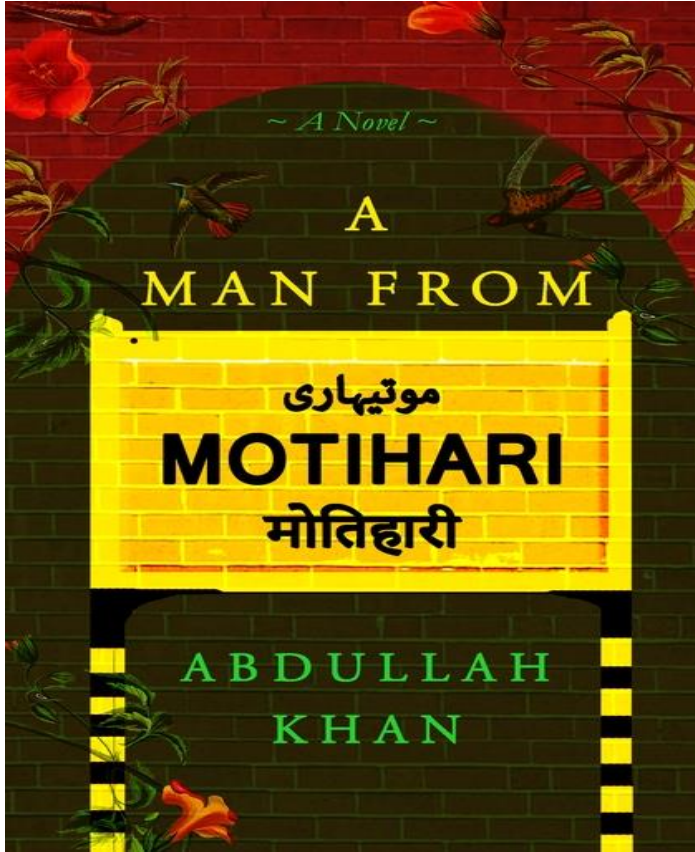


Abdullah Khan. 2023. *A Man from Motihari*. Delhi: Penguin Random House Ind Pvt Ltd, 304 pp. ISBN:9780143459187



Abdullah Khan's recently published novel *A Man from Motihari* is a unique and notable contribution to Indian English literature. It delves into the socio-political landscape of the Hindi heartland, a perspective that has not been explored adequately. Published by Penguin Random House, the novel has garnered critical acclaim from readers and critics alike – a testament to its distinctiveness. This is evident in the reviews published in various reputed newspapers of the country, including *The Hindu*, and the writer has been invited to multiple Lit-fests for interviews and talks.



Abdullah Khan at the Hindu Literary Festival

Divided into three sections, the novel centres around a man named Aslam Khan from Motihari. The intriguing opening line, “I was born in a haunted bungalow. And the midwife was a ghost,” immediately captures the readers’ attention, hinting at a supernatural narrative. However, as the story progresses and shifts its focus from one place to another, the mystery paves the way for a realistic narrative. Born and brought up in a Bihari Muslim family, Aslam proves himself to be a bright student. His life takes a turn when his friend Arvind lends him a copy of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, and Aslam seriously thinks of becoming an author of the highest reputation. Despite facing a series of setbacks, his resilience shines through as he gets employed at a bank and marries Heba. Their marriage, however, ends in divorce.

The squabbles and bickering of everyday married life culminate in the ultimate fallout of Aslam’s and Heba’s marriage. Heba deserts Aslam to be married to her Pakistani cousin Shoaib. Grief-stricken and shattered because of separation from his daughter Kainat, who means the whole universe to him, Aslam gradually starts recovering from the shadow of the past. While travelling to the Jaipur Literary Festival, Aslam encounters Jessica from Los Angeles, an ex-actor in the adult entertainment industry and a social activist fighting to alleviate the pains and suffering of migrants in the USA. They hopelessly fall in love with each other and develop a camaraderie, with Aslam, too, becoming involved in social activism and protest rallies. Their love is consummated in marriage despite the fear of social and religious ostracisation. The novel ends with Aslam being treated in America for a brain haemorrhage.

