

POETRY

on tears and taxidermy

BY RIFAT ISLAM ESHA

i.
the first time i saw a tiger
was in someone's house
all tall and lifeless; yet a tiger --
my small self dissolving in its shadow.
i drew from its still eyes -
a scary thought and nothing else.
i heard someone say
the tiger was dead but its frame
was kept as it once was.

i only remember my bird-like heart,
my hand holding on to my father's big grip
and how i wanted to hide from something dead which was
supposed to look alive.

- 11 June, 2021

Rifat Islam Esha is a poet. For more updates on her work, you can follow her on Instagram: @rifatiesha.



Migraine

DILRUBA Z. ARA

A hood of iron thread
Drawn over face,
Hefty as a medieval sinner's burden on her neck.
Light stabs through the slits,
Sharp as a lance,
Penetrates one eye
To enter the head.

It burrows into mind
Churning half the brain
Into molten matter,
Originating grey vapour.
Thoughts get ill-defined,
Colour negatives.
Half lucid. Half blurred
Spinning together. Phantoms of spirit.

She sinks into a miasma
of shapeless throbbing.
The eye,
Stares restively around the clock.
Head, heavy as though severed
Indents the pillow.
Embedded as a gem in a cushion—
An offer,
to the regal pain.

Dilruba Z. Ara is an internationally acclaimed Swedish-Bangladeshi writer, novelist, artist, educator and translator. She lives and works in Lund, Sweden, and writes from there.

Coevolution, not evolution

AHMAR MAHBOOB

Yes, you have no reason to trust me:
I am not your elder, I am not from your tribe;
I may not even be your species or your type.

But, look at me.
Closely.

Do you not see you in me
The part that is the same
That unites

Life.

Or, have the words taught in school
Blinded you to what is in plain sight:
Life doesn't evolve, life co-evolves.

Ahmar Mahboob is a Linguist. Currently, he is Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney.



Why Are You Sad, O River?

A Review of Tanvir Mokammel's Bishadnadi

ISBN: 978-984-8079-64-5. Behula Bangla, 2021

BY SABIHA HUQ

Many of us still remember the year 1998 when *Chitra Nadir Paare* (Quiet Flows the Chitra) was released in Dhaka; with Afsana Mimi's smiling face on the big posters around Dhaka University campus, the film became the talk of the town. At the English Department, we were even more enthusiastic because Mimi completed her Master's at the department and we would come across her at the Chair's office occasionally. Back then we did not know that Tanvir Mokammel, the director of the film, was a prolific writer too, or that he had visualized the film as part of his Partition trilogy with two other novels. Mokammel was then known as a young director of parallel cinema, and his films were sure to create a lot of interest because of their different take on the Bangladesh Liberation War. To be honest, Indian Partition of 1947 was not a concern for us as young students; it was 1971 that was etched deep in our mindscapes. But this film changed all that and we concurred that Mokammel's way of narrating through visuals was strong, while his films were an important perspective on cultural history.

Gradually, his sustained work on screen and page became an eye-opener on civilian engagements in Partition history that is integral to the story of our nation. I was reassured of his preoccupation when his Partition trilogy came out from Dhansere Boighar, Kolkata in 2020 under the title *Bishadnadi*. While a publisher from West Bengal evincing interest in partition from a Bangladeshi perspective is commendable, the name of the river in Mokammel's title speaks of

ecology and humanity. Indeed, to Bangladeshis, especially to writers of former East Pakistan née East Bengal, Partition of India based on communal division between Hindus and Muslims becomes important whenever we hear of Muslims being harassed in India, and temples being vandalized in Bangladesh; but for the Bengalis of West Bengal, 1947 remains an epilogue of a long drawn political drama that has kept its mark on the unsuccessful and unhappy refugees from Bangladesh who were victims of forced repatriation. Therefore, partition fiction is a more frequently produced genre in West Bengal. A Bangladeshi edition of the book is published by Behula Bangla in February 2021.

The first novel of the trilogy is *Kirtinasha* that was previously published by Anarjo in 2016. The novel sets the premises of the trilogy by introducing Padma or Kirtinasha flowing by Bikrampur (present day Munshiganj) situated quite close to the south of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Bikrampur has a long history since the days of the Maurya dynasty and is the proud birthplace of notable scientists, writers, performance artists and politicians including Jagadish Chandra Bose, Sarojini Naidu, Chittaranjan Das, Buddhadeb Basu, Humayun Azad, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, and many others. The names of these people are not mentioned though, only a sad undertone of this legacy is there while the author comments on the disintegration of communal solidarity. The novel is about two boys, a *dosti* or friendship between two communities accepted through social ritual. The friendship ritual

and the breach between two communities are paralleled to show that individual will is always nullified by collective measures. Thus friendship between two individuals pales to insignificance before massive killing, burning and destruction that demobilized communal coexistence. Suhash, the Hindu boy, who is now a thoughtful young teacher, decides to migrate to India, and his friend Sohrab, who had left his forefathers' farming occupation to be a teacher, must endure this separation. The division dictated by an arbitrary borderline drawn between two newly formed nation states impacted Bikrampur which represents Bengal or perhaps greater India. The word *Kirtinasha* meaning the "destroyer of glory" is significant because both the river and the Partition are destroyers, the first being that of land and property and the second causing hatred and separation. Mokammel asks, "who affected Bikrampur's glory more? Padma? Or Partition of 1947?"

The second novel, *Chitra Nadir Paare*, takes the riots of 1960s as its backdrop. Since the departure of Suhash and his likes after the Partition, the remaining Hindu families in the mufassil towns were living somewhat peacefully, but the rigorous religious propaganda seeded in the Partition ideology did not allow community integrity to sustain. The novel is replete with friendship and fellow feelings between Hindu and Muslim neighbours in Narail, the idyllic town of Mokammel's childhood and a haven for child-protagonists Minoti, Salma, Najma, Badal, Bidyut, whose lives and worldviews evolve by the Chitra. However, the love between Minoti and Badal

needed to be uprooted through Badal's death, as Mokammel must follow history that would not allow matrimonial harmony between two communities. The Muslim boy therefore is killed in Dhaka during the student agitation against the West Pakistani autocratic regime in the 1960s, and Minoti leaves for Kolkata after her father's demise on the banks of Chitra. In the second novel too, the river becomes the silent witness to strokes of history that significantly contribute to the title of the trilogy *Bishadnadi* (Sad River). The last novel *Dui Nagar* (Two Cities) brings us to 21st century Dhaka among the young citizens of Bangladesh leading the Shabbag movement, and this symbolic flow of human enthusiasm is assessed from the vantage point of a Kolkata lady who compares this youthful upsurge with the apparent detachment of the Bengalis of West Bengal from their national polity. The union between a Bangladeshi Muslim male and a West Bengal Hindu female whose forefathers had to leave East Bengal, perhaps comes as a proposition of being reunited linguistically and culturally, though the impossibility of erasing borders weighs as a heavy burden in the collective unconscious of the protagonists.

A significant contribution to Mokammel's Partition narratives, the trilogy could be even more enriched if the struggles of the migrated population of both Bengals were added to it. Hopefully, those narratives will come from his pen some other time!

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