

Eight Poems by Five Bengali Poets

Debjani Chatterjee

from her collection: *Albino Gecko* (University of Salzburg Press, 1998).

From Silence

"Speech is... but silence is golden."

"Little girls should be seen, not heard."

What bully shut our silver mouths?

("In the beginning was the Word.")

Silence is ripening yearning,

listening. Let my silence grow -

silence to nurture thoughtful speech.

From silence may my language flow.

The Geisha

Gliding soft on tatami mats,

she was silent, invisible,

like a paper screen pulled across.

Yet the blank room had a precise

ikebana that bore her touch.

Her laugh was an apology,

hidden by a delicate fan;

her eyes were careful to avoid

stares at her butterfly beauty.

Ordered tea-times saw her preside

with a quiet formality.

Each morning she removed the beds

and effaced herself from the day.

Saleha Chowdhury

Translated from Bengali by Debjani Chatterjee. from *My Birth Was Not In Vain: Selected Poems by Seven Bengali Women* ed. by Debjani Chatterjee & Safuran Ara (Sheffield Libraries, 2001).

Woman

Noorjahan¹ was stoned to death,
Surotjan died of blows from shoes.
In Wife Number Three's mouth
the scent of paan² lingered all night.
Their husband said:
"The Kazi is right in our society
to pronounce such punishment."
Women may be sold at any time
and ten takas will buy four.
But shoes are too expensive,
so he now gathers stones.

Shared Pain

Rohim Miah's two wives
pull the plough in his field;
Rohim Miah enters
his field for work at midnight.
His house is shut in the daytime -
Rohim Miah's womenfolk are learning the Shariah.³
From time to time a cane
swishes sudden welt marks on backs.
Heads ache, blood is vomited -
alas! God is the witness.
From time to time the two women
hold each other and weep.
People marvel at such friendship
between the two wives.

¹ In accordance with orthodox Islamic law, Noorjahan was stoned to death in Bangladesh for adultery.

² *paan*: a betel-leaf eaten as a digestive. *Kazi*: a judge who administers Islamic law. *Takas*: currency notes in Bangladesh.

³ *Shariah*: the canonic law of Islam, but in popular speech it refers to any of Allah's commandments.

Susmita Bhattacharya

Translated from Bengali by Debjani Chatterjee. from *My Birth Was Not In Vain: Selected Poems by Seven Bengali Women* ed. by Debjani Chatterjee & Safuran Ara (Sheffield Libraries, 2001).

The Mask

A mask hid my face all day long,
the mask concealing every wrong.
Now at dusk, spectacles discarded,
mask removed, my face unguarded -
where is my face?

Where is my face?

Search is pointless -
unused, my face just fades, I guess.

Banana Tree Bride⁴

You were the living branches, their leafy verdure;
In vibrant green you breathed life's exultant song.
The first man worshipped you as one with Nature;
Goddess, bodied in flora, you made us strong.
Now bride - the green beneath the cloth is pale,
The voice of the drum has stifled her dying call,
The muted pain of uprootment has told no tale.
Below the dias, the divine doll's veil shrouds all.

Rashida Islam

Translated from Bengali by Debjani Chatterjee. From *Mother Tongues: Non English-Language Poetry in England* ed. by Stephen Watts & Daniel Weissbort (Modern Poetry in Translation, King's College London, 2001).

Question

(for International Women's Day)

I am a proud woman of this earth:

⁴ In Bengal the banana tree is the bride of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh.

loving Mother, Sister, Beloved.
 An ascetic's statue in an evergreen wood,
 I am a cluster of stars in night's darkness.
 Filling my sari corner, I brought gracious hope.
 I have freely given love and abundant affection.
 Neel-kantha-like⁵, I have swallowed poison.
 My sacrificial nectar has slaked Agastya's legendary thirst.
 I have heard that I am free, a free-living bird,
 That is why I would sing freedom's song;
 I wish to move in step with everyone, to move in unison.
 I am absorbed in the dreams shaped by a liberated mind.
 Then why these impediments to my progressive plans?
 Why am I a puppet on an invisible string?
 Someone seems to play whimsical games with me.
 String-pulled, I turn to cinders, my heart's core burning.
 Then what is this unfulfilled dream I see?
 Will I awake at last, will I be free?
 I have shot so many pointed questions at the Creator.
 Like a question-paper in a test, He offers no answer.

Safuran Ara

Translated from Bengali by Debjani Chatterjee. From her collection *Songs in Exile* translated by Debjani Chatterjee (Sheffield Libraries, 1999).

A Bengali Woman in Britain

A Bengali woman in Britain earns her bread,
 her life is not confined by narrow limits.
 Hard looks can hold no threat for her,
 she is no homeless victim or beggar.
 A Bengali woman in Britain does not easily surrender.
 She is no still and silent statue.
 Nothing startles her, no sudden noise;

⁵ *Neel-kantha* means 'Blue-Throated'. Shiva saved humanity by swallowing the Serpent Vasuki's venom; this sacrifice earned him the title *Neel-kantha*. *Neel-kantha* is also a small bird in the Indian sub-continent. *Agastya* was a famous sage.

she is no golden deer caught in a veil of illusion.
Though far from home, she is no straw adrift on the tide.
The scent of lemon, moonlight dancing on tamarind leaves,
music in the drizzling of Monsoon nights, grip her in nostalgia.
Even today such sweet memories have not dimmed.
A Bengali woman in Britain
has yearnings unfulfilled but her head is unbowed.
She is no wretch to crawl in anyone's dust.
Do not view her with pity, she is no beggar.
A Bengali woman in Britain
arose one dawn and flew, she soared wild on wings.
She is not insignificant, she needs no looks of sympathy,
she is no angelic being, nor some drunkard's slut.
She is no mysterious goddess, she wants no worship.