

Postmodern Bangla Short Stories: the arrival of the departure (Part I)

The Gift of the Colonial Magi

Having published a few English translations of Bangla short stories in this page I have of late been asked questions like 'What kind of short stories were these?' 'What did they mean?' 'Were they written by 'experimental' authors?' 'I didn't understand them at all.'

Fair enough. To readers of this page, the stories referred to seemed to violate all established norms of good storytelling: a beginning, an end, recognizable characters, a 'meaning' to be drawn from the tale, and the satisfied murmur at the end from a reader whose expectations have been skillfully aroused, and then met. However, the short stories published on this page broke away from the mould, seemed to zigzag in time, had no coherent pattern, had characters who drifted in and out from the margins, and, like the whole story, seemed to have no fixed center, in fact seemed at times not to inhabit any space at all, and the repeated authorial intrusions seemed to deliberately draw attention to the fact that 'stories' are artifices that should reveal the 'hand' consciously fashioning the tale (in fact, that seemed to be the real 'story' in each of these 'stories': how stories get made, that the process is the thing).

Obviously definitions of 'literature' and 'fiction' are undergoing changes. Fiction in English reflected one such change—a trending towards postmodernism—quite some time back. It arrived in Bangla literature and fiction more recently—granted, in the works of the more 'experimental' and 'avant-garde' writers, in out-of-the-way little magazines and journals, in volumes from the more outré publishers. One thing, however, is clear: Postmodernism, for good or bad, is here to stay in the fiction written in Bangla, both across the border and here.

So what is it? How did some Bangla short stories (and novels) arrive at this point? How does one make sense of it? The answer is attempted in the following

---Editor, Literature Page

MALAY ROY CHOUDHURY

Chhotogolpo, synonym for short story, is a hybridized word. *Chhoto* having been derived from *prakrita* or plebeianized Sanskrit *chhudda* or *chutta*, which meant short, small, tiny, dwarfish, low-pitched, little, reduced, puny, delicate, minor, etc. *Golpo* is a hybrid of *gappo* and *jalpo*. *Gappo* is plebeianized Bangla version of Persian *gupp* that entered indigenous lexical domain consequent upon establishment of Islamic rule. It meant oral narrative, conversation, argument, gossip, prattle, etc. It had also entered English lexicon as *gup*, in the guise of an Anglo-Saxon slang during the gin-and-tonic days of the Empire. Almost all indigenous words which entered the imperial semiotics received a degenerated reception. Hindu gods became lords, and god *Jaggannatha* became juggernaut, a strange expression which meant a relentless destroying force; an example of colonial semiotic violence transforming the native's protector into a destroyer. *Jalpo* evolved out of Sanskrit *jalpan*, and meant utterance, discussion, speculation, proposal, and establishment of one's own opinion by refuting someone else's. Narratives at folk level as well as at the level of the court of kings, in brief or elaborate

form, existed prior to the arrival of British Empire, written in poetic meters to enable people to memorize them, in the absence of literacy and nonavailability of nonmanual process of reproduction, as the texts were calligraphed on palm-leaves. In essence, therefore, indigenous story-texts existed since antiquity, outside the perimeters of the constructedness of fables, but within the confines of nature, i.e. tale. However, the indigenous culture did not have exact equivalents of fables and tales, since the genres were based on the Greco-Roman dialects of good and evil, and papal dialects of God and Devil, which assumed human individual as a cultural product and subject to construction. Premodern Bangla had *katha* or narrative, and *kathakata* or narration of scriptural and mythological oral chronicles. The narrator was *kathak-thakur* or Brahmin priest, and may be found even today in a metamorphosed gaiety during any *puja* trying to re-root himself in antiquity in front of a loud-speaker mike; he would be worshipping goddess Durga, demon Mahishasura, and a veiled banana plant simultaneously, in a postmodern anomic, of course.

Fiction is indigenous, though in metrical form. However, the genres short story and novel

long essay by Malay Roy Choudhury (Postmodern Bangla Short Stories 2002, Haowa 49 Publishers, Kolkata), long enough in fact that it has to be published in installments. It is difficult to read, and the author has tried to cover a broad --as well as a contentious--area. All of which means that the piece contains a fair amount of specialist literary terms and assumptions not easily grasped by the average reader. Plus the earnest style (the baggage of critical literary theory, which at times seems not to function without the words 'episteme' or 'metropolitan') and erroneous ad hoc declarations (that, for example, the 'novel started in European antiquity') can be wearisome. But the essay nevertheless has one radiant quality: its very theme! Malay Roy Choudhury does wish to answer the question what is the postmodern Bangla short story as honestly and comprehensively as he can. And in doing so necessarily provides an interesting interpretation of its history. At the very least, his analytic framework has the merit of consistency.

