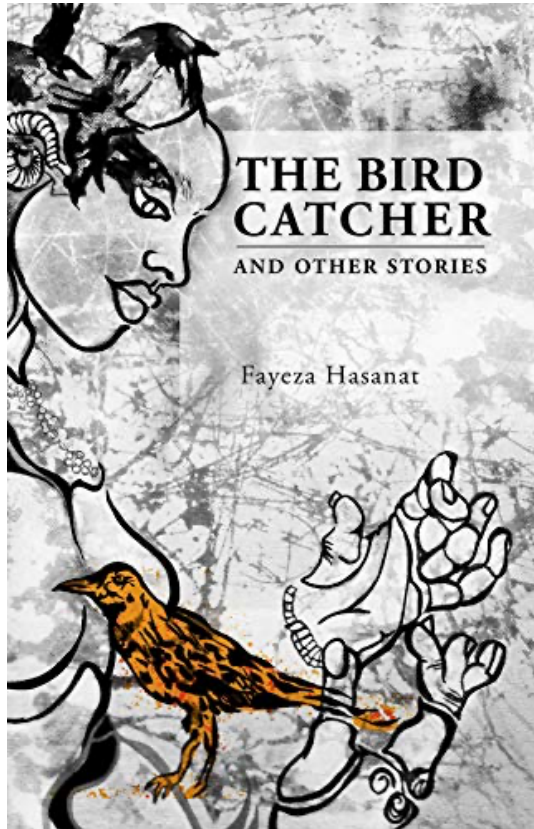


Fayeza Hasanat. *The Bird Catcher and Other Stories*. Los Angeles: Jaded Ibis Press, 2018. 164 pp. ISBN: 978-1-937543-75-4.



The Bird Catcher and Other Stories by Fayeza Hasanat is challenging for any reader because it is difficult to define a single critical approach that can explain all stories in the volume. If one is keen on finding an overarching theoretical canopy, one may pick feminism because that surely threads the underlying messages conveyed in the stories. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), though not the first book of its kind, marked a new hike of feminism towards a meticulous philosophical turn that broke several social myths. Beauvoir deconstructed marriage, motherhood, and other social structures, and after about seventy years, Hasanat reminded readers of those social myths, which she has deconstructed in eight stories. One specific aspect of a woman's life is taken up in each story to de-mythify 'womanhood.' The author treads the grounds of queer studies, philosophy, existentialism, postcolonialism, transnationalism, and diaspora, and hence her stories need a lot of pre-reading without which the readers are not able

to grasp their meaning. It is perhaps pertinent to state that Hasanat's life and work have spanned opposite geo-political locales, and this lends a synthesising quality to her work, something of which cosmopolitan feminism often loses sight.

In the first story "The Anomalous Wife," a middle-aged Bengali woman responds to the injustices done to her by her physician husband. A representative of patriarchal society, the husband is an object of ridicule and is looked down upon as an asinine person with hardly any understanding of human psychology. The transnational existence of the Bengali housewife in the United States adds a new dimension to Hasanat's response to Rabindranath Tagore's "Streer Patra" (A Wife's Letter). The protagonist's half joking utterance "dear Mr. Can-de-Cahr" (Americanised pronunciation of the title Khandakar) evidences the writer's playful approach to male identity that sets the humorous tone which she retains even in the most serious of her stories. With each story telling a different tale of a woman's tragic experience, the subject range of the book varies from biological attributes to philosophical deliberation – all of which the writer accumulates to highlight a woman's inherent understanding of the geopolitics of her cultural roots that subvert her agency.

The first story refers to several European literary pieces in a comic manner. For example, the protagonist refers to the female doctor's teeth as "The pearls that were her teeth" (8). It mimics the famous Shakespearean quotation from *The Tempest* (1611) which reads "Those are pearls that were his eyes" that T S Eliot reiterates in *The Waste Land* (1922). She then draws on *The Doll's House* scene by Ibsen in which Nora realises that her husband was a complete stranger to her even after eight years of married life. Hasanat's protagonist notices that her husband's nose was unnaturally twisted and mutters, "I had spent my whole adult life with this man and never noticed he had a meandering nose!" (8). She then notices his ears and says, "And his ears? What big ears he got! Better to—how did that saying go? Oh, I remember, better to hear... hear what? What did he hear? What?" (9). This resonates with "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?" – again from *The Waste Land*. The Bangladeshi-American writer constantly challenges her Western readers with her appropriation of Western texts.

