

"I am where I thought I would be"

Syed Shamsul Haque is a literary star, the ambidextrous writer of Bangla literature. Haque has distinguished himself as a writer with a unique linguistic style and the wide range of subjects that he delves into. Born on December 27, 1935, in Kurigram, which was then a part of Rangpur district, Haque came to Dhaka in 1948 and therefore witnessed how a small nifty town like Dhaka grew into a megacity. December 27 marks his 81st birthday. In a conversation with poet Syed Shamsul Haque, The Daily Star's Emran Mahfuz tries to unravel the secret to the freshness with which this prolific litterateur looks upon life and literature.

The Daily Star (TDS): You are turning 81 this year and yet you are enviably young; your pen is still at work. What is the source of this amazing vigour?

Syed Shamsul Haque (SSH): About working in every medium- yes, I do that. After all, it is language and language is my medium.

Poetry, prose, novels, plays, these are only ways. I try to convey my words through these ways. Not all of it can be presented through signs and cues. Can we catch all of what is in the mind? Even Rabindranath could not do that. No writer or artist could. A distance always stays from what is in the imagination. In that sense, I keep trying through signs and cues. It does not feel like the time or the calling to give up has come yet. I am still the same and it feels good. A birthday is not that special a day; 81 years is only a calculation.

This staying alive, life itself is its inspiration. Lalon has said, "Would a life like this come again?" It will not; here, now. The time that I have passed; if I were to be reborn then I would like to come back here, just like this.

TDS: You have been working in many mediums; which one do you think works the best for you?

SSH: The first thing is that my work, in terms of the ingredient, is to work in the medium of language. While working with language, I have worked and am still working in all the creative expressions of language - poetry, prose, novels, and plays. It is that I do not differentiate between mediums. I think I have used the medium which is the most tailored to what I have to say. Sometimes it comes in poetry, sometimes in prose, sometimes in novels, and sometimes in plays. Every medium is strong in its own way.

TDS: Now I want to talk a little on your memoir Pronito Jibon. You wrote in the introduction, "I do not think of any autobiography to be of more truth than a novel." What is your reason behind this thinking?

