

## “The Creative Journey is all about Conquering New Frontiers”: In Conversation with Kaiser Haq

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Kaiser Haq

### Abstract

In this interview, Bangladeshi Anglophone poet, translator, and critic Kaiser Haq discusses diverse aspects of his writings and concerns. First of all, he talks about his recently published poetry collection, *The New Frontier & Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose*. Then, he dwells upon the charms and challenges of conquering new frontiers during his long poetic journey, his distinguished career as an academician, his role as an essayist and his work as a translator. He gives his

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opinion about the tradition of Bangladeshi Anglophone poetry and sheds light on his stance as a poet-witness and as a social critic. His representation of aberrant figures, debt to Bengal's rich folk heritage, transformation of mundane observations to socio-political musings, and exploration of issues like identity and the environment come to the fore in course of the conversation. He spells out his poetic standpoint on issues like tradition and modernity, love and sex, religion and ethnicity, and diversity and unity. He takes pains to explain how his poetry testifies to Bangladesh's evolution over the years through all the ups and downs. He points out how exposure to other climes and cultures and love for his own country and country people complement each other to create his poetic credo. Later, he elaborates on his attitude to memory and the media. He reveals his perspectives on poetic craftsmanship and stylistic innovation. The interview wraps up with an enduring message from Kaiser Haq the poet for his readers.

### **Keywords**

Bangladeshi Anglophone poetry, Kaiser Haq, *The New Frontiers*, poet-witness, literature and environment

### **Introduction**

Kaiser Haq (1950-) is a Bangladeshi poet, essayist, translator, critic, and academic. He was born on 7 December 1950 at Naya Paltan, Dhaka to Md. Azharul Haq and Hamida Begum. Haq studied at Don's Kindergarten and St. Gregory's High School where he came under the influence of Brother Hobart, who inspired him to write poetry in English. Haq's higher education was temporarily disrupted due to his participation in the Bangladesh War of Independence. In fact, he was, for a time, the second lieutenant in the command of a company in the Liberation Army. He eventually graduated with honours in English in 1972 and completed his masters in English in 1973 from the Department of English, the University of Dhaka. In 1981 he received a PhD as a Commonwealth Scholar from the University of Warwick, England. He has also been a senior Fulbright Scholar and Vilas Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (1986-87) and a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at SOAS, London University (2000-2003). In 2001, he was a writer in residence at the Hawthornden Castle Writers' Retreat and the Ledig House Writers Colony in upstate New York. He was also a Café Poet at the Poetry Café at the Poetry Society, London, in the summer of 2003 and spent three months in the capacity of a prestigious residency at Les Recollets in Paris in 2013. From 1975 to 2016 he taught at the Department of English, the University of Dhaka. He is currently a Modern Poetry and Creative Writing

professor at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh and the director of the Dhaka Translation Centre.

He started writing poetry from his student life, and won an All Pakistan Poetry Competition in January 1971. Haq has published a number of poetry collections, such as: *Starting Lines* (1978), *A Little Ado* (1978), *A Happy Farewell* (1994), *Black Orchid* (1996), *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song and Other Pieces* (2002), *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems 1966-2006* (2007), and *Pariah and Other Poems* (2013). In 2017, Haq brought out the second edition of *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems with New Poems including 'Ode on the Lungi'* which brings together all the poems previously included in *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems 1966-2006* (2007) as well as a sizeable number of more recent and hitherto uncollected poems. The same year also saw the publication of the second edition of *Pariah and Other Poems*. Of late, he has published a new poetry collection *The New Frontier & Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose* (2024).

As a poet, working with traditional, often ingeniously constructed poetic forms, Haq has remarkably extended the territory and scope of Bangladeshi Anglophone poetry with his generous, wry, and emotionally complex treatment of his life and times. During his long poetic career, he has been a poet-witness to the transformation of the Bangladeshi nation and culture. His experiences of the Liberation struggle, observations on the prolonged socio-political upheavals and concern about the diverse ecological crises of the world today have found a critico-creative treatment in his poetic oeuvre.

Haq has also been a prolific translator for over four decades. His works of translation include *Selected Poems of Shamsur Rahman* (1985), *Quartet* (trans. of Tagore's *Chaturanga*, 1993), *The Wonders of Vilayet* (trans. of the first Indian travel book on Europe, 2002), and *The Triumph of Snake Goddess* (a transcreation of Ketakadas Kshemananda's *Manasamangal*, 2015). His edited books include *Contemporary Indian Poetry* (Ohio State University Press, 1990) and *Padma, Meghna, Jamuna: Modern Poetry from Bangladesh* (SAARC Foundation, 2010). Besides, he has written a number of academic articles, miscellaneous essays and monographs. As a translator, Haq prefers transcreation to straightforward translation. As a literary and social critic, he promotes creative innovation and honest rather than conventional deportment. Above all, as a postcolonial writer, Haq writes back to the colonial centre with his unabashed championing of the cultural alterity of the Global South.

The following interview was taken via Google Meet on 8 May 2024.

*At the outset I must congratulate you on the publication of your latest volume 'The New Frontier & Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose. Would you mind telling us about its genesis, please?*

(Laughs!) Thanks a lot. As a matter of fact, the second and enlarged edition of *Pariah and Other Poems* came out in 2017. We have seen a lot of changes thereafter including the Covid-19 pandemic and “some natural sorrow, loss or pain.” Naturally, I have gone on writing poems and prose pieces in response to the timely as well the timeless. So, this volume is an attempt to collect those pieces in which the ULAB Press has been my collaborator.

