



On the allegorical gaze of Meghmallar

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FORMATION of Bangladesh in 1971, with the war of liberation as provider and midwife, screens the storyline of Meghmallar. The film is, however, about more than the war of liberation. It is, I will argue, an allegory of modernity in the age of late colonialism. I will of necessity limit my remarks here only to two or three points.

Let me begin with 1971 or the war of liberation. Devoid of perspective it might look like a triviality. Pakistan, as a symbolic order, was carved out of the Indian Empire in 1947 based on the imaginary of one religion and one language intertwined with the symbolic function of engaging a common enemy. The hope of a new democratic homeland for India's Muslim population, in the West as well as the East of Empire, ended up in a passive revolution of 'Punjabi imperialism' within less than a decade. Pakistan's destiny, contrary to certain wild thinking, lied not in its anatomy, i.e., its 'geographical absurdity'; it remained embedded in its historical trajectory. The remoteness of Dhaka from the federal capital first in Karachi and then later in Islamabad, as an astute observer notes, 'intensified the sense of marginality of the Bengali political elites.' 'I feel a peculiar sensation when I come from Dhaka to Karachi, I feel physically, apart from mental feeling, that I am living here in a foreign country,' as Ataur Rahman Khan, Chief Minister of East Bengal, said in 1956. 'I did not feel as much when I went to Zurich, to Geneva... or London as much as I feel here in my own country that I am in a foreign land.'

Pakistan's coming apart in 1971 was not a fact made in a scheming India or for that matter in an insurgent East Bengal; it was made, as a mélange of chauvinism and race prejudice, in Islamabad. Bangladesh, it should be said, was born lately of the new democratic hopes of the masses in East Bengal. It was that military crackdown, not improperly qualified as brutal, in East Pakistan on 25 March, 1971, which transformed the 'mutiny' of the East Bengal Regiment (or what some to this day keep calling 'civil war'), into a full scale war of liberation. As close to ten million people fled to India, meta-morphing a crisis into a catastrophe, Pakistan just sleep-walked into war with India. For nine months, till mid-December, sixty-five millions or so many in Bangladesh survived or perished under 'Punjabi domination' turned full scale occupation.

Atrocities of Pakistan occupation forces in Bangladesh can in no way be over-narrated. They have not been told as much or as well so far. Meghmallar, a debut film by the no longer so young film-maker Zahidur Rahim Anjan, cuts open a small incision into that black-box of our ignorance. Yet, I would insist, it is not a war film. It is a film, at worst, of the effect of war on the human condition in occupied Bangladesh. A young college teacher, a rather peaceable

man, Nurul Huda by name, is the protagonist of the film. He happens to be married and is living in a small living quarter in a remote district town in occupied Bangladesh with his wife Asma and a daughter, hardly three, curiously her name is Sudha.

Nurul Huda is suspected by the occupation army to have links with the Mukti Bahini, the forces of resistance, and is accordingly called up one closely raining day by a collaborating college principal only to hand him over to the commanding officer of Pakistani occupation forces. Nurul Huda, whose name by the way means 'enlightener', duly obeys. He rather helplessly puts on a raincoat left behind, as if absent-mindedly, by his wife's younger brother who used to put up with the couple and is now away somewhere in the occupied land fighting the occupiers with a resistance unit. Nurul Huda is taken to a Pakistani torture chamber, is duly interrogated, i.e. given the third degree when he meets his death heroically.

Before he succumbs to his torturer's last bullet the victim, nevertheless, picks up courage and cries out 'Joy Bangla' loud. He confessed to know the whereabouts of the resistance fighters but cannot fulfill his obligation. A timid man, a most collaborating servant that he is, turns a martyr, a hero of the people.

Critics have already aired their apprehensions if the film will make it to the box office or even to the street corners of Dhaka at any rate. What kind of a hero can this be? I am reminded of 'A Hero of Our Own Times', by Mikhail Lermontov, where the author claims his hero is a portrait, but not of one person alone. 'My hero,' Lermontov writes, 'embodies the vices of our whole generation in the full flush of development.' The Russian author insisted contrarily on the truthfulness of his depiction. He would not harbor any reforming intentions.

I suspect Meghmallar too intends nothing less either. It offers, in this reading, a most trenchant critique of political elites in Bangladesh, or of their ambivalence. What one sees here, forty odd years after the liberation war, is perhaps only a glimpse of the gaze lurking behind! Whatever happened to the war of liberation, forty years on it keeps moving! The illness has been diagnosed, one adds, 'but goodness alone knows how to cure it'.

Portrayal of a hapless intellectual, a martyr of the war of liberation, who didn't want to go to war, nonetheless ended up there in the killing field. It is an episode all too well known in Bangladesh. We meet them too often. This 'way of seeing' a hero of the liberation war that results from the spatial and temporal devaluation of the war or its objectives, the smashing of what we have called 'new democratic hope' in post-liberation Bangladesh I would like to refer as the 'allegorical gaze', a term first used by Walter Benjamin in the interwar years in middle Europe. I would only add that the concept of allegory as



used by Benjamin is something tangentially different from the rhetorical technique of allegory one finds in the pages of literary criticism.

Meghmallar opens with a gaze at the aura of Bengal countryside, where even nature seems to communicate. Gaze implies the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. 'Experience of the aura,' as Benjamin has written, 'thus arises from the fact that a response charac-

teristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationships between humans and inanimate natural objects.' Throughout the duration of the film one sees the same old nature but with a different human significance. People hardly talk to each other there. Even at home Nurul Huda hardly communicates with his wife or child. Paranoia has taken the world over.

In the end, as Nurul Huda faces his

death, he gives a vacant look, a look that won't reciprocate. It doesn't meet its equivalent. The torturer has become a non-organic entity. The condition corresponds to a Baudelaire poem, named 'Une martyre' and to be found in Les Fleurs du mal, where our eyes meet a headless cadaver cascading in a flood of hot blood, the linen beneath it soaked like the mud of wet field. One stanza there describes the severed

head:

'On the night table, like a ranunculus
Reposes; and a gaze,
Mindless and vague and as black as the dusk

Escapes from the pallid face.'
When the film opens our eyes bathe in lush green, the greenery of Bangladesh swaying in south wind produce an aura, only to be enhanced by a long flying shot at the gathering clouds above.

Nature, it seems, once used to reciprocate.

Familiar looks of nature, of green shrubbery of the Bengal delta, of marvelous clouds and rains in late autumn in opening sequences stand in a diametrically opposed relation to a pair of eyes which gaze at us with a vacant expression. The rigidity of death, displaced to the gaze of the dying eyes, flows with the signifier 'Joy Bangla', a signifier that becomes an emblem of the allegorical gaze. A gaze is a spot that sees but which in turn cannot be seen. Meghmallar evokes a state of siege, a country under foreign occupation looking like a deserted town, where college professors are trying to learn the occupier's language and where the office assistant, an employee in the lowest grade, already is speaking it. The state is marked by disintegration of the aura.

A word on the difference between symbol and allegory is perhaps warranted here. In Walter Benjamin's work symbol reflects a reconciliatory relationship with its object, allegory is split by a permanent fracture of the object and its signifying immanence. This fracture caused by death, separates the signified from the signifier. A symbol, in the romantic folklore, gives a transfigured face to nature by imparting eternity to it, thus presenting an imaginary beyond history. Allegory, by contrast, is concealed, enigmatic, and lacks immanent congruity between the signified and the signifier, 'it is timelessness sui generis'. It does not float, detached from nature, but rather lies as a transitory state in the realm of natural history.

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... close wounds or more?

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About Al-Shams, the book titled 'Genocide '71' an account of the killers and collaborators by MuktiJuddha Chetana Bikash Kendra, reads:

"... after the Islami Chhatra Sangha Union- the student front of the Jamaat-e-Islami was transformed into the Al-Badr force, student bodies of other parties combined to form the Al-Shams force. Apart from the student fronts of the Muslim League, there was predominance in this force of the Jamiyat-e-Talabaya Arabiya, the organization of madrassah students. The work of the Al-Shams force was similar to that of the Al-Badr; its members were used in large numbers to kill the Bengali intellectuals."

So was the International Crimes Tribunal created only to give justice to the martyrs' children? Was it formed to avenge the death of the three million who were killed; the more than 200,000 women who were raped and millions of others who were forced to leave their home?

