

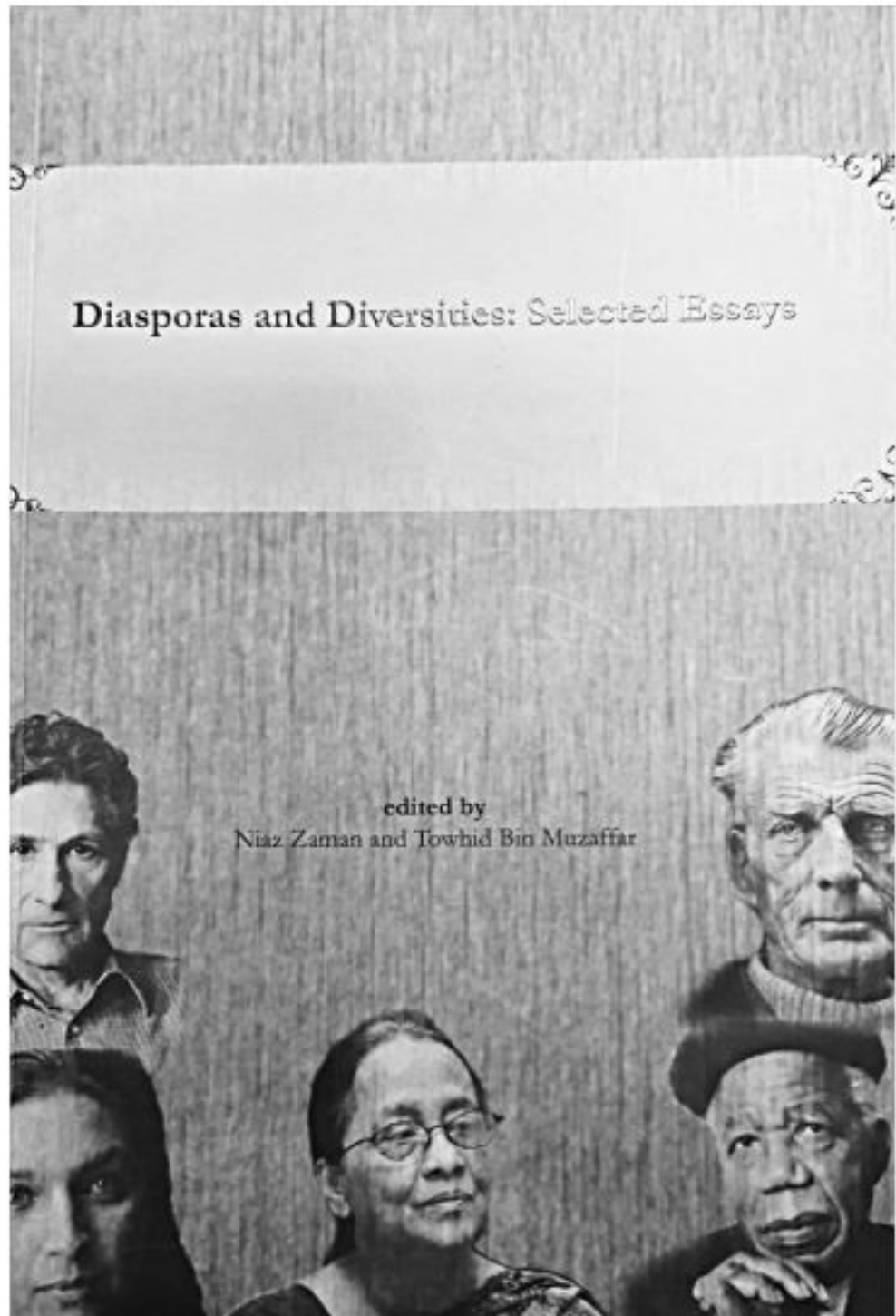
# Diversities in Diasporas

MOHAMMAD SHAFIUL ISLAM

*Diasporas and Diversities: Selected Essays*, Edited by Niaz Zaman, IUB, ISBN978-984-34-1273-7, 2016

Keeping in view the dichotomy of diversity within unity and unity within diversity, the Department of English, Independent University Bangladesh (IUB) organized a three-day-long conference in November 2015. From the papers presented in the conference, eleven were selected for the book entitled *Diasporas and Diversities: Selected Essays*.

The work begins with 'Language Matters: English in a Multicultural World', the keynote paper of the conference delivered by Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam which explores how language is instrumental in synthesizing cultures. Islam argues that language is a vehicle which enables humans to share knowledge across a wide range of regions and spectrums. Premised upon the universal nature of languages as changeable, the keynote paper discusses the way English has travelled across the world and permeated local cultures. During its voyages, and despite all efforts made by grammarians and lexicographers to standardize it, English has continuously lost its monoculturalist attributes so that gradually different varieties emerged while it was being used as a lingua franca. A passionate promoter of multiculturalism, Professor Islam maintains that languages change, evolve and gather momentum as they travel beyond standardized fortifications. Citing



Shakespeare's Anglicization of foreign language words and terms stemming from sources such as Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Germanic, Spanish Old Norse and Celtic languages, Islam shows how accommodation, adaptation, approximation

and assimilation can enrich a language. His paper also highlights the way globalization has caused the phenomenal growth and expansion of the English language: the number of Chinese students learning English far outweighs the total number of people speaking English in Europe; thirty-four countries in four continents have English as their official language, and a significantly high proportion of the world population use English as a second language! Islam apprehends that the dominance of English will inevitably endanger many languages of the world; he also feels that English teaching in our parts of the world should focus on linking local cultures and sparking the creative imagination of learners. He believes that teaching methodology prescribed by any outside agency will contribute to the perpetuation of a language hierarchy.

Alongside the keynote paper, the anthology collects ten more research and critical papers of the conference that are kaleidoscopic in terms of ideas, approaches and attitudes. For instance, Mohammad Kaoser Ahmed's 'Yes, the Subaltern Can Speak: Deconstructing Gender Hegemony in Selina Hossain's Ghumkature Ishwar' helps us dive into the world of subaltern studies. Incessantly afflicted by patriarchal trauma, the female characters of Hossain's novel are seen by Ahmed to be bold and quick to

protest against the treatment they receive from men. Ahmed investigates critically the dynamics that have empowered the women in the novel and sees them as determined to challenge conventionally enforced fatwas and the traditional argument of biological determinism that posits men are superior to women because of their biological composition.

In his essay 'Endgame: War and Trauma on the Absurd Stage', Md. Tanvir Ahsan depicts the traumas of victors and the vanquished that result from warfare. With clinical precision, the author throws light on how the horrific holocausts of World War II traumatized victims in their immediate locality and even beyond in works such as Samuel Becket's *Endgame*.

In 'Spiritual Metaphors: East-West Connectivity Synthesizing Eastern and Western Approaches to Spirituality,' Haroonuzzaman shows how the human search for the mystic side of life is quite pervasive despite the presence of humans in geographically diverse locations. This essay epitomizes the spiritual philosophy of 'Man in God' to show how the syncretic Baulism of the East strikes the same chord as that of the western transcendentalists. In today's strife-torn world, this idea of binding disparate areas through spirituality could bring about peace, overcoming differences.

Parallel to the contributions on diasporas, a number of essays dealing with other areas have also curved out niches in the anthology. While Mohammad Shafiqul Islam is busy exploring the human psyche, images of modern city life and overall degeneration in Kaiser Haq's *Pariah and Other Poems*, Razia Sultana Khan focuses on the world of fairy tales. Mohammad Shafiqul Islam's essay 'Nostalgia, Contemporaneity and Cynicism: Kaiser Haq's *Pariah and Other Poems*' show how the poet portrays minor but significant incidents of everyday life subtly. In her contribution, Razia Sultana Khan finds significant resemblances in fairy tales produced in varied geographical locations. Her essay 'It's All in the Plot: Using Fairy Tales to Teach Plot Construction' shows us how in-depth analyses of fairy tales help learners understand the way plots are constructed in fictions.

*Diasporas and Diversities* has been edited meticulously. No doubt the hard work and the professionalism of the editors have resulted in a work that will be of immense benefit to those who are engaged in the study of literature and cultures as well as English teaching.

