

Shakespeare offerings in Bangla

MD. SHAFIQU L ISLAM

MOHIT UJ Alam has accomplished a splendid job for those who want to read Shakespeare's great tragedies in Bangla. He completed with virtuosity his arduous but praiseworthy task by presenting us with the Bangla rendition of Shakespeare's great plays in one edition: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth. Alam's translation is innovative as well as new. This is because he is candid and honest about his abilities. Rabindranath Tagore was intelligent enough when he abandoned his attempt to translate Macbeth in the middle. Shakespeare is so great that he is sometimes untranslatable because of his divine language, astonishingly varied imagery in poetry and infinite variety of vocabulary. Alam rightly presumes it to be so.

Alam's translation is not the first but his is different from those of others. Let he mar the divine charm and myth innate with blank verse, Alam translated Hamlet in descriptive prose keeping the inner meaning intact and poetry unharmed. He has done a wonderful job by giving Shakespeare's own words side by side with Bangla. Hamlet is entirely a quotation. But the general readers were so far forced to remain happy with just a popular and insignificant part of it. Alam's translation lends us access to otherwise unpopular but intellectually, spiritually and philosophically rich portions of Hamlet.

Life is meaningless if one has not traveled across the Shakespeare domain. But the fact remains that even the natives find him difficult, sometimes archaic for his Elizabethan English. Some of the expressions that we use today originated with Shakespeare. Some words that he used have different meanings now, while others are no longer used.

The additional but special gift for the reader from the translator is his informative, analytical and selective introduction encompassing all important information on the four plays he translated, synopsis of each play, contemporary history, Elizabethan theatre and stage, Globe theatre, Shakespeare's life, birthplace and education, Shakespeare's England with special emphasis on Elizabeth I and James I. The reader will be immensely benefited in clarifying his confusion and he will find ready answers to many questions about Shakespeare as a whole.

The Hamlet reader will always find Alam beside him while going through it. Alam begins telling us bit by bit what happens after the appearance of the ghost at Elsinore castle, substantiated by appropriate quotes in original from the play. Prince Hamlet, mourning his father's recent death, resents his mother Gertrude's hasty marriage to his uncle Claudius, now king. His mother scolds him, "Do not forever with thy veiled lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust". The queen adds, "all that lives must die." His uncle Claudius consoles him, "But you must know your father lost a father / That father lost, lost his." All these attempts to pacify Hamlet go in vain. His desire to take revenge, procrastinations about it, philosophical questions on life and death put him to the insurmountable throes of pain and suffering. We find this line depicting Hamlet's mental state in beautiful Bangla flanked by English, "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew."

Alam beautifully renders great lines in Hamlet, "There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy", "To be or not to be, that is the question," "What a piece of work is a man" and so on. We shall find exact merit and inner meaning of those lines when we read them in Bangla and English side by side. The lines we quote now about the worth of humanity will entice any reader to find the Bangla of these, "Sure he that made us with such discourse / Looking before and after, gave us not / That capability and god-like reason / To fust in us unused" (4.4.26-29).

One other great as well as novel aspect of this version is reading those less read or less popular lines having great reflections on basic philosophic questions. Hamlet maintains that a man's life may be shorter than the time it takes pronouncing "one". In Hamlet's own words, "And a man's life is no more than to say one" (5.2.75). Shall we not enjoy the Bangla version of the great lines, "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (5.2.157-161).

A pathetic and humorous situation arises during a conversation between Hamlet and Claudius right after the accidental killing of Polonius by Hamlet. It becomes philosophic for its turning to con-

templation on life and death. Claudius asks, "Now Hamlet, where is Polonius?" Hamlet replies, "At supper". In reply to Claudius "At supper? Where?" Hamlet gives a thought-provoking and spiritual reply, "Not where he eats, but where (he) is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots" (4.3.17-25).

These maggots (ledapoka in Bangla) eat both the fat king and the thin beggar. Alexander or Caesar is no exception. Hamlet tells Horatio, "Alexander died, Alexander was buried. Alexander returneth into dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?" (5.1.192-197). The play ends with the deaths of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes. Before dying Hamlet's words, "The rest is silence" (5.2.300) will rather make the reader restless for revisiting the entire play in Alam's translation.

We now move on to Othello, which is one of Shakespeare's great tragedies and remains a cautionary tale regarding the dangers of jealousy. The play is most memorable, however, for the charming, roguish, frightening and evil Iago. It is a beautiful translation, giving us a taste of reading in Bangla while Alam is very careful to give us Shakespeare in the original side by side wherever necessary.

