

A doomed love, in a new language

Shakespeare Roman Tragedy: Antony and Cleopatra

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If Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* is a manifest love story of two young lovers, *Antony and Cleopatra* is a mature version of love between two mature lovers. "Age can not wither her, nor custom / Stale her infinite variety. Other women cloy / The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry/ Where most she satisfies. For vilest things / Become themselves in her, that the holy priests / Bless her when she is riggish" (2.3.240-45). The above words uttered by Enobarbus aptly tell us about the entirety of the magic character physical and psychological demeanour of Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt. Who could evade the terminal spell cast by Cleopatra? Ah, none! The three great Roman heroes: Pompey the Great, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony did succumb to the all encompassing and pulling power of the mysterious queen! Mark Antony, at a critical state of making a choice between his martial duties and his love for Cleopatra, falls in an all-lost, happily of course, love with Cleopatra. Their love triumphs over all other mundane affairs. At the time of their impending doom, however, Antony tries to kill himself and an unyielding Cleopatra commits suicide by applying on her chest a pair of asps that release the fatal poison into her system. She remains triumphant to herself and their love: "Antony shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'th' posture of a whore" (5.2.214-17).

No, Cleopatra doesn't let it happen that way; she cannot recede to such a state it is not in her proud and worthy veins. She boldly resolves the crux of the crisis: "Husband, I come / Now to that name my courage prove my title. / I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life" (5.2.27881). Two undaunted lovers of amplitude meet the martyrdom of love! Even great Caesar pays tribute to Cleopatra's greatness after her death thus: "If they had swallowed poison, 'twould appear/ by external swelling; but she looks like sleep. / As she would catch another Antony/ In her strong toil of grace" (5.2.335-38). It is indeed "paltry to be Caesar" for Cleopatra, who is an incarnation of love, power, passion, beauty and intelligence--infinite verities wrapped in one unfailingly love-longing soul with a unique mental uprightness. Cleopatra remains enigmatic; and their love reaches the heights of immortality.

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Mohit Ul Alam has truly accomplished a praiseworthy job by translating the major tragedies of Shakespeare, and the one under discussion in particular.

Alam, demonstrating clear authority over Shakespeare's works (he earned his PhD on Shakespeare's works) and with his long experience of teaching Shakespeare at universities, has deftly maintained the sombre quality and sublimity of the original text in his translation. He has very carefully dealt with the multilayered complexities of Shakespearean diction, tone, image, metaphors and other such elements in his translation. It is to be noted, however, that Alam has been writing poetry, novels and other writings on varied social interests in Bangla, all of which has helped him reach the required heights in translating The Bard of Avon's works.

Alam hasn't done a literal or the word for word translation of the play; he rather has maintained the literary verve in his work in a very innovative use of Bangla. He has done it in a thematic manner presented in an impeccably lucid expression. Translating Shakespeare in any language is almost impossible, and keeping that point in mind he has done it in plain prose. And here is where his innovative attempt has triumphed--the use of a very simple but fitting and lucid Bengali diction. Such employment of diction has helped him maintain a flow of spontaneity throughout the book. Readers will find no linguistic obstacles while reading the book. The serenity of the word-flow and the solemnity of the tone will enhance their reading and relishing of Shakespeare's work in Alam's Bangla.

More importantly, Alam has provided a good number of footnotes along with some important and famous lines from the original text in original form in the footnote sections. His footnotes are immensely informative. Readers occasional or serious can easily grasp the beauty of the original work through a parallel reading of both the Bengali rendition and the original lines, though not all, of the play. The footnotes and the textual lines amount to as many as 202.

Furthermore, the exclusive introduction that Alam has coined while explaining the historical context, Elizabethan theatre or the theatrical direction and the background information about the characters and the synopsis of the play will immensely help readers to get to the heart of the text.

Amazingly, not a single important point of linguistic properties--Shakespearean pun and other subtleties--eludes Alam's keen observation. He brilliantly mentions and explains the pun on the word "indeed" and "in deed" (act 1, scene 1) at his footnote 29, to mention one or two from among many! In the initial footnote, he explains Cleopatra's Greek origin and her complexion that she was supposed to be white. But, he says, as Shakespeare's Elizabethans loved to take her to be black, the playwright, keeping that point in mind, attributes Cleopatra with a 'tawny front' (1.6) --- (shemla mukh, in Bangla). These, along with many other such instances, are exclusively explained by Alam in his footnotes. He keeps 'Egypt', as its Bangla name 'Mishor' will mar the verve of the term, he opines. Let

us discuss another one (footnote 60) regarding Cleopatra: “For what good turn? Messenger: For the best turn i' th' bed” (2.5.57-58). Here the messenger means sexual intercourse by the word 'turn'. There are ample explanations of the complex and subtle usage of Shakespearean diction, pun, image and underlying ambivalent meanings, which, I believe, will hugely help the readers in relishing the Shakespearean drama in Bangla.

Readers might find the life sketch of The Bard of Avon at the end of the book helpful.

In summing up, it ought to be said that Alam's candid approach, lucid and informative expressions that have shaped this Bengali version of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* will evidently help readers in general and English literature buffs in particular, if they make a parallel reading of the drama in the original. Leonardo da Vinci once said: “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.” Alam has attained that sophistication in this brilliant translation.