Authenticity and Mahasweta Devi

Waqar Ahmed

In my last column, I reviewed Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk*, the Arabic Booker-winning novel that champions the cause of the transmigrant laborer. Mr. Alsanousi furnishes his novel with a Filipino protagonist after taking just one trip to the Philippines. For this column, I point my readers to a more well-grounded work—*Imaginary Maps* by the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi (translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak)—a collection of three stories about the bonded tribal class of India. Ms. Devi has lived with tribals all over India. There is anger in her stories and, at times, didacticism. Where Mr. Alsanousi makes what are sometimes touristic observations about the new land he writes about, Ms. Devi writes in excruciating detail, which, for this subject matter, is essential.

Constituting one-sixth of India's population, the tribals have been betrayed by the system. Land and money are allotted to them each year by the government of India, but none of it reaches these indigenous people. Instead, upon borrowing money from businessmen, landlords and members of the religious class to pay for weddings and funerals, they become permanently bonded. Despite a lifetime of toil for the upper caste creditor, insurmountable interest on their principal loan continues to accrue to the grave.

The three stories that make up *Imaginary Maps* typify tribal experience. The deforestation (i.e. rape) of Sal trees in a tribal area is the backdrop of the first story, 'The Hunt.' Tribals, also called forest dwellers, in this story have their timber looted by the many segments of the upper class. In the second story, 'Douloti the Bountiful,' the most heart-wrenching of the three, a prostitute embodies the practice of bond slavery. Her body is used throughout the story. On India's Independence Day, she finally collapses, bleeding onto an open-air map of India. The last piece, 'Pterodactyl' deals with a celibate journalist who, unable to enter into a relationship with the woman he desires, decides to tour remote tribal villages in Bihar and document incidents of violence, famine and corruption.

But back to the issue of authenticity. Mahasweta Devi has fought for the tribals' cause for almost fifty years, focusing her efforts on abolishing in practice (it is already illegal by writ of law) the bonded labor system, and trying to ensure that affirmative action funds from the government reach the tribals. The focus of her fiction is literary journalism rather than perfection of the short story form. Take for example, the following passage:

"After the final agreement, the contractor gave six bottles of number one country liquor to the six elders... He has given Banwari a rupee per tree in secret. This too leaves him a wide margin for profit." [8]

Passages like the above speak to the systematic economic exploitation of the tribals. This inside knowledge from Ms. Devi educates and, yes, slows down the narrative, but she stays true to the art form with scenes like the following which takes place in the hospital:

"There was an attached lavatory, there too he couldn't go at first. They would make him shit and piss in a kind of shiny pot or pan that you would find in the house of Master or Moneylender. Who has heard anything stranger? To piss and shit in pots and pans? Pots and pans that he'll never be able to eat off in his lifetime, to have to do his business in such costly things, this sorrow will remain in his mind." [37]

Colonialism and capitalism were thrust upon India by the British. Capitalism and its accompanying modernity continue to master the tribals. Ms. Devi contends that even simple implements such as the hospital pan work to enslave them. We find out in the third story that the situation is more structurally dire than we can imagine:

"Pashupati Jonko, of the Ho tribe of Singhbhum, a native Ho-speaker, had said with humble amazement at the time of translating Birsa Munda's life into the Ho language, there are no words for 'exploitation' or 'deprivation' in the Ho language. There was an explosion in Puran's head that day." [118]

The tribals of India lack the very vocabulary to express opposition to the system that enslaves them. Ms. Devi's *Imaginary Maps* supplies them with it.

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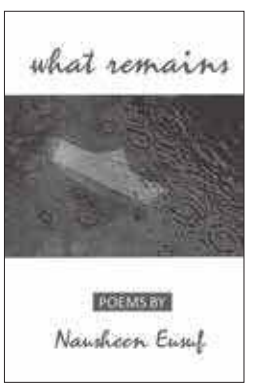
BOOK NOTES

Khademul Islam



What Remains: Poems by Nausheen Eusuf; 2011: Longleaf Press; North Carolina, USA

I smiled at the word 'cabin' in the sestina in this book of poems, and later in the poem 'Evening,' to mean a hospital room. Though it is Indian English I think only we in Bangladesh still use the word in that sense. 'Cabin' usually denotes a ship's cabin. In the USA, it means a log cabin, or a cabin in the woods. But to see it in Nausheen's work, a careful poet and a serious student of her craft, is to think that it slipped in either because she is a Bangladeshi whose instinctive use of English can at times override what she learnt at school, or that she deliberately chose that word. Either way it is charming. Not so, her use of the words *'Azrail,' 'namaaz-e janaaza,' 'Fatiha'* and *'kaal boishakhi,'* to evoke responses not available with their English counterparts.

It is a book of poems - well, what they call a chapbook, something short, about 20 to 25 pages, which historically sprung from the age when pamphlets sold door to door, with its singularity being poems around a single theme - of 16 pages. The theme is a mother's death, and the husband and the daughter - more girl than woman - left behind, coming to terms with memories, grief, loss and absence. It is this grief that circumscribes the poems' diction, keeping it plain, an attractive quality. Sometimes the language strays into being ornamental, but not too often. Her mixing up of tercets with quatrains also is misplaced - no particular effect is gained.

A sestina is a difficult beast. A fixed form, with six stanzas whose end words have to be repeated in a certain order, finishing with a three-line *envoi*. Those end words act both as glue and rubber band: The complex repetition of the same words imposes structure and lends emphasis, and the changes in the word order stretch the meaning and force it back. Nausheen's 'Sestina,' as a back-of-the-book blurb points out, pays "an obvious homage" to Elizabeth Bishop's one - a point underlined by the use of the same title. It is a fine effort by Nausheen, the end words 'whisper,' 'know,' 'aunts,' 'watch' - employing stressed one-syllable words - all working to build the claustrophobic atmosphere of a death watch, with very Bengali aunts hovering, of the whole severe unreal strain of it all. It is the sustained feeling - where technique plays its part - from first to last, that makes the poem work.

The title poem is the last one, a question: What remains after the lowering into the grave:

Why is it that what remains most vivid
are the sunlit squares cast by the lattice
of a verandah in a house now lost?