

essay

## Literature and the Colonial Encounter in the 18th Century

By Fakrul Alam

AS the seventeenth century drew to a close, many events came together to give new impetus to England's desire to be a colonial power. England's bid to acquire new colonies overseas, we must remember, had become stymied since the initial thrust into New England early in the century by the disruption of the Civil War and lingering uncertainties about succession and French intentions. The succession question was, of course, settled with the Glorious Revolution. A few years later, the Bank of England was founded. Subsequently, the Stock Exchange started to flourish, new trading companies such as the South Sea Company were floated, while the older ones such as the East India Company became rejuvenated. At around this time, the Royal Society began to sponsor explorations to remote regions of the world, and an unshackled press covered voyages to those regions enthusiastically.

Daniel Defoe showed in his life and work how these diverse events could lead to a hyperactive interest in colonization. As a businessman, an adviser to and agent of successive governments, a "consultant" to and paid propagandist for trading companies, an ardent supporter of scientific and geographical discoveries, an economist with well-developed mercantilist ideas about colonies, a journalist and pamphleteer, a chronicler of the lives of sailors and pirates, Defoe churned out works that directly or indirectly advocated colonization for this or that reason. As he grew older, and as his connection with the government and business weakened, he

turned to fiction to show how colonization was the panacea to England's unemployment problems and need for captive markets. Colonies, he argued when he turned to fiction towards the end of his life as he had done in the tracts he had published in middle age, were exactly what England required for its trade and commerce, its vagrants and petty criminals, and its exuberant, restless youth. In the process, he became the author of innumerable pamphlets, books on economics and commercial geography, and fiction that embodied the colonial idea.

It has often been observed that Defoe was ideologically at odds with Swift in almost anything. Defoe, after all, was a Puritan, an enthusiast for "progress", a Whig, a tradesman by birth and businessman by inclination, and the archetypal Englishman. Swift, on the other hand, was an Anglican divine, a classical humanist, a Tory, a man who identified himself with landed interests and the aristocracy, and an Anglo-Irishman who wanted to be English but found himself increasingly at odds with the English and identified himself with the Irish. Not surprisingly, then, he

was someone who was bound to dislike ventures such as the South Sea Company, colonial propagandists such as Defoe, and the experiments and explorations sanctioned by the Royal Society. Not surprisingly, also, he was the author of bitter anti-colonial works such as the *Drapier's Letters* and, "A Modest Proposal". Inevitably, too, his most famous work, *Gulliver's Travels*, parodies colonial propaganda masquerading as fiction. If *Robinson Crusoe* is the first major work of English fiction in the eighteenth century to promote colonization, *Gulliver's Travels* is the first major anti-colonial work of prose fiction of that century.

In other words, England's colonial encounters in the eighteenth century spawned many of the situations and themes treated in two of the acknowledged masterpieces of prose fiction of the first part of the century, although they took opposing positions on the question of colonization. Other major writers of the first part of the century — Pope for example in *Wind- sor Forest* and *The Rape of the Lock* — also showed England's preoccupation with global commerce and indirectly registered England's colonizing

thrusts into the wider world. Minor writers such as James Thomson in his 1744 edition of *The Seasons* also ranged over most of the world either to display amazement at new worlds being suddenly revealed or to record the attractions of regions ripe for colonization. The underlying implication at times was that their people were mostly incapable of taking advantage of the luxuriant vegetation and precious minerals in them. Missionary and travel accounts were other sources of information that stimulated interest in the colonizing enterprise even as they recorded exotic places being visited by Europeans all over the world.

The closing decades of the eighteenth century, however, showed that a counter-discourse about England's overseas expansion had been initiated with the growing unrest in America, the debate about the East India Company's policies in India under Hastings, and increasing doubts about the practice of slavery. In speeches delivered in parliament, parliamentary committee reports, polemical tracts, and satirical literature published during the American war of independence and the impeachment of Hastings, the

fissures in English imperialism became increasingly evident as the century drew to a close.

One fascinating aspect of the counter-discourse to Empire that we can detect in the late eighteenth century is the part played in it by Goldsmith, Burke, and Sheridan. Like their illustrious countryman, Swift, they seemed to have become sensitized about English misgovernment and abuse of the people it had colonized because of the English presence in Ireland. Thus Goldsmith at times may seem to be very approving of the English, but in his *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning* (1759) he critiques English manners overseas. In his poem *The Traveller* (1764), he implies that the English tend to be domineering and self-centred. Surely, is was the Irish in him that made him so critical.

