



DESIGN: HRISHIK ROY

INTERVIEW

‘The language movement did not reject the importance of dialects’,

says Syed Manzoorul Islam.

Modern writers are picking up global themes and placing them in the context of trying to find out how they fit in. Each of these writers is opening up my eyes to a different possibility, a different interpretation.

FAIROZ ANIKA, MST MANJUMA FERDOUSHI, SADIYA TABASSUM

Dr Syed Manzoorul Islam, one of the most prolific names in Bangladeshi academia, is also a prominent writer, translator, columnist, and literary critic. Currently working as a Professor of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, he received the Ekushey Padak for his contribution to language and literature and the Bangla Academy Award for literature, among other awards.

In this interview, he sheds light on writing in English in Bangladesh, its future, and the influence of the language movement on the Bangladeshi psyche.

How is writing in English perceived in Bangladesh?

SMI: It depends on the perspective from which you are looking at writing in English. If you ask English medium students who have not been exposed to their mother language, they appreciate writing in English and can relate more to the practice. But if you ask Bangla medium students, they will probably keep a distance from it. I don't think there will be an instant rejection of this writing from them but they will not be getting involved in the process that is distant from their own experiences. Not everyone buys a book in English, only very specialised readers. So, the views are divided.

Also, there is a section which is very antagonistic about writing in English. And you can classify this group into two categories. One group believes that this is an intrusion in our local culture as if English language writers are cultivating a foreign culture, in touch with our own homegrown culture. And another group believes that this is almost an elite pretension about doing something which goes over most people's heads. However, readers in time have learned to accept different categories of writers. English language writing does not have that kind of hostile reaction anymore, it's been centred now.

How do you see the future of Bangladeshi writing in English? Are you optimistic about it?

SMI: Yes, more optimistic for two specific reasons. I can see the emergence of many new writers who are based in Bangladesh and abroad. I have been on the editorial board of a journal called *Six Seasons Review*. We get contributions from young writers in North America, Europe, Australia, and almost all over in the world. So they're the ones who have taken English as their mother language because they have grown up in a culture in which English has to be spoken. Many of them cannot even speak Bangla. I congratulate them, particularly their parents, who have kept a connection to Bangla. So, this is something like a candle lighting another candle. You see, the inspiration travels. Also, now the internet has made connectivity easy.

And the third factor in the optimism is the growing or expanding market of books written in English. In India, many writers are writing in English, and many of them are, in fact, depending on their writing to sustain themselves since the market is expanding. They choose an easy job like teaching. This gives them plenty of time to keep writing, as they're using this language to continuously analyse and critique. In Bangladesh, this scenario is developing as well.

Does the memory of the language movement in the national psyche anyhow affect Bangladeshis to write in English?

SMI: Now, there is a difference between two generations remembering the language movement. We witnessed the direct impact of the language movement in our politics and in our culture, first hand. In a neo colonial setup, we could see how our language was in danger of culturalism. And now increasingly, we are becoming victims to another neo colonial wave of control and domination. Therefore, in our psyche, the language movement has a deep effect. And we became activists; our generation invested everything in terms of the cultivation of the mother language. But now, I see there is a loosening of this attitude; people are not very concerned about their mother language.

Then comes the bazaar language dictated by neoliberalism, which believes homogenisation

is very important. So, this generation is falling into a trap. But dialects and regional languages are important. The mother language movement did not reject the importance of dialects. If you deny your mother language, culture gets distorted in that battle. So that has to be resisted.

These days writers from Bangladesh are using Bangla words in English to “glocalize” the local expressions of Bangladesh with the world (which you also included in your short story in *The Book of Dhaka*). Do you think young writers of Bangladesh should follow the same pattern while writing and using Bangla words in English to glocalize our culture?

SMI: It's not only Bangladeshi; the trend was established by Salman Rushdie and many other Indian writers. In the beginning, the trend was that if you use a local word like kula, you have to put in a glossary saying kula means “basket”. This assumes the English are not aware of these languages.

But if a culture allows us to use a word differently, why should we go for the western word to use it? If your reason to not glocalize your writing is that you want the readers to pick up on these distinct terms on their own, so that they engage with your language and culture, then you can do it.

How can platforms for Bangladeshi writers writing in English be increased?

SMI: By journal publications, by continuing to write more and having a kind of get-together among writers. Events like the Dhaka Lit Fest can energise these writers as well. They can form Facebook groups. So, in that way, they can keep writing and improving themselves. Besides, they can also attend the fiction writing courses.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Read the full interview on the *The Daily Star* website and on *Daily Star Books'* social media pages.

