

EDITOR'S  
NOTE

We start off the month of February by highlighting one beautiful aspect (among many) of our mother tongue: Bangla. Picking up on this point of finding value in something close to one's heart, Joe Treasure writes about the allure of fiction. Author Javed Jahangir then takes a closer look into the craft of fiction writing, focusing on the conflict between memory and fact. Enjoy the read!

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# A Beauty Spot of Bangla Language

Nanjiba Zahin



You might have already noted this since the time you tried to understand the eloquence of Bangla language, but there's no reason why this beauty should not be highlighted over and over again. So here's another reason why we should take pride in our mother tongue - Bangla is a genderless language.

A genderless language is one which does not distinguish between man and woman grammatically (Braun, Friederike. "Gender in a Genderless Language: The Case of Turkish." *Language and Society in the Middle East and North Africa: Studies in Variation and Identity*). Bangla language, then, is gender-friendly because with single words used as pronouns, it refers to all genders without any bias. Hence, without using specific gendered subject pronouns of 'he' or 'she', the word 'shey' is used. Also, objective genderless pronouns 'tar' (tar/ta'kay) or 'o' (o/ o'kay) is used in place of 'him' or 'her'. These genderless pronouns are comfortably used by millions of Bengali-speaking people in our country and all around the world. This, dear readers, is pretty cool.

People generally face irritation when using the words 'he or she'. I certainly do and I'm sure majority of the people who are extra conscious about the content of their speech go through it too. When a person has to use pronouns in the process of articulating an idea - be it through writing or giving a speech - this is one trouble he or she (there you go!) may face. This can actually disturb the way

ideas are being presented and distract the audience or readers from focusing on the main claims/ideas/content. This is especially true when someone is giving a speech. Many tend to stick to one subject pronoun, however, for a smooth flow of the expression of thought. It's easier that way.

A person who is a part of an institution or organization where English is the mode of communication will find this act of picking a pronoun rather bothersome. There have been moments of confusion several times in my life when I was speaking in public and needed to pick a pronoun to use. I could not decide whether I should say 'he' or 'she'. People in my situation continue with one pronoun, perhaps justifying that no one pays heed to which pronoun they use. But, when I was in the aforementioned situation, I faced trouble in clearly expressing myself. It was disturbing.

Here's why I felt disturbed: there's silent anger and frustration within myself after seeing and hearing the use of 'he' all the time when people try to use one pronoun to refer to a man or a woman. It isn't only that men use this, women also use it. Why does this occur? Frequent use of 'he' in English books or other write-ups, both academic and non-academic, is to be blamed. But what can the poor writers do if the language itself is biased? They certainly have a choice, but selecting and continuing with one pronoun would in turn be a matter of bias, no matter which one they

choose.

The male dominated society which exists today is also partially to blame for this. Our history and our old civilizations wrapped around patriarchal ideologies generated gender biases in languages such as English, the use of which is prevalent in Bangladesh. Most spoken languages in the world today make the distinction of gender in their languages. There are very few countries which make that distinction. For example, Sweden, Norway and Bangladesh.

We communicate through our own respective languages and it is quite obvious how profoundly this shapes our mindset and thoughts. Frequent use of gendered languages in writing and speech affects our mentality. If someone subconsciously uses 'he' while writing or speaking to refer to a person of any gender, it may imply to others that you value 'men' above 'women'. This might not necessarily be a bad thing and might not be the case too, but why should I have to assume that 'he' or 'she' refers to a person, regardless of their gender? This, I believe is a flaw in English language. Attempts have been made to use a gender-neutral English pronoun, such as 'Ze', but they have failed to be used globally.

I am proud of my Bangla language, for it doesn't distinguish between man and woman, he or she. It's one step towards working and communicating together to successfully narrow the existing gender gap in our country.

