

SHORT STORY

PURABI BASU (translated by Farhad Ahmed)

I felt scared.

When you said, 'So this is your true face. Look---this is who you really are. Can't you see my shadow reflected in your eyes? You are mine, only mine, and the rest is all lies.' It was right then that I made up my mind that you'd never see me again.

Yesterday at noon, just having come back from you, I had entered my secret room and was getting ready to take a bath. This was the only time I would have to myself during the whole day. On the wall next to me hung a row of masks. Anytime, whichever one I needed, I would put on.

I'd just finished washing the one made out of thick lines of white hair, the one for my son.

I had finished wiping from my forehead the brown, three-eyed *teep* that I usually wore to please my husband. I had also removed the dangling wire-earrings I would wear for my father. The stethoscope and spectacles worn for the benefit of my patients had also been taken off. Just then you walked into the room.

The red rose you had given me was still ablaze in my hair. You looked at it, and you loved me for it, felt as if I was very near and dear to you. You wanted to completely overpower me, though you yet did not know why right then I seemed so very dear to you, so very close. I understood why, because yesterday my eyes were far more clear, were not the pair of eyes you were accustomed to seeing every day.

Because by then one by one I had stripped off the spangles from the irises of my eyes, the ones that made me so beloved by my husband, the red ones that drew my son towards me, the off-white spangles that gave comfort and security to my patients, the golden ones that made me my father's darling little girl.

I was about to take off the rose-coloured spangle, through which I would see you and the one you knew---that look you were familiar with, my eye in which you would see the flame of desire, when right at that very moment in you walked.

You were not supposed to come in then.

I had met you just a little while back.

Yet you came. At a very inconvenient time.

I felt scared.

When you said, 'So this is your true face. Look---this is who you really are. Can't you see my shadow reflected in your eyes? You are mine, mine only, and the rest is all lies,' I immediately made up my mind that you'd never see me again.

Yesterday, after coming back from you, I came straight to this dressing-room. I had thought that before I took my bath I would take off the mask familiar to you, put on the mask for my son and go to his room. That would have been the right thing to do. But I couldn't do it because you robbed me of that opportunity. You had returned too quickly. It hadn't entered my mind that you could do so. And the way you desired me then, it wasn't because of the mask. That mask you had seen on me many times before. In fact, to tell the

Unknown Face

truth, that was the only face of mine that you were familiar with. So why did you lay claim to me with such complete arrogance yesterday? With such selfishness?

Because then the usual laughing words I reserved for my son were not there.

Then I hadn't even thrown away the dimples in my cheeks which enchanted my husband. Because then for a moment there had disappeared the frowning, lip-biting evaluations of the sick who came to me.

And because my bright red-lipsticked lips of which you were so fond were still locked in a wide smile.

You wanted me very much then. Nobody else existed except you. Alone, by myself, you wanted me. When, after getting naked, I was about to go take a bath.

Nobody knew about the existence of this room of mine.

Inside this big house was this six feet-by-eight feet secret little room, in this world the only thing I owned---the one thing I had earned. In this whole wide world there was nothing else I could call mine. Even the handbag I used daily was not fully mine. I would not use this room merely to check on or change my daily masks or clothes, put on makeup and dresses and various paints. Every day I came to this room and washed my body clean of all colours. I would take off all my ornaments, masks and clothes and quietly see myself naked for some time. Look out of the small window. Listen to the beat of bird wings. Give my ear to the racing *falguni* wind. Be spell-bound by the blue sky, white clouds and the array of flowers in my neighbour's garden. I would sit quietly. With nobody around.

Not you.

Not my husband.

Not my son.

Not my father.

Not my patients.

In this six feet-by-eight feet room, except for my own five-and-a-half-foot frame, there wasn't enough room for anybody else. I would sit and grow so powerful, so huge, so mighty that it would seem this room would no longer be able to hold me. And armed with that power and confidence, putting on any one of my masks, I would stride out swiftly ready to face the world. This room of mine---nobody was allowed to enter it. You did not know that. Which is why breaking all the rules you barged into my designated space like some idiot. Nobody else had done it before.

I felt scared.

When you said, 'So this is your true face. Look---this is who you really are. Can't you see my shadow reflected in your eyes? You are mine, only mine, and the rest is all lies,' observing your arrogance I felt scared. I was hurt by your selfishness. And immediately made up my mind that you'd never see me again.

Now there were only five masks in front of my eyes. Four of them hung on the wall. The fifth mask that I had been putting on for you was in my hand. It is this mask that I wanted to break first. My hands smashed to pieces your familiar, much-loved mask that was the bed of your eyes, the one with the thin curved eyebrow, the slightly flushed cheek. They all fell to the ground---the scarlet *teep*, the short hairs trailing by the ears. Then I lifted the mask kept



aside for my father. It wasn't any trouble breaking that. It had become old and ragged with long use---its skin had grown loose, its colour pallid. Breaking the mask for my son---its calm façade creased on the forehead like a school-teacher's---now that hurt a bit. My son, who only wanted to see his mother pretty, and did not deserve to lose her for that! The mask that I wore for my

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Purobi Basu is a well-known Bengali short story writer. Farhad Ahmed is a free-lance translator/writer.