England, as has been famously said, suddenly woke up and found that it owned an empire. The closing decades of the eighteenth century showed that anxiety about English conduct in its Indian empire and uncertainty about its imperial role everywhere found their way into literature. Certainly, Edmund Burke and

Richard Sheridan composed speeches that were considered masterpieces of oratory in their time and still can claim to be classics of English non-fictional prose. Sheridan's play *Pizarro* (1799) dramatizes his dismay at the unscrupulous methods adopted by colonialists and reveals his sympathy for the oppressed.

On the other hand, English men and women were settling in colonies in large number and attempting to make a life of it in places such as Calcutta. Eliza Fay's *Original Letters* (written apparently between 1799 and 1815) is characteristic of travel literature written in what has been called the "contact zone". The close of the century also saw novels such as the anonymously published *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789) where the heroine, Sophia Goldborne, writes in the epistolary vein about the life of an expatriate and of her romantic interest in a Brahmin who is supposed to introduce her to Hinduism. Which is to say, as the century ended questions of transculturation were being explored in fictional and nonfictional prose. Englishwomen as well as men were encountering cultural "others" no longer in desert islands and outposts of civilization but in burgeoning colonial settlements. The way was open, in effect, for novels such as *Burmese Days, A Passage to India, and the Raj Quartet*.

(This is the synopsis of a lecture delivered at the Academic Staff College of Calcutta on Friday, 10 March, 2000.)

poem

## Poems of Shamsur Rahman

Translated by Andalib Rashdie

## A Midday Experience

Bending my body towards the table, when I was writing a poem you came and got nearer to my table your breathings gave me a touch of warmth you were wiping the fountain water from your hair with a careful towel and it appeared that your soft palms gathered all the broken pieces of rainbow and kept them in a corner of a bookshelf near the statue of Rabindranath.

The sari that wrapped you like a moonlit night, suits you in this midday and I thought of a Greek goddess who had entered silently into my poor house just after taking a bath.

You stretched your hands from behind to embrace my neck and your soft voice uttered, 'Read me out the poem that you have composed so far forgetting your food and bathing'.

I smiled and recited for you the incomplete piece of my poem The small ripples of your delight swung me and I got the clue of the fleeing rhymes.

The burden of your incomparable pair of breasts on me generated *deepak raga* in my blood the dust of gold of the midday started melting. We continued the duet of kissing each other for a while and the surroundings sunk in oblivion.

Suddenly the bills of a word unknown pecked on me and got me back to senses again and I found you are nowhere around me nor in the corner of my room. What is the spell that had taken you away from the scene that I had been longing for years Or was it only a patch of dream that I had composed on a midday in my room.



## Before Departure

I shall depart very soon, and alone shall I go, silently. I shall not allow any of you to come and accompany me In my expedition to the unknown Don't insist on my accepting you with me. Must I go leaving you all behind.

I shall not take anything with me in this lonesome journey It was not at all necessary to put so many things in my suitcase Don't keep a book of my choice in my swollen bag I do not need a book to browse over on my way there Let my passport rest in sleep in the locked cabinet.

Show me once and for a while the crops that grew out my ceaseless labour and intellect. Oh my fate! What did you bring before me? Did I produce this lifeless and ugly crops and got drunk in complacency? A dumb crisis emerges in my heart assuming that I have to go away carrying with me this scenery always before my eyes. Please do not burden my journey with anything that I may not need.

impressions

## Sweet memories are made of these!

By Narayan Gupta

Continued from last week  
THE babu would pull her *Nekab* and hit her with his toy. It was so embarrassing that the child's mother tried to restrain the baby as best as she could. What a blasphemy! How outrageous! After nothing worked, husband of the lady instructed, while uttering in Urdu "Ye *Betamiz Kahika*" (Uncultured brute!) he ordered his wife to move to another seat nearby. Thus, would end this embarrassing incident!

On another occasion, I was travelling from Mymensingh to Calcutta. It was fairly long journey. The boredom soon broke with the boarding of couple of blind fakirs and their handlers. It was obvious then that these wretched fakirs were made blind by groups who then operated from North India and Punjab. People pitched a paisa or two

each in exchange for grace of Allah. As soon as they stopped, a *Bairagi* (minstrel) started his song with a *Dutara* (Two-stringed instrument very popular in Bengal). It was not too late when a vendor arrived with a basketful of delicious *Balushal* - a special variety of sweet cheese cake only available on the Mymensingh Jagannath-ganj line. I bought a full five Rupee worth of the *Sandesh* (sweetmeat). Few other of my age group were in the crowd. Therefore, it did not take long to pick up conversations with the folks belonging to my age group. "Taash *Khelbayen Naki*?" - "Want to play some cards?", I asked. All it took was this simple invitation. Three of them immediately joined me in a card game.

