

The Lesser Sex

ROSE DELANEY

SAKINA'S glare is empty. Her defeated, glassy eyes scan the room passively. The subdued silence and withered frame expose her fragility.

As a young girl, she endured both the physical and emotional trauma that had aged her into a state of lifelessness. Sakina's childhood innocence had already been ruthlessly beaten away. She was only a 12-year-old.

Sakina's expressionless stare showed indestructible detachment. As hard as a rock, her inner turmoil had obligated her to push her emotions aside and live in a state of heartless survival. However, once encouraged to voice the perils of her childhood, Sakina's face softened.

The gush of tears that flooded her eyes reminded one of a coursing river that had burst at its banks, wild, chaotic and finally free of limitations.

Sakina articulated her experience of what can be considered years of irreversible trauma and abuse in her family home in Dhaka.

"I remember my mother's crushing custom of spitting venom. Her vicious words wounded me more than the beatings. Somehow, her malicious remarks always seemed to cut deeper than the whip."

However, the root of Sakina's abuse is not founded in ignorance or poverty. The cause of her mother's fury stemmed in her being a "kalluni", a dark-skinned girl. She would never fare well in a marriage market so focused on the South Asian standard of "fair" beauty.

In spite of having grown up in a privileged manner, attended to by dozens of domestic workers in a household of plenty, violence was rife within the four walls of what appeared to be "paradise" for those who could not look inside.

"I recall being locked in the bathroom for two days, deprived of food and water as a punishment for my disobedience. Most of the time, I felt like ending my life in that suffocating bathroom, I couldn't take it any longer." Sakina said.

When she was not being made to starve or dehydrate, she endured severe physical punishment under the wrath of both her mother and father, her younger

brother never failing to report on the shame she brought on to the family once he discovered Sakina's exchange of love notes with a local boy.

"There is one nightmarish memory that refuses to leave my mind. I shudder in fear when I think of it. It comes back to me in the form of a recurring dream, my mother's snarling expression as she takes out a one and a half metre long whip, freshly chiselled from the branch of a kadam tree, thrashing me with it mercilessly, for hours on end."

She paused to compose herself. "The grotesque image of my blood spattered on the wall will never leave me," she stated.

Although Sakina's tragic story happened over five decades ago, has Bangladesh made any radical change for the better in terms of female security and development?

It appears the great lengths the local government has gone to, to eradicate violence against women and young girls have not stretched far enough. Even today, cases of abuse and violence against women and girls are commonplace in male-dominated Bangladeshi society.

Recently, a woman was reported to have been caned 101 times in a rural community in Rangpur for what was considered to be a shameful "extramarital affair" by the local village arbitration committee. In reality, the "affair" was a case of breaking and entering as the woman, shamefully labelled "adulteress", fought off a neighbour who entered her home by force.

In spite of this violation of privacy and act of male-perpetrated violence, the woman - as the "weak" scapegoat - was obligated to take the blame for the man's reckless behaviour.

As a direct consequence, she was relentlessly beaten in the presence of hundreds of villagers. The village arbitration forced the husband to conduct the caning. Readers of *The Daily Star* (Bangladesh) report commented on the sheer barbarity and sexism of the caning as the male perpetrator of the attack's sole punishment was 20 lashes.

Young women and girls in Bangladesh are punished for the crime of being the "lesser sex" on a daily basis. They are pushed into child marriage,

slain for dowry and subjected to severe familial and marital acts of gender-based violence. In many ways, young girls and women are seen as nothing more than "financial burdens" on the family.

There is far less investment in education and healthcare for young girls and women across Bangladesh and once they reach puberty, their mobility is heavily restricted. As the high number of

gender bias still exists. The document emphasises that "the low socio-economic status of women is reflected in the poor health services provided to them, their inadequate food intake and their limited decision-making authority. Early marriage, dowry practices and sexual harassment, as well as violence against children and women continue because of social

to the elite, like a threatening plague.

In most cases, the abuse is rooted in the home where girls' decision-making power is most limited. Women's "intrinsic role" relegates them into a position of subservience.

Violence within the home perpetrated by women who target other vulnerable young women and girls, much like in the case of Sakina and her abusive mother, are by far the most difficult cases to tackle, as few have the courage to condemn and speak out against the actions of their own families.

In a recent research study, more than half of women interviewed aged between 15-49 experienced some form of physical or sexual violence in their homes. Ironically, UNICEF has reported that even in the wealthiest quintile of society, 13 percent of girls are underweight, possibly due to food deprivation as a form of punishment.

Acid throwing, whipping, and sexual harassment are also common forms of violence perpetrated against women and young girls. The rampant culture of violence and abuse has led many young women to contemplate suicide, as UNICEF reports suicide to be most common among girls aged between 14 and 17 in Bangladesh.

