IN CONVERSATION

'Writing becomes my only passion . . .'

Anwara Syed Haq is a prominent writer in the realm of Bangla literature. She began writing short stories in her teens. This year she won the Bangla Academy Shahitya Puroshkar for her outstanding contributions in the literary world. She was born in 1940 in Jessore, where she spent her adolescent years. She obtained her MBBS degree in 1965 and in 1973 went to the United Kingdom for higher education. She returned home in 1982. She has since then worked at a number of institutions, among which are Bangladesh Biman, Dhaka Medical College and BIRDEM. Even though she works professionally as a psychiatrist, her presence in the literary arena has always been very pronounced. So far she has written more than fifty books. She has been awarded the Annanya Shahitya Puroshkar, Agrani Bank Puroshkar, Michael Madhushudhon Puroshkar and Shishu Academy Puroshkar, besides a host of others.

Recently the writers' group *Gantha*, initiated by Prof Niaz Zaman, accorded a reception to the eminent writer. On the occasion, **Jackie Kabir** talked to her about her writing career.

Jackie Kabir: We know you have two very prominent identities --- one a writer, the other a psychiatrist. Is there any conflict between the two?

Anwara Syed Haq: There is of course a delineation. They are totally two different terrains. But I deal with it very consciously. When I do my work as a person of science I am totally devoted to science; while I write I totally devote myself to my writing. A person has many different roles in life. We all perform these different roles by transforming ourselves at every necessary interval. We are in fact compartmentalized and we act according to those compartments and portray ourselves as such while dealing with different situations. I play the role of a writer, a mother, a wife and a physician. There are different domains for all of the roles. The patients I deal with are mentally unwell and the people living around me are mentally sound. But I always find a connection, a channel between the two. A mentally sound person may become unwell in no time and vice versa. So there is no conflict as far as I am concerned.

JK: You have just mentioned the many different roles you have to play. So how do you find the time to write?

ASH: I take writing as a habitual thing, like eating, sleeping and all. Whenever people ask me this question I say that a person must take up writing in her daily routine. I am saying 'her' because there are all women writers here. You must remember that if you want to write then you must read a lot. Much more than you write. A writer must find her time for both. Once Pablo Neruda was asked how he found the time to write when he worked as an ambassador for Chile. He answered that he was a full time poet and a part time ambassador. I would also like to mention here that I am a part time physician and a full time writer. I forget that I am a physician when I write. Writing becomes my only passion.

JK: I would say that it's a very big sacrifice . . .

ASH: You see, I decline offers to come on television as a doctor. But if it's a literary program then I always accept it. It is because I have always wanted to be a writer since my childhood. But somehow I got deviated from my goal and became a physician. I think I identify with my writer self more than I do with my other profession. I have advised the other writers, like Mohit Kamal and Zakir Talukder, to shun their profession as physicians if they

really want to become writers.

JK: How do you choose your subjects?

ASH: My subjects are all around me. I go to the slums, to the brothels and collect the ingredients for my stories. I went to the central jail a couple of years back. My patients are the biggest subjects of my writing. I spend so much time with my patients that they get annoyed and seek my permission to leave sometimes.

You collect your materials all the time. Even the man standing behind the counter may be your subject. People who walk around you could be your subject. I study people who could at some point become the ingredients for my writing.

JK: I think then we can say that your two professions complement each other. Am I right?

ASH: I always have my eyes and ears open for collecting raw materials for my writing. One must always collect them at all times. I sometimes sit with girls who get arrested by the police. They warn me that even I may get arrested. But I really don't mind. I will have a new experience if I get arrested.

JK: We know that you have already written more than fifty books. Is there any book among these that you like the best?

ASH: You must remember that when a writer is creating something she is not at peace. Even the most interesting things may not hold your attention right then. The moment you finish writing and send the manuscript off to a publisher you tend to forget about it and also feel relieved. Then you start looking for something new to write on, a new theme, new characters and a new setting.

JK: You have mentioned that in order to write one has to read a lot. Have you read a lot of authors? Is there anyone who may have influenced you and your writing?

ASH: No, not even my husband's writing could influence me. I started writing at the age of fourteen and had also been published by then. So I had already entered my literary world by then. When I met him I had already made my niche in the world of writing. I had developed a way of thinking. I met Syed Haq as I liked him as a writer. But in no way has he influenced my writing.

JK: What about Rabindranath Tagore?

