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The Born Out Of Wedlock Club

by

Grace Tioso

Translated by

Tiffany Tsao

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A moving and humorous story about female friendship, diasporic identity, and healing the scars of intergenerational racial trauma. For fans of Balli Kaur Jaswal.



Perkumpulan Anak Luar Nikah
GRACE TIOSO

Original Title: *Perkumpulan Anak Luar Nikah*

Publisher: Noura Books

Date of Publication: 24 May 2023

Original Language: Indonesian

Length: 80,000 words (396 pages)

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“A tree can only grow big and tall when the roots are strong. And who’s ever heard of a tree ignoring or rejecting its roots? How will the next generation find its strength if they aren’t rooted in those who came before – not just their ancestors in China, but those in Indonesia as well?”

DETAILED SYNOPSIS:

Martha Goenawan is making headlines in Singapore – for all the wrong reasons. Sixteen years ago, she faked a document to obtain a scholarship to the country’s top university. Now her secret is out, and the young Chinese-Indonesian mother of two faces imprisonment and possible deportation back to Indonesia. The life in Singapore that she and her husband **Ronny** have built is about to come crashing down.

Also under threat is the viral Twitter account that Martha secretly masterminds with her cousin **Yuni** in Indonesia. It’s an account they run anonymously for the benefit of the Indonesian public, exposing political candidates’ lies and past misdeeds. Martha’s husband and her close

friends **Linda** and **Fanny** have long disapproved of the Twitter account – if you're ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, “getting political” isn't a good idea. Initially, Martha refuses to shut the account down, but the risk of further scandal eventually causes Martha to comply.

The sudden eruption of the Martha Goenawan case and the sudden disappearance of the infamous @duolion163 account – is there a link? **Krisna**, a Chinese-Indonesian journalist for the Hong Kong Post, thinks so. Krisna's research leads him to Klaten in Central Java, to Yuni. Despite Yuni's best attempts, he finds out that Yuni and Martha are the brains behind @duolion163.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, the police take Martha into custody. Under interrogation, Martha reveals the document she falsified in order to qualify for a scholarship: her birth certificate, of all things! Due to deteriorating diplomatic relations between China and Indonesia during the 1950s and 1960s, the government revoked the Indonesian citizenship of several hundred thousand Indonesians of Chinese descent. One of these was Martha's father, resulting in her parents' decision to register Martha as legally fatherless – “born out of wedlock” – to avoid compromising her citizenship status too.

After the police interrogation, Martha and Ronny consult a lawyer. Martha wants to go ahead with a court trial, but Ronny wants Martha to plead guilty so that the court proceedings won't get out of hand. Ronny, a hardworking assistant professor, worries that the media attention will result in his tenure being denied. Martha thinks Ronny is being selfish. They have a big fight.

Krisna's still on the case. He flies to Bali to interview Fanny, one of Martha's two closest friends from high school. There, he discovers how the trio became friends – and why they refer to themselves jokingly as the Born Out Of Wedlock Club: Fanny's and Linda's fathers were also made stateless by the same piece of legislation. The names printed on Fanny's birth certificate aren't those of her real parents. And Linda has “born out of wedlock” printed on her birth certificate like Martha does. Impulsively, young Linda and Martha took matters into their own hands and made fake birth certificates for themselves. Which is why Martha is in hot water now. Meanwhile, Krisna contacts Martha's father, **Budi**, and manages to interview him as well.

Krisna flies to Singapore to talk to Martha's other friend, Linda, who has worked hard to erase Indonesia from her life. Since Martha's scandal, Linda has distanced herself, refusing to have anything to do with Martha's case. Before leaving, Krisna writes her a message: 落叶归根 – *a falling leaf will always return to its roots*. As Linda's extended family badmouths Martha, Linda experiences inner turmoil. She's reminded of Krisna's message and realizes that it's wrong to disown Martha, not to mention her own heritage.

In the meantime, Martha and Ronny have reconciled, with Martha facing the reality that justice won't be found by going to court. She's made the difficult decision to plead guilty and not stand trial. But just when things can't get worse, Martha receives terrible news. Her father is gravely

ill. Martha is hysterical; she can't fly home. Linda and Fanny step in to help their friend get special permission to return to Indonesia, but it arrives too late. Martha's father is dead.

Krisna's article about the Born Out Of Wedlock generation – and Martha's situation – comes out. It receives a warm welcome from “born out of wedlock” Chinese-Indonesian readers around the world. Martha's story is a beacon, showing them they're not alone. Krisna visits Martha bearing a gift – a video recording of his interview with her father, days before his death. Martha watches it, eyes filling with tears at seeing her father alive again. Krisna offers to help if she does change her mind about standing trial, but Martha declines.

In the presence of her family and friends, Martha appears in court and pleads guilty. The court sentences Martha to prison, but reduces the time she must serve. Ronny assures Martha that he will be waiting for her when she gets out.

