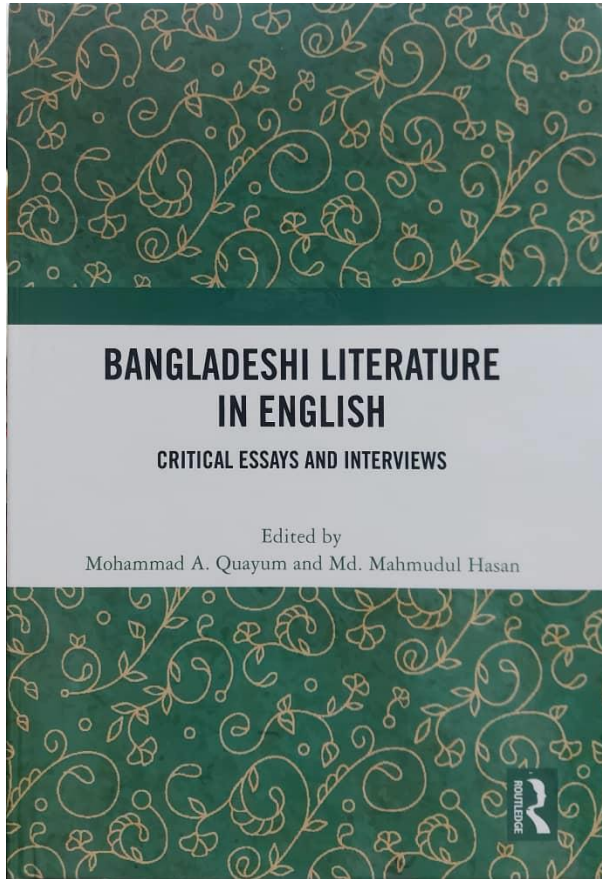


Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan (ed.). 2024. *Bangladeshi Literature in English: Critical Essays and Interviews*. Oxford: Routledge, viii+106 pp. ISBN: 9781032670355



Bangladeshi Literature in English: Critical Essays and Interviews (2024), edited by Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan, recognises a slew of obstacles to the production, reception, and circulation of anglophone literary works by authors of Bangladeshi origin. Earlier, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh published a critical anthology by the editor-duo, calling for consideration of Bangladeshi literature in English. This companion volume, published by Routledge, extends the scope of the previous effort by targeting an international audience. The editors took a safe route by selecting three critically acclaimed diasporic writers of Bangladeshi origin and three first-generation anglophone

writers, including two from the colonial period. The familiar names serve a propaedeutic function while providing a historical context.

The editorial introduction hints at the obstacles faced by anglophone Bangladeshi writers: they struggle for recognition among the more established traditions of anglophone literature in South Asia. It traces the originary moments of creative ventures in English during colonial rule. But as one treads through the shadow lines of shared history and the nascent stage of English writing in the subcontinent, one gets a rather discomfiting feeling that the editors are slightly apologetic for the “diminished and desultory state” (p. 4) of writing in English. Instead of celebrating the vibrancy of the literary scene, which has a new lease of life after the 1990s, the introduction devotes at least half of its efforts to ruminating on the colonial past. One reason could be that the editors, who have been living abroad for a long time, know from their experience of working within an academic milieu that there is not enough critical mass to receive and appreciate Bangladeshi writings in English even after fifty years of existence. There have been intermittent attempts to read individual texts or include them in academic syllabi. But in the absence of a critical mass informed by cross-cultural awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity, the creative outputs of Bangladeshi authors writing in English have not been able to draw the attention they deserve.

The volume therefore acts as a cultural mediator by giving voices both to the critics and the authors. There are five essays engaging with Bangladeshi authors across the spectrum to show their thematic diversity, as well as two interviews to address issues of nationalism, transnationalism, cross-cultural hybridity, creativity and language, and the tug between regional and world literature. The editors observe that in terms of receptivity and production, the list is slowly shifting towards the west, where the majority of prominent Bangladeshi writers in English reside. Even many of the contemporary writers split their time between home and abroad. Kazi Anis, Saad Z. Hossain, and Tahmima Anam are cases in point. The editors argue that

a robust English writing tradition will help bring Bangladesh closer to the world by sharing its history and culture with people of other countries in the global lingua franca, something that cannot be achieved if the national spirit is wholly invested in Bangla. (p. 8)

The editors are confident about the cultural capital with which Bangladeshi writers can “catch up” with their peers from other South Asian literary traditions in English. The selection of the essays is designed to strike a balance between global aspirations and local authenticity. The themes analyzed by the critics in reading the assorted texts, as well as the questions posed by the interviewers,

ensure that they do not harp on any stereotypes with which Bangladesh is typically painted.

