Envisioning the Future of Literature in the Age of Globalisation: Bangladesh and Beyond

Mohammad A. Quayum
Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

Introduction

My objective in this paper is to deliberate on the future of literature in the age of globalisation in Bangladesh and other democratic societies, such as Australia, India, Europe, and North America. My attention will be on the importance of literature as a form of creative and imaginative art, as well as a field of study; the challenges it faces with the increasing focus on cross-border business, trade, and technology; and the prospects literature holds in the aftermath of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

However, since this paper is written primarily with a Bangladeshi audience in mind,[1] let me begin by citing the Preamble to the Bangladesh Constitution. This will help us understand the country's national aspiration – namely, the kind of polity Bangladesh hopes to be and the quality of citizens it requires to fulfil that goal – and explain how literature can help realise that national aspiration.

Extract from the Preamble to the Bangladesh Constitution:

> Pledging that the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism, which inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in, the national struggle shall be the fundamental principles of the Constitution;
>
> Further pledging that it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process a socialist society, free from exploitation, a society in which the

> rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens;
>
> Affirming that it is our sacred duty to safeguard, protect and defend this Constitution and to maintain its supremacy as the embodiment of the will of the people of Bangladesh so that we may prosper in freedom and may make our full contribution towards international peace and co-operation in keeping with the progressive aspirations of mankind. ("The Laws of Bangladesh")

This is undoubtedly a noble and ambitious document, full of optimism, idealism and yearning, but not necessarily reflective of the reality in the country. It is not a document of reality because Bangladesh has not yet attained any of its stated goals, although it has been striving to achieve them since independence, perhaps much too slowly to the liking of its people.

However, reading the Preamble allows us to see what kind of a nation Bangladesh wants to be. It aims to be a democratic and socialist society based on the principles of nationalism and secularism.[2] However, *biswakabi* (world-poet) Rabindranath Tagore, in his book *Nationalism*, condemned nationalism as "a cruel epidemic of evil" (*Nationalism* 9) that causes national self-adulation as well as hostility towards other nations.[3] In his view, nationalism has been the predominant cause of war and colonial exploitation in recent history. So why did Bangladesh espouse this ideal, even after suffering from the nationalist aggression of the UK during the colonial period and Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947? This is because Bangladesh emerged from its own nationalist movement – the language movement that started soon after Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, declared in 1948 that Urdu would be the newly independent Pakistan's only national language.[4] This shows that Bangladeshis value their language more than any other aspect of their socio-political-cultural

identity. Language is the vehicle for literature, and literature, with its songs and stories, helps formulate a national psyche. One may like to think of the many patriotic songs that Bangladeshis sang during the 1971 Liberation War to inspire themselves, the songs they still sing to understand their history and culture, and the national anthem that Bangladeshis sing every day to show their love for the country.[5] That is how the magic of literature helps to bond a group of people into a national belonging and create what Benedict Anderson describes in his seminal book *Imagined Communities* as an "imagined community."

However, although Bangladesh espouses nationalism as its first principle, it rejects national militancy or chauvinism by including in the Preamble that it wishes to contribute to "international peace" and cooperate with the global community "in keeping with the progressive aspirations of mankind." Bangladesh also intends to ensure the "fundamental human rights of all its citizens" – Hindu or Muslim, man or woman – and uphold "equality and justice" for all its subjects. Furthermore, it promises to be a law-abiding nation.

That is a pretty tall order for any country. Thus, the question arises: how can Bangladesh evolve into the ideal society envisioned in its Constitution? What kind of education system and citizenry are required to achieve this aim? After all, is not any nation only as good as its residents? If the citizens of a nation are not enlightened, it is likely to devolve into chaos, as we currently see in many democratic societies, rather than becoming the exemplary republic it seeks to be.[6]

Therefore, to fulfil its national goal, Bangladesh will need citizens:

1. Who can examine, reflect and debate national issues without complying with tradition or authority and are capable of thinking freely and innovatively – without fear or favour to any political or religious group?

2. Who can recognise their compatriots as people with equal rights – notwithstanding their religion, language, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality – and treat them with respect as fellow citizens deserving of the same opportunities and entitlements?

3. Who love their own country but think like citizens of the world; being proud of their heritage, they consider members of other countries as part of the same human community and equal partners in the global commonwealth of nations?

