
A REVIEW OF BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDYOPADHYAY, *KALEIDOSCOPE OF LIFE: SELECTED SHORT STORIES*, TRANSLATED BY HIRANMOY LAHIRI

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Known primarily as a novelist across the literary world in India and beyond, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay was an equally proficient writer of short stories, as evident in the new collection of his stories in English translation from the Bengali original by Hiranmoy Lahiri, an extremely promising literary talent on the horizon. Amongst the prose translations in general, the short story posits a greater challenge than the novel because of certain structural or thematic factors that limit the scope for the writer for expansive/extensive experimentations with form and content of the narratives. At the same time, however, the inherent immediacy of the genre affords the liberty for the authors to make use of literary devices like allegory, metaphor, or symbolism, with the specific objective of creating a flash effect with a lasting impression on the minds of the readers. As a writer of stories, Bibhutibhushan dealt with a range of emotions and sensibilities, thereby endeavouring to unravel the diverse facets of human understanding about oneself and the world as existing within and beyond its sensory limitations. As a translator entrusted with the choice of handpicking a certain number of stories out of his oeuvre, Hiranmoy has brought together a selection of sixteen stories skilfully curated to represent the “kaleidoscopic” vision of the writer, well-complemented by the profundity of his insights and perspectives on human life. In fact, thirteen of those stories, as admitted by the translator, are appearing for the first time in English, and they collectively signify a significant addition to the relatively under-appreciated genre of Indian writing in English translation.

The volume begins with a semi-autobiographical story, “How I Began Writing” (*Aamar Lekha*), which incidentally narrates the series of events leading to the publication of Bibhutibhushan’s first-ever short story called “The Disregarded” (*Upekshita*), also translated in this volume by Hiranmoy. These two pieces provide some crucial perspectives on Bibhutibhushan’s decision to embark on the journey as a writer with a candid acknowledgement of the fact that “the seemingly insignificant moments in our lives hold the most profound meaning for us.” This is a particular trait that runs through most of the narratives presented in the book, and then there are others where he takes his readers on a journey into the strange and the unknown, thereby keeping them engrossed through his inimitable powers of storytelling. As a translator, Hiranmoy has adeptly represented the lively and, at times, rustic style of narrativisation adopted by Bibhutibhushan in stories like “The Disregarded,” “Discrimination” (*Parthokyo*), “Gangadhar’s Peril” (*Gangadharer Bipod*), and, most noticeably, in “Taranath, the Tantrik” (*Taranath Tantriker Golpo*). A representative instance may be quoted from the last-mentioned story: “A gentleman! If you’re so gentlemanly, why did you choose this path, you decrepit old corpse? Practising tantra isn’t the work of a gentleman. Off you go, dress up in a shawl and a *kameez* and go to work in an office or something. Scram!” While it is not possible in its entirety to replicate the colloquialism inherent in the vernacular, the translator has admirably managed to convey the inherent rawness of the madwoman’s outburst against Taranath. In his introduction to the volume, the translator has drawn attention to his emphasis on “preserving the author’s unique voice and creating a seamless and immersive reading experience.” It is by no means an easy exercise since the author’s range of thematic engagement—from unravelling the varied textures of human relationships to discovering the many-layered realities of the external world—has necessitated the adoption of a narrative style that accommodated such diversities. Stories like “Archaeology” (*Protnototto*), “Chyalaram’s Adventure” (*Chylaram*), “Jawaharlal and God” (*Jawaharlal O God*), and “The Suitcase Swap” (*Baksho Bodol*) reveal interesting aspects of the author’s perspectives on subjects like art and heritage, contemporary politics and history, and also factual/real-life references. The years he lived in—quite precisely the first half of the twentieth century—were characterised by the slow advent of urbanity and modernisation in many non-metropolitan centres of the country, and he was quick to capture the spirit of the changing times in/through his stories.

It is noteworthy that most of the stories he wrote are based on incidents drawn from his own life and surroundings, and his ability to weave narratives out of quotidian realities reflects a keen sense of observation and a remarkable ability to infuse them with a vibrancy derived from his mastery over imagery and diction. As a translator, Hiranmoy has succeeded to a great extent in representing the deft turn of events and emotions that often signify the trademark or signature style of the short-story writer. Certain descriptions like—“The fallen white blossoms of the coral jasmine tree in my yard at dawn looked like a white blanket, and their beauty made me quiver with delight—just as the grass trembles with the cold dew on autumn nights” (“The Disregarded”), “The Buddhist monk vanished into thin air ... I suddenly woke up after hearing a noise. It was just the servant sweeping the veranda. Dawn had already broken” (“Archaeology”), and “Khan *sahib* was no more ... he had melted into the surrounding darkness. Suddenly, a piercing cold gust of wind seemed to sweep through the room, and Gangadhar uttered a cry of terror and collapsed unconscious on the damp floor” (“Gangadhar’s Peril” [Gangadharer Bipod])—testify to the translator’s deep knowledge of the target language and a more profound sense of appreciation and understanding of what the author intended to convey through his stories in the first place. The translator has exercised the proper discretion in keeping certain words in italicised original, and also in providing an extensive glossary at the end, thereby striking the right balance between retaining the aura of the original and providing an extended contextualisation for the convenience of the global readership.

Over the years till the recent times, a number of translations of Bibhutibhushan’s stories have appeared, most notably, *A Strange Attachment and Other Stories* (by Phyllis Granoff, 1984), *Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay Stories* (by Rani Ray, 2018), and *Tales of the Natural and the Supernatural* (by Debashish Sen, 2021), to go with the translations of his more famous novels. It is therefore a challenging endeavour to produce another translation of an already globalised author, and Hiranmoy Lahiri has made a judicious selection of stories hitherto untranslated for the volume under review. In fact, the very emphasis on the kaleidoscopic writerly vision of Bibhutibhushan as a guiding principle has given the book its unity of purpose and orientation, in addition to enhancing the presence and popularity of the author among the global readership. The *Kaleidoscope of Life: Selected Short Stories* signifies a significant milestone at the very outset of Hiranmoy Lahiri’s career as a translator, and it is earnestly hoped that he continues to translate literary works not only of the prominent canonical writers of Bengali literature but also of those inhabiting the peripheries of the literary culture(s) of Bengal.

WORKS CITED

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