Why I started writing in English

RAHAD ABIR

I am Bengali. I am a writer.

Being a writer is hard. Being a Bangladeshi writer is even harder. 'Writing is a side business, a hobby; it cannot be a full time job'—that is what most people think in Bangladesh. The term "Professional writer" is still foreign to their ears.

Thus, professional Bengali writers are a rare breed. It is said that the few who tread this path might see the light of success only if they can write with two hands. They must author two to three books a year to survive. Because they must produce publishable prose quickly, they hardly have time for literary efforts. Usually their work falls into the category of 'popular writing.'

Do I want to be a pop writer? No. I want to produce literary works. At the same time, I long to be a full-time professional writer. Is that possible in Bangladesh? Writing in Bengali? Not that I have ever heard of. A day job is a must.

In 2001, I am a twenty-year-old-freshman at the University of Dhaka. I cannot not imagine myself being anything other than a writer. I want it so badly that focusing on studios is a challenge. John Steinbeck never graduated from university. William Faulkner and Ray Bradbury never even attended college. Then why should I take classes when I could be using the time writing? Yet, I decide to knuckle down and do both, complete university studies and write for publication, even if it means lower grades and being published without any payment.

In the final year of my bachelor's when my fellow students have not a second to breathe outside of their studies, I start a serial translation of a novel from English to Bengali. Free of honorarium. Just to see my name every week in a literary page. The reward is worth its weight in gold – even though it means I pass my courses with lousy grades which will forever forbid me from applying for regular jobs.

I take a position in journalism. The pay is miserable, but it is a writing job, after all. My papa steps in, gives the typical Bengali expectations his best shot. "You want to write, fine," he snaps. "Get a good job. Get filthy rich. Then write in your spare time."

My papa, like most Bengalis, considers money to be the measure of success. Nonetheless, he is unwilling to belittle my writing habit—a healthy hobby indeed. "No penny, no dignity," he warns. "You can write whenever you want. But once you are old, you are old. You will be a loser."

If writing is a losing business, it's fine. I want to be a loser then. I am adamant.

Seasons come and time carries on. I watch my friends grabbing good jobs. Gaining respect. Going abroad. Getting all the fun in life.

I feel depressed.

I think to myself: I need to change my life.

I fly to London.

I survive by doing all kinds of odd and menial jobs. Two years pass. It is early January 2012. I am frustrated. I have suicidal thoughts. Since landing in London, I have written nothing at all. The muse has left me, I begin to believe.

Then one late evening I have a dream. A speck of light in the distance waves at me. The speck becomes a ball of light. The ball of light moves, creeps in. When it is around a corner, it becomes a creature, dressed in black robe, a Black Monk. The only thing visible about him is the blazing light ball—which is his face. As the creature closes in I begin to pant, then I start to scream.

How long did the dream last? I am unsure. I open my eyes to find my flat mate shaking me: Hey, what happened?...It's okay, it's okay… Calm down.

I stop screaming. Calm down. Suddenly I realize that I have been screaming out the name of God. This is unusual since I'm not a religious guy. Fear is a strange thing. It made my unconscious seek help from a celestial being.

For days afterwards, I get lost in my nightmare—analyzing the blazing ball of light and Black Monk. What is that light supposed to mean? I am not a dreaming man. The moment my head hits the pillow I am asleep. If I dream at all, I do not remember.

I buy a book titled *10,000 Dreams Interpreted*. It doesn't help. I plunge into an extensive online research. Finally, I piece together an interpretation. The light is my anxiety—my drifting goalless living in London. So my swelling depression broke into a cold sweat and turned into an uncanny fiery-ball.

In the summer of 2012, five months after that nightmare, I return to Dhaka. For around three years I breathed British air. Now I am in Dhaka again, Bangladesh's capital, a boisterous booming city where traffic eats away one third of its residents' time and with every dusk comes buzzing mosquitoes to kick off their evening concert. Yet I feel happy and bubbling with excitement. I will write again.

This time, I decide to write in English. In the decade before moving to London I'd written in my native tongue, Bengali. There was barely a leading Bangladesh newspaper or literary magazine in which my name hadn't appeared. So was I a pop writer? No. Bangladesh has a bizarre literary environment compared with the rest of the world.

