Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*: Food for Thought

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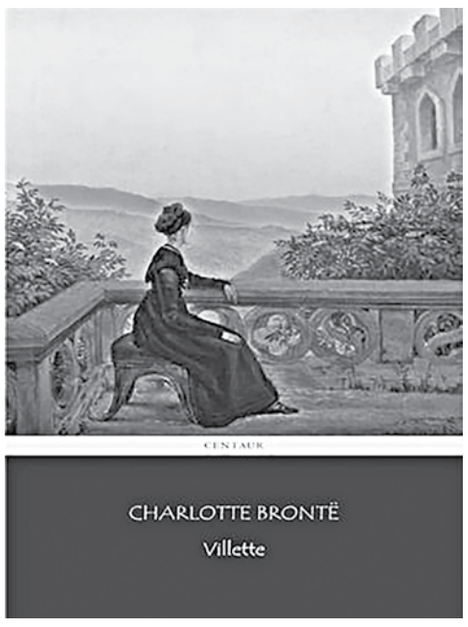
Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is widely read as a classic feminist novel. Published in 1953, *Villette*, however, still resides in a shadowy region. Most readers of English novels would raise their eyebrows and then would exclaim, "Ah, that one!" And yet, in a number of ways *Villette* is a reminiscent of Brontë's other novel, *Jane Eyre.* The protagonists of both novels are lonely and poor young women venturing out in the world on their own. Both of them face adverse situations, fall in love, and suffer. Both prosper later in their lives. For many readers, the similarities end here, and for most, Lucy Snowe, the protagonist of *Villette* might appear antithetical to the eponymous heroine of *Jane Eyre*. For me, they appear as the two faces of the same coin. Whereas *Jane Eyre* is the romantic, turbulent expression of a deeply felt love, *Villette* is the realistic version of the same story lacking the presence of Edward Rochester, the Byronic hero that came to frequent many works of the regency romance in later times.

In many ways again, Lucy is like Jane, having lost her home and family at an early age and is forced to take up the job of companionship to an elderly lady. Later on, she travels to Villette, a fictional French-speaking city to teach at a boarding school run by Mme. Beck. Here, she meets M. Paul Emanuel, a relative of Mme. Beck, who is a teacher at the academy and eventually the two fall in love. But Lucy is Protestant while the other is Catholic and there are hindrances in their union. M Paul has to go away to West Indies, but before leaving, he declares his feelings for Lucy and helps her setting up her own boarding school, which she develops further.

The biggest problem that one faces while reading *Villette* stems from the reticence of its central figure. Much like Jane, Lucy is intelligent and observant. But very unlike Jane, she is quiet, reserved and patient. She hardly shares her thoughts and feelings with those around her. Moreover, she also keeps her readers at bay from reading her innermost thoughts. At best, she hints at certain occurrences, and surprises by her nonchalant revelations. Lucy might appear cold and indifferent because of her reticence, but she is also capable of being passionate, and forming sincere attachment. Her contentment in her service for Miss Marchmont reveals that she was truly able to connect with the semi-invalid elderly lady. For her god mother Mrs. Bretton and her son Graham, too, she feels deeply. When she gains consciousness in the presence of the former, the familiar furniture from the oblivious past make her yearn for a lost, but happy time. She even rushes to the window to see if she was back in that old house in the St. Anne's Street. (190)

How else is *Villette* a realistic version of *Jane Eyre*? *Jane Eyre* is the romantic tale of an eighteen years old young woman who finds her "master" in the Byronic Rochester. There are problems, but eventually they overcome the obstacles and live happily ever after. But the very fact that Lucy has to bury her first love and accept the truth about Dr. John that he would never fall for a poor girl of little



physical beauty marks her story as realistic and plausible. Dr. John, or Graham Bretton is a kind and good person, but lacks depth in character. In a real world, there is only M. Paul, who is difficult to be understood even by the keenly observant Lucy Snowe. Even though he is revealed to be noble in a strange fashion, he lacks the charisma and strength of Rochester.

I also could not help feeling that whereas none of the male characters have even the capacity to understand Lucy fully, the women around her are more appreciative of her. Her relationships with Miss Marchmont and Mrs. Bretton highlight the importance of the absentee mother in Lucy's life. Here once again one can detect a parallel connection to Jane Eyre. From this perspective, even the intrusive Madame Beck has an important role to play. Then just as Jane played the mother's role in little Adela's life, Lucy comes to play a similar role in the lives of both thoughtless and flirtatious Ginevra, and her ladylike and thoughtful cousin Paulina.

