

Poisoned Wells: A Tender Tale of Love and Death

AUTHOR: HILARY STANDING

REVIEWED BY REBECCA HAQUE

"WHEN the well is dry, we learn the worth of water"—Benjamin Franklin

"If we lived in the desert and our lives depended on a water supply that came out of a steel tube, we would inevitably watch that tube and talk about it understandingly. No citizen would need to be lectured about his duty toward its care and spurred to help if it were in danger. Teachers of civics in such a community might develop a sense of public responsibility, not only by describing the remote beginnings of the commonwealth, but also how that tube got built, how long it would last, how vital the intake might be if the rainfall on the forested mountains nearby ever changed in seasonal habit or amount. It would be a most unimaginative person, or a stupid one, who could not see the vital relation between the mountains, the forests, that tube and himself."—Isaiah Bowman

Hilary Standing's debut novel, *The Inheritance Powder*, was originally published in the UK in October 2015, and short-listed for the Yeovil Literary Prize in the same year. We in Bangladesh, however, were unaware of this fine novel's existence, until UPL took the laudable decision to print the Bangladeshi edition and launch it at the Dhaka Literary Festival in November 2016. I have borrowed the first part of this review's title from the heading given to the book-launch session in the DLF 2016 programme, but for a while, as I read the book, I played with the idea of using the quasi-allegorical, *Death by Water*. In the end, I plagiarized "Poisoned Wells" because it focuses more sharply on the tragic and deadly, carcinogenic effect of mass arsenic poisoning in large parts of rural Bangladesh. This, in essence, is the scaffolding upon which Hilary builds a powerful tale of a botched development programme and the complex nature of foreign-aid projects in poor countries. "Poisoned Wells" merges idea and image in one epithet, thereby capturing the inescapable and sinister pall of doom hovering over the lives of villagers forced to rely on nature's randomness, on nature's fickle ebb and flow of benevolence and malevolence. Of course, every Bangladeshi knows how Nature can be "red in tooth and claw", how our country's unique geography can devastate land and huts and blood and guts. We live from one crisis to another, from one natural calamity to another. Ironically, human intervention for the greater good can sometimes make things worse.

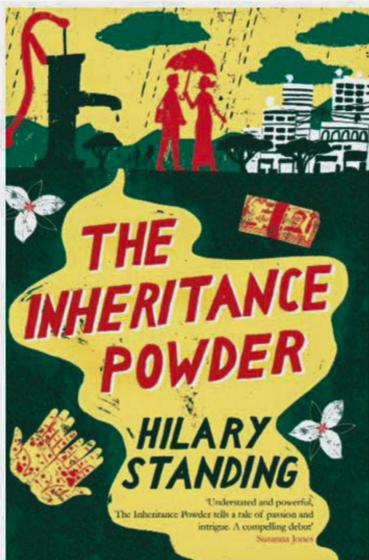
The *Inheritance Powder* was first published by RedDoor publications, and, as Hilary pointed out in conversation with me

in November 2016, it was such a shame that it was only available at Amazon.com. It is indeed a boon for us that Hilary had the impulse to offer the manuscript to UPL for publication and wider circulation in Bangladesh. Hilary is an emeritus fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. She has a doctorate in social anthropology, specializing in health systems development and reproductive health. She has lived and worked for long periods in India and Bangladesh, and has worked on issues of gender and health sector reform in many other countries. In an essay published on 3 November 2015 in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) blog titled *Fiction and Development*, Hilary writes: "Over a decade ago, I decided to write a novel about 'development'. The decision came about partly because I have always been a secret scribbler of...short stories and narrative of events that have engaged me in ways that social science doesn't quite work for. But particularly because the story behind the novel presented itself to me unbidden in a country where I have worked and lived and that is very close to my heart. That country is Bangladesh and the story which came to haunt me is one of good development intentions gone disastrously wrong."

The *Inheritance Powder* tells the tale of the world's worst mass chemical poisoning, a terrible story of 50-80 million people poisoned by arsenic released from under layers of sediment in deltaic regions of India and Bangladesh by the action of constructing deep bore wells. Hilary puts some harsh questions in her blog, "Where does accountability for this disaster lie? Could it have been foreseen? Which actors and agencies should take responsibility for resolving it?" She goes on to explain the narrative design of her novel: "I wanted to...explore these troubling questions through the prism of individual lives, to imagine how characters caught up in this situation in different ways might respond...The novel is told from the alternating viewpoints of a visiting British consultant working for a European development agency that wants a grand plan for dealing with arsenic, and a Bangladeshi woman leader of a grass-roots organization that is working to develop local solutions."

