

DHAKA LIT FEST 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

‘KHANDITO NAZRUL’

Why he is and should be relevant

With Manmay Zafar as moderator, Nashid Kamal, Rachel McDermott and Winston E Langley discuss the resurgence in Nazrul studies in Bangladeshi academia and beyond.



COLLAGE: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

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ABDULLAH RAYHAN

“Scheherazade from Arabian Nights had more time than I have today, you know?” The moderator Manmay Zafar, who is Assistant Professor of English at Jahangirnagar University, started the 10th Dhaka Lit Fest’s session on Kazi Nazrul Islam with a joke about the small amount of time he could allow each speaker. But the 15 minutes each of the speakers got on January 6, Day 2 of the DLF, were enough for the audience to discover Nazrul in new lights.

Singer and translator Nashid Kamal talked about how Nazrul’s creations have vastly influenced her life. In addition to her family connections with Nazrul, she has felt obliged to carry his legacy because she discovered all the ways his literary endeavours attempted to remove enmity from society. By using a wide range of references from different religions and bringing together various religious

fiction within the same line, Nazrul created a bridge between distinct groups. However, as Nashid Kamal explained, this has also made it challenging to translate Nazrul. His words have diverse connotations, making it complicated to find equivalent vocabulary for them in other languages.

Rachel McDermott, Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard College, added to the discussion, specifying factors that made it difficult for the study of ‘khandita Nazrul’ to rise in the west.

The difficulty of translation is one of the reasons why he is not discussed as extensively as Tagore in the west, she explained. She, too, agreed that Nazrul is difficult to translate because of not only the references from other languages, but grammatical issues as well. Yet the study of Nazrul has been flourishing in recent times, and the credit goes to the encouragement from Bangladesh, she expressed.

Though McDermott herself admitted that her main interest lies in Nazrul’s Shyama-sangeet, she pointed out the problem with his selective acceptance. “Nazrul has become ‘khandito’”, she said—the perception of Nazrul changes depending on the geopolitical location. Some consider him to be Islamic, while some see him as a secular poet. Just one example is how a particular type of songs by the national poet was popular in Bangladesh when she first started studying his work, while in India, it was mainly the Shyama Sangeet that were widely appreciated.

In her years of research on Nazrul, Professor McDermott has found that this attempt to divide Nazrul has always been there. The elites attempted to forge him into one Pakistan. There was an apparent attempt to de-Hindunise him. His works focusing on ‘Hindu ideas’, or works that brought Hindus and Muslims together, were rejected by many publishers. In some cases, certain words were changed to allow the diction to satisfy Islamic sentiments. Although Nazrul could save his works from the influence of political pollution during the time when he was active, he couldn’t preserve the essential integrities and authenticity after he became a ‘blank slate’ in the later period, she explained.

Fortunately, nothing could prevent his essence from surviving these attempts. Winston E Langley, journalist and Emeritus Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Massachusetts Boston, pointed out that Nazrul is “one of the greatest advocates of human rights among poets”, and this will keep him alive forever. Nazrul’s emphasis on self-identity, spirituality, and optimism has secured him a permanent place in society. Professor Langley agreed that Nazrul is not as widely known as he ought to be, but he believes this is changing. As evidence to support this claim, he mentioned that Hammaraskjold High School, a cosmopolitan high school in Canada, has Nazrul in their curriculum. This is a hint that the study of his work in the west has already begun and will flourish in the future.

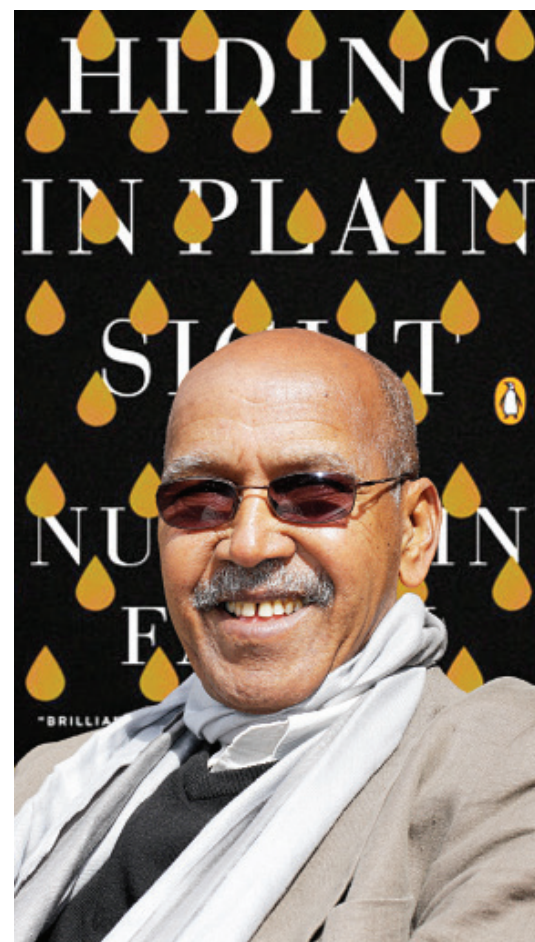
Professor Langley has noticed interesting similarities between Nazrul and some revered western figures. What Nazrul and Robert Burns, the national poet of Scotland, have in common is comparable backgrounds, meagre lifestyles, and a tendency to use local language rather than following the established norm. Most importantly, both their contemporary academic elites rejected them.

Nazrul was a religious existentialist, Professor Langley pointed out, comparable with Søren Kierkegaard. He also compared Nazrul to Neruda for their affinity for ordinary objects and ordinary people. In addition, he explained that Nazrul can be found in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel, *Paradise*.

A brief Q&A session after the discussion was followed by Nashid Kamal’s short yet mellifluously astounding performance of one of the famous Nazrul songs, “Laili tomar eshechhe firia.”

This session offered an extensive understanding of why Nazrul is essential, necessary, and relevant. As moderator Manmay Zafar explained, not only will Nazrul forever be relevant, we need him to be relevant in our society because where there lies diversity, advocacy of unity is essential.

Abdullah Rayhan is studying English Literature at Jahangirnagar University.



FEATURE

On discovering Somali novelist, Nuruddin Farah, at the Dhaka Lit Fest

USRAAT FAHMIDAH

On each edition of the Dhaka Lit Fest, you leave having discovered a brilliant author. Last time, it was the humorous and adorable Jan Blake whose performance storytelling left me captivated.

Among the luminaries on the DLF panel this year, it was Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah’s candour and humour that left an impression on me. For those unfamiliar with his work, Farah’s debut novel, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), is considered “one of the cornerstones of modern East African literature”. In his panel on ‘Lost Country, Last Words’, Farah discussed the trajectory of his life and literary journey with writer, publisher and DLF Director K Anis Ahmed.

It is the story of Ebla’s struggle to maintain her identity and autonomy in a patriarchal society where women are treated as commodities. For a book like that to come out in 1970 was revolutionary in itself.

Nuruddin Farah was born to a merchant father and poet mother in Somalia. Three years after Somalia’s independence, he had to flee. He went to university in India and the UK and has lived in different parts of the world. This has made him a citizen of the world, but he continues to write about Somalia.

As a young man, Nuruddin Farah studied English, Arabic and Amharic. Asked by K Anis Ahmed as to why he writes in English, Farah shared that it was also possible for him to write in Italian and Arabic.

“I found that I was very very lucky in discovering a typewriter that was strong enough to withstand the weight of my fingers. Whenever I tried the Italian typewriter, it broke under the weight of my fingers”, he recalled with a touch of wit. “The other thing that was very important was that my intellectual makeup, in terms of reading and understanding literature, were either in Arabic or English.”

His first book was revolutionary for multiple reasons. Being a man, he was writing in a woman’s voice. His book is about a young orphan, Ebla, who flees her home in rural Somalia after discovering that her grandfather has arranged for her to marry an older man. It is the story of Ebla’s struggle to maintain her identity and autonomy in a patriarchal society where women are treated as commodities. For a book like that to come out in 1970 was revolutionary.

With over 13 novels written, Farah has also authored essays and plays since then. “When I count my children, I have more than 13”, he said jokingly.

Throughout the session, I noticed the 77-year-old take several pauses before answering in a thoughtful manner while the crowd listened intently. He has a vigour to the way he speaks that, as a young listener, I could not help but admire.

How did he end up studying in India? The author shared that he came looking for spirituality and inner peace—an illusion which quickly broke as soon as he reached the country. So, he made the best use of the bad hand he was dealt with and completed his education there.

Farah describes his younger self as a “rebellious” spirit.

“Writing the first book is easy”, he said. “Writing the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh becomes more and more difficult. Because you move away from your own life and into the lives of others and to a world created through one’s imagination and so on”, he shared.

“One way to keep my sanity is to keep busy writing”, he added.

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DHAKA LIT FEST 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

Goddesses of Bengal: The living myth of Devi Manasa, Bon Bibi and more

Kaiser Haq and Rachel McDermott with Shamsad Mortuza on January 6, Day 2 of the Dhaka Lit Fest

MALIHA HUQ

Many ancient Bengali tales and folklores have revolved around the archetypes of divine feminine energies. These energies are represented as different forms of goddesses. Apart from their theological importance, goddesses have easily accessible mythical archetypes. Their stories of evolution, interaction and emotional entanglement with human beings have continued to be areas of great interest to people.

