

REVIEW ESSAY

Nazrul's Bandhan Hara in English

As is well known, the King James Version of the Bible the greatest triumph of translation in English prose was done by a team; now the enthusiastic members of Dhaka's Reading Circle have shown by rendering Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Bandhon Hara* into very readable English that there is scope for teams of translators from Bangladesh to work together to represent the classic narratives of our literary tradition into English through inspired collective efforts.

*Bandhan Hara's* status as a classic, of course, may be disputed. An early work by Nazrul, it has been largely ignored by many, even in the two Bengals. Only Nazrul aficionados have valued the work over the years. Indeed, Nazrul's songs and his poems are the aspects of his oeuvre most treasured today; his narratives have more or less been treated with lukewarm responses by the reading public over the decades.

The Reading Circle's translation of *Bandhon Hara*, however, proves that it is time for fresh initiatives that will bring Nazrul's lesser know works, especially the prose ones, into the literary limelight once again. As Professor Rafiqul Islam, the leading Nazrul scholar of our country and Niaz Zaman, the most prominent member of the Reading Circle group of translators, suggest in their very helpful introductory comments on the work, the novel is important for many reasons: a) it offers us a self-portrait of Nazrul that is invaluable; b) it is one of the earliest instances of the use of *chalitriti* or modern colloquial Bengali in Bengali prose narrative (instead of the *shadhubasha* stories that dominated till the middle of the second decades of the twentieth century); c) it reflects Nazrul's perpetual penchant for rebellion and tendency to break free of chains that would earn him the epithet of "Rebel Poet" permanently; d) it reminds us of the extent of Nazrul's admiration of Rabindranath's work (something that communal Bangladeshis who would elevate him at the expense of the Nobel laureate need to be reminded of again and again); e) it indicates that Nazrul was not only ingenious but also dexterous in weaving an epistolary tale in Bengali; f) it records Nazrul's intimate knowledge of Hindu mythology as well as his familiarity with Arabic and Islamic narratives and his deep

knowledge of classical music and letters; g) it shows how impressively multi-lingual this largely self-taught genius was (he seemed to have known Urdu, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit quite well in addition to his unsurpassable knowledge of Bengali and more than adequate knowledge of English); h) it makes clear not only Nazrul's zest for life but also his abundant humor; i) it records Nazrul's exemplary and pioneering sympathy for someone from an Islamist background for the plight of Bengali women, especially Muslim ones; j) it implies that Hindus and Muslim Bengalis could and should be living in harmony and that communal harmony was a desideratum in colonial India.

But the most important achievement of the Reading Circle translation of *Bandhon Hara* is that it reveals Nazrul's novel in letters to be a truly captivating tale of unfulfilled love. At the center of the love interest of the story is Nurul Huda (or as he is called in the letters, Nuru). He is the object of attention of two women, Mahbuba and Sophia, who love him deeply. He is attracted to them too, especially to Mahbuba, but something in him is not willing to tie any kind of knot that would fetter him (hence the "unfettered" of the title). It is for this reason that he flees from the emotional demands made by him by these two women and others who have invested emotionally in him like his sister-in-law Rabeya by enlisting in the British army that is engaged in campaigns in Asia and Europe against the German and their allies. His decision to flee commitments to women that would bind him in marriage leaves the two women broken-hearted. Mahbuba is eventually married off to an old woman. Sophie too is also married off but is on her death-bed for unspecified causes(s) at the end of the story.

Nazrul's narrative is spread out spatially as well as in time. Nuru's initial letters are from Karachi cantonment and though undated suggest the First World War in well under way as the events depicted in the novel keep unfolding but his last one is sent from Baghdad at a time when the Armistice of Malta has already been signed. Other letters are from various parts of Bengal such as Salar, Shahpur and Bankura as well as Calcutta. In all, Nazrul devises eighteen letters to present his story four written by Nur, two by Mahbuba and one by Sophia.



Two of the letters are from Nuru's friend Monuwar and "brother" Robiul, three from Nuru's sister-in-law Rabeya (Robiul's wife), one from "Ma" (the woman who adopted him), two from two other women, Ayesha and Rokiya. But perhaps the most interesting of the letters is from the Brahmo woman Shahoshikha, who is the daughter of Rabeya's tutor and with whom Nuru is very intimate.

