Why and how is Razia Khan's "Argus under Anaesthesia" part of the 1971 transnational discourse?

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Abstract: Though the Bengali fictional works by the bilingual writer Razia Khan (1936–2011) are appreciated to some extent, her English-language literary expression (poetry and fiction) and critical writing receive less attention in the country. Her relevance as a quintessential Bangladeshi author flourishing through the last colonial decade, post-Partition realities, and the transition years of newly liberated Bangladesh is manifest in her cosmopolitan nationalistic spirit beaming out in her oeuvre. Contrary to the notion of the country's Anglophone poetry being dissociated from the popular struggle for liberation and post-Independence equality and justice, this paper finds that Khan shared the burgeoning nation's concerns in her English-language poems, too, which mostly register her tri-generational and transnational exposure to life as lived through conveniences and uncertainties. In line with the aforesaid claim, this paper focuses on "Argus under Anaesthesia," the title poem of her first collection *Argus under Anaesthesia* (1976) and proves that this poem—coterminous with Harrison's lyrics "Bangla Desh" and Ginsberg's "September on Jessore Road"—stands out as a historical document on the 1971 ground reality, and partakes in the broader the transnational discourse on the war. Apparently modelled on Eliot's form and invested in Western mythology, the poem deserves to be canonized in the country's genre of war poetry, and in the tradition of Bangladeshi literature, for that matter.

Keywords: Bangladesh War of Liberation, Razia Khan, transnational discourse, war poetry

> Indeed to return to 1971 to examine its implications is like returning to a place that has been marked with the traces of future. To separate fact from fiction then appears difficult and perhaps harmful for constructing notions of history. Revisiting 1971 thus requires *a mixing of genres, an alertness to multiple voices from multiple contexts, and often competing versions*.
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> ___Chaity Das (2017). *In the Land of Buried Tongues*, p. xii, *emphasis added*

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Introduction: In Search of the Nationalist Anglophone

How relevant the pioneering Bangladeshi bilingual writer Razia Khan[2] (1936–2011) is to literary and historical studies in Bangladesh becomes obvious from the several reminiscences and tributes offered by, among others, the poet and translator Kaiser Haq (2020), the translator and academic Fakrul Alam (2018), the poet and critic Azfar Hussain (2017), the poet and translator Rebecca Haque (2020), the journalist and author Syed Badrul Ahsan (2012; 2020). Most of these commemorative writings have of late been appended to *Razia Khan: Omnibus Edition* (2020) containing all her prose pieces since the 1950s. The florilegium opens with a foreword by the country's celebrated polymath scholar Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury (2020). He evinces unrestrained appreciation for her authorial stance, using expressions like 'among the brightest of our time,' 'born to be a writer,' 'a prodigy,' 'originality of thought and style,' 'an organic unity' (p. 5–6)—attributes very few writers, let alone writers from the Anglophone clique, of the country have been accorded. Like Khan's other admirers, Serajul Islam Choudhury extols her offbeat, cosmopolitan yet patriotic stance above all as a litterateur in the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) with a rare humanist sensitivity, as the poet and fictionist

> responded to the world around her, grasped the meaning of her personal experiences and put them artistically in their proper context with a restraint which is charming. Her sense of right and wrong was unyielding and flowed through whatever she wrote and said (Choudhury, 2020, p. 7–8).

One of the reasons Khan is commemorated (and is worth commemorating) in contemporary Bangladesh is her cosmopolitan nationalistic thinking which evolved around the avant-garde Bengali cultural traditions and heritage at a time when ethnocentric contestations gripped South Asia and her sentiment manifests itself in her non-restrictive creative outpourings both in Bengali and English. It can be inferred that growing up under the shadow of her father Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan (1889 –1963) had a catalytic effect on Khan's juvenile self, as the stalwart politician—also a noted minister of undivided Bengal, then President of Pakistan Constituent Assembly and next Speaker of the Pakistan National Assembly—always exhibited a liberal stance towards the unPakistani Bengali cultural practices (See: Ahsan, 2009).

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[2] In some commemorative writings on the poet, she is mentioned by her full name "Razia Khan Amin," but this paper prefers her authorial name "Razia Khan."

Of course, her father like many others from this region was once "a firm believer in Pakistan, giving up the Congress to join the Muslim League after the demise of C. R. Das who kept Hindus and Muslims united" (Khan, 2009). But Khan avowed "a wide gap between his and my political affiliations" (Khan, 2009)—a rift on the individual level that symbolically speaks to the widening fissure between East Pakistan and West Pakistan on political, economic, and cultural lines since at least the 1950s till the war. She was in thrall to the Bengali culture through the pre-Partition and then Pakistan years in the land's privileged circles who, irrespective of gender, had access to the colonial education system. Becoming fond of Tagore music, even while among the chauvinistic Urdu-speaking echelons of Karachi and to the acquiescence of her father, comes as a surprising anecdote, because we know the 1913 Nobel Laureate was held dispensable for the purported Pakistani ideology (See: Anisuzzaman, 2008). Overall, Khan upheld the burgeoning nationalism of this culturally distinct group in the then eastern wing of Pakistan. Her diverse cultural orientations across Calcutta, Karachi, Dhaka and England rendered her into a cosmopolitan exponent affectively moored to the Bengali ethnic identity.

While at Dhaka University, Khan had paragon exposures to English studies, and she secured the first position in her undergraduate program with the Pope Gold medal for English literature, receiving her MA degree from the British Prime Minister (Khan, 2010). Remarkably, her receptiveness of Western enlightenment seems to have exceptionally piqued her Bangladeshi patriotic sense and sensibility, as her oeuvre testifies. This epistemic exposure bears its deep imprints on her English-language poetry which domesticates Graeco-Roman myths. In his tribute, her student Syed Badrul Ahsan (2012) at DU posits that she was not only "our very first literary window to the world" but also emerged as the pioneer "to bring home to our sensibilities an awareness of literature being a composite and integral part of existence." Clearly Ahsan underscores the bilingual writer's cosmopolitan awareness both interconnected with and open to the rest of the world when it came to cultural exchanges.

Now commemorated as an instrumental professor of English literature at the University of Dhaka (Akbar 2012; Alam 2018; Hussain 2017), the first tertiary institution of Bangladesh and the most frontal one in the country's historic freedom movements, Khan initiated a point of departure in literary studies in Bangladesh with a profile almost similar to that of the litterateur and India's Sahitya Akademi Award winner Meenakshi Mukherjee (1937–2009). The claim is corroborated by Haq's observation: "Creative,

cosmopolitan, forceful, she left an indelible mark in our literary history" (2020, p. 237). The country's leading Anglophone poet, Haq (2020) remembers her "as kindred spirit" (p. 233) with a prodigious literary sensibility ahead of her time and at "one with the soul of modern literature (p. 233)." Haq tries to determine the dimensions of this sensibility:

> She knew her Symbolistes [sic], and Decadents, and Aesthetes, and their Dadaist and High Modernist successors. Perhaps more importantly, she wasn't afraid to speak her mind in defiance of the excessive Grundyism that pervades our society (p. 236).

In Bangladesh's literary history, Khan is celebrated as one of the first-generation Anglophone poets of post-Independence Bangladesh along with the authors Niaz Zaman (1941-), Feroz Ahmed-ud-din (1950-) and Kaiser Haq (1950-) (See: Quayum and Hasan, 2021, p. 3; Haq, 2021[a]; Haq, 2021[b]). In their historiography of Bangladeshi Anglophone literature as a "thrice born tradition," Quayum and Hasan (2022) synoptically posit that Khan's works "generally focus on gender, nationalism, and multiculturalism, expressing *a deep sense of pride in Bangladeshi history, culture, and identity* and a call for the empowerment of women" (p. 737, *emphasis added*). Several awards in her name including the PEN Lay Writing Award, Bangla Academy Award for contribution to Bengali literature, Ekushey Padak for education and Ananya Award (*The Daily Star*, 2013) indicate that she still holds a distinct stature in the Bangladeshi literary scene. All these facts taken into consideration suffice to read Khan's English-language poetry with a motive to delve out whether her creative expressions speak of her time, and if so, how intimately.

This research is partly spurred by Khan's exceptional career evolving through the political transformations of the territory historically termed as Bengal and then as East Pakistan till its emergence as Bangladesh at the tail end of 1971. But in the hope of making a lead within a permissible expanse, this paper focuses on the poem "Argus under Anaesthesia" because it embodies almost all the salient features of her oeuvre and stands out as a historical document on the 1971 ground reality, proclaiming the poet's impassioned concern for her country beset with one of the most tremendous crises of the twentieth century. When critically appreciated, the poem registers characteristic emotive outbursts, aesthetic experimentation, historical attestation, and of course, political counteraction against contrived amnesia about the ground reality of the 1971 war. Considering all these aspects, this paper analyzes the form, content and context of "Argus under

Anaesthesia" in relation to a few other concurrent transnational texts that included politicians, political scientists, cultural activists, journalists and that, in the hope of a humanist consensus, directed the world consciousness to the ground reality of the war. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the poem reflectively shares the contemporary shock and anxiety about humanitarian crises, and thus partakes in the broader the transnational discourse on the war, and contrapuntally within the country's literary tradition of which the war and its aftermath is a leitmotif, as if inextricable from the nation's present times.

To propose this paper's standpoint more specifically, Khan's "Argus under Anaesthesia" deserves a place in the corpus of Bangladeshi poetry. Of course, recognition of that ilk came when the poem was showcased in *The Daily Star*'s 2016 Independence Day supplement among the stories like Hasan Azizul Haque's "Without a name, without a tribe" and poems like Shamsur Rahman's "Roaring Liberation" in English translation, all of which, as the newspaper's editor remarked, "reflect the psychological trauma" and "the extent of the sacrifice" that the Bangladeshi nation had to undergo for its liberated status. In the Hay Festival commemoration of her poetry, Amitava Kar (2014) opined that "Argus under Anaesthesia" "connects us to our past, and unmasks both private and civic memories, dreams, and urgencies," and that the poem materializes through "the utterance of both beauty and the grotesque."

Since research on Khan's Anglophone poetry—or on Bangladeshi English-language poetry en masse—is scarce, this paper culls from a number of tributes and reminisces Khan's admiring posterity wrote and a few essays by and on her with a view to formulating a conceptual framework that may conduce to understanding the poem in focus as well as other poems by her. I believe that a bilingual Bangladeshi poet versifying journalistically in English on the inflicted troubles of an emerging nation during the war's peak point in tandem with the American poet Allen Ginsberg and the singer George Harrison deserves some attention at par with the foreign friends and institutions whom the government of Bangladesh recognized for their contributions to the country's liberation (See: *The Daily Star,* 2019; Mahboob 2020; Dhaka Tribune 2022). Hence, the key motivation for this research comes from the simple disappointing observation that Khan's work, in Azfar Hussain's (2017) words, "has not received as much critical attention as it surely deserves" and also that she embodies both the Bangladeshi nationalist zeitgeist even in her Anglophone creative expression and the postcolonial outlook on contemporaneity. A corollary of this research is that

we can make sense of the poems she wrote over the three decades of 50s, 60s, and 70s, albeit publishing them later in the two collections *Argus under Anaesthesia* (1976) and *Cruel April* (1977) in addition to her only Bengali-language poetry collection *Sonali Ghasher Desh* (1978) only at the juncture of the poet's world and her sensibility charged with a sense of urgency.

On the Assimilation of Eliot's Form

Khan wrote the poem as a way of condemning the military atrocities, aligning her poetic voice with political and journalistic ones. That the Bangladeshi poet exploited the form and structure of Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), a modernist masterpiece and one of the most important poems of the 20th century, is itself a commendable enterprise. So, composed in five sections, the 166-line poem "Argus under Anaesthesia" opens with an empathic delineation of the millions of Bangladeshis displaced from their war-torn "land/ No longer their own," carrying themselves and their belongings on "Bruised feet, bleeding hands" and bearing the fresh memories of "loss of violated wives, mothers,/ Sisters, butchered babies" (p. 13). To Khan's creative imagination, the survival-obsessed crowd of people appears the way the London throng is pictured in Eliot's poem:

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet (p. 54–5)

Needless to say that the contexts are entirely different and Eliot's pointing to the spiritual destitution does in no way relate to the extreme situations of war victims. Only the fact that Khan made use of the Western imagination to the advantage of portraying the harrowing scenes of annihilated localities and devastated states of denizens is just an act aesthetically and politically exigent. Khan might have expected that the form would enable her to capture "the social etherisation as popularized by Eliot to symbolically refer to our '71 war" (Manzur, 2020, p. 262). We know with its shift of focus on speakers, locations, and times throughout, Eliot's masterpiece draws on a wide array of literary, musical, historical, and popular cultural allusions to present the terror, futility, and alienation of modern life in the wake of World War. The episodes, says Gardner (2001), follow each other "without narrative consequence, of allusions and quotations that drift across the mind"

(p. 79). While in exile and in anticipation of her people's fate in the throes of war, Khan found Eliot's form to be the most viable model for the representation of multimodal reality of the soon-to-be country, as the poet on the European soil "could visualize the fragility of life so clearly" (Manzur, 2020, p. 262). She tries to capture the urgency of life, as the jeopardized millions rush away from misanthropic madness:

> Beyond the reach of bipeds
> Set loose by madmen with moron eyes
> Spurting martial orders
> Between bouts of drunkenness. (p. 13)

Khan generously appended a footnote to her poem, where she explains the first two sections of her poem as "the exodus" of war refugees to India—an event which makes for historical references (See: Ahmad, 1971; Mukherji, 1974; Murshid 2011; Pattanaik, 2021). In fact, the poem gives a pictorial clarity to what Beachler (2011) terms as the "campaign of murder, rape, and pillage" (p. 11) by the West Pakistani military and its victims:

> …..impossible phantasmagoria
> Haunting the eyes
> Of deserted dogs and cattle; incredible
> Whiteness of human flesh, pigment
> Peeled off by blind bayonets;
> Crouching figures of raped
> Infants marking the earth red. (p. 13)

In the second section, the focus shifts between the sites of atrocities and of discourse, which are poles apart:

> …….pencil strokes confer
> Life and death on millions
> When bony arms stretch for proferred
> Morsels global motives
> Are espied; new slogans coined to deter
> Feeding hands. (p. 14)

The military-political schema of war, with all its wasteful malignancy towards humanity and its post-perpetration indemnity plan, comes out in the third section that records "the reaction of a lady Parliamentarian back from Pakistan to her native England to Yahya Khan's action in Bangladesh"

(Khan, 1976/ 2020, p. 17). The fourth section takes us back to the East Pakistan landscape, but it does so from the military autocrat's viewpoint:

> The demonic delta now wears a strange look!
> As the battle cry is sounded
> By a spray of machine-guns
> A true post-ablution
> Beauty bathes the ones sprawled
> In streets and promenades …..
> THE VULTUERS SHALL COME
> Cheap scavengers—to supplement
> The economy of bayonets—in a protracted
> And sacred war (p. 15)

The exasperated irony about connivance at suffering humans is reminiscent of Walcott's style in his 1962 poem "A Far Cry from Africa" mourning the Kikuyu victims of the Mau Mau uprising under the British colonial machination. To digress a little, Eliot's modernist poetry, with its complex use of language, imagery, and symbolism, has had a profound impact on Walcott's own poetic style and themes (See: Pollard, 2004). Here, the vultures in Khan's poem can be analogous with the worms in Walcott's image of the corpse-littered land.

> Corpses are scattered through a paradise.
> Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
> "Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"
> Statistics justify and scholars seize

The salients of colonial policy ("A Far Cry from Africa," Walcott, 1992, p. 17)

The fifth section of "Argus under Anaesthesia," in the poet's interpretation, "shifts back from England and Pakistan to Bangladesh" (Khan, 1976/ 2020, p. 17), where we see hints at killings on Dhaka University campus—killings symbolically testified by the departed souls of Selim, Jyoti, and Madhu, irrespective of religious identities. This section closing the poem is remarkable for the poet's prophetic optimism, in reversal of the titular visualization of Argus under the effect of anesthesia, about a revival of the nation's convergent zeitgeist and its striking back at the "demagogues":

> What if these livid plants which
> Bore the roses should awake in a terrible
> Resurrection

Armed like Argus with a myriad eyes;
And with their
Omniscient, cruel light burn the hypnotic
Tongue of demagogues,
Scald inept ringers glued to the reins
And demand back
Their broken lives, theirs
To live or sacrifice? (p. 17)

The form and the content of Khan's signature poem "Argus under Anaesthesia" having been analyzed above, it is worthwhile to examine how this poem was conceived in synchrony with the transnational and transcultural consciousness about the 1971 war, mass killings, gender violence and refugee crisis, and, by extension, to probe into the poem's contextualized significance.

