Star Literature DHAKA SATURDAY, JUNE 28, 1997

essay

Male Birs as Feminists and Bhadromohilas as Birs?

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

IT WAS ALMOST BY ACCIDENT THAT I read two different essays at the same time that mean quite a lot if seen together. One essay showed how certain nineteenth century Birs (Bangla word for hero) could or could not be seen as feminists. Should being sympathetic to women's causes make one a feminist, does feminism as a term mean anything now that feminism realizes that women do not so much want separate identity politics as they want to share the common dessert in the disposal of humankind in general — are some important and provoking questions that are asked in this essay. The other essay looks at autobiographies of three Bengali women and deconstructs the binarical relationship of the cloistered woman and the turbulence of nationalist and post-nationalist politics. The writer chalks the entry of the bhadromohila into the political domain, but the reason why the bhadromohila is adulated is not only because she is militant and a champion of real causes, but because she like a true Bir excludes herself of narrow (feminist) causes and choices.

The first essay I mentioned is in Bangla and titled "Postscript Bir Taramon : Storm in a Teacup" by Kuat il Islam, that came out in Shaili (3.2 March, 1997). This essay is in the form of a conversation taking place between a reformed feminist and two proverbial New Men — Aditi, Shaurov and Shaurya. Amongst themselves they discuss a revisionistic feminism. The essay points out through Aditi's view that Bir Taramon's femaleness has nothing to do with her subject status as a Bir, just as being female does not automatically make her a feminist. The essay uses excerpts as examples from Begum Rokeya to elucidate that women need to be seen as humans, the advocates should be seen as humanists instead of feminists. Kuat il Islam brings in Socrates for theoretical reasons, Raja Ram Mohan and Ishwarchanra as nineteenth century birs are posited against Engels. Engels recognized the essay says, that patriarchy could be regarded as the narrative of the heroes (male). Aditi in the essay says that both patriarchy and feminism have withered themselves out of existence. It seems to be saying be human foremost — the rights and wrongs to man/woman will take care of themselves.

The other essay in English is titled "Bengal Women in Politics — An Argument against Essentialisms of Home and Abroad" by Ranabir Samaddar which appeared in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities), vol 41, no. 2 December 1996. Samaddar examines the autobiographies of Sarala Devi, an early protagonist of the nationalist movement, Manikuntala Sen a communist leader in Bengal and Hena Das, a political organizer in Erstwhile Pakistan. Sarala Devi's contribution as the essay points us to is, in "encouraging a martial, heroic culture in Bengal, (an) imaginative use of folklore and history, the conversion of the local king Pratapaditya into a Bengali hero equal in stature to Shivaji." Born in the illustrious Tagore family this bhadromohila talks about change and militancy in a way that is not about to be censured. While Uma Chakroborty thinks it is "significant that the women's question never featured as an issue in Sarala Devi's work", Samaddar is pleased precisely because this has not occurred. He does not think Sarala Devi was required to practice feminism. With a logic that bewilders, Samaddar even tries to accommodate Manikuntala Sen into this. Manikuntala had a complex view of politics and an aspersion for the educated political leaders who spoke distantly to women representatives and the women freedom fighters of the Tebhaga — with all of this Samaddar has little patience. Samaddar almost contorts Manikuntala's concerns as a feminist, he points out that Monikuntala was certain that women's problems were still "basically (only) human problems".

Both these ideas, one of male Birs being male feminists or just well meaning people and the other which sees bhadromohilas in a Bir-like light but without a feminist shadow show few things. The Bir (ennobled) male becomes reacknowledged through being man and human enough to take up women's causes. The political and bhadromohila becomes a Bir of sorts by stepping into the male domain without disengaging from home either and is rewarded for not advocating feminism. Like Tolstoy had said about Mahatama Gandhi "his Hindu Nationalism spoils everything" (VS Naipaul, India The Wounded Civilization — Birs male and female, are people who take up good causes without spoiling it with feminism.

This disquiet with feminism, even rumbling within feminist circles is called post-feminism. Harking figures like Raja Ram Mohan and Ishwardchandra who defended the abolition of the Sutti and encouraged the Hindu widow remarriage, could seem like ceremoniously giving back to the male figures of authority the privilege to be the voice for and narrate the desire of the muted. But if it is, the point laboured through Kuat il Islam's essay is that patriarchy, which supplied the Sutti and the reasons why women were without property rights, had now supposedly absolved and transcended itself by adopting a humanistic vision which is gender cured. Female specificity has become an irrelevant detail, so much so feminism has ceased to 'matter', even less than that, feminism has ceased to 'be'.