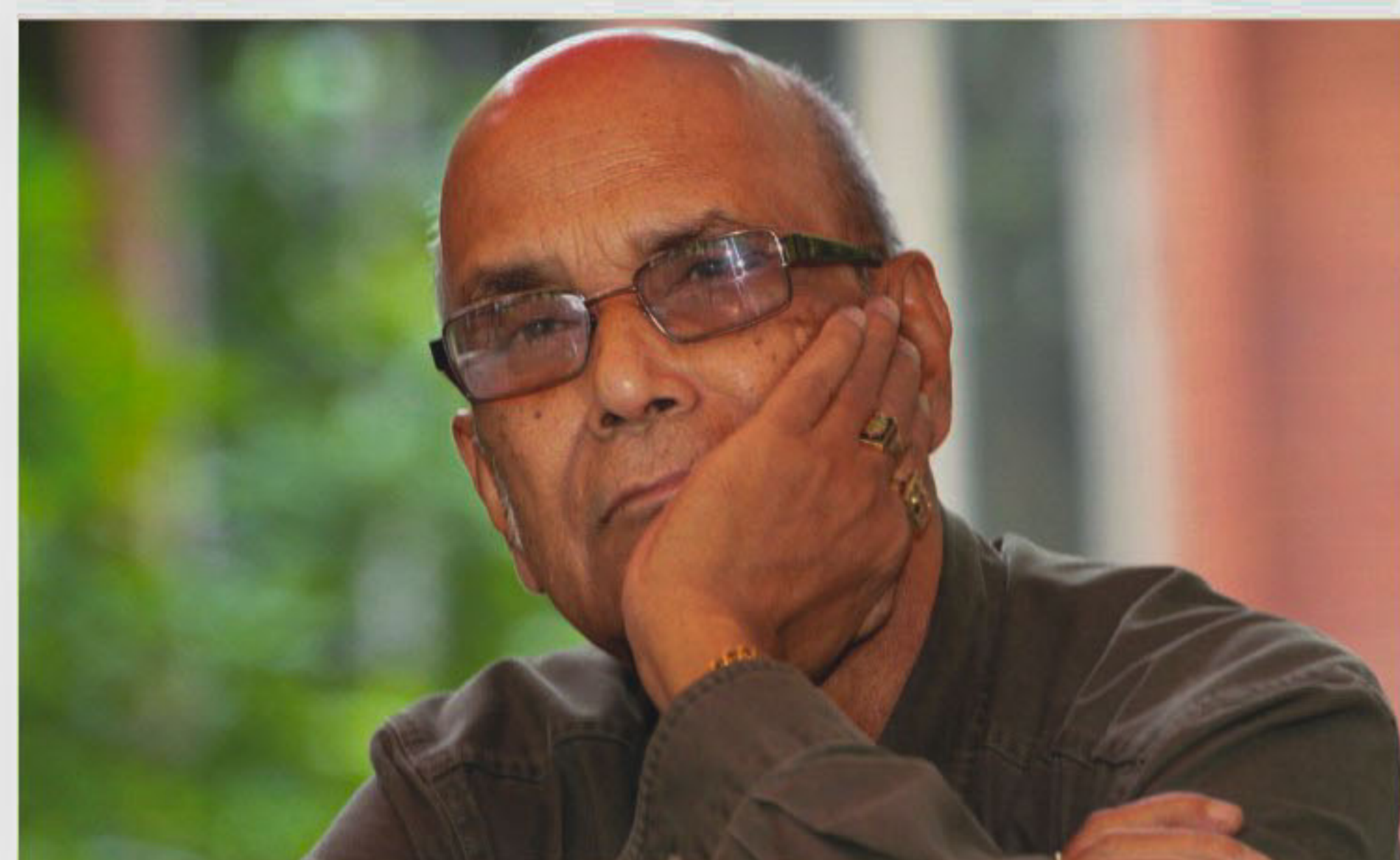


PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

SSH: About taking refuge in fantasy in an autobiography? I do not think autobiography is more true than a novel, only as true as a novel is; it is true that it could have happened. This is because when we look back at ourselves, we do not see everything in the same light or in the same measure. When we look at our lives, it has colours, it has feelings; we add the references from life with those and try to make something creative. That is what I meant.

TDS: We read Keranio Doure Chilo in Kaler Kheya and Nodi Karo Noy is being serially published in Kali O Kolom. Could you say something about these two novels?

SSH: I have framed time in the novel Keranio Doure Chilo. I think of writing novels as creative journalism; writing the story of time word by word. My growing up during the partition is coming up in Nodi Karo Noy and with that I have tried to tell the story of this issue touching the life of an ordinary person.

TDS: You have witnessed important

times such as the British colonial regime, Pakistan occupying regime, the military regime, and independence. How does this feature in your work?

SSH: My assessment will not be like a historian's but I have tried, through my writing, to capture the essence of that era. I was born in a village in Kurigram. I was there until I was 12 years and 3 months old. In my childhood, especially in the times of World War II, Kurigram town, overland, was filled with white soldiers as it was thought that if the Japanese come, they would come by this way. The atmosphere was like that from when I was four to when I was 10 years old. Two events in my life have greatly affected me - the partition of '47 and the War of Independence in '71, which will never happen again in history.

TDS: Tell us about your early life and how it shaped you as a writer.

SSH: Seeing me, some people may think that I am at present what I was back then. In reality,

we used to stay in a small house with a bamboo roof and clay floor. My father, penniless, destitute, reached the middle class life after a lot of struggles. We grew up in hardship after my father passed away. We shared whatever we could find with the whole family. We were in darkness but we did not consider it to be dark. We never had any regrets. I always see life from the outside, and also from the inside. For a writer, seeing things from both perspectives is necessary too. Even after being in the midst of so much technology, literature has to be more inbound.

TDS: When did you first realise that you wanted to be a writer?

SSH: When I was in class 10, I thought that I would become a writer when I grow up. There is no other 'historic' reason behind this. So, there is nothing to glorify this. The fact that my father was a writer of homeopathy books might be one reason for the special attraction.

TDS: I read a piece of your writing called Jaleshwari. Is Jaleshwari your place of conscience or a refuge?

SSH: Neither; it is geography. I keep on wanting to write about the people of the village, to write the story. Why does one have to fantasise a new place every time? Rather, I create something on the basis of what I have seen, what I have known, and what I have identified. Jaleshwari was created this way. It is rooted in Kurigram and the adjoining areas. I feel like it is my birthplace. It can be thought of as a literary locality.

TDS: Critics have praised your play Gononayok adapted from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Such individuality and spontaneity within such a beautiful translation is rarely seen. What do you think is the secret to a successful adaptation?

SSH: When you are translating something in a language, it has to be like that language. When I translate Hafiz or European poetry into Bangla, it has to reflect nuances of the Bangla language so that it completely becomes a

Bangla poetry, instead of reflecting nuances of that country's language.

TDS: We want to know about your philosophy and motivation of life.

SSH: Life has to be driven but strength is needed to do it. This strength is born within one's self. I am being able to take my life forward, everyone is getting older, time keeps going forward, and this is a matter to be enjoyed.

TDS: You are writing romantic poetry even at 80. Please comment.

