

reflections

Wary Reflections on Violence

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

THE TOOK MORE THAN DESENSITISATION on part of a leading Bengali newspaper that thought fit to publish on 14.7.97 the outcome of the Seema murder trial and then on page 14 amongst various other trivia insert a tale of casual violence. A pop singer is here given an opportunity to try his hand at fiction writing. The author-narrator is a young man, angry and all — somehow that is predictable. Has dreams of having murdered a young woman Sharothi — possible again. That this conscientious newspaper would want to publish it along with the Seema trial verdict — is not so easy to understand. Or may be it is.

The plot of the tale in question involves a young man who has experienced the sensation of murder. With graphic description of the murder and the post-murder clean up operation, there is also a storm scene depicting the narrator's inner chaos and the sensation of release he experiences through all of this. The spectacularity that the act of killing had generated is about to be demystified as he begins to wake up from his dream. It was infuriating to read the piece and I still read it half a dozen times. No, I was not mistaken. It was all there. The unabashed male sense of right, the disproportionate

sense of injury, vengeance of a sulking man whom Sharothi has left, methodical madness and of course the cause had to be love. I wasn't dismayed because violence is supposed to be distasteful and is wrong even in dreams, even when like rape it cannot be proven. The reason what made the piece unbearable was its last thought. This contemplative murderer-cum-office-goer wakes up to the realisation that Sharothi is not around to leave him warm water for him to get along with his morning toilet. If this is not casual — what is? Different kinds of pipes are sending all over the same message — it's all right to be violently disposed. To protest and say in defence that this is fictional and hence cannot hurt, or that this is some sort of oblique critique that no one suspects to find, or that this is in print because the liberty to write what one chooses is a fundamental right that outrage or moral indignation should not have anything to do with — sound valid but are they?

To Gertrude Hamlet's words were daggers. In print words can be just as much. Not everyone needs to think like this — this is what we liberally have agreed to allow. Just as Catherine Mackinnon's crusade against pornography (defined as "graphically, sexually

explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words") "with no exemptions for literary value or artistic merit," writes Lesley White, "rattled" the refined intellects, rather than the pornographers." Mackinnon explains for us: "(I)t's a very American idea of liberalism — that the more you tolerate a concept that is deadly to you, the higher you score on the scale of principles."

The contemplative murderer's tale had refreshed another discomfiting memory. If one had walked down Wembley High St., London — say in the early nineties, one might have seen a chain store's display window strewn most mornings with bits and pieces of the store's mannequins. Plastic female forms. Disconnected and unclothed limbs would wait in the window until the shop assistant had time to weasel the plastic ladies into their outfits for the day and put them together again. The pedestrians and early morning shoppers — never blinked an eye at this. I felt undiluted awe for this crowd and even respected their unruffled poise. They had taken it casually just as the shop assistant and the management apparently had. I almost felt ashamed then that I scored so miserably on

"principles" and that I could not budge the feeling that this kind of viewing had no good in it. What if these sort of things did trigger something in psychopaths that we are not yet ready to acknowledge? Rape, fictional murder-wishes, pornography, disjointed mannequin bits strewn in the window — call them love, art, consumerism what you will, nothing really justifies them.

Violence Against Women an interdisciplinary journal launched in 1995 concentrates on gender based violence from different perspectives like "ethnic studies, public policy, criminology, social work, public health, law, medicine and advocacy." While the range is astonishing what really struck immediately was the non-posturing attitude of some of the article titles. Compared to the sententiousness of titles elsewhere such as "Sex and Muscle: The Female Bodybuilder Meets Lacan" or "Dressing in Imaginary Communities: Clothing, Gender and the Body in Utopian Texts from Thomas More to Feminist Science Fiction" — the titles in *Violence Against Women* were almost prosaic: Working Toward Freedom from Violence: The Process of Change in Battered Women, or Violence and Women with Disabilities: Silence and Paradox or 'Mothers in Incest Families: A Critique of Blame

and its Destructive Sequel.' See violence physical or mental, real or imaginary, institutionalised or accidental, as that which has hurt or is hurting some one, stop fabulising violence and stop decriminalising it — you might have risked your 'principles' and you might have discovered yourself unable to make mighty gestures or think of gimmicks. If you haven't, nothing is really lost, you might be able to launch yourself as a writer writing sentimental/sensational stuff about mutilated female bodies.

There will be people who read and do find in violence something that humours them, there will be people who will fly off the handle at anything, there will be others who will be wary. In the 26th July edition of *Desh*, I came across the following poem by Purnima Goswami: I realised that I had come more than half through the poem before I realised the subject of the poem was not what I was imagining it was: My translation of Goswami's poem:

"No honey, I am not cross, I just happened to fall out
from your hands. Love, your hand was not
to blame.
Smeared in dust you picked me up

brushing me with such tenderness.
Honey, really, I wasn't angry. I know,
how much you love me.