ASH: Of course I have read Rabindranath, Manik Bondhopadhyay, Tarashankar and Bankim but I can't say I have been influenced by them. I have tried to develop my own literary style. But, yes, I read a lot. One has to read in order to write.

JK: There are two writers in your family and both are very prominent in their own right. I would like to know if that creates any conflict. Do you discuss your writings?

ASH: Not at all. We don't discuss our writings at all. But, yes, I do seek my husband's help in spellings. I have a problem with Bengali spellings which I have to look up in the dictionary. Why should I waste my time when I have a walking dictionary in my house?

You see, I was educated to be a physician and was away from the language for a long time.

JK: Why were you named Anwara Syed Haq?

ASH: Everybody asks me this question. People say, 'You claim that you are an independent woman, so how come you have a parochial name?' You see, I was named Anwara Begum. I tried to modernize it by adding a 'Chowdhury' to it. But nobody noticed it. After I got married I was lamenting about this. My husband told me that maybe my name was very old fashioned and that's why people didn't notice it. Why didn't I change it to Anwara Syed Haq and see what happened? I did so, without realizing he was making me use his name.

JK: You were awarded this year's Bangla Academy Puroshkar. What is your reaction to that?

ASH: I got the prize, yes, but one must remember it was after writing for so long, towards the end of my career. By then I had already learnt all the tools of the trade, I had earned the confidence of being a good writer. I may not be a great writer but I am a good writer. So the award I got was really coincidental. Even so I am happy to get it.

When my name was announced I was surprised and happy for two reasons. One, the TV cameras started running towards me, which was something new for me. And, two, some young journalists came and asked me about my life, about my writing and wrote down what I said, which also made me happy.

JK: How you evaluate the women writers of our country?

ASH: I am very optimistic about them. There are some writers in this room right now who are very promising. I have faith in them. I would just request them to keep on writing and then, Insha'Allah, one day they will reach their goal.

Jackie Kabir is a writer, critic and reviewer.

POETRY

Enigma

NAHID KHAN

Mamma said you would be my God
Or at least the next best thing.
When Daddy gave away my hand
I was led to believe never to miss him.
Everyone assured how you would be
A friend and just like a brother to me
I could share the laughter and loss
As if you are not the dignified boss.

Time has come and gone . . .
You never proved to be
Anyone else but yourself.
I longed for the familiar souls
As I needed God in confusion.
There was no dad who trembled
To see only a little drop of my tear.
I couldn't find my brother there
To ask a casual chore of many
Or to show how clouds may
Look in the golden ray.
Nor my friend was there
To have a laugh for nothing
Or to accept my mistakes
Without a hint of teasing.

Time will come and go . . .
You won't be someone else
Not that you have any reason to.
You are just yourself
Kind and loving, sharing and caring
In your own classical way.

You are just who you are . . .
Not any God who forgives
Not my dad who loves unconditionally
Nor my brother to share a joke so meaningless
Not my friend who accepts weakness.

You are just who you are--
It would be best only if,
Once and for all to end the enigma,
If no one gave you another name . . .
You are who you are.

Nahid Khan writes from Melbourne, Australia

ESSAY

Of lights going out, of cherry trees . . .

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A friend writes about Mozart. It is his birthday, she tells me. Yes, I remember. I remember too the chaos in which this pre-eminent of composers was buried by his friends. He died young and poor, almost bereft of everything beautiful that life could offer him. Having spent a lifetime, albeit a brief one, showering happiness on the world through his music, it was his fate to be thrown hastily into his grave because a storm threatened to disrupt the last rites. You could say his remains were swiftly deposited in the grave, in unseemly manner. And then his friends moved off.

I looked out the window, at the grey sky, at the leaves swaying in the bitter, cold wind of winter in London. And I remembered. When you reach middle age, there is that certain consciousness in you of the twilight approaching fast, of the reality of the greater part of your life having passed you by. And twilight, in that literal as also figurative sense of the meaning, is a moment for you to go back in time, to the ages as it were, and reflect on the world of men, on the thoughts that have shaped their politics and their literature. When the dark shadows of winter pelt the window panes with their insistence of purpose, you cannot but think back on Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary who on an evening like the one you happen to be passing through, peered through the greying daylight even as the world moved toward war. It was a moment immediately prior to the breaking out of the hostilities that would come to be known as the First World War. Grey intoned, to no one in particular: 'The lights are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.'