Here, newspapers happily maintain a 'no pay for writers' philosophy. There are exceptions, but exceptions are not the rule. The reason is not that newspapers are on the rocks. It is just a bad practice in this country. With the arrival of every new parliamentary government, media gets pregnant with reporters and news outlets breed like mice. They seduce bright journalists with fat salaries. A few years go by, everything is peaceful, subscriptions fall, outlets are about to close. Pay becomes irregular, and staff is laid off.

There is a cruel joke about being a poet in Bangladesh: A poet visits a doctor. Constipation, the poet explains, is his problem. The doctor prescribes him medication. A week later, the poet is back. No improvement, he whines to the doctor. The doctor prescribes a different medication. The next week, when the poet is back again, the doctor is taken aback.

"Tell me, what do you do for a living?"

"I am a poet."

"That's it? No other job?"

"That's it. I only write."

"Oh my! You should have told me that earlier!" The doctor offers him a TK 100 note and asks him to go fill his stomach. "No food, no faeces. Simple as that."

Another joke is about a would-be debut-novelist. The author has decided to self-publish his work. His friend hears this and suggests that he has his book printed on heavy offset paper. Why? "Because years later, the book be sold in stacks, by weight," the friend chuckles. "At least then it will be worth something."

I don't want to wind up like the poor poet or the aspiring novelist, so I think and think and think. Where the problems lie is not difficult to dig up. On the one hand, for financial survival, most writers writing in Bengali tend to (or have to) focus on quantity rather than quality. They cannot afford to spend time laboring over word choice and imagery. Most prize-winning foreign authors, on the other hand, spend two to three years on a book. And, unlike the international publishing houses which pride themselves on the quality of their catalogs, Bangladeshi publishers lack professionalism. No editing is done here, whatsoever. An author submits a manuscript, the publisher has it proofread, and that's the end of it. The book then goes to press.

Another consideration: Many Bangladeshis, subscribing to colonial mentality, think: Anything local is low-grade, anything foreign is fabulous. 'West is best' is their belief. There are religious, cultural and historical bases behind these value judgments.

One day, as I am pondering these things, I discover why foreign books in translation are in huge demand and I am overwhelmed with hope. Often, the amount of royalties a native writer receives is far lower than those earned by a translator of that same work. Additionally, literary editors and book publishers are extremely interested in publishing works in translation. "Translations sell, native writers don't," publishers acknowledge.

So I take my decision: I will write in English.

As word gets out about my switching from Bengali to English, my writing friends christen me "another Madhusudan." They laugh saying that I have got the Madhusudan Syndrome. Born in 1824, Michael Madhusudan Dutt is considered to be one of the greatest poets in Bengali literature. But in his younger years, he wrote in English and wanted to be recognized as an English language poet. He was so dogged that he converted to Christianity to fulfill his ambition. Since then "another Madhusudan" has been a catch-phrase for the Bengal writers venturing into English.

The world is not the world it used to be. 'The sun never sets on the British Empire' is no longer true or meaningful. I debunk my friends' prejudice. Madhusudan Dutt, I explain, was born in colonial times, the untimely period for a non-white man to treasure a dream like that. So the poet inside him went through a miscarriage.

Any beginning is critical. I adapt myself to writing in a second language, finish a number of short fiction works, and add a few foreign publication credits to my name. Confidence grows. I embark on my first novel. This is the summer of 2014. I am married, with a child, and I am a full-time author writing in English.

My wife is okay with my preferences. My extended family is not. Their surprise is unmistakable. Do you have a screw loose in your brain, they ask. Or think. I can read their faces. They want to assert either that I am simply straightforward or I have a mental disorder.

Trouble arises at social gatherings. The dreaded 'What do you do?' question. The moment I answer that I write, they ask me rightly 'What else do you do?' My reply 'I write full time' raises eyebrows. Ears seem to cock, cannot discern my words. How can a man with sound body and mind do nothing but write all day, they wonder. Once in a while I make up stories, telling them that I work with a foreign online news outlet.

Eventually, I isolate myself. Although writing in a small room for month upon month is tiring, frustrating, time slips by. Three years. I finish the first draft of my novel. I am flat broke. My family is struggling. I apply for the £10,000 Charles Pick Fellowship at the University of East Anglia.

