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Writing Matters: In conversation with Dr Mohammad A. Quayum

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By Shikhandin

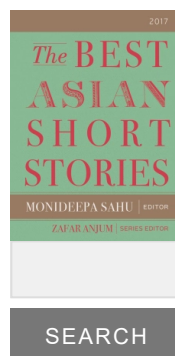
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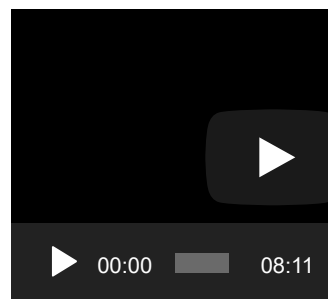
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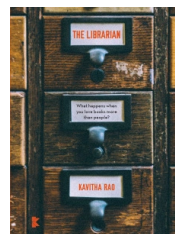


Dr Mohammad A. Quayum is the author, editor and translator of 32 books in the areas of American literature, Asian Literature and Postcolonial literatures. He is also the author of more than sixty articles in distinguished peer-reviewed journals. His research interests range from 19th and 20th century American literature to contemporary Asian literature, with special focus on Indian literature, Bengali literature and Malaysian-Singaporean literature.

He is the Founding Editor and Editor-in-Chief of *Asiatic: An International Journal of Asian Literatures, Cultures and Englishes* (indexed in Web of Science and Scopus) and is on the advisory board of several leading journals including *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (Routledge, UK; ISI indexed), *Transnational Literature* (Australia; ERA indexed), *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* (USA; WoS indexed), *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* (USA), *Literature Today* (India), *The Apollonian: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* (India), and *The*

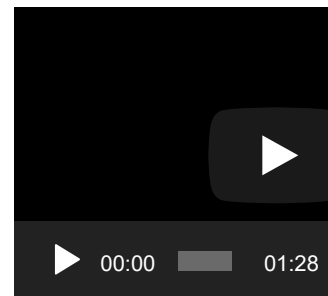
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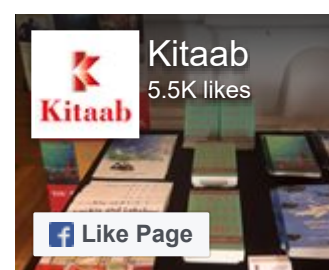


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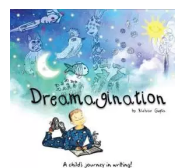
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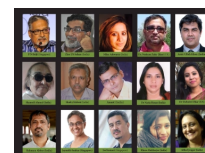


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Dr Quayum is dean of the Kulliyah (Faculty) of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), and an Honorary Professor of English and Creative Writing at Flinders University, Australia.

Shikhandin: Most of us only know of you as Dr M.A. Quayum the academic and mentor. Tell us a bit about your early life, and what drew you to pursue literature.

Dr M.A. Quayum: I was born in a small town called Gopalganj, in the district of Faridpur in Bangladesh. This was before Bangladesh was formed and was still known as East Pakistan. I grew up in this small, near-idyllic town and got my early education in the only Government school for boys there, S.M. Model Primary and High School. When I was eleven, my father sent me to a public residential school several hundred kilometres away, known as Jhenidah Cadet College. This marked a turning point in my life. It was an English medium school and the fees were very high. My father could hardly afford the fees and yet he sent me there, mainly to secure a good future for me. A second reason was that my father, who was a lawyer in Gopalganj, had a great admiration for English language and literature. Probably he thought that sending me there would also give me a good grounding in the language. I don't know how and where he picked up his love for English, because my grandfather was a religious teacher at a primary school in our village who had little interaction with the language. My father was, however, educated at the Islamia College (now Maulana Azad College) in Calcutta (Kolkata), and perhaps it was there that he developed his great love for both English language and literature. You would be surprised to know that my father could recite several poems by Wordsworth,

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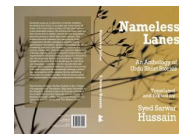
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Keats, Tennyson and Browning from memory. He would take enormous pride in reciting Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and Tennyson's "Ulysses" in particular. Maybe I was infected by his love in childhood and therefore developed a natural penchant for literature from an early age, reading all kinds of books, in both Bengali and English. My father would often buy me books and take me to the local library and encourage me to participate in various literary activities such as essay writing and poetry recitation competitions. I remember participating in an essay writing competition on the life of the Prophet when I was seven or eight years old, and then being invited to read my essay at a local mosque. I also remember my father giving me a copy of Rabindranath Tagore's collection of short stories, *Galpagucchha*, for my eleventh birthday, and I recollect reading almost all of it in a great rush. My recent attempt to translate some of Rabindranath's short stories into English, which was first published as *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* by Macmillan India in 2011 and then as *Rabindranath Tagore: The Ruined Nest and Other Stories* by Silverfish Books Malaysia in 2014, was a means to share that childhood excitement and discovery: firstly with my daughter who, being born and brought up in Australia, has in a way lost touch with the language and the culture; secondly, with my students and friends in Malaysia and elsewhere, who have great curiosity about and admiration for Tagore but cannot read his work in the original because of the language barrier.