You have the stuff of literature here, the imagery of desperation you are liable to associate with Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. And what indeed is literature? It is life as you live from one day to the next. And yet, paradoxically, literature is not life. But it could well translate into the chronicle of the life you lead, of the lives you see rise and crumble around you. Think here of love, of the ardour that comes into it. There was Tennyson for us. He it was who thought it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. As you go crisscrossing the region of English literature, you stumble into truths that may have come barging into your life or your surroundings. William Butler Yeats, in Ireland, did not belong to the Romantic era and yet romanticism drips from his poetry, those that he especially forged in the quiet, sad niches of his soul for Maud Gonne. 'When you are old and grey and full of sleep and nodding by the fire', he tells her, 'take down this book and slowly read, and dream of the soft look your eyes had once and of their shadows deep.'

The sheer poignancy of the poetry cannot be missed here. You stand at that window as the bitter winds howl in the trees and think of the pained beauty that sustains your tortured land across the seas and the mountains. Love, you tell yourself, can spring up in your soul as much for a loved one as for the country that loves you. Ah, yes, it is the country that calls, that called, back in 1971 through all the bravery of its young Mukti Bahini soldiers, through the songs you heard on Shwadhin Bangla Betar.

There was the substance of literature in the songs; and they complemented the pathos of the dying and the almost dying on the fields of battle. In 'bhebo na go maa tomar chhelera harye giyechhe pothe', you spot the sublime in literature. You might then be tempted to hark back to the pains Tolstoy voices in *War and Peace*. You wonder why the beauty of literature cannot make inroads into politics and save the world from the ravages it goes through again and again. To listen to Tagore sing 'O amar desher mati tomar pore thekai matha' is in essence to express gratitude to the spirituality that defines your heritage. In much a similar vein, you hear Iqbal sing, in the silence of a soft evening, 'saare jahan se achha ye Hindostan hamara', and you know how literature can translate into patriotism, how it enriches the sensibilities in you, how a yearning for a lost, once indivisible land can remind you of wounds yet raw and festering.

Literature sharpens the sensibilities. You read Shamsur Rahman and Rafiq Azad and Abul Hasan and Sukanto. "Asader Shirt" gives you a newer dimension in your understanding of literary perspectives. Time was when Nazrul reshaped the literary canvas for us with his songs. He makes you soar, all these decades later, with 'jago onoshon bondhi uthore joto'. And then he causes the heart in you to ripple out in knowledge of the love taking shape inside you with 'amar aponar cheye apon je jon khunji tare aami aponaye'. There is Nirmalendu Goon with his elegies on Bangabandhu, to have you remember the imagery which literature shapes around the great individuals who forge the destiny of a people. Move on and come to Saadat Hasan Manto. The partition of India was a tragedy our parents lived through and continues to be a nagging pain we in our times go through. And Manto gives it a permanence of meaning through his heart-wrenching stories of common men and women, people like you and me, walking through fire and blood, in their attempts to find a sanctuary away from the home which bad politics and worse men have stolen from them.

Which makes you reflect instinctively on the modernity, in that lugubrious sense, that T.S. Eliot brought into poetry in the early years of the twentieth century. *The Wasteland* could be the apocalyptic world you imagine will shape up before you. And Prufrock could be you, in the gathering darkness of your twilight: 'I grow old, I grow old / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled . . .' Pain, as you will have noticed, is the foundation of literature. Nothing that is not sad can be literature. There is nostalgia, there is the ache of not coming by the stars you reached out to touch. Buddhadev Bose, whose place in Bengali literary history lies in his polite refusal to be in the shadow of Rabindranath Tagore and indeed to stay clear of it, gives you nostalgia in his reflections on Purana Paltan, that area in Dhaka where a decisive phase of his boyhood was spent. Read his letters. Read Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* and Isabel Allende's *My Invented Country*. The tales are all about lost countries. They are also about the throbbing way in which those lost countries live on in the hearts of those who do not forget the old fragrances that once wafted along their breezes and their winds.

