

CREATIVE WRITING

A first in Bangladesh

Ziaul Karim gets some insights from the internationally acclaimed poet, Sudeep Sen, who recently curated and directed the first English-language creative writing workshop in Bangladesh.



Workshop in progress



Budding poets learning the aspects of prosody



Young poets find a solid platform in The British Council Creative Writing Workshop

Ziaul Karim: What was the essential idea behind holding such a workshop?

Sudeep Sen: The British Council creative writing workshop was specifically designed for emerging young poets who were looking for a grounding in the basics of writing and for an intense reading of their own work.

The workshop looked at new work and work-in-progress of the selected participants. Aspects of prosody - metre, rhythm, rhyme, structure -- was discussed, along with line-by-line analysis, critical thinking, and notes on revision and rewriting. Participants were encouraged to write extensively and read on a variety of subjects, the principal being that to be a good writer one needs to be a good reader first.

ZK: Was the three-day duration of the workshop adequate for what you wanted to achieve? Tell us about your experience in the workshop? Was the interaction with the aspiring poets in any way inspiring for you too?

SS: It was certainly a good platform or starting point for the interested participants to get themselves going. We managed to pack in an enormous amount of stuff during the three-day period. The participants -- my girls and boys as I affectionately call them -- worked diligently and enthusiastically. It was as much due to their enterprise as my own, where the secret of this workshop's enormous success lay. And how can you go wrong with such a great bunch of young writers ready to explore and learn. I was very pleased and moved by their responses and commitment. Yes, and inspired too.

ZK: Given the opportunity, would you be interested to hold similar workshops like this in future?

SS: Absolutely, I would be delighted. This

one was so immensely pleasurable. What a wonderful batch of young gifted writers I had this time. I look forward to following their growth as writers. They (and other people like themselves) are really the future of the slowly emerging Bangladeshi writing in English.

Interestingly, they have already formed a writing club called '17BC', which meets on the 17th of every month, the first meeting in fact being this very evening! Not only will this be a forum to discuss theirs and other writers' works, but they plan to start a literary and arts magazine too. The club's logo is a 'lizard', the mute 18th member present during the time of the workshop. Of course, the name '17BC' stems from the '17' members who first met at the British Council ('BC'), but more interestingly, it alludes to a fictitious ancient group of poets -- a live poets' society -- dating back to 17th century 'BC'. All this of course is a private joke for the core group. But on a more serious note, I think they all deserve our support in every possible way.

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I feel that a follow-up workshop by The British Council would be very useful for this group, after all this one was really like a crash course in poetry writing. Just as my student writers got terribly excited and productive, it was time to wind up. But those are the constraints of the real world.

However, a private workshop is being organised, by a Dhaka-based book club on Saturday April 21, 2011. Anyone interested in participating ought to contact via email -- kelly@bangla.net -- for more information and reserve a space as soon as possible to avoid disappointment.

ZK: What should our young poets do to have



The curator and director: Sudeep Sen

international exposures?

SS: They really ought to send their work out to various magazines and journals, both here and elsewhere. The advantage for English-language writers is that the whole world of publications are open to them. There are no barriers. All you need is a clean typewritten script of your poems, a covering letter, an envelope, and sufficient postage stamps to send them.

ZK: What is your advice to the budding poets who want to write in English?

SS: To read voraciously other good writer's work's and immersing themselves in their work. One cannot possibly write in a vacuum. To be a good writer, as I said before, one needs to be a good reader first. Beyond that, I would urge them to just write, write like a person possessed. Eventually, a lot of good material will arise out of that process,

and they will learn from the sheer discipline that this endeavour involves.

ZK: Did you write anything while conducting the workshop?

SS: No, not creatively. The entire workshop programme was just too packed. I was totally immersed in the participant's work. Really, I felt jealous of the good writing the poets were producing. There were times I wanted to be in their shoes and just write myself.

ZK: Are you working on any new writing project now?

SS: Quite a few, actually. The biggest one, *Bangladesh: Personal Vignettes*, is a coffee-table four-colour book, that will include text by me, photographs by a young talented Bangladeshi photographer Tanvir Fattah, and the book will be designed by a long-time American resident of Dhaka, Kelley Lynch who currently designs the *British Council Quarterly* magazine. This is due to appear by the end of this year. Besides that, my own new book of poems titled, *Quartet*, is due out soon. The Bangladesh edition of both these titles will appear through University Press Limited (UPL).

Two of my long-poem sequences -- *Mount Vesuvius*, and, *BodyText* -- are going to be adapted for stage as a multi-lingual multi-media play by Dhaka's Centre of Asian Theatre (CAT) during the winter of 2011/2012.

A compact disc, tentatively titled *Diptych*, containing readings by me of my English poems, and their Bengali translations read by Aminur Rahman, Asaduzzaman Noor, Kazi Arif and Progya Laboni, with specially composed music will be produced later this year by The Bengal Foundation. This project is in part inspired by the overwhelming

response to my latest book -- *A Blank Letter -- Ekti Khali Chithi* -- brought out by The Indian High Commission last year. So, as you can gather, it is a rather chockered, creatively-ferocious time ahead.

But more appropriately for the purposes of this interview, it would interest everyone to know, that the last phase of the creative writing workshop that was titled 'From Inspiration to Publication', is the actual publication of the very first English-language poetry anthology by Bangladeshi writers.

The book titled, *Modern Bangladeshi Poetry in English*, will be brought out by The British Council in association with UPL. Not only will this book include substantial selections by the participating workshop poets, but it will include historical background and devote some space to the pioneering senior English-language poets of the country like Kaiser Haq (a guest speaker at this workshop itself), Farida Majid, Feroze Ahmed-ud-din, Razia Khan Amin, Sanjib Datta, and some others, those who inadvertently provided a foundation for the current generation of poets.

The book would be a landmark anthology (like staging of the workshop itself), as it will be the first book-length collection of poetry of its kind from this region, both nationally and internationally. This anthology would be of invaluable interest to both students and academics, but more importantly, a great source-book for general lovers of poetry, literature, and new writing.

POEMS

A Portfolio of selected '17BC' Poets: edited by Sudeep Sen

KASHFY KABIR
Student, North South University
Leaning on your Axis

Wings out-stretched --
I lean on wind's shoulders
like an acrobat. I gyrate,

soar like an eagle
circling on your axis.
All my dreams rush

into its own turbulence
conjured up by my wings.
My life's tiny miracles

all build, blossom
like a collage
on wind's wide canvas.

I revolve on
my footsteps, paving
a path amid the clouds.

I circle around
the cosmos, forever
leaning on your axis.

ABAK HUSSAIN
Student, Mastermind School
Business

Give me money --
I'll give you the moon.

An Ocean of Night

An ocean of night --
I can't see light --
I have to fade away

ZAIN OMARALI
Student, Sunbeam School
Urban Horizon

Brick-blocks, whitewashed --
rise from the dark's edge,
speckled motes of blurred light.

Car horns blare, the sun sets,
and through the night-sky
a single airplane flies.

Birds encircle
the hazy silhouette --
casting high-rise dreams.

FARHANA FARID
Student, Dhaka University
Through the Eyes of a Cuck

Amber golden moon --
like a sliced lucent lemon.
Garnish -- berry juice.

Reality Stares Back

Busy traffic-isle --
A dusty man stands, holding
some withered garlands.

MUHAMMAD SAIFUL ISLAM
Student, Dhaka University
Dream

Drops of red -- black red, liquid red
gather and grow to create history,
transfusing millions, resisting bullets
and batons. Sun swells the blood-pool
on my grass-green canvas.
Euphoria defies faith, waking sanity.
Finally, the red itself regrets, haunts.
Clouded heads vomit -- a distorted
landscape, where all sacrifice mocks.

NOYONIMA HASSAN
Student, South Breeze School
Do You Know Me?

Do you know me?
I'm the Mad Maringo of Louisiana.
I'm ugly, I'm rotten, I'm hungry.

Feed me, child -- come, feed me now.
I'm waiting, I won't leave.
Why are you staring at me?

