

The Ruined Nest and Other Stories

Translated by: Prof. Mohammad A Quayum

Kualamlampur: Silverfish, 2014

Reviewed By Shamsad Mortuza



TRANSLATION is a risky job, but somebody has to do it. After all, a translator runs the risk of being lost in the act of crossing the language or cultural barrier. It is never easy to grasp the subtlety of the source language and render it in a readable target language. The linguistic competency is just one of the many qualities that a translator requires to avoid communication collapses. The translator must be both sincere and sensitive not only to the original text but also to its context. The risk gets even bigger when one attempts to translate an author who himself has ardently tried and arguably failed to translate his own work in his second language.

I write the last sentence, and brace myself for the criticism that it must entail. Tagore, after all, got the Nobel Prize for his translation of *Gitanjali*. But the translated abstract philosophy of Tagore, as critics have argued, turned out to be mawkish verses. Philip Larkin, for one, ill-famously used the F-word to show his disgust for Tagore in translation. Amit Chaudhuri, writing for *The Guardian*, quotes Karl Miller who once told him that Tagore was "showed down our [British] throats." A dose of the colonial quinine I suppose. Chaudhuri also cites James Campbell who under the pen-name of JC in his TLS column "notebook" questioned the fuss over Tagore's 150th anniversary. Chaudhuri summarizes: "Any man dressed in a loose robe-like garment, and whose poetry, at least in English translation, comprises lines such as the one Jack quotes ('Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark'), is up, in Britain, for a laugh."

Tagore was no stranger to criticism when he was alive. Throughout his career, he had to negotiate with harsh criticism. Centuries down the road, it is up to a new breed of translators who can really show the world what the fuss over Tagore was, and is, all about. This is precisely the reason why the dirty job of translation has to be undertaken. Without good translation Tagore's essential genius will fail to cross the cultural threshold. The need of good translation has been recognised and addressed by Ketaki Dyson, William Radice, Radha Chakravarty, Fakrul Alam among others. I pick up the collection of short stories by Rabindranath Tagore, *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories*, translated by Mohammad A Quayum, with certain apprehensiveness. Can Quayum do justice to Tagore and add his name to the list of translators mentioned here? At least he has picked up a relatively easier job of translating Tagore's prose, and not poetry.

Settled in Malaysia, Quayum is a university professor who specializes in South Asian literature. His academic orientation is evident in the introduction on Tagore. He begins by providing a brief account of Tagore's life before going on to discuss the central ideas behind the stories. The good thing about this

collection is that it approaches a readership that probably has no prior knowledge of Tagore. He tries to explain and add footnotes to every possible cultural reference. These footnotes do not necessarily block the flow of a very readable prose. At times, it seems the translator is overdoing it. Then again, it could be just me (or anyone who is familiar with Bangla for that matter).

You cannot think of a Bengali middle class household without a copy of *Golpuguchha* and *Shonchoyeta*. And as you read the translation, you feel something is amiss. Tagore, by his own admission, "had to create" a poetic prose to short stories as he had no literary ancestor such as Maupassant when he started writing his stories (*Galpaguchha*). The lyricism of Tagore's prose and the economy of language are really hard to get across in a different language.

Quayum has tried his best to be honest to the text. He was making sure that his overseas readers understand what the stories were all about. Some of the themes like Suttee or child marriage may appear as lore from bygone days. To make Tagore contemporary to a modern audience, Quayum focused mostly on the tapestry of human relationships available in Tagore. Love, jealousy, caste consciousness, liberal humanism seem to loom large in the selection of translated stories.

There are 20 stories in total—the longest one is the title story 'Nasto Nirh', translated as 'The Ruined Nest'. The collection aims at translating one-fifth of *Galpaguchha*, while remaining quite representative of Kabiguru. Quayum has tried to capture various stages of Tagore's literary career—an idea that has been depicted in the cover illustration of the book.

The praise for the book on the jacket will confirm how successful the translator has been in making his work accessible to a great majority. But anyone familiar with the Bangla may find some of the interpretive translation a bit limiting. For example, in Tagore's "Suha" where a relationship dies because a deaf girl fails to express herself in human language. She has no problem in communicating with a calf in the stable. But her husband is simply eager to get rid of her and marry for the second time when he realized that he had married someone without language. "The second time around, her husband, making use of sense organs of both sight and hearing married a girl who could speak" (98). The original story, however, mentions someone with "language." By making it an issue of speech, Quayum is blocking other possibilities associated with communication collapses.

