

Rural Life In Shawkat Ali's Post-Liberation War Novels: The Conflict And Emergence Of Subaltern Consciousness

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Abstract

The Bangladesh Liberation War once shook the entire world. The blood-soaked land of Bengal in 1971 presented the strength and resilience of its youth as a symbol of self-respect and dignity to the global community. However, the wounds inflicted on Bengal since 1947 remain unhealed. Even today, the cries of lost children, the agonizing wails of violated women, and the furious roars of rising fundamentalism echo in the alleys of Bengal. Bangladesh still suffers, unable to rise above the deluge of bloodshed. This is why the Liberation War occupies such a significant space in Bengali literature. From 1971 onwards, writers could not find solace in romantic poetry or imaginative tales. Their works became imbued with the grief of bereaved mothers, the stories of abused women, the chronicles of protests, and the echoes of marches. Shawkat Ali, a writer of that era, was no exception. His literary universe reflected the realities of the Liberation War, where truth replaced exaggeration, and reality superseded imagination. Even the smallest of events in his works are intricately tied to the Liberation War. A deeper exploration reveals that Shawkat Ali's entire life was shaped by the upheavals of the Liberation War. It is perhaps natural that his stories mirrored his surroundings.

Introduction

Shawkat Ali was born on February 12, 1936, in Raiganj, Dinajpur district, in undivided India, into a middle-class family. He was one of four siblings, with his father, Khorsohod Ali, being a respected homeopathic physician and his mother, Saleha Khatun, an established school teacher. Growing up in this cultured, middle-class environment, Shawkat Ali imbibed the values of education and refinement. His parents played a significant role in shaping his character, which may explain his deep empathy for the Liberation War and its fighters in his later life. Although Khorsohod Ali was an educated and prominent figure, his moments of impatience often stemmed from principled causes. As a member of the Congress Party, he actively participated in the anti-British movement, which deeply influenced young Shawkat Ali. Interestingly, Khorsohod Ali's marriage to Saleha Khatun, a woman of remarkable intellect and progressive values, was unconventional. Saleha

Khatun, a product of a conservative Muslim society, defied norms by pursuing education, developing a passion for literature, and establishing herself as a school teacher. Despite their differing political affiliations—Khorsohod Ali being a Congress supporter and Saleha Khatun an ardent supporter of the Muslim League—their mutual respect and understanding prevailed. However, the aftermath of Partition and the rise of the Pakistan government disillusioned Saleha Khatun. The regime's oppressive policies, the exploitation of East Pakistanis, and the imposition of Urdu as the state language deeply scarred her. Her anguish was evident in her warning to her children: "You shall not go to Pakistan. The Pakistan for which we toiled day and night has become a betrayal."¹

Shawkat Ali's literary works, especially his novel *Warish*, capture the essence of his family's experiences and the socio-political turmoil of his time. Through his writings, he masterfully portrays the intricate tapestry of rural life, the struggles of the subaltern classes, and the enduring impact of the Liberation War on the collective consciousness. Shawkat Ali spent his childhood in the Hooghly district, where he received his early education. He grew up under the care of his mother. From the third grade, he began his schooling in Raiganj and completed his secondary education from the same school, achieving a first division. In 1952, at the age of 15 or 16, he moved from Raiganj to Dinajpur. At that time, the preparations for the Liberation War in Bangladesh were in full swing, and it was impossible for Shawkat Ali to ignore the call for freedom. He was deeply moved by the suffering of the common people in villages. Before the Partition, there wasn't much geographical separation between Raiganj and Dinajpur, but after India's independence, the gap widened significantly. Crossing from one place to another now meant risking one's entire livelihood as a refugee. A poignant quote from Shawkat Ali reflects his personal experience: "One dark night, carrying our belongings, we too had to flee, leaving behind our birthplace and home. In such events, while the helplessness of losing everything was apparent, so was the intense will and effort to establish a foothold in a new place. However, despite these efforts, there remained a sense of uncertainty because life in the new land was fraught with political instability."²

Shawkat Ali's personal experiences gave him a profound understanding of the refugee crisis and the impact of Partition. He comprehended why ordinary citizens of Bangladesh plunged into the Liberation War. Returning to Bangladesh, he completed his BA from Surendranath College in 1955 and later enrolled in the MA program at Dhaka University. However, due to various socio-economic difficulties, he could not complete his MA on time, finally achieving the degree in 1958. His family's political awareness and his parents' ideology naturally drew him into politics during his college years. This political activism made him a target of Pakistani authorities, leading to

his arrest and a nine-month imprisonment during a movement. While in prison, Shawkat Ali became inspired by leftist ideologies. His empathy for the people and his compassionate nature became evident during this period. It was in jail that he interacted with prominent leftist leaders and realized that writing could be a powerful tool to protest against the Pakistani regime. His literary journey began with themes centered around Partition, the refugee crisis, and the Liberation War. Shawkat Ali's professional life was marked by instability. He lacked enthusiasm for government positions, as these jobs came with numerous constraints and accountability. Nonetheless, upon a family friend's request, he took up his first job as headmaster at Birganj School. In 1959, he joined Thakurgaon College as a lecturer, where he worked for three years before marrying Shawkat Ara Begum. Despite being well-established in his personal life, he eventually left the teaching profession due to dissatisfaction and moved to Dhaka, where he ventured into journalism. Later, he returned to academia and joined the Bengali Department of Jagannath College, where he served until 1987. Subsequently, he was appointed Deputy Director of the District Gazetteer and later returned to teaching at Ananda Mohan College in Mymensingh in 1995. However, within a month, he was called back to the District Gazetteer as Editor. His tumultuous career ended with a three-year tenure as Principal of the Dhaka Sangeet Mahavidyalaya before his retirement. Despite this professional instability, Shawkat Ali remained deeply devoted to literature. His works predominantly addressed themes of Partition, the refugee crisis, and the Liberation War. Unhindered by the constraints of his government job, he pursued his passion for writing and literature with unwavering determination.

On the challenges of government service, he remarked: "Government jobs inherently come with certain limitations. During the Pakistani era, many issues had to be avoided simply because of the potential for trouble. As a result, I often felt that the actual work suffered. The same applied during the Bangladeshi period—there were many things one had to sidestep. Such compromises often left me feeling uneasy."³ At the very start of his professional life, Shawkat Ali faced numerous challenges. Early in his teaching career at Thakurgaon College, he encountered a significant issue: the well-established institution was on the verge of closure due to political conspiracies. In such a dire situation, Shawkat Ali, along with his team, opposed this vehemently. It was through his efforts that the college was saved. This struggle is subtly referenced in his novel *Dakshinayaner Din*, which provides glimpses into how he spent those three years at Thakurgaon College. During this period, Shawkat Ali and his colleagues, including professors Saiful Islam, Moslem Uddin Mondal, Harun Al Rashid, and Karimdad, frequently explored the region, immersing themselves in the beauty of nature. They savored

every aspect of the natural world around them, which profoundly influenced Shawkat Ali's literary pursuits. This love for nature, combined with the reality of the socio-political backdrop, sparked a creative revolution in his literary mind. While Shawkat Ali primarily established himself as a fiction writer, his poetic sensibilities were evident in his work, though he never sought to bring his poetry to the forefront. He believed poetry significantly aids in the craft of fiction writing, providing it with depth and brightness.

Shawkat Ali's works reflect the realism ingrained in his worldview, shaped by witnessing political conspiracies and turmoil since childhood. Despite this strong realism, his literary creations never lost their artistic essence. His writing seamlessly combines an artistic sensibility, realistic themes, careful word choice, masterful language use, and a wealth of information, all enriched by his family background and life experiences. Regarding his approach to literature, Shawkat Ali remarked: "Broad and profound life experiences are essential prerequisites for great creative works. Studying, practicing, and enduring nerve-wracking experiences all fall under the umbrella of 'experience.' The essence lies in deeply perceiving life and expressing it aptly. It's all about staying committed, being immersed, and working diligently."⁴ This statement clearly reflects his dedication to literature. The refined environment cultivated by his parents and the politically charged atmosphere shaped Shawkat Ali into an independent and free-thinking individual. It is well-known that during that time, the Muslim households rarely fostered an environment conducive to education. Although some education existed, it was often confined to the boundaries of schools. However, Shawkat Ali's case was different. His parents, being literary enthusiasts, filled their home with books, especially novels and biographies. Surrounded by such treasures, Shawkat Ali spent his formative years deeply engaged with literature.

