



FICTION

THE TREE

TANVIR MALIK

Doctor Mahtab Uddin looked at the luminescent hands of his watch: 9 pm. Not that late, he thought and sat down on the circular cement platform not far from the patient's house. The platform encircled the base of the great banyan tree – one that was believed to be over two hundred years old; it was said to be standing erect when the Borgis had attacked. Countless passersby sought

The patient had had a close shave. He had advised the son to take his mother to Dhaka. "Have meals timely, and take your medicine punctually. The rest is in Allah's hands," he had said to the patient with a smile.

His forehead rippled for a second and then straightened out: the fused light bulb over the gate outside his house needed replacing. His three sons, two daughters-in-law and three grandchildren were arriving the following day. The youngest son Moyeen's interests lay in everything else but studies. He had demanded an exorbitant sum so he could go to America for study. The father was certain he would one day marry a white woman with blond hair.

The breeze had dried his sweat, but the dizziness returned. Taking out a handkerchief, he wiped off the dirt from the lenses of his glasses. He needed a new pair. Numerous times he had meant to visit an ophthalmologist in Dacca, but it was impossible to work around his tight schedule.

The property he had amassed over the years was to give his progeny a solid footing: they were his insurance policy against the ravages of chance. The house in Dhaka was finished, and the old house in Chuadanga had no dearth of room when most of his children came round to visit once a year with all his grandchildren running around and giggling.

9:30 -- time to leave. The road was dark except for a street lamp with one tube-light flickering feebly; some crook had made away with the other one.

He hailed a rickshaw. "Jhenaidah Bus Stand." The rickshaw-puller nodded. "You look new here, *baba*," he said. "Where do you sleep at night?"

"In the rail station." The *baithak khana* outside the house lay fallow. The veranda had a deer head mounted over the entrance to the only room. The carcass of a steel bed frame had once been shoved inside nobody remembered when. The servants, after their half-yearly cleaning expeditions, complained about enormous rats, colonies of ants and jungles of cobweb that held sway there.

"Stop," the Doctor said.

The consequences of asking a total stranger to sleep in his house had not escaped him, but he wanted to give the poor kid the benefit of doubt.

"You can sleep in the veranda at night until you get a roof over your head," he tucked a five take note in his hand.

The rickshaw-puller looked on. Rabeya Begum was at prayer in a corner of their room. She always had the dim light on lest the Doctor bumped into the furniture. The bluish glow fell over everything: the showcase, the four-poster bed, the desk, the ceiling fan that hung low from one of the joists. The mosquito net lay bunched neatly across its awning. The palm-leaf hand fan was on the desk – a blunt reminder that power-cuts were routine.

"You're late again," she sat by him. "You need to slow down. The body can take up to a certain limit."

"I will. Let me work one more year, and then I'll stop for good," he smiled. "Come have dinner, and don't forget about your medicine," she left the room.

The Doctor stared into the panes of the showcase opposite. A cavalcade of past events paraded by: his mother's death when he was thirteen, raising five younger siblings, his father's second marriage, completion of MBBS, marriage at twenty-one, first job, frequent job transfers, retirement in 1971... burying four children.

But a lot remained still. Six children waited to be married; and he had to make sure they were well provided for. He was not ready – at least not yet.

Jockey Aushadhaloy sat smack dab in the middle of Borobazar. The large signboard had a yellow background, against which the name was emblazoned in red in Bangla and English. Shelves of boxes and bottles covered three sides of the walls inside. The ever-busy compounder's counter in the front and an alcove for storing medicine at the rear hugged the Doctor's cubicle from both sides.

Gobindo always arrived at 8:30 am sharp. He then swept the floor. To top off, he sprinkled water to check the

encroaching dust mites. Twice a week he dusted the framed photo of Jockey -- the Doctor's youngest child who had drowned seven years previously.

An indisposition made the Doctor arrive later than usual today. He felt cheerful though as his house would be full again briefly. He especially looked forward to seeing Diya and Rayan -- his oldest grandchildren. He oversaw the progress of their studies whenever he visited Dhaka. He was their taskmaster at these times -- not their grandfather.

The patients who visited today complained of stomach ailments and gastritis. What the Doctor always advised fell on deaf ears: eat less spice and rice. He joked that Bengalis would have fared much better if they hadn't gorged themselves on rice three times a day. He remembered, encouraged by his advice on protein intake, Rayan was an avid *dal* lover. He wished most of his patients had had the brainpower the four-year-old did.

