

INTERVIEW

‘Bangladesh has failed to foster an environment that encourages creative and intellectual freedom’: Badruddin Umar

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SHAHAD MUKTADIR

At 91 years old, Badruddin Umar is a fount of knowledge and brazen candour, whose life has run parallel to some of the most formative moments in the history of this subcontinent. As a writer, historian, Marxist theorist, and political activist, Umar has worked unceasingly to document an unfiltered history of Bangladesh, while foregrounding the struggles of the underprivileged in the face of political tyranny. In a career spanning over six decades, his contributions to the Bengali literary and historical canon through publications such as *Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Tatkaleen Rajneeti*, *The Emergence of Bangladesh*, and his five-volume autobiography, *Amar Jibon*, are unmatched.

“I don’t like some of these questions,” Badruddin Umar says as he holds my phone inches from his face. His eyesight and hearing are not what they used to be. I had handed him the questionnaire, and he tsked reprovingly as he went down the list. “Questions like ‘what books inspired me’ or ‘what five or ten Bengali books I would recommend to others’ irk me,” he said, handing me back my phone, “I’m not inspired by any one in particular, I’ve read thousands of things and all of those have shaped my thoughts and ideas. As for book recommendations, the Bengali literary canon is rich. Start anywhere, read the classics; read Rabindranath, Sharatchandra, Tarashankar. I don’t have any particular recommendations.”

I went to meet Badruddin Umar at his residence in Mirpur, where he lives with his wife and youngest daughter. I was invited into his well-kept but relatively austere living room for the interview. He was dressed casually in a white fatua and lungi, and was putting on his hearing aids as I sat down, although I have doubts about their efficacy. His audiovisual senses might have declined over the years, but his blazing wit and encyclopaedic knowledge of Bengali history and literature seems to have only sharpened with age. He found it easier to read the questions rather than have me verbally ask them—I would hand him my phone, he would read the question, and then proceed to answer. He speaks with incredible clarity, and as he speaks his gaze and gestures seem to follow the individual threads of a tapestry of experiences



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

accumulated over a long and storied life.

How have you seen the writing in Bangladesh evolve over the last 50 years?

How writers and their consciousness evolve in a country is largely dependent on that society’s intellectual development, their freedom of expression, and if their intellectual development is encouraged or discouraged. Since the Liberation War, Bangladesh has failed to foster an environment that encourages creative and intellectual freedom. On top of that, our education system has proven to be grossly inadequate to provide children with the tools that allow for creative self-expression. What this means is that we have been unable to maintain the tradition of writing present during the postwar era, and the expectation that we would receive new and diverse writing from young authors in the 1980s and 1990s has fallen flat.

So, the general practice and promotion of culture and education has not only been ignored, but antagonised. The state has largely been responsible for this alarming condition, and it is foolish to expect good or great writing to emerge in this environment.

Does history and its mediation affect people’s beliefs and their forms of expression?

One of the biggest mistakes we have made and continue to make is to ignore history, and downplay its significance in dictating the present and the future. History is of utmost importance because it provides perspective. It provides a lens to perceive the world around us, and to better grasp why things work the way they do. History is being severely ignored in our current education system, and I understand why—the study of history reveals unsavoury truths about our current world and the power structures that we are subject to. Progress in every layer of society happens when people understand who they are and where they stand, and this in turn informs literary and artistic expression.

Do you believe our current political climate stifles creativity and forms of expression? How can writers and creators challenge censorship and other forms of oppression?

The current political environment presents many obstacles to free speech and literary expression. How a writer works within these constraints depends on their personal views, how they perceive resistance, and if they are willing to compromise in the face of adversity. Writing in its purest essence comes from individual expression, and individuality is resistance—it is the ability to resist what other people want you to be and

do. I have personally held a ‘come what may’ attitude all my life, and have never let adversity suppress me. A good writer must have integrity, and that means having the ability and willingness to overcome challenges placed before them without compromising their vision.

What is fiction’s role in establishing and promoting social ideas?