SSH: The essence of Bengali poetry is love. This comes from Radha-Krishna. And as much as love is in this imagery, there is also eroticism. It is physical in one way and psychological in the other. The principal motif of Bengali poetry is Radha-Krishna. If you read the poetry of Rabindranath and other great poets in depth, you will understand what I mean. That is the motif I have worked with.

TDS: What would you like to say to our contemporary writers and those young individuals aspiring to be writers?

SSH: You have to write in your own way. Writing is a lonely job; you have to keep doing it alone. You have to grow up on your own. Remember that the last refuge of truth is art.

TDS: What are you working on now and what are you reading?

SSH: At present, I am working with two poetic dramas, one long poem and some stories. I am also working on a writing which is a bit different; when a reader reads it, new stories will be formed in his/her mind. I want the reader to be creative too.

At present I am reading some books on history, philosophy and some classic novels. Other than reading, what else can keep oneself going?

Translated by Afsin Trisha.

"Values" without borders



SHIFTING IMAGES

MILIA ALI

IN the wake of the Paris and San Bernardino attacks, prominent US Republican senators have called for measures for stemming the entry of Syrian refugees. It is amazing how the plight of the unfortunate people fleeing war and famine has been turned into a political game. Ironically, many of those who are opposed to allowing the refugees a safe haven in the United States argue that the migrants from Islamic countries do not share "American values" and are therefore misfits here. The discourse about American values always makes me cringe since it ends up giving the impression that people who have a legal status in the US are on a higher moral ground. And the helpless men, women and children seeking refuge from violence and terror are ethically inferior.

Unfortunately, no one has offered a well-articulated definition of what these zealously guarded "values" are. The reality is, a country's values come into sharper focus when it is faced with difficult humanitarian choices. And these virtues shine more brightly when people make sacrifices to help the less fortunate. By this definition, America's values have fallen short of expectations.

I believe that there are two issues that one needs to appreciate about the refugee problem. The first is fairly straightforward - no self-respecting human being wants to leave his home and familiar surroundings and seek asylum in an unfamiliar and often unwelcome territory unless he is pushed against

the wall. The second is more important: once a refugee takes the leap, he usually tries his best to integrate and imbibe the value system of the host country. But assimilation requires patience and understanding both on the part of the immigrant and the host country.

Perhaps I should illustrate these points by narrating my personal experience as a refugee in India in 1971. I arrived in West Bengal both physically and spiritually shattered - I had lived through the carnage of March 26 and the fear of being hounded by the Pakistan army for three months. My parents decided that I would be safer and that my life would have a purpose if I crossed the border and participated in the country's Liberation War. When I think of it now - I cannot understand how they parted with their teenage daughter, despite the dread of an uncertain and challenging future. But then it happened to many youngsters like me. The point is those were exceptional times and people were not using the kind of rationale that they do under normal circumstances. And this is true for most individuals who leave their familiar environs and take refuge in an unknown land.

Luckily I received a warm welcome on the other side. And it reinstated my faith in the goodness of man. I developed a deep love and respect for the people and the country that gave me a chance to live again after the crushing experience of being shipwrecked in my own country. The thing that continues to amaze me is that ordinary folks responded to the millions of Bangladeshi refugees with extraordinary gestures of humanity: providing shelter, food, monetary help and emotional support. We were all welcomed and accepted, irrespective of our religion or social background. The crisis

revealed the best of human nature!

I am shocked that we, in the United States, talk about our superior values and yet have shown so little compassion for the men, women and children who are fleeing from the horrors of a war. We have closed our doors to thousands of innocent people because of a preconceived notion that they may pose a security risk. The media is full of the story of the Paris terrorist with a Syrian passport but the heartbreaking picture of the 3-year-old Syrian boy's dead body washed ashore has been consigned to oblivion. How can we brag about our values when we have shown such callous indifference to the hapless people caught between the chemical weapons of the Assad regime and the barbaric killings of the Islamic State?

People don't carry values across the ocean, for values are not permanent features etched in our psyche. We human beings evolve and we are capable of learning from our environment. I know that the months I spent as a refugee have taught me that the best values are those that inspire us to be compassionate and kind to the less fortunate, irrespective of their religion or class. The men and women who distributed blankets to the Bangladeshi refugees in the squalid camps, gave them food and comforted them with kind words continue to restore my faith in humanity each time I am disillusioned. When I forget to be kind or compassionate I am reminded of their radiant faces - and I realise that the least I can do is give back a little of what these exceptional people gave me. These are the values I want to live by - I don't know whether these virtues are American or Indian or Syrian, but I do know that they are human values.

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank. E-mail: shiftingimages@gmail.com

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