

# Like Dark Clouds are Adorned

SHAH NISTAR JAHAN

TRANSLATED BY ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN

The rainy season is here. At this time, the river next to our home is filled to the brim. A small river, it is lost during the summer heat. By the month of *Poush*, it becomes a dead river. We were to cross that river in a dinghy – Ma and I.

As soon as we were in the boat, Ma hurried the boatman, “Start rowing! No one else is coming.” The boatman was old. Ma’s words did not satisfy him, but he remained silent. A little later, Ma urged him again: “I don’t think anyone else is coming now. Why don’t I give you one taka extra? Start rowing.”

These words had an effect, albeit little. The boatman said, “I will leave as soon as I get one more person. I’ll be in trouble if I don’t get at least three passengers after waiting here for an hour. I don’t see anyone on the other side either.”

If the boatman took one more person across, he would earn two taka. Ma said, “Ok. I will give you two taka. Now let’s go.”

The boatman didn’t delay any longer. Striking his oar against the riverbank, he pushed off. The boat began to move swiftly. Ma spoke, as if to herself, “A hitch at every step!” The boatman heard her and said, “Are you speaking to me?”

Ma didn’t answer.

I didn’t understand what hitches Ma was talking about. Perhaps having to wait in the boat for some time was one of them. I don’t know how long we had waited but it was a while. We had waited for a third passenger. It wasn’t worth the boatman’s time if he didn’t ferry at least three people. Three passengers or six taka: either of these conditions had to be met. Was he able to meet them all the time? Perhaps not.

Last night there was a lot of rain. A lot. There was also some wind in the middle of the night. Ma had packed her little bag then. She would have to leave in the morning. This preparation by Ma meant it would happen. There was no chance that plans would change. Even Baba didn’t know when Ma would leave and when she would return. And he had no say about such things. Or perhaps nothing would change even if he had. It never did. Baba knew that very well. Still, today when we were leaving, Baba called, “Aru!”

Ma became livid at being addressed like this. Angriily she said, “Haven’t I told you not to call me by that name?!”

“Why? What if I do?”

“That’s not your business. I hate it when you call me by that name.”

“Then with what name shall I call you?” Baba asked, not expecting an answer. And he received none. He said, “But –

“What now?”

“I mean, there was a storm in the night. The sky is still overcast. Couldn’t you go a day or two later?”

“Seems like you can’t sleep from worrying about me! Do me a favor and stop nagging at my ear.”

Baba didn’t say anything more. He didn’t trust himself to. We headed out on our journey as soon as we saw the sun’s face. Then we had to wait at the riverbank for the third passenger who never came.

Our boat moved on. The boatman called to the oars – I don’t think the oars heeded him much. I felt as though it was an endless journey.

How surprising! There was no rain or storm all day. The sky was a tireless blue. We had to take a rickshaw and cross a second river before we arrived. In between we had to walk a little. During this walk, I felt quite tired. I didn’t feel like walking. Ma was patient – “It’s just a little longer, and then we’ll get a rickshaw. Then it won’t be hard anymore.”

I grew sadder. The path here went mostly through paddy fields. During monsoons, the whole area would be inundated. Then we wouldn’t have to walk. We would take a boat the entire way then. On the other side, there is the main road. It is quite wide. But it would be a roundabout way. In the rainy season, Kashem the boatman would bring and take us back. When he was unable to come, we would have to take the main road. Sometimes cars would drive by on that road. Ma said she didn’t like the sound cars made.

I also liked going the entire way by boat. We would take many different types of food on the boat with us. I could eat whatever I wanted anytime. Ma was not bothered. It was a time of great freedom for me. On the way back home, we would have even more food. Nanima would make them for us. But on this walking path, that wasn’t possible. There



wasn’t even a shop anywhere. Ma only had some dry biscuits in her little bag.

By the time we got there, I was starving. It was quite late but the sun was still beating down. There was a *jhinghe* machan in the front yard of this house. A *doyle* called from atop this machan. The yard was big and busy – lots of people were coming and going. Some were busy with their crops, some had other business. Some women on one side were busy either cooking or picking up the crops. I was quite astonished at the sight. The *doyle* on the vegetable machan was dancing. I only saw it for a moment before Nanima came and snatched me up in her arms. I went inside with her. Ma was talking to someone. She continued talking as she entered the house. I didn’t look in her direction.

