

Kaiser Haq: Forty Years' Worth of Poem

Kaiser Haq is a certified, born-and-bred Dhaka-ite--St. Greg's, Dhaka College, then student and teacher at Dhaka University, resident of Purana Paltan and Fuller Road, chronicler of monsoons and friend of Kashinath Roy. He is also Bangladesh's foremost English language poet, who recently published his volume of collected poems titled *Published in the Streets of Dhaka, Collected Poems 1966-2006*. That, as any fool can see, is forty years of writing poems, which is a long time of not just the writing of poetry, but also of reflecting on the multiple, diverse issues connected with being a Dhaka poet writing in English. Kaiser Haq has always been a reticent fellow, rarely given to pronouncements on his art and craft--preferring the epigraph or the tipped sardonic aside. It is a reticence that is allied to his art--as is demonstrated in his zen-washed poem 'Pebbles on a Beach', where pebbles, those sea-swept "mineral miracles/of texture, geometry, colour":

*demand the artist's adoration;
knocked one against another
their modest clicks admonish
our garrulity,*

*counsel silence,
contemplation.*

But publishing forty years' heft of poems--a collection that is both a life and a world--is surely a time to perhaps not be--Heaven forbid!-- garrulous, but to share with us, his readers, the thoughts that reside behind that 'contemplation.'

So here is the poet in his own words, Kaiser Haq talking with *The Daily Star's* Ahmede Hussain.

--Literary editor

Ahmede Husain: *You are Bangladesh's leading and (sadly) only English poet. Though Bangladesh has produced quite a few novelists who write in English, the country's poetry scene is somewhat barren. Why do you think the country's contribution to English poetry is so insignificant?*

Kaiser Haq: That's something of an exaggeration. I belong to the second generation of Bangladeshi poets in English, in the previous generation there was Razia Khan Amin and Farida Majid. Razia Amin was my teacher at Dhaka University and later a colleague, and I have fond memories of how she encouraged me in my efforts at versifying when I was an undergraduate. Farida Majid was an important figure on the London poetry scene in the seventies. At her Chelsea flat she ran a Thursday evening salon that attracted both young and established poets and the marvellous polish artist Felix Topolski, who sat and listened to the poems being read out and discussed and drew the poets. The drawings and a selection of the poems was published by the Salamander Imprint, which Farida ran with great distinction. A couple of poets she published won poetry book society recommendations. Her poems are fine specimens and lie scattered in various magazines and anthologies. They deserve to be garnered between two covers.

In my generation my old classmate Firoz Ahmed-ud-din published a promising collection from Writers' Workshop before slowly losing interest in writing poetry. Now there are a couple of my younger university colleagues who have published promising debut collections.

So you see, the situation isn't as dismal as it might seem. One reason why it seems more dismal than it really is may be that poetry is read by very few people, and fiction, especially the novel, gets all

the publicity in the media.

I should hasten to add that this doesn't bother me at all. I don't think I'd much care if I had no readers. I'd be quite happy to have only half a dozen readers as long as they felt my work was worth engaging with.

I should also point out that when you say there is a sizeable number of Bangladeshi writers of fiction you are grossly exaggerating. And if you want to mention fiction writers who are worth reading, how many would you list? Two or three perhaps?

AH: *You actively fought in our Muktiujuddo. What drove you, a budding poet, to take up arms to liberate the country?*

KH: Yes, I was one of the hundred thousand or so who took up arms against the occupation army in 1971. I was a second year undergraduate then. The crackdown by the Pakistan army and the terror of the occupation brought young people face to face with a existential choice: lie low or escape to another country or go and join the resistance. I made my choice and I'd repeat the choice if I had to relive my life all over again.

