

KAISER HAQ

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**PUBLISHED IN THE STREETS OF DHAKA
COLLECTED POEMS 1966-2006**

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(For Ashis Nandy)

Pretty objects continued to be admired until 1875 when the phrase 'pretty-pretty' was coined. That did it. For the truly clever, apt, and skilful, the adjective pretty could only be used in the pejorative sense, as I discovered thirty years ago while being shown around King's College by E.M. Forster. As we approached the celebrated chapel (magnificent, superb, a bit much), I said, 'Pretty.' Forster thought I meant the chapel when, actually, I was referring to a youthful couple in the damp middle distance. A ruthless moralist, Forster publicized my use of the dread word. Told in Fitzrovia and published in the streets of Dacca [now spelt Dhaka], the daughters of the Philistines rejoiced; the daughters of the uncircumcised triumphed. For a time my mighty shield was vilely cast away.

Gore Vidal, 'On Prettiness', *New Statesman*,

March 17, 1978.

Pretty, isn't it – sure he's caught you
On the wrong foot, Mr. Morgan Forster
Broadcasts his priggish amusement
Over cigar and port in the King's SCR.

The story travels swiftly – and why not,
It's suitably droll – to Fitzrovia,
Where poets moustached with bitter froth
Nibble nuts and gossip in equal measure.

But all the way to monsoon-racked Dhaka?
That's a stretch! I should know,
I was born and live here.
Your pretty tale swinging into print
Under the bamboo, the banyan and the mango tree
Is the height of absurdity – isn't that your point?

Point taken. Now imagine the dread
Of a writer from Dhaka. Yes, a writer,
For *Homo Scriptor* has a local branch, you know,
And at bazaar booksellers' such things
As lyric verse and motley belles-lettres
Peep out of routine stacks of Exam Guides
Like rusty needles – I too have perpetrated a few.

But your unsolicited publicity may well put paid
To the prospects of any pamphlet or book
Published in the humble streets of Dhaka.
After all, Mr. Gore Vidal,
You are almost as famous
As Vidal Sassoon.

Your word may not be law
But it comes close, in certain quarters –
Deservedly. In assailing the iniquitous
You never beat about the bush
Or blare like a bully. In my axiological tree
You are up there with Chomsky,
Honderich, Arundhati. That makes your snide
Aside rankle all the more. Now,

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

No way. Here I'll stay, plumb in the centre
Of monsoon-mad Bengal, watching
Jackfruit leaves drift earthward
In the early morning breeze
Like a famous predecessor used to

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

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

BANGLADESH '71

Venturing at last to go out
I blink at the guilt in the eye
And fumble with the throat
As if there were a tie.

Smoky dusk falls like fear
Over stone and human heart.
How, and with what, shall one create art?
Flames, death, then ash consumes the fire.

Blood of the doomed stains our sleep,
Like a question hangs pen over paper,
Fumbling fingers miss flesh they look for,
My love is vapour, but I don't weep.
Dawn stirs like a mouse; whose knock is it on the door?

Saidpur Cantonment, 1972