

NEW AGE Literature C4

Makbula Manzoor: From poetry to prose

Makbula Manzoor has been writing for forty years. Initially, she wrote poetry but moved to prose on the suggestion of Quamrul Hassan. She writes both novels and short stories, and, in 1997, received the National Archives Award for her epic novel *Kaler Mandira*. Recently Makbula Manzoor spoke to Niaz Zaman about her writing

Niaz Zaman: You were born in Bardwan, but did you spend much time in West Bengal?
Makbula Manzoor: Actually, most of my childhood was spent in North Bengal. My father came from Siragaji, but as a police officer, he was posted to various places. So I spent my childhood and adolescence among the lush green landscape of North Bengal and its blue sky and rivers. I went to quite a number of schools, depending on where my father was posted. Later I studied at the University of Dhaka, where I did my Master's in Bangla Literature.

NZ: After that you began teaching?
MM: No, I didn't start teaching right away. Initially I worked in a bank. I was there for two years. It was after that that I started teaching at Holy Cross College. I was there for two years. Subsequently, I joined University Women's Federation College and worked there at a stretch for 30 years till my retirement.

NZ: When did you start writing?
MM: It might sound funny, but my writing career started from the age of eight. I had written a poem which was published in the *Azad*, in the children's section called *Mukul Mahil*. Till I was about thirteen I mainly wrote poems, very few short stories. The artist Quamrul Hassan, who was associated with the *Mukul* movement, encouraged me to write stories. He said my prose was better than my poetry and I should write more stories. So I started writing stories. However, I didn't completely give up writing poems. But after the age of 18, I stopped writing poetry. I was very young when my first novel was published, just a BA student.

NZ: Apart from Quamrul Hassan, were there any other literary influences?
MM: There was a literary atmosphere in our house. My father was also a poet and he used make us memorize his poems and at dusk after Magh prayers we used to sit in the courtyard and recite those poems. My eldest brother, Dr. Mokhlisur Rahman, who was a writer himself, encouraged me to write. In fact, all my brothers and sisters are more or less writers. My elder sister, Moslema Khatun, used to write. My brother Inze Reza, who is a film director, writes all the scripts of his works himself. Some of my father's books have been published.

NZ: You haven't said anything about your mother.
MM: Of course, she too nurtured my interest in stories. I heard so many stories and rhymes from my mother. And also fairy tales, the stories that we later read in Upendra Kishore Ray's book of fairy tales. My mother used to read a lot, Saratchandra and Bankimchandra especially. She also loved to read detective stories.

NZ: To go back to your first novel, what was its title?
MM: *Akash Kanya*. It was not published as a book, but was serialized in *Begum*. My first novel, published as a book, was *Aar Ek Jiban*. It too was published before I had completed my MA.

NZ: Was it also published serially?
MM: Yes, it was also published serially in *Begum*.

NZ: Your first novel, was it ever published as a book?
MM: No, I am not quite sure why, but perhaps it was not mature enough. But now when I look back, I feel that it should have been published. *Akash Kanya* was a very romantic novel, *Aar Ek Jiban* was more mature — in a way I was very mature for my age.

NZ: Could you talk a bit about the plot and the main character of *Aar Ek Jiban*?

MM: The main character is a rebellious girl named Laila. Her husband has gone abroad and never returned. The plot revolves around Laila's struggle to bring up her three children by herself. Eventually she loses two of her children. In all her struggles the only person who helps her is Khaled, a former class friend of hers. Khaled offers Laila his friendship, but she rejects his offer. She says that she has come so far on her own and that's how she wants to continue. But at the end, when she is on the point of breaking down, with her two children dead in an accident and the other in a critical condition, she finally gives up and accepts his friendship. I ended my novel with a scene of complete submission on Laila's part. Laila, who has never cried throughout the novel, breaks down when Khaled extends his hand towards her.

NZ: Were your poems published?
MM: Not as a book, but individually, in newspapers and magazines.



(Photo: Monema Jall)

NZ: You write both novels and short stories?
MM: Yes, in fact I started as a short story writer. Now for many years I have been writing short stories as well as novels.

NZ: There is a difference between short stories and novels. Can you move easily from one genre to another? Which one do you prefer? Or don't you feel any difference?
MM: No, I don't feel the difference. I like both the genres. When I want to write something on a larger canvas, I prefer novels. But there are times when I keep writing short stories one after another and I enjoy it. The stories come out one after another like flawless pearls.

NZ: You won the National Archives Award for *Kaler Mandira* in 1997. You have also received some other awards.

MM: Yes, the Bangladesh Lekhika Sangha Award, the Rajshahi Writer's Association Award, the Qamar Mashtari Literary Award, the Nadein Literary Award.

NZ: Would you call *Kaler Mandira* an epic novel?
MM: Yes, the plot covers a period of about a hundred years. It starts at the end of the nineteenth century and ends in 1995. A

number of critics such as Bashir Al-Helal, Hosne Ara Shahed, Abu Bakar Siddiqi and Syed Ali Aslan have commented on my book as an epic novel because of the expanse of time and range of characters. The novel portrays the political and social conditions of the time even as it narrates domestic and familial events. It also reflects the different upheavals and struggles including the partition, the language movement, the liberation war.

NZ: Are you writing anything at the moment?
MM: Well, my latest novel, *Ekar Jiban*, was published in this year's *EksheyBoi Mela*. A second edition of *Kaler Mandira* has also been published. Two of my novels were published early this year. At present I am writing a play. Not a theatre play I have never written a play for the theatre. My plays are usually written for the radio and television. Now I am writing a serial. In fact, one of my plays will be broadcast very shortly — not the one I am writing now, another one. The one I am writing now will be on a larger canvas.

NZ: Could you tell me something about your themes? Do you work with a particular, recurrent theme or do you work with different themes?
MM: I try to analyze life from different perspectives. Also, I usually write about ordinary people, about the middle and lower middle class, very rarely about the upper class. In some of my recent short stories I have portrayed the lives of garment factory workers and girls who work as domestic helps.

NZ: Yes, this theme is also reflected in 'Nagar Aranya' (The Urban Jungle), included in your collection of short stories in translation, *The Vultures Are Everywhere*.

MM: Yes, there I portray the lives of domestic workers. They come to the city from their villages with the dream of earning and saving money so that they can help their parents. But they are tortured and raped, sometimes even murdered. Some of them commit suicide. At times they are murdered and the murders are passed off as suicides.

NZ: Your first novel was published serially in *Begum*. Do you still write for the magazine?
MM: No, because *Begum* is not published on a regular basis these days. However, I did write in the last Eid special that was published.

NZ: *Begum* created a platform for women writers. Do you think it still serves that purpose? A lot of people say that they do not want to publish their works in *Begum*.

MM: That's because *Begum* is not published on a regular basis any more. Besides, there are many other magazines which are of a higher standard than *Begum*. *Begum* has not progressed. Perhaps you know that at one time I was very closely associated with *Begum*. I worked for it for twenty years as assistant editor, from 1964-1984.

NZ: You have been writing novels for about forty years now. Do you find any difference between your earlier and your later writings?
MM: Yes, of course, I have matured. Society too has changed. Our history is that of struggles and political upheavals. There was the 1947 partition, the language movement of 1952, the liberation war of 1971. My writing has drawn upon these social and political movements and upon these social and political movements and upon these social and political movements and upon these social and political movements.

NZ: Are almost all your stories set in Bangladesh?
MM: Yes, although I have spent a lot of time abroad — in fact I spent the last three years abroad and before that also I was abroad for a

year or two and I have had the opportunity to analyze the lifestyle abroad. I haven't written anything using a foreign setting. However, I have written some travel stories for children. For example, there is a mountain near Melbourne called Hanging Rock where a terrible tragedy took place. I have written a novella based on that tragedy. But most of my writings set abroad are travel stories, not short stories or novels. Even when I was staying abroad the writings I sent home were set in Bangladesh.

NZ: Do writers have some obligations towards society or should they just write for themselves?
MM: I think we do have a responsibility towards society. I believe writers should portray both the positive and negative sides of our society. I don't believe that a person can be totally good or totally evil. I want to portray how a person can have a wonderful heart, a heart full of compassion and love in my last novel *Ekar Jiban*. I wrote the story of a retired professor. Some hoodlums of his neighbourhood claim that they are the nephews of some minister who owns the house. They tell him that the house belongs to the minister and not him and they ask him to leave. The professor is also a renowned writer, but he doesn't want to get into a fight with anyone. One night when he is sleeping, he is suddenly woken up by gunshots. He wonders what happened to all the promise of Bangladesh. At this point his granddaughter enters. She has grown up abroad. Both her parents are foreign nationals, but she herself has not given up her Bangladeshi citizenship.

NZ: At her university she met a Bangladeshi economist and decided to come to Bangladesh. Visiting the National Mausoleum with her grandfather, she tells him that she has come to stay. Through her I try to portray a ray of hope. The youths of this country are not totally hopeless. Of course some of them have gone astray. When a country gains independence, the struggle and bloodshed leave an effect on the people. At times I become frustrated. I wake up in the middle of the night and wonder why I am still living. But then, when I see the sun rising at dawn I feel that there is still hope. Maybe the next generation or the generation after that will improve the situation of our country. There will be harmony among all people.

NZ: Thank you for your time.
MM: Thank you.

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