The protagonist's private life of marriage, love, and fatherhood is set against the backdrop of the rise of right-wing politics in India in the 1980s and 90s when the politics of hatred threatened to wreak havoc in the characters' personal lives. The Ram Temple Movement, organised and steered by the right-wing groups in India, proved to be detrimental to Hindu-Muslim relations. Slogans such as *Kasam Ram ki khate hain, mandir wahi banayenge* (we swear by Rama, we will build the temple right there) created fear in the minds of Muslims. The text depicts how the friendship between Aslam and Shambhu falls apart when the latter becomes fascinated with LK Advani's temple politics of the 90s that called the BJP leader Hindu *Hriday Samrat* (Emperor of Hindu Hearts). Shambhu talks about the necessity to "put right the historical aberrations," meaning the wrongs done to Hindus by past Muslim rulers like Mahmud of Ghazini and Babur, the founder of the Mughal Dynasty in India. In response, Aslam retorts by saying, "As a Muslim, I can be held responsible for the wrong deeds done by Muslim kings who are not related to me. But you, as a high caste Brahmin, are not responsible for the awful things your grandfather or great-grandfather did to the low caste Hindus." Aslam laments the loss of his friend to what he calls "the politics of hate" and despairs over the existing state of affair. But the lament and despair yield to the eerie grip of haunting nightmare when at the pretext of the news of "the burning of the train" anti-Muslim pogrom breaks out in Gujrat. The riot carried out by the right-wing groups claims his Hindu friend Arvind as its victim since he also carries the surname Khan that is usually affiliated with Muslims. Actually, this surname was bestowed upon Arvind's predecessors centuries back by a Muslim king for their bravery in the battlefield. As a result, he often suffers horrible nightmares, as he is haunted by the image of his friend "being burnt alive." Narrating a story like this, Abdulla Khan simultaneously questions and problematises the notion of fixed identity regarding self, religion, and community to emphasise that Muslims and Hindus in India have a common heritage and past.

However, all is not bleak in the novel, and the text leaves readers with hope and possibilities of redemption. In the face of right-wing extremism and persecution of Indian Muslims, the ordinary Hindus stand shoulder-to-shoulder and provide their fellow Muslim Indians with protection and security. When Aslam finds it onerous to rent a house in a Hindu-majority city, Mr Jaiswal extends support by renting out his own home to him. When his friend Arvind is burnt alive in Ahmedabad by the right-wing goons in broad daylight, he is given shelter by a retired professor named B.K. Yagnik, at his own peril, for the professor knows, "I may get into trouble too for giving you shelter." Even his friend Shambhu, whom Aslam lost to the politics of hate, also returns to him to

mend their ties. The novel ultimately shows the power of human compassion, empathy, and fellow feelings, espousing the Gandhian message that love triumphs over hatred. Amitava Ghosh, commenting on the 1984 Sikh Massacre in Delhi, once wrote,

When I now read descriptions of troubled parts of the world, in which violence appears primordial and inevitable, a fate to which masses of people are largely resigned, I find myself asking: Is that all there was to it? Or is it possible that the authors of these descriptions failed to find a form – or a style or a voice of a plot – that could accommodate both violence and the civilised, willed response to it? (Ghosh 60)

Abdullah Khan's *A Man from Motihari* accommodates both violence and the civilised, attesting that violence can never be the final point of progression. He also upholds human cooperation and friendship as a source of redemption.

Over and above, *A Man from Motihari* is a narrative about the growth and development of an artist from his early formative years into maturity. In this complex narrative, the theme of Aslam's struggle to become a writer who can win the Booker Prize remains a constant preoccupation. Born in the same house as George Orwell in Motihari, Aslam comes to see himself as the reincarnation of the English writer and puts himself to the task of writing. To begin with, he writes, imitating Orwell's novels. In his retelling, *Animal Farm* becomes *1947: An Indian Animal Farm*, *Burmese Days* becomes *Bihari Days*, and *A Clergyman's Daughter* is titled *An Imam's Daughter*. Unfortunately, he fails to complete any of those stories. Failures give rise to self-doubt, and gradually, frustration creeps in, but his confidence is constantly boosted by the mysterious Lady in White, who calls him Son Parashnath. When he decides to give up the dream of becoming an internationally published writer after his multiple setbacks, Aslam is reassured by the Lady that he "shouldn't give up so easily and must keep trying" for, after all, he is "an incarnation of the great Orwell." Overcoming all the setbacks and obstacles, Aslam gets his novel published by the acclaimed Alfred A Knopf, which fetches him a whooping sum of money and critical accolades.

To conclude, Abdullah Khan's *A Man from Motihari* is a multi-layered narrative in which various discourses of contemporary India seamlessly merge. This intricately designed narrative successfully weaves all those sociopolitical and religious discourses into a single narrative so that the novel never appears flat or episodic. The novelist's genius lies in his ability to flawlessly merge the personal with the political, the local with the national, and the violent with the civilised. Readers eager to gain insight into post-liberalisation India must get hold of a copy of the book and study, for it is intended to generate compassion, love, and

empathy. It helps break the boundaries of prejudice that keep us apart from one another in a plural India.

Reference

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