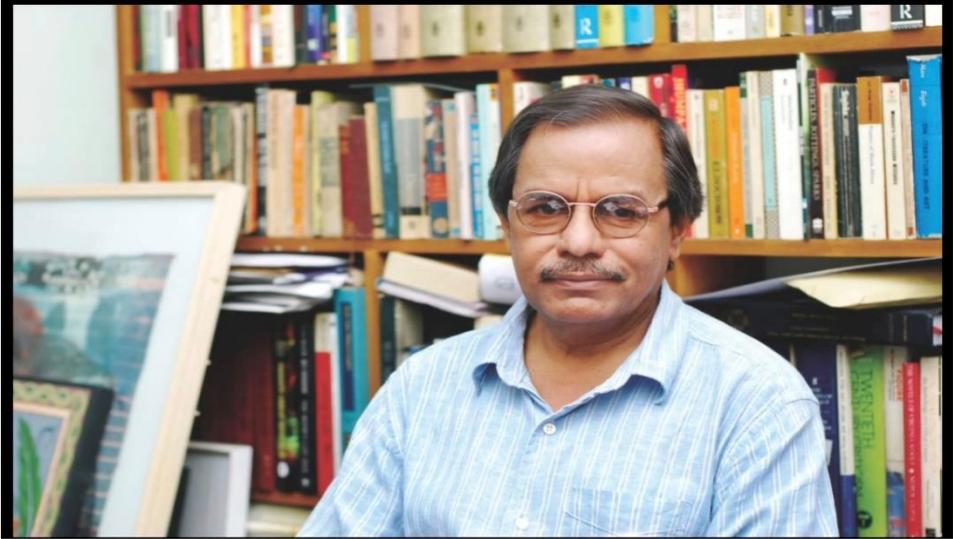


Vale SMI: A Literary Luminary Who Hitched His Wagon to a Star

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The founder of American Transcendentalism and the father of modern American literature, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), once wrote, calling humanity to its higher self and the pursuit of greater ideals, “Hitch your wagon to a star” (“Civilization,” 1862). My dear friend and colleague, Syed Manzoorul Islam (1951-2025), or SMI, as he is affectionately known among friends, students, and colleagues—a luminous Bengali writer, critic, and academic—lived up to that ideal. He consistently aimed for lofty goals and the transcendent, upholding the principles of truth, compassion, conscience, and creativity rather than settling for the mundane, the conventional, and the practical. He yoked his earthly life to the

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ever-brighter star of love, fellowship, honesty, and humanity. He was Whitman's "noiseless patient spider," who ceaselessly spun and re-spun the world with his shimmering imagination, striving to make it a better and brighter place—of peace, goodwill, progress, and harmony. He discovered his life's mission of promoting righteousness and morality—his "svadharma" (duty or responsibility)—early on and pursued it with unrelenting conviction until the very end.

SMI was a many-hued spirit; he contained multitudes and wore several hats, each with grace, purpose, and distinction. He was an academic, writer, critic, editor, translator, columnist, political commentator, and a leading public intellectual in Bangladesh. His imagination was anchored in two languages, Bengali and English, with equal proficiency in each—a rare gift for any writer. However, he also learned to read Spanish, probably to enjoy the works of Colombian writer and master of magic realism, Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014), in the original. He was profoundly influenced by Márquez, whom he regarded as a "titan," along with several other contemporary writers, and inspired by them, he became a pioneer of postmodern experimental techniques—such as fragmentation, time shifts, self-reflexivity, genre-blending, and the fusion of the real and the surreal—in Bengali literature. A consummate storyteller, SMI redefined the possibilities of Bengali fiction, turning the familiar and everyday life into the unexpected and a realm of dazzling surprises.

