

## Kaiser Haq: A Postcolonial Poet Writing from Bangladesh

Sheikh Mehedi Hasan\*

**Abstract:** Like most of the noteworthy South Asian poets writing in English, Kaiser Haq has moved away from traditional verse forms and stereotypical themes. He has been articulating his cultural identity uniquely in the context of Bangladesh—a third world country afflicted with poverty, hunger, floods, tornados, political turmoil and recently corruption—with a treasure house of distinctive poetic images tinged with a sense of irony and humour. This paper explores various aspects of Kaiser Haq's poetry with special emphasis on the poems dealing with cultural duality inherited from the colonial presence in the Indian subcontinent. In some of the poems, Haq deliberately uses colonial Babu English—inflected and distinctive idioms, non-stop use of the continuous tense and expressions shaped and affected by the first language of a colonial subject—only to 'mock' the colonial legacy that we more or less still bear. Besides, his ironic stand while critiquing the colonial burden in his society affirms his existence as a postcolonial poet. Another notable aspect of Haq's poetry is how he clings to his own cultural reality by refusing to join the immigration queue and become a Diaspora writer. The paper also focuses on his ironic portrayal of the political system existing in the postcolonial Bangladesh. In fact, the paper tries to discover how poetry can bear witness—instead of creating ego-centred lyrical vivacity—to a social system where language, politics, culture and custom are reshaped or reconstructed by different aspects of postcoloniality.

Like American literature, African literature or Australian literature, South Asian literature in English has attained its rightful place in the mainstream of English literature. However, if we examine the history of South Asian literature in English, which goes back to the late eighteenth century, we do not find any significant Indian (South Asian) poetry in English before independence in 1947. Nazareth (1983: 26) mentions that Dom Moraes was the first modern Indian poet who made an international impact for his work in English. When he was just eighteen, his first volume of poetry, *A Beginning*, was published in 1957. The book made a sensation by winning the Hawthornden Prize that year. It signalled a beginning, too, for Indian poets writing in English (51). Then with a cluster of South Asian poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, A. K. Ramanujan and Raja Rao in India and Kaiser Haq in Bangladesh, the traditional south Asian verse with the typical tendency towards 'mystical obscurantism' (Thieme xix) and with stereotypical themes has been replaced with an insistence on precision

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\* Sheikh Mehedi Hasan, Lecturer, Department of English, Prime University, Dhaka

of expression and a sceptical rationalism. And it is more or less true with the poetry of Haq who simply, by subverting the conventional rhyme and rhythm, is able to construct a tightly knotted versification and natural music in poetry that is being quintessential to the expression of his cultural identity as well as giving a concrete picture of a society where as a postcolonialist he has to inhabit the conceptual, cultural and ideological legacy of colonialism.

Haq is the poet of a country that was once colonised by the British. Therefore, people, here, have a sense of colonial hegemony shaped by personal memories, knowledge and opinions as well as those shared with members of the group or culture as a whole. Haq's poems do not ignore this colonial hangover of the Bangladeshies. In some of the poems we see Haq satirising the existing colonial hegemony:

I just try  
to write poetry  
which is neither a nation-building  
nor an income-generating activity  
nor is it,...

(Haq, 'Your Excellency' 130)

Haq's dissatisfaction with the aspects of hegemonic society constructed by social and political irregularities and cultural absurdities inherited from the long time colonial experience finds expressions in the poems written in Indian English. His ironic stand while critiquing the colonial burden on his society just substantiates his existence as a postcolonial poet. As Spivak puts it, 'the situation of the post-colonial subject is that she or he has to inhabit the conceptual, cultural and ideological legacy of colonialism inherent in the very structures and institutions that formed the condition of decolonisation, a situation—a space that the post-colonial does not want to, but has no option to, inhabit' (qtd. in Royle 195).

In this paper, Postcoloniality is understood as the problematic processes of interculturality resulting from different political and colonial scenarios. Attention is given especially to the prevailing social system in Bangladesh where language, politics, culture and custom are reshaped or reconstructed by different aspects of postcoloniality.

First of all, postcolonialism can be defined as an intellectual discourse that holds together a set of theories found among the texts and sub-texts of philosophy, film, political science and literature. These theories are reactions to the cultural legacy of colonialism. Postcolonial literature and criticisms study the processes and effects of cultural displacement and aggression, expose the internal doubts of postcolonial subjects, question the colonial legacy of language and deconstruct

discourses on politics in a postcolonial society. Bhabha, one of the most prominent postcolonial theorists, has put it this way:

Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' [...and...] they formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination.... (qtd. in Bertens 438).

While seeking out areas of hybridity and transculturalisation, postcolonialism deals with cultural identity in colonised societies: the dilemmas of developing a national identity after colonial rule; the ways in which writers articulate and celebrate that identity. Gilbert and Tompkins observe that postcolonialism is 'rather an engagement with and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies' (2). Postcolonial discourses also expose the absurdity of colonial language and discourses.

Colonial absurdities in the field of politics in a postcolonial society are also the subject of postcolonial literature. Moreover, cultural duality in a postcolonial society can also be seen as the alienation of the native in his own land. This condition can be described as a traumatic experience that erodes an individual's identity.

Identity crisis is one of the dominant phenomena in a postcolonial society. A postcolonial subject fails to identify himself/ herself either with the colonial burden or with the subsequent postcolonial existence. Haq has probably been struggling lifelong to find a definite cultural identity, though he has also been mingling with other cultures in order to know about his one better. He can be located in poems like 'Spring in Dhaka' ('the tantrums of rickshaw bells become merry tinkles'. Haq: 69), or 'Nature' ('A man moves to the side of a road, / simultaneously raises his *lungi*'. Haq: 124) as a Bangladeshi poet, but through versification and poetic tradition how he locates himself in the tradition of mainstream English poetry is evident in the following verse:

Quick, children! run  
Through the ruins of the sun,  
Catch the gold in your hair.  
(Haq, 'Sunset Song' 43)

One is at once reminded of Blake's image of children in Blake's poems such as "The Nurse's Song." Moreover, how his poetic imagination represents him as an original image builder can be found in the following analogy. Let's compare his 'Aubade' (1975) with Larkin's 'Aubade' (1977). Though Aubade is an early rising song, Larkin in his 'Aubade' sings a song of death, decadence and negation: 'no sight, no sound, / No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, / Nothing to love or link with',... It is, however, startling that Haq expresses the

same sense of cynicism and irony in his 'Aubade', which was published two years earlier than Larkin's 'Aubade'.

A clear cool morning green and grey.  
 Paintless whores plod slumward to wash.  
 The Muezzin calls the devout to pray.  
 Time to sleep but there's no rush.  
 (Haq, 'Aubade' 49)

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
 Walking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
 In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
 Till then I see what's really always there:  
 (Larkin, 'Aubade'. Abrams 2570)

It is now apparent that Haq and Larkin express satire and irony through the delicate use of iambic metre and the rhyme scheme (ab ab) to subvert the conventional image of Aubade or morning songs (remember Donne's 'The Sun Rising' or 'The Good morrow').

A postcolonial poet should have a cosmopolitan sensibility as well as a definite knowledge of his cultural identity. By ignoring his root and identity he can never become a notable artist. Haq, in fact, 'uses the tones and rhythms of everyday English and yet manages to convince us of his location as a Bangladeshi poet' (Alam 328). 'Without abandoning his quest for poetry that will remain original as well as interesting, he has kept himself open to all sorts of influences from various cultures and traditions' (Alam 329). However, he is quite disturbed by Diaspora literature which is patronised by the West in the name of multiculturalism.

What are we to do, Mr. Vidal?  
 Stop writing, and if we do, not publish?  
 Join an immigration queue, hoping  
 To head for the Diaspora dead-end  
 Exhibit in alien multicultural museums?  
 (Haq, 'Published in the Streets of Dhaka' 31)

The conditions that make for a diasporic community are admittedly complex. One can question 'the presumed link between the diasporic community and the motherland' (Lal unnumbered). 'The Diaspora dead-end' as mentioned in the poem implies the end of individual identity and the erosion of cultural sensibility as nothing remains when the diasporic multiculturalism engulfs a cultural unity.

Bhabha says that no culture is full unto itself, and multiculturalism may found a sense of cultural duality that alienates a person from his own root (Rutherford 210). This condition is meant to be 'the Diaspora dead-end'. Therefore, what Haq

articulates in the poem is a refusal to join the immigration queue, for he feels that by becoming a Diaspora writer he can only be someone patronised by the West in the name of multiculturalism. Thus, Haq's forceful utterance simply strengthens his existence as an independent postcolonial poet whose works need not be displayed in alien multicultural museums.

In a review, Foakes remarks on Haq that he 'writes in English and shows clear influence of modern Western traditions whilst remaining uniquely South Asian' (79). One can determine Haq and his cultural root in a verse like— 'Yesterday I went digging/ For my root in the library.' (Haq, 'Nirvana' 113). As Seamus Heaney does in his poem, 'Digging', Haq also finds his root through digging. In Haq's case, however, the root lies in the mesmerising verse of mystical singers (*bauls*). The poem goes on: 'I read the *bauls*, long haired/.....who said *fuck* to caste and creed/.....at last I had found my spiritual brothers! / I hummed their songs' (Haq, 'Nirvana' 113). Surprisingly up-to-date with the spirit of modern English verses, Haq is always loyal to his cultural root.

In the poem 'Published in the Streets of Dhaka', Haq raises a number of colonial and postcolonial issues. Here, he also locates himself perfectly not in the deluge of loss but in the poetic image of Jibanananda Das ('a famous predecessor'), one of the greatest modern poets of the Bangla language.

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.  
(Haq, 'Published in the Streets of Dhaka' 31)

Haq, who is described in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* as 'Bangladesh's leading English-language poet' ('Books Received' 195-203), is determined to stay exactly (plumb) 'in the centre of monsoon mad Bengal', watching its natural beauty and rejuvenated 'in the early morning breeze' (Haq 31). Though his country is ever afflicted with poverty, hunger, floods, tornados, political turmoil and corruption, Haq yet relishes creating art in the shabby streets of Dhaka:

I'll cut a joyous caper right here  
On the Tropic of Cancer, proud to be  
Published once again in the streets of Dhaka.  
(Haq, 'Published in the Streets of Dhaka' 31)

Postcolonial critics object to the colonised's creation of art 'as hollow mimics of Europeans or as passive recipients of power' (*Postcolonialism* unnumbered). However, a postcolonial poet has to be conscious of the radical emergence and

aggression of all European or Western values, thoughts and beliefs. He is well aware of his surroundings and what he talks about. It is not his desired practice to depict an alien world, a landscape of the British island (as the poet is writing in English), nor a vivid imagery of hills, mountains and English flowers like daffodils. To make a point here, one can justify the cause of Modhusudhon's failure as a poet of the English language. Whereas Dutt was 'squandering his talents by chasing alien gods' (qtd in Alam 322), weaving images like 'Albion's distant shore, / its valleys green, its mountain high' (Alam 323), Haq observes the world with ironic glee— 'the sun goes down, a luckless balloon' (Haq, 'Sunset Song' 43).

Now, 'Ode on the Lungi', <http://asiatic.iuum.edu>, can be discussed in terms of cultural diversity and hybridity. The great romantics and classicists wrote grand odes (grand narratives!), addressing an idealised bird (Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' or Shelley's 'To Skylark'), or a force of nature (Shelley's 'To the West Wind'), or any ancient relic (Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'), but Haq, here, pays tribute to the Lungi:

I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST!  
 Friends and fellow lungi lovers,  
 let us organise lungi parties and lungi parades,  
 let us lobby Hallmark and Archies  
 to introduce an International Lungi Day  
 when the UN Chief will wear a lungi  
 and address the world  
 (Haq, 'Ode on the Lungi')

He then talks about neo-imperialism and sartorial hegemony. Haq mocks English educated Bengali snobs ('brown and yellow sahibs') who 'in natty suits crinkle their noses at compatriots (even relations) in modest lungis'. He also points out the irony and mockery of democratic practice in the neo-imperialist (postcolonial) society.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot  
 about sartorial equality  
 How far we are from  
 this democratic ideal!  
 (Haq, 'Ode on the Lungi')

Through age-old traditional attire how Haq satirises the sartorial legacy inherited from the colonial presence in the subcontinent is noteworthy in the lines above. However, he is not forgetful about his poetic sensibility reinforced by the superb use of irony and humour:

there are more people in lungis  
 than the population of the USA  
 Now try wearing one  
 (Haq, 'Ode on the Lungi')

Among the other south Asian poets, Nissim Ezekiel is found to have the same ironic voice against the colonial hegemony prevailing in India. Alam in his scholarly essay on Kaiser Haq rightly comments—'Haq is like Ezekiel too in his wry responses to environment and his perspective on things' (327). With regard to tone, content and versification, there is a rare similarity between the poems 'The Patriot' by Ezekiel and 'Welcome, Tourist Sahib' by Haq. Let's have a look how both of them, through sub-continental or Indian English, depict society, its culture and the so-called change in a postcolonial society.

'Everything is coming—  
 Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception.  
 (Ezekiel 237)  
 Our culture is rich like television, cinema, dances and songs  
 (Haq 96)

Language shapes and develops a culture. The colonial ghost still exists boastfully in the language world of a postcolonial society. Language, a source of empowerment can be used as a tool of exploitation. It is, indeed, a discourse that is powerful enough to dominate a nation. English was once the language of domination, torture and tyranny. The English masters taught native people how to write official letters, how to apply through proper channels (in 'Civil Service Romance', Haq 98-99). Quite surprisingly, the practice of that Babu English is still found in the sub-continent—in government offices, schools and colleges.

English is even thought to be the only means of getting good jobs or social status. Haq and Ezekiel ironically show these aspects in a postcolonial society in their respective poems in which both the speakers are anxious about facing native English speakers. Therefore, they are trying to get prepared for getting into a fluent conversation with them.

