



The Impact of Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat* and its Implications on the Nationalist History and Culture of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the apparently inviolable idea of a nation has become a subject of scrutiny in the Indian subcontinent. International and intranational conflicts in socio-political spheres of the region and the hegemonic rule by certain political ideologies has prompted a novel pluralistic view in the literary productions that has disrupted the long-held monolithic myth of nationalism. In recent times, a proliferation of Bangladeshi English fiction seems to have jumped onto the wagon of a different historiographical approach to existing nationalist metanarratives that have for so long stifled the voices that have developed their own nationalistic ideals. This paper explores how Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat* (2013) deconstructs the history of the early years of post-independence, a forgotten time in the collective memory of Bangladesh. It demonstrates that a representation of peripheral people enables the novel to create an alternative historical narrative that stands in stark contrast to established history. The paper's Subaltern leanings reinforce Imam's rejection of the indemnification of traditional nationalist history.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the nature of man's being is a result of imperfect memory of an imperfect past never to reach fullness and this unavoidable consciousness of history ultimately leads to both individual and collective suffering, which must be acknowledged [1]. For centuries, nationalist history has been thought to be a body of unalterable facts: singular and monolithic, always bearing a stamp of final authority. All nations are attributed with a metaphysical entity motivated by a supposedly shared culture and history and are founded on the same ideals of solidarity and brotherhood.

It was only in the latter half of the twentieth century that scholars and authors initiated a revision as regards the role of historical memory used by the advocates of traditional nationalism. At times, the *bhagya-vidhata*¹ of a nation does not seem as fair or the *shan-e-hal*² is something that shines only on a waving flag; a reactionary approach in the midst of crippling Partition (1947) neuroses that echo the hegemonic colonial power struggles. In former times, the British colonizers' justification rested on their civilising mission due to professed cultural superiority, whereas in the post-1947 era, a similar rationale has been provided; only this time, it has a manipulative historical dimension that limits nationalist culture to the advantage of pseudo-democratic nations. So the representations of the usually excluded, misrepresented or underrepresented parts of society offer a devaluation of the validity and status of an official history as the only narrative. It has opened a doorway for alternative histories that can potentially contest the already established historical metanarratives. In recent decades, writers from the Indian subcontinent have engaged in a pursuit of such narratives that challenge the apparent temporal linearity and ideological homogeneity of logo-centric nationalist discourses that try to suppress the inconvenient, undesired, yet valid elements of the past-present continuum and at the same time purport to extend their hegemonic control. Bangladesh has seen an unhealthy phase of power struggle that is dominated by the political

elites that deify certain historical figures in order to sustain their partisan ideals of Bangladeshi nationalism, while disregarding their glaring failures that endanger the founding principles of the country's constitution – nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism, ultimately leading to unending suffering among the masses. Very rarely does anyone see such blatant use of pervasive partisan history that renders a wholesome political atmosphere with diverse historical and nationalist perspectives impossible; a ploy that is vital for the continuation of traditional nationalism. Hence Bangladeshi writers of fiction have embarked on a similar task in order to challenge the hegemony of official historical narratives of the country. *The Black Coat* (2013) by Neamat Imam [2] a Bangladeshi-born Canadian writer, narrates one of the most significant phases in Bangladesh's history – between 1971 and 1975 – when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman [3]. The leader of the War of Independence, later dubbed the Father of the Nation by his ideological progeny, took the helm of the new-born nation after a nine-month bloody struggle against Pakistani occupation. However, this novel narrates a history that is not to be found in the traditional, highly politicized narratives of the country's past. It purports to give voice to the masses and their sufferings during the devastating famine of 1974. As opposed to the exclusivism of contemporary repressive official history that tries to sweep the inhuman sufferings of the people under the rug, the author puts their misfortunes at the centre, as the deluded central characters suffer from exclusion and grapple to come to terms with the pre-1971 ideas of unity and solidarity espoused by their leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The aim of this paper is to explicate how *The Black Coat* adopts a subaltern strategy in order to deconstruct one of the most significant periods in Bangladesh's history; how it tries to infuse certain degree of ambivalence towards the existing nationalist culture by rendering history pluralistic as opposed to what its most ardent advocates claim; in short, the implications of providing representation to the disenfranchised voices alongside those of the privileged ones, even though the former cannot be accommodated in traditional history books.

2. THE CONCEPT OF NATION AND BANGLADESH

Man cannot stand the thought of living alone or in so small a group that fails to ensure a relatively

¹ From the Indian national anthem; it translates to 'the dispenser of Destiny'

² From the Pakistani national anthem; it translates to 'the glory of the present'

safe and meaningful cultural existence. It is within the framework of a fully flourished culture, in modern context, a nationalist culture, that one actually exists as an entity elevated from the supposedly base animal world. Yet, in spite of being the most powerful form of socio-political unit since the advent of modernity, a complete definition of nation has always been elusive. Nonetheless, there are certain consensus that can be adopted as guiding principles for investigating the emergence, nature and evolution of nationalism, nation and nation-state. Due to a lack of critical insights in the novel, the remainder of this section focuses on these aspects of nationhood that apply specifically to the nation of Bangladesh.