The first essay in the volume spotlights a pioneering Muslim woman writer who is known for her genre- and gender-bending oeuvre. The early twentieth-century author Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dreams*, for instance, is science fiction in which gender roles are reversed in a speculative Ladyland. Md. Mahmudul Hasan portrays Hossain as a cultural bricolage with the intellectual sophistication to critically engage with the Victorian 'woman question' and make it relevant for colonial India. Hasan surveys Hossain's literary career to demonstrate her progressive attitude towards the English language, even at the height of the nativist Swadeshi movement. By examining Hossain's appropriation of Marie Corelli's *The Murder of Delicia*, somewhat transcreated in Bangla as *Delicia Hatya*, Hasan highlights the need for cultural engagements for sensitivity and mutual understanding. He quotes a bemused Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, whose first reaction after reading about Delicia was, "How could Marie Corellie come to know the domestic condition of this wretched India?" (p. 18). Presenting Hossain's "openness" and "transnational feminist concerns" (p. 21), Hasan's depiction of Hossain teases the reader out of the stereotypical trap in which Muslim women are often located.

The second essay, once again by Mahmudul Hasan, examines a charismatic author who died before the birth of Bangladesh. Humayun Kabir has been the Minister of Education in India and was known for his activism during his days in Oxford. Evidently, the volume's editors have chosen Humayun Kabir in order to represent the pre-Independence period. Kabir's 1945 novel, *Men and Rivers*, deals with the peasant movement in colonial Bengal. The story of Bangladesh, as an agrarian country in the Himalayan delta, will remain incomplete without any reference to the peasants and their negotiations with the rivers. The irony lies in the fact that it took the ingenuity of the cosmopolitan writer Kabir to depict the rural setting by delving deeply into the social fabric of its villages. The indigenous judiciary system of *panchayat* is under threat from the settlers' corrupt imported system of *dewani* court, while the primitive entrepreneurial setups in village markets (*baat*) and the traditional medicinal practices are at risk of being vitiated by colonial modernity. Hasan uses the postcolonial frame and refers to Fanon who says that "in colonial countries, only the peasantry is revolutionary" (p. 26) and thus relates it to the political movements of its time. The essay serves as a link between colonial Britain and the emergence of a political consciousness that created a need for a separate home for the Muslims, later translated as a nation-state, Bangladesh. One would have thought that Syed Waliullah's *The Ugly Asian*, steeped in Cold War realpolitik and diplomatic

espionage, would have been a better fit to represent the period covered by the essay. Then again, Kabir's novel touches upon some of the essential Bengali ingredients without which Bangladesh would have been underrepresented.

The third essay by Kathryn Hummel locates one of the most celebrated anglophone poets from Bangladesh, Kaiser Haq. Haq, unlike the other contemporary writers discussed in the book, writes from Bangladesh. Hummel is intrigued by Haq's location and challenges the idea of "staying back." Haq has his characteristic wry humor to identify himself as a *hijra* (third gender)—"neither to one category or another" (p. 41). As a modernist scholar, Haq could have compared himself to Paul Klee's *New Angel*, stranded between the clouds of heaven and the dusty debris of the earth. No, he prefers the titillating gender category, which is also his everyday experience, to denote the limbo in which Bangladeshi anglophone writers are positioned. Haq's conscious choice to embrace English as a medium of expression from the location of a country steeped in nationalist fervor for the mother tongue prompts Hummel to address several strands of paradox in Haq's poetry. She acknowledges Haq for his simultaneous acceptance and rejection of postcolonialism. More importantly, Hummel labels Haq as an "anthropoet" (p. 47) who observes his time and space, which transcends political boundaries, and establishes a space where readers can "learn and evolve" (p. 50).

The volume gives equal space to both genders. The thoughtful design is evident in the male-female distribution of the authors selected for the volume. The exception is Kaiser Haq who deservedly enjoys the privilege of being both discussed and interviewed. Hummel's discussion of Haq nicely segues into Tahmima Anam, who won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book in 2008 for her novel *A Golden Age* (2007). The volume includes an essay that scrutinises Anam's 2016 novel, *The Bones of Grace*, the third and final installment of her Bengal trilogy. The shipbreaking industry, which has developed at the expense of cheap labor, humanises the climate crisis that is threatening Bangladesh. Md. Alamgir Hossain examines the novel to highlight the "pollution trade and its asymmetrical power relations" (p. 54) that are responsible for the Anthropocene. Once again, we must give the editors credit for selecting a text that skillfully presents the labour issue in the Global South and the perspective of the Global North on it. The case study will help international readers understand callous polluters as pawns of neoliberal capitalism.

