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## Book Review: Jeremy Seabrook, *The Song of the Shirt*,

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By Prof. Charles Sarvan

In a poor house, a woman is seated at a table. “Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle... She is embroidering passion-flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honour to wear at the next Court-ball. In a bed in the corner of the room her little boy is lying ill... and is asking for oranges. His mother has nothing to give him but river water”. (From, ‘The Happy Prince’ by Oscar Wilde, 1854 – 1900.)

*The Song of the Shirt* (subtitle: ‘The High Price of Cheap Garments from Blackburn to Bangladesh’) is divided into six parts, each part consisting of several short chapters. The author evidently has a close knowledge of Bangladesh, and the book is marked by the ‘story’ of many individuals, their harsh life and tragic fate. Opinions expressed in the following (unless otherwise made clear) are those of Jeremy Seabrook. The book’s title and epigraph are from ‘The Song of the Shirt’ by Thomas Hood, 1799 – 1845:

It is not linen you’re wearing out,

But human creatures’ lives!

Stitch – stitch – stitch,

In poverty, hunger and dirt,

Sewing at once, with a double thread,

A Shroud as well as a Shirt.

The death of more than 1,100 people in the building-collapse on the edge of Dhaka in April 2013 is “a story of such appalling contempt for human life that it must rank among the most callous in the brutal history of industrialism” (21). Bangladesh, the third largest exporter of clothes, earns 70% of its foreign exchange from this business (page 39), and yet the workers are treated as disposable, rags of humanity, used up like any other raw material in the cause of production for export (23). Children as young as eleven are employed in the factories (35). Labour is totally impersonal: as Karl Marx wrote, in such circumstance, there is no other nexus between human being than naked self-interest and callous 'cash payment'. The workers often don't know who owned the factory or the name of the manager; what becomes of the product which passes through their hands. They suffer from weak eyesight, spinal problems from bending over machines all day long, and infected lungs. They work long hours and return to squalid living conditions: compare the experience of tea-plantation workers in Sarvan, *Sri Lanka: Literary Essays & Sketches*, 2011, pages 56-80. Fleeing tidal waters, the workers fall into the fire of a pitiless industrialisation. Exploited by all and sundry, the hapless workers are chained life-long to a debt they cannot ever repay. “Between 80 and 90 per cent of workers in garment factories are young women” (38), drawn by desperation from an impoverished, hopeless, rural life

Gross exploitation continues because some of the country's lawmakers, and those with power and influence, own factories; others have financial interests in factories or are connected to those with vested financial interest (50). “It was believed that an independent Bangladesh would restore the vanished wonders of the distant past” (157). Bangladeshi dreams of a new life have been swept away by flood and famine, and “generations of kleptocratic politicians, feudal landowners and venal bureaucrats” (103). The ruling elite know each other: they “shared stories and exchanged gossip about visiting their kinsfolk in London, Rome, Washington, California, the places where their children were studying and the specialists which their relatives had consulted. ... It was a restricted, claustrophobic world, which has as its disposal resources equal to anything the global rich can boast of” (pp. 50-1). Trade Unions exist but are either corrupt or are company controlled (48). The picture that emerges is one of workers left without protection against a rapacity that is material in nature and appallingly pitiful in its human consequence.

Yet Bengal had been “the richest province of the Mughal empire in the seventeenth century” (127). “Dacca was the centre of one of the most flourishing textile industries in India” and its muslin was traded in Persia, Arabia, Armenia, China and Sumatra (130). Bengal muslin was so sheer it seemed to be “woven wind” (45); and it was claimed that if spread on the grass, one couldn't distinguish it from the dew. In a policy of deliberate “re-ruralisation”, British imperialism laid waste an industry far superior to what obtained in Britain (ibid). The story that Britain cut off the thumbs of weavers is literally false but metaphorically true because Britain destroyed both their craft and their ability to sell (137). After the Battle of Plassey, 1757, the British East India Company removed all other competition. Late in 2009, police dispersed agitated workers surrounding the Nippon Garment factory, killing three workers, and then filed charges against the protestors, *including those they had killed*