In the course of his life, he witnessed the harrowing consequences of the Partition of India. As a refugee, he experienced firsthand the struggles of starting over. During his time in prison, he became inspired by leftist ideologies, which fundamentally altered his worldview. From that point on, he became increasingly concerned with the plight of the common, helpless people. It is often said that those with politics in their blood cannot refrain from using their writing as a form of protest. This holds true for Shawkat Ali, who in his works, emphasized the political undercurrents behind the Liberation War of Bangladesh. As a child, he nurtured a love for beauty and wrote poetry, but as he grew older, his focus shifted to the struggles of the oppressed and destitute. He had seen people starve, watched hungry individuals risk their lives in the fight for freedom, and witnessed the despair of refugee life—leaving their villages in search of a piece of land in the cities. He saw people who once belonged to esteemed families grapple with

poverty, seeking a shred of dignity. Shawkat Ali also observed young girls, disregarding the threat of dishonor, diving headfirst into the freedom movement. Themes of famine, hunger, rape, and communal riots are pervasive in his fiction.

This is why he remarked, "Literature inevitably portrays the tapestry of society." His deep understanding of the history of the Bangladesh Liberation War was unparalleled. Regarding these experiences, he stated: "Amidst all this, riots broke out—Hindu-Muslim riots were orchestrated. Temples were destroyed. These events tormented me immensely. I've seen protests, people being killed, and tear gas being fired. I had seen these before, but now they evoke a profound sense of sorrow and restlessness in me. At such moments, I cannot write or even think clearly. I want to express these feelings, but to do so in my chosen medium of stories and novels requires time and space. At times, I think that if I were a poet, I might have been able to convey my anguish through an emotionally charged language. But then again, I wonder if being a poet would have made me so emotionally distressed and restless that I might not have been able to write at all. Perhaps it's because of government jobs or the environment I've lived through—why so little is being written in our country, why writers, particularly fiction writers, are writing less—this seems to me to be a significant reason. Writers are generally more sensitive than ordinary people, and as a result, they are deeply affected by these events. They feel anguished, restless, and disturbed, which makes creative writing a bit challenging for them."⁵

Shawkat Ali skillfully extracted the heated moments from various facets of contemporary politics to weave them into the broader fabric of life. His novels frequently depicted contemporary times and society. The impact of the Partition deeply scarred his personal life, subjecting him to numerous crises. Shawkat Ali always exhibited sympathy towards various branches of popular movements. Events like communal riots, Partition, the Language Movement, the United Front election, the education movement, the Naxalbari uprising, the Liberation War of 1971, and the anti-authoritarian movement of the 1990s inspired him and were vividly reflected in his writings. The root of the alienation within the Bengali nation in the 20th century lay in blind adherence to Western ideologies. Repeatedly, we distanced ourselves from our own civilization. A relentless conflict between societal structures and individual sensitivities continually disturbed our collective consciousness. The internal and external struggles of our class-divided society found equal expression. The state of Pakistan, born mid-century on the basis of religious fervor, gradually established a dictatorial regime influenced by semi-colonial, semi-feudal ideologies. Yet, reactionary forces never succeeded in stifling the ideals of humanism, as exemplified by the creation of Bangladesh.

The political stage witnessed the rise of military autocracy, fueled by communal hatred and division. Corruption soared abnormally, making everyday life unbearable for ordinary people, while unethical profiteering enriched the industrialist class. Between 1947 and 1957, the Pakistani state apparatus devastated the entire society of Bengal. The slogan of an "Undivided Pakistan" deeply entrenched communalism and subjected the people of the then-Bangladesh to relentless exploitation and oppression. Writers, poets, and conscientious individuals stood against this tide. Against this vast historical backdrop, Shawkat Ali constructed the expansive world of his novels.

