The Persistence of Nationalism in Bangladeshi Postmillennial Fiction: Realism and Dystopia in Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat*

Angelo Monaco

Abstract

My article analyses Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat* (2013) as an exemplificative case study of the Bangladeshi postmillennial literary scene. I contend that, whereas Bangladeshi literature has seen the emergence of prominent diasporic voices by opening to the market of the English language, Imam can be said to draw on a traditional realistic style as his debut novel chronicles a tragic moment in Bangladeshi post-Independence history. In this regard, my essay takes it as a working hypothesis that Imam's narrative conveys a critical revision of postcolonial Bangladesh and it does so by intertwining realism and dystopia. On the one hand, the novel privileges a dystopian aesthetic that engages with the catastrophes of the present, thus echoing the colonial past and foreshadowing an unpromising future. On the other hand, *The Black Coat* resists the hallucinatory effects of dystopia owing to the realist mode the narrative hinges around. My essay aims to show how nationalism still represents a trend in contemporary Anglophone literature and how, in certain respects, Imam's novel denounces fundamental contradictions that are still current in Bangladesh in the age of globalisation.

Key-words: Neamat Imam, Bangladeshi literature, nationalism, dystopia, realism.

1. Neamat Imam and the Postmillennial Bangladeshi Novel

With the publication of *The Black Coat* (2013), the Bangladeshi-Canadian novelist Neamat Imam has aroused considerable attention. Originally published by Hamish Hamilton in 2013, Imam's *opera prima* was printed by Periscope in the United Kingdom in 2015 and, one year later, in Canada. The novel won the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Debut Novel of the Year 2016 prize, the Quill and Quire Book of the Year 2016 and it also drew critical acclaim among

reviewers. In *The Independent*, for instance, Rebecca Morrison described Imam's novel as "a compelling tale of absurdist humour" (Morrison 2015), thus illustrating the dystopian tones of the story. Likewise, reviewing *The Black Coat* in *The Sunday Guardian*, Aditya Mani Jha praised the novel's outstanding quality, viewing it as a "classic" that "will be used – again and again – as the gold standard for any book which seeks to engage with South Asian politics or history" (Jha 2015).

This last comment discloses the narrative force of *The Black Coat* as it depicts the traumatic historical events that followed the birth of a nation. The novel portrays the aftermath of Bangladeshi Independence (1971), specifically the years 1972-1974 when the country was stricken by a devastating famine[1]. By focusing on a tragic moment in Bangladeshi postcolonial history, *The Black Coat* exposes the tragic birth of a nation, generated by a second Partition – the atrocious conflict between East Pakistan and West Pakistan with an estimated death toll of about three million civilian casualties and mass displacements – and it does so by means of a stylistic combination of political satire, dystopia, and historical realism. In the aforementioned review, Jha notes that Imam's literary engagement with historical and social issues is inevitably indebted to such authors as Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh who established the model with their seminal works in the 1980s, thus allowing for the emergence of a new generation of South-Asian writers. Imam's writing can be said to recall Rushdie's "knockout satirical flourish" (Jha 2015), on the one hand, and Ghosh's more realistic use of literary imagination, because of a certain awareness of the "trapdoors that […] inventions contain" (Jha 2015), on the other. Born in a rural village in Chandpur District, Imam is representative of the contemporary scene of Bangladeshi diaspora writers who "have strong voices and have taken Bangladeshi literature in English to a new height and given a new dimension to English Literature" (Islam and Ali 2019: 4). Despite his transnational experience as an immigrant to Canada, Imam seems to be inspired by that variegated narrative tradition which has developed in the Indian subcontinent since the 1980s.

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[1] Among the various causes of this mass starvation that killed over one million people, one should include the flooding of the river Brahmaputra and the rapid demographic growth that reduced food availability in the country.

Interestingly, Rushdie himself celebrated the polymorphous nature of Indian literature in English with an article which appeared in *The New Yorker*, to mark the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian Independence from British colonialism. According to the exiled Indian novelist, the prose produced by Indian writers, such as Anita Desai, V. S. Naipaul, Bapsi Sidhwa and Arundhati Roy, just to name a few, represented "perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books" (Rushdie 1997: 50)[2]. Despite the celebratory vignette in which he placed himself as a kind of father-figure, Rushdie also lamented the fact that this strong tradition of Indian authors writing in English remained "largely unknown in the United States, in spite of its considerable present-day energy and diversity" (p. 50). Three years after Rushdie's words, Mervyn Rothstein, in the *New York Times*, acknowledged the advent of "a young, critically praised generation of Indian writers" (Rothstein 2000). The list included, among others, a new generation of authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, whom Rothstein referred to with the label "Midnight's Grandchildren" in homage to Rushdie's seminal novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). What these writers seemed to share, according to the American journalist, was a rejection of Rushdie's magical realism and epic-scale tones by privileging, instead, realism and ordinary situations. Additionally, Rothstein emphasised the contribution of these writers to American literature in that they offered a multicultural perspective about the problematic experience of immigration.

The emergence of South Asian literature in English was later facilitated, as Alex Tickell observes, "by its increasing visibility in university English Literature curricula in North America, Europe and Australia" (2016: 5), a trend well exemplified by the many categories (DESI, ABCD, NRI)[3] South-Asian scholars have devised

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[2] Rushdie's above-quoted words were preceded by a lamentably notorious comment against the literary tradition in the local languages of the Indian Subcontinent. In his words, the prose produced by transnational authors was "proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen 'recognised' languages of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages'" (Rushdie 1997: 50). As Anjali Panday contends, this statement sounded like "a linguistic generalisation" (243) which ignited a debate on the dignity and creativity of these so-called "vernacular languages".

[3] The formula DESI, from the ancient Sanskrit "land", describes people and cultures

to deal with such a multifaceted literary tradition. Whereas it is true, as Fakrul Alam notices, that contemporary South Asian literature in English exposes a "trans-Indian and subcontinental phenomenon" (2007: 40) owing to the use of the same language which unifies the different voices of the subcontinent, one should also underline that Bangladeshi literary contributions are "the least developed in the subcontinent, not only in terms of its economy but also its English writing resources" (p. 37). Notwithstanding a long exposure to English culture, Bangladesh is a monolingual country, with Bengali as its official language, and Bangladeshi literature has accordingly received limited critical attention, dwelling on the fringes of the other South-Asian countries. Bengali works started to be translated into English in the aftermath of independence, while only recently, as Islam and Ali note, has the attitude towards the English language changed with writers "actively participating" (2019: 4), particularly in the field of fiction. Diasporic writers juxtapose universal themes, such as migration and generational conflicts, with domestic issues related to the socio-economic reality of their homeland. As far as the Bangladeshi economic situation is concerned, tragic historical events, like the 1974 famine, have been instrumental in shaping the future development of the country, with the introduction of such measures as disaster management, poverty reduction and food security, which have paved the way for the development of present-day Bangladesh. The traumas of the early 1970s have then left a legacy of social reforms which have made Bangladesh "a 'test case' for global capitalist development" (Hossain 2017: 14).

Whereas the paradoxical socio-economic condition of the South-Asian country has given rise to phrases such as "the Bangladeshi conundrum" (p. 46), since good economics has prevailed over bad politics, the Bangladeshi community, returning to literature, has found an important echo in the voices of diasporic writers like Monica Ali, Tahmima Anam and Imam himself. Ali's *Brick Lane*

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from the Indian subcontinent. The acronym ABCD, instead, indicates "American-born confused desi", a phrase that complicates the socio-cultural status of Indian migrants who are legally recognised as "Non-resident Indian" (NRI) since they live outside their homeland. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, NRI living worldwide are about 30,000,000 (see https://www.india.gov.in/topics/foreign-affairs/nris).

(2003), for instance, offers interesting insights into the Bangladeshi Muslim community of East London in the wake of 9/11. Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007), which won the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2008, is instead a historical novel delving into the troublesome Bangladeshi Liberation War. In a way, Imam's *The Black Coat* interrogates the same historical upheavals as Anam's story by addressing the political and economic problems that have catalysed social changes. On the one hand, the representation of major historical events, as Cara Cilano argues, is one of the key elements of contemporary Bangladeshi writing. On the other, the openness to the market of the English language has finally placed Bangladeshi literature "in a context more aligned to subcontinental realities" (Cilano 2016: 65), specifically concerning the portrayal of events like the 1971 Liberation War and the calamitous 1974 famine. What Cilano identifies in contemporary Bangladeshi literature is hence a potential "to reflect, to refract and/or to reinvent the frames through which Bangladeshis and other English-speaking audiences understand the war and the nation it created" (p. 66).

