

Zakir Hossain Khokan and Monir Ahmod, eds. *Migrant Tales: An Anthology of Poems by Migrant Bengali Poets in Singapore*. Trans. Debabrota Basu. Dhaka: Morshed alam readoy, Babui Prokashoni, 2017. 67 pp. ISBN 978-984-92563-0-4.

When I first read that this collection was imminent I was, crusty academic that I am, full of excitement and enthusiasm, and impatient to get hold of a copy. While Ethos Books were the pioneers in first publishing in Singapore a collection of “transcreations” (by Cyril Wong) of poems by Bangladeshi migrant poet and novelist Md. Mukul Hossine, *Me Migrant* (2016), for some time I’ve been impatient to read a selection of migrant labouring poets’ work, reflecting a range of migrant poets’ voices and experience. *Migrant Tales* certainly does not disappoint in either the quality of its poetry, or the authentic richness of its voice. Twenty-odd Bangladeshi migrant worker poems are communicated to us with minimal mediation or interference. Long may these poets remain supported and welcomed while being granted the space to develop and publish sharing their own forms, their own voices. Perhaps it is a little romantic, even naïve of me to think of Debabrota Basu’s slightly more rough and ready translations are any more authentic than those of sublime wordsmith Cyril Wong’s. All the same, despite grammatical, prosodical, or typographical hiccups and failings Basu’s translations certainly chime illuminatingly with this reader.

The collection’s cover, depicting successive white clouds in a blue sky framed as from above in unvarnished light wood, literally skylights, may have been inspired by the last lines of twenty-nine year old construction worker Sikder Md. Suman’s “If you remember,”

If you think of me
in a silent moonlit night,
unlock your window, and
I would become your sky. (31)

The lines seem to gesture to a need for Singaporeans to be aware of, and to connect with migrant workers either directly or at least through their writings. As intriguing is the title of the collection: *Migrant Tales*. These poems certainly convey a rich variety of tales, and while not tale-telling surely do encourage a (privileged?) reader perhaps for the first time to give sustained reflection to the lives and conditions experienced by the builders of HDB blocks, MRT tunnels and others as well as the tale/s hanging thereby. However, an anonymous prefatory poet says it best:

Textures of migrant’s words,
entwinements of their sentences

are outlandish, like their lives.
 and, exiled in the city of dreams,
 lost in its busy cacophony,
 let poetry tell the migrant tales. (11)

The lines suggest that there is something strangely revelatory about migrant worker poems: their content as well as form borne of not only hard jobs, but estrangement and loneliness in the crowded, unstoppable city-state. In addition, the modestly paid jobs undertaken by these poets often seem to involve the systematic destruction of nature they hold so dear. The collection's simple dedication, "To all/who left home," might suggest that Singapore, even after the years some of the poets included in the collection have spent in Singapore, is not, and perhaps never can be, home.

The volume features a poignant preface by a Singapore poet who early on has promoted and supported migrant poetry, Alvin Pang. Pang reminds us of how little we know of the men and women who live and work proximately constructing our ever more easy postmodern landscape. Adding slight to undocumented injury, migrant workers, constructing men and domestic women, while keeping, running this city, are too often marginalised, othered by Singaporeans. Pang also provides an overdue reminder, richly illustrated by our migrant poets, that poetry, migrant or otherwise, has not always been the self-consciously intellectual-hipster luxury we often currently encounter in the island-state, but an age-old phenomenon of community, speaking "truth to power the world over for millennia... fed from and feeding the full range of human experience" (7). These poets acting on their own initiative in unison are at long last able to share their poems with us, thereby surely enriching and informing Singapore's literary scene and well beyond. Many of the poems collected here reveal migratory experience of exile, loneliness and isolation, also of the minute particulars of the grim hard experience of working here, fraught with incidences which all know are unfair. The poems also explore memory, beauty, family, love, home and homesickness dealt with via the strategy of recreating the quotidian details of home through imagination, through poetry.

Migrant Tales contains 26 poems from approximately 19 poets printed in their original beautiful Bengali script face to face with translations into an English rawer than many of us are perhaps used to, but I think all the more impactful for this. First, Debabrota Basu, currently a PhD student in engineering at NUS, in his first poem "The Lover's Grief," expresses homesickness, divorce from origins, momentary escape through reverie, but too soon the "grief" of "hustle" returns,

HOME,
 far apart

not only in space but also in time. (14)

One can dream, remember in reverie but:

When... life calls me back to its hustle,
to forget the infinites and to be small,
not to be a bird but to be a human,
I feel this grief. (14)

