

Unique Glimpses: A Portrait of Bangladesh Through Their Eyes

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Compiled and edited by Saima Wazed Hossain : Foreword by Sheikh Hasina
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Until recently not many people were aware of autism or thought about it. The subject was a social taboo. No one talked about it and when confronted with an autistic child one did not know how to handle it and tried to ignore it as if they had noticed nothing unusual. The precise cause of autism was then, as indeed even now, not known. It was associated with abnormality, a sign of intellectual retardation, and odd or abnormal behavior.

As a college student, I was not consciously aware of autism and do not recall ever discussing the subject with friends and family. It was only years later when I watched the film *Rain Man* (1988) that I first became aware of it and was greatly moved by Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of an autistic young man. His odd behavioral traits, existing simultaneously with genius in solving complicated mathematical calculation brought home to us our own blindness and prejudices. It was only then I also learnt that as a child Albert Einstein was also considered autistic. We still do not know what causes autism except that it is a neurological condition present at birth; and some of the common symptoms include problems of communication, difficulties with social interaction, and compulsive behavior. The treatment was in the domain of behavioral sciences in which incentives were used to correct compulsive repetitive behavior.

In the conservative and traditional society of Bangladesh autism also came with stigma; and families would either not speak about it or go on behaving as nothing was the matter. Society added to the misery of the families, especially of the mother of the child. Often the mother was blamed for the birth of such "an abnormal" child; she was made to feel guilty as if she or her actions were somehow responsible for the "misfortune"; and not infrequently the husbands would leave their wives for bearing such a child. Superstition also played its role. The inability of the child to communicate easily or play with other children was believed to be due to the child being possessed by some 'spirit'. Often the only remedy was an amulet supplied the imam of the local mosque, and in extreme cases being thrashed by the members of the family. The tragedy of the family was augmented manifold by societal hypocrisy and ignorance.

We do not have precise data on the number of people with autism, but various estimates, both national and international, suggest as many as 15 percent of the population may suffer from some form of autism or learning disability. In Bangladesh until 2009 there was little recognition of the

problem, and scarcely any systematic facilities for detection and treatment of autism. It was at that time that Saima Wazed Hossain took up the cudgel and made it her mission; and since then she has waged a relentless campaign to create awareness, created the Bangladesh National Advisory Committee for Autism and Neurodevelopment Disorders for coordinating the efforts of the government to deal with autism, persuaded a number of hospitals and clinics to establish specialized units for autism, and mobilized large number of nongovernmental organization and volunteers for both providing services and for advocacy. Internationally, she has been invited to join the World Health Organization's Expert Advisory Panel on Mental Health advisory committee; she has sponsored a number of resolutions in the UN to enhance global consciousness; and she has used many platforms to spread her message. Her main focus has been to remove the stigma that afflicts the victims and families of autism and to train families and



teachers for early detection of any signs of autism or learning disabilities. Most important of all, she has been ensuring that most public hospitals have specialists in their staff to handle autism. To ensure the sustainability of her work she founded the Shuchona Foundation, a not for profit advocacy and research body. Not least she has persuaded the prime minister (her mother) to use the bully pulpit to create public empathy to end the stigma of autism.

People with autism have difficulties in communicating; they have trouble in articulating their thoughts or conveying their feelings verbally. Social interactions in classroom or in groups are especially difficult for them. Kate Lacour, who specializes in art therapy, wrote: "Art therapy is a unique form of treatment for autism, as it helps mitigate symptom, while also channeling autistic behaviors into an expressive, creative outlet." They are essentially visual thinkers; and it is now widely recognized that art therapy is one of the most successful methods to overcome their social inhibitions and to give them a medium for self-

expression. Autistic persons are highly creative; they have a natural knack for abstract ideas and music. Through art they communicate their thoughts to others— "they think in pictures" – and at the same time comprehend others. Art gives them joy, enables them to explore themselves, and find a world that is their very own. It also helps them to gain confidence and form connection with those around them.

The Unique Glimpses: A Portrait Of Bangladesh Through Their Eyes, compiled and edited by Saima Wazed Hossain, is indeed both a moving and an awe-inspiring journey into the world and minds of autistic children. Saima, a Specialist in School Psychologist, is a strong proponent of art therapy and other creative modes outlets for individuals with autism"; and has over the years collected large number of paintings and drawings by them. There are very few words in the text (in both Bangla and English) and the editor has left it for the paintings to tell their own story. The result is quite unique. The reader (or more precisely the viewer) is transported to another world, full of deep emotions, conveying hopes, aspirations and frustration. There are no sound and voices, but the silence of the painting speaks out loudly and emphatically and pleads with you "not to be their handicap". They are different, but just like you would want to for yourself, treat them with respect; they have brilliance and creativity locked inside them. All they want is an environment in which they can express themselves and realize their inherent potentials fully.