The need to implement gender-equal initiatives with the outcome of delimiting women and young girls' mobility is vital. Through innovative education, the perpetrator of violence in Bangladesh will benefit just as much as the victim.

Through the widespread implementation of anti-violence initiatives, those most affected by abuse will come to realise that brutal castigation is by no means embedded in the national culture, nor is it an acceptable manner of monitoring and "controlling" female behaviour.

It is time women in Bangladesh and elsewhere speak out in the face of violence and realise that the open condemnation of abuse is key to addressing the entrenched discrimination against women and girls that dominate the nation.

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child marriage, gender-based acts of violence and adolescent motherhood soars, it is clear this growth surpasses the setbacks of social disparity and lack of education.

The UNICEF country programme document states that in spite of significant progress in the reduction of poverty and gender equity in the education system up to secondary level,

acceptance and gender norms".

In this sense, Sakina, in spite of her prestigious family name and affluent background, is just as much a victim of violent brutality as the isolated village woman who was mercilessly caned. In South Asia and elsewhere, ruthless violence against young women knows no bounds, it unleashes itself in all classes of society, from the marginalised

Freeing literature from a colonial mindset

HISHAM M NAZER

AS an unregimented Anglo-American agent of English, it is generally expected from me to praise everything and anything "English" in Bangladesh. I have heard it, said it myself hundred times: you have to cultivate the "English" consciousness otherwise you will not be able to do ... wait, yes, do what? Keeping aside the benefit of learning English in learning the world, the answer is, we will not be able to understand the literary canons from the West - the canons that still colonise our English syllabi in the universities with their former glories and stories. English history is thus perpetuated, made delightful; it is made somehow remunerative through texts that hail the old, even in a new intellectual atmosphere where Bangladeshi English academia is entering slowly but surely.

The presence of cultural and theory courses that discuss and analyse modern and postmodern critics and theories seriously alongside the "dead" ghosts of old writers makes it even more interesting because the approach towards texts has not yet totally changed. Even now some teachers of English literature are comfortable discussing only images, symbols, themes and motifs in the class, without,

at any moment, referring to the social, psychological and cultural aspects/significance/insignificance of the text. A knowledge of these literary devices is a must, but as a slowly "post-modernising" nation, it is imperative for Bangladeshi English scholars to delve deeper into the text by going beyond the text itself and into the thick world of theory where issues that occasion a literary creation is analysed. We cannot afford any longer to be duped into believing and blindly accepting any inherent, foundational, propaganda-born discourse or structure that might re-insure in us the "inheritance of a negative self-image".

The very presence of the old canonical texts in the English graduation syllabi and the absence of contemporary native or international literature (written in English) is a threat to our intellectual development because till date, most English graduates even from reputed public universities know only a few names of writers outside those they found in their syllabus, and even fewer theories.

This startling ignorance of contemporary literature also makes them incapable of understanding the theories in applied form. The problem lies not even only in this incapacity to read, understand and envision, but also somewhere else — somewhere more

sensitive than anything. Unlike journalistic writing or history, literature tells us how things happen, through stories. Thus fiction gives us an insight into reality, from which it is born. Therefore it is of utmost necessity that besides merely getting informed about the world around us through newspapers and journals, we must also grow the ability to extract the valuable substance from contemporary literature—the substance that is infused with the writer's conscientiously chosen words, done after careful analysis of reality and mature response to real problems.

To know the real contemporary world, there is no other way than to acknowledge the plethora of contemporary literature and consider them seriously in the English syllabi, because as mentioned previously, knowledge of the modern/postmodern theories alone will do no good, because things are best understood as examples and not in their purely theoretical complexities; contemporary literature happens to rejoice in this theatricality of theories through its careful translation of the abstract into a story and vice versa.

This repetition of English canonical texts in the under and post-grad syllabi is a tool of Anglo-American imperialism because even if it does not

do us any direct harm, it surely keeps us uninformed of the recent happenings in the subtle, behind-the-scenes, uncharted spaces of the world presented and represented through the grossly slighted contemporary works. The characters of a story speak of the sentiments, and often, they are the sentiments of the writer who must take refuge in an unreal world creating unreal personalities to express his anger and anxieties, his horrors and happiness, his interpretation of everything that cross him physically or mentally. If we keep ourselves away from knowing such contemporary characters, we will surely remain ignorant of the cognitive subtleties of great creative minds that can give us a deeper insight into present reality.

