

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Brecht's poetry presented in delicious Bangla

While choosing the poems to render in Bangla, Selim has put premium on the sociopolitical dimension of Brecht's poetic self. His love for the oppressed, the marginalised, the dispossessed and the disenfranchised are obvious.

LITON CHAKRABORTY MITHUN

"The process of translation is a rigorous delight. But the product? As a translator, you also always carry with you an anxious awareness of the ways in which you have fallen short. You have seen it, that, at least, you hope; but you have failed to carry it over." - Tom Kuhn.

Like all other translators, Abdus Selim, too, encounters in this book the enormity of transferring poems originally written in German to Bangla via the midwifery of English. The journey through three different languages makes poetry susceptible to spilling some of its original meaning, charm and musicality. Despite such possibilities, Selim seems poised to hold on to the contents of the original while retaining some of the stylistic sweetness. The Bangla in which he presents Brecht's 32 poems in *Kobita: Bertolt Brecht* (UPL, 2022) is lucid, dynamic and electric.

As Selim wrote in the preface to his own Bangla translation of Brecht's play, *Galileo Galilei*, "Brecht is a great artist and it's erroneous and unfair to consider him

as a proponent of a limited theory. He is unfamiliar to a large extent in this country. I believe a complete translation of his poetic works would dispel some of this confusion". (translation mine)

This particular volume is an attempt in this direction. While choosing the poems to render in Bangla, Selim has put premium on the sociopolitical dimension of Brecht's poetic self. His love for the oppressed, the marginalised, the dispossessed and the disenfranchised are obvious. In the poem "The Legend of the harlot Evelyn Roe," the existential dilemma of a prostitute comes to the fore in an appealing language. The poem "Germany, you bond pale creature" is replete with the poet's unconditional love for his motherland and the fulmination against those evil elements vitiating the core of the country. Another poem titled "The Spring" signals the regeneration and revival of both humanity and nature. It speaks to a promising prospect of a new future marked with optimism, dynamism and camaraderie.

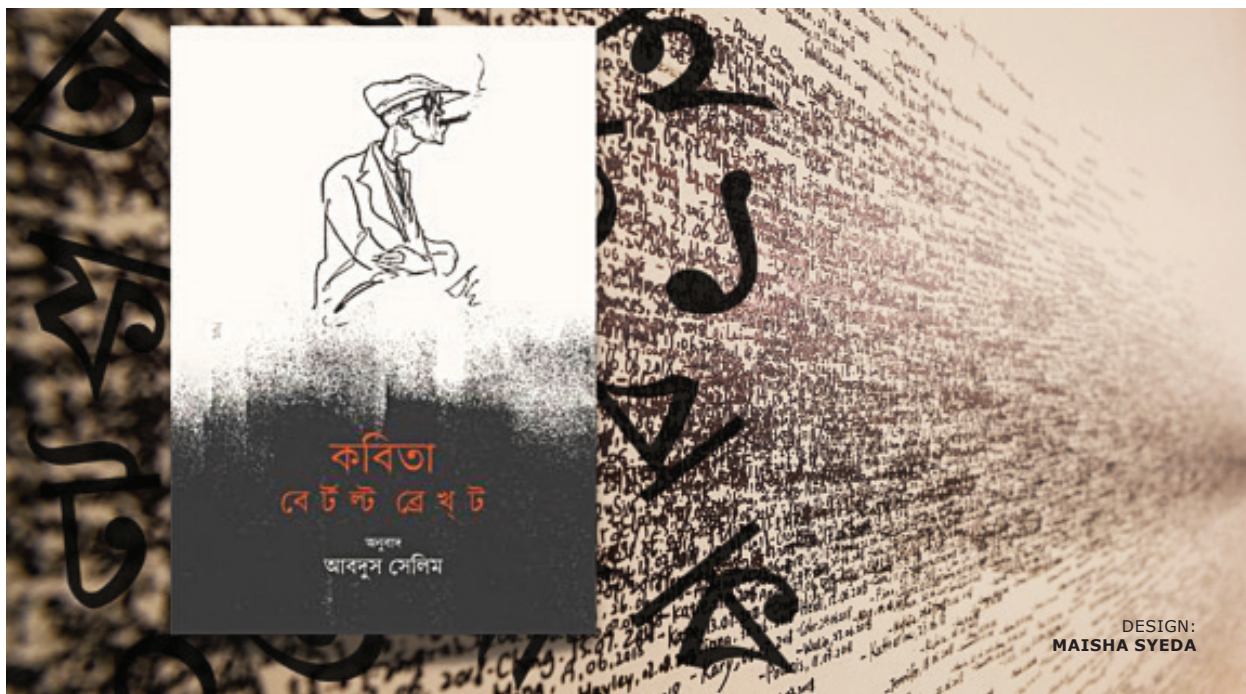
Some of the poems are political in nature and seek to pummel fascist, capitalist and

