

ANALYSIS

Elias, Bankim . . . and perspectives

AKRAM HOSEN MAMUN

Akhtaruzzaman Elias is arguably the most radical novelist of Bangladesh. Although he had written only two novels, he is recognised to be among the most critically acclaimed Bengali novelists. To read or confront his writing is to go through an experience that radically changes our worldview and questions carefully constructed rationales and dogmas. In the canon of 20th century Bengali fiction, no one's writings are more unsettling yet fascinating than Elias's. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to give what is usually called an overview of Elias's writings. In what follows I attempt to present some of my observations on his second novel *Khoabnama* (1996).

I
Khoabnama is set in a time that is profoundly significant in the development of modern Bengali nationhood. The novel roughly captures the period when English colonial rule in India was coming to an end. Considering the history of Bengal, we can fairly assume that the novel covers a period when the country was suffering from the legacy of Governor-General Warren Hastings. The region had just suffered through a devastating famine that claimed the lives of almost one third of the population. The first successful Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* (1882), a very significant novel in the socio-political history of Bengal, is also set around that time. A juxtaposed reading of the two novels can be very revealing, as literary

critic Ahmed Sofa once suggested.

Anandamath is widely recognized to be a historical novel in which Bankim put forth his political views and articulated his vision of India as a Hindu state. It is, in fact, a novel with obvious roots in history; but it is instructive to note how Bankim buries an elementary truth of our history to reach his political ends.

The rebellion of Hindu sanyasis (ascetics) and Muslim fakirs united against the rule of the British East India Company adds a glorious chapter to the rich history of our resistance against imperialism. The Islamist fakir Majnu Shah and the Hindu sanyasi Vabani Pathak put together an army of their disciples and declared a war against the company administration and fought the British soldiers. This episode of our history is important not only because it is inspiring for the people who care about freedom, but also because it shows how the people of Bengal, despite their differences in religion and customs, organized a secular resistance movement against the imperialists.

However, in *Anandamath*, Bankim appropriated this episode by depicting only a Hindu ascetic army fighting the soldiers of the Nawab of Murshidabad. The book calls for the rise of Hindu nationalism to uproot the foreign Turko-Afghan rule of Bengal and then, in the long run, drive the British away from India. Ahmed Sofa suggests that it was Bankim's conscious effort to deprive Bengali Muslims of their legacy in the history of dissidence.

Akhtaruzzaman Elias's *Khoabnama*, on the other hand, opens with a description of fakir



Majnu Shah and sanyasi Vabani Pathak fighting together on the front against the British soldiers. If we place *Khoabnama* in its historical context, we can see that the accomplishment of this novel is remarkable: it stands in defiance of a scholarship that had cast an impenetrable gap between the two people of Bengal. Sofa observes, 'Bankim and some other conservative 19th century thinkers had often sent their contemporary readers on the lunatic fringe and sparked many acts of communal violence' [my translation]. One of the reasons why I think *Khoabnama* is a remarkable feat of Elias in that it begins with a proper approach to our history.

II



The most distinguishing aspect, in my opinion, of Elias's novels is the representation of political activism and organised popular struggle as the only way to bring about positive changes in society. It is mostly evident in the actions, decisions and predicament of Haddi Khijir, Osman and Chengtu in *Chilekothar Shepai* and Tamij in *Khoabnama*.

History offers numerous examples to affirm that the major positive changes in society do not come as a gift from governments or people with power and privilege. The changes are rather results of the ongoing struggles and sacrifices of countless ordinary individuals.

However, social organising and political struggle are virtually absent and studiously

ignored in the works of some of the most celebrated contemporary writers. In addition to this growing lack of representation of political struggle, we find the efforts of resistance movements often being undermined or ridiculed in many literary works.

This tendency shows either a reckless cynicism or an inability to understand elementary phenomena of human history.

III

Khoabnama manifests the underlying radical coherence of Elias's critical mind from his views on history and politics to his use of regional dialects and slang diction. Middle class sensibilities and the taste of readers constantly stumble over the shocking images.

