

INTERVIEW

Three literary walks



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA; PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

That Booker-winner Shehan Karunatilaka is approachable has been the topic of conversation among most DLF visitors this past week. At his suggestion, upon my asking for a quick chat, we make a silent beeline for the parking lot and find two chairs in an abandoned, parrot green book stall.

SARAH ANJUM BARI

‘Should a Books page be apolitical?’

“Can I be really blunt? Features sections by and large are handed out to women. That’s the only reason it is seen as ‘soft.’”

Nilanjana S Roy has authored three novels, *The Wildings*, *The Hundred Names of Darkness* and this year’s *Black River*, but it is *The Girl Who Ate Books*, her collection of essays on reading, which told me we would have much to talk about if we ever met. The hunch was right—as a columnist of books at the *Financial Times’* Life and Arts section, she tells me that “a book review gives a book a home, a place.”

We have this conversation as she begins to leave the Bangla Academy on the penultimate day of the Dhaka Lit Fest. She had said something in her session on ‘Culture Wars’ a day earlier which struck me—how Books pages are (incorrectly) expected to be the “unpolitical” part of a newspaper. Could we talk about it? She suggests we take a walk.

“In India and in the UK, the moment people started to realise that Books pages are the ‘ideas’ pages, they started to be passed back to male editors. And then again you have to fight for your space”, she says as soon as I bring the issue up.

We delve deeper: “What you’re doing with a Books page is creating a running history of the ideas and the parallel history or the imagination of a country. You’re not looking to question and knock the book out of attention as much as you’re trying to say, What kind of creature is this? Of what family? What tradition?”

It’s a challenge. You have 52 weeks in the year, and if you have a monthly or weekly Books page, that’s 12 or 52 chances to identify not just the most popular books—as important as that is—but also the books in your time that are going to last for another generation.”

How do you pair books with the right reviewer? And how do you decide who your readers are?

“[With reviews] I look for something that is seen as non defensive expertise”, she responds. “Somebody who is generous with their expertise and yet is dispassionate enough to not get carried away.

With the *FT*, readership is global. You can’t write a review of one of the great London authors with in jokes and references. If you can simultaneously write for the reader in Dhaka and a reader who is out in one of the smallest villages you can think of but who picks up *The Daily Star*, somewhere in there is your sweet spot.”

We talk some more about the intense process of writing book reviews—the art that goes into crafting each of its sentences, but the snarl of Suhrawardy Udyan’s traffic takes over as she exits Bangla Academy, and I turn back.

‘Like sourdough, Tomb of Sand continues to expand’

Another day, another hectic exit from the Bangla Academy auditorium. There is daylight this time, so the interruptions are more energetic, as hordes of readers want their copies signed by Daisy Rockwell, the American translator of Geetanjali Shree’s 2022 International Booker Prize-winning *Tomb of Sand*—the first novel in a Hindi language to win the prize.

Daisy Rockwell hasn’t stopped smiling for days. She tells me she doesn’t care if we run late, or if we stop to talk to people, as long as her daughter walks with us. “She must be exhausted because she’s heard me talk endlessly about the same book.”

But the text certainly merits it—written first as *Ret Samadhi*, Shree’s novel follows Maa as she freezes shut upon her husband’s death, and rises open again to revisit the spaces she left behind during Partition, finding, along the way, love, friendship, a new voice.

What brought you to translating Hindi and Urdu?

“I started studying the languages in college and just fell in love with first Hindi—I felt a strong urge to translate it”, Daisy Rockwell says as we wade through the walkway bordering the Bangla Academy pond.



Nilanjana Roy

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

“I took a course with AK Ramanujan, the famous translator, and he encouraged me to do more translations.”

Since then, she has gotten a PhD in South Asian literature and translated iconic works of literature written in Hindi and Urdu, alongside painting under the alias of Lapata (missing).

One can’t help notice the difference in size between Ret Samadhi and Tomb of Sand. What has it gained in translation?