I practice in front of mirror.....  
 .....what I say to you in English conversation.  
 (Haq, 'Welcome, Tourist Sahib' 96)  
 (Everyday I'm reading *Times of India*  
 to improve my English language)  
 (Ezekiel, 'The Patriot' 237)

But the English practised by the sub-continental chaps is nothing but an English affected by inflected and distinctive idioms, non-stop use of the continuous tense

and expressions of their first language, which ironically bear the colonial legacy of the English language.

'Now I training for tourist guide'.  
 ..... 'ninety percent people  
 are believing Muslim religion'.  
 (Haq, 'Welcome, Tourist Sahib' 96, 97)

'I am simply not understanding'.  
 'I am not believing in ceremony'.  
 (Ezekiel, 'The Patriot', 237, 238)

The poets then demonstrate how cultural or religious beliefs are formulated by the same expression of language:

By God's grace, all my children  
 Are well settled in life.  
 (Ezekiel, 'The Professor' 238)

By the grace of Allah my Boss today  
 Is sending me with URGENT file to your section  
 (Haq, 'Civil Service Romance' 99)

Besides, exploiting the syntax of Indian English ironically, both the poets depict society—'Our progress is progressing. / Old values are going, new values are coming'(Ezekiel, 'The Patriot' 239) and 'we proudly confidently say. / With rural economics we are progressing'(Haq, 'Welcome, Tourist Sahib' 96). In fact, they mock not only the language, but also culture, society and other values.

Haq believes that poetry bears faithfully the marks of exploitation, tyranny and torture. Addressing General Ershad, the dictator of Bangladesh in the 1980s he actually warns all the dictators—no matter where they live—of the power of poetry as a reliable witness:

Poetry  
 bears witness  
 to the system of graft and kickbacks,  
 that governs your world,  
 the graffiti on mud walls,  
 the meaningless morse of gunfire,  
 (Haq, 'Your Excellency' 131-132)

A dictator is seen to be a powerful agent of neo-colonialism in a postcolonial government. Suppression, torture and control are imposed in the name of civilisation, democracy or good governance. Haq, with his objective observation



and poetic sensibility, can perceive the hollowness of democracy in a postcolonial society. In Bangladesh, democracy is practised, but as it is not proper democracy, Haq, by coining a new word, calls it nomocracy, which, he, sarcastically, says very few people know the meaning of.

Democracy is meaningless without nomocracy.  
 Unfortunately, the millions who vote and the hundreds they  
 vote for do not even know that there is such a word as  
 'nomocracy'.

(Haq, 'Short Shorts' 139)

Therefore, Haq questions the validity of political discourses centred on democracy which in a postcolonial society is used as an alluring means of manipulation and exploitation. As Chatterjee has pointed out the postcolonial system operates on 'a derivative discourse', which means that the postcolonial states are left inscribed with the colonial concepts (such as democracy) of the West (qtd. in Royle 195).

Through a note of irony in 'Civil Service Romance', Haq portrays bureaucratic irregularities of the civil service in Bangladesh. He mocks the Babu English by deliberately mimicking the style used in letters of application to the English Sahibs or Masters.

The poem starts with:

Subject: Improvement of Bilateral Ties

*Dear Miss:*

With due respect and humble submission  
 I beg to welcome you to neighbouring section.

(Haq, 'Civil Service Romance' 98)

The title of the poem mentions a 'romance' that occasionally flowers in a work place. When in a government office, a male employee and a female employee are engaged in discussing family particulars, sharing likes and dislikes, making jokes (or love!) and improving all-round bilateral ties, the most URGENT file is kept pending as per rule of the red-tape culture. Haq then speaks about another embarrassing aspect of the civil service—the buttering or oiling of the bosses (the neo-imperialists), which guarantees promotions and other benefits. These are some phenomena in a postcolonial civil service world coming down from the colonial political culture. The limitless power of the government officials is still seen in the civil service; the officers are more or less like Sahibs or Babus.

What is URGENT when we dealing  
 with MOST IMMEDIATE? Bosses and governments  
 come and go, but we go on forever.

(Haq, 'Civil Service Romance' 99)

One can now notice that Haq has 'a cosmopolitan sensibility', is 'very well read' and able to assimilate 'diverse traditions of writing' (Alam 328). He is quite experimental in composing verses, and a stunningly original image builder. He is a poet having an ironic sensibility expressed in a serious as well as playful mood. In other words, Haq is a poet of the English language with a keen sense of his cultural roots.

Thus, through his acquaintance with the global culture, and his experience of assimilating world literature, and the use of satire and humour, he brings his local images alignment with the poetry of the rest of the world. Dwelling in the reality of his own country and using a mocking sense of irony, Haq, a postcolonial poet, writes in English from Bangladesh and his works are published in the streets of Dhaka.

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