

BANGLA LITERATURE, PARTITION & TRANSLATION

From Kalo Borof to Black Ice: a translator's journey

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NEAR the end of Mahmudul Haque's novel *Kalo Borof*, Abdul Khaleq reaches the Padma.

So this is what it looks like now. What a state!

The Padma has shifted its course quite far. A fleet of sailing boats can be dimly seen. There is nothing here of what he had imagined. It's all dried up, derelict. The name Louhojong flickers in his head like the lights of the distant boats bobbing in the water. Goalondo, Aricha, Bhagyokul, Tarpasha, Shatnol - he can hear a deep sigh rising up from the names of those ghats.

Abdul Khaleq had not anticipated this disappointment. What was the point of coming so far merely for a name Louhojong?

Abdul Khaleq approached the Padma chasing a memory from his childhood journey from Barasat to erstwhile East Pakistan. One December morning while visiting Kolkata a few years ago, I made my way to Barasat to seek out whatever I could find of Abdul Khaleq's childhood. By then I knew that those reminiscences were those of the author himself.

After a long, bumpy ride on the DN18 bus along Jessore Road, I stepped off at Champadolir Mor. I did not know if I would find the neighbourhood where Abdul Khaleq spent his childhood as Poka (his nickname), but I was confident I would locate Hati Pukur (a pond in the novel). Large public ponds do not disappear easily.

Indeed, Hati Pukur lay right behind the bus terminal. When I set my eyes

upon it, I caught a gulp in my throat.

So this was what it looked like now. What a state!

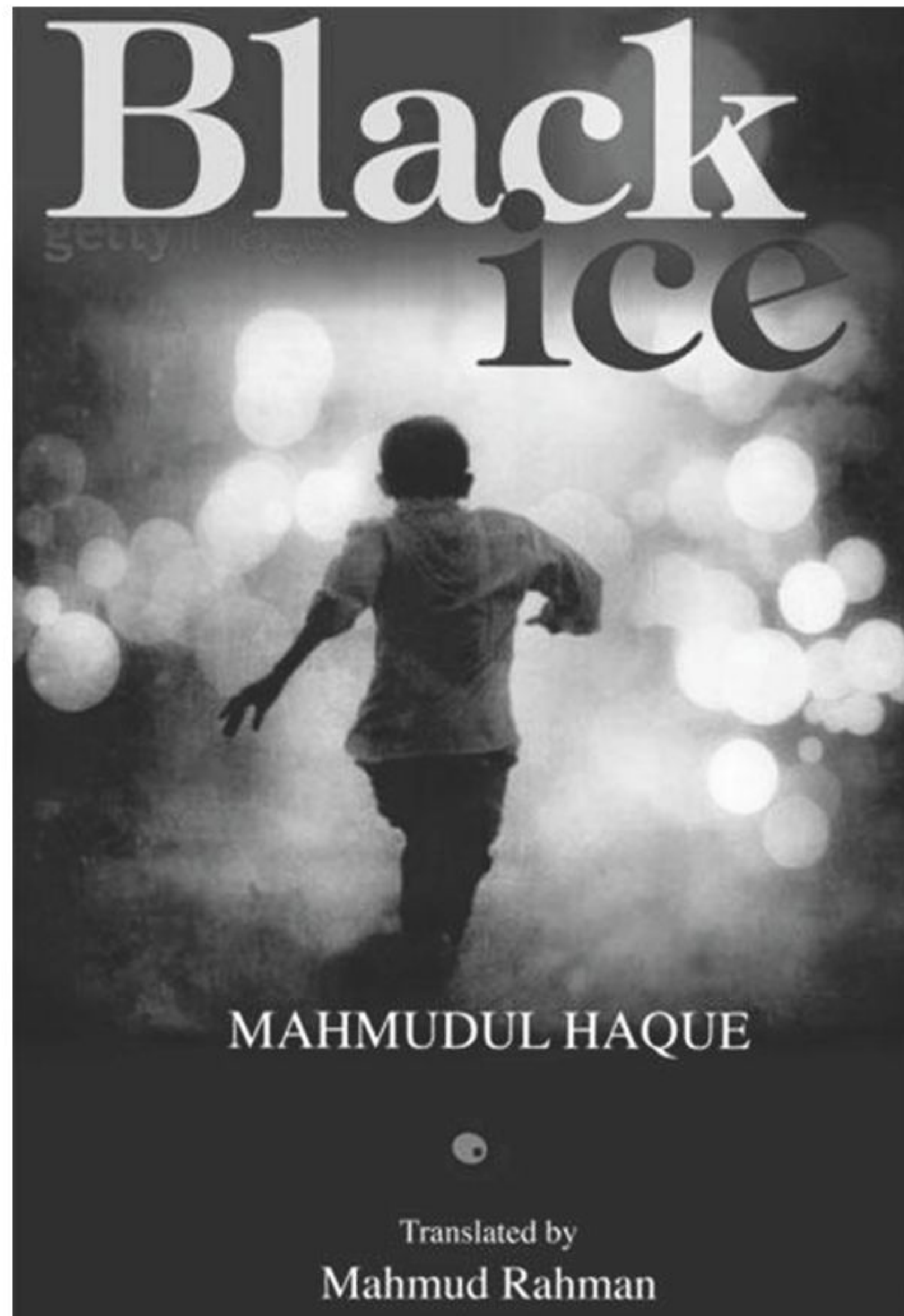
In the book, Poka used to walk here with his hand held by his Kenaram Kaka (uncle). Hati Pukur was described as ringed by huge rain trees. There was a gazebo in a centre island reached by an iron bridge. Poka and his school mates traipsed around Hati Pukur soaked in the fragrance of bokul flowers.