Many poems have striking titles, such as editor Zakir Hossain Khokan's "Ballad of Kisses" which for me at least in translation possesses an almost English decadent 1890s lyrical feel, a world away from most Singapore poetry currently favoured and published locally. Is this because we are so advanced, sophisticated in Singapore, or due to ignorance of the less familiar, less exposed and championed, but infinitely richer global forms and traditions? Certainly, we have yet to appreciate the long and rich written and oral tradition of Bengali poetry from which these poems, of the Baul tradition, almost Muslim-Hindu "suffi" songs in hard helmets, spring. Long may that unique difference in content and style thrive and be appreciated. The poems while not couched in complex post-modern forms (though at least one of the poems shows some exciting experimentation with form: Syedur Rahman Liton's "nucleus poetry") make for profoundly rich, beautiful and challenging works. "Beauty at Times" by shipyard health, safety and environment supervisor M.R. Mizan (familiarily known as "Paradise!") is obviously not about Singapore, more about communing with the elements whether here or in Bangladesh – but does a migrant poet or a Singapore poet necessarily need to write about Singapore? We get love poetry in the form of Construction worker and journalist, Mohammad Abdus Sobur's, "Be the Rhythm," Kausar Ahmad's "Snatch Away my Live [sic]," Rajib Shil Jibon's "Indestructible You," M.R. Mizan's "my unquenchable thirst," and the literally invigorating feel-good factor poetry of safety supervisor Md. Sharif Udin's "I feel Good." But Sharif's citation of lines from Bangladesh's national anthem penned by Tagore suggest far more is going on in this poem, yet to be captured and unlocked by future doubly sensitive translations.

Reminiscent of an early W.B. Yeats lyric, Rajib Shahil Jibon's "Passion of Moonlight Night" ends in another treasured brief moment of profound reverie in a Singapore workers' canteen:

I would love to be here,
in this canteen chair, for the rest of my life
with this melody of frogs,
raindrops on the blades of leaves,
the smell of the wet soil
and, that enchanting moon. (29)

Monir Ahmod, in “Memories” explores homesickness, memories derived from moments in the nature that still momentarily survives.

Still come back once,
and touch this body of grass,
and these sleepless eyes in this city of dreams
that carries our memories curved in it. (35).

Similar feelings emerge in Mohosin Akbar’s “Letter”:

I used to lose myself in the green of this city
holding your words against my heart. (37)

“City of Dreams” and “City of Forever Spring” are Bengali euphemisms for Singapore that seem to convey something of the hopes, dreams and also pain of thousands of migrant workers who work here. That migrant experience, endured over years, but now perhaps becoming potentially less of a constant as certainly MRT and possibly HDB projects are completed, are valuably chronicled in these poets’ writings. Md. Mukul Hossine writes of dreams of Bengali home and mother fused and then harshly interrupted:

I was so glad, like I am in heaven.
But then the mobile alarm rang
to break my dream, to wake me up
on my hard bunk bed. (41)

Hossine’s poem seems to mark a shift in the collection from memories of and homesickness for Bangladesh, places and people remembered to closer engagements with the actual experience of migrant life in Singapore. Md. Sharif Uddin, keen to record his migrant experience in both prose and poetry for now and future readers, evokes the sense of the MRT construction worker doubly neglected and forgotten as he works in the dark underground. The MRT excavations provide a unique subterranean experience-lens on Singapore “captivated under the earth of this city/by many layers of earth... bottomless tunnel of time” (43) not open either to Bangladeshi poets who stayed at home or Singaporean poets who do not descend to the depths of construction:

Who does care about the pain of migrants
working under the soil of this city of forever spring?
Do you?
....
I am an immigrant lost

in the loneliness of hot and humid womb of soil.
The touch of solitude
makes my heart weep and howl,
and every moment like an accumulation of eternities. (43)

In exile the migrant worker, unseen, seems in danger of losing any sense of his own identity as he gradually loses those memories of home grounding him.

As my existence gets blurred in the darkness of depth,
I can hardly remember that I belong to this earth. (43)

Or as M.A. Sobur would have it, in his tellingly entitled “Elegy for Myself,”

At times like a man unwilling to see,
Or at times like a coward,
I am escaping silently. (45)

Sharif’s poem ends,

this exiled heart still floats
in bottomless tunnel of time.

M.A. Sobur’s poem following Sharif’s begins by echoing Sharif’s last line: “Slowly drowning in the bottomless well of time.” One wonders how closely the poets worked in both creating these poems and arranging this collection. Unlike in Mukul’s poem, in Basu’s poem, “The Lamenting Refugee,” the migrant’s sense of melancholy returns at the time it can be registered, afforded:

Had leaving not been so difficult
would there be the urge to return
in every dream, at every night? (47)

Basu conjures up the migrant experience viscerally:

Only left are the traces of life,
and a pledge to live
wet in love and sweat. (47)

Sweat and tears recur in this collection, as do some unexpected, arresting images, a hallmark of moving, memorable, groundbreaking poetry:

Every ruin escaped,
is pulling you back,
and the dead memories reincarnate
like Jesus under the easter sun. (47)

Exiled from “home” which seems to run very deep in those who perform have left “Mother” Bangladesh, the Singaporean here and now is represented as where “the urban moon hides behind the lofty facade,/amidst the choking void” (47), a milieu where “creation is an impetus to destruction” (47).

