

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

The Gift of the Colonial Magi

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Western canons, emanating out of anti-nature episteme, had far-reaching consequences on native Bangla life/world. Academicians such as Srikumar Bandhapadhyia, Sasibhushan Dasgupta, Narayan Gangapadhyia, Sisirkumar Das, Narendranath Chakraborty, Upendranath Gangapadhyia, Haraprasad Mitra, Jagadish Bhattacharya and Bhudeb Choudhury have generally ignored native folk, tribal and indigenous Bangla grassroot discourses, but studded their books and articles with such alien signifiers as Iliad, Odyssey, Walter Scott, Henry James, Somerset Maugham, Virgil, Dante, Boccaccio, Voltaire, Ralph Fox, Richard Burton, H.D. Bates, Elizabeth Bowden, Brander Matthews, Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving, Van Wyck Brooks, Ernst Rhys, Dawson Scott, T. Seltzer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Balzac, D.L. Thomas, A. Symons, Samuel Johnson, L.B. William and even Encyclopedia Britannica, in order to enforce their arguments to create a stasis each for novel and short story. It was only after the emergence of academics of the new school of *subaltern studies* in 1982 that the short story broke out of universalism and talked of power not as homogenous and split, but as universally distributed in different ways, in different sites, among different social groupings.

The values that the definitions of stasis sustained are worth deconstruction. Here are a few (italics mine): 'The novel deals with the *individual*, it is the epic of the struggle of the individual against society, against nature, and it could only develop in a society where the balance between man and society was lost, where man was at war with his fellows or with nature' (Ralph Fox). 'The short story fulfills the three unities of the French classical drama; it shows one action, in one place, on one day. A short story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation' (Brander Matthews). 'The short story is an emphatically personal exposition. What one searches for and what one enjoys in a story is a special distillation, a unique sensibility which has recognised and selected at once a subject that, above all other subjects, is of value to the writer's temperament and to his aloneness counterpart, his perfect opportunity to project himself' (Sean O'Faolain). 'Short story is an impressionistic prose tale, a short, effective, single blow, a moment of atmosphere, glimpse of a climactic incident' (Fred Lewis Pattie). 'A short story usually presents the crisis of a single problem.' (Webster's Dictionary and Encyclopedia). 'A short story must contain one and only one informing idea, and that this idea must be worked out to its

logical conclusion with absolute singleness of method' (Hudson). 'Brevity and natural limitation give the short story a precision as an Art, beside which the art of the novel seem rambling and formless. Standing as a single crystalline episode or experience, the short story bears, perhaps, the same relation to the novel as a single parable to the whole *gospel*' (John Courmos). 'The imagination of the *savage* and the child are partly of the same power and quality. They float in a world of wonder in which the *wildest* wishes become realities and the most impossible fancies wear the look of truth, especially when they are given form and substance by the art of the storyteller' (Masterpiece of Short Stories). 'If the novel is the record of the emotions of an *individual soul*, influenced by and influencing some other soul, one cannot have the novel until some notion of *individuality* has come to the world' (Stoddard). 'A short story is a short work of prose fiction, which typically either sets up and resolves a single narrative point or depicts a mood of an atmosphere' (The Wordsworth Encyclopedia).

The above Occidental abstractions were accepted and given the garb of Oriental abstractions, despite the fact that the indigenous society had no such concepts as individuality, Art, masterpiece, single linearity, opposition to nature, etc. Academic insistence and critical acclaim forced Bangla short stories to have design, purpose, bounded form, totalization, originality, unilinear, monocentric, metaphysics, determinacy, etc. The author of the short story, in order to get canonised in Bangla literature, had to produce a work of art that knew no other rules but its own, aspire to and transform the crude contingency of worldly relations into purified aesthetic forms. The claim for universality had to be inherent in the text, although it had to be a highly specialised discourse called short story. Authors who were canonised post-Sabujpatra and up to Kallol (1932) are Dhurijati Prasad Mukhopadhyia (1894-1961), Nareshchandra Sengupta (1883-1964) Manindralal Basu (1897-1986), Dineshchandra Das (1888-1941), Gokul Nag (1894-1925), Achintya Kumar Sengupta (1903-1975), Premendra Mitra (1904-1988), Buddhadeva Basu (1908-1974), Shailajnananda Mukhopadhyia (1901-1976), Tarashankar Bandapadhyia (1898-1972), Saroj Kumar Roychoudhuri (1903-1972), Manik Bandapadhyia (1908-1956), Annadashankar Ray (1904), Banaphool (1899-1979), and Bibhuti Bhushan Bandapadhyia (1894-1950). Obviously, modernist critics have identified some of them as major, great, original, etc. However, literature fill then had not been commodified and integrated into post-Independence Five-Year-Plan capitalism and bureau-

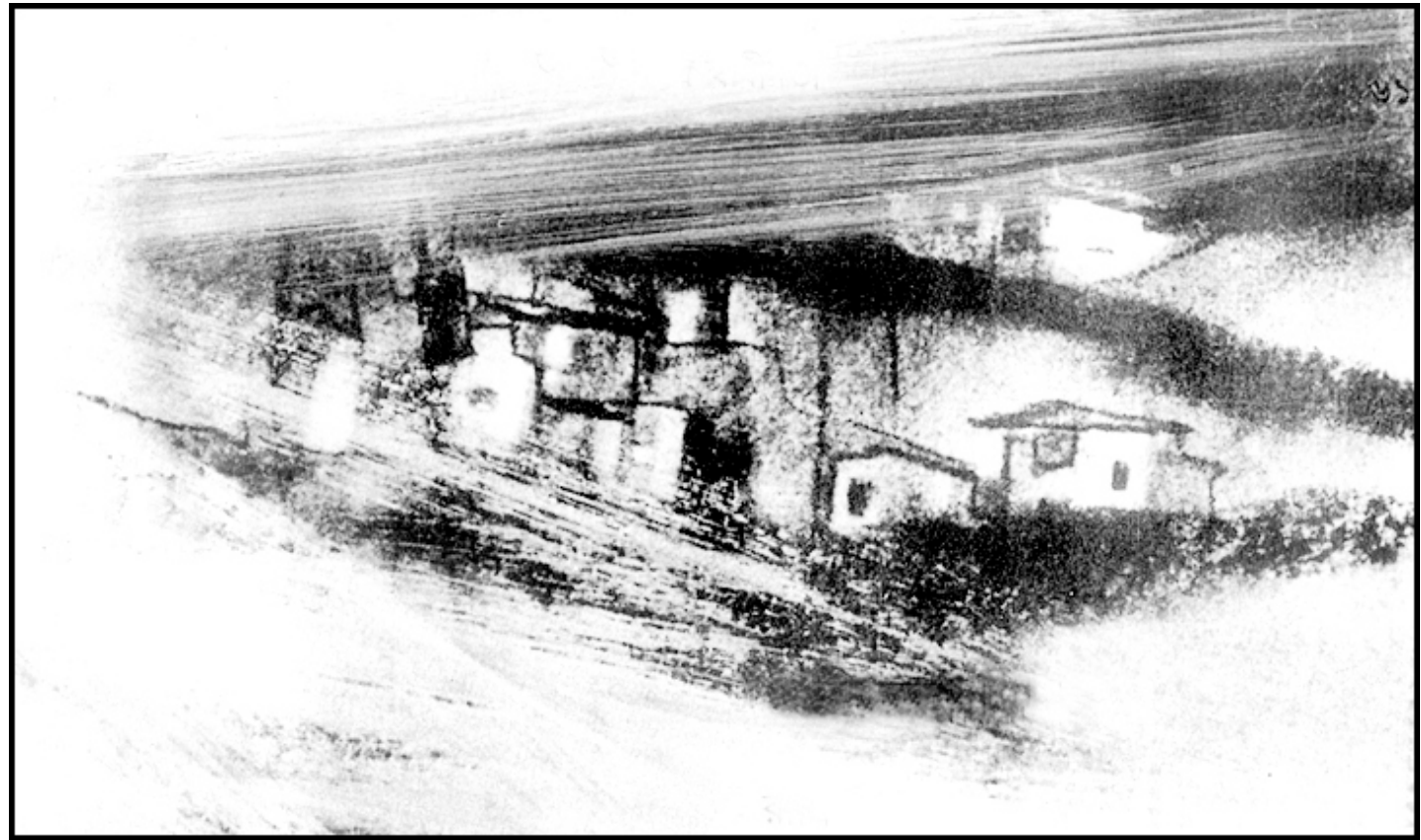
cratic culture.

The Occidental definitions were succinctly Orientalised in these words by Narayan Gangapadhyia in his book *Sahitya Chhotogolpo* (1957): 'Short story is an impression-born prose fiction whose one single message achieves totality through crisis of unity of a certain occurrence or a certain circumstance or a certain mentality.' He characterized short story in three categories, i.e. Occurrence-centric, Character-centric and Essence-centric. These centres were further classified in twelve categories for the benefit of modernist critics: philosophical, social problem, questions or relations between man and woman, psychological, romantic, protagonist-based, allegorical, satirical, poetic, idealistic or political, supernatural, and strange.

Bhudeb Choudhury had in his *Bangla Sahityer Chhotogolpo o Golpokar* (1962) highlighted the following essential ingredients of a short story: a) at every moment, at every juncture, in endlessly spread, mysteriously complex modern lifesite lay unfathomable secret depths. A total reflection of this may be encountered at a single point of deeply absorbed fullness of life; b) second ingredient of short story is the densely close perceptive raptness of the author-artist—his meditative self-absorption in ongoing life. A single moment of total life should be reflectable in the mirror of that serene consciousness; c) thirdly, what is required is suggestiveness of the composition. A location, an emphasis, or emotion of special moment of a life which transcends life/world of all countries and times; d) in these ingredients specialties lies the incomparable specificity of short story. A story whose climax does not reveal complete perception of the moment of rootsource of the life-ocean, even if the story is brief in size, it is not a short story; it may be a tale, fable, parable or whatever. Therefore, in the creation of suggestiveness of eternal life within limited life's climactic moment lies the form-style of short story.

Though the target readers of the articulations of Bangla academicians were graduate and postgraduate students as well as their teachers, the academic framework provoked authors to aim to abstract the world through structures of imaginative control to enable them to establish a position of detachment (*nirlipta*) from which they could survey the field of appearances, claim to have privileged perspective of absolute truth as a universalizing tool for accusing others of error. Content of the story was given much more importance by academicians rather than construction of the language. They were oblivious of the fact that languages of European fiction were several centuries old. Unfortunately none of the academicians discussed the semantic, semiotic,

syntactic, lexical, dictional etc. attributes of short story, and neither did they correlate the text with the ethnic and social structures. There were several Bangla linguists but no language philosopher such as, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), or Theodore Adorno (1903-69); forget about our own Sanskrit language-sages of yore, namely, Anandavardhana (AD 850), Bharthari (AD 450), or Bhoja (AD 1000). Pramatha Choudhuri pulled up the language structure from antiquity to modern, but modernist Bangla literature remained within the strict confines of metropolitan, sophisticated, elite-friendly language. The modernist academicians created and fabricated a pattern and went on excluding all those who did not fit into their scheme of things. They tried their best to impose a monocentric order. To them the world was an object of willed action, raw material for short story, guided and given form by the authors' designs. Meaning and design had become one. The world itself had inconsequential meaning for them because they were artists (*shilpi*). They imposed sense and purpose. The process went on as authors emerged on the pages of *Parichoi* (1931), *Kallol* (1932) to post-Partition diasporic platform *Notun Reeti* (1958), the kingdom of indigenous gods and goddesses as Nature got blurred; *sarthakata* or significance and effectiveness could be traced when nature was de-animated in the text. The modern assumption of the world as chaos endowed the authors with a compulsion to make order solid, obligatory and reliably founded. A short story had to be confined within ordered form, within restricted time-space, to be certified as a short story. Chaos meant contingency and therefore modernists thought that chaos was the enemy of canons, of Art. Precolonial versified fictions and hagiographs were found to represent raw human condition (people were not constructed as individuals with the tools of Enlightenment), and therefore, contingent. Those premodern texts were found uncanonable, as they were disorderly, open-ended, irrational, spontaneous and nature-centric. Reviving the premodern, precolonial ethos and ethos became a felt need for a large number of fresh authors who could realize that the modernist epistemic violence made man devoid of meanings. They realized that the *Notun Reeti* breed of post-Partition modernist fiction writers had become order suppliers of consumer products. Nevertheless, *Notun Reeti* and its fellow travellers did invent the technique of fiction writing in the language of the customers. This brand of modernist authors started producing twenty sleazy novels and a hundred short stories each year during Durga puja alone to mop up the



bonuses of white-collar labourers. Partition was a devastating blow to the social and cultural values of ethnic West Bengal. The influx of refugees still continues, though now in dribbles. In this erosion of values, and superimposition of a post-Partition diaspora on the ethnic life of West Bengal, lay the seeds of indigenous postmodern Bangla fiction.

Premodern Kalikshetra to Postmodern Kolkata

Like in any other language, Bangla literary modernism had its own contradiction between radical disruption of form and traditionalism of content and ideology, as were exhibited on the pages of such periodicals bulletins as *Kalikalama* (1926), *Parichoi* (1931), *Kallol* (1932), *Chhotogolpo Notun Reeti* (1958), *Hungry Andolon* (1961), *Shastravirodhi* (1966), mouthpiece *Ei Dashok* and *Neem Sahitya* (1967). Epistemic and ontological modernism had, however, arrived in Bangla literature first on the pages of *Bangadarshan* (1872) edited by Bankimchandra Chattapadhyia (1838-1894) who had already written first ever Bangla prose fiction *Durgeshnandini* (1865). However, Bangla prose got its real semantic, semiotic and syntactic breakthrough on the pages of *Sabujpatra* (1914) edited by Pramatha Choudhuri (1868-1946). But the rise, youth and putrefaction of *Parichoi* properly maps literary modernism as well as birth of cultural grace, and its ultimate degeneration and cultural disgrace.

Notun Reeti was the last bastion of metropolitan upper-caste dominated quasi-Occidental canons. In fact, fiction, including adventure stories for children, continued to be written by them in the image of the colonial genre, where White Man's Africa was Indianized in imagination to enable children of well-to-do families have Bangla indigenous feel of H. Rider Haggard, G.A. Henty or Henry Morton Stanley. Colonial adventure

stories have spawned a new genre of Hindu religious adventure stories wherein the protagonist or author visits supposedly inaccessible pilgrim places, a strange metamorphosis of the colonial discourse in which fiction writer Avadhoot specialised and wrote innumerable volumes. Satya Guha in his history of contemporary Bangla literature *Ekaler Godyo Podyo Andoloner Dalil* (1970) has stated that all *Notun Reeti* authors were anthologized in *Ei Dashaker Golpo* (1960) by Bimal Dar. The short story writers included in that anthology were all upper caste youth, with the majority of them being high-caste Brahmins: Ajay Dasgupta, Amalendu Chakraborty, Dibyendu Palit, Dipendra Nath Bandhapadhyia, Mati Nandi, Jashodajiban Bhattacharya, Ratan Bhattacharya, Shankar Chattapadhyia, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyia, Shyamol Gangapadhyia, Sandipan Chattapadhyia, Somnath Bhattacharya and Samarjit Bandhapadhyia. Some of them charted an unprecedented course of prolific writing, having written 400 novels and 5000 short stories, apart from duplicating Rider Haggard in equal number of books for children. Despite the command over their craft, the immediate postcolonial authors named above failed to produce texts comparable to those of Ben Okri, Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Elechi Amadi, Ayi Kwei Armah, J. M. Coetzee, Wole Soyinka, Jamaica Kincaid and Neil Bissoondath. But then, Ngugi wa Thiong'o took six years to write *Petals of Blood*; Salman Rushdie took the same period to write *Midnight's Children* and Arundhati Roy for *The God of Small Things*. There are other factors in the make-up of the authorial self as well. Firstly, the Indian polity had been co-opted into the colonial power structure through inauguration of Provincial Autonomy and formation of native ministry way back in 1936, a decade before Independence. Secondly, the refu-

gee writers knew nothing about and had no experience of indigenous rural West Bengal, the inexplicable panorama so vividly displayed by Bibhuti Bhushan Bandhapadhyia (1894-1950) and Tarashankar Bandhapadhyia (1898-1971). Fiction writer Shyamol Gangapadhyia did purchase farmland and lived village-life for a feel of the ethnicity but was not accepted into the weave of the place by the locals.

