

Bangladeshi Literature: Outside the Global Tango

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Abstract: This paper explores the difficulty of reading or transmitting in translation. In recent decades, writings from certain cultures have found a great deal of global currency, both in translation (viz. Latin America) or in international languages (viz. Indian writing in English). At the same time, writing that is as rich in its content and artistry from other languages, termed 'vernacular', from the point of view of global marketplace, finds it quite hard to reach any audience beyond its linguistic boundaries. Is it mainly because, as Gayatri Spivak accused, these literatures are 'stylistically non-competitive', or is it due to other structural reasons? This paper argues that it is mainly due to limitations of the global reading protocols, rather than qualities inherent in the vernacular writings. While a great deal of such writings might be a bit too 'local', and makes access to its realm of reality and references a bit too prohibitive for readers not familiar with the history and context of the tales and the writings, that is not the only reason. Some of the recent 'international' writing has succeeded so well partly by learning how to manage this access without diluting the 'localness' too much, thus retaining just the right amount of 'authenticity', for a wider consumption than just in one's own culture, or perhaps primarily for consumption in other cultures. But, it is possible both to write and read in vernaculars, primarily for a vernacular audience, while retaining a richness that would be rewarding for global readers too, if only they were open to widening the protocols of their reading. This paper takes a Bangladeshi novel, Shahidul Jahir's *Shey Ratey Purnima Chhilo* to demonstrate the shape and nuances that such a reading might take.

Gayatri Spivak writes in a recent essay: "If we were transnationally literate, we might read sectors that are stylistically noncompetitive with the spectacular experimental fiction of certain sections of hybridity or postcoloniality with a disarticulating rather than a comparative point of view" (Spivack 483). This proposition is made ostensibly in the spirit of a more progressive pedagogy than that provided by existing forms of multiculturalism. The inclusion of both the so called "noncompetitive" literature and also the intention of reading them in a "disarticulating" manner are the steps that are to take us farther than current multiculturalism. Yet, the readiness with which Spivak associates "experimental" literature with the site of hybridity is somewhat troubling. It seems to retain a division between a normative site of experimental literature which coincides with

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metropolitan cultures and a greater stylistically impaired sector which collapses into the "rest." As long as this binaristic approach stays in place, the subjectivity of the Other can never be rescued – though this would then be the self-contradictory purpose of a transnational literacy. This divide between the metropolitan and the local is worth examining because it speaks to problems not only of multiculturalism, but more broadly to problems of global cultural exchange.

"We admire the sophistication of Indian writing in English," writes Spivak even as she points up the absence from this literature of a non-Christian, tribal voice (483). The shortcoming of Indo-Anglican literature from this viewpoint is not a lack of literary merit but a lack of representational diversity. In the case of the "non-competitive literature," however, there remains a lingering charge of aesthetic inadequacy. The example of such writings is furnished by Bangladeshi literature, about which Spivak writes: "You will hardly ever find an entry from Bangladesh in a course on postcolonial or Third World literature"(483). Spivak considers it insupportable, however, to leave that literature out of the multicultural curriculum simply because it does not measure up to existing criteria of literary excellence, or even competence. Where others would wait until Bangladesh produced its Tolstoys – or at least, Achebes and Rushdies – Spivak feels the imperative to make its inclusion possible by radicalizing the notion of literature itself. She writes: "We expand the definition of literature to include social inscription" (485). She suggests that the voice of noncompetitive communities should be culled from any serviceable form or venue. In the Bangladeshi case, she uses the "Declaration of Comilla," a statement about the reproductive rights of Third World women especially in the face of imperialist discourse and practices of population control, as an example of a worthy and usable instance of such an inscription.

