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INTERVIEW

Foreign literature is a very precious tool for peace

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SARAH ANJUM BARI

Daily Star Books' panel on January 8, Day 4 of the Dhaka Lit Fest sought to take the audience to a more existential aspect of what the festival attempts to do. Who chooses which stories deserve to become books? Who chooses whether news of those books will even reach readers? Does book criticism truly help the flow and business of literature within and across national borders?

Moderated by DS Books Editor, Sarah Anjum Bari, the panel included writer, editor, translator, critic, and academic Fakrul Alam; French author, journalist and literary critic Florence Noiville; researcher and academic Mashrur Shahid Hossain; and Annette Köhn, a Berlin-based graphic designer, illustrator and publisher of young and emerging artists.

What are some of the factors that come up when we're deciding the 'worth' of a book?

Fakrul Alam: With a good review, you can tell that a book has stirred a reader's imagination. There are two kinds of book reviews in Bangladesh—one that, like a magic carpet, takes you somewhere else, and the other is when somebody you know has written a book and they dump it on you. I can say no to some, but it's something that you have to do.

Annette Köhn: For me the worth of a

book is that it has to be touching—you learn about a part of the author that is inside the story. The second is that it helps you learn something about a topic.

Mashrur Shahid Hossain: The very nature of the book defines whether it is worth reading and reviewing. I would like to differentiate between book reviews that appear right after a book is published—its major objective is to engage and inform the reader to read it or not read it, and literary criticism—which has more methodical rigour. The point is whether the book brings to the fore something new and something relatively less explored. As Annette pointed out, whether it is well presented is also important in order to make the book engaging for a reader.

Florence Noiville, as editor of foreign fiction for *Le Monde*, you're trying to bring the vast world of literature to your local readership. Fakrul Sir, you were also Literary Editor of *The Daily Star*. How do you curate your content?

Florence Noiville: The readership is there, and it is not the same readership as for *The Guardian* or the *TLS*. Except that I do not know exactly who they are. I make suggestions and the editor-in-chief has the final cut. But what I'm really trying to do is to not favour too much of the Anglophone world, meaning the white, classical English and American. We tend to be

overwhelmed by translations. What is important is to bring, as you said, the entire world in those pages. In the long run, foreign literature is also a very precious tool for peace. It helps you get under the skin of the other.

Fakrul Alam: For me, sometimes it depended on what books were submitted to us. So sometimes it was a book that I thought would be good for *The Daily Star* readership. Occasionally we would experiment with a book—such as a poetry book written in Bangla.

I think book reviews should also be about going back to classics and reacquainting it with audiences.

Florence Noiville: I completely agree. If Tagore were republished by Galimard, that is something I would want to highlight. Forgetfulness is very common among us all and it's important to make links between authors of now and the past.

I also pay attention to small presses—they are the ones who make the discoveries and take all the risks.

Media coverage is not the only way we find out about books. First, we study them in classrooms. How much are we able to innovate our school and university syllabi in order to nurture readers?

Mashrur Shahid Hossain: How many of our hundreds of national and international authors are covered in

our textbooks? We choose a certain number of authors and we consider them representative of a language or a culture. The very first choice of what to read is made by curriculum makers. The question to ask here is whether these curriculum makers incorporate literary critics. It is the critic who helps to develop or generate a literary and cultural tradition of a country. Which author we will use to be proud of our country, which author we will learn from about other countries, that is somehow defined and conditioned by the choice of writers and texts that we cover in our syllabi.

We have noticed some problems in the recent reconfiguration of our syllabi regarding writers from which language, religion, or ethnicity will be included or excluded. When a particular ethnicity or religion is represented in a curriculum, that gives us the idea that they do not exist. For instance, how many non-Bangla writers do we accommodate in our conception of Bangladeshi literature?

My point is that let us not fake objectivity. If I have a stance, let me make it clear that I have a stance so the reader can decide how they will perceive my choices.

Fakrul Alam: I have more experience selecting texts for Honours and Masters curricula in Bangladeshi universities. So how did I choose? It was based partly on my reading but also on the fact that I was privileged enough to

travel abroad and get books that you wouldn't get here. So over the years of shaping the English department syllabus, I think I have contributed my bit to keeping us occura—with books from recent decades. The best thing to do is international networking. Going back and forth.

