

BOOKS REVIEW

# A Postcolonial Take on Literature in English and English Studies in Bangladesh

Fakrul Alam. Reading Literature in English and English Studies in Bangladesh

Postcolonial Perspectives. writers.ink, 2021.

REVIEWED BY AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN

In *Metaphor*, David Punter reads Chinua Achebe's postcolonial novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which draws upon Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1921) for its title, arguing that the centre is "responsible for the very social, political and cultural problems now being encountered in Africa, and perhaps globally" (117). While in Yeats the centre is synonymous with "innocence," Achebe's position as the colonised reconceptualises it to be the root of

all plights. The shift in perspective caused by colonial experience endows the postcolonial writer with a weapon to rework. It also alters and indeed subverts the ideologically coded colonial network of images and metaphors to write back to the centre. Theorised as "contrapuntal reading" by Edward Said, it is "a form of 'reading back' from the perspective of the colonised to show how submerged but crucial presence of the empire emerges in canonical texts" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, *Edward Said* 8). Martinique-Francophone poet Aimé Césaire's postcolonial take on *The Tempest* in his play *Une Tempête* (1969) is a good way of understanding how a creative writer can read back the canonical texts and destabilise canonicity and thus produce powerful narratives. Postcolonial standpoint then enables a writer or a critic to unsettle the "colonial straitjacket" (Dalrymple, 2005) which privileges the imperialist and colonialist gaze to exoticise and orientalise the colony and the colonised.

*Reading Literature in English and English Studies in Bangladesh: Postcolonial Perspectives* (hereafter *RLE*) by Fakrul Alam reveals the author's deep-seated interest in themes and issues with postcolonial overtone. Consisting of more than 500 pages, the recently published book includes an illuminating introduction which lays the perspective, as well as 25 essays, papers and reviews the author presented in conferences and wrote for journals or books. It addresses issues such as South Asian Literature, postcoloniality, transnationalism and the state of English language teaching in Bangladesh. The paperback collection dedicated to Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury, "a mentor for all seasons," builds on Alam's *Imperial Entanglements and Literatures in English* published in 2007 which negotiated the creative writing in English in the erstwhile colonies as well as discussed the literary outcome of Britain's colonial ventures and how they impacted the writing in English over the centuries (xv). *RLE* critiques the state of English language teaching in Bangladesh in the age of neo-globalization and

English as the language of "power" in "our apparently decolonized world" which continues to use it as "a valuable commodity" (xv).

The book is divided into four parts, each of them exploring particular postcolonial concerns. Part 1 entitled "Reading Literature Postcolonially" comprises eight essays including articles on Defoe, and his Crusoe, who Alam views as "a prototypical colonizer," and *A Passage to India*. Included in this part is a review "A Primer for Postcolonialism" (126-34) which discusses the significance of *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (1998) by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in the study of postcoloniality. Alam finds *Key Concepts* enormously important because it first traced the origins of some of the key ideas in the works of Fanon and emphasised the seminal role played by Said and later theorists like Bhabha and Spivak in stimulating postcolonial studies (7). In "Imagining South Asian Writing in English from Bangladesh" (135-51), the author negotiates the limitations that labels such as "Commonwealth writing," "Third World Literature," and "New Writings in English" pose. He opts for "South Asian Writing in English" as the umbrella term for creative writing produced in the geo-political region known as South characterised by a "shared history" based on "shared historical location" and "shared traditions and practices that regularly defy the diktat of national boundaries" (Sayantan Dasgupta qtd in Alam, 147). With a view to providing directions for the South Asian Writing in English, Alam refers to the works and scholarship of Bangladesh's foremost poet in the English language, Kaiser Haq, who is rooted in Bangladesh, but simultaneously takes part in trans-Indian subcontinent phenomenon, "a movement vitally involved with world literature for sustenance and growth" (148).

Part 2 entitled "Essays on a Few Major Writers" includes articles on R K Narayan, Achebe, Said, Joseph Conrad, as well as issues such as exile, cosmopolitanism, diasporic intellectual,

global intellectual and transnationalism, confronting Empire, and reading South Asian Fiction in English to-day. Alam is deeply indebted to Said and he puts it on record how the Palestinian-American scholar has been an "influence" on him, and how his works such as *Beginnings, Orientalism, The World, the Text and the Critic* and *Culture and Imperialism* continue to fascinate and provoke him. He shows how Said's "contrapuntal reading" is a powerful tool to resist the authority of the "Great Tradition" as signposted by F R Leavis (11). Said is important because he implied that students of culture and imperialism must juxtapose the canonical works of the western tradition with the works by writers from the colonies "to make them yield meaning pertinent to their world" (224).

In the chapter entitled "Confronting Empire Now" (297-99) Alam stresses how imperialism in its different manifestations is a living reality for the non-western world. He believes that postcolonial criticism can play a pivotal role in exposing and challenging neo-imperialist projects from the western powers, which are always on the lookout for cementing their strength "and fulfilling their appetites for markets." Alam draws readers' attention to several cases in the recent past to reveal how Bangladesh is vulnerable to imperial projects. He refers to the tactics deployed by the British Council to sell "British educational and linguistic interests" in the country, as well as the Rana Plaza tragedy of 2013 the roots of which were laid "in the insatiable appetite for cheap textiles in the western world." This is where our civil society can draw inspiration from Said and activists like Arundhati Roy whose "stance exposes graphically the network of interests that sustains empire and propels imperial interests perpetually" (299).

Part 3 "English Studies in Bangladesh in the age of Globalization" and Part 4 "Reading Some Great Writers Postcolonially" respectively include four and three essays. The main focus of Part 3 is a diagnosis of the contemporary pathetic state of English studies in

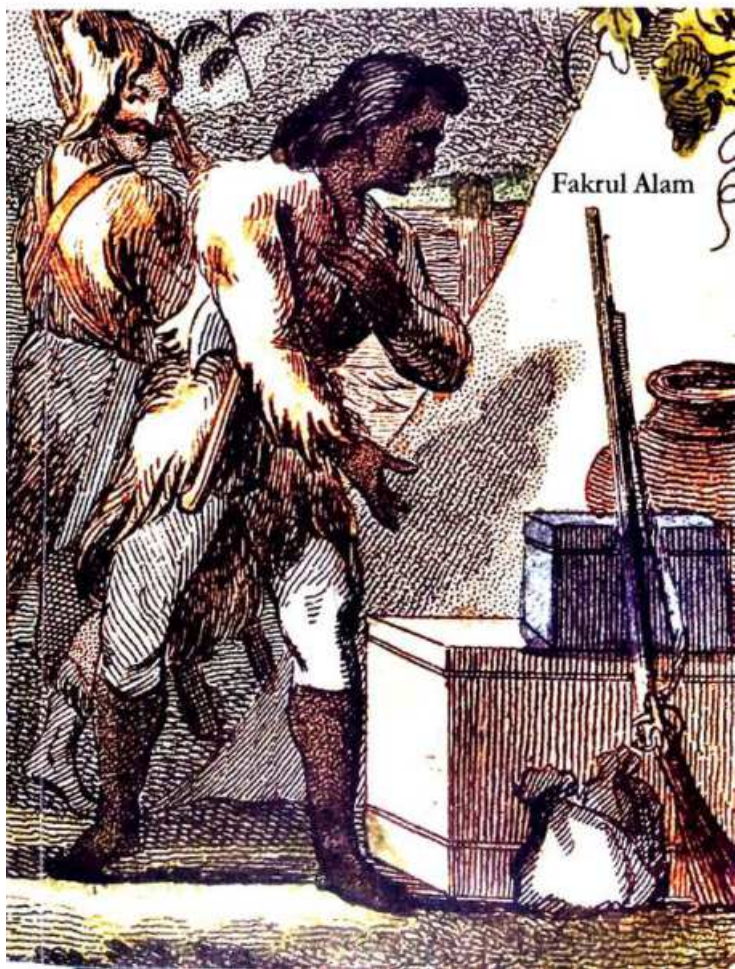
Bangladesh caused by the onslaught of "communicative language teaching" which literally drove away the age-old "grammar-translation method" from school curricula. Alam suggests an introduction of "appropriate English language pedagogy" for redressing the damage done over the years. "Shakespeare's Political World and Ours" (447-65) and "The Continuing Relevance of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*" (488-505) in Part 4 discuss how reading of the plays by the two most influential dramatists of the world from the perspective of Bangladesh's own history of power politics (25) can add new meanings to the plays. Thus *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar* appear in a new light to one familiar with the topsy-turvy history of the country — its glorious birth in 1971, the brutal killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, coups and counter coups to capture power — making its citizens anxious and uncertain about the country's future. (455). And Alam argues that Ibsen's play makes sense to Bangladesh in its unveiling of the unholy nexus of corrupt politicians and businessmen who can go to any extent to amass power and money. One may also add that extremely cunning political leaders like Peter Stockmann are to be found everywhere in Bangladesh and that encroachment of rivers and grabbing of forests and wetlands by the powerful is a contemporary reality.

