

Interview with Niaz Zaman

Jackie Kabir¹
Bangladesh



(Niaz Zaman)

Niaz Zaman, adviser, Department of English, Independent University, Bangladesh, and former Professor of English at the University of Dhaka, has an M.A. in English from the University of Dhaka (1963), a second M.A. in Literature from the American University, Washington D.C. (1983) and a Ph.D. in American Literature from George Washington University, USA (1987). Her doctoral dissertation, “The Confessional Art of Tennessee Williams,” is published by the Dhaka University Press.

Apart from several academic papers published in *Journal of American Studies*, *Dhaka University Studies*, *Chittagong University Studies*, *Harvest*, *Spectrum*, *Chaos*, *Crossings* and *Nazrul Institute Journal* to her credit, she has published widely in folk art in Bangladesh and abroad. Her published works include *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (1981; 3rd revised edition, 2012), the first book on the *nakshikantha*, and *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (1999), which received the National Archives Award as well as the Atwar Hussain Award of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, and is the first book-length study on the subject by a Bangladeshi scholar. She is also the co-author (with Manjulika Chakma) of *Strong Backs, Magic Fingers* (2010), about

¹ **Jackie Kabir** is a writer and translator. She has co-edited a book titled *Lekhoker Kotha* and translated Selina Hossain’s *River of My Blood* (2016). Her first collection of short stories is *Silent Noise* (Dhaka: Pathak Samabesh, 2017). She has published many academic papers in journals and has worked as a contributor to many anthologies. Email: jackie.kabir@gmail.com.

indigenous backstrap weaving. A well-known creative writer, Niaz Zaman has published three novels: *The Crooked Neem Tree* (1982, 2006), *A Different Sita* (2011) and *The Baromashi Tapes* (2011), as well as three collections of short stories – *The Dance and Other Stories* ([1996] for the titular story, she won an *Asiaweek* award), *Didima's Necklace and Other Stories* (2005) and *The Maidens' Club* (2015). She was editor of the *Bangladesh Journal of American Studies*, consulting editor for *Banglapedia* and literary editor of the *New Age*. She has edited several anthologies including *Selected Short Stories from Bangladesh* (1988), *The Escape and Other Stories of 1947* (2000), *1971 and After: Selected Stories* (2001), *Under the Krishnachura: Fifty Years of Bangladeshi Writing* (2003), *Arshilata* (2007) and *Contemporary Short Stories from Bangladesh* (2012). She edited *Unfettered* (2012, 2015), the translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam's epistolary novel *Bandhon Hara*, and also translated several of the letters in the novel. Moreover, she has translated Kazi Nazrul Islam's novel *Mrityukshudha* as *Love and Death in Krishnanagar* (2015) and translated (with Mohammad A. Quayum) his *Kubelika* as *The Revolutionary* (2016). Furthermore, she has co-edited numerous books, among them, *Other Englishes: Essays on Commonwealth Writing* (1991), *Infinite Variety: Women in Society and Literature* (1994), *An English Anthology* (1998, 2003), *Regional American Studies: Conference 1999* (2003; an edited volume of selected conference papers), *Colonial and Post-Colonial Encounters* (1999), *Revisioning English in Bangladesh* (2001), *Galpa: Women Writing in Bangladesh* (2005), *Hemingway: A Centenary Tribute* (2007), *Centennial Essays on Ibsen* (2008), *Fault Lines: Stories of 1971* (2008, 2017), *Caged in Paradise and Other Stories* (2010), *Diasporas and Diversities: Selected Essays* (2016) and *Alice Munro: Nirbachito Galpa* (2017).

She is the founder of Gantha, which serves as a platform for women writers writing both in English and Bangla. She also initiated The Reading Circle, a reading group which has been meeting regularly for twelve years. Niaz Zaman has received many awards for her literary contributions and translations, including the Bangla Academy Award for Translation, the Anannya Sahitya Puruskar and the Lekhika Sangha Award. From 1981 to 1983, Zaman was Educational Attaché at the Bangladesh Embassy in Washington D.C. What follows sheds light on her thoughts and ideas.

You have many different identities: writer, translator, researcher and editor. Which identity do you prefer most?

I am most at ease with my identity as a teacher. I have been teaching since 1962.

How many books have you written so far? Which of them is your favourite?

I am not sure about the numbers. I never count. But my first major book is *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*. It was first published in 1981 before the *kantha* revival. The latest revised edition came out in 2012. My book on partition novels in English, Bangla and Urdu, *A Divided Legacy*, received the Atwar Hossain Award of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in 1999, as well as the National Archives Award.

Where were you born? Could you tell us something about your childhood?

I was born in Delhi. However, as my father had a transferable job, I grew up in many sub-divisional and district towns: Patuakhali, Mymensingh, Barisal, Chittagong and Dinajpur. I was quite a tomboy when I was small. We came to Dhaka in 1949. When I was seven I was sent to Loretto Convent in Darjeeling. Then, for a year I studied at St. Francis Xavier's, Dhaka, but then both my brother and I were home schooled for about the next three years.

Indian and Pakistani writers have already made a place for themselves in world literature; what about Bangladesh? Has Bangladesh made its place too?

For a long time, Bangladeshi writers were unknown internationally. Things are changing. Bangladeshi writers are making a mark in world literature, winning literary awards. Tahmima Anam, Adib Khan, Neamat Imam and now the very remarkable Zia Haider Rahman are a few I can name. The Dhaka Translation Centre, which started a couple of years ago, is translating Bangla books into English and launching them in Dhaka and abroad. These are fine publications and will make our Bangla writers better known internationally.

You received the Bangla Academy Award for Translation in 2016. What inspired you to take up translation?

After my third son was born, I was suffering from postpartum depression. I was also depressed, thinking that my career was going nowhere. By that time, I was too old for any scholarship. Then one day, at the Bangla Academy, I met poet Asad Chowdhury, who suggested that I try my hand at translating fairy tales. That was when I collected a number of stories featuring birds and animals. Some of these were suggested by Mohammad Saidur Rahman, a collector at the Bangla Academy. These were in manuscript form and I had to engage someone to copy them by hand. Before I could start my work, I got a posting as Educational Attaché at the Bangladesh Embassy in Washington D.C. American University was halfway between my residence and the embassy and I started taking evening classes there. I already had an MA, so I needed six credits less to complete a second MA. I also opted for the thesis option, so I didn't have to take two

academic courses. I planned to translate the stories I had with me and write an introduction to it to complete my thesis requirement for the degree. I completed my M.A. at American University and brought my thesis with me when I came back to Dhaka for a holiday. Since most of the stories were from Bangla Academy collection, I thought I should approach them first regarding publication. I met Mr. Shamsuzzaman Khan, who was at that time in charge of publications. He accepted my thesis. *Animal Tales of Bangladesh* (1985) was a very simple book without any illustrations. Later the University Press Limited (UPL) published it with some changes as *Princess Kalabati and Other Tales* (1994), with the addition of colourful pictures. That was the beginning of my journey as a translator.

The other major step was when I took up the task of translating women's stories. In the early nineties, I accompanied my husband to Kolkata. He had not been keeping well and we had gone to a hospital for some medical tests. I went to the canteen to get a cup of tea for him. While I was waiting in line, another customer realised I was not from Kolkata. The first question he asked was where I was from. When I said, "Bangladesh," he was ready with his next question. What was the situation with Taslima Nasrin? At that time, Taslima Nasrin was still in Bangladesh. Firdous Azim and I had co-edited a selection of conference essays and creative pieces read on the occasion of a conference on "Women in Society and Literature," organised by the Department of English, University of Dhaka. Despite the controversy surrounding her, Taslima Nasrin had been invited to give a reading. Subsequently, we had included a number of Taslima Nasrin's poems in the volume that emerged from the conference: *Infinite Variety: Women in Society and Literature* (1994). I could honestly tell the man she was well. But his question upset me. I thought that we had several good writers in Bangladesh, but people were only interested in Taslima Nasrin. Perhaps the man hadn't read anything by her, only knew the controversy about her.

When I returned to Dhaka, I decided that I would publish an anthology of translations of different stories by women writers of Bangladesh. While I was working on this project, I happened to meet Professor Syed Ali Ahsan (1922-2002). I told him about my project. He jokingly asked me if male writers had harmed me in some way. I told him that while they hadn't, male writers were already well known. By contrast, people seldom knew female writers. An anthology of translated stories published by the Bangla Academy, for example, included only one woman writer, Selina Hossain (1947-). However, Ali Ahsan suggested that an anthology containing both male and female writers would also honour male writers. I took his suggestion to heart and included male writers. I had planned to include twelve stories by men and another twelve by women. That didn't happen. There were so many important male writers that I thought had to be included in the book that the ratio was 13:11 – a point commented on by a reviewer. Another remarked that the women's stories lacked substance and wondered why I had included them. I felt that because the men were writing on

“important” subjects and the women on the “small” details of women’s lives, the women’s stories were much more interesting.

In 2012 you were involved in the publication of the translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam’s Badhon Hara. Could you please tell us something about the book?

I am a member of The Reading Circle. We celebrated the ninetieth anniversary of Kazi Nazrul Islam’s famous poem *Bidrohi* in May 2011. Many of the members felt that none of the translations equalled the original poem. Since I had some experience of translating, I explained that translation was always difficult. We could try to translate something by Nazrul as an exercise. Not poetry, but prose. I suggested *Badhon Hara*. This is an epistolary novel, and we could share the letters among ourselves. We completed our work in May 2012. One of our members, Asfa Hossain, happened to meet the CEO of an international bank on a social occasion and mentioned our work. He immediately said that his bank would be interested in publishing it. I was somewhat worried. The material was still very much in a rough shape. It had to be edited. The bank wanted the book ready to be launched in November that year and with a lot of pictures. Moreover, the bank would reserve the rights of distribution for two years. What this meant was that not a single copy of the book would be available to readers who were not clients of the bank. We bargained for extra copies for the members – which they could distribute judiciously. I worked hard to have the book as error free as possible, but, because of the haste with which we had to do the work, some mistakes crept in when the translation, titled *Unfettered*, was published in November 2012. The problem of the pictures was solved by the publisher, Nymphaea. In 2015, Nymphaea brought out a paperback edition of the book with corrections.

Nazrul’s fiction is generally ignored. However, this is an important book. It is based on his own experiences as a soldier in Karachi. The female characters of the novel remind us of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s (1880-1932) female protagonists. The book first came out in 1920 when Nazrul was only twenty-one. It is remarkable that a twenty-one-year-old man could understand the psychology of women so well. Most of the characters in the novel are Muslim but there is a woman who is a Brahmo. After translating *Badhon Hara*, I was inspired to translate *Mrityukshudha* and *Kubelika*. *Mrityukshudha* was translated by me whereas *Kubelika* was together with Mohammad A. Quayum.

What inspired you to form Gantha with female writers from Bangladesh?

I was in Delhi some years ago for a women writers’ conference. We discussed why it was important to have a separate platform for women writers. Women writers, it was stressed, did not get the same privilege as male writers. Someone

mentioned that Nabanita Dev Sen had a group named *Soi*. The word has a number of meanings: “friend,” “endurance,” “signature.” One of the reasons why women writers lag behind in writing is that, unlike their male counterparts, they do not have time for *adda*. They do not have time for peers to critique their writings. It is very important to have a literary gathering or *adda* for writers. Male writers in the fifties would meet regularly at Beauty Boarding, read their writings and get suggestions or critiques from their peers. I felt that women writers too needed a platform where they could meet, exchange views with a younger generation of women writers and mentor them. I also felt that there was a need for a common platform where writers who wrote in Bangla could interact with those who wrote in English. Some writers who write in English don’t read the writings of those who write in Bangla, and vice versa. I wanted to bring these writers on the same platform. I have edited collections of short stories by members of Gantha: Jharna Das Purakayastha, Jharna Rahman, Papree Rahman and Saleha Chowdhury. Young members of Gantha have translated many of the stories. So we have quite a few achievements.

Do you have any publication from Gantha?

Yes, we published a book titled *Ganthagalpa* in 2010. There are twelve stories in the book. Eight of them are original Bangla stories while four are translated from English to Bangla. Apart from one of my stories and Jackie Kabir’s, stories by Shabnam Nadiya and Tulip Chowdhury have also been included. We have published two other books: *Lekhoker Kotha* (2013), which includes interviews of Gantha writers and *Alice Munro: Nirbachita Galpa* (2017), which has ten stories of Alice Munro translated by Gantha members.

What is the main obstacle for a woman writer in Bangladesh?

“There are no obstacles for any woman writer these days.” I am quoting the writer Nasreen Jahan (1966-) who said that in a workshop at the Goethe Institute, Dhaka, some years ago. But then women can’t always write about the things male writers can. People will not say anything about male writers but they will defame a woman. Women writers are, however, highly regarded. Publishers request writers like Selina Hossain and Rizia Rahman for their writing. Women are almost always busy with their household work; they have to steal away time in order to write. Virginia Woolf said a woman needs a room of her own to write. I personally write when there is no one at home.

You are a successful editor too. You have edited quite a number of anthologies of Bangladeshi writings. Is there a difference between English stories from Bangladesh and those from other countries?

Somehow I feel that many Bangladeshi short story writers actually write what we call novellas. A short story is written on one incident. There should be a twist in the story. A Bangladeshi writer often wants to say quite a lot in one short story. However, there are also Bangladeshi writers who understand the need for unity. For example, Jharna Rahman has a story based on a person sitting in a traffic jam. She describes the traffic scene, which also includes a one-legged person. This handicapped person reminds the protagonist of the war of independence. Thus the story tells us about 1971 as well as contemporary times. I think this story is not at all different from the stories written in the West.

Recently young writers have started to experiment with themes and styles. For example, Shahnaz Munni has written a surrealist story in “Gultush,” about a monkey falling in love with a woman. This story may not teach any moral lesson nor does it have any social message, but it is a good story by any standard. We also see surrealism and magic realism in writers like Ahmad Mostofa Kamal.

You have also done a lot of research on the art, crafts and culture of Bangladesh. For example, you have written a book on the embroidered kantha, a number of papers on different folk forms, as well as a novella on the baromashi. What inspired you to do so?

Many of the things that I have done in my life have been inspired by chance incidents. I had a sister-in-law who liked to share stories with me. One day she told me the story about Jasimuddin’s *Nakshi Kanthar Maath*. I had never seen an embroidered quilt till then and assumed that embroidered quilts were fiction. But she told me that if I went to the Dhaka Museum – as it was called in those days – I would see the type of quilt that had inspired Jasimuddin. The museum in those days was still at Nimtali, and very small. There were no quilts on display. My sister-in-law suggested I ask the curator. It was possible that the *kanthas* were kept in storage. So I went again and requested the curator. He obliged me by taking them out for me. When I saw the exquisite pieces of embroidery, I knew I had seen something unique. I wanted to share my experience and started to write about them. I am talking about 1977. At that time *kanthas* were not on display at the foyer of Hotel Sonargaon or for sale in handicraft shops. That happened much later. So my interest in the *kantha* predated public interest. People from Rajshahi or Malda would give *sujnis* – quilts with a red *salu* surface and embroidered with white yarn using the back stitch – and *loborikanthas* – a fairly thick *kantha* using twisted yarn in close running stitches – as part of their daughters’ trousseau. But *kanthas* in which the embroidery was in different forms of the running stitch had been almost forgotten. So when I wrote my book on the *kantha*, it was about a lost form of art. I was out of the country for several years after that. Meanwhile the *kantha* revival took place, with *kanthas* being commissioned for Hotel Sonargaon and people being trained to embroider to

them. *Kanthalas* – as well as a variety of objects for personal or household use based on *kantha* embroidery – are available for sale in the numerous handicraft shops that have come up. Jamalpur today has become a *nakshikantha* town. Subsequently, I also became interested in the *baromashi* and the *patachitra*.

Have you written any work on the Liberation War?

Shortly after I came back after completing my Ph.D., Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury (1936-) and Quazi Nooruzzaman (1925-2011) requested me to translate their book on traitors and collaborators of 1971. Accordingly, I translated *Ghatak Dalalera Ke Kothay* as *Genocide '71: An Account of the Killers and Collaborators* (Muktijuddha Chetana Bikash Kendra, 1988). In 2001, the University Press Limited (UPL) published *1971 and After*, an anthology containing twenty-four stories on 1971 and its aftermath. Apart from choosing the stories and editing the book, I also had a short story in it. Subsequently, in 2004, I attended a conference organised by the Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA) in Delhi. The focus of the conference was to explore the ways in which we could have a peaceful South Asia. Participants were requested to speak on the subject and to submit a story on the theme of peace. I wrote a story titled "A Lucky Escape." It is basically about how a group of Bengalis fled Pakistani soldiers. However, in addition to a woman from Bangladesh – who narrates the story – there is another from Pakistan. Through their conversations at the end of the programme, the woman from Bangladesh realises that the Pakistani officer leading the soldiers had knowingly spared the Bengalis. The woman from Pakistan realises that the woman she has met was one of the group whom her husband had saved. I tried to convey the idea that most Pakistani wives did not know what was happening in 1971.

My most ambitious work on 1971 is the novel *A Different Sita*.

Why did you call it A Different Sita?

