

What Does It Mean to Write in an Everyday Life?

SHAKIL RABBI

There is a paradox to literacy in our contemporary societies. This generation – sometimes called digital natives – read and write more than any other in history; yet, they are also as adverse to writing activities as all others. So ahead, and ask any student on any college campus when was the last time

determine people's disinclination to reading and writing. With that said, one source worth pointing out – because it is unintentional – of people's resistance to it comes writers and teachers. People whom one would think should be champions of literacy. Most writers and teachers tend to

they interpret the question as asking whether they write creatively. The answer is usually no.

This is a problem for anyone who wants people to read and write more. Most people simply do not live as literary persons. This is not to say they are anti-intellectual. They are not invested in acts of expressing themselves. It can be embarrassing to bare oneself publicly. They might be shy. They might not think they are good enough. For when any idea of writing comes up, they begin to compare themselves to specters of great authors, Tagore, Shakespeare, Rushdie, etc. This comparison will always get people stuck.

There is a conceptualization of writing as an individual expression that is both a cultural commonplace as well as a pedagogical program. It is a way to both think about and teach about writing as creative writing, a way to make art. This view of writing is a historical development, one that emerged during the Romantic era, which also saw the rise of bourgeois society and a view of genius as a person in the throws-of-inspiration. The image of the writer was that of the tortured-artist, sentenced to paroxysms of letters on the blank page, trapped in the scene of isolation. It is terrifyingly symbolized by Franz Kafka in his short story "In the Penal Colony," where the narrator is killed by being strapped to a writing machine that tattoos him to death. This image holds even for the woman, as Virginia Woolf proposes, in her famous essay, the image of solitude as a prerequisite to writing: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."

Given this image of writing, it is no wonder that most people do not want to write. Only masochists would be excited about writing when this is the understanding of the task. It filters out anyone not inclined towards solitude, a disposition to express themselves

in the written word, or simply in love with the sound of their voice. Most people tend to not think of themselves in such pathologies and therefore they freeze up whenever they start writing. They might chatter-on or message their friends about "a funny thing that happened to them on the way to the classroom," yet then draw a blank as soon as they are asked to write down the experience meaningfully. They develop, in other words, writer's block as soon as they are asked to think of themselves as writers.

Another way to think about writing, which everyone practices all the time, is articulated communication. It sees writing as a tool used to connect and transfer information. This is a more prosaic view of writing, but more accurately represents the vast majority of writings' functions. This view of writing can sometimes be charged with reducing language to simply a commodity. It also can be charged with reducing the person to a part of a larger system. The writer is someone who pours meaning into a container and sends it away to the person who will read it. It makes the writer disappear.

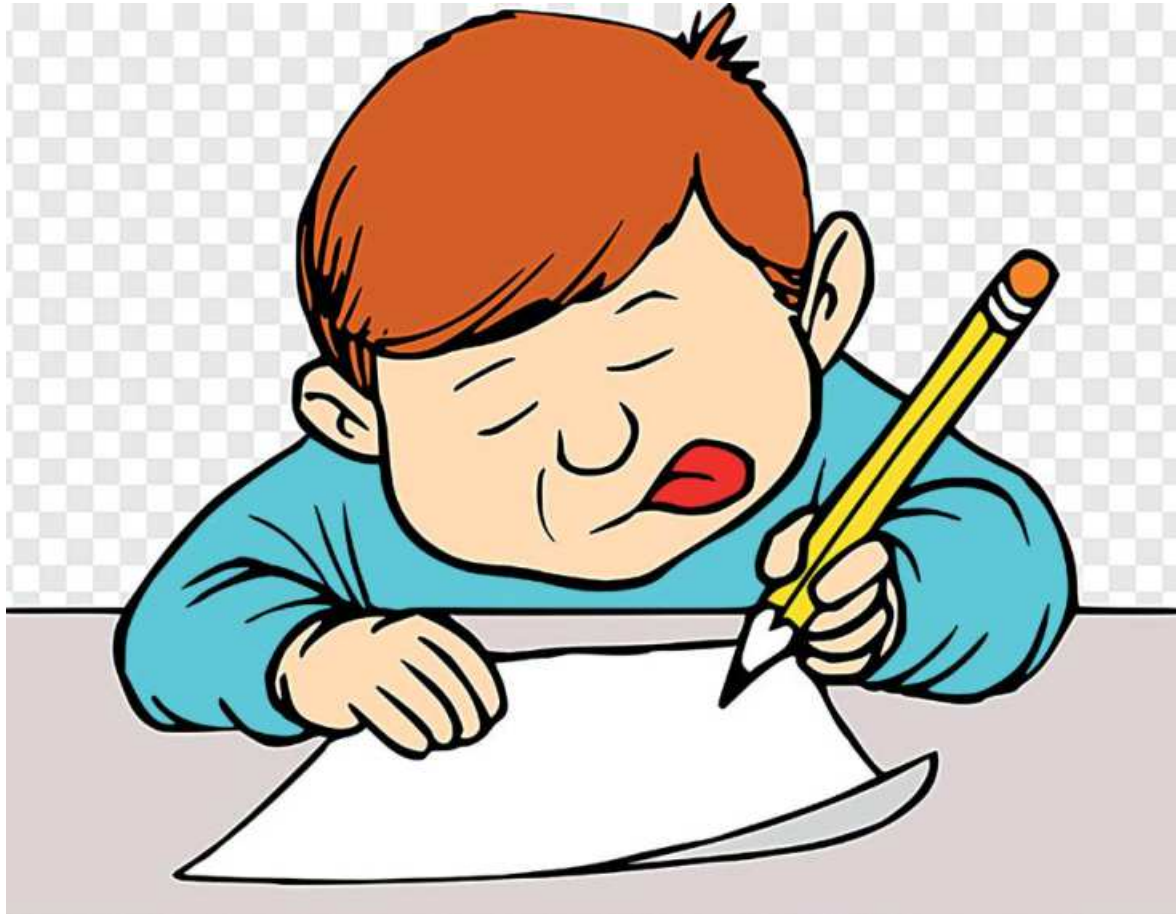
This is a wrong way to view communicative writing because it ignores the adjective "articulated" in the concept. It refers to not simply spoken communication, but a sense of conscious choice. Stuart Hall, a prominent cultural theorist, explained it in terms of links that connect trains of thought, like carriages are connected on a train, turning distinct units into one body. In this idea, the writer is someone who chooses ideas out there and mixes them into a new whole. They are cooks who mix ingredients into cuisine. The writer, at their most dramatic iconography, is not isolated at all, in such a view, but an interlocutor in the conversations of mankind. Modernists writers, writing in the early part of the twentieth century, made this axiomatic

in their writing. Most of their major works as explicit continuations of classical works. The epigraph in T.S. Eliot's *Prufrock* is taken from Dante Alegeri's *Inferno*; Joyce's *Ulysses* was a play on Homer's *Odyssey*.

This communicative function of writing and a framework to literacy in such terms, I have found in my research on everyday professional writers, tends to open people up to writing. Examining how scientists and social scientists write for their professions, I find that accomplished writers tend to frame the literacy work they do as textual transactions. They write to exchange information. This helps them get out of their way when writing because they focus on how they can add value to their readers or help them see the world otherwise. They do not find themselves concerned with what the reader might think about them because the writer does not matter in this scenario. They do not matter as much as what they have to communicate.

To think of writing in such terms is a way to demystify it. It is to think about it as an act of labor, a task based on reading and communicating new ideas by refashioning what one has learned. There is little room for inspiration in this process. It is "a breathing out" of the readings one has done as one breathes in, to paraphrase what Stephen King says in his memoir *On Writing*. It frames writing as an act of dialogue and interaction, which clears it up as what it is. A fundamentally social act. The only thing anyone needs to do to write in an everyday life is to live it, responding to the things in examined ways and as an everyday task or job.

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they wrote anything. They will stare at you askew and hesitate to answer (and not only because you just accosted them minding their own business with a random question.)

This dislike of literacy, I admit, is multifaceted. There are social, economic, and political reasons that over

still think of writing and reading in aesthetic terms, writing is novels, poetry, short stories. This view has become the only way the general public also can think of reading and writing. In South Asia, especially, this mindset is so dominant that it is almost invisible. When you ask someone if they write,

REVIEWS

A REVIEW OF FAKRUL ALAM'S

Once More Into the Past: Essays, Personal, Public, and Literary

BY SOHANA MANZOOR

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"How does Tagore intoxicate a growing young man . . . ? How has Dhaka transitioned through the Partition of Bengal and the birth of the University of Dhaka? . . . how does one remember—with nuance, with style—icons of history and culture . . . ?" I have this habit of stopping mid-stride while reading a book and looking at the last pages as well as the book jacket, tracing the cover design and reading the blurbs. The quoted sentences are from the jacket of Fakrul Alam's collection of essays, entitled *Once More Into the Past*, and it occurred to me that many others would be repeating these questions while reading the book.