Nations are born out of a set of varied sentiments of nationalism which is driven, as Anthony David Smith [4] puts it, by "a singular pursuit of nationhood". Nationalism is the result of two contradictory, yet mutually essential aspects of human psychology: division and unification [5]. Ultimately, an apparently natural sense of relatedness lays the foundation for a nation. This process of division, caused mostly by cultural and political hegemony, is followed by a desire for unity based on various cultural factors, such as language, religion and ethnicity, characterizes the violent, gradual birth of Bangladesh. Like all its South Asian counterparts, it has emerged gradually in phases of division and unification: one hundred and ninety years of British rule followed by the Partition of 1947, another twenty-four years as East Pakistan ending in a nine-month War of Independence culminating in freedom in 1971. At each stage, there was the desire for political secession and autonomy due to, on the one hand, the cultural diversity in the region, and on the other, the arbitrary and myopic departure of the British as well as the oppressive West Pakistani regime.

Next, according to Ernest Renan [6] the culturally diverse populations in terms of race, language, material interest, religious affinities, geography and military necessity are bound into a community by means of a historical process: a shared "rich legacy of memories" and "present-day consent" to consciously preserve this glorious past (pp. 19). In other words, it is a result of a symbiotic process in which past glories and present willingness create an apparently solidified communal entity. Here, the abovementioned desire meets history with a "quasimessianic fervour which attaches to their founders and leaders.... the men who led their nations to independence ... a new era of ...

justice and love". For Ernest Gellner [7] certain fundamental social conditions are essential for the birth of a nation, such as "standardised, homogeneous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire populations." The ideological values of these cultures become synonymous with the diverse ones of the entire nation and eventually turn into "natural repositories of political legitimacy", which is achieved by a strictly selective approach: a process of cultural transformation, inclusion and exclusion (pp. 55). In order to sustain the original sentiment of nationhood, the dominant ideological force sidelines a host of elements, such as varying cultures, religions and economic classes etc. As the newly formed nation assumes a more political (ideological) stature, the different cultural subjectivities of diverse communities are levelled off into an objective unity. However, Benedict Anderson's emphasis on the concept of 'imagining' in the formation and evolution of modern nations complicates matters more as it makes it impossible to do away with nationalist subjectivity in the long run. He proposes that the nation is a political community, which is imagined because the people therein have a strong sense of togetherness, in spite of the fact that they will never get to know most of their compatriots [8]. For Walter Benjamin, in the mind of the reader, books and newspapers create an impression of "homogenous, empty time" (as cited in Anderson, p. 24). The simultaneous depictions of disjointed time and space provide the reader a sense of fraternity that connects him to the rest of the population. This sense of "community in anonymity," is "the hallmark of modern nations" [8]. But in course of time, there is a good chance that this collective fervour for national identity may be threatened by the failure of nationalist discourse of unity forged by a desire to preserve historical roots, an issue which is going to be taken up later.

In short, the desire, rather the necessity of human beings to 'imagine' a community with a shared history and a culture is what accelerates the formation of nations like Bangladesh. In the years leading up to 1971, the people of the erstwhile of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), led by the leader of the Awami League Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, dreamt of and fought for political sovereignty from the oppressive West Pakistan. Their cultural diversity (religious, ethnic, economic, ideological and so on) seemed to have been replaced by a singular desire for independence. In this context, the process of imagining was fuelled by the dissemination of

news, invigorating speeches and patriotic music. *Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendro* (Independent Bangladesh Radio) played an instrumental role in this respect, as people of all classes were glued to the broadcast of battle news all over the country, the heroics of the freedom fighters, the one thing mattered to them. Still, the volatile subjective nature of nationalist sentiments makes it necessary for the ideological elites to ensure that the original fervour of nationalism remains intact at any cost. After five decades, in order to sustain the original ideals of nationalism, the Awami nationalists, as suggested by Gellner, have erected an absolutist and exclusivist nationalist culture dictated and reinforced by their version of history, where their leader has been indiscriminately deified. In the last decade, there has been an upsurge in the reproduction of partisan history. The Awami League government has only one agenda: to create a Golden Bangla, a vision of the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Even though these classical theories provide (partial) explanations of the nature and *modus operandi* of traditional nationalism, they are unable to account for the underlying heterogeneity of race, ethnicity, language and economic class. Recent critical approaches seem more suited for this particular purpose, due to their adaptability to the changing cultural climate of the last few decades. This is especially the case in a nation like Bangladesh, where there is still a strong attachment to the original Western model on nation, even though the latter have transformed in course of time. A poststructuralist or deconstructionist revision is a demand of the time. As the purpose of this paper is to examine how Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat* explores the issue of subjective imagining or *re-imagining* the nation of Bangladesh as pluralistic and its implications with regards to the status of the homogenous traditional historical narratives that shape its nationalist public culture, the next section focuses on the theoretical arguments in favour of bottom-up approach (focusing on the lower strata of society) to the issue of nation and nationalism as opposed to the top-down one of the classical models. Naturally, these recent developments necessitate a deconstructive approach towards the idea of nation, which is the driving force behind Imam's narrative.

