

## The Perpetual Catwalk of Modernity: The Show Seen from Bangladesh

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While lazily channel browsing some years back, my attention was caught by an ongoing discussion on a now defunct Kolkata-based channel. In fact, that particular program is the only one I vividly remember from the short and distinguished life of Tara TV. Several participants had been marshalled to talk about “adhunikata,” modernity. The session was in its final stages, and seemed to have been an informal for-and-against debate. The only speaker I could watch had begun his spiel. I do not remember his name but I was struck by his cheerful countenance, and his engagingly animated and fluent delivery. He was of modest build, which might have been a consequence of a hyperactive metabolism. This is a retrospective observation I make in passing because, if we were to personify “modernity,” one of its conspicuous physical attributes would be a hyperactive metabolism.

The participant in question was an unabashed votary of modernity. I was immediately fascinated by his enthusiasm. He was a connoisseur of both the delights and discontents of modernity. As an example of the delights he mentioned FTV. Could he have been inspired by Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, the essay on “Striptease” in particular, I wondered. Perhaps, perhaps not; it didn’t matter. And further back, of course, there were the figures of Mallarme and Baudelaire. If I may paraphrase from what I doubtless can only recall imperfectly, FTV offers us continuous titillation, an endless catwalk of delectable figures, female and male, draped in divers ways, from the splendidly elegant to the excitingly louche. Being male, the speaker breathlessly described the always partial revelations of the female body that mesmerized the male couch potato. The breasts almost but not quite popping out, the slit in the skirt that goes up almost but not quite all the way, such are the pleasures proffered by modernity to the male gaze. Correspondingly, a woman commentator might easily wax lyrical about the pleasures offered by FTV to the female eye.

The champion of modernity did not ignore its supposedly unsavory sides either. Yes, we are beset with anxiety, neuroses, melancholy, but these are to be embraced as unavoidable aspects of the human condition. He descanted on melancholy, “bishonnota” in Bengali, and, with visible jollity, welcomed it into his life. I was reminded of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the rapidly maturing sensibility of Stephen Daedalus experiences the pangs of adolescence. At a children’s party, Stephen sings his song and then, “withdrawn into a snug corner of the room he began to taste the joy of his loneliness.”

Teaching modern poetry to undergraduates, following a syllabus I helped design, I find myself trying to impress on them the darker aspects of the modern world. They are generally receptive, and can write appropriately depressive answers in tests, and make suitably pessimistic comments at the viva voce that concludes a course. At one of these, one of the



girls whom one would describe as demure and personable, and academically middling to fair, who in class always avoided getting into discussions, remarked in a refreshing gush of pent-up feeling that she didn't understand why the poems about modern city life painted a gloomy picture, poems like "Prufrock" and "The Waste Land," "Acquainted with the Night," "The Great Figure." Wasn't city life more enjoyable than living in the country? There were more places to hang out with friends, more fun things to do, etc. etc. I could not but agree that she definitely had a point, and said she ought to have broached the matter in class so that we could have a jolly debate weighing the pros and cons, and hopefully arrive at a satisfactory synthesis. I wished she had seen the Tara TV program; it would have struck a chord, and perhaps given her the confidence to speak up in class. I am sure she would enjoy watching FTV, which was on the menu of all servers until a few years back. I am inclined to believe it was taken off the general range of channels in response to the complaints of prudish and puritanical elders.

She would also have found a nuanced synthesis of the positive, pleasurable, aspects of modern city life and its negative, disturbing ones in the personal lives and attitudes of the modern poets in her own city, Dhaka. But first these poets need to be historically contextualized, socio-economically and politically. If I may use my own life as a temporal frame of reference, in 1950, Dhaka city, capital of the eastern province of the infant nation-state of Pakistan, had 335,000 inhabitants, a new-born me being one of them. Unbeknownst to me, there was an embryonic milieu of modern poets and writers too. We grew up together, the postcolonial city, the modern writers' milieu, and myself. By the time I reached my mid-teens I had a slight acquaintance with modern poetry, in English and Bangla, and in time would get to know many of the modern Bangla poets well. My Exhibit A, in the context of my student's critical comment, would be Shaheed Quaderi, who died in 2016 in New York.

