

History, Location, and the Poetic Consciousness in Kaiser Haq's Poetry

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Abstract

South Asian poetry in English comprises an amalgamation of Western literary traditions and an ambiguity regarding the poet's location that subsequently stirs up questions regarding identity. Both these features can be attributed to the relationship between the poet and the use of English language as opposed to his/her mother tongue. The syncretism and hybridity that occurs as a result of cultural clashes and convergences has become increasingly apparent in identity formation in today's diasporic world. However, for those South Asian poets writing in English and borrowing from Western traditions, who can neither be identified as migrants or exiles, anxieties of identity and belonging have been a marked feature of their work. Most of these South Asian poets, despite displaying a strong sense of belonging to their national cultures, also exhibit a global heterogeneity in their identity due to the multiple affiliations that define their cultural consciousness. This paper attempts to explore the poetry of one of the major South Asian poets, Kaiser Haq, who has not only established himself as the leading Bangladeshi poet writing in English but has also carved a niche for himself as a recognized international poet. Like most other poets writing in English from the Indian subcontinent, Haq carries the burden of a colonial inheritance and his work has been and is subject to innumerable labels such as Commonwealth literature, postcolonial poetry, sub-continental poetry, etc. He defends his use of English as the medium of his poetry as a unifying force in fusing the disparate parts of his Bengali psyche. However, in his work, when placed within the context of national identification, there seems to be a refusal to limit "location" within national boundaries and yet there is a continual return to Bangladesh which remains an underlying presence in his poetry. This study focuses on how the perceptions of history and location have impacted and contributed to the identity and creative consciousness that articulates Kaiser Haq's poetry.

Keywords: history, location, individual and collective identity, hybridity, consciousness

In a critical study of South Asian poetry written in English, Mitali Patil Wong and Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan attempt a definition of it, "The experience of South Asian poetry in English takes us on a journey through time, place and literary history by uncovering aspects of modernism, pastoralism, Victorian realism, Romanticism and ultimately reaching a condition of permanent dislocation" (13). This definition denotes two aspects of South Asian poetry in English. Firstly, it comprises an amalgamation of Western literary traditions and secondly, there is an uncertainty regarding the poet's location that subsequently stirs up questions regarding identity. Both these features can be attributed to the relationship between the poet and the use of English as opposed to his/her mother tongue. The syncretism and hybridity that occurs as a result of cultural clashes and convergences have become increasingly apparent in identity formation in today's diasporic world. However, for those South Asian poets, writing in English and borrowing from Western traditions, who can neither be identified as migrants or living in exile, the resultant anxieties of national identity and cultural belonging have become a marked feature of their work. Most of these South Asian poets have found themselves circumscribed within the condition of contemporary

nationhood, which comprises a multi-focused process loosely contained by a national boundary interacting with globally circulating constructions and process. Despite a strong sense of cultural belonging to their nations, they are aware of a global heterogeneity in their identity and of the multiple affiliations that define their cultural consciousness. As Homi K. Bhabha points out, “the very concept of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions [...] are in a profound process of redefinition” (5).

This paper attempts to explore the poetry of one of the major South Asian poets, Kaiser Haq, who has not only established himself as the leading Bangladeshi poet writing in English but also carved a niche for himself as an acclaimed international poet. Like most other poets writing in English from the Indian subcontinent, Haq carries the burden of a colonial inheritance and his work has been, and is subject to, innumerable labels such as Commonwealth literature, postcolonial poetry, sub-continental poetry, etc. Very cognizant of this multi-labeled legacy, Haq points out, “We live in an age of multiple labels and identities or at least in an age in which we are conscious of and deliberate on our multiple labels and identities.” However, he contends that, “I don’t let labels bother me. They come and go. I just want to keep writing” (Interview with Ahmede Hussain). Nevertheless, Haq has earned labels as both a poet whose “poetry is rooted in Bangladeshi life and culture” as well as “a Bangladeshi poet writing in a major and international tradition of poetry” (Alam 323). He defends his use of English as the medium of his poetry as a unifying force saying that “trying to write in English” was, from his early years, an exercise in fusing the disparate parts of his Bengali psyche (Interview with Kathryn Hummel). His poems exhibit, by virtue of history and cultural alliance, an openness to the world. The focus of this study is a close reading of Haq’s poetry to show how the perceptions of history and location as well as global literary traditions have impacted upon and contributed to the identity and creative consciousness that articulates his poetry. Haq’s poetry draws from both a host of prominent modern poets like T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Philip Larkin, Derek Walcott as well as absorbs elements from modern Bengali poetry from his Bangladeshi contemporaries and other poets from the region such as Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes, Arvind Mehrota, and Arun Kolatkar.

