

100 YEARS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA

Reflections on DU convocation speeches: Part I

FAKRUL ALAM

One of the best ways to learn about the past 100 years of the University of Dhaka, for those proud of its history and truly concerned about its future, is to read the two volumes of *Dhaka University: The Convocation Speeches, Volume 1: 1923-1946* and *Volume 2: 1948-1970* (Dhaka University Publications, 1989). Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury compiled these volumes thoughtfully, as well as diligently, editing and then seeing them lovingly into print almost on his own over 30 years ago. Anyone who sifts through the speeches delivered by successive Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors, and Convocation Speakers almost annually, and ponders on why there is no third volume to this important undertaking, will have a reasonably good perspective on the inherently political nature of this unique institution, the advantages that it derived from its political heritage, as well as the limitations it has had to suffer from politicking that is inherently indifferent to humanistic higher education and bent on self-satisfaction. One will be able to also understand why, in this centenary year, we have abundant reasons not only to take pride in the institution's past, but also reflect soberly over the problems it will forever have to deal with, as new dispensations replace old ones.

As Professor Choudhury points out in his introduction, the convocation speeches "recorded some of the ideas and views which shaped the University of Dhaka and were themselves influenced by the working of the university itself". As Professor Choudhury observes, "To read these speeches chronologically is to see history unfolding itself, physically". What follows in the rest of this piece is a kind of overview of some of the noteworthy speeches of the first volume—noteworthy, let me emphasise, in light of the nation's as well as the university's history. My overview is meant to be representative and not exhaustive.

In his inaugural Chancellor's speech, Lord Lytton (1946-1947) declared that he felt that the already two-year-old university was "Dacca's greatest possession" and destined to "do more than anything else to increase and spread the fame of Dacca beyond the limits of Bengal or even of India itself". He predicts that in no time at all will people find that the "Dacca-trained student is a superior man" (we now know there were two women who were amongst the first batch of students of the institution!). And he provides the *raison d'être* of the university: it was a "splendid Imperial compensation" for the annulment of the partition of Bengal offered to the predominantly Muslim population of the region. The university that resulted, he emphasises, though designed to be the "chief center of Muhammadan learning" in this part of undivided India, was also meant to be secular and "a seat of learning and not a mere employment agency", a place that would enable its students to ultimately take charge of their own and the region's destinies.

Let me now move to 1925 and Vice-Chancellor PJ Hartog's parting speech. An able administrator and educator, Hartog had by this time served the university well for four years. As he prepared to leave it, he felt happy that he had not merely overseen the expansion of the university's physical facilities and its growth as a centre of learning but also as the place he had envisioned it to be: "a great university uniting the

science and culture of the East and the West and achieving new things by a new synthesis". Hartog goes on to stress that the institution he had nurtured till it was ready to walk upright was the positive result of the union of "corporate action and common endeavor and high ideals, not depending on any one man for its continuance because it had been implanted in many minds and hearts".

Fast forward to VC AF Rahman's speech in 1934, where he stresses that though the province has been suffering economically, "the university has maintained its high academic standard", "undisturbed" too "by any political movement" affecting the subcontinent because of the burgeoning anti-British campaigns. Among its noteworthy achievements, he emphasises, is the increase in the number of women students—23 at this time! He stresses that the time has come

political, social, and communal—for it was "a storm-racked world" that graduates would be stepping into in the era of the Second World War and Partition. The university and the city had recently witnessed "communal disturbances", no doubt brought about in response to the discord of the pre-Partition period in the subcontinent. But the Diwan believes that DU graduates have been equipped to step out of them to build their country anew.

The last convocation speech I would like to use before concluding is by Professor Mahmud Hasan, the VC who supervised the University of Dhaka's transition from a colonial institution to one in a country that had just achieved independence. But instead of commenting on it, let me end by quoting at some length his 1946 overview of the first 25 years of the University of Dhaka:



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to recruit women faculty members. He adds that in a time of growing tension, the university must play its part in "softening the bitterness that unfortunately exists" between India's two major religious communities.

Fast forward once more to the 1936 speech by Vice-Chancellor RC Majumdar, a distinguished historian of India. He is proud to note how the university's graduates have gone on to become members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. Professor Majumdar, like all VCs before or after him, reports on the expansion of the university in terms of student strength, faculty recruitment, and infrastructure, but points out too why it needs generous donations from East Bengalis and has to supplement money received from the government and student fees thus. Another area of concern for him is to see that the powers that are in Bengal do not interfere in the university's workings overmuch and that they take into account "the considered views of the university" in their actions.

One of the best speeches by a Convocation Speaker Professor Choudhury has been able to retrieve is that by Mirza K Ismail, the Diwan of Hyderabad. Speaking in 1942, 20 years after the establishment of the university, Ismail recalls that the institution was to be a place for students to pursue "a strenuous life of high endeavor and great ideals", made distinctive by "distinguished teachers [who] would develop a quiet but far-framed intellectual center". Ismail is aware of the problems in the way—financial,

"Has the University fulfilled the purposes for which it was established? Perfection is not attainable in the world, and the ideal can never be realized fully. The University of Dacca has made mistakes and it has not always made the best use of its opportunities; but on the whole, it has undoubtedly done its work satisfactorily, and education has taken a great step forward in East Bengal and there is a renaissance and re-awakening among Muslims of Bengal... This University is the agency through which East Bengal particularly... will benefit and progress, and I appeal [to the British government]... and to people of east Bengal, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc... to give it every help, facility and encouragement".