Saima has organized the painting in a number of separate sections. They include: Nature, the Liberation War, Festivals, Eid, Pahela Baisakh (Bangla New Year) and History and Heritage. In each section we can the world through their eyes, so different and replete with symbolism, ecstasy, joy and pain, and the feeling of being abandoned and not a part of all that is around them. Sometimes it feels they are like flies on the wall, watching and observing us, but too afraid and fragile to come near us or be a part of us. There is a deep sense of loneliness, and of being abandoned. But like Tagore's *janakhi* or the firefly they live their own lives, with their inner power, and are not beholden to anyone. Browsing through their expressive illustrations, I asked myself: how often we have stopped to think about them and how much have tried to bring them into our midst?

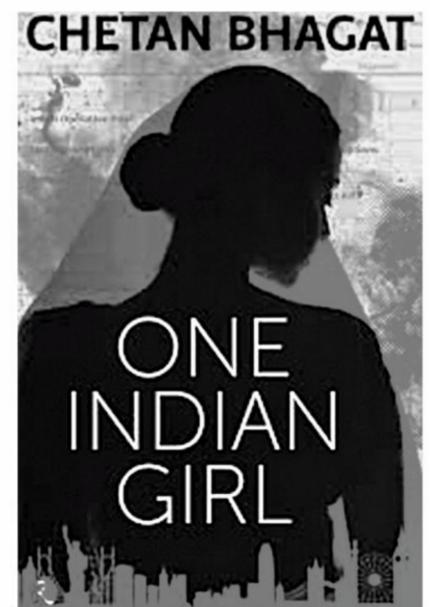
Gauhar Rizvi is a historian, scholar and academic. He is also the International Affairs adviser to the prime minister of Bangladesh.



Tahmima Anam Wins O Henry Award

Tahmima Anam's short story "Garments" is one of the winners of the O Henry Award this year. She is one of a group of 20 writers so honored for their outstanding fiction. Anam is the daughter of Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, and a recipient of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers Prize. Her award-winning story will form part of the 2017 O Henry Prize Stories Anthology, to be published by Anchor Books this September.

THUMBNAIL REVIEW



One Indian Girl, Many Indian Girls

One Indian Girl, Chetan Bhagat, 978-81-291-4214-6, Rupa Publications, 2016.

TS MARIN

Chetan Bhagat's latest creation, *One Indian Girl* is rather unique when compared with his previous works since it is written from a woman's perspective. Despite what the title suggests, however, *One Indian Girl* is not a story of any typical saree-wearing, roti-making Indian girl; it is the story of a cosmopolitan career-woman Radhika Mehta. Set in New York, Hong Kong, London, Philippines, Goa - the novel's ever-changing settings echoes expertly the protagonist's fluctuating love life, or lack thereof. Despite being financially liberated and strongly opinionated, she encounters issues pretty much all Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and other South-Asian women do - nosy and dominant relatives, the either-or option of "nest or fly," conventional white-washed idea of beauty, commitment-phobic boyfriends... the list goes on. What is most convincing about this book though is that Bhagat expresses without any hesitation how (academic and financial) success does not necessarily guarantee a fairytale life. In his signature sassy style, the author lists in the back cover the protagonist's three eminent traits which make her a youth icon. The character development of the male characters, however, is not very well-defined; both Debu and Neel appear to be rather generalized and vilified by the author. While this book may not be a masterpiece, it should prove to be a good read when you are stuck in Dhaka's never ending traffic jams or are in the mood for something Bollywoody. For sure, *One Indian Girl*, is not the story of merely one Indian girl; it is story of all subcontinental phoenix-like women from this side of the planet. Easter egg for Chetan Bhagat fans: just like all his previous novels, the (synonymous) namesake of Krishna ultimately ends up, or at least has the possibility of ending up with the vivacious heroine, Radhika.

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The Burdens of Translation: Nawab Faizunnesa's Rupjalal

FAYEZA HASANAT

In 2003, while getting ready for my PhD oral examination on English women writers of the British Raj, I read Sonia Amin's *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal: 1876-1939*. Amin wrote in her introduction that she had chosen 1876—the publication year of *Rupjalal*—to mark the beginning of women's history in colonial Bengal. My interest in Nawab Faizunnesa was instantly ignited. I tried to obtain a copy of *Rupjalal* during my visit to Bangladesh the next year, but found out in the process that finding a needle in the haystack would have been an easier task.

