

Bangladeshi Writing in English

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Introduction: The emergence of a new voice in global literary scene

Although originally the language of England, English is now the most widely spoken language in the world. It is used as a language of international communication and the ideal vehicle for world literatures. As a medium of creative writing, the English language has been consciously taken up by writers hailing from the formerly colonized countries. They are exploiting the so-called King's/Queen's language in their own sweet ways to realize their full potential as postcolonial writers. The number is multiplying with the rise of Postcolonial consciousness in the countries and peoples who had been living for years under the shadow of colonialism.

How can we identify this wave of Anglophone writing in the non-English speaking countries? Can we call it English literature? Would the traditionalist academics accept it with grace? What they are teaching in the name of English literature hardly includes any authors apart from the mainstream (British/American or of a few English-speaking countries) authors. Anthony Burgess, however, tries to resolve the situation by contending that English literature "is not merely the literature of England or of the British Isles, but a vast and growing body of writings made up of the work of authors who use the English language as a natural medium of communication "(1974).

The peripheral English language authors, however, do not bother their heads about whether any recognition dawned on them with regard to their status as practitioners of creative English writing. They choose to write in English to reach a

global reading public, to share their very own feelings with the world, and most consciously, to 'write back to the centre'. With these ends in view, different indigenous literatures in English, i.e. 'African Writing in English', 'Latin American Writing in English', 'South-Asian Writing in English', 'Indian Writing in English' etc. have come into existence in the once colonized world. In South-Asian English writing, Indian or Pakistani English writings have, by now, been able to earn a reputation. A new generation of English-language writers have also emerged in Bangladesh which is poised to extend beyond its boundaries. The stream of creative work in English, which is increasingly developing in the present literary arena of Bangladesh, can better be called, in my own favourite phrase, 'Bangladeshi Writing in English'.

When it comes to "Bangladeshi Writing in English", whose acronym is BWE, I'm afraid, I may sound hortative and a bit big-headed if I claim that it is I who used the phrase "Bangladeshi Writing in English" (BWE) for the first time in writing and drew up an outline for it. But I know for a fact that my piece entitled "Bangladeshis writing in English" published on the *Daily Star* literary page on 14th August 2010, had used the terms for the first time ever. And what prompted me to think about BWE is quite obvious. The tidal wave of writings in English has grown across the globe in this post-colonial era in keeping with the process of decolonization.

The nature of Bangladeshi writing in English: Creativity and originality

By 'Bangladeshi Writing in English' (BWE), we generally mean the whole corpus of creative work of writers in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi Diaspora who write in English but whose mother tongue is Bengali or other indigenous language(s) spoken in Bangladesh. This special stream of writing can also be called 'Writing

English in Bangladesh' or 'Bangladeshi Anglophone literature'. But, to my way of thinking, the adjectival use of the country better describes the nature of this writing. This school of writing includes only the creative writing in English i.e. poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction or writings that have considerable literary and artistic merit.

The origin of Bangladeshi Writing in English: A cognate development

In fact, the subcontinental writers in English have emerged, more or less, from a cognate development of cultural and literary consciousness arising from the collective resentment bred by British Raj's denigration of subcontinental knowledge and education manifested in Macaulay's Minute 1835. In other words, Indian postcolonial writers in general and the Bangladeshi ones in particular have emerged as dissenting groups against the colonial educational legacy of Macaulay's Minute and Macaulay's patronizing attitude towards the subcontinental people. Lord Babington Macaulay mercilessly lampooned Indian and Middle Eastern knowledge and languages and dismissed them as worthless. As he put it, "...a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." The ulterior motive of the British Raj behind the introduction of English education to Indian curriculum, as Macaulay mentioned in his historic 1835 "Minute on Education" was to create a "class who may be interpreters between [the English rulers] and the millions whom [they] govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect". Most of whom we now call South Asian writers in English are also writing back to Macaulay's bitter reproaches and asserting their postcolonial rights.