Several decades ago, the sight of many people, mostly women, suffering from goitre (enlargement of the thyroid gland, locally known as *ghag*) was a common in this region. But women suffering from goitre are hardly represented in literature. However, in *Khoabnama* we find Tamij, the protagonist, being drawn to the beauty of a woman with goitre. What is more striking is that the woman is, in fact, presented as desirable.

The plot of *Khoabnama* evolves around a couple of historical episodes -- the partition of 1947 and the *Tebhaga Andolon* -- that shaped the identities of nations in this region. But it did not really make much of a difference to the majority of the population, who remain underprivileged to this day. Nevertheless, the spirit of resistance it enkindles is remarkable.

AKRAM HOSEN MAMUN IS WITH STAR ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

POETRY

Breakfast Angel

SAMIRA ABBASI

Those tiered pancakes were awesome,
Yet you thought they were lonesome,
Layered in ripe strawberries,
Or were they love-filled cherries?
Passionfruit, tangy, as icing,
My hazel eyes, enticing,
On top, whipping cream,
Mixed with your "yaman" dream,
All over, auburn sauce, drizzling,
My auburn lips, always giggling,
One bite yours, one mine,
Such tender love, how divine,
Long lovely breakfast by the sea,
My passion bubbling, along with the tea.
Alas
Like all good things, this morn must end,
Love, yours and mine, all barriers must transcend
Strawberries strewn lazily on the floor,
Your soul touching mine as you walk to the door,
Meet, again, who knows when?
Love flows like the Ganges, until then.

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Tale of a pretty foot

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A foot is what keeps the world standing.
It makes us foot all those sad bills of life.
It roots us to the realities of the cosmos.
A pretty foot on an elegant woman is
Something else, though.

It is, quite truly, a piece of sheer poetry.
You know why? Because it holds up a
Whole body of beauty on its strength . . .
Because it is an aperture into glamour that
Courses its way, all the way up.

A pretty foot on a beautiful woman is a
Lesson on the graces that anoint her being.
For it shows, from the rear, the myriad
Sensual ways in which she walks, with that
Curve that so becomes her hips.

And from the front? A pretty foot demonstrates
Beauty that knows no bounds, that marches to
The tune of the heart. A pretty foot is a hint of the
Fullness that comes with a heaving bosom, a sign
Of desire not being a sin after all.

A pretty foot, wounded and bandaged, causes
Ripples in the ponds and lakes of the mind.
For the woman with that pretty wounded foot
Sways as she walks, holds out her hand to the
Wall and bares a little more of her charms.

A pretty foot, in bandages, on a woman with a
Face steeped in verses, is a thought of sublime
Romance in a man even as the breeze wafts along
In the nocturnal hours. It is a foot he loves, would
Like to hold, for it is his hold on life.

This, then, is the tale of a pretty foot on a woman
Who epitomizes the subtlety of dreams.
This pretty Foot is a sense of her Venus limbs, a
peek into the Layers of delight embedded in her
vigorous Geography.

A pretty foot on an alluring woman is a journey
Into the timeless pastoral. For on that foot, on its
Maturing folds of skin sleep thoughts of Elysian
Dance, of shepherds playing the flute in Elysian
Fields. The pretty foot belongs to your Radhika.

FICTION

The Golden Deer

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Translation MOHIT UL ALAM

Adyanath and Baidyanath Chakroborty are the two sharers of their paternal property. Of them Baidyanath's financial situation is a little worse. Baidyanath's father Moheshchnadra had absolutely no worldly knowledge, and he used to depend wholly on his elder brother Shibanath. Shibanath used a lot of affectionate words for his brother, and in return grabbed his property. Only a few sheaves of company papers were all that Baidyanath had in his possession. They were the only support Baidyanath had against the sea of life.

Shibanath, after a long search, had found out the only daughter of a rich man to marry his son Adyanath, and thus had opened the opportunity to increase his property. Moheshchnadra had taken pity on a poor Brahmin burdened with seven daughters and married his son Baidyanath to his eldest daughter taking not a single farthing as dowry. That he didn't bring all his seven daughters to his house was because he had only one son, and the Brahmin didn't request him for that either. But, Moheshchnadra helped the Brahmin at the wedding of his other daughters, by going beyond his means.