Fetched me. In leisure, you open me up, whenever
you feel — read me. If in a stray wind I
begin to fly, make a flutter —
You take care of it by settling a paper weight on me."

I read it up to this point and then realised that the subject was not a battered wife as I had suspected but it was about a book-reader relationship. Call this being wary of violence! The rest of Goswami's poem goes like this:

"Sometimes when you like some part
of me you
mark it red. I understand, honey, I
understand.
Should some one spy and make off
with me —
because that scares you, you display
me in glass sheltered shelves, lock up
and go out.
Some place in me is torn, I know, you
will
repair this with glue."

This poem should have been like a rebuke to me. Violence lies in the perception, in the eye of the beholder-reader? Exactly so. That is why so much discretion is required.

essay

Some Aspects of Nationalism of the Bengalis-II

by Serajul Islam Choudhury

THE SCISSORS OF THE RULERS has indeed been busy, playing with the fate of Bengal. Almost all the rulers in the past, except perhaps the Pals, were outsiders and did not speak the language of the people. Nationalism is basically a state of consciousness; in Bengal it had to fight against external occupiers and also against internal feudalism. The aggressor from outside promoted conservatism inside. The subjugated mother had her silent revenge; she stuck to the kitchen, remained sensitive rather than responsive, practiced self-conscious isolationism: in a word, tended to make her progeny instruments of her silent revenge. Rabindranath's complaint to the over-caring mother against her keeping the children Bengalis as contradistinguished from human beings is certainly pertinent.

In a well-known essay, Pramatha Choudhury made a valid distinction between 'we' and 'them,' 'we' meaning the Bengalis and 'them' the British. Owing to political changes, the meaning of 'we' has changed, but the difference between the two categories has persisted. In fact, pronouns in the Bengali language were often connected with politics. In the early and middle periods 'we' (thou), and 'you' (you) were interchangeable, but in modern times the separation between the two has become strong, owing not to linguistic but to economic reasons. Class division had made it necessary to introduce the honorific 'আমি' (I), a pronoun that signified 'myself' and not an 'honourable you' in the past. In nationalistic discourse 'we', however, is more abundantly used than any other pronoun. But it is easy to notice that often than not 'we' takes on a communal, rather than a national meaning. Thus 'we' in the autobiographies of as diverse personalities as Surendranath Banerjee, Profullah Chandra Roy and Nirad C Chaudhuri, and also in some of the political writings of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay does not include the Muslims. In a similar manner, in many of Kazi Nazrul Islam's poems, songs and essays 'we' means Muslims only.

TO GO BACK TO THE LINGUISTIC basis of Bengali nationalism.

Sukumar Sen notes, and we all agree, that the history of the Bengali nation began as soon as the Bengali language originated. But historiography in Bengal continues to be controversial, including that of the language. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, foremost among the Bengali linguistic scholars, overemphasized the indebtedness of Bengali to Sanskrit. He disapproved of the introduction of Persian-Arabic words and thought it to be connected with Muslim communalism. The Muslims, on the other hand, felt it necessary to use those words partly for self-expression and partly for self-assertion. There has been a tension over the use of 'বাঙালি' The word was in currency in early and middle Bengal, without causing any trouble; but it created communal controversy in the modern period. In his book on *Modern Bengali Prose*, Sajjanikanta Das offers us a specimen of what Bengali would have looked like but for the intervention by the English, ending the rule of the Persian-speaking Sultans and Nawabs of Bengal. He makes no comment, for no comment is necessary. Seen through the modern sensibility of the middle class, the ridiculousness of the specimen he suggests is self-evident.

This linguistic point about gratitude to the British conquest has also been made by Amaresh Tripathi in a book recently published. He mentions Halhed, the Englishman who wrote a Bengali grammar in 1778, and says that the writing of that 'pure' grammar by Halhed inaugurated the re-birth of Bengali Prose. Approvingly, Tripathi quotes the comment that Nirad C Chaudhuri has made in his *বাঙালি বাঙালী* (The Self-destructive Bengalis) to the effect that before the coming of the English, the Bengalis were only 'বাঙালি' (derivative), which means that they were not 'আমি' (like the original), i.e., not all-Indian. The desire to be a part of greater India has been typical of the influential sections of the middle class — Hindu as well as Muslim, and did contribute significantly to the partition of Bengal in 1947. Chaudhuri's gratitude to the English is a characteristic hall mark of the subservient section of the middle class,

which class always interpreted the world in terms of its own benefit.