Haq has been described as a poet who has paved a road which other Bangladeshi writers having similarly embraced hybridity as their condition can follow and a road that may well lead to creative excellence (Alam 322). The growth of a hybrid identity is described by Melucci as “the multiple experience of the self [which] obliges us to abandon any static view of identity, and examine the dynamic process of identification” (64). A number of Haq’s poems actually delve into the self to reveal some of the anxieties that surround individual and collective identification. The poem “Growing Up or Softly Falling” about his early formative years as a child and youth charts the growth of his global consciousness:

People of this subcontinent
squat or sit cross-legged
with an ease occidentals
can only painfully acquire
There are people squatting
on riverbanks, backyards, rice fields,
cross-legged on cinema seats, football fields,
yogis sitting on Himalayan glaciers,

fakirs under a banyan tree ...
One of my earliest memory post-cards
shows me squatting in a field; another
shows me sitting cross-legged. Someone
might have pushed me as I squatted
and I broke my fall
rolling backwards, then got up
and sat cross-legged on the grass (63)

The use of the word “falling” as a metaphor for being pushed to conform and the subsequent use of the word as part of the process of fighting back to “grow up” (as intentionally placed in the title) is significant. The poem starts off betraying some of the anxieties and awkwardness that surround his individual identity as it negotiates with a collective sub-continental identity. The poem goes on to describe “growing up” as a process of imposed and laborious cultural absorption and expansion:

In missionary school I learnt to sit at a desk –
with cramped back, sleeping legs, and stiffening neck –
sniffing civilization between two covers.
My chi-chi made me
a citizen of the world (“Growing Up or Softly Falling” 63)

Finally the poet arrives at a more confident and assertive but hybridized identity that he acknowledges as having been grafted or rather sharply stitched on to him as implied by the British airline imagery used in the closing stanza of the poem:

I too scatter;
schizoid
split
between this and that,
between my western know-how
and eastern wisdom
between that and this
forever falling
...
I squat on a grassy bump,
one of millions,
 (A British Airways jet goes like a needle,
 its vapour trail threads
 stitch nothing to nothing)
But I am singular in American jeans,
smoking an English briar. (“Growing Up or Softly Falling” 65)

Thus the poetic consciousness moves beyond the limitations of traditional, stable notions of identity into a form of identification that is fluid and limitless in nature and reveals the multiplicity of the “self” in terms of both individual and collective identity. His portrayals of both individual and collective identities seem to be in a continual state of process. In theorizing cultural identity, Stuart Hall acknowledges identity as a “production” which is always “in process” (392) and Hall’s

focus is on “positioning” within a particular historical and cultural environment as the key concept of identity (395). The dynamics of Haq’s postcolonial South Asian identity represent a “production” attained via a process of assimilating a multiplicity of memories, histories, traditions, myths, and desires. The Asian, the European, and the American presences which are clearly discernible within him gives him a sense of belonging to what Benedict Anderson terms “an imagined community” that aberrates his worldview from the “location” of his native geographical space into “dislocation” within a transcendental global space. The consciousness of being a “citizen of the world” and the vision of his native land as ultimately a microcosm of a global landscape and culture is recurrent in his poems:

I am struck
by a double-barrelled epiphany:
Dublin is Dhaka is any city
And Bloomsday is today is any day ...
Henceforth,
 the map of Dublin as in Ulysses,
suffices for all cities,
and calendars are redundant
 For everyday is Bloomsday ...
 (“Bloomsday Centenary Poem in Free Verse and Prose” 17-18)

Haq’s poetry thus negates the concept of a “fixed” identity and is ameliorated by moving away from the binary notions of “here” and “there” to a third and almost transnational space (in terms of a mental sphere) that is “somewhere else.” However, whether this notion of an un-representable “Third Space” constitutes a space coterminous with Bhabha’s “Third Space” (37) seems to be contentious. Haq accounts for this extension of the boundaries of poetic consciousness as just an aspect of the modern poetic tradition he espouses (Interview with Rumana Siddique). However, that Haq also uses his poetry as a space which allows for “the enunciation rather than the erasure of difference” (Mackey 73) is evident from lines that insist on homogeneity like,

Loneliness is the same
in Frisco or Soho,
Delhi or Dhaka, ... (“Growing Up or Softly Falling” 64)

Haq’s poetic vision more often opens up or widens to accommodate an encompassing world view that cuts through history and geographical space as is common among other modern poets. His metaphors and images portray a consciousness that merges confidently with those of Joyce’s Ulysses as they view the nightmare of history together (“O Clio”), or frolics with Eliot’s hollow men on the notion of a good life (“Short Shorts”), oscillates between musing with Ovid on devious-deviant desires and Yeats’ doomsday vision (“A Happy Farewell”), mourns passionately the passing of a fellow confessional poet, Lowell (“Homage to Robert Lowell”) or on a monsoon-drenched day, celebrates the fortieth birthday of another, Eleonore Schonmeier, on the opposite corner of the world appropriating Edgar Allan Poe’s raven as a substitute messenger-pigeon to convey glad tidings across some ten thousand miles (“The Raven”). This shared sensibility is an integral part of his poetic consciousness with allusions to EE Cummings, Samuel Beckett, TS Eliot, Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and a host of other twentieth century English and American poets and writers woven organically into his verse.



