

TEACHERS TALK

Exploring the world of literary theory

In conversation with Nazia Manzoor, Assistant Prof. of English at NSU

"Education is seen as an investment and this investment is supposed to give you returns. So, the truth of the matter is there is no guarantee that doing theory is going to yield an income. Generally speaking, the most common aspiration for those that love literature is to either become a writer or a teacher/professor. Those are solid dreams and it is absolutely possible that if you do this out of love, you will be able to make a career out of either one of those options."

A degree in literature allows at least two very basic, but useful, transferable skills:

- **Effective communication:** A literature degree allows students to communicate their ideas and concepts with clarity and precision, which can translate to a plethora of fields.
- **Ability to think critically:** Given how a literature degree is rooted in critical thinking, it further boosts analytical thinking in students, which can be useful in other fields as well.

SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

When did you decide to go for an English major?

Nazia Manzoor: When I was in the first year of my college, I was pursuing science. However, I had soon reached a stage where I was quite unhappy with it. I loved my English, Bangla and Social Science classes.

In our first-year midterm exam, we had to translate excerpts from *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry. One day, my English teacher came to class and said, "There's something I want to read out to the whole class, something I really enjoyed reading."

Then she went on and read the translations I had written, as I proceeded to melt down in my seat. I decided then that this is who I wanted to be.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in literary theory?

NM: Professor Fakrul Alam of Dhaka University introduced literary theory to us in our second year (of undergrad). I remember that we all had the same question – what has theory got to do with literature?

Over the next two years, I found out that theory allows me to think even more critically. It allows me to have a more nuanced and sharpened perspective on things that traditionally went unchallenged.

For me, theory is a method through which I question things including the inequalities and injustices that exist in our world. And so, I cannot not do theory, because I refuse to accept the world as it is.

Can you tell us a little bit about your research interests and dissertation topic?



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

NM: Broadly speaking, postcolonial feminism. I am interested more specifically in Biopolitics and the Genres of the Human. I am also fascinated by affect, trauma, and memory. I went into the PhD program knowing I was going to work on the over-representation of certain South Asian identities. I was troubled by the Western construct of the oppressed Muslim woman character who needs saving by white men from other brown men, the famous Spivakian quote.

The dissertation project began with a series of questions. When we think about political trauma, it often focuses on certain political events and not others. For instance, trauma and memory studies as a field begins with the Holocaust as the paradigmatic event. Two years later, the Indian partition happened, which was a bloodbath and the consequences of it are still very much present in our current world. The genre of the human has a similar hierarchy.

So, my question is, why is there a gradation in the hierarchy of trauma? Why do certain lives get prioritised over other lives?

That's where this investigation began, eventually the dissertation became about three things – the access to speech, the construct of political subjectivity, and the idea of being human.

What would you like prospective students of English literature to know before they begin their journey?

NM: University is the start of adulthood, and one sign of becoming an adult is you are responsible for yourself, for chalking out your own future.

Once you have a goal set, you work towards it. It is almost like pursuing music. Only after listening to classical music for countless hours, do you develop your ears. Quite similarly, after reading a lot of great works of art, your taste develops, and your writing improves, and you're able to produce new thought.

One advice I would like to give prospective students is to read in Bangla, or your own mother tongue. Having an expertise in a language other than English gives you an advantage that you may not be able to appreciate right now, but the more time you spend exploring English Literature, you will come to realise that your ability to see things from an alternative perspective will allow you to see through the gaps in the canon. It will make you a stronger scholar. Get to know your people, and this way you will know yourself.

Syeda Afrin Tarannum is a sub-editor at Campus.



BUILD SAFE HOMES WITH THE TRUST OF MILLIONS



BSRM

building a safer nation