

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

‘THRICE BORN’

The journey of Bangladeshi literature in English

Review of ‘Bangladeshi Literature in English: Critical Essays and Interviews’ (Routledge, 2024) edited by Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan

While the first two chapters focus on the colonial period, chapter three, which Kathryn Hummel writes, brings the readers to the present time with the analysis of Kaiser Haq’s poems. Haq is very popular in “dui Bangla”, meaning both in West Bengal and Bangladesh and thus, scholars from both sides of the border have worked with and written about him.

UMME AL-WAZEDI

Bangladeshi Literature in English: Critical Essays and Interviews, edited by Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan, focuses on critical essays on Bangladeshi literature in English—both from Bangladesh and its diasporas (US, UK, and Australia). Until recently, there was hardly any anthology or edited volume in English that one could access if one were to look for a collection of essays on Bangladeshi literature in English. Thus, *Bangladeshi Literature in English* as an edited collection with five chapters written by seasoned and young scholars fills that gap. It also has two interviews—one of Kaiser Haq and the other of Monica Ali. The writers of the chapters used an amalgamation of theorists, from Franz Fanon and Michel Foucault to Rob Nixon.

The introduction gives an overview of the history of literary evolutions in the South Asian continent, from the colonial period through and after the Partition of 1947 to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The editors use the phrase “thrice born” (ensuring readers do not confuse it with the twice-born concept in Hinduism) to discuss the Bangladeshi English literary journey in the Indian subcontinent. The introduction is succinct and helpful for new scholars. The editors also mention the challenges of English writing in Bangladesh. In addition, they contend that even if works are coming out, lack of publishers and the inability to cross the borders and grasp the readers are some of the reasons for these books not enjoying the popularity that they should (many of these issues are again highlighted by Kaiser Haq in his interview with Mohammad A. Quayum). However, the authors mention that diasporic writers receive the highlights.

Md. Mahmudul Hasan’s first chapter is titled “Muslim Bengal writes back: Rokeya’s encounter with the representation of Europe”. In it he talks about the first Muslim feminist from South Asia, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and her interpretative summary of Marie Corelli’s novel, *The Murder of Delicia* (Kessinger Publishing, 1996). Hasan argues that she created a bridge between Muslim Bengal and England through her summary of Corelli’s novel. The chapter provides a new direction

where Hasan compares Corelli and Hossain to talk about gender norms both in India and England. The author’s focus is on the commonalities between the two and the fact that both Indian women and British women faced the same kinds of subjugation as Britain brought its Victorian moral values to the Indian subcontinent. This chapter will complement those abroad who teach Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905).

Hasan’s second chapter, “Panchayat and colonialism in Humayun Kabir’s

talk about the socio-political lives of the villagers.

While the first two chapters focus on the colonial period, chapter three, which Kathryn Hummel writes, brings the readers to the present time with the analysis of Kaiser Haq’s poems. Haq is very popular in “dui Bangla”, meaning both in West Bengal and Bangladesh and thus, scholars from both sides of the border have worked with and written about him. Hummel argues that Haq is a transnational local

talk about the issues Gosh writes about. Using Rob Nixon’s work as a theoretical lens, Hossain weaves in the problems that we should be concerned about—the countries of the Global South as the dumping grounds for things that the Global North discards. Hossain’s chapter opens a new venue to see a Bangladeshi diasporic writer writing about environmental disasters. This chapter would complement any syllabi that focus on the environmental issues of the Global South.

marginalisation of the different groups of people in the 1971 war narratives.

Mohammad A. Quayum’s interview with Kaiser Haq brings out the problems of not having more anglophone literature in Bangladesh. Haq thinks that the fear of apasankriti drives writers away from writing in English. He talks about his background—growing up in an English-medium school and how that encouraged him to write in English. He mentions the teacher in his school who infused critical appreciation of a poem in the classroom and Haq’s desire to see “the music in free verse”. He refers to a plethora of English writers who have influenced him. In his response to Quayum’s query about the sustainability of subcontinental English, Haq says that literature will exploit various forms of English. He writes that translating works into English “enhances our critical awareness of the complexities of our cultural inheritance”.

Sadaf Saaz’s interview with Monica Ali centres around their conversation on the book, *Love Marriage* (2022). Ali’s conversation with Saaz revolves around British society and its outlook on class and race. Saaz also asks Ali questions about the differences between generations of immigrant communities. Ali’s main character, Yasmin, deals with multiple aspects of her personal and public life as a doctor. Ali candidly tells Saaz that this novel is not only about marriage but also about sex, infidelity, and sexual violence. Ali reflects on not being a writer of a particular type—only writing about Bangladesh because she has a connection to it.

The book will benefit scholars, Bangladeshi, as well as other South Asians and their diasporas, who are looking for a set of critical articles on Bangladeshi Literature in English. Although numerous critics have written on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Kaiser Haq, or Zia Haider Rahman, the essays focusing on these writers in this collection have something new to add. Therefore, I am glad to have read the book and recommend it to those interested in teaching and researching Bangladeshi Literature in English.

