



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

## A wound in our experience

Review of Saikat Majumdar's 'The Remains of the Body' (Penguin Random House, India, 2024)

**Many readers would identify the problems of the modern-day system in Sunetra's words when she observes how the not-so-academically-bright ones made it to the top and she, the best student of her class, was merely a highly paid lab assistant. And Kaustav, another top student in his discipline was barely making ends meet despite being affiliated with the best universities.**

SOHANA MANZOOR

"An exceptional novel that makes gender disappear to build unconventional love and friendship"

Ruth Vanita

Saikat Majumdar's latest novel, *The Remains of the Body*, is a deeply visceral and textured exploration of loss, desire, and identity. To an unsuspecting reader, the novel might start out as a love triangle rising out of marital discord, or betrayal of old friendships. *The Remains of the Body*, however, delves deeper into examining various forms of relationships reflecting the complex human psychology in an intricate and ever-changing world.

Set in Toronto and La Jolla, the storyline constantly moves not just between places, but more between times. The story is narrated from the perspective of Kaustav, who is a post-doc fellow based in Toronto. He is a bachelor, but it is hinted that he had had romantic relations with women throughout his life. The novel begins in the backyard pool of Avik's spacious home in La Jolla, California. A cautious reader might find it symbolic because human life begins in water—in the womb of one's mother. And then all three major characters, Kaustav, Avik, and Sunetra are seen playing in it. The complexity of their relationship is introduced right there as they thrash about the pool aimlessly, each revealing in different ways the dysfunctionality of their seemingly successful lives. Kaustav's position is perhaps the most vulnerable as he is caught between his love for both his childhood buddy Avik and his wife Sunetra.

Avik is a professional whom his childhood friend Kaustav describes as a big baby who never grew up. Their relationship goes far back into the past when they were mere boys and shared intimate moments and secrets. As adults, they are still forever attached, even though their relationship is dotted with occasional jealousy and doubt. Hence,

Kaustav and Sunetra can make fun of Avik and his successful friends with houses in suburbs, who seem mad about "goat curry for dinner and sausages for breakfast and their wobbly tummies" and laugh over "sad jokes and endlessly recycled memories from their engineering college hostel days."

Many readers would identify the problems of the modern-day system in Sunetra's words when she observes how the not-so-academically-bright ones made it to the top and she, the best student of her class, was merely a highly paid lab assistant. And Kaustav, another top student in his discipline was barely making ends meet despite being affiliated with the best universities. When Kaustav accuses Avik of hindering Sunetra from pursuing her dreams in academia and joining instead a research-intensive biopharmaceutical company, he feels a "kick in his groin," as the latter retorts that Sunetra and Kaustav are equally impractical, and that the world does not run on theories. Here, the readers suddenly have the lens being reversed—Kaustav and Avik, the old friends, had been looking at each other through the same lens and shaking their heads and calling each other immature.

Seemingly caught between the two men in her life, Sunetra shows a strength that is characteristic of women thwarted from attaining their dreams. Bright as she is, she is quick to realise that Kaustav and her adulterous adventures were merely mistaken acts. For Kaustav, at least, it turns out to be the means to reach out to an unattainable body. Sunetra is quick to retreat because she cannot afford to make another mistake. In some ways, she may remind one of Garima Basu, a fascinating New Woman from *The Firebird*, Majumdar's second novel, who pursued her dream of stage-acting in spite of being criticised both at home and outside. Sunetra's plight and decision to finally pursue her unfulfilled dream is not altogether unusual in

a world where marriages often end in divorce because the highly qualified wife refuses to be quelled by the dictatorial husband. Her struggles also touch on an important segment of women's problems in a patriarchal world where men and women are forever set across from each other simply because of power structures.

*The Remains of the Body* is a very short novel, barely 172 pages. But a sensitive reader would find it fascinating, not necessarily for the storyline, but for the portrayal of a world that is both vibrant and realistic. Anyone frequenting the diasporic world and familiar with the tension between academia and the corporate world would recognise the scenes depicted in this slim volume. One will also find remnants of loss, pain, and love that keep us alive. In his "Acknowledgements", the author writes: "Sometimes we write because there is a wound in our experience of life about which we can do nothing. Writing then becomes a cry of both pain and war." The words are a reminder that life is a constant battle and there are many wounds. A wound-free life might be happier, but the wounds give meaning to our lives because each one of them has a story.

