

books

A Must for Theatre Workers

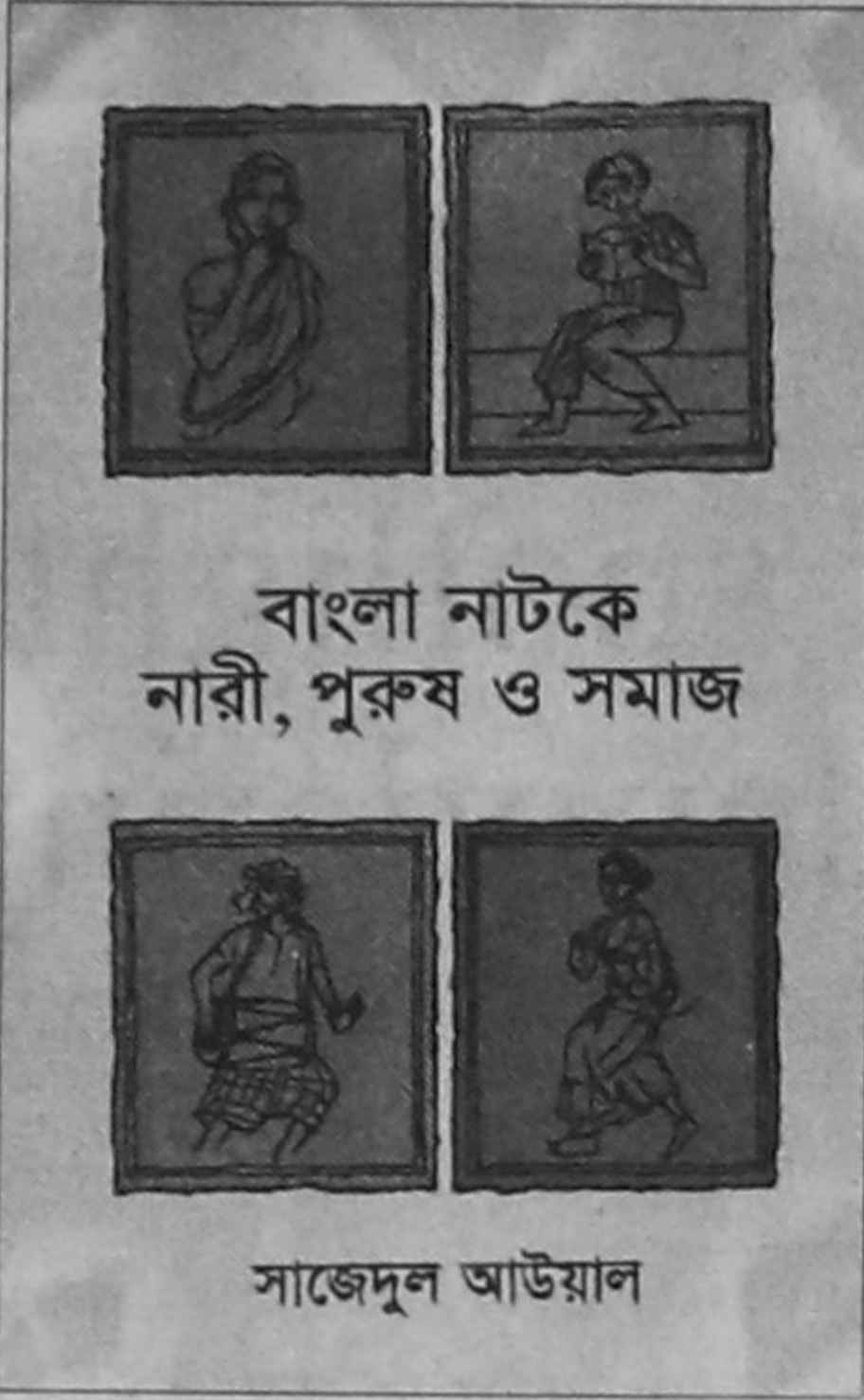
By Tahmina Ahmed

Awal picks out four plays of different kinds from our theatre world — *Kokilara*, *Madhabi-Malanchi Kaynna*, *Bandorer Kissa*, and *Mudi Paribar* — and analyses them more as social products rather than as aesthetic objects. His study of *Kokilara* is the most in-depth analysis among the four plays. Awal rightly points out that '*Kokilara*' does not indicate any possible social reformation of women's exploitation; rather, it ends with a facile conclusion that the men will not be punished because it is a male dominated society. Although the different *Kokilaras* belong to different classes of society, their reactions are pretty much the same. Perhaps the male playwright could not go any further — one's natural response is that.

