

DARK DESTINIES, DARK SHIPS

AUTHOR: SHERKO FATAH

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN CHALMERS, *Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015*

REVIEWED BY NIAZ ZAMAN

THANKS to "Literary Encounter," a programme initiated by Goethe-Institut Bangladesh, in cooperation with The Reading Circle, to introduce contemporary German literature in English translation, a discussion of *The Dark Ship* by Sherko Fatah was held at Goethe-Institut, Dhaka. Sherko Fatah, a prize-winning author who writes in German, was born in 1964 in East Berlin, to an Iraqi Kurd father and a German mother. He has received numerous awards: Aspekte-Literaturpreis, 2001, Ehrenpreis zum Deutschen Kritikerpreis, 2002, Hilde-Domin-Preis für Literatur im Exil, 2007, Großer Kunstpreis Berlin and Adelbert von Chamisso Prize 2015.

Awarding the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize for his prior body of work, in particular for his novel *Der Letzte Ort* (The Last Place), the jury noted, "his books enrich intercultural literary writing through their brutally honest depiction of war and terror." Fatah's novel, *The Dark Ship* (2015), the translation by Martin Chalmers of the German novel, *Das Dunkle Schiff* (2008), depicts the terror of living under a brutal and repressive regime as well as the impossibility of a migrant's leaving a traumatic past behind. Though Kerim flees his homeland for Germany, as a discussant at the literary meet pointed out, the ugliness and the violence of his hometown follow him to Germany.

The book is in five parts, with a prologue – almost like a five-act play. The first part introduces Kerim and his father and describes their life in circumstances which become increasingly bleak and terrifying. The second part follows the death of Kerim's father, Kerim's abduction by a group of jihadists, his escape from them and his decision to flee to Europe. The third part – which justifies the title of the book – describes Kerim's journey in the hold of a ship and his almost miraculous escape. The fourth part is set in Berlin as Kerim strives for asylum. The fifth part, like the denouement in a tragedy, ends catastrophically for Kerim.

The prologue describes a seemingly ordinary scene – old women collecting greens from the hillside – but suggests the horror and futility that underlies the book.

It was a summer's day, hot, yet so windy that one couldn't really feel it. Dark shadows of clouds hurried across plains and slopes, as if airships were gliding through the deep blue sky. Perhaps it was the most beautiful day of

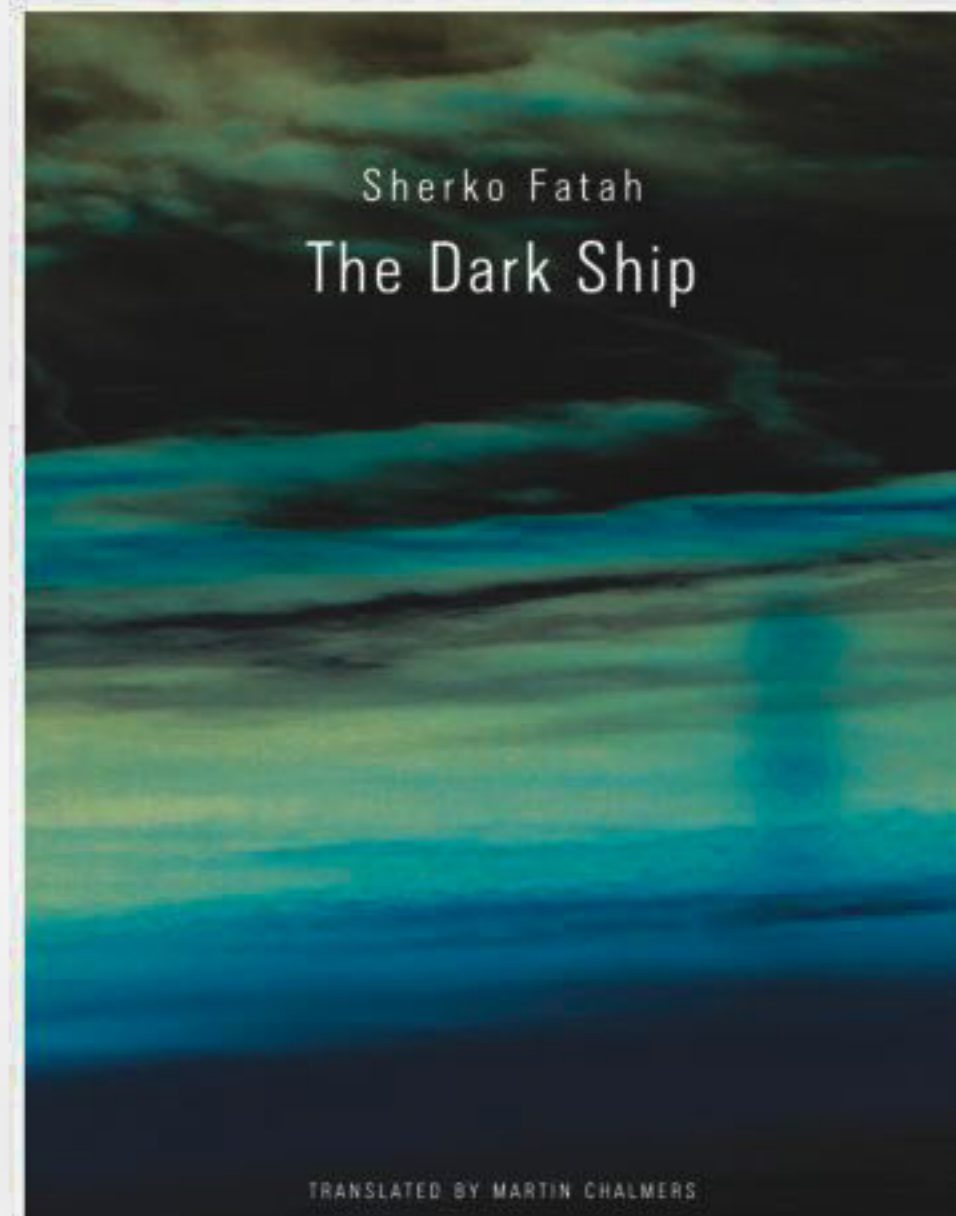
his life, not because of the mild light and the gentle wind, no, on this sluggishly fading day he for the first time felt the deep peace which beauty grants, and at the same time discovered its futility. (1)

