

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

BRIDGING DIVIDES: Aruna Chakravarti's journey through Bengal's hidden narratives

Review of 'Rising from the Dust: Dalit Stories from Bengal' (Om Books International, 2025), selected and translated by Aruna Chakravarti

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

"You have done an excellent job. People who know English tell me that your translations are better than the originals," said the late Sunil Gangopadhyay to Aruna Chakravarti on her translation of his writings.

This conversation took place at a Tagore Conference organised by the Sahitya Akademi in Kochi in 2011. By then, Aruna Chakravarti, an eminent writer herself, had bagged a Sahitya Akademi Award for her translation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Srikanto* (1917). She had started her journey into the world of translations by bringing Tagore songs to non-Bangali readers and then moved into prose translations, which include Sunil Gangopadhyay's own novels.

Recently, she has put together and translated a collection of 12 short stories about the downtrodden from Bengal, *Rising from the Dust*. Some of these stories spread across the borders

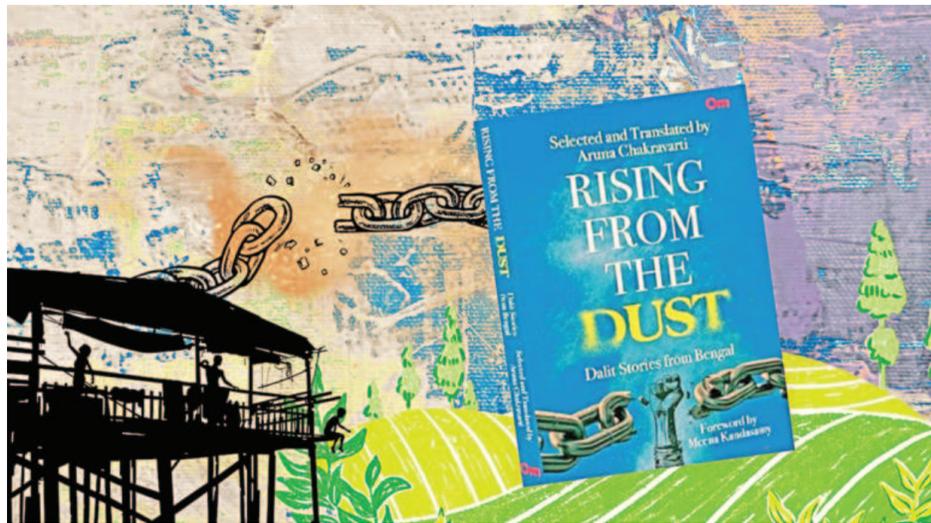


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Contemporary and historic issues are woven into these narratives to shake us out of torpor. While keeping the flavours of Bengal intact, these translations bring together the diverse cries of the suffering and downtrodden with their complex varied needs from a variety of backgrounds to a global readership. They cannot be put under a single label as the translator has pointed out in her note.

as, in those days, Bengal was united. The stories she has selected include erstwhile greats like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Tarashankar Banerjee, Mahasweta Devi, and more modern voices like that of the late Prafulla Roy, the late Anil Ghorai, Manoranjan Byapari, Bimalendu Halder, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Nakul Mallik, and Kalyani Thakur Charal.

These narratives rip through our complacent bourgeoisie fabric to explore tribes like the Bedes, communities like Duleys, Vaishnavs, and many more heterogeneous groups—including refugees—that together create an image of rural Bengal with its plenitude and variety. And yet,

there are stories that are written by contemporary writers who themselves have risen from the dust to deluge the world with a flood of words begging for change. The narratives spanning time and contours are such that they create a sense of discomfiture in the reader, of dissatisfaction for the accepted societal norms.