The origin and development of English language in the Indian Subcontinent was promoted by the East India Company which was based in Calcutta. The great Indian philosopher, Raja Rammohan Roy's settling in Calcutta in 1815 is considered by historians to be the beginning of the Bengal Renaissance. Besides, the establishment of the Calcutta Madrassa in 1781, the Asiatic Society in 1784, and the Fort William College in 1800 became instrumental in establishing Calcutta as the nucleus of Colonial Bengal and the literary metropolis of post-colonial writing. The other Bengal Renaissance figures like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Traore, and many others of their generations and following generations, who were hugely influenced by English education and culture, were mostly based in Calcutta. Calcutta was also the commercial and educational hub of the subcontinent during that time. Towards the beginning of the 19th century, as English learning gained a firm foothold in Calcutta, an enthusiasm for writing in English originated in Bengal. The new wave of writing had its origin at the hands of Sake Dean Mahomed (1799-1851), the earliest non-European immigrant to the Western World who introduced Indian cuisine and shampoo baths to Europe. He was the first Indian to get a book published in English. That growing literary trend was also developed by Raja Rammohan Roy who was fostered more in Calcutta and the cities that fell on the Indian side after the partition of 1947. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774 -1833), the father of Bengali Renaissance, was also the 'father of Indian literature in English' (Williams, 1987: 1). He was the pioneer of that literary trend, which has now extended over a vast area of the subcontinent including Bangladesh. So, similar to Indian English literature, Bangladeshi English literature is Bangladeshi in content and English in form.

The first book of poems in English entitled *The Shair and Other Poems* by Kashiprashad Ghose was published in 1830. Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824—1873) took to writing poetry in English under the influence of English poets like Thomas Moore, John Keats, George Byron, and others. Although his genius for English writing was nipped in the bud, his two English poetry books, *The Captive Ladie* and *Visions of the Past*, both published in 1849, were well received by the highly educated locals and the English circles. Toru Dutt (1855—1876) in her very short life, caught global attention by writing and translating poetry in English. Her *A Sheaf Glean'd and French Fields* and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* were published in 1876 and 1882 respectively.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838—1894) won wide recognition for his novel *Rajmohan's Wife*. Rabindranath Tagore (1861—1941) showed considerable talent in English writing. He, however, was not a writer in English as such. He took to writing in English for the pressure from his admirers at home and abroad. Nevertheless, the corpus of his English writings is pretty large and manifold. They generally fall into two major categories—originals and translations. Although he began this part of his career at his early fifties as a translator of his own writings, he did a considerable amount of original writing and translation of works by others. In addition, he used the language to write scores of letters, and to give numerous lectures, talks, speeches, and addresses throughout the world.

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the quintessence of Tagore's translation skill. In addition, he used English to write scores of letters, and to give numerous lectures, talks, speeches and addresses across the globe.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1999) was the quintessential English writer of Bengal. His English writing reached such towering heights that he is said to have outdone even many of his contemporary mainstream English authors. Writers like E.M. Forster, Winston Churchill, Arnold Toynbee, V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie have held his writing in high esteem.

Bangladeshi writing in English: The early bards and contemporary poets

Bangladeshi writing in English has come into being after the Independence of Bangladesh. Although the stream is very feeble, it exists. There is, however, no authorized list of the writers of this school. I have tried to make a rough outline, which is, of course, subject to further modifications. I have included the names of the writers who have been writing poems, fiction, short stories and pieces with literary merit in English, and by now, have earned for themselves some recognition.

The first generation of 'Bangladeshi writers in English' includes a few poets. Razia Khan (1936—2011) came up with a couple of collections of poems. Her poetry books *Argus Under Anaesthesia* (1976) and *Cruel April* (1977) bear the stamp of her preeminence among English poets in Bangladesh. Her English “like that of many other sub-continentals has been a result of one of the most willing bondages...” and since she has “learnt the language in the sub-continent [her] English in undeniably sub- continental” (Khan, 2014: 7). She has consciously taken up English as a medium of expression, and liked to use it on her own as a

socially, culturally and politically conscious author, not as a blind imitator of the mainstream writers.

Farida Majid is a poet, scholar and literary translator. Her *Take Me Home, Rickshaw* (1974) is a collection of poems by contemporary Bangladeshi poets translated in English. She has edited an anthology of English poems titled *Thursday Evening Anthology* (1977). She is a self-proclaimed secularist modernist Muslim. She was an important literary figure on the London poetry scene in the seventies.

Kaiser Haq is the most leading English language poet in Bangladesh. His poetic output is quite substantial. They are as follows: *Starting Lines* (1978)-Dacca; *A Little Ado* (1978)- Dacca; *A Happy Farewell* (1994)-Dhaka; *Black Orchid* (1996)-London; *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song* (2002); *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected poems 1966—2006* (2008). Kaiser Haq is a consummate artist who has painted the contemporary Bangladeshi scene with powerful imaginative mind and artistic precision. His poems are “firmly rooted in the pristine soil of Bengal. It’s not that... [they do not] deal with urban motifs, which all English Language writers in this part of the world do; but what sets Haq apart from his peers is his motifs that sometimes touch the lives of the ordinary, the most mundane. And this he does with a liberal pinch of irony” (Hussain, 2013). His most studied and appreciated poem “Ode on the Lungi” is the symbol of the subaltern with voice to speak aloud their sufferings unlike Spivak’s subalterns.

