

THE DIALECTICAL SCOPE OF TIME AND SOCIETY IN SHAHZAD FIRDAUS'S NOVEL 'SHAILOKER BANIJYO BISTAR'

Dr. Barunjoyti Choudhury,

Associate Professor, Department of Bengali, Assam University

Global capitalism, riding on the wings of advanced information technology, facilitated the proliferation of globalization. While many believe that globalization is solely an economic phenomenon, this is far from accurate. On the contrary, globalization has profoundly impacted our society, literature, culture, and every aspect of life. Global capitalism, in its attempt to maintain power and dominance, attacked our languages, cultures, and histories, erasing traditions, the past, and the future, thereby reducing us all to beings trapped in the fleeting present. It cleverly propagated the notion that life is singular and meant solely for consumption. The ultimate aim of globalization was to lead humanity to the extreme boundaries of consumerism.

In third-world countries, globalization gradually blurred the boundaries of nations and cultures, projecting the dream of a unified culture and a singular global nation. The dream of one language and one culture seems appealing. The idea that we would all share the same language and culture was part of globalization's strategic cultural politics. However, globalization conspired to erase the resistance inherent in diversity. Systematic efforts were made to destroy heritage, legacy, culture, and language. Neo-colonialism and globalization worked hand in hand to establish themselves as our absolute overlords.

In this fiery crucible of time and society, humanity began chasing wealth and consumerism relentlessly. Yet, as the night grows darker, the dawn draws nearer. Some individuals, torchbearers of hope, step forward to illuminate the darkness. Shahzad Firdaus is one such torchbearer. Through his novel 'Shailoker Banijyo Bistar', he constructs an alternative narrative against aggression, economic globalization, and the advertisement-driven society. When the doors of consciousness seemed to shut, he struck hard with the warmth of ideas and values, striving to awaken our awareness. Through 'Shailoker Banijyo Bistar', he confronts our collective consciousness. Dedicating the novel to "those fighting against the new Shylocks," he attempts to build a wall of resistance and protest.

In 1950, Shahzad Firdaus was born. He grew up nurturing the awareness of harrowing stories of Partition, famine, and the horrors of World War II told by elders. The direct impact of events like the India-Pakistan war, the Naxalbari movement, and the Bangladesh Liberation War in the 1970s left a permanent imprint on his consciousness.

In the West, modernism had established cultural-political hegemony, rendering protest consciousness stagnant and directionless. Postmodernism emerged as a rejection of modernism, marking its end. Although postmodernism attempted to decentralize concentrated power, it carefully preserved the chains of commodification. Rather than reducing the commodification process, postmodernism amplified it, making it all-encompassing. Neo-colonialism found new ways to exploit old colonies. Imperialist forces realized from experience that destroying the languages, cultures, and traditions of colonized nations would ensure no resistance against their unrestrained plundering. In the prologue to his novel, Shahzad Firdaus observes: "Within a short span of time, we will be forced to enter the abyss of a mercantile civilization that will plunge us deeper into darkness. Our art, culture, history, traditions, thought, intellect, past, present, future, identity, and soul will all be sold like commodities in the global marketplace of globalization. Before being sold, we will be distorted; after being sold, we will become mindless slaves."¹

In this era of globalization, we clearly see that wealth and dollars have become the controllers of life. Our social status no longer depends on humanity or morality but is determined by financial power. We erase our past and present, focusing solely on the pursuit of wealth. Day and night, we dream of dollars to live a life of consumption. Shahzad Firdaus beautifully brings this cultural politics of globalization to light in his novel, making readers conscious and playing an active role in awakening our awareness.

The central character in 'Shailoker Banijyo Bistar', Nasib Sikandar, experiences a catastrophic downfall as his greed blinds him. For one crore rupees, he sells his past, which holds no value to him. In the novel, Nasib Sikandar is portrayed as a highly educated man from a poor family. Besides his father, his struggling household includes his wife, one son, and one daughter. Amid financial hardship, he decides to sell his last asset, a small piece of land, to his friend Malay. On his way to finalize the deal, he meets Shylock, a capitalist mogul representing imperialist forces, on a train.

Shylock introduces himself as "a trader, manufacturer, merchant, and financier." He claims to have no homeland, stating that any country offering business opportunities becomes his home. Governments must obey his commands. He has no religion—his only religion is trade.

The novelist portrays Shylock as a symbol of globalization. For him, buying and selling are ultimate. He has the power to buy anything in life because of his immense wealth and access to a global market. He controls the trade of every country through his financial power, possessing the ability to purchase the "belongings" of both rich and poor.

