

New Lines in Bangladeshi Writing in English: The Poetry of Shamsad Mortuza

Subir Dhar

Professor of English and Director of School of Languages and Culture, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata India

Tapu Biswas

Assistant Professor of English and Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati, Shantiniketan, West Bengal



Barkode

Shamsad Mortuza

Dhaka: Adorn Publications, 2013. 135 pp.

ISBN: 9789842003714

For a country like Bangladesh, which emerged as an independent nation only in 1971, the coming into being of a fully definable national literature in English may understandably take a little more time. Nevertheless, Bangladesh does have a significant number of new writers even in the field of poetry written in English. The first Bangladeshi English poetic voices began to be heard in the mid-1970s with Feroz Ahmeduddin's *Handful of Dust* (1975), Razia Khan's *Argus Under Anaesthesia* (1976) and *Cruel April* (1977), and Kaiser Haq's *Collected Poems: 1966-2006* being early productions (Askari). Other poets who published their poetry in English were Nadeem Rahman (with *Politically Incorrect Poems*, 2004), Rumana Siddique (*Five Faces of Eve: Poems*, 2007), and Syed Najmuddin Hashim (*Hopefully the Pomegranate*, 2007) (Shook). Monica Ali, with her 2003 debut novel *Brick Lane*, put Bangladeshi writing in English on the map of the New English Literatures, and, in this light, it may be appropriate to read and appreciate the output of Shamsad Mortuza who is a comparatively new talent in the field of Bangladeshi English poetry.

Born in 1970, Mortuza published his first volume of poems in a print edition in November 2013. Not insignificantly titled *Barkode*, the poems in this collection are largely short lyrics on a wide range of subjects and topics, from acute observations of life and lived reality to

more reflective observations on individuals, attitudes and cultures. Nevertheless, more than the content, it is the title of this book of poems that first catches the attention. The white on black cover design featuring vertical lines or strips are clearly meant to be evocative of the ubiquitous barcodes that adorn almost all the products we buy today. In a footnote to a poem called “Barcode or on a Zebra Crossing,” which happens to be the last poem in the book, Mortuza himself explains that he:

discovered a new meaning of being checked out while in London. It seemed that I didn’t have the cultural code to access the grand narrative (ode) that I was planning to study. My skin color barred me from decoding the message. The innocent black-and-white bars at a mall were no different from the stripes on the streets. (135n.)

But the name “Barkode” may also be more playfully (and meaningfully) read as “bark” and “ode,” with, that is, all the paronomasia involved in the word “bark” (the explosive cry of a dog, or an emphatic command or assertion, a boat, or the bark of a tree, for instance) combined with the resonances of the poetic form of “ode” which is, at its most basic, a poetic song or an address or exclamation in verse. Interestingly, these implications are often woven into the literary text composed by the poet. The dog image, for example, figures in quite a straightforward way in the epigraph lines that introduce the first section: “toothing bones/ while eyeing the butcher/the dog in me becoming u-in-verse.” Somewhat similarly, though a little more obliquely, the image of the bark of a tree is evoked in the line: “A poem that will not nail any tree...” (“A Dead Poem” 19).

Pun-ny and funny, but not the less serious for all that, the poems in *Barkode* encompass a wide range of moods. Eighty nine poems are spread out over six sections in this volume, each section labeled with such descriptive headings *asu-in-verse*, *eye*, *For You*, *m. eye*, *A Thin Line*, and *Silence*. The poems in the first section are about the art and craft of writing. The initial poem in the collection is, appropriately enough for a conscious writer and poet, about punctuation—and about a poet’s punctuated (punctured?) thoughts. “Does a sentence die with a full stop?” is a line in this poem named “Punctuated Thought.” “Does a sentence come to life when it is read without the punctuation mark—the dead stop?” reads another line. But it is the last two verses that drive home the real point of the poem’s “thought”:

My ghost reader reads a decomposed document
As I look out for the field where my poem ought to be. (Mortuza 15)

What is distinctive about these verses is their highly compressed expressivity. There are at least four major cruxes in these brief lines, the first being the poet as reader/ghost reader, the second the dead (and so decaying) textually bodied document of the already-written poem, the third being the poet as the writer-creator, and the fourth the conceptual field in the mind of the poet where the poem ought to be but is not as yet, despite having being written. In fact, “Punctuated Thought” is evidently a poem about the composition of a poem, a lyric reflecting upon how a finished poem may appear to remain unfinished to the poet who has written or drafted it. The poet’s “look[ing] out for the field where my poem ought to be” represents the expected zone of realization or accomplishment desired by a poet. That few poems ever

actually perfectly express what the poet wants to say is indicated by the infinitive “ought to be.” In the meantime, the words on the page (or computer screen) written out by the poet as the “finished” poem exists only as a “decomposed” document, decomposed in the double sense of not as yet fully composed or completed, and simultaneously as dead and decayed since words written down inevitably become a recorded text, a finite artifact that has passed away beyond the spasm of the creative process that gave birth to it. The “ghost” reader in all probability is the first reader of the poem, that is the poet him/herself, and s/he is referred to as “ghost” since being a reader involves only his/her readerly consciousness which is a fragmentary aspect of the poet’s complete persona and personality as a creator. The paradox this poem celebrates, its originary germ, is the thought of life and death, the beginning and the end of creativity. A completed poem is like the full-stopped end of a sentence. Once published, it cannot be changed even by its writer. But creativity is an endless process, like a sentence without a stop. The poem in creation is thus never completed, at least in the mind of the poet, even when it has been written down.

