



SAARC Literary Festival: Speaking up for a Cleaner World

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This past March, Sahitya Akademi and Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) arranged an online Literature Conference on "Environment and Literature" with participation from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The three-day conference spanned through March 27-29 where writers from all the above mentioned countries read from their work and engaged in discussions and conversations. All the sessions of the conference went live on youtube.

Ajeet Cour, the Chairperson of FOSWAL and one of the organizers, in her welcome speech set the tone of the conference: "It is high time that we talk about our own problems related to our environmental degradation, butchering of our forests, neglect of our beautiful sea-coasts, mindless expansion of our industries on cultivable land, melting of our glaciers, our

oceans sighing with anguish called Tsunamis, drying up of our water bodies effecting not only human life but also the lives of birds and animals and fish."

Like all previous years, many writers, poets, translators and academics from Bangladesh participated in the conference. Some of the highlights of the conference include conversations and interviews of authors such as Syed Manzoorul Islam, Kaiser Haq, Selina Hossain, Niaz Zaman, Fakrul Alam, Muhammad Nurul Huda, Jharna Rahman, Bimal

Guha and Ashraf Jewel.

Since the umbrella topic of the conference was environment, the discussants and readers mainly focused on that aspect in their writing and reading. Prof. Fakrul Alam in his interview by Shakhaawat Hossain went on to speak of Melville and how early in his career he wrote on Melville and the effects of industrialization on cities. In 2012, he also had read a paper at FOSWAL conference on Rabindranath Tagore and ecocriticism. Renowned author and critic Prof. Syed Manzoorul Islam drew attention to an interesting aspect of the oral tradition of story-telling. He pointed out how environment is entwined with oral tradition. Writer, translator and academic Prof. Niaz Zaman read from her novel *The Baromashi Tapes* that tells the story of migrants who communicated through recordings before the days of cell

phones and the Internet.

Among other sessions of interest and significance for Bangladeshi audience was the sixteenth session that took place on the last day—a panel in which the renowned poet and academic Kaiser Haq was in conversation with Sanjeeda Hussain and Ashraf Jewel was interviewed by Faruq Sumon. Kaiser Haq also chaired a poetry session and read out from his own work.

Alongside the literary readings and interviews, the three-day program also incorporated academic papers from scholars who spoke on various issues regarding climate change and environmental problems. It is indeed a credit to the organizers that even during the pandemic they were able to make three consecutive conferences in two years. Ajeet Cour ardently hopes that the next conference in November 2022 will be held offline in India.



BOOK REVIEW

Kabuliwala and Other Stories: A NOTEWORTHY VENTURE IN THE FIELD

Rabindranath Tagore (Trans. Shawkat Hussain). Shahitya Prakash, 2022

REVIEWED BY JUNAIDUL HAQUE

Kabuliwala and Other Stories is a collection of twelve outstanding stories of Rabindranath Tagore, translated into English by Prof Shawkat Hussain, a former professor of the Department of English, University of Dhaka. He frequently translates poetry and fiction from Bengali to English and modestly calls himself an 'occasional translator of Rabindranath Tagore.' But in his few words on the book carried on its flap, Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury doesn't fail to notice that "it is a noteworthy venture in the field" and that Professor Hussain has "deep interest in Tagore." Professor Kaiser Haq, our premier English language poet and brilliant translator, calls Rabindranath 'inexhaustible' ('afuronto') was the word used by Buddhadev Bose) and is very satisfied that Prof Hussain has "lovingly translated a dozen of his best stories into eminently readable English—with a sprinkling of words carried over unaltered from the original."

A quick glance through the list of twelve stories on the first day saddened me a bit. My favorite "Poyla Nombor" was not there! And where was "Athiti," the story of Tarapada, the lovable tramp? Or "Bola," the story of the nature-loving child? "Subha," the innocent village damsel who can't speak but can easily enter your heart? Or, the disturbingly brilliant "Noshoneerh"? But soon I realized that Prof Shawkat Hussain's choice and taste are excellent. He has translated stories like "Kabuliwala," "Strir Patra" (The Wife's Letter), "Malyadaan" (The Gift of a Garland), "Shasti" (Punishment) and "Samapti" (The End) with dexterity. Professor Hussain's fluid translation of twelve wonderful Tagore stories make them true to the originals. Among the other stories are "Tarapasannar Kirti" (The Achievement of Tarapasanna), "Adhyapak" (The Professor), and the amazing "Shesh Ratri" (The Last Night).

Sometime in September 1914 Rabindranath Tagore had requested Edward Thompson, his first English biographer, to translate some of his short stories and bring out a selection of them that might appeal to the Western audience. "Please make your own selection, for it is difficult for me to know which of my things will be palatable to the English taste," he had said. Even Victoria Ocampo, his Argentinian friend and admirer, once ruefully commented in a different context, "Tagore had doubts as to the Westerners' capacity of understanding Eastern thoughts." The situation is certainly different now. The West and the East have come to know each other better. Tagore's own translation of Gitanjali (Song Offerings) had fetched him the Nobel Prize. Many Europeans, Americans and sub-continental translators have translated his poems, fiction, essays and letters. The stories (and also the songs) have captured every possible human emotion. Kaiser Haq (1950-) and William Radice (1951-) are two of his best translators. Now Professor Shawkat Hussain has translated his short stories with brilliance. When some of these translations were printed in the literary pages of Dhaka newspapers, stories like "Shasti" and "Strir Patra" made quite a stir.