Overall this is a great production that will make contemporary readers aware of the brilliance of one of the greatest storytellers of the world.

The reviewer is Professor of English, University of Dhaka.

40 Years of Public Administration and Governance in Bangladesh

Edited by: Prof. Nizam Ahmed

Published by: The University Press Limited

Reviewer Shakhawat Liton while going through the book wonders why public servants do not serve the public?

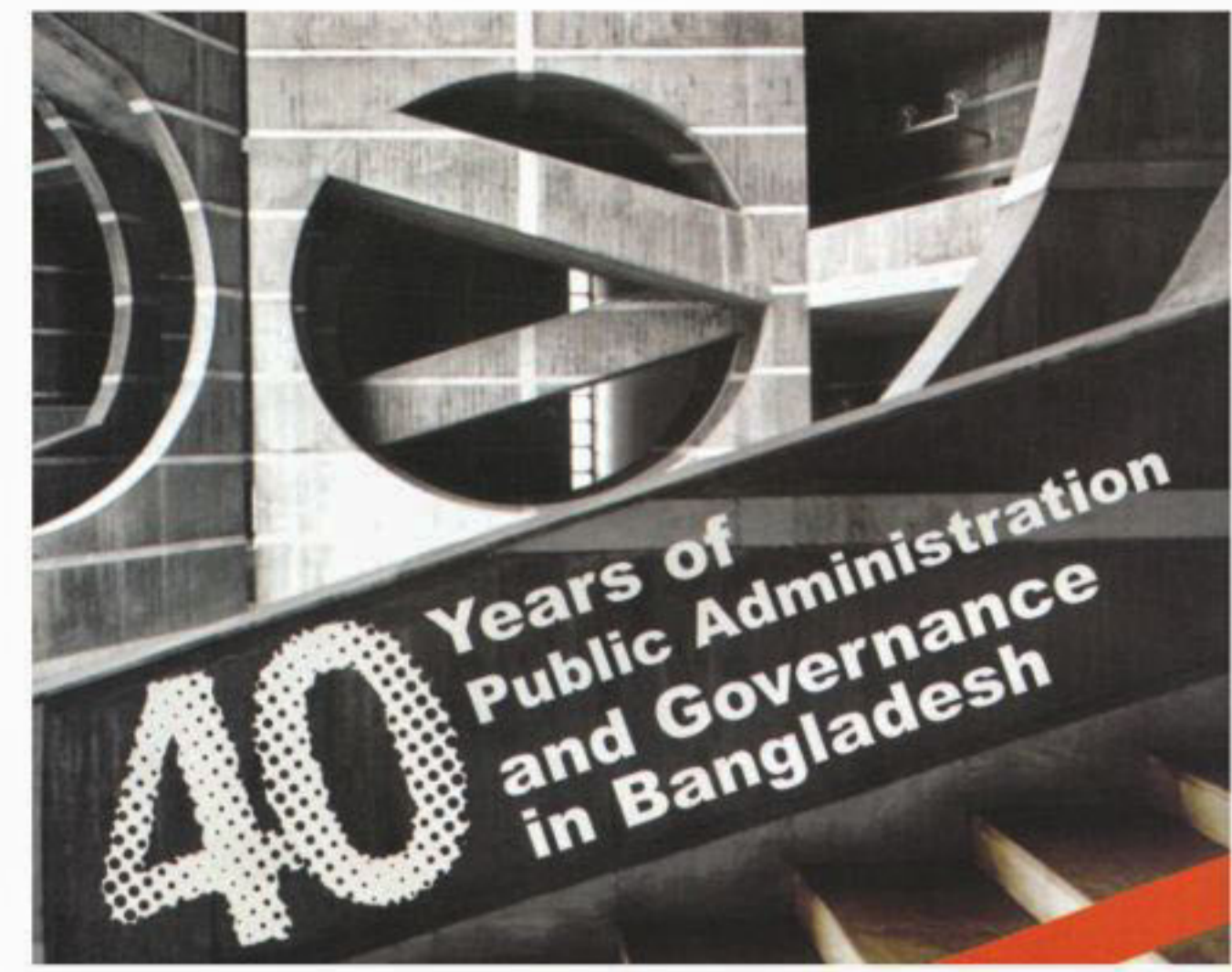
EXPERTS in an authoritative book explores many aspects of the bureaucracy and offers food for thoughts to address the crisis in the administration. The authoritarian regimes even were better to some extent for the country's public administration than the democratic rule for last two decades. It may sound ridiculous. But a recently published book based on extensive research by more than a dozen of experts on public administration has come up with the astounding findings. Meaning of the findings is so unpleasant. The public administration was abused in different ways during the one party system rule till the middle of August, 1975 and the authoritarian and two martial law regimes until 1990. The martial law regimes and semi-martial law rulers in between August 1975 and December 1990 have abused the public administration to consolidate their power base. However, the martial law regimes could not behave ruthlessly with the administration as the regimes suffered from legitimacy crisis and they needed support from the public administration to rule the country.

