

In a set of para-fictional texts which interweaves the life of cultural historian Dr. Shahidul Zaman with key moments in the ruptured history of Bangladesh, the artist Omar A. Chowdhury, builds a reflexive mirror to examine the nature of memory, of historiography, and the processes of the art system. Recounting the history of an exhibition that was censored and closed down in Dhaka in 2016, Chowdhury constructs a narrative that doubles back on itself along multiple axes of the personal and public as he and Dr. Zaman delve into the uncertainties in the presentation of identity, the recollection of history, and the compromises of political commitment.

From: mail@omarchowdhury.com
To: susan.khan@gmail.com
Bcc: adnan.spare@gmail.com
Subject: Keeping in touch

Dear Susanna,

It's a lovely surprise to hear from you. I'm sorry to hear that you've been sick and I hope you're better now. Thank you for the kind words about the show and for visiting. *Age of Saturn* was very difficult to put on, as it touched so many personal unknowns in me, around my displacement from BD to Australia, my thinking around the place of history and fiction in the construction of identity, and the forms these concerns can take in the art space, amongst art objects/concepts. In any case, it was fascinating to have the show looked at and thought about in that way—which is to say, deeply. I also wish we had more time to talk and I hope there will be time in the future.

I wanted to tell you that the whole show has been pulled down and they've stopped the public distribution of the text. The reasons are myriad and connected but key was a quiet request directly from the current government. Bengal Foundation have complied with the request and have intimated that the government was not comfortable with the show's surfacing of various aspects of the BAKSAL period in the early to mid 70s. Along with this was the bad timing/luck of having the show in the same building as the Daily Star newspaper whose editor Mahfouz Anam has been under sustained attack by the government in recent weeks (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35594968>) and who the owners of the Bengal Foundation are intimately connected to. And lastly, of course, is the intransigence of those with and around whom the show was made. A bit of a perfect storm, really.

I tell myself now that I wasn't naïve about this happening. Bengalis are the only ones with the resources and connections required to help develop and put on the show. But I knew that if it did become hot politically they wouldn't be there. I also knew that, as the country hurtles towards a new authoritarianism, this was one of the last chances I'd get to question the things I wanted to. Yet, when it happened, I wasn't able to

understand it.

A show hasn't been censored directly like this in a long time. It's uncharted territory for everyone. I can understand Bengal feeling like they have no choice and I know it hurt some key people in the organisation very badly to do this. Farah has resigned her position as head of arts. As for myself, it's been a difficult thing to navigate in terms of my own safety, ethics, and for the future of my practice. As the threat seemed to subside I've thought more deeply about what is the right thing to do, or what's the smart thing to do, and then about what I want to do. I don't know if we talked about this but Coetzee (along with Sebald) were two catalysts for how I began to relate to Bangladeshi history, and ultimately for the approach of the show. Recently, as this has all been happening, I've gone back to read Coetzee's *Giving Offence* and have been thinking hard about the effect of censorship and one's relation or reaction to it. How one reacts to the application of power. A lot needs to have already happened for a state to be able to apply its power like this. Things have to be pretty far along.

I'm an Australian citizen and I'm here on a long-term visa that can be revoked. That would be a disaster. The government has turned uncompromisingly brutal recently and I can't jeopardise the works I want to make in the next six months. I ask myself if I'm being cowardly by not making a bigger, public deal about this, by not altercating in the press both here and overseas. But when I sit and think and feel out what's right by who I am, I know that I want to continue to work. That I want to turn towards the history and work out my thoughts in the context of my relationship to art. I don't want to be distracted, and I don't want to be exiled.