Rabindranath Tagore has two powerful rivals as writers of short stories, one Frenchman and a Russian, Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov were brilliant story-tellers. But the musical quality of Tagore's prose and his deeper

grasp of the human mind probably exceed them by far. Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury reminds us, "Tagore was a poet even as he wrote in prose; and the nuances, metaphors, ironies and, above all, the music of his writings refuse to be translated adequately." Professor Hussain was very much aware of this and has been quite successful. In his "Translator's Note" he writes, "The act of translating Tagore's short stories has been challenging as well as a great pleasure. I have tried, as much as possible, to remain true to the content, the style, the tone and the music of Tagore's prose. How much I have succeeded is not for me to judge,"



but I am sure examples will prove that he has been quite successful. In a story as tragic as "Shasti" (Punishment), how beautifully Tagore describes Chandara, the ill-fated female protagonist: "Chandara was no more than seventeen or eighteen. Her face was soft and round, her stature not very tall. There was such a lilt in her petite, lithe limbs that every movement seemed fluid and rhythmic. Like a newly-built skill, small and graceful, she moved with unhampered ease and speed. She was curious about everything in the world and had a sense of humor. She loved visiting her neighbors for a chat; on her way to the bathing ghat, she took in all that was worth noticing with her restless, bright, black eyes by parting slightly the end of her sari with two fingers." Simply amazing! Both the original and the translated words.

Nature in Tagore's stories is indifferent to human sorrow. We may remember the serene nature after Raicharan has

lost his master's child (Khokababur Pratyaborton), or the unperturbed nature after Dukhiram has unthinkingly killed his wife Radha in "Punishment": "Outside, it was very peaceful. The shepherds were returning home with their herds. The peasants who had gone to the sandbank on the other side to harvest the newly-ripened paddy, were returning home in groups of seven or eight, sitting in small boats, carrying sheaves of paddy on their heads as payment for their labor." What a description! And translated so well!

Take also "Strir Patra" (The Wife's Letter), one of the best stories of the book. After the ailing Bindu dies, Mrinal sadly thinks about her and her own fate: "When the music of death floated through the broken heart of this girl and touched the shores of my being, it pierced me the first time. I asked God why that which was so insignificant was also so momentous. Why was this walled-up pleasureless bubble of a life, in this alley in Kolkata, so very difficult to burst? Why could I not cross the threshold of the inner house even for a moment when the magnificence of the six seasons of the universe beckoned me?" Unforgettable words translated so poignantly!

Professor Shawkat Hussain has chosen his twelve stories well. There is a variety of themes in the stories chosen. He has called this 'labor of love' and has been very successful as a translator, neither missing the nuances of Tagore's language nor the musicality of his prose. The colorful cover by Pradip Chakraborty is attractive. The book will be liked by translators, students and teachers of literature, the common reader and young boys and girls of Bengali parents growing up abroad with little or no knowledge of Bengali or Tagore. Printing is of good quality and mistakes are almost absent.

Junaidul Haque writes fiction and essays in Bengali and English. He is also a translator.

POETRY BY ASAD LATIF

KALBOISAKHI

The very day in bless'd disarray,
this is no time to stay in place.

As begging kids and homeless dogs
flee the chasing skies above,
they drive the lovers of College Street
to shelter in Raga Malhar or a hookers' beat.

You laugh: I cry
at the sight of a storm
more solid than the ground
beneath our feet.

You say:
Let's set up a new home.
It's not enough to live in this world:
We should be lived in as well.
Let mad dogs and sad urchins
set up home in us.
Let singing lanes lined with lovers,
and syphilitic males peeing into sewers
migrate into us
and continue as before.
Please, let this storm live evermore.

Most of all, may we be lived in,
you say,
by the elements above
the reach of our grasping love.
May our meetings
by chance or design
become family to sly
cycles of time
that only themselves know
what moves them to lift
mortals into their flow
and enfold them, entwined.



And if all this turns true,
the wind and rain may yet
find in the city within us
on a kalboisakhi day
a feral completion too.

Asad Latif is an editorial writer for The Straits Times, Singapore. He graduated with Honours in English from Presidency College, Kolkata, and read History for his Master of Letters degree at Cambridge, where he was a Chevening Scholar. He was a Jefferson Fellow at the East-West Centre, Honolulu, and a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Harvard. Among his books is Celebrating Europe: An Asian Journey (Singapore, 2012).

POETRY BY SHIRLEEN MANZUR

Expect

Etched a figurine, taking dots and lines and curves
Xeroxed our desires weaving through the blurs
Poured life into the statuette and we found you
Except, who you are, we never really knew
Clarity came with disappointments and deepening rue
Truth be told, we only ever knew the figurine we sculpted of you

Fickle

Friends, like leaves
Inseparable from the branches it seems
Changes though, in a season's notice.
Keeping friends is not one of his specialties,
Loving them is not either, losing them is.
Every time he is touched by the breeze.

Shirleen Manzur is a PhD student at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia in the Department of Economics. She writes poems and fictions.

