

FICTION

Grace

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

WOMEN'S REHABILITATION CENTRE, DHANMONDI, 29TH DECEMBER, 1971
Gabriella is a 40-year-old obstetrician-gynaecologist from Australia, a godsend for the violated women spat out by the nine-month long bloody war of Bangladesh. She is a tall woman, almost like a lean pillar. Her hair is long and blond, caressed with dark streaks.

Her profession has exposed her to extreme degrees of cruelty, and she has always been an expert at easing her sorrow by the fact that she plays a role in repairing the women—helping in abortions, stitching up the vaginal wounds, waging war against the infections that trouble the affected females' genitals. It is as though the fact is an ointment to the grief that causes her pain when she witnesses the violated women's sufferings.

"Please take off your Burkha," Gabriella orders Sushmita.

Her assistant, Manzoor, translates it for Sushmita. "Madam, apnar Burkha ta khulen. Daktar bolechen."

Gabriella is not taken aback by the hideousness of her presentation. It's because she is used to seeing the women of war in their grim forms, the hideousness being mutual. The forest of thick, tangled hair, the bite marks running downhill from her nose to her collarbone, the shirt and lungi soiled and torn at places, the swollen belly with a baby swimming inside, her skin bearing evident signs of injuries, coated with layers of dark substance, possibly soot.

It's hard to guess Sushmita's age with the pregnancy. Gabriella assumes she is a teenager. Sushmita wears a teal gown, the same colour as Gabriella's gloves, and spreads her leg as Manzoor translates whatever instruction Gabriella gives. She lifts up a microscope and holds it under a giant, mechanical eye attached to a handle, just above Sushmita. She examines her swollen and bayoneted breasts, her swollen and bayoneted vagina. She applies antiseptic medicine all over her wounds in silence, her mask hiding her inquisitive and wincing facial expression, rendering her a glassy robot just doing its job. The examination, the application of antiseptic, and giving advice on treating the wounds later on are part of a monotonous ritual for Gabriella.

— "So where did you come from?"

— "Cantonment."

— "Age?"

— "17."

— "Where is your family?"

— "I don't know."

— "Did you visit your home before coming here?"

— "No. The government people brought many of us here in their trucks from the Cantonment."

— "Do you wish to call your family?"

— "No."



PHOTO SOURCE: KAZI ABDUL BASET

Gabriella knows how the conversations with such patients proceed. Manzoor does too, after all, he is the bridge through which the languages travel and meet each other. Besides the repetition of her job, she has to embrace the repetition of such conversations as well. She has seen how some of the victims were received by their families with open arms. She has seen how some of them were ostracized. She has seen how the women had many battles to fight, how the liberation of the country meant very little for them. She couldn't wrap her head around the fact that the deeply rooted misogynistic and patriarchal perception made the victims powerless, hacking at their bones until they became powdered.

It turns out that Sushmita is seven months pregnant.

— "Are you willing to keep it? It's very dangerous to abort it now. You can give birth and put the baby up for adoption. There are many foreigners willing to adopt the babies born here."

Sushmita doesn't know where her parents are. Have they fled to Sylhet? Do they still polish shoes at the Railway Station? For a moment, she thinks of making an attempt to find them at the Kamalapur Railway Station, where they used to live. She doesn't even know whether they are alive. And even if they are alive, she doesn't feel it right to show her face before

them. The last time she saw them they were begging the Pakistani soldiers to kill them instead of defiling their daughter. It was the black night of 25TH March. They were forced to see the act playing out right in front of their eyes. At one point, Sushmita was hit by a bayonet and fell unconscious.

She suppresses the thought of finding them, gulping it, hoping it never floats up again.

A Hindu girl violated at the hands of Muslim soldiers. What a disgrace. The notion hovers above her all the time like an evil bird warding off the peace she deserves.

Sushmita stands under a running shower—hot and long. She crosses her hands over herself and recalls the days of captivity. She tries hard to forget those days but the bruises on her skin, the bite marks of the predators, and the bayonet-inflicted injuries keep her eyes open to replay the days in the camp, not allowing them to close, to forget. It's almost involuntary. She thinks of one of the fellow captives, with whom she grew quite friendly during the period of captivity. Bijoya. She was 15. When the Mukti Bahini rescued them from the Cantonment, her brother clutched her in a hug, breaking into tears. Her brother was in the Mukti Bahini. She remembers how seeing Bijoya so happy locked in her brother's embrace saddened her. She has been fiddling with the thought of her parents ever since. If they get to know that she is here in Dhanmondi, will they

come to pick her up? Or would her theories of estrangement turn out to be true? Many questions crowding Sushmita's mind never end.

Sushmita is asked to meet Dr. Gabriella since a list of adoption is to be made for the Christian missionaries that are helping in arranging international adoptions.

— "Do you want to keep the baby after its birth? We need to hear your decision soon."

— "I don't think I will."

— "Alright. Fill out the form. Sign here."

