

## BOOK REVIEW

## Getting into the brave and exciting world of theory

FAKRUL ALAM

ONE of the funniest moments in my favourite Restoration comedy, William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, occurs when the totally tipsy country gentleman Sir Willful Witwoud meets the sophisticated city beauty, Millamant, in a London dining room. When the lovely and urbane woman dismisses him as a "rustic, ruder than Gothic," Sir Witwoud reacts by declaring: "I shall understand your lingo one of these days, cousin. In the meantime I must answer in plain English." No fool despite his fondness for drink, Sir Willful had already resolved in an earlier scene with his foppish cousin, Witwoud, to do what was essential if he was to go anywhere outside his country home: learn the intricate upper-class 'lingo'. In other words, picking up the current fashionable vocabulary was essential for survival in a cosmopolitan world.

I have no doubt that those of us who are interested in culture in our part of the world must put ourselves in the position of Sir Willful Witwoud, for no matter how sensible we are and comfortable in our surroundings in talking about aesthetic issues, if we want to talk about the arts anymore anywhere outside our part of the world, we will have to learn the complex and sophisticated vocabulary of literary theory. Indeed, even if we want to embark on mental voyages involving any field in the humanities and social sciences in this day and age we will need to understand the 'lingo' of theory, especially literary theory, immediately.

This is why books about literary theory, and guides to theory, have proliferated in the West in recent decades. There are not a few such books readily available in Dhaka for those who want to understand the ferment in theory that has taken place since the 1960s in the West. Among the ones that stand out for their usefulness is M H Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Although he has not written a guide specifically to help us understand literary theory, Abrams has taken advantage of the frequent reprinting of his book on literary terms to update it with dependable explanations of concepts and words introduced into literary criticism from the field of theory. Another helpful book available in local bookshops

The most comprehensive, updated, and thoughtful aid now available in Dhaka for those wanting to make sense of the specialised vocabulary of literary theory and the sophisticated, and at times, abstruse concepts now used in contemporary literary and theoretical discourse is the fourth edition of Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Glossary of Literary Theory*. Published last year, this is a reliable, inclusive, and clearly written dictionary of literary as well as cultural theory that will be indispensable for anyone trying to make sense of the peculiar and at times baffling 'lingo' of theory.

for those wanting to understand the vocabulary of literary theory is J. A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. I must say, however, that I consider Cuddon's entries to be much less satisfying than Abrams's thoughtful and clear explanations of terms now bandied about in literary criticism and theory; Cuddon is more intent on comprehensiveness than on analysis in his entries.

The most comprehensive, updated, and thoughtful aid now available in Dhaka for those wanting to make sense of the specialised vocabulary of literary theory and the sophisticated, and at times, abstruse concepts now used in contemporary literary and theoretical discourse is the fourth edition of Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Glossary of Literary Theory*. Published last year, this is a reliable, inclusive, and clearly written dictionary of literary as well as cultural theory that will be indispensable for anyone trying to make sense of the peculiar and at times baffling 'lingo' of theory. Covering fields such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, linguistic theory, as well as literary studies, and the works of continental, American, and English theorists, the book is intellectually stimulating as well as sensible in the way it carries out its task of defining, explaining, and contextualising terms encountered in any contemporary excursion into art and culture. Moreover, the book gives us a sense of what the avant garde are up to in theorising literature and society in the West.

Take the entries under "A" for instance. Although Jeremy Hawthorn begins his *Glossary* disappointingly with an entry on **Aberrant decoding** which says only "See CODE" (don't we all dislike dictionary entries which refers us to other entries instead of explaining them?), the

first term to be properly glossed, **Abject**, clarifies a difficult concept. In defining the term, Hawthorn resorts to helpful excerpts from Julia Kristeva, the theorist who has given currency to "items typically found on ambiguous borderlines between self and not-self". Further on under "A" we have an entry on Absence, a key concept in recent theory. This time Hawthorn refers us to Pierre Macherey's belief that a book "is not self-sufficient but is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence without which it could not exist," implying thereby that there are absent presences that one must attend to in interpretation. Still further on under "A", Hawthorn explains Edward Said's concept of **Affiliation** in the Palestinian-American intellectual's own words as "what enables a text to maintain itself as a text, and this is covered by a range of circumstances: status of author, historical moment, conditions of publication, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of consensually held tacit assumptions, presumed background, and so on and on." And still further on under "A", we have a lucid exposition of the Brechtian theory of **Alienation effect**, illustrated once again with generous excerpts from the theorist's works, and with suggestive comments on the way the word connects to concepts such as Marxism and Defamiliarisation, and the writings of the theoretical school of Russian Formalism and the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.