*As the subtitle of your new volume suggests, it contains “Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose.” In other words, occasional pieces addressing various subjects have been yoked together almost by violence. Would you tell us something about the adhesive principle(s) that produced this new volume?*

I didn't conceive of this volume beforehand. This volume was put together using whatever I have published since my last book of poetry. I have used the phrase “Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose” because it is not exclusively verse. The essay, “How I Discovered the New Frontier” illuminates the occasion and enhances the understanding of the central poem “The New Frontier.” It makes the reader think deeply about all the implications of climate change and climate movements. Besides, the volume ends with an essay, “The Emperor's New Clothes” which is a postcolonial take on the story by Hans Christian Anderson. To be honest, the climate change activists are happy to make their voice heard. Theirs is an egotistic mindset. They take themselves so seriously as if what they say or write would really make a difference. But I am very cynical about this. I have also written protest poems in the past like “How Many Buddhas Can They Destroy” and “Kabbadi with Death.” But then I have realised that any artwork has an autotelic quality and is an end in itself. I have seen people writing protest poems and passing them around saying, “Is not it nice the way I phrased it?” So the focus is on what they have written or painted and not on the problem. When one is faced with a really serious problem like climate change or genocide, it is not possible to pat someone on the back because they have done apparently their bit by writing a few lines or drawing a picture. In such situations, one has to face one's helplessness and try to give expression to that feeling. The central poem “The New Frontier” relates to this major concern of the world today and it gives an unusual view. The other poems related to the ecological degeneration are “Figures of Speech” and “Buriganga Blues.” “Figures of Speech” is about the river that runs through my ancestral village and how it has turned into a smelly

and choked waterway. The fish from that river used to be famous because it was so tasty. Now, no fish can survive in its polluted water.

In the new volume, there are few poems related to the corona crisis like, “2020-nKarV” and “Belated Mirror Stage.” I was unfortunate to catch dengue and wrote a poem entitled “Ka Dinga Pepo” on the dengue epidemic that has become an annual scourge to this part of the world. These issues concern all of us. Apart from that I had not thought of the volume as a monothematic one. I am a poet who proceeds piece by piece and collects them in a volume once an adequate number is reached. The volume, in a way, is an artist’s response to occasions, inspirations, epiphanies, positive and negative emotions, and shocks as well. Though I often write with my tongue in my cheek, an elegiac note runs through the entire volume, bewailing the passing of the old world, and our stock responses to that.

*I have read your long poem “The New Frontier” in which you have dwelt upon some serious environmental issues. Will you tell us how you came to write this poem?*

The poem “The New Frontier” that I sent you earlier, has now appeared in this little collection of poems. It’s the longest poem I have ever written. It’s about climate change and its possible after effects. As I have discussed in the prose piece “How I Discovered the New Frontier,” my poem was prompted by a project undertaken by the University of Swansea and the Dhaka Literary Festival. As part of this project, they had a series of discussions on climate change, and they selected three Welsh and three Bangladeshi writers for a specific purpose. I was one of the Bangladeshi ones.

We met a number of times to discuss the topic, and each of us worked on a literary piece. The fiction writers wrote fiction, the playwrights wrote dramatic pieces, and I wrote this poem. But, it did not come out of the blue because some time previously, I was struck by how global warming was making the frozen parts of the earth available for economic exploitation. I have incorporated, in the poem, the arctic meltdown and the systematic exploitation of that region’s natural resources which the countries of the Global North are undertaking. I had been thinking about this for a few years. I found that people were not much aware of this. Instead, they were talking only of the crisis we faced in the South, for example, the rising oceans and the inundation of low-lying places. But, I realised that this was also giving the countries around the pole an opportunity to exploit the economic resources there, and it’s quite amazing that there are huge oil, gas, and mineral reserves that will all be exploited. So, I think, fossil fuel will be with us for a very long time. (Laughs!)

There will also be more immigration; in Canada, there is a need for “a northern immigration strategy.” So, they will take more immigrants to work on the land in the northern parts of the country that are becoming easily cultivable. It reminded me of the Bengali saying, “karo poush mas karo sarbonash” (Someone’s boon is someone else’s bane). Isn’t it so? (Laughs!) Small islands will be going under water. But, over there, in the “Circumpolar North,” they will be making capital of the arctic ice meltdown. So, all those things and thoughts went into the writing of the poem.

*Your readers would like to know about your long and eventful poetic journey from “being” a teenager to “becoming” a septuagenarian.*

Well, this is the last phase of my poetic journey, and I think one naturally goes downhill just as one nears the end. I started writing at the tender age of 16 or 17 when I was still in secondary school. My poetic journey, as a whole, has been an uneven phenomenon. Why? Because poetry, at least with me, does not come in a steady flow. So, there have been many gaps. At some point, I did declare that I would not write poetry any more. Accordingly, in 1994, I published a collection entitled *Happy Farewell*, which was meant to be adios to my poetry. Isn’t it all about writer’s block and finding that “After all, All art is born of nympholepsy”? But then, a few poems started coming again, and I started collecting them in clusters and publishing in collections again. And even now, months may go by without a poem being written. I think it’s perfectly alright, and one cannot always be a poet. (Laughs!) It’s also a part of a poet’s life to read, think, and write prose, essays, etc. The creative journey is all about conquering new frontiers.

Of course, poetry today sprouts either as lyrics or as short poems. In fact, the long poem has almost become a thing of the past. Well, now I write in spurts; sometimes a nudge helps – usually from an editor who asks for something for a particular issue of a magazine or an anthology.

*As students of English Literature, we must read T. S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” We would like to know from you your take on the tradition of Bangladeshi Anglophone poetry.*

I see Bangladeshi Anglophone writing as being embedded within several circles, such as, the South Asian tradition, the postcolonial tradition, the larger anglophone tradition, and the emerging framework of world literature. When I began writing there was hardly any significant presence of Anglophone Bangladeshi poetry. But I could relate to poets in India, like Nissim Ezekiel and

Dom Moraes, and Pakistani poets like Zulfikar Ghose and Taufiq Rafat. I discovered that the polyglot Anglophone poet, critic and theatre expert Shahid Suhrawardy, who can be claimed by all three countries of the subcontinent, was our first modern poet. I have edited his Collected Poems and I am now working on a full-length critical biography of him.

*Besides being a major South Asian poet in English, you have been a career academic for over five decades now. How has your status as an academic affected your poetry?*

I don't think it has. I believe they are two parallel phenomena. Of course, I must have imbibed something from my academic work which went into the poetry. Still, I think they have parallel paths. Some of the pieces or issues cater to my particular interest.

Regarding academic work, again, I think I am going to stop doing any more of that kind of thing. I was recently asked by someone to contribute an essay to a critical collection he is editing. I said I have decided not to write academic pieces or even do straightforward translations. Instead, I will focus only on my own creative output. I will read – I enjoy my reading – and I will write whatever may come to interest me.

*You have talked about the relationship between poems and essays. Besides, you have written several essays yourself. Now, please tell us if you have ever thought of writing critical essays on the poetic craft in general or your own poetry in particular.*

That, I haven't. My essays are more like personal essays than essays on my own works or the poetic craft. In fact, the form of the informal or the personal essay interests me a lot. There have been memoirs like, "English medium boy: A Post-commonwealth Memoir," and "With the Hamzapur Tigers." There have also been portraits like, "Abba at War: My Father as a Colonial Subject" and "Remembering freedom fighter Lt. Col. Quazi Nooruzzaman, B.U. (declined)." Combinations of memoir and ratiocination have also been there, such as, "Strike A Heroic Pose: A Memoir of Camp Life in the Independence War" and "Dhaka University and Our Literary Culture." Besides there are occasional pieces in the new volume like "The Emperor's New Clothes" and "How I Discovered the 'New Frontier' that shed light on poems and poets."

*Besides writing poetry in English, you have extensively translated from Bengali to English. You have translated mainstream as well as folk poetry. We would like to know how this engagement with other people's work influences your tryst with words?*

That, I'm afraid, has not happened till now. I have mainly translated selected poems of major Bengali poets Shamsur Rahman and Shaheed Quaderi. I have also translated a couple of Lalon Sah's songs ("The Mysterious Neighbour," "Strange Bird of Passage") and Rabindranath Tagore's "Tirthajatri." I have written an essay on Jibananda Das's "Banalata Sen," "The Mona Lisa of Bengali Poetry: 'Banalata Sen'." Jibananda Das happens to be my favourite Bangla poet. I really don't warm to Rabindranath Tagore's poetry too much, but his free verse poetry interests me a lot. In *The Essential Tagore* I translated some of his poems in free verse, which he calls "gadyarite lekha" (written in prose). However, it's not prose poetry, it's actually free verse, and these free verse poems, which Tagore wrote in the very last phase of his life from *Punashcho* onwards, I like very much. The verve and virility of Nazrul Islam's verse have ever appealed to me. So, I have translated "Bidrohi."

I don't think the work of translation directly impacts my writing. But, I feel that the writer I translate, and I work together. I mean, we toil together like fellow workers in the same big factory. They were producing work in Bangla, and I was re-creating something based on their work in English. Besides, there are tonal differences which should be quite obvious. Bengali poetry has a more serious tone, whereas the comic spirit seems more important to me. I like the comic elements in Auden, for example, very much. And I try to generate humour. I enjoy laughter very much. I think it's necessary to make people smile, chuckle and laugh, as 'laughter' has a sort of liberating effect. Mikhail Bakhtin is a notable exponent in this regard, as he has elaborated on the liberating function of comic texts in his *Rabelais and His World*. (Laughs!)

*Starting Lines, your first collection of poems, contains pieces written between 1968 and 1975. Does it represent a desperate poetic effort to hold on to your beleaguered land at a time when the state was threatening your right to your own cultural heritage?*

I think there is more of nature in that collection. The language movement of 1952 was already a part of history. By 1956 Bengali had been made a state language along with "Urdu." So, the language movement had succeeded. In the 60s, there was something else. There was a ludicrous attempt by the military Government of Ayub Khan to remove Rabindranath Tagore from the cultural scene, but it didn't go anywhere. It provoked an unexpected reaction. Cultural organisations became more active, and anthologies were published to show how important it was to study Tagore seriously. The reactions galvanised public opinion and developed a more heightened form of national awareness and consciousness. The



cultural aspect of the national movement that eventually led to the Liberation War emerged at that time because the rulers wanted to interfere with the natural development of culture in this part of Bengal, which is, now, Bangladesh. The political dimension of the struggle centered round a charismatic leader. Bangabandhu (as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is popularly known to his admirers) was imprisoned on a trumped-up charge. Then, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani launched a movement to have Mujib released from jail, and he emerged as a hero.