*RLE* merits special significance not only because it offers a contrapuntal reading of complex postcolonial issues but also because it is scholarly without ever becoming pedantic. Alam's deep engagement with the subject and his lucid style make it an absorbing read. The book will be an invaluable source of reference for students, academics, researchers and general readers interested in postcolonial studies.

Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman is professor of English at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), Dhaka. He is the Chief Editor of *LitWrite Bangladesh*, the first peer-reviewed online literary journal in English of the country.



READING LITERATURE IN ENGLISH AND ENGLISH STUDIES IN BANGLADESH POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES



Fakrul Alam

## A Brief History of Silence: A Delicate Relationship between Risk and Beauty

Manu Dash. ISBN: 978-8194085799. Dhauli Books, 2019

REVIEWED BY MANOJ KUMAR PANDA

*A Brief History of Silence* (by Manu Dash) was an enjoyable read on my silent rooftop spanning a silent week. But as I sat on the silent table for a review, I sat amazed and brooding. The poet must have had a frightful toil, and it's not easy to write a poem on his silence by shifting, correcting, combining, constructing, expurgating, expunging and tasting words, phrases, images as well as the empty spaces between them to pen his dreams and intellect. And I wonder what is left for me to write more on it!

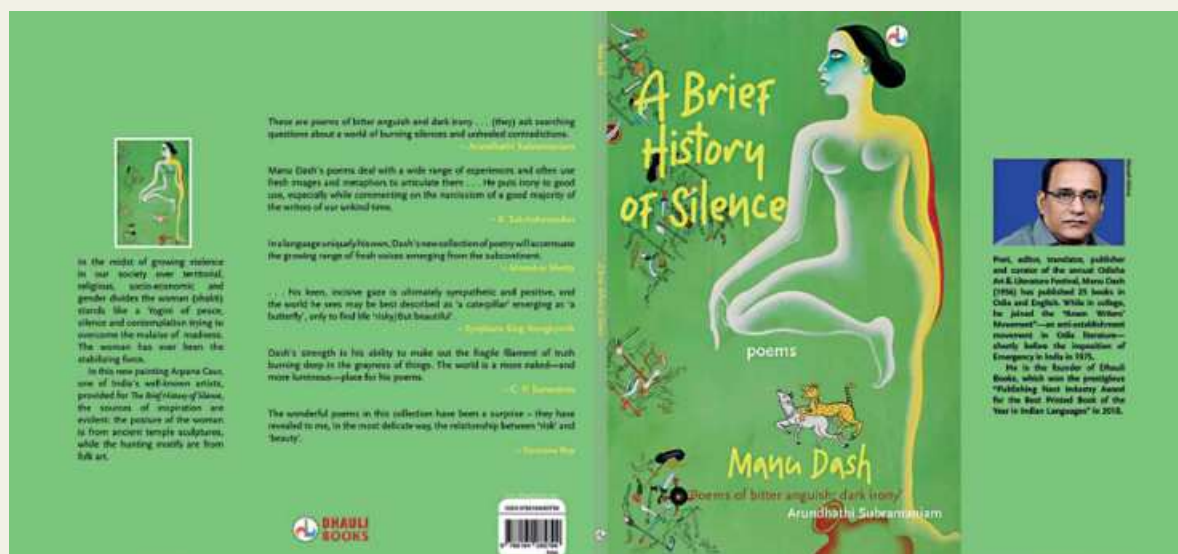
It is enough when one finds every single poem in this anthology is a vortex one has to pass through and return to it always; it is enough that poems are presented rather than described; enough that they appeal directly to the senses, more particularly to the sense of sight with the use of concrete visual images.

