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READING LETTERS OF 1971 : A THICK DESCRIPTION

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This write-up is premised upon my experience of translating *Ekattorer Chithi* (Bengali title) or *Letters of 1971* (English version of the title), an anthology of letters written by the freedom fighters of the 1971 War of Liberation of Bangladesh, into English. *Letters of 1971*, a collection of letters, diverse as they are in meaning and implications, encompasses a myriad of issues and hence can be looked at from different perspectives in different ways. These are the letters written by our freedom fighters at the most critical junctures of our personal and national life, when things were falling apart. But the purpose of this study to follow is not to embrace all the concerns in the narrow space of this chapter. The main point of this study is to investigate the political and literary aspects of the letters written by the freedom fighters in 1971. In tandem, it also takes cultural and historical issues into consideration to put the

letters into their context that helps us read them between the lines. It will focus on how they fashioned and were refashioned by the people and their social, political, and cultural milieu in which they occurred in different conjunctures of time and place. Put in other words, it will make a ‘thick description’ of the letters in order to explore different voices and layers of significance—be they historical, political, social, cultural, gendered, generic and the like.

The study is thus based on an ethnographic approach called ‘thick description’— which is also a philosophical term borrowed and expounded by anthropologist Clifford Geertz.¹ As a valid theoretical tool, this method provides an opportunity to analyze the work *Letters of 1971* from various perspectives and to evaluate political, historical, cultural, and literary issues brought up by the letter-writers. In particular, this approach is aimed at observing *Letters of 1971* on the basis of different interpretations, generating new results with regard to freedom fighters and their lives in juncture. This method is utilized in the form of different readings on political identity, culture, history, socio-economic inequality, and dominance of West Pakistan, constituting the core of the study. Applying this ethnographic approach to the research, the study uncovers the importance of culture for the freedom fighters and for that matter the Bangladeshi (the then East Pakistanis) people and also reveals the threat of its destruction from the side of West Pakistan regime. This approach regards the freedom fighters as a particular social group and their letters as a cultural product that shapes and is shaped by the very society and culture in which these have been produced. This intervention will be substantiated by its drawing on the primary and secondary literatures relevant to the orientation of this study.

To put this intervention/approach into operation, this study is divided into three sections, focusing on the said issues.

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While the first section deals with major events of the political history of Bangladesh, the second section zooms in on the political aspects of the letters reflecting, this or that way, those events constituting the political identity of the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). And the third section concentrates on the poetics or the literary aspects of this letters in view of different literary genres and theories emerging in the field.

1971 *is* political²—political in that it grows out of a series of events and incidents pertaining, this or that way, to our existence as a nation. Put in other words, they fashioned and were refashioned by the people and their social, political, and cultural milieu in which they occurred in different conjunctures of time and place. Hence the series of events we have gone through since 1947 needs to be taken into account, at least tangentially, especially for our non-Bengali readers to grasp the import and purport of the year 1971.

I. Issues in Retrospect

Looking back on the past is necessary to understand the present, and the point of departure can be of British period conducive to our current project. The sun of an independent Bengal setting in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, Bengal had gone under the rule of the British who had ruled and exploited this country for about 200 years. After a long rule of exploitation, tyranny, and killing of tens of thousands of people in riots and massacres, a proposal called “Lahore Proposal”³ came into being in 1940, fixing that with places commanding majority of Muslims, there would be two independent countries for Muslims, and the rest would constitute a third country. Unfortunately, the two regions with majority of Muslims—Bengal and West Pakistan—were turned into a single country called Pakistan being comprised of two wings—one being called East Pakistan, and another West Pakistan—while the

remainder of the region turned a different country named India. Virtually, these two wings, divided by a thousand miles of Indian Territory, came into existence based on infamous “two-nation theory”.⁴ Mohammad Ali Jinnah assumed the office as governor general of the new state Pakistan.

