

# The origin of the om: Ahmed Sofa’s aura



Salimullah Khan  
is professor at the General Education  
Department of ULAB.

SALIMULLAH KHAN

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?

Irene Sergiou is an architect based in Nicosia, Cyprus.  
Dr Syed Saad Andaleeb is distinguished professor emeritus at Pennsylvania State University and former vice-chancellor of Brac University.

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

Love solving our crossword puzzles?

WE SEE YOU!

Email us a photo of your solved crossword puzzle at [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com) and we will post it on our Facebook page. Let's grow our community of crossword solvers!

[www.facebook.com/dsopinion](https://www.facebook.com/dsopinion)

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Director Clint	15 Small fastener
1 Moist	36 Guessing game for kids	17 Cooking mint
5 Happy colleague	40 Diverts	18 Finished
10 Continually	41 Rotate	19 Brooklyn team
11 Stop working	42 Fourth-down plays	20 Easy run
12 Fictional captain	43 Throw	21 Get news of
13 Appears onstage		22 Pale tan
14 Director Martin	DOWN	25 Sullen look
16 Director Wes	1 Retreats	26 Loosen, as a cap
20 Greek letters	2 Opposite of “sans”	28 Neon and helium
23 Blvd.’s kin	3 Office note	30 Banquet
24 Sports summary	4 In fair shares	31 Cube’s sextet
25 Sound of Washington	5 Slow-witted	33 Ibsen’s home
27 Crew need	6 Mink’s cousin	34 Musical work
28 Dead ducks	7 Cobbler’s kin	35 Colors
29 Director Francois	8 Mess up	36 Travel aid
	9 “You bet!”	37 Outback bird
	11 Oboists’ needs	38 Sister, of sorts

