

Paving the Way....

Dr. Muhammad Zafar Iqbal discusses children's literature and reading habits

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Writing for the harshest of critics

KARIM WAHEED

When one considers Bangladeshi literature for children and adolescents as well as science fiction, the first name that comes up is Dr. Muhammad Zafar Iqbal. Dr. Iqbal, a physicist and a professor at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, however, says that when he started writing, he had no intention "to be recognised as a writer."

"My father encouraged me and my siblings to write when we were children. Pretty much all of us (Dr. Iqbal's elder brother Humayun Ahmed is a living legend in the literary circuit; younger brother Ahsan Habib is a popular cartoonist and writer as well) can write," he says.

Why particularly children's literature? "Because, honestly, I don't enjoy writing for adults. Whenever I've written for a more mature readership, it was invariably at the request of editors of newspapers or magazines" -- Dr. Iqbal's response.

"The issue that has always perturbed me is that our renowned writers don't seem keen on writing for youngsters. Perhaps they are put off by the possibility of being labelled 'Shishu Shahittik'," he adds.

What inspired him to pursue writing seriously? "When I was a university student I wrote a book called 'Haatkata Robin'. I moved to the US and was working on my Ph.D. I didn't think I had a significant number of readers at that time (mid '70s).

"In the US, I met Jahanara Imam and when I was trying to introduce myself, she said that she knew me and that she was an avid reader of my science fiction. That encouraged me to take writing seriously," Dr. Iqbal recalls.

Has it been a rewarding experience? "Very" is the litterateur's ready answer. "My readers are the harshest critics possible, not in a negative way of course," Dr. Iqbal smilingly says. "Children are very blunt. They can be ruthless in that sense. If they don't like something, they'll let you know right away without pretence. This keeps me grounded and helps me remain committed and sincere to both my readership and writing."

Many point out that ethics and Liberation War are recurring subjects in his works. Dr. Iqbal's response: "Patriotism or pro-Liberation War values are not forcefully incorporated into my writing. They emerge as extensions of my personality."

"Besides, I don't consider my young

readers to be naive, contrary to what many adults believe. Just because children don't or can't communicate articulately with the adults doesn't mean they don't understand the complexities of life."

A member of the committee that recently made recommendations for the national education policy, Dr. Iqbal points out the need to have libraries in every school. "Apart from a small percentage of youngsters whose parents can afford to buy them books, most children in our country have no option for developing a reading habit. Most schools don't have a functional library."

He elaborates on the role of TV as well. "TV channels, in my opinion, are not playing a positive role in the development of young minds. Hindi TV serials won't broaden their horizons. The random formula variety show with a group song and recitation obviously won't get any audience. Every Eid hundreds of plays, films and shows are produced. How many of them are for children and adolescents? Out of those, there's probably just one film or play -- for youngsters -- by Morshedul Islam. Is that enough?"

"It's high time our future nation-builders got the focus they deserve."

Propagating a cultural movement through 'Shadhona'

In conversation with Lubna Mariam

Looks like there's no stopping cultural organisation Shadhona. On the brink of 2010, its go-getting general secretary Lubna Mariam spoke to Kavita about Shadhona's successes, obstacles it has had to confront and future directions. Here's what she had to say:

Could you tell us about Shadhona's achievements in the year gone by?

Lubna: 2009 has been a landmark year for Shadhona due to the launching of Shadhona's Cultural Circle -- a membership-based network of music lovers -- on June 26, 2009 and the inaugural of "Nupur Beje Jaye" -- a bi-monthly ticketed dance performance -- both of which, we are certain, will widen the base of audiences who will support the performing arts. One of the most difficult tasks of any art facilitator is sourcing funds. With a yearly contribution of only Taka 1000 per year from each member, we are being able to arrange monthly recitals of dance and music. Ticketed performances, too, help defray expenses. With these funds, Shadhona's main target is to support the artistes, especially the young ones, by giving them a regular platform to perform.

Shadhona has also organised workshops, especially a well-appreciated "Contemporary Dance Workshop" by Dr. Urmimala Sarkar of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi; commissioned productions such as the joint Indo-Bangla production of Simon Zakaria's mono-drama "Sitar Agniporikha" performed by Delhi-based actor Avereer Chaurey, and supported a theatrical production of "Gazi Kalu Chompaboti" by the Department of Theatre of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA).

We are happy to be working with

BSA because we believe that government and non-government cooperation in any field has the most lasting and far-reaching impact. Shadhona has also facilitated the participation of indigenous narrative theatre, "Padmar Nachon" of Kushtia, at the Second SAARC Folklore Festival in Chandigarh. Furthermore, we have performed at Durga Puja festivities in Delhi this September, at ICCR (Kolkata), Visva Bharati (Shantiniketan) and at the Uday Shankar Dance Festival organised by the West Bengal Government in Kolkata.

What has Shadhona done to promote young dancers, actors and directors?