The trial process which started after 40 years is more of a symbol of justice to prevent repetition of crimes against humanity rather than a venture to avenge death to the families of martyr, according to Tawheed

Reza Noor, son of eminent martyred journalist Serajuddin Hossain, who was abducted on the night of December 10, 1971 by Al-Badr men. He reminded that the movement started by Jahanara Imam, mother of Shaheed Rumi in the early 1990s for trial of war criminals was not for taking revenge. It was to ensure that people who commit heinous crimes such as genocide and mass rape never get away with it. In fact, Bangladesh is not unique in trying perpetrators of these crimes. War crimes was and is being held in different countries of the world, he said.

Even when expressing their reaction to the verdicts of the war crimes, families of martyrs and victims welcome capital punishment not out of revenge but because they feel that the extent of these crimes deserves the maximum punishment that exists under the law of the land, Noor explained.

Would the truth and reconciliation process, in line with what was set up in South Africa worked in Bangladesh's case as suggested by many westerners? Would it work for someone like Ghulam Azam who even in an interview with a weekly Bengali magazine Bichitra in April 17, 1981 said brazenly, 'I made no mistake in 1971'?

'Genocide 71' in page 70-71 presents trans-

lation of the Bichitra article which depicts the role of Ghulam Azam:

"In early September 1971, at a meeting with Rao Farman Ali, Professor Azam presented a blueprint on the killings of the intellectuals. It was in accordance with this blueprint that later in December, the intellectuals were cruelly murdered.... The plan was as follows: "It might not be possible to preserve Pakistan. However, intellectuals, engineers, scientists, doctors, must be eliminated forever, so that even if we lose Pakistan this country cannot function. Professor Azam gave directions to his cadres, the Al-Badr and Al-Shams to carry out the plans of the blueprint. Areas were also demarcated. In 1972, quite a few of these blueprints were recovered from captured Al-Badr leaders. ... At a meeting of the All-Badr, some Jamaat leaders exhorted those present, "In order to rescue our motherland from the hands of these Nimruds, follow the directives of our Ameer (Gholam Azam)."

Neither Ghulam Azam nor Jamaat-e-Islami ever refuted this Bichitra article about the role of Jamaat, the Al-Badr and the ICS in the killing of intellectuals under the guidance of Ghulam Azam, mentioned the book.

Yet, the country's failure to hold people like Ghulam Azam accountable for their crimes for about 40 years, created unknowing

fans who see him as saint and we see London-based journalists like Yasmin Khatun empathising with Ghulam Azam's son upon the death of the war criminal while serving imprisonment. Could she have done the same for Shumon?

When Jamaat's leaders live in a state of denial about the atrocious crimes they committed in 1971, how far could the truth and reconciliation process work? Noor points out that instead of admitting their mistakes, war criminals received political rehabilitation in independent Bangladesh and continued to preach and promote their fundamentalist ideology so much so that even the young generation considers these war criminals as their leader despite the monstrosity they committed and assisted in 1971.

It was this very terrorist ideology of Jamaat that is still being practiced by its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir, the successor of Islamic Chhatra Shangha, the student of Jamaat whose leaders and activists were part of the notorious Al-Badr force.

It is unfortunate the benefit that Jamaat could not gain in a united Pakistan run by West Pakistanis, they received much of it in independent Bangladesh. Two of Jamaat leaders and also Al-Badr key men Ali Ahsan Muhammad Mujahed and Motiur Rahman

Nizami even made it to the cabinet during the BNP regime of 2001-2005 led by Begum Khaleda Zia. While Mujahed became social welfare minister and death designer Nizami was awarded with the responsibility of the agriculture ministry first and later the commerce ministry.

Just as the saying in our country goes you can never trust a fox with hens, Mujahed and Nizami showed their true colours while occupying the highest echelons of the country. While Nizami helped bring in 10 trucks of illegal firearms in April 2004, Mujahed allegedly conspired in the killing of the then opposition political party activist of Awami League through the 21 grenade attack of 2005.

Thus the claim by war criminals, their families, Jamaat leaders, their supporters and sympathisers that they have been deprived of justice, pose a big question. What is the definition of justice? Instead of trying the war criminals in the court of law, had the nation followed Jamaat's footsteps and hacked or burnt the war criminals to death, in the same manner the party activists flared passenger-filled buses even last year, would that have been fair?

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