The years pass. Martha gets out of prison to discover that Yuni and Linda have created a Born Out Of Wedlock Foundation, which helps “illegitimate” individuals obtain new birth certificates by legal means. Martha isn't ready to get involved yet. But she feels grateful to be reunited with her family and ready to embark on this new season in her life. In the words of the Book of Ecclesiastes, *there is a time for everything*. For Martha, it's her time to heal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Grace Tioso is an Indonesian writer currently residing in Singapore. Her debut novel, *The Born Out of Wedlock Club* (*Perkumpulan Anak Luar Nikah*), was one of ten manuscripts to win the 2023 **Mizan Writing Bootcamp** competition. The book went on to place first in the 2024 **Ayu Utami Literary Prize for Debut Novels** (*Hadih Sastra Ayu Utami untuk Pemula*).

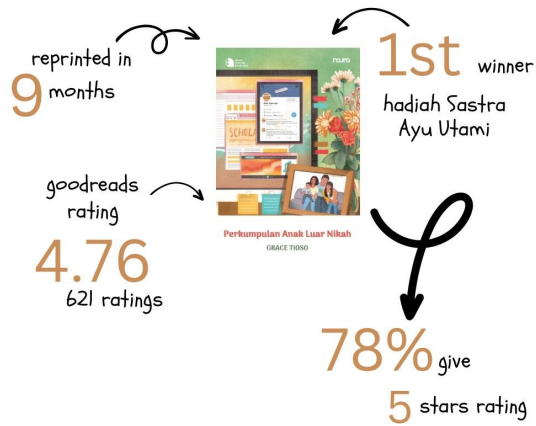
Tioso completed her undergraduate study in Chinese Language and Literature at Hua Qiao University, after which she returned to Jakarta before relocating to Singapore. Articles about her work have been featured in several local and international newspapers such as, the *South China Morning Post*, *BBC News*, and *Detik.com*.

In addition to her debut novel, Grace has authored several other books, including *The Puzzle of Teenage Life* (2004), *The Puzzle of Jomblo Life* (2005), *God, Why Do I Have to Go to China* (*Tuhan Mengapa Aku Harus ke China*) (2007), and *God Still Writes Love Stories* (*Tuhan Masih Menulis Cerita Cinta*) (2009).

AWARDS, RECOGNITION & FIGURES

- ◆ One of ten manuscripts to win the 2023 Mizan Writing Bootcamp Competition
- ◆ First Place in the 2024 Ayu Utami Literary Award for Debut Novels (*Hadih Sastra Ayu Utami untuk Pemula*)
- ◆ Under contract to be made into an original series with a major international streaming company

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July 24, 2023

★★★★★

Khansaa 169 reviews 209 followers Follow

Sebagai keturunan Jawa-Muslim, aku tidak pernah merasa asing di negeri sendiri. Di mana pun aku berada, hampir selalu ada perempuan berhijab yang terlihat familiar. Rumah ibadah pun tidak sulit untuk dicari. It's easier for us, Javanese-moslem women to feel belong in our country. Majority perks, huh?

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<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/179295865-perkumpulan-anak-luar-nikah>

REVIEWS

“Perkumpulan Anak Luar Nikah” is an engaging novel that offers a point of view of those often silenced by societal norms and political decisions by those in power. It is an insightful storytelling, sensitive and unflinchingly honest, bringing to the forefront the emotional and psychological impacts of being labelled as “illegitimate” in Indonesia.

Asmayani Kusrini, writer

We took a deep breath after finishing your book, each of us reflecting on the Chinese community in our literature and the Chinese community in Indonesia. A good work always leaves its readers in deep thought.

Your novel conveyed what has long needed to be expressed in literature. First, it addresses what will liberate us from forgetting dark histories, forgetting acts of discrimination, and silencing our inner voices. Second, it challenges and frees us from stereotypes about certain ethnicities or groups.

*Ayu Utami, award-winning author,
founder of the Ayu Utami Literary Award for Debut Novels*

WAIT... HOLD ON..... i was crying hard after finished this book

Hanna, Goodreads reviewer

So bloody good! If only I could give all the stars in the world for this masterpiece!

Andreas Poerwanto, Goodreads reviewer

idk what to say except: brilliant storytelling.

if schools in indonesia ever decided to make a reading list for students, this should be on it.

PS: bring tissues

Olga Meidelina, Goodreads reviewer

FROM THE AUTHOR: Why did I write *Perkumpulan Anak Luar Nikah*?

The idea to write about “out-of-wedlock” children came to me when I wanted to take part in a free writing camp during the pandemic. This coveted writing camp required me to submit, in short-story form, a folktale from one of Indonesia’s traditional people groups. I searched my mind. As a Chinese descendant, and thus a minority in Indonesia, I couldn’t remember any folktales about Chinese-Indonesians. In fact, during the New Order (1965-1998), the government banned all Chinese language and culture in Indonesia.

Then, an image emerged: a dining table, my 10-year-old self, and my mom. I was having lunch with her, and I asked, “Mom, why do some children in my class mock my friend? They said she’s an out-of-wedlock daughter, and it’s written on her birth certificate! But she has a father, right? We met her dad! Remember?” My mom was silent. Of course, she knew my friend’s family. We had been in the same school from kindergarten to primary school. She finally mumbled something about my friend’s dad’s citizenship. “He’s a WNA (foreign citizen), not an Indonesian like us.” Mom’s answer raised more questions. She refused to answer further, only saying a short sentence:” That was a difficult time for the Chinese.”