# Embarrassed by fiction?

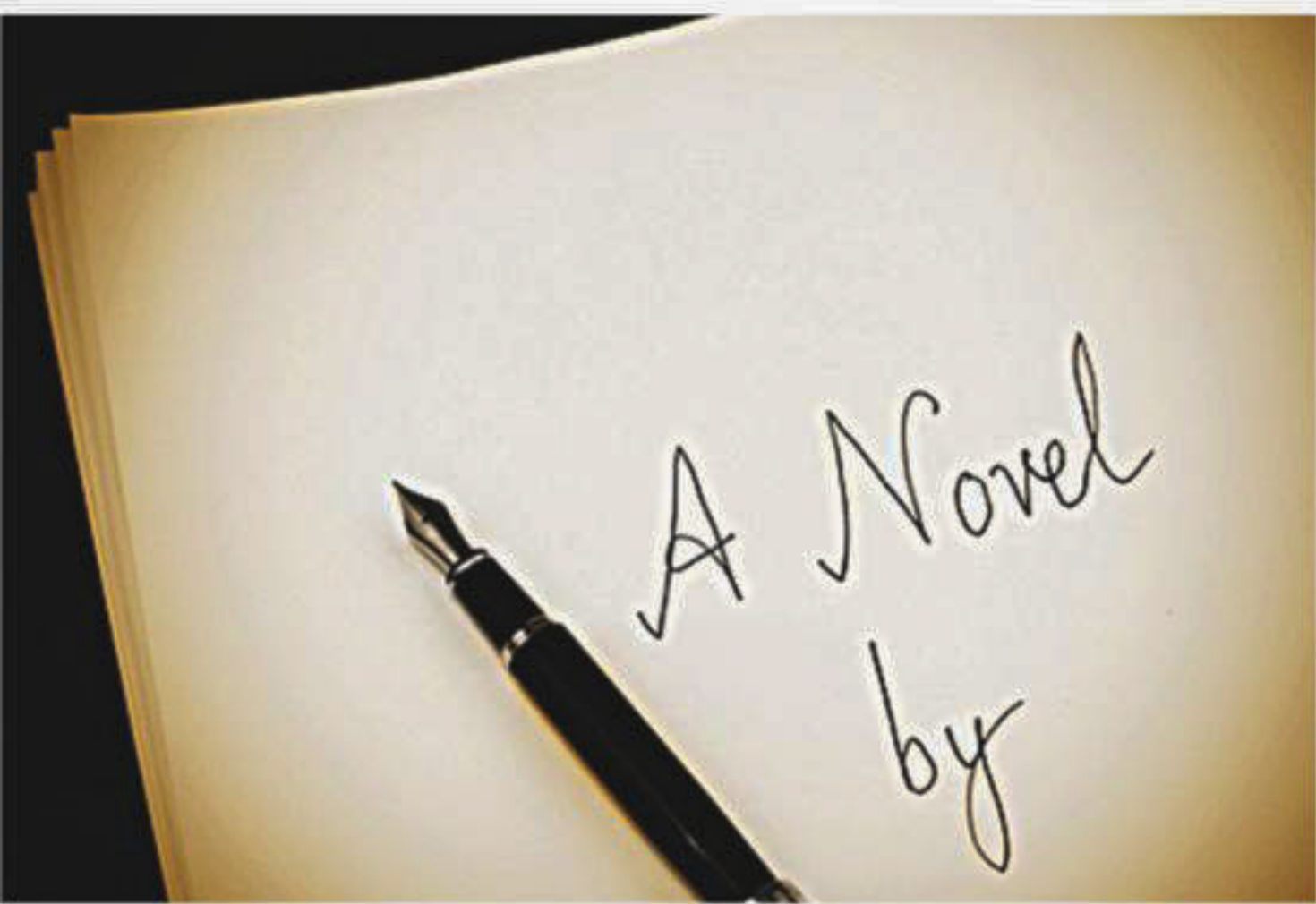
Joe Treasure

An American novelist writes to tell me he's read one of my books. There are things in it he admires, such as 'the evocation of atmosphere' and 'the urgency of suspicions of adultery'. But the plot bothers him - the fact that there is one. 'Plot always bugs me,' he says, 'and I couldn't help thinking - if you'll forgive me - that almost all novels would benefit if they (we) could break loose of the imperative of A leading to B leading to C, etc.'

A friend, writing from Japan, is less apologetic. He has already told me, to his own great amusement, having read only the publisher's blurbs, that my books are 'silly'. A social historian who has lived on four continents, he just can't see the point of made-up stories when there's so much real life to learn about. He writes, 'I'm reading about Karl Ove Knausgaard and he says the same kinds of things about fiction as me. I'm not as mad as I'd thought!'

Knausgaard's unflinching memoir has won him notoriety far beyond his native Norway and has given new impetus to an old critical trope: the death of the novel. 'Just the thought of a fabricated character in a fabricated plot made me feel nauseous,' he writes in the second of six fat volumes of the bizarrely titled *Min Kamp* (My Struggle). The British novelist Rachel Cusk is also reported to have given up on fiction, finding it, according to a profile in a recent *New Yorker*, 'fake and embarrassing', and the creation of plot and character 'utterly ridiculous'.

As I wrestle with the familiar challenge of bringing fictional characters to life and giving shape to their experiences, I begin to feel disheartened. Perhaps I should just write about my life. But I have no appetite for self-revelation. On an impulse I download Cusk's latest book, *Outline*.



Some books I buy in the expectation of pleasure, others for work. This one I encounter as an enemy. If Cusk considers ridiculous what I put so much energy into, it follows that I will either hate what she's doing or be defeated by it, recognising that my craft has indeed been superseded.

But the headlines have misled me. *Outline* is no memoir. The first person narrator, of whose life we gather only fragments, is mainly a recipient of other people's stories, which are delivered with arresting eloquence. I'm reminded of the strange fictions of Borges, or of a Chekhovian play in which characters take it in turns to reveal something of themselves. Many of these narratives lead to moments of illumination. The effect is elaborately fictive.

It occurs to me that I have mistaken Cusk's self-reflective musings for literary analysis. Her embarrassment is, of course, purely personal. Pushing herself to solve problems thrown up by her earlier works, she is acutely aware of what she perceives, justly or not, to be their shortcomings. This is a feeling I understand. I finish *Outline* exhilarated and ready to get back to my novel.

Joe Treasure is the author of two novels: *"The Male Gaze"* and *"Besotted"*, and teaches creative writing at Royal Holloway, University of London.



# Writers and Memory

Javed Jahangir

I recently came across one of those ads you see everywhere: take a photo of your choice and have it be imprinted on a cover for your smartphone. This innovation struck me as a little bit confusing. Were we so hungry for the image of our loved ones that we couldn't wait to turn on the phone and stare at the two hundred albums we have revolving in there? Everywhere we look already has more screensavers, coffee mugs, mouse-pads, cakes and toilet covers bearing the likenesses of our loved ones, so do we really need another place? Little is left of our fallible memory banks, with which, heaven forbid, we would otherwise use to conjure up a fuzzier, softer image for ourselves.

Though I rarely use actual personal experience as fodder for my writing, I do rely heavily on memories. I like to tap into the memories of the emotional truth underlying a conversation or an event or a person. So it scares me to find this realm of our minds to be in retreat from the onslaught of such advancement as pixilation technology. When you examine a person's photo in the daylight, he may not look as shifty-eyed as you would have been led to believe after that little chat in the dark bar. The wine enhanced moment you shared with the girl under the awning in the rain? Seen through someone's Facebook photo or video feed you are little more than a couple of giggling, wet drunks. It is easy enough to deride the notion of 'write what you know', perhaps as easy as it is to take it literally and write thinly veiled memoirs; but the adage is still not one that can be easily ignored.

So it has to be asked - what do we really know, and doesn't art reside in the cracks of the imperfect human experience- where subjective truths weigh as much as the empirical facts?

For those of us, writing 'out-of-country' and 'out-of-language' as Rushdie has described diaspora writing, this conflict between memory and fact begins to war amongst themselves. I have, for example worked on a novel for years, trying to mine the subjective and emotional truths of a Bangladeshi landscape in the eighties- a place that may have existed, if even mostly in my head. But if you look at the physical evidence today (photos and video) of the city I lived in, you will see that no shred of that landscape, physical, cultural or emotional, exists any longer. No house I ever lived in exists there any longer, having made way instead for tall apartment buildings, to house people with lives as unfamiliar to me as a random apartment complex in, say, Ulan Bator, Mongolia. The streets have become a labyrinthine puzzle that I don't recall losing track of. And Bollywood, of course, has eaten up the people. It is an intense feeling of loss, this feeling of being amongst a tribe of Mohicans, for whom the past truly is a place we have emigrated from. To fully quote Rushdie who expresses this dislocation better than many -

*"Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses,*

*capably only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because of our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death."*

- Imaginary Homelands (1992)

But then I realize that what connects us more closely to one another than anything else, is not the uniqueness of what we might have lost, but the sheer sharedness of that fact that we have all lost, a past that is never to be reclaimed except as colonies of our minds. So perhaps this tribe of Mohicans, last of them though we may be, it seems to include many of us. Maybe all of us.

And maybe on second thought, we need to put something on our iPhones covers to remind us of that fact.

Javed Jahangir is the author of *Ghost Alley*, launched at Hay Festival Dhaka 2014. This article is reprinted with permission from *Beyondthemargins.com*.