I didn't know what I would write when I first started the novel. I remembered in 1971 an Urdu-speaking *kababwala* used to come to our house and deliver *kabab* and *sukbaruti*. He would come only when the curfew was lifted. So the story began with him and how he met a young woman whom he had known when she was small and lived in Old Dhaka. Gradually, the narrative became the woman's narrative, but with the *kababwala* appearing frequently. He sells her *kabab* and *sukbaruti* – which is a welcome addition to their menu – tells her sons stories and anecdotes, helps her when her situation seems desperate.

Later I decided on the name *A Different Sita* rather than *The Kababwala* because the woman is the protagonist. I didn't want to portray her as a victim or a helpless creature. Rama saved Sita but she had to walk on fire to prove her

chastity. Are women just victims? Will they never be able to save themselves? Will it always be men who will save them? I thought about it a lot. Finally, I had her save her husband – though at the end she couldn't save him. She is not a chaste woman for she slept with a general in order to save her husband. She even had an affair with a Pakistani officer. At a book discussion, some people asked me if she enjoyed having sex with the general. In this novel I tried to describe the situation of people like my family who didn't flee to India as refugees. It was very difficult to continue living in Dhaka at that time. I tried to depict how a mother struggled to keep her children alive amidst all the turmoil.

You have edited numerous books, for example, Selected Short Stories from Bangladesh, Contemporary Short Stories of Bangladesh and From the Delta: English Fiction from Bangladesh (2005). You have also edited single author anthologies like The Blue House (2009), Fugitive Colours (2010), and Lilies, Lanterns, Lullabies (2014), by Jharna Das Purakayastha, Selina Hossain and Papree Rahman respectively. Why did you take up this endeavour?

In 2005, I started a small publishing house called writers.ink. Though I had been inspired by Kali for Women, I publish both male and female writers. However, writers.ink gives greater importance to women writers.

Well, you are also a very successful publisher, what was your motivation behind becoming a publisher?

Some years ago I went to Mohiuddin Ahmed of UPL with Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots*. It was out of print at the time. The writer had passed away, and his wife asked Syed Waliullah's cousin in Dhaka to help republish the book. However, Mr. Mohiuddin told me that there was no demand for the book. That's when I decided to have a publishing company of my own. Firdous Azim and I had already published a book named *Bhinno Chokbe* (1997) under the banner of Rachana. We had hoped to start a feminist publishing house together but somehow were too busy. I felt that *Tree Without Roots* was an important book and needed to be republished. I decided then to start my own publishing house for creative books. So I started with a male writer but I have always given more importance to women writers.

What inspired you to publish a book titled Fault Lines? You co-edited the book with a Pakistani writer I believe.

As I told you, I had edited *1971 and After*, an anthology of short stories on 1971. Unfortunately, this book never crossed our border. The first time Pakistanis came across 1971 in fiction was in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*. I was sad thinking

that the work that we do here doesn't reach the literary world outside. I wanted Pakistanis to know about what had happened in 1971. At the same time, I felt that Bengalis should also know that all Pakistanis were not murderers and rapists. I came across Asif Farrukhi's name as a writer and translator on the Internet. So when I got the chance to go to Pakistan, I met him and discussed my proposal to bring out a collection of stories on 1971. In addition to stories from Bangladesh and Pakistan, there is also a story from India and another from the US. Asif suggested the name – *Fault Lines*. We couldn't always agree, so the Introduction contains our separate accounts as well as a combined explanation of why the book is important.

You have been awarded the Anannya Shahitya Puroskar and Bangla Academy Shahitya Puroskar. What is your reaction?

When I got the Anannya Shahitya Puroskar I was surprised but of course I was happy because it showed that the work I had been doing quietly was recognised. I was surprised because the award had usually been given to writers who write in Bengali. It was the first time it was given to someone who writes in English. I was also a bit sad because I always wanted to work from behind the scene rather than being in the limelight. Nevertheless, I appreciate the award. After that Lekhika Sangha, a group of women writers which has been in existence for forty years now, gave me an award for translation. It was after this that the Bangla Academy gave me the Bangla Academy Award for Translation. Though this award had mainly been given to writers who translated from English to Bengali, it had earlier been given to Fakrul Alam (1951-) and Kaiser Haq (1950-) for their translations from Bengali to English. I was perhaps the third or fourth person to get the prize for my English translations. Awards encourage people to work more but they are never the sole inspiration behind any work. Nevertheless, there is always a pleasure in having one's work recognised.

Thank you for your time.

My pleasure.