

# SYED AKRAM HOSSAIN

## THE MAKING OF MODERN LITERARY STUDIES IN BANGLADESH

SALAHUDDIN AYUB

Very few books ever fail to draw us into an ever deeper contemplation of literature, no matter how many times we turn to them. *Rabindranath's Novel: Patterns of Thought and Representation* ([1977] 2014) by Syed Akram Hossain belongs to that slim, selective canon. This is a factual statement, not a figure of speech, but I will say a few words as to why this book is accorded a central place in our literary criticism. As will be shown shortly, Syed Akram Hossain has been, and continues to be, a major avant-garde literary critic of the late sixties and seventies, although his name may not—I suspect—ring a bell right away. Let alone judge his literary contribution against my opening proposition, many may not have even heard of his name, and I don't know whom or what to blame for this strange state of affairs. Syed Akram Hossain is certainly not one of those figures that appear on television and talk shows or write political columns in popular newspapers. Much later in his long, illustrious career, just before retiring from teaching literature and training dozens of PhDs at Dhaka University, he launched *Uluhkhagra*, a modern literary journal, of which he was the editor. But Syed Akram Hossain merits serious attention not because of this journal, but because of his unique literary criticism and lasting scholarship, and of his instrumental role in shaping modern literary studies in the academia. He is the author of several works, including two separate books, published in 1969 and 1981 respectively, on Rabindranath Tagore. The publication of his second book on Rabindranath ([1977] 1981), widely regarded as the definitive book on Rabindranath's novels, has established him as the preeminent literary critic in Bangladesh. In addition, his many impeccable essays on Syed Waliullah, Bibhutibhusan, Nazrul Islam, post-partition (1947) poetry and fiction, and on Tagore's short stories—undeniably the best of their kind ever composed in any language—have constituted momentous breakthroughs in the field of literary studies. Every time I pick up his essays to muse on a passage or to simply refresh my memory, I can't help but wonder whether what he manages to articulate in a short paragraph can be found, say, in a lengthy dissertation on the same topic.

In post-independence Bangladesh,

Syed Akram Hossain set out to reinvent post-Tagorean tradition of modern literary inquiry inaugurated by the great literary giants like Buddhadeb Bose (1908-1974), the founder at Jadavpur University of the first comparative literature department in the whole of India, in the 1930s. Buddhadeb's academic project, like his fine literary criticism, was driven by the same overriding idea, namely to bring, as he said somewhere, the East and the West "spiritually closer" and nurture a "cosmopolitan spirit" in literary studies by replacing parochial, regional literary orientations with robust comparative theorizing and methodology. Syed Akram Hossain's work—his writings and, as importantly, his extraordinary guidance and expertise that produced some of the finest dissertations in the field—must be seen as a continuation of, and as a significant addition to, that enduring tradition. I am not aware of any other person in the citadel of academia who has spent all his life directing outstanding research projects just to bring the best out of bright young minds who choose to sign up for them and are undeterred by the hard work lying ahead. It is remarkable that almost all of the dissertations, executed under his sustained guidance and unmatched acumen, have eventually found their way into print. These dissertations exhibit high standards of presentation, incorporate clear statements of the research problem, display applications of appropriate methods, systematic analyses of findings, interpretations, and sensible conclusions. Marking a paradigm shift in critical work and scholarship, this collective enterprise under the quiet leadership of a man more interested in translating his vision into reality than bragging about the credit he deserves, is surely an answer to the nagging question as to whether we have accomplished anything of substance, of significance, in the last four decades after independence. Let me be clear: I am not talking about a celebrity figure, but a great scholar, literary critic, and professor. More importantly, and contrary to what some people might assume today, Syed Akram Hossain most decidedly did not wish to be famous or a celebrity. Instead he had chosen early on to traverse the much tougher terrain in the unglamorous academic world and be happy within its boundary for years on end, away

from the media spotlight and fast rewards, deriving satisfaction from teaching and research, advising, and serving as chair on PhD committees, while playing a role of such consequence as to alter the course of literary studies in the mainstream academy for the better.

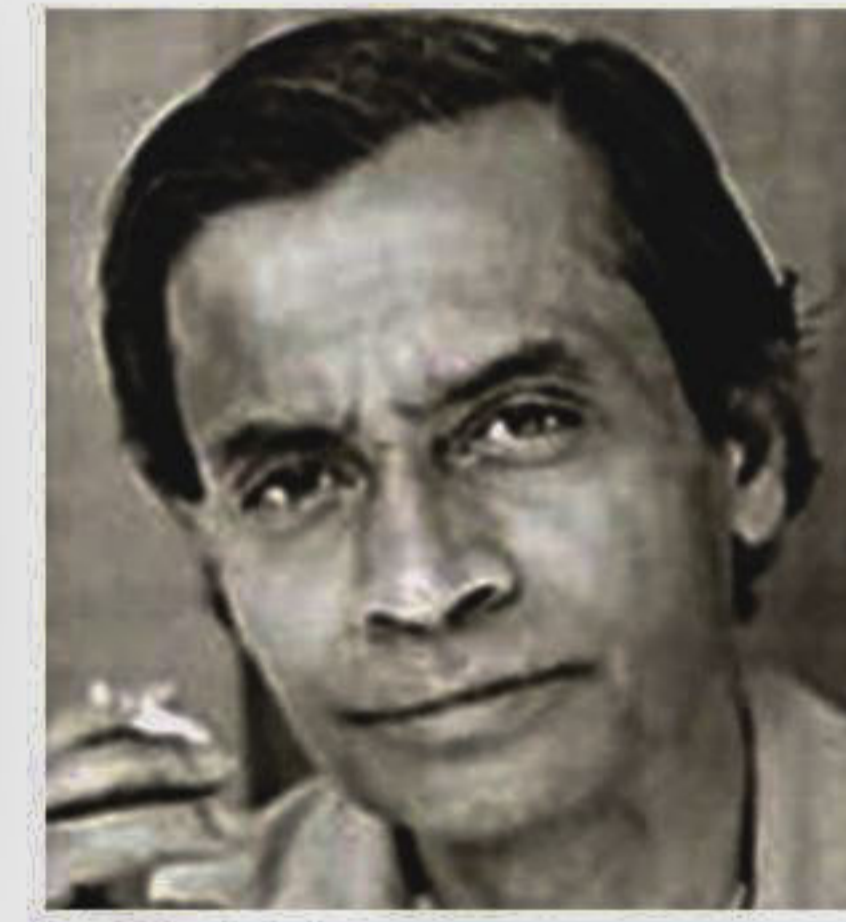
Interrupted more than once by events as tragic as the murder of Munier Chowdhury and as big as the liberation war of 1971, *Rabindranath's Novel: Patterns of Thought and Representation* ([1977] 1981) signifies a moment of decisive import in the literary landscape, breaking a new ground in literary criticism by obliterating the



Syed Waliullah

then-prevalent obsolete, antiquated literary discourse and embracing a refreshingly modern, rigorously analytic, methodology. The subject, Rabindranath and his novels, is hardly new, but what makes Syed Akram Hossain's work stand out from much of what has been written on the subject is its close textual analysis, disciplined inquiry, and methodological innovation. With the release of this book, one begins to realize that the happy old days of the past, when one could string together a bunch of essays on the great poet and claim himself to be an expert, are over. In this authoritative text, Syed Akram Hossain commits himself to redraw the contours of critique and teach, quite literally, how to study modern fiction and to discriminate, for instance, between genuine *literary criticism* and amusing personal commentary habitually mistaken for that genre. Though Tagore's novels—from his first, 'long-neglected,' *Karuna* (1981: 56) to

his last, perpetually misrecognized, 'experimental' *Char Adhyay* (1981: 354)—are its main focus, this book, *Rabindranath's Novel*, does not treat them as isolated textual events, but situates them in the rich, dynamic context of Tagore's vast, magnificent oeuvre. Thus, when we finish reading the book, we come to see not only how Tagore's novels connect or interpenetrate to yield meaning, but also how different parts and particles coalesce and rebound in Tagore's prose, poetry, painting, and music, to form a stunning literary analogue of the vast, material universe. Lack of space inhibits me from elaborating on this point, but



Buddhadeb Bose

for now suffice it to say that eminent critics—like Debipada Bhattacharya, Shankha Gosh, Ashrulkumar Shikdar—hold this book in the same high regard as most of us do. Leaving aside the issue of his contribution to Tagore scholarship, what sets Syed Akram Hossain most sharply apart from other critics is his piercing analysis of the art of fiction, rendered in a style that is most restrained, elevated yet unpretentious, and unmistakably his own. Occupying a special position in his superb oeuvre, Syed Akram Hossain's *Rabindranath's Novel* ([1977] 1981) has been rightly held as an epoch-making feat of literary criticism in Bangladesh, the newly independent country bristling with verve, confidence, and new dreams.