Eventually, Shylock expresses a desire to buy Nasib Sikandar's past. Sikandar does not object because he considers his past to have no practical value. However, while his past holds no value to him, Shylock is willing to pay one crore rupees for it and even offers ten crore rupees to buy his future. Shylock even proposes purchasing Sikandar's identity and soul. Shylock seeks to own Sikandar's entire "history."

This reflects globalization's cultural politics, which aim to destroy the history of colonized people. Once history is erased, the empire of capital can be built, and there will be no resistance against its all-encompassing exploitation. The concept of selling the past carries symbolic significance. Sikandar's father clarifies the meaning of the past: "The past! It means your heritage, your culture, your history, the hopes and aspirations of your ancestors, your memories—one-third of your entire existence."² Indeed, under the grip of globalization, we all lose our past, accelerating the process of dehumanization while shattering human relationships. The destruction of tradition pushes us toward "nonhumanization," transforming people into soulless automatons.

Indeed, under the grip of globalization, we have all lost our past, accelerating the process of dehumanization, shattering human relationships, and taking the process of nonhumanization to its ultimate stage. When human relationships are broken, and traditions are lost, people lose everything to the all-consuming claws of commodification, becoming thoughtless mechanical beings.

Fredric Jameson, in his essay 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', remarked: "...the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve... The information function of the media would thus be to help us to forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms of our historical amnesia."³ Driven by greed for dollars, people in third-world countries, like Sikandar in the novel, sell everything to Shylock. The novelist portrays this all-consuming aspect of commodification with great awareness.

The novel describes how governments of various countries invite Shylock for unrestricted trade. As a representative of multinational corporations, Shylock plans to exploit these nations to the fullest. In the 1980s, multinational companies exploited the world by leveraging their immense financial wealth, and the novelist depicts this reality through Shylock's character.

During the last decade of the 20th century, we see a massive inflow of foreign capital into India, facilitated by economic liberalization. The capitalist objective behind globalization was to transform “developing” (or rather underdeveloped) countries like India into international markets. Around that time, markets in various parts of the world were shrinking, but India, with its 35% middle and upper-class population—about 400 million people—offered a huge potential market. Capturing this vast market was the primary goal of globalization.

By exerting pressure on the Indian government, global capital forced its unrestricted entry into domestic markets. Collaborating with local small businesses, global capitalists initiated unrestricted investments in India. Within a very short time, small domestic capitalists fell far behind multinational companies in terms of financial investments. Ownership of many local companies shifted to foreign multinational corporations.

This led to the rich becoming richer and the poor even poorer. Some multinational corporations' annual revenues became greater than the national income of countries like India. For instance, General Motors in the U.S. had an annual income equivalent to 80% of India's national income. The exploitation of workers intensified significantly.

Multinational companies were particularly interested in investing in third-world countries like India because of the surplus labor and high unemployment. Labor power could be purchased at very low costs, significantly reducing production expenses. A laborer in India could be paid one-tenth of what a laborer in Europe would receive for the same work. By purchasing raw materials at extremely low prices and minimizing labor costs, multinational companies in the age of globalization began maximizing their profits.

The novelist vividly portrays this intensity of economic exploitation through Shylock's character. Shylock's own statements reveal the extent of this economic exploitation and global dominance: “The governments of every country voluntarily approach me, revealing the veins and nerves of their lands. Why? Because I have unlimited money—dollars. And every government in the world needs dollars. Those who have more want to keep it safer, so they need me. And to grow my dollars, I need soil as soft as your countries, governments as pliant as yours, bowing before me.”⁴

Globalization not only enforces economic domination and exploitation but also seeks to destroy our language, culture, and heritage. This is because every language and culture inherently carry the potential for protest and resistance. If culture and language are obliterated, no opposition can emerge against domination and exploitation. Hence, globalization strives to promote and expand a singular language and culture. While cultural unification may sound appealing, it hides an all-consuming form of cultural politics.

In the novel, the company ‘Shylock and Sycophants’ also seeks to promote a single language and culture:

“There will be only one language in the world.

- Which language?

- English.

- Yes, the process is being carried out so rapidly and extensively that it is expected that within the next ten years, all other languages in the world will be eradicated!... The world will become a unilingual country, a part of one empire. The world will be transformed into a giant market... Isolated cultures will be destroyed and brought under the control of a single culture... buying and selling!”⁵

Using the bulldozer of the dollar, globalization attempted to destroy our heritage, our languages, and our cultural pluralism. The aim of imperialism has always been to eliminate diversity, an insight Rabindranath Tagore had long understood. He believed that by reclaiming and reconstructing the past, one could fight against colonialism.