So to all those readers who have questioned me, and perhaps will continue to do so, on the subject of 'experimental' Bangla short stories being written by a younger set of writers interested in the politics of language and culture, who feel the press of postcolonial theory, who are sympathetic to the increasing assertion of forces, political and linguistic, of vernaculars previously considered marginal, here is my answer. Seek The Daily Star literature page from now on, and ye shall find. If not the answer, then at least the right questions.

came with colonial rule. Novel was a product of European Renaissance, and the original genre *novella* was Italian, which emerged during that great epistemic upheaval, though the rudiments thereof existed since second-century Greece. Novel was coterminous as an established genre with the appearance of Rene Descartes' theory of knowledge. Descartes' theory starts with the quest for certainty, for an indubitable starting-point or foundation on the basis alone of which *progress* is possible; the point of certainty had to be located in one's own awareness of one's own self. Renaissance and Descartes would not have been possible without such royal plunderers as Christopher Columbus, an Italian. Novel was generic outcome of the concepts of individuals' self-location, progress and seizure of nature. None of these philosophical ideas existed in premodern life/world of Bangla people, for whom nothing existed outside nature. In fact the synonym for culture, i.e. *samskriti*, had to be coined by Rabinranath Tagore (1861-1941). The appellative *upanyas*, synonym for novel, was coined by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-1894) who had first written *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), a novel in English, before writing the first ever novel in Bangla literature,

Durgeshnandini (1865), a fiction in prose. Economic and political powers in Europe, when novel emerged, were agriculture-centric and rested with landowners who had time for leisure. Short story emerged in Europe with the Industrial Revolution, and the epistemic paradigm shift caused by European Enlightenment. Industrial Revolution replaced traditional agrarian economy by one dominated by machinery and manufacturing. This transferred the balance of political power from the landowner to the industrial capitalist, and created a huge urban working class. The slow agrarian idyllic life was replaced by a fast industrially-compartmented life without much leisure for a large population. The subject-position of the individual changed beyond retreat. While the history of rise and fall of the novel in Europe is associated with the rise and fall of imperialism, the rise and change of short story is associated with the centrality and fragmentation of the modern human individual. Novel emerged in European antiquity. Short story emerged in European modernity. Both of them arrived on the shores of Bangla literature at the same time, when the representatives of European Enlightenment, the Christian missionaries, settled at Srirampur in 1800, simulta-

neously introduced Bangla printing press, translated prose of gospels and the Bible, Bangla grammar books and Bangla dictionaries. The first gospel of the first century Christian apostle and evangelist St. Matthew was the mother of printed Bangla prose, which appeared on 18 March 1880. This was also the year of establishment of Fort William College. And this was the juncture when a Bangla speaker of letters left the world of nature to join the world of culture, in order to get constructed as an individual in the mirror image of Enlightenment episteme.

Groomed in the above episteme, a sizeable Bangla middle class originated, and spread with the British as their reliable appendages, throughout India. Bangla periodicals with news and fiction had to appear for, by and of the newly constructed individuals of this class. Though newsmagazines such *Digdarshan* (April 1818), *Samachar Darpan* (May 1818) and *Sambad Prabhakar* appeared first to cater to the cultural needs of this class, they contained the seeds of the subsequent literary periodicals like *Bangadarshan* (1872), *Bharati*, *Sadhana*, *Hitavadi*, *Navajivan* and *Sahitya*, published in the 19th century. For publishing *Bangadarshan*, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya had installed printing press at his own residence. The contentious issue relating to strict definability of novel and short story might not have been imported till then, and all fictions were *golpo*. The eighteen-page fiction *Indira* (1872) and fifteen-page fiction *Yugalanguria* (1873) written by Bankimchandra and fourteen-page fiction *Madhumati* (1873) written by his brother Purnachandra were all published under the rubric of *upanyas* or novel. It was more than eighty years later, when the power of definition, distinction and evaluation of literary discourse rested with academicians that the former two were declared to be neither novel nor short story whereas the latter was branded as a short story, since by then definitions imported from the West had piled up in the volumes stacked in college libraries. But the first canonisable perfect short story did not appear till Rabinranath

Tagore wrote *Postmaster* (1891) in the weekly *Hitavadi*.

