



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

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A young reader has no particular template image through which to visualise the story and yet the story pushes her to imagine things that aren't even real and tangible," adds Sarah.

I know this to be true, thanks to my childhood years poring through Enid Blyton's *The Enchanted Wood*, *The Magic Faraway Tree*, *The Folk of the Faraway Tree* and others in the series. The books took me on a journey, to some place in England—painting vivid imagery of magical creatures who live in the woods. It also came with a dose of real world knowledge. I learned of the children's regular picnic meals and pined over how much I wanted to have a treacle pudding or a jam tart.

Today, Enid Blyton's stories are assailed for racism, sexism and overall political incorrectness. All of which are true and in retrospect, I can see how her critics were right. Her books are smack full of racial superiority. Her white characters are forever urged to cultivate "better manners than all the little black people." And let us not forget the black doll she created, 'Golliwog', a name that was essentially a racial slur in Blyton's time. The appearance of a racial caricature of a toy was dropped from a 1980s BBC adaptation of *Noddy* later. Blyton simply refused to do anything about gender stereotypes. In her books, fathers seldom leave their studies and mothers are making sandwiches or washing laundry all the time.

But Blyton also tickled some of the right spots. I remember reading her books and conjuring up worlds and images, simply out of a void never before experienced.

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And I feel it is important to indulge in literature intended for children because during those early years, a child's mind is free of worldly prejudices. When you do read it as an adult, it helps you poke at that childlike amazement, a part of our minds that we forego in the hurry to grow up.

It is fascinating to read children's stories as adults and notice how much depth they have. Like when, as kids, you don't notice the stronger bits that are meant to leave a (good or bad) impact on you, but as grownups you notice the full potential of the stories, opines another fellow booklover.

Sometimes, that potential could mean calling out and a fallout with childhood favourites such as Enid Blyton and Herge. And sometimes, if you are lucky, it could be a reliving of a brief few moments of unadulterated childhood innocence.

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I first met her on the premises of Bangla Academy. She often visited the academy, a meeting place for writers who went there even if there was no programme or event. While at the academy, we had great *addas* where we would often discuss her writing. Her *Rokter Okkhor*, published in "Bichitra" magazine, was widely acclaimed back in the day. The story is about a woman who, tortured during the Liberation War, takes up sex work for a living. In answer to our questions, Rizia Rahman would explain her position readily and say, if the abstract articulation of a time does not survive through art, that particular time will be lost forever. It is not possible that people will know about or remember a time only from history books; that is not how it works. All readers are not the same—history books and research journals do not have the same impact on all readers. If we choose to portray an era through fiction to readers, then it becomes our responsibility to explore that time through many different lenses.

In the novel *Akal Chirokal*, written about the Santal communities, she describes their suffering as well as their revolt. She shows how the Santals had fought for their rights without compromising on the question of identity. I was impressed with her nuanced exploration of Santal life as well as that of the tea gardens.

She never compromised when it came to art. And that is how readers will remember her—that she remained true to herself in writing boldly. There was nothing you could fault her on. She approached each topic with the clarity and sobriety it

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deserved. In her books, she intentionally created worlds that were driven by her own social consciousness. Several of her novels were set in different regions of Bangladesh and her descriptions of local life show how she infused her consciousness and experience in her creations.

The ability to turn thoughts and subjects into art is an extraordinary skill, of which Rizia Rahman was a master. She dedicated her life to it. Her novel, *Bong Theke Bangla*, published in 1987, is a remarkable work of Bangla fiction. It is a fine example of interpreting history in a new context and deconstructing life as we know it. Another remarkable novel, *Shilay Shilay Aagun*, was published two years later. In it, too, she

went on to create a world full of fascinating stories and interpretations. I also remember another of her novels, *Aabe Rouwa*, which is set in the days when our Muslin fabric was world famous. It revolves around the production of muslin, the market economy around it and muslin weavers' struggle to exist. In fact, each of Rizia Rahman's fiction bears the stamp of an intellectual mind.

To us, her death is not only an occasion for mourning; it is a deeply painful reminder that we have lost such a writer. If she had been amongst us for longer, our literature would have been further enriched.

I pay my deepest respect to her memories.

Rizia Apa was born in 1939. We had a deep and meaningful friendship. There was a time when we would meet often and reflect on books and other subjects. Looking back at her work, I am reminded of how enormous her contribution has been to our literature. She not only nurtured her own creativity but also took our literature to bigger heights. There was barely any difference between her work, personality and philosophy of life. She was totally devoted to her craft. Her short stories, novels and other writing make her one of the major writers of Bangladeshi literature. She is someone who our next generations will follow when taking Bangla literature forward. Rizia Rahman will live forever in the minds of her readers.

(Translated by anubad.net)

Selina Hossain is a prominent Bangladeshi novelist. Her major works include *Hangor Nodi Grenade* and *Poka Makorer Ghor Bosoti*.