3. NATIONALISM AS A DISCURSIVE FORMATION

According to Craig J. Calhoun [9] "nationalism is a way of talking and thinking and seeing the

world" that forms "patterns of collective identity and pride" (p. 1). It provides us with a sense of place in the world. His characterization of nationalism parallels with that of Michel Foucault: "a 'discursive formation', a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness" and dictates the limits of cultural lives. Calhoun provides a new dimension to Anderson's claim that the nation is an imagined community, as for him (Calhoun) this "'imagining' of collective identity and social solidarity" takes place under the influence of nationalist discourse. He identifies a number of features of the nationalist discourse or as he calls it "the rhetoric of nations": importance of national boundaries, national unity or integrity, national sovereignty, legitimacy of national government, people's participation in national affairs, equality of members (citizens), cultural assimilation, past-present continuum and so on. He claims that it is not necessary for a nation to incorporate all these features, it rather depends on particular circumstances for producing collective identity, to mobilize people for collective projects (pp. 3-5). The ultimate goal of nationalist discourse, as Calhoun seems to agree with Grosby here, is to form and promote an internal homogeneity of national identity, at the same time establishing an essentialist binary difference with people of other nations; moreover, it also tries to institute, just as Gellner said, what nationalist elites consider to be "correct" culture and behaviour (p. 7). He admits that though culture and politics (state or ideology) are crucial in the formation of a nation, it is the nationalist discourse that empowers states and apparently homogenizes cultural differences within the national boundary by "posit[ing] temporal depth and internal integration. Elie Kedourie's definition corroborates Calhoun's claim: Nationalism ... pretends that humanity is naturally divided into nations, ... that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government (as cited in Calhoun, p. 11). It appears to be something not recent or new, but "ancient, or even natural" (p. 12).

Similarly, Umut Özkırımlı [10] holds that it is nationalism that crystalizes the idea of nation and that all nations, irrespective of their cultural or political origins, operate through nationalist discursive formations that lead to national identities. He too adopts the Foucauldian concept of discourse: "as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 54). For Foucault, discourses construct the limits of our reality through engineered cognition and action [11] For John

Scott, 'discourse' works through 'ideas', 'institutions', 'structures', 'everyday practices' and 'specialized rituals' in order to organize society in a particular way (as cited in Özkırmılı, p. 207). A similar definition can be found in Sara Mills, where she says that the linguistic aspect of discourse is always aided by "[i]nstitutions and social contexts", as they contribute to its "development, maintenance and circulation" (as cited in Özkırmılı, p. 208). In short, discourse is a body factors such as language, ideas, institution and so on that work together for the fulfillment of the dominant nationalist agenda.

In terms of the nation as an organization, Stuart Hall asserts that 'a national culture is a discourse' that defines and limits "meaning" which in turn provides us with a self-conception and an identity (as cited in Özkırmılı, p. 207). Özkırmılı considers the nation to be an organized socio-cultural space where diverse groups contest over the establishment of their version of the abovementioned reality. As regards the claims made by nationalist discourse, he says that there are three interrelated ones. Firstly, he speaks of *identity claims* that create a division between the national population and *Others* in terms of distinctive cultural characteristics, while at the same time, convincing the native people that their national "identity" and "loyalty" is of "absolute priority" indicating that the nation is ultimate form of "legitimacy" and "sovereignty". Secondly, there are the *temporal claims* that emphasize "linear time of the nation". It tries to justify the present in terms of the past. Özkırmılı, like Gellner, claims that the nationalists employ a selective approach to the past only including the elements that are suitable for "the narration of their respective nation, while forcing a kind of "social amnesia" with regards to everything that is undesirable for their agenda. Manipulated historical narratives prove instrumental for this purpose. This use of history in narrating the nation is the focal point of this paper, hence it is going to be taken up later in much more detail. The last category of claims made by nationalist discourses, according to Özkırmılı, are the *spatial claims* that attach immense importance to particular aspects of the homeland, initiating "a processes of territorial imagination" eventually leading to "a reconstruction of social space as national territory". They formulate a distinctive national character based on geographic features (p. 209). Ultimately, to reiterate Calhoun's assertion, nationalist discourse establishes hegemony in both the material and psychological spheres of the population by "naturaliz[ing] itself",

attributing their version of nationalism an aura of "common sense" and inevitability, while attempting to dismiss "alternative discourses" (p. 207).

In addition, this sedimentation, or naturalization, is not achieved only by occasional intervention of political institutions or their state apparatuses. There is a good deal of agreement among scholars that ideological power exerted by nationalists pervade the most ordinary, taken-for-granted areas of everyday life, where nationalist claims are "reproduced" and repeated relentlessly (Özkırmılı, p. 210). Nationalism has penetrated so deep into the socio-cultural life of people that it has turned into an unconscious everyday phenomenon, or as Michael Billig calls it 'Banal Nationalism'. After the establishment of the nation state, nationalism returns on a daily basis on "coins, bank notes" and "stamps" to remind us of who we are [12] In our daily cultural interactions, all the claims of nationalist discourse remind us of our identity, of our beloved sacred homeland and continuity with the glorious past [12] The hanging of the national flag on rooftops, national anthems sung at sports events and school assemblies, politicians' rhetoric of patriotism and national superiority, dress made in national colours, names of restaurants (both home and abroad) and food categories on their menus can be cited as examples of everyday nationalism. These ensure the persistence of the dominant nationalist claims. As a matter of fact, all these instances abound in the day-to-day life in Bangladesh.

However, the artificial or constructed nature of the apparent homogeneity and naturalness of the established nationalist ideology, for Özkırmılı, leaves it vulnerable to reinterpretation or reformulation, or even, revolution. Though immersive force of (everyday) nationalism allows the individual little scope for doubt even when it does not live up to its claims, there is always the possibility of re-education and revision as regards the inherent contingency and temporality of nationalist. Though the rhetoric of "immutable 'essence' of the nation" avoids any "reference to its internal diversity, a discursive approach to the nature of nationalism makes it apparent that formation of national identity is "an ongoing process" that can be subjected to "ambiguity, discontinuity, and disruption" (p. 210). This awareness can lead to "... [an exploration of] the alternative representations that have been silenced or repressed by the dominant nationalist project" (p. 213).