As the small boy watches, he hears the noise of a helicopter. When the helicopter comes into view, he sees two soldiers sitting in the open hatch. One waves at him; he waves back. Hoping that he can get a ride on the helicopter, he runs towards it, but the helicopter is too far for him to reach it. As he continues to watch, he sees the soldiers get down and herd the women into the helicopter. Disappointed that he could not get a ride, he still waves to the soldiers. Then, as he continues to watch, he sees the old women tumbling out of the helicopter. "There they were falling, one after another tumbled out of the hatch, arms spread out they gleamed in the light and, as if to halt them, the wind tugged at their clothes" (2). It is an understated description, reflecting the perspective of the child watcher.

Other scenes of horror and repression follow, some graphic, some understated. For example, one afternoon two men come to the diner. There is something striking about the two men and, seeing their Range Rover parked outside, Kerim realizes that they are not ordinary men. He hears then narrate stories about spies, boasting how they were discovered and one of them punished: "We played football with his head" (59). Though Kerim realizes there is something terrible about these two men, he admires the confidence of the older man, wants that confidence and freedom for himself. When the two men leave without paying, Kerim watches his father follow them and ask for his money. Instead of paying what they owe, they drive away, running over Kerim's father as he stands in the way. "Kerim saw only the dark-tinted panes, heard the roar of the engine and, immediately afterwards, the dull soft thud of the impact as the Range Rover struck his father" (62).

With the death of his father, Kerim has to carry on his father's business of running the diner. Even though he had not admired his father, the reader is aware of the significance of his father in Kerim's life: how his father had protected him and taught him how not to be afraid. With his father's death, he also has to take on his father's role of taking supplies to his grandparents. On the way to his grandparents' place, however, he is captured by a

group of jihadists, called the Holy Warriors. Fascinated by their charismatic leader, simply called the Teacher, Kerim witnesses at first-hand what Islamists believe about jihad and martyrdom. Kerim manages to escape from the group after six months and returns to his family. He takes up where he has left off. (The reader is not told how or why Kerim left the group, only that he has brought back a lot of money in a bag that belonged to Rashid, one of the Holy Warriors.) However, he does not stay, but uses the money – how he got it is not explained at the time – to plan his escape. He contacts a tailor, whose name his father had given him in case he ever needed help. The tailor puts him in touch with traf-



fickers who smuggle him across land to a port from where he has to journey by boat or ship.

