

An innovator who blends traditions with the new

Leading fashion designer shares her view with *The Daily Star*

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Crowned designer Maheen Khan says she is more of an innovator, a revivalist of Bangladeshi textile and crafts, rather than a successful entrepreneur.

"What I do is not purely commercial. You can see that I am not doing pure business. Instead, I am trying to work and revive our folk art and designs."

"Although, I may qualify for a 'successful entrepreneur', I see myself as more of an innovator and revivalist," she says, the owner of a leading boutique, Mayasir.

"At the same time, I am neither a tailor nor a retailer. I work hard, take time to develop designs and constantly work to make a unique piece."

Khan played a big part in the renaissance of the industry. She revitalised traditional motifs and replicated those on clothes, accessories and jewellery, and is courageous enough to experiment.

She has been blending traditional designs on contemporary materials for the last 20 years.

Starting her career as a designer at Aarong in 1986, she worked there till 2001. In 2001, she started Mayasir at an investment of Tk 15 lakh.

"Now, you can call me a successful entrepreneur, because I survived in the most difficult market of the country for nearly a decade, where I have to compete with imported luxury costumes, accessories and jewellery."

"Every year, we have a steady growth of 30 percent in revenue. In 2009, we achieved 45 percent growth in revenue."

Running a team of nearly 2,500 people in the factory and showroom, she plans to further promote the traditional and Bengal art.

Khan has worked in the textile regions of Bangladesh with jewellers, artisans, metal smiths, potters and many more master craftsmen, and created products that revolutionised and opened new doors for the design industry.

She was also one of the masterminds behind reviving silver jewellery across the country from 1987.

Fashion industry growth

The fashion industry in Bangladesh is growing in numbers, not quality, which is holding the industry back, believes Khan.

"Our fashion industry has not grown as much as it should have in the last 20 years. Instead, the industry has grown fast in terms of number, but not in quality."

She draws a line to clearly differentiate a boutique from a retail outlet. "In our country, people often mix-up these two different ideas. In a true sense, a boutique is meant to develop designs and display its own designed items, while many do not meet these criteria."

"At most times, our local boutiques work more like budget shops and retailers, who get raw materials and designs from different sources, and offer products at competitive prices," she adds.

"They create nothing new."

"Sadly, at times, the quality of their products is as ordinary as the items available at Gausia or New Market," Khan says.

"It's easy for the budget shops to charge lower prices. Many of them are also successful, but the quality of products is questionable."

Khan points to a lack of investment on research and training and development of arts and crafts. These are the reasons behind the poor quality

of the fashion industry, she says.

"A designer wear is an art piece, which would be few in numbers. But the quality has to be extraordinary, the colours must have longevity and the fabric should be comfortable. Most importantly, the design has to be unique."

"Now, there are thousands of boutiques, but sadly, many are just copying ideas from the reputed ones. They invest neither time nor energy to develop their own designs."

Maheen Khan pointed to a lack of experienced, skilled designers, and inadequate exposure behind the slow growth of the industry. "A lack of investment and government support also creates bottlenecks to the pace of growth."

However, Khan is optimistic.

Increased investments -- both from individual entrepreneurs and the government -- on research and development and well exposure would fasten growth of the local fashion industry like Thailand or India, she says.

Several non-government organisations are working on reviving traditional designs, but it also needs attention from entrepreneurs and the government, she adds.

"Investment on age-old art on wood, cane, bamboo and terracotta can bring bigger output."

New dimension in her life

Khan believes she has to reinvent herself every season with a new beginning.

"I have been experimenting with my life. In every 10 years of my life I tried different things. For example, in my latest phase, I initiated a new venture with my friends named Bangladesh Arts Council to introduce our heritage to the new generation."



Maheen Khan

The council will also work as a platform to promote Bengal art that has been neglected for ages, she says.

Khan, a graduate of the Parsons School of Design, USA,

believes hard work is the thing that pays off eventually.

"If I have 10 percent of creativity, the rest 90 percent is my hard work and disciplined steps towards my goal that makes me

a successful person. The bottom-line is, hard work and discipline pays off for every single dream."

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GLOBALISATION

The redistribution of hope

THE ECONOMIST

"HOPE" is one of the most over-used words in public life, up there with "change". Yet it matters enormously. Politicians pay close attention to right-track/wrong-track indicators. Confidence determines whether consumers spend, and so whether companies invest. The "power of positive thinking", as Norman Vincent Peale pointed out, is enormous.

For the past 400 years the West has enjoyed a comparative advantage over the rest of the world when it comes to optimism. Western intellectuals dreamed up the ideas of enlightenment and progress, and Western men of affairs harnessed technology to impose their will on the rest of the world. The Founding Fathers of the United States, who firmly believed that the country they created would be better than any that had come before, offered citizens not just life and liberty but also the pursuit of happiness.

Not that the West was free of appalling brutality. Indeed, the search for Utopia can bring out the worst as well as the best in mankind. But the notion that the human condition was susceptible to continual improvement sat more comfortably with Western scientific materialism than with, say, the caste system in

India or serfdom in Russia.

Now hope is on the move. According to the Pew Research Centre, some 87 percent of Chinese, 50 percent of Brazilians and 45 percent of Indians think their country is going in the right direction, whereas 31 percent of Britons, 30 percent of Americans and 26 percent of the French do. Companies, meanwhile, are investing in "emerging markets" and sidelining the developed world. "Go east, young man" looks set to become the rallying cry of the 21st century.

Desperation Road

The West's growing pessimism is reshaping political life. Two years after Barack Obama's hope-filled inauguration the mood in Washington is as glum as it has been since Jimmy Carter argued that America was suffering from "malaise". The Democrats' dream that the country was on the verge of a 1960s-style liberal renaissance foundered in the mid-terms. But the Republicans are hardly hopeful: their creed leans towards anger and resentment rather than Reaganite optimism.

Europe, meanwhile, has seen mass protests, some of them violent, on the streets of Athens, Dublin, London, Madrid, Paris and Rome. If the countries on the European Union's periphery are down in the dumps it is hardly surprising, but there is pessimism



at its more successful core too. The bestselling book in Germany is Thilo Sarrazin's "Germany Does Away with Itself", a jeremiad about the "fact" that less able women (particularly Muslims) are having more children than their brighter sisters. French intellectuals will soon have Jean-Pierre Chevènement's "Is France Finished?" on their shelves alongside Eric Zemmour's "French Melancholy".

The immediate explanation

for this asymmetry is the economic crisis, which has not just shaken Westerners' confidence in the system that they built, but also widened the growth gap between mature and emerging economies. China and India are growing by 10 percent and 9 percent, compared with 3 percent for America and 2 percent for Europe. Many European countries' unemployment rates are disgraceful even by their own dismal standards: 41 percent of

young Spaniards are unemployed, for example. And the great American job machine has stalled: one in ten is unemployed and more than a million may have given up looking for work. But the change goes deeper than that -- to the dreams that have propelled the West.

For most of its history America has kept its promise to give its citizens a good chance of living better than their parents. But these days, less than half of

Americans think their children's living standards will be better than theirs. Experience has made them gloomy: the income of the median worker has been more or less stagnant since the mid-1970s, and, thanks to a combination of failing schools and disappearing mid-level jobs, social mobility in America is now among the lowest in the rich world.

TO BE CONTINUED

The Economist Newspaper Ltd (Dec 16)

Optimism is on the move--with important consequences for both the hopeful and the hopeless