

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Of dewdrops and grit

Review of a translation of Syed Mujtaba Ali's novel, 'Shabnam' (Speaking Tiger Books, 2024), from Bangla by Nazes Afroz



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

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'Shabnam' is a dewdrop in Persian. *Shabnam* (1960) is the name of Syed Mujtaba Ali's passionate love story that stretches beyond the history of nearly a century ago. Like the writings of his teacher, Rabindranath Tagore, the polyglot scholar Mujtaba Ali's story is more than just the plot and the telling. His novel can be compared to a dewdrop which assumes rainbow hues during sunrise as it encompasses not only the passionate cross-cultural romance of Shabnam and the young Bengali lecturer, Majnun, but also shades of humanity, love, compassion set against the uncertainties generated by ruthless political upheavals. It is no less than Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) in scope, set against the backdrop of the Afghan Civil War (1928-29) and beyond, though the characters that people the two books vary widely given the differences in geographies and times. That this has recently been

translated by Nazes Afroz, a former BBC editor stationed in Afghanistan, and published for a wider readership, emphasises its relevance in the current context.

Shabnam is a young Afghan woman—educated and polished—multilingual to say the least, fluent in French and Persian. As we learn in the course of the narrative, she is fearless. She introduces herself as such: "You know I'm a Turkish woman. Even Badshah Amanullah has Turkish blood. Amanullah's father, the martyred Habibullah, realised how much power a Turkish woman—his wife, Amanullah's mother—held. She checkmated him with her tricks. Amanullah wasn't even supposed to be the king, but he became one because of his mother." Given the current context, where narrow fragmented walls, dreaded by Tagore in 'Where the Mind is Without Fear', seem to be the order of the day, how transnational and confident does her description sound?

She further goes on to say: "In your own country, did Noor Jahan not control Jahangir? Mumtaz—so many others. How much knowledge do people have of the power of Turkish women inside a harem?" Her knowledge of history and the world is extensive. She can make calls about her surroundings and her own life, which is more than what many women can do in today's Afghanistan.

The novel is divided into three parts. In the first part is the dramatic meeting of the narrator, Majnun, with the beautiful and unconventional Shabnam at a ball given by Amanullah Khan, the sovereign of Afghanistan from 1919 to 1929. Their introductions are peppered with wit and poetry. The first part concludes with the two of them acknowledging their love for each other.

Mujtaba Ali is known for his sense of humour, and satire. This can be experienced in the dialogues and descriptions in the translation too. As

Bacha-e-Saqao or Habibullah Kalakani conquers hordes while her beloved is out to organise their exit from Afghanistan. "Because I can go about in it without any trouble. The ignorant Europeans think it was an imposition by men to keep women hidden. But it was an invention by women—for their own benefit. I sometimes wear it as the men in this land still haven't learned how to look at women. How much can I hide behind the net in the hat?"

An intriguing description of the political turmoil is given by Mujtaba Ali through the voice of his narrator, Majnun, with reference to his earlier non-fiction set around the same time. "At that moment both of us heard a commotion in the street outside. There was shouting and wailing too. I got worried sensing that the noise was coming closer. Then we heard the firing of guns at a distance. Coming down to inquire, we found out that the bandit leader Bacha-e-Saqao had entered Kabul. He wanted to oust Amanullah. It was an intriguing chapter of Afghanistan. One can find details of it in history books. One Bengali writer wrote about the time too." The Bengali writer was of course Mujtaba Ali himself, and the book was *Deshe Bideshe*, written and published the same year as Alan Paton's Nobel Prize-winning *Cry my Beloved Country* (1948). However, his book, no less deserving of the greatest accolade, remained unknown to the world outside Bengal despite its excellence as there were no translations. Later in 2015, Afroz translated and published this book as *In a Land Far from Home: A Bengali in Afghanistan*. It was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award.

The second part of this novel homes rather an unusual incident. Shabnam makes the bold call to marry Majnun secretly with only their attendants looking on. And then later, as if part of a comedy of errors, there is a wedding organised for them by her father, who does not know they are already married. Despite the phobia of Afghans against marrying their daughters to foreigners, her family decides to marry Shabnam to Majnun as they wanted Shabnam out of conflict-ridden Afghanistan and safe. Her father hopes she will go off to India with her husband. And this is almost a century ago. But instead, in the third part, she is taken away by the

conquering hordes while her beloved is out to organise their exit from Afghanistan.

The last part continues with Majnun's quest for his beloved. His endeavour leads him to travel, hallucinate and drives him almost insane, reminiscent of the Majnun of Laila-Majnun fame, a story he did refer to in repeated conversations with Shabnam. At the end of the novel, Majnun ascends the physical realm of love. He says: "Now after losing all my senses, I turn into a single being free of all impurities. This being is beyond all senses—yet all the senses converge there... There is Shabnam, there is Shabnam, there is Shabnam."

The novel concludes with a quiet but terrific statement—"tamam na shud". "There is no end".

