

A Popular Man of Letters: A Critical Appreciation of Syed Manzoorul Islam (1951-2025)

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Syed Manzoorul Islam (1951-2025) was a widely admired bilingual Bangladeshi writer and academic, whose sudden death has induced many to write copious encomia. This essay begins with a personal introduction to the man and moves on to attempt a critical appreciation of his fiction, which is the aspect of his oeuvre most likely to endure.

A personal introduction

Syed Manzoorul Islam, SMI to many students, friends, and colleagues, earned an enviable reputation as an all-round man of letters in Bangladesh, and came to be admired in the larger Bangla-speaking world as well. He came from Sylhet, his home district, and was academically a year senior to me at the English department of Dhaka University. As often happens in such cases, we moved in different circles, and it was only when we became fellow academics that we got to know each other better. When I discovered that he was only a couple of days older than me, I started calling him by the Bangla phrase *Dui din-er dada* (“elder by two days”) – to the amusement of our growing coterie, which included my classmate Fakrul Alam. The three of us – Manzoor, Fakrul, and I – were identified by some as a trio. But, as writer-translator Professor Niaz Zaman, our sometime teacher, senior colleague, and mentor, told me recently, we were each of us quite distinctive and yet the three of us were good friends.

Apart from enjoying addas (the casual and meandering conversations that form the distinctive core of Bengali social and cultural life), we had shared literary interests, and in time Mr. Abul Khair Litu, better known to us as Litu Bhai, roped us in to help out with several publishing ventures launched by the Bengal Foundation, ranging from the popular to the highbrow. At one end were

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the somewhat glitzy English language monthly, *ICE Today*, named by Litu Bhai, and the Bangla monthly *Charbela Chardik* (“Round the Clock in All Directions”), named by Manzoor. At the highbrow end were *Jamini*, a sumptuously produced art journal in English, and later the literary journals *Kali O Kalam* (Pen and Ink) in Bangla and *Six Seasons Review*, in English. Overall, Manzoor was a key figure in all these ventures. He oversaw *Charbela Chardik* and, after the sad demise of Professor Anisuzzaman, edited *Kali O Kalam*, besides being on the editorial boards of the other periodicals as well. Apart from his commitments to the Bengal Foundation family, Manzoor was on several Civil Society committees, and on the editorial board of *Anyadin*, the magazine brought out by his publisher, Mazharul Islam of Anyaprakash. I’m afraid it’ll prove to be well-nigh impossible to find his replacement.

Manzoor’s literary career spanned more than half a century, his books add up to eighteen or so titles, and he won nearly all the literary and civic awards Bangladesh has to offer. Few are aware that his first literary publication was a clutch of poems. He told me that he realised that he couldn’t go very far as a poet, and decided to switch to prose. Quite early on he decided to carve out a niche for himself as an art critic, publishing reviews, essays and profiles in newspapers, exhibition catalogues, and anthologies, in both Bangla and English. It so happens that his last serious art-related essay is in the projected *Routledge Handbook of Bangladeshi Literary Culture* which I am co-editing with Professor Shamsad Mortuza.

These activities, as art critic and literary editor, are relatively specialised ones. Manzoor became a well-known public intellectual, a pundit, thanks to his op-eds, columns, and TV and other media appearances. I must confess I didn’t follow this aspect of his career at all. But from hearsay I was fully aware of his impact on readers and viewers. His Bengali column, *Alash Din-er Hawa* (Breeze on a Lazy Day), I’m told, covered literary matters and had an educative influence on a generation of young readers.

Those who belong to Gen Z and Gen A will have to exercise their imagination to figure out what literary cultural life was like before the age of the Internet and smartphones. We’d hear the name of the year’s literature Nobel laureate on TV news, and the literary editors of our newspapers would ask around for a write-up on the laureate’s life and work. If it happened to be someone hitherto unknown there would be a frantic search for their books and background material so that a passable article could be cobbled together. If I’m not mistaken Manzoor produced some readable pieces of this sort. Then there were social issues to pontificate on. These too came under the purview of Manzoor’s

commentary gaze. Readers admired his balanced views, which he sometimes aired on TV talk shows as well.