4. DECONSTRUCTION AND THE NATION

This paper adopts a deconstructive methodology in redefining the nation as it focuses on the temporal claims that nationalist discourses make through narratives of shared history. Histories are nationalist narratives that ensure the simultaneity of the past and the present. The past is being re-lived on a daily basis creating an apparent sense of homogeneity between itself and the present. In Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) words, history "gather[s] the past in a ritual of revival" (p.139). This 'ritual of revival' is one of the tools that nationalists all over the world employ to narrate the nation so as to keep the aforementioned will or desire ablaze in the heart and mind of the people, as also mentioned by Billig and Özkırımlı. They are being constantly reminded that their existence in the present rests on a continuation of the past. In Bangladesh in recent times, one cannot turn more than a couple of corners in the streets without coming face to face with the glorified image of the great leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Posters and banners on every other wall remind people of his contribution to and sacrifice for the emergence of a sovereign nation in and after 1971 – a fact that cannot be denied in any way. However, this is also the kind of historical discourse that hides the undesirable and inglorious elements of that particular period that can undermine the present authority of the government led by his followers. Similarly, the erection of war memorials, statues of martyrs, TVCs make it an hourly affair in the life of the populace.

This almost inescapable proliferation of nationalist history has come under more and more scrutiny in the past few decades, as this kind of historicism, for Bhabha "most commonly signifies ... a holistic cultural entity" (1994, p. 140). It attempts to create "a symbolic force," which he calls an impossibility, because the emergence of the nation was the result of a number of historical factors that can never be encapsulated within a unitary narrative [13]. Consequently, an alternative approach is proposed, where the professed singularity and linearity of history is replaced by "a particular ambivalence" that can lead to an awareness that the age-old historical narratives as well as the idea of national identity are subject to change. His intention is to introduce a "temporal dimension in the inscription of political entities" where 'ambivalence' defies "centred causal logic" of cultural representation [14]. This ambivalence is positively problematic, as those who live by

this history wake up to the thought of redefining their identities through an alternative and more authentic representation in history.

In other words, Bhabha proposes a deconstructive approach to the question of the nation and its narration: a kind of Derridian "rupture" in the cultural logic of nationalism. Jacques Derrida [15] questions the metaphysical element in the nature of interpretation of all epistemological structures. For him, such structures have always been given a centre, which renders them "neutralized or reduced" to "a fixed origin". It is this privileged centre that determines and limits the scope of interpretation. Derrida suggests that, throughout history, the centre or episteme has undergone a process of substitution that disrupts its inviolable metaphysical presence. It opens up the argument that the centre is "not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play" (Lodge and Wood, 2000, pp. 90-91). This process of decentring, of creating an absence, allows the marginal signs, the *Others*, to emerge as potent political forces. For Bhabha, the way to start this journey is by initiating a re-examination of the totalitarian premise of social togetherness that tries to coalesce cultural differences into "unitary collective experiences".

This displacement and the potential decline of hegemonic authority in the national consciousness allow the histories or (alternative nationalist) discourses of the excluded or minority communities to emerge. A subaltern consciousness, which for so long, has been silenced, can finally have its own legitimate presence. A subaltern is someone who belongs to an inferior social standing "in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" and a Subaltern group is "always subject to the activities of the ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up" [16]. They live out their cultural lives under the hegemonic authority of the elites who dominate both nationalist culture and history, whereas the former go through a process of misrepresentation. So a history of the subaltern has the potential to disrupt the centre/periphery binary in the nationalist discourses and create cultural spaces for the less-privileged to move relatively freely along the socio-political axes. In the wake of this revisionary approach to nationalist history, literary historiography, especially in fiction, has emerged as a convenient tool. In *The Black Coat*, Neamat Imam's deviation from traditional approach to

narrating the nation in line with the above theoretical premises is an attempt to advocate for a deconstructed, pluralistic model of a modern nation of Bangladesh that seems more in tune with contemporary globalized world.

5. IRRECONCILABILITY OF THE PAST AND THE PRESENT, AND THE SUBALTERN CONDITION IN *THE BLACK COAT*

As discussed earlier, the apparent continuity between the past and the present has always been problematic. In course of time, as the past glories start to fade in the face of present and unforeseen obstacles, certain questions arise in marginalized communities. In *The Black Coat*, Imam explores this issue by foregrounding the tension caused in the fractured spaces of history. After centuries of foreign rule under the British, then the Pakistanis, the nation of Bangladesh finally emerged following a nine-month War of Independence in 1971. The Awami League under the able and glorious leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had led the country to a new dawn of a promising future. But they had a daunting task of rebuilding a country left with a depleted economy, poor infrastructures, insufficient food, medical supplies and what not. The leader had a mammoth task of transforming the new-born Bangladesh into a successful nation state. His dream was that of a '*Sonar Bangladesh*' (Golden Bangladesh), as his followers claim. So he started off with a fresh constitution and a new cabinet. But his efforts were cut short, as most of his family members including himself were brutally assassinated in a *coup d'état* on 15 August 1975.