SAJEDUL Awal's book, *Bangla Notoke Nari, Parush O Samaj* (Pub. Ananta Publishers, 1999, Dhaka) is an ambitious attempt to study three different components — female, male and society — and discover their underlying link. He has combined theory and practice brilliantly to create a book which is a 'must read' particularly for theatre and social workers, as well as the general reader. No one's research into Bengali theatre would be complete without reading this book.

Sajedul Awal has been working for theatre for a long time — since 1973 with Dhaka Theatre — not as a performer, but in the more demanding and somewhat less rewarding arena of back-stage work. He has also written and translated plays. Working closely with directors, designers and actors in various aspects of theatrical productions, Sajedul has grown to love and understand theatre as an integral part of his social entity. Hence his repeated emphasis is on theatre as a social form of art, an active component of human society in the development of a civilisation. This belief of Sajedul is reflected in every word of his book.

In the preface of his book, Sajedul writes that he wanted to research not for the sake of research only; he wanted to gain such knowledge which would work towards changing the class and gender based exploitation of



women prevalent in our society. He believes that knowledge brings power to motivate the mass for social reformation. He searches new paradigms to analyse the class and gender based exploitation.

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and analyses them more as social products rather than as aesthetic objects. His study of *Kokilara* is the most in-depth analysis among the four plays. Awal rightly points out that '*Kokilara*' does not indicate any possible social reformation of women's exploitation; rather, it ends with a facile conclusion that the men will not be punished because it is a male dominated society. Although the different *Kokilaras* belong to different classes of society, their reactions are pretty much the same. Perhaps the male playwright could not go any further — one's natural response is that.

Awal's analysis of *Madhabi-Malanchi* appears a bit effusive regarding the degree of freedom and power enjoyed by the female lead in the play. Perhaps he does not realise that the privileged social status of the female characters ensures a certain degree of power and strength. And yet, Sajedul himself writes that the women have earned power and authority due to the 'system' of that time, which was the matriarchal system (P. 90). Obviously the freedom and power enjoyed by the higher class of women were not similarly enjoyed by the women working on the field. Moreover, *Madhabi*'s happy marriage to two women would hardly further the cause of women's rights.

The other two plays taken from Street Theatre and Popular Theatre are

more didactic as they were composed and performed with the deliberate intention of exposing the religious exploitation and gender exploitation faced by our rural women folk. Even the audience is directly questioned at the end of these plays. Consequently, it is unfair to place them at par with the other two plays as these cannot be examined to discover the interaction of social forces lying behind the creation of an art form.

In his attempt to evolve a theoretical basis for his analysis of the plays, Awal has drawn on various resources ranging from Foucault to Farida Akhter, unfortunately, all these do not cohere well in the book. In some cases, viz. Foucault, he has used secondary sources to quote Foucault (P. 86). At times it appears that he has tried to give too many things in too small a space. All the topics that he tries to summarise briefly has hundreds of books written on them; consequently, the summaries appear schematic. Moreover, Awal is unable to evolve a distinctive link between the theories and his practical analysis of the plays. Perhaps it's not his fault alone: all the plays used by him do not lend themselves equally to such analysis and interpretations.

However, undoubtedly, it's a pleasure to read Sajedul Awal's book — it will definitely act as a guide for further research and writing on our theatre.

fiction

The Ordeal

by Mohit Ul Alam

IT was a hot autumn morning, Friday. Saleh was thoughtful as he came out into the front balcony which was screened with a grille, painted yellow. The sunlight now fell on the floor repeating in larger shapes the square designs of the metal bars. Suddenly now a shadow figured itself. He might have been startled, because Choli said, "Are you scared?"

"No, I was just preoccupied." Choli, literally the girl-next-door, came from the adjacent flat which her father had rented about two months ago when Saleh was still reading in a college in Dhaka. She stepped out into the balcony, her shadow instantly engulfing Saleh who was occupying one of the steel chairs that were brought in from the old house, but now being out of fashion were abandoned in the balcony. The synthetic fibres of the chair came off long time ago, so he felt the direct contact of the hard steel on his back. He carried a nailcutter in his hand, and now started clipping his nails. He clipped the finger-nails quickly, but as he came to the toes, he noticed the big toe-nails which grew like a pair of half-moons, and had caused holes in his socks. The chair was small, but he managed to fold his right leg under his thigh. The cutter was new, and when the big toe-nail was punched by it, there was a sudden little thrust to his fingers.