Why do some of us write poetry in English?

Yes, why do we?

It is a question that arose in my mind after a recent conversation with Mintoo Bhai (Enayetullah Khan, editor, New Age). Meeting with him after a gap of twenty years, our talk at one point veered towards literature. Towards South Asian fiction in English. In the midst of which he suddenly confessed to being mystified by Bangladeshis who wrote poetry in English, to the fact that he had never gotten any pleasure out of reading it; he lofted his hands into the air, rotated the palms, and said 'Its images and metaphors, somehow I just don't...', then trailed off. A little taken aback, I muttered something about the Indians writing some excellent poems in English, which he conceded. Then we turned the car back on to the main road, went on to other topics. But that line of his stayed with me. I could have answered that while our response to Bengali poetry is inborn and innate, the ear, the senses, for English language poetry, whether South Asian or Caribbean, or, indeed, British or American, has to be acquired, has to be developed and nurtured before it becomes something close to innate and natural, and that what might be equally interesting to explore was not only Bangladesh poetry in English, but the kind of reader that read it. But what stopped me from saying it was the perfectly valid, larger question implicit in Mintoo Bhai's statement: Why do we, or some of us, write creatively in English? Yes, why do we?

That stopped me. Sometimes the basic questions are the best.

It is a topic that has been debated by an older generation of Indian authors and poets more prone to soul-searchig--Raja Rao is one example that readily comes to mind--than the current crop of Indian writers, most of whom take writing in English for granted, simply because not only due to the ease with which they write it, but because of the tradition of such writing they are backed up by. 'Keep on truckin', Daddy O,' seems to be their attitude, 'and don't explain and don't complain'.

But what about us Bangladeshis? While the above debates/essays are relevant to us within the larger frame of South Asian writing in English, yet, I felt, surely there had to be some features, some kinks, unique to the Bangladesh context. I turned to Kaiser Huq, described as 'the leading Bangladeshi poet writing in English' by the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (UK), as the perfect person to respond to the question. The following article is his answer, the title an echo of Sir Philip Sydney's An Apology for Poetry (1595). Hopefully, there will be others.

Kaiser Huq is represented in several international anthologies, such as *Stories from South Asia* (OUP) and *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literature*. He has published five collections of poetry: *Starting Lines* (1978); *A Little Ado* (1978); *A Happy Farewell* (1994); *Black Orchid* (1996); *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song* (2002).

--Editor, Literature Page

An apology for Bangladeshi poetry in English

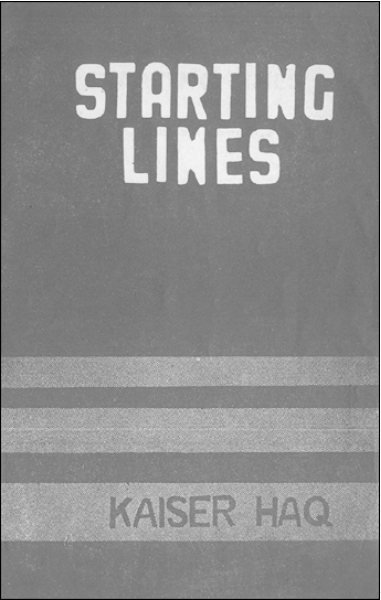
KAISER HAQ

Ever since subcontinentals started doing creative writing in the late 18th century they (especially versifiers among them) have faced the question, "Why write in English and not your mother tongue?" One can answer the question broadly by saying that if a language is taught and used in a region, some are bound to try creative writing in it. But each writer has a personal story to tell.

I do not think I would have tried creative writing in English if I weren't an English-medium boy. From the age of four I moved in three realms. At home in a poor neighbourhood in Dhaka I belonged to a barefoot troop happily at play in the dust, jabbering away in East Bengali Bangla, and spending part of my spare time in reading Bangla. At school, which for five years was Don's Kindergarten, run by a Eurasian family in tandem with the "Hotel Airline and Bar" on the upper storey of the schoolhouse, I sat well-shod and straitjacketed in shorts, tucked-in shirt and tie, chanting English lessons in chorus. We were a motley crowd of Bangla, Urdu and Gujrati speakers, with a handful of anglophone Eurasians thrown in. Until everyone had acquired Basic English the lingua franca was what I believe used to be called Hindustani, which was nearly as alien to me as English. I had been a garrulous infant. Now I grew tongue-tied. By the time I began to feel a growing confidence in my use of English it was time to move to St. Gregory's High School downtown, founded over a century ago by a Belgian Benedictine and now run by American Catholic missionaries.

During vacations I would move to my mother's ancestral village. Though only a dozen miles by bus from the city centre it was a fairytale world of birds and beasts, elusive *pretas* and rough-talking peasants. In summer we swam, fished, punted (with bamboo poles). In winter we played *kabaddi*, hunted foxes--not in hunting pink or mounted on thorough-breeds, but in a barefoot, lathi-wielding chase.

I spent two years at Faujdardhat Cadet College, set up with military patronage along English public-school lines. Among our English texts were Tom Brown's Schooldays, which all of you know and Adventures at Dabanga School, which no one here has probably heard about. Dabanga is a boarding school somewhere in East Africa, in a region where smugglers thrive. Among the students is a rough beer-drinking character called Nelson who becomes embroiled in criminal activities. But as events build up to a thrilling climax he reveals his innate goodness and becomes the hero of the hour. Despite the efforts of the Principal,

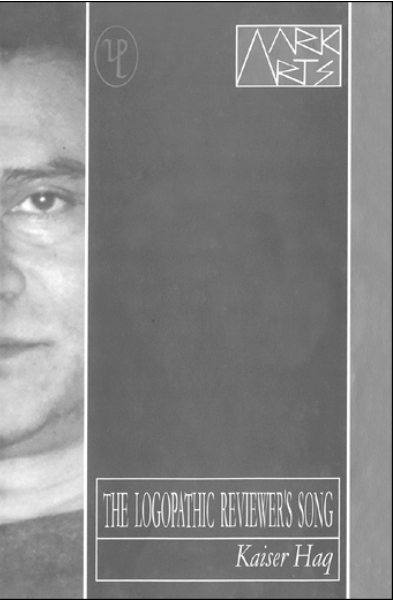


a colonel from New Zealand, Faujdardhat didn't quite measure up to Rugby. It fell somewhere between Rugby and Dabanga.

But how did I get to writing in English--and poetry at that. I wasn't a great poetry buff until my last year in school. The great English poets---Milton, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats---were names to remember and drop at opportune moments. But what we read by them didn't particularly appeal--a common experience in the tropics, it seems. Naipaul points out how English infant was what I believe used to be called Hindustani, which was nearly as alien to me as English. I had been a garrulous infant. Now I grew tongue-tied. By the time I began to feel a growing confidence in my use of English it was time to move to St. Gregory's High School downtown, founded over a century ago by a Belgian Benedictine and now run by American Catholic missionaries.

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What do the similes and metaphors say to us? Asking such questions, trying out answers, modifying them, he would write out a response to the poem on the blackboard. He taught me that writing was a process of playing around with words till one struck what seemed the right note. Moving from poem to poem in our textbook we came to Lawrence's "Snake." And it opened up a whole new world. I could feel the music of its free verse as I hadn't felt the music of any other English poem. Its simple diction gave me immediate access to the dramatic situation in the poem. It hardly mattered that I had never seen a carobtree, which features prominently in the poem; the adjectival fanfare preceding it--"the deep, strangescented shade of the great dark carobtree"--brought it to life. I started scribbling free verse. Walking in the park (this was soon after I left school) I began a poem, "Nature on a leash." Friends applauded. I began enjoying myself in my new role. I do not wish to make too much of this experience, but it may not be farfetched to hypothesize that similar experiences must be quite common in the Third World; the fact that most Third World English poetry is in free verse would seem to support the hypothesis.

By now the controversy over whether subcontinentals can create significant literature in English is a matter of cultural history. The ill-humoured attack by the Bengali poet Buddhadev Bose in an encyclopedia entry on Indo-Anglian poetry (i.e., Indian poetry in English) is not likely to be repeated. (He described Indo-Anglian poetry as a cul-de-sac lined with curio shops.) But have the objections raised against it been completely refuted? At the heart of the diatribe lay the belief that authentic poetry can be written only in one's mother tongue. Is this a totally wrong-

headed view? I do not think so. It is pertinent to remember that neither India nor Africa, where English is not the mother tongue of a significant fraction of the population, has produced a major poet in English, but the Caribbean, where a kind of English is the mothertongue, has--in Walcott.

Emile Cioran, himself a crosser of linguistic boundaries (he was a Rumanian who wrote exquisite French prose), comments: "In a borrowed language, you are conscious of words; they exist not in you but outside of you. This interval between yourself and your means of expression explains why it is difficult, even impossible, to be a poet in another language besides your own. How extract a substance from words that are not rooted in you? The newcomer lives on the surface of language; he cannot, in a tongue belatedly learned, translate that subterranean agony from which poetry issues."

Hard evidence of a sort for this view comes from the cognitive sciences. Steven Pinker in *The Language Instinct* mentions an ingenious experiment that shows how early infants get attuned to their mother tongue. It was found that "four-day-old French babies suck harder to hear French than Russian, and pick up

PARK

Nature on a leash;
indifferent collar of bricks
pierced by gates.

Like its kinsmen,
zoo tiger and pet dog, yet unlike:
one in irritation paces,
the other in contentment prances,
but the park in lonely introspection wraps itself...

Late morning. Busy self-centred birds;
A few human figures
like bare winter trees.
Voices: coarse rustle of autumn leaves.
Busy afternoon:
Throngs of bare feet,
sneakers,
leather shoes,
high heels,
slippers
press the grass.
When the lamps appear most are home;
a few linger
making hard park benches their couch,
the grass footrests,
the park their parlour.
At last they leave,
wrapped in its torn blanket of darkness...

So I mused
on a lonely park bench
till he came and drove me away:
a gaunt fellow
with a munching beard
carrying peanuts and body-odour.

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their sucking more when a tape changes from Russian to French than from French to Russian." This positive response to the mother-tongue is due to the fact that "the melody of mothers' speech carries through their bodies and is audible in the womb. The babies still prefer French when the speech is electronically filtered so that the consonant and vowel sounds are muffled and only the melody comes through. But they are indifferent when the tapes are played backwards, which preserves the vowels and some of the consonants but distorts the melody. Nor does the effect prove the inherent beauty of the French language: nonFrench infants do not prefer French, and French infants do not distinguish Italian from English." The inference is that "The infants must have learned something about the prosody of French (its melody, stress and timing) in the womb, or in their first days out of it."

The experiment demonstrates that one is most intimate with the lyric genius of one's mother tongue. It follows that poetry written in a language other than one's mother-tongue is not likely to be conspicuous for its lyricism. And this, I believe, is the case with Indian English and African English poetry. Dom Moraes of course was very lyrical, but his mother tongue was English.

But it does not follow, as Bose thought, that subcontinental poetry in English is doomed to oblivion. The best of it is good by any standard, noteworthy for its irony and satire, the quality of its imagery, its use of the Indian voice. It gives us something one cannot find in any other kind of English poetry or in poetry in the subcontinent's regional languages. Besides, with the subcontinental diaspora more and more Indians are picking up English in their mothers' wombs, so to speak, and so a major Indo-Anglian poet may emerge any day now.

Part of my writerly activities involve translating from Bangla. This has a special significance for me. Since my literary sensibility has two rather distinct areas, one occupied by Bangla literature, the other by literature in English and literature read in English translation, translating is a way of unifying the two. It

is also a means of coming to terms with aspects of myself of which I may have been only vaguely aware, and of combining the creative and critical sides of my mind: Pound, you may recall, cites translation as a mode of criticism.

My translations have all been labours of love: Shamsur Rahman and Shaheed Quaderi, dear friends besides being leading Bangla poets; *The Wonders of Vilayet*, an eighteenth century Indian's memoir of a trip to Britain; Tagore's *Chaturanga* (Quartet). And Tagore's *Yogayog*, for which I am looking for a publisher. Generally speaking, I find translating Bangla prose a more satisfying activity than translating the poetry, partly because more is lost in translating poetry. The prose, on the other hand, incorporates more of the complex texture of our culture and is therefore likely to appeal to readers interested in otherness. Doesn't Richard Rorty in *Irony, Contingency, Solidarity* make a case for novels and documentaries as the best agents available for broadening and deepening our human sympathies?

Translating Tagore's Quartet led me to realize with blinding clarity the extent to which the Bengali psyche--and indeed my individual psyche--is polarized between the devotional and romantic on the one hand, and the logical and rational on the other. We have all been aware of the impact of bhakti with its associated irrationalism and eroticism on the Bengali mind. We are perhaps less aware of our logic-chopping side, which goes back at least as far as the NavyaNyaya logicians of the sixteenth century. It is conspicuous today as what Alan Ross in a poem titled "Bengal" calls "A querulous literacy." The opposition between the two weltanschauungs passed into popular culture, as in the saying, *Biswasay milay swarga, tarkey bahadur---* "Faith takes you to heaven, but arguments lead you astray." I recall it from my childhood. In its original form it has "Krishna" instead of "swarga" ("heaven") and was obviously a bhakti squib directed at the hairsplitting logicians. By substituting "*swarga*" for "Krishna," Muslims too could use the proverb: an interesting example of how the two religious communities could drink from the fount of a shared culture. Sadly, the two aspects of the Bengali psyche seem to have remained separate through our history: ours has always been a dissociated sensibility. I like to think that in trying to write in English--an activity that, as Meenakshi Mukherji pointed out years ago, enhances our critical awareness of the complexities of our cultural inheritance--I also try to bring the disparate parts into a meaningful, dialogic relationship.