For the most part of five decades, nationalist history has ensured the prevalence of Mujibesque sentiments of 1971 in Bangladeshi nationalism: how Sheikh Mujibur Rahman united the whole population in an armed struggle against the Pakistani forces, how he had a vision of a Golden Bengal that would usher in an era of democracy, equality and prosperity for the people. Almost every nationalistic feeling has emanated from his contribution and larger-than-life stature. In other words, the whole socio-political climate of the country, for the most part, has been shaped by his god-like presence. Imam uses a number of symbols that indicate this pervasive and central presence in the formation and narration of post-war Bangladeshi nationalism: *the black coat worn by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; the speech on March 7, 1971*

delivered by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; and the media representation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. If one goes through any of the traditional history books, as well as almost every media platform in the last decade, they would discover that all his efforts were in the service of building a happy and prosperous Bangladesh. For fifty years since independence, textbooks in schools, songs, biographies and documentaries endorsed by the major political ideologies have narrated the nation of Bangladesh in a similar way with an apparent sense of solidarity, in spite of debilitating crises that could easily have extinguished all of the nation's past achievements. So in *The Black Coat*, Imam offers a different kind of literary historiography, which has its locus somewhere else. Instead of the celebrated elites, the novel focuses on the subalterns, those who occupy the marginal spaces. Its subaltern historiography allows the minorities (not in terms of population, but historical representation) much needed representation during the years between 1971 and 1975 in the history of Bangladesh, a time when all hopes of the infant nation hinged on the shoulders of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League. The whole population entrusted him with their future, as it was he who once inspired them to take up arms in order to oust the Pakistani occupation forces. They expected him to uphold the nationalist sentiments of 1971 and to rebuild the country for a better future. The narrator of the story, Khaleque Biswas, puts it this way: "Sheikh Mujib was more popular with Bangladeshis than Mohammad the Prophet; he was supported by people of all religions and creeds" (Imam, 2013, p. 7). The thought of anyone leading the nation except Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is beyond any question. This unflinching faith in the leader is further illustrated a little later, when a random old man on a ferry tells him: "If he calls upon you, you can't just say no, or say you're afraid to die.... It is impossible" (p. 9). Clearly, Imam does not deny the leading role of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the struggle for independence, because that would be unthinkable, rather his story corroborates to its authenticity. But the difficulty of the task that lay ahead was manifold. It is in the portrayal of these restless times that *The Black Coat* deviates from the glorified traditional nationalistic discourse to Bangladeshi history.

Historical narratives fall within the category of discourse that Michel Foucault calls "a system of representation" [17] He defines discourses as something that "'unite' language and practice and

... [regulate]" our way of speaking about a subject, thus leading to the formation of cultural meaning of "objects and practices" [18] Traditional historical discourses perform similar functions in ensuring the centrality of a privileged sign as a unifying force. The word 'regulate' implies an element of power - a power to name, describe and to limit the scope of (historical) knowledge. Through these narratives, nationalist ideologies exercise their power over the people and eventually transform their diverse subjective experiences and perspectives into passive conformity even in times of apparent chaos. Similar to Bhabha, Foucault asserts that such "discursive practices" employ selective and repetitive representations of an idea, an event, an object or a person which is ingrained in the psyche of the population. Eventually such representations or discourses emerge as the only truths. Ultimately, the power to represent leads to the power to rule. Foucault's concept of discourse is especially relevant in the context of this paper, as he is particularly concerned with power and how it leads to ideological dominance in different eras of history. In the novel, the Awami League tries its best to uphold the sentiment of Bangladeshi nationalism founded on the image of their leader giving rise to what Foucault calls "a specific 'regime of truth'". This regime is erected on the exclusivist units of knowledge (truths), which is the desired fruit of discursive practices (as cited in Hall, p. 44). Imam attempts to displace/replace the central elements that constitute the Foucauldian 'episteme' that dominate the collective political consciousness of Bangladesh. *The Black Coat* brings to the forefront the often-forgotten masses and their untold sufferings exacerbated by the 1974 famine. The confused disillusioned characters in the story represent the people and their inability to come to terms with the alleged failures of the government during the testing times after liberation.

The crises in the story are partly caused by the ruling party's mistaken attempt to preserve the symbolic past at any cost rather than focus on the harsh reality of the present that causes all the characters to undergo uneasy fluctuating sentiments towards the sacred symbols, a practice that is still prevalent. The narrator Khaleque Biswas, who represents the educated class, fails to accept the post-independence reality of the country. He holds Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the highest regard, but suffers the torments of doubt. Nur Hussain represents the illiterate, unemployed, simple-minded and

confused majority of the population. His name is significant, as it reminds one of the anti-government protesters Nur Hussain (1962-87) from the late 1980s. The historical Nur Hussain took to the streets of Dhaka with a slogan on his back: 'Death to Autocracy'. It is noteworthy that both Nur Hussains lose their lives in a struggle for a better nation. Last, but not the least, there is Shah Abdul Karim, who acts as the spiritual spokesperson of the country through his music. He is the fictional counterpart of the real-life *baul*³ (1916-2009) of the same name. He represents the suffering soul of the nation.

Throughout the novel, Imam explores the subalternity of these characters that drift further and further away from the elite political centre held by their leader. What drives a wedge between the two is the famine of 1974, which, according to the author, is aggravated by serious corruption and mismanagement by the government (Imam, p. 65). This famine seems to overshadow every accomplishment of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The author's portrayal of the characters' development makes this argument compelling. Each of these characters share, among other things, one feature: *disappearance*. Their journey is one of confusion, disillusionment, rage and surrender. They all start to lose their seemingly unfaltering faith in the Black Coat, in the 7th March speech and eventually in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself. It echoes William Butler Yeats's [19]. celebrated opening lines in "The Second Coming": Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/ Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (1996, pp. 186).