But it is as a fiction writer that Manzoor is likely to be remembered by future generations. I believe he was primarily a short story writer, though he did stretch himself into the novel form several times, and not without success. I witnessed the birth of Manzoor the fiction writer at first hand. As young lecturers we had a heavy load of exam invigilation duty assigned to us. Between rounds of the exam hall Manzoor would sit down and scribble a paragraph or a few lines. He was writing a story. He'd explain with disarming frankness that he had come across a piquant piece of news or witnessed a peculiar incident. He was now weaving a short story around it. It was a novel approach to fiction writing, and he would later extend the method to produce novels as well.

The most fruitful literary influence on Manzoor's work was no doubt that of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He was so taken with the Colombian master that he even went through the Spanish language course offered by the Institute of Modern Languages at Dhaka University. Another name that must be mentioned is the American post-modernist Kurt Vonnegut. Eventually, Manzoor became a proponent of Latin American magic realism and American postmodernism, and enjoyed teaching courses in postmodern theory and literature.

This was something of a bone of contention between us. Manzoor would at times lean towards the extreme postmodernist mantra "anything goes." My own view is that such a philosophy would, so to speak, pull the ontological rug from under our feet. I enjoyed Vonnegut's fiction as much as Manzoor, but I pointed out that postmodernism was merely a literary strategy with Vonnegut and that underlying his fiction was a moralist's vision.

Now that Manzoor has departed this vale of tears I will miss engaging in that argument with him. His students will miss his generous tutelage. His readers will miss the appearance of new works from his pen. All his friends and colleagues will miss his good-humoured jests. His death from a massive heart attack was a bolt from the blue. The initially positive prognosis after stenting was followed by a shockingly rapid decline. We watched the decline in disbelief.

Fortunately, his wife, Sanjeeda, who had gone on a visit to Boston, could come back with their son, an attorney in that city, just in time to exchange a few last words. I thought it was a small mercy, and would help them achieve a solacing closure. But Sanjeeda, who had been my classmate at Dhaka University, said, using the jocular form of address we habitually used with each other, "Dostoh, closure is just a convenient word; in reality there is no closure." It was heartbreaking. Now, one can only repeat the formulaic prayer: May his soul rest in peace.

Manzoorul Islam's fiction

My task is simplified somewhat by the fact that two books of Manzoor's fiction – originally in Bangla – are available in quite readable English translations. Since this essay is aimed primarily at an international Anglophone readership, I will restrict my commentary and analyses to these volumes. The first, *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories* (Dhaka: Daily Star Books, 2013), contains the author's own translations of seventeen of his short stories. One of these is "Daedalus's Kite," which is also the title story of a selection of thirteen of the stories, published in 2018 by Rubric Publishing, Noida, but is now out of print and need not concern us further. The other book is the novel *Absurd Night* (Dhaka: Bengal Lights Books/ ULAB Press: Library of Bangladesh Series, 2019), translated by Pushpita Alam from the Bangla *Ajgubi Raat*. Another translation that deserves mention is by Arunava Sinha: "The Weapon," first published in the anthology *The Book of Dhaka: a City in Short Fiction* (Dhaka: Bengal Lights Books/ ULAB Press, 2016), edited by Pushpita Alam and Arunava Sinha, and subsequently included in *The Penguin Book of Bengali Short Stories* (Delhi: Penguin, 2024), edited by Arunava Sinha.

I have already indicated Manzoor's distinctive method of generating fictional narratives. It was very different from the usual practice of fiction writers who immerse themselves every day in their study at set times for a certain duration. Manzoor's friends and colleagues were on the whole charmed and impressed by his work habits, seeing it as a special ability, rather like his ability to take cat naps even in the most uncongenial circumstances – in a rattling auto-rickshaw, for instance. But I couldn't help feeling that the method carried with it an inherent risk, the risk of ending up with a shaggy dog story.

And indeed, when I got round to reading Manzoor, I felt that he had in fact become a producer of shaggy dog tales. His narratives meander, repeat formulaic motifs, go into digressions, and seem to rise towards a climax, only to settle ultimately for a rather flat ending. However, the usual reaction of sophisticated readers to turn their noses up at shaggy dog tales would be inappropriate. Manzoor has cleverly blended the shaggy dog tale with postmodernism and magic realism, and exercises enough control on the narrative flow to produce stories and novels that readers find engaging. Unpleasant and disturbing aspects of Bangladeshi life, such as corruption at all levels, underworld violence, tension in familial relationships (between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, for instance), mistreatment of domestic helpers, misuse of power, are presented in a deadpan style that captures the endemic cynicism in the country. These aspects provide the harsh realism that counterpoints the magical elements,

e.g. the juxtaposition of two historical periods, the colonial and the postcolonial, with the same narrator present in both, in the story “The Silk Handkerchief”; or the merman in the title story.

The magic realism in Manzoor and other Bangladeshi writers, one notes with satisfaction, has been noticed by the global critical industry. *The Oxford Handbook of Gabriel Garcia Marquez*, edited by Gene H. Bell-Villada and Ignacio Lopez-Calvo, contains a chapter by Sonia Surabhi Gupta and Shad Naved titled “South Asian Readings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.” In the section of the chapter titled “The Creative and Literary Reception of Garcia Marquez’s Works in South Asia,” the authors bring Syed Waliullah, Syed Shamsul Huq, and Akhteruzzaman Elias within the magic realist fold, before noting:

In Bangladesh newer writers such as Syed Manzoorul Islam (1951-[2025]), Shaheedul Zahir (1953-2008), and Nasreen Jahan (1966-) are deeply influenced by Garcia Marquez’s works. For example, in his preface to Jahan’s debut novel, *The Woman Who Flew* (2012; original title in Bengali, *Urukko*, published in 1993), translator Kaiser Haq mentions how the author lists Garcia Marquez, whom she read in Bengali translation, as one of her admired writers (ix). (270)

It is worth noting that the chapter reserves the most substantive critical comments on a Bangladeshi writer for Manzoor’s stories. They cite *Daedalus’s Kite* (2018), which contains thirteen of the seventeen stories that make up *The Merman’s Prayer and Other Stories*. They locate Manzoor as a bilingual writer and professor of English who “uses elements of a Garcia-Marquez-like universe to present stories from the groundswell of life in postcolonial and post-independence Bangladesh” (270). Their summing up of the significance of Manzoor’s stories anchors them in a larger ideological context that the Bangladeshi reader may not be immediately aware of:

Manzoorul Islam shows the micro-voices of modern life in moments of tender connection with each other and violent confrontation with the larger forces of capitalism, state oppression, and national myths. His storytelling eschews a straightforward realism for moments of banal wonder.... These moments are not always exuberant or comical, and they often turn toward the wretchedly tragic, confronting us with the harsh realities of the disenfranchised people of the Third World. Manzoorul Islam’s fictional universe teems with events and characters that do not follow the logic of bourgeois-nationalist realism: character development, seamless narration, and conclusive endings. (270-271)

In their final wrapping-up, though, the authors commit a lamentable gaffe. “The narrator is distant from the happenings yet seem to belong to the world he is

narrating,” they comment, and then leap to an erroneous conclusion: “This neatly encapsulates the self-consciousness of an English-language writer of non-English realities in Bangladesh and South Asia at large” (271). By a strange oversight they have missed the fact that the stories are originally in Bengali and have been translated by the author, which puts him in the same category of bilingual writers as Samuel Beckett and Jhumpa Lahiri rather than in that of the South Asian Anglophone writer.

Manzoor can also be seen through another lens, that of precarity. In *Representations of Precarity in South Asian Literature in English*, edited by Om Prakash Dwivedi, I have a chapter titled “Precarious Cultures: Bangladeshi Novels in English and in English Translation,” which comments on Manzoor’s novel *Absurd Night* alongside a large number of other works. The novel is a dark comedy that brings together a diverse set of characters on an apocalyptic night in coastal Bangladesh as a cyclone is posed to make landfall. A jealous husband chops off his beautiful wife’s hand, which drifts down the river and is discovered in pristine condition. The lives of ordinary folk intersect with the lives of the powerful, from a state minister to the local police chief; the glamorous world of film and TV, with a bevy of neurotic personalities. The collective psyche of the entire society is characterised by “sexual repression and erethism” (292). This is in my view Manzoor’s most ambitious novelistic portrayal of the dystopian realities of his country.

To sum up, I am sure literary critics will characterise Manzoor as Bangladesh’s most committed magic realist and postmodernist, and even when these trends recede into history readers will find something to enjoy in his works.

Works Cited

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