



Dr Fakrul Alam, Professor of English, at Dhaka University, with poet Mimi Khalvati at the Powerful Voices session of Hay Festival 2014.

PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

# A Powerful Voice

ANDREW EAGLE

Iranian-born British poet Mimi Khalvati first met her poetry in a similar way to how she was introduced to her extended family. Both meetings came late. Each was a door to new expression, understanding and identity.

She published her first poetry collection at age 47, within a few short years of having written her first poem.

She met her extended family as a 17-year-old. At age 6 Khalvati was sent to boarding school in Britain and it was during her first trip back to Iran. "This is your uncle, this is your aunt," she remembers. Everything was discovery: cultural mores and daily realities.

Farsi was a forgotten mother tongue and at boarding school she'd envied students who wrote home in the "squiggly letters" of their native scripts.

"Home was an empty space / I sent words to," reads one poem, "Writing Home."

Her relationship with Iran is "one of great loss and

privilege." The privilege includes having access to the wealth of Iranian literary tradition.

It was in Iran, for example, that Khalvati later experienced a very different interaction between poetry and society. "In the UK," she says, "poetry is the Cinderella of the arts. It has a tiny, barely visible cultural role. Its readers are almost exclusively other poets."

"In Iran, poetry is top of the tree. It's genuinely loved. Illiterate Iranians can recite poems. Poetry is part of daily lives and memories."

Pondering the adoration for Hafez that no visitor to Iran could miss, Khalvati believes the appeal is in the lucid language – a deceptive appearance of simplicity leaves his poems, as he described them, "clear as water." She also thinks that old function of poetry, which has fallen by the wayside in the west, of poets as knowledge-bringing seers, still exists.

Perhaps her Iranian experience encouraged an already determined Khalvati to pursue her chosen

lyrical style – because while British past is rich in such tradition, "to use tones of rapture" is often considered in contemporary Britain as "sentimental and soppy." Considering herself to be a poet who "often swims upstream," she did it anyway.

Her exposure to Iranian poetry allowed her "to drop the talkative quality of modern British poetry," she says, also noting that contemporary British poems are often filled with material things. "In one poem might be a trailer, concrete slabs, a hat, a sofa... They can be crammed with materiality." Yet Khalvati is British: sometimes she pursues those options too.

In explaining the ghazal, a poetic form of disjunctive couplets with a repeated refrain originating in 6th century Arabic verse and celebrated by Hafez among others, she notes the form holds difficulties for western minds that are used to thinking in a more linear fashion. "The ghazal is circular," she says, "The refrain is like its hub; the couplets are its spokes."

"Iran added strings to my bow," Khalvati says, "In the range of tones and colour, in forms and verbal density."

Yet in Britain Khalvati is likely overly associated with Iran. She has written twelve ghazals "to varying degrees of success," but mostly prefers free verse.

She admits her career had a head start due to her Iranian background, with her first collection published in 1991 at a time when Britons were keen to explore their country's ethnic diversity.

"It was too quick," she realises in hindsight, believing a suitable "apprenticeship" period for a poet could easily be ten years.

But her Iranian link also served to pigeon-hole. She was primarily invited to events with an ethnic diversity theme and her poems were misread. One reviewer said her syntax was "inflicted by Persian grammar." "I did not know what it meant," Khalvati says. She has learnt to speak colloquial Farsi but does not read it or understand its literary form.

Rather she draws primarily from the well of English lyric tradition, with Wordsworth her "first and greatest love."

It was her earlier career choice – also creative – of directing theatre that finally led Khalvati to poetry. As a single mother of two she found the demands of directing too onerous and decided to attend a script writing seminar in Devon. The seminar also covered poetry.

Unimpressed with her script writing efforts, the coordinators sent her to try her hand at poetry. "I hadn't any idea what to do!" she says.

Nonetheless she worked on a 10-line poem, "The Black and White Cows," later published, and inspired by the bovines out the window. She'd recently seen a movie, she recalls, with a funeral scene in the rain. The images mingled, bringing in death as a theme. "Fusing different elements is a common poetic technique," Khalvati notes, "but I had no idea." Within a year she was concentrating on poetry.

Eight collections later, Khalvati has made up for lost time. She says to be a productive poet requires sticking to a routine rather than waiting for inspiration. She works on several poems simultaneously. "When you're tired," she says, "you work on a poem in its refinement stages when fresh energy is less required."

Khalvati believes strongly in technical skill and study. "Syntax, for example," she says, "is very important. Nobody says 'wow!' about syntax but it's a tool. People mention depth of emotion, intellectual and spiritual power when assessing poems. Brilliant use of language is the first thing I look for. If the language is divine it elevates the poem whether or not it holds those other qualities."



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Mimi Khalvati

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Hay Festival 2014 brought Khalvati to Bangladesh for the first time. She spoke at the session entitled "Powerful Voices." In terms of starting her career late, in encouraging a more sophisticated understanding that ethnic backgrounds can take many paths and subtler shades of influence beyond the oft-cited "immigrant story", and foremost for her contribution to British poetry, Khalvati's voice is indeed powerful.

On her second day in Dhaka perhaps it was unfair to ask her impressions. "I expected to see rickshaws. But with my poet's eye – and everyone has a poet's eye – I was amazed to see so much cauliflower! We passed markets and there seemed too much cauliflower for an entire country to eat!"

Will there be a poem about Dhaka and cauliflower? "Who knows?" she says.