Shikhandin: Who were the authors you admired during your formative years? Their influences on you, in terms of literary taste and philosophy.

Dr Quayum: Like any typical Bengali child, my encounter with literature began with Bangla chhara (Bengali rhymes), rupakathar galpa (fairy tales), upakatha (fables) and rupak galpa (allegories). My habit was to imagine and conceptualise any poem/verse or

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story I read. This made me not only enjoy the verse or the story but also connect it to my life and surroundings. This habit continued as I grew up and began to read more 'serious' writers such as Rabindranath, Sarat Chandra, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Begum Rokeya, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Jibanananda Das, Jasimuddin, Syed Mujtaba Ali, Abdul Kadir, Manik Bandopadhyay, Ashapurna Devi, Begum Sufia Kamal and Shawkat Osman. I think I have just given you the list of my favourite Bengali writers from childhood. All these writers have influenced me in one way or another and I have great admiration for all of them. However, if I have to name the ones who influenced me most, it would have to be Rabindranath, Sarat Chandra, Rokeya, Nazrul and Sufia Kamal. Later I developed a great admiration for Mahasweta Devi, Sukanta Bhattacharya, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Razia Khan Amin and Nirmalendu Goon. Both Serajul Islam Choudhury and Razia Khan Amin were my professors in the English Department at the University of Dhaka.

I admire these writers in different ways, in different degrees and for different reasons, but the one thing they share is their love for Bengali culture, society and people, and above all, their love for humanity. I think they wrote mainly to document life in Bengal as it was during their time, to mirror the joys and sorrows of the common people, and to improve their lot by abolishing the prevailing injustices in society, for political or socio-cultural reasons. By and large, their intention was to purge society of all fusty, age-worn and oppressive traditions and make it more modern, moderate, equitable, accountable, inclusive and progressive. They also fought for the rights of women, children and minorities, especially the poor, uneducated and the deprived. In short, they acted as doctors of culture and the conscience of society. It is their humanitarian outlook and the aspiration to make society better, by ensuring the rights of everyone and healing the divide among various religious groups, which really attracted

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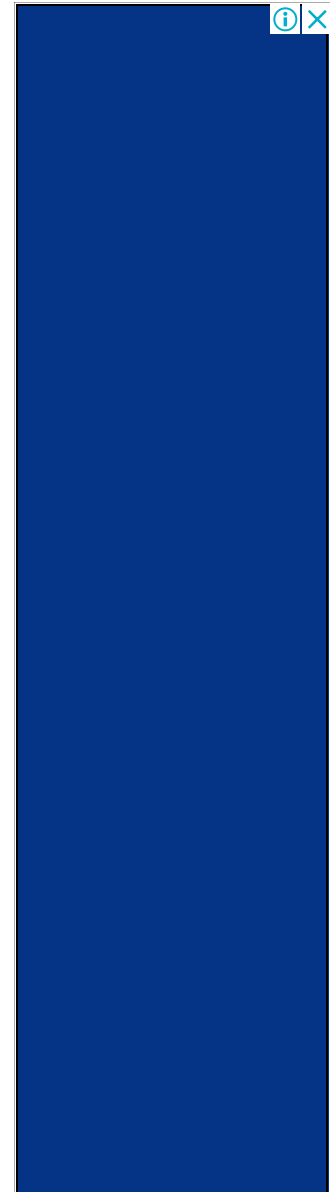
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me to their work and encourages me to return to their writing again and again. South Asia being a multicultural and multi-religious society, it is important that we remain inclusive, open-minded and catholic in our outlook and not shut each other out based on the way we speak, dress or worship. These writers have taught us in their own way the values of unity, peace and harmony and the need for equality and justice for all.