To be aware of women's conditions and to solicit to change this, no longer it appears is called feminism. Just as Virginia Woolf or Begum Rokeya, Islam's essay points out are no more feminists than Raja Ram Mohan or Ishwardchandra. Feminism has to absolve itself out of its existence, so that we can all get started on being just human beings, even if it means settling for a watered down version of androcentricism and a feminism cured of its difference politics. If feminism was pejorative before, now it has become almost a reactionary political choice. What has changed, hopes an enlightened patriarchy and cured feminism, is that there will be a showdown time, to fuse what patriarchy has shown to the female about the male with what feminism has taught the male about the female — and get on with it.

theatre

Never The Twain Shall Meet

by Dilip Hiro

A stage play that explores the problems facing a mixed race family in Britain raises many questions but it gives no answers.

LONDON (IPS) — "EAST IS EAST" IS a drama set in the northern English town of Salford, near Manchester, that revolves around a mixed-race family struggling to come to terms with its identity.

It centres on the family of George and Ella Khan: he is Pakistani, she is English. The focus of this two-act, two-hour-long play is on the identity of their four sons and one daughter.

The children unwittingly are entangled in the old axiom that "East is East and West is West — and never the twain shall meet!" Are they Anglo-Pakistani, Eurasian, half-caste, Pakistani, or brown British?

The play, the first ever written by a member of Britain's Asian community to be produced in a major West End theatre, may soon may be made into a film. A local production company is trying to put together an investment deal after buying the movie rights to the play, written by Anglo-Pakistani actor Ayub Khan-Din.

Khan-Din wrote the script in January 1996 and after many revisions East is East opened at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in October, and toured the provinces before reaching London and a commercial production by the Royal Court's English Stage Company.

"The play shows that the identities forged from British and Pakistani backgrounds are multifarious, and simply a question of East versus West," observed one theatre critic.

The traditional sociological view here is that children born of parents of different races or religions belong to neither side and face an insoluble identity crisis. This playwright, however, says they belong to both worlds.

The play's appeal lies in the fact that the author applies a light touch to the subject, often treating it with good humour. This has gone down well with the predominantly white, middle class audiences.

There is little doubt that Khan-Din has drawn heavily from his own life. He was raised in an Anglo-Pakistani family of eight brothers and two sisters in Salford where his father, like George Khan in the play, ran a fish and chip shop.

One of the strengths of the script is the authenticity not only of the local idiom and the speech rhythm — both as spoken by the Salford-born characters and the Pakistani father, making free use of words and grammar from both languages.

The conflict in the play revolves around the insistence of the father, George Khan, on unquestioning obedience from his children. Khan's attitude is aptly summed up by his statement: 'Pakistani believe if father ask son doing something son follow father instructions, has respect, see.'

But his eldest son, Abdul, expresses himself pithily when he says: 'Father makes decisions about my life as if he owned it.'

The most frequent word Khan uses in his conversations with his children and wife is 'respect'. When he feels he is not getting respect he gets violent. Thus within 15 minutes of the play's second Act he beats up his wife twice and his son once, though since there is no hint throughout the first act of any latent streak of violence in Khan, this violence appears stagily contrived.

The major flaw in the logic of the play also lies in George Khan's character — he left behind a wife and family in Pakistan, who he has not visited in 20 years and married again, to Ella, outside his community and culture. Yet he insists on arranging the marriages of his grown up sons at any price.

Abdul complains that his father has "no right to tell us what our culture should be, he lost that when he settled here and married my mam (mother)" — but the play skates over the father's blatant irrationality. It does not explore the conflict between reason and emotion.

This is partly because the script provides no background of romance between George and Ella, a commitment that led to a 25 year marriage and yielded seven children. Nor does the script help the audience to form a rounded view of the parents by filling in their background, or even seeing them express mutual affection or indulge in joint reminiscing.

Many critics have pointed out that this is the first stage play which explores the problems facing a mixed race family in the South Asian community in Britain, which is over two million strong.