I could go on at this rate to point out how under "A" we can find many more helpful glosses of fascinating terms/concepts such as **Ambiguity** (from new criticism), **Always-already** and **Aporia** (from post-structuralism), **Androgyny** (from

gender studies), **Arbitrary** (from linguistics), **Aura** (from the German Marxist Benjamin). Anyone who has been mystified by these terms/concepts will find them glossed more than adequately by Hawthorn. But why I have been finding *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* not only useful in understanding the significance of key words used in theoretical discourse but also illuminating in clarifying ideas considered crucial in contemporary theory can be seen in the long entry under **Author** almost at the end of the opening section. As people interested in recent theoretical work know, the whole concept of authorship was challenged by two provocative essays, Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author", where the notion of the author as the key referent in any discussion of a text is problematized until the power the author-figure has traditionally had is challenged and the author made into "a site rather than an originating presence". Hawthorn discusses Foucault and Barthes's critique of the primacy given to the author in traditional literary discourse and then contextualises the whole issue by seeing it "as an aspect of postmodernist and post-structuralist attack on origins". Hawthorn, however, shrewdly notes that the concept of the author was not as unproblematic in earlier literary discourse as contemporary theorists would have us believe, and that prior to contemporary theory, Wayne C. Booth's concept of the *implied author* had alerted us to the complexity of the role of the author in producing meaning. In other words, Hawthorn's *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* is more than a dictionary of literary terms; it is thought-provoking, balanced, well-informed, and

a substantial introduction to the world of theory, especially literary theory.

Nevertheless, Hawthorn's *Glossary*, 400 pages long though it is, is not exhaustive. Reading it in tandem with an essay that I have been teaching, Peter Hulme's "Nymphs and the Reapers heavily vanish: the discursive contexts of *The Tempest*", a piece collected in the 1985 book called *Alternative Shakespeares*, I notice a few glaring omissions. Thus Hawthorn does not gloss "occlusion", 'imbrication', 'inscriptions' and 'distantion', four not so unusual words used by Hulme to explain how Shakespearean criticism before the recent ferment in theory had ignored Caliban's presence and made a villain out of a victim. Occasionally, also, I have been puzzled by the way Hawthorn has allotted space to some of his entries. Thus **Alterity**, a term frequently encountered in theory, is here correctly linked to "otherness" and we are referred to the long entry on the **Other**, but the four lines given to this entry hardly seems enough, especially when we consider that a full page is given to obscure and rarely seen word **Heterobiography**.

But I will resist the tendency to be hypercritical about Hawthorn's *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* for two reasons. Firstly, despite the caveats I have registered, it is undoubtedly the best and most comprehensively updated book published till now on literary terms and theoretical concepts currently in vogue. Secondly, without a guide as good and engaging and as courteous as Hawthorn is, we will be lost in the brave and exciting world of contemporary theory. And without knowledge of what is happening in the world of theory in recent decades we

## A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory

JEREMY HAWTHORN

Fourth Edition



Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Literary Theory*, Fourth Edition. London: Arnold, 2000. Xvi+400 pages.

will be worse than cultural rustics, reeking of medieval notions about art and culture. Why not, instead, venture forth into the sophisticated and dynamic world of literary and cultural studies equipped with books such as the *Glossary*, Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* and an anthology or two of literary theory?

