

MARTYRED INTELLECTUALS DAY

Relevance of Munier Choudhury's thoughts on theatre

Choyon Khairul Habib is a Bangalee poet and playwright living in Brittany, France.

CHOYON KHAIRUL HABIB

For me, working on 10 short plays by martyred intellectual Munier Choudhury has been a blissful and humbling experience. As a practising playwright, the burning question in my mind was about the relevance of Munier's plays in today's world. How can we commemorate Martyred Intellectuals Day in a broader manner and with a contemporary mindset?

Munier was a minimalist, and he perfected this style in 1953 when writing the play *Kobor (The Grave)* while serving a prison term. In the early 1940s, Munier met some US soldiers at Kurmitola. Among them was Dr Norman Springer, who gave him a copy of Irwin Shaw's *Bury The Dead*, which later subconsciously influenced Munier to write *Kobor*.

Munier Choudhury started his writing journey by penning short stories. Late national professor Anisuzzaman once wrote about him, "In his stories, we see a deep observation of reality and subtle expressions. But Munier Choudhury didn't realise his potential of being

writer-turned-playwright Chekhov's spirit worked within him, enabling him to transform his concepts into applied theatre.

In the selected short plays, amid all the fanfare, Munier's characters are subject to suppressed anxiety. Due to this undercurrent of anxiousness, the plays are deliberately still, which also shows the uncomfortable relationship between the playwright and the state where he was residing. The post-World War and postcolonial situations, the fatigue from the bloody Indian divide, and the bitterness of being second-class in a new country led Munier to conjure a fictional story of hope in which all the protagonists and antagonists would be speaking in his mother tongue.

Though Munier was an activist of the Indian communist party in his youth and later joined the Pakistan communist party, he was far removed from being an ideologue in his treatment of the theatre. His characters are individualistic, which didn't sit well with the party line.

Other than the pointed use of the words "fifth column" and "rulers" (in *Fifth Column* and *Leader*, respectively), most of Munier's characters in the selected works represent either the middle or the



Munier and Lily's complementary efforts remind me of the theatrical mutuality of Italian playwright Dario Fo and his partner Franca Rame.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The murders of Munier Choudhury and other intellectuals represent the worst of censorship regimes. All over the world, it is other intellectuals that justify the killings of the dissidents and let censorship penetrate all spheres of life. In independent Bangladesh, too, some quarters holding an apologist, censorial attitude argued against the Liberation War.

Turning the pages back to January 1971, Munier was attending a linguistic conference in the US. A rumour spread that the Pakistani authorities had banned international flights to Dhaka. Munier cut his stay short and returned to Dhaka in February. At Dhaka University, he was appointed the dean of humanities. Responding to Bangabandhu's call to boycott Pakistani honours, Munier gave away the Sitara-e-Imtiaz that had been bestowed upon him in 1966. After March, his eldest son left to join the Liberation War. On December 14, Munier Choudhury was picked up by the al Badr militia from his parents' residence.

The relevance of Munier's work today is owing to how he related with his language, Bangla. After liberation, Bangla as a language was supposed to flourish, but the creative diversity of the language became somewhat stalled. Universities have more arts and performance faculties now, but their playwrighting has dried up. The formal reading of theatre and the fine arts has increased manifold. Still, the literary pursuit of drama is poorer than ever before, with fine arts leaning heavily towards abstraction. The secular achievements of 1971 are questioned by reactionary forces. So, Munier's dialogues are needed now more than ever to revive the stagnant status quo.

This piece is a concise version of the Bangla preface to '10 Short Plays of Munier Choudhury,' to be published at the Nondon BishhoMela 2024 in Dhaka.

In the selected short plays, amid all the fanfare, Munier's characters are subject to suppressed anxiety. Due to this undercurrent of anxiousness, the plays are deliberately still, which also shows the uncomfortable relationship between the playwright and the state where he was residing. The post-World War and postcolonial situations, the fatigue from the bloody Indian divide, and the bitterness of being second-class in a new country led Munier to conjure a fictional story of hope in which all the protagonists and antagonists would be speaking in his mother tongue.

a powerful story writer due to his obsession with playwrighting." Even though Munier stopped writing stories completely, short-story-

working class. As such, the plays mirror social dynamism, class struggle, and futuristic aspirations. As per my reading, Munier was an

experimental writer. His characters speak in standard Bangla (*promito* Bangla) and the linguistic projection is free from any archaic pretence. Though the hinterlands of Bangalee urban cities are agricultural villages, his characters don't represent rural attitudes, but rather portray a cosmopolitan psyche.

If we consider myths as the aesthetical base of urban and indigenous communities, we will find Munier's plays enhancing the potential of mythical proverbs to make them tangible and believable. Without screaming out slogans, Munier did this subtly. And keeping with the same subtlety, his vision of nationalism is not a punctuated excuse for extremism, but a way forward to wider discourses and

dialogues.

Munier opted for the humane perspective of literature. He was no teacher, parent or missionary to his characters. He was also not a Boalian educator for his audience. I didn't find him to be "above all the patience of a detached writer," as observed by late professor Anisuzzaman. Munier's journey was patient indeed and solitary to an extent, but he was attached to and engaged with his characters.

