

The end of history

Conversations with Aurangzeb

By Charu Nivedita

Translated from the Tamil by Nandini Krishnan

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An important quandary that plagues so many translations is one of simultaneity: how to ensure that one language retains its essence and tonality while conveying the tenor of another.

Conversations with Aurangzeb circumvents this, somewhat, and announces right at the beginning that this is not so much a translation as a “transcreation”, in which, the author Charu Nivedita has wholly re-written and composed a novel in cahoots with the translator Nandini Krishnan. This fruitful collaboration is in part made possible by their mutual love for cats, thereby earning each other the monikers ‘Catappa’ and ‘Baahubilli’ respectively. (For those, not in the know, I recommend, at your own peril, the Telugu blockbuster in two parts, *Baahubali*). In the Translator’s Note, Krishnan sets out the mode of writing as one intended to portray “the life cycle of a novel” from translation to awards. This last, of course, part seriously and in part lament.

There are some things one should know about this novel, beforehand. One, that it takes a little time to get used to its rhythmic movements between languages, timelines, places, and modes of conversation. For *Conversations with Aurangzeb* is first and foremost rooted in understanding the conversational form as wholly sufficient to storytelling. If that sounds unbearably serious, then it’s important to remember that, secondly, this novel is often very funny, working through analogy and metaphor to extract laugh-out-loud chortles from the most serious historian. Lastly, it involves labour on the part of the reader to stay with its only loosely avowed intentions to speak with Aurangzeb; for this is truly a postmodern novel. By postmodern, I mean its sweeping use of – and here, let me resort to Wikipedia – “metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality”, all of it wielded with some flair and ease. In the novel, Aurangzeb is also therefore constructed as a character of the novel. Charu Nivedita, author of more than 60 works in Tamil is clearly in fine form, albeit in densely overwritten and contested territory, namely, Mughal history, and even more specifically, the life and death of Aurangzeb, ostensibly the last major emperor of the Mughal dynasty.

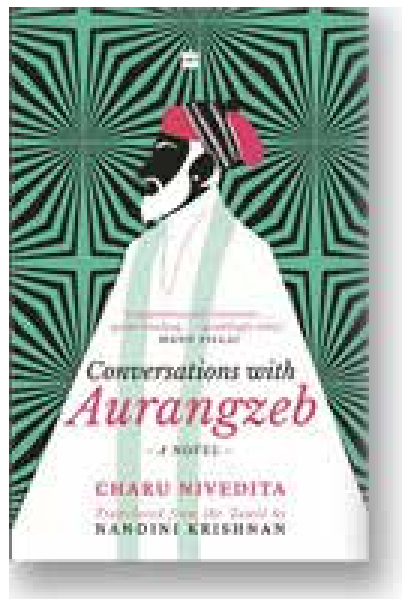
The characters of this novel are many: they primarily include the eponymous Aurangzeb; the author, unnamed but identifiable; an Aghori whose body is possessed by the emperor in order to narrate his life story; at times, various members of Aurangzeb’s clan as also his antagonists and enemies who make guest appearances in the medium’s body; the author’s alter-ego and frequent collaborator in text, Kokkarakko; and his on-ground translator Rizwan. The primary speaker, however, remains Aurangzeb. What begins as an effort to uncover the story of the Catholic nun Catarina de San Juan, born in 1606 as Mirra and raised in the same palace as Shah Jahan, turns into a conversation over 12 séances with Aurangzeb. The calls to Shah Jahan to speak about the nun via a medium, an Aghori, are instead answered thus, “I Alamgir, born Aurangzeb, have come before you.” At which point, the

author spontaneously thinks, “Even after having passed into the spirit world, must you be an usurper?” Thus begins Aurangzeb’s novel-long quest to clear his name and hold forth on the journey of his life. Over 14 chapters, the reader is launched headfirst into the travails of early modern kingship, and a hilarious retelling of Aurangzeb’s life as translated into the 21st century, drawing upon popular film, fandom, social commentary, and writerly woes.

Prologues 1 to 5 clarify for the reader the conditions of the novel. Its

made manifest is to produce a complex first-person history of Aurangzeb, who, “in his eighty-nine-year-long-life – and forty-nine-year-long-reign – ... was not always the same person”.