Nuru's letters to Robiul and Monuwar reveal his restless and indomitable spirit as well as the kind of life he led in the army. His musings as he writes to Monuwar also show how deeply he was moved by Rabindranath's work, especially his monsoonal song-lyrics. Robiul's letter indicates the deep pain that Nuru carries with him everywhere but also the hurt he caused to both Mahbuba and Sophia by leaving them behind. Rabiul suggests that there is a volcano in Nuru that has the capacity to ignite anytime. His adopted mother berates him for his capricious ways and abrupt departure in her missive. Monuwar teases him in his epistle about his poetry but also indicates that he has the potential to be almost as famous as "Rabi Babu". He too emphasizes how he left everyone depressed by his leaving. Rabeya, as well, rues his going away, suggesting that a deep-seated agony had made him disappear, abandoning her family and the girls. She notes that Sophia would be better off than Mahbuba because of her marriage to Monuwar but that Mahbuba would have little option

except to get married to just about anyone her guardians chose for her. Mahbuba's letter is full of the suffering women in Bengal perforce endure because of the men in their lives. She notes that even the men who had benefited from exposure to western education were holding on to attitudes that belittled women. As she puts it: "Who will make them understand that we too have some rights? And we too can judge right from wrong?" Nuru's letters acknowledge the hurt he left in his wake but strikes a romantic pose that is quite Byronic he was born to suffer, restlessness is what had marked him from birth, and he will pursue the boundless endlessly. What he relished most, he declares, is "to find the boundary of the boundless, to revel in the deep joy of being lost".

All of us who love Nazrul can look forward to the insights offered by our reading of *Bandhon Hara* into the rebel poet's consciousness and his distinctive take on life. But we can also derive from the book fascinating glimpses into the sources of his creative impulses. The work is particularly interesting in the way Nazrul depicts through the letters the advent of modernity in the more affluent section of Muslim Bengal. It is clear that one of the conduits through which modernism was beginning to transform at least some Muslims in colonial Bengal was education. Rabeya, for example, discusses in some detail how she had changed because her father had her educated by a Brahmo woman whose daughter Shahoshikha had become the headmistress of a school. The Brahmos, she points out, are quite different from the upper caste Hindus who not only treated Muslims with disdain but also were contemptuous when it came to the Brahmo Samaj. Significantly, Rabeya believes that the upper caste Hindus could only come out of their benighted existence through their women who would "have to try the hardest to sweep away the superstitious nonsense of pure and impure touch" that was blighting their dealings with others. Rabeya notes how educated Muslim women were now writing in Bengali not only to each other and to the men in their lives but also in periodicals.

Befittingly, then, it is the Brahmo woman Shahoshikha's letter that embodies all the positive messages Nazrul wants to convey through his book. She suggests that a new dawn

was about to break in Bengali society. Shahoshi or courageous herself, this single woman strikes the emancipatory note that is the essence of so many of Nazrul's writings in her very long epistolary response to Rabeya's letter. One hears Nazrul's defiant rebel cry when she declares: "Human beings are far superior to deities". She also proclaims that "the womanhood of any woman is imperishable". She is quite sure that it was meaningless to tie down anyone as indomitable as Nuru: "Any attempt to stifle the man in whose blood the restlessness of the unfettered spirit dances, in whose veins the god dances his frenzied dance of anger, would only increase his desire to be free". She is contemptuous of those who are made sanguine by conventional religion and are wary of unconventional people like Nuru. The Nurus of the world must be acclaimed for "a rebel pushes away all the darkness shrouding religion and forges a new path. He is one in a thousand, but can the rest of the nine hundred and ninety-nine stand up as he does"? Paradoxically, she declares, that "the rebel might even someday become closer to the Almighty in some way". Quoting Rabindranath, she affirms that only those like Nuru who lose their way find out the true path into the future.

The Reading Circle's translation of *Bandhon Hara* is welcome, then not only because it presents us with a captivating self-portrait of Nazrul and his times but also because of the positive message it offers of emancipation of women as well as any mind fettered by convention and hidebound religiosity. It is especially relevant at this stage of Bangladesh's history because the issues it deals with seem still relevant for us. Amazingly, the translated letters read seamlessly, though they are the work of ten different translators. Clearly, much thought has gone into finding a common translation strategy and the editing too reveals care and meticulousness. The extensive glossary, the helpful timeline of Nazrul's life, and the photographs on the cover and at the end of the text provide readers with supplementary information and images that make the book an attractive read as well.

Almost the only caveat I have as a reviewer with some experience of translating myself is the indecision shown in retaining Bengali words and phrases in the translation. There was a

time when translators preferred to not use any word at all from the source language in the translated text. Now, what with the chutnification of the English language, even Books in English are sprinkled with words from other languages. Translators now prefer to flavor their work with the sound of the original text by including as many words from the source language as they can. But one needs to strike the right balance then, for why have a glossary and retain the original word or phrase if the translator can convey its meaning and expressive quality through a word and phrase available in the target language? It does not seem to me that the members of the translator collective of *Bandhon Hara* have always succeeded in this respect.

