



Navigating Bangla literary TRANSLATIONS

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A lot of translations are being done in Bangladesh, from English into Bangla and Bangla into English; much of the latter by native Bangla speakers. While native Bangla speakers may have had 12 years of English education, they often lack the language skills necessary for literary translation. Why then, do they persist in doing so? Perhaps because they feel that some writers are so important that his or her writing should be presented in a world language. They often say, "If Tagore had not been translated into English, would he have won the Nobel Prize?" As Syed Manzoorul Islam said at a PEN workshop on translation in 2003, "Readers and scholars in the West tend to confine themselves to writers whose works are available in English."

Since its inception, the Bangla Academy has been publishing literary translations in English. This includes poetry as well as short stories, novels and plays. Its journal also includes translations of stories and poems—occasionally even novellas. University Press Limited (UPL), the largest publisher of English language books in Bangladesh, has also published a significant number of literary translations: including Brother James's translation of the *Gitanjali*, Hasna Jasimuddin Moudud's *A Thousand Year Old Bengali Mystic Poetry*, and Fakrul Alam's *Selected Poems of*

and Death in Krishnanagar (Mrityukshudha) and another translation of *Kuhulika* as *The Revolutionary*.

In 2005, writers.ink made its debut with the launch of *Tree Without Roots*, Syed Waliullah's translation—or transcreation—of his novel, *Lal Salu*. *Night of No Moon*, Afia Dil's translation of Syed Waliullah's *Chander Amabasya*, and *Cry, River, Cry*, Osman Jamal's translation of *Kando Nadi Kando*, followed. It has also published single writer anthologies of poetry and short stories. In 2011, it published a Bangladeshi edition of Mirza

translate into that language.

Some years ago, a translator working with Al Mahmud's fiction excused his poor translation. Either it was false modesty or he really knew his shortcomings and requested readers to consider his work "as an effort of a poor pen." At the same time, he expressed the hope that somebody better would come along to do justice to Al Mahmud's writings. What he was doing was translating Bangla writings that needed to be translated into English for a non-Bangla reading public as a stop-gap measure until someone "with proper

unnecessary. In Bangla, it is perfectly all right to say, "*She mone mone bhablo*," literally translated as "He thought in his mind." In English, however, the words "in his mind" are redundant. Similarly, in Bangla, the word *sal* is given next to the year: 2010 *sal*, for example. In English, however, we would not normally say "in the year 2010," but just "in 2010." Similarly, in English, one would not say "inside his heart, he felt unappreciated and unloved." Since it is quite evident that it is inside one's heart that one feels unappreciated and unloved, the first three words are unnecessary.

Translations from Bangla also need to be toned down. Bangla is a more emotional language than English. For example, when referring to the Pakistani soldiers fighting in 1971, most writers in Bangla use the phrase "*hanadar bahini*," that is, the marauding forces. How to translate this phrase becomes a problem for even Bangla speakers with almost native English fluency. Thus, a sentence in a translation, which was then in progress, had a sentence that read: "On the 25th of March, the barbaric aggressor Pakistani armed forces began killing Bengalis." The young translator was advised to avoid adjectives and adverbs and allow the verb/action to convey the meaning. However, many Bangladeshis might feel that this sort of translation tones down the emotion of the original and might even be misconstrued as a deliberate whitewashing of aggression.

One of the problems of a translator working with languages from different cultures is to find equivalent terms. Some years ago, I was translating a short story by Makbula Manzoor. The story was about a young woman who was raped during 1971, betrayed by the man she loved, and consequently had to leave her village to work in the city. The title of the story was *Kochuripana*, meaning water hyacinth. For an English reader, the hyacinth is a beautiful flower; for an educated western reader, who has read Greek mythology, the flower carries suggestions of homosexual love. In Bangladesh, where this beautiful flower floats on the river ways, clogging them and becoming a nuisance, it is waste, unwanted rubbish. Therefore, instead of using *Hyacinth* for the title, I used the word *Flotsam*, to give the sense of something unwanted but also floating—as the protagonist is after the war.

Often, translators just haven't read enough of contemporary literature in the target language. Thus, they are not familiar with the idioms of the language they are translating into. Even translators who are good in English slip up. No native English speaker would ask, "Have you taken your lunch?" It would be either "Have you had your lunch?" or, more commonly, "Have you had lunch?" Similarly, the Bangla word "*kol*" is literally "lap." But "*kol*" isn't always lap. Sometimes it means "arms."



Artwork from *Teabag Stories: Art on used teabags by Md Sadiuzzaman.*

Ihtesamuddin's *The Wonders of Vilayet*, translated by Kaiser Haq.

Considering the importance of translation, the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) launched the Dhaka Translation Center (DTC) in 2013 with the translation of three short stories by Hasan Azizul Huq. It organised workshops, and Bengal Lights Books (BLB), a sister concern, co-published a collection of stories emerging from those workshops: *The Book of Dhaka*. The Library of Bangladesh Series has been "conceived and created" by DTC at ULAB to "make works of leading Bangladeshi writers accessible to world audiences in high-quality translations." The series editor is Arunava Sinha. Apart from Hasan Azizul Huq, BLB has published Syed Shamsul Haq, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Rizia Rahman, Shaheen Akhtar and Imdadul Huq Milan.

Translating from one European language into another or from one Asian language into another is somewhat easier than translating from a European language into an Asian one or vice versa. Despite differences, the cultural contexts are similar in the first case but different in the latter. Apart from cultural content, the rhythms of a language learned but not spoken are difficult to acquire well enough to write creatively in it or to use it for literary translation. It has often been said that one must have learned a language at one's mother's knee to be able to write creatively in that language or to

knowledge and authority" came along to do so.

For Bangla speakers who wish to translate into English, common problems are with tense, verbs, tautology and tone. Perhaps the main problem with any translator of Bangla fiction is tense. In *Translation*, Rimi B Chatterjee notes "In Bengali... the conventional literary tense in novel and story writing is the simple present." In English, however, the literary tense is usually the past tense—although recently, a number of books in English have also used the present tense. Translators who begin to translate a story in the present tense often move to the past tense as they go on—and then get confused with the tenses, which keep shifting.

The apparent absence of the verb in many Bangla sentences is also problematic. Bangla fairy tales, for example, often begin: "*Ek raja. Tar saat rani.*" Literally, these sentences translate as "A king. His seven queens." Translators who want to be "true" to the original leave out the verbs. While a sentence fragment in English can be quite effective, these sentences in Bangla are not really fragments as the verb is clearly understood by the Bangla reader. A good translator would supply the verb in English that the Bangla reader automatically supplies—along with tense, depending on the context.

While a Bangla sentence might frequently omit the verb, it might also add words that in English would be

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Jibanananda Das. It has also published several anthologies of Bangla short fiction in translation.

The Nazrul Institute has published a number of English translations of Nazrul's writings. *The Poems of Kazi Nazrul Islam*, a bilingual edition, edited by Mohammad Nurul Huda, provides several English versions of some poems. Nazrul's *Kuhulika (Enigma)* was translated by Kabir Chowdhury, keeping the same name as the Bangla original. The poet's novels and short stories were not given the importance given to his songs and poems. It was not until 2012, that Nazrul's epistolary *Bandhon Hara* was translated by some members of The Reading Circle as *Unfettered*. Subsequently, its publisher, Nymphaea Publication, also published *Love*