Words spoken in 1946 but still in so many ways relevant for all of us delighting in the university's birth centenary—pandemic or no pandemic—proud about its past and concerned about its future. Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury surely deserves our thanks for compiling on his own in 1989 this and the other volume of the convocation speeches covering the period from the founding of the university to 1970. The university press people too deserve our thanks for printing these volumes, recording important aspects of the institution's history.

And why is there not a third volume of convocation speeches? Thereby hangs a tale!

Fakrul Alam is UGC Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

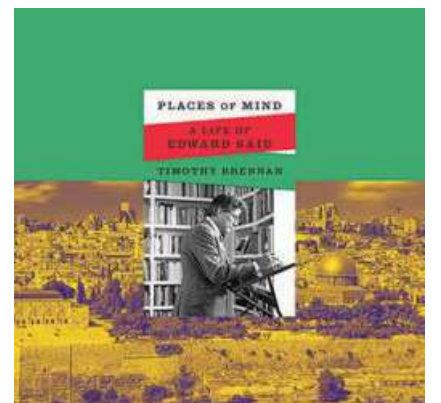
On Edward Said: Different shades of an intellectual

ISRAR HASAN

Edward Said is one of only a handful of intellectuals who can truly be said to have educated and influenced multiple generations on the Palestinian cause and the different prisms of thought through which we now look at literature, art, and history. In many ways, we are the heirs of the man who popularised the term, "Orientalism"; a man who championed the voices and struggles of the Global South in the Anglo-American sphere. For the first time since his untimely passing in 2003, we have a fleshed out biography of Edward Said, one of 20th century's towering intellectuals.

Written by colleague and friend, Timothy Brennan, *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said* (Macmillan, 2021) is an intellectual biography. It maps out Said's life and his experiences from the British Mandate of Palestine to colonial Egypt to Israel to New York's Columbia University.

Born to a Palestinian-American couple in Jerusalem, Edward W Said always referred to himself as "Out of Place", a title he used for his 1999 memoir, which reads, in fine prose, like a novel. In this new account of his life, Brennan takes us to the lost cosmopolitanism of Said's Cairene childhood in the 1940s as the family crisscrossed between Jerusalem and Cairo, nudging shoulders with Armenians, Europeans, and Jews in a multicultural, Muslim Middle East. Said was an American citizen because of his father, Wadie, a US Army veteran. He had an ambivalent relationship with his domineering father and a "not very satisfactory" relationship with his sisters. His mother, Hilda Said, he states, was his



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

activism, led to seismic shifts in academic circles, with Said going head-to-head with intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre, Bernard Lewis, Sadiq Azm, and many others. Said reckons even with his own intellectual heroes, like the charismatic Charles Malik, the brilliant Lebanese statesman and one-time President of the United Nations General Assembly, from whom Said was inspired to write about the much misunderstood world of the "Orient", and yet someone he would later refer to as "the great negative intellectual lesson of my life". It was Malik who gave the green light to US interference in Lebanon perpetuating a series of conflicts that have engulfed the region ever since (notwithstanding the brutal massacres of Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli military and the Lebanese Maronite militia).

In *Places of Mind*, Brennan taps into a plethora of sources from Said's personal papers, which highlight the critic's soon-abandoned forays into the world of fiction. Engrossed in personal testimonies from Said's treasured array of admirers, family members, and critics, the book maps out the intellectual journey of a man who among many achievements will be remembered as the voice of Palestine. Brennan's prose is quick, easy to read, magnetic, and at the same time acting as a sequel to Said's brilliant memoir, *Out of Place* (Vintage Books, 1999). Said's dissatisfaction with the Oslo Accords—a series of "peace" negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government—is captured articulately, with the late critic's feelings on the bit of "venomous sarcasm designed to burn bridges" noted well. His opposition to the Oslo Accords saw his books banned in the West Bank and him being further marginalised by the Palestinian political establishment, alongside the fury with which the Zionist lobby came after him.

As a refugee who longed to go to the land of his birth, the place as an idea had forever permeated Said's work. Whether a place is geographical, or of the mind, or simply the intersection of the two, it is finely encapsulated in this biography capturing the complexities of an intellectual the Global South can gladly claim to be their own.

Israr Hasan is a contributor.

Born to a Palestinian-American couple in Jerusalem, Edward W Said always referred to himself as "Out of Place", a title he used for his 1999 memoir, which reads, in fine prose, like a novel.

"closest and most intimate companion". From 1951, Said found himself in America where he would remain a mainstay in the rigorous world of academia, and where he would cement his legacy as Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University.