One gloomy weekend afternoon, I open an email and then run screaming to my wife. The email announces the fellowship has been bestowed upon me. In the application, for the writing sample, I had included an excerpt from my novel. In the email, the fellowship granter bowled me over with the comment: "The judges were impressed by the lucidity and power of your prose and by the strength of the story you have to tell.'

Rahad Abir is a fiction writer from Bangladesh. He is the 2017-18 Charles Pick Fellow at the University of East Anglia.

DSLitEditor@gmail.com
Star REVIEWS

MYANMAR'S ENEMY WITHIN:
Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"

MAYESHA ALAM

Francis Wade, Zed Books, ISBN9781783605286, 2017

As Bangladesh continues to grapple with the massive influx of Rohingya refugees, an unprecedented spotlight has been shone on the human rights record of the Myanmar government and the future of democracy in that country. Many, in the region and beyond, are trying to make sense of the widespread brutal violence that has driven the Rohingya from their homes. In search for answers about the causes of this ongoing humanitarian catastrophe and political crisis, a new book by British journalist Francis Wade offers some thought provoking insights.

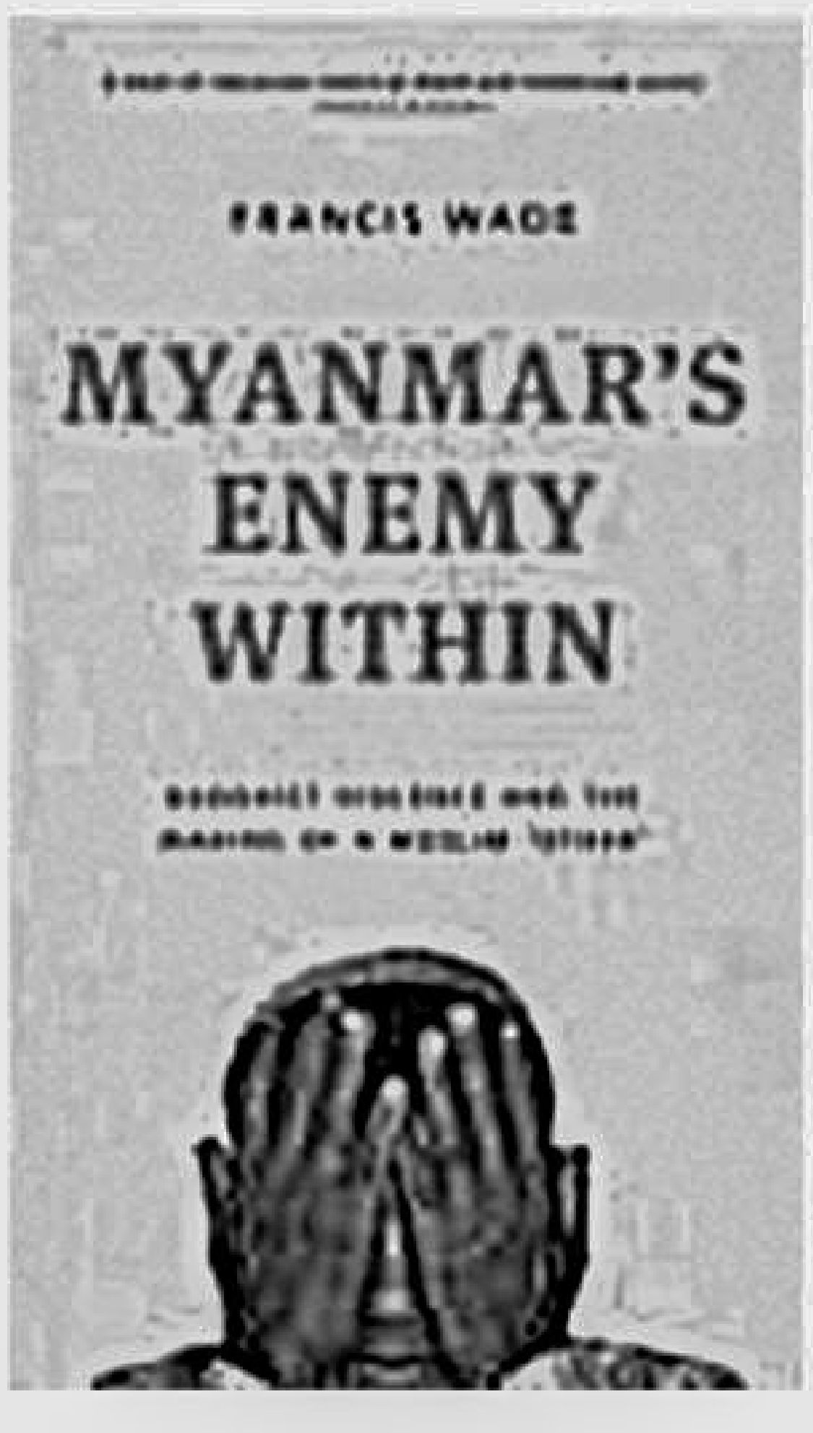
In *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making if a Muslim 'Other,'* published in August 2017 right as the most recent pogrom began, Wade delves into the complex ethnic, cultural, and religious factors that define the contentious relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine. Though he identifies the 2012 rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman by a group of "Bengali Muslim" men, so reported in the local press, as a recent critical juncture in the worsening inter-communal conflict, he argues that in order to truly understand the vitriol towards the Rohingya, we must trace the colonial roots of population movements and identity formation. Particularly consequential to the administrative ordering of peoples was the British obsession with racial classification which, Wade contends, introduced boundaries between groups along ethnic and religious lines. These social cleavages would endure post independence and become formalized as part of the state building project.

