


DSC PRIZE FOR SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE 2019

Half the Night is Gone emerges as the winner from a shortlist of six to take the coveted US \$25,000 DSC Prize



Amitabha Bagchi's brilliant novel *Half the Night Is Gone* has won the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2019. The announcement was made at a special Award Ceremony at the IME Nepal Literature Festival on 16 December this year in the picturesque city of Pokhara. Honorable Mr. Pradeep Gyawali, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nepal, along with Surina Narula, co-founder of the DSC Prize presented the winner's trophy to Amitabha Bagchi in an event attended by key dignitaries, literary enthusiasts, writers and media. The DSC Prize has always encouraged diverse voices that bring alive the layered nuances of South Asian life, and Bagchi's novel, a post-colonial saga that unfolds over three generations, adroitly explores human relationships, and the intertwining of fates and cultures in a thoroughly Indian context. The novel's amazing attention to details, the inventive use of language, and its memorable and well-defined characters make it an outstanding read.

Jury Chair Harish Trivedi, speaking on behalf of the jury said, "For the five jury members located in five different countries, reading 90 novels in 90 days was a transformative experience. Over the months, we arrived at a diverse and inclusive longlist of 15 and a shortlist of 6 novels, representing the polyphonic richness of the region. It is out of this collective literary churning that there has emerged a winner whose work subsumes many languages and sensibilities."

Half the Night is Gone is a novel about fatherhood, brotherhood and childhood, love, loyalty and poetry. It seeks to make sense of a new India that came into being after independence. Spellbinding and penetrating, *Half the Night Is Gone* raises questions of religion, literature and society that speak to our fractured times.



THE DSC PRIZE FOR SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE
2019 WINNER

Amitabha Bagchi



FICTION |

Click Clock Click Clock

KAY



The Gulmohar tree was tall and wide glowing with blossoms and green leaves. It gave a shelter as good as a home for some. The old woman sat under the tree from morning till evening with a bundle of clothes and beddings she needed. She slept under the tree using the bundles as her pillow. People and passers by would leave some food and fruit for her.

Where was her home? She had one at Rupali basti which was burnt down in a fire. It was her family? She had a husband and two children. Where were they? They, too, were burnt in that fire. The government officers asked her repeatedly to return to her home and identify the bodies of her family so she could claim compensation from the Government - to live in comfort for the rest of her life. Kind missionaries had given her some wool and needles to knit scarves which could be given and distributed to those in need of it in this blistering winter.

Her needles went click clock click clock knitting from morning till evening when finally sleep took her away from her present position and she fell into a deep but tired sleep.

She refused to return to her hut to identify the melted bodies of her beautiful babies and her dear husband. What torment was this? Her mind went back to a spring time years ago, to the day of her wedding. She was dressed in red and gold resplendent and her husband in sherwani. They were a handsome couple. In the wedding ceremony the promise glowed "as never to part" and she sang her today as her loved ones lay burnt.

Days and nights passed this way for her in this, static living. Then quite suddenly one day another slum area reportedly was on fire. The sky turned orange, red and yellow... Screams and cries of children tore the sky with mothers wailing. The old woman heard and saw what she never wanted to see. She knitted faster "click clock" to draw the sound of a weeping humanity not far from her.

No, she will not go back to identify her loved ones burnt to ashes, just so she can get a government sanction for compensation. People's persuasion failed to move her from the static position she occupied under the tree.

Work, incessant work kills feelings. So she kept knitting "click clock click" with her needles. Beautiful scarves to give away to the poor in this winter wind.

She was known as a helpful social worker in her community as with any call for help in mishaps of injury or delivery she would run to assist the patients. Till they were safely placed in an ambulance.

Her desire to help was always uppermost. Today she sits numb without feelings, click click, as the needles move to produce scarves. The missionaries were very pleased to get those for the poor and in return they served her with food.

The old woman's life had the soothing effect of an automaton. Where the hours were divided into manual work and cleaning, eating meals served to her, and lastly a long dreamless sleep.

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The old woman heard and saw what she never wanted to see. She knitted faster "click clock" to draw the sound of a weeping humanity not far from her.

She was a born helper. A trained midwife, a woman known for her kindness and efficient service. Will she ignore this crying, this wailing? Will this catharsis not incite her?

It did. She dropped the needles. Unknitted scarves flew in the wind as she ran towards her basti to give her skilled help to people who were in need. She was moving briskly from patient to patient, placing them in the ambulance, bandaging some and soothing others, and inviting some in her hut which she now turned into a temporary clinic.

The old woman came to life again. Kay wrote this story after the recent fire in a slum area in Dhaka.

"Women's Voices, Joined Together from East to West in Literature"

STAR LITERATURE AND REVIEW TEAM

Each year from November 25 to December 10, women around the world unite and raise their voice in support of the UN's 16 Days of Activism Campaign against gender-based violence. Following the same trend, the annual international campaign for this year started on November 25, the international day for the elimination of violence against women, and ran till December 10, Human Rights Day. This year's theme was "Orange the World: Generation Equality Stands against Rape!" and as a part of the campaign, the Canadian High Commission partnered with The Reading Circle, and "Gantha," a group of dedicated Bangladeshi women intellectuals - to host a reading session titled "Women's Voices joined Together from East to West in Literature" as a part of the sixteen-day long activism.

Considering storytelling an important tool in terms of raising awareness about gender-based violence, giving voice to survivors, creating a safe space to reflect on and be critical of one's environment, and inspiring activists to take action, the intense discussion was held at Six Season Hotel in the capital on 7 December, 2019 at 3.00 pm. It was based on a selection of diverse women's voices in literature from East to West and their contribution to eliminating violence against women. The High Commissioner of Canada in Bangladesh Benoit Prefontaine attended the event, and confirmed that addressing gender-based violence is necessary for achieving gender equality- also "critical to eradicating poverty and building a more peaceful, prosperous and inclusive world. Eliminating gender-based violence needs to be a priority for all counties, especially those working to attain the Sustainable Development Goals." After his welcome remarks, it was the turn of Professor Niaz Zaman, an academic, writer and translator herself, to moderate the

reading session and introduce the writers of the day, whose deliberate involvement and constant efforts in establishing women rights both in East and West have proved successful over the years.

Among the writers, educators and artists, were some of the most renowned names of Bangladesh including Selina Hossain, Anwara Syed Haq, Jharna Rahman, Shahnaz Munni, and Razia Sultana Khan whose stories function as a reminder of the program's motto: the elimination of violence against women. Alongside, were the translation works of Alice Ann Munro by Jackie Kabir, Sauda Akhter, and Shahruk Rahman and their works were read out by a number of readers, following which was a question-answer session where the audience had the opportunity to engage with the guest speakers, authors and translators directly. Rosalee LaPlante, the Program Manager (Political Counsellor of the High Commission of Canada) also remarked on some of the seminal Canadian women's voices in contemporary literature like Margaret Atwood and Alice Ann Munro, encapsulating the diversity and complex socio-cultural reality as portrayed in their writings. Munro's work was described as having revolutionized the architecture of short stories, especially in its tendency to move forward and backward in time, some of which have been edited and translated to Bangla by Niaz Zaman and Papri Rahman. The successful program came to an end at 5:45 pm, followed by a reception and book exhibition.

With a view to promoting women's economic empowerment, their full and equal participation in all aspects of social, economic and political life as well as international peace and security, the joint venture of Bangladesh and Canada further promised to stand together in the future to shine a spotlight on the impact of gender based violence and women and society.