In the third section of the article, I will explain how literature and the arts can be instrumental in developing such rounded, unbiased, objective, thoughtful, and conscientious citizens in a modern, democratic nation. However, first, let me briefly explain how the current global obsession with economic and technological development has been causing threats to literature and the study of literature by falsely suggesting that literature and the humanities are not worth pursuing academically as they hardly contribute to the nation's profitability, prosperity, and material well-being.

Culture War in the Academia and Threats to Literature in the Present Era

When we talk about the foundational works of modern civilisation, we think of epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Homer's *Illiad*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Shakespeare's Plays. However, ironically, when students choose to study literature or other humanities subjects for their university degree, parents and friends often express concern about their future. This may happen even if students enrol at a university named after a writer, say Rokeya University in Rangpur or Nazrul University in Mymensingh (both in Bangladesh). This suggests an inherent paradox in how we perceive the subject: we admire and glorify the writers for their achievements and trailblazing contributions to society but belittle those who wish to tread their path and be like them. Literature students are often deemed lesser than science, medicine, and engineering students and looked upon with pity

rather than approbation, as their education is seen as not economically rewarding or competitive enough in the global market. I have often heard this from students and their parents in every country I have taught: Australia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Singapore, and the US.

Many pundits and political leaders nowadays dismiss literature and the humanities as "feckless frills." This view is not limited to a country or a region but has become a global trend. For example, Ruth O'Brien, an American academic, has the following to say about the declining stature of literature and the liberal arts in the US:

> The humanities and arts play a central role in the history of democracy, and yet today, many parents are ashamed of children who study literature or art. Literature and philosophy have changed the world, but parents worldwide are more likely to fret if their children are financially illiterate than if their training in the humanities is deficient. Even at the University of Chicago's Laboratory School – the school that gave birth to philosopher John Dewey's path-breaking experiments in democratic education reform – many parents worry that their children are not being schooled enough for financial success. ("Foreword" ix)

In other words, education has become a mere pathway to money, power, and success rather than a source of inner enrichment and holistic individual development. Success, modernisation, and material development are no doubt essential for building a nation like Bangladesh (or any society), but so are culture, creativity, and human development. We need prosperity, wealth, and advancement, but not sacrificing our morality, spirituality, and emotional development; money, but not at the cost of equality and justice for all members of society. It does not have to be an either/or zero-sum game. We can have both literature and science serve our civilisation, like how we synchronise our eyes to view the world and stand on two legs instead of favouring one over another.

It is essential that every democratic society, whether Australia, Malaysia, or Bangladesh, adopts a balanced education policy that equally values science, technology and

business on one hand and literature and the arts on another. Excessive emphasis on one will tilt the boat and force it to capsize. Emphasising the importance of balance in all spheres of life, the American sage Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Everything has two handles…. There must be both" (qtd. in Matthiessen 24). Elsewhere, he added:

> The middle region of our being is the temperate zone…. The mid-world is best. Human life is made up of two elements, Power and Form, and the proportion must be invariably kept if we would have it sweet and sound… every good quality is noxious if unmixed…. A man is a golden impossibility. The line he must walk is a hair's breadth. (*Complete Works* 3: 65-66)

This twoness, or the necessity to find a temperate zone between the opposing forces of life, is also a central teaching of Islam, the dominant religion in Bangladesh, where many self-serving Muslim political leaders and policymakers conveniently disregard this tenet. The word for moderation in Arabic is "wasat" or "wassathiya." In Surah Al-Baqarah, Allah describes Muslims as a "wasat community" (2: 143), while in Surah Luqman, He admonishes those who stray from the middle-of-the-road ideology: "And be moderate in your pace and lower your voice; indeed, the most disagreeable of sounds is the voice of donkeys" (Luqman 31:19, Quran.com).