Lastly, I wanted to respond to the issues you raise around the personal nature of your trip here and your "tentative" approach towards the history of this place. There is so much I want to say to this as I've just spent the past six or seven years living a version of this out myself. Various ventures, failures, disasters, confusions, nothingness, successes, and through it all a reluctance to engage with what happened here. Too confusing, too complex, too painful. And everything so partial and tendentious and unstable ... it's easier to turn away and avoid it. I tried and I couldn't do it, I got dragged into the history and even then I tried to avoid the spikes, '47, '71, it's too strong, too difficult to manage with subtlety. At first I just tried to be here. Got a motorbike and just rode around as many streets as I could. Walked and walked and walked the streets, nights, mornings, afternoons. When I couldn't take it anymore, I went to the tea gardens in Hobiganj. I know how shielded I was from this place, both epistemologically (I mean in the very structures of how to think or remember this place) and ontologically. The history is out on the streets, it's all still unresolved and flailing around. The history is debated and fought over with menace and a ferocity that's heartbreaking. But I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't also exhilarating. But things are also changing rapidly. They are rushing through things, trying to put any answer down, impose it, and then move on. The 'they' seems to be nearly everyone. I guess I feel a special responsibility to raise these questions again in all their variegation and uncertainty. That the answers that people have settled on and are trying to bind each other with leads us to more bloodshed and backwardness and disorientation. I'm probably just in an emotional state, but I want to encourage you to not be tentative about your approach. That the time to discuss everything, to remember everything, is now.

I wasn't quite sure how I'd communicate to you what's gone on recently and although long there is much more that I'd like to say. Also, apologies for what I see now is a very personal response from me, everything is very fresh, and I wanted you to see the affect of these conceptual strategies as they come into contact and self-reify in this context.

Regards,

Memoirs of Saturn

—Martin Heidegger, from “Who is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen, 1954

I first met Dr. Shahidul Zaman, the political and economic historian, and a cousin of my father, for the first time in New York in 1990. I don't

remember anything about this meeting, I've only been told that it happened. It was about four years ago that we reconnected here in Dhaka with the encouragement of my father. I did not know then that our second meeting, in a characterless apartment building in Wari, would consume my thoughts and my work for the past number of years and produce this show which he and I have jointly (and sometimes contentiously!) conceived. Without the incredible hospitality that Dr. Zaman has shown—into what is an intensely private life—by opening up his home, archives, writings, and spending many afternoons with me discussing both his own life and that of his people and geography, there would be no show.

At first, the story that he told me and which, moreover, I saw laid out on his tables, bookshelves, and from watching the way he spent his time, seemed unremarkable. Just a thoughtful, obsessive man living quietly alone with his historical esoterica. Yet, I couldn't shake off the details he'd reveal: about this thinker that I hadn't considered to be relevant to South Asia, or that Muslim politician from the 30s who now seemed terribly instrumental. I heard him talk about my grandfather and other family members who had been like ghosts to me when I was growing up in Sydney. I was also struck by his aura. He would, no doubt, raise his eyebrows at this, but there was a sense of timeless delimitation when I was with him. A sense of drifting in history and a bodily re-experiencing that unsettled my sensorial certainty. It felt like I was listening to a virtuoso storyteller who traversed ages and different epistemological universes. Compared to my then-dissolute life of waking up next to people I did not know very well, this ambience of the past, of theory, of fictionality and enigmatic narrative was intoxicating. I began to believe in his halting, hushed recollections. I began to believe in him.



Photographer Unknown

Eventually, after discarding the other research (an euphemism) I'd been working on, I decided to do something about what he was uncovering for me. I asked him if he would be open to this and that I'd perhaps have an actor playing his role if I could use his story to make an exhibition, that I would try to reify his autobiography and thinking with objects. Considering how guarded he is with the world, and even many who are close to him, I was shocked to see flickers of excitement behind his rimmed glasses. He agreed and said that he wouldn't mind being photographed or filmed himself, that he'd done things like this at University. He said that he'd need some time to collect together his archives and that he and I should start meeting at a regular time. Those times, our afternoons together in that waning yellow-grey Dhaka light—I remember them. I remember the timbre of his voice like a persistent yet faded dream.

Now

It is as though subjective life in the form of consciousness consisted in being itself losing itself and finding itself again so as to possess itself by showing itself, proposing itself as a theme, exposing itself in truth.

