Blood

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Sunil Gangopadhyay

Translated by
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juggernaut

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Translator's Introduction

The ending of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) postpones the possibility of friendship between the British and the Indians—the colonial rulers and their subjects—viewing the relationship between Mr Fielding and Dr Aziz as a metaphor for the inherent inequity in the geopolitical standing of the two nations. While several years after the trial of Aziz, which had exposed British prejudice against Indians, the two make a few feeble overtures at reconciliation, nature herself resists it:

> the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the

> jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not here'.

India gained independence twenty-three years after Forster's novel was published. Aziz had predicted, 'we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then … and then … you and I shall be friends'; the first part of his prophecy had come true, would the second also come to pass? Now that India was free, was a relationship between the British and Indians possible—friendship or, perhaps, romance? Set in 1965, eighteen years after Independence, but flashing back to the colonial era, Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel *Blood* (1973), explores how the memories of the past—of past violence, of loss, of trauma—and postcolonial rage shatter the potential for a harmonious relationship. It examines how the legacy, or the curse, of colonialism endures beyond Independence, making human attachments across ethnic/racial lines difficult to sustain, though

not impossible. In a scene set, this time, in England, Forster's 'No, not yet' returns in Gangopadhyay's novel with one character observing, 'You and I might forget our mutual hostilities, but until our two countries come much closer, a closeness founded on equality, the people of the two countries will never be in harmony with one another. But the time hasn't come yet …' *Blood* suggests that the pacification of relations between former colonizers and the colonized is perhaps still to be achieved.

Set in three continents—Asia, Europe, and North America—and spanning almost half a century, Gangopadhyay's novel tells a story of colonial and postcolonial encounters, of racial hostilities, of the intersection of race and sexuality, of home, kinship, spiritual exile, forgiving, and forgetting.

Translator's Note

Non-Bengali phrases and sentences used in the original have been preserved in italics. This is to maintain the heteroglossia of the original. For phrases and sentences in languages other than Bengali or English, translations have been provided in parenthesis.

Explanation of Bengali words, phrases, and kinship terms used in the text have been provided in the Notes section at the end of the book.

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—Whose photo is that?

—That's my father.

—No, I mean who's the man standing with him?

—*That gentleman killed my father*—

Tapan gazed at the photograph in silence. He moved closer to it, as if the light in the room was dim. It was an old photograph, its original tones fading to sepia, yet still definitely identifiable. Somewhere far away on this planet there exists the land of Bengal … and, in Bengal, a little village … a village school. Standing in front of the school building was a towering Englishman and, facing him, a gaunt, smallish Bengali man. In his hands the Englishman

held a set of books tied with a red ribbon and on his face he wore a charitable smile. The Bengali man's hands were joined in a namaskar. The photograph had been taken at least thirty years ago, but the smiles on their faces had remained undimmed.

Tapan didn't sigh, but his feet seemed nailed to the ground. Pain surged through his belly. He got cramps whenever he felt depressed. It could be the beginning of an ulcer. He was living in New York the first time it happened. Along with the pain, he had thrown up blood. The doctor advised him to never leave his stomach empty, to always carry biscuits to nibble on, and to avoid feeling depressed. Depression was at the root of his gastrointestinal disorder.

It's not that Tapan wanted to be melancholic. Following the doctor's instructions, he'd immersed himself in constant partying. This evening, too, he'd come prepared to have a good time. But London's damp weather, the ugly fog, and, to top it all, coming face to face with this inconceivable photo just before the merriment were enough to depress anyone!

Taking his hand out of his pocket, Tapan patted the frame lightly. A hefty, black wooden frame. The

gold inscription on the frame was no longer legible. It seemed to Tapan as if the photo had waited in this room all these years just so that one day he might see it. Who else but Tapan could grasp it so fully!

Alice said, You haven't taken off your overcoat yet! Goodness, your shoes are soaking wet! Why don't you warm your feet at the heater?

Tapan slowly removed his coat and shoes. Still in his socks, he sat down on the divan and raised his feet across the side of the heater. Then he asked calmly, Alice, your father was in Bengal? How come you never told me?

Alice was busy setting the table. She said, Didn't I? Yes, he was in Bengal. *A long, long time ago*—

She opened the gift Tapan had placed on the dining table. Her eyes lit up when she saw that it was a bottle of champagne. She murmured softly, Champagne? *Gosh, this is damn expensive! Are you a maharaja or something?*

—Where in Bengal was your father, Alice? In the east?

—Yes, Duckah.[1] You know how to open a bottle of champagne, right?

—What's so difficult about opening a champagne bottle?

—Tell me if you know how to do it. Have you opened one before?