Nathaniel Halhed's grammar is important not for what it contains but for what it reveals. Because in stating that Bengali grammar is modelled absolutely on that of Sanskrit, Halhed's book bears testimony to the fact that a juvenescence middle class dominated by the Sanskrit-loving Brahmins had taken over the control of the language and culture of Bengal. The source of Halhed's linguistic knowledge was his contact with this particular middle class. The Brahmin hegemony, in its turn, was a product of the caste system created by King Vallab Sen, which creation was nothing short of a backward-moving social revolution. The caste system, which came to be accepted as one of the corner-stones of Hinduism itself, has been a curse for Bengali nationalism, creating as it did a rift which endured for long and has not yet exhausted its negative possibilities.

William Carey, the other early writer and grammarian, shared Halhed's view on the Sanskrit-origin of the Bengali language. Carey has put it on record that while at Dinajpur the only language he had heard was the uneducated dialect which, he knew, was not Bengali. He realized that "there are two distinct languages spoken all over the country, 'the Bengali spoken by the Brahmins and higher Hindoos and the Hindoostani spoken by Muslims and lower-class Hindoos." It was a relief for him, professionally as well as linguistically, to come to Calcutta and live among Brahmin scholars. Chaste Bengali, he saw, was very near Sanskrit and far removed from the language used by the common man.

In a lecture, Carey claimed that he had lived and grown old among Hindus and mastered Bengali like his mother tongue. To him, as to many others at that stage of history, Hindu and Bengali were synonymous terms, and it remained so until a Muslim middle class grew up and challenged the advanced Hindu middle class, making use of its growing political power, supported by the Muslim majority in the population. Carey's putting together of Muslims and

lower class Hindus in a single category is also meaningful. The class-division existed, and was, at all stages of history, more powerful than is generally admitted. Often it hides itself under the blinding cover of communalism.

The Brahmins were leaders. They saw themselves as fathers to the community, and kept others under their hegemony. The system did not include the Kshatriyas and the Baishyas. The exclusion of the Baishyas was particularly symptomatic. It showed how trade and traders were looked down upon, and explained, to some extent, why capitalism failed to grow in Bengal even at a later stage. The Sudras were the serving class, whose duty it was to be useful to the Brahmins. In common parlance nation often meant nothing more than the caste. In his autobiography, Surendranath Banerjee speaks with understandable pride of his ancestral connection with the Aryans; it was characteristic of the Kulinism of the Brahmins to be proud of their linkage with Kulin outside. That Surendranath's father should arrange for his son to go to England for his ICS examination and his mother should faint hearing of her son's likely departure are indicative of the difference between the father and mother, within the family as also in the culture that was being developed in society.

Sanskrit was the language of the Aryans and of the Scriptures; the Brahmins were its custodian. The English rulers and missionaries had every reason to know the Brahmins and hardly any reason to have creative contact with the Muslims and low-class Hindus, who, they thought, used a dialect instead of a language. An Englishman, James Wise, notes that "When the English magistrates first came in contact with the people of Bengal, they arrived at the conclusion that Mohammedans comprised 'only one percent of the population.' But after the 1872 census it was impossible to be oblivious of the existence of the Muslims, who constituted more than half of the population. Bankimchandra wrote:

বাঙালিক একজন বাহারিকে বাঙালী বলি, তাহারিগের মধ্যে চারিপকার বাঙালী পাই। এক আরী, বিভাগ অন্যান্য বিন্দু

তত্ত্বীয় আর্যনার্থ হিস্বু আর তিনের বাব এক চতুর্থ জাতি, বাঙালী মুসলিম। চারিতাল পরম্পরার হইতে পূর্বক থাকি।

[Among those who are now called Bengalis, we find four kinds. First, Aryans, second, non-Aryan Hindus, third, Aryan-non-Aryan Hindus, and beyond these three a fourth nation, Bengali Muslims. These four nations live apart from one another.]

He identifies the Bengali Muslims as a separate nation, though not in the modern sense. The separation among the four parts is basically a class division. One of the most remarkable qualities in Bankimchandra is his outspokenness. Reviewing a play by Mir Mosharraf Hossain, Bankim says in the same open manner:

বাঙালী হিস্বু মুসলিমদের দেশ — একা হিস্বু দেশ নহে। কিন্তু হিস্বু মুসলিম এখানে পূর্বক — পরম্পরার সহিত সম্পর্কন্তু। বাঙালীর পূর্বক উন্মত্তির জন্য প্রয়োজনীয়... হিস্বু মুসলিমদের একা

[Bengal belongs to both Hindus and Muslims and not to Hindus only. But the Hindus and the Muslims live apart — they are without a mutual relationship. For the real progress of the Bengalis... we need Hindu-Muslim unity.]

These — the fact and the necessity — are both true. But the question remains, how is the unity to be achieved? Language, by itself, cannot, as it has not, bring about the unity, particularly when all Bengalis do not speak the same language.