The cosmology of goddesses in the orient versus the occident was a topic of discussion in ‘Goddesses of Bengal’, a session with Kaiser Haq, poet, critic, translator, writer and Professor of English at ULAB, and Rachel McDermott, Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Columbia University, moderated by Shamsad Mortuza, educator, poet, translator, columnist and Professor of English at the University of Dhaka.

Professor McDermott finds great interest in the relationship of a community to their goddess, be it Durga, Kali or Jagatdhatri. “You can ask for her refuge, you can express your anger, you can complain about your frustrations—from getting your son into medical school to attaining Moksha, goddesses are always there for you.”

There is a sort of reimagining of the meaning of their image and different portrayals in modern socio political situations. Remythologizing is bound to happen for living cultures. Misappropriation can come along with these situations. The reason being, stories are powerful; stories mean something to people. One story can have multiple interpretations based on the onlookers’ motive and projection.

From a religious aspect, South Asian Hindus have been worshipping goddesses since the beginning of Sanskrit cosmopolis. Additionally, everyone in the South Asian region and beyond are connected to the myths of



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

these goddesses. “Myths are still a living part of the culture here. Stories of the folk goddesses are so relevant that they have become a part of popular culture as films, songs, dramas, etc. One good example is the myth of Behula and Lakhindar from *Manasamangal*”, said Professor Kaiser Haq, who has retold the myth of the Manasa goddess in prose form in *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

Every monsoon season in Mymensingh, a folk theatre troupe performs *Manasamangal*, Haq points out. They go seven bends in the nearby river as part of the Mangal Kavya ritual. What is most interesting is that all the performers there are Muslims and two among them claim to be Hajis. This is almost a kind of a public ceremony where the audience and performers are deeply connected with each other through the legend of Manasa. Unfortunately, modern media has replaced the intimacy of these performances, a terrain previously occupied by folk cultural practitioners. Haq added, “These folklores and performative arts can only be imagined in their truest forms at a village setting.”

Kaiser Haq further discussed the legend of *Manasamangal*, “The

deities of the *Mangal Kavyas* have a more folk background. They have human attributes of greed, lust, jealousy, deceit and easily bend the rules of conduct as opposed to the traditional Aryan gods.”

Shiva, for instance, as described in the Brahmin tradition, is a great ascetic, yogi and master of fertility. In *Mangal Kavya*, however, Shiva is depicted as “a bhanga addict and a lecher with multiple dalliances.”

“Folk literature has a typical way of setting up the traditional gods and goddesses. The North Indian god, Shiva is very different from the Shiva in Bengali folklores.” Manasa, the snake goddess, was born out of Shiva’s semen unintentionally and thus, not readily recognized as a goddess. Manasa is known to be the goddess for low caste Hindus. Shaivism is generally associated with the upper class Hindus. Chand Sadagar from *Manasamangal* is a representative of the upper class. He was a devotee of Shiva and the tragic hero of *Mangal Kavya*. Representation of these deities through folklores is a way of marrying the Brahmin tradition with the indigenous folk tradition. And *Manasamangal* is not merely a folklore; it is a sociological drama, a class conflict is going on here.

“For Muslim Bengalis, the pujas are

just colourful events”, said Haq. But the regional myths of these goddesses are meaningful to many non-Hindus. The myth of Bonbibi and Dakshin Roy is very popular in the Sundarbans area. Amitav Ghosh has written about the legend of Bonbibi in his novel, *Gun Island* and his verse retelling of the folk epic in *Junglenama*. Shamsad Mortuza pointed out that Bonbibi is identified as the prophet’s daughter, Fatima by many Muslims of the Sundarbans region. To which Kaiser Haq responded, “People believe in the regional myths irrespective of their religion. For people living in Sundarbans, Bonbibi is real. Paying a visit to Bonbibi’s temple and asking for her blessings before entering the forest is a must for them.”

“The anthropomorphism of the goddess is actually in some sense a justification for or a mirroring of or an opportunity to experience the feelings that people feel about their own daughters”, McDermott pointed out while discussing the history of the Durga Puja, which originated in the 18th century around the story of a little girl named Uma, who got married to Shiva and left for Kailash. Every year, Uma comes back to her parents’ home for three days. It also became a norm at around that time for married women to return to their parents’ homes during Durga puja. “But the remythologizing of goddesses happens over time, especially if you think about how they are used as commentary in modern politics, political cartoons, social situations, etc.”

However, “there is absolutely no necessary relationship between the worship of goddesses and the treatment of women”, she said. “Think of Italy, which has lots of virgin Marys and lots of machismo. Just because one reveres a goddess in the heavens doesn’t necessarily mean that you treat women well. It can help, but there are field studies that show both sides of this.”

Maliha Huq teaches English at DPS STS School, Dhaka.