"Abbu sent me to you to help me do some translation."

Choli looked skeletal but energetic in a grey kameeze and salwar. She was holding a fat book with her skinny fingers, but as Saleh looked up she instinctively hoisted it up against her chest as if to divert Saleh's gaze to some other area. Her hair was black, matted straight back with the hint of a bun. Some loose strands caught in the sun wore sandy. Her forehead was broad and shining, showing the effect of a skin-cream. Her face was thin and angular, and

nose pointed. Her eyes were brilliant, flickering in nut-coloured irises. Her thin lips, little reddish, quivered occasionally as she was trying to give a reason for her visit.

She was not exactly shy, but a little anxious, and in her effort to read Saleh's mind she restlessly glided her foot in and out of the sponge sandal she was wearing. Her free hand clutched the grille behind her.

She held out the fat Functional English toward him. A small pencil was nudged inside the book as an index to the chapter on translation. On being asked to sit, she obligingly drew a chair and sat with her back to the sun. "I'm not good in English. How did your father get the idea that I would be able to do your translation?" Saleh innocently queried.

She became restive, her face turning red.

"Not exactly Abbu, but Ammu thought since you have a degree, you might do this translation. Abbu could also do this, you know, but he never has any time. He's gone out already, and he won't be back until late night."

"Even on a Friday?"

"Yes, even on a Friday. His business ethic is this, 'if don't keep my shop open, my customers will suffer, they won't get the things they need to buy.'"

"Fair enough, but is it not the profit he is rather minding," he grinned.

She chuckled.

"Well, that's a matter of interpretation."

"You seem to love your father much."

"Why, everybody does, don't you?" She stared at Saleh. Against the light her face was a shade darker. But her eyes gleamed, the nut-coloured irises vibrated. Tiny sweat bubbles crowded on her nose.

Saleh casually returned, "Yes, I do too." *To be continued*

essay

Befriending Brutus

By Syed Maqsood Jamil

A looser has few friends. The support weakens, the faith declines. Faults and follies become much larger than they are. Assuming permanence, virtues and qualities are forgotten. The villainy attributed lasts a life time. For centuries. For millenniums. This has been the fate of Marcus Brutus. Even after two millenniums, the world regards Brutus in the words of Shakespeare, 'Et tu! Brute.' (Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, Complete Works of Shakespeare, Page 983). Even you, Brutus — the last words of Caesar, as put by Shakespeare in 'Julius Caesar', I am taken to believe that all Caesars are not great. All Brutuses are not villains. The counsel I took, the aesthetics I followed is from Plutarch and Shakespeare. The purpose is not historical rehabilitation. It is simply a matter of befriending Brutus. Discovering the human in him.

Marcus Brutus lived in this world from 85 BC to 42 BC. He was a descendant of celebrated Junius Brutus. His father, Brutus Sr was a plebeian that rose to prominence. Servilia, his mother was the sister of Cato the elder, a much revered senior citizen of Rome. Caesar regarded Brutus highly and made him a Praetor of Rome. It was a high office which he deserved for his character and qualities. Caesar was however a man of great ambition and rose to become the sole Consul by eliminating Pompey. History informs of a personal consideration working inside Caesar behind his elevation of Brutus. It was broadly understood that in his youth Caesar had an affair with Servilia, the mother of Brutus and even was inclined to believe that perhaps Brutus was his son. Brutus on the other hand was a man of great character and principle. He cultivated culture and education in humanizing his natural instincts in developing his virtues. It was through disciplining his principles he brought great force into his beliefs. A man of upright morals took shape. He did not even hesitate to join Pompey, the killer of his father in his campaign against Caesar. Brutus earnestly believed that right was on Pompey's side. Later he was welcomed into Caesar's camp after Pompey was killed in Egypt. He joined Caesar believing that it was good for Rome to unite it. The impersonal nature of his principles and the virtuous nature of his stand find expression in Shakespeare when Brutus