Feroz Ahmed-ud-din is another noted poet. Though not prolific, his poetry is marked by shortness and intensity. His *Handful of Dust* (1975) vividly portrays the loss of vision in contemporary life. Nuzhat Amin Mannan's *Rhododendron Lane* (2004) is enriched with creative imagery and distinctive style. Syed Najmuddin

Hashim's collection of poems *Hopefully the Pomegranate* (2007) is a valuable addition to Bangladeshi English poetry. Hashim has drawn allusions and references from far-off European mythology and biblical anecdotes, and woven them into the local themes.

Rumana Siddique's *Five Faces of Eve: Poems* (2007) reflects the timeless experience of a woman symbolized by their biblical ancestor- Eve. Her poems are a mix of pleasures and pains of life. The poet “transfers her personal experience, observations, feelings, thoughts, ups and downs, and the things that affect her life into concrete forms of literary art.... She plays with words to succinctly demonstrate what women go through in the different stages of life. The sharp and sleek observations in the poems make them sound very modern, witty yet poignant. The spontaneity is palpable all throughout the collection” (Mortada, 2007).

Nadeem Rahman's *Politically Incorrect Poems* (2004) is a collection of poems dealing with post-liberation war themes. His poetry is typified by highly individualistic attitude, sharp social sensibility, and keen political observation.

Apart from the poets mentioned above, a number of enthusiastic amateur poets, such as, Syed Badrul Ahsan, Azfar Hussein and Rabiul Hasan are also writing good English poems.

Bangladeshi fiction in English: A wave of gripping narratives

The realm of Bangladeshi fiction in English is being dominated by a host of distinguished writers and fresh talents. The name of Adib Khan, a multi-award-winning Bangladeshi-Australian novelist comes first. He is a writer of real merit. His novels *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994) *Solitude of Illusions* (1996); *The Storyteller* (2000); *Homecoming* (2005); and *Spiral Road* (2007) win global

acclaim, and are mostly concerned with themes of self-identity, sense of belonging, migration, and social dislocation. *Seasonal Adjustments* is “a poignant, sometimes painful account of a middle-aged man coping with loss and struggling to identify with a nation, culture and family he is no longer familiar with” (Mudditt,2010). *Solitude of Illusions* “portrays an encounter between South Asians and Australian cultures, although here the focalizer is an elderly protagonist which highlights the issues of generational conflicts and changing living conditions” (Alexander, 2008:83). The third novel, *The Storyteller* also focuses on south Asian themes as represented by an Indian dwarf. *Homecoming* “constitutes a new departure, in that it describes the tribulations of a Western Vietnam veteran” (Ibid). This is how Khan has “undergone a transcultural transition from depicting the imaginary world of South Asian immigrants in Australia to other ‘othernesses’” (Ibid). In *Spiral Road* “the diaspora’s return to the “imaginary homeland” is triggered by the desire for self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. It extends to an analysis of the aesthetics of this return journey” (Lokuge, 2008). Adib’s style is characterized by lucidity and sarcasm.

Monica Ali is a Bangladeshi-born British writer and novelist. Her debut novel, *Brick Lane* (2003) was well received by critics in the United Kingdom and the United States and shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. *Brick Lane* — named after Brick Lane, a street at the heart of London’s Bangladeshi community explores different aspects of expatriate lives and processes of adaptations to alien people and culture. The novel, however, provoked controversy within the Bangladeshi community in Britain who thought Ms. Ali had negatively portrayed people from the Sylhet region, as they constitute the majority of the Bangladeshi immigrants living in Brick Lane. The writer and activist Germaine Greer, too, criticized Monica on the same ground in her piece in *The Guardian*. As she puts it, "As

British people know little and care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in an English novel had the force of a defining caricature ... [S]ome of the Sylhetis of Brick Lane did not recognize themselves. Bengali Muslims smart under an Islamic prejudice that they are irreligious and disorderly, the impure among the pure, and here was a proto-Bengali writer with a Muslim name, portraying them as all of that and more” (Paul, 2006).

