

## Bangladeshis writing in English

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English is no more the patrimony of the Anglo Saxons. It is now a universal public property. By the British colonial train, it travelled almost the entire world, came in touch with myriad people and their languages, and enriched itself as the world's number one language. Not only as a comfortable means of communication between the peoples of the opposite poles and hemispheres, but also as a medium of creative writing has English been deliberately taken up by writers of the formerly colonized countries. The number is multiplying with the rise of Postcolonial / Diaspora consciousness. The situation is as if the colonizer Prospero (The Tempest) is being written back by the colonized Caliban in the same language the latter was taught by the former. The process of colonization has proved a double edged weapon whose other edge has now been sharper than the one used earlier by the colonizers.

How can we identify this tidal wave of English writing? Can we call it English literature? Would traditional academia accept it? In the name of English literature they are teaching the work of the central (British/ American or a few First World English-speaking country) authors. Anthony Burgess, however, tries to resolve the situation. To quote him: "It (English literature) is not merely the literature of the British Isles, but a vast and growing body of writings made up of the work of authors who use the English language as a natural medium of communication." But, of course, the peripheral authors do not bother their heads about whether they are being able to get into the same line with the central ones. They choose the language to reach a wider reading public, to let the world share their very own feelings. With this end in view, has come into existence African writing in English or Latin American writing in English or South-Asian writing in English. In South-Asian English writing, Indian or Pakistani writings in English have by now proved their own existence. But Bangladesh is lagging much behind. Nevertheless, Bangladesh is not giving a walk-over.

By 'Bangladeshi Writing in English' (BWE), we generally mean the whole corpus of work of writers in Bangladesh and among the Bangladeshi diaspora who write in English but whose mother tongue is Bengali (theoretically their mother tongue can be other language(s) too spoken in Bangladesh). This special stream of writing can also be called 'Writing English in Bangladesh'. But to my thinking, the adjectival use of the country better describes the nature of this writing. This school of writing includes only creative writing in English i.e. poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction.

The legacy of Bangladeshi writing in English should be traced back to pre-independence undivided Bengal. As a matter of fact, towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, when English learning gained a firm foothold in Calcutta, the capital of British India, an enthusiasm for writing in English originated in the then Bengal. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774 - 1833), the father of Bengali Renaissance, was the pioneer in this regard. Five years before the famous Minute of Macaulay (1835), the first book of poems in English entitled *The Shair and Other Poems* by Kashiprashad Ghose was published. Following this trend Michael Madhusudan Dutt



Tahmina Anam

(1824/1873) took to writing poetry in English. Influenced by English poets like Thomas Moore, John Keats, George Byron, and others, Madhusudan started writing poems in English. He was the father of blank verse in Bengali poetry. Although his genius for English writing was nipped in the bud, his two English poetry books, *The Captive Ladie* and *Visions of the Past*, both published in 1849, were well received by the highly educated locals and the English circles. Toru Dutt (1855/1876) in her very short life caught global attention by writing and translating poetry. Her *A Sheaf Glean'd and French Fields* was published in 1876 and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* in 1882.

Bankim Chatterjee (1838/1894) won wide recognition for his novel *Rajmohan's Wife*. Rabindranath Tagore (1861/1941) showed considerable talent in English writing. The translations of *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings) were made by the poet himself so perfectly that the poems in the original did not lose their ingenuity in the translation. Begum Rokeya's (1880-1932) *Sultanas Dream* (1905) is also a significant English publication of that time. Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1999), the last flower of Bengal renaissance was the quintessential English writer of Bengal. His English writing reached such a towering height that he is said to have outdone even the mainstream English authors. The demoralizing effects of Madhusudan's failure to sustain English writing were finally conquered by authors like Nirad C. Chaudhuri.