Actually it is more than a mixed race play, as the two parents belong to different religions as well. Khan, who is confusingly called George (probably a variation of the word Jar which, in Arabic, means neighbour), is a Muslim, and Ella a Christian, who later converts to Islam abut does not adopt a Muslim name.

Unlike in the Afro-Caribbean community in Britain, which is a little over half a million strong, the incidence of mixed marriage among South Asians is low.

A recent survey showed that among the British citizens of Afro-Caribbean origin, nearly one third of those under 30 are either married to or cohabiting with a white partner. In contrast, only 10 per cent of South Asian men and five per cent of South Asian women have white spouses.

Moreover, there has been no change over generations. Young South Asians are as averse to marrying outside their race or religion as their parents. On the other side, white attitudes have altered sharply. A Gallup poll conducted in 1958 showed that 71 per cent of whites strongly disapproving of mixed race marriages. But by the late 1980s that figure had dropped to 27 per cent.

What about the preferences of the children of mixed race marriages? A study conducted by psychologists Barbara Tizard and Ann Phoenix in London four years ago showed that 20 per cent of these children were 'not proud of their colour, and another 20 per cent wished they were either white or a 'non-mixed-race' colour.

Interestingly, 38 per cent of them thought that one of their parents was 'racially prejudiced'. Other studies have shown that mixed-race children marry their kind more often than others. All in all, a fairly mixed picture of mixed race communities.

IPS

poems by Azfar Hussain

Fear of The Quiet

No, I can't walk through the woods.
The reason is simple: I fear the quiet
they pretend.

Quiet, my mother kneads the dough
in her kitchen, where sunlight hardly enters.
I don't understand what silences she weaves into a ball.

I simply don't understand all this:
the night's fall, the rain's whispers,
the street whistling like a whore.

No, I'm no longer in love with poetry.
I can't afford to wait for a line
to fall with a plop,

for I've already been to the city of search.

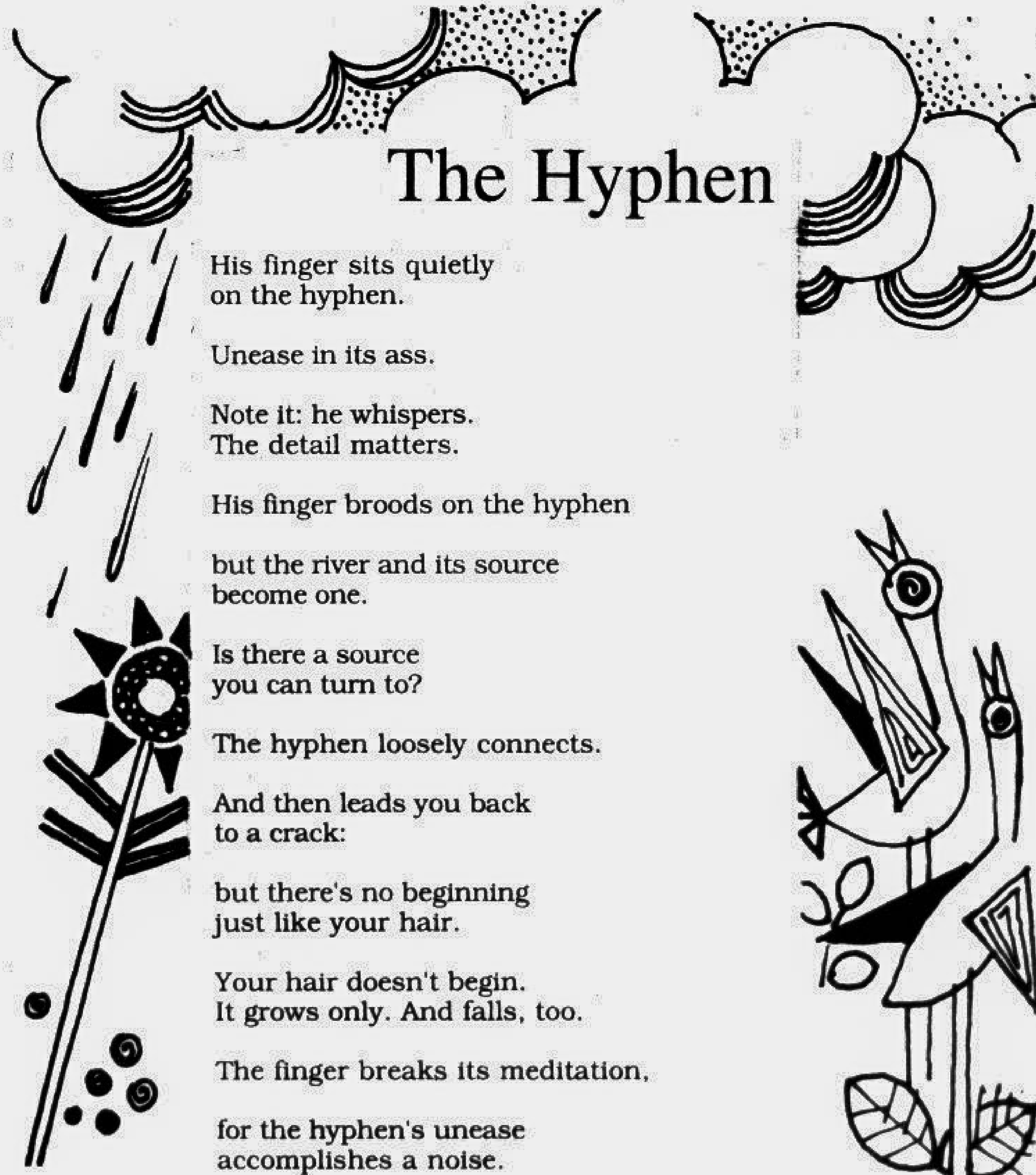
A railway station still calls me at midnight,
the glint of metal, the whistle fading
into the horizon.