Among the 10 plays in the series, particularly the ones centring man-woman relationships (like *Upstairs, Downstairs; Dondokaronno; Who are You; and Percussion*) made me think of his wife, Lily Mirza. Lily had acted in *Upstairs, Downstairs*, which was Dhaka TV's first

televised play. Munier and Lily's complementary efforts remind me of the theatrical mutuality of Italian playwright Dario Fo and his partner Franca Rame.

Some of my hand-picked plays are surrealist, some are realist. One common trait of the drawn characters is their existential struggle, stemming from a political tug of war, and their efforts to overcome it via personal endeavours. Accusations are the basis of these selected satires, but the core is humorous, influenced by Bernard Shaw. In Munier's own words: "Comical, introvert and absurd." He also translated Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, a task which had a determining effect on his short plays by making them click.

What's holding the world back from recognising the 1971 genocide?



Harry van Bommel is a former member of parliament in the Netherlands and a human rights activist.

HARRY VAN BOMMEL

The term "genocide" is regularly used in referring to the bloody conflicts in Israel/Gaza, Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Genocide is a crime that has been carefully defined by the United Nations in a treaty. The concept should not be referred to lightly. The Netherlands and the EU would be wise to start recognising genocides that have been scientifically established as such.

Recently, at the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, I was able to argue for international recognition of the genocide committed by the Pakistani army during the independence struggle of Bangladesh. That independence, declared on March 26, 1971, followed 25 years of exploitation and the denial of self government to the original population. East Pakistan's secession from West Pakistan was accompanied by genocide; approximately three million people were murdered, 300,000 women were raped, and 10 million people had to flee their homeland.

The crimes committed by the Pakistani military upon the independence of Bangladesh are in line with the definition laid down by the UN in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This treaty defines genocide as "acts

committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group..." Not only the murder of the population, but also the rape of hundreds of thousands of women was aimed at destroying the identity of the people of Bangladesh.

It is not disputed that Bangladesh's independence was accompanied by genocide. Four renowned institutes have come to this conclusion, including Genocide Watch, the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, and the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. And, in April this year, the authoritative International Association of Genocide Scholars also expressed this recognition and called on the UN to adopt a resolution that does the same.

In May 2023, I visited Bangladesh with a European delegation to speak with organisations and individuals who advocate international recognition of the 1971 genocide. The delegation spoke with relatives of victims and witnesses (with investigators from the International Crimes Tribunal), visited murder locations, and studied witness statements. We submitted our findings and the call from the International Association of Genocide Scholars to the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke

Hoekstra for a response.

In his response, the minister referred to the 2021 coalition agreement. It states: "The Netherlands, together with a representative number of like-minded EU member states, is examining the recognition of genocides and under what conditions they can jointly recognize genocides." It is added

that "rulings of international courts or criminal courts, scientific research and/or findings by the UN Security Council carry weight in this regard." Scientific research regarding the genocide in Bangladesh is widely available. That is why I, together with the European Bangladesh Forum (EBF), urge the House of Representatives and the cabinet to take steps to

achieve international recognition of the 1971 genocide.

The Netherlands would not be the first Western country to pay political attention to the genocide of Bangladesh. In October 2022, US Congressmen Steve Chabot (a Republican) and Ro Khanna (a Democrat) submitted a proposal for recognition of the Bangladesh genocide. In February of this

Netherlands through adoption. These babies were the result of the Pakistani military's "rape policy." To make adoption possible in later years, the actual ages of these children were often concealed. This fact is noted in the report of the February committee investigating intercountry adoption.

The 1971 genocide in Bangladesh is also called the "forgotten



(CAL-1)DHAKA, EAST PAKISTAN, DEC.18--TEARS FOR LOVED ONE--A young girl weeps over the body of a loved one in Dhaka, East Pakistan, Saturday, killed by Pakistani troops a few hours before Indian troops arrived in Dhaka. Reports have come in from different parts of the city about the unearthing of mass graves dug just before Indian forces swept into this former East Pakistani capital two days ago. (AP WIREPHOTO VIA RADIO FROM DHAKA) (See AP AAA wire story) (L71730cca) 1971

SCAN: STAR FILE

The crimes committed by the Pakistani military upon the independence of Bangladesh are in line with the definition laid down by the UN in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This treaty defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group..." Not only the murder of the population, but also the rape of hundreds of thousands of women was aimed at destroying the identity of the people of Bangladesh.

year, calls were made in the UK Parliament for recognition. Both countries naturally played an important role in developments in the region. The US during the Cold War was an important supporter of Pakistan and the United Kingdom was a former coloniser in the region.

Less well-known is the early involvement of the Netherlands in the fate of the Bangladeshis. On February 11, 1972, our country was one of the earliest to recognise the independence of Bangladesh. In the period after the War of Independence, the Netherlands also allowed an unknown number of "war babies" to come to the

genocide." The UN Human Rights Council showed that the genocide has by no means been forgotten and that several countries want to seriously consider recognising it. Relatives and organisations in the diaspora of Bangladeshis will also not allow the genocide of their family members to be forgotten. The Netherlands can play an important role in the European Union in the process that will ultimately lead to international recognition of the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh. Through cooperation with the US and the United Kingdom, the first steps towards recognition can be taken.