

The origin of the om: Ahmed Sofa’s aura



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The poet resembles this prince of clouds
who chases the tempest and laughs at the
archer:
exiled on earth amidst a booing crowd,
his enormous wings impede his walk.

— Charles Baudelaire

WITH the death of Ahmed Sofa on July 28, 2001, Bangladesh (or modern Bengal in historical perspective) lost not simply one of its most original thinkers; it also marked the passing of an age. In death, as in life, Sofa found himself on the wrong side of power, which explains why his passing was shunned by the powers that were and mourned only by a handful of friends and fellow workers. I, for one, have never been ashamed of expressing my admiration for him.

Ahmed Sofa was engaged with the large questions of the day in Pakistan and Bangladesh for at least four decades and provided a unique intellectual terrain of resistance to tyranny, injustice, and inhumanity in his homeland and beyond. Today, some 20 years later, his work, distinguished for both its depth and clarity of thinking, continues to speak to thousands, if not to millions. In this tribute, I will not call on his sundry interventions but will invoke one of his enduring contributions. As a storyteller, Sofa became, in Walter Benjamin’s formulation, “the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.”

But what is a storyteller? For Benjamin, he is an artisan, a worker of sorts: “The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – rural, maritime, and then urban – is itself an artisanal form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure ‘in itself’ or gist of a thing, like information or a report. It submerges the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again.”

In 1976, the year I made Sofa’s acquaintance in Dhaka University, it was already two years since he discovered his calling as a thinker with an incomparable aura surrounding him. He had already joined “the ranks of the teachers and sages,” as Benjamin would say. What may be the basis of this aura? It lies in “the ability to reach back through a whole lifetime,” a life which includes not simply his own experience, but the experiences of others as well, what he knows by hearsay. “His gift,” Benjamin says, “is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to relate his *entire* life.” The storyteller is a

With a traditional realistic novel, a short story collection, and a bouquet of tales for children before, *Omkar* is the first work with which Sofa discovered what is most his own storytelling, the allegory. It made all the difference between him and the rest in Bengali literature of the late twentieth century. The signifier “om”, kit and caboodle would henceforth follow his path until his last tales were crafted. Its denouement would be evident in *Alatchakra*, Circle of Desire, realised a decade later.

Thanks to *Holiday*, *Omkar* came out in an English rendition in 1975. Introducing her translation much later, Roushan Jahan put *Omkar*’s storyline in a capsule: “the story of a young dumb [sic] girl, who refuses to accept the physical limitation and after persistent and desperate efforts, finally succeeds in mastering the handicap.” The story, however, goes a little beyond this challenge.

Set in historical time, a time out of joints in East Pakistan, the story draws on a formative

an urban milieu, becomes desperate in her attempts to speak. In passionately forcing open her glottis, at the end of the day she succeeds in uttering “Bangla”, but loses consciousness and starts to bleed from the mouth. It is significant to recognise that a signifier represents a subject for another signifier, and not for another subject. What is also significant is that Sofa does not let out either the girl’s or her husband’s name. Her attempt at uttering a signifier is provoked by roaring sounds out there, the fury of marchers on the streets of Dhaka, signifying something; thus linking up *Erlebnis* (or everyday experience) with *Erfahrung* (or longtime historical events). This is a tale told by no idiot. It tells the story of a transformation, churning logos out of mythos. *Omkar*, in other words, raises itself to the status of an allegory.

As the first-person narrator speaks: “For all these years, she has expressed all the feelings of joy and pain, wonder and frustration by grumbling like a dynamo. What pains of expression she must have suffered. By now, the procession was passing our house. It was like the crater of a volcano. The whole country seemed to be in long labour. The shouts of these people were those of a mother in labour. I was trembling. It seemed Bangladesh, her sky, her air, everything was trembling. Suddenly my wife jumped clear off the ground and said ‘Bangladesh’. At last her dumb [sic] voice has delivered an intelligible word. She fell



Ahmed Sofa (1943-2001)

ILLUSTRATION: BIPILOB CHAKROBORTY

phase of the new Bengali Muslim middle class. The story is told as the fable of the country lawyer Abu Nasr, also the father of the girl, who made a paltry fortune as collaborator of the Pakistani military regime. The simple fable, in Jahan’s take, “has a surprising depth, breadth and resonance”. Abu Nasr in a typical single shot kills two birds, marrying his physically challenged daughter off to a parvenu and neutralising a rival clan all the same. Narrated by the girl’s husband, “a timid, passive young man from a downward mobile family,” as Jahan comments, “the two main strains of the story – the public and the private – mesh beautifully.”

The climactic moment of the story coincides with the beginning of the end of old Pakistan when Pakistan’s myriad peoples united against Ayub Khan’s military regime and East Pakistan rose up, unwilling to put up with the loss of self under neocolonialism, in the face of waning national identity and dignity. Ahmed Sofa opens up the myth of the origin to an allegorical gaze.

An everyday story reaches its climax when the speech-impaired girl, a housewife in

unconscious and lay bleeding. I looked at the blood-splattered floor, then at my wife.”

Ahmed Sofa could well have left the myth there. Dissuaded by a thesis that claims that “style is not the man himself but one the man addresses,” the narrator adds: “A question rose in my mind, ‘whose blood is redder? That of Asad, the martyr, or that of my dumb wife?’” This veil of choice serves a subtle propaedeutic to the inaugural signifier *om*.

As there is no meta-language, it all depends on the unfolding of history. It is history that shapes both the signifier or existence and the signified or its meaning.

