



Conversation

Shamsur Rahman Reflects on Poetry, Literature, National Identity and Life

SHAMSUR Rahman is unquestionably one of the greatest — some would say, the greatest — modern poets of Bangladesh. His permanent place in our literature is assured, while his contribution to contemporary Bengali poetry, as a whole, is already being rated highly by critics in Calcutta.

Many things have distinguished the life and work of Shamsur Rahman. He is a poet par excellence, but he has also been a journalist and editor, and remains so until this day, despite difficulties, not certainly of his own making, of creating a place for himself in the field of journalism, even from the point of earning a decent living. He had a troubled — or simply an awful — experience as the Editor of Dainik Bangla and anything but a happy time as a columnist of a Bengali daily. On this subject, Shamsur Rahman speaks only in hints, often with a smile and never with a trace of bitterness.

Apart from being a journalist-editor, Shamsur Rahman takes a deep interest in what goes on in the life around him, even in the political field. He is not a member of any party or organisation, but he occasionally appears at small meetings and signs petitions on issues of public interest, such as human rights, freedom of the press and rule of law. He lent his full support to the anti-Ershad movement at various stages and today he looks ahead to the democratic future of Bangladesh with hope and optimism. Now just past 60, with all his hair gone white, Shamsur Rahman looks like a Biblical sage, a man at peace with himself — which he is not as he tells the Editor of The Daily Star, S. M. Ali, his contemporary at the University where both studied English Language and Literature and his long-standing personal friend — during the conversation published below. S. M. Ali was assisted by Daily Star Assistant Editor Sabir Mustafa and Feature Writer S.Y. Bakht during the conversation:

S.M. ALI: Forty years ago, you started as a romantic poet, and in time you became one of our best modern poets. How

ticular event, or incident, that served as a catalyst?

It was the whole climate of '69. A feeling was building up against Pakistani oppression before that the year, but '69 was certainly the climax. The death of Assad and other killings pulled me inexorably towards politics and my writing entered a new phase. Sixty-nine changed my technique as well as the subject matter of my poetry.

Is there any other poet whose influence you have absorbed, consciously or unconsciously? This evolution in your technique, subject matter, style, the politicisation of your thinking and poetry — do you want to pinpoint any particular poet, at home or abroad, who influenced your development?

To begin with, it came from life itself. Works by foreign poets like Pablo Neruda did leave a strong impression on me, but I think it was my direct contact with life around me that brought about the change in my attitude to life, and consequently to my poetry.

The evolution and change that came over you, did that change come for all the other poets of this country? Or do you stand out as the outstanding poet?

Yes, I think a change swept other poets off their feet too, and perhaps in some people's cases it existed before. I don't know. There always were one or two different trends in poetry. You have the isolationist trend, with the poet in isolation and aloof, and then there was the politically-conscious poet. These trends were there, and are still here.

But I never tried to sacrifice poetical quality for anything else. It must be POEMS, otherwise it will fall flat. One of literature's principal functions is to communicate with people. For that communication to be profound and intense, literature must have aesthetic quality. Otherwise it becomes mere slogans and propaganda, and I am totally against that.

Do you have any thoughts on how the new, post-liberation generation is shaping up? Which way is their trend going?



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Now our art scene seems a little forlorn. True, Shahabuddin is a great artist, Kalidas Karmakar is a great artist, but still we seem to be suffering from an attack of national cynicism... Do you think we don't see the good things in our own people?

No, why should it be like that. Good things will get noticed and appreciated by someone. Why should there be any cynicism? But we do have a nostalgia for the past, quite naturally. But new good things will never go unappreciated.

What do you think is the state of our publishing industry? Are enough books, poetry being published, and bought?

Books of poetry, I think, are not selling as much as they were immediately after liberation. Decline of reader interest probably has something to do with it, economic reasons also. But main thing is that poetry is being published, by both publishers and poets themselves. But novels do seem to sell well. But the best-sellers are not necessarily the best books. Sometimes though best books do become best-sellers.