Unfortunately, the research findings show how both Awami League and BNP are engaged in devising new ways of politicizing the bureaucracy for their partisan purposes for over the last two decades. The democratic rulers coming after the fall of autocratic Ershad regime in December 1990 could not deliver on their promises to offer good governance by refraining from abusing the public administration. One of their dominant strategies in the pervasive culture was to punish the disloyal civil servants and reward the ones who are loyal to the partisan politics. According to the findings, both the parties when in power have adopted this strategy in more aggressive manner during the decades of democratic rule than under authoritarian regimes. Relying on the findings in the book, it may be argued that country's two major political parties--AL and BNP that have been ruling and governing the country over the past two decades must shoulder the maximum responsibility for the present worse state of the public administration.

The authoritative book styled "40 Years of Public Administration and Governance in Bangladesh" offers many foods for thoughts. The book edited by Professor Nizam Ahmed, a teacher of Public Administration at the Chittagong University, explores many aspects of public administration and governance in our country. It also offers some good international practices which Bangladesh may follow to overcome the existing disastrous situation in the public administration.

The book shows the extent of politicisation that has taken place in the bureaucracy. It provides evidence to show that politicisation is noticed at every stage--recruitment, promotion and training of members of the bureaucracy. Several mechanisms have been used to ensure the primacy of party politics in personnel management matters.

The excessive politicisation of bureaucracy keeps producing dangerous consequences. The institutional capacity of the bureaucracy to govern has gradually declined. The research findings of the book say the government remains mostly un-



countable. MPs routinely utilise various techniques to hold the government accountable, although without much success. Those owning their elevation to political leaders remain busy satisfying personal/political need of their mentors rather than serving the public interest as a whole. The issue of accountability and transparency remains neglected. The government is struggling to deliver on its electoral promises as the excessive politicised administration appears unable to discharge neutrally their jobs. Public servants can not serve people according to their constitutional obligation to do so.

The present sorry state of the administration completely mocks the government's vision and mission stipulated in the official website of the Ministry of Public Administration. The public administration ministry envisions to become a key provider of high quality organizational, functional and human resource support to Bangladesh public service with a view to ensuring efficient, professional, transparent and responsive public service delivery. About its mission the ministry claims that "it contributes to the development of a competent and accountable public service system by attracting, developing, engaging and managing an efficient and innovative organizational, functional human resources support system".

Unfortunately, the vision and mission expressed in words remain only in paper. Is the current public administration fit for independent Bangladesh and its people? One may draw an analogy between the public administration now exists in Bangladesh and that one existed during the British colonial rule. The British had laid the foundation of a modern public administration. But it was established more to help stabilize colonial rule than to serve the common interest. Whom does our present public administration serve more--people or the party in power?

Classics Corner

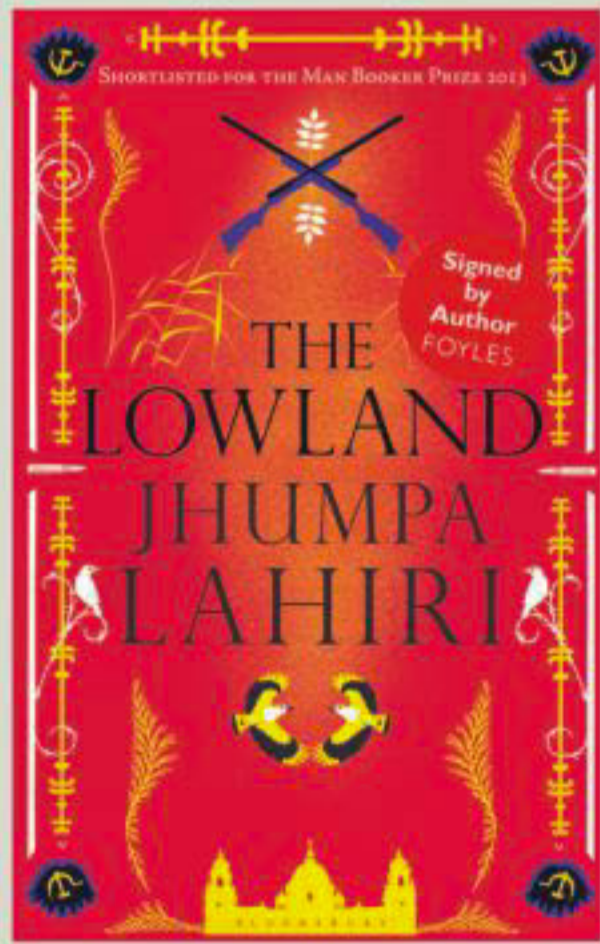
Dear readers and writers, we are going to start a corner titled "Classics Corner" where reviews from you on timeless Classics and very popular books published between 1900 and 2000 will be printed. You are requested to write reviews of books of your choice, scan the book cover and send to us. We may do the cover scanning in our office if you bring it along. Please send them to: shahnoorwahid@yahoo.co.uk

