Star Literature
DHAKA SATURDAY, JULY 18, 1998

poetry

Metaphysical Elements in Al- Mahmud's Poetry

by A Z M Haider

HAVING trudged a long and laborious way in the Sahara of life, the poet today looks tired and exhausted. But he is not a spent up force. He is still writing poetry unabatedly.

He has no regrets for the life he has lived. Having reached the twilight years of his life, he often casts a long lingering look to his distant past which radiates the gloom of his twilight years by occasional flashes of ecstasy and excitement. In the spring time of life he was blessed with amorous excitement, warmth of friendship, kindness and compassion from his close kins, comrades and countrymen in abundance. Indeed, he has drunk life to the dregs.

He is now fast nearing his journey's end. Naturally, therefore, he often lapses into a pensive mood. Hence the predominant note of his poetry he is writing these days is depression and melancholy. The poignant feeling of a passenger sitting on a rudderless boat gliding without any control to a land of dismal darkness has overtaken the poet.

A devout Muslim, Al-Mahmud derives solace from his unflinching faith in Islam in his hours of despair and deep pessimism. In his hours of disappointment and frustration he draws consolation from his religious faith which enjoins on its adherents to prepare themselves for an ultimate union with the infinite force working at the back of all creations in this universe. A man is an integral part of that force. To the poet it is an article of faith that a man emerges from that force and he merges himself with that force at the end of his tenure in this mortal world. The exquisite lines that follow sum up adequately his deep feelings at present.

O my beginning and the end
I stand at the edge of eternity, take me now
I am an unprepared soul
I know the undulating boat of my body
It is not set for another destination
I have no coin to pay the boatman
But you are my last refuge
I am a sinner, but there is the gateway to acquittal
I am erroneous. I know there is a smile of kindness
that radiates for eternity
O my beginning and the end.

In writing his metaphysical poems, Al-Mahmud is greatly influenced by Persian poet, Maulana Rumi, German poet Rilke, French poet Bodelaire, English poet T S Eliot, American poet Edgar Allen Poe. Just as T S Eliot resigned himself to God in the poetry he wrote in the later years of his life, Al-Mahmud surrendered himself to the Almighty. Despite note of gloom and despondence permeating [illegible]'s later poems he never expressed lack of faith and confidence in the infinite power of the Almighty which lies at the back of all creations. His *Ash Wednesday*, for example gives vent to his unflagging faith in God. Al-Mahmud's abiding faith in the omnipotent which regulates the whole cosmic system has given him strength and hope in his dark days of despair. His poem entitled *"Eagle by nature"* outlines his mental frame in the fag end of his life.

I have broken my rules
You take me as per your rules
Give me shelter under the cloud
I am eagle by nature
Sound, utterances, tune
Help cross all bounds and reach the end
Why there is cloud below the flying soul?
Why so much water in the sea?
Seeking freedom from my physical frame
I wander about to fill land, water, hills and the whole world
with my footprints
Teach me how to vanish
Obliterate my determination
My world is dotted with rivers, lakes, and hills
Once all these used to cast a spell enchantment.
And form a source of inspiration for my poetry
Today I am torn to shreds
O the invisible principle of destruction
Exhaust me. Let there be an end to destruction.

The English rendering of Al-Mahmud's later poems clearly indicate mental metamorphosis he is undergoing. The transformation is of course not very sudden. It came slowly but perceptibly with the advancing years of the poet. The poet is now in his sixties. Hence thrills and throbs of his romantic emotion have given way to sombre thoughts. The infirmities of age, which find clear manifestation in poems he had written in the nineties, have coloured his outlook on life. These days the poet remains engrossed in mystic thoughts seeking to establish communion with the Almighty. His poems entitled *"Astachaley nam likheychi"* (I have written my name in the sunset) expresses deep pathos about the closing years of his life.

When the body becomes lax, hair grey
Hearing your injunctions the whole nature trembles
Dying afternoon stood startled
Receiving notice of love, the sun turned red
The day, wrapped in darkness, will descend in a moment
The night will become colourful to cover your shame
The smoke of love waters blood
Will flower of hope blossom in this water
Let water or poison whip up waves
Let heart's lake quiver, stir and overflow love
I have written my name in sunset
I don't care for anyone
Lift your veil to show your bolted door
Tåking key of the closed room
I have mistaken the world
Nobody gave me your whereabouts
Nobody paid your price
I have outstripped men and monsters
Now there is a vast vacant field
Can I cross an unknown sky at such odd hours of day

* * * *

In the brittle frame bird is singing
O dear Moina, the cage has turned old
Now you better fly away
Staying in mud-house the bird has developed bad habits
Sitting on the cage-bar, warbler dreams of heaven.