Between these two countries not only was there a difference of distance but also that of huge economic, political and cultural discrimination. Mentions of some events, I believe, will make our assertion much clearer. To begin with, on 21 March 1948, on his first and only visit to Dhaka, Mohammad Ali Jinnah stated that Urdu and Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan.⁵ The students of Dhaka University massively protested against this uncircumspect pronouncement of Jinnah. About five years later, as a sequel of this proclamation of Urdu as state language, students of Dhaka University defied Section 144 imposed earlier and protested to command the status of Bengali as a state language for Bengalis on 21 February 1952. The police readily shot four of them dead—Rafique, Salam, Barakat, Jabbar being our language martyrs—when injured others seriously. Yet they could not put an end to this movement, and were forced to recognize Bengali as State Language in 1956 in the long run. Importantly, this was the struggle for the status of Bengali as a state language in which the letters of 1971 (anthologized in this volume) were written by our freedom fighters. In fact, the language movement is a distinctive hallmark in the history of East Bengal. Not only did it bear the political purport but also help constitute the identity of the Bengalis as a nation. This change in connection with identity impacted the succeeding social, cultural and political developments of the Bengalis giving way to the emergence of the sovereign state of Bangladesh.⁶

From the inception of the Pakistan state, myriad of machinations and conspiracies had been at work, mostly and

mainly hatched by the Pakistan Army. And this conjuncture reached its zenith at the death of the then Deputy Speaker of the East Pakistan legislature. Moreover, there were many intrigues and much palace-politics, and too much bitterness and animosity among political parties.⁷ Under the circumstances inescapable, the then Chief Martial Law Administrator General Ayub Khan proclaimed Martial Law throughout Pakistan on 8th October 1958. He also abrogated the Constitution and Central and Provincial governments, and dissolved legislatures and did away with political parties.⁸

Ayub Khan, indeed, out and out, failed to keep his initial promises he made to the people of Pakistan. The people were thoroughly outraged by the causes cited above and the nation rose up against the despotic regime.⁹ As part of the prolonged suppression they had been committing since 1947, the Ayub regime accused Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, together with 34 other Bengalis from civil service and armed forces, of conspiracy to separate East Pakistan from the rest of the country in early January 1968. For Pakistanis, Mujib's previously announced six-point program gave birth to this conspiracy. The case came to be celebrated as the Agartala Conspiracy Case, under which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his co-accused were brought to trial before a special tribunal in Dhaka Cantonment on 19 June 1968.¹⁰

Moreover, in East Pakistan, demands heightened for a withdrawal of Agartala Case and absolute release of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other arrestees. As a result, Vice Admiral A.R. Khan, Pakistan's defense minister, announced the withdrawal of the Agartala Case and the unconditional release of all accused on 22 February 1969. What is more, on 25 March 1969, President Ayub Khan resigned handing over power to army Chief General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, who promptly placed Pakistan under martial law.¹¹

On 26 March, just immediately after his assumption of power, General Yahya Khan, in a radio broadcast, promised to hold a fair and free election and create a congenial atmosphere for it in Pakistan. General Elections, being the first in the history of the country, were scheduled to take place in October. But because of the devastating floods, the elections were rescheduled, and the fresh date for elections was announced to be held on 07 December 1970. The result of the general elections was an absolute victory for the Awami League. It wound up bagging 167 out of 169 seats dispensed for East Pakistan, and hence got hold of a majority in 300-seat National Assembly. Pakistan People's Party, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, won 88 seats while other parties got 58 seats, thus paving the way for Awami League to come to power.¹²

Having met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 27 January 1971, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto proposed that a grand coalition be made between the Awami League and the People's Party. Mujib rejected the proposal readily. More specifically, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto went nearly crazy to assume the power. All on a sudden, on 01 March, Yahya Khan adjourned the meeting of National Assembly to be held on 03 March. Aggrieved and slighted, Bengalis came down to streets to demonstrate, and the agitation flared up all over the country. Protests and resistances went off in East Pakistan as Mujib called for a non-violent non-cooperation movement.¹³

As soon as the people came to know the meeting of National Assembly was postponed, they became agitated and burst into protest. The whole Dacca city turned into a battleground with people in rallies and demonstrations. Millions of people came down to the streets with vigorous slogans giving off: "May Bengal be victorious," "Hold arms, warrior Bengalis, and liberate Bangladesh."¹⁴

After a five-day hartal as a token of protest and resistance, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrived at Suhrawardy Park to deliver his historical speech of 7th March. That day Suhrawardy Park was replete with a mammoth number of people turning the whole park into a human ocean. In his historic speech of Seventh March, he announced in his steady voice: “This time, the struggle is the struggle for our freedom. This time, the struggle is the struggle for independence. May Bengal be victorious.” The way his address inspired and provoked the people that day was enormous thus drawing and uniting the people from all walks.¹⁵

Meanwhile they mobilized army and gathered arms and ammunitions in Dacca and Chittagong. On 21 March Bhutto joined this clandestine program with the President only to procrastinate and move on to the killing spree of 25th March. According to their prior plan, the Pakistan Army opened Operation Searchlight in East Pakistan and carried out killing at Dhaka University as well as its student dormitories, the headquarters of Rajarbagh Police lines and the East Pakistan Rifles.¹⁶

Operation Searchlight was mainly designed to launch a crackdown on Bengalis and to arrest Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was marshalling the people’s movement in East Pakistan. Before he was arrested by Pakistan army he had declared Bangladesh as independent on 26 March. A little while after midnight, a special Commando Force of Pakistan army arrested Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and took him later to West Pakistan. They took him away leaving the whole country vulnerable under the severe control of Pakistan army. They continued to torture and oppress Bengalis to give in to their tyranny.¹⁷

It was at that juncture of history that the Bengalis turned around and were determined to come up with a mortal resistance against the Pakistan army, and for that matter the West Pakistan regime. They felt it urgent to be organized to form a resistance, but at the same time found it dangerous here in Bangladesh, and hence they moved to the neighboring country India where they were trained and prepared as Freedom Fighters. It was during that time that Freedom Fighters mainly corresponded with their parents, wives, brothers, sisters, friends, and other relatives. This volume mainly contains those of the letters reflecting, more or less, aforesaid events and incidents, and their impacts on the letter-writers as well as their reactions to these.

II. The Politics of the Letters

Deprived, exploited, and oppressed, the people of Bengal—more specifically, the youths—became very much aware of their identity and entity, and hence got adamant to retribute it even at the cost their lives. This identity is a political identity—one which grew out of the spirit of Bengali nationalism. This urge for national political identity is palpable in many letters of this volume. For instance, we can draw on a letter written by a naval commando named Shaheed Jinnath Ali Khan to his mother Shukurunnessa, in which this urge is expressed blatantly:

If your poor son gets the streets smeared with his blood to save your honor and dignity, this very blood will testify to history that the Bengalis, even today, do not hesitate to receive bullets in their chests *to protect their motherland* (italic mine). (Letter-3, *Ekattorer Chithi*, 2009:25; subsequent references to this edition are absorbed in the text with letter numbers)

After an outright victory in General Elections in December 1971, power was not transferred to elected representatives of the people of East Pakistan. This unjust and unfair treatment is unbearable even to the freedom fighter Nazrul Islam (Nawab Mian). Aggrieved, he wrote to his father Alauddin Ahmed (Dudu Mian):

Nevertheless, at this hour of sheer crisis of the country and its people, we cannot tolerate the brutal torture of Pakistani army closing our eyes. You know Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is a great leader. The whole Bangladesh cast votes for him, and you did the same taking him as a competent and brave leader of Bengal. If he is ready to sacrifice his life for the interest of the country, then we must respond to his clarion call. If we retreat, the freedom of this country will never embrace us. (Letter-55)

People's craving for independence turned formidable—so much so that they can stand the lunacy of a mother, but not the tyranny of enemies for a moment, which is evident in the letter of Sirajul Islam to his father:

If the country cannot get independent, life will turn futile. So I have taken war as a means of life. In my absence *if anyone hurts mother*, I won't forgive them. You all have to stand the *lunacy of one*.... Ask *dadu* (grandfather) to pray for me. I am at the point of death. At any moment I may die and hence I am always ready to die. Wish the country a victory even at the cost of my life (italic mine). (Letter-24)

The address of the Seventh March made by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been a landmark for its potential to awaken and invigorate the people to stand against Pakistan ruling class and their army. We can easily discern how fervently the wounded young freedom fighter Abdur Rahim was inspired by this speech, which is expressed in his letter to his mother from Bahamrampur Hospital in India:

I can never ever forget the love and affection of Kazem, Hazrat, Samad, and Rajab sirs (his teachers). ... Having stood first in class six and seven, I was promoted to class eight. Immediately after that, I joined the War of Liberation with a strong determination to liberate the country, being highly inspired by the Speech of 7th March of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (bold mine). (Letter-27)

Another salient political aspect portrayed in the letters is a vicious agenda by Pakistan army, in collaboration with their local agents and traitors, to kill the highly educated persons and intellectuals of Bangladesh with a view to making the country devoid of genius. Excerpts from the following letters will prove it beyond doubt. The first one was written by Fazlur Rahman to his elder brother Professor Abdur Razzak warning him about the possible attack he might receive from the Pakistan army as well as their collaborators:

The message to relate is that the brutal Punjabi striking forces together with Al-badr, Razakar (ancillary military forces) and CF were jointly launching killing spree or genocide on unarmed Bengalis on 26 March night in 1971. The people they killed were **mostly educated**. Among us you are the most educated, that is, you are an MA and a professor at a college Hence we requested you to leave the village to join the Liberation War, regardless of whatever awaited our destiny (bold mine). (Letter-47)

Communalism played an important role in killing Hindus and molesting and raping (mostly) Hindu as well as Muslim women. Ethnic cleansing being part of their operation, the Pakistan army in cooperation with local collaborators carried on such heinous misdeeds. This is evident in a letter by the Freedom Fighter A B M Mahbubur Rahman to his mother Rahela Begum Ranga:

I entered India, crossing the Nagada Border via Jessore. Once we were seized by *Razakars* (a paramilitary force collaborating Pakistani occupation army). They released us after confiscating our money and seizing 4-5 Hindu young women. Then, it evoked once in my mind that I would protect the women from them at the cost of my life. But, a moment later, it seemed to me—no, if I, thus, lost my life by my attempt to protect them, what would happen to thousands of mothers and sisters whose honor and shame was at stake?(Letter-2)

Molestation of women became a common phenomenon for the Pakistan army, which degraded them to the level of beasts. They continued with their wild pleasure at random and it was a well-concerted onslaught on the Bengali psyche to denigrate their morale. Nevertheless, freedom fighters are not too fragile to give in to the shameless manipulation and harassment of Bengali woman by the Pakistani army. Quite the reverse, this denigration of our women triggered their morale and spirit of retaliation much more than ever, which comes out in the letter of a son to his mother:

Mama, do you know where lies my immense pleasure? Just four days before today, when I was passing by a village, suddenly I heard a moaning female voice in the air. Without the least delay, I rushed towards the place. A bullet narrowly passed over my head—then, passed away one more. Now I realized they were firing bullets aiming at me. Yet I was moving forward. I took my position in a bamboo bush behind the house. *I found several rogues got frenzied in a wild game with a naked woman. I could not resist myself, mama. Millions of mothers crammed into my mind that moment. I shot at enemies.* They started firing bullets in torrents too. When my sense got back, I found myself in a hospital. I got to know that five cannibals left this world, being hit by my bullets. Pray for me, mama, so that we, hundreds of your children, can move forward shoulder to

shoulder to take *revenge for humiliation* of our mothers by way of fighting enemies (bold and italics mine). (Letter-66)

Another important political feature of the letters is the status of women from a feminist point of view, in which their gender role is determined by society and culture.¹⁸ In a patriarchal society like ours, women are vulnerable creatures, whose safety and security completely relies on men's wish and whim—so much so that a woman without a husband or losing a husband is faced with a number of difficulties, which can be located from the following letter written by a freedom fighter named Golam Rahman to his wife Fozila:

After my death, I will not be here to look after you. So it is not my order, but I request you on and on to listen to me. Don't listen to others, regardless of the merit of their words. When you have been cheated, you will be hurt remembering my words and admonitions. Look after our kid that might be the cause of your solace. If you listen to people, you will lose your land. Then people will ignore you. Even the parents and relatives do not stand beside the woman who has lost her husband and land. They will look down upon you. However affectionate they are, it is a curse for the women to lose their husbands. Needless to say more, you will get the proof if you just look around. People will care you much if you have money and asset, and it is not the right way to take off your shoes. Please bring all the necessary articles lent to other people, which my elder brother can help you to collect. Whether you stay at your father's house or [...] or other [...], even if you stay for a long time, people will not be tired taking care of you. Just remember my words. Raise and educate our daughter properly. Try to give our loving daughter whatever she wants. You know I was longing for a girl and Allah fulfilled my dream. Maybe I cannot bring her up, but I hope you can raise her the way I want to. (Letter-13)

We can glean a number of elements—social and political—in the letters of 1971 that can be substantiated by events and incidents as references outside the text. A serious reader can find out these elements to come up with their own interpretation of the letters. My purpose is here to present them to the readers the way they will be interested in reading them at least for pleasure. Now that we have shed a gleam on the political leaning of some letters, we can turn to the poetics or literary aspects of a few, among many, letters to justify their literary merit.

III. The Poetics of the Letters

As a genre, *Potro Sahittoy* (Epistolary literature) is not a new phenomenon in literature.¹⁹ This particular genre written in the form of a series of letters exchanged among the characters of the story encompasses at times extracts from their journals. It is a form of narrative often utilized by French and English novelists of the 18th century, which is exemplified by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749), and Pierre Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). Since then, it had taken on a declining trend, though remained popular till the 19th century. Previously, it was portended by Aphra Behn's poem cycle *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1683).²⁰ Since the 19th century, it has nearly been out of scene with few rarities, as is the case with the publication of John Barth's *Letters* in 1979, among others. In her recent study of letters written by Harvard Enrique Anderson Imbert and Rosario, Patricia Pardiñas maintains, "This extensive model supports and expands genre approaches proposed by Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1984) and Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, eds., *Epistolary, Histories, Letters, Fiction, Culture* (2000)," testifying to the recent development in the field.²¹ But in all these works

mentioned, all the letter-writers are fictional writes growing out of the imagination of their authors. "What sets," as Porter Abbott puts, "these works off from other forms of nonretrospective fiction (epistolary or diary) is that the authors have compounded their effects by isolating or cloistering their fictional writers."²² On the contrary, the letters of *Letters of 1971* are that which are written by the writers of flesh and blood writing from their own feeling and experience that are not constructed by anyone other than themselves. Hence it is highly unlikely that they have been "isolated or cloistered" as the freedom fighters themselves are the authors of their letters. These are the letters written by the people who fought for the independence of their motherland, and many of them even laid down their lives for her in 1971. So, they wrote all these letters from a feeling that is bound to be different from that of other people who have not gone through the same as they (freedom fighters) had. This is the uniqueness that adds to these letters a sort of grandeur, and for that matter, makes them different and distinct from traditional letters of epistolary literature.

Letters of 1971 is a book comprised of 83 letters or a book of 83 uneven chapters—uneven in that they are of various volumes each ranging from about 100 words to around 1000 words. Many a letter sounds like a tiny story having a good beginning, a good middle, and a good ending. To me, it is not extreme to say that *Letters of 1971* is a novel—an epistolary novel, indeed. It is a novel of 83 fragmented episodes—again fragmented in a sense that they are not linked with one another in line with a normative technique of storytelling. Nevertheless, in a postmodern or poststructuralist approach, fragmentations, aporias, and discontinuities are the inextricable part of narration and textualization. Having said that, even then we can, albeit their fragmentations, discern a common thread passing through—an unmixed passion for killing and living,

and abortion and creation, which can be aptly located in the very lines of P. B. Shelley:

Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
Her clarion o’ver the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill—
Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere—
Destroyer and Preserver—hear, O hear!²³

Moreover, the way letter-writers used rhetoric or figures of speech to make their points emotive and persuasive can be taken into account, which may help us to locate the poetics, that is, literary traits of these letters. Let us look to these features of the letters to appreciate their literary merit.

To begin with I would like to introduce you to a letter that an unknown (as he could not be identified) freedom fighter wrote to his mother. If we look at the beginning, atmosphere, point of view, use of words and phrases, metaphors, similes, personifications, and above all, the emotion expressed in the letter, we cannot help saying that we are reading a short story, as it were.²⁴ The letter reads:

This very house beside the road, which I have taken respite in, has helped me to write this letter to you. This is an opportunity I have had since I left home to write to you first. Before that, despite my willingness, I could not gather paper, a pen, and my mind and time to write. I am sitting in a tin-shade. It is raining outside heavily. Deep darkness is all over. A suppressed moaning of nature is heard in every falling sound of rain. Mama, today your smiling face during the time of my departure evokes in my mind. You looked very pleasing in your unsullied white sari. It was a morning of rainy season. White clouds were floating in the sky. That day the sun seemed to be very red on the east horizon. You

know, mama, that day innumerable strong corpuscles of red hot blood absorbed the sun. Each cast of its ray gave birth to a Bengali citizen on the earth. (Letter-15)

The following excerpt from a letter can be read as part of a short story of a lost child found, as that of a child lost in S T Coleridge’s poem “Dejection: An Ode”: “‘Tis of a little child/Upon a lonesome wild,/Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:/..., and hopes to make her mother hear”.²⁵ Just look at the appeal and atmosphere, and the ending of the letter of the freedom fighter Abdur Rouf Bobin to his mother Rafia Khatun:

Mama, someday at my childhood father took me to Sayeedpur to show me a special train. I was lost there. Then I moved around alone for a long time. Gradually, the evening was approaching. It seemed to me that I was lost. I then thought that I would never be able to return to you. After that, I moved towards the railway station crying. It was Hye of Hazary Belpukur, who happened to meet me on the way took me to his home. Surprisingly, father reached there little later. Next day, scarcely had you heard the whole affair when you started crying hugging me. Quite the reverse, that day you did not cry, mama! I left for the battlefield. Now my life goes in company with bullets, shells, mortars. (Letter-16)

If love is one of striking features of literature at all, then this letter by the freedom fighter Patwari Nesaruddin (Nayan) to his beloved wife Fatema Begum (Onu) is, among all the letters, the best one where love of woman, love of nature, love of mother and motherland and child, dream, and well and woe all mingle together, isolating us completely from this mundane world around to take beyond the world of sufferings and hardships:

In this hilly area of greenery, the rain frequents everyday darkening four directions around. The relentless shower of

rain drives the hilly fountain mad. With an unstoppable force, the current of fountain water rushes to the even land with murmuring sounds. Sharing all harmony of my mind with it, I whisper to the water current—oh water current, on your reaching the flat land, convey the message to my beloved Onu, “I wish I could approach her very intimately, when all will fall asleep. The loneliness of deep darkness, then, remains no more. I can see everything in the light of my mind. Away doesn’t seem to be away, turning everything into oneness.... I would like to conclude today’s writing by saying, though much later, a very interesting matter coming about while staying at Gokulnagar. We had to starve all day long for some reason I cannot recollect at the moment. Anyway, we could not manage to take food—neither in the evening nor in the afternoon. We fell asleep without taking any food. Nonetheless, I could not sleep despite falling asleep. (Letter-19)

Nayan has put an end to his letter with a dream in which he encountered his beloved wife, but he could not fulfill his insatiable love for his darling wife even in the dream. It remains unfulfilled in the long run, and hence he urges his wife to appear in his dream again and again. Like the following riddle he has posed to his wife, his love for his wife remains an emotional and psychological conundrum for him. Their love is great because it is unattainable—and hence eternal:

While I was sleeping, you marred my sleep by insisting on me taking a lot of food—so much so that the moment I was about to be sportive with you by holding your hand to stop, I woke up. ... That was the day you came last, and after that, no more. Who can stop you coming if you want, though? This time I won’t draw any conclusion; rather, I’ll pose a riddle you have to brainstorm to work out. If you can work it out, you will know my whereabouts. The riddle is:

My name being of three letters is that of a country

But for the letter at the middle indicates climbing a tree
Without the one at last implies asking to approach
Can you tell me Onu where I am staying now?
Passing on my regard to parents, ask them to pray for me.
Give my love to the younger. You will take my kisses in
thousands—l-o-o-o-t-s of love. (Letter-19)

Some of the letters of the volume can be read like thrillers that are like “tense, exciting tautly plotted and sometimes sensational type of novel (occasionally a short story) in which action is swift and suspense continual.”²⁶ They can also be read as “politico-military” thrillers, on which a complete article can be built, but as our purpose here is not to concentrate on a particular type or genre, we had better be content with one or two illustrations. The following letter from the freedom fighter Abdur Rahim to his mother Meherunnessa informs some features of the genre:

Mamma, after a short rest, we were going to attack the camp of Pakistan army at 3 O’clock at night. But a servant of the house owner secretly went to the Pakistani Camp at 11 O’clock at night to inform them of our strategic position. Keeping our LMGs, three-not-three rifles and other arms and machineries standing against the wall, I, as well as Latif bhai, Abdullah, Wazed, Momin, and Kasem and many others, fell asleep. One was on guard outside. At about 01 O’clock at night, as soon as a contingent of Pakistan army abruptly entered the house, our guard asked, who? The reply came in Urdu, “Toder zom hai (an Urdu expression meaning your death).” So saying, they shot him dead. Then they opened firing aiming at our two rooms like a shower of rains at random. The door of our room shattered into pieces due to the sudden thrust of brushfires. At one point, they hurled a grenade, the explosion of which caused few of us including me serious wounds. Being pierced with eight splinters in my abdomen, two thighs, and legs, when I was nearing death, I could remember the back window. Breaking four window

rods with the butt of a rifle, I got out of my room to fall noisily down into a huge pile of cow dung, and felt like getting my blood stained body stuck in a heap of huge cow-dung. In severe cold, ceaseless bomb-explosions, and a ghostly atmosphere, I, with my wound bleeding unstoppably, crawled very narrowly into a resort of densely grown plants of bind weeds and *dantcholas* (a sort of bushy plant) across the slop of a pond. I lost my sense after that. (Letter-27)

Yet my intention is here not to show that some letters are awesome thrillers. Even in thrillers, we come across the conflict between good and evil that can be informed by some letters, in which our freedom fighters stand for good while the Pakistani occupation army epitomizes evil.

By now travel writing or literature has established itself as a viable genre in which we come across the Homeric journey that we even today “describe an epic journey [of an adventurer], and his episodic adventures offer a blueprint for the romance, indirection, and danger of travel as well as joy (and danger) of homecoming.”²⁷ By the same token, a freedom fighter’s epic journey is episodic, and presents us with romance, aimlessness at times, perils of their missions, and of course the joy of returning home as a victor. Moreover, every training camp turns like a meeting place or a “contact zone,”²⁸ where people from different walks of life gather here with their likes, dislikes, idiosyncrasies, differences in opinion and behavior to continually negotiate with one another to find a common ground—albeit a sense of not belonging and of displacement is there. A single excerpt from a letter of the freedom fighter Iftekher Uddin Ahmed Montu to his mother testifies to this strain:

By Allah, we stepped into the soil of India (Madhabpur) at 01 O’clock at night on 31 August. Having passed the rest of the night at Madhabpur School, we reached the Joy Bangla

Office by 10 in the morning. On the way we came across the residence of Faruki. Leaving our bag and baggage there, we managed to get our ID cards from “Joy Bangla” office, with the help of Samsul Haque, MP, who is also a professor of our college. From there we returned to Faruki’s, and then picking up a letter from him we moved to “Bijna Youth Camp” of Durga Chowdhury Para, ten miles away from Agartola town. Here are located two more youth camps, Ichhamoti and Jamuna, side by side. In actuality, mama, these are not youth camps; rather, these are “**Youth Fair**”, as it were. Youths from different places of Bangladesh have gathered in this youth fair. Apart from a little scarcity of food and meal, we are passing our time enthusiastically in this fair. How many young men from Bangladesh we have got acquainted with! How many young men whose identities we look for! How many young men I have given my own specification (bold mine)! (Letter 38)

The continuing exchange of letters can be regarded as registering temporal, spatial, emotional and intellectual conjunctures to relate one’s story to someone else where one is situated in a particular time and place in relation to one’s progress in the physical and intellectual odyssey. As Pardinias-Barnes puts forward, “Life as a journey, viewed through the window of a system of letters, allows the addressee/reader to examine a society’s cultural development, demise and resurrection. Thus the epistolary discourse of”, by my extension, *Letters of 1971* “... transcends notions of reciprocity, temporal relativity, and that conundrum in epistolary discourse,”— the crucial and unattainable time.²⁹

Putting the letters, as is done above, into any template of hermeneutics—like thick description—seems to be reductive in that they, because of their diverse merits and purports, can deserve to be interpreted and problematized in a number of ways. But, to the extent the letters written by the letter-

writers—be they political, personal, emotional, persuasive and subjective—are concerned with our passion and reason, they will fashion and refashion our whole gamut of life in keeping with our personal, national, political, and cultural concerns evolving in and revolving around, as they did in the past, our day-to-day experiences in different conjunctures of time and place. They will have a far-flung effect on our entity as a nation and inspire our future generation to take hazards and fight back heroically in any national crisis, indeed.