We finished eating – Ma and I. Nanima had many questions for me: What had I been doing all these days at home? What did I do at school? She had to know everything. She asked me question after question. I had to give her a list of all the poems I had memorized. I also had to recite one for her. I obliged her

with answers and a recitation. I knew that there was more delicious food to be had from her. We could not finish though because Mama arrived. I am terrified of this person, but I think Ma is the one more afraid of him. As soon as Mama entered the room, Ma bolted. She was completely silent. Everyone else’s voice also grew lower, almost to a whisper, as though they were having some urgent consultation. Even in the kitchen, Mama’s entrance seemed to cause the general conversation to become very specific. There were only three people in the room now: me, Mama and Nanima.

Mama looked at me. His eyes and face seemed to harden. He turned to Nanima and asked, “Aruna? Has Aruna come?”

Nanima hesitated. It would be better if she hadn’t been able to answer or best if she could say no. But, of course, that couldn’t be. She replied, “No, I mean, yes. She just arrived. She’ll leave tomorrow.”

Mama didn’t speak immediately. After a brief pause, he said, “Why does she have to come so frequently? She’s been married for a while now. She should concentrate on her marriage now.”

“She will gradually. Does everyone learn to

focus on their marriage so quickly? Some people need more time.”

“I’ve heard this excuse so many times before! It’s getting old.”

Nanima didn’t respond. Mama asked, “Where is Aruna?”

“She must be around somewhere. She just went out.”

“She went out, that’s fine. But to where?”

“Where else? Perhaps gone to see Abida.

Why don’t you calm down and sit?”

“I am calm. Call Aruna.”

“Didn’t I just tell you she’s gone to see Abida?”

“Did she really go to see Abida, or somewhere else?”

“Where else would she go? We don’t mix with them anymore. They don’t come and we don’t go either.”

“We may not go but Aruna surely does. I know. Go and see – Aruna has gone to that house.”

“Impossible! They just arrived.”

“Go and see. Then come and tell me.”

But there was no need to go. Ma came back. Mama looked at her carefully. Nanima had not expected Ma to be here, at least not at that moment. She looked surprised. Mama asked, “So, tell me, why come back here so often?”

Ma was silent. Mama said, “I’ve told you repeatedly not to come here. I’ve told you to focus on your marriage.”

“I...I don’t like it. I can’t settle down.”

“You must.”

“I can’t.”

Mama kept quiet for a while. Then he said, “Okay.”

Afterwards, they didn’t speak to each other. Mama went into the next room. A lot of people were waiting there for him. Mama began to advise them on different things until late at night. This was the daily routine. Ma moved away. She went to sit by herself somewhere outside. Meanwhile, from Nanima’s lap, I went with Shikha Khala to the pond where we sat for a while at the paved ghat. Water lilies bloom on the other side of this pond. During monsoons, moonlight smiles on the flowers. But now there were none. Ma said that the water lilies hid themselves until the rains came.

“Where?”

“Inside their stalks.”

“How do they come out?”

“How else? When the waters rise, the stalks give the news to the flowers. And right then, the lilies spread their petals, their smiles, their light.”

I had heard this story many times before but wanted to hear it many more times. I left the ghat and went to the other side, alone. Shikha Khala didn’t pay any attention to me. She kept sitting. There is an open field here – not too large but not too small either. An enormous mango tree stood by the side. From there, a man stepped out. He seemed to have been hiding behind the tree and came out on seeing me.

The man came to me. Taking a handful of chocolates from his pocket, he asked, “Do you want them?”

I nodded, yes.

As he poured the chocolates into my pocket, the man said, “Do you know what I am to you?”

I kept quiet. He continued, “I am your Mama.”

I didn’t say anything now either. I couldn’t recognize the man.

There had been a storm late in the afternoon. The sky was still overcast. A little rain had fallen and I was feeling quite chilly. There was a custard-apple tree next to the room in which I lay. I could hear the sounds from its branches, which meant it was still windy outside. One side of the window across the room was ajar. That window opened up wide. The rain began to fall soon after. Heavy rain. I don’t know when the rain stopped but I was woken up deep in the night by whispers at the window. Someone was calling to Ma, “Aru,Aru!”

I was surprised, but kept quiet. The voice called again, “Aru, Aru! I’m here.”

