

Humayun Kabir, Men and Rivers, and Faridpur

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Writer, statesman and educationalist Humayun Kabir (1906-69) was born in Komarpur near Faridpur town. The childhood of this cosmopolitan intellectual was spent in a rural culture. He chose India as his home at the 1947 Partition and later became a minister in the Indian government, holding the portfolios of scientific research and cultural affairs and education. Because of his birth and upbringing in what is now Bangladesh, we consider him a Bangladeshi writer. For the same reason, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Nirad C. Chaudhuri are also regarded as Bangladeshis. Accordingly, dubbed as the national encyclopaedia of Bangladesh, *Banglapedia* has entries on all these three writers.

Like that of most other Bangladeshi Anglophone writers, Kabir's remarkable literary career was apparently inspired by his education in English literature.

He completed his first degrees in English at the University of Calcutta with distinction before studying Modern Greats (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) at Oxford where he obtained the first rank in the Honours Examination. Furthermore, as the formative period of his life coincided with the British colonial presence in South Asia, conceivably, his Anglophone writing practice was also stirred by his interactions with Anglo-Indians living in the region.

At Oxford, Kabir was deeply involved in organisational and literary activities. Following the model of the Cambridge Union (est. 1815) and the Oxford Union (est. 1823), students from British India at Cambridge and Oxford Universities formed the Cambridge Majlis (est. 1891) and the Oxford Majlis (est. 1896), respectively. Again, patterning upon the practice adopted in the Cambridge and Oxford Unions, Indian students of the Cambridge Majlis and the Oxford Majlis organised weekly debates. Kabir was active in both the Oxford Union and the Oxford Majlis.

The writer Dosoo Framjee Karaka (1911-74) went to Oxford in 1930, two years after Kabir, and later became the first Oxford Union President of South Asian origin. In his book *I Go West* (1938), Karaka regards Kabir as "one of the greatest products of modern Oxford" and states:

But the power behind us all was Humayun Kabir ... marred though his success was by his misfortune to miss the Presidency of the Union by the narrow margin of four votes. I have always felt that he was more deserving of that office than a great many of us who succeeded.... I remember Kabir that night at the Majlis dinner. Seldom have I seen anyone speak with such sincerity.

Kabir was intensely involved in English writing and editing during his Oxford years (1928-1931). He wrote a book of poetry which was later published under the title of *Poems* (1932); he was involved in Oxford magazines the *Isis* and the *Cherwell* as well as *Bharat*, the official outlet of the Oxford Majlis.

In his writings, Kabir largely focused on the problems of his birthplace (Bangladesh) and country of adoption (India). His English writings include *Men and Rivers* (1945), *Science, Democracy and Islam: And Other Essays* (1955), *Rabindranath Tagore* (1962), *The Bengali Novel* (1968) and *Education for Tomorrow* (1969). Congress President Maulana Abul Kalam Azad dictated in Urdu and Kabir wrote in English the monumental work *India Wins Freedom* (1959).

Kabir self-translated *Men and Rivers* into Bangla under the title of *Nadi O Nari*. In this he followed the example of Rokeya who wrote *Sultana's Dream* (1905) in English and then self-translated it into Bangla.

In the history of South Asian literature in English, *Men and Rivers* is the third fictional work written by a Muslim author after Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940). *Men and Rivers* is a literary work of great merit though more research needs to be conducted on the work to appreciate its value by examining various thematic and stylistic features.

Men and Rivers is a realist regional novel. Its setting and characters are completely rural. All the place names in the novel are real and geographically definable. Characters in the novel originate from Katihar in the Indian state of Bihar and settle down in Faridpur. The tragic climax of the story – characterised by extreme drought and Padma-induced flood – is set in Rahimpur in Faridpur. After the flood, the surviving characters migrate to a far-off island named Byanchar at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal.

There is a clear connection between the Padma and its riverbank district Faridpur and the novel. Places in Faridpur such as Dhuldi, Rahimpur and Gazir Tek mentioned in the text are real. As Scotland, Wessex and Lafayette (fictionalised as Yoknapatawpha) are



▲ Homestead of the author in Faridpur

identifiable in the writings of, respectively, Walter Scott, Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner, so is Faridpur in Kabir's *Men and Rivers*.

All the three important characteristics – "locality, reality and democracy" – that Phyllis Bentley in *The English Regional* attaches to the genre of the regional novel are present in *Men and Rivers*. It depicts the life, and articulates the experiences, of the peasantry in Faridpur who live on the banks of the Padma River and are vulnerable to its weather conditions. A similar work is Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi*. However, the setting of *Padma Nadir Majhi* is imaginary though the novel presents familiar, recognisable themes and depicts a discernible riverine rural world encroached upon by colonial capitalism.

