



column: *Miscellaneously Musing*

On a Road Less Travelled By—Kaiser Haq's Poetry—II

by Fakrul Alam

A GOOD WAY TO GET into Kaiser Haq's poetry can be through "Your Excellency", a recent poem, and one that should be familiar to the regular reader of these pages since it was published in its entirety in the November 23 issue of *The Daily Star*. This is a poem composed as an act of refusal to become "a poet" in the "official" sense of the term. Written no doubt with the memory of the dictator whose grand gestures included the trumpeting of verse, and who loved to dabble in poetry and surround himself with the literati — and thus arranged poetry festivals with great show — this poem demonstrates that Haq's poetry is rooted in Bangladeshi life and culture, although he prefers to view it from an oblique angle. Not only the ironic posture that the poet adopts to the official invitation extended to him to join the dictator's show ("I hope you will forgive my inability/ to accept your most generous invitation/ to join the noble enterprise/ of your party and people"), but also the squalor and corruption which the dictator has helped to perpetuate ("the system of graft and kick-backs/ that governs your world/ the graffiti on mud walls") indicate that this is a poem about us. The first point to be made about Haq,

then, is this: he is a Bangladeshi poet writing in English; not someone pinning about "Albion's distant shore./ Its valleys green, its mountain high" as Michael Modhusudhon Dutt did in a literary vein, but someone who has forged his verse out of our lives and times in an idiom distinctively his own.

The second point to be made about Kaiser Haq's poetry may seem to contradict the first one: though Haq is a Bangladeshi poet writing in English, he is also a poet writing in a major, and international, tradition of poetry written in English. This is obvious in the sly reference to what the Anglo-American Eliot said to the young English poet Spender ("one can understand somebody/ trying to write poetry/ but to be a poet?"), inserted into "Your Excellency" to put down the dictator's pretensions about poetry. But there are in the poem other, less explicit, allusions to poets in English and their poetics. Thus when Haq reveals his poetic credo ("I just try/ to write poetry/ which is neither a nation-building nor an income-generating activity") and locates poetry in the world ("it is very much in the swim of things, it jostles the crowds/ even as it stands apart"), one is reminded of WH Auden's comments on the effect of poetry in "In Memory of WB Yeats": "For

poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/ In the valley of its making where executive would never want to tamper". Similarly, when Haq writes that a poem by "simply being itself/ bears witness", one can hear echoes of Archibald Macleish's famous poem, "Ars Poetica": "A poem should not mean/ But be". Then there is the glance at Nero in the lines about the poets who hope on the dictator's bandwagon "fiddling away/ while..." Which reveals to us that Haq sees our history of despots and sycophants as part of a universal history which he can access through classical western literature.

The third point that can be made about Kaiser Haq's poetry through an analysis of "Your Excellency" is that his characteristic gesture as a poet is to meld the serious with the comic in his verse. This can be seen in the poem when he says that he would be ready to sympathize with those who "declare/ that/ poetry is all balls"; after all, the poet knows that this is quite true, since "Balls/ Testes/ [means] in Latin/ witnesses". As a poet, he will stand witness to pompous dictators as well as fatuous critics of poetry, but he will do so with irony and disdain. He will concern himself with the metaphysical, too, but we will do so without abandoning his

sense of the absurd. As he puts it in the poem: "Being... / is the grandest, most puzzling thing/ the human mind has dreamed up", but while the poet ponders the problem, he is also aware that it is a subject studied in our universities in "the

comic mode, Haq writes poems that exploit the rhythms of speech in a variety of metrical forms. He does so with a commitment to the craft of poetry which he describes with a spare eloquence in "Your Excellency" as "the putting to-



Fakrul Alam

subsidiary philosophy" by would be autocrats "to get easy marks". To phrase it somewhat differently, Haq's preferred tone is one of self-conscious, parodic skepticism, of someone who manages to be playful and serious at the same time.

The final point to be made about Kaiser Haq's poetry is that he communicates his ironic vision of contemporary life in Bangladesh in carefully controlled "free" verse. Basing his lines on "standard" English, and only occasionally using Bangladeshi-English in a

gether/ of words/ by which it comes into being."

A Bangladeshi writing poetry about Bangladesh or from Bangladesh, someone who has also affiliated himself with other traditions of verse, a man who composes poems to communicate an ironic vision of life, and a poet given to experimental effects in free verse — these are aspects of Kaiser Haq's poetry that I would now like to explore in further detail by analyzing some poems from A Happy Farewell, the only one of his collections now in print in Bangladesh.

That Kaiser Haq is a "very" Bangladeshi poet writing in English is perhaps most obvious in his four "Poems in Subcontinental English." Written in imitation of the Indo-Anglian poet Nissim Ezekiel's comic experiments with Indian English, these delightful poems use "binglish" not only to make us laugh but also to satirize our foibles and prejudices. In the first of these poems collected in A Happy Farewell, "Welcome Tourist Sahel!" Haq presents Bangladesh to us through a tourist guide hawking the country any which way he can to make a living. The guide's perspective on life is a mixture of the venal and the patriotic, and while we may find his attempts to sell our country's image hilarious ("Our culture is rich/ like television, cinema, dances and songs? [My love-life is cultural also/ with neighboring daughter going to cinema/ and singing in bathroom — but that is personal matter]"), we can find his views disquieting too ("because of ancient history-heritage/ we are in many ruins"). Civil Service Romance, dedicated to Ezekiel and the second of these poems, is an amusing transcript in verse of a correspondence between a low-level bureaucrat and the girl next desk. Haq's version of the young man's romantic vision is very droll ("You are

joining as Lower Division assistant/ but you are Upper Division lady to me), but the poem is memorable also because of the implicit satire on bureaucratic red-tapism ("By the grace of Allah my Boss today/ is sending me with URGENT file to your section/ and we are talking while the matter/ is pending as per unwritten regulation/ What is URGENT when we are dealing /with Most Immediate? Bosses and governments/ come and go, but we go on forever"). "Sahara Desert" takes a wry look at the dreams and preoccupations of a "bachelor boy"; the type of young men who take over New market every evening to ogle girls since viewing is our hobby. "Party Games," the last of the four poems Haq has written in subcontinental English, is a farcical account of Dhaka's beau monde. In other words, it is a poem about a party where "everybody [is] respectable and highly occupied," but where the surface glitter and the merry-making can hardly conceal a sense of disquiet and heartburn.

That Kaiser Haq's poems are rooted in Bangladeshi life and culture is also evident in his more personal poems. His poems thus deal with "the noisy campus corridors" of Dhaka University ("A Happy Farewell"), the nightmarish quality of our history, the stifling sun

of April and May when "the sun bakes our pillows/ into hot bricks" ("Unholy Sabbath"), the oppressive pre-monsoon period when "The sun [is] so killing days on end/ Then the rain so sudden" ("Two Monsoon Poems"), and the unreal streets of Dhaka ("Surreal Morning"). On occasions, and in more "public" poems, Haq will reveal his compassion for people whose lives amount to a litany of disasters ("A peasants Lament") or men doomed to a faceless existence in rural Bangladesh ("My village and I"). A Happy Farewell also includes portraits of people we meet everyday in our streets and markets: a defiant madman ("On a Street"), a village tailor whose life is a saga of endurance ("Cousin Shamsu, Durzi"), and the ubiquitous house tutor ("Master Babu"). "Bangladesh '71", an early poem written by Haq apparently to describe his emotions as he set out to join our war of liberation, confirms the feeling that one has throughout a Happy Farewell: Haq may appear to be skeptical and cynical about aspects of Bangladeshi society and even alienated by parts of it, but he is really concerned about it and the quality of Bangladeshi lives.