Chakravarti with her selection uses translation to bridge cultures, bringing a myriad of colours within Bengal together for the reader. She has selected these stories with care. In an earlier interview, Chakravarti had claimed: "For me the most important consideration when taking up a translation project has been the literary value of the piece. I had to enjoy the process of translation and could only do so if I thought the subject worthwhile...The process also intensified my interest in Bengal and the evolution of its society, literature and culture. I was enthused to read and learn more." Though Chakravarti lives outside Bengal—in New Delhi—her translations and writings revolve around Bengal. Her *Jorsanko* (Harper Collins, 2013) novels around Tagore and his family are perhaps the most wonderful recreation of his times and life in English. The stories in this collection are a reflection of what she claims to be of interest to her—

the evolution of society, culture, and literature.

The author has classics like Sarat Chandra's "Abhagi's Heaven", where the discrimination faced by the Duleys is such that they are not even allowed a proper cremation. In Prafulla Roy's "Snake Maiden", her description of the dwelling place of Bedes, a tribe that deals with snakes and lives in harmony with nature, leaves one spellbound. Chakravarti translates: "When the first monsoon showers fall upon the earth, Sonai Bibi's Bil awakes. Shaking off her torpor, she raises her face to the sky and drinks great gulps of pelting rain. Her contours change. She stretches and expands. Her newly awakened limbs unfurl and spread in all directions. To the north, south, east and west... all the way to the horizon. The river Meghna helps her. Swelling and frothing in a demonic dance she bursts her banks and makes her way into the fen. Wrapping her in a fierce embrace she turns her into a great sheet of waving water. Sensuous, joyous, seductive..."

Chakravarti skilfully recreates impactful dialogues with her linguistic prowess as can be seen in Mahasweta Devi's "Nalini". The oppressed Nalini—who was abandoned by her husband and works as a housemaid—goes

deeper into pecuniary hardships. She rebels against the coercion of performing the last rites (sradha) for a spouse she had not seen in decades. She asserts her perspective with a barrage of questions, translated impactfully by Chakravarti: "Whose sradha must I spend my hard-earned money on? And why? Who'll feed me if I lose my job? I'll have to starve or beg in the streets."

Rebellion against exploitation rings out again when Bimal Halder's Chintay "Salt" rages against the false allegations made by the exploitative employer of her husband. She shouts when the employer suggests that her husband and his coworkers had run away with the equipment as they'd gone missing at work: "Of course, you don't care if they are eaten by tigers and crocodiles. Why would you? What are you but an exploiter of your fellow human beings? A man of no morals. No feelings. Shameless! Selfish to the core!" And then she empowers other women to rise against such cruelty.

And yet, there are women who succumb to dehumanisation because of societal ills as in Tarashankar's "The Witch" and Byapari's "The Fortress". While Shora from the Dom community is dehumanised and called a witch, Tarashankar offers us the beautiful Raikamal, a Vaishnavi, who rises above

castes and creeds to sacrifice her needs for her one true love despite societal criticism. Anil Ghorai's "The Insect Festival" shows the unattractive Larani trying hard to put her beloved's needs above her own. The stories selected are not only centred around the tensions generated by the conflicts among different strata of society but also are women centric.

In Nakul Mallik's story, Chakravarti translates the plight of a contemporary young couple as the husband is declared an "illegal immigrant" and sent back to Bangladesh from India. The wife, pregnant and separated from her beloved, confronts the security at the Radcliffe line.

"How will you go? Do you have a passport?" The officer stood in front of her, barring her way.

"What passport?" Shefali cried out angrily. "I'm going to my husband. How dare you try to stop me?"

"That's not possible, Didi," the man said quietly, reasonably.

"Your husband was an illegal immigrant from Bangladesh. We have sent him back from where he came. We've acted strictly on the orders of the government."

"My husband is an illegal immigrant you say! Suddenly a shriek tore out of Shefali's lungs, so loud that sky, land and river reverberated with the sound."

Contemporary and historic issues are woven into these narratives to shake us out of torpor. While keeping the flavours of Bengal intact, these translations bring together the diverse cries of the suffering and downtrodden with their complex varied needs from a variety of backgrounds to a global readership. They cannot be put under a single label as the translator has pointed out in her note. This is a collection that creates an awareness that clubbing people under a homogenised label is not an answer to actually healing social malaise. Perhaps, the first brave attempt of its kind. Kudos to Aruna Chakravarti's selection, the brilliant translation and to the breadth of her outlook.