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ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

Men and Rivers”, has several diverse aspects. Hasan not only does a comparative study to discuss the panchayat in Humayun Kabir’s *Men and Rivers* (1945) but also uses critics like Franz Fanon and Mary Luis Pratt to present the multiple “contact zones” in a small village during the colonial period. The author argues that Kabir critiques the colonial influence in destroying the lives of the peasants as they struggle to understand the strength of bribery and theft by middle managers. Kabir presents the non-volant nature of the peasants at a time when India saw peasant movements. The chapter does an elaborate analysis of the characters and their multiple relations with the different constituents of the village to

who talks about home without going far away from home. Haq’s resistance against colonial mimicry involves writing about the most mundane things you see in Bangladesh, such as lungi or stray dogs. The chapter brings about the multifaced nature of Haq’s poetry.

“Toxic grace? Tahmima Anam’s *The Bones of Grace* and the pollution trade” is written by Md. Alamgir Hossain. The importance of this chapter in this collection is noteworthy because Anam’s *Bones* has not received the attention it should have in South Asia. Sometimes it is hard to get out of the India-centric Amitav Gosh environmental novels, and there are reasons for that—people are willing to

Zia Haider Rahman, the focus of chapter five, is another Bangladeshi writer in English whose work has been written about extensively. Like Haq, he crosses borders when it comes to analysing his works. In this chapter, “Beyond national(ist) binaries: The case of Zia Haider Rahman’s *In the Light of What we Know*”, Md Rezaul Haque gives a background of the war of 1971. He also questions what role a nation-centred or nationalist discourse plays when presenting different groups of people in different narratives. For example, how do non-Bangalis appear in literature? A contested and controversial issue about the role of the non-Bangalis is a topic of many recent critical essays as more and more scholars are trying to voice the

THE SHELF

Diverging perspectives: Exploring Bangladesh’s history through controversial narratives

TASNIM ODRIKA

When it comes to the history of Bangladesh both pre-and post-Liberation War, certain aspects have either remained hidden from the public or been deliberately obscured. The general understanding of this history is often oversimplified, usually presented from a single party’s perspective, lacking the nuance it deserves. This list of books offers essential reading from various voices that present this history through different lenses—voices that were once drowned out by dominant narratives.

The Black Coat
Neamat Imam
Penguin Books India, 2013

This historical fiction novel explores Bangladesh’s turbulent history during the period of 1972-75, a time marked by severe famine and widespread misgovernance under the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujib. Given the longstanding taboo around discussing

and criticising this era, this novel offers a fresh perspective by blurring the lines between fiction and fact.

The novel follows journalist Khaleque Biswas, who, after losing his job, mentors a simple country boy named Nur Hussain, ultimately transforming him into a counterfeiter Sheikh Mujib.

Set against the backdrop of Bangladesh’s post-independence corruption and food shortages, the story provides a varied portrayal of Sheikh Mujib, depicting him as a totalitarian leader rather than the benevolent Father of the Nation he is often celebrated as.

Ami Serajul Alam Khan
Shamsuddin Payara
Sucheepatra, 2020

Serajul Alam Khan, one of the early leaders of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), has long been a figure of intrigue. His influence on both Bangladesh’s independence and the post-independence struggles is a crucial part of our history. Although he never authored any books to

tell his side of the story, this memoir offers insights into the life and contributions of this mysterious figure.

How did this man, who was Bangladesh’s most beloved and influential student leader, become one of the key figures in the anti-Bangabandhu movement in independent Bangladesh? Some of these questions are addressed in this book, while others, to this date, remain unanswered.

Amar Fashi
Chai Motiur Rahman Rentu Shornolota O Bonolota, 1999

In the history of Bangladesh, one figure who has often remained cryptic is our former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. This book delves into that mystery, offering deeper insights into her character.

The author, who served as Sheikh Hasina’s aide for nearly 12 years, from 1981 to 1997, wrote this book after being labelled “undesirable” by the regime

for speaking out about certain irregularities within the Sheikh family. The book draws heavily from the author’s personal experiences of working with the Awami League and criticises its leaders, particularly Sheikh Hasina. However, since the book was written after the author’s dismissal, there are speculations that some stories may be exaggerated. Given that some of the accusations and criticisms cannot be independently verified, it might be a good idea to approach the book with an open mind.

Bangladesh Er Jonmo
Rao Farman Ali Khan
The University Press Limited (UPL), 1996

Following the 1971 Liberation War, which culminated in Pakistan’s humiliating defeat, many Pakistani military officers began writing autobiographies. The intent behind these memoirs was often to obscure the crimes against humanity they committed in Bangladesh and to mask

their guilt. Among them was Rao Farman Ali, a military officer often recognised as a central figure in orchestrating the 1971 Bangladesh genocide.

His book is carefully crafted to deflect blame from himself. Therefore, to fully grasp its context, it’s crucial to read the insightful introduction provided by Professor Muntasir Mamoon. As readers, we often seek to understand history from the perspective of the victors. However, this book offers a rare glimpse into how Pakistanis may have perceived our Liberation War. While this book may be a controversial addition to any reading list, it is essential for understanding the mindset of the Pakistani military officers—in their own words—who brutally massacred Bangladeshis during the war.

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