

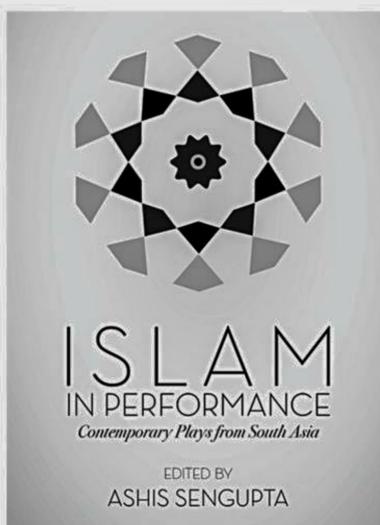
## ISLAM IN PERFORMANCE: Contemporary Plays from South Asia

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EDITED BY ASHIS SENGUPTA  
London & New York, Bloomsbury, 2017.

REVIEWED BY SOMDATTA MANDAL

As its title suggests, this is a collection of plays from South Asia which deal with the social and political performance of Islam in the region post-1947. It distinguishes between Islam as faith and Islam as political ideology, however connected the two might be in the constantly evolving narrative of jihad at home and abroad. The first of its kind, the anthology puts together six play texts from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan which offer insights into a situation where the performance of political Islam refers to both the constructions about the myths about the religion, and their deconstruction through a variety of theatrical modes. The first play, *At the Sound of Marching Feet* [Payer Awaj Pawa Jai] is from Bangladesh and written by Syed Shamsul Haq and translated into English by the author himself. The other entry from Bangladesh is called *Life of Araj* [Araj Charitamrita], and is written by Masum Reza and translated by Bina Biswas and Sayantan Gupta. Of the two entries from India we have *The Djinn of Eidgah* by Abhisekh Majumdar and *The Far-Reaching Night* [Bahut Dur Tak Raat Hogi] by Zahida Zaidi, translated by Ameena Kazi Ansari. The two plays from Pakistan are *We Shall Resist* [Hum Rokaen Gae] by Anwer Jafri, translated into English by Sheema Kermani and *Watch the Show and Move On* [Dekh Tamasha Chalta Ban] by Shahid Nadeem, translated by Shuby Abidi. All six plays seem to be in conversation with one another in the context of competing nationalist narratives predicated on Islam in South Asia. The playwrights may or may not have been much aware of one another's works, but their plays sometimes cross



borders and take part in the region's annual theatre festivals and seminars.

As the editor makes clear, the book hopes to establish a connection between the plays, thus creating a complex framework of South Asian theatre around the narrative of Islam – a pattern that broadly hinges on the plays' abiding as well as changing contours of relationship with society and

politics. Islam, as a spiritual worldview, is, therefore, less the theme of any of the plays here, and more of a trope which, tempered within the crucible of divisive politics in colonial and postcolonial South Asia, has been used to breed and foster narratives of nation-making that continue to largely affect the state of affairs in South Asia. On the other hand, the targeting of Islam, or unequal treatment of its followers in places where they are the minority, becomes an equally significant aspect of this anthology. The concerns addressed in the plays in this book go beyond the clichéd frame of communalism to incorporate much wider patterns of life woven circuitously around the political and personal exploitation of a faith, as much by its professed followers as by its detractors.

This anthology further demonstrates how theatre in its different forms supplements conventional history which cannot often help leaving out of its purview the intangibles of the past – such as feeling, belief, and memory – and thus betrays its own inadequacies and erasures. The plays invite comparison with one another, engaging with this situation from perspectives of the three countries concerned: the idea of *azadi* countering the performance of state-sponsored nationalism and the predicament of life in the Kashmir Valley today (*The Djinn of Eidgah*, 2012); Hindutva politics shaking the long-held principles of a plural India, and often threatening to erase the religious "Other" (*The Far-reaching Night*, 2006); sectarian violence and abuse of Pakistan's

blasphemy laws by self-professed guardians of Islam (*We Shall Resist*, 2009); Islamization of Pakistan at the expense of political governance, and persecution of non-Muslim minorities (*Watch the Show and Move on*, 1992); the clash between ethnolinguistic and religious nationalism, culminating in Bangladesh's Liberation War (*At the Sound of Marching Feet*, 1976); and censorship of production/dissemination of scientific knowledge and threat to the lives of secular liberals in the country (*Life of Araj*, 2001). As nation-building in South Asia remains a continuous, unfinished product, trouble keeps brewing around the contestatory constructions of the "Muslim" subject by Muslims as well as non-Muslims of a geopolitical and cultural space that they have co-inhabited historically. The plays also underscore the need to resist violence in the name of faith, and uphold the ideals of plurality and hospitality across the region.