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

exhibition

Paintings to Suit Your Pocket

by Fayza Haq

THE EXHIBITION OF four contemporary artists at Haque Art Gallery was slightly haphazard in presentation but it brought together a number of paintings of different styles and media that the Dhaka bourgeois could afford.

All the artists work as BTV designers and have a BFA qualification from the Institute of Fine Arts, DU. Rafique Anwar, who prides in his oriental style is good

at mural work as well. His work presents rural life, specially that of the river-sides. The second artist, Jalil Biswas, dealt with themes like women and flowing rivers. Zahid Mustafa had a strong sense of patriotism and had the cause of women in mind. The last and the youngest artist of this group of four was Mir Ahsanul Alam who used three dimensional collages to express himself. Rafique Ahmed's "Device

for catching fish" had a bait for catching fish in deep water as its subject. The fish were a delicately painted golden colour with pencil lines seen through the water colour, while the atmosphere of the deep sea was brought in with touches of black and white. The underwater world was clearly created with confident strokes. His "Fish for eating" depicted fish again, here caught in a trap. Once again the life underwater

was carefully created by water colour strokes of blue and red. The fish looked most realistic. The strokes in water-colour lent an air of romance.

His "Cull flowers on handkerchief" had women embroidering. This was done in the oriental fashion and comprised women with long hair and doe eyes. A watching observer was brought in a balcony in the background while the rest of the picture was complete

with the delineation of tree covered thatched roofs and lyrical mud walls.

Jalil Biswas's "Faded afternoon" was an impressionistic piece with a voluptuous woman bending over a clay water vessel. In front and behind here were patches of trees and bushes done in variations of green, yellow and blue. "Reflection" had a mosque on a lake with shadows falling in a romantic pattern on the water. This was done with splashes

and strokes of colours and would definitely decorate a sitting room well.

Biswas's "River mother" had women in bright saris dipping their water vessels in the river to carry home. The colours were bright blue and red and the strokes were allowed to smudge deeply. His "Mother and child" was a conventional pastel piece done on a small scale but with care.

Zahid Mustafa's "Woman

with a parrot" had a lady presented with the usual graceful drapes of a sari. Flecks of colours surrounded her. With her was her feathery pet in a metal cage. You could almost imagine tender words coming from the woman's lips.

In the surrealistic piece "Man and woman" all one could find were eyes, lips and nose scattered all over the canvas in sweeps, swirls and curls.

Mir Ahsanul Alam's

mixed media "Lonely" was done with wires on an aluminium sheet. With simple bending of wires he had obtained the image of a woman weeping at the foot of a tree. In "Portrait" the artist had depicted a dancing woman with pieces of leather complete with jewels and details of the face. In "Life -1" and "Life -2" the artist had worked on wood and had attempted to portray what our existence was all about with semi-abstract figures. ■

poem

I Only Raised My Hand

by Zahid Haider

I only raised my hand in the emptiness.
The sky screamed
The clouds darkened the earth
With their steamy procession.
The radio, the TV and BSS journalists
Kept talking only about
My raising the hand.
The news media from around the globe
Sent their correspondents,
And the soldiers aimed their tank muzzles at me.

The politicians became worried:
For whom is this hand raised?
The economists sat in an urgent meeting:
How much of the budget should be spent
To pull this hand down?
The sociologists called a seminar:
What percentage of the society
Will be confused, seeing this raised hand?

Each one asked himself,
Why has the man raised his hand?
Does the hand clutch something?
If it does,
What is written on it?
Is there any other hand behind his?