Tahamima Anam belongs to the group of writers who were born after Independence of Bangladesh in 1971. She is also an author of Bangladeshi Diaspora in London. Her first novel *A Golden Age* was published by John Murray in 2007, and was the Best First Book winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Set in war-torn Bangladesh, the novel is rooted in the birth pangs of the country. Its main strength lies in “its decision to show war from the perspective of the women who cannot join the armed resistance and must instead find a way to live in the limbo world of a city in curfew, where daily life must continue its deceptive normality even while there are guns buried beside the rose-bushes, and visits to the Urdu-speaking butcher are fraught with political tension because he's believed to be a collaborator” (Shamsie, 2007). In her second novel *The Good Muslim* (2012) Ms. Anam examines the after-effects of our Liberation War, the growing unease at the way the post-war situation develops. It is “an angrier, more bitter book — fittingly so, since the main protagonist is Maya, the family's thorniest character — but it's also more mature, evoking ambivalence and regret with a complexity that was not as evident in Anam's accomplished first novel” (Smith,2011).

Shazia Omar is another Bangladeshi novelist in English. Her first novel, *Like a Diamond in the Sky*, published in 2009 by Penguin India and Jubaan, gives a

dismal picture of drug addiction in Bangladesh. Ms Omar is a social psychologist and it is a bold move on her part to deal with a taboo subject with artistic rigour. The novel is ‘well-researched’ and based upon gritty realism. It ‘succeeds because her characters are multi-dimensional and as such they provoke an emotional response.’ (Mudditt, 2010)

A young storyteller Mahmud Rahman has appeared on the BWE scene with his debut publication *Killing the Water* (2010). It is a collection of a dozen of short stories, which cover a wide variety of themes ranging from the Liberation War of Bangladesh to the racial violence against the fresh immigrants in the USA. K. Anis Ahmed came up with his collection of short stories titled *Good Night, Mr. Kissinger and Other Stories*, which offers nine stories mostly, based on different aspects of Dhaka city. *The World in My Hands* (2013) is his second book. It is a political satire and is described by Tahmima Anam as “darkly funny heralding Ahmed as a strong new voice in English writing from Bangladesh” (The Daily Star, 31 Dec 2013).

Rashid Askari is one of the top 10 rising authors of Bangladesh (Singh, 2014), and “one of the promising storytellers of our time and an emerging talent in Bangladeshi fiction in English” (Islam, 2012). His debut short story collection *Nineteen seventy-one and other stories* (Dhaka, 2011) is “the quintessence of his deep-rooted emotional attachment to the land and its culture and fine literary craftsmanship” (Ibid). Askari “picked the plot of [his] stories both from the bustling metropolis and the far-flung corners of the country, and tried to paint them in an unprejudiced light” (Askari, 2011:10). He, comments the distinguished writer and critic, Syed Manzoorul Islam, “writes witty, racy stories with surprisingly serious undertones” (Islam, 2012). He deliberately avoids offbeat approaches and

writes stories in a rather conventional way. There always remains a scattering of literary devices in his writing, which adds extra spice to his style.

Farah Ghuznavi is a short story writer whose story 'Judgment Day' was placed second in the Oxford GEF competition. Her debut short story collection, *Fragments of Riversong* (2013) vividly portrays the trials and tribulations of people in post-war Bangladesh. Farah justifies herself to her readers by saying: "I wrote *Fragments of Riversong* in the hope of providing readers with a more authentic and nuanced picture of my country as it is today. I wanted to go beyond the typical stereotypes of poverty and disaster, which are only part of the picture, to understanding better the beauty, chaos and contradictions that make up modern Bangladesh" (Mitra,2014). Ghuznavi's stories, says Susmita Bhattacharya, "tackle day-to-day issues with sincerity and realism without being judgmental or moralistic. While her stories are about the empowerment of women, they do not degrade men. Each character lives in a realistic world that we recognize. Our own stories and lives bounce back to us from the pages of this book." (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Maria Chaudhuri is a Hong Kong-based Bangladeshi writer. Her debut book *Beloved Strangers*, a memoir, has been given a mixed reception by the critics. Erika Banerjee has found it "[aspiring] to a duality of texture and meaning, the gentle unravelling of a not-unusual childhood in Dhaka with the later intensity of her adult experience" (2014). Ms. Banerjee considers it 'flat' with regard to its technique and artistry, but Chaudhuri struggles to "establish a sympathetic connection between the prose and the reader. The result is a confusing rites of passage tale that leaves the reader with the uneasiness of being a reluctant voyeur into an ordinary life" (Ibid).

