

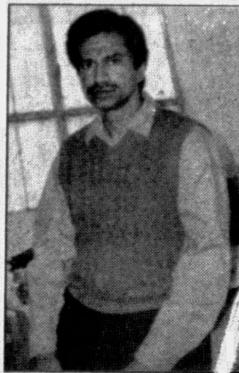
A Faring Forward, Hopefully

A Review of Kaiser Haq's 'A Happy Farewell'

by Niaz Zaman



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Kaiser Haq

IN Bangladesh, mainly due to our linguistic make-up and our emotional, cultural, political attachment to Bengali, English writing has been few and far between. Writers who like Kaiser Haq choose to write in English have of necessity been unpublished or privately published. Tough Kaiser Haq has had two collections published earlier — *Starting Lines* and *A Little Ado*, both in 1978 — he is better known abroad than in Bangladesh. He edited *Contemporary Indian Poetry* (Ohio State University Press, 1990), and his poems have also been appearing in *The Cambridge Review*, *Chapman* (Edinburgh), *London Magazine* and in anthologies published from the United Kingdom and Pakistan. He has translated Shamsur Rahman's poems into English, and, very recently, Heinemann published *Quartet*, Kaiser's translation of Tagore's *Chaturanga*. Khushwant Singh has written an appreciative article on him in *Sunday* (Calcutta). A translation of *Shigurfama-e-Vilayat* is forthcoming from Peepal Tree Books, Leeds. The publication of *A Happy Farewell* by University Press should now give Kaiser access to a Bangladeshi audience as well as a foreign one.

University Press, which has till now been devoted to the publication of text books and books on Bangladesh, has perhaps added poetry to its list of publications after realising that there is a market for creative writing. Creative writing often supplements books on development. Because writers in a non-native language cater to a foreign audience, they consciously use their culture as subject in a way that writers in a native language never have to. This makes them more Indian — or Bangladeshi or Pakistani. As Meenakshi Mukherjee, Professor of English at Jawaharalal Nehru University, points out, "What it means to be an Indian, is not a question that troubles the Marathi or the Bengali writer very much. The need to define oneself and analyse the specific elements of one's cultural identity is usually the consequence of coming in contact with another culture. The writer in the Indian languages does not often have an exposure to another culture with sufficient intensity to worry about these problems."

For an Indian — or a Bangladeshi or Pakistani — to write successfully in English, a command of the language is imperative. Many ambitious writers fail simply because they lack command of the language. Indian-English, as Kaiser points out, can only be exploited in comic poems, deliberately by the writer who knows 'Standard English' and has enough sense of the pecu-

liarities of the English language to play with it at will. Kaiser Haq is fortunate to possess a command of English that helps him to a felicitous phrase, or a play upon the peculiarities of the English tongue. Together with a poet's eye and a critic's perspicuity, he has a sense of humour that makes reading his poetry a rewarding experience.

A Happy Farewell includes poems from Kaiser's earlier volumes as well as his latest poems. It is divided into three sections: New and Uncollected Poems (1978-1993), Poems in Subcontinental English, and Poems from *Starting Lines* (1978) and *A Little Ado* (1978). In a number of earlier poems as well, Kaiser had revealed the comic potential of subcontinental English. In 'Master Babu', for instance, from *A Little Ado*, Kaiser had portrayed the life of an English tutor and used the pompous phrases that were — and in many cases still are — used by English teachers in the region. Thus Master Babu doesn't talk, but 'converses' or (better still) engages in conversation. (The final effect of the poem, however, is far from simply comic.)

The title poem of *A Happy Farewell* is a poem about writing poetry and about the failure of inspiration. It reminds one immediately of similar poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge and, more recently, W B Yeats — whose *The Second Coming* looks over the poem. In 'A Happy Farewell', the poet suggests that inspiration is gone, and there are no poems in the writer's head. He rifles through old note books. He comes across a word here, a phrase there. He is reminded of embarrassing failures. He ponders contemporary history. Is there enough for him to write poetry? Perhaps not. Like Yeats, he wonders what a poet should do "as two millennia of nightmare/rattle to a close?" Should the poet adopt

a yogic indifference, twisting his legs into the lotus pose or continue to sing? Perhaps it would be best for him to say a happy farewell, stop 'chaining impossible desire to verse,'

"Let me be content in my abulic watching of universal collapse. As for anything beyond, The eternal requires no celebration."

This is a happy farewell. But farewells can never be happy, and one hopes that the volume will only be a beginning, giving Kaiser a place on the Bangladeshi literary scene long overdue. Of the four poems in subcontinental English, the most delightful perhaps are 'Welcome, Tourist Sahib' and 'Civil Service Romance' — the latter dedicated to Nissim Ezekiel who exploited the potentials of Indian-English in his poems. In 'Welcome, Tourist Sahib' a tourist guide welcomes a foreign visitor to Bangladesh. He tells the tourist about the rich historical past of Bangladesh and its mixture of races, religions, cultures. He is writing a tourist guide-book to Bangladesh, and will give his tourist the benefit of his knowledge. He is suitably proud of his land.

"Bangladesh is new nation with very ancient history-heritage. Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim-Moghul, British, Pakistani. Bangladeshi finally — and forever..."

He can give the tourist good advice on what to wear, what to eat. He also can show the tourist what is not contained in official guide books.

"We are for moral life. But in tribal area I take you to see men and women especially living naturally in topless. Believe you me They invent topless before West!"

"Civil Service Romance" is

in epistolary form, consisting of two letters. The first is from a clerk in a government office to a young woman in a neighbouring section; the second is the young woman's reply. The use of subcontinental English clerks to depict an office romance is delightfully comic. Though the clerk is writing a love-letter, he uses the format and phraseology of official letters peculiar to the subcontinent. Thus, the subject is carefully noted: 'Improvement of Bilateral Ties.' And it is 'With due respect and humble submission' that the clerk welcomes the young woman to 'neighbouring section.'

He meets the young woman accidentally when "Power is falling as per schedule" and the lift is not working.

"Five floors is no joke for fair sex But still you are climbing and smiling."

I am sweating but you are glowing and becoming very beautiful.

She is Helen to him, and he wants to become "immortal crew-member". His Boss inadvertently helps expedite the romance by sending the clerk with an "URGENT file" to the young woman's section and the two talk "while the matter/is pending as per unwritten regulation." Now it is night and like "everloving film hero" he is "tossing and turning with pillow/ in lieu of towel." He asks her to reply to him "MOST IMMEDIATELY" and ends the letter as her "humble, servant."

The young woman replies in like fashion. Under the subject "Matrimonial," she refers to his letter "of no date," and informs him that "the matter is referred/ to father through mother." She has taken casual leave and is learning to cook dishes. She ends the letter as his "loving servant," asking him to "apply/through proper channel/and thereby oblige." While many of us laugh at the continuing use of Babu English in letters, Kaiser has exploited its potential in a delightful manner in this poem.

Perhaps Kaiser's finest poem is 'Peasant's Lament' which traces the life of a Bangladeshi peasant from birth, through marriage to death. The word 'Allah' ends almost all the stanzas and suggests the faith of the simple Muslim peasant but also serves as an ironic comment on his lot.

"Your name on granny's lips mumbled Put me to sleep sang in my dreams Allah on hungry nights filled half the belly the other half cried for you, to you Allah"

Though Kaiser's language is English, he succeeds in distill-

ing the Bangladeshi ethos into his poems. Thus the blend of fear and faith, of hope and despair, of floods and drought that mark this land are successfully combined in this narrative tracing the life of the peasant.

The Indian or Bangladeshi writing in English has a dual heritage, a double perspective that lends depth and resonance to the writing. Thus, in this poem rooted in Bangladesh, a reader familiar with Wordsworth's *Prelude* would recognize the Wordsworthian echo. The peasant stealing a chicken and fleeing God's wrath is reminiscent of the child Wordsworth who steals a boat-ride and imagines the mountain uprearing to chase him. Kaiser's sense of black humour is reflected in the peasant's account of the grim joke that nature plays on the Bangladeshi farmer.

"Father prayed to you to give rain then to send the floods back while the moneylender cursed him in your name Allah"

Between failed crops the peasant's father gets his son some land and a bride. Years pass. The father dies, the wife grows old. Now it is time for the peasant himself to follow. He leaves behind "a withered wife," "a brood of hungry rebels" and also some money "for your man the Mullah; when I'm dumb below your praise will still be sung Allah Allah"

Kaiser does not write romantic poems, though he does focus on occasional tender moments as in 'Letter from Hyderabad' and 'A Freshman's Unsent Billet-Doux.' Juxtaposing the tenderness is, however, a brittleness or Donne-like wit that guards against sentimentality. Poets talk about promises and broken hearts; in 'Hitting It Off,' Kaiser talks about making a battered heart whole again:

"thrusting deep with thread and needle of your tongue, cobbling the fragments together."