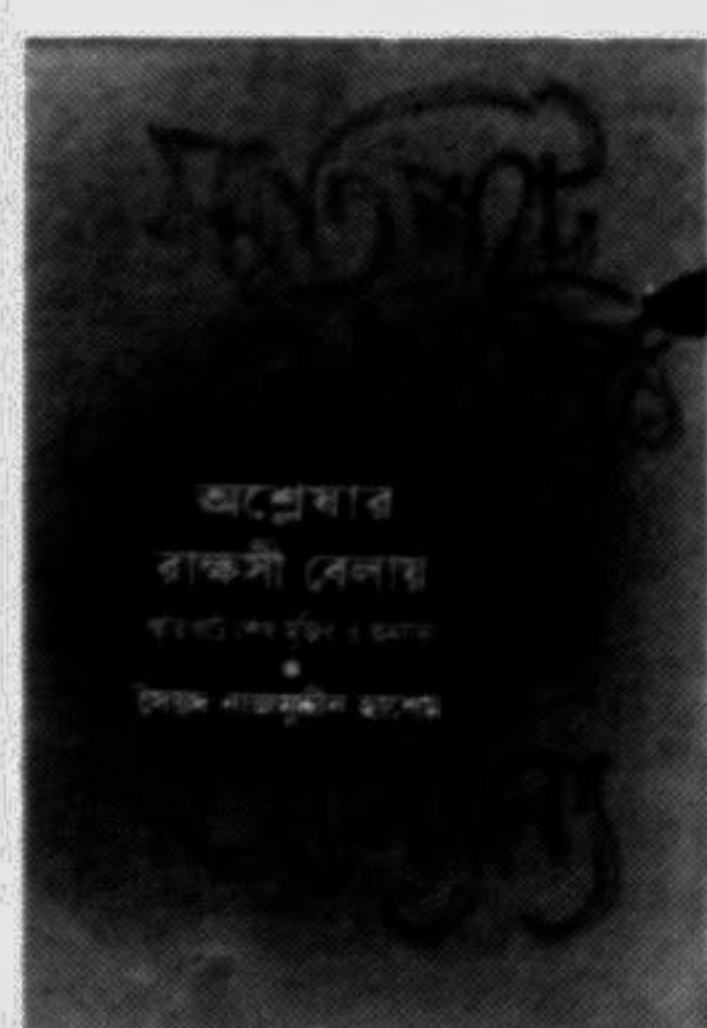
NOT against man,
But I only raised my hand
Waking up from sleep
Yawning, to bring back the circulation.

Translated by S. Manzoorul Islam

books

Ashleshar Rakshashi Belai (III)

Translated by Sonia Nishat Amin



SO, TO KARACHI WE came. Wali bhai was very restless. He would stride up and down in the midst of our work at the news editor's room. No one could write English as well as he did. Soon, veteran British news reader Eric Warner, who too was a bachelor, and Wali bhai became fast friends. Eric was one of the countless refugees who had marched on foot from Burma to India during the Second World War.

Waliullah's innate chivalry towards women put him in a tight spot now and then, and rescued him from these, as well. Fun-loving Kalimullah, in order to embarrass him, in collaboration with a few others,

spread harmless rumours about Wali bhai linking his name with Anise Mandiwala — beautiful news-caster from Christian College; Jahanara Syed from Hyderabad; the fiery Anita Ghulam Ali daughter of the famous judge from Sind; and Fatema Mansuri of the Gujrati service (in the Radio Department). At the time we were all staying in a hall at the YMCA and would stop over at the Hotel Palmgrove (then owned by a Hindu) or at "Mexicano", for a change from our usual fare. Our sessions would be joined by persons such as Ismail Ibrahim Allu — son of the Bombay millionaire, but renowned for his elegant poetry in English; the painter whose real name is now forever lost behind his takhallus (pen-name) Ibn Isha — and the beautiful, aristocratic writer Qurratul Ain Hyder. Qurratul Ain had published her "Aag Ka Dariya" (River of Fire) — a novel dating back to prehistoric times. The author in her work had resorted to the doctrine of "reincarnation" which offended, I suppose, the sentiment of the powers that be in Pakistan. Qurratul sought asylum in India where she was honoured with the highest literary award (According to Kalimullah, the Wali-Qur-

ratul romance had reached, though unbeknownst to all, the heights of the famed Devdas-Parbatii). Ibrahim Jalis — author of *Chalis Karore Bhikhar* — was also a regular at our small gatherings.