Caesar was a national hero of Rome. He took Roman empire to great heights of glory. Such a national success begets a spirit a great intoxication. It pulsates with a single passion seeking uniformity of purpose. Dissent is held in suspicion, treated with contempt, often hunted down. The time of Caesar was like that. He was the sole Consul, adulation wanted him to wear the crown. On the pedestal was he placed, a God, greater than his equals. Although remaining vulnerable to human weaknesses and frailties. Caesar was succumbing to public adulteration in degrees.

observes on Caesar's kingly ambition speaking to Lucius 'and for my part/I know no personal cause to spurn at him./ But for the general: he would be crown'd/ How that might change his nature, there's the question./ ... Th' abuses of greatness is, when it disjoins/ Remorse from power; and speak truth/ of Caesar:/ I have not known when his affection/ swayed/ More than his reason. But 'tis a common proof/ That lowliness is young ambition's ladder.' (Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Page 975-976).

Caesar was a national hero of Rome. He took Roman empire to great heights of glory. Such a national success begets a spirit a great intoxication. It pulsates with a single passion seeking uniformity of purpose. Dissent is held in suspicion, treated with contempt, often hunted down. The time of Caesar was like that. He was the sole Consul, adulation wanted him to wear the crown. On the pedestal was he placed, a God, greater than his equals. Although remaining vulnerable to human weaknesses and frailties. Caesar was succumbing to public adulteration in degrees. When Brutus wanted to know from Casca about public shouting, he in the words of Shakespeare informs "Why, there was a crown offered/ him; ... and he put it by/ thrice, every time gentler than the other." (Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Page 974).

In such an emotionally charged historical perspective, it was natural that a different course, even though based on virtuous beliefs, could be branded as the vilest path of the traitors. Brutus was cast into a difficult time of history. He had all the goodness and pious conviction of an honourable man. Under Caesar he was a trusted and competent administrator as a governor of Cisalpine Gaul. The region was administered with gentle and caring spirit. Unlike the other administrators he was not

swayed by the lowly ambition of building his own base by plunder and by sharing the spoils to win support. It was with great reflection, and studied moral choices he administered the region. The good governance that endeared the Roman occupation was not appropriated by Brutus for his personal reputation. It was the discipline in his disposition which dedicated it to Caesar. This is the account of Plutarch. He was far from being a traitor, a conspirator building his muscles and sharpening his swords. It was the honesty of his purpose and the moral consideration of his stand that mattered to him. Brutus was not to be talked into or goaded by moral pretensions into compact. Thus when Cassius called for an oath to put steel into their resolution, Brutus waived it aside, saying "No, not an oath ... What need we any spur but our own cause/ To prick us to redress? ... And what other oath/ Than honesty to honesty engag'd/ That this shall be or we will fall for it?"

The nobility of Brutus is to be seen in his assessment and treatment of Mark Antony. Against the persistent reasoning of Cassius and others in the group, he did not relent in believing in the futility of taking the life of Mark Antony. Thus he speaks to Cassius "Our course will seem too bloody./ Caius Cassius, / To cut the head off and then hack the limbs — / Like wrath in death and envy afterwards:/ For Antony is but a limb of Caesar./ Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius/ We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar./ And in the spirit of men there is no blood./ O that we then could come by Caesar's/ spirit/ And not dismember Caesar/ ... Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully; ... And for Mark Antony, think not of him:/ For he can do no more than Caesar's arms/ When Caesar's head is off." (Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Page 977-978).

Even Caesar commended the intensity of purpose in the character of Bru-

tus. Plutarch narrates when Caesar first heard Brutus speaking, he told his friend, "I do not know what this young man wants, but everything he wants, he wants badly." (Plutarch, Makers of Rome, Page 224). It was the moral force of Brutus's action that impressed Caesar. In spite of the loftiness of his ideals, the honesty of his character, it is the dramatisation of the circumstances of Caesar's tragic end that doomed Brutus. The dying words of Shakespeare put into Caesar's mouth, "Et tu, Brute," found lasting acceptance through the ages as the name of treachery. Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" through this exclamation reached a high mark of literary appeal, but was inappropriately brief on facts.