– Emmanuel Levinas, 1968



Photographer Unknown

Dr. Zaman seems to do the same things every day. We filmed him and I swear that we could cut alternate days together perfectly. The same schedule, clothes, the same food, classes, the same archives and libraries, the same desk. The same bus every day! He's actualising the "eternal recurrence." Yet, there was something the matter. I can't say I saw it but I felt it. I thought it: in the notes that he'd spent his years collecting; in the atypical ideas that he pursued; and the unnerving detail of the things he recollected and systematised. There was something significant going on in his quiet approach of a phenomenological politico-economic history which was idiosyncratically personal, even ontological. His was an affective view of what had happened to his country and his family. Unexpectedly, it came into focus through the story of what had happened to him.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays he teaches English and English literature at a small private "university" here in Dhaka. It's essentially a college mill. For the reasons of his history, and the current political situation in Bangladesh, he cannot be offered the professorship that would be commensurate with his learning and experience. I went to a number of his classes and the least one could say is that he is underemployed. What he teaches, with so much care, is not what is needed. Students are more interested in business English. What they want is the employment and safety of commerce. But I assume that the job is convenient for him, with the low contact hours and access to a network of libraries and archives as a researcher. And it's in these libraries and archives that he seems to live out his real life. What he does there was initially a mystery to me. He seems to traverse history physically, running his hands over old newspapers and books and speeches in a concentrated trance. I found him staring out windows and doors often. Yet, there is a very specific and vast repository of narrative that he is trying to pattern-match. He collects photographs, letters, articles, ephemera, and he makes notes. When I first read some of these notes I was shocked.

Some of the notes were just what you'd expect: references, paraphrases,

ideas, links, etc., but there were other things that he was incorporating: the realities and memories of his past. He seems to be as happy to mix stories from his youth, what he has heard about his father, or his laments about his time overseas and juxtapose these with the historical and economic research and thinking that he is collecting. The feeling of these separate pieces, both private and public, both inner and outer, and other unclassifiable things, come together to give a vibration on the page that I found to be very new. He has many large notebooks full of permutations and combinations of the past. He told me that he had begun to write a book but that as time went on the idea seemed increasingly absurd. Yet, even after he gave up on that idea, he couldn't stop the process of construction, he kept on collecting things and remembering and trying to feel out and put down History. There didn't seem to be an exit plan.



Photographer: Enayet Karim Babul

After some time apart from him, I now wonder if that's the whole point. That by living through the process of reassembling his, a history, without a purpose, without an endgame, he is surfacing a kind of Zen or Beckettian ontology of being. This is not something he ever acquiesced to. The only thing he'd say is that his work wasn't about putting together a puzzle, rather, it was about taking one apart and that the history of Bengal (or his own history for that matter) isn't something that you try to see, but something that you try to unsee. Eventually, I found out more about what he was trying to unsee.

Exile

Having borrowed money from his maternal uncles to fly to New York, Shahidul Zaman spent the decade from 1982 to '92 mostly in America (with various trips abroad for conferences and seminars). His proposal to begin a PhD at Rochester was accepted in 1982.¹ He had travelled to India before but never on an aircraft and the initial years were lonely to be sure. Dr. Zaman and Mita had only recently been married and although he left very soon after, he does not remember his time away being particularly difficult. Many men left in those days, and many wives stayed behind for years and years until a visa and airplane ticket would arrive to carry them away. He remembers being quite happy those first years, doing a lot of coursework to catch up, and starting his research into Levi-Strauss and historical Bengal. He marvelled at the resources and the quietness of America and moved in with some other Bangladeshi men and felt like he had gone into a kind of retreat. An escape from what had come before. A moment of respite from being a son, a husband, or even a

father.

