

The wonderland of 19th century Bengali fantasy



"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" was famously adapted by (below) Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay

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Another book attempts to bring the 19th century writer Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay's fabulist, magical realist brilliance into English

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In 2013, in a book titled *Of Ghosts and Other Perils*, the critic and translator Arnab Bhattacharya brought a few stories by the Bengali writer Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay into English. Now, 10 years later, writer-journalist Sucheta Dasgupta does the same with *Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay: Tales of Early Magic Realism in Bengali*.

Stumbling upon Bhattacharya's book a few years after its publishing was fascinating; it revealed there was more to non-realistic, speculative and fantasy fiction from late 19th century India than I had imagined. And subsequently learning of Mukhopadhyay's multifaceted talents—school teacher, police officer, museum curator, civil servant—in addition to his underrated importance in the Bengali literary canon, was a revelation.

This was a man whose epic fantasy from 1892, *Kankabati*—a fabulous Bengali retelling of Lewis Carroll's 1865 story *Alice in Wonderland*—caught Rabindranath Tagore's attention; but Mukhopadhyay was also, as Dasgupta writes in her new book, "played...down as a children's writer" by the Nobel Laureate "per-

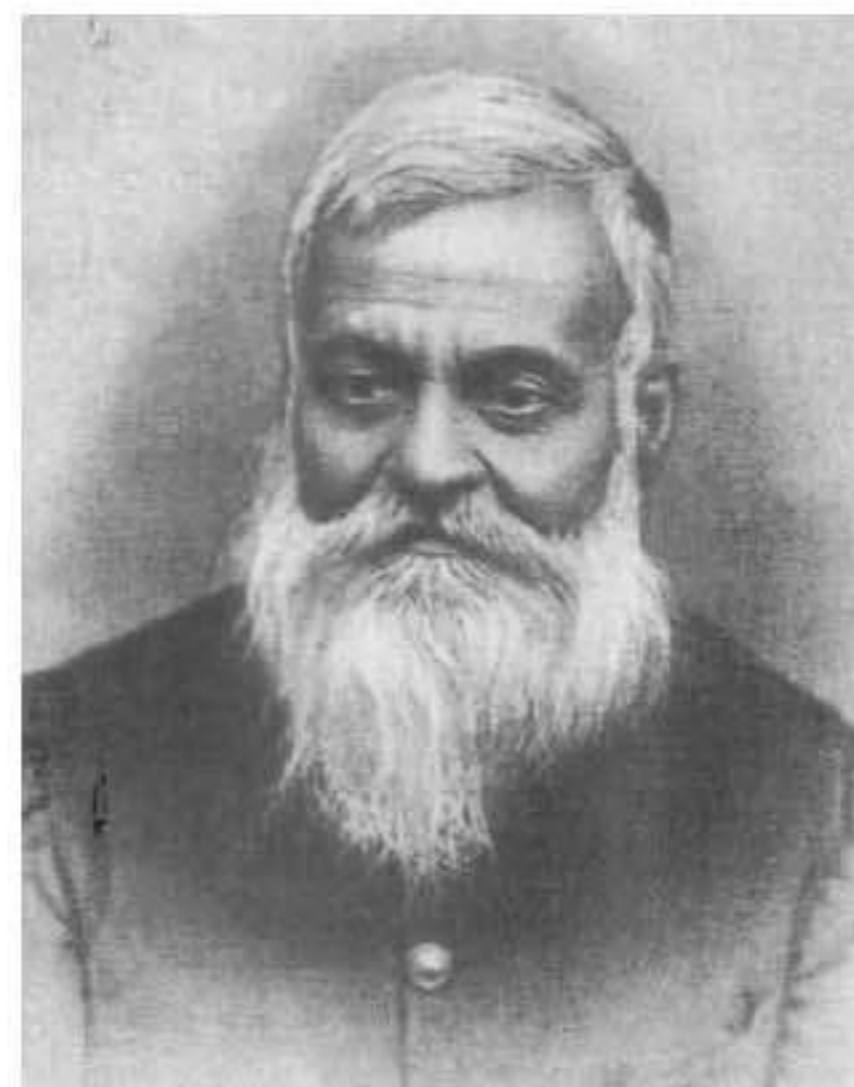
haps due to professional rivalry". Reasons to know more about Mukhopadhyay, and read as much of his work, were only stacking up. And *Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay: Tales of Early Magic Realism in Bengali*, couldn't have come at a better time.

Dasgupta's curation of stories in her book is a clear strength. While the story *Lullu* also features in Bhattacharya's collection, the similarities between translators' efforts ends there. Dasgupta also includes in her book some "international" folktales that Mukhopadhyay seems to have heard and recorded through his extensive travels, including *Rostam* from Iran and one piece of non-fiction, titled *The Alchemist*, about the German Johann Bottger.