What we call Bangladeshi writing in English has come into being after the emergence of Bangladesh. Although the stream is very feeble, it exists. There is, however, no chronological list of the writers of this school. I have tried to make a rough outline which is, of course, subject to further modifications. The first generation of Bangladeshi writers in English includes a few poets. Razia Khan Amin came up with a couple of collections of poems. Her poetry books *Argus Under Anaesthesia* (1976) and *Cruel April* (1977) bear the stamp of her preeminence among English poets in Bangladesh. Farida Majid is



Razia Khan Amin

another distinguished poet and literary translator. Her *Take Me Home, Rickshaw* (1974) is a collection of poems by contemporary Bangladeshi poets translated in English. She has edited an anthology of English poems titled *Thursday Evening Anthology* (1977).

Kaiser Haq is the most leading English language poet in Bangladesh. His poetic output is quite substantial. They are as follows: *Starting Lines* (1978)-Dacca; *A Little Ado* (1978)- Dacca ; *A Happy Farewell* (1994)-Dhaka; *Black Orchid* (1996)-London; *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song* (2002); *Published in the Streets of Dhaka : Collected poems 1966/2006* (2008). A freedom fighter himself, Kaiser Haq is a consummate artist who has painted the contemporary Bangladeshi scene with powerful imaginative mind and artistic precision. His work bears all the hallmarks of good poetry. Feroz Ahmed-ud-din is another noted poet. Though not prolific, his poetry is marked by shortness and intensity. His *Handful of Dust* (1975) vividly portrays the loss of vision in contemporary life. Syed Najmuddin Hashim's collection of poems, *Hopefully the Pomegranate*, is a valuable addition to Bangladeshi English poetry. Hashem has drawn allusions and references from far-off European mythology and biblical anecdotes, and woven them into the local themes. Nuzhat Amin Mannan's *Rhododendron Lane* (2004) is enriched with creative imagery and distinctive style.

Rumana Siddique's *Five Faces of Eve: Poems* (2007) reflects the timeless experience of a woman symbolized by their biblical ancestor, Eve. Rumana's poems are a mix of the pleasures and pains of life. Nadeem Rahman's *Politically Incorrect Poems* (2004) is a collection of poems dealing with post-liberation war themes. His poetry is typified by highly individualistic attitude, sharp social sensibility, and keen political observation. Fakrul Alam's translation *Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems* (1999) is of great literary value. Apart from the poets identified, a number of enthusiastic poets are also writing good English poems. Syed Badrul Ahsan is one of them.

The realm of fiction in BWE hitherto is



Kaiser Haq

dominated by Adib Khan, a Bangladeshi diasporic author in Australia. He is a writer of real merit. His novels *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994) *Solitude of Illusions* (1996); *The Storyteller* (2000); *Homecoming* (2005); and *Spiral Road* (2007) win global acclaim and are mostly concerned with themes of self-identity, sense of belonging, migration, and social dislocation. His style is characterized by lucidity and sarcasm.

Tahmina Anam belongs to the group of writers who were born after the liberation of Bangladesh. Her novel *A Golden Age* (2007) is set in war-torn Bangladesh. As an English fictional work on the independence war (1971), Anam's novel must have a singular place in the history of Bangladeshi English literature. The storyteller Mahmud Rahman has appeared on the BWE scene with his debut publication *Killing the Water* (2010). It is a collection of a dozen short stories published by Penguin India and covers a wide range of themes ranging from the liberation war of Bangladesh to the racial violence against fresh immigrants in the USA. A galaxy of promising writers is trying their hands at writing short stories in English. Among others Khademul Islam, Kazi Anis Ahmed, Ahmed Hussain, Razia Sultana Khan, Shabnam Nadiya and Shahidul Alam deserve special mention.

Although Bangladeshi writing in English has a long way to go, it has a bright future too. We may be able to play at least a role similar to that of India. But how? The ongoing mode of BWE has to be liberated from the literary coterie, i.e., the small circle of writers, publishers, and their admirers. It has to be rescued from the narrow confines of academia and the English medium schools. English language newspapers and magazines should allow enough room for literary expression and fresh writings should be picked solely on merit. The King's/Queen's English can better be exploited by the conscious 'Calibans' of our country.

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### Disconnecting my dreams

ATIKA CHERRY

I worth nothing but my irritating heart-beats  
I wake alone I stand alone I fight alone  
Desperate wishes arising- tired!  
Killing'em  
(I) locked alone my innocent wishes.

Breathing harder  
Vein in cold  
Blurred vision

B-O-O-M

BLACK  
Damn! Failed to connect my mood with my dream  
How long I'll be haunting by my wishes  
Out of order my tears! Absurd!  
Oh my Hound wishes hound me every sec!

Hail the holy soul  
Hail the purest part of me--  
Is dying crying and already decayed--  
That doesn't make any sense to the whole world!

Like an insect (I am to my dream)  
I'll create holes in my dreams to ruin them.  
Can't stand their (my poor dreams) existence.  
And I love my existence, I've to exist!!

### Call from the other side

RIM SABRINA

A voice said, "Cyanide or Hemlock?"  
Just like we ask a guest, "Tea or Coffee?"  
I replied, "No, thanks, I prefer to live"  
The voice announced, "It's time;  
Wave bye to life  
And drink this potion of death".

I questioned, "But why?"  
The man laughed and answered,  
"I collect souls;  
You have been asked to give yours."

Sadly I nodded my tired head;  
For the very last time,  
Me and my helpless eyes  
Looked out the window;

Life outside seems like...  
Golden sunshine on a butterfly's back;

Slowly I raised my heavy feet  
And followed a mysterious shadow,  
The shadow of all shadows;  
The shadow where life terminates;  
The shadow of a dark, pale curtain;  
The shadow they called "death"!

## Frost and Wordsworth: A comparative overview

SYED NAQUIB MUSLIM

Robert Frost is often designated by students and critics as the American poetical parallel of William Wordsworth, the forerunner of the Romantic Movement in England. It is widely believed that Wordsworth exerted profound influence on Frost in writing his poems, especially those on nature. In philosophy and style, Frost and Wordsworth appear both similar and dissimilar.

Both Wordsworth and Frost wrote in the ordinary language of ordinary people. Frost's poetry, to use his own words, "begins in delight and ends in wisdom", whereas Wordsworth's poetry "begins in delight and ends in delight." Frost's wisdom is best reflected in the immortal line in *Mending Wall*: "Good fences make good neighbors." In Byron's view, Wordsworth is "dull, over-mild and flat like a sauce into which the cook had forgotten to shake pepper." Unlike Wordsworth, Frost is less egotistical and he maintains what Eliot terms as 'artistic detachment.' Except in elegies, Frost does not always involve himself in the subject matter of his poetry.

Both poets consciously avoided the rhetorical extravaganza of William Shakespeare and grandiloquence of John Milton. Frost was able to capture the natural tone of human conversation. His poem, *A Boy's Will*, captures the reader's attention not only for the theme but also for plainness of expression. Ideas, emotions and feelings are expressed in ordinary speeches. The same is true of Wordsworth. My views about Frost are a bit different. Frost is deceptively plain whereas Wordsworth is genuinely simple. Frost's poetry contains plain words but complex thoughts whereas Wordsworth's poetry has plain words and plain thoughts. Wordsworth is plain both in manner and matter. He is never pretentious, covert and deceptive. Both Wordsworth and Frost are democratic in style as they speak "to men in the tongue all men know because they are men." Wordsworth is more comparable to Whitman than Frost. In Frost, plainness is present but it is a deceptive plainness. In deceptive simplicity, Frost reveals the complexities of rural life in the garb of plain words. Many of his monosyllabic words were difficult to comprehend as these were charged with symbolic meanings. The body of his poetry wears an ordinary garment but beneath it remain messages that need one to introspect for clear understanding. Frost uses symbols taken from nature to express the intended meanings or messages.

For Wordsworth, poetry is the outcome of personal spiritual or mystical experience---experience is the antecedent and poems are the consequent. In fact, experience causes expression, and expression becomes a spontaneous outburst. For Frost, poetry begins consciously and it ends unconsciously. In Wordsworth's poetry, nature is supreme, where humans and nature forge an intimate communion; humans and nature are never found hostile to



each other. In Frost, rural people are supreme and nature has been made subordinate to humans. It is hard to describe Frost as the poet of nature, if we determine Wordsworth as the standard. Frost himself admits: "We have had nature poetry for a hundred years." He is interested in locating the relations between nature and humans. It is true that both poets sought to find solace and delight in nature. The poem "Birches" offers the best example of how the poet blends observation and imagination, fact and fancy, feeling and wisdom.