After I finished reading the novel, I phoned the Director of the Institute of Disaster Management, University of Dhaka, and quizzed her about local solutions. She explained that, given the magnitude of the problem of arsenic poisoning, and despite funding from the World Bank and The Netherlands, and despite good faith and intervention by NGOs and civil society leaders, the cost and complexity of testing for arsenic contamination made amelioration

and resolution of the crisis very difficult. The work is hard, but progress is slow. Funds are provided for the construction of the three-pitcher water distillation units, but this is an expensive alternative and our poor, ill-educated villagers are not really equipped to utilize this technology efficiently to gather enough drinking water. There are other, less expensive, local solutions which are in operation. For example, dug-wells in North Bengal, and rainwater harvesting, as in the remote areas of Sathkira. The Director pointed out that foreign aid is also being used to provide medication, and for available treatment of those affected by arsenic poisoning. Soon after this colloquy, serendipitously, my eyes caught the following news item which was squished into a small space in *The Daily*



Star (25 January 2017), bearing the headline, "12 pc face arsenic risk: LGRD minister tells parliament". The staff correspondent reported, "Replying to lawmakers' queries, the minister said in 29 percent of tube-wells of the country, arsenic concentration was found to be exceeding the acceptable level (above 50 parts per billion -ppb). In a scripted answer, he said arsenic test was conducted in 50 lakh tube-wells in 271 upazillas in 2003. Of these, 14.5 lakh tube-wells (29 percent of 50 lakh) were extremely affected (above 50 ppb), he added. A project titled 'Arsenic Risk Reduction Project for Water Supply' involving some Tk. 1,865 crore is now awaiting approval."

Aye, there's the rub—a report from 2003, delivered thirteen years later, and finan-

cial support "awaiting approval". As the Managing Director of UPL pointed out earlier this month on 12 February 2017: "The discourse about the silent killer arsenic has lost its focus in the development priorities even though there are 19 million people still at risk in Bangladesh." How does one respond to this level of disinterest? With sardonic mistrust, or with grim stoicism? How many more years will it take for red-taped files to move from one bureaucratic office to another? How much of the disempowered rural populace will be decimated before the coffers are full? How much will trickle down to the grass-roots after innumerable deals are toasted over hard drinks or gaping pockets fed with bribes over tea and shingaras? This is the crux of the dilemma faced by the economist/consultant Carl Simonovsky, the protagonist of *The Inheritance Powder*. Carl, who has made his name in agro-economics in Africa, finds himself in an absurd tragic-comedy, shuttling back and forth between the five-star hotel in Kawran Bazar and the posh British Club in Gulshan, trying to understand the official doublespeak and see the true face behind the hypocritical geniality of public decorum. Woven into the narrative fabric of *The Inheritance Powder* is a love story. Subtly, without obtrusive detailed description, Hilary makes us see Zafrah (divorced, educated in America, now a grass-roots leader, fated to inherit the legacy of her grandmother) as tall and elegant and ready to fall in love with the sensitive, good-looking Carl, divorced, and now estranged from his girlfriend in England. It might seem a touch clichéd—the white man and the exotic Bangladeshi woman sexually attracted at first sight, and it might even seem a tad too neat a plot-closure to have Carl and Zafrah flying towards a 'happily-ever-after', but I have to admit openly that such stories do really exist in the Bangladeshi context for me to touchsafe the plot's authentic tone. Moreover, the texture of the narrative is made richer by the inclusion of a submerged plot, a silenced narrative of the grandmother's past illicit relationship. This enables Hilary to comment peripherally on the cultural taboos and sectarian discriminations which still bind many in our country to medieval practices of oppression.

Hilary Standing graduated with distinction in MA in Creative Writing from Royal Holloway, University of London in 2010, and her novel is a fascinating study of place and human character. Her prose flows effortlessly, creating living, palpating, noisy, grubby scenes of the Dhaka I know and love and hate in equal portions. There is as much quick wit and humour as there is hard acerbic satire in her keen, perspicacious sketches of

