

INTERVIEW

Doing post-colonial criticism in the West

Imtiaz Habib, author of *Shakespeare and Race, Shakespeare's Pluralistic Concepts of Character: A Study in Dramatic Anamorphism and Tennessee Williams: A Descriptive Bibliography*, tells Ziaul Karim how he looks at the issue of race in Shakespeare's plays in his seminal work *Shakespeare and Race*. He also discusses issues that surround post-colonial writing today. Professor Habib teaches Shakespeare, English, renaissance drama, post-colonial literature and theory, history of English drama and modern drama at Old Dominion University. Excerpts:

Q: The growing body of post-colonial writing as well as the systematic indigenous theories are offering alternative concepts and trying to address traditional questions from a non-European perspective. But the critical tools that are being used to understand and analyze new writing are often replicated from the traditional centres. Do you think a new discourse is essential for the new writing that has developed in the post-colonial world? Or is it possible to escape from the old metropolitan-colonial axis?

A: In the first place I recognize this charge. This is a problem of discourse analysis. True, work emanating from a certain location is already, to a degree, compromised by the politics of that location. And so to that extent, post-colonial work particularly emanating from the metropolitan centres of the West might seem to be yet another exercise in writing the non-west. I personally believe that is not so. For example, take the kind of work that is done under the post-colonial theoretical exegesis, in particular, to take examples of the Subaltern Studies school of Ranajit Guha or to take a cluster of different disciplinary approaches to what ends up as post-colonial work. It might also include black studies, it might also include African studies, and it might also include gender studies from Asian perspective. These have, in effect, reconfigured the contours of western knowledge construction. The work of metropolitan theorists and critics in the western academies is not the same work as the work of critics and theorists in the east or elsewhere. Both are relevant, both are important. The work of critics and theorists, the way I see it, in the metropolitan academies in the west is, to, to use a phrase, to jam the machinery of the west from within the west; whereas the oppositional stance of critical and theoretical writing in the non-west has a different approach to the problem; in some ways an easier approach, in some ways a more difficult approach. For instance the issue of race is not easy to focus on and identify with the same degree of urgency and relevance in the non-west as it would be inside the west.

Q: This is because there has been a mass exodus from the east to the west.

A: Absolutely. And which has historical implications, which also can be explained in terms of post-colonial theory. The west itself is changing. One might put it this way: the job, the lot of post-colonial metropolitan critics in the west one might feel is to reclaim the west. If the west has claimed the east historically perhaps it is possible to culturally reclaim the west. For people like us, our objective is nothing short of dismantling the basic assumptions of western cultural-civilizational thought; be it in law, be it in medicine, be it in language, be it even in applied sciences (there is work been done in that), be it even in the pure sciences. For example, there is work being done in mathematics which talks about how, with the advent of the colonial project in the seventeen century in Europe, mathematics was also implicated in the particular mercantile expansion of colonial trade and how it was configured in a particular way even when the result of colonial presence created new kinds of educational form, new kinds of curricula, new kinds of syllabi and therefore new ways of understanding the world, which are western ways of understanding the world. I would not say that post-colonial theories merely replicate same system of the centre, which is what you have said in your first question. In response to the last part of your question where you have asked is it possible to escape from the old metropolitan-colonial axis, I would say: yes. I



Imtiaz Habib

location; you speak from inside India --who is talking about the tribals or who is talking about the Tamils?

Q: A lot of new writings generated from the non-English speaking world are targeted for the western readers in mind and controlled, to some extent, by the western publishing houses and new global economy. How does one respond to that?