Ma didn’t say anything. I kept thinking: who could it be? Everyone was sleeping in the house. Who would be calling Ma at this time like this? But how could I?

The man said again, “I’ll just say a couple of things and leave. I won’t come back.”

Ma still didn’t respond. After a few minutes the man said, “Aru, I won’t come again. Just talk to me one more time. I swear I won’t come again.”

Ma kept quiet. The man waited for a little. Then he said, “So you too won’t speak to me? Ok, I am leaving then.”

This worked. The window was opened from this side. Ma’s anger escalated but her voice was low. Ma said, “Why don’t you go then? Why have you come here to die? You’ve killed me already– why don’t you now go and die?”

“I want to die, but I can’t even do that. I just keep thinking of you. I will die this time for sure.”

I peeped at the window in the dark but I couldn’t see him clearly. Was this the man who had given me the chocolates that afternoon? I couldn’t be sure.

But the man couldn’t stand there for long. There came the sound of the bolt opening from the other room: Mama was up. He came out, but went back in. The man left quickly. As he left, he said, “I’m leaving now but I will try to come again tomorrow.”

Ma said nothing. She closed the window carefully, a lot more carefully than when she had opened it.

But Nanima’s voice sounded outside Ma’s door, “Aruna, Aruna!”

Ma got up and unbolted the door. Nanima asked, “Why are you still awake? Who were you talking to?”

“What? No, I wasn’t talking to anyone. Why? What happened?”

Nanima didn’t reply to her. She just said, “I don’t know what you are doing, what you’re up to.”

One more thing happened afterwards. At dawn, we were awoken by loud cries of people in the neighborhood. I noticed a lot of anxious people, a lot of hurrying around, loud voices. Everyone kept saying there was a dead body there, the blood still fresh on the clothes.

The site of the incident wasn’t too far away. I went to the scene in Shikha Khala’s arms. A man was lying by the paddy fields – in a very open place. I recognized him. This was the man who had given me chocolates the other day.

We left that same day. On other occasions, Nanima would say, “Stay a little longer.” She said nothing today though. We headed out along the same path, a small bag in Ma’s hand. Ma said nothing much the whole way. We came to the small riverbank close to home. The old boatman didn’t pay us much heed, but he pushed off the boat as soon as we got on. He didn’t wait for a third passenger and Ma didn’t have to say she would pay him for the third person either.

Just as we got to the other side, the rain began. There was no wind today. Still, the boatman said, “Mother, hold on tight.” Ma was not listening. The rain fell in torrents. The raindrops touched Ma’s eyes. The boatman said, “Mother, get down. We have arrived.”

The rain would be cataclysmic today.

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## REVIEWS

# A Linguistic Examination of *Twelve Stories*

*Twelve Stories* by Hasan Azizul Haq, Translator: Bhaskar Chattopadhyay, ISBN: 978-984-91722-4-6, Bengal Lights Books, 2015

REVIEWED BY MAHMUDUL HASAN KHAN

As part of the Library of Bangladesh series, Dhaka Translation Center (DTC) has published a translation of twelve stories written by Hasan Azizul Haq, one of the most prolific writers of contemporary Bengali literature. The translator of *Twelve Stories*, Bhaskar Chattopadhyay, is himself a writer who has authored a number of significant works in Bengali. His commitment to maintaining a balanced relation between the source language (i.e., Bangla) and the target language (i.e., English) can be felt throughout *Twelve Stories*.

Commitment to the specificity of the struggles of the people depicted in the original text and the determination to represent these struggles by maintaining what we may call linguistic fidelity to the source text are crucial in translating a politically committed author like Haq. If the translator concentrates only in satisfying the needs of the target language, the vibe created may dilute the complexity of the source text. Translators could, of course, address these issues regarding linguistic fidelity by providing adequate background information. This can sometimes be done through “introductions, footnotes, critical essays, glossaries, maps, and the like,” so that the provided information “acts as a running commentary on the translated work.”

Bhaskar Chattopadhyay conveys the

social reality depicted in Huq’s story, *Patale Hashpatale* (translated *A Hell called Hospital*), by keeping feudal honorific words like *Huzoor* and kinship terms like *Chacha*. But it has to be said that the word *Chacha* required a footnote since *Chacha* could be both paternal uncle and a way of addressing elderly people, and it has to be contrasted with *mama* or maternal uncle in Bangladeshi contexts.