Known as the founder of postcolonial studies, Said was credited for introducing literature from the non-western world, particularly Arabic literature from the likes of Tayeb Salih, Mahmoud Darwish, and Naguib Mahfouz to western audiences. It was Said's magnum opus, "Orientalism", in 1978 that challenged mainstream views on the colonised world having long been projected as barbaric and sensualised beings from the western lens. This, alongside his pro-Palestinian

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Where roses bloom in concrete

RASHA JAMEEL

Angie Thomas has done it again.

If you thought the unapologetically outspoken Starr Carter from *The Hate U Give* (Balzer + Bray, 2017) was a force to be reckoned with, it's time you met the man who raised her to be so: Maverick Carter.

Angie Thomas' latest release, *Concrete Rose* (Balzer + Bray, 2021), acts as a prequel to her 2017 bestseller which had featured Maverick's daughter Starr as the protagonist. *The Hate U Give* had introduced us to a black American teen struggling to find her identity in between two communities in the aftermath of a racially-motivated shooting of an innocent black child. In *Concrete Rose*, Thomas takes us on a bit of a trip down Maverick Carter's memory lane, exploring the Garden Heights neighborhood in the 1990s, as witnessed by a 17-year-old Mav, then-a gang runner for the King Lords.

The 360-page novel is divided into three sections: "Germination", "Growth", and "Dormancy". Maverick's story starts off on a considerably wholesome note with a neighborhood basketball game that Maverick and his friends from the

King Lords gang are participating in. It is here that Thomas deftly sets up Garden Heights' gang-run environment alongside Maverick's backstory as a long-term resident in the neighborhood. Written entirely from Maverick's point of view, the drug-running gangs, King Lords and Garden Disciples, are initially presented as a vital part of Garden Heights' community spirit in the young protagonist's eyes, easing the readers into the norms of a fictional world that's been heavily modeled, unfortunately, on the one we live in.

The dialogues exchanged between the characters largely makes use of African American vernacular slangs, which indicates a strong political move on Thomas' part. This is a black woman taking back the black slang language that is often culturally appropriated by non-black individuals via social media lingo and other avenues.

It is hard to detect the ominous sense of foreboding in the narrative early on, as Thomas manages to paint an uplifting image which gradually transitions into

one marred by violence. In its portrayal of damaged youth against the backdrop of a black American community, *Concrete Rose* breaks away from the stereotypes found in most YA novels written from white perspectives. You won't see a black teen predictably drowning their sorrows with the help of narcotics. Instead, Thomas offers some insightful social commentary by highlighting the plight of misguided and desperate black teens and children, forced to partake in illegal activities as gang-runners as a means to not only make ends meet, but ensure security in a violent environment.

At its heart, *Concrete Rose* is the polar opposite of *The Hate U Give*. Starr Carter's story was one of a full-fledged rebellion against systemic racism, while her father's is centered around personal growth and finding independence. The author never places Maverick on the mantle of a hero. Instead, our protagonist is an everyman with real problems regarding unplanned parenthood and family trauma, which motivates the reader to become all the more invested in such a tenderly-written

character.

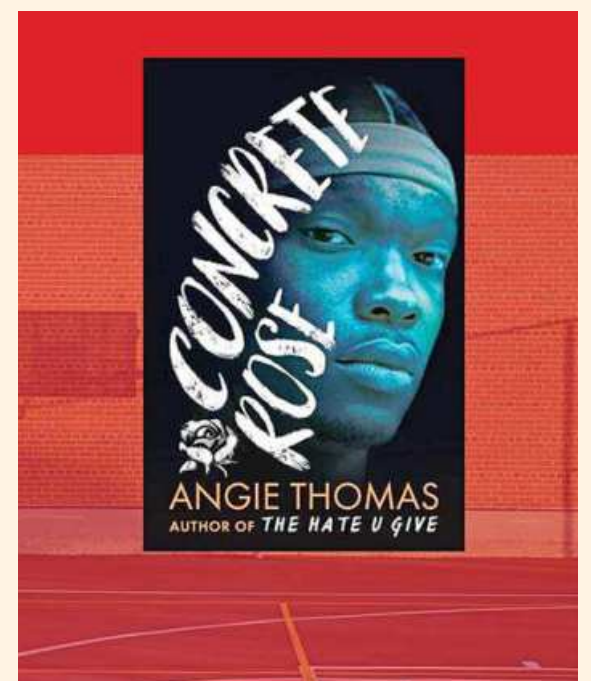
Maverick Carter's story is simultaneously rooted in both trauma and love. When push comes to shove, the 17-year-old finds himself at a crossroads trying to process both the death of a family member and his new responsibilities as a young father. The reader walks alongside him in his journey towards manhood, bearing witness to the difficulties associated with breaking out of oppressive societal norms and growing under the influence of a parent in criminal incarceration.

Did this book break my heart at certain moments? Yes.

Will I still recommend that you give it a read? Believe me when I tell you that the heartbreaks are worth it.

Rasha Jameel studies microbiology whilst pursuing her passion for writing. Reach her at rasha.jameel@outlook.com.

Angie Thomas's *Concrete Rose* (Balzer + Bray, 2021) is available at Omni Books, Dhanmondi.



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