Do I appear funny to you?
Speak, you petty gullible little thing!
I'm an irascible man, so watch out!

Come now, child.
You know I wouldn't hurt you.
All I can do is to bang against
this pathetic grill that separates us.

Do I detect terror in your eyes?
Fear is slapped on your little face.
Fine, then. I'm Napoleon Bonaparte.

I conquered the world with my little ship,
And now, I've stopped here
and I want food. Go! Shoo! Get food.

I'm an immemorial imprecator,
So be warned. What? You still choose
to stare at the immortal devil
with those bursting goggled-eyes?

Is it my yellow-stained teeth
that has caught your speechless attention?
Oh, so you choose to run away.
Am I too impetuous for you?

I'm going to settle under your doorstep
till my feast arrives. I'll wait, I won't leave.
You know me -- I'm the Mad Maringo.
And I say to you: "Feed me now"

SAMEEN ELAHI
Student, Mastermind School
A Street Girl

The night deepened further.
I gently lowered my head on the pavement,
my arms trying to ward off the cold.
A fierce tremour gripped my body,

fear crept closer, whispering unpleasant things;
stirring ugly thoughts which I fought to silence

with my dreams - dreams of a would-be life,
if I were born on life's other side.

Pain shot through my body
shoving aside my fantasies, thrusting
reality,
bringing to the surface bitter thoughts.

My tear-filled eyes searched the sky
hoping for something to happen.
I pleaded with God to grant me one
dream --

one that would end my misery, loneliness.
Now, if only, He would listen

GRAHAM THOMAS
Teacher, Grace International School
Perception

On a dark, drab drape
a thousand splashes of light;
bursts of bright colour
on an expansive
canvas of night.

On a rainbow-hued screen
multitude of marks of grey;
shadows experienced
on the bold, broad
canvas of day.

On whichever canvas,
does it mean the same?
Is it just perception
either colours in the night
or shadows in the day?

What is life?
Breakfast, lunch, dinner --
with a cup of tea, perhaps,
like a cool shower.

What is life?
A dream, dreamt last night
like never-ending water
in the ocean.

What is life?
Is it a mystery, a puzzle,
a piece missing among the stars
that I look for, forever?

What is life?
A world full of words --
most of the time
it doesn't make sense.

AASHA MEHREEN KHAN
Magazine Editor, The Daily Star
Fade Out

It is as if you were dead --
completely gone from reality,
no longer within my reach.

Assorted fetters
keep me at its furthest end.
Bits and pieces, fading --

a once-brilliant jigsaw puzzle
remains unfinished,
neglected in my mind's corner.

They erase themselves,
day by day, the possibility of
someday, somewhere.

Small, narrow alley -- crude,
high brick-walls on either side.
Dome of a mosque juts in distant view.
There were wagon-trails on mud,
and on either side of the alley --
garbage, water, and dirt.

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My mother and I walked through them,
our heads under dupattas.

We reached a whitewashed building,
stopped, stared up at it in awe --
There, a realization surged through me.

Quietly, we went into the room --
in the middle -- the mazaar -- and on it
lay a gold-trimmed green velvet cloth,
and fresh flowers. We folded our hands,
shut our eyes in prayer --

I thought, how so many centuries ago,
Diwan Dada came to this country
to establish traditions, to teach customs
that now tie our family together.

I unclasped my hands,
opened my eyes,
and whispered into the still air --
"Thank you, Diwan Dada."

INSHIRAH SAKHAWAT
Student, Scholastica School
Mental

As shadows footstep the graveyard, soft
blue liquid-threads trickle down her
lashes.

She buns her hair, sunlight --
lifts her eyes to the sky,
scoops moon-water onto her hands,
and drinks the cold tasteless liquid

that wraps around her fingers.
She sips this off her wrists, and slowly
her body flowers with silver foil;
until the shifting blue threads freeze,
and in her hair, sunlight no longer
streaks

as she floats -- a cold statue in the sky --
moved by disapproving winds.
When the last drop of her tear freezes,
streaks of heaven crayon the shadows,
and

the graveyard is kissed with her last lash.