

In Memoriam: Syed Manzoorul Islam (17 January 1951 – 10 October 2025)

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The last time I met Manzoor *Bhai* (we were really close friends but I always used this honorific in addressing him), we spent over three and a half hours together in a Dhaka Club *adda*. It was on 1 October 2025. Among other things, we talked about our uneasiness about the way things were shaping out in our part of the world. He was also worried about the fate of *Kali O Kolom* and felt he would not be able to carry on as the Chair of the Editorial Board of this high-quality Bangla literary magazine, and discharge his responsibilities for it for long, because of uncertainty about its funding. He was also quite unhappy at the way things were in the Dhaka University campus which had been somewhat unsettled for well over a year now. After all, Manzoor Bhai and I had completed 50 years of teaching in the Department of English here; both of us loved being part of it and kept feeling it was still part of us. How could he or I, or other like-minded colleagues, teach freely and enjoy the kind of academic freedom there that we all treasured, given the stance taken by a few students of the department about some of us? These students seemed all too eager to tarnish reputations and break free of all existing campus rules of decorum and regulatory conventions.

In fact, Manzoor Bhai had all but stopped writing for well over a year now. Mazharul Islam, the editor of the well-known Bangla literary magazine *Anyadin*, and his admirer and close friend, told me after Manzoor Bhai had passed away how over a year ago he had committed himself to contributing a story for the magazine. He told Mazhar afterwards that having written a page or two, he had to give up since nothing was coming out of him.

I was aware that Manzoor Bhai had gone to New York – or was it Boston? – en route to Chicago some weeks back to deliver a talk at the University of Chicago, but had to abandon the idea because he had contracted a viral infection soon after his arrival in North America. When I met him in another

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Dhaka Club *adda* on his return from the United States, he seemed frail in a way he had never looked before. In our October 1 Dhaka Club meet he looked even frailer. I asked him again if he was feeling unwell. Once more he told me he was o.k. but only a bit depressed.

No wonder when I received a phone call about Manzoor Bhai being hospitalized just before noon on 3 October 2025, when he was in his car on his way to taking a class at the University of Liberal Arts and apparently had a stroke, I was shocked. How could he, despite the recent appearance of frailness, become a victim of a severe heart condition so suddenly? He always seemed to be indefatigable; for most of his professional career, in addition to teaching at the University of Dhaka's English department, he was an adjunct faculty member of other universities. And he was seemingly forever someone writing prolifically for all sorts of publications—academic, literary and/or dedicated to topical issues. Indeed, he was always in demand for his ability to teach exceptionally and to contribute to intellectual endeavours significantly one way or the other. For instance, in seminars held internationally as well as nationally, he was a coveted featured speaker. Moreover, his talk show admirers always looked out for his appearances as did readers of his fictional and nonfictional works.

II

Indeed, for as long as I knew him, Manzoor Bhai struck me as someone of limitless energy and creativity. As an academic in high demand in seminars and conferences, as a key note or plenary speaker, and even a talk show celebrity commenting on politics, letters and the state of the country, he seemed to be participating in such activities with boundless enthusiasm. He was what was termed once “a renaissance man” and what is often characterized now as a polymath. His energy and interest in life and letters seemed limitless. He seemed to devour all kinds of books with an appetite that seemed insatiable.

I asked Manzoor Bhai once: how did he get the time to read so many things? The last day we met in Dhaka Club I had asked him again: you read so much even now and have written so many things—tell me—do you get to sleep at all? He had answered the first question smilingly some time ago saying “When I was doing doctoral work at Queens University I had taken a course in speed reading then and that must be a reason why I can read so much.” As for the second question I had asked him in our last Dhaka Club *adda* he said: “I go to bed every day at 1 in the morning and sleep very soundly for five to six hours. And as you know, I can snooze any time and all the time.”

Manzoor Bhai had told me once that he was born in a family of avid readers. His mother, a school teacher in the northeastern city of Sylhet,

Bangladesh, would come home from work and after lunch would read a book till sleep overtake her. Her uncle was the famous Bangla writer Syed Mujtaba Ali—an avid reader, a born story teller, and a raconteur who regaled everyone spontaneously and endlessly. Which is to say, reading endlessly and storytelling was in his genes. And so was being the life of adda sessions and spicing up his experience and encounters in stories and features that would be printed.

III

A couple of weeks before he passed away, Manzoor Bhai had responded to my request for a piece for a festschrift which Professor Mohammad A. Quayum—a dear colleague now in retirement in Australia and teaching as an adjunct faculty of Flinders University, Adelaide—and I are trying to publish. Its title “Translating Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Adequacy and Untranslatability” indicates two areas that interested him: Tagore and translation. For *The Essential Tagore* (2011), the anthology of translations of the poet’s work Professor Radha Chakravarty, then of the University of Delhi’s Gargi College, and I had edited for Harvard University Press and Visva Bharati’s Grantha Vibhag, he had translated excellently some letters from one of Tagore’s most loved books, *Chinnopatro* which title he translated impeccably as *Torn Leaves*.

