

Revisiting History through *The Silent and the Lost*: a Reading

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to retrospect on the liberation war of Bangladesh through Abu Zubair's debut novel The Silent and the Lost. It also reexamines the scars that it left on the characters of this novel. Through this novel Zubair tries to bring the unforgettable memories and agonies of the people of Bangladesh by depicting the independence movement realistically. Credit must be given to Zubair for his narration, minute details of incidents, art of characterization, and above all, for his attempts to represent history and let coming generations know about the war and the sacrifices made. He tries to give a realistic picture and provide authentic details of the independence movement of Bangladesh through this fiction. This paper attempts to read the novel theoretically as well as to revisit the past and the unforgettable history that created Bangladesh.*

Key Words: Independence Movement; National Allegory; Identity; Guerilla; Genocide;

The Silent and the Lost shows the sufferings, sacrifices, and losses of the people of Bangladesh as well as the inhuman torture, cruelty and atrocity of the Pakistani military and their barbaric treatment of Bengal during the independence movement of Bangladesh. It is shown through the novel that the people of Bangladesh were fighters; they fought with whatever they had to protest and to save themselves from Pakistani oppression and exploitation. In this novel we notice that freedom fighters like Rafique, Nazmul, Jewel and *Birongonas* or war heroines like Nahar and Amina sacrificing their lives for an independent Bangladesh. They, the 'silent' and the 'lost', created a country named Bangladesh under Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership and paved the way for coming generations. *The Silent and the Lost* can be read as a national allegory in the light of Jameson's ideas about third world texts as "national allegories". Zubair allegorically shows in the novel all the sacrifices, and sufferings of the people of East Pakistan and the brutality as well as the inhumanity of the West Pakistani army.

Frederic Jameson brings into light the concept of Third World texts and "national allegories" quite clearly in his essay entitled "World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism". He puts forward the idea that "All Third World texts are necessarily . . . allegorical . . . they are to be read as what I will call national allegories" (141). He further states that those third world texts "project a political dimension in the form of national allegories: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third World culture and society" (142). Jameson defines "national allegories" as "the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself" (158). Jameson's thesis about "national allegory" is very pertinent and

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can be applied to read *The Silent and the Lost* as a national allegory. In the “Afterwords” Zubair states the purpose of writing this novel thus:

“Bangladesh’s Graveless Genocide is one of the most underwritten tragedies in the history of mankind. In the memory of this world, it is important to remember the silent and the lost of 1971. Their sacrifices, their lives. Flowers that never bloomed. Smiles never to brighten the earth”(422).

The narrative perspective of *The Silent and the Lost* is both the third person point of view and the omniscient point of view. The story is narrated from an omniscient point of view. Moving forward chronologically, the narrator reveals the personal feelings, agonies, sorrows, sufferings and thoughts of the major characters – Alex, Nahar, Rafique, Nazmul and others. The descriptions, dialogues, interactions and different stories – all these make the reader understand the novel. The way the narrator tells stories is very touching. The narrator narrates the events that took place during the 1971 war and its aftermath. The events were fictionalized by Zubair four decades later into *The Silent and the Lost* with its tragic love story between Nahar and Rafique to show how things were falling apart in 1971. Zubair tries to give the reader a sense of immediacy, of actually witnessing history in his writing. The way he treats history imaginatively bringing all important events with realistic touches is brilliant. In narration, he keeps it simple, wasting directly to the point.

He has given great care and attention in particular to the art of characterization. All the characters are very well drawn by Zubair. Rafique’s external features as well as his inner mental features have been vividly drawn. All the important events revolve round him. Zubair describes the inner thoughts and emotions triggered in the character by external events. The novel brilliantly maps the psychological complexities of its characters.

One of the most important aspects of this novel is Zubair’s handling of time and place. The way he moves backward and forward from one place to another connecting the events is praiseworthy. Another very distinguished feature is Zubair’s handling of the English language. Though Zubair is not a popular novelist, he writes English distinctively. He uses words and sentences from Bengali, Arabic and Urdu in the narrative, as for example, “*Mukti Bahini*”, “*Birongonas*”, “*Banarasi*”, “*Shadhin*”, “*Shootki*”, “*Ma bonera asro dhoro, Bangladesh moktoo koro*”, and many others to give the flavor of reality.