This does not mean that all Anglo-American texts have to be erased from our syllabi. This is where I am going to give a rather difficult challenge to our academics. While working for an Indian e-zine once, I came to know that students of English in India read authors like the Brontë sisters, Austen and Dickens when they are still in school. As a country adjacent to India, our colonial experience is very similar which is why it is so crucial to cultivate a non-colonial attitude towards literature. This is not to negate the West, but to empower the

East and a small country like ours that holds bigger possibilities. My proposal is this- introduce the common canonical texts in school and college syllabi. With almost half of the texts transferred to the secondary/higher-secondary syllabi, it will be easy to accommodate theories and contemporary literature (both Eastern and Western) in the graduation syllabi of English studies. We need something like what Fanon said, though in a different way- before we can reclaim our past, we need to claim the present, otherwise this subjugation to a syllabus and an education system more than half a century old is going to keep us in dark and is going to keep us as experiment-specimens in the imperial laboratory of the West. Unless we pace up a little bit, we are going to end up as a nation which will always be the "other" even with all our so-called anti-colonial enterprises and outward, and hence superficial, manifestations of mere West-resisting-whim. Before we can even speak, let us learn what to speak about, and without updating our knowledge of the contemporary world and literature, we are just going to quote Mr. Shakespeare and be happy about it.

The writer is Lecturer of the Department of English, Varendra University, Rajshahi.

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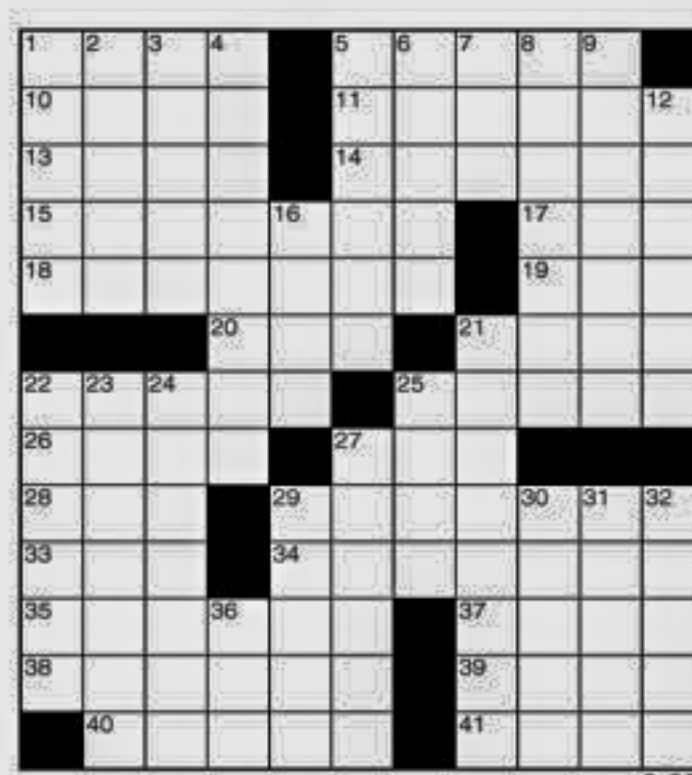
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Mosquito attack
- 5 Plant pest
- 10 First person
- 11 Oklahoma native
- 13 Pack down
- 14 Polite word
- 15 "Ta-ta!"
- 17 Mud bath site
- 18 Cry of dismay
- 19 Snapshot
- 20 Have debts
- 21 Price
- 22 Surgery souvenirs
- 25 Great weights
- 27 Chick's mother
- 28 Gallery fill
- 29 Get in touch with
- 33 Sock part
- 34 Toronto's province
- 35 Salad green
- 37 Dorothy's dog
- 38 Béchamel and béarnaise
- 39 Prayer ender
- 40 Wasn't thrifty

DOWN

- 1 Cookie quantity
- 2 Sun Valley's state
- 3 Circus star
- 4 Montezuma and Napoleon
- 5 Have high hopes
- 6 Casual shirts
- 7 Garden tool
- 8 Needing help
- 9 Hate
- 12 Changes chemically
- 16 Uses oars
- 21 Bach works
- 22 Declares
- 23 Astronomical haloes
- 24 Paid for a hand
- 25 Nice guy
- 27 Truthful
- 29 Witch group
- 30 Fragrance
- 31 Refers to
- 32 Animated characters
- 36 Drink cooler



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	L	P	A	C	A	A	R	A	B
N	O	R	M	A	L	D	I	V	E
G	R	I	N	D	S	E	P	I	C
L	A	C	E	S	C	L	O	A	K
E	X	E	S	P	R	E	S	T	O
T	A	R	A	T	O	N			
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L	A	P	E	N	Y	A			
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D	I	D	O	S	T	A	P	L	E
E	N	I	D	A	I	R	I	E	R
R	E	N	E	T	R	Y	S	T	S

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