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## My PhD in English Literature at Portsmouth

by **Md. Mahmudul Hasan** on November 29, 2019 in **Information**

*Md. Mahmudul Hasan completed his thesis "Introducing Rokeya's Plural Feminism: A Comparative Study of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Feminist Writings with Those of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Attia Hosain and Monica Ali" at the University of Portsmouth in 2007 under the supervision of Dr Bronwen Price and Dr Alex Tickell (now at the Open University) . He is currently with the Department of English Language and Literature at International Islamic University Malaysia.*



It was my first meeting with Bronwen Price.

After greetings and introductions, she asked me if I had written a long essay before. The answer was both yes and no. Right after completing a coursework-only Masters of English Literature degree at the University of Dhaka, I produced an amateur's book titled *Gender Issue: An Islamic Approach* (1999) for a lay audience. It did not strictly follow standard academic writing conventions.

As regards postgraduate research training, I was somewhat ill-prepared for doctoral studies. Perhaps, Bronwen noticed in her student enough enthusiasm and a strong resilience and undertook the task of supervising him as a challenge.

I came from a humble family background and had to work to support myself and help my parents during my university studentship in Dhaka and Portsmouth. Supply teaching at British schools and writing PhD chapters demanded from me a higher level of hard work.

Bronwen advised me to consult a list of books on grammar and style and arranged for me to receive one-to-one training – from some staff members of the university – in library research and other academic and technical skills necessary for doctoral work. Thus, my PhD research under her guidance began.

The next (and bigger) hurdle involved selecting an appropriate topic and writing a convincing research proposal. Bronwen read the proposal that I had sent from Bangladesh for admission purposes. It intended to look at the “Woman Question”, covering a number of Victorian women writers. In a face-to-face session, she smiled at me and said: “It will require a number of lives to complete this project.”

In order to develop a meaningful research proposal, I began reading extensively in the areas of feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory. Bronwen read through and provided feedback on my proposal drafts where the name of the South Asian feminist writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) consistently appeared. During one supervision meeting, she said in a by-the-way fashion: “How about comparing Rokeya with some western feminist writers?” Her suggestion sounded like a revelation to me. I moved into a new phase of my journey through the world of Rokeya.

I had teething problems in pursuing a PhD in English and Comparative Literature at a British university. Honestly, being a non-native English-speaking PhD candidate, I had anticipated some leniency especially in the standard of English in my thesis. I was wrong. One day Bronwen said to me: “Your English may let you down.” It made me anxious but did not dismay or deter me, as I embarked on my PhD research with a strong resolve for learning. I was passionate about the training I was receiving through supervision.

Bronwen used to write detailed comments on the content of my chapters and let me address my writing woes and struggles on my own. She underlined obvious errors or marked sections with issues of language and style, leaving it to me to decipher the reasons for her doing so. In retrospect, her refusal to spoon-feed provided for me a real learning experience.

Bronwen’s critiques on my work were blunt and merciless. During supervision meetings, I often put a smile on my face to hide anxiety and stress without her realising it. Will I be

able to reach the level Bronwen anticipates from me? Will I achieve my goal and complete this thesis? – These lurking questions continued to throb intensely in the back of my mind.

Half way through my PhD research, Alex Tickell joined us as my Co-Supervisor. I was happy for a non-academic reason, as I thought he would be less stringent in his comments on my work. Again, I was wrong.

I did something mischievous.

One day I complained to Alex that Bronwen was harsh in her comments on my work. He ignored my complaint and said that she only wanted to help me. Another day, I complained to Bronwen about Alex on the same ground. Bronwen's reply was: "He does it not for the hell of it!" Instead of gaining any sympathy, I learned a new English phrase, "for the hell of it". Both Bronwen and Alex remained uncompromising on the question of the quality of my work.

Britain was the first country beyond the borders of Bangladesh in which I set foot and Bronwen, the first European with whom I interacted in an ongoing fashion. Initially, in emails I used to write "Dear Dr Bronwen Price" or "Dear Dr Price". One day an email from her hinted that I could call her simply "Bronwen". It was a real culture shock for me. How could I address my mentor, my supervisor by the first name!

In South Asian society, while addressing our teachers, we simply say "Sir" or "Madam" and avoid mentioning their names. I began following the western convention and calling her "Bronwen" and gradually became used to it. Later it did not appear difficult to me to call my other supervisor "Alex".

Since I completed my PhD at Portsmouth, I have undertaken a number of meaningful research projects and published many works with presses in the east and west. Had Bronwen and Alex been lenient with me regarding the quality of my work and had I navigated through my doctoral journey with relative ease, perhaps my PhD thesis would have remained the main landmark of my academic career with little to no further research.

All my post-PhD work carries a silent note of gratitude to both my supervisors.

