

## Editing *Asiatic* and the Burden of Carrying Mohammad A. Quayum's Legacy Forward

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### Introduction: An Editor's Journey

In his editorial note "Adios, *Asiatic*: A Journey that was Inspiring and Enriching," my predecessor Mohammad A. Quayum ([1954-] henceforth referred to as MAQ) – whose torch in some way I am bearing here with due humility as Editor-in-Chief – gives an account of his "journey" with *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*. He states:

It was no doubt a challenging, sometimes excruciating, but overall an exhilarating experience. I enjoyed producing every issue of the publication. It became a sort of a *nesba* – habit, inebriation, strong excitement – for me to work on it, often selflessly and single-mindedly. Perhaps one cannot run a journal, and for an extended period, without wholeheartedly immersing in it. (Quayum 1)

I take MAQ's experience of running the journal as a personal note to me from someone who helped elevate *Asiatic* to its present height globally. Without an altruistic motive, it may not be possible for an editor to offer the degree of commitment, devotion and patience that it takes to edit a journal.

Editors often have to put aside their own research, writing, and publishing activities in order "to help fellow academics [most previously unknown] build their capacity to write clear, crisp and comprehensible prose – a skill that we, too, may still struggle to hone" (Green 58). This requires a courage and commitment on their part, which goes beyond one's formal job scope. It entails a sense of moral obligation, selfless effort, and the impulse of voluntarism on the part of the editor to devote time and employ discretion in order to select quality papers from numerous submitted manuscripts and then help render them publishable in their journal.

### Reviewers' Suggestions and Editors' Decisions

After initial screening and during the review process, editors receive expert opinions and suggestions from reviewers who help them reach a decision

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whether or not to accept a manuscript for publication. Describing the crucial role reviewers play in improving the overall merit of manuscripts with their constructive feedback, Gupta observes: “A peer-reviewed journal would not survive without the generous time and insightful comments of the reviewers, whose efforts often go unrecognized” (1).

However, reviewers remain anonymous and their reports for editors, confidential, consultative and non-binding. The onus of making decisions on manuscripts rests with the editor, which makes their position unenviable and susceptible to be misunderstood. My understanding is that a good editor is always careful in selecting materials for their journals and appreciates high-quality manuscripts for their scholarly contents. They usually become ecstatic with joy when they come across submitted manuscripts which are written in proper English, have a good flow and contain untapped and potentially valuable information and knowledge. Providing a valuable glimpse into the minds of editors, Song Gao states: “Editors will always appreciate manuscripts in the right style for their journal’s papers” (520). They love papers which are space-efficient as well as easy to understand and edit. They develop respect and admiration for contributors who adhere to authors’ guidelines and follow the format of their journals.

A good editor rejects a good paper at their own peril and will be considered a veritable loser. An author who receives a rejection note with suggestions for improvement is a gainer, while the one who finds in their inbox a comparable message but without reviewers’ comments can still build on this experience to work harder in the future. In a nutshell, a manuscript itself amounts to a substantial success of the author, and the period between its completion and final publication stores challenges and enriching and edifying experiences to which they need to have the right attitude.

### **The Author-Editor Relationship**

Once a manuscript overcomes the review process and lands on the desk of the editor whose job it is to prune and edit it with a subtle and meticulous hand, the author and the editor participate jointly in the ongoing process of improving it and taking it to the production level. At this stage, the editor somehow embraces the role of a research supervisor and helps the author illuminate their arguments, present them in a persuasive manner, and substantially improve the manuscript before publication. In most cases, gratitude overflows when the author thanks the editor for the helpful comments, suggestions, and editorial assistance they receive. In rare cases, when dealing with unpredictable behaviours, the editor encounters non-cooperative and unamenable authors who are unreceptive to constructive criticism and impervious to change and improvement. Another untoward experience that can potentially upset editors involves dealing with authors who seek to publish only for reasons of career advancement, personal

prestige, or promotion in the career ladder. Such contributors show a lack of commitment to academic integrity and to our shared responsibility to contribute to knowledge generation and knowledge exchange.

Sometimes, the editing of manuscripts involves unselfish dedication to the essentially thankless task of helping fellow academics and researchers improve their work. Most of the authors are grateful and respectful. The gratitude of the right-minded authors and the strong academic bond that they develop with the editor outweigh the isolated instances of toxicity which can still occur and recur. Here lies one reason for satisfaction for the editor.

I am quite sure MAQ had most of these and many other experiences while “initiating and running” the journal “for 14 years” and producing “as many as 26 issues during this period” (Quayum 1). In my role at the Editor-in-Chief of *Asiatic*, I am somehow carrying forward his legacy. Hence, it is perhaps pertinent to mention some personal reflections on and memories of the man whose dedication and diligence had given the journal life, and whose commitment to it had been continually and consistently outstanding for well over a decade.

### **Knowing MAQ**

MAQ was my colleague and mentor at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) for 10 years – from June 2010 to August 2020, to be precise. However, my familiarity with him dates back to my student life at the University of Dhaka (conventionally abbreviated as DU).

My early encounter with MAQ was impersonal. When I began my studies at DU as an English major in mid-1992, MAQ was still there but I did not have any encounter with him, in classrooms or beyond. However, I regarded him as my teacher, following our time-honoured convention of conferring respectability on educators. He left DU in 1993 to join Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore. A good friend of mine, Khorshed Alam Sarker was from the “old first year” and joined us in the “new first year” as an undergrad at the Department of English. He was a direct student of MAQ and told me a lot about the academic and literary critic.

After completing my PhD in the UK, I joined DU's Department of English as Assistant Professor in November 2006. In June 2010, I moved to IIUM's Department of English Language and Literature where MAQ was a professor. I met him at IIUM and considered him a lost treasure I missed at DU and now rediscovered in a foreign land.

Before I left DU, I had a chat with Syed Manzoorul Islam ([SMI] 1951-), then a professor of English at the university, who mildly reprimanded me for my decision to leave my alma mater, as I was going to relinquish the opportunity to teach students of my country. He mentioned MAQ to me and said that the man was a most prolific writer and an “indefatigable scholar.” I learnt a new usage of the term “indefatigable” and received some identifying information about MAQ

who I was going to meet in person and about whom Khorshed had told me before.

MAQ's reputation as a scholar of international standing at IIUM confirmed the impression I had gained from SMI about him. Among the IIUM community, he was well known for his professionalism, tenacious research, and publication prolificacy.

### **My Collaborative Research with MAQ**

I sought to listen to and learn from MAQ. I found him a bit “formal” and not very responsive to requests to engage in collaborative research. I tried to read the man. I realised that he was a virtuoso scholar and colleague with high professional standards – someone who would show interest to work with me at an academic level only if I can prove my worth as a researcher and writer. I redoubled my efforts and multiplied my research activities. Within years, I published in some of the topmost journals in the field of the humanities, and that perhaps helped me gain MAQ's confidence. We undertook some collaborative research projects that led to joint publications. I was proud to have my name next to his on them.

MAQ came across some of my research on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). In some way, that helped develop his interest in her writings, as he states in the acknowledgements note of his book *The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (2013). Rokeya remained the focus of MAQ's research and publication for some time. We undertook a book project on the legendary Bangladeshi feminist scholar, which appeared under the title of *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (2017).

After the successful completion of the Rokeya project, I suggested – and MAQ readily agreed to – bringing out a special issue of *Asiatic* on Bangladeshi writing in English. We produced the special issue titled “Introducing Bangladeshi Writing in English: Emergence to the Present” (*Asiatic*, 12.1, 2018). However, we were encumbered by mainly two limitations arising from the dearth of sufficient scholarly articles and the lack of adequate breadth of topics the contributors covered. We could not include articles on many important Bangladeshi writers in English.

We approached *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* with a special issue proposal on Bangladeshi literature in English.<sup>2</sup> After internal bureaucratic procedures, its editors Janet Wilson and Chris Ringrose gave us the go-ahead. The special issue (58.3) titled “Thrice Born Tradition: Bangladeshi Literature in English” is

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<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps worth mentioning here that the precursor of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* was *World Literature Written in English*. The latter began its journey in 1973 and continued under that name until 2004. MAQ was its co-editor from 1993 to 2000. In 2005, it morphed into *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* as it is today and moved from its original publisher Oxford University Press (Singapore) to Routledge (UK).

scheduled to be published in June 2022. The Call for Papers is currently open and the process to produce the special issue is very much under way.