That *Villette* is a realistic realization of the other novel is also given out in its title. Unlike Jane Eyre, the focus of the title is not on the heroine, but on the setting. Though it is her story, in her pragmatic and cautious way Lucy Snowe manages to influence beyond her story by claiming that she is not significant enough to have her name on the title page. She seems to want to include the stories of all those having impact on her life. However, the fact that she is able to do so much shows her to be very important indeed.

Charlotte Brontë's treatment of the supernatural has always seemed fascinating to me. Unlike her sister Emily, she always looks for an explanation for the eerie, bizarre elements she uses in her novels. But whereas the demonic laughter of Thornfield can be credibly traced back to the mad woman in the attic, the mysterious nun in *Villette* transforming into M le Comte de Hamal is a disappointment. At the same time, it is probably the author's way of grappling with the reality where there is no way of becoming an heiress. At best, one can get a hundred pounds from a charitable benefactress, or through someone's guilty conscience.

In my years of reading literature, I have come to this understanding: "Truth might very well be sordid. But we make it beautiful/ meaningful through our interpretations. Hence life is about interpretations, as is literature." When I was younger, I loved Jane, her bold proclamations about love and life. A part of me will always admire her, but I have also learnt to appreciate Lucy and I feel that Charlotte Brontë in all probability, put more of herself in Lucy than she did with Jane.

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POETRY

Short-Lived

AREEBAH OZARA ELHAM

Unloved and unnoticed
He fell to the ground.
A burden for his mother -
A weakling in her eyes.

His life, so pitifully short,
Was merely one of countless.
The green eyes of a viper, vicious and hungry,
The last thing he ever saw.

For a few short days, he experienced the world.
Yet his only memory was of his crowded home.
Dying was nothing to him
As he never knew what living meant.

Areebah Ozara Elham is a student of Class VIII in Sunnydale School.

REVIEWS

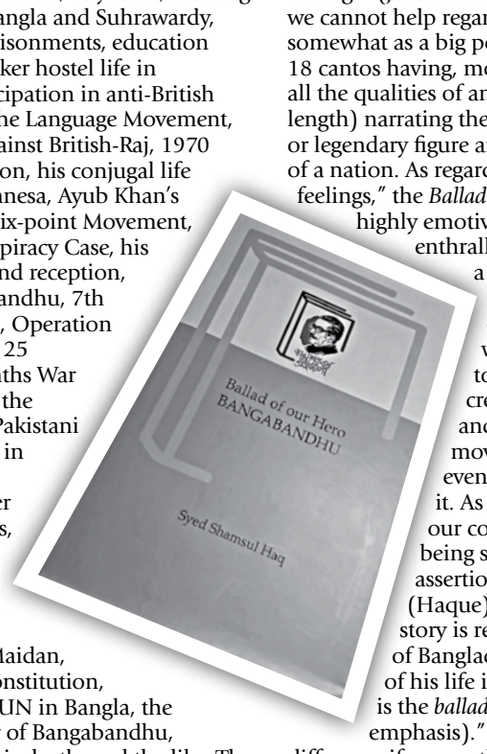
Original vs Derivative: Reading Syed Shamsul Haque's *Ballad of Our Hero Bangabandhu* in Translation

Translated by Fakrul Alam. Bangla Academy, 2020

REVIEWED BY ZAKIR MAJUMDER

To aptly celebrate the Birth-Centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, one initiative, among others, by Bangla Academy has been to publish Syed Shamsul Haque's *Ballad of our Hero Bangabandhu*, together with its translation in English, as part of its grand project named "Birth-Centenary Publications of the Father of the Nation Bangabadhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." What could be more becoming for a prolific and multitalented author like Syed Haque and an all-round academician, writer, and translator like Fakrul Alam than writing and translating respectively a *ballad* portraying the versatile writhing life of a great man of Bangabandhu's stature? Inexplicably enough, it is not the original that interests me in the derivative called translation; rather, it is the derivative that draws me toward the original. The *Ballad* is a page-turner that can drag one from the beginning to the end, barring distraction of any kind.

