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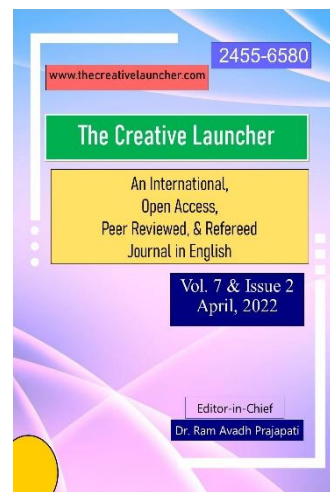
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☞ Research Article

Expectation vs Reality: A Dystopian Presentation of Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat*

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Abstract

The Liberation War of Bangladesh is groundbreaking event in the history of South Asia. Under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the people of the then East Pakistan went into an uneven war against Pakistan. The aim was to build Bangladesh on the principles of equality and justice. Bangladesh would be a free corruption-less democratic country. But after independence all these principles were vanished and the leaders of the country became corrupted from head to the toe. They kept themselves busy to make their own fortune instead of providing a good governance to the citizen. The famine of 1974 is the worst manifestation of terrible administration of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Millions of people died during that time

due to the lack of responsibility of the government. But Sheikh Mujib never held him responsible, instead he admitted only 26000 deaths from starvation. Neamat Imam brings this sad truth of Sheikh Mujib's administration through his artistic representation of the famine of 1974 in his novel *The Black Coat*. Rich with political statements this novel unfolds the rather darker side of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his sense of irresponsibility during the tough period of 1974 famine.

Keywords: Liberation War, Famine, Equality, Democracy, Government, Justice, Marginalized, Starvation

Neamat Imam is a Bangladeshi-Canadian author of international repute. He comes to fame with the publication of his first novel *The Black Coat* in 2013. It belongs to the category of very few Bangladeshi literary pieces which does not blindly celebrate the heroic achievements of Bangladesh in the 1971 Liberation War, rather it questions the subsequent failures of the government to ensure a healthy prosperous living of the people of Bangladesh. In this novel he brings an unfettered eye to one man's attempt to live through the catastrophic famine that occurred just few years after independence. The fatalistic famine of 1974 in Bangladesh which destroyed numerous lives is the subject matter of this novel. Instead of depicting Sheikh Mujib as a hero and the real idealistic prime Minister of Bangladesh, he presents him as an absolute tyrant, as a man whose hunger for pomp and power leads him to disregard his duty towards country. Rather than presenting and acknowledging the true facts of famine of 1974 which claimed the lives of millions of Bangladeshi people, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman denied death from starvation of so many people. Neamat Imam went on to depict the grim reality of Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during the famine period.

There are two main characters in the novel- Khaleque Biswas and Nur Hussain. The narrator Khaleque Biswas is a journalist keen on depicting the grim reality of Bangladesh after independence. As ill luck would have it, he loses his job and all his principles, values and sense of judgement are washed away with it. Losing his job, he was passing his time sitting in his room. At this time Nur Hussain comes to him in the hope of getting a job in Dhaka. When Biswas realizes that Nur lacks any basic skill and is only adept at mimicking the famous 7th March speech of Sheikh Mujib, he starts organizing corner shows to earn money. While delivering the speech of Sheikh Mujib at the street corner, they come to the notice of local leader Moina Mia and then to the notice of the man they have been mimicking, Sheikh Mujib himself. These politicians take full advantage of Hussain's talent to subdue the growing displeasure among the masses. With the inflow of money Biswas' upright character withers away but Nur evolves from being a mere puppet of Biswas to being a vocal critique of Sheikh Mujib from the experience he gathered while visiting across the country to deliver Sheikh Mujib's speech. He sees poverty, starvation, corruption, misrule, black market, deplorable conditions of the slums, prosperity of the political leaders under leadership of Mujib. He holds Sheikh Mujib responsible for country's miserable conditions as he is the ruler of Bangladesh

and becomes a vocal critique of him by labeling him to a blood hungry monster. Khaleque Biswas who by now a blind supporter of Mujib can no longer tolerate this rebellion of Nur Hussain and warns him not to speak ill of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. When Nur goes against his instruction and criticize him, Khaleque kills him in a grotesque manner. The story of the novel ends thus.