It is because of my admiration for these writers that I have translated some of their work into English. Besides Rabindranath's short stories, I have translated Rokeya's works, *The Essential Rokeya*, Brill Publishing, 2013. I have translated Kazi Nazrul's last novel *Kuhelika*, and currently I am translating some of the stories and novels by Sarat Chandra, which I hope to bring out in 2019.

Shikhandin: With regard to South Asia and South East Asia, how has (in your opinion) English writing and literature evolved and grown in the last two decades?

Dr Quayum: There has been a proliferation of English writing in both South and Southeast Asia in the last twenty years or so. Both regions have seen the arrival of many young, energetic and sparkling writers. But let me not speak on all the countries in these two regions, as that might result in a very lengthy discussion. Rather, I'll focus on the state of English writing in Bangladesh and Malaysia, as these two countries have more in common than we think. Of course, the differences are there too. The history of Bangladeshi writing in English can be traced back to such nineteenth century writers from undivided Bengal as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Kashiprashad Ghose, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath Tagore, but if we strictly consider the scene in the post-independence period, we must acknowledge that there was hardly any English language activity in the early years because of the way Bangladesh was formed. Bangladesh was



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created out of a language movement that began in 1952. The nucleus of this movement lay in Jinnah's declaration soon after the partition of 1947, which was that Urdu alone would be the state language and the lingua franca of Pakistan. Bengalis of East Bengal, then known as East Pakistan, saw an injustice in this and fought against it tooth and nail, which gradually resulted in a political movement leading to the breakup of Pakistan and formation of the new nation-state of Bangladesh in 1971. Because the country was formed solely on linguistic identity, it was difficult for writers in the early years to repel this sentiment and start writing in English. As a result, English-language writing was sparse in the early years. I can recall only Razia Khan Amin, Suraiya Khanam and Kaiser Haq writing in English in the seventies and eighties. However, since the nineties, and more recently, we have writers like Adib Khan, Monica Ali, Mahmud Rahman, Tahmima Anam and Zia Haider Rahman who have made their mark. What is interesting is that all these writers are diasporic, writing from abroad rather than from home soil. This would indicate that the centre of Bangladeshi writing in English has moved away from its native land and has taken roots mostly in the West.

Malaysian literature in English has also encountered a similar fate, although it has trodden a different path since its inception in the 1940s. The tradition of Malaysian literature in English is relatively new compared to the tradition of Indian or Bangladeshi writing in English. It began in 1947-48 with the establishment of an English Department at the University of Malaya in Singapore, when the young students of the department started writing in the language and publishing student magazines such as *The Cauldron* (1947-49), *The New Cauldron* (1949-60), *The Malayan Undergrad* (1951-57) and *Write* (1957-58). This was followed by the emergence of a strong literary tradition in English that saw the rise of such prominent writers as Lloyd Fernando, Ee Tiang Hong, Lee Kok Liang, K.S. Maniam and Shirley Lim. However, the

growth of English writing in Malaysia was seriously impeded with the passage of a Language Act in 1967 that made Malay the national language of the country. With the passage of this act, and the steps taken in its aftermath, writers in the English language and those considering writing in English were left with little hope of a successful future in their craft. As a result, some of them ceased to write altogether and several left the country. Of course, English writing has made something of a comeback in Malaysia in the last twenty years or so with the arrival of well-known 'young' writers such as Beth Yahp, Tan Twan Eng, Tash Aw, Rani Manicka, Huzir Sulaiman, Shih-Li Kow and Preeta Samarasan.

However, one will notice that, as in the case of Bangladeshi writing in English, most of these Malaysian writers are also writing from abroad. This could be because like Bangladesh, Malaysia also has a strong sentimental attachment to the indigenous language, English education and readership is limited to a small group within the middle-class population, and the overall environment is not very congenial to creative activities in English.

Shikhandin: Who are the current South Asian and South East Asian writers, both new/emerging and established that you enjoy reading/have enjoyed reading?

Dr Quayum: This will be a long list since you have not set a language boundary. I have favourite writers in English, Bengali and Malay – although my reading of Malay literature is limited to English translations. Among the contemporary South Asian writers in English, my favourites would be Bapsi Sidhwa, Tareq Ali and Mohsin Hamid from Pakistan; Anita Desai, Keki Daruwalla (whom I have published in my online journal, *Asiatic*), Amitav Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri from India and Kaiser Haq, Razia Sultana Khan and Tahmima Anam from Bangladesh. Among writers in Bengali, I would like to mention my former colleagues Prof. Serajul Islam

Choudhuri and Prof. Syed Manzoorul Islam, as well as Navaneeta Dev Sen, Nirmalendu Goon, Abul Bashar and Selina Hossain. My favourite Southeast Asian writers in English are Edwin Thumboo, Catherine Lim, Suchen Lim, Alfian Sa'at and Boey Kim Cheng from Singapore and Lloyd Fernando, Adiah Amin and Shirley Lim from Malaysia. Among writers in the Malay language, I admire the works of Shahnnon Ahmed, A. Samad Said and Muhammad Haji Salleh (who is currently an Adjunct Professor in the same department I teach).

