

Arise out of the Lock

50 Bangladeshi Women Poets in English

Bilingual Bangladeshi Edition

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Translated
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Edited
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কথাপ্রকাশ
KATHAPROKASH

Dedication

To the first female poet of Bangladesh, Chandrabati
(Approx. 1550-1600) who re-wrote Ramayan, the great
Indian epic, from a woman's point of view, depicting Sita as
its protagonist.

And

To those countless Birangonas or the war heroines of 1971
for their supreme sacrifice and tremendous sufferings which
paved the way for Independence of Bangladesh.

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Introduction to the Bilingual Bangladeshi Edition

To celebrate the golden jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh, a wonderful and exceptional initiative was undertaken purely on a citizen and civic level by a handful of literature-loving people of the sub-continent. I am one of them. This was a representative anthology of poems by fifty women poets of Bangladesh in English translation, titled *Arise out of the Lock*, published by the Balestier Press, UK on a historically significant day, 21st February 2022. The poets and their poems included in the collection were carefully curated by the undersigned and skillfully translated by Nabina Das, an acclaimed academic, poet and translator of Bangla origin based in Hyderabad, India. The book was well received by its intended international readers and was appreciated by the critics too.

The original publisher was very kind and thoughtful to grant us permission for a local edition. Unfortunately, it took us unusually long to find an able and appropriate publisher here in Bangladesh despite multiple attempts on my part. Finally and rather unexpectedly, after a more than two-year-long

wait, a worthy and wonderful publishing organization, namely Kathaprokash, one of the leading and prestigious publishers of the country, came on board. Its visionary and dynamic helmsman, Mr. Jasim Uddin, not only accepted my proposal readily but also proposed, rather happily, to make it a bilingual edition, which was no doubt a real boon, both for the poets and the readers. And that's how the publication of this much coveted and much awaited bilingual Bangladeshi edition of the original anthology *Arise out of the Lock* became a reality. This edition is really a reproduction of the original version, except for the inclusion of the original poems in Bangla, and a few minor changes here and there. However, the glossary section of the original edition is taken out altogether, and its contents are redistributed right beneath the poems, as and when required.

To conclude, I thank Mr. Jasim Uddin of Kathaprokash publication and his capable team profusely for undertaking this ambitious project and making it happen in a swift and befitting manner. This is indeed a great service to the publication industry of Bangladesh in general, and to the myriads of poetry lovers worldwide in particular, for which no amount of admiration and gratitude seems adequate. Lastly, I would like to thank once more the original publisher duo, Cecily Chen and Roh-Suan Tung; the indefatigable translator and poet Nabina Das, and my Tamil/Bengali translator-warrior friend, Venkateswar Ramaswamy, who was the actual behind-the-scenes catalyst in luring me into this challenging, yet immensely gratifying project.

Alam Khorshed

Chattogram, Bangladesh

January, 2025

FOREWORD

The poems in this ambitious collection are by women poets writing in Bangla who have emerged from the land that is now Bangladesh—having lived, or are still living here, or are now part of the first-generation diaspora.

What beautifully comes through in this thoughtfully curated and faithfully translated volume, is Bangladesh emerging as a country on its own terms, with this collage of writing from women, rooted in a rich eclectic cultural history, and yet with a contemporary and cosmopolitan sensibility.

Much has been written about the economic success and social progress of Bangladesh, especially highlighting women's empowerment. However, the creative spaces in Bangladesh, especially in poetry, have been largely dominated by men. Dipping into this book will be like the delicious potential discovery of a treasure trove of work by women who bring out varied aspects of the collective Bangladeshi experience. The poems really give a sense of what Bangladesh is, 50 years after its inception; while celebrating the rich history of people of an ancient land over millennia. Bangladesh today is an amalgamation and confluence of our pluralism, diversity and

syncretism, and the energy of a young country free-er from rigid prescriptive structures, forging our own future—though still with a plethora of barriers. These come through in the work, with force and creativity, but without melodrama.

The inferences to the culture, the land and nature form the back-drop to women navigating their reality. With echoes of Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, and Kazi Nazrul Islam, they get strength from the familiar, symbolic and concrete, to express themselves, and frame and voice their resistance. The historic influence of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Animism, Tantric, and other practices, as well as the sheer potency and beauty of the fertile land and mother nature, are drawn on, interpreted and used as they see fit.

Fearless, confident, defying expectations, and covering age-old emotions like anger, love, and dissonance with the status quo, many of the poems display a boldness of material and direction that is able to capture the essence of what could represent the modern Bangladeshi women.

Whether it's the pioneering force of Sufia Kamal, the seasoned words of Kochi Reza and others of her generation, or the younger poets who are finding their voice, we are left with a feeling of wanting more. Rather than nationalism as a constraining, jingoistic notion, these poems are a celebration of Bangladesh from a women's gaze, giving due recognition to the injustice, colonisation, upheavals and neglect that those who have been part of this land have faced, along with that which has given them a resilience, and a certain kind of defiance and multiplicity.

