

**Arunava Sinha, ed. *Library of Bangladesh Presents Imdadul Haq Milan: Two Novellas*. Trans. Saugata Ghosh. Dhaka: Bengal Lights, 2017. 144 pp. ISBN 978-984-91722-8-4.**

The famous lines from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian national poet, that have become more famous after Edward W. Said used them in the title of his memoir *After the Last Sky* are considered by many as the quintessence of exilic predicament: “Where should we go after the last frontiers?/ Where should the birds fly after the last sky?” But while reading the book by Imdadul Haq Milan one is reminded of the lines from another poem by Darwish titled “The Exiles Don’t Look Back,” as they seem to echo the extremities of Lalan and Abdullah who are the protagonists of the tales, “Bondage” and “Exile,” two Bangladeshi nationals living in erstwhile West Germany presumably around 1980s: (there is no mention of any specific calendar year in the text but there is a reference to *Kaala Pattbar*, a blockbuster Bollywood action-flick starring Amitabh Bacchan which was released in 1979):

They travel from the soft silk of morning to midday dust,  
Bearing a coffin filled with artifacts of absence:  
An identity card and a letter to one beloved, address unknown:  
‘After we’re gone, remember only this life.’  
(<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-exiles-don-t-look-back/>  
accessed on 12.07.2018)

During the last half of the century or so, since the days of the establishment of the International PEN Club Centre for Writers in Exile in 1956 for expressing solidarity and giving support to writers who have been compelled by harsh circumstance to leave their homes the terminologies have undergone significant changes. In the 1950s words like “exile” and “émigré” were used to connote suffering in banishment but also the possibilities of a new life beyond the boundaries of the familiar. But with the phenomenal rise of the number of people fleeing cross-border and inter-communal conflicts, ethnic or religious persecution these days, hapless people who are forced to live away from the country of their birth are much more frequently referred to as “displaced persons,” “refugees” or “asylum-seekers.” This trend shows a shift in focus – from plights of individuals towards international crowd control. The perceptions of exile have also become more complex with works of researchers who, in the context of an ever-developing capitalist mode of production in an age of globalisation, have highlighted the nexus between the desire for economic growth by the countries from where more and more people are migrating and the host countries where the demand for labour is perennially on the rise. This fact brings to light a very important feature of exile – an entire spectrum of skill-levels of

individuals comprising highly-skilled and highly-paid specialists in the field to the low-skilled and low-paid “labourers.” The skill-level often becomes instrumental in categorising such people. They are variously labelled as “expatriates,” “guest workers,” “economic migrants” and “illegal aliens” by the host countries, depending upon their importance in the governmental agencies and their employers. Thus, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries a class-structure has gradually developed among people living in foreign countries; a structure that shapes their experiences and feelings of being in exile in conditions which may vary from extreme luxury to abject poverty.

Needless to say, that their visions, therefore, are heterogeneous in nature. Among them only a small number are writers or artists. Hence, in dealing with the conditions of exile, creative minds and intellectuals in modern and also in so-called “postmodern” times are faced with many a choice. The choices may range from taking a metaphorical turn and probing the idea of being exiled as a primary human condition and that all human beings, in an existential sense, are “not at home” (one may think of works by Heidegger and Sartre, among others) and, therefore, continuing in the same vein, developing ideas like metaphorical exile, mental travelling, the double vision of both as insider and an outsider (the works of Milan Kundera or Salman Rushdie, for example) or portraying the documentary reality involving horror and the loss of people who have to suffer the deaths of their near ones and who also have to flee for their lives from war or natural calamities and end up as asylum-seekers in countries which are not always welcoming – people who are products of a process of large-scale displacements unleashed by certain political, economic and social conditions which form the mainstay of what Antonio Negri would term as the “empire.” In these two novellas Imdadul Haq Milan makes the latter choice. He has rights too since he has had an access to such a reality as the blurb of the book informs us, that after completing his graduation Milan went to Germany in search of a career.

Bangladesh has a fairly long history of migration to the West; a history that has evolved in conjunction with historical geo-political changes. This history began when a few Bangladeshi (then East Bengal) sailors working with the British merchant navy settled in London in 1920s. This gradually triggered off an emigration pattern through labour recruitment schemes in the 1950s and 60s. After the formation of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh in 1971 the most significant growth of Bangladeshis in UK happened in the 70s and 80s, primarily through family reunion and the chain migration resulting in the perpetuation of the Sylheti link. According to a House of Commons Report (1986-87), around 95 percent of Bangladeshis in Britain came from the district of Sylhet. In a larger, global context, locations of Bangladeshi migration can loosely be divided into two categories: permanent and semi-permanent destinations (USA, Canada, and Australia) and areas of short-term precarious migration (Middle East, Far East and Western Europe). Western Europe is long perceived as a prestigious

destination in Bangladesh. Its high standard of living, its “free” lifestyle and its renowned universities have allured generations of Bangladeshis – a fact which resulted in complicated migratory aspirations which theorists would later label as “escalator” theory of migration in which upward social mobility is achieved through horizontal spatial movement. But, unlike Britain of the 70s, Western European countries including Germany would largely remain an uncertain prospect because of very stringent immigration laws in most countries. On the other hand, the escalation in the process of large-scale industrialisation during a period of nation-building in post-War Germany created plenty of job-opportunities. That is probably why, with the exception of the UK, Europe’s largest Bangladeshi community used to be in Germany in the 70s. However, the German authorities gradually began to suspect Bangladeshi claims to political asylum. Muneem, a Bangladeshi character in “Bondage” who is trying to settle down permanently in Germany informs Lalan, the hero of the tale, that among some five thousand Bangladeshis in Germany only four have been given political asylum by the government. But if one could somehow enter into Germany and survive the hardships of working as a labourer or making ends meet with the unemployment dole, one could stay in Europe for 10 years or more by staying in turn in countries like Italy, France, Belgium, Holland and Switzerland, after being evicted from Germany. This possibility gave birth to new and strange professions like *adam bepari* or the “manpower agents” and migration sponsors who would lure and ruthlessly exploit the prospective emigrants in Bangladesh. Milan’s novellas are a detailed representation as much of the rosy pictures of life in Europe, imagined by the educated bhadralok class, an aspirational category in Bangladesh, as of the brute realities, broken dreams and a life of ignominy and bondage in exile.

Thematically as well as structurally the two novellas seem very much like two parts of a diptych: or, if one has to use a musical metaphor, they are like two contrapuntal motions of a symphony. Only if one reads the two tales back to back one gets to appreciate the total design. The texts complement each other. There are many points of convergence as well as of contrast in them. Haq requires two narratives, instead of one, to give full artistic treatment and also to do justice to issues that were pertinent for the aspiring middle-class of a new nation with a struggling economy and a rather unstable political scenario. These are stories of two educated individuals who due to pressing economic necessities and certain twists of fate have to face an uncertain future in Germany, a country with which they share no historical, cultural or linguistic association, as they engage themselves in hard, back-breaking menial labour. The stories are told in a third-person narrative (interspersed with first-person narrations when the author decides to unravel the events from the past-life of his characters) and in a straight-forward documentary style, full of minute details of life in an alien land – its climate, its nature, its cities and its people which make the stories both gripping

and poignant. The fine observant eye of the author is instrumental in bringing out flashes of insight in a chronicle involving individuals hailing from two different corners of the globe. In “Exile,” by looking at the colour of skin of Abdullah, the manager of Hotel Holiday Inn asks him during an interview for the job of a housekeeper, “So, is your Bangladesh in Africa?” (108).

The first of the two, “Bondage” is about the trials and tribulations of a young man named Lalan who has to leave Bangladesh and Setu, his lady-love, behind, after failing to get a job with his post-graduate degree in his own country and land up in Weilimdorf, an industrial town near Stuttgart in Germany to work in a food-processing factory as an ordinary worker. Lalan gets that job too against a temporary work-permit as he, like most of his Bangladeshi compatriots in Germany, has to apply to the authorities for political asylum although he has never been involved in active politics in his own country. After spending a few years in Germany and being treated as an opportunist immigrant from the “Third World” by the Germans as well as a Deutsche Mark-earning, “profitable” member of the family by his mother and other relatives back home Lalan becomes moody, takes to drink and he struggles to fight depression. In the end, he turns schizophrenic as he learns that a fellow-countryman whom he has met briefly in McDonald’s has died of starvation thousands of miles away from his mother-country, in a land renowned for its superabundance, for failing to adapt to the culinary habits of a new country and being deprived of an opportunity to eat rice, the staple Bangladeshi food.

As a contrast to the macabre drama in the life of Lalan that unfolds during a sunny, German summer in “Bondage” the episodes in the life of Abdullah in “Exile” take place in a cold, unforgiving and grim winter in a foreign country. Whereas Lalan is young and unmarried Abdullah is middle-aged and is overweight, a factor which adds to his woes. In order to avoid imprisonment Abdullah has to flee from his country, leaving behind his family comprising his wife Renu and two daughters, Sonali and Rupali after he gets falsely implicated in a monetary fraud by his scheming colleagues in a private college in Sherpur where he has been working as the Principal. He too has to apply for political asylum in Germany. Being unsuitable, in every possible way, for hard, manual labour Abdullah finds himself out-of-job every time he tries to adjust himself to the demands of a new service in a country where discipline and hard work are the two major threads of social life. As an erstwhile professor of Bangla, working alongside illiterate, boorish Pakistani labourers to build roads in Sindelfingen town and sharing rooms with them is an ordeal that Abdullah finds too much to handle, both physically and emotionally. His picking up the skills of speaking German in a competent manner becomes of no use as far as job-opportunities in Germany are concerned. On top of that, he is never able to overcome the trauma of leaving behind a contented family life, spent in Bangladesh with loving wife and kids. He pines for his past life and remains distracted for most of his waking

hours. When he is thrown out of his job and his lodging in Hotel Holiday Inn he finally decides to make an attempt to go back to Bangladesh as he declares, “But right now going to jail in my country is preferable to staying here. I am going home” (143).

