

Ballads from Bangladesh : An Anthology of Poems

Translated by Helal Uddin Ahmed and introduced by Syed Manzoorul Islam; Dhaka: Sucheeptara, February 2009

Every human society has its own shape, its own meanings, and its own stories; and literature of every society has immense merit and significance because it tells us stories of the people of that society and artistically narrativizes their life and culture. It delves deep into the recess of the human mind, explores humans' emotional geographies and describes imaginatively their love and hatred, their joys and sorrows, their hope and fear – their life. Literature excavates the psychological landscape of a people, which may not be understood completely by looking at their external activities. Litterateurs register human experiences by using their creative paraphernalia and literary implements. Literary production is not primarily driven, and its worth determined by people's economic status or political strength/weakness, although the English feminist writer Virginia Woolf has a different view on that. It is a spontaneous expression of human feelings and is produced in every society, in every culture. That the literature of some countries dominates the global cultural and intellectual discourse does not necessarily suggest its superiority or superior merit over that of other parts of the world. Predominance of the literary works of a particular country or language may have to do with other factors including political dominance, economic power and the currents and hierarchy of global politics.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the term 'global literature' dominates the global cultural flow and 'English literature' has already shifted away from its monolithic assumptions and taken a new definition of literature written in English irrespective of the geographical denominations of the site of production. In such a global cultural context, there is huge space to share literary creation of one culture with others. Using the English language as the vehicle, now we have the opportunity of transmitting the ethos, the distinctive spirit and attitudes of a people, culture, and community to the rest of the world. And thus we have the opportunity of telling our stories to others, to our fellow human beings.

By translating pieces of both established and not-so-established poets and compiling them in his 80-page book *Ballads from Bangladesh: An Anthology of Poems*, the poet Helal Uddin Ahmed has addressed the need for letting the world in our emotional landscape. Himself a literary practitioner and a writer, Ahmed chose the most intricate genre of literary production for this translation anthology – poetry. Among the categories of literary composition, poetry is the most condensed and compressed, and hence the most difficult to translate from its source language into another (target language). Along with the usual complexities and constraints of translating a text of one language into another – from the source text to the target text – poetry translation involves the additional complicity of maintaining rhyme and meter, which is not always easy to

transfer from one language to another, while keeping the content intact. Undoubtedly a challenging task, but the passion of Helal Uddin Ahmed prompted him to do that – to get our poetry transcend our geographical boundary, which he has been able to do with reasonable success.

Other literary genres may be inspired or influenced by socio-political or other considerations; but poetry tells us the deepest, strongest and truest feelings of the people of a particular culture. Though poetry is losing its strong grip in many societies and the genre of the novel is dominating the literary arena globally, literary practices in Bangladesh have a different story altogether. Poetry is deeply ingrained in our indigenous tradition and permeates all aspects of our cultural life; it is found even in the podium of political speeches. One known political leader of Bangladesh even desperately sought the recognition of a poet. Moreover, in our literary tradition, poets have remained dominant as ever. Most of the illustrious literary figures of Bangladesh are poets; both Rabindranath Thakur and Kazi Nazrul Islam are primarily known as poets. And in the last few decades, hundreds of volumes of known poets have been published in the country.

So in order to communicate a representative feature of the literary tradition of Bangladesh to the wider world, one has to take the translation of poetry seriously. Translating Bangladeshi poetry into English will definitely find an international audience for our poets. So far not many of our poets have been translated into English or into other major languages. One of the proud exceptions is poet Rafiq Azad, a selection of whose poetry was translated into English and published under the title of *Poems on Love Environment and Other Difficulties* (edited by Kaiser Haq) in 2008. A significant contribution to translating Bangladeshi poetry has been made by the American poet Carolyne Wright. One of her notable poetry translations is *Majestic Nights: Love Poems of Bengali Women* (2008). Our poets rightfully deserve an honorable place beyond our national frontiers; and once that is done, they will form a bridge between the rest of the world and us. However, to make that happen, anthologies of translated Bangladeshi poetry should go beyond the size of chapbooks and a greater amount of our poetry has to be translated into English.

Helal Uddin Ahmed's *Anthology* has been enhanced and adorned by a short but very useful introduction by Syed Manzoorul Islam, a renowned literary practitioner and a critic. While praising Ahmed's noble task of translating selections of Bangladeshi poetry, Islam also points to the limitations and lapses of the work. Though alliterative, the very title of the anthology sounds a misnomer because the poems of the anthology do not fall under the category of ballad *per se*. One noticeable flaw of the collection is omitting many major poets of Bangladeshi literature while giving 'generous' space to not-so-known ones. While it is difficult to include all the major poets within the scope of his book, and though the list of our poets is really long, Ahmed could at least include few more greats and giants of Bangladeshi poetry. However, Ahmed's selection is pardonable, since he has explained in his Foreword that his choice has been made on the basis of "personal preferences and likings" and has mentioned the caveat that readers in the lookout for "a representative sample of works of contemporary Bangladeshi poets" may be "disappointed".

In a final analysis, however, I must appreciate Helal Uddin Ahmed's selection from the vast poetic oeuvre of Al Mahmood, who is in my opinion to be the most democratic and representative poet of today's Bangladesh, as, according to Khondakar Ashraf Hossain, "Al Mahmood sought to take poetry back to the pastoral scene, to the eternal rural Bangladesh." He tells us the story of everyman. Al Mahmood is not mesmerized by the master narrative and by the pre-eminence of the city bourgeoisie and the comprador class in our literary scene. He seeks to chronicle and narrate the life of the ordinary people of the rural Bangladesh who are in most cases forgotten about in the writings of many litterateurs. Few extracts from Helal Uddin Ahmed's translation of Al Mahmood's poetry may be mentioned here:

Our Code says, if a thief is caught by chance
While stealing a ring at Shakuntala,
He would definitely be sentenced to six-month jail,
He would undergo rigorous imprisonment
And be dubbed a thief;
But if a monstrous Flounder swallows
The whole of Bangladesh as if it was a ring,
He would have to be called the revered King;
Salute him – this is called the Code of Flounders.
(Law of the Fish)

Al Mahmood narrativizes the chronicle of our liberation war thus:

Another boy had jumped into the fray
Beside the custom colony of Kushtia,
He attempted to wipe out an enemy jeep with bombs
But parts of his arms, thigh and back were torn away
By the blast. Hasibul Islam
Had launched that attack by uttering 'Allahu Akbar'.
His heart remains stuck on that flag
After flying out from his chest.
Write down his last words – 'Allahu Akbar'.
(Valiant Witness of the Flag)

It is true that Ahmed's *Anthology* cannot meet the immense need for sharing our cultural treasures with the wider world completely, but we must appreciate his passion for poetry and his noble endeavor. We hope more will be done in this area by writers and academics, especially those in the field of literature.

Md. Mahmudul Hasan

SOURCE: Journal of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh