

REVISITING THE INHERITANCES OF BANGLADESH LIBERATION WAR

Between fiction and testimony

Once stories of sacrifices made and pain incurred for the country have been told, extolled and retold in lore about the liberation war, once the betrayal by compatriots have been mourned, what remains is examining the complex legacies of the war.

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Literature in Bangladesh about the war is in the nature of memorials to 1971, a thread between the dead and the living, a reminder of the absent as having once been, a mark of the present, of rupture and continuity. Memoirs and fiction pave the way for a narration of betrayal, resistance, sacrifice and disillusionment. What lessons nations draw from violence and war.

My heart was stuck in my throat. I asked her:

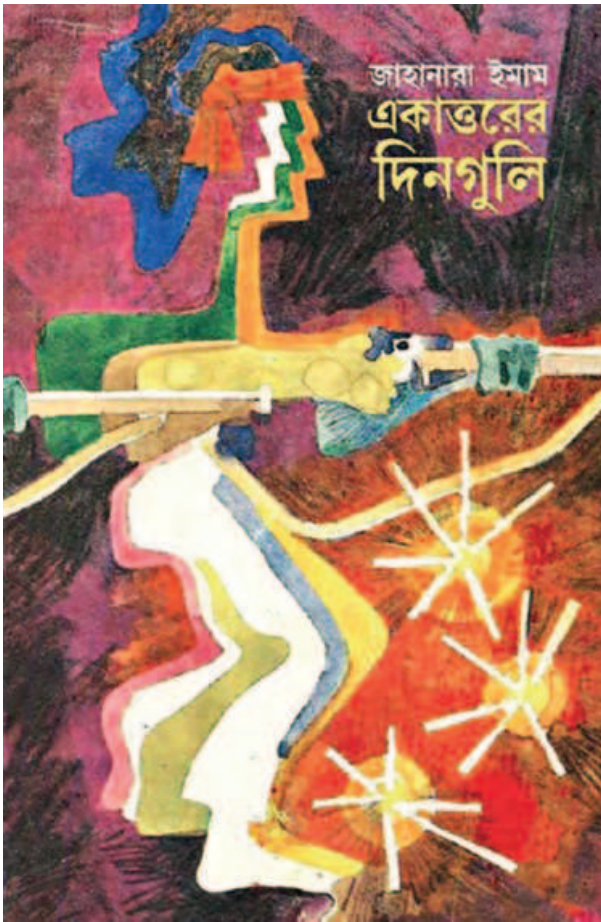
—They allowed you to meet him.

—No, sister. Just once. They used to bring him to Ramana police station. A man I know bribed the soldier and somehow managed to let me in. I spoke to him surreptitiously through the window.

—What did you say to each other? How is he?

—Oh Sister! They have beaten him mercilessly. I asked him, “Son, you haven’t revealed anyone’s name, have you?” He said, “No ma, I haven’t. But Ma, if they keep hitting me? I am afraid I might”. I told him: “Son, if they keep hurting you, harden yourself and try to bear it”

Jahanara Imam in her *Ekattorer Dinguli* reports this conversation between herself and Safia Begum, Azad’s mother, the same woman Anisul Hoque pays tribute to in his iconic, moving docu-fiction *Maa*. The spirit of Shahbag protests had appeared long before in war writing. The sons of both women



foot after the military crackdown as we encounter incredible human misery in the images the writer records:

In the crowd I saw a girl – her image is still clear in my mind. Wearing a cheap blue saree the young maiden walked with slow steps. Her co-travellers would soon leave her behind; a new group would catch up with her and move ahead as well. Under her *achol* was an infant – wonder if it had been born on the way! Her neck was tilted to the right. No tears in her eyes, no words. She was moving unhurriedly in search of safety – whatever she else may lack in the world, she did not lack time.

Combatant memoirs take us to the center of the theatre of war where guerrillas brave inclement weather and terrain and strategize to inflict maximum harm on the enemy. In images of shared cigarettes, communal cooking, anecdotes of clashes with the enemy, the banter and bonhomie among the men we are made privy to the world of conflict and its memories. Mabbub Alam’s *Guerrilla Theke Shomukh Juddhe* communicates the alchemy of a glorious cause that alleviates physical pain. The desire for homecoming is ubiquitous, whether one recalls the idealism or the horrors. In a letter written by a rebel Firdaus to his mother on the September 3, 1971 published in *Ekattorer Chithi*, we encounter the dark underside of the violence that war sanctions:

Mother, if you see me now, you won’t recognize me. Though I do not know what I look like exactly for there is no mirror here. Mihir says I look like a savage. Mihir is right. I can feel a savagery inside me these days. I am no longer who I was. Do you remember mother that I used to turn my gaze away when a chicken was to be slaughtered? That same Mihir now swims in rivers of blood. (57)

Amin, the protagonist in Muhammad Zafar Iqbal’s *Akash Bariye Dao* is a guerrilla who has returned from the war. He cannot forget the blood, raw wounds, thirst and fever of the days of torture by the army. Thrown into the river and mistaken to be dead, he escapes. That was 1971. He returns to find most of his childhood playmates killed. Thereafter, having joined the university in Dhaka he encounters students who are now, so to speak, part-time criminals. He witnesses their transgressions which range from extortion, hold-ups, abducting women, gambling and occasionally murder. Terrified when his MIT-bound friend is killed by an irate mob as he attempts a ‘hijack’ to fund his trip to America, Amin embarks on a journey of discovery across the country. The poignancy of the beauty of Bangladesh’s landscape set against pettiness of human acts does not escape the reader. Iqbal presents us with the possibility of a spiritual regeneration but the deeply traumatized war hero commits suicide on his return.

To be able to find the right vocabulary to represent an experience without precedent is a struggle that writers are alive to. Anwar Pasha’s novel *Rifle Roti Aurat* pushes the margins of fiction and testimony as its protagonist provides an eyewitness’s account of the violence in Dhaka since the genocidal military crackdown. On the night of December 14 when defeat seemed inevitable, Pasha was killed along with other intellectuals but not before he wrote what appears to be the last lines of the novel

The old life came to an end on the night of the 25th. Ah – let that be true. New men, new friends and a new dawn. How far were they? Couldn’t be very far. There was nothing to fear. It was a matter of this one night. It will be over. (216).

Nights lengthened further in post war Bangladesh. As it is with the energy that drives utopias, there was gradual realization that the darkness was far from over. As Jatin Sarkar put it in his *Pakistancor Jonmomrityu Dorshon*, the ghosts and specters of Pakistan had reappeared with the rise of military dictatorship.

Utopias are treacherous. They also possess stardust. They offer us hope and like Rupnagar in Intizar Husain’s *Basti* etch a world culled out from shards and fragments. In the debris of the utopias writers search for remnants of dreams and painstakingly rebuild stories. In “Milir Haathe Stengun” by Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Abbas Pagla informs Mili, his neighbour, that the bastards have taken over the moon; not content with colonizing the earth they have spread their tentacles and all he needs is a gun to save the world. With an almost prophetic voice, the writer presents the war’s moral burden and the injury to nature that it inflicts.

Why should a river have a name? Now that the fuckers have reached, the bastards will name it. They will give it a name, mark it, make accounts, seize and document it, get a mutation done – the bastards think it’s their property that it belongs to their bloody fathers and grandfathers – don’t you see they



have taken their position on both sides of the river? Those dung heaps have soiled the water – air – earth – fire – rocks here; now they have carried their filth to the moon. (52)

Rana, Mili’s brother, has new found respect at home after the war because he is now the breadwinner. The home grows visibly prosperous as he returns from nightly jaunts in the company of his friends..., with fresh spoils. In a Bangladesh where post war lawlessness was fast becoming a norm, where the Rokkhi Bahini wielded coercive power while the Army grew restless, Mili finds a kindred soul in

Abbas. Abbas, a schoolteacher who has returned from the war reminds one of Toba Tek Singh in Manto’s story, mirroring the chaos of the nation by his very existence. Elias’ narratives inhabit half-lights and liminal spaces. In “Khowari” he highlights the marginalisation of the Hindu Samarjit who cannot forget how he had carried his grandmother as a refugee across the border, running for cover from bullets. Both he and Iftekhar, a “Bihari”, after the war become hangers on, grateful to their ‘native’ friends and acquaintances for small favours and even basic safety.

