

## SMI Sir: A Man for All Seasons

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Students never got bored in SMI Sir's classes. Reading the avalanche of nostalgic and commemorative posts coupled with my experience of tabulating attendance marks of MA students, I can say that even students with irregular attendance showed up for his lectures. This is perhaps the best tribute one can pay to a teacher; the acknowledgement that he could engage students and inspire them to work. One of his former students, who is now a noted academic herself, remarked that Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam (or SMI, as he was affectionately called) was like a Prospero waving a wand in the class (Hasanat). Indeed, there was magic in him, but unlike Prospero, this word wizard encouraged students to become autonomous and explore new dimensions of culture rather than remain passive and confined to the text.

SMI was not just an academic but a storyteller, one who wrote and explained our own age to us through his writings and his lectures. In addition to writing fiction, he was a cultural critic analysing and commenting on literature, politics, art, architecture, and more in newspapers and academic journals. My introduction to the English Department of the University of Dhaka was through him. I had heard about this celebrity scholar from family friends who considered him an amazingly clever and knowledgeable writer. Their high regard piqued my interest and eventually impacted my decision to pursue a Master's in the English Department despite warnings of delays in exams and looming threats of campus violence. It was my good fortune that he was the Department Chair when I applied for admission, and he became my tutor as well.

Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam's success in captivating the fleeting, easily distracted attention of young people was due to his versatility and storytelling powers. The recipient of the *Ekushey Padak* for literature in 2018 and the Bangla Academy Award for literature in 1996 could transform lectures into storytelling sessions without neglecting academic rigor or critical thinking. The playfulness animating his lectures on literature was a postmodern one which

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invited students to think outside the box. In this way, his classroom discourse reflected the same postmodern narrative style as his writing, characterised by a distinctive blend of academic analysis, references to contemporary culture, and personal and humorous anecdotes. He believed that classroom teaching should be in sync with the trends of digital age, and since attention spans have shortened teachers need to vary the pace and incorporate pauses – what he called “commercial breaks” – during the class period.

Apart from the use of magic realism and fragmentation, pluralism or hybridity is another postmodern feature that distinguished both his writings and his lectures. For SMI, hybridity was not limited to indeterminacy or pastiche, he wielded it as an analytical frame to incorporate multiple perspectives such as reading canonical texts from postcolonial or subaltern stances. Many former students have mentioned the way he humanised William Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* (1611), rendering him the most memorable figure in Shakespeare's play. SMI's postmodernity in teaching was also reflected in the way he foregrounded local culture. He himself was a bilingual writer, well-read and fluent in both Bangla and English. He always encouraged students to find intertextual links among different literary traditions and to connect popular culture with high culture. He brought in references to movies, popular songs, and advertisements while discussing literature. To foster learners' ability to relate English studies with our national culture and way of life, he used to set tasks where students would have to visit exhibitions so that they could learn about a world outside the classroom.

Like the narrators of his stories, SMI was a keen observer of human behaviour, noting the flaws and sufferings with empathy and tolerance. In terms of recounting contemporary crises, the influence of Gabriel Garcia Marquez is obvious on his anthology titled *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories* (2013). As a faculty member, he seemed to be always aware of which student or colleague required help. For him the interest in marginalised or subaltern characters came from a genuine concern for people. A humanitarian and compassionate outlook undergirded his interventions, which drew people towards him. He was the person everyone went to for advice and solace in times of crises. He would help without denting anyone's sense of self-respect. For example, once when a colleague had invited all faculty members out to lunch, Sir asked me to collect money from all those going and buy a large cake for the host so that there would be no need to order dessert. It was his way of tactfully lessening the burden on the host. Professionalism was another trait he instilled in us by modelling such behaviour. He was polite and respectful to his colleagues who were senior to him in age and to his juniors he was affectionate and kind.

SMI's navigation of the learning journey from textbooks to horizons beyond the syllabus was grounded in an interdisciplinary approach. When I think back to the tutorial discussions, I am reminded of the vast swathes of time and space we covered in the 50-minute sessions. We may have begun with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) but ended up moving through the orange groves of Lorca's Spain, Edward Said's Arab world only to arrive at the paddy fields of Bengal to discuss Tagore. This global view of literature was possible because of his own wide reading that was never presented as pedantic erudition. Years later when I casually mentioned that I was interested in travel literature, SMI instantly referred me to Bruce Chatwin's work and his namesake Syed Manzurul Islam's *The Ethics of Travel: From Marco Polo to Kafka* (1996).

This interdisciplinary strand appears in his interest in visual media and research on art criticism. Besides writing extensively on art as in *Nandantattwa* (1985), *Bangladeshi Art: Collection of Contemporary Paintings* (2003), and *Rabindranather Jaymiti O Annanya Shilpa Proshongo* (2011), SMI was a familiar figure in workshops and courses on art theory as one of the foremost authorities on Bangladeshi art. Coming back to his role as a teacher, he introduced me to the finer nuances of art. Thanks to him I learnt how to introduce students to Hemingway's literary style through post-impressionist paintings.

SMI may have embraced the eclecticism of postmodernity and the interplay between different cultural traditions, but postmodern playful irreverence and irony never led him to compromise academic standards. There was a linguistic purism in him as he hardly used code-switching; he always completed his sentence in the same language with which he began. He was a strict tutorial teacher when it came to grading and giving feedback; one who demanded a thorough understanding of the text, clear organisation of structure, and accuracy in language. Years later working together on an editorial team of an issue of our departmental journal *Spectrum*, I witnessed his eagle eyes in action as they quickly scanned errors and awkward phrasings in the articles we reviewed. As the editor, he took the lion's share of proofreading and completed his copy editing with amazing speed. He also had a facility to succinctly present the gist of a topic or a person. A few years back, I approached him for advice on preparing a citation for Professor Emeritus Dr. Serajul Islam Choudhury, and it took him only five minutes to encapsulate the manifold and far-reaching contributions of Serajul Islam Sir into three or four sentences.

The decolonisation of the curriculum of Dhaka University's English Department owes much to SMI and his generation of teachers. The shift from an Anglo-American literary canon towards a more multicultural and interdisciplinary curriculum with courses on cultural studies, translation theory,

philosophy, history, and Bangladesh studies among others could only succeed because teachers like him were invested in challenging themselves and enhancing the study of English. But more importantly, the ethos of inclusivity, liberalism, and respect for others was not confined to academic discussions. Both within and outside the classroom, Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam treated everyone with dignity and kindness, be it student, colleague, or any other person. He was well-liked and respected by academics and non-academics, young and old, and nearly everyone as evident from the accolades and tributes that continue to fill print and social media upon his death. With our contemporary critical lens, we can easily view SMI as a postmodern man, though I like to imagine he was a man for all seasons and will remain relevant and influential in the years to come.

### **Work Cited**

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