However, in their thirst for profit, nations and their education systems are recklessly downsizing or discarding literature and the arts, which are necessary for human development and fostering balanced and fair-minded citizens. As of 2021, Australia has, for example, adopted a policy of incentivising education that produces job-ready graduates. At a media conference in January 2020, then Education Minister of Australia, Dan Tehan, outlined the country's new higher education policy in which he unequivocally stated that starting in 2021, the fees for humanities subjects would double while the fees for STEM (Science, Engineering, Technology, and Math) subjects or those that offer graduate entry jobs would decrease by 60%

or more. “A cheaper degree in an area where there’s a job is a win-win for students. And as I said earlier, when graduates succeed, our country succeeds,” the Minister stated emphatically in his National Press Club Address (“Minister for Education Dan Tehan National Press Club Address”). Put differently, Australia’s education policy is now predicated solely on jobs and economic growth. It has nothing to do with creating thinking, caring, and compassionate citizens, which is likely to be a threat to national security in the long run as Australia is increasingly becoming a multicultural and multi-religious society that requires well-informed, enlightened, and open-minded citizens willing to respect members of different communities and cultures within their national polity and actively participate in political issues that determine the nation’s future. However, job-ready graduates, who may be able to contribute to other aspects of nation-building, may not have the know-how to adjust to this changing cultural scenario in the country or help build a thriving civil society.

More education for the dollar is also becoming the norm in Europe and America. For example, in her book *Not for Profit*, Martha Nussbaum suggests, “Many European nations give high marks to technical universities and university departments and impose increasingly draconian cuts on the humanities” (17). Similarly, in an article published in *The New York Times*, “The Decline and Fall of the English Major” (2013), Verlyn Klinkenborg contends:

> The teaching of the humanities has fallen on hard times…. Undergraduates will tell you that they’re under pressure – from their parents, from the burden of debt they incur, from society at large – to choose majors they believe will lead as directly as possible to good jobs. Too often, that means skipping the humanities…. In 1991, 165 students graduated from Yale with a B.A. in English literature. By 2012, that number was 62. In 1991, the top two majors at Yale were history and English. In 2013, they were economics and political science. At Pomona this year [2013], they were economics and mathematics.

Countries like Malaysia and Bangladesh in the Global South are also not immune to this process. Literature is often dismissed as a lesser cousin of business and science in these countries. Malays are very proud of their language, but the best and brightest students in the country are encouraged to study medicine, economics, and engineering. The same is true about Bangladesh. Bangladeshis are fiercely proud of their mother tongue and fought a war to break away from Pakistan in 1971, primarily over the language issue. Yet, if anyone goes to study Bangla literature, instead of applauding them, people often view them with disdain and dismay. English literature was valued as an elite subject and the recruiting ground for top civil servants and diplomats in both countries during the colonial period, but that lustre was lost in the postcolonial period in the excitement to decolonise the national curriculum and bolster local culture. As a result, funding for literature and the humanities has, in general, dwindled in the public universities in the two countries after independence, while the private universities, which have mushroomed in many Asian countries, including Malaysia and Bangladesh, hardly care to offer literature as an academic subject. As business enterprises, their priority is profit and self-enrichment rather than the nation's holistic development.

All these indicate that literature and the humanities are gradually becoming peripheral academic subjects globally with an increasing focus on science, business and technology – a development based on the assumptions that literature has no correlation with a nation's economic growth and that the economy is the sole yardstick of a nation's success. The new tradition of ranking educational institutions based on methodologies favouring the sciences has only exacerbated this skewed trend.

Formative Influences of Literature on Students

Having outlined the silent crisis that literary study is experiencing worldwide, let me elucidate how literature at its best helps create active and thoughtful citizens and build healthy societies.

First and foremost, literature cultivates readers' critical thinking and interpretative skills and sharpens their curiosity and sense of wonder. Writers often use various techniques to enrich their writing, avoid being overly literal, and engage the reader. These include different figures of speech, such as metaphor, simile, symbolism, personification, irony, hyperbole, and euphemism. Writers sometimes also use allegories to add layers of meaning to their work. In fiction, they use elements such as plot, setting, theme, points of view, characterisation, etc., each having sub-categories. For example, writers may include backstory, flashback, flash-forward and foreshadowing to build their plot and sometimes introduce a sub-plot or sub-plots to add to the complication. Writers also frequently use the technique of omission to trigger the reader's curiosity and imagination. Ernest Hemingway explains this technique with the metaphor of the iceberg in his following statement:

> If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows, and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. (qtd. in Oliver 322)

Therefore, if only one-eighth of a work is visible, and the rest has to be imagined by the reader, it would require considerable thinking, reflection, and reading between the lines and words to comprehend a literary text. In other words, the reader must be active and alert throughout the task to figure out and enjoy the work. However, that's not all. In addition to the structural issues, thematic issues must also be untangled to enjoy a literary piece. This would

require further analytical skills by the reader. A student trained in such a rigorous evaluative process is likely to be an independent thinker and inclined to scrutinise ideas thoroughly before accepting them. In other words, one trained in literature is expected to be an active citizen in later life, defiant of the herd mentality and unwilling to follow tradition or authority unthinkingly. They would know how to stand up to political and religious demagogues who generally thrive in societies where people are inert, submissive, and docile.

In his book *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that the function of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear in the audience's mind and thereby effect "the proper purgation of these emotions" (*Poetics*). This explains that when we watch a tragedy, we suffer along with the suffering hero on stage for his *hamartia* and *hubris* and thus disburden our minds from the emotions of pity and fear and emerge as better human beings. Therefore, literature can be salubrious and ennobling by making us aware of our vulnerabilities and creating empathy for one another as fellow human beings. It gradually encourages us to remove all barriers that separate us – the barriers of race, gender, sexuality, language, class, caste, colour or religion – and realise that we all share similar human predicaments as fellow creatures on the planet. We are all flawed, fallible and frail whether we are Muslims, Hindus, Christians or Jews, men or women, black, brown or white. Therefore, the best way to live is by respecting each other and collaborating with other members of society rather than being aloof, arrogant, spiteful, and prejudiced. Cultivating this sense of equality in diversity and mutual sympathy can be a great gift of literature if we take literature seriously. In a country where citizens lack sympathy, empathy and mutual respect, there will inevitably be more marginalisation, exploitation, and stigmatisation, thus increasing rather than solving the nation's problems.

Literature also helps to broaden our cultural understanding and create globally-minded citizens. Students who study writers from different parts of the world and of diverse cultural,

racial and religious backgrounds typically develop a multilateral and inclusive sensibility. They learn to look at the world through many eyes, imagine the circumstances of dissimilar people, and shun narrowness and ill-informed prejudices about other societies and cultures. They realise that no matter how or where we live, our basic human circumstances are the same; we all suffer in sorrow and rejoice in happiness; our temporality on earth is our great equaliser. This awareness will likely make them more tolerant, accepting, empathetic, and constructive and help them avoid bigotry, extremism, and violence. As the world becomes increasingly globalised, it is all the more important that we shun provincialism and accept the great diversity with which God has created the universe. If, on the other hand, we become overzealous about our own values and way of life and try to impose them on others in the vein of a racial or religious supremacist, then it will signal the end of the multiculturalism that we see around us and, with it, the institution of democracy that we so need to build robust and healthy societies.

Furthermore, literature creates awareness about nature and the environment, which has become crucial as we face threats of potential extinction as a species through an environmental catastrophe. The relentless plundering of nature and natural resources for centuries by profit-mongers of the world has brought us to the brink of destruction through the depletion of the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect. It is time we start seeing nature as more than just a haven for wealth or a storehouse of resources to be transformed into cash at will, but also as the natural habitat we need for survival. Environmentally conscious writers and writers who value the immaterial in matter or love and idealise nature for their pantheistic worldview may help us develop a broader understanding of the natural world and our inherent relationship with it. Cultivating the sensibility that nature deserves our active sympathy and kinship from childhood in our younger generations will significantly assist in restoring the lost ecological balance and thereby averting the natural calamity that may befall us. Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore

tried to instil this appreciation in his students at his Santiniketan School by writing songs about nature and singing those to them, telling them stories about nature, holding his classes under trees, and taking them for walks through the nearby forests. He also introduced an annual *brikharopon* (tree planting) ceremony in 1928, in which he would encourage students to plant trees around the campus and to create intimate bonding between his students and the trees, he would name the trees after the children. This was his way of suggesting that nature is not an inert object to be abused and exploited but a living thing that deserves our goodwill, admiration and respect. Reading the works of writers like him will induce appreciation for nature's beauty, power and sustainability, thereby avoiding the current reductive approach of its thingification.[7]

Illustration of the Positive Effects of Literature on Students with Two South Asian Short Stories

Let me briefly explain how literary study generates some of the values discussed earlier by analysing two short stories by South Asian writers: Rabindranath Tagore's "Kabuliwala" and R.K. Narayan's "The House Opposite."

Tagore's "Kabuliwala," published in 1893, is about an Afghan man, Rahmat, who has come to Calcutta (Kolkata), British India, to make a living by selling fruits and lending money. He also supports his family back home with this income. One day, as he was passing by, he was called by the narrator's five-year-old daughter, Mini, out of curiosity, as his height and baggy clothes caught her eye. When the Kabuli man enters the narrator's house, Mini initially feels intimidated by his colossal stature, but after their first awkward meeting, they become close friends, and Rahmat begins to visit her at her home almost daily. Mini's mother is uneasy about this growing relationship as she has heard many shocking stories (in keeping with the social norm of dehumanising foreigners) about Afghans abducting children and selling them back home to make money. Besides, the Afghan is a Muslim, while the narrator's family is Brahmin. However, the narrator, who loves his daughter dearly, is fascinated by this

development and enjoys the growing relationship between his daughter and Rahmat, a twice outsider to his Bengali-Brahmin community.

One day, Mini sees Rahmat being taken away by police to jail for killing a Bengali man who refused to return the money he had borrowed from the Afghan. Rahmat usually collects all money from his borrowers before returning home every year. He is sent to jail for eight years for the murder, but the first thing Rahmat does after his release is to visit Mini. Mini was fourteen years old at the time, and the visit coincided with her wedding day. Initially, the father objects to the meeting but allows it when he learns that Rahmat has a daughter of Mini's age and he has been carrying a handprint of his daughter all along to remember her. However, the meeting fails to revive their past friendship, as Mini has changed with age. She no longer appreciates the jokes the duo fondly shared during her childhood. The story ends with the narrator giving Rahmat some money so he can return home and be with his daughter.

The story may seem straightforward, but it requires the reader to know the historical circumstances in which Tagore wrote it to understand and appreciate its underlying meanings. When Tagore wrote the story, India was a British colony, and there was considerable rivalry between Hindus and Muslims for two reasons: firstly, the divide-and-rule policy of the British which helped establish British supremacy over the natives by pitting the two main religious groups against one another and, secondly, the arrogant and intolerant attitude of caste (*varna*) Hindus who saw Muslims as socially inferior, in a way comparable to the Dalits or Untouchables, and so refused to interact with them.[8] Tagore tries to resolve this hostility by creating a friendship between Mini and Rahmat. By allowing Rahmat to visit Mini at home, he sends a message of amity, empathy and unity between the two religious groups – that we should not play to the British tune but trust one another as Indians. Besides, notwithstanding our cultural differences, we should view one another as equals. The message is further complicated

by the fact that Rahmat is an Afghan. This is where Tagore's cosmopolitan view comes into play: we should trust not only our neighbours who are different from us in caste, colour, language, or religion but also people of other countries. Being an Afghan Muslim, Rahmat is doubly an "other" to the narrator, but he has no qualms about letting him enter his home and make friends with his daughter (a taboo in orthodox Hindu society then and still now). This message is further strengthened when we are told that Rahmat has a daughter like Mini, and he loves his daughter as much as the narrator loves his. Therefore, although he is a stranger to Indian society, he shares the same human qualities as a father. Thus, while society demonises the foreigner by spreading gossip about him, Tagore humanises him by making him paternally an equal to the narrator.[9]

Reading this story will force Bangladeshi Muslims to rethink any prejudice they may have against Hindus and other religious minorities. It will also inspire them to review the parochial attitude they potentially harbour towards foreigners. The story also incorporates a gender discourse in the parallel father-daughter relations between Mini and her father and Rahmat and his daughter. Both fathers unconditionally love their daughters. This is refreshingly different from the social reality of the time when, under the influence of patriarchy, South Asians were often negligent and even hard-hearted toward their daughters. Reading the story will prompt them to reevaluate their gender relations more favourably and thus make them better human beings and citizens; infused with grace, warmth and cross-cultural empathy, they will likely have the potential to play a constructive role in society.