Among these characters, Khaleque Biswas's fluctuating loyalty to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the most obvious. At the beginning of the story, he works for the *Freedom Fighter*, a newspaper highly instrumental during the War of Independence. His devotion to the cause of freedom and to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been as unwavering as anyone else's. He too desires a new day of freedom and dreams of a sovereign and prosperous Bangladesh, as he shares in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's hope that "the enemy is gone", that "it is [their] country now", and that it is time to "build this nation" (Imam, p. 8). But this sentiment receives a harsh blow, as he later realizes that his paper has decided to replace truth with political convenience and join the propaganda campaign.

³ Minstrels of mysticism of Bangladesh

As thousands upon thousands of people from all corners of the country flood into the capital Dhaka, the Mujib administration starts to show signs of inadequacy. Khaleque Biswas's "search for a superior meaning in [...] freedom ... at the cost of thousands of lives" comes to a halt (p. 23). To him, stability seems like a far cry. This is the moment, when he starts to see "what [he] did not want to see.... hunger, dissatisfaction, rampant poverty, looting. It was only eighteen months into Bangladesh's independence, and the country was falling into a deep pit of brutality" (p. 23). Poor Khaleque Biswas's romanticized view of freedom and also that of the supreme leadership suffers a set-back. His eyes are opened to the fact that his beloved country is failing, that corruption has started to plague the politicians, and consequently rob the people of their hopes. More and more people are becoming less and less interested in patriotic engagements. He starts to question the integrity of the government and its supporters. When his editor refuses to let him write about it, he explodes: "Freedom is freedom when it surfaces as a lifestyle for the people [the] first step is to ensure food for everyone, then a place to sleep. At the end of the day, everyone must go home. ... Don't they see these people" (p. 25)? And that is how he loses his job, which was the best way for him to serve the country. The homogeneity of the past and the present, which is crucial in 'imagining' the nation, seems like an illusion to him, as he says: "[N]ow we must live in the past forever; we must rot there year after year after year" (p. 55).

Now there is no fundamental difference between Khaleque Biswas and Nur Hussain, who has come to Dhaka in search of a living. "I became like Nur Hussain", says he (p. 25). Both of them are caught in a limbo of nonchalance towards the past, confusion about the present and apprehension for the future. Their fates are intertwined, as they start off on a journey of survival. Everything Khaleque Biswas has held as sacred, every symbolic force that the Awami League has been using in its nationalist discourse - the 7th-March speech, the Mujib Coat, and even the very image of Sheikh Mujib - has been knocked off the pedestal. The whole country is about to plunge into a state of disarray, as a deadly famine starts to wreak havoc among the population claiming one and a half million lives (p. 90). Though the statistical accuracy of this data is not beyond doubt, it does serve the purpose of exemplifying the scale of mass suffering during the famine. The sentiment of

nationalism that had brought the whole nation together in 1971 seems to slip away and is being replaced by a feeling of anxiety and doubt that drive the characters into an existential crisis. Khaleque Biswas decides to re-evaluate the historic speech: "This is the struggle for independence ... this is the struggle for freedom. Now that we had achieved our nationhood, I wanted to understand what Sheikh Mujib had in mind for me as an individual citizen" (p. 30). This shows a sense of alienation of the subaltern condition, where the collective consciousness slowly makes way for subjective despair, doubt and reawakening that leads to a devaluation of ideological dominance and its insistence on the glory of the past.

In the same context, another symbol that Imam uses in the story is that of a recurrent dream that vexes Khaleque Biswas almost to the point of hysteria. As he struggles to find some semblance of comprehension in the face of both a national and individual crises, he keeps reverting to a conversation with one of the seven martyrs of 1971, *BirSreshtha* (bravest of the brave) Mostafa Kamal. At the height of his anxiety, Mostafa Kamal addresses him as the "Confused One" (p. 206). This dream reflects not only Khaleque Biswas's, but the whole nation's bewilderment towards the present and search for answers as to the future of the dying nation which has been suffering from a severe lack of leadership. Ultimately, the suffering masses are left to their own devices. The representation of the Subaltern reality, which is even more relevant now, allows Imam's narrative to expose the vulnerability and untenability of the hitherto undisputed supremacy of the dominant nationalist ideology that has survived by means of deceptive traditional history. It reveals that the powerful cultural and historical forces can no longer sustain their monopoly over the truth through partisan historical narratives, as the past seems to be severed, or not as glorious and relevant to the present.

6. AMBIVALENCE AND REPURPOSING OF THE SACRED SYMBOLS

The obvious alienation and disillusion of the characters ultimately force them to adapt means of survival that reflect a sense of deliberate ambivalence. Like the rest of the population, Khaleque Biswas and Nur Hussain's only concern at this point is survival. Khaleque Biswas discovers that Nur Hussain is quite apt in replicating Sheikh Mujib's speech. So they turn

the 7th-March speech and the Mujib Coat into social capital. Khaleque Biswas edits the speech to suit his purpose and trains Nur Hussain to deliver it in public places as a fake Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He even gives Nur Hussain a black coat and a white *Panjabi*⁴. Hence, they appropriate a vital piece of history and start their journey as a duo selling what used to be at the core of their identity as Bangladeshis. As more and more people die of starvation, diseases and desperation, they embark on a feverish adventure in the streets of Dhaka. They become each other's only stay and support for a while. Both of them become lesser Sheikh Mujibs battling against a disaster aggravated by administrative incompetence.