The poet is conscious of this change over which he has no control. But the change is taking place in him as easily smoothly as a day yields place to night and the night to a bright dawn. Al-Mahmud's flight of spiritualism ends in God to whom he has completely surrendered himself. To him life emanates from that Supreme Being and terminates in him. He does not visualise the existence of anything beyond. There is only total darkness beyond. It is an unfathomable darkness in the gorge of a cod.

Al-Mahmud like Fazal Shahabuddin does not believe in life hereafter. Fazal thinks human life in this evanescent world is an integral part of a life of infinity. After this mortal life in this planet ceases, it merges with the life of infinitude and perpetuates in the world hereafter which is the world of eternity. Steeped in religious injunctions Al-Mahmud thinks human life ends in God and there is nothing to look for beyond our mortal existence on earth.

A poet of love and romance, Shamsur Rahman does not believe, as Fazal does, in the merger of human life with anything after death or in its perpetuation in the shape of kinetic force after death. Nor does he, like Al-Mahmud, surrender himself to the Omnipotent. Shamsur Rahman is not concerned with what transpires after death. He keeps gazing at a butterfly flying from one leaf to another, but does not bother about what befalls it after the termination of its life.

(Concluded)

---

essay

Cultural Displacements by Imaginary Communities

Indianization of the Bangladeshi Cultural

by Chowdhury Irad Ahmed Siddiky

THE separation of people from the process of their cultural self-determination either through political imposition of a foreign culture or through misleading one to imagine his cultural existence in another space or time — what I am calling cultural displacement — is one of the most formative experiences of our country.

Imagined communities — those who imagine their communion with people of another culture and another country — can place their boundaries in time and space anywhere they like. For example, one can always live, sleep, work and eat in Bangladesh but at the same time imagine his cultural existence in the early twentieth century Calcutta or in the late fifteenth century Middle East.

It is not always reasonable to look for objective criteria for these things. Another way of saying this would be that the objectivity they often display is an historical form of objectivity. Take for instance — an eminent cultural correspondent of The Daily Star literary supplement, who wrote,

"In independent Bangladesh, academics excelling in teaching English seem to have preferred the road taken by such illustrious predecessors as Buddhadev Bose and Vishnu De, choosing to write and lecture in Bengali and on the whole on topics of Bengali life and literature." (June 13th, 1998).

From these comments it is impossible to justify the objectivity of the entire imagined community to which the eminent writer of The Daily Star subscribes his cultural views, nevertheless it is easy to see the difficult objectivity of its consequences — teaching English by doing something else — writing and lecturing in Bengali. It is also not at all difficult to see the implications of its consequences over space and time — extension of our national cultural space (Bangladesh) to include the Bengali-Hindu intellectuals from another cultural space (Calcutta, India), of another time (early to mid twentieth century Bengal).

Whether the issue of any particular communion is imaginary or real, this way of conceiving a community is a very modern and unprecedented theoretical device. Acquaintance with European history since the renaissance surely helped the intellectuals to use this idea and devise an appropriate form of this for themselves.

Imaginary communities, whether or nor they exist in reality, describe and conceive their community in ways that are quite different from earlier, more genuinely communitarian ways of conceiving one. Any idea of community is based on an idea of identity, which is predicated in turn on some conception of difference. In case of The Daily Star correspondent, the difference is that of his own cultural space and time vis-a-vis the late twentieth century Bangladesh.

From Imagination to Narration

The telling of a story brings into immediate play some strong imaginations of one's aspired community. A narrative about an imaginary community does not therefore aspire to be a universal form of discourse. It draws lines, it distributes people, unlike rational theoretical discourse which attempts to unite them in an abstract universe of ideal consensus. The dominant Hindu minority as the middle class of nineteenth century British Bengal tended to idealize their universe around their own moral order. Historically Bengal was never undivided. Divisions always existed along religious-communal and class-cultural lines, in addition to geographical separation. There used to be as many as six Bengals at one time. Later two divisions evolved — Gaur and Bengal, a distant relation of East Bengal and West Bengal. The convergence of these two political, economic, social and cultural spaces into a single nation-state was made difficult by the differences of the two in those same spheres. East Bengal was poorer and more populated vis-a-vis West Bengal.