In a recent interview with *Platform Magazine*, Majumdar observes, "I think this book ends up showing that what we call queer is actually a pervasive reality, and the heteronormative ideal is just that—an ideal that is forced due to the needs of the state and the market." In some crucial ways, these words capture the spirit of our world. The characters with a Dostoevskian analytic turn of mind often make ruthless assessments of the selves, and thus are a constant reminder that there are so many contradictions and conflicts in the modern world that the word "normal" has lost its traditional meaning, as have many others.

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BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

## Speaking up for the intellectual resurgence in non-cosmopolitan Bengal

Review of Bibhas Roy Chowdhury's 'Poem Continuous: Reincarnated Expressions' (Hawakal, 2024), translated by Kiriti Sengupta

MALASHRI LAL

"My reader, I dip into the water just for you."  
Bibhas Roy Chowdhury

How does a poet capture a boatman singing words to the gentle wind, a child bewildered by war, and a woman identified with rain? Bibhas Roy Chowdhury is a legendary poet who is known for the strength and diversity of his Bengali poetry. The translator into English, Kiriti Sengupta, has achieved an immense feat in bringing 60 poems into a 10th anniversary edition. Roy Chowdhury writes a nuanced Bangla, often focusing on rural Bengal, haunted by memories of Partition, and remains a highly private person. *Poem Continuous: Reincarnated Expressions* is a fortuitous title as it gestures towards the challenging act of translation and the desirable creativity of a refined translator.

One can offer a specific example by commenting on the exquisite poem, "In the Monsoon", which begins with the lines, "The alga float in the song / of my tender age. / I wonder if the river / is nearing death." Bengal's dramatic *kaal baishakhi* and *barshe* defy any easy description—and here, the association with algae, which is a parasite, and water, which is an element associated with the final rites of ash immersion, are collocated to yield a magnificent spectrum. This short poem ends with a startling image: "In the song of my younger age / two blind come / across each other quite often", packing a cryptic



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coding of "blind" relations among people. Is the Monsoon downpour from heaven a witness to social interludes, the maya or illusion of action? Such a poem is open to multiple interpretations, and I present mine as an example of the complexity of Roy Chowdhury's writing and Kiriti's translation.

If water, earth, and fire are the core elements defining human existence—as in the poems "I can Leave, but Why", "Lunatic", "The Lighthouse", among others, do the poems take a philosophical stand in re-casting this eternal interdependence? Perhaps the answer is in the negative because Roy Chowdhury never repeats himself, nor does he preach. The book's "Epilogue" comprises a significant interview between the author and translator. Kiriti asks: "Your poems mostly deal with agony and emotions... Why is this agony an essential component of your poems?" Roy Chowdhury answers obliquely, "Let my poetry capture the journey of the refugee boy from extreme distress to where I stand now. I have let my life play behind the metaphors."

Metaphors are the greatest challenge to translators, and several poems build upon a key phrase or word. "The Poetry of a Hibiscus Flower" is a striking example, and if one reflects upon the lines, "The hibiscus lives in solitude as expected. / Lost people do exist, more or less in a similar way", a plethora of cultural references will show up. Though a common flower, the hibiscus, called 'joba' in Bangla, is sacred to Maa Kali and offered in worship at the temple; Santhal women often wear it in their hair, and Jaba-Kusum is a popular cosmetic brand. These allusions float in the literary aura of the word. Roy Chowdhury astutely associates the hibiscus with a lost mother—perhaps pre-Partition Bengal—isolation, abandonment, yet hardy survival. Interestingly, the translator, Kiriti Sengupta, has independently written a poem, "Hibiscus", with the lyrical lines: "I'll bloom / like a hibiscus: / the blush will endorse / my bloodline" that I read in the *Amethyst Review*. My point is that metaphors are powerfully suggestive, and insightful poetry hints at a backstory through a key image and allows the reader to ponder over the consciousness it generates.

This is an excerpt from the essay. Read it in full at *The Daily Star* and DS Books' websites.

Malashri Lal, a Former Professor in the English Department at the University of Delhi, has published 21 books, the most recent being *Mandalas of Time: Poems and Treasures of Lakshmi: The Goddess Who Gives*. She has also received several research and writing fellowships. She is currently the Convener of the English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi.

## FOR THE CURIOUS WRITER

### Sitting in the discomfort

During the drafting stage, consider letting your first (or even second) draft simmer a bit. Return to it after a while—you decide how long a 'while' lasts—and let your writing simultaneously impress and horrify you. Give yourself a pat on the back for having a draft and snort in self-deprecating derision because the draft needs work. As for the time you spend away from your desk? Perfect for doing tasks that let your mind wander—cleaning comes to mind or even trying to keep a plant alive.

**Nazia Manzoor**  
Editor, Star Books and Literature

