MUSINGS

Things That Write Me

FAYEZA HASANAT

I do not write. I am not a writer. I am an active thought, willing to reveal through words the enigmas of human lives and the perplexities of women's stories.

My grandmother's life was my first storybook. I spent most of the summer vacations of my girlhood days with my paternal grandparents, who lived in a tiny village near the northern border of Bangladesh. Traveling to that remote village was like a globetrotting of its own kind. We had to start with a train journey from Dhaka, then cross a river by boat, and then hop on a bus that dropped us at a place from where we either had to get on a rickshaw or use our feet. The grownups always opted for the rickshaw, but I preferred running the rest of the way—a mile maybe—to a house where I was warmly received by a bunch of aunts and uncles and my grandparents. My grandfather smiled like an old wizard as he nodded his long white beard and hugged me, while my grandmother tried to snatch me away from him with utmost excitement. She had a lot of stories to tell and, as she would always say, a lot of things to learn from me.

Being a little girl, I had much to teach, and my grandmother was the only obedient student I had. I was always eager to share with her the stories of my fictional adventures, and in return, I wanted to know everything about her ghost friends who lived in the trees all around that house. While I sat mesmerized, listening to her tales of a big hand that followed her everywhere and advised her on the crucial things of life, my grandmother praised me for my storytelling skills. "You are such a good storyteller! One day, I will be like you," my grandmother used to say as she braided my hair, listening to my nonsensical tales. Her compliments gave my self-esteem a pair of strong wings! When your grandmother wants to grow up to be like you, you must be some sort of a superwoman, no?

But my magical power did not last

long. When I was thirteen, I spent my summer vacation with an estranged grandmother, who was indifferent to my stories and was almost absent from the world she was living in. The day we reached the village, I found my grandmother running—not toward me—but around the house, holding a knife in her hand and chasing some invisible enemy. When she saw me standing by the gate, she stopped and smiled at me, and then started running again, circling the house. For years, I was haunted by that image and could

not figure out how someone could

look so scary, so scared, and yet so

happy at the same time. Back then, I did not know that my grandmother was schizophrenic. I found her cruelty toward me quite unbearable. She stayed mad at me for no reason. Sometimes she called me a dumb girl, and sometimes she stole my books and threw them out the window. One day, she snatched a ripe mango from me and blamed me for taking what was rightfully hers. Because the mango was from her tree and the aunt who gave me the mango was her daughter, she should be the one eating that mango, she argued. Heartbroken, I took my pen and my notebook and sat

under a big tamarind tree to write a story about a good grandmother who was turned into a witch by some magical power of a "ghost hand" that lived on top of that tamarind tree. It was the courageous granddaughter of that poor lady who eventually saved her grandmother by slaying the invisible body of that "ghost hand."

My father was so impressed with my story that he shared it with all his siblings and they all had a good laugh at my expense. But my grandmother became sad and rebuked me for killing the only friend she had since her childhood. I promised to write a sequel and resuscitate the dead hand back to life. But my summer was over, and I had to postpone my creative adventures indefinitely. My grandmother's ghosts stayed buried inside my head for several years, until one day I decided to resurrect them in one of my stories in my debut collection, The Bird Catcher and Other Stories.

In the story, "Make Me Your Sitar," I revisited my grandmother's haunted past: a child bride in the early 1930s, who created an imaginary friend as her survival mechanism. I finally brought the dead hand back to life and granted it immortality through my writing. I took the title of that story from a song by Rabindranath Tagore. I also translated that song and made it a part of the story, in remembrance of my grandmother's deep love for Tagore's songs and poems.

Tagore plays a dominant role in the first story of this collection as well. "The Anomalous Wife" is in fact my take on Tagore's "A Wife's Letter." In Tagore's story, his protagonist Mrinalini wrote a powerful letter to her husband before leaving him for good. We—and by "we" I mean all the Bengali-speaking people from both Bangladesh and India—always saw Tagore's Mrinalini as the Nora of the Eastern world. But then again, just like Ibsen's Nora, Tagore's Mrinalini (and her letter) was actually created by a

man. It was a male narrative—from a woman's perspective—written by a man and was being read by the husband—the alpha male in a household. As a gender-conscious writer-critic, I interpreted that letter as a symbolic suppression of the wife's voice and wanted to write a wife's letter from a woman's perspective. I replaced the 19th century Bengali wife with a highly educated immigrant wife and kept thinking of her predicament in a contemporary context: how would this wife write or explain her life to her husband, or to the world? Are there words enough to hold her thoughts? Are words ever enough to explain our truest emotions? What would happen when such a woman, who is aware of all limitations—society's, her husband's, her own—and who is aware of her immense strength and yet chooses to play dumb for the sake of social balance, decides to leave the doll's house? Which house will she leave? The one that houses her, or the one that houses all the doll keepers as the masters of the world? And how will that world define her? Will she be seen as a rebel or as an anomaly? "The Anomalous Wife" thus rewrites

