

ESSAY

TWO AWAKENINGS: Reading ‘Dhorai Charita Manas’ and ‘Things Fall Apart’

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ALI TAREQUE

My readings of the two books—the subject of this write-up—happened to be on two momentous occasions, set two decades apart in utterly contrasting ways. The first was an awakening. The second was... well, also an awakening, albeit in a quite different sense. The two books in question are Satinath Bhaduri’s *Dhorai Charita Manas* (Bengal Publishers, 1963) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann, 1958). Before delving into the “momentousness”, let me note one difference between the two occasions.

While reading *Dhorai*, I felt a quiet solitude in which I stumbled upon a rare gem—one that, though lying in plain sight, had somehow remained hidden amid the vast, anonymous sea of books. My emotion was shared by few—an awakening to the unseen epic that was latent in our own soil. *Things Fall Apart*, on the other hand, was already riding the glorious, western, shiny crest of the highest wave of worldwide recognition—that brought about a realisation as to how under-translated and under-represented Bengali literature is, even as a similar epic form lived fully in another colonised world.

Back in the mid-90s, Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed of Biswa Sahitya Kendra sent someone to the BUET campus to fetch me for his newly formed study circle—Biswa Shaitya Chakra, which he described as the echelon of all study circles at Kendra. Among many famous books we read and discussed, *Dhorai* had the most unassuming title—its rusticity and backwardness perfectly setting up the biggest surprise upon reading.

I remember Ahmad Mazhar’s reaction resonating exactly with mine, validating it: “As I was reading this book, I felt an enormous shame—how come I had never even heard of this novel, let alone read it?”

I became an instant admirer of Satinath Bhaduri and soon went on to read his other works—the awe never ceasing to inspire. Yet I carried the unease of being a lonely wolf placing Bhaduri on such a high pedestal, sensing a widespread paucity of his recognition—until one day.

On television, Shawkat Osman was asked about his favourite writer. “You may not recognise him—not someone very well known,” he began. “Satinath Bhaduri,” he declared. I felt redeemed. Later, of course, I saw Bhaduri’s stock begin to rise in our literary society.

As for *Things Fall Apart*, I first became aware of its celebrated existence soon after moving to the United States,



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

around the turn of the millennium. Web searches for the “top 100 books” kept returning Achebe’s title near the top. Intrigued, I made a few attempts to read it, but each was thwarted by other urgencies.

Then, in 2014, after an exhilarating literary discussion with a Brazilian educator of African descent—an excitable client and friend—he expressed shock that I hadn’t read *Things Fall Apart* yet. He insisted I do so immediately, lent me his copy, and extracted a promise that I would finish it within two days. I complied. It set a big rock rolling—a story for another time. What matters here are the thoughts that passed through my mind before that rock was tipped off.

Two decades separated my readings of the two books, yet the memetic gap was bridged instantaneously. So much of *Things Fall Apart* reminded me of *Dhorai Charita Manas*. “The absence of author!” That was my first reaction. I had no idea—almost as if by providence—of the writer or person Bhaduri was when I first read *Dhorai*. The same was true of Achebe when I began *Things Fall Apart*. Neither author intruded upon the reading experience with their person. In both,

the characters are self-sustained, the narration local, the conflicts raw and internally charged. Judgment is not absent but expressed only in the moral idiom of the indigenous. Globality is kept rigorously at bay—spatially and temporally.

If I had not recognised that Gandhi was being referred to as Ganhi Bawa, I would never have known the time period of *Dhorai*. Not a single mention of the British Raj, if my memory serves. Nor in *Things Fall Apart*, until the very last leg of Okonkwo’s journey. As a reader from a different world, I was equally in the dark about the historical moment of Achebe’s tale. This authorial invisibility is perhaps the most significant quality that places these two novels among the highest in the literary canon.

The next recognition was structural. Both heroes are born of uncelebrated backgrounds; both exhibit off-the-shelf heroism; both face mimetic incidents that drive them into exile; both achieve renewed leadership and return home seeking restoration, only to meet inevitable downfall. The parallels are almost architectural. The resemblance made me wonder if one writer had influenced the other. But realising that *Things Fall Apart* was written nearly

a decade later, and that an English-speaking Nigerian could scarcely have encountered an untranslated Bengali novel, I turned to the possibility of historical convergence—the twin consciousness of colonised worlds wrestling with moral collapse.

To expand further on their mirrored odyssey is to find more reflections still. Both emerge from familial backgrounds that epitomise societal vice: the dubious moral circumstances of *Dhorai*’s mother, and Okonkwo’s father—a failure within the Igbo value system. Both men strive to transcend inherited shame through the pursuit of dignity and order, only to commit acts that destabilise their moral standing (Okonkwo’s killing of Ikemefuna; *Dhorai*’s compromised role in rebellion and violence). Both endure exile and return, their homecomings culminating in futile redemption.

Beyond these parallels lie the more predictable correspondences of two postcolonial masters: the documentation of vanishing indigenous orders, the erosion of spiritual leadership. And, overarching all, a universal phenomenon—the empire as an unseen gravitational force, not a character but a condition—making

their tragedies less about conquest than about internal corrosion.

Contrasts are not my subject here, but one deserves mention: the titles. Achebe borrows from a contemporary poem, “The Second Coming”; Bhaduri, by contrast, invokes the archaic and rustic cadence of *Ramcharitmanas*, a half-millennium-old epic. One gestures outward to the modern world; the other descends into the folk-epic soil of its own.