Most importantly, the women in this collection come across as the multi-dimensional beings we are; beyond binary

caricatures. Historically, ‘ma’, the mother, has been put on a ‘pedestal’, given the ‘highest’ position; the one who gives and sacrifices, is devoted to her family, but rarely is expected to have dreams or thoughts of her own. The counter of this is the lack of rights and social acceptance for women actually demanding their voices be heard and their rights to be respected, and their potential to be met. Throughout the ages we have demonized or glorified women with a ‘bad’ woman/ ‘good’ woman narrative. Women have been used as cultural markers to represent the horrors of the war with a ‘loss of honour’ as women who were raped, or vilified for the violation of their bodies being their fault.

From strident voices of strong women who pioneered the way, encapsulating the fervour of rebellion, whether it is from those who were born well before the war of independence, like Sufia Kamal and Anwara Syed Haq, to those who had their formative years in Bangladesh like Leesa Gazi, and Shahnaz Munni, to the newer voices of Rimjhim Ahmed, Mahi Flora and Shweta Shatabdi Esh, the collection traverses generations, with surprises and twists along the way.

The modernity of the work spans the collection. From the trepidations of love, seen through Farida Majid’s *The Wait*, or Taslima Nasrin’s *Emancipation*, to Zeenat Ara Rafiq’s powerful *Promise*, and Anjana Saha’s *The Curse*, with Aloka Nandita’s refreshing *Eye Glasses*, and Shakira Parvin’s stark *Special*, as well as Shanta Maria’s irreverently ‘spot on’ *What’s a Woman Gotta Do in Heaven*, to the quirky, off left field *Crime* from Jahanara Perveen, and *Existentialism* of Novera Hossain, these gems, largely unknown to the wider world, along with the many more poems in this collection,

underline the contrast between truth and perception, countering stereotypes and defying societal restrictions.

The poems capture women as I have known many to be in all my years here—passionate in love and purpose, compassionate, courageous, unconventional, not taking no for an answer, full of rage against the unfair structures that be, and wanting to tackle the world at large on their own terms, along with expressing vulnerabilities and acknowledging the tribulations of fighting deep-rooted patriarchy and prejudice. There is a feeling that perhaps the elegance and cadence of their words can only be fully appreciated in the original Bangla. However, this translated collection does convey the philosophical and the practical, and I believe will entice and inspire lovers of poetry to dig deeper and further explore their works, and those of other Bangladeshi women poets (those who write in Bangla, English and the myriad of other local languages) too.

Sadaf Saaz

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Dhaka Lit Fest

Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Editor's Introduction

Bangladesh won her independence in 1971 through a bloody war of liberation and is celebrating the golden jubilee of her glorious emergence this year. During that deadly and devastating war of independence, the women of Bangladesh in particular paid a hefty toll. Even though they fought side by side with their male counterparts, they were the first victims of the invading Pakistani army and their local cohorts. They were killed, tortured, mutilated, and worst of all, raped *en masse* by the marauding army. As many as two-hundred-thousand women fell prey to unprecedented and unbridled brutality. After independence, these women were given an honorific title, *Birangona*, or War Heroine, by the father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in recognition of their suffering and sacrifice.

During the year-long celebration of her golden jubilee, Bangladesh saw a plethora of events and activities to commemorate the historic landmark. Unfortunately, nothing very significant was planned at the national level to pay tribute to the heroic women who fought and suffered, were persecuted and murdered, and who contributed immensely to

the struggle for freedom and independence. As a writer, translator, and literary activist I was curious to see if the Bangladeshi publishing sector was doing anything worthwhile focusing on women, and from their own perspective, to celebrate this hugely important event. Sadly, this too proved to be extremely male-centric with hundreds of publications focused mainly on history, politics, memoirs, poetry, fiction, etc., written mostly by male authors, and predictably purely from a male point of view. This disheartened me deeply.

At that point, knowing my interest in women's literature, both global and local, my Kolkata-based friend, Venkateswar Ramaswamy, a Tamil-speaker who is a literary translator from Bengali, who harbours an intense love for the Bengali language, and Bangladeshi literature in particular, urged me to compile an anthology of 50 women poets of Bangladesh, translated into English, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh. This idea immediately caught my attention, but at the beginning I was a little apprehensive about committing myself to this rather grand proposition, considering the enormity of this daunting task. But after some persuasion on Ramaswamy's part, and some intense soul-searching of my own, I relented. And thus began this beautiful trans-border literary project, which gained its own momentum when Nabina Das, a critically acclaimed English-language poet from India and a fine translator in her own right, agreed to come on board, enthusiastically undertaking the mammoth task of translating the selected poems into English. It needs to be reiterated here that India as a neighbouring country played a pivotal role in 1971, and was instrumental in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation.