

## Kaiser Haq: Emerging Transnational Poet of Bangladesh

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### Abstract

This essay attempts to locate Kaiser Haq (1950-), the foremost Bangladeshi poet in the English language, in the wider arena of transnational literature. Transnational literature could be regarded as a movement away from diasporic and postcolonial writing. It is the production by poets and writers from various geographical locations and ethnicities who are united by their choice of creative medium, i.e. English. These poet-writers have lived and moved around in more than one nation and experienced a unique diversity in life which they depict in their writings. Globalisation and connectivity through technological development have led to an expansion of readers and availability of texts. Kaiser Haq says that ultimately any literary work is “bound to go on-line” (Ahmed) and he is ready to accept that. Haq’s famous poem “Ode on the Lungi,” illustrates how a poet can cross boundaries and appeal to a variety of people who share common concerns and viewpoints. In this poem, Haq effortlessly moves from a Bangladeshi man “swimming in a lungi/ abbreviated into a G-string” to a list of similar garments used by men of other nations and given other names. Finally, he uses it to criticise the hypocrisy and undemocratic behaviour of the Europeans and Americans. After discussing the concept of literary transnationalism, this paper will examine Haq’s poems to discover the features of transnationalism present in them.

### Keywords

Transnationalism, globalisation, world literature, crossing borders, fusion, travelling

The two World Wars of the early twentieth century led to displacement of huge numbers of people, but also increased trade and economic transactions across borders. The consequently changed economic and social conditions, among other issues, gave birth to transnationalism. The final impetus for the growth of transnationalism occurred with globalisation and technological advancement in the twentieth century: as for example, the invisible net of the world wide web which has connected people from all corners of the world. Subsequently, a blending of people and cultures led to porous territorial demarcations and the

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birth of global citizens. Anthropological and socio-economic studies discovered transnationalism as an appropriate tool for analysing these newly born phenomena in the early twentieth century. Thereafter, human perspectives changed, and the production of literature adopted new forms, themes, viewpoints and styles, leading to the rise of transnationalism in the field of literature and literary studies. Kaiser Haq (1950-), having lived in and travelled over more than half of the world is one such poet who has crossed many frontiers and continues to write while overcoming boundaries of content and style, and can be regarded as the first emerging transnational poet of Bangladesh.

Transnationalism is a break from confining ideas of nationality or even regionality to become part of the larger world. Paul Jay focuses on this comparatively recent paradigm of literature moving from a limited local world to an unlimited global arena and says:

English Literature is increasingly postnational, whether written by cosmopolitan writers like Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Arundhati Roy, Nadine Gordimer, or by a host of lesser known writers working in their home countries or in diasporic communities around the world from Europe and Africa to the Caribbean and North America. (Jay 33)

Jay insists that Western literature must not be studied or presented only from a Eurocentric perspective, but must be viewed as evolving out of “transnational cultural politics” (Jay 43). He believes that the future of English is largely linked to a new phenomenon:

... the remarkable explosion of English literature produced outside Britain and the United States has made it clear that this literature is becoming defined less by a nation than by a language, in which authors from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds write. (Jay 35)

The poetry of Haq, written in English, his adopted language, can be regarded as belonging to this latter body of writings, “exploding” (Jay 35) on to the field of world literatures. Aligning with Paul Jay, whom she quotes, Arianna Dagnino claims that transnationalism transcends boundaries and erases the centre/periphery binary to open a wider vista of shared experiences. Dagnino mentions Frank Schulze Engler as part of a group of scholars working on this concept, who says:

Transcultural English Studies... stands for a genuinely transnational and transcultural perspective that is capable of encompassing both the literary practice of writers who can no longer be related to one particular ‘national literary space’ and the complex articulations that link individual works of literature not only to local or regional modernities with their specific social,

linguistic, and cultural constellations, but also to the world-wide field of English-language literatures.... (Dagnino, "Transcultural" 2)

Engler, like Jay, writes about authors who have crossed territorial boundaries not only physically but also by vaulting beyond specific local literary patterns. Hence, such writers yearn for unlimited and free space in world literature far beyond the perimeters set by a single nation and single language. Haq in an interview with Kathryn Hummel, reacted to her labelling him as a "national" poet by protesting: "No! I don't care for the 'national' association. I think I can be more as an individual because one's national identity is given, but as an individual there are many things to explore" (Hummel).

Haq expresses an inherent desire of creative artists to reach out to as wide an audience as possible. Mingled with this longing is the urge to know and use, transform, re-form, re-create and internalise all forms and styles of writing to find "many things to explore," as Haq says. Dagnino focuses on this aspect in her essay as she opines:

... these authors are aware that the conventional narratives about nation, allegiance, and belonging firmly rooted in a particular community, location, or tradition no longer work in a world where Transnational experiences and neo-nomadic trajectories tend to disrupt the cohesive sense of belonging of clearly defined and homogenised groups. (Dagnino, "Global" 132)

The writers Pico Iyer, Kamila Shamsie, Maki Kureishi, Keki Daruwalla, to name a few, are products of a changed world, mostly born after the two World Wars and having grown up in changing circumstances. Those belonging to postcolonial countries observed their own identities and allegiances transpose from one to the other, or acquire new independent selves and perspectives. This change from one country to another happened to quite a few of the older generation of India and Pakistani poets. Shahid Suhrawardy, Ahmed Ali and Maki Kureshi moved from India to Pakistan; Keki Darwalla and Imtiaz Dharker journeyed from Pakistan to India and beyond. Likewise, Haq was born in Pakistan but then fought in the independence war to get a new homeland – Bangladesh. Even their roots and traditions altered, making it almost impossible to hold on to a single fixed well-defined reality and forcing them to re-negotiate their lives on new terms. That is the point where transnationalism provides them with a new identity and ushers in newer meaningfulness in life to go beyond a single label. When Haq is asked by Ahmede Hussain about his view of being regarded as a South Asian poet born out of postcolonial literature, he replies:

We live in an age of multiple labels and identities.... To be a South Asian writer is also to be an Asian writer, a Commonwealth writer, a third-world writer, a postcolonial or a postmodern writer... it's mainly Asian, African and

Caribbean writers who have to deal with this label. The label has its uses; it enables critics to focus on a body of writing that would otherwise have been in a limbo perhaps. (Hussain)

At the same time, Haq is very much conscious of the problems of being labelled only as postcolonial writer, as he tells Hussain:

But problems can arise if they [critics] start arguing that only certain 'postcolonial' issues should be privileged in postcolonial writing. That could stymie creativity. I don't let labels bother me... they come and go.... (Hussain)

Having discussed the definition and background of transnationalism and Haq's affinity as a poet with this tradition, I now intend to examine his poems following an approximate sequence of their writing/publication. Haq began writing in English; he explains why he chose English, and not his mother tongue, as his medium, in his following statement: "I do not think I would have tried creative writing in English if I weren't an English-medium boy" (Haq, *Published* 151).

He titled his first prose-poem "Les Misérables" and published it in a school magazine. Obviously, the title is borrowed from a French novel, not expected to be read by a school-boy in Bangladesh. Haq's earliest poems were published in two editions, first in 2007 and later in 2017, with the same title, *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems 1966-2006*. These poems were influenced by T.S. Eliot and other modernist poets. One of his most dominant characteristics in these poems is the use of allusions, which illustrate his exceptionally wide reading. Even a short poem, "Figures of Speech," belonging to his earliest collection, contains three allusions taken from three different worlds:

... e.g. Heraclitus's aphorism about the impossibility  
of stepping into the same river twice  
which I revise in the light of Lord Buddha's wisdom, viz.  
... Rimbaud's mysterious self-definition. (Haq, *Published* 3)

Haq begins his poem by talking about his "ancestral village," then moves on to reflect on the philosophies of three great thinkers on rivers in comparison with human life. He is combining Greek and Buddhist philosophy with a French poet's idea. From there, he cogitates on the figures of speech used in poems and symbolically relates them to the present condition of the river and human life. This remarkable allusive characteristic of Haq's poetry serves to connect Bangladesh with the rest of the world. Although Haq writes his poems mostly sitting in Bangladesh, references to the whole world can be found in them. In the interview with Kathryn Hummel mentioned earlier, Haq explains:

Maybe I look at the world through my city. It's interesting how some writers adapt to each other and some can't, or some change. It's about finding your spiritual home. Most modernists wrote in exile. Ezra Pound, Joyce... affirm civil, rather than national identity. (Hummel)

Generally, Haq is grouped with other South Asian poets writing in English in journals and anthologies published worldwide, for example, *London Magazine*, *The Cambridge Review*, *Wasafiri*, *The Arnold Anthology of Contemporary Poets*, *World Literature Written in English*, to name a few. When Mir Arif questions Haq about which tradition he follows, Haq answers:

The primary tradition that I belong to is the tradition of South Asian poetry in English, which began with Henry Louis, Vivian Derozio and comes down to our time... and at the same time I am a Bangladeshi writing poetry. Even though it's in English, my poetry is a part of the Bangladeshi literary scene. (Arif)

In a book Laetitia Zecchini includes Haq with other South Asian writers in her essay. She begins by making a very significant point about South Asian Poetry:

Poets of the Indian subcontinent refuse to be pigeonholed in neat national linguistic, and cultural categories. Their poetry both springs from a specific locale like Dhaka, Bombay or Lahore and is dialogically engaged with the world outside. They are not concerned with writing *back* to the west or writing *for* India or Pakistan, only with honing their voice and modernity. (Zecchini 1)

The South Asian writers are connected to each other through their geography as well as political history. For the poets of the Indian subcontinent, there is also a shared history as mentioned earlier in the essay. In recent years, SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) literary and cultural festivals have been (and continue to be) held to re-discover the commonalities and connectivity among them. In Bangladesh, the Dhaka Literary Festival, which grew out of the Hay Festival held in 2012, also provides a platform for literary and cultural exchanges. Zecchini feels that many South Asian poets are distant from each other in spite of sharing many common concerns.

And yet their work springs from the same troubled cultural and political context. Countries of South Asia share a tumultuous history and sometimes a chaotic present, marked by the rise of communal politics, and by various forms of cultural or religious fundamentalism. (Zecchini 3)

Although Zecchini's remarks may be viewed as a broad generalisation, it cannot be totally denied. The partition of India and Pakistan forced some poets to

change their homelands, as did Hassan Suhrawardy, Ahmed Ali, Maki Kureishi, Keki Daruwalla, to name a few.

Zecchini points to the political divisions of these countries as “partitioning of the minds” (3). She sees that these poets have shared inheritances from earlier poets who had moved away, for example, Hasan Suhrawardy and Ahmed Ali, for Indian and Pakistani poets. Zecchini further discovers a common challenge for these poets, which is their use of the English language, “because English remains the language of a privileged minority and the language of power; a colonial relic often attacked as a sign of persisting servitude” (Zecchini 4). In Bangladesh also, poets writing in English are not very popular and are sometimes criticised by their compatriots and sometimes isolated for their actions. Haq acknowledges this in an interview with Quayum: “Individual Bangladeshis still trying to write in English work in isolation” (112). However, Zecchini argues that these poets writing in English have negotiated the challenge by transforming it into their strength to reach beyond their immediate locality:

... because it gave poets the freedom to ‘make their pacts’ and affiliations across space, time and languages both abroad to distant literatures and to the South Asian past. It also gave them the freedom to experiment and invent a modern voice unburdened by many of the national conditionings and anxieties. (Zecchini 6)

Indeed, ironically, writing in English is their power which earns a much wider readership of the texts moving beyond the perimeters of one region and one language. Even Haq echoes the above when he tells Quayum; “By now every third world writer in English is aware of a worldwide readership, whether potential or real and so do I” (116).

Although Zecchini does not use the term “transnationalism,” her analysis shows how these poets carry their voices, thoughts and ideas towards possibilities beyond the limitations of any specific locales. Moreover, with technological advancement, they do not have to depend on translations or properly printed publications of their work to reach readers living far away from the poets’ homelands. As Jay states, it is the English language that unifies these poets. Ironically, the choice of English being criticised as a weakness turns into a strength for these writers. However, apart from the language, perhaps the greater unifier is the Internet. Haq, in a personal conversation with me, commented with delight, “All the poems will end in the net and I have no problem with it” (Ahmed). Ultimately, globalisation and the rapid spread of technology have created a transnational literature which is quite unstoppable in its spread around the world.

One of Haq’s poems frequently discussed and included in anthologies is

“Ode on the Lungi” (Haq, *Published* 27-34).<sup>2</sup> It provides a playful but acute criticism of the hypocrisy of the United States and the West vis-à-vis the other parts of the world. It is Haq’s perception of the world through an Asian-African lens. Addressing Walt Whitman, considered as the most democratic of American poets, as “grandpa Walt,” Haq sets the conversational familiar tone right at the outset. Then he begins his commentary on an item of male clothing very popular in many Asian and African societies:

Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about sartorial equality.  
How far we are from  
This democratic ideal!  
And how hypocritical! ‘All clothes have equal rights’ –  
this nobody will deny  
and yet some obviously  
are more equal than others (Haq, *Published* 27)

He unites the third world from “the Pacific to Africa” with the “lungi,” known by a number of names, “sarong,” “munda,” “saaram,” “pinon kanga,” “kaiki” and “dhoti etc.” Haq claims that people wearing lungi far outnumber the entire population of Europe and the United States of America. However, “Now try wearing one/ to a White House appointment” (Haq, *Published* 28) and you will not be allowed to enter through its hallowed portal. Then Haq gives a series of advantages a lungi has and ends by hoisting it aloft as a flag identifying himself as a “LUNGI ACTIVIST.” Kaiser Haq’s success lies in his particular ability to use a very simple, inexpensive, but essential subject to explore the inequalities and injustices in the world. In spite of the gravity of the topic, the humour in the treatment of his subject cannot be overlooked or denied: therein lies the appeal of this poem.

A poem like “Ode on the Lungi” can also be a representational site for postcolonial and multicultural interpretation and analysis. The east-west dichotomy is clearly visible here with the confrontation between people wearing “Lungi” from “the Pacific to Africa” and those in Europe and America. The poem also lends itself to a multicultural reading by objectifying the “Lungi” as a cultural artefact representing the least developed world as compared to the most developed nations. However, these readings are more limited than an analysis based on transnationalism. Actually, one of the reasons for the rise of transnationalism after the practices of postcolonialism and multiculturalism is the limitation of content/subject-matter that is imposed by the other two. Regarding this problem, Dagnino refers to Keefer thus:

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<sup>2</sup> This poem was also published in 2.2 (2008) of *Asiatic*.

Confronted with the problematics of multiculturalism resulting in ghettoization with its ethnic, migrant and marginalised literary productions, Keefer suggested to revisit the notion of multiculturalism through a transcultural lens and a transcultural form of writing that can cross the borders of different ethnic and cultural groups. (Dagnino, “Transcultural” 3)

The inherent difficulty in multiculturalism lies in its enforced compartmentalisation of subject matter and emphasis on ethnicity deemed necessary to maintain one’s own cultural identity in a multicultural society. This leads to isolation and communal groupings which hamper communication among the various kinds of people and readers of the world. At present, reading appears to have moved from printed texts to more online versions which make texts available to readers sitting across the proverbial seven seas, connecting people around the world. While diasporic writings explored the sufferings of separation, transnational works do the opposite: they seek to establish connections. Diasporic writing attempts to link the world left behind with the present world. For transnational writers, the movement is forward towards an unspecified space without nostalgia for any world inhabited in the past.

Thus, while transnationalism transports the text out to the world, simultaneously it brings the world into the text and the poet’s world. Multinational business firms around the world are using the term “glocal,” i.e. global + local, to describe these kinds of linkages in production. Figuratively, that is what happens in the works of transnational authors. As Dagnino comments on Bill Ashcroft and his fellow critics, this is “... the literary multipolar and decentered system of transnational, where the local and the global, the national and the transnational, are inextricably intermeshed and engaged with each other through new, though often unequal or disjunctive, configurations and heterogeneous temporalities” (“Transcultural” 6). These scholars reiterate an essential characteristic of transnationalism, i.e. the fusing of the writer’s inner world with the outer world beyond his national territory to produce a new synthesised form of writing. In this creation a metaphorical net/mesh is produced while simultaneously the digital world plays a major role to provide the necessary linkage.

Haq’s poem “A Myth Reworked” (Haq *Published* 55), as the title indicates, illustrates this concept very well. It begins with a father buying a kite for his son with the picture of a man on it, seeing which his son happily cries out “Batman! Batman!” (Haq *Published* 55). In school the little boy listens to the myth of Daedalus and Icarus as a warning by the teacher of the dangers of trying to fly in the sky. The boy goes to fly the kite, falls from the roof and dies. This is quite a sadly common incident in kite-flying tropical countries and is visible all over Bangladesh at certain seasons. However, by bringing in the myth of Icarus from outside the perimeters of the Bangla literary world, Haq adds a new dimension to this common incident in the everyday life of Bangladesh. The fall of Icarus is



always seen as a downfall of over-reaching ambition and by mingling it with the story of an unnamed Bangladeshi boy Haq seamlessly fuses two different worlds together. The Icarus story has been re-worked by quite a few Western poets, e.g. W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams, but Haq has done something very different from them. Both Auden and Williams concentrate on the scene they depict in their poems. Auden uses another example, that of Jesus's birth, as well as Icarus's death, to connect the two points of life and death. Williams fixes his intense gaze on the scene and as an imagist poet, creates a series of images to deliver the drowning of Icarus. Haq's focus is not Icarus, but the little boy who learns about Icarus in school from two unimpressive teachers. The teachers are also described humorously, through the eyes of the young students rather than the poet. The boy who falls to his death here is not Icarus but a little school boy. The boy is received by the "Soft/cold earth" (Haq *Published* 57). Consequently, Icarus and the little boy become one in death. As Haq titles his poem "A Myth Reworked," that is exactly what he does and again unites two worlds.

One of the major themes of transnationalism is war as it leads to displacement, refugees, diasporas, exile as well as cross-border transactions of goods and people. To Bangladeshis, the War of Independence of 1971, fought against an elite West Pakistani army, remains an emblem of bloody sacrifices for the coming-of-age of an entire people: Haq is no exception. His collected poems in *Starting Lines: Poems 1968-1975*, appear to have acquired a seriousness not easily perceived in his early poems as he appears to have matured also. The two poems published here, "Crackdown" (45) and "Bangladesh 71" (45), deal directly with experiences of the War. "Crackdown" is a reaction to the brutal and bloody army attack on Dhaka's sleeping citizens at 12 midnight on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1971, which began the war. It is a poem tightly woven with haunting images of that night which superbly illustrates the adage that one image can portray a thousand words. The dreadful fear, the blood-shed, the bullets, tell of an incident deeply etched into the Bangladeshi psyche: "... the dark waters of the moon. That/ has clotted, growing thick with dull terror" (Haq, *Starting Lines* 45). However, since Haq does not use any name or any specific location or particular characters, this poem's content may be of any war-torn country: Syria, Palestine, Vietnam, Kashmir, Iraq, Somalia and so on. It reaches out to the agony of any nation ravaged by war but it does not connote the classical concepts of "heroism" of the Homeric wars largely due to the imagery.

The poem "Bangladesh 71" is given a specific context through its title and the postscript, "Saidpur Cantonment, 1972" (Haq, *Starting Lines* 49). In an interview with Shamsad Mortuza, Haq clarifies the viewpoint and context of the poem. He explains that it is not written from his own point of view but from an insider's point of view, someone who

stayed inside Bangladesh, lying low, and living in dread while the war went on. He supports the independence movement but has not taken the plunge and joined the Resistance. I tried to empathize with them. They had a sense of guilt because they hadn't actively done anything for the independence movement even though they supported it. Hence the phrase, stare at the guilt in the eyes. (Mortuza 153)

This internal division between those who actively participated in the war and those who suffered inside Bangladesh resulted in significant issues in the political field of the newly born country. During the relatively short history of Bangladesh, political parties have used this division to lump the insiders and those who did not actively participate in the war of independence as disloyal anti-liberation forces. Particularly during elections, this disjuncture is deliberately employed to win votes. This unrepaired fissure is one of the many wounds of Bangladesh and Haq appears to have anticipated the problem immediately. Haq's war poems can be considered more as "political poetry" which examine and comment on the consequences of war rather than glorify war as done in many poems written during and after world war I by Rupert Brooke, Julian Grenfell and others. In an interview with Niaz Zaman, Haq talked about his view that poetry can be of different kinds:

... there can be social satire, there can be political poetry, there can be dramatic monologues, which are not only authentic but can also contribute significantly to the cultural mosaic of this country, the subcontinent, the postcolonial world – the whole world in fact. (Zaman 2)

Hence, according to Haq's own view, the two poems on war mentioned here, can be regarded as part of the discourse of political poems written as reactions to war. Obviously, war is a result of politics all over the world.

Haq has travelled extensively throughout the world and much more than that through his eclectic reading and inevitably, his poetry bears the marks of his journeys. Apart from European and American references he has also used Indian and Buddhist myths and folklore in his poetry. To grasp the entirety of the poet and his work, an idea of Gramsci that Edward Said quotes in his book *Orientalism* appears perfectly applicable. Said quotes the following from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (Said 25)

Gramsci's "traces" are not overt manifestations of influences but minute droplets of experiences and remembrances deposited by the process of history. These can neither be dragged out to analyse critically, nor can they be extracted and thrown away: they remain as essential parts of the self/psyche. The oeuvre of Haq contains "an infinity of traces" (Said 25) that the historical process of his life has left in him. In his interview with Mortuza, Haq discusses one of the world-wide movements of the modern world which builds up these traces significantly, i.e. the phenomenon of migration. He says:

Now, the problem I am concerned with in the poem is the location of the sensibility rather than mere physical domicile. Diaspora literature tends to address a certain range of themes, which I would find limiting. Hence the affirmation of the importance of my roots, I feel rooted here but at the same time I am very cosmopolitan. (Mortuza 152)

In the poem, "Published in the Streets of Dhaka" (*Published* 30-31), Haq's response to the issue of migration is examined from quite a personal viewpoint. The poem written in 1978, begins with a quotation from an article by Gore Vidal, published in the *New Statesman*. It is about Gore Vidal's encounter with E.M. Forster at King's College, London and Vidal's misuse of the word "pretty." Vidal's mistake, as he narrates is laughed at by literary people far and wide "and published in the streets of Dacca [Dhaka]" (Haq, *Published* 30). Haq finds Vidal's disparaging remark about Dhaka unacceptable and argues against it. He asserts that Dhaka is not a wild barbaric place, but a "civilized" place where books are written, published and read. He directly questions Vidal:

What are we to do, Mr. Vidal?  
Stop writing, and if we do, not publish?  
Join an immigration queue, hoping  
To head for the Diaspora dead-end,  
Exhibit in alien multicultural museums? (Haq, *Published* 31)

The poet is quite clearly expressing his dislike and rejection of the diaspora and multiculturalism but he is not averse to disseminating his work all over the world. Mortuza thinks that it is an existential crisis which people of the less developed part of the world confront: to migrate or not to migrate. However, Haq delves deeper into the issue and perceives it from a more artistic point of view, saying: "it is the location of the sensibility" rather than bodily abode, which creates a dilemma in the mind. Pico Iyer also emphasises the conceptual idea of travelling and asserts:

Even the man who never leaves home may feel that home is leaving him, as parents, children, lovers scatter around the map, taking pieces of him wherever they go. (Dagnino, "Global" 133)

Iyer, a transnational writer, is a child of Indian parents who grew up in Oxford and California; at present, Japan is his country of residence. Even to such a writer, the concept of movement, travelling, migration is more significant than the actual physical journey itself. Similarly, Haq has crossed and re-crossed territories and his poetry has transcended the perimeter of his national boundary. Hence, he answers Vidal on his own terms, claiming:

Here I'll stay, plumb in the centre  
Of monsoon-mad Bengal....  
....  
And should all these find their way  
Into my scribbles and into print  
I'll cut a joyous caper right here.  
On the Tropic of Cancer, proud to be  
Published once again in the streets of Dhaka (Haq, *Published* 31)

As mentioned earlier, literature in English written and published far away from the canonical publishing centres in the UK and USA contributes greatly to transnationalism. Haq was commissioned by the Barbican Arts Centre to contribute to a series of poems "to accompany an exhibition of photographs of migrants, refugees and other displaced people taken by the Brazilian economist Sebastiao Salgado" (Haq, *Published* 13). This information is given at the beginning of the poem "Battambang" (*Published* 13), written by Haq on that occasion. The context of the birth of this poem – the Barbican Arts Centre displays photos taken by a Brazilian economist and a Bangladeshi poet is commissioned to write a poem to accompany it – indicates how transnationalism has spread in today's postmodern world. "Battambang" is Haq's reaction to the photographs which to him tell tales of existential choice. Looking at them Haq discovers three worlds: the world of Salgado's refugees, the world of the refugees fleeing to India during the Independence War of 1971 and the world of the madwoman from Indo-China in a novel by Margurite Duras, *The Vice-consul*. In a note, the poet tells us that the madwoman of Duras utters only one word, "Battambang," the name of her native village. To Haq, this word becomes a symbol of "the home all exiles have left behind, as well as the home they seek to create for themselves" (Haq, *Pariah* 13). He begins the poem with an image which contains elements of all the three worlds: "Out of this tangle of text and things and beings/ she springs up like a weed" (*Pariah* 13). The madwoman becomes part of the exodus of refugees on the "Jessore Road towards Calcutta" and at the end, she is transformed into a beggar-woman boiling rice on the road in front of the British Council, Dhaka.

This poem is one of the hallmarks of Haq's poetry and reveals his transnationalism. He brings the outer world into his own and connects it with his world of Dhaka city, and probably Haq is one of the few poets who could create a seamless fusion like this.

Haq does a similar act in his poem "Blooms Day Centenary Poem in Free Verse and Prose," when he joins Dublin and Dhaka as the two cities share the same initial "D":

Suddenly  
I am struck  
by a double-barreled epiphany:  
Dublin is Dhaka is any city  
and Blooms day is today is any day.... (Haq, *Pariah* 17)

He also uses figures from Greek, Arab and Indian legends as well as from Kipling to create a net which holds his poem together.

This is not the only remarkable incident in Haq's poetry writing life. In 2016, the British Council and the South Bank Centre London organised a programme titled "Sonnet Exchange at the Alchemy Festival." "Four poets were asked to write poems in response to a chosen Shakespeare's sonnet to mark the quarter centenary of his death" (Haq, *Published* 26), and were required to present in a programme. He wrote "An English Sonnet = 140 syllables," in response to Shakespeare's *Sonnet 66*. An invitation to this prestigious programme indicates Haq's growing visibility as a Bangladeshi poet in English.

As Zecchini mentioned in her essay, most of the South Asians writing in English suffer criticism at the hands of their countrymen and Haq is no exception. Zecchini writes, "Kaiser Haq acknowledges that he is something of a 'pariah' in his own country and called his last collection *Pariah and Other Poems* (2013)" (Zecchini 5). In fact, Haq has published *Pariah* in a 2<sup>nd</sup> enlarged edition in 2017. The poems of this collection have a more mature and serious tone without the insouciance, humour, and partly mocking tone of his earlier poetry. In "Santahar," the second poem in the book, Haq playfully compares Santahar to Santa Fe, but ends on an emotionally nostalgic note:

Unawares,  
a catch  
in my throat.  
Now I know what Santahar means:  
It's any place you want to go back to  
So you can die in peace. (Haq, *Pariah* 17)

It is as if the world traveller's travels are almost over and he is preparing his return to his final resting place. The poet appears to have become more socially

conscious and quite a few poems are written in immediate response to heinous crimes of hatred, e.g. “Barbecue,” “Kabbadi with Death,” “How Many Buddhas Can They Destroy” and others. The title poem, “Pariah” is one of the most touching poems Haq has ever written. It depicts in a narrative style, the alienation and degradation of not only a childhood hero, but also a rebellious part of the poet’s own self:

... I often think of him  
 as of one who understood the desire for power  
 and the despair of not having it, and though I’ll not  
 take his name, fancying a dread taboo on it,  
 hear again his manic rage and manic laughter  
 as valid commentary on all there was or is or will be. (*Pariah* 55)

He ends the collection with a prose-poem, “Finish Line.” It is a metaphorical rendition of finishing a race where the tape held at the end point is invisible though inevitable. The poet cannot perceive the finishing line but knows very well that he is moving towards it. Among the various poems in *Pariah* are translations of two most sung sufi songs of Lalon Shah: (i) “The Mysterious Neighbour” and (ii) “Strange Bird of Passage.” This reveals another aspect of Haq – his love for the spiritual as well as translation.

Translation is an important way of transmuting one’s own or other’s works to a wider readership in the world. With the availability of easy modes of communication through the net and increasing number of online readers, translation of literary texts is gaining more popularity. It has acquired a greater significance in a transnational world. Haq has done a number of translations and he calls them “labours of love.” In an essay titled “Testament of a Pseudo Translator,” Haq gives an account of how and why he started translating from Bangla to English. Offered by BRAC (world’s number 1 NGO) to translate the poems of Shamsur Rahman, the foremost contemporary poet in Bangla literature, he accepted with pleasurable anticipation. He explains:

If I could transform his Bengali poems into English poems, it would almost be as if I had produced poems of my own. The exercise could also rev up my own poetic creativity. Furthermore, if my use of English had alienated me from my mother tongue, the act of translating from Bengali could be one way of revitalizing my connection with it. (Haq, “Testament of a Pseudo Translator” 35)

These words reveal his consciousness of using English, rather than Bengali, for his creative writing. But a desire to create in Bengali still exists in him and that may partially be fulfilled through translation. He also expresses a hope that going through the process of translation may uncover greater ability for creation. These

lines are also evidence of a transnational poet's dilemma buried deep inside him, regarding his choice of language. Hence, Haq presents a number of reasons for his translation work and shares with others the desire to connect more deeply with the mother-tongue from which he may have been alienated. Zecchino notes that many South Asian poets are translators from a number of vernacular languages into English. The effect suggested by Zecchini is as follows: "By translating and revitalizing vernacular South Asian traditions into English, modern poets exceed the inevitable dialectics of the 'native' vs. the 'alien' or the 'local' versus the 'global'" (Zecchini 11). These poets, wherever they may live, accept it as home, whether "imaginary" or "real" and have no regrets about it. The home-sickness or nostalgia of the diasporic writers does not dominate these poets and hence they are transnational writers more than conforming to any other labels.

The stature of Haq as a translator has risen higher with his publication of *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess*. This is an epic tale of Manasa, the snake goddess in Hindu mythology, who has to struggle very hard to earn her rightful place in the pantheon of the Hindu deities. He writes that he grew up listening to this tale from his mother and remained fascinated by it throughout his life. He had nurtured the idea of translating it for quite a few years. Finally, circumstances cohered to present the opportunity to translate and get it published by the Harvard University Press in 2015. Wendy Doniger, one of the foremost experts on Sanskrit, has enriched the volume by her scholarly introduction. Although the translation is in prose, it contains the hallmarks of Haq's writing: serious and playful, humorous and sarcastic, critical yet empathetic. As Haq said in his essay on translation quoted earlier, the work has turned out to be more of his own creation than a translation. A single sentence can bear witness to the uniqueness of this work: "Delighted to hear this the brothers flew off at supersonic speed and returned with the Gandaki water before one could say 'Jack Robinson'" (*The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* 125). Haq's selection of a tale from Hindu mythology to compose a major literary text in English, indicates his awareness of the need to link the east with a greater part of the world. Ancient Greek epics are regarded as the basis of western literature but many people in the world are unaware of the existence of Indian epics and particularly the *mangalkavyas* of our part of the world, which is the basis of our literature. Hence, Haq's translation of *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* is an endeavour to connect two different worlds at a deeper level. On the other hand, by using a casual conversational tone and phrases such as "Jack Robinson," Haq has provided a sense of currency to an ancient text. It has turned out to be an easily readable and thoroughly enjoyable piece without overt moralisation and cumbersome footnotes and will surely appeal to a wider readership in the literary world.

Kaiser Haq has also translated Tagore, and has edited one volume of South Asian poetry. He has achieved what he dreamt of as a little boy, as he writes in

his “Testament of a Pseudo Translator”: “One day dreamt of living in a small town and producing books that would carry their exciting smell to far corners of the globe” (35). Through his writings Haq has put Bangladesh on the map of the literary world and he is read by people from all corners of the world. One of the ways in which Dhaka has entered the literary world is through the Dhaka Literary Festival. Running into its 8<sup>th</sup> year, the Festival provides a significant platform for a literary and cultural exchange and encourages a wider international readership. In a personal interview with me Haq explains:

A festival like this brings the writers and readers closer.... A lot of book sellers have stalls... books get sold and writers and readers get a chance to interact.  
 (“Kaiser Haq”)

Over the years, the festival has had a number of famous writers, critics, editors and cultural icons participating, such as Ben Okri, V.S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Pankaj Mishra, Tariq Ali, Adonis, Sir David Hare, Richard Beard, Cate Blanchett. The role of festivals like the Hay Festival and Dhaka Literary Festival in the dissemination of literary works is validated by a recent achievement of Haq’s translation works. *The Guardian* has prepared a list of “books to give us hope” during the Hay Festival held in Wales and Haq’s translated volume, *The Wonders of Vilayet: Wonderful Tales about Europe* by Mirza Sheikh Ptesamuddin, is one of the books on the list. A literary award, the DSC prize for South Asian Literature, is given here and it is a wonderful transnational meeting place. Translated works play a major role here and it is not improbable that his own poetry will also soon be translated into other languages. Along with his publications, he has also won various awards at home and abroad.

As mentioned earlier, Jay opines that the future of writings in English lies not in the Eurocentric publications in the UK and the USA but in the thousands of writings being done and published far away from these canonical centers of publications. One of the main reasons for this occurrence is the rise of global readership which in turn owes much to the internet and other technological advancements easily available all over the world. It is perhaps no wonder at all that the Nobel Prize for Literature has been bestowed in 2017 upon Kazuo Ishiguro, a not so familiar figure in the English writing world. Ishiguro was born in Japan but grew up in England in an “English atmosphere.” Writing about him, Rebecca Walkowitz suggests:

... it is as if Ishiguro’s books and those of other major transnational/post-national authors were from the moment of their conception already meant either to be read in English by readers whose native tongue is not English or to be translated into other languages and thus to become part of a wider literary context. (Dagnino, “Transcultural” 7)



Ishiguro's award is a validation of his transnationalism. Thus if Haq's literary journey is mapped, it can be seen as an odyssey from a little known writer to a widely acclaimed poet, through his own writings as well as his translations. Beginning by publishing in a tiny far off country like Bangladesh, he has progressed to the wider world by having his work printed by such canonical publishers as Oxford, Heinemann and, most recently, by the Harvard University Press. Hence, the claim that he is evolving into the first Bangladeshi transnational poet, can be staked resolutely and with strong justification. Furthermore, one can happily wonder as to what more laurels are awaiting this major poet of Bangladesh.

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