When I first picked it up, I was thinking of many of the articles by my venerable professor that I have read over the years. I was indeed looking forward to re-reading at least some of them. But I had not anticipated their effect on me. A third of the way in, I realized with a jolt that the book goes on to include memoirs, travelogues, personal essays, tributes and reflections he wrote over the course of three decades—and that is exactly how long I have known Fakrul Sir, as a teacher, mentor and later, also as a colleague. In this collection, I was actually able to trace his thoughts on various subjects from childhood memories and university activities to public events and literary analyses. Little wonder that reviewing this book seemed both appealing and daunting.

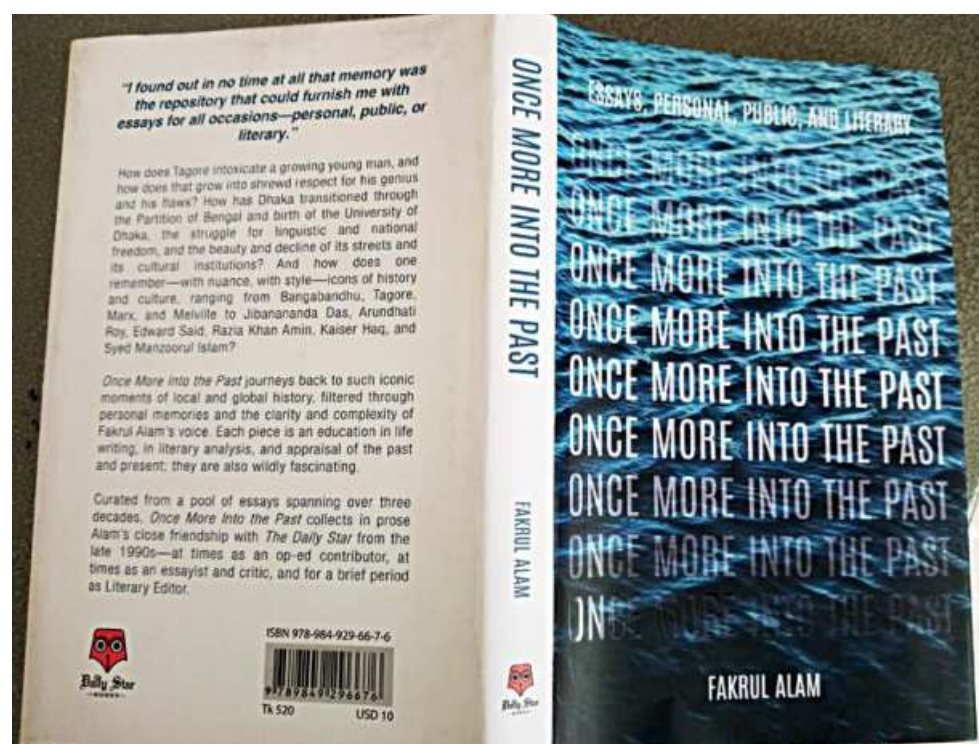
Published in February 2020 by Daily Star Books, *Once More Into the Past* is a collection of essays by an observant and introspective writer. The first two sections, titled "Personal" and "Public," comprise twenty essays. The third section called "Essays: Literary" showcases twenty-one more. Many of the personal essays are reminiscences of the past, for example, growing up with Rabindra sanghet and the inspirations and aspirations brought about by a culture centred around Tagore and Nazrul. The public essays range from the history of Dhaka University and student politics to the colossal figure of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The first three pieces concern the author's early life, reflecting on his parents and his maternal grandparents' house. "Ah, Nana Bari!" is a title that endears in the first place because

any adult from our part of the world is bound to give a shout of rapturous pleasure recalling the childhood visits to one's *nana bari*. The excitement and longing, however, essentially ends with inevitable sadness when one compares the current state with the past: "Better not to come any more, I told myself, better to keep Nana Bari intact in memory than confront the diminution of the place where more than anywhere else we had once been totally happy" (15). "Memories of Durga Puja" falls in the same category of nostalgic essays and a reminder that the memories of bygone days are always golden: "Age ki shundor din kataitam!" It made me realize sadly that the dream of a secular Bangladesh is indeed gone with the wind.