*You are a persistent observer of the “passing show,” and your poetry attests to what it witnesses. Then, will you say that “witnessing” is your poetic credo?*

Exactly, “to be is to see.” In “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” W.H. Auden says, “poetry makes nothing happen.” Auden said this because of the disturbing realisation that poetry, which is supposed to be a powerful tool for change, cannot perform that role adequately or directly. However, that does not mean that writing poetry is pointless. Poetry outlives the poet, so it has power. It “survives,” and although it does not make anything happen, it places on record what one sees and feels. Then, poets are witnesses. Again, in the poem “Your Excellency” I have said in a comic vein:

that poetry is all balls  
 which,  
 in fact,  
 is literally  
 true.  
 Balls—  
 Testes—  
 meaning in Latin  
 witnesses (47-55).

It’s true of all writers. “The committed writer,” I think, is a thing of the past. I don’t think that role is viable any longer. That role was feasible in the age when we had the socialist movement or when Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre were selling Maoist newspapers in Paris. That is a part of history now. In fact, the writers delude themselves when they think that they can change the world. Marx wrote about the necessity and power of philosophy to change the world. But I don’t think even philosophers can dream of changing the world anymore. (Laughs!)

*Bangladesh has been called a region of multiple frontiers—agrarian, climatic, cultural, and linguistic. We would like to know how, in your capacity as a flaneur poet, you witness and record the breathtaking diversity of people and places of Bangladesh?*

The diversity actually gives unity to Bangladesh. We have a mix and pluralistic culture. I think, if we can make something positive out of this plurality, that will be a big achievement. Yes, there are supremacist groups that denounce this *mélange* as something negative. If a force valorises purity of caste, creed, and ethnicity and exerts power to homogenise or assimilate, people may feel an inferiority complex. But if we can be proud of this mixed identity as something positive, then things will change for the better. For example, the loan words from Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, and Urdu make the “Bangla” used by Bangladeshis so vibrant.

*Don't you think that the recent shift in the poet's attitude has been from political commitment to social commitment?*

Yes. Of course, new forms of activism, like the feminist movement, the ecological movement have come up now. These have become the new areas of social activism. This is why I really enjoyed participating in the climate change project to which I contributed the poem “The New Frontier.” There I realised that activism, in all its different forms, tends to fall into a pattern. So, when people talk about climate change, specific issues must come to the fore, for example, how we can educate the young, make everyone aware, and make governments take note. (Laughs!)

I also realised that there are areas that are not yet discussed adequately; I mean, for instance, the role of the military and the armament industry and war that adversely affect the ecology. Just a few weeks ago, I was delighted to see an article regarding the impact of the military on the climate in *The Madras Courier*. Again, the United States leads the major military powers. The US military is responsible for more carbon emission than 145 of the world's 195 nation-states. Russia, China, India, and other countries with sizable armed forces considerably add to that harmful emission. All the military exercises, including the massive naval exercises, which serve no purpose except showing off one's power, a sort of muscle flexing to intimidate rival powers, have a vast but avoidable impact on the environment. Think how much fuel is consumed by air force exercises for no reason.... We must also consider the terrible effects of wars and bombings on the ecology.

*In your role of a “poet as witness,” you often foreground the sordid and the light aspects of life as you observe it. Please let us know how irony, humour, and satire help you deal with the ugly and the devious.*

I think this is the only way to deal with the world. I agree that making people laugh with humour is one of my major strengths and goals. Nonetheless, some who are imbued with the spirit of seriousness might consider it a weakness. (Laughs!) Jean-Paul Sartre has made fun of this spirit of seriousness. I, too, don't find this spirit very congenial. For me, humour, irony, satire—these things are important. For me as a poet writing in English, these things come naturally since English is not my mother tongue, even though I started learning the language very early in my life. I learned the English and the Bangla alphabets at the same time at home, then studied at Don's Kindergarten, and St. Gregory High School (English medium). Yes, still there are some differences. The English lyric tradition is not something that I was born into. The way I put it is “We are not born to breathe out iambic pentameter by default.” (Laughs!)

Our intonation, I mean, the South Asian intonation or the Bengali intonation, is different. Now, the poetic expression is directly related to that. So my poetry is not lyrical but satirical and more like monologues. That's why satire, humour, and irony may play and do play important roles in my poems. For example, in the poem “East and West: A Plan for World Peace” I make fun of the toilet habits of East and West (“East is Wash / West is Wipe!”), but under the comical garb, I try to satirize the sanitary imperialism of the West.