Let me share with you an anecdote about my great teacher Dr. Syed Akram Hossain. Since he is not a dry or reserved person at all, you might wonder if there are reasons why he doesn't give interviews, participate in

political debates, or write in magazines and newspapers. There could be many reasons, of course, but I would point to one that might catch your attention. Sometime in the sixties, he read an essay in a meeting on contemporary poetry, highlighting its strengths, achievements, as well as its flaws. Among the poets in the audience was Fazal Shahabuddin who hastily, without thought or reason, rose up from his seat and began to ramble about Shamsur Rahman. It was a comical interlude no doubt, but the young Syed Akram Hossain found it quite instructive as well, for he resolved to avoid, from that day forward, this type of congregation at all cost. Whether he wrote a sentence or paragraph on Shamsur Rahman that offended one of his cronies, I don't know. But Humayun Azad, you might know, penned an entire book about the poet which, at times, reads like a religious eulogy delivered by a fawning lapdog. From this evidence, it would be safe to assume that the difference between Humayun Azad and Syed Akram Hossain is one of constitution. The former was free to write and publish anything that would make him famous, but the latter, Syed Akram Hossain, was made of a different metal. Amid an astounding array of phonies and fake heroes, Syed Akram Hossain has devoted his long academic life to accomplish something much higher than easy fame or popularity by staying fully committed to his principles, convictions, and to the discipline for the long haul. I therefore ask you to join me in celebrating the work of a man who is not a celebrity, but is the author of real books, a major critic, and a central figure in our literary and intellectual history not yet written.

## REFERENCE:

Syed Akram Hossain. [1977] 2014. *Rabindranath Uponnash: Cetonalok o Shilparup*. New Edition. Calcutta: Noya Uddog.  
Syed Akram Hossain. 1969. *Rabindranath Uponnash: Deshkal o Shilparup*. Dhaka: Department of Bengali, University of Dhaka.

Dr. Salahuddin Ayub, a professor of criminal justice at Chicago State University, is the author of several books, including *Adhunikata o Uttoradhunikata* (1994) and *Sanskritir Jiggasha* (1999).



Joseph Vernet, Night: Seaport by Moonlight, 1771, Louvre.

## Diagnosis of a HALF CRAZY MOON

Anis Pervez

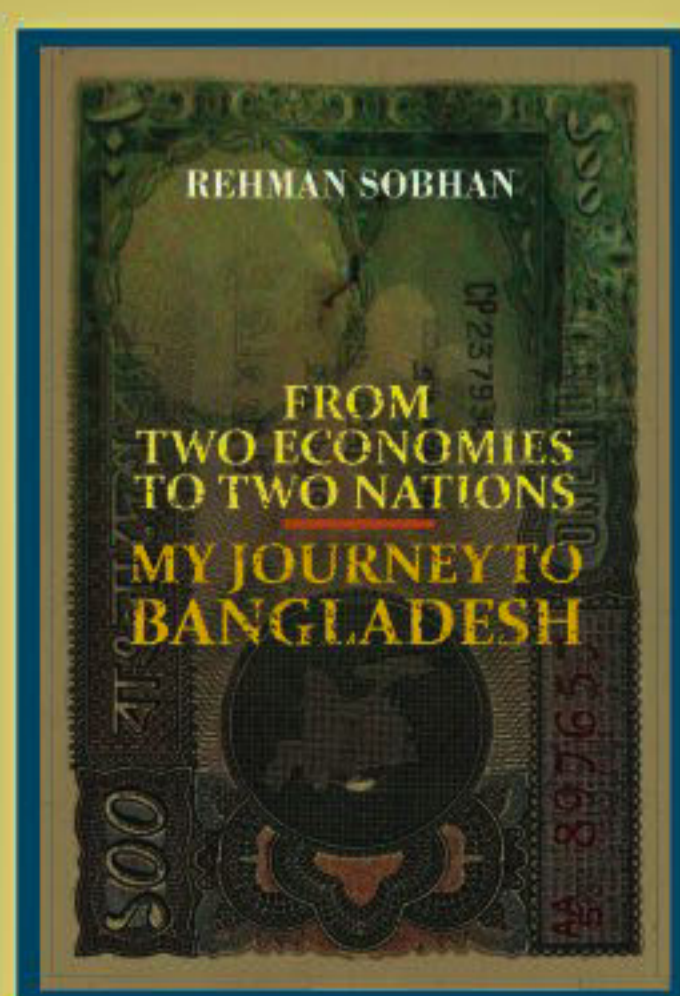
Local time is now twelve past one  
birds are back to their nest again  
the sky is a big empty space now  
and women are sleeping like a river  
I bathed in that river  
before taking a flight to the border  
of the night.

One who crosses the border

he never returns home  
but birds come home every evening  
time and word never come again  
lover who shows her back  
never ever will show the face  
even if she comes it's not her  
but the body.

