

INTERVIEW

# Behind the scenes of the Dhaka Literary Festival 2023

Literature is our main area of interest. But we also want to highlight areas of intersection between literature and science, politics, pop culture, human rights, and new media. We have 2-3 fantastic panels on OTT this time. We look into the individuals from Bangladesh and abroad who will be relevant to these conversations, who can talk to each other.

SARAH ANJUM BARI

The 10th edition of the Dhaka Literary Festival will take place on January 5-8, 2023. As preparations gear up after a two-year hiatus caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, I spoke with the DLF Directors—author, publisher and businessman, Kazi Anis Ahmed; writer, cultural figure and DLF co-founder, Ahsan Akbar; and writer, poet, entrepreneur, women's rights advocate and DLF producer, Sadaf Saaz.

As directors, each of you come from different backgrounds—literature, business, finance. How does that impact the character of the event?

**Kazi Anis Ahmed:** Sadaf is very strong on science, Bangladeshi culture and non-traditional forms such as folk music, travel culture, children's literature. I probably know a bit more about Bangla literature. Ahsan is very strong on contemporary films, art exhibits. But fundamentally it's about the value of tolerance. We believe in having the sturdiness to sit and listen to someone with whom we may vehemently disagree. But that disagreement must be a rhetorical exercise, never violence or personal attacks.

**Sadaf Saaz:** All three of us are very curious.

people who are doing important work—for instance we're bringing in Sarah Gilbert, who led the research team for the AstraZeneca vaccine. The story of her work is important because it changed all our lives.

The informal connections are also very important. We're bringing in well known editors and publishers—Alexandra Pringle has been the editor of Bloomsbury for the last 18 years. But we're also bringing in niche, up and coming publishers. Our writers can connect with them, get a chance to meet them.

**Kazi Anis Ahmed:** Literature is our main area of interest. But we also want to highlight areas of intersection between literature and science, politics, pop culture, human rights, and new media. We have 2-3 fantastic panels on OTT this time. We look into the individuals from Bangladesh and abroad who will be relevant to these conversations, who can talk to each other. Simply the presence of our audience can impact their areas of interest. It is educational for them too.

**Ahsan Akbar:** We're also trying to brand Bangladesh. Our country tends to get a lot of negative press globally. So we try to look for columnists, curators, cultural impresarios who can talk about the valuable work being done in Bangladesh.

What goes into planning a literary festival?

**Ahsan Akbar:** Lots of caffeine. We prepare the lists of speakers throughout the year. Speakers for 2024 have already been prepared. You have to see which books will be coming out in Spring and Autumn of next year. Agents and publishers send us lists and we choose titles that may be relevant to our audience and titles that our audience might want to discover.

**Kazi Anis Ahmed:** Some of this takes a long time to plan—we had actually invited Orhan Pamuk to DLF back in 2014; he's joining us now in 2022. We have to invite them, help them with visas.

Then there's the actual event, for which Sadaf is the main producer. I take the lead on matters of security, logistics, and government procedures. It scales up immensely when the event nears. And the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been superbly supportive over the years with visas and security for guests.

One of the most critical decisions is moderators. You get the moderators wrong and even with the most famous authors, you can have a very dull, problematic or awkward conversation. We have never underestimated our audience. We've tried to bring very experimental writers, such as Will Self and Yara Rodriguez Fowler, and we've been vindicated.

**Sadaf Saaz:** I'm in the middle of the entire festival tsunami right now. We have almost 100 sessions. Arranging just one of these sessions would take a huge volume of time to confirm the guests, fixing the right topics. Different combinations of people will have different results. You want some known names, you want other people you might not know but will go well in an international panel. But the person you want is not available at the same time slot as others. We have close to 50-60 iterations of these tasks.

You mentioned that there will be a registration fee for visitors this time. Why did you choose to go in this direction?

**Sadaf Saaz:** We all deeply value literature and culture. And it's not cheap. Artists have to be paid. Hardly one or two people in Bangladesh can survive financially as writers. A registration fee would help make it more sustainable. We want to be able to continue this. It's a festival for Dhaka, so rather than have its future depend on a few major sponsors—which is difficult as it is—we should all be able to have a stake in it. **Anis Ahmed:** If you go to the Hay Festival, each session would have a charge of 50-25 pounds, and 50-100 pounds for big name authors. Our audience would have to spend thousands on flights, accommodation, and festival registration fee. But we're bringing these authors to Dhaka, and we aren't charging individual panels. We feel that the audience members who love the DLF so much should be part of the supportive ecosystem. They should take ownership of it along with us, and express that value in a substantive way.

Read the rest of the conversation on The Daily Star website and on Daily Star Books' social media page.

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PHOTOS: DHAKA LITERARY FESTIVAL

At the same time, we also highlight the need to reach some kind of excellence. It doesn't happen overnight, it takes years and years of hard work. We're trying to create a platform where young people can find inspiration, get out of their tunnel vision and be exposed to things they might not normally be exposed to.

How do you select the speakers and sessions for DLF?

**Sadaf Saaz:** It's a mixture. There are some iconic names whose work we've grown up reading, such as Nobel laureates or Booker Prize winners. We want those kinds of conversations to take place in our own country. And then there are up and coming writers and artists whose work deserves to be discovered by more people. Then there are

Then there are authors who have released a book after a long time, for instance Pankaj Mishra, who has published a book after 25 years. So the point is to remain relevant, contemporary and on par with the literary festivals around the world.

How will the 10th DLF explore freedom of speech?

**Kazi Anis Ahmed:** We've been doing this from the very beginning. We've had sessions on the very controversial Digital Security Act. Freedom of expression has both formal and non-formal avenues. What are you allowed to express socially, publicly, and even privately within your family? The issue of self-censorship is a very toxic part of free speech. We will have conversations on all of this.

## REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

# AN ORDINARY DAY with monsters in our jungles

MAISHA SYEDA

A perk of being acquainted with writers is that sometimes—if they trust your judgement enough—they will let you take a peek at their works in progress. That is the angle from which I thought I would write my "review" of Kaiser Kabir's 'Arekti Shadharon Din', one of the short stories from the supernatural thriller collection, *Rohossho Romancho* (Puthipuran, 2022). I opened it in book form though, and a few lines into it, I realised that this wasn't the story I had read previously.

I couldn't help but feel that author Kaiser Kabir put a little bit of his own likes and biases into the character and the world he created. An enthusiast (a gross understatement) of graphic novels, anime, and manga, it's no surprise that the story would have an edgy element to it. Keeping in mind their unconventional publication of *Feluda pastiche*, where one book starts from the front cover, and another from the back, the publisher, Puthipuran, seemed like a good choice to go with these stories that are a little out of the box. I was sucked straight into the rohossho and the romancho of it all.

It caught my attention that the language used in the story was very simple, yet evocative. Kabir's diction is undemanding, but his style of description flush with rich, evocative details and



flowy narration. He talks about t-shirts of rock bands and jeans bought from New Market, about rivers instead of seas that flow through Bangladeshi jungles and villages—ideas and images that create relatability through familiarity.

The author gets right into the meat of the story within the first page, and it wasn't hard to guess what is happening in the story. 'Arekti Shadharon Din' has anything but an ordinary plotline.

It follows the story of a modern-day protagonist taking on the 12 labours of Heracles set in the backdrop of a Bangladeshi village. The end goal

however, is to save a little girl from the village, which comes with other obstacles that the protagonist may face. The story takes a turn from its Greco-Roman motifs into a very South Asian digression.

Even the Bangladeshi protagonist—merely referred to as Agontok (a stranger)—is established as an anti-hero, in contrast with the traditionally heroic Hercules, which I thought was an exciting change. Agontok has an air of disregard, almost disdain, for a fearsome creature like the hydra. The methodology of killing it is a "luxury". It reminded me of Dean from *Supernatural*, with his grungy

persona and indifference to fighting terrible and dangerous creatures.

Even within the limited scope of a short story, Agontok's ruminations, even his reflections of his teacher's advice, which helps him on his adventure, reveal a good opportunity for character development. In fact, this happens simultaneously as the story is also progressing. For me, this spoke volumes about the writer's skill as storyteller, as often I find that, especially in contemporary Bangla Literature, it is usually one or the other.

Some instances, such as the mentor advice to Agontok, may come off as the weaker links of the story. Where there was scope to shed some real depth into the protagonist's history, these attempts at wisdom sound rather generic. For an older audience, it can fall short of impressing readers, a younger audience (quite young, dare I say), may overlook this.

Nevertheless, it was fascinating to see what it would be like if minotaurs, basilisks, and Medusa existed in a remote jungle in Bangladesh; the adaptation of Greco-Roman mythology in a familiar setting was thoroughly entertaining, and made for an action-packed, thrilling adventure that ended in a very cryptic ending that I did not see coming.

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and the Sub editor of Daily Star Books.

THE SHELF

## 5 books to read on Victory Day

HIRSHIK ROY

With Bangladesh celebrating its 51st Victory Day on December 16, these 2022 releases explore the history and legacy of the war.



**Smritir Pataye**  
**Muktiyuddho O**  
**Sonakanda**  
**Nasir Uddin Ahmed**  
*Anannya* (2022)

Written by freedom-fighter Nasir Uddin Ahmed, this memoir talks about his experiences fighting in the Liberation War; the historical and sociocultural shifts in his birthplace, Sonakanda; and his university days at Jahangirnagar University.

The candidness with which the book is written enables the author to shed light on various socio-political issues and readers get a feel of the real life implications as per his observations.

**Shurjo's Clan**  
**Iffat Nawaz**  
*Penguin Random House India* (2022)

Bangladeshi-American writer Iffat Nawaz's debut novel *Shurjo's Clan* tells the story of a young girl growing up in the newly formed country of Bangladesh.

With the mingling of magical realism and history, the story follows the adventures of a family as they migrate to East Bengal after the Partition in 1947 and experience the horrors of the Liberation War in 1971. The book vividly reimagines the struggles the family has to face in a country born into sorrow.



**Porobashe Bondhu Amar**  
**Arif Rahman**  
*Granthik Prokashon* (2022)

The book covers the crucial role of the Bangladeshi diaspora and the international community during the Liberation War in garnering international attention and help for the ailing country. With the goal of making their contributions more known within the younger generation, the book discusses multiple

people from the international community, from doctors to diplomats, who were a part of the war, in the form of stories written in very accessible language.

**Narider Ekattor**  
**Afsaan Chowdhury**  
*The University Press Limited* (2022)

Written by the recipient of the Bangla Academy Award in 2018, Afsan Chowdhury's book narrates the multifaceted encounters faced by women during the Liberation War.

From the horrors of rape and torture in the hands of Pakistani soldiers to the important roles played as the ones actively fighting in the war, the book attempts to shatter the previously held stereotypes on women's role during the time of the war by adding newer dimensions to the commonly held narrative.



**Mujibnagar Government O Bortoman Bangladesh**  
**Akbar Ali Khan Prothoma**  
*Prokashon* (2022)

In his book *Mujibnagar Shorakar O Bortoman Bangladesh*, the late economist and bureaucrat Akbar Ali Khan discusses the urgent formation of the Mujibnagar government during the Liberation War and how the government has evolved over the years.

He shares his experiences of being at the helm of various government entities throughout the years and talks about how they have changed since the establishment of the Mujibnagar government will fascinate anyone interested in the history of the Liberation War.