Fiction absolutely plays an instrumental role in proliferating ideas, and not just writing; people are driven and motivated by songs, paintings, plays, and movies. Fiction might be ‘made-up’ or imaginary, but they are based on the matrix of realities we all experience, the relationships and conflict between people, and how people address the prevalent issues in the world. If fiction does not reflect social realities, it has no literary value. So, fiction should be imaginative, but even that imagination must be bound within a framework of social and cultural realities.

Are there any Bangladeshi writers of fiction or nonfiction that you believe deserve wider recognition? What kind of writing do you believe is missing from the Bangladeshi literary canon?

There have been a handful of prominent writers such as Hasan Azizul Huq, Shawkat Ali, Akhteruzzaman Elias, and Shantanu Kaiser over the years—but you’ll notice that they all pre-date the

Liberation War. Except for a few isolated examples, I don’t believe any writer born after ’71 has produced anything of literary or historical significance. Any literary critic must examine the cause of this vacuum, because a literary critic cannot divorce literature from the society that produces it. Society is a collective and communal entity, and the fiction and nonfiction that has been written in the aftermath of the Liberation War must also be examined within the social conditions that produced it.

How would you like Bangladeshi writing to evolve over the next few years?

Well, what I want is irrelevant, but I could talk about how it should ideally evolve. I would primarily want something that has social value, and this transcends genres. Depending on how it is written, even a romantic poem can have social significance. There are two elements without which no writing, either fiction or nonfiction, can be considered good or worthwhile—substance and artistic merit. A writer must have something to say, and they must say it with an artistic expression of language and form.

I also hope to see writing that reflects social development—good writing should encapsulate progress or the potential for future progress, and avoid unanalytically harping on about the past. So, I want to see grounded writing that elevates human thought and acts as a catalyst for social progress.

In the case of nonfiction, language and how it is used is paramount. Language is the vessel for thought, so the language being used must fit the content and vice versa. This is how language develops—new words are introduced, archaic expressions are retired, and people discover and rediscover novel ways of utilisation. So, just like fiction, you cannot ignore language when writing nonfiction. I often come across Bangladeshi texts where the language that the author has decided to use does not align with the gravitas of the content. To me, it seems that seriousness has disappeared from the Bengali middle class, including their intellectuals.

This interview has been edited for brevity, and translated from the Bangla by the interviewer. Find the longer version of the conversation on The Daily Star website and on the ‘Star Books and Literature’ social media pages.

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FICTION

CATCHING LILIES

NAZIFA RAIDAH

“Listen, I have a plan but you have to say yes,” said Naya as her eyes traced Noorie’s computer screen, checking to see if she finished typing the rest of the sentence. With a last click on the full stop, Noorie bent backward to see Naya’s face gleaming.

“I wonder what bad idea you’re going to spill now,” said Noorie, as she gave away a smile to Naya, the kind which neither you nor I, but only two close compatriots could decode—a smile that spoke: ‘this will be interesting’.

“I want you to hear me out first before you start breaking it down into tiny little itty bitty pieces and then squeeze the spontaneity out of it,” said Naya, holding back an eye roll.

“Naya, I’m all ears and I’m here to....” Before Noorie could finish, Naya started, “The plan is we go out wandering in the old University after our shifts are over.”

Although it fled in a few brief moments, time seemed to operate in periods between Naya and Noorie’s glance, as though they had somehow finished an entire conversation without a single exchange of words.

“I’m in!” Noorie said. Naya seemed pleased.

“So, we’ll take a bus to the outskirts and I’ll bring the snacks and drinks,” says Naya, hyping her up. But truthfully, there were no additions required. The two had hardly any time to breathe since their 5-10 shifts started. Their social lives had been obliterated; any shot of respite in that week would be the treacherous after hours—a time that was reserved for heavy vehicles to enter the city and the vermins that lurked within the streets in search of people’s wallets.

And so, our brave duo set out into the night on a Monday, riding on what should be called a ‘public-carrying metal box with wheels’ instead of a bus.

After taking their seats, Naya popped out two buns and some juice, exclaiming “time for dinner” and passing one to Noorie.

“I have some mishti to add to the bite,” said Naya, taking a big bite.

“What are we, kings? This is fantastic!” Noorie chirped approvingly.

