

SAME OLD STORIES

The meaning of 'hegemony'

BY NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

Nineteen years after I first watched it, two scenes from Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) have stayed with me. An early sequence, in which a teenager explains her death urges to a bewildered member of hospital staff: 'Obviously, Doctor, you've never been a 13-year-old girl.' And the film's closing lines, when the narrator recounts his inability, as a hapless teenage boy, to fend off the group suicide of the Lisbon sisters in a neighbouring house. ('They hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us calling them from out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time.')

Watching that film during its opening week, I thought: 'I know you' – and felt a sharp pang of dislocation from myself. Why was I already so familiar with the motifs of American high-school suburbia, though my own childhood imprint was thousands of miles away, in 1980s Bangladesh? If these were supposed to be shared stories, the flows were only in one direction. I haven't yet met a European teenager with a treasured set of memories that include *Amar Chitra Katha* (a popular Indian comic book; more than 100 million copies have been sold since the imprint was founded in 1967); cassette tapes of *Bhanu'r Kautuk* (Bhanu's Comedy); or the legendary romantic couple of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, who captivated Bangla audiences in the 1960s. Meanwhile, by mistaking the vampires-and-shopping-malls sunlit *noir* of novelist Stephen King as my own story, I had lost part of the city and life I grew up in.

This sense of familiarity comes from the manner in which a set of experiences, and histories, have been normalized as 'universal'; when making a work, wherever you may be from, there is an awareness that certain things can appear as elements in your work without requiring explanation or footnotes. I wondered about this freedom from over-explaining when I saw, with pleasure, that Raqs Media Collective had taken Bangla filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak's last work, *Jukti, Takko Aar Gappo* (Reason, Debate and a Story), 1977, as an anchor for their curation

of the 2016 Shanghai Biennale. But would the audience take this gesture (and Geeta Kapur's chapter about the film in *When Was Modernism?*, 2000) as a familiar shared story or as embedded in 'elsewhere'?

In *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (2009), Susan Buck-Morss argues that the Haitian slave rebellion was the template for Hegel's master-slave concept. But references to dialectic struggle consider it the invention of only the European thinker. The European and American sense of entitlement and dominance of history pivots on the idea that theirs are the stories that matter. It's a different version of a proposition Dipesh Chakrabarty made in *Provincializing Europe* (2000) – Europe gets to be theory and non-Europe is always the practice: proof of principles 'established' by Europe. The enchantment of this concept risks alienating you from your own context, adrift at home.

In high school, I DJed on Radio Bangladesh's *World Music* programme. In a half-hour slot, we had to play at least one Bangla song – and we did it grudgingly. Later, when I read 'Pop Idols', British-Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie's contribution to *Granta*'s 2010 'Pakistan' issue,



Ritwik Ghatak, *Jukti, Takko Aar Gappo* (Reason, Debate and a Story), 1977. Courtesy: Nabarupa Bhattacharjee and Rita Productions

I felt a surge of recognition – we had obsessively listened to the same British bands. I felt sad, too: why had I been so slow to listen to the songs that were being made around me? Nobody forced me to watch all those American films, certainly not in 1985 when VHS players were expensive and rare in Bangladesh. Video cassettes could be found in just two stores in Dhaka and the police would routinely raid them to seize 'blue films'. And yet, we kept at it. By the time it premiered, the detached houses, flare pants, summer soundtrack and football pitches of *The Virgin Suicides* felt as familiar as our own lives.

Museums, universities and other institutions are now targets of critiques about decentering the canon and ending European hegemony in the production of culture and knowledge. Efforts sometimes focus on expanding: hiring non-white curators and academics, collecting works by non-Western artists, etc. These are necessary steps, but I wonder if they will be enough. Increasing the number of non-European protagonists is a way to disturb the status quo, but what to do with the way that the familiarity of certain stories (and the strangeness of others) has settled into our bones over generations? A change of gatekeepers alone won't shift this.

The English language as a global flow melds with the triumphalism of capital in projecting European and American culture as world culture. Sometimes I mistake myself as part of this 'we', and then realize it is because of a century's project of soft dominance. The late Mladen Stilinović understood this with his work *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist* (1992). I have been thinking about how the museum gets to a place where the majority world is not a therapeutic addition to what is already overrepresented, but a shared project. Expecting the Global South to always 'bring' its narratives into the proscenium places all the burden on one side: for us to know equally our stories and yours – a project of twice the work. What is needed is much more joyous entanglement between the two, not only in listening to these stories, but also in their making: not as duty, but as pleasure – the way things could be ●

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN works with film, installation and essays. He has translated texts by Farhad Mazhar and Syed Mujtaba Ali from Bengali to English and by Allen Ginsberg from English to Bengali. He is nominated for the Turner Prize 2018, on view at Tate Britain, London, UK, until 6 January 2019.