Like the poetry of Thomas Hardy, the subjects of Frost's poetry are local or regional. Their poetry springs from specific areas. The subjects of Wordsworth's poetry are universal, and are true of all people of the world. Frost wrote about ordinary people, farmers, workers were the subjects of his poems. Woods, flowers, birches, weeds, birds and trees showed up frequently in his poems. The rural landscape and wildlife form the content of his poetry. Because of his unfeigned interest in and love for rural people, Frost emerged ultimately as a national bard and a poetic sage of America.

Frost is an environmentalist, and Wordsworth is a pantheist. In New Hampshire, Frost declares:  
"The more the sensiblist I am The more I seem to want

my mountains wild."

Both Wordsworth and Frost are optimistic in their attitude to life. As Jonathan Swift had all complaints against humankind, Frost had all the complaints against nature. But still he would seek recourse to nature, when he becomes weary of urban life. In *Birches*, he says:

"Earth's the right place for love,  
I don't know where it's likely to go better."

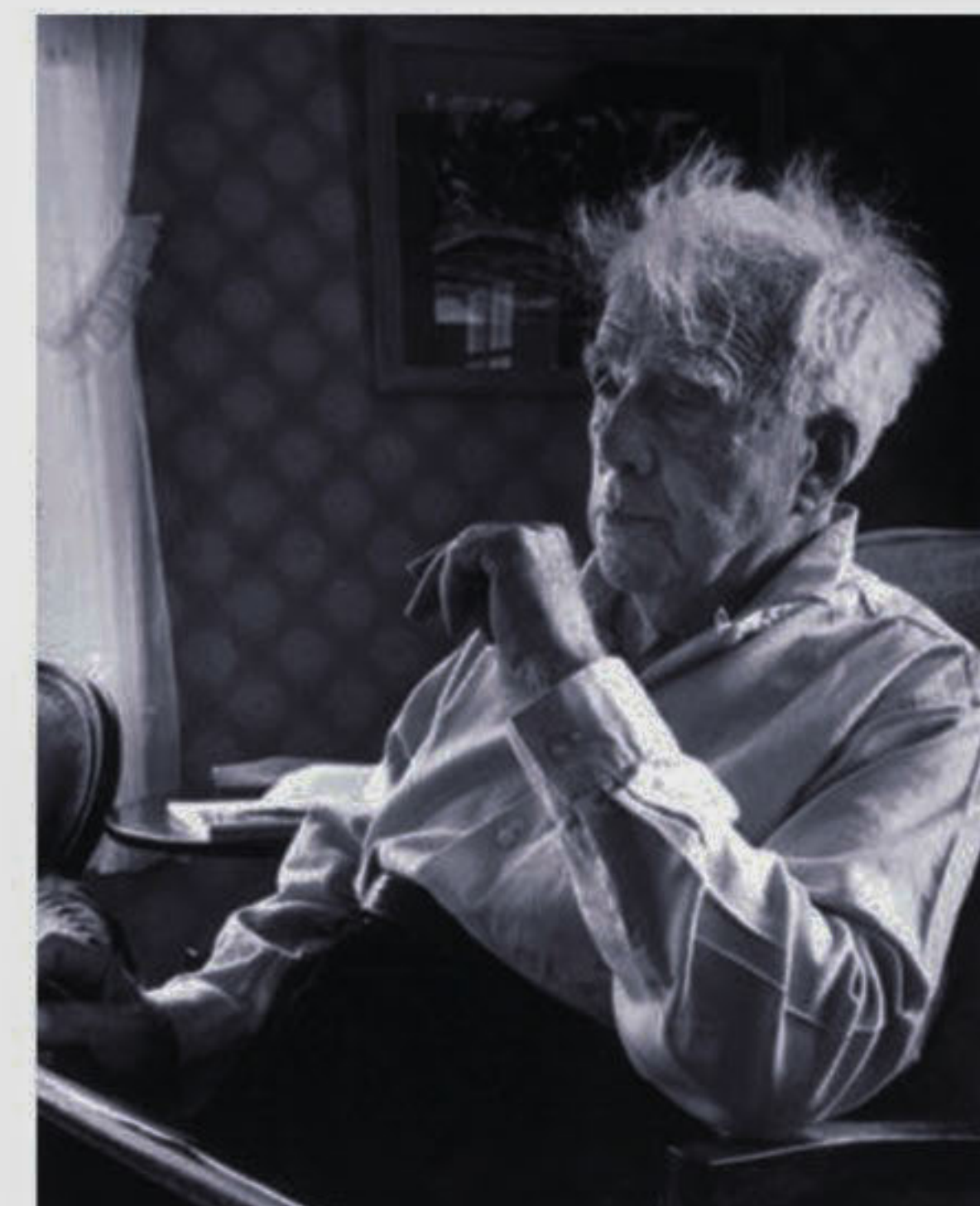
Poetry, to Frost, was a record of personal experience where to Wordsworth, it was "the image of man and nature. Its object is truth, not individual and local but general and operative; not standing external testimony but carried alive into the heart by passion." Thus Wordsworth's poetry is a direct revelation of reality, an authentic version of human phenomena. To Wordsworth, nature was the source of learning, ideas, power and values; nature was the fountain of inspiration and solace in times of mental agony. Nature appears to him as his 'guardian, nurse' and teacher. In times of despair and suffering, nature acts as the spring of moral strength and confidence for psychic survival. In nature Wordsworth feels "a presence that disturbs" him with "the joys of elevated thoughts." To Frost, nature is unfriendly, malevolent and malignant; it creates barriers to the smooth fulfillment of human and social obligations. From this perspective, Frost is comparable to Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. Nature is a menace and discomfort. Although, to Frost, the woods are "lovely, dark and deep," humans should not stay there for long, as they have duties elsewhere, they "have miles to go" before they sleep. In the poem *Come In*, Frost promises:

"But no, I was out for stars:  
I would not come in."

To Frost, there are barriers between humans and nature, between humans and humans, and between the creator and the creation. Yet he does not cease to work; he rather tries to adjust himself with the barriers created by nature. Like Wordsworth, Frost could not feel in nature  
"... a sense of something far more deeply interfused."

Amid nature and even with a human companion, Wordsworth was ever solitary; he could create solitude in the midst of a multitude.  
Wordsworth is the poet of thought and meditation whereas Frost is one of activity, work, obligation and duty. Frost was pragmatic, worldly and anti-romantic. Wordsworth was a transcendentalist, romantic and mystic. Unlike Wordsworth, Frost keeps himself confined within earthly region, with mundane phenomena; he is not willing to transcend the boundary of this earth. Frost goes to the rural areas to drink the delight of nature and also withdraws from nature to respond to the call of duty-- social, familial, official. As he says: "But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go."  
Frost is always in favour of ceaseless mobility, of activity and

action. To him suffering is action, action suffering. Love between man and woman is present in Wordsworth but it seems to be missing in Frost. In Frost's poetry, "words have become deeds." To him, life is duty; every human being has to fulfill the duties or obligations assigned to him or her by God or by fellow-humans. In his poem *Mending Wall*, and *The Road Not Taken*, he shows that although he takes recourse to nature for delight or pleasure, he at once



withdraws himself from nature and returns to the place of work. In New Hampshire he says: "I'd hate to be a run-away from nature." The poet is not willing to depart from the world so soon because he has more duties to fulfill. It is not justified to leave this earth early without meeting the obligations to society, to country, and to the earth.  
Wordsworth has taught us how to be friendly to nature and how to obtain solace from it in times of psychic crisis, and Frost has taught us how to engage in ceaseless work and also to seek transitory relief by being away into wildlife and communicating with the innocent unacknowledged rural people.

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