I often wonder how *Dhorai Charita Manas* would fare if translated and placed alongside *Things Fall Apart* in the global run for the great-novel canon. The crowd mind may be unpredictable, but in my private hierarchy, *Dhorai* would stand a few rungs higher—its quiet moral resonance reaching further than its fame ever has.

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NONFICTION

Kumu: Meye bela

Chapter 2, section 1

LAZEENA MUNA

Kumu was born five years after Peara. Five long, whisper-filled years. Peara, the third child, the first son, the long-awaited heir who arrived with the weight of joy and expectation. Before him came Bulbul and Tuntun—two girls with soft feet and striking beauty—and after him came silence. A pause. A space too wide to ignore.

In those in-between years, the house in Bogra filled with questions the way courtyards fill with laundry: daily, uninvited, flapping in the wind. What had gone wrong? How could one son carry the lineage? The house must be filled with children. Was it the evil eye? A curse? Something Nani had eaten, or not eaten? Something her body had forgotten to do? Everyone had an opinion. Suggestions arrived wrapped in pity. Boiled herbs. Aluminum amulets. Unpronounceable oils from faraway villages. Someone suggested sleeping under a new moon. Someone else, an old aunt with no children of her own, whispered of dark water, “phoo” (breathing), and old gods.

Nani bore it all in silence. Not the noble, defiant kind. Just the worn-down, practical quiet of a woman already raising three children and a thousand invisible demands that didn’t wear names but still drifted through her house every day—loud, invisible, and constant as breath. There was no time for tears. Not in front of others. Not even in secret.

She folded her disappointment into her sarees, into the soft pleats she tucked beneath



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

her navel each morning, into the threadbare ones that smelled of turmeric and firewood, and the crisp white one she saved for Fridays, starched like hope.

She stitched her shame into kanthas, old sarees reborn as stories. Of women bent like question marks, of birds mid flight, of fish with eyes too wide. She chose her threads like memories, green for envy, red for rage, blue for waiting. Every stitch, a silence; every color a wound softened by time. She wasn’t just stitching warmth. She was stitching grief into flowers and leaves. Stitching longing into patterns that didn’t ask for explanations. She stitched to keep her hands busy. She stitched to hold something still before it

slipped away again.

And then, as if by accident, as if her body remembered something the mind had stopped hoping for, there was Kumu. Kumkum. Born in Bogra, in the back room of a house that held its breath for her. Her birth was witnessed not by doctors or nurses, but by her mother, her grandmother, and two watchful sisters—hands steady, hearts braced.

Outside, the mulberry trees stood bare-boned and brittle by the hemanta air, their last yellow leaves clinging like rumours—whispered, half-believed—rustling stories of a summer long gone. Their branches reached crookedly into the dusk, sketching ink-thin lines against a sky bleeding vermilion. In the

corner of the courtyard, a cow lowed softly, calling her calf home with the insistence of instinct.

And inside, the house, heavy with the scent of kamini blossoms and the stillness of waiting, sharpened by the anxious waiting for a life to arrive. Three generations of women braced themselves. Knees pressed to cold floors. Sarees tucked in. Eyes unwavering. They held their breath between contractions. Folded screams into silence. Swallowed pain, swallowed joy—lips sealed tight with centuries folded inside. They carried their mothers’ losses and their daughters’ hopes in the quiet strength of their spines. Water boiled. Invocations were murmured. Sweat and tears ran together, wiped away with the threadbare end of a saree.

And then, without ceremony, with the muted explosion only birth knows, they made space. Raw, wide, aching space for one more girl. In a world that never gave them space unless they carved it out themselves, where every inch of space had to be earned in silence and struggle.

Kumu arrived in the folds of a kantha Nani had stitched for this day—sewn from worn sarees and older sorrows. She was received into hands that had stirred pots and buried grief, that raised daughters on the strength of dreams never spoken, only carried.

After Kumu, the children came like rain on a metal roof. Tultul, two years later, wide-eyed and always reaching. Then Bacchu, Faruk, and finally Lucky, the last—the lightest, the one Nani cradled with the exhausted love. Eight children in total. And

Nani stopped. Not because she chose to. But because her body, one day, simply said “enough”. It whispered no in a language only women’s bones understand. Her hips refused. Her womb closed like a fist. Her strength, once infinite, began to slip quietly out of her joints, like water from a leaky pot.

When people asked her why she stopped, she didn’t give them reasons. She gave the truth to her.

“Bochorer e matha ar o mathai shudhu atur ghar,” she would mutter half under her breath, half into the pillow she was thumping into shape. Speaking to no one, yet heard by all. That year, to her, was nothing but a blur of birth: her cradle at one end of the bed, someone else’s screams of labour at the other. A year bookended by blood and breath, swaddled beginnings and sweat-soaked ends.

And that was that.

No ceremony. No announcement. Just the quiet retreat of a woman who had birthed eight children, survived the gossip, the bleeding, the endless boiling of milk and pain and still managed to cook two meals a day with very little help available.

“Kumu” is a living memoir of Selina Hossain’s early life, told through carefully chosen themes reimagined by her daughter.

Lazeena Muna writes occasionally, weaving together gender and politics, and often exploring memory, movement, and meaning.