

column

## On a Road Less Travelled By — Kaiser Haq's Poetry (I)

A literary conferences overseas, and responding every now and then to queries from correspondents interested in our literature, I have been made to reflect on why it is that there is so little Bangladeshi writing in English. Westerners, and even Indians interested in learning more about Indian literature in English, take it for granted that we have an emerging tradition of writers creatively using the English language to articulate themselves to a wider world. After all, Indian literature in English is at least two hundred years old and at the moment in full blossom, and Bengalis have been attempting to produce a major work of art in English since the second decades of the nineteenth century. Thus Ram Mohun Roy published his autobiography in English in 1820; the first English play by a Bengali, Krishna Mohun Banerjee's *The Persecuted*, dates back to 1831; the first Bengali to have written a novel in English was Bankim Chandra Chatterji (in 1864 he published *Raj Mohun's Wife*), and a Bengali woman, Toru Dutt, attracted the attention of the likes of Edmund Gosse when in 1875 she published a volume of poems titled *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*. Even though Rabindranath Tagore and Nirad C Chaudhury are, arguably, the only Ben-

galis to have left a lasting impression on English literature in this century, in the last decade or so, West Bengalis have been making impressive contributions to English literature once again; witness the novels by Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Sunetra Ghose, Upamanyu Chatterjee, and Amit Chaudhury that have been attracting enthusiastic reviews all over the world. The question, then, seems to be inevitable: if Bengal has produced the earliest practitioners of Indian literature in English, and if West Bengal is even now sprouting writers in English, why is Bangladesh not producing its share of poets or novelists who have resorted to the English language to express their vision of life?

The reason why Bangladesh has not yet produced a major writer in English is perhaps not so difficult to find. After all, the seeds of the country's independence were sown when in 1951 East Pakistanis suddenly realized that West Pakistan was about to impose Urdu as Pakistan's national language and relegate Bengali to the status of a minor language even if it was the mother tongue of more than half of the nation's population. Bengali thereafter became a rallying point for all East Pakistanis. But the outcry against Urdu ultimately led to widespread disapproval of the use of

English in public life. Indeed, successive Bangladeshi governments began to take measures to reduce the use of English at all levels and English, in effect, became not the second language of the country but a foreign language. In the seventies English-medium schools disappeared for a while, and throughout the seventies



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Fakrul Alam

and eighties Bengali-medium schools began to downgrade the teaching of English.

One result of the nationalistic fervour was that no one writing in English in Bangladesh could hope to find favour with local publishing houses. True, a few Bangladeshis using the language did manage to get into print; but they did so

probably not overseas, since a Bangladeshi diaspora did not gather momentum till the seventies, and since there was little Western interest in the new literatures in English till then.

Then there was the story of Michael Modhusudan Dutt which was readily invoked to prove that a Bengali had no business writing in English. In 'The

Story of Indo-Anglian Poetry,' an essay collected in a volume published by the University of Dhaka's English Department, *Other Englishes: Essays on Commonwealth Writing*, Kaiser Haq cites the popular use of Michael's life as 'a cautionary story'. Haq draws out in his piece the conclusions most often drawn by our moralists from the poet's life: even a supremely gifted Bengali writing in another tongue could never become a good, let alone a great, poet; that same Bengali could produce immortal verse when he used his mother tongue; and attempts to ape western cultural models and mimic western lifestyles could only result in dissolute lifestyles and literary disasters. As Haq puts it in his admirable essay, the lesson supposedly to be learned by all Bangladeshis from Michael was a simple one: 'Since Michael couldn't do it (i.e. succeed as a poet in English), no other Indian can.'

Kaiser Haq points out in 'The Story of Indo-Anglian Poetry' that his father would often 'pontificate' on Michael, presumably to caution his son about the folly of writing in English and squandering his talents by chasing alien gods. Even in the English Department of the university of Dhaka where he did his undergraduate work, Kaiser would hear dismissive remarks about the future of

Bengali writing in English. And yet Haq's literary career to date has proven that his father (and people of his generation) was wrong to cite Michael as a test case: that you can be a Bangladeshi and still produce first-rate verse in English; and that you can write 'naturally' in English even if your mother tongue is Bangla. In four slim but distinctive volumes of verse, *Starting Lines* (1978), *A Little Ado* (1978), *A Happy Farewell* (1994), and *Black Orchid* (1996), Haq has established himself as our leading poet in English and has been internationally acknowledged as a writer worth noticing. In the process, he has demonstrated that creativity cannot be constricted by nationalistic categories. In effect, Haq has shown that a road which can be taken by Bangladeshi writers who have embraced hybridity as their condition is English — even if that means being on the road less travelled by — and that this road can also take one to creative excellence. In my next column, it is this less travelled path which Haq has chosen to articulate with sensitivity and a skeptical intelligence the pressures of life in Bangladesh and his metaphysical and physical longings and frustrations that I intend to analyze.