*A: I have addressed this issue at some point in my book *Shakespeare and Race*. The work of metropolitan, post-colonial critics is really or should really be meant to be allied to the work of non-western located post-colonial critics. It is meant to strengthen and reinforce all the narratives of disempowerment, you know the work of excavating the narratives of disempowerment wherever they occur, particularly in the eastern locations. In its widest context, post-colonial work embraces any narrative of oppression including narrative of oppression within western cultural practice, but in hierarchical degrees. I mean there is a sense in which the western woman is a victim of western patriarchal capitalist imperialist tradition. But there are some ways in which the western women might also be complicit unknowingly in the patriarchal imperial project of the metropolis elsewhere in the world. In other words, the white western women might, in fact, be complicit in the oppression of the coloured women in the non-west. These are not simple binaries. These are unstable binaries. It is the location that decides, you know, what are the pressures, what are the necessary vigilance in that particular speaking moment. It is also true; there is no escaping that, that we are part of the global economy. And the global economy is a western project. So, in effect, you know, you perform within that traffic and in doing so you strengthen that traffic. But it need not be so. Again I go back to someone like Spivak whose translation work deliberately outlined the dangers of those things. Her work and Mahaswata Devi, for example, speak about margins within margins and further margins. To understand Spivak's concern for these kind of work is to make you aware that those who say these are replicating simple binaries between east and west are unaware that these binaries, in fact, can get reconfigured if you speak from inside, let's say one particular large metropolitan*

Q: Do you think that this new 'taking over of English by the non-English' and getting big publishers in the west by the writers from the post-colonial cultures would be short lived situation? And the appetite of the western readers for something exotic and foreign would soon die down? Do you think that to assess the resurgence of New writing in English and to decide

whether these writings are genuine achievement in creative writing, we need more time?

A: Let me begin by first making a qualification; you know, I do not work in the twenty-first century and do not work in the modern period. But they pertain to issues and conflicts within post-colonial theory and to that extent I am responding on that level. I do not think that anything that you have said I would disagree with provided that if you apply it to multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is not post-colonialism. These are two very different things. I can offer an analogy about what this distinction would be in terms of the notorious metaphor about Milton Friedman's economics, you know, the "trickle down" theory. Multiculturalism is a manifestation of the condescension of the white Eurocentric consciousness, a sense of guilt that well we should perhaps also include others at cultural feast of the table and so a little amount of exotic difference would perfectly apply which is precisely the reason why post-colonial works are at least as vehemently opposed to any kind of notions of multiculturalism and diversity and so and so forth. As for the questions about the evaluative criterion for creative work, what are these criteria? And evaluative for what? It sounds as if this question has been set almost entirely within the standards of western literary evaluation, which is precisely what we are trying to point at and what we are trying to dismantle. Literature is no longer literary. And that sounded like a literary question. Literature now envisages the implication of the writer in the social, economic and political bases of the world for which she/he operates. And therefore, aesthetic criterion by themselves are totally irrelevant.

*Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, for example, would be set to make a massacre of the Kings' English. You remember the expression that Caliban uses to reply to Prospero in the *Tempest*: "You have taught me English, my profit is I only know how curse you?" I did not want your English, since I have it and I have it forever and I will use it to write back to you. This kind of new functionality of English is something that the imperial project can not control. But it gets implicated in the west because of the tremendous power of western publishing houses who seek market and who have control over markets.*

Ziaul Karim edits literary and cultural pages of The Daily Star

BOOK REVIEW

Re-examining Islam and theatre

In Praise of Nirajian is a thoughtful, imaginative and open-minded book. The conclusions throughout are sound and based on a detailed knowledge of the Bangladeshi indigenous theatre tradition, writes Emile Chabal.

In Praise of Nirajian: Islam, Theatre and Bangladesh, Syed Jamil Ahmed Pathak Shamabesh: Dhaka, 2001 ISBN: 9848120297 295 pages, Tk. 995.00

In Praise of Nirajian succeeds in covering two subjects simultaneously. For the specialist, Ahmed has delved deep into the indigenous theatre tradition in Bangladesh, presenting a virtual encyclopaedia of information on its many facets. For the non-specialist, there are illuminating commentaries on the relationship between Islam and performance and the practical problems of staging 'Islamic' plays.