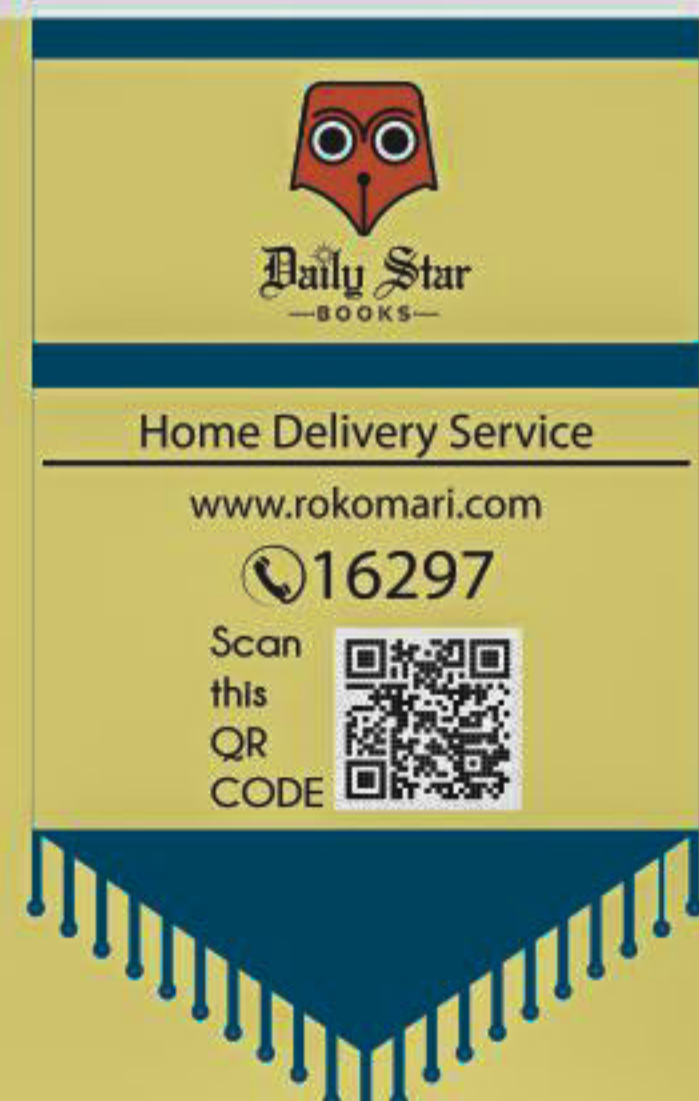
Local time is now twelve past one

I see the whistling of the night  
and I touch the color dropping  
from the bricks of the wall of darkness  
color turns into a butterfly  
someone, from the other side of the border,  
is playing a flute aloud  
and river-like women has finally become  
a point in the geometry of darkness  
local time is now twelve past one.



FROM  
TWO ECONOMIES  
TO TWO NATIONS  
MY JOURNEY TO  
BANGLADESH

by  
REHMAN SOBHAN



আবুল মনসুর আহমদের  
শ্রেষ্ঠ গল্প

সম্পাদনায়  
ড. নূরুল আমিন



Our books are available at:

Aziz Super Market, Shahbag: Prothoma (9664825), Pathak Shamabesh (01713034440) Dhanmondi: Gyankosh (8623251), Baily Road: Sagor Publishers (01716544444), Gulshan: Gloria Jean's Coffees (01914426135), Banani: Ananya Crafts (9882542), Old Aripport: Bookworm (9120387), Aripport: Omni Books (8901808).

Chittagong: Batighor (01713304344) and Prothoma (01711649422)

আমাদের পরিবেশক

আজিজ সুপার মার্কেট, শাহবাগ: প্রথমা (৯৬৬৪৮২৫), পাঠক সমাবেশ (০১৭১৩০৩৪৪৪০), কাঁটাবন: প্রকৃতি (০১৭২৭৩২৮৭২৩), বৈলি রোড: সাগর পাবলিশার্স (৯৩৫৮৯৪৪), গুলশান: গ্লোরিয়া জিনস কফি (০১৯৭০০০৮৯৮৯), বিমান বন্দর: বুক ওয়ার্ম (৯১২০৩৮৭)। নরসিংদী: বই পুস্তক (০১৮১৮৫৩৪৮৯৩), কুষ্টিয়া: বইমেলা (০১৭১১ ৫৭৫৬০৬)। চট্টগ্রাম: বাতিঘর (০১৭১৩৩০৪৩৪৪), প্রথমা (০১৭১১৬৪৯৪২২)