

# The Story of a Moonlit Night (Part 3)

Shaheen Akhtar's "Modhupurnimar Raater Galpa"

TRANSLATED BY ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN

Ismat was very irritated at my suspicions. She lectured me on how terrible it was to guess and gossip about others without actually hearing anything with my own ears. I was ashamed. The next moment I felt scared – was this disease contagious? I had managed to pull the wool over Ismat's eyes for the last two decades and thought I had made it – but apparently not. This wasn't just a case of going to the doctor's. Looked like there would be great trouble before that.

"How's your home life?"

I slumped and stared at my dwarf-like shadow. Silent. If she now wanted to talk about why she left Saira's house, I didn't want to hear, even though that was the juiciest bit of talk all evening. Ismat was desperate. She swung the swing hard – "Hey! Are you sleeping? Tell me – how's your home life?"

The thick dwarf-like shadow scattered and shattered in the moonlight. I raised my eyes – Ismat looked animated. When Ismat used to sing in the hostel corridor on rainy days, I felt like throwing aside my books and going out in the rain right then. I could sit for exams later, but there could be no other joy than letting the rain wash over you.

My eyes looked through the mirror of the eighties and whispered – "Home life? Tolerable."

Ismat's face grew dark. "Tolerable is good. You know that Shathi is learning to sing?"

Was this praise, or slander? What was she implying – that we were only pretending to be fine but we really were not? The mirror shattered. I hadn't met Shathi in a very long time. Ismat was still hankering after the past, but she was no longer the same. Were we still the same? Shathi had called suddenly about seven or eight years ago. Ismat should not hear of her pregnancy. I was astounded. What kind of talk was this from a woman with a husband and child? From the other end, the reply was "Ismat is never happy at any good news of ours. I think she feels hurt and cries through the night."

Perhaps. She was a closed book – we deduced whatever we wanted to without reading between the pages.

"Don't you sing anymore?"

Ismat curled up in the chair like a cat. Irritation sounded in the clearing of her

throat. I had recorded Kanganini Sufia's songs about six months ago, but would a Rabindrasangeet singer appreciate that? "Ekta mala gaitha de/Pranshokhire/More nai, more nai biya'r shuwami/ Gotokal aishase..." [Make me a garland/my dear friends/He's not dead, not dead – my wedded husband/He visited yesterday...]

A memory. The first death anniversary of a thirteen or fourteen year old grandson who would play the gypsy along with his grandmother's songs. After the prayers, Kanganini sat by the open southern window, tambourine in hand. The transformer on the electric pole stood close by. The grandson had got tangled in one of its live wires and died.



Kanganini Sufia sang one song after another. Her laments rose through her voice.

These stories had already been printed in books, and yet it felt like a dream.

"Why don't you sing like before? People forget all their sorrows when they sing." I offered Ismat my advice as we climbed down the stairs.

"I don't even read the papers."

"The news is uncontrollable. The country is worse off than in a state of emergency."

"There's no rape in this country, or acid-throwing, or homicide. Nothing. Seems like the street kids have forgotten how to evert-tease. The peacekeeping army is in complete

control."

Everyone enjoyed Ismat's conversation over dinner. Thank God! Even if she was crazy, she spoke fantastically and her head was clear.

The Tarabi prayers had not ended yet at the mosque next door. Perhaps I decided this because it was a moonlit night – I would take a walk and also accompany Ismat up to the main road. We walked along the silent alley, watching our shadows in front of us, and I listened to her talk. It wasn't even ten yet, but I'd have to face the canting when I returned home. Look, I'm forty-five years old. I don't have to give you any account of where I was till ten. I stopped when I saw Ismat's raised wrist towards my shadow. What a mad woman! A little further on, she stopped me again in the middle of the road – apparently, we were travelling backwards in a time machine to when we couldn't go out without permission from parents or a house tutor. It took us about fifteen minutes to make two rounds in this stop-and-go manner.

