Syed Shamsul Haq, *Two Novellas*. Trans. Saugata Ghosh. Library of Bangladesh Series. Ed. Arunava Sinha. Dhaka: Bengal Light Books, 2015. 191 pp. ISBN 9789849172253.

In an interesting coincidence, this review is being written whilst the incumbent head of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, is in Santiniketan, the seat of the university founded by Rabindranath Tagore, to inaugurate the Bangladesh Bhavana, planned and set up with a view to commemorating her nation's cultural ties with Tagore. The building in question and the idea it embodies are intended as a tribute to the composer of Bangladesh's national anthem, and his legacy of amity between man and men, man and woman and, above all, man and nature. Indeed, the "defining" Library of Bangladesh series itself, edited by a now well-known Bengali-speaking translator into English based in New Delhi, may be seen as a similarly laudable sororal endeavour to make the literary riches of the *Padma* available to the wider English-speaking world.

One needs have no hesitation in certifying the constituent title in question as an ably translated profoundly evocative testament to the mindfulness of this forty-something-young nation with regard to the history of its own making and to the masterful ability on the part of its most eloquent scions to memorialise the organic connection between its nativity and its mother tongue. Very few nations, if any, in the world can proclaim quite that strong an umbilical fidelity to the womb of language.

Even as Haq's two novellas, *Blue Venom* (translated from *Neel Dangshan*, 1981) and *Forbidden Incense* (*Nishiddho Loban,* 1990), offer hauntingly graphic documentation of the horrors of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence, what arrests the reader is their rousing homage to the triumph of human resilience in the face of extreme atavistic savagery. In other words, the narratives combine the ruthless realism almost indispensable in a true telling of war with a gritty refusal to see the poetry in the pity alone. Instead of the slightest trace of shrill sentimentalism, what confronts the reader is the stark, raw endurance of the human spirit and the almost phantasmagorical strength it bestows upon the body that clothes it.

Blue Venom builds up its gripping drama of torture and inquisition occasioned by a chilling case of mistaken identity into a penetrating study of an Audenesque citizen's self-unfolding into the power of poetry. Appropriately minimalist in its arrangement of words and sequence of action, the story is quickly able to implant the protagonist right inside the reading mind, so as to create an almost chiastic interchangeability of consciousnesses essential to the apprehension of torture, violence and psychological trauma. Thus the atmosphere of the solitary chamber and the interrogation room by turn resonates through the interplay of disembodied voices long after the reader has moved on. Needless to say, there is

no suspense in this story or its companion as to the brutality of the outcome. The suspense then hangs by the protagonist's slow and subtly plotted growth in moral stature and emotional resilience through a complex but convincingly wrought interlacing of conversation, physical suffering and psychological delusion. It takes an extremely assured and taboo-divested grasp of the primal, amoral workings of the human subconscious to delineate the Descartian split between mind and body engendered by prolonged imprisonment and torture. Clearly, the detainee finds escape and healing sanity in unbridled immersion in memories of a forgotten, lost love, twined and tangled with lingering, proleptic guilt about the surviving wife and children. This double helix, as it were, of dream territory and the terrifying terrain of Kafkaesque detention makes for the rich blend of naturalism and surrealism in Haq's narrative art. As any realist, naturalist work of trauma fiction is expected to afford, *Blue Venom* reflects the boiling cauldron of our minds and memories.

The remarkable *anagnorisis* stems from the gradual transformation of the common man Nazrul Islam from an incredulous prisoner naively sanguine about being able to convince his keepers of his non-complicity in the purported sedition of the poet Nazrul Islam's incendiary poetry-making to a defiant devotee of his revolutionary poet namesake. His awakening into the heroism of poetry in the face of terror grows in inverse proportion to the violent dehumanisation his physical existence is progressively subjected to. In the process what is vindicated and held up as an inspirational force is the sheer endurance of language generally and of poetry as a redeeming, redemptive act of faith. Where the tale joins the ranks of classic war literature is in its inversion of the entailed meaning of victory and defeat. Pacifist humanists of sixteenth-century Europe would have lent voice to this lopsided moral justice.

If *Blue Venom* celebrates the spirit of the individual, unsung male survivor-martyr to the cause of free expression, then its companion piece, *Forbidden Incense*, affords a vicarious experience similarly apocalyptic in impact but variant in focal detail. Where revenge in *Blue Venom* is essentially symbolic in that it ends with the protagonist remaining intransigent even in death in his refusal to calumniate the moral standing of the poet as hero, Bilkis, the daughter and sister making her way back to her war-ravaged native village only to find her family wiped out, emerges in course of the narrative as a classical European martyr-avenger, whose final act of revenge is real and graphic even as it is circumstantial and opportune. Unlike Nazrul in the previous story, an Antigone-like Bilkis is given a companion in her fight for justice and respect for the human body in death. Siraj, who is actually a Hindu boy, and whose cold-blooded murder in the hands of the enemy commander becomes the real turning point in Bilkis's encounter with the bestial cruelty of war, remains, in tandem with the surrogate "sister" he sets out to

protect, an icon of the triumph of humanity over the bigotry of organised religion and racial pogroms.

As with its predecessor, the drama of *Forbidden Incense* (the title being suitably symbolic and indicative) lies in its insidious charting of the protagonist's *becoming*– from a shaky, vulnerable, uprooted young woman to a fearless Delacroix-like heroine, who not only confronts the necropolis of rotting carcasses but valiantly looks her tormentor in the eye. The quasi-erotic standoff between the attractive Bilkis and the lustfully besotted general underlines, as in so many war-tales and war-films of the past and the present, the intricate overlap of rape and war, sex and violence, power and carnal attraction.

Yet again, as in the greatest tales from war, Bilkis's combination of murder and suicide in one chilling climactic moment elevates her beyond the rung of Antigone, who, after all, struggled for her blood kin. Bilkis's avenging of Siraj's murder is a testament to the long-acknowledged power of war to forge and consecrate fundamentally human bonding among strangers and non-relations that outstrip kinship ties in their intensity and depth of commitment. Bilkis's final act also offers an interesting contrast to the equally stirring nihilism of the final moments in Ritwick Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*.

To conclude, the book in question is living proof of where the greatness of peoples and nations lies and how, admittedly, a shared, collective memory of blood-sacrifice can give fillip to a creative language as historically faithful as it is universally transcendent. The mark of a good translation lies in its ability to convey the tone of the original while sounding perfectly original in the target language. The eloquent economy of Saugata Ghosh's English has struck just that poise and measure.

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