Rabindranath further recognized that the cultural politics of colonialism aimed to trap us within the confines of Westernization, devouring our uniqueness. Aware of these strategies, he famously remarked: “Becoming uniform is not the same as unity. Only those who are distinct can come together. Those who erase the individuality of others in the world are the same ones who destroy global unity. Imperialism is like the unifying principle of a python; it propagates the idea that swallowing up others is unity.”⁶

The idea of one language and one culture has been successfully ingrained into the mindset of the younger generation through globalization. Today, we can see that from Mumbai to Agartala, Silchar to Delhi, and Kolkata to Kanyakumari, young people consume the same kinds of food. People of the same age across the globe are adapting to similar eating habits. Through the overwhelming promotion of this one language and one culture via advertisements on television, globalization has revealed its aggressive form by eroding cultural pluralism.

By selling our very humanity for money, we have turned into mindless, lifeless objects. Losing our language and heritage, we have long accepted the slavery of the mind. All we desire is dollars—more and more dollars. Today, social status and respect are determined by financial wealth. The wealthier a person is, the more valuable they are perceived to be in society. Discarding humanity and morality, we live in the empire of money, having turned into mechanical robots.

In this hyper-real era, while we may have countless friends on social media, in reality, we live thousands of miles away from our families and ordinary members of society. Multinational corporations like Shylock’s have entangled us in their web. There seems to be no way out, and the darkness deepens. Shahzad Firdaus, through *Shylock’s Expanding Trade*, awakens our consciousness against the cunning politics of multinational corporations and the ugly face of imperialist powers. The novel’s characters reflect diverse messages amidst the dialectics of time and society.

The narrative reveals that as Sikandar’s financial fortunes improve, hope lights up in the hearts of the villagers. Sikandar too wished for the betterment of his village, for the more people who sold their pasts, identities, and futures to Shylock, the more commission he would earn—10%. In this way, Sikandar also became an agent of the multinational company. He engaged the villagers to work on constructing his new house and even provided advance payments to many of them.

Through the power of wealth, the previously poor Sikandar quickly became a societal authority. Excessive money, however, hardens the human heart. Sikandar’s father could not accept the overnight wealth and took his own life. Shortly after his father’s death, Sikandar resumed his normal life, unaffected by grief. Wealthy people often lack deep emotions and affection, and Sikandar, driven by his greed, ordered the construction of his new house to proceed with even more vigor.

This demonstrates Sikandar’s character as someone consumed by the lure of wealth. The novelist skillfully highlights how greed for money strips people of their humanity, holding a mirror to the reader.

After his father’s death, Sikandar’s son Jeshu also disappears because Sikandar wanted to sell his son’s future to Shylock for more money. However, Jeshu refuses to sell his future. To him, the future represents dreams and the essence of a beating heart. With Jeshu lost after his grandfather’s death and his wife Suraiya opposing him, Sikandar’s life spirals into utter ruin. Having lost everything, Sikandar is engulfed by the pain of loneliness. No one is safe in

Shylock's empire. By buying both the past and the future—unreal properties—Shylock-like globalization drains the present, leaving people thoughtless and senseless. The narrative depicts Jeshu, the next generation, taking refuge near his grandfather's grave. In this way, the future seeks solace in the past. Having lost everything, Sikandar realizes that money is not everything in life. When he tries to bring Jeshu back home, the boy screams: "In Shylock's empire, no one is truly alive, nor are they dead—they are sold. No sold person can live or die."⁷ Sikandar, having lost his father and son, finds his life devoid of meaning. He becomes deranged, desperately trying to reclaim what he has lost, but all paths are blocked. By selling everything to Shylock, he loses even the ability to resist.

Through the portrayal of Sikandar's destitution and helplessness, the novelist vividly highlights the devastating consequences of capitalist globalization and seeks to awaken the reader's consciousness.

There is no connection between a sold person and a true human being, for a sold person has no existence or consciousness. Having lost his father and son, Sikandar's life becomes meaningless. In his madness, he attempts to bring his father and son back, but all paths are blocked. By selling everything to Shylock, he loses the ability to protest. Through the portrayal of Sikandar's destitution and helplessness, the novelist attempts to awaken the reader to the all-encompassing consequences of capitalist globalization.

