

Introducing Bangladeshi Writing in English: Emergence to the Present

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Abstract

In postcolonial literary criticism, Bangladeshi writing in English has not received the scholarly attention or the recognition it deserves. However, there is an irony here because colonial Bengal was perhaps the first among the British colonies to embrace English education and its people had early working experiences with the British. Moreover, this literary tradition claims some of the earliest writers of literature written in English outside the British and American canons. In the present time, it has gained renewed vibrancy as writers both in Bangladesh and in the diaspora, especially in the UK, have produced English works both in the original and in translation. Considering the rich background, sophistication and huge potential of Bangladeshi writing in English, in this article we will provide a historical overview and the varying strands of this literary tradition. As editors of this special journal issue, we will also attempt a general outline of the articles included in it and consider the main themes they explicate.

Keywords

Bangladeshi writing in English, Bengal, British India, South Asia, postcolonialism, diaspora

Among the people of what is now Bangladesh, the urge to express themselves creatively in English goes back to the days of their first encounter with the British on South Asian soil. However, since historically the Bangladeshis have had to grapple successively with different concepts of national identity, the distinctive literary tradition of Bangladeshi writing in English has not yet received the full critical attention it deserves. It has lagged behind its Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan counterparts in the region, which have thus far claimed precedence in literary history books and attracted considerable critical discussion.

Even though Bangladesh is perhaps among the least developed in English literary writing in the subcontinent and Bangladeshi literature in English is less well known compared to, say, Pakistani literature in English, it should not be forgotten that from 1947 to 1971, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) and Pakistan (then West Pakistan) constituted a single country, known uniformly as Pakistan. Consequently, the literary contribution of East Pakistani writers in English during

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that 24-year period has become part of the generic rubric of Pakistani writing in English. As Sirajuddin states, “Pakistani literature in English began to draw serious attention in the 1960s. S. Sajjad Husain, Syed Ali Ashraf and Maya Jamil contributed articles to journals and collections on topics in Pakistani literature” (301). Even though Syed Sajjad Husain (1920-95) and Syed Ali Ashraf (1925-98) became Bangladeshi citizens after the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan in December 1971, their work in the Pakistan period was appropriated or categorised under Pakistan’s literary culture. What is more, Husain commenced his writing career in English with the *The Statesman*, *The Daily Star of India* and the weekly *The Comrade* in the early 1940s, certainly before British India won its independence and the dominions of India and Pakistan were created in 1947. Thus, though Bangladeshi writing in English appears relatively puny on the surface, this literary tradition includes writers such as Sajjad Husain who wrote under three flags: British India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

It is significant to note that, compared to other regions of the South Asian subcontinent, the Bangladeshi English literary tradition has arguably the most prolific and distinguished historical origins. Once considered the jewel in the crown of British India, the Bengal region was more exposed to English education during the colonial period than the other provinces. The first institution of its kind, the Hindu College in Calcutta was established in 1817 by the joint initiative of the British colonists and the native gentry, led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), an iconic Renaissance figure who was keen to spread English education among the local people.² If we take this historic context into account, then Bangladeshi writing in English can be traced back to the East India Company period, to a time before Thomas Macaulay wrote his now infamous Minutes on Indian Education in February 1835 or Bentinck’s English Education Act took effect in March of the same year, and can therefore be regarded as one of the oldest and most prestigious English-language literary traditions outside the English-speaking world.

English-language writers of pre-1947 Bengal have claimed arguably some of the earliest and finest South Asian literary works, dating back to Sheikh Deen Muhammad’s³ *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794) and Kylas Chunder Dutt’s *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1845* (1835). However, because of mapping and remapping of the borders, critics often consider the 1971 spatial (not temporal) boundary of Bangladesh as the site of Bangladeshi writing in English. Some of the precursors of this literary tradition include such distinguished figures as Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94), Toru

² The primary purpose behind establishing this institution was to give a liberal education “to the children of the members of the Hindu Community”; however, it also enrolled “non-Hindu students like Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists and Brahma Samajists” (Patil).

³ Commonly spelt Sake Dean Mahomet.

Dutt (1856-77), Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), Humayun Kabir (1906-69), Syed Sajjad Husain and Syed Ali Ashraf. The last two in this list wrote creative and critical pieces in both pre- and post-1971 Bangladesh. Hossain's (fondly known as Rokeya among her readers and followers) feminist utopian novella *Sultana's Dream* (1905) is "arguably the first significant piece of literature in English written by a Muslim author, followed by Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*" (Hasan 180), and probably the first feminist utopian fiction in South Asian literature.

