

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Betwixt and between: Tales from a Nepali-Indian girlhood

Review of ‘The Woman Who Climbed Trees: A Novel’ (HarperCollins India, 2023) by Smriti Ravindra

Ravindra’s prose is brisk, smooth, and detailed, with numerous stories from traditional Nepali and Hindu folklore chipped in, adding layers as the story unfolds. Stories of Rama and Sita are evoked to showcase the eternal bond between the twin cities of Janakpur and Darbhanga, with Ram viewed as the groom who moved over to Janakpur to woo his bride, Sita.

ISRAR HASAN

Images of Nepal, lingering in the annals of social media and casual conversations with friends, often evoke conversations about natural beauty, spectacular architecture dotting its numerous hills, and intimate hospitality. Sandwiched between the behemoths, India and China, Nepal’s history is a striking case of contradictions slaloming many structural challenges such as religious fundamentalism and ultranationalism engulfing the region today.

Nepal, very much like the fictional Shangri-La, remains mired in mystery with its deeply engorged stories, myths, folklore, and its storied lived experience—from the world’s only Hindu Kingdom to South Asia’s most vibrant democracy—largely unknown even to its most ardent supporters. It is in the last couple of years that Nepalese literature has grown, exposing us to the multifaceted complexities in the country itself.

First-time author, Smriti Ravindan weaves a tale in her novel, *The Woman Who Climbed Trees*, of striking clarity on the lives of the Indo-Nepal border focussing on the contested region of Madhesh, whose people have straddled along the border for the generations and have been seen as “outsiders” to the ruling Pahadi class in Kathmandu. Ravindan’s story revolves around three women in the same family, with the first two women’s destinies leading to them having respective families across the border. The story starts off with 14-year-old Meena, an Indian with a Nepali mother, Kaveri, as she is placed in an arranged marriage with the 21-year-old Manmohan, a Nepali undergraduate student and underground political activist based in India. “Eleven hours. Another town. Another country.” This sets up the narrative for numerous entanglements, resilience, and resistance, with women’s agency put front and center.

The first half of the book showcases the inner psychological battle Meena faces to turn up as a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law to an increasingly absent husband and an overbearing



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

mother-in-law. Struggling with her duties as a young bride, Meena finds solace in her sister-in-law, Kumud, trespassing and bringing to the surface the volatile yet budding notions of female desire, sisterhood, and the transgressions of relationships between women. It is in the second half of the novel that the reader is drawn into the beguiling intersectional complexities and divergence of class, power, gender, and citizenship, with the focus shifting to the capital, Kathmandu, as Meena goes through multiple miscarriages that test her status as a woman in society. With Manmohan climbing up the civil service ladder, he is increasingly

taunted for being Madheshi (*marsiya*) and “Indian looking”. The narrator of the story later on becomes the couple’s daughter, Preeti. Preeti traverses the delicate terrain of generational trauma, narrating the story in first person and acting alternatively as a cynic and a cheerleader when it comes to understanding her family’s numerous problems buffeted by the changing dynamics of Nepal’s political system. Preeti acts as an additional commentator to her mother’s feminine rage and anguish at a system that fails women, their desires, and forms of solidarity. The matriarch of the family, Kaveri, has her story lurk in

the background, providing an anchor to understanding the multifaceted and silenced lives of Madheshi women across borders.

Ravindra’s prose is brisk, smooth, and detailed, with numerous stories from traditional Nepali and Hindu folklore chipped in, adding layers as the story unfolds. Stories of Rama and Sita are evoked to showcase the eternal bond between the twin cities of Janakpur and Darbhanga, with Ram viewed as the groom who moved over to Janakpur to woo his bride, Sita. In the same vein, many facets of Nepali folklore are dissected, such as the story of Rani Pokhari, a large pond in

Kathmandu, whose backstory lies in the tragic outcome of a royal family losing their one child.

Putting female characters at the center of the story, the novel brings to life with vivid audacity what it means to be a Nepali-Indian woman in a changing subcontinent where, till today, the battles of citizenship and gender rage on. A tale of belonging, attachment, displacement—the novel unpacks and lingers on the important question: “What is mother and motherland to a woman?”

Israr Hasan is currently working as researcher in a public health institute.

## INTERVIEW

# ‘Human translation will continue, despite machines’: An interview with V. Ramaswamy

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

V. Ramaswamy is a translator and writer based in Kolkata, India. I had first heard of him in early 2022, when a new book of translations of Shahidul Zahir was being written about in newspapers here in Bangladesh and in India. Yet it would be his work on Shahaduz Zaman where I first experienced his craft. A translator of writers such as Subimal Misra, Manoranjan Byapari, and Adhir Biswas, I found his translations to be effortless forays into the bleak world of these writers.

Speaking with Ramaswamy on behalf of *The Daily Star* about his life as a translator, he also shared insights on his upcoming projects and, among other things, thoughts on whether AI could ever be a serious translator.

