

The Renaissance That Failed: the little magazine movement in Bangladesh in the eighties

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BANGLA literature, more specifically, poetry, of the late 1960s through to the early 1980s was marked by an excess of raw emotions, verbiage, and descriptiveness. Influenced, among others, by the Liverpool poets and the Beatniks, and given impetus by the recent hard-won national independence, which was a tailor-made subject-matter, Bangladeshi poets of those decades made good use of the time to secure immediate popularity. One would be hard put to find another era in our history where poetry was so successful a commodity. In fact, poetry became the most accessible of the art-media to readers and poets alike. One would need only to find a suitably sensitive theme such as freedom or love or hunger, and an accompanying wide range of adjectives to go with it to enlist in the business of writing a popular poem. These poets had as aids to their efforts the effeminate "reciters"(a unique profession that sprang out of the immediate post-war sentimentalism) who in loud G-sharp voices would broadcast poetry (of all things!) from around the street-corners, theatre halls, parks, cafés, and even the radio and television. Literary pages and special supplements of daily newspapers and journals of the day were flooded with lines such as:

"Freedom, you are  
the loveliest dream I have ever dreamt,  
Freedom, you are  
also the ugliest of my nightmares..."

Or

"For my love only,  
I planted the rose tree I've just cut,  
For my love only,  
I have cut the rose tree I planted..."

So on and so forth.

This frivolity ("jug jug to dirty ears" maybe) went on and on, undiminished, until around the mid-eighties a group of young poets and writers emerged who threw these formulaic poems completely overboard, and sought to do something worthwhile, something that in their eyes, would represent a genuine literary effort. This "Little Magazine Group" (as they came to be known later) consisted of young and promising poets and writers like Ashim Kumar Das, Tapan Barua, Masud Khan, Khondkar Ashraf Hussain, Moin Chaudhury, Shajmul Kabir, Amanullah, Swadesh Bandhu Sarkar, Raja Hassan, Salim Morshed, Sajjad Sharif, Bishnu Bishwas, Syed Tarik, Sarkar Masud, Rifat Chaudhury, Shahidul Alam, Parvez Hussain, Shantanu Chaudhury, Shobeh Shadab, Bratya Raisu, Matiyar Raphael, Jewel Mazhar, Shahed Shafayat, Bayejid Mahboob, Masud Ali Khan and many others, including the present writer.

Modelled after their famous Western counterparts like the *Dial* and the *Criterion*, and naming themselves after *The Little Review*, the little magazines are, first and foremost, literary journals that facilitate new and counter-culture literature. In Bengal, while the advent of little magazine may be attributed to Pramatha Chaudhury's *Sabuj Patra* or *Kallol*, it may be more correct to mention Buddhadev Basu's *Kavita* as the first real Bangla little magazine, being closest to the kind of non-commercial journal propagating new ideas and art forms associated with little magazines. After *Kavita*, both banks of the Ganges have seen a steady flow of such journals--*Pragati*, *Parichay*, *Kanthalaswar*, *Samakal*, *Bijnapanparba*, *Kaurab*--to name a few.

This trend was slightly altered in the late eighties when in both West Bengal and

Bangladesh comparatively younger writers began opposing the gradual institutionalization of the aforesaid journals and at the same time started to position themselves against the social, political and commercial establishments--the high priests of *status quo* in their view. Therefore, in order to avoid the mistake of these journals which had started to become institutionalized, they deliberately started to bring out their journals sporadically--that is to say, when they were able to and deemed it fit to do so. These journals were generally short-lived, and defied the stylistic norms that were adopted by their precursors (a few of them were actually handwritten and stencilled).

Belonging exclusively to the new writers (the writers of a new kind of literature, that is), these journals were considered by some as "yet another avant-garde madness," while by others the true indicators of what literature would be like in the approaching century. The most noteworthy of such journals in Bangladesh, especially the ones that were actively involved in the inception and nurturing of the movement, would include *Ekabingsha* (editor, Khondkar Ashraf Hussain), *Gandeeb* (editor, Tapan Barua), *Anindya*, *Sangbed*, *Nadi*, *Pranta*, *Prasun* (edited jointly by Masud Ali Khan and myself), *Nirmiti*, *Pencha*, *Nisarga*, *Purnadairghya*, *Bipratik*, etc.

The contributors to these journals were reluctant, first of all, to compromise their standards and acquiesce to the publisher, the newspaper editor, as well the common reader. In short, they refused to turn their *œuvres* into commodities. Another value to which most of them strongly adhered to was an express disrespect for whatever they considered outdated and stale. This attitude gained them more foes than friends, and up to the very end they continued to be the targets of venomous censure and unfair attacks (these went to the extent of physical assaults a few times). To be honest, however, it must be admitted that insiders of the little magazine world rather than the outsiders contributed more to the disintegration of the group in the early nineties.

For the sake of historical correctness, I should mention that this particular variety of little magazine originated not in Bangladesh, but in West Bengal. Poets like Mridul Dasgupta, Gautam Chaudhury, Prasun Bandopadhyay, and Jay Goswami (I cite his name with some reservation), and fiction writers (or, more properly, anti-fiction fiction writers) Subimal Mishra were amongst the real progenitors of this school. Nevertheless, from the very outset, we had a quite different objective than our West Bengali counterparts. We were less politically and socially motivated and were less given to using our journals as weapons against establishmentarian 'mouthpieces' like *Ananda Bazar*, which allegedly represented and promoted political and social dogmas the little magazine group in West Bengal detested, and were regarded to manipulate and exploit writers for these ends.

We on our part had no such very obvious opponent, and ours was, therefore, a more purely aesthetic movement (that is not to say that we were not at all concerned with the establishment, in fact, the issue of whether we should write for daily newspapers gave rise to such huge battles over the 'correct line' to take that some of us were literally ousted from the group as a result). We fought not against bad politics (the state of political affairs was of course quite as bad, if not worse, in Bangladesh, exactly as in West Bengal but we found our authorities simply too vulgar to be the subject of literary attacks), but against bad taste. Consequently, we failed to attract any readership, but that was not one of our principal concerns either. Being the writers, editors, distributors, and even readers of our own magazines, we were fairly content to publish them for ourselves. But the financial constraints were extremely forbidding: deprived of any support from both the

public and the private sectors, we were to depend solely on our own mostly small and uncertain incomes, along with the patient but not endless, generosity of our parents, friends and relatives.

However, this factor, even though it did contribute heavily to the downfall of the movement, was not the only, or even the major, cause of our dispersion. One of the more crucial issues was the fact that while we knew, probably too well, what *not* to write, we tended not to have as clear an idea of what *to* write, and even worse, what to read. Our immediate predecessors in the little magazine publication world had not faced this particular dilemma. For the great majority of them, the world was not any bigger than Great Britain and the USA, and they were fairly complacent with their anecdotal knowledge of poets like Keats, Yeats and the like, and, say, critical theorists like Arnold and Eliot.

Looking for other gurus across the world in our turn, we were instantly bewildered by the profusion of isms out there, and were unable to determine which one of those we were to espouse. We tortured ourselves with Russian Formalism, Post-Structuralism, and Deconstruction Theory to little or no avail. There was nothing, not even a good library, and no one, no outstanding academic or teacher, who could show us the way or light the path ahead, and we scoured through such diverse sources as Richardson and Kafka, Rilke and Seferis, Borges and Soyinka, without pausing in between, reading in between. We noted wide-eyed the advent of the African writers into the very select circle of immortal literature and cursed ourselves for not being able to come up with a single something to regain and secure a position in world literature that was lost to the Bangali nation after Tagore. Following the example of the magic-realist Latin Americans, we felt strongly the need to work with our own resources, but could not decide what exactly could be made use of, and in what manner.

Ultimately, as a natural upshot of this undefined, unfocused struggle against obscurity, our small group split into yet smaller sub-groups, and a painful period of factional and intensely personal in-fighting ensued. We started blacklists of writers, imposed embargoes on one another, and very soon all of us were deadlocked against one other, and the demise of the movement began before it could even be properly born. Yesterday's dearest friends became sworn enemies, and the whole atmosphere became so poisonous that some of my ex-comrades had to run away to God-knows-where, some stopped being writers and went back to a "normal" life, some succumbed to drug addiction, and a few others literally cracked up and ended up in sanatorium wards. Thus the narrative came to its bitter conclusion.