It was Eid time. The shopping malls by the roadside were decked in lights. Beautifully dressed men and women mixed with the rickshaws and cars. What a different world it was! It wasn't necessary to go to the markets anymore – everything was at our doorstep. I was dressed in my home clothes – and Ismat was in her eighties garb. We hid in the playful shadows under the mango tree. I would get her a rickshaw, then make myself scarce. A motorbike with two riders rushed out from the shadows, almost hitting us. I grabbed her hand – "Did you hear that? What they said?"

"Nope! What did they say?" Ismat looked at me, surprised.

"They asked if we'd go with them!"

"They probably thought we were street beggars."

"No, floating whores. Those rascals are out girl-hunting."

When I described what had happened, everyone at home stared disbelievingly – "Did you hear this with your own ears?"

How bothersome! Everyone asked questions like a doctor.

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## POETRY

POETRY: MAHBUB TALUKDAR

### Lines Dedicated to My Love

TRANSLATED BY KAZI FAZLUR RAHMAN

#### (One)

I have but one life  
And I offered it to you  
You left me bereft  
When you declined it with disdain;  
Life became a void  
Worth nothing.

What can I offer you now?  
All I have is a small slice of love  
A love already too soiled  
Tarnished by your callous neglect.  
Yet that's all I have to offer  
For you to tread on unfeelingly  
So you do – I implore you.

#### (Two)

Your love made my life sweeter  
And the rest of the world  
Sad and melancholy.  
Why could you not be a flower  
Without a stem?  
Then you wouldn't sway  
To and fro,  
In the murmuring breezes.

Now, whenever I seek to hide you  
Light and breeze rush in as invaders  
To snatch you away from me.  
And unlock all the secrets  
Between us two  
For the world to see.

I stretch out my hands  
To hold you tenderly  
But tyrants make you a captive  
Their spears sharp and ready  
To impale my love  
That like a butterfly  
Seeks only you.

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## REVIEWS

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# CHINA RULING THE WAVES?

Mohammad Aminul Karim. *Geopolitics of the South China Sea in the Coming Decades*. ISBN: 978-1536140941. Nova Science Publishers, 2018

REVIEWED BY IMTIAZ A. HUSSAIN

Lieutenant General Mohammad Aminul Karim is no stranger to the sea. His latest book, *Geopolitics of the South China Sea in the Coming Decades*, continues a streak explaining why we must give ocean-based rivalry more currency. Yet again he applies the discipline of his military training to the International Relations discipline, leaving readers, as every scholarly book should, both inquisitive and enlightened.

International Relations, of course, was proposed a century ago amid the same kind of a military imbroglio Karim describes across East and South Asia today. As it transpired, E.H. Carr led a group of scholars not at all happy in placing all the tumultuous unfolding post-World War I developments inside such relevant extant fields as 'history' or 'diplomacy'. His classic *Twenty Years Crisis* pleaded for an 'inter-national relations' knowledge mode. Delivering it through *Politics Among Nations* (Knopf, 1948), Hans J. Morgenthau earned the 'Father of International Relations' sobriquet. The subtitle of this masterpiece, *The Struggle for Power and Peace*, projects the heart, mind, and soul of Karim's work.

Today's neo-liberalized setting challenges this. Our mindset is so riddled with free-trade agreements, market-access, and software technologies that our geopolitical sense may have waned too much. Karim's assessment of our own 'twenty years crisis' in this century reaffirms the grimness of a reality we cannot easily dismiss. But we must.

He covers 180-odd degrees of the hemisphere's circumference in as many pages. Unlike many others exploring South China Sea dynamics, Karim treats this zone as one 'tree' in a geopolitical game whose 'forest' matters immensely more: not just China, nor too the littoral countries, but those, like the United States, with calculations strategic enough

to rock the boat. He offers a blueprint to unwrap concurrent complications to future diplomats (note his title's suffix: 'in the Coming Decades'). Unbeknownst to him, he also leaves a tidy IR101 textbook for his IUB Business School students to wrangle with.