His prose style is simple, straightforward and free from obscurity. His sentences are short and very readable. This novel has been divided into three books. The titles of the books are “The Sinuous Path”, “1971” and “Journey into the Heart”. The novel begins with the wedding ceremony of Alex and Sangeeta in Brentwood, California in 1997. Soon the identity of Alex is revealed; first as Salim in Bangladesh and then in America as Alex Salim McKensie. Alex, a war baby of 1971, is adopted by Jack and Laura McKensie, who lost their only son Frank in the Vietnam war. From that moment onward, he grew up as Alex Salim McKensie. Alex, who loves Sangeeta passionately, faces serious problem because of his identity problem. Sangeeta also loves him equally but her parents can’t accept their marriage. Mrs. Shoba Rai and Dr Subash Rai, Sangeeta’s parents, try their

level best to convince her not to marry Alex due to several problems. Alex's father could have been a Pakistani soldier and his religion is also different. But Sangeeta is recalcitrant. Finding no way out, Sangeeta goes with Alex and marries him, leaving her parents behind. Book I deals with these issues and the rising conflicts regarding Alex's original identity which has led them all to the split. Alex and Sangeeta love each other a lot and for them nothing else matters. Book I ends with Alex's determination to come to Bangladesh to know about his origins.

The novel soon shifts from one story to another, from the present to the past, and from one distant location to another. But thematically it is unified as the identity of Alex is connected to the historical movement of 1971 that created Bangladesh. Book II, the central part of the novel, entirely fictional in origin, focuses on the realistic depiction of the liberation war of Bangladesh chronologically. Here, mainly through the characters of Rafique and Nahar, the novelist tries to show the 1971 situation. Their stories are the stories of the independence movement of Bangladesh. Jameson states that "those texts, even those narratives are seemingly private" (142). Here, we see clearly the application of Jameson's ideas.

Book II begins with the gathering of people at Ramna Race Course on the 7th March 1971 for the immortal speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. People from different parts of the country assembled there to chant inspirational slogans, hold placards in their hands, and eagerly wait with "hope for freedom that Bangabandhu was promising today" (43). According to the narrator, ". . . Sheikh Mujibur Rahman embodied that ironic centrality of Bangladesh politics. That unique voice that comes along in a nation's lifetime. That unique compassion that embraced Bangladeshis from the very destitute to the highest intelligentsia."(47).

In his historic speech Bangabandhu showed the way and instructed everyone present there what to do in his absence. Bangabandhu's utterance "*Ebarer songram muktir songram, ebarer songram shadhinotar songram!*" [This struggle is for our freedom, this struggle is for independence]" (52) stirred and united everyone in the country to join the freedom movement. Nahar, newly married, also went there along with her husband Rafique to witness history. "Today Nahar could taste a free Bangladesh . . . the very mingling of her voice with the loud chanting, yelling, the screaming created a harmony in unison, a wondrous strength in numbers, in a chorus, a oneness she never felt before"(53). The description of that historic moment is very touching. Here, the novelist allegorically shows how Bangabandhu's speech ignited fire within the heart of each and every Bangladeshi for freedom.

The world witnessed the brutal and cowardly attack of the Pakistanis in the name of "Operation Searchlight" on the night of 25th March, 1971 and the brutalization on the innocent lives of the people of East Pakistan. At that time, Nahar, Rafique, Nazmul and Professor Rahman along with his family were at Dhaka University, the center of that operation. Tension, fear, and uncertainty took control of their lives. All of them trembled

with fear at the sound of firing, screaming and explosions. They all kneeled down to pray to Allah for their safety.

All houses and residential areas “have now become a flaming holocaust. People flee out of the burning slum. Satanic soldiers, dark black silhouettes against the flames shooting tongues of death, swallow the men, women and children alive.”(66). Professor Sen and his wife Indubala had to change their appearances so that they would not look like Hindus as they were the first target of the Pakistanis. Professor Sen hanged “the lock outside to give the impression that the gate was locked as the owners vacated”(73). The Pakistani soldiers searched every house and building. They also searched the building where the Rahmans were staying. But fortunately, they were able to survive because of the outside lock which tricked the Pakistani soldiers into thinking that the house was empty. This kind of strategies to some extent fooled the Pakistani soldiers and enabled many families to save their lives.