AH: *Do you remember the time when you penned your first poem?*

KH: I have written about the experience of starting to write in an essay that I have appended to my collected poems. Let me sum up. I wasn't a great poetry buff in school. I dutifully memorised poems because we were supposed to, but if I were asked to recite them they'd come out as sing-song, I'm afraid. I didn't feel at home in the traditional English metres. Then in class 10 Brother Hobart, from whom I learnt more about literature and writing than from anyone else, took up D.H. Lawrence's poem 'Snake'. At once I warmed to the sinuous free verse, the directness of treatment, the clarity of the images. But I didn't begin writing poetry just then. My first attempt at creative writing was a short story which can be called a prose poem and which I have included in my collected poems. It was written when I was sixteen. A year later I began scribbling verse in earnest. I have included a poem written early in 1968 in my new book. But even then and for some years after I didn't realize that my poems, such as they are, would turn out to be the chief form of my creative output. I thought that like most people with literary interests I'd switch to fiction. I thought the versifying was an exercise in handling language in a concentrated form, a preparation for novel writing. Now I realize that the novel requires a different type of sensibility, a different kind of discipline. A lucky few can manage both the novel and poetry; I am not one of them.

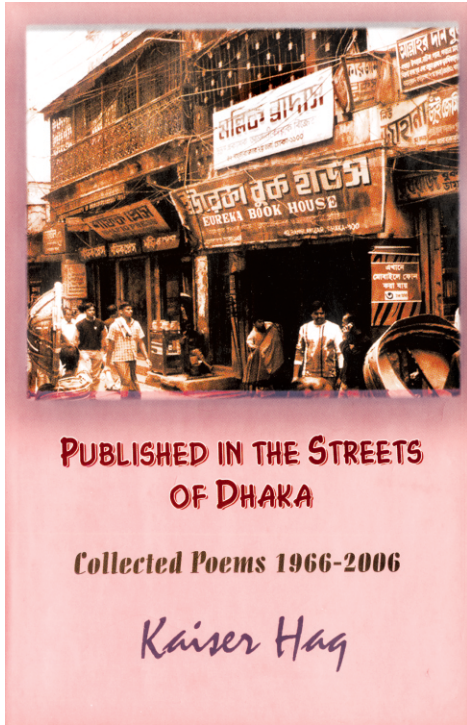
AH: *Unlike most of your contemporaries who write in Bengali your imageries are urban in nature. How does your muse come to you? Do you consider writing a spiritual process?*

KH: My imagery is mostly urban because I was born and grew up in Dhaka city. But till the age of 13 I spent my school holidays in the village. Considering that, perhaps there should be more of the village in my poems. Maybe in future I'll be able to work more of village life and the landscape into my work.

As for those who write in Bengali, I don't think it is accurate to say that they do not use urban imagery. Among major figures, the urban world is at the centre of Shamsur Rahman's work, and this is even more true of Shaheed Quaderi, who was born in Calcutta and came to Dhaka when he was a young boy. Rafiq Azad too is full of urban imagery. I can't speak about younger poets, not having read much of them.

I'm not very comfortable with expressions like the muse coming to one. But I will try to tell you how my poems get written. Some get written at one go, some are revised a number of times, some come into being through a process of accretion: I may jot down an image or phrase and keep adding more, then rearrange them and revise the whole thing.

I don't know what it means to say that writing is a spiritual process. Some may take it to mean that writing poetry or creating art in general is one way of worshipping God. Others may equate writing poetry with a spiritual activity like meditating since both enable one to create a distance between oneself and the chaos of life. With



