

# “Every Poet Has to Find His or Her Own Way”

## Kaiser Haq in Conversation with Rumana Siddique

RS: *How did you get into writing, who were the major influences on your work when you started writing and which contemporary writers do you identify with now?*

KH: I started writing poetry because I was turned on by D.H.Lawrence's poem "The Snake". Then I started reading more poetry, browsing in anthologies, coining images and scribbling poems myself. It's very much like what Eliot said happens; when one is beginning writing it's not a bad idea to model yourself on someone that you like. And then, as you grow you engage with the entire tradition and discover that this tradition was a long process. You have to remember that Dhaka at that time was really the backwaters; there was no way to order books from anywhere and the libraries were not well stocked either. News about books would come just by chance so it was very different from the situation now but in a way it was also more interesting because every new book you read was a discovery. You would suddenly come upon a very interesting book stuck among all these other cheap books in a strange book store. Influence-wise, I latched on to the modern tradition, especially Eliot, who is central to my conception of modern poetry. But I read around and I think my verse owes more to D. H. Lawrence and William Carlos Williams than to Eliot. Eliot's verses are very distinctive but his mythopoeis didn't attract me (I chortled over Larkin's dismissive phrase "the myth kitty"?), his imagery was the thing that has stayed with me. Poets that I relate to warmly would be perhaps, Eliot, Philip Larkin, Derek Walcott. John Ashbery I am still struggling with; I was very dismissive of him previously and had found him infuriating but I think now I've got a kind of handle on him. I have identified the aesthetic mystery behind his work as Dadaism; I may be wrong of course.

RS: *You have been acclaimed as not merely a Bangladeshi poet writing in English but also as one writing in a major and international tradition of poetry in English. So when you first started writing, as you just said, you felt your work was a continuation of an existing tradition but was there any awareness of creating a literary tradition of Bangladeshi writing in English at all?*

KH: Well, it's not something you do in a programmatic way, but there was certainly an awareness of a likely literary world where people like me would produce work, share it, and find a readership. When I started writing there was a small Anglophone literary community in what was then West Pakistan. I got to know their work first through anthologies. And then, interestingly, in January 1971 my classmate Firoz and I were winners in an all Pakistan poetry contest organized by the USIS and were taken to Lahore for the final ceremony. There I met Taufiq Rafat and Kaleem Omar who were very welcoming. That sort of connection of course was severed because just after a few months the independence war started, and I joined the Mukti Bahini. When I went back in 1985 for another USIS event I met Taufiq Rafat; Kaleem Omar was in Karachi at the time. And I met Alamgir Hashmi, who had been a young man in the audience in the earlier event.

RS: *Had you ever tried to reconnect at all before this?*

KH: Actually once after 1971 my father, who worked in the Textbook Board then, went to Malaysia for a conference. Taufiq Rafat went as a delegate from Pakistan. One

day Taufiq Rafat approached my father and said, "Do you know a young poet called Kaiser Haq?"

RS: *So you had left a lasting impression on him from that first meeting!*

KH: Apparently. You see, when I had gone to Lahore and read my poems, he had asked to see my other work and I had left a sheaf of poems which he apparently had read and liked. He told me later that my poems were read out at little Anglophone Mushairas. At the same time I started exploring the new "commonwealth literature", which was the term used at the time. I discovered the Indian poets such as Nissim Ezekiel and others then.

RS: *Nissim Ezekiel seems to have had quite an influence on your work; you have modeled some of your work on him--right?*

KH: Yes. His poems written in Subcontinental English, his ironical voice, and his urban imagery appealed to me. I knew him personally. I got to know over the years other important Indian poets as well: Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Keki Daruwalla and the late G. S. Sharat Chandra.

RS: *Several of your poems juxtapose images of your motherland with images borrowed or imagined from landscapes elsewhere. The consciousness of being a "citizen of the world" and the vision of your native land as ultimately a microcosm of a global landscape and culture is recurrent in your poems. Also, your poems exhibit an awareness of a history that is not local. Does this shift between cultural worlds reflect any sense of emotional displacement at all or is it just part of your modern tradition?*

KH: No, I don't think so really. It was just a very modern thing to do, extending the boundaries of one's vision. Eliot has that, mentioning the Upanishads and Krishna alongside his western imagery.

RS: *You have translated some Bengali works including the poems of Shamsur Rahman and the*

*RS: How do you see your work within the wider context now and would you define yourself as a transnational poet?*

KH:Transnational perhaps not physically, but then every writer is transnational in his mental sphere. Every writer automatically absorbs transnational influences. So in that sense, yes. But because of the cultural ambience here I have actually often had to defend my use of English as a medium for my poetry.

