

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":

demanded the artist's adoration;
knocked one against another
their modest clicks admonish
our garrulity,
counsel silence,
contemplation.

But publishing forty years' worth 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* Ahmed Hussain.

--Literary editor

Ahmed Hussain: 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

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 'Bangalore'. Unable to resist the temptation, I ask them what being 'Bangalore' 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 Buddhadey 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 Bengali some of your favorite English poems? The Alphred Prrophock-er LaabhSong? And Shalot ki Lady", at a time when Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is including 'aunti-j' and 'uncle-j', 'freshie' (a new immigrant), 'film' (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.

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