

THE MUJIB COAT

By Naeem Mohaiemen



When Sheikh Mujib led the movement that broke Pakistan in half to make Bangladesh (the sound of one wing flapping), he was like a god. Bangabandhu, friend of Bengal. Humayun Azad once wrote that when Bengalis want to elevate someone, they pump him until he loses his head. And when they grow tired of an idol, they slam him to the ground until he breaks.

An officer's memoir spits disenchantment: "We were ready to eat grass for Mujib. But look how he behaved." August 1975. Tanks again on Dhaka streets, rolling past the old airport. Not Pakistani this time, but the new army of independent Bangladesh. Mujib could never imagine "his boys" would turn on him, even after Fidel Castro asked him, "Your Excellency, do you trust your bodyguards?" This is the problem with a god complex.

OBJECTS
124

OBJECTS
125

Beware, Caesar, men who dress like you. On the Ides of August, you will die alone and unprotected.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's house is now a museum in Dhanmondi, Road 32. The guards are obsessive.

"I'm sorry, you can't take that bag inside. You have to leave it in the guard room."

"I can't leave it there, it has my camera inside."

"Sir, everyone has cameras in their bags, that's why you can't take it inside."

And then, "You have to leave your mobile phone as well."

Firm and smiling, he knows what's up. Unlike at many venues where I have taken furtive footage, the guardians of Mujib's house know all about mobile-phone cameras. I enter with nothing in my hands or pockets.

All the rooms are cordoned off, everything covered with cloying plastic shrouds. Dust from neglect. Artifacts of death preserved with such perversity, they lose dreaming power. The steps where his body fell are covered with glass sheets, supposedly preserving bloodstains underneath. But beneath the pressed surface, there is no residue. Bullet holes covered with plates look like weak installation art, casualty of the last Dhaka Biennial. Only the smashed bathroom mirror looks real, looks 1975.

Every object he possessed is here. The dressing gown, the sandals, the kurta; the books, the plates, the cutlery. The ever-present pipe. After nine months in a Pakistani prison in 1971, when Mujib emerged as leader of a new country, he told David Frost what he'd missed most in jail. "I missed my pipe tobacco," he said, and then he named an English brand.

Finally, there is the coat. In photographs of state functions. Black. Light felt or thick cotton, the arms cut off, always buttoned to the neck. Every icon must lend his name to at least one item of clothing. The Mao jacket. The Gandhi cap. The Mujib coat.

Stare long enough at these official images and all the threads start to merge. The obligatory third-world solidarities: Castro, André Malraux, Léopold Senghor, Kenneth Kaunda. The future embarrassments: Ferdinand Marcos (looking so bloody fresh-faced and young), Mobutu Sese Seko. One rare meeting with Gerald Ford, just before the end, though none with Nixon, his arch-nemesis during the 1971 war, when the Americans backed Islamabad, and the Indians, backed by Moscow, came to the rescue. (Later we learned that Kissinger called Indira Gandhi "that bitch" during the war—what did he call Mujib?) Many meetings with the Soviets: Brezhnev, Kosygin. Taken together, a vision of Non-Aligned splendor.

Parallel walls of photos, the living cliché of yellowing prints. When Mujib's daughter Sheikh Hasina came to power in 1996, after twenty-one years in the wilderness, the whole house was rebuilt. That's when the museum was completed, the photos framed and hung. Just five years later, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Mujib's ideological foes, were back in power, and the museum started to wither again. Badly deteriorated and all, there are lost worlds here. One row of photos shows an endless series of meetings with the Arab bloc. Anwar Sadat, Muammar al-Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Hafez al-Assad, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahayan, Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, the emir of Kuwait, the prime minister of Lebanon. The smiles and clasped hands all hiding a palpable sense of tension.

If history is written by victors, who won in 1971? Triumphant Bangla secularists wrote of "the shattering of Islamic Pakistan." Indians insisted that the birth of Bangladesh was the end of the two-nation theory (separate countries for Hindus and Muslims). But the Arab bloc was determined to stop the splintering of Pakistan from taking on any greater meaning. This was not the end of the *ummah*; it was only a quarrel between brothers, we were told. And so the meetings, pressuring Bangladesh to attend the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit in 1974. In Lahore, no less. The nail in the coffin of our planned "secular" identity; we were all Muslims after all.

And then, the rapprochement with Pakistan. There are photos of that, too—Mujib smiling alongside Zulfikar Bhutto, the return of the POWs—all greased along by the promise of oil money and jobs in the Middle East.

What the photographs don't show is the unraveling of Mujib's rule; those last years before the crash. He wore the coat to the end; but so did everyone else. By 1973, the Mujib coat was on every pretender. Every would-be acolyte took the easy path to state patronage, dressed for the part. Camouflaged. During the 1974 famine, millions of dollars in international aid went missing. The proverbial "relief blanket" became an object of derision. Rumors flew that the missing blankets were being diverted to make Mujib coats for his followers. The fabrics look nothing alike, of course, but what a bleeding image!

The poetics of hunger. Angry opponents started lampooning the boat, the symbol of Mujib's party. A street ditty emerged:

The steps where his body fell are covered with glass sheets, supposedly preserving bloodstains underneath. But beneath the pressed surface, there is no residue. Bullet holes covered with plates look like weak installation art, casualty of the last Dhaka Biennial.

Kombol kata Mujib Coat
Ar dibo Na Nouka-e Vote
Cut from a blanket, Mujib Coat
No more will I vote for the boat

OBJECTS
126

I heard a story recently in a Dhaka canteen. There is a flood all over the land; a man takes shelter on his rooftop. A boat goes by, and the boatman urges him to climb onboard. "No, Allah will protect me." The water keeps rising. Another boatman passes by. Same offer, same refusal. "Allah will protect me." Water is now up to his waist. A third boatman, again the refusal. By now, the water is up to his neck. As the man loses his footing and slips underwater, he screams, "Oh, Allah, why have you forsaken me, your devoted son?" And a booming voice from heaven replies, "You fool, I sent help for you, and three times you turned it away."

In the wake of the famine and facing a growing Maoist guerilla movement, a cornered Mujib and his government are under siege. Out of desperation or conviction, he abolishes all political parties, installs himself as President-for-Life. Perhaps he has become unpopular. Perhaps the Army majors are only waiting for an excuse. Perhaps, perhaps . . . still wearing the coat, a prop for all seasons, signifying everything and nothing.

OBJECTS
127