R.K. Narayan's "The House Opposite," first published in 1931, is a story about a swami or a Hindu religious teacher who gets up every morning, bathes to cleanse himself and recites *The Bhagavad Gita*. This is his daily routine. He also avoids different kinds of food and tortures the body for spiritual fulfilment. He does all these, motivated by his selfish desire to attain

"spiritual liberation." He has no interest in society and does nothing charitable for the members of his community. One day, he moves into a village where a woman lives all by herself from across his house. The woman is visited regularly by men, and because she lives alone and is frequented by men, the hermit concludes that she is a prostitute. He does not care to find out who the woman is, why she lives alone and why she has many male visitors. Instead, he jumps to his unhealthy conclusion. This shows that the swami is prejudiced and judgemental about women who live alone for whatever reason. The woman could be a widow or a single woman, and the men could be her relatives, but that does not occur to the sanctimonious swami. Rather than trying to reach out to the woman and offer any help she might need, he determines that she is an "awful monster" and "the personification of evil." Ironically, despite his rigorous routine to avoid temptation, the swami gradually becomes obsessed with the woman, so much so that he can no longer concentrate on his recitation of the holy book and, conversely, keeps imagining the woman's voluptuous body and her sexual activities with the men. Unable to control himself, he decides to move to another village. However, before his departure, the woman walks over to his house with a plate of fruits and gives it to the swami, asking for forgiveness from the "holy man" on the occasion of her mother's death anniversary.

The story shows that the swami is not a credible religious figure but a self-righteous man who falsely puts himself on a pedestal and denigrates his neighbour woman because it is easy for a man in a patriarchal society to stereotype and slander (single) women. He is not an enlightened religious figure but a sexist and arrogant man. He recites the sacred book without trying to understand its actual meaning. Hinduism teaches that all humans are spiritually equal, although different in the flesh. But this holy man fails to get beyond the world of flesh, even though he has been striving to attain spiritual liberation. The story further shows that the woman is voiceless as she is viewed throughout the story via the swami's gaze. Eventually,

however, the woman emerges as a superior being as she reaches out to the swami to ask for forgiveness for her human flaws, while all that the swami can afford is to vilify her.

Anyone reading the story will not only sharpen their analytical skills and learn to question the evil practices in society but come out better as an individual realising that self-scrutiny is better than criticising another and gender binary, religious orthodoxy, and foolish stereotyping of others, especially the vulnerable members of society, are perils that ought to be avoided by everyone. It will also make the reader aware of the importance of being kind and charitable towards one's neighbours rather than acting insensitively and indignantly. Moreover, the story will make the reader mindful that vulnerability is a common human experience; therefore, we need to be interdependent and mutually respectful rather than being malicious and vain; tolerance, hospitality, and forgiveness are better than postures of righteousness and piety. Finally, it will alert the reader to the differences between appearance and reality, thus avoiding accepting things at their face value.

Conclusion

In his influential 1959 Rede Lecture, titled "The Two Cultures," British scientist and novelist C.P. Snow lamented the growing disjuncture between the two significant areas of human intellectual activity, science and technology on one hand and humanities and the arts on another. He argued that practitioners in both areas should come together to solve problems confronting society and ensure the progress of civilisation. His concern was the second-class status of science when the Western education system over-rewarded the humanities at the expense of science, technology, and engineering. However, the pendulum has since swung in favour of STEM subjects, and literature is losing the culture war. More and more politicians and policymakers are advocating economic growth and prosperity, and parents are showing concern about their children's job prospects. It is, of course, a misconception that literature and

humanities students cannot contribute to the world of science and business. As I have explained before, literature and the arts impart critical thinking and imaginative skills in students, which are essential qualities in a dynamic corporate culture and the fields of innovation. Science thrives on creativity and imagination, and so does business. Albert Einstein, a leading scientist of the modern era, once said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world" (qtd. in Quayum, "Education for Tomorrow" 1). No nation can prosper on yesterday's skills learned by rote, and no new problems can be overcome with ideas used for solving problems of the past. Therefore, employees trained in critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovative skills – in questioning rather than sheepishly following – would be of great value in the world of economy and science.

Moreover, they would bring their intellectual know-how alongside some moral and emotional ethos. In this context, the views of David Rubenstein, co-founder and co-chair of the Carlyle Group, one of the most successful multinational private equity firms and a well-renowned philanthropist, are pertinent. In the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Rubenstein suggested that studying the humanities was the formula for success and even came up with an abbreviation to counter STEM: "H=MC: Humanities equals more cash." He argued that "Humanities teach problem-solving skills that enable students to stand out among their peers and to achieve success in the business world" and added, "the reasoning skills that come with a well-rounded humanities education actually result in higher-paying jobs over time" ("Carlyle Co-Founder's Formula for Success").