Many people think we are going through a crisis of identity, they say the problem is deep with our culture, even our social life. It is casting a shadow over our culture, literature and our social life. Do you really feel that we have a problem there, that we have a crisis of identity?

I think this problem of identity has been created, artificially. In my opinion there is no problem. I mean, I know I am a Bengalee, and my culture is Bengali culture. Now Bengalees are a mixed race and there are several varied influences in our culture. For instance, we have Hindu influences, Buddhist influences, Islamic influences... they are all there.

Our culture is what we eat, what we speak, how we speak, how we dress... all this. And there is an international trend in our culture too — we wear Western clothes, we don't go around in pjama-kurtas all the time. But to understand real culture, we have to look at our rural, village culture which is our root, where there is no communalism.

Our first cultural "crisis" was created by the Pakistani rulers. At that time, a Punjabi could be a Punjabi, a Baluch could call himself a Baluch, but we (the Bengalees) had to become East Pakistanis... we were not even allowed to keep the name of the place East Bengal. This was part of the conspiracy of the ruling class and the vested interest groups. The British did much the same thing when they ruled India by whipping up communalism.

But still we observe February 21, draw alpanas on the streets which some people

may call a "Hindu custom", but in reality that is part of Bengalee culture. We value works of Chaitanna Dev, and the works of the Sufis.

Actually we must learn to look at humans as humans. As the great poet Chandi Das said, "Man is the truth, and there is no truth above him". This must be the criterion. Only then could all conflict come to an end.

Do you think our culture has become too inward-looking? In literature, I get the feeling as if we are not ready to be exposed to outside influences. The younger generation is running the risk of alienation because it is constantly being told about "alien culture" — to be careful about alien culture.

I don't think culture is like a pond. It's like a river — and it will go forward. Why shouldn't people accept good things from foreign cultures? Not everything foreign is bad. If we can use foreign computers and telephones, for instance, so why not other good things?

In culture, we are being influenced from the West, particularly in music. Rabindranath borrowed from baul songs as well as Western music; Nazrul took from local classical music and from the music of Turkey.

People are talking about this alien culture... but they don't even say what they mean...

This has been going on since Pakistan times. It is not even made clear which "alien culture" they are talking about, yes, it has become a phobia. I mean, what is this alien culture? Do they mean Indian culture? Or American, British, French or what? But shutting doors and windows simply won't do. The world has become smaller with every advance in communication technology, younger people are travelling and seeing different things. Also since ancient times, there has been a great thirst for knowledge among Bengalees. People like Alish Dipankar, the great Buddhist monk, had gone to Tibet and Kashmir. No you cannot confine knowledge within a set boundary.

You made the point that we have no problem of identity, it is an artificially created one. But what about our values and standards? Many of us feel that we face an erosion here, which has resulted in a crisis. How do you look at this situation?

Like you, I am extremely concerned. We are certainly facing a crisis with our values and standards. Sometimes one has the impression that they are all gone, even such basic ones as honesty, integrity, truthfulness and sincerity. Our human relations are no longer what they used to be a couple of decades ago. There are

times when I do not know what is happening. I feel a little frightened.

Part of the crisis in our values and standards arises from our socio-economic conditions which have been deteriorating all the time. Take the population pressure and problem of urbanisation in a city like Dhaka, the increase of people living below the poverty level, the growing unemployment even among the educated young men and women — all these are creating all kinds of imbalances within the society. Do you agree?

Yes, I agree.

As you were saying, you became politicised in 1969, then you were involved in other things like journalism. What would you like to do in the years ahead, in journalism, in the field of politics?

I do not have any ambition in the political field. I really don't want to be a political activist because I don't have the mental make-up for it. But whatever I have done, if you call it political, I have done it out of solidarity with the people of this country. I have only done things which I have thought to be good. But I would like to carry on writing... I want to be a literary person.

You are slowly showing more and more interest in prose. You are writing columns now...

I write more poetry, but yes, I have done newspaper columns and articles in order to earn a living.

Going back to politics again, there does seem to be a lack of thinking, intellectual people in the new parliament.

Do our thinking, intellectual people have money? Also, perhaps they don't take part in party politics because they don't wish to get alienated. And except one or two, most intellectuals do not have any grassroots contacts.

Is there anything about this country that really upsets you?

Many things! The abject poverty; lack of education; lack of education in educated people! And of course, corruption.

Is there any political party

Unfortunately, I have always, throughout my entire life, worked in the wrong newspaper. I was at Dainik Bangla from 1964 to 1987. I have never been able to work in a newspaper of my choice... I have to carry the ignominy of doing those jobs through my whole life.

I was unemployed for three years after I resigned my editor's post at the height of the 1987 movement against Ershad. You know how difficult it is being unemployed in Bangladesh. Lots of people praised me, saying what a great poet I was, but nobody offered me a job.

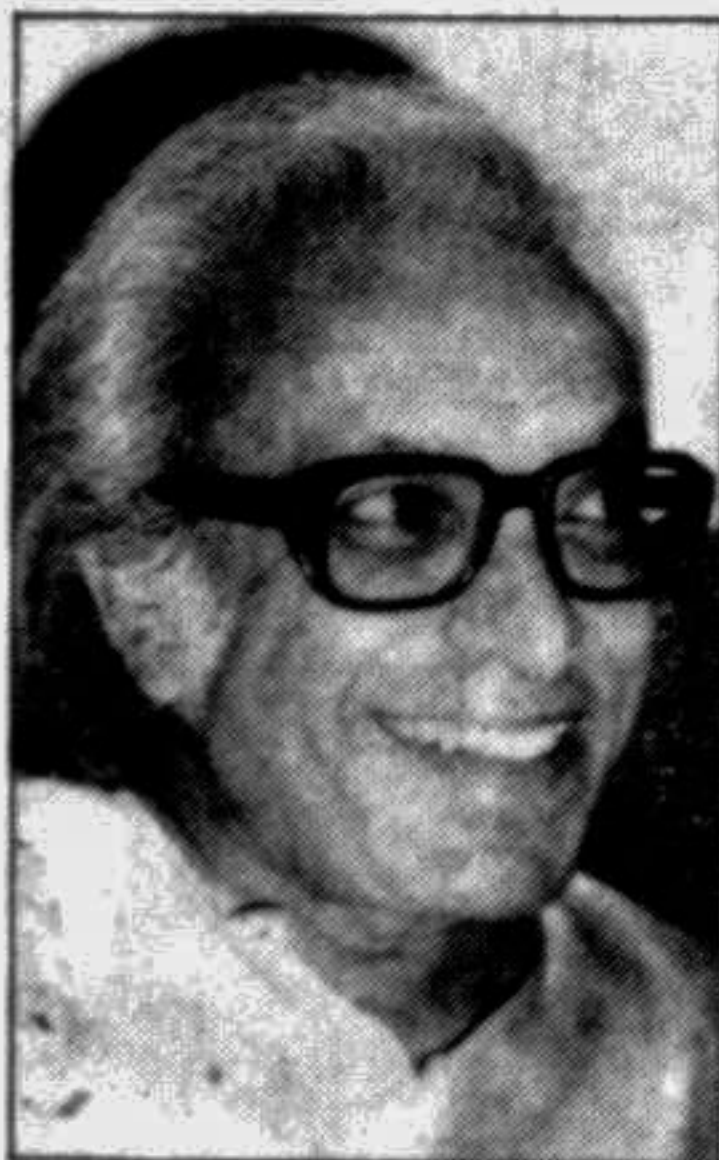
I should have left Dainik Bangla long before. I did some pieces which were critical of the government, which was an unethical thing to do, since I was after all editor of a government-owned newspaper. Then my name was withdrawn from the printline by the authorities... the minister of information then was I think Anwar Zahid... Then, I submitted my resignation when State of Emergency was declared by Ershad. It wasn't an easy decision, since I knew the pitfalls of unemployment in this country, but there comes a time when a man just has to take a stand.

I did not have a job until last year when I joined Mul Dhara, a weekly. At present I am working in a monthly literary journal.

We are trying to create a new society, a brave new world. But society is not giving any thought to contributing to culture by providing security to writers who might be unemployed, or who might be staying home to pursue their work. (Indian Journalist) Pran Chopra once told me, "All my friend, it looks as though I will be writing my last newspaper column from my death bed".

Yes, quite so. To survive, I think I too will have to write articles till the last of my days.

Everybody says we are now entering a new world of democracy, of popular will. Is there anything that can be done in the fields of culture, literature, films, publishing to help the younger generation, as well as the older generation



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do you see your transformation, your evolution? Do you find you have passed through different stages of development?

SHAMSUR RAHMAN: Yes, there have of course been stages. Man gains greater experience with the passing of years, and even his attitude towards life undergoes a change. I think every writer, not just me, but all writers, go through stages in life, through ups and downs.

When I first started off, as you've rightly said, I was a romantic poet... I don't know if I was really a poet then... but people used to say that the romantic trend dominated my writings of early years. In those early days I was not all that politically conscious. This political consciousness came to me around the year 1969. It became part of life. Until then politics or goings on in the country did not affect me to any significant degree. But in '69, perhaps even a little earlier, I began to look at politics in a different light.

I did not get involved with any particular political party, but there was a certain political awakening inside me, and it was more of a progressive, left-wing type of consciousness. Association with progressive-minded friends such as Hasan Hafizur Rahman certainly helped to push me along that line.

You mentioned 1969 as the year of your political awakening. Do you remember any par-

I think art and literature do not stand still in one place. They evolve and move forward, some times towards something good, sometimes not. So I think it is progressing and if not in every decade then certainly within the span of a period of time, it develops to a higher stage. It is a gift of time... I, too am controlled by time. I think we produce new good poets every decade, and we will continue to do so. For the future of our poetry, I am optimistic. I always am.

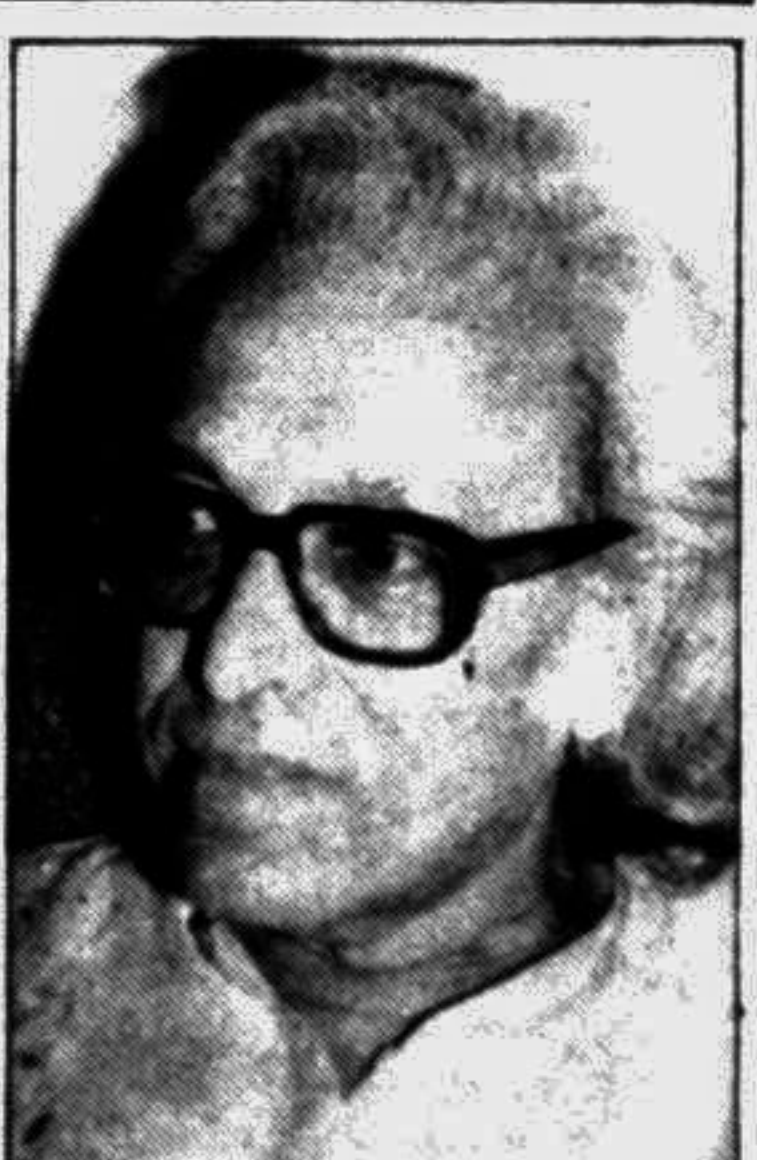
I think our non-poetry literature, such as fiction, travel stories, other novels etc. is going through a period of stagnation. Do you think we have produced good fiction writers?

We have. Among older generation of novelists we have Shahkat Osman, Rashid Karim. Hasan Hafizur Rahman has written good short stories. There is novelist Mahmudul Huq... then Akhtaruzzaman Elias has written... so it is not that we have not produced at all. But yes, since liberation, we have not done as well as we perhaps should have.

We don't seem to have here in Dhaka a good practice of literary criticism. What do you think is the reason? Are you afraid? Are we shy or do we feel ashamed to criticise?

Our literary criticism is very poor indeed. I can't pinpoint the reason... maybe we don't have the critique culture. Maybe, we raise people we like to the sky, and those we don't like we turn them into dust!

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to which you would like to belong?

In fact, I don't find any political party which I can support whole-heartedly. But if any party really believes in Bengalee nationalism, secularism, and has progressive attitudes, then I can support that party.

Can intellectuals create a forum, something like a Committee of 100, where you and I will differ, but work together. A place where we could not change the prime minister of the country, but where we could tackle selected issues, such as the state of the media or any other topic of intellectual interest.

What you have just said is a very nice idea, a very civilised idea. But it's not possible in this country. You and I can have a disagreement, and still have a cup of tea together, that's the civilised way isn't it? But that's not possible in most other places in this country. Here, if someone doesn't like your views, he will damn you for it, and your forefathers too.

Just take a look at the leftist movement in this country. They are supposed to be the progressive, enlightened ones. Yet they cannot agree amongst themselves and are split into so many factions. This is happening at a time when all the right-wing forces are getting together.

Tell us about your life as a Journalist. You were the editor of Dainik Bangla...

like ourselves? Any thoughts?

If free thinking is allowed, if one is free to write what he wants to, what he feels, then I think that will be the most we can expect. I doubt that this much will come about... but a person should be allowed to think and write freely.

Tell us about your family.

I have ONE wife. I had two sons, but one died very young. I also have three daughters. All my children are married now, with one of the daughters living abroad in the USA with her husband. I have four grandsons and one granddaughter.

What is the concept of a poet's happiness? Are you a happy man?

No, I think Shamsur Rahman makes me unhappy.

Inside? Have you tried to think about what it is that makes you unhappy, as a poet, the lonely runner, the long distance runner of Shukanta Bhattacharyya?

I think it is something inner that makes a man unhappy. Sometimes the world out side makes him unhappy, but it is the inner turmoil which is more difficult to deal with.

If you had to live your life all over again, knowing Shamsur Rahman would be basically an unhappy man, would you still be the same?

Yes, I would not have it any other way.