The middle class, the most important catalyst of any national chemistry, was overwhelmingly and predominantly Hindu. However in overall population they were a minority and indeed a dominating one. The struggle of power between a socially and culturally predominant minority and a political majority, led to the partition of Bengal in 1905 — drawing the political lines and distributing the people according to the dominant Hindu middle class imagination.

The British were involved in it for the sake of their administrative efficiency, since this Hindu middle class was becoming a nationalist force against their imperial power. Narratives of any Bengali nationalist discourse of this time (nineteenth century) reflects historiographically, the Bengali Hindu middle class imagination of a Bengali nationhood that clearly excludes the Muslims of Bengal. Such narratives, as the construction of the Bengali past in the nineteenth century Bengali-Hindu imagination, are not for all to hear, for all to participate into an equal degree. It has a self in which it originates, a self which tells the story — the Bengali-Hindu-middle-class-self of the nineteenth century.

But that self obviously is not soliloquizing or telling the story to itself. It implies an audience — the greater Hindu community of nineteenth century Bengal — a larger self towards which it is directed, and we can extend the idea to say that the transaction of a narrative creates a kind of narrative contract. For the recipient of narrative can not be just any body — it is only some people belonging to particular social, religious or cultural categories who are privileged by the narration. It was the dominant Hindu middle class of the nineteenth century (apart from the Hinducized Muslim writers like that of our Daily Star literary supplement) who were in the receiving end of the narrative and its efficaciously cultural contract. It was not the illiterate Bengali Muslims. As for our Daily Star writer, his aforementioned comments are certainly not a soliloquy. It has an intended and targeted audience (fanatics of Buddhadev Bose and Vishnu De) who are in the same cultural space (Calcutta) at the same cultural time (early to mid twentieth century) in the same moral order (secular Bengali Muslims inclined to Hinduism) as part of the same imaginary community. Therefore the narrative transaction on Buddhadev Bose and Vishnu Dey that binds them in a narrative contract, also liberates them culturally and politically to an imagined community, in the company of those who reflect the writer's Hinducized-Bengali-Muslim self-image.

The evolution of a Bangladeshi space of culture in the late twentieth century, took substantial cultural displacement to shape. Bengali was not a long pre-existing language and a sense of Calcuttization and other forms of Indian nationhood that is most often ascribed to it is relatively recent, notwithstanding the servile practices of Bangladeshi intellectuals of our times to do otherwise. Before the British came, the linguistic map of "Bengal" would have been quite confused and unfamiliar. The use of language was stratified in several ways. For some purposes, traditionally, Sanskrit served as an inaccessible elite language. It was the language of the Aryans and the scriptures. The Brahmins were its custodian. For the others, the elite language was Arabic and Persian.

The English rulers and missionaries had always an urge to know the Brahmins but not any reason to have creative contact with the Muslims and low-class Hindus, who, they thought, used a dialect instead of a language.

According to an English by the name, James Wise, "When the English magistrates first came in contact with the people of Bengal, they arrived at the conclusion that Mohammedans comprised only one per cent of the population."

However, the 1872 census had proved to be totally otherwise — the Muslims constituted more than half of the population. Also, according to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a luminary of Bengali literature in the nineteenth century, "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." Through his outspokenness, what Bankim is pointing out, is the clear distinction between the Bengali Hindus and the Bengali Muslims as separate nations with separate classes. In another instance, Willam Carey, an English, in a visit to Dinajpur notes that, "While at Dinajpur the only language he had heard was the uneducated dialect which, he knew, was not Bengali".

Moreover, he realised that "there are two distinct languages spoken all over the country ...." the Bengali spoken by the Brahmans and higher Hindoos and the Hindoostani spoken by Muslims and lower-class Hindoos."

It was a relief for him, professionally as well as philological, to come to Calcutta and live among Brahmin scholars. Pure Bengali, he saw, was very near Sanskrit and far removed from the language used by the common man. The inaccessibility of Sanskrit to ordinary people was complemented on the other side by their universality among the elite.

Thus the structure, in linguistic terms, would generally replicate the structure of agrarian societies. An arrangement of this kind would offset the numerical advantage of the lower orders by their horizontal division, and conversely, compensate for the relative smallness in number of the privileged by their cultural homogeneity and political cohesiveness. Against the clear singleness of Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian, traditional vernaculars do not display a strong normative form. Below the layer of these esoteric languages, thus, there exists an implicit equality of dialects. As languages are not standarised it is hardly possible to use these as standards by which to identify the regions that speak them. A large number of dialects existing in neighbourly difference covered a region. Drawing a linguistic map was a difficult if not an impossible affair, because the frontiers where one language ended and another language began were bound to be hazy. The dialect spoken in certain parts of Sylhet would hardly be different from the one spoken in certain parts of Assam and the dialect spoken in Rangpur would hardly be different from the one spoken in certain parts of Kuchbihar.

