Bangladesh

compiled and introduced by
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Introduction
This introduction was meant to be written in Dhaka in the stifling pre-monsoon heat. I had planned to read many of the books during my visit. But as Burns knew well our “best-laid schemes [...] go often askew”, for the pandemic brought travel to a halt and “lockdown” became the defining term of our lives. As I wondered how I would get hold of books “published in the streets of Dhaka”, to borrow a phrase from Kaiser Haq’s poem, whilst under lockdown in Sussex, a dear friend managed to send me e-copies, thus saving the day. I re-read the poetry of Jibananada Das, especially Clinton Seely’s The Scent of Sunlight, for Das, who is both a romantic and a modernist, a symbolist and a surrealist, captures for us the intense longing for the riverine landscape of Bengal. Re-reading his poems in time of forced isolation, I imagined various ways in which a return to Bengal could be facilitated. Das obsessively imagined his rebirth in Bengal, as “a shalik bird or a white hawk”, maybe as the “crow of dawn” or “as a spotted owl” or even as “[t]aking on the compassionate flesh of a cold tangerine/At the bedside of some dying acquaintance”. Of course, the pandemic robbed us of such farewells, and we mourned the passing of family members from afar. But lockdown also brought us a ruminative state of being. I was reminded of a line from the wonderfully titled Buddhist text Khaggavisana Sutta (Discourse on the Rhinoceros Horn): “to be alone like the horn of a rhinoceros”. The South Asian rhinoceros not only has one horn but is also a solitary creature. The Buddhist text extols the virtues of solitude, a prerequisite for the contemplative life: “Having left son and wife, father and mother, wealth and corn, and relatives, the different objects of desire, let one wander alone like a rhinoceros”. I do not know if Das read the Khaggavisana Sutta, but that inclination for solitude is one of the most notable aspects of his poetry, along with unexpected metaphors like silence that creeps in through an open window like the neck of a camel. Das would not have minded lockdown as long as it was in Barisal, the place in present day Bangladesh where he was born and spent most of his life, until the Partition of 1947.

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Seely’s translation offers seven poems from *Rupashi Bangla (Bengal the Beautiful)*, the collection that exemplifies Das’ unique descriptions of the Bengali landscape. As Seely states in his introduction, during the 1971 war of independence lines from *Rupashi Bangla* “served to remind the freedom fighters […] of what it was they were sacrificing and willing to die for”. This link between the rural landscape and the freedom fighters is visible in “From the Diary of a Freedom Fighter” by Zahir Raihan, collected in *Chronicles of 1971: An Anthology of 21 Stories on Bangladesh Liberation War*. In Raihan’s story freedom fighters ponder why they have joined the fight against the Pakistani army, whether it is for freedom, revenge, justice or is it simply the requirement of the times. They all appear to be the right reasons, yet the anonymous diary writer is not absolutely sure that such abstract concepts can adequately explain the urge to take up arms. Instead, the fighter’s gaze is continuously directed to a scene of paddy fields, of a trellis from which hangs bottle gourds, of an expansive sky, palm trees and further afield a village. The fighter’s rumination on war, his experience of killing Pakistani soldiers, discovering a field of dead bodies and of angry, frightened, disconsolate villagers is punctuated by the repetition of this scene. The scene of rural Bengal embodies what Joni Adamson would have described as the “vernacular landscape [which] is a folk landscape [where] people are attuned to the contours of home and space”. That this vernacular landscape is what West Pakistan failed to grasp or appreciate is the argument put forward in Shazia Rahman’s *Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism: Pakistani Women’s Literary and Cinematic Fictions*. In the chapter focusing on East Bengal and the war of ‘71 Rahman uses Adamson’s concepts of vernacular and official landscapes to interpret the absence of contrition for and discussion of the atrocities committed by the army in the West Pakistani narrative. In place of the vernacular landscape we see in Raihan’s story, West Pakistan viewed East Bengal through the lens of “official landscape”, which is an “extraction-oriented landscape”. For West Pakistan, as Rahman discusses, East Bengal yielded economic resources, but its people, culture and ecology were absent.

In his essay “The Novel of Bangladesh”, Kaiser Haq states that “[s]ince [the] geopolitical entity [of Bangladesh] came into being in 1971, writers [had] to be retroactively enfranchised”. The act of enfranchisement, however, is not straightforward, for there are no set criteria by which a writer can be retroactively claimed by Bangladesh. Take for example the case of Samaresh Basu, who was born in East Bengal in 1924 and spent his early youth in Dhaka. Basu always felt a kinship with East Bengal as did many Hindu East Bengalis who were caught up in the turmoil and violence of Partition. Anindya Raychaudhuri’s *Narrating South Asian Partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema* is the latest account of how Partition muddled our sense of belonging. The book reveals that for many the urge to “transcend the national borders’ remained potent. Basu’s novel *Khandita* (1987), translated as *Dissevered*, deals precisely with this conundrum of national identity. The novel begins on the afternoon of 14 August 1947 near Kolkata. Three friends, Satu, Biju and Gora, converse about the impending celebration of freedom from colonial rule, but there is also widespread discontent and confusion. As the day draws to an end, the friends decide to visit East Bengal/East Pakistan on 15 August, the first day of independence. When they arrive at the station the ticket collector is startled by the idea of three Hindu men willing to travel to East Bengal. Satu’s response is: “We have seen Hindustan, so thought we’d go and see what the new country is like”. On the train they
meet an elderly Muslim gentleman returning to his village in Rangpur, East Bengal. Finding out that the three friends are heading to East Bengal but did not have any fixed destination, the Muslim man invites them to stay in his village. The most symbolic encounter in East Bengal, especially for Satu, is with the dancer/prostitute Moti who – ravishing, enigmatic and, significantly, with an amputated left arm – refuses to identify herself as either a Muslim or Hindu, but says “I am the Earth”. In the closing scenes of the novel, Satu, watching her departing figure thinks, “I will always come forever. [...] I will be born again and again here”. The desire to be reborn in this Bengal is of course an echo from Das’ Rupashi Bangla.

As the train crosses the newly demarcated border the friends feel that they are moving into a more primal, authentic Bengal. The originary status of East Bengal is also explored by Paulomi Saha in An Empire of Touch: Women’s Political labour and the Fabrication of East Bengal: “Purba Banga [East Bengal] is the historical Bengal – the very site from which Bengal emerges”. Although Saha’s discussion begins with the production and history of the famed muslin of Dhaka, of its limpid, diaphanous quality, so fine that it appears not to be of this world, the book is not about this fabric. Saha is interested in objects that are less well known and those which have not lead to poetic mythologizing, such as the ready-made garments of the factory workers that clothe the world. The book is also about the absence in postcolonial studies of East Bengal which is “subsumed under the sign of a unified Bengal, romanticized as the spectacularly maternal source of raw material and poetic feeling that fed an urban political intelligentsia in West Bengal”. Saha, I feel, oversimplifies the division between the two regions. Such a reading, can be applicable to Tagore but it cannot accommodate, for example, the figure of a Jibanananda Das who was not of the urban, intelligentsia of West Bengal, who spent most of his life in rural East Bengal and whose poetry shaped post-Tagore modern Bengali literature. In relation to pre-1947 Bengal, the book offers an interpretation of Bimala’s political awakening in Tagore’s The Home and the World and a Spivakian reading of the political activities of the East Bengali revolutionary Pritilata Waddedar. Muslims of East Bengal who comprised the majority of the population are conspicuously absent. In the second half of the book, Saha’s focus shifts to independent Bangladesh and to the political labour of the Birangonas, the women raped by the Pakistani army during the war of independence, and the garments factory workers of contemporary Bangladesh. Unlike previous studies, Saha’s book attempts to assess the state archives that should yield information regarding the government rehabilitation programs for Birangonas which included “gynaecological care (including abortions), arranging adoptions, setting up marriages, and or returning women to [their] families”. Yet, Saha discovers that these records are missing from the Bangladesh National Archives. The common rumour is that the files were deliberately destroyed by politicians. Or, as the professor of history and former director of the National Archives, Sharif Uddin Ahmed, recounts to Saha, the files, which for many years were gathering dust in the basement, were sold off by “Janitorial staffs” to dealers who buy scrap paper. Thus, the archive is destroyed either by state actors who want to eliminate from the national consciousness the stigma of Birangonas or by bureaucratic inertia and indifference.

The stigma of being a Birangona and the trauma of those who gave birth to “war children” is the focus of Selina Hossain’s Charcoal Portrait (Kathkoylar Chobi). Dulal, a war child adopted by a German couple, returns to Bangladesh to look for his biological
mother. Dulal’s search takes him to the tea estates of Sylhet where he meets Chaitirani, a tea plantation worker. Like Dulal’s mother, whom he fails to find, Chaitirani too was one of the Birangonas. She too gave birth to a war child. Hossain’s novel interweaves the plight of the captured women during the war of 1971 with the history of the tea plantation workers in East Bengal, indentured labourers brought over by the British in the 1860s. The majority of the workers were non-Bengalis from various tribes of Orissa and Bihar. The harsh conditions of the “labour line” in the tea plantation have not changed since the days of the British owners, as is revealed by Chaitirani, whose first son Kukua, born before the war of 1971, was also the result of rape. She gives birth to her second son in the rehabilitation centre set up by the independent government. Unlike the official narrative of unwanted babies, Chaitirani fought, but ultimately failed, to keep her child. The defining characteristic of Chaitirani through her ordeals becomes that of the Mother. Is this an example of what Nayanika Mookherjee describes as the “mothering of the raped woman”, a way of washing away the stigma of rape? Or is it that as traumatic as the war was for women such as Dulal’s mother, for tea plantation workers the war is only one event in an endless struggle for freedom? For Chaitirani, her children, irrespective of their fathers, are a way of equipping her uprooted clan.

It is a commonplace that the Language Movement of 1952, when Bengalis refused to accept Urdu as the national language, was the defining impetus for the war of 1971, but what is frequently elided is that the prominence of the Bengali language in the nationalist discourse has led to the imposition of a violent Bengali hegemony on the tribal communities of Bangladesh. Selina Hossain’s “The Forestland” (Bonobhumi) reveals not only the encroachment of Bengali settlers in the Chakma territories of Chittagong but of the brutal subjugation of the Chakmas by the Bangladeshi army. Unlike the Chakmas, neither the Bengali settlers nor the army can empathise with the forestland, though they are keen to appropriate it. In the closing scene of the story we see Chandana, the protagonist, being dragged away at gunpoint from her home by soldiers. At that moment, Chandana feels that the forest itself is being crushed under the soldier’s boots.

Like the tea-plantation workers, the methars (sweepers, garbage and latrine cleaners), too, were brought over to East Bengal by the British from Andhra and Uttar Pradesh. Ramgolam, which tells the story of the methars of Chittagong, is by Harishankar Jaladas, Bangladesh’s celebrated Dalit writer. Of all the low-caste groups in Bangladesh, the methars are the most exploited and discriminated against. Both Muslims and Hindus consider them to be “unclean”. Jaladas brings to light all the inequities faced by the methors, from the slurs that they daily face to the two-room houses in the colonies where three-generations are crammed together and where their stifled lovemaking becomes yet another symbol of their stifled lives. The birth of Ramgolam, grandson of Seucharan, the leader of the methor colonies, brings a sense of hope to the community. Ramgolam demands more rights and opportunities for his people, but also finds himself in a fight to protect for the methors the very job of cleaning latrines that makes them “unclean”. Until 1971 the methors’ work was protected, but after independence the government opened up the profession to other groups and communities. Ramgolam, realizing that their livelihood is at stake, for the methors would not be able to shake of the stigma of their caste and apply for other forms of work, calls for strikes. Ramgolam, however, is framed for a murder and imprisoned.
Papree Rahman’s “Famine-Stricken Akaalu’s Fish Dreams” (Mangakranto Akaalur Mach Samachar) tells the story of a migrant worker in Dhaka who struggles to provide for himself and his pregnant wife. As he looks at his wife’s growing belly with wonder and subdued anger, for it “was rising at the same rate as the price of rice”, Akaalu is overcome with an urge to smash her swollen belly like he used to squash, as a child, puffer fish. He is both bemused and disturbed by this urge, for in reality he is not a violent man. Cash-strapped and driven to distraction by hunger, Akaalu one day wades into a nearby river where fishermen “had enclosed portions of the river with bamboo slats to trap fish”. Akaalu picks out an eel and holds the fish between his teeth as he kneels to catch another one. At that moment, the wriggling eel “slipped down his throat”. As the fish went lower into Akaalu’s body it “ate into his vitals, his heart, his lungs’. His last thought before losing consciousness is his wife’s growing belly.

As we imagine Akalu’s body floating down the river, we come to another river and yet another strange death. “The Bloeshwar carried Noor Banu’s dismembered hand up to the jetty at Pathorghata”. So begins Absurd Night (Ajgubi Raat) by Syed Manzoorul Islam. The severed hand has been floating in the river for two days and yet “hadn’t swollen like the belly of a rotting fish”. The hand emits an ethereal glow and appears to possess a magnetic power, for all who see it want to touch it and those who do, experience a subtle but powerful transformation. The hand is taken to the local police station by a watch repairman, a young fisherman and a teacher of Maths at a local college. In the Police station they encounter a group from Dhaka, Lucky Khan, a popular actor, who is in town for a shoot, a group of journalists reporting on forest erosion, the disaster management Secretary, who has arrived for a family funeral – they have come to the station to consult the Officer in Charge regarding the super cyclone about to hit Patharghata. As the day progresses, the cyclone increases in strength, yet this motley group are strangely oblivious of the danger of the storm. Transfixed by the hand, they are overcome by an inexplicable desire to solve its mystery. This is one of two interwoven strands of the story. The other takes us to Noor Banu’s life in an ordinary village on the banks of the Boleshwar. Here, one-eyed Raisu, a ten-year-old boy who stands guard day and night under the hog-plum tree across the yard from Noor Banu’s hut, tells us the story of the life and death of this simple woman. Yet nothing is what it appears to be. Noor Banu may have committed suicide or simply died from snake bite. More mysterious than Noor Banu’s death is the presence of Raisu, who is perhaps no more than an apparition. On the one hand, this is the story of a simple village woman and of the casual violence and cruelty of man towards woman. On the other hand, it is the story of the uneven modernity of Bangladesh. For Noor Banu, confined by the backwardness of village life, and Sabrina, the confident journalist from Dhaka, armed with her laptop and mobile phone, “do not exist”, to quote Ernst Bloch, “in the same Now”.

The uneven modernity of Bangladesh should not, however, be seen as a belated and imperfect modernity whose most complete and original expression is in the West. Science Fiction in Colonial India, 1835-1905: Five Tales of Speculation, Resistance and Rebellion edited by Mary Gibson, reveals a network of exchange, transfer and appropriation that complicates our understanding of what constitutes the periphery and centre of global modernity. As Gibson explains in the introduction, although it is generally assumed that science fiction developed in the capitals of Europe and then travelled to the
colonised world, 1830s Bengal is “an important starting point in English language sci-
ence fiction”. The anthology includes “Sultana’s Dream” by Rokeya Hossain, one of the
two East Bengalis represented in the collection, the other being the biologist and botanist
Jagadish Chandra Bose. His “Tale of the Missing One”/Nirudessher Kahini (published in
1896) is the first science fiction written in Bengali.

The context of writing science fiction in English in colonial Bengal is complex but
one significant factor was that this group was “well-educated in English”. In his assess-
ment of English writing in Bangladesh in “The Novel of Bangladesh”, Haq points to the
impact of the decision of the government after independence to impose Bengali “as the
medium of instruction at all levels”. This is one of the primary causes of the relatively
small number of writers in English in Bangladesh. The decision to repeal English did not,
however, lead to the disappearance of English as a medium of instruction. It led, instead,
to a boom in private medium schools following the British curriculum. The students of
these new English schools, unlike those of pre-1971 model where the national curricu-
 lum was taught in English, inhabit a world separate from the vast majority of students
who study in Bengali medium schools. This separateness is often starkly visible in the
English novels of the new generation of Bangladeshi writers, all of whom are products
of the private English schools.

Shazia Omar’s Like a Diamond in the Sky, first published in 2009, reissued by Bengal
Lights, is the story of those English medium students. It tells of drug addiction, rave par-
ties, drug dealers, gangsters, prostitutes and corrupt police officers. Omar’s novel offers
a picture of Dhaka that goes beyond the privileged areas of Gulshan and Banani. In
Srabonti Ali’s Broken Voices we are, however, firmly lodged in the plush environs of
Gulshan Lake. The novel is populated with the rich women of Dhaka, their opulent jew-
ellery worn as casually as their cosmopolitanism. The heroine Amola is briefly taken
away from this environment when she travels to Chittagong, to her husband’s ship break-
ing yard, the source of the family’s wealth, to meet a group of women whose husbands
died in an accident in the yard due to negligence and faulty equipment. The novel wants
us to marvel at Amola’s transformation from the cossetted socialite in Gulshan to a
woman who is not only ready to face the world but also to identify with the impoverished
widows. The widows, however, are no more than a plot device for the expression of
Amola’s independence. The novel does not take us beyond the narrow confines of
Amola’s consciousness: her empathy is expressed though trite words of apology and the
most potent symbol of her adaptability is that she has the nous to change into a pair of
gumboots before visiting the ship-breaking yard.

The Bangladeshi English novel of 2019 that has garnered the most attention is Numair
Choudhury’s Babu Bangladesh!. Sometime in 2028, an unnamed narrator tries to write
the biography of the enigmatic Babu Majumdar, patriot, politician, environmentalist,
philanthropist or perhaps mere con-artist. One is not sure, least of all the narrator, who
tries to construct a narrative through snippets of conversations, interviews, newspaper
articles, official documents and Babu Majumdar’s diaries that the narrator, like a latter-
day Cervantes, discovers in a fish market. It is an allegory of Bangladeshi history in the
vein of Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children. Babu is conceived in the most hallowed of
grounds, the Dhaka University campus, which played a pivotal role in the creation of
Bangladesh during the most hallowed of times, the war of 1971. Born in a newly
independent country, Babu rises from the ranks of student politics to the very heart of the Bhaban, the shorthand for the Parliament building in Dhaka, Louis Khan’s masterpiece. The first part of the novel is indeed a discourse on the symbolism of the Parliament building, indicating the new country’s high aspirations for democracy, secularism and modernity, confounded by petty and corrupt politicians. In the end, the national allegory is one of disappointment and the reader, overwhelmed by the fantastic elements and plot devices, is also disappointed by a novel which is not equal to its ambitions.

Of the many characteristics that sets Kaiser Haq apart from the young generation of writers in English is his ability to weave Bengali and Western literary traditions. Haq’s schooling was in an English medium school in pre-1971 Bangladesh. In his essay “Many Histories’ and “British Poetry and I”, he talks of the impact of this education on his poetry. In his work, such as “A Late Poem”, we move effortlessly from a distinctly Dhaka imagery to Greek mythology to an echo of King Lear. Haq can playfully use well known lines from English literature (“If history is/a nightmare/ let me sleep on –/ at least it’s unreal) and refer to lines from Bengali poetry. Despite his choice of English as his creative language, Haq is conscious of being part of the literary tradition of Bengal as is evident in these lines: “Here I’ll stay, plumb in the centre/ of monsoon-mad Bengal, watching jackfruit leaves drift earthward/ In the early morning breeze/Like a famous predecessor used to”. The predecessor is of course Jibanananda Das.