Othello begins with a dialogue between two malcontent rogues, Roderigo and Iago. Iago is discontented with Othello for appointing Cassio his lieutenant, the post he had coveted. He takes to teach-



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ery, machination and conspiracy from the beginning against Othello until revealed by Emilia before the last scenes.

Iago's brutish nature is exposed by his language when he divulges Othello's intimacy with Desdemona to her father Brabantio in these insulting terms, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88-89). Goading him to wake up from sleep, Iago continues, "Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you." (1.1.91). Shall we not read it in Bangla to laugh our hearts out?

Othello marries Desdemona while Iago goes on conspiring to instill in him jealousy. He professes his animosity towards Othello and suspects that he was cuckolded by him, "I hate the Moor / And it is thought abroad that twixt my sheets / He has done my office".

Alam's Bangla is easy and homely. He wonderfully and dexterously translates this difficult line uttered by Iago about Othello, "The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him as bitter as coluquintida" (1.3.340-342).

Iago succeeds in destroying Othello for his gullibility. "The Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by th' nose / As asses are" (1.3.397-400) Iago evaluates Othello. His complete trust in Iago is expressed when he leaves for Cyprus by entrusting him to escort Desdemona afterwards, "So please your grace, my ensign (Iago) / A man he is of honesty and trust / To his conveyance I assign my wife" (1.3.282-284).

Othello, after smothering Desdemona in bed, realizes his mistake and sums up about himself: "... one that loved not wisely but too well" (5.2.352). In Alam's hand this tragic love tragedy becomes reading for both pleasure and enjoyment. The characters in the drama come alive in his magic hands.

King Lear is another intense and profound tragedy translated by Alam. This popular story is about a sentimental king bringing about his own downfall after distributing his kingdom between his two 'pelican' and unfaithful daughters, Goneril and Regan, while depriving the innocent one, Cordelia. Soon after his handing over of the kingdom, Lear discovers his blunder but gets no respite to salvage himself. Being thrown out of the palace in a raging stormy night, Lear finds himself helpless and realizes his foolishness. He feels: "I am more sinned against than sinning". Though Lear suffered for his own mistakes, yet his character has been developed to the fullest extent in the process of realization of life through suffering.

King Lear contains great quotes too. Gloucester, after being blinded, philosophizes on life, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.37-38). Lear hastens to his death when he knows that Cordelia is murdered: "And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life? / Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life / And thou no breath at all?" (5.3.305-306). The tragedy will reverberate in the mind of the reader for long for Alam's steadfast effort in keeping up the right vein of the play all along.

The fourth and last but not the least accomplishment by Alam, the rendering of Macbeth, is also equally exquisite. He does not lax a bit in the arduous task of putting in Bangla the unfamiliar terms used by the witches while cooking a potion.

Macbeth, out of ambition, aroused by the witches and provoked by the fiend-like Lady Macbeth, becomes a butcher by killing his great and magnanimous king Duncan when he is a guest at his own home. The play, full of gory details, witches, a ghost, battles, madness and brutal murders, is transformed into an excellent version by Alam.

The translation goes on smoothly with magic lines uttered by the witches, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.10-11), enmeshing the readers' attention to the last line with rapt attention. This play engages the reader from the beginning through the end. Alam translates great dialogues and soliloquies in Bangla for us with great care and mastery. King Duncan unwittingly and ironically says, "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" (1.4.11-12).

Lady Macbeth's dialogue is also tough to translate as she dares to utter, "Unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the top-full / Of direst cruelty" (1.5.39-41) or when she expresses herself, "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me / I would while it was smiling in my face / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn / As you have done to this" (1.7.54-59). She convinces Macbeth to commit murder with these venomously inspiring words but eventually she herself suffers from guilt, sleepwalks and becomes insane. She always tries to wash away the blood from her hand, "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little blood. O, O, O." (5.1.42-43).

Alam very dexterously renders the great lines by juxtaposing the text from Macbeth with Bangla: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time... Out, out brief candle / Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more: It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" (5.5).

In his attempt to translate the four great tragedies, Mohit UJ Alam has always been mindful of his mammoth task that calls for great application of the mind in achieving the highest state of excellence. He promises to impart a taste of Shakespeare through a simple and straightforward translation of these plays. Alam has been successful, I perceive, in drawing his readers close to him into undertaking a journey to read the plays in Bangla and also in the original. Presenting it all in a slim and well-covered white paper book, Milon Nath of Anupom Prokashoni deserves thanks for keeping the price within the reach of the reader.

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... from SAYEEDA AHMAD

Eurasian

I was born nearly bald with a few thin locks like strings of black ink, and eyes a shadowy chestnut, but an Indo-European adored for being the lone ivory-toned baby in a family of wheat-tinged Bangalis.