Very quickly after arriving he realised that his spoken English was not up to par for teaching and this gave him more time to read and think and write. He would catch the Greyhound to New York and he wandered around and fell in love with Vietnamese food. He found himself in the Lower East Side often, looking “at” these other cultures making a space for themselves somewhere new, and how fast the process was compared to what he was concerned with. He marvelled at the peacefulness, the naiveté of it, compared to what he had known. Soon afterwards he began to make friends in the faculty. He has especially fond memories of playing badminton and discussing fraudulent post-colonial theory with a number of people who became close colleagues over time, the historians: John Sebal, Sophia Myrzavik, and Mohammed Alam. Other than that not much happened until Mita came: “I read, I researched, I ate, I played badminton and I slept. We didn’t have the internet then but American television was mildly interesting.”



Photographer: Rahul Amin Kajol

Mita Zaman and Atiq arrived late in 1984 and instantly disliked America, especially this quiet college town. She was part of a seven-sibling family and the eery quietness of the parks and their apartment and the roads and even the middle of the city unnerved her. She had studied materials engineering in Chittagong and painted, but when applying to do her PhD in America she was taken aback by how far behind the education that she had was. Especially in the first years, although Dr. Zaman was on a stipend, things were quite difficult financially and she took a job cleaning local bank branches with a contracting company. Within a year or two she had improved her English and took on an admin position with Citizens Bank, some of whose branches she had used to clean. The young family slowly became more secure.

Yet, something happened, or perhaps nothing happened and by the end of 1989, Mita left Rochester along with Atiq and came back to Bangladesh. She also began the proceedings for a divorce. There is a gulf of silence here and I could find out very little. In a way, I didn’t really want to. This wasn’t my work. Dr. Zaman submitted and defended his thesis under the tutelage of Prof. Stuart Daley. He was offered a role as an assistant lecturer working on 20th-century South Asian history. It was “Ershad-time” back home, and everything and everyone seems to have been in deep freeze. His thesis was taken up by Ohio University Press and published in 1990. Two of his articles were accepted for publication. He remembers that it was around this time that he definitively broke away from the phenomenologists, Bataille, and Schumpeter, and became far more

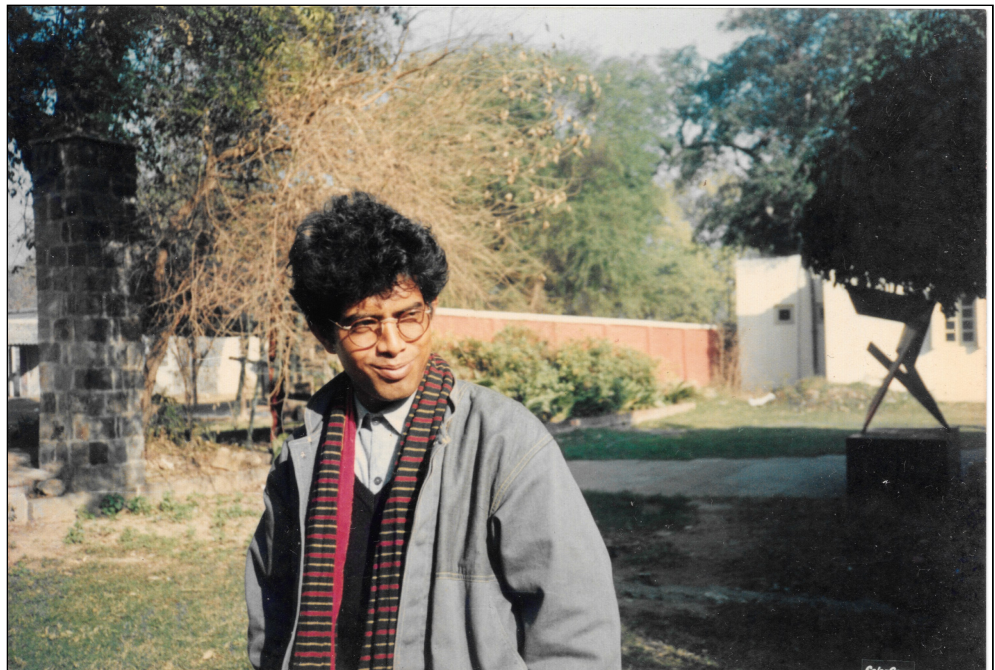
interested in people like Rorty, Said, Foucault, and Barthes. Then, he recounts that he fell into a lethargic sickness. Perhaps it was depression. He didn't seek treatment but began to spend a lot of time alone and in bed. He says that the way that he talked about doing history, and the way he was actually doing history and teaching it, didn't align. Perhaps, he says, history is placed on the earth like a lake, and you can't uproot the impression, the shape, that holds it. I guess he also missed his child and his wife. Whilst still managing to publish widely in the early years of the 90s, Dr. Zaman resolved to come back to Bangladesh. He arrived soon after a democratic government was elected in 1992. There was jubilation in the streets.