The prologues are also some of the funniest exchanges of the novel, as the interlocutors struggle to establish mutual understanding, sharing confidences and regrets. Aurangzeb declares his familiarity with many languages including English and French lamenting how, “If you had troubled yourself to read Bernier’s travelogues,



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uninterested in Mughal kingship and Aurangzeb. Its postmodernity notwithstanding, *Conversations with Aurangzeb* tells a damn good story and one which may offer fruitful imaginative potential for this age at the end of history

languages are delineated, and Alamgir Aurangzeb agrees to exchange words such as “Fie on you all!” – prompting the audience to look around the room for Shashi Tharoor – for Urdu, since as the author beseeches him, “Your English is too complex for this century...and if one goes by the national bestseller lists in India, our readers are even worse.” Also clarified are some of the sources that inform the novel’s irreverent, but scholarly treatise: “Pandit Chandrabhan Brahman, the Mughal royal court astrologer from the late 1620s to 1663”; the travelogue of François Bernier (1620-88), a royal physician; and the accounts of Niccolao Manucci (1638-1717), a Venetian of many talents who had access to the Mughal courts. This novel is also thus historiography even as it declares no allegiance to accuracy, just to “fewer errors”. Its project as

the false image of Alamgir fostered by history would have disappeared.” The author in turn envies this multilingual capacity and his lack thereof, ruing further his fate in Tamil Nadu, where writers are “on par with street dogs”. At this point, both come across as mildly whiny men, each in turn rushing to explicate his time, place and condition to the other.

By Prologue 3, the author has begun to woo Aurangzeb with Imampasand mangoes “presented as finger food on a porcelain plate, complete with a toothpick” and the latter has deigned to explicate the use of titles to address the Mughal emperors since as “Giti Sitani Firdaus Makani”, in other words, the first Mughal emperor Babur had once declared, “The people of Hindustan know no respect.” This unfolds into an analogy between emperors and

Tamil film stars, where the author tells Alamgir that his title ‘Ruler of the World’ has been appropriated by the Tamil film actor known as ‘Uлага Nayagan’; he declares, “What’s even more bizarre is the man looks quite like you too!” By Prologue 5, Aurangzeb finally reacts, “When I gave myself the title of Uлага Nayagan – Alamgir – I meant for it to signify “He who has conquered the world”. For such a tragic fate to have befallen that title in three hundred years...” In the Prologues, the author and the emperor also spar on revolution, Karl Marx, encounter killings, Baudrillard and populist politics, comparing in turn the mores and modes of each period and rule. The author also peppers such talk with social commentary on a range of issues, including sexual identification, revisionist historiography and postmodern living, many of them often throwaway and curmudgeonly; one begins to suspect that *Conversations with Aurangzeb* is more or less a conversation between two men.

Chapters 1 to 8 unfold in Aurangzeb’s voice rehearsing litanies on the work of kingship, the compulsions of fratricide, the benefits of marketing as seen in the case of the celebrated Mauryan king Ashoka, the work of devotion and many such, all serving to illuminate an important paradox as articulated by the translator, Rizwan: “Bernier equates Aurangzeb’s rule to Rama Rajyam...Manucci writes as if he were the villain...Aurangzeb calls himself a fakir...Which version of Aurangzeb is the real one?” The Mughal kings in turn perform similar paradoxes; most of them, ignoring the last piece of advice proffered by Babur: “Don’t ever kill your brothers...”, wage war, court conspiracy, revel in poetry and suffer a lack of love.

Chapters 9 onwards veer off and return to the protagonist, waging an exchange with Kokkarakko, expounding on men’s lust and desires, and orchestrating a trip to Chile (Read the book!). Aurangzeb’s voice is also interrupted and contested by a few others occupying the Aghori’s body, including his brother and sister; Rani Durgavati, queen of Gondwana; and also briefly, the late historian Jadunath Sarkar whose differential interpretations bolster what Aurangzeb then comes to conclude, “Perhaps your democracy is the way forward, Honourable Katib. It is too much for one man to rule over an entire people all by himself. He is bound to go insane.”

At 330 pages, drawn from and constructed via an impressive bibliography, *Conversations with Aurangzeb* is a frequently funny, highly inventive, sometimes repetitive, mildly transgressive, long read. Its form can be unwieldy even as its historiography is riveting, even for those uninterested in Mughal kingship and Aurangzeb. My one complaint would be that the playfulness and ease of the prologues have not been replicated enough in the chapters, leading often, to some fatigue in an introduction/ re-introduction to what may be familiar episodes in early modern Indian history, albeit often in surprising form. However, this is a minor ask. Its postmodernity notwithstanding, *Conversations with Aurangzeb* tells a damn good story and one which may offer fruitful imaginative potential for this age at the end of history. I recommend reading it over many days and weeks. ■