Bangladeshi English-language writers in the post-1971 era can be divided into two generational categories. The older generation includes, among others, Razia Khan Amin (1936-2011), Kaiser Haq (1951-) and Feroz Ahmed-ud-din (1950-). The list of the emerging, younger generation of writers is too large to enumerate here, but some of the more prominent ones, especially from the diaspora, will be mentioned later in this discussion.

Perhaps the main reason why the English writing tradition was slow to find a footing in independent Bangladesh and writings in the early years were rather sparse is because Bangladesh was, after all, created out of a language movement and formed exclusively on language identity. The language movement, which commenced in 1952 after Bengali was left out "as the one of the divided country's official languages" (Shook), eventually led to the "country's movement for independence, culminating in 1971's Liberation War that resulted in the massive murder of ordinary Bangladeshi – at that time East Pakistani – civilians by the Pakistani army" (Shook). Because of this hideous atrocity by the Pakistani forces, which by some estimates claimed as many as 269,000 Bengali lives ("269,000 People Died"), it was obviously difficult for the aspiring writers in the English language to shake off the nationalist sentiment and start writing in English in the immediate years after independence (Shikhandin).

Moreover, Bengali was instituted as the sole medium of education at both primary and secondary levels in the newly independent country. However, as time passed, the memory of the war began to recede in the national psyche, and concomitantly the need to re-accommodate English – now the dominant language of business and technology – became more acute. Henceforth, English language education and with it, creative writing in English started gaining ground and soon wrested prominence again. English-medium schools began to proliferate in Dhaka and other major cities in the country in the early 1990s, while the number of English-language dailies that published original English works in weekly instalments and/or in literary and Eid specials also began to multiply. The launching of the Hay Festival of Literature and Arts in Dhaka in 2011 has also contributed significantly to the present advancement of English literary scene in Bangladesh. Among these factors, however, the contribution of English-medium schools is perhaps the most outstanding. One example may illustrate this point.

Manal Mohamed (1986-) published her first writing in English, “Life in Bosnia,” in *The Bangladesh Observer* in 1994 when she was only eight years old and a grade-2 student in an English-medium school in Dhaka. Subsequently, her fiction and non-fiction works appeared in almost all major Bangladeshi English dailies and she won various writing competitions conducted by these same publications. The pinnacle of her literary career to date occurred in 2009 when her short story “Sotto Voce” was published in Routledge’s *Wasafiri*. Her “A Recluse in Rain” is included in Niaz Zaman’s *New Age Short Stories* (2006) and has received an award. Like Manal Mohamed, many other English-medium school students have written English pieces and the trend is increasing.⁴

Also significant is the influence of English dailies. *The Daily Star*’s Saturday literary supplements, as well as *The New Age*’s and other English newspapers’ occasional literary specials attract an increasing number of writers and readers in English. *The Daily Star* and *The New Age* have produced collections of short stories, *The Daily Star Book of Bangladeshi Writing* (2006) and *New Age Short Stories* (2006) respectively, which are important contributions to this vibrant and burgeoning literary tradition. The Hay festival in Dhaka attracts crowds of prominent and promising literati, although the most enthusiastic participants are local (that is, Dhaka-based) Bangladeshi English-language writers.

Linguistically, Bangladeshi writers in English can be characterised into three groups: 1) those who produce original works in English, 2) those who self-translate their English writings into Bengali and 3) those who self-translate their Bengali works into English. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Humayun Kabir self-translated *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) and *Men and Rivers* (1945) respectively into Bengali. Syed Manzoorul Islam’s *The Merman’s Prayer and Other Stories* (2013), co-incidentally published by *The Daily Star* publishing group, is a collection of his short stories which he translated from Bengali into English; meanwhile *Galpa: Short Stories by Women from Bangladesh* (2005), edited by Niaz Zaman and Firdous Azim, and *New Age Short Stories* contain both original and translated pieces.