Rather than go back to the sorrowful tale that has so far been related, I should, in conclusion, like to end on a positive note. Before I emigrated to Australia in the mid-nineties, our group having completely disintegrated by then, I'd had started to notice that even younger writers, most of whom had just started, were writing in the same fashion as we did; that the rejection of the older trends was complete; and that we'd created, out of the *charivari* of discord, a symphony, that, albeit indistinct, was resonating, slowly but surely, in various quarters. My satisfaction, therefore, lies in the fact that after about five full decades of the 'old' literature, we were the first in our country to have felt the need for a radical change in our literary thinking and practice, and to have worked towards that end, and that in spite of our apparent failure, Bangla literature will surely benefit from our committed efforts in the new millennium.

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The Little Review: 'making no compromise with the public taste'

The Little Review, the legendary magazine that made the little magazine movement famous, was founded by Margaret Caroline Anderson (1886-1973). She once wrote, "People who make Art are more interesting than people who don't. They have a special illumination about life; this illumination is the subject matter of all conversation; one might as well be dead as to live outside this radiance."



Margaret Caroline Anderson

In 1914 these feelings made her want to start a magazine. She was 21, writing book reviews for an established Chicago journal, *The Continent* when one night, lying awake, she came to the conclusion that her life was dull. "If I had a magazine," she is famously said to have thought, "I could spend my time filling it up with the best conversation the world has to offer." Margaret decided to start one, fell immediately asleep, and woke up with the solid conviction that she was already an editor. All she had to do was get people to write for her and give her money. With that spirit, she not only started *The Little Review*, but also kept it running for 13 years, usually at the forefront of the latest controversial aesthetic movement, frequently with no income except a few subscriptions. She lived without furniture or in other peoples' houses. Sometimes she went without food or sold her clothes. She put off landlords, printers and creditors with aristocratic élan. When a landlord said she had written a bad check she replied, "I didn't tell you it was going to be good." The *Little Review's* impact is perhaps best summarized by quoting a partial list of contributors: Ezra Pound, James Joyce (whose *Ulysses* was first printed in *The Little Review*), Wyndham Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, W. B. Yeats, Ben Hecht, William Carlos Williams, Djuna Barnes, Brancusi, Aldous Huxley, Tristan Tzara, Emma Goldman, Gertrude Stein, Jean Cocteau, Dorothy Richardson, Francis Picabia, Guillaume Apollinaire, Andre Breton, Hart Crane, Marcel Duchamp. The *Little Review* in its early days was best known for "partly comprehensible prose and unrhymed poetry brave with dots, in which the bourgeoisie took the count every month. Who were the bourgeoisie? Anyone who didn't read the *Little Review*," wrote Ben Hecht. Frederick Hoffman wrote that the *Little Review* "cast a sympathetic eye on the more radical departures from conventional realism -- in short -- [it was] concerned with widening the boundaries of an age dedicated to photographic realism and naturalism." She put a sub-head under the cover logo: 'A Magazine of the Arts, Making No Compromise with the Public Taste.' Thereafter her search for quality work embraced, in succession, feminism, imagism, cubism, surrealism, dadaism, and experimentalism in general. All literary accounts agree that she, along with Ezra Pound, created a magazine which remains the most important archive of an era of little magazines, a record of the struggles as well as successes of a turbulent period in American arts and letters whose effects are still shaping literary studies. Along with *Poetry*, *The Little Review* is considered the most influential small magazine of its time.

Letter from KATHMANDU

THE INTERVIEW OF AMITAVA KUMAR WAS TAKEN BY AJIT BARAL IN DELHI IN AUGUST OF LAST YEAR AND IS BASED ON KUMAR'S BOOK BOMBAY-LONDON-NEW YORK.

AMITAVA KUMAR is one of the exciting new voices in global cultural studies and postcolonial theory. Kumar was born in Ara, Bihar, and grew up in the nearby town of Patna, famous for its corruption, crushing poverty and delicious mangoes. An Associate Professor of Literature at Penn State University, Kumar is a poet, literary critic, journalist, filmmaker and photographer. He is the author and editor of books of poetry, politics, teaching, cultural studies, and radical aesthetics. Like his earlier book *Passport Photos* (University of California and Penguin-India, 2000) that treated the related themes of immigration and postcoloniality, his latest book *Bombay-London-New York* (Routledge and Penguin-India, 2002) is also a multi-genre celebration of the fascinating literary journey that Kumar has undertaken as a reader and critic of Indian fiction. His own fiction and poetry, along with personal accounts, make the book an imaginative exercise that explores many of the impulses that have helped create contemporary Indian fiction in English.

