

# The Story of a Moonlit Night (Part 2)

## Shaheen Akhtar's "Modhupurnimar Raater Galpa"

TRANSLATED BY ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN

Foreign calls were cheap these days. So the parents had whined and cried on the phone: how could they bear their only son living abroad away from them? Who would carry their coffins on his shoulder? They had four daughters, of course – daughters who ignored their own homes to shop for the parents, take them to the doctor's, pay the bills, but they couldn't shoulder the coffins. So the son came right back. And as soon as he arrived, he took the reins from his old father, and almost came to blows with him!

Did Ismat see these things with her own eyes? This wasn't a case of the doctor's theory of thought-sharing, concerned only with the ears or mind. So I had no reason to disbelieve my old friend's eyes. I was sad. It hadn't been a month since his return, and already the brother had taken back all the gifts he had brought for his sister – the hair dryer, the perfume, and everything else. Ismat would have nowhere to go should her parents die. The brother would kick her out of the house with just the clothes on her back. The sisters may hold each other and cry for a bit though. Our shadows looked ghostly in the moonlight and I wanted to run away again...

If one tiptoed along the muddy path under the shade of the bamboo grove, one would arrive at a yard that was as clean as the palm of a hand. Music played there; songs were sung: "Ghaat picchul, pantha picchul, picchuliya maati go/ Picchla ghaate achhar khaiya/ Bhainga ailm kolshi go." [The bank is slippery; the path is slippery; slippery is the earth/ I fell on that slippery bank/ And returned with a broken waterpot.] "You actually want to run away."

Ismat's words startled me. She cackled like a mad woman. "Am I a tiger or a bear?"

Seeing my grim face, Ismat stopped laughing and looked at her watch. It wasn't even eight yet, so the question of leaving didn't arise. Perhaps she was thinking about going to Shathi's. Seemed like she had given up on Cousin Saira's place.



"What kind of girl is Saira, by the way?" I was curious. I'd heard a lot about her but never met her in person.

"Good." Ismat's voice dropped. "But all sheltered-- relatives are forbidden to walk even to the shop at the end of the alley to recharge their phones. They must take the car."

Ismat, after all, was the first cousin of a rich man's wife. Even the security guards at the house wouldn't stand it if they walked. And yet, this honorable relative of the rich man was sleeping in a medium-sized room in the servants' quarters with the maids. These were the

so-called elite of Gulshan.

Ismat, though, had no problem with the servants' quarters. She had managed to get the old maidservant, Lal Chan's Ma, on her side. They had an unwritten agreement – Lal Chan's Ma would turn on the lights before dawn to pray, Ismat would smoke whenever she felt like it, and the two young maids would watch movies and Hindi songs and dances on the 14" black and white TV whenever they wanted. If anyone had a problem with this contract, they could leave.

I found the contract quite agreeable too. If Ismat had been well, she would

have been teaching at a university, but it seemed like she had adjusted quite well to living in the servants' quarters. But ultimately, it was Ismat who had been forced to leave that house. Why? Sternly, I said, "That Saira is the root cause of all this!"

Ismat was astounded. Saira had no inkling of the contract. The girl was naturally very helpful. She wasn't so heartless that she would abandon the maid who had brought her up just because she had aged. The old woman would eat and pray on her bed, and there were the two young maids, and Ismat of course, who would help her to the bathroom behind the kitchen to shit or pee, and bathe. Lal Chan's Ma lived in style. Her son in the village was to be sent money in the first week of the month. No matter how rich someone is, they might still have some problems, but if the money was late by

Shaheb's young daughter, Mun-ni. I thought you went abroad. When did you come back?" The fan would drop from her hands and the old woman would fall on the bed, shivering, instead of going to the toilet.

"Oh, how ungrateful I am! I struck Mozammel Shaheb's young daughter! These hands will rot with leprosy for that!"

It was the same all over the next day.

"So the main culprit is that shameless woman, Lal Chan's Ma?"

No, not her. Not even Asma or Rozina. If they could, they would hold Ismat high on their shoulders and dance. Who but Munni Afa could have arranged for them to watch TV day and night? Was it then the fault of Saira's husband who, like Boro Dulabhai, had some revolting ideas which he didn't act on but was found guilty through thought-sharing? And it wouldn't be

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surprising even if he did do anything. Anything was possible for a man who had suddenly become a member of the elite in Gulshan with black money in his hands.

Aloud, I said, "I think Saira's husband is the real culprit here."

(The last installment will be published in the next issue).