After 30 years, my current self knows more layers, pain and tragic history beyond the simple explanation, “Her dad is a foreigner.” I understand why my mother didn’t explain more to my younger self. Us Chinese-Indonesians have a complicated and fragmented history. A dark side hidden by the government and buried with a mixture of tears and fears by the elderly.

I didn’t get into the free writing camp. Nevertheless, the story stayed in my heart and I rewrote it into a novel. I want to be able to explain to my children what happened at that time, something more about the “hard time for the Chinese.”

KITA PERGI HARI INI

by

Ziggy Zezsyazeoviennazabrizkie

Translated by

Tiffany Tsao

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About the Book

Nobody likes children. Yet, people keep making them. In a desperate attempt to find childcare, Mr & Mrs Mo employed Nonna Gigi, who's a nanny and also a Cat. Mi, Ma, and Mo find themselves in a magical childhood filled with dancing shadows, visits to the moon, buttery baguettes, train rides and popcorns, and secret island of the Cats.

But, as it's been said, nobody likes children.

Based on the living superstition that progeny means prosperity, this novel telescopes into the social, economic, and psychological effects of natalism in Indonesia. Belying its light-hearted tone and playful treatment of the subject, KPHI expands the scope of the novel beyond a single household, or a single story, especially in an urban setting. Examining the societal pressures of reproduction and parenthood and the consequent victimisation of children as an effect, this story, in the vein of Reda Gaudiamo, Dee Lestari, and Lee Pamuntjak, offers a sobering reality turned on its head.

Synopsis

Mr and Mrs Mo of Boisterous Borough are at their wit's end. They have three young children, jobs, and no childcare. Their parental leaves are ending, and no solution is in the horizon—until it presents itself at the very last second in form of an Out-of-Ordinary Cat who calls herself Nonna Gigi.

From then on, the three children of Mo family—Mi, Ma, and Mo—grow under the care of their strange and magical cat nanny. One day, she invites the three children and their new friends, Fifi and Fufu, to visit her hometown in the Out-of-Ordinary Floating

Island of the Out-of-Ordinary Cats.

They take a trip in the Train of Thoughts and visits the Sad Circus where they witness gruesome and gory acts and acrobats, and nearly drown themselves in the tent. The children survive and take one final trip before arriving at the capital of the Floating Land.

In the Floating Land is a civilisation built by Out-of-Ordinary Cats, where they live as humans do. Amused by the magical land, the children spend a night at Nona Gigi's tavern and set to venture the city the following morning. Mi and Fufu discover an abandoned train that's littered with children's bones. Ma and Fifi find taxidermy of humans. Mo finds himself in a trading dock that sells fried human ears as a snack. The children realise the horror of the Floating Land and attempt to return to their homes in Boisterous Borough. During the escape, Fifi is captured, but the other four children successfully return home, only to have their story dismissed as a dream, and to discover that their parents have plotted to leave them in the Floating Land all along.

About the Author

Ziggy Zezsyazeoviennazabrizkie is an Indonesian writer. She won Jakarta Arts Council Novel Writing Competition in 2014 and 2016, was longlisted for Khatulistiwa Literary Awards 2015, won Prose of the Year 2017 from Ministry of Education and Culture, received Rolling Stone Indonesia Editor's Choice Award in 2017, and was nominated for Tempo Magazine Book of the Year 2022 and 2023. Her short stories have been translated into English and Japanese. In 2023, she won PEN Presents from English PEN for her work Kita Pergi Hari Ini.



The Book of Mating: Short Stories

by

Laksmi Pamuntjak

(Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2021),

Translated by

Annie Tucker

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About the book:

The Book of Mating is the latest story collection of Laksmi Pamuntjak, winner of Singapore Book Awards 2021 Best Literary Work for the novel *Fall Baby*.

Published in Indonesia in 2021 under the title *Kitab Kawin* and translated by the award-winning translator Annie Tucker, it offers a versatile interpretation on women in relationships.

In Bahasa Indonesia, the title itself is a playful attempt to ‘marry’ the word *Kitab* (the Arabic word for ‘Book,’ but whose common usage in Bahasa Indonesia imparts a sense of ancientness or sacredness, e.g. *Kitab Suci*, the Holy Book) and *Kawin* (which can mean two things: marriage or wedding vows, or the primal act itself—the act of copulation).

The Book of Mating depicts a cruel and tender world not only where desire, longing, and modern perversity go side by side, but also where the realities of women’s lives often include the violence visited upon their bodies.

In the twelve stories that make up this collection, we meet women as diverse in experience as they are in age and occupation: former child brides living together in a Korean restaurant-cum-presumed brothel; a pair of middle-aged artists bickering at the funeral of their famous former lover, a maestro; a hardened insurance company executive and writer-wannabee trained in the art of self-preservation; a yoga instructor-cum-reluctant swinger who might or might not have killed her own husband; a fifteen-year old girl raped repeatedly by her own father in their own home; a woman deliberately embarking on an affair to elicit a reaction, a feeling, anything, from her intimacy-shunning husband; a native Moluccan woman who miraculously finds love in her perilous relationship with a Javanese political prisoner; a lonely middle-aged woman finding herself besotted by her daughter’s new partner; a restless housewife keeping three boyfriends on a leash as a way to cope with the infidelities of his husband; a couple who write

a love letter to one another to seal their commitment not to marry; a successful art consultant meeting for the first time the fiercely loyal wife of her long-time secret lover; a woman falling madly, almost ruinously in love with her own brother's wife; a ghost telling the story of her own grisly murder.

Spanning different locations and islands—from comfortable Jakarta upper-class middle-class homes to pokey minimarts, from the Bogor Botanical Gardens to the Left Bank streets of Paris, from small towns in rural Central Java to the former prison island of Buru in Eastern Indonesia—each of these stories distil as well as enlarge women's affairs—relationships that sour and fester, spouses who hurt and betray, family members who molest, children who leave, bodies that cave in to age—in a culture that so often radicalizes ordinary human experience and describes the colors of corrosion in the flat, one-dimensional language of dysfunction.

The women in these stories are brave and vulnerable, malleable and intractable, raw and calculated, healthy and hurt. They yearn, trust, desire and love. They fear, waver, doubt, and hate. They fight, defy, fail and triumph. They are often attuned to their own flaws, but are not necessarily apologetic about them. They talk and think about sex and their bodies, plumbing into the depths of the feminine experience as something that is located in the body, sensed from within. They could be any of us, whose struggle between what we are and what society wants us to be is the staple of our daily lives.

Though the stories' contemplation is bound up in sex, power, pleasure, pain, guilt, and often debilitating sense of duty, the true events of *The Book of Mating* are the unending quest for self-knowledge: what holds the solitary self together and what blows it apart, what makes a woman and what undoes her, how to make peace with one's past and present selves.

Other than becoming a basis for a popular podcast of the same name, *The Book of Mating* was recognized among the author's other works on women and women's rights by the Indonesian Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, culminating in an award in late 2023 for being one of their 95 Most Inspiring and Resilient Women.

Wordcount: 80000

About the Author:

Laksmi Pamuntjak (b. 1971) is an award-winning, internationally-published bilingual Indonesian novelist, poet, journalist and food writer. She writes widely on culture and politics including for the *Jakarta Post* and the Indonesian newsmagazine *Tempo*, as well as for *South China Morning Post*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, and *Die Welt*. She also writes op-eds for the *Guardian*.

Pamuntjak has published three poetry collections, *Ellipsis*, *The Anagram*, and *There Are Tears in Things: Collected Poems and Prose by Laksmi Pamuntjak (2001-2016)*. In 2012, Pamuntjak, who is also co-founder of Aksara Bookstore in Jakarta, was selected by an international panel headed by Sir Simon Armitage as the Indonesian representative for Poetry Parnassus at the 2012 London Olympics.

Pamuntjak's debut novel *Amba/The Question of Red* won Germany's LiBeraturpreis 2016. A finalist of the 2012 Khatulistiwa Literary Award, it was also named #1 on Germany's

Weltempfaenger list of the best works of fiction from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Arab World translated into German. The novel has been translated into English, German and Dutch. Recently, in March 2024, *The Economist* named it among 6 Books to Read about Indonesia.

Pamuntjak's second novel, *Aruna dan Lidahnya*, was one of the finalists of the 2015 Khatulistiwa Literary Award. Its English translation by Tiffany Tsao was published by Amazon Crossing in 2018 under the title *The Birdwoman's Palate*. The movie adaptation of the novel, directed by Edwin, was screened nationwide in 2018 and had its European premiere at the prestigious Berlinale International Film Festival in February 2019. The movie is available for viewing on Netflix under its original title, *Aruna dan Lidahnya*.

In 2018, Pamuntjak's first English novel, *Fall Baby*, was published in Germany by Ullstein Verlag under the title *Herbstkind*. A year later, the original version was published by Penguin Random House SEA and won the 2020 Singapore Book Awards for Best Literary Work. The Indonesian version, *Kekasih Musim Gugur*, was published in August 2020 by Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

Pamuntjak's latest work, published in 2021, is *Kitab Kawin (The Book of Mating)*, a collection of short stories on women in relationships. Since the end of 2021, Pamuntjak has been hosting *Podcast Kitab Kawin*, a popular podcast based on stories in the book. Among some of the darker subjects discussed are domestic violence, sexual violence toward women and children, child marriage, the rights of minority groups and resistance toward domestic partnership—realities that are sadly still prevalent in Indonesia.

Pamuntjak has been invited to speak at numerous international literary festivals, conferences, and universities around the world, including as keynote speaker at the opening of the 9th European Southeast Asian Studies Association (EuroSEAS) at the University of Oxford in 2017 and at the Australian National University in 2019.