5TH JANUARY, 1972

Gabriella is giving a lecture to the former captives on taking care of their damaged organs; the things they are allowed to do, the things they aren't allowed to do. Manzoor, of course, is translating her words. While the lecture continues, thin lines of water and blood run down Sushmita's legs, soaking her white sari and covering the mosaic floor. She needs an emergency C-section.

A crying baby is taken out of Sushmita's womb. It is a girl. She is longing to see her mother's face. She is longing for the motherly warmth she deserves. But Sushmita is no more. Her mouth is gaping, her eyes open and fixed at the direction of the door. So for the time being, Gabriella holds the baby delicately, her eyes welled up, baby-talking with the little crying machine wrapped in pink cloth.

Sushmita's phantom kisses the baby on

the forehead, caresses its little fingers and toes, then it shoots towards the ceiling of the OT, flying out of the Rehabilitation centre, out of Dhaka, out of Bangladesh, into the space, where the souls of the dead welcome her with flowers as celestial bodies shine in the background. Her parents aren't there, among the souls of the dead. They are indeed alive. On the earth.

This is the first time Gabriella has observed a mother's death during delivery in this war-affected country. The grief of the moment overwhelms her, holds her senses under its clutch. She feels a sudden urge to protect the screeching baby. The baby with soft, pink skin, a pillowy appearance, a tender innocence, a brutal origin, and motherless first moments. It is as if an unseen hand has set the dormant mother inside her free. Although she could stay stress-free once the baby was sent to the missionary for an international adoption, the gravity of the moment holds her still, fixates her on the subconscious decision to adopt the baby, unplanned. Gabriella has never thought of getting a baby until now. Perhaps, it was the emotional vulnerability of the moment that hung in the air. Perhaps, it was the tragedy tied to the baby's birth. Perhaps, it was the innocence of a baby born of violence.

She knows the baby will fly to Canada when it finds its Canadian parents within a month or two. She knows it is destined for a good life. She knows she doesn't have to worry about its safety. But still, she swims in the strangeness of emotions, in their unpredictability. She feels vulnerable with the baby held in her arms. She thinks it's a delicate bird, meant to be touched lightly so that its bones don't snap. Its rhythmic and shrill cries make Gabriella want to cry her heart out, set her tears free, like a dam breaking, flooding the valleys below. Emotions indeed are strange. They make Gabriella take a decision in the spur of the moment. A decision that is linked with someone she didn't know well. A decision that ties her to a war-torn country.

After a long while, when the baby stops crying and holds Gabriella's index finger lightly, she names her Grace, registers it in the diary, closes Sushmita's eyes, and puts a tick on the box that reads, "Adopted." Then she jots down her personal information on an appropriate paper.

"Ma'am, are you adopting the baby?" Manzoor asks.

She faces towards Manzoor, Grace in her arms. Tears run down her cheeks. A smile lights up her face.

"You are safe with me, little Grace."

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REVIEWS

Azfar Hussain's *Dorshonakkhyan*: Materialist Philosophy

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REVIEWED BY HASAN AL ZAYED

In Hegelian philosophy, the dialectical relation between appearance and reality is an important relationship. Marx brought this philosophical concept to bear upon the concrete world of contestation and exploitation, explaining how what appears is underwritten by something more complex and systemic. As one reads Azfar Hussain's *Dorshonakkhyan*, one is obliged to take into account the significance of the relation between the book's philosophical/aphoristic form and its compelling political content. The short meditative paragraphs that communicate abstract ideas are loaded with implicit and explicit discussions on social inequalities. The quasi-theological contemplations reflecting on existence are vignettes under whose frames lark penetrating anti-colonial critiques that simultaneously alert readers about the failures of western positivistic thought and about our own inability to inhabit a radical space when we confront colonial knowledge and power. Azfar Hussain's *Dorshonakkhyan* is not simply another mundane work hiding behind a shiny book cover; it is one of the finest specimens of philosophical thought in Bangla language which solicits us with its political content. Anyone interested in theory and criticism will find this book both provocative and worthy of attention.

Divided into eight chapters that explore eight different concepts, Hussain's micronarratives engage with trivial and commonplace materials/conceptual things like language, silence, place, map, soap, narrative, smell and dot to show how these familiar things/ideas exist as complex symbols in an overdetermined world. Most chapters begin with deep philosophical meditations and end with poetry, connecting philosophical thoughts with aesthetic experience. One of the clear projects of the book is to undermine the line of demarcation between philosophy, politics and aesthetics.

Dorshonakkhyan's restless navigation between different disciplines and genres is an attempt to undo the rigid disciplinary boundaries we strictly follow and fetishize. Every chapter of this book is an interdisciplinary take on commonplace but

deeply significant things. Poetry, mathematics, theology, ethics, politics, fiction, linguistics exist in this work as mutually constitutive concepts, in conversation with each other. Despite *Dorshonakkhyan*'s formal and thematic interdisciplinarity, however, what constitutes the ideological core of the book is revolutionary politics. *Dorshonakkhyan* enacts not only a political economy but also a political philosophy and suggests that the purpose of knowledge is not only to critique oppression and inequality but also to resist them.