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## Men, Memories and Missing Pieces

NISHAT SHOILEE

*Men Without Women*, Haruki Murakami, ISBN 9780451494, Bond Street Books, 2017

"Well, that was weird!" might be the first fleeting thought to cross a reader's mind who is new to experiencing Haruki Murakami's bizarre world of jazz, baseball, ghosts, cats, spaghetti, marathon, sex, and ironing. Bathed in an ever-gyrating whirlpool of urban myths, parables, postmodern nightmares, miracles, puzzles, and pop art, Murakami's characters appear as those familiar strangers with whom you could gladly share a psychedelic trip down the dark abyss of deserted memories. The Kafkaesque prose master's unusual dream-reality requires a contemplative engagement of one's memory in all its missing bits and poetic elusiveness. On that account, his romantic treatment of the shadowy figures of imagination captures a less predictable world of fantasies and fickle nostalgia.

Despite its clearly strong narrative command over everyday reality and substantial issues, the idiosyncratic pattern of storytelling one comes across in Murakami's latest translated collection, *Men Without Women* (2017) is not an exception either. This book may be easily misunderstood for its somewhat obscurantist title, for it has nothing to do with Hemingway's narrative of rugged prizefighters in his similarly titled 1927 work from which our Japanese storyteller would seem to have borrowed the phrase. Indeed, Murakami's men harbor an acute fear of emotional intimacy, especially when the unforeseen advent or disappearance of a mysterious woman strikes their plastic lives like a brief bright thunderbolt. For his prosaic generations of modern-day hikikomori, voluntary estrangement from personal histories serves as a pseudo-security blanket that offers momentary comfort. Nevertheless, an inevitable existential awakening ultimately stalks them to a state of cryptic mindlessness, making each story a sullen statement on alienation, absurdity, and existential despair.

For example, the first story "Drive My Car" (echoing a Beatles song) shuns how the timely intervention of a taciturn female driver (Misaki) begins to confront all the lapses and "sickness" in a widowed actor's (Kafufu) flawed memoriae: robotic reenactment of scenes from the past, complacent categorization of people as "entities" and "nonentities," pretentious quest for emotional convenience, false propensity for "becoming somebody else," and most importantly, amnesiac "blind spots", both as observer and husband. The enduring "silence" of the end, however, leaves us mystified about Kafufu's dealing with the hollowness he never came to terms with. The concept of the protagonist trying to review the past as "a totally different person" from who he or she originally was is worked out in the second story, "Yesterday" as well, where Murakami demonstrates almost a Salingerian affection for an eccentric college dropout, Kitaru who lives in Denenchofu yet acquires the Kansai dialect, sings The Beatles' track "Yesterday" in garbled lyrics, invites a friend to date his own girlfriend and lastly, decides to become a sushi chef in Denver. In the story, the idea of Kitaru never quite knowing where he belongs plays out on multiple levels of signification, including that of the kind of trans-cultural insecurity a post-WWII hybrid millennial may feel about his or her floating conscience trapped in an a temporal "growth ring" and bygone "yesterday."

The protagonists of the next two stories, "An Independent

Organ" and "Scheherazade" both meditate on lovesickness as a strange medical condition in which the core idea of storytelling itself compels its characters to reinvent their eventful past as a potent tool to negotiate the present. The former deals with Murakami's narrator-ego recalling his memories of the narcissistic plastic surgeon, Dr. Tokai and his suicide from self-inflicted starvation, whereas the latter involves Scheherazade (a contemporary counterpart of the ancient Arabian Night's storyteller) reliving her teenage self's unusual obsession with breaking into peoples' houses and stealing "erotically charged" tokens. When the once flamboyant doctor wonders, "Who in the world am I?" or Scheherazade imagines her incarnation as a storytelling lamprey fish, what becomes clear is that neither of them is truly ever prepared to leave behind the nostalgic familiarity of their habitual past. It constantly manages to return and haunt their unsure present, be it in the form of an anorexic disorder incited by one's reading of the Nazi techniques of inhumane torture, or of a lamprey fish "fastened to the rock,

eying a fat trout swimming by".

Similarly, in the next three stories, "Kino," "Samsa in Love" and "Men without Women," Murakami deploys a sarcastic edge over his characters' futile attempts to identify and fill the "empty caverns" inside their mind. "Kino" vaguely recounts the notion of ancestral memories being "useful" through an allegorical portraiture of cats, "ambiguous" snakes, cigarette marks, willow trees, aggressive bar goers, soft jazz, and Shinto spirits. "Samsa in Love," on the other hand, gestures at a reversal of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* where, we remember, a confused Samsa underwent an "embarrassing" humane transformation, only to discover that he could not remember ever living a human life before. Finally, the "second loneliest man on earth" in the last piece of the collection, "Men Without Women," keeps longing for a conclusive "essence of truth" about meaningful relationships in order to rid himself of his past romantic attachments. Yet, in an imaginary dimension that is unable to define itself within any set of spatio-temporal parameters, the omnipresent

ghosts of his former lovers, "sailors" and "unicorns" never quite leave him alone.

In the end, it is their vain pursuit of such unresolved mysteries of life that defines Murakami's men without women, his drifters living "in a relentlessly frigid plural." Even though the temptation of an indecipherable loneliness permeates their lives like non-washable "Bordeaux wine stain," they are the "pastel-colored Persian carpets," demonstrating the responsive resilience it requires for one to master kintsugi, the art of embracing damage. Just like Beethoven's numbers—odd and even notes played in parallel—their strengths and vulnerabilities resonate powerfully with our ones. Each story complements the collection in its own and unique way as would a complete track-list of experimental recordings in a unified concept album. One could venture to say that after taking a meditative dive into the collapsing montage of Murakami's world full of lonely men, perhaps, the multivalent readerly epiphany is that of unforced awe at a boat rowed against the current, where before anything else, the boatmen "felt."

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### THUMBNAIL REVIEW

## A Liberation War Novel for Our Time

ISHRAT BINTE AFTAB

*Muslim House*, Mohsin Habib, ISBN 978-984-92182-7-2, Behula Bangla, 2017

The title of Habib's work is suggest why did our valiant freedom fighters liberate this country? Why did the martyrs go through hell for their mother tongue? The answer cannot be penned outright; it has to be felt first. Unfortunately, most of us have paid scant attention to their achievements in the first place. Moreover, some of us have tarnished our glorious history of liberation because of silly political maneuverings. Surely we are unique among nations for so blemishing the past. Mohshin Habib tries to depict that process discerningly in his work *Muslim House*.ive but does not fully represent its content. His is a novel about a young boy, Majed, who views the liberation war from his point of view. He is raised by his mother under the guardianship of Atahar, a powerful person in Faridpur who supports Pakistan blindly and wants Bangladesh to be defeated because of his religious prejudices. Throughout the book, readers come across instances of the violence done by the (West) Pakistan military and their local collaborators and Bihari supporters. The storyline develops through Majed's growing perception of the situation. It ends with his understanding of the bitter truth that after liberation real freedom fighters have often been suffering while some hypocrites have attained success and are even treated with respect.

It has to be said that to his credit that Habib manages to treat the essentially serious events of *Muslim House* with humor, something rare in this sort of book. The book is also a compelling read because of its vivid delineation of educated razakars or collaborators' lifestyle and the way they use their learning to justify (West) Pakistani demands on Bangladeshis and to make religion the only barometer of nationality. Hamid underscores the way some educated people are still using religion and the issue of language to meet their own ends. Habib's novel is admirable also because of the flow of his writing.

However, there are portions in *Muslim House* that can appear monotonous, especially when Habib attempts to reproduce political conversation. The ending of his book is also too abrupt. Surely the development of the story demanded a longer conclusion.

Nevertheless Habib's *Muslim House* is worth reading in our time for it deals with issues that still have significance for our national and political consciousness. The incidents depicted in the book can also be connected to events occurring around us. There are too many razakars flourishing even now and freedom fighters in plight or forced to do things that sully them. The sacrifices our freedom fighters made during the liberation war and trauma they had to undergo subsequently are sad and depressing facts; they can never be compensated adequately for what they underwent. But it is good to have writers like Habib reminding us of the neglect they have suffered and the unfortunate consequences of the betrayal of the ideals that led to our liberation through his compelling novel.

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