The interviewees are students in the MA in English program at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

FEATURE

Paying homage to the language movement through literature

ISRA KABIR

Seventy-one years have passed since our forefathers paid a high price to preserve the integrity of our mother tongue. 1953, which marked the first anniversary of the language movement, was a pivotal year in our history. The inauguration was marked by a significant amount of cultural expression, challenging the then-authorities of Bangladesh. The literary urge to convey the significance of the moment was mirrored in essays, poems, song compositions, and so on. These works of literature instilled the seed of Bangladeshi nationalism in people, which in turn helped free this nation.

Growing up in a household where literary analysis was fostered in understanding historical and cultural movements, my ode to the martyrs includes literature as a crucial component. Much



PHOTO: DARSHAN CHAKMA

of my February 21 was spent listening to my father recite such poetry or waking up to music inspired by the language movement that my mother was hearing on the television.

All of this is to emphasise that the language movement is much more than the flower wreaths and walking to the Shahid Minar barefoot. It had the capability to transcend political boundaries and was defined more in literary and cultural terms than in political ones.

The first ever anthology to be written on the events of the language movement was by Hasan Hafizur Rahman. Titled *Ekushey February*, the book is a compilation of 21 literary pieces. Published in 1953, the anthology created huge turmoil among people as the message of the publication spread far and wide even though it faced police persecution. The police confiscated the book and the printing press was raided. The book also includes a very incisive introduction by Ali Ashraf titled, “Equal recognition for all languages”, reminding us that the language movement was just not for Bangla Language but for every other language which deserves equal recognition and respect.

Another literary and cultural input to this list was made by Munier Chowdhury through his play *Kobor* (1966). Centred on the martyrs of the language movement, the play was written and produced inside Dhaka Central Jail with other political prisoners as cast members. Here, the protagonist, Murda Fakir starts talking with the dead ever since his family dies in the 1943 famine. The buried corpses of the martyrs are still alive in Murda Fakir's mind, representing how they will never be forgotten but always be a bright chapter in the pages of history. The language martyrs knew and undertook the risk of sacrificing their lives for the mother language. In the eyes of Murda Fakir, this means they were never afraid to perish and they have won against death.

Renowned filmmaker, Zahir Raihan, who was a young participant in the language movement, wrote a novel *Arek Falgun* (1969) which describes the commemoration of February 21 in 1955. Bangla has not yet been instilled as the state language of East Pakistan. Concerning this, the main character Munim and his friends are printing leaflets, advertising posters, distributing black badges, making slogans and other organisational works amidst the fear of the repetition of what happened three years ago. The way *Arek Falgun* depicts the students as exhilarated and brave to be working against an authoritative government and to obliterate their injustice has inspired generations. This novel has also encouraged the parallelism of Spring with the theme of defiance and hope.

Among all the literary works, the poems inspired by the language movement have generally had a greater impact. Most notable of all the poems is titled “Kono Ek Ma Ke” by Abu Zafar Obaidullah. The poem is written in a third-person perspective where the poet is witnessing a mother reading a blood-soaked letter from her martyred son. In the letter, the son writes how the then-Pakistani government wants to steal our mother tongue and for that, he will not come back until they are afraid to do so. Knowing that he might never come back, the son asks his mother to wait a little longer for him to come home. Abu Zafar Obaidullah portrays not only the sacrifice made by the protesters but also by their families in the most human interaction.

Reading these literary works inspired by the language movement gives us a better appreciation of what transpired during that time. The dynamics of the people during those events serve as a guide to fully acknowledge the martyrs' sacrifice. The emotional turmoil of the families, the rebellious spirit of the young, spring being the symbol of the resistance, and the aftermath of such a powerful revolution can be comprehended by this literature.

Isra Kabir tries to complete her ever growing TBR list while tackling her sleeping schedule. Reach out to her at israkabir.21@gmail.com.

POETRY

The native lores know

TASHFIA AHMED

Language trickles down the routes that blood took through Time. They say it's a linear path, and yet I, a reluctant servant to the wiles of Time, find myself laid out in loops and slopes.

If I retrace, I guess it began with my first etch on paper—it was a keepsake from my people's exploited past. It was an A carved from the ink bled out of theanine scars. My B was an arrow that lost a tooth in the battle between the tongues of my people and my colonizers. My C, a triumph as haunted as my English Major graduation cap fraying in loose threads.

Though my mother's tongue escapes my own, I strive to wrap mine around its vines. I unlearn my silent R's to preserve my flag from unraveling at my foot—its red an inheritance from the 700 rivers of blood shed from revolting on foreign words.

And yet, if I assess who I am, I find my roots growing upwards, where English is a vulture preying upon Time's empires to adorn its stolen history. And Bangla is the soil, begging like a helpless mother, to nourish me.

But Language is the fifth horseman the lores fail to mention; hurtling on with its mouth agape, riding Time's conian steed, trampling and muddying the tongues that we speak.

Tashfia Ahmed is a contributor and a regular at SHOUTxDSBooks Slam Poetry Nights.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA