

EDITOR'S
NOTE

"I mark the hours, every one,
Nor have I yet outrun the Sun.
My use and value, unto you,
Are gauged by what you have to do."

—Inscription on Hermione Granger's Time-Turner

With five simultaneous events happening around the Bangla Academy grounds during Hay Festival Dhaka, not to mention the food treats and the *cha-adda*-sessions at *Bottola*, one couldn't help but wish for Hermione's Time-Turner! The joy of not missing on anything – watching sparks fly between panelists, listening to the discussions, asking questions, learning, musing...we don't get literary opportunities like this in Dhaka often enough. It seems only appropriate thus that SLR presents three reflections on Hay written by contributors Shahpar Selim, M.K.Aaref and our columnist Nupu Press. Read on, enjoy the different strokes that together illustrate the luminosity of this Literary Festival.

MUNIZE MANZUR



COURTESY ARIF HAFIZ

HEY, HAY!

Nupu Press

I attended all three days of Hay Festival Dhaka, from the first session to the last, and felt terrifically pleased for being so fully present. Until, that is, I saw photos of the weekend on social media and didn't recognise half the people sitting on stages and talking into microphones. Why did they not look familiar? Who were they? How did I miss them?

Attending sessions back to back as I did, still didn't allow me to catch everything, as there were five events running concurrently every hour. While I watched what turned out to be my favourite panel – Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Lucy Hawking and Marcus du Sautoy on popularising science – I was sad to be missing Manju Kapur, Nilanjana Roy and Muneza Shamsie talk to Tahmima Anam about the woman as a writer. Even when I was in my own session

demonstrating my storytelling lessons from films, I wanted to see Salil Tripathi over in the next room.

The festival provided a rich dimension to my reading experience. I'm already a fan of historian William Dalrymple's writing, but when he paced the stage and recounted tales from his latest book, *Return of a King*, I was transfixed. Never mind that I was sitting in a large air-conditioned packed hall in Dhaka, I was transported to nineteenth-century Afghanistan and its ill-fated British occupation.

The festival brought me a more profound understanding of writing. I had recently completed Zia Haider Rahman's novel, *In the Light of What We Know*, and found it partly brilliant and partly infuriating (certainly by the way women are portrayed by both the male narrators). On stage, he spoke much the

way he wrote: starting in one direction, then digressing into tangents that brought forth unrelated factoids and insights that eventually illuminated his original point; he was brilliantly infuriating. Then, right at the end, he said that if the work makes the reader comfortable and happy, then it only serves to keep the world secure; whereas the purpose should be to make one uncomfortable in order to provoke questions. (I paraphrase, and that too in hindsight, so this doesn't quite capture his more lyrical choice of words.) Now, on top of his being compelling and refreshing, I decided he was also infuriatingly brilliant.

The festival introduced me to new voices. Kosal Khiev described his fourteen years in an American prison, where when the lights were turned off at night, the inmates would line up in silence to hear him tell stories. These

stories, inspired by an in-house programme, went on to become the spoken word poetry that he now shares around the world. He may have been born in a refugee camp in Thailand, and deported to Cambodia after his time in prison, but the poet was so infectiously buoyant and life affirming, my spirits soared in wonder and appreciation.

Lastly, given my otherwise hermetic existence, the festival gave me the opportunity to meet people, reminding me yet again of the importance of physical presence and connections. There were friends I hadn't seen in months due to conflicting schedules. There were those I had known only virtually via my blog and social media, whom I was finally able to meet in person. There were those I had known in previous chapters of my life, like the then-agent and now Group Editor-in-Chief of Bloomsbury, Alexandra Pringle, who

had been the first to read my early manuscript in London. I had described the incident in this paper some months back, never imagining that I would meet her again sixteen years later in Dhaka. The festival was large enough for surprises such as this but, critically, intimate enough to allow everyone to mingle and meet.

I hope Dhaka Hay doesn't expand much more than its current scale. This year proved it's more than ample in its vision, depth and breadth. Any bigger, and I'll no doubt look at images after the festival is over, at all the events and people I don't recognise, because I could only be at one place at one time, and wonder if I missed it all. And it's much too thrilling and rewarding to do that.

Nupu Press is a writer and film producer. Her blog is at www.nupupress.com

For Whom the Hay Shines

Shahpar Selim

The Hay Festival Dhaka 2014 concluded recently and with it has ended three days of "transcending the boundaries of nations through literary and intellectual exchanges", as one columnist described it. Sounds like a lofty goal for three days...but perhaps not totally out of place in Bangladesh. A country where many don't know where their next meal will come from, but know *sufi baul* songs by heart. Bangalis know how to celebrate culture and we do it with all-encompassing exuberance. The Hay Festival this year mirrored that aspect of the Bangladeshi psyche perfectly.

One of the most thought provoking and talked about sessions at Hay this year was on "Identity", between panelists Namita Gokhale (who writes candidly about the Indian everywoman), Shashi Tharoor (who writes about his changing country in intensely personal ways), Zia Haider Rahman (who writes about multiple identities across class in his acclaimed first novel), moderated by Salil Tripathi. The session delved at length about who writers are in relation to what they create; and how their memories and experiences shape their creativity. The discussion turned to who they write for – the identity of their readers – which is very apt at a literature festival where writers and their readers can interact on a direct level.

The writers on stage that day said that they were conscious that one cannot simply write for everybody. They commented that being true to one's artistic expression was inevitably alienating to one or more segments of the reading public, simply for factors such as their chosen language or their cultural references. It could be for practical reasons too such as whether their book had been translated (or translated well), or whether their book was even available in shops. The question of the reader's identity stayed with me throughout the Festival this year.

Who reads the books being discussed at Hay? Who comes to this Festival? Why do they come? Why do others not?

The Hay didn't require pre-

registration and was open to all. You could see every kind of person walking through the metal detectors. Judging a crowd by its cover was confusing. There were simple cotton saris, jewel-coloured *jamdanis*, rubber *chappals*, khadi *kurtas*, casually slung *jholas*, lots of skinny jeans and an expensive sunglass or two. This year must have been disappointing to those who have raised a ruckus in the past about the "elitism" of Hay in Bangladesh. The Bangla Academy grounds were not as crowded as it gets during the month-long *Ekushey BoiMela* but the crowd didn't look or feel very different.

The main difference was that most of the events were conducted in English, and people were discussing books, newspapers, blogs, etc. primarily drafted in English. The other difference was that Hay invited international literary luminaries to Dhaka. This brought a frisson which lasted throughout the three days. The Festival felt manic, as we scrolled through the tiny printed "event calendar" and tried to figure out which session we wanted to get to, at the expense of giving up another session. Another difference was the presence of the writers outside the elevated podiums. So, writers got to meet their readers and the readers got to meet writers that they had read, or hopefully – will now read.

The Festival was heavy with star writers (some with their entourage of admirers, and some milling about more quietly) who had come from all over the world, but what Hay did (as it does every year) was give the stage (literally) and the floor (metaphorically) to Bangladeshi writers in English. It was their day in the sun, a time of well-deserved accolades. It was interesting to see that the reactionary idea of *deshi* writers in English only writing for the selected few isn't true. The well-attended sessions and interesting conversations with the authors have hopefully translated into solid book sales.

Another thing Hay had in common with *Ekushey* is that it was a book-sellers dream. Stalls from UPL, Bengal Lights, Daily Star Books,

Bengal Publications, Bookworm, etc. did brisk business with their wide range of titles. Readers were however disappointed a few times because advertised books had sold out, or had not even arrived! The Hay attendance is growing, and the organizers must pay closer attention to book buyers' needs.

At the *Bottola* of Bangla Academy, one witnessed another cultural quirk of the Bangali – the intense and impassioned *adda* over hot cups of tea. Although this year the fruit juice stand – *Thanda Gorom* – was the unpublished star of the Festival. Authors, *deshi* and *bideshi* were seen chatting animatedly with litterateurs and Festival invitees. The volunteers were simply marvelous – well informed and courteous. The attendees were excited to spot faces familiar from book jackets, and nervously approached writers for autographs. The young and the beautiful took pictures and uploaded them at the speed of sound. We were clicked, tagged and shared. Friend requests were sent.

These are the people that the Hay in Dhaka caters to. People didn't care if it appeared snobbish to talk about English books. People didn't pretend to be something they weren't – that is the overly erudite smug Bangali *Babu*. To me, that was the beauty of the Festival. You didn't have to be a bookworm to be here or to have a good time. You simply had to have a curiosity about books and an interest in ideas. You could sense it from the audience Q&A components at each panel. People engaged enthusiastically – albeit sometimes forgetting the difference between a 'question' and a 'comment'...but I digress. It was exciting because Dhaka doesn't see too many opportunities to meet and discover new English writers. My favourite was when I saw bearded men in long, white robes listening to a discussion on poetry. That scene made me pause. You think you know who comes to the Hay? You'd be surprised. Welcome, world.

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COURTESY HAY FESTIVAL DHAKA

Hay Fever

M.K.Aaref

Dhaka has the annual *Ekushey BoiMela*, an extravaganza of books and celebration of our local authors, many of whom we are already aware of. However, Hay Festival Dhaka is quite the opposite. Selling books is not the focus, rather it's a side-benefit. The main attraction is to meet and interact with stellar International authors. Then comes the mad rush afterwards to buy their book and get it autographed.

The Hay Festival Dhaka is the first of its kind that introduces authors from abroad; provides a platform for our local authors who write in English; and highlight our traditional literary practices to the outside world. Attendees were spoilt for choices with so many authors to interact with, all on the hallowed grounds of Bangla Academy.

Two years ago, we got to meet Vikram Seth, author of the global best-seller, *A Suitable Boy*. Last year, Tariq Ali came back to Dhaka after more than forty years, a firebrand leftist originally from Pakistan and a supporter of our quest for independence. From the one-day event on the grounds of British Council, it has grown from strength to strength, with visiting authors, related events, and performances multiplying. The highly anticipated November weekend is an orgy of intellectual treats, literary readings, and running from venue to venue not to miss the sights and sounds of personas we only get to read about or follow on Twitter. Biting into a kebab roll, you could also have the good fortune to meet international publishers looking for local talent to promote and publish abroad.

This year, Zia Haider Rahman – a British author of Bangladeshi origin, introduced his book, *In the Light of What We Know*, to the Hay audience. Lauded internationally, his debut delves into classism of the British society as experienced by someone like him. The audience was quick to claim him as one of our own, but he persisted in his self-proclaimed global citizenry. Then there was William Dalrymple, whose enactment of historical events is a story-telling performance *extraordinaire* that had the audience mesmerised. Shashi Tharoor proved why he was a star in the UN and later in the Indian Foreign Service through his erudite brilliance; while Jung Chang made the alien world of Chinese philosophy attractive and palatable.

Among the Bangladeshi authors featured this year were Maria Chaudhuri and Javed Jahangir among others. The latter's book, *Ghost Alley*, i.e. *Bhooter Goli*, a local landmark, touched on the fractured lives of a family affected first by Partition and then Independence War.

All together more than sixty luminaries that encompassed not just literature, but also mathematics, philosophy, journalism, history and publications, came and spread their insights in over eighty sessions. On Saturday evening, it was hard to believe that the Festival was over for the year. Many of us yearned for more. Yes, we definitely and willingly had Hay Fever.

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