After observing all austerties of the Christian Hostel, Waliullah sought refuge in a small, secluded flat where he could pursue his library endeavours in peace. It was as a devotee of the literary muse that Miss Casablanca, cultural attache of the Italian embassy, dropped in on Wali one day. Instantly self-styled guardians and well-wishers rushed in to hold at bay the consequences of this "unfortunate" infatuation, which soon came to a close, however.

In 1951 Waliullah left for Australia as press attache to our diplomatic mission there. I met him at Sydney the following year when my younger colleague at the Radio Office Zia Mohiuddin and I arrived in Australia for a training programme under the Colombo Plan. I introduced Wali bhai to our friend Anne-Marie Thib — a Fulbright scholar to Australia from Paris. Wali bhai I think paid more attention that night to the critics and patrons of art, on that evening of his first meeting

with Anne. I do not know the history of the intervening years. We met again in Karachi, in 1953 where one evening the three of us — Dirky, Malek and I — gathered at a flat in Elphinstone Street to celebrate Anne-Marie and Waliullah's wedding. Shortly after the couple left for Indonesia. I learnt from their letter that a belated honeymoon was spent among the coral reefs off the island of Bali.

We did not see each other for a long time after this. When we did meet it was 1968, and I had arrived in Paris to take over from Syed Waliullah as First Secretary at the Embassy, and he was off to join UNESCO. We were like one big family, in Paris. We travelled to Versailles or Fontainebleau in Wali bhai's luxurious car — or spent the day picnicking in the garden of Bois-de-Bologne. Anne Marie and my wife became fast friends; their children Semeen and Iraj were inseparable from our Snighdo and Tanmay.

I remember the long hours the two of us spent walking in the woods and talking of everything under the sun. The issue of China was a bone of contention between us. China was in the throes of the "Cultural Revolution" — the heritage bestowed by centuries of

achievement in art, literature and philosophy, was being trampled under foot in the name of some ill-conceived amateurish "revolution". This utter disregard of the teachings of Marx and Lenin and the mass hysteria that had seized that nation, pained me. Wali bhai, however, was stoical about it. He felt that the attempt on part of the younger breed — the "Red Guards" to dislodge the old and experienced leaders, would have some positive far-reaching as well as immediate consequences. This would (so he felt), be conducive to the state of permanent revolution envisaged by Trotsky! I must admit, the fact that despite arguing over everything day in and day out, there was no crack in our friendship, was due to Wali bhai's innate cordiality and tolerance. We were bound together by our deepest philosophy of life, literature and art, the tremors in remote China could not touch our friendship there.

We shared another bond. France was then in the throes of the "May Revolution" drawn along the lines of Russia's October upheaval. The brave new generation of France in defiance of the older one, had taken over the reins for a couple of days. We were both ardent admirers of Presi-

dent de Gaulle — specially his independent foreign policy which was aimed at distancing France from the US military alliance — network. The dauntless courage and spirit of the young also evoked our profound sympathy.

I had written a report analysing the concurrence of facts that had led to the explosive events in France, right before our eyes, so to speak. For its title I had borrowed from Lenin's pamphlet on the abortive revolution of 1905.

After reading it Wali bhai agreed with me on several counts: the smouldering embers left by the constrictive legacy of the Code Napoleon, finally caught fire — but to this must be added the revolutionary ideas of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse Tung, Lenin, Trotsky, philosopher Herbert Marcuse, Nechayev, the Russian nihilist, Algerian theorist Frantz Fanon, and the father of Nihilism Prince Kropotkin.

* In the Jaws of an Ill-starred Time Remembering Sheikh Mujib and Others, by Najemuddin Hashim

About the writer: Dr Sonia N Amin Associate Professor of History at Dhaka University.