the various parts of this city. Dhaka is a riddle, a continuing paradox feeding the fires of its underbelly and fanning the flames of its denizens' resilience. No one who is not awed by the sheer dynamism and vibrant colour and the ugliness and the chaos and magnetism of Dhaka can write with such vigour and verisimilitude. No one who is not tethered to Bangladesh passionately and intellectually can write with such integrity and emotion about the simple, honest, townspeople and village folk. The narrative of *The Inheritance Powder* moves from the city to the small towns and villages, carefully noting the flaws in the economic and social infrastructure, but also brimming with feeling for the beautiful women of Bengal. There is much that the cultural-social anthropologist has absorbed symbiotically. She credibly redirects the dual insights of the insider-outsider into reflective, poignant portraits of rural women often shackled by poverty and patriarchy. In the Prologue, Hilary explains the title's oblique reference to the fatal chemical: "Arsenic is versatile. It has many forms. It kills quickly. It kills slowly. ... Until the advent of forensic testing it was a fast and foolproof way to secure an early inheritance." The second, concluding paragraph of the Prologue is a rhythmic dirge, a mournful lament: "In a poor country like Bangladesh there are many bad deaths. In ancient, overcrowded ferries that sink, in shock from septicaemia after childbirth without any childcare, under collapsed buildings made of shoddy cement and with no foundations, in fires that sweep through flimsy shacks; death from waves and cyclones and cold and heat. It seemed particularly unfair, he [Carl] reflected afterwards, that an accident of geology added slow poisoning by arsenic."

In her essay *Fiction and Development*, Hilary anticipates the question, "Why write fiction about development?" She answers by summarizing the cogent points made by David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers and Michael Woolcock in "The Fiction of development: knowledge, authority and representation," (*LSE International Development Working Papers*, Vol. 5, no. 60, 2005), "one of the first scholarly articles to argue for the value of fiction as an important form of development knowledge. Fiction, they suggest, can sometimes give us a 'better' representation of development realities. In exploring the private and informal worlds of people and institutions and giving voice to the experiences and emotions of those who often go unheard, it reveals the complexities that are so often glossed over or selected out of academic accounts."

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Search for Self

AUTHOR: JHUMPA LAHIRI

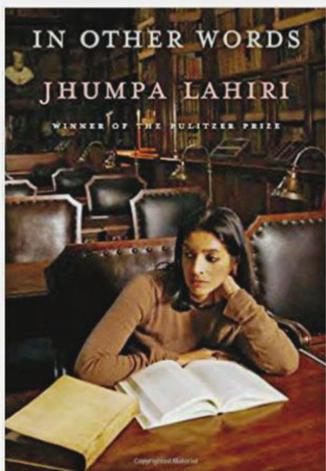
REVIEWED BY MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

JHUMPA Lahiri, a well-known voice of diasporic literature and very popular among the contemporary writers of world literature, has emerged as an author of a nonfiction book titled *In Other Words* that she originally wrote in Italian. Born in London to a family of Bengali origin from India, Lahiri grows up in an English environment and is educated in English medium schools. Before going to school, she listens to Bengali and uses the language. As she starts school, Lahiri faces challenges of dual linguistic environment, but English becomes her favorite, even more fascinating than Bengali. A kind of struggle with the awareness of the use of language starts in her life from this time.

In the end, English wins as the language that takes her far away. English becomes her language, and she begins to forget Bengali. She writes in English, the language that she loves and also thinks in. Her first book *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999 wins the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. And the second book *The Namesake* (2003) adapted into film in different languages becomes a world famous book on diaspora. Her novel *The Lowland* (2013) was shortlisted for various prizes including the Man Booker Prize. Lahiri's presence in world literature is acutely felt because of her deep concern about diasporic reality that migrant people from different parts of the world, especially from India and the Indian sub-continent, go through.

During her doctoral studies on Renaissance literature, Lahiri seriously feels to learn Italian, though her interest in the language rooted in her first visit to Florence during her college life. She begins to dream to use the language for communication and literary writing. She searches for opportunities to learn Italian and subsequently finds some tutors who sincerely help her learn the language. She grows profound love for Italian, the language that she begins to dream with. Later she along with her family moves to Rome to stay there—learning the language works as the prime drive behind the migration.

In Other Words is an autobiographical work, a memoir, originally written in Italian, later translated into English by Ann Goldstein. The translation is smooth, flowing and readable—Goldstein is a renowned translator from Italian. Written almost as a diary, as the author herself mentions, the book centers around Lahiri's love with Italian, the language that she is desperate to learn and write in. To seek a new voice, to discover a new self, to unknot a mystery, Lahiri ventures on learning a new language that she is truly fascinated with. It is relevant to quote, "In Other



Words is at heart a love story—of a long and sometimes difficult courtship, and a passion that verges on obsession: that of a writer for another language." The author is deeply in love with the language, and so she intensely strives to make the language her own.

