

WHAT'S ON

Painting Exhibition
Bangabandhu Bangladesh
Organiser: BSA & Samata
Sonargaon
Venue: National Art Gallery, BSA
Date: March 4-17
Time: 11am-8pm



Photography Exhibition
Title: London 1971: Unsung Heroes of the Bangladesh Liberation War
Venue: British Council
Date: March 3-31



Solo Painting Exhibition
Title: Journey & Images
Artist: Ranjit Das
Venue: Galleri Kaya
Date: March 12-25
Time: 11am-8pm



Solo Photography Exhibition
Title: Here, For Now
Photographer: Hadi Uddin
Venue: Kala Kendra, Mohammadpur
Date: Feb 25- Mar 22
Time: 5pm-8pm



Solo Art Exhibition
In Memory of Khalid Mahmood Mithu
Venue: Zainul Gallery, FFA, DU
Date: March 7-13
Time: 12noon-8pm



CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

WOMEN'S VOICES

Women around the world have come a long way from the days when they engaged in fierce struggles to gain the right to vote. Today many women have broken the glass ceiling in corporate boardrooms, the service and development sectors, media, arts and so on. But the fact remains that they live in an inequitable world. How many women in our part of the globe really have the freedom of choice --do they have the right to move around freely, dress the way they want, spend their earnings in a way they see fit or even to determine their family size? And what about gender discrimination at every level--be it at the workplace, home or even on the streets, But there are nevertheless a minority who see the brighter side of an otherwise dark picture and we spoke to some of them:

“As a bilingual author I juggle my skills very carefully”
— Shamim Azad



ROBINA RASHID BHUIYAN

Among Bangladesh's rich literary traditions, transnational writings have been acknowledged little on the forefront of national literature, despite rapid cultural changes into hybridity brought about by globalisation. However that has recently changed with the conferment of Syed Waliullah Literature Award 2016 on Shamim Azad for her literary contributions. A Bangladeshi born British writer, Shamim Azad's diverse range of works cover poetry, novels, essays and plays, and play a key role in not only representing our cultural activities at home in the West, but also at home from abroad. As a woman writer, she is both representative and an example of women and for women in Bangladesh and international territories. In a recent conversation, the writer speaks about her identity as a bilingual author, as well as her views on women empowerment.

This year's theme on International Women's Day is about women in the changing world of work, and the implications globalisation has on women. What are your views on this? How can women in our nation create advantages for themselves in our society?

Shamim Azad: We have to change, and the only time for change is now. Change cannot occur without boldness and being true to your goals. Everyone is capable of action and inspiring others, which begins with friends and families, then next of kin, and then to a group of people associated with your social community. This is how social changes are made. To be bold is to take a stand and let others know you are no more taking unfair deals. Challenges

will be inevitably met, and every decision must be made wisely in order to be constructive. I believe we must work with teenage girls more, as they are at that tender age when core values are built, and have their identities explored.

As a bilingual author, how does writing as a woman differ in English and Bangla?

Shamim Azad: It does not really matter how many languages you know; it all comes down to being a writer, a job that is a grave responsibility. My responsibility is to address people while also speaking my mind. I consider myself lucky to be a writer with two worlds in her hands. As a bilingual author I juggle my skills very carefully. I import the skills and strategies from the West into our country, and in turn I take back my heritage and try to disseminate it abroad. No matter where we go, we never leave Bangladesh. Wherever we are moving about in the world, we are a slice of Bangladesh, taking our culture wherever we go. Right now I am part of the executive body of Exiled Writers Ink, an organisation that gives immigrant writers a platform to share their work all over the world.

Throughout your years of writing as a woman, how does writing in the present time compare to when you first began?

Shamim Azad: The world has changed, and so have the people and our targeted readers as a result. I've had to familiarise myself with digitisation in order to reach the young readers of today, and use social media to write my drafts so I can receive readers' responses. Writing content has not changed, but my approach to reach out to the hearts and minds of the youth has.

ROBINA RASHID BHUIYAN

Along with the perceived roles of women in society, physical representations of women have been crucial in shaping their presence within culture. With social reforms in education during British imperialism, the sari had been modified to enable women to venture out of their homes, and for some time was exclusively associated with members of the upper caste. However times have changed, and fashion has been important in documenting those changes. To talk about fashion's role in female empowerment, The Daily Star reached out to eminent designer Maheen Khan, who helms the brand Mayasir and is also the founder of Fashion Design Council of Bangladesh.

Since you have been in the fashion industry for about 30 years. How has fashion shaped the image of women for these years?

Maheen Khan: Bangladeshi fashion industries have just taken off. In our initial years, we have always felt the need to incorporate our roots into our designs. However Bangladeshi women are working and assuming positions of power in job sectors, and gaining more public visibility. So women are taking fashion seriously, taking great care into how they want to be seen by others. I think the trend is towards more global, transcontinental, transcultural clothing that is functional. Although the sari is our national dress,



a lot of women are not comfortable wearing it in the workplace anymore, preferring a more homogenous, asexual look. Also women who are empowered are moving away from the over the top looks inspired by Bollywood,

opting for something more natural and simple, while maintaining sophistication.

How has fashion empowered women as both consumers and producers?

Maheen Khan: Fashion here is driven more by individual choice rather than trends. Fashion must cater to all the roles they want to play, as well as give them the freedom to be able to do so. I have been involved with the world of fashion since 1986, and I work with mostly women starting from the grassroots level. In that case we take our work to them instead of uprooting them from their natural environment. We are the second generation of entrepreneurs who are engaging women in production, but if you look at NGOs and other organisations working in the field of women's empowerment, the changes they brought about have been phenomenal. Not only do women have more financial autonomy within their communities and allow them to contribute to their families, but it gives them more agency over decision making and giving their positions more power.