Her poems, short stories and essays have appeared, among others, in *Asymptote*, *Words Without Borders*, *Critical Muslim* (Summer 2015); *Books Actually Gold Standard Anthology 2016*; *Softblow*; *Takabe* (NZ); *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* (Vol. 11 no. 1, Jan 2012), *Heat Literary Journal* (2007), *Asia Literary Review*

(December 2015; Autumn 2006, Vol. 3; Spring 2007, Vol. 4; Autumn 2007, Vol. 5; *Prince Claus Fund Journal* (Special Edition, #12, 2006); the Anthology of Writings from the Utan Kayu Biennale Literary Festival 2007; *Scalar Literary Magazine* (Premier Edition, April 2010); *Biblio Review of Books* (2007); and the Poetry Edition of the *Asia Literary Review* (November 2010). She also wrote the preface to *Not a Muse: World Poetry Anthology* (Haven Books: Hong Kong, 2009).

In 2012, in conjunction with her representing Indonesia at Poetry Parnassus in London, Pamuntjak's poem, "A Traveler's Tale" was published in *The World Record* (edited by Neil Astley and Anna Selby, Bloodaxe Books: London, 2012) and included in *Rain of Poems* (Casagrande: London, 2013).

In 2022, "A Traveler's Tale" appears in the 20th anniversary Special Edition of the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*.

In 2023, two of Pamuntjak's short stories from *Kitab Kawin* ("The Book of Mating"), "Mukaburung's Story" and "Anna and Her Daughter's Partner," in award-winning Annie Tucker's English translation, were published in *Asymptote* and *Words Without Borders* respectively.

At the end of the year, “Anna and Her Daughter’s Partner” was named one of *Words Without Borders*’ Top 5 Fiction Choice of 2023.

As a food writer, Pamuntjak’s most notable contribution to Indonesian culinary history is five editions of the *Jakarta Good Food Guide* series, started in 2001. The JGFG series is widely acknowledged as the first independent good food guide in Indonesia, accepting no advertisement from the food industry, and written with a decidedly literary bent.

Pamuntjak is also active in the art and culture scene—a field she has been engaging in since the mid-2000’s. She has published a short fiction collection based on the paintings she loves, written on art for various publications, and produced a number of musical and dance performances in Singapore and Jakarta. Between 2009 and 2011 served as an international award jury member for the Prince Claus Fund, an Amsterdam-based international art philanthropy organization.

As a literary curator, Pamuntjak recently co-curated an exhibition in Jakarta to commemorate the centennial of Chairil Anwar, arguably Indonesia’s greatest poet.

She has also translated three poetry collections of the leading Indonesian poet, essayist and public intellectual Goenawan Mohamad and his book of aphorisms. Recently, in March 2023, she curated (with an introduction and an accompanying essay) *Di Ujung Bahasa: Antologi Puisi Goenawan Mohamad (1961 – 1922)*, a compilation of Goenawan Mohamad’s poetry and visual work in a span of 61 years.

Pamuntjak’s literary memoir, *Selaput Biru (Blue Iris)*, was published in Jakarta in March 2024.

In December 2023, Pamuntjak was named one of 95 Most Inspiring and Resilient Women by the Indonesian Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPPA) for her work on women.

About the Translator:

Annie Tucker is an award-winning translator who brings unique and notable stories from Indonesia to English language audiences. Her translation of Eka Kurniawan’s novel *Beauty is a Wound* for New Directions was a New York Times Notable Book of 2015, longlisted for the 2016 Best Translated Book Award, named by LitHub as one of the best ten translations of the decade, and the winner of the 2016 World Reader’s Award. Her translations have been published in Granta, Freemans, The White Review, Asymptote, and Words Without Borders, which placed her translation of Laksmi Pamuntjak’s short story “Anna and Her Daughter’s Partner” in their top five fiction highlights of 2023.

Her work has been supported by grants from PEN USA, The American Literary Translator’s Association, The Association for Asian Studies, US-INDO, and Fulbright-Hays, among others. She has written and translated for various publications and organizations, from *The New York Times* to ethnographic film companies to art galleries. Annie holds a BA in English from Barnard College and a PhD in Culture and Performance from UCLA, where she taught from 2009- 2014. She brings her training in writing, anthropology, curation and education to every translation. Her work is also informed by years spent living in Java and Bali

Pakhi Hijrer Biye / The Wedding of Pakhi, the Hijre

The novel

by

Mrinal Kanti Dutta

Translated by

Arunava Sinha

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About the Book

The novel starts with the birth of the eponymous Pakhi, named Bipasha by her family; and the time leading up to her birth. Bipasha is born intersex, and assigned “transgender” at birth. Although her family is initially distraught by the revelation, they are protective of her and are determined to raise her well. The family is wary of the possibility that their child might be taken away by members of the *hijre* community.

As Bipasha grows up, her first encounter with discrimination occurs when she is nine, and wins a gold medal at a national running competition. This medal is taken away because she is outside the gender binary. Despite her family’s best efforts, details of her gender identity are gradually revealed to other people. Among these people are a *hijre* community, whose members are determined to claim Bipasha for themselves. Their efforts are foiled with help from the police, but they still hover around.

Still, Bipasha remains shielded from the reality of her gender identity, through her mother’s careful manoeuvring. She is simply told that there is an issue with her genitalia, which impedes her ability to run by affecting her lungs, and that she will need surgery later. Her parents do actually seek medical help to consider the possibility of corrective surgery, but abandon their plans when they are told that this could put their daughter’s life at risk.