Their future had become bleak. They did not know what would happen next but they knew from the bottom of their hearts that something terrible was going to happen and that this was going to change their lives. Professor Rahman, Sen, Nahar, Nazmul and Rafique managed to survive in spite of being in that killing field. After that horrible night, curfew was imposed on Dhaka city. According to Nahar, “In one night, everything has changed. Everything”(80). Zubair shows through the process of allegorization the happenings of the night of 25th March, 1971.

Nazmul and Rafique had the horrible experience of witnessing “the heaped burnt bodies of the dead” (85) on their way back to the house of the Rahmans. No one could imagine the horror of that “unbelievable night of murder and mayhem” (84). Afterward, they all planned to leave Dhaka as it was no longer a safe place. “Dacca, City of Mosques, now the city of martyrs, the city of the unburied dead”(91).Nahar, Rafique, Nazmul, Selina, Rahman, Sen, Indubala and their children all moved on to leave Dhaka. On the way, they saw unbearable scenes. Nahar gasped when she noticed “. . . Thirty bodies are lined up on the grass for public display. Some are beyond recognition, their faces blown away by bullets” (97). They also noticed “a mass grave” in front of Jagannath Hall. Selina was deeply moved to see the brutality of the Pakistanis. Her “eyes wander to the mangled bodies. She can look numbly at a world that was sacred a few days ago, now strewn with the bodies of students. A sacrosanct Dacca University. Now dripping in blood, littered with the bodies of professors, students, workers, children, women and men” (97). Nahar, Nazmul, Rafique Rahman, Sen all moved very carefully and reached Sheetalpur, leaving the Sen family in Narayanganj. Nahar’s experience was nightmarish and she would never go back to Dhaka city again.

The story then shifts to the McKensie family living in California. They were also witnessing the carnage through news channels and talking about international politics and wondering why there was no support from the international community to stop the mass-killing in Bangladesh. Mrs. Priti Kumar who worried for her aunt living in Dhaka, pointed out to the McKensie family that because of Pakistan’s dictator Yahya Khan’s

“ping pong diplomacy between the United States and China”(106) no one was coming forward to stop the carnage in East Pakistan. They talked about the happenings during the India-Pakistan partition of 1947 and killings of Muslims in Calcutta but Jack McKensie noted that mass killing in East Pakistan was “a planned Genocide by a General ... [who] with all his army is attacking a country under the guise it’s an internal matter, and killing hundreds of thousands as the world looks on doing nothing”(102).

The novel returns to Sheetalpur, Bangladesh. Newly married Rafique decided to join the *Mukti Bahini* leaving his wife Nahar at home with his family members. Nahar knew that “March 25 had changed everything. Everything”(128). Rafique promised Nahar that he would come back after they had achieved their freedom and that their lives then would return to normal. They would taste real freedom. Like Rafique, Nazmul had also decided to join the freedom struggle. They left for Agartala, and a guerrilla training camp. They knew quite well their “worst enemy, the enemy within” (117). Neezam, a traitor and a betrayer in spite of being Rafique’s nephew, was helping the Pakistanis with information. Pakistani military and collaborators were destroying village after village. Through the character of Neezam the novelist shows allegorically the inhuman actions of *Razakars* or traitors who at that time had conspired against motherland.

In the Guerrilla Camp, Captain Jahangir inspired everyone assembled. The slogan of “Joy Bangla” and the fiery line of Bangabandhu “*Ebarer songram muktir songram, ebarer songram shadhinotar songram!*” ignited fire within the heart of the people of East Pakistan, enabling them to fight for freedom and country. In that guerrilla camp, Nazmul and Rafique found Khalid and Jewel who had come with the same purpose. They were all trained for military operations. They also shared their memories and feelings with each other while they rested. Tension gripped them as they talked about their families and their expectation of returning back and seeing them alive again.

Through a letter written to his wife Nahar, Rafique informed her about his mission and habitation, expressed his love, hope, warned her to be aware of the traitors and also reminded her about the promise to be with her in a free Bangladesh. They were also on a mission “to blow up a remote bridge, to ambush a convoy of Pakistani soldiers” (165) under Jewel’s supervision. Though they were successful, Jewel and Khalid sacrificed their lives in that mission, being “two men who gave everything for freedom, for a free Bangladesh.”(177).

Khalid’s last wish was to inform his mother through a letter that he “died a Bir, a hero”. Khalid who could not write told Rafique to write a letter for his mother and Rafique agreed. Before going into that operation, Rafique started writing that letter but could not finish it because Khalid did not know what to write next. Khalid told him to stop and would tell him later what to write in that next letter. Khalid uttered that line to be written in that unfinished letter without giving Rafique the posting address.

“Where would he post it?

To an unknown address, to a Ma who waited for news”(179).

Allegorically, the novel emphasizes the role played by *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro* through “rebellious uplifting songs” to motivate freedom fighters during the freedom movement.

“Intangible ephemeral songs floating in through moist air, riding on the wings of clouds, wings of hope, became indestructible edicts of strength”(184). The novel also familiarizes readers with the contribution of George Harrison through the “Concert for BanglaDesh” held in New York in 1971.

In the refugee camp, thousands gathering from different parts of the country came closer through “. . . stories of atrocities, of slaughter, of looting, and burning, of rape, of harassment and abuse by Pakistani soldiers and Razakars” (197). Rafique and Nazmul moved to the Bell-bottom guerrilla hideout situated at Kalabagan in Dhaka for action. At one point after several operations, Rafique and Nazmul returned there quickly as the Pakistani soldiers got to know about their locations with the help of Razakars. The Pakistani soldiers captured almost all the guerillas in the raid. Only Rafique and Nazmul escaped. Nazmul headed for Agartala and Rafique returned to Sheetalpur to see Nahar and his family. Rafique shared everything with his father Mustafa Chowdhury who also knew about Nazeem’s treacherous action. Many thoughts about the fearful night of 25th March and about their future came to Nahar’s mind after seeing Rafique. Both became nostalgic. They did not want to talk about the horror of that night or the war and became one, forgetting their own self at the end. Rafique left the house before dawn.

On the following day, Neezam along with Pakistani soldiers, Razakars and Bodor Morol reached Chowdhury’s house to arrest Rafique. After an altercation about Rafique’s visitation, the Pakistani soldiers fired at Jahanara and Chowdhury, Rafique’s parents and they died on the spot. After a raid, Pakistani soldiers found Rafique’s sister Amina and his wife Nahar who were hiding. Amina and Nahar pleaded and begged not to be harmed. The Pakistani soldiers and Razakars laughed at them and started torturing them brutally. They finally took Nahar and Amina into a Jeep. The way the Pakistani soldiers were torturing (e.g. burning by acid, ripping out fingernails, electric shock, upside down hangings) the innocent men, women and children were unbearable, unspeakable and unseeable for the Bangladeshis in particular and the humanitarians in general.

On his way back to Agartala, Rafique crossed the Salda river and saw floating corpses. Later, he heard the voice of Pakistani soldiers who were beating and torturing captured refugees. Witnessing such brutal torture, Rafique remembered his family members whom he would not be able to show his face to if he did not help the captured refugees. All by himself, Rafique threw a grenade and “the exploding shrapnel tore into the soldiers, killing them all, wounding the officer behind”(279). In the course of that fight, Rafique was shot; one bullet pierced his stomach and another went through his left shoulder.

Rafique did not die alone. “March 25, the bridge, Jewel, Khalid, Rintu, their deaths, his life, the unkept promises of returning to Nahar, his parents. Everything, all Rafique’s anger exploded into the smashing of the stone into the face of the Captain”(280). At the end he died silently like a hero, killing his enemies. After “nine long arduous, months of

carnage and killings, blood and struggle, sacrifice and sufferings”(305) freedom finally came on 16th December, 1971, albeit at the cost of many lives and the honor of women. All imprisoned *Bironganas* were released after liberation.

