

Blue Venom and Forbidden Incense

Syed Shamsul Haq, Bengal Lights Books, 2015, ISBN 978 984 91722 5 3

Reviewed by NADIA RAHMAN

Blue Venom and *Forbidden Incense* are translations of two novellas, *Neel Dongshon* and *Nishidhho Loban*, by the eminent Bangladesh poet and writer Syed Shamsul Haq. Published for the series, Library of Bangladesh, it is a laudable initiative by the Dhaka Translation Centre to introduce the literature of Bangladesh to the world. Through these translations by Saugata Bose, the novellas take us 45 years back to the liberation war of 1971, a war we cherish but also remember with fear. The horrific details with which the novellas recall the terrible days of 1971 and the sacrifice and brutal torture of innocent Bangladeshi people then become vivid in the translations. The readers are able to re-live and witness through them the barbarity of the Pakistani Army and the predicament of innocent bystanders. A winner of numerous literary awards, Syed Shamsul Haq is known for his versatile representations of liberation war through his powerful style, and these translations give readers a wonderful taste of his representational skills.

Inevitably, the intense emotions with which Syed Shamsul Haq writes the novellas gets blunted at least a little and are sometimes lost in the English translations. Also, the edginess with which Syed Haq describes his protagonist Nazrul in *Blue Venom*, a namesake of our national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, is not as evident in the translated work as it is in the original work. The novella opens with Nazrul in a torture cell after he is picked by the Pakistani Army men who mistook him for the poet and asked him to sign a statement to recall what they believe are foolish rebels who have gone astray from the right path. Or have they embarked on a “poem of progress” that will guide them to “the right path”? Nazrul, who has, in fact, never written a single line of verse is repeatedly called ‘the poet’, and cross-examined over and over again till he starts to



believe in his altered identity.

Blue Venom is written primarily in the form of dialogue (between Nazrul and his captors) which makes the rendition very dramatic. But Huq also makes use of the stream of consciousness technique in the novella from time to time to indicate the past events of Nazrul's life. This technique allows readers to get an insight into his thoughts, his outlook on life, and above all, on how he, an ordinary citizen, viewed the war. At first, he is a mere onlooker of the horrifying events unfolding before and after 25 March 1971. After he is picked up by the Pakistani army, however, things become nightmarish for him. Captivity makes Nazrul construct an alternative reality where he seeks to resolve the mental crisis of his personal life and his love.

His consciousness makes him acutely aware of his surroundings, his responsibilities, and of his purpose in life, and it is aptly depicted through the stream of consciousness technique. The horrific graphic description of the daily torture inflicted on Nazrul make us cringe with disgust, but also fill us with compassion for those thousands of people who sacrificed themselves but did not yield to the heinous proposals of compromise offered by the Pakistani army.

This translation of *Blue Venom* is a laudable endeavor to inform readers of the wartime crimes committed by Pakistanis as well as to familiarize them with the micro-level impact of the war. And while the pace of the action and the connotations of the Bengali words become occasionally compromised when translated, the narrative techniques used by the translator to give a special effect to the different frames such as the capitalization of the whole dictated statement and the deployment of the stream of consciousness parts that are separated by italics from the dramatic parts, create a distinctive narrative. Even the translation of the much-loved Bengali revolutionary songs into English is done with vigor. With stupefied horror one encounters the gruesome details of the physical and mental torture inflicted on Nazrul that culminated in him being buried alive.

The second novella translated in the book, *Forbidden Incense*, has a more revolutionary tone. In it the central characters, Bilkis and Shiraj, meet each other by sheer coincidence when the former arrives in her village to look for her family when the liberation war breaks out. Shiraj, barely seventeen or eighteen at the time of the war, follows Bilkis around and ultimately helps her to find the corpse of her brother, Khoka. The story takes a peek at the wartime events. In this novella, Huq focuses once again on common people and depicts their

thoughts about the war. The intensity of Syed Shamsul Haq's writing can be felt in the translated version, which enables us to see the rebellious Bilkis and Shiraj working together to give a decent burial to the people killed in the genocide, though they eventually get caught for doing so. Though not connected by blood, Bilkis and Shiraj, come very close to each other. Transcending all barriers, they act like siblings caught up in a conflict which has taken a lot from both of them. The last rites of Shiraj or Pratap (as it is later revealed) is a kind of consolation for Bilkis and she acts like one possessed to avenge the death of her brothers. A woman who has lost everything in the war, but is ultimately rejuvenated by it, Bilkis pits herself against a Pakistani army major and burns him in the very pyre in which her brother had been incarcerated.