Syed Mujtaba Ali was a Humboldt scholar. He had lived in five countries, including Afghanistan, where he had gone to teach. His own outlook coloured his writing and peopled his novel with characters who while culturally authentic often have perspectives that could be much broader than the norm. In addition, the main characters often have a terrific sense of humour. They exemplify what humanity could be if they were truly humane. Of course, you do have the villains too!

Shabnam herself towers above the rest with her playfulness, unconventionality, courage, bravery, education and finesse. She remains like her name, pure, exquisite and multi-faceted. Along with Majnun's heart, she makes room for herself in every reader's heart. Her character makes a strong statement against all kinds of repression and is an inspiration to all of us to live with courage, by our convictions and principles. To me, this translation is a good way of introducing more holistic and inclusive streams of thoughts to people beyond the boundaries of language and culture.

Mitali Chakravarty founded the borderlessjournal.com. She has edited *Monalisa No Longer Smiles: An Anthology of Writings from across the World (2022) and Our Stories, Our Struggle: Violence and the Lives of Women (2024)*. She has a book of poems, *Flight of the Angsana Orioles: Poems (2023)* and a book of essays on *China, In the Land of Dragons (2014)*.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A tale of forgetting and remembrance

Review of 'One Left' (University of Washington Press, 2020) by Kim Soom

MOUMITA HAQUE SHENJUTEE

Being an ardent admirer of K-pop culture, I wonder why I was hitherto unaware of this gem of a book, *One Left* by Kim Soom, and the excruciatingly painful truth it delineates. But, surely, the answer lies in the question: is it popular literature, or a serious work of scholarship? It depicts a disturbingly dark chapter of Korea under Japanese rule during the Pacific War, through a seemingly difficult narrative structure infused with memory and time shifts. No wonder this novel lacks mass appeal.

Translators Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton had to face quite an ordeal to publish this book despite winning the prestigious PEN/Heim Fund Grants for their work. The publishers were conflicted about whether to market it as a piece of fiction or a historical work. The carefully put endnotes, along with sources, indeed reflect Soom's assiduous research to establish the authenticity of the text. This, ultimately, is a chronicle of "comfort women" who were forced to work as sex slaves for the Japanese Army during the Second World War—a truth that the Japanese Government has contested, and even some Koreans seem to be sceptical about and are ashamed of. Nonetheless, this is a moving work of fiction, created out of rigorous study of the comfort women of Korea.

To summarise the plot, this novel is set at a time when only one registered comfort woman is still alive. However, she is on her deathbed. This narrative, thus, progresses through the protagonist's (who is a hidden comfort woman and remains nameless till the last chapter of the novel) reminiscences of her harrowing experience in a comfort station; her life story is intermingled with her isolated life at present. Moreover, her



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

recollection of post-conflict Korea also shows how these comfort women faced extreme social ostracisation, given the shame, humiliation, and disgust that followed the revelation of their identities. Hence, the last few chapters feelingly portray the psychological conflict of the protagonist to remain hidden because of the threats of social ostracisation, and the desire to reclaim her identity since no one will be left to chronicle the voices of comfort women after the last one dies.

Undoubtedly, recording one of the most painful incidents in the history of Korea which remains mostly unacknowledged in the public domain, is in itself a step towards remembrance and acknowledgement. This clash between public amnesia and a personal narrative of remembrance seems to be reiterated throughout this text. This novel, thus, depicts how coercive outward forces ruptured the identity of the comfort women in myriad ways, who had to change their names and were raped so many times that

their bodies did not feel like theirs anymore. This attempt to obliterate their identities did not end with the war. Nevertheless, resistance against such erasure is represented at the end of the novel, through the nameless protagonist, who suddenly remembers her name, as she decides to reclaim her agency by meeting the last surviving victim and revealing her identity.

To emphasise this dichotomy between the coerced subalternity of comfort women and the desire to recover their agency, Soom

uses a mask as a symbol. The protagonist is given one by another nameless girl from the neighbourhood. Although the mask has eyes, it lacks a mouth. Later, she carves a mouth out of the mask as she contemplates coming out as a victim. The firm decision to express her identity comes after her nephew crushes the mask with the mouth beneath his foot and tries to force her out of the house. Such usage of symbols, metaphors, and images is one important characteristic of Soom's writing style, especially, the animal imagery becomes a motif through its recurrent appearance in the novel, evoking the general tendency prevalent in all living beings, of the powerful to dominate the powerless.

In one interview, Soom has reflected on how she started writing this novel. As she heard on television that the number of registered comfort women was declining, she had a vision one day, of an elderly comfort woman sitting all by herself in a room, like an island in a vast ocean. She indeed creates such a character through the language of affect, revealing how shame, fear, and disgust alienate her from society. However, the desire for love and connection seems to overpower the pessimistic tone of the story, since towards the end of the novel, the last surviving comfort woman alludes to a passage from Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (1899) that looks forward to a world where all living beings coexist happily. Despite the emphasis on the despondent situation of comfort women and their reparation, this longing for a world filled with empathy, love, and peaceful coexistence seems to be the beating heart of this novel.

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