Reviewed by Raana Haider

'The Lowland'

Jhumpa Lahiri

Bloomsbury, 2013, London



A sweeping saga spanning four generations weaves itself through the bustling, pell-mell metropolis that is Calcutta and its antipode - a calm orderly small-town in Rhode Island, USA. This is Calcutta of the Coffee House, Park Street, Presidency College, "together they took in the stone buildings, with their decrepit grandeur, that lined the streets. Their tired columns, their crumbling cornices, their sullied shades."

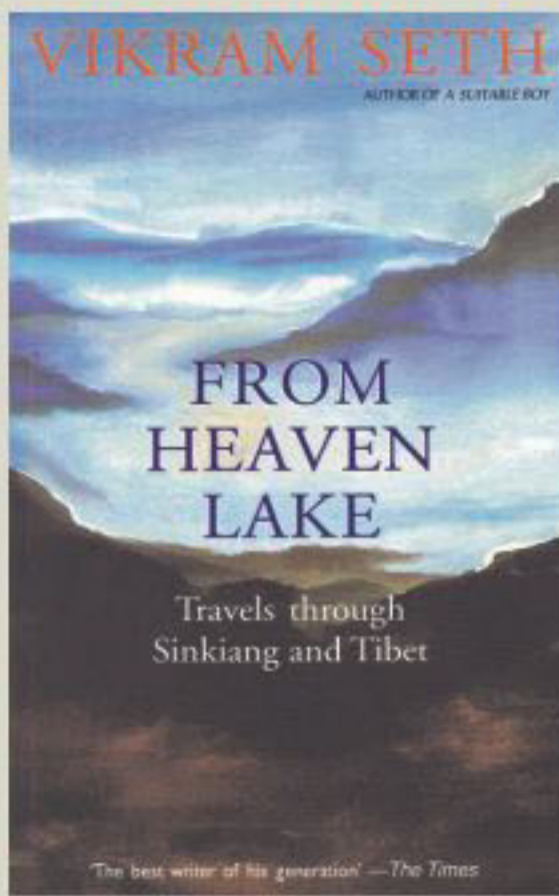
An immensely evocative narrative, the reader is caught up in the global events of the late 1960s - the Paris student revolt of 1968, the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations at Berkeley campus in California, Mao, Che Guevara and Castro and the revolutionary book of its day - 'Wretched of the Earth' by Frantz Fanon. In this anti-establishment scenario, we encounter the restless and volatile Udayan a committed member of the West Bengal Naxalite movement. Killed by the police, the pensive and responsible elder brother Subash marries Udayan's young pregnant widow Gauri. They move to the USA.

In a reversal of stereotyped expectations, Lahiri explores the unconventional and non-stereotype role of the mother Gauri in her distant relationship with her daughter Bela. The reader may ponder who fits into the conventional role of parenthood? Gauri? Or Subash the uncle who adopts fatherhood and makes the parental identity entirely his own. Bela grows up in the belief that Subash is her father. Gauri leaves it to Subash to divulge the truth to Bela. Upon the revelation, Bela leaves the home. A week later, she calls. "Baba? He had heard her. He'd heard her still calling him this." Understated in language and elegantly subtle in style, the narrative embodies 'less is more.' In a long journey of loss and discovery, of complexities and sensitivities that delve deep into the human heart, here is a deeply satisfying novel that stays with the reader long after the last page.

'From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet'

Vikram Seth

Daily Star Books / Dhaka, 2013



For the ultimate intrepid global traveller, there is Timbuctoo and there is Tibet. Among routes less travelled, the Tibetan destination offers terrifying twists, terrifying drop-offs, massive mudslides, moon-scaped paths and assured uncertainty and yet people continue to dot the destination. In 1885, the Bengali babu, Sarat Chandra Das on two occasions visited Tibet and he too left a record.

Tibet in the early 1980s is the riveting read put forth by Vikram Seth in his first published book (1983). A student at Nanjing University from 1980-1982, he made the hitch-hiking journey from the oases of north-west China to the Himalaya - the lofty land of perpetual snow-tipped peaks - covering the basin and plateau of Qinghai to his destination the 'roof of the world' Tibet. Notably, this is China a few years following the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s. Here is the land over which Chairman Mao ruled till his demise in 1976.

Turfan in July: "In summer it bakes and in winter it freezes...Xian reminds me irresistibly of Delhi...and most of all, the city wall, the presence of history. The only other place where I have had a similar sense of *déjà vu* is Shanghai. There the intolerably density of population, the sluggish river crammed with boats and sewage, and the vestiges of British commercial architecture combine to create an atmosphere evocative of Calcutta. Beijing and Nanjing, the two cities I know best, remind me of nothing but themselves." Do note that these are Chinese cities in the 1980s. Since then the transformation has been of tectonic magnitude.

In a language that is lyrical, Seth writes on water. "There is enchantment in flowing water: I sit hypnotized by its beauty - water, the most unifying of the elements, that ties land and sea and air in one living ring..." He is observing the many faces of water in one of the valleys in a terrain known for its extreme harshness and rugged beauty.

Noteworthy are his comments on social development in China and India. In his diary on the 14th August, 1981, Vikram Seth records: "Tomorrow is Indian Independence Day.

Reading Naipaul makes for sad and serious thought. I think about what the two countries have done for their people in the course of the last thirty years. One overwhelming fact is that the Chinese have a better system of social care and of distribution than we do...Tibet will take a long time to achieve the standard of living of other parts of China; however, in this comparatively prosperous part of Tibet I have not, for instance, seen signs of malnutrition."

On the Tibetan trail amongst his travails and travel, most engaging is his running account of his interactions with truck-drivers, the tea-shop owner, the garage mechanic, fellow hitch-hikers - the populace that Seth meets on route. The last paragraph of one of his poems encapsulates the sentiment:

'Here we three, cooped, alone,
Tibetan, Indian, Han,
Against a common dawn
Catch what poor sleep we can,
And sleeping drag the same
Sparse air into our lungs,
And dreaming each of home
Sleeptalk in different tongues.'

Kaler Nirantar Jatra:

Living memories of a former bureaucrat

Masum Billah embarks on a journey down bureaucratic by lanes along with the writer

The author had the rare opportunity of closely observing the techniques and strategies of governance being a personal secretary to former President Hussain Muhammad Ershad and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The author as a bureaucrat came into contact with the people from lowest to the highest strata of society which gave him ample opportunity to learn about their philosophy of life, mentality and simplicity and the way people sitting at the highest tier of administration run day to day affairs. The early life of the author, his higher education at Dhaka University, experience as its teacher, closer observation of people, memories of Humayun Ahmed, thoughts and limitations coupled with his education abroad and assignment in foreign missions are reflected in the lines of this book.

His experience in the field administration as SDO, DC and Divisional Commissioner is living example of the field administration, its relations with the government and administration and also the simple and common people.

He has drawn the picture of the university campus during the 1960s and also a contrasting picture which we see today on the campuses.

As a diplomat he worked hard to attract the business tycoons of Japan to Bangladesh. The then Bangladesh Ambassador supported and helped implement the plan. In one chapter we get to know that he established Dhaka Forum along with some of his fellow retired colleagues to find out a solution to political chaos in the country. Some of the incidents have been written a little bit haphazardly. Had they been neatly arranged, the book would have been a far more interesting read.

He has drawn a contrasting picture of the behavior of the doctors of the USA and Bangladesh. The smiling face and cordial behavior of a doctor can lessen much pain of a patient which most Bangladeshi doctors don't practice so he comments, "We may be financially poor but our doctors should not be mentally poor as well. Doctors' good behavior is the first and very important treatment of any disease."

The book is a mixture of author's travelling, boyhood experience and the experiences during his service in the administration at various levels. The book comes in 316 pages divided into twenty-eight chapters.

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