Syed Jamil Ahmed, a well-travelled director and writer, is the author of several books on indigenous Bangladeshi theatre, but here also chooses to tackle the controversial and much-neglected issue of Islam's attitude to theatre. In effect, the book is divided into three parts. The first two chapters concentrate on this aspect, the third on the Bangladeshi theatre tradition and the final two describe the difficulties and issues arising from the staging of the *Bisad Sindhu* and the *Thousand and One Nights*.

The standpoint of Islam towards theatrical performance has always been lukewarm at best. The prohibition of the representation of the Prophet and the forbidding of idolatry would seem to place severe strain on the concept of theatre. As Ahmed makes clear in the opening chapter, the Prophet as quoted in the Qu'ran and the Hadith is opposed to representation and idolatry. However, Ahmed is careful to point out that, contrary to the radical interpretation of this attitude by fundamentalists today, these original words do not point to a dogmatic sanction of theatre. This, he argues, comes from the rigid reading of the Qu'ran that led to Qiyas and Ijma.

Inevitably, Islam's anti-theatre approach has led both Western and Eastern scholars to conclude that little or no theatre existed in the Islamic world. Ahmed takes a vigorous and wholly justified stand

against this view. In Chapter 2, he calls for a complete re-interpretation of the Euro-centric definition of theatre. If we recognise that 'theatre' is any action by an individual or a group for another individual or group in a three-dimensional space and that dramatic conflict is not an indispensable element in constructing a piece of theatre, then much of the confusion about the existence of a theatrical tradition in Islam can be cleared."

Making a distinction between 'secular' performances and Islamic performances, he proceeds to show how theatre was practised through a variety of oral and narrative means. Many performances featured music and dance, or even puppets, and themes ranged from the intense dances of the Meleviyya to slapstick political satire. From Turkey to Persia, theatre flourished despite the limitations imposed upon it by Islamic culture.

Though one may have qualms about this extremely broad definition of theatre, it certainly helps to correct the prevailing impression that there was no theatre in the Islamic world. The clerics may have tried to halt its advance but, amongst the population at large, it combined with animist and pagan rituals to create a unique brand of performing arts. Furthermore, Ahmed's attempt to re-define theatre is a stimulating challenge to the European concept generally employed. One hopes it will encourage scholars to think differently about the subject as well as showing radicals that theatre is an inevitable and highly desirable product of a civilised society.

The third chapter is distinct in both character and content. Taking up roughly half of the book it offers a quasi-anthropological perspective on Islamic performances in Bangladesh. Ahmed has identified three types of Islamic performance: those dealing with the legend of Karbala and, particularly, the problems associated with the characterisation of the Prophet. The second recounts the author's experience of staging the *Thousand and One Nights* in Karachi.

Again, we are treated to detailed facts about sets, lighting and costume, and the use of the text. Most interesting are the justifications for Ahmed's choices. How best to portray the Prophet without offending Islamic sensibilities? How to

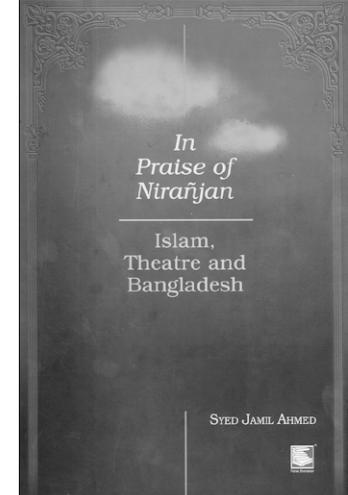
information drawn from his numerous field trips in Bangladesh. Texts, staging, characterisation, costume, music, lighting and even the names of prominent troupes and performers have all been covered in exhaustive detail. For the specialist, the extensive primary research will undoubtedly make this book an important source of reference material.

