

# Quietly unsettling

MARYAM & SON

By Mirza Waheed.

Context, ₹699

**M**aryam & Son is a quietly unsettling novel that traces the emotional and the political aftershocks of a disappearance in contemporary Britain. At its centre is Maryam, a forty-six-year-old widow living in East London, whose son, Dilawar Ali, vanishes one fine morning without any trace. Born to a British-Indian mother and an Irish-Indian father, Dil is portrayed as a shy, introvert kid who is good with computers and has made a career out of it. Initially, the mother is reluctant to involve the police but as days pass and no news arrives, Maryam decides to lodge a missing complaint along with the assistance of her sisters, Saffina and Zarrine. What seems like a casual missing report of an ordinary young man turns into a nightmare as government officials insinuate at his involvement with a radical Islamic organisation — something that immediately turns it into a high-profile case, drawing the attention of the media and the people alike.

Mirza Waheed's novel is also a tale of conflicting emotions where the mother is torn between her unconditional love for her son and an obligation to act as a responsible citizen. It gets further complicated when she finds herself enmeshed in a desire for one of the officials, Julian, who is entrusted with her case. Julian visits her under the pretext of further updates regarding her missing son, but as the days go on, their meetings grow more person-



al. Gradually, both of them find it hard to ignore the attraction between them. Thus, while Maryam is troubled by her son's absence and the mystery surrounding it, she also feels guilty about growing closer to the investigating officer.

Maryam's maternal gaze often disrupts political categories, and the narrative privileges intimate memory over public discourse. Relying more on silences, rumours, and nostalgia, the novel shows how personal memory resists political finality. It hovers over past episodes, such as the death of Maryam's husband, Dil's upbringing, her equations with relatives and neighbours, and the alienation they are often subjected to under the shadow of Islamist terrorism in contemporary Britain. The spectre of the missing son haunts Maryam's household and the narrative describes her growing attachment with inanimate things like her son's room, clothes, bed, and photographs. Even though she digs into her past, trying to trace what might have gone

wrong, the truth remains elusive. The book's narrative structure thrives on subtle clues and possibilities rather than dramatic revelations while grief creates a perpetual state of suspension wherein Maryam continues to exist in a liminal state between knowing and not knowing.

Mirza Waheed's prose is understated, careful, and introspective. Rather than adopting a thriller-like pace befitting a high-profile terrorism investigation, the novel opts for emotional interiority. Its energy lies not in plot twists but in psychological nuance. This deliberate quietness is one of the novel's strengths. Yet, at times, the pace can feel somewhat uniform, its emotional register sustained at a single, muted pitch. Readers anticipating investigative urgency or narrative propulsion may find the rhythm to be too measured, even repetitive. Waheed offers not a thriller about terrorism but a contemplative study on love, doubt, and the painful spaces between mothers and sons.

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