



BANGLADESHIS WRITINGS: A HISTORIC VIEW

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ABSTRACT

English is no more the patrimony of the Anglo Saxons. It is now a universal public property. By the British colonial train, it travelled almost the entire world, came in touch with myriad people and their languages, and enriched itself as the world's number one language. Not only as a comfortable means of communication between the peoples of the opposite poles and hemispheres, but also as a medium of creative writing has English been deliberately taken up by writers of the formerly colonized countries. The number is multiplying with the rise of Postcolonial / Diaspora consciousness.

Having studied the British diasporic groups of writers of Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan Bangladeshi origin, the writings of Monica Ali (1967—) and Tahmima Anam (1975—). Whereas Monica Ali is a first generation diasporic writer, with one of her parents of British origin and having moved to England at a very early age; Tahmima Anam belongs to the second generation diasporic group, who settled in UK only a few years back. But as far as their writing is concerned, both women though deeply connected with Britain still hanker after their own past association with the original homeland or association through the family stories. What comes out, therefore, is an open encounter with Bangladesh.

The story of migrating Bangladeshis to different parts of the globe is no new phenomenon. Bangladeshis have moved to the Middle East and different other countries from almost all over Bangladesh. However the striking phenomenon that needs to be observed is that the British community of Bangladeshi origin is mostly from one particular region of erstwhile East Pakistan, namely Sylhet, located in the North East of the present Bangladesh. The Sylhetis have transmigrated to Britain as early as the 1920s and 1930s, when the country was a part of (East) Pakistan. This phenomenon remained unabated even in the 1950s and 1960s.

Bangladeshi literature contributed to the common pool of world writing in English. It is a literature which is a combination of Bangladeshi literature and Bangladeshi literature written in English. Bangladeshi English Literature refers to the body of work by writers in



India who write in the English and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of Bangladesh. It is also associated with the works of members of the Bangladeshi Diaspora. As a category, this production comes under the broader realm of postcolonial literature- the production from previously colonized countries such as Bangladesh.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

English is no more the patrimony of the Anglo Saxons. It is now a universal public property. By the British colonial train, it travelled almost the entire world, came in touch with myriad people and their languages, and enriched itself as the world's number one language. Not only as a comfortable means of communication between the peoples of the opposite poles and hemispheres, but also as a medium of creative writing has English been deliberately taken up by writers of the formerly colonized countries. The number is multiplying with the rise of Postcolonial / Diaspora consciousness.

The legacy of Bangladeshi writing in English should be traced back to pre-independence undivided Bengal. As a matter of fact, towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, when English learning gained a firm foothold in Calcutta, the capital of British India, an enthusiasm for writing in English originated in the then Bengal. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774 -1833), the father of Bengali Renaissance, was the pioneer in this regard.

'Bangladeshi Writing in English' (BWE), we generally mean the whole corpus of work of writers in Bangladesh and among the Bangladeshi diaspora who write in English but whose mother tongue is Bengali (theoretically their mother tongue can be other language(s) too spoken in Bangladesh). This special stream of writing can also be called 'Writing English in Bangladesh'. But to my thinking, the adjectival use of the country better describes the nature of this writing. This school of writing includes only creative writing in English i.e. poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction.

1.2 Bangladeshi Diasporic Writing:-

Having studied the British diasporic groups of writers of Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan Bangladeshi origin, the writings of Monica Ali (1967—) and Tahmima Anam (1975—).