The last patient left at half past four. The Doctor tried to stand up, but dizziness forced him to sit down again. The blood pressure must be a bit high. But he was going home after this, and a thirty-minute rest should do the trick.

"Where's the doctor?" Hearing a familiar female voice, he came out.

"Chacha, father's burning up!"

The Doctor came out of Shamsuddin's house at 9 p.m. His friend's wife wouldn't let him leave, and he really could never say no.

The Doctor hurried, and got on the first rickshaw he found. The veins on his temples throbbed. He needed rest. But all would be fine the moment he saw his home filled with gaiety.

The house in Mymensingh in the sixties had always been full. Relatives from his in-laws' family and his own visited round the year. The old red building with high ceiling from the British Era housed at least thirty people at any given time. Every meal was a feast those days.

The rickshaw pulled up. The headache was at work with a vengeance. He walked with measured steps to not lose balance. The well-lit

windows on the second floor ripped through the darkness outside. Tittering children's voices drowned out the chirping crickets. Was Rayan driving the adults crazy with his volley of questions again?

"Rayan, Rayan," he called out, walking up the stairs.

At the door, his daughter-in-law touched his feet. "Abba, Rayan fell asleep. Shall I wake him?"

"No, let him sleep," the Doctor swallowed his disappointment. "How are you all doing, *ma*?"

"We're all fine. But you look unwell." "Y-yes," He trudged towards his room.

Rabeya Begum was at prayer as usual with the dim light on. She heard the footsteps come in, but there was no sound for seconds. Suddenly, a bulk descended on her.

"O Allah!" "What's happened?" "O my God!"

"Place him on the bed... slowly." "Call in a doctor, now!"

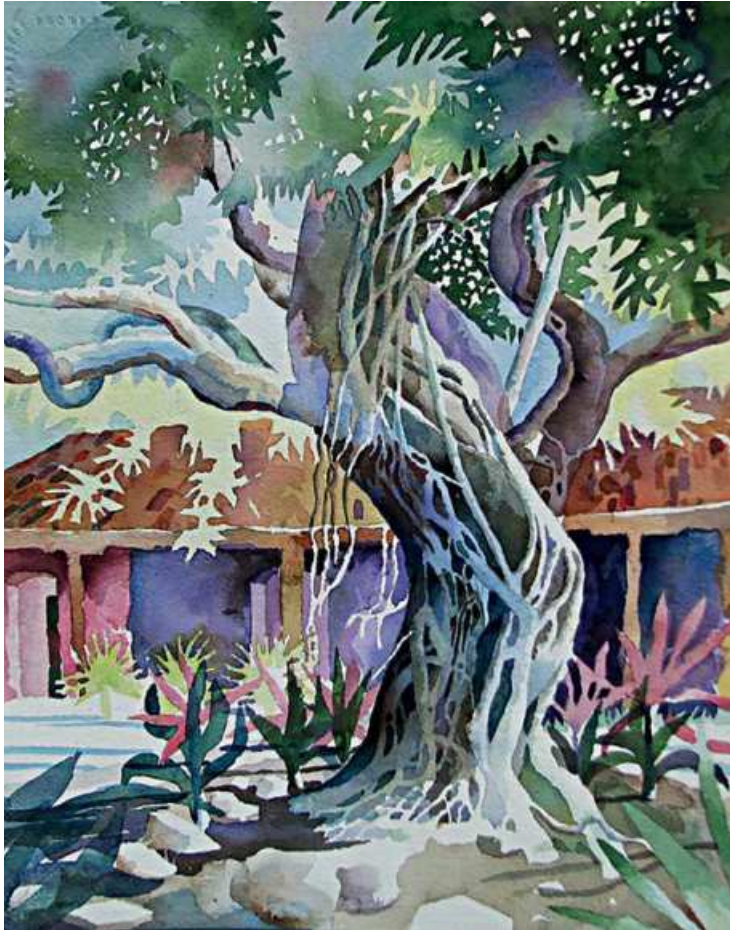
"O Allah, what will happen now?" The power-cut struck on cue. In the commotion, it was impossible to distinguish weeping from talking and shouting. After a while, crying took over.

Rayan woke up early in the morning by the sound of sobbing that oppressed the atmosphere. "Ammu, what's wrong? Why is Dadu sleeping on the floor -- anything wrong with his bed?" he asked.

A fresh roll of wailing went up. He was confused: had he asked anything wrong?

Skirting the crowd, he stepped into his grandfather's empty room and looked out through the window. In the distance a huge tree reared its head, dwarfing everything else. Rayan had often wondered what its name was. He wanted to ask Dadu. But he's asleep, he reasoned with himself. Anyhow, he would wait until Dadu woke up.

Tanvir Malik's first book is a collection of short stories called *Short Takes: Stories from Bangladesh*. A teacher by profession, he enjoys reading, travelling, and painting.



rest in its shade, and the tree -- with its canopy of enormous branches and benevolent leaves -- was never known to have said no.

The doctor wanted a breather. The nonstop flow of patients kept him busy during the visiting hours, and then there were house-calls to make. Some patients even appeared at his doorstep at unsocial hours. He could never say no.

REVIEWS

In Memoriam: Smaran and Palataka: Tagore's Elegiac Poems

TRANSLATED BY SANJUKTA DASGUPTA. SAHITYA AKADEMI, 2020.

REVIEWED BY SHAFI AHMED

Tagore has remained ceaselessly relevant to us not just for his contributions to Bengali literature but also for issues relating to society, politics, gender, education and even environment. He has been the centre of many intellectual discourses including translation studies, more for the English renditions of his own verses put together in *Song Offerings*, the title that made him the first non-European Nobel Laureate. Recently, a fresh volume of the translations of his two not-much-widely-discussed books of verses, namely, *Smaran & Palataka*, has been published by Sahitya Akademi, India. And the translator is no less a person than Sanjukta Dasgupta. Herself a poet, Dasgupta is a reputed figure in the Indian intelligentsia for her exercises in translation and critical engagement with Rabindranath. Her analysis of Tagore as a "radical" in the perspectives of "nation, family and gender" excited many to review the traditionally held responses. Dasgupta's translation of the lyrics included in the *Suadesh* category of the *Geetitan* bears her keen interest in Tagore.

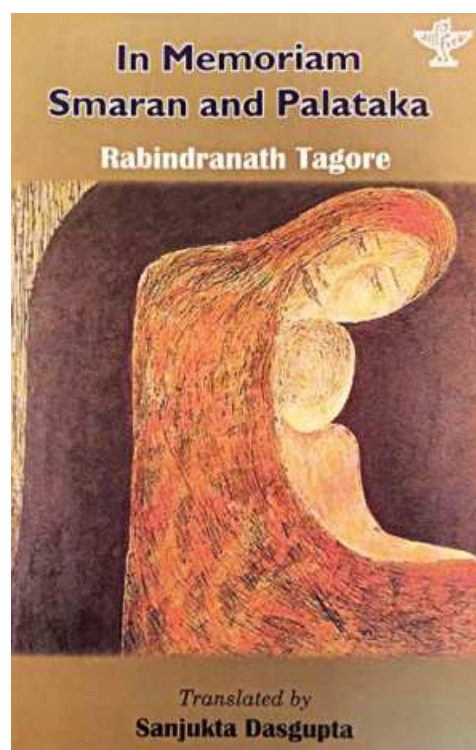
Reading this new volume containing the English versions of *Smaran & Palataka* poems is a pure pleasure. The last cover of the book, to which often we usually offer a primary look, in this case too stuffy in words though, guides us to the re-reading of the poems as elegiac interpretations rooted in the mortal departure of Tagore's wife and his eldest daughter. This is a rediscovery. Dasgupta offers a critical and instructive introduction to the poems, wherein she refers to 'the irrational, ruthless and non-negotiable' inevitability of death. A professor of English, Dasgupta ties John Donne's sonnet "Death be not proud" to explicate her point. Dasgupta's references to sundry biographical details of Tagore in relating to the loss of dear ones underline the thematic concerns of death that the two books represent. The profile of a pedantic professor

can further be identified as she drags in four Tagore biographers to elaborate and defend her observations.

Congratulations, Sanjukta Dasgupta. A marvelous enterprise accomplished with mastery. The 27 brief poems of *Smaran* (1902) constitute a poetic and contemplative document of Tagore's inner and subjective world. Many readers will be able to understand the depth of emotions and realization that the bard transcendently incorporates in this book. The present translator's focus is on this particular aspect. I am a somewhat Tagore-addict. But I must confess that I had no experience of reading these particular poems in the English version. Surely, the basic question of authenticity may also be raised. In the fastidious search for the nuances and the exact effects of some of the very exclusive Bangla words, the Bangali readers may become disappointed at certain places. And this is commonly applicable to all the languages of the world.