The first part of the novel gives us a picture of Bipasha as a beloved child in a conventional middle-class Bengali family, whom her parents try their best to protect. The depiction of Bipasha’s childhood ends with the birth of a baby brother.

The story picks up again ten years later, when Bipasha is a student of Sociology at Presidency College. Her boyfriend Shouvik asks her to marry him before he goes off to England for further studies. She agrees, and even meets his parents. When she tells her own family, however, they finally inform her of her gender identity, and how her indeterminate genitalia would keep her not only from having children, but also from sex with her husband.

Although Bipasha is confident Shouvik will not call off the wedding over the former, he walks away from her when he gets to know. Members of the *hijre* community who had wanted to claim Bipasha ten years ago catch wind of the news, and show up to her house to explain to her and her family how she can still participate in conjugal life. Her grandmother is particularly horrified at the details of queer sexuality revealed to her, and Bipasha is advised to stay celibate.

She, however, finds this life unbearable. Alongside the revelation, she undergoes a sexual awakening, and ultimately runs away from home to join the *hijre* community. This is because they inform her she can easily find a husband once she lives with them. Bipasha’s separation from her family is painful to both her and them. She leaves behind a note, and her mother considers herself to have failed in her mission to keep her daughter with her.

Bipasha enjoys a privileged position in her new community. She is appointed disciple to the *gurumaa*, Dinu. Her entry into their life is celebrated through a grand party, and she is relieved of many of the responsibilities that characterise the life of the younger members of the community. This section of the novel is full of detailed insight into the lives of the members of the community – their customs, their parlance, their societal codes and organisation, their mythology, their syncretic religious practices and the like.

Various members of the community also reveal their life histories to Bipasha, now named Pakhi. Most members of the *hijra* community are transgender women, who were assigned male at birth. Those like Pakhi, born without “male” genitalia, are considered a precious rarity. The stories of the other members reveal accounts of horrific abuse, both within and outside their own community.

Within the community, it is the hierarchal organisation that makes them vulnerable to abuse from their elders. Abuse also occurs at the hands of their male lovers, where even the eldest and most respected members of the community find themselves victimised. One’s appearance also significantly impacts one’s prestige within the community, as it affects the ability to generate income. Details of the members’ lives outside the community are rife with episodes of sexual exploitation, trafficking and societal humiliation.

For a while, Pakhi finds herself entrusted with the charge of the *hijra* quarters, as the elderly Dinu embarks on a much awaited pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif. In her absence, one of the members, Binita, undergoes castration and ends up dying. This heart-wrenching episode, and the abuses that the community members hurl upon their dead to keep them from being re-incarnated in the same state, provide closure to the second part of the novel.

In the next section, we see Pakhi performing at the Mona Lisa bar. She had received training in singing and dancing from teachers appointed for her by her *gurumaa*. Pakhi is growing increasingly displeased at not having found a lover yet. She had been told by another member that they were not allowed by the elders to have lovers, but that she might expect an exception in her case. Dinu tries to brush away Pakhi’s concerns, but ultimately says that she, like the other members, was also not supposed to have lovers.

Pakhi falls in love with a musician named Arjun at the bar where she performs. Arjun proposes to her after a show, and she accepts. While they are together, Dinu shows up with her group members and beats them up. They lock them up inside the room where they had been found. Pakhi and Arjun end up contacting the bar owner, and ultimately the police, to save themselves. At the police station, Dinu and her community members are made to promise to never attack, or seek to capture, Pakhi again, after which Pakhi and Arjun elect to arrive at a truce with them. The couple has an impromptu wedding at a temple, and then he takes her home to his family. They are told that the impromptu wedding was necessitated by Pakhi’s parents’ determination to marry her off to somebody else.

Dinu, meanwhile, vows to trouble Pakhi wherever she goes. So she shows up at Pakhi’s in-laws’ place when her husband is away, and reveals Pakhi’s gender identity to them. When Arjun returns home, his parents tell him to either leave Pakhi, or leave with her. He chooses the latter, and the two go to Pakhi’s maternal grandmother’s house. While Pakhi’s paternal grandmother had disdained her sexuality, her maternal grandmother had been supportive, and told her that she could come to her house with her husband once she was married.

Dinu had, long ago, stealthily obtained details about this grandmother’s residence. She shows up to threaten Pakhi and Arjun with legal action, while also abusing the grandmother who had remained supportive to Pakhi all along. Dinu tells the police how Pakhi’s conjugal life was in violation of Article 377. A police officer calls the couple to the station, but Pakhi makes an excellent case for herself and wins his sympathies. She explains that the law was made in ignorance of queer sexuality, and with the presumption that sexual union should necessarily be for conception of children.

Given Dinu's repeated attacks, Pakhi and Arjun decide they need to leave the city. They move to the slums of Mumbai, where they continue performing at bars. Dinu and her group make show up there as well. They demand a large sum of money, and publicise Pakhi's gender identity, leaving her vulnerable.

After this Pakhi and Arjun decide they need to not only move cities again, but also change professions. Arjun takes up driving and the two move to Delhi, living in the slums there as well. However, Dinu also comes to know of this, and engineers an accident to attack Arjun. Arjun survives, but the two are so tired of living in constant fear that they decide to die by suicide. They even celebrate the end to the reign of terror before they are supposed to hang themselves to death.