The pond is still there, smaller than what I had imagined. The water was blanketed with algae and the bridge coated with turquoise-coloured corrosion. The rain trees stood proud and magnificent, even though they had shed much of their leaves because this was winter. I looked up and they appeared to whisper a question: what brings you here?

I had come on a kind of pilgrimage. I was then finishing the English translation of *Kalo Borof*. That journey reached a culmination recently when the translation was published as *Black Ice* by HarperCollins Publishers, India.

I became a fiction writer while living in the US. When I returned to Dhaka in 2006 for an extended stay to write a novel, I began seeking out Bangladeshi prose. Beyond the joy of reading, I felt this could add a new layer of complexity to my own writing. I often write about the same social context taken up by Bangla writers and it is helpful to absorb how Bangladeshis are written out by writers from within.

Soon after I arrived, I read an interview by Ahmad Mostofa Kamal of a writer named Mahmudul Haque. He was unknown to me, but he had apparently penned many



novels and stories from the 1950s to the '70s before turning his back on the literary world around 1981.

I promptly went looking for his books. The search through New Market was futile. I had better luck at

the December Dhaka Book Fair being held at Shilpakala Academy. From Shahityo Prokash I bought several of his books. The very next day I read the novel *Nirapod Tondra*. I scoured Aziz Market for more

books, and soon I read the novels *Matir Jahaj* and *Kalo Borof*, along with the stories in *Protidin Ekti Rumal*.

I liked the writing so much that I wanted to translate. Mahmudul Haque deserved to be known outside those who read him in Bangla. I know the value of translated prose: I had been stimulated by fiction originally written not just in English but also languages like Portuguese, Gikuyu, Japanese. Why should the world not receive the best of our Bangla writers then? As a writer of fiction in English, I felt I could do justice to Mahmudul Haque's prose.

There was another interest. While absorbed in drafting my novel, I yearned to work with language on a different plane. Some fiction writers write poetry. I am not a poet. But I had once made an attempt at literary translation and enjoyed it. Here I could work with words and sentences at a close level in two languages. And because in my own novel I was rendering into English conversations of characters speaking in Bangla, I felt that translating might have a good effect on my book.

I began with the story *Chhera Taar*. The response to its publication in the Daily Star was encouraging. Next I chose the title story from *Protidin Ekti Rumal*. Dhaka is lax when it comes to author permissions, but I was reluctant to publish a second story without the author's consent. I asked around for his phone number.

I knew he was selective in who he let near him. I carefully rehearsed my line when I called. In a neutral voice, he heard me out and agreed to have me come over. When he let me into

his flat in Jigatola, I sat in a room crowded with chairs, coffee and side tables, bookshelves, and a desk piled high with books and magazines. The book cases looked like they had lain undisturbed for a while.

