

# A Critical Survey of Bangladeshi Fiction in English

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of English Studies

Of

East West University

By

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Student ID: 2007-3-93-002



In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Of

Masters of Arts in English

August 2009

Submitted to: Professor Kaiser Mohamed Hamidul Haq

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I dedicate this dissertation paper to my parents who have supported me throughout the long struggle to put this together.

I also dedicate this to my mentor, Professor Kaiser Mohamed Hamidul Haq, who has always been my inspiration.



## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my parents for pushing me to go forward and encouraging me to believe in myself. I would also like to thank all my teachers at East West University for all the encouragement, inspiration and priceless knowledge I shall carry with me for the rest of my life.

Special thank you goes to my teacher and mentor, Professor Kaiser Haq, for having believed in me that I would be able to take up such a challenge and being optimistic and patient with me. You have made this journey seem so easy. All the hard work was more than worth it.

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## Abstract

The title of this dissertation is "A Critical Survey of Bangladeshi Fiction in English." It is an in-depth study of the influence English has had on the Indian subcontinent during the reign of the British Raj. It is a study of the rising number of Bangladeshi writers who are writing books and diversifying Bangladeshi literature with a confidence that is qualifying to be in the global arena of litterateurs. It is an exposition of how the use of English has introduced and acquainted global readers with social and cultural aspects, traditions, as well as the constituents and characteristics Bangladesh embodies. It also includes the views and thoughts foreign people have expressed on our literature written in English. Through the interaction of literary cultures by means of a language spoken universally, this paper intends to manifest the similarities, differences, etc Bangladesh faces with other countries regardless of the difference of language.



## 1.0 Introduction

The topic of this dissertation is “A Critical Survey of Bangladeshi Fiction in English”.

The reason for choosing this topic is not only that it is regarded as a relatively new

phenomenon up till now, but also because there is a growing body of Bangladeshi

writers expressing the muscles in English.

## 1.1 South Asian Literature

Arthur (1998) defined South Asian English as the English language applied in

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The British

influence in educational, colonial and commercial areas led to English bridging them

since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, albeit the Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives remained outside

the British Raj.

When people are asked about their take on South Asian Literature, the mental

connection ties mostly with Indian Literature. Literature from Pakistan and India are

given secondary consideration. Even though Bangladesh attained independence 37

years ago, it has yet to make a niche for itself in the international arena. Bangladeshi

literature is still unfamiliar globally. The reason for this: a large number of Indians,

Pakistanis and Sri Lankan people are more familiar with the English language than

even a handful of Bangladeshis. There is a tradition of writing in English in the

Indian sub-continent, although it is regarded as the latest Big Bang in Bangladeshi

literature.



## 1.2 Use of English in South Asia

English as a language has been assimilated by the Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan societies mostly due to the British who had ruled the Indian Sub-continent from 1857 to 1947. That and the fact that the Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan societies are more likely to be bilingual and have the ability to speak a number of foreign tongues allows them to integrate English into their daily forms of communication.

This trend has not been encouraged as a norm in Bangladesh by a majority of the population. However, there is a strong noticeable influence of English in Bangla. Primarily, during the days of the Raj words of English origin such as "tebil" (table), "tiffin" entered Bangla. In more recent times the ever-rising global nature of English has led to words like "television", "telephone", "video" and "tomato" being adopted in Bangla. There has never been the need for English as a colloquial speech as we see in India. Therefore Bangla is the state language of Bangladesh. Zaman (2007) noted that we have expelled the "true Bangla" from our lives. We now speak a queer concoction of English and Bangla.

## 1.3 Loyalty towards Bangla

Bangla is firmly bonded to Bangladeshi hearts for cultural and political reasons. The 1947 partition led to Bangladeshi intellectuals demanding that their culture and nationalism would be portrayed through Bangla. Bangla was the elementary cause in launching the 1971 Bangladeshi Liberation War. The Pakistan government's declaration in 1952 that 'Urdu and only Urdu' would be the national language led to a language movement which quickly became the Bangla national movement.

## 2.4 Past and Rising Writers

There are many Bangali writers from the Indian city of Calcutta, such as Rabindranath Tagore who are mistaken as Bangladeshis representing Bangladesh as a country, its culture, heritage, art and social norms. Even though Tagore wrote nearly a hundred years ago, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in literature for the English translation of his own work *Geetanjali*. Till now, there still lies a vague line that distinguishes a Bangali from Kolkata and a pure bred Bangladeshi, as both regions speak Bangla.

There is now a growing body of Bangladeshi writers writing poetry, prose and fiction to make a niche in world literature. English is yet to become an official language as it was in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, though it is spoken and widely used in writing. Gradually, the teaching of English is being encouraged as the English speaking and writing skills are deteriorating, and mainly because private and international dealings involve communication in English. The Bangladeshi poet Kaiser Haq (2006) wrote that English medium schools grow by offering an expensive British education up to “O” and “A” levels. The students are usually from well-off families going abroad for higher studies or enrolling at private universities at home. Those with literary interests even turn into Anglophone writers.

As we have a few early writers who have translated their own work into English and have upcoming innovative writers portraying different aspects or situations of Bangladeshi life in fiction, there is a need to critically study and analyze them and their work, as this is an area that has hardly been studied or focused on. Early writers refer to those from the early 1900’s till the mid twentieth century, like Sir Syed Waliullah who translated his own work *Lal Shalu* into “The Tree without Roots”. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain had also written a short story called “Sultana’s

ream". Recent pieces of fiction are Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments*, Sanjib  
Bhutta's *Judas Tree*, S. M. Ali's *Rainbow over the Padma*, Niaz Zaman's *The Crooked  
Neem Tree*, and more.

## 5 Delimitations of the Research

There is a lack of critiques, reviews and journals due to lack of interest in this area. As  
there have been no journals to refer to in this field, newspaper and magazine articles  
have been used along with book reviews and as interviews. The study has been  
delimited to Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots*, Adib Khan's *Seasonal  
Adjustments*, Niaz Zaman's *The Crooked Neem Tree*, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*,  
Mahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*, and Shabbir Ahsan's *The Peacekeeper* because  
these texts have had quite a bit of exposure in Bangladesh and abroad. A couple of  
them were published by international publishing houses for which reason they have  
gained international fame.



## 2.1 Life of Syed Waliullah

Syed Waliullah is better known in Bangladesh as a novelist and playwright, having written many short stories as well. Born on August 15 1922, he hailed from Comilla. Being the son of a government officer, Syed Ahmadullah, Waliullah had the privilege to travel, thus allowing him to have diverse experiences and ideas while meeting people. Eventually, this helped him to outline characters and plots for some of his body of work. Waliullah was educated at Kurigram High School and Dhaka College. Unfortunately he was unable to complete his Masters in Economics from Calcutta University.

When Waliullah was still a student of Feni High School, he edited a magazine called *Bhorer Alo*. Later on, his first short story called *Hothat Alor Jhalkani* was published in the Dhaka College magazine. His writing capabilities were not bound within the perimeters of Bangla. He was proficient in English as well, for he published an English journal called *Contemporary*. Waliullah also worked in editorial positions at radio stations in Pakistan and Calcutta, India. He also worked at Pakistani embassies at Jakarta, Paris, New Delhi, Sydney and London. Waliullah played a great role in the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh when he mobilized the support of French intellectuals, who would go on to influence global opinion.

Waliullah's body of literary work began with *Lalshalu*, later on to be translated and published in English as *Tree Without Roots*. It was at first translated in French by his wife Anne Marie. It has been a confusing issue to determine who had written the English version. According to the preface of *Tree Without Roots*, his wife "described

... she had translated this novel into French "from Wali's own translations into English." Waliullah did not want to publish the book under his own name for various reasons.

Waliullah was a writer who did not compose just simple stories. His work included psychology and the philosophy of Existentialism, and he molded fiction embodying the exposure of society and its prejudices, religious contradictions and ethical abnormalities of the human mind. Some of his finest works include *Nayanchara* (1951), *Dui Tir O Anyanya Galpa*, *Bahipir* (1960), *Tarangabhanga* (1964) and *Madhanga* (1964).

The great Syed Waliullah breathed his last on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1971 in Paris where he is also buried.

## 2.2 The Plight of the Poor

*Tree Without Roots* is about Majeed, the protagonist, who is a devout Muslim cleric in search of a good life. He is religious but cunning, and he travels from the southern part of Bangladesh, to the Garo Hills and further north. He has heard about the comfortable lives and wealth of the people in the northern part of the country from a hunter who told him, "They have all they want to eat. They have plenty of jute and tobacco. They are well off" (p.7). Majeed understands that he does not have anything but his religious knowledge to get him a source of income or shelter, for which reason he uses his expertise to move into a village called Mohabbatpur.

here he claims an unknown grave to be that of a saint, rebukes the villagers for not paying the 'saint' his due respect, and takes it upon himself to be caretaker of the grave turned shrine or *majar*. He marries two women; at first Rahima and then Jamila, but Rahima was barren. The story revolves around Majeed's ways as an imposter, and not a religious one at that, and how he uses the religious theoretical subtleties to manipulate the village mind and scenario, thus creating a niche for himself.

It is through Majeed that Waliullah portrays the religious contradictions and behavioral abnormalities among the poorer members of society. The author puts forward a sad but biting truth when he holds poverty as the culprit behind human frustration. He writes "and they all dream of leaving their homes, clearing out before it is too late, going to places where they can at least have one meal a day" (p.3). In the pre-Bangladesh era, the village scene involves hardship and the fight to survive. People work hard harvesting and planting crops from land that goes poor from over use. "The land is ploughed and reploughed, sown and resown all the year round, every season, everyday from sunrise to sunset. It has no rest, no peace..."(p.3).

To escape from this life, people move out of the rural scene in search of a better life into urban Bangladesh. Diaspora forces them to leave their roots. The village scene in Bangladesh is made up of a conservative society. Women work in the fields, tend to children, look after their families and households but at the same time hold on to the shelter of their husbands as security. A widow is shunned by rural society without her having anything to do her husband's death. When Kulsum the widow comes back smiling that her secret wish to bring peace among her parents is about to come true with the help of Majeed, her mother says to her, "She's eaten one husband, she'll eat the next one too" (p.27).

The author shows that because of poverty people turn to religion as the last source of hope to hang on to. It is probably because most villagers do not have the means to get higher education, or even a basic education, that they use religion as a source of income. The situation becomes one of survival of the fittest. It is common to see men of religion use mind games and the application of God's threatening wrath to plant fear in the hearts and minds of the mostly illiterate poor. This situation is shown through Majeed. He has led a hard life and is envious and angry that God has been so kind to the residents of Mohabbatpur. He is a good judge of character, for he realizes in a short time that the Mahabbatpur villagers were "simpleminded....even a little stupid, not at all like the ones down south-east" (p.14). He is envious of them because their hard work is fruitful, as opposed to the fate of his own people.

Because the villagers are illiterate and lack Islamic knowledge, he uses this to create fear among them, and concocts a lie that the unnamed grave outside the village is that of a Saint, Shah Sadeque. Shrines are bestowed great religious value; most of the time people go to the extent of believing that they have the power to grant the wishes of the distressed; in other words, being positioned on a pedestal, equivalent to God.

Waliullah portrays a world that absurdly falls for the mind games religious clerics tend to play for power. He also shows that religion tends to distort for the same reason. Majeed disapproves of the villagers for spending money on festivals and entertainment. "And then the money you have you squander on wasteful feasting, on sinful drum-beating, and entertainments when you marry your children, on clothes and ornaments for your wives" (p.13). Nowhere in the Quran or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (S) has it ever been mentioned that one should not indulge in feasts. Because enticing music and lyrics are not approved in the actual teachings of

Islam, drumbeats are allowed, for the Prophet (S) was welcomed with drumbeats on his migration to Madinah. Husbands are obligated to adorn their wives with gold and clothes as per their capabilities, for women wearing gold is an accepted practice in Islam. Majeed also goes on to rebuke his young second wife Jamila for he thinks that it is not proper for a Muslim woman to be heard laughing” (p.80). These are only a few examples that the author shows us of how the religious clerics in rural Bangladesh are responsible for the distortion of religion, and how they use these means for their own benefit. When another *pir*, Matlub Khan, comes to the next village, Majeed sees this as an obstacle that might unveil his motive.

Although he uses the unnamed abandoned grave as his key to power and position, Majeed is uncomfortable and apprehensive about his lies and deceit. He is aware of the possibility that he might be found out to be a liar. Majeed always had a gnawing feeling of guilt, but he consoled himself with the thought that God is Merciful.

*“Then for an instant, he felt afraid that the game he was going to play might turn dangerous. Doubts came to him that he could succeed in it for long. But the people seemed to be so simple and good-hearted, he reassured himself”* (p.12).

*“But the fear he had felt that first night never quite left him. Wasn't it all resting on a very shaky foundation? Wasn't it all merely a house of cards which the slightest wind could upset? Then he would pray fervently, hoping that God would forgive him. He would try to console himself with the thought that God's mercy was infinite and eternal. Were these not the very words of His messenger?”* (p.17).

Majeed realizes that besides installing fear of the Unknown, he must befriend the landowner Khaleque. His character is quite contrary to that of other landowners of the



large scene, who are expected to be tough. The friendship is not mutual in basic terms. Khaleque “always seemed eager to act on his advice and help (Majeed)” (p.20). Like all the villagers, Khaleque goes to ask Majeed to pray that his wife Amena can give him babies. However, Khaleque never gets to know about Majeed’s unprivileged and strict upbringing to become a mullah. Majeed’s selfishness is seen in his way of thinking:

*If Khaleque were to make them (villagers) suffer with the power of his wealth, then, though they might hold their tongues, the villagers would undoubtedly feel a deep hatred towards him. Majeed’s power came from Above, from their fear of the Unknown, from the grave that lay beneath the red cloth” (p.23).*

Majeed is found to be an expert at playing mind games. It is through him we find Waliullah’s interest in dealing with psychology. The author shows us that humans fear the unknown because it cannot be seen, or not much is known about it. Majeed takes this as an advantage, realizing that people would fear him because he holds ample knowledge about the Unknown, i.e. God. Waliullah mentions that the *pir* Matlub Khan did not want to release into public knowledge when his ancestors had come from Persia simply because he did not know. Instead the *pir* gives a date that coincides with the death of the Pathan Governor of Bengal. “Curiously enough, it was one of these same vices that the *pir* was accused of by those who were not among his devoted followers” (p.43). Trying to prove his power, Majeed goes to the extent of declaring that Amena’s barren fate is due to coils in her abdomen, a ridiculous assumption in the medical field, but accepted instantly by the uneducated poor. The scenes of uttering prayers and blowing into water are common features especially in the villages. To an extent, it seems that Waliullah mocks at the absurdity of society.

### 2.3 Conjugal Life in *Tree Without Roots*

The novel does not manifest the conventional love of a husband and wife between the married couples. The married couples we find in the novel are shy and reserved towards each other. Khaleque has two wives, Amena and Tanu, and the relationship between the husband and wives is more of respect than love. When it is thought that Amena is mentally disturbed because she dreamt of a black bull charging at her, Khaleque takes a decision to send her back to her parents' home. He does accompany her for she had spent many years in his house as a legally wedded wife, sharing his joys and sorrows. Majeed on the other hand lusts for the female gender, regardless of who she may be or belong to. He gets aroused seeing Kulsum's bare shoulder and skin, Amena's foot when she steps out to the *mazar*, marries Rahima for her body, and then Jamila just to expand his lineage. He does not bother to ask Rahima's permission whether he could remarry. This shows that he has no concern whether Rahima has any reservations about sharing her husband with another woman. He lacks love for women but has great lust for them.

Besides lust, he treats Jamila with reproach. She is a young girl, newly married and her childish ways have yet not subsided. For this, Majeed feels highly distraught, saying that he does not understand her. He does not like her or any other women laughing in his house. Majeed does understand, however, that the reason lies behind his attraction towards her that led to their marriage. Rahima is more understanding towards Jamila. She makes excuses for Jamila to save the younger bride from Majeed's wrath. "But what did she have to be sad about? She had no cares, no responsibilities. She was a little girl who had just got married, without problems or worries" (p.84). Majeed even goes to the extent of calling her "Whore! Daughter of a

more! (p.85). This is simply because he is unable to ascertain why she is so upset. This shows that he has no respect or love for her.

Jamila is afraid of the unknown, not uncommon a feeling among the villagers as they hardly have any knowledge of the Unseen. She is young and illiterate but Majeed feels that her illiteracy is what makes her uncanny. He tries to put fear in her by telling made up stories of roaring sounds that come from the *mazar*. He himself realizes that games dealing with human psychology and fear are only capable of giving him the upper hand. This way he will have power.

He decides that prayer would change her, and so he forces her to start with the five daily prayers. It should be noted that because he makes this decision for her, she prays not out of fear of God, but fear of Majeed. She has a tendency to fall asleep and miss the evening prayers. When Majeed catches her sleeping in the middle of her prayer, he punishes her by dragging her to the mazar. He starts to recite verses from the Quran and this frightens her more. The whole scenario resembles that of exorcism, which Majeed attempts to perform, as he believes Jamila is possessed. This belief is strengthened since she spits on his face in defiance.

*“An evil spirit has found its way inside you. It can do harm to you and all of us. You are now sitting by the side of the mazar, in the very presence of the saint. Still, there are no tears in your eyes, no sign of fear of the Almighty. It is because of the evil spirit which has taken possession of you”* (p.102).

The author shows readers to what extent power and authority can make man stoop low when we see Majeed tying up Jamila with ropes as if she were an animal.

Among all the characters we find in the book, the only person with a sensitive side is Rahima, Majeed's first wife. She does, however, adopt a firm stance telling Majeed to retrieve Jamila from the *mazar* in the middle of a hailstorm. It is here that we see Majeed obeying her without a word. Rahima always showed affection towards the stranger bride, something quite unnatural, as one would expect jealousy to prevail. Instead, Rahima becomes emotional when she sees Jamila's limp body cold and livid from exposure. Jamila becomes sick, burning with fever. The author shows Rahima's sensitivity by telling us that she plans to go to buy sago from the local village shop and prepare an herbal medicine.

Majeed, on the other hand, realizes that exposure from the storm and probably frightened to Jamila's illness. He does not manifest his worry; instead he implements his religious tactics into medical healing when he utters prayers and blows into a glass of water for Jamila to drink.

The author shows readers an omen when Rahima spills some of the holy water on the ground. It is also a warning for Majeed that the situation was about to intensify in gravity.

## **2.4 Faith vs. Wealth**

Hailstorms can be especially devastating to farm fields, ruining crops and damaging farming equipment. When a sudden hailstorm hits Mahabbatpur at dawn, it leaves everyone shocked and frazzled since all the crops have been ruined. For Majeed, a

more worrying issue than the crops is Khaleque. He must make sure that his pawn, the wealthy landowner of the village, has full faith in Majeed and his teachings.

The main source of his livelihood was not his land and his crops, but faith, and faith, he knew, though not as easily destroyed by natural calamities as material wealth, if once destroyed may never be restored” (p.113).

Majeed is a cunning and selfish man who could not seem to care less about the villagers’ ordeal. He comes up with another plan that he would use Khaleque’s faith to win over others’ faith.

*Most important of all was the need to assure himself that Khaleque’s faith in him did not diminish, for it was his faith that counted most. If Khaleque had complete faith in him, others would too.*

*And I can give him faith, he told himself with great satisfaction, a faith that is ennobling and sublime. What does it matter is the mazar is a hoax? What does matter is what I achieve with it. My purpose is good. Because of me too, the poorer ones, those who normally would now starve or be plunged deeper into debt, those who have lost everything- they too will now suffer less. For surely I will be able to make my friend Khaleque help them in little ways. Though their loss does not stir me so greatly, nevertheless it is my duty to think about them too in this time of disaster” (p.113).*

However, disaster takes a worse toll when a flood hits Mahabbatpur. Even though the villagers, along with their livestock, were heading for higher ground, there was no way for the saint that protects and the house of the shrine’s protector to be spared the rushing waters, or God’s wrath.

Majeed knew this very well, and it constantly disturbed his conscience. The villagers were concerned about their own safety and how much they could save. They were terrified by the state they were in, and even if they had any doubts about the *mazar* they kept mum. After all, was it not the very sayings of Majeed that the saint would protect them at all times?

Majeed was not surprised to see the rising waters reach closer and closer. “For the present, he was sure of one thing: that the flood would not hesitate to attack the *mazar*, for, he alone knew, it was an unknown who lay there and not a saint at all” (p.129). This natural occurrence finally led Majeed’s confidence to weaken and question his lies and manipulations over the past eleven years. He asks himself:

*“Am I being punished? Did I not lead innocent people to pray to the spirit of an unknown man, a man who might well have been a sinner? My aim was a noble one, but does that justify my having deceived them? Surely, I am not being punished for it”*  
(p.129).

At one point, Majeed realizes the inconsistency in his mental utterances. He forces himself to believe that he is doing what is good and that God is Merciful, even if man voluntarily sins for his own benefit. The author shows Majeed reciting:

*“When the sky is rent asunder and the stars are dispersed; when the oceans are poured forth and the graves are overturned; then shall each soul know what it has done, and what it has failed to do. Oh man! What evil hath made thee careless concerning thy Lord, the Bountiful One...”* (p.130).

Even though the verses pop up into his mind, he fails to realize that his conscience is recalling all the religious teaching he had learned. They only calm him. Majeed sees it

not only as cowardice to betray the *mazar* and leave his own home, which he describes as an ‘annex’ to the *mazar*, but deep down he knew that abandoning all that he used to manipulate and create a living would shatter the people’s trust.

*“If he left the mazar, he would forfeit his right to that privileged position, like a captain who abandons his ship when in danger. If he left now, what trust could people have in him and the mazar? When the floods subsided, any damage to the mazar or house could be dealt with. But people’s shattered trust could not be restored so easily”* (p.132).

There is a battle brewing inside Majeed’s mind where he is overcome by rage one moment, and then calms down. His anger is caused by his ego. He is in denial that what he has done over the years is karma. He is not afraid of his sins but afraid that he will have to go back to where he had started from, from his minimal beginnings. As a last option, he decides to remove Rahima and Jamila to Khaleque’s house for shelter and return to the *mazar*. This is where the English translated version ends. It is quite unclear what happens to Majeed. Does he really go back to protect the *mazar* and his house to hold up his reputation of being holy? Or does he leave his wives at the shelter and run away, to a place where no one would hear of him again, nor would he have to play this game of pretensions any longer?



## 3.0 *The Crooked Neem Tree*

### 3.1 Life of Niaz Zaman

Niaz Zaman is professor of English at the University of Dhaka. Her area of specialization is American literature. She has also published articles and books on women's folk art. Among her major publications are *The Confessional Art of Tennessee Williams*, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* -- the first book-length study of the kantha -- and a study of the partition, *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, which won a National Archives Award. She has edited a number of anthologies, including *Under the Krishnachura*, *From the Delta*, and *New Age Short Stories*. She was consulting editor, Arts and Humanities for *Banglapedia* and editor of the *Bangladesh Journal of American Studies*. She is also a creative writer and has published *The Crooked Neem Tree*, *The Dance and Other Stories*, the titular story of which won an *Asiaweek* Short Story Award, and *Didima's Necklace and Other Stories*. Last year she started [writers.ink](http://writers.ink) to publish creative writing in English and English translation as well as writings on literature and language. From 1981 to 1983, Dr Zaman was posted to the Bangladesh Embassy in Washington D.C. as Educational Attaché.

Dr Zaman has also retired on a university-level American Literature Reader in two volumes. The reader includes a multi-media CD.



### 3.2 Clash of Cultures

As the story is set in the pre-Bangladesh period, we come to see the hostility between the West Pakistanis and the Bengalis during that time. From the events and mention of Language Movement and Shahid Minar, we can make out that the backdrop of the story is in the fifties and sixties. It was the time when resentment regarding suppression of Bangalis' mother tongue and prejudices between East and West Pakistan was still quite fresh.

The protagonist and narrator is Seema, a Punjabi girl, raised in the sheltered and well-off lifestyle of her bureaucrat father. She obtains her education from Dhaka, which was spelt Dacca back then in East Pakistan. She gradually becomes aware of social injustice and personal betrayals. She falls in love with Tanvir, a young Bihari. When Tanvir breaks off this relationship she gets engaged to Qamar, a Punjabi cousin. Learning that Qamar is responsible for her friend Saida's unhappiness, she ends the engagement and turns to Khalid, a Bengali student she meets at the university. However, she never stops loving Tanvir.

At her institution, distance is maintained between the girls of these two cultures, except between the rich. The Urdu speaking students were mainly from well off, bureaucratic families or businessmen fathers settled in Chittagong. Seema gives us a glimpse of this when she narrates to the readers:

*“Most Bangali girls were hesitant about making our acquaintance because they felt that we “Urdu-wallahs,” as they called us, liked to herd together, speaking in Urdu or English. The few Bangali girls we were friendly with were daughters of either rich*

*businessmen or bureaucrats to my father and when we talked, we talked in*

*English* (p.24).

### 3.3 Nationalism

There was a significant difference between the Bangalis and Urdu-wallas portrayed by Niaz Zaman. In most cases, we have seen authors write novels on the 1971 Independence War of Bangladesh but hardly get a picture of the twenty to thirty years prior to it. The novel contains a number of noticeable and interesting dialogues that give readers a picture of Bengali nationalism and the non-Bengali mindset during the East Pakistan era.

Nationalism is basically a collective state of mind or consciousness in which people believe their primary duty and loyalty is to the nation-state. Often nationalism implies national superiority and glorifies various national virtues. Thus love of nation may be overemphasized; concern with national self-interest to the exclusion of the rights of other nations may lead to international conflict. Hawthorn (2000) noted that a single person in the developed world can “be a member (willing or unwilling) on a state, but membership of nation, people or culture may in each case contested or multiple.” The liberated nation re-asserts its culture, language, and history in the operation of driving out its previous rulers.

*“But it was more than language that kept us separate. It was a difference of race and culture, of years of prosperity versus ages of poverty. The Bengali girls in the in the hostels were from villages where parents had done without any but the bare necessities to send their daughters to a good college. To them every anna bit counted. They would painstakingly was all their clothes - from college-wear to their heavier*

sheets. For them studies were more important than the luxury of lying in bed as long as possible and then rushing down to breakfast as Saida and I did. They would be up at dawn to study in some secluded spot under then many trees of the campus. Not for them the luxury of spending money; frivolously on clothes or movies” (p.2).

From a conversation between Seema and Khalid, we learn that despite living for a quarter of a century in East Pakistan, the “Urdu-wallahs” cannot speak Bengali simply because “they refuse to learn Bengali” and that they would learn other foreign languages “but it’s beneath your dignity to learn Bengali” (p.35).

Shahid Minar Khalid opines that it “symbolizes the force that has broken the prison door of injustice. The Shahid Minar is more than just a symbol of those who died for the Bengali language; it’s a symbol of the Bengali nation itself, its potential for breaking any force that wishes to destroy it” (p.70).

One point to note is that Seema, being an Urdu speaker, has negative views of the Bengalis and the Land of Bengal. She tells Khalid that Dacca airport “was a wooden shed”, there was “one stupid little cinema” that showed English movies, “one” shopping centre, “no mills, no factories, no good colleges” ending with an opinion that “Bengalis complain too much (p.35). She finds

“an ugly

creature” failing to see what pride it sprouted in the Bengal heart (p.70). Undoubtedly,

like all non-Bengalis during that era, Seema disapproves Bengali nationalism (p.70).

Contradictory to this, she would miss Dacca during her visits to Lahore as she had become quite connected to the Bengali natural environment. “There was gentleness about the Bengali, softness, a modesty, that I missed in the roughness of the Punjab”

(pp. 27-28).

### 3.4 Imperialistic Ways

Zaman also gives readers a short description of the West Pakistani imperialistic ways through Khalid during one of his heated debates with the strong willed Seema.

Imperialism is the forceful extension of a nation's authority by territorial conquest establishing economic and political domination of other nations. The term describes the imperialistic attitude of superiority, subordination and dominion over foreign peoples, and the exploitation of natural resources. This has been seen especially during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century when European reign covered 85% of the world. The motives behind Imperialism were the competitions against western countries for natural resources, cheap manpower, diversified markets, and the Imperialists' cultural and political dominance. This field deals with how the Imperialists' strengthening and principles integrated with Christianity, anthropology, art and culture and literature, thus impacting political and economic history and ideology.

When Seema had praised West Pakistan, he spoke of it being evident with the utilization of East Pakistan's wealth to beautify West Pakistan. "Our jute and tea pay for those roads and gardens you have been praising to the high heavens...It's you and your people who have suppressed not only us but also the other provinces in West Pakistan. Look at Sind, look at Baluchistan" (pp.35-36).



### 3.5 The Rootless in Search of Roots

Characters like Seema, Tanvir, Nasreen, and Farid all share heartbreak because of the Diasporas each have in their lives.

Diaspora has been used mainly in Post- Colonial and Cultural studies, described by Gilroy in Brooker (2003) as “a similar range of cultural affiliations connecting other groups who have been dispersed or who have migrated across national boundaries.” Some reasons of Diaspora criticisms speak of the history of exile, labor migration, slavery, colonialism, post colonialism, globalization and the transformations of the old nation-states and their literature.

Tanvir had come from India after the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. He was a poor artist who planned to go to West Pakistan when the Bengalis made them leave. When Seema questions this, he says, “Because we do not come from here. People call us ‘Biharis,’ and they do not like us” (p.16). According to Seema, he is “a wanderer, searching for his goal...Uprooted, with his childhood and adolescence behind him in the home he had left in India, he could never be happy with this “alien land” (p.22). When Seema goes to visit Tanvir after meeting him again at an art exhibition, he tells her, “I have no right to ask you to share my rootless life; wherever we go in Pakistan, we shall be Mohajirs, refugees, and outsiders” (p.52).

Seema, on the other hand, knows that she is in search of roots. “Like all women I wanted a home, but I needed a rooted home” (p.22). Seema is a quiet and meek character who gathers courage to break out of her sheltered home and societal bonds with the freedom of mind she obtains through education. When she marries Khalid, Seema faces problems like differing eating habits to Khalid’s (p.104), arguments

about wearing saris other than shalwar-kameezes (p.107), *alpana* drawings on the bedroom floor (p.107), bowing before Khalid's parents and touching their feet (p.102), and an altercation with Khalid about what should be their children's mother tongue (p.104). This leaves one asking whether Seema had forgotten her own thoughts about Bengalis at the beginning of the novel: "The people were different, the climate was different. The language, customs, everything was different..." (p. 22).

Rashed's parents reject Nasreen which is why he could not marry her at the end. "...she might be nice to look at, but what could she bring with her? She was a refugee from India – with no land, no money, no backing" (p.72).

Like Tanvir, Farid does not ask Sajeda to marry him. Instead, he tells her many times before that marriage was not written in their fates. He knows that the actual reason is that he cannot give Sajeda the luxurious life she was raised in. He has hurt Sajeda in the past that she would never marry him and that she "was too fond of money to marry a poor refugee from India" (p.22).

### **3.6 Broken Promises, Unhappy Marriages**

The novel is a window to an era where parents had a stronger say in their children's marriages. Because the society was more conservative at that time, most children would have to submit to their parents' wishes, whether about education or life partners. The novel contains many examples of intense love relationships that were to be broken because parents had better options in mind for their children.

The first broken relationship we see is between Sajeda and Farid. Sajeda is a girl from Chittagong whose parents are Punjabi. Being the daughter of one of the richest men in Chittagong, she is educated abroad from Darjeeling to one of the finest English finishing schools. Sajeda admits to Seema that she and Farid are from different worlds and that they do not understand each other, despite being in love. Farid has led a hard life as a teenager and annoys Sajeda so often that she would never marry him because money was more important to her. When her parents arrange her marriage to an elite from Chittagong, she has no choice but to accept because Farid had never proposed, and it would have been foolish to marry “a poor refugee from India” (p.22). Sajeda was no better off as “everyone says her husband has a roving eye” (p.33).

Nilufer is a Punjabi girl whose father is a diplomat. She is in love with a well-to-do Bengali man whose picture she keeps hidden in a book receiving a gold medal at the Pakistan Day Essay Competition. She is aware of the possibility her parents might reject her choice. Her parents arrange her marriage to a man who wants her to give up her teaching career and be a full time housewife (p.26). Nilufer also submits to her fate of marrying a man to whom she will get acquainted to after marriage because the Bengali broke his promise to send a ticket. “He hardly writes and, when he does, his letters are full of his teachers, his daily routine, his class assignments – things one would write to an acquaintance, not to the girl one loves” (p.26).

We also see Seema’s heart broken by Tanvir’s refusal to maintain their relationship any longer. Tanvir is also rootless and poor. Contrary to the Sajeda’s lover, Tanvir speaks blatantly that he could never have anything with a commissioner’s daughter. Tanvir rejects Seema because she is the daughter of a bureaucrat who would not be able to cope with poverty ultimately. Though Seema states that position and money

are not everything. Tanvir insists that means that one becomes desperate. One loses all one's finest qualities, and forgets everything only to get a little money to sustain oneself' (p.53). At one point Seema decides to marry her good looking but selfish cousin Qamar to spite Tanvir. She wants to get away from Dacca where everything reminded her of her former love.

When Seema marries Khalid, she marries him because he is the only person to whom she can speak freely. With Tanvir, she knows the aches of love, and with Qamar, she feels nothing but the feeling of being miserable for the rest of her life. Choosing Qamar was also her parents' choice. She is confused between the weight of loving and being loved. Zaman gives a clear portrait of Seema's feelings with each man:

*"In my little room I asked myself whether it was more important to love or be loved. I had loved Tanvir, would love him till the last day of my life. But Tanvir, how did he love me? Did he know me even half as well as Khalid with whom I had shared so many thoughts? To Tanvir I had shown only one side of my nature- the short time we had together had hardly been conducive to a deeper understanding. With Khalid I had fought and argued, learned something from him and he meanwhile had started to learn something about me. I had hidden nothing from Khalid. I had no need to hide anything from him. He met me as his equal, and, if necessary, someone weaker who needed help and guidance. But Tanvir had placed me on a height I did not deserve. I could neither stay there forever, nor could I return there for impunity.*

*Tanvir had starved me of love. I had needed him and he had rejected my need. In anger, in frustration, I had turned to Qamar. I should have known that I could never have been happy with him. Had I grown up in the land of my father, I might have*



*accepted Qamar's values. But I had not. There had in fact been a vacuum till Khalid filled it. And now I belonged to this land far more than to the land of my ancestors.*

*With Khalid I had known friendship. I asked myself, Could I know love? What did it matter that I did not love him as I loved Tanvir? All marriages are not built on love. A lasting union can be based on friendship, a deep understanding of intellectual and emotional needs” (pp.77-78).*

Nasreen and Rashed's broken relationship is similar to Nilufer's, except here the boy's family rejects Nasreen. She is also an Indian refugee. Rashed wants to marry her and had also approached his father about the matter, who blatantly refused. His mother saw it as a mere hindrance that her son should get married when he would be appearing for the C.S.S exams. Nasreen is married off to an abusive older drunkard. To escape from his battery, she walks off a cliff being pregnant. Her marriage was especially unhappy as her husband was reeking of liquor on their wedding night and fell asleep on the bed beside her. Her marital nightmare started from that day on.

*“Nasreen had, in a few days, become a woman, not gently and with love, but rudely and brutally. She had learned what no romantic young girl wants to know – that the brutal husband might be legally hers. We expect that somewhere there must be our ideal companion, our soul-mate whom we have only to meet once and know forever that we have found what we sought. But life does not work out that way. The Sleeping Beauty waits in vain for her Prince Charming; Snow White remains locked up in her glass coffin, the Prince does not come to carry her away from the forest. What might have been will never be. Sleeping Beauty chooses a substitute but, physically aroused, her innermost being is never awakened, and the pretty young girl deteriorates into the slovenly matron shouting at servant and child alike, her dress unkempt, her hair*

*uncombed, or else into the gutter... a girl from lover to lover, never knowing love with any (p.76).*

One very interesting character we see is Saida, a girl from Delhi whose family is settled in Chittagong. She is acquainted with the bitterness of poverty, which might be the reason why she seems to ‘bounce’ from one male to another after facing dejection and rejection. Initially she falls in frivolous love with ‘Cupie’ who turns out to be Qamar, Seema’s cousin. Thinking, “it’s not just kisses...it’s a oneness of two bodies,” (p.8) that defines love, it does not take long for Qamar to drop her like a hot brick. We learn later that she was seeing a more handsome chartered accountant called Jalal in Lahore, before joining the modeling world and becoming a mistress to her employer Mahbub. She describes the situation as “...when he has nothing better to do, he deigns to visit me” (p.32). It may be said that Saida is a modern day opportunist who thinks that sexual urges are equivalent to the definition of love. Because she is at fault, she throws herself at rich men to lead a good life, but consequently she becomes entangled in a smuggling ring and jailed. Thus she commits suicide. It can be said that reluctantly accepting parents’ choices for marriage, none of the girls faired better than Saida.

### **3.7 The Elite Force**

During the East Pakistan era, it was a matter of prestige and elitism when a man held the title of C.S.P. Seema’s father held this title, leading Tanvir to give up his love for her. One would be counted as highly fortunate, should they obtain a chance to appear for a CSS examination and pass it in return for laudable posts and life of the rich.

Therefore we cannot entirely blame Tanvir for letting Seema go. Because he loved her, he did not want to see himself incapable to give the comforts of home and life to her.

In one of the many arguments that erupted between Seema and Khalid, it was quite clear that Khalid saw no reason why he should sit for the exam. He describes the normal Bengali boys of becoming “critical of bureaucracy” once they attain the title. “They talk differently, behave differently” (p.40).

Things that he had done for fun before becoming a CSP would be seen as absurd. It becomes a matter of dignity. The CSP’s status soars so high that he has the power and right to divorce one wife and marry another. Besides getting a wife, he also obtains a house, car, fridge, and a great bank balance from his father-in-law (p.40).

Rashed’s mother mentions that marriage would only hinder her son’s career if he marries Nasreen. After becoming a CSP he would “be in a position to bargain and get the best” (p.72).



## **4.0 *The Peacekeeper***

### **4.1 Life of Shabbir Ahsan**

Born in 1968, the author is actually a professional soldier who had taken part in Gulf War I as well as UN peacekeeping missions in Congo. His friends suggested that he compile his African experiences into a novel inspired him. Ahsan is also a civil engineer and business graduate, holding a post in the Bangladesh army. He is currently living in Bangladesh with his wife Labony and daughter Faiza.

### **4.2 Peacekeeping**

This was created by the United Nations Organization (UNO) as “a way to help countries torn by conflict (and) create the conditions for lasting peace”. Ever since 1948, when the first UN peacekeeping mission took place in the Middle East to keep a close eye on the Israeli-Arab Armistice Agreement, there have been more than 63 peacekeeping ventures around the world.

The nature of the UN peacekeeping has changed over the years. Since the Cold War between Russia and the United States, the UN Security Council set perimeters for peacekeepers to maintain ceasefires and steady unstable situations on ground, allowing peaceful agreements to be made peacefully in the political front. At the time, peacekeeping missions were composed of military personnel who would carry light weapons, observe, monitor and report hostile situations to their headquarters. Alongside, peacekeepers had a duty to build peace, hope and confidence among the

citizens and conflicting parties simultaneous to ceasefires and short-term peace agreements.

The end of the Cold War also brought along with it a drastic change to the entire structural and procedural backbones of the UN. Its field operations have widened and diversified, involving a variety of tasks of a number of levels as well as individuals of more complex “multidimensional” expertise and less “traditional” military operations to carry out and lay down the base of peace and peaceful agreements. The duty of a modern peacekeeper involves “helping to build sustainable institutions of governance, to human rights monitoring, to security sector reform, to the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants” as well as more (United Nations Peacekeeping). Along with the change in structures and procedures, there are various types of conflicts in the modern world today. Peacekeeping was previously applied to inter-state conflicts, as opposed to the present, which includes a widening of horizons into intra-state affairs and civil wars. The military still remains the pillar behind peacekeeping operations with the involvement of “administrators and economists, police officers and legal experts, de-miners and electoral observers, human rights monitors and specialists in civil affairs and governance, humanitarian workers and experts in communications and public information” (Bangladesh UN Peacekeeping Force).

### **4.3 Bangladeshi Peacekeeping**

Since the establishment of the UNPSO (United Nations Peace Support Operations) in the 1970s, Bangladesh has participated in two missions, namely United Nations Iran-

Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG) and United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in 1988 by the then president, Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad.

The Bangladesh Army sent around a 2,193 fixed infantry battalion as part of the UNIKOM force deployed to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia subsequently to the Gulf War. Since then, the Bangladesh Army has been involved in peacekeeping missions in as many as twenty-five countries, some of which are Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda, Mozambique, former Yugoslavia, Liberia, Haiti, Tajikistan, Western Sahara, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Georgia, East Timor, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire and Ethiopia.

Bangladesh was ranked second for its contribution to United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in December 2008. For this, the Bangladesh Army is now one of the top foreign currency earners for the country due to the funding it is given for its contribution to the UN.

Quoting Ahsan, Bangladesh has been doing very well and earning fame for themselves and the country.

“...Bangladesh was the highest troops contributing country in peacekeeping missions worldwide. Bengali troops were all over the troubled spots of the globe from Ethiopia to Georgia, from East Timor to Sierra Leone. It was as if peace missions and Bangladesh Armed Forces were synonyms- one meant the other. For a country where poverty was rampant, population was gigantic and unemployment was one of the highest in the region, the achievement of her military abroad was something to be agreed with accolades. They worked relentlessly to better the uncomplimentary views

of the country held by the world outside. And their endeavor was aptly awarded by stories of tremendous success” (p.17).

#### 4.4 Plight of Peacekeepers

It is undeniable that peacekeepers are destined to face an assortment of challenges at different levels, sometimes going as far as death. Families and loved ones are kept in a dungeon of fear whether the nations’ men of honor will return home safe and sound once again to be a present member in the family scene. As described by the protagonist of the novel:

*“A kaleidoscope of bizarre, funny, dramatic and morbid events took the form of a movie-a movie so intense, so enthralling that even if I played it time and time again I would never get tired with. As a United Nations peacekeeper, I saw scenes gruesome beyond words to describe, heard words that were never meant to be heard and felt a certain kind of suffering that, though not my own, stayed sealed in my consciousness for eternity”*(p.10).

“Peacekeeping was a very risky business and working in the Foreign Affairs branch meant I was no stranger to horrible things that happened on the field missions on a regular basis”(p.18).

The novel begins with a tragedy that had shocked the entire nation of Bangladesh on 25<sup>th</sup> December 2003. Samir Iqbal, the protagonist of the novel, receives a fax informing the death of fifteen Bangladeshi peacekeepers on their return from Benin after a nine month long mission in the African jungles. The aircraft by which the

peacekeepers were returning had been the same one that had gone missing after take off from Angola on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2002. It was later investigated that a new registration number had been painted over the plane's former registration number.

Families had been torn apart with wives turned widows, aged parents overcome with unbearable grief with the loss of sons, and children turned orphans as fathers would remain strangers forever. As Samir is assigned to be a peacekeeper in Congo, his ideal wife Srabonty is frantic that he might be the next victim to return in a coffin. Like other army wives, she gathers courage for the sake of her husband and prepares the necessities Samir would require in his year long assignment. She packs in sweets for other Bangladeshi milobs (military observers) he would meet, "spices and medicines, windbreakers and mosquito repellants, music discs and packs of fifty-two candles" (p.38). The love and possessiveness of a wife is shown when she hands over a list of ten things for Samir to fulfill, starting from taking good care of himself to trying not to be Rambo to not talking or looking at any "other" women (p.39).

Another Bangladeshi milob working at Mbandaka Sector Headquarters is Lieutenant Commander Shahid. Upon meeting Samir, the army official overcomes with emotion seeing another brother from the homeland.

*"As soon as I was spotted, Shahid came running and hugged me so tight that my heart stopped beating. I was the first deshi guy he had met in five months and he direly needed to unwind in Bangla. After a squeeze of what seemed like three hours long, he released me and we were on our way to his house in his Toyota"* (p.51).

Samir is not any different from the others. He is a husband who reminisces about the moments and memories compiled in his mind about life back home with his family



and the Bangladeshi life. He and Samir share the longest, warmest and most tender hugs in those days before his departure. They text each other poems and sweet one-liners over cell phones long distance. Samir is hit by memories a number of times in Africa when he spends time with other milobs, Bangladeshi and foreign.

*Shahid was an outgoing fun-loving guy who knew how to have a good time. We two often drove through the dirt road and enjoyed quiet evenings by the river over cups of coffee. I suffered a sense of nostalgia. There was a river by my house in Dhaka and Srabonty and I would stroll along the bank for hours in the evening. The sun would drop like a huge orange ball and we would sit on a bench until it was dark. Our time together at home was quiet but beautifully romantic. In Mbandaka, I discovered that memories hurt and loving memories hurt some more” (p.54).*

We see the plight in other non-Bangladeshi milobs like Colonel Baez from Paraguay. Ahsan has a powerful ability of moving readers with the way he illustrates the sympathy owing to isolation. The novel makes readers feel the pain of being away from loved ones.

Baez receives a call that his son Andre broke his leg and is in the hospital. Helpless because he cannot do anything from the other side of the globe, he can only seek solace in the family photographs Baez keeps in his wallet. Showing them to Samir, Samir immediately sees Srabonty and his daughter Brishty in the Paraguayan family photos. “I felt like I didn’t know my team leader, for he seemed too familiar, too close. My memories of my own family weighed heavily on my mind- my emotion threatened to break open the hardened façade of a military man” (p.72).

*“Eight months of isolation and the man silently wept for the family left on their own. The faces in the small square pictures he kept in his wallet saw nothing but tears at that moment and from a quarter of the way around the world they couldn’t stretch their arms for a soothing embrace. ....Just a few days in this land and my single strand of thought about Srabonty and Brishty already surrounded me like a cobweb. ...My words probably would fail to console him but my heartfelt empathy didn’t. For the next two minutes, we two, sufferers in solitude, sat together- silently sharing and nursing each other’s wounds” (p.72).*

In another instance, we see a peacekeeper losing his life tragically as his assignment was about to be over. A Ghanaian peacekeeper called Atidigah was shot in the head as rival gangs attacked him and a Zambian female milob, Sarah Angela. Atidigah had been recently married to his fiancée of two years (pp.171-172).

## **4.5 Hospitality vs. Hardships**

Bangladeshis are known for their hospitality, and from many instances in the novel we see that Congolese should be complimented with this virtue. In many cases people have misconceptions about Africans to be uncouth, uncivilized, cannibalistic humans trapped in the Dark Ages but residing in one of natural heaven on earth. Hardly one is heard to be expressing the virtues and vibrancy of African people.

When Samir arrives in Ikela after leaving Mbandaka he finds around a hundred men, women, and children waiting outside the airport fence with welcoming placards for him. Dressed in clothes of a myriad of colors, the placards shouted “Welcome to

Ikela” and “Wendome” both in English and in French. Patron Bangladesh means ‘boss of Bangladesh’ (p.44).

Alongside the hospitality, the Congolese people tend to form close bonds with each other and with those of other races. Initially Samir found it very strange that one would refer to Africans as Mama or Papa. There is Papa Toma who is the caretaker of Bangla House in Kinshasa, Papa Sentinel who is the watchman, and Mama Judith who is the housekeeper in Ikela. “This is hilarious, I thought. With a population of sixty million and one to one male-female ratio, I instantly got rich by thirty million Papas and many Mamas” (p.44).

Ahsan gives a detailed illustration of the hardships the Congolese people endure like poverty, brutalities, as well as AIDS. People seek hospitals as a last resort, partly due to faith and partly due to not having medical affordability.

Landmines are strewn everywhere in eastern Ikela left from the previous war. “People lived in virtual landmines. Children, unaware of the dangers, got blown up everyday while playing with mines that looked like with prongs and trip wires” (p.53). The land is difficult to cultivate.

In northern Ikela foodstuff like scanty grains, fruits and vegetables are transported over a hundred miles from Ikela. Those who transport goods supply them by bicycle, pedaling for nearly a week. Strenuous and cumbersome, there is always the risk of “being mugged en-route” (p.79). The hardest time during the year is when the area goes without rain that makes the crops hard to grow. Those who could afford make a living from chicken and goat farming. The less fortunate have to take up begging as a last resort (p.80).

The schools are deficient in the fact that they were not provided for a proper education. "...books, blackboards, desks and the chairs were not inadequate to meet the needs of pupils" (p.78). Probably because of this, classes are held outdoors under the shade of trees where teachers read out from texts while students repeat after them. Information is "primitive" while books also contain half-truths. Villains in history are portrayed as heroes and vice versa. The children do not have the conception about gravity as children globally are taught. The students' mathematical education does not go beyond timetables (p.78).

Southern Ikela has the most inhabitants. The living conditions are the least civilized with no schools or cultivation. However, these inhabitants are the most hospitable among the four areas of Ikela. Ahsan gives us a beautiful opinion, no matter how spine chilling the truth he opines.

*"But strikingly, people here were the most hospitable. Poor as they were, they slaughtered the last chicken in their house and picked the last papaya from their trees to treat us. We often accepted their invitation and paid them even after their consistent refusal to accept money from us. It was astonishing for me to see how little these people had and how contented they were with that. I often wished I was like them- plain, simple and unpretentious, not blemished by the so-called progress that had me put on a mask. I tried but I couldn't. I was not like them from deep inside. My very existence was one of mockery and deception. I fed on other people's misery from childhood- me, my ancestors and the whole world that I grew up with. I felt like a virus feeding on these unfortunate people reduced to nonexistence. They didn't eat a full square meal in their entire life, because I ate more than my own fair share; they*

*was they who were paying the price — they had lives in despair for us to live a life of pleasure and affluence. And that was not enough, it was they who were stigmatized through everything we had under our power to control— our language, our literature and our media” (p.81).*

This is confirmed when Samir and Colonel Baez go to the local police chief at his office in Ikela. Baez hands two hundred francs to a little boy who comes begging. Later the little boy returns happily with two coconuts for Baez and Samir, cutting the tops of the coconuts for them to drink. Regardless, he is handed over another five-dollar bill as he stands confused. A little bit of kindness goes a long way.

We see the Africans wanting dollar bills from the foreign peacekeepers, especially in the bazaars. “Locals were very reluctant to accept francs from us. They wanted the green bills. Dollars made them powerful. A fistful of dollars of any denomination was a sure way to earn admiration from the neighbors” (p.73). Samir learns this in Mbandaka at the weekly bazaar. Sellers are eager on making a sale to foreign faces to have their payment in foreign currency. “Foreigners were constant targets of the hell bent mamas who desperately needed a piece of their wallet” (p.57). The dollar bill may also be seen as a form of lifesaver, considering the life threatening situations Samir gets into. To mention one, when their Toyota accidentally runs over and kills a chicken belonging to a group of Mbandaka natives, it is either two hundred dollars or Samir and the accompanying interpreter’s lives (p.61).

## 4.6 Warriors at Heart

Ahsan takes time to put forward a detailed illustration of the women from both worlds. Taking Srabonty and the African women both are unique and share similarities in unique ways.

Ahsan portrays Samir's lovely wife as ideal, beautiful, caring, responsible, mother, daughter, sister, and wife. With that he gives readers the beauty of Bangladeshi women and their unique ways to run the household and keep their husbands devoted to them.

Ahsan describes how Samir and Srabonty meet, how their marriage is an arranged affair even though Samir fell head over heels in love with her at first sight. It is because of a "mysterious thing" Samir describes as 'dhong' (p.24). Samir describes women from South Asia to have this unique trait. It is a discreet method of hypnotizing the male using actions that make the South Asian woman simple yet speak volumes.

*"The concept of dhong is untranslatable in any other language. No bilingual dictionary renders it accurately. It's intrinsic to women from this part of the world-like an inimitable individual trait. Dhong makes women here utterly shy but covertly seductive, solemn but slyly playful, traditionalist but stealthily trendy. Hidden beneath their demeanor of bashfulness they possess a certain kind of sweet and innocent mischief that can turn any man into a willing game. They look through the corner of their eyes-a piercing sudden glance with a teasing grin on their lips. They feign anger-not heated rage but a soft, mild and sugary kind of resentment. They don't hold*

Besides possessing the meek secrets of hypnotic seduction, Srabonty is the ideal wife who is not irritated by her husband's lazy ways, or his ideas of Valentine's Day and birthday gifts. She is an impeccable homemaker, a favorite family member who has a cheery disposition with the in-laws, a mother who looks after her child's academics, and a wife who wins her husband's heart through his stomach with her immaculate collection of cookbooks and culinary skills. Samir is a food lover and Srabonty "likes to treat (him) like an Indian *Maharajah* on an eating spree" (p.27). Refusing to burden Samir with her grief over his assignment in Congo, she does not shed tears before him except to herself in the wee hours of the night in secrecy.

African women are described as strong, both mentally and physically, with a keen sense of responsibility rooting from the need to run their families and feed hungry mouths. The African women would endure the torture and ill treatment from their husbands patiently after a hard day's work.

*"Women in Mbandaka, as well as other parts of Congo, worked harder than men. They were the housekeepers and the bread earners. They maintained their families- their kids as well as their husbands, who sat tight in their homes and ogled at other women all day. Ironically, the women still got beaten and harassed by their men.*

*African women were tolerant and didn't complain" (p.55).*

Samir sees mostly women selling fish, chicken and other African delicacies at the weekly bazaar in Mbandaka.

Mama Judith is a character with a small yet significant role. She is the housekeeper in Ikela who sometimes takes the responsibility of cooking meals if the milobs are not cooking. She is described to hold the status of a male unlike the usual status almost all females around the world hold. Mama Judith is the breadwinner in her family, where she leads two marriages simultaneously. A mother of ten children and a grandmother blessed with thirty grandchildren, her two husbands speak to her with respect and honor (pp.69-70).

An interesting issue is that women in Ikela divorce men who cannot father children ever since the women learned about zero sperm count. This gives the women of Ikela the upper hand and the men of being ostracized. Contrary to Ikela, the blame game still continues in many places and many families in Bangladesh. Many women face mental and physical torture because the couple cannot bear children. In many parts of the world the misconception that infertile women are cursed still persists.

When it comes to African beauty, it is a question whether Samir prefers the 'black beauty' to the 'Bangladeshi beauty'. He describes Srabonty's eyes as "black, dark black, like the moonless night and there was a particular madness about them (p.25). On the other hand Bibiche's eyes are "deep, dark and so lustfully wide that the whole world could be lost in them forever" (p.85). Srabonty's hair is shoulder length (p.25) whereas Bibiche's hair, "atypically African, was long and shiny like the serene waves of the Pacific" (p.85). Her dimple is one that should be given another name. A French speaker, it is unclear whether she is African or of African descent. Her tank top and jeans give away her curves and cleavage, and the expressions of the milobs give away their attraction towards her even though it had gone unnoticed by her (p.85). Srabonty is of average height with a slim figure. Both ladies have pearly teeth. The line that



demarcates the African from the Bangladeshi woman is that Bangladeshi women “are not *hot*, they don’t burn the eyes at first sight; they are *warm*, teasing playfully with the heart. None can get enough of them” (p. 25).

#### 4.7 Common Quacks for Doctors

Africa and Bangladesh (under South Asia) share common grounds when the issue of quacks and voodoo magic comes under focus. Quacks and witch doctors are known for their manipulations, mainly targeting the poorer and illiterate people as poverty compels them to take cheaper means of cure. They do not have significant power nor influence to hold the unscrupulous accountable. Faith plays a role as the illiterate people fail to conceive that the supernatural does not control the way of life.

Hospitals are not necessarily the first on their lists to run to when illness, disease or injuries strike. For instance, a fake doctor in Bangladesh by the name Abdus Sadek claimed to be a doctor and ran a medical center called Sadek Medical in Bhairab, Bangladesh. He was arrested for killing ten newborns, mutilating them during birth in 2007.

The national daily The Daily Star reported, “In his statement, Sadek gave a grotesque description of murdering newborns by deceiving and taking advantage of the naivety of rural people from the lower income group” (*The Daily Star*, 2007).

“Quack Sadek claimed to have spiritual powers. After reciting his saint’s name five hundred times and with the help of the power, he delivered babies without any medical instrument, he said” (*The Daily Star*, 2007).

Similarly, when Samir and Umma Eze go to the hospital in Ikela to see the fatally injured man to whom Eze goes next. Both of them see the hospital in extremely poor condition. It functions without a water supply and electricity. The patients are operated in a room with the windows open. X-rays are too expensive for the people's affordability. The healthy people are exposed to the diseased, who are laid down in rows on the hospital floor. "The hospital was a virtual preparatory for the souls to depart the world- a place where everyone came to die. More people left the hospital dead than cured. People in Ikela were either too preoccupied with their chores to be concerned about their ailment or preferred the local quacks who promised a panacea with their voodoo magic" (p.76).

On a less serious note, let us take the instance when Papa Sentinel takes Samir to the sex guru at the monthly bazaar in Ikela.

Because Ikela is a little village in the African jungles without leisurely entertainments, people use sex as the best alternative. Sexual power gives African men fame and honor. To them "sex was like food" (p.88). Impotency was dreaded as the village people, especially the women, would come to know about it.

At the monthly bazaar there is a long queue of people outside the sex guru's hut. It occurs as very strange to the Africans that Samir does not want to have sex simply because his wife forbade him to even look at another of the opposite gender. After all, all other men in Africa were having it. Suspecting Samir as impotent, the guru forces Samir to take some of his medicines. He goes to the extent of giving Samir proof of his own manhood, which Samir describes as a penis "like an enormous pendulum" (p.92). The lotions that Samir are compelled to buy "looked like grease and smelled like kerosene...the one marked blue was to be applied just before coitus" (p.93).

Congo is a country where magic and belief in the supernatural hold reigns over many parts of life. From Ngomba we learn of magic water, which the rebel group he used to work with, Mai Mai, considered as a shield against enemy rebels. The gang members would bathe with buckets of water into which a magic man spat in. This man would sit under a tree and chant all day.

*“Nothing’s gonna get you now. You are shielded boy.” Ngomba couldn’t believe them. But relentless holy water eulogy entered through cracks in his reasoning and he too embraced the idea that bullets and rockets fired at his holy anointed body would turn to drops of harmless liquid. In his mind he was virtually wrapped in an invisible coat of arms- the Mai Mai holy water” (p.97).*

Even after a bullet hit Ngomba and his comrades lay dead around him, Ngomba refuses to believe the futile powers of the water. He says it is his “lack of loyalty” and the “price for my unbelief” (p.99).

#### **4.8 Indian Bangladesh or Bangali Bangladesh?**

Even though Bangladesh had gained independence in a bloody 1971 war, there are many parts of the world today that mistake Bangladesh for India.

Major Rabi emails Samir that Hindi DVD’s are very popular in Africa and that it could bail one out of the tightest situations if necessary (p.34). The local police chief in Ikela made a similar *faux pas*. The gentleman is an ardent fan of Amitabh Bachchan, the star of what he thought was “Bangladeshi movies” (p.74). Bibiche had mistakes Bangladeshi cooking for Indian, infuriating Samir. “It’s in the fifth grade

geography book” (p.86). After flying into a small town east of Kinshasa called Kikwit, Samir encounters officials who had never heard of Bangladesh. “Given my interrogator’s geographically- challenged knowledge, I had to use the India reference under duress, much as I hated it” (p.185). African people seem to relate India to its Hindi movies and songs and Amitabh Bachchan rather than to its geography or culture. Major Rabi’s advice comes in handy after a promise of Hindi movie DVD’s help release Samir, Colonel Rana and David from the officials (p. 185).



### 5.1 Life of Tahmima Anam

Tahmima Anam was born in Dhaka in 1975, four years after Liberation. Her father Mahfuz Anam was an active participant in the war, who is now the editor of *The Daily Star*, an English newspaper. He toured India as an orator, raising awareness of Bangladeshi people's plight in the years before the war. Friends of the family were guerrilla fighters and revolutionaries.

He joined the UN that privileged Tahmima to be raised in Paris, New York and Bangkok. She completed her PhD in social anthropology from Harvard and holds an MA degree in Creative Writing.

### 5.2 Literature Review of *A Golden Age*

Rehana Haque is a widower in her thirties who lives in Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan. She runs two houses and struggles to raise her two children Maya and Sohail. When the 1971 war breaks out, Maya joins the student wing of the Communist party. Sohail hates politics and has a love "for all things Bengali: the swimming mud of the delta; the translucent, bony river fish; the shocking green palette of the paddy and the open, aching blue of the sky over flat land" (p.34). He is forced to join the war as a "guerilla" ready to die for his country (pp.102-103). The novel describes how Rehana and those around her experience and absorb the horrors of genocide and army occupation. Along with a story of national independence, Rehana also emerges from her former constricted life.

Tahmima Anam writes the story by collecting real life experiences of war veterans and molded her fictional characters into nonfiction facts. Many instances have been mentioned regarding the torture and killings of the East Pakistani people during nine long months of war. However there is a difference between facts and how the author portrays them. At the party scene where Rehana is celebrating the anniversary of getting her children Maya and Sohail back from West Pakistan, Sohail says, “West Pakistan is bleeding us out. We earn most of the foreign exchange. We grow rice, we make the jute, and yet we get nothing- no schools, no hospitals, and no army. We can’t even speak our own bloody language!” (p.29). During the cyclone of 1971 Maya and Sohail had realized that aid would not arrive for it was not sent to begin with (p.33).

Writers must carefully place plot at par with historical facts, as mentioned by Michael Gorra (2008) in his article “The Birth of a Nation”. For instance Tahmima writes that the Pakistani army tanks began to fire at ten in the night when in fact it had started at around midnight. In a newsletter published under the Bangladesh Awami League:

“At that stage, Bangabandhu in the early hours of 26th March, 1971 (before his arrest) declared Independence of Bangladesh...”(2004).

It should be emphasized that the National Party had not forced the East Pakistanis of different faith to change their manners of greeting. Anam writes, “She was unable to pretend, as she saw so many others doing, that she could replace her mixed tongue with a pure Bengali one, so that the Muslim salutation, *As-Salaam Alaikum* was replaced by the neutral *Adaab*, or even *Nomoshkar*, the Hindu greeting” (p.47). Similarly, it was not of the norm for an upper middle class woman like Rehana to attend political gatherings as she is shown to have done at the racecourse on March 7<sup>th</sup>

until after the declaration of Independence.

The author succeeds in utilizing some of the many hardships people had gone through, like Mrs. Chowdhury. Out of fear for her daughter, she marries Silvi off to Lieutenant Sabeer, an army officer for the Pakistani army. Young unmarried girls were sexual targets in the eyes of Pakistani soldiers.

Anam tries to revive the intensity of a war that cost the lives of three million people. Anam writes “a wet ribbon poured into a gutter, which was also red,” and of a girl whose ‘mouth was tiny, only a pale pink smudge” (p.64). In some ways, the writer’s descriptions are vague and hard to understand.

Tahmina Anam mentions food and delicacies all throughout the novel, where the protagonist Rehana is seen cooking meat, ‘dimer halwa’ chicken of various varieties, etc. It is interesting to read about Rehana cooking biryani in a raging war and genocide. It would seem far fetched as the prices of most food items spiral at a time of war.

The story progresses with life and realism as Anam describes in detail the fear Rehana has about losing her children again. Anam successfully creates Sohail’s character as one of the young boys of the time, who might have been pacifist-turned warriors, and women like Maya in whose hearts burned patriotism for the birth of a jewel, Bangladesh.

Sohail takes part in the war for Bangladesh and in hope that his childhood love, Silvi, would come back to him. As the story is about love for a country, it is heart warming to see how a non-Bengali like Rehana, who is from Calcutta, still goes on to live in

She embraces the country as her own and with tremendous fearlessness contribute in their own ways to the war.

There is an even greater description of torture and hardship when Maya's best friend Sharmeen is found raped and dead after becoming pregnant (pp.122-123)

husband is inhumanly tortured when Rehana finds that his fingernails had been torn off, his ribs broken, burn marks all over his back from cigarettes, and he was made to drink salt water. He meets his death eventually. Tahmima excellently describes the bravery of a woman trying to contribute to the war, when Rehana gets a release order from her Pro-Pakistan brother in law Faiz to free Sabeer from a pump house at Muslim Bazar.

There is a short love affair that grows between Rehana and an injured Major who takes shelter at Shona, the two-storied houses Rehana had built and rented out to the Senguptas. Like many others, a scene of loss and sacrifice is shown when Rehana is compelled to sacrifice the Major to save Sohail from the clutches of the Pakistani army.

The exodus of a million people who flee to Salt Lake, India, is shown accurately with refugee camps, the morbid state and condition, the lack of sanitation, and live corpses roaming around create a war scene. The loss of sons like Mithun, friends like Joy, Aref and Partho, lovers like the Major, all give a heart wrenching effect.

### **5.3 Critiques and Criticisms: *A Golden Age***

*A Golden Age* had received mixed reviews. Although Anam lays down background of war, she “doesn't unduly concern herself with political specifics” (Smith, 2008). In a



2008 review, Smith also noted that that a first time author's inexperience shows as Anam could have emphasized evil's extreme "in even the most honorable people confronted with life-threatening choices." However in 2007, Shamsie commented that one of the strengths of the novel was its portrayal of war from a female perspective as she cannot participate in action except find a way to live and survive "in the limbo world of a city in curfew". In 2007, House had compared Anam with Romesh Gunesequera, stating that "Anam has created for Bangladesh what Romesh Gunesequera managed for Sri Lanka: a ballad to perseverance."

#### **5.4 Diaspora elements in *A Golden Age***

The text gives manifestations of dispersion and mass migration. In *A Golden Age* the protagonist Rehana sends her seventeen-year-old daughter to Calcutta to keep her safe. She herself escapes arrest by fleeing to Calcutta after crossing the Indian border. One must applaud the feminine strength of the mind Anam has served to her readers when Rehana says to herself that "she was not a refugee" (p.206) or that she has not returned to Calcutta (p.210). People of other faiths, mostly Hindus are forced to flee mainly because they were non-Muslims and are thought to be pro-India and working against the Pakistani government. Mr. And Mrs. Sengupta are assumed to flee to India because they were Hindus. Instead they opted to head for their village home in Pabna since Mr. Sengupta's "family has been in that village for generations" (p.72). This is just an instance of how an exodus of ten million people were uprooted and forced to leave their origin.

When one is uprooted from their home, it creates trauma. Forced migration causes instability of the mind as one cannot return to the place they call home. This has to do

with exile. It is emotional to read how the effects of war mentally ravaged Mrs. Sengupta when she is found at the Salt Lake Refugee Camp in Calcutta. She could not utter a single word because of the trauma she was suffering from. She could only write a few sentences that said, "I went into the reeds... In the pond... I left him...I left him and ran into the pond...I didn't think about him, I just ran...They shot him" (p.232). The Hindu lady, who had once worn a 'teep' and *sindoor*, was referring to 'him' as Mithun, her son.

### **5.5 Elements of Nationalism in *A Golden Age***

In *A Golden Age*, nationalism is shown through the story of war. Rehana is slow to convert to Bangali nationalism initially for she is an admirer of Urdu poetry. However, her children are radicalized by Bengali nationalism. They join the rebel army in protest of the Bangla language suppression and culture and martial law. Rehana performs actions for the sake of her son, which are regarded by others as great feats of nationalism. Instances include sowing saris together to make quilts for the rebels, selling pickles to buy more thread, digging tunnels outside her home to hide weapons. Sohail's loyalty for Bangla forces him to join the rebels. Maya turns into a politically active woman indirectly avenging the rape, torture and murder of her closest friend.

## 5.6 Imperialistic elements in A Golden Age

This has been shown in *A Golden Age* as the Pakistani army's brutality on the East Pakistani people. Anam talks about the looting burning roofs, rape, murder, massacre, and varieties of torture. The assertion of Urdu over Bangla, the mention of West Pakistan taking away all of the Eastern region's money are characteristics of imperialism.



## 6.0 *Brick Lane*

### 6.1 Life of Monica Ali

Monica Ali was born in Dhaka on February 7, 1967 to an English mother, Joyce, and a Bangladeshi father, Hatem Ali. Before the war, the Alis led a quiet life in Dhaka and got along well with their neighbors. Monica and her elder brother, Robin, lived like other middle-class Bengali children until political unrest forced the family's emigration. After the war broke out, Hatem Ali sent his wife and children to safety in England. In 2003, as Monica Ali recalls in "Where I'm Coming From", after her father escaped to England, the children stopped speaking to him in Bangla. Returning to Bangladesh was not a plan. Home, "because it could never be reached, became mythical: Tagore's golden Bengal, a teasing counterpoint to our drab northern mill town lives" as quoted in Haq (2006).

### 6.2 Choosing *Brick Lane* and *A Golden Age*

The two texts portray the history and culture from a modern perspective, as well as through those writers' eyes that have had the privilege of being educated and living abroad, even though their roots lead back to Bangladesh. The bridge between the two texts is that both texts allege to symbolize people of a race or nation, thus attempting to legitimize the bourgeois claim on Bangladeshi culture, history and heritage.

### 6.3 Literature Review of *Brick Lane*

The story is about Nazneen, born in a village, who is married off at the age of eighteen to an older man, Chanu. They live in a dismal housing project in the East End of London's Tower of Hamlets. Chanu is nearly twice Nazneen's age and was

admired by Nazneen at first. He has a noticeable collection of books and furniture that awed his much younger wife, until she grew tired of his habit of making statements and not acting upon them. He does not make an endeavor to put through his aims which are left futile. Nazneen is not comfortable with Chanu's view that women's work should not go beyond the boundaries of the domestic territory.

Nazneen faces a whole new Western culture while leaving behind a more familiar Asian culture. She grows a passion for ice-skating which she is acquainted to by television. It is the death of their first child, a son named Raquib, that brings a change for the better between Chanu and Nazneen. They grow to respect each other better, understand one another and Chanu becomes more responsible.

This is a novel that gives a good glimpse of the various fiends of society that are corrupt and pollute it. There are those characters in the novel whose children are far from the original traditions and norms of their roots. HIV, drugs, sex, etc. in England. Tariq, Nazneen's best friend Razia's son, gets trapped in drugs and Nazneen's own two daughters, Shahana and Bibi, are too Westernized for the likes of Chanu. He is a father who has been wanting to move back to Bangladesh since long. This is what Dr. Azad, a family friend ashamed of his own family, describes as the "Going Home Syndrome" which everyone suffers in a foreign land away from home. Otherwise Chanu complains about the racism in England. Luck is not on his side since he hops from one job to another. In a desperate attempt to raise money to return to Bangladesh with his family, he lets Nazneen take up a sewing job at home while he works as a taxi driver, before which he borrows money from a Mrs. Islam who has thugs for sons.

Nazneen's only connection with Bangladesh is with her pretty sister, Hasina, through the letters she writes to Nazneen. *Brick Lane* gives us a comparison between life in Britain and Bangladesh. Nazneen is shown the political changes over a 13 year period. The letters speak of the bails of Bangladesh, starting from pollution to child labor, violence on the streets, domestic violence, child trafficking, etc. Hasina elopes to Khulna, but her husband abuses her. She runs away to Dhaka and becomes a garments worker who then is slandered, raped and sacked. Hasina is a woman who takes fate in her own hands and never gives up without a fight, probably the reason she survives so much.

Nazneen has an affair with a young Muslim called Karim from whom Nazneen gains confidence and self recognition. He supplies sewing tasks to her from his uncle's shop and the love affair grows. Karim makes Nazneen feel that all that she says has significance

#### **6.4 Critiques and Criticisms: *Brick Lane***

The novel has received mixed reviews from the East and West. The West regarded the book as "central to contemporary England and South Asian diaspora", commented Haq (2006). From the Western aspect, Gorra (2003) wrote that Ali showed a "technical assurance and an inborn generosity that cannot be learned." Lane (2003) commended Ali for writing a book that was "warm, shrewd, startling, and hugely readable". However Sandhu (2003) uses Hasina's letters to describe "what is perhaps the major weakness of *Brick Lane*: its language". He finds it "strange" that being set in 1985, it "has so little to say about the campaign of violence and intimidation" of

almost all Bangladeshis that lived around Brick Lane. Also, Haq (2006) noted that the book did not make an impression on the British Bangladeshi Community, that they accused Ali of “portraying them negatively and in a distorted manner.”

## 6.5 Globalization

This theory explains the diversification of economic markets globally in the 20th century. It is based on the Western ideology of industrial capitalism as we enter deeper into the information technology backed by multinational companies. Albeit, changes such as “saturation of markets and costly overheads” of the West has forced companies to branch out in Second and Third world countries mainly for cheap labor. This causes a mutual intercourse between Eastern and Western countries in terms of culture and production, hence leading to hybrid cultures (Brooker, 2003).

This applies to both *Brick Lane* and *A Golden Age* indirectly. Both books are about Bangladeshi history and race, but published by British publishing houses Doubleday and John Murray respectively. As both writers are Bangladeshis based in the West, writing on Bangladesh and having them published from well known publishing houses has caught the attention of readers at home and around the world to pick up the books and have a read. This is a form of capitalism both beneficial for the authors and publishing houses in terms of consumerism, profit, and fame. There is now a globalization in literature. Migration and mixing of cultures have led to a global access to publishing houses. Publishing houses study the market to see how well a book will sell depending on how the story relates and appeals to a community. The British audience is more likely to read about sad situations of Bangladeshi migrants than about a Bangladeshi rickshaw puller.



## 6.6 Diaspora in *Brick Lane*

In *Brick Lane* Nazneen is one of the statistics that settle in London like the mass migration of the Sylheti community that settled in England since the 1960's. These two examples of dispersion are, however, creative. Evidently, one finds it hard to settle into foreign land. That, along with the trauma, allows ideas and thoughts to form, and in turn, create literature on those events. *Brick Lane*'s Nazneen attained self-realization after coming to England, as she felt displaced. Becoming used to foreign land only destabilizes ideas and self-criticism is important to construct literature.

## 6.7 Nationalism in *Brick Lane*

*Brick Lane* shows nationalism and religious loyalty through Karim, a politically active person organizing the first meetings of similarly radical individuals. After a group of white radicals send leaflets against Islam to the Muslim inhabitants, Karim responds writing similarly sharp leaflets. As the chairman of Bengali Tigers, a Muslim organization, he openly proclaims to support fighting Muslims in Chechnya, Egypt and other countries, where race and religious riots remain.

## 6.8 Binary Elements in *Brick Lane*

French structural linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, introduced that signs have meaning not by a simple reference to real objects, but by their opposition to other signs. Hawthorn (2000) stated in *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* that "many cultural phenomena are based on binary opposition" using the instance "If you are



not with us, you are against us". Binary differences often lead to the creation of stereotypes.

*Brick Lane* has been criticized for being stereotypical. It portrays a comparison of East vs. West, giving subtle hints that life in Bangladesh is hard with women regarded as the inferior gender. We see this as Hasina describes her life as a battered wife, a maid, a prostitute, and a rape victim. Political unrest in Bangladesh is described. Ali directly implies the freedom the West provides with the last sentence "This is England... You can do whatever you like" (p.413). The East is portrayed as an area of inequity, discrimination and harassment, giving the Bangladeshi community in England and Bangladesh such an image.

## **6.9 Imperialism in *Brick Lane***

In *Brick Lane* imperialism is more targeted at one person than a mass. Nazneen grows through Eastern stereotypes by the Western people around her and through her marriage. Chanu has the most long-term influence over Nazneen, is immensely complex himself and in his effect on Nazneen. He alone shows both aspects of dual oppression. He exhibits the typical attitude of male patriarchy one might expect from an Eastern marriage, adhering to cultural traditions and maintaining a firm attachment to their native culture, and treating Nazneen as more of a possession and a maid than as a wife or equal individual. He is not abusive or unkind to her. Without any thought to the matter, he expects Nazneen to fulfill the duties of a traditional Bangladeshi mother. In addition, however, his extreme obsession with Western education, academia, business, and relations almost makes him a figure of Western culture as well. Nazneen is therefore dominated not only by the patriarchal ideals of her own

influence, too. Thus she commits adultery with Karim.

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## ***7.0 Seasonal Adjustments***

Adib Khan is a Bangladeshi writer who has lived in Dhaka till 1973 during which he obtained a degree in English literature from Dhaka University. It was the same year he had left for Australia to pursue a Masters degree in English Literature from Monash University. Adib Khan presently lives and works as a teacher in Ballarat, Victoria with his wife and two daughters. He has a love for reading, cooking, listening to Western and Indian classical music, chess and cricket.

Adib Khan has authored five novels. His first novel, *Seasonal Adjustments* won the Christina Stead Prize for fiction and the Book of the Year in the 1994 New South Wales Premier's Prize, and won the 1995 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for First Book. His second novel, *Solitude of Illusions* was short listed for the Christina Stead Prize for fiction and the Ethnic Commission Award in the 1997 New South Wales Premier's Prize, and won the 1997 Tilly Aston Braille Book of the Year Award. His other novels are *The Storyteller* and *Homecoming*. His latest work *Spiral Road* was listed among the twenty books for the 2008 State Library of Victoria's summer reading program. Adib Khan is also has a PhD in Creative Writing.

## **7.2 Zamindari Elitism vs. Cruelty**

The term *Zamindar* is a distortion of two Persian words compounded together. *Zamin* is defined as land, and *dar* comes from the verb *dashtan*, interpreted as to hold or possess. The word *Zamindar* has diffused into the Mughal era vocabulary of the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century to constitute the issue of land interest of those of superior rank.

The *Zamindars* were titles given to the people who were entitled to collect the rent of the land on which cultivators worked. This does not insinuate that they held

possession rights over the land. The land was in possession of the peasants called *raiyyats*. The rent rolls, or *jamabandis*, were created in the names of these peasants. Therefore the *zamindars* were “intermediaries between the government and the inferior revenue farmers, excluding the *huzuri* (independent) *talukdars* who paid revenues straight to the *khalsa* (exchequer) and the peasants.” It was the Mughals who had designed this system of serfdom in a way so as to be beneficial to their economic and political interests. However this does not mean that there was a constant precedence in the rules, even though the rules were set by the Mughals themselves. Because the *zamindars* of pre-modern Bengal held control over the land this was a status symbol, a source of influence and social power as well as a factor of production.

The *zamindars* led an extravagant life which they maintained usually within the boundaries of their ‘little kingdoms’. It was their lifestyle that had led to the development of local crafts and small-scale industries like fine quality cotton textiles, exquisite silks, jewels, decorative swords and weapons. The extravagant lifestyle also led to a flow of money and wealth in the society. Their *darbars*, or courts, were designed like those of the *nawabs*. Their sense of style, dress, food, art and architecture were a fusion between Turkish and Persian heritages, as well as indigenous ones.

*Seasonal Adjustments* is the story of Iqbal Chaudhary who comes from a *zamindari* clan. He, like the author himself, had left Bangladesh for Australia, but only after the Independence War of '71. He leaves his country as there were erratic reprisals against the Biharis who had collaborated with the Pakistani Army. He comes to Bangladesh

after eighteen years with his grey-eyed teenage daughter Nadine. Iqbal and his Australian Catholic wife Michelle are separated to give her distance to reflect on their deteriorating marriage.

The story starts off with Iqbal arriving at his ancestral village of Shopnoganj in Bangladesh. Because he comes from an elite family holding the title of Chaudhary, he is expecting Mateen, his cousin, to be annoyed. “Mateen would have preferred a formal welcome – musicians with harmoniums and *tablas*, dancing girls sprinkling flowers at my feet, special prayers in the mosque followed by a feast for the entire village. “A celebration befitting the return of the wayward Chaudhary” (p.3). Should the setting have been some time in the medieval era of Bengal, one could expect such a ceremonious and musical welcome. This is a story set in the twenty-first century and one would go far enough to regard a welcome by dancing girls as a pure exaggeration. This has been criticized by Bangladeshi poet Kaiser Haq as a “pure Orientalist fantasy” (Haq, 2008).

Even though the novel shows Iqbal as disagreeable to his heritage and Bangali ways on many occasions, he does take pride at one point in giving readers an introduction of himself and his welcome at Shopnoganj with much pride and pomp.

*“A cushioned, cane chair has been especially brought out for me. After all, I am a Chaudhary. Iqbal Ahmed Chaudhary. My surname bears the legacy of a Moghul title bestowed on chosen warriors. I come from a family of landowners. Zamindars. Tyrants and despots, some would say with justification. The fact that I live overseas*

*gives me additional prestige. I live among shahebs and memshahebs. That in itself is a laudable achievement”* (p.10).

As they are the *zamindars* it is evident (and compulsory) that the citizens of subordination would always speak highly of their superiors. They also entertain themselves by relating embellished stories of the past about the *zamindari* richness and darkness. Khan gives us a description of the *zamindari* daily routine that take place when the Chaudhary clan of uncles, aunts, cousins arrive at the ancestral home to spend the summer. The mornings start off with the villagers and their families assembled before the *Boro Shaheb* to offer their respects. The Chaudhary men take long walks along the river discussing male oriented issues of politics and business. The Chaudhary women pass their time within the contours of the house occupying themselves with sewing, cooking and gossip. The children, being aware of their status, have the beginnings of pride which they flaunt with the family title. They “civilize the locals by teaching them about cricket or asserting (their) superiority by thrashing them in a game of soccer” (p.23). The elder Chaudharys see it as a matter of prestige to arrange an *aqeeqa* for Nadine, celebrating with “a modest dinner” for one hundred and fifty guests of the upper class and spending ninety-thousand takas on party preparations (p. 95).

Towards the end of the novel where we find the land and house in Shopnoganj have to be sold off due to the losses incurred every year, it dawns on Iqbal that the reason behind it are many. He finds it surreal to fathom that the Chaudhary reign and empire was crumbling. The more vulnerable villagers had been emotionally manipulating Iqbal’s father regarding his generous obligations, thus extorting money out of him. It

was a device concocted by Mateen after Iqbal and his elder brother Hashim had left the country (p.224).

*“The peculiarly innate faith in our invincibility has been severely jolted... We are the saviours, the magnanimous agents of rescue for those in trouble. We are the ones people turn for help. I was brought up with the tacit assumption that altruism was an inherent family trait rather than a rare individual virtue. We helped the people of Shopnoganj because of our god-like ability to bestow favours on unfortunate mortals. It was a task we relished. We enjoyed the power of life and death over the villagers without ever feeling vulnerable or apprehensive about the forces which might control us. It was a notion as remote and absurd as asking if there was an omnipotent power above and beyond Allah Himself” (p.223).*

It was also a common habit in the past that *zamindars* would go to unjust extremes for their own pleasure and benefit at the cost of the villagers. In many cases the cost can be interpreted in terms of the villagers’ lives. The *zamindari* life was one of extravagance as well as murkiness. It was of the norm to have a *naach ghor*, or dance house, where dance girls would entertain this elite force. Iqbal describes it as “a place for entertainment and relaxation” (p.5). It was the place where remnants of the past remained, remnants of his “ancestral misdeeds” (p.5). Iqbal had been terribly upset when a portion of the family ancestral residence in Shopnoganj “had to be demolished and replaced by a number of characterless rooms and ostentatious verandahs” (p.23). We also learn from Iqbal during his lunch with Mateen that their great grandfather was one of a lesser character and “a bit of a scoundrel” (p.20).

*“To put it mildly, my great-grandfather was a bit of a scoundrel. He spent his days riding his horses through the fields, looking for young peasant girls who could be trained as dancers for his nocturnal revelries. His evenings were spent in the dance-house with drunken friends and a bevy of young women to entertain them. I know nothing about my great-grandmother. I suspect she may have been one of Ishtiaq Ahmed Chaudhary’s concubines who cajoled him into matrimony during one of his periods of inebriated generosity” (p.20).*

Another incident Iqbal speaks about is of a Brahmin priest’s daughter who was picked up by the characterless Ishtiaq Chaudhary. She was found dead and decomposed in a floating river, only to raise the wrath and curses of her father that the Chaudhary and his descendants would never know the meaning of happiness (p.20).

One point that raises an eyebrow is when Adib Khan writes that in eighteen years Iqbal can “discern no changes” in Shopnoganj (p.7). One would find this to be highly unlikely especially the era during which the book was written coincides with the time when global development was on the rise. People in Bangladesh were for the urbanization and growth of the country not only within the perimeters of cities, but also for the diversification towards the outskirts, i.e. villages. Kaiser Haq has commented on this with hard scrutiny as an indirect disapproval towards Khan and his discriminatory misinformation.

*“No changes in a Bangladesh village in two decades following the independence war? Bangladeshi villages have probably undergone more changes during this period than in the previous two centuries! For the first time in history, villagers throughout*



*Bangladesh (and not just in particular districts like Sylhet or Noakhali) began to look for opportunities for emigration or jobs as migrant labour. Chaudhary, however, can only see Bangladesh in terms of prefabricated generalizations, stereotypes, caricatures” (Haq, 2008).*



### 7.3 Alienation

Brooker (2003) defined alienation as a concept where external forces have an impact on life and luck, thus leading to inadequate control or originality and recognition with oneself. The alienated feel a sense of estrangement from their workplace as well as from the results of work. They feel a sense of incomprehensibility for they find it hard to relate to issues of the world, relationships as well as the meaning of life. They see no purpose in life. A tendency of distrust sustains them as well as one of where they isolate themselves from social conventions and social relations. At the root, the alienated are also out of touch with themselves.

The prologue of the novel mentions Iqbal’s friend Claire telling him to go back to his roots and search the past that made him, rediscover who he is and heal himself from all that had left a void inside. Khan shows how the visit after nearly two decades to Bangladesh changes Iqbal, making him realize the facts of life and differing worlds, the roots that will always anchor man to the norms of the world from which he originates. Nadine also makes a transition into realizing the darker side of life and its bitter truths. In some cases life’s sadistic twists and turns leave man with a hardened exterior and heart as well as a bitter soul. This is the consequence Iftiqar, Iqbal’s best friend, endures after the Independence War of ’71.

He sees no changes after all these years, yet notices an “unfamiliarity” regarding all that is around him. It is none that he has never encountered, but lies on the borderline. He is seeing the Shopnoganj life all over again but from a different angle and feeling. “I am uncomfortable here in my village of birth” (p.7). He finds the supernatural stories the villagers relate as ridiculous. His life is almost like a machine, “commercialized, without mystery or multiplicity of meanings” (p.7). Gains and achievement seem to be more essential. Iqbal gives readers a list of causal ingredients that have led to his alienation without his realization.

“Work...money...consumerism which dictates the quality of life...ceaseless striving for professional success and recognition even as I warn others of the dangers of ambition...competition...self-induced stress...more work...periods of emotional drought and mental fatigue...spiritual aridity followed by a yearning for a simple life in isolation” (p.7). Thus are the consequences: “I am caught in a self-destructive vortex euphemized as living in the developed world. I ever seem to view life from a stationary position. I do not know how to stop and see. I have lost the patience and skill for nourishing dreams” (p.8). Relationships have an inessential part in his life, comprising of the professional faces at the workplaces, acquaintances, and an unhappy marriage fruitful of only a daughter. It is tragic to see the degeneration of the human soul that values productive time in terms of tangible gains and not emotional, social or family bonds (p.8). Iqbal is so alienated from his family that he has hardly written in all those years. He does not even now under what circumstances had Shabnam died, confusing a nasty betrayal with a car accident. He did not make an attempt to find out till he came to Bangladesh (p.30).

Iqbal takes sympathy towards the “hundreds of lepers” (p.194) he encounters outside the mosque in Dhaka as opposed to Hashim who sees it as pointless. Even though Khan etches an absurd impression of Dhaka, he shows readers that, reacquainting with his roots Iqbal, does have a compassionate side becoming more expressive. We see this transition in Nadine when she chooses to give twenty takas to a female laborer instead of buying a set of glass bangles (p.258).

Iqbal’s relationship with his wife Michelle is sourly disintegrating. It was evident that two people from different cultures worlds apart, who are determined to stick to the values bestowed upon them since birth but expect the other to give in and surrender, will only lead to an alliance of contempt and fight for the upper hand. Iqbal and Michelle are separated which leads to young Nadine believing that she is to blame. Iqbal’s negligence in taking responsibility over some of the domestic chores is only a flimsy peripheral layer screening the sour truth embittering the marriage: they were two worlds different (p.68). Michelle’s Catholic Australian family has never approved of Iqbal. He experiences civil conflicts with his father-in-law Keith on whether Nadine should be brought up in “the mainstream of Australian life” (p.85). Despite Iqbal creating a life in Australia and adopting some of its culture, he would never be one of them.

Iqbal thinks that Michelle is having an affair with her childhood friend Colin. His suspicions are confirmed when Colin helps arrange a villa in Tuscany, Italy for her during the Christmas holidays. Unfortunately for Iqbal (whose suspicions were proved baseless), and Colin (who had interpreted Michelle’s agreement to “share an

accommodation with a male in exotic Tuscany” as free sex), Michelle had been craving for some seclusion all along (p.229). Like her husband, Michelle regarded and expressed her thoughts of Colin no less than a machine. “She writes about Colin without inhibitions, as if he were an obsolete robot (p.228). Though it is natural one might interpret the obvious, Michelle thinks of Colin’s behavior as “neanderthalic single-mindedness” (p.229). She has an image of two people simply running a household, and it was till there she draws the line (p.230). The thought of sex outside marriage never occurs or entices her.

Iftiqar had joined the *Mukti Bahini* to fight against the Pakistani army in 1971. He had left his love interest, Shabana, in the care of Iqbal, who was to maintain a friendship with her and give her support while Iftiqar was away. Over time it grew to more than just friendship. “She wished to escape the reminder of a chaotic city gripped by fear, rumor and panic” (p.107). All the eighteen years Iqbal is away he thinks he is the culprit behind Iftiqar and Shabana’s breakup. On the contrary the war had ravaged people’s souls by the Pakistani atrocities. Iftiqar and Shabana’s first meeting after the war had been completely casual. She told him about her affair with Iqbal; it did not stir any feelings of jealousy or anger in him. “There was no anger left. The war had drained me of all feelings. I was surprised by her honesty” (p.268). Regarding the drastic change of thoughts and ways post war Iftiqar gives a clear picture why it occurs. “The political upheaval had dwarfed our private concerns into insignificance. We were too busy realigning our lives to a new order to indulge in recriminations” (p.269). Iftiqar has no more love left for Shabana nor feels anything towards her as all his feelings of emotions had been sucked dry. “Without those vital emotions and the commitments they induce to give life its shape and meaning, I was condemned to a

state of indifference. There I languish” (p.273). The alienated soldier tells Iqbal that he does social work simply to keep him occupied. There are no “moral conviction” in what he was doing (p.273). The Pakistani army had killed his entire family and demolished their house. “I became so scared of relationships that I isolated my feelings and imprisoned them somewhere inside me” (p.125). On Iqbal’s part he is not sure whether love had existed between Shabana and him. The challenge to prove himself better than his best friend had more significance than their friendship. It is safe to say that Iqbal envied Iftiqar (p.268).

#### **7.4 Rootless and Racial Victims**

We find out that Iqbal had left for Australia eighteen years ago because he was appalled by the brutality of the Independence war of ’71 after the war that had left many disillusioned. Understandably so, people have a preconceived notion that life abroad is equivalent to being served the fruits of life and its comforts on a silver platter. The cons are hidden away till reality explodes in one’s face only to discover a bitter truth.

Living overseas with *shahebs* and *memshahebs* is envied, as mentioned previously. Ironically, a life of wealth still does not manage to keep educated Bangladeshis in their own country where they are likely to receive handsomely and take the motherland to new horizons. For instance, when Mrs. Aziz coyly announces that her son Younus is about to be employed at a firm in Australia, the other ladies become distraught into a nervous frenzy. Another’s good luck cannot be handled or looked upon with sincere happiness if one’s own children cannot acquire the same good luck (pp.79-80). The ladies are wives of elite men and their children are highly qualified.

This mentality is by all means double standard where songs of patriotism will be sung and overshadowed by the same person who prefers to follow a life of hybrid cultures.

There are impressions and contrasts between a first world country and a third. Iqbal faces a barrage of curious inquisitions regarding Australia. “Are Australians racist?... Are Muslims hated there?...Is it easy to find well-paid jobs?...How much does a house cost?... What sort of car do you drive?... How do people manage without servants?... Is it difficult to migrate to Australia?” (p.75). Iqbal faces another barrage of different questions in Australia when Michelle introduces him to her family. “Do you go back to India often?...Bangladesh? Weren’t some people killed there some time ago?...Bangladesh? Bangladesh...That’s where you have the floods... Do you speak Indian at home?...Pardon me, but are you a Hindu?...Do you go to church?...Do you believe in Christ?”(pp.146-148). Judging from the above it is not hard to miss the racial tones and looks and ignorance in the latter about Bangladesh. To the Australians, India comprises the subcontinent with Pakistan and Bangladesh combined.

Michelle’s brother Martin gives a second thought before shaking hands with Iqbal and continues small talk while eyeing for more “compatible company” (p.146). His English wife Judy coldly insults Iqbal hinting at the Bangladeshi immigrants in England. Michelle does not show any support other than chide Iqbal to behave, or in other words, be submissive to the white race. Iqbal explodes at Michelle saying, “...I am fed up with being treated as an oddity, a stray from the forbidding darkness of the world up there. I’m tired of misconceptions and assumptions, of being an object of curiosity” (p.149). Michelle’s father, Keith, sees everything wrong about Iqbal.

*“What makes me unacceptable to Keith, even dangerous, is not my color or my background. It is my refusal to uphold what he considers to be the immutable virtues of every decent Australian...we are lumped together as Asians, recognizable by our absence of Christian principles which outweighs any discernible differences in ethnic characteristics. We are devious, unscrupulous, greedy, and godless. Our unstated philosophy- copulate and populate. We are a bunch of untrustworthy ratbags extending our sinister shadows to blight the country he claims to be God’s gift to Christians”* (pp.86-87).

As Iqbal tried to blend into his wife’s culture and family, he himself had deteriorated from the values he was born with. He had become more westernized. Simultaneously, he was becoming rootless. He looks at his own country and ancestral home with a scrutiny of disgust.

“The circumstances of birth are an accident, a quirk of fate...I am relieved I do not live here anymore” (p.40).

“...I have adopted another country” (p.42).

“What upsets me most is my inability to slip back into a tradition I assumed was an integral part of me” (p.116).

Iqbal faces two forms of alienation, as Kaiser Haq mentioned (2008), one that is “the outcome of the unavoidable anxiety of a secular, rational, consumerist l’homme

moyen sensual". Otherwise he feels a detachment from Bangladesh as he feels he is in a better position away from the poverty, dilapidation and dirt. He finds himself amidst "the bleeding rawness of bare existence. It is an expansive experience, a forced act of selflessness to be able to reach out and feel a pulse of suffering not my own" (p.10). At the same time he feels the bitterness in being a foreigner.

*"Do you know what it means to be a migrant? A lost soul forever adrift in search of a tarnished dream? You live in a perpetual state of conflict, torn between what was and what should have been. There is a consciousness of a permanent loss. You get sick of wearing masks to hide your confused aloneness. You can never call anything your own" (p.143).*

Regardless, he considers himself as a "skeptical inquirer" (p.197) and an equal to all because he is "a composite of all those contradictory characteristics which are far stronger than any racial or religious differences. And that is worth celebrating" (p.143).

We also see the death of love and disintegration of Hashim's marriage. He wants to divorce his Pakistani wife, Farhana, and marry his mistress Nadira. Nadira has a degree in Medicine from England. Before moving back to Bangladesh she had a job in London and a marriage with a Welsh surgeon. The marriage lasted for seven years as it bore no fruits of children. Like Iqbal, she too did not receive or feel any attachment towards the West. Like Iqbal, she faced racial attacks. Nadira realized that coming back to Bangladesh would give her the strength to go on with her life. A



divorced woman in the Bangladeshi society, in most cases, faces looks of disapproval for her inability to be bound by bonds of matrimony.

*“I was once again a part of an ethnic majority. That was vital for my self-confidence. No abuses or snide remarks about my color or my dress, no fear of racist attacks, no blame for Britain’s difficulties. There were many disadvantages about coming home. Many. But the compensating factor was the comfort of belonging. There was nothing artificial about it. I no longer had to call the past my home. Everything around me spoke intimately. It was all a part of me. It was a great feeling to be in love with life again, to embrace it without the fear of rejection” (p.153).*

## **7.5 Religion and Post Colonization in *Seasonal Adjustments***

Besides his views conflicting with Keith’s and his family, we see a religious confusion building inside Iqbal since his school days. An education at an English medium came with an input of Christianity into the young minds. The Islamic lessons subsequently followed after school. It was God vs. Allah when it came to Who was more supreme. Thus, Iqbal grew to detest men of religion. Christianity had crept into the Asia during the colonial period.

*“Of all the harm colonization has inflicted on the subcontinent, none has been more damaging than the cultural havoc wrought by that hallowed and sacrosanct institution, the English medium school. It is a remarkable mechanism which has survived the insular fury of nationalism and continued to flourish. It uses impressionable children from affluent families as raw material to be shaped and*

*molded into arrogant stereotypes before sprouting them out as aliens in their indigenous environments” (p.88).*

Hashim and Iqbal's Pathan *mullah* would be armed with a cane, holding belief that physical retribution was the only method of purifying young boys' hearts of the Devil or *Iblis*. The Islamic lessons were tedious to the point where the boys would deliberately infuriate the mullah with blasphemy. Jesus Christ and George Washington held superiority over Prophet Muhammad (S) as the greatest person in history (p.94). At school the students were taught that Christianity was the right way of life, its order to spread love and bring unity among all mankind. “The beauty of Christianity...is its subtlety” (p.201). Thus, Iqbal has detested the religious men, Christian and Muslim, who “have turned (his) early years of adolescence into a state of prolonged misery tainted with confusion, pain, guilt and rebellious anger” (p.88). In his eighteen years in Australia he has prayed only four times in a mosque (p.195). The Arabs at the mosque took a dislike in him because he was Bangladeshi, a country created through its alliance with Indian Hindus. Breaking away from a more religiously conservative Pakistan was a “religious betrayal and treachery against Islam” (p.196). Iqbal refuses Nadine's baptism because it will only affirm Keith's faith. Otherwise, to him, Catholicism is “also about illusions” (p.84). “I believe in Nadine's right not to be imprisoned to a faith. I insist on her right to have a freedom to choose when she is capable of making a rational decision” (p.84).

Similarly Iqbal faces a verbal toss of argumentative words with his father who cannot fathom that Nadine has never been taught about Islam, the Koran, or how to pray.

“Her most important identity is that of a human being” Iqbal retorts to his father (pp.250-52).

Though Khan has gone on to describe Bangladesh with inaccuracy on a few instances as well as with refined crudity, his depiction of the hypocrisy underlying the Muslim cleric is commendable. *Maulana* Khawja Rahmatullah Azad claims to have been bestowed with the gift of prophecy. He is a man of noticeable riches, living in a relatively posh area in a three-storied mansion with rose beds, Persian carpets, and satin covers. The man sports a Rolex watch, which is unsurprising if he has nearly surpassed the country’s Head of State on meeting with international and political dignitaries. Payment is made usually in terms of money in the name of donations or gifts, like the expensive pack of cigarettes she had Iqbal bring from Australia. Iqbal finds it amusing that there are ninety-nine pictures of the man displayed on the wall. Ironically in Islam there are ninety-nine names of Allah, which only goes on to show the blasphemy Muslim clerics discreetly put forward, putting themselves on a pedestal with the Almighty.

*“They hound him for amulets to cure embarrassing diseases, straighten wayward husbands, lose weight, win fortunes, restore potency, obtain quick divorces, evict tenants, ruin business rivals and charm away mistresses. They come from remote corners of the country with faith in instant miracles. Needless to say, the devotees are more than generous in displaying their tangible appreciation of the Maulana’s hotline to Allah” (p.44).*

Some of these activities were encountered in *The Peacekeeper*. Needless to say, there is a blurry line demarcating a man of God and a witch doctor in today's world.

Khan's choice of 'hotline' hits the target where, in reality, people in the twenty-first century fail to see the fallacy in those who make a living out of trickery and create skeptical doubts and confusion out of religion. The use of *tabeez* is manipulated into minds to have magical powers, going against the true teachings of Islam. Penetrating fear of the Unknown, Satan and Hell Fire are norms used to emanate fear and obedience by many clerics of today's religions, as can be seen when a younger Iqbal is reprimanded for poor results in his school exams (p.44). The book Iqbal had to study on Christianity mostly had "descriptions of the ordeals to be suffered in the eternal flames" (p.91).

Iqbal's mother believes that blessings and a *tabeez* would cure him of his sorrows and unhappy marriage, as it did his school results. It does not matter that Iqbal had worked exceptionally hard to improve his results, nor does it matter that two people are to be blamed in a broken relationship (pp.44, 51). The mullah had terrified a younger Iqbal to such a point that he saw it necessary to work diligently only to strictly avoid seeing the figure of monstrosity ever again (p.45).

## 7.6 The Colorless Colors of Bangladesh

Adib Khan, being an eloquent writer, serves readers graphic descriptions of the contrasting classes of life in his place of origin. Probably, it may also be a glimpse of the posh and poor areas through the NRB- Non Resident Bangladeshi.

Dhaka is a city where the bustle of life is not one of monotony for the observer. It is a city where the poor and the rich live, but segregated by areas that loudly announce the division of classes. Dhaka does not embody the cosmopolitan attire of the West although it is a city of mushrooming businesses. It is a populated city on a train ride passing among poverty. Although the book has been published in 1994 Khan portrays the country sometimes with an exaggeration fit to build inaccurate preconceived notions in the general minds of those unacquainted with Bangladesh and its capital. However his choice of speech is commendable in his graphic descriptions.

He describes the Dhaka traffic that runs “without the aid of lights or any awareness of traffic rules” (p.41). The overpopulation of Dhaka city never goes without notice. “In this crazy, cart-wheeling world of man-made chaos, an individual life is a quantitative burden rather than a qualitative gift. One more or less does not alter the intensity of the swirling nightmare” (p.41). Houses are neighbored by tea-stalls which the lower class working people use, mostly “rickshaw *wallahs*, laborers, domestic servants, professional beggars and their minions, sweepers and peasants who flock to the city in desperate search for work” (p.42). Dhaka’s rapid growth towards development can be instanced by the “number of private schools which have sprung up like toadstools on a rainy day” (p.43). The advertisement for the British ‘A’ Level examinations speak volumes that upper middle class and affluent families have the potential, financial

up to date with the global world. English medium schools hold pride over Bangla medium schools as most of the students are from affluent families and are instructed under an English-spoken command at school. The mentality of the subcontinent is that anything foreign or outside the culture should be looked upon as superior, and should be adopted to gain a superior difference in society and culture. It is a form of diversification from our own culture. “We prostituted ourselves willingly to the glamour of a culture we did not fully understand. We enjoyed being snobs and openly rejected non-English-speaking Bangalis as our intellectual inferiors” (p.90).

Iqbal describes Wari which was once a posh area of Dhaka back in the 1960s and 70s. With time comes age, and now the once palatial landmarks that beautifications of the past are in dire straits with fungi covered walls, clogged drains and stomach-churning stench. Khan describes Old Dhaka as if it were a scene from a horror film where the people “bear the burden of a murky life on drooping shoulders...” (pp.101-103). Ironically, it is from these old parts of Dhaka that Morich Mia, the *Ustad Baorchi*, or the master cook, is hunted down by the servants of the Chaudhary clan to cook for Nadine’s *aqeeqa* (p.127). The old parts of Dhaka are famous for the exquisitely delicious assortment of dishes and culinary magic.

As opposed to the bustle of the city, Iqbal takes in the Bangladeshi green countryside of Rupganj more acceptingly (pp.130-131). He takes Nadine to the *dhobi ghat* where she is in awe and full of questions about the way clothes were being washed (p.132-133). Iqbal, well acquainted to us for his criticisms on religion, describes Baitul Mukarram as a mosque that “stands at the end of a wretched stretch of cemented

imprisoned in concrete, to enshrine a landmark of striking ugliness” (pp.187-188). Khan is highly misinformed when he shows Dhaka to have “hundreds of lepers” (p.194). Either that or he focuses on showing Iqbal’s disgust about Bangladesh through exaggeration. The pen seller Iqbal and Nadine come across claiming his pens to write endless letters without refills, produced by the newest machines from Germany (p.259), is an example of the poverty and discourse used by the underprivileged to earn a living in a developing country like Bangladesh.



Over the years Bangladeshi literature has diversified and made its niche in a variety of genres, mostly written in Bangla. With the passage of time, changes in society and its mindset, as well as the development of the country and modernization of its people, its literature is building its potential and place in global literature now through the English language. In more recent times, novels like Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* have been translated into English while Tahmina Anam's *A Golden Age* has been translated in Bangla.

The variety of genres Bangla literature can be found in are romance, horror, comedy, science fiction, suspense, etc., written by renowned writers like Humayun Ahmed, Zafar Iqbal, Begum Rokeya, Humayun Azad, Zahir Raihan, Jahanara Imam, Kaikobad, Jasimuddin to name a few. With the exponential growth of the country, writers feel the need to publish in the English language as it has become a crucial part in our lives to correspond at an international level. The 1971 War of Independence is a platform on which many authors plot stories on. More recent books are about social issues people face and the obstacles they face. The increasing familiarity of Bangladesh and its culture globally is also changing its initial norms. This may be the reason why modern Bangladeshi literature is gaining popularity and Bangladesh has new writers eager to publish not for the sake of fame, but to give the country's literature a distinct name and mark in global literature



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