This approach may be perfectly in keeping with a post-structuralist politics of eternally repositioning oneself in alliance with the most unvoiced constituencies of the moment. But in a crucial way it also seems to miss the point: What the so called "noncompetitive" literatures need is not to be supplanted or supplemented with non-literary inscriptions, but to have the very criteria of aesthetic judgment that finds them short to be reexamined. But Spivak seems to hold the literatures rather one-sidedly responsible for their failure to excite foreign interest. She writes, for example:

And class-fixed literary production as such in Bangladesh is concerned not with the place of the nation in transnationality but rather with a nation-fixed view that does not produce the energy of translation. (484)

Presumably, if instead this literature were devoted to producing the accepted and highly desired narratives of globality (migration stories, marginality portraits,

etc.), then it would have no dearth of "energy." Even the national tale could produce the necessary energy as long as it was concerned with placing the nation within transnationality. These are very disturbing demands indeed: Third World literature is thought to be insufficient or subpar when it is engaged with its own locality. Third World literature can achieve globality only when it asseverates its filiations with the extra-local; namely, the Western metropolis.² It is Indo-Anglican fiction's spectacular success at such filiation – and not its vaunted experimentation alone – that has made it a global success.³ It is also precisely the failure to forge such connections – in spite of some superbly successful experimental endeavors – that has prevented Bangladeshi literature from becoming celebrated in a similar fashion.

If Bangladeshi literature is not busy affiliating itself with the West, one might ask, then what exactly is it doing? The best answer might take the form of actual readings in that literature. I can hardly hope to do justice to such a spirited body of work as contemporary Bangladeshi poetry, drama and increasingly fiction in the span of so short a paper. In fact, even a much longer format may not relieve the problem of representation. It is in a discursive vein that I offer an interpretation of one recent Bangladeshi novel, Shahidul Jahir's *Shey Ratey Purnima Chilo* (1995), which may be translated as *Night of the Full Moon*. It is set in an imaginary but prototypical Bangladeshi village called Suhasini and its protagonist is the village patriarch Mofizuddin. The novel opens with some of the villagers of Suhasini gathered in a compound the night after the assassination of Mofizuddin together with his entire clan. In the initial shock of the event the villagers seem hard pressed to recall any detail of the massacre other than the exceptional luminosity of the Moon. Over several nights of collective remembering a tale emerges, though it fails to conclusively resolve the mystery of the murder. Memory, treacherous for the one, proves no less slippery for the many. Yet even in its falsities it yields a tale which has its own kind of validity. And what the villagers of Suhasini are able to gather is the extent to which Mofizuddin's autocratism has been the defining fact of life in Suhasini, a fact so obvious, yet a fact to which they had been benumbed by long years of acquiescence.

It is possible to read in this tale, if one wishes, the "national" story of Bangladesh. The Father of the Nation of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was indeed assassinated with almost his entire family. And the story of his life is

² This assertion rests partly in seeing hybridity as a manifestation of a postmodernism that despite its vaunted radicalism cannot operate out of the imperatives of contemporary capitalism. See David Harvey. *The Conditions of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996).

³ Arif Dirlik has well analyzed the postcolonial intellectual's (and writer's) imbrication with capitalism and the centers that dominate its global exercise. See Arif Dirlik. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism." Also in McClintock, Mufti, & Shohat, 501-528.

inextricably linked in certain tellings with the story of Bangladesh. However, this more obvious allegory is neither the most interesting nor the most significant possible reading of the novel. The novel indeed exceeds the purpose and satisfaction of any such simple parallelism. And in so doing, what it achieves is a much broader critique of modernity itself. One of the main ways in which this critique manifests itself is through the depiction of the thwarted instrumentalities of the state. In the process, the novel achieves a conscious, critical and nuanced articulation of an autonomous locality in the encroaching context of the modern state.

Mofizuddin rises to prominence first by establishing the *haat* (market) of Nayantara in defiance of the colonial authorities. And then, despite his lowly origins by marrying the village head's daughter and becoming the head of the village *panchayet* (council). It is important to note that the *haat* and the *panchayet* are institutions of the Bengali village that predate British colonialism by centuries and represent the self-organizing capacity and legacy of the village community. Mofizuddin's relationship with his community is independent of the mediations of the state and it is from the start largely autocratic. When the state seeks to co-opt or control such autonomous micro-communal relationships through the union chairmanship elections at the end of the British era, it is no surprise then that Mofizuddin simply has to state his desire for the newly created post to assume it. Ironically enough, Mofizuddin's chairmanship outlasts not only those who created it but several other regimes through the British, Pakistani and Bangladeshi eras. In the process, the villagers are denied the opportunity to ever participate in that near talismanic ritual of modernity – casting ballots. When a challenger to Mofizuddin does come up, in the form of another aspirant to local autocracy, Afzal Khan, the villagers' hope that they might finally get a chance to vote is raised again. But it is dashed soon enough as Afzal Khan cowers before Mofizuddin's intimidating presence. A challenger appears years later in the figure of one of Afzal Khan's sons, who wants to run for yet another new office. But Mofizuddin tells everyone:

