BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Mundanities, magic realism, Bangladesh

Revisiting Shahidul Zahir's novellas

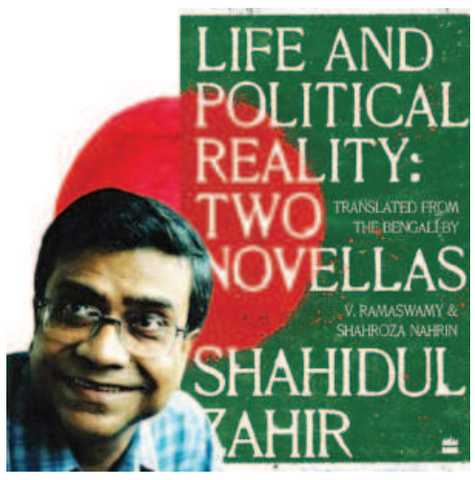
JAHANARA TARIQ

There are instances in both novellas which act as a celebration of unobtrusive, everyday beauty. Shahidul Zahir's expertise lay not only in the depiction of social reality or the nuances of local culture, but in the experimental language he opted for, in his play of dialogues and dialects.

Like the unforeseen rip and the "phot" with which Abdul Mojid's footwear breaks away in the beginning of *Shahidul Zahir's Life and Political Reality* (Samhati Prokashan, 2022), translated from Bangla by V Ramaswamy and Shahroza Nahrin, the readers too are dropped like egg-yolks within the sprawling, caustic narrative of Zahir's story. A split in time occurs as our protagonist scuffles through his dismal memories of 1971. Tortuous branches of prose flow through the fabric of history, intertwined with the debris of appalling cruelty, navigating eddies of crises, and setting off flash floods of collective remembrance. This novella examines the war, keeping the focus narrow, on a particular mohalla but exploring the destruction of idealism and the spirit of frustration encompassing Bangladesh in her post-war years. Thus the personal space is the same as the political sphere, the individual on the same strand as the collective.

Through the use of anaphoric instances, Zahir stamps certain images in the reader's mind. Mojid's sandal straps, the inauspicious dispersion of cut flesh to the ravens by Moulana Bodu, the murder of Momena, and Mayaraani's Satanic chants are some of the snapshots among many others which reemerge through the span of the novel. These images in turn work as a kind of hook for the readers to rely on and to get hold of where the story is headed. Hence the narrative is not necessarily an open-ended stream of consciousness, one that moves from point A to B, from B to C and so on—but one which circumnavigates, touching all the points and creating many intersections. It might sound chaotic, yet it is anything but, as nothing becomes repetitive or cacophonous, let alone monotonous.

The themes and the distinctions of the plot—the substance, so to speak—tend to fall flat to Zahir's grasp over style. Instead of aligning itself with a steadfast arc or a steady plotline, the story moves restlessly through



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

the treacherous terrains of time and space. Without a single break in the paragraph, *Life and Political Reality* hovers over readers like a massive cloud of text formed with a deft pen.

Abu Ibrahim's Death, the second novella in the collection, may seem like an odd choice for *Life and Political Reality*'s accomplice, in so far that it is a text that is riffed with the occurrences of everyday life. The story opens with the death of Abu Ibrahim and then reverts into the life he lived. We see him in different roles, an absent spouse, a loving father, a righteous government worker.

The protagonist is someone who acts as a shadow of Maoist, Marxist morality. However, when offered a bribe by a businessman, a Shylockian figure who is cartoonish and sinister with his talks of whiskey and money-making, Ibrahim's conscience gets a hold of him. He stands against the culture of taking backhanders but simultaneously is afflicted with a burden to buy land for his own family. He does not resist the man, however, with a bellowing horn of an idealist hero like the doctor in Satyajit Ray's *Ganashutra*, but with a steely, quiet rumination which infuriates the shady merchant. First published in 1991, the political context of then-Bangladesh and the zeitgeist of uncertainty and disillusionment are captured through Ibrahim's struggle of navigating his principles in a fractured world.

While reading *Abu Ibrahim's Death*, I was surprisingly reminded of Wong Kar Wai's meditations on Hong Kong's urban spaces—the pages saturated with aching glances, quiet longings which become deafening in unsaid words. Zahir draws up a shade of Dhaka abloom with flame flowers and a kind of tranquillity that appears to be a myth in this present day.

However, despite the dreariness of the themes, there are instances in both novellas which act as a celebration of unobtrusive, everyday beauty. From Ibrahim's act of savouring an ice-cream with his daughter, to Abdul Mojid choosing not to become a gunda when he finds access to the doors of the neighbourhood library—it all adds an emotional, wistful tuning to the callous realism and the indisposition of cut flesh and horror.

Shahidul Zahir's expertise lay not only in the depiction of social reality or the nuances of local culture, but in the experimental language he opted for, in his play of dialogues and dialects. In case of the translation of *Abu Ibrahim's Death*, the dialects were not translated like in *Life and Political Reality*. The inclusion of that would have perhaps helped to draw a better picture of the characters, given an indication of their social class too.

While the Bangla, original renditions of the two pieces evoke a certain sense of maya, the English versions do not fall short. Ramaswamy and Nahrin provide worthy translations of these masterpieces, concurrently holding the audience haunted and mesmerised.

Jahanara Tariq *is Adjunct Lecturer at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).*

ESSAY

Ali Riaz's 'More than Meets the Eye' and a writer's responsibility

MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN

I have been following Professor Ali Riaz's writing for quite some time, and I stand amazed by the prolificity and eclectic scope of his work. On July 23, 2022, Dhaka's University Press Limited (UPL) organised at its head office in Farmgate a publication ceremony of his book *More than Meets the Eye: Essays on Bangladeshi Politics* (2022). The event was broadcast live on UPL's Facebook page, which enabled me to attend it remotely from Kuala Lumpur.

Truly more than meets the eye, the book discusses contemporary politics and the erosion of social and political institutions in Bangladesh. Ali Riaz examines the profound social divisions that have weakened civic life and cohesion in the country. Discussants of the publication ceremony deplored the policies of what they called an 'authoritarian' government that has been ruling Bangladesh for over a decade.

As Bangladeshis, whether inside the country or abroad, we keenly follow its political and other developments. We are alive to most of what is happening in the country and reported in the media. Hence, it is almost impossible for the writer of such a book to say something new or completely unheard of.

During the publication ceremony, some suggested (though not cynically) that much of what the book discusses is what we, as Bangladeshis, already know. What is more, some sought from the author solutions to the political ills that he has diagnosed in the book.

Since I attended the event virtually, my opportunity to engage in the discussion in a personal way was limited. I wanted to say that some members of the audience seemed to have missed the point that a writer's job is not always to say something new or original, especially when they act as a social or political commentator. Nor is it necessarily their duty to carve out solutions that will transform a country into a land of freedom and opportunity.

In her powerful essay "The Small Personal Voice" (1957), the British-African writer Doris Lessing maintains that a writer writes out of "a feeling of responsibility, as a human being, for the other human beings". She regards the writer as "an architect of the soul" who must know the nature of the soul they wish to persuade. A good writer writes what they and we see, though at times they may reveal what others may have missed. The writer has greater abilities to articulate our shared experiences and to critique underlying socioeconomic structures.

A writer is not a stranger to society. They are one of us and share similar desires and interests. Our collective human problems and struggles often form the basis of their writing, as they synthesise and represent our ideas and imaginations. Therefore, when we seem to identify with what we read, we indirectly testify that the writer has been able to hold our interest and is successful in their endeavour to develop a meaningful rapport with readers.

Given the prevailing culture of impunity and the stifling of dissent in today's Bangladesh, one must congratulate the author of *More than Meets the Eye* on his courage in sensibly defying it. He took the plunge while many have been nursing the fear of victimisation and reprisal. There are perhaps others – in the country and beyond – with comparable intellectual capacities but seem to have been silenced by economic incentives or intimidation, or by positions and perks. In that sense, Ali Riaz does not belong to those writers who, in Doris Lessing's words, "can be bludgeoned into silence by fear or economic pressure".

DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

In his book *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), the Palestinian-American public intellectual Edward Said argues that a true intellectual who seeks to represent his people cannot be "a functionary nor an employee completely given up to the policy goals of a government.... In such situations, the temptations to turn off one's moral sense ... are far too great to be trusted". Here Said emphasises two key attributes in the repertoire of a writer: intellectual independence and integrity. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has identified the category of "state intellectuals" who do not possess such ingredients and therefore fail to commit to egalitarian goals.

The term 'buddhijibi' has gained wider currency in popular discourse in Bangladesh. It generally refers to urban writers and intellectuals of some persuasion. In response to a question from the audience during the publication ceremony, Ali Riaz warned against the wholesale, indiscriminate use of the term. He is reluctant to confer this appellation on self-proclaimed and self-seeking intellectuals who are silent about the assault on civil liberties and about sociopolitical problems that have beset Bangladesh.

In this respect, Ali Riaz seems to think along the same line with the famed Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe. In an essay titled "The Black Writer's Burden" (1966), Achebe states: "One of the writer's main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice". That is to say, when a writer avoids this responsibility of exposing the truth about a government, they actually take off the badge of a writer from their neck.

The South African writer Nadine Gordimer suggests that a writer should not hesitate to tell the truth to power even if such telling renders them political. She says: "If you're writing honestly about your society and that society is in turmoil, you become a political writer". Morally, one cannot remain a detached scholar and observe events of injustice and suffering from on high.

Establishing the untenability for an academic to remain alienated from la condition humaine, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o poses these rhetorical questions: "In a society built on a structure of inequality, where do we stand? Can we remain neutral, cocooned in our libraries and scholarly disciplines, muttering to ourselves: I am only a surgeon; I am a scientist; I am an economist; or I am simply a critic, a teacher, a lecturer?"

Writers and intellectuals are obligated to discuss the conditions of their fellow human beings. They embody the sensitive, artistic conscience of their people. It is their responsibility to stir moral indignation at gross injustices and the plight of the masses. Readers in return receive a cathartic pleasure after reading what the writer has said about them. In "African Literature and Social Problems" (1975), Romanus Egudu states that through depicting people's difficulties, writers provide readers with "intellectual pleasure in the midst of tears". W H Auden says it more beautifully in his "In Memory of W. B. Yeats":

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;
With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress.

Lastly, the British writer John Osborne came to my mind when someone from the audience at the UPL event urged Ali Riaz to provide solutions to the problems he describes in *More than Meets the Eye*. Reflecting on his role as a writer in 1950s Britain, Osborne says in his essay, "They Call It Cricket" (1957): "I am a writer and my own contribution to a socialist society is to demonstrate those values in my own medium, not to discover the best ways to implement them".

Accordingly, Ali Riaz employed his training in political science to comment on the new "political settlement" that has developed in Bangladesh and to articulate the threats it poses to the country. However, providing solutions is not the task of the writer alone. That will need to involve many stakeholders at various levels.

Md. Mahmudul Hasan *teaches English and postcolonial literature at International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: mmhasan@iium.edu.my.*

OPINION

What's missing from quirky period dramas?

SHABABA IQBAL

The '90s offered something of a renaissance of period dramas, particularly with meticulous screen adaptations of Jane Austen's beloved novels. While filming 1995's *Sense and Sensibility*, Emma Thompson, who wrote the screenplay and starred as Elinor Dashwood, agonised over line changes and refused producers' pleas to "novelise" her script and sell it as an "update".

Fast forward two decades and a new type of period drama is taking over today. Filmmakers are ditching accuracy and precision in a move to cater to Millennials and Gen Z audiences. Young and "good-looking" actors are cast, contemporary music is played in ballroom scenes, and the flirting and sex are ramped up. From the language to the set design to the score, forays into period drama are increasingly spiced up with modernity to both delightful and disappointing effects.

The Austen-inspired *Bridgerton* (2020)—Netflix's Regency-set romance based on Julia Quinn's novels published from 2000 to 2006—uses candy-coloured costumes and an idealised depiction of race in society, featuring prominent Black and South Asian characters and motifs like string quartets playing Ariana Grande covers instead of period waltzes. Lady Whistledown, *A Gossip Girl*-esque scandal sheet narrator, dominates the plot.

DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

Since its release, *Bridgerton* has proven to be as controversial as it is popular. It explores race and representation in the early 19th century through the Duke of Hastings, a Black man named Simon Basset (Regé-Jean Page) in Season 1, and Kate Sharma (Simone Ashley) in Season 2, an Indian. But in a rush to be inclusive, it glaringly overlooks nuances. A controversial scene in Season 1 depicts the sexual assault of a Black man by a white woman in a context where the inverse was a narrative that used to kill Black men. This is appalling, to say the least.

"Sharma", Kate's surname on the show, is a common name among upper-caste Indians—and herein lies the problem. In celebrations of representation, the notion of being an "Indian" continues to be cemented in the upper-caste Hindu mould in popular culture and media. And even though it is appreciable that Hollywood is showcasing diversity in a genre that has long been greatly fronted by white characters, in its bid to be a light, frothy, and visually pleasant show, *Bridgerton* does not meaningfully address these complex issues.

Emma. (2020), starring Anya Taylor-Joy as the titular smart, wealthy, and meddlesome matchmaker, is a great example of a period film that incorporates subtle contemporary influences into the personality and costume design of characters. This adaptation is distinguished by its commitment to snarky retorts and a bright aesthetic, as seen in Emma's flashy mustard yellow gown and extravagant black hat with yellow feathers.

Emma and Mr Knightley's relationship is also edgier in the film, more socially acceptable. There are dance scenes without gloves, fleeting male nudity, and kisses when the girl's father is present in the room. She has her widowed, neurotic father to care for—or is that just her excuse to live as free of constraints as any man? It's a radical notion for the Regency era, and Taylor-Joy relishes in Emma's snobbery and callousness, confounding expectations of how a young lady of fortune should behave. Such playfulness is in keeping with the spirit of the book and with Austen's humour. Nevertheless, *Emma.* falls at a risk of being so highly stylised and goofy that it loses many of the deeper layers of the novel.

The recent Netflix adaptation of Austen's *Persuasion* (2022) plays like a romantic comedy rather than a complex, sombre story about second chances at love. In the film, protagonist Anne Elliot (Dakota Johnson) ends up in several contrived circumstances on her quest to win back her "ex". Breaking the fourth wall, she cheekily addresses the audience after comments from her family members, which seems nonsensical for the introverted and dejected Anne we know from the novel. She has been turned into the awkward yet sassy and vivacious heroine that has been popping up in recent, contemporary period dramas. Trying too hard to be quirky, the film widely fails to capture the tone of the book. This points to a prevailing issue in adaptations of classic novels today where studios seem to think female characters need to be glossed with a "zany" and "feisty" persona in order to be relevant.

It appears that in warping period pieces on screen into colourful, digestible, and clickable content for Millennial and Gen Z viewers, filmmakers are doing a disservice not only to historical and literary texts, but also to the audience that they are, apparently, so desperate to attract.

Shababa Iqbal *is a contributor to Daily Star Books. Email: siqbal.tds@gmail.com.*