Of Contextual and Transnational Entanglements

Though we cannot say the poem was published immediately after it had been composed, it became the title poem of Khan's first 1976 collection and manifests the English-language Bangladeshi poet's shared nerves and verves about the ongoing political and humanitarian crisis of the country to which she had always belonged. The dateline appended at the bottom as "Mittelweg, Hamburg/ November 12, 1971" may offer insights into the circumstances or environment that influenced the creation of the poem. The dedication page of *Argus under Anaesthesia* shows Khan expressing gratitude to Hans and Liselotte Woydt of Hamburg, for their "friendship and hospitality" during her exiled stay. In a recollection essay by Fakrul Alam, her student at Dhaka University and now a nationally recognized academic and translator, we get a mentioning of her leaving for England after the March 26 siege of Dhaka by Pak army. In a more reliable write-up by Amitava Kar following the 2014 Hay Festival in Dhaka, we come to know that she was in her "virtual exile in Germany" where she wrote "Argus under Anaesthesia" seconded by her "God in the Goblet", a poem she wrote in response to the massacre of intellectuals at the fag end of the war. But we do not have detailed information as to why and how she ended up in Hamburg in times of Germany's bifurcated existence. However, her literary ambassadorship can be established by two factors. Firstly, the activism of Bangladeshi diasporas during the Liberation War and in the present times for genocide recognition is well documented (Bangladesh Genocide Archive, nd; British Council Bangladesh 2017; *The Daily Star*, 2018; van Schendel, 2020,

p. 191; Dhaka Tribune, 2023). Secondly, it is known that Bangladeshi Anglophone literature has so far been a predominantly diasporic enterprise dealing with lived experience (Quayum and Hasan, 2022, p. 740). It becomes clear that Khan might not have been part of what poets like Shamsur Rahman (1929 – 2006), Rafiq Azad (1941 – 2016), Mohammad Rafiq (1943 –2023), Nirmalendu Goon (1945 –) and many other writers internalized as victims and fighters in the fate-determining war. Yet, one should note when Haq (2023) reminisces: "One was an exile in one's own home." According to Haq (2023), during the wartime, anxiety had a stifling effect on the creative imagination. Even when it managed to find a way to express itself, the process of cultural creation was hindered. As a result, poetry from the Liberation War only saw publication after victory had been secured. So Khan's exiled status did not have compromise with the intensity of her imagination and expression of the reality. In Professor Choudhury's insight, even while an exile Khan "had her agonies knowing what was happening in the country" and these feelings, as if by telepathy, became common to her fellow writers.

Eliot's influence having being confirmed by her adaptation of the English maestro's form and style for her poem "Argus under Anaesthesia," we can now examine the broader context within which Khan could compose this historically significant piece. Pertinently, it can be premised that she also adopted Eliot's concept "objective-correlative" which facilitates the expression of emotion in a work of art. In his 1919 essay, Eliot defined the concept as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" in the reader (1920; p. 100). All the same, to discern Khan's bona fide concern in her self-exile about the 1971 troubles and travails of her people back at home, we may refer to how the political and legal theorist Ashwini Vasanthakumar (2021) attempts to capture "the political agency and moral complexity" of exiles (p. 1) whose "political obligation, membership, and participation do not end at a border—physical or imagined," suggesting that transnationalism is a long-standing, rather than recent, phenomenon" and that exiles are "key transnational actors" (p. 3). To some extent, Vasanthakumar's (2021) defining exiles as "rescuers and representatives, nation builders and peace-makers, and witnesses to the suffering they have left behind" (p. 2) is attributable to Khan for her attempt to represent what

she had witnessed before leaving East Pakistan/Bangladesh at its moments of urgency.

As the dateline makes it obvious, Khan wrote the poem after the phenomenal Concert for Bangladesh held on August 1, 1971 had brought the crisis to the Western consciousness and Allen Ginsberg's "September on Jessore Road" consecutively published in the *New York Times* in November and December had recorded eyewitness plights of the war refugees. While the concert changed the "dynamic between political speech and popular music" (Hossain and Aucoin, 2017, p. 150) marking the "peak" of international cognizance about the Pakistani ruling elite's ruthlessness (Schendel 2020, p. 191-92; Kamalakaran, 2021; See also: Christiansen, 2014), Ginsberg's 152-line poem, now a historical document of the liberation war, remains as "a touchy and emotional museum of images of those days' sufferings and pains … a harrowing portrait of mass-misery, a unique caption of our liberation war, and a reality of our glorious history" (Islam, 2019). We cannot be certain whether Khan in her exile had been aware of the two discursive phenomena; however, the symmetry of concern evident in these three texts— Harrison's song, Ginsberg's poem, and Khan's poem—should attest to the fact that as an insider-outsider's testimony to the perpetration of war and its resultant suffering meted out to a collective group seeking political, economic and cultural emancipations, the poem "Argus under Anaesthesia" shares the historicity of all the other texts. And this referential aspect is consolidated by the poem's intertextual investments.

According to the British journalist Thomson (2011), the concert marking "rock's first mass act of philanthropy" and pioneering live aid "did more than simply raise money, it left a deep imprint on the times." Ravi Shankar, the man behind the initiative, evaluates the act from his memory: "We are artists, but through our music, we would like you to feel the agony and also the pain and a great deal of sad happenings in Bangladesh and also the refugees who have come to India" (quoted in Kamalakaran, 2021). In his introduction to the 2005 re-release of the album, Ravi Shankar (2013) remembers that Harrison's closing song "Bangla Desh" occurred to the effect that "overnight the name of the country Bangladesh came to be known all over the world" (p. 509). Harrison transmitted the transnational concern through expressions like the following:

> Bangla Desh, Bangla Desh
> Where so many people are dying fast
> And it sure looks like a mess

I've never seen such distress
Now won't you lend your hand

Try to understand Relieve the people of Bangla Desh.

On the other hand, Ginsberg's exposure to subhuman conditions "compelled" him "to address the global consciousness in an idiosyncratic way" (Huq and Ahsan, 2016, p. 63) through this poem of "literary-activist impulse" (Hemmer, 2007, p. 92). The pioneer Beat poet's minute documentary can be discerned from the following lines which also reflect Khan's reflections on the event:

Millions of souls nineteen seventy one

homeless on Jessore road under grey sun

A million are dead, the million who can

Walk toward Calcutta from East Pakistan

Taxi September along Jessore Road

Oxcart skeletons drag charcoal load

past watery fields thru rain flood ruts

Dung cakes on treetrunks, plastic-roof huts (npn.)

The academic Asrar Chowdhury (2021) analyzes how the concert and subsequent compositions by Ginsberg and Joan Baez ("Song of Bangladesh") had their collective impact on the global cognizance of the situation. In terms of representation, Khan's poem reinforces— and is reinforced by— Ginsberg's and Harrison's lyrics bringing out the horrors both the refugees and the survivors were subjected to. It also attempted to countervail the invading party's game of denial and self-justification. Khan uses irony instilling pathos in the lines under the third part:

……..Eve in the shape
Of a voluptuous politico
Twitters in girlish glee—just returned
From the holy land:
"Genocide? No!—Only banquets,
Lovely roses, bushy eyebrows,
Exotic charm—a little brutal perhaps" (p. 14–15)

As we connect the three texts mentioned above, we may by extension entail Zahir Raihan's debut 20-minute documentary film *Stop Genocide* (1971)

produced with the assistance of Alamgir Kabir and on the model of the Cuban filmmaker Santiago Álvarez. Haq and Shoesmith (2023) observe that the film "created international sympathy towards Bangladeshis and built awareness among international powers about the genocide. (Haq and Shoesmith, 2023, p. 58). Completed in June 1971 and followed by Alamgir Kabir's *Liberation Fighters* (1971)—a few months before Khan's poem—the film, in Mokammel's view (2013), ushered in Bangladeshi "alternative cinema" with support from the exiled government (p. 390). The opening scene of the film with an old woman on a journey through toils, travails, and agonies mirrored in her countenance towards an unknown destination is so emotionally charged that it allows one to sense the terror of the atrocities and mass murder that were taking place in what was then known as East Pakistan. As shown above, the first part of Khan's poem also captures similar scenes of escaping millions.