However, Pakhi has a sudden brainwave and returns to Kolkata with Arjun. She goes off to meet Achintya, Dinu's lover, and unleashes Dinu's tactics on him, demanding money not to disclose the affair. Asked why she was acting like this, Pakhi relates the harassment that Dinu had been subjecting her and her husband to. Achintya has previously been contacted about this once, but had refused to intervene. The new threat forces him to act this time around.

He tries to convince Dinu to make peace with Pakhi. Dinu is, however, unrelenting and brushes off the threat of his being jailed if things come out in the open. Achintya is furious, and a physical fight follows. He severs all ties with Dinu, which causes her immense grief. He also demands that their quarters be shut down.

Pakhi, however, intervenes here, and expressed her objections. She says because of Article 377, these quarters were the only safe space for members of the *hijra* community. She suggests instead an improvement in living standards, a relaxation of the hierarchical structure, and a more democratised and inclusive space. Dinu admits that the years of running the quarters had hardened her and made her cruel. She offers Pakhi the position of the *gurumaa*, which she declines.

Pakhi proposes, instead, that the quarters be made two-storied, and that all members be allowed to live with their lovers. She also asserts that the quarters were the one place that members of their community could possibly live in peace. The novel concludes with the community members testifying to their own ability to build a better future for themselves within the confines charted out for them by a deeply discriminatory society.

Pakhi Hijrer Bijje is an unique and important book. It details the crisis in transgender rights, while highlighting important issues and raising awareness about the same. While it does not mince words about the aggressive transphobia that is widespread throughout society, it does not confine transgender people to the status of victims. They are depicted, instead as complex characters who persevere and seek to mould their own agency in the face of great adversity. It neither romanticises nor pathologises the transgender experience, but provides a detailed and intimate picture of transgender life. It is also laudable for its unflinching discussions on transgender sexuality, with important ramifications for LGBTQI+ activism at large. Many of the views on gender and sexuality vocalised by the characters display the confusion in ideas even within the community.

This novel is a neglected modern classic.

About the author

Mrinal Kanti Dutta was born in 1962. The son of a sex worker of the Kalighat area of Kolkata, he completed his school education but had to drop out of the college because of his mother's profession. From the age of 30, he was involved with social work for sex workers. Although he did not acknowledge it, he was a transgendered person, who used his personal experiences to write this novel, which is his only published work. He died in 2015 at the age of 53.

THE RIVER OF RYEJEONG KIM

by

Wonshik Woo

Translated by

Cynthia Jee Yoon Kim

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About the Book

An intergenerational memoir about a Korean family torn by Japan's 35-year annexation and the Korean War, this book brings together writing by three generations of the Kim family. Wonshik Woo, South Korean politician in the liberal Democratic Party of Korea, and Assemblyman since 2012, writes both from his perspective as well as that of his mother's: Ryejeong Kim, the daughter of an independence activist, Mr. Han Kim, but also a wife who stepped up during 1930s and 1940s Korea against the status quo as a female entrepreneur to support her family.

The mother of an independence activist, she also lost two daughters in North Korea—a partition that happened before she could bring her daughters with her. Korea still remains as the only divided country in the world today, with separated family members in North and the South who live not knowing what each other looks like.

The third generation is the youngest: Cynthia Jee Yoon Kim—Wonshik Woo being her great-uncle, and Ryejeong Kim her great-grandmother—both translates the original Korean and contributes to this genealogy of the history of South Korea by writing from her perspective. A three-generational story, this book takes us through each generation's perspective and memoirs, from Cynthia's 21st century grappling with her Korean identity and the lasting impact of the War and the partition, to Wonshik Woo's extensive political career and first-hand impressions of his mother's life, and then a first-person retelling of Ryejeong Kim's heart-wrenching story, as narrated to Wonshik.

The book highlights the reunion between Ryejeong and her daughter from North Korea she hasn't seen for 60 years since being separated from them during the Korean War.

Ryejeong's father, Mr. Han Kim, was a lawyer who studied in Tokyo, Japan but gave up his life as a lawyer to fight for the independence of his country during Japan's annexation of Korea. After being an accomplice to a bombing attack against the Japanese, he was on a constant run from the Japanese men in black suits trying to chase him down. He was arrested and released to eventually die alone in an unfamiliar country of Russia.

As a wife, Ryejeong endured hardships to support her family by starting a restaurant as well as setting up a stall to sell American goods and dollars, and operating a snacks bar in movie theatres for her family of 11 to live on when her husband fell ill. As a mother, she suffered heartbreaks from losing her own child and being separated from her two children in another country, North Korea where the same language is spoken. Hardships for Ryejeong continue on when her youngest son, Wonshik is arrested for his student movement, protesting against dictatorship regime and fighting for democratization in Korea.

On August 15th, 2006, on Korean Independence Day at 90 years-old, Ryejeong was invited by the Former President of South Korea, Moo-hyun No to receive the Patriot Independence Medal by the Order of Merit for the National Foundation for her father, Mr. Han Kim's patriotic work for the country.