The lay reader, on the other hand, may feel that it breaks the flow established in the first 60 or so pages. The information is technical and the synopses of the many plays are tortuously complicated. The difference between the *Jari Gan* of Eastern Mymensingh and the *Jari Gan* of Rajshahi probably seems of only academic interest. Fortunately, Chapter 3 is saved from this fate by a liberal scattering of photographs, useful tables of clarification, and Ahmed's uncluttered writing style.

What becomes quite clear by the end of the chapter is the extraordinary diversity of theatre in Bangladesh. Not only that, but how the encounter with Hindu beliefs, pagan traditions and, of course, Islam, has created what Ahmed calls a "syncretistic" theatrical tradition, free of Islamic dogma. For example, in the Introduction he mentions a performance in southwest Bangladesh where a performer was acting out the role of Allah yet, as he says, "it was even more surprising to see that no one among the spectators murmured a word of protest."

The final two chapters can be considered 'case studies' of Ahmed's approach. The first deals with issues in staging the *Bisad Sindhu* (which tells the story of the legend of Karbala) and, particularly, the problems associated with the characterisation of the Prophet. The second recounts the author's experience of staging the *Thousand and One Nights* in Karachi.

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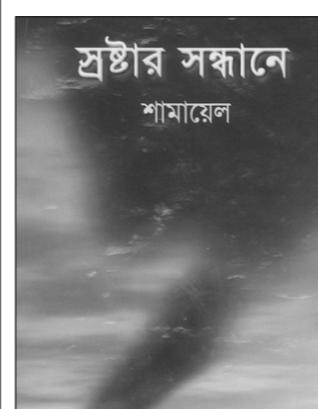
give the impression of reality in artificial surroundings? How to give ancient texts contemporary relevance? Ahmed's answers to these questions will be of interest to all. The latter was especially relevant in the performance in Karachi. Ahmed chose to highlight the treatment of women as objects to draw parallels with the current plight of females across South Asia. Even the question of the authenticity of the *Thousand and One Nights* comes under scrutiny and the text used in Karachi is included in the Appendix for reference.

Most of all, *In Praise of Nirajian* is a thoughtful, imaginative and open-minded book. The conclusions throughout are sound and based on a detailed knowledge of the Bangladeshi indigenous theatre tradition. The abundance of photographs and a helpful glossary add to the quality presentation of the book and it deserves an audience outside the academic field. It should be used as ammunition against the "myopic vision of the fundamentalists" and is a resounding tribute to those who devote their life to theatre.

Emile Chabal is a Cambridge-based student now visiting Bangladesh

A journey towards finding the Shrosta

Let Shamael's feelings and perceptions open the minds of others so that all can experience the beauty and might of the Creator. I hope Shrostar Shondhaney stirs the minds of all who read it into finding their true destination, says Dr. M. Shamsher Ali.



Shrostar Shondhaney
Shamael, Ganakosh Prokashani Dhaka 2001, 207 pages, Tk. 100.00

*S*HAMAEL is a writer who is sufficiently well-versed in religion and is acutely aware of its position in world affairs. She drew considerable attention with her previous book, *An Open Letter to the Pope*, which I had the opportunity to review. The first thing I have to say about her present book is that the title itself, *Shrostar Shondhaney* is indeed attractive and draws a lot of attention.

The Creator cannot be seen with the naked eye. We can see His creation. We have the opportunity to understand the Creator from His creation. Many craftsmen remain unseen to us, yet we still have the pleasure of enjoying and praising their arts and crafts. Many judges also remain unseen, yet their judgement, intellect and wisdom still astonish us. So for the great Creator who has created the animate and the inanimate, and has been caring for their sustenance and governance through His established, silent rules, His creation is enough evidence of His existence. If anyone spends a considerable time reading the great Open Book called "Nature" written by the Almighty "Author," the Author and His greatness can be easily guessed. Shamael wants her readers to realize this. Of course, questions may still be asked. Shamael could have discussed just creation and the Creator, so why discuss Aroj Ali, Dawd Haider, Humayun Azad, Taslima Nasreen etc? The main reason seems to be despair. Those who have been

"Who created the Creator?" with a firm, rude "shut up". The knowledge given to the created by the Creator is not the knowledge with which to answer such a question. This knowledge lacks in both quantity and quality. Yet in His own words the Creator was, is and will be, He is Eternal.