*some of the prose of Rabindranath Tagore. Have you translated any of Tagore's poems?*

KH: Some poems, yes. For *The Essential Tagore* edited by Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty. I did the translations of the later free verse poems because I find the idea of translating his rhymed verse unappealing.

RS: *So how has Bengali literature influenced the style, if at all, of your work and is it as important an influence as your European heritage?*

KH: Among some of the local poets I like, I have taken cues mostly from their imagery because in modern Bangla poetry you have imagery drawn directly from the subcontinent and Bengal. I think I have absorbed that from

the imagery of Bengali poetry. Let me give you an example. Shaheed Quadri, a friend of mine and a poet who I am translating now, has a poem which has a line which translates as "I will buy nothing" which in his work is a comment on the consumer society; now I have a poem where a *nanga pagla* character on the street similarly says "From you I will buy nothing", even though here it is a very different situation and mine is a very comic character saying this. Also, he has a very famous poem called "Brishti Brishti" where at the end he compares the rain to a deluge and he says that unlike Noah you can't sail because there is nowhere to sail to. Now at

*choice because the memory of it is too painful or was it as a result of post-war disillusionment?*

KH: It just happened that just a few poems came. I mean when I went to the battlefield I had an anthology of war poetry with me but really the nature of the war and the problems we faced were very different from the experiences of the first world war or the second world war.

RS: *Did you try to equate your experience with those war poems?*

KH: You know I should actually write about this. When I was commissioned, after just fifteen weeks of training, I was a young chap commanding a company. I went in



the end of my poem "Ode on a Lungi", the lungi becomes an arc in the face of a deluge. This is the way one can learn from the way local poets have used imagery. Jibanananda Das is perhaps the greatest reservoir of evocative local imagery that we can draw upon.

RS: *Many of your poems are quite humorous while still having serious undertones; was this balance hard to achieve?*

KH: No, it was something that came quite naturally.

RS: *Your poems written in subcontinental English seem to have more of a tongue-in-cheek quality rather than being any serious attempt to write-back postcolonially or establish the authenticity of a non-standard form of English. Do you agree?*

KH: Yes, absolutely. See, we don't have a Creole but we do have these forms of subcontinental demotic English which western writers would make fun of. Why let them make fun of us? We can make fun of ourselves! At the same time, underneath those poems there are serious themes lurking. In Africa and the Caribbean you have Creole which can be used as dialogue. Here, if you are writing fiction, and you have a character who speaks a local subcontinental variety of English, one can use it but I haven't been able to find too much use for it in my poetry.

RS: *Despite your active role in the liberation war of Bangladesh you seem to have allotted very little space to it in your poetry. Was this a conscious*

because I had to make a choice—either to leave the country, lie low, or join and resist. I chose to resist, and as they were interviewing for officers I decided I would rather fight as an officer than as an ordinary soldier and take on more responsibility.

RS: *So do you think you will ever go back to those memories and write more poems on them?*

KH: Perhaps. I have also written a couple of essays. If I write an extended memoir there may be more stuff about the war. Interestingly, while the war was going on and for some time after, I could remember every little detail of the war experience, the minute by minute record was there, like where we took a patrol and where we had a skirmish. I had thought I would write it down sometime. But even if I had written it down I don't know if minute details about patrolling and skirmishes would have been very interesting reading.

RS: *I've often wondered, given your background, if you had actually kept a journal during the war.*

KH: You know, I wish I had, but I have never been a diary keeping person.

RS: *Your poetry is quite heavily infused with western literary, historical and cultural references which may well elude the mainstream Bengali audience. So, regarding reception of your work, do you have any specific audience that you aim to target?*

KH: Anyone who is interested really. It's impossible nowadays to think of a particular

limited audience or to define the audience, as it were. As it is, poetry has a very small audience and then the transmission of poetry is a very peculiar process. You never know how your books will be distributed or where they will end up. Nowadays the internet has become a very important medium and I think it's going to become more and more important because poetry will have to use it a lot more.

RS: *Your more recent poems such as 'Ode on a Lungi' and 'Published in the Streets of Dhaka' seem to indicate your work is adopting a more aggressive political stance on identity than your earlier poems. Is this a conscious standpoint that we will see more of?*

KH: I don't know if you will see more of it but it's like stating that this is where I am. "My backward place is where I am," to quote Ezekiel, and it had to be stated. And having stated that nothing else changes. As for my choice of subject, I wouldn't predict which way my work will go.

RS: *I also notice that recently you have shifted focus to bringing forth traditional Bengali mythology into readable modern English by translating several Hajong folk tales as well as the folk epic titled The Triumph of the Snake Goddess. Translation and integration of indigenous mythology into modern literature has been quite a prevalent strategy in African literature in English. Is this process of reconnecting with your ancient heritage something we will also see integrated in your forthcoming poetry?*

KH: I don't know. I can't see how to fit it into my poetry unless it comes naturally. But the task of presenting our ancient heritage in modern English is something that I find very engaging and I want to do a few more of these books.