More importantly, literature and the humanities instil values that we need for the success of our democratic institutions and the fulfilment of our human destiny. Literature teaches us empathy, sympathy, and mutual respect; the ability to think critically and creatively; rise above local loyalties and think like a world citizen; and identify our individual

vulnerabilities through self-scrutiny so that we may overcome our pride and prejudice and sympathise with the predicaments of others. Therefore, while business and technology will remain indispensable for their practical benefits, we cannot afford to ignore literature and the arts for the skills and knowledge they provide. As Emerson said, "The mid-world is best" (*Complete Works* 65). The pendulum has swung on both sides; now, it should move to the middle to find a balance between what Emerson called "Form" and "Power," or the material and the immaterial and moral. If we surrender our "Power" to "Form" or our conscience and integrity to the tyranny of the material world, it will have a detrimental effect on us and lead to, to quote Tagore, "a process of gradual suicide by shrinkage of the soul" (qtd. in Nussbaum 1). As long as we want education to be for life and living, for building decent democratic societies and healthy world culture, for producing well-rounded citizens who are capable of both thinking and feeling, saying "nay" to literature will not be an option now or in the future, especially in autonomous, self-determining societies like Bangladesh. Our fate and future are as closely tied to studying and appreciating literature and the humanities as it is to science, business and technology; any attempt to exclude one from the other or glorify one at the expense of the other is a false binary Bangladesh, and its democratic counterparts, can ill afford if it wants to move forward steadily and in full-swing like a bird gliding in the sky on two wings. Therefore, while Bangladesh invariably needs economic growth to overcome its festering, dehumanising poverty and bolster its standing in the global community of nations, it needs literature and the humanities to fulfil the aspirations ascribed in the Preamble of the country's Constitution.

Notes

1. This paper was presented as a keynote address at the "Envisioning the Future: Teaching Language and Literature" conference, organised by International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh, in January 2023.
2. Bangladesh adopted secularism as one of its fundamental principles in the Constitution primarily because of the history of religious oppression of its people by upper-caste Hindus during the colonial period and West Pakistani Muslims after the formation of the new country in 1947. Given this negative experience from two different religious groups, the nation wanted to steer clear of any potential politicisation of religion, which could translate into oppression of its religious minorities, especially Hindus.
3. For further discussions on Tagore's views on nationalism, see Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. *Tagore, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism* (2020).
4. At a public rally at Ramna Race Course (Suhrawardy Udyan) in Dacca (Dhaka) on March 21, 1948, the founder and then Governor-General of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, unequivocally declared Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan, a view he reiterated at a gathering of students at the University of Dhaka on March 24, 1948. This created an outcry among the Bengalis of East Pakistan, resulting in a language movement in 1952, which eventually catapulted into the War of Liberation in 1971.
5. The Bangladeshi national anthem is a song composed by Rabindranath Tagore during the *Bangabhago Andolon* (1905-1911), resulting from the British partition of Bengal in 1905.
6. The US, where politics has become utterly "tribal" in the post-Trump era, is an excellent example of the decadent state of democracy. Similar situations also prevail in countries

like Brazil, India and Hungary, where right-wing, populist leaders use ethno-nationalism, religious nationalism or nativism to divide their own people, defying the basic norms of democracy, which demands equality and harmony of all citizens. In Bangladesh, too, politics is so polarised, corrupt and toxic that to call it a democratic state is almost a mockery of the institution.

7. For further information on Tagore's view of nature and how he tried to instill love for nature in his students at Santiniketan, see Mohammad A. Quayum, ed., *Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator*.
8. See Tagore's essay "The Way to Unity" and Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* for how caste Hindus used to treat Muslims during the colonial period, the most devastating consequence of which was the partition of Bengal in 1947, when the Hindu majority half decided to stay with India and the Muslim majority half joined Pakistan as East Pakistan (which metamorphosed into Bangladesh after a violent was in 1971).
9. There is a widespread perception among Bangladeshi Muslims that Tagore was anti-Muslim in his imagination, and he always glorified the Hindus at the expense of Muslims. I have countered this perception in my article "A Herald of Religious Unity" by arguing that as a cosmopolitan thinker, he favoured unity, inclusivism and harmony among all religious and ethnic groups and believed that for India to become a modern and progressive society, it was incumbent on the nation to overcome its festering sectarian rivalries and treat all members of the society equally. Tagore's "Kabuliwala" has become even more relevant in the wake of the dehumanisation of Afghans and Muslims in general in the Western media after the horrific events of 9/11.

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