

Classic Poetry Series

**Kaiser Haq
- poems -**

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Kaiser Haq(7 December 1950 -)

Kaiser Hamidul Haq is a Bangladeshi poet, translator, essayist, critic and academic. Kaiser Haq is one of the few Bangladeshis who excel in creative writings in English.

He is a professor of English at the University of Dhaka.

In the liberation war of Bangladesh, he fought against Pakistani Army "as a freshly commissioned subaltern in command of a company". Haq's poems, mostly written in free verse in standard English and rooted in Bangladeshi life and culture availed him international acknowledgement as "a writer worth noticing".

Liking It

It's the easiest thing to say
In the grey light of thinning hair:
I liked the world the way it was-
If only it had held steady
Time would be unchanging bliss!
What is it you so fondly remember
Amidst the glitches in recollection?
An album of snapshots,
Some video clips at best.
The mood that binds them together
Like an invisible rubber band
Comes out of a pocket you're wearing out now.

Maybe you can see
Clearer than your fast-fading fate line
An arched gate confettied with creepers
Golden green in early morning light,
Maybe your olfactories thrill
At the musky odor of blossoms
On a long-dead mango tree.

Or a remembered tale may set you
Dream-walking down village tracks
After a hurricane lantern swinging
Beneath a bullock cart's creaking chassis
Like a luminous pineapple...or scrotum.

But don't forget:
Calm cannot be retroactive.
The willed insouciance of youth
Crumpled before manic urgencies.
Why look back on such routine tussles?
Besides,
From the bottom of the well
One can only look up.

Not that a benign gaze answers:
The twinkling could be tinsel
And lights no superior tomorrow.

Better just carve a squiggle
On softening grey timber
At amber-grey dusk
And hum under your breath:
I like it the way it is.

Kaiser Haq

Ode On The Lungi

Grandpa Walt, allow me to share my thoughts
with you, if only because every time
I read "Passage to India" and come across
the phrase "passage to more than India"
I fancy, anachronistically, that you wanted
to overshoot the target
by a shadow line
and land in Bangladesh

Lately, I've been thinking a lot
about sartorial equality
How far we are from
this democratic ideal!
And how hypocritical!
"All clothes have equal rights" –
this nobody will deny
and yet, some obviously
are more equal than others
No, I'm not complaining about
the jacket and tie
required in certain places –
that, like fancy dress parties,
is in the spirit of a game

I'm talking of something more fundamental
Hundreds of millions
from East Africa to Indonesia
wear the lungi, also known variously
as the sarong, munda, htamain, saaram,
ma'awaiis, kitenge. kanga. kaiki
They wear it day in day out,
indoors and out
Just think –
at any one moment
there are more people in lungis
than the population of the USA
Now try wearing one
to a White House appointment –
not even you. Grandpa Walt,

laureate of democracy,
will make it in
You would if you
affected a kilt –
but a lungi? No way.
But why? – this is the question
I ask all to ponder

Is it a clash of civilisations?
The sheer illogicality of it –
the kilt is with “us”
but the lungi is with “them!”

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,
exceptions only proving the rule:
Sri Lanka, where designer lungis
are party wear, or Myanmar
where political honchos
queue up in lungis
to receive visiting dignitaries
But then, Myanmar dozes
behind a cane curtain,
a half pariah among nations
Wait till it’s globalised:
Savile Row will acquire
a fresh crop of patrons

Hegemony invades private space
as well: my cousin in America
would get home from work
and lounge in a lungi –
till his son grew ashamed
of dad and started hiding
the “ridiculous ethnic attire”

It’s all too depressing
But I won’t leave it at that

The situation is desperate
Something needs to be done
I've decided not to
take it lying down
The next time someone insinuates
that I live in an Ivory Tower
I'll proudly proclaim
I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST!
Friends and fellow lungi lovers,
let us organise 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
(the longest in the world, we proudly claim)
watched 28 young men in lungis bathing in the sea

But what is this thing
(my learned friends,
I'm alluding to Beau Brummell)
I repeat, what is this thing
I'm going on about?
A rectangular cloth,
White, coloured, check or plaid,
roughly 45X80 inches,
halved lengthwise
and stitched
to make a tube
you can get into
and fasten in a slipknot
around the waist –
One size fits all
and should you pick up dirt

say on your seat
you can simply turn it inside out

When you are out of it
the lungi can be folded up
like a scarf

Worn out it has its uses –
as dish rag or floor wipe
or material for a kantha quilt

Or you can let your imagination
play with the textile tube
to illustrate the superstrings
of the "Theory of Everything"
(vide, the book of this title
by the venerable Stephen Hawking)

Coming back to basics,
the lungi is an elaborate fig-leaf,
the foundation of propriety
in ordinary mortals
Most of the year, when barebodied
is cool, you can lead a decent life
with only a couple of lungis,
dipping in pond or river
or swimming in a lungi
abbreviated into a G-string,
then changing into the other one
Under the hot sun
a lungi can become
Arab-style headgear
or Sikh-style turban
Come chilly weather
the spare lungi can be
an improvised poncho
The lungi as G-string
can be worn to wrestle
or play kabaddi
but on football or cricket field
or wading through the monsoon
it's folded vertically

and kilted at the knee

In short

the lungi is a complete wardrobe
for anyone interested:
an emblem of egalitarianism,
symbol of global left-outs
Raised and flapped amidst laughter
It's the subaltern speaking

And more:

when romance strikes, the lungi
is a sleeping bag for two:
a book of poems, a bottle of hooch
and your beloved inside your lungi –
there's paradise for you

If your luck runs out
and the monsoon turns into
a biblical deluge
just get in the water and hand-pump
air to balloon up your lungi –
now your humble ark

When you find shelter
on a treetop
take it off',
rinse it,
hold it aloft –
flag of your indisposition –
and wave it at the useless stars

Kaiser Haq

Poor Man Eating

Were I a painter
I am sure
My signature theme would be
The title of this poem.
The sun races to the zenith,
Imperious as an oriental autocrat.
The poor man crouches
In imitation Tommy Hilfiger rags
In the dwindling shade
Of a denuded tree.

His hands cradle
A bowl of fired earth—
It could be an Ouija board
To conjure up goodies,
Courtesy of the weak of conscience.

And when they come,
How he falls to it!
Eyes focused in mystic concentration,
Left arm protectively around
The pile of comestibles,
As right hand shovels them
Into an eager mouth.

I would paint the scene
Over and over
In luscious oil:
The painted proliferation
Might work magic,
Converting seeming impossibility
Into palpable reality:

All the world's poor
Men and women
Gathered as if on the mythic day
Of final reckoning,
On this lowly earth,
Devouring earthly fare:

O the gods would come down
To bless and share!

Kaiser Haq