AB: In *Bombay-London-New York* you have written that you came to books or anything literary late in life and you did very little reading and writing when young. But that didn't prevent you from

harboring a desire of being a writer; how come that happened?

AK: Yes, it is true that I did very little reading in my childhood and even youth. I think the desire to write came not from doing any reading--though that became true later on, when I found writers I liked---but from a deeply felt need to make sense of my own surroundings and the way in which I sought to transcend them.

AB: Your first language is not English, and it is very difficult for someone whose first language is not English to start writing in English from a very young age. Around what age did you start writing seriously?

AK: I went to an 'English-medium' school in Patna. Although at home we spoke Bhojpuri, the main language of learning was English. Whatever knowledge I had of the language then was not in any way exceptional.

I began writing when I was in higher secondary school. I wrote poems and some stories. The poems I wrote were not any good. Most of them were written while I was in class, trying to ignore what

the teacher was saying about economics or mathematics.

AB: I felt traces of Naipaulian prose--simple, short and pruned down to the essentials---in your writing. Are you in any way influenced by Naipaul's writing?

AK: Naipaul has been an important influence, and he is also a presence in the book. I cannot ignore him. Just this morning, having returned from Srinagar yesterday, I was reading what he had written about his own visit to the city. I am amazed at his clarity and more than that, at his intelligence. I do not always agree with him, of course, but I find it impossible to remain unimpressed by him.

AB: The title gives the impression that your book is a travelogue, but it isn't; at least not in the sense of a body journeying into different geographic locations. Isn't the title misleading? However, the book is about a journey, but an unusual journey made through the reading of books.

AK: The book is a travelogue, but it also makes the argument that often we travel only through books.

I have never lived in London. Yet, like many other children of the empire, I carry a London in my head.

AB: Your book is a smorgasbord of poetry, story, article, literary reading, autobiography, social critique and whatnot. How would you categorize this unusual book? Or is it a deliberate attempt to blur the distinction between the literary and non-literary, which the back cover attests to?

AK: I am a writer; I practise journalism; I teach. This means that I employ different languages every day. These languages are a part of me and they make me who I am. In my book I have tried to give voice to my experience---and to what I think is the complexity of the world we inhabit---by employing a more mixed form. In the process, as you suggest, I have tried also to point out how the literary cannot always be sealed off from the nonliterary.

AB: Your book is rife with diasporic concerns, dislocations, disposessions, rootlessness, nostalgia about the home left behind. You seem to have heightened



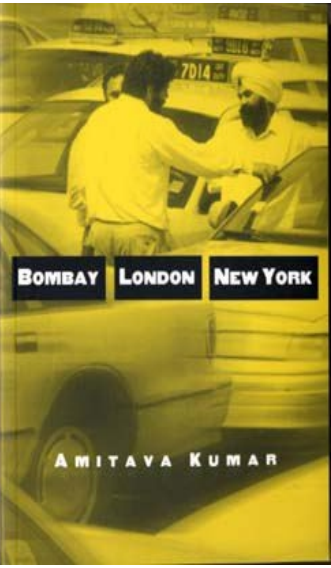
diasporic concerns. Is it because you always wanted to leave your country? Or, does that heightened diasporic concerns stem from your reading of third world literature, something which you have to do as a part of your teaching job?

AK: The book is about migrant lives. It is but natural that what you call 'diasporic concerns' will loom large in my account. My interest in the diaspora is not because I always wanted to leave my country---I am not sure I always wanted that, and if it was ever as simple as that---but because I want to under-

stand the politics of the immigrant condition. One of the questions I take up in the book is why among the Indians abroad the 'soft' emotion of nostalgia often turns into the 'hard' emotion of fundamentalism. The support that overseas Indians have given to vicious, rightwing campaigns waged by the Sangh Pariva makes this a very urgent issue.

AB: Marxist critic Aijaz Ahmad says third world literature does not exist. Writer Amitav Ghose says that Commonwealth literature is a

Star Literature EXTRACT



In my hometown, Patna, also in Bihar, there is a general consensus that culture, like the surrounding economy, lies in ruins. And yet a visit to the *Khudabakhsh* Library reveals another world, distant from the cramped, dusty streets outside filled with rickshaws and cars with loud, blasting horns. A librarian, his right hand shaky, pulls out a book on medicine that was written 2000 years ago. The book is titled *Kitab-ul-Hashaish*. The edition the librarian holds in his hands is from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The book was translated from Greek to Arabic by the order of Haroun-al-Rashid; it carries beautiful illustrations painted with herbal and mineral colors that still appear clean and bright. The librarian is old; his spectacles sit crookedly over his bulging eyes. He wants to show me ancient paintings of war scenes, where, he says, "no two faces are

alike." He keeps using the phrase "hidden treasures." There are 22,000 handwritten books in this library; about 5000 to 70000 of them are rare manuscripts.

A well-known historian, Surendra Gopal, accompanies me on my visit to this library. Gopal tells me that the library was gifted to the government in 1891 and is today "the richest manuscript library on Islam in the world." When I hear this, I am only conscious of the wretchedness of the streets outside. A stone's throw away is the Patna Medical College and Hospital where I had been treated and operated upon when I was a boy. My mother, too, was a patient there. Later, my sister worked in its wards as a doctor. Medical procedures in the hospital were sometimes performed by the light of lanterns and torches; when it was raining, dying ants would crowd in and settle down on the open wounds

during operations. Even during the day, stray dogs pulled at patients' bandages. Patna is a place where rats carried away my mother's dentures. The librarian at *Khudabakhsh* has taken out from his safe another book. He tells me that it is a priceless book of poems by the Persian poet Hafiz. The book was presented to the Mughal ruler Humayun by the emperor of Iran in the 16th century. The Mughal rulers used the book to read omens, of *shakun*: they would turn to a page and try to foretell the future from the words there. Humayun's son, Akbar, was emperor when his son Jahangir, banished to Allahabad for his philandering, sought the help of the book to divine his future. The lines that the young prince came across were: "*Ghan-e-garib! hu mehaat chun barnametaibun / bashar-e-khud rauveem washaher year khud bathan*" ("If it is intolerable for you to live in the foreign land / Then you

should return home. You will be emperor.") In the margins of the book, Jahangir had written that he was in Allahabad and had been perplexed; he returned home to Fatehpur Sikri on reading the augury, and a few days later following his father Akbar's death, was crowned emperor.

The librarian's dark finger hovers over the lines that the emperor had inscribed. The page is filigreed in gold, the bare portions stained with age. I want to touch the page myself. I ask the librarian's permission, and when he says yes, I gently place my index finger where the emperor has signed his name.

The librarian and the historian talk for a long time. I do not want to leave the library. It is hot outside--the temperature has exceeded 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The librarian, who knows Urdu, Arabic and

Persian, is reciting poetry. The words were written in the 19th century by the last Mughal governor of Bihar. The historian, Gopal, mentions his name. I ask the librarian to repeat the lines. The poet was addressing the deer in the forest, saying to them what they know, that *Majnun* (from the famous 12th century Persian love story of *Layla* and *Majnun*) has died. But what the poet wants to know from the deer is what has passed over the wilderness, how the forest has suffered. The librarian is a man of courtesy, what is called *tahzeeb* in Urdu. When I am leaving his office, he gestures toward Gopal and says, "he is a museum of knowledge. There are very few people left like this in Patna." Patna is the wilderness; people like the librarian recall *Majnun*, who has departed.

Gopal has been affected by the

conversation about Patna and the loss of cultural institutions. He says that there is a complete absence now of those kinds of conversations, which he feels are essential to civilized life. He is nostalgic about his youth in a young India. The historian is burdened by his memories. He talks about the lack of funds, the theft of public money, the closing of colleges and libraries.

I think of the librarian with his unsteady hand, lovingly laying out the volume that was brought from Iran to India by Humayun. The acquisition of those books was a part of a process of trade and conquest, tied to commerce, to the sale of both precious and ordinary goods. But, that was not all. There are other truths about books, too, like the words written by a reader in the margins of the text, about his hopes and fears, and the unknown. Books contain auguries of the future and

melancholia about the past. They haunted by the marketplace, but, at the same time, they embody subtle complexities of memory and desire, which cannot be neatly or fully regulated by the marketplace or, for that matter, the rulers of nations and corporations.

Writers bear witness to this uneven battle of forces too: It is part of the reality of the writer's work--struggling every day with the worldliness of the word. Writers are caught in the contradictory tasks of building imaginary worlds that are removed from everyday life and, at the same time, establishing how the imagination is not detached from the quotidian world but very much a vital part of it. To realize the truth of that condition is to know that books not only offer refuge from the world, but also return you to it.