

CONVERSATION

Literature At a Crossroad

Syed Shamsul Haq Reflects on Culture, Politics and the Nation

DAILY STAR: We all feel that Bangladesh may be at a crossroad when it comes to literature and culture. How do you feel about it? Do you agree? If you don't please tell us why? If you do, let us know how the crossroads are like? What we want to know really is that, are our culture and literature in such a state from where it can lead us to many directions?

SYED SHAMSUL HAQ: What I always say is that as Bengalee people we have a common heritage. But since the partition of India, Bengal has been divided and the two parts of Bengal have had totally different social, economic, cultural experience and that has made the difference.

It's not only the language. You see, Americans speak and write in English. But their literature is not the same as the British, because the cultural, political, economic experiences are different.

Over the years, since 1947 till now, we have gone through a kind of experience which is not the same as the other part of the Bengal.

For instance, when I visited Calcutta couple of years back in connection with staging one of my plays there, one journalist asked me whether I could hint at the difference between Bangladesh and West Bengal regarding the use of words. In my reply, I cited that I had compiled a list of at least 200 words which had different meanings in West Bengal and in Bangladesh. For instance, the word 'Krishnachura', in Bangladesh corresponds to the event of the Language Movement, 21st of February. But the same word has only love connotation in that part of Bengal, being related to the story of Radha and Krishna.

When in Bangladesh someone utters the word 'roko' (blood) immediately the same word as it is used in West Bengal becomes different. Because we have gone through 1952, 1969, 1971 and the word, after weathering away these crucial years obviously bears a different connotation for the people of this region.

One thing we must not forget, that since 1958, till today, with the exception of four to four and half years, we constantly struggled under Martial Law, one man rule and autocratic rule. I do not think that any other country or it's people in the subcontinent has had the same experience and that has made a lot of difference — specially to a writer.

In 1952 when the Language Movement was on and on 21st February I was not in Dhaka. But when I came back a few people advised me, like the late Fazle Lohani, who incidentally published my first story, that this country had no future so there was no fruitful reason for me to stay here and pursue my literary endeavor in Bangla.

He suggested that I should migrate to England and start writing in English. I strongly protested to this saying, "No way whatsoever. I was born in this society and I shall not forsake this country and I shall continue to write in Bengali."

Such was our spirit back in 1952. Most of the major writers, including Shamsur Rahman who started writing poems in 1948 are the prod-

Movement.

They know more about 1971 than they know of 1952. Because there have been 200 or more books published in 1971, but unfortunately there are not even one and half a dozen books on the language issue.

I was really greatly surprised looking at the huge gathering of about five thousand who for one and a half hour were totally spell bound. For creative reasons I sort of telescoped the incidents and the expressions of the audience, they were spell bound. I always believe that in our country, the writer is not only a creative personality. He has his social duty, his political commitment and the duty to his people.

DS: You have already pointed out that we Bangladeshis have a different kind of identity than the people who live in the other Bengal. You mentioned about the Language Movement, which you probably looked at as the most decisive in the whole evolution. This search for identity, if it is at all a search for identity, or would you just say that within the framework of the larger identity as Bengalees, we have different variations of people who live with the rivers, the different kind of folk songs, different type of socio-economic evolution or is it because of any reason something quite different? How would you put 1971 in this context? Does it widen the gap, narrow the gap or eliminate the gap?

SSH: If you allow me, I will go back a little. Mr. Humayoon Kabir, one of the great Bengalees, he wrote a book on Bengal about its cultural identity and the elements of it's culture.

He in his book said over 50 years ago that East and West Bengal have two different kinds of cultural identities. East Bengal is a riverine country and West Bengal is a flat land and land of the red soil (Lal Matir Desh) and 'Bauler Desh'.

In his book he tried to find out the differences of these two parts of Bengal in respect to its cultural practice. He discussed thoroughly about the poems, songs and plays of these two parts and finally drew the conclusion that East Bengal had a distinctive cultural heritage, which is their very own.

So there is a different cultural identity. Yet two of these cultures combined to make the Bengalee culture as a whole. He wrote this book even before the partition of India when the British Raj was there.

We believe that after our independence in 1971, we wanted to establish certain things, are we Bengalees first and Muslims second? Or are we Muslims first and Bengalee second?

Born on December 27, 1935, in what he described as the most impoverished and deprived district of Bangladesh, Kurigram, SYED SHAMSUL HAQ has enriched the literary world of this country through three decades of dedicated and imaginative endeavour. Author of over 70 books, including 11 novels, 12 collections of poems and seven verse plays, Haq is Bengalee to the core of his heart. Since his first piece of writing was published in 1951, Haq has won virtually every major national literary awards, including the *Ekushey Padak*, the *Bangla Academy Padak* and the *Nasiruddin Gold Medal*. Currently a Fellow of the Bangla Academy and Senior Vice President of the International Theatre Institute of UNESCO, Haq recently spoke at length with a DAILY STAR team led by the Editor S. M. Ali about art and literature, nation and nationalism, politics and life. Ali was assisted during the interview by

Executive Editor Mahfuz Anam and Assistant Editor Sabir Mustafa:

is any such thing as Islami-culture. I believe that any religion may be a contributing factor in forming one's culture, but it is never the ultimate criteria.

Today in Bangladesh, where eighty 85 cent of it's citizens are Muslims, our religious rites and their practices have obviously become a part of our culture.

For instance when I wrote the play *Payer Aayaj Pawa Jai* I was in London and had to work very hard for it. I went to various libraries studied the mind of rural Bengalee people whose religion is Islam and I tried to use 'Islamic myths' in this play, myths like Habi and Kabil (Abel and Cain) and numerous other myths.

At one point in that play a person was describing the wretched plight of Bengalee people during Pakistani occupation of our land in 1971. He (the character) described the plight of our people as similar to that of a half slain sacrificial cow, this of course, had a connection with the practice of Qurbani in Islam.

I think first we have to know what is the Bengalee culture. As a person I believe we shared a common heritage which goes back to Charja Pada and after travelling a long way from there, almost a thousand years, on February 11, 1947 there was a Hindu-Muslim riot in Dhaka.

Then there was a great migration of Hindus from this part of Bengal to the other and Muslims from West Bengal. The city that we knew, where we were born and brought up suddenly became alien to me. I saw strange faces on the street. One thing that we understood then was that we had to decide about our selves, we had to know from where we came and to where we belong, so the search for identity was on.

One thing I say quite often, it may seem a little cerebral, is that, "if we do not know why we are a nation, then we are gone as a nation. Living in an independent land today I believe that we should understand and make others understand the fact, why we are a nation and writers can play a stealer role in this connection. Ancient Greece is no more, but writers like Sophocles and Aeschylus remain, they continue to live through the ages."

DS: Is there really any country of the world which has known the basis of it's nation? Once at a conference in Greece organized by the UNESCO, they came up with this answer that there are no pure races in the world, and added to this, it also proclaimed that there was no such thing as a tradition or convention nation — state. What is your opinion about it?

SSH: As I now sit here with you, I really cannot tell whether my forefathers few generations back were Bengalees. People have been moving around through the centuries.

As I have said earlier on, I believe culture is a set of symbols. After living in a land for a considerable length of time, you agree and respond to these symbols and that very place becomes your nation. When one agrees to these set of symbols, which are really components which make one's culture only then one forms an idea of nationhood about the place.

Tagore once said that aggressive nationalism narrows the mind of people, which is in fact very true. He said that he loved the soil in which he was born and felt a sense of duty towards this soil. And on my own, as Syed Shamsul Haq, I try to find out answers to these questions — why I am here? Who am I? What am I doing here and what is my purpose of being here?

I think it high time now in 1992 before it is too late to try to define our culture, make clear what our set of symbols are, understand that Islam or any other religion are not the



Syed Shamsul Haq

cardinal element of one's culture, but only a component of the culture as a whole.

The four major pillars on which our country was founded — secularism, equality of man, socialism and nationalism (of course by nationalism) I mean patriotic nationalism — have become a target of the vested quarters.

DS: How would you really define our nationalism in 1992?

SSH: I am a Bengalee. I share a long heritage of Bengalee nationalism, culture or whatever have been achieved till now. In painting, sculpture, architecture and history starting from the days of Charja Pada till now, all of which are a part of us, we have inherited this through the ages.

Today we have a country, a nation, nation does not only mean a piece of land, a national anthem, a parliament and a few political leaders. Nation means much more than that, it's scope and its horizon explain much more than that.

Once again I quote Rabindranath here, because I consider him as one of the greatest Bengalee men who had ever lived. Tagore said in one of his books *Pathi Chinta* that the land is not anything. Soil is not the nation, but it is the people who make a nation and I think that it is now the duty of writers and journalists to nurture these people who will make a real nation out of this soil. Of course among writers I have included the whole section of creative people.

DS: You mentioned that we are the inheritors of a collective experience. But how does our experience differ to that of our West Bengal counterparts?

SSH: Differences in political experience, social experience and economic experience separates one land from the other even if the language is same. Only affinity being language, has never been a criterion adequate enough, to combine these two parts of Bengal together. Our social-political atmosphere had always moulded our thoughts in a different way. Constantly living under martial laws and autocratic regimes have definitely influenced the thoughts of numerous creative personalities of this region. But people who live in West Bengal

had to work in night shifts, at four o'clock in the morning I came out and I was greatly shocked to see an army tank placed near Kaoranbazar, where at present Hotel Sonargaon is situated. This was the first time, out side photographs or cinema screen, I saw a tank physically present in front of me. There was a couple of GIs there who ordered me to clear off at once.

I came to my house and later in the day heard that the parliament had been dissolved. Iskander Mirza had taken over, and on October 27, Ayub Khan over.

Then there was a great movement in '62 on question of food and everything. I myself from the top of Provincial Library Building saw men killed in the streets by armed forces. During the war in 1965 I was politically bit confused.

But the later development of our national history helped me in my evolution. During the war of 1965 and Sheikh Mujib's placing of Six Point programme I really failed to understand the crux of the situation. But gradually during the days of '69 I began to realise the situation and it was a vital metamorphosis for me, because it had led my thoughts to a very positive stream.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was convicted at the Agartala conspiracy trial. Today the case which has been filed against 24 of us who participated in the public trial of Golam Azam accused us of waging war against the state. Is Golam Azam the state?

The irony is that everyone knows who the real conspirators are — Golam Azams or we?

It demanded at lot of time from '52 to '92. I took time. I think that I am every gradually coming to such a stage from where I can contribute something worth-while to my nation and people as a creative writer.

I think I am advancing to such a position from where I can contribute to my nation culturally and politically.

But I do not 'belong' to any political party. I want to be free as a writer. Because if I want to praise you as a political leader I shall have to be a free man to praise you. If I want to criticize you, I shall not do that as being your enemy, but rather being your friend.

I do not belong to any political party. But as Tagore said, "It is not the soil that makes nation, it is the people". As I care for these people who make our nation I took a political step and participated in the People's Court trial of Golam Azam without any party affiliation what so ever.

Because I never want to be used as a political pawn, and I have been careful so far, because I never really had political experience at large. I believe that there was an obvious mis-interpretation of the government of this public trial, it was actually a gathering who expressed their public opinion or verdict. With all humbleness, I would like to say that I am the only creative personality in the list of 24 person accused. Creative in the sense that I am a creative writer. Others come from various different lines of profession.

DS: We are interested in knowing from you as a leading writer and dramatist your perception of what we have done in the field of literature in the last 20 years since 1971. Have we not achieved much, if not why? And if we have achieved what are the specific areas of achievement?

SSH: I have been writing over four decades. So I am familiar with at least three generations of writers, and very closely since 1971.

I am a poet, playwright and a novelist myself. But since '71 subject matter or creative literature has entered a narrower field. They have dealt with our struggle for freedom or Mukti Juddha, Razakars and social problems, but more interesting and intriguing sides of human psychology and essential

conscious of man which is a very ripe subject for modern literature is hardly dealt with.

It has become a trend fashion with many writers, including a few major writer, to deal with the subject of our struggle for freedom or Razakar problem. Any prolific writer has at least two or three publications on these topics. These common topics are more favourite with fiction writers. Any writer who has not yet written a book on The war of Liberation or 'Razakar' feels that he is still lacking in qualification to join the 'patriotic club'.

To tell you the truth since '71 there have been hundreds of books on Mukti Juddha but very few of them can stand the test of time. As a writer, I write when I really feel an urge to write. But I refrain myself from over burdening my readers with a lot of rubbish in the more of patriotic feelings.

So I think our subject for writing has become very limited. Instinctive human traits, such as love, jealousy or filial feeling etc. can very well be a grand subject matter for any kind of writing.

One of the great directors of West Bengal once said that "We would have been independent long ago if half the revolution which shook the stage had taken place in the streets." And if we think that by using these narrow subjects in our literature we are helping our nation then we are greatly mistaken.

Fiction I think, is a journalism of creative order. One novel should the highest form of creative journalism about the age. Mrinal Sen, the great film director from India, once while having dinner with me at my residence, agreed with me that we are failing to induce adequate hatred into our reader by using these sensitive issues so often.

In the field of poetry I think there has been 50 or more poems written on Nur Hossain alone, who died as a mark of protest during the days of anti-Ershad demonstration. It seemed that anyone who could lay a hand on a pen was prepared to write about Nur Hussain. I think we should have tried to preserve the essence of the youth and uphold the values for which he had laid down his life.

DS: But would not you say that writing on such subjects can be possible from genuine feelings? If I am affected by loss of my near and dear ones, if I have travelled through the same experiences of my characters in the novel or poetry, isn't my emotion bound to be genuine and my creation read worthy?

SSH: You see, as I have said subjects like this have become popular fashion with most of the writers, if not the major ones. One thing you cannot deny is that one can never write about subjects like this

If you cannot cultivate human values in literature, then you won't get a Razakar-free country, because the essential human values won't be there'

Again the jaws of VCR have taken a heavy toll on local Bangla film. The producers are left with very little choice but to compete with their commercial Bombay counterparts. What I think about our audience here is that, people are frustrated. There hopes after '71 have virtually come to nothing. So they want a momentary escape from the mundane realities of life. So they go for commercial films. But there has been some good and positive contribution in short films I am opposed to the idea of calling it short film. I call it free length film. It is an alternate movement which was supposed to have happened in feature films.

Actually every creative endeavour is divided into two distinct categories — entertaining and deductive. Not only in Bangladesh but all over the world there are these two types. Even in England and America there are many paperbacks which you might read in the sub-way then throw it away in the bin. But the difference is that any best-seller there would not claim to belong to the mainstream literature or literary pursuit, as in our country it happens quite often.

Television has always been a government controlled medium and I am quite familiar with its do's and don'ts. I remember that about three years ago one of my programmes was cancelled just because I used 'Bengalee' instead of 'Bangladesh'. When I go abroad and fill in my embarkation card, I always write that I am a citizen of Bangladesh. I think the word Bangladesh is a misnomer. Of course, this is my own point of view.

DS: Will you not say that there are not even one or two great works on the subject of Liberation War in fiction or in any non-fictional work?

SSH: Second World War ended in 1945 and now it is 1992 but critics think that Norman Mailer's *Naked in the Bed* is still one of the best pieces ever written on World War II. This book has simply weathered away more than 30 years which is not a great amount of time for a nation. In my play *Nurul Deen* Shara Jeeban Nurul Deen is a peasant leader who upholds the people of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Kuchibihar in 1783 against British rule and 'mahajans' and berynas. He was forgotten totally. In 1983 I wrote a play about him which was staged by 'Nagorik' theatre group.

A few days ago I saw someone write that for 200 years we have passed heroes like Nurul Deen and Titumeer ... and I was really proud. For 200 years Nurul Deen was forgotten. So you see if we can wait for Nurul Deen for 200 years then why cannot we wait another 50 years for good literature on 1971?

It is not that people are not trying to write on our war of liberation and not all of them are bad either, but yet I think it would take time before we write something which can really stand the test of time.

I believe that this will be possible by the generation of creative personalities who are now young and was born just



'As I care for the people who make our nation, I took a political step and participated in the People's Court trial of Golam Azam'



ucts of this period, I call them "Children of '52". Actually we found a sense of direction during this time.

Recently I wrote a documentary play on the language movement which was staged at the Central Shahed Minar on February 18 this year and it is totally a documentary play in every respect. I collected my materials from political resolutions of the time, pamphlets, speeches as recorded from newspapers, editorials and even from the proceedings of the legislative assembly.

I was really amazed to see nearly five thousand people spell bound for nearly one and a half hour. I could only identify one reason behind their undivided attention and interest.

Most people only knew that in 1952 student fought for establishing their demand of Bengali as one of the state languages and that they laid down their precious lives for this demand. This is as far as most people's knowledge goes regarding the Language

Actually it became a vital question to us whether we were Bengalee-Muslim or Muslim-Bengalee. We decided that we were Bengalee first and then Muslims.

Because, as you know culture is a set of symbols. February 21 means nothing to many other countries, but it bears an immense symbolic value for our people. Nineteen seventy-one can mean just a set of numbers to any other country, but to the citizens of Bangladesh these numbers make the history of our nation.

I believe that one's culture is formed by a set of symbols. What we wanted to do after our independence was that we tried to identify these vital symbols. The symbols which make us Bengalee people.

When we consider religion in this evolution of culture, I believe that it is a major element, but not the only element in the growth of our culture.

A phrase that has now become popular with many people now a days is 'Islami-culture'. I do not think that there

out of the cloud or from mere detached necessity. One has to be very committed and hard working to write anything worthwhile on chosen subjects like that.

DS: We do not seem to have enough feature films and TV serials on the subject of our Liberation War. Do you think that the lack of quality literary products discourages film makers to make films on such issues?

SSH: Even though I am not a film producer myself I have seen that producers are not very enthusiastic about subjects such as war of independence or movement of the people. So they are least interested to throw away their money on matters such as these.

Most of the investors in the film line feel happy to believe that they were much happier during the rule of Pakistan. Another thing is that any investor would want his money back in surplus.

after the independence of Bangladesh. This will be possible because they are learning to grow up in a soil which is independent and free. So they will be the one's to stir the stillness of the atmosphere in which we constantly feel trapped, that I firmly believe.

We say that after 1971 if any medium of creative art really flourished that is drama or stage play. I have a theory about this. I believe no nation which is under the yoke of officialdom can produce quality plays. You need a free atmosphere to create quality plays. Mahila Shamiti stage which has now become the centre of theatrical performances existed in the pre independence Bangladesh. Everything was there for a theatre to operate, but what was greatly lacked was the spirit.

I believe that theatre demands promptness, it does not wait a century to be discovered. Poetry may wait, novels may wait for the ultimate result but drama ceased to wait.

(continued on page 11)