BOOK REVIEW: POETRY AND NONFICTION

Poetry for our times and a poet's new frontier

Review of Kaiser Haq's 'The New Frontier & Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose' (ULAB Press, 2024)

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

A number of the poems of 'The New Frontier and Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose' express as well the dark thoughts of the poet in old age

FAKRUL ALAM

Inevitably, Kaiser Haq's *The New Frontier and Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose* is about the poet, his poetic predilections, and situatedness in this time of human existence. In many ways it is typical of the verse we have come to expect from our leading poet in English for a long time now, but in other ways it articulates his present-day concerns in new and striking poetic measures.

Let me begin illustrating my assertions with the first poem of the collection. "Words" is about the "coming of a new poem" and the poet's exaltation at its arrival. What the Muse has told him is to "storm the ramparts/ of a rotten state/ letting in sweet light". Where is the "rotten state" though? And will Arnoldian "sweetness and light follow"? But the volume indicates something is "rotten" not only in the poet's own part of the world but planet earth itself.

Fast forward for confirmation to the title poem of the collection, "The New Frontier". Commissioned jointly by the University of Swansea and the Dhaka Literary Festival a few years ago to present poetry dealing with climate change, the longish poem has the poet remind us that the age of the "anthropocene" is nothing less than "obscene". The "world may be there for us to love", but much of it has already been "laid waste". Feelingly, Haq agonises on a loved one we seem to be bent on debasing/ destroying perversely and permanently. But though the poem is full of such "dire observations", as is at times this poet's hallmark, it is not "devoid of humor".

Those who have relished Haq's "Ode on the Lungi" will thus savour the wit and the naughtiness of his "Ode on a Sari". Indeed, the poet's characteristic wry, and at times even "black" humour nuance many of the poems of *The New Frontier and Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose*. The humour may even be self-subversive as in the autobiographical "Belated Mirror Stage". Here we find the poet musing at his own mirror image over the years, which would make him do anything and everything—play football, cultivate a sense of identity as someone "South Asian, Bengali and Muslim", study assiduously, do body-building, and even write poems! This "Covid-inspired poem" concludes with Haq moving from his Lacan-inspired take on the formation of subjectivity to an affirmation that takes off from Descartes' famous formulation and lands waveringly in the concluding lines, "I think therefore I am": "Yes:/ I'm still here,/ here I am still/ still I'm here still/ I am still here.

But there are sobering poems too—an example is the moving "Elegy Written in a Redbrick House", which not only evokes John Gray, but also echoes John Donne (clearly, Haq's consciousness is rooted in the great tradition of poetry in English) to pay tribute to architect Bashirul Huq, whose redbrick houses have become landmarks of our architecture. The poem that follows the one on the groundbreaking architect is also elegiac, for it remembers fondly the pioneering Bangladeshi publisher of high quality books, Mohiudin Ahmed. It is thus that the poem ends so eloquently and stirringly, "In the Book of Books he stands/ illuminated under 'Acknowledgments' ".

A number of the poems of *The New Frontier and Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose* express as well the dark thoughts of the poet in old age. Indeed, the poem titled "A Late Poem" muses on old age and is nostalgic about a time when verse would come to him "like beans sprouts" and one could, so to speak, lead life to the lees, indulging in the kind of pleasures that increasingly would seem "irrevocable". Always allusive, Haq ends this brooding, dark poem with two lines that echo no less than two Shakespearean formulations from his "dark" tragedies, "Blankness/ is all" ("Ripeness is all" and "Readiness is all"). Apparently, the recent pandemic and rampant viruses have been reinforcing his pessimistic thoughts. Thus "2020-nKarV"—a poem on Covid-19's impact—wonders if the virus is a sign that "entropy rules after this/ universe there may not be another". Haq's dengue poem, "Ka Dinga Pepo" also mediates on that other "wicked virus". This is poetry coming out of pain, or as the poem so uniquely articulates, "poetry in pain"!

There is then the kind of variety in Haq's latest collection of verse that will reinforce his reputation for coming up with thoughtful, humorous, and distinctive volumes of verse every now and then. His readers will keep hoping that he will desist from taking the "happy farewell" to poetry that he was intending to take through his 1994 volume, and will continue to gift us his inimitably flavoured poetry in the years ahead. "Making a Case", a poem full of the kind of droll moments that liven up Haq's poetry, ironically explains why he has recently opted for writing verse using the "lower case" as a "postcolonial" gesture of protest in Caliban's vein, knowing that what matters for the poet, ultimately is the hope that "maybe they'll find a way" into the reader's "heart". One hopes that Haq will keep on experimenting stylistically, for one is encouraged by the fact that the poem that follows "Making a Case" is "What Good is a Poem", which suggests wryly that a poet like him will keep on striving to write poems even "in long tried syllables" in the hope of breathing "old truths" compulsively.

In fact, "The Emperor's New Clothes", the poem Kaiser Haq has chosen to conclude *The New Frontier and Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose*, is in prose. It is his whimsical take on "The Emperor's New Clothes". Hans Christian Andersen's delightful folktale becomes as a result, "postcolonially" transferred to Dhaka. After all, Haq's ancestral home is Rupganj, home of the fabled Muslin, a cotton fabric so transparent seeming that it appears to the poet that Andersen's apparently "nanga" emperor might have worn it. Haq, we may conclude, is a very Bangladeshi poet writing in English uniquely, in a manner that is quite postmodern and always captivating. May he keep weaving poetry out of his Bangladeshi location in a manner that will continue to earn him the admiration of connoisseurs of poetry everywhere!

Fakrul Alam *is Bangabandhu Chair Professor, University of Dhaka.*

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The saga of a mother's sacrifice and resilience

Review of 'Kokhono Amar Maa-ke' (Prothoma Prokashan, 2024) by Anisul Hoque

MUHAMMED RUKAN UDDIN

Anisul Hoque's *Kokhono Amar Maa-ke* is the story of appalling sacrifices made by a mother and her unwavering determination to secure a bright future for her children. Set amidst the rustic charms of Phulpur, a quaint village typical of the 1970s countryside in Bangladesh, this narrative tells the story of the upbringing of four siblings whose lives are profoundly influenced and shaped by their "majestic" mother, Shefali—affectionately called 'chotoma'. The novel's title alludes to Shamsur Rahman's poem *Kokhono Amar Maa-ke*, and the narrator of the novel essentially embodies the voice of the poem. The first few lines, in my translation, stand: "I've never heard my mother sing any song./ Nor do I recall if she ever sang lullabies to me."

The novel has a calming start. On a tranquil Falgun night when "the moon's inner core comes out to light up the earth", Mablu, the narrator, broods over the past, and memories come flooding back. He reminisces about his siblings, Bablu, Dablu, and Lovely, their school days, their childhood escapades across the field of Tepantor, and most importantly, their Chotoma's sacrifice, resilience, and death. What appears to be crucial is the narrator's overwhelming urge to reveal to readers why his Chotoma, despite once being an award-winning singer during her college days, has stopped singing. The whole story spins around unravelling this mystery that keeps readers eagerly anticipating till the closing chapters. On her deathbed, Chotoma unfolds some disturbing truths: her getting raped by Pakistani forces, her traumatic journey through motherhood, and her marriage with Rafiqul Islam, Mablu's freedom fighter father. The writer's literary prowess shines through the thematic exploration of sacrifice and fortitude as well as the masterful delineation of rural life with remarkable credibility.

In fictional narratives, mothers often go through suffering which, in turn, fosters resilience and inspires them to champion causes of revolution, liberation, and emancipation. This truth is exemplified in characters, such as Maxim Gorky's Pelageya Nilovna in *Mother* (D Appleton & Company, 1906), Tahmina Anam's Rehana Haque in *A Golden Age* (John Murray, 2007), Anisul Hoque's Shafia Begum in *Maa* (Somoy Prakashan, 2004), and Shefali, the mother figure in the novel in discussion.

In this novel, each major character undergoes significant sacrifices, yet, Chotoma's stands out prominently. Prior to her marriage, she endures traumatic experiences at the hands of the Pakistani army, where "hell would descend every night". She describes the agony as if "her body [had been] lacerated by a thousand blades, wracked by the venomous bite of countless snakes". Her anguish is multiplied by her father's callous denial to bring her home. After marriage with Rafiqul Islam, Chotoma's devastated self forges her into a resilient and dedicated homemaker. Her singular mission now is securing a bright future for her four children amidst an increasingly adverse economic condition. Her transformation from victim to protector underscores the strength of her character.

ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

On the other hand, Rafiqul Islam's life is also marked by sacrifices. He is disinherited by his father for marrying a war rape victim, and his siblings sever ties with him altogether. Situations take an unexpected turn when Rafiqul Islam is unjustly suspended from his job and subsequently imprisoned. His demise by massive cardiac arrest leaves his family grappling with financial insecurity. The impact of this situation weighs heavily on Bablu, the eldest son. He shoulders the financial burdens thrust upon the family, forsaking his own promising future.

One commendable feature of the novel is its faithful depiction of the formative years of the four siblings in the natural setting of Phulpur. For instance, they go to school with books in polythene bags, go into hiding prior to the announcement of school results, play football in rain-soaked fields adorned with pilipiliula clinging to their clothes, scrub their teeth with charcoal, ride bicycles by tucking one leg inside the triangular frame frequently paddling to propel it forward, and fly kites across the azure sky. Furthermore, the author's vivid description of the premises of Phulpur pilot high school and the dilapidated bungalow, the two important settings of the story, and lively presentation of flora and fauna not only offers visual splendour but also evokes olfactory sensations, breathing life into the narrative. However, the straightforward construction of the plot using conventional dramatic denouement, where all mysteries unravel in quick succession, may draw unfavourable critique from literary connoisseurs. Nevertheless, the author's dealing with themes, depiction of rural vistas, portrayal of characters, and use of befitting language overshadow the minor weaknesses.

The novel's true strength, indeed, emanates from the characterisation of Chotoma, the central character, whose sacrifice and resilience reverberate across the narrative. She stands as a poignant symbol of the countless unsung heroes whose contributions often languish in obscurity in the margins of mainstream historical discourse.

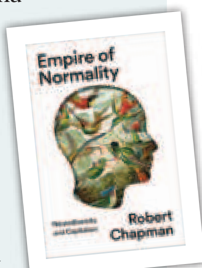
Muhammed Rukan Uddin, *a literary enthusiast, teaches English at Chittagong University. He can be reached at rukan.english@cu.ac.bd.*

What we're reading this week

AMREETA LETHE
Sub editor, Star Books and Literature

Empire of Normality
Pluto Press, 2023

The idea of normality is so entrenched in how we are socialised that we often openly reject people who appear to be in any way different from us. Despite innumerable awareness campaigns, the stigma persists, and anyone who appears to deviate from the "norm" is frequently pelted with words such as "autistic" and "pagol". In *Empire of Normality*, Robert Chapman delves into how this very idea of "the 'normal' person, brain, and mind" is the issue because it fails to take into account how our colonial pasts and late-capitalist presents have shaped our perception of "normality". If the only "normal" brain is one that is capable of keeping up with ever-soaring targets of profit and productivity, what does that mean for the rest of us? So, this week we're reading Chapman's *Empire of Normality* to better develop a politics of neurodivergent liberation and work towards dismantling the capitalist hustle and grind.



FOR THE CURIOUS WRITER

Read back to front:
During the editing stage, consider reading the piece backwards. This reverse method—where you read the last paragraph first, and then the paragraph before that—will ensure that your argument and quality remain uncompromised throughout, and not just the front of the project which gets edited the most. Give it a shot the next time you're stuck in editing hell.

Nazia Manzoor
Editor, Star Books and Literature