Kaiser Haq's Reminiscence Poems: A Dialectic Reading of Memory and History

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Abstract

Bangladesh's leading Anglophone poet, Kaiser Haq, resents both the ontological manifestations of history as a site of contestations and miseries and the politicized reconstruction of history as a potential tool serving the agenda of the ruling class. A 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War veteran and a discerning witness to the country's transformative phases, Haq deplores uncritical representations of history in Bangladesh's literature. Consistently, he has formulated a poetics that engages more with personal memory and subjectivity while still opening alternative windows into the historical timeline paralleling his maturation as an individual and, particularly, as a poet. This article reveals the inherent dialectic between history and memory in Haq's poetry, and underscores the poet's turn to memory through reminiscence poems that exemplify what Pierre Nora terms *les lieux de memoire*. These poems register his disillusionment with the post-independence state of affairs – that contravene the fundamental principles of Bangladesh – and his late-life moral reflections on life's entanglements in the country's evolving socio-cultural and politico-economic reality evolving since the 1950s through the subsequent decades to the present. Consequently, this paper offers a retroactive understanding of Haq's poetry within Bangladesh's literary history.

Keywords: Bangladesh, history, dialectic, memory, history, Kaiser Haq, reminiscence poems

My memory is again in the way of your history/…/Your history gets in the way of my memory.

(Agha Shahid Ali, "Farewell")

What we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history. What we take to be flare-ups of memory are in fact its final consumption in the flames of history. The quest for memory is the search for one's history.

(Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" 13)

Introduction: History as a "nightmare"

Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Farewell" marks an ontological divergence between personal memory infused with the pain of loss and state-modulated history that often overpowers personal recollections. While memory grapples with the obligation to reveal intense feelings and hitherto unexplored experiences from the viewpoints of subjectivity, history with its methodological claim to objectivity tends to impose a grand narrative on the individual voice. Bangladesh's avant-garde Anglophone poet Kaiser Haq must be aware of such a dialectical union of memory and history in the country's archival as he exhibits an uncharacteristic acrimony towards history in favor of memory, especially the varied ways history unfolded in the 20th century as a site of contestations and hegemonic pursuits. His reflection on history is finely encapsulated in the four-line poem "O Clio" composed anytime in the decade immediate to the Liberation War. The title addresses one of the nine Muses in Greek mythology usually portrayed with an open scroll or a book as the matron of history. Referring intertextually to Stephan Dedalus who – out of a sense of entrapment, anguish, and a desire to break free from the traumatic weight of historical experiences – declares that history "is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920/2000, 42), Haq wishes the harsh truths of the past did not impact private lives as intrusively as it does:

> If history is
> a nightmare
> let me sleep on —
> at least it's unreal (Haq, *Published* 176).

Like Dedalus, the poet might be blasé about history as a horizon of inevitable catastrophes, struggles, and discontinuities concealed by the "redemption-seeking" nationalist and the ruling class in the name of linear progress (Benjamin 389-400) or history rendered into "a costly superfluity and luxury," "a hypertrophied vice," or "a dark, invisible burden" that neither serves life nor lets ordinary citizens go beyond its manipulative uses (Nietzsche 59-61). Haq's discontent with history – even after his necessary involvement in its rerouting in South Asia through the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War – manifests itself in his recent poem "Barbecue" (included in *Pariah and Other Poems*) where he anxiously ponders whether his well-intentioned engagement has unintentionally aligned him with vested groups, making him complicit in deleterious actions without his awareness:

> Am I responsible to an extent for the whole series,
> Am I, if only by an iota, culpable
> For the horrors flashed on TV

Or at least implicated, however tenuously, enough
To feel duty bound to play the concerned citizen
Lining up on the pavement in a human chain? (Haq, *Pariah* 21)

This ethical reconsideration of becoming a cog in the wheel of history is significant on the part of a Bangladeshi poet who is conscientious about the evolution of an Anglophone literary genre in the country's cultural domain. What unsettles him is his having to witness the perpetuation of a conflict-rife state even after independence as if all acts – visionary or transgressive – are connected "in the chain of history" so that life still remains subject to the same "horrors" that should have been things of the past with the post-war new beginning. But if events are destined to repeat themselves, engendering nightmares for subjectivities across successive phases of history, the "self-indulgent, metaphysical question" of culpability proves "irrelevant, anyway" (Haq, *Pariah* 21). About two decades ago, Haq's metaphysical thinking would prioritize the spatiality of life over its temporality; to him "time, a wriggling eel" tendentiously grasped by modern historiography's markers like "pre and *post-*" (Haq, *Published* 227) could be conquered by life's immediate fulfilments in the private sphere where the "absolutes" of infinity and eternity become tenable to "the space / between our bodies —" as we go,

making naught
of the nightmare
of the separateness,
by the simple act

of leaping into
a tight embrace (Haq, *Published* 228)

Composed in the 1990s – the decade of Bangladesh's tremendous politico-economic transition but also the era of political regression, of the attenuation of secularism by religious fundamentalism, of the rise of militancy and of the marring of democratic processes (Riaz 76-108) – the above two poems and others in Haq's fourth collection *Black Orchid* (1996) evidence the poet's "libertarian" penchants for Eros or love, desire, attraction, and creative energy (Alam, "Kaiser Haq: A Bangladeshi Writing in English" 335), all the while insulated against the state of affairs constantly disorienting the sensible citizen about the changing landscape of history. All the same, the most obvious case for Haq's umbrage about history as a site of contestation and power dynamics or as a point of reference for the ruling-class ideology in the overall ordering of things can be made from his avowed unwillingness to revisit the longue durée of 1971 either in poetry like his contemporary Bengali-language poets or by intentionally writing a full-fledged

memoir beyond just a few short prose pieces, even though we know he fought the war as a commissioned officer leading a 200-strong company from October of the year following weeks of rigorous training at the legendary Indian military camp called *Murti*. However, all this amounted to "an existential choice" – or a timely exigent involvement, as indicated above – to free the country and to go back to a projected, normal life (Sources cited in subsequent sentences). In fact, Haq posits that the choice became inevitable after the 25th March crackdown "plunging 70 million people into a cauldron of terror, panic, anxiety, but also strengthening a collective resolve to resist and overcome" (Haq, "'For your sake…"). Hence, the prevailing trends of memorialization of the war history through nationalistic exaltation or through creative writing hardly do justice to the immensity and intensity of the collective experience, as Haq professes on several occasions (Haq, "Introducing a Bangladeshi Writer in English 110-119;" Haq, "In Conversation with Bangladeshi Poet…;" Haq, "It Was an Existential Choice…;" Haq, "Forty Years' Worth of Poem;" Haq "Nationality and Other Difficulties"). To some extent, Haq's argument harks back to Adorno's much cited skepticism in his 1949 essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" about the legitimacy of writing poetry on dehumanizing experiences (Adorno 34). But Haq's disinclination to romanticize war and its aftermath stems from his critical stance towards the often-idealized representations of the Liberation War in Bangladeshi literature. Historical fiction works like Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007), the first in her *Bengal Trilogy*, fall short of realism for their "starry-eyed, optimistic" treatment of history purged of "[a]ll complications" involved in the chaotic and uncoordinated reality of the time (Haq, "In Conversation with Bangladeshi Poet…"). Then there is Bangladeshi "war poetry about lying low in trepidation" while thousands of freedom fighters like Haq battled the enemy braving death (Haq, "In Conversation with Bangladeshi Poet…"). While saying this, Haq might have in view the unofficial poet laureate, Shamshur Rahman, celebrated for his embodiment of the country's struggles and aspirations from the 50s (Radice 2006; Islam 2022), the nationalist poet who sought the "reassurance [of a secured refuge] amidst the tension and terror, the daily arrests and murders, the ominous noises of military vehicles, and the sound of boots," and wrote the poems of his collection *Bondi Shibir Theke* (1972) in hiding (Haq, "'For your sake…"). By contrast, Haq was "more clear-headed" about history's betrayal as the euphoria of liberation was quickly overshadowed by disillusionment, political discord, and a sense of abandonment felt by those who fought on the ground. It is no wonder that those experiences have left him skeptical and unwilling to indulge in the triumphalist narratives that tend to dominate discourse on the war. Cognizant of all the contradictions, the poet regrets: "It's very painful to write about" (Haq, "In Conversation with…").

The 1971 history being too complex and too painful to aesthetically verbalize, the three poems Haq brought himself to write after the war touch the real scenario only tangentially, not with the seriousness of intent per se to transmit history. These poems are included in *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems* (2017) and have become part of the vast post-liberation corpus that, according to Kabir Chowdhury, obsessively centers on "the theme of war" (105). "Dateline, Dhaka, 25 March 2006," one of the three poems, rather opens with the quotidian, unperturbed life of some "Cynical romantics / Pretending insouciance, / Talking realpolitik" till they are jerked awake by the game of history:

> Who'd have thought
> We'd be waylaid
> By History —
> Sounds portentous
> But how else to put it? (Haq, *Published* 67)

It is only after the outdoorsy friends have been shocked by "impoverished barricades," "exploding skies," and "slain bodies" on their way home that they suddenly figure out their "ultimate choice — / Fight or flee —," as they all find themselves locked "in a gorgon's stare." Then and there they resolve to fight back ("We stared back, unpetrified"). Haq recounts those moments of their self-discovery invoking a historical consciousness:

> It was precisely
> Half a biblical lifetime ago
> Though on this day once again
> It feels like it was yesterday. (Haq, *Published* 67)

Clearly, Haq's empirically informed perspective on history discredits the linear, progress-oriented narrative of the nation's struggles for statehood and its outcomes; rather it speaks to an exceptionally enlightened understanding of evolving human conditions in South Asia through ages and through man's being and becoming in the world, for that matter. This claim could be safely authenticated by a more extensive study of his oeuvre that, other than poetry collections, includes prose writings and occasional interviews. This article leaves the task for future research. However, one instance of Haq's view on historical consciousness can be cited here to support this article's premise that Haq is more prone to mining his memory through poetry than turning to formal, state-modulated historical narratives. The tendency might be uncharacteristic of a 1971 war veteran but can be validated by the way Haq views the *Muktijuddher Chetona* or "spirit of the Liberation War" – occasionally popping up in the

present-day politico-cultural discourse of Bangladesh. He defines the spirit in terms of "the national unity" the then East Pakistani populace across all differences felt at that particular historical moment about which one can now be only "nostalgic" in full knowledge that "we cannot recreate it [the spirit] for we are no longer in the same historical situation" (Haq, in interview with Eresh Omar Jamal). Elsewhere Haq dismisses the linear progression of this spirit on the ground that the "ideological questions" the spirit evolved around "have not been fully resolved" in the post-independence era, an indicator being the newly liberated state's failure to manage its demographic dividend (Haq "Nationality and Other Difficulties"). It needs emphasizing here that when Haq expresses his divergent view on how to interpret history, he inspires – to quote Ramin Jahanbegloo introducing Romila Thapar – "an unavoidable step to critical lucidity and transformative clarity … against the logic of society and state" (xi). In other words, Haq's perspective is inclined towards a critical understanding of history that often challenges the dominant narratives imposed by societal and governmental institutions.

Turning to Memory as an Urgency

The French historian Pierre Nora, renowned for his distinction between memory and history in his trailblazing essay "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," attributes the significance of the *lieux de memoire* or "sites of memory" – where memory solidifies and is preserved – to the realization of a rupture from the past, when we are left with a sense of "torn" memory. This disconnect is intertwined with the feeling that memory has been disrupted, yet in a manner that raises the issue of how memory is embodied in certain locations that maintain a sense of historical continuity. Nora argues in clearer terms: "There are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory" (7). These sites dictate how the past comes down to the present via "commemorative vigilance." The strongest raison d'être of these sites are their potential to countervail history's workings: "if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no *lieux de memoire*" (12).

A number of Haq's poems composed in the form of unpretentious reminisces dialectically engage with prevalent historical narratives of lived conditions of the 50s and 60s in the erstwhile East Pakistan through the post-Partition years and of the 70s in the post-independence era of Bangladesh. Read with reference to his prose writings and interviews, these poems testify to the poet's disinterest in the country's ubiquitous historical consciousness that tend to thrive on certain binaries, elisions, and on appropriation. In contrast, it is life above everything else that concerns him, as his poetics is "very much in the swim/ of things" and

"jostles the crowds / even as it stands apart" in the hope of an objective look on the lived, complex conditions (Haq, *Published* 260). Haq's resort to memory is valid given that memory is dynamic and "open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting" and is increasingly being subjected to the "conquest and eradication" by history which is "a reconstruction" of the past, hence "always problematic and incomplete" (Nora 8). Citing his intellectual predecessor, Maurice Halbwachs, the French historian draws a more pragmatic contrast between the two key terms:

> Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative. (Nora 8-9)

This section of the article underscores a growing sense of urgency in the increasingly age-conscious poet's ongoing attempt to recollect the past in verse, to connect the past to the present and probably to anticipate a future, thus seeking a coherent selfhood confronting the snare of an alienated existence – both as an individual and as an Anglophone poet – in the temporal order. It is as if these poems sprang from his consummate desire to reaffirm his place in the nation's cultural-political archive. In hindsight, we may take Haq's recollections as the result of an awareness aligned with the caveat of the ancient Greek philosopher Plutarch who once emphasized remembrance as loath to disconnecting oneself from their own history and experiences ("On Tranquillity of Mind," 217-18).

Not willing to write a full-fledged prose memoir, Haq now wishes to mark his progress, at par with his fellowmen, from a semi-urban, middle-class Anglophile to a Bangladeshi neorealist poet trekking the jagged course of Anglophone writing and publishing in the post-independence era when he found himself to be impersonating "a pariah" or "a hijrah" – indeed, the two terms he frequently uses to interpret the Anglophone poet's predicament in the country's cultural sphere (Haq, "The Hijra Comes in from the Heat and Dust;" Haq, "English-medium boy;" Haq, "A Highbrow 'Hijra'?" 140). Remarkably enough, in the process of his poetic reminiscences, Haq demonstrates an alternative perspective on the formative history of Bangladesh and subjectivities within it. And in doing this, he assimilates what Uta Gosmann distinctively terms as "historic memory" that allows the poetic self to assert itself "by the conscious, recollectable experiences of the past" and "poetic memory" that is more than a "remembered biography" as it is free from the bindings of "the accuracy, linearity, causality, or coherence of historic memory" and thus "reaches beyond the accountable facts of life towards the notion of a self that is dynamic, expansive, and full of potential." According to Gosmann, the two types of memory are not mutually exclusive nor does

poetic memory become "a critique of history or historiography as a highly varied and theoretically sophisticated discipline." This is because, explains Gosmann, poetic memory is "aware of the limitations that derive from a self grounded in a narrative of its past" (1-3). Seen through this critical lens, Haq's five-decade-long conception of the tenets of modern poetry finds its veritable manifestations in his reminiscence poems, as they can be read in the light of this genre that, in Gosmann's assertion, works as "a *medium* of memory" as well as "a *system* of memory," and "*represents* and *thematizes* memory, its contents and functioning" (emphasis original, 5). However, within its permissible range, this article focuses on only the first aspect.

Remembering is self-sustaining in the midst of rampant chaos and uncertainties. On the tripartite threshold of memory, language, and subjectivity, remembering resolves the fundamental question of the Anglophone writer's belonging to the milieu that hardly recognizes his creative contributions only because they are not being produced in the dominant literary language, Bengali. So a strong reason for revisiting childhood times nestled in the collective history is to confute the long-held deprecation of English-language writing and its practitioners within the ambit of Bengali-lingua-cultural nationalist imaginings, and thereby to vindicate that the poet, regardless of the apparent detachment through Anglophony, has always shared the lived conditions of the populace having to reconfigure its statehood and with it subjectivity through persistent struggles. It is notable here that most of Haq's new poems in *Published in the Streets of Dhaka* (2017), and the poems in *Pariah and Other Poems* (2017) and *The New Frontier* (2024) betray a sense of disillusionment about the country's present reality of political violence, economic injustices and inequalities, environmental degradation, human rights violation, etc. that seem to have bounced beyond ameliorative action. It pains him to find "Everything a tad worse / Each morning—" (Haq, *Pariah* 26). Now disillusioned about the receding light of promises once projected into a redeeming future (that happens to be the present deviating reality), the 1971-war-veteran poet becomes nostalgic of those times of material constraints and complacence, of ideological conflict and activism, and of loss and prospects – those times when struggles for a regime change promised democracy and equality in a liberated land. Added to all these preceding considerations is the palliative effect of memory contra the feeling of an old-age angst as one is "heading fast" toward the "damned … invisible" finish line of life's journey (Haq, *Pariah* 77). If living carefree has been stunted as much by the current politico-economic reality as by his waning psychophysical state, writing also cannot escape their fatal blow on his once-unbridled creative outpourings. In the conundrum further intensified by the Covid-19 terror, he retrospectively wondered: "How poems would appear / Like bean sprouts / A sudden flash of fresh green / Or like flaming red chillies /

Ready for combat" (Haq, *The New Frontier* 21). So one more reason to draw on personal memory can be the poet's wish to reconcile with the challenges of aging on the idea of "eros" (life instinct) or with Nietzsche's idea of "eternal recurrence." Upon turning sixty, Haq felt the toll of aging; yet he could proclaim: "I'll just take things easy, / let eyes wander where they will" in the poem "Senior Citizen" that closes with the poet's tenacity to hold on:

> I wish mad old Nietzsche were right —
> wouldn't it be lovely
> living this unexceptional life
> over and over
> all eternity … (Haq, *Published* 3)

Consistently, the anxiety about ineluctable infirmities surfaces in the poem "Nearing Sixty-Five" where he visualizes old-age quirks and kinks that, despite their inducing some musings on death, are supposed to remain "ultra-private" (Haq, *Pariah* 70). Negating this anxiety, the memory of growing up, of pursuing an existential meaning of life, and of writing in the still unsophisticated natural setting in the 50s and 60s energized him during the most precarious spell of Covid-19 at the end of which he celebrates his acquired resilience: "I'm still here" (Haq, *The New Frontier* 16).

Memory as a Window into History

The individual's delved-out memory interacts with the community's past and gains objective significance through its interspersing with certain watershed moments in history and their aftermath which the individual has been a witness to. The timeframe that Haq's reminiscence poems – particularly "Barbecue," "Beginnings," "Pariah," and "Belated Mirror Stage" from the last two collections – cover are documented as the most decisive decades (i.e., 50s, 60s, and 70s) for the creation of Bangladesh as a nation-state through a succession of ideological-cultural struggles and political movements. In these poems, Haq first depicts his childhood self as a spectator still trying to make sense of the world around him and then presents himself as a partaker imbued with the zeitgeist of the moments. These two roles are central to understanding Haq's poetry in relation to the evolving historical context that produced a band of politically-conscious, instrumental Bengali-language poets of his generation who, among many others, include Shamshur Rahman (1929-2006), Syed Shamshul Huq (1935-2016), Al Mahmud (1936-2019), Rafiq Azad (1942-2016), Shahid Qadri (1942-2016), Abdul Mannan Syed (1943-2010), Mohammad Rafiq (1943-2023), Mahadev Saha (1944-), Nirmalendu Goon (1945-), and Abul Hasan (1947-1975).

Haq grew up witnessing the rise of what historians term as "a vernacular elite"

that, in the 1950s-60s, had to instrumentalize its distinctive collective identity first at variance with domineering Hindu elite rooted in West Bengal/Calcutta and then through a more direct confrontation with the hegemonic ruling of the "military elite" based in West Pakistan (Hashem 61; N. Anam 326-27; van Schendel 233; Jahan 184) or, as Serajul Islam Choudhury defines it, with the "Panjabi hegemony" (quoted in Anam, *A People's History* 51). Haq remembers: "even as a very small boy I felt the tension between being a Pakistani, and a Bengali" (Haq, "Nationality and Other Difficulties"). Nevertheless, in those tumultuous times he discovered "his sense of being" to be "complete" as an adolescent impersonating the "hierarchically" conceived tags of "South Asian, Bengali and Muslim," as he recollects in the bildungsroman-style poem "Belated Mirror Stage." This poem records his progress from a phenomenological understanding of selfhood in the post-Partition arrangement of things to a more conscious "self-fashioning" endeavor in sync with writing creatively in an attempt to withstand "the drab prosody of life" (Haq, *The New Frontier* 15-16). Self-fashioning as a private practice anytime during the 23-year-long military regime following the Partition, that relegated East Pakistani Bengalis to "second-class citizens" can be conflated into the collective struggles for self-determination. Though far-fetched, the connection ought to become worthwhile in understanding the Bengalis' resistance to the legacy of "racial stereotypes" fabricated by the British Raj and wielded by West Pakistanis. Haq explains:

> The "martial" Punjabi took it as his right to dominate the "non-martial" Bangalee. When the Pakistan Army launched its genocidal onslaught, little did it expect an effective popular resistance. The Bangalee freedom fighters not only helped liberate their country but also removed the mind-forged manacles of racial stereotypes. Bangladeshis could henceforth project a self-image free of an inferiority complex (Haq, "'For your sake…").

The English-medium schooling Haq received on the projected fervor of his father – whom he dubs as "an Anglophile to boot" with a nationalist consciousness typical of the day – was a bourgeois entitlement that few in his neighborhood could afford and, indeed, turned out to be "the defining moment" in the development of his socio-cultural identity among the milieu (Haq, "English-medium Boy"). His memory of living in the semi-rural middle-class vicinity of Nayapaltan – as the sprawling site was gradually being appended to Dhaka's rapid modernization and expansion process – and of playing football and *kabadi* "barefooted and baretorsoed" (Haq, "English-medium Boy") brings to us the ideal Bangladeshi childhood experience flushed with nature's bounties. The poem "Beginnings" echoes snippets of Haq's childhood memory with reference

to the history of Bangladesh since the culmination of the British rule the legacies of which boasted "no statues / at crossroads for crows to crap on," but only a club, a university, racecourse, the Mughal gun named Bibi Mariam, and, of course, a collective rush for Western modernity (Haq, *Pariah* 46-47). The winds of change over the next two decades could be termed a pervasive transformation from what Haq termed as "backwaters" in describing Dhaka (Haq, "Every Poet Has to Find His or Her Own Way") or what Salma Sobhan calls "a rural hinterland" vis-à-vis West Bengal (304). One of the symbols that represent this new elite's search for modern tastes and sensibilities in the poem is *Radiant Reading* English-medium students like Haq would read "amidst a sacramental hush / in the amber light of hurricane lanterns / while fireflies and stars lit up / a world of wonderful possibilities" (Haq, *Pariah* 48-49). Now shocked by the increasing temporal and spatial disconnect from that relatively assured way of life, Haq conjures up the evening reading scene in his mind's eye so that he can have a consoling view of his young self, unaware of the terrors of everyday life meted over the questions of democracy, human rights, cultural autonomy, among various other issues. Despite its commemoration of blissful times, a return to the childhood reality cannot escape the permeating politico-historical currents that, more than the Anglo-American literary themes Haq absorbed from his voracious reading, might have encroached upon the young consciousness. What he deems "my paradise" in the closing line of the poem "Beginnings" is threatened by the series of events that reconfigured subjectivity and the very idea of nationhood:

> through discontent
> and demonstrations
> and war and coups
> and varieties of misrule
> and people and more people
> and I am elsewhere looking back
> on a locality that's only a name. (Haq, *Pariah* 49)

Put into the perspective of historical consciousness, these seven lines synthesize the crucial pre- and post-independence happenings in Bangladesh over the five decades that also comprise the parallel span of Haq's poetic career, and hint at his presently being "elsewhere," nostalgic about the past whose material traces have been buried under the accumulating heaps of structural progress. Like Baudelaire pining for the old Paris yielding to Haussmann's massive urbanization and modernization project (See: Sanyal; Kerr), Haq feels displaced from the topographic scene that now exists only in memory inducing a desire to go back to the unmodulated native tradition. All the same, while these events in the nation's history have sprung from the politico-economic contestations over power and

its modus operandi, it is selfhood that dominated Haq's understanding of the world in flux. Often the observant and introspective selfhood was analogous with "stray dogs," if not entirely with Baudelaire's modern *flâneur*, as Haq depicts his juvenile camaraderie in terms of a "local pack" whose adult leader was driven by a "desire for power" and was catapulted into "the despair of not having it" ultimately turning into "the local lunatic." The darkly ambitious leader's loss of sanity in an apathetic world and Haq's growing up are juxtaposed with the reckless but vulnerable living of stray dogs in the vicinity and the multiple, simultaneous happenings in the country's broader socio-political fabric:

> while the strays ran around
> playing their own game of survival
> and demonstrators ran into police bullets
> and genocidal wars spread like bush fire
> and refugees filled up maps
> and independence lit up the sky with fireworks
> and varieties of misrule flourished
> and slums grew like leaves in spring
> and trade and manufacture sped up like falling meteors
> and every outfit grew a thousand eyes like Indra
> to keep an eye on what was or wasn't going on
> and people scattered like autumn leaves (Haq, *Pariah* 52–55).

The two reminiscence poems analyzed above outline how Haq's transition from an English-medium student to a historically shaped individual witnessing the burgeoning nation's successive struggles and transformations through the 50s, 60s, and 70s to the post-independence era made him conscious of his place in history. But it is not merely as a witness to those events that he portrays his childhood self. Occasionally in prose and poetry, he brings up his childhood memory of chanting "blood-curdling slogans" through a megaphone improvised out of a rolled-up piece of cardboard, of subscribing to the demand for the recognition of Bangla as a state language, and of enlightening himself about the economic exploitation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan, particularly in terms of using foreign exchange earned through jute exports to finance development projects in West Pakistan (Haq, "English-medium boy;" Haq, "Nationality and other difficulties").

One of the early outcomes of the growing consciousness in Haq in the 60s comes out in the poem "Barbecue" where he recounts his "first protest march on a broiling summer day" in which he partook even as an English-medium student, that raged across the country against the 1962 East Pakistan Education policy propounded by the Sharif Commission at the behest of the military regime

of Ayub Khan. Officially named as "Commission on National Education," the policy would have made English and Urdu mandatory institutional subjects, rendered education more inaccessible to the economically underprivileged and, according to Alam, would have rescinded students' "right to maintain any connection with political parties" (21). Haq's experience of joining this student movement when he was a twelve-year-old student at Saint Gregory's, of rallying to "the shade of a legendary mango tree" – the historically celebrated *aamtala* on Dhaka University campus where Haq would later pursue his English studies – and of quenching his thirst at Madhu's Canteen on that day (Haq, *Pariah* 19-20) underscores the poet's upholding of the collective patriotic zeal materializing, to cite Fakrul Alam, towards the vision of East Pakistan's self-determination through subsequent movements (21). Once attuned to the spirit of protesters, he must have felt the "progressiveness" that, as Quazi Faruque Ahmed recalls, the 1962 education movement "inculcated and infused" into the East Pakistan/ Bangladeshi society. Though he did not write poems in response to those events, he acknowledges the symbiotic link between poetry and zeitgeist at various critical stages of Bangladesh (Haq, "For your sake"). It is worth mentioning here that Haq started "scribbling" free verse in the late 60s towards the end of his secondary schooling after he had had "a conversion experience" under the tutelage of his teacher-mentor Brother Hobart, and soon set to honing Anglophone poetry to depicting the native conditions (Haq, "Introducing a Bangladeshi Writer" 113; Haq, "The Hijra" 5; Haq, "Many Histories" 44; Haq, "British Poetry and I" 8). An adolescent living in the erstwhile East Pakistan, he must have inculcated the sweeping spirit of the 1960s – the timespan that Basu terms "a transformative, radical era" and also "a decade of hope, protests and rebellion" (1-2) and that Bangladesh's eminent political scientist Talukder Maniruzzaman commemorates for the "ideology-based" agitations of 1960, 1962, and 1969. But this research finds that it is only through the few reminiscence poems that Haq looks back at his childhood self in those years of high politics. For reasons yet to be determined in further research, Haq did not feel an urge, like contemporary Bengali-language poets, to simultaneously respond to those events through his English-language poetry.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis sheds light on Haq's awareness of the ontology of history with a particular focus on Bangladesh – an awareness enlightened by his exposure to the several evolutionary stages in the pre- and post-independence times and evidenced in his poetry, prose writings, and interviews. His view on history significantly stands askew to the grand nationalist narrative that prioritizes politics and ideological binaries over the nuances and aspirations of individual lives. A *Muktijuddha* or freedom fighter upholding the sine qua non of his choice

to participate in the making of history with no political or ideological affiliations, Haq reels from the "nightmarish" unfolding of history across South Asia and in Bangladesh, and is anxious about any iota of complicity – if only because of his existential, situation-demanded choice – in the deviational workings of history contrived by vested groups. It is life possessing a treasure trove of memory that Haq celebrates and gives the center stage in his poetry. He resents that history is treated, rather uncritically, in literature and other discursive media with resultant popularity as a quid pro quo. So his discontent and nonchalance about the trends of historical consciousness in the country is evident in his divergent Anglophone poetics and in his staid reluctance to memorialize the 1971 history in his Anglophone verse except for writing three short poems. In fact, this particular stance distinguishes him from his contemporary Bengali-language poets, such as Shamshur Rahman for one, and makes his poetry a curious case, beyond the perennial language question, for the researchers of Bangladeshi literature and culture, for another.

As narratives and counter-narratives on aspects of history preoccupy everyday discourse, Haq's turn to memory becomes significant for its potential to bring up the past in an alternative strain. Additionally, Haq seems to think old-age reminiscences not only ascertain his native rootedness despite being an Anglophone poet or having, for that matter, an apparent estrangement from the Bengali-lingua-cultural imaginings of nationhood; they also sustain life compensating for the loss of the best lived times at childhood. To serve any or all of these ends, Haq has composed a number of reminiscence poems that may together be considered a substitute for a full-fledged memoir or an autobiography useful to understanding the poet in relation to his context. Though composed as a way of looking back at the poet's younger self maturing along the timeline of the nation through the 50s, 60s, and 70s, these poems offer windows into some of the decisive historical events from the poet's subjective point of view, and contrapuntally countervail the all-encompassing grasp of historical narratives, thus pointing to the complexity of life's material conditions in the past, by extension, in the present. That a minor and his peers growing up in the nascent elite milieu would chant the Language Movement slogans then in the air testifies to the pervasiveness of the movement itself in the collective consciousness of a Bengali speaking populace rising against the imposition of Urdu, the West Pakistani ruling elite's language. Again, that an English-medium school boy would entangle himself with the exploding protest against the 1962 education policy mandating English among other things underscores the urgency of the movement for a broader nationalistic cause. Furthermore, the pictorial representation of Dhaka as a sparsely populated semi-urban area in the immediate post-Partition era ought to make older generation-readers nostalgic

about those times now lost irretrievably to history while younger readers may divine a once-pristine locale unfamiliar with today's urban space disorders.

Finally, despite being creative recollections, these poems become a kind of history-telling from present perspectives, as they refer back to the pre-independence collective movements and struggles and post-independence tribulations of the nation. These poems may be deemed as the materialization of Haq's "late style" after Said's conceptualization of the term on Adorno's fashion of reflections on Beethoven's last works. For Said, with its accumulated wisdom and old-age endeavor to make sense of the world, late style is "*in*, but oddly *apart* from the present" (Said 24). And for Haq too, lateness far from being belatedness opens a more mature vantage point to see life in all its complexities and nuances as it has evolved through history's many turns and twists in this land now called Bangladesh.

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