Starting from this premise, in this article I will explore how the rhetoric of nationalism governs *The Black Coat*. I will claim that Imam's debut novel draws on and parodies the feelings of nationalism that marked the literary background immediately after the Liberation War. By combining realism and dystopia, Imam delves into Bangladeshi history, thus exposing the nationalist cause to the risks of propaganda. Clues of these processes can be found in the realistic form of the novel: owing to its narrative form, which recalls a diary or a chronicle, *The Black Coat* can be read as a social document that charts the nationalist rhetoric of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the devastating consequences of the 1974 famine. This view seems to be corroborated by the first-person narrative perspective that tends to blend personal testimony and historical events using dates and chronological linearity. And yet, Imam's novel also shares a fascination with dystopia. By featuring a conflictual interaction between individualism and collectivism, the narrative transcends the realistic mode with dark satire, humour and delirium – forms that alert readers to the contradictions inherent in the nationalist imaginary, thus emphasising the climate of oppression that permeates nationalist rhetoric. In this light, the novel's first-person narrator, Khaleque Biswas, being first a victim

and then a perpetrator of nationalist propaganda, gradually reveals his unreliability, turning the sense of national unity into fratricidal violence and thereby illustrating the failures of the present and the dangers of the future.

2. Narrative Form, Realism and Nationalism

Divided into two books, structured into fifty-six chapters, with both a Prologue and an Epilogue set in the present, *The Black Coat* is a long flashback opening in the aftermath of the Liberation War between East Pakistan and West Pakistan, a conflict ending with East Pakistan becoming independent with the name of Bangladesh. The narrative explores the years 1971-1974, while both the Prologue and the Epilogue are set in the third millennium when an old Khaleque Biswas lives in a condition of "pain and remorse and despair" (Imam 2013: 339). The Prologue opens in 2010. The scene introduces the reader to the ceremony that celebrates Sheikh Mujibur's birthday. Though the 'Father of the Bengal Nation' has died, thousands of Biswas' countrymen are commemorating Sheikh Mujibur, while Biswas, surrounded by festoons and banners, conjures up "a different time" (p. ix), remembering when the Bangladeshis would shout these words: "'You have betrayed us! You have betrayed us!'" (p. ix). As is clear from the incipit, the narrative juxtaposes two temporal axes, one foreshadowing the present and the other, which covers the largest part of the story, exploring the past.

On a formal level, the novel is narrated as a series of testimonial accounts focalised around the consciousness of the narrator-protagonist. Initially, Biswas, who is a journalist, understands history as a form of progress and intellectual enlightenment. Gradually, however, the narrator's efforts to chronicle the history of the country fade away, making space for a psychological realist mode centred on his mental processes. As the novel begins, it is 1971 and Sheikh Mujibur, then "the leader of the liberation struggle" (p. 3), is kept in prison in West Pakistan. The narrative then tracks the transition of the country towards freedom, using precise dates and referring to well-known historical moments, such as Mujibur's famous speech to the nation on 7 March 1971 or the refugee crisis in 1974. *The Black Coat* thus recasts history as a "large moment of truth" (p. 15), presenting a historical consciousness where

the memory of the colonial experience and the utopic promise of freedom and progress are intertwined. In this regard, the novel's realist temporality can be said to play a crucial role in the development of a nationalist consciousness which requires "the conceptualization of a linear history whose logical development could be channelled toward future national sovereignty" (Anjaria 2012: 101). As Ulka Anjaria argues, the model of linear temporality is inherent in the discourse on nationalism due to the emphasis it puts on the idea of history as progress, "structured around a recognizable logic of political awakening undergirded by transitions from present to future, decay to utopia" (p. 108). And yet, despite the central preoccupation with Bangladesh's entry into nationhood, the novel's exploration of Biswas' thoughts about the present state of the country interrupts the linear temporality of nationalism, providing an example of what Anjaria calls a way "to critique the homogeneous time of the nation-state" (p. 103). If nationalism tries to go beyond colonialism, the narrator's critique of the emergent nationalism interrupts the promising rhetoric of Mujibur's emergent national identity, unveiling power imbalances, debilitating poverty, and oppressions. Thus, in *The Black Coat*, realism contributes to foster the emergence of a historical consciousness in which the birth of Bangladesh is evoked and criticised at the same time.

In portraying the disastrous effects of nationalism, Imam confronts historical atrocities, engaging with the personal ramifications of major political events in the same way as in *A Golden Age*. As previously alluded to, Anam's narrative inaugurates the tradition of the historical novel addressing nationalism in Bangladeshi contemporary literature. Through the story of an East-Pakistani family, *A Golden Age* charts the brutal escalation of violence leading to war and independence, thereby invoking the idea of history as a transition towards liberty and progress. By using a realistic style that arouses empathic connections in the reader, Anam's debut novel promotes "a hopeful vision for the future" (Cilano 2016: 72), notwithstanding the exposure to grief and loss it also stages. In addition, the novel brings the struggle between the public and the private sphere to the fore, disclosing the strength of the painful forces that lead to the fragmentation of a family and the violent birth of a nation. With a vivid psychological characterisation

of the protagonist, Rehana Haque, the novel foreruns the interface of private and public concerns: from a caring mother to a secret supporter of the Bangladeshi freedom fighters, Rehana's first-person narrative perspective morphs Anam's novel, lending a deep psychological quality to the story of the country's brutal passage into nationhood.

Similarly, the conflict between private and public animates *The Black Coat* where individual aspirations clash with collective needs, revealing a fractured collective consciousness within the newly born nation. The narrator-protagonist of Imam's novel embodies the failure of all the attempts at integrating collectivism and individualism. While working for a Dhaka journal symbolically called *The Freedom Fighter*, Khaleque Biswas shares the nationalist propaganda of the *Mukti Bahini*, the Bangladeshi military forces fighting against West Pakistani soldiers. By using the language of nationalism, his articles seek to arouse emotional contagion in the local population, "so that every Bangladeshi upon reading my words", the journalist states, "would be imbued with an enormous sense of patriotism" (Imam 2013: 4). As this quote demonstrates, the reader is immediately confronted with a clear declaration of Biswas' ideology: the journalist is animated by a fervent nationalist imaginary that aims at illuminating the future of the country, through the dissemination of the main tenets of nationalist ideology to the Bangladeshi people "by rousing its conscience" (p. 4) against the enemies of the country. What seems to prevail here is the idea of nationalism as a form of popular mobilisation for the betterment of the country. In this situation, where the population is aroused by an emotionally charged language, Biswas serves as one of the many "public servants" (p. 6) of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (called Sheik Mujib in the novel), who embodies the collective utopian dream of a better future as his words "had the power to motivate Bangladeshis" (p. 40).

Surprisingly, the cultivation of collective responsibility in the Bangladeshi community suddenly evaporates. In the wake of Bangladeshi Independence, the journalist is fired, apparently owing to financial constraints, while the real reason lies in his boss' opposition to Biswas' articles charting the sufferings of a country gradually plunging "into a deep pit of brutality" (p. 32). Thus, Biswas realises that the nationalist rhetoric does not satisfy the real

needs of the population and that the editorial line of the journal tends to favour the political propaganda of the Prime Minister's regime. As a consequence, Biswas's reaction to this transition from dreams of independence and democracy to a state of media control and dictatorship is conveyed through his own identity metamorphosis, which also signals a chasm between the individual and the collective. By resorting to the very same illusory words of political propaganda, Biswas is able to "stun a whole generation of people" (p. 82), disclosing the gap between political aspirations and reality. He easily crosses the frontier between victim and perpetrator sliding from ambitions of fostering collective responsibility to unbridled individualism: individualism, then, disrupts the collective utopian dream, which comes to be spoilt by Biswas' abuse of the population's innocence.

Bangladeshis are not only victims of Biswas' manipulation of their opinion and the rhetoric of Rahman's regime, as we will see. Also, in *The Black Coat*, natural catastrophes and environmental disasters impinge on the story, conveying the image of a collectivity suffering from "hunger, dissatisfaction, rampant poverty, looting" (p. 32), but also from the changes provoked by natural calamities which cause mass displacements of refugees towards the capital city:

Too many people had moved to Dhaka after the war: those who were directly affected by the war; those who could not find any employment in the villages, like Nur Hussain; those who suddenly became ambitious because they were new citizens of a free country. [...] They came from all areas of the country, but mostly from districts that had seen repeated natural disasters. Home lost; entire crops damaged; cattle mad or dead. (p. 31)

The above-quoted extract provides readers with a realist snapshot of a country in crisis. As Biswas himself reports later in the novel, in the winter of 1973 scores of people were dying in the countryside, owing to extremely low temperatures, "though Sheik Mujib was far from admitting it" (p. 105). In presenting socio-economic tensions and climatic catastrophes, Imam's novel follows Biswas' testimonial accounts of the upheavals that torment the country and disrupt the lives of many Bangladeshis, like Nur Hussain who is a simple and almost illiterate young man in search of a better future. Against this

painful condition, Biswas' attitude towards the most vulnerable is initially one of care as he offers food and shelter to Nur. Also, he feels compelled to teach him the history of the country, using the nationalist imagery as a persuasive tool. As he admits, he could tell stories of the whole Liberation War, "dividing it chronologically month by month, dissecting it analytically incident by incident" (p. 38). This obsession with reconstructing the past emerges clearly when he starts a long tale of the colonial history of the subcontinent, "beginning with 1757, when India fell to the British imperialists" (p. 40). As alluded to before, the realist mode of the novel, with the evocation of precise dates and historical details, enacts a compromise between the reconstruction of the past from a postcolonial perspective and the utopian dream of creating a future ground for hope and progress.

Notably, realism and history tend to operate as potential vehicles for depicting the country's political scenario in Imam's narrative, addressing the aching contradictions of nationalism. This stance seems to chime with Cilano's contention that historical frictions can offer "a space for critical narrative reflection on the war's legacies, including the disillusionment born of failed nationalisms and other attempts at creating inclusive claims to belonging" (2016: 66). *The Black Coat*, in my view, conforms closely to this sort of meditation on the condition of the country, revealing the failures of a hopeful vision of solidarity and, thus, contributing to a chasm between collective needs and individual ambitions. Evidence of this tragic moment of postcolonial history is provided in the various narrative sequences that describe the diasporic waves of Bangladeshi villagers pouring into the capital city. A paradox, however, does emerge here: while to the eyes of the refugees, Dhaka symbolises the force of the country's liberation, with the Shaheed Minar[4] epitomising Bangladeshi Independence and attracting a vast mass of people

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[4] The Shaheed Minar, which means "Martyr Monument", was built in 1952 to celebrate the demonstrators killed by the West Pakistani policemen while protesting against plans to oppose the official status of the Bengali language. It is then a symbol of national unity which was later reconstructed in 1956 and finally renovated in 1971, in the aftermath of Bangladeshi Independence. A major tourist attraction nowadays, the monument consists of columns on a marble floor representing a weeping mother and its four fallen children.

during Mujib's Independence speech, for Biswas Dhaka is riddled with misery and decay. This is how, for instance, Biswas portrays the hellish over-populated landscape of Dhaka:

In the city, more pavements were covered with tents made of old *saris*. The *saris* soaked in the night fog and dried in the sun during the day, and soon began to look as colourless as the faces of people who lived under them. Because of the lack of proper sewage facilities, the city air became sticky with bad smells. Blind people, people with elephantiasis, people wounded in the Liberation War, people who were disabled or paralyzed, found their stations on the road. (Imam 2013:105-106)

Such instances of misery and wretchedness abound in Imam's novel, with a vivid, realist force that is reminiscent of the "rotting body" (Mistry 1995: 436) of the unnamed metropolis in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). In a similar vein to Imam's novel, Mistry's tale is concerned with a tragic moment of postcolonial India, namely the Emergency (1975-77), when the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended elections and limited civil rights because of an alleged social threat. While portraying the inhabitants of the squatter camps of a metropolis that largely resembles Bombay, Mistry questions the policy of "beautification" launched by Gandhi. The sidewalks, in particular, become the symbolic space of the local population's daily struggles for survival. Like Mistry, Imam resorts to a realist mode of writing that illuminates the collective reality of the 1970s, while aspirations of national freedom seem to yield only suffering and pain.

In terms of style, Imam also shares with Mistry the use of fiction as a realist chronicle denouncing political propaganda and social evils. To do so, Imam emphasises the reality of the most vulnerable. This emerges clearly in the titles of the various chapters which either reproduce or ironically synthesise the climate of hopelessness that animates the lives of common people. Take, for instance, the chapter entitled "The Newcomers", in which Biswas chronicles a further wave of refugees to Dhaka in September 1974. By adopting the technique of free indirect speech, Imam enables the reader to enter the narrator's mind, while Biswas muses on the reasons leading the refugees to the city. This endo-diaspora has caused the death of half a million people, a number, as Biswas reflects, five

times higher than the Bangladeshis killed during the Liberation War (Imam 2013: 131). Although the title of the chapter may sound welcoming, it indirectly criticises Sheik Mujibur's indifference to the real state of the country. While indulging in thoughts about the social condition of his countrymen, Biswas then concludes that the migrants are invading Dhaka to warn the Prime Minister, "to draw his attention to their suffering" (p. 130). Here, the reader is confronted with the description of a cataclysmic human tragedy which is ironically juxtaposed to Biswas' curious remarks on the possible reasons for such a mass displacement. Among the various causes he takes into account, it eventually dawns on him that what the refugees want to show is that they "would not lose confidence" (p. 130) in the Prime Minister, reminding him of the value of his promises. A human catastrophe is critically interwoven with the narrator's efforts to achieve an in-depth understanding of socio-economic mayhem, thus offering a choric dramatic perspective that contributes to conveying the image of a world in pieces.

In addition, *The Black Coat* juxtaposes realist depictions of nationalism with psychological insights, by privileging the narrator's interior monologues. Owing to the absence of an omniscient narrator, the reader is forced to rely solely upon a focal perspective that gradually proves to be unreliable and insincere as Biswas' wicked project is gradually carried out. The former journalist, who had believed in the power of his articles to evoke feelings of freedom and justice, later acknowledges the decline of his nation and criticises nationalism, viewing it as a powerful mass-delusion disorder. Nationalism, Biswas claims, "is not a matter of decision" (p. 74); rather, it is a mental trap, a sort of "trance" (p. 74) which exposes people to delirium and illusions. Bereft of plans for the future and deprived of his dreams of democracy, Biswas instils a dystopian condition in the story by exploiting the very mechanism of nationalist propaganda: he turns Hussain into a fake Sheikh Mujibur because of an apparent physical similarity to the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, thus distorting the socio-historical reality and creating a counter-narrative of the present condition of the country:

[…] I was playing with people's helplessness. With a fake Sheikh Mujib I was manufacturing dreams for them. I was convincing them that the future was behind us. It had frozen the moment Sheikh Mujib opened his mouth

in 1971; now we must live in the past forever. We must rot there year after year after year. (p. 80)

While further corroborating the idea of Bangladesh as a country without a future, with cyclical repetitions of the same pattern, Biswas' words also disclose one of the main themes of the novel, the unwillingness and incapacity to change reality, thereby replicating a form of exploitation redolent of the colonial past. The farcical parade of the fake Mujibur around Dhaka gradually erodes the utopian dream of a collective betterment, edging towards, instead, the discursive space of postcolonial dystopias that, as Mrinalini Chakravorty explains, give narratives "the capacity for dazzlement" (2015: 278). The delirious manifestations and the seductive allure of nationalist propaganda testify to a condition where reality is distorted, infused with parody and dark satire.

3. Postcolonial dystopia, mimicry, and humour

Decay madness and delirium become common symptoms of post-independence Bangladesh, disclosing the image of a place where modernity and rationality are challenged. These aching contradictions come to the fore when Biswas exploits the Prime Minister's nationalist rhetoric as a weapon for corrupting the naïf Hussain. Specifically, Hussain memorises Sheikh Mujibur's first speech delivered to the independent nation on 7 March 1971, declaiming the words in a series of recitals to raise money. Later, Biswas teams up with the Awami League, the political party supporting Sheikh Mujibur, using Hussain's mimicry in official events. This distortion of reality seems to evoke the delirious nature of postcolonial dystopias in that Biswas' creature is not merely a comic manifestation of Bangladeshi tragic reality; rather, it "remains pointedly a part of the desperate scene that produces it" (Chakravorty 2015: 278). Dystopia, therefore, is another face of reality, a version of the story where the individual and the collective collide, thereby generating a fracture.

For Chakravorty, postcolonial dystopias feature "an irreducible social chasm wherein disaster or historical damage appear as the defining circumstance of the present" (p. 270). Interestingly, what makes postcolonial dystopias peculiar is "a highly self-conscious rendering of the genre itself" (p. 272), which reveals an awareness

of the limitations and the dangers of certain utopian desires projected into the future. In *The Black Coat*, the atrocities of the present seem to entail the same delirious and illusionary forms as in the colonial past. Nationalist discourse, hence, resuscitates pain and loss which masquerade as freedom. Being a journalist and accustomed to chronicling the condition of the country, Biswas's interior monologues convey a symmetry between the disorders of the present and its inscription in the narrative mode:

The famine is a time for the able and the strong-willed, I thought. It is a time for the intelligent to reign. They will introduce new ways of life. They will make their own laws to protect themselves from non-existence, the way I have found my own path. They will create a religion of their own, if necessary, which will define success and morality in a completely different language. The famine will set apart the fit from the weak-hearted. (Imam 2013: 231-232)

The narrator's reflection signals a struggle between human dispossession and self-interested ambitions. If the rhetoric of nationalism germinates with words or, as Biswas explains, develops by "using words as weapons" (p. 210), the Prime Minister's dream of a country with "at least half a dozen Nobel Prizes in the next two decades in the fields of science, medicine and poverty alleviation" (p. 153) showcases the linguistic force of nationalist propaganda. While the language of revolution is simple and based on slogans, the intricate language Mujibur is using, Biswas claims, is meant "to conceal his limitations as an administrator" (p. 210), enmeshing the population in illusions and false expectations. The utopian dimension conjured up by the Prime Minister's words does not seem to exist anywhere, thus illustrating the contradictory nature of utopianism, an ambiguity that, according to Bill Ashcroft, demarcates the border with dystopias. Drawing on Ernest Bloch, Ashcroft discusses the role of utopianism in postcolonial literatures, claiming that in dystopias we find that "the fulfilment of the individual is always denied as a condition of a collective utopian dream" (2016: 75). In certain respects, Bangladesh, as a new-born nation, is an interesting example of a country where collective needs and individualism collide in many ways since the population is in search of a collective dream that might enhance a "project of

social transformation" (p. 79) on which utopian dreams are centred. Biswas, instead, epitomises individual fulfilment: his initial idealism is converted into the cult of his personality, building 'a religion of his own' inspired by the very principles of that nationalist propaganda he had tried to criticise as a journalist.

Whereas utopianism entails solidarity and cooperation in the hope that this will ensure the improvement of life, in dystopian literary representations the erosion of social integrity emerges in countries, like Bangladesh, whose social roots are not deep. Both utopia and dystopia are two complementary ways of portraying societies and, in this light, dystopia does represent "a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2010: 2). The incongruities that emerge from the contrast between collective dreams and individual aspirations make the border between utopia and dystopia porous. Imam's novel conceptualises this tension between collectivism and individualism, in which the dark tones of dystopia are instrumental in depicting disrupted subjectivities. Biswas, in particular, embodies the fractures of the self in a country suffering from economic depression and environmental disasters. He gradually becomes alienated from the bleak reality around and regresses to a state of moral deterioration, living off Hussain's innocence. Moreover, in line with Chakravorty's understanding of postcolonial dystopia as "a concert of contradictions" (p. 270), *The Black Coat* can be said to refract the nationalist propaganda concerned with the construction of a better future by means of absurd humour which does not alleviate grief and loss; rather, mimicry and parody provide readers with a less realistic account of the horror of the present which is not, however, less accurate. This may explain why the narrator's viewpoint slowly shifts from a realist mode of observing and commenting on the reality around himself to making lucid observations that make space for irony and humour.

Interestingly, the black coat the title refers to is Sheikh Mujibur's sleeveless coat he used to wear over his white *Punjabi*, considered a "symbol of patriotism" (Imam 2013: 59) by the population. By wearing a coat similar to the one of the Bangladeshi president, Hussain emblematically crosses the border between the private and the public sphere in that "[t]he coat had the power to make all men look the same – strong and unafraid in the quest for freedom" (p. 60).

Thus, in such a dystopian perspective, Imam presents the dichotomy between public and private using a symbolic element of cohesion as a motif for instilling loss and alienation, conferring to Hussain's mimicry the tones of exaggeration. The illiterate man's repetition of Mujibur's words bears the visible sign of a delirious manifestation, chiming with Chakravorty's contention that postcolonial dystopias insist on their own version of reality, "no matter how disjointed this version may seem to others" (2015: 278).

In addition, Imam deploys provocative satire and absurd humour to ridicule the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, spoiling his political qualities. A comic scene, for instance, occurs when Biswas takes Nur Hussain to a barber's to have the young man's hair cut like Mujibur. The barber's reaction is ironic since he perceives Biswas' attempt at imitating the Prime Minister's hairstyle in an 'ordinary' man as a way to undermine Mujibur "as a person, as leader and as a head of state" (Imam 2013: 56). This scene not only reduces Mujibur's leadership as it places him on the same level as his countrymen; more significantly, it interrogates the relationship between the Bangladeshis and their leader, showing how people seem to be more mesmerised by the dictator's physical aspect than by his words. In this respect, Imam might have drawn inspiration from a number of sources, such as Indira Gandhi's parodic depictions in *Midnight's Children*, or from Mohamed Hanif' s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), where the former Pakistani president Zia ul-Haq is the target of the author's satire. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie uses witchcraft[5] to satirically portray Indira Gandhi's political activity, particularly when describing the Prime Minister's abuse of her political authority. Resorting to witchcraft, Rushdie chronicles Gandhi's adoption of a campaign of forced sterilisation that extinguishes 'midnight's children': while the children symbolically represent Indian pluralism, Indira Gandhi's strategy entails the force of central state authority and its totalising control over the population. Likewise, Hanif employs farce and parody to convey the crude reality of Pakistan under Zia ul-Haq's

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[5] According to Nicole Weickgenannt, Rushdie's depiction of Indira Gandhi's political abuses "spills over into misogynist remarks and characterizations" (2008: 74) by means of a strategy that combines widowhood and witchcraft, thereby revealing the obsession with certain "patriarchal anxieties" (p. 80) at work in *Midnight's Children*.

regime. In *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, two narrative strands are intertwined, one dealing with the tortures inflicted upon a Pakistani air officer and the other following Zia ul-Haq before his death in a mysterious aeroplane accident in 1988, as alluded to in the very title which puns on a container of mangoes that presumably carried explosives. Hanif uses satire to deconstruct the socio-political Pakistani context: by incorporating multiple stories and motives, including Zia ul-Haq's homosexual romances, the novel emphasises the manipulative power of the Pakistani president. As Sadia Abbas observes, the complicity of the pilot with the Pakistani regime seems to entail that comedy is "a means of exposing such complicity" (Abbas 2014: 169), while the proliferation of storylines tends to avoid empathic engagements, allegedly distancing readers through laughter. As these examples illustrate, satire is a powerful tool combining the comic and the tragic as a way to criticise official truth by providing "elements of destabilisation [that] can undermine the supposed neutrality and veracity in literary voices" (Friedman 2019: 33).