Absence and Disillusionment

On hearing about his father Azizur Zaman's disappearance and suspected execution towards the end of 1974, the young Dr. Zaman first went into extended shock and then, along with the rest of his family, settled into a kind of communal forgetting. There was nothing to be done but they tried to do everything anyway. When I try to speak to him about this time, it's not so much that he doesn't want to talk about it, it's that he doesn't seem able to. That perhaps the way of thinking required to talk about this isn't available to him. That there is deep trauma remaining from that time is, I think, self-evident. From members of his family I've only been able to gather a partial narrative, enough to make the combines and other works in the show that deal with these periods. "I don't know what happened to my father. I'm not even sure that he ever really was."

Before the Liberation War, Dr. Zaman's father worked for the Municipal Water Board in Dacca which was, naturally, part of the Pakistani government at the time with headquarters in West Pakistan. Azizur, a devout Muslim, had been very quiet before the war and he had remained quiet during and afterwards. According to Dr. Zaman, Azizur had begun to attend the political rallies of some Muslim parties, as he had sporadically done prior to the war, and that maybe this was behind his disappearance. That perhaps taking a minimal stance, a quiet stance, seemed even more dangerous to the paramilitary group, the Rakkhi Bahini, and Mujib's increasingly autocratic government (who Dr. Zaman's family accuse of his disappearance), than full-throated resistance. One is easier to see. Or maybe it was just a neighbourhood feud. Or just a mistake during the writing of a list. Many mistakes like that were made. In any case, on the evening of the 10th of December, Azizur did not return home. No one had seen him since he had left work at 4 p.m. The people at the local mosque had not seen him for afternoon prayers, which was remarkable to them. Where he once was, there was now only emptiness.

Dr. Zaman began, for a year or two, to rebel but he soon lost interest in the pettiness of his own anger and his natural dedication to study kept him on track through his first years at Dhaka University. Initially he wanted to do science (biology, he now vaguely remembers), but his reading and thinking took him in a different direction and he fantasised about the history of this continent and especially Bengal—of the grandeur, variegation, and complexity of it. He devoured novels and magazines and with his best-friend, Mustafa Golam (now a professor at King's College, London), he began to write poetry seriously. (I've read them. They aren't very good.) His results in class however were impressive and in everyone's memories it seems that there was no residual at all of the trauma of losing his father just a few years before.



Photographer: Dilara Begum Jolly

The years that followed had one surprising blip, Dr. Zaman became, I strongly suspect, very involved in leftist politics. As Zia took over and internal army ructions often brought the country to a stand-still, Dr. Zaman was active in some kind of political subterfuge. The ensuing chaos and Zia's own strange yet practical political inclusivity allowed a thousand parties and groups to bloom (only to be cut down in due course). Dr. Zaman was involved in something. I say something because I can't get him to tell me what it was although friends and some documents I've found certainly hint at violent political activities. He now says "I got mixed up in false consciousness [laughter], but I got out of it." Photos from this period show wild, bushy hair, and a kind of mania in the eyes. A young radical in flight. But that isn't how the decade ended. The army composed itself, or enough were executed into composure, and Dr. Zaman finished his master's degree with excellent results. At the end of the decade he began to see Mita Hoque, a charming yet melancholic young woman from Chittagong, whose father Dr. Zaman had done some research for at the end of 1979. They were married just after New Year's day in 1980 and Dr. Zaman and Mita had Atiqur Azizur Zaman, their first and only child, on the night of November the 23rd, 1980. Pregnancy and the time afterward were difficult for Mita but to others their future seemed very bright.