*Poets and devotees are often represented as madmen. Please tell us how the idea of introducing “Nanga Pagla” or the insane nude in poems like “On a Street,” “Speaking of Kama: On Reading A. K. Ramanujan's Speaking of Siva,” and “Nanga Pagla Addresses the Nation” came to your mind.*

Laughs! Nanga Pagla is quite a fascinating character. I was born in Dhaka in 1950, and I just googled the population statistics of this city and found that the estimated population of Dhaka in 1950 was just 335 thousand. It was a small town by today's standards. Today, it has twenty-one million people. It has surpassed Calcutta and is one of the largest cities in the subcontinent. Even globally, it is a big city, population-wise, much bigger than London. In that small town of Dhaka in the 1950s, the lunatic was a conspicuous figure. These lunatics wandered about the city, and often people gave them food; the institutions for mental health care had not really developed in this part of the world. The character of “nanga pagla” is related both to mental health problems and to the

spiritual tradition, because we have the “Digambar” as well as “Pitambar” Sadhus. Besides, Muslim society has a very specific and quite positive attitude towards the insane, I mean the “fakir-figure” – that is also there.

Just after independence, within the compound of the High Court, there was a “mazar” (tomb/shrine), whereas, outside the gate of the High Court, there was a banyan tree. Initially, there was an open space where people could just hang out. In the 1970s, a group of nanga paglas turned up there. They were bare-bodied. They would sing, dance, and smoke pot. There was a guy called “Noora Pagla” who became quite famous. I have also written an article about him. He was the leader of the group. He used to sit there. As I went to the university, I would pass the group. He would have a knife stuck in his forearm, while his disciples had long thick needles thrust right through their thighs. They did not bleed. They would sing and dance at the same time. The young people were fascinated by them. There was a popular song in those days, and it emerged as a fusion of popular music and folk, “high court er majare koto fokir ghure/ kojon asol fakir” (Near the tomb within the High Court premises so many fakirs roam about/ how many of them are real fakirs?). Eventually the authorities drove the group away because they were allegedly corrupting the youths. (Laughs!)

On a serious note, I may point that “Nanga Pagla” has distanced himself from the world, and his attitude towards the world is critical, even contemptuous.

*The inheritance of Bengal’s remarkable folk heritage often finds expression in your poems. Please tell us about your use and usurpation of this folk heritage in your poetry.*

In this regard, my work is like that of a reteller. One thing that is missing in the picture of World Literature or Global Literature that is emerging is, you know, the global folk tradition or rather folk traditions of the world. When we think of modern literature, we mainly think of modern and contemporary writers, but if we think of our culture, we have a long history of folk literature which is still a living tradition.

As I have already discussed in *The Triumph of Snake Goddess*, I have attempted a creative retelling of the legend of Manasa, the Hindu snake goddess. Even in my poetry collections *The Logopathic Reviewer’s Song* (2002), *Pariah and Other Poems* (2013/2017), I have critico-creatively engaged with Garo, Hajong, and Chakma folk-tales and fables. After I had finished the Manasa legend, a lady friend of mine who is one of the directors of the Dhaka Literature Festival organised a trip, and we went to a village in the Mymensingh district. Every year at the end of Shrabon, they have a Manasa festival, and folk troops go from one bend of the river to another. They stop at each bend, ritually re-enact Behula’s

journey, perform some bits of the “pala,” sing, and dance and then move on to the next bend. There are many folk theatre groups that participate in this annual event. At one time, they had a couple of hundred of these folk theatre troops. Interestingly, the group that was performing for us was made up of Muslims. It reflects an important aspect of our culture in that, folk culture unites the different religious and ethnic communities. So, it is still a living tradition. I think retelling folktales in a modern idiom is at once necessary and challenging. Most people in the urban sphere are not really aware of this tradition. They have a vague awareness. Even those who study Bangla Literature now and specialists in this literary tradition have confessed to me that they have a paper on the folk writings, and they just read them cursorily to pass the paper. (Laughs!) They don’t take folk literature seriously. In other words, they focus mainly on what I call “Post-Plassey Literature.” (Laughs!) But, our cultural roots are entangled with these folk traditions. I would like to do some more work on Sufi texts and “purba banglar gitika.” This is something that interests me, and I want to focus more on it, besides writing my own poetry.

*Please enlighten us about how you transform the most personal and mundane observations into political and poetic musings.*

I don’t think that it is a conscious effort. Well, again, I mean, if the human world around us is important, reflection automatically comes in. The “philosophical aspect” also comes naturally into my personal observations. Can you think of an example I can comment on?

*What, for example, will be your opinion about sartorial poems like “Ode on the Lungi” and “Ode on the Sari”? Don’t you think that though these poems start with commonplace themes, they eventually address serious issues like equality and identity?*

Yes, “Ode on the Lungi” zooms in on issues like “the subaltern speaking.” This is the second longest poem I have written. Of course, in the new volume, there is “Ode on the Sari” as well. However, its tone is a bit different, and it equates the South Asian female identity with the sari as a traditional and ethnic wear. As for the “Ode on the Lungi,” when it was first published in *The Daily Star*, the version was slightly different form. Then, it went through several versions until it reached the present form in *Collected Poems* and I cannot explain how it took shape. The thought of bringing Walt Whitman in just came like that. In fact, I wove the whole poem with the allusions and the parodies of Walt Whitman and Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*. As regards the serious aspect, that too came in a

playful manner. I think it's a bit like what happens when we have an "adda" (informal group conversation) where we crack jokes, talk about everyday matters, and at the same time, serious concerns are woven into the fabric of the conversation. So, you could say it's a very Bengali or a South Asian way of working through a theme where different tonalities, like the serious and the comic, get blended.

