

Crossings: Stories From Bangladesh and India

Compiled and Translated by Radha Chakravarty
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The original short stories in Bangla were compiled and translated into one volume by Radha Chakravarty. These are situated within the same cultural context, Bengal, wherein the artificial boundaries are transgressed to combine the writings that unfold the reality in so many varied dimensions of human emotions. All the narratives, echo from within the depth of human psyche that range in myriad shades; the lives of ordinary individuals as they grapple with forces larger than themselves, the tales leave an indelible impression.

The title of the book that emphasizes the artificiality of cultural distinction is the namesake of Danielle Steel's 1982 best seller novel, *Crossings*. The western woman writer's narration is about a journey across the water, the majestic ship Normandy makes its transatlantic voyage from Washington D.C. to France with a legend of love and passion and is close to the literal meaning of the book's title.

"Aukal Darshan," a short story by Showkat Ali is "A View of Famine" or rather "A View of Hard Times." The story is about famine and hunger which is like a blazing flame and engulfs everything. It obliterates all distinction and reduces all living creatures to a common denominator of biological being. The story also has a satirical twist to social classification, wherein the elite and the educated Abid is unable to fathom the fear of famine and heartlessness of hunger. It is a matter of the menials and lowly like Akkas Ali.

"Aaj Onamika" "Incognita" by Rashid Haider is a romantic story that begins with a casual telephonic talk with a melodious voiced woman that soon turns into an expectation and enjoyment of the heart, until the sudden discovery of the grave and gloomy event that encircle the life of the unknown woman.

Rezia Rahman's "Irina's Picture" is "Irina's chobi" is the image of an orphaned girl connected to public theme of war and peace and the breakup of private relationships within the family. The protagonist described as a poet by the mother is perplexed and questions "who says I'm a lunatic?" while she watches family dynamics in helpless rage.

Gopal in Selina Hossain's "Khoroch" "Spent" is a terrorist, and while alive has been used by many VIPs for their own empowerment and when he was dead and

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even though the pager was continuously peeping, there was none to claim or cremate his body.

Exposed to domestic violence at a very early age he takes to crime. His aggressive ways draw the attention of the politicians who exploit this trait to suit their devious plans. Hidden within rough and tough Gopal is a tender heart with love for his mother and dream and longing for the beautiful.

Hasnat Abdul Hye's "Still Life," is a painting in words, portrayal of life, and love that is no more. Inanimate objects convey the pain and the pathos of the two persons in the silent photo frame. The writing on torn pieces of paper is a disjointed tale of a broken home. Birds, sparrows have no sorrow, fly freely and joyfully in and out of the open window, busy building a nest. On the empty wall of the room small predators, lizards prowl without fear.

In *Secret Life*, "Public Death," Syed Shamsul Haq explores the tormented soul of Shukur Mohammad, the man who had committed one sin after another in his private life and had got away better than he previously was. The climax of his forbidden desire which he had nurtured for some years was his attraction for his beautiful daughter-in-law Mariam Bibi. Hasan disappears, amidst rejection of acknowledged son. Shukur seeks redemption in public. Death follows without burial rites.

As individual, Shanta and Arif, each is alone. They are together in a bondage due to social pressure is the story of "Alone, Together" by Manju Sarkar. Grounded in an ordinary middle class family, the compassion between the couple does little to unlock the trap of a loveless marriage. Is this then, the nexus of a social façade?

In a "Mother-Daughter World," by Hasan Azizul Huq, the setting is amidst dense forest, removed from the civil society. They are attacked by four animals in the guise of male figures, who assault and rape the mother and daughter. Surrounded by the wilderness, the abject pain and suffering brings about a state of hopelessness "Allah is there for alcoholics...scoundrels, bastards.... Men folk they have everything and they have Allah as well."

In Rahat Khan's story, "The Shape of Things," is about the downfall of the urban upper middle-class due to their obsessive pursuit of material pleasures. Three couples on their way to a picnic indulge in forbidden fantasies; oblivious of the procession of angry workers marching towards them.

The forest with such variety of trees, the river with its own kind of fish and lonely moonlit landscape gradually turns into a mindscape, as characters peer into the abyss of their own repressed guilt. "Return, in the Moonlight" by Jyotiprakash Dutta evokes a ghostly presence that spreads terror and fear of discovery.

Private tuition is essential for children seeking admission to a school, and to cope with the school curriculum. It is a tremendous experience for most parents and their children. "Rainbow Colors" by Suchitra Bhattacharya narrates the pressures of the rat-race, entailed upon the child and the mother until the realization by the later that it is the simple things in life that are important and not the textbook knowledge.

"A Dream Day" by Sunil Gangopadhyay is a romantic intermission mingled with dreams and desire of the heart, to the humdrum routine and rigidity of every day life. The beauty of this brief interlude becomes the cherished memory that remains and is cared for.

Marriage is a social construct over-riding the individual's psychological needs. The social practices and attitudes lag behind the working woman's expectations from life that surround the altered female psyche.

Dibyendu Palit in "Aparup Katha," "Wonder story" explores the social implications of an arranged marriage, through the narrative of Shohini

Eradication of poverty by doing away with the poor is the path for progress, particularly material progress like beautification of the city. Mahasweta Devi in her story, "Jamunaboti's Mother," narrates how hard reality of hunger and malnutrition, confronts the child Jamunaboti while her impoverished mother oscillates between night mare and daydream. The story raises the priority question that needs to be addressed, between saving the lives of the poor or putting cosmetic touches to the city.

The antics of a precocious child end in pain and devastation, a tale of innocence and violence is central in Debesh Ray's "Ranju's Blood."

"Raft" by Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay is a science fiction based on the changing social mores and the dehumanizing effects of so-called 'progress.' Consumerism mixed with class-consciousness is the force or energy that transforms Debnath from simple seafarer to covetous collector of luxury items. Atin Bandyopadhyay's "Amazing Light" combines the voyage genre with adventure to bring to the forefront the rapidly changing society.

"Proprietor" by Nabaneeta Dev Sen explores the impact of divorce on the relationship between mother and child. The adult mends the pain from torn emotional bondage through the new-found confidence that Mita subsequently acquires.

Loss of innocence is the central motif of the story by Sadhan Chattopadhyay, in which sixteen year old Aditi romanticizes her encounter with the local MLA, imagining that the new bus link to the city is really the politician's personal gift of "Six Midibuses" for Aditi." The story compares the growing pains of the young girl with the dream of modernization that affects her entire village.

“Gangacharan’s Champreng,” is a musical used by tribes in Tripura, by Debabrata Deb, is about Rabichandra’s longing for beauty and tradition, in the face of violent social change. He remembers his father, Gangacharan Debbarma, playing the champreng on a moonlit night and he, too, yearning to play such beautiful music.

This is a collection of contemporary Bengali fiction made available in English with all the indigenous essence and local flavour. It has been enmeshed artfully with small amount of notes, so that a reader with limited familiarity with Bangla culture feels comfortable. “Rainbow Colors” narrated from a female perspective is a good story. So is “Jamunaboti’s Mother,” and “Proprietor.” All the three stories centre round mother and child relationship. Social change, marriage, and search for compensation within a changing milieu is set in stories such as “Amazing Light,” “Six Midibuses for Aditi” and “Gangacharan’s Champreng,” “Alone and Together” and “Wonder story,” “Irina’s Picture” and “The Shape of things.” Like a painting in words “Still Life” through inanimate objects narrates the story of broken hearts. Hypocrisy larger than life is captured in “Secret Life, Public Death,” terrorism, balanced with humaneness and encroachment upon the weak by the powerful is told in “Spent,” irony of poor and poverty is detailed in “A view of Famine,” and “A Mother- Daughter World.” Romance runs in the pages of “A Day Dream,” and “Incognito.”