The language of *Forbidden Incense* is more lucid and personal than that of *Blue Venom*. The strong inter-personal bonding that takes place in it becomes clear even in the translated version. The setting, the unnatural silence of a war-ravaged village, and the tireless dedication of the characters are represented faithfully in this work.

The translation of these two novellas will, hopefully, enable them to travel beyond linguistic borders and convey them to the wider world. The novellas of the series truly depict the spirit of Bangladeshi people during the Liberation War through characters like Nazrul, Bilkis, and Shiraj. They are representatives of the kind of ordinary people who did not hesitate to stand up to their oppressors and take apt measure to liberate their country. The translations will also allow the readers of the English works to get a glimpse of Syed Shamsul Haq's fictional brilliance and discover his mastery of language.

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Scientific Outlook in Education for Social Progress

Ronny Noor, *Slice of Heaven and Other Essays*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, December 2016
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Reviewed by BINOY BARMAN

Literature is full of delicate perceptions that help fill up voids existing in our minds. Its purpose is more than pleasure; it promotes progressive viewpoints as well. Writers thus take up positions, whether in fiction or non-fiction, obliquely in the former, and explicitly in the latter, that they would like their readers to accept.

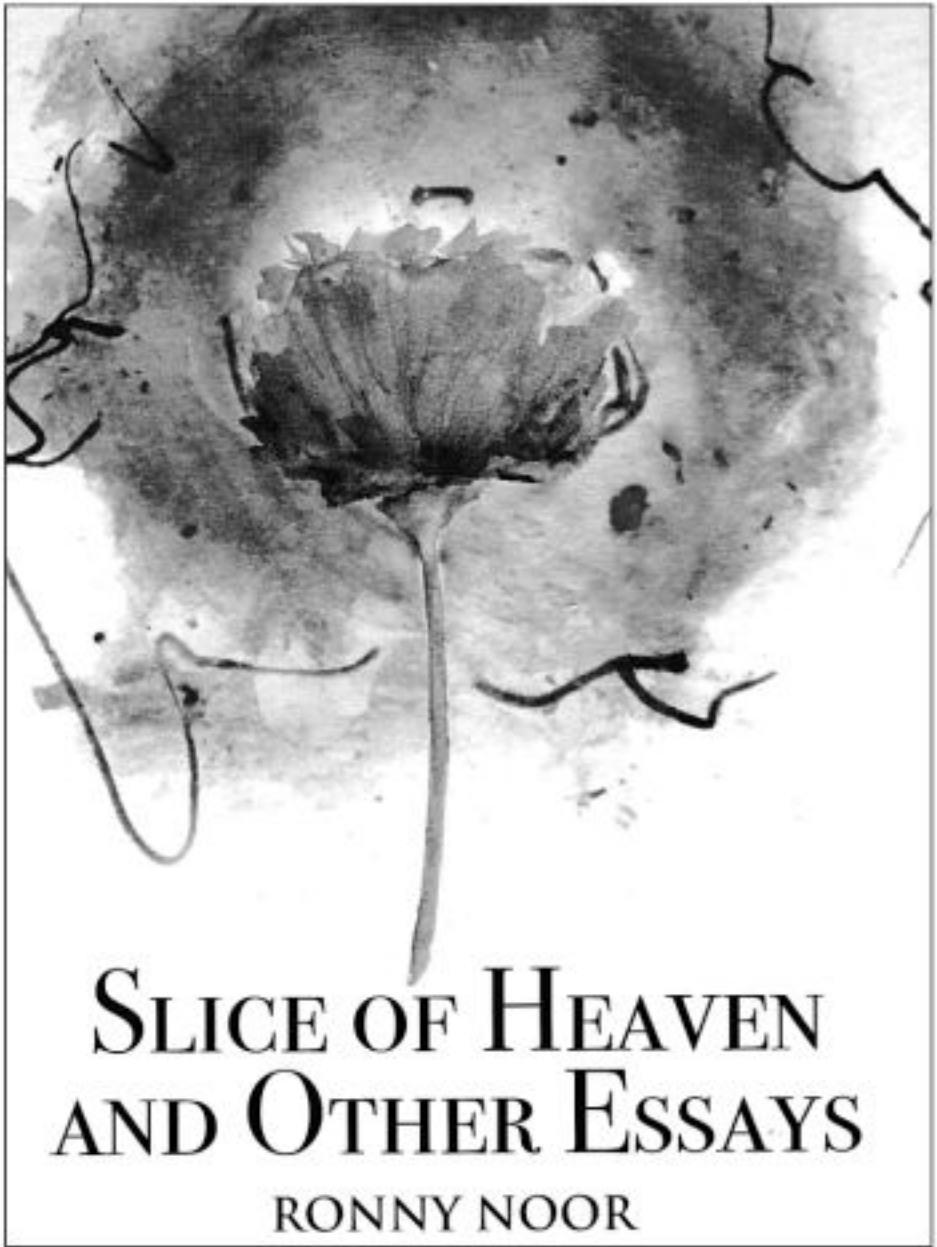
Ronny Noor's *Slice of Heaven and Other Essays* attempts to educate people about writers and their visions of progress; his intent is to show them the writers and thinkers' way to a society free of parochialism and superstitions. He would also have people keep faith in logic and reason, shun all prejudices and sectarian feelings, embrace good sense, and display civility. He would like to see them as agents of free thoughts as well. To produce such people, a new social order is necessary in which unobstructed exercise of knowledge (not simply, freedom of expression) would be possible. The bedrock of such a social order would be the adoption of a scientific attitude and a culture of openness, inquiry and sound argumentation.