Pablo Neruda, one of the defining voices of literature in the twentieth century, comes back to you in the way that Chekhov and Dickens do not wish to let go of you. He plods through life, even if he is tired of being a man. And then he cheers himself through causing love to arise in him for the woman who reminds him of cherry trees. Pause awhile and pass through the coruscating charm shining through the song: 'I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees.' And then plant yourself in Barkis' shoes as he passes on, in plaintive fashion and through the boy David Copperfield, the simplicity of love's ardour to Peggotty: 'Barkis is willing.' Gabriel Oak goes in for a more direct approach in his wooing of Bathsheba Everdene in Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

Yes, literature is all. Men who have struggled to free their nations of colonial domination have taken courage from poetry and have then gone on to shape their own literary imaginations. Mao Zedong composed poetry on the peaks of the mountains he crossed in the course of the Long March. Leopold Sedar Senghor led Senegal to freedom and governed it wisely, alongside the profundity of his intellectual reflections. Forget, for a time, Stalin's purges of the 1930s, but remember that he was one man who read voraciously and recalled images and verses and statements in elephantine fashion. Robert Mugabe grew into adulthood reading everything he could lay his hands on. Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's Mwalimu, translated *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* into his native Kiswahili.

In the depths of a descending monsoon dusk in Bangladesh, as the rising winds run riot across your courtyard and all over the ancient cemetery and through the village where life and death have kept faith with each other for generations, it is literature you go back to --- to explain the commotion in the heavens. And you wait for your own tryst with the stars.

Dag Hammarskjoeld put it in perspective, days before he perished in an air crash in Africa in 1961:

"Others have gone before,
Others will follow."

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REFLECTIONS

The desire to hear . . .

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

Looking at the azure-whitish canvas of the skies heralding the season of autumn, one feels crispness in the air subduing the wetness of monsoon, sunlight staying young more or less for the whole day. Then there appears, rather unconsciously in her, an assemblage of emotions evoking the past, relating to the present and looking forward to the future. Not that they all appear at one and the same time, but in the cubicles of her heart they take their turn, oftentimes overlapping. As she ponders, one thing becomes obvious to her --- that in this mental state of hers, she feels a strong desire to hear some sounds, some voices, some music emanating from nature, some others from human voices. She is afraid that since her auditory sense is deprived of much of its yearnings, those in the passage of time could be obliterated.

But that is not to be. She feels a strong desire to hear her parents call her by her nickname, especially her father who would give a little twist to it, making it sound sweeter. She misses her

university teacher's phone call that came once in a while, enquiring of her school and her disabled son's condition. One day she brought her almost to tears when she asked her, very innocently, if her son could call her 'Amma'. Her answer was in the negative. Her teacher apologized for her question, realizing the profound sadness it had caused. Nevertheless, she still yearns to hear her voice on the phone, although she knows the voice is long gone. And, hoping against hope, she fantasizes a desire to hear her son call her 'Amma'. But that is never to be. Human folly along with the impact of the carnage of 1971 caused some losses that remain irreversible. Much of our fate is predestined, she thinks. A *fait accompli*.

She desires to have a quiet life and hear the sounds of silence that she is much deprived of, taking together the societal factors that dominate life today. Rude noises originating from various sources have been corroding the atmosphere in the name of development and modernization. But that is the order of the day, she reflects in her aloneness. If you join it, you survive; if you don't, you are bound to suffer. She suffers. Thus the silence becomes distant to her. At the most, she can relive the silence from her old days in her own created world at those moments only to survive. Since it is a fight against reality, it turns out to be most agonizing to her. Then, to console herself, she delves more into sorrow --- by hearing sad songs. In the velvety, melodious voice of Talat Mahmood, she tries to immerse her own sorrow into an ocean of sorrows. And those two merge. A plateau in the progression of sorrow gives temporary relief by making it numb.

But what she desires most to hear amidst the din all around is a voice oftentimes from a short distance, oftentimes from a long distance, maybe from several thousands of miles away. In her there is an expectancy, filled with eagerness, that oftentimes makes her hear the phone ring even when it does not. Her longing to hear the voice creates an illusion, an auditory illusion for her. And in her rationality, she explains that away as one of her acts as a selfish person because she wishes that voice to materialize for her own sake, for her personal fulfillment, for some solace. She feels ashamed at discovering herself in this state. Nevertheless, she cannot and does not deny her longings. When her desire actualizes, she feels ecstatic. When it does not, she has the shelter of her imagination to embrace her. Her imagination never fails her. It is her defence mechanism when she is faced with a crisis.

She discovers that she can live her life in such a beaconing of hope, of some optimism that exudes from that voice. But, then again, she likes to wait, indeed she waits, to hear that voice more than actually hearing it. To her, waiting does not have an end, however painfully long that might be. But hearing it actually happen ends it. She prefers to keep on moving towards an oasis rather than reaching it. To her, emotional attainment is meaningful when it throbs, when it vibrates rather than when it satiates. Her view of life is atypical. She is different.

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