Between Allusions and Signification

Khan set the title of the poem "Argus under Anaesthesia" as a doorway into its multi-layered message. The genesis of different allusions in the poem is attributable to the poet's socio-cultural milieu as shown in this paper's first section. In view of the authorial provenance, the title of the poem "Argus under Anaesthesia" is itself an aesthetic attempt at picturing the Bangladeshi spirit suppressed by a foreign element, i.e., military force, whose debilitating effect is destined to be overpowered by the inherent potential of revival and resistance. The mythology-based title, says Manzur (2020), divines an "uncanny futuristic clarity" (p. 263). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the giant Argus is depicted as a trustworthy servant whom Juno (Hera) assigns to guard Io, a beautiful nymph who is transformed into a heifer by the god Jupiter (Zeus) to hide her from his jealous wife (See: *Metamorphoses*, 1998, p. 27). In the epic, Argus is often referred to as "Argus Panoptes," which means "Argus the All-Seeing" or "Argus with a Hundred Eyes." This description emphasizes his extraordinary ability to watch over Io constantly without ever falling asleep. Argus is portrayed as a diligent and vigilant guardian. However, Argus meets his demise at the hand of Mercury (the Roman version of Hermes), the messenger of the gods, sent by Jupiter to rescue Io. Mercury uses his wit and musical skills to lull Argus to sleep and then slays him (See: Ovid, 1998, p. 31). Defeated and aggrieved, Juno takes dead Argus's eyes and places them on the tail of her bird, the peacock, as a tribute to his faithful service. Mythologically speaking, this is how the peacock got its distinctive eye-like markings on its feathers. And this transformation of Argus's eyes into the peacock's feathers is one of the many

mythological stories of transformation and metamorphosis that Ovid explores in his epic poem. Being one of the avant-garde modernists in the East Pakistani/Bangladeshi cultural scene, Khan could harness Western myths for transnational semantic possibilities and imagine Argus in the cumulative embodiment of a populace catapulted into a dire test of history by a malevolence military power establishment.

Of course, the Graeco-Roman story has undergone various transmutations in Greek, Roman and subsequent sources (See: Kapach, 2023), but for the loyal giant's multiplicity of vision and simplicity of thought that could yield to deceptive performances, Khan's poem uses the story's dominant version as narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. However, Ranu Vanikar (1978), who, in her review of the collection, finds Khan to be the "solitary reaper" of Bangladesh, deems the title as "captivating but inappropriate" for its referential reliance on myths. Yet the reviewer admits: "The pluralism suggested in the title is entrenched merely within the heterogeneous culture of Bangla Desh, rather than in the poet's vision" (p. 116). Conveniently putting Vanikar's argument aside, we can say that the form, theme and context come to the fore when we value the text as a testimony to the self-exiled poet's "agonies" for the troubled countrymen, to quote Choudhury (2020), in the November of 1971, and her feelings persisted "when the fighting was at its most brutal, a time when our young freedom fighters were getting killed brutally" (Manzur, 2020, p. 263).

In fact, Khan's poem brings home the story of Argus for a mythopoeia of verdict reached after her representation of the harrowing reality into which Bangladeshi people were catapulted during the 1971 Liberation War. While searching for "images and symbols adequate to our predicament," quoting Heaney (1980, pp. 57-58) that could stand for the multiplicity of faiths co-existing on the higher planes of a syncretic culture being subjected to annihilation like plants, like the closing of Argus's numerous eyes, the Bangladeshi poet had her own vision about the resurrection of that imperiled multitude with an uncanny potential to overthrow the political "demagogues" and their collaborators and to live their lives as they unitedly define it: "What if these livid plants which …. To live or sacrifice? (p. 17, cited above).

At the same time, we find that Khan's decontextualized aesthetic reliance on intertextuality (e.g., allusions) tends to undermine the synergy between historical consciousness and pathos the reader feels while going through lines

like the following where metaphor "the frenzy of Oedipus" connects with the reader's consciousness only by a long shot:

> The least noise was suicidal;
> A mother frenzied by the roar of mortars
> Throttled her whining infant:
> Its life for the life of millions.
> Bruised feet, bleeding hands;
> Dilated eyes enacting the frenzy of Oedipus.
> Corroding thirst dulled
> The sense of loss of violated wives, mothers,
> Sisters, butchered babies (p. 13).

The way the poet's imagination registers a particular scene is quite subjective and is inadmissible of the reader's intentionality. Undeniably, Khan's poem communicates before it is understood, in the sense of Eliot's "genuine poetry" that the English poet proffered in praise of Dante for his poetic vision, his ability to merge the personal with the universal, and his profound understanding of the human condition. Today any reader familiar with world wars and other conflict situations from where escape for survival is one of the two options can easily make sense of the scene Khan has reproduced in the above lines. In this regard, other than the aforementioned intertextual elements, intersemiotic affinities are destined to render "Argus under Anaesthesia" decipherable to Khan's assumed Western readers, if Western readers were really in her mind as she was languishing in a foreign land for her war-afflicted people.