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# Sustainable English language teacher development at scale: Lessons from Bangladesh

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REVIEWED BY OBAIDUL HAMID

**London: Bloomsbury, 2019.** Externally-funded English language projects of different stripes are an integral part of Bangladeshi education. These projects come and go at regular intervals, often leaving their unevaluated impact on the education sector. An exception appears to be the recently concluded English in Action (EIA, 2009-2018), a milestone in the history of English language teaching (ELT) development aid. This UK Aid-funded ELT intervention is DFID's "flagship" project which is also represented as an example of "success" in international discourse. Aligned with the relevant MDG and SDG goals, EIA aimed at taking 25 million people out of poverty by developing their English language skills which would increase their employability and life prospects. The key component of the project was school-based, technology-enhanced teacher development seen as a prerequisite for students' (and teachers') English language skills enhancement. The book that I am going to introduce is about this high-profile project. Edited by three Open University (UK)-based colleagues, the volume is an important addition to the literature on ELT projects. It can be read as a biography of English in Action: How and in what context EIA was born, what it achieved in its life, and what legacy it has left behind. This "biography" genre makes the book interesting to read and reflect on.

I find the selection of the content and its organisation thoughtful, logical and innovative. The book opens with a Foreword by John Shotton, who led the EIA design team. In introducing the project, Shotton notes how the EIA

strapline "Changing Learning, Changing Lives" really came to "fruition" defying the scepticism at its birth. The 14 substantive chapters constituting the volume are placed between an editorial introduction and a final reflection (Chapter 15). Each of the chapters including the introduction highlights the achievement of the project, pointing out some challenges and constraints. More thoughtfully, the authors in each chapter draw out relevant lessons for EIA and similar interventions in the future. This acknowledgment of what could have been done differently helped maintain a balance in the EIA story written mostly by project insiders. Another key strategy in maintaining a balanced storyline is related to the selection of authors and chapter organisation, which I will comment on shortly.

The editorial introduction sets the scene and outlines what to expect in the successive chapters. The 14 chapters are divided into four parts arranged in a logical manner: Part I (Chapters 1-3) is about the political, economic and educational context of Bangladesh in which EIA was introduced. Part II (Chapters 4-7) is about teacher professional development in low-to-middle-income countries, which also outlines the EIA approach to teacher development. Part III (Chapters 8-10) focuses on English language teaching in Bangladesh to illustrate how the intervention described in Part II was brought to change teaching practices. Part IV (Chapters 11-14) deals with strategic issues, providing justification for the pedagogical transformation. Three key issues that the chapters deal with are research, monitoring and

evaluation, sustainability, and value for money. Each of the four parts of the book opens with a one-page section preview, identifying the question that the chapter authors addressed. The last chapter of each part is written by an EIA-external author who provides critical comments on the chapters written by EIA insiders. Thus, Fauzia Shamim from Pakistan comments on the Bangladeshi context (Chapter 3);



David Pedder from UK critically reflects on the EIA approach to the school-based innovation (Chapter 7); Amol Padwad from India reflects on EIA success in bringing tangible and intangible changes in ELT (Chapter 10); and Shamim Ahmed from Bangladesh comments on the strategic issues of sustainability, monitoring and evaluation and value for money (Chapter 14). In a way, these four

authors provide a critical review of the book as well as the project based on their reading of the chapters. For example, Ahmed wrote: "this book-length sharing of EIA successes and challenges is not only a welcome change but may also prove to be a milestone in the history of compiling evidence on international, development-aid, education projects!" (pp. 43-44).

The key theme of the book, as would be expected in a development context, is transformation. This transformation is not just pedagogical; it is also the transformation of economy and society. While it is the material transformation that is the goal, the substantive change can be talked about and disseminated only in a discursive way. Thus, the book is essentially about (re)constructing and (re)doing the project discursively.

An essential discursive strategy in developing the theme of transformation is that of contrast: the contrast between Bangladeshi ELT before and after EIA; between EIA and previous ELT projects; between scepticism about "another ELT project" and the success that was achieved; and between EIA and non-EIA schools, methods, teachers and practices. The book's construction of EIA also relies on stories of English teachers and other stakeholders.

The discursive transformation made me curious about the substantive change that EIA has executed in English teaching and learning in the country. This is due to my keen interest in Bangladeshi ELT as a researcher and my sincere wish for the improvement of teaching practices and learning outcomes. Coincidentally, a few weeks before I read the book, I had been invited by an Australian university to examine a PhD thesis on

the policy and practice of English teaching in secondary schools in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi researcher conducted her research in 2016 in 18 secondary schools involving English teachers, teacher trainers and school principals in three districts. Teacher professional learning as well as practice was a key focus of the thesis. Therefore, in reading the thesis I was expecting to come across EIA, which had already left its mark in schools in the country. However, I was disappointed because there was no mention of EIA by the participants or the researcher, although there was mention of a previous ELT project.

I would recommend the book to ELT colleagues, educators, researchers, postgraduate students and development workers in Bangladesh. There are many lessons to learn from the book about EIA, which endeavoured "to bring necessary changes to the education culture of Bangladesh" (p. 218). Moreover, Bangladeshi readers will attest to the achievement of the project based on experiential or anecdotal evidence. They can also keep the conversation going about EIA and other projects in the country. So, the book won't be the "last word" about English in Action.

Having said that, I must also point out that the book is expensive. I wonder if the editors can negotiate with the publisher about a cheaper (paperback) edition for readers in low-to-middle-income countries.

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