

# Shakespeare's Great Tragedies

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শেক্সপিয়ার: সেরা ট্রাজেডি  
(হ্যামলেট, ওথেলো, কিং লিয়ার, ম্যাকবেথ)  
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Mohit Ul Alam has accomplished a splendid job for those who want to read Shakespeare's great tragedies in Bangla. He completed with virtuosity his arduous but praiseworthy task by presenting us with Bangla rendition of Shakespeare's great plays in one edition: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Alam's translation is innovative as well as new. This is because he is candid and honest about his abilities. Rabindranath Tagore was intelligent enough when he abandoned his attempt to translate *Macbeth* in the middle. Shakespeare is so great that he is sometimes untranslatable because of his divine language, astonishingly varied imagery in poetry and infinite variety of vocabulary. Alam rightly presumes it to be so.

Alam is sensible enough for not trying to translate Shakespeare literally or word for word. He admitted that he did not try to render Shakespeare's poetry in Bangla. We will try to read a part of his translation here with the aim to read and understand Shakespeare. The beauty of every tragedy lies not in knowing the outline of the story but in the development of the plot, the growing up of the characters and the dialogues that lead to climax and eventual fall of the tragic hero.

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Alam's translation is not the first but his is different and fascinating from others. Lest he mar the divine charm and myth innate with Blank Verse, Alam translated *Hamlet* in descriptive prose keeping the inner meaning intact and poetry unharmed. He has done a wonderful job by giving Shakespeare's own words side by side with Bangla.

*Hamlet* is entirely a quotation. But the general readers were so far forced to remain happy with just a popular and insignificant part of it. Alam's translation lends us access to otherwise unpopular but intellectually, spiritually and philosophically rich portions of *Hamlet*.

Life is meaningless if one has not traveled across the domain of William Shakespeare. But fact remains that even the natives find him difficult, sometimes archaic for his Elizabethan English. Some of the expressions that we use today originated with Shakespeare. Some words that he used have different meanings now, while others are no longer used.

The additional but special gift for the reader from the translator is his informative, analytical and selective introduction encompassing all important information on the four plays he translated, synopsis of each play, contemporary history, Elizabethan theatre and stage, Globe theatre, Shakespeare's life, birthplace and education, Shakespeare's England with special emphasis on Elizabeth I and James I. The reader will be immensely benefited in clarifying his confusion and he will find ready answers to many questions about Shakespeare as a whole.

The reader of *Hamlet* will always find Alam beside him while going through it. Alam begins telling us bit by bit that happens after the appearance of the ghost in the Elsinore castle of Denmark substantiated by appropriate quotes in original from the play. Prince Hamlet mourning his father's recent death resents his mother Gertrude's hasty marriage to his uncle Claudius, now king. His mother scolds him, "Do not forever with thy veiled lids/ Seek for thy noble father in the dust." The queen adds, "—all that lives must die." His uncle Claudius consoles him, "But you must know your father lost a father: / That father lost, lost his." All these attempts to pacify Hamlet go in vain. His desire to take revenge, procrastinations about it, philosophical questions on life and death put him to the insurmountable throes of pain and suffering. We find this line depicting Hamlet's mental state in beautiful Bangla flanked by English, "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt./ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew."

Alam beautifully renders great lines in *Hamlet*, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." "To be or not to be that is the question," "What a piece of work is a man" and so on. We shall find

exact merit and inner meaning of those lines when we read them in Bangla and English side by side. The lines we quote now about the worth of humanity will entice any reader to find Bangla of these, "Sure he that made us with such discourse/ Looking before and after, gave us not/ That capability and god-like reason/ To fust in us unused" (4.4.26-29).

One other great as well as novel aspect of this version is reading those less read or less popular lines having great reflections on the basic philosophic questions. Hamlet maintains that a man's life may be shorter than the time it takes pronouncing "one." In Hamlet's own words, "And a man's life is no more than to say one" (5.2.75). Shall we not enjoy the Bangla version of the great lines, "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (5.2.157-161).

A pathetic and humorous situation arises during a conversation between Hamlet and Claudius right after accidental killing of Polonius by Hamlet. It becomes philosophic for its turning to contemplation on life and death. Claudius asks, "Now Hamlet, Where is Polonius?" Hamlet replies, "At supper." In reply to Claudius's, "At supper? Where" Hamlet gives a thought-provoking and spiritual reply, "Not where he eats, but where a (he) is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots" (4.3.17-25).

These maggots (Ledapoka in Bangla) eat both the fat king and the thin beggar. Alexander or Caesar is no exception. Hamlet tells Horatio, "Alexander died, Alexander was buried. Alexander returneth into dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?" (5.1.192-197). The play ends with the deaths of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes. Before dying Hamlet's words, "The rest is silence" (5.2.300) will rather make the reader restless for revisiting the entire play in Alam's translation.

From wonderful reading of *Hamlet*, we now move on to *Othello* which is one of Shakespeare's great tragedies and remains a cautionary tale regarding the dangers of jealousy. The play is most memorable, however, for the charming, roguish, frightening, and evil Iago. It is a beautiful translation giving us a taste of reading in Bangla while Alam is very careful to give us Shakespeare in original side by side wherever necessary.

The play *Othello* begins with a dialogue between two malcontent rogues - Roderigo and Iago. Iago is discontented with Othello for appointing Cassio his lieutenant- the post he craved for. He takes to treachery, machination and

conspiracy from the beginning against Othello until revealed by Emilia before the last scenes.

Iago's brutish nature blurts out from his language when he divulges Othello's intimacy with Desdemona to her father Brabantio in these insulting terms, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88-89). Goading him to wake up from sleep, Iago continues, "Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you." (1.1.91). Shall we not read them in Bangla to laugh our heart out?

Othello marries Desdemona while Iago goes on conspiring to instill in him jealousy, 'The green eyed Monster'. Iago professes his animosity towards Othello and suspects that he was cuckolded by him, "I hate the Moor. / And it is thought abroad that twixt my sheets / He has done my office".

Alam's Bangla is easy and homely. He wonderfully and dexterously translates this difficult line uttered by Iago about Othello, "The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him as bitter as coloquintida" (1.3.340-342).

Iago succeeds in destroying Othello for his gullibility. "The moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by th' nose / As asses are"(1.3.397-400). Iago evaluates Othello. His complete trust in Iago is expressed when he leaves for Cyprus by entrusting him to escort Desdemona afterwards, "So please your grace, my ensign (Iago). / A man he is of honesty and trust. / To his conveyance I assign my wife" (1.3.282-284).

In Alam's impeccable Bangla, we enjoy *Othello*, a drama of perennially traumatic and stormy relationship between husband and wife. About Desdemona as the wife of Othello, Cassio sums up, "Our great captain's captain" (2.1.74) while Iago quips, "Our general's wife is now the general" (2.3. 304-305).

Emilia is unfortunate that such a sprightly and exuberant woman was married to Iago. Being extremely disappointed by him, she bursts out about husbands to Desdemona, "Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell, / And have their palates both for sweet and sour / As husbands have. What is it that they do / When they change us for others? Is it sport? / I think it is. And doth affection breed it?" (4.3.92-96).

Othello, after smothering Desdemona in bed, realizes his mistake and sums up about himself, " ... one that loved not wisely but too well" (5.2.352). In Alam's hand this tragic love tragedy becomes a reading for both pleasure and enjoyment. The characters in the drama come alive in his magic hands.

King Lear is another intense and profound tragedy translated by Alam. This popular story of how a sentimental king brings his own downfall after

distributing his kingdom between his two 'pelican' and unfaithful daughters—Goneril and Regan while depriving the innocent one—Cordelia. Soon after his handing over of the kingdom, Lear discovers his blunder but gets no respite to salvage himself. Being thrown out of the palace in a raging stormy night, Lear finds himself helpless and realizes his foolishness. He feels "I am more sinned against than sinning." Though Lear suffered for his own mistakes, yet his character has been developed to the fullest extent in the process of realization of life through suffering. About hypocrisy he rightly cries out, "Thou, rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand; / Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back, / Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind / For which thou whipp'st" (4.6. 156-9).

King Lear contains great quotes too. Gloucester, after being blinded, philosophizes on life, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.37-38). Lear hastens to death when he knows that Cordelia was murdered, "And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life? / Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life./ And thou no breath at all?" (5.3.305-306). The tragedy will reverberate in the mind of the reader for long for Alam's steadfast effort in keeping up the right vein of the play all along.

The fourth and last but not the least accomplishment by Alam, the rendering of *Macbeth*, is also equally exquisite. He does not lax a bit in his arduous task of putting in Bangla the unfamiliar terms used by the witches while cooking a potion.

Macbeth, out of ambition, aroused by the witches, becomes a butcher by killing his great and magnanimous king Duncan when he was a guest at his own home provoked by his fiend-like Lady Macbeth. The play, full of gory details, witches, a ghost, battles, madness and brutal murders, is transformed into an excellent version by Alam.

The translation goes on smoothly with magic lines uttered by the witches, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air' (1.1.10-11) enmeshing the readers' attention to the last line with rapt attention.

This play engages the reader from the beginning through the end. Alam translates great dialogues and soliloquies in Bangla for us with great care and mastery. King Duncan unwittingly and ironically says, "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" (1.4.11-12).

Lady Macbeth's dialogue is also tough to translate as she dares to utter, "Unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the top-full / Of direst cruelty" (1.5.39-41) or when she expresses herself, "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me / I would while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had

I so sworn / As you have done to this" (1.7.54-59). She convinces Macbeth to commit murder with this venomously inspiring words but eventually she herself suffers from guilt, sleep-walks and becomes insane. She always tries to wash away blood from her hand, "All the perfumes from Arabia will not sweeten this little blood. O, O, O." (5.1.42-43).

Alam very dexterously renders the great lines by juxtaposing the text from *Macbeth* with Bangla, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, / To the last syllable of recorded time....Out, out brief candle / Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more: It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5).

In his attempt to translate the four great tragedies by Shakespeare, Mohit Ul Alam has always been mindful of his mammoth task that calls for great application of the mind in achieving the highest state of excellence. He promises to impart taste of Shakespeare through a simple and straightforward translation of these plays. Alam has been successful, I perceive, in drawing his readers close to him to undertake a journey to read the plays in Bangla and also in original. Presenting in a slim and well- covered white paper book, Milon Nath of Anupom Prokashoni deserves thanks for keeping the price within the reach of the reader. I wish Alam and the Publisher a success and look forward to reading the comedies and histories by Shakespeare in the future.