Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology: A Ground-Breaking Collection of Critical Essays

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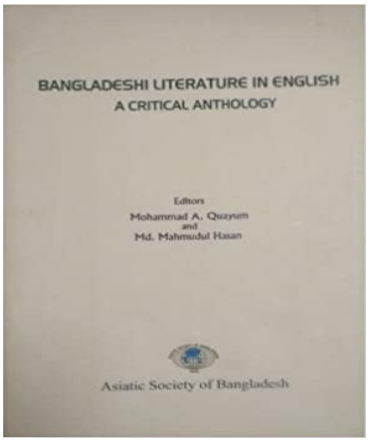

Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology
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Bangladeshi literature in English is marked by several interconnected transitions. Beginning with the two-hundred-year British rule in India, followed by the birth of the midnight twins, India and Pakistan, and the eventual independence of Bangladesh makes the position of English literature in Bangladesh a curious one. With nationalistic politics on the rise, the strategic interests in language as a cultural and identity marker shifted towards Bangla. The currency gained by the mother tongue is no accident as the birth of the new nation cannot be separated from its struggle for Bangla as a state language while under Pakistani rule. The literary culture in Bangladesh, thus, evolved in parallel with these changes.

English as a second/foreign language became an object of sustained critique by policy makers and intelligentsia who wanted to free national consciousness from the pitfalls of colonization. Promoting Bangla in all spheres remained the stated policy of the country. Consequently, the literary imprint of Bangladeshi literature remained largely unknown outside of its territory, and the plight of Bangladeshi literature in English remained stuck in a quagmire. The absence of translations and critical mass can be held responsible for the marginal presence of Bangladeshi writers in English among the South Asian writers.

There is hardly any collective effort to traverse the cross-linguistic boundaries to represent not only the current authors of Bangladesh but also its shared legacy that gets blended with two other flags (i.e., British and Pakistani) under which the country existed. The need for a study anchored within the framework of both colonial and contemporary histories has long been felt. There has been a need for an advocate for Bangladeshi creative expressions in English as a transnational or regional category to highlight a parallel literary tradition. Bangladeshi writers who write in English reflect the circulation of people, ideas, and texts just like those who express themselves in their native tongues. The fluidity of cultural

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history demands a critical scholarship that captures the various nuances of overlapping issues and ideas.

These writers largely fall into two categories. The first category of writers is mostly affiliated with the English Departments or academia, and they live or have lived in Bangladesh (e.g., Syed Sajjad Hussain, Razia Khan Amin, Niaz Zaman, Kaiser Haq). The second category of writers have either migrated to or settled in Anglophone countries (e.g., Monica Ali, Zia Haider Rahman, Adib Khan, Tahmima Anam, Dilruba Z. Ara, Nadeem Zaman, Fayeza Hasanat, Saad Z. Hossain). Their presence in the international literary scene is marked by the publishing houses that feature them. There is an emerging trend helped by the literary journals, anthologies, chapbooks, online ventures, annual Lit Fest and cultural activities of English medium schools, and creative writing programs which are producing new writers (e.g., Munize Manzur, Sohana Manzoor, Shabnam Nadiya).

Edited by two expatriate Bangladeshi scholars, Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan, *Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology* (2021), claims to be the first-ever critical anthology on Bangladeshi Anglophone literature. The shared legacy of the publisher, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, which started its journey as Asiatic Society of Pakistan in 1952, made this anthology equally symbolic. The decision to publish the book as a significant contribution to the literary map of Bangladesh seems deliberately strategic by the editors who had access to publish the book from outside of the country. The editor duo thus remind us of a tradition of writing that we have ignored for a long time. Yet the potential for the sector cannot be overlooked in a world that is intrinsically connected with English as its lingua franca.

In their acknowledgements, the editors admit that the project helped them "return to [their] roots in a metaphorical and meaningful way" (n.pag.). The anthology cleverly reclaims the Bangladeshi authors whose works are branded under the pre-independence or pre-Partition labels. Syed Sajjad Hussain, for instance, "wrote under three flags: British India, Pakistan and Bangladesh" (2). Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Syed Waliullah did not live long enough to see the birth of Bangladesh.

The extensive introduction to the anthology contextualizes the collection while explaining the selection process. Quayum and Hasan posit:

> Our selection and inclusion of chapters were based purely on the critical merit of the items, and breadth of coverage. In other words, we have decided to include some of the best critical material on Bangladeshi literature in English internationally, balancing it with discussions on the maximum number of new or established writers we could accommodate in the book. (6)

Etymologically, the word anthology denotes a bouquet (from Greek *anthologia*: *anthos* "flower" + *-logia* "collection"). And any collection is guilty of the personal choices of the collectors. The editors by design become the gatekeepers to decide who is in and who is not. The superlative "best" is loaded with a similar prejudice. The list of authors covered in the collection accentuate the idea.

Of the fifteen chapters included in this critical anthology, there are twelve research articles and three interviews. This seems like a good mix as the voices of the creative writers are added to supplement the analysis of the critics. Two of the authors interviewed, Niaz Zaman and Kaiser Haq, are also represented by critical essays on them. The multiple entries limit the scope of the anthology as there are two essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Adib Khan, Monica Ali, and Tahmima Anam each. While Rokeya is pitched as a "pre-independence pioneer" ("Contents"), the other three fall under the diaspora category. This is the largest category for which seven chapters are assigned.

That leaves only two writers writing in English from Bangladesh. If one looks at the list of writers who appear in the literary supplements of the English dailies (*The Daily Star* Literature page and Arts & Letters of *Dhaka Tribune*) or the literary journals such as *Bengal Lights* and *Six Seasons Review*, one is sure to find a new generation of writers. Many of these new writers come from an English medium school background and show considerable ease in expressing themselves in various experimental genres (e.g., science fiction, flash fiction, screenplay, hybrid, and hypertext) English. The personal choice to restrict the scope of the anthology to "best" writers contributes to what can be called a canon formation. And this canon merely discusses fiction and poetry. The genres of non-fiction (travelogues, essays, autobiography, memoirs) and drama are excluded.

It is to their credit that the editors do not claim that this anthology is complete in its coverage. Furthermore, the anthology aptly gives Bangladeshi writers a niche, freeing them from various academic tags of South Asian, Global South, Commonwealth, or Third World. The contributions of expat critics placed alongside Bangladeshi scholars hint at another issue. Susan Stanford Friedman's reading of Monica Ali, for instance, is heavy with references to Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Fayeza Hasanat reads Monica Ali alongside Zia Haider Rahman and Tahmima Anam to detect religion as a source of dystopic consciousness. The scholarship coming from Bangladesh has a deeper understanding of the "local" contexts that have produced the "global" texts. Mohammad Quayum's interview with poet Kaiser Haq serves as another example where the poet is curiously dubbed as a "highbrow hijra" to denote the pivotal role played by him from his peripheral location. The use of a transgender category in local terms is unlikely to be featured in a non-native context.

Published in the Golden Jubilee of the country, the critical anthology complements several literary anthologies that have been launched to celebrate the occasion. One can only hope that this ground-breaking collection of critical essays will enhance the scope of creativity in English. This is the first of many anthologies that will help Bangladeshi writers writing from both home and abroad find a collective platform.