One piece in the "Personal" section that made me nostalgic is "A Short, Winding and Legendary Dhaka Road," referring to the famous Fuller Road that bridges the University of Dhaka and BUET. Anybody who has lived around that area or walked the road on a daily basis will not forget the calm and quiet, and the large canopies of trees. Fakrul Alam's essay provides a historical background of many of the surrounding buildings and sculptures. Students who studied and lived in Shamsunnahar Hall around 2002 would appreciate "15 Days in the Life of a DU Professor," covering the events of the infamous police attack on the Ladies Hostel when students protested against the unauthorized stay of JCD leaders there. He also points out the moments when people actually go beyond political affiliation and raise their voices together. Quite a few of the essays throw light on incidents and events pertaining to the history of the University of Dhaka, where Prof. Alam had studied and still teaches as a UGC Professor.

"In the Land of No Worries" records the author's visit to Australia, a country which still remains widely unexplored in South Asian travelogues. The Aussies with their casual, easygoing habits seem inviting, and their games, flora and fauna quite different from most of the things we know about Australia. But as I finished reading the piece, I started looking for more travel pieces and discovered there this is the only travelogue in the book. And that came as one



disappointment. Speaking of disappointments, I should also mention that the volume seems to follow two different styles with punctuation. A little more editorial care could have solved the problem.

Among the "Public" essays, the ones focusing on the evolving of the British Council Library reflect on the purpose and function of a library. The prettily decorated place under high security that is known as the British Council Library today is nothing compared to what it was in the 1980s or early 1990s even. As the author notes, he has no problem with the British Council "cashing in on the O and A level exams" (93), but truly, what happened to the books? What is the point of keeping one or two shelves and calling it "library" when it fails to serve the purpose of a library?

Four essays at the core of this collection are about the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I can recall editing at least one of these pieces for the *Star Literature* page. I could see why these particular pieces were chosen for this volume, as they present Bangabandhu from varied angles. We encounter him as a folk hero and a tragic hero, a leader who spent much of his time behind bars for the people of his country, and a man who was deeply concerned about ethical issues: "Bangabandhu realised early that the real enemies of a country are those who exploit ordinary men and women" (124).

The third section of the book contains literary essays that connect the literary scenario in Bangladesh and abroad. Prof. Alam writes about his anxieties as a teacher when he first started to teach. I laughed because I could relate. "The Literary Club of 18th Century London" is a wonderful reconstruction of one of the most famous of *addas* of all time, eigh-

teenth-century London's "The Club," with good food, great coffee and drinks. Reading the essay on Melville was like travelling back in time to my undergraduate days when Fakrul Sir taught us the great prose epic *Moby Dick*. The essays on Shakespeare and Rabindranath, on Buddhadeva Bose and Edward Said, Günter Grass to Arundhati Roy, are informative and deep-delving, and yet not too scholarly for the lay reader.

The last three essays of the collection hold a special attraction for me as they are testaments to two towering literary figures who were also my revered teachers at Dhaka University, Prof. Syed Manzoorul Islam (aka SMI) and Prof. Kaiser Haq. In the two essays on Kaiser Haq, Fakrul Alam comments on two of Kaiser Haq's books, namely, *Published in the Streets of Dhaka* and *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess*. The tribute to SMI was written on the occasion of his 70th birthday and reflects on SMI as a scholar and writer, as well as a literary friend and guide.

In the preface, Fakrul Alam mentions his fondness for the famous E.B. White essay, "Once More Into the Lake," which inspired the title of his book. In fact, the connection with E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake" goes beyond just the title. The well-known memoir is not just a recollection of past events, but reflects on the present when the author takes his own son to the very same lake to which his father used to take him. Memoirs turn more meaningful when one can connect them to the present and future. As Mahfuz Anam, the Editor and Publisher of *The Daily Star*, points out in the foreword, the essay collection "tries to bottle this journey, gathering the greater part of Fakrul Alam's pieces written for *The Daily Star* over the past three decades." This volume is a small token of the varied literary journey Dr. Alam has made over the years. *Once More into the Past* holds precious moments of the past as witnessed, assimilated and recorded by a scholar for the readers of today and the days to come.

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