The third part of the book details Kerim's journey by sea. The last few years have made all of us vividly aware of the plight of desperate migrants, of the horror of suffocation on board trucks or of drowning on overloaded, unsafe boats. Fatah's description vividly reveals the sufferings of migrants on board ship through tracing the experience of Kerim. Kerim believed that once he managed to stow away on a ship, it would be easy for him but it isn't. The hold is dark and claustrophobic. There is another stowaway in the hold and the two are discovered. The captain of the ship tells the two that though he sympathizes with

them, there are laws and he cannot permit them to remain. The two are rowed over to an island from where Kerim manages to leave in a small fishing boat which has place for only one extra passenger.

In Germany Kerim starts the process of seeking asylum. He has to concoct a story. The real story should have been enough: the repressive regime, the brutal actions of the military, his abduction by Islamic militants, but, as one of the characters says earlier, Europe grants refugees permission to stay for different reasons at different times. Thus Kerim's narrative must meet the current requirements.

Unlike other refugees, who have no one in the country where they have sought shelter, Kerim has his uncle. He meets other compatriots who befriend him. He also meets a beautiful German woman named Sonja. Kerim had been in love with a girl back home, but it is Sonja with whom he first has sex. On evening, while on the long walks he had started taking, he sees some people skating on ice. He thinks he too can walk across the frozen lake. However, he doesn't see a warning sign that the ice is thin at that spot. As a result, he falls through the ice into the water. Sonja helps rescue him. She takes him home and helps him get dry and warm. Both are aroused and they have sex.

He becomes obsessed with Sonja, but memories of his violent past haunt him. Unable to adjust to his new country, he turns to the mosques in his adopted city. One day at prayer he is surprised to see Rashid. They do not speak to each other, and Kerim sees him leave with his new-found friend Amir. Memories of the past had haunted Kerim in his adopted land, but now he remembers the last time he had seen Rashid. They had been working together at a computer, uploading propaganda videos, when Rashid left the room. Finding himself alone, Kerim had wandered about the house and found a stack of money. Later, when he got an opportunity, he grabbed as many notes as he could, stuffed them into Rashid's bag and left. Kerim's reason for stealing is not clear – as his other thefts and betrayals are not. Thus, with Amir, he robs a man of drugs, on his own he robs an addict of a ring, which he then gives to Sonja.

The last chapter comes as a shocking climax to the narrative. Amir learns what Kerim did and sets out to punish him. He tells him, "You could have been a hero. But I know

what you are – a thief and a traitor" (307). Amir does what he has come to do and then stuffs the stolen packet of drugs in Kerim's pocket.

After Amir leaves, Kerim lies on the ground, thinking of the Teacher and the Teacher's words. (A weak translation unfortunately detracts from what could have been poignant words: "The flowers are blooming so magnificently here in the snow as if next spring would never to [sic] come. . . . Along here, stay with me just a little while," 308)

Though the book blurb describes the novel as telling "the story of the kind of trauma and striving that lead a man from religious extremism to a vain hope for redemption," Kerim was never a religious extremist. In fact, he had been indifferent to religion. His joining the Holy Warriors had been an accident. However, in his new home, he longs for a "purity of belief which would be a purity of life" (267). But the focus of the novel is not so much upon religion, on doubt and disbelief, as upon repression and indoctrination, the traumas of past experiences, which prevent one from ever escaping.

Sherko Fatah's *The Dark Ship* is an interesting book, describing life under a repressive regime, the pressures that lead people to migrate and the attempts of the asylum seeker to settle down in his new home. Through his vivid descriptions and graphic narrative, the writer brings the plight of Kurds vividly to light – but also casts a light on the plight of other refugees fleeing their conflict-torn homes. The scene of people skating on a frozen lake is reminiscent of a scene in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. However, in *The Dark Ship* it is just an incident which brings Kerim and Sonja together. In *Brick Lane*, the ice skating scene is symbolic. As Nazneen skates awkwardly in her sari, she becomes aware of a freedom that only life in the west can give. *The Dark Ship* promises no such freedom, no such happiness.

For the most part the book is immensely readable, but it is occasionally marred by poor translation. Some sentences seem out of place and some constructions are faulty. The translation could have done with some editing. I hope there will be a new edition with necessary corrections.

The reviewer is Advisor, Department of English, Independent University, Bangladesh, and a member of The Reading Circle.