Take, for instance, its first chapter titled 'Bhasha' (language). This chapter begins with two epigraphs on the question of language: one by Marx (and Engels) and the other by Gramsci. The first micronarrative alerts us about the difficulty of finding answers to some of the most fundamental questions about language. What is language? What is its abode? What are its destinations and limits? These questions are difficult to answer because neither history nor reality accords us enough clarity to understand the abstract truth of language's being. Questions about the being of language, Azfar Hussain tells us, do not need to be approached from a singular direction. One can also begin from the premise of language's social being: how language operates in society. What follows from this philosophical premise is the political economic understanding that language's existence in society is mediated by production relations.

'Language,' writes Azfar Hussain, 'comes steeped in the dirt of production relations.' This is how the philosophical query into the being of language turns into a historical materialist interpretation of the existence of language—an interpretation that tells us that the being of the language cannot be understood from a purely philosophical standpoint. One cannot hollow out history and material life from language and seek to posit it as an abstract concept unscaathed by either life or time. As Azfar Hussain reminds us, language exists as a mediator but that

mediation itself is historically and socially mediated. Linguistic mediation, in that sense, is a tripartite mediation between 'the self and consciousness, between consciousness and the material world, and between material world and the self.' From this philosophical premise, the narratives then spill into other dimensions of language's existence, discussing how language both conceals and reveals class-race-gender-national struggles. The chapter on language ends with an excellent translation of the Spanish poet, Vicente Aleixandre's



poem 'Después del amor,'—a poem that explores the relation between language and the body. Language, after all, is an embodied expression, existing in relation to other material and immaterial sites that dialectically relate to it and interact with it.

One of the most unusual chapters of this book is an autobiographical meditation titled

'Alkhhyan' (narrative). In it, the author recounts how a day-long trip to listen to a lecture by French deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida turned into a harrowing experience of witnessing intellectual evasiveness. Derrida's four-hour long discussion on typewriter ribbon and ink, we are told, is a classic example of how alienated intellectuals cover the actually existing injustices through surfeit of words and language games. Those who can powerfully employ narratives themselves are often oblivious to the consequences of their intellectual apathy. The plain truth about human suffering—racial, colonial, gender, sexual, and class oppressions carried out by economically and politically powerful people against the less powerful ones—appear vague and equivocal because intellectuals lose sight of concrete lived experience. Azfar Hussain draws attention to intellectual evasiveness through this personal narrative, reminding us that seduction of abstract ideas led postmodernist and post-structuralist thinkers towards a self-referential textual politics which failed to create a better world.

The other chapters, much like the ones mentioned here, are also intricately composed. They discuss a whole range of philosophical and political issues, from the Cabbalist concept of words and articulations to the colonial/racial politics of soap and purification. Many of these micronarratives are insightful and politically charged, while a few others, as is supposed to happen in a book like this one, do not have the same level of intensity and finesse. The chapter on smell is not only short but also relatively less meticulous, while almost every other chapter is penetrating and incisive. What binds all these narratives together is a powerful critique of various forms of oppressions that exist today. *Dorshonakkhyan*'s premise is unmistakably Marxian, although stylistically it follows an eclectic path, combining short narratives with poetic, autobiographical and fictional accounts.

Besides its historical materialist philosophy, the true achievement of the book is its language. Written in crisp and clear prose, *Dorshonakkhyan*'s

rigor comes as much from its thematic content as it does from its language. Although philosophical, Azfar Hussain's book is never dull because of his captivating prose that pulsates and changes its cadence according to its subject matter. Very few people writing in Bangla can muster such powerful prose which transmits the author's emotion into the reader, communicating at a level rarely seen in case of theory and philosophy. When the fashion among theorists is to hide behind their language, Azfar Hussain chooses directness and simplicity over opacity; but what is remarkable is that he does so with a poet's creativity and liveliness, which makes reading his work an engaging enterprise.

Those who have been following the author for a long time will find some of these micronarratives familiar. As is acknowledged in the book's preface, five of the eight narratives were published almost a decade ago when the author was simultaneously writing for an English daily a longer series of narratives titled 'Micronarratives.' Most of the chapters included in the current book were printed in a daily newspaper published in Bangla. In that sense, the book's subject matter is not entirely new. Despite some people's familiarity with the book's thematic content, we need to feel excited by *Dorshonakkhyan*'s arrival amidst us because this book's significance far outweighs our familiarity with it. We ought to celebrate every time a good book is published because every good book is a reminder of our potential. In an era of darkness when both knowledge and philosophy are under assault—when we demur the absence of decency and courage—Azfar Hussain's *Dorshonakkhyan* gives us hope. This 151-page book has more to offer than what may appear at the beginning, when we set our sight on it. Reading it will challenge our understanding of the world. Not many books published today can aspire to do so.

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