What changes do you hope to see in the future?
Maheen Khan: We should never forget our roots and must always practise our cultural heritage. I would like for people to enjoy the living art of our grassroots fashion and enable women to be more confident, more professional and be more emboldened to act out their choices.

Redefining the feminine ideal

Up close with Maheen Khan

“I prefer to regard myself as a human being first...”

-- Momena

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Popular theatre artiste, Momena Chowdhury has been an active member of Aranyak Nattiyadal for the last 27 years. Before joining the theatre troupe, she did stage plays in her district town. While she makes regular appearances on stage, she has appeared in TV plays and films too. The multi-talented artiste spoke about what International Women's Day means to her and more in a recent talk with The Daily Star.

Did you face any barriers when you first ventured on stage?

Momena: I have been associated with Aranyak Nattiyadal for 27 years now. Before this, I acted in plays in my district town in the '80s. I never faced any objections from family or brother who is a cultural exponent. But, initially I did not get any societal support because at that time people looked askance at women theatre artistes. But I

was unstoppable. Later, I became a mother and my children were a great support to me.

Does International Women's Day mean much to you?

Momena: The very nomenclature International Women's Day is offensive to me. I prefer to regard myself as a human being rather than woman. I never enjoy the day.

Tell us about stage plays that earned you raves.

Momena: I acted in the mono drama "Lal Jomin", the story of a 13-year-old freedom fighter. The 113th show of the play will be staged on March 10. I enacted 17 characters in the play. This was my first stage play outside Aranyak Nattiyadal.

What are your favourite plays by Aranyak Nattiyadal?

Momena: "Joyjoyonti", "Iblish", "Lebedef", "Sangkranti", "Mayur Singhasan" and "Ebong Bidyagar".



From bricks to walls: Women torchbearers

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

“One of our favourite pastimes was to gather with our friends on the rooftops and practice broto-chari...with the daily laundry strung as 'tents' off course,” my mother would tell us whenever the women's movement came up in the conversation. Here they learnt the simple dance and songs which led the way to Bratachari Movement, initiated by Gurushodoi Dutta.

With so many forces barring women's freedom, this was the only acceptable compromise. Little did anyone know how these simple routines would slowly evolve and inspire women to emerge from their age-old confines. Dr. Nurun Nahar Fyzennessa (my mother), had been at the forefront of the women's movement for over 50 years and I believed her when she said that the greatest changes could start from something seemingly insignificant. The brotochari dance encouraged patrio-



PHOTO: STAR

tism, secularism and most importantly physical and psychological fitness amongst the youth. Progressive families championed the spirit of education and culture among girls. A handful of girls who were emboldened with

such opportunities soon stepped into the world beyond their courtyard. This was the beginning and soon the time would come when that step would take women on to the stage of performing arts, in essence the very

core of society.

The radio of course played a significant role. After the 1947 partition, the first radio station was on Nazimuddin Road in old Dhaka, the then city centre. Perhaps, out of sight of viewers, the radio was the most attractive channel for women to perform for the audience and yet maintain their privacy.

Vocalists Afsari Khanam, Anjali Mukherjee, Malika Perveen were joined by legendary voices of Feroza Begum and Laila Arjumand Banu. The golden era of music in erstwhile East Pakistan (during 1955-60) was led by Ferdousi Begum, Anjuman Ara Begum, Mahbuba Rahman, Farida Yasmeen, Nina Hamid, Sanjida Khatun and Farida Bari Malik to name a few. After Liberation War, the momentum was nurtured by a host of talented artists from Sabina Yasmeen, Shahnaz Rahmatullah, Runa Laila, to Pappya Sarwar, Nilufar Yasmeen, Shabnam Mushtari, Rezwana Chowdhury, Farida Parveen and more.

The theatre world was not far behind. I often heard stories from my mother about how very few women initially joined the drama circle when she herself entered the scene along with Madhobi Chatterjee, Nomita Anwar, Lilly Chowdhury, Biju Mustafa and much later Ayesha Khanam, Mirana Zaman and others. In

films Sultana Zaman, Reshma, Sujata, Sumita Devi, Shabnam, Rosy and later Kabori, Babita, Shuchanda also joined in gradually.

Then there was Khelaghar, an immensely popular radio programme aimed at nurturing the budding talents way back in the mid '60s. Shahnaz Rahmatullah, Sabina Yasmeen, Shaheen Samad, Sabiha Mahbub, Abida Sultana and myself appeared almost every Sunday, then the weekly holiday. Children gathered from all around the city to sing or recite a few lines from poems. Dr. Fyzennessa initially conducted the programme and after a decade, Hena Kabir took over.

Over the years, some of the leading dancers to grace the stage were Rahiza Khanam, Laila Hasan, Sharmin Hasan, Dahlia Salauddin, Kajol Ibrahim, Lubna Marium, Zeenat Barkatullah, Shamim Ara Nipa, Munmun Ahmed and others.

The changing role of women progressed slowly from the makeshift tents on rooftops, to centre stage to public media -- growing from strength to strength. Change needs a face, and these spirited artistes leave a lasting image of the women's movement. Let us take a moment to honour women everywhere, not only as a part of today's agenda, but to treasure them as role models who inspire many.