He asked some questions to situate me. Once reassured that despite living abroad, I felt connected to Bangladesh, he opened up. We talked about his schooldays, his childhood ailments, the houses where he had lived, and his interest in animals. We touched on his writing and his not writing.

I asked for permission to publish the translation of *Protidin Ekti Rumal*. He waved his arm in dismissal. I could do as I wished.

Returning home, I sent off the finished story to the Daily Star where it was published in an Eid Supplement. When I handed him copies, he was delighted.

When I brought up translating more of his writing, he retreated into the kind of response he had come to be known for: what does it all matter anyway? In fact, it was his wife, Hosne Ara Mahmud (Kajol) who encouraged me. She felt strongly the world should know his writing.

I began to visit every two weeks. He would not let me leave for four or five hours. I had come seeking support for translation, but he gave me much more: friendship. I sometimes wondered why. I think it was because I never pressed him on why he did not write. It may also have helped that I was someone exploring Dhaka's literary world without hardened attachments and prejudices. He enjoyed bringing to me a world I did not know.

SEE PAGE 11

Escape

HASAN AZIZUL HAQUE
(TRANSLATED BY
HASAN AMEEN SALAHUDDIN)

HE tried to listen for the faintest of sounds-for any sound. But neither sound of the breeze nor the falling of leaves existed to reach his ears. The ground was frozen over within that moment. The diverse multitudes of leaves were all wet, bathed in the silent dew. The north wind took to forces of storm. It ran through the open field to suck out the last bit of warmth from his body. The wind came back once again with the same gusto, and retreated to leave this side of the world after having shaken all the dry leaves off the trees just as dusk approached. With that, the fields, the gleaming backlogged water of the pond, and the jungles of unidentified mounds of half-dried yellow leaves all lay still. The cold wind left a fog that surrounded him like the phlegm in the congested lungs of a dying pneumonic patient. The world around him fell static through the mist and the stale death induced pale darkness. He tried hard to listen to something, anything, but no sound fell on his ears. Neither sound of the breeze nor the falling of the dry leaves or even the dew sliding off and falling on them to make a dribble reached his ears. He wound the ragged wrapper around his torso to put his weight on his elbows, lying on the uneven, wet, hay-coloured ground to stare into the heavy haze.

Though the world of sound, besides his heartbeat, became alien to him at that moment, there was no shortage of noise just before evening shadowed the planes. He had heard the heavy traffic of buses and trucks plying the black-pitched-road far off. Even the engines of the small cars and the shrill whistle of the passing mail-train had been audible. He heard these sounds all day long, and as soon as evening approached, a number of crows flew over the bush in the barren field; then there were pairs of stork followed by white-breasted kites, and

lastly a few lone birds flew away, accompanied by a gigantic bird with its large wings spread across, flapping frequently with its feet stretched back parallel to the ground and its beautiful head scanning the grounds to-and-fro. The bird cut through the air making swishing sounds with every flap of its big wings, floating towards one corner of the eastern sky, growing smaller every moment till it completely blended into the sky. The smaller birds nesting in the bamboo-clump near the village on one side of the field were chirping away in cacophony then, although they disappeared as soon as the night progressed on a bit more. He nearly undressed himself completely while trying to ward off the bone freezing cold by tightly winding the wrapper around himself and covering the gaping hole in it near his belly with his lungi. He felt pangs of hunger even at that moment. He started munching on chira from a small sack made of dirty rags, as he un-mindfully thought to himself, 'Hmmm... they've gone to sleep.'

He thought of nothing else for quite a while after that. He started to teeter on his feet as he walked away from the pond after drinking some water from the vessel that he had very carefully collected from a canal. As soon as the cold became unbearable such that his head felt like a block of ice and his feet had gone numb- he took shelter in this dry ditch. Somehow managing to generate some heat by curling up he started to think once more, 'The night has dragged long after all. Hell knows how long I've been walking -can't even imagine where I've turned up at. And have never felt such satanic cold before!'