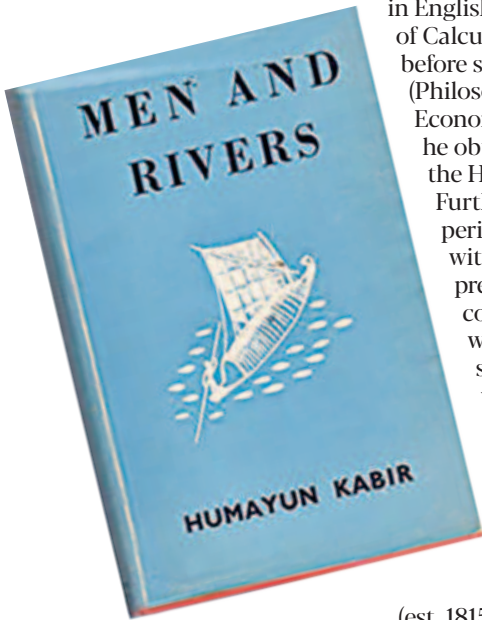
Given that all other place names in the novel are real, it is unlikely that Kabir used a fictional name in the case of Byanchar. Among the major coastal islands near the Bay of Bengal within Bangladesh are Rabipur in Barisal district; Bhola, Char Fasson, Manpura and Sona Char in Bhola district; Char Montaz and Rangabali in Patuakhali district; Hatiya, Bhasan Char and Nijhum Dwip in Noakhali district; and Sandwip in Chattagram district. However, no known island in that region is now called Byanchar though there is one named Boyarchar (also spelt as Boyerchar) situated between Hatiya in Noakhali and Ramgati in Laxmipur. However, Boyarchar may not have existed during the temporal setting of *Men and Rivers*, as it is relatively a new char where human habitation started only in the 1990s.

As regards Byanchar, one of the following possibilities or a combination thereof is most likely the case. Perhaps, it was an area that no longer exists, as such islands are dynamic landforms that evolve and undergo physical adjustments or migrate through erosion; and some of them disappear as time progresses. That is to say, "emergence, submergence, re-emergence and re-submergence" are a continuous feature of charlands, and this triggers "settlement>displacement>re-settlement>re-displacement" of their inhabitants. Or, Byanchar has thus far assumed a different name. Nijhum Dwip in Noakhali was previously called Baluarchar and Char Osman. Therefore, it may be the case that Byanchar still exists, but under a different name.

That said, as mentioned earlier, the spatial setting of *Men and Rivers* stretches – along the course of the river system – hundreds of kilometres from Katihar in India through Faridpur to Byanchar near the Bay of Bengal. However, Faridpur is the setting of the climax of the story that involves "the great havoc of the drought and the flood."

Thus, through *Men and Rivers*, Hamayun Kabir conferred on Faridpur literary immortality. I believe the novel will continue to make the district memorable and special to its readers for a very long time.

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Parallel Realities, Peripheral Existences: Saikat Majumdar's *The Middle Finger*

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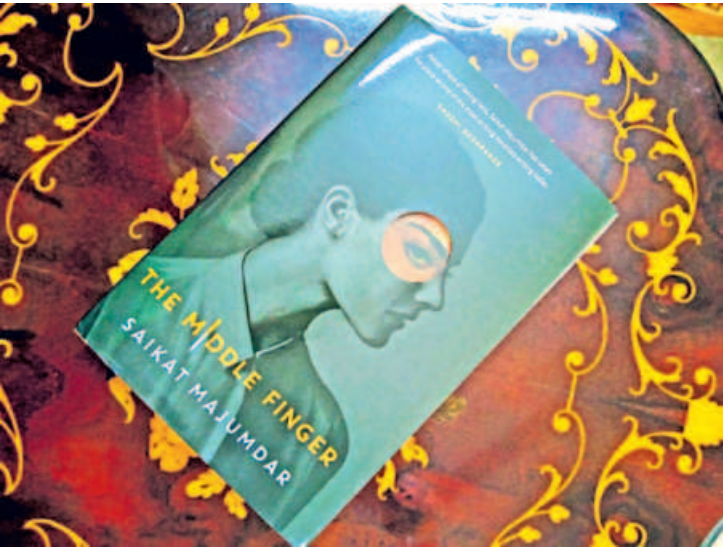
The intriguing image of a woman's eye peering through a hole cut into the glossy book jacket suggests that there is more to Saikat Majumdar's *The Middle Finger* than meets the eye. It is a novel about the peripheral and parallel spaces and existences that we tend to deny. It is also about opening one's eyes to the most important things in life, which may not be in the accustomed structures that we tend to take as the absolute truth.

At the centre of *The Middle Finger* stands Megha Mansukhani, a graduate student at Princeton who leaves the programme in the middle of her dissertation because she cannot connect with her studies. The reality that hits her is terrifying: "The world didn't give out jobs to people who had thrown their dissertations away. Her advisors were real about these things, they didn't want to keep illusions scattered."

Megha's plight is cushioned by a one-year fellowship at Princeton, but the fear of being jobless or tackling adjunct teaching at best looms right behind it. The perks of her lonely life are getting published in literary journals and going grocery shopping—one gives her a sense of belonging and the other freedom. She takes comfort in her sparsely furnished, windowless basement apartment in New Brunswick because it's a far cry from the "violent silence" of her perfect and cold childhood home in Alipore, Calcutta. That she works well in vacant apartments reflects the emptiness of her typically fragmented modern life—the intense focus on work that wipes out everything else. In such a competitive and goal-oriented existence, people

learn to disregard matters that are personal and meaningful.

But *The Middle Finger* is also a poetic novel about a poet who cannot disregard the pains she sees around her. The suffering of others finds expression in Megha's writing, while she herself grapples with imposter syndrome: "It was like sleeping with someone and gossiping about the lives they had revealed under the blanket. It was cruel. Her words were cruel. The guilt



nudged her. She laughed them away. They nudged her again." Something is missing that makes her unable to connect with her life, and Megha's quest is to make sense of her own trajectory.

Spanning two continents and cultures, *The Middle Finger* brings together two different times and lives. When Megha returns to India to teach

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at an elite institution, she was only exploring an option of a different life and seeing if she could finish her discarded dissertation. Her western education sets her apart in Delhi and she exudes an elitism that she lacked many years ago when she lived in the same city with her divorced mother who could not earn respectability in spite of her well-paid job.

In her new role as a creative writing professor at Harappa University, Megha feels uneasy and conflicted. She enjoys performing in front of her students, but she's uncomfortable about the fact that this exclusive college costs far beyond what an average Indian student can afford. Most of her students are from rich, well-connected and influential families. Yet, when her domestic help Poonam asks her to teach English to the poor women at her local church, she declines. Poonam herself also asks to be Megha's pupil. Unconsciously, the class division is stark in Megha's mind: "She was not her student, she could never be. She was too far away." Megha might be angry and frustrated enough to tweet in the middle of her class when she hears of a black girl being shot by police in Atlanta, but she is not ready to take the step that can bridge her life and Poonam's.

This is where the story of Eklavya in the epic *Mahabharata* comes into play, alluded to by the novel's title. That story remains relevant even today for the Bheel and Bhilala archers of Alirajpur and elsewhere in India who use their middle fingers instead of their thumbs as a sign of respect to their ancestor Eklavya and as a symbolic protest against Drona and Arjuna. By alluding to Eklavya, Saikat Majumdar questions the authoritarian patriarchal setting

where fixed social status, caste and gender roles destroy or suppress human emotion and authenticity.

Poonam could have been just an ordinary domestic helper, but Megha unknowingly touches her life through her poetry. Poonam is able to deeply apprehend Megha's poetry and use it to enliven others in a way that the best of Megha's elite students cannot. Her story intersects the novel like the discordant cry of chickens being slaughtered in the Calcutta market where she grew up—and where she returns after Megha rejects her. Megha is able to connect with her only when she recognizes her own pain—the idyllic childhood she could have had in Calcutta if her parents had not divorced. She had been to the best schools, but she never recognized the void within her. Poonam appears in Megha's life like Eklavya, the "artless, honest, unsophisticated forest dweller," questioning the validity of the reality she had created for herself.

The imposter syndrome that Megha struggles with is nearly universal today, and we almost take it for granted. Early in the novel, Megha's friend Rory claims, "Literature sits uneasy in India." He further explains, "English is taught the way the British wanted it taught in the 19th century. But being a Bharatnatyam dancer has taught me whole new things about the life of words in the subcontinent." For me, *The Middle Finger* is like a carefully choreographed dance-drama where many lives and many worlds collide—a moving story of class, cultural and racial tension.

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