Manzoor Bhai was as knowledgeable about Kazi Nazrul Islam—the other star of Bangla Literature—as he was about Tagore. Indeed, I came to know and admire the extent of his knowledge about Bengal’s “rebel” poet when he, our other *adda* friend and colleague Kaiser Haq, and a few other Nazrul lovers began working in a volume we thought would be a companion of *The Essential Tagore* and that we had titled provisionally as *The Essential Nazrul*. For almost a year we would meet regularly to discuss its contents and share our work on Nazrul for the Nazrul Academy with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, the project was shelved, having become a victim of a change in the administrative structure of the Academy. I feel this was yet another reason for Manzoor Bhai’s unhappy state of mind in the last few months before he left us all.

While reading the classics of Bangla Literature was something he had picked up from his exposure to great Bangla writers at home and elsewhere over many, many decades, from an early age Manzoor Bhai developed expertise in English Literature by choice. After all, even though he was a student who had studied science till the intermediate level of our educational system, he had opted to study English Literature at the University of Dhaka’s English department. And having graduated at the top of his class in the B. A. (Hons.) and M. A. programs there, he joined the department as a lecturer afterwards. He told me once that he had not wanted to do anything except become a university teacher. Inevitably, he

then went on to do doctoral work in English Literature, opting to write his Ph.D. dissertation on W. B. Yeats at Queen's University, one of Canada's leading universities. His supervisor there was the distinguished scholar Norman Mackenzie, a specialist in late 19th century English Literature and Modernism.

As I wrote earlier, Manzoor Bhai had told me that he learned to speed read at Queen's. But I also learned from him how he developed expertise in close reading at the same time as a graduate student exposed to formalism and the latest developments in critical theory. In other words, an avid reader that he was, he came into contact with all sorts of writers and literary trends that he would skim through if he wanted to, but he also became a master of what is known as close reading, having learned to delve into the books he was reading and retain whatever he found of value in them, and holding on to all that he read in his prodigious memory. From his mastery of literary theory, cultural studies, and aesthetics, he gained immense expertise in new ways of seeing literature and the arts.

One outcome of his desultory reading and encounters with diverse groups of writers and his appetite for world literature in translation was his first collection of essays chosen from what he characterised through its title as *Olosh Diner Hava* or "The Fruits of Reading Leisurely." Although he had already published a number of academic essays in English for scholarly journals and would continue to do so for some more time, he would not bother to collect them at all. Instead, from the 1980s he would be publishing short fiction in Bangla in leading literary journals and the literary page of Bangladesh's major newspapers steadily, no doubt based on his wide and regular reading of fictional works in English. They showed not only his admiration for experimental fictional trends such as surrealism, magic realism, and postmodern fiction, but also his ability to be stimulated by what he read into writing experimental fiction. A typical story that he would write would be based on close observation and an eye for life's oddities but also his ability to leap wittily and convincingly into the realm of the implausible and the far-fetched. For readers limited to the English language, I would recommend his collection of translated short fiction in the 2013 work, *The Merman's Prayer*. But whether read in English or Bangla, his short stories and novellas will reveal to readers the kind of man I had learned to know intimately and admire—a man full of what the French call *bonhomie*; someone with the gift of empathy; and a writer who could utilise his learning, academic and non-academic interests, reading in modernism, literary theory and contemporary fiction as well as art and aesthetics to come up with a blend that is rare in Bangla fiction.

Although Manzoor Bhai kept publishing his fictional pieces and writings on aesthetics in Bangla, and although he would send some of his academic/critical essays to journals and books at the request of their editors, he would not himself take the initiative of publishing the ones he wrote in English anywhere. The excellent essay on Tagore and translation that he had contributed to the festschrift Professor Quayum and I are hoping to publish soon is an example to me of how he neglected his very good English writings. As I conclude my commemorative piece on him, I feel strongly that his friends and admirers must do their best to collect and publish the best of his unpublished writings whether in English or Bangla for they do not deserve to disappear from our intellectual horizon.

IV

Manzoor Bhai's days in the hospital and passing away there were marked in the weeks that followed by an outpouring of disbelief and grief that was without a doubt exceptional. How could a man who was so full of life pass away so suddenly? I myself got calls from leading intellectuals in West Bengal and Nepal who were shocked and saddened by his exit from the world of letters. When his body was taken in a coffin box to Dhaka's Shahid Minar where our 1952 language martyrs are remembered through uniquely designed memorial markers, literally thousands of people were present; not a few of them were shedding tears at that time. It was raining then—as if nature itself was shedding tears at his untimely departure from this world of ours.

All we can do now is remember him in commemorative volumes and collections like this one and in the kind of literary addas he treasured. As well, we need to work together to preserve and publish his uncollected writings. His friends, colleagues, readers, and relatives know the enormity of their loss but he can still live on through his works, remembrances, and tributes in print. Rest in peace, dear Manzoor Bhai!