Conclusion

The entire analysis presented above establishes the premise that the significance (or signification) of Khan's "Argus under Anaesthesia" lies as much in the transnational context of its composition as in its mimetic capture of atrocities under geopolitical shadows. Taking these two aspects—context of production and representational potential—into a critical view, we may emphasize that Khan's "Argus under Anaesthesia" be valued as a timely text targeted at the global consciousness about the 1971 geopolitical crisis the memory of which is often threatened by amnesia—the Czech novelist Milan Kundera's novel refers to this amnesia with a pithy statement: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (1980, p. 3). The analysis also proves that despite its esoteric referential aspects from the Bangladeshi perspective, the poem may be considered a masterpiece in its own right in view of its blend of form, content and context.

The myths and allusions culled from Western traditions were contemporaneously exigent as Khan aimed at broader readership of her poetry that reflects on the troubled times of Bangladesh's independence. These intertextual and intercultural elements in the Bangladeshi poem also signify Ragavan's use of the expression "interplay between the domestic, regional, and international dimensions" to understand the 1971 events within "in a wider global context" (p. 9.). Shamsur Rahman—the Bangladeshi nationalist Bengali poet (Radice 2006)—also composed poems using myths transnationally. For example, his poem "Samson" composed in response to the imprisonment of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by the Pakistani military force for "mock trial" (Abu Zafor, 2021) invokes the story of Samson is a well-known tale from the Book of Judges (chapters 13-16) in the *Bible*. Another poem titled "Telemachus," the name of a central character in Homer's *Odyssey*, who, during his father's 20-year absence, struggled to protect his mother and father's kingdom, Ithaca. In fact, the educational experience and Dhaka-based bourgeois social milieu of Bengal and English language poets induced the Bangladeshi modern poets at the tail of the 1930s new moderns of Bengali literature to widen their referential net incorporating Western mythological and literary elements.

In the absence of an official history as well as an analytical narrative, other than the official fifteen-volume collection of documents titled *Bangladesher Swadhinota Juddho: Dolilpottro*, Guhathakurta and van Schendel (2013) observe that "it is the emotive content of the war that has been most apparent" (p. 221). In "Preface" to her book *In the Land of Buried Tongues*, Chaity Das (2017) observes that revisiting 1971 to understand its implications is akin to returning to a location that bears the imprints of the future. Distinguishing between reality and fiction then becomes challenging and potentially detrimental to the formation of historical concepts. Therefore, a review of 1971 necessitates a blend of genres, a sensitivity to diverse voices from various contexts, and often conflicting narratives.

Hence, it is no wonder that the events of 1971 have been explored in various genres, poetry with its visceral and intellectual appeal being the most engaging of them. In the Anglophone literary tradition of Bangladesh, as Quayum and Hasan (2021; 2022) call it, Khan's poem functions what the novelist Anam (2021) undertook as her "ambassadorial responsibility" to represent the country to the world. Eliot's form and structure, Oedipus's frenzy, murdered Duncan's blood metaphorically imagined as turning golden, and, of course, the many-eyed Argus—all these transnational and

transcultural elements bridge between the particular and the universal, enhancing the poet's chance of making her symbols and images vivid to referentially enlightened readers, Western in the 1971 context.

In fact, the poet and her poem bear immense significance when they are put into the context which is marked by a discursive space contested between the perpetrators, i.e. Pakistani military force and their allies, on the one hand, and the victims-insurgents-whistleblowers in the history of 1971 and its trails in the present. Sparsely constituted by historians, academics, politicians, diplomats, journalists, poets and singers, and so on, this discursive space should incorporate Anglophone poets too, among whom Khan deserves a place. However, Bangladeshi Anglophone literature being almost absent in the academic curricula in the country for the sine qua non preeminence of Anglo-American and other Western traditions (See: Quayum and Hasan, 2022, p. 739; Hossain and Alam, 2023), this paper and others in this line of research may conduce to the understanding of the need to incorporate poems that represent the times and experiences of war in 1971 from literary perspectives. However, research needs to be done following questions whether Anglophone poetry treating the 1971 war with intertextual and intercultural elements end up decontextualizing the tragic event from its experiential extremes, as we find Mookherjee (2011) expressing such a concern about the supposed ellipsis of "genocidal cosmopolitanism" saying: "it is important to reflect on the dramaturgical standardization through which various conflict situations are intertextually circulated and cited" (p. 87). Also, we are yet to compare the affective treatments of Bengali language poems and English language poems in their representation of the war-time experience.

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