Journalism: Offline Online

AUTHOR: MAHAMUDUL HAQUE

Publisher: Academic Press and Publishers Library (APPL), February 2016, Price: Tk 350

REVIEWED BY MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE history of journalism in Bangladesh is largely non-academic as people with different educational backgrounds have come up and joined this exciting profession without any career plan. Even then many of them have been able to show their mantle in the profession, while many others quit it halfway through. We can recall many stalwarts in this profession who had little academic background of journalism. Yet, they rose to the pinnacle of the profession, creating a good ground of journalism for their successors.

The academic practice of journalism in Bangladesh began only in 1962 when Dhaka University introduced a postgraduate diploma course on journalism. This journalism department began its journey basically borrowing curricula from US universities. Later in 1979, it was upgraded by introducing Honors and Master's degree courses. Even after the upgrade of this department, it remained largely dependent on books and curricula of foreign universities, particularly the USA.

There is no harm in referring students to the books written by scholars and academics of countries like the USA and the UK. But my intention is to draw attention to the fact that each country has its own culture of journalism and background. Reading journalism books written in American perspective is unlikely to help the students catch up with the main temperament of journalism of his or her own society, though the basics of journalism, particularly the style of story writing and the objective of journalism, are more or less universal.

Students can be benefited from the books written with the general perspective of journalism to some extent but to have the real temperament and taste of the journalism of their own countries, there should be books written by the journalists and scholars of their own communities. When we were the students of Dhaka University's Journalism Department, we saw few books written by teachers or our journalists. But today things have started changing. Many university teachers and senior journalists – the young and old alike – have started writing books on journalism.

'Sangbadikota: Offline Online', authored by Mahamudul Haque, deputy editor (metro) of The Daily Star. The author, also a researcher, a trainer and former editor of the now-defunct online news outlet 'Media for Media' (established in 2006), is known to me since he joined the United News of Bangladesh (UNB) as a sub-editor in 2003 after graduating in journalism.

With the unbelievable advancement of technologies, journalism across the world has got a tremendous boost both in its pace and presentation patterns. What we used to receive after a gap of 24 hours, now we get information instantly even on our cellphones, let alone the online webportals. The author has tried to catch up with the changing institutions of journalism accommodating the major issues of both electronic and print media in his book. And he



rightly pointed out the new ideas and patterns of journalism. As he started his career in a news agency, he has dedicated a chapter to agency journalism as readers are hardly aware how a news agency serves its clients from behind the scene.

In his 244-page book, Mahamudul Haque has described with logic and information how the print media has run into troubles with the fast-going online media. He also narrated the changing business pattern of the media with the change of media's traditional approach. The writer also cited the examples of traditional media's survival efforts depending on

their online versions shutting down their print ones. Most of the mainstream media in Bangladesh have also introduced their online versions along with their print ones. But, the media organisations are yet to integrate the traditional news management system with that of the new media to build an integrated newsroom considering it as a 'lifesaving' model in the new era of journalism, says the author.

He has also said the online media in Bangladesh could not yet put up the real challenge as they did in the Western world. He says no print media in Bangladesh has so far embraced death because of the booming online media. The writer has also mentioned news production techniques both by citizens and regular journalists and the creative strategies of media houses to boost their revenue generation alongside putting in place their new business models. This book also presents the new journalism's significant vision of Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute, who redefines news as a 'collaborative intelligence' explaining that 'news is no longer a product delivered by one cohort—journalists—consumed largely in private by another—audiences—who then interact with each other mostly in an invisible way around a proverbial water cooler. The new journalism has the potential to be a more dynamic interaction between these cohorts and at its best even a virtuous circle of learning.'

In his critical analysis, the author indicates that journalists need to be 'news engineers' rather than ending up as mere good reporters and copy editors. One has to be a good news planner, designer and manager as well, he insists. Mahamudul Haque has also dwelt on newer genres and ideas of journalism, and its future trend, putting together 50 newer inventions of journalism in the developed nations, which he says, could be followed by the mass media in Bangladesh as well. The writer also efficiently analysed the history of online journalism in Bangladesh and its challenges – both professional and administrative ones.

The author has focused on the latest journalism concepts of five Es, experimental, experiential, explanatory, emotional, and economical

journalism, which are becoming prevalent in reshaping the contours of news and the media. Alfred Hermida, director and associate professor at the School of Journalism at the University of British Columbia, has pointed out these five trends as 'a prerequisite for survival at a time of flux and uncertainty' in the new media landscape. Other new concepts—online journalism, solutions journalism and embedded journalism—as well as oldest concepts—'newspaper morgue' or news library and feature in combating child labour—have also been discussed and analysed in separate chapters of the book. The author has clearly described the code of conduct for the practice of journalism as well as national policies of community radio, FM radio and television channels. The role of development communication, including the contribution of print and electronic media, to Bangladesh's development process has also been analysed based on latest statistics.