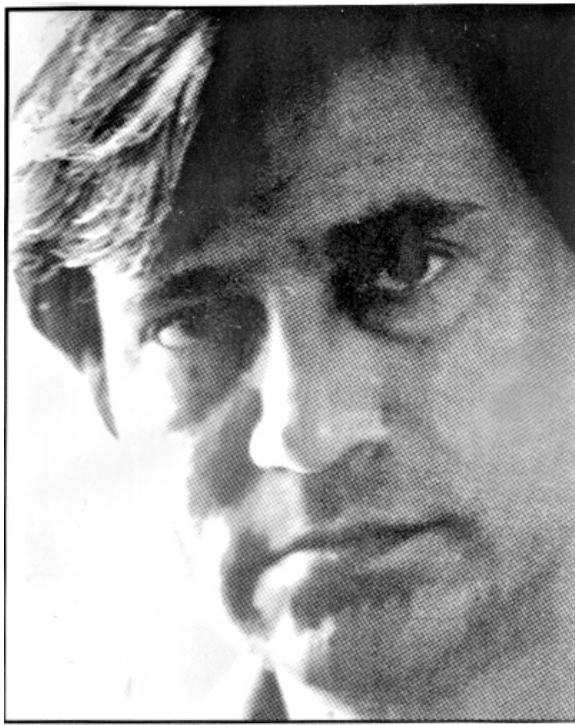
Schopenhauer one might regard art as a means to achieve spiritual liberation. I am more sympathetic to the Nietzschean idea that it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that life has any meaning. Only I am not very happy with that 'only', for different people may find meaning through different means. Besides, every means to find meaning, including art, is ultimately provisional. Anyway, if I may cut the pseudo-metaphysical cackle and call a poem a poem, I should perhaps end by saying that it's very pleasurable to write a poem that seems to work, i.e. one that I enjoy reading out and that one or two people say they have enjoyed reading.

AH: *You write in a language that has once been a tool of colonisation in this part of the world. Has English been your conscious choice?*

KH: Yes, it's true that English was a tool of colonisation, but it was a double-edged tool, and so when the anti-colonial movement got going the English language and the ideas that were conveyed through it played a role. Then, when the colonisers left, the subcontinent didn't let go of the English language. There are wheels within wheels too. Recently the dailis in India celebrated Macaulay's birthday with great fanfare because they felt that learning English and being educated through English had enabled them to liberate themselves from the tyranny of upper-caste Hindus.

By now of course in the subcontinent as a whole there is a thriving tradition of writing in English. But it isn't free of controversy. And that is a good thing. It is salutary that writers should question themselves and also be questioned by readers and others. A subcontinental who writes in English should keep on questioning his/her relationship with the language used.

But there is also a kind of criticism that is too ridiculous for words. When someone says that a Bangladeshi should not write poetry in English, the statement is nonsensical. Let's analyse it to see why. One can ask if it is only poetry that should be put under a ban, or fiction and non-fictional prose as well? If it's only poetry that is under the interdiction and not the other two, one can question why fiction shouldn't be under the interdiction as well. If both poetry and fiction are under the interdiction, because both are forms of creative writing and the critic in question believes authentic creative writing can only be done in one's mother tongue, the question arises whether, when a Bangladeshi writes non-fictional English prose he/she should deliberately write badly or, if he/she writes well enough for his/her



work to be considered of literary merit, he/she should be condemned. If he/she isn't condemned and is praised instead, how is it that his/her work is authentic when a fiction writer's or a poet's is declared a priori to be inauthentic? Creative non-fiction is often little different from fiction; what if the successful non-fictionwriter now writes a novel? Will it be condemned outright? and if fiction is considered to be ok, why not poetry, if the poetry deals with our situation successfully? One could change tactics and argue that writing in English is bound to be a coterie affair in a country like Bangladesh and should therefore be discouraged. But why? Why, if there is a coterie that enjoys writing in English and reading the stuff, should they not be allowed to enjoy themselves? Would we discourage a small ethnic community from writing in their language? Besides, even if we take writing in Bengali, it is not read by everyone in the country. Most poetry collections in Bengali sell a few hundred copies; should the poets stop writing on that account?

The upshot is that one can respond critically to a Bangladeshi poet (or novelist or creative non-fiction writer) in English, that is to say, read the work and comment on it, but one cannot say that a Bangladeshi should not write in English. If a language is used at all in a country one cannot prevent it from being used for literary purposes.

As to why I write in English, it was a conscious choice made against a certain background -- my English-medium educational background. But I am very conscious of my Bengali heritage, enjoy reading Bengali classics and I have translated some Bengali poetry and prose.

