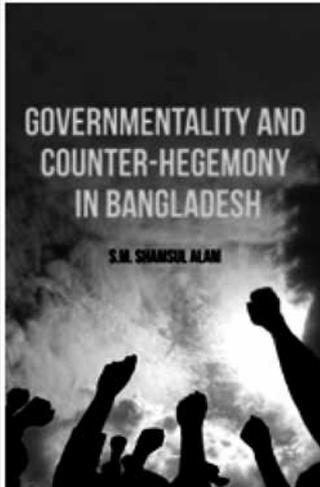


Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh

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S.M. Shamsul Alam

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Perhaps a mere coincidence, yet I consider it a great intellectual benefit that while reading S.M. Shamsul Alam's *Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh*, I was reading Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and Shaheen Akter's *Talash*. This simultaneous reading is beneficial since the texts, although in different forms and genres, interrogate the contested histories of Bengali nation, nationality, and the state, Bangladesh. Alam's main focus is the state. Divided into ten chapters, the book intricately taps Bangladesh's journey from the post-imperial "two nation" condition to its present democratic status into a neat theoretical framework. The theoretical framework, called "Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony" creates a dialogue between maverick political theorists, Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci.

The term "governmentality" is rather common in the neoliberal global and local conditions. Postmodern disciplinary methods such as constant surveillance and better management are rooted in this concept of "soft" power exercise. The "Introduction" of the book succinctly lays out the contour, context, limitation, and amalgamation of both the terms in this history of postcoloniality. The concept of "governmentality," as Alam argues, has been Foucault's theoretical tool to "make a shift in his own work from the individual context of power relations to the exercise of political sovereignty by the state over the entire population" (1). However powerful the state's nexus of sovereignty may be, it is vulnerable to resistance. Since Foucault sees power and resistance as inexorable, his theory lacks any robust articulation of resistance

against state-level governmentality. While Alam uses Gramsci's widely used concept of hegemony to compensate for Foucault's theoretical limitation, he does so with his own modification. If "hegemony" in its simplest form articulates the fraught relationship between "domination and subordination" (4), Alam's "counter-hegemony" pronounces that such an unequal relationship, even if controlled by the state's political governmentality, possesses the possibilities of protest and widespread revolutions. Alam sees the history of Bangladesh not as a continuation from colonial, postcolonial to an independent state, rather as a history of disjuncture between various forms of colonial/state-engineered governmentality and peoples' episodic involvement to counter the political hegemony.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Alam places the Mother Language Movement as the first culminated episode of Bengalis' counter-hegemony against West Pakistan's state governmentality. The first two analytical chapters, "Gorob O Asha: Language as Counter Governmentality," and "Conscious Spontaneity: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt of 1968-69" map out the pre-independence conflict between the Pakistani state and the subjects of East Bengal. Even if the book creates an impression of linearity of Bangladeshi history through chapters, within chapters such linearity is consciously manipulated. For example, in the "Gorob o Asha" chapter, before the author analyzes the contextual conflicts between Urdu and Bangla language, drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of fetish, the author sees the symbol of the Shahid Minar as a fetish of Bengali nationalism, even if nationalism itself is an emotion of conflict and disavowal. The idea of hegemony (21-22) is effectively used to draw a link to language as a political tool of social transformation. The language movement turned into a tool of social (political) transformation because the movement, as the author persists, was not a Bengali middle-class revolt, rather its effect needs to be examined within the other counter-hegemonic projects (such as *Tebhaga and Tanko*) by various subaltern groups living in the territory of Bengal. The author analyzes the 1960s, a decade of various, sometimes related but often isolated, events of revolts and resistance, which cumulatively have given birth to a "radical subjectivity" (48) of people living in East Bengal against the despotic state, resulting in the 1971 War of Independence and the birth of Bangladesh.

The middle three chapters, "Nationalism as (Re)Governmentalization," "Military Authoritarian Governmentality and Its Displacement," and "Islamic Governmentality: The Taslima Nasrin Case," provide thorough and insightful analysis of the shifts in Bangladeshi state power and the changing strategies of hegemony in independent Bangladesh. The author's critique of nationalism includes the question of power, which, he argues, while nationalism in a colonial state can unify various subaltern groups to fight for freedom, the same collective emotion can be a source of exclusion and state governmentality in an independent state. Thus, right after the birth of the state, Bangladesh evolved through a bifurcated emotion of nationalism (Sonar Bangla) as state biopolitics. The nationalist homogenizing process faced resistance from within the factions of petty bourgeoisie vying for positions of state power and from various groups of religious, economic, and ethnic "others" occupying marginal positions in the overarching discourse of nationalism.

When examined through the lens of colonial continuity and postcolonial disjuncture – as the book's individual chapters takes us through – it only seems logical that in independent

Bangladesh “the emergence of an authoritarian governmentality [the decades of military dictatorship of the 1980s] is firmly rooted within the liberal governmentality” (78). “Passive Revolution,” a Gramscian concept, allows the author to present a systematic analysis of the state-strategized development and administrative projects (such as, canal digging, establishment of upazillas and village sarkers) to construct a totalitarian governmentality in combination of Islamic religiosity and the 1980s’ new socially powerful class complicit to the state’s depoliticized rule.

The questions of gender, ethnicities, and violence occupy central spaces in the subsequent chapters of the book. At the expense of certain repetitions about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh, in the chapter, “Islamic Governmentality: The Taslima Nasrin Case,” the author develops an understanding of the gendered practice of fatwa as an extreme means of biopolitics to control women’s sexuality and subjectivities in Bangladesh. Women’s “gendered subaltern narratives” (126) unsettles, if not disrupts, Islamist governmentality. The author returns to the discourse of women’s body and violence in Chapter 8 (“On Rape and Revolt”) to extend his thesis on “spontaneous act of counter-governmentality” (172) which, as the author suggests, bears the possibility of meaningful resistance against the state’s governmentalization. It might have been useful if the chapters on fatwa and state-engineered violence against women were put together to examine women’s vulnerable positions in patriarchal states. Chapter 7, “Ethnicization and (Counter) Governmentality in the Chittagong Hill Tracts” presents a historical and contemporary analysis of the political making of Chittagong Hill Tracts as “other” of Bengali national identity, and the struggle for power and resistance between the state and different indigenous communities.

The last two chapters shift the attention from national to global (counter) governmentality. It is justified to question, as Alex Johnson does in his review of the book, the rationale of taking a long leap from national to global. When globalization is settled and neoliberal policies have taken on political shapes in most capitalist countries, it is necessary to critically reflect on the soft yet ubiquitous discourses of “better management” of neoliberal biopolitics. For the author, the possibility of challenging and resisting the insipid neoliberal governmentality lies in developing what he calls “fragmentary citizenship” (196). While the book ends with a note of optimism that embracing fragmentary citizenship may create a “postgovernmentalized society,” such causal optimism is hardly convincing. Rather, in a world wired with multiple sources of conflicting ideologies and reactions, mediated by transnational, national as well as local forces, one can only appreciate a book like Alam’s that help us analyze the complex context of governmentality and counter-hegemony in postcolonial nation states.

Work Cited

Johnson, Alex. “Book Review: Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh by S.M. Shamsul Alam.” *LSE Review of Books*, blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/01/14/book-review-governmentality-and-counter-hegemony-in-bangladesh-by-s-m-shamsul-alam/.