Lullu, which is Dasgupta's opening story, is the strongest of the lot. A rollicking tale of Ameer, a man in search of his abducted wife, who seeks the help of a brahmin, a weaver, and a band of ghosts, it is a prime example of what Mukhopadhyay seems to do best. Crafted as a simple story that follows the all-too-familiar hero-rescuing-the-heroine storyline, it is filled with incredible subplots including the marriage of two ghosts, and subtexts of realist interventions, including a plea to boycott foreign textiles for the sake of economic independence, spoken by a ghost.

A favourite metaphor from *Lullu* has to be the one that comes from the scene in which Ameer, having been advised that applying ghost oil will give him powers for his journey underwater where his wife was imprisoned, tricks the ghost Gongon into believing he was to edit a newspaper that Ameer was to start, and takes him to an

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oil-press. Soon, the ghost, whose bones begin cracking in the machine's bracket cries out in pain and the anguish of being cheated:

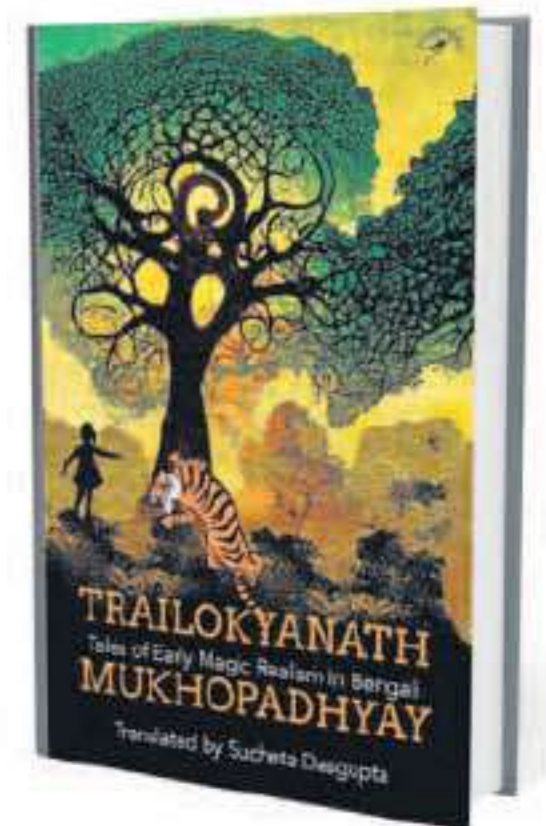
"Is this what you meant when you said I would edit a paper?" Ameer smiled and replied, "Don't

you know, mister? Why this is how I get my articles out of my editors..."

...Only when the apparition's essence did become dry and wholly desiccated the bullock stopped its per-

ambulations. The wheel moved no more. Ameer set free the shrivelled shell of the ghost. Suffice to say that had he been human, he would have been long dead by then."

This great opening effort is followed is by



Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay: Tales of Early Magic Realism in Bengali translated by Sucheta Dasgupta, published by Niyogi Books 386 pages, ₹595

Dasgupta's brave attempt at translating *Kankabati*. Titled *Treks of Kankabati* in this volume, it follows two very able translations of the tale, one by Bhattacharya as a standalone book two years after *Of Ghosts and Other Perils*, and another by Nandini Bhattacharya in 2017.

While all three efforts are sincere line-by-line translations, Dasgupta's is unfortunately the hardest to read. It's missing the sort of zaniness that a story such as this requires (the titular heroine goes from learning the alphabet to escaping marriage to an old man to marrying a tiger). The translation gets too bogged down by Mukhopadhyay's commentary on social issues and is unable to take the many flights that the story does. While indeed important to and inseparable from the story, Mukhopadhyay's commentaries against social evils or any sentiments of moderate nationalism could only escape closer colonial scrutiny folded as they were into fabulism.

The language also jumps and jars in places throughout the book. For example, the use of "secret" as a verb, with sentences like "Tell all, don't secret anything from the council of the village" could seem clunky and archaic. In her translator's note, Dasgupta says "The challenge...was to be accurate in my translation so that I could communicate as much of the Bengali idiom and history of the language to the reader while preserving the thrust of the dialogue and the thought process of the author. I fully intend my work to be the 'same text in a different language' and not a transcreation." I would have to argue that the translation versus transcreation debate has acquired a lot more nuance than the lines above suggest.

In the high-action points of most stories, however, Dasgupta's approach does iron itself out—the pace carries the reader along. In some places the translator's approach also brings with it a sort of old-world charm. "Said he"; "Said I"; or "This is how does the scripture advise" automatically conjures up a sing-song conversation style that much of Indian oral traditions are known for, immediately placing Mukhopadhyay in his period—one of early transition of storytelling into book publishing.

Maybe it has so far been a case of an embarrassment of riches when it comes to Bengali literature of the 19th Century that Mukhopadhyay is still not too well-known. But one glance at Dasgupta's sensitive and frank exposition of the writer and satirist's skill and politics in which she lists five reasons convincing us of his merits and relevance in the here and now—and it is all the push we need.