

# The Daily Star

Friday, "March 15, 2019"

Home » Literature

12:00 AM, March 09, 2019 / LAST MODIFIED: 12:00 AM, March 09, 2019

## Our Debt of Gratitude to Abdul Quadir



---

**Md. Mahmudul Hasan**

---

Abdul Quadir (1906-84) was a poet-prosodist, essayist, editor, journalist, literary critic, bibliophile and collector of literary works. He came from Araisdha – the village where I was born – in the district of Brahmanbaria, so I feel a special affinity with him. The homes where he and I spent our childhoods are within 200 metres of each other. I grew up with the pride that our village produced this great poet and writer.

Unfortunately, much to the peril of our understanding of the history of twentieth-century Bengali literature, he is not widely known and is somewhat neglected in literary scholarship. Had he been born in a country like Britain and contributed to English literature the way he did to Bengali literature, I presume he would have been remembered as an outstanding literary figure both in his country and abroad – both during his lifetime and afterwards.

It seems that we Bangladeshis have collectively failed to make adequate conscious efforts to preserve and promote the wealth of our creative cultural traditions. We have fallen short of making the most of our intellectual gurus and their works.

During my early education, I came across Abdul Quadir's poem “Manusher Seba” (Service to Humanity) in the syllabus, and since then have remained impressed by his emphasis on the humanitarian aspect of Islam with special reference to the needy, the sick, and the afflicted. In fact, the poem is his Bangla rendering of a hadith or tradition of Prophet Muhammad. (I will provide my English translation of the poem at the end of this article)

For a long time, “Manusher Seba” was the only work of Abdul Quadir with which I was familiar; and the poet-editor re-emerged in my life during my PhD years. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was at the centre of my doctoral research entitled “Introducing Rokeya's Plural Feminism” (2007) that I completed at the University of Portsmouth in Britain. Since the beginning of my PhD journey, Rokeya has remained one of my major research interests and Abdul Quadir's *Rokeya Rachanabali* (Complete Works of Rokeya [1973]), a lifelong companion. I feel personally indebted to him for producing this massively important work. For the first time ever, it was he who pieced together, edited, and gave a clear structure and logical order to Rokeya's oeuvre.

*Rokeya Rachanabali* made Rokeya's works more accessible to readers, especially those who wished to pursue a comprehensive, specialised investigation of her legacy. It facilitated critical reflection on, and heralded a considerable quickening of interest in, her life and work. It was a formidable task and a significant contribution to Bengali literary

studies. However, that was not Abdul Quadir's only major achievement. He accomplished far more than that.

In the five volumes of *Nazrul Rachanabali* (Complete Works of Nazrul [1966-84]), Abdul Quadir collected and compiled the works of Bangladesh's national poet and the pioneer of anti-colonial resistance literature in Bangla, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976). Since the fifth volume of *Nazrul Rachanabali* has two parts, the entire corpus was actually published in a series of six sequential books. After completing the last volume, this literary colossus regretted that he could not continue collecting more of Nazrul Islam's undiscovered or uncompiled works due to his poor health and expected that other/future researchers would put the last touches on his unfinished task.

In the Introduction to the fifth volume of *Nazrul Rachanabali*, he talked about his old age and physical decline which prohibited him from continuing the great effort of recovering and structuring more of Nazrul Islam's writings. He wrote:

On 18 Joistho 1391 [1 June 1984] my age will cross 78 and will be in 79. Beset by the scourge of multiple diseases, I am currently a decrepit and senile man with poor eyesight. About seventeen years ago, I had an operation of the cataract of my right eye; but that eye still does not work very well. [Less than two years ago,] on 28 October 1982, I had an operation of the cataract of the left eye. In such a physical condition, it may not be possible for me to finish collecting all of Nazrul's scattered works.

His days were numbered. After expressing this concern about his health, he continued to deteriorate and died about six months later, on 19 December 1984.

In addition to *Rokeya Rachanabali* and the multivolume work *Nazrul Rachanabali*, Abdul Quadir produced and published more literary collections of similar nature and significance. He scavenged, compiled, structured and produced complete works of other pioneers of twentieth-century Bangla literature such as: Ismail Hossain Siraji (1880-1931), Mohammad Yakub Ali Chowdhury (1888-1940), Mohammad Lutfur Rahman (1889-1936), Abul Hussain (1896-1938), Golam Mostofa (1897-1964), and Muhammad Enamul Haque (1902-82).

His literary collections made it possible for us to see much of the richness of Bangla literature which was once equated with Hindu literature. With the sincere and painstaking efforts of literary practitioners and compilers like Abdul Quadir, many Bengali Muslim writers now have their well-deserved place and Muslim Bangla Sahitya (literature) has become a well-established literary tradition.

Regarding Muslim contributions to Bangla literary and cultural legacy, the eminent scholar of Nazrul Islam, Shahabuddin Ahmad (d. 2007) likens Abdul Quadir's role to those of Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad (1871-1953), Muhammad Shahidullah (1885-1969), Muhammad Enamul Haque (1902-82), Nazrul Islam and Muhammad Sufian. Discussing our collective debt to Abdul Quadir, Shahabuddin Ahmad commented:

Acquiring and piling up mountains of treasure is an end in itself unless there are effective endeavours to preserve them. Abdul Quadir is among the few Bengali Muslim litterateurs to whom goes the credit of preserving our shared literary canon. I do not think I have seen more than one such a great lover of literature. If there is an iota of gratefulness left in the (Muslim) community, they would erect a minaret of honour for him for the fact that, with love and devotion, he rescued (Bangla) Muslim literature and literati from neglect and oblivion.

Besides edited volumes, Abdul Quadir also produced works of literary criticism and biography. He (with Rezaul Karim) edited and published *Kabya Malancha* (Poetry Garden [Calcutta: Anustup, 1945]). He edited *Sonnet Satak* (Chittagong: Baighar, 1973) and *Bangla Sonnet* (1974). His other works include *Kobi Nazrul* (1970), *Kazi Abdul Wadud* (1976) and *Chhanda Samiksan* (Survey on Prosody [1979]). His two posthumously published works are *Bangla Chhander Itibritta* (History of Bangla Prosody [1985]) and *Yugakobi Nazrul* (Nazrul: Poet of the Time [1986]). His poetry books include *Dilruba* (1933) and *Uttar Basanta* (1967). There are many of his poems – not included in these two volumes – which were published in various periodicals and need to be collected in book form.

*Dilruba* contains poems he had written during his youth which had been previously published in various periodicals. Abdul Quadir and his fellow writers and friends – such as, the author-journalist Abul Kalam Shamsuddin (1897-1978), the village bard Jasimuddin (1903-76) and the writer of children's literature Bande Ali Mia (1906-79) – rummaged different periodicals and collected the pieces in *Dilruba*.

It is not possible for one person to collect and edit the works of all Bengali literary luminaries. Abdul Quadir did what he could to preserve our literary heritage that was available and accessible to him. The responsibility now rests on his successors. One way to repay our collective debt to him is to complete his unfinished tasks and to embark on new projects of collecting, compiling and preserving the literary works of the giants and greats of Bangla literature including Abdul Quadir himself.

In order to share with readers the content of “Manusher Seba,” I provide here my English rendition of the poem:

## Service to Humanity

*Abdul Quadir*

On the Day of Resurrection God will say: O human being,

You did not take care of Me when I was seriously ill.

Human being will reply: You are Master, Lord,

How could we take charge of Your care?

God will say: You must have seen people suffering from severe diseases,

Had you taken care of them you would have found Me there.

God will add: O human being,

I was hungry and asked for food, but you refused to feed me.

Human being will reply: You are the Sustainer of the whole world,

How could we feed You? How is that ever possible?

God will say: My starving servant went to your door,

You would have been repaid by Me if you had fed him.

God will further say: Listen, O human being,

I was thirsty and asked for water which you didn't offer Me.

Human being will reply: You are the Lord of the worlds,

I am Your humble servant, how could I feed You water?

God will say: The thirsty called upon you, hoping for water,

If you had given him a drink, you would have been rewarded by Me.

Notes: English translations of all Bangla source texts used throughout this essay are mine. I have greatly benefited from Ashiq Reza's and Emran Mahfuz's *Kom Chena Boro Manush Abdul Quadir* (Little Known Great Man Abdul Quadir [2017]).

*Md. Mahmudul Hasan teaches English literature at International Islamic University Malaysia. He has published with Brill, Routledge, SAGE, Orient Black Swan and other presses. One of his latest published works is “Intimate revelations: Conversations among “evil” women in Rokeya's Padmarag” (Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 2019).*

**Stay updated on the go with The Daily Star Android & iOS News App. [Click here](#) to download it for your device.**

### The Daily Star **Breaking news** alert on your phone

Grameenphone:

Type **START** <space> **BR** and send SMS it to **22222**

Robi:

Type **START** <space> **BR** and send SMS it to **2222**

Banglalink:

Type **START** <space> **BR** and send SMS it to **2225**

*Find more information on SMS subscription*

---

## LEAVE YOUR COMMENTS COMMENT POLICY

---

0 Comments

Sort by



Add a comment...

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

---

## TOP NEWS

---

- **Gun attack at Christchurch mosque leaves players distraught**
- **Shots fired at NZ mosque, some casualties: Witness**
- **Deadlock at DU**
- **Consumer Rights Protection Body: Laudable job with limited resources**
- **Third Test called off after attack in Christchurch**

- **Railway fare rise mulled**

**VIEW MORE**

---

**MORE FROM LITERATURE**

---



**MORNING WALKS**

---

**LATEST FROM STAR LIVE**

---