*In poems such as "Playing Games" and "Philosophy with Raina," you target political issues and personalities from behind the haze of effete innocence. How far is it a deliberate ploy to avoid controversy?*

Well, I think direct treatment of politics in poetry is not possible or desirable today. So, one has to do it tangentially. I am not making political statements in my poems but making sort of critical asides about life, including politics. In South Asia, particularly in Bengal, people love talking about politics. So, these political themes come naturally into my poems. I notice an interesting change in our social life as the Bangladeshi economy grows. It has been growing at a decent pace in the last two or three decades at the advent of globalisation and the readymade garments industry. I think Bangladeshis today have become homo economicus. So, they are focusing mainly on economic activities. People do not spend as much time chatting about politics as they used to in the past. Quite early in my life, I imbibed that aspect of Bengali culture with endless talk about politics. From childhood, I saw my father and uncle spending the evening with friends discussing politics. They talked about history, political activities, the problems they were facing, the language movement, martial law, etc. For instance, my poem, "Arriving on a Weekend," written just before the Liberation War, ends with reference to "the intermittent therapeutic chatter" (38) among the hookah's smoke shared by gathered people in the evening:

crop-talk, cattle-talk, talk of power,  
of inscrutable disasters,  
of death burgeoning everywhere,  
incubating fast within parched ribs. (39-42)

That was the staple of their conversations, and our drawing room became a sort of forum. After having a football match, boys in the locality with whom we played and fraternised, used to sit down on the field and often talked politics. That tendency to talk about politics is changing so much that in class nowadays, I find that if, I mention the word, "communist movement" or "socialism," students do not understand the political concepts. They do not know the history of these movements. In the younger generation we are teaching now, I find a lack

of interest in history; for the new technologies that are coming up are creating new technocentric societies and a new mindset. The younger generation are focused on the future, and instead of looking for new ideas look out for the new gadgets which are expected to come into the market soon. So, it seems that the historical sense has suffered a decline. Contrarily, for us, the First World War seems to be a living memory. We can easily go back to the First World War poets and understand what sort of events these people had experienced. Today, “history” seems to have started just yesterday for the younger generation.

*In a globalised world, Bangladesh, like India, is finding it tough to maintain the balance between tradition and modernity. How as a poet, would you comment on this crisis?*

In a strange way, the traditions live on in the popular culture. Yes, there have been some modifications. But, modern popular culture also is a vehicle of traditions, interestingly. I think Bollywood, for example, better illustrates Indian aesthetics, I mean, the theories of “bhavas” and “rasas” than modern Indian literature. Bollywood productions incorporate the traditional “bhavas” and “rasas,” however crudely, whereas the modernist and postmodernist writers have to be explained in terms of a global critical idiom. The younger generations, including those in India, have a strange mix of these traditional elements and the modern or ultra-modern aspects of their life which relate to their socio-economic existence. There is a peculiar *mélange*. The real problem is that there is no serious thought on tradition and modernity. Imbibing tradition and keeping up traditional practices is one thing. One can dance the “Bhangra,” and at the same time, one can be an IT specialist working in cities and towns. Nonetheless, serious thinking about tradition and modernity is missing. The lack of critical thought and critical engagement disturbs me. That’s why I keep telling students that the most important thing is to develop the critical faculty. It will be at work in whatever situation one faces, be it the world of technology, culture, entertainment, or whatever. We are becoming more and more consumers than connoisseurs capable of critical thought and judgement. To be brief, discernment is, somehow or the other, lacking. If these questions are left to professional intellectuals only, there will be academic discourse, but it won’t shape our collective life.

*While dealing with the theme of love in poems like “Civil Service Romance,” “Sabara Desert,” “Black Orchid,” and “A Freshman’s Unsent Billet-Doux,” etc., you seem to pay equal attention to physical and social concerns. Would you please explain your poetic attitude to this primal passion?*

Yes, “love” is a universal theme. You cannot write poetry without dealing with the theme of love.

*As a liberation soldier and a professor of English Literature, you have had a long and intimate association with the youth. Is this why love and sex play such vital roles in your poetry?*

In quite a few poems, yes. They contain romantic as well as erotic elements. Well, I remember Shakespeare talking about the lunatic, the lover and the poet in *As You Like It*. (Laughs!) You see, the juxtaposition of the lunatic, the lover, and the poet in our imagination comes back again and again. The poetic imagination, romance and sex – these things cannot be separated. Freud, you know, says that poets write to attract the attention of those of the opposite sex. But, nowadays, it’s also true about same-sex relationships. This is part of LGBTQIA+ activism and day by day, it has been gaining currency with its focus on such key issues as gender roles and sexual roles. Again, issues concerning ‘love’ naturally appeal to me, and it is also a pleasant exercise to write about love, romance, and sex. In fact, as the world is becoming a downright dangerous place in an extraordinary way with the implementation of some strange curbs on freedom of expression, one has to be cautious in talking about subjects related to power. So, one way of avoiding that is to focus on romance, love, and sex, and it allows one to comment indirectly on life as a whole. In fact, ‘love’ as a primal passion, is also a liberating force.

*You spend your life in a country with a Muslim majority and a considerable religious diversity. Please tell us something about the influence of this religious heritage on your poetic consciousness.*

Well, in Bangladesh, the social mosaic has altered over the years. In 1947, I think, 30% (approx.) of the population were Hindus; that has now come down to 9% (approx). When I visited my ancestral village or my mother’s ancestral village in the past, the bond between the different communities was very intimate. However, over the years, we have seen people move and migrate. As a result, the social picture has changed. When we were growing up, the two communities would take part in each other’s festivities. That was more noticeable in the past than today because of the change in the demographic condition. But, as far as the cultural heritage is concerned, the folk tradition continues to appeal to both communities. Sufism, for example, has imbued the Bauls, and a blend of “Sufism” and “Vaishnavism” has naturally taken place in many parts of Bengal.