Significantly, this conflation of tragedy and comedy also permeates *The Black Coat*, with Biswas selling Hussain's farcical imitation of Mujibur to the Awami League to make money. If this logic of identity confusion seems to prevail it, however, reverses when Hussain finds his own voice. The young man emends Mujibur's speech, declaiming the following words: "Today I can tell you that there is no hope in the words I have spoken for so long, that they were words unconnected to our lives, to our dreams, our future" (Imam 2013: 251). So, despite the coat, the pipe and the haircut that make him like the Prime Minister, Hussain eventually recovers his own ability to speak, displaying moral integrity and drastically interrupting Biswas' manipulation of his own identity. Mimicry, as Bhabha understands it, is not a mere copying of language and manners; rather, it entails slippages, emerging as "the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (1994: 122). If Hussain's creative eruption paradoxically subverts the postcolonial idea of 'the subaltern who cannot speak', this occurrence of individual force unsettles Biswas who eventually experiences "a blind and inconsiderate nemesis" (Imam 2013: 276). And yet, despite the dark atmosphere *The Black Coat* hinges around, Biswas' final crisis is a cathartic moment of revelation which ultimately opens

to a sense of liberation and acceptance of his hideous crimes, thus transcending the devastating effects of dystopias.

4. Conclusion

The Black Coat, as I have tried to demonstrate, focuses on issues of social injustice, environmental decay and economic recession, a bleak reality that is incompatible with the utopian Bangladeshi dream evoked by Sheikh Mujibur's propaganda. On the one hand, the novel privileges a dystopian aesthetic that engages with the catastrophes of the present, thus echoing the colonial past and foreshadowing an unpromising future. As a consequence, the narrative exhibits a certain attentiveness to humour, madness and delirium, particularly with regard to the misuse of language and the manipulation of identity. On the other hand, *The Black Coat* resists the hallucinatory effects of dystopia owing to the realist mode it hinges on. Despite its bleak tones, the novel is an honest depiction of what it means to live in a country contaminated by corruption, propaganda, economic crisis, rapid urbanisation, and illiteracy, thus illustrating how dystopia is close to realism.

What are, to conclude, the implications of Imam's dystopian portrait of post-Independence Bangladesh? Whereas contemporary South-Asian literature addresses the contradictions of "contemporary transformations" (Tickell 2016: 3), Imam's Bangladesh presents the persistence of nationalism as a vehicle for representing the complexities of many South-Asian countries. Like other South-Asian narratives, *The Black Coat* offers a controversial vision of modern Bangladesh where the celebration of freedom is questioned by juxtaposing historical frictions to psychological reflections, thus interweaving the collective and the personal. Not only does the narrative criticise the use of propaganda, it even contributes to the creation of a dystopian world infused with farce and humour. In the novel, dystopia and realism are used as the two sides of the same coin, as a way to refract the contradictions of the present and not, as dystopian tales tend to do, as projections of the future. Imam fuses traditional realism with a more self-reflexive stance: against a disastrous social background, the individual parable of Khaleque Biswas provides a grim reminder of the recent history of many South Asian countries, shedding light on a watershed in a country still beset by

contradictions, as the 2018 elections, won by Hasina Sheikh, Sheikh Mujibur's daughter, have testified – despite poll irregularities, violations by candidates and mass arrests.

Given the current surge of populist propaganda, *The Black Coat* reminds readers of the continuing relevance of nationalism as an alienating experience. There is, however, another line of inquiry scholars might follow from the relative neglect this novel, and Bangladeshi literature in general, has received. Whether or not diaspora literary criticism has overemphasised the Indian context, what happens when we move beyond India? Imam's novel, then, promotes critical thinking in order to consider "what literary students and scholars mean when we talk about anglophone/global literary production" (Cilano 2016: 60). I would argue, in conclusion, that *The Black Coat* exemplifies not only a local experience based on ethnic and historical particularities; rather, it can be read as a more general representation of human resistance under the common yoke of nationalist propaganda.

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