Fakrul Alam is Professor of English at Dhaka University

## ART

## Nazlee looks out the window

MASUD MAHMOOD

BORN 1952, educated in painting at Dhaka Art College and the Department of Fine Arts, Chittagong University, and now resident in the port city of Chittagong, Nazlee Mansur began to paint in the 1970s. Her development as an artist has since been the gradual waking up from a

back of a winged deer grazing white slick cattle on a paradisaic lakeside by night would illustrate both her aesthetics and her fantasising power in this stage. The woman-tree with a deep foliage for her hair passionately stains towards her shepherd lover while the white crescent lies in the calm circular lake like a chin of opal. Lush, verdurous nature in deep and

subject-matter, structure, colour and craftsmanship all take turns and tumbles. These are works of strong social consciousness with a clear, unequivocal voice of protest against class discrimination and upper-class callousness. They are a long way off from her dream world of the 70s and are steeped in the blood and mire of life. The first departure is marked by the hard geometric

kind of paining and point of view, and her craftsmanship underwent a sea change.

In the 90s Nazlee's preoccupation with the human condition of the urban middle and lower classes becomes clear. She subtly delineates the misery of alienation, lust, meanness, indignity, and incomprehension to which the impersonal city usually subjects the people from these cases. Her paintings recapture colours with her palette steadily increasing in variety, brilliance and intensity. But the captivating colorfulness can be a deceptive lure to draw attention to the blatant contradictions created by the prevailing social, religious and economic discriminations. These works have the character of genre pictures portraying the common scenes of daily life in the street with a satirical slant such as the dark-skinned flower boy selling flowers to the light-skinned lady in the car or the young street girl sleeping on a traffic island while a man from the car lustfully drools on her. Light and dark skin complexion are apparently used to portray class distinction. Often these paintings arrange different street scenes on the same canvas at different angles. In *Life As It Is*, three episodes in three strips a boy throwing a ball on a rooftop, a funeral procession, and three persons lounging at three separate tables *al fresco* all running up parallel to one another from bottom right to top left across the canvas show our absolute unconcern with the surroundings and, at the same time, our own alienation in the urban condition. Nazlee employs contrasts to represent self-contradictions not only of urban society but of life in general and thereby elicit satiric effects (*Golapira, Allah Megh De*). Poverty creates irony: in a painting, a woman in *burkha* has to read the holy book on the busy pavement for



In Waiting-Oil on Canvas

a living by courting the passers-by's pity and sympathy. The cramped



Lady and the Moon-Mixed Media on paper

and congested city life finds its vivid expression in her canvas choked

with forms in complex arrangements with little or almost no free space left. Although Nazlee lives in Chittagong, there is no idyllic or romantic scenery of hills and lush vegetation of the place in her paintings. Instead, tame, potted plants decorate the tiny middle-class flats, and the common crow figures as the appropriate company of the common people and the life they live in the city. The rickshaw, the common transport of the middle and lower classes, serves as the setting of many of her paintings. It becomes almost the patent mark or signature of her work. However the rickshaw does not only suggest the economic reality of those classes; as the painter shows, it can also afford the common people romantic moments in a small way.

Being a woman herself, Nazlee is deeply concerned with the plight of women in our society, particularly with their underprivileged conditions



Moon and the Rickshawpuller-Mixed Media on paper

and loneliness. Her women are gloomy and unsmiling. Their dark complexion deepens their sadness. They are always portrayed as solitary in cramped space or detached from their companions. They sleep alone or are seen waiting alone for their unseen (or unseeable?) companions. Windows are their only opening to the world. Even this little opening looks like a rigid geometric frame severely limiting the movement or lookout. This lack of space gives a prison-like look to their living quarters with themselves

as prisoners. One wonders why she has taken such a long time to make this single appearance. The answer emerges from her innumerable sketches, studies and paintings that haven't come into view. All these years she has been engaged in finding her subject and the idiom that would fitly express the subject. Now she has distinguished herself by both content and style. The paintings are patently her own.

Masud Mahmood is Professor of English, at Chittagong University

## LETTER

## "Women and Islam in Bangladesh": The Author's Response to the Review

IT was indeed very gratifying to see a review of my book, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh: Beyond Subjection and Tyranny* (Macmillan, London & St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000), in Daily Star, January 13, 2001. I have every reason to be happy as Ziaul Karim, the reviewer, has very kind words for my book, such as "More Than Skin Deep" and "A fascinating book on women, Islam and fatwa sets cat among the pigeons". However, I feel that something is missing in this otherwise extremely fascinating review (from the author's point of view), as it seems, the overwhelmed reviewer has nothing to say against my book. I personally never expected such treatment from anybody other than my close relatives and friends in this

part of the world. In fact, I encountered quite bitter criticism from two of the reviewers of this book during the launching ceremony at IUB on August 24, 2000. One of them, a renowned social scientist and pro-vice chancellor of a local university, had hardly any kind words about the book. He felt that I was very unkind or "nirmom" in his language, to micro-credit and NGOs. Another reviewer, a renowned gender activist and writer, also came up with a long list of suggestions for the "improvement of my book", albeit in the wake of its publication. She even suggested that the title of the book should have been something else.

