

ESSAY

On wars and words

TASHFIA AHMED

*Karar oi louho kopat
Bhenge fel kor re lopat rokto-jomat
Shikol pujar pashan-bedi!*

I was about seven or eight years old when I first heard these lines sung in the boisterous chorus of the little boys from my class as our music teacher played the harmonium in preparation of a Victory Day cultural program. I couldn't comprehend a single word being uttered—and yet it sounded like a wacry. And yet, I felt something rise up in me: a kindling fire, a burning spirit, a scorching desire to seize something. Generally, the fervour invoked by this lyric penned by bidrohi kobi Nazrul is attributed to the musical beat of the song and its fast-paced tempo. However, with whatever knowledge of poetic metre and phonetics I have now, I can trace some credit to the frequent usage of plosives like /k/, /p/, and /t/ as well as the rapid back and forth between the trochaic and iambic metres. Read or sung as per the maestro's intended rhythm, it sounds like an organised chaos. And I think that's exactly what wars are—organised chaos.

From what I hear from my nana nana who are freedom fighters, the most iconic lyricism that reigns the Victory Day celebrations in our country and what I can piece together as a Bangladeshi citizen perceiving the muktijuddho from the distance of time, is that the glorification of soldiers and their efforts asserts a dominant presence over all other themes of war. It is a sentiment echoed in the odes of Horace: "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," i.e. it's sweet and proper to die for one's country. "Dulce et Decorum est" says the title of Wilfred Owen's famous war poem—but this time, more ironically so, as Owen strips the glory and glamour attached to a soldier's valour to expose the gore and grime of its reality: "Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots, /But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind; /Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots /Of gas-shells dropping softly behind." And this is not even the goriest of the images that Owen paints with his words. Reading what the poisonous gas does to the soldier that falls short of time to put his gas mask on would easily arise revulsion and horror in any reader; and Owen contrasts that very horrid image with only two simple words underscoring how behind those visions of violence lies a blameless happenstance: "Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—". With just two words, Owen



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

makes the reader reconsider the person behind the propaganda-inspired grandeur of a soldier's image. It's just an ordinary man; it's just someone as inconsequential to the grand schemes of the organised chaos of wars as your brother or the neighbour's teenage son.

The hollow feeling I get from this epiphany is very similar to the effect created by the words of poet Shamsur Rahman in the opening lines of his poem "Asader Shirt". The disparity between the blood stains on Asad's shirt and what they're metaphorised as (the red of typically beautiful things like oleanders and sunsets) births a chilling irony. And yet, that same air of glorification presides over the images of horror. When I contrast this against the similar techniques of Mahmoud

Darwish in "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies", the effect is markedly different, perhaps because Darwish's soldier belongs to the opposition and his stoic commitment to the atrocities of war does not warrant any sympathy. Nevertheless, Darwish still manages to humanise this soldier with his longing for the softer things in life—"[his] mother's coffee," "lemon flowers", and of course, "white lilies." The polarising effects created by Darwish's contrasting imageries of war and the soldier's dreams are exactly what makes this poem, in my opinion as a thinking observer of wars, so praiseworthy in its intent. Because wars are never one-sided, thus their victims aren't always just the oppressed but often the oppressor too—particularly the hands that commit its carnage

directly—as apparent from Darwish's soldier dreaming about a life of safety ("Homeland for him, he said, is to ... return safely, /at nightfall").

With that, when I come back to questioning why the words of the war poems and lyrics dominating the muktijuddho's narrative, in spite of all its vigour and evocativeness, feels overwhelmingly one dimensional in its tones of glorification—I finally realise that it is rightfully so. And why not? These words are not just some veils adorning the valour and victory of our freedom fighters; they're not just tributes but testaments to the rare occasion of the oppressed overpowering the oppressor. These words are powerful. But why is it so important for these words to be of poesy or musical lyricism? Because

speech is ephemeral; because stories get corrupted by the passage of time (ref: the telephone game, folklore, history texts). But poems and songs are much more eternal. And yet there's more: I recall my index finger breaking its monotone of swiping up each reel on my Instagram feed as my attention is captured by the resonant voice of a boy—a child—reading out his poetry to an audience of hundreds of protesters, an open-letter where he apologises to his friend at Gaza over the guilt of a privileged life. I feel the ghost of a memory rekindling something. I recall my poet friend, Raian Abedin, praising Ilya Kaminsky's "We Lived Happily During the War." I read it and feel the dwindling flames in me fanned by a gust of shame and guilt. I recall Asad uncle, a distant relative and beloved mentor, recounting to me how he had sneaked out from home at the age of 19 to fight for freedom; how he would listen to Hemanta Mukherjee's "Maago Tomar Bhabna Keno" at the military training camp and simultaneously shed tears for a glimpse of his mother while trying to harden his heart for whatever reality had in store for him. To this, I feel the flame in me give out with a sigh tinged in shades of blue.