Prehistory

I was a loyal party member for two decades before 1956 and therefore silent about a number of things about which it's reasonable not to be silent.

—Eric Hobsbawm, "Man of the Extreme Century," *The Guardian*, 22 September 2002.

Before the second partition, Dr. Zaman's family lived in Behrampur in what is now West Bengal. An old Muslim family who were officials of the city going back centuries, the break of the country and their state into two religiously mandated parts was a significant event to say the least. There was tension in the family. The respect for thinkers like Muhammad Iqbal and Syed Ahmed Khan was deep rooted and the fears of a Hindu-led state and of one-person-one-vote entrenching what was felt to be systemic racism were strong. Dr. Zaman's father and grandfather seemed to have been strong proponents of the two-nation theory and were encouraging of the family's move to a Muslim nation. Yet, there must have been some doubt. To break one's country in half out of fear, how can that be done without uncertainty and doubt? It was, of course, not practically easy to uproot themselves but eventually Azizur Zaman received a transfer and they all moved to Rajshahi (in what was about to become East Pakistan)

just before Partition. Initially, they settled near some distant family members who had made the journey earlier. They were able to sell, transfer, and exchange a number of landholdings and fared far better than the majority of those who moved. Dr. Zaman was born in Rajshahi in 1959. Saturn was ascendant. His first memory was of the beheading of a goat, or perhaps a small cow, for Eid-al-Adha.



Ali Murshed

After partition, state control from the west of the country and the authoritarian ideology of the creators of Pakistan seeped into law and the administrative structure. They began to question whether Bengali culture and language belonged in the new nation and how and if it could be assimilated. The dream realised, the costs were being weighed. Fatigue set in when faced with the reality of obligation and compromise. Azizur Zaman began to dim towards political Islam and moved his immediate family to Dhaka in 1957. Dr. Zaman suspects that his father began to lose hope in the rhetoric of the promises of a Muslim nation. We can't be sure. There are no records. Azizur published some poetry in right-wing journals which are coded, melancholic affirmations of Partition. Perhaps it was his faith or his increasingly important government position which restricted him from taking a stronger public position. But the acrimony was deep and the topic was a fraught one between Azizur Zaman and Dr. Zaman's maternal uncles who were strong proponents of Bengali and eventually ardent nationalists and freedom fighters. Ideas had become real.

The last time I spoke to Dr. Zaman he said: "There isn't a line between what is inside you and what is outside, or between what is thought and what is. One must work towards coming to this understanding. It is the right understanding." I teased him about Dōgen (who he loves). The research and re-experiencing that Dr. Zaman fixates on grew out of the seeds of this Muslim discontent and disorientation, the control and abuse of a whole diverse culture by an alien other, and the impacts and repercussions that had on the political and economic events that followed. Ostensibly, one feels a sort of postponement about his life. Yet, that his own and his family's "history" is seemingly so intricate and echoic, and that its affect lives on through documents, ideas, narratives, and bodily traumas is what seems to silently illuminate his life and gives him that tectonic energy one feels in him. The silence is a ruse, because in his very being, he is living out the vastness of history.

Omar A. Chowdhury
Rajshahi, Bangladesh
January 2016

- 1 Shahidul Zaman, *Levi-Strauss's Identity Formation of Groups and Nietzsche's Will to Power in East-Bengal's Subject-Ruler Relationships, 1900-1915*. Proposed Ph.D. Abstract in the Department of History, (University of Rochester, March 1982).The research reads the early history of the relationships between the Colonial Raj, it's administrative systems and individual administrators, and the political leadership of various villages and areas around the Rajshahi region of Bengal. It extends Levi-Strauss's theories of the identity formation of groups using artificial mythemes and Nietzschean readings of power subconscious and volition to interpret letters, notes, news-articles and diaries and other texts to postulate evolving structures and patterns of subservience and domination amongst the key participants.