I was hardly surprised by their criticism and rejection of my four-year-long labour of love that has gone through the preparation of the

volume. Nor am I surprised and upset about the total indifference of the intelligentsia, journalists and the so-called gender activists of Bangladesh, who simply do not want to hear any praise for "liberal" Islam as interpreted by the exponents of the "Back to the Qur'an" movement or "Islamic Feminists", as being developed in the Middle East, North Africa and the West. They also do not want to hear anything bad about the "NGOwallas" for the obvious reason. What is missing in Ziaul Karim's review is the proper appraisal of my work. One would assume from the review that my book is primarily a study of women's rights and status in Islam and is about the illegitimacy of the so-called fatwabaz mullas in Bangladesh. I simply fail to under-

stand why the learned reviewer has not even indicated anywhere in the review that my book contains seven chapters and only one of them (Chapter 2), "Women in Islam: a Reappraisal", deals with the status of women in Islam and other religions. In this chapter, I have highlighted that Islam as understood and interpreted by the Hadis- and Fiqh-oriented Ulama, with all their prejudices and patriarchal biases against women, is problematic. I have followed the radical "Islamic Feminists" (both Muslim and non-Muslim, men and women) like Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Haleh Afshar, Walther Wiebke, Amina Wadud-Muhsin, Barbara Stowasser, Naila Minai, Asghar Ali Engineer and others who rely more on the Qur'an, history, anthropology

and commonsense than on the Hadis literature and Fiqh in explaining the status of women in Islam. I have also depended on the radical and modern interpretations and translations of the Qur'an to reject what has been going on with regard to women in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the name of Islam. In short, my women in Islam, as my research reveals, are free, empowered, property holders, politically active, totally unveiled and in short, simply equal to men in every sphere of life. My work shows, Hawwa or Eve, in accordance with the Qur'an, was not created from a rib of Adam and the Qur'an has never allowed the husband to disinherit the wife let alone abuse her physically. Having said all this about the status of women in Islam, my main contention is how

women are persecuted, exploited and deprived of their rights in Bangladesh in the name of Islam as well as that of "empowerment" by the so-called representatives of the civil society, including NGOs and garment factories. Out of the seven chapters of my book, the chapter on "Women in Islam: A Reappraisal", is based on secondary and published sources. Most definitely, this chapter does not represent the core of the work. Only chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, entitled respectively as "Mullas, Popular Islam and Misogyny"; "Women as Victims of the Salih: Fatwas, Mullas and the Village Community"; "NGOs and Empowerment of Women: Some Problematic Prognoses" and "Military Feminism, Islam and Patriarchy : Taslima Nasreen, Ulama and the

Polity", may be considered as the core chapters and byproducts of original research.

In short, my book takes a long historical view of the position of women in society in general and that of Muslim women in particular. I have argued that women have been under male domination in all societies ever since the days of Socrates and that this is not particular to Islam or Muslim societies. I have also explored how women in urban and rural Bangladesh are persecuted at the behest of the self-proclaimed custodians of Islam or mullas. NGOs active in the country are also not free from the accusation of exploiting women in the name of empowering them through microcredit. Nor has militant feminism done much good to the cause

of their liberation. The on-going conflict between "Islam" and modernism is reflective of the on-going elite conflict-rural versus urban- in the predominantly agrarian country, is an important part of my research finding.

I think, by reproducing a section of my chapter on Women in Islam in the name of "An Extract" of my book along with the review by Ziaul Karim, is simply misleading and should have been avoided. However, I am ever thankful to Daily Star for at least taking note of my book.

Taj Hashmi Professor and Director School of Liberal Arts and Science, Independent University, Bangladesh.