I am confounded by their adulation of color and why my nation of henna prefers alabaster brides, and the luminescence of an onyx is ignored. This gloomy theory remains engraved in post-colonial Bengal minds but not in mine because the onyx of my heart is not a tarnished *paisa* to be tossed into a garbage bag, or lost under the backseat cushions of my Corolla, and I am no longer a pearl but a sun-baked brownie tattooed with henna.

Glory be to God

My mother feeds me glorious God and religion, nourishes in me a moderate path with modest living the same way my *Nana* nurtured her: "Eat only what you need, and don't waste any food.

Show your sharp mind, but not your body."

She tells me of the midnight invasion of Dhaka on March 25, 1971, of *Nana* who praised God with prayer beads that morning prior to encountering flying bullets.

He was religious, woke up daily before dawn, walked in the dark to the mosque to pray.

On his way home that March, he heard metallic flies zinging at extreme speeds by his ears but didn't realise

their danger until he arrived home, heeded my mother's voice: "the West Pakistani Army invaded our city late last night." My mother keeps his picture in the family album, recalls her memories for me.

I see him now in a roseate snapshot as a dignified man, quiet and content with hazel eyes that radiate God-given peace.

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The iconoclast in Ahmed Sharif

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

DR. Ahmed Sharif, the doyen of Bangladesh's Marxist intellectualism, was born on February 13, 1921 and died on February 24, 1999 on his way to hospital. He had had a massive heart attack. The nation remembers him with pride for his wisdom, courage and friendliness. He was a non-conformist who believed in free thought.

I have not been a committed Marxist but I have always respected the leftists, especially the dedicated souls among them. I admired Lenin and the Russians. I remained grateful to the Russians for their support during our war of independence. I have always been an unshamed admirer of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, Ivan Turgenev and Maxim Gorky. So, the Russians are a favourite with me. I also admired all that was positive about China and its communism. I liked the Labour Party in Britain and the Democrats in the USA. I always found them more humane than the Conservatives and the Republicans. You can call me a Socialist Democrat. I admired Sher-e-Bangla for his love of farmers, Maulana Bhashani, Moni Singh and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib. I thus had no problem in admiring Dr. Ahmed Sharif and his Marxist ideals. He was the friendly non-conformist we always liked to listen to.

I was part of Ahmed Sharif Sir's Friday morning *adda*. I attended it not at a stretch but with breaks. But I enjoyed the *adda* thoroughly. We were bound by Sir's overwhelming affection, his courage and wisdom and his generous 'feeding' in the form of 'jhal muri', 'chire bhaja' and tea. From Rashed Khan Menon to Dilip Barua, from Bashir Al Helal to Aziz Misir, from Mustafa Majid to Neamul Huq, we simply loved his company. He was our fatherly friend, always ready to fight for a noble cause. His wisdom and scholarship were matchless. His courage and eagerness to speak the truth were unparalleled too. You could disagree with him but you could never ignore him.

Ahmed Sharif fought a life-long battle against fascism, communalism and fanaticism. He was always anti-establishment. He was thus neither a friend of the religious fanatics nor of the government. He loved to question and provoke and



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whatever he said or wrote caused a lot of furore among thinking people. He was a misunderstood person and was considered controversial. This was mainly due to his outspoken views against the establishment, pro-establishment intellectuals and politicians. He searched for knowledge and loved the poor. The government and the elite class avoided him. He proudly avoided them too. The government-controlled media also positively avoided him. Thus he was read less than he deserved to be. He was also misinterpreted by opportunistic intellectuals and grasping politicians. Only the very curious came to know the real Ahmed Sharif. He was a born rebel and the young always loved him for this quality. They flocked to listen to the great 'fighter'.

Ahmed Sharif was born in Patiya, Chittagong. He did his MA in Bangla from Dhaka University in 1944. His received his PhD in 1967. After working for while in a college and Radio Pakistan, he joined Dhaka University as a Research Assistant in the Bangla Department on December 18, 1950. He retired as Chairman and Professor of the department thirty three years later. He was elected President of the Teachers' Association and

was elected Dean of the Faculty of Arts for three consecutive terms. He was one of the most popular teachers ever to teach at Dhaka University. For a couple of years in the mid-eighties he was a Kazi Nazrul Islam Professor at the University of Chittagong.

Dr. Ahmed Sharif was considered an outstanding scholar on medieval Bangla literature. He had excellent publications on the subject. He wrote brilliantly on contemporary social, political and cultural issues. He received many valuable awards, the most outstanding of which were the Bangla Academy Award in 1968 and the Ekushey Padak (given by a caretaker government) in 1991. Rabindra Bharati University conferred upon him a Doctorate of Literature in 1995 for his outstanding contributions to Bangla literature. He delivered a number of memorable commemorative and institutional lectures. He was connected with many progressive socio-cultural organizations. We can conclude that he was a selfless man who earned knowledge to serve society and the people.