Questions like these offend Tapan, regardless of whether they come from a man or a woman. He said, How many bottles of champagne have you seen in your life, Alice? I have drunk many, many times that number in the last five years. *I hope you have proper glasses!*

Don't be funny,[2] Tapan.[3] *Open it.*

Tapan held the bottle in one hand and with the thumb of the other he deftly pressed the cork. Following a pomm! foam gushed from the bottle. Without spilling a drop, he put the bottle on the table with a thud. A sweet–sour aroma filled the room. Tapan asked again, When was your father in Bengal?

Alice dashed to the cupboard to get the glasses. Returning with them seconds later, she said, Let's not watch a film this evening. In fact, let's not go out at all, just the two of us here …

—Alice, why aren't you answering me?

Alice was startled, her exuberance suddenly

dampened. A little bewildered, she turned around. Answering what, Tapan?

—I've been asking you repeatedly, when was your father in Bengal? Are you worried that if you tell me I'll figure out your age? Well, I already know that you're no less than thirty.

In the last few days, Alice has learnt something of Tapan's disposition. Nevertheless, she couldn't help feeling insulted at his taunt about her age. Like a hurt child she said, Why would I hide my age? I am thirty, I've already told you that. Why are you being so rude, Tapan? I'd thought that this evening we'll find better things to talk about than my age or things past. My father was in Bengal in nineteen thirty-seven, thirty-eight, *just before the Second World War started*. I was four or five then.

—Where were you at the time? Here or in Bengal?

—I was with my father. Mum hadn't yet …

—Do you remember Bengal at all?

—A little bit, like a dream. It was so lush everywhere, the rivers so expansive, the Padma …

—Alice, do you know that I too am a Bengali?

—Of course, I know. You said so yourself.

—Doesn't it make you furious when you see a Bengali or hear about Bengal?

—Why should I be angry? Such a beautiful area …

—Because a Bengali man killed your father.

Suddenly Alice let out a strange scream. Please, please don't.

Tapan stood up quickly. What? What happened?

—Please, Tapan, don't bring up all that. I don't want to think about that, ever. We are friends. You haven't hugged me today, not even once. Come.

Tapan looked into her eyes briefly. Then he approached her in a detached way. Without touching her, but only craning his neck, he lightly planted a kiss on her lips. Alice pressed herself to him, and encircling his neck with both arms she kissed him passionately for a few minutes. When it was over, Tapan wiped off the lipstick stain and the scent from his lips with his handkerchief.

Moving towards the table to pour the champagne, Alice said, The fog has lifted. Look how gorgeous it is now. *It's beautiful outside.* Tapan, come to the window—

Holding his glass, Tapan stood by the window.

She leaned against him, her body relaxed. Almost unconsciously, Tapan put an arm around her shoulder. Alice's blonde head was right under his nose. Inhaling the sweet perfume coming from her hair, he gazed outside. The fog may have lifted, but it was still drizzling. One couldn't see the people on the street, but only a moving stream of umbrellas, hats, and overcoats. This part of Hampstead was a little congested. There were more older women on the streets than younger ones. Nannies pushing prams. Dirty London, melancholic London. Most of the men were in black suits, as if they were all part of a funeral procession.

Time and destiny were playing a game of hide-and-seek with him! Looking out of the window of his girlfriend's London bedsit, he was reminded of a day in his life when he was sixteen. It was in Siuri, in the home of his uncle, his father's younger brother whom Tapan called Kaka. Tapan was lying on the bed staring out of the window. He was very ill, the area around his right knee was swollen and throbbing. Although his uncle was a doctor, he had failed to diagnose the cause. Day and night Tapan howled in

pain. He was regularly injected with tranquillizers. In one of his half-awake half-asleep moments, Tapan had indistinctly heard his uncle discussing his condition with another doctor. The other doctor suspected cancer and said that the patient should be taken to Kolkata for treatment. Tapan knew that people didn't survive cancer. After he woke up that evening, he no longer wailed in pain. He lay in bed looking out of the window—a group of men were clearing water hyacinths from the small pond nearby, a few boys were hollering, a dog sat silently, his mother stood in the shade of a portia tree talking to a monk from the Ramakrishna Ashram. It was like a painting. Tears gathered in Tapan's eyes—he won't live? He'd have to leave all this behind? All of it? At that time, he couldn't have imagined, not even remotely, that one day he would leave those places behind, that he would stand at windows across the globe—in Paris, New York, Chicago, Rome, even England—that one day he would stand at a window resting against a living, breathing Englishwoman.

Alice said, Look! The weather has suddenly turned so beautiful, the fog has lifted just for us!