



INTERVIEW

OF LANGUAGE AND FREE WILL

ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

Sanya Rushdi and Arunava Sinha discuss 'Hospital'

Once the novel was published in text, Rushdi's elder sister and writer, Luna Rushdi, sent a copy to renowned Indian translator, Arunava Sinha, who expressed an interest in translating the novel into English.

NABILAH KHAN

"We are truly prisoners of the mind", says Sanya Rushdi, the author-narrator of *Hospital* (Giramondo Publishing, 2023), originally published in Bangla (Bohiproakash, 2019) and translated into English by Arunava Sinha.

Shortlisted for the 2024 Stella Prize and longlisted for the 2024 Miles Franklin Literary Award, two of the highest literary honours in Australia, it conveys the emotions swirling around in the story's protagonist, who is diagnosed with schizophrenia after her third episode of psychosis. Based on events that occurred in Rushdi's life, the autofiction takes us deep into the recesses of the narrator's mind and portrays a simple, yet powerful picture of the illness.

A slim volume that packs a powerful punch, *Hospital* came about by chance. A few months after she left hospital in Melbourne, Bangladeshi-born, Australia-based Rushdi commenced journaling her thoughts. She shared them with a friend, a renowned poet, writer, and artist, Bratya Raisu, who recognised a novel in those notes.

Having only written for academic purposes before (as a student of biological sciences and psychology at Monash University, University of Sydney, and Deakin University), Rushdi was uncertain about her abilities to write a full length novel. So, Raisu suggested writing a few lines of a chapter at a time, which was then published in *shahitya.com*.

Once the novel was published

in text, Rushdi's elder sister and writer, Luna Rushdi, sent a copy to renowned Indian translator, Arunava Sinha, who expressed an interest in translating the novel into English. With over 80 translations (English to Bangla and vice versa) of classic, modern and contemporary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry under his belt, he is no stranger to the literary landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

What was the thought behind the title 'Hospital'? Was it simply a place or the narrator's state of mind? Is there a deeper meaning behind the simple title?

Rushdi: I guess I ended up with a broader name such as "Hospital" because the book can be read at different levels. What this name means really depends on how the reader is reading it. At first, I named it "Hospital and a flock of smoking pigeons." In Bangla, the name was "Hospital o ek jhak dhumpayi kobutor" but the name was changed to "Hospital" later on.

The narrator has a strong awareness of 'the self' when she describes it being allowed to thrive in a community house while 'the self' is "subdued with medication at every opportunity" in the hospital. Why was it important for the narrator to feel this way?

Rushdi: I think, if we take them out of the hospital and community house context for a moment, we find that a person living in today's society, who is not very politically aware or is very innocent and naïve in a lot of ways, is generally treated in two different ways. The first way is to just tell them

what to do and what not to do, and in so doing, infantilise him or her or take control of his or her life; and the second way is to just let them be and let them go about their own business, but have an undercurrent agreement that they are really not a member of the larger society, and so, eventually, they have to be eliminated. I think, in *Hospital*, I compared this second way to the slow death of a frog in a gradually heating water pot. I feel that both of these ways exist due to a sense of care for these people, but also, a sense of not knowing what to do with them.

The narrator portrays a lot of compassion and empathy for her fellow psychiatric ward patients, whom she refers to as "inmates". What was it like to see yourself through the eyes of a character in a novel? Did you discover something about yourself you weren't aware of while penning your thoughts down?

Rushdi: There is a part in the novel about assertiveness, where the protagonist is in the courtyard with two other patients. There are pigeons on the floor that the narrator is a bit uncomfortable with. The dialogues that took place there about assertiveness between the narrator and another patient, where I, as a writer, was kind of shuffling positions between the narrator and the other patient, seeing the narrator or 'myself' through another person's eyes, led to the realisation of this tendency that I have to react rather than to assert myself. There are lots of other little discoveries like that throughout the book.

What made you choose *Hospital*? What was the first thing that drove you to want to translate this book?