The wife's complaint against her husband is entangled in the racial discourse on which the story touches. The white female doctor who is attending the wife is described as a "dumb, white-attired angel, with white halo and wings" (9) to the brown Bengali female migrant, who does not want to go back to the condominium anymore. The world she aspires to is *shamudra*, the ocean, which symbolises freedom for her. This comes from the cultural consciousness that a woman inherits, as one may see in Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* (1888). The concept of freedom culminates in the last and titular story of the volume, "The Bird Catcher" that amalgamates the idea of the soul that transpires as the *achin pakhi* or the ancient bird that represents the soul. One may interpret the woman

as that bird or that unattainable soul; the body is captured by the bird catcher, the soul left the mundanity of the world. To come to that philosophical point, one must know the rest of the history of a woman.

The second story “Bride of the Vanishing Sun” is about colourism. Centred around a dark-skinned Bengali girl’s marriage, this story deals with superstitions about women’s reproductive role and the essential ‘passivity’ needed for them to be ‘feminine’. As Beauvoir’s suggests, “a vicious circle is formed” when the readers find one dark skinned girl becomes a mother and applies the same ‘pleasure principle’ for the groom’s gang to sell her dark-skinned daughter. Ultimately, a girl’s wish not “to be served on a gold platter” is annulled by her father who agrees to compromise his professional ethics in order to get her married.

The father becomes an important figure in many of these stories, as in Bengali culture the bonding between father and daughter is seen as sacred and sweetest of relationships. In two of the other stories, the father figure dominates. The third story “When Our Fathers Die” depicts the emotional landscape of an expatriate pregnant daughter who was to decide about her father’s life support at a hospital in a foreign land. Indeed, this story tells of the woe of a transnational woman who is torn between her roots and her new responsibilities. For a girl child who lives abroad for the sake of her marriage, the responsibilities towards parents and younger siblings often become a burden. “Piles of hospital bills” (59) for the sick father indicates how important it is for a girl to become economically independent, which the protagonist was.

As a teacher of cultural theory to American students, the protagonist’s embarrassment about pronunciation of several foreign words represents language issues of a non-native in an Anglophone country. However, the other side of this mental connection is built on a Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings style, whose “A Mother in Mannville” (1936) is famous for adolescent psychology. Rawlings coincidentally happens to be a storyteller from Florida where this story is set. Florida pythons become symbolic when the female protagonist’s mental pathway takes a recoiling course; her guilt of being the decision maker of her father’s fate was eating her up, as the snake devoured the chihuahua of the American student. “Darkling, I Listen” presents the father as an idealist who stands against typical social expectations. Here Hasanat subverts the idea of a powerful father, and shows the power of a mother-in-law, the older woman, who takes masculine sadism in taunting the daughter-in-law by insulting her father. The girl’s decision to burn herself reiterates the fact that society has not been able to enlighten the lives of women, and hence, they need to light up themselves to negotiate with the unknown, the darkness, as visualised in the story.

Hasanat, however, is never typical in her depiction of the Bengali mother-in-law figure. In “Mother Immigrant,” she portrays an immigrant Bangladeshi woman in America who represents the first generation of migrants who carried

forward hilarious stories of settlement. Noor Jahan's constant loquaciousness is an attempt to hide her inner struggle to stay away from the nostalgia for homeland. Her relation with her daughter-in-law Molly is what she banks on to ask for the favour of 'going home.' In "Make Me Your Sitar," set in rural Bangladesh, a mother-in-law becomes a Messiah for an adolescent daughter-in-law. This story also draws on cultural elements like child marriage, possessed rural women, unexpected pregnancy, the Indian partition, Muslim migration to East Bengal, and so on. Motherhood is seen as a tool of empowerment in the story, and the final scene once again reminds us that Western feminism cannot be enshrined in its modular form to fit diverse South Asian contexts.

The last and titular story of the book 'The Bird Catcher' draws on the metaphysical world. The essential symbolism of the story subverts the gender dimension to some extent, but it is not difficult to identify the singing bird as a woman's soul that struggles to remain free. However, it is important not to limit the story to one single interpretation since the writer has referred to the myth of the Kombok bird from the Maring community in Papua New Guinea. She mixes it with Homa or Huma bird from Sufi philosophy of central and South Asia, in which the bird becomes the soul, the ultimate spirit with which one can unite through devoutness. The writer refers to several myths from several cultures. Indeed, the story connects a Bengali reader to the concept of *achin pakbi* or the ancient bird in the songs of Fakir Lalon Shah, the philosopher and Baul singer from the southern region of present-day Bangladesh. The human lover must become the Recluse to find the divine beloved, the Bird. Lalon's philosophy is repeatedly enlivened in the story, and the philosophical journey in search of one pure thought is what rounds it off. Thus, *shamudra* looks unseeably nigh when human existence desires to vanish in it as a dew drop. A truly Bangladeshi *Sufi* experience.

The stories thus provide Anglophone readers with a sense of what a Bangladeshi transnational creative imagination can grasp. Bangladeshi English writing – at home and abroad – is a comparatively new and emerging field, and *The Bird Catcher and Other Stories* is undoubtedly a significant addition to this literary tradition.

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