



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

## In Conversation with Professor Mohammad A. Quayum

Md Rezaul Haque

*Professor Mohammad A. Quayum teaches in the Department of English Language and Literature at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). A gifted student of literature with an impressive academic record at universities both in Bangladesh and abroad, and a recipient of many awards and fellowships, Professor Quayum began his teaching career in 1979 by joining the Department of English at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Moving on, he then joined the Department of English at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1992 and has since taught at a number of universities overseas.*

*Professor Quayum chose to work on American Transcendentalism for his PhD at Flinders University in South Australia.<sup>1</sup> Two of his books Saul Bellow and American Transcendentalism (2004) and Saul Bellow: The Man and His Work (2000) directly grew out of his doctoral research. Apart from American literature, Professor Quayum is also interested in postcolonial literatures, especially Malaysian and Singaporean literatures in English. He has authored and (co-)edited numerous important books dealing with many different aspects of Malaysian and Singaporean literatures written in English, and is considered one of the leading critical authorities on them. In recent times, Professor Quayum has turned his attention to translation and has already published translations of works by two of the pioneers of modern Bengali literature, namely Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. He also has to his credit about fifty scholarly articles published in top-ranking peer-reviewed journals. Professor Quayum is the Founding Editor of Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature and has been co-editor of World Literature Written in English for eight years.*

*The present interview was conducted through a series of back-and-forth emails, though the original plan was to do it orally in a face-to-face conversational format as we both (interviewee and interviewer) were in Adelaide at the time when the idea of interviewing Professor Quayum came to my mind. But our ways soon parted and we were left with no other choice but to do the interview in a written format. Initially, I sent Professor Quayum a set of questions and added some more to it over time, especially in those cases where answers to additional queries, I thought, would further clarify points he had touched upon in his responses to earlier questions. The end product is the interview you are about to read, in which Professor*

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<sup>1</sup> In defining his relationship with the University, Professor Quayum had once jokingly compared himself with Mathew Flinders (after whom Flinders University is named), his justification being that like Flinders he was also the first Bangladeshi student to pursue doctoral study at Flinders. Incidentally, Mathew Flinders, a renowned English cartographer and navigator, was the first to circumnavigate Australia and identify it as a continent.

*Quayum talks about his academic and personal life as well as the contexts and influences that have made him the kind of person and academician-researcher-scholar-translator that he is.*

RH: You've been translating for quite some time now. How would you explain your interest in translation? Is there any special reason for turning to translation?

**MAQ: You are right. I ventured into translation for the first time in 1995, when I was teaching at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. You could call it a chance encounter. I was playing with my daughter (who was then only four years old) in our apartment, on a warm, sunny Singapore afternoon. After a while, I took out a collection of Bengali short stories, somewhat casually, and began to read. I have always been passionate about Bengali literature, and perhaps the idea of translation had always been there at the back of my mind. When I went back to Bangladesh in 1991 after finishing my PhD at Flinders University, I revived my interest in Bengali literature and when I moved to Singapore in 1993, I brought along with me an array of Bengali novels and collections of poetry and short stories. I was reading one of those books that day, and suddenly I thought perhaps I should try my hand at translation; why not share something I love and enjoy with people who have no access to our language and literature? It was not a conscious decision, not something I had planned; it happened somewhat spontaneously, on the spur of the moment. So I began my labour of love (I must tell you that translation is an extremely laborious process, and only one who loves doing it can live through it). But I didn't go very far. I was not yet ready for it.**

However, my disappointment in 1995 did not turn me away from translation. It only made me more determined, and if I may use the word, devoted. Devotion is the key to success. We must be devoted to what we want to achieve. You can call it *love*, which I consider to be the central metaphor of life. I believe that if you love something wholeheartedly, it'll love you in return. That is the mystery of creation. So while I put away my translation pursuit for the time being, I didn't give it up altogether. I continued to work on my shortcomings, and nurture my desire to return to it better prepared. This materialised in 2009, fourteen years later, when I took it up more intently and with a greater sense of purpose and passion.

My understanding of the pivotal role of translation as an interpretive art also sharpened in the meantime. I came to realise how important translation was in bringing societies closer through exchanges of literatures and cultures. Translated writings enable readers to explore and experience through literature the customs and practices of people of another time or culture, and even share in their thoughts and feelings. In this way, it transforms the foreign into the familiar, and subsequently broadens and deepens people's understanding of the world. Translation also helps to enrich the national literature of a country through literary cross-fertilisation. This is evident in the literature of English Renaissance and Neo-classical period, both of which experienced a resurgence because of the translation of Roman and Greek classics into English, such as the works of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Horace, Juvenal, Virgil, Plato and Aristotle; in Bengali literature, which has modernised itself over the years through its contact with English and other European literatures; and in modern Malay literature, which came into being as a result of the translation of the *Ramayana* from Sanskrit into Malay sometime between the thirteenth and

seventeenth centuries, under the title *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Chronicle of the Great Rama). Although it may sound a bit heady and presumptuous, one ought to emphasise that no universal, enlightened civilisation is conceivable or achievable without the dynamic role of translation in the field of knowledge.

In addition to my growing conviction of the importance of translation, there was a circumstance in my personal life which added to the urgency of my returning to it in 2009. As you would know, my only child has grown up away from our native culture and country. This has been enriching for her, but also impoverishing in certain ways. In Bengali, there is a saying, 'A river must break one side of its bank, to build the other.' This has been her case. So while she has learnt from many other cultures, she has now lost her mother tongue from lack of opportunities for adequate practice. Therefore, she has no access to the great works of literature in our language, which I grew up with. I now feel the need to translate those works for her to bridge the gap, and also in a way to boost her sense of who she is.

RH: So far you've translated Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Why these two, especially given the fact that the former has already been extensively translated?

MAQ: My answer is, why not? Obviously Tagore and Rokeya are two of the best writers in the Bengali language, and a translator is always inclined to translate the very best. In translation there is no room for mediocre writers. As I said earlier, a translator's inspiration comes from the desire to share the best treasures of his or her literature with the rest of the world, and undoubtedly Tagore and Rokeya fit the bill; they deserve to be shared and celebrated through the medium of translation.

Tagore's greatness is of course indisputable. He has been canonised throughout the world. He was once described by Mahatma Gandhi as a poet of the world, and indeed, he has really and truly become a world poet – a *biswakabi*, as we call him in the Bengali language. In 2011, when the world celebrated Tagore's 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary, there was hoopla everywhere. Conferences were held to commemorate his work in every part of the world, from the US, UK and Europe, to Australia, Singapore, Burma and China; not to speak of the grand celebrations that took place in both India and Bangladesh.

Rokeya's circumstance is somewhat different. Perhaps she is not the equal of Tagore as a writer, but she is equally important. Tagore and Rokeya both wrote during the period of the Bengal Renaissance, and if Tagore was the crowning jewel of the movement, Rokeya was certainly the best of the Muslim writers of the time. We have to give credit, where credit is due. Rokeya wrote under extremely adverse circumstances, when Bengali Muslims were not even sure whether their tongue should be Bengali or one of those 'Islamic' languages, i.e. Arabic, Persian or Urdu. Her father would not even allow her to learn Bengali, because of its non-Islamic history and inheritance. She also didn't get any formal education, as education was forbidden for Muslim girls at the time. In spite of all these restrictions, however, she grew up to be a writer and, defying all odds, took up Bengali and English as her creative mediums – the two languages that were banned to her from childhood by her family and society. What makes Rokeya even greater is that this woman, who was brought up in an orthodox environment with no formal education and, from the age of five, no freedom to mingle with people (neither men nor women) outside her close family, came to challenge

such orthodoxies, take up the fiery mantle of feminism, and fight tooth and nail for the emancipation of women through an on-going social reform, female activism and women's education. Her writing is all about women's emancipation. If Tagore wrote for the moral and spiritual upliftment of mankind, Rokeya was singularly devoted to the social and cultural amelioration of Indian women. However, in spite of her pioneering role as a writer, activist and educationist, Rokeya has received hardly any attention from critics and translators in recent times. So, while I translated Tagore for the sheer fact that he is the greatest writer in the Bengali language, I took up Rokeya mainly because she deserves more attention, both at home and abroad, than she has received so far.

Apart from these literary-historical reasons, I also have deep emotive and personal reasons for translating these two writers. As in many Bengali families, Tagore was a household name in our family too, and I was exposed to his songs, poems and short stories at a very early age; in fact, you might be surprised to hear how early. My mother used to hum Tagore songs to put me to sleep, and when I was eleven my father gave me a copy of Tagore's collected short stories as a birthday gift. These were clear indications of how much admiration they had for this writer; so obviously it left a lasting impression on me. Likewise, I was introduced to Rokeya by my mother, who told me the story of 'Sultana's Dream' when I was a little boy. Of course, I didn't understand the actual meaning and gravity of the story then, but I was still amused by the thought of my mother and sisters going out for work and business while my father was confined in the kitchen – an absurd idea, but quite exciting and compelling, especially if your father stood as the symbol of authority in the family. So, you could say that my act of translating the works of these two writers is a way of paying tribute to my late parents' memory and an attempt to reach out to their departed souls.

In the second part of your question, you have asked why I should translate Tagore since he has already been extensively translated. Actually, he has not been translated as extensively as he deserves. I am told that Homer's *Iliad* has been translated two hundred times, and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* eleven times. Has any of Tagore's works been translated as many times? I am not sure. The demand for Tagore's work in translation far exceeds what is available. As you know, my translation of Tagore's short story, 'Kabuliwala,' which was first published in *Transnational Literature* in 2009, has been downloaded more than 10,000 times in about five years. What does that say about the interest in Tagore's work? Obviously, readers are constantly looking for new translations of Tagore's writings so that they can decide for themselves which one is most proximate to the original or best represents the story the author has left behind. I believe that the more translations we have, the better; it gives us more options, and helps to widen the readership for the particular author. Of course, at the end of the day, only the best will survive.

Having said that, I should add that several of the stories I have translated in my two volumes – *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* (2011) and *Rabindranath Tagore: The Ruined Nest and Other Stories* (2014) – have not been translated before or since. For example, I have not come across any translations of 'Muktir Upai' (The Path to Salvation), 'Adhyapak' (The Professor), 'Uddhar' (Deliverance) and 'Chitrakar' (The Painter). Some of the other stories may be available elsewhere, but I would like to think that the energy and experience I bring to my work distinguishes it from that of others. One way of assessing this would perhaps be to see what readers and reviewers have to say about my translation vis-à-

**vis other Tagore translations. To tell you the truth, any previous translation of a particular story/text can only be a distraction for the new translator, as well as an added challenge that he or she must be able to overcome to stake his or her claim as a translator, and to be taken seriously by others.**

RH: Following on from what you've just said, what kind of readership do you have in mind? How is it possible, say, for an Australian, supposing s/he knows nothing of the Bengali language, to decide for himself/herself whether or not a translation of a Tagore text is 'proximate' to its original? Could you please explain?

**MAQ: English is world's lingua franca; it is spoken wherever literacy prevails. Therefore, I would expect people anywhere or everywhere to purchase copies of my translated works. This could be in Bangladesh, India, Azerbaijan or Australia. Or at least, that is the ideal I have in mind. In other words, the books are not meant for any specific group, but rather for whoever is interested in Bengali/Indian literature/culture, women's issues and multiculturalism, or in the works of the two writers in question. But even in the best of situations the audience size is not likely to be that big, as the number of people reading and buying books seems to be decreasing steadily throughout the world. We have come to a point in our civilisation when people are more willing to spend money on gadgets than on books. Francis Bacon's maxim, 'Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man,' unfortunately no longer holds true; it is gadgets that make the man nowadays. Thus, even an acclaimed novelist Philip Roth estimated some years ago that there are only about four thousand people in the United States who buy books. Leaving aside the sardonic aspect in the statement, the picture still looks quite bleak; and should this be true for the most affluent country in the world, what about countries where people can't afford to buy books?**

As for your question on how non-native speakers of the Bengali language can judge the proximity of the translated text to its original, the answer is, of course, they have no way of doing it. They will have to base their judgement entirely on how the text works in the second language: its coherence, rhetorical harmony and narrative gracefulness, or what Horace calls *dulce et utile* – how pleasurable and profitable the translated work is to readers in the target language; how well the 'vineyard' has been dressed by the translator, to borrow Dryden's expression, that s/he does not possess.

RH: Of the two authors you've translated, who appears to be more challenging to translate? If one is more difficult to translate than the other, could you please shed some light on the sources of difficulty?

**MAQ: Translation is not just 're-language-ing' of a text from the source language to the receptor language; it's far more than that. Of course, as translation is an interlingual activity, the translator has to be constantly mindful of the various lexical, syntactic and semantic constraints involved in the process, so that the 'processed' (L2) text reads semantically right, grammatically accurate, stylistically powerful and textually as precise and consistent as the L1 text. A translated text will not succeed if it lacks in accuracy in the semantic transference or in the appropriateness of the use of syntax and diction in the target language. However, at**

the same time, it is incumbent on the translator to deal with the cultural and phatic elements as well as the paralinguistic and psychological elements involved in the source text.

I would say that so far as linguistic and stylistic aspects are concerned, I found Tagore more challenging; but in extra-linguistic constraints, where one has to decode and encode the tone, mood, environment, temperament and other social and cultural specificities involved in the source text, Tagore and Rokeya were equally difficult and challenging.

Although Tagore and Rokeya were contemporaries as writers (Rokeya being nineteen years younger than Tagore), artistically and stylistically the two were very different, even polar opposites. Tagore was fundamentally a poet; he began his career by writing poetry, and his fame outside his native Bengal lies primarily in his poetry. This intrinsic aspect of his genius remains central to all his writings. Thus, even in his prose and narrative writings, Tagore has a tendency to be poetic, often using florid and figurative language. There is a lyrical and pictorial quality in his fictional narrative, an elegance and grandiloquence, which is not there in Rokeya's writing. This is because while Tagore dwelt more in the realm of imagination and beauty, writing his stories with an 'artistic' purpose, intended to both delight and instruct, Rokeya wrote in the vein of a realist, with the primary purpose of reforming society. Thus, there is a kind of simplicity, clarity and matter-of-fact quality in Rokeya's writing. She writes in an ostensibly simple and transparent style, using familiar diction, simple sentences and a deliberately unadorned prose. This is where, perhaps, the degree of difficulty varies with regard to the two writers. Given the simplicity and directness of Rokeya's prose, I found the transference of the source material to the target language relatively easy, compared to the heavily laden poetic prose of Tagore, with its frequent use of similes, metaphors, alliteration, assonance and other decorative aspects which really belong to the poetic realm. So my main qualm was, how to retain Tagore's splendour without sounding hackneyed and archaic in the translated text? This was why I had to adopt a 'dynamic' and 'task-oriented' approach at several places in translating Tagore's short stories, whereas in the case of Rokeya, I had relatively fewer worries because, being a polemical writer, she writes frugally and in a penetratingly plain style.

However, in the cultural, phatic, paralinguistic and psychological aspects, my challenges in translating both writers were equally great; I had to cross the temporal interstice that lies between when the source texts were written and the time of translation, in order to fully comprehend the social and emotional environments in which the authors produced their works, and the moods and temperaments they sought to convey. In addition, I had to deal with certain religious specificities in the case of Tagore, and gender specificities while translating Rokeya's work. This was where my journey became 'painful' but equally pleasurable.

RH: Do you align yourself with any particular school/theory of translation?

MAQ: I am a practitioner, and no practitioner can afford to tie himself or herself down to a particular school. That would be fatal; it would simply destroy the free-floating energy of the translator. One thing that a translator must avoid is fixity, being routine-bound in his strategy. He or she must remain flexible and keep his or her mind open to all possibilities. Translation is an intricate interpretive performance that requires the translator to remain

honest, elastic, inclusive and constantly vigilant in the potential alternatives that he or she may have in carrying out his or her task.

My method is simple, but I believe quite effective: to remain 'faithful' as much as you can, and be dynamic where you must. Any mutually exclusive approach of being 'literal' or 'idiomatic,' 'word for word' or 'sense for sense,' 'moving the author to the reader' or 'moving the reader to the author,' 'foreignising' or 'domesticating' the source text, is not necessarily a good, effective or prudent method. I try to stay close to the source text, and only when a 'formal equivalence' is not available, do I look for a 'dynamic equivalence'. I never truncate the text or merge paragraphs to add pace to the narrative. I have seen some of my counterparts do it. I think that is being outright dishonest as a translator. The translator's intervention in the text should remain minimal, because his role is that of a 'carrier,' a 'medium,' a 'bridge,' or a 'channel.' He or she is trying to present the text to non-native readers of the language by reproducing its content, style and context, with the least degree of manipulation, so that it reads like a work that the author would have written had he been a native of the target language.

One of the reasons why Tagore's own translations of his poems in the post-*Gitanajali* period did not succeed is because of his excessive intervention in the source material, and adopting a casual and reductive approach in his style of translation, where he showed the least concern for maintaining the intricacies of tone, diction and cadence of the original, in the translated text.

Like Tagore, Rokeya too was in translation. Several of her stories are based on translation, but Rokeya was more in the South Asian tradition of loose adaptation and retelling of the original story than in following a close translation of the source text. One might say that she was more into 'trans-creation' than translation. That of course is not my purpose. My purpose is to render a text in the target language as closely and faithfully as I can, providing the dynamic equivalence of a word, expression or idiom where necessary, but never succumbing to the literalist fallacy nor encroaching on a loose adaptation, both of which I consider contrary to the function of the translator.

RH: One final question about your translation activity. What's your view of translation? Do you consider it as something creative? Where would you locate the creativity of a translator?

MAQ: George Steiner once said, 'All acts of communication are acts of translation.' If this is true, then all art is translation. Artists translate their ideas, experiences and observations through their chosen medium; it may be visual, verbal, gustatory, auditory or tactile. A poet or writer, for example, translates his or her ideas into a verbal expression. He or she uses language to give his or her feelings and ideas a perceptible form. A painter or a sculptor uses the visual and perhaps the tactile medium, and so on. Thus, if artistic expression can be considered a form of translation, then by the same token, the activity that we call translation, can also be considered an act of artistic creation.

The writer and the translator both work through the medium of language. The writer uses language to create a parallel reality, while the translator uses it for the purpose of creating a parallel text. The latter's function is to render a literary text from one language and culture to another. We can describe this process as 'creative reconstruction'. In doing

**this, the translator experiences the same creative challenges and participates in the same creative activities undertaken by the writer. Like the writer, the translator has to have a gift for language because translating is an exacting art; it requires precision in the translator's choice of equivalences in the target language. One ought to remember that, like in the source text, the exactness of the chosen word is a fundamental factor in 'evoking worlds' in the translated text. Moreover, like that of the creative writer, the translator's act is an emotional journey, on which he or she must feel inspired enough to go beneath the surface of the chosen text to comprehend its essential meaning. No translation can be successful unless the translator has full understanding of the intellectual, cultural and aesthetic complexities involved in the source text. To achieve this understanding, the translator has to not only constantly move between two languages and cultures, but also between two time periods, of when the source text was written and when the translation is being carried out. In this way, the translator acts as a nexus between different literary and intellectual traditions.**

**In order for a novelist or a playwright to successfully create a character, he or she has to enter, and even inhabit, the mind of the character. Likewise, a translator has to situate himself inside the mind of the source author during the process of translation. In fact, he or she has to move back and forth between the two selves, those of the author and the translator. Thus, Gregory Rabassa, one of the most successful translators of the modern era – whose translation of Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was declared by Marquez himself to be superior to his Spanish original – for example, said, 'So the poor translator must not just go back and forth between two languages, but if he is worthy of his calling, must shift between two selves, with all the perils of this induced schizophrenia.'**

**Apart from all these, translation is a creative activity in its most basic sense, as long as the translator carries out the act selflessly, with joy, excitement and without any intention of material gain. Earl Nightingale said, 'Creativity is a natural extension of our enthusiasm.' The translator has to be enthusiastic in his or her work, because it is through enthusiasm that we can transform the most mundane of activities into something creative and artistic. For example, Bakha, a sweeper-boy in Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Untouchable*, transforms his filthy work of cleaning latrines into a form of art, through his selfless devotion to and enthusiasm for the work. When we are enthusiastic in what we do, our souls get involved in the act and make us more intense, energetic and resourceful in the activity.**

RH: Moving on to a different aspect of your professional life, you chose three American authors as the subject of your doctoral research; what intrigues me is that by the time you began work on your PhD in the late eighties, some of your (former) colleagues and mentors (especially Fakrul Alam, Kaiser Haq and Syed Manzoorul Islam in Bangladesh) as well as a couple of co-PhD students at Flinders (notably Chandani Lokuge, Paul Sharrad and Sudesh Mishra) were moving towards what has come to be known as postcolonial literatures. Looking back at your choice today, what would you like to say about it?

**MAQ: I have always been interested in the American Transcendental writers since I was first introduced to the poetry of Walt Whitman when I was pursuing my Masters degree at the University of Dhaka. My fervour increased when I did several more courses on American literature, and a course exclusively on American Transcendentalism, at Lakehead University**



in Canada. I was simply captivated by Emerson's ideas; they struck a deep chord in me, perhaps because of my inherent interest in mysticism, spirituality, human divinity, equality of souls etc. As I mentioned earlier, I was brought up on Tagore's songs from childhood, which have a strong mystical quality, especially those in his Nobel Prize-winning volume, *Gitanjali*. I was also extremely fond of Sufi poetry. Our national poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam was (and still is) my favourite because of his fiery rebellious quality – his tendency to challenge social and political status quos of all kinds in order to transform the world into a better and brighter place – but also because of the strong Sufi elements in his poetry. In addition, I have a great admiration for the Hindu religious texts, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. I have lost count of how many times I have read these two books, in various translations, since I have no access to them in the source language, Sanskrit. Around this time, when I was doing my second Masters at Lakehead, I also discovered Gandhi, read his autobiography and many of his letters and lectures, and got so deeply involved in his way of thinking that I began to translate some of his work into Bengali. Really, I was so much into Gandhi at the time that you can call my Lakehead years the 'Gandhian years' of my life.

All these came together in my mind on the spur of a moment, and I instantly decided on studying the influences of Oriental mysticism on the works of Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau for my PhD. That was my proposed topic at Flinders. But when I arrived there, I realised through conversations with then-Head of the Department, Professor Eugene LeMire, that there was no specialist in the department to supervise a thesis on Oriental mysticism. So I tailored my topic to bring Saul Bellow into the equation in place of Oriental mysticism, and chose to investigate the influences of Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau on the literary imagination of Bellow.

However, I have no regret for my PhD subject choice. I enjoyed exploring the moral and philosophical affinities between these four writers, and have benefited significantly from the ways in which they perceive the world, God and humanity. To a certain extent, it also helped to fulfil my quest in mysticism and spirituality, because indeed, in spite of being the most intellectual writer in post-Second World War American fiction, Bellow's worldview is also characterised by a sense of the noumenal, the intuitive and the invisible, which makes him, as I argued in my thesis, a *neo-Transcendental* writer.

RH: But you have also published several books on Malaysian-Singaporean literature. When did you make this transition and why?

MAQ: After my PhD, I moved first to Bangladesh and then to Singapore. During this period I realised that being physically away from the culture, I could not participate meaningfully in the discourse on American literature. Besides, since I was living in Singapore, it was important for me to understand the Southeast Asian culture and way of life. So I started slowly branching out into Malaysian-Singaporean literature, and the various literary and cultural theories that come with it. This transition was made easier by the fact that around this time I was appointed co-editor of *World Literature Written in English*, the oldest journal in post-colonial literatures, through the good offices of my senior colleague and friend, Kirpal Singh. This was an eye-opener for me. I was getting to read some of the best scholars and scholarship in the field. But I was not yet ready to take up writing in the area. I wrote a few

book reviews here and there on Malaysian-Singaporean fiction, but still the bulk of my academic writing was devoted to American literature. I started writing, editing and publishing in the field from 1998, and have since authored two books – *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women’s Writing in English from 1940s-1990s* (2001, 2003; with Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf) and *One Sky, Many Horizons: Studies in Malaysian Literature in English* (2007) – and edited or co-edited several more. These include *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (2001) and *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (2002) with Australian academic, Peter Wicks; *Sharing Borders: Studies in Singaporean-Malaysian Literature in English* (2009), with Malaysian poet Wong Phui Nam; and *Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Malaysian and Singaporean Poets, Novelists and Dramatists* (2007). I have also edited three volumes of Malaysian-Singaporean short stories, one of which has been published by Penguin Books: *The Merlion and the Hibiscus: Contemporary Short Stories from Singapore and Malaysia* (2002).

Over the years, my interest has expanded from Malaysian-Singaporean literature to Asian literature. In 2007 I began a new journal, *Asiatic*, to provide a forum for scholarship on Asian and Asian-diasporic literature as well as creative works by writers of Asian origin. I have also edited a volume of Asian short stories, *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories*, which was published in Singapore in 2010, and am currently working on a second volume of Asian short stories with Kirpal Singh, which we plan to bring out in the second half of 2014.

RH: Returning to your interest in American literature, you published two books on Saul Bellow. Did you intend your second book, titled *Saul Bellow and American Transcendentalism*, to dispel the popular myth that associates American culture with crass materialism? Or was it just an academic exercise like so many other works of literary criticism?

MAQ: It was rather to reaffirm that American culture is overly steeped in consumerism and crass materialism; in a *weltanschauung* of ‘mere facticity’ and sheer ‘muchness’ of the physical world; in ‘getting and spending’ and worshipping ‘the plastered idols of the appearances’; because this is what Bellow maintains in his novels, especially in his ‘classic’ novels, from *Henderson the Rain King* (1958) to *The Dean’s December* (1982), which I explored in my second book. In these novels Bellow reiteratively addresses an ongoing crisis in American culture, which he believes is the root cause for the dehumanised and despiritualised state of his fellow compatriots, who are subjected to a vitiating polarity between what he calls the ‘Cleans’ and the ‘Dirties’ – those who ‘celebrate the bourgeois virtues ... steadiness, restraint, a sense of duty,’ against those ‘latter-day Romantics [who] celebrate impulsiveness, lawless tendencies, the wisdom of the heart’; between the mainstream materialists and mammon-worshippers on the one hand, and the proponents of a ‘counter culture’ or ‘flower culture’ on the other. In his narratives, Bellow shows, through his spiritually aware protagonists, how to overcome this crisis and the resultant dichotomy in American culture, by finding an axial line or a golden mean between the opposing forces of body and soul, head and heart, reason and emotion, self and society, and by overcoming all ‘incongruities and extremes’ of modern life. Bellow believes that we can overcome the festering moral decadence of modern life, the ‘big-scale insanities’ that plague American culture, by restoring a sense of morality and spirituality to the individual, which will

instantaneously make him/her a whole person, enabling him/her to find an inner symmetry or equipoise of *being*. I argue this thesis in the book by linking Bellow and his moral philosophy with that of the American Transcendental writers, claiming that he is the modern-day successor of the movement, and an ideological heir to Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, who also believed in a similar philosophy of 'higher synthesis' and 'double consciousness.'

RH: How do you yourself perceive the transcendental tradition in American literary culture?

MAQ: As I mentioned earlier, Transcendentalism is a movement in literature that was influenced by diverse religious and spiritual traditions. Its influences came from German idealism, English Romanticism and Oriental mysticism. The writers of this movement also inherited the pervasive sense of morality of their Puritanical forebears, without their rigidity and formalism in religion. In addition, they were inspired by the Quaker principle of 'inner light' of the individual.

The Transcendental writers, in keeping with the individualistic nature of their philosophy, often disagreed with one another; however, one of their shared ideals was the immanent quality of God: that although God is the overseer of the universe, paradoxically, he has also manifested himself in his creation. Therefore, there exists a presence of God everywhere, in every created object, including the human soul. This makes the individual the spiritual centre of the universe; hence, to know the individual is to know God also, and is possibly the only way to fathom God's mystery and amplitude. They viewed the individual, as Emerson said, as 'a god in ruins' and 'creator in the finite,' and because of this divine presence in the human soul, self-realisation and self-knowledge were important. Emerson preached the ideas of 'knowing thyself' and 'trusting thyself,' and added, 'The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul.' Because of their incessant faith in the human soul and human spirituality, the Transcendentalists also came to celebrate imagination, emotion and intuition, as opposed to reason and intellect. The divine presence in nature also led them to love and glorify the phenomenal world, and to consider that 'knowing thyself' and 'studying nature' were in a sense synonymous.

However, in spite of their spiritual worldview, the Transcendental writers were also worldly and pragmatic in their outlook; they believed in what they called 'double consciousness' (a phrase I have quoted above) and 'Blessed Unity', in which all the contrary forces of life are brought together to create balance and harmony. Allow me to quote here a couple of lines from a poem, 'A Fable of Critics', by one of Emerson's contemporaries, James Russell Lowell, who, responding to the accusation that the Transcendental writers were overly optimistic, idealistic and impractical,<sup>2</sup> described Emerson in the following words:

... his is, we may say,  
A Greek head on right Yankee shoulders, whose range

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<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, once said, caricaturing Emerson, 'Mr. Emerson – the mystic, stretching his hand out of the cloudland in vain search for something real.' Likewise, Henry James commented, '[Emerson] has no great sense of wrong – a strangely limited one, indeed for a moralist – no sense of the dark, the foul, the base.' W.B. Yeats was of the view that '[Emerson and Whitman] are writers, who have begun to seem superficial because they lack the vision of Evil.'

**Has Olympus for one pole, for t'other the Exchange.**

Since their emergence, the Transcendental writers have, arguably, remained the most influential group of writers in the tradition of American literature. In fact, many would consider Emerson's 'The American Scholar' (1837) as the starting point of modern, 'post-colonial' American literature, marking the declaration of American literary and cultural independence that celebrates American ethos and landscape by looking at it from inside, rather than from a European point of view, as can be seen in the writers who preceded the transcendental movement. Critics believe that all the writers subsequent to Emerson and Whitman have either responded or reacted to their writing. Their influences are fairly obvious in the poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, e.e. cummings and Allen Ginsberg, and in the fiction of Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and John Updike, among others. Harold Bloom (born 1930), a dominant critic of our time, rightly said, 'Emerson ... is the inescapable theorist of all subsequent American writing. From his moment to ours, American authors are in his tradition, or else in a counter-tradition originating in opposition to him.'

RH: Any reflection on the Jewish connection with the tradition concerned?

MAQ: I don't think it has any Jewish connection as such, except that there would be overlapping elements with Jewish mysticism, especially the Kabbalah tradition which emerged in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Southern France and Spain. My intention was not to investigate Jewish connections to American Transcendentalism, but rather to argue that although Bellow was born in a Jewish immigrant family in Montreal, Canada, and the family moved to Chicago when Bellow was nine years old, Bellow's moral affinity with the writers of American Transcendentalism is so basic and broad that he should be viewed above all else as a neo-Transcendental writer. This was my argument, against many who saw him as a Jewish writer, a modernist writer, a post-modern writer, a Schopenhauerian, and so forth.

Let me share an experience here. I was in correspondence with Bellow when I was pursuing my PhD at Flinders. He was very happy that a Muslim from Bangladesh was pursuing research on his work, at a university in Australia. But when I told him that I was trying to place him in the tradition of Emerson and Whitman, he was not particularly happy, as no writer likes to be put in any single box. That would go against the grain of their creativity and originality. This is especially true for a writer like Saul Bellow, who is known for his intellectuality and the depth/breadth of his reading. However, when I assured him that my intention was not to pin him down to a single tradition, but rather to claim that it was one of many ways of looking at his fiction, he sounded pleased, wished me well and asked me to send a copy of my thesis to him at the end of my study, which I did. Subsequently, our relationship became such that when I later embarked on my first book on his works, *Saul Bellow: The Man and His Work* (2002), which is an edited collection of essays and interviews, he suggested that I collate some of his interviews in it.

RH: Do you think that your South Asian heritage of spirituality had anything to do with your interest in American Transcendentalism?

MAQ: Yes, definitely. I think I have made this clear in my answer to one of your earlier questions. You won't know how excited I felt when I first read Emerson's poems such as 'Brahma,' 'Hamatreya,' 'Merlin' and 'Days,' or when I came across references to the *Qur'an*, Prophet Mohammad and his companions, Caliphs Ali and Omar, and to poets such as Rumi, Hafiz and Sa'adi in his works. It was heartening to see Emerson describe the *Qur'an* as 'Kingdom of the will,' and the Prophet and his *sahabis* (associates) as inspiring models of balanced 'vigour,' nurtured by 'the sound mind in a sound body.'

When I first read Thoreau's *Walden*, I was mesmerised by the frequent references to the *Bhagavad Gita*, so much so that I actually counted the number of times Thoreau mentions or cites from this book in his own work, and compared the quotations to the contexts in which they appear in the source book in English translation, so as to understand them better. Reading Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience' immediately told me that Gandhi was inspired by Thoreau in his Civil Disobedience movement against the British, and his refusal to pay salt tax was perhaps an emulation of Thoreau's refusal to pay poll-tax to the American government. Although I felt strongly about these connections, I was not sure of the extent of Thoreau's influence on Gandhi until I came across several statements by Gandhi himself, in which he explicitly acknowledges the inspiration he derived from Thoreau's ideas. For example, in his 1942 appeal 'To American Friends,' Gandhi wrote, 'You have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay on the 'Duty of Civil Disobedience' scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa.' In a letter to Franklin Roosevelt, written the same year, he added, 'I have profited greatly by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson.' All these were obviously compelling reasons for me to undertake American literature and American Transcendentalism for my doctoral study.

RH: Thank you so much Professor Quayum for your time and the trouble you've taken to answer my questions.

MAQ: Thank you, Dr. Reza, and I take this opportunity to wish you a bright academic future!

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