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29

30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39

40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49

50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59

60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69

70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79

80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89

90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99

100 101 102 103 104 105 106 107 108 109

110 111 112 113 114 115 116 117 118 119

120 121 122 123 124 125 126 127 128 129

130 131 132 133 134 135 136 137 138 139

140 141 142 143 144 145 146 147 148 149

150 151 152 153 154 155 156 157 158 159

160 161 162 163 164 165 166 167 168 169

170 171 172 173 174 175 176 177 178 179

180 181 182 183 184 185 186 187 188 189

190 191 192 193 194 195 196 197 198 199

200 201 202 203 204 205 206 207 208 209

210 211 212 213 214 215 216 217 218 219

220 221 222 223 224 225 226 227 228 229

230 231 232 233 234 235 236 237 238 239

240 241 242 243 244 245 246 247 248 249

250 251 252 253 254 255 256 257 258 259

260 261 262 263 264 265 266 267 268 269

270 271 272 273 274 275 276 277 278 279

280 281 282 283 284 285 286 287 288 289

290 291 292 293 294 295 296 297 298 299

300 301 302 303 304 305 306 307 308 309

310 311 312 313 314 315 316 317 318 319

320 321 322 323 324 325 326 327 328 329

330 331 332 333 334 335 336 337 338 339

340 341 342 343 344 345 346 347 348 349

350 351 352 353 354 355 356 357 358 359

360 361 362 363 364 365 366 367 368 369

370 371 372 373 374 375 376 377 378 379

380 381 382 383 384 385 386 387 388 389

390 391 392 393 394 395 396 397 398 399

400 401 402 403 404 405 406 407 408 409

410 411 412 413 414 415 416 417 418 419

420 421 422 423 424 425 426 427 428 429

430 431 432 433 434 435 436 437 438 439

440 441 442 443 444 445 446 447 448 449

450 451 452 453 454 455 456 457 458 459

460 461 462 463 464 465 466 467 468 469

470 471 472 473 474 475 476 477 478 479

480 481 482 483 484 485 486 487 488 489

490 491 492 493 494 495 496 497 498 499

500 501 502 503 504 505 506 507 508 509

510 511 512 513 514 515 516 517 518 519

520 521 522 523 524 525 526 527 528 529

530 531 532 533 534 535 536 537 538 539

540 541 542 543 544 545 546 547 548 549

550 551 552 553 554 555 556 557 558 559

560 561 562 563 564 565 566 567 568 569

570 571 572 573 574 575 576 577 578 579

580 581 582 583 584 585 586 587 588 589

590 591 592 593 594 595 596 597 598 599

600 601 602 603 604 605 606 607 608 609

610 611 612 613 614 615 616 617 618 619

620 621 622 623 624 625 626 627 628 629

630 631 632 633 634 635 636 637 638 639

640 641 642 643 644 645 646 647 648 649

650 651 652 653 654 655 656 657 658 659

660 661 662 663 664 665 666 667 668 669

670 671 672 673 674 675 676 677 678 679

680 681 682 683 684 685 686 687 688 689

690 691 692 693 694 695 696 697 698 699

700 701 702 703 704 705 706 707 708 709

710 711 712 713 714 715 716 717 718 719

720 721 722 723 724 725 726 727 728 729

730 731 732 733 734 735 736 737 738 739

740 741 742 743 744 745 746 747 748 749

750 751 752 753 754 755 756 757 758 759

760 761 762 763 764 765 766 767 768 769

770 771 772 773 774 775 776 777 778 779

780 781 782 783 784 785 786 787 788 789

790 791 792 793 794 795 796 797 798 799

800 801 802 803 804 805 806 807 808 809

810 811 812 813 814 815 816 817 818 819

820 821 822 823 824 825 826 827 828 829

830 831 832 833 834 835 836 837 838 839

840 841 842 843 844 845 846 847 848 849

850 851 852 853 854 855 856 857 858 859

860 861 862 863 864 865 866 867 868 869

870 871 872 873 874 875 876 877 878 879

880 881 882 883 884 885 886 887 888 889

890 891 892 893 894 895 896 897 898 899

900 901 902 903 904 905 906 907 908 909

910 911 912 913 914 915 916 917 918 919

920 921 922 923 924 925 926 927 928 929

930 931 932 933 934 935 936 937 938 939

940 941 942 943 944 945 946 947 948 949

950 951 952 953 954 955 956 957 958 959

960 961 962 963 964 965 966 967 968 969

970 971 972 973 974 975 976 977 978 979

980 981 982 983 984 985 986 987 988 989

990 991 992 993 994 995 996 997 998 999

1000 1001 1002 1003 1004 1005 1006 1007 1008 1009

1010 1011 1012 1013 1014 1015 1016 1017 1018 1019

1020 1021 1022 1023 1024 1025 1026 1027 1028 1029

1030 1031 1032 1033 1034 1035 1036 1037 1038 1039

1040 1041 1042 1043 1044 1045 1046 1047 1048 1049

1050 1051 1052 1053 1054 1055 1056 1057 1058 1059

1060 1061 1062 1063 1064 1065 1066 1067 1068 1069

1070 1071 1072 1073 1074 1075 1076 1077 1078 1079

1080 1081 1082 1083 1084 1085 1086 1087 1088 1089

1090 1091 1092 1093 1094 1095 1096 1097 1098 1099

1100 1101 1102 1103 1104 1105 1106 1107 1108 1109

1110 1111 1112 1113 1114 1115 1116 1117 1118 1119

1120 1121 1122 1123 1124 1125 1126 1127 1128 1129

1130 1131 1132 1133 1134 1135 1136 1137 1138 1139

1140 1141 1142 1143 1144 1145 1146 1147 1148 1149

1150 1151 1152 1153 1154 1155 1156 1157 1158 1159

1160 1161 1162 1163 1164 1165 1166 1167 1168 1169

1170 1171 1172 1173 1174 1175 1176 1177 1178 1179

1180 1181 1182 1183 1184 1185 1186 1187 1188 1189

1190 1191 1192 1193 1194 1195 1196 1197 1198 1199

1200 1201 1202 1203 1204 1205 1206 1207 1208 1209

1210 1211 1212 1213 1214 1215 1216 1217 1218 1219

1220 1221 1222 1223 1224 1225 1226 1227 1228 1229

1230 1231 1232 1233 1234 1235 1236 1237 1238 1239

1240 1241 1242 1243 1244 1245 1246 1247 1248 1249

1250 1251 1252 1253 1254 1255 1256 1257 1258 1259

1260 1261 1262 1263 1264 1265 1266 1267 1268 1269

1270 1271 1272 1273 1274 1275 1276 1277 1278 1279

1280 1281 1282 1283 1284 1285 1286 1287 1288 1289

1290 1291 1292 1293 1294 1295 1296 1297 1298 1299

1300 1301 1302 1303 1304 1305 1306 1307 1308 1309

1310 1311 1312 1313 1314 1315 1316 1317 1318 1319

1320 1321 1322 1323 1324 1325 1326 1327 1328 1329

1330 1331 1332 1333 1334 1335 1336 1337 1338 1339

1340 1341 1342 1343 1344 1345 1346 1347 1348 1349

1350 1351 1352 1353 1354 1355 1356 1357 1358 1359

1360 1361 1362 1363 1364 1365 1366 1367 1368 1369

1370 1371 1372 1373 1374 1375 1376 1377 1378 1379

1380 1381 1382 1383 1384 1385 1386 1387 1388 1389

1390 1391 1392 1393 1394 1395 1396 1397 1398 1399

1400 1401 1402 1403 1404 1405 1406 1407 1408 1409

1410 1411 1412 1413 1414 1415 1416 1417 1418 1419

1420 1421 1422 1423 1424 1425 1426 1427 1428 1429

1430 1431 1432 1433 1434 1435 1436 1437 1438 1439

1440 1441 1442 1443 1444 1445 1446 1447 1448 1449

1450 1451 1452 1453 1454 1455 1456 1457 1458 1459

1460 1461 1462 1463 1464 1465 1466 1467 1468 1469