As we were growing up, it was fortunate that festivals were the most important part of religion.

I visit my mother's ancestral village more than my father's because no one lives there anymore except some of my father's cousins. At Durga Puja, held in my mother's village, I remember we were taken to sweetmeat shops and allowed to indulge ourselves as much as we liked. There was a popular fair, a mela, which was held in the month of "poush," and it was called "Puru pujar mela." I failed to find out the exact nature of the mela; even the Hindu friends I asked could not enlighten me on this. That mela still takes place. It has nothing to do with religion. It is more of a social festival because the puja was performed separately; the Hindu community would go to the puja, but both communities enjoyed the mela, which was free for all. Circuses would come, and Jatras would be performed. So, when you think of religion, there has always been two strands—the first one is the liberal strand which can accommodate everyone, and the other one is the orthodox ones which can create divisions.

I want to share an interesting fact. The Manasa festivities were looked down upon by both orthodox Hindus and orthodox Muslims. But the masses—the ordinary people of both communities—enjoyed the festivities. In fact, religion as such or religious practices don't enter my poetic oeuvre directly. But recently, I have published an essay titled "Alhamdulillah: With relish and gratitude." It is included in an anthology of writings on South Asian Muslim Food Culture, titled *Desi Delicacies: Food Writing from Muslim South Asia* (Picador India, 2020), edited by Claire Chambers. In it, I write in detail about Bangladeshi Muslim food culture and start the essay with my memories of my grandmother's "chehlum," the ritual rounded off with a feast forty days after the death. This is similar to the Hindu "Sraddh"; I also give an account of attending the "Sraddh" in my ancestral village. The special characteristic of Iftar cuisine, what people eat to break the fast in Ramadan, is described, as are the general food habits of Bangladeshi Muslims.

*Would you please explain your treatment of Buddhism and other faiths in many of your poems?*

I have poems titled "Durga Puja," "Eid Mubarak," "How Many Buddhas Can They Destroy," and "Nirvana." I find Buddhist philosophy very interesting, especially Nagarjuna's "Madhyamika" (middle way) and "Shunyabad" (emptiness). At some point, I did some extensive reading in Buddhist philosophy, which is also a part of my mental world.

*In a long and eventful life, you have often written about memory giving equal importance to both 'reconstruction' and 'reinterpretation' of the past. So, we, the readers, would like you to explain the role and significance of memory in your poems. Would you associate experience and memory with the poetic act of witnessing?*

Well, memory is the mother of the muses. (Laughs!) The whole of human culture is an attempt to deal with transience and to create something that may last longer than the creator. Exploring memory is one way of making a memory last. I think it's important to explore the past and excavate memory. In fact, experience lingers in the poetic mind in the form of memory. The poet remains and operates as a witness who reconstructs and reinterprets experiences through memory. For example, we may consider the issue of religion. I went to a Catholic missionary school and experienced certain aspects of Christian religious culture. It's true that we did not have to practice anything related to "Christianity," but it had been there, and I still remember that every classroom had the crucifix. The mention of that "crucifix" comes directly in the poem "Learning Grief." Our school was next to another missionary school. Actually, they were two sister institutions. The other one was a girls' school, and in the compound of the school, there was a large crucifix, and the figure of Jesus on the cross was quite fascinating. The dedication with which the 'Brothers' taught us, again, left a lasting impression. In the poem "Learning Grief," I used a simile when I lost my sister. She died very young at the age of three months. I was grief-stricken. I have the line-

Under the austere miniature

Of the Crucifixion

I went through lessons and exercises,

Sombre as any penitent monk. (34-37)

Poems like "Durga Puja," "Eid Mubarak," "Nirvana," and "Learning Grief" came naturally to me as records of what I had witnessed in life.

*In many of your poems, you extol Bangladesh's national diversity, proclaim South Asia's civilisational unity, and promote sartorial and sanitary equality beyond the so-called East-West binaries. Would you explain what prompted you to write such poems as "Six Shared Seasons," "Ode on the Lungi" and "East and West: A Plan for World Peace," etc.?*

Well, you see, nowadays, I have found that as the subcontinent becomes urbanised more and more, very soon, if not already, the majority of the people will be living in cities and towns in the subcontinent. But when we grew up, there were two worlds. Every school holiday, we would go to the village, and during the war I had to visit different areas of the country. I was in close contact with

young people, and peasant volunteers who were fighting under me. Even though “Muktijuddho” was the people’s war, most of the volunteers came from the peasantry. It was a kind of awakening they had at this critical time. Of course, they were naive in their hopes, and that disturbed me a lot; for I knew that there would be lots of problems after independence. Nation-building is not an easy task. Utopia would not come just like that. But the boys under me were naive in their faith that they would find utopian life after independence, and many were disillusioned afterwards. It took them a long time to adjust to the new situation. Now, they are all old men like me, and most of them have learned to live with the new situation. Eventually, stability came into their lives. Many of them have become prosperous. At least they are stable now.