That Haq is critical about the role of the reluctant educated class in Bangladesh in his fiction is portrayed in the following conversation on a news report about salary increases recently decided upon by the government in the story. The conversation can be seen taking place between a member of the silent masses and a subaltern in a hospital:

The man who had not spoken a word so far now remarked, “It will [government will raise salaries]”

“It will? Why?”

Because the government wants to silence the educated class.”

“As if the educated class ever speaks anyway! They have always kept their mouth shut...Don’t give me the educated class bullshit, I’ve seen enough educated class in my lifetime.”

The alienation of the educated class is also explored by Haq in the story translated by Bhaskar Chattopadhyay as, “The Public Servant.” This story can be read too as an example of allegiance to authority maintained by

public servants at all levels. This is an instance of what sociolinguists would call language ideology, that is to say, the belief that allegiance and servitude flow through one’s veins and is reflected in speech utterances. In the source language Haq uses the phrase “*murdha theke jononendriyo*” which translated literally is, “from head to the pubis.” That this allegiance is craftily molded in the public servant’s intelligence so that it streams from his head and moves ultimately towards the phallus is present in the source language. Because in the English translation this nuance is omitted, readers may fail to get the message that Haq has conveyed. Haq’s ironic message is that a public servant is taught to serve the bureaucracy in such a way that he might even lose his sense of the self. This is why the translator of his fiction needs to commit himself to the specificity of the political context of the utterance.

Another story of the collection, “Excavation” is about two journalists visiting a village to report on an irrigation project in which a canal is to be dug to connect it with a nearby river so that villagers could use it for irrigation. The locally appointed collaborator ensures the journalists that when the excavation is done, “The two barren fields on both banks of the river will be fertile once again.” Another crucial issue emphasized is that “publicity should never stop...”

that is why the journalists are there. Yet “in no circumstances do the people belonging to this [underprivileged] class benefit much – their situation, their position, their problems...everything remains unchanged.” The ones who are supposed to question the sickness of meaningless developmental projects and the unequal distribution of wealth, that is, journalists, may find themselves not being able to perform their professional task as has been expressed by the main protagonist Shahed himself: “Shut up!” roared Shahed. “Don’t ever mention ethics and journalism and all that bullshit again...The entire country is going to the dogs and his highness is talking about ethical journalism!”

While depicting the socio-economic inequalities in Bangladesh, Haq is not indifferent to nature depicted as the backdrop against which his characters’ struggle.s Powerful imageries are used in almost all the twelve stories translated for this purpose; often the characters and the nature mesh into one in their desire, frustration and angst. Take the story titled, *In Search of Happiness* which begins with: “How cool the shade over there must be! It’s calling out to me.” The main protagonist of the story, Kunkum constantly “opened herself up to the mute world” and it would seem from



outside that she “never” understood herself “fully.” She confesses that as she “watched a dragonfly rub its head with its leg,” she heard a “solitary crow”cawing and a “dove cooing. “A dry leaf floated from a tree to the ground. [And] the wind whistled through the trees.” Kunkum carries in her breasts this strange pain and a kind of *je ne sais quoi* feeling which can only be shared in immersing herself fully and nakedly in nature, by “finding bliss in letting go.”

Human ability to play ‘evil’ and ‘brutal’ have not been ignored by Haq either. The story, *Vulture* is an apt example. A group of boys playfully

kills a vulture. Fatigued by their innocent but brutal playfulness, they return home “swaying and staggering, limping and tripping, exhausted and famished,” they “talked about the next day’s plan.” That there is spontaneity even in such brutal acts by individuals has been addressed by Haq over and over again in his writing.

Like any other original writer, Hasan Azizul Haq may appear untranslatable at the outset. He appears so, not because of his diction and style, but because of the very content that he deals with, i.e., the specificity of the struggle of the have-nots under an uneven economy like Bangladesh and also the specific crises suffered by individuals across societies. Those who look for ‘comfort’ in literary texts will also find Haq disturbing. In depicting a harsh reality without compromise, he pushes his readers to a revolutionary understanding of society. Hence translating him to the people in a different language would require a commitment to the struggle of the masses. The translator Bhaskar Chattopadhyay must have felt the challenge to the fullest, and it does appear that he tried his best to satisfy his readers to the best of his abilities in *Twelve Stories*.

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