“Like trained imprisoned animals, they followed the orders today as they had been doing in these barracks for weeks and months. Some started to cry hysterically, some laughed out loud like crazed psychopaths. And some were in complete silence. Their eyes dead. Their faces colourless” (319).

Allegorically, the novelist shows the problems of a newly independent country. Though the war was over, all was not over yet for war heroines. The war did not bring anything positive for them but shame. It changed their lives completely. Most lost everything (honor, husband, parents, sons, daughters, relatives) because of war. After the achievement of freedom, they had nowhere to go. They were not acceptable to society. They were outsiders. Their relatives who were alive could not accept them because of honor. The only place they found was Dhanmondhi Women’s Shelter in Dhaka. They suffered during the war and continued to suffer afterwards. Freedom was not for them. Utter negligence, mistreatment and mental torture were their fate. It seemed as if they were responsible for everything. They had also sacrificed and suffered and fought for the freedom of the country. How pitiable the sight was to discover that instead of getting respect and acceptance in society, “The heroines of Bangladesh, *Bironganas*, the givers of all, for what, to where, to now, to then, to death, to body, to torture, to being stunned by mothers, slapped, kicked and tortured by husbands, beaten by mother-in-laws”(354).

Bironganas like Nahar and Fatima were taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital for medical treatment. To Nahar, Rafique was everything. She became nostalgic as she awaited Rafique’s return and thought everything would be fine; and that everyone would accept her and show her respect. It had been disclosed in hospital that she was pregnant. After the war, the two options that the *Bironganas* had were abortion and adoption laws. At the end, Nahar heard through the song of Bulbuli “unspoken promise: the promise of love, the promise of freedom”(363). Book II ends with that hallucinatory vision of Nahar.

Book III begins from where Book I ends. It starts with Alex’s coming back to Bangladesh to find out his identity in 1997.

“Memories rush through Alex’s brain, from childhood to today. Incidents, tears, humiliation- all revealing, like lines of light invading a dark space, a painful place. The sketchy silhouettes, the unanswered questions, the deep shadows cast on his life by his birth in the 1972 war-ravaged country of Bangladesh”(378).

Alex goes to the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa’s *Shishu Bhavan* situated at Islampur in Dhaka from where he had been adopted by Jack McKensie. But the Sisters refuse to let him see the birth register as it is confidential and sealed. Seeing Alex at the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka, Nazmul discovers the lost identity by finding a piece of paper where the name of Sheetalpur is mentioned, and comes across the line that Alex is Rafique and Nahar’s son. It seems to Nazmul that “Rafique reappears” through Alex

because he notices “same age, same stance, the look of Rafique”(400). But Alex returns to America without getting the answers of his questions regarding his birth.

“War babies who come silently, leave silently, empty-handed, returning home with an inheritance of sad enigmas”(398). Later on, Nazmul sends an air mail to Alex informing him about his identity. The novel ends with Alex getting the answer of his question through that mail.

Thus, we see that Frederic Jameson’s ideas about “national allegories” are very much relevant and applicable. The characters of this novel are representative figures. The stories of Rafique and Nahar are the stories of all the freedom fighters and the *Bironganas* of the liberation war of Bangladesh. In the novel, the frustrations of not getting the fruit of freedom and negativity are also shown through the shadow characters in Post-Independence Bangladesh. Mustafa, Rafique’s father, asks the pertinent question “What did you fight for, why did you join the *Mukti Jhuddho*? How could a free country’s people vote for Neezam?”(396). In this novel, we find the realistic portrayal of the characters, incidents, sacrifices and sufferings of the people of then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Zubair’s depiction, narration and chronological descriptions are praiseworthy. It helps and would continue to help the new generation to re-experience the war of independence of Bangladesh. Bangladesh would move ahead in future fulfilling the dreams of the so many unnamed and unknown freedom fighters and *Bironganas* who sacrificed everything for the freedom of this country. Based on the above observations, it can be said that Zubair through this novel thus allegorically familiarizes us all with the Independence movement of Bangladesh. The story of Rafique and Nahar becomes the story of Bangladeshis in general. Thus their story, destiny and experience “involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (Jameson 158).

References

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