A conceit about the writing of poetry being a performance and perhaps a performative is the soul of “A Poet Performer.” The first two stanzas of this poem run:

Words are but costumed actors on the pages;
 A poet is but the director of the stage
 While the readers remain the real producers who never age.
 A poet is a word player who empties out her self
 To empower the readers to become the producers
 Of a world full of meandering meanings. (Mortuza 21)

In a sense, these lines are highly literary, and even school-ish, for their inspiration seems to have come from Barthes’ “Death of the Author” and from the theories of the Reader Response theorists. But certainly less scholarly and more tellingly intelligent is “A Box of Intravenous Saline” in which a familiar image is taken up and given a number of surprisingly appropriate turns. The image is that of a saline container, the transparent fullness of which is evocatively referred to as “transparency/Measured tranquility.” Mortuza’s observant eye is equally evidenced in the description of the saline container as “Spiked in one end/Needed in another.” The valve in the drip-tube is a “Regulated ... Geared wheel” through which “Fluids change bodies”—from the container to a patient’s body obviously. But if the refrain of “Drip drop/Drip drop/Drip drop” reminds the reader of a few well-known lines in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the infusion of the liquid into a patient’s bloodstream is quite innovatively likened to:

... how a story
 Flows into the veins
 drop
 drop
 drop
 And signals an end
 Like a thrown plastic bag
 Dropped in a bin (Mortuza 25)

Only if one notices the missing period at the end of the poem does one realize that the poet is cleverly de-registering the fact that an inspiration which is left empty after an act of creation is like an empty plastic saline bottle thrown into a waste-bin.

The poems in the section titled *eye* are of a different flavor altogether, sparked off as they are by what may be called minor epiphanies, momentary realizations of the significance of quotidian experiences, or end results even of stray thoughts that wander into the mind. “Winged Feet,” for instance, is about a commonplace sighting—about the poet’s observation of his own “feet ... resting on the windowsill.” As the poet looks at his toes, he wonders “why can’t they have fancy names like fingers/thumb, grooming, middle, ring, little/thumb, grooming, middle, ring, little.” Seeing his toes outlined against the sky, he notices too that “They branch out like wild mushrooms/They spread out like cobra hoods.” He flinches his toes as if he needs to “grab a piece of the sky,” even though a “jacaranda tree has already taken up a large share of the sky” framed by the window. But the tree brings to his mind the image of a perching bird and he muses:

Maybe I can use the tree as my bar to put my feet on
Before I can spread my wings. (Mortuza 31).

If there is a touch of Robert Frost in these lines, memories of Ted Hughes, Eliot, and perhaps even Baudelaire, surface upon reading the first lines of “Para Diced for the Cents of a Woman”:

Eve
snakes through the city,
the ant colony,
the termite colony,
the concrete jungle, (Mortuza 36)

What is significant, however, is that these intertexts are given a completely local habitation and implication as the poem turns out to be about the plight of women who slave for long hours stitching clothes for paltry wages in garment sweatshops in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The “Cents” in the title of the poem refer, of course, to the small amounts of money (literally cents, and not American dollars) earned by the women laborers, and so the allusion draws attention to the exploitative practice of labor outsourcing, while at the same time ironically reflecting on the Western notion of female sensuality as exemplified by the film *The Scent of a Woman*. “Para Diced” is quite self-evidently “Paradised” as in the Miltonian sense of “Adam [and Eve] unparadised”; but “Diced” can also mean cut into small pieces, which is a most effective way of indicating the subjugation of the poor working class Bangladeshi women who have to sacrifice their lives at the altar of capitalism. Hence the lines:

Eve weaves. Eve weeps
Cents sent
Saints sent
To check on compliance
To check on corp. finance

St. aah, St. uhh, St. ouch
 St.ich! St.arch! St.one-
 Wash and dye

There are poems of many moods in *Barkode*. “I Don’t Feel Anything Anymore” is a lament and a protest against the benumbing de-humanization of consciousness that is a fallout of a submission by video-gamers, internet addicts, and virtual reality aficionados the world over to the realm of simulation and cyber reality. Beginning with the lines:

I don’t feel anything anymore
 Anger, frustration, hatred
 Love, fear, jealousy —
 Nothing touches me anymore!
 Maybe it does touch my cyber avatar,
 But the human me is comfortably numb!
 Children gunned down or droned; I don’t care!
 For me it is but the size of the guns that matters.
 Women flogged or raped; I don’t care!
 For me it is the media coverage that matters.
 The innocent hacked or chopped; I don’t care!
 For me it is the video footage on You Tube that matters ..., (Mortuza 85)

the poem moves on to approximating the language of God to “cyber tongue” (“God speaks in a distant language, so is my cyber tongue”), before concluding with a compelling reference to the first element in the digital binary—the zero—to which “you can both come to... or start from....” Among the other of Mortuza’s poems expressive of social concern and consciousness are “4891, or 1984 Revisited,” which is on “the whistleblower Mr. Edward Snowden,” and “Even Hydra Headed Monster Has But One Shoulder,” which is about the salespersons in television advertisements persuading viewers to buy and to keep on buying. The latter poem ends wittily however as the poet realizes that the TV remote with which he had invoked these “spirits” to appear before his eyes can just as easily be exorcised by the pressing of another button on the same gadget. More explicitly indicative of a political consciousness—of one about the cause of the Gulf War—is the brief three-line poem “How the Rest was Won” which deserves to be quoted in full:

Sitting by the big pond
 Big B brays ‘ee’ and little b brays ‘or’
 And there was War (Mortuza 92)

Apart from calling attention to its specific political content (the “big pond” being the Atlantic Ocean, Big B or Big Brother being the United States, and “little b” being not-so-Great Britain), it may be indicated that this poem invokes through its title a concept of a far greater significance. And this is the idea that the aggressiveness of contemporary America is a residue of the much older heritage of the sociologically aggressive spirit that won the Americans the Wild West.

Political also is “To Daddy on 9/11” in which the Daddy is President Bush post-9/11 and the war on Iraq has Americans “Paddle in pyre” with the “Plane truth struck” being “Bom-baba Bag-Dad!!” (Mortuza 93). Equally imbued with a political consciousness is “March on Europa,” a poem about the Statue of Liberty—and Guantanamo Bay.

There are evidently several sides to Shamsad Mortuza’s craft as a poet. The writer’s professional side and knowledge of British and American literature as Professor of English at Dhaka University and the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh surfaces every so often in casual allusions, the employment of forms and styles reminiscent of canonical British and American poets, the use of sub-genres such as Concrete Poetry (used in “The Barometer,” “Animal,” “Through the Pores,” etc.), and in direct intertextual echoes. Not only are readers referred back to original English poems like Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (which becomes *The Rime of the Modern Mariner*) and Spenser’s famous *Amoretti* sonnet “One day I wrote her name ...” which becomes an unrhymed sestet beginning: “I tried to write your name on the beach/But waves kept on wiping the first part off” (“On the Beach” 51), there are also instances of direct name-dropping like the reference to Tom Stoppard in “Peeling the Onion” or the poem entitled “A Letter for Mr. Kurtz.” A largely selfconscious creative play with words like puns and not-so-unoften paradoxes (as in the lyric “Paradoxes”) seems to be typical features of Mortuza’s art. And then there is his love for surprise endings as displayed in the poem “The Fire” which runs:

I might just as well as make the best use of the time and
Bow-drill a piece of wood and light a fire.
Join glasses and trap sunlight and add kindling to the bundling tinder;
Ask the dragon to teach me how to fire out heart’s anger;
Learn the Chinese magician’s trick with magnesium and start fireworks;
Find Prometheus and ask him to help me start a civilization — Then again,
I might just as well make the best use of time,
While waiting for a spark from you —
my match! (Mortuza 49)

Witty in a neo-Metaphysical kind of way, Shamsad Mortuza seems to have been inspired by such contemporary British poets as Carol Ann Duffy amongst others. Nevertheless, both the mind and the voice of the poet are distinctively South Asian and specifically Bengali/Bangladeshi. The one poem that most unambiguously declares this is “Sheuli,” which is an ode on a flower probably indigenous to Bengal alone. This, and the other poems in Mortuza’s volume, may be described as experimental, tentative, exploratory, and as yet unfinished in the entirely positive sense of possessing new possibilities for development. *Barkode* barks back at the English speaking western world in the voice of a Third World South Asian English language poet. It asserts the poet’s—and his postcolonial reader’s—ownership of a tongue that was two centuries and more back an alien imposition, but which gradually became an inalienable part of him like donated blood transfused into living human flesh.

Works Cited

- Askari, Rashid. "Bangladeshis Writing in English." *The Daily Star* (August 14, 2010). Web. August 4, 2016.
- . "A Brief History of Bangladeshi Writing in English." *The Missing Slate*. October 1, 2015. Web. July 17, 2016.
- Mortuza, Shamsad. *Barkode*. Dhaka: Adorn Books, 2013.
- Shook, David. "Bangladesh on the World Stage: An Introduction." *World Literature Today*. May 2013. Web. July 17, 2016.