AH: *Many see South Asian poetry as a strand of Post-Colonial literature. Does Po-co really exist as a genre or is it just another term produced by some critics in the West for general convenience? Is it fair on the authors to be put together under one roof only because they were born into a particular part of the world?*

KH: We live in an age of multiple labels and identities, or at least an age in which we are conscious of and deliberate on our multiple labels and identities. To be a South Asian writer is also to be an Asian writer, a commonwealth writer, a third world writer, a postcolonial writer or a postmodern postcolonial (pomo-poco) writer. Nobody will of course regard all these labels to be equally felicitous; you can have your pick. the postcolonial label covers both first world and third world writers, since Australians and Canadians and even the Scots may regard themselves as being postcolonial. But it's mainly Asian, African and Caribbean writers who have to deal with this label. The label has its uses; it enables critics to focus on a body of writing that would otherwise have been in a limbo perhaps. But problems can arise if they start arguing that only certain 'postcolonial' issues should be privileged in postcolonial writing. That could stymie creativity. I don't let labels bother me, they come and go. I just want to keep on writing and if I'm lucky some of it will stay.

Ahmede Hussain's novella 'Blues for Allah' has been published in Colloquy, Monash University's journal.

Dhaka-fied, casually: poems in subcontinental english

RUBANA

At a local coffee shop in Kolkata, I overhear two men talking about an ex-colleague being 'Bangalored.' Unable to resist the temptation, I ask them what being 'Bangalored' means. They explain to this Dhaka-ite, irremediably so, that their friend's, a software engineer, contract had just been terminated and that he was returning to Bangalore from Silicon Valley! Indeed the subcontinent has been "chutnify"-ing English in a zillion ways for quite some time. A poet 'gone' local is often well celebrated in the neighborhood. His/her jokes about the linguistic and cultural milieu are considered non-malignant. And when the subcontinental artists started writing in English and began re-fashioning the language, "the blind alley" of Indian English writing referred to by Buddhadev Bose and company opened up to a new lane and the new empire laughed back. The style settled down comfortably within its territory, picked up its own idiom, and humored readers.

It was Nissim Ezekiel who first went down this particular path. Born in December 1924 in a Marathi-speaking Jewish family of Bombay, Nissim Ezekiel not only casually depicted his background, but also added laughter to the scene. Some of his most celebrated poems are the ones titled 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English'- considered to be a satirized version of Gujarati-influenced English used in Bombay. In 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa, T.S', Miss Pushpa "is departing for the foreign/...smiling and smiling/ even for no reason" can be traced back to Bombay's Bhindi Bazaar.

In 'The Professor' his

invitation: "If you are coming again this side by chance, visit please my humble residence also I am living just on opposite house's backside" -can also be taken as a reminder of the insistence on speaking English as a sign of erudition in our part of the world. In 'Very Indian Poem in Indian English', he comes out at his best with "Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct....But modern generation is neglecting-/Too much going for fashion and foreign thing." At a time when Upamanyu Chatterjee in *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* chooses to ask: "Aap all right hain?" and then moves on with a bolder: "Why don't you translate into Hinglish or Benglish some of your favorite English poems? The Alpred Pruphrock-er LaabhSong? And Shalott ki Lady", at a time when Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is including 'aunti-ji' and 'uncle-ji', 'freshie' (a new immigrant), 'filmi' (dramatic), 'gora' (White), 'yaar' (friend), and 'adda' (local joint), every subcontinental artist is busy contributing to the remarkable linguistic humor and word-play shared between the subcontinent and other parts of the British-influenced English-speaking world.

Kaiser Haq's latest book, *Published in the Streets of Dhaka* includes previously written 'Four Poems in Subcontinental English' that proves that sub-continental English is never far away from everyday usage and humor. Haq's humor is home grown and unlike Ezekiel, who overheard and borrowed from local scenes, Haq's journey in comedy has been on his own and has sprung from his own imagination.