Widely performed but mostly unpublished, these six plays with their geographic and stylistic range provide a good spectrum of some of the best writing in contemporary South Asian drama. In his lengthy introduction the editor offers us a framework for studying the plays as both texts and performance pieces and needs to be congratulated for clearing the reader's mind of a lopsided view of Islam or mistaken attempts to see it as a source of political malaise.

Somdatta Mandal is a Professor of English at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

## Their Lives Written with Blood

*Letters of Blood: A Novel* (ISBN 978-984-91722-7-7)

BY RIZIA RAHMAN

TRANSLATED BY ARUNAVA SINHA

114 pages, published by Bengal Lights Books

REVIEWED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

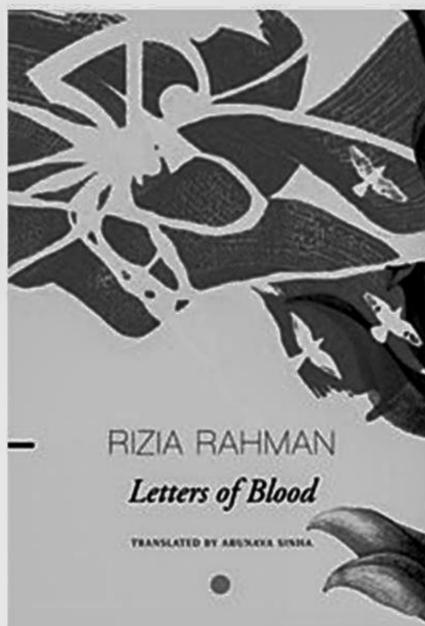
Published as early as 1978, Rizia Rahman's *Rokter Okshor* is an acclaimed fictionalization of prostitution in post-Liberation War Bangladesh and the hypocrisy of so-called civic society. It came out at a time when writing about brothels and prostitutes by a woman writer was simply unheard of. Though unexpected and frowned upon, it had caused a stir back then. As the author herself says, critical appreciation of the work came after people were done with asking "why" and "how."

When I first read the book in the late 1980s, I was a teen-ager, only dimly aware that a species called "prostitutes" existed somewhere out there. Having been brought up by conservative middle-class parents, I had been screened from the knowledge of "loose women." A friend of mine had lent me the novel and had advised me to read in secret, and I therefore perused it late at night when everyone had gone to sleep. A thin volume, but its contents are no thin matter.

Many years later one 2017 evening, I opened Arunava Sinha's translation of *Rokter Okshor* or *Letters of Blood, a Novel*. I read there the following line: "The morning lies here in an inert stupor like a drug addict..." (11). Time sprinted backward and I remembered, "Shokal ta ekhane okejo neshakhore moto jhim dhoray poray acche." Translation is a difficult task and there are too many terrible translations. But *Letters of Blood* certainly does not fall in that category. It is beautifully crafted in lucid language that catches all the unexpected details, starting from the unkempt and dingy atmosphere of Golapipatti to the intricate and often disturbing exchanges among its inhabitants. The physical description of the two old and ex-prostitutes are uncannily astute: "The hag starts coughing before sunrise. She dumps herself just about anywhere these days. Today, she's a lump of flesh outside the door of Rupa, Amina and Moti's house, lying on the bricks where the cement has worn off" (11-12). This is a ludicrous and yet harrowing account of the station of a former prostitute that also foretells the future of all those who throw mouthful of vitriolic abuses at her. Sinha captures scenes from Rahman's novel in picturesque detail in his work.

Although presented by a third person narrator, *Letters of Blood* traces the voices and memoirs of various women in Golapipatti. There are young girls like Piru, snatched away from the safety of home, and Phulmoti, whose birthing of an illegitimate child draws caustic remarks from all quarters. Most of these women who have been either lured, or abducted from home, or worse, were left with no choice but to become prostitutes. And once anyone enters this awful world, there is no way she can return to her formerly known circle. This narrative is presented from the perspectives of women who mean very little to the world. It is a nightmarish

portrayal of a prohibited domain we deliberately choose not to ponder over, even when fully aware of its existence. There have been other writers writing about prostitutes in Bengali fiction, but Rizia Rahman's novel and Arunava Sinha's translation of the work are surely among the most accurate and moving ones in its description of brothels and their occupants. The most commendable aspect about the narration is the perfect balance between neutral observation and emotional investment. The author often describes the sordid ambience through visitors like Delwar, and through Yasmin, the middle-class educated woman who ends up at the whorehouse



after being betrayed by people she knew and society at large. A war-heroine, Yasmin might be a misfit in the brothel, but she is also very much an integral part of it. Her story is perhaps the most painful of all because she understands the agony and humiliation of her position every living moment, something others like Jahanara realize only on desperate occasions. She also puts the reader in an awkward position because she questions his or her very standing in society.