Whereas Monica Ali is a first generation diasporic writer, with one of her parents of British origin and having moved to England at a very early age; Tahmima Anam belongs to the second generation diasporic group, who settled in UK only a few years back. But as far as their writing is concerned, both women though deeply connected with Britain still hanker after their own past association with the original homeland or association through the family stories. What comes out, therefore, is an open encounter with Bangladesh. Studies the ties

with their homeland, their position in their locale, whether Britain or Bangladesh, their present status and their future aspirations as revealed through their writing. Like the earlier chapters, this one is also divided into three sections. Whereas the first section deals with general observations of the uniqueness of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain, the other two sections offer more indepth study of the two novelists selected as case studies. Diasporic position, however fruitful, is problematic as well, especially from the perspective of reception where the culture of adoption wishes to see through the text the culture of the “other,” while the culture of origin wants to assess the authenticity of self-reflection, and very often the writer is assailed for either misrepresenting the reality, or catering to hegemonic market forces. Jasbir Jain explains categorically that the work of a diasporic writer attracts the attention of two different sets of readers – the West looks for familiar landmarks, a West-centric vision, while the reader at home seeks his own validity – and the writer is trapped between the two (“The New Parochialism” 85).

Diasporic writers seek their audience globally while simultaneously, they remain cautious about preserving their subjectivity, difference and marginality (Spivak, “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern” 246).

1.3 Bangladesh and the Overseas Bangladeshi diaspora:-

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British community of Bangladeshi origin is mostly from one particular region of erstwhile East Pakistan, namely Sylhet, located in the North East of the present Bangladesh. The Sylhetis have transmigrated to Britain as early as the 1920s and 1930s, when the country was a part of (East) Pakistan. This phenomenon remained unabated even in the 1950s and 1960s. The migration was further enhanced during the 1970s, when the liberation was commenced in the country.

After independence and establishment of Bangladesh as a free nation state, the 1970s saw an alteration in the mode of migration and the craze for gaining passport, as the British government grew more and more sensitive oimmigrant issues. The Bangladeshis migrated in large numbers from particular areas or districts of the country showing a unique phenomenon of chain migration. After the 1970s the man of the house, earning in foreign land to make life for the family back home prosperous, was changed to situations where entire families shifted, evacuating several districts. Apart from improving the financial status of the relatives back home, this move affected the economy of the country. Dr David Garbin observes, “In 1995 a report indicated that 20% of the Bangladeshi families in East London were sending money to

Bangladesh, whereas during the 1960s and 1970s approximately 85% were remitting their savings” (Garbin). As per the statistics provided by Wikipedia, regarding the settlement of Bangladeshis in Britain:

The largest concentration is in London, primarily in the East London boroughs, of which Tower Hamlets has the highest proportion, making up approximately 33% of the boroughs total population... Bangladeshis also have significant communities in Birmingham, Oldham, Luton and Bradford, with smaller clusters in Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cardiff and Sunderland... According to the national 2001 census figures, and the Office for National Statistics 2006 figures, there are around 300,000 Bangladeshis living in the United Kingdom (“British Bangladeshis”).240

This migration had begun as a result of the job opportunities created in Britain by the shipping companies. The odd jobs on the ship floor were done by these men who later shifted to catering business as situations and needs changed drastically.

As a young nation, Bangladesh has not produced so many creative voices in the diaspora as India and Pakistan have. One of the reasons for this vacuum might be the average socioeconomic condition of most of the immigrants in Britain. An interesting fact to note regarding the writers of Bangladeshi origin settled in Britain is that they are mostly women. Apart from Monica Ali and Tahmima Anam, recognized as the most popular authors of Bangladeshi origin; another author of recent recognition is Shazia Omar who is presently located in Bangladesh. Her debut novel, *Like a Diamond in the Sky* (1997), deals with social problems as drugs, disease, trauma and despair wrenching the life of a twenty-one year old Deen, making a criminal out of a bundle of positive passions. Niaz Zaman and Firdous Azim’s compilation of short stories *Galpa: Short Stories by Women from Bangladesh* published in 2006 is another significant work. In spite of the presence of such promising voices it must be noted that there is dearth of creative authors of Bangladeshi origin in Britain and the number of fiction writers is lesser still.

Both Monica Ali (1967—) and Tahmima Anam (1975—) have created sensation in the world with their books. Their novels are taken as worthy accounts of the Bangladeshi diaspora and the Bangladeshi people back home. The characters that pervade the corpus of their fiction are real life evidences of struggle, of the Bangladeshi people both at home and/or in the diaspora.