Mitali Chakravarti edits borderlessjournal.com and has published widely. Her latest book is *From Calcutta to Kolkata: City of Dreams—Poems* (Hawakal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2025).

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The imperfect art of leaving

On reading *Katy Family* (Jackleg Press, 2025) by Gemini Wahhaj

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

In a recent conversation I had with a well-regarded photographer about his longitudinal study on a subject, he talked about Sufism and the structure of the raagas in classical music where a single refrain being repeated was actually an inward search for deeper meaning. It took me a while to sit with those ideas, but reading *Katy Family* made a few things click into place.

Gemini Wahhaj, is an award winning author and academic based in Houston, Texas. *Katy Family* is a compilation of 21 short stories published in various publications, mostly set in Katy, an oil-rich suburb of Houston, featuring immigrant Bangladeshis. This is a milieu she's familiar with, having grown up in Bangladesh, moving first to Iraq with her family before putting down roots in America.

In 'Gracious', Nadiya, an engineer who escaped the classism of Dhaka perpetuates the same when she hires a Latina nanny for her child. 'Patent' explores the trajectory of Mirza, who achieves the American Dream, having aced his studies at BUET, obtaining a degree from an American university, getting a lucrative job in oil and gas, which comes with the glossy wife and kids and the fancy house in Katy, before reality catches up. In the same vein, the stories juxtapose the Bangladeshi yearning for escape against the immigrant isolation, with Katy providing the capitalist setting for the little dramas to play out on. It is a refreshing departure from the poverty-porn stereotype dogging the scene since Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (Doubleday, 2003) ushered in a fresh



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

wave of Bangladeshi Anglophone writers speaking to a global audience. The middle class characters speak to a much wider readership in Bangladesh; every voice could belong to someone you know.

Upon my first reading of the stories, I found some of the attitudes present in the

characters pretty dated, considering that in real life, in the present context—be it because of globalisation, capitalism, or the spread of social media—Bangladeshis as a whole don't have that wide-eyed wonder about all things "Umrican" anymore and conversely, the diaspora is aware—if grudgingly—of

this. A closer reading reveals the author's tongue-in-cheek use of the obliviousness of her characters to poke fun not only at the fanciful ideas that the deshi natives harbour about their "bideshi" relatives, but the snobbery with which the diaspora regards its abandoned homeland, and the insecurities

bubbling just under the surface. Gemini Wahhaj borrows a leaf from Kazuo Ishiguro, but adds enough cultural flavour to make her own version of this device.

Deftly woven into these intimate cultural snapshots are larger themes like racism and climate anxiety. The stories are ordered so that the reader begins with the lighter, wittier ones. In 'The Lady Doctor', Dr Hasina Rasheed is learning to navigate the unaccustomed social niceties of a dawlat in the States, and realises that she is completely out of her depth. In the titular 'Katy Family', a similar theme is explored, but from the perspective of a divorced man. The later stories like 'Marker' or 'Two Mothers' become more sinister, with death and madness stepping out of the wallpaper and taking pride of place in the narrative. 'Camping' directly addresses the environmental impacts of Big Oil, the greenwashing they participate in, and the hypocrisy required of the employees in order to carry on living with themselves. In the age where we all have tickets to a genocide livestream, but all have at least one probashi relative who is curiously mum on the subject, this one hit really close to home.

The prose feels like a little bit of a throwback, with the kind of vague descriptions favoured by English professors in the 80's, but once one gets used to it, the book feels like a little time capsule from an era before smartphones and global franchises. And despite the sadness, the desperation, the feeling of being stuck that seeps through every story, the book feels comforting, like a long forgotten memory of home.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is a writer, journalist, and the founder of *Sehri Tales*.