We exchanged the names. Kajal, Kuha (a Mymensinghi version of

Kolkata's Khoka), Bachhu, and Matin. There was no time or curiosity to figure out who was *Mia* or *Moshol*. A pack of cards came out, Bidis (deshi cigarette) lit and we were on. It was Bray game. For next several hours there were shouts, pushing, accusations for cheating, etc. My partner whispered, "A quick peep is far better than a *finnace*, according to Master Goren." This partner of mine had short crew cut hairstyle and he was wearing a *Lungi* (One piece deshi Pantaloons). He was often using the words like Ji, inshallah, Pani and sort of Mirjapur dialect of Mymensingh district. We were soon surrounded by other interested spectators. They cheered us up all the way to Darshana Station (a border station between the East Pakistan and West Bengal). At that point, it was all silence. Other

two players had left. I thought that my partner will also leave soon; for the next stop is Banpur in Hindustan. I noticed gleam of delight in my partner's face. When the train started, I asked him, "Aafnee Lamlen Na?" (How come you didn't get off the train?)

Curiously I blurted a la the elderly person whom I met earlier in the same setting, "Aafne *Mia Na Moshol*?"

"Aami Apnari Moton, Kolkata Jaachhi, Pujar Chhuti'e Maake Dekhte Eshechhillam, Mitra School'e Class Tene Pori" (I am also like you. Returning to Calcutta. Came here to visit my Mom during this puja break. I am a tenth grader in Mitra School), he replied in perfect Calcutta dialect.

Nonetheless, I was dumbfounded.

About the writer: Narayan Gupta writes from Maryland, USA.

book

## Call for International Summit to Combat Drug Minace

SOME multinational pharmaceutical companies have been providing an impetus for the legalisation of hard drugs such as heroin. That claim comes in a book published by Macmillan of England in April 2000 (Hardback, 336 pages, £45.00) on the PhD thesis of a La Trobe University graduate, M Emdad-ul Haq, who has called for a global summit on the drug question.

Under diverse 'harm minimisation' programmes, these pharmaceutical companies have presented alternative drugs that have had prolonged drug dependence. At every stage, modified medicine was introduced to cure the dependency of the previous one, but the end result was adverse.

This chain of experiments began with the opium trial in China, then morphine in the US, heroin in the UK — and now perpetuated in the methadone programme in Australia. To stop such medical catastrophes, uniform international control is required, Dr Haq says. Dr Haq says the purposive pharmaceutical companies often use writers, journalists, and

medical experts to argue in favour of their trade policies, and invite politicians to frame laws and policies in accordance with their business interests.

Now Professor of Political Science at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh, Dr Haq has analysed the history and politics of the narcotic drugs in South Asia during the past 150 years. He was awarded a Ph D from La Trobe University in March 1998 for his elegant thesis written in the Department of Politics under the supervision of Professor Robin Jeffrey. Dr Haq did his MA in Political Science from the University of Waterloo, Canada in 1986.

His book — *Drugs In South Asia: From the Opium Trade to the Present Day* — has been co-published by the scholarly and reference division of the St. Martin's Press in USA in August 1999. St. Martin's edition, with the price of \$65.00, has been in the best seller list in the US. The book highlights the pro-revenue drug policies pursued by the British colonial

authorities in South Asia. Dr Haq claims during its 190-year rule in the region, Britain gained more than a quarter of its revenue through taxes on diverse intoxicating drugs.

These policies, he argues, coupled with the contradictory actions sought by the post-independent governments in India and Pakistan, and US Cold War strategies in Afghanistan, have helped promote the drug trade throughout the region in recent years. In any examination of the present day fragility of international controls on narcotics, it is important to know about the US crusade on harmful drugs in South Asia — which goes back to the post Civil War era when the US had a large drug addiction problem — and how during the Cold War era US Drug War strategies became half-hearted. Following the Cold War era, the US government significantly changed its Drug War strategies in South Asia. Instead of pursuing a policy of disengagement of the poppy growers it has adopted defence measures using the country's military in the interdiction of US bound drugs.

That has complicated the working of international control on drugs in southwest Asia, especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan. 'The feebleness in the anti-narcotics battle has created a milieu in recent years from which no country in the region, including the US, is immune,' he says.

In line with the colonial mode of thought, he adds, India has re-emerged as the major supplier of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances to Third World countries in recent years, with drug money becoming an important source in the mainstream Indian economy. 'To stop India from illicit diversion of opium, heroin chemicals, and supply of illicit heroin, mandrax and phensedyl syrup (an opium-based cough medicine illegal in many other countries) a major international initiative has become imperative,' he argues.

To his credit Prof. Haq has two other books published in Bangladesh and a good number of research articles presented and published both at home and abroad.