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Professor Fakrul Alam: Literature, Life and Translation



Hasan Al Zayed

Editor's Note

He is surely one of the most loved and respected professors in Bangladesh. Even though he was mostly anchored at the Department of English, Dhaka University, many others across the country will claim him as mentor, professor and guide. I consider myself fortunate to have worked directly under his tutelage as well as with him as a colleague. He is known across the border not just as a fine academic but also as a translator and critic whose works

on postcolonial literature and Rabindranath Tagore have established him as one of the foremost intellectuals of Bangladesh. Along with the other members of The Daily Star Literature team, I am proud to present Dr. Fakrul Alam interviewed by Hasan Al Zayed, who I am sure will claim the same privilege of having him as mentor.

HZ: Where were you born, Sir? Where did you grow up? Can you give us some ideas about your childhood?

FA: As was quite usual in those days, I was born in my Nana Bari, which is in Ukilpara, Feni. If you want to know about it, you can type “Ah, Nana Bari!” on Google. But I grew up in Ramkrishna Mission Road, Dhaka. Once again, you can read a little about this phase of my life by googling “Memories of Durga Puja.” But I was the first grandson of my mother's family and an only son, and so my mother brought me up quite strictly, fearful that I could be a spoilt brat! I loved to play—soccer, cricket and later basketball—and read and read. I went to Little Jewels School in Purana Paltan, and then St. Joseph's, and am very thankful that I went to such excellent schools. Hard to believe, but Dhaka was a wonderful place to grow up—not quite a city but not really a small town either. Lots of spaces in which to play! And there were excellent bookshops in Nawabpur for me as well.

HZ: What made you study literature? You could, I assume, choose several other careers. Why did you choose to become a professor of English literature?

FA: One reason, I often joke and say, is because I was so poor in Math, for otherwise I would have studied Economics, a subject I liked! The other is, like most middle-class boys of my generation, I wanted to be a CSP—the glamour of the elite service seduced me and my friends quite early. But, really, it seemed a degree in literature was a natural outcome of my passion for reading. Since I did quite well in my exams, I was offered a job at DU—something I had never dreamt of previously.

HZ: I have heard you express your admiration for critical thinking and literary theory. What made you interested in literary theory? How did it influence your reading of literary texts?

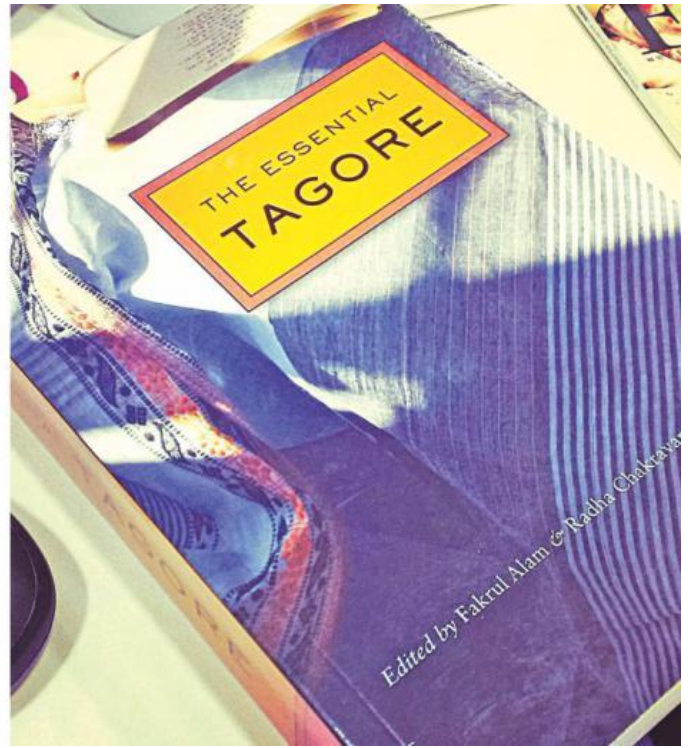
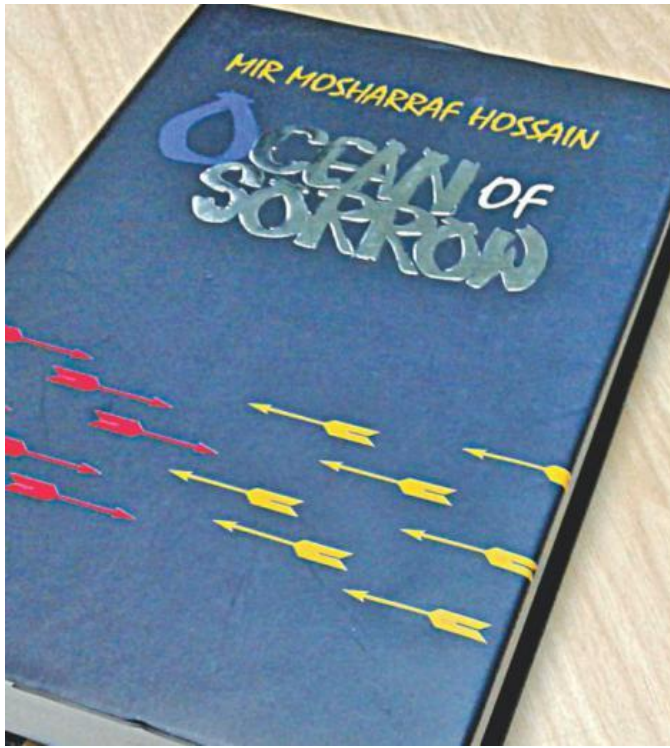
FA: There are two things English Studies teaches its devotees—to think critically and to interpret texts. When I started reading English, close reading was the rage and I absorbed the theory and practice of reading critically—by osmosis, as it were. But when I went to Graduate School in Canada, I discovered poststructuralist theory. I soon learnt to be wary of surface meanings and about the importance of reading contextually and with an awareness of ideology. Crucial to me in this respect was my reading of Edward Said, for he taught me to read from my location in space and time, that is to say, postcolonially.