Sinha: Sanya's sister, Luna Rushdi, whom I have known for several years, asked me if I'd like to read her sister's debut novel (in Bangla). I said of course, and they sent me a copy. The moment I read the first few pages, I felt this was the kind of novel that one would like to translate. So, I made my decision very early on and I'm very happy to say I wasn't disappointed. When a novel really speaks to me within the first few pages, and I talk to the author and they are okay with my going ahead and

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translating it, I start translating it right away without waiting to finish reading it till the end. So, reading *Hospital* in this case was simultaneous with translating it. It was a truly extraordinary experience from beginning to end.

Do you start translating it in your head or do you prepare in advance? What does the process involve?

Sinha: The curse for the translator sometimes, especially when you're reading from the language in which you're translating, is that a part of your mind is always asking the question of whether this is a book you'd like to translate or not (assuming it hasn't been translated

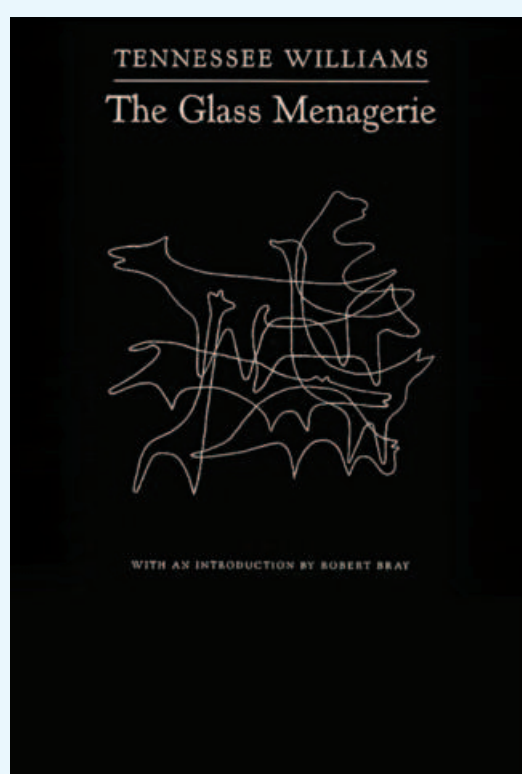
before). So, that part of the brain is always active, and you're right, even if I am not consciously translating in my head, I'm thinking of how it'll sound in English and so on. I'm not saying it happens with every book I work on, but *Hospital* was one of those books where I knew from the word go that this is a book that would work just as well in any other language.

In certain parts of the book, you left the original terms in Bangla where the characters are referring to family members as "Luna apa" or "Luna'r ma", the narrator's parents affectionately calling her "baba" and "ma", etc. Was that a conscious choice to keep the authenticity?

Sinha: Well, it's verisimilitude. It's important because at the back of your mind, you know that those conversations did not originate in English. When you start using terms like 'dear' or 'darling', you cannot insert a cultural context that does not exist. If you were talking about a family that was entirely integrated into the Anglophone world, and it didn't matter what the origins were, then it'd be fine. But, in this case, the family is not integrated in the sense that they have completely given up their ways of speaking in their own manner, including using endearments, and to gently point out the fact that, at the end of the day, this is a slightly different group of people, therefore those were useful markers.

These are excerpts from two interviews. Read the full conversations on DS Books and The Daily Star's websites.

Nabilah Khan was born and raised in Bangladesh and currently resides in Sydney, Australia. After more than a decade working in the global banking and financial services industry, she now works in the Australian public service.



SHELF LIFE

The Glass Menagerie

Tennessee Williams, 1944

When we see glass, we think two things—how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken. When we meet Laura in the play, we see the embodiment of this concept. Quietly struggling with mental illness, she spends her days tending to her little glass menagerie. She, her mother, and her brother live in a world of their own, wrapped in a cocoon of nostalgia and tucked away from reality. Yet, their world is what

strikes the reader as real because of the way the play brings to life an all-too-familiar internal world rife with loneliness and human desperation. This play tugged at my heartstrings like none other! In the absence of a plot, there is the presence of an emotional tempest.

Syeda Fatema Rahman
Undergraduate student of English at North South University

QUOTE OF THE WEEK



"The opposition to Negro education in the South was at first bitter, and showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood; for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent."

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*