

Tahmima Anam called it a “feast of sorts.” And a feast it was! With panellists like Muneeza Shamsie, Manju Kapur and Nilanjana Roy, and chaired by Anam herself, the session titled ‘Women as Writers’ was a treat for every avid reader – man and woman.

The three panellists and the moderator had some things in common – they were all writers who happen to be women writing in English from the Subcontinent. Thus, it’s not surprising that they are constantly bombed with questions regarding the choice of their written language. When asked by the Feminist Press, which published her first anthology in New York in 2005, why the women writers of her book wrote in English, Muneeza Shamsie initially reacted with anger and annoyance. However, after realizing the validity of the question, she traced back to the point in history when women from the Subcontinent started writing in English. “When I started to trace the history, I found that there was this fascinating limb between women writing in English, the decline of the Zanana culture and English education for women,” says the eminent writer, literary columnist and editor from Pakistan.

Manju Kapur, whose first novel ‘Difficult Daughters’ won the 1999 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, wanted to write something which she and people



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Writers, from left: Tahmima Anam, Muneeza Shamsie, Manju Kapur and Nilanjana Roy.

Rewriting the Domestic

Three writers discuss some of the challenges faced by women writers

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like her would read and relate to. “Most of the works I read came from the West. But I guess I was targeting an audience who were like myself, those who wrote in English, who were from the Subcontinent and wrote novels,” says Kapur.

Nilanjana Roy, whose fantasy fiction ‘The Wildlings’ featuring a small band of cats living in an old neighbourhood in Delhi gained much acclaim nationally and internationally, says that writing came naturally to her as she came from a family that appreciated and engaged in literary pursuits. “My grandmother was a poet and a writer who works in Bangla all her life. All of her essays and stories, which were often sharply charged with political awareness and content, were handwritten at the back of account ledgers,” she says. However, after her grandmother’s death, when one of her daughters’ in law inherited the trunk that contained those notes, she called Roy’s mother to inform her that she had thrown away the

bunch of papers as she thought they were useless.

“I constantly remember my grandmother’s story because it seems to me that this is the repeated story of many women’s lives. You go to great trouble all your life to find your voice only to have your stories discarded or thrown away,” she says. Roy adds that the challenge is to change the world’s perception to accept women’s stories as important rather than just dismissing it as an aspect of the “domestic.” “Even if we were to accept that women write primarily about the domestic, why should that be discounted? Family is really where it all happens. It’s the biggest source of personal history.”

Agreeing with Roy’s re-definition of the domestic, Manju Kapur added that even though she initially felt that the family was an interior space that did not claim any political or social space, she gradually adopted the American feminists’ slogan – ‘the personal is political’ – in her writings. “So if the

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personal is political then my novels are as political as any other works of literature. I just have a different way of going about it,” she says with a laugh.

While ‘women’s writing’ has become a subject of debate over the years, all three panellists concede that women do have a different approach to writing than men. Kapur admits that when she first started writing she was very defensive about this issue, as she felt that this was a way of marginalising women’s writing and making them feel somehow less signifi-

cant or important. “After five novels and one anthology down the line, I feel that there is a difference in the way men and women write. There is a difference simply because men and women perceive the world differently,” explains Kapur.

Muneeza Shamsie contends that nine out of ten times in a man’s narrative, the woman character uses her body to get out of any dangerous situation. She explains that a lot of men writers are not able to move beyond the sexuality when writing about women. This exoticisation of the Sub-continent women is not limited to male writers alone. “What’s it with Western publishers and pomegranates? How does a pomegranate or any other fruit for that matter have anything to do with my book?” asks Manju Kapur amidst much laughter and applause.

Their works may seem effortless, as if they were created in a matter of days, but it took years of struggle for them to even muster the courage to start writing. Kapur says that it took her three novels to call herself a writer, while Roy admits that she started addressing herself as an author only after her second novel. As Roy says, the distance for a woman to accept and claim her space as a writer is shortening bit by bit. However, there are still miles to go and so much more to accomplish. Until then, we can be thankful to these wonderful female writers who, through their struggle, have paved an easier path for future women writers to tread on. ■