A story that brings the tragedies of displacement and dislocation, *The River of Ryejeong Kim* is a history that makes tangible the realities of intergenerational trauma, and brings to the surface the impact of seemingly distant national and international politics on the intimate family unit.

About the Author

Born in 1957 in Seoul as the youngest out of 9 siblings, [Wonshik Woo](#) has two elder sisters, Jeonghye and Deokhye who had been separated from the family during the Korean War when Seoul was taken over by North Korea. No one imagined this separation would last a total of 70 years. Wonshik's mother took the burden of taking care of the entire family due to her father, Mr. Han Kim being an independent activist who was fighting for the freedom of Korea during the Japanese annexation. Even after getting married, Wonshik's mother would roll up her sleeves to survive and lead the family whenever they would get in trouble. Growing up, Wonshik learned to have strong will and convictions like his mother.

In 1977 when Wonshik was a sophomore at Yonsei University, in memory of the April 19 Revolution, he was handing out blank papers and was arrested for 'disseminating false information.' Thereafter, once he was discharged as an army sergeant in 1981, he was involved in the withdrawal movement against the President Chun Doo-hwan regime and was arrested again and imprisoned



for two years and eight months.

In June 1987, the 13th presidential election was held after a pro-democracy movement but democratic candidate Mr. Daejoong Kim was defeated and this prompted Wonshik to join the political party to get involved in real politics. In 1995, he ran for the Seoul City Council and was elected for the office. He has since then served as the 17th, 19th, 20th, and is today, the 21st member of Congress. His political belief has been based on the foundation of ‘politics is the weak’s strongest weapon’ and with this, he created the ‘Euljiro Committee’ to carry out parliamentary activities to protect the weak from tyranny. After serving as a spokesman, a deputy leader and a supreme council member of the party, he also held the position as the first leader of the party in President Moon Jae-In’s government.

About the Translator and Contributor

Cynthia Jee Yoon is the eldest great granddaughter of Ryejeong Kim. Born and raised in Japan, Korea, and Canada, Cynthia is a Canadian of Korean ethnicity and currently resides in Singapore as the Co-founder and Chief Marketing Officer of a technology software startup. Having had an upbringing that crosses multiple continents, she never had as close a connection to her ancestral heritage and to Korea, having spent only 6 years there.

Having completed her studies with a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Cynthia has always had a passion for learning the sociological explanations to the links between the society and the individual as well as the influence of social location, ethnicity, and gender on an individual. Throughout the pandemic, she was able to reflect and have the chance to learn more about her ancestors and read the original book published by her great uncle, Mr. Wonshik Woo. She knew then and there after reading the book that the story needs to be shared internationally with a global audience to not only learn of the history of Korea and the independence movement but also the moving life story of her ancestors. Since then, she has devoted her time to translating and restructuring the book to be able to share it with the world.



My great uncle, [Won-shik Woo](#), is a prominent figure in South Korea’s political and historical landscape and currently serves as the Head of the National Assembly, a role comparable to the head of Congress in the United States. In Korea, the three most important figures in terms of power and authority are the President, the Vice President, and the Head of the National Assembly.

His role has gained worldwide recognition recently due to his leadership in rallying 190

legislators of the National Assembly to vote against and oppose the martial law declared by President [Seok Yul Yoon](#) on December 3, 2024, during a televised press conference. This act of leadership and courage underscores his unwavering commitment to democracy and justice.

[The martial law crisis in Korea](#) was equivalent to a "legislative dictatorship," prohibiting political activities, suspending gatherings of the National Assembly and local legislatures, and silencing the free press. South Korea is currently experiencing a turbulent political climate, with President Seok Yul Yoon impeached, arrested, and replaced by an acting president. The official ruling on his impeachment is expected soon, likely removing him from office and triggering a new presidential election, which must be held within two months by law.

This is where my great uncle comes into the picture. For the critical role he has played and continues to play, he has been widely recognized by both the media and the public as a strong candidate for the presidency. Internal discussions are already underway to prepare for his potential candidacy.

Meanwhile, the head of the same Democratic Party, Jae-myung Lee, is facing imprisonment after being found guilty in the first trial for corruption involving misappropriation of presidential campaign funds for property development, which he later denied on television. His second and final trial, expected to conclude within two months, is likely to affirm the initial guilty verdict, effectively disqualifying him. This positions my great uncle as the Democratic Party's most eligible candidate, further underscoring the urgency of moving forward with this book before the presidential election begins in two to three months.

This timeline is *crucial*, as April marks the selection of presidential candidates, with my great uncle emerging as a leading contender within his party. If Jae-myung Lee is disqualified due to his legal issues, the likelihood of my great uncle's candidacy **exceeds 90%**. However, should he secure the candidacy, publishing this book afterward would be politically constrained and risk being perceived as a campaign tool, detracting from its historical and cultural significance.

This book offers profound insights into Korea's complex history and evolution, connecting deeply with immigrants and global audiences while celebrating the resilience of its people. The urgency of publishing it now lies in preserving its essence as a historical and cultural narrative, untainted by the political implications that will inevitably arise after April. This timely release ensures that its universal message of democracy, justice, and the immigrant experience reaches the world at the perfect moment.



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