Lubna: Bangladesh is a treasure-trove of young and talented performers, both in the urban arts and indigenous theatre. For 2010 we have already commissioned the production of two dance-dramas -- Syed Shamsul Haq's "Chompaboti" by Samina Hussain Prema, and Simon Zakaria's "Bodhi Drum" by Warda Rihab. For "Chompaboti", based on a folk-narrative, we have made a tremendous effort to strengthen folk dance by organising workshops and for "Bodhi Drum" a Buddhist narrative, we are working with dancers from Nepal. This has brought about a very exciting project on "Charya-Nriya" which links ancient Bangladesh and Nepal.

In the indigenous milieu, we are on the brink of launching a countrywide project to strengthen "Lathikhela", the Bangladeshi martial art, which includes dance, with the help of AKTEL and Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.

How far has the organisation been able to achieve its objectives? What

progress has there been on building South Asian cooperation on the cultural front?

Lubna: Besides our work with music and dance, our trustee Sadaf Saaz is about to launch an English theatrical group. We are a bit disappointed that our efforts to organise an annual music festival is just not materialising. The main obstacle is funding and government permissions for international artistes. But we have resolved to overcome all this in 2010.

Shadhona's objective is also to train young art-entrepreneurs to take over this work of facilitating and supporting the arts. We are very hopeful. Some young members of Shadhona Cultural Circle are already taking initiatives: among them Mehedi Hasan Shoibal, Jaan-e Alam, Hena Afrose and Mikhail Islam.

As I have mentioned earlier, we are working with artistes in India and Nepal, but this is project-based. At some point we would like to come up with a few over-arching South Asian projects.

To what extent has Shadhona been able to integrate culturally with countries outside South Asia?

Lubna: We haven't been able to connect with the world of arts beyond South Asia. I think we need to do much more work to strengthen our base before we do that. Personally, I am now the Chair of the World Dance Alliance-Bangladesh, which is part of a global network of dancers. I hope with the help of this organisation Bangladeshi dancers can showcase their dance internationally.

What obstacles have there been along the way?

Lubna: Funding, of course. We

remain undyingly grateful to our corporate sponsors such as HSBC, GMG Airlines, AKTEL, Olympic Industries Ltd, Charuta Pvt Ltd, Unilever, Standard Chartered Bank and many more. I wish we had a permanent corpus and did not have to run around for funding on an ad-hoc basis. Too much time and energy is expended on this alone. My personal dream is to start a micro-credit organisation only for the arts and artistes.

What is the present cultural scenario like in Bangladesh?

Lubna: Absolutely vibrant! And the magic is that there is so much happening in spite of the fact that there is no major institutional support. I travel all over rural Bangladesh and find so much theatre, music and dance being supported by the community alone -- lathi khela, Baul songs, narrative theatre and so much more. The quality of dance, music and theatre is extraordinary. We still need to work on improving classical vocal and instrumental skills though.

My own organisation, "Kolpotaru" -- a dance, theatre, fine arts and music school, is organising regular workshops on Indian classical vocal music by Shubhra Guha of Kolkata. We need more such initiatives. We often forget that creation of human resource is the building block of all creative edifices.

It'll happen. I am an optimist. We must have the courage to dream big.

What are Shadhona's goals for 2010?

Lubna: Besides our dreams for more music, dance and theatre, we want to expand our membership-based network, encourage younger audiences to support the arts and put more effort into documentation.



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Momtaz: The uncrowned queen of Bangladeshi folk music

NUSRAT JAHAN PRITOM

This is the 21st century; under the label of globalisation, westernisation has crept in. One would think that the younger generation is fast losing old values and traditions that also include music. Fortunately, folk music is ingrained in the air and soil of this country and has lost none of its appeal. Today people are not travelling on ox-carts for miles to listen to live performances but Bangladeshi folk songs have found their place in iPods, computer hard drives and MP3 players alongside their global counterparts. And when one considers Bangla folk, the name Momtaz comes to the

fore. Momtaz's latest album "Roshor Kotha" was out this year and has been a hit with generations X, Y and Z.

"Since childhood, I had only one niyat (intention) and that is whatever I'd do, I'd do it well, or I'd at least try my level best," says Momtaz.

How was the year 2009 for her? "It went really auspicious -- shows, albums, programmes here and abroad," the crooner says. Momtaz is also one of the judges on the show "Shah Cement Nirman Taroka".

What does she have to say about remixes of popular folk songs? "We might think that all or majority of

young people listen to Hindi or western music but it's not like that; they also listen to Bangla folk music. In fact the audience of folk songs is growing. I know this because I've seen the presence of hip youngsters at my shows. Sure, they have their way of appreciating music and remixes are very popular among them. What's important is that the lyrics and the sur (tune) are intact. When that is in check, what's the problem with remixing or rearranging?"

There is another aspect of Momtaz that most people aren't familiar with, and that is her philanthropic projects. Other than the fact that she is a renowned singer and a member of the parliament,

Momtaz is committed to social work. There's Momtaz Eye Hospital in Manikganj. Then there's another eye hospital for children.

"In 2010 I plan to do something for the hearing-impaired," the artiste says.

Music, social work, representing people in the parliament, Momtaz got it all covered. But her focus remains on music, as she says, "The peace and contentment a musician gives to people is also a type of service. Musicians love people and people love them back. Through their music, they always remain with the listeners."

The writer is a freelance contributor.

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