Tagore's "A Wife's Letter." I am a woman and what I write is a woman's writing-lived and learnt and earned and at times overwhelmed and at times exuberant—but a woman's writing nonetheless. Sometimes my words are fierce, sometimes they are soaked with a wry sense of humor, sometimes they are loaded with references, and sometimes they blur the lines between the real and the metaphysical and wander around with phenomenological queries. The title story, for example, examines myths and tales about human aspirations, and intentionally moves around the same circular logic regarding time, love, death, or freedom. Through its geographic references, "The Bird Catcher" touches the whole world and its people, nature, music, myth, philosophy, the conflict between need

and desire, the seeker and the sought, and the very essence of human existence as a singular and free spirit, while allowing all these various elements to be intermingled in the triangle tale of a bird catcher, a recluse, and a bird.

Each of the eight stories in The Bird Catcher deals with specific issues regarding women and gender—be it familial relationships, misogyny, sexual identities and discrimination, prejudice about one's skin color, mental health, the cultural isolation of elderly immigrants, the existential quest for a woman's identity, or a woman's mode of writing. The world depicted in these stories is not our usual world where everyone seems to have every right to dream or live freely. Women in this world are Daedalus' daughters, desperately trying to fly toward the sun, wearing a pair of waxen wings prepared for them by their benevolent patriarch.

For a woman like me, writing is a surge, a whim that sparks through the hidden layers of darkness. Writing is a voice, my voice—a marginal woman's voice. Writing is not what I do or produce; it is a yearning, a yearning so intense that when it tries to write itself in words, each word explodes into a million pieces and hits like meteors and rattles the core of every thought. For me, writing is breathing—on my own accord. I don't know how to write or even "un-write" because I don't write. I get written, and what writes me is a labyrinth of my dreams and awakenings and my consciousness of the cultures and histories that I carry in the brown bag of my body.

Fayeza Hasanat is an author, translator, and educator. She is noted for her translation of Nawab Faizunnessa's RupJalal and Neelima Ibrahim's Aami Birangana Bolchi (A War Heroine, I speak). Her debut collection, The Bird Catcher and Other Stories, is simultaneously published this year from the USA and Bangladesh.



Lore of the Woman: The Bird Catcher and Other Stories

Fayeza Hasanat, ISBN: 978-1-937543-75-4, Jaded Ibis Press (Will also be available from BLB Publications at DLF, 2018)

REVIEWED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

A reader can perhaps assume from the back flap of Fayeza Hasanat's debut collection of short stories that the pieces revolve around a woman's position in society, familial relationships and identity that is constructed for her. But that is all one can assume because the stories presented here are no simple social representation of women's lives. They delve into the complex psyche of women who look into their souls and search for other identities beyond that of a wife, mother, daughter and sister. One might as well ask, "What makes a woman?"

Hasanat's The Bird Catcher and Other Stories is certainly not an easy read. A reader might pause to blink and think many a times between the two covers of the volume. A rhythmic story-telling punctured by searing language and literary allusions, this collection could very well be titled, The Lore of Bangladeshi Women, relating the tales of women who have stood on the threshold of nothingness.

The first story "The Anomalous Wife" might remind one of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper." That the wife wants to walk into the sea after thirty years of marriage could also evoke Virginia Woolf who walked into a river. The piece is also a commentary on the limited and problematic aspects of counseling and the definition of mental health. The patient is wondering about her doctor, "What is wrong with this woman? Why is she so paradisally dumb?" One might also ask what the purpose of therapy is. Does it cure, or does it make one adept in a world that has gone terribly wrong? Hasanat surely questions the established norms of the society that deems a successful Bangladeshi man as the one "who has lived the American dream to the fullest,

must have in his possession a few

perfectly designed children and a content wife" (24).

"Bride of the Vanishing Sun" turns to an age-old problem in Bangladeshi society that judges the beauty of a woman through her skin colour. Konay dekha alo is a romantic term that suggests that the late afternoon light would make even a dark-skinned girl absorb some of the light of the setting sun. The reality, however, is indeed very different. The mother and grandmother of Aandhi may hope that the magical light would turn their darling into a beauty, but the groom and his family keep on weighing the prospective bride through dowry. The darker the skin