How much freedom do university lecturers and even students have in selecting what to read in classrooms?

Fakrul Alam: We have a top-heavy system. I would say that the selection is more nuanced now than before. We have African literature, we have Latin American literature—previously it was only English literature. Cultural studies has also contributed to this widening of the syllabus.

As for students, they can choose if only they read a lot. I just took a national university class for college teachers, and all of them were complaining that no students read. I told them, did you ever ask yourself if you taught them how to read? So I'm not blaming the students at all.

Read the rest of this conversation on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

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FEATURE

The art of moderating literary conversations

NAZIFA RAIDAH

Dhaka Lit Fest swept the netizens of Dhaka till Sunday, January 8, engaging them in stimulating discussions and leaving them with a thought to take away. Viewers pondered, roamed under the open skies (and at times in auditoriums), witnessing discussions of eminent panellists—an event that is quite the rarity in this city.

Behind the flashy lights and names, I witnessed what made the audience attend a particular session, among so many others that went on, and what made them get up and leave a session in between.

And eventually, I figured it all came down to the grip of the moderator.

The goal of a moderator ideally should be to facilitate a productive and respectful conversation among participants, while also ensuring that the discussion stays on topic and is conducted in a professional manner.

Sadaf Saaz, Producer and Co-Director of Dhaka Lit Fest, shares, "We spend a lot of time selecting different speakers for a topic, often putting together seemingly 'unusual' combinations, which spark discussion and debate, and ensure a balance of what they can each bring to the panel."

These are the choices that leave a mark on the audience.

Maitreyi, a writer and visitor to the DLF this year, points out, "In the *Tomb of Sand* session with Geetanjali Shree and Daisy Rockwell, Rifat Munim highlighted how a



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

moderator can be a catalyst to an engaging dialogue between the panellists and the audience, as opposed to each question going off on a different tangent. Their conversation had us rapt with attention."

When asked how he achieved this effect, writer and editor Rifat Munim responds, "When the topic is the book *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree, the objective is to make the author speak about her experiences of writing the book and from there, many relevant aspects come up, which can be broken down further. It's important to research the topic and to familiarise yourself with any relevant background information. This can help to

ensure that the discussion stays on topic and that all participants are on the same page."

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad, Deputy Editor of *MW* magazine and founder of the annual *Sehri* Tales challenge, who was also a speaker and a moderator at DLF, said, "As a panellist, I would expect the moderator to at least have an idea about what I do professionally and what I've been up to, with regards to my work."

Another key aspect is the ability to manage time effectively, ensure that all participants have an opportunity to speak and be prepared to redirect the discussion if any disruptions arise.

This includes being aware of any conflicts or tension that may arise among participants or with the audience, and working to resolve them in a way that is fair and respectful.

Indian politician Mohua Moitra was especially effective with this in her session on 'Settling Scores' with authors Iflat Nawaz, Shehan Karunatilaka, Elizabeth Shick and Vivek Menezes—"Let's remember that they have to be questions", she asserted before opening the floor to the audience.

In interactive sessions especially, it's also important for a moderator to actively listen. This means paying close attention to what participants are saying, and being able to understand their perspectives. This can help identify any areas of confusion or

disagreement, and address them in a way that is respectful and non-confrontational.

"For example, in my sessions [on *Microtales*]", Sabrina Ahmad shares, "we were doing a verbal exercise. I noticed that most of the crowd were too shy to participate. So halfway through the session we decided to change it up and I started walking through the rows of the audience to make the session more lively and informal."

At times, even choosing the seemingly "right" people as moderators doesn't cut it. As a spectator, I've witnessed many moderators who were seemingly well-versed in the topic, lead very mundane sessions—where the conversational flow eventually became quite generalised. Eventually, those sessions were greeted with yawns, as opposed to "oohs and aahs".

"Moderating is an art", Sadaf Saaz reflects, "Despite the best laid plans we have surprises. Some moderators surpass our expectations, and make the sessions brilliant rather than just good. Some may not bring out what we had initially thought—but then manage to take the discussion in a wonderful unanticipated direction."

"We try and choose those who are conceptually clear, understand the breadth of the topic, but also help bring out the nuances", she adds.

Nazifa Raidah is a sub editor at the City desk, The Daily Star.

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