In the 1970s, the reactionary forces of East Pakistan, imperialist powers, communal entities, and opportunistic groups united for their interests, marginalizing progressive, humanistic, and democratic individuals. This resulted in extreme hardship for the general population. Gradually, the struggle for liberation from black-market profiteers, linguistic aggression, and social terror culminated in the birth of an independent Bangladesh in 1971. This liberation was a multifaceted emancipation: from communal poison, from the imperialist darkness, from division, from the grip of malevolent forces, and from the hands of profiteers. Shawkat Ali's novel *Warish* portrays the journey of four generations, reflecting self-discovery and the inheritance of identity against the socio-political backdrop of the times. The return of two generations seeking their inheritance creates a canvas of conflict and connection between past and present, illustrating the struggle for liberation from political tyranny.

Shawkat Ali stands out as one of the finest novelists in Bengali literature of the 20th century. His deep understanding of life, extensive social experiences, and love for humanity positioned him uniquely in the realm of Bangladeshi novels. Emerging in the 1960s with distinct perspectives and literary strength, he cemented his place over time. He witnessed a society rife with decaying feudalism, Pakistan-centric loyalty, religious fanaticism, military misrule, exploitation, and public dissatisfaction, all of which deeply influenced his life and writings. His engagement with leftist politics and journalism, combined with his teaching career, shaped his humanitarian outlook.

Shawkat Ali's novels often revisited themes of political awareness, middle-class struggles, and the historical consciousness of urban life. His works reveal that political consciousness is central to the rise of any nation. His literary lens vividly captured the tumult of Partition, the refugee crisis, Pakistan's military exploitation, the Language Movement, and the Liberation War, often reconstructed in his novels. As a direct witness to the political upheavals of the 20th century, Shawkat Ali enriched his life and his literature with these experiences. The post-World War II era saw anti-colonial struggles and the gradual emergence of independence across

Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Arab world. This anti-imperialist sentiment also influenced global literature, reflected in Shawkat Ali's profound social awareness and self-reflection. His novels repeatedly explore themes of urban life, the rise of the educated middle class, the Liberation War, and humanity's yearning for freedom. Themes such as disillusionment, the clash of modernity, and the hypocrisies of urban society are presented uniquely. While his writings depict darkness and despair, they also illuminate paths to redemption and hope.

Through his portrayal of rural settings where people care for one another, Shawkat Ali brings a refreshing depth to his literary universe. His works emphasize the coexistence of light and shadow, inspiring readers to imagine new possibilities. The Liberation War of 1971, which fostered a renewed national consciousness, echoes through the pages of his novels, offering visions of unity, love, and a brighter future. Shawkat Ali's literary universe thus occupies a unique position, embodying resistance and resilience. True to the idea of literature as a mirror of society, Shawkat Ali vividly depicted stark realities while preserving themes of love and beauty. He showed how fragmented middle-class lives could progress with love and perseverance. A genuinely honest and principled individual, Shawkat Ali led through his literature, amplifying the voices of ordinary people and championing humanity. Despite his success, he remained humble and refrained from commercializing his craft, proving himself a true artist and a great human being.

Shawkat Ali's literary contributions stand as a profound testament to the intersection of historical consciousness, socio-political awareness, and a deep understanding of human emotions. His works transcend the boundaries of time and geography, capturing the essence of a turbulent century marked by colonialism, communal conflicts, and the fight for liberation. Through his novels, Ali illuminated the struggles and aspirations of the common people, blending their narratives with themes of hope, resistance, and societal transformation. With his unyielding commitment to portraying reality, he transformed literature into a mirror reflecting the socio-political upheavals and human resilience of his era. Shawkat Ali's unique ability to juxtapose the despair of oppression with the light of hope and renewal underscores his belief in humanity's capacity for change and progress. His works not only enrich Bangladeshi literature but also inspire readers to engage with history and society with a critical yet compassionate lens. In essence, Shawkat Ali remains a towering figure in the literary world, whose vision and legacy continue to resonate as a beacon of truth, justice, and the indomitable spirit of humanity.

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