Kaiser seems very much an imperialist poet — despite his use of 'I'. There are, for example, two poems on 1971 — 'Crackdown' and 'Bangladesh '71' — but there is nothing in these poems to reveal the personal impact of the war on Kaiser. It is only through the brief biographical note on the book jacket that the reader learns that Kaiser fought in the War of Liberation. Furthermore, the conflict of a writer torn between the two worlds of 'western know-how and eastern wisdom' that Kaiser revealed in his early poems such as 'Brown, Powerless' and 'Growing Up' is absent from *A Happy Farewell* with the omission of these poems. Despite these omissions and absences, however, *A Happy Farewell* is a good introduction to Kaiser Haq and, one hopes, a beginning and not an end, a faring forward and not a farewell.

Recalling Keyt — the Sri Lankan 'Guru'

by Titash Chowdhury

SRI Lankan artist George Keyt's name will come first if we talk about Sri Lankan art, as Zainul Abedin's to ours. Keyt was also a poet. His painting and poetry have not received general recognition outside Sri Lanka and India. He did not visit Europe and America to promote his art. And he died in Colombo on July 31, aged 92.

George Keyt was born in Kandy on April 17, 1901. The origins of his family are obscure. His grandfather and father had both married into Dutch burgher families, descendants of early Dutch colonists. The family had a high social

position, the ruling British population being mostly temporary residents, with their real homes elsewhere. He received a largely Christian and Europeanised education at Trinity College, Kandy.

Keyt left Trinity College when he was 17 and received no higher education. But, being a precocious boy and a great reader, he had virtually enjoyed a university education already. Soon after his father's death, in 1927, Keyt decided to make painting his life. His work of that time shows an acute and careful observation of people and their surroundings, always Sinhalese and



'Woman with Cup' by George Keyt, 1982

Tamil. When exhibited in 1928, 1929 and 1930 his pictures were furiously denounced in the press, for reasons that are now difficult to understand. But he also had his supporters, the most important of whom was the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda who then held a consular post in Colombo.

According to critics there is a similarity between our Kamrul Hasan and George Keyt. Easy brush works, variations of form, very strong drawing — these are the qualities of Keyt's painting. Also there is a profound presence of folk form and influence of cubism can be seen in his painting.

Although Keyt's personal life was Europeanised, but this never appeared in his art. Although the British literary influence on him as a schoolboy was powerful, the intensity of local life instilled in Keyt, from an early age, a life long aesthetic nationalism and a spirit of reaction against the dominance of foreign culture.

He won prizes for poetry. He was also a contributor to the newspapers, mainly on Buddhist and Hindu historical and religious themes. The split between Keyt's personal life and his aesthetic and historical instincts came to a climax about 1937, when his first marriage was collapsing. This tension can be sensed in some of his paintings and poetry.

He was introduced to Marxism by Harold Peiris, his brother-in-law. Keyt also learned Sanskrit from Peiris.

Keyt belonged to the '43 Group who held their first exhibition in 1943, in Colombo. This exhibition was criticised in the official army newspaper as "conceded". But the Group thrived and in 1947 Keyt moved to Bombay. He held a number of important exhibitions there and in New Delhi in subsequent years. He had a reluctance to leave Sri Lanka and India, and did not venture outside Sri Lanka and India until his 9th year, when he made a short visit to England.

Decolonising Shakespeare

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is an encounter with random semiotic possibilities that would not approve of any centre of dictation as such. The ghost, like that strange bird of Lalou, flits in and out — in other words, the sign slips in and out, time and again cancelling out any fixed version of reality, but these accommodations space for her possibilities — possibilities of experimentation which would disperse with any form of textual authority. Our lives, our realities, our politics, our culture have, long been dominated by fixed texts — colonialist, imperialist, fundamentalist, neo-colonialist and so on, and Hamlet can certainly reawaken us with the politics of deconstruction — not nihilistic, luxurious deconstruction, but a deconstruction that would strike at the roots of fundamentalism and autocracy, unsettling and dismantling the texts that freeze the free play of signs, of minds, of actions. In his 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!', or even in his so-called conflict-ridden, tossed syllables of 'To be, or not to be', Hamlet, however feebly and indirectly at times, tends to evince a sort of resistance to the slavery of texts, and this resistance constitutes one of the themes of the play relevant to us.