Shikhandin: Apart from your considerable academic writing, you have also edited several books of short stories. Tell us what you look for, what moves you, grabs your attention as you wade through the submissions. Any story/stories you'd like to mention that stood out for you?

Dr Quayum: I have edited five volumes of short stories, three by Malaysian-Singaporean writers and two by Asian writers, but I have never really reflected on what I look for in selecting a story. In my experience it is more like a spontaneous process, something that strikes you, moves you, and appeals to your imagination, emotion or sensibility as you read the story. I don't think there is a set formula or a matrix that is used to measure the stories. Generally, I see if a story 'says' something and does it precisely and exquisitely; whether there is a poet's feel for language in the narrative; whether it makes us aware of ourselves as human beings, our identity, circumstances and the world around us; whether the details in the story are sharp and evocative; whether it helps us to grow emotionally and intellectually and makes us sensitive to the condition of all living things – human, animal and vegetable; whether it makes us morally aware of good and evil, and inclines us towards what is admirable in human beings while rejecting all that is diabolical and sinister.

Having said this, I must add that every story is judged on its own merit and doesn't have to possess each and

every one of these qualities. A story may be rich in ideas but poorly told, with tedious prose and fuzzy plot. On the other hand, a story can be well told, using elegant language and rich technique, but may lack substance. It's the combination of the two that makes a story stand out, makes it both readable and memorable, intriguing and engaging.

I like all the stories included in my five edited volumes, and they are all beautifully told, giving us a slice of contemporary life, but if I have to name one from my latest collection, *Twenty-two New Asian Short Stories*, that stands out in my mind, it will probably be Razia Sultana Khan's "The Mollah's Revenge". This is a powerful story about religious hypocrisy; how a crooked cleric abuses his religious authority to victimise an innocent, young married woman; or how in patriarchal societies powerful men often use religion for exploitation and self-gratification. Being a Muslim myself, it struck a chord in me, as I have seen similar abuse of religion by corrupt, pseudo-religious Muslim priests both in Bangladesh and Malaysia. It is because of such wicked, unconscionable religious imposters that Islam has been much misunderstood of late and misrepresented in the Western media.

Shikhandin: Do you also write fiction and/or poetry yourself?

Dr Quayum: I used to once, but not now. I used to write in Bengali during my younger days but after I left the country in 1982 – first to do my Master's in Canada, then my Ph.D in Australia and subsequently pursue my working career in Singapore, Australia and Malaysia – it became difficult for me to keep in touch with the language and the culture. This vacuum was gradually filled up by academic writing, translation and editing, which are what I have been pursuing for more than 35 years. Sometimes I take comfort from Saul Bellow's comment that 'critical writing... is a rival form of imaginative literature.'

Shikhandin: You have written on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, probably the earliest feminist writer from Bengal – am I right? Can you share a few insights into her writing, life and times? Other than her widely known *Sultana's Dream*, what other works in Bengali and English by her do you consider noteworthy.

Dr Quayum: Rokeya was a pioneering feminist, not just in Bengal but perhaps in the whole of South Asia. She was a woman of extraordinary vision, determination and courage. Do you know that she was not even allowed to go to school by her father? She was also forbidden to learn either English or Bengali at home. In those days elite Muslims in Calcutta spoke only Urdu, Persian or Arabic. They associated these languages with Muslim identity and rejected Bengali as a Hindu language, meant for lower-class Muslims who had converted from Hinduism. English was seen as a taboo language, meant only for 'kafirs' or infidels. Rokeya grew up in that kind of repressive environment and yet she not only acquired both English and Bengali to the extent of using both as her creative mediums but also went on to set up a school for Muslim girls in Calcutta in 1911, which was only the fourth school for Muslim girls in Bengal. The school, as you would know, is still there, named after her altruistic husband, Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls. It ought to be mentioned that Rokeya's husband was a mainstay behind much of Rokeya's success as an activist, educator and writer. Without the generous support and encouragement from her husband, things could have been far more challenging for Rokeya, given the entrenched patriarchal environment she lived in.