I will be the chairman again, as I am the lifelong chairman of Brommogacha. You have always made me the chairman of the union, so I will be the chairman of the upazilla as well, and it is for your own good.... When no one else could do it, didn't I establish the haat of Nayantara, for your own good, on this road of the zilla board?... When all the villages around us suffered from drought, when there was no crop in the fields or peace at home, then didn't I arrange for these canals spreading like a net through the village?... If you look over the village through the Dog-Killing Field, if you smell the soil, can't you smell the sweat of my body? (16) (My translation)

This is the classic self-serving speech of an autocrat, yet this speech – as indeed much of the narration – attests this relationship is still contractual. While autocracy may be the dominant factor in Mofizuddin's relationship with his community, it retains an element of accountability. Mofizuddin is in fact answerable to his community in ways or degrees that was not usually the case with his state-level counterparts. Moreover, unlike the Father of the Nation (or his military successors) Mofizuddin's power did not derive from an affiliation with the instrumentalities of the modern state. If anything, he absorbed them into the more autochthonous networks of being and belonging that governed the strong culture of his locality.

The slippage of political and institutional power represents only one of several ways in which Jahir's novel explores the problems of modernity. By way of suggesting the novel's discursive variety I will touch in passing on one other aspect. If Suhasini embodies a space which in many ways successfully resists the impersonal, homogenizing, bureaucratic will of the modern state, it does not by any means represent some utopian escape. The individual in Suhasini can be said to stand in the same relation to the community as the community does to the state: a resistant bondage. The community's coercive will finds its most acute expression in the ferocity with which it polices individual desire, especially romantic and sexual desire. Some strong and resourceful people such as Mofizuddin can find ways to cross the barriers of class and marry the village head's daughter. But as a village head himself Mofizuddin blocks the possibility of his son's marriage to Dulali, the fourteen year old daughter of a laborer. The lovelorn adolescent takes her life in disappointment. But her father, in a gesture of final defiance, refuses to bury his daughter until her lover, Mofizuddin's son, comes from the city to attend the funeral. The entire village, including Mofizuddin's own wife, rallies behind the bereaved father. And though they could not stand up to Mofizuddin when Dulali was still alive, they score an ambiguous victory against the patriarch in her death. In a rare instance of supernatural clemency, Dulali's body does not decompose until her lover does arrive.

There is no atavistic longing for a pure past in this novel. Neither the village life nor the modern state is valorized. What one is left with is rather a portrait of individuals who struggle to survive between the brutal demands of two imperfect modalities of power. It is this critical outlook really, rather than say its many marvelous touches (fine though those inventions are) that separates Jahir's novel from both an earlier generation of rural realism and from a more contemporary brand of national allegory. To fail to notice this would be a result more of a tired template that a reader brings to such a work than anything intrinsic to the text. Yet works such as Jahir's are habitually misread, if they are read at all. This is true not only for Bangladeshi literature but also for the vernacular languages of India – and indeed of many other African and Asian countries. So vast an

omission from the multicultural curriculum can hardly be blamed one-sidedly on these literatures. The neglect of these literatures may have less to do with the energy they do or do not produce than it has to do with a problem endemic to Western academia. Speaking of the discipline of history, Dipesh Chakrabarty has eloquently underlined this problem:

... the globality of academia is not independent of the globality that the European modern has created. To attempt to provincialize this "Europe" is to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of "tradition" that "modernity" creates. (13)

Isn't the solution that Chakrabarty suggests here precisely what a novel such as *Purnima* attempts to accomplish? Instead of reproaching literatures that remain perversely beyond the ambit of literary globalism, cosmopolitan critics should probably start learning to go beyond the well-established contact zones to eavesdrop (with permission) on internal conversations of other cultures. Unless globalists are open to such engagements, they risk missing out on the plenitude of alternative modernities.

Works Cited

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