

Bangladeshi Writing in English: The Emergence of a New Voice

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English is no longer the patrimony of the Anglo Saxons. It is now a universal public property. By the British colonial train, it traveled almost the entire world, came in touch with myriad people and their languages, and enriched itself as the world's number one language. Not only as a comfortable means of communication between the peoples of the opposite poles and hemispheres, but also as a medium of creative writing, English has been deliberately taken up by writers of the formerly colonized countries. The number is multiplying with the rise of Postcolonial / Diaspora consciousness. The process of colonization has proved a double edged weapon whose other edge has now been sharper than the one used earlier by the colonizers (The Empire writes back).

How can we identify this tidal wave of English writing? Can we call it English literature? Would the traditional academia

accept it? In the name of English literature they are teaching the work of the central (British/ American or a few First-world English-speaking country) authors. Anthony Burgess, however, tries to resolve the situation. To quote : "It (English literature) is not merely the literature of the British Isles, but a vast and growing body of writings made up of the work of authors who use the English language as a natural medium of communication ."

The peripheral English language authors, however, do not bother their heads about whether they are being able to get into the same line with the central ones. They choose the language to reach a wider reading public and to let the world share their very own feelings. With this end in view, has come into existence 'African writing in English' or 'Latin American writing in English' or 'South-Asian writing in English'. In South-Asian English writing, Indian or Pakistani writings in English have by now proved

their own worth. But, Bangladesh is lagging much behind in this regard. Nevertheless, Bangladesh is not giving a walk-over. A stream of creative work in English is increasingly developing in the present literary arena of Bangladesh.

By 'Bangladeshi Writing in English' (BWE), we generally mean the whole corpus of work of writers in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi Diaspora who write in English but whose mother tongue is Bengali. This special stream of writing can also be called 'Writing English in Bangladesh'. But, to my thinking, the adjectival use of the country better describes the nature of this writing. This school of writing includes only the creative writing in English i.e. poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction.

The origin of 'Bangladeshi Writing in English' should be traced back to the pre-Independence and undivided Bengal. As a matter of fact, towards the end of 18th century and beginning of 19th century, when English learning gained a firm foothold in Calcutta-- the capital of British India, an enthusiasm for writing in English originated in the then Bengal. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774 -1833), the father of Bengali Renaissance, was the pioneer of that literary trend. The first book of poems in English

entitled *The Shair and Other Poems* (1830) by Kashiprashad Ghose was published. Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824—1873) took to writing poetry in English being influenced by English poets like Thomas Moore, John Keats, George Byron, and others. Although his genius for English writing was nipped in the bud, his two English poetry books, *The Captive Ladie* and *Visions of the Past*, both published in 1849, were well received by the highly educated locals and the English circles. Toru Dutt (1855—1876) in her very short life caught global attention by writing and translating poetry in English. Her *A Sheaf Glean'd and French Fields* was published in 1876 and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* was in 1882.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838—1894) won wide recognition for his novel *Rajmohan's Wife*. Rabindranath Tagore (1861—1941) showed considerable talent in English writing. Rabindranath, however, was not a writer in English as such. He took to writing in English for the pressure from his admirers at home and abroad. Nevertheless, the corpus of his English writings is pretty large and manifold. They generally fall into two major categories—originals and translations. Although he

began this part of his career at his early fifties as a translator of his own writings, he did a considerable amount of original writing and translation of works by others. In addition, he used the language to write scores of letters, and to give numerous lectures, talks, speeches, and addresses throughout the world. Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1999) was the quintessential English writer of Bengal. His English writing reached such towering heights that he is said to have outdone even many of his contemporary mainstream English authors. Writers like E.M. Forster, Winston Churchill, Arnold Toynbee, V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie have held his writing in high esteem.

What we call 'Bangladeshi writing in English' has come into being after the Independence of Bangladesh. Although the stream is very feeble, it exists. There is, however, no standardized list of the writers of this school. I have tried to make a rough outline which is, of course, subject to many further modifications. I have included the names of the writers who have been writing poems, fictions, and short stories in English, and by now have earned for themselves some name. The first generation of 'Bangladeshi Writers in English' includes a

few poets. Razia Khan Amin came up with a couple of collections of poems. Her poetry books *Argus Under Anaesthesia* (1976) and *Cruel April* (1977) bear the stamp of her preeminence among English poets in Bangladesh. Farida Majid is another distinguished poet and literary translator. Her *Take Me Home, Rickshaw* (1974) is a collection of poems by contemporary Bangladeshi poets translated in English. She has edited an anthology of English poems titled *Thursday Evening Anthology* (1977).