SMI's legacy as a Bengali writer includes ten volumes of short stories, four novels, and numerous newspaper columns and essays in local media, exploring a broad range of topics in literature, culture, education, and society. He believed that writers and intellectuals had a pivotal role in shaping the nation and urged them to speak out on social justice, systemic corruption, and the erosion of democratic accountability, linking cultural critique with real-world social concerns. His advocacy for education in the Tagorean spirit, as crucial to nation-building and a national priority, was a call to action. He viewed education as a means to produce enlightened citizens, knowledge enthusiasts, innovators, and "thought leaders" (SMI's phrase); its purpose was to light tomorrow's lamps with today's flame and enable the future to breathe through the present. However, he observed with discontent that in Bangladesh, educational institutions no longer served as centres of genuine inquiry and failed to produce inspiring, dynamic citizens and moral visionaries capable of transforming society. Instead, they were largely oriented towards the corporate sector, nurturing bureaucrats, management executives, and compradors, feeding their own greed or that of their political masters at home and abroad. He lamented, "There are no scientists, no researchers, no philosophers—only administrators wherever you look."

SMI received several national awards for his contributions to Bengali literature, including the Bangla Academy Award (1996) and the Ekushey Padak (2018). He also received Prothom Alo's Book of the Year award for his collection of short stories, *Prem o Prarthana Galpo* (2005). However, he did not stop there; he self-translated some of his stories into English and published them as *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories* (2013). He also expressed the desire to write a novel in English, which he said was gradually crystallising in his mind—"I already feel its ghostly presence inside my skull," he said—but it never materialised, probably due to his other commitments or because his primary mode of literary engagement was short stories, where he found his truest voice and therefore gravitated towards it intuitively.

Writing was SMI's passion, but teaching was his vocation. "I get the most pleasure from writing fiction, especially short stories," he acknowledged, but added, "teaching has always been my first priority." He thoroughly enjoyed teaching and lecturing at public forums. He was an extremely eloquent speaker, radiating with conviction, confidence, and energy whenever he stood on a podium facing an audience, whether in the classroom, at seminars, or at public gatherings. He loved exchanging ideas and engaging with his audience. His talent for teaching, conversing, and reflective dialogue also made him a national celebrity, frequently appearing on television. He was not like Philip Roth's ghost writer, living a reclusive life, turning sentences around in his head, lying on a sofa, but a man of action—a "Plotinus-Montaigne," and a "winged-Franklin" (William Russell Lowell's phrases to describe Emerson in "A Fable for Critics" [1848])—or a dreamer-doer, very much like Emerson.

SMI never engaged in idle talk, but used words like a goldsmith to craft something of cultural and aesthetic significance; in his hands, words melted, moulded, and became a sparkling jewel. Anyone familiar with his lectures would attest to this. He was an avid reader and read widely before giving a talk, a classroom lecture, or writing an academic article. He always came prepared, regardless of the occasion. It is because of his extensive and profound reading and his ability to articulate ideas as precious nuggets that he consistently engaged, inspired, and mesmerised his audience, whether they were students, colleagues, or the general public.

I have personally observed this, having attended several of his talks during my time as a teacher in the Department of English at the University of Dhaka in the early nineties (1991-93). I recall an occasion when I was a co-respondent at a seminar on R.K. Narayan by the esteemed Professor Fakrul Alam, and, as expected, it was SMI who outshone us all, stealing the show with his charismatic presence and compelling display of his grasp of postmodern and

poststructuralist theories. Recently, I had the privilege of reading an article by SMI on Rabindranath Tagore and the challenges of translating his work into English. He had submitted it for the festschrift that Professor Alam and I are editing in honour of our revered colleague, Professor Niaz Zaman. It is one of the most authoritative discourses on the topic I have encountered in recent years. The way SMI engages with words, weaving his insightful analysis of Rabindranath's poetry with diverse theories on translation, is a rare aesthetic act that I am sure will intrigue and stimulate many Tagore scholars and readers of the book.

SMI's sudden passing has left our hearts bereft and created an irreplaceable void in Bengali intellectual and cultural life. But his spirit lives on through his stories, scholarships, lectures, talks, editorial columns, mentorships, and the love, humility, and grace he demonstrated in his encounters, as well as the countless lives he touched over a half-century of academic service. His light will forever guide us, reminding us to live with dignity, courage, and integrity; seek knowledge to enrich ourselves, the nation, and humanity; and, like him, hitch our own wagons to the ever-shining star of love, honour, justice, and creativity.