

Bangladeshi Writing in English

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WHY do we have so little Bangladeshi writing in English? And why aren't Bangladeshis taking to writing creatively in English in ever-increasing numbers as is the case with Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and, nowadays, even the Nepalese? Looked at qualitatively or even quantitatively, there isn't much to talk about as far as the

clear, however, is that by the 1950s poets like Nissim Ezekiel emerged who simply opted to write in the language despite the provision of the Indian constitution adopted after partition that stipulated that English would be used for official purposes for only fifteen more years. What is notable, also, is that every decade in post-partition India has seen the emergence of new and distinctive

joyfully offering their unique takes on life through it and in a few cases, even chutnefying it.

Similarly, Pakistanis could take pride in the works of Taufiq Rafat, Zulfikar Ghose and Bapsi Sidhwa and Sri Lankans boast about the Booker prize winning Michael Ondaatje or the impressive Romesh Guneseckera well before the twentieth century ended. Noticeably, too, Indian

least a few Indian writers were producing quality work in English as well as their mother tongues (Arun Kolatkar or Kamala Das are examples). Why was there, then, so little Bangladeshi writing in English in any form all this while and where were the diasporic Bangladeshis as far as English writing was concerned?

It was not that the part of India that became Bangladesh in 1971 totally lacked people with the ability to produce quality English prose or verse. After all, Fuzlul Huq's rhetorical skills in the English language is on display in *Bengal Today* (1944), an impressive book based on his letters to the Governor of Bengal in which he articulates his protests against the British ruler eloquently. Buddhadev Bose, as we all know, had opted to write in Bengali even as a youth but his *An Acre of Green Grass* (1948) demonstrates that a writer educated in East Bengal could write lucidly and elegantly in English if he wanted to. And then there is the case of that splendid autodidact Nirad Chaudhuri who wrote wonderfully provocative English prose that seemed to have been originally stimulated by remote Kishoreganj!

And yet the sad fact is that there has been very little Bangladeshi writing in English worth mulling over. Kaiser Huq has written enthusiastically about Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots*, published in 1967 by Chatto and Windus in London as "the first novel in English by a Bangladeshi writer" (see his review of the Bangladeshi edition reprinted in *The Daily Star Book of Bangladeshi Writing*, but the book is essentially a "transcreation" of the Bengali version and has had no influence at all on subsequent Bangladeshi writing in English. Feroz Ahmed ud Din published a slim collection of poems called *This Handful of Dust* in 1974 that could undoubtedly be called promising at that time, but the work came out from Kolkata as a Writers Workshop book and very few people, I am sure, have any recollections of it now. Similarly, Razia Khan Amin's volumes of verse, *Argus Under Anesthesia* (1976) and *Cruel April* (1977) have real merit, but these books have left very little traces on anyone who aspired to write in English afterward. Mention may also be made of Niaz

Zaman's short fiction, written over the years and collected in a few books, and Rumana Siddique's collection of poems, *Five Faces of Eve: Poems* (2007), but once again they have not led to anything much anywhere.

Indeed, Kaiser Haq is the only English language poet from Bangladesh who has had any kind of presence not only in the country but also in the wider world and only he can be called a major voice as far as Bangladeshi writing in English from within Bangladesh are concerned. He has been a source of inspiration not only because he has published quality verse steadily over three decades now but also in the way he has kept evolving as a poet. Definitely, he has found his métier as a Bangladeshi poet writing in English. That his poetry has been anthologised overseas and he has been written about by others also make him stand out among those who have written in English while staying in the country. One could argue, however, that Bangladeshi writing in English hasn't done badly if we consider the writers of the Bangladeshi diaspora. After all, Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Best First Book in 1995 and his subsequent novels have attracted many reviews in Australia and elsewhere. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* has been acclaimed by critics in both England and America and was even short-listed for the Booker Prize in 2004. Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) also attracted considerable attention on publication. This is no doubt an impressive list but these writers haven't had any impact on Bangladeshi aspiring to write in English. Also, they have not had the kind of influence Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh or Jhumpa Lahiri or even Michael Ondaatje have had. Noticeably, these writers have been feted globally but have also made their presence felt among their people. All the three Bangladeshi novelists mentioned above have followed up the success of their debut novels with works that have attracted some attention in the countries in which they reside in but except for Anam's *The Good Muslim*,

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literary pieces that have been written in English over the years by people from our country are concerned. In contrast, it is easy to see that not a few Indian writers took to the language with considerable enthusiasm soon after partition. One can of course argue that writers like R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand simply continued to write on in English after independence. What is

English language authors. Salman Rushdie's masterpiece *Midnight's Children* (1981) simply confirmed not only the global presence of Indian writing in English but also the impact of diasporic Indian authors who have become celebrities in international literary circuits. The success of Rushdie's novel also apparently galvanized others and now there are quite a few writers

Bengali writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Amitav Ghosh to name only two, have made their presence felt in British and American writing by the end of that twentieth century. What is more, writers with Bengali links think of Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri -- had carved distinctive spaces for themselves in contemporary letters by the turn of the millennium. Noticeably, at

Is Patriotism Alive and Kicking?

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

ONE of the predictable expectations of the generation that experienced the Muktiyuddho and lived to tell its tale is to narrowly define the notion of patriotism. To them, and justifiably so, it is the unconditional love for one's motherland; the irresistible urge to free it from the clutches of oppressive rule.

There is nothing illogical about such presumptions. All nationalistic movements -- to establish the basic rights of the common person, to speak one's mother tongue or to bring democracy -- have been spearheaded by the youth of this country, braving teargas, bullets, incarceration and death. Idealism, we know, is born amongst the young and uncorrupted. They are the ones who can fight without fear and dream without restraint.

For a post-independence generation, patriotism is a little more complex. The fire of nationalism lurks within, emerging from time to time when the occasion calls for it, but the youth of today are waiting desperately for a change in their present reality that will ultimately define their sense of nationalism.

So what is a young Bangladeshi's reality these days? When we talk of a post-independence generation let us stick to those young men and women who were born Bangladeshi. Being a citizen of an independent country is a given something they take for granted. Hence the need for other factors that will keep them rooted to the soil of their birth.

Economic status and global image are the outer perimeters that may encourage national pride. But ultimately it boils down to the opportunities to lead a decent life the youth of this country craves for that can bring about the patriotism required for a nation to progress.

A young person whose job opportunities have been curtailed by economic hardship or a flawed education system or the ability to acquire necessary skills, will take the first chance he gets to escape wherever there is hope of a better life. A young man who has never been given the chance to go to school or was forced to drop out to slog away his youth just to feed himself and his family may resort to the only other modes of escape: drug addiction, crime or a premature death. A young woman in Bangladesh may only see a future where the chains on her freedom will become tighter and harsher over time. For her, those lands where women can take their own decisions, and walk freely in the streets without fear, are the fantasies they wish they could run away to. How does patriotism have a place in this bleak scenario?

Young people of today's Bangladesh are also bombarded by the idea of globalisation. They find it difficult to cope with their counterparts to be the 'ideal global citizen.' True, a tiny fraction of them, watch the same TV shows, are adept Facebookers, listen to the same tunes, use the same smart phones and have even adopted universal mannerisms. These youngsters either flee to those foreign lands or create islands in their own country, shutting out the reality of the rest of their fellow citizens.

For struggling economies like us globalisation is an illusion for the young and restless who expect at least a decent standard of living that includes financial and personal security from the countries of their origin.

It is at this point that the biggest crisis that threatens to annihilate patriotism becomes relevant: the dwindling number of role models in our political landscape. It is the worst debacle Bangladesh has ever faced; the

biggest let-down for the millions of talented, energetic youth.

Young people today, are reluctant bystanders of the petty, bitter squabbling of their so-called leaders. Those at the helm of power continue to perpetuate the unhealthy political culture embroiled in megalomania and self-aggrandizement. There is no intention of cleaning up the debris of

sisters by the ends, completely ignoring the ignobility of the means. Being in politics today, is seen not as the privilege to make a significant difference to the common man's lot but the opportunity to grab as much as possible from the land they are oath-bound to protect and cherish. What patriotic values are our young people supposed to learn from such leaders?

heights of development.

Coming back to the question of patriotism, it is a mysterious emotion that lies deep within every human being and manifests itself at some time or another. In the wake of a post 9/11 Islamophobic west that is struggling itself with poor international image, economic recession and growing discontent of ordinary people, young



corruption that has poisoned every crevice of society. It is as if each government that comes to power with lofty promises of change for the better end up inheriting their predecessor's arrogance and insatiable appetite for material gain.

Young people watch helplessly as they see honesty being punished and opportunism rewarded. Some are enticed like their elder brothers and

For the aging leaders of the present and the younger ones who will succeed them this is the moment of truth. Unless they discard the culture of greed and embrace the moral obligation to lead the country to economic stability and unadulterated democracy, a priceless opportunity will be lost. The opportunity to use the strength of this huge, young populace and allow them to take the country to the expected

Bangladeshi are realising that the outside world is no longer the answer. They must fulfil their dreams within their motherland for it is the only place that will never deny them a fundamental right -- their right to belong. To be patriotic is not just a moral obligation, it is the only way to live with dignity.