imperialist forces battering the world in which Brecht lived. "The last wish" is one such poem that valorises the boldness of a war prisoner, who punched and spat contemptuously in the face of a Nazi commander and embraced martyrdom. In "Letter to the playwright Odets", Brecht asks a playwright and other artists through him whether artistic protest against injustice is effective in the demolition of the diabolical section of society who exploit the overwhelming majority. The poem "Pride", however, is redolent of his immense pride in the moral high ground taken by commonplace Russian maids, who cannot be sold for anything despite their abject poverty. The poet implies that a socialist society underpinned by Marxist ideology has elevated the character of the Russian people.

Selim's Bangla translation of these poems use idiomatic and trendy Bangla with no stain of pedanticism. From the poem "I, the Survivor", he translates the saying "Survival of the fittest" as "Joggyotai toh tikiye rakhey" instead of the more prevalent, pedantic version, "Joggyotomer udborton." His choice of easy, everyday terms shows his smartness and sagacity. While reading the poems in Bangla, I felt that he keeps Yuval Sharon's evaluation of Brecht's poetry in mind: "His poetry is full of dialogues and debates, with a tone predominantly characterised by the spirit and crackle of everyday speech turned surprising and memorable."

Selim's is most probably the only Bangla version of Brecht's poetry collection done by a Bangladeshi author. The translator wears many hats: educationist, teacher, playwright, critic and media personality. This Bangla Academy Literary Award-winning writer has many popular and critically acclaimed translation works and prose pieces to his credit. He is still leading an academically and intellectually active life, teaching at Central Women's University, penning occasional essays, translating books, giving talks and leading addas. This particular translation work, *Kobita: Bertolt Brecht*, is a testament to his credentials and deserves a wide readership.

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DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A tale of love across two cultures

SHEJUTI PASHA

Love Marriage (Simon & Schuster, 2022), Monica Ali's latest novel, is set in contemporary London, and the city, along with its concurrent glory, glides in the background as a couple endeavours to bring their families together for their wedding.

Joe, a young British doctor, has fallen head over heels for Yasmin, a fellow doctor of Indian origin. As they attempt to unite their families, Yasmin begins to fret over the first meeting. Her mother has been preparing Indian food for the last two days for their visit to Primrose Hill and Yasmin cannot help but wonder how the rendezvous is going to turn out. Harriet Sangster, Joe's mother, is a woman of prominence, known for her undisguised approaches on feminism and women empowerment. She is an outspoken author known for her "self-indulgent" memoirs, a perceptible contrast to the Ghoramis, who have lived a typical life of order and silence ever since Shaokat Ghorami moved to London from Kolkata with his wife Anisah. Yet their greatest difference is, as Monica Ali writes, "Whatever Harriet really thought about Shaokat and Anisah would be cloaked by English manners and didn't even matter anyway. The English middle classes did not meddle in their children's matrimonial affairs."

As Ali strikingly presents the contrasts between how families function across cultures,

What begins as a social comedy goes on to reveal many secrets and undeniable truths; readers cannot help but relate to the Ghoramis and the Sangsters in the end, as they consequently present the skeletons in the cupboard.

the novel slithers over issues such as race, gender bias, identity, modern relationships, trust and infidelity. In contrast to Yasmin's distress, the meeting between the Sangsters and the Ghoramis turns out quite well. Problems materialise when wedding preparations begin and Harriet, Joe's overpowering mother, takes charge of everything. Despite this, an unusual bond is seen to form between the two women, the flamboyant Harriet Sangster and the modest Anisah Ghorami, which not only takes Yasmin by surprise but also threatens the normalcy of her life and filial relationships. Yasmin discovers an unexpected side of her homemaker mother, who not only shows a sudden interest in Greek plays, but actively promotes many of Harriet's pursuits. A mutual understanding evolves between the two and as the moth turns into a butterfly, Yasmin confronts a more independent Anisah Ghorami.