However, *Letters of Blood* is not merely about the pains of these fallen and abandoned women; the novel also shows their daily chores, struggles and

aspirations. For some, the way out is to become famous, to be someone like Jahanara, who has customers among the rich and influential. Then there is Mamata, who acts and dresses like a movie star and still dreams of becoming one. There are accounts of girls leaving prostitution, but most of the time they also come back, either rejected by society, or forced back into the old occupation out of sheer necessity.

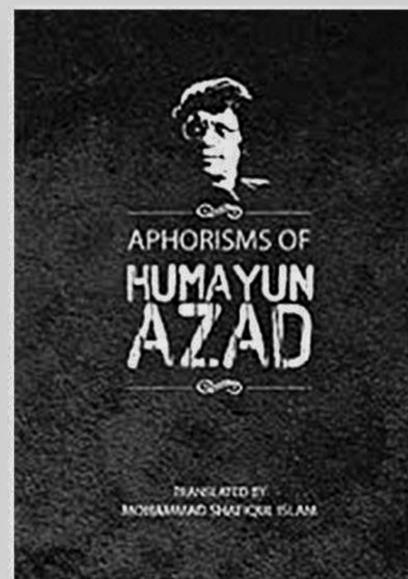
Many of us would like to believe that slavery belongs to the past, but this book will surely make you wonder about the different kinds of servitudes in the world. A real life horror story, *Rokter Okshor* offers glimpses into a world where women are bought and sold almost every other day. More interestingly, the profit-makers are not the pimps and bawds, but the so-called "respectable men" who would not even allow their wives, daughters and sisters to be near Golapipatti. The picture presented of a post-liberation nation here is very bleak indeed; reading it one can see why human trafficking in today's world has grown to be its second most lucrative illegal business, second only to drug trafficking.

So there is no escape from this slave coop; each outsider visiting this place is in for some gain. Even Delwar, who is a journalist, is here to pursue his idealistic notions. Such ideals might bring temporary solace for these fallen women and make them dream of becoming human once again, but they cannot be sustained. After all, this world is beyond normalcy and is condemned by the very society that propagates the ideals. The forces that operate here are brutal and ruthless; manipulation is the norm. A grotesque equilibrium is maintained to check anything subversive.

It is often said that the translation of any book means that the same book is written twice. I certainly had the same parched throat and stinging eye I had when I finished reading the original Bengali version around 30 years ago. Going through the translation, one aspect that one misses in the translation though is the use of local dialects, but these perhaps were not translatable, and Sinha that is why does not even attempt to do so. Hence *Letters of Blood* is strewn with words like "daalpuri," "maagi," "bilati maal," and "buji." This retaining of native words does bring the story close to the original, giving it thereby a distinct note. At the same time, there are also translations of songs like "The new tree is blooming/ Don't break the branch..." that I immediately recognized as "Chara gaachhe phul phuitachhe/ Daal bhaingona..." Sinha's translation indeed does justice to the amazing documentation of Rizia Rahman's novel *Rokter Okshor*.

Sohana Manzoor is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh.

### THUMBNAIL REVIEW



## Aphorisms of Humayun Azad

BY TS MARIN

Mohammad Shafiqul Islam's book of translation, *Aphorisms of Humayun Azad* appears to be almost as pithy and barbed as the famous and sometimes controversial author's *Prabachanguchchha*. While most of these 200 maxims were penned exclusively as aphorisms, some have been collected from his other works by Azad himself for the Bengali work. He was, of course, fearless when it came to being vocal against patriarchal society, religious fundamentalism, political corruption, and hypocrisy. Certainly, these aphorisms are dazzling examples of this trait of his personality. Islam's sense-for-sense translation does not dull the brilliance of these aphorisms; rather, it gives them a distinct edge as well as readies them for an international audience. This handsome and compact navy edition will surely enrich the collection of any book aficionado.

TS Marin teaches English at Primeasia University, Dhaka.