Noor's book contains ten essays, all of which have unmistakable philosophical undertones. “The Worlds of Scholars, Philosophers and Creative Writers”, for example, discusses how great minds have sought truth in their time, albeit in their own fashion, and have propagated the message of ‘salvation’ through the pursuit of knowledge. While philosophers, he suggests, tend to be rigorous in their investigations, creative writers, he feels, adopt idiosyncratic styles to present their apprehensions of reality and the path forward. But like philosophers, creative writers also learn from life. Reading books by other writers, however, provide them with examples of techniques of writing, new forms and unique styles.

According to Noor, both philosophers and creative writers have been contributing to epistemology throughout history in their distinctive ways. The philosophical canon has been consolidated by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in ancient times, and Locke, Kant, Hume, Schopenhauer and Sartre in the modern era. On the other hand, the literary canon has been enriched, among others, by Homer, Virgil, Sadi, Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Milton, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Tagore, Eliot and Marquez. There is a middle ground where philosophical and literary tendencies meld. Occupying this middle ground are writer-philosophers like Nietzsche, Camus, Russell and Emerson. But all thinkers, philosophical or not, search truth in seclusion. It is often a lonely struggle for them—a struggle against convention and a situation where they have to wade wading through the prevailing odds.

Noor poses a provocative question: “Are

intellectuals irreligious?” According to his reckoning, the answer is “no”. A deep sense of spirituality works in the mind of intellectuals, who concentrate on the core objective of religiosity rather than emphasize the rituals associated with it. Intellectuals, he believes, have contributed to our understanding of the universe and the role of humans play in it. According to him, the practice of religion has evolved over time—from animism to pantheism, from polytheism to monotheism, and from theism to atheism. Intellectuals have been tracing the gradual development of the concept of God, and many of them have come to the conclusion that it is a social-historical construct, which may even be explained in psychological/neurological terms as a product of human evolution. For cherishing such ideas, many intellectuals have been branded as



‘iconoclasts,’ and thereby put to humiliation and torture. But Noor would have us believe that intellectuals believe that real religion is not in rituals and blind worship of deities, but within us, and truly religious attitudes are reflected in our deeds.