About the writer: Fakrul Alam is Professor and Chairman of English at Dhaka University.

travel tale

## A Trip to Sylhet

by Waheedul Haque

Continued from the last week  
IT IS A VERY PLEASANT AND SOOTHING and sometimes elevating experience to be at Boi Patra and we missed it that evening for the crowd that was waiting for hours for us had all gone away. And in the meantime the darkness foisted by load shedding had also descended on the area. We sat wistfully for a while and there was candlelight to help us with our forlorn mood. A(nanto) K(umar) Sherum, the poet, who had recently authored a brilliant book on Manipuri history and culture, suggested meekly that the awkward time could be spent in his nearby house.

A K Sherum's parlour was lit up bright in spite of electric load-shedding when his daughter came in to do us the essential *pranam*. She was all of five feet and five but jutting skywards straight as a line — so thin and so beautiful. And so

pure, pure as a marigold. And that was her name. Shana-ri means a marigold in Manipuri. She was followed by her puny brother Chingthal. Sprightly but manageably so. The mistress Chandra brought us food needing no notice at all for it. And we had our best eat of the day. Manipuris are as a rule very secretive about their home life. And this Sherum was diffidence personified. How can he keep this saintly thing ensconced in his living as a bank manager? I have known him for some years and I never suspected he had such a wonderful family with Chandra at its centre. Chandra, Manihar Sinha's sister and a sister-in-law to my one-time protégé the great Indian dancer Santibala!

We had to hurry on to Subroto's to pay him a debt of gratitude for our afternoon's patch of a paradise. Songs and food flowed there till midnight. Out on the road for a longish journey home

by rickshaw, we were ushered by an unceasingly smiling Subroto into his trap.

No food please, we pleaded with Mr and Mrs Aziz. And persuaded them to retire with the help of a ruse. It was past one and I made for the bed wishing the hosts good night. When I felt sure they had bolted their bedroom I crept out of my bed and slipped into the drawing room where two imps were to pounce on me. I willingly gave myself up to their burning my soul on a spit in slow interminable fire. Gentleman, declared the two, Soma and Shubho, we are going to give you a crash course in the Bangladeshi music of the last two decades. Count yourself lucky and don't sleep off. How could I? It was a killing thing all through. My sides were bursting from the very outset. After sometime I was bereft of all sense of reality. It struck three. We couldn't care-



less. But at about four we had to. For our bus to Dhaka departs at eight and we must set out from hospitality by seven. There is no guarantee we would land a godsend of two rickshaws in a chilly morning.

essay

## The Dark and the Dry: Two Novelistic Views of Colonialism

by Serajul Islam Chowdhury

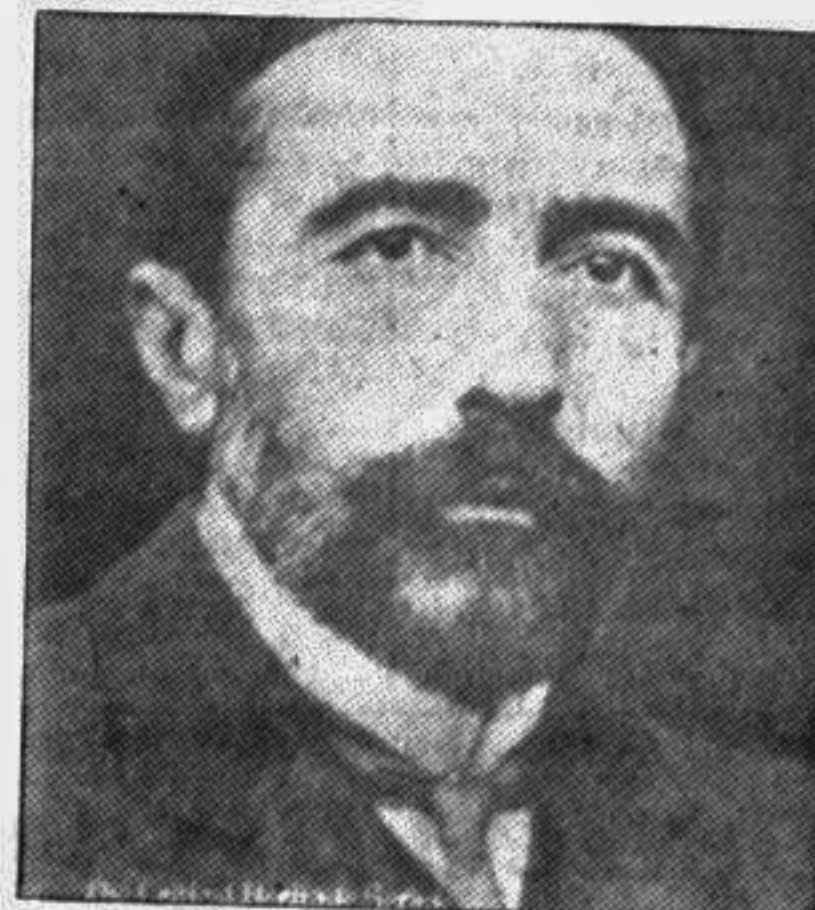
Continued from the last week  
IT IS TYPICAL OF HIS LIBERAL imagination that Forster does not see trade at the heart of colonialism. In India he thinks a hardened colonial bureaucracy, without taking into account the essential truth that the phenomenon is not the master, but the servant of the trading interests of the British masters. This limitation is that of liberalism itself. For we recall that even Edmund Burke, the great political thinker that he was, failed to notice that for England, India represented trading interests, more than anything else. The political state England had set up in India was subservient to commerce and was not designed either to preserve an ancient civilization or to set up a model of benevolent statehood. Writing more than a hundred years later than Burke and having been personally to India more than once, something Burke had not done, the liberal Forster did not see colonialism as trade tucked under bureaucracy. Here then is another refusal in Forster, along with the two we have mentioned.

Forster's somewhat shocking failure to appreciate Conrad's works is the liberal gentleman's turning away from literary works which do not invite the reader in a hand-shaking manner, and betray, instead, a dread of intimacy. Differences apart, there are remarkable and significant resemblances between the two novelists in their apprehension of colonialism. Race exists, as inevitably as the skin, nor is class absent; but more abiding than these is the fact of politics.

Both novelists are ironical, and in *Heart of Darkness* as well as in *A Passage to India* irony, sometimes Sophoclean in character, is connected with, and results from politics. For Conrad the irony of the European expedition to Africa, philanthropic garb and all, is epitomized in the picture Kurtz had painted of a woman holding up a torch, while herself remaining blindfolded

and, even more devastatingly, in the frenzied cry of "Exterminate all the brutes" Scribbled by a later Kurtz at the ending of the many-splendoured report on the suppression of savage customs in Africa. The short man becomes a god and finally crawls like an animal because of politics.

Not long before completing *A Passage to India* in 1924, Forster reviewed a book by Marmaduke Pickthall, called *Valley of Kings*. The book tells us of the misadventure of a Syrian guide, named Iskander. The man was under the illusion that he knew of a hidden treasure in the deserts. He took an English friend on an expedition in search of precious



Joseph Conrad

metal and got into trouble, when instead of finding a treasure they were taken prisoners by a group of Bedouins. To compare this expedition with that of Aziz to the caves is to see the harm politics of colonialism is capable of causing. Aziz's suffering is wholly ironical in the most tragic sense. He knew nothing about the caves, and was not at all interested in going there. Aziz was a political, and he kept himself deliberately away from the so-called Anglo-Indians. And yet it was he who had to take all the pains and spend all the money necessary to arrange an expedition that brought him very near destruction. He was

obliged to do by what he did because he found that his personal honour and that of all Indians were at a stake owing to the two English ladies' taking his words literally. Neither Mrs. Moore nor Adela were interested in going when the final invitation came, but both had to go because they had said they would. Aziz's invitation was in reality no invitation at all, it was a trick he had extemporaneously invented to extricate himself from a situation in which he found himself to have asked the two English ladies to come to his unspeakably dirty house.

That Adela's charge against Aziz was propelled by the politics of colonialism



E M Forster

is undeniable. It is, of course, profoundly ironical that the charge should have been brought by the unprejudiced newcomer and not by any one of those racialistic, two-dimensional women of the civil station. Adela had a breakdown, and when that happened all the racial prejudices that her unconscious mind had been continually fed by were released in the form of an outrageous charge of assault brought against Aziz. Politics dominates once again when Aziz and Adela lose their individuality and become a martyr and a villain, depending on the side they were looked at from. Fielding, who wanted to travel

light, is forced to take up the baggage of partisanship. He resigns from the club and joins the Indians.

There is the inevitable antagonism in both novels between the coloniser and the colonised, the oppressor and the oppressed. That both writers are full of sympathy for the deprived is unmistakable. But in the ultimate analysis, their concern is not so much for the Africans or Indians as for the Europeans themselves. The setting is exotic, far-off queer; but the principal characters are Europeans. It is what colonialism has made of the colonizers, rather than the fate of the colonized, which remains the focal point of attention for the conservative as well as the liberal artist.

True, it is Marlow and not Conrad who said about the British colonies "good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done there." Marlow is British and it is understandable that he should evaluate British imperialism differently. But we know that Conrad himself had testified to the superiority of the English, whenever, the occasion arose, in Lord Jim and *Nostromo*, for example. Kurtz is European. He is a universal genius; all Europeans contributed to his making, we are told; and he is superior to all others in the novel, serving as an alter ego to Marlow himself. Kurtz's superiority, one feels, is due, not to a insignificant degree, to his partly English background. He is not a Belgian as most others are, nor is he a Russian like the young worshipper of Kurtz; he is partly English (his mother was half-English) and he was educated partly in England, we are assured.

Kurtz is not hollow, he had some substance inside him. What Conrad mourns, is not the loss of the Africans, who are unnamed; but that of the Europeans who overshadow everyone else. The ornamental knobs that Kurtz had made with human skulls are shocking morally, more than physically; they embody not so much the cries of the men killed as the moral decline of the

man who had the desire and nerves to do the job. Marlow "hates, detests and can't bear lies," for he finds "there is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies". But he does lie to the intended in order to save Kurtz and also Kurtz's woman herself from that cruel devourer of all light, called darkness. The magnificent African woman is disposable, but not the European intended, before whose innocence the near-cynical Marlow bows down.

Andre Gide did not exaggerate when he called *Heart of Darkness* the most severe indictment in literature of colonialism; the work is a very important document indeed. For it deals not only with what European colonialism has done to the Africans, but also, and this is more important, what it has done to the Europeans themselves. Kurtz dies and the dead Kurtz has to be redeemed with a lie. Tragedy, we know, deals with wastefulness has been created by the Europeans for their own selves. What man has made of man — both Marlow and Conrad regret with even a greater sense of melancholy than Wordsworth had reasons to feel at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The men are, of course, European.

Forster is known for his fairmindedness. He was particularly critical of the English middle classes with their developed bodies; fully developed minds and undeveloped hearts. But in *A Passage to India* he is really telling us the story of English middle class men and women; just he had done in his other novels. The passage is of the English and not of the Indians. Colonialism has dried up the emotional life of the Anglo-Indians. Ronny was normal in English, he was attractive in the Lake Districts, but in colonial India he is unacceptable to Adela as husband. In India the English are battled up; they live like exiles, if not prisoners; and their sense of insecurity is not unfounded. Forster is not concerned with the gain of the British empire; he mourns the loss suffered by the English individuals.

To be sure, Conrad has a deeper and clearer understanding of colonialism; he knows what colonialism essentially is. But even he deals not see it as an economic phenomenon. In the ultimate analysis, in *Heart of Darkness* colonialism does not emerge as the expansion of capitalism; it is seen in human terms of greed; of material interests, to be precise. Ivory is white, but it creates dark greed in man. Nor does colonialism remain a modern phenomenon; for greed transcends recorded history. Then there is the realization in Marlow that the primitive man lies not only in Africa, he is there inside the civilized man also.

"They howled and leaped," Marlow tells his auditors, and span, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity like yours." The civilized man becomes an animal, and colonialism recedes, for the moment at least, into the background. Is cure possible? No, not really. Man will remain what he is an animal; but the individual can save himself through work, and restraint, loyalty and sympathy, perhaps renunciation.

In a manner not very dissimilar, Forster has declined to accept politics as entirely man-made. There is a suggestion in the novel that something mysterious works; something beyond and above man; maybe they are the echoes or the sky overhead, pouring sometimes dryness and death and sometimes fertility and beauty. The echoes settle the human affairs, so does the sky. Underneath, men look like dwarfs, shaking hands. The responsibility is mystified in both novels.

Children are absent in *Heart of Darkness*. The adult and ironic world of *A Passage to India* also has no place for children. We see them in the final section which after all is the world of abundance and vitality. But children, whether they belong to Aziz or the Anglo-Indians, are items of property, they are owned; which is quite in keeping with the general culture prevailing in the colony.

To be continued