HZ: Your PhD dissertation was on Daniel Defoe. Your first book Daniel Defoe: Colonial Propagandist explores the intersection between literature and ideology, establishing a connection between British imperialist culture and Defoe's work. Was this the beginning of your lifelong interest in postcolonial themes and methods of reading?

FA: Two books led me to working on Defoe for my doctoral dissertation. The first was Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, a brilliant work of scholarship, that made me feel that I should do research on the originary moment of the English novel and made me write my first academic essay when still in Dhaka—"Realism and the English Novel." This led me to Defoe's voluminous and fascinating works and extraordinary range as an author. And when I read Said as I was thinking of a doctoral topic it occurred to me to write on Defoe postcolonially. And one thing led to another—conferences, invitation to publish and scholarly networks kept me going in the area.

HZ: You have written numerous essays on Edward Said—more than anyone I know of. Your book Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English, I feel, reads more like a tribute to Said than a book of essays paying equal attention to different writers and themes. Why are you drawn to Edward Said so much?

FA: As I've already indicated, he inspired me early! Do note though that if there are six essays on Said there are five on R. K. Narayan. But the important point to note though is that he kept developing. In following him as he wrote book after book I felt that I too could evolve, learn and mature in scholarship as well as develop as a teacher from my distinctive location. But I must admit that I have never tired of his work and am unable to be critical about anything he did or said or wrote!



HZ: In the past few years, you have written extensively about Rabindranath Tagore. You also seem to believe that Rabindranath embodies what is best in us. What makes him so special to you?

FA: Rabindranath was part of my growing up in the late 50s and 60s. But an English medium background and English Studies kept me away from him for a long, long time, though all my life I have listened to his songs. But in the 1990s I started to read Bengali literature for the first time with any kind of sustained interest and there he was—the Everest of our culture that you couldn't help admiring and that you had to come close to and breathe, as it were, even if it meant climbing heights you had never climbed till then. And to me, he is not only the greatest Bengali writer but an endless source of wisdom, beauty and light, a truly great man, one of the greatest, as well as a maker a shaper of our collective consciousness.

HZ: You are among our best known and most prolific translators. Your translations of Jibanananda Das and Rabindranath are well-received. You have also translated Bangabandhu's Unfinished Memoir. You received Bangla Academy Award for translation in 2012. How did you become interested in translation?

FA: It was the part of connecting to my Bengali roots that I talked about above. But I am always reminded when I'm asked this question also of a poem by Tarapada Roy on Jibanananda Das's incomparably haunting poem “Lash Kata Ghore” where Roy suggests that he is a ghost who possesses one endlessly and won't let go. That is how the poems seemed to me when I read them in the 1990s. The moment I read “Banalata Sen” Jibanananda gripped me so I felt I had to translate it and other poems by him. And that

led to the other translations, for I discovered that I had the ability to translate from Bengali because of my training plus inclination.

HZ: In my reckoning, your translation of Bishad Sindhu— Ocean of Sorrow—and Professor Kaiser Haq's The Triumph of the Snake Goddess, which is a creative reworking of Manasa Mangal, mark a significant turn in the history of Bangladeshi writing in English. Both Bishad Sindhu and Manasha Mangal are located at the fringes of Bengali middle-class' literary taste, despite these works' immense cultural and aesthetic importance. Tell us why you chose to translate Bishad Sindhu. Was it rewarding?

FA: Thanks very much! As I indicate in my Preface to my translation, I translated the work because Professor Shamsuzzaman Khan, D. G. of Bangla Academy, requested me to do so and persuaded me in his gentle way that it is a classic of our writing that needed to be introduced to the rest of the world. Translating Bishad Shindhu was difficult; indeed, immensely difficult. But of course it was rewarding to be so close to such a great work for month after month!

HZ: You have a long and illustrious teaching career. You have been among the most admired teachers of your generation and department. What are your pedagogical principles and philosophy?

FA: No principles or philosophy, really, except love of teaching literature in English, absolute commitment to my job, and the desire to communicate to my students the classics that I have encountered as meaningfully as I am able to. I feel now teaching was a boon and I chose to use it!

HZ: You want to retire from teaching and administration after a few years. You also said you fancy going back to uninterrupted reading and writing. I find it deeply admirable that even now you fancy reading and writing. This also reminds me of what is absent in today's academic culture: lack of genuine interest in reading and in-depth research. With so many private universities only interested in superficial classroom engagement and public universities uninterested in solid research, what is the future of knowledge in our country?

FA: As I respond to you now, my beloved University of Dhaka is going through traumatic times and I feel saddened at the turn of events. I am saddened also by an academic culture that has been so vitiated by politics on the one hand and commercialism on the other. But I am by nature someone who looks ahead and thinks—such things will pass! Teaching makes me come annually in contact with at least a few bright and hopeful minds and I believe they and others of their generation will lead us forward through the morass of mediocrity and greed. Knowledge will come and, as the poet said, but wisdom lingers; nevertheless, Bangladeshis have achieved so much since 1971 that I or anyone

else can't write off advances in wisdom as well as knowledge in our country in times to come.

HZ: Do you have any regret? Is there anything that you would have done differently?

FA: I definitely do. I wish I had believed in myself when I was younger and attempted to write creatively as well as critically. But I will end by thanking you and saying that I am thankful to my colleagues and students as well as loved ones for achieving what little I have been able to achieve.

Hasan Al Zayed teaches at the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh and is a PhD student at State University of New York, Albany.

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