*In your poems you have dwelt more extensively upon the post-independence disturbances in Bangladesh than upon the gruesome experiences during the Liberation War. Please let us know which experience seems to you more pathetic of the two and why?*

Well, I think I have not been able to process the experiences of fighting into the production of poetry mainly because of the fact that as a company commander, I was thinking about what my boys were going through, what problems they would face. Well, in every war, there are periods of intense and perhaps desperate actions followed by a lull. Even there, in a sense, normal life goes on; people joke and try to be as normal as possible. Let me share with you a strange experience that I had at that time. It happened when I was going to the sector. I fought in Dinajpur and first went to a camp in West Dinajpur near Raiganj. I had to come to Calcutta to link up with some of my friends. Again, I was travelling alone to Raiganj and had to change trains at Malda. I came to Malda from Calcutta and spent a night on the railway platform. Next morning, I took a train to Raiganj. Suddenly I saw a familiar face. He was a year senior to me at Dhaka University, in the Department of English. He was going somewhere. He chatted with me and gave me a piece of advice I still remember. He said to me, “Always drink tea from an earthen cup, and after you drink the tea, just smash it on the ground, and never drink tea from a ceramic cup because it may not be washed properly, and you don’t know how many people have used it. It may have bacterial germs which can infect you.” This is a mildly amusing anecdote, but the advice is very interesting and valuable. After drinking the tea, I lay down on the station platform.

*Though born and brought up in Bangladesh, you have visited such foreign lands as India, Pakistan, Scotland, France, and the USA in different capacities. Please let us know how the poet in you has responded to new climes and new cultures.*

My writing is mainly about this corner of the world. Foreign travel is always enjoyable. But it is difficult to pinpoint its impact on one's creative writing. I mean, it's because whatever one absorbs comes in such an intangible form and a blended mode that it becomes very difficult to pinpoint those things. The overall vision that one has is the result of the exposure one has to the world at large.

*We know that foreign trips have not greatly influenced you. Is it because you have had a sustained exposure to other cultures and literatures as an academic—first as a student, and then as a professor of literature?*

Yes, I would like to accept that. This is because of my education. I grew up reading and discovering English writers. So, it has been like Nirad C. Chaudhuri going to England for the first time, but he knew everything about England. (Laughs!)

*As one of Bangladesh's foremost poets, how have you shouldered the responsibility to welcome and conduct your readers to and through the heritage and history of Bangladesh? Do you think you are doing the same job as the B.A. pass tourist guide proposes to do in the first part of the poem, "Welcome, Tourist Sabe"?*

(Laughs!) Well, in a way, perhaps. The poem introduces a comic character. But underneath the comic veneer, there is a grain of serious truth. You see, when I write, I don't have a foreign audience in mind. Anyone interested in reading literature in English can be my reader, whether in Bangladesh, in India, or elsewhere. In a sense, every poet is a tourist guide not only to the places and sites, but also to the culture at large.

*The world, today, is greatly influenced by the media. But the way you rail at the media in your poems, it seems you are not quite happy with their role in society. Do you think they should disseminate only what they witness, or should they discriminate between verity and propriety?*

Well, we are in a difficult position because we, the writers and teachers of literature, are word people in a visual world, in a visual culture. The media is always selective. There has to be a balance between verity and propriety. Propriety should not prevent them from the dissemination of truth. Similarly, peace and

security may, sometimes, lead to self-censorship in the media. It's a problem that has to be addressed issue by issue because the media has changed our lives in a way we could not anticipate even a few years back. So, we have to learn to deal with these questions almost on a daily basis, and work out feasible solutions.

*You have often been praised for your poetic craftsmanship. As such, it will be quite instructive for us to know your attitude to poetic experimentation and innovation.*

I do try to pay attention to the craft. But, my poetry has, from the very beginning, been mainly based on free forms. In fact, I became a poet through the discovery of the free verse of D. H. Lawrence, because traditional English poetry using rhyme and meter, which I would enjoy reading, was not something I felt like writing. I think I was not born to the 'Iambic Pentameter.' (Laughs!) When Brother Hobart in school discussed D. H. Lawrence's poem "Snake," I realised that poetry could be created using very flexible forms. The important thing is not meter or rhyme but poetic cadence. So, the poetic craft is not the question of the mechanics of poetry alone but the overall shape of poetry. So, I try to focus on the cadence of the lines and the imagery. Imagism, which, I think, laid the foundation for modern poetry, partially influenced my poetry as well. Besides, I have a great interest in the free verse poems of Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams. I try to follow these principles in my poetry.

*As a grand old man of Bangladeshi Literature in English, you have attempted and achieved a lot. So, I would like to close this fascinating conversation by asking you to share with us the enduring message of Kaiser Haq, the poet for his readers.*

Oh dear, you have made an impossible demand because I never think of leaving enduring messages, though I do hope that some of the things I write or say will endure. I see everything as provisional and tentative. We are on earth for a brief spell during which we have to guide our lives in ways that do not violate our sense of decency and ethics. There is no absolute principle of right and wrong or justice and injustice, yet we cannot dismiss these concepts as insubstantial. While we try to live as ethical and politically conscious beings, we must also attach value to the aesthetic dimension. Striking a balance between these is an aim worth having. If we realise that there can never be a perfect balance, that realisation will induce in us a salutary humility. What I have said is commonplace but may be worth reiterating. You will have to let me off now (Laughs!).