Take the translation of Nuru's letter to Monuwar as an instance of contradictions and awkwardness created by translating some words and phrases and retaining others in the text. On p. 90 we come across the italicized phrase "*Du chhai*", but how would a reader without any knowledge of Bengali understand this phrase? On p.92 we are told about the *sheora* tree under which one can stand; here the context makes clear that sheora is a tree and so why italicize the noun? On the same page we learn about "Sri Krishna's *tribhangapose* because he appears *bhanga* broken" ; in this instance *bhanga* is quite helpfully glossed in a footnote but why is the word then also explained in the text itself? In the next page we are told about "the greatest play of *allrashleelabut* surely this is a word that also needs to be glossed for the non-Bengali speaking reader!

But these problems do not stand out in the text and impede the reader from enjoying Nazrul's epistolary narrative. The final impression The Reading Circle's *Bandhon Hara* leaves on the reader is a positive one. The collective efforts of the translators of this group must therefore be lauded as must the generosity of Standard Chartered Bank for financing this handsomely produced volume. Here is hoping that these translators will embark once again on another project to bring one more of the neglected works of our great writers in English language versions for the readers who cannot access the text in Bengali.

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BOOK TALK

Words that have made a difference

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

(The first segment of this article was published last week. This is the second and concluding part)

Spring 1971 *Faruk Aziz Khan*

Faruk Aziz Khan, yet another Bengali government official, saw every reason to make his way to Mujibnagar and play his role in the rapidly expanding guerrilla struggle for Bangladesh's liberation from Pakistan. In this work, Khan comes forth with a detailed account of his participation in the war, with particular emphasis on his link-up with Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed. The writer then goes on to focus on the various hurdles the struggle was faced with, the political battles that cropped up one after another and the measures taken to contain them. The work provides a clear, objective perspective on the war, projecting as it does the all-round participation of the Bengali masses in the struggle for national liberation. Khan remains conscious of a need to project his story in all the objectivity he can muster. And he does the job excellently well, which is why Spring 1971 will remain a powerful point of reference for any student of Bangladesh's history.

Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendra Belal Mohammad Of all the works which have appeared on the seminal role played by Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (Free Bangladesh Radio) during the War of Liberation, this account from Belal Mohammad is perhaps one of the most authoritative. The writer was active at the Kalurghat radio station when the Pakistan army launched its genocide in March 1971. With Chittagong yet to be targeted by the army, Belal Mohammad, along with his colleagues, went into the job of organising resistance through the radio. The first individual to announce Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's declaration of independence was M.A. Hannan late on 26 March. It was a message that was not heard by many in the tumult

of the carnage going on in Dhaka. The book brims with details of how Major Ziaur Rahman came to make himself part of history through his declaration of independence on Bangabandhu's behalf. And then the story moves on, with riveting accounts of how the Pakistan air force strafed the station, compelling the staff of the station to cross the frontier into India. It would not be some weeks before Shwadhin Bangla Betar would resume broadcasts. Belal Mohammad takes you on the path and other pioneers travelled in that defining moment of Bengali national life.

Kashboner Konya Shamsuddin Abul Kalam *Published 1954*



Shamsuddin Abul Kalam (1926-1997) remains the great unsung hero of modern Bengali literature, one reason probably being that he took himself off to the West long before

Bangladesh became a free nation. And yet his contributions to the literary field here are as incisive as anyone else's, as this work of fiction so amply demonstrates. It is a simple tale of love in a rural clime in Bangladesh, with two men wooing two women they love beyond measure. The tragedy for them, though, is that the women turn their backs on them because of their poverty. The plot is woven around love, rejection and the materialistic considerations that come into play. If there are Sikdar and Hossain, the two doomed suitors, there is also Sakhina, who quietly, almost meekly, accepts a proposal of marriage from Boro Mia's brother.

Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochhor, Abul Mansur Ahmed *Published 1969*

This happens to be an eminently written book from one who knows all about politics. The reason is simple: Abul Mansur Ahmed (1898-1979) was



himself a politician in the fullest, professional sense of the meaning, having moved along a trajectory from pre-partition times

down to the last stages of Pakistan. In the process, he observed men, influenced events and indulged in that other passion of his, literature. One of that rare breed called intellectual politicians, Abul Mansur Ahmed brings into this work all his accumulated experience in the political world, commenting freely on men and matters in his times. In this book, therefore, there is promise of portraits and analyses of half a century of politics. The writer does a good job of presenting to readers the image of a past that was not to be matched by those who came after him. A pity. But, then again, not many have had the opportunity or the inclination to bring together such human traits as wit, profound literature and purposeful politics in their career. This work shows how Abul Mansur Ahmed managed to bring all three traits in a survey of a world now gone.

