

## COLLABORATIVE TRANSLATION FROM BENGALI

Because my knowledge of Bengali was limited at the start of my project—to translate the best representative work by modern and contemporary West Bengali and Bangladeshi women poets for a comprehensive anthology—my translation efforts have been collaborative. Though my *bangla* has improved, I am acutely aware that many nuances still elude my grasp. For the work of Shamim Azad and a few other Dhaka-based poets, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Professor and Chair of the Dhaka University Department of English, volunteered to be my collaborator. Shamim and Manzoor supplied cultural information built into the poem's language through proverbial expressions, allusions to history or mythology, and references to customs and traditions Bengali readers would be familiar with.

An example, in “Conjugal Prayer,” one of the poems featured here, is the expression “dream city” (*Ālaka* in the original Bengali). This “dream city” is the legendary capital of King Kubera, who is popularly regarded in Hindu lore as the lord of wealth. *Ālaka* could be translated as “El Dorado” or even “Oz” to convey the sense of a fantastical city of unimaginable wealth and splendor. But both of these names are too specific to non-Bengali cultures, and such associations would distract from the original poem's dramatic situation and meaning, and simply to use the city's name, *Alaka*, in the translation, would convey little to most readers outside of India. So Manzoor and I determined that a more general term would carry over the most important sense of the city's name for non-Bengali readers. The expression “dream city” would allow readers of the translation to understand the poet's intention here—to complain in a humorous figure of speech about the otherworldly man so disconnected from the real world that he ignores his own wife at night!

The poem “I Want to Pierce with the Arrows of My Voice” takes some of its inspiration from the turbulent years of Shamim's undergraduate education at Dhaka University, as Bengali resistance to the oppressive measures of West Pakistani rule finally erupted into the bloody 1971 War of Liberation. During this period, while the country was occupied by West Pakistani troops, Shamim, confined indoors for her own safety—as were most young women—wrote resistance poetry and pamphlets, listened to reports on the banned freedom fighters' radio stations, and absorbed memories and impressions that would lead to the social and political concerns expressed in her later writing. Translating such poems presents the “footnote challenge”—how much background must the translator provide in order to make historical allusions comprehensible to the non-Bengali reader? Should such details be added to the poem's language, or should this information come in footnotes? For this poem, we determined that 1971 as a pivotal date for the War of Liberation and the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation was sufficiently familiar to Western readers (parallel to 1776 as a watershed date in U. S. history) that it didn't need a footnote or any added language to the text of the poem.

The final stage of translation was to combine elements from the word-for-word literal version and the relevant cultural information, to create an English version as faithful as possible to the original in meaning and tone and also successful as a poem in its own right. At this point I worked alone, with a Bengali-English dictionary for reference, but thinking and creating as a poet. My raw materials were those of the Bengali poet as glimpsed through the sensibility of the Bengali translator.

## WAITING FOR THE TOUCH

I've tuned time to the wind,  
In every season, famine's shadow.  
With the changes in rules and regulations  
The robin can't unfold its delicate wings.

The seedling grows in the courtyard in self-reproach  
Sprayed by the water of new distress.  
With the season's poison, poverty and flood  
The dream-pitcher floats away again.

Even the sun can't give time's destination.  
Every moment, confidence loses its track  
With the onrush of tears in the sleep-shunned bed,  
But that boy is never seen again.

The feathers keep falling after the hours.  
How will the robin unfold its blossoming wings  
And in the courtyard, on the seedling's dying stem  
Will any new leaf ever again be seen?

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## স্পর্শের অপেক্ষা

সময় বেঁধেছি এই বাতাসের সাথে  
প্রতিটি খাতুতে মনস্তরের ছায়া  
নীতি নিয়মের রূপান্তরের দায়ে  
পারে না খুলতে দোয়েল নম্র পাখা।

আত্ম-গানিতে উঠোনের চারা বাড়ে  
নতুন ক্ষোভের জল ঝরে তার গায়  
মৌসুমী বিষে দারিদ্র্যে বন্যায়  
স্বপ্ন-কলস পূশরায় ভেসে যায়।

সূর্যেও নেই সময়ের সন্ধান  
প্রতি নিয়ত আস্থা হারায় রেখা  
অশ্রুর বেগ বিনিদ্র শয্যায়  
সেই ছেলেটির মেলেনা তবুও দেখা।

প্রহরের পর পালক যে খসে যায়  
কি করে দোয়েল খুলবে ফুল-পাখা  
উঠোনের সেই চারাটির মরা গায়  
নতুন একটি পাতাও কি দেখা যায়?