She laughs and holds up the two paperbacks—one double the size of the other.

“Part of the reason is that for the first English edition, they do all of the books in the same page size at that publisher. So it’s a shorter page than the Hindi and that makes it go longer. The Hindi publishers are trying to save money on paper. For the English I put in page breaks.

So it’s the same book, but our book is very expensive. When it came into English it expanded and then it got the Booker prize and our lives expanded. It’s like sourdough, it’s growing and growing.”

In your session with Rifat Munim,

Geetanjali Shree spoke about how some of the objects in the book (the door, the wall) had turned into characters. But the characters, like Maa, had also turned into objects. How did you work with that as a translator?

“It’s actually very tricky because sometimes you’re not sure if it’s the door or the person that Geetanjali is writing about. In Bangla and Hindi, you can leave out the subject of the sentence. It’s somewhat clearer in English, but I still had to maintain that ambiguity in English as to whether it is a door, or a back, or a person thinking. Sometimes even I myself wouldn’t realise that it was the door until a few drafts in. If you as a translator are surprised, you have to try to surprise the reader.”

You talked about how tedious the process of translating and editing was. What helped retain the pleasure of it?

“It’s like going through a forest until you suddenly come to a clearing. You just have to keep slogging and then suddenly it starts to come alive, and then you interact with it very differently when it becomes an English text that you’re editing.

The beginning is joyful and the end is joyful. Translators have to be very patient people”, Daisy Rockwell concludes before she, too, is lost in the crowd.

‘Until you have a voice, the writing doesn’t exist’

That Shehan Karunatilaka is approachable has been the topic of conversation among most DLF visitors this past week. We’ve seen him unwind on the grass, stroll through the stalls, signing copies of his 2022 Booker-winning novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, and posing for photos with fans even when the queues seemed to become unending. And so there I was at the exit to the auditorium again, after sunset this time, hoping to score a hatrick with these literary walks. The Sri Lankan author of fiction and children’s books—who by day works in advertising—decides to change things up. At his suggestion, we make a silent beeline for the parking lot and find two chairs in an abandoned, parrot green book stall.

Seven Moons splits the protagonist from his own voice, gives his ghost the power to whisper into ears, hovering over people’s shoulders. Why do voices interest you so much?

“For work I write websites, feature articles. I can have a plot, or I might have an idea and I can keep writing around it, but until I find a voice I don’t consider it a project.”

You’ve talked about how writing the book as a ghost story was a safe choice. Did you orchestrate it in any way that it reflects more contemporary issues of Sri Lanka?

“There is a character called Rajapaksa. This is a delicious fact that I found—that in ‘89, Mahendra Rajapaksa was a human rights activist who was going to Geneva with the mothers, holding up photographs, saying that these are the atrocities my government is doing. And I put that in because it was historically accurate. One of the characters says, Let Rajapaksa run a war, let’s see how he does. It’s ironic that I’m looking from the future talking about this.

I was very clear about my novel *Chinaman*, that it was based in 1996–1999. Purposely I didn’t watch any modern cricket when I was writing that. Same with this—I kept it to 1990. Now it’s going to be read in 2023 and people are going to look for parallels, but I don’t know if I planted any clues on purpose.”

The tug between remembering and forgetting drives the novel forward. For you as the author, was it also about remembering these events in Sri Lanka or processing them and moving on?

“It was supposed to be an amnesia tale, like Jason Bourne. Maali remembers bits of it and it comes to him in bodily aches. But then it also became a revenge tale and a love story. It was also about how much Sri Lanka remembers and forgets.”

Do you have any advice for independent writers to navigate censorship in South Asia, since you were able to do that with your book?

“Someone asked me, why don’t your detective stories have any detectives? And I thought that in our part of the world, our detectives are useless. Our cases, our murders are unsolved or repressed. So it seemed fake for me to invent a Poirot or Sherlock Holmes for Sri Lanka. It seemed more realistic that it’s the journalist who unearths the truth, puts themselves in danger and sometimes pays the price. So my self-preservation technique is that I hide behind fiction.”

Finally, any literary ghosts that you think are or should be hovering over your shoulder?

“Uncle Kurt Vonnegut is always the ghost that is in my ear. So the great writers perhaps. But other than that, no, I don’t want to hang out with ghosts!”

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FEATURE

Local publishers, sales, AND THE 2023 DHAKA LIT FEST

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

The leafy Bangla Academy compound teems with Bangladeshis and foreigners throughout the duration of Dhaka Lit Fest every year. Book stalls, pop-up artisan stores, and food stands line the periphery. Such an arrangement seems favourable for business owners to attract customers. In this light, how did local publishers fare at the 2023 Dhaka Lit Fest?

The event has been a resounding success for some publishers like Cosmos Books. They usually specialise in coffee table books that are of visual interest and pertinent to areas of arts, archaeology, architecture, travel, and photography, among others. Ali Sina, in-charge of Business Development at Cosmos, says, “We gather a decent number of customers through such events; our target audience is typically found among the crowds there because our books tend to be quite expensive. Not everyone is interested in spending on such books with the exception of some passionate customers.”

The same observation holds true for Nymphaea Publication, a publishing house that has been working for the past 23 years to showcase Bangladesh to an international audience. The publisher’s 2021 hit title, a collection of 50 Bangladeshi short stories, *When The Mango Tree Blossomed* (edited by Niaz Zaman), is a glaring testament in this regard. Karunangshu Barua, the publisher, says, “This was our first time at Dhaka Lit Fest. We saw that foreigners have an immense interest to learn about Bangladesh. The sales we achieve at Ekushey Boi Mela throughout a month, we almost achieved the same figures at Dhaka Lit Fest in only 4 days. Our sales were lower



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

than expected at Boi Mela because our target audience was absent. Our collection of coffee table books interests foreigners a lot. We are trying to build a platform to showcase the Bangladeshi success story via various angles—economists, historians, journalists, archaeologists, and other specialists are our primary authors.”

For some publishers, the scenario hadn’t been as rosy.

Zakir Hossen, Manager at Prothoma, says, “Other years, it was open for all. This year a ticketing system was imposed. As such, sales were lower than expected.”

The dismay is shared by Journeyman Books, Writers.ink, ULAB Press, and Agami

Prokashoni.

Nazneen Haque Mimi from Journeyman says, “We didn’t sell much even though we publish books in the English language. I think one significant reason was the introduction of fees. However, we were able to showcase our work to many people.”

The complaint about fees was also

evident in Agami Prokashoni’s experience. Jannat, assistant publication officer, said, “We publish books by prominent intellectuals of the country, and yet, we couldn’t gather customers due to the fees.”

Niaz Zaman from Writers.ink, who is a renowned professor, author, and editor, gives a different perspective regarding the lukewarm response some publishers received. “People mostly flock to stores that sell prominent, especially international, books, like Bookworm Bangladesh. They don’t have the same level of interest in buying from local publishers”, she stated.

As for how the festival could accommodate some low-budget local publishers with ease, Nazneen Haque says, “Paying 30,000 BDT for a stall for 4 days wasn’t feasible for us. It would have been understandable if the program was held at a five-star hotel like the Radisson. But Bangla Academy is public property, and charging so much slows us down. Moreover, we have four-five teams dedicated to producing and selling each book. From editing to designing to printing, the investment is already high.”

This perspective strikes a chord with the dilemma surrounding the idea of monetising literature in a country like Bangladesh, where the financially well-off have relatively more avenues to enjoy the arts industry. On one hand, small local publishers find themselves in financial constraints owing to the fees. On the other hand, a high-profile literature festival cannot sustain itself financially without commercialising certain aspects in the face of a global economic crisis.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.