A poem by poem, though a few of them, citation is what it all needed here.

In his poem "Words," where "Words/Flap their wings/Before nesting/On her lips"; where "The beauty of words revealed less and concealed more "like the breast of a lady"; where "Words come and leave/Sleep and dance/Hurry on her lips./She is my aphasic daughter." Exquisitely sad, the poem crafted with magical intimacy of words and silences. One wonders if the poet presents here the dance of "Words"

or the dance of "Silences." Another very delicately crafted poem is "Diwali in a Cancer Ward," where a father waits haplessly "For the biopsy report/To arrive from Mumbai,/As an innocent victim craves/The verdict of the apex court." Elsewhere, the much publicised, legendary *Dana Majhi* is presented as "the cheerleader of grief," who has spread hunger into the world like "arabesque scroll"; and whose "tall daughter/Walking through the Tyburn scaffold." We may look at the poem, "Walking with a Corpse" as well. Quite a common scene in Odisha's village roads, where "He trudges mile after mile/Like King *Vikramaditya*,/Betal heavy on his shoulders," on "The camouflaged road ahead/Appears stubborn and cruel." Sad and introspective, yet without scruple, the poet "makes" poems straight out of a post mortem report. A splendid attempt to free oneself from the despair of time, that offers a clear vindication for life on Earth, a la in Odisha.

As we go further to "Folklore" we find childhood was free from demons and ghost when a "Grand mother died of diarrhea/Before father's marriage" and "Nights have turned into asylums." Dreams and nightmares, tinged with surrealism, defy interpretation many a time in Dash's poems. In "Alphabet of Silence" the silence is clearly heard in contemporary literary meets, where "The number of speakers/Was half



that of the listeners"; and where "The speakers clapped./The listeners sat/In stony silence." And still another, "For an ISO-Certified Poet' who has taken 'all the air, colour and space," would someday be questioned by posterity. "Why were these (his) books/Devoured by white ants?" We meet with bitter sarcasm when the poet's cousin, "a born liar," got "Sahitya Academi *Puraskar*./ For an acclaimed travelogue/ On places he has never visited." Or in "Postcard," a rare commodity now, "Words are faded bell-bottom/Peeping through/ An old wardrobe." Some artistically motivated

deviation in putting words and phrases as "foreground" to a poem are seen in ample. See, the poet asking his beloved to meet him at the terrace garden for black coffee, with no moon overhead, only to see her as an absolute "assassin." So also some defunctive use of words at places adds surplus beauty to his poems. For example: "Like the arrival of the first monsoon/Or menstruation/Banks have opened to the clients/After demonization." Or, for that matter, cyclone is "an unclaimed industry" in Odisha, that "breeds swarms of stories." The parallel use of "selling a kiss for a

price" in "Kiss" has a foregrounding effect as synonymical or antonymical relation of meaning between the expressions. Such phonological features one may bump at many a time in the anthology.

When a poet publishes his maiden venture at a later age, he is bound to be responsible and discreet. The range of subjects he could write with richness of details and with refined medium. The poet's perception of the pastness of the past and the presentness of the past could form a new combination out of variegated diverse experiences. His impersonality in art is visibly seen,

when he writes on the silent suffering and solitude of the oppressed, with sarcasm and empathy. Surrendering personal emotion to the emotion of art he writes passionately, where the poetic mind transmutes poems into a new artistic whole.

Barring some inconsequential adjectives and adverbials, and too many "Likes" (35 of them), many rich images and metaphors are at their splendid perfection, synthesized and assimilated in this anthology. A rousing collection of poems for our young poets and for posterity. Each poem bears the indelible thumb impression mark of the poet quite impressively, and to put in the words of poet K S Nongkynrih, "The world he sees may be best described as 'a caterpillar' emerging as 'a butterfly' only to find life 'risky/But beautiful'."

As you quote Pablo Neruda, "Let me speak to you as well with your syllables of silence," you need not, dear poet, look askance, for posterity have all the trust in your "unquiet dreams."

A word of absolute praise for Arpana Caur for the beautiful cover page art that depicts a sculpture like "Yogini of Peace" along with some folk materials.

A recipient of prestigious Sarala Purashkar, Manoj Kumar Panda was an acclaimed short story writer in Odia.