Haq's poems, however, just as fluidly embrace the other side of his identity alluding to Tagore, Jibanananda Das, and his contemporary Bengali poets and writers. There is as comfortable an integration and adaptation of hymns from Vedantic Hinduism and figures from Hindu mythology as there is from Greek mythology. His poems on life in his homeland often borrow from the semi-surrealistic style of the Bengali poet Shahid Qadri ("Surreal Morning") whom he also alludes to in his poems "On a Street" and "Ode on a Lungi." Haq is just as happy to integrate a free translation of a line from Jibanananda Das ("Published in the Streets of Dhaka") as he is to integrate as a title a line from Ben Jonson ("Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes"). He pens a poem in homage in serious overtones to Tagore ("Lord of the Dark Sun") and another in a cheekier tone parodying Jibanananda's most famous poem "Banalata Sen" ("Ms Bunny Sen"). All these reveal the multiple cultural and historical heritages that shape and enrich Haq's poetic consciousness. This consciousness transcends any fixed notion of cultural identity and can perhaps best be defined as a product of syncretic acculturation. Bhaba comments, "the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized and read anew" (37). Haq's poetry is characterized by this transgression of cultural boundaries. He enjoys spring rooted in Dhaka's grassy beds while admiring the tilted bed of the Greek Orion in the corner of the sky ("Spring in Dhaka"). This multiple consciousness is what renders his poetry with a sense of dislocation. Even his most celebrated poem, "Ode on a Lungi," despite its deceptively simple title, is heavy with Western literary, cultural, historical, and social references.

Haq's poetry does not offer a coherent definition of nationhood; rather, it suggests that whilst the idea of nation continues to endure and is still seen to confer identity, it does so through a constant process of change and through the transcendence of national boundaries. The way in which national identity is conceptualized is beyond fixed or distinctly dichotomous forms of identity become a process of identification that refuses fixity. Thus no totalizing definition of nationhood satisfies the poet and his vision of his nation has an insider-outsider aspect which leads to a mixed bag of standpoints, skepticism, cynicism, alienation, disdain, sympathy, and nostalgic affinity. He is at once a rooted cosmopolitan, an existential nomad, and an international citizen. Fakrul Alam comments, "Haq's poetry is rooted in Bangladeshi life and culture, although he prefers to view it from an oblique angle" (323). Despite his active role in the Liberation War of Bangladesh, Haq retains a very clear-headed view of both the war and the chain of leadership that followed it. He seems to be suspicious of all ubiquitous public displays of nationalist euphoria and voices his apathy for political dictators or despots and their followers in lines like,

I hope you will forgive my inability,
to accept your most generous invitation
to join the noble enterprise
of your party and the people. ("Your Excellency" 130)

Haq claims to not care so much for national associations in celebrating freedom as he does for individual freedom (Interview with Hummel). Thus he excuses himself from the political scene saying,

I just try
to write poetry
which is neither nation-building
nor an income-generating activity ("Your Excellency" 130)

However, despite the refusal to limit “location” within national boundaries, there is a continual return to Bangladesh which remains an underlying presence in his poetry. Haq’s poems do reveal an innate confidence about his place in the nation as he explicitly states in poems like “Homecoming” where, as he takes the “straightest homeward route” acutely aware of the world around him darkening, changing, and shifting, he asserts “but I am clear about my position/In the middle of a black swamp/Where wrecked boats come alive with frogs” (72). In another poem titled “Arriving on a Weekend” he voices a sense of union with the rural land of his birth in lines like,

Arriving means twisting around clumps of bamboo,
 their sterile swish loud in the air,
 skirting crude fences, missing
 a rat’s tail by a split second,
 cutting across red rays from kerosene lamps
 trickling through pores of bamboo walls,
 through warble of rote-learning voices
 ...
 And arrival means my dull footsteps
 on the dung-plastered yard announcing
 presence. (51)

A number of other poems such as “My Village and I,” “Cousin Shamsu, Durzi,” “Peasant’s Lament,” “Master Babu,” “As Usual,” and “On a Street” celebrate humble, unknown, and rustic lives of sons of the land like tailors, peasants, house tutors, roadside sages, a defiant nanga pagla (naked madman), and capture the very quintessence of a Bengali consciousness effortlessly. However, a more premeditated effort to assert a national label may be discerned in more recent poems such as “Published in the Streets of Dhaka” and “Ode on a Lungi.” Both poems register the postcolonial angst of the downtrodden third-world citizen but also take on a subversive tone which challenges the forces that seek to undervalue this status.

The poem “Ode on a Lungi” has gained most popularity and recognition because of its explicit stance on identity and the challenge it throws back to the forces of Western supremacy. The strength of the poem lies in the way Haq wields an extended scope of allusions from Western cultural, literary, academic, scientific, historical, and political fields to present a succinct counter-discourse. Haq turns a simple poem about sartorial rights of the lungi-wearers of the globe into a strong argument to expose how identity politics of the West has created a world of discrimination and double standards instead of one of democracy and equality as it otherwise claims. This is one of the few poems which seems to show Kaiser Haq’s political leanings.

The poem “Published in the Streets of Dhaka,” like “Ode on a Lungi,” eschews patronizing ideals of the west. The poem basically epitomizes the protest of a postcolonial writer/intellectual struggling for recognition. Haq presents a skeptic view of Western society’s attempts to promote non-Western writers who choose to settle in the west and dismiss all others. This poem too is heavily laden with cultural symbols of assumed Western literary superiority as priggish “poets moustached with bitter froth” in London sit over “cigar and port,” and while “nibbling nuts and gossip in equal measure,” they dismiss as trash anything that might be written and published in remote monsoon-racked Dhaka. The poem presents contrasting symbols that define his identity and location “Under the bamboo, the banyan and the mango tree” and among bookseller’s bazaars

from where he defiantly refuses the impulse to shift, as numerous others have done, to any place in the west by accepting it to be the primary location of literary culture in English, dismissing them instead as “Diaspora dead-ends” (“Published in the Streets of Dhaka” 31). The poem articulates a clear postcolonial voice which resists the attempt to manipulate it into a mouthpiece for Western civilization. Haq asserts his determination to “stay, plumb in the centre/Of monsoon-mad Bengal” from where he will continue his activism of counter-discourse versus pompous Western ideology. The poem ends on a combatively triumphant note,

And should all these find their way
Into my scribbles and into print
I'll cut a joyous caper right here
On the Tropic of Cancer, proud to be
Published once again in the streets of Dhaka (“Published in the Streets of Dhaka” 30)

The poem undoubtedly takes its cue from Nissim Ezekiel's lines, “I have made my commitments now/This is one: to stay where I am/... My backward place is where I am” (“Background Casually” 23). The reference to the “Tropic of Cancer” is significant in its allusion to the self-exiled Henry Miller. Haq, who believes in the spirit of individual freedom as compared to national affiliation to explore his creativity, has referred to modernist writers like Pound and Joyce who wrote in exile. But this poem also seems to mark an actual homecoming in the mental sphere, as Haq finally appears to have found and accepted his place in the world. Many of his earlier poems betray a sense of being left out or denied belonging “always becoming something/that will never be me” (“Growing Up or Softly Falling” 65). “Language is a life-sentence,” he laments in “Baby Talk,” and in the poem “Eleven Serious Warnings” he articulates an acute sense of being perceived as insignificant and forgotten,

For no matter what you don't do
you'll remain as you are
 hanging
 like washing
 a woman has forgotten
 to take out of the rain (62)

In an interview with Kathryn Hummel, Haq asserts, “Maybe I look at the world through my city, as it were. It's interesting how some writers adapt to each other and some can't or some change. It's about finding your spiritual home [...] Being here helps you to retain your country's voice.” One of his poems also gives us a glimpse of his poetic philosophy,

I am not concerned here with Poetry
My subject is Life, and the protest
against the enemies of Life.
The poetry is in the Protest (“A to Z Azad” 12)

The poem “Published in the Streets of Dhaka” marks Haq's turning full circle on his creative axis to return to his own land, his own city as the vantage-point of a global creative vision and confidently promotes his own new manifesto – that if writing in English must have a primary location, then that location must surely be Bangladesh. The amalgamation of multiple and diverse literary, cultural, historical, and political traditions within his psyche have resulted in a dynamically

open and fortified consciousness that is concurrently Bangladeshi and global. Kaiser Haq's poetry bears witness not to the creation of a space in the world but indeed a new world which he defiantly dares to construct,

To say there is no world
but what we make with words ("A to Z Azad" 11)

The main impulse that fuels Haq's poetry is the freedom to be and to create without limiting labels. Kaiser Haq's poetry reveals a poet who uses irony and satire, parody and droll humor, rational logic and emotional absurdity to express his free spirit's take on his homeland and the wider world.

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