In Other Words is divided into a number of chapters, each having a title. The book starts with "The Crossing," a story which is metaphorical, and describes the speaker's impulse to cross a lake. Crossing the lake is actually learning Italian. She describes the hurdles of a person, who does not know

how to swim, to cross the lake. The person should cross the lake as the impulse is strong, but she cannot swim—only after earning the capability of swimming, she can cross the lake.

When Lahiri first visits Florence with her sister in 1994, she falls in love with Italian—it was, for her, love at first sight. She reveals her feeling, "It's like a person met one day by chance, with whom I immediately feel a connection, of whom I feel fond". But there is also ambivalence in her mental state as she puts, "I feel a connection and at the same time a detachment. A closeness and at the same time a distance." She knows well that it is not easy to leave her language English and shift to a new one, but still she feels attracted to Italian. In the chapter titled "Exile," Lahiri reflects on her linguistic exile. She knows Bengali, her mother tongue, but cannot read or write it. She thinks that her "mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language, too."

Learning Italian, in some moments, appears impossible for the author. She quotes Carlos Fuentes, "It's extremely useful to know that there are certain heights one will never be able to reach". She feels that learning Italian is a kind of that "certain height" that she can never reach, because she stresses, "The better I understand the language, the more confusing it is. The closer I get, the farther away. ... Because in fact a language isn't a small lake but an ocean." Anxiety engulfs her because she wants to learn the language perfectly, but she gradually discovers, as she is a writer, it is really impossible to attain perfection.

While translating a text from Italian into English, Lahiri encounters a distinct experience, and she shares, "When I write in Italian, I think in Italian; to translate into English, I have to wake up another part of my brain." A few pages later, she expresses her view about translation, "I think that translating is the most profound, most intimate way of reading. A translation is a wonderful, dynamic encounter between two languages, two texts, two writers." These remarks are valuable as far as the area

of translation and translation studies are concerned. She evaluates the position of a writer and comments on the role of a translator. She also refers to Becket who translated himself from French into English. But Lahiri consciously avoids translating *In Other Words* from Italian into English.

The chapter titled "The Triangle" is powerful. The author reflects on her triangular relationships with language. Until four she speaks and loves Bengali. After going to school at the age four in America, she encounters English that, in the beginning, was fearful. But she gradually improves her relationship with English, and then Bengali becomes inferior. Later her relationships with both English and Bengali fade away because she falls in love with Italian. She refers to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and it is beautifully contextualized in *In Other Words*, especially to compare her transformation to Daphne's metamorphosis into a tree.

In Other Words, no doubt, is an autobiographical text that investigates into a search for the writer's own voice, her own self. In the afterword, Lahiri writes, "In Other Words is different. Almost everything in it happened to me. I've already explained it began as a sort of diary, a personal text. It remains my most intimate book but also the most open." The author has an emotional relationship with the book, and she feels proud of it, but at the same time she feels insecure about it. Hence lies an ambivalence in the author's mind, especially when she reflects on the process of writing the book and then its reception. She also concludes the book with her ambivalent state of mind, "I hope that every book in the world belongs to everyone, or to no one, nowhere." *In Other Words* belongs to, we want to believe, everyone everywhere.

The reviewer is the translator of *Humayun Ahmed: Selected Short Stories*, teaches English literature at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh. He can be reached at: msjijewel@gmail.com

NEW BOOKS

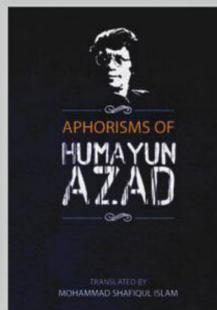
Aphorisms of Humayun Azad

Translated by Mohammad Shafiqul Islam

Publisher: Agamee Prakashani

Aphorisms of Humayun Azad is the translation of Humayun Azad's groundbreaking book *Prabachanguchchha*.

The book is published by Agamee Prakashani and is available in the book-stall at Ekushey Book Fair. It is Humayun Azad's unique contribution to Bengali literature. The author has exposed incongruities existing in society, politics, religions and institutions in the form of aphorisms in the book. This wonderful book in English translation will certainly find readers across borders.



Taboo Bristy Asuk

AUTHOR: SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

Online Publisher: Nobo Boi, 2017

'Taboo Bristy Asuk' of Shafiqul Islam is a book of poetry. It was published in February, 2007. This book consists of 41 pieces of poems. The poems in this book show that the poet cherishes a separate unique poetic existence in his mind. These poetic existence unlike his daily mundane life bear an eternal human value. It is now available at the Ekushey Book Fair-2017 at the Nobo Boi Publication (Stall no: 55)