From this story it can be said that Neamat Imam is keen to show the dark sides of the political leaders of Mujib's government. The Liberation War of Bangladesh was fought to liberate it from the clutches of West Pakistan and to make it a democratic country. The aim was to build Bangladesh on the principles of equality. It would be a corruption free country. In the pre independence Bangladesh Mujibur Rahaman enjoyed an overwhelming popularity. People obeyed his instruction to the fullest degree. But after independence his popularity suffers a drastic change. Sheikh Mujib becomes the president in 1971 and then prime Minister in 1972. The new found power of authority makes him rather autocratic. Immediately after independence Bangladesh plunges into corruption and political chaos which he fails to curb. The rich become more affluent and the poor becomes poorer. In fact, after independence Bangladesh becomes a dystopian reality. The difference between reality and experience becomes more and more clear in coming years.

A dystopia is a community in existence in a chaotic condition. It is almost opposite of Utopia. The term 'Utopia' is coined by Sir Thomas Moore in 1516 which presents an ideal imaginative society with no or less crime, equality among people and no existence of binary or hierarchical ranks. A dystopian society presents a blue print of social, political and economical scenario which are completely undesirable or unwanted in Utopia. Fear and distress, autocratic government, environmental disaster, oppression and suppression etc. are main characteristics of dystopian society. Among many features of dystopia mention may be made of the following:

1. Complete control over the people in a society through the usage of propaganda
2. Heavy censoring of information or denial of free thought
3. Worshipping an unattainable goal
4. The individuality of a person sinks into oblivion in a dystopian society.

Despite certain flaws dystopian fiction is different from post-apocalyptic fiction. Many authors in their writings depicts dystopian society to show their discomfort with it and the dangers it presents to the world. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* is considered to be the finest exam of dystopian fiction. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 251*, Neamat Imam *The Black Coat* are others examples of dystopian fiction. A dystopian novel presents a catastrophe in society, environment, politics, economics, psychology, ethics, science, religion etc. The dangers posed by totalitarian state is the foremost theme of a dystopian novel and the readers are drawn towards its adverse effects.

Now it is important to know how far the features of dystopia are found in Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat*. Khaleque Biswas, the journalist who was an ardent supporter of Sheikh Mujib became completely disillusioned when the famine made havoc on Bangladesh. He was ousted from his job as a journalist when he started writing critical pieces about Sheikh

Mujib's government depicting the poverty ridden condition of Bangladesh. Losing his job, he spent time in his home listening the famous 7th March speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman which stirred the people of Bangladesh to sacrifice themselves for independence. He found Nur Hussain, sent to him for employment, to be completely incapable of doing anything but for one astounding quality- the incredible capacity of making artistic mimicry of Sheikh Mujib's speech. Khaleque conjures up a cunning plan to get money from the people by delivering the speech here and there. Noticed by Moina Mia they were employed by him and Sheikh Mujib to deliver the lecture at public gathering to draw sympathy from the people.

This novel shows the corrupting influence of power and a courage to put questions against the existing system and power. "When men become too powerful" says Abdul Ali, the personal assistant of Moina Mia, a member of parliament in Sheikh Mujib's government, "God stops thinking". (Imam, *The Black Coat*, 159) The comment is made in the context of a scene in which a man who is among country's starving masses has been arrested after stealing a bag of screws from a construction site and eating them. "I needed something heavy in my stomach, heavier than regular rice and egg and potato and milk" (Imam, 159). The man says by way of explanation "I did not want to go to bed only to wake up a hungry man in the morning" (Imam, 159). In topsy-turvy world of Imam's novel, this novel makes a bizarre kind of sense.

The novel is set just two years after the independence of Bangladesh when Mujibur Rahman was the Prime Minister. Power, money, greed and struggle for existence are the main themes of this novel. It is set against a backdrop when Bangladesh was going through the toughest period after independence- when the catastrophic famine sweeps the country. The inflow of refugees from around the country makes the situation even worse. Famine forces the starving people to lose their minds and break the laws and order to get food. Even in big cities like Dhaka laws and order suffers a breakdown. Daily thieves, burglary etc. show desperate conditions of the people during the famine. They are ready to do any despicable work to earn money or get some food.