You can’t say it much stronger than Mahbub Hasan Dipu in his poignantly titled “In Exile,” even being so specific as to record his “cell,” or dormitory number:

I am the man

 who lives in a prison cell, at-
 31, Street 2, Sungei Kadir. (49)

And again Singaporeans, appear through the alienated, labouring migrant’s lens,

I become oblivious
 Beholding... nests of lonely souls
 and towers kissing the sun. (49)

Dipu seems simultaneously lost out in the streets and incarcerated in solitary confinement:

what do I look for in the streets
 of this city of dream,
 though I am confined in a cell, at –
 31, Street 2, Sungei Kadut. (49)

In Mohar Khan’s wonderfully evocative and scathing “Luggage,” Khan represents himself as a warrior, Singapore a battlefield. But in a different image he announces:

I used to be as pale as this untimely moon

 Now this moon shines in documentaries,
 and front page headlines.... (53)

The poet seems conscious of a Singapore finally sensitised to the migrant’s plight, if characteristically turning the good thing into a student project, a tourist attraction, a nation’s boastful assertion. Magically, Khan becomes the true urban warrior: “as one by one cities rise from my sweat, from my battlefield...” (53).

Syedur Rahman Liton is the inventor of the poetic form, “nucleus poetry” which is also the name of his own volume of poetry. For economical, logistical

reasons I am not sure if *Migrant Tales*, produced by the poets themselves at less than half the price of the average Singapore collection of poetry, were able to truly represent his poem in its full concrete “nucleus” form. The first word of Liton’s poem is “Howl,” echoing Sharif’s poem discussed above. But the allusions to Rampal and Sunderban, in Calcutta and Bangladesh respectively, suggest that development, its benefits and losses are not merely the preserve of Singapore.

Bikas Nath, provides a reverie of schooldays, nostalgia, the homeland game of kabaddi and Bengali childhood summers. Nath’s poem comes as a breath of fresh air after successive engagements with the construction sites, canteens and dormitories of Singapore, through seeming to simultaneously evoke a return to youth and spaces associated with youth.

In this summer,
I would visit those old orchards,
would breath the bakul, and would run
from grounds to grounds like hat young gun. (57)

In Zahirul Islam’s, “Come to my city” – in an act of audacious imagination development is refused. Instead the poet seems to flip-reverse the situation, providing an invitation to those whose cities have no shade to come rest in his own genuine garden of a city.

come to my city,
let it be your shelter
stretching thousand new branch. (59)

Zakir Hossain Khokan in “Nature” collapses all into himself:

Like you, at times
when grief pours down on me,
Nothing can ease the pain but
Nature,
an enchanting touch of magician (63)

But while we are free to enjoy what’s left of nature in Singapore, the migrant labourer poet is compelled to “immerse myself in noise of gigantic machines” (63). Nature for him then is “soil soaked in/sweat of craftsmanship” that river-like “streams down every moment/through every inch of my skin” (63). Tea breaks “shorter than a glimpse,” poetry books and the faces of infants hopefully bring peace.

Still at times,
when grief pours down on fatigue-torn me,

in roads and in MRTs
I behold the faces of the infants,
free and pure as Nature would be. (63)

Migrant Tales is a wonderful collection, a very promising start in the dissemination of a new and rich body of writing in Singapore, but let's hope we see more representative volumes soon featuring more poems, more poets and what about female migrant poets? Would Epigram, Ethos, Math Paper Press be able to support a larger, more representative collection? Or even a series of thematic collections? Would migrant poets fear losing autonomy in such a project? Hopefully migrant workers can benefit from Singapore support without any feeling of beholden-ness or compromise. For instance, I appreciate the poets' wish to do this themselves, as a point of pride and all power to them, but future collections will urgently require not only a sensitive and deft translator of the standing of Shivaji Das (witness his admirable work on Md. Sharif Udin's "Little India Riot: Velu and a History" in Gwee Li Swee's recent anthology *Written Country*) but also a copyeditor fluent in English to check the final MS. In fact, all Singapore MSS can benefit greatly from actual professional copyediting. *Migrant Tales* and Syedur Rahman Liton's less well known solo collections *Nucleus Poetry* and *My Gift* are wonderful collections of poetry – but they would be even better for some light but precise copyediting, checking. While such a task would take relatively little effort on the part of an editor familiar with English, the process would make such a difference to the communication of the poet's voice and the reader's reception of these very important poems.

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