Dhaka: Smriti Bismritir Nogori Muntassir Mamoon *Published 1993*



Muntassir Mamoon is the quintessential historian. His portrayals of Dhaka, apart from his analytical studies on Bangladesh's political heritage, have given him a perch not quite

matched by others. As the nation's capital goes into an observance of its four-hundredth anniversary, it makes sense for one to go back to the work here noted because of all the old tales, all the historical points, indeed all the nostalgia Dhaka conjures up before a

generation that does not have much idea of the city's truly glorious past. In Nogori, Mamoon gives you the physical Dhaka. Its gardens, its lakes, its shops located on what today are narrow, overcrowded roads, its politics, its rich traditions with all their roots in what we now know as Old Dhaka come to us in this rich enumeration of the life of Dhaka as it were. There are the old marks of heritage in its old buildings. And there is the history of the Dhaka central jail, where famous politicians as well as common criminals have been held for as long as anyone can remember.

Uttam Purush Rashid Karim, *Published 1961*



Uttam Purush is a simple story of idealism. Rashid Karim (1925-) shows the protagonist, like so many others of his generation, as being caught up in the volatile politics of pre-partition India. But that is no reason to suppose

that he is an apolitical being. He certainly is not, for his belief in the idea of a separate homeland for India's Muslims is as firmly pronounced as in other around him. An unabashed admirer of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, he moves from West Bengal to East Pakistan in the great expectation that life will undergo a qualitative experience. Does the novel speak of all those Muslims who had cause to migrate to the new state of Pakistan in their search for self-assertion as a people? Is the idealism symbolised by the protagonist a mere camouflage for the disillusion the new state will soon come to embody? You can read a whole lot in the work. Then again, you just might not. It leaves you fumbling for meaning. You need to read between the lines.

Obhishopto Nogori Satyen Sen *Published 1967*

The work is a comprehensive walk through history. For Satyen Sen (1907-



1981), the emphasis consists in depicting the common strand of misery and struggle that people have been afflicted with throughout the

centuries. In this novel, therefore, it is as much a historical analysis of human destiny as it is a story of politics and priesthood dominating the lives of common men and women. The writer takes, as his starting point, the 6th century BC, with the prophet Jeremiah in the centre of things. In the background stands Jerusalem, a city which has made history, has been battered by history and indeed has been restored by history. Tales from the Bible add to the richness of the narrative. And by drawing on these tales, Sen projects recurrent historical images of truths that civilisations have endured through the times. Satyen Sen's work is a brilliant instance of how the historical novel has meant an expansion of the Bengali intellectual horizon.

Hangor Nodi Grenade Selina Hossain *Published 1976*



The pre-eminent position Selina Hossain (1947-) holds as a novelist has never been in doubt. One very powerful reason

why that has been so has to do with the themes of individual and social struggle that are a recurrent feature of her works. And with that comes the very necessary political underpinning, as in the work in question. Hossain brings into the narrative here her own exposition, one that her readers will easily identify with, of the trials and tribulations Bangladesh's people went through in the course of their War of Liberation in 1971. Symbolism is all that matters, for it is crucial to the tale. Within the symbolic comes realism. 1971 was that time in the lives of Bengalis where sharks,

figuratively speaking, gnawed at the life of a bloodied country. The rivers, timeless, flowed on. And yet change was on the way. The Bengali, long given to poetry and politics, took to the path of revolution. The grenade was what he needed. He used it brilliantly in his new avatar as a guerrilla. Such is the light Selina Hossain's fiction creates, to recreate history.

Nari Humayun Azad *Published 1992*



Known for his anti-establishment positions, together with his rejection of religious fanaticism,

Humayun Azad (1947-2004) sought to convey through Nari the first comprehensive account of the difficulties and dilemma Bengali women faced in their pursuit of everyday life. The radicalism inherent in the work was enough for many to think back on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. In the work, Azad takes readers on a journey through the broad swathes of experience feminist writers in South Asia have gone through in their writings. At the same time, Azad cannot hold himself back from taking swipes at major figures, including the venerated Rabindranath Tagore, for what he thought was their anti-feminist perceptions of life. Azad directs his criticism, at once sharp and unambiguous, at the patriarchal positions adopted by males, to a point where he comes down heavily on those who have historically sought to keep women confined in isolation from a religious point of view. The book, considered incendiary by the government, was banned in 1995. Five years later, though, Azad won a legal battle for the ban to be lifted.

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