Descriptions of the mass suffering all over Dhaka pervade the whole story. The author has spared no details in highlighting this often-forgotten tragedy in the history of Bangladesh. The deadly cold weather of 1973 has killed thousands of people in both Dhaka and the countryside. There are massive unacknowledged deaths throughout the year caused by extreme cold and famine. Here is the picture of Dhaka:

Blind people, people with elephantiasis, people wounded in the liberation war, disabled or paralysed found their stations on the road.... refugees broke pipes to collect water.... torched one another's tents. Their sons learnt the art of picking pockets Their daughters and wives ... learnt the language of the street ... desperate for some coins to buy some food. (Imam, pp. 73-74)

The situation at the ironically named Mrittunjoyee (death defying) Primary School provides an even grimmer picture: "It [is] not a place to live for a human being ... the young ones [are] eating mud, cow dung, guava seeds, sundried banana peels. A few yards away a woman of eighty was caning her fifty-year-old son" (p. 89). But all of this suffering pales in comparison to that of the hungry man's, who eats metal screws and dies a horrible death. For Khaleque Biswas, who is a witness to such misfortunes, "this is what famine does to a person ... it eats one alive" (p. 160). He still ironically holds on to the belief that all these people have poured into Dhaka, because they want to feel what it means to be free. However, there is a noticeable difference between

Khaleque Biswas and Nur Hussain in terms of their reaction towards the chaos that unfolds in front of their very eyes. Khaleque Biswas is feverish and anxious all the time. He is unable to accept the apparent indifference of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman towards the hungry, diseased and dying masses, whereas Nur Hussain, for the most part of the story, is nonchalant towards the famine; he appears to be an impenetrable fortress that defies logic. But nothing can save them from the inevitable. In the end, Khaleque Biswas uncannily turns into a tyrant who wants to control Nur Hussain; a lesser reflection of the man he once used to admire the most: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

As for Nur Hussain, the fake Sheikh Mujibur Rahman eventually loses his composure, as he turns the famous speech into a mad rant. All his frustration and anger seem to have slipped into it: "... there is no hope in the words I have spoken so far, that they were words unconnected to our lives, to our dreams, our future [All] your brothers, your sisters, parents, children and neighbours ... were not as lucky as you were because of the famine" (p. 177). Ultimately, they both turn into monsters created by the failed promises of nationalism, which that speech and that black coat held together for so long. To put it differently, by the crippled god. Eventually, Nur Hussain pushes Khaleque Biswas to the brink of maddening rage and gets atrociously murdered by him. Khaleque Biswas, on the other hand, meets an ideological death forsaking his faith in building a nation as professed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He even makes peace with the fact that the history textbooks in later years erase the famine, that history is conveniently manipulated (pp. 233-234). They both disappear into thin air like those creatures outside Mrittunjoyee Primary School – unacknowledged and forgotten. Thus *The Black Coat* reinforces the deconstructive claim that the apparent inscrutability of the authority of dominant cultural signs rests on volatile ground; that these can be undermined by introducing an element of tension and ambivalence through counter discourses. In other words, through historical representations and recognition of the Subaltern condition that can potentially disrupt the existing monumental façade of nationalism.

7. THE UNDERBELLY EXPOSED

Imam's narrative also reveals the ruling party's desperate attempt to sustain public opinion in their favour: the relentless revival of the dwindling image of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that

⁴ a traditional Bengali dress worn by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

echoes the current situation mentioned earlier. He does this through the exploits of Moina Mia who is an advisor on “homeland security” and “enemy property affairs and “close to [Sheikh Mujib] personally” (p. 62). He oversees the circulation of leaflets that glorify Sheikh Mujib. At the same time, he capitalizes on the skills of Nur Hussain and Khaleque Biswas, as he is aware of the public displeasure ... across the city (p. 62).” He pays them handsome amounts of money in return for their services in the propaganda drive. Nur Hussain is to deliver the 7th March Speech at various crucial places all over the country. The dissemination and revival of partisan historical knowledge plays a vital role in forming public opinion and achieving a stronghold over it. For Louis Pierre Althusser, political hegemony is achieved when the dominant ideology takes over this discursive practice of representation by means of the “state apparatuses”. He categorizes some of these as *ideological*: “Scholastic”, “Information”, “News”, “Publishing and Distribution” apparatuses etc(p. 92). In *The Black Coat*, Moina Mia is the one in charge of these propaganda tools that are used to form and sustain popular opinion of the leader. Later on, the original speech is to be distorted, as some contemporary issues are going to be added to it. The purpose is to “convince ... constituents that [they] must not forget the enduring spirit that made [them] free” (p. 74). The whole strategy reveals their apprehension during the famine of 1974 and their consequent attempt to restore public faith in their leader by reminding people of the triumph in 1971 and by providing them a sense of inclusion, as Gellner suggested, in the rehabilitation process. This goes to show how the naïveté of the public can easily be manipulated, how that historic speech that inspired a whole nation has been covertly turned into a propaganda tool. One can easily hear the echoes of George Orwell’s political satire *Animal Farm* [20] where the ruling pigs (Bolsheviks), unbeknownst to the other animals in the farm (common Russians), change their original Seven Commandments into a something that only serves their ideology: “ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL/ BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS (2011, p. 90).” There is an undeniable commonality in both Imam and Orwell’s narratives; something that makes a strong argument that all political ideologies suffer the same insecurities and, at all times, react in similar ways.