Kaiser Haq is the most leading English language poet in Bangladesh. His poetic output is quite substantial. They are as follows: *Starting Lines* (1978)-Dacca; *A Little Ado* (1978)- Dacca ; *A Happy Farewell* (1994)-Dhaka; *Black Orchid* (1996)-London; *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song* (2002); *Published in the Streets of Dhaka : Collected poems 1966—2006* (2008). Kaiser Haq is a consummate artist who has painted the contemporary Bangladeshi scene with powerful imaginative mind and artistic precision.

Feroz Ahmed-ud-din is another noted poet. Though not prolific, his poetry is marked by shortness and intensity. His *Handful of Dust* (1975) vividly portrays the loss of vision in contemporary life. Syed S. N. Hashem's

collection of poems *Hopefully the Pomegranate* is a valuable addition to Bangladeshi English poetry. Hashem has drawn allusions and references from far-off European mythology and biblical anecdotes, and woven them into the local themes. Nuzhat Amin Mannan's *Rhododendron Lane* (2004) is enriched with creative imagery and distinctive style.

Rumana Siddique's *Five Faces of Eve: Poems* (2007) reflects the timeless experience of a woman symbolized by their biblical ancestor- Eve. Her poems are a mix of pleasures and pains of life. Nadeem Rahman's *Politically Incorrect poems* (2004) is a collection of poems dealing with post-liberation war themes. His poetry is typified by highly individualistic attitude, sharp social sensibility, and keen political observation. Fakrul Alam's translation *Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems* (1999) is of great literary value. Apart from the poets identified, a number of enthusiastic amateur poets, such as, Syed Badrul Ahsan, Azfar Hussein and Rabiul Hasan are also writing good English poems.

The realm of fiction in BWE hitherto is being dominated by a few writers. The name of Adib Khan, a Bangladeshi Diaspora author in Australia comes first. He is a

writer of real merit. His novels *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994) *Solitude of Illusions* (1996); *The Storyteller* (2000); *Homecoming* (2005); and *Spiral Road* (2007) win global acclaim, and are mostly concerned with themes of self-identity, sense of belonging, migration, and social dislocation. His style is characterized by lucidity and sarcasm. Monica Ali is a Bangladeshi-born British writer and novelist. Her debut novel, *Brick Lane*, was published in 2003. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. *Brick Lane* — named after Brick Lane, a street at the heart of London's Bangladeshi community explores different aspects of expatriate lives and processes of adaptations to alien people and culture.

Tahamima Anam belongs to the group of writers who were born after Independence of Bangladesh. She is also an author of Bangladeshi Diaspora in London. Her first novel *A Golden Age* (2007) is set in war-torn Bangladesh. As an English fictional work on Independence War (1971), Tahmima's novel must have a singular place in the history of Bangladeshi English literature. In her second novel *The Good Muslim* (2012) Ms Anam examines the after-effects of our Liberation War, the growing unease at the way the post-war situation develops, and the gains

Shazia Omar is another Bangladeshi novelist in English. Her first novel, *Like a Diamond in the Sky* published in 2009 gives a dismal picture of drug addiction in Bangladesh. A young story teller Mahmud Rahman has appeared on the BWE scene with his debut publication *Killing the Water* (2010). It is a collection of a dozen of short stories which cover a wide variety of themes ranging from the Liberation War of Bangladesh to the racial violence against the fresh immigrants in the USA. *The Glass Bangles* (Dhaka, 2011), Nashid Kamal's debut fiction portrays a desperate plight of a young Bangladeshi woman in pursuit of her life in London. K. Anis Ahmed came up with his collection of short stories titled *Good Night, Mr. Kissinger and Other Stories* which offers nine stories mostly based on different aspects of Dhaka city.

Rashid Askari's (the author of this paper) *Nineteen seventy one and other stories* (Dhaka, 2012) is a fresh inclusion in the BWE list. Picking real-life events from the remote areas and the marginal people of the country and weaving them into various fictional forms are the hallmarks of his storytelling. Ahmede Hussain is another Bangladeshi writer in English who has edited *The New Anthem: The Subcontinent*

in its Own Words, which is an anthology of fiction from the Indian Subcontinent. A galaxy of other promising writers is trying their hands at story writing in English. Khademul Islam, Razia Sultana Khan, and Mohammad Alamgir Toimoor deserve special mention.

Although 'Bangladeshi writing in English' has a long way to go, it has a bright future too. We may be able to play at least a similar role to that of India. At least an Amitav Ghosh or an Arundhati Roy or a Vikram Seth can very well be born of the budding fictionists of Bangladesh.

But how? The ongoing mode of BWE has to be liberated from the literary coterie i.e. the small circle of writers, publishers, and their admirers. It has to be rescued from the narrow confines of academia—the varsity English departments and English medium schools and colleges. The English newspapers and magazines should allow enough room for literature page and fresh writings should be picked solely on merit. The literary journals should promote BWE growth. Bangladeshi writing in English can better be a global vehicle for our national feelings and emotions, and herald the emergence of a new voice—which our literature is in urgent need of.