No, I simply don't understand all this.

The quiet has a hollow core, someone says.
So you need not plumb any depths.
Just walk by, casually.

But I fear the calm in our footsteps
squelching across the field
muddy

just like my old town
writing and rewriting my ruins
in unbroken quiet.



The Hyphen

His finger sits quietly
on the hyphen.

Unease in its ass.

Note it: he whispers.
The detail matters.

His finger broods on the hyphen

but the river and its source
become one.

Is there a source
you can turn to?

The hyphen loosely connects.

And then leads you back
to a crack:

but there's no beginning
just like your hair.

Your hair doesn't begin.
It grows only. And falls, too.

The finger breaks its meditation,

for the hyphen's unease
accomplishes a noise.

My Benglish Breathes Badly

She complains my breath smells of *panta bhat*.
I mean half-water and half-rice with little salt in it.
And she says my breath smells of onion and garlic.
In fact, more garlic than onion.

But I cite *Let Live*, a magazine of health:
"Garlic helps prevent platelet stickiness,
lowers blood pressure, and has a beneficial effect
on cholesterol metabolism." To make my point
clink like a coin, I then move on to page 9
in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

But she dismisses my documentation,
and my logic caves in.

She says my breath releases an English
that hurts her sense of linguistic hygiene.
Yet she kisses me, laying her lips on mine
for minutes on end,
to cleanse the dirt off my breath,
and off my Bengali-English,
I mean *Benglish*.

Thus we meet, breath to breath,
in our nights of little negotiations
in the name of love: You English,
and I, Bengali.

But I eat Bangladeshi rice three times a day,
and my Benglish is ricy,
if not so spicy
as you've expected.

When I drop a verb in a sentence,
creating a heavy *genzam*, I mean hassle,
with the sense of the plural,
her grammar like an owl
swoops down on the miss, the mouse
unable to scamper by.

Then she squawks:
I've breached our all agreements
as I've breached our love
between subject and object,
verb and object,
and clause and pause.

Egged on by an expert headmaster,
whose recent work in King's English, I hear,
made many sit up, she concludes:
my phrases stink like a fish; to be precise,
like a rotten *Hislha!*

And I tell them: yes, I eat fish three times a day,
and my Benglish is fishy,
if not so juicy
as you've expected.

On my nineteenth birthday,
our *pundit mahashay*
who could write sentences in English
in that falwless subject-verb-object order,
and whose grandfather's grandfather served
Lord Clive's East India Company,
gave me a copy of Nesfiled's *Grammar*,
asking me to eat it
so as to get a right kit to fit in.

But lo! I ate some salty chutney instead,
yet my Benglish is not so chuntnied
as you've expected.

She says my Benglish breathes badly,
and then she kisses me madly.