After his father's death Baidyanath was living listlessly happily being satisfied with the company papers in his possession. The need for work never occurred to his mind. The only work that he did was to cut off branches from the trees and make walking sticks out of them with great care. The whole lot of children and youths of the village came to him with demand for the sticks. And he gave away the sticks to them free. In addition, inspired by an altruistic feeling, he would spend much time in making kites and kite-pins for them. The work which required much care and much chiseling for a long time, but which from a practical estimate had no value whatsoever, and was sheer loss of time and labor, was something he would pursue with infinite zeal.

When internal squabbles and groupings between the rival neighborhoods were raising a smoke of confusion at the big temples in Bengal, it was a common scene to watch Baidyanath sitting in front of his house on the verandah and busily working at a branch of a tree with his pen-knife from dawn to noon, and, after the noontime meal followed by a nap, to continue to work until dusk.

In course of time, by the blessings of Goddess Shashthi, Baidyanath became the father of two sons and a daughter, thereby, throwing ashes at the face of the enemy. Wife Mokshshadasundari's anger was rising by the day. At Adyanath's house there was always this or that going on, but in Baidyanath's house nothing like that ever happened. What more can go so much against logic than the fact that being of the same family, while Bindhabasini, wife of that house, sported so much jewellery, wore so expensive Benarasi saris, and moved and talked with such airs, she, on the other hand, felt being out of depth at everything. They became that rich by depriving the brother that is the plain truth. The more Mokshshada listened to these stories of filching, the more her mind became filled with disrespect for her father-in-law and his only son. She turned disregardful, and nothing in her house seemed to be enough to her liking. Every article in the house was found to be inconvenient and cumbersome and a cause for embarrassment. Their very bedstead was not even fit to carry a corpse, and even the young of a bat, who had no shelter in the wide world around, would not like to make its lodge in the worn-out wall of the house, and looking at things inside the house even the great saint Paramhangsha would shed tears. But to protest against all these outpourings was beyond the power of the cowardly manly race. So Baidyanath continued chiseling the sticks at his verandah with double attention.

But mere silence is no guarantee that you would escape danger. On some day, interrupting him at his artistic employment, the wife would call the husband inside the house for a chat. Looking away from her

husband, she would most gravely say, "Ask the milkman to stop supplying milk."

Baidyanath, after keeping silence for a moment, would softly say, "If you stop the milk, what would the boys drink?"

The wife would reply, "The rice-washed water."
On some other day she would exhibit a totally opposite mood. She would call him, and then declare, "I don't know anything. You do, whatever has to be done."

Baidyanath, in a diffident voice, would ask, "What has to be done?"

The wife would say, "Buy this whole month's provisions." And then would thrust in his hand such a big list which would be sufficient to cover a royal feast.

If Baidyanath had the courage to ask whether such a big purchase was necessary, the reply would instantly come, "Then let the boys die without eating and me too, and then you would be able to run the house cheaply."

In this way, Baidyanath gradually realized that it was not enough to chisel canes only. Something must be done. It was beyond his capacity to either do business or get a job. So a shortcut to discover the treasure of Kuber had to be invented.

One night lying in bed he prayed to Mother Jagadambe earnestly: "You mother Jagadambe, if you just gift me a patent medicine in dream to cure a complicated disease, I'll bear the expenses for advertising it in newspapers."

He dreamt that night that his wife was very angry with him, and swore that she would marry as a widow. And he was protesting this idea saying that he didn't have the money to buy the jewellery, and she was also arguing that a widow had no need for gold to marry. He thought there was some sure answer to it, but as he was trying hard to figure out what it was, morning had already broken out and the answer to why his wife couldn't marry as a widow flashed through his mind at once. And he felt a little bit sorry about it.

The next day after his morning washing, while he was applying the sharpening paste to the thread of the kite, a hermit suddenly turned up at the door shouting chants. That moment struck Baidyanath like a lightning in which he could see the bright image of his future fortune. He took great care of the hermit and entertained him with plenty of food. After much pleading, he came to know that the hermit had the power to turn things into gold, and, if he wanted, he agreed to teach him the gift as well.

The wife also jumped to the idea. When the liver is infected people see everything yellow, likewise Mokshshada was seeing everything across the wide world being wrapped in gold. She foresaw an imaginary goldsmith casting her sleeping bed, the furniture, and even the walls in gold, and in her thoughts she invited Bindhabasini for a visit.