The heights Sofa reached, enormous wings he carried, tempests he haunted and archers he ridiculed, of course, came not without a price. He had been indicted as a German agent or even “Ghaddafi’s man.” These attacks were not merely defamatory on Ahmed Sofa’s identity as a Bengali Muslim and dignity as a thinker, but part of a much larger project to undermine the cause he resolutely stood for, the cause of workers and peasants in a nation that shed buckets of blood in struggles for prestige, in 1947 and in 1971.

Why is Dhaka city so dirty?

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IRENE SERGIOU and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE Dhaka metropolitan area is teeming with a population of 22.5 million, according to UN estimates in 2021. In 1971, this population was 1.5 million. With a centralised administration and the best infrastructure in the country – including education, healthcare, and communication – Dhaka has been the focus of rapid urbanisation. This gives rise to numerous challenges – from unruly traffic, health and hygiene issues, social problems, and economic disparities, to their effects on the environment. With more people in a relatively small urban space, their consumption needs are bigger, which then translates into waste disposal problems.

This problem has become massive because of the indiscriminate manner of waste disposal by Dhaka residents, along with the insufficient and inefficient waste management practices. This is reflected in the accumulation of garbage in the streets, the playgrounds, open spaces, the landfills, etc. Why is this happening? What is the psychology of littering or improper waste management?

The root of the problem lies in human behaviour, especially people’s apathy towards dealing with waste. For them, it is someone else’s problem. The individual is the beginning of the vicious circle; therefore, things must change with them first.

There’s a term called “habit loop,” which describes the essential features of habits: The *trigger* (waste accumulation at home), the *behaviour* (disposal of waste as conveniently as possible) and the *reward* (saving time by not experiencing the “hassle” of searching for a garbage bin or thinking of separating waste by categories, such as organic waste, liquid, recyclable or non-recyclable, and hazardous). Most people usually work in an “autopilot mode.” As a result, bad habits become ingrained. This habit loop needs to be reframed.

The idea of rewards would seem to offer some possibilities. We believe that creating the right *incentives* could play a significant role to break into and change the passive “autopilot” habits and turn them into active and more “thoughtful” ones, which would result in developing positive routines and impulses. A simple behavioural change, such as separating waste at the household level, would thus reflect a change of bad habits, which is then rewarded through a system of points.

Behavioural change is also facilitated by raising awareness about the significance and importance of dealing with household and other types of waste (cognitive learning theory) through education – both formal and informal – to help the city residents think more about their recycling behaviours and their far-reaching consequences. Raising awareness requires persistent efforts to make people put more thought into changing their waste disposal behaviour.

So how do we get a cleaner city? How do we become better and more responsible residents of Dhaka?

As a city producing thousands of tonnes of solid waste a day, the problem could be broken down into four phases:

Phase 1 – The Pre-Waste Phase: This is where people are informed of how much they waste and of their own carbon footprint to help them make responsible decisions when purchasing consumables, choosing packaging, daily usage of water, burning rubbish, using air conditioners year-round, printing pages unnecessarily, etc.

Phase 2 – The Act of Disposing: When people are made more conscious, they will begin to “segregate” waste properly. They may even begin to reuse some of it, expand the lifespan of an item, or repurpose it before dispensing with it.

Phase 3 – The Collection System: Behavioural change must be accompanied by an efficient waste collection system that is in sync with the households.

How are metals recovered? How is non-biodegradable waste treated? Do the current methods of recycling or composting have adverse effects on the environment? These questions must be given serious consideration.

This requires a proper, organised, and coordinated system of waste collection with timing/locations/logistics all worked out.

Phase 4 – The Post-Waste Phase is essentially about how the waste is treated. Is everything ending up in the same landfill or is there a recognition of value in waste?

In some regions of the world, organic waste is composted and sold; in other areas, portions of the landfills are seeded with larvae to be fattened on organic waste and used later for fish or poultry feed. How are metals recovered? How is non-biodegradable waste treated? Do the current methods of recycling or composting have adverse effects on the environment? These questions must be given serious consideration.

Behaviours such as senseless littering, garbage not being collected, or primary and secondary waste segregation not coordinated with transportation can amplify the problem. But the root of this massive problem is about targeting and changing mindsets. And mindsets are embedded in culture and some inherent traits such as habits. As culture influences the way we are brought up and what we value, it affects our way of thinking, behaviour, and actions. Over time, some elements of culture will thus have to change.

Importantly, change will begin with the state of awareness at various levels, conscious reflection, and ethical behaviour. In addition, collaboration is critical at all levels: Individual level, community level, and public service provider level, who must operate jointly within a set of regulations.

To benefit the household, the environment and the economy, the greening and cleaning of Dhaka (and other cities) is imperative and will only come with people acting consciously, incorporating innovative features of recycling, and developing teamwork between formal and informal bodies that make up the city. This process must begin soon.

This op-ed, the second of a four-part series, resulted from the authors’ participation in the 23rd ASEF Summer University (ASEFSU23) interdisciplinary hackathon on “Livable Cities for a Sustainable Future” envisioned by Asian and European young professionals and students.

kinsman of Plato’s Socrates: “I want to tell you a story. You may think it is a mere story, but for me it is the logic.”

Ahmed Sofa was able to produce two slender poetic collections, “Time the Hangman” and “Songs of Sufferance” in 1975. Earlier, in 1974, he put out the novella, *Omkar*.

/Opinion

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