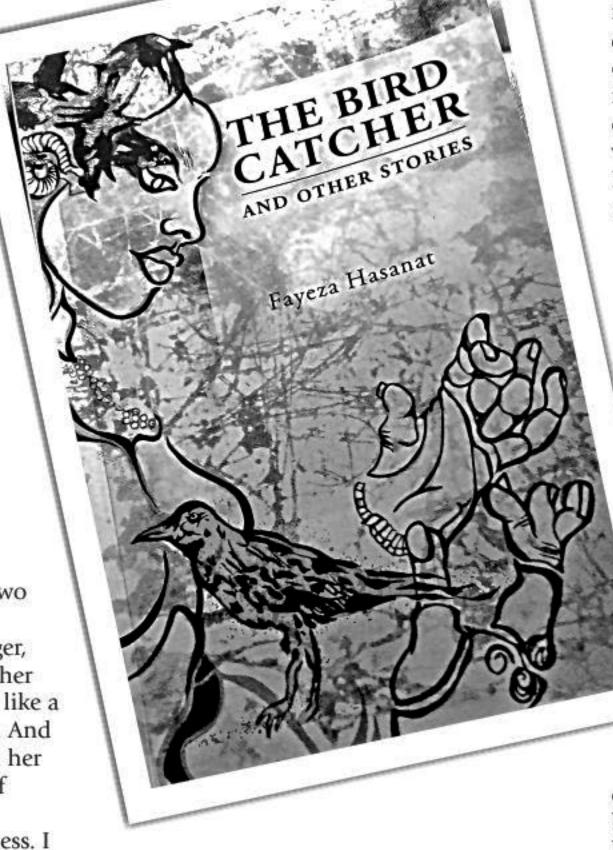
colour, the higher the amount. The incapability of men to appreciate their wives as human beings is an inherent theme of Fayeza Hasanat's collection. A woman is never a complete human being; even her loving father or brother fails to see her so. making one question the nature of love a woman is showered with. It is mostly another woman that can hear the anguish and is able offer some solace as can be seen in "Mother Immigrant" and "Make Me Your Sitar."

Noor Jahan—the old lady in "Mother Immigrant" is a relatively new kind of mother in contemporary society. She lives among her children in the US and mesmerizes her audience with her stories of wisdom and hope. Her definition of home is indeed one that any immigrant would recognize: "What home? Home is not where you are from. Home is where you live. Home is where your children and grandchildren are. Home is where you die. This is my home, because this is where I will die." (95). At the same time, this is also a thought-provoking portrayal of a system where elderly parents are ferried from one house to another. The only person who truly cares for Noor Jahan cannot

claim her because she is her daughter-in law and certainly does not love her more than her own children. "Make Me Your Sitar" evokes a similar relationship from a village of the old times, where a mother-in-law chases out her son whose only understanding of marital pleasure is to rape his young bride.

"Darkling I Listen" portrays typical marriage in which the mother-in law screeches at her son's wife. The main focus of the story is the narrator, a woman who is judged for her incapacity to bear children. The definition of love then might very well become a practice of oppression: "There are no two beings in love: there's only one—the one who is stronger, the one who absorbs the other like a sponge eats the other like a flesh-eating bacteria" (109). And when the wife fails to fulfill her wifely duties, in this case, of bearing a child, the ardent husband says, "I am powerless. I can't hurt my parents." But isn't adoption a viable option for educated couples?

When a student writes to his teacher about his dying father, the narrator of "When Our Fathers Die" suddenly recalls the death of her own father—the pain, helplessness and some insignificant detail suddenly become poignant. How can one console a loss that is as huge as life? When a life goes out of one's life, what consolation can possibly be there? That brings us to "The Hyacinth Boy," the one story that



is not about a woman, but it is not about a man either as the boy Shojol is a member of the third gender. He is treated by most of the people around as an anomaly, a package that has a little more to offer.

"The Bird Catcher" is the last story of the collection, and perhaps the most difficult and the most beautiful one. The reader will either be thoroughly confused or thrown into a sea of contemplation because the tale is indeed loaded with suggestions and possibilities. It has an enigmatic ending

that makes one ask: Where is the beginning, and where is the end of anything? The figure of the bird catcher is a reminiscence of the Gollum in Lord of the Rings. He is possessed by the idea of capturing the bird that sings of immortality. And finally, when he captures her, he puts her "in a glorious vault, hidden from all sights and sounds. He served the bird bright berries and red cherries, raisins and nuts" (143). He studs her with pearls, diamonds and sapphires, and also adorns her with gold chains that tie her to the magnificent cage. Hasanat deals with some disturbing concepts—the difference between capturing and owning. Does the bird-catcher love the bird, or does he just want to possess her? With its intricate use of Sufi philosophy, the piece is also an eerie reminiscence of The Phantom of the Opera, with the bird catcher ordering his bird, "Sing for me, beautiful bird,

sing and dance for me" (143). The Bird Catcher and Other Stories uses illustrations by Chitra Ganesh, the Brooklyn based artist who draws from myths and pop culture to

capture feminist and queer themes. The black and white cover page depicting the bird-catcher and a golden bird indeed is different from most debut collections. One wonders if the author, who also specializes in gender studies, did not choose the black and white to illustrate the colourless domain that men create for women to turn their own worlds colourful. Yet the soul of the bird remains free and hence the golden, glorious bird.

Sohana Manzoor is Assistant Professor, Dept. of English & Humanities, ULAB. She is also the Editor, Star Literature & Reviews Pages.