RS: *Finally, what advice would you give the new generation of aspiring Bangladeshi poets writing in English?*

KH: I think every poet has to find his or her own way. Remember, at one time people said there was no future for poetry in English in Bangladesh.

RS: *And you have proved them wrong!*

KH: Well, I've kept trying to prove them wrong. I am very pleased to see that there are younger poets who have started writing, yourself included, who are very promising so you have to agree there is a slowly growing band of writers. Nausheen Eusuf's *Not Elegy But Eros*, just out from Bengal Lights Books, is a splendid debut collection. A tradition takes a long time to grow, but the good thing is that there are more writers appearing. This is especially seen in fiction. There are fifty novels or so in English from Bangladesh. I know this because I have recently done an essay for the forthcoming *Oxford History of the Novel in English*. There's a volume devoted to south and southeast Asia and I was commissioned to do the Bangladeshi writers, leaving out the diaspora, and I covered twenty-eight. So that seems to be a positive development for Bangladeshi writing in English.

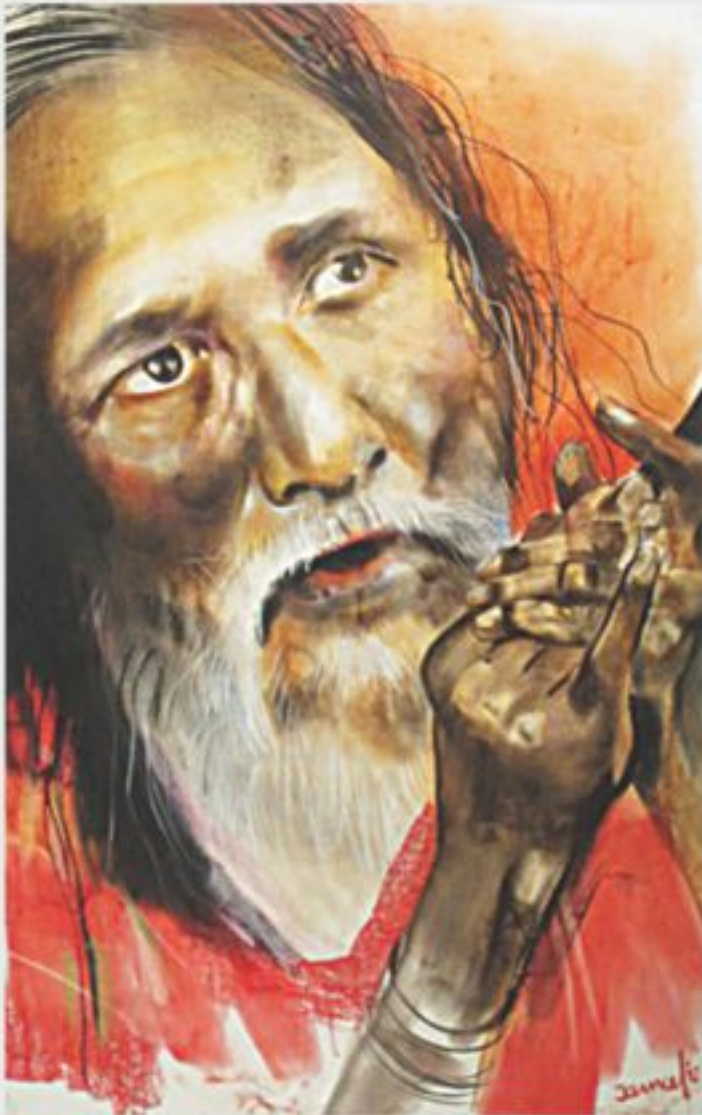
*Kaiser Haq has just retired as professor of English from the University of Dhaka; he is currently the Dean of Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, and a poet and translator.*

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POETRY

KAISER HAQ



COURTESY: JAMAL AHMED

## On A Street

Nanga Pagla the sky-clad one  
Terror and delight of children  
Halts the traffic to announce his name  
Is Badshah Akbar, Henry Ford, Aga Khan.  
Then marching to the department store  
Stops before assistants can bar his way  
And dismisses them with a laugh:  
'From you I will buy nothing.'



## Autumn Fragment

November, where are the mists of yesteryear?  
If it's late afternoon in one's life  
Should one set fire to the stubble  
Of memories? Little warmth  
And such smoke! Time to file  
The tax return: no rebates, though,  
Or scope for evasion. Another depression  
Brewing in the Bay. Can one write