



# FASCINATION WITH THE ROOTS AND IDENTITY: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF KAISER HAQ'S POETRY

SAYEEF AHMED & MD SAJIB MIAH

## Abstract

Identity crisis has always been an issue detrimental to individuals in society, particularly to those from the least and under developed countries that used to be colonies under white supremacy. Yet, the curiosity and the love of knowing their own identity is a basic instinct intrinsic to all human beings. In that context, it is perceivable as natural for Kaiser Haq, a leading poet of Bangladesh, despite his English medium education, urban upbringing, long periods of living abroad, and exposure to modernity in many respects, to remain, out of fascination, faithful to the roots of his identity found in the culture, society, and terrain of his homeland. Kaiser Haq composed most of his poetry addressing the roots of his identity, his cultural consciousness, and his desire for decolonization. In order to familiarize with the cultural and political significance of his poetry, this paper attempts to investigate his instinctive curiosity about his roots that appear in a series of his poems inclusive of “Ode on the Lungi” (2007), “Published in the Streets of Dhaka” (1978), “Writing Home” (2000), “My village and I” (1994) and “The Waistline” (2002-06). By highlighting the poet’s deep-rooted love of his identity, the paper attempts to introduce Kaiser Haq’s contribution to the nation-wide struggle to rescue his community from the anachronistic but hegemonic discursive ideologies injected in to his people by the decadent colonial powers that used to rule them for some decades.

**Key-words: Root, Identity, Culture, Love, Colonial Influence**

## Introduction

Kaiser Haq is one of the prominent Bangladeshi poets and one among the few in South Asia who was educated in English at all stages of his education, from elementary to tertiary, and with a native like flair and knowledge of the English language started writing poems in English instead of his mother tongue, Bangla. He has been writing poems in a country which was a colony of an English-

speaking country of the West, United Kingdom. The white colonial power ruled the poet's motherland for nearly two centuries, from 1757 to 1947. The colonial rule ended but it left behind the strains of cultural deviation and degeneration. Colonial rule also had influenced and impacted on multiple aspects of life of the people of this region. Now, though the colonial rule is over, its legacy and influences are seen in the spheres of education, culture and the way of people's life. Hence, Haq's poetry is likely to be affected somehow by the trend, notion, thought and culture of the said imperialist country and the West. Nevertheless, the poet could manage to conceive and inverse colonial discourses in his poem which practically divulges his uncompromising fascination and commitment for his own roots and identity. Furthermore, Haq stands against metonymic process of colonial discourses ingrained in the mind of his community, and this hegemonic (domination by consent) ideology is being subverted and dismantled by his poems to rescue his own root and identity. Generally, post-colonial period is marked by the discursive resistances against colonialism that are done through the process of decolonization of the colonial discourses and eventually the nation and the country. The objective of this study is to give a close reading of Haq's selected poems to show how his poetry reflects his undying fascination for Bangladesh, its culture and his identity, and also to identify the path that Haq toils to show us that will free us from colonizer's discursive hegemonic ideologies established through ISA (Ideological State Apparatus). Recollecting own identity and dignity is the chief agendum of post-colonial writers where Haq is very much meticulous and ardent about recollecting his own identity and dignity which the poet shows could be achieved even by wearing lungi (Bangladeshi man's outfit) and he insists other fellow men to wear this costume as a sign of freedom from the 'sartorial hegemony'. Salman Rushdie's "Imaginary Homeland" and Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" of Post-colonial Studies Reader have also been referred to in the given context to justify this study.

## Literature Review

Based on the content, critical aspects and clues of Haq's famous poems which include "Ode on the Lungi" (2007), "Published in the Streets of Dhaka" (1978), "Writing Home" (2000), "The Waistline" (2002-06) and "My village and I" (1994) that were composed from the post-colonial perspectives, some other books, works and essays of noted academician, writers and scholars have been considered for this study. Different journals and critical writings also have been supportive to attain the goal of this study. To begin with, in a seminal work on South Asian poetry written in English, Wong and Hassan write, "The experience of South Asian

poetry in English leads us to a journey through time, place and literary history by uncovering aspects of modernism, pastoralism, Victorian realism, romanticism and ultimately reaching a condition of permanent dislocation” (13). However, Haq being a prominent Bangladeshi poet writing in English stands apart where he is a die-hard lover of his root and identity, and he shows his genuine passion for Bangladesh, his birthplace. To clarify the matter, in an interview with Mir Arif of the daily Dhaka Tribune, Haq asserts, “...I am a Bangladeshi writing poetry. Even though it’s in English, my poetry is a part of the Bangladeshi literary scene. My poems are rooted in Bangladeshi reality. At the same time, they belong to a broad tradition of postcolonial poetry, which includes poets from the Caribbean, from Africa, from South East Asia and of course, also South Asia”. Alam notes, “Haq’s poetry is rooted in Bangladeshi life and culture as well as he is a poet writing in a major and international tradition of poetry written in English language” (323). Alam also brilliantly analyzes some of the notable poems written by Haq for three decades and explains how the poet focuses on his own land, Bangladesh, its culture and its reality, and at the same time, remains equally universal in his thoughts and expressions. However, Alam eventually remarks, “Haq may appear to be skeptical and cynical about aspects of Bangladeshi society and even alienated by parts of it, but he is really concerned about the country and the quality of Bangladeshi lives” (326). Ahmed calls Haq, “the first emerging transnational poet of Bangladesh” (127) while Siddique writes how Haq’s poetry has been affected by “multiple cultural and historical heritages that shape and enrich Haq’s poetic consciousness” (108), and for which, she defines his poetry as “a product of syncretic acculturation” (108). Yet, she states that “despite the refusal to limit ‘location’ within national boundaries, there is a continual return to Bangladesh which remains an underlying presence in his poetry” (109). R. K Narayan has also been referred to and quoted in this research because he has some similar sort of senses that Haq keeps as regards writing poetry to recollect roots and identity. Narayan seriously speculates about the khaki dress and his own spinning systems in his novels to recollect his own culture and identity where Cabral also asserts in his “National Liberation and Culture” that for any type of liberation, culture must be restored and resettled in its own position. These literatures of different academician, writers and scholars have assisted the researchers to segregate, determine and focus on the intrinsic fascination of the poet for the roots of his identity and culture which ultimately contributes to the extensive endeavor to emancipate his own community from colonial hegemonic discourses.

### Examining and locating root and identity in Haq's poems

As we start examining Haq's poems, we will first look at his most acclaimed poem, "Ode on the Lungi," wherein we will presumably be convinced by his use of the lungi as a symbol of indigenous Bengali culture and identity. Indigenous refers to something which is produced, lives, or exists in a particular region and environment naturally. The poet is just in favor of this age-old indigenous attire for its comfort and usefulness. According to him, lungi is very easy to wear, highly comfortable, cheap and it has various uses—towels after a bath, bag or carrier for something, flag, comforter, and even a scarf. Lungi is the costume of the common people of Bangladesh and it is loved by the people for its handy and homely characteristics. Like lungi there are similar clothes that are worn in many countries of the world and which have different names. People from East Africa to Indonesia and in Sri Lanka or Myanmar wear the same type of clothes in a slightly different way that has their own names like Sarong, Mundu, Htamain, Sairam, Ma'awaiis, Kitenge, Kanga and Kaiki.

Then the poet speculates about sartorial equity, the equity that stands for the equity of clothes, and he goes to argue that some clothes like the western suit or coat get preference just because of cultural colonization or aggression. The mentality of preferring the western outfit by some eastern people should be abandoned. In order to be modern, smart and fashionable, one should not reject or avoid his / her own costume and hence own culture and identity where lungi for the poet is the flag for Bengali culture and identity. This is because he sees the lungi as something identical with the Bengali existence as lungi is produced, worn, and adored by these people from time immemorial. Nahida Afroz and Farhana Yeasmin argue that his poems are excellent examples "to blur the dichotomy between the East and West and create an egalitarian world where both the East and the West will exist enjoying the same power, dominance and right" (p. 47). They conclude as they say,

Kaiser Haq is conscious of Eastern cultures, religions, beliefs as well as the Western cultural aggression over the native cultures. He revisits and represents the Eastern tradition—its glory, heritage, and history. His respect for Eastern tradition does not permit him to surrender to the hegemonic superiority of the West and so he attempts to the eastern cultural consciousness to destabilize the Eurocentric cultural hegemony by building up a mutual world between the East and the West—a world where both the cultures will maintain their uniqueness and reciprocate each other. (p. 53)

In addition, the poet puts forward the examples of countries where people give due place to their own indigenous attire and they wear them at their offices and even at the highest state places like the parliament or presidential palace. The best example of this sartorial equity is found in Myanmar, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. But, unfortunately, clothes, nowadays, are worn by people for many reasons going far from the primary reasons: comfort, beauty and a means of covering the human physique. Relevantly let us see what Mohammad Shahadat Hossain says:

Clothes which, by nature, stand for the social and cultural status of a human being, in the sense that one's dress code tells of the culture and society he or she belongs to, are now standing for 'status symbol' as well as social and cultural division—a division made by sartorial hegemony generated by power supremacy—an immediate outcome of the economic and cultural hegemony of one nation and culture upon another. This experience of unequal societal power-structures has led to stupendous social inequality in terms of ethno cultural identity, national boundary and geographical locations, as well as restricted humanity awfully by covering every sphere of life from international to national and personal ( p. 1)

Haq is against the sartorial hegemony established to a large extent by the global west. Another contemporary famous post-colonial writer, R. K Narayan talks about Metonymic (restoring indigeneity is one of the major parts of this resistance) resistances in almost all his major works especially "Waiting for the Mahatma" wherein he says "I will never again wear clothes spun by machinery. The dhoti and jibba were heavy; it was a piece of lead that was interwoven with the texture. But he felt it was something to be proud of" (p. 99). Like Narayan, Haq fervently wants to emphasize on the native clothes to annihilate sartorial hegemony. The poet regards this hegemony as a phenomenon of neo-imperialism, and he finds no good reason to favor the western outfit whereas the indigenous clothing is more comfortable, available and economical. This is a fact that some whimsical ignorant people love and work for imported culture and clothing in our country but which can not be acceptable for the sake of fashion, aristocracy and so forth. In fact, fashion gives way to weather, comfort, and culture, and therefore, our dress should conform to our weather, taste, and culture. In this regard, R. K Narayan goes as far as to say, "Khadi alone was going to save the nation from the ruin and get the English out of India" (p. 33).

Haq is rightly sarcastic and humorous as well in criticizing the people who uphold the cause of foreign clothes. The people of the western rich world love their costume not only because of its smart look but because it conforms to their taste, weather, and usability. Therefore, we should recognize our taste, weather,

and culture and give place to lungi which is so adorable. Haq is a veteran lungi activist and goes as far as arranging the lungi party and parade with the help of other lungi lovers of the world. He is also to introduce an international lungi day when he hopes the UN chief will wear a lungi to address the people of the world. The poet urges the world-famous poet, Walt Whitman to come forward to join him and enjoy the comfort and luxury of a lungi on the beach of Cox's Bazar. In the words of the poet:

Friends and fellow lungi lovers,  
 let us organize lungi parties and lungi parades,  
 let us lobby Hallmark and Archies  
 to introduce an international Lungi Day  
 when the UN Chief will wear a lungi  
 and address the world  
 Grandpa Walt, I celebrate my lungi  
 and sing my lungi  
 and what I wear  
 you shall wear  
 It's time you finally made your passage  
 to more than India—to Bangladesh—  
 and lounging in a lungi  
 in a cottage on Cox's Bazar beach. (*Lungi*, lines 84-98)

In the guise of praising the costume, lungi, the poet addresses the democratic ideal, equity. Like all people of the world, all and every type of costumes around the world should get their own place and recognition. And hegemony should not exist in any form, be it sartorial or economic or linguistic. And, in this connection, we may quote what Kafeel Ahmed Chowdhury says:

the disease is within, if not altogether without—the colonial legacy. The so-called 'elite' people in the former colonies suffer from a 'colonial hangover' syndrome. The backward, the uneducated, the downtrodden, and the politically excluded and economically deprived underdogs of the society are, therefore, looked down upon by the more educated, politically powerful and economically affluent class of people who consider themselves a class above the common people. The consciousness of difference as a class apart from the common

mass in their psyche and their behavior and actions make us realize that some form of neo-imperialism is at play (p. 4)

Interestingly, it seems, Chowdhury's above statement is the parallel of what Haq says in his poem,

Think too of neo-imperialism  
and sartorial hegemony,  
how brown and yellow sahibs  
in natty suits crinkle their noses  
at compatriots (even relations) in modest lungis.

( *Lungi*, lines 49-53)

The above lines of Haq's poem echo the poet and politician, Amilcar Cabral in his revolutionary and the most resounding speech of "National Liberation and Culture" wherein he says, to de-colonize any nation from all sorts of colonization, first we need to restore our own culture and identity which could be achieved through way of dressing ups, for instance, wearing lungi or khaki like Mahatma in Narayan's writing.

Haq's another poem, "Published in the Streets of Dhaka," characteristically tells the reader about the poet's love for his own city, Dhaka, and its culture. In this connection, we may take into account what Mohammad Shafiqul Islam comments about Haq's poetry. He says that Haq's poetry "bears witness to the fact that he is a keen observer. Deeply attached to the city in which he grew up.... Like Baudelaire's Paris and Eliot's London, Haq's Dhaka is sick with sirens, disorder, chaos, and stench" (pp. 108-115). But as we understand, whatever the state of Dhaka is, Haq loves this city all the more despite all its problems. Again, we observe, the poet is receptive to and accommodative of the humble condition of the printing process and the industry, and with him, we the readers here are quite aware of the socio-political conditions which for people of other parts of the globe would be something very much repulsive. But, like the reader, the poet loves his land with all its drawbacks. And anybody requesting the poet not to publish here will invariably be rejected by him as he says in his poem:

And take note to  
Of flashing knives, whirling sticks, bursting bombs,  
And accompanying gutturals and fricatives of hate,  
And evil that requires no axis  
To turn on, being everywhere—

And should all these find their way  
 Into my scribbles and into print  
 I'll cut a joyous caper right here  
 On the Tropic of Cancer, proud to be  
 Published once again in the streets of Dhaka.  
 (*Streets of Dhaka*, lines 46-55).

The poet is set to hint to the poor condition of writers and the printing industry of Bangladesh. Anybody who has taken up writing as a profession knows well that writers are here poorly paid except a very few. Anyone who is a reader here knows about the place, Banglabazar where the industry mainly grows, and which accommodates hundreds of shabby buildings and shanties to house the industry. And the other place Nilkhet instantly recognizable by buyers of books which has narrow alleys allowing hundreds of small shanties as book shops. And it is worth mentioning the sidewalks chiefly around the Dhaka New Market and Nilkhet that are flooded by makeshift bookstalls. Haq summarizes the whole scenario thus:

Your petty tale swinging into print-  
 Under the bamboo, the banyan, and the mango tree  
 Is the height of absurdity—isn't that your point?  
 Point taken. Now imagine the dread  
 Of a writer from Dhaka. Yes, a writer,  
 For Homo Scriptor has a local branch, you know,  
 And at bazaar booksellers' such things  
 As for lyric verse and motley belles-letters  
 Peep out of routine stacks of Exam Guides  
 Like rusty needles—I too have perpetrated a few.  
 (*Streets of Dhaka*, lines 12-21)

As a sign of a poet's love for his own land and culture, we see his outright rejection of the idea of migration to some foreign land in order to embrace good fortune. The poet sarcastically says about the issue in the following manner:

What are we to do, Mr. Vidal?  
 Stop writing, and if we do, not publish?  
 Join an immigration queue, hoping  
 To head for the Diaspora dead-end,



Exhibit in alien multicultural museums?

(*Streets of Dhaka*, lines 36-40)

At this point, the poet argues that giving up writing or publishing here in Dhaka cannot be a solution. He denounces the idea of migration to some foreign rich country and writing Diasporas. He considers a writer who migrates to another country and keeping the profession of a writer there, will eventually be a show-piece in a museum. Henceforth, the career of a writer will cut a sorry figure in that foreign land. In fact, the reality is that a writer's best way to flourish is to depend on his own land and culture. Like the buyers of books in his country, the poet loves the scenario of his homeland and vows to continue his writing in this country.

Let us examine Haq's another poem, "Writing Home" which truly tells of his fascination for his own land and his home. Living in a foreign land, the poet remembers his place candidly. He is perhaps talking about a sanctuary of bird or a park of Scotland where he composed this poem and where he stayed for some days or probably which he would visit. The poet says that two particular birds and their song remind him of his land. In his words:

On this hundred-acre plot  
 that pretends to be paradise  
 of all birds, I have an ear  
 for doves and crows  
 whose cooing and cawing  
 is just like at home ( *Writing Home*, lines 1-6)

From the above verses of his poem, we can trace the poet's highly nostalgic state of mind and unconditional love for his home and homeland. For many ambitious, educated and comfort loving people of the world, any developed western country like that of England is like a dreamland to want to live in. But, Haq was seemingly sarcastic about the artificial man-made nature which pretended to be a paradise, and this attitude of the poet, indirectly tells us of his country's natural beauty which is effortless and not man-made or artificial. From the "Imaginary Homelands", Salman Rushdie has been quoted in the Post-colonial Readers Studies, that exposes his restoring memories and states "it is probably not too romantic to say that was when my novel *Midnight's Children* was really born; when I realized how much I wanted to restore the past to myself, not in the

faded greys of old family-album snapshots, but the whole, in Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor” (p.428). In this case, Haq has some resemblances with the resounding post-colonial writer Rushdie where both of them desire for restoring memories of homeland and cultural identity. Now, in addition, we can mention Stuart Hall in his “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” that conspicuously speculates about root, identity and diasporas conditions which match with the ideologies of Kaiser Haq about root and identity.

Surprisingly, in the poem “Writing Home”, the poet remembers even the insignificant rickshaw bells that appeared to him something to remember. He considers the frenzy of rickshaw bells as the ting tong sound of a merry note. In fact, rickshaw has been a part of our identity and culture for a long time. Very few places of the globe still have this century-old ancient human carrier and the poet’s country will be one of the forerunners. The poet says:

I remember the frenzy of rickshaw bells (*Writing Home*, line 7)

This particular line of the poem, however, indicates the problem of hyper sound that many cities of a country like his one suffers. But, with this shrill unbearable sound of rickshaw bells, the poet loves his city all the more. It is also suggestive of the poet’s love for anything and everything that his country offers. Then at the end of the poem, the poet becomes entirely nostalgic of his home and country as he says:

I shut my eyes  
and imagine the weight  
of your head on my chest. (*Writing Home*, lines 8-10)

In the above mentioned lines, the poet uses the word ‘your’ dubiously that may mean the memory of his country or his beloved. Referring to the weight of the head, the poet candidly and succinctly pointing to his beloved whereas he is a jilted lover or a lover living far away being detached, so her memory is like a heavy stone on his chest which is both sweet and sad. Again, he may refer to his homeland and the memory of his country being a true lover of his country.

In the poem, “My Village and I”, the poet is telling us about all the backwardness and problems of his country. The illiteracy, poverty, lack of recreation, and above all the ugly mercenary goal of the West and their making this land a suitable market are rightly focused in this particular poem. From harvesting to childbirth nothing escapes his attention. Though, at the surface level, it may appear to the reader

that the poet is not happy with his place or he is critical of the State, status of the people of his village, but if we take a deeper look, we will surely be convinced that he is eventually not unhappy and is complacent. The poet is hinting to some clues that he believes are responsible his bad fortune of him and that of the people around him but ultimately he is happy as he is accustomed to being so like the change of weather. Haq says:

This is our third  
and I am sad—for the child  
whose mouth will open with a cry  
to swallow swiftly-falling darkness. Sadness  
goes with the climate; I suppose  
it agrees with me. (*My Village and I*, lines 7-14)

In the above mentioned verses, the poet in an expert and meticulous manner dubiously refers to his third world least developed poor country and simultaneously and literally his third child which at the same time hints to the overpopulated state of his country.

To express his view and attitude as a Bengali poet writing poems in English, the poet termed the English language as a double-edged weapon in a post-colonial time in a country like Bangladesh. Kaiser Haq himself said that in an interview with Ahmede Hussain of *The Daily Star*, “It is true that English was a tool of colonization, but it was a double-edged tool, and so when the anti-colonial movement got going the English language and the ideas that were conveyed through it played a role. Then, when the colonizers left, the subcontinent didn’t let go of the English language. There are wheels within wheels too”.

Being a poet from a post-colonial country, Haq has been successful in utilizing the English language as a sharp weapon to shatter off the demon, Shindabad (a mythical character of Bangla folktale) from the shoulder of him and his community and he sticks to his root and identity as a sign of his fascination and love for his country and its culture. And not only that, he has also been able to criticize the culture of western countries with his sharp weapon of satire. As we go through his poems, we see that the poet does two things simultaneously. On one hand, he speaks against the culture and other issues of western developed countries and on the other hand, he speaks for the culture, place, and issues of his own country.

In the poem, “The Waistline”, Haq puts the matter in the following way:

Corsets are the cruellest things—  
 breathing’s impossible  
 and the mammaries  
 crowded painfully together;  
 it was so lovely to lie  
 in bed with nothing on. (*The Waistline*, lines 1-6)

In the preceding lines of the poem, the poet subtly and sarcastically criticizes the western outfit worn by women in the given culture and any woman from any part of the world who follows the culture. He explains the discomfort that the western outfit offers and the health hazards that it may pose. And, at the same time, he unfolds the natural way of living without such a foreign outfit and the comfort it extends that resembles our own costume and culture.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Haq has been a successful Bangladeshi poet of English language who has written poems on various issues: from politics to spending daily life, settings: from rural to urban and at times global and, characters: from poor peasant or vendor in the street of the third world country to the snobbish rich western sahib. However, in all cases, we are always made to sense his attachment and hidden love for his birthplace and his root. The poet cares for his economically backward country with all the problems it offers to its inhabitants like him.

Kaiser Haq, the poet and the man belongs to this time and this global village. Despite being highly aware of the ongoing world and its affairs, the poet seems to have been deeply attached to his identity, root, country and culture. Having critically appreciated and explained Haq’s selected poems, this paper argues that the poet is successful in retaining his root, identity and culture while he is truly in love with his country and all other things that his country offers. As a true patriot and as a poet, he has shown his responsibility towards his country by showing his genuine consciousness about his identity, root, culture and above all his motherland. Haq’s poems influence the readers to be aware both culturally and politically. As a poet of the post-colonial era, Haq’s poems show the resilience and strength in guarding nationalism and national spirit as a sign of collective identity and also work actively and continuously to keep the readers’ mind independent from the colonial hegemonic influences as the poet is arguably successful in getting across

his thought in the form of his fascination, love and awareness about his identity and root to the readers.

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