### **MAQ and *Asiatic***

MAQ founded *Asiatic* in 2007 and remained its Editor-in-Chief until his retirement from IIUM in August 2020. Almost singlehandedly, he took the journal beyond its institutional confines to international repute and ranking among those indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. Professor of English and postcolonial studies at the University of Northampton, Janet Wilson, whom I mentioned before as an editor of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, says about *Asiatic*:

[A] more recent development has been the founding of *Asiatic* in 2007 to fill the gap in avenues for scholarly discussion on Asian Englishes and Asian writings in English. Although the journal's focus is slightly different from mainstream postcolonial or Commonwealth literature journals, it serves a similar purpose by promoting literature and literary discourse by/on Asian and Asian diasporic writers.... Despite being relatively recent, *Asiatic* has made a significant presence by publishing articles by leading scholars and writers of Asian and postcolonial literatures. (145)

Although, in the above statement, Wilson highly admires *Asiatic* as a journal, it is a real tribute to the abilities and devotion of its founder-editor. In my opinion, *Asiatic* will remain one of MAQ's landmark achievements and key legacies.

### **MAQ's Research Tenacity**

Even though MAQ has retired from full-time employment for reasons of health and family, he is at the apogee of his academic and writing career. He is currently Honorary Professor of English at Flinders University and Adjunct Professor at the University of South Australia. He continues to produce critical works and has signed book contracts with publishers, including Routledge and Springer. He has served on advisory editorial boards of journals such as *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (UK), *Transnational Literature* (Australia) and *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* (USA).

MAQ's publications include more than 30 authored, edited, and translated books with publishers as diverse as Bangla Academy, Brill, IIUM Press, Macmillan, Marshall Cavendish, Pearson, Penguin, Peter Lang, Routledge, and Springer. The number of his articles in academic journals and chapters in critical anthologies is now well over a hundred. More are in the works.

His voluminous writings on Malaysian-Singaporean literature makes him a foremost scholar of Southeast Asian literature in English. His extensive writings on Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Kazi Nazrul

Islam (1899-1976), R. K. Narayan (1906-2001) and many others offer him a comparable status in relation to the South Asian literary tradition.

### **MAQ's Love for Knowledge**

If one's large collection of books and other reading materials is a testament to their love for learning, I certify with certainty that MAQ is a dedicated, passionate knowledge seeker. During the initial outbreak of COVID-19, like other countries, Malaysia was taking measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and travel restrictions. MAQ had underlying medical conditions which needed routine and urgent check-ups. He preferred to have medical treatments in Adelaide where he has settled with his wife and their daughter.

He was very worried that imminent travel restrictions would prevent him from leaving Malaysia. Before comprehensive lockdowns and quarantine measures were announced, he managed to leave Kuala Lumpur for Adelaide on 7 March 2020, carrying only his hand luggage and leaving behind most of his belongings that he and his family accumulated during his 24-year stay in Malaysia. I volunteered to clear his rented flat and rummage the contents of his offices at the university. In that role, I discovered roughly a thousand books on subjects ranging from art, literature, philosophy, religion and mythology to anthropology, history and politics of both the east and the west. I was amazed by the eclecticism of his intellectual interest and pursuits, his forays into learning and knowledge production. He has taken different branches of knowledge as his province and writing, as his lifelong pursuit. He often said to me: If we do not produce scholarly works, what is the use of living outside Bangladesh?

As mentioned before, MAQ was my colleague at IIUM for ten years, and it is unlikely that I will enjoy such a close collegiality with him again. If there was an appointment to see him or to meet me at IIUM, there were no delays or forgetting on his part. Once I wanted to borrow a book from him. He said that he would give it to me at the main entrance of IIUM's Human Sciences building at 10 am on a certain day. I went there at 10 am, and found him waiting for me. On another occasion, I needed a document from him. He came to my office and slipped it through my office door. I was inside, which perhaps he did not know, or he preferred not to interrupt my work.

### **Conclusion**

Students of literature mostly focus on creative writers and their lives and works. Literary critics and editors like MAQ who evaluate and promote creative writers and writings rarely receive adequate attention. Literary critics contribute immeasurably to our understanding of various literary traditions by shedding light on contextual aspects that influence writers and their literary productions. They draw attention to various features of literature which may otherwise remain unappreciated, unnoticed, or uninterpreted.

To my knowledge, MAQ's devotion to literary criticism and other scholarly activities is unstinted, unremitting, and unselfserving. His devotion to scholarly activity and professional accuracy and his munificence to fellow researchers and writers manifested in his editorial leadership of *Asiatic*. His prominence as a first-class, celebrated scholar of literature of global stature is a cause of pride, especially for *Asiatic*, for IIUM and his other affiliations, and for his homeland, Bangladesh. The burden of carrying his legacy of *Asiatic* forward is most humbling for me.

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