Dissecting the contemporary body politic of Myanmar, Wade examines the role of powerful actors that steer both institutions of governance as well as public discourse, including the ruling elite and powerful right-wing monks. The book's analysis of the Ma Ba Tha movement, and the social grip it holds, is especially damning, but Wade's critiques are generally nuanced, detailed, and grounded in evidence.

While acknowledging the extremely tight grip on power that the military — or *tatmadaw* — continues to maintain, Wade does not shy away from criticizing the failure in leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy, in the face of growing intolerance. Despite some fledgling democratic reforms, Myanmar is far from a democracy — in spirit or authority — and if Wade's account is to be believed, there is little reason for optimism. The Rohingya are unlikely to be able to return safely anytime soon, if ever, and the persecution of other minorities, many of whom are in armed conflict with the state, will probably endure. This is about more than securing the borders or counterinsurgency, irrespective of what Naypyidaw would have us believe.

Central to Wade's story is the Bamar majority's conceptualization of the nation — what it stands for and who belongs. The Rohingya, in both the public imagination as well as under citizenship laws, fall squarely outside, and thus are unable to make any legitimate claims to the land on which they have lived for generations. In addition to detailing the tyranny of the majority, Wade reveals that "othering" is not exclusive to the Rohingya, or even in Muslims, but rather a broad swathe of non-Bamar people, including those who are recognized as citizens.

Wade also uncovers the performativity of belonging that some members of minority groups have adopted as mechanisms for self-preservation or advancement. Take, for example, the story of a Mon State woman whose family moved to Yangon in the late 1980s. They deliberately assimilated into the Bamar Buddhist majority, Wade recounts, stripping themselves of their original ethnic identity in order to become fully Bamar Buddhists because of the tangible privileges and protections that this legal and social classification bears. Throughout the book, anecdotes and personal stories like this serve as moving testimonies about the psyche of the oppressors and the oppressed. The book, however, could have done more to highlight the economic and geopolitical factors that have shaped the trajectory of Myanmar in the last several years. This, perhaps, represents an area of future work, particularly in light of how the ongoing mass expulsion of the Rohingya has unfolded.



In touching on themes of nationhood, nationalism, assimilation, and contentious politics, Wade's book is evocative of the writings of intellectual heavyweights such as Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities,* 1983), Rogers Brubakers*(Ethnicity Without Groups,* 2004), Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism,* 1983), Donald Horowitz (*Ethnic Groups in Conflict,* 1985), and Charles Tilly (*Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties,* 1985). Wade's, however, is not an academic book and therefore should appeal to a wide audience. An easy and compelling read, it is sure to be of interest to students, scholars, policymakers, and the general public who seek to better understand the transformative social and political changes that are taking place in Myanmar and how these changes fit into the history of a divided society.

Mayesha Alam, based at Yale University, is the author of Women and Transitional Justice: Progress and Persistent Challenges in Retributive and Restorative Processes *(Palgrave Macmillan 2014).*