Creative writing in English among the Bangladeshi diaspora is worthy of serious critical and analytical consideration. Some of the most prominent Bangladeshi diasporic writers are Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri (1897-1999), Adib Khan (1949-), Syed Manzurul Islam (1953-), Muhammad Abdul Bari (1953-), Dilruba Z. Ara (1957-), Mahmud Rahman (1964-), Husna Parvin Ahmad (1964-), Monica Ali (1967-), Neamat Imam (1971-), Sanchita Islam (1973-), Rekha Waheed (1975-), Tahmina Anam (1975-), Kia Abdullah (1982-), and many more. Ali’s debut novel *Brick Lane* has received more critical attention to date than any

⁴ Of course, it goes without saying that majority of the native Bangladeshi writers in English, including Serajul Islam Chowdhury (1936-), Niaz Zaman and Kaiser Haq, were brought up in English-medium schools and were exposed to the language early in life.

other work by a Bangladeshi diasporic writer.⁵ It “is regarded as very successful in drawing very lively portraits of first- and second-generation Bangladeshi immigrants” in London (Töngür 561). However, Australian writer Germaine Greer questions Ali’s portrayal of Bangladeshi society, stating, “Ali is on the near side of British culture [and]... her point of view is, whether she allows herself to impersonate a village Bangladeshi woman or not, British.”

The list of Bangladeshi writers in English we have mentioned above, and including those covered in the various articles in this special issue, is far from complete but should nevertheless intrigue and enable interested researchers to delve further into the tradition. The number of writers within this rapidly developing literary body are many, and the themes they address are likewise too varied and numerous to detail in the scope of this article, or to address as a comprehensive whole in this special journal issue. The issues that the contributors discuss in their articles here are by no means exhaustive or fully representative of the tradition, but mainly represent their research interests instead. Our selection and inclusion of articles in this issue were dependent on the number of submissions and on their quality and breadth of coverage. We are fully aware that there are many other important Bangladeshi writers who have written works of excellence and contributed immensely to the development of Bangladeshi writing in English, whose writings reflect Bangladeshi society and its people both in Bangladesh and in the diaspora, but whose works have not been featured in this issue. Again, this lapse is not by choice but rather determined by the spread and quality of the submissions we received in response to our call for papers.

Of the fifty or so articles we received in response to our call, only eight have been selected for the issue after a rigorous vetting process. They have been arranged chronologically according to the seniority of writers within the two literary forms addressed in this issue – prose fiction and poetry; within the “fiction” category, first the novel and then the short story are covered. This is followed by two interviews, the first with Niaz Zaman, a first-generation writer of the post-independence period, based in her native country, and the second with Sanchita Islam, a British-born Bangladeshi writer and artist whose name has already been mentioned above in the list of Bangladeshi diasporic writers. These interviews are most intriguing and engaging and provide extensive discussion on the life and literary/creative oeuvres of the two writers.

The first article of the issue, “Images of Bangladesh in Niaz Zaman’s Novels” by Sabiha Huq examines Zaman’s realism in her portrayal of Bangladeshi women and their struggles at different historical junctures. Detailing the everyday experiences of ordinary women as described in Zaman’s three novels, Huq sheds light upon “an essentially Bangladeshi reality” and women’s “glorious and

⁵ Characteristically too, in this special issue of *Asiatic*, of the eight articles published on Bangladeshi writing in English, two are on Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*.

extraordinary journeys.” The article argues that women’s resilience, strength and resourcefulness are better manifested during challenging times when they have to cope with tragedies of epic proportion on their own without the presence of or support from men.

The next article, by Farhanaz Rabbani and Tazin Aziz Chaudhury, “The Silent Soldiers: A Postcolonial Feminist Study of Selina Hossain’s *River of My Blood* and Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*,” embarks on a comparative discussion between vernacular Bangladeshi novelist Selina Hossain’s 1976 novel *Hangor Nodi Grenade* – which was translated into English as *River of My Blood* (2016) – and Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). A thread of commonality that runs through the two novels is the condition of women in the largely patriarchal societies of Hossain’s Bangladesh and Hosseini’s Afghanistan. Women’s experiences, portrayed in the contexts of the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971 and of a politically volatile Afghanistan following the incursions first by Russia and then the US, provide the discussion in the article with a sense of what feminists from the 1970s encapsulated in their slogan “the personal is the political.”

In the third article, “The Blame Game: War and Violence in Dilruba Z. Ara’s *Blame*,” Sanjib Kr Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi deal with the 1971 event as portrayed by the Swedish-Bangladeshi writer, Dilruba Z. Ara in her 2015 novel, *Blame*. The article touches on gender-based violence against women and investigates women’s self-esteem during the war and its aftermath. Using the context of Ara’s novel, a Bildungsroman about self-development and coming of age, the authors situate women in the midst of a culture of blaming that reproaches women for unconventional behaviour and “unwomanly courage.”