The two novellas read like records of almost all the major markers present in most exilic writings – encounter between the self and the “Other,” delineation of issues like race, class, language and the question of fashioning an identity in an alien environment. Talking about the environment, it is interesting to note that in the novellas Germany for the Bangladeshi immigrants emerges both as a prototype of *Jannah*, the paradise, or the final abode of the righteous according to Islamic beliefs as well as, with its innumerable and stringent government rules and regulations applicable for asylum-seekers, a Foucauldian panopticon whose towers and walls seem to last till eternity. The first of these two diametrically opposite perceptions becomes evident when Muneem makes an observation in “Bondage”:

But I think differently of Germany. Remember all those stories we’ve heard of heaven when nymphs will attend to us, feed us delicious apples and grapes, and make us drink nectar?... Aren’t German girls enough to give those divine nymphs a run for their money? Boy, I go mad every time I think of the breasts and buttocks.... Apples and grapes, too, are aplenty here. And what else is German beer but nectar itself? Doesn’t this mean heaven is but another name for Germany? (23)

The opposite tendency comes to the surface when Lalan ruminates, “I sighed. This country was little better than a well-kept jail, what with all the strictures that stood in the way of finding a place one wanted to live in.... I am technically illegal in your area! The police can set a heavy fine on me, if they catch me” (26).

Milan, however, does not deal with binaries in creating characters for his tales – neither all the Bangladeshi characters in his narratives receive his full sympathy nor do all the Germans come out as nothing but staunch racists. Instead, the novellas are like a gallery of genre paintings where we get to meet varied kinds of characters trying to negotiate with the duties of a humane kind of life. Who can forget the motherly-figure of Frau Mann, working in the employment bureau in “Exile,” whose eyes become moist as Abdullah announces his decision to leave Germany for good? The author is, nevertheless, ruthlessly savage in his criticism of Bangladeshis who marry German ladies to get citizenship, ape German behaviour and try their best to pass off as Europeans. This tendency reminds us of Frantz Fanon and his analysis of a new social type in *Black Skin, White Masks* which he labels as “Évolué” – one pathetic outcome of colonialism.

Not all the significant features of Milan’s novellas can be discussed at length in this review for obvious reasons. But I wish to end by drawing the readers’

attention as to how intelligently and sensitively Milan portrays food and culinary habits which form an integral part of an individual's identity in the texts, written much before something called "Food Studies" came into existence. Food items, manners of cooking and uses of ingredients often function as a language which acts as a means of amalgamating the different stages of the exile's adaptation (and also resistance) to a new culture and to the state of exile. Food can simultaneously function as a route back to the old culture and a way of fashioning a new identity in a new land. Smells of cooking and the act of eating in a collective manner can be a means of simulating nostalgia and a show of solidarity among the exiles. Food is possibly the most important index in evaluating the extent of cultural miscegenation that takes place in an encounter between two cultures on a plane of an unequal power relation. References to both German and Bangladeshi food, cooking, eating, food items like fish and chicken, fruits, cheese, beverages and spices galore in the two tales. Wherever the characters go they seem never to move too far away from the world of kitchens, restaurants and bars, inhabited by the Bangladeshi expatriates in Germany: "The moment I stepped into the building on Alexanderstrasse I felt like I was back in Bangladesh. Each floor had a common kitchen from where the familiar smell of spices and mutton or fish curry wafted out. The building was abuzz with the sound of Bangladeshis talking and joking among themselves. It was no less than a Little Bangladesh in the middle of Stuttgart" (71-72). Food seems to bolster the exile's craving for a possible return to the homeland. This craving assumes tragic proportions when we read that Majnu, a minor character in "Bondage" has scrawled in red ink on the walls of his dingy room, "Help me get back home" (68).

Finally, a few words about the series and the translation. First, the undertaking of such a project aiming to translate literary gems written in Bangla into English, considered by many as *the* global language, is well-timed and is very appreciable. Kudos to Arunava Sinha, the series editor, who is an eminent translator himself, for taking up a project like this one. His efforts are well-timed because there exists a perception among many readers of Bangla literature that the world of Bangla literature has missed out on a few more Nobel prizes in literature simply because good English translations of works of were not available in the authors' life-time. One should, however, need to be a bit careful in choosing the titles for such a series for one must consider the relevance of literary works in an age when the world is getting smaller each day. One should also provide in each volume all the necessary information about the source language text. This volume does not carry any information regarding the publication details of Milan's novellas; it does not even provide the readers with the original Bangla titles of the texts. Secondly, the translation is fluid as the translator succeeds in capturing the essence of the Bangla texts in an English which is both contemporary and precise. Saugata Ghosh has really done a commendable job. While reading his translation it never felt that one was experiencing a world

through an alien semantic horizon. Both the worlds of Bangladesh and Germany, with their people, natural settings, seasons and customs, come alive through Ghosh's very competent use of the target language. However, one must add that for the benefit of the readers who do not know Bangla, a Glossary of Bangla words like "Razakars," "*lungi*" and "*nashta*" would have been helpful. The production quality of the book is good but the publisher could have thought of using a larger font.

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