The first acknowledgement of the winter entered the soft-headed man's mind as he lay in one corner of the harvested barren field. It was as if he heard someone yell, 'Bachir, O Bachir, hey Bachir! Sleeping are you? The master will take an ear away for that! Such deep sleep of yours!' He heard

the screams for only once in his head. Everything went still once more.

One could have very well claimed that it was the coldest winter. Just as it had approached early with Aghrayan barely starting off, it lingered on as piercingly even when Maagh drew almost to an end. The cold spell had

all the years I've been around and have grown my hair and beard white, I have never seen such cold!"

Then the young, much like every other year, would laugh and say, "Hah! No wonder you feel so. Just the way we are not feeling so cold now, you had not felt the same as us when you



begun abruptly, even before Sharath expired and the leaves had turned yellow in the season, even before one had the chance to enjoy the approaching winter breezes. The elders, just as every previous year, said, "Oh its cold, definitely cold! This is what bone-freezing cold really is. Of

were young. It's nothing much but the blood being the real factor." Some would nod their heads in the affirmative, "Yes, it may well be that. The warmth of the blood is the real factor. We had even cut the paddy under the full moon when we were as young as you in the middle of Poush. We went

into the field even in clear nights with only the stars hanging bright. The blood is the real factor."

But the verdict of the elders who did not say anything further had to be undeniably accepted in the end that year. It was as if the winter had kept overflowing from the skies on the flat lands that year. The village was veiled by the black of winter with the cold north winds blowing wildly during the day, while the ground was left freezing after the winds had subsided in the evening. The stark white land became black with winter. The slippery black sediment that overtook the lands could in no way be related to the layer of moss that blanketed the crop-land every *Sharath*.

Work had begun in the extreme cold that year. What could the winter do as long as there was work to be done? It didn't matter. No matter how cold, no matter how much the harvest amounted to, half of it was due to be dropped off at the doorstep of the land-owner, and even then: what would the winter be able to do? And thus, like clockwork, all able bodies with a sickle in hand went out into the fields just like any other year. All of them had to face the fierce northern winds with their ragged wrappers and old-dirty-smelly *kanthas* tightly wrapped around their bodies. Thus all the sickles in the village were put to work. Each iron sickle with just a hint of steel in them turned silver bright as mid *Poush* approached. The harvested paddy was laid in bound bundles in the field, each resembling the corpse of a felled soldier in war-fields for a few days. Each dew-soaked grain of rice gleamed like specks of gold, while the chore of the sickle came to near end. They started to mound the bundles into little hills while marching in their hard-soled shoes made by the local cobbler.

The flat lands had been stripped off the green lush while the ditches were filled with nothing but the gleaming black silt from the land. The snipes poked the mud with its long bill while flocks of white and black

herons stood in rows on their long legs. The northern winds started to take toll on the lands as even the bright green grasshoppers camouflaged themselves with the dull brown mud of the roads and the trees were denuded of all their leaves.

The picture of the winter engulfing the country flashed vaguely across his uneducated mind. Even though the description given so far is absolutely accurate, the picture he drew was raging with fresh memories and emotions. Thus, even if he forgot to acknowledge many components, he added elements of his own, making the image truer to him. Even though he was dying of hunger and the cold spell took over his body as it had slowly created this aura of a stunned blackened abyss, he somehow mustered the strength to look back over his shoulder having rested on his elbows. The mist gathered itself to veil his sight, such that he could see nothing at all. The surrounding remained motionless, and the ditch he took shelter in started to bite him with fangs instead of providing warmth. Even so, he somehow curled up and imagined the picture and heard, very distinctively, the yells once more, 'Bachir, O Bachir, hey Bachir! Master will teach us a good lesson if you keep sleeping away like that!'

He did not have to put in much effort while yelling at him. Bashir had already jerked away from the warmth of his wife's body in one fluid motion. Her symmetrical hand hit the cold floor with a meaty thud. His eight year old boy cleared off the bed instantly. Bashir came back to his senses and placed his wife's fallen hand around her neck and slowly hugged his child. He then carefully came out of the kantha and took the hanging wrapper and covered himself head to toe. No time was wasted in finding the gleaming sickle even in pitch dark. While closing the mango-wood-door from outside, he asked, 'Is that you Chaha?'

SEE PAGE 11