However, the works of Mir Mosharrif Hossain (1847-1912), poet, novelist and playwright, failed to get canonised, primarily because formation of Muslim middle class individual in the new episteme of Enlightenment was delayed as the rulers whom the Empire decimated were mostly Muslim. The community initially refused to be subsumed in the language of emerging Bangla literature because of what was considered Hinduani semiotic and semantic features. For the Hindu individual, this also was one of the reasons to move closer to the new episteme. In third volume of *Bengal in 1756-1757*, historian Hill had written 'Genuine (i.e. Hindoo) rajahs and inhabitants were much disaffected to the Moor (i.e. Mohammedan) government and secretly wished for a change and opportunity of throwing off their tyrannical yoke.' The first fiction of a Muslim author to be canonised came quite late in *Byathar Daan* (1922) by Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1977). In fact, this is the only Muslim name I find in Budhed Choudhury's voluminous dissertation on short story *Bangla Sahityer Chhotogolpo O Golpokar* (1962), spanning a period from 1800 to 1940, and no such reference in *Sahitye Chhotogolpo* (1956) by Narayan Gangopadhyaya, though the books are studied with names from classical and modern European literatures.

Thenceforth canonisation could be possible only within European maxims. But the strictest maxim was that no printed matter should be against the interest of the Empire. Short story therefore had to be confined to a defined freedom of the author, sort of a four-walled discourse. Indigenous diverse oral forms were never drawn upon and ultimately withered away in neglect. Since the first grammar books and dictionaries were written and printed by European missionaries, Bangla signifiers started developing cataplexy. Most the Bangla words had several meanings, depending upon context, and even contradictory meanings, as is now evident from the *Bangiya Sbdakosh* (1933), dictionary compiled by Haricharan Bandhyapadhyaya. Consequent



upon alien intervention, the meanings of Bangla words were narrowed down to a few or even only one, and in several cases even change by colonial educators. Today a large number of Bangla words are explained with the help of English words. A huge lexical world at the social periphery simply vanished as the expressions were dubbed *anchalik* or non-metropolitan. Metropolitan Bangla flourished as language or literature articulated by upper caste Hindus, especially by the super-Brahmins of the 19th century, the genity of *Brahmosamaj*. Our modernity emanated from colonisers' values, and metropolitan Bangla evolved within those confines. *Anchalik* was tribal and lower-caste semiotic sphere. Similarly, words and expressions used in Muslim community were exuviated off metropolitan Bangla. The fund of words, diction, expressions were basically metropolitan till the emergence of the postmodern Bangla short story. That the language of the entire two hundred million people is the language of Bangla literature dawned quite late, when the Western rhetoric, poetics and canons became redundant and irrelevant.

From *Bangadarshan* onwards till the publication of the periodical *Sabujpatra* (1914) edited by Pramatha Choudhuri (1868-1946), son-in-law of Rabinranath's elder brother Satyendranath Tagore (1842-1923), fictions were written in former old Bangla of letters, documents, verse, horo-

scopes etc., which was being articulated in flowery, Sanskritised, compounded, consonantal or vowel-blended words and long-winding sentences, beyond the reach of the uninitiated, so that the Brahminism of vocabulary could represent the fixity of power of the newly constructed individual. Pramatha Choudhuri was well versed in English and French languages and literatures, and had introduced triolet, terza rima, sonnet etc., colonial verse forms after he came back from England as a barrister. *Sabujpatra* gave prestige to spoken Bangla, i.e. the dialect spoken in and around the metropolis, which was the imperial capital till 1911. What had happened by the time *Sabujpatra* appeared was establishment of hundreds of jute mills in the same area, and convergence of a huge labour force from far-flung places who required a common medium of communication. A common medium of communication was also required by students from other provinces who came to the metropolis for studies at Hindu College (1817) and Calcutta University (1857). *Sabujpatra* changed the language of literature forever, and strengthened the grip of Western canons, but within elitist semantics.

(to be continued)

Malay Roy Choudhury is a poet/novelist who was the founder of the 'Hungry Literary Movement' in the 1960s. He lives in Kolkata.