In one of his essays Noor attempts to find the causes of the backwardness of Bengali society. He blames our erroneous education system responsible for its present state. The essay “Our Faulty Educational System” lists its faults thus: 1. Our education is based on rote memory; 2. It is not based on social, historical and philosophical understanding 3. It is not connected to life; 4. It does not emphasize social responsibility. Therefore reformation of our education system is necessary to ensure proper intellectual training of the school-going

generation of Bangladesh. Only such training will enhance students' intellectual capabilities, making them liberal in outlook and socially responsible. The pulse of real life will be heard in the artery of education only then.

Constricting the path to education only leads to communal conflicts. Limiting education can spawn religious bigotry. A person whose knowledge is limited to only one scripture may end up as a bigot, misconstruing other religious practices. He will behave offensively with hatred towards the people of other persuasions. He will be intolerant and will attempt to annihilate all others who do not subscribe to his own faith. Such attitudes will bring him to the brink of conflict. They are not healthy for society at all. Such attitudes can be avoided with proper philosophically based scientific education, which could elevate him spiritually with the knowledge of true human nature and educate him in the path of the truly humane.

Noor has been looking for a path out of extremism frantically. Referring to an essay titled “Navigating Past Nihilism” by Harvard Professor Sean Kelly, he argues that the world is plagued by two extremist forces, fanaticism and nihilism; the first comes from monotheism and the second from atheism. Both of them have vested interest in imposing their own points of view on others. A probable way out is creating a pluralistic notion, where competing doctrines can stay side by side, without adopting superior airs. Monotheists will often trumpet their faiths as superior to others. In order for peace to exist on earth, all will have to follow the Golden Rule of Confucius: “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.”

Ronny Noor, let us note, is a professor of English at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA. Though he left Bangladesh a long time back, he never forgot his motherland. He witnessed the war of 1971 and the atrocities perpetrated in the country in the name of religion; he was witness then to the unwise decisions of some politicians. He questioned himself as to how one could overcome the effects of such atrocities and idiocies. He became convinced that the only way out would be to adopt secular and rational education, emphasize our indigenous cultural heritage and reemphasize ancient wisdom. *Slice of Heaven and Other Essays* will give its readers a sense of Noor's thoughtfulness and expressive style. Indeed, this fascinating work is evidence of his crystal-clear vision, which will surely enlighten the curious reader.

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THUMBNAIL REVIEW

1971:
A New Horizon
in History

Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, The Daily Star Books, 2015

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Reviewed by EMRAN MAHFUZ

“I could hear the incredible voice of Sheikh Muzibur Rahman, ‘Make your homes forts. Fight with whatever comes handy. Our struggle will continue; this time the struggle is for our freedom; our struggle is for our independence!’ These are words spoken by Mr. Sen, a Christian citizen of Pakistan, who is also a major character of *Ekti Kalo Meyer Kotha* (The Tale of a Dark Complexioned Girl), Tarashankar Bandopadhyay’s novella, 1971. He came to Bangladesh during the liberation war of 1971 to collect information, and this is a part of his testimony. There were other foreigners like him who were mesmerized by the dream of freedom and the spirit of struggling Bengalis who had provided support to Bangladeshis then. Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, preeminent as a novelist in Bengali literature, presents this amazing tale by fusing emotions with realistic details. His book depicts rural Bangladeshi life during the liberation war. His heroine, Nazma, is representative of thousands of Bengali women of that period. Then there are also characters like Rahim, Mr. Sen and Chhaya, through whom the author presents a moving tale of 1971.

The other novella of the collection, *Sutopar Toposya* deftly deals with a complex issue. Through the letters of a young man to his wife it depicts the problematic political situation of West Bengal after 1965 and youth protests of that period.

Bandopadhyay wrote *Ekti Kalo Meyer Kotha* and *Sutopar Toposya* when close to dying. The sufferings of ordinary people are at the centre of both stories. In other words, despite their distinct settings, the two novellas are similar in narrating the misery of ordinary people, caught up in political events that traumatized them and appeared to be life-threatening. In depicting the tumultuous and terrifying aspects of 1971 the author has indeed done a magnificent job.

Emran Mahfuz is a poet and journalist.