A few weeks back, I had been at Jahangirnagar University to attend a meeting of its Journalism department's syllabus committee. Taking advantage of sharing personal opinions as a student of journalism before the meeting, I urged the teachers to deeply involve their students in media houses rather than keeping them confined to the four walls of their classrooms. I also requested the teachers to work for media from their respective positions in different forms and formats. This will help them widen their line of thinking and make their class lectures more interesting. The writer of this new book also has interlinked journalism education and profession focusing on academy-industry relations to deal with the challenges faced by media organisations in Bangladesh in developing human resources, and journalism research and innovations.

Though there is a scope for one to dispute with the author over some points, which is quite natural, this book, published by Academic Press and Publishers Library (APPL), would be worth reading. It will also serve better the purposes of journalism teachers, students, researchers, policymakers and journalists as well.

The reviewer is Chief News Editor, UNB.

A glimpse of Indian society

AUTHOR: AVIROOK SEN

Penguin Books India, 2015

REVIEWED BY TUSAR TALUKDER

THE very beginning of *Aarushi* by India based eminent journalist Avirook Sen reminds me of the opening lines of *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing. Both books deal with macabre murder. Both writers, through their tales, raise some questions which remain unanswered till the end of the books. Since the review will solely discuss multifarious facets of *Aarushi*, it will not answer the questions raised by Lessing. Rather, it will attempt to unfold how Avirook Sen has hatched a gruesome tale based on a real life incident. De facto, Sen started covering Talwars' trial from 2012 for the Mumbai Mirror. In 2014, after the declaration of verdict which gave Talwars' life time imprisonment, the author interviewed the key witnesses, investigators, family and friends of the Talwars. He attended the trial and accessed important documents.

Aarushi is based on the brutal killing of a thirteen-year-old girl Aarushi Talwar. She was found with her throat slit in her room in the Delhi suburb on May 16, 2008. The day after the murder, a middle-aged domestic servant of Talwar's family, Hemraj's body was also found nearby.

A very close reading of the book exposes that Sen as a writer is less interested in knowing who may have actually killed Aarushi, rather he is much interested in exploring whether there was enough evidence to convict the Talwars. He strongly believes there has been a miscarriage of justice based on the evidence he saw in the trial. At this point, it must be mentioned that in November 2013, Rajesh Talwar and Nupur Talwar, parents of Aarushi Talwar, were held on accusation of killing their only daughter and domestic help Hemraj. Two investigation reports given by the Uttar Pradesh Police and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) clearly state that 'it was an honor killing perpetrated by the parents.' But Sen thinks this story has been fabricated by the CBI to prove the Talwars guilty.

Furthermore, Sen's keen observations unveil many a prosecutorial errors and the failures of the investigators. Whether Aarushi was raped before she was killed is unknown due to the contamination or loss of DNA. Sen outstandingly reports the doctor who changed his testimony to assert that Aarushi's "vaginal opening was found prominently wide open" had never performed an autopsy on a woman's body before. Moreover, the pillow cases would draw special attention to the readers. A pillow and pillow cover seized from Hemraj's room were photographed and packed in sealed covers, which could only be opened on court orders. But Sen observes that these were taken out from the sealed envelopes and photographed again violating the due process. In this regard, Sen raises some relevant questions: "Here are the questions the agency did not answer about the photographs: 1. The pillow covers were under seal. No court authorized the opening of the seals, so on whose authority were the pictures taken? 2. Who took the pictures? 3. When were they taken?" In this way, Sen brings into focus the incongruities of the CBI's case against the Talwar couple.

I believe if the readers go through the book, they will easily perceive the inner meanings of the aforesaid words. Though it is a non-fiction, the readers will get the taste of reading a fiction. The way Sen has shed out the true happenings of Talwars family amid us is gravely heartrending. The diction he has employed in his text is fat-free and facile. Last but not least, some days before I went through *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James. The book took me to a world where there is nothing at all to believe in. I believe after coming across *Aarushi* the readers will feel the same way I felt after I came across James's above-mentioned book. Overall, *Aarushi* will open a new vista before the eyes of the readers to discover the true nature of human beings hidden beneath the skin.

The reviewer is a critic. He teaches English at Central Women's University (CWU).