

LITERARY CURTAINS

‘All Quiet on the Western Front’: Reverberating despair and dread through a theatrical production

Certain conversations and dialogues have remained with me and I’m sure they had a similar effect on everyone in attendance. For example, when a soldier dies, he is just a cadaver to be left to rot and not something to risk one’s life for in the hopes of giving it a proper burial; friendship “doesn’t matter” during a “bloody war”.

NOORA SHAMSI BAHAR

All Quiet on the Western Front (Little, Brown and Company, 1929), a semi-autobiographical novel authored by a German World War I veteran, Erich Maria Remarque, is one of the greatest anti-war works of literature—one that was published nearly a century back and still holds relevance today. The 2022 film adaption on Netflix, directed by Edward Berger, is nothing short of a cinematic masterpiece, and so visceral and marrow-chilling is its realistic portrayal of the horrors of trench warfare that it kept me glued to the screen all throughout. To that end, I didn’t miss the chance to watch a Bangla dramatic adaptation at the National Theatre, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy last weekend. Having watched seasoned director Bakar Bakul’s three other plays in the past, I knew it would be an experience I wouldn’t want to miss.

I’m not certain what made Bakul choose such a text (adapted for the stage by Runa Kanchan) for theatrical production, given how difficult it may be to present scenes from the frontlines and the German trenches on to the confines of a stage, but the set design, lighting, sound effects, costumes, and props created an immersive and realistic experience for the audience. Visual representation such as dilapidated trench walls that were barely shielding the unprepared, untrained, underaged child soldiers, auditory elements such as artillery fire and bombardments, and atmospheric effects such as the use of smoke were thoughtfully utilised. Moreover, the juxtaposition of dim, cool lighting to evoke the destitute condition of the soldiers and harsher, dramatic lighting to convey danger and threat left a beautifully disturbing impact. And lastly, the most magical stage prop was the drop of a larger-than-life pendulum at the center of the stage, one that swayed to and fro—covering the entire length of the stage’s backdrop—reminding both the characters and the audience that the war was almost over, and at the same time, bringing about a feeling of dreaded suspense.



PHOTOS: SHADAB SHAHROKH HAI

As far as the plot goes, Bakul did justice to the original, portraying how war propaganda drove teenage boys to get enlisted at a time when men were scarce. “Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori”—“it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country”—a quote from the Roman poet Horace, was taught to the German school boys, and they didn’t know any better. After all, it’s not like the reality of war was publicised and information wasn’t at their fingertips as it is today. The enchantment of becoming men in uniforms drove naïve boys to assume that the war was more like a rite of passage or a show of machismo—one that they would surely win and come back from as glorious victors/heroes, worthy of the attention of young women. Little did they know that they’d have to bury

everything that made them human, i.e., their conscience, will power, and humaneness, and become more like programmed robots or puppets—mere pawns that were to blindly carry out orders in an abominable hellhole that they couldn’t have fathomed even in their worst nightmares. The losses of both bodily autonomy as well as boyish innocence were heavily highlighted in multiple scenes. And so, instead of becoming the strong men they aspired to be, the characters became tormented souls, not knowing if the next minute will be their last, and in one instance, walking right into a death trap, as a result of being driven mad by the overwhelming distress of it all.

Certain conversations and dialogues have remained with me and I’m sure they had a similar effect on everyone in

attendance. For example, when a soldier dies, he is just a cadaver to be left to rot and not something to risk one’s life for in the hopes of giving it a proper burial; friendship “doesn’t matter” during a “bloody war”. Empathy for a comrade soon disappears when a soldier loses a leg and has no use for the good pair of boots his mother had given him; his boots become the subject of selfish interest, while his painful cries fall on deaf ears. In another scene, the soldiers don’t even know what started the war and the reason itself—that one nation had insulted another—is so ridiculous that they laugh an eerie laugh, which left me unnerved. War is an instrument to bring fame to politicians and “war is just a fucking business” for the weapons industry. When Paul, the protagonist, knifes a Frenchman, he

is engulfed in remorse. He wonders if a different uniform is all it takes to make another man his enemy. He says, quite emphatically, “War is nothing but murder”—a universal truth that can be applied to the wars and genocides we come across in the news every day. Interestingly, audience members were given a “Daily Bullet-In” (a play with words), designed to look like a newspaper, which has headlines and pictures of the murderous wars Paul refers to.

As for any constructive criticism I may have to offer, in scenes involving actors who were supposed to speak in French, they spoke mostly gibberish. The actresses playing the role of French girls in particular couldn’t even mimic French intonation or accent. That being said, the fact that there was a gutsily-choreographed, heated love scene between German soldiers and French girls that bordered on soft-porn sent home the message that human cravings to be touched, felt, and loved cannot be withheld by differences in race or language barriers. And finally, at the end, when Paul is fatally shot ironically at the moment when armistice is declared, his metamorphosis into a supposed dancing Monarch butterfly added a nice choreographic touch, but the Casper-the-friendly-ghost-like costume seemed a little off. Perhaps a white shroud was what the director had in mind?

The amount of physical and mental energy the actors had to exert into putting up such a stellar two-hour-long performance is truly commendable. The actor who played the role of the German General in particular, despite being a flat, side-character, was possibly my favorite, because he managed to instill a strong sense of hatred towards his character, given that he was the indefatigable puppet-master and the sole reason why ceasefire was not declared earlier.

Noora Shamsi Bahar is a senior lecturer at the Department of English and Modern Languages, North South University, and a published researcher and translator.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A primeval, timeless phantasm

Review of ‘Ghoramasudke Niye Rupnogorer Lokjoner Jotpakano Golpogujober Biboron’ (Mowla Brothers, 2005) by Mashiul Alam

NAFIS SHAHRIAR

How does one write about history? Certainly, there is the straight-forward, head-on approach, where a historical period is confronted directly by populating it with historical/fictional characters and portraying the times through their eyes. I’m not one to disparage this tactic. *Crutch Er Colonel* (Mowla Brothers, 2009) is a good example, and it certainly gives one a peek into the turbulent times post-71, a much-needed peek that puts a lot of our inheritance into perspective. *The Magic Mountain* (Secker and Warburg, 1927) is one of my favorite novels, and through its mixture of allegory and trenchant socio-ideological critique—beyond giving us an understanding of the ailments of Europe that led to the first world war—it also touches on universal themes such as love, societal progress, and time.

But when it gets right down to it, what differentiates one historical period from another? For context, what are the primary differences between 1971 and something recent such as 2024? The specific circumstances can be different, but it has always appeared to me that the primary agents of history are the same, and it is through focusing on these agents that we can gain a deeper understanding—something that hopefully will let us stop the cycle of time from repeating. Mashiul Alam

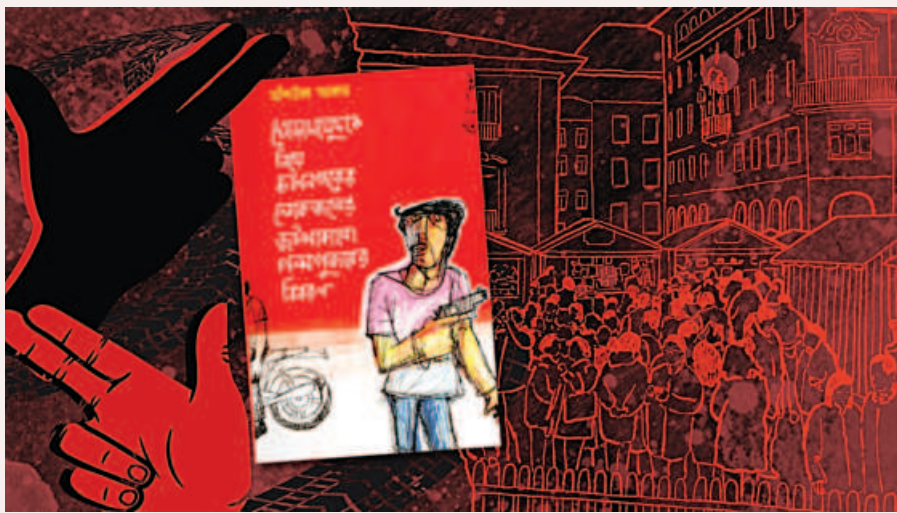


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

seems to agree, and in his *Ghoramasudke Niye Rupnogorer Lokjoner Jotpakano Golpogujober Biboron*—he takes a macro-level perspective to examine the history of Bangladesh—a period primarily spanning the rule of Ayub Khan, 1971, Sheikh Mujib, Ziaur Rahman, Ershad, and the successors of Mujib and Zia, finally stopping in the final years of BNP’s rule in the early 2000s when the fear of crossfires were at an all-time high; when the fear of criminals seemed unassailable. In doing so, Alam has focused on a number of agents when it comes to

the history of Bangladesh; particularly, how the people in power have always used the people of this country as sheep, and how this power has always been ineluctably linked to violence.

From the title of this book, it should be clear that the novel focuses on the titular Ghora Masud—a government sponsored criminal who has been a sort of a boogeyman for the people of Rupnagar from time immemorial. The title also suggests that the novel will focus on how the people of Rupnagar talk about Ghora

Masud, but a few chapters in and it becomes clear that the people of Rupnagar talk about things besides Ghora Masud as well—conversing about the charisma of Mujib and then jumping onto how he celebrated his birthday with an insanely huge cake when the nation suffered from a famine, conversing about the bravery of the local freedom fighters and about how they took money to facilitate the release of a Rajakar, conversing about how criminals in the town used to maintain a certain decorum before they got backing from the government, etc. Through such colorful, multifaceted discussion, the people of Rupnagar are certainly portrayed as a diverse, complex bunch—with their admiration for criminality on one page and their appeals to religion in the other—and the book can certainly be read as vivisection of a small community in the face of greater social and political changes, the community acting as stand-in for myriads of communities like this throughout Bangladesh.

So, how does one write about history? What Alam does particularly well is not affording greater importance to one historical period over another. By taking a macro-level perspective and a large dataset, he is able to examine a huge swathe of history all at once—identifying the motifs and repetitions to strike at the primary agents. What he stumbles on is something that should be apparent to anyone who

casts a somewhat objective, unbiased glance towards the past: no matter which side wins, the fate of the people scarcely ever changes. It doesn’t matter if it’s Pakistan or Bangladesh that’s calling the shots, it doesn’t matter if it’s Awami League or BNP or the decades of military dictatorship we’ve slept through: the structures and the mechanisms through which power is yielded and exercised in Bangladesh never change; on the contrary, whoever comes into power becomes wholly integrated into this infernal process.

There is scarcely a sense of continuity in the novel; the structure eliminates any sense of temporality, showcasing the people of Rupnagar living in a nebulous, muddled sphere that is void of memory. Their memory is circular, continually self-effacing and incomplete—touching on one of the most important and pitiful facets of history: regular people living through history like zombies. Sure, some are aware of the greater forces at work; some are even able to profit from the chaos. But for most people, history is like the tide of a downstream river; it takes up all their energies just to keep their head above water. Beyond that, most don’t even make an attempt.

This review has been abridged. Read the full article on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature’s* websites.

Nafis Shahriar is currently working in the Ed-Tech space.