Nowhere in India has there been as wide a difference between the educated and the uneducated speech as there was in Bengal. The difference between Sanskritized and Persianized Bengalis existed. The bond of sympathy Bankimchandra desires could have been established had there been a commonness of objective of the kind that was seen, for example, in East Bengal during the liberation war of 1971, and also a reduction, if not removal, of inequality between the rich and the poor.

A common goal has been made difficult to set up owing to the divisive working of the vested interests of class and community. It is ironical, but not at all difficult to see why, that as the colonial state, under public pressure, widened the franchise and the quantum of autonomy to the province and cre-

ated newer job opportunities for the locals, the communal tension increased. In fact, the greater the move toward representative government, the more fearful has been the rise of communalism. This inverse relationship between the two tells us of the fact that neither the state nor the leadership of the two rival communities was interested in democracy, even in the most limited of senses.

The 1905-partition was designed primarily to break the power of the Hindu middle class which was becoming increasingly intolerant of British rule. Protests against the move were as immediate as they were fervent. The trinity of the mother, the mother tongue and the motherland appeared to have been threatened and the determination to resist it was natural and spontaneous. But ironically again, in the ultimate analysis, the movement proved to be counterproductive. For it roused communalism and made the partition of 1947 inevitable. In 1906 the Muslim League came into being; and with the gaining of separate electorate in 1909 and the communal award in 1932, the Muslim middle class advanced politically. A K Fazlul Huq's assumption of office as the Chief Minister of Bengal in 1937, his moving of the Lahore Resolution in 1940, Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy's Chief Ministership after the 1946-election and the Direct Action Day of August 16 in the same year were traumatic experiences that frightened the Hindu middle class into accepting the partition of Bengal, which to many has been, as Nihar Ranjan Roy puts it, the most disastrous incident in the 2000-year-old history of Bengal.

Nihar Ranjan Roy's use of the metaphor of 'রাজবিশ্ব' (lord of the state) to designate the power working behind the splitting of Bengal is fair and acceptable. What, however, is rather unexpected in the Marxist historian is that he does not regret the vivisection of Bengal so much its severance from the rest of India. He sees Bengal in relation to India as a child tied to its mother by the umbilical cord.

(To be continued)

two poems: by Mohammad Rafiq

This is the Path

here's grandfather's grave, grandmother's is over there
blossoming *bababi*, a clump of bamboo on the left
Mahananda turns a bend, flowing peacefully into
Kirtinasha — from this ghat Lakhindar launched

his crude boat of bamboo and clay on a journey
to the sky — rising through this dome of memories
every evening in courtyards mopped with blood
housewives with crimson dots on their brows and jutting

jaws peer into broken pieces of cloudy mirrors, counting
strawlike grey strands — in their coiled hair destiny's
sighs quaver, stars tremble over huddled houses
lanterns flicker. Mahua's muddy land shivers feverishly

here's grandfather's grave, grandmother's is over there
lime branches bend over the bottomless pond
where fingerling *kaila* bite — Bagha Jateen's
proud feet walked down this grassy path

toward the noose — every morning the salty tides
of Buri Balam flow past the fields of faraway villages
graceful waves stroke the damp-smelling soil
breathing deeply, gathering strength — after blessing

absent fathers, coconut cakes on winter nights
a mother's magic touch casts spells by the dying fire
deep mysteries the seven enchanted mountains
Pritilata's deep-set gaze fastens onto brimming eyes

here's grandfather's grave, grandmother's is over there
tangled vines and weeds have covered last year's
wild herb — then witch mountains shoot up
and plant themselves — playing hooky on this path

Tajul goes sketching sacred designs in the dust
a golden eagle rides on the executioner's blind chariot
in this century of falling-stars tails of black *boyol* thrash
the murky pond's surface — after breaking bricks all day

Fatima heads home in evening, blood dripping from her hands
streaking through vegetable patches, over fences, into rice fields
avoiding courtyards, ignoring warnings from the deep, Lakhindar
rows back through the dark stream of humanity — this is the path

Hey, Rafiq !

perhaps someday on a crowded street
someone will shout, hey, Mohammad Rafiq!
and pummel me with his fists, leaving me helpless
blood streaming down, dripping into the dust
or press a gun barrel into my ribs
just one deadly blast — my eyelids will grow heavy
as I drift into deeper and deeper darkness

perhaps someday on a crowded street
someone will shout, hey, Rafiq!
and not say or do anything except smile scornfully
I won't be able to make a move — he'll blend in
with thousands of others, I wouldn't recognize him
what would I recognize? alone in the indifferent crowd
I'll stand stockstill for a while, a bit confused, hurt perhaps

Translated by Carolyn Brown
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