Such love that holds up a mirror is difficult and yet many writers from the country continue to discharge this debt. As is to be expected, once stories of sacrifices made and pain incurred for the country have been told, extolled and retold in lore about the liberation war, once the betrayal by compatriots have been mourned, what remains is examining the complex legacies of the war. Hasan Azizul Haq’s “Namheen Gotraheen” presents us with its conception of such a task. An unnamed man returns to his desolate town as the war rages. He finds his home empty and starts digging through a mound in the garden by moonlight. Skulls and bones are thrown up as he utters cries of recognition. This act overwhelms its immediate context to become a metaphor for the ethical task that confronted those left behind.

The testimony of Firdausi Priyobhashini and other women in *Narir Ekattor*, a narrative which leads

their way into war writing. Selina Hossain’s novel *Hangor Nodi Grenade* has a free-spirited woman Buri at the centre of her novel. The war brings her an opportunity to transcend the narrow confines of her life. In seeking empowerment, vicariously, she turns her autistic son over to the Army in order to save her stepsons who have joined the Mukti Bahini. In an interview with the writer in 2010 she spoke of how she attempted to question the stereotype of women as victims in 1971 through this novel.

Fiction in English from Bangladesh in the past couple of decades has emerged, revisiting the war through the lens of the present. Clearly visible are also the strings that bind them thematically to the early writers of fiction on the war. Tahmima Anam’s *A Golden Age* presents a cosmopolitan Urdu-speaking Rehana Haque who fights tooth and nail to keep her children alive during the war. Her son Sohail (a lover of Tagore and Neruda) becomes a guerrilla. Returning from the war in the sequel *A Good Muslim* he kills a “nothing-man”. In a reminder of Septimus Warren Smith in Woolf’s *Ms Dalloway*, he encounters another young man traumatised by the violence he had witnessed and committed during the war. To avoid annihilation of his self he turns to the Koran and alienates his sister Maya who believes that it is religion that had divided the country and is committed to the war crimes trials. In the microcosmic family space, a struggle between a fundamentalist faith and unbending secularism plays out in a tender evocation of the failure of empathy between estranged siblings, as the mother watches silently, urging empathy and forgiveness. Masud, in Adib Khan’s *Spiral Road*, is a freedom fighter who leaves for Australia, deeply disillusioned after independence. He returns to find young men like his nephew leaning towards religious extremism. The return is never to the same country. *Babu Bangladesh* by the late Numair Atif Choudhury, a polyphonic eruption of voices, travels with Babu, from his childhood in Tangail. When his playmate and caregiver, the Hindu Kanu is hacked to pieces after the war, he turns to books and a world of imagination, a reverse of Sohail’s move away from them. In a powerful evocation of ecological costs of war, he describes how the West Pakistani soldiers hacked away at the tree at the University of Dhaka that stood for the undying spirit of freedom. The hacking of the tree and the hacking of Kanu remind one of spectacular violence. To witness such failure of all connotations of ‘human’ or ‘humane’ is perhaps what turns Babu into an apparition of sorts.

Slowly and surely, a body of literature that deals directly or implicitly with the consequences of 1971 and how the nation’s future was



shaped, grows. While the references to 1947 are few and far between, we might soon encounter a work that reaches beyond 1971 to re-examine both partitions in a continuum. If one is to take the man digging away in “Namheen Gotraheen” as a symbol, we may venture to say that the day is perhaps imminent.

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