

NAH!

A Note on the Na Movement in Bangladeshi Literature

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I am sure it was sometime in 1965 that a classmate at St. Gregory's, Muhammad Ali Rume, piqued my curiosity by describing a new movement in letters launched by some friends of his elder brother. Rume would go on to become a hotshot banker but at fifteen he prided himself on his literary acumen. He told me that his brother's friends were Nihilists and had launched a little magazine titled, simply, *Na* (Bangla for "No"). Besides the snappy negativity of the title, the magazine had a policy to make

each appearance in a unique, unpredictably unconventional format. The second issue, just out, was printed on brown wrapping paper, measured five and a half inches across and at least half a yard long, with covers cut out of jute sacking.

On my way home from school I picked up a copy from a newsagent who stocked out-of-the-way publications. The strange format gave me a little thrill. The contents matchingly included modernist sketches and visually arresting, Apollinaire-inspired concrete poems, charmingly dubbed "*ch-hobita*" by their perpetrator, Rabiul Husain (our Rabiul bhai). The copy remained in my possession for years before disappearing from my library. I did not see any other issue of the magazine until recently, when I decided to write something about the *Na* Movement. I badgered Rabiul bhai until he fished out all four issues of the magazine from his collection and made photocopies for me. As a top-up he handed me a copy of an article in Bengali that he had written as a retrospective account of the movement.

As a general rule for dealing with writers and movements I take into consideration three contexts, biographical, literary, and historical. *Na* was launched by a group of architecture students at BUET. They were all young men, a detail of sociological interest that needs to be highlighted in this post-Feminist age. All the Twentieth-century literary movements and coteries that I can think of in this country and across the bor-

were anxious to have their children (read "sons") well settled, preferably in the Civil Service, or at least in one of the respectable professions. Architecture as a profession was still in its infancy in this country, which must have added a touch of ambiguity to the status of those studying it. Dabbling in "modern poetry" was as bad as being anti-social. The *Na*-sayers were quite willing to court such notoriety, in the good old modernist/Decadent tradition of *Epater la bourgeoisie*.

Bangladeshi poetry had already acquired a High Modernist slant in the work of Shamsur Rahman, Syed Shamsul Huq and Shaheed Quaderi, a surrealist edge in Abdul Mannan Syed, and a brash rebelliousness in Rafiq Azad; the last two were members of the short-lived Sad Generation, which in a manifesto in English proclaimed their existential angst. And in Calcutta the Hungry Generation declared war on the literary conventions of their forebears.

Unlike the established Bangladeshi modernists, the *Na* poets eschewed traditional forms and advocated a freewheeling style that incorporated so-called obscenities. There were examples of new modes like concrete poetry, experimental prose, and the original intention was to promote all genres. The grand design was to remain unrealized, no doubt for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the group as a whole ran out of steam; more plausibly, political events took a dramatic turn and this led to the

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der were all-male affairs. With the number of women writers growing every day, one hopes that any movement in future will be a mixed-gender one. Of course, I should add that by the look of things literary movements seem to be things of the past.

University students by and large look forward to an upwardly mobile future, but they are also liable to suffer stresses and strains if there is a disjunction between their predilections on the one hand, and the wishes and values of parents and the social establishment on the other. The conflict, however, can be beneficial and productive in the creative sphere. One could cite numerous examples from the sixties, in Bengali and in western literature.

The Establishment in our sixties meant Ayub Khan and his cohorts and their "controlled democracy," with Opposition leaders flitting in and out of jail. Parents

movement's superannuation. The launch of the six-point movement in 1966 revitalized the Opposition, and the fiasco of the Agartala Conspiracy Case put the government on the back foot. Released from custody, Bangabandhu led a struggle for autonomy that, with the Army crackdown, turned overnight into a war of independence. Now it was no longer enough to say *Na!* One had to say yes to a lot of new values, even if they eluded realization.

The literary scene altered after independence. Little magazines lost their vibrancy and literary supplements of newspapers became the major forum for writers. New generations of poets came into prominence – Nirmalendu Goon and Abul Hasan, Rudra, Taslima Nasreen, and younger ones in growing numbers – but no one was interested in launching a new movement or school with a clearly articulated