Most readers would endorse the view of the poet-critic Syed Ali Ahsan that among Bangladeshi poets Shaheed Quaderi is the only one imbued with a truly urban sensibility (*Adhunik Bangla Kabita*, 144). Born in Kolkata to a West Bengali mother and an East Bengali father who was a senior journalist on the *Star of India*, a Muslim League mouthpiece, Shaheed had vivid memories of the wartime city, with GIs kicking their heels as they waited to be posted out. Come Partition, Shaheed's father took the advice of his spiritual preceptor, a pir, and decided to opt for India. He died suddenly, and with communal riots breaking out, the family, comprising, besides Shaheed, his elder brother, younger sister, and mother, moved to Dhaka; from a city of over four and a half million to a provincial town that would take more than a decade and a half to reach a population of a million. Shaheed, still a schoolboy, was quick to adapt, urban sensibility and all, and make himself at home. Even after he left Dhaka in the late seventies, never to return, it remained his spiritual home, object of a poignant, unrealizable, longing to return. He was never prolific as a poet, though he was precocious, publishing a poem in Buddhadev Bose's *Kabita* in his mid-teens. He told me, with evident relish, about his youthful flânerie, reciting Eliot and Dylan Thomas and Buddhadev Bose's Baudelaire translations as he looked upon the city crowds or the Buriganga river flowing past with sailboats or chugging motor launches; and

occasionally hitting a local bar to order, as one might in a Hollywood film noir, “Scotch and soda, make it double.” And yet, in his poetry, the mood is elegiac, melancholy, marked by alienation from the consumerism creeping into society.

The young Shaheed Quaderi exemplified the modern Bohemian poet and left a lasting impress on a generation of writers and poets in Bangladesh. The memoirs of two of his contemporaries are worth highlighting. The first is Belal Chowdhury (1938-2018), himself a poet and man of letters of note, who interestingly lived illegally in Kolkata from 1963 to 1973 or thereabouts. A close friend of the two leading Kolkata poets of his generation, Sunil Gangopadhyaya (1934-2012) and Shakti Chattopadhyaya (1933-95), he was a much-loved figure on the Kolkata literary scene, and edited four issues of the avant garde journal of their coterie, *Krittibas*. To Belal Chowdhury, Shakti and Shaheed were the arch Bohemian poets of the two Bengals.

Belal Chowdhury was a fellow Bohemian companion of Quaderi’s in the Dhaka of the late fifties and early sixties, and for some time in Chittagong, the country’s second city with a history going back to the times of Sindbad the Sailor, where uncharacteristically Quaderi allowed himself to be put into a suit for a brief spell as a medical representative. In Dhaka Shaheed’s day would begin at midday, and he would spend the time until the dawn of the following day moving unhurriedly from café to café, most famously at a still extant one called Beauty Boarding, which was what Kolkata’s coffee house was to its literati, or Café de Flore to existentialist Paris. In fact Shaheed was instrumental in turning Beauty Boarding into an adda hub for Dhaka’s literary and artistic milieu. His perambulations would end at the railway station, where he would hang around till the tea-stalls started frying “jelabees” and preparing the first round of morning tea. These would be his “chhota hazri” before he headed home.

In considering Quaderi’s Bohemianism vis-à-vis Shakti Chattopadhyaya’s in Kolkata or that of the Beat Generation in San Francisco and elsewhere (including Kolkata, of course, where Allen Ginsberg sojourned for a long spell), it is worth remembering that Quaderi’s Dhaka was a small town of half a million people, and not the megacity it is today, with a population of more than twenty million, exceeding that of Kolkata. If Kolkata-centered modernity provincialized Europe, Dhaka carried the provincialization a degree further. If it wasn’t a provincial capital I would have introduced the term “mofussilizing Europe,” but I will save that for an extension of the process of adaptation to the mofussil level. For now I would like to claim that “mofussil modernism” is a term with considerable critical potential. Indeed I would go so far as to claim that the greatest modern poet in Bengali is a mofussil modernist. It is, of course, Jibanananda Das, whose genius was firmly rooted in mofussil Barisal and its surrounding countryside. But whether modernism, Bohemian or otherwise, manifests itself in a metropolis, a provincial city, or a mofussil town, it deserves to be considered on the same level. There is no hierarchy here. A trend or movement may originate somewhere and travel, but each of its manifestations is distinctive (if it is not crude and shameless imitation), and all its forms, so to speak, exist on the same ontological plane. No matter where an interesting modern work is published, it is from a strange and sublime address.

Quaderi's coeval, Abdullah Abu Sayeed, also Kolkata-born, in his memoir *Bhalobashar Sampan* ("Sampan Filled with Love"), gives a vivid picture of Quaderi's Bohemianism as well as his literary influence. "Many of the young writers of the first half of the sixties imbibed their modernism from him," Sayeed declares. And further, "What everyone, from senior writers to young aspirants, looked upon with fascination – that deracinated psyche of western modernity, the unworldly Bohemianism of Baudelaire or the American Beats, the Outsider of Camus' fiction, Eliot's Hollow Man – all these Quaderi absorbed and made his own, and thereby became an enigma to us ... But he belonged to no group or coterie; he stood alone; he was the supreme leader of his one-man band .... Utterly devoid of any sense of home, Shaheed was the first Bohemian personality in the new Dhaka that was then taking shape."

Not that organized coteries and manifesto-driven movements were unknown in Dhaka. While the Beat Generation hit *Time Magazine*, and the Hungry Generation stirred up Kolkata, Dhaka came up with the Sad Generation, and following on its heels, Na (No). The Sad Generation announced itself in 1964 with a bilingual 16-page bulletin of the same title. It opened with a manifesto in rather shaky English by the poet Rafiq Azad (1941-2016) and ended with a sort of prose poem by Prashanto Ghoshal, also in bad English, addressed to Rafiq Azad, and titled "Champabati: A Catharsis of Pent-up Passions." The poems in the middle, in Bengali, were by half a dozen poets, of whom two are still active, although the movement was short-lived. Few, even in Bangladesh, know about the movement, so a few excerpts from the manifesto may have some curiosity value:

We don't know what we are doing....

We have no friends....

We hate conventional life. We cannot tolerate the conventional notions of private and public morality

Life is meaningless, we are living meaninglessly. We are constantly living in anxieties. We know the intensity of our anxieties to feel and know that we EXIST and that is the root of all our anxieties.

...

I should warn the headless conventional gentleman and the bloody critics in this connection that we are not sex-driven youths. We are faithful to ourselves and to our 'SADNESS'. There should be no doubt in it.

We are not beatniks or angries, remember we are 'Bipanna'. And that is why we are sad.

We are for no time interested in politics and newspapers. Then, what do we want? NOTHING, NOTHING, -- we want nothing from our bloody society. We are exhausted, annoyed, tired and 'sad'.

Here's a large part of Prashanto Ghoshaal's prose poem:

Champabati, a lady excommunicated by the cruel stroke of society for no fault of hers is a boon companion. In her, I recognize a perfect juxtaposition of peace and destruction. Rafiq, a sincere friend of mine, remains always depressed in this

age of reason, what with insecurity and what with hell-fire of the earth. And I, a middleman between the two, with my deceitful existence, am in a mysterious process of decay.... Women (except Champabati), FOXY and SEXY, do not know the meaning of life. Rafiq, don't pay attention to a lady.

There is youthful nihilism here in a brash, naïve form, and an underlying misogyny; these can be explained with reference to the small town, puritanical social context. But why the two pieces in English, when Bengali was the obvious literary language of the writers, the language they habitually wrote in. Perhaps, the use of English, a language cultivated by the educated classes, heightened the intended shock effect. But it is noteworthy that Rafiq Azad inserts into his English manifesto the Bengali word “Bipanna,” “imperiled,” the key word describing the mental state of a suicide in one of Jibanananda Das's best known poems. Abdullah Abu Sayeed, who was one of the poets in the bulletin, notes in his memoir: “Innocuous in appearance, [The Sad Generation bulletin] proved to be a bomb-shell that shook the town. The quiet town of Dhaka, hurt and flabbergasted, reacted by hurling abuses.” Apart from its nihilism, the Sad Generation bulletin “created tremors for another reason as well. Its pages were reeking with the raw smell of sexuality. In this respect, the young poets were as reckless as they were immature.”

Rafiq Azad was also loosely associated with “Na,” whose more active advocates were a group of engineering and architecture students, and an artist fresh from a spell of training in Paris. The novelist Mahmudul Haque declared solidarity. Somewhat Dadaist in orientation the group published four issues of their journal, which was, of course, titled *Na* (No). Each issue had a different, unconventional format. The second issue, of which I once had a copy, was printed on brown wrapping paper, measured five and a half inches across and at least half a yard long, with covers cut out of jute sacking. One issue was circular, another had a number of sides. The most Dadaist of the group, Kazi Shahid Hasan, provocatively declares in a note: “It is my personal belief that in order to rescue poetry from its present state we need to compose poems with the skeletal remains of (1) letters, (2) news, (3) detective stories, (4) novels, (5) advertisements, (6) adversarial thought, (7) the imagination, etc. Such poems may draw the reader.” A longer manifesto, promised for the fourth and final issue, didn't materialize. Both the Sad Generation and *Na* have become forgotten chapters of literary history.

However, the brash and naivete of these movements ought to be seen in a positive light. In the socio-cultural context in which they emerged, they were a rebellious force that shook up the staid, government-patronized literary establishment, which was encouraged to drum up publicity for the official religion-based nationalism. This ideology had already been challenged by the “Bhasa Andolon” of 1952, the student-led movement to have Bengali recognized as one of the state languages. The aftermath of the movement saw a cultural resurgence, in which the modern poets and writers were key contributors. In 1953, one of the noteworthy modern poets, Hasan Hafeezur Rahman, put together an anthology titled “Ekushey February,” among whose contributors was Shamsur Rahman (1929-2006), the greatest of the modern poets in Bangladesh. Songs were written and sung, pictures painted,

plays written and produced. The Language Movement acted as a catalyst that turned the modern poets into political activists.

Not that there was a happy marriage of modern writers and political ideologues. Some in the Leftist camp looked askance at what they considered to be decadent aspects of modern literature. Abdullah Abu Sayeed ruefully recounts in his memoir that when he launched a journal of modern writing, titled *Kanthalaswar*, he hoped for the approbation of an upcoming young academic. To his dismay, the scholar, an orthodox Marxist, poured scorn on the venture.

And yet, as the pro-democracy movement gathered force, and a progressive cultural forum dubbed “Lekhak Shibir” (Writers’ Camp) was launched, among those who joined it were writers who combined political commitment with modern modes of writing. Among them were two of the best known modern fiction writers of the country, Hasan Azizul Huq and Akhteruzzaman Elias, whose novel *Khwabnama* (The Book of Dreams) has been described by Supriya Chaudhuri as “perhaps the greatest modern Bengali novel.”

Shamsur Rahman, who is an urban modernist rooted in Old Dhaka, shared Shaheed Quaderi’s penchant for flânerie, though not to the same extent. He mentions spending the whole night walking about with Quaderi on hearing of the death of Jibanananda Das. As the democratic movement, which would culminate in the war of independence, gained momentum, Shamsur Rahman captured the strange alteration brought to the cityscape by a general strike, a “Hartal,” as the title has it. The viewpoint is that of a flâneur who notes that the city is like a child asleep at its mother’s breast, or perhaps like Rodin’s Thinker. He compares the quiet of the city to that of Prophet Muhammad as he made for the cave where he used to meditate. Fancifully, the speaker replaces the advertisements on hoardings with his favorite poems.

To put these random notes on modern writing in Bangladesh in perspective a general consideration of modernity is called for. That takes us to the problems outlined in Amit’s concept note. First, the Indian sociologist’s discomfited dismissal of modernity as a conference topic. I would have loved to hear the sociologist speak at this webinar. I will not, however, speculate on what he might have said. Instead, let us note some of the problems that arise when we use the term “modern.”

The modern has to be seen in contrast to the not-modern. If the modern is represented by A, and the not-modern by not-A, we will find that lists of disparate items and phenomena can be placed under the terms in binary opposition. If we put all the poets mentioned above under A, we may oppose them with puritan and anti-democratic ideologues, writers engaged in promoting the official ideology of the day, and also orthodox Marxists. Common binary oppositions are set up between modernists and Romantics or Victorians or realists. And yet, if we broaden the perspective, and place the historical category of Modernism, a movement that is said by some to have flourished between 1890 and 1939, we will have to consider it as a subset of modernity, the concept that the Indian sociologist found uncongenial. A few rough and ready comments on modernity should therefore be apropos.

Modernity encompasses numerous varied, if not exactly, opposed trends and movements. The overarching opposition, according to many critics, is that between modernity and the medieval. When the Middle Ages slowly ended, modernity steadily emerged. The Renaissance was its first cultural configuration. But this is not a water-tight distinction, as Umberto Eco engagingly argues in the essay “The Return of the Middle Ages.” The reason for revivals of aspects of medieval culture in the modern and postmodern age is an underlying connection. According to Eco, “looking at the Middle Ages means looking at our infancy, in the same way that a doctor, to understand our present state of health, asks us about our childhood, or in the same way that the psychoanalyst, to understand our present neuroses, makes a careful investigation of the primal scene.”

“Our return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for ‘reliable Middle Ages,’ not for romance and fantasy.”

Nor is this a phenomenon of our times: “Immediately after the official ending of the Middle Ages, Europe was ravaged by a pervasive medieval nostalgia.”

So the Middle Ages get on the catwalk of modernity.

What about further back? The ancients never lost their appeal, but we look upon them now in a different way. Take the last works of Michel Foucault, and their break with the earlier studies of the conventionally recognized modern era. As Frederic Gros notes in his foreword to the recently published “Confessions of the Flesh,” the final volume of *The History of Sexuality*, “The plan to study the modern biopolitical *dispositif* [plan of action] of sexuality (sixteenth through nineteenth century) ... was dropped in favor of the problematization -- through a rereading of the philosophers, physicians, and orators of Greco-Roman antiquity – of sexual pleasure from the historical perspective of a genealogy of the desiring subject and under the conceptual horizon of the arts of existence” (6). With the phrases “the desiring subject” and “the arts of existence,” we are in our times, and now must accept that we have a vital connection with antiquity.

The ancients too get on the catwalk of modernity.

And even further back, the primitive too has long been inseparable from modernity. Primitivism is a vital aspect of modern art and literature.

There are some piquant oppositions within modernity as well. In the penultimate episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, when Sheldon Cooper is complimented for his Renaissance mind (if I remember rightly), he snorts, “Huh, the Renaissance! I am an Enlightenment person.” Or words to that effect. Despite the critiques of some postmodernists, “Enlightenment Now” is an indispensable aspect of the scientific worldview. Steven Pinker equates Enlightenment with modernity, and the Romantic and the postmodern as its enemies. But Romanticism and postmodernism too are simply further twists in the evolution of modernity. One can get into a leotard and hop on to the catwalk of modernity.

What distinguishes modernity, then? Perhaps simply that its opposite is the view of reality *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity, whereas in the world of “anitya,”

impermanence, we exist under the aspect of modernity. Like it or not, we need the concept of modernity to make sense of human reality. It may have come soiled by colonialism, but postcolonialism cannot be articulated without recourse to modernity.

It seems to me now that historical time as we know it is the catwalk of modernity. Of the four yugas, Satya, Treta and Dwapara seem to be prehistoric. The Kali yuga brings us into history and is our catwalk. Those of us who try to write must get on the catwalk of modernity and perform their Monty Python silly walks, while others play the critic or simply watch. Like many, I enjoy all three catwalk-related activities.

**Note:** This is the text of a talk given at webinar on February 25, 2022, organized by Amit Chaudhuri at Ashoka University, India, on the theme of modernity, “On Not Mentioning the Modern.”