The senate was convened on the Ides of March i. e. on the 15th of March. Julius Caesar reached the Forum ignoring the dire prophecies, the ill omens and the desperate pleadings of his wife Calphurnia. No sooner, he took his seat, it was crowded around and Tullius Cimber was pushed forward with a petition on behalf of his banished brother. They surged on Caesar, trying to clasp his hand, kiss his breast and head. Initially, he was trying to refuse, then stood up to shake them off by force. Tragedy followed. His robe was wrenched off his shoulder by Tullius, and Casca, standing near him drew the dagger and stabbed Caesar. He was slightly wounded in the shoulder. Caesar grasped the handle of the dagger and shouted to Caesar "Casca, you villain, what are you doing." (Plutarch, Makers of Rome, Page 237). Stabbing followed from all side. Brutus was among the last to deliver the blow. Caesar lost all hope when he saw Brutus coming, then covered his head with his robe and yielded. There was not much he could do. It was a brutal deed by all account, and nothing can absolve Brutus of his share of guilt in the assassination of Caesar.

Mark Antony, the avenger of Caesar's murder had a prominent place

both in history and in Shakespeare's works. By historical narration, he was of loose morals, reckless and ambitious, given to drinking, profligacy and indiscreet spending. Shakespeare gives Antony's account of Brutus through his servant, sent to assure him of his good intentions. His servant informs Brutus "... thus he bade me say:/ Brutus is noble, wise, valiant, and honest:/ Caesar was mighty, bold, royal, and loving./ Say I love Brutus and I honour him:/ Say I fear'd Caesar, honour'd him, and lov'd him ..." (Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Page 983).

In sparing Antony's life and in allowing him to return to the senate, Brutus made a fatal error in his judgement. Later, against the protests of his friends, he allowed Antony to go ahead with the public funeral of Caesar. It was to give a rallying ground to a formidable enemy in Mark Antony which was to cost his life. Shakespeare is superbly vivid in his dramatic narration of Antony's willingness in pushing Brutus to doom with his oratory. On being allowed by Brutus, thus speaks Antony "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend/ me your ears:/ I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him./ The evil that men do lives after them:/ The good is oft interred with their bones:/ So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus/ Hath told you Caesar was ambitious./ If it were so, it was a grievous fault:/ And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it? Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest-/ For Brutus is an honourable man:/ So are they all, all honourable men-/ Come I speak in Caesar's funeral-/ He was my friend, faithful and just to/ me:/ But Brutus says he was ambitious,/ And Brutus is an honourable man./ He brought many captives home to/ Rome,/ Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:/ Did this in Caesar seem ambitious? When the poor have cried, Caesar hath/ wept:/ Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:/ Yet Brutus says he was ambi-

tious/ And Brutus is an honourable man ... What cause withholds you, then, to mourn/ for him? O judgement, thou art fled to brutish beasts,/ And men have lost their reason!" (Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Page 986).

The events took a final turn against Brutus, with the arrival of Octavius Caesar, the son of Caesar's niece. Brutus left Rome in 44 BC. Destiny dived Brutus on the loosing side. Everything went against him. But he did not bend to adversity, kneeling before its blows. He was the upright man as he was all through. The rank and file loved him, his friends adored him, and his enemies could not hate him. Brutus was gentle, loving man of great idealism. His character was not tainted by worldly weaknesses, and unto death he stuck to what he believed in. The principles he believed in were moulded in virtue. They constituted a matter of honour for him. It did neither bend nor cower. The finest tribute Shakespeare pays to Brutus are the words he utters to the ghost, "Why I will see thee at Philippi." (Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Page 994).

He lost the battle. At the last hour, Brutus scorned both surrender and flight. Lucius, his most trusted lieutenant met Antony and declared boldly "Antony, no enemy has taken/ Marcus Brutus prisoner, and none never will. Fortune must never gain that victory over virtue. (Plutarch, Makers of Rome, Page 267). He discarded flight, answering, "Yes, we must escape, but this time with our hands, not our feet. (Plutarch, Makers of Rome, Page 264). Strato was holding the sword and Brutus flung him with such force at the sword that it transfixed his breast, killing him instantly. Brutus was a looser. History takes note of him for treachery. He lived his life in accordance with his ideals, and died for it. Time followed its own course and Brutus did not become its slave. Destiny was not to be on his side, the course of events triumphed over him. The loss took his life, smeared his name. Facts however know no death. The good part of Brutus that he lived, lives. It's not merely a matter of loving or leaving. The goodness of Brutus was not crowned. For that matter, facts always do not wear crown, but can make worthy friends.