## I WANT TO PIERCE WITH THE ARROWS OF MY VOICE

I wasn't born without complaints.  
I announced with piercing shrieks  
the first fault of this earth's seasonal wheel.  
I've displayed on my skin  
the pestilence and possibilities of all tinned milk.  
And in this way I've learned  
to identify time through my complaints.

Milestones identify and divide the road,  
the moisture-rich air is measured  
into brilliant balloons.  
In the geography books, all the bodies  
of water push this vast earth  
into one-third of its expanse.  
People are known by their eccentricities.

Here, without hunger, there are no gaping mouths,  
no forest without thorny trees.  
Without the sweat of slaves there's no society,  
without huge stones no rushing stream  
could take its rippling turns,  
without the launching of missiles there is no war.

And I know—  
without the burning of neglect  
love cannot be measured.  
The wayward embrace reveals  
renunciation's all-absorbing root.  
Rage exhausts itself in a cascade of sweat,  
touch comes to climax in a sudden blow,  
and in the gigantic build-up  
of starvation on a massive scale  
Ethiopia is announced to the world.  
So I want to leave my mark  
on every Namibia,  
on 1971, through my complaints in the spring,  
by piercing everyone with the arrows of my voice.

Note: Spring (the original poem names the spring month of Phalgun, (*Phalgun*, mid-February to mid-March) was the season of the Language Movement of 1952, when Bengali students in Dhaka died in a demonstration protesting the imposition of Urdu as the national language of Pakistan. This protest movement culminated in the bloody Liberation War of 1971, when Bengali-speaking East Pakistan declared and won its independence from Pakistan as the nation of Bangladesh.

বিদ্ব কৰতে চাই কৰ্ত্তবাসে

জন্মাইনি অভিযোগ বিহীন  
 সুতীৰ চিৎকাৰে ঘোষণা কৰেছি  
 এ পৃথিবীৰ খাতুচক্ৰেৰ প্ৰথম দোষ,  
 তুকে বহিঃপ্ৰকাশ ঘটিয়েছি  
 তাৰে টিনজাত দুধেৰ সংক্ৰমণ-সম্ভাবনাৰ  
 এবং এভাবেই সময়কে  
 অভিযোগেৰ মাধ্যমে চিহ্নিত কৰতে শিখেছি।  
 সড়ক চিহ্নিত হয় কিলোমিটাৰ ফলকে  
 বিভাজিত হয়ে, জলীয় বাষ্প সমৃদ্ধ বাতাস  
 বৰ্ণিল বেলেুনে সৈঁধে  
 পৃথুলা এ বিশ্বেৰ সমগ্ৰ জলাধাৰ  
 তাৰই এক তৃতীয়াংশেৰ পরিমাপে-  
 ভূগোল গ্ৰন্থে সীমায়িত হয়ে আৰ  
 মানুষ চিহ্নিত হয় ব্যতিক্ৰমী আচাৰে।  
 এখানে ক্ষুধাবিহীন কোনো হা নেই,  
 ক্ৰীতদাসেৰ স্বেদ বিহীন কোনো সমাজ  
 অতিকায় পাথৰ ছাড়া স্ৰোতস্বতীৰ কলস্বরা বাঁক  
 আৰ উৎক্ষেপিত আগ্নেয়ান্ত ছাড়া কোনো যুদ্ধ নেই।

আমি আৰো জানি-  
 উপেক্ষাৰ দহন ছাড়া  
 পরিমাপ হয়না প্ৰেমেৰ  
 ব্ৰহ্মচাৰ্যেৰ সুকৃতিৰ মোহন মূল  
 কলঙ্কেৰ আলিগনেই হয় প্ৰকাশিত  
 স্বেদেৰ প্ৰপাত অবসিত হয় ক্ৰোধে  
 আঘাতে প্ৰতীয়মান হয় স্পৰ্শেৰ চূড়  
 আৰ গোপন ক্ষুধাৰ বিপুল সঞ্চয়েৰ প্ৰকোপেই  
 একদিন বিজ্ঞাপিত হয় ইথিওপিয়া।  
 তাই চিহ্ন রেখে যেতে চাই  
 প্ৰতিটি নামিবিয়ায়  
 একান্তরে, ফাল্লুনে  
 অভিযোগেৰ মাধ্যমে  
 সুতীক্ষ্ণ কৰ্ত্তবাসে সকলকে বিদ্ব কৰে।