Managed, written, defined and canonised within urban middle class values, *Parichoi*, *Kallol*, *Pragati*, etc. periodicals identified themselves with the Occidental canons and discourse whereas *Notun Reeti* adopted a mode of counter-identification by staying within the governing structure of above ideas, with a mix of Soviet discourse in case of some authors, but by nativising the terms. They combined aesthetic self-consciousness and formalist experimentation. The left-sympathisers among them tried to combine what they thought was social realism, though according to the Soviet definition social realism meant a dialectical interpretation of reality and its criterion in light of the needs and aims of an *evolving socialist society*. However, gradually lucre became their main driving force. For most of them lucre became the best mode to reeroot them on the soil of West Bengal. The *Neem Sahitya*, *Hungryalist* and the *Shastravirodhi* literary movements attempted to go beyond the structure of oppositions and sanctioned negations of the discourse through disidentification. They located themselves in essentially adversarial relations to the prevalent aesthetic realism. Thereafter the post-Naxalite little magazine explosion-activated extrication of the discourse, as a result of which aesthetic realism completely collapsed; there was gradual deconstruction and dissolution of high and subaltern cultural distinction. This became more pronounced in films. Evacuation

of commitment pervaded all spheres of Bangla life/world, and protean postmodern cultural politics emerged. So much so that an erstwhile Naxalite started fleeing Marwari businessmen at the Income Tax Office to bring out special issues of his periodical in order to honour a couple of left-leaning poets.

The vernacular news dailies which started newspaper literature (Narayan Gangapadhyia had termed it *magazinist literature*) are actually Bangla tabloids which thrive on front page sensationalisations of rape, murder, collective lynching, kidnapping, gang wars, elite brothels, etc., as if these are the only events taking place in West Bengal. No comparison can be made with English news dailies. The readerships are poles apart. Each vernacular daily has its own collegium of captive geniuses, and mainly their books are reviewed and hoisted on manipulated bestseller lists. Such bestsellers are declared to be *landmarks*—an imperial concept to grab other peoples' lands. There are authors who write Leninist stories on the pages of the Communist Party newspaper, and Mills & Boon stories on the pages of consumerist dailies. *Krittibas* (1953), which started as a parallel poetry magazine to *Notun Reeti* fiction, produced frighteningly money-spinning potboiler fiction writers, outsmarting the Harold Robinses. Jyotirmoy Datta, the ultra-rightist member of *Krittibas*, teamed up with ultra-leftist revolutionary Azizul Haque in order to bring out a tabloid. Amid this funniest of cultural intramurality, some authors emerged as ex-Naxalites who reportedly were anti-Naxal informers of the Police establishment!

(to be continued)

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Daily Life

FARHAD MAZHAR

(translated by Khademul Islam)

Early morning knock on the door I race to open it
Nothing there just flowers nodding in the empty wind
A fleeting fog dewdrops on the vast fields at night
Pieces of paper left behind by somebody on the grass.

Eight a.m. A tempo-wheeled middle-class day
Somebody slips and breaks a skull on a roof
Head lowered I stare out at the speeding cars
Suddenly lock eyes with someone riding a rickshaw

My office is on the upper storey, a panting climb
A bone-tiredness makes my back ache,
Work like a machine glasses glued to my eyes
Then spy a letter whose writing I know:



With a broken nib in a gentle easy everyday style
Somebody has written one's name in capital letters
The inkwell's lip was probably broken, and three
Inkdrops tiny and large spilled in careless haste.

This spurning! First you came close to me, then withdrew
Gave the caged bird a glimpse of open skies and endless space
This is how it ends, will end, the night comes on as usual

Early morning knock on the door again I race to open it...