I went to see Mansur Musa, the then DG of Bangla Academy, and asked him for the copy reprinted by the Academy in 1976. Something in my approach convinced the honorable DG (maybe my inexperience, or my eagerness, but I am not sure which of the two!) to ask his people to look for the book. Two weeks later, I was told that no copy had been located. I approached the DG again, this time, requesting permission to search for it myself. He then gave me access to the restricted rare books section. Two staff members helped me as I dived into the piles of books, some of which had been manually catalogued, and some of which had been stored chaotically. After hours of searching, one of the gentlemen handed me a book with termite-bitten pages—Faizunnesa's *Rupjalal*! I asked the DG for one last favor: a photocopy of the book. He granted me that wish too. Till this day, I am grateful to Professor Musa for believing in me.

I translated a few poems from the book and talked about them in my oral exam. My PhD committee members then asked me to translate the whole book. They wanted to read the book, they said, and expressed willingness to include it in their academic courses—on South Asian History, or Creative Writing, or Gender Studies, or Translation Studies—once published, of course. *Rupjalal* was published ultimately by Brill Publishers in 2008; most research libraries of the world obtained a copy of the book, and it was made a part of their reading list for courses on South Asian Women's History or Literature. I have taught it myself in one of my Graduate courses in Gender Studies.

The task of publishing, nay translating such a book, may seem like an easy one. But, in truth, the task of a translator is never that simple. For me the most powerful writing is the one that can convey a complicated thought or concept in the most plain and simple language. Writing, or translation for that matter, has the maximum impact when it touches the reader without much effort. After all, Language is a medium of

expression, not a hindrance. I somewhat agree with Gayatri Spivak, who says that the translator's surrender to the rhetoric of the original text and her ability to speak of intimate matters in the language of the original retains the "literarity, textuality and sensuality of the writing," and helps her embrace the Other through the intimacy of cultural translation (*The Politics of Translation*, 43). I believe that translation is a two-fold process. A translator translates for the Other (the original writer), and for the others (the readers). And as a translator, she must let the Other be. Instead of imposing too much of herself on the otherness of the original writers, she should always invite them in—as if to possess her.

Rupjalal is narrated partly in poetry and partly in prose. Both the plot structure and the narrative technique are influenced by the *Mangalkabya* tradition.



It frequently alludes to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and exhibits a strong resemblance to *The Arabian Nights*. The poetry section follows the tradition of Bengali lyric poetry, which is then blended with the Muslim literary traditions of writing in mixed language. Some verses are written in rhyming couplets (*payar*), some in four-lined rhyming verse (*choupadi*), and some, in three-lined verse (*tripadi*). The *payar* verses are end-rhymed while the *tripadi* verses are long couplets with two caesuras.

Working with a text with such a complicated narrative pattern is an exhilarating challenge for any translator. I took the challenge to recreate the poetic form in English as closely as possible, without

tarnishing the lexical sense of the original text. At times I translated every word, or every line; at times, when the imagery or the expression was too complicated, I had to use more words or lines than Faizunnesa originally used in her text.

My intent to analyse, historicize and translate was motivated by Faizunnesa's contribution to the field of women's writing in Bangladesh. Given the contemporary context, I also think that my translation may have saved *Rupjalal* from extinction. After all, an English translation is more accessible and comprehensible than the original— written in an archaic Bengali language— dead, and almost forgotten. But how can we forget our pioneers? How can we build a rich literary history of women's writing in Bangladesh if we forget to revive the foundation that was laid for us by our forerunners? I feel that I have been able to rectify history's neglect of Nawab Faizunnesa and hope that others will also take up projects to retrieve valuable texts written by women writers from disappearing from our shelves after termites had feasted on them.

The Ordeal of Ruphanu

1
4 The month of Sravan pours monsoon rain
Darkness envelops whole nature.
The sky falls apart and breaks my heart
Like rain drops, I tremble in fear.
At a time like this where is he? Which
Paths does he tread? And what hurdles
Block his ways?! I wish I could erase
All the dangers that lie in his path.

2
Bhadra is a dangerous month. Ferocious
Tidal waves threaten rivers
My heart falters as it sees no hope. Tears
Betray my eyes; what if he is
Trying to return? What if this rain
Has caused a flood? How would he return?
And what if his boat or his ship
Sinks in the deep ocean?
My heart sinks in sorrow. Fate brings
Me nothing but loads of despair.
My lover suffers in a remote place
And for him, I suffer here.

Excerpt from Fayeza Hasanat's *Nawab Faizunnesa's Rupjalal* Leiden: Brill, 2009. Fayeza teaches at the University of Central Florida, USA.