All this is to essentially say that the words of verse are far more efficient in terms of the emotions they elicit. I am thinking of Shamsur Rahman's "Shadhinota Tumi" and the lyrics of Gobinda Halder's "ek shagor rokter binimoye Banglar shadhinota anle jara, amra tomader bhulbo na" as I'm writing this—and I'm thinking of how these verses help me reconcile with my national identity more intimately than any amount of textbook knowledge of the muktijuddho ever could. I am thinking of Rupri Kaur's moving words penned in tribute to a fellow belated Palestinian poet. I am thinking of the language of resistance in the verses of Anna Akhmatova, much more subdued but just as effective as Kazi Nazrul Islam; of the poetic prowess of Bangabandhu's 7th March speech; of the language of protest in placards saying "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free"; and of Instagram reels exposing the Zionist terrorism. Ultimately, my deconstruction of national and international war poetry reconstructed into slices of epiphanies has helped me to arrive at this one conclusion: that words hold the power to wage wars much stronger than any weapons, depending upon how well we wield them.

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REFLECTIONS

The sarees and the stories we inherit

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It was only in my third year of university, in a class for South Asian Literature, that I came upon Razia Khan's *The Enchanted Delta* (2020). The story offers a rare image of Dhaka as the centre of a newly independent nation, as experienced by a 20-something year old woman named Selina. The events that unfold are simple and unremarkable. But through it, the author alludes to the pitfalls of building a new nation and explores the responsibilities of each gender in the collaborative creation of a new national and cultural identity. It examines the post-colonial hangover entrenched deep in Dhaka society. And it depicts, on a smaller, more intimate scale, the critical period of the post-Liberation era, which was foundational to the creation of the identity that we have since inherited. One that is constantly shifting even today.

I must admit however that it wasn't the pertinent questions raised about class privileges or the thoughtful rumination over the corrupt leadership that first made me fall in love with the story. It was getting to see a picture, a small glimpse, a microcosm of my mother's Dhaka, that made me greedily flip over the pages. It was the joy of experiencing, for the first time, reading a story that featured places of the city that both my mother and I have stood in the midst of, perhaps in the same exact spot, at very different times. I found myself underlining every casual mention of places like TSC, Banani, Gulshan 2 Circle, even the traffic jam at the rail crossing in Mohakhali, for no other reason other than the novelty of finding in a book, parts of my city from another time.

For the first time, I also found myself giddy over a male protagonist from the world of my father and uncles. The

character of Nadeem, Selina's boyfriend, can be best described as a "man written by a woman". The interactions between Nadeem and Selina showcase a relationship of mutual respect and understanding where neither tries to undermine the other, which is refreshing to see in the portrayal of relationships between men and women in South Asian literature of its time. The first time Nadeem goes over to Selina's house reminded me that tenderness and romance does not belong only to the Darcys and Elizabeths of the literary world. Such references to women's desire or their inner lives are so rare in contemporary Bangladeshi literature that it took me entirely by surprise. From the flowers Nadeem puts in her hair, to the moments of tension passing between them in the form of longing gazes and charged silences to the culmination of all of this yearning into a passionate kiss. It reminded me that such romance existed not only in Victorian ballrooms and the English countryside but also right here, in the bustling streets and quiet corners of my city.

Interestingly, Selina is not from the margins of society but rather the very top. She is a woman of privilege, the bonafide "Gulshan girl". And yet every time she steps out of her privileged circle, she is haunted by the dualities of life in the city. At once self-aware and also deeply flawed, there is an air of superiority and a degree of hypocrisy in her perception of herself. On one hand, she proudly rejects Western conventions, choosing to wear sarees in Europe to represent her culture and promoting Bengali literature. On the other hand, she takes considerable pride in seamlessly fitting into English society and looks down on those who can't do the same. These details humanise Selina's character, raising important questions about the privileges of class and the

hypocrisy of internalised otherness among contemporary, third world subjects. While Selina is a representation of hybridity or inbetweenness, other characters like Maruf and Sheila depict instances of colonial mimicry. It left me wondering how one can ever really define their cultural identity in this increasingly globalised, postcolonial world. And if doing so is ever entirely devoid of hypocrisy or appropriation.

I find history is often better understood through connections and parallels—between past and present, personal and public. It creates room for reflection that is unenforced. A story like *The Enchanted Delta* offers a refreshing account of the kind of personal history and feminine subjectivity that is largely absent in our literature. Much has changed in Dhaka since Selina's time and yet, like the traffic jam in Mohakhali, much has remained the same. To me, this story is memorable because it evokes a rare feeling of familiarity and representation: of imagining life in past versions of places I walk through today.

Selina, in her green-bordered Tangail saree, having kashundi and Pabda fish over sheetal mats, represents a story similar to that of the women in my life. Whose Tangail sarees and Rajshahi silks I've now inherited. And while the "desi fits" I source from my mother's wardrobe form an integral part of my own cultural expression, they are accompanied by the acknowledgement of the personal histories and unrecorded sacrifices that are contained within those six yards of fabric.

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PHOTO: MAISHA SYEDA

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