This kind of "shut up" is also present in physics. Physicists have come up with the Big Bang Theory, which finds some support in verse 30 of Surah Ambia in the Holy Quran. This theory states that all matter and energy in the universe (matter and energy being equivalent) was packed into a tiny blob, ultra dense and ultra small. There was a huge explosion (Big Bang) and the creation of the universe started first with the creation of light (Noor), and then with tiny sub atomic particles and anti-particles, and much later with the creation of atoms and molecules which set the foundation for organised matter as we perceive it today. But more than ninety nine percent of all matter in the universe remains in the form of "Plasma" (a collection of positive and negative ions) which is called the fourth state of matter. The beginning of the measurement of time, T, began with the Big Bang (T=0). Now, if anyone asks how was there so much matter in one single dot, or what was present before T=0, then the physicists will have to answer with "shut up." In the mathematical equations of physics dealing with this matter, T=0 is a singularity. Everything from a certain moment after that (10 to the power of minus 43 seconds) can be answered for, but anything before that cannot be. This "shut up" which is necessary for a lot of answers, is what Shamael, who is not a scientist but a person with five senses, wanted to explain to Aroj Ali and his confused disciples and in doing so Shamael has burst the intellectual balloons of many. This perhaps could have been avoided, but in our country, false concepts have to be removed with logic and a loud voice. And Shamael's logic is strong enough for this argument. In many cases this logic is within the reach of our senses and in others it is beyond this reach. Not everything can be understood with logic, some things just have to be taken for granted.

Man's knowledge is increasing and he is able to answer many questions, while facing many new questions too. But what man doesn't realize is that man, like the computer, is 'programmed'; a highly sophisticated programme indeed, yet still with limitations. And even though man knows a lot, can do a lot, he cannot know everything nor can he do everything. One has to remember this limitation. In her book Shamael has tried to explain this in many different ways. Many dismiss the question,

One more thing. Nowadays there seems to be a very strong idea that if one knows the Laws of science then one will also understand creation and one need not invoke Divine issues. But what one should remember in relation to this is that no scientist makes any Law, he merely discovers the Laws existing in Nature. For example, if Ibin Aash Sharif, Nicolas Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, and Albert Einstein hadn't been born, would not the planets have orbited the sun? The answer to this is "Yes". The planets orbit according to the Creator's Laws of Nature. Scientists have discovered these Laws, and have even had some named after them, (e.g. Kepler's Law, Newton's Law etc) but we must remember that the Laws are not theirs but the Creator's.

The knowledge that is working behind these Laws has astonished many scientists. "Whence ariseth this order?", said Newton in awe. Albert Einstein saw science and religion as complementary to each other. If science is an establishment in nature then so too is Love. Shamael has drawn our attention to this love in her book. Poets have let us know about their feelings of love and Shamael has quoted and used some poetic verses to make her point stronger.

In the end, what Shamael is trying to tell us is that with our limited/programmed knowledge, we will be able to understand some aspects of the All Knowing Creator, but some of it we may not understand. This does not render His Creation meaningless. This Creation has all the elements of mercy, sympathy and love embedded in it, and is full of the wonderful ways of God. If we try to understand the wonderful workings of God and embrace this world with love, then that, indeed, will be our great journey towards finding our Creator. Let Shamael's feelings and perceptions open the minds of others so that all can experience the beauty and might of the Creator. I hope Shrostar Shondhaney stirs the minds of all who read it into finding their true destination. I wish Shamael all success with her present book.