I started reading the poems in this book without taking out the original volumes from the shelf. The scholarly introduction was the starter and I felt more curious to identify within the body of the poems the points raised by the translator. I found the poems extremely pleasant to read, I could find my Rabindranath too, his essential spirit as caged in the words, in a different language though. That's where the beauty of Sanjukta's translation lies. It was a happy and smooth reading all through.

And later as I had to consult and re-read the original Tagore poems since I decided to embark on a review of this volume, I located some areas, which I might have done a little differently and also felt that a third person would have preferred even some different synonyms. However, I went back to the text that Dasgupta has re-produced to assess how would one English-speaking person without



any knowledge of Bangla be able to fathom the contents of the verses and get a taste of the poetic flavor of the elegiac mood of Tagore. Going through Dasgupta's translations with my emotional and intellectual affiliation to Tagore as the explorer of the human mind at times of broken bondage, solitude, loss, longing, repentance and compulsive rehabilitation set the trajectory of my thoughts beyond the borders of language. I felt that the readers in English will be able to discover as the translator desired- "Tagore's life in his inner space, as a loving husband and father" as reflected in these two slim volumes of verses represent. I could justly evaluate the contents of Dasgupta's introduction. I must say readers will largely benefit from this. But I would have felt happier if some commentaries

in the footnotes could have been provided on the "feminine" beauty of some Bangla words like *palataka* or *porarmukhi* to convey the special nuances of Bangla to the English-speaking readers. There are some more words like *Lakshmi* and *Saraswati*, allusions to which are necessary for such readers. Dasgupta concludes her introduction with the assertion that "English translations of vernacular texts are more about gain than loss." I fully agree with her and highly appreciate Sahitya Akademi's efforts in such enterprises.

In these two volumes, particularly in *Smaran*, Rabindranath followed a popular pattern of versification in those days. He excellently handled the late 19th or early 20th century styles of rhyming and rhythm that often combined some distinctly audible-cum-visual stanzaic formula. The visual of these texts in the traditional structures presents a very different look which even today deserve our admiring recognition. But translating those texts for the modern-day English-speaking readers in faithful conservation of the original structure will never be the right way to present Rabindranath. No one should be a puritan in this respect. I specially commend Sanjukta Dasgupta for her cultural and intellectual responsibility to cater Tagore's poetry to the overseas readers. With the inclusion of the critical introduction, this book becomes an important addition to Rabindra studies. On the one hand, it unfolds some biographical slices of a privately desolate and meditative poet and on the other, it upholds the lyrical beauty of Tagore's poetry.

Dasgupta has taken recourse to an artistic and rhetorical riddle with her borrowing from the famous Tennyson poem *In Memoriam*. "In Memoriam" has been justly appropriated here, in spite of the Tennyson hangover. However, the artistic problem hangs on. Dasgupta has deliberately prefixed these two words from English and they have been made commonly

applicable to both *Smaran & Palataka*. This becomes a bi-lingual reconstruction converging Anglo-Bengali vocabulary. It appears on the first cover (in the same font and points, without the: & in the spine and the inner pages with:). That produces an ambiguity of primary impression. The question gets complicated right from p.1. There, the original title of the first book is given all in the upper case, followed by "In Memoriam" within parenthesis denoting as well as connoting the English version of this particular title. But inside, the headers of all the right-hand pages show "In Memoriam" and the original Bangla titles of the book in italics. It is then a new title that conjoins Tagore and Sanjukta, sounding a little aphoristic. I think that having committed to translate two of Rabindranath's books dealing with the predominance of personal grief and the terminal fact of death, for Dasgupta, the choosing of the English title became very challenging and she had to give in. It has been a fine artistic dilemma for her. If asked whether this has earned a synthetic character, I prefer silence. But no catalytic effect has visually taken place for the use of both the target and source languages on the cover of the title.

But I feel constrained to critique the editorial team. The original Bangla titles of the *Palataka* poems have been put in English literatim within parenthesis, but not in italics. The poem *Mukti* has it, while the others appear in the common "Times" font. Two poems have been deprived of the Bangla form and one bearing the title- "The Mother's Honour" has the Bangla *soman* as "Sanman," which is a silly yet unpardonable mistake. There are some other places which should have deserved more care from the editing team.

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