Subsequently, the new literate elite created by Western education gradually dropped the courtly Arabic/Persian or the Priestly Sanskrit as languages of high culture. They tried to create a high culture Bengali via the structural, sometimes even syntactic imitation of English. Gradually, through the historical selection of the privileged dialect of some area, and thereby displacing the dialect of the other areas, this elite gave rise to a new norm language. The growth of printing in the subcontinent in the nineteenth century, and the possibilities of standardisation it contained, helped this norm language to be consciously adopted by the elites of the sub-regions triggering the second wave of cultural displacement of the indigenous people in different regions, so much so that they became ashamed to utter the dialect which would have been in an earlier era, the cultural flag of their region. Bangladesh, the former East Bengal, a conglomeration of many such sub-regions with their sub-regional dialects, was in the backwarders of the nineteenth century Bengali high culture that predominately flourished in Calcutta through the nineteenth century Bengal renaissance. It was this historical selection of Calcutta as the center of privileged dialect and the center of Bengali "high (Babu) culture" that culturally displaced the Bengalis of all other regions, particularly those in the East, up until the secession from British India as East Pakistan.

Since East Pakistan, the language of the Bengalis in East Bengal developed its own desanskritised colour, texture and character. When a "high language" normally the product a "high culture" develops (as we saw in the case of the high Bengali culture of Calcutta in the nineteenth century), all other co-existing dialects and sub-regional cultures can be differentiated from it as lower-case languages and lower-case cultures. Only now is it possible to draw a linguistic and cultural map of a region with some amount of clarity. Since what happens in one linguistic and cultural area is repeated by similar norm-setting processes around a similarly constructed language and culture in another area. For example, the norm-setting process that happened in pre-1947 Bengal around Bengali language is repeated in the appropriate regions of Bihar and Orissa by similar norm-setting processes around a similarly constructed Hindi and Oriya language and culture.

Therefore, East Bengal, a sub-region of the greater Bengal in the pre-1947 era, by virtue of its political history of later becoming East Pakistan and independent Bangladesh, has gone through a totally and radically different linguistic, cultural, social and religious norm-setting process than our neighbouring West Bengal under the high cultural influence of Calcutta. In less than a hundred years an area which was covered by a mass of small dialects got restructured linguistically into two regions like West Bengal and Bangladesh using the highly self-conscious languages of their respective high cultures.

In fact, this constructedness comes out clearly in attempts of fashioning a long history which Bengali high culture of the modern time gives to itself. It is only in the period after the eighteenth century that some identifiable historical ancestor of the modern literary Bengali can be found. But this culture requires a high ancestry; and consequently, this highly confident literary culture gives itself an interestingly idiosyncratic and opportunistic genealogy. It is interesting to see it move in the tangled antiquities of a few contiguous and fluctuating regions to do its shopping for its historical past. For such purpose it happily appropriates Buddhist *"dohas"* from Nepal and the splendid poetry of Vidyapati as the undoubted ancestry of modern Bengali literature. We should not therefore be misled by the impressive Calcuttisation and other forms of Indianasiation of our cultural ancestry pressed upon us from different spaces and times.

Finally, cultural displacements, as they continue to happen in our space and time reminds me only to what Kipling had in mind when he made the monkeys in *"The Jungle Book"* say, "What the Bandar Log think today, the jungle thinks tomorrow", or when the wrote that the Bandar Log were always talking of what great things they were going to do, but forgot all about them when the next fancy diverted their attention. Hindúcised Bengali Muslims, Tagore fanatics, Mahatma Gandhi cultural foundationists and all others are alright when they bring their cultural vanity bags for display in our Bangladeshi cultural space. But when they begin to displace the people of Bangladesh, off the Bangladeshi cultural space by interrupting and disrupting the process of their acculturation and cultural self-determination by claiming the front row of the dress-circle, something is seriously wrong. It is the responsibility of every Bangladeshi to guard his or her cultural space and his or her cultural unconscious from any indoctrination.

About the writer: Chowdhury Irad Ahmed Siddiky is a Ph.D student at the University of Iowa, USA.