The Bangladeshi diaspora presents, of course, a different kind of writing, one that is imbued with the experience of immigration. The Love & Lies of Rukhsana Ali by Sabina Khan is a coming-of-age story of a girl in Seattle who leads a double life. At home she plays the role of a serious student and an obedient girl who helps her mother with household chores, but also realizes that her ultimate ambition should be to marry a suitable boy. At school, Rukhsana is openly gay and has the same dreams and ambitions as any other American girl. Her double life comes to a sudden halt with her mother’s discovery of her sexuality. What follows is the well-known trope of Muslim parents taking their daughter back to the home country, confiscating her American passport, at one point locking her in a room and bringing over a “holy man” to cure her of her deviant desires. Although the novel rehearses these familiar themes, they do not become the defining characteristic of either Bangladesh or Islam. Khan presents a more complex idea of tradition and religious values, symbolised by the figure of the grandmother in Dhaka, who becomes Rukhsana’s confidant and ally. But conservative political forces exist and wreak devastation. Sohail, who might be the sought-after suitable boy and is a member of a group of bloggers who challenge conservative ideology, is killed by Islamic fundamentalists, the novel thus signalling the recent history of Bangladesh where free-thinking bloggers have been murdered by such machete wielding individuals.

On the one hand, Rukhsana enjoys the freedom that American society offer but, at the same time, she is aware of the need to hide the complexity of her Bengali identity, of its culture and tradition with which she identifies. The freedom to be one’s Bengali self in America is, therefore, riddled with contradictions, as we see in the Bangladeshi-American poet Tarfia Faizullah’s “Self-Portrait as Mango”. It begins with the familiar: “she says, Your English is great! How long have you been in our country?”. Just as the poetic persona bristles at the sense of exclusion that the comment implies, she is equally frustrated by the insinuation that she has become the good immigrant, one who has assimilated fully. Faizullah’s poems also reveal the anguish of not wanting to identity with her
Bengali self, evident in “En Route to Bangladesh, Another Crisis of Faith”, “conceived” in Dubai airport, where the Dhaka bound flights are full of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Middle East: “I take my place among/This damp, dark horde of men/And women who look like me–/Because I look like them –/Because I am ashamed/Of their bodies that reek so/Unabashedly of body–/Because I can – because I am/An American”. Here the bourgeois immigrant is reluctant to identify with the working-class migrant, who is altogether too redolent with the anxiety that marks the experience of many immigrants. This poem appeared in Registers of Illuminated Villages (2018), Faizullah’s second collection. Her first collection of poetry, Seam (2014), was the product of a research that Faizullah undertook in Dhaka to interview Birangonas.

Up in the House and Other Stories is the US release of Nadeem Zaman’s Days and Nights in the City, published in Dhaka in 2018. “The Enlightenment of Rahim Baksh”, the story of a middle-aged Bangladeshi man in England who no longer finds his Bengali wife attractive, is by the British-Bangladeshi writer Nadia Barb. Monica Ali’s “The Son’s Tale”, as told to her by a Nigerian immigrant in England, is the story of immigrant detention and deportation by the Home Office. The American based writer Mahmud Rahman’s “Dear Honorable Commissioner” is a satirical take on police corruption and the unwieldy bureaucracy of Bangladesh. Rahab Abir’s “Mr. Moti” is a story of the mother of a freedom fighter who waits for her son’s return. I Remember Abbu (Abbu ke Mone Pore) by Humayun Azad reveals the war through the eyes of a young girl. She too is waiting for the return of her father who had joined the resistance. Saad Hossain’s Gurkha and the Lord of Tuesday is the latest example of science fiction with elements of fantasy from Bangladesh. Dust Under Her Feet is by the Bangladeshi-American novelist Sharbari Ahmed. In 1942 Kolkatta, amidst the crisis of war, famine, caste and class conflicts, Yasmine Khan, proprietor of a nightclub, and Edward Laferve, an American army officer, have an affair. Ahmed has said that the book does not follow the “tradition of romanticising the Raj”.

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