" (58. Original italics.) This is a continuation of imperial Company policy where the property of workers who died in debt was seized and sold, even if it were a hut valued at two Rupees (ibid). A system of strict supervision, informers and spies was set up, and continues into the present (58). Even during times of famine, revenue was not allowed to fall: compare the export of potato from starving Ireland to England during the great Irish Famine. *Najai* which compelled peasants to make good any deficiency in payment by their neighbours in any village was enforced by the Company during and after periods of famine. Seabrook observes that the Black Hole of Calcutta (1756) "was used to justify almost every British atrocity in India of the following two centuries" (182).

With reference to the Battle of Plassey and to the Black Hole, I quote from a review of mine: "The Battle of Plassey, 23 June 1757, is presented as the brave and brilliant triumph of Clive and his 3,000 soldiers against the "hordes" of Siraj-ud-Daulah. But the British had conspired with Mir Jaffar (army chief) who deserted, together with his men. Some of Siraj's own men either refused to fight or turned against him. The battle was more bought and betrayed than fought and won". The Black Hole of Calcutta caught the imagination, provoked anger and disgust, and was used to justify retaliatory cruelty. However, Jan Dalley, in her *'The Black Hole: Money, Myth and Empire'* (2006), establishes that the hole was "an ordinary military cell of the sort that is common in any barracks anywhere". Perhaps, only nine people had been locked up, of whom three died during the night of wounds sustained in battle.

Having destroyed Bengal's once-thriving cloth industry, the cultivation of opium was encouraged. England was importing tea from China and paying for it in bullion. Now opium grown in India became the substitute, a drug that the Chinese were compelled by force to accept: see p. 150. Despite talk of 'free trade', in 1813, the duty on calicoes was 85 per cent (136). "Britain's conversion to 'free trade' coincided with its capacity to impose it coercively upon the world: by the 1820s, the weavers of India had been reduced to misery and no longer posed any competition" (223). Coming to recent times, in the mid-1990s the US Congress threatened to pass "a bill that would ban the import of garments from factories in which child labour was used. As a result, about two-thirds of the children working in the industry in Bangladesh were dismissed. There was no record of the fate of these unemployed waifs, nor of the families who may have depended upon their scant income. The US Congress exhibited no concern for the crowds of children employed in even more hazardous occupations than garments; and this drew criticism that their primary interest lay in protecting their own garment industry rather than the vulnerable youth of Bangladesh" (41).

To keep actions in perspective, Seabrook argues that imperial cruelty and exploitation began at home: see Oscar Wilde's words which I have used as the epigraph to this review. Hegemony at root is selfish and cruel. The Waltham Black Act of 1720 prescribed the death penalty for over two hundred crimes, including the poaching of a rabbit or "cutting down an ornamental shrub" (see p. 229). After the Jacobite rising of 1746 was crushed at Culloden, English soldiers set across the Highlands, looting and killing and leaving a trail of devastation. They laid waste the landscape and scattered the people (227). "In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries", local people were driven out systematically to make room for sheep farming (228). Seabrook quotes John Cobden (1853): "The burden imposed upon the Hindoos are precisely of the character and extent of those that have reduced Ireland to poverty and her people to slavery" (230).

Now the people must decide: What should be the nature of Bangladesh? Is it primarily a Bengali or a Moslem country? Is its ancient culture compatible with “the austerities of the dominant strain of contemporary Islam” (95)? From a broader, world-wide perspective, Seabrook observes that, in a world of continuous flux and change, profit seems to be the only constant. “Will the industrial paradigm and its global market which gouge the treasures of the earth, the harvests of its land and waters, with such ferocity continue to intensify their pressure in the name of development, and if so, will large tracts of the world become scarcely habitable? Will the market become cosmos, leaving no alternative, no culture, no civilization, no other way of living outside of its constantly expanding frontier” (284)? *The Song of the Shirt* is both powerful indictment and passionate plea.

(This Review has already appeared in Confluence: South Asian Perspectives London, November, 2015. The author has permitted its re-publication.)

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