The book comprises of 18 small episodes preceded by a "Forward." First two episodes can be looked upon as a synopsis or a prelude to what follows in the subsequent episodes, while focusing on how stories surrounding Bangabandhu and his life have been passed down since his demise on to posterities and reflected in natural objects and phenomena like the sun, the moon, stars, the deep blue sea, *shimul* flowers, both alluvial and hard rock soils, and our various seasons. And the events happening through all episodes are abutted by two untitled verses opening and closing the *Ballad* respectively that correspond to birth, death, and immortality of the great soul. The episodes have had a panoramic view on a great life capturing various events and activities of Bangabandhu: his birth, childhood, boyhood, meeting with Sher-e-Bangla and Suhrawardy, frequent imprisonments, education in Kolkata, Baker hostel life in Kolkata, participation in anti-British movements, the Language Movement, movement against British-Raj, 1970 General Election, his conjugal life with Fazilatunnesa, Ayub Khan's Martial Law, Six-point Movement, Agartala Conspiracy Case, his exoneration and reception, being Bangabandhu, 7th March Speech, Operation Searchlight of 25 March, 9 months War of Liberation, the Surrender of Pakistani Army,his days in West Pakistan prison, murder of Intellectuals, his Return to Independent Bangladesh, reception in Suhrawardy Maidan, creation of Constitution, speech in the UN in Bangla, the brutal murder of Bangabandhu, aftermath of his death, and the like. The list is not an exhaustive one in that Syed Haq confined the vast ocean of events and actions to a dot, as it were — such a meticulous artist as he is!



The *Ballad* is more of a prose poem, indeed — with its connate rhythm, resonance, consonance, alliteration, and other figurative speeches like metaphor, simile, frequent uses of personifications to create particular effects and images in readers' minds and hearts. If poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (just to mention Wordsworth), we cannot help regarding the *Ballad* somewhat as a big poem divided into 18 cantos having, moreover, all but all the qualities of an epic (but for its length) narrating the deeds of a heroic or legendary figure and the past history of a nation. As regards "powerful feelings," the *Ballad* has come to be highly emotive and evocative by enthralling the readers in a moving and tragic story of the rise and demise of a man with its recourse to the history of creating a nation, and concomitant movements that eventually gave birth to it. As to its epic stature, our conviction of its being so goes in line with assertions of the bard (Haque): "Bangabandhu's story is really the history of Bangladesh. The story of his life is legendary—it is the *ballad* of a hero (my emphasis)." Does it make any difference if we use the word "epic" in place of "*ballad*"? A serious reader going through the book will come up with a reply in the negative: "No." And Syed Haque left no stone unturned to create a milieu of "powerful feelings" and an epic grandeur in matter and manner in his book while Fakrul Alam, the translator, did not compromise at all in retaining these strains, tenors, and contours to recreate the same in terms of wording, phrasing, and collocation, thus remaining faithful to the original that is quite contrary to the sheer economy he usually practices in case of his academic writings. If Haq's is a creation with its originality, then Alam's is a transcreation with its, at once, sticking to the original but, at the same time, going beyond mere transliteration to give it an extra edge of creativity: thus crumbling down the traditional precincts between the author and the translator, the original and the derivative, and the creation and the transcreation. One reason, among many, may be that both Haque and Alam have grown up with the same culture and language, Bengali, and spoken firsthand in it as they have inherited it as mother tongue. That said, perhaps they have drawn on different languages for professional reasons, but they are well-versed in both languages in theory and practice. While Fakrul Alam has been translating iconic maestros of Bengali literature like Rabindranath Tagore and Jibanananda Das for quite a long time now with much ease and scruple, Syed Haq translated Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and American novelist Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* with a dexterity unparalleled. In fact, they are not strangers either to Bengali or to English; rather, they have made both languages of their own in passion and profession.

When it comes to the question of facilities available, our children lag behind many a nation, and in case of education and entertainment, they not only fall behind or are deprived of but also ignored variously. And here comes the efficacy of the works of Haque and Alam who have offered the children the greatest icon of our national culture and heritage Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as gift, the greatest Bengali in thousand years, whose life and actions would inspire them in a number of ways.

In the process of lionizing Bangabandhu at the time when we are celebrating the Birth-Centenary of the Father of the Nation, Haque and Alam, wittingly or unwittingly, have sealed their names with Bangabandhu. Although Syed Haque used lucid language in the *Ballad*

conducive to children's understanding, youths and elders can equally draw on it as he registered the events and actions in it without compromising the grandeur and meaning of them — hence, it is a food for adults too! The opening verse ends in with: "Come boys, come girls/To Tungipara let us go/There we'll take with us/Heart-red roses we will grow…The reddest rose there will belong/To the father of our nation—/Sheikh Mujibur Rahman!" Likewise, like Haque, I am, as a reader, making a clarion call to you all: Come men, come women, along with boys and girls/Let us all buy a copy of the *Ballad* of our Hero Bangabandhu each that contains the story of a red-heart pumping "crimson blood" taking the hue of "crimson roses" and "crimson *shimuls.*" After all, this is the *ballad* of a great soul Bangabandhu that will not ever fail us. Should we fail ourselves? No way!

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