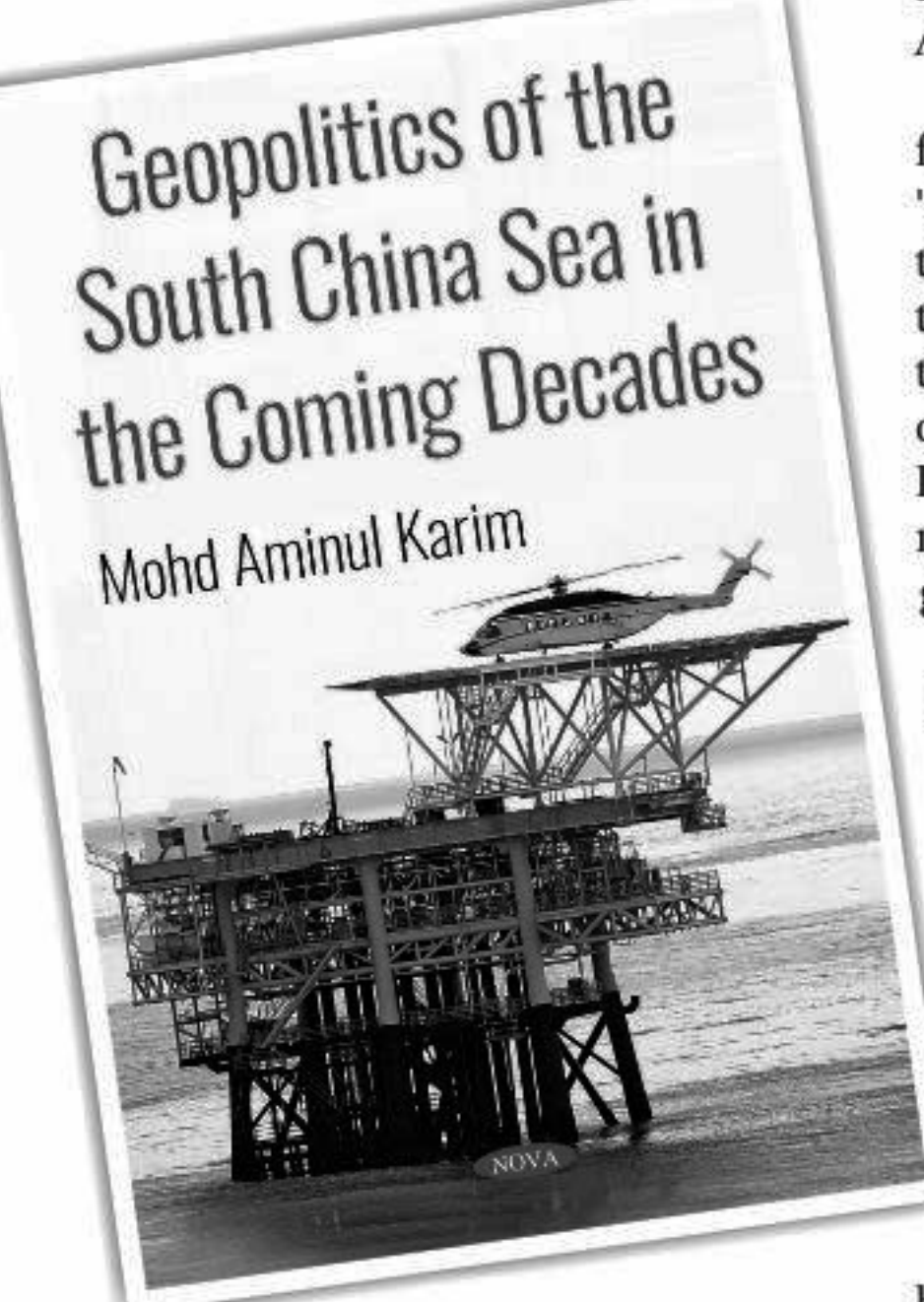
His first three chapters describe, in chronological order, his investigative subject, the book's organization, and the IR theories needed to navigate those dynamics. In chapters 4, 5, and 6 we see the shape and size of his 'forest': China-based intricacies, their maritime spillovers, and why controlling the hitherto nondescript South China Sea (hardly the Mackinder heartland, or the Cold War Iron Curtain), helps usurp half the world (only the Atlantic zone is spared his scrutiny). Appraising other countries impacted by the Dragon's outreach, Karim gives India the pride of place, in Chapter 8, followed in Chapter 10 by the directly agitated ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) members. Chapters 9 and 11 connect the dots of chapters 8 and 10 with legal, historical, and policy discussions, leaving Chapter 12 for budding diplomats/scholars/students to ponder various future 'scenarios.'

