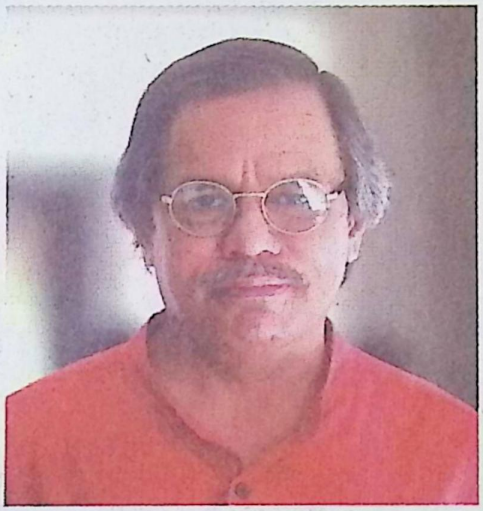
ing young defendant as a theatrical proof of guilt! As with the paranormal elements elsewhere, scenes like that make for a moreish and bright narrative.

Islam's stories are also remarkable in having been translated from their Bangla original by the author himself. There are few who could do this as well as he can. English readers may count their blessings at having this door opened for us.

Yet I wondered if a foreigner unlike me would understand a story like "Daedelus's Kite." It is probably true that when written originally in Bangla an international audience was not well-considered. It's not that a seasoned self-respecting writer would direct their words to a "readership" as such, but English readers without any knowledge of Bangladesh might've needed a little more by way of description and explanation in some places in order to properly access that Bangladeshi reality which permeates the collection. An understanding of the broader societal context in which the narration occurs cannot be assumed.



Syed Manzoorul Islam

"Daedelus's Kite" for example, risks leaving the impression of a society overwhelmed by impropriety, instead of being the keen observer's commentary on those things we know go wrong, sometimes or even oftentimes.

In that vein it was nice to find examples of decency in later stories, such as the family in "The Living Dead" which is relatively functional and the Manikganj vet in "Parapar Hotel" who briefly proves to be main character Sultana's one good among her several successive husbands. Even the character Shekul Arefin in "The Merman's Prayer" might've held promise in the field of relative goodness were he not introduced as having embezzled a large sum of money.

While highlighting social problems is certainly achieved through narration of the things that are wrong, especially when readers are "in the know", it may be of equal importance to point to positive examples, especially for a broader readership. In particular it would've been welcome to find a few more relatively functional, poor families – because they are common – and they still face misadventure as fodder for narration.

Similarly welcome were the instances of random acts of kindness such as in "The Two Assassins" when a middle aged stranger gives his gumchha to a nearly-drowned mother and daughter-in-law to dry themselves with. Acts of generosity and kindness are commonplace in Bangladesh – it stands out. There could have been more of these.

Regardless, there remains no doubt these stories do hold international appeal.

Nor is it to say that Islam's observations of how human relations run are not true to life – his descriptions are well-informed and thoughtful. Indeed the relationship between the two "witches", the mother and daughter-in-law in "The Two Assassins" is appealing, even humorous because it mirrors so vividly what that relationship can sometimes be. It is also an example of the sort of relationship that will readily transcend cultures.

Islam's narrative style, meanwhile, shines of intimacy and immediacy. The reader is engaged when he addresses us directly, as he often does, including in "Everything You Wanted to Know about Ferguson Dinnerwala."

"You seem to be amused by the name of Ferguson Dinnerwala?" the author asks. It feels as though depending on their thought-response the reader might suddenly see the words on the remainder of the page change, as a dialogue might meander in a conversation.

Yet as with any true storyteller, Islam admits to being not more than a conduit. "But Sir, it's not in my power to change it..." Islam continues. He knows his stories have their own life, a vibrancy the reader must also acknowledge. Ferguson Dinnerwala is Ferguson Dinnerwala because that's who he is. There's nothing to be done about it.

As a follow-up it would be interesting to see Islam writing directly in English, perhaps with a translation into Bangla. With his keen sense of observation and as an accomplished wordsmith he could shed further light upon Bangladesh for an international readership, made more effective by drawing out some local traits, scenes and ways of thinking.

In the meantime we have the schadenfreude of the razakar sent to his death in the murky depths of a haor or lake by a dream; we can revile the unwitting cannibalising of a policeman by his henchmen; and experience just about all emotional responses in between. It is a varied and fulsome story collection. Because above all, this story-teller remains an expert batsman whose eye never leaves the ball. And that is our reward. ■