After independence Bangladesh did not prosper as it had been thought to be. Huge unemployment and the scarcity of money led the people to march towards cities, particularly Dhaka. The narrator Khaleque Biswas, while evaluating the condition of the country, observed the dark sides of the country- "I saw hunger, dissatisfaction, rampant poverty, looting. It was only eighteen months into Bangladesh's independence and the country was falling into deep pit of brutality" (Imam, 23).

In 1974 Bangladesh suffers badly by the devastating famine which destroyed millions of lives. The famine was not the results of natural causes only. It is in fact the misrule of Bangladeshi government that made havoc on the lives of the people. There was widespread corruption, black market, oppression across the country in the rule of Sheikh Mujib. Mujibur Rahman's popularity suffered a significant setback in just two years after independence. Instead of looking forward to improve the condition of the country he only tried to maintain his public image by employing a number of innate supporters who only propagate his gorgeous benevolent character and by enforcing the belief that all the Bangladeshis are in a very

comfortable position even during the devastating famine. Here in this context Moina Mia makes use of Nur Hussein to draw public sympathy. The politicians leave no stone unturned to manipulate a portion of intellectual such as Khaleque Biswas to use their intellect to pacify public anger against government. It is obvious from the story of the novel that the Bangladeshi government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was more interested to keep public image of Sheikh Mujib intact than to make necessary arrangements to feed the hungry people. This irresponsible attitude of the government is symptomatic of a dystopian country. Like a dystopian country Bangladesh is also headed towards chaos due to irresponsible government. In this context a quotation from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is suitable:

No one believes more firmly than comrade Napoleon that all animals are equal. He would be only too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you make wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be? (Orwell, 55)

During the famine of 1974 the sufferings of the people of Bangladesh are beyond description. They could not eat for a long time. But as the novel shows the government did not take the necessary steps to curb black market which is one of the important factors of famine. They spoiled tons of food instead of distributing them to the poor people. This indifferent attitude on the part of the government is an indication of misrule and mockery of democracy. In this context Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* is relevant. In response to Mrs Sengupta's claim that Nature is responsible for country's starvation during Pakistani rule, Sohail retorts "Starvation is not caused by God. It is caused by irresponsible governments" (Anam, *The Golden Age*, p 29). In a way Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman resembles to that of East Pakistan under general Ayub Khan.

How long can any one endure such devastating scenes? How much his ability to tolerate such devastation survive? Man has a limit of tolerance and when the limit is crossed he turns against the system. This is the case with Nur Hussein. His wonderful art of mimicry opens the opportunity for him and Khaleque to roam across the country to deliver Sheikh Mujib's speech at various gatherings. This is done with aim of drawing public sympathy during famine. While traveling they witness the inhuman deplorable conditions of the poor people. Khaleque Biswas in his greed for money closes his eyes to the people's distress. But Nur Hussein gradually becomes distressed after seeing the condition of the people. As he comes from the village he feels affinity with those poor people who could not get enough food to fill their stomach during the famine. Therefore, a conflict arises between Khaleque and Nur which metaphorically represents the conflict between the powerful and powerless, between authoritative people and subaltern people. Nur comes to believe strongly that Sheikh Mujib is responsible for the suffering of the people. The Prime Minister himself enjoys a lofty standard of living while the poor people pines away for the shortage of foods. His concern for the safety of the people and his deep regret for the suffering of the people seem to be crocodile's tears. If he were really concerned for them, he would come out of his palace and make necessary arrangements to ensure that not a single people die due to starvation. But the contrary happens. In fact

corruption within government, black market stock flourished during his governance. In his book *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood* Anthony Mascarenhas notes;

By the summer of 1972 everything was going wrong for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. By June 1972 the price of paddy was well above the crisis level of Bangladesh.... Other essentials such as puffin, cooking oil, salt and soap well also difficult to come by because of the outrageous market manipulation. The country was in the grip of a severe money famine since unemployment... showed no signs of declining... And adding to the overall distress there was a pervasive lawlessness and violence. (Mascarenhas, 1986, page 22)