“Did I tell you my ex started texting me again? It’s always in the middle of the night. I mean, where was all this interest when I was still into him?” Naya asked Noorie without expecting an answer.

“I think it’s just common psychology. A child only realises he wants the toy he’s ignored when some other kid decides to take an interest,” Noorie replied. They burst out laughing.

“You’re right. He’s a total man-child. But in all honesty, I have to give it to him. He really knows my taste in music. These days, whenever I’m looking for new music, I just go to our chats, and voila! I have five new songs that I love,” said Naya.

“Honestly, Naya, don’t let this Pied Piper back in your head. You know he’ll be asking you out again soon enough,” Noorie said as she took a sip from the water bottle to make it easier to swallow the dry bread.

Standing in the middle of the crossroads of the campus, the two seemed unable to decide. The only source of light was the lamp posts lining the roads. They graduated from this place, were veterans, but the cloak of darkness seemed to confuse them still.

“I know, I know! Oh! We’re here. Get your things, Noor.” Naya got off her seat, Noorie quickly followed.

The grandeur of the university hit them as soon as they got off the bus. They took a few moments to take it all in.

“Does the gate seem smaller now somehow?” asked Noorie.



ARTWORK: NAZIFA RAIDAH

“Now, we find our spot,” Naya said upon coming out of the washroom.

Standing in the middle of the crossroads of the campus, the two seemed unable to decide. The only source of light was the lamp posts lining the roads. They graduated from this place, were veterans, but the cloak of darkness seemed to confuse them still.

“Naya, how about we just choose the roads that seem inviting?”

“Which one seems more inviting, then?” Noorie raised her hand and pointed left. So they set off.

There wasn’t a lot happening in the university at 1 AM. Many students were in their dorms, nose-deep in textbooks. Some had raised their white flags against the massive reading list and sunk into their beds instead. Others were playing cards with their fake money and almost getting into fistfights.

“Did I tell you my parents met at this university? I’ve heard so many stories of where they used to hang out that half of my campus life felt like déjà vu. Even after they had graduated, we used to come here in the winter to see all the storks and foreign birds near the preserved ponds,” Noorie said, taking a gulp out of the juice bottle.

“How come you’ve never told me this?” Naya asked, grabbing the bottle out of Noorie’s hands and taking a sip.

“Well....don’t like talking about my parents much. They have the most convoluted story in the history of relationships. And they’re so bitter towards each other now that when I remember those stories, it....”

“Brings you nothing but pain?”

“Yeah,” Noorie replied, taking an enormous gulp.

“Speaking of love,” Naya started hesitantly, anticipating Noorie’s reaction. “I want to find the spot where I had the best kiss of my life. But all I remember was that the place had pink lilies.”

“Wait, was this Irfan or Farhan? Or was it

Kamran?”

“Oh shut up! But yes, it was Irfan. I never liked how things ended between the two of us. He said so little and it seemed like he held back so much of what he wanted to say. Like he had a jar for them or something.”

“Well, it’s almost dawn now. Let’s find the spot before the first lights.”

And the two walked aimlessly down the road with nothing but the hope that by dawn they would reach their destination. They laughed, danced around, and joked. They visited the seemingly harmless pond that had taken away a dear friend once. They cried when they stood near the spot, said their goodbyes, and then they walked on.

Suddenly, Naya exclaimed, “I see it! I think this is it!”

Noorie rubbed her eyes and looked at the sky. The night had passed them. They reached the fated spot after walking through a few bushes: an array of waterlilies seemed to have just come out of slumber. As they sat, the storks came down to say their hellos.

Naya broke the silence of bewilderment, and without casting a glance at her companion, said, “Remember it always. Remember that you and I made this journey and together, we went to a place where there was nowhere left to go.”

“Arundhuti Roy?” Noorie inquired.

“Who else can come up with a line like that?”

“Will you? Remember?” Naya said, now looking up at Noorie.

“A place, just for us to see the sun.”

“With the trees that bear testament of our tales.”

“This night will be our namesake,” said Noorie, smiling back at Naya, and secretly memorising every little detail of that moment.

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