Ahmed Sharif was never one for compromise. I am sure he didn't know how to compromise. While fighting communalism and fascism, he received many death threats but was never afraid. His school of free thought and his courage influenced several generations of young people. He talked to the young at the Suhrawardy Udyan. I have mentioned his popular Friday *adda* before. There he shared with us what he knew. He taught us to gather knowledge. He taught us how to live our life. He was mentally younger than us. In fact, he was much ahead of his time and his ideas were too radical for us to understand and appreciate.

The death of Ahmed Sharif on February 24, 1999 shocked the whole nation. The progressive section of our people lost its most courageous thinker and activist. His ideas, his courage, his youthfulness and his eagerness to fight for a noble cause will be long remembered by Bengalis. His contribution has enriched Bangla literature immensely. Before his death he decided to donate his eyes and body for the benefit of mankind. An Ahmed Sharif is perhaps born only once in a century.

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Commonwealth Writers' Prize nominees shortlisted

INTERNATIONALLY recognized for propelling authors into the literary spotlight, the shortlist for the regional winners from South Asia and Europe has been unveiled in the race to win the influential 2010 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, says a press release of the Commonwealth Foundation. Offering an exceptional opportunity for new writers to demonstrate their talent and for authors already on the literary scene to strengthen their reputation writers across the region - are in pole position to compete with the best authors from Africa, Caribbean and Canada and South East Asia and the Pacific to win the coveted prizes of the Commonwealth's Best Book and Best First Book.

The shortlisted writers for South Asia and Europe Best Book are:
Solo by Rana Dasgupta (Britain)
For Pepper and Christ: A Novel by Keki Daruwalla (India)
The Beijing of Possibilities by Jonathan Tel (Britain)
Heartland by Anthony Catwright (Britain)
Another Gulmohar Tree by Aamer Hussein (Pakistan)
The Immortals by Amit Chaudhuri (India)
The shortlisted writers for South Asia and Europe Best First Book are:
The Hungry Ghosts by Anne Berry (Britain)
Arzee the Dwarf by Chandras Choudhury (India)
In Other Rooms, Other Wonders by Daniyal Mueenuddin (Pakistan)
Among Thieves by Mez Packer (Britain)
An Equal Stillness by Francesca Kay (Britain)
Tail of the Blue Bird by Nii Parkes (Britain)
The critically acclaimed Commonwealth Writers' Prize is in its 24th year and has a strong track record of discovering new international stars. The winners of Best First Book and Best Book will stand alongside some of the biggest names in fiction, including Vikram Chandra, who won the Best First Book award in 1996 for his book Red Earth, Pouring Rain. The Prize is presented by the Commonwealth Foundation with support from the Macquarie Group Foundation. The

final programme, starting on 7 April in Delhi, India, will bring together the finalists from the different regions of the Commonwealth, and the two overall winners will be announced there on 12 April.

The Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, Mark Collins, notes: "The Commonwealth Writers' Prize is distinct and unique in that the books that win often have strong insight, spirit and voice about the incredible diversity, history and society of the Commonwealth. The Prize aims to reward the best of Commonwealth fiction written in English and in doing so, spots rising talent and creates new literary figures from the Commonwealth. This is the Prize to watch for tomorrow's best-sellers."

David Clarke, Chairman of the Macquarie Group Foundation, the main sponsor of the Prize, adds:

"The Commonwealth Writers' Prize is unique in giving a voice to authors who throw light on evolving social realities. The Macquarie Group Foundation is delighted to be part of recognising literary talent from around the world and to help support emerging writers."

Regional Chair Muneeza Shamsie highlights: "The wealth of talent on the shortlist puts Europe and South Asia region in a strong position to go onto win the overall prize. The judges were overwhelmed by extraordinary range of the submissions from the exquisitely carved miniature of Hussein to the broad sweeping strokes of Dasgupta: the shortlists represent authors who have expanded the multiple dimensions of the form from short stories and historical novels to provincial and transcultural fiction."

It may be noted that the £10,000 Best Book Prize in 2009 was awarded to Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas for The Slap. The Best First Book Prize of £5,000 went to Pakistani writer Mohammed Hanif for A Case of Exploding Mangoes. The prizes were announced at the Auckland Writers and Readers Festival in New Zealand. The 2008 Overall winner was Lawrence Hill of Canada for The Book of Negroes.