This is why Nur Hussein likens him to monster in one of his speeches:

‘My brothers,’ he said, in the most memorable tone of the 7 March speech, ‘I have stood here many times before. But I have not felt what I am feeling today. Today I can tell you that there is no hope in the words that I have spoken for so long, that they were words unconnected to our lives, to our dreams, our future. Look around you and tell me truthfully: where are all your brothers, your sisters, parents, children and neighbours; where are they, why aren’t they here with you now? They were not as lucky as you were because of the famine? No. We have won our luck in the victory in 1971. We have written our claim on hope forever by winning freedom. This is the mistake of one person and one person alone. I have struggled with myself hard but today I can tell you the truth: Sheikh Mujib has become a monster, and as I speak of my emptiness here, he is coming for you.’ (Imam, 177)

This speech proves fatal for him and he is killed by Khaleque Biswas. This act of silencing the voice of the downtrodden by the authority reinforces Spivak’s view that the subaltern cannot speak. Whenever they try to raise their voice against the injustices done to them, they are silenced by the oppressive mechanism of government. On a broader sense the murder represents the death of people’s consciousness by the exploitative tools of authority. It clearly shows that Bangladesh after independence has not become Utopia or relatively corruption free state, rather it has become a dystopia, a living hell. Distortion of truth is one of the chief features of a dystopian state. In 1974 famine although millions of people died, Mujibur Rahman acknowledged only 26000 death from starvation. The novel shows that the condition of the people was such that every needy is ready to do anything to get some money. Such as the small boy gets ready to bury dead body just for a few taka (Bangladeshi currency) even though he had no prior experience, the owner of a house allows other to take the body of the women who committed suicide when she is offered some rice and dal etc. According to Mohiuddin Ahmed the actions taken by the government to battle against the famine are not adequate. All of these shows the grim reality of the 1974 famine.

As the novel depicts sheikh Mujibur Rahman in a negative light, it undoubtedly creates a spark of criticism in Bangladesh. But for Imam, who successfully depicts the scenes of famine, the never-ending flow of refugees and above all the destruction of a Bangladeshi dream that was dreamt in 1971, the reactions could have been more and more argumentative. The credit

of presenting scenes of starvation that are completely realistic and pragmatic and not in the least imaginative goes to him. Through Khaleque Biswas and Nur Hussain, Imam shows that the belief in Sheikh Mujib as the saviour of the country is gradually losing its ground in Bangladesh. The novel climaxes with Biswas' despairing attempt to muffle the voice of this other truth. Imam uses one straightforward symbol in the novel to depict the dystopias presentation of Bangladesh- the use of black coat. Not only Hussein but the other characters in the novel begin to sport to reflect their frightening identification with a form of totalitarianism that swaps an ideology for power and greed.

In the end it can be said that Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat* is actually focusses on the dystopian presentation of a reality that Bangladesh faced after independence. Most of the literary figures shows only the heroism of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to snatch independence from the clutches of Pakistan against all odds. It is no denying the facts that though Mujibur Rahman was in Pakistan jail during the war of independence, he was the main inspiration of the freedom fighters. They went to join the Liberation War only because of him. But after independence his personality suffered a drastic change. It was for the first time that he was enjoying the absolute power as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. He didn't want to lose that power. Though he lost his popularity in only two years after independence, he could not think of anything than to retain his position as Prime Minister. This is why towards the end of 1974 he banned all the political parties except Awami League. This banning of party except one is indicative of his autocratic governance. In fact, during the famine of 1974 he didn't take necessary precautions to protect Bangladesh. Instead, to save his skin he acknowledged only 26000 death. Neamat Imam is the first writer to depict this distortion of truth through this novel *The Black Coat*, because people need to know both sides of Mujibur Rahman. In this novel through his gentle irony and delicacy of writing he presents him not as a hero, be as an anti-hero. He shows that Bangladesh has actually been turned into a dystopia under his regime.

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