The plot traverses between several narratives where we see consequent changes in perspectives, with Ali bringing in each character with equal care and attention. Shaokat Ghorami is a proud and dignified doctor who has worked hard his entire life to leave the clasp of poverty and ensure that his children have well-to-do careers just like him. Anisah is a dutiful housewife who has dedicated her life to helping others and making infinite jars of chutneys. She carries the old-day charm of a Kolkata girl who drapes a saree whenever she can along with her brightly coloured cardigans. And then there's Arif, Yasmin's younger brother, a Sociology graduate who just about exists in the Ghorami household, remaining confined to his room for hours, idling his time away. His disorientation and lack of ambition are the cause of constant rifts with his father and his ultimate decision to leave is part of the many twists and turns in the story. As both Arif and Anisah abandon the house, Yasmin is torn between her lonely father, her suddenly rebellious mother, Harriet, and the love of her life, Joe. What begins as a social comedy goes on to reveal many secrets and undeniable truths; readers cannot help but relate to the Ghoramis and the Sangsters in the end, as they consequently present the skeletons in the cupboard.

Monica Ali, acclaimed author of *Brick Lane* (2003), with her talent for spinning tales, introduces some more elements of surprise and leaves readers wondering about the fate of each of the characters who are constantly fighting their own battles both internally and externally. There is desire, infidelity and betrayal and as Yasmin stands on tenterhooks, contemplating the fate of her loved ones along with her own, readers get a picture of what modern day relationships look like across cultures and countries.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A history of this subcontinent, woven in jute

FAKRUL ALAM

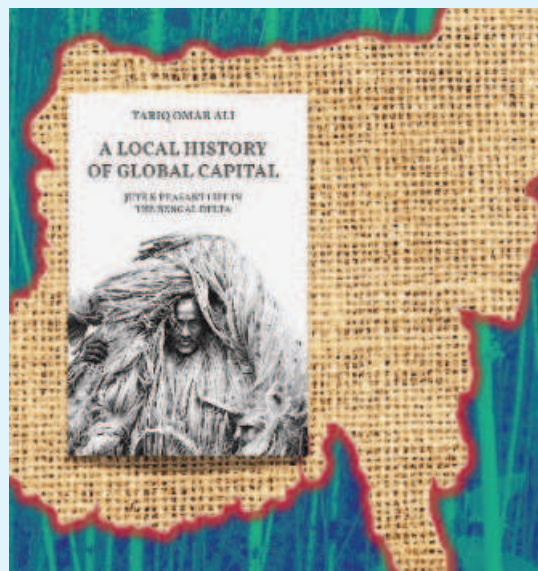
Anyone interested in our part of the world will find Tariq Omar Ali's *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute & Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta* (Princeton University Press, 2018) a remarkably thought-provoking work. Based on the socio-economic, intellectual and cultural history of events leading up to the birth of Bangladesh, Tariq Omar Ali's work weaves adeptly in it a narrative of the manner in which fluctuations in the demand for jute internationally shaped the lives of the peasants of the Bengal delta, contributing in the process to the identity formation of a people who would eventually end up with a nation of their own.

Associate Professor at Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service of Georgetown University, Ali draws on archival and library resources, on extensive research he carried out in our country and India, document depositories such as the National Archives of Bangladesh, the Dundee University Archives of Scotland, and the India Office Records at London's British Library. He also depends on memoirs and accounts written by men such as Abul Mansur Ahmad and Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan and mofussil press productions. Ali is thus able to compose through such diligent scholarship a fascinating historical narrative about late 19th and early to mid-20th century Bangladesh. Its history, we can conclude from the book, is intricately tied to the production and marketing of jute, which we all once knew as our "golden fibre".

In the 100 years that is his focus, Ali depicts a subcontinent where initially British capital took advantage of the empire's powerful presence to make East Bengal a source of a fibre that it found indispensable then. One positive consequence of British control over jute production and marketing, however, was to create infrastructure in the Bengal countryside such as railroads, telegraphs and river ports, as well as mills. This would empower some locals and lead to the rise/spread of mofussil towns, ultimately making their inhabitants so politically conscious that they would eventually demand the right to determine their own destiny as well as indulge themselves as consumers. But Ali notes as well how "market entanglements created new forms of vulnerability" since "peasant households" well being depended on the fluctuations of prices in distant markets. "If farmers, traders and dealers of jute in Bengal benefitted from the relative prosperity that good prices of jute brought them,

to use a word Ali uses repeatedly, poor production or prices or problems in distribution led to periods of "immiseration" for Bengal's people too.

Empirically based, Ali's book benefits from his ability to apply insights derived from his knowledge of recent historiography and theories of history. Concepts such as the emergence of a "global countryside" as a consequence of empire building and "new technologies of commodification", but also of the possibilities of "self-fashioning" brought about "through global market entanglements", enable Ali to offer fresh insights into the making of people who would be soon wanting a country



DESIGN: ORCHID CHAKMA

of their own. He convinces us thereby that jute, in essence, played a "transformative" role for the delta's people in manifold ways.

Two aspects of *A Local History of Global Capital* deserve special mention. One is the dexterous sequencing of Ali's chapters. The first chapter deals with the period between the Crimean War and World War I when jute cultivation throughout the Bengal delta "expanded exponentially", making it soon the region's "leading cash crop". An unfortunate consequence, however, was the plight of peasants whenever jute prices dipped because of falling demand internationally, as in the first world war. But when sales boomed, as Ali observes in his third chapter, jute cultivators and those

who marketed it locally would flourish, becoming consumers wanting to indulge themselves variously. This is why most of them would be opposing the "swadeshi" movement of 1905-6 and why the mofussil would henceforth be full of hats and bazars where "foreign" goods would be bought and sold. The third chapter illustrates the intricate ways in which the whole Bengal countryside was transformed by jute and how Calcutta became the apex of a network stretching from the jute fields to the metropolis through mofussil sites connected by steamers, train services and roads. Inevitably, he points out, local politics was stimulated in the process as well as was state policing. Nationalistic feelings developed too, though the second partition of Bengal became a topic of discussion and a source of increasing tension.

In Chapter 5, titled "Agrarian Forms of Islam", we read about the popularity of the Khilafat movement at one point and the Pakistani one at another. As print culture flourished, the topic of Muslim decline kept appearing in books, magazines and pamphlets. A consequence, as the next chapter demonstrates, is the rise of "peasant populism" and the bid for empowerment through electoral politics. The Krishak Praja Party's success in the 1937 elections becomes for Ali illustrative of the sense of empowerment of a "rural Muslim" — someone he equates with a "peasant jute cultivator" — and the rise of the "rural Muhammadan". However, the way it was booting out of power soon afterwards, Ali stresses, accentuated the cultivator's sense of being manipulated and disempowered by metropolitan conspiratorial forces. The consequence, Ali argues in his seventh chapter, would be the partition through which East Bengal would become Pakistan. The dissatisfied Bengali Muslim peasants would, consequently, join in the stream that would be flowing towards the land that would become Bangladesh.

By the time they conclude Tariq Omar Ali's *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute & Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta*, Bangladeshi readers will surely be admiring the seamless sequencing of the chapters as well as Ali's prose style and the immense readability of his work. This is, indeed, a very lucidly written and easily understandable book despite the subtlety of its arguments and the historical depths its author has traversed.

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CORRIGENDUM

The book review titled "Dispatches of Independence" published on Daily Star Books on June 23, 2022 incorrectly stated that, "Author Manash Ghosh was one of the few Indian journalists who covered the entire event from the very beginning till the historical surrender of Pakistan on December 17, 1971." The correct date is December 16, 1971. The error has been corrected on *The Daily Star's* website. We sincerely apologize for any inconvenience caused.