

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

FROM CULTURAL BEACON TO BATTLEGROUND: The DU English Department at 100

Review of 'Dhaka University's English Department: Centenary Perspectives' (University of Dhaka, 2022) edited by Nevin Farida et al.

The book's introduction, written by the five editors who are currently teaching at the Department, traces the 100 years' journey. They share the historical aspect of the university's birth along with the Department and its contribution to the "cultural enlightenment and educational progress of the people in East Bengal".

SABIHA HUQ
Imagine that a 104 years after its inception, the Department of English of Dhaka University wakes up on a July morning to see its rain-soaked campus abuzz with young men and women walking past the Aparajeyo Bangla, a reminder of the 1971 Liberation War, their heads drooping with the onslaught of moral policing and insurrection of reactionary student politics! Why would someone even think of such a dystopian future? The university that was once called the Oxford of the East, and was established to nurture critical thinking and state of the art knowledge, has now fallen prey to philistinism and mobocracy. The campus grounds have been polluted on several fronts since the Partition of India in 1947.

Prior to the independence of Bangladesh, the suppression of Bangla language by West Pakistan and eventual killing of students who stood against such oppression had soiled the verdant greens of the university in 1952. Mass killing of students again made the grounds gory in 1971. In post-independence Bangladesh, many were killed because of political reasons. The bankruptcy of Bangladeshi politics has been soiling the haloed ground of Dhaka University and affecting its student life for decades. Despite these onslaughts, there has been nurturance of critical thinking and humanism from the inception of the university in 1921 through the departments that began their journey from the very first year.

The Department of English was perhaps the most progressive of these. It is therefore quite natural that graduates of the department were and are the most prominent figures in Bangladeshi cultural arena as well as governance. Today, when over 100 years have passed, the nation sees a few of its own female students being harassed by men on their own campus and a section of its own student community supports the fanatics who cause such embarrassment. Therefore, this is high time to evaluate a century of achievements as also the challenges that have come in the way of the Department of English, and of the university itself. The book titled *Dhaka University's English Department: Centenary Perspectives* may help the nation understand trajectories of the growth of English studies in Bangladesh against a wide range of



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

contexts mentioned above. Select teachers and alumni of the department have contributed to the volume of 348 pages and have written about many aspects ranging from the evolution of the syllabus to the possibility of a 'neoliberal' future.

The book's introduction, written by the five editors who are currently teaching at the Department, traces the 100 years' journey. They share the historical aspect of the university's birth along with the Department and its contribution to the "cultural enlightenment and educational progress of the people in East Bengal". Expectedly, Macaulay's *Minute* (1835) has been referred to, and there is a quick revisit of the reception history of English by the East Bengalis. Gradual changes in the nature of the Department with the political changes of the country that is Bangladesh now, are also factored. The department's glorious history of involvement in the Liberation War and martyrdom are reminisced by the editors, though they do not elaborate on the topic perhaps to focus on the 12 chapters that follow the introduction. There was however scope of dwelling on how the academic vision of the Department charted an independent course from the colonial objective of simply procuring a smooth supply of coloured servants for the

whites. In more recent times, similarly, one expected deliberations on how the Department has persistently resisted bigotry of the kind that is gnawing into the marrow of the nation as it undergoes a churning. The measure of the department's success in upholding the secular culture of the country is a tenable question though, given the fact that many of its graduates are taken in by student politics and reactionary groups, and nobody knows what the future holds.

The second chapter, titled "Revising English Literature Syllabuses", written by Fakrul Alam, gives an overview of how the curricula evolved over the decades when each revision of the syllabus was a timely step to march with the global educational perspectives. He mentions the job market and how the graduates are being benefitted from the new courses; while what is still lacking according to the graduates of the department is that the curricula need more research components to expand the opportunities for them. While new literatures, linguistics, and theories have enriched the English studies, media, cultural, gender studies and such others have made it more interdisciplinary. The third chapter complements the second with more detailed historiography of

the development of the curricula including the syllabuses of various decades, teaching methods and use of technology in pedagogy, and envisioning a possible future of it.

Niaz Zaman's chapter on "Women Empowerment and the Department of English" is enriched with historical references to the women who were themselves enlightened, empowered, and also illuminated the lives of others. The history of the first female student Leela Nag came to the nation's notice in 2021 when the Department had its centenary celebrations. This chapter talks about her as well as other illustrious women who taught, studied or held important administrative positions in the department. The fact that women dominate in numbers among the faculty and students is to be factored in vis-à-vis the current debate regarding gender quota and equal rights in the country. The chapter offers highlights of the glorious contributions of women of the department in academia, politics, cultural arena, and administration, and one can easily assess how progressive the university once upon a time was. This is sad to witness the gradual effacement of such a bright past through a bunch of murky events in the present times, which warn about a murkier future. The book is sure to initiate such thoughts while one

compares the written words with what one witnesses in a rather politicised and misogynistic campus culture.

Talking of culture, the following chapter "The Department of English: Literary and Cultural Contributions" by Syed Manzoorul Islam and Tahmina Ahmed may give a broader overview of how the department has contributed to the national cultural scene. Beginning from the very first years of the Department's establishment and through the East Pakistan period and then after the independence, its illustrious alumni participated in all kinds of literary and cultural activism that defined the evolving spirit of the Bengali nation. A plethora of great poets, writers, film makers, actors, singers, diplomats, ministers, politicians have tread the department's corridors as students, and they have etched their names permanently in the nation's history. This constant stream of erudite alumni could have been possible only because of the great teachers of the department who shaped the minds of the students. This phenomenon is also adequately exemplified in the chapter written by Bijoy Lal Basu and Farhanaz Rabbani.

In a few chapters the writers have tried to establish the interdisciplinary nature of English studies and its applicability in the job market. Media, civil service and teaching being identified as major destinations of the graduates, these chapters may open new vistas for the current students. Indeed, the last chapter talks much about the current facilities and tries to give a roadmap. The book maintains a healthy balance between the nostalgic past and a visibly certain future. With a colourful ensemble of texts, archival documents and photographs, the book has quite much to offer. English studies were introduced to Bangladesh through Dhaka University, and till date the department has proven leadership in national level decisions regarding educational matters. It is possible that teachers and alumni of the department will continue to do so. It is also expected that it will continue to take part in national crises and guide the nation as its great alumni always did, and in the next hundred years, another centennial book will sing of that glory for future readers.

Sabiha Huq teaches English at BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

The evolution of theater magazines in Bengal

Review of 'Theaterer Kagoj Jotorokom Daay' (Troyee Prokashon, 2025) by Dr Babul Biswas

TUSAR TALUKDER

Dr Babul Biswas's *Theaterer Kagoj Jotorokom Daay* is a thoughtful and detailed study of the evolution of theater in Bengal and Bangladesh, through the lens of theatre-focused little magazines. Divided into three structured parts, the book offers a chronological narrative that highlights how these publications contributed to the growth of theater culture and critical thought in the region. The author not only traces their development but also probes into the challenges that led to their decline despite their pivotal roles.

The first part of the book addresses the emergence of theater magazines in pre-partition Bengal. Magazines like *Samakal*, *Mashik Mohammadi*, and *Sawgat* played crucial roles in providing platforms for discourse on theatrical art, performance, and criticism. These magazines acted as bridges between theater practitioners and the larger intellectual and cultural movements of their time. Dr Biswas shows how they nurtured a culture of discussion and reflection, helping to shape an evolving Bengali theater identity during a politically charged and artistically fertile era.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Dr Biswas then shifts his focus to the post-partition period, specifically looking at East Pakistan and later, Bangladesh. The sociopolitical context here is significantly different, and theater becomes a medium for expression of national identity, protest, and social consciousness. Magazines like *Shilpkala* (jointly edited by Abdul Mannan Syed and Abdus Selim) and *Theater* (edited by Ramendu Mazumdar) are discussed for their critical role in promoting new playwrights, experimental performances,

and cultural analysis. These publications provided intellectual grounding and space for collaboration among theater critics, directors, and writers. They documented both mainstream and fringe movements, preserving otherwise ephemeral elements of the theater scene.

The third part of the book is perhaps the most introspective. Dr Biswas explores why so many of these impactful little magazines ceased publication. He identifies reasons such as financial hardship, lack of institutional support, the absence of a consistent readership base, and changing media consumption patterns. These challenges reflect broader shifts in the cultural economy and priorities of artistic communities. However, even in their disappearance, these magazines have left behind a substantial legacy—a rich archive of creative and critical voices that continue to inform contemporary theater studies.

A notable point comes in the book's preface, where Ramendu Majumdar—one of the leading theater proponents, a prominent actor, and editor of *Theater*—praises Dr Babul Biswas's rigorous research. Majumdar highlights how the author has enriched the manuscript with well-

documented facts and practical examples drawn from the theater world, offering a rare and valuable insight into the cultural history of Bengal and Bangladesh.

One of the book's core arguments is that little magazines were instrumental in forming the intellectual and aesthetic landscape of Bengali theater. By offering a space for criticism, reflection, and innovation, they helped theater activists and critics engage with both local and global trends. Through editorials, essays, interviews, and reviews, they created a vibrant ecosystem for ideas to flourish.

Theaterer Kagoj is a valuable contribution to South Asian theater studies. Dr Babul Biswas not only documents the forgotten efforts of little theater magazines but also revives interest in their cultural responsibility. His work underscores the urgent need to preserve such platforms—whether in print or digital form—for future generations of artists, critics, and cultural historians.

Tusar Talukder teaches English at Central Women's University, Dhaka. He can be reached at writing.tusar@gmail.com.