

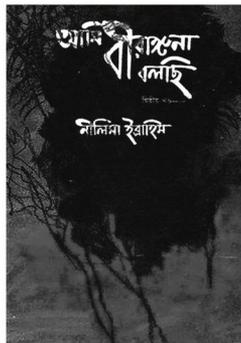
MUSINGS

For the War Heroines, I will Speak

FAYEZA HASANAT

It was 1996 when I first got hold of Dr. Nilima Ibrahim's *Aami Birangana Bolchi*, or rather, the book got hold of me—my soul, my spirit, every bit of my conscience and consciousness—with its gripping narration and harrowing tales of the sufferings of *birangnas*. Every now and then I would take the book out with the intent to translate it, but I would then put it back in haste, before it by my heart caught fire and got scorched seven times as I read each of the seven chapters of the book. It took me twenty years to finally gather the courage to translate a section from the book for the 2016 Independence Day Issue of the *Daily Star*. I am not ashamed to admit that I would have covered away from that task yet again, had Dr. Fakir Alam not stood as an obstacle to my cowardice. Upon his consistent encouragement and the insistence of Dr. Nilima Ibrahim's daughter, Saira Ahsanullah's, I finally completed the translation of *Aami Birangana Bolchi—A War Heroine, I Speak!*—which, hopefully, will soon be published by Bangla Academy.

Last November, as I was translating the book, I was invited by CLUNY's History and Women's Studies department to give a talk on the [Bengali] female body as the narrative of defiance. As I stood in front of a packed auditorium, talking about Bengali women writers and fighters, I felt belittled and ashamed of our failures—my failure—to properly acknowledge the war heroines for their service and sacrifice. It was then I decided to pay my tribute to these heroes by writing about them. My current book project takes into consideration the representation and re-presentation of war heroines in context of the nation's socio-political-cultural discourse, and also in the light of life writing—through reportage and memoirs. In the first part, I will offer a historiographic analysis,



examining the public reaction and the representation of *birangana* bodies in the post-war phase. The second part of the book will include my translations of texts written by or about the war heroines. These translated texts will demonstrate the resilience of these women who defied the discourse of suppression that was imposed upon them (both during and after the war), and who decided to re-present themselves through writing. My translation of *Aami Birangana Bolchi* will be included as a chapter in this section. The second chapter will include excerpts from memoirs

[published or unpublished] written by the war heroines, in my translation, of course.

Bangladesh took an unprecedented step by acknowledging the rape survivors of the war and honoring them with a title for their bravery. However, one cannot overlook the ultimate impact of such gendered violence on both the raped body and the body of the country itself. Theorization of rape has become a dominant concern. On a more de-catur feminist level, it can also be seen as patriarchal society's hypocrisy around the transgression of female chastity. By the way, even though I have used the term "victim"—in describing the war heroines in the introduction to my translation of *Aami Birangana Bolchi*, I would not use that term in connection with these war heroines any more. After all, they bore the burden of the liberation war in their bodies. They were no less heroic than our brave freedom fighters, who confronted our enemies at the war front.

Indeed, during the war, the female body was targeted, identified, and assaulted by the enemies; and in the post-war country, her body was rescued, redefined, and rehabilitated—but in both cases she was defined in sexual terms. And it is because of such sexual framings, I am provoked to read the war-trodden Bengali patriarchy's attitude towards these women from a Freudian perspective. Let me put it this way: in the post-war Bangladesh, the raped female body was treated like nation's "id," in need of suppression, regulation, and policing. The domestic patriarchy's "Ego"—father, brother, son, or husband—wanted to control the raped body by trying to take away her voice and by putting constraints on her mobility. The nationalist /governmental authority worked as a "Super ego," in its attempt of renaming, relocating, rehabilitating, and restructuring her

raped/impregnated/cleansed body.

On the other hand, the women themselves were not sure how to adapt to this new identity that branded them on the basis of their body perceived as an item of war. Hundreds of thousands of women refused to register as "war heroines," many decided to be financially independent after being rejected by their families, a large number of them merged into crowds, and a sizeable number of them even went voluntarily to Pakistan with the soldiers. These women preferred a life of humiliation in the enemy country to a shameful life at home. Nilima Ibrahim's book records the life of one such woman, who married one of her rapists and went to live in Pakistan.

My book project, titled, *Wounded Memories: the Written World of the War Heroines*, has been recently accepted by the Brill Publishers. They are going to publish it as an academic book, under their Women and Gender series. My editor, Nienke keeps sending me enthusiastic letters, asking me to take my time, but finish it soon. I keep sending her reassuring emails. I know I am in no condition to delay the project, not because my publisher is eagerly waiting. I am obliged to complete the task and bring it to light, because they are waiting—my heroes, the hundreds of thousands of women warriors of my country are waiting—to speak through my writings. They are waiting to be heard and remembered, not as victims, but as valiant fighters. And for these courageous women warriors, I am trying to raise my voice so that their situation can be apprehended by the world.

Fayeza Hasanat, of the University of South Florida, muses on two of her forthcoming books.

FARAH GHUZNAVI'S

Fragments of Riversong:

Baadaas for Our Time

Daily Star Books, ISBN: 978-984-90271-9-5, 2013

REVIEWED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

Long ago, I read somewhere that writing short stories is more difficult than writing a novel. While writing about *Fragments of Riversong*, I suddenly recalled the comment because writing a review for a collection of short stories is proving to be quite difficult as well! It certainly is more difficult than writing the review of a novel. When we look at a novel, we can quite easily decide if it is a good novel, or a bad one after considering its characters, language, themes and structure. We can get into a heated discussion with a friend over what worked in it or didn't or what made it a classic tale or a stale one. But what does one do with a collection of short stories where each tale requires individual attention and analysis? *Fragments of Riversong* proved to be a bit of a problem to become while some of the stories are mind-blowing, some worth remembering, there are also a few that seem pretty mediocre and repetitive.

A critical and creative culmination of Farah Ghuznavi's journalistic passage for over a decade," is how Shilpa Kameswaran in *World Literature Today* describes the author's collection of short stories. The cover page with its shards of glasses in a background of indigo and black makes one curious about the pieces inside. On a close inspection, I detected further that there were also tiny human figures that glued the shards together. The title of the book has a sing-song quality that promises stories of different tastes, and taken in tandem with the picture at the top, the collection indeed offers baadaas for our time.

The opening piece, "Getting There" will cause a reader to pause and ponder over a family drama where relationships turn sterile because of the father's obsession with power and desire to keep everything under his thumb. So typical of a traditional Bangladeshi family where children, especially girls, must follow the path set by their elders! The rites of passage, as many would call the process, can be excruciatingly painful for those going through it, as it is with Laila, the younger daughter. As Laila reminisces about events of the past, a sense of resentment and a feeling of guilt as an estranged daughter become focal points of the story. In spite of all her professional successes, she is a loner who has paid the price of accomplishment through her loneliness and mistreatment of others, especially her family members and men. The anger felt by Laila is mirrored in the silent suffering of her elder sister, Sahreen, and yet they have been unable to bridge the gap between themselves. So, while the beginning of the story is just about reaching a destination, the ending, one realizes, is about the promise of a fulfilling relationship through a younger member of Laila's family. Laila's teenage niece makes her recognize the "kindred soul" that wants to follow the same path her aunt took years ago. The context of "Getting There" is thus very familiar, and clearly

events of everyday life can turn into a poignant story in the skillful hands of a storyteller like Ghuznavi.

"The Mosquito Net Confessions" is another striking piece that might remind us about our human frailties when we just tend to presume things about others. The reader might smile wryly at the ludicrous incident with the big bug or the bumpy van rides in rural Bangladesh that bring two apparently dissimilar young women into close proximity only to make them realize with a jolt that they are not too unlike each other.

