



Humayun Azad

# The maverick

By Nurul Kabir

**W**HEN Bangla literature is passing through a barren period, Humayun Azad stands out for his prolific literary output. With a total of some seventy publications to his credit, the quantum of his writings is comparable only with that of Rabindranath Thakur. Writing in a modern style and language, Azad is a masterful analyst of different

'unbeliever'. In his book *Amar Abishvash* (My Unbelief, 1997), Azad denounces all those ('politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, generals, professors, even the writers') who believe in 'almost everything, such as God, convention, power, dictatorship, posts and money'. The book, spread over seven long essays, questions the concept of belief itself and argues that igno-

the role of religion in the history of mankind.

It wasn't as a writer of prose that Azad made his literary debut. His first publication was a volume of poems, titled *Oloukik Ishtimar* (Miracle Steamer, 1973). There followed several volumes of poems till the early 1990s, earning him the reputation of an unconventional poet. A collection of his 'best poems' was

is a mere romantic," Azad observes.

As a fiction writer, Azad made a late beginning. His first novel, *Chappanno Hajar Bargamail* (Fifty-six Thousand Square Miles), was published in 1994. As soon as it hit the stalls, the educated readers discovered a modern prose writer behind the book. Written in dynamic language in Azad's own characteristic style, the novel revolves round the events of 1971. Its theme is the distortion of the democratic hopes and aspirations of the people of Bangladesh by the martial law regime.

The novel begins with the disappointment a little girl experiences when she is stopped from going to school and is forcibly sent back home by men from the military. It is a spring morning and martial law has been imposed the night before. The girl is upset over the unscheduled closure of her favourite educational institution.

Azad abhors military rulers and hates the politicians of the third world countries, who, according to him, are 'just bandits'. He attempts to satirically expose immorality,



corruption and the double standards of the local politicians in his book *Rajnitibidgan* (The Politicians). Even his latest prose work, *Anna Ki*

*Eie Bangladesh* (*Cheyechilam* (Did We Want This Bangladesh), February 2003, is an analytical attempt to show how the politicians and generals' lust for absolute power has shattered, over the decades, the Bengalis' dream of a democratic society.

Given the performances of the mainstream political leaders of Bangladesh, one would hardly disagree with Azad's analysis of the situation. What is, however, dangerous is that Azad has an inherent negative attitude towards politics as such, which, if propagated by an otherwise passionate man, might contribute to the depoliticization of a politically vibrant society — a rather favourite agenda of the autocrats, Azad ostensibly detests.

Besides, the generalized charge that politicians are bandits undermines the credentials of thousands of brilliant political activists who made supreme sacrifices in the past for the emancipation of the people. They could well

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times obsessed with sex; but he dismissively argues that "sex is a very important element of life".

"Bangla writers have always found it a taboo subject. They have mystified it, which is absolutely unfair," he observes. His *Kabi o Dandita Apurush* (Poet and a Punished Non-man) also deals with the role of sex in life, while its main theme revolves round a poet's inner struggle vis-a-vis the conflict between life and art.

Meanwhile, Azad has done a great job by analytically compiling the feminist ideas of the west, which underlie the feminist contributions of the subcontinent's socio-political reformers. He has exposed the anti-women stance of some 'great' Bangla writers like Rabindranath Thakur in his monumental work *Nari* (Women, 1992). The work, critical of the patriarchal and malechauvinistic attitude of religions towards women, attracted the wrath of the conservative censors and was banned in 1995.

The ban was eventually lifted in 2000, following a legal battle Azad won in the High Court. As the legal battle was on, Azad came up with another book on the same subject, *Ditiya Linga* (Second Sex) in 1998. The two books are complementary to each other.

Azad did not attempt to provide any theoretical structure to link the country's feminist movement with the broader political agenda of constructing a democratic state in Bangladesh. He has introduced the European and American feminist ideas before the Bengali readers who do not have or have limited access to English. The couple of books would continue to inspire those, both men and women, committed to have a society based on gender equality.

Another significant contribution of Azad to Bangla literature is his compilation of two volumes of essays written over the last two hundred years. The volumes called *Bangla Bhasha* (Bangla Language) provide the readers with a clear picture of the

development of the Bengali writers' thinking and language.

In his role as a writer for children, Azad has made an impact. His *Lal Nil Dipabali*, *Ba Bangla Sahityer Jibani* (Colourful Lights, or the Biography of Bangla Literature), first published in 1976, is a brilliant portrayal of ten centuries of Bangla literature in a nutshell. His identical work on the history of Bangla language — *Koto Nadi Sorobar* — published in 1987, is also a brilliant job done for the young readers. What is interesting about these books is that they remain essential reading for the grown-ups as well. Those who are interested in the origin and development of the language and literature of Bangladesh find his books most informative.

However, Humayun Azad admits that Bangla literature is going through a very 'pathetic' phase. "Our literature in Bangladesh is, at the moment, characterized by lack of creativity and great ideas," Azad observes ruefully. Explaining the reason for this phenomenon, he says, "We have, somehow, lost the aesthetic connection with international literature, especially since our independence. The younger generation, it seems, has little interest in world literature of the day, which was just the opposite in the 1960s. They are rather inclined to the mediaeval age. And this is reflected in the literature they produce."

Azad has another complaint against contemporary Bengali literary writers. "They shamelessly belong to this or that political camp. Slogannongers cannot produce great literature."

Azad is, however, not an incorrigible pessimist. He believes that the time will come some day when things change for the better. "A period of vacuum always follows a great period of creativity. The period between the 1930s and the 1960s was a great period of our literary creativity. Now we are going through a vacuum, which would be definitely followed by another age of creativity," Azad concludes. ■

## Humayun Azad: profile

Born on April 28, 1947 in Rarikhal village (Munshiganj, popularly known as Bikrampur)

Education: BA (Hons), MA in Bangla from the University of Dhaka. PhD on Prominization in Bangla from Edinburgh University

Professional life: Professor of Bangla in the Dhaka University

Publications: 70 books, which include ten novels, seven collections of poems, seven books on linguistics, two for children. *Oloukik Ishitmar* (Miracle Steamer, 1973), *Chappanno*

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