and are now planning your first meeting. Ideally, it is best to take a family member when meeting in person. If you do decide to meet one-on-one, pick a public location with which you are familiar and comfortable. Prior to the meeting, share your live location with a close friend, and have them message you at half-hour intervals to ensure that you are alright and provide you with an escape route, should you need one. Although most apps use selfie verification to ensure profiles are authentic, you are still meeting a stranger from the internet, so it is best to be cautious. If things go well, exchange phone numbers and discuss next steps.

5. Remind Yourself of Your Purpose

Online dating apps open up a world of possibility, and Muslim apps are no different, with people located globally within your reach. However, the gamification of online dating, makes it easy to sift through profiles and expect that you can “do better”. Adopting this view is detrimental to your wellbeing, causing you to lose sight of your purpose. Do not be afraid to take an online dating hiatus to remind yourself of your purpose; to find a decent Muslim who you are attracted to, compatible with, and share goals with. While dating apps make it easier to meet people, they do not accentuate compatibility. It is rare to form a deep connection with someone, so be sure to explore your connection with a perfectly good candidate, before considering the supposed “endless possibilities” out there.

Sara Wasim

Sara Wasim is the pen name of a Scottish-Muslim writer and marketer, passionate about empowering women and improving inclusion. She is proactively involved in diverse influencer-focused research. In her spare time, she can be found binge-watching Studio Ghibli, reading fantasy novels, or baking a mean chocolate fudge cake.



ART



NADA ESMAEEL

Nada Esmael is a Palestinian-American artist that began her journey in Charlotte, North Carolina. She began selling her first “journal art” pieces at Tough Ass Crew, a local art shop that has since closed, and this is where her art found its initial outlet, enabling her to navigate commentary on social observations. Her work over the years has since developed into a stunning array of vibrant portraits, symbols and landscapes that give homage to her rich heritage. Growing up in a large, tight-knit Muslim and Arab community meant that Esmael easily identified with her culture, but it often left her with the feeling that she was unable to grow past the confines of its conservatism. It’s only when she moved away to university that she was able to immerse herself into all the facets of her creativity and in different communities whilst truly nurturing her passion for the arts.



Exploring what it means to be Palestinian, away from Western discourse and the white gaze, led Esmael to appreciate the depth of her heritage in all the ways it can be visually shared and all the different symbols that have come to represent the resilience of an oppressed people. The desire to look beyond the pain and celebrate is what sets these pieces apart. In 2022, Esmael, being an American passport holder, was able to visit her homeland and take part in the initiative Eyewitness Palestine — an education program that advocates for lifelong social justice amongst the Palestine solidarity movement. With the Olive Harvest and Environmental Justice delegation, her visit to different cities and villages became eye-opening as she spent time talking to locals about how they conduct every-day life under occupation.





Although she is a digital artist, mixed medium work that involves qualities such as *tatreez*, a traditional Palestinian woven pattern, prompts Esmael to involve and showcase it in her pieces frequently. You can see the intricate details woven into the traditional thobes of the Palestinian women in various portraits, accompanied by different accessories that illustrate the diverse nature of Palestine's different communities.

Nada Esmael's artwork is a credit to her community. Her meticulous technique and purposeful use of colour and symbolism portrays something that extends beyond a 2D painting — the feelings of awe, solidarity and hope encompass each piece and I cannot wait to see what else Esmael has in store.

A trip to Wadi Foquin, a village southwest of Bethlehem in the Occupied West Bank, particularly stood out. Esmael described overlooking the village one afternoon and having it pointed out the damage that a nearby illegal Israeli settlement had done by pumping their sewage directly onto the Palestinian land, the least of overlooked violations that will continued to hinder Palestinian livelihood. Her powerfully potent piece portraying a striking woman standing in front of her family farm with the apartheid wall and burnt olive trees in the background was inspired by this visit and many others to olive farms all over Palestine that had felt the ruin of settler colonialism.

When asked about those that inspire her, Esmael referred to Dana Barqawi, Rama Duwaji, Nora Zeid to name a few, and spoke of the beautiful *tatreez* research work of Wafa Ghnaim.





FASHION

KAZNA ASKER

Kazna Asker is a fashion designer who is putting her community on the map. Growing up in both Liverpool and Sheffield, and coming from a Yemeni Muslim background, Asker's work is heavily influenced by the friends, family and culture she surrounds herself with.

Asker was born and raised in the outskirts of Liverpool where racism was rife. Her father's corner-shop was regularly vandalised and her and her siblings were the only people of colour in school, which all made for an intense environment to grow up in. When Asker turned twelve, her father decided it would be best to move the family to Sheffield where their extended family were located and where there was a much larger Yemeni community — and Asker fully immersed herself in what felt like her new safe haven.



The desire to pursue fashion started early on as Asker won a fashion competition in primary school and was deeply encouraged by her father. Soon after, she made the choice to study Fashion at college, then continued pursuing Fashion Design at Manchester University for her BA, and then at Central Saint Martin's for her MA. Studying at CSM was "intense" and had a "competitive atmosphere", says Asker, as she explained how the master's degree pushed her physically and mentally when having to produce large quantities of work in extremely limited time-frames. The demographic of her year group was also not particularly diverse so she desperately states:

I would really recommend minorities to just go for it.





Asker mentions that there was a real thirst to hear about different voices, perspectives, religions etc. when it came to the course. However, she did at some points feel tokenised as her political voice became a constant point of reference for profit. Going to protests for Palestine and Syria, being outspoken about the war in Yemen, having an aunt that was a Labour councillor, politics was part and parcel of Asker's life. As a person of colour, as part of the diaspora, it was only natural.

Being political is part of my DNA.

After her MA, she also realised that she wanted to champion sustainability by steering away from mass-production and thinking more about slow fashion. Asker began sewing many original garments herself from scratch by upcycling her sister's old Nike jackets — this then caught on with her other friends and family, and blossomed into the creation of versatile designs that saved clothing from prematurely being sent to landfill.

Having recently participated in Fashion Trust Arabia and won the Debut Talent Prize, Asker didn't hold back when it came to representing her people in her winning speech. She used the opportunity to shed light on the war and famine in Yemen and urged people to donate, despite her parents pleading her back home, "please, don't be political". Asker says that once she stepped off the stage, security rushed over and led her to Sheikha Moza who was sat amongst celebrities like Bella Hadid, and all she could see was how emotional and deeply-affected the crowd were. That was a moment where her ethos, centring around community, activism, and charity, was truly actioned. Although she started off with menswear, a lot of Asker's designs now lean towards catering for Muslim women. There is a strong focus around "brotherhood and sisterhood" as well as Islamic influences from her faith. She says she is:

Grateful that hijabi women are at the forefront of my work.

She is relentless in her desire to give her community a voice, always keeping up with her siblings and her cousins about the type of fashion they're sporting. Before starting her most recent collection, Asker even filmed a few documentaries asking those in her community what interested them and what they wanted to see in her designs.

After having graduated from Central Saint Martin's, Asker has gone on to receive multiple global accolades and we can see why. She is currently doing research for a new collection and we can't wait to see what the future holds for this young designer.



Kazna Asker interviewed by Asia Khatun

ASKER KAZNA ASKER KAZNA ASKER

Collection 01

Thank you for being part
of our journey thus far.

Thawra

02 - 2023