Rokeya was primarily an educationist and activist but took up writing in 1902-03, around the age of 23 (Rokeya was born in 1880), to reinforce her thoughts on women's issues, especially the education of Muslim women who were perpetually trapped in a vicious cycle of male servitude and tyranny. Rokeya wrote over a

period of almost three decades and in different genres – from poetry, polemical essays, fiction and allegorical narratives to social satire, burlesque, letters and journalistic vignettes. Altogether, she has left behind five books and scores of uncollected essays, stories, poems and letters. Her books include *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vols I (1904) and II (1922); *Sultana's Dream* ([1905], 1908); *Padmarag* (Ruby, 1924; her only novel) and *Aborodhbasini* (The Zenana Women, 1931; a collection of reflective diary entries).

Rokeya has often been seen as the first and foremost Muslim Renaissance woman in Bengal, sometimes placed ahead of Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Devi as a writer. Mohitlal Majumdar, Rokeya's contemporary, described her as the 'soul and consciousness' of her age, and Shibnarayan Roy maintained that no other writer of her time, Hindu or Muslim, wrote with the kind of conviction that Rokeya did.

Rokeya has sometimes been seen as a writer who wrote for Muslims only, indifferent to the cause of Hindu women of her time. I have tried to rectify this misunderstanding in two of my articles – "Gender and Education: The Vision and Activism of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain" and "Hindu-Muslim Relations in the Work of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain" – as well as in my co-edited book, *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (Orient Blackswan, 2017).

Shikhandin: What are you working on now?

Dr Quayum: As I mentioned earlier, I am currently working on a translated volume of Sarat Chandra's fiction. This will include his novels *Srikanta* and *Devdas* as well as some of the short stories. *Devdas* is very popular in Malaysia, perhaps a result of its film renditions, and my friends and students here keep reminding me that they are waiting for my translation of the book. I am also working on three other edited

books – one on Tagore’s vision of nationalism and global unity, a collection of critical essays on Bangladeshi writing in English, and an anthology of Asian short stories – the latter a follow up to the previous two collections mentioned above: *A Rainbow Feast* and *Twenty-two New Asian Short Stories*. As you would perhaps know, I am also the editor-in-chief and founding editor of a biannual online journal, *Asiatic: An International Journal of Asian Literatures, Cultures and Englishes*, which has been around since 2007. It is a journal of creative writing and criticism, focusing on Asian writers and writing, both indigenous and diasporic, and this project preoccupies me considerably as its volume of submission has been increasing steadily. Currently, we receive about 300 articles on average in a year, as well as numerous interviews and creative writing pieces.

Shikhandin: What is a day like in the life of Dr M.A. Quayum?

Dr Quayum: It’s fairly ordinary, like the typical day of an academic. I am currently the dean of my Faculty, so much of the working day is taken up by administration work – meeting staff and students and addressing whatever work-related problems they may have, welcoming visiting delegates, attending meetings and writing memos. It can be gruelling at times but exciting as well, as in the midst of all the challenges there is also the opportunity to achieve good things for the faculty and faculty members and contribute to the future of the university. Being in administration means less teaching and less research. Whatever research or writing I may be involved with, I have to save it for night-time or the weekend. It was the other way around before I took up my current post, when almost all my time was spent on teaching, research and postgraduate supervision. Now my priorities have changed somewhat, as I have to ensure the wellbeing of more than six thousand students in the eleven academic departments in my

faculty and more than 250 staff – that is my foremost duty.

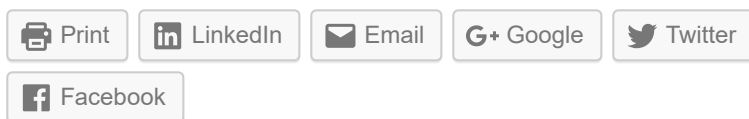
Shikhandin: Does light reading figure in your free time?

Dr Quayum: Not very much now, but during my adolescent years I read lots of thrillers and fantasy novels both in Bengali and English, including the Kuasha and Masudrana series by Kazi Anwar Hossain. I also read some of the works by Arthur Conan Doyle, Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie and Roald Dahl in English and stories for children by Sukumar Ray and his son Satyajit Ray in Bengali. Last year I read a few young adult novels like Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused* and Kavita Daswani's *Indie Girl* and *Lovetorn*. But generally my only light reading nowadays would be browsing through news blogs to keep myself abreast of the global happenings.

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