When the Ideological State Apparatuses start to fall short of their desired ends, more harsh

approaches are adopted by the dominant ideology. Althusser [21] calls these *Repressive* apparatuses: “administration”, “army”, “police”, “courts” and “prisons” apparatuses etc (p. 75). It is once again Moina Mia who is entrusted with the task of crushing all oppositions that undermine the supreme leader’s authority. He heads the surveillance campaign inserting spies all over the city, something that prompts Khaleque Biswas to say: “I was astonished to see how they know everything” (p. 182). Once identified, anyone trying to incite any unrest among the people is swiftly dealt with by the private militia he leads, whose historical counterparts are not hard to find. Their presence in the story serves to maintain a constant sense of terror in the heart of Khaleque Biswas. This whole strategy is exemplified by Moina Mia’s reaction to the spectacle at the Shaheed Minar (martyr memorial) caused by Nur Hussain’s hysteric tirade that turns him from a valuable asset into an expandable liability. Moina Mia has already decided his fate (p. 183). Though it is Khaleque Biswas who eventually murders him, it can all be traced back to the brutality of the regime trying to hold on to its past glories. In the past decade, no one in Bangladesh has heard or read about these hard times, especially how the historical Mujib Administration dealt with the famine, even if they did, it got overshadowed by the proliferation of positive narratives.

Moreover, Moina Mia represents the corrupt politicians who fill their coffers with misappropriated public funds. On their visit to the monumental building erected by him (Moina Mia), Abdul Ali intimates to Khaleque Biswas the lavish plans the MP has drawn up for the place. To his utter shock, Khaleque Biswas learns how the famine has been a blessing for people like his boss: “this building would go higher, as the famine went deeper. It would stop only when the famine was over” (p. 156). This corresponds to similar allegations against party members who are said to make the most of the crises since independence. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself addressed such corrupt practices in one of his speeches, the focus of which can be summarized as follows: on the one hand, the Pakistanis looted everything from the country. To make things worse, the ‘thieves’ are depleting the local resources and foreign aids frustrating the rebuilding process (my translation) (“Great Speech”, 2018, 00:00:58-00:02:20).

The ultimate stage of repression is reached when all the crises brought about by the Famine of

1974 and the severe administrative inefficiency and corruption ultimately culminate in the suspension of democracy, one of the core underlying principles of the Constitution of Bangladesh. As the whole country descends into utter disarray, the President declares a state of emergency, dissolves all political parties and forms a new one called *Bangladesh KrishokSramikAwami League*, a more inclusive name that prompts Khaleque Biswas to ask: “Weren’t Krishak (farmers) and Sramik(workers) part of the Awami League before? Then who did we support before (Imam, pp. 230)?” Within a year, the Supreme Leader of the nation, the inspiration for the whole population, the author of the 7th March Speech, the Man in the Black Coat and the glorious personification of patriotic zeal meets a violent death in the hands of assassins; thus bringing to an end a journey punctuated by contradictions: courage and fear; generosity and nonchalance; and godliness and monstrosity.

8. CONCLUSION

The Black Coat does not reject the idea of Bangladesh or a Bangladeshi nationalism, because that would be unthinkable, as Tom Nairn says: “Nationalism’ is the pathology of modern developmental history as inescapable as ‘neurosis’ ... and largely incurable” (as cited in Anderson, p. 5). Rather it shows that a nation is not a uniform entity that can level off all differences; that there is a whole plethora of unrepresented elements within the bracket of nationalism that constantly interact, at times counteract, with one another. It sympathetically affirms the fact that these elements, some of which are represented by Khaleque Biswas, Nur Hussain, and overall Shah Abdul Karim’s tragic existence, have a simultaneously legitimate presence in the national consciousness and history of Bangladesh. Their subjective experience has the potential for a different nationalist discourse. The façade of dominant nationalist culture reinforced by politicized history is multifarious rather than one dimensional. Imam’s novel exposes the fundamentally flawed nature of nationalism, which Eric J. Hobsbawm [22] calls a form of ‘invented tradition’ ... “of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek[s] to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity ... with a suitable historic past” (p. 5).

The main characters in the story act out against this set of ‘values and norms’ indoctrinated by glorious representation of the black coat and the

seventh March speech in official history of Bangladesh. The purpose of this paper has been to establish that their eventual failure, in no way, diminishes the attempt on the part of their author in providing them, as well as the mass people they represent, their own ‘suitable historic past’ that is still relevant in the socio-political context of Bangladesh. Rather it demonstrates the tension between what nationalist narrative constrained by ideological dominance claims and those that speak of the subaltern condition. To point out the incompatibility of these narratives, Imam first establishes the undeniable centrality of the image of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the founding history of Bangladesh and then pits it against those of the suffering masses during the famine of 1974, thus providing them a parallel recognition. Khaleque Biswas’s ultimate surrender represents the irreconcilability of the marginal voices with the centre. Similarly Nur Hussain’s predominantly silent, yet undeniable suffering and eventual demise, to some extent, compensate for the lack of representation of the mass people’s plight in nationalist history. By lending a narrative exposure to these characters, *The Black Coat* succeeds in recognising their place in the history of Bangladesh indicating that it is possible to disrupt the narrative monopoly of nationalist history enjoyed by ideological juggernauts. In addition, but not less significantly, this paper has been an attempt to shed light on Imam’s endeavour through literary historiography to offer a possible re-evaluation of the out-of-date model of the nation state and has come to the possible conclusion that his deconstructive approach in *The Black Coat* has successfully uncovered the plurality of a Bangladeshi nation state in historical and cultural spaces; that its Derridian ‘rupture’ discussed earlier can potentially displace the privileged political signs in order to make room for the Khaleque Biswas, Nur Hussain, and Shah Abdul Karim – the Subalterns. *The Black Coat* asks questions that, more than ever before, acquired more relevance given the stagnant waters of Bangladeshi nationalist politics.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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