**Tell us how your journey as a translator began.**

It began almost by accident in 2005. During a casual encounter with my friend Dr Mrinal Bose, I asked him if there was one contemporary Bangla writer who he thought was worth reading; he thought for a moment, and said, “Yes. His name is Subimal Misra.” And thus, with Dr Mrinal’s prodding and pushing, I began translating Subimal Misra’s short fiction. But after that initial start, I persisted with translating Misra because his writing resonated with my own background as a grassroots and community organiser and activist, working with the labouring poor of my city for two decades. I was selected for the Sangam House residency in 2011—and it was the Sangam House residency that made me a translator. After completing three volumes of Misra, I saw myself as a translator of voices from the margins. That was when I learnt

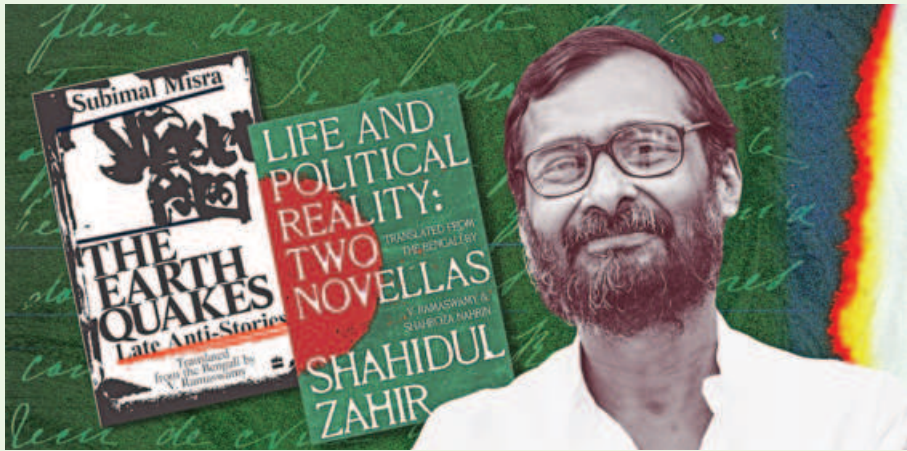


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about the autodidact writer Manoranjan Byapari, and received the novel Chandan Jibon from him. A three-month fellowship in Wales in 2016 enabled me to work on this. For me, that was an apprenticeship in working on a long novel.

**You are currently translating *Prodosh* by Shawkat Ali. What drew you toward the works of Shawkat Ali?**

It was my translation assistant, Srishti Dutta Chowdhury, who told me in 2020 about Shawkat Ali’s novels, *Prodosh* and *Narai* (The United Press Limited, 1984) and *Narai* (Bidyapokash, 2012). She wanted to translate these, and asked me if I would join her. But it was the way she described these two novels that had a mantric effect on me. As it happened, Srishti was unable to devote time to this; also, following the experience of a collaborative translation of Shahidul Zahir with Shahroza Nahrin from Bangladesh, I thought I ought to induct a Bangladeshi co-translator for Shawkat Ali

as well.

I had the consent from the late Shawkat Ali’s family in a matter of hours. That was only because of my network and circle of friends in Bangladesh. Similarly, my eventual co-translator on the Shawkat Ali project, Mohiuddin Jahangir, was introduced to me by Asif Showkat, the author’s son, now a good friend. Mohiuddin’s PhD thesis was on Shawkat Ali. We completed the novel, *Narai*, titled *We Must Fight!* in English.

**You have been part of multiple translation projects as a co-translator. How different is the process of translating in collaboration?**

I had no plan as such to collaborate; it was just a sudden thought, and so I invited Shahroza to join me as a co-translator of the novella, “Life and Political Reality”, by Shahidul Zahir. I had become acquainted with Shahroza Nahrin via Facebook. I arrived in Dhaka in early 2020 and sat with her for a few days; she read out, and I

translated.

This first experience was a happy one, and it convinced me that when it comes to important texts, two is definitely better than one. Two people can share the ownership, responsibility, and labour of translation.

I would like to think that this was also a good mentorship experience for my co-translator. Bangla needs a Mukti Bahini of translators, and so this collaboration-mentorship process can also be a means towards building more translators.

**What do you think of machine translations in the sphere of literature? Should it ever be taken seriously?**

I guess machines will gradually get better and better, but until then we, humans,

images in a fraction of a second. But we will still look with awe at the works of the great masters. Will people stop expressing themselves in drawing and painting? Will people stop writing? So human translation will also continue, despite machines.

**How do you deal with cultural nuances when translating from Bangla to English?**

I guess one has to be embedded in the culture in order to perceive and sense the nuances. The translator must then bring this to the fore creatively. For instance, if someone addresses an older person as “tui” rather than “apni”, that conveys something about sociology—about classism being ingrained in the culture. A particular word or term may be very significant, from the perspective of history, or politics, like Ponchasher Monontor, or Mir Jafar, or Dandakaranya. The translator has to be ever alert. Readers of a translated work thus also learn about the history, politics, culture, etc. of a people.

There is something else I’d like to share in this context. When one translates, say, proverbs, there would be equivalent expressions in English. Like, “as you sow, so you reap”. But there is an expression in Bangla, “kaath khele angra hagbe” (if you eat wood, you’ll excrete charcoal). Rather than translate that into a tame expression like “as you sow, so you reap”, I would like to give the reader a peep into the psyche of the speakers of Bangla, the pungency of the speech, etc. So I would translate the original expression itself.

**This is an excerpt from the interview. Read the full article on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature’s websites.**

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