In Sikandar's father, we find the embodiment of a rebellious spirit. After a heated argument with his son, during dinner, he refuses to eat, citing illness as an excuse. Yet, that evening, his favorite dish—chicken—was cooked. Deeply wounded by his son's inhuman greed for money, Sikandar's father chooses to end his life. The true responsibility for his suicide lies more with "Shylock and Sycophants," the multinational corporation that seeks to dominate the world through the power of the dollar. Through his suicide, Sikandar's father protests against this multinational corporation.

The character of Jeshu in the novel also embodies the intensity of protest. Jeshu's loud cry, "I will not sell my future!" becomes a timeless protest of the oppressed. Like the courageous boy in the poem, Jeshu shouts:

"No! No! No! I will not sell my growing up. I will not sell my future, I will not, I will not!"⁸

Jeshu, breaking away from his mother, runs wildly along the pondside, screaming in despair. Jeshu understands that without roots and dreams, no human can exist. He wishes to live with his dreams, to keep his spirit alive. Through Jeshu's refusal to sell his future, he stands as a beacon of resistance against the commodification of human lives.

Jeshu understood that no human being can exist without roots and dreams. He wished to live with his dreams as his companion. Just as a plant's roots in a pot are not rooted in the soil, it lives as a parasite, detached from its foundation—Shylock also wanted to purchase Jeshu's future, intending to control and exploit him for generations, expanding his dominance through the power of the dollar. "Abba and Jeshu"—Sikandar's past and future, both generations embody a rebellious spirit. In the womb of both the past and the future lie experience and dreams. This is why, in today's age of globalization, there is an attempt to destroy both roots and dreams. In doing so, it becomes easier to reach the pinnacle of dominance, with no room left for protest or resistance.

In today's time and society, we can all feel Shylock's influence. Gradually, we are all unknowingly heading into the abyss of imperialism. There seems to be no escape from it. People cannot free themselves from the addiction to dollars. Anyone who protests against Shylock—or rather, against imperialist powers—finds themselves crushed under the wheels of the dollar. There is no easy escape from the crushing grip of globalization; all our beings are sold. Imperialist countries like America are destroying our thoughts, language, and heritage. Our minds are being brainwashed through advertisements, and we are all facing an apocalyptic

reality. As one sociologist aptly put it, “It is a colony, but there is no colonizer.” In reality, the colonizer has seized our minds, trying to erase our past and heritage.

Through reducing interest rates on savings, cutting all forms of life security, diminishing sources of income, and funneling all earnings into the market, an effort is being made to drain us of everything with the temptation of small gains. Standing at the threshold of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the reading of *Shylock's Expanding Trade* strikes a blow to our deeply ingrained consciousness. The novelist attempts to make the reader face the mirror and become aware of the contemporary times and society.

'Shiloker Banijyo Bistar' Trade serves as a powerful critique of the pervasive influence of globalization, highlighting its destructive impact on human relationships, cultural identities, and societal values. Through the characters of Sikandar, his father, and Jeshu, Shahzad Firdaus vividly portrays how the commodification of human lives, fueled by unchecked economic power, erodes not only individual agency but also collective resistance. The novel underscores the dangers of a singular global culture imposed by imperialist forces, where language, heritage, and tradition are sacrificed for the pursuit of wealth.

The narrative warns of the consequences of living in a world where financial dominance dictates human existence, turning people into mere instruments of consumption. It is a stark reminder of how the commodification process, symbolized by the figure of Shylock, systematically dismantles the dreams, histories, and identities that make us human. The novel calls for an awakening, urging us to reclaim our roots and dreams as a means of resisting the encroachment of globalization. Ultimately, it serves as a poignant reflection on the need to preserve cultural diversity, human dignity, and the resistance against the forces of dehumanization and exploitation.

References:

1. Shahzad Firdaus; Shailoker Banijyo Bistar; Sanghati Prakashan, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Second Sanghati Edition – 2013; Page 9.
2. Ibid; Page 53.
3. Frederic Jameson; *Postmodern and Consumer Society; Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*; edited by Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson, and K. J. Shepherdson; Routledge, London; 2004, Page 206.
4. Shahzad Firdaus; Shailoker Banijyo Bistar; Sanghati Prakashan, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Second Sanghati Edition – 2013; Page 24.
5. Ibid; Page 41.
6. Rabindranath Tagore; *Shikshar Milan*; Kalantor; Visva-Bharati Granthan Division; Chaitra 1403; Page 183.
7. Shahzad Firdaus; Shailoker Banijyo Bistar; Sanghati Prakashan, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Second Sanghati Edition – 2013; Page 87.
8. Ibid; Page 61.