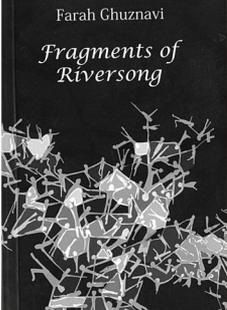
Another story which will make readers hold their breath while reading it is "Escaping the Mirror." I gasped at the familiarly uncanny turn of events in it. "Do you think that they will believe you?" is a trite question all child abusers pose. But

trying to get rid of her elderly husband. The narration might sound like something of the confession of a psycho, but the reader is bound to feel compassion for the wife who has always been made to feel like a burden and who was married off to a widower because she had little prospect of catching an eligible bachelor. Ghuznavi indeed writes with empathy and compassion, but certainly not sensationalism, which makes her work enjoyable. There are been loads of NGO fiction around these days; and while some of the stories like "Big Mother" and "The Mosquito Net Confessions" could have turned out that direction, they certainly do not. Human minds having to deal with external and internal conflicts are expertly exposed and craftily drawn out in these stories. Even "Waiting," the story that portrays a grotesque encounter between the crudely rich and the extreme poor, pushes sentimentality into the backseat. Asha, the girl who provides the dream ice-cream for the two street-urchins, runs away from them in self-reproach and embarrassment rather than self-justification.

However, there are also several stories that made me question their inclusion in the volume. Stories such as "Just One of the Gang," "The Homecoming," and "The Silver Lining." While the first and the third one appear out of place in this collection, the second one seems to be more of a fragment than a complete story. In some ways "The Silver Lining" seems like a retelling of "Just One of the Gang," with its coming of age kind of theme. Nevertheless, even these stories point to a noteworthy problem in modern life-bullying by the peers. The theme of the other story is something central to our consciousness—the 1971 Liberation War and its aftermath. It is difficult to incorporate such devastation, and hence it begins and ends in medias res. Yet, I feel dissatisfied with the closure of "The Homecoming," and wonder if a little more work could have given it a more satisfactory ending and if a little more introspection and description could have tightened the storyline effectively.

What makes a story a good story? Craft, compassion, precision and control over one's emotion, and skill with language and expression, I would say. Ghuznavi's style of writing indeed covers all that. *Fragments of Riversong* is a good read. But a reader may not be able to read it in one sitting as there are issues to ponder and reflect on. One hopes Ghuznavi will hone her craft of storytelling further and give us even more satisfying stories in the years to come.

Sohana Manzoor is Assistant Professor of English at ULAB. She is also the Deputy Editor of The Daily Star Literature and Reviews Pages.



while this could have very well turned into one of those horror stories one hears, the author strikes the right balance in presenting it as a story of a traumatic experience and the sense of release felt by a daughter when it is finally able to tell her father what had happened to her years ago.

"Big Mother" has a similar theme in that it deals with a child abuser; it narrates how a family fails to protect the abused one. But the suffering projected here is more complicated because it also throws light on other grave issues of society such as polygamy and the prioritizing of the male child and the vulnerability and oppression of women.

One of the shorter stories in the collection, "Waiting for the Storm," was published in The *Daily Star Lit* page a couple of years earlier. It portrays the bleak picture of a younger housewife

THUMBNAIL CLASSICS REVISITED

Franny and Zooey (1961) by J. D. Salinger

REVIEWED BY ANIKA SABA

FRANNY AND ZOOEY



While everyone knows J.D. Salinger for his widely-acclaimed masterpiece *The Catcher in the Rye*, very few are familiar with his other works. His 1961 work *Franny and Zooey* consists of a short story named *Franny* and a novella called *Zooey*. Publishing them together makes sense because both the short story and the novella narrate the story of the Glass family. *Franny* is short for Frances and *Zooey* for Zachary and they happen to be the youngest of seven siblings who are famous for starting in a radio program. In this collection, *Franny and Zooey* are shown to be struggling to come to terms with the ghosts of their elder brothers and sisters, both literally and metaphorically. Two of their elder brothers had passed away tragically and their deaths had clearly left an impression on them. The eldest, Seymour, is especially recalled again and again since he is the biggest inspiration behind their devotion to reading and pursuit of knowledge far and beyond their cultural milieu such as the philosophies of Zen Buddhism and ancient Hinduism. Clearly, *Franny and Zooey* find it difficult to fit in with the phony and narcissistic lifestyle of their American peers.

This existential crisis of the young American is Salinger's favorite theme in this book. From family love and loss to philosophical debates on life and God, this small book touches on a variety of issues in only a few pages, and depicts intensely the domestic drama of one big family. For those who have loved *Catcher* and wanted to read more Salinger, this is definitely worth a try. As for others who did not read the book, these tales will be quick but delightful reading for their witty dialogues and intriguing characters.

Anika Saba is Lecturer, Department of English & Humanities, BRAC University.