Zia Haider Rahman is a Bangladeshi-born British novelist who has earned huge critical acclaim after the publication of his debut novel *In the Light of What We Know* (2014). Set against the backdrop of economic crisis and the war in Afghanistan, the novel tells the story of how people make friendship and finally split up. Olivia Laing, the author of *To the River* and *The Trip to Echo Spring*, has written an appreciation of Rahman's book. As she puts it: "Zia Haider Rahman's troubled and troubling debut novel [is] a wide-ranging examination of global politics, rootlessness and post-colonial guilt that travels from Bangladesh to Oxford, Kabul to New York, and that has already drawn comparisons with Sebald, Conrad and Waugh" (Laing,2014). The novel has postcolonial undertones that explore the ambivalences of globalization, military might, and the process of dehumanizing 'the other'. It is "a novel unashamed by many varieties of knowledge—its characters talk, brilliantly, about mathematics, philosophy, exile and immigration, warfare, Wall Street and financial trading, contemporary geopolitics, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, English and American society, Islamic terrorism, Western paternalism, Oxford and Yale" (Wood,2014). *In Light of What We Know* is "what Salman Rushdie once called an 'everything novel.' It is wide-armed, hospitable, disputatious, worldly, and cerebral. Ideas and provocations abound on every page...A dazzling debut" (Ibid). Moreover, it is "a tour de force inspired by Kierkegaard's dictum: 'life can only be understood backwards; the trouble is, it has to be lived forwards'"(Adler, 2014).

Sharbari Z. Ahmed is a performer, film director, scripter and fictionist. Her debut short story collection *The Ocean of Mrs. Nagi: Stories* (2013) is a collection of eight stories of independent themes and plots where she "sets out to deconstruct the subtlest of shades that make up the myriad experiences of South Asians...[and] draws delicate linkages—backward, forward, sideward—establishing repeatedly

how an external and politically extravagant exhibition of ideology affects the behaviour and anticipations of common immigrants” (Kameswaran,2014).

Numair Atif Choudhury’s *Babu Bangladesh* is “a tour de force of a novel. Exuberant, extravagant, learned, zany, ingenious, whimsical, irreverent and provocative, this is a work of amazing merit” (Alam 2021). Elements of postcolonialism, postmodernism, and magic realism abound in the highly experimental novel.

Syed Waliullah (1922-1771), a renowned Bengali novelist, short story writer and playwright, had written an English novel, *The Ugly Asian*, under the pseudonym of Abu Sharya, which remained unpublished for about fifty years after it was written. He might have been inspired by J Lederer and Eugene Burdick’s *The Ugly American* (1958) to write a novel in English. In the novel, Waliullah “explores the relation of America to an Asian country, which [was] attempting to throw off its colonial roots and trying to find a way to benefit its people” (Waliullah, 2013: xiii). Ahmedi Hussain is another Bangladeshi writer in English who has edited *The New Anthem: The Subcontinent in its Own Words*, which is an anthology of fiction from the Indian Subcontinent. A galaxy of other promising writers is trying their hands at fiction and short story writing in Bangladesh. Razia Sultana Khan’s *The Good Wife and Other Tales of Seduction* is a collection of fourteen short stories based on the day-to-day happenings in Bangladesh among people whose roles are characterized by tradition, culture, gender, politics and religion.

Conclusion: A great future ahead

This paper is a primary small attempt to sketch out the world of Bangladeshi writers in English and naturally it has not been possible to include all for the dearth of information. I am now supervising PhD dissertation on this subject which will phenomenally contribute to the study of 'Bangladeshi Writing in English'.

Although 'Bangladeshi Writing in English' has still a long way to go, it has a bright future. Bangladeshi English writers can easily be able to play a role similar to that of India or of Pakistan or of Sri Lanka at the very least. However, there are limitations too! The practice of creative writing in English mostly remains confined to particular quarters. Therefore, to allow it to grow independently, the ongoing mode of BWE has to be liberated from the literary coterie i.e. the small circle of writers, publishers, and their admirers. It has to be rescued from the close confines of academia—the varsity English departments and English medium schools and colleges. The English newspapers should not be limited to “publishing only a literature page but would also provide active support and an enabling platform” (Islam, 2006). The scarcity of Bangladeshi writers in English necessitates bringing out anthologies of creative writing in English to facilitate growth of fresh talent. The literary magazines and journals should pick fresh writings solely on merit, and promote the development of Bangladeshi writing in English. Bangladeshi writing in English can better be a global vehicle for the national themes, indigenous subjects can gain access to universal literary circles, and exchange mutual thought to cater for the growing sensibilities of the global audience. This is what the present-day literature is in urgent need of.

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