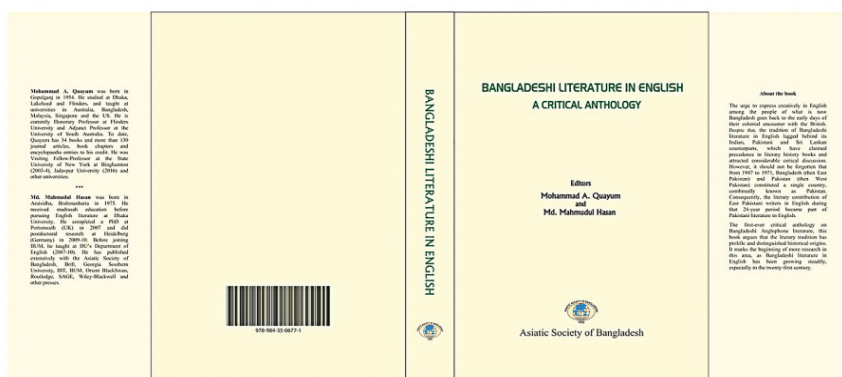


Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan, eds.
Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology. Dhaka:
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English language writers of pre-1947 Bengal have claimed arguably some of the earliest and finest South Asian literary works. However, because of mapping and remapping of the borders, critics often consider the 1971 spatial (not temporal) boundary of Bangladesh as the site of Bangladeshi literature in English (BLE). Since the country emerged primarily as a result of the language movement in 1952, the emergence of Anglophone writers in the nation state was rather late in arriving. Though its popularity in the younger generation is steadily ascending in the last two decades, English has no recognition in the Constitution of Bangladesh. With the influence of English dailies and literary festivals like the Hays Festival, the Dhaka Lit Fest, and others, and many of her citizens living abroad in the diaspora, the situation has started to change at a rapid pace. Basically, BLE can be classified as those writings which are originally written in English as well as those that are self-translated from Bengali to English.

Bangladesh Anglophone writers in the post 1971 era can be divided into two generational categories – in the older generation falls writers like Razia Khan

Amin, Niaz Zaman, Feroz Ahmed-ud-din, and Kaiser Haq who live primarily in Bangladesh itself while the list of the emerging writers is rather large but comprise primarily Bangladeshis living in the diaspora, namely Zia Haider Rahman, Adib Khan, Monica Ali, Tahmima Anam, Fayeza Hasanat, Dilruba Z. Ara, and others.

Apart from the detailed introduction by the editors, the present anthology under review comprises twelve chapters and is divided into three sections with three additional long interviews at the end. Some of the essays, published earlier in journals like *Asiatic* and *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, have been revised for the present volume. The first two essays under the heading of “Pre-independence Pioneer” focus on Begum Rokeya, her Bengali Muslim imagination, and worldview. Md. Mahmudul Hasan in “Rokeya’s Encounter with and Representation of Europe” believes that Rokeya interacted with Europeans living in India and imaginatively journeyed through the continent by means of books and her depiction of Europe and Europeans blend realism with imaginative fantasy and intuitive interpretation. “Gyanphal” in *Motichur II* is an allegorical story that recounts the process of the British colonial conquest of South Asia. Also her use of Marie Corelli’s *The Murder of Delicia* (1896) and her treatment of the Victorian ‘woman question’ functions as a pretext for critiquing patriarchal manipulations and power structures both in England and Bengal. In the second essay, Ayesha Tarannum analyzes *Sultana’s Dream* and points out obvious Islamic imagery – how Sultana’s introduction to Ladyland seems to be influenced by Prophet Muhammad’s teachings about the divine power of dreams, and his journey to heaven which is commonly known as Isra and Miraj. She tries to define Ladyland’s function as a Jannah or Islamic sanctuary and believes that Rokeya was aware of the systematic marginalisation and neglect of her fellow Muslims by both the colonisers and the dominant Hindu community.

The second section comprises of writers from Bangladesh. In “Images of Bangladesh in Niaz Zaman’s Novels,” Sabiha Huq discusses three of her novels – *The Crooked Neem Tree* (1982), *The Baromashi Tapes* (2011), and *A Different Sita* (2011). Though Zaman calls herself “the accidental feminist,” all these novels reveal an essentially Bangladeshi reality and focus on women’s “glorious and extraordinary journeys.” With female protagonists and written from a female perspective, they depict interesting turns in the nation’s history, especially during the turbulent years of the nation’s struggle for independence. *A Different Sita*, for example, depicts a middle class Bengali housewife who becomes the saviour of her husband when she rescues him from the concentration camp at the cost of her chastity. In her detailed interview given to Jackie Kabir, Zaman discusses the life, imagination and creative process of the writer. Zaman’s publishing house Writer’s Ink has been bringing out several anthologies and some of them on the writings of Bangladeshi women. Though she has several roles to play, Zaman prefers her identity as a teacher. She elaborates on how she turned out to be a

publisher and is also sure that Bangladeshi writers are making a mark in world literature, winning literary awards.

Kaiser Haq, the most internationally renowned Bangladeshi poet in the English language, is the subject of Tahmina Ahmed's essay, who calls him a "transnational" poet. Haq's war poems can be considered more as "political poetry," as they examine and comment on the consequences of war rather than glorify it as done in many First World War poems. His remarkable collection *Published in the Streets of Dhaka 1966-2006* has poems influenced by T. S. Eliot and other modernist poets. Also, as a translator he believes that translation helps connect more deeply with his mother tongue. In the interview section, Mohammad A. Quayum engages Haq in discussing his entire creative writing where once again the issues of marginalisation and cultural dislocation become salient. The very title of this interview "A Highbrow 'Hijra'" questions Haq's role of using the trope of an outsider as a 'hijra' or a pariah. Here we find him keen to make English the national second language. He considers satire and social criticism to be the most significant aspects of literature today.

The Escape and Other Stories of 1947 has twelve stories of Muslim Bengalis who migrated from West Bengal to East Bengal. In the essay "Homed, Unhomed and Rehomed in Partition Stories of East Bengal/East Pakistan," Rifat Mahbub and Anika Saba focus on three stories related to cross-border migration, namely Syed Waliullah's "The Tale of a Tulsi Plant," Abu Rushd's "The Bone," and Asraf Siddiqui's "A House with a Pond." Using the term "displacement" instead of "migration," they examine issues like "re-memory" and "post-memory" (to borrow Marianne Hirsch's theory) of Partition. The year 1947 has turned into a collective amnesia that is at best associated with the birth of India and Pakistan. These three stories are some of the earliest works from East Bengal/East Pakistan about Muslims moving eastwards thus proving that history moves beyond the stereotype of linearity and circles our shared past.

The long third section "Writings from the Diaspora" begins with two essays on Adib Khan, the Bangladeshi writer who migrated to Australia in 1973. Khan challenges the orthodoxies of rigid cultural boundaries and hierarchical systems in society by imaginatively redefining histories, landscapes, and identities into forms of cross-cultural dialogue. South Asian writing today, according to Khan, continually flourishes "as a part and parcel of the truly 'Australian' made" experience. In the first essay Stefano Mercanti discusses two of Khan's texts, *Homecoming* (2003) and *Spiral Road* (2007) as illustrations of what he calls "Restorying the Past, Re-imagining the Future." In the second essay Andrew Hock Soon Ng analyses in details Khan's novel *The Storyteller* (2010) about a raconteur dwarf living in the slums of New Delhi and uses a mixture of Western cultural theories of bodies, deformity, and space to read a postcolonial text.

Dilruba Z. Ara at present resides in Sweden but her novel *Blame* (2015) is a heart-wrenching tale of the unsung heroines of the 1971 war. For Ara the

important things are how the Bangladeshi psyche was formed and the role that the Bangladeshi women played during the liberation war. She focuses on the institutional silence of the country on women's issues and believes that the survivors can speak if they are allowed to do so. Sanjib Kr. Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi offer detailed textual analysis of this novel and show how Ara showcases the bitter side of the war, especially through the portrayal of the victimisation of non-Bengali people in an independent Bangladesh.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is the most discussed contemporary Bangladeshi novel in English. Speaking of migration and its effects, Susan Stanford Friedman emphasises intercultural contact zones, travelling, transplanting, and indigenising cultures. According to her, hybridisations and diasporic longings have been central to narratives of colonial and postcolonial modernities since 1945. She relates Ali's text to Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, particularly their gendered and imperial plots into a new place. Analyzing Ali's novel from a different perspective, Md. Mahmudul Hasan touches on the transplantation of South Asian gender norms in the metropolis. The larger South Asian diasporic community in Britain mostly opt for the preservation of their home culture while negotiating with the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the host society and meeting its acculturation requirements. Hasan points out the recurrent motif of "Going Home Syndrome" which is presented as a staple experience of the men in the novel. He concludes by stating that transplanting the South Asian model of domestic seclusion in the diaspora is a futile patriarchal attempt to control women.

Discussing Tahmima Anam's novel *The Good Muslim* (2011), Farzana Akhter talks about the marginalisation of women's role and voice after they participated in the 1971 war. They faced masculine erasure that denied them their rightful place in history. Although in the war women suffered the most, male and female participation in nation-building is regulated by socially constructed ideas of femininity and masculinity. Speaking on the issue of the *biranganas*, the female war victims, Akhter discusses how both Maya and Piya have contributed to the birth of Bangladesh in different ways and again reiterates the fact that women's role in nation-building has been overshadowed by the notion of male heroism.

Anam's texts are also discussed in Fayeza Hasanat's essay where she discusses the homing desire in three writers of the diaspora. Hasanat examines Zia Haider Rahman's interpretation of cognitive burden of home, Tahmima Anam's understanding of the blinded soul, and Monica Ali's portrayal of the radical frictions in the context of what Edward Said calls in *Culture and Imperialism*, an issue of "overlapping territories" and intertwined history of the diasporic consciousness. In all the three texts, she studies the juncture of religion and the politics of diasporic homing desire and examines the impact of such entanglements over the Bangladeshi diaspora. Thus all the three protagonists in

the three novels have a dystopic consciousness: schizophrenic and multi-faceted, as they go on in their quest for identity.

The last entry of this anthology is Elisabetta Marino's detailed interview of the British born writer and artist Sanchita Islam. Born in Manchester to Bangladeshi parents of mixed parentage, Islam is an artist, writer, filmmaker, and a composer. Through her multifaceted art she has forcefully succeeded in exploring the palliative impact art has on the brain, and how art can be regarded as a powerful tool to deal with mental health issues and excavate personal and collective traumas. Though addressing pivotal issues in modern day society, she declares that, being unconventional, she would never fit in with Bangladeshi society or any society for that matter, including Britain. But when she is "in Bangladesh and hear the language, the sounds, experience the visceral onslaught to her senses," she becomes "delirious."

Though the writings of newer and emerging voices in Anglophone Bangladeshi literature could be included (the editors admit that the list of writers included in this volume is incomplete), the anthology definitely is a landmark contribution. The focus is primarily on fiction and poetry while other genres like memoir, autobiography, drama, and non-fiction are missing. Though any anthology cannot claim to be all-inclusive, it would be nice if there were complete essays on Numair A. Chowdhury's *Babu Bangladesh* and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know*, both of which demonstrate how the art of writing a novel has been experimented with to compete with many masters of modern English novels.

For both the editors, Bangladeshi diasporic academics residing outside the nation state of Bangladesh, in Australia and Malaysia respectively, this exercise has helped them return to their roots "in a metaphorical and meaningful way" and surely the distance from homeland adds objectivity to their perspectives. The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh needs to be congratulated for their yeoman service in bringing out this anthology. Published on the 50th year of the establishment of Bangladesh, it affirms the identity of Bangladeshi Anglophone literature standing firmly on its own feet and no longer needing to ride piggy-back on such terminology as South Asian Writing in English, Literature from the Global South, or Indian Writing in English, as it did in earlier times. I am sure further anthologies of this nature will appear in the future.

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