Reference

1. One way of looking at the relationship between fiction and ethnography is to draw on a “thick description” of them—a term anthropologist Clifford Geertz borrows from Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle—with a view to examining various discourses, conventions, motivations and behaviours of culture represented. This approach looks at a text as a cultural production. More precisely, the point of analysis and thick description of a text, as Geertz posits, is “sorting out the structures of significance” in it and resolving their cultural ground and purport.” One can, therefore, utilize Clifford Geertz’s seminal term “thick description” as a methodological trajectory to “construct a reading” exploring different discourses—social, cultural, racial, historical (to name a few) concentrating on ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic elements,—at work, explicitly or implicitly, in fiction. For an elaborate discussion, see Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3-30
2. It is political not merely in a traditional sense, as we understand it; rather, it is political in terms of identity crisis, of preserving rights, of freedom of speech, and of all other concerns enhancing human dignity and honor as a whole.
3. For details, see Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 88-89

4. “Two nations theory” is a theory that grew out of conflicts between Hindus and Muslims with respect to economic, political, and cultural discriminations between the said nations. Taking these discriminations into account, the Muslim League had a plea to manufacture the theory needed for a separate homeland for the Indian Muslims—the theory that later formed the core of their political propaganda. For detailed analysis, see Badruddin Umar, *The Emergence of Bangladesh: Class Struggle in East Pakistan (1947-1958)*, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 14-17. Also, see James Heitzman and Robert L. Worden, *Bangladesh: a Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. 1989 (2nd edition), p. 17
5. Lt. Gen. A S M Nasim (Retired) Bir Bikram, *Bangladesh Fight for Independence*, Dhaka, 2002, pp.13-14
6. Badruddin Umar, *Language Movement in East Bengal*, Dhaka, pp. 129-30
7. Hafiz Habibur Rahman, *Political Science and Government*, Dacca, 1960, (8th enlarged edition 1970-71), pp. 117-22
8. Enayetur Rahim, “Military in Pakistan Politics 1947-1971”, *History of Bangladesh 1704-1971, vol. 1 (Political History)*, ed. Sirajul Islam, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992 (2nd edition 1997), pp. 516-543
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11. “Road to 1971” (compiled by editorial desk), *The Daily Star* (Independence Day Special), (26 March 2009), p. 2
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13. For details, see Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, Karachi: Oxford, 1977. This edition was (by an arrangement with Oxford

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14. Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, *A History of the War of Liberation (Muktijuddher Itihas)*, Dhaka, 2009, p. 7
 15. M. R. Akhtar Mukul, *I Have Seen the Victory (Ami Bijoy Dekhechi)*, Dhaka, Sagar Publishers, 1985 (this edition, 2007), p. 14
 16. For a detailed description of what happened on the awful night of 25th March, see Rafiqul Islam, "The Fateful Night", *A Tale of Millions*, Dhaka, UPL 1997 (first published in 1974), pp. 102-28
 17. Lt Gen J F R Jacob, *Surrender at Dhaka: Birth of a Nation*, Dhaka: UPL, 1997 (2nd edition, 3rd impression, 2004), pp. 33-34
 18. For an exhaustive analysis of the role of sex and gender, see Toril Moi, *Sex, Gender, and the Body*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 3-21
 19. J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976 (3rd edition, 1991), p. 299
 20. To know more about this genre, see Jeremy Hawthorn, "Types of Novel", *Studying the Novel: an introduction*, London: Arnold, 1997 (3rd edition), pp. 53-65. Also see, James R. Foster, "Sentiment from Afra Behn to Marivaux", *The Eighteenth-Century English Novel*, ed. Hrold Bloom, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004, pp. 43-70
 21. Patricia Pardiñas-Barnes, "Letters from Harvard Enrique Anderson Imbert (1910-2000) and Rosario Rexach (1912—): (A Generational Account of an Epistolary Friendship)", *Hispania*, Vol. 84, No. 2(May, 2001), pp. 157-180
 22. Porter Abbott, "Letters to the Self: The Cloistered Writer in Nonretrospective Fiction", *PMLA*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Jan., 1980), pp. 23-4 (23-41)
 23. P. B. Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind," *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II, eds. Frank Kermode and John

- Hollander, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 447-49
24. Steven Croft and Helen Cross, "The Short Story," *Literature, Criticism, and Style*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 150-64
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 27. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 2
 28. According to Pratt, "contact zone" is a social space "where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination." See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 4
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