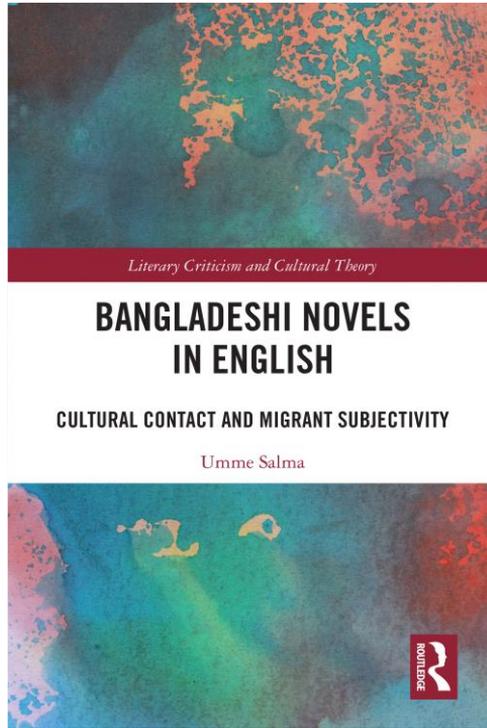


Umme Salma. 2025. *Bangladeshi Novels in English: Cultural Contact and Migrant Subjectivity*. New York: Routledge, 252 pp. ISBN: 978-1-03-275122-1



Umme Salma's *Bangladeshi Novels in English: Cultural Contact and Migrant Subjectivity* is an important scholarly work that addresses migration and diaspora through the lens of eight selected novels written in English by authors of Bangladeshi heritage. The book examines migration, cultural contact, women's agency, and identity formation, focusing on narratives that span the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These texts portray the experiences of Bangladeshi Muslim migrants against the backdrop of their struggles and adaptations in host societies.

Structured into three sections – “Women's Perspectives,” “Men's Perspectives,” and “Children's Perspectives” – the book provides a layered analysis of migration. The narratives explore women's agency in Nashid Kamal's *The Glass Bangles* (2011), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), and Farhana H. Rahman's *The Eye of the Heart* (2016), the fragmented masculinities in Manzu Islam's *Burrow* (2004), and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* (2014). The book also touches on the intergenerational conflicts in Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments*

(1994) and Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace* (2016). Salma challenges reductive portrayals of Bengali Muslim migrants as unsuccessful examples of integration, offering alternative perspectives on their diasporic realities.

The book engages with the connection of migration, gender, and cultural identity, offering subtle perspectives on women's experiences. Nashid Kamal's *The Glass Bangles* uses the metaphor of glass bangles to explore the fears, struggles, and aspirations of women migrants. The bangles represent not only symbolic entrapment but also the potential for transformation, challenging stereotypical portrayals of South Asian women as passive or oppressed. Salma is of the opinion that Kamal's narrative critiques traditional views, presenting a journey of resilience and self-reconfiguration. The author of *Bangladeshi Novels in English* posits Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* as a foundational exploration of diasporic identity. The protagonist Nazneen faces cultural dislocation and experiences personal growth within the confines of a London flat, which becomes a potent metaphor for the restrictive yet transformative space of diaspora. She notes that Ali's depiction of Nazneen's evolution has sparked critical debates. While some commentators view Nazneen as an emblem of neoliberal individualism, Salma emphasises her portrayal as a complex figure who negotiates between tradition and change, embodying the quiet strength of diasporic women.

Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace* adds another dimension in the discussion. Focusing on Zubaida Haque's fragmented identity and struggles with belonging, Salma observes that Anam employs metaphors like amphibians and wasps to discover Zubaida's internal conflicts. By embracing ambivalence and questioning established norms, Zubaida exemplifies the tensions between mobility and rootedness. The author asserts that Anam's portrayal moves beyond conventional narratives, shedding light on the complex realities of modern Bengali womanhood. In her critical exploration of Farhana H. Rahman's *The Eye of the Heart*, the author highlights portrayal of transient migration and the gendered power dynamics faced by professional women in elite political spheres. She discusses how Umberreen, the protagonist, embodies both empowerment and vulnerability while confronting the dual burdens of representing her nation and asserting her individuality.

The book's analysis addresses the thematic links among these narratives, particularly the two shared motifs: displacement and resilience. For instance, the recurrent use of domestic spaces – Nazneen's London flat or Zubaida's shifting homes – symbolises the paradox of confinement and possibility. These spaces serve as arenas for introspection and transformation, promoting the adaptive capacities of women in exploring cultural and emotional dislocations. Furthermore, these novels interrogate the societal constructs of honour and

shame by acknowledging women's efforts to redefine their identities beyond traditional boundaries. By placing these narratives within broader socio-historical contexts, the author shows the universality of their themes; and thus, she makes them relevant to global discussions on migration and gender. The book thus provides an analysis of how these authors use storytelling and symbolism to portray women's migration as a complex, multi-layered process.