The next two articles, by Md. Mahmudul Hasan and Wigati Dyah Prasasti respectively, focus on Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003). Md. Mahmudul Hasan’s “Transplanted Gender Norms and Their Limits in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*” explains diasporic anxiety of severance from the cultural values of one’s country of origin. A sense of displacement and identitarian fear of being lost to metropolitan cultural influences compel the Bangladeshi diasporic community in Britain to transplant Bangladeshi gender norms into their new lives and cultural surrounds. Mainly drawing upon Ali’s depiction of the character of Nazneen, Hasan argues that such measures are inept and inefficacious in the context of the contemporary world of virtual communication, which renders the private life of domesticity porous and vulnerable to outside influences. However, in “Unchaste Desires: Gender- and Identity-Related Disquiet in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*,” Prasasti highlights Chanu’s gendered conditioning of the protagonist Nazneen in the novel. With Chanu’s approval, Nazneen starts working from home in compliance with patriarchal norms. However, it leads to her intimate familiarity and subsequent extramarital affairs with Karim, who regularly visits her as the middle man between her and the garment factory for which she works.

Eventually, Nazneen embraces metropolitan culture and refuses to follow Chanu in a reverse migration back to Bangladesh, instead seeking putative liberation in the Western lifestyle.

A feminist empiricist and historicist perspective is present in Farzana Akhter's "Negotiating the Politics of Power: Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* and Women's Role in War and Nation-building." Using Anam's novel, the article discusses women's participation in the 1971 war on multiple fronts and how, in the subsequent grand narrative that followed, women faced a masculinist erasure that denied them their rightful place in history. The article argues that in the hysteria of eulogising male heroism, women's contributions are often forgotten in the nationalist jubilation as well as its lexicon. This article has a certain affinity with the one by Sanjib Kr Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi, as both Ara's and Anam's novels centre on the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and the effect it had on women in general and the birangonas in particular.

Drawing on three short stories from Niaz Zaman's edited anthology, *The Escape and Other Stories of 1947* (2000), Rifat Mahbub and Anika Saba ("Homed, Unhomed and Rehomed in Partition Stories of East Bengal/East Pakistan") take readers back to the beginnings of independence for British India and the subsequent partition of the region into India and Pakistan in 1947. Predicating upon Ananya Jahanara Kabir's concepts of "postmemory" and "post-amnesia," the article dilates on the violence and cross-border mass migration in the aftermath of the partition, and how these experiences shaped "the intergenerational identities of Bangladeshis."

Tahmina Ahmed in "Kaiser Haq: Emerging Transnational Poet of Bangladesh" celebrates arguably the foremost Bangladeshi poet in English, whose work has been received favourably in both Bangladesh and beyond. In an era of globalisation and transnational exchanges through migration as well as information technology, a poet of literary merit can easily transcend national and geographical boundaries, which Ahmed seeks to demonstrate by way of evaluating some of Haq's poems and translated works.

Women's experiences and feminist issues involving the political events of 1947 and 1971 and diasporic life dominate in the articles in this special issue of *Asiatic* on Bangladeshi writing in English. As mentioned earlier, the literary forms covered in the issue are fiction and poetry. Some of the important themes that have not been touched on and which future research projects may wish to consider are the issue of class, the rural-urban divide, tradition and modernity, gender and work in Bangladesh, women in the garment industry, internal migration, and religion and culture. Literary forms that have not been investigated in the issue but merit research attention are autobiography, drama, memoir and non-fiction.

One final point that needs to be made is that almost all the articles in the issue, including the two interviews, focus on women writers. This does not necessarily indicate that more Bangladeshi women than men are writing in the English language, nor that their work is necessarily superior to that of their male counterparts, but perhaps it does suggest that more research is being carried out on the works of women writers compared to those of men. We are disappointed that we could not include articles on such major male writers as Nirad Chaudhuri and Adib Khan, or even such important female writers as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Razia Khan Amin. Notwithstanding such limitations, we believe that this effort is timely and marks the beginning of more research to come on the tradition of Bangladeshi writing in English, which it certainly deserves as the tradition has been growing steadily and in strides during the last twenty-odd years.

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