The next essay on Zia Haider spends too much time contextualising the theoretical frame that, ironically, Haider is trying to resist, if not desist from. Nevertheless, the essay touches on the identity crisis that informs present-day mainstream politics. The protagonist of *In the Light of What We Know* engages in a

debate between Bengali and Bangladeshi, which is crucial to understanding secularism and the moderate Muslim (i.e., the good Muslim) image that modern Bangladesh aspires to project. Zafar wears many masks, and he gets so used to them that it is difficult to give him a single national tag. This is a recurring theme in the volume. “Why label a purposefully international writer with a national tag?” is a question that resurfaces in Sadaaf Saaz Omar’s interview with Monica Ali later in the book.

But before that, the other editor of the volume, Mohammad A. Quayum, engages with Kaiser Haq to understand the complex politics of writing in a country with strong nativist sentiments. Haq’s candid responses elaborate on the writerly tension of negotiating their identities and literary expressions within a socio-political context that can be resistant to anglophone narratives. Haq, a poet who stayed back despite an opportunity to migrate to New Zealand following a personal crisis, is a central aspect of the literary experience for many Bangladeshi authors. Haq finds it difficult to be optimistic about the future of Bangladeshi anglophone writers. Haq tells Quayum, “Individual Bangladeshis are still trying to write in English while working in isolation. Nor can one envisage an anglophone literary community evolving here” (p. 83).

Haq draws inspiration from a variety of Western or Indian poets, and he credits his missionary school training for his poetic initiation. While he acknowledges his respect for prominent Bengali poets like Shamsur Rahman (whom he actually translated), he refuses to credit any Bangla writers as his inspiration. Even Tagore, for Haq, is romantic with little relevance to contemporary poetry (p. 86). He remains conscious of his third-world writer status, writing for a worldwide audience, including bilingual readers at home.

The volume ends with arguably the most celebrated Bangladeshi writer abroad, who, ironically, is more comfortable with her British passport. Since the shortlisting of her 2003 debut novel *Brick Lane* for the Booker Prize, Monica Ali has established herself as a pivotal figure in South Asian or postcolonial course. In the author’s introduction, Sadaf Saaz tells us that Ali constantly tries to avoid locational boxes and hates the postcolonial label and offers a different side of the writer. Ali is presented as someone who is more interested in human relationships that transcend geographical boundaries. The discussion pivots around her recent novel, *Love Marriage* (2022).

Ali talks about the “moral dimension” of her novels, which involves finding empathy for others. She gives equal consideration to each of her characters. “The goal is to inhabit those other mindsets. ...One can increase powers of empathy through reading novels, and that cannot come about unless the writer has had that experience herself to produce the work” (90).

The interview stands out as the most significant contribution to the volume, as Monica Ali rejects the binary opposition of either/or and instead chooses to embrace both/and. This interview provides a reality check on the hyphenation of the British Bangladeshi, or Anglicised Monica, and the Muslim surname Ali, which shot *Brick Lane* to fame. Even though it seems that, after trying out different multinational plots, including that of *Lady Diana*, Monica Ali is finally returning to the familiar territory of East London. The title ‘love marriage’ hints at a redundancy that exists only in subcontinental culture; in the west, one marries only out of love. The central character, Yasmin, is not shy about her sexuality or her troubles with class issues in contemporary England. Ali wants her character to revel in their time. As an author, she pursues her “heart, mind, or intellectual curiosity” (p. 97), and she is now happy to become a screenplay writer.

Monica Ali informs Sadaaf that the immediate context for writing *Brick Lane* was the sudden realisation after the death of her grandfather that her children were growing up as British losing the “intergenerational thread.” Ali read a book – *The Power to Choose* (2000) – by Naila Kabeer on migrant workers from Bangladesh, and thought of a way of transporting her mind to the place her characters had come from. The interview provides rare access to the writing process and eschews the fallacy of confining writers to any geographical territory. Ali’s cosmopolitan ventures are not different from the other writers discussed in the volume. The list of authors included in the editorial introduction can be a useful resource for future research.

Leafing through the volume, it appears that Bangladeshi writers writing in English are finally ready to embrace the world. They have the linguistic ability and storytelling craftsmanship to be part of the larger literary landscape. It is just a matter of time for them to catch up with the reputation of their counterparts from the region. Routledge’s *Bangladeshi Literature in English: Critical Essays and Interviews* is a refreshing look at the local landscape and a gift to the world.

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