The hermit was consuming two seer of milk and one and a half seer of royal sweets everyday, and also wrung out much silvery juice (money) by milking (using) the company papers.

The ardent customers for cane sticks and kite-pins came to Baidyanath's house and returned disappointedly seeing the door closed. The boys didn't have their meals in time, hurt themselves while playing, got their foreheads swollen, cracked the sky by their crying, but neither the house lord nor the house lady had any regard for it. All their attention was focused on the fire lit before them by the hermit, eyes without blinking and mouths without words. Their vigil was so intense that soon their eyeballs took the effect of the fire, the touching quality. Their eyesight adorned itself with the bright golden hue of the rays of the setting sun.

After using up two whole pieces of company papers as if they were useless documents to be burnt in the fire, the hermit solemnly declared one day, "Tomorrow things will turn to gold."

That night nobody had any sleep; the man and wife were building a golden palace. While doing it, they had altercations and differences of opinion from time to time, but all were resolved in view of the greater joy they were going to achieve soon. While arguing, each was ready to concede to the other, and so wonderful had been the conjugal reunion that night.

The hermit, however, was not to be seen anywhere the following morning. The golden lustre from everything had disappeared, and even the bright sunshine of the day looked dark. The old sleeping bed, the furniture, the walls all were now exposing their shabbiness and poverty four times as much as it did before.

From now on, if Baidyanath had passed not so much as a comment on any matter of the family, the wife would break out into a torrent: "Enough indication of your intelligence have you already given, now be silent for a while." Baidyanath was, thereby, put off completely.

Mokshshada had taken such a superior attitude as if she had had no faith from the beginning in the hunt for the golden mirage.

Feeling guilty, Baidyanath had tried to find out means to placate his wife. One day he brought a square-shaped packet to his wife, and, turning his neck, said with a mischievous smile on his face, "Can you tell me, what I have brought for you?"

Suppressing her curiosity, the wife said nonchalantly, "How can I say, I'm not a seer."

Deliberately Baidyanath took much time in untying the thread of the packet, and then blew off the dust from the paper, then carefully unwrapped the paper fold by fold and then took out a coloured portrait of the dashmahabidya (a portrait displaying ten qualities of Goddess Durga) done at an art studio and turned it to light for his wife to have a good view.

At once what came to the wife's mind is the English oil painting hanging in the bedroom of Bindhabasini, and so she said with infinite sarcasm, "Ah, what can you say, better hang it in your living room, and watch it for yourself. I've nothing to do with it." A disappointed Baidyanath realized that like many other capacities, God has also deprived him of the difficult virtue of winning women's hearts.

In the meantime Mokshshada was having her palm read and family history examined by palmists and astrologers all and sundry. Everybody said that she would never die a widow. But she was not keen on meeting that very fortunate end, so her curiosity was not quenched by this knowledge.

She also was told that her luck for children was good, and that the house might soon be full of children. But even at that she didn't seem to be much pleased.

Finally, an astrologer told her that if Baidyanath hadn't come across hidden treasure in one year, then the astrologer would burn all his books. Hearing of this prophecy by the astrologer, Mokshshada had no iota of doubt about the good fortune to come their way.

The astrologer was well paid when he left, but Baidyanath's life became miserable. There are certain traditional ways of amassing wealth, like cultivation, jobs, business, thievery and forgery. But there is no definite way as to how to get hold of hidden treasure. For this reason, the more Mokshshada inspired or admonished Baidyanath to find a way out, the more Baidyanath got puzzled about which way to go. He couldn't set up his mind as to where he would start digging, or which pond he would send the divers to, or which wall of the house he would drive the pickaxe into.

Out of utter annoyance Mokshshada let him know that she did have no idea before that a man could have had so much of dung in his head in place of brain. She said, "Move around a little bit. Will it rain money from the sky if you sit idle with a gaping jaw?"

Quite justified a comment, and Baidyanath also wanted to start doing something, but to which direction he would go, which way to ride on, nobody is there to tell him. So, sitting on the verandah, Baidyanath once again employed himself in sharpening cane sticks.

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

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