In fact, one can go on and on to identify numerous familiar characters in the Shakespearean world, and one can now and then pause to wonder at his mastery of characterisation, at Shakespeare's creation of men and women with his typical pleasure-principle of a god. You want to listen to the heart-beats of a thief stealing in the nocturnal, dreadful silence? Listen to Shakespeare. Do you want to see a dejected father, a forlorn lover, a fallen king, a rejected friend, a bank-defaulter, a renegade, a funda-

mental, an autocrat, a spiritual *pir*, a cunning fool, a sentimental lover, an incurably melancholic man, an incurably euphoric man, and so on? The answer is: look at Shakespeare. But, what also deserves noticing is that each character in Shakespeare, howsoever minor he/she might be, is invested with one's own rhythm and dynamic — one's own distinguishable traits. Say, that Scottish nobleman and general — Banquo in *Macbeth*; or that merchant of Syracuse called Aegon in *The Comedy of Errors*; or Aeneas, the Trojan Commander, in *Troilus and Cressida*; or Desdemona, the heroine of *Othello*; or Macbeth-Lear-Hamlet; or the Duke of Vienna in *Measure for Measure*; or each of Shakespeare's fools — all of them exhibit their own characteristic tones and tenors and texts not to be fused into commonness. Of course, certain types such as Macbethian ambition, Shylockite greed, Learian renunciation, lagoosque malignity, or Hamletian indecision and so on, have been frozen into convenience by critics from time to time. But, what marks Shakespeare's relevance to us and the contemporary world is his textuality attributed to each of his characters, and it is this textuality which crosses out possible signs of fundamentalism. Yes, Hamlet is more than irresolution; or for that matter, Shylock is more than greed.

The fact that one is more than something — or that one is elastically textual — is almost always carried out in various flexible terms in Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies, both. In *King Lear*, for example — in that play concentrating on the

'sight-beguiling spectacles of a fatwabaj', we certainly notice Cordelia's resistance to *fatwas*, to arrogant absolutism brought to the fore by King Lear himself.

His arrogant absolutism exemplified in his act of abdication at the beginning of the play finds only momentary satisfaction in the flowing rhetoric of the first two daughters — Goneril and Regan; while, it is threatened by the comparative silence of the youngest daughter Cordelia who, in fact, breaks Lear's spectacles later. In fact, Lear himself breaks his own spectacles, evolving a sight of his own, thus enabling him to look beyond absolutism, beyond his self-limiting, self-justifying *fatwas*, beyond the textual authority which he activates only at the beginning of the play. In fact, in most of his tragedies, Shakespeare tends to exhibit his concerns with the breakages of textual authorities, with the crossing-out of fundamentalism and *fatwabaj*, leading us to seek freedom in the world of *free plays*. A modernist may object by saying: no, no, Shakespeare tends to restore order and coherence as a gain of a tragedy; he may also remind us of the Elizabethan world order as an example of textual authority which Shakespeare tries to defend; but then, if we look closely into the problematical endings of most of Shakespeare's tragedies, it is not at all difficult to have the impression that *order* in Shakespeare remains mostly an unresolved phenomenon, a slipping metaphor leaving space for creating texts, non-authoritative, but full of possibilities.

Mrs B Ahmed

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In 1988, and most of Dhaka city was submerged. It was quite natural that Mrs B's was one of the most effective relief operations.

In the two decades she worked in Dhaka before liberation, on top of her Mahila Samity preoccupations and calls of duty from the Red Cross, APWA, the Manikganj Samity etc, she organised and ran a primary school in the premises of her house. This house had become an art centre through the presence in it of leading dancers, singers and instrumentalists of the then East Pakistan. She did neither sing nor dance — the realities of her formative years did not permit that. But she more than made that up by grooming each of her children as well as those of her near ones into performing artists of high quality. In this she beat all her peers. Her pioneering of the musical arts helped the cause of social progress a great deal. With her daughters giving regular dancing performances on the stage the taboos against not only Muslim but also Hindu women making stage appearances beat a quick retreat. Who could think this firmly en-

trenched prudishness, exemplified by a joint statement by a section of the Dhaka elite, headed by the venerable Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, in the journal Dhaka-Prakash in the early twenties condemning preparations for holding a Rabindra-Jayanti function in which girls were expected to sing and dance, would be challenged by a plain housewife in her late fifties — and the challenger would come out on top vanquishing social inertia?

Dhaka was quite a cultural and modern town, nurturing nineteenth century stalwarts like Kalliprasanna Ghosh, Krishnachandra Majumdar to the twentieth century literary *avant garde* Buddhadev Bose and Jibananda Das. But everything changed in 1947. The Dhaka of the State Language Movement and Tagore Centenary and the Six Points and Liberation War was something grown out of the ashes of 1947 — resembling very much the rise of the Phoenix. Mrs Badrunnessa Ahmed was one of the few that fashioned this impossible rise. On April 20 passed her 13th death anniversary — quite unbeknown to the beneficiaries of her lifelong service to society and progress.

Barefoot Playwright Acts for Rural Poor — Free

Atiya singh writes from Calcutta

Bengali director Badal Sircar is causing ripples in rural India with plays on social issues. His street theatre movement has brought a new awareness among the rural poor. To the sheer delight of villagers the renowned theatre personality and his troupe perform free of charge. Gemini News Service profiles India's award-winning barefoot playwright.