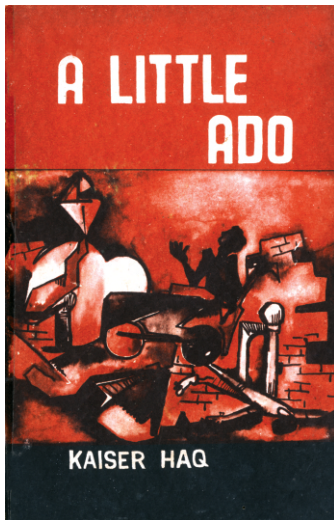
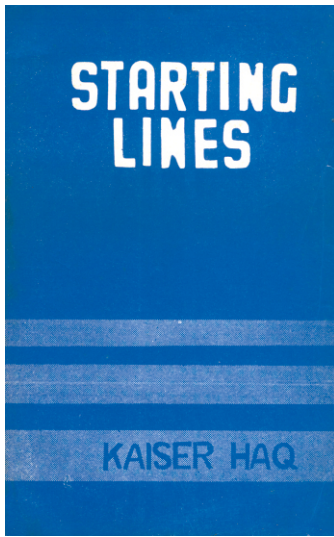
Haq's first poem in sub-continental English is 'Welcome, Tourist Sahib', possibly inspired by an article in a Dhaka

newspaper: 'Bangladesh Born to Tourism'. A guide honest enough to declare his "ambition for writing tourist handbook and printing-publishing in Big Uncle's printing press" is however someone we no longer know in our local scene. The references to tribal women being topless and the information of the East inventing "topless before West", the suggestion of going to Bangkok and not declaring all the currency at the airport, the advice of bribing the tourist's way in and then finally ending with: "So come. I believe in friendship also strongly" reflect our obsqueousness and flattery of foreigners. Haq has merely picked that up and has given it his own color in poetry. The next one, ' Civil Service Romance', composed in a letter form with the heading 'Improvement of Bilateral Ties' hints at a marriage proposal and has the flavor of a traditional romantic discourse that shies away from a direct modern day approach. It was indeed usual for a man in the 60's to instantly fall for a visitor from a distant land and in the process, try explaining the urgency of setting up a "bilateral" dialogue. The civil servant is seen portraying the perfect picture of the Bangladesh covering rivers, tigers, heritage, idols, mosques, guidebooks. The regular Eastern ways of "buttering of Boss without compromising situation, etc" is a reminder of our own inadequacies. The whining hero of 60's comes through with Haq's lines: "I am like everloving film hero, tossing and turning with pillow in lieu of beloved." He signs off as her "humble servant", while the woman composes a reply with a more direct heading: "Matrimonial" and signs off as "Your loving servant" instead. The third poem, 'Sahara Desert' is, once again, reflective of a general setting at New Market,

the once-upon-a-time haunt for aspiring parents to showcase their eligible girl/boy for marriage prospects. A young executive of a commercial firm meets an insurance salesman and discusses life without a wife being as hostile as the Sahara. Television is "viewed" by this man, boys in the market are "miscreants...pinching and hijacking and giving us a bad name." This poem, too speaks of a common setting. The last one of this kind, 'Party Games' is one which is set against a contemporary social scene where the narrator and three of his friends, Ustad, Roy and Moody, are temporary bachelors attending a party hosted by a certain Bashir Bhai and a Baby Bhabi. The gathering, is, indeed very "cosmopolitan" as there are a "few foreigners" and "non-resident locals". The alcohol loosens them all up and they start stealing glances at women: "some slim, some not so slim, but very nice on the whole." The show's stolen by Mae West in a sari, referred to as "Mae East" in the narrator's mind. In no time, "somebody is entering magnetic field of Mae East and losing control of his fingers," whereby Mr. Mae East starts screaming and the gang "is down in all fours galloping to exit."

