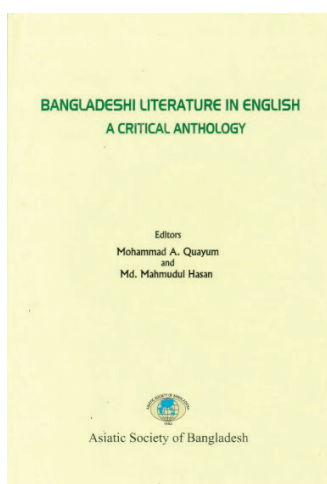


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Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology

Mohammad A. Quayum & Md. Mahmudul Hasan (eds.). 2021. Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 302 pp., BDT 350.00, ISBN 978-984-35-0677-1



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From the colonial era and the Pakistani regime, many writers from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) wrote in English quite prolifically. In post-independence Bangladesh, this practice has gained renewed dynamism, as a significant number of Bangladeshi native and diasporic writers have produced literary works in English. Despite this, Bangladeshi literature in English has not received deserving critical attention. However, following the sweeping eminence of Anglophone literature in the neighbouring countries such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, Bangladeshi literature in English is being included in academic studies; many universities have already incorporated a course on Bangladeshi Literature in English in their syllabi of English studies. Against this background, Mohammad A. Quayum's and Md. Mahmudul Hasan's edited book *Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology* (2021) that anthologises significant critical insights into the Bangladeshi

English writings has been recently published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Hence, it can be considered a timeous as well as valuable contribution in the burgeoning academic discourse of Bangladeshi literature in English (hereinafter BLE).

Arguably the first compilation of this kind, this anthology covers many BLE writers whose works are “worthy of serious critical and analytical consideration” (5), incorporating divergent literary themes such as feminism, gender stereotypes, (post)modernism, postcoloniality, diaspora, transnationalism, and trauma and memory. Carefully chosen “on the critical merit of the items” (6), the fifteen chapters of the book are divided into four sections – “A Pre-Independence Pioneer”, “Writings from Bangladesh”, “Writings from the Diaspora”, and “Interviews”. Apart from these critical essays, the “Editors’ Introduction”, providing the historical details of Bangladeshi English literary tradition from the emergence to the present, can be studied as a grounding resource for students, teachers and researchers of this field. What is particular in the “Introduction” is that the editors duly recognise the contribution of the country’s English medium schools, often seen pejoratively by many, the English language dailies and some literary festivals behind BLE’s recent growth. However, since I will focus on the articles based on the predominant themes explored in them, a chronological chapter-by-chapter reflection may not be important.

A good bulk of the chapters reflect on the role of women writers as well as their female characters in numerous literary and historical junctures of Bangladesh. The opening two chapters – “Muslim Bengal Writes Back: Rokeya’s Encounter with and Representation of Europe” by Md. Mahmudul Hasan and “The Influence of Rokeya’s Islamic Identity in Sultana’s Dream” by Ayesha Tarannum – delve deep into Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain’s life, her struggle to emancipate Bengali (Muslim) women and her literary works. While Hasan explores how Rokeya used in her works European culture and literary spirit to inspire and emancipate Bengali women from their “animal state” (7), Tarannum offers an allegorical, Islamic interpretation of Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream*. Tarannum, using some textual terms and references, compares the Sultana’s dream journey with the Islamic Prophet’s journey to heaven, commonly known as *Mi’raj*. Sabiha Huq’s “Images of Bangladesh in Niaz Zaman’s Novels” discusses Niaz Zaman’s three novels *The Crooked Neem Tree*, *A Different Sita* and *The Baromashi Tapes*. Despite the title’s implication on Zaman’s distinctive portrayal of Bangladesh in the novels, the chapter overarchingly broods on the feminist awareness of the three female protagonists of the three novels – Seema, Shabina and Sakina – and their diversified sacrifice in historical, political and familial situations.

The woman issues have also been further extended in chapter eight by Sanjib Kr Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi titled “The Blame Game: War and Violence in Dilruba Z. Ara’s *Blame*”. It portrays how the female protagonist Laila in Ara’s novel *Blame* manoeuvres through a multi-layered blame and disgrace because of her fighting against Pakistani Army and the resultant loss of her chastity. However, in the teeth of this trenchant blame Laila remains in a brave aplomb thinking that she did what her conscience told her to do in that terrible situation. By extension of this feminist query, in the last chapter of the third section “Negotiating the Politics of Power: Tahmima Anam’s *The Good Muslim* and Women’s Role in War and Nation-building”, Farzana Akhter exhibits how the Bangladeshi women’s active

role in war and contribution to the formation of the nation are either obliterated or relegated to subordinate status in the post-war masculine historiography. The author rounds off her discussion reaffirming that the independence of the country has not regrettably been “the autonomy and liberation of women” (255).

The only chapter on the Bangladeshi English poetry titled “Reading Kaiser Haq: A Bangladeshi Transnational Poet in English” by Tahmina Ahmed probes into Bangladeshi famous poet Kaiser Haq’s transnational worldview in his poems and interviews. Ahmed discusses numerous critical issues regarding transnationalism, from definition to its growing theoretical prominence, in contemporary literature. Her arguments, on the one hand, familiarise Haq in the translational studies, and her exploration of the poet’s inherent translational outlook, particularly in “Ode on the Lungi,” may, on the other hand, inspire young researchers to vet other works of Bangladeshi literature from this theoretical prism.

It is well known that Partition scholars are critically preoccupied with Indian writers focusing on the odysseys of the Hindus who migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal during the 1947 Partition and disregard the corollary migration of the people of West Bengal Muslims to East Bengal. Considering this historical background, the chapter “Homed, Unhomed and Rehomed in Partition Stories of East Bengal / East Pakistan” by Rifat Mahbub and Anika Saba is particularly ground-breaking because it examines the Partition literature by East Pakistani/Bangladeshi writers – Syed Waliullah, Abu Rushd, and Ashraf Siddiqui – who otherwise remain unrecognised in Partition discourse. In an intricate interpretation of home and homing desire, the authors have admittedly endeavoured to counterbalance the critical indifference to these writers, drawing a sympathetic attention to the settling travails of the West Bengal migrators.

Several chapters investigate extensive issues of diasporic identities, subjectivities and sensitivities in the fiction by well-known Bangladeshi diasporic writers such as Adib Khan, Dilruba Z. Ara, Monica Ali, Zia Haider Rahman and Tahmima Anam, “who were born in Bangladesh but have since found a home elsewhere, but still identify with Bangladesh, consider Bangladesh as their original homeland, and write about Bangladeshi life and culture or on its uprooted variations” (6). In the chapter “Re-storying the Past, Re-imagining the Future in Adib Khan’s *Homecoming* and *Spiral Road*”, Stefano Mercanti underscores the tensions of displacement and investigates the role of the memory of the past in the lives of Adib Khan’s protagonists Martin and Masud that help them psychologically negotiate the orthodoxies of rigid culture and social hierarchical systems.

In fact, almost all the critical essays on the diaspora draw, apparently or thematically, from James Clifford’s “overpowering paradox of diaspora”, that is “dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*” (qtd. in Hasanat 193 & in Friedman 222). For example, in “Religion, Diaspora and the Politics of a Homing Desire in the Writings of Zia Haider Rahman, Tahmima Anam and Monica Ali”, Fayeza Hasanat examines “the positioning of a good Muslim” (186) in the diasporic context from the perspective of what Edward Said defined as “overlapping territories and intertwined history” (qtd. in Hasanat 186) in his *Culture and Imperialism*. The remarkable commonality that Hasanat discovers in the protagonists of these novels – Chanu in *Brick Lane*, Sohail in *The Good Muslim* and Zafar in *In*

the Light of What We Know – is that they all are “consumed by an unconquerable horror” (199) in the diasporic world which ultimately leads them to the desire of (an imagined) home in their homeland.

Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Anam’s *The Good Muslim* are further explored in subsequent three chapters of this section. Mahmudul Hasan in “Transplanted Gender Norms and Their Limits in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*” investigates the paradox between the diasporic men’s inherent urge to marry *deshi* women and bring them to Britain in order to translate and “re-institute” a home domesticity against all social and cultural inhabitations in immigrant existence, and their women’s transition from nativity to self-identity against the patriarchal confinement in a diasporic domestic atmosphere. In a fascinating analogy between *Brick Lane* and two great modernist novels James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, Susan Stanford Friedman in her “Migratory Modernisms: Novel Homelands in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*” uses Ali’s intertexts to reveal modernist trope in the novel in “diaspora space” (237). Her arguments may evoke a vibrant debate whether a diasporic novel like *Brick Lane* is a forward-moving new literary genre or merely tracing back to the European modernist novel as its precursor.

The last section of this anthology contains three intriguing interviews, the first two with Niaz Zaman and Kaiser Haq, the country’s best-known English writers, and the third with Sanchita Islam, a British-born writer and artist with Bangladeshi heritage. These interviews may be a significant reservoir of academic references, for young researchers, which bring forward the real challenges in writing in English in Bangladesh and the marginalisation that these writers continually encounter in both academia and society for choosing English language for their creative expressions. Moreover, these interviews encompass numerous autobiographic anecdotes and experiences of the writers that may be imperative in research arguments and critical interpretations of their works.

Throughout the book, the contributors investigate the predominant themes of Bangladesh Anglophone literature. Albeit far from being exhaustive, these issues include the issues of class, the rural-urban divide, tradition and modernity, gender differences, dislocation and displacement, diasporic sensitivities, overseas and internal migration, transnational and transcultural spaces, homing desire, and religio-cultural tensions, which may create a fascinating relevance to the themes of the contemporary Anglophone literature of global reach. In fact, one can hardly disagree with the editors when they maintain that the research articles in this anthology “intrigue, induce and enable interested researchers to delve further into this literary tradition” (5). To conclude, *Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology* is certainly a significant reading experience in terms of Bangladeshi English literary tradition and its establishment in the academic and research arena.

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