BADAL SIRCAR

'I've learnt many things in villages'

audiences. Later the troupe started performing in public parks, slums, offices, factories, college lawns, vacant plots in the suburbs.

In the traditional theatre the players act on the stage and the audience just watches; applauds of jeers. Not so in Sircar's plays.

He had realised long back that the theatre had to be freed from the clutches of what he calls commoditisation. By this he means the proscenium mentality, which feeds on creating an illusion of reality in order to make the fake look real. For this it relies on distance (between actor and audience), different stage and audience levels, the magic of light and shade and so on.

What does 'free' theatre mean to Sircar? Theatre critic Gowari Ramanarayan says: "This he interprets as living experimental communication between the performer and the spectator. The play becomes a participatory ritual, 'result-oriented', as theatre committed to

cause." It is not uncommon to see a large audience in a slum watching a Sircar play and interacting freely with the actors and actresses. This is theatre acting as a social catalyst. It aims to change the thoughts and beliefs of the spectator and lead them to some action.

Ramanarayan says: "It dispels confusion, illusion and make-believe. As a progressive social movement, the theatre claims, however modestly, to be contributing to changing the world."

Most of Sircar's actors are amateurs. Their motivation is to use the theatre to bring about changes in society. Says theatre enthusiast Ashish Mukherjee: "They are succeeding sheerly because of sincerity to their cause." Initially, since most of the amateurs were doing other jobs to earn a living, the plays were performed after office hours as a part-time effort.

In due course, outdoor performances of Sircar's plays became a common feature in Cal-

cutta's Curzon Park. In 1975 when prime minister Indira Gandhi clamped an Emergency on the country, the performances were banned. Sircar's theatre went underground. It resurfaced after the Emergency in 1977. In 1985, Sircar took his theatre to farmers, villagers and tribals, under his *partikarma* (tour) programme. Since then his troupe has played to overwhelming responses in remote villages. He finds it rewarding to work with the rural poor.

Bright-eyed, quick-tongued Sircar was born in a middle-class family in Calcutta and says he did not inherit the deep cultural roots he would have liked. He said: "I've tried, though rather late, to go to villages and establish contact. I've learnt many things in villages that I didn't know before which made me feel guilty and ashamed." He is quick to disown any pretensions of educating villagers or enlightening city dwellers through his plays. He says "that would be condescen-

sion, even presumption."

Rather Sircar sees his mission akin to sharing a certain consciousness, combination of knowledge and feeling, with other, hoping that this mutual interaction would raise that consciousness to a higher level. He considers the middle class the most important section of society, an indispensable catalyst for bringing about any revolution. His 45 Bengal plays deal with such basic issues as death, starvation, imprisonment, torture, economic oppression, political surveillance and violence. The most performed play is his 1965 masterpiece *Evam Indrajit*.

For it Sircar was given in 1967 the Sangeet Natak Academy Award, India's top theatre honour. Later he was awarded *Padam Shri* (equivalent of 'sir' in Britain) by the government of India. He also won the prestigious Nehru Fellowship (1971-73).

Sircar wants to be known not as a mere playwright but as a theatre person. He says: "I started with acting, directing and then writing plays to quench my thirst." His work is appreciated outside India and he has organised more than 60 workshop on street theatre abroad, mostly in Bangladesh, Britain and Pakistan.

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University at Iasi

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Department of Mathematics of the Faculty of Science and the Department of Physics had earned international fame. In fact, Romania had earned a good reputation in teaching mathematics, physics and chemistry. Dr Viorel Barbu, Rector of the University, who was assisted by Dr Grigore Veres, Head of the Department of English Language and Literature told this writer that Romania was in fact a forerunner in the Indo-European cultural domain. He informed that 80 full professors from Romania were teaching in dif-

ferent universities of the United States and Europe.

Established in 1839, the Central Library of the University of Iasi is one of the richest libraries which bears the name of the great poet of Romania, Mihai Eminescu, who also hailed from Moldavia.

The Mihai Eminescu Library, which contains over 2,000,000 books, many old manuscripts dating back from the 9th century, old magazines, journals and newspapers, has 21 branches and 31 reading rooms. This writer was taken round the library by the Deputy Director of the library, and was shown the room where Mihai Eminescu used to sit as Director of the library for about a year. To my utter surprise, I saw a Sanskrit Grammar book written by Mihai Eminescu. The authorities of Iasi University expressed their desire to exchange journals and magazines with the universities of Bangladesh to start a cultural exchange programme between the two countries.