Those diplomats, scholars, and particularly extant students (future policy-makers), should note: not a beat comes unannounced. Very much like a military parade, every foot-soldier (Karim's 'trees') falls into place. Coherence and comprehensiveness characterize the book.

Yet, the metaphorical seat of 'deep learning' lies in the substance. Amid the deluge of 'South China Sea' description, explanation, and references today (in articles, books, media, and so forth), Karim vibrantly discusses the East China Sea controversy and the forthcoming Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) battlefield. Once completed, China's island-

building project cannot but force Japan to lock tighter horns with China over East China Sea claims.

Notwithstanding, President Donald J. Trump bailed both countries out with his tariffs. China is fighting back, Japan fears 'collateral damage,' and both decided to join hands. Shifting priorities to local arrangements over strategic safeguards with the United States



and the rest of Asia, their October 2018 détente underscores the merits of looking a gift-horse in the mouth. Karim senses the right battle, but neglects one constituent component entirely.

Swinging south, as it must, the book again ends up merely surfing across Australia instead of sifting into the nitty-gritty details. More attention is paid ASEAN members and India than an Australia battling between China, its top trading partner and increasing source of

migrants, and the United States, its post-World War II patron. With only one mention of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Karim's IPR elevation identifies a long-term rival, the United States, a pacified neighbor, Japan, a short-term concern, India, and a crucial Australia left too limp. That is an intellectual gold mine, if the General has any more ink left in his quill, comparing Japan's and India's Chinese rapprochement, or Australia's possible balancer role.

In admiral clothing, our General fittingly informs us of future naval 'flash-points.' He dots Asia's rim, from the Korean peninsula to Africa, through the South China Sea, Australia's north, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea, obviously overlapping China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI). Dynamics invoked here may be too strong to ignore in future geopolitics.

Karim might also rethink, in a next book, how more mileage can be gotten out of the hegemonic stability theory (HST). He identifies on only one of its two explanatory theses in Chapter 3: the necessary condition of world leadership, based on military might. Robert Gilpin, who laid out that theory to explain leadership-changes, also emphasized leadership's sufficient conditions: economic and technical resources. Demonstrating his argument that foreign direct investment served as the vehicle of U.S. hegemony, Gilpin actually emphasized this thesis more than military power. Karim's geopolitical study could do likewise: let China's sufficient leadership conditions (the BRI network) complement his geopolitical configurations.

As a BRI flagship, China's island-construction project alerts us how South China Sea, Hambantota, Gwador, and Djibouti, among other BRI recipient stations, may resemble for China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century what Gibraltar, Colombo,

Singapore, and Hong Kong did for 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain: outposts to 'rule the waves,' raising soft-power (trade and investment) to at least the geopolitical hard-power level. Since counterpart U.S. world leadership outposts, like the Normandy invasion, Midway, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, were/are all military, China's 21<sup>st</sup> Century power-rivalry paints a different evolutionary picture than the 20<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. case.

The farther back we go, the clearer our contours become of China's possible future hegemony being different to what we know. It is, first, the only repeat world leader, using, secondly, more soft power than hard, mobilizing, thirdly, naval over land or aerial capabilities, and, finally, depicting war-averseness far more than war-cultivation. These were evident in China's 2nd Century BCE Great Silk Route, and its 14th Century Indian Ocean suzerainty under Admiral Zheng He, who, curiously, was China's only Muslim admiral: his fleets reached the Americas just after his 1433 death, still half a century before Christopher Columbus (whose sea-routes were brought back from nowhere else but China by the likes of Marco Polo).

As he writes his next books, Karim might heed the wisdom of another military don, also addressing the coming decades: "War is not an independent phenomenon," Claus von Clausewitz noted from Napoleon Bonaparte's ill-planned expansion. It must also include "a continuation of politics by other means." Producing more polished future diplomats (and current students) to deal with Karim's favorite subject and top concern needs Clausewitz's dialectics.

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