Typically humorous sub-continental scenes such as this bless the poetic landscape of both Haq and Ezekiel. Their styles allow roots to grow, and their national conscience is never violated. Alternatively, an overactive interrogation of identity, an inelegant celebration of 'un-belonging' and the stress to prove oneself, refreshingly, are not traits found in either Ezekiel or Haq.

Rubana is a poet pursuing higher studies at Jadavpur University.



Experiencing Kaiser Haq's poetry

(The following is an excerpt of a talk given at the book launching of Kaiser Haq's *Published in the Streets of Dhaka* on 17 February, 2007.)

Abeer Hoque

I'm here to tell you about my experience of Kaiser Haq's poetry. I am Bangladeshi but I grew up abroad. I was born in Nigeria, lived there for 13 years, and then moved to the States. My knowledge of Bengali literature was limited to a few Tagore poems (of course). Given the Western bent of Western education, things didn't change, even when I went for my MFA in writing. White Western writers, every which way you went, and given that I was in San Francisco, a few White Western gay writers, thrown in for good measure.

It was a year into the program that I took my first poetry class. We learned various ways to analyse poems, break down their structure and intent. One of our last assignments was to pick a poem of our choice and analyse it given the tools we had learned in class. I decided to pick a Bangladeshi poet, although I knew none. So I asked my Bangladesh experts: Google, naturally, my Sabrina khala (a lover of literature), and my father (a scientist, and a writer himself). I was given Kaiser Haq's name, among others. I liked that we shared a similar last name though I had no expectations of liking anything else. You see, I liked very little poetry, even though I was a wannabe poet myself. My education had taught me to understand more poetry, to see what the author was trying to do, what was active between the lines, but it hadn't necessarily gotten me to like more of it.

At the time, I was living in Berkeley, and it just so happens that UC Berkeley has the biggest and best library in the state of California. It also happens to have one copy of Kasier Haq's book, *A Happy Farewell*. I thought I would flick through the book and pick a poem I kind of liked that had a lot of prosodic elements I recognised. I'd write up my report, and that would be that. Instead, I devoured the entire book from front to back. And then proceeded to violate all the publisher's copyrights as well as my company's photocopy machine rules, by copying the entire book for myself.

You see, I knew, at once, when I read the very first poem, that Kaiser Haq was speaking for me, he was speaking to me. His language, his subjects, his sardonic and suddenly sexy turn of phrases, it was all utterly modern and utterly captivating. And more than this, I was surprised that someone who had grown up so differently from me could describe things in a way that made so much sense to me.

I disagree (with) Kaiser (when he says) that subcontinental poets writing in English might not have their fair share of rhythm and rhyme. Living on "the surface of language" as (he) quotes Cioran

saying, rather than being rooted in it, can be another way to see the world, perhaps more elemental, perhaps even more eloquent, than others.

This collected works we're here to celebrate, *Published in the Streets of Dhaka*, brings together some of Kaiser's old debut publications along with new poems. I found the newer poems to be richer in reference, but the same pleasurable cocktail of imagery and irony. One of my favourite writing teachers, Kate Brady, once told me that creating art was serious play. When I read Kaiser's poetry, I am ever struck by his sense of this: serious play. From Buddha to Bloomsday, from Sartre to Salgado, from Dhaka to Dublin, he weaves his history of the world in words that are alternately deep and light, fleet and bright.

The poem I chose to analyse, five years ago in San Francisco, was called "Moon".

Moon

Aunts in orgies of gossip
Plough through mountains of betel,
Outchewing a flock of goats;
I don't listen to them.

Self-immured, hands
to the head, elbows
on a creaking escritoire,
I've missed dinner to imagine
the real terrors behind rumours
that bite their own tails;

when suddenly the air
is tinted silver,
through the window a rain-washed garden looks in
like eyes prettified by tears,
on the river beyond a canoe
goes by with a glitter.

it's that ageless moron again,
the moon. You don't belong
here, I tell it sharply.

Abeer Hoque is a writer and photographer, currently in Bangladesh on a Fulbright Scholarship.