The book shifts its focus to explore the diverse experiences of Bangladeshi migrant men, emphasising how their narratives interconnect with themes of race, identity, and resilience. Salma analyses Manzu Islam's *Burrow*, which portrays Tapan Ali's struggles in 1970s London. She observes that Islam's use of the burrow metaphor encapsulates the protagonist's entrapment and eventual transformation. Salma highlights how Manzu Islam's depiction of racial hostility and systemic injustice reflects the historical realities of Paki-bashing by encapsulating an insider's perspective on the positive aspects of Bangladeshi migrants. By dramatising Tapan's psychological evolution, she argues that Islam critiques the dehumanising effects of racism while presenting the agency of marginalised individuals.

Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* is another focal point of the book. She examines how the novel brings in themes of class, race, and transnational mobility through the character of Zafar. Rahman's use of metaphors, such as "bridges" and "gulfs" (p. 154), articulates the fragile connections and divisions in migrant lives. Rahman's narrative structure, combining philosophical reflections with personal stories, deepens its exploration of identity and belonging. The novel critiques the socio-political complexities of diaspora by adding commentary on how global events like 9/11 and invasion of Afghanistan influence individual lives.

As regards Adib Khan's *Spiral Road*, Salma talks about the political dimensions in the lives of Muslim men during the post-9/11 era. Khan's use of metaphors, like the "spiral" road and the "gecko" (p. 172), shows the cyclical nature of displacement and the quest for stability. The portrayal of Masud's journey in the novel reflects the stable emotional and social impacts of migration, engaging themes of religion, gender, and identity. By contrasting first and second-generation experiences, Salma adds, Khan enriches the understanding of migrant subjectivities, presenting a novel view of the challenges faced by Bangladeshi diasporic men.

Additionally, Salma's comparative analysis reveals a critical engagement with the emotional domains of these male protagonists. While Tapan's entrapment reflects the racialised fears of the 1970s, Zafar's philosophical musings expose the psychological burdens of transnational spaces. In contrast,

Masud's narrative illustrates the heightened vulnerability of Muslim men in the post-9/11 era. These varying contexts highlights the evolving nature of racial and cultural prejudice, presenting how Bangladeshi men negotiate their identities in response to shifting socio-political climates. Thus, Adib Khan critiques the reductive binaries of victimhood and heroism and presents migrant men as multifaceted and adaptive human figures. The book contends that Khan's and Rahman's narratives reject simplistic portrayals of migrant stories, presenting instead a diverse range of experiences.

Bangladeshi Novels in English also examines the experiences of second-generation migrants by presenting a detailed account of their struggles with identity and cultural belonging. It discusses Monica Ali's portrayal of Shahana and Bibi in *Brick Lane*, noting how these characters symbolise the tensions between parental expectations and their own lived realities. It highlights the sisters' contrasting responses—Shahana's rebellion and Bibi's acquiescence—as reflective of the deeper challenges faced by second-generation migrants. Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* further incorporates these themes through Nadine, a biracial teenager exploring her identity amidst familial and societal pressures. Perceiving Nadine as an active participant in redefining her sense of self, Salma claims that Khan's narrative captures the intergenerational rigidities that arise from differing perceptions of culture and identity.

What is more, the author observes that Shahana's defiance and Nadine's introspection are not merely reactions to parental expectations but also responses to the cultural dissonances they experience in their host societies. Discussion on characters reveals the dual pressures of assimilation and cultural preservation. Furthermore, she draws attention to the subtle but impactful presence of maternal figures, whose significant roles challenge traditional narratives of parental authority. Placing migrant families as sites of both conflict and reconciliation, these insights extend our understanding of intergenerational dynamics. Contrasting "authoritarian" and "protective" approaches, Salma discusses the portrayals of parental figures and examines their impact on children's agency (p. 212). The author presents second-generation migrants not as passive recipients of cultural heritage but as active agents in moulding their identities.

Despite its strengths, the book has certain limitations. The focus on a small selection of novels, while offering in-depth analysis, does not fully represent the diversity and extensiveness of Bangladeshi diasporic literature. Furthermore, the remarkable reliance on metaphors as central analytical tools occasionally risks overinterpretation, potentially narrowing the scope of textual insights. The book's theoretical focus might also limit its accessibility to a broader audience.

Finally, the lop-sided attention given to certain texts leaves some themes underexplored. A more balanced approach could have enhanced the credibility and fairness of overall analysis.

Bangladeshi Novels in English is a welcome addition to the study of migration and diaspora. By addressing issues of gender, race, class, and cultural contact, Umme Salma offers a valuable examination of Bangladeshi migrant experiences. The book's thematic structure and critical insights make it an essential resource for scholars and students interested in postcolonial literature and migration studies. While the book focuses on eight novels, its acumens reverberate far beyond its chosen corpus. Providing meaningful and valuable perspectives on cultural exchange and identity formation, her analysis invites readers to further reflect on the implications of diasporic encounters. While some thematic aspects of the book have room for further elaboration, it has made remarkable contributions to Bangladeshi anglophone literary studies. I highly recommend this book to anyone having interest in diaspora literature.

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