Reetika Vazirani (1962-2003): Indian-American poet

INQUILAB HASHEMI

Poet Reetika Vazirani, who was found dead in Chevy Chase, Maryland on July 18 with her 2-year-old son, an apparent suicide, was born in India and raised in Maryland. At the time of her death she was Writer-in-Residence at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA. She had published two books of poems, *White Elephants* (1996) and *World Hotel* (2002), in her short life. Her poetry had energy and panache, along with formal dexterity and control - her work abounds with sonnets, sestinas, villanelles--so that it was easy to miss its underlying sense of dislocation and homelessness.



"It's me, I'm not home," she declared lightly in one poem, though the phrase also had a lethal accuracy. Though her verse could be playful and lighthearted, the lightness also masked rootlessness and drift.

It's Me, I'm Not Home

It's late in the city and I'm asleep.
You will call again? Did I hear
(please leave a message after the beep)
Chekhov? A loves B. I clap
for joy. B loves C. C won't answer.
In the city it's late, I'm asleep,
and if your face nears me like a familiar map
of homelessness: old world, new hemisphere
(it's me leave a message after the beep),
then romance flies in the final lap
of the relay, I pass the baton you disappear
into the city, it's late and I'm asleep
with marriages again, they tend to drop
by, faithful to us for about a year,
leave a message after the beep,
I'll leave a key for you, play the tape
when you come in, or pick up the receiver.
It's late in the city and I'm asleep.
Please leave a message after the beep.

Reetika once said "Culture shock is not your reflex upon leaving the dock; it is when you have been a law-abiding citizen for more than ten years: when someone asks your name and the name of your religion and your first thought is I don't know." To her the past was at times unbearably heavy, while the future offered no comfort.

RICE

And this is hunger:
beans & rice
beans & rice.
A pang for a meal. You're broke.
Sweet butter on challah. In the eighties,
you had money, everybody did
until the stock market crash
when the lucky got richer.
Spiced chicken on flat wheat,
the chef at Kebabish
cooking for you. An immigrant with no papers
cooking just for you.
The drizzle & snap of oil on fire,
cumin bursting into pulao, biryani.
You rave, a deported illegal
wandering into the night air
sniffing the streets for gravy.
You are nearly crazy with the hint of it.
Keep walking.
It is Main Street & you're a citizen.
Remember the ceremony
& all the coca-cola & hot dogs afterwards?
Or try to imagine your old life.
Being a saleslady in Virginia
is far preferable
to the old way of life
that you lived when you were a queen
called Rani in your native country & the servants
fanned you night & day when you
snapped your fingers.

Inquilab Hashemi is a poet and writer for a rock-n-roll magazine in Maryland.

The Daily Star Literature Page Limerick Contest Winners

First:

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleida agree,
That on the same side they shall never be.
H-Not one minute's rest,
K-Oh my hair, what a mess.
H&K-Let's take it out on the people of Dhaka, B.D.

Rukshana Habib

Banani
Dhaka
(Photo unavailable)

Second:

There was a *mali* from Noakhali.
He had an eye for his sweet *Sali*.
When seen by his wife,
He ran for his life.
He's now hiding in Mohakhali.

Rahat Kamal

Tejgaon
Dhaka



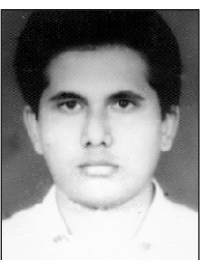
In skool exams, I'm exceling
So I rote my muther fortelng
That results mite
Be kwite all rite
Well, except perhaps for my spelling!



Rozana Ahmed
Chandgaon RA
Chittagong

And honorable mention (simply for joining from way over there) goes to:

There was a husband gay and gentle
The tiptop man always wore a mantle
His wife looked like an owl
Always pursued him with a howl
Ready to run he never wore sandal!



Devjyoti Kundu
Fultala
Khulna

Editor's Note

A pattern was discernable in the entries to the limerick contest which was interesting in its own right, and furthermore may be reflective of a national gender trait.

In comparison to the women, entries by men were negligible in number. Men prefer by and large to send us poems on enormous, abstract topics such as Peace (that's right, Peace with a capital P), Justice, Love, Revolution, etc. They disdain to join in limerick contests, to write something that actually might be read and enjoyed by others, i.e., their egos are larger, they strain after the impossible. Women, on the other hand, by sending us limericks in relatively large numbers, showed us that they go after something achievable, that they like to do something within a framework and with rules, that they think a limerick contest is a fun thing to do.