The novelists project their characters with ardent vision of a Bangladeshi; however their

experience is tainted by their diasporic identity, they being British citizens, and their sense of being the second sex.241

Monica Ali a British writer of Bangladeshi origin catapulted into fame when her debut novel Brick Lane (2003) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1967, to a Bangladeshi father (originally from the district of Mymensingh), and an English mother, the family moved to Bolton, England, when she was three years old and where she was raised. She had studied at Oxford University and lives in London. She was named in 2003 by Granta magazine as one of twenty 'Best of Young British Novelists.' Her second novel, Alentejo Blue, set in Portugal, was published in 2006. Her latest novel is In the Kitchen (2009).

Tahmima Anam, a Bangladeshi writer and novelist, was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1975, and grew up in Paris, New York City, and Bangkok, due to her father's work with the UNICEF. Her first novel, A Golden Age, was published in 2007 and was the Best First Book winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her second novel to be published in April, 2011 is The Good Muslim: A Novel. Trained as an anthropologist, with a PhD from Harvard University, USA, she also completed an MA in Creative Writing from the University of London in 2005. She presently lives in West Hampsted, London. Anam comes from an illustrious literary family in Bangladesh. Her father Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of Bangladesh's most prominent English newspaper The Daily Star. Her grandfather Abul Mansur Ahmed was a renowned satirist and politician whose works in Bengali remain popular to this day.

1.4 Conclusion:-

Bangladeshi literature contributed to the common pool of world writing in English. It is a literature which is a combination of Bangladeshi literature and Bangladeshi literature written in English. Bangladeshi English Literature refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in the English and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of Bangladesh. It is also associated with the works of members of the Bangladeshi Diaspora. As a category, this production comes under the broader realm of postcolonial literature- the production from previously colonized countries such as Bangladesh. Bangladeshi English literature has a relatively recent history; it is only one and a half centuries old. The first book written by an Bangladeshi in English was by Sake Dean Mahomet, titled *Travels of Dean Mahomet*; Mahomet's travel narrative was published in 1793 in England. In its early stages it was influenced by the Western art form of the novel. Early Bangladeshi writers used English unadulterated by Bangladeshi words to convey an experience which was essentially Bangladeshi.



Bangladeshi writings in English are a product of the historical encounter between the two cultures—Bangla and the western—for about one hundred and ninety years. It isn't that Bangladeshi people didn't experience the impact of a foreign culture. It did during the reigns of various foreign rulers. But the difference with the British rule lies in the nature of the economic system that had come into being in Europe after the Renaissance, described by Marx as capitalist system. Before the introduction of the British rule Bangladesh had the feudal economic system, in accordance with which the vast population of the country, having various religious faiths and conforming to the caste system, tried to live their life, sometimes fatalistically and sometimes stoically. Above all, it was a closed society with a peculiar cultural racial intolerance. In fact, Bangladesh had been awaiting a political and cultural change, which became necessary after the weakening and disintegration of the Mogul Empire. British rule in Bangladesh, first of all, resulted in breaking the barrier of that closed society. Then the greatest cultural impact came with the establishment of four universities and with the introduction of western educational system. The English language provided the natives with a way to the western literature and to the western culture, of course. English education created a class of native bourgeoisie, the majority of which turned to their mother tongue while giving birth to a native literature, applying the western aesthetic norms. But a few among them thought it appropriate to give expressions to their feelings and experiences in English. Thus, the peculiar body of Bangladeshi literature was created—while its contents were to be Bangladeshi, its medium of expression was English.

Bangladesh is kind of considered to be one of the world's few Muslim democracies. We're very moderate. We have this huge Hindu history